
OBJECT, SIGN, TEXT

E. Tsareva

TO THE HISTORY OF TEXTILE TERMINOLOGY

I. ON THE ORIGIN OF TERM *SUMAḤ*

Suggested short article is the first in the series of publications devoted to various aspects of terminology used by the people of Eurasia concerning production and decoration of textile artefacts, in particular connected with genesis and semantics of the incorrectly interpreted or labelled as “untranslatable” nouns and verbs of textile glossary.

One of the most interesting and, as far as I know, little studied areas in the field of textile terminology research concerns the question of how did the widespread names that indicate particular techniques and representative motifs enter textiles' glossaries of different and oftentimes unrelated languages. As a rule, such borrowings take place when people borrow foreign ornaments and methods of textile-making, which samples will be examined in the subsequent articles of the “Textile Terminology” series. However, there are also cases when an evidently existent “native” term was forced out by a foreign one. In Islamic countries such borrowings often have Arabic origin.

Without touching the reasons of this fascinating phenomenon, the article under discussion examines a particular instance of the kind. I mean the word *sumah*, of supposedly Arabic origin (although quite distorted), which is employed in the Caucasian region to indicate a particular type of plain weft wrapping carpet-making technique as well as articles made in this technique. It ought to be noted that the pattern for *sumah* is obtained by means of reminding the “back stitches” supplementary weft wrapping. Each weft of the structure encircles groups of warp threads, which make rows of “braids”, which boldly stick out against the smooth background of the basic plain woven panel (*fig. 1*).

The first attempts at exposing the origins of the term, which were repeated for years from one publication to another, linked it to the name of the city of Şamaxı, in the past the capital of the Şīrwān Khanate and one of the major centres of rug trade in the Caucasus. In 1986 this theory underwent critical analysis by Alberto Boraveleli [1], who referenced the works by Karabacek, Lewis, Mazzini, Ercoli, Jacoby, Emery and Stone [2]. For his

part, Boraveleli discussed in great detail the possibility of linking the term to the name of the widespread in the Caucasus and Middle East plant *sumac* (*Rhus Cotinus* L. or *Venetian Sumach*). Such suggestion, however, is based solely on the similarity of the way the two words sound, and by and large was considered by specialists to be unsuccessful. Another interpretation of the term, which unfortunately did not attract any attention of the colleagues, was voiced by the author of this article in the chapter titled “Caucasian Carpets” of the collective monograph “Peoples of the Caucasus” [3]. The proposed essay argues in greater detail in favour of the reading of the term suggested in 2000. Prior to the given considerations we start with some brief information necessary for the sake of substantiating the theory with data from the history of the regional rug-making industry.

The Caucasian region is the closest neighbour to territories, where archaeologists discovered the most ancient for Eurasia material evidence, which testified to the presence of various rug-making techniques. Such discoveries were made in Anatolia — fragments of eight thousand years old *kilims* from Çatalhöyük [4] and 5 thousand years old Beycesultan findings [5]; close in dating are also the imprints of a patterned rug from burial mound 9, from the natural boundary known as the Three Brothers', the Lower Volga [6]. Dated to the middle of the 3rd millennium BC are textile monuments of Sumer, southern neighbour of the Caucasus [7]; and Assyrian written evidence, which confirm the spread of textile practices to the Southern Caucasus and beyond [8]. Much later, but also much more detailed, witness is given by antique authors, who recount the antiquity and rich forms of Caucasian rug-making, which during its earlier stages had already taken on the form of a well-developed trade on a number of its territories.

Medieval Iranian and Arabic sources from the 8th to 10th centuries paid much attention to the state of handicraft and trade in the countries of the East and Europe. The main objective of such manuscripts was to describe the most significant trade centres of the Great Silk Route, and goods that were produced and sold at local