

Regionalism and Internationalisation in the Urartian Period



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An Iron Age Metal Hoard from
Yeghegnadzor, Armenia

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Cover: Detail of bronze vessel 1304/4110 (YGZ01).



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Foreword

This new volume represents a welcome addition to the group of works on the Urartian civilization published recently by ISMEO. The volume testifies to ISMEO's commitment to become heir and developer of the "Urartu Project" that was started years ago by Mirjo Salvini and has produced fundamental contributions to the discipline. The study of the materials presented in this text was carried out as part of ISMEO's research activities in the South Caucasus (Archaeological Mission to South Caucasus - ISMEO) and, in this specific case, in Armenia. This group of objects dated to the Iron Age had been characterized by only one preliminary publication and certainly deserved an in-depth study and reassessment. The re-evaluation of these materials took place as part of an agreement with the Regional Museum of Yeghegnadzor in the framework of the Vayots Dzor Project, a long term joint project of ISMEO and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences, Republic of Armenia (IAE NAS RA), with the aim of investigating the Vayots Dzor region in detail through surface surveys and archaeological excavations. In addition to the discovery and documentation of numerous unpublished sites, the mission distinguished itself with its research collaboration with Armenian institutions on two very important prehistoric caves, Areni-1 and Areni-2, in the excavation of the first Middle Bronze Age settlement in the region, Tigranashen and a series of contexts ranging from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Ages (Mokhrot, Yelpin-1, Kyoshk, Gnishikadzor). The hoard of Yeghegnadzor represented an excellent opportunity to reconsider the complex problems that characterized the Armenian Highlands during the Iron Age, in particular when the state of Urartu came into contact with the local communities of those regions. The group of objects published here opens a window on the vastness and complexity of the relations and cultural exchanges that took place between the Urartian state and the local groups and more generally reflects the internationalization of relations between very distant areas, such as Mesopotamia or the northern Caucasus. The book is divided into sections and includes a reassessment of the archaeological context of discovery, and a vast *raisonné* catalogue of the objects accompanied by considerable graphic and photographic documentation. In particular, the reconstruction of the two famous belts of Yeghegnadzor is remarkable, as the specimens were found in dozens of fragments and here reconstructed. The final part of the volume is reserved for a series of contributions that discuss some specific classes of objects and the problems connected to the study and interpretation of hoards in archaeology. This volume is a further demonstration of how fruitful collaboration between scholars can be, even from very distant parts of the world, and brilliantly renews the bond established by ISMEO with Armenia since 2013.

Adriano V. Rossi

President of ISMEO – The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies

Preface

From its birth, Urartian archaeology and the study of its metallurgy in particular have been cursed by a disregard for context. Even objects reputedly recovered by excavators at prominent sites like Toprakkale often appeared stripped of any associations. Before the spectacular results of the Karmir Blur excavations gave the field a modicum of respectability in the mid-20th century, unprovenanced materials were virtually all that one had to work with. Even today, despite the growing body of artifacts excavated more scientifically, no treatment of Urartian art can be considered the least bit comprehensive without including many pieces that have come from nowhere.

The danger of relying on such a body of material is of course widely recognized. The art market places little value on mundane objects and fragments which together might speak with a voice that individual pieces lack. Forgeries abound and even real objects may be modified to increase their value. For example, bronze belts almost never bear cuneiform inscriptions. The exceptions are unprovenanced fragments that would otherwise command little attention and the short inscriptions incised into them are identical to those found on excavated bronze bowls. Is it not more likely that these were added by some modern forger than by the creator of the ancient belt? Without more studies like the present one, we can never be certain.

This meticulous reworking of the Yeghegnadzor hoard is a solid demonstration of how much can be achieved by keeping materials together and respecting the value of what might be regarded as a secondary context. Although the discovery was accidental, the location of the find only approximately known, and the jar which contained the materials has disappeared, the survival of these artifacts as a group has made it possible for the authors to effectively refute the original hypothesis that the find represented the contents of a grave. Treating those materials completely, rather than selectively was essential to establishing that it was a hoard, and specifically a collection of metal objects.

As the authors point out, hoards are very special kinds of assemblages and can be created for a variety of purposes. While working at 'Ain Dara in Syria, I witnessed the discovery of a small jar containing eighty Byzantine gold coins, dating as I recall, to the 10th or 11th century. This find had nothing to do with the Iron Age temple the Syrian archaeologists were excavating. The site was merely a convenient hiding place and was probably unoccupied at the time it was buried. It takes little imagination to construct a hypothesis where someone traveling through the Afrin Valley sensed danger and buried his treasure in already ancient ruins, never to return and collect it.

It is less easy to discern the motives of the individual or individuals who assembled the Yeghegnadzor hoard. Although the size of the vessel that contained it is unknown, it seems unlikely that it was very portable, and not enough is known about context of its discovery to be certain that it was deliberately buried. The authors observe that it was essentially a collection of metal objects perhaps assembled for recycling, with the single seal included for some other purpose. The dating of the objects all fits comfortably, if not definitely, in the 8th or 7th century, but this, of course only establishes a terminus post quem for the time of collection.

Even if we do not know much about the sources of these metal objects and the circumstances under which they were assembled, defining them as a group and revealing their associations makes an important contribution to the archaeology of the region.

Paul Zimansky
Stony Brook, New York
October 2022

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This volume has had quite a long preparation, as we began to write it in 2018, and for this reason the authors wish to thank many people.

Our foremost gratitude extends to the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (IAE NAS RA), to its former director, Pavel Avetisyan, and to its current director, Arsen Bobokhyan. This volume owes its existence, in part, to a trilateral agreement between IAE NAS RA, ISMEO – the International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, and the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum.

Our second, significant thanks go to ISMEO and its president, Adriano V. Rossi, for their unwavering institutional and financial support, as well as for facilitating archaeological activities in Armenia. Alongside ISMEO, we would also like to express our gratitude to MAECI – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

This work would not have been possible without the support and collaboration of Karen Azatyan, director of the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum [Եղեգնաձորի երկրագիտական թանգարան], and of all the museum's staff, who assisted us throughout our study visit; a particular thankyou is addressed to Artavazd Khachatryan.

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There are many colleagues who, directly or indirectly, have helped us over the years in the drafting of this text. Among them, we would like specially to thank Arsen Bobokhyan, Yervand Grekyan, Marie-Claude Trémouille, Mauro Giorgieri and Stephan Kroll, and all the past and present members of the Vayots Dzor Project.

Last but not least, our most sincere thanks go to Mirjo Salvini, who introduced us to the archaeological finds from Yeghegnadzor, gave us a preview of the material, and inspired our Urartological studies.

I. Introduction

During construction works carried out in Yeghegnadzor in 1989, several objects, mainly in metal, were found in unclear circumstances, and immediately interpreted as Urartian grave goods. Of these allegedly Urartian objects, the two bronze belts have undoubtedly had the most success in specialist literature, while most of the other objects seemed to be perceived as of little scientific importance. The first publication of this discovery was a brief article written by S.A. Yesayan and O.S. Xnkikyan in 1990, entitled “Nakhodki biayniskikh izdeliy v Yekhegnadzore (Urartian objects in Yeghegnadzor)” (Yesayan and Xnkikyan 1990), published in Russian and entirely devoted to the description of the material; the only other work on the objects was published by O.S. Xnkikyan in 2002, where the materials were discussed in a paragraph of the section dedicated to the Iron Age in the region of Syunik (Xnkikyan 2002: 94-96, and pls. XCIV-XCVI).

As a result of a *Memorandum of Understanding* between the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Science of the Republic of Armenia (IAE NAS RA), the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum, and ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, in 2018 an extensive project was launched, with the aim of studying the materials kept in the Yeghegnadzor Regional Museum in the framework of the archaeological activities conducted by the joint Armenian-Italian mission “Vayots Dzor Project” (VDP). This volume contains the results of this collaboration as the publication of a first group of objects from the museum, and it constitutes the first systematic and comprehensive publication of these items. A total of fifty-eight objects were discovered, fifty-five of which are in metal (bronze and iron), and only three, a seal and two potsherds, were made of other material. The volume includes a catalogue and a detailed analysis of each object, accompanied by photographic documentation realised with both a professional camera and a portable microscope. The picture that emerged from the study of some specific finds has convinced the authors to partly reconsider their cultural attribution, their chronology, and the interpretation of their context of discovery.

All the contributions published in this volume are signed with the initials of their single authors. All the pictures present in this volume have been prepared by Roberto Dan.

R.D., A.S.B., A.P., B.G.