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## ASSYRIANIZING ELEMENTS IN THE IRON AGE CULTURES OF THE HIGHLAND: THE DECORATED BRONZE BOWL FROM THE YEGHEGNADZOR HOARD\*

**Keywords:** bronze bowl, Urartu, Assyria, Yeghegnadzor hoard, Armenia, Vayots Dzor Regional Museum, Armenian - Italian archaeological research.

### Introduction

During construction work carried out in 1989 for the construction of a cheese factory in the Armenian town of Yeghegnadzor (Vayots-Dzor Province), several objects, mainly metallic, were found and immediately interpreted as Urartian grave goods.<sup>1</sup> Of these objects, the two bronze belts had undoubtedly the most success in the specialist literature, while many of the other objects seemed of little scientific importance. The first publication of this discovery was in a brief article written by S. A. Yesayan and O. S. Xnkikyan in 1990, entitled “Nakhodki biayniskikh izdeliy v Yekhegnadzore” (Urartian objects in Yeghegnadzor) (Yesayan - Xnkikyan 1990), published in Russian and entirely devoted to the description of the material; the only other work on these objects was

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\* Received 03.10.2022, sent for review 18.01.2023, accepted for publication 07.07.2023.

1 The authors of this contribution would like to thank Boris Gasparyan and Artur Petrosyan who helped in the creation of this study, which was conducted on the original materials between 2018 and 2019 in the context of the activities of the Vayots Dzor Project, an Armenian-Italian archaeological mission. Another thank you is to Karen Azatyan, the director of the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum, not only for giving us permission to study the materials, but also for actively supporting us in documenting the materials together with Artavazd Khachatryan. The archaeological activities in Vayots Dzor have been conducted thanks to the financial support of ISMEO (through the “Progetto MUR quinquennale. Storia, lingue e culture dei paesi asiatici e africani: ricerca scientifica, promozione e divulgazione”), MAECI, IAE NAS RA and Gfoeller Renaissance Foundation. The content of the present article has been developed jointly by both authors. In particular, A.S. Bonfanti has written “Iconography” and “Analysis and parallels,” while R. Dan has written “Reconstruction of the Archaeological Context” and “Description of the Bronze Bowl.” Introduction and Final Remarks were written jointly. All the pictures have been drawn and prepared by R. Dan.

published by O. S. Xnkikyan in 2002, a brief text in a section dedicated to the Iron Age in the region of Syunik (Xnkikyan 2002, 94–96 and pls. XCIV–XCVI). As a result of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Science of the Republic of Armenia (IAE NAS RA), the Vayots Dzor Regional Museum (Եղեգնաձորի երկրագիտական թանգարան), and IS-MEO – the International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, in 2018 an extensive project to study the material kept in the Vayots Dzor Regional Museum was launched, as part of the activities conducted by the joint Armenian-Italian mission called the Vayots Dzor Project (VDP). A total of fifty-eight objects were discovered, of which fifty-five were in metal, bronze and iron, and only three, a seal and two potsherds, were made of other material. In this article, the authors will present a particularly significant object as part of the Vayots Dzor Regional Museum collection, an almost perfectly preserved bronze bowl with the depiction of a kneeling bull incised in the center.

### Reconstruction of the Archaeological Context

Little information is available regarding the discovery of the Yeghegnadzor material. Brief reports are given in the two main publications on these objects (Yesayan-Xnkikyan 1990. Xnkikyan 2002, 94–96. pls. XCIV–XCVI). According to these authors, in 1989, during construction work near a cheese factory and a car servicing building, now mostly dismantled, a tomb was unearthed but destroyed (Yesayan-Xnkikyan 1990).

The place of discovery was visited on July 13th 2018, in the context of the Vayots Dzor Project (VDP), an Armenian-Italian archaeological research activity in the Vayots Dzor Province of Armenia, and listed under the code VDP059 (Gasparyan et al. 2016, 149 and 160). The site is located on the south-eastern edge of a high rock spur on the south-eastern outskirts of Yeghegnadzor city. The exact findspot is unknown, but the dismantled remnants of the cheese factory are still visible<sup>2</sup> on the north side of the Yerevanyan Highway connecting Yeghegnadzor with Malishka, and there we placed the approximate location of the discovery. According to the available information, the data recorded by the scholars were almost entirely based on the oral description given by the workers involved: during their work, some large basalt slabs were found and interpreted by Yesayan and Xnkikyan as a cist grave dug in the ground with missing capstones. During a brief survey of the place of discovery, the scholars identified only two potsherds, dated to the Iron Age, which were collected but are now lost. As no other significant archaeological feature was detected in this area, investigations were not continued, but the objects found were taken to the Vayots Dzor Regional Museum, directed at the time by G. Amiryan (Xnkikyan 2002, 94). According to the scholars, the objects were buried inside the pithos (of which only a small fragment of rim survived and was collected), a tradition typical of the Urartian (Yesayan-Xnkikyan 1990, 84) and post-Urartian periods. However, there are contradictions in the report of the discovery: the first relates to the description of the pithos which, according to the scholars, originally contained the

2 Coordinates: 39°45'26.39"N 45°20'32.36"E; elevation: 1230 m a.s.l.

material. The vessel is, in fact, described as small, but it is impossible that a small pithos could have contained the 57 artefacts (once 58, of which one vessel fragment has been lost) kept in the Vayots Dzor Regional Museum. And indeed, the affirmation that burials in pithoi are typical of the Urartian culture cannot be fully supported.<sup>3</sup> The objects belonging to the Yeghegnadzor deposit are mostly weapons, arrowheads and spearheads, but a bronze bucket, two decorated metal belts and a carnelian seal should be mentioned as they are particularly relevant findings.

From the study of the objects found, and on the basis of the few contradictory pieces of information reported in the original publications, we interpret the discovery at Yeghegnadzor as a possible hoard of objects that cannot be reliably connected to a burial. Firstly, there is no mention of the discovery of human bones.<sup>4</sup> However, the aspect that mostly disproves the burial hypothesis is the type and quantity of objects found: not only this number of objects would be unusual for a burial, but also the extreme variety of the artefacts strongly suggests that they are not grave goods. This discovery should therefore be added to the list of metal hoards found in the Armenian Highlands, together with Zakim and Guşçi.

We are unable to establish whether there is in fact a connection between this material and the important burial ground of Joj Dar (Oganesyan 1986, 435. Oganesyan 1987, 27–28), excavated by the Erebuni Museum in 1984 and 1985 under the direction of V. Hovhannisyanyan. In all, the excavations unearthed 30 tombs, mainly stone-box type graves with abundant grave goods; they cover a time period between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The human bones were poorly preserved. Nine of the ten graves excavated in 1985 belong to the Early Iron Age, dating to the 10<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

### Description of the Bronze Bowl

The decorated bronze bowl, almost completely preserved, has been catalogued by the authors while preparing the publication of the whole hoard with the code YGZ01. Its Vayots Dzor Regional Museum catalogue is instead 1304/4110. The bowl has a diameter of 19 cm, and its walls are ca. 0.1 cm thick. Its shape can be classified as a shallow bowl. Some parts of its base are corroded, and the body is broken in two places. The rim, slightly everted, has the same width as the rest of the vessel and starts from a swelling of the body; it can be clearly seen on the right side of the vessel, which is better preserved. The base is not perfectly flat, but is instead rather convex. On the lower right side of the base there are two holes, ca. 1 cm apart: the left one is 1.6 cm from the rim, and the right one is 1.1 cm from the rim. In correspondence to the right hole there is a little break. At the center of the base, on the inside surface, there is an incised drawing of a kneeling bull facing right; the front legs are flexed, while the back legs are straight. The depiction of the four legs is very detailed, with indication of the leg joints and hooves: the knees of the flexed front legs are drawn as two small circles. The body and the tail of the bull are

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the *pithos* burial of Armavir (Tiratsyan 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Although it might, of course, have been a cremation burial, a practice well attested in Urartu.

decorated with incised points and lines; the tail is hidden behind the left back leg and ends next to the hoof. The bull's head is depicted in detail: the nose, mouth, right ear, eye and eyebrow can be clearly seen. The right horn has the shape of a crescent, oriented towards the rear of the bull. Around the bull, there is a frame composed of two concentric zig-zag lines: at the end of every segment of the zig-zag there is a small dot. It can be seen that the bull was incised before the realization of the circular decoration framing it. In the center of the bowl, the point where they placed the rudimentary compasses that served to ensure the frame's circularity is still visible. In some cases, the bronze worker has mistaken the orientation of the lines of the decorative zig-zag frame and redone them, essentially leaving two lines instead of one.

## Analysis and Parallels

### Shape

Another bronze bowl, plain but belonging to the same type, was found among the objects of the hoard (YGZ02).

About 150 bronze bowls have been identified in Karmir-Blur (Piotrovskiy 1952, 55–63, pls. 18. Piotrovskiy 1966, 259, pls. XXXIV. Piotrovskiy 1969, 155, fig. 97–98. Piotrovskiy 1970, 17. Wartke 1993, 90–113, figs. 39 and 53), and other similar ones in Çavuştepe (Çavuşoğlu et al 2018, fig. 9) and Ayanis (Çilingiroğlu-Batmaz 2013, 197, fig. 11). About 100 bear inscriptions by several kings Minua, son of Išpuini (6 specimens; CTU IV B 5–5), Argišti (I), son of Minua (2 specimens; CTU IV B 8–19, B 8–20), Sarduri (II), son of Argišti (several specimens; CTU IV B 9–18, B 9–19, B 9–20, B 9–21), Rusa (II), son of Argišti (6 specimens; CTU B 12–16). A similar inscribed specimen has been found in Gavar (CTU IV B 18–7). More than 200 hundred metal bowls are known in the specialist literature, most of them in bronze and some in silver. A metal bowl morphologically similar to our specimen was identified in the cemetery of Melekli, among several other metal bowls (Barnett 1963, fig. 23.1). Several other uninscribed bronze bowls have been unearthed in Urartian sites, such as Bastam (Kroll 1988, 157–158, pl. 2.7), Adilcevaz (Öğün 1978, 662–663, 678). Other specimens of unknown provenance are stored in Van Museum (Belli -Salvini 2010, fig. 1), Ahlat (Çifçi-Gökçe 2010, 18, figs. 1–3), Elâziğ (Yazgan 1996 114–119), Adana (Taşyürek 1976, 103–104, figs. 4–5, pls. 9–12); the last one is particularly interesting because a wild goat is depicted on it.

### Iconography

The decoration incised in the center of these bowls is completely different from the one depicted on the Urartian royal bronze bowls, as it usually represents the head of an animal, mainly lions and bulls, surrounded by a cuneiform inscription and surmounted by the depiction of a tower. The tower depiction, in particular, has been the object of speculation on its meaning by different scholars: while B. B. Piotrovskij read it as a tower surmounted by a tree (Piotrovskij 1952, 59), R. Merhav suggested that it was instead a sort of “abbreviation” of the motif of the sacred tree placed in front of a fortress (Merhav 1991, 315–316), as represented on the pillar bases found in Kef Kalesi (Seidl 1993, 558,

fig. 2). Vayman's interpretation hypothesized instead that the two symbols should be read as Urartian "hieroglyphs," with the meaning of "belonging to the fortress," implying the fortress of Karmir-Blur (Vayman 1978, 100). The most convincing interpretation is the one given by Calmeyer (Calmeyer 1979, 183–193), who defines it as the "Lanze des Haldi" and connects it to a representation of the susi temple.

As the depiction of the Yeghegnadzor specimen is unique when compared to other Urartian bowls, one can try to find comparisons among the Urartian iconographic motifs in general. The kneeling bull iconography is actually common in Urartian wall painting, and it is derived from the Assyrian world. On the walls of the so-called "throne room" in Erebuni one can see a painting depicting two kneeling bulls facing each other with a concave-sided square in the middle (Oganessian 1980, fig. 54); from the Hypostyle Hall of the Altintepe temple comes a similar depiction (Özgüç 1966, figs. 14, 20–22). The kneeling bull image is attested once on metal, on a frieze decorated in openwork technique found at the site of Toprakkale (Barnett 1950, pl. VIII.1) with an inscription thought to be of Rusa, son of Argišti (Salvini 2012, 72). The characterization of the bull's coat is similar to that of the bulls depicted on the two belts found in the Yeghegnadzor hoard, but it appears to be more delicate and precise. However, it looks different from the images of striding bulls depicted on the various Urartian shields, which present a different characterization: unfortunately, it is difficult to find parallels because there are no detailed pictures of the Urartian royal shields. As already mentioned, this motif has an Assyrian origin. The Yeghegnadzor bull, with its stylized musculature and anatomy, recalls the animals embroidered on the garments worn by some figures in the palace reliefs (Bartl 2014, pls. 1b, 36a-b). The same image is represented on many other ivory plaques found in Nimrud: the incision found on a plaque fragment from the Nabu temple was probably part of a couple of facing bulls, winged and kneeling (Mallowan-Davies 1970, pl. XXXII.112); another example of a kneeling winged bull was found in Fort Shalmaneser (Mallowan-Davies 1970, pl. XXXIII.127). Both plaques are dated to the 9th century BCE on the basis of the similarities between these bulls and those depicted on the king's garments represented in the reliefs of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. The kneeling animal concept is represented also on other ivory plaques depicting kneeling goats facing each other in front of trees or palmettes from Fort Shalmaneser (Mallowan-Davies 1970, pls. XXXVIII–XXXIX). In Assyrian wall painting, one can see a depiction of a kneeling bull on the walls of the Upper Chambers A and C (Albenda 2005, 16, pl. 3; 17, pl. 5), immediately south of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, sketched by Layard: those chambers are dated, thanks to an inscription, to the time of Adad Nirari III, and curiously the depiction of kneeling bulls in Assyrian painting only dates to this epoch (811 to 783 BCE) (Albenda 2005, 126). Other depictions of kneeling bulls are to be found on a seal/amulet made in black limestone or steatite discovered inside the Southeast Palace in Nimrud,<sup>5</sup> while another seal in serpentine depicts a hunting scene with a kneeling archer and a kneeling bull (Collon 2001, pl. II.20).

5 See the seal catalogued as BM 126409 on the British Museum website.

The zig-zag motif, used here as a frame for the kneeling bull, is quite a common motif in Urartu: it is present on several Urartian artefacts, usually used as a filler or divider between different figurative registers. Urartian objects presenting this decoration are, for example, several helmets found in Karmir-Blur (CTU B 8–10. Piotrovskiy 1955, 26. Piotrovskiy 1960, no. 50–135. Seidl 2004, E. 5, fig. 29) and Ayanis (CTU B 12–10. Derin-Çilingiroğlu 2001, 164 (Cat. 59). Seidl 2004, 41, I. 11. Batmaz 2015, 158, AY.7) on which the depicted scenes are framed by a zig-zag motif. The inscriptions engraved on these helmets date from the reign of Argišti, son of Minua, to that of his successor, Sarduri. The zig-zag motif is also present on quivers, both as a scenes' divider and as the main decoration: again, the dating of these specimens can be traced to the kingdoms of Argišti, son of Minua, and Sarduri, son of Argišti.<sup>6</sup> Also, the zig-zag motif is used on three shields as a divider between the registers: they all date to the reign of Rusa, son of Erimeña, allowing to propose a dating between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The analysis of the zig-zag decorative motif in Urartian royal art seems to suggest that this motif was mainly used during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, starting from the reign of Argišti, son of Minua, and then again during the reign of Rusa, son of Erimeña, in which the motif is again used only as a divider between the main figurative registers (see also Seidl 2004, 122). The zig-zag only appears as the main decoration on two belts, from the Yerevan Columbarium (Yesayan et al. 1991, pl. XVIII. Biscione 1994, 134, fig. 16), and one from Burmageçit (Yıldırım 1991, fig. 10.3–5) which is probably unfinished. The other belts bearing the zig-zag motif, the silver specimen found in Altntepe (Özgüç 1983, 37, pl. XVI, c–d) and the belt from the tomb 425 in the Tli necropolis (Techov 2002, 47, fig. 114. Bonfanti et al. 2021, 50–52, fig. 7), are to be considered Southern Caucasian or “hybrid” examples. The zig-zag motif itself is not a feature of Assyrian art: one should instead look at Caucasian art to find zig-zag motifs, where it can be found on ceramics dating from the Middle Bronze Age period (Sagona 2017, 352), more from the Late Bronze Age (Chantre 1886, pl. 50.3). On bronze objects, a sort of zig-zag is present on several “Transcaucasian” belts (Areshyan 1970, 243, n° 58. Yesayan 1984, pls. 20.59, 22.66), never represented as the main decoration of the scene but rather as a filler or divider motif. An Early Iron Age “Transcaucasian” belt with a zig-zag decoration has been found in the Kalakent Paradiesfestung Grab 48 (Nagel-Strommenger 1985, pl. 22), combining a zig-zag motif with a dotted decoration: this belt finds a perfect comparison in the already mentioned Altntepe silver belt, which may be considered an (early?) import from the Southern Caucasian area. The origins of this motif are therefore not Urartian: if it is clear that the zig-zag pattern has been widely used on Urartian royal objects more than on popular materials, such as belts, this very motif had deep roots in the Southern Caucasian / local sphere.

6 See the quivers and the helmets with cuneiform inscription of this king from Karmir-blur (for example, CTU B 8–10).

## Final Remarks

The Yeghegnadzor decorated bowl can be seen as a unique object thanks to its decoration. While, for its shape, one can see a similarity with the bronze bowls connected to Urartian royalty, the incised decoration in the center cannot be found on other Urartian bowls. This circumstance allows us to formulate several remarks both on the bowl itself and on the nature of the Yeghegnadzor hoard in the context of the Urartian presence in the Vayots Dzor region.

The first Urartian military campaigns in Armenia can be dated to the reign of the king Argišti, son of Minua, in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE: these campaigns are archaeologically documented thanks to the important sites of Erebuni and Argištiḫinili, both located in northern regions of Armenia, namely in the modern-day Yerevan and Armavir provinces. The expansion of the Urartian presence in the southern regions of Armenia is still debated in its chronology, ways and extent: in Vayots Dzor, however, one can find several traces of the Urartian presence, such as the Getap fortress (Melkonyan 2007. Melkonyan et al. 2010. Melkonyan et al. 2017), the Aghavnadzor tomb (Gasparyan et al. forthcoming 2023), and the Yelpin burial and rock-cut complex. The Urartian presence in Vayots Dzor was indeed a reality with archaeological support.

Although some of the objects found in the Yeghegnadzor hoard appear more or less properly “Urartian,” in particular the bowl and the two bronze belts, the cultural interpretation of the entire batch of objects is much more complex. A recent interpretative proposal (Dan-Bonfanti 2022) has re-evaluated Urartian royal productions, leading to the conclusion that only inscribed artefacts, or objects morphologically and iconographically highly standardized, are unequivocally Urartian royal productions. The bowl does not belong to this category of objects.

Most of the finds discovered over the years and considered of Urartian production have been re-evaluated as local products from the zone of the Armenian Highlands and neighboring regions, areas that were subject to systematic processes of Assyrianization from at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The military pressure from and trade contacts with Assyria led to the spread north of the Taurus and east of the Zagros of iconographic elements from the civilizations of northern Mesopotamia, gradually assimilated by the local populations. This process created a fertile background on which the future Urartian culture developed: with the emergence of Urartu and its progressive expansion in Armenia, cultural elements belonging to the Assyrian civilization spread much farther than the original Assyrian sphere of influence. As already mentioned, evidence that the Urartians frequented the Vayots Dzor region can indeed be found from the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This would seem to be supported by the dating of the Urartian tomb of Aghavnadzor, still unpublished, which is said to have been dated with a 14<sup>C</sup> determination. This date fits well with early frequentation in the years of co-regency between Išpuini and Minua (c. 820–810 BCE). Even before the emergence of Urartu, and even more so afterwards, local productions that mixed Assyrian elements and local features circulated, generating hybrid productions that continued throughout the entire Urartian

period, and probably beyond. This can be seen particularly in relation with the so-called “Uartian” metal belts, as they bear decorative motifs datable to different periods of Assyrian history, also preceding the emergence of the Uartian state (see Dan-Bonfanti 2022).

The material from the Yeghegnadzor hoard fits with this picture, as the decorated bowl in particular has elements that are unequivocally derived from northern Mesopotamia and brought to this region by Uartu, but cannot be directly referred to the Uartian royal sphere. We cannot propose precise dates for this hoard, but, in general, it seems likely that these objects were produced, perhaps at different times, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, between the earliest Assyrian references to Uartu and the emergence of the first dynasties in the Armenian Highlands, in particular that of the Orontids. The bowl shows aspects of cultural contamination that also partly characterize Uartian royal art: the iconography of the kneeling bull unmistakably refers to iconographic models found on Assyrian ivories, paintings and reliefs, all dating from the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and occurs together with more typically Caucasian elements such as the zig-zag decoration that frames the bull.

From the data presented here it may be concluded that the bowl cannot be considered as exclusively pertaining to the sphere of Uartian royal art, but should instead be placed within a group of local productions belonging to the so-called Assyrian-Uartian cultural production, which can realistically be dated from the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards, up to the post-Uartian period.

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 ՄՇԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՄ. ԵՐԵԳՆԱՁՈՐԻ ԳԱՆՁԻ ԶԱՐԴԱՐՎԱԾ ԲՐՈՆԶԵ ԹԱՍԸ**

**Հիմնաբաներ.** բրոնզե թաս, Ուրարտու, Ասորեստան, Եդեգնաձորի գանձ, Հայաստան, Վայոց ձորի մարզային թանգարան, հայ-իտալական հնագիտական հետազոտություններ:

Ուրարտական ամենահայտնի նյութերից են բրոնզե թասերը, որոնք սովորաբար ունեն նույն ձևը և կենտրոնում կրում են փորագրված զարդանախշ՝ շուրջը սեպագիր արձանագրությամբ, որը ցույց է տալիս, թե ում է պատկանում: Այս հոդվածը վերաբերում է Եդեգնաձոր քաղաքում (Հայաստան) հայտնաբերված մեկ նմուշի, որը ներկայացնում է միայն կենտրոնում գտնվող փորագրված զարդանախշը. այս զարդանախշն ուրարտական բրոնզե թասերի մեջ եզակի է, քանի որ այն չի հանդիպում որևէ այլ հայտնի նմուշի վրա: Հեղինակները մանրակրկիտ կվերլուծեն թասը՝ ներկայացնելով տարբեր համեմատություններ ինչպես դրա ձևի և զարդարման հետ կապված, այնպես էլ հայտնաբերման վայրի համատեքստում:

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**АССИРИАНИЗИРУЮЩИЕ ЭЛЕМЕНТЫ В КУЛЬТУРАХ  
 ЖЕЛЕЗНОГО ВЕКА НАГОРЬЯ: ДЕКОРАТИВНАЯ БРОНЗОВАЯ  
 ЧАША ИЗ ЕХЕГНАДЗОРСКОГО КЛАДА**

**Ключевые слова:** бронзовая чаша, Урарту, Ассирия, Ехегнадзорский клад, Армения, Вайоцдзорский региональный музей, армяно-итальянские археологические исследования.

Среди самых известных урартских материалов можно найти бронзовые чаши: в основном, они имеют одинаковые формы с клинописью в центре, которая указывает на принадлежность. Эта статья об уникальном экземпляре, найденном в городе Ехегнадзор (Армения), на которой имеется один резной узор в центре, который не встречается ни на одном известном экспонате. Авторы подробно рассматривают чашу с разных точек зрения представляя сравнения формы и декорирования, в том числе в контексте территории, где она была найдена.

*Annarita S. Bonfanti, Roberto Dan*

Assyrianizing elements in the Iron Age cultures of the highlands.  
The decorated bronze bowl from the Yeghegnadzor hoard

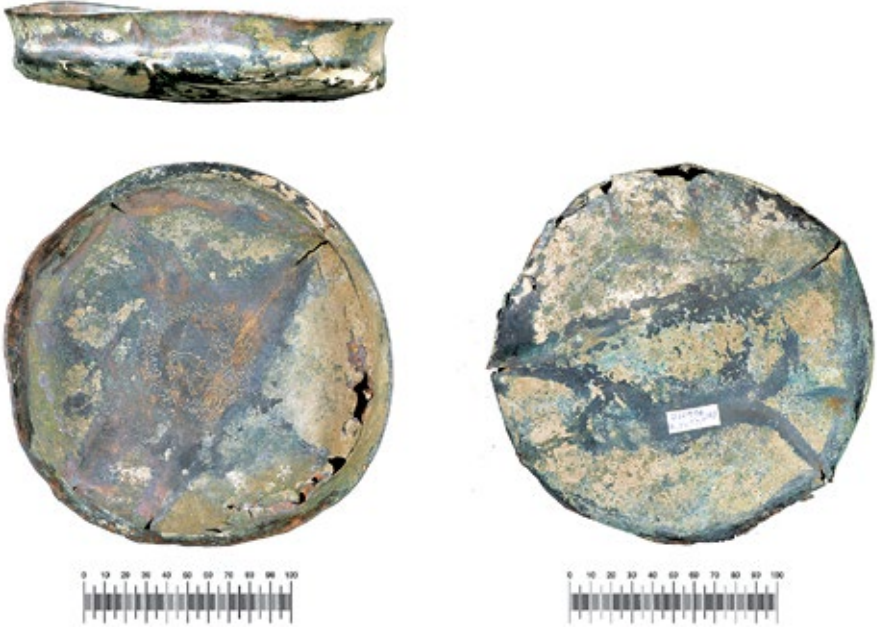


Fig. 1. Views of the decorated bronze bowl.

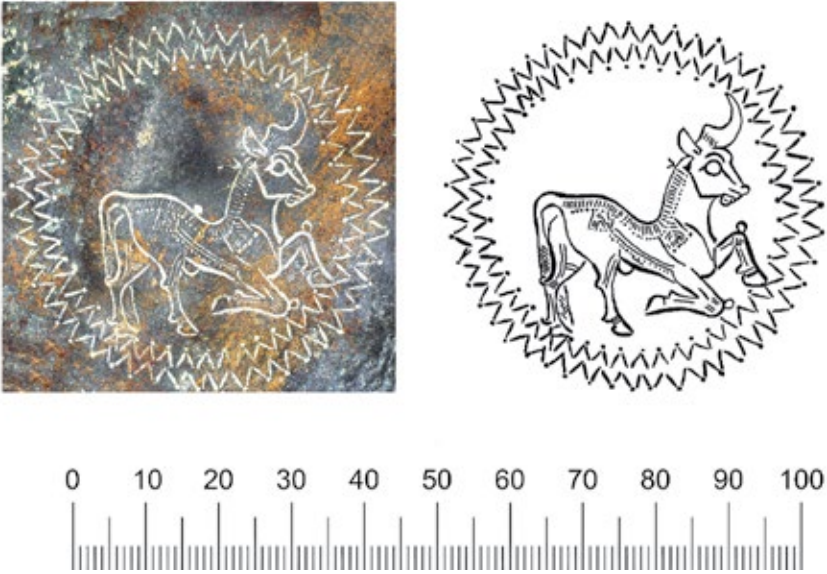


Fig. 2. Detailed view and drawing of the kneeling bull and the circular zig - zag frame.

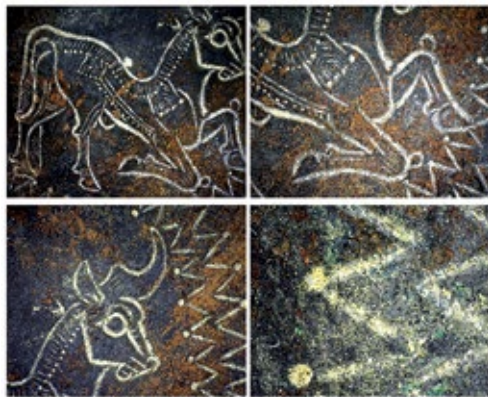


Fig. 3. Microscope views drawing of the kneeling bull and the circular zig - zag frame.



Fig. 4. Microscope views drawing of the kneeling bull and the circular zig - zag frame.



Fig. 5. Depictions of kneeling bulls in Urartian art. A. Wall painting from Erebuni. (Oganessian 1973: fig. 10); B. Bronze plaque from Toprakkale (Barnett 1950: pl. VIII.1).