

ON THE MAIN EPISODES OF THE EPIC POEM ABOUT ARMENIAN-ARAB ALLIANCE

Tork Dalalyan

PhD, Institute of Literature, NAS RA

Abstract

The most famous Armenian epic poem, “Daredevils of Sassoun” (“Sasna Tsrer”), is a folk heroic poem about the centuries-old conflict between Christian Armenians and idolater Arabs. In contrast, there was another epic poem in which Armenians and Arabs acted as allies. During the Soviet period the study of this epic poem remained in the shadows, as its main character was a real historical figure, the Armenian Catholicos of that time.

Key words: Epic poem, Hovhan Odznetsi, folktale, medieval sources, Arab emir, Byzantines

Introduction

The most famous Armenian epic poem, “Daredevils of Sassoun” (“Sasna Tsrer”), is a folk heroic poem about the centuries-old conflict between Christian Armenians and idolater Arabs. In contrast, there was another epic poem in which Armenians and Arabs acted as allies. During the Soviet period the study of this epic poem remained in the shadows, as its main character was a real historical figure, the Armenian Catholicos of that time.

In various Armenian folktales, the written versions of which have been known since the 10th century to the present day, the main character is the 8th century patriarch Hovhan(nes) Philosopher Odznetsi (717-728). We are familiar with stories about him from the works of medieval historians, as well as from the legends written down in Vayots Dzor, Bznunik, Lori and Javakhk from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century.¹ The versions told in Lori have survived to the present day and have been recorded in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods as well. However, researchers have overlooked the fact that they are the constituent parts of a large epic poem.

The study of the legends about Odznetsi shows that they formed a complete logical series, where the fictionalized image of the famous 8th century Catholicos played a central role. The epic series or epic poem about Odznetsi apparently started with the following episodes or “chapters”: “Odznetsi and the Illegal Child”, “Odznetsi and the Pythons of Ardvi”, which are directly related to topographical legends, so it is natural that they have been preserved only in Lori, where Hovhan Odznetsi lived and worked for the most part. Later the epic poem introduces the episodes “*Armenians and*

¹ Kajberuni 1881; 2003, 171-182; Okhan Otsneli 1898; Lalayan 1903; 1983, 483-484.

Romans”, “Handsome Look”, “Meeting with the Arab Caliph”, “Witchcraft paper”, “Odznetsi and His Troops on the Bridge”, “Cruciform Sword”, “Boiling in Saucepan”, “Odznetsi and Vasil”, “The Points of the Armenian-Arab Treaty”.

Historical and scientific references

The main historical (including historical-epic) information about Odznetsi is provided by Armenian medieval historians Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi (9th-10th centuries), Kirakos Gandzaketsi (13th century) and Vardan Areveltsi (13th century).

Before Draskhanakerttsi, brief information was given by Movses Kaghankatvatsi. It is in fact a pure mention of the name of a certain Hovhannes Vardapet. Modern scholars identify him with Hovhan Odznetsi, who later became Catholicos. After Draskhanakerttsi and before Gandzaketsi information about Hovhan Odznetsi was also given by Stepanos Taronetsi Asoghik (11th century) and Mikayel Asori (12th century), who describe in detail Odznetsi's theological activity.²

However, we get the first detailed information about Odznetsi from Catholicos Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi who wrote “Armenian History” about two centuries later. The latter reported that Hovhan(nes) Odznetsi became Catholicos after Eghia Archishetsi (703-717).³ After Draskhanakerttsi, one of the main sources regarding the life and activities of Hovhan Odznetsi is Kirakos Gandzaketsi's (1203-1271) “Armenian History”.⁴ Another 13th century historian, Vardan Areveltsi, wrote a special work about Hovhan Odznetsi, called “A Speech on Hovhan Odznetsi”.⁵ In this work Odznetsi is called Patriarch Hovhan *Udznetsi*.

In special studies Hovhan Odznetsi's folklore image was first thoroughly addressed by famous ethnographer Yervand Lalayan, who wrote down field folklore materials in Lori, Odznetsi's birthplace⁶. After Lalayan, in the Soviet period, folklorist Tamar Gevorgyan brought new versions of stories about Odznetsi in the general folklore collection on Lori.⁷ They are most likely influenced by Y. Lalayan's versions.

Hovhan Odznetsi's folklore image was analysed in separate publications by Astghik Israyelyan, Lilit Simonyan and others.⁸

Historical Context

The period preceding the reign of Hovhan Odznetsi was quite difficult for Armenia. The country had neither a king nor a unifying prince. At the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th century, Arab troops occupied Armenia and the capital of Dvin,

² See Papyan 1998: 9-10.

³ Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi 1996: 102-104.

⁴ Kirakos Gandzaketsi 1961; 1982.

⁵ Vardan Areveltsi 1888.

⁶ Lalayan 1903.

⁷ Gevorgyan 1999.

⁸ Israyelyan 2001; Simonyan 2015; Dalalyan 2020.

creating the administrative unit of *Arminia* within the Arab Caliphate.⁹ The province of Arminia included Armenia, Virk and Aghvank, and the Armenian Catholicos was recognized as its main political figure.¹⁰ Unlike the patriarchs of Syria and Egypt, the Armenian Catholicos was considered first of all as political figure.¹¹ For this reason he was invited to the capital of the Arab Caliphate to meet with the caliph.

There is a certain disagreement in historiography around the person of the Arab caliph. Kirakos Gandzaketsi calls him *Heshm*, while Vardan Areveltsi calls him Umar (and Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi does not mention any name at all¹²). Thus, according to medieval Armenian historians, Hovhan Odznetsi's visit to Damascus took place either during the reign of Umayyad caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (717-720) or caliph Heshm/Hisham (724-743).¹³ A. Ter-Ghevondyan was in favor of Caliph Umar II (717-720), considering that the visit would be improbable during Hisham's rule.¹⁴

Catholicos Hovhan Odznetsi managed to ally with Muslim Arabs and with their help to drive Chalcedonism out of Armenia: it was destroying the unity of the Armenian Church. This makes Odznetsi one of the most prominent spiritual figures of the early Middle Ages; his fame resounded not only in Armenia but also in the whole region. This is the reason why a separate epic poem was dedicated to Odznetsi, which has reached the present day both in writing and orally.

Odznetsi and the Illegal Child

This episode is known only in the records from Lori¹⁵ where it says that "Ohan Odznetsi" lived in Odzun and had a milkmaid who was a widow. It so happens that this woman gives birth to a son and people began to doubt Odznetsi. Odznetsi gets very insulted and on the eighth day of the child's birth served mass in the church, during which the child miraculously spoke and says that he is the son of shepherd Ohan. The people repent and fall at Odznetsi's feet, but the latter, nevertheless, puts a small curse on the people of Odzun, so that they never become too rich or too poor. And he leaves the village of Odzun, climbs Mount Ardivi and becomes a hermit. But since from there he sees Odzun every day, which reminds him of the unfair gossip of the villagers, he goes down to the gorge and founds the monastery of Ardivi. This episode is closely connected to the legend explaining the origin of the name of the village of Ardivi, in which also the main character is Hovhan Odznetsi¹⁶.

⁹ Yeghiazaryan 2008.

¹⁰ See Ter-Ghevondyan 1977: 73-74, 79-82; Miqaelyan 2004: 27-30.

¹¹ Ter-Ghevondyan 1965: 41.

¹² Just like Draskhanakerttsi, Stepanos Taronetsi Asoghik and Samuel Anetsi make no mention of the name of the Arab caliph (Ter-Ghevondyan 1977: 83, comm. 47).

¹³ See Miqayelyan 2004: 27.

¹⁴ Ter-Ghevondyan 1977: 83, comm. 47.

¹⁵ Lalayan 1903: 217-218.

¹⁶ Ephrikyan 1902: 283; cf. also Ghanalanyan 1969: 182 (№ 482).

Odznetsi and the Pythons of Ardvi

To this day this episode was told as a legend which explains the emergence of the black layered rocky cliffs and the spring called “Snake Navel” not far from the village of Ardvi.¹⁷ According to that legend, two huge pythons appear in the area between the village and the monastery, and they swallowed Odznetsi’s seven deacons one by one. Odznetsi curses the snakes, saying: “Abort the deacons, and turn into stones”. The curse is immediately fulfilled, and the pythons turned into black stone layers in the cliff. Iron water bursts out from the middle of them and it cures leprosy and other diseases. The same legend is briefly mentioned in the 13th century, in Kirakos Gandzaketsi’s work. Here, there is no mention of the seven deacons, but the fact that the spring water comes from the navel of one of the petrified pythons is mentioned more clearly¹⁸.

Armenians and Byzantines

This episode tells how Odznetsi decides to go to the capital of the Arab caliphs, i.e. why the meeting with the caliph takes place. The reason for the decision lies in the conflict with the “Romans”. In old times the Byzantines or in general all the Chalcedonians were called *Romans* regardless of whether they were Greek or Armenian.

The key symbol of this episode is the wheat bread. In the Middle Ages, in order to emphasize national and ethnic differences, it was customary to characterize them with various components of identity, among which an important place was held by the diets and dishes of different peoples. The use of wheat and millet or barley was considered a significant difference between the *Romans* and Armenians, the first of which was typical of Armenians, and the second - of *Romans*. The latter, as it is told in the epic poem, exercised their dominant position and forbade Armenians to bake wheat bread.

A poor old woman begged a *Roman* miller to give her wheat bread for her only son who was dying. The miller made an indecent proposal to the woman. The poor woman, offended, went to Odznetsi and asked him for justice¹⁹. In Lori and Javakhk²⁰ it was told that Odznetsi did something and miraculously two (or three) loaves of bread appeared in the wall cupboard. He ordered the servant to give them to the woman. Thus, Odznetsi not only acted as a defender of justice and patron of the poor, but also opposed the *Romans*, and by his actions directly connected to wheat, the symbol of national identity.

Handsome Look

Along with inner virtues, historians pay great attention to praising Hovhan Odznetsi’s appearance, starting with Draskhanakerttsi. There are significant miraculous elements in the description of Odznetsi’s features. This shows that two centuries after

¹⁷ Lalayan 1903: 218-219.

¹⁸ Kirakos Gandzaketsi 1961: 70; 1982, 61; cf. also Ghanalanyan 1969: 62 (№ 168 A).

¹⁹ Kajberuni 1881: 83-84; Kajberuni 2003: 175.

²⁰ Lalayan 1903: 219-220; Lalayan 1983: 403-404; Lalayan 2004: 217.

Odznetsi's life his image was already fictionalized, and it is possible that Draskhanakerttsi referred to folk or church written sources. Similarly, when writing about Odznetsi, Gandzaketsi also used "church conversations or religious-and-folk stories". In the preface of the critical text of Kirakos Gandzaketsi's work, published with the diligence of famous Armenologist, philologist-folklorist Karapet Melik-Ohanjanyan, it is mentioned that Gandzaketsi greatly valued and used oral sources – folk tales, stories of eyewitnesses and earwitnesses²¹.

According to Draskhanakerttsi, under his outfit Odznetsi wore rough and unbearable sackcloth made of goat hair, not wool, which was called *tspsi*, while on the outside, he was adorned with an outfit made of fine colorful material. He sawed the gold, mixed it with fragrant incense and blew it on his grey beard which reached down to the pockets of his dress²². Vardan Areveltsi also praises Odznetsi's glorious appearance, but there is no mention of his golden beard. Instead, Odznetsi's cruciform sceptre is emphasized²³.

According to a story recorded in Vayots Dzor in the 19th century, "Odznetsi had a golden beard, decorated outfit, under which he wore sackcloth"²⁴. In general, in mythology gold was considered a symbol of heavenly supreme power, solar power and royal supremacy. This meaning of gold is manifested in Armenian, as well as Caucasian and other myths²⁵. The component of gold in Odznetsi's image is not surprising, since at the beginning of the 8th century the supreme power of Armenia, both political and spiritual, was concentrated in his hands.

In the Vayots Dzor story, Odznetsi's golden beard is mentioned for the second time during the soldiers' dedication ceremony. Here it plays a miraculous role, because when Odznetsi kisses the locks of hair on the heads of the skinhead soldiers, "in the middle of the lock of hair, touched by Odznetsi's lips, gold came out, from which originated the name *Kızılbaş*, i.e. golden-headed"²⁶.

Meeting with the Arab Caliph

In the epic poem about Odznetsi of great significance is his meeting with the caliph of the Arab Empire.

According to Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi, Odznetsi was seen by an Armenian *ostikan* (governor) named Vlit²⁷, who told the Arab emir about Odznetsi's grandeur and so the emir wanted to see him. According to the historian Vardan, the high-ranking Arab officials often took part in Armenian Church festivities, during which they repeatedly saw

²¹ Kirakos Gandsaketsi 1961, 49, 51.

²² Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi 1996: 104.

²³ Vardan Areveltsi 1888: 584-585.

²⁴ Kajberuni 1881: 84; Kajberuni 2003: 175.

²⁵ See Dalalyan 2002: 193, 206-207, note 90; Dalalyan 2008: 40-43.

²⁶ Kajberuni 1881: 85; Kajberuni 2003: 176.

²⁷ The name *Vlit* must have been a version of the Arabic name *Valid* (Ter-Ghevondyan 1977: 82).

Odznetsi and put in a good word for him with Emir Umar²⁸. It was after this that Umar expressed a desire to see Odznetsi.

According to Draskhanakerttsi's story, Odznetsi was brought to the royal city with great honor, and the emir sent him a message telling him to dress ordinarily, so that he could see him like that. But Odznetsi went to see the emir adorning his tall figure with more shiny outfit, making his newly whitened beard look like a bouquet of golden flowers and holding in his hand the golden-painted scepter made of ebony wood²⁹.

At first the Arab emir did not have a positive attitude towards Odznetsi's external splendor, but when he saw the rough sackcloth under his outfit, he honored Odznetsi, presented him with luxurious clothing, gave him gold and silver treasures and sent him to Armenia. Odznetsi lived for several years and died after having spent eleven years on the patriarchal seat³⁰.

According to Gandzaketsi, Hovhan Odznetsi's modest behavior and words had such a great influence on Emir Heshm that the ruler honored and paid his respects to Odznetsi. He also guaranteed that Christians would be exempt from taxes and would be able to freely exercise their faith everywhere and no one would force them to renounce their faith. In return, the Armenian nation would submit to him politically. Heshm signed this agreement with his ring and sent Odznetsi back to Armenia with great gifts and troops. Then, with the help of the Arabs, the Armenian Catholicos persecuted and drove out all the Byzantines from Armenia, "both the overseers and the soldiers". Thanks to this he was able to effectively fight against Chalcedonism and re-establish the holidays established by Gregory the Illuminator³¹.

According to Vardan Areveltsi, Umar, trembling, astonished by Odznetsi's glorious appearance was able to come to his senses and asked Odznetsi a question only after a while. Then there took place almost the same dialogue that is described in the works of other historians. As a result, Odznetsi showed Umar the clothes he wore under after which Umar ordered to call all the sick ("deprived") in his troops, whom Hovhan Odznetsi healed on the spot. Umar promised to do anything Odznetsi pleased, like a son. At Odznetsi's request, Umar provided him with troops. With the help of Smbat Kyuropaghat and Arab regiments Odznetsi persecuted all the Byzantines "out of the Armenian world"³².

According to the version recorded in Lori, Odznetsi asks the caliph of Baghdad for help. When the latter sees the "clothes" with small nails under Odznetsi's outfit, a drop of blood falls on the caliph's blind eye, after which his eye immediately recovers. Then

²⁸ Vardan Areveltsi 1888: 584.

²⁹ Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi 1996: 105-107.

³⁰ Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi 1996: 106-107.

³¹ Kirakos Gandzaketsi 1961: 67-69; 1982: 59-61.

³² Vardan Areveltsi 1888: 585-586.

Odznetsi heals the caliph's leper hands. The delighted caliph promises to grant him any favor³³.

In the Vayots Dzor version, "Hohan Odznetsi", seeing the sufferings of the Armenians from the Byzantines, goes to the city of Madinah to seek help from the Arab caliphs, with whom he was already acquainted³⁴. In the story titled "Okhan Otsneli" known from the northwestern province of Bznunik of Lake Van, Otsneli is the leader of the Manazkert region, and his ally is Turkish *Mehmet*, who is later often referred to only as *Mamad*. According to the story, his residence is in Sham (Syria), although he is considered a Turk, not an Arab. Okhan Otsneli's opponent is the king of Urum, i.e. the emperor of Byzantium, and his name, *Costanos*, is mentioned several times³⁵.

"Witchcraft paper"

According to the Vayots Dzor story, the caliphs of Madinah consult and decide to give Odznetsi financial aid, not people. Odznetsi agrees and to determine the amount of money writes on a small piece of paper, and asks to give him money the weight of the paper. The consultants, seeing that, laugh out loud, surprised that Odznetsi intends to drive the *Romans* out of Armenia with money equal to the weight of a piece of paper. However, when they start weighing, the whole amount of the caliphs' treasury does not suffice, that is why they decide to provide manpower to Odznetsi. They impose the condition that Odznetsi should compensate the Arabs by giving them seven Armenians for each killed soldier. Odznetsi accepts this condition as well³⁶. Approximately the same episode is told in the Lori story, where the caliph of Baghdad gives Odznetsi 500 soldiers³⁷.

Odznetsi and His Troops on the Bridge

The bridge and the river play a central role in the rituals of dedication. On the bridge, Hovhan Odznetsi manages to solve the tricky problem of not sacrificing seven Armenians. In the Vayots Dzor version, it is said that together with the Arab army, Odznetsi comes across a large river. He crosses the bridge and at the other end of it he prays to God and asks that the shadows of the soldiers who are to die or be killed should be reflected in the water of the river without their heads when they cross the bridge. God fulfills his wish and shows these soldiers without heads. Odznetsi picks them out and sends them back. And after crossing the bridge the soldiers of the rest of the army line up, and the Armenian army joins them. Here the dedication ritual of kissing the soldiers' heads takes place³⁸. *The Lori version tells that Odznetsi returns*

³³ Lalayan 1903: 220; see also Ghanalanyan 1969: 305 (№ 773 D).

³⁴ Kajberuni 1881: 84.

³⁵ Okhan Otsneli 1898: 412-413.

³⁶ Kajberuni 1881: 84; 2003: 175-176.

³⁷ Lalayan 1903: 220; see also Ghanalanyan 1969: 305 (№ 773 D).

³⁸ Kajberuni 1881: 85; 2003: 176.

*200 headless soldiers to the caliph of Baghdad, and he sets off for Armenia with 300 soldiers. It is at this moment that a cruciform sword falls from the sky and Odznetsi ties it to his back*³⁹.

Cruciform Sword

From the mythological point of view, the motif of getting a celestial sword is one of the most interesting in the epic poem dedicated to Odznetsi. In that episode, Hovhan Odznetsi already plays the role of not only a religious but also a military figure; and according to mythological thinking he is endowed with the qualities of a thunder hero⁴⁰. The motif of receiving a celestial “cruciform” sword in the Lori version clearly reminds of the concepts of Thunder Sword (Tur Ketsaki) and Cross War (Khach Paterazmi) in the epic poem “Daredevils of Sassoun”, as well as the folk stories about the Havluni Sword.

If in the Lori version the motif of the sword is very fleeting, the Vayots Dzor version addresses it in more detail. It says that *“when the Arab army was ready to come to Armenia, Odznetsi appointed a certain Ali as the commander of that army. Ali was a hefty, strong man with fierce red eyes. Odznetsi takes the sword, blesses it with the sign of the cross, and as a sign of the cross, has a cruciform copper piece built and puts it on the head of the sword. Odznetsi ties the sword to Commander Ali’s back with his holy hand and they set off for Armenia together”*⁴¹.

The army led by Hovhan Odznetsi, without losing a single person, persecutes and drives out all the Byzantines, *Romans* from Armenia. After that Odznetsi personally takes the troops to Madinah, gives them back to the caliphs and returns to Armenia.

In Haykuni’s version as well the motif of the sword is fleeting. It tells the story of how Turkish Mamad conquered the world with the sword anointed by Okhan Otsneli (which is why he is called Otsneli - Anointed), got to Istanbul and defeated King Costanos, who was beheaded by Mamad’s servant (Arab). The story ends with the following *“All of them remained under Turkish rule”*⁴². It is obvious that the second part of this version was adapted to the historical realities formed much later than the times of Odznetsi.

Boiling in Saucepan

This episode tells the story of Odznetsi’s revenge against Roman priests. Thus, arriving in Armenia Hovhan Odznetsi’s joint Arab-Armenian army persecutes all the *Romans* and drives them out of its borders. According to the Vayots Dzor story, Odznetsi orders to catch their bishops and patriarchs and boil them in a saucepan⁴³. In the Vayots Dzor story this episode is presented briefly, in just one sentence, while the Lori story reveals its details.

³⁹ Lalayan 1903: 220-221.

⁴⁰ Cf. also Israelyan 2001: 77.

⁴¹ Kajberuni 1881: 84; 2003: 176.

⁴² Okhan Otsneli 1898: 414.

⁴³ Kajberuni 1881: 85; 2003: 176.

According to the version written in Lori, the Greek patriarch was the first to threaten to put Odznetsi into boiling water. As a result, Odznetsi makes the Greek patriarch boil his hand in water. Odznetsi makes the sign of the cross over the water, puts the cross into the water and takes it out without hurting himself. The Greek patriarch, following Odznetsi, puts his hand into the water, but it immediately gets boiled. "This will do as a punishment for you", - says Odznetsi and releases him⁴⁴.

Odznetsi and Vasil

Acting with "*Witchcraft paper*", i.e. with the power of prayer, can be considered one of the most characteristic features of Odznetsi's image. A similar folk story was recorded near the village of Odzun in Lori. It tells that the Byzantine Commander Vasil marched to Armenia with a large army to massacre the Armenians. Odznetsi gives a written note to the sick Vasil, who swallows it with water and is cured. After that, Vasil sends his army back, and he secludes himself in Surb Nshan monastery and leads an ascetic life. One day Odznetsi visits him and by the miracle Odznetsi performs, the spring of Tndots starts flowing from the cave, and its water cures diseases⁴⁵.

The Points of the Armenian-Arab Treaty

According to the Vayots Dzor story, Odznetsi signs a treaty of mutual friendship with the Arabs. According to that treaty, every Armenian had to pay the caliph an annual tax "now equal to twelve coins". In their turn, when Arabs came across any sleeping Armenian they had to stop and cast a shadow on the Armenian to protect him against the rays of the sun with the hem of their clothes until he woke up. In return, every Armenian, coming across an Arab on his way had to get out of the way and give way to him in honor of the Arab race. "*This is how Arabs and Armenians became friends*", - with this Kajberuni's narrator ends the Vayots Dzor story⁴⁶.

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⁴⁴ Lalayan 1903: 221; cf. Ghanalanyan 1969: 269-270 (№ 722).

⁴⁵ Lalayan 1903: 222; 2004: 218; cf. also Ghanalanyan 1969: 104 (№ 281).

⁴⁶ Kajberuni 1881: 85; Kajberuni 2003: 176.

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