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## “THE SACRIFICIAL RAM”: GOLDEN STATUE IN THE HISTORY OF ART

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The paper deals with a gold human figure, carrying a ram on its shoulders, kept at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (Fig. 1-2). This statue, a rare, small example of plastic art, was taken from a destroyed grave in the south-east of Azerbaijan, in the territory of Lerik district, and was handed over to the Museum of History in 2012. Although the analogies of the statue, distinguished by its uniqueness, have not been found in the South Caucasus up to date, there is no doubt that such figures existed in the ancient art history of the Near and Central East. Also similar images depicted on numerous metal and pottery items, especially demonstrate prototypes of Mannaeen, Assyrian and Urartian art of the 9<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. At the same time, this statue with the image of a man carrying a ram on his shoulders can be considered as a traditional continuation of the ritual rite of “sacrificial ram” in the South Caucasus. Because, the discovery of a great number of ram figures in the territory of Azerbaijan in the ancient Eneolithic-Early Bronze Age settlements (Исмаилзаде, 2008, с. 106) and even the use of tombstones with ram images in burial customs in the later antique, early and advanced Middle Ages (Kərimov, 2006, s. 79–81) should be considered as solid facts proving that “sheep-rams” were a sacred symbol in the district for thousands of years. The main goal of the paper is to comprehensively involve this rare find in scientific research and conduct analogies to determine its period.

**Key words:** archaeological find, Ram image, Goddess statue, Near East, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, ancient art, chronology.

**Introduction.** Azerbaijan is one of the oldest metallurgical centers of the Caucasus. It is no coincidence that valuable artifacts reflecting the level of development of ancient metallurgy have been obtained during the archaeological excavations conducted in different periods in the territory of the country. In the territory of Azerbaijan, which has a rich source of raw materials and precious metal deposits, artistic metalworking has been one of the developed art fields since ancient times. Today, among the world’s most famous museums – Saint-Jermain and Louvre in Paris, Victoria-Albert in London, Metropolitan Museum in New York, State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Topkapi in Istanbul, Turkish and Islamic Art Museums preserve examples of artistic metalworking that characterize the ancient art of Azerbaijan (Əfəndi, 2007, s. 9–25). These examples of art reflect the level of development of ancient Azerbaijani art, artistic and aesthetic features, and differ in the richness of symbolic and meaning shades. It can be

noted that art samples made with high taste by artisans in the field of artistic metalworking had a special importance in the history of art. Since each produced item was made in accordance with the demand of the period and reflected a number of historical features of the period on this sample. At the time of early class societies, the ritual of offering sacrifices to the gods has left a mark in history with statues, images and art motifs reflecting religious beliefs in a vast area. Through these elements, along with following the spiritual culture of an era, we can also see what the organic world, which occupies a central place in religious beliefs, consists of.

**Description of the find.** In recent years, new findings of ancient art have been discovered both by archaeological excavations and accidentally. Although a few of them were involved in the study, most were left out of investigation. One of such findings is a gold statue-figure, which was accidentally found in Lerik district in 2009 and handed over



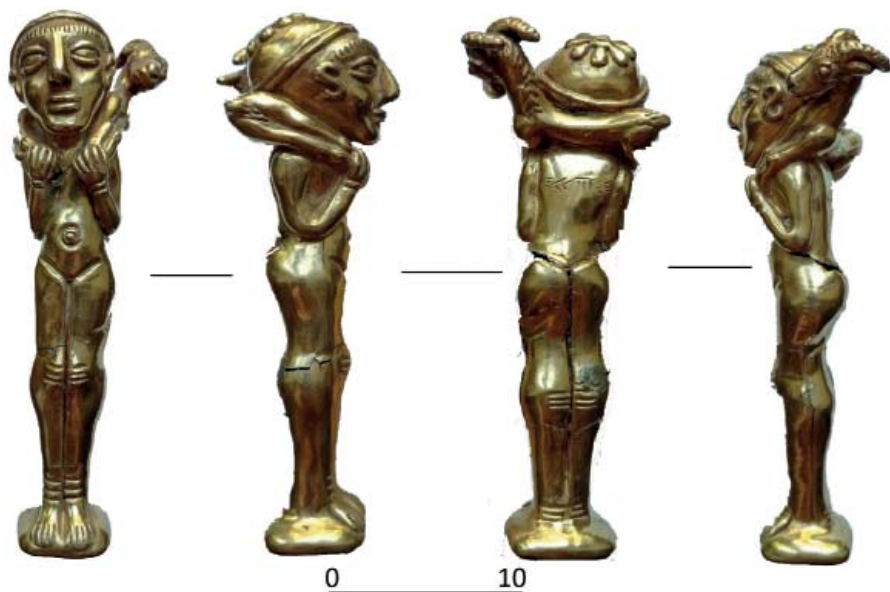


Fig. 1. Golden statue. Fund of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan.

Рис.1. Золотая статуэтка. Фонд Национального музея истории Азербайджана.

to the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan in 2012. The height of the figure is 14 cm, the diameter of the head is 2.6 cm, the width of the face is 2.7 cm, the diameter of the seat is 2.5 cm and the weight is 21 grams. It was made by casting and welding method (inv. No. 318). Brief information about the figure was given for the first time in the catalog "Gold and silver archaeological items of Azerbaijan" published by the museum in 2013 (Rüstəmbəyova, 2013, s. 88). Unfortunately, this rare gold statue found in Lerik district has not been involved in research for a long time and no substantial scientific information has been provided about it. Authors of this paper for the first time conducted extensive research on the find with the permission of the museum management (*We would like to express our gratitude to academician Naila Velikhanly, director of the museum, for the conditions created to conduct scientific research on the rare find*). We would also note that this unique find should be considered the most important among the gold items

found in Azerbaijan. It can be said that such a find has never been found before in Azerbaijan.

In the statue, a young, half-naked man standing on a pedestal is depicted in a realistic style from front. The young man has an elongated face, salient eyes and cheeks. The ears are "S" shaped, the nose and cheeks are salient, and the chin is relatively oblong. There is a circular, cone-shaped hat or helmet with an eight-petalled flower on his head. His hair is depicted singly combed towards the forehead. On his shoulder a ram with his head tilted to the side, as if he is carrying a sacrifice somewhere. The man's hands are raised above from the elbow holding both legs of the ram. One thick bracelet is depicted on the right arm and two thick bracelets on the left one. The man, who is depicted half-naked and whose navel is indicated by bulging semi-circles, also has short clothing above the knees. The knee joints are indicated by three incised lines and two thick bracelets on both legs are given by notched lines. On his back and on the left side of the ram there are

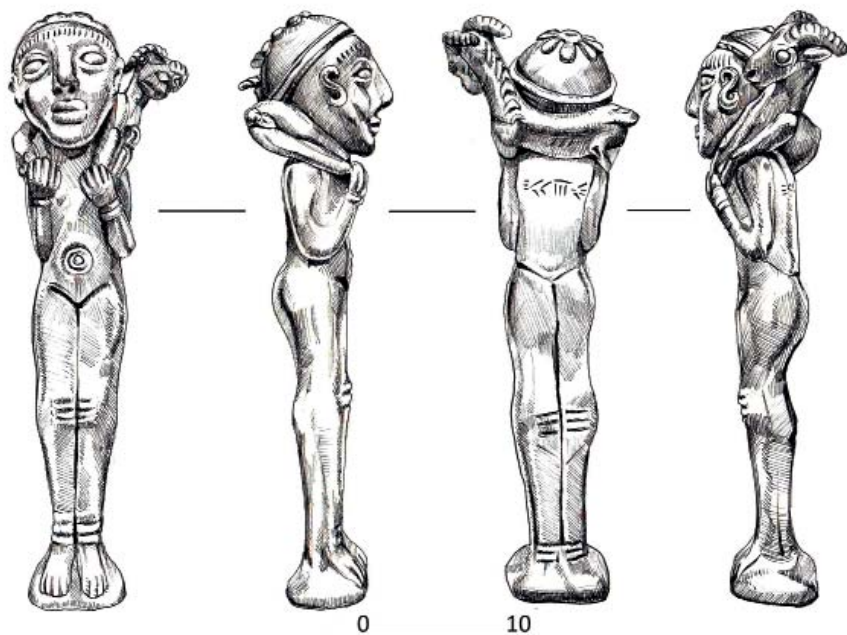


Fig. 2. Graphic representation of the golden statue (artist Seymour Farmanli).

Рис. 2. Графическое изображение золотой статуэтки (художник Сеймур Фарманлы).

marked inscriptions. His hips are bulging from the back and his right hip has an inward dent. Most likely, this dent was formed when it was removed from the soil. The ram's backward-twisted horns, bulging eyes, nostrils and a tinkler on its neck are clearly depicted. Also splitting found in some parts of the statue. Some researchers presented the animal as a mountain goat (Baumer, 2021, p. 155). But in our opinion this is wrong. Because among the animal images known from the monuments of the mentioned period, mostly images of rams are depicted. This is directly related to people's economic life. They sacrificed to nature the animals they kept in their farms. According to ethnographic observations, this custom still exists in our modern times. On the other hand, it is unfounded that the mountain goat is alive on the shoulder of the man as depicted in the figure. It is impossible to catch them alive and sacrifice because mountain goats are quick, timid and wild animals. Also, while the mountain goat has a beard, this is not

reflected in the figure. According to the initial possibility, this figure was found in a destroyed grave monument.

**Golden statue: A goddess or a man carrying the sacrifice?** In the territory of Lerik district, jewelry items and tinkler made of gold were found in Veri and Keraveladi necropolises (Morgan, 1896, p. 214; Kərimov, 2006, s. 59–60; Rəhimova və b., 2013, s. 356). It should be also noted that since the beginning of the 1st millennium BC the district had extensive relations with the cultural centers of the Middle East. The discovery of such findings in the territory of Lerik district is of great importance in the study of ethnic-cultural relations of the district. From this view point, the figure is of great interest. The headdress or helmet of the figure has certain similarity with the headdresses of Assyrian rulers and warriors depicted in Assyrian (Вардиман, 1990, с. 42) and Elamite reliefs (Alvarez-Mon, 2009, p. 139–180). It should also be noted that pointed and cone-shaped helmets were more typical



Fig. 3. 1–2 – Marlik necropolis (Vahdati, Piller, 2018);  
3 – Luristan necropolis (Mahboubian, 1997).

Рис. 3. 1–2 – некрополь Марлик (Иран) (Вахдати, Пиллер, 2018);  
3 – некрополь Луристан (Иран) (Махбубиан, 1997).

for the Assyrian army, and such helmets were also found in Hasanli excavations (Qaşqay, 1993, s. 70–71). This figure-statue has similar features to the bronze nude goddess statue found in Luristan (Fig. 3/3). Two doves are depicted on the shoulders of the goddess in Luristan, and a ram with twisted horns is depicted on her head (Mahboubian, 1997, p. 63). The ram is depicted on the shoulders of the gold statue found in Lerik. At the same time, the headdresses of both statues are similar, which makes it possible that the statue is an image of the Goddess.

The human bust made of gold with hands crossed on the chest (Fig. 3/1-2) found in the Marlik graveyard in Gilan dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries BC has a closer analogy with the Lerik gold statue in terms of both headdress and facial structure (Vahdati, Piller, 2018). The gold items found from the Marlik graveyard are also more distinguished by their richness. The archaeological

materials found in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age monuments in Lerik district are also similar to the Marlik findings. Also, there are quite enough ram images among the Marlik finds (Negahban, 1998, p. 47) (Fig. 4).

Archaeological material provides rich and varied monuments of the religion of the Bronze and Iron Ages. But these monuments refer in most cases to the peoples of classical antiquity (Токарев, 1965, с. 45). It should also be noted that the image of the ram embodied the sun god Mithras in the Avesta, and this image spread from the contemporary monuments of South Azerbaijan up to Asia Minor, Egypt, Anatolia and the Black Sea coasts (Ремпель, 1987). Even before the Avesta, the image of the ram was a symbol of fertility and abundance. It has been embodied in various forms in the Middle East art. The first information about the Mithras cult was given in the cuneiform sources of the 15<sup>th</sup>

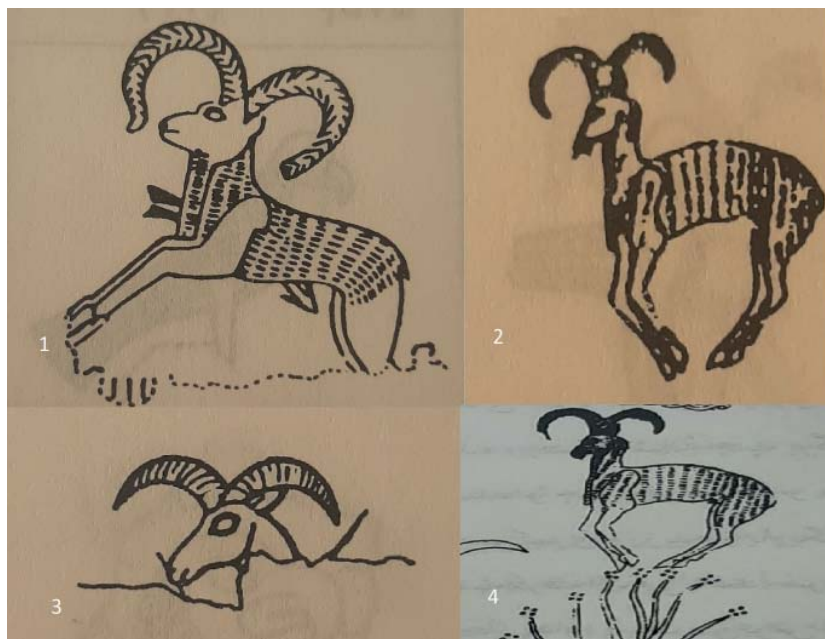


Fig. 4. Ram images on various items in the Marlik necropolis (Negahban, 1998).

Рис. 4. Изображения овна на различных предметах некрополя Марлик (Негахбан, 1998).

century BC, and it was based on the sacrificial ritual and the worship of the Sun (Karaketir, 2016, s. 1–13). Most likely the golden statue of the Goddess found in Lerik also embodies the “Rite of Sacrifice to the Sun”. It can also be assumed that the statue is the “Goddess of the Sun”. Because the image of an eight-petalled flower depicted on his (her) helmet is identical to the image on the headdress of the Late Bronze Age “Wind-Hurricane God” found in Tell-Hazor (Tallay, 2012, p. 454). It should also be noted that “Wind-Hurricane God” has a special place in Mannaean pantheon of gods. The rite of offering wine to the gods depicted in the Hasanli gold basin, and the closeness with the gods of ancient Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, occurred as a result of the integration of the Lake Urmia basin into the culture of the Middle East (Qaşqay, 1993, s. 79–80).

Undoubtedly, we try to look for the closest analogies of this figure in the Hasanli excavations of the Mannaean period. There are images of sacrificed

rams among rich motifs on the Hasanli gold basin. It is interesting that two of the rams here are being carried by people, and the other image of ram is depicted on the shoulder of a half-naked Goddess (Winter, 1989, fig. 6). Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that Hasanli IV B was destroyed at the end of the 9th century BC. It is clear that Hasanli gold basin was also used during ritual rites before this destruction. It is believed to have been made between 1000 and 800 BC (Winter, 1989, p. 90; Magge, 2008, p. 103).

The Assyrian and Urartu expansion to Mannaean also conditioned the influence of Middle Eastern traditions on its art. The golden statue found in Lerik belongs to the local Mannaean art and reflects the centuries-old traditions of the Ancient East. Depicting of the goddess standing indicates her position after the gods sitting on throne in the cult hierarchy of the Middle East and is considered a secondary god (Tallay, 2012). This Goddess seems to create an image of be-



ing in the service of some chief god and offering sacrifices to him.

**Chronology and comparative analyses.** However, there are three main ideas up to date, that remain unanswered in the field of research of this type of art: 1) the place and history of the production of this type of samples, 2) the iconography of the motifs, and 3) ethnic, linguistic and cultural associations (Winter, 1989, p. 89). Undoubtedly, all the mentioned problems require a joint investigation of the mentioned art examples and do not exclude that they belong to the same art. Perfectly and very delicately worked similar examples of this type, indicate the formation of professional craftsmen and their special position in the period of early class societies.

Unfortunately, although this golden figure-statue has attracted the attention of some researchers, wrong assumptions have been made about it. Some tried mistakenly present it as an example of the Caucasian Albanian (Aliyev et al., 2021, p. 110), while others as an example of the Roman-Parthian period of the 1st century BC (Baumer, 2021, 155, fig.1). All this can be connected with the fact that the above-mentioned authors have superficial information about the figure.

The study of the marks on the back of the human statue and the ram can also help to obtain detailed information about the period of the find. The marks on the ram's back are relatively faint, but the marks on the man's back are clearly visible. We observe that there are four signs here: 1) 3 lines drawn horizontally and parallel; 2) 2 pyramid-shaped signs on the left side; 3) marks with 3 parallel lines drawn vertically and 1 straight line on top (T-shaped); 4) 5-line incised marks.

In general, this type of signs is found mostly in ancient Elamite inscriptions. Of course, their reading is a separate field of study. However, in order to conduct even brief comparative analysis and determine the chronological framework,

we consider it appropriate to bring comparisons from several monuments with examples of this type of writing.

As a result of the excavations carried out in 1961–1962 at the Tchogha Zanbil monument, the inscriptions carved on clay blocks demonstrate the stage of development of the writing culture of the period (Steve, 1962, p. 23), and no matter how difficult, it is an actual problem in the direction of studying the ancient Elamite language through these writings (Lambert, 1965, p. 18). A small group of Middle Elamite inscriptions was also studied in the West Asian collections of the British Museum (Walker, 1980, p. 75).

On the whole, according to the preliminary assumption, the figure-statue found in Lerik can be attributed to the 8<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. This golden statue of the Goddess stands in the same row as the finds from Hasanli, Marlik, and Ziviyya, which characterize Mannaeen art.

**Conclusion.** Finally, at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BC, the formation and development of the art of Elam in the south, the Caucasus in the north, and Bactria in the northeast achieved great progress in craftsmanship (Winter, 1989, p. 104). The analysis of the golden figure-statue of the Goddess discovered in the south-eastern region of Azerbaijan also shows the close connection of this type of samples with the ancient cultural centers of the South Caucasus. In the mentioned period, extensive cultural and economic relations with neighboring districts were important in the life of local tribes, and all these relations led to a number of changes in their social life and spiritual culture (Ağalarzadə, 2021, s. 125). Undoubtedly, the changes should be characterized by the rapid development of the production economy, crafts and local production traditions. For these economic and trade relations, it is possible to mention the road that connects the south-east of Azerbaijan with Luristan (Tepe Giyan)

and Marlik hill as the leading road from the south to the Caucasus (Джафаров, 1894, s. 67–68). It is not an exception that the place of production of this type of samples in the South Caucasus was in the territory of Azerbaijan. Although such finds are known only from the south of Azerbaijan, this find from Lerik proves that its distribution area was wider. Because, there is no doubt that these art samples were made in Azerbaijan, which has rich precious metal deposits. Simply, the main problem fac-

ing us today is to determine their production sites and to obtain more samples. Undoubtedly, examples of this type are not unique, and it is not exception that they will be revealed as a result of more extensive archaeological research in the future. All this will create conditions for the study of the history of ancient art not only of the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan, which is part of it, but also of the Middle East in a wide area, and the study of mutual relations among the districts.

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### "ЖЕРТВЕННЫЙ ОВЕН": ЗОЛОТАЯ СТАТУЭТКА В ИСТОРИИ ИССКУССТВА

С.К. Каримов, А.М. Агаларзаде

В статье сообщается о хранящейся в Национальном Музее Истории Азербайджана золотой фигурке человека, несущего овна на шее. Эта статуэтка, являющаяся редким образцом малой пластики, была найдена в разрушенном погребении на территории Лерикского района, на юго-востоке Азербайджана и сдана в 2012 г. в Музей Истории. Несмотря на то, что эта уникальная статуэтка не имеет до сих пор аналогов на Южном Кавказе, несомненно наличие подобного типа фигурок в истории древнего искусства Ближнего и Среднего Востока. Схожие сюжеты, в частности представляли собой прототипы искусства Маньшан, Ассирии и Урарту IX–VIII вв. до н.э. и изображались также на многочисленных металлических и керамических образцах. Данную статуэтку человека, несущего на шее овна, также можно считать традиционным продолжением ритуального обряда «жертвоприношения овна». Весомыми фактами, доказывающими наличие в регионе на протяжении тысячелетий священного символа овна можно считать выявление многочисленных фигурок овнов из древних поселений эпохи энеолита-ранней бронзы на территории Азербайджана (Исмаилзаде, 2008, с. 106) и использование надгробий в форме овна в античности, раннем и развитом средневековье в погребальных обрядах (Керимов, 2008, с. 79–81). Главной целью данной статьи является привлечение этой редкой находки к комплексному научному исследованию и проведение аналогий для датировки.

**Ключевые слова:** археологическая находка, изображение овна, статуэтка Богиня, Ближний Восток, Южный Кавказ, древнее искусство, хронология.

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