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SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF THE RITUAL SCENE ON THE GOLD MEDALLION FROM TOPRAK-KALE

Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the Urartian (the Kingdom of Van, 9th–6th centuries BC) gold medallion from Toprak-Kale (Turkey). The Urartian medallions known to us are mostly circular and usually adorned with artistic compositions of a religious or mythological character corresponding to the form. The interpretation of the potential symbolic value of the medallion's artistic decoration is the main goal of the study. Iconographic and religious parallels in Urartu and other cultures of the ancient Near East were used for the analyzing of the ritual scene on the cultic object. Within the framework of the article, an attempt was made to reveal through iconography the role of the female deities in the Urartian religious life.

Keywords: *Urartu, medallion, Toprak-Kale, Haldi, Arubaini, worship, symbol, ritual.*

Gayane POGHOSYAN

Institute of Arts, National Academy of
Sciences of the Republic of Armenia
gayanepoghosyan8787@gmail.com

The gold medallion from Toprak-Kale (1 mm thick, 6.5 cm in diameter) is most interesting for study from the point of view of its iconography (Fig. 1). It was found in one of the jars of the wine storeroom during excavations of the German archaeological expedition in Toprak-Kale¹. The surface of the medallion is engraved from the front with a sharp tool after being embossed from the back in a technique specific to Urartian metalworking 8th–7th centuries BC². The round shape is decorated with a convex border along the diameter. The composition is created on a horizontal basis, decorated with a pendent of five buds. Compositional elements are emphasized by convexity relative to the surface. It is obvious that the decoration of this medallion represents a worship scene in accordance with Urartian religious canonic iconography. This is evidenced by the bronze statuette found in Van (Darabey castle) as a three-dimensional representation of the enthroned female figure with a long dress and veil on the left side of the medallion's composition (12x3.1x5.6 cm) (Fig. 2). The thematic repetition in different artistic compositions indicates the significance of the represented female figure (an Urartian goddess or queen³) in the religious life of Urartu. The right hand of the enthroned figure is raised in a blessing gesture and the left holds a branch, which is lost on the statuette. It is not excluded that such figurines served as a worship object in Urartian temples and ritual sites. The female worshipper without divine attributes and accompanying any sacrificial animal is represented standing with raised hands toward the enthroned goddess. The iconographic composition of the "adoration of the goddess" (by the

¹ PIOTROVSKI 1962, 84.

² VAN LOON 1966, 129.

³ BARNETT 1950, 29.

queen or priestess⁴) had probably been a beloved religious theme for faithful people. Real statues of mortal prayers were captured from the temple of Musasir according to the records of Sargon II⁵. The symbolic object in the enthroned figure's hand and the iconographic composition of the worship scene imply that we are dealing with a divinity. It is supposed that the worshipper woman depicted belonged to the upper crust of society. It seems logical that representatives of the royal families or high-ranking people should be depicted in Urartian religious art. Similar scenes with the enthroned figures are also known from the ancient Near East cultures. The enthroned woman must be the main goddess of the Urartian pantheon, who is consistently present in the canonical iconographic system of Urartian art. According to the cuneiform inscription of the Mher's Door (Meher Kapisi, Van, Turkey) the main goddess of Urartian pantheon was Arubaini⁶. Arubaini is also mentioned in records of Sargon II (the king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire) as the supreme god Haldi's wife, but under the name Bagmashtu (Bagbartu)⁷. Presumably, the presence of the veil on the head appears to correspond to the woman's social status according to the Urartian traditions. S. Hmayakyan suggests that young girls did not cover their heads in Urartian culture⁸. The various types of clothing of divinities in the religious iconography may probably be explained by ceremonial differences. R. Dolce supposes a deliberate use of the cloak in a sacred ritual sphere in the Syro-Anatolian area⁹. A special garment could identify a woman as a priestess, as a widow, as a queen or elderly woman¹⁰. In Akkadian and Old Babylonian periods, a veil was worn for marriage rites, but from the Middle Assyrian period, wearing a veil became the attire for a married woman¹¹.

Unfortunately, our understanding about the life of Urartian women has remained obscure in the lack of written sources. Arubaini is the only goddess whose name is referenced in numerous inscriptions, mostly about constructions or laying a garden. Arubaini is mentioned in a rock inscription from Ashotakert (south-east of Van, Turkey) concerning a sacrifice to Arubaini and Haldi on establishing a Susi temple¹². An inscription is also known where goddess mentioned in the form of the god Haldi's spouse¹³. Arubaini's name appears on inscribed steles from Argishtihinili (Armavir, Armenia) and Teyshebaini (Karmir-Blur, Armenia) in a sacrificial ceremony provided for temple building¹⁴. Referring to this fact, S. Hmayakyan considers that Arubaini was probably a goddess of fertility, as well as arts, and crafts¹⁵. I. Loseva interprets the presence of a branch on the goddess' hand as a symbol of a vegetation¹⁶. It is possible that the goddess of fertility could also be perceived as a deity of love and family,

particularly the patroness of prosperity¹⁷. On this occasion it will not be in vain to note that trees have been associated with a woman in different cultures¹⁸. The buds that decorate the horizontal plane on the medallion are most likely connected to the idea of vegetation. The representations of the "Tree of Life", or floral motifs in general, have always been associated with the idea of growth and fertility¹⁹. The examination of the one Mesopotamian seal impression reveals that the tree seems to have had a special symbolic value regarding women²⁰. In this perspective, it would be reasonable to take into consideration the idols with anthropomorphic features and engraved herringbone pattern found in Karmir-Blur or Merdzavan (Armenia)²¹ as pre-Urartian embodiments of the idea "women-tree-procreation-fertility-life". It can be assumed that the medallion as a votive object belonged to a high-ranking woman. It is not excluded that the female figure in front of the enthroned goddess was recognized as the medallion wearer who hoped for birth and fertility from the Mother Goddess (like the Christian imagery of donor portraits). Ancient Near Eastern written sources consist of information on worshipper's confident expectations from their "personal" God's Blessing²². According to the Mher's Door inscription, a cows and ewe lamb were sacrificed to Arubaini²³. On this occasion, in a comparative observation context, it is remarkable that according to the Hittite religious beliefs, cows were sacrificed to goddesses for the sake of sacred purification²⁴. The most notable is the cuneiform inscription on a stela at Guzak (northeast of Lake Van, Turkey), which provides a valuable insight into the celebration of the grape harvest devoted to Arubaini and Haldi²⁵. Later, the tradition of the symbolic blessing of the fruits for the fruitfulness of the earth in the Armenian Highlands was celebrated in the Hellenistic temples of the goddess Anahit and subsequently transformed into the Christian ceremonial rite of the "Blessing the Grapes" following the liturgy of the feast of the "Assumption of the Virgin Mary"²⁶. The type of examined ritual scene with some additional elements is also represented in the decoration of one Urartian silver crescent-shaped pectoral (pendant, h. 3.5 cm²⁷). The main pictorial scene illustrates the pictorial field with eight-pointed star images, flanked on both sides by female figures in adoration position (Fig. 3). From an artistic point of view, composition is symmetrical and appropriate to the shape of the pectoral. Iconographic motifs, as well as the shapes of the medallion and pectoral, all imply their religious meaning. It is conceivable that in the composition, the eight-pointed star represents Arubaini's symbol or indicates the planetary hours of ritual activity. It is noteworthy that stars in Urartian language mentioned as "D'Ardi"²⁸. In this regard,

⁴ Hmayakyan 2005, 7.

⁵ Diakonoff 1951, 333.

⁶ Melikishvili 1954, 371.

⁷ Diakonoff 1951, 332.

⁸ Hmayakyan 2005, 7.

⁹ Dolce 2008, 71.

¹⁰ Otto 2016, 116.

¹¹ Stol 2016, 26.

¹² Harutyunyan 2001, 42.

¹³ Harutyunyan 2001, 56–57.

¹⁴ Harutyunyan 2001, 272, 349–350.

¹⁵ Hmayakyan 1990, 38.

¹⁶ Loseva 1962, 307–310.

¹⁷ Poghosyan 2023, 185.

¹⁸ Vardiman 1990, 70.

¹⁹ Mnatsakanyan 1955, 5.

²⁰ Otto 2016, 117.

²¹ Martirosyan 1958.

²² Stol 2016, 638.

²³ Hmayakyan 1990, 11.

²⁴ Ardzinba 1982, 67.

²⁵ Harutyunyan 2001, 103.

²⁶ Karapetyan 1998, 182.

²⁷ Kellner 1991, 166–167, fig. 2

²⁸ Hmayakyan 1990, 37.

it would be appropriate to highlight that Musasir, the main religious center of Haldi, was called Ardini by Urartians²⁹. It is notable that in this city, there was an area of worship with steles belonging only to Haldi and Bagbartu (Arubaini)³⁰. The eight-pointed star depicted in front of the constellations of Hydra and Leo on the Seleucid astrological tablet is known as “SAG.ME.GAR”-Jupiter³¹. It is accepted that the lion is a symbol of Haldi by various researchers. Therefore, it is conceivable to compare Haldi to Jupiter³². It comes found that the planetary symbol of Arubaini might be Venus (despite the opinion of B. Piotrovskii that Venus was associated with the goddess Sardi³³). In this perspective, it would be interesting to consider in comparison the representations of the eight-pointed star in ancient Near Eastern art, which often appear with the images of the goddess Inana-Ishtar³⁴. The results of the analysis suggest that the Toprak-Kale medallion is more than just a decorative applied art object, but it also represents the unique iconographic interpretation of astrological concepts, in which mortals find their role in communicating with divine creatures.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the study, it can be concluded that the Toprak-Kale medallion with its religious iconography served as an artistic embodiment of the spiritual beliefs for the female wearer. Pictorial elements of this votive item make it possible to obtain information not only about the communication between Urartian women and their goddesses, but it also refers to the religious and astrological imaginations of ancient society. Urartian art represented the spiritual reality of the time through a stable system of religious imagery that believers were familiar with. It can be said that Urartian votive objects, like Christian icons, have been understood as a visible testimony of divine existence.

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- ²⁹ RADNER 2012, 245.
³⁰ ÇAVUŞOĞLU/İŞİK/GÖKCE 2014, 255–256.
³¹ KASAK; VEEDE 2001, 13, fig. 4.
³² HMAYAKYAN 1990, 37.
³³ HMAYAKYAN 1990, 37.
³⁴ COMPARETI 2007, 206.
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Fig. 1. Gold medallion from Toprak-Kale (VAN LOON 1966).



Fig. 2. Bronze statuette of a goddess from Van, Darabey castle (History Museum of Armenia).



Fig. 3. Silver crescent-shaped pectoral (KELLNER 1991).