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**ARTISTIC COMPOSITIONS COMBINED WITH HIEROGLYPHIC
INSCRIPTIONS IN URARTIAN DECORATIVE AND APPLIED ART:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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Abstract

Introduction: The article is dedicated to the analysis of compositions combined with hieroglyphic inscriptions attested in several examples of Urartian decorative and applied art. In the written culture of pre-Christian Armenia, hieroglyphic writing stands out as a distinct phenomenon. Although some researchers have addressed the subject, the scarcity of Urartian hieroglyphic finds has thus far prevented a systematic study. The research examines rare examples of decorative art containing hieroglyphic inscriptions, found at sites such as Karmir Blur (Red Hill, Teyshébaini, Armenia), Toprak Kale, Altintepe (Turkey) and other locations. **Methods and materials:** The study is conducted through a historical-comparative analysis, considering relevant scholarly publications, hypotheses proposed by other specialists, as well as analogous parallels preserved in neighboring cultures. **Analysis:** Within the framework of this study, hieroglyphs are examined from the perspective of their pictorial characteristics. **Results:** The study concludes that hieroglyphic inscriptions in artistic compositions carry both textual and symbolic significance corresponding to the objects, and their interpretation is crucial for understanding the applied functions of the objects.

Key words: *Urartu, decorative and applied art, hieroglyph, composition, symbol.*

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ՄԵՀԵՆԱԳՐԵՐՈՎ ՀԱՄԱԴՐՎԱԾ ՀՈՐԻՆՎԱԾՔՆԵՐՆ ՈՒՐԱՐՏՈՒԻ
ԴԵԿՈՐԱՏԻՎ-ԿԻՐԱՌԱԿԱՆ ԱՐՎԵՍՏՈՒՄ . ՀԱՄԵՄՏԱԿԱՆ
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Գայանե Ռ. Պողոսյան

ԳԱԱ արվեստի ինստիտուտ,

Երևանի պետական համալսարան, Հայ-Ռուսական համալսարան, Երևան, ՀՀ

Ամփոփում

Նախաբան. Ուսումնասիրությունը նվիրված է ուրարտական դեկորատիվ-կիրառական արվեստի որոշ նմուշներում հանդիպող մեհենագիր գաղափարապատկերային արձանագրություններով համադրված հորինվածքների քննությանը: Դիտարկվում են Կարմիր բլուրից (Թեյշեբահինի, Հայաստան), Թոփրակ-կալեից, Ալթին-թեփեից (Թուրքիա) և այլ վայրերից գտնված կիրառական արվեստի մեհենագիր պարունակող հազվագյուտ նմուշները: *Մեթոդներ և նյութեր.* Ուսումնասիրությունը կատարված է պատմաքննական համեմատական վերլուծությամբ՝ քննության առնելով թեմային առնչվող այլ մասնագետների գիտական հրապարակումներ, ենթադրություններ, ինչպես նաև հարևան մշակույթներում պահպանված նմանօրինակ զուգահեռներ: *Վերլուծություն.* Ուսումնասիրության շրջանակում մեհենագրերը դիտարկվում են պատկերագրական հատկանիշների տեսանկյունից: *Արդյունքներ.* Ուսումնասիրության արդյունքում կարելի է հանգել այն եզրակացության, որ գեղարվեստական հորինվածքներում զետեղված մեհենագիր արձանագրություններն ունեն տվյալ հորինվածքներին համապատասխան գրավոր և խորհրդարանական նշանակություն, և դրանց վերծանումը կարևոր է առարկաների կիրառական նշանակության բացահայտման գործում:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *Ուրարտու, դեկորատիվ-կիրառական արվեստ, մեհենագիր, հորինվածք, խորհրդանշան:*

Ինչպես հղել՝ Պողոսյան Գ. *Մեհենագրերով համադրված հորինվածքներն Ուրարտուի դեկորատիվ-կիրառական արվեստում. համեմատական քննություն* // ԳԱԱ ՇՀՀ կենտրոնի «Գիտական աշխատություններ»: Գյումրի, 2026: Հ. 1 (29): 246-253 էջեր: DOI: 10.52971/18294316-2026.29.1-246

INTRODUCTION: Urartian hieroglyphs, as pictorial forms, originated locally and were not used beyond the boundaries of the Kingdom of Van and its sphere of influence. These hieroglyphs are attested in Urartian decorative and applied art up until the collapse of the Urartian state in the early 6th century BCE. Urartian hieroglyphic signs were discovered for the first time during the excavations of Toprak Kale, on pottery and bronze vessels [15, p. 285]. From an artistic perspective, they are distinguished by textual linear system constructed from simple geometric forms and figurative motifs (including human and animal figures, objects, as well symbols). An example of notable cultural interaction is the presence of Hittite-Luwian hieroglyphs on certain Urartian objects [11, p. 18]. Hieroglyphic symbols have been found on seals, metal bowls, statuettes, votive plaques, pendants, pottery, weapons, and other objects. Scientific interest in Urartian hieroglyphs has been shown by Lehmann-Haupt, B. Piotrovsky, A. Waiman, P. Calmeyer, L. Barseghyan, Z. Ghasabyan, and others. I. Meshchaninov, while studying the ancient writing

systems of the region and opposing the views of various researchers, attempted to demonstrate that before cuneiform was adopted, the Urartians had used hieroglyphs as a writing system as early as the 9th century BCE [10, p. 55]. According to the scholar, the Urartian hieroglyphic system had a local character. Perhaps among the few studies specifically devoted to the Urartian hieroglyphs are the works of R. Barnett [2] and A. Movsisyan [11]. Movsisyan's study is the first comprehensive work on the subject. Another important primary source for analysis is H. Martirosyan's study on prehistoric signs, in which the author observes the pictorial and hereditary development linking rock carvings, Urartian hieroglyphs, and medieval signs [12]. Hieroglyphic inscriptions are attested on bronze vessels, plaques, and pottery found at Altın Tepe [7] (fig. 1). Linear hieroglyphic texts are also found on seals discovered at Çavuştepe (Haykaber, Turkey) [6]. For the figurative motifs in these inscriptions, created under certain Hittite influences, simple geometric forms (circles, quadrilaterals, etc.) and combinations of dotted lines were used. Of particular interest are seven of the sixteen bronze bowls discovered in the northwestern section of Hall A of the Karmir Blur citadel, which bear cuneiform and hieroglyphic inscriptions in the central area of their rims, accompanied by images of a tower and lion heads. One of the bowls is notable for a seven-character hieroglyphic composition on its base, which, according to A. Movsisyan, was initially published upside-down by B. Piotrovsky, thus entering scholarly circulation in that orientation [11, p. 13; 16, fig. 3 a] (fig. 2). L. Barseghyan also interpreted this hieroglyphic composition in the same orientation, suggesting that it is divided into three parts [3, p. 240]. By comparing the eye and gate-like pictograms in this hieroglyphic composition with similar symbols, it can perhaps be assumed that B. Piotrovsky's original presentation of the composition may indeed be correct. Regarding A. Movsisyan's interpretation of the spear image, it is not impossible that the pictograms in the composition could have been arranged in various orientations, as is evident in the depiction resembling the Tree of Life, which was used in the Armenian Highlands from the 3rd millennium BCE up to the "անթառսուճ" (antaram, in Arm., unfading) symbols in medieval manuscripts. This floral motif also appears in Hittite hieroglyphs with the same symbolic meaning [4, p. 97]. It is possible that the bowl with this hieroglyphic composition, judging by the images, was intended for sacred libations before the gates of the supreme god of the Urartian pantheon Khaldi, for life and well-being [3, p. 243]. The author does not rule out the existence of a sacred structure at Teyshebaini, as suggested by the discovered ritual vessels. It is also possible that the images combined with a crescent symbol may have indicated a particular time of day or season of the year, perhaps serving as a symbolic depiction emphasizing a libation festival. This hypothesis may also be supported by L. Barseghyan's suggestion that the branch-like hieroglyph on the right side of the composition may have represented the concept of the "year", like a comparable cuneiform sign [3, p. 241]. L. Barseghyan interprets the eye-like image as an animal head, likely symbolizing an animal intended for sacrifice. Another sign in the composition is interpreted by the author as a hieroglyphic sign denoting a deity, analogous to a cuneiform symbol. In this composition, the sign depicted beneath the crescent is already known from a hieroglyphic inscription discovered in Armavir (late 2nd millennium BCE) [9, p. 6, fig. 6]. On another bowl, a composition of three sign clusters is presented [16, fig. 3 b]. A similar arrangement is also found on a silver bowl's rim discovered in 1952 in Hall 36 of the Karmir Blur citadel, reflected in mirror image [16, fig. 3 c]. This composition likely functions as a pictorial-symbolic system performing both sign and ideographic functions. According to A. Movsisyan, this image serves as a symbol of the god Khaldi, with the bull representing Teysheba and the horse perhaps representing the sun. P. Calmeyer, noted the placement of the lion-head image at the beginning of the text, suggesting that it may have served as a reference or calibration indicator. In

Urartian hieroglyphs, the most frequently occurring captions are those accompanied by a tower. According to A. Movsisyan, the tower image in Urartian hieroglyphs was used as a determinative, indicating a large structure, building, fortress, or temple. Since the tower is not decisive for determining the orientation of the inscription, it can be read from top to bottom, also considering the central bull's head in the inscription [11, p. 13]. According to A. Movsisyan's study, in the case of horizontal writing, the direction from right to left should also be considered [11, p. 23]. The author identified at least five tower determinatives. Artistically, these images are bipartite in structure, consisting of a lower base resembling a tower and a vertically rising element, which can be compared to the outlines of a spear or a Tree of Life. With the addition of the Tree of Life, symbolizing life and immortality, the image denoting a large house could have been interpreted as a temple or the house of a deity, and perhaps read together with a lion-head as a temple of Khaldi. A. Movsisyan is likely correct in suggesting that the bronze bowls with such symbols were intended for sacred use. In the case of the spear image, it could perhaps be interpreted as representing the house of Khaldi, the house of a god, or a temple, suggesting the armory symbols of the Khaldi temple at Muşasir. In some cases, the images are highly schematized and, even with stylistic variation, do not resemble the outlines of a tower or a Tree of Life. Here, the interpretation and semantic combination of the images may be problematic. Lion-head pictograms are frequently found on the bowls discovered at Karmir Blur. According to A. Movsisyan, these images were depicted at the beginning of the cuneiform inscription, while the tower, which is also frequently observed, was added later. In our view, judging by the structure of the artistic composition, the tower was intended from the outset (although there may be exceptions), because on some bowls, in the circular cuneiform text adapted to the diameter and shape of the bowl, certain sections are left blank, apparently to accommodate the tower image (in some cases, the textual section is complete, and the tower appears to have been inserted separately from the main textual composition). Notably, the tower image is positioned above the lion-head, and in some cases, the lion-head faces to the right, in another case to the left, which apparently has symbolic significance. From an artistic perspective, one bronze votive plaque from Giyimli (Turkey) is also noteworthy (fig. 3). The plaque measures 9.9 cm in height and 9.1 cm in width. The rectangular composition is adapted to the shape of the object, and the corner holes for attachment. In the left section of the composition, the main figure is likely depicted — a deity seated on a bull throne. The figure is shown wearing a patterned long garment, with a horned divine crown on the head. The headdress and general appearance resemble the bronze statuette of the god Teysheba discovered at the Karmir Blur (fig. 4). According to S. Petrosyan, the bull-shaped pedestal of the seated deity cannot yet serve as justification for identifying it as a symbol of the god Teysheba, arguing that the animal is gentle and not a storm-associated bull. According to the author, it represents a symbolic support of the cosmos. According to this hypothesis, the deity embodies the sun, which exists both under the earth and in the sky (sunrise, sunset). S. Petrosyan, referring to the three objects held in the deity's hand, suggests that they are bird feathers and are associated with the sun [14, p. 31]. The researcher further proposes that the sun deity seated on the throne is depicted as the supreme deity, while Teysheba and the Mother Goddess are depicted in front of him. Among the standing figures, the second is identified by the author with the goddess of Arubaini, by comparing the hieroglyph above her head with the symbolic concept of medieval “Նշանագիրք իմաստնոց” (Nshanagirk Imastnoc in Arm., Book of Wisdom) [1, p. 241] (the word is also explained as meaning pure, holy) [13, p. 636]. According to the author, here there is a tripartite cosmic arrangement: the bull-shaped pedestal represents the underworld, the crown represents the sky, and the body and throne represent the earth. R. Barnett, who published the plaque, identifies the seated deity as Khaldi [2].

S. Hmayakyan, in his book, objects to R. Barnett's identification, citing the symbolic bull of the god Teysheba [5, p. 112]. The eye-like figure in the composition is interpreted by S. Petrosyan as the thunderous eye of Teysheba [14, p. 35], while the crescent depicted above the goddess' head is read as a hieroglyph representing the Mother Goddess. According to A. Movsisyan, there are eighteen hieroglyphs present here. S. Petrosyan's interpretation was not accepted at the time by A. Movsisyan. In the deity's left hand are objects, while the right hand as usual, is raised in a gesture of blessing. Four human figures, with different attire, height, and characterizations, are directed toward the deity. All their hands are raised toward the deity in a position of worship. It is evident that, as an artistic narrative, the composition depicts the act of worshipping the deity. Morphologically, it is canonical for Urartian art. In the composition, the presence of hieroglyphs perceived as ideograms also carries an artistic function, located in the upper part of the composition and above the heads of the worshippers. The first figure, by its clothing and head ornamentation, resembles the deity. According to A. Movsisyan, the figures standing before the deity do not belong to the same class [12, p. 152]. Interpreting these figures as deities would likely be incorrect, since it is improbable that one deity would worship another. In addition, it is important to consider that in the Kingdom of Van, kings were perceived as representatives of the deity on earth and were also depicted in divine attire in visual art. As further evidence, one can consider the sun-disc above the heads of the front figures. Here, hieroglyphic symbols likely reflect pictorial information related to the content of the composition. Such a phenomenon is known in the Armenian Highlands from the rock art, in which the pictorial language of ancient humans was simple: a combination of image and symbol was used to convey a specific message, which had cognitive and psychological foundations [18, pp. 6-7]. The sun was considered the protector of the royal household, and in the composition, it likely symbolizes the sun-king or royal authority. It is also improbable that the deity would stand on the same level as ordinary mortals, and here it is evident that we are dealing with a human group. The fourth person may be someone working with the text, most likely a scribe or a priest. It is also possible that the star-shaped symbol above this figure's head serves as an ideogram indicating a priest or worshipper [12, pp. 12, 13]. The triangular sign above the human figures (incidentally, the left-hand figure in the second row of the lower inscription, resembling a hand, is also represented with the same sign) is perhaps known from the hieroglyphic two-line inscription at Tsolakert (Armenia) [9, p. 7]. In terms of pictorial content, the composition on this plaque resembles a mysterious sculptural relief that was once published by G. Levonyan (its discovery and current location are unknown) [8, pp. 69-70]. A. Movsisyan also examined another bronze plaque, where the composition is rectangular (fig. 5). The plaque features a decorative cut at the top, and the artistic scene is arranged horizontally on a zigzag surface. In the left section of the composition, the deity identified as Khaldi, stands on a lion, while facing him is a female worshipper with her hands raised toward the deity. She is probably a goddess, since in the case of a queen, tradition required that she be depicted accompanied by her husband, the king (but this is not certain). Between them is a sacrificial goat, and the deity's left hand holds a raised standard, while the right hand, as always, is in a gesture of blessing. On the right side of the composition, above the head of the female figure, there is a hieroglyphic inscription, which, according to A. Movsisyan, is probably the four-character or four-syllable name of the figure [12, p.151]. There is an interesting pattern in the compositions: a leftward orientation, which may be related to right-to-left writing conventions. Although S. Petrosyan considers the identities of the figures depicted on the plaque to be definitively established in his article, it is difficult to fully agree with the author's conclusions. First, it is questionable whether the figures worshipping before the enthroned figure on the first plaque are

deities or representatives of the elite. The next issue concerns the second standing figure, which the authors interpret as female, whereas in well-known Urartian artistic compositions, female figures, especially principal goddesses, are typically depicted with a traditional veil [17].

CONCLUSION: Thus, it may be concluded that the placement of hieroglyphs in Urartian artistic compositions is closely linked to the emphasis of the significance of the depicted figures. Urartian hieroglyphic iconography reflects the influence of the iconographic and symbolic systems of the Armenian Highlands and neighboring cultures.

Illustrations

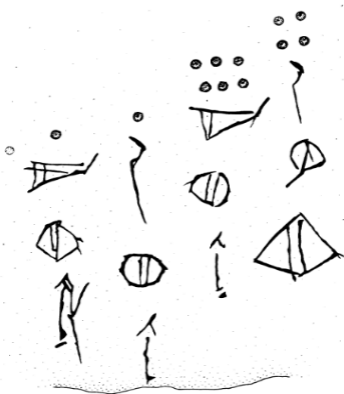


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

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