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## Belts in Georgian mythic-ritual system

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### **Abstract**

*The paper studies belt as a part of visual sign system of garment in Georgian cultural context and tries to reveal its symbolic fields in diverse practices; It explores their functioning in different (human and other cosmic) realms and for this purpose, both ethnographic and archeological data are used in the analysis, to show the continuity of tradition.*

*Consequently, the symbolic role of belts is discussed in Georgian mythic-ritual system, sacred poetry and in the archaeological artifacts, in particular on the Early Iron Age engraved belts, on which hunting scenes are depicted.*

*The paper focuses on the concept liminality and tries to find the liminal in the above-mentioned artifacts and in the ethnographic practices. It argues that liminal on the belts is revealed on the décor of the aforesaid engraved belts and that they are associated with idea of labyrinthine path; The same liminality can be found in the labyrinthine round dances that symbolize “vitalized path” on the ethnographic level. Thus, in the both studied cases the ideas of liminality and the labyrinth are revealed in the former (i.e., on the engraved belts) graphically and in the latter (i.e., in the round dance) – kinetically.*

**Key words:** *Hunting, liminal, labyrinth, threshold, the Patron of the Beasts, round dance song.*

The paper studies belt as a part of visual sign system of garment in Georgian cultural context and tries to reveal its symbolic fields in diverse practices; It explores their functioning in different (human and other cosmic) realms and for this purpose, both ethnographic and archeological data are used in the analysis.

The customs preserved in the lifestyles of Georgians and the archeological data found within the territory of Georgia show that belts had a great importance since olden times in *the rites of passage*.<sup>1</sup>

The belts *sui generis* function in time and space of the cultural context. They together with the written and oral lore represent the significant sources in the study of belief systems and religious ideas, that show how these objects shape beliefs and behavior through the orienting visualizations (or better to say through the concepts of figure).

In the semiotic system of the ritual, belt, as a material object, acquires the function of a sign, but as soon as it is withdrawn from the system it again transforms (changes) into a common thing. Generally, the semiotic status of the object can change substantially over time, function differently within one ethnos, as well as for different ethnic groups, and might vary according to the situation [1].

In this regard interesting patterns of the early Iron Age engraved belts (dating from 9<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc BCE) should be analyzed that were unearthed by the archaeologists within the territory of Georgia. The similar artifacts were also discovered in contemporary Armenia and Azerbaijan [2]

Bronze engraved belts attracted the attention of many scholars immediately after their

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *rites of passage* was first introduced into scientific circulation by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) in his work: *Rites of Passage* (1908), in which he classified rites as marking a change in personal or group identity (birth, puberty, marriage, motherhood, or death) and status.[6]. See also, Turner V.[7].

discovery. They were studied primarily as the works of art, and therefore the researchers mainly were interested in the development of form and style in them. Besides, they were also concerned with where and who wore such belts: neighboring Urartians, Hittites or others, women or men, warriors, nobles, officials or ordinary peoples, etc. [3],[4],[5].

At different times, scientists sometimes attributed their decorative details to the sphere of fertility symbols, sometimes they associated them with agriculture and Amirani's<sup>2</sup> epic. For example: cross-engraved rhombic shapes or squares were thought to be cultivated fields, engraved strokes - rain, and the incised triangles were associated with the mountain farming; A special emphasize was made for deer and bulls, as farm animals, etc. They also were related to the agricultural calendar and to the laying of the first furrows, sowing and harvesting, etc. [9], [10],[11]. Later they were associated with hunting in general [12] [13].

In the studies of the mentioned artifacts, the emphasis was made more on agricultural activities or hunting, and less attention was paid to the entourage within which these symbols were placed. The paper aims to show the relationship between the figures of concept and the surroundings; it tries to show the relationship of the pictorial images to the frame that contains significant guide not only of form and style.

The high semiotic status of the mentioned belts can be seen through their features: a). in the decor, which goes beyond the aesthetic framework; b). in the reflection of ancient cosmology; c). in its regulated use, etc. As a subject with a semiotic status it is associated with certain types of myths, i.e. sacred stories and narratives. At the outset, it should be noted that differently decorated each belt carries different information and these artifacts, symbolic in nature, indicate that they are related to ritual.

#### **Belt in ritual:**

Generally, certain types of belts worn around the waist refer to the particular status of its owner and the powers believed to be invested in them. In the same category are arranged votive, initiation or ceremonial belts, which are attested in rituals and traditions worldwide. It, as an embodiment and sign of a certain condition, oath, promise, often takes on sacred or initiatory qualities, and such aspects are manifested in the rituals and traditions of many peoples including Georgians.

The similar symbolism is ascribed to thread, which in Georgian tradition shares the symbolism of the rope and chain in the ritual and as such might be related to the idea of fastening the fate up on humans. E. g. according to the old custom preserved in *Saingilo* (the historical-geographic area of northeastern Georgia, now within the territory of Azerbaijan) on the New Year's Eve the head housewife of the family used to bind a cord around the wrists of the sleeping sons.

To our opinion, in doing so, in this ritual mother (or in some cases grandmother) temporarily assumed the role of a mythological "allotter" (who metaphorically was thought to spin human's fate); According to the native beliefs the ritual had to ensure luck, health and well-being of the sons of the family in the coming year [8].

The old custom of binding a rope around the wrist (in other cases, around the neck, ankles, etc.) on the one hand, may have had protective functions, and on the other, it might be understood as "a tying (binding) means" of desirable destiny and qualities (e.g. longevity, wisdom, health, etc.) or it might be a certain status indicator. Later, such amulets, which were worn around the wrist, neck and (or) waist, took the form of protective bracelets, belts and necklaces [9].

The motif of good or bad luck (or better to say fate) is also revealed at childbirth rituals to which special prayer ritual practices are related. In these rituals girdles of midwives were loosened which were supposed to ease the pains in childbirth. [10].

In the Georgian mythic-ritual system, the belt attached and tied up around the human body has the function of binding fate in addition to protection (more on this, see [11]). Knotted around the waist, it bonds the part to the whole and bonds the individual.

#### **Fastening and unfastening of the belt as a certain mode of expression of transition from**

<sup>2</sup> Amirani is a culture hero of a Georgian epic who often is compared with the Classical Prometheus.

**one modality to another:**

In Georgian tradition, the symbolism of fastening and loosing of belt is revealed in the sacred poetry and is predominantly associated with the name of St George:

"Whose day is today?

St. George's (day)

George walks on the fence with unfastened belt,

And on his footprints,

The poplar tree<sup>3</sup> grows up...

According to T. Jakeli [12], the above quoted fragmentary verse is about St. George who after returning from the battle with the dev-kerpebi (i. e. the mythological giants) supposedly has unfastened his combat belt. According to the researcher, the fastened belt, in contrast to the unfastened one, signifies the preparation for war (cf: "Get ready for war the Cross of Gudani<sup>4</sup> (i.e., St George of Gudani) and gird your sword on your waist") [13].

However, the same may be explained in a different way if we consider other cases in which the belt is fastened or unfastened. At first, it is perhaps important to emphasize that the girdled belt is generally understood as a boundary between the self and the other, and in various cases removing or wearing it had certain meanings, purposes and functions. E.g., as it was mentioned above, it was unfastened by the midwives at difficult childbirth [14] or in the mourning rituals during which the participants loosened their girdles in order to guarantee the deceased peaceful exit to the Nether world (See [15]). The semantic ambivalence of fastening and loosing reveals its connection with the other realm, when it is necessary to penetrate through the other loci and as such alludes to the border / threshold symbolism.

The wearing of belts (like wearing the magic ring or the beads given to the hunter by the Queen of the Woods) is also associated with the motif of fortune and ill-fortune in hunting to which a whole set of beliefs and practices are associated (see more [16]).

Among the various cases described, one common condition is noticeable: the belt (which, among other functions, has the symbolic function of a threshold) is unfastened during the contact with another, foreign realm and becomes a kind of guarantee for communication and contact. Here is revealed the reason why semioticians attribute to the belt the function of a subject-mediator between oneself and the other [17]. Therefore, the above verse may reflect an opening to the other world. (see [24]).

The semantic ambivalence of tying and untying the belt, in our opinion, should point to the threshold symbolism and initiation, for going out of the house (i.e., out of the inner world to the outer world) implies a transition from one modality to another. We also think that the decor of the above-mentioned engraved bronze belts is related to the border symbolism, which seems functionally related to the hunting (see Fig. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Poplar tree is an image of sacred tree often met in the sacred poetry of Georgians.

<sup>4</sup> Gudani is the name of the village in Khevsureti, in eastern mountainous Georgia.

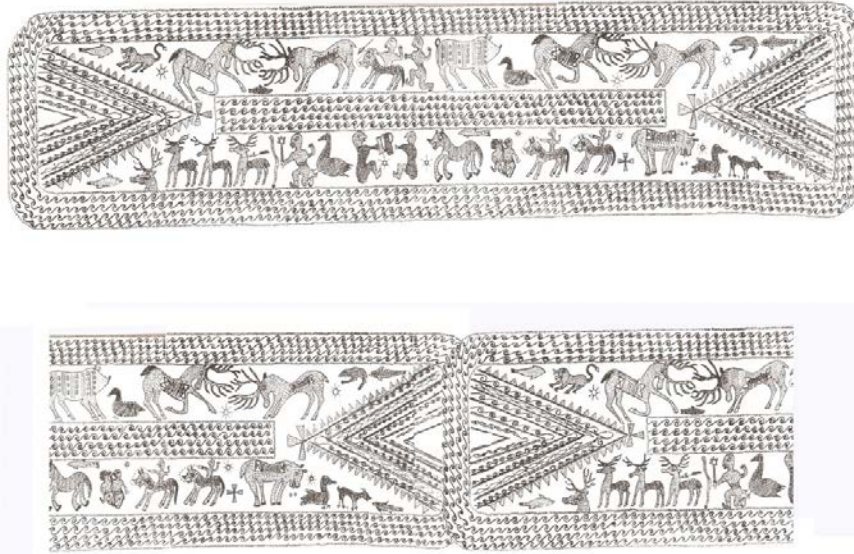


Figure 1. Engraved Early Iron Age Belt from Samtavro Site (Eastern Georgia), Tomb N276  
Georgian National Museum, Inventory Number 12-54/7399

The hunting ritual involves unfolding in two types of horizontal spatial environment – in the inner and the outer space - and therefore, we use the term liminal ( in the meaning of transition point, which was introduced by Van Gennep and later taken up by Victor Turner in anthropology) to study all kinds of social and individual changing processes in time and space; We extend the mentioned term to the hunting ritual as well, and therefore the paper is organized around the questions: where is possible to find the liminal zone in the above-mentioned artifacts and what might the liminal mean in these narrative icons of the artifacts.

Before discussing the liminal, it should be noted that the messages of the above-mentioned belts introduce us in the essence of communication that exists between human/nature worlds and in such relations that are revealed in the oppositions: inner/outer, this world/ the next world, *amieri/imieri* (i.e., time in this world and time in the next world), transient/ intransient, impermanent /permanent, etc.

Georgian specific complex perception, arising from its own nature, is related to the reality of mortals. Accordingly, the relations between *shina* (inner world) and *gare* (outer world) are given in the spatial-temporal pattern and are retold in the histories of hunting, travelling, approaching the sacred center, which are related to the Patron of the Beasts [19]. These transmissions, which imply crossing (trespassing) the liminal zones, are also traveling through time. It is quite possible to gain access to Saikyo i.e., the Outer (Next) world: a). If the individual is initiated and chosen; b). During sacred time (for example during a holiday), or c). During the allowed hunting period, which is associated with the owner of the sacred center (the Hunting deity or the Queen of the Forest) [20].

It is known that the spatial and temporal centers are related to each other [21]. This is the sacred center towards which the hunter strives. The way to reach the sacred center is difficult. It requires preparation: ritual cleaning/washing and wearing clean clothes, sexual abstinence, and, as we think, putting on special attributes (that can be buckle, belt, ring, crown, beads, etc.).

Taking into the consideration the decor and the functions of the belt, we argue that the engraved belt clearly indicates the identity of its owner – the hunter, for the belt as an attribute of the garment should be an index of the owner's status.

Wearing of the belt, as well as the possession of the magic ring by the hunter, which the hunting deity (or the Queen of the Forest) had given to him as to her chosen one, is thought to be associated with good luck and good fortune (see more [22]).

### **Security and adventure while overcoming the maze**

As Walter Burkert puts it, the man ever since the development of hunting has belonged to two overlapping social structures Family and Männerbund: his world falls into pairs of categories: indoors and out, security and adventure, women's work and men's work, love and death [23]. In Georgia, according to the developed rules of culture tradition man and, in particular, hunter constantly used to move between these two realms. The hunter wearing a girdle was supposed to meet danger and overcome it.

The ethnographic descriptions of hunting enable us for more or less reconstruction of the hunting process, which can be divided into the rituals performed at home before going to hunt, entering the forest, hunting the game, and returning home again.

Thus, the first threshold was crossed when the hunter left the house (*shina*).

In order to succeed in hunting, it was necessary to enter the world of the game owner and tame it [24]. Therefore, when leaving the house and entering the forest i. e. the territory of the owner of the game, the hunter crossed the second threshold and performed a ritual prayer under the tree with candles and ritual bread.

After the act of killing the game, the hunter's main concern was to keep a series of rules, which involved skinning of the animal, dividing and sharing it among other hunters (if the hunt was group), making an offer to the goddess and feasting.

In the sacrificial ritual, which is performed after killing the game, the best part of the hunted animal - the heart and the liver – are burnt and eaten there along with a ritual bread, which should be specially baked for this day by a woman (hunter's wife or mother).

After the killing and bloodshed of the hunted animal, it was dismembered and ate; the sacrificed animal's bones were carefully collected and sewn into the animal's skin (in some cases, the animal's skin was laid over the top of a stone, which used to be an old form of sacrifice). The whole practice was thought to be the form of the worship to the goddesses, who was thought to be present at the altar stone, where the sacrificial animal's parts were burnt and the blood was sprinkled.

According to the widespread tradition, the number of wild animals that a hunter had the right to kill was determined by the Patron of the Beasts herself. She and the hunter "made a contract", which like all contracts, implied mutual obligations. The owner of the game had to give the hunter the right to kill the game (albeit in a limited way) and thus ensure a lucky hunt and prosperity; In turn, the hunter had to establish a love affair with her.

### **The patron of the beasts and the hunter:**

The oldness of hunting rules is confirmed not only by artifacts, but also by customs, and in particular by ritual round dances. The oldest example of a round dance dedicated to the Patron of the Beasts, called Shroshana was fixed in Racha and Svaneti (the regions of western mountainous Georgia). The mentioned round dance (*perkhuli*) was recorded at the end of the 19th century. According to the report, it was performed in the Spring and according to the local beliefs the proper performance of it should guarantee a lucky hunt to the hunter [see 25]. Due to the limitations of the format, we will not go into a detailed analysis of the text here for it has been published in full [26]. Therefore, we will limit ourselves here only to the received conclusions. From the round dance song's text, we learn that the hunter has become the chosen one of the Goddess Shroshana. The sign of election is the possession of a magic ring, which the goddess presents him. According to the research, the possession of the ring (one of the emblems and insignia of the Goddess, a sign of the love affair) makes the hunter the "temporal mortal king of wild nature" and opens access for him to the sacred center of the realm. The ring presented by the goddesses is usually considered a material proof of their love affair, and later this ring on the finger of the hunter's wife hints of his betrayal. The fact of betrayal turns the hunter's fate upside down. Thus, the possession of a ring, according to a certain opinion, is simultaneously associated with good fortune and ill-fortune and this is known from the so-called killed hunter cycle (see [27], [28], [29], [30]).

Thus, the hunter is a privileged member of the society, who being the favorite of the goddess, is allowed to approach the sacred center, arrive the heavenly state, and for a limited period of time reach wholeness.

The hunter's making the way through the forest and meeting the goddess, entering into an auspicious contract with her, and thereby gaining fortune, transforms him from the ordinary to the extraordinary, the chosen one.

### **Labyrinthine "Ornaments" in the Round Dances and on the Bronze Artifacts:**

The wholeness is also expressed by the above-mentioned circular round dance rituals, performed by a certain society. Besides the hunter the whole society participated in the aforesaid round dance because according to E. Virsaladze, by these dance the cosmic event - the coming of Spring was celebrated [31]. The analysis of the text allows for another interpretation, namely, the round dance, that was performed by the entire village, can be interpreted as a magical act, which was supposedly performed before a group hunt, which was thought to bring good luck to the entire village.

It is argued that the choreography of round dances also reveals the symbolism of labyrinthine constructions. Certainly, the access in the sacred center was difficult and a hero (in this particular case a hunter) had to overcome the labyrinthine difficulties. Thus, it is inferred that the text of the round dance in question is an invocation of the Goddess; and as for the choreography of the round dance it is a magic means of overcoming the difficult path, which has to be trodden by the hunter. It is supposed that the performance of round dance song had to help the hunter to overcome the difficulties and obstacles on his way to the sacred grove, and the performance of the round dance or magical maze dance and the possession of magic belt (together with the magic ring) helped the hunter in this perilous quest. Symbols manifested in myth of the cycle of the killed hunter and ritual (circular dance) performed in mythologized situations are also found in archaeological visual materials from Colchis.

Here we have in mind the inscription on the signet ring of "Dedatos" from the noble warrior's tomb<sup>5</sup>. On the stone of the signet-ring the goddess of wild nature is depicted, who is sitting under a sacred tree on a throne. In her right hand she holds a vial, and a branch of a sacred tree in her left. On the signet-ring, which M. Lortkipanidze thinks to be a local product, is depicted the Goddess of native ethnic type, who supposedly is the patron Goddess of Dedatos himself [32].

Thus, the hunter is the privileged member of society who, through the favor of the goddess can and is allowed to approach the sacred center, attain the heavenly state, and temporarily attain wholeness. The round dance (perkhuli), as a "vitalized path" with its rhythm, text and music, transfers the performers of the round dance from the everyday life to the sacred realm.

Actually, with the round dance the hunter's perilous quest begins in the kingdom of the Patron of the Beasts (or the Queen of the Forest).

The above-mentioned wholeness was also expressed by the aforesaid circular ritual.

In the special ethnographic literature round dances represent the order of the world, fertility, well-being, etc. see [33]. But here should be emphasized once again that each round dance in different contexts and situations has a different symbolic meaning.

What can be associated with the round dance involved in the hunting cycle and what can it symbolize? The answer could be found in the text, which is actually an invocation of the goddesses, and in the manner of performance, which the entire village performs. In the round dance song both verbal and non-verbal actions complement and help each other, and both together - the hunter.

In our opinion, the form "drawn" with braking movements can be identified with the labyrinth, while the dance with the labyrinthine dance.

In the specific situation, the purpose of the dance is to encourage the hunter and guide him on the invisible path that leads from the transient to the intransient realm (cf. the shaman's dance, which helps the shaman pass through the spiritual world, or Shiva's dance in the circle of fire,

<sup>5</sup> Colchis - centered in present-day western Georgia on the eastern coast of the Black Sea.

which is associated with meditation).

But what should the invocation of the round dance song mean in this particular case? If we take into account the different functions of sacred dances and also the geometric pattern that is created by these dances, then we can deduce that the purpose of the mentioned sacred dance was to draw a path, that the hunter had to pass and which could be defined as a labyrinthine dance or a symbolic path to the spiritual world. The purpose of the sacred dance was to encourage the hunter and guide him along the invisible path that would lead him from the transient to the intransient world. The path itself symbolically represents liminality or being between the two realms; it is a threshold that forms frame for the both realms. Initially it might have protective function and was derived from the native cosmological belief system, but gradually it might have lost its cosmological function and developed into a decorative edging of the outer world.

In our opinion, the same idea might be expressed on the Early Iron Age engraved belts, the edges of which could be identified with the labyrinthine model, which at the ethnographic level already had a distinct religious significance for Georgians.

The labyrinth model (which may consist of concentric circles, squares or any other geometrical figure, in our opinion, can be identified with the images created on the edges (frames) of the above-mentioned engraved bronze belts.

But what possible significance could the bronze girdles have, that had been identified by the scholars with the scenes of the divine hunt and feasting? The girdle, as mentioned above, should itself indicate its owner i. e. a hunter who, had to appease the goddess and who needed her permission to hunt in the sacred territory, for that reason he had to become the chosen of the goddess.

In the above-mentioned context it becomes clear why the whole village sang the songs, which meant the invocation of the goddess, who was supposed to ensure a lucky hunt for the hunter. Common elements of round dances include spiral complexity of movements, repeated reversals (turning to one side, stopping, and then turning to the opposite side), as if re-shaping after pauses due to repeated resistances, which can be symbolized by winding paths. The approaches to the sacred center were difficult, and the hero (in this particular case, the hunter) had to overcome labyrinthine difficulties. In our opinion, the choreography of round dance songs reveals the symbolism of labyrinthine constructions.

In this way, the text of the mentioned round dance is an invocation of the goddess; And as for the choreography in the round dance, it is a magical means of overcoming obstacles of the difficult road in his journey.

We argue that, the performance of magical labyrinthine dance and the possession of a magical girdle (perhaps along with a magical ring) must have helped the hunter in his perilous search for and attainment of the sacred grove.

The analysis of the above data suggests that the sacred hunt was directly related to the breaking through the threshold of the Next world and, the labyrinth, as a liminal zone, expressed a difficult and a dangerous path.

We identify the round dance song with a "vitalized path", the rhythm, text and music of which transfers the round dance performers from everyday life into the sacred realm.

We argue that the idea of the same labyrinthine model engraved on the edges of the bronze belts had a distinct religious significance for Georgians at the ethnographic level, as well.

Thus, in the case of engraved belts liminality and labyrinth are revealed graphically and in the case of round dance – kinetically.

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