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Between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus: an analysis of the belts from the Tli Burial Ground and their contexts (graves 40b, 215b, 425)

aus / from

Archäologischer Anzeiger, 2021/2, § 1–15

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/5660-s6ml>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

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ABSTRACT

Between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus

An Analysis of the Belts from the Tli Burial Ground and Their Contexts
(Graves 40b, 215b, 425)

Annarita S. Bonfanti – Andrea Cesaretti – Roberto Dan

This article presents a new study of three burial contexts from the important Tli graveyard located in the Southern Caucasus. The three tombs contained bronze belts with features mainly pertaining to an Assyro-Urartian tradition. An analysis of the belts' iconographic apparatuses is given, together with a new chronological position proposed for the belts and the tombs: our idea is that a possible date for them should be within the period between the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E. The analysis showed, moreover, that the Tli necropolis must be considered a great example of the complex contacts and cultural exchanges between multiple realities located both in the Caucasus and in the Mesopotamian region.

KEYWORDS

Tli, Great Caucasus, Koban culture, Urartu, bronze belts

Between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus

An Analysis of the Belts from the Tli Burial Ground and Their Contexts (Graves 40b, 215b, 425)

Introduction

¹ The Tli burial ground is considered by the international academic community to be one of the most important and unusual archaeological sites in the entire Southern Caucasus region¹. About 480 burials have been excavated in the graveyard, relating to different chronological periods of the Bronze Age² and the Iron Age³. The main purpose of this contribution is to analyse three burials excavated by B.V. Techov, namely tombs 40b, 215b and 425, which are the only ones united by the presence of bronze belts with decorations referable to the Assyro-Urartian tradition⁴. The group of finds from the three tombs has been analysed by comparing it both with the other tombs from the same necropolis and with other regional contexts. All the tombs have similar grave goods, with elements that show the circulation of cultural materials and influences that originated in the territories north and south of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. This circumstance is certainly attributable to the geographical position of the Tli archaeological site, which is located in the southern foothills of the chain, close to one of the connecting routes that still crosses the mountain range today. The final goal of the contribution is to discuss the nature of the artefacts found in the tombs under study, and try to delimit their chronology.

A. S. B. – A. C. – R. D.

1 The content of this article has been developed by all the authors; specifically, Annarita S. Bonfanti wrote »Analysis and Description of the Tombs. Grave 40«, »Iconographic Description of the Belts«, and »Grave 40b belt«; Andrea Cesaretti wrote »Localization and Archaeological Context of the Tli Cemetery«, »Grave 425«, and »Grave 425 Belt«; and Roberto Dan wrote »Grave 215«, »The So-called ›Urartian‹ Belts«, and »Grave 215b belt«. »Introduction« and »Conclusions« were written jointly.

2 Techov 1980.

3 Techov 1981.

4 These belts are considered to be Urartian specimens; see, for example, Castelluccia 2017b, 89 f.

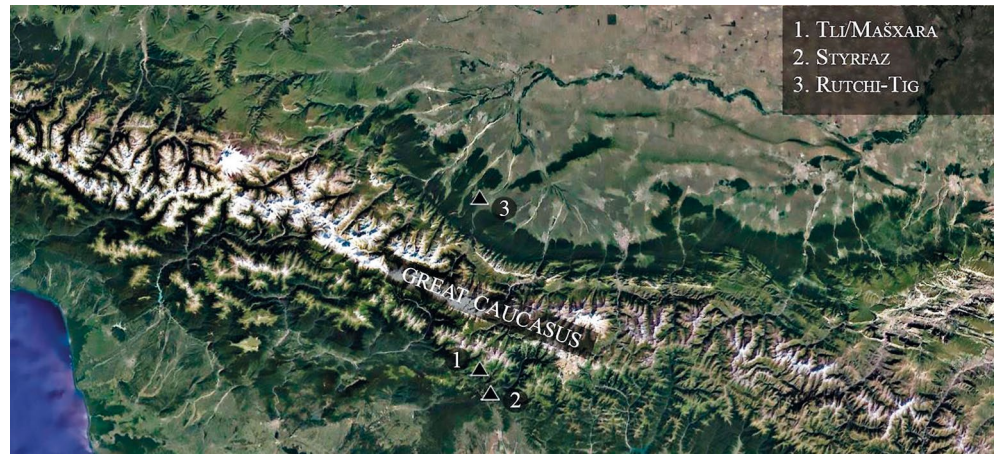


Fig. 1: Map with the sites mentioned in the text

1

Localization and Archaeological Context of the Tli Cemetery

2 Tli⁵ is certainly the most extensively excavated necropolis in the region (Fig. 1, 1). It is located⁶ at an altitude of about 1850 m a.s.l., and covers an area of about 1000 m² on the slope of a hill overlooking the Great Liachvi River⁷. The River Valtkatzi flows near the archaeological site. Techov investigated the burial ground several times between 1955 and 1988; it remained in use for a long period, at least from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Some of the tombs were used for multiple burials, however, the vast majority of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age tombs contained single burials. Many tombs have undergone secondary taphonomic phenomena associated with the deposition of successive burials on previous ones, with the result that only some of them were found intact. One of the most problematic aspects of the Tli necropolis is precisely its chronological definition, mainly due to the excavation technique adopted by Techov, which on the one hand allowed the excavation of numerous burials, but on the other did not facilitate a stratigraphic reading of a very difficult context, since the most recent pit tombs tend to cut into the oldest ones. A further problematic aspect for the chronological definition is the almost total lack of C-14 dating. At present, scholars⁸ tend to divide the artefacts of Tli into three phases, based exclusively on their dating: the first phase is related to the Middle Bronze Age (16th–13th centuries B.C.E.), which, however, is characterised almost exclusively by disturbed graves; a second phase is related to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age (12th–10th centuries B.C.E.), and a third phase to the Middle Iron Age (9th–7th centuries B.C.E.) period. Most burials are inhumations, with grave goods that range from personal ornaments to weapons.

3 Another important funerary context for the reconstruction of the local protohistoric phases is the site of Styrfaz (Fig. 1, 2)⁹, not far from Tli. Near the Tli cemetery also stand the remains of a fortified structure, known by the name of Maşxara, which could be directly related to the graves¹⁰. These sites are part of the traditions that go by the name of Koban culture, covering a long period of the Protohistory of the territories of

5 42°29'4.04"N 43°51'25.72"E.

6 The modern village of Tli, also known as Tlia, has the following geographical coordinates: 42°29'0.29"N 43°51'24.94"E.

7 Sagona 2017, 435 f.

8 For comprehensive work on the evaluation of the chronology and organisation of the materials of the Tli necropolis, see Pruiß 1993, Motzenbäcker 1996, and Reinhold 2007.

9 Techov 2000; Sagona 2017, 438.

10 Coordinates of the Maşxara fortress: 42°29'38.98"N 43°52'4.45"E.

the Greater Caucasus chain, the southern foothills and the steppe area to the north. This aspect bears witness to the fact that the Caucasus mountain range must not only have represented an impassable boundary in the past, but it must also have connected the two territories to its south and north, an aspect that will be discussed later in this text. This is not the place for an overall synthesis of the various characteristics of the Koban culture, but it is worth mentioning that this tradition is mostly known from funerary contexts, of which Tli is certainly one of the best known in the scientific literature, since it is a site that fits very well into the pattern of this type of tradition.

A. C.

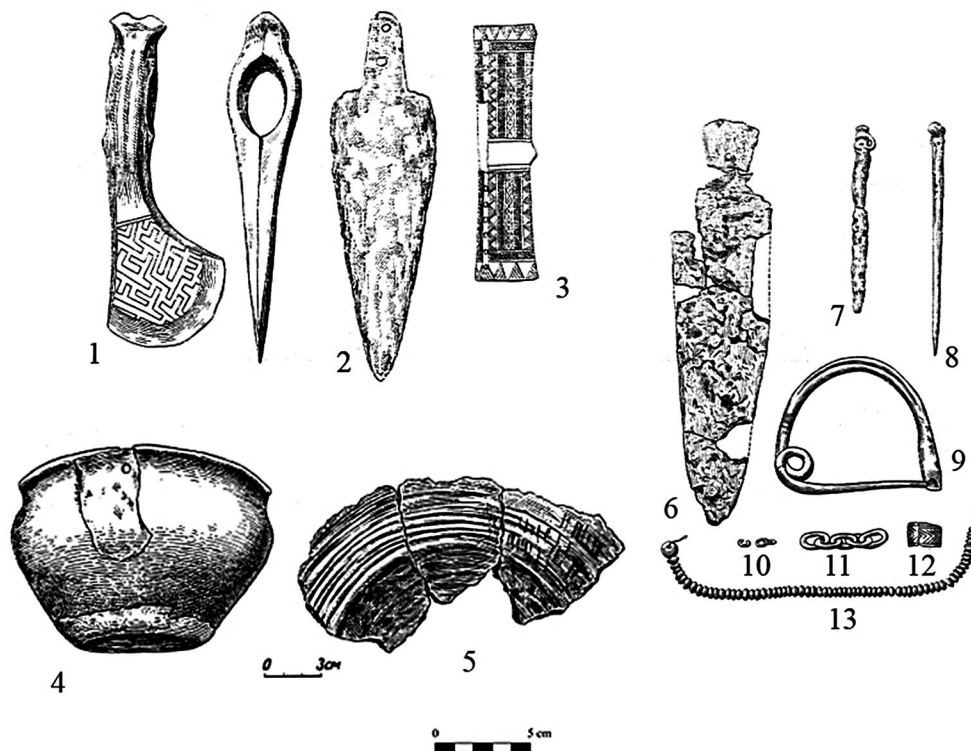
Analysis and Description of the Tombs

Grave 40

4 Grave 40 features several depositions divided into 40a and 40b; 40a is in a higher position than 40b. The main deposition layer was at a depth of 2.6 m below ground level at the time of excavation¹¹. Burial 40b was multiple, containing the remains of at least two individuals, perhaps even three. This uncertainty is due to the subsequent reuse of the tomb, which was cut by burial 40a. The digging of the second grave makes any reliable taphonomic understanding difficult.

5 The grave goods found in Tomb 40b were mainly metal objects (Fig. 2). Three are bladed weapons, one of which is a typical Koban-type axe with a visible geometric

Fig. 2: Tli. Grave goods from Grave 40b (scale 1 : 4)



2

11 Techov 1981, 29 fig. 40.

decoration (Fig. 2, 1); the other two are short tanged dagger blades (Fig. 2, 2 and 6). The axe and one knife are made of bronze, while the more fragmentary dagger is made of iron. Two small vases were also found in the tomb, one in metal, tall and wide-rimmed, with a sinuous profile that shows traces of an ancient repair by means of application of a metal plate (Fig. 2, 4). The other pottery vase is broken in three fragments; the foot and the body are preserved (Fig. 2, 5). Nine personal ornaments were found among the grave goods: two bronze pins (Fig. 2, 7 and 8), a fibula (Fig. 2, 9)¹², a bronze chain (Fig. 2, 11), a possible ring (Fig. 2, 12), a necklace (or perhaps a bracelet; Fig. 2, 13), and other small objects of unknown function (Fig. 2, 10). The coexistence of the fibula, which is also found in the other tombs analysed in this contribution, and the pins would suggest a diversified use of these objects, with the fibula used for clothing and pins for hair or other parts of clothing. Together with the Koban axe, the two most representative and distinctive elements are a bronze belt termination (Fig. 2, 3) and a complete bronze belt (Fig. 4). The slightly fragmented belt termination was certainly fixed to a perishable material, probably leather, as evidenced by a row of holes preserved on one side. It was decorated with motifs of geometric inspiration, characterized by rows of triangle patterns, grid and rhomboid motifs with an element in the centre. The belt, broken into several pieces but substantially complete, has the typical morphology of Caucasian and »Urtian« belts. At its right end, there is a metal ring that would have served to fasten it. The entire margin of the decorated area has holes for its attachment by rivets to a strip of (non-preserved) leather. It has three horizontal decorative registers¹³.

A. S. B.

Grave 215

⁶ Tomb 215, like 40, featured successive depositions and is therefore divided into 215a and 215b. The main burial layer lay 1.6 m below ground level and the tomb, as reported in the literature, contained two burials: one intact and one disturbed¹⁴. The tomb was probably disturbed when Tomb 216 was dug. Grave 215 contained eleven objects of which eight are metallic, three made of iron, and the remaining five of bronze (Fig. 3). Those in bronze include a characteristic Koban axe with geometric decorations (Fig. 3, 1), a fragmentary fibula (Fig. 3, 2), a fragment of a bronze belt of which are preserved only the dividing line of the figurative field and some holes for its attachment to the leather base (Fig. 3, 3), and a belt termination with holes for its attachment to the organic part (not preserved; Fig. 3, 4). The three iron objects are two fragmentary blades of a short dagger (Fig. 3, 5) and a dagger (Fig. 3, 6), while the third iron object is unidentifiable due to corrosion (Fig. 3, 10). Then, there is a stone object, a whetstone, with a hole for fixing it in some way (Fig. 3, 9). There are also fragments of two small clay pots; of one, only a handle pertaining to a vessel useful for pouring liquids remains (Fig. 3, 8). The other vase, a jar, is fragmentary and has a handle decorated with vertical and horizontal lines (Fig. 3, 7). Together with the Koban axe, the most interesting element is an almost complete bronze belt that is morphologically very similar to that of Grave 40b, apart from the missing horizontal dividers of the registers, but in any case with decorations arranged on three horizontal levels (Fig. 3, 11 and Fig. 6)¹⁵.

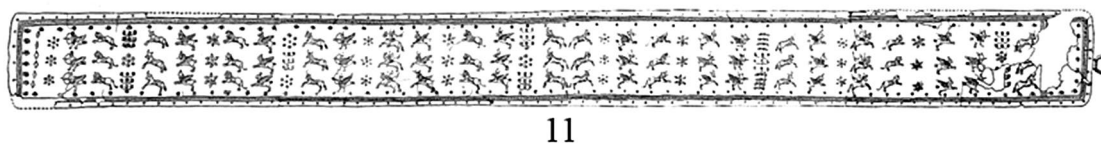
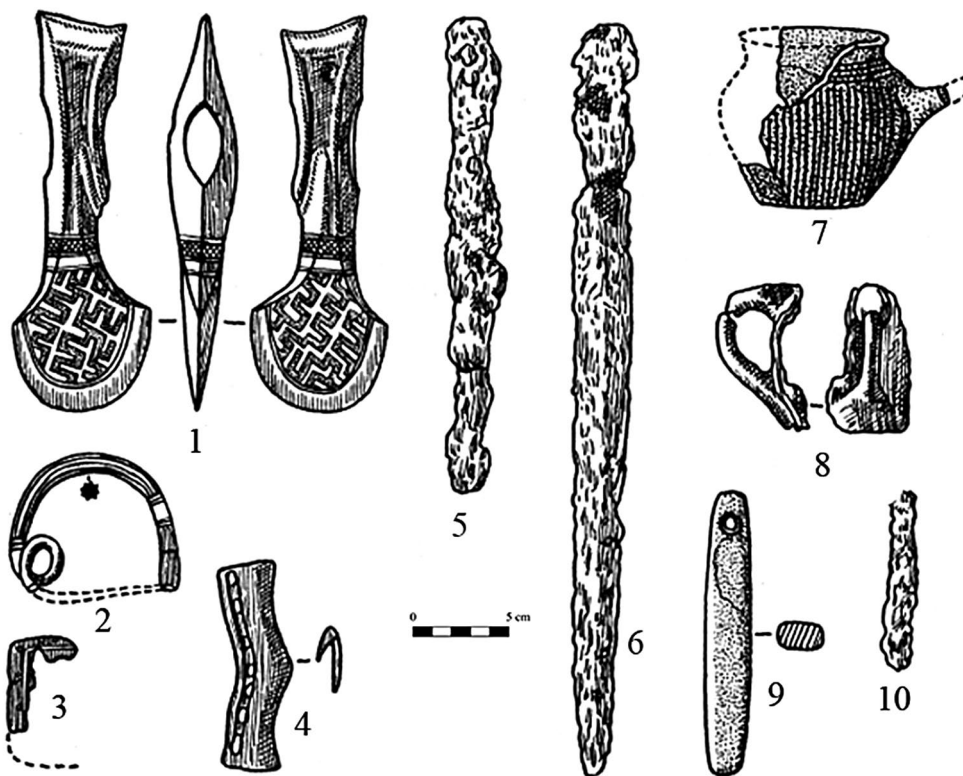
R. D.

12 In Apakidze's chrono-typological scheme, the iron dagger, Koban axe, fibula and the ornaments allow him to attribute the burial to period IV (Apakidze 2009, 208. 210. 211 f. figs. 89. 91. 92), which he dates between the end of the 8th century and 650 B.C.E. (Apakidze 2009, 207).

13 For a detailed description of the iconographic systems, see the next chapter.

14 Techov 1981, 46.

15 For a detailed description of the iconographic systems, see the next chapter.



3

Grave 425

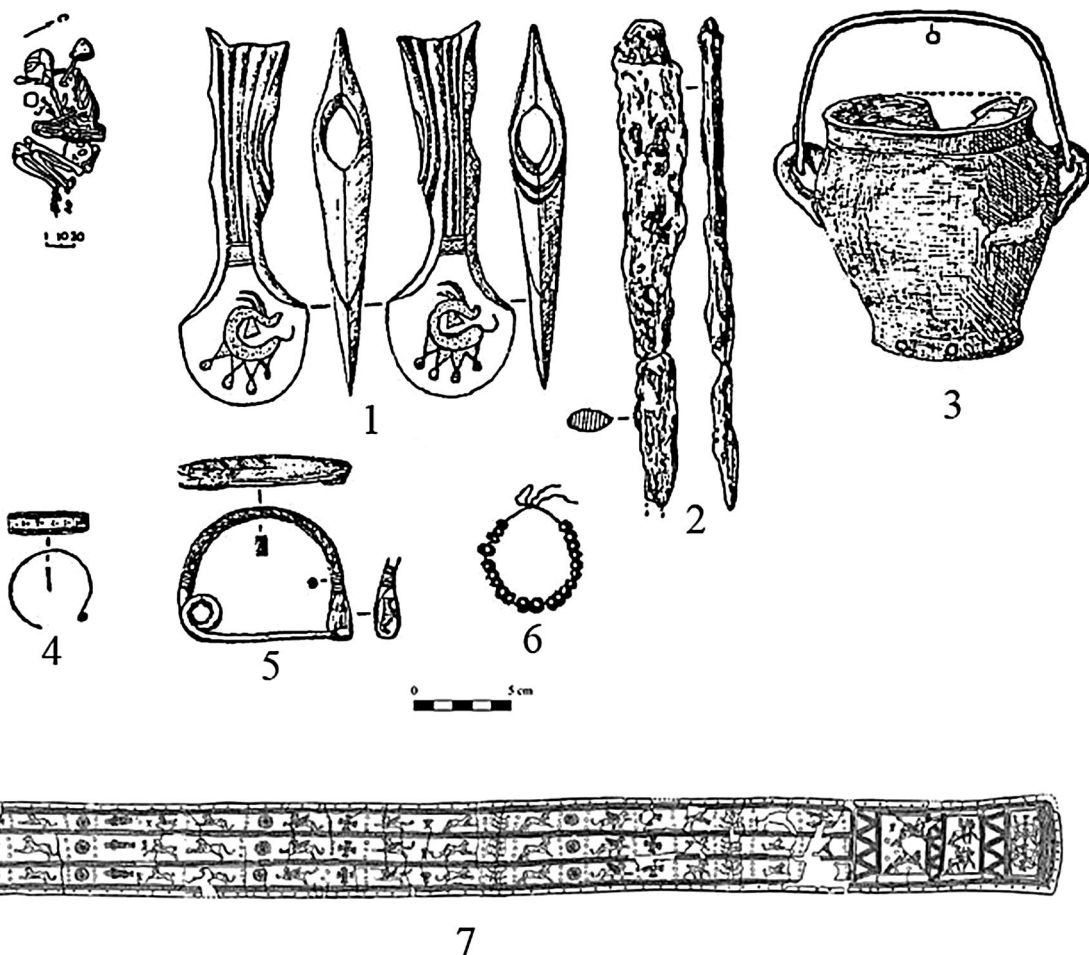
7 The burial layer of Tomb 425 was located at a depth of 3.45 m. The burial was single and is reported in the literature to have been of a male¹⁶. Tomb 425 contained seven objects, six of which are in metal (Fig. 4). Of these, five are presumed to be in bronze, including a typical Koban axe with zoomorphic and stylized decoration probably representing an ungulate (Fig. 4, 1), a fibula with herringbone decoration and a small zoomorphic representation on the termination (Fig. 4, 5). A double-handled jar has a semi-circular element attached, perhaps added later but still in antiquity (Fig. 4, 3). There is also a metal bracelet with a poorly visible decoration (Fig. 4, 4). The only iron object is a fragmentary dagger blade (Fig. 4, 2). Moreover, there is a bracelet or necklace with carnelian beads (Fig. 4, 6)¹⁷. In addition – again the most interesting element, together with the Koban axe – there is a fragmentary but almost complete bronze belt with a slightly expanded termination at one end (Fig. 4, 7 and Fig. 7). The elements of the decoration and their distribution on the belt probably represent a unique case in the vast panorama of Caucasian-Urartian belts; for a description, see the following chapter.

A. C.

Fig. 3: Tli. Grave goods from Grave 215b (scale 1 : 4)

16 Techov 2002, 47 fig 114.

17 Following the chrono-typological organization of Apakidze, the Koban axe, ribbed dagger blade, whetstone, ornaments, and vase are attributed to period IV (Apakidze 2009, 208. 210. 212. 214 fig. 89. 91. 93. 95), that he dates between the end of the 8th century and 650 B.C.E. (Apakidze 2009, 207).



4

Fig. 4: Tli. Grave goods from Grave 425 (scale 1 : 4)

Iconographic Description of the Belts

8 This paragraph is devoted to an analysis of the three so-called ›Uartian‹ belts found in the graves 40b, 215b and 425 of the Tli necropolis. The first remark one should do when talking about these belts is that their current depository is not known: the only available publications that scholars can use in order to analyse them are the excavation reports published by Techov¹⁸, where these artefacts are illustrated only by means of drawings. This analysis has been therefore based on the study of these drawings, an operation that may anyway lead to an incorrect interpretation of the images depicted. This section is preceded by a short introduction to the more general topic of the so-called ›Uartian‹ belts, outlining their main characteristics, and a brief discussion on chronology. The discovery of ›Uartian‹ belts in the Tli necropolis is exceptional, as it is located farther north than the area where the Uartian state developed, and, as already mentioned, the Tli burials do not contain any other Uartian materials: the three ›Uartian‹ belts are evidence of the complex economic and thus cultural exchanges that took place in the Iron Age in these regions, and they are not to be considered locally produced, but rather imported from the area south of the Caucasus range. These three bronze belts are the northernmost examples of ›Uartian‹ belts found so far.

A. S. B.

The So-called ›Uartian‹ Belts

9 Bronze belts are undoubtedly one of the most representative object types of the Southern Caucasian area during the pre-Urartian, Urartian, and probably post-Urartian periods¹⁹. The spread of bronze belts had a broad diachronic development in the Caucasus²⁰, probably starting from the periods following the end of the Middle Bronze Age, when there was a clear change in material culture production, which then remained largely unchanged until the so-called Late Iron Age. The use and diffusion of these metal belts, therefore, was connected to historical events which cannot be exactly understood through the data in our possession: in general, one might say that the belts had a symbolic function, linked, at least before the formation of Urartu, to the social status of the owner or to the membership of a certain clan. With the emergence of the Urartian state, the belts became objects of more widespread diffusion, probably because they were a well-suited medium for the development of a complex decoration: for this reason, belts were one of the main vehicles of diffusion of iconographic elements. The main difference between Southern Caucasian and ›Uartian‹ belts, however, regards the iconography and the themes used for their decoration²¹. ›Uartian‹ belts are part of an extensive collection of heterogeneous materials bearing different decorative motifs, ranging from the geometrical ones to the more figurative ones. Within this collection, anyway, should be highlighted a systematic coexistence of few preserved Southern Caucasian iconographic features with many elements of Anatolian-Mesopotamian derivation, due to the diffusion, in the Armenian Highlands at least from the 14th century B.C.E., of the Assyrian iconography: the elements derived from Assyria are traditionally considered directly linked to Urartian art, even if, in some cases, the scene represented on belts can't find parallels among the set of artefacts properly defined as Urartian²². It can be said that, by separating individual iconographic elements belonging to the sphere of belts' decoration, one may find elements with parallels within Urartian royal art, but, as these objects were produced in non-centralized workshops, it is not possible to ascribe them to a precise chronological phase, while it is possible that they could have been made after the fall of Urartu, keeping the Mesopotamian iconographic elements as a sort of legacy. As a final remark on the comparison between ›Uartian‹ and Southern Caucasian metal belts, it should be underlined that, as is the case of the examples discussed in this contribution, they were mainly found inside burials: there are few examples of ›Uartian‹ belts found in fortresses or in uncertain contexts, but they should be considered as disturbed archaeological contexts, and the belt should be considered primarily as part of the grave goods.

10 The main motifs reproduced on ›Uartian‹ belts can be divided into two main categories, geometrical and figurative. Among the geometrical motifs, one can find zigzags, dots, cruciform elements, guilloche and dividing elements in various shapes, such as garlands of buds or pomegranates, which, except for the more strictly geometric ones (dots, zigzags and crosses), can find exact parallels in Assyrian art. The figurative motifs are further divided into other categories, such as zoomorphic (mainly bulls, lions, horses) and anthropomorphic figures (soldiers, people standing on animals), and so-called *Mischwesen*: in this case, animals and anthropomorphic figures appear to be closely linked to the Assyrian world, while the hybrid creatures, not common in Urartian royal art, are more anchored to a local taste with an Assyrian-Levantine derivation.

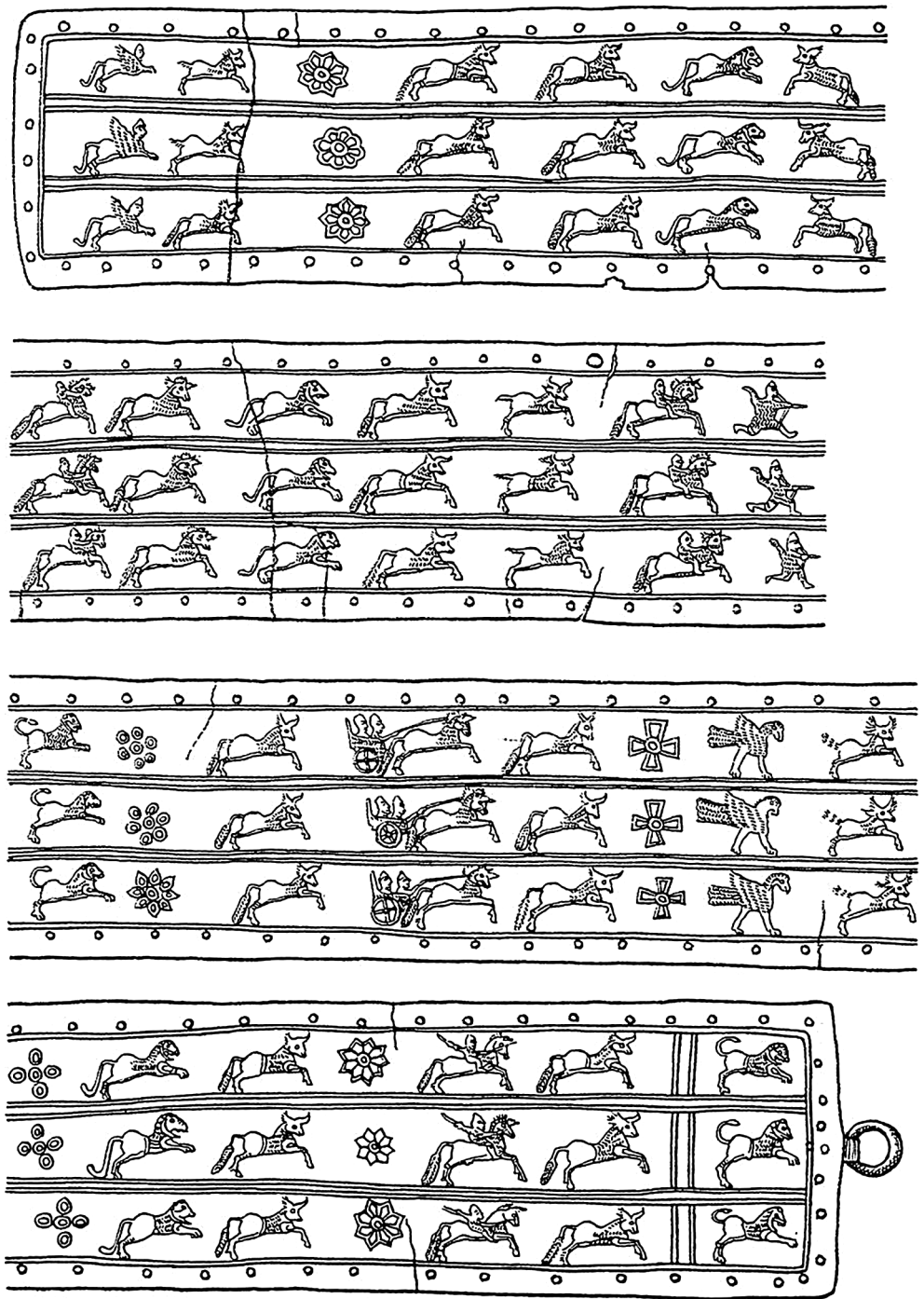
R. D.

19 This topic is extensively discussed and analysed in Dan – Bonfanti 2021.

20 For a distribution map of the bronze belts, both Southern Caucasian and ›Uartian‹, see Dan – Bonfanti 2021, figs. 1. 2.

21 Those themes and motifs are listed below.

22 These objects are the ones bearing Urartian royal inscriptions.



5

Fig. 5: Tli. Belt from Grave 40b

Grave 40b Belt

11 The main decoration on this belt is divided into three horizontal registers of animals, hybrid creatures, horsemen, and soldiers on wagons, separated by rosettes executed in various styles (Fig. 5)²³. The succession of the figures is reproduced identically on all three bands. The registers are separated from each other by double straight lines that continue on the side cartouche, which is separated from the main scene by a double vertical line. The edge of this scene is outlined by a single contour line. The lines are plausibly interpreted as embossed. The succession of images mainly repeats the same figures: starting from the left side, there is a hybrid creature with the body of

²³ Techov 1981, pl. 94.

a lion, wings, and a human head with a helmet; a parallel for this kind of representation may be seen on the Metsamor belt, found in an inhumation grave together with pottery and bronze objects (bronze pins, spiral bronze bracelets, and another unknown metal object)²⁴. Moreover, the Metsamor belt has the same subdivision into bands by double straight lines. The following figure is an ibex, which is represented as a bull in the lower band due to a mistake of the metal worker: ibexes are seldom represented on ›Uartian‹ belts (for example the Dedeli-4²⁵ and Yeghegnadzor-1²⁶ specimens), but they are never depicted with the short tail seen on the Tli examples²⁷. Both bulls and lions are frequently represented in Urartian royal and popular art: this belt features two types of lions, one rampant with a raised tail and the other rampant with a lowered tail. Usually, although this may hardly be considered distinctive, low-tailed rampant lions are represented on the central scene of the belt, while raised-tailed walking lions are depicted on the side cartouches. In this case, the main scene features both lowered-tailed rampant lions (depicted on belts such as Altuntepe²⁸, Dedeli, Guşçı²⁹, Yeghegnadzor and many others) and raised-tailed rampant lions, which are represented on a belt's main scene only on the Dedeli-4, Metsamor and Giyimli³⁰ specimens. Rampant lions are not represented in Urartian royal art, which prefers walking lions: an exception is seen on the Anzaf shield³¹, a masterpiece of Urartian royal art, which depicts a battle and thus shows running animals. On the Tli belt, a rampant lion with its tail raised is also depicted on the side cartouche, as seen as well on the Yeghegnadzor belts; the discovery context of the two Yeghegnadzor belts is described as a tomb that contained two bronze belts, a shallow bronze bowl engraved with a kneeling bull, and some other less elaborate metal objects³². Another figure on the Tli specimen is a horseman, shown with a spear but without a shield, as on the Metsamor and Yeghegnadzor-2³³ belts. This character also appears in two different representations: towards the right end of the belt there is another horseman, this time with a raised left arm holding a weapon, probably a sword; this type of horseman is found only on the Altuntepe-2 belt. The next figure represented on the belt is a running horse: horses are never depicted alone in Urartian art, either royal or popular, as they always appear as a horseman's mount; the situation is different with regard to the ›Transcaucasian‹ belts, where a running horse appears to be a common decoration³⁴. Again, another unusual character is the archer depicted in Knielauf, which appears as a lone figure only on the Yeghegnadzor-1 and Dedeli-4 belts; on the Dedeli-2³⁵ and Suçatı³⁶ belts, the archer forms part of a more complex composition, as part of a sacred tree. Rather than in Assyria, hunting-related images of kneeling archers are to be found in the art of the South Caucasus, for example on the belts found in Samtavro³⁷ and Treli³⁸, whereas Assyria has only yielded images of kneeling archers referable to

24 Esayan 1984, 193.

25 Kellner 1991, 45 n. 103 pl. 30, 103. The ›Uartian‹ belts are numbered according to the table in Dan – Bonfanti 2021.

26 Xnkikyan 2002, 96 fig. 96, 1.

27 The Anzaf shield may be considered an exception to this; it probably depicts a winged ibex as the mount of a god.

28 Özgüç 1961, 272 f. figs. 23, 24.

29 Hanfmann 1956, 206.

30 Erzen 1974, 207–209 figs. 29, 30.

31 Belli 1999.

32 Xnkikyan 2002, 94–96.

33 Xnkikyan 2002, 96 fig. 96, 2.

34 Castelluccia 2017a, 56 f.

35 Kellner 1991, 37 n. 63 pl. 12, 63.

36 Karaosmanoğlu 1991, 595–603.

37 Castelluccia 2017a, n. 317.

38 Castelluccia 2017a, n. 323.

sieges³⁹. The inspiration for this motif came from the Caucasian region, but it was adapted to the Assyrian style. The presence of the archer/sacred tree motif only in two burial grounds in eastern Turkey is also noteworthy, although it should be underlined that the archaeological contexts of both graveyards (Dedeli and Suçatı) are not well documented (or not documented at all). The chariot with two soldiers pulled by a horse is another distinctive element, appearing only on the more ›dynamic‹ belts of the Urartian area, i. e. those from Nor Aresh⁴⁰, *Kayalıdere*⁴¹, *Burmageçit*⁴² and *Yerevan*⁴³. Outside this group of belts, clearly attempted imitations of Assyrian wall reliefs, a chariot is represented on an exemplar from the fortress of *Çavuştepe*⁴⁴, specifically from a collective burial in the Uç Kale postern, part of a parade scene of chariots and horsemen; the only belt featuring a chariot in a series of apparently unrelated items is that from Metsamor. In Urartian royal art, chariots are always represented in parade scenes, clearly of Assyrian inspiration. A hybrid creature represented on the Tli belt has the head and body of a bird, and lions' paws, which is not found in Urartian art, but is very similar to some hybrids depicted on the Yeghegnadzor-1 belt (with human feet) and Mališka⁴⁵ belt (with a horse's head). The side cartouche depicting rampant lions with an upraised tail is only divided from the main scene by two parallel vertical lines, but the horizontal division follows the central scene dividing lines. The space-fillers used on this belt are different types of rosettes and Maltese crosses, which are frequent in the corpus of ›Urartian‹ belts⁴⁶. It is clear that the main similarities with ›Urartian‹ belts regard only the eastern specimens, i. e. those from Metsamor and Yeghegnadzor; greater caution is required for the specimens from Dedeli and Suçatı in eastern Turkey, since the discovery contexts are not well known or studied.

A. S. B.

Grave 215b Belt

¹² The main scene is divided into three registers of animals, hybrid creatures, and horsemen, separated by rosettes executed in various styles (Fig. 6)⁴⁷. The series of figures is reproduced identically on all three bands. The registers are not separated from each other; the whole scene is bordered by a single line of repoussé dots enclosed between double straight lines, and with a row of palmettes; at the right end of the belt, the cartouche is entirely ruined. The line of repoussé dots resembles only the border line on the Guşçi belt and a dividing line on the Giyimli belt; in Urartian popular art, multiple rows of dots framed by straight lines seem to be preferred, as seen, for example, on the Yeghegnadzor-2 belt and various belts found at Urartian sites, which only bear a dotted decoration⁴⁸. A single row of repoussé dots is instead present on another so-called ›Urartian‹ belt found in the Tli burial ground (Grave 425 belt), and on some ›hybrid‹-Urartian (or Urartian-inspired) belts found outside or on the borders of the kingdom; these consist of some right-side fragments of belts found in the Chrtanoch⁴⁹ and *Lori Berd*⁵⁰ cemeteries,

³⁹ BM 124554.

⁴⁰ Barnett 1963, 195–198.

⁴¹ Burney 1966, 78 fig. 10 pls. 9 b–11 b.

⁴² Yıldırım 1991, fig. 10, 1–10, 10.

⁴³ Esayan et al. 1991, pls. 16. 17.

⁴⁴ Bilgiç – Ögün 1964, pl. 20.

⁴⁵ Esayan 1977, 97.

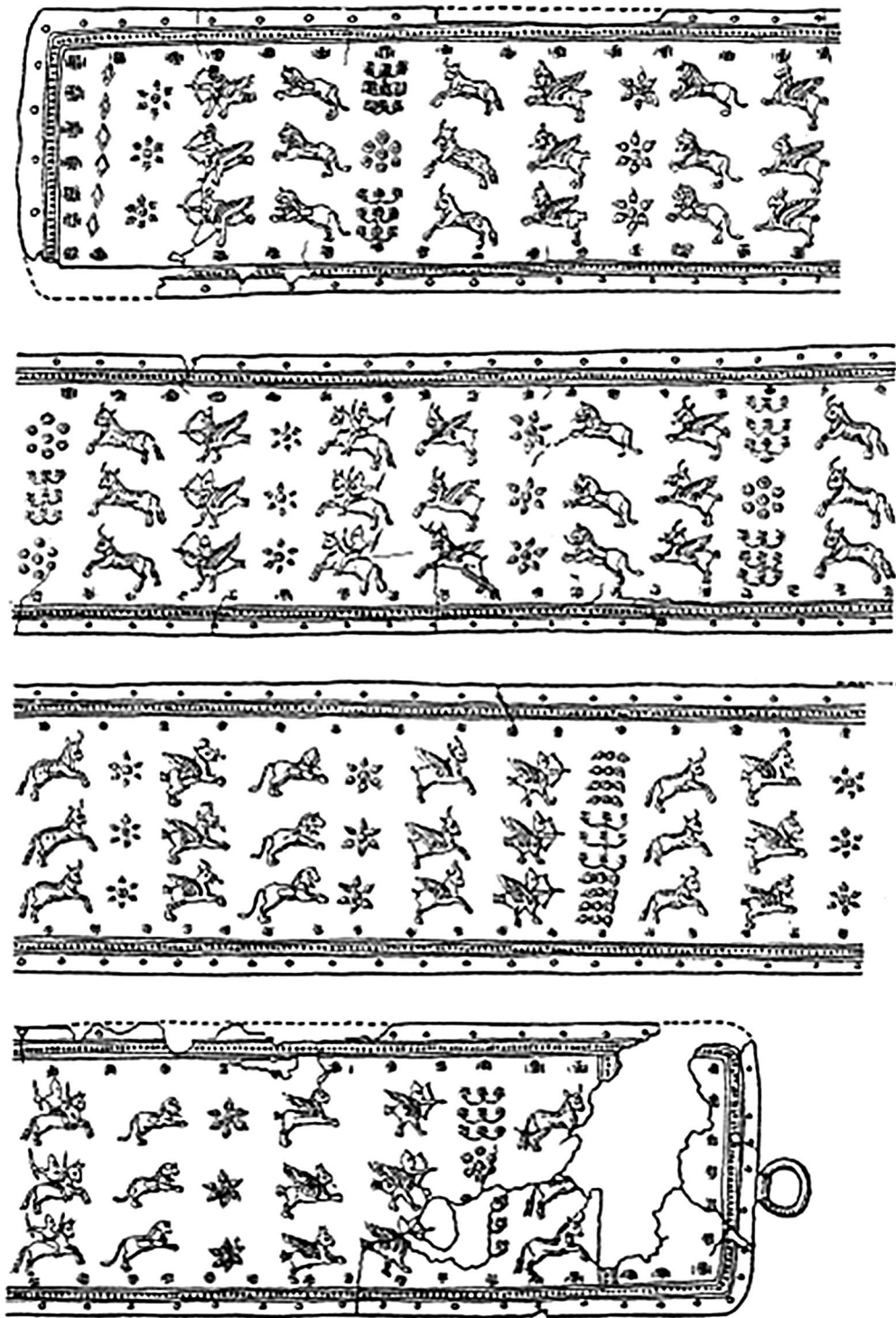
⁴⁶ See, for example, the Yeghegnadzor-1 and Dedeli-2 belts.

⁴⁷ Techov 1981, pl. 126.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Karmir-blur and Melekli; it is still uncertain whether these belts should be considered to belong to Urartian popular culture. Urartian royal art does not seem to use this motif, except on a quiver from Upper Anzaf (Belli 1999, 283 f.).

⁴⁹ Esayan 1984, 104 f. fig. 15.

⁵⁰ Devedjyan 2010, 83 fig. 5. pl. 17, 1.



6

depicting a sort of cartouche containing hybrid beings (on the Chrtanoch specimen) and lions (on the Lori Berd one). Bearing in mind that the Guşçi belt's discovery context is not well documented (it was a chance find and we have only the villagers' description), and that only a small fragment of the Giyimli belt is preserved, no significant conclusions may be drawn with respect to the diffusion of this motif in Urartian popular art. On the other hand, the line of palmettes present inside the border line resembles one on the Yeghegnadzor-1 belt; moreover, this type of palmette is also used to compose the sacred tree image on the Tli belt, and on the Yeghegnadzor-1, Dedeli-2, and Suçatı belts, although the problems associated with the discovery contexts of the last two should be

Fig. 6: Tli. Belt from Grave 215b

borne in mind. The first decoration inside the main scene is a vertical line of diamond shapes, which is paralleled by the Dedeli-2 belt for the Urartian area, and the Mingečaur belts⁵¹ from present-day Azerbaijan: both the belts from Mingečaur present a decoration divided into two or three horizontal registers, in a sort of ›Urartian‹ manner, even if they feature Caucasian motifs. The figurative motifs on this belt comprise various hybrid creatures, many of which have no parallels among ›Urartian‹ belts: the first represented is an archer with bird's body, a human head wearing a polos, and lion's paws, which bear some resemblance to motifs on the Guşçi and Yeghegnadzor-1 belts, although the characteristics of the hybrids represented on those belts are slightly different. Very similar, but wearing a pointed helmet instead of a polos, is the hybrid creature portrayed on the three registers of the Tli belt. Another hybrid creature not found in Urartian popular art is that composed of a lion's body, wings, a bull's snout, and a snake's tongue protruding from the mouth, which is depicted three times on this belt. Another hybrid creature represented here is a sort of winged sphynx, which has a parallel on the Metsamor belt and (probably) the Dedeli-4 belt. This last belt also features the image of the winged bull, which also appears on the Şahtaxtı⁵² and probably the Burmageçit-3⁵³ belts. The other figures featured on this Tli belt are horsemen with a raised arm, bulls, lions, and ibexes, which are discussed in the section on the Grave 40b Tli belt; all the lions shown here are rampant with lowered tails. The usual Urartian space-fillers, such as rosettes and sacred trees, are present. There is a clear majority of hybrid creatures compared to real animals, some of which have no parallels on other ›Urartian‹ belts (nor, of course, in Urartian royal art). An interesting detail is that all the horsemen portrayed on the three Tli belts don't bear any shields, unlike the horsemen of the Urartian area⁵⁴, who always carry a shield. Like the first belt, this specimen too is completed by a belt clasp in the form of a ring attached to its right end. An observation on this specific belt has been made by Kossack⁵⁵: because of its similarity to the Guşçi belt, he suggested that the two were produced in the same workshop. This is probably an option, but at present there is insufficient support for this hypothesis since our knowledge of ›Urartian‹ bronze belts is preliminary; moreover, it must be remembered that this study is based on the examination of drawings of the two aforementioned belts.

R. D.

Grave 425 Belt

13 The main scene is divided into three registers of animals, hybrid creatures, and horsemen, separated by rosettes (Fig. 7)⁵⁶. The sequence of figures is reproduced identically in all three bands, which are separated by a line of repoussé dots enclosed between two straight lines. At the right end one can see a different distribution of the figures on the belt, which looks like a succession of three cartouches separated by vertical zigzag lines executed with repoussé dots. On the basis of the published drawing, it looks as though every figure has been traced freehand, without the use of a stencil or a model⁵⁷. The figures on the belt include rampant lions with lowered tails, bulls, and ibexes, which are widespread in Urartian popular and royal art; they also include various hybrid creatures, mainly unattested in Urartu, such as beasts with a lion's body, wings, and a bull's head, and also a winged lion with one front paw raised. A very atypical

51 Castelluccia 2017a, nos. 231–260.

52 Başsaliev 1997, 117 fig. 26.

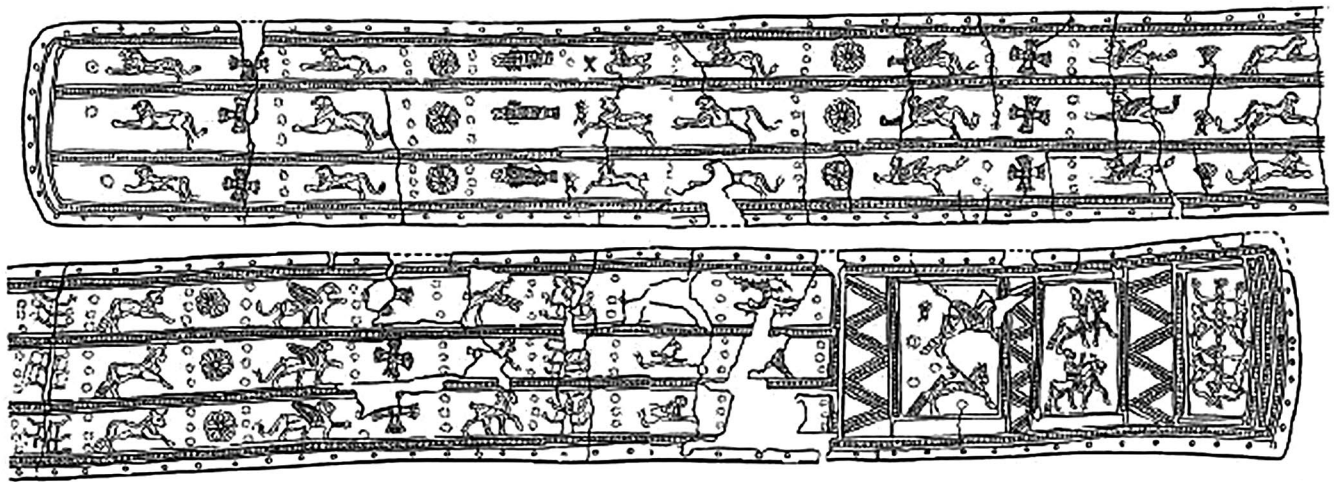
53 Yıldırım 1991, fig. 10, 6. 7.

54 Except for the belts found in Altuntepe and Metsamor.

55 Kossack 1983, 145.

56 Techov 2002, pl. 100, 8.

57 As already mentioned, the main problem with the study of these artefacts is that it is only feasible using drawings, which are per se interpretations of the objects.



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Fig. 7: Tli. Belt from Grave 425

image is that of a fish, portrayed on this belt among the other characters; this decoration is totally unknown in Urartu but is present on a helmet from the Lori Berd necropolis, found inside the so-called ›Royal tomb‹ n. 56 together with other ›Urartian‹ objects such as two belt clasps⁵⁸. The fish motif is popular on Scythian objects⁵⁹ and is also found on some Southern Caucasian belts⁶⁰. Another unusual feature is the choice of space-fillers and also their disposition between the figures, with the same number of fillers and figures; the decorations comprise a sort of solar motif, which usually appears in groups of three in a vertical row, except for the first appearance. These sun motifs are attested on the unusual Mališka bronze belt and on a belt from Mouçi-yéri⁶¹. Southern Caucasian belts often feature solar motifs of different shapes and sizes, used both as fillers and as part of the scene. Other space-fillers are rosettes, palmettes, sacred trees, and a sort of Maltese cross with a decoration inside. The right end has a unique decoration: inside a vertical register delimited by a frame of repoussé dots and separated by vertical zigzag lines of repoussé dots, there are three cartouches containing two superimposed images. The first cartouche shows two rampant bulls facing to the right; inside the same register there are other representations of what may be interpreted as a solar motif. The second box shows two horsemen with pointed helmets armed with spears but without shields; their horses wear harnesses with a sort of crest. The last cartouche on the right depicts a sacred tree among whose branches there are images of four ibexes or bulls, with an iconography that recalls the sacred trees on the Dedeli-2 belt. The belt's decoration is completed by three parallel lines of repoussé dots. Peculiar to this belt is the vertical zigzag decoration: the use of always horizontal zigzag lines is attested in the Urartian area only as a space-filler or dividing motif; there is only one ›Urartian‹ belt which has an exclusive zigzag decoration and it was found in the Yerevan columbarium⁶², while the motif has a uniquely dividing function on the Burmageçit-3 belt⁶³. It has been said⁶⁴

58 Devedjyan 2010.

59 Gold fish from the funerary context of Aržan 2 (Čugunov et al. 2007, 81) can be cited as an example, and one gold fish from the so-called Vetersfelde Treasure (Nawroth 2007, 320. 322 figs. 1. 2). Also noteworthy is the incredible finding of a tattoo on the leg of a mummified man from Barrow 2 in Pazyryk (Rudenko 1970, 247 fig. 121).

60 Castelluccia 2017a, 64.

61 Castelluccia 2017a, n. 261.

62 Esayan et al. 1991, pl. 18.

63 The Burmageçit-2 (Yıldırım 1991, fig. 10, 3–5) belt is decorated only with a zigzag pattern but was probably not finished.

64 Castelluccia 2017a, 44 f.

that the zigzag motif only appears on ›Transcaucasian‹ bronze belts found in Urartian sites, taking as an example a bronze belt found in Karmir Berd, whose burial ground dates from the 15th century B.C.E. and has yielded numerous other belts, most of them plain, and one decorated with images of men and animals, perhaps horses, in Caucasian style. The author dates the belt with the zigzag to the Middle Iron Age »given its strong resemblance to similar Urartian items«, without mentioning what these items are and to what category they belong, but he specifies that the discovery context of this zigzag belt is unknown⁶⁵. To justify his proposed date, he uses a bronze cup found »in the necropolis« to draw a parallel with the bowls found in storeroom 28 of *Karmir Blur*, dating the belt to the 9th–8th centuries B.C.E.⁶⁶. However, he also indicates a feature connecting the zigzag decoration to the Caucasian area: »it is, however, true that this type of decoration is found in the Caucasian world from the Late Bronze Age on metal objects and clay vessels⁶⁷«. A zigzag line associated with the repoussé dots pattern is present on the silver belt *Altuntepe-1*⁶⁸, with an exact parallel on the belt from Grab 48 of *Kalakent*'s so-called *Paradiesfestung* dated to the Early Iron Age⁶⁹, once again confirming that the motif was mostly common in the pre-Urartian era. The motif formed by a single row of dots framed by single or double parallel lines occurs on numerous other belts, mainly from Tli⁷⁰; a zigzag line of embossed dots appears on a belt from the hoard of *Stepantsminda*⁷¹, and a similar motif, perhaps composed of short lines (dashes) rather than dots, on another belt from Tli⁷², both associated with a clearly Caucasian decoration, not to mention the belts with ›snake‹ decorations that may resemble the zigzag/dotted line motif⁷³.

¹⁴ In the light of these considerations, it seems that, while there is a strong similarity between the belts from tombs 40b and 215b of the Tli necropolis and various ›Urartian‹ belts⁷⁴, there is on the other hand a huge difference between the tomb 425 belt and the patterns usually associated with Urartian art, both in terms of depicted images and the division of the main scene. With regard to the first two belts, it may be cautiously hypothesized that they might be imported in the Southern Caucasian territory during the Urartian era, but for the third belt it is not possible to propose a direct derivation from the Urartian area. It may be considered, more likely, as a local reworking of an ›Urartian‹ product, a specimen that might be defined as an *Uarto-Caucasian* hybrid.

A. C.

Conclusions

¹⁵ In conclusion, the three tombs analysed in this contribution present distinctive elements compared to the other tombs found in the Tli burial ground. Their peculiarity lies not so much in the composition of the grave goods as in the presence of bronze belts apparently referable to the Urartian cultural sphere. Other graves in the Tli cemetery

⁶⁵ Castelluccia 2017a, 289.

⁶⁶ Castelluccia 2017a, 289.

⁶⁷ Chantre 1888, pl. 50, 3. Castelluccia 2017a, 45.

⁶⁸ Özgüç 1983 37 pl. 16, c. d.

⁶⁹ Nagel – Strommenger 1985, pl. 22.

⁷⁰ Castelluccia 2017a, nos. 77–81. Culican – Zimmer 1987, 187: »in a number of graves in the surrounding area are portions of belts decorated with horizontal repoussé lines or rectangular panel work in a style well known in Urartian metal belts (v. Techov 1981, figs. 88. 91. 98. 101. 106. 119. 124)«, but this framed single-dotted line decoration is not actually common in the art of Urartu, as seen above.

⁷¹ Castelluccia 2017a, n. 291.

⁷² Castelluccia 2017a, n. 322.

⁷³ Castelluccia 2017a, nos. 332–349.

⁷⁴ *Dedeli* – whose belts, however, must be carefully considered –, *Guşçi*, *Suçati*, *Yeghegnadzor-1*, *Metsamor*, *Giyimli* – again, to be considered with caution.

contain belts more commonly related to the vast and varied tradition of the so-called ›Transcaucasian‹ belts⁷⁵. Those found in the three tombs examined here are certainly exceptions, but also of considerable significance from a diagnostic perspective. Among the other finds discovered in these tombs, the only ones that have potential diagnostic value are the Koban-type axes and fibulae. Some scholars have tried to attribute the complex of objects found in these tombs to a period that in the relative chronology of the cemetery corresponds to Period IV, which may be dated to the late 8th and second half of the 7th centuries⁷⁶. Despite this proposal, it is necessary to underline the lack of certainty with regard to the precise dating of fibulae with rather generic features, and, above all, also the problem related to the chronology of the Koban culture complex, generally dated between 1400 and 600 B.C.E.⁷⁷, of which the axes are probably the most distinctive objects. We believe that probably the most characteristic and identifiable elements are the so-called ›Urartian‹ belts, whose stylistic analysis can help to frame the burials chronologically. As has recently been shown, the populations of Nairi and Uruatri, who formed the ethnic and cultural substratum that made up the Urartian ethnos, underwent a progressive and constant process of Assyrianization⁷⁸ at an unspecified time, probably around the 10th century B.C.E. The local populations of the emerging Urartian state adopted the tradition of the Caucasian belts, developed in previous periods in an area located north of the borders of the state of Urartu. With the birth of Urartu, the effects of the progressive Assyrianization became evident with the official adoption of a series of cultural elements characteristic of Mesopotamian civilizations, and in particular of Assyria⁷⁹. Although some of these features became part of the official culture of Urartian royalty, it must be emphasized that bronze belts never became part of the highly standardized material, both in morphological and decorative terms, that characterizes most of the royal metalwork production. Unlike these artefacts, the so-called ›Urartian‹ belts, have a very high iconographic heterogeneity and, above all, at the current state of research, there is no single belt coming from an established archaeological context that bears a royal cuneiform inscription. The bronze belts, therefore, do not pertain to the sphere of the royalty but can instead be considered as manifestations of local culture of the Urartian period, in continuity with their use – especially by populations north of the River Araxes – as a marker of social status. From this perspective, the three belts from Tli must be considered in detail. The belts from tombs 40b and 215b are morphologically and iconographically consistent with types attested in a period from the 9th to 7th centuries B.C.E. in the north-eastern territories of the Armenian Highlands, where the tradition of belts was typical, and where it is likely that the exogenous Assyrian cultural tradition had influenced that of the local communities. These are probably productions not made locally; instead, they could have been taken from southern territories in accordance with dynamics that we will discuss shortly. In fact, among the various hypotheses that might be proposed regarding the discovery of these three belts, which however constitute exceptions among the grave goods of Tli, it may be suggested that they were produced in lands further south, and then transferred to their final location by a process that may not have been too dissimilar from that which brought to North Ossetia an inscribed Urartian royal helmet of Argišti (I), son of Minua (CTU IV B 8–13). This helmet, identified at a location known as Rutchi-tig or Verkhnyaya Rutkha, may be dated by an inscription to the first half of the 8th century B.C.E (Fig. 8)⁸⁰. This specimen, as well as some of the artefacts present in the tombs of Tli, could be the result of predation, practiced by local

75 For a catalogue of Southern Caucasian metal belts, see Castelluccia 2017a.

76 Apakidze 2009, 165.

77 Sagona 2017, 425.

78 The start of which can be dated to the 13th century B.C.E.

79 Köroğlu 2015; Dan – Bonfanti forthcoming.

80 On the helmet, see Nagel 1959/1960, 144–147; Dezsö 2001, 83 pl. 91.



8

Fig. 8: Rutchi-tig (Northern Ossetia). Inscribed Urartian royal helmet

hybridization, and the assimilation and reinterpretation of different cultural models. We propose as a possible date for this belt a period between the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E. This later dating is also reinforced by the presence of a characteristic representation of fish that would seem to be a characteristic feature of Scythian art. Conventionally, the start – or at least the intensification – of the systematic descent of these populations in the southern Caucasus is dated approximately to the 7th century B.C.E.⁸². The fact that elements of this nomadic culture had penetrated into the toreutic productions of regions south of the Greater Caucasus suggests that the production of this belt probably took place at a time when the penetration of Scythian people was constant, and local populations of the southern Caucasus had adopted certain Scythian cultural elements. In our opinion, this would justify a chronological range that also extends to the 6th century B.C.E. Moreover, this dating does not conflict with the discovery within the Tli cemetery of Koban-type axes with depictions of fish that are certainly not a strictly Caucasian feature⁸³. The Tli burial ground is located on the edge of two worlds: the vast area of the Euro-Asian steppes and the Near-Eastern-Caucasian world. The natural limit of these two worlds is constituted by the Great Caucasus range, which, like all borders, is physical, and does not constitute merely a place of conflict but also one of cultural contact. The tombs of Tli as a whole, and above all the belts examined in this article, represent an extraordinary example of the complexity of contacts and cultural exchanges between multiple realities.

A. S. B. – A. C. – R. D.

81 Esayan 1977, 97.

82 Liverani 2011, 697. 757. 789.

83 Apakidze 2009, 184 fig. 69.

populations living in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus towards the territories on the northern edges of the Armenian Highlands. It may be hypothesized that these predatory phenomena were one of the contributing causes that led to the progressive dissolution of the Urartian state. It seems, therefore, much more likely that these events occurred starting from the 7th century B.C.E or later. The belt from tomb 425, on the other hand, constitutes an exceptional case of cultural hybridization. Its complex iconography shows the synthesis of iconographic elements pertaining to truly Urartian culture, Assyrian features conveyed by Urartu, elements more typical of the Caucasian iconographic sphere, and, finally, aspects pertaining to the nomadic world. This belt, precisely because of its characteristics, can be framed in a final phase of a process of cultural hybridization, in which the plurality of influences present at the moment in which the metalworker created this work is manifested. This example as well as the Mališka belt⁸¹ might be of a somewhat later date than the other belts, resulting from a process of

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METADATA

Titel/Title: Between the Greater and Lesser
Caucasus. An Analysis of the Belts from the Tli
Burial Ground and Their Contexts (Graves 40b,
215b, 425)
Band/Issue: AA 2021/2
Bitte zitieren Sie diesen Beitrag folgenderweise/
Please cite the article as follows: A. S. Bonfanti –
A. Cesaretti – R. Dan, Between the Greater and
Lesser Caucasus. An Analysis of the Belts from
the Tli Burial Ground and Their Contexts (Graves
40b, 215b, 425), AA 2021/2, § 1–15, [https://doi.
org/10.34780/5660-s6ml](https://doi.org/10.34780/5660-s6ml)
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Online veröffentlicht am/*Online published on:*
05.05.2022
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/5660-s6ml>
Schlagwörter/Keywords: Tli, Great Caucasus,
Koban culture, Urartu, bronze belts
Bibliographischer Datensatz/*Bibliographic
reference:* [https://zenon.dainst.org/
Record/003002446](https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/003002446)