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The Trialeti Silver Cup Reconsidered: Ritual, Royal Ideology, and Cross-Cultural Iconography

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Abstract:

This article reconsiders the iconographic program of the Trialeti silver cup through a cross-cultural comparison of Caucasian and ancient Anatolian religious imagery. Comparison with Hittite polychrome relief vessels challenges earlier interpretations of the figures in the upper frieze as masked, tailed beings: their unusual attire is instead identified as ritual clothing, with a longer undergarment ending in a triangular hem beneath the tunic. The lower frieze, depicting deer moving opposite to the human procession, reveals a symbolic opposition between nature and culture, outer and inner worlds. Read together within the local network of symbols, the cup's registers form a unified ritual and cosmological program associated with elite hunting, the hunting deity, and royal ideology. The Trialeti cup is thus interpreted as a symbolic model of a world in which the king-hunter mediates between natural and cultural, supernatural and human domains.

Keywords: Trialeti silver cup; Trialeti culture; Hittite ritual; iconography; royal ideology; elite hunting.

The miniature silver cup of Trialeti was discovered in Kurgan XVII of the Tsalka district (in the central part of the Kurukh-Tash kurgan) during the Trialeti archaeological expeditions of 1936–1940 (led by B. Kuftin). Immediately upon its discovery, the silver cup (18th–17th centuries BCE) became a source of broad discussion among archaeologists, ethnologists, and art historians, and inspired a variety of theoretical interpretations.

The “magnificent culture of the Trialeti kurgans,” as Kuftin termed it—today submerged beneath the Tsalka reservoir—is dated to the third and second millennia BCE. According to the archaeological excavation material, only one deceased was buried in each elite kurgan tomb of the Trialeti culture, accompanied by a four-wheeled cart (chariot) and a variety of luxurious artifacts of artistic craftsmanship, which are regarded as illustrations of a fusion of local and Near Eastern traditions and have been compared with the artifacts of Ur (Kuftin, Amiranashvili, and others).

The find pointed to the burial of a representative of the upper social stratum—a ruler (king/priest). It was revealed that the society practiced agriculture and that both large and small cattle breeding, as well as pig husbandry, were highly developed; animal bones were found among the offerings. Furthermore, the society hunted ibex, chamois, deer, wild boar, and other animals, whose images often adorned the vessels used in burial rituals [1], [2]. Distinctive burial customs and a high level of metallurgy and pottery were also identified [3], [4], [5]. All of this enabled scholars to reconstruct the most ancient religious ideas of this society and to develop various theories. Over time, the number of theories has grown. Each of them has been based on an individual “reading” of the images on the silver cup and on their identification.

Description of the Cup

The Trialeti silver cup was found together with gold and silver jewelry and ceramics. The cylindrical cup (height 11.3 cm, diameter 9.8 cm, weight 250 grams) is made from a single silver sheet and has two friezes. The compositions on the friezes carry specific information (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Trialeti cup, 18th or 17th centuries BCE. National Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi

The upper frieze depicts 22 figures dressed in identical attire, advancing with cups in their hands and stepping forward with their left foot toward a deity or a king/priest seated on a backless throne (chair)—according to some interpretations, leaning against it. The procession moves from left to right. The figures in motion wear shoes of the “Hittite” type.

The participants of the procession, evenly distributed within the register, are depicted in profile and look in the same direction; the faces shown in profile are identical. They have large almond-shaped eyes and prominent protruding noses. According to the traditional description (interpretation), the face of each figure is covered with a mask bearing the image of an animal’s head. Their hairstyles are uniform. They are dressed identically. Their garments consist of a short tunic (kulaja). The lower part of the garment terminates unusually with a triangular element, which has typically been identified with a tail and has become a source of various interpretations (discussed slightly further below).

Behind the seated figure on the throne, a sacred tree is depicted, of a type attested in the art of the ancient Near Eastern peoples (Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, etc.). The sacred tree on the Trialeti cup, in form and style, resembles the sacred tree of Hittite art and reliefs: GIŠ. eya, usually translated as the evergreen tree. Some scholars see in this sacred tree a cedar, others an oak, and still others a pine [6].

Before the deity or the king/officiant, a large vessel stands on an altar with animal hooves for legs. The altar is flanked by two animals; an oval vessel (possibly a censer) stands in front of the altar. Both vessels are decorated with ornament.

On the lower frieze, animals (stag-deer and doe-deer) are depicted moving in the direction opposite to the procession of the upper frieze (clockwise, that is, from right to left). Less

attention has been devoted to this frieze, although, as we shall see below, it is highly significant for understanding the meaning of the ritual and provides the key for deciphering the artistic program.

The animals are depicted within a relief linear frame that runs around the entire cup; the upper band of the lower frieze connects it to the upper frieze. The surface of the cup, from the frame of the lower frieze down to the foot, is engraved flat, and the ornament is rendered without relief in the form of a lotus.

The principal questions raised among scholars in the study of the Trialeti cup were: do the figures depicted on the cup represent deities, or zooanthropomorphic benevolent genies known among virtually all ancient Near Eastern peoples? Or are they human beings depicted with the attributes of animals? What was the significance of the processions depicted on the cup, and to what were they connected?

Interpretations

Studies of the Trialeti cup are essentially based on the following premise:

If two visual representations from different geographical areas resemble one another and belong to approximately the same chronological framework, then their visual similarity may be explained by several socio-cultural factors characterized by direct or indirect contact [7]. Such contacts may include trade, travel, marriage, war, gifts, and the like.

The above-mentioned premise is emphasized not only in the diverse theories but is also a necessary foundational assumption in the study of art objects found in archaeological contexts [8]. It implies the study of artworks within their local context as well as within the contexts of neighboring and contemporary cultures, so that the objects may be understood through every possible avenue [9].

According to Shalva Amiranashvili, a comprehensive study of monuments through comparative art-historical analysis makes it possible to establish the genesis of certain Caucasian forms, to reveal the relationship between the ancient art of the Caucasus and that of neighboring countries, and to clarify the socio-economic structure of the most ancient population of the South Caucasus. He was also among the first to point out the affinity of the Trialeti silver cup with Sumerian and Hittite artifacts, among others [10]. Significantly, in explaining the composition of the cup's frieze, Sh. Amiranashvili made use of the ethnographic material of the Georgian tribes alongside comparative archaeological data.

It should also be noted that there is an opposing view, according to which metal vessels in the South Caucasus must have appeared under the influence of Near Eastern art, since the production of bronze, silver, and gold vessels in Mesopotamia, Iran, and Anatolia chronologically preceded the emergence of toreutics in the South Caucasus [11].

The identification of the images and the study of various details have played a particularly important role in the formulation of theories concerning the Trialeti cup.

Beginning with the original publications of B. Kuftin (1941), the figures depicted on the Trialeti cup have often been compared with the figures of humans and deities in Hittite art—specifically with the relief figures of Yazılıkaya, who are shown in a similar procession and wear similar garments. B. Kuftin regarded the central figure as a hunting deity whose fertility functions were emphasized, and he considered the composition as a whole to be a ritual feast dedicated to the fertility deity [12].

Some scholars saw, in the terminations of the garments, the tails of foxes or wolves (B. Kuftin, P. Ushakov, Sh. Amiranashvili, V. Bardavelidze)—a view subsequently shared without exception by all scholars. On the heads of the figures, some saw stylized masks of moles [13], while others identified stylized wolf faces and wolf tails [14]; in the animals seated on either side of the altar, dogs with pricked-up ears were recognized [15], [16].

The identification of fox tails on the garments of the figures in the procession enabled Sh. Amiranashvili to compare them with the Melia Tulepia ritual attested in Svaneti and to conclude that the fox was the totemic animal of the Georgian tribes, from which the cult of the fertility deity—represented in the composition of the frieze—originated, and that the tailed anthropomorphic figures represented priests. The recognition of masks on the faces of these anthropomorphic figures further reinforced this view, reminding the scholar of the masks of priests in religious mysteries [17].

The fact that the figures arrayed in line resemble the central figure and, like the latter, are holding their cups close to their mouths—that is, are united in a single action—enabled V. Bardavelidze to conclude that all the figures represented one and the same world [18]. Drawing upon Georgian material, Vera Bardavelidze developed the view that the entire composition embodies the gate of the deity, the sacred tree (Tree of Life) risen at the gate of the deity, while the 22 figures are communal deities advancing toward the principal deity to perform a hymn of praise at the main tribal festival [19].

The connection with Telepinu was later examined by N. Bendukidze in light of the Svan festival of Murq‘vamoba [20]. According to the scholar, the Svan ritual of Melia Tulepia—dedicated to the awakening of nature and forming part of the Murq‘vamoba/Koshkoba cycle (Javakhishvili, Bardavelidze)—reveals a certain similarity to motifs associated with the Hittite god who periodically appears and disappears. One of the customs of this cyclical festival is a round dance accompanied by song. The participants of the round dance stand opposite one another and recite in turn: “Adrekilai has departed from us, Adrekilai has come to us.”[21]. Javakhishvili (1979) connected these words (“departed/came”) with the name of the fertility god Melia-Telepia, while Adrekila he linked with a part of the vegetation festival dedicated to this deity [22], [23].

The comparison of the Svan spring festival’s customs with the Hittite myth led Iv. Javakhishvili to suggest that this festival represented a form analogous to the Hittite religious festival of the regeneration of nature, and that Telepia was equivalent to the Hittite Telipinu, the deity of fertility [24].

According to N. Bendukidze [25], the explanation of the first part of the name Melia-Telepia on the basis of the Georgian word melia (“fox”) is unfounded, since in Svan the word for fox is represented in the form māl, and moreover, as V. Bardavelidze noted at the time, a cult of the fox is not attested among the Kartvelian tribes [26].

In N. Bendukidze’s view, the typological closeness between the Anatolian myth of Telipinu and the Svan custom of Melia-Telepia is evident. According to her, the parallels between the aforementioned Svan customs and their connection with the Hittite Telipinu myth may be traced through the first part of the word Melia-Telepia, in which the initial component is linked to the Hittite myth and specifically to the bee. For comparison, she cites Hittite LAL-it, *melit “honey,” NIM.LAL-aš “bee,” which plays an important role in the Hittite myth. As is known, the goddess Ḫannaḫanna sends the bee to find Telipinu, and it successfully accomplishes the task. From the word melit—“honey” (LAL.it)—the form of Indo-European origin *melitas, “bee,” is reconstructed, corresponding to Greek melita, mel “honey.” According to the scholar, this word, together with its associated ritual dedicated to the deity of

fertility, must have entered Svan from the Hittite linguistic world, which once again confirms that this custom emerged in Svaneti directly under the influence of the Hittite myth [27].

All of this, in N. Bendukidze's view, attests to the existence of contacts between the ancient Caucasian (in this specific case, the Svan) and the Hittite worlds.



Figure 2. Karashamb silver cup, ca. 22nd–21st centuries BCE. History Museum of Armenia

The possibility of such contacts is also indicated by the elements of material culture depicted on the Trialeti cup, to which the archaeologist D. Narimanishvili has devoted an entire series of works.

He examined in particular detail the garments, vessels, and furniture of the figures. He compared the Trialeti cup with the cup discovered in the Karashamb kurgan in Armenia in the 1980s [28], [29], [30].

The scholar shares the view of those who hold that the depiction of numerous details on the Trialeti and Karashamb cups brings the Trialeti culture closer to the art of the ancient Near East, while at the same time these cups are distinguished by local peculiarities. He observes that these objects must have actually existed in everyday life as well, among the bearers of the Trialeti culture in the ancient South Caucasus. A particular style of life is in evidence—one widespread in the ancient Near East. The comparison with analogous Mesopotamian and Anatolian material led the scholar to conclude that the existence of the objects depicted on the Trialeti cup in the South Caucasus may be assumed to date from the 21st–19th centuries BCE [31].

Owing to the format of the present article, we shall not dwell on the contrasting mythological and cult-related themes of the Karashamb cup, which require a separate study; we draw attention, however, to the fact that on the Karashamb cup as well, the figures of the second register wear pointed-toe shoes. Moreover, figures are depicted there which, according to the identification accepted in the specialized literature, bear “wolf tails”—although on the Karashamb cup the “wolf-tailed” figures represent slain warriors. According to V. Hovhannesyan, the procession of wolf-tailed figures may depict the otherworld [32].

As for the second frieze of the Trialeti silver cup, on which the animals are depicted, less attention has been devoted to it (discussed slightly further below).

M. Beriashvili and Z. Skhirtladze [33] consider that the type of ritual scene on the cup stands close to Sumerian and Hittite representations. The image of the seated person, in their view, must be one of the principal figures of the ritual: a king, queen, or priest. Others identify this figure with a deity. For example, such a deity could have been the Anatolian deity of spring and the regeneration of nature, Telipinu (Kuftin, Ushakov, Amiranashvili).

The Trialeti Cup in Light of the Religious Ideas of Old Hittite Monumental Pottery

The aim of the present work is to bring together various cases within a single model and to correlate and integrate the religious ideas of Anatolia and the Caucasus, which prove mutually complementary and explanatory in the study of the artifact under consideration.

From this perspective, particular interest attaches to the polychrome relief-decorated vases used in Hittite cultic practice, as well as to numerous fragments of such vases discovered in north-central Anatolia [34].

These vases are assigned in the specialized literature to the monumental ceramic group and are dated to the 16th century BCE.

Three essentially intact vessels, published in 1957, 1988, and 2006, are known as the polychrome relief vases of İnandıktepe, Hüseyindede, and Bitik. They share not only a common style of representation but also a common programmatic approach. What is striking in these artifacts is the absence of social-rank distinctions among the depicted persons and the depiction of anthropomorphic deities (if these are deities at all—N.A.) without their attributes [35].



Figure 3. Hüseyindede Hittite relief vase, approximately 1650 BCE, Çorum Archaeological Museum

The most well-known of these vases is the İnandıktepe vase [36], [37], on which 50 figures are arranged across four decorative friezes. The recent discovery of a second nearly complete vase has confirmed a strictly maintained programmatic similarity in the decorative schemes of the vases, even though each vase represents a different kind of ceremony [38].

Scholars agree that the figures on the vases are engaged in cultic activities involving entertainment, the offering of gifts, and sacrifices, but the question remains a matter of debate: are those depicted on these vases gods or human beings?



Figure 4. Detail of a Hittite relief-vase ritual scene: musician, worshipper, altar, seated deity, and bull in the lower frieze. Image provided by the author in the accompanying presentation.

For our purposes, the polychrome relief-decorated vases are particularly important because of the programmatic unity and the similarity of the garments worn by the figures, which may help explain certain unusual details on the Trialeti cup.

The figures depicted on these vases have shown us that the figures of the Trialeti cup, clothed in their unusual garments, closely correspond to the attire of the figures depicted on the polychrome vases. We can therefore state with certainty that the figures of the Trialeti cup do not have tails attached to their garments; rather, the feature depicted is a longer undergarment with a triangular hem, worn beneath the tunic/kulaja. As T. Moore [39] notes, of the eight types of garments attested among the Hittites, this is one of those that recurs repeatedly in depictions of various ritual processions. Owing to the polychromy of the vases, we know that this undergarment, like the kulaja worn over it, was white in color (or cream-color) and was used in various rituals (hierogamy, sacrifice, festivals, and others).

Thus, as has been noted, all of this allows us to conclude that on the figures of the upper frieze of the Trialeti silver cup neither tails nor masks are to be identified. But the question still remains: who could have been clothed in such garments? The uniformity of dress, indicating the unity of the group, and their participation in various rituals may point to a particular stratum of society. To answer this question, we need to consider the lower frieze. One point, however, is clear: these friezes belong to the spheres of nature and culture.

On the second, central frieze, the depictions of stag-deer and doe-deer, which conspicuously move in the direction opposite to the figures of the upper frieze, immediately evoke the association with the sphere opposed to culture—the outer sphere, the sphere of nature. As for understanding the significance of the participation of animals in various rituals or festivals, we are aided by the rich and varied religious texts left by the Hittites of the Late Bronze Age (1690–1180 BCE), which permit a more or less full reconstruction of the process and which are divided into rituals to be performed in the inner and outer worlds.

In the program of the KILAM festival of the Hittite imperial period, the deer and the bull occupy a special place. The deer, which is the sacred animal of the tutelary deity of the country, is venerated by the king (text KUB 25.18 ii 5–11). Collins draws an important conclusion: the cult of the deer is directed, on the one hand, toward hunting and, on the other, toward the worship of the tutelary deity whose sacred animal it is. The deer points to elite hunting, while the bull points to elite sacrifice. Together, both are symbols of dominion over animals, both in the kingdom and in the divine world [40].

In summary, Collins notes that the presence of the symbols of hunting and sacrifice in the Hittite royal funerary rituals strengthens the supposition that the depictions of dominion over animals in Hittite texts are linked to royal ideology. From this perspective, the cult of the deer becomes increasingly important in the 13th century BCE, particularly during the reign of Tudhaliya IV [41]. The idea that the hunting deity is the giver of success to the king-hunter is clearly expressed here. Thus, the cult of the deer encompasses the most ancient ideas of hunting, of the tutelary deity, and of his sacred animal. That the hunting deity is the giver of success to the king-hunter, as Collins notes, is clearly seen in the Luwian inscription:

“The Storm-god loves me, and I have conquered every land. The Stag-god loves me, and I have become a hero, the lord of the fields, a hunter, a great king.” [42]

In other words, the blessing of the Storm-god grants political power, while the blessing of the Stag-god grants lordship over wild creatures (game) [43].

The animals depicted on the Trialeti silver cup are either attributes of a deity or indicate the sphere of a deity. As attributes of a deity, they are connected with the female hunting deity (or deity) and with the idea of the Lord of the Game, who is the owner and protector of the sacred topos. The life of the king/priest encompasses two categories: the outer and inner worlds, death and life, nature and culture [44]. According to Georgian material relating to hunting, the inner and outer are the spheres between which the hunter moves—not as a mere passerby, but as one at home in both spheres and answerable before both [45],[46]. He is the mortal spouse of the owner and guardian of the sacred center (the goddess) and the “temporary king” of the outer sphere.

Conclusion

On the basis of the foregoing, in the composition rendered on the Trialeti cup we may discern the spoils of a royal hunt; success in the hunt and the attainment of fortune are possible if a covenant of love is concluded between the hunter (in this case, the king-hunter) and the hunting deity.

The procession revolves around the drink poured into a chalice. The only stationary figure here is the larger anthropomorphic image, seated on a backless chair. He sits and holds a chalice in his hand. On either side of him, the participants of the procession likewise hold such chalices in their hands. The sacred tree, the deity, and the altar (with a chalice?) constitute the very center of the entire visible space. This indicates that the ritual is performed under the open sky and that the space is consecrated by the sacred tree. The schematic representation of the *Tree of Life* as the axis mundi is a symbolic motif employed in many traditions.

Presumably, the religious ritual associated with royal ideology creates a circular, complex symbolic space in which the Trialeti cup, attested in the funerary rite, may have belonged to the king-hunter, who can be conceived as the lord of two worlds. This view is further reinforced if we recall that the Hittite kings established their relations with the deities in order to strengthen their own power. The figures participating in the ritual depicted on the cup—the

central static figure (the king/priest) and the 22 figures in motion (royal courtiers, officials)—are represented in a particular communicative relationship with the supernatural, in which the hunting deity is implied.

The Trialeti cup bears no inscriptions; therefore, the juxtaposition upon it of a flower, animals, and unusual figures must point to certain connections existing among them. This combination reveals the structure of a small-scale model of the world, represented through different registers.

If we “read” the images on the cup from bottom to top, then the lotus engraved at its base—as a symbol both of the cup itself and of the receptacle—presents to us two categories of a unified world unfolding from a single center: the inner and the outer // culture and nature. The outer is represented by the wild world and is depicted by the procession of stag-deer and doe-deer. It implies the sphere of the Lord of the Game and the hunting deity/goddess, under whose protection these animals fall and whom they often themselves embody, as well as the fortunate quarry.

Thus, the engraved lotus represented on the Trialeti cup is a symbol of the world, which itself implies two domains: it embraces the king and the royal court—the life of the royal court (and consequently, culture)—and the world of plants and animals (nature), with the Lord of the Game and the hunting deity.

This artifact has been variously regarded—sometimes as an import, sometimes as a borrowing, and sometimes as a local product. To establish its meaning, however, it is more important to consider the relations in which it is situated within the local network of symbols. Its use as the personal object of a king/noble in a funerary ritual, together with the program depicted on it, in its relation to elite hunting, reveals the dual role of the sacred king and underscores the unity of the king’s religious and political power in the region.

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Included: 5 figures

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