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## AN OVERVIEW OF THE OFFERING SCENES IN THE DECORATION OF URARTIAN BRONZE PLAQUES

**Abstract:** The present research examines the sacred offerings depicted in the artistic decoration of Urartian bronze plaques. These plaques, which are devoid of written sources, contain significant information regarding the religious customs of the Kingdom of Van (Urartu, 9–6 BC). It is a known fact that bronze plaque making was the most advanced art forms in Urartu. The shape and the predominance of ritual scenes suggest that these plaques had a cult definition or were used as amulets for protection and good luck. It is possible that iconography on the plaques was chosen based on religious beliefs. The artistic interpretation of the scene of the sacrificing of a goat and offering of a flag to a male deity is particularly worth studying. The decoration of different plaques is dominated by a similar theme. To this day, the true iconographic meaning of the offering scenes on Urartian votive plaques has not been revealed. The main goal of this study is to try to reveal the essence of Urartian religious ceremonies through the iconography. The study involves a comparative analysis, using ancient textual sources from Urartu and neighboring cultures.

**Keywords:** *Urartu, bronze, plaque, offering, Haldi.*

For this study, we consider some bronze plaques discovered during the construction work in the area locally known as “Serbartepe” (Giyimli, Van Vilayet, Turkey)<sup>1</sup>. The plaques are made of thin bronze sheets and generally range in size from 5 to 10 cm (dating back to 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC)<sup>2</sup>. These plaques have holes in the corners, probably intending for fastening. The bronze plaques are mostly square, rectangular and oval in shape (like ancient Greek *pinakes*). Some plaques have a different technique than the “popular or court style”<sup>3</sup> in Urartian art. It can be explained by the existing “folk style”<sup>4</sup>, which differed from the “conventional art”. The decorative surface contains single and multi-figure scenes focusing on worship and offering. According to certain canons of ancient Eastern art, the images are mainly made in profile with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  slope. One plaque<sup>5</sup> is distinguished by its composition over the entire vertical surface of the object, with the upper outer edge decorated with triangular cutouts (Fig. 1). To make the figure of deity look balanced, the artist placed his right foot on the back of the lion and the left one in the middle of its head. The right hand of the male figure is raised with the palm facing upwards, while the left hand possesses a quadrangular object resembling a flag. The woman’s hands are pointed at the deity in a gesture of worship. The

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<sup>1</sup> About Urartian bronze treasure from Giyimli see ERZEN 1974.

<sup>2</sup> TAŞYÜREK 1977, 12.

<sup>3</sup> VAN LOON 1966, 166.

<sup>4</sup> HMAYAKYAN 2011, 16.

<sup>5</sup> The photos of plaques in the article are taken from TAŞYÜREK 1978, Figs. 1, 3, 4.

Uartians used simple artistic means, to convey on these objects the anthropomorphic representation of deities in accordance with their religious beliefs. Despite the primitive and schematic approach to the depiction, Urartian masters skillfully preserved the anatomical symmetry of figures, as well as the precise movement of body parts. Due to the harmonious contrast between linear contours and shapes, volumetric solutions in a planar composition were achieved. The concept of the three worlds—heavenly, terrestrial, and subterranean probably connected to the usage of zigzag pattern and horizontal line on the basis of composition. Ancient Egyptian art often used horizontal lines to divide the planes of a composition; these lines were solid and impenetrable, much like the Earth<sup>6</sup>. Presumably, the plaque shows a scene of sacrificing a sacred goat and a flag to a male deity. It is significant to note that male gods were offered male animals as sacrifices in Urartu<sup>7</sup>. It is possible that this offering scene may be part of important sacred ritual for the Uartians. The goat's predominance on the plaques implies that it had a sacred significance in Urartian religion. On this occasion it is noteworthy that the sun discs on the bodies of goats on some Urartian bronze plaques are evidence of the symbolic connection between goats and sun in the folk beliefs of the Kingdom of Van<sup>8</sup>. According to the cuneiform inscription of "Door of Mher" (Van, Turkey) goats were exclusively sacrificed to the main god Haldi in the month of the solar deity Shivini<sup>9</sup>. According to studies, the "Sun Month of Shivini" corresponded to March, when was celebrated New Year in the Armenian Highlands and Mesopotamia in ancient time. It follows that in artistic compositions, the subject of the offering represents precisely the supreme god of the Urartian pantheon. Here the main argument is the figure of a lion, as, according to the opinion of the outstanding urartologist B. Piotrivski, it was the sacred animal of Haldi<sup>10</sup>. Lion as a sacred animal of Haldi is also accepted by other scholars<sup>11</sup>. Judging by the artistic design of these objects, it follows that the god Haldi was presented not only with sacrificial animals, but also with sacred objects of worship. Objects in the form of a flag in the hands of the depicted figures are most likely an artistic embodiment of the phrase «<sup>D</sup>hal-di-ni-e di-ru-ši-ie» mentioned in the 53<sup>rd</sup> line of the inscription of "Door of Mher". A. Mortman interpreted it as a flag (*di-ru-ši-ie –drosh*) in the Armenian language<sup>12</sup>. In the Kingdom of Van, there was also the concept of "banner of the god Haldi" mentioned in the inscription of the Assirian king Sargon II. It is noteworthy that in the ancient Armenian language the concept of "drosh" meant not only a flag, but also an idol<sup>13</sup>. Thus, it turns out that perhaps the ancient Urartian concept «<sup>D</sup>hal-di-ni-e di-ru-ši-ie» or Haldi's flag is associated with images on ritual plaques. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that the text of the Kelyashin (Iran) Urarto-Assirian bilingual inscription mentions the standard presented in the temple of Musasir (Ardini). A similar plot of

offering a flag or a goat is presented on other plaques (Fig. 2, 3). Judging by the different arrangements of the figures in the composition, it can be assumed that we are dealing with iconographic fragments of the same Urartian ritual. The female figures in front of the god Haldi probably represent the goddess Arubaini mentioned in the inscription "Door of Mher" among the main goddesses of the Urartian pantheon. From the inscription of the Sargon II it is known that Bagmashtu-Aruabaini was revered as the wife of the supreme god of Urartu and the supreme goddess of the pantheon<sup>14</sup>. According to S. Esayan, Arubaini was the main intermediary between Haldi and other gods, introduced petitioners to him and brought sacrificial goats to him<sup>15</sup>. It is also possible that the offerings are made by queens or kings (maybe priests), since on some plaques goats and flags are presented by male figures. The problem here is that the figures depicted on the same level as the deity. The clothing and visual characteristics of the women on the plaques correspond to the Urartian three-dimensional bronze female figurines<sup>16</sup>. It should also not be excluded that mortals are depicted, since in Urartu people represented their gods like them<sup>17</sup>. Based on the presence of a headscarf<sup>18</sup> in all depicted female figures, one can imagine that we are almost certainly dealing with married women. It follows that married women could also participate in the ritual of sacrifice in Urartu. As for the depiction of gods in human form, the tradition here is the same as in Mesopotamia. It is known that in Mesopotamia the gods were always depicted like a human (for example, gods and kings were depicted in the same clothes and attributes)<sup>19</sup>. These votive plaques were probably created in special workshops for temples<sup>20</sup> with special iconographic prototypes.

## CONCLUSION

Research conducted on the Urartian votive plaques iconography had led to some new theories. As a result of a comparative analysis of some bronze plaques, it can be assumed that the artistic compositions represent episodes of the popular scene of religious ritual and offering to the supreme god Haldi in Urartu, which probably took place on the day of the spring equinox. An attempt was made to identify flags in scenes with the phrase «<sup>D</sup>hal-di-ni-e di-ru-ši-ie» from the famous Urartian cuneiform text. As the examined objects show, bronze votive plaques, regardless of the technique of execution and aesthetic perfection, were for Uartians symbolic representations of their religious beliefs, probably "like icons" for Christians.

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<sup>15</sup> ESAYAN 1998, 94.  
<sup>16</sup> SEIDL 2004, Tab. 38, a-c  
<sup>17</sup> ESAYAN/HMAYAKYAN 1980, 204.  
<sup>18</sup> Wearing a head covering was a sign of a married woman in Urartu: See POGHOSYAN 2017, 80–81.  
<sup>19</sup> OPPENHEIM 1980, 188–189.  
<sup>20</sup> KELLNER 1976, 53–60.

<sup>6</sup> RAUSCHENBACH 1980, 17.

<sup>7</sup> MELIKISHVILI 1954, 370.

<sup>8</sup> ESAYAN 1998, 89.

<sup>9</sup> HMAYAKYAN 1990, 10.

<sup>10</sup> PIOTROVSKI 1959, 223.

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**Fig. 1.**



**Fig. 2.**



**Fig. 3.**

**Figs. 1-3.** Bronze offering plaques from Giyimli (Hirkanis).