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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Vasileios SPANOS

HISTORICAL REFERENCE POINTS OF ANCIENT LARISSA.....3

Lucrețiu MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA

THE MOBILITY VECTORS OF SOLDIERS RECRUITED FROM THE RURAL MILIEU IN MOESIA INFERIOR. I. THE INSCRIPTIONS FROM CLAUDIUS TO TITUS.....10

Lev Shir COSIJNS

AM I MY CHILDREN'S KEEPER? EVIDENCE FOR INFANTICIDE IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE.....23

Raúl GONZÁLEZ-SALINERO

JEWISH EXEMPTIONS FROM ROMAN MILITARY SERVICE: A REPLY.....40

Noé CONEJO

THE MATERIALIZATION OF IDENTITY: ARCHITECTURE AND CONSUMPTION IN THE LATE ROMAN VILLAS OF LUSITANIA....45

ARCHAEOLOGY

Harun OY

AN IMPORTANT SETTLEMENT RELATED TO YORTAN CULTURE IN CENTRAL WEST ANATOLIA: KIZILKABAĞAÇ, EŞME, UŞAK... 57

Gayane POGHOSYAN

RITUAL SCENES IN THE ARTISTIC DECORATION OF THE URARTIAN BRONZE HELMETS.....73

Arturo SANCHEZ SANZ

GRYPHOMACHIAS. AMAZONS AND GRYPES IN ANCIENT ART.....77

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Stefanos SPANOS

THE MYCENAEAN POTTERY OF THE TEMPLE-TEMENOS AREA FROM KOUKOUNARIES (PAROS) AND THE CONNECTIONS

WITH THE OTHER CYCLADIC ISLANDS, LEFKANDI AND THE ARGOLID.....87

Ramaz SHENGELIA, Levan GORDEZIANI, Nikoloz TUSHABRAMISHVILI, Nodar POPORADZE, Othar ZOURABICHVILI

DISCOVERY OF UNKNOWN SCRIPT SIGNS IN GEORGIA: THE BASHPLEMI LAKE TABLET.....96

Derviş Ozan Tozluca

WHEEL-MADE TERRACOTTA AND HOLLOW BULL FIGURINES FROM THE KNIDOS TERRITORY.....114

Dávid Petruț, Sorin COCIȘ

DOMESTIC LIGHTING IN ROMAN NAPOCA. THE LAMPS DISCOVERED ON THE SITE AT V. DELEU STREET (CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA).....131

Sever-Petru BOȚAN, Vitalie BÂRCĂ, Sorin COCIȘ

NOTES ON SOME OF THE GLASS FINDS IN THE VILLA RUSTICA OF DEALUL LOMB – CLUJ-NAPOCA.....161

Vladyslav SHCHEPACHENKO

ROMAN GLASSWARE FROM THE AREA OF THE CHERNIAKHIV/SÂNTANA DE MUREȘ CULTURE: TYPOLOGY, CHRONOLOGY AND DISTRIBUTION.....172

Deniz Berk TOKBUDAK

A LAMP-BEARER (?) IN THE FORM OF DIONYSUS FROM ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS MUSEUM.....214

NUMISMATICS

Nathaniel S. KATZ

THE LEGIONARY COINS OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS.....222

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RITUAL SCENES IN THE ARTISTIC DECORATION OF THE URARTIAN BRONZE HELMETS

Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the distinctive iconographical features of some Urartian bronze helmets. The decorations of the bronze helmets occupy a unique place in the decorative-applied art of the Kingdom of Van (Urartu, 9–6 c. BC). Within the article, conical bronze helmets decorated with ritual scenes are described not only as an important element of military equipment but as a ceremonial or votive object as well. The purpose of the study is to discover the possible iconographic interpretations and symbolic characteristics in the artistic decoration of the Urartian helmets. The main goal of the article is to demonstrate iconographic forms as an artistic expression of ancient astrological and mythological knowledge.

Keywords: *Urartu, ritual, decoration, helmet, iconography.*

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The helmets have been found mainly in the places of worship and armoury of palace complexes.¹ The most significant findings for this study are the helmets with the cuneiform inscriptions of the Urartian kings Argishti I and Sarduri II, discovered during archaeological excavations in Karmir-Blur (Red Hill, Teishebanini, Yerevan) in 1947 and 1950.² The helmets are united by the same type and distinctive artistic decoration (Fig. 1). The decoration of these helmets is unique only to Urartian fine-art. From the iconography, it can be said that these helmets were royal offerings to the deity at a certain ritual or festival. This is probably evidenced by the mentions of offering sacrifices to the troops of the supreme gods of the Urartian pantheon,³ as well as the references to weapons in the temple of Haldi in Musasir.⁴

THE ARTISTIC DECORATION OF THE HELMETS

The first frieze in the decoration of the helmets has a “Tree of Life” in the centre and male figures wearing long dresses and horned headgear on each side facing it. Horns play an important role in religious symbolism. According to ancient mythology, horned headgear is a symbol of strength and divinity.⁵ So here we are dealing with the depictions of the divine beings (or maybe priests). The figures in the lower bands are distinguished by their winged and wingless types. The figures located in the upper zone don’t have wings. All the figures are positioned with one hand pointing towards the tree and the other holding a bucket. It is noteworthy that the right hand of the figures is raised,

¹ DEZSŐ/NIEDERREITER/BODNÁR 2021, 128.

² PIOTROVSKI 1950, 67; PIOTROVSKI 1952, 39.

³ HMAYAKIAN 1990, 11.

⁴ DIAKONOFF 1951, 331–333.

⁵ INASS 2022, 247–272.

possibly due to the ancient ritual significance assigned to it. The hand is the most semantic element of the human body. The concept of the “right and left” has always been important in different cultures. The way the hands were positioned carried a spiritual significance.⁶ According to ancient beliefs, the action of the ritual is emphasized in this composition. It is likely that the position of the hands is due to the transfer of spiritual and physical energy.⁷ The representations of the “Tree of Life” in the decoration are identical. A schematic visual approach reveals stylized branches arranged in an arch, reminiscent of a “stelae-like” monument. It is interesting to note that the central part of this type of helmet is dedicated to the depiction of ritual, and in the zones extending beyond the arch, motifs of a secular nature, which is a military episode, are shown. It appears that this iconographic combination has its own symbolic basis, which requires clarification. The iconographic friezes are bordered by a zig-zag fringe. Secular and ceremonial scenes are divided by the lion-headed snakes. In the military parade scenes, Urartian masters were able to obtain dynamic, moving images. This is especially true of the jumping positions of the limbs of horse figures. Here, the use of a constant iconographic scheme is prominent. The position of horsemen and charioteers in the image field of the helmet is directed towards the ritual scene. Apparently, a spiritual theme on the front of the helmet was supposed to protect the wearer from the enemy and evil. It is important to pay attention to the arch surrounding the tree (cartouche), which not only serves as an iconographic approach but also appears to have its own mystical explanation. In addition to resembling a stela in its form, it also echoes the iconography of the firmament, which we later see in Christian iconography. On this particular occasion, it is necessary to draw a parallel between the extension of tree branches towards the arch depicted in Urartian images and the description of the “Tree of Life” in a 16th-century apocryphal manuscript. According to this manuscript, there is a tree full of fruit in the center of Heaven, and its top reaches the sky.⁸ Judging by the branches, the ritual should take place in the spring or summer, symbolizing fertility and life. Here, we are probably dealing with a certain season of the year and the ritual associated with it. It looks like this iconography is based on a particular ritual in which the “Tree of Life” was sanctified. It’s worth noting that in various examples of Urartian art, there are tree images with and without fruits, with branches pointing upwards or downwards. Maybe the liquid in the hands of the figures might be used to revive the lower branches of the trees (the idea of resurrection).⁹ Maybe the bearded figures are associated with the different times of the year. For example, winter as an old man with a beard and spring or summer as a young man without a beard. The humanizing of the seasons exists in fairy tales and mythologies of different cultures.

The bronze helmet from the museum in Gaziantep (Turkey) has the same type of decoration (Fig. 2). The artistic decoration of the helmet is of the same type but differs by its iconographical

features.¹⁰ The front side of the helmet is adorned with lion-headed snakes, and there is only one band with the “Tree of Life” and two figures positioned in the same direction. The engravings of warriors and cavalymen are the same.

Another type of Urartian helmet is decorated with lion-headed snakes on the front in a different way from the discussed versions and has lion-hunting scenes instead of a military parade (Fig. 3, 4). The helmet’s front has four snakes with lion heads inside a double-arch frame. There’s also another snake with a lion head coming down from the top of the helmet. The middle part represents a ritual scene. In the center of the composition, situated on the back of the bull, is a throne of the deity within the ringed wings, resembling the Assyrian god Ashur. In the throne section, the artist used a classical approach to the spatial layout of the image. Figures worshiping and offering to the deity are probably represented. It’s noteworthy that the pictorial elements of all compositional sections are balanced. The characters differ in their clothing and headgear, maybe by their religious position as well. The central winged figure might be the second supreme god of the Urartian pantheon (Teisheba). The motif of the lion hunt bears resemblances to the renowned scenes depicted in the Assyrian bas-reliefs. Is this representation a secular depiction of a lion hunt, or is it a ritual motif that is ideologically connected to the scene? Most likely, we are dealing with a hunting scene, where the symbolic killing of the lion highlights the significant role of the bull. The popular motif of hunting in the art of the ancient East was not only a royal pastime but also a component of royal rites. A record of Tacitus mentions ritual hunting, where it describes chariots intended for night hunting by the order of the god near the Behistun rock (Iran).¹¹ The scene depicting hippopotamus hunting in one of the tomb wall paintings in the Karnak complex (Egypt) is accompanied by a text recording its ritual significance.¹² The battle between the god Ninurta and a lion in neo-Assyrian art is a prime example of an ancient ritual or a legendary hunt. Additionally, seal impressions found in the area of ancient Elam reflect the idea of a hero-god.¹³ Based on the hunting scenes depicted in the palace reliefs of kings Ashurnasirpal II (Nimrud, Iraq) and Ashurbanipal (Nineveh, Iraq), it is apparent that in the ancient East, the royal hunt was accompanied by the pouring of a beverage, whose purpose was to honor the role of the god in a successful hunt and a distinctive form of animal sacrifice.¹⁴ In Assyria, as in Egypt, the success of hunting was equated with victory over the enemy. The significance of this particular ritual of hunting in Urartian iconography can also be deciphered as a representation of the affirmation of one’s superiority through the symbolic slaughter of an animal. This hypothesis derives perhaps from the regularity present in various art samples of the Urartian kingdom. The scenes of royal hunting mainly depict the lion and bull, symbolizing the main deities of Urartian mythology (Haldi and Teisheba). In other words, apparently, we are dealing with the end of a certain phase of the year, the symbol of which

⁶ KOROLYOV 2005, 564–567.

⁷ TRESSIDER 1999, 141.

⁸ AFANASEV 1982, 214.

⁹ BATMAZ 2013, 73.

¹⁰ TAŞYUREK 1974, 179–181.

¹¹ DANDAMAEV 1963, 18–19.

¹² MATIYE 1961, 459.

¹³ GHAEMPANAH/AFARIN/HEYDARI 2014, 142.

¹⁴ ALBENDA 1972 167–178.

is the lion. The deity's enthronement in the foreground basically represents the leadership of the bull over the lion or, more specifically, Teisheba over Haldi, depending on the season.¹⁵ The frequently seen lion and bull themes in iconography were probably associated with the animal cycle created by the ancient people's cosmic concepts. In ancient Eastern and Asian cultures, the summer sun was represented as a lion, signifying the mighty force of nature. For instance, in ancient Babylon, the summer months of July and August were known as the months of fire, with the lion appearing in the zodiac.¹⁶ During excavations, Late Bronze Age belts with lions carrying discs on their backs were discovered in Georgia.¹⁷ The constellation Leo is shown as the lion image with the heavenly luminaries of the Armenian petroglyphs.¹⁸ The text known as «Mul Apin», in which lions and bulls are described among the constellations as the prototypes of today's zodiac, is crucial for understanding Mesopotamian astrology.¹⁹ It can be concluded that in the ritual scene of glorification on the Urartian helmet, the winged figure is the weather-god Teisheba, who represents the sun in the constellation of the Taurus. The constellation Taurus was known to the people of the Armenian Highlands from ancient times, and the bull images of the petroglyphs and Dragon stone (Vishapakar) carvings are evidence of that.²⁰

CONCLUSION

As a result of the study, an iconographic regularity can be inferred from the examination of some Urartian helmets, which can be derived from the imaginative and mythological ideas of the Urartians. Bronze helmets with ritual iconography appear to have been used for ritual purposes. We may infer that we are dealing with the iconography of the rituals dedicated to a specific period of the year, where the deities and their symbolic animals symbolize the months and relative constellations.

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¹⁵ POGHOSYAN 2016, 171.

¹⁶ ISRAYELYAN 1973, 61.

¹⁷ KUFTIN 1941.

¹⁸ MARTIROSYAN 1978, 176.

¹⁹ BARTON 1994, 13.

²⁰ MARTIROSYAN 1973, 37–39.

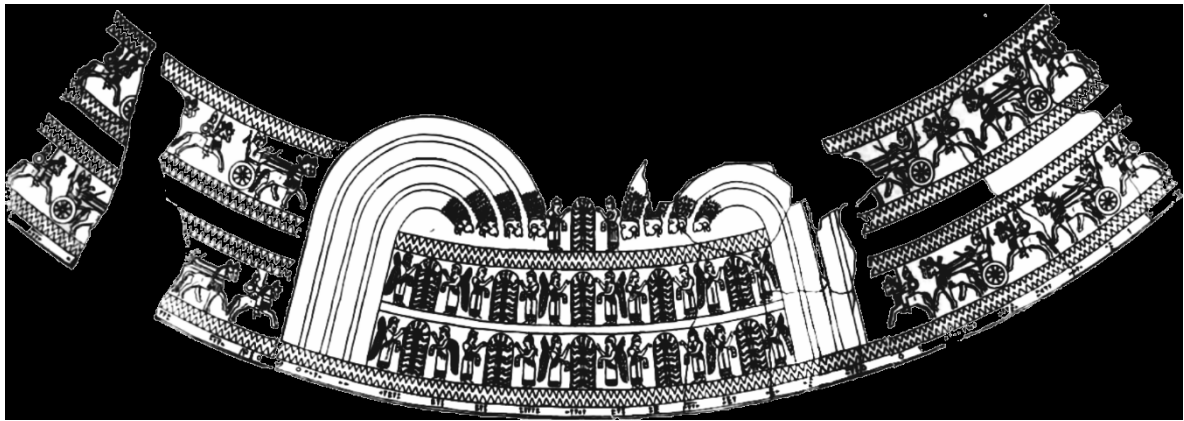


Fig. 1. The drawing of the bronze Urartian helmet of Argishti I, Karmir-Blur, History Museum of Armenia (PIOTROVSKI 1952).

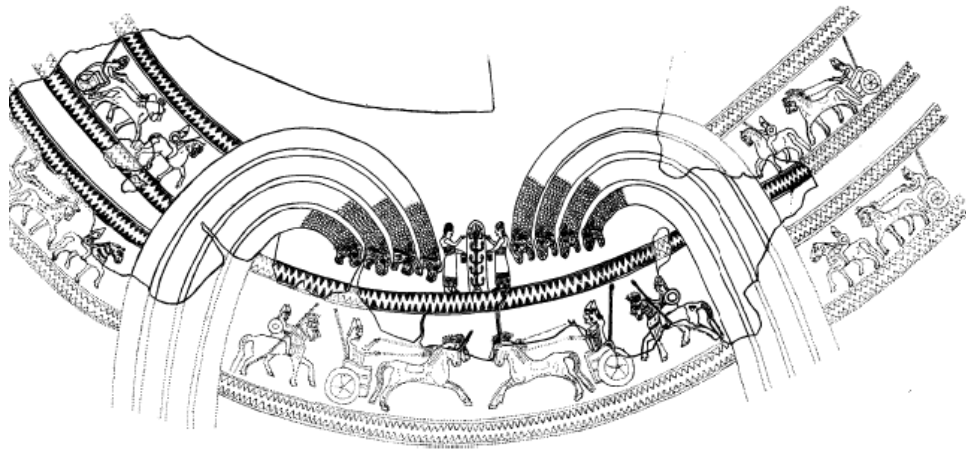


Fig. 2. The drawing of the bronze Urartian helmet, Gaziantep Museum of Archaeology (TAŞYUREK 1974,180).

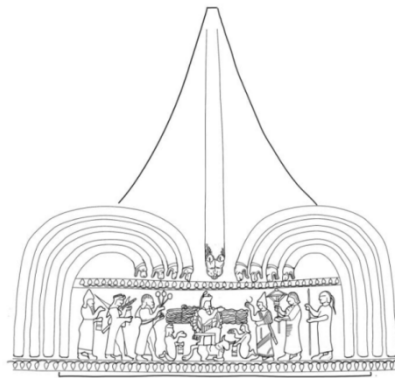


Fig. 3. The drawing of the bronze Urartian helmet, circa 8th century BC, private collection (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5425499>).

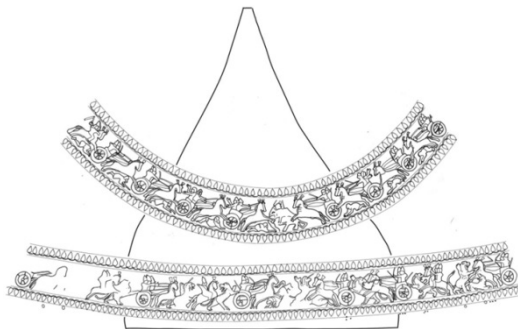


Fig. 4. The drawing of the bronze Urartian helmet, circa 8th century BC, private collection (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5425499>).