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PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON A NEW STUDY OF THE URARTIAN ROYAL BOWLS IN THE HISTORY MUSEUM OF ARMENIA*

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Introduction

In the summer of 2022, as part of a cooperation agreement signed between the History Museum of Armenia and ISMEO-The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, a project was initiated for a new study and classification of the Urartian materials preserved within the Museum.¹ The first objects selected for this

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project are 71 bronze bowls with Urartian royal inscriptions discovered during excavations at Karmir-blur/Teiṣebai.URU. These bowls were discovered in 1949 (Piotrovsky 1950, 59–60. Piotrovsky 1952, 20 and 54–64), all found inside pithos n° 5, which was sealed by wooden planks, in storeroom 25, at the basement level of the fortified complex. Their deposition would not appear to be directly referable to a time immediately preceding the final destruction of the fortress (Piotrovsky 1952, 20), but they appear carefully placed and covered at an unspecifiable time between the second half of the 7th century BC and the Achaemenid conquest of Armenia.

One of the reasons that led to the choice of this group of materials is its importance and uniqueness. In fact, these are the only royal bowls currently known to have been identified in regular excavations,² except for a couple of specimens from Ayanis/Rusaḫini-li Eiduru=kai (CTU B 12–17. B 18–10). These objects show standardised morphologies: they are shallow bowls with minimal variations in size and shape, with short epigraphs that allow their attribution to the ruler who commissioned them. Unfortunately, the absence of the use of a patronymic, which instead characterizes most other epigraphs on stone, rock, and metal,³ precludes in many cases their certain attribution to rulers bearing the same names, as in the cases of Argišti, Sarduri, and Rusa. The bowls also present a rather simple but characteristic iconographic apparatus for each individual ruler, an element of great importance in the attempt to subdivide them chronologically in detail.

This new study, introduced in this contribution, which will have as its final outcome the publication of a series of other contributions and a specific monograph, will allow a general advancement in the understanding of some remarkable aspects of the Urartian civilization. In fact, these materials have so far been studied only superficially, at best as a collection of similar objects, rather than individually. As we shall see, each bowl is different from the others, both in terms of iconographic and epigraphic aspects: this study will propose the attribution of some of these objects to “forgotten” rulers of Urartian history. Each bowl will receive a new, unique code, in which the name of the sovereign and the site of discovery are followed by progressive numbering and summarised in the form of an acronym.

In this contribution, we have tried to introduce the most relevant elements that will be systematically developed within the monographic work, presenting some of the most emblematic and representative cases we encountered during the preliminary study of these objects.

History of the Studies

To date, a comprehensive study of the entire set of metal bowls found in Urartu has not yet been undertaken, although they have been considered extensively within various contributions on Urartian art, toreutics, and epigraphy. The first mention of these bowls is to be found in their original publication by B.B. Piotrovsky, in the first and

2 See, for example, Kellner 1976, 85–86.

3 See CTU A and B.

second volumes of the excavation report of the Karmir-blur site (Piotrovsky 1950; Piotrovsky 1952). He mentions the discovery of 97 bronze bowls⁴ within pithos 5, in store-room 25, and then analyses this set of material in more detail within the section on inscribed bronzes in the second volume (Piotrovsky 1952, 54–64). In this section, Piotrovsky reports that the 97 bowls bear an engraved cuneiform inscription with the names of four Urartian kings from the 8th century BC, Minua, Argišti, Sarduri, and Rusa. After this preliminary publication, the bowls are briefly mentioned by Piotrovsky in his study on the Urartian inscribed objects found in Karmir-blur (Piotrovsky 1960); they were not considered in detail for further studies. These bowls, in literature, are usually treated all together and not singularly (see Arutjunjan 2001, 163–168); the only exception can be seen in the volume by U. Seidl, *Bronzekunst Urartus* (2004), where the author lists individually all the metal bowls bearing inscriptions of the Urartian kings and discusses the whole corpus in a section exclusively devoted to its analysis (Seidl 2004, 55–58). These objects are then treated in the fourth volume of Salvini's *Corpus dei Testi Urartei* (2012); here, the bowls are considered taking into account their inscriptions, and for this reason, they are chronologically divided according to the inscribed texts.

Morphological, Iconographical and Epigraphical Description

As already mentioned, the bowls show absolutely standardised morphologies. In fact, they are shallow bowls with a continuous profile, an indistinct rim, and a concave bottom in continuity with the profile. The only exception, from a morphological point of view, is a bowl referable to a ruler named Sarduri, which, although presenting a similar shape, has about ten grooves that make it a unique specimen in the Urartian royal toreutic production (see Dan – Bonfanti forthcoming).

All these bowls are made in bronze, with a varying percentage of tin, the maximum of which was set at 10% (Piotrovsky 1952, 54), an expedient designed to give the objects a golden appearance. The diameter is generally between 16 and 20.6 cm, and the weight is between about 280 and 450 grams. The depth of the bowl varies between 4.3 and 6 cm, while the thickness of the walls is between 0.15 and 0.4 cm.

From an iconographic point of view, the bowls can be divided into two macro-categories: those with figurative decoration and those with no element other than the inscription. The cuneiform epigraphs feature relatively repetitive sentences, with the name of the commissioning king in a circular arrangement.

Problems and Perspectives

From the first approaches to this corpus of materials, a number of problematic issues related to the interpretation of both the epigraphic and iconographic apparatus emerged. At the same time, the authors immediately understood their potential for

4 71 bowls are stored in the History Museum of Armenia, 9 bowls are stored in the “Erebuni” Historical & Archaeological Museum -Reserve, 15 are stored in the State Hermitage Museum, and 1 is placed in the Georgian National Museum. It is not known where the last bowl is stored; however, it could be located in the Pushkin Museum.

revealing several discussed aspects of the Urartian kingship. The first significant aspect is referable to the attempt at a new chrono-typological organisation of these bowls; in the past, with rare exceptions (Seidl 2004, 18), these objects have been attributed to the most celebrated rulers of the Urartian royal dynasty. However, these bowls should not be attributed to only four rulers but they certainly belonged to a larger number of Urartian kings: the new chronology of the bowls proposed is based on a careful analysis of the epigraphs, both in terms of their content and paleographic aspects, and of the iconographic apparatuses, which appear to be somehow personalised according to different periods. Already in the early stages of this study, at least three cases of great interest have been identified, which will be discussed in this same contribution, involving the new attribution of bowls originally believed to be from Sarduri, son of Argišti, to Sarduri, son of Lutipri, and to Sarduri, possibly the son of Sarduri.

This study provides an opportunity to highlight the fact that most bowls are still completely unpublished, and in at least one case, it has been possible to attribute a bowl that appears to be devoid of inscription, but is in fact simply incomplete, to the sovereign who commissioned it. As part of this study, every single inscription and every single group of cuneiform signs were documented for the first time with a microscope in order to create a graphic record that will allow a timely study of the paleographic evolution of the Urartian cuneiform *ductus* on metal. On a completely preliminary basis, we have recognised at least three different *ductus*, probably belonging to three different periods: one probably more archaic, with “Assyrian” cuneiform signs, one similar to the monumental Urartian cuneiform, and a last one, a probable evolution of the monumental cuneiform, in which features of archaism, such as the elongated shape of the wedges, re-emerge.

The same approach used for the epigraphic section was employed for the analysis of all the iconographic elements. With rare exceptions, the bowls present a standardised decorative apparatus, characterised by stylized depictions of lion heads and architectural structures that have been interpreted in different ways over the years; the exceptions include the presence of heads of other animals instead of lions (bulls, birds) and astral symbols. According to our interpretation, the buildings depicted represent schematic and perspective representations of the Urartian tower temples (*susi*), surmounted by a spear surrounded by elements of various kinds, which in each case refer to the representation of the god Կալդի and his spears on the famous shield of Anzaf (Belli 1999). The lion, especially, but also the bull, can be interpreted in a dual key, both as a symbol of royalty and as an element connected to the religious sphere. The buildings depicted apparently present a standardised morphology, although they are characterised by variable construction techniques and features. The documentation through the electronic microscope and the creation of a new graphic apparatus with high-resolution photos and drawings will allow a detailed analysis of the production techniques of the epigraphs and iconographies through the recognition of the possible tools used for their realisation.

Some case studies

A number of significant case studies have already emerged. These are, in particular, four bowls, three of which have been attributed to different kings named Sarduri, one of which has been substantially read and attributed to Minua for the first time.

The first inscribed Urartian metalwork

The bowl (2010/325; first published in Piotrovsky 1951, 111, n° 5), better analysed in a future contribution by the same authors (Dan-Bonfanti forthcoming), is one of the most significant items among the corpus of metal objects found in Urartian excavations. As far as its morphology is concerned, the object has traits of absolute uniqueness: it is, in fact, a peculiar ribbed bowl with a characteristic use of the grooves, few in number and widely spaced, in comparison with all other known ribbed bowls.

Its inscription shows traits of archaism that are very rare in Urartian epigraphy on metal: it only features a cuneiform inscription that allows it to be identified as the property of a king named Sarduri, and it doesn't present any iconographic elements that characterise the great majority of the Urartian royal bowls. The inscription presents a ductus characterised by well-incised and elongated wedges, which refers to the Neo-Assyrian cuneiform ductus, as already noted by B.B. Piotrovsky (Piotrovsky 1952, 56 n° 5). All of these elements (the peculiar and unique shape of the bowl, the "Assyrian" ductus, and the absence of further iconographic features) concur in assessing this object as a production referable to an early phase of the Urartian historical period, ascribing its ownership to king Sarduri (I), son of Lutipri, who can be dated to the second half of the 9th century BC.

This interpretation, which substantiates an original insight by Ursula Seidl (Seidl 2004, 55), means that this inscribed bowl can be recognised as the oldest metal object attributable to Urartian workshops bearing an inscription in the Urartian language. The object may therefore be considered as a sort of missing link between the introduction of Assyrian cuneiform, supposedly by Sarduri (I) himself, and the later developments attested from the time of Išpuini, considered to be the ruler who adapted the Assyrian cuneiform script to the Urartian language.

A hidden inscription of Minua

Another bowl (2010/3252) appeared to be devoid of an epigraph, but closer examination with a microscope revealed the presence of small preparatory incisions to an epigraph that was never realised. The practice of making incisions before the actual realisation of the inscription was well-established in Urartu, as is visible in dozens of bowls, in which preparatory marks are still visible despite the final realisation of the inscription. This was due to the fact that the metalworker, probably the same person who made the preparation marks, decided at a later time to make the final signs in a slightly different position than planned. In sporadic cases, preparatory marks are also visible within the final cuneiform signs. The study of the positioning of the preparatory marks allowed us to recognise an incomplete bowl attributable to Minua, son of Išpuini.

Two bowls belonging to Sarduri (III)

The last case study we would like to discuss here concerns two bowls bearing cuneiform inscriptions qualifying them as the property of a king named Sarduri (2010/322. 2010/3210), traditionally attributed to Sarduri (II), son of Argišti (see, for example, Piotrovsky 1951, 111, fig. 6. Seidl 2004, 49, fig. 10.b). A careful analysis of the cuneiform *ductus* and iconographic apparatus would suggest that these bowls should not be included in the large group of those belonging to Sarduri, son of Argišti, but should be attributed to another Sarduri, who, however, cannot be the son of Lutipri for two essential reasons. The first concerns the fact that all the bowls predating the time of Argišti (I) do not present any iconographic element; on the other hand, the cuneiform *ductus* of these two bowls presents elements that seem to be unattributable to a period prior to the 8th century BC, presenting unmistakable elements of resemblance to the *ductus* attested on a small group of bowls bearing the name of a ruler named Rusa, a king who reigned after Sarduri (II), son of Argišti. The hypothesis on which we will work wants to attribute these two bowls to Sarduri (III), son of Sarduri, attested so far only on a fragmentary shield from the same Karmir-blur (CTU B 16–1).

Conclusions and Perspectives: The Most Iconic Object of Urartian Royalty

The Urartian royal bowls constitute a unique and extraordinarily interesting group of materials. They are, in fact, the only known objects that were definitely the ruler's personal property and were most likely used in the ruler's daily life with a drinking or eating purpose.

The origin of the Urartian royal bowls can be detected in those processes of Assyrianization that began in the middle-Assyrian period, and found their climax thanks to Sarduri (I). As for the inspiration and reference models to which the Urartians looked, one can refer directly to the figure of the Assyrian king Aššurnāširpal II, ruler of Assyria between 883 and 859 BC (Frahm 2017, 615), who is depicted several times holding a bowl on the reliefs of his Northwest Palace in Kalḫu/Nimrud. The king is most often depicted in the act of drinking, in audience or ritual situations, when he is represented between winged genii. A substantial difference between Assyrian and Urartian bowls is the material from which they are made, which in Assyria is essentially precious, such as gold and silver (Dan-Bonfanti forthcoming; Hussein 2016), whereas in Urartu it is solely bronze, whose high percentage of tin inside makes the bowls appear to be golden.

The later developments in the tradition of making these bowls are also interesting: it is important to note that the two traditions, Assyrian and Urartian, diverged in later centuries, as is the case with most of the Urartian adoptions from Assyria. If, in fact, we are aware of a series of extraordinary objects made of precious materials referable to the Assyrian queens of the 8th and 7th centuries BC found in their tombs at Nimrud, which allow us to observe how the tradition continued substantially unchanged over the centuries. In Urartu, on the other hand, we see a progressive morphological simplification, with a complete disappearance of the grooves, but a greater richness in the iconographic apparatus, with the inclusion of a highly selected set of symbolic elements that will

make, especially from the time of Argišti (I) onwards, the Urartian royal bowl the most iconic and symbolic object of Urartian kingship. In fact, the Urartian bowls are objects made of metal, a production in which the Urartians certainly excelled; they bore cuneiform inscriptions, the highest element of Urartian royal expression; and iconographically, they presented few but highly evocative representations that may show a polysemic interpretation, but were always connected to kingship. The bowls are most likely the most recognisable object associated with the Urartian court.

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Abbreviations:

- CTU A = Salvini 2008.
CTU B = Salvini 2012.

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*Տուշայի համալսարան**Միջերկրածովյան և Արևելքի երկրների ուսումնասիրության միջազգային ասոցիացիա
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*Պավիայի համալսարան**Միջերկրածովյան և Արևելքի երկրների ուսումնասիրության միջազգային ասոցիացիա
as.bonfanti3@gmail.com***ՆԱԽՆԱԿԱՆ ԴԻՏԱՐԿՈՒՄԵՐ ԶԱՅԱՏԱՆԻ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԹԱՆԳԱՐԱՆՈՒՄ ՊԱՅՎՈՂ ՈՒՐԱՐՏԱԿԱՆ ԹԱԳԱՎՈՐԱԿԱՆ
ԹԱՍԵՐԻ ՆՈՐ ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԱՍԻՆ**

Հիմնաբաներ. Ուրարտու, արքայական թասեր, Հայաստանի պատմության թանգարան, Կարմիր բլուր, Թեյշեբաինի, վիմագրություն, հայ-իտալական հնագիտական հետազոտություն:

1949 թվականին Հայաստանում Կարմիր բլուր ամրոցի պեղումների ժամանակ հայտնաբերվել է 97 բրոնզե թաս: Դրանք բոլորն էլ կրում են սեպագիր արձանագրություններ և պատկերագրական տարրեր, որոնք էլ, անկասկած, դարձնում են այդ թասերը ուրարտական թագավորական առարկաներ:

Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է գիտական հանրությանը տրամադրել մի շարք նախնական դիտարկումներ և տեղեկատվություն, որի արդյունքում կստեղծվի այս առարկաների վերաբերյալ նոր մեկնաբանություն: Մի քանի նոր տեղեկություններ ի հայտ եկան դեռևս առաջին ուսումնասիրության ժամանակ, ինչը թույլ տվեց վերակազմավորել ընդհանուր նյութը և առարկաների նոր ժամանակագրական հաջորդականությունը:

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as.bonfanti3@gmail.com***ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ НАБЛЮДЕНИЯ ПО НОВОМУ
ИССЛЕДОВАНИЮ УРАРТСКИХ ЦАРСКИХ ЧАШ,
ХРАНЯЩИХСЯ В МУЗЕЕ ИСТОРИИ АРМЕНИИ**

Ключевые слова: Урарту, царские чаши, Музей истории Армении, Кармир Блур, Тейшебаини, литография, армяно-итальянские археологические исследования.

В 1949 году при раскопках крепости Кармир Блур в Армении было найдено 97 бронзовых чаш. Все они имеют клинописные надписи и иконографические элементы, что, несомненно, делает эти чаши урартскими царскими предметами.

Цель этой статьи — предоставить научному сообществу некоторые предварительные наблюдения и информацию, которые приведут к созданию новой монографии по этим вопросам. Некоторая новая информация была обнаружена еще при первом исследовании, что позволило реорганизовать общий материал и установить новую хронологическую последовательность предметов.