

STUDY UNIT SPOTLIGHT

This month: **Armenian Philatelic Association (ArPA)**

Editor's note: This is the 44th installment of a regular feature intended to – indeed – spotlight one of our study units and the fine work done in its journal. This month we feature “Vishap, or The Armenian Dragon,” from the June 2018 issue (No. 84) of *The ArPA Journal*. To be considered for “Study Unit Spotlight,” please select what you feel may be the finest article appearing in your journal recently (preferably with philatelic content) and submit it via email to the *Topical Time* editor (wystamps@gmail.com), or to Study Unit Coordinator Jeff Hayward, jeffhaywardata@gmail.com. We hope you enjoy this fine feature.

Vishap, or The Armenian Dragon.

By Karine Chilingaryan and Igor Grigorian

Mountains of the Armenian plateau conceal many mysteries. Archeologists consider this area to be an interesting ground for research, while the local inhabitants tell amazing stories of dark caves and formidable rocks.



Top: Chinese and Hong Kong Dragons.

Above: Japanese dragon.

Right: European dragons.





Historically, Armenian dragons featured combinations of elements of different animals..

Right: Vahagn, the Dragon Reaper.

In the midst of myth fans an unofficial science has developed, one that studies dragons in various cultures; it is called dragonology. It turns out that, depending on the habitat, these monsters vary in specific behavior, appearance and even food ration.

If a Chinese or a Japanese dragon is a kind being, incarnating wisdom and moral perfection, the European congeners differ by being ferocious and having brutal appetites.

The Armenian dragon ruled the water element and lived in lakes, rivers and in the skies – in the dark clouds causing thunderstorms and hurricanes. Even the appearance of the Armenian dragon kept him apart from his intricate Asian and multi-headed European relatives. Historically, he was depicted as a winged snake or with a combination of elements from different animals.



Originally, Vishap was worshiped, especially in a drought; it was believed that the serpent, dragging its long tail on the ground, indicated the place where it was possible to dig canals. Later, the belief changed, and it was he who blocked access to life-giving moisture, and it was possible to get water only by defeating the dragon.

The main rival of Vishap in Armenia was the god of storm, Vahagn. In an



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Left: Dragon Stones, Armenia.

unequal battle, the hated serpent was defeated; after which a long-awaited rain fell to the ground. He was called Vishapakagh (Dragon Reaper or Dragon Slayer).

The Armenians believed that during a storm black unbridled dragons would be born in heaven

or arose from the deepest depths of the earth to swallow the sun, cast dark shadows over the earth and block the waterways. When this happened, Vahagn would attack them and release the sun and the earthly waters. In an unequal battle, the hated snake would be defeated, after which the long-awaited rain fell from above, and the sun again shone on the earth. This is how Vahagn's nickname, Dragon Reaper, came about. A pair of dragons were also depicted on the 1919 50-rouble banknote of the First Republic of Armenia, the artist highlighting their historical significance and importance.

Old Armenia inhabitants knew numerous stories about the dragons, as they shared the land with them. Not surprisingly, a Vishap city and Vishapadzor (Dragon gorge) monastery used to be located in the vicinity of Lake Van. One of the peaks of Geghama Mountains (near Lake Sevan, present day Armenia) is still called Vishapi Ler (Dragon Mountain). Even today, local inhabitants tell stories about Sevan Monster.

Known as dragon-stones, slabs from the megalithic period are particularly typical of the Armenian Highlands. Based on the research started in the 19th and 20th centuries, archeologists consider them to be forerunners of the

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stone-crosses, as there are strong similarities in their craftsmanship and function.

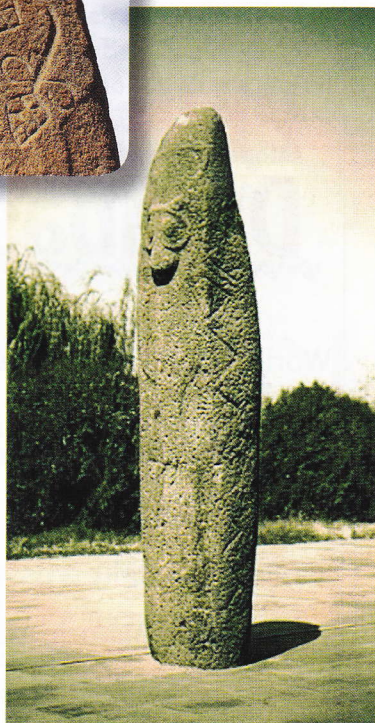
Customarily, the dragon stones are divided into three types, based on the image on the slab: fish-like (usually depicts catfish, ox-like and fish-ox-like. Fish-ox-like dragon stones would have zigzag lines on the sides symbolizing water (resembling the Zodiac sign for Aquarius).

Fish has a special meaning in the Armenian culture: it symbolizes fertility, while ox symbolizes storm deity. As of today, 150 examples of dragon stones are known, 90 of which are on the territory of modern Armenia. They are made mostly from basalt and have lengths (or height) between 150

and 550 centimeters (5-18 feet). Although most of the



The three customary styles of Armenian dragon stones: catfish (above), ox-like (above-right) and fish-ox-like (below-right).



A 1919 50-rouble banknote of the First Republic of Armenia, which sports a pair of historically significant dragons.

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dragon stones are found in horizontal positions, they are carved from all sides, besides the tail, which means that originally they were standing on the tail, vertically. It is also known that they were placed at the altitude of 3,000 meters (9,800 feet) above sea level, but the reason is still a mystery.



Today, one can encounter them in the middle of the city of Yerevan, as well as in other locations outside of the city. In our opinion, they should be returned to their original sites, as they are part of our history and culture. ☐



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In January 1997, the Armenian Philatelic Association (ArPA) was established by a group of dedicated stamp collectors. ArPA's goals are to promote the study of Armenian philately for all those interested in stamp collecting. Among its members are renowned collectors, enthusiasts and beginners. ArPA's monthly meetings have provided a regular forum for the exchange of information, stamps and other materials. *The ArPA Journal* provides the means to disseminate new research and information about Armenian philately. Annual dues are \$35 in the United States, \$45 elsewhere. Contact Igor Grigorian, 2764 Delevan Dr, Los Angeles CA 90065-5134.

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