

## THE PERSISTENCE OF MISLEADING WESTERN NARRATIVES IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUG SCHOLARSHIP

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### INTRODUCTION

Western narratives in rug scholarship have been particularly influential in shaping broader understanding of the woven textile heritage of Western Asia. Despite their influence, however, these narratives have not always been sensitive to, or aware of, local understanding and knowledge of woven textile techniques and symbolism. To this end, this paper presents and discusses three prominent symbolic motifs appearing in Anatolian and Caucasian rugs a) the “crab” border, b) the “leaf and calyx” or “wineglass” border, and c) the Talish rosette. The paper examines these motifs and places their symbols within the context of an Armenian, and not just Western, visual language.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of Armenians on the art of rug weaving was well known. In his prominent book, *A History of Oriental Rugs before 1800* Fredrik Robert Martin (1868-1933), a Swedish rug scholar living in England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote fully acknowledging the seminal contributions of the Armenians to the art of weaving, especially in the creation of the famous Dragon rugs from Artsakh (Nagorny-Karabagh). The New York Metropolitan Museum in their 1910 Exhibition entitled *Early Oriental Rugs* attributed many rugs, including several Dragon rugs, to Armenia.<sup>2</sup>

Other publications from that era confirmed the seminal importance of Armenians to the art and weaving of rugs. Noel Buxton (1869-1948) states:

As craftsmen the Armenians show considerable capacity. They have been long renowned for their skill and artistry in carpet making. Most of the carpets known as

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<sup>1</sup> F. R. Martin, *A History of Oriental Carpets before 1800*, Vienna, 1908. In, its 159 pages the book has 393 monochromes and applied lithograph illustrations, 33 full plate illustrations at the end.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Early Oriental Rugs*, New York Nov. 1, 1910-January 15, 1911.

Turkish are manufactured by them and sold to the Western world by merchants and traders in Constantinople.<sup>3</sup>

Another account by Lewis George Griffin (1865-1946) confirms: [In Turkey] “Almost all weavers were Armenian.”<sup>4</sup>

Antony Wynn, biographer of the Oriental Carpet Manufacturers Company (OCM), the biggest rug company in the world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, states:

The OCM, as it expanded its weaving further and further into Anatolia, employed, almost without exception, Greek or Armenian weavers.<sup>5</sup>

But after the Armenian Genocide in 1915, as Armenians were ethnically cleansed from their homeland in Anatolia and east of it, the story changed. Churches were destroyed, names of villages were changed, art and culture were appropriated and the Turkish government began to deny the extermination of the Armenians. The Western powers in their desire to keep the new Turkish republic in their fold as a bulwark against the Soviets, closed their eyes to the atrocities and the cultural theft.

The Armenians, reeling from mass extermination and subsequent wars, were too shell-shocked and devastated to protest and counter-act as their cultural legacy was being stolen in front of their eyes. Their first priority, understandably, was survival. Also, in 1921 Armenia being pulled behind the Iron Curtain as a new Soviet Republic did not help.

Accordingly, after 1915, an army of rug scholars led by the influential Arthur Upham-Pope<sup>6</sup> from the US and Kurt Erdmann<sup>7</sup> from Germany promoted the theory of the Turkic nomadic weaver who migrated to Anatolia from Central Asia in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, conquered Anatolia and originated Anatolian and

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<sup>3</sup> Noel Buxton M.P. and the Rev. Harold Buxton, *Travel and politics in Armenia*, with an introduction by Viscount Bryce and a contribution on Armenian history and culture by Aram Raffi, 1914.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis G. Griffin, *The Practical Book of Oriental Rugs*, J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia & London, 1920.

<sup>5</sup> Antony Wynn, *Three Camels to Smyrna: Times of War and Peace in Turkey, Persia, India, Afghanistan & Nepal 1907-1986. The Story of the Oriental Carpet Manufacturers Company*. Hali Publications 2008. ISBN 978-1-898113-67-6. <http://www.levantineheritage.com/testi70.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Upham-Pope (1881-1969) was an American scholar, art historian, and architecture historian. He was an expert on historical Persian art.

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Erdmann (1901-1964) was a German art historian who specialized in Sasanian and Islamic Art. He is best known for his scientific work on the history of the Oriental rug, which he established as a subspecialty within his discipline.

Caucasian rugs. Upham-Pope's first salvo was to challenge the accepted attribution that the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dragon rugs were woven by Armenians.

"In this respect, it is interesting to observe this in parallel with his critical study of the so-called Armenian dragon rugs, published in the same year as his Art Bulletin article, in which he challenges both the attributions given to the 'dragon rugs' and the dating methods applied to them. This article provoked prolonged debates between Pope and various scholars of Armenian origin, including Arménag Sakisian."<sup>8</sup>

Upham-Pope, travelling through Anatolia in 1925, even went as far as to write, "*There is no record nor even any local tradition that weaving was ever carried on in Armenia to any extent...that a slow elaborate and difficult art like rug weaving could have grown up in Armenia without showing relation to contemporary and allied arts is difficult to believe.*"<sup>9</sup> Of course there was no record. Anatolia was ethnically cleansed of Armenians. Armenian homes and looms were now taken over by Kurds and Turks who were moved to the Armenian highland by the Turkish government to replace them.

Rug dealers also latched on to the Turkic nomadic storyline because it helped sell rugs. The tale of nomads roaming Anatolia and the Caucasus with their families and flocks with their women weaving on portable looms was a far more alluring vision than a sedentary Anatolian woman sitting down and weaving a rug after feeding her family and putting her children to bed.

There is ample documented proof of weaving in Anatolia and the Armenian Highland thousands of years before the appearance of Turkic tribes. The below-mentioned data are the tip of the iceberg.

The tenth-century Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan, who visited the Volga Bulgars as a member of an Abbasid embassy in 921–922 CE, offers the following account of the Volga Bulgars in his travelogue, the *Risala* (journal):

The king's yurt is enormous and can hold more than a thousand people. It is carpeted with Armenian rugs. In the middle the king has a throne bedecked with Byzantine silk...<sup>10</sup>

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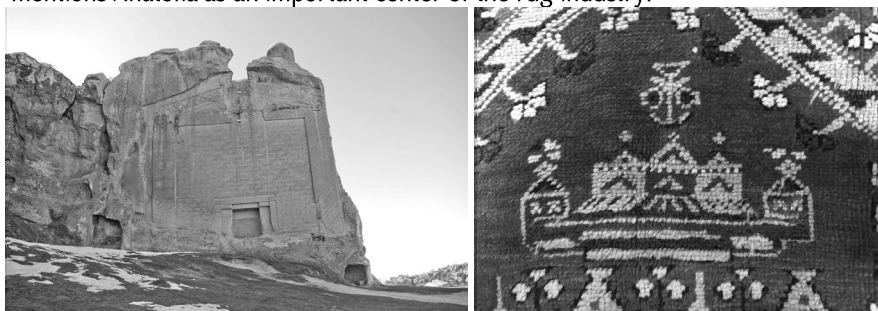
<sup>8</sup> Yuka Kadoi, "Arthur Upham-Pope and his 'Research Methods in Muhammadan Art': Persian carpets", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6:2012, p. 5 (<https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/kadoi.pdf>).

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Upham-Pope, "The Myth of the Armenian Dragon Carpets," *Jahrbuch der asiatischen kunst*, 1925, pp. 147-138.

<sup>10</sup> Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān ibn AlAbbās ibn Rāshid ibn Ḥammād, (commonly known as Ahmad ibn Fadlan), was a 10th-century Muslim traveler, famous for his account of his travels as a member of an embassy of the Abbasid caliph, AlMuqtadir of Baghdad, to the king of the Volga Bulgars; it was known as his *risāla* ("account" or "journal"). His account is most notable for providing a detailed description of the Volga Vikings, including

Most of the crafts of Turkish village life, with the exception of certain techniques of animal husbandry, must have been learnt by the newcomers from native inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

The Byzantine products of the silk industry, especially brocades, *mandils*,<sup>12</sup> and material for upholstering, were widely demanded in the Mediterranean. On carpet production in eastern Asia Minor-Armenia, it is of interest that *Hudud al-Alam* mentions Anatolia as an important center of the rug industry.<sup>13</sup>



The precursor of the Mihrab form, the Midas Monument of a Phrygian King, is at Yazilikaya, which is located in the ancient Phrygian Valley and is dedicated to the mother goddess Kybele, the only god of the Phrygian religion, and the so-called Mezarlik motif on Kirsehir rugs, thought to be cemeteries

It also became accepted that along with the weavers, the motifs on Antique Caucasian and Anatolian rugs were claimed to have been introduced from Central Asia! In reality the origin of the motifs was ancient Anatolian, starting from petroglyphs then used by the Anatolian sedentary cultures of the Hittites, Luwians, Lydians, Phrygians, Assyrians, Urartians, Sassanians, Byzantines and finally the Armenians, the successors of this artistic tradition of Anatolia that is reflected in the rugs. One can see many of these motifs on the remaining Byzantine and Armenian Medieval Churches, manuscripts and Armenian *khachkars* (cross stones). Western rug scholars after 1915 never bothered to

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eyewitness accounts of life as part of a trade caravan and witnessing a ship burial (Ahmad ibn Fadlan - Wikipedia).

<sup>11</sup> W. V. Brice, "The Turkish Colonization of Anatolia" p. 27 (<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/api/datastream?publicationPid=uk-ac-man-scw:1m1904&datastreamId=POST-PEER-REVIEW-PUBLISHERS-DOCUMENT.PDF>).

<sup>12</sup> From Arabic مَنْدِيل, mandil, "sash; turban cloth; handkerchief".

<sup>13</sup> Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971 ("The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century : Speros Vryonis, Jr.", Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive)

research Armenian medieval art or ancient Anatolian culture and blindly attributed everything to Turkic nomads.

In addition, many of the names of the rug motifs were coined by Europeans who misread them without understanding their true significance.

A good example is the so-called “Mezarlik” (cemetery in Turkish) rug motif common on Anatolian rugs from Kırsehir, in central Anatolia.

Even Turkish rug scholars today admit that this description was wrong and what was represented in reality was a landscape scene:

These are named as rugs with ‘cemetery or grave’ in foreign resources. Turkish researchers did not pay attention on rug art for many years, mostly western researchers had works on this subject. For this name might have been given by foreigners. On resources published abroad, these rugs are described as ‘cemetery rug or grave rug’. Most of the rugs belong to Kırsehir region but foreign resources mention Kula with landscape. Numerous rugs have been taken to Germany many years ago. They are known as ‘grave rugs’ or ‘friedhofteppiche’ in Germany. There is no explanation on the reason of this name on resources. The trees on landscape zones must have been likened to a cypress tree. Cypress trees are mostly found on cemeteries. In this sense, they must have established a connection between cypress trees and cemeteries. Foreigners misattributed these rugs as they did not know the characteristics of the era. These rugs are imaginary landscape descriptions with architectural motives.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, even with better information and knowledge today these myths still persist in Western rug scholarship.

In addition to the continued support for Turkish attribution and the sellable storyline of the Nomad weaver, another western phenomenon supports these myths: Oikophobia. “An extreme aversion to the sacred, and the thwarting of the connection of the sacred to the culture of the West is described as the underlying motif of oikophobia; and not the substitution of Christianity by another coherent system of belief. The paradox of the oikophob seems to be that any opposition directed at the theological and cultural tradition of the West is to be encouraged even if it is “significantly more parochial, exclusivist, patriarchal, and ethnocentric.”<sup>15</sup>

Except in the most obvious cases, western rug scholars reject the notion that Christianity had much influence on rug design and instead point to Islam. They

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<sup>14</sup> Çiğdem Karaçay, “An Examination into the Rugs with a View of Kırsehir”, *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* (RTEÜ Journal of Social Sciences), 2:2018, pp. 141-55 ([https://www.academia.edu/98519683/An\\_Examination\\_into\\_the\\_Rugs\\_with\\_a\\_View\\_of\\_Kirsehir](https://www.academia.edu/98519683/An_Examination_into_the_Rugs_with_a_View_of_Kirsehir)).

<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia, “Oikophobia,” n. d.

insist cruciform designs on a rug are only graphic motifs, and not an expression of Christian spiritual devotion. They ignore ancient Anatolian motifs and the early Christian heritage of Anatolia that existed thousands of years before the appearance of Turkic tribes. For example, they attribute all rugs with Mihrabs to Islamic weavers when it is well known that Eastern Christians including Armenians wove and used prayer rugs.<sup>16</sup>



The funeral of Hovhannes/Ohannes Khazanjian, 1904. Kharpert/Harput with prayer rug covering the casket. Credit: Houshamadyan

To fully understand pre-19<sup>th</sup> century rugs, one must put oneself in the place of a Christian weaver of that era. Understandably it is hard for us to imagine in the secular world we live in today, but for a weaver in the 19<sup>th</sup> century their lives revolved around religion.

Let us look at the Armenian community: In the Ottoman Empire the Armenians lived within the Millet system. Through the Millet system, religious communities were taken under control, and order was established. Communities who belonged to different religions and sects were governed by their religious leaders (congregation heads). These religious leaders also had the status of civil servants and were responsible for their community.<sup>17</sup> In other

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prayer-rug>

<sup>17</sup> "The Ottoman Millet System and Its Relationship with Nationalism," [https://turkishstudies.net/economy?mod=makale\\_ing\\_ozet&makale\\_id=46455#:~:text=Through%20the%20millet%20system%2C%20religious,were%20responsible%20for%20their%20community.](https://turkishstudies.net/economy?mod=makale_ing_ozet&makale_id=46455#:~:text=Through%20the%20millet%20system%2C%20religious,were%20responsible%20for%20their%20community.)

words, religious leaders were involved in all aspects of life of the Armenian community.

To further elaborate the misleading approach of Western rug scholars, we will focus on three examples of motifs. These represent three common misunderstandings of the motifs on Anatolian and Caucasian rugs by western rug scholars based on their ignorance of ancient Anatolian motifs and the early Christian heritage of Anatolia.



So-called Crab border on an Armenian Karabagh rug and the Jerusalem Cross

### 1. The ‘Crab’ border

The first example is a ubiquitous border design on antique Caucasian rugs known as the “Crab” border.

Peter Stone describes the ‘Crab border as follows:

A border of repeated florets connected by radiating lines suggesting crab claws. This border is often found in rugs of Karabagh.<sup>18</sup>

The border has nothing to do with crabs. It is a representation of the Jerusalem cross – a heraldic cross and Christian cross variant consisting of a large cross surrounded by four smaller crosses, one in each quadrant. It was used as the emblem and coat of arms of the Kingdom of Jerusalem from the 1280s. It was an important symbol for Armenians, too, and therefore, naturally, it was used on their rugs as well.

“Arguably, the Jerusalem cross is the most recognizable symbol of Christianity. But nowhere in the world is this sign as significant or culture-rooted as it is in **Armenia**. Throughout Armenia, thousands of *khachkars* decorate the mountainous terrain of the first Christian nation. They are a unique example of the Armenian art of spiritual expression. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the conversion of Armenians and establishment of Christianity as a

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<sup>18</sup> Peter F. Stone, *Oriental Rugs: An Illustrated Lexicon of Motifs, Materials, and Origins*, Tuttle Publishing, 2013, p. 77.

state religion in 301 gave a beginning to a new era of Armenian national consciousness with the cross in the centre of the Armenian symbolism.”<sup>19</sup>

But Western rug scholars deny the origin of the border as a Christian cross and do not understand the significance of the motif, thus avoiding its attribution to Armenians as it rightly deserves.

## 2. The ‘leaf and calyx’ or ‘wineglass’ border

The second example is another ubiquitous border called the “Wineglass” border or, its other name, “the leaf and calyx border.” Peter Stone describes it as

A border design used in Caucasian rugs, especially those of the Kazak region. Diagonal serrated leaves alternate with a geometrized calyx which suggests a goblet or wineglass.<sup>20</sup>



12th century Nor Varagavank monastery  
with Jerusalem cross carved on the walls

This comical description shows the complete lack of knowledge of Armenian history and art.

The border comprises half of a very important motif which dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Put two borders side-by-side, and one will see that the so-called “Wineglass” border is actually half of a motif that goes back all the way to the Pazyryk rug, the oldest known rug in the world, said to have been woven by the Urartians or proto-Armenians.<sup>21</sup>

The motif represents the pagan Sun that later became the Christian symbol for the cross. Armenians call it “Arevakhach” or suncross. One can see it all the way back on the helmet of Tigranes the Great.

## 3. The ‘Talish Rosette’

The so-called “Talish rosette” is also frequently seen on Anatolian and Caucasian rugs. Rug scholarship believes it was created by the Shaksavan tribe, a nomadic Turkic tribe that roamed in the Moghan Valley, south of Karabagh.

What is the Talish rosette? Basically, it is the interlocking of two eternity symbols that form a cross in their negative space.

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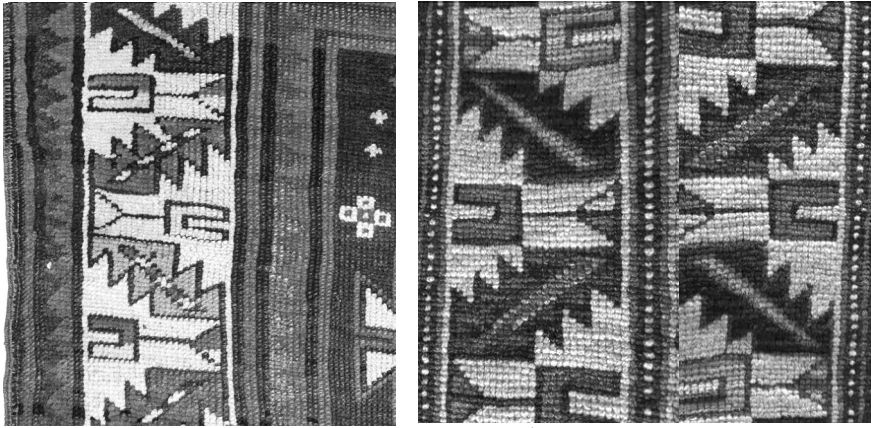
<sup>19</sup> “The Origins of the Jerusalem Cross”, <https://allinnet.info/interesting/the-origins-of-the-jerusalem-cross/> .

<sup>20</sup> Stone, p. 173.

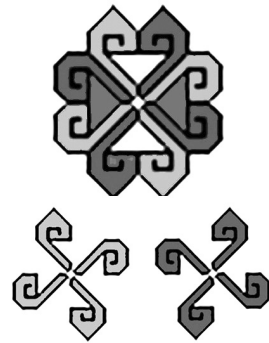
<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Schurmann, “The Pazyryk,” <https://www.attalus.org/armenian/paz1.htm> .



This rosette can be traced back to the Ancient Romans and was then used extensively in ancient Anatolia by the Byzantines and the Armenians, who modified it to accommodate a lobbed cross within it.



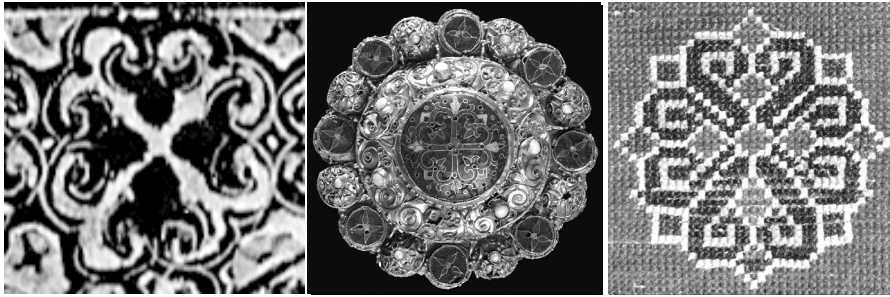
Leaf and calyx, or the wineglass borde



Close-up of Armenian Manuscript Dedicatory page, Erevan 1268; Pazyryk motif 5th century BC; two borders brought together create the Pazyryk motif

The Armenians then began using it on everything from medieval manuscripts and *khachkars* to Caucasian and Anatolian rugs. Therefore, as we can see, the design's evolution was from west to east, and its origin had nothing to do with either the Talish/Shahsavan Turkic tribe or with Central Asia.

These three examples are only a small sampling of how rug scholars of the 20th century either through ignorance or intention ignored ancient Anatolian and Armenian art as the source for the motifs of antique Anatolian and Caucasian rugs and instead attributed everything to Turkic or Islamic art.



The rosette on a Roman textile in the Textile Museum in Washington, DC; Gold and enamel, 975-1025 AD (circa), Byzantine Empire; Close-up of the motif with a lobbed cross on an Armenian rug dated 1822

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some prevalent assumptions by western scholars in the study of Anatolian and Caucasian rugs. It has sought to demonstrate that, by contextualizing three prominent rug motifs within an Armenian aesthetic context, a richer, more complete understanding of the aesthetics of Anatolian and Caucasian rugs of Armenian origin can be reached.

## ՅԱՄԵՑՈՂ ՍԻԱԼԱՊԱՏՈՒՄՆԵՐ 20ՐԴ ԴԱՐՈՒ ԱՐԵՒՄՏԵԱՆ ԳՈՐԳԱԳԻՏՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՄԷՋ (ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)

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Յօդուածը կ'անդրադառնայ Հայոց Յեղասպանութենէն ետք արեւելեան գորգարուեստին մէջ հայկական ազդեցութեան շուրջ գիտական փաստագրութեան դիմափոխումին: Ան կը բացատրէ, թէ ԺԹ. դարուն, արեւելեան գորգարուեստին վրայ հայկական ազդեցութեան փաստը գիտական շրջանակներու կողմէ ընդունուած էր ամէնուրեք: Սակայն Ի. դարուն եւ Հայոց Յեղասպանութենէն անմիջապէս ետք, շրջադարձ մը կատարուեցաւ եւ նոր պատում մը յառաջացաւ, ուր լուսարձակի տակ առնուեցաւ ԺԲ. դարէն սկսեալ Կեդրոնական Ասիայէն Փոքր Ասիա ներխուժող ու հաստատուող թուրք թափառաշրջիկ ցեղախումբերու կողմէ իբր թէ գործուած գորգերու ազդեցութիւնը: Յիրաւի, հայկական նպաստը վերագրուեցաւ ասոնց, անտեսումի ու մոռացումի մատնելով հայութեան նպաստը գորգագործութեան:

Յօդուածը կը հակադարձէ այս պատումին եւ իբրեւ օրինակ կը բերէ արեւելեան գորգերու վրայ յաճախ գործուած երեք՝ խեչաբարի, 'տերեւ ու բաժակ'ի (կամ գինեբաժակի եզերքի) ու թալիշեան վարդակի զարդանախշերը: Հեղինակը կը քննէ ու կը վերլուծէ ասոնք եւ ասոնց աղբիւրները կը մատնանշէ ուրարտական ու վաղմիջ-նադարու հայկական մշակութային այլեայլ դրսեւորումներու մէջ: