

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH212337-343>

Research paper

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THE DEPICTION OF HALO IN THE ARTISTIC DESIGN OF URARTIAN MEDALLIONS

Abstract. Urartian medallions have been found in Karmir Blur (Teyshébaini, Armenia), Toprak-Kale (Rusakhinili, Turkey), Çavuştepe (Haykaber, Turkey), Giyimli (Hirkanis, Turkey), and other sites. This article examines three silver medallions with ritual scenes, housed in the History Museum of Armenia in Yerevan and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Based on their imagery, in the Kingdom of Van, jewelry served not only an aesthetic purpose but also held magical significance. The depiction of a halo is unique in Urartian art and is known only from the discovered medallions. The halo is represented as a circular golden frame around the deity's head. This research is the first to analyze the iconography and symbolism of the divine halo in these medallions, challenging the prevailing attribution of the halo's origin to ancient Persian culture. Archaeological evidence from Urartian sites suggests that the symbolic representation of a deity's body part, associated with the Sun or Divine Light, predates Persian influence in the Armenian Highlands. Employing comparative analysis of archaeological finds, textual sources, and published materials, this study interprets the iconography of the Urartian supreme deity Haldi, depicted in ritual scenes on medallions and other cult objects. The analysis suggests that the disc-shaped halo around Haldi's head, symbolizing divine light and the sun, may trace its origins to petroglyphs and religious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of the Armenian Highlands, highlighting Haldi as the sole deity adorned with this symbol in the Urartian pantheon.

Keywords: Urartu (Kingdom of Van); medallion; halo; Haldi; ritual; iconography; symbol

For citation: G.R. Poghosyan. The depiction of halo in the artistic design of Urartian medallions. History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus. 2025. Vol. 21. N. 2. P. 337-343. doi: [org/10.32653/CH212337-343](https://doi.org/10.32653/CH212337-343)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH212337-343>

Исследовательская статья

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ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕ НИМБА В ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОМ ОФОРМЛЕНИИ УРАРТСКИХ МЕДАЛЬОНОВ

Аннотация: Урартские медальоны были найдены в Кармир-Блуре (Тейшебаини, Армения), Топрак-Кале (Русахили, Турция), Чавуштепе (Айкаберд, Турция), Гийимли (Хирканис, Турция) и других местах. В статье рассматриваются три серебряных медальона с ритуальными сценами, хранящиеся в Музее истории Армении в Ереване и Метрополитен-музее в Нью-Йорке. Судя по изображениям, в Ванском царстве украшения, помимо эстетического назначения, имели также магическое значение. Изображение нимба уникально в урартском искусстве и известно только по найденным медальонам. Нимб выражен как круглое золотое обрамление головы божества. Актуальность данного исследования состоит в том, что впервые изучается иконография и символика божественного нимба в художественном оформлении некоторых медальонов. Проблема заключается в том, что большинство исследователей относят происхождение нимба к древнеперсидской культуре, однако урартские археологические находки доказывают, что символическое выделение части тела божества, ассоциировавшейся с идеей солнца или божественного света, использовалось в священных изображениях Армянского нагорья гораздо раньше. Изучение основано на иконографической интерпретации изображений главного божества урартского пантеона, представленного в ритуальных сценах на медальонах и других предметах культа. Исследование проведено методом сравнительного анализа на основе археологических находок, текстовых источников и различных опубликованных материалов. В статье сделана попытка представить дискообразное выделение головы урартского божества как нимб, а истоки происхождения рассмотреть в петроглифах и религиозных верованиях древних жителей Армянского нагорья. В результате изучения религиозных сюжетов можно сделать вывод, что только верховный бог урартского пантеона Халди изображался с нимбом вокруг головы, как символом божественного света и солнца.

Ключевые слова: Урарту (Ванское царство); медальон; нимб; Халди; ритуал; иконография; символ

Для цитирования: Погосян Г.Р. Изображение нимба в художественном оформлении Урартских медальонов // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2025. Т. 21. № 2. С. 337-343. doi.org/10.32653/CH212337-343

Introduction

This study employs a comparative methodology, drawing on archaeological discoveries, textual sources, and a range of published materials to investigate the depiction of the halo in Urartian art. Specifically, it seeks to interpret the disc-shaped highlighting of the head of the Urartian deity as a halo and to explore its potential origins in the petroglyphs and religious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of the Armenian Highlands. The analysis focuses on three silver medallions adorned with ritual scenes, currently housed in museums across different countries. The halo, a distinctive feature in Urartian art, is uniquely represented in these medallions, typically as a circular form imbued with religious iconography. The scarcity of these medallions is attributed to their exclusive use by the elite as a symbol of status [1, p. 254]. In his article, S. Hmayakyan suggests that these medallions may have been worn by women associated with religious roles, such as priestesses, noting that men typically wore pectorals [2, p. 13]. While this hypothesis is compelling, it remains debatable due to the varied iconographic themes depicted on the medallions. For instance, one medallion portrays a woman worshipping a male deity, another depicts a female goddess, and a third shows a man making an offering. This begs the question about whether men, women, or both wore these medallions.

Analysis

A silver medallion (3.5 cm, 8th-6th century BCE), discovered at Karmir Blur in Area B during excavations of the northern sector of the citadel's central part in 1951-1952, depicts a sacrificial scene. The composition, adapted to the medallion's circular surface, shows a female figure sacrificing a goat to a deity seated on a throne (Fig. 1). While B. Piotrovski [3, p. 11] identified the throned figure as a goddess, it is more likely a depiction of the male deity Haldi. This interpretation is supported by written records at the Door of Mher (Van, Turkey), which indicate that goats were sacrificed exclusively to the supreme god Haldi during the "month of the sun-god" [4, pp. 25; 281]. F. König [5, p. 76] suggests this month likely corresponds to March, aligning with the known celebration of New Year in the Armenian Highlands during the spring or vernal equinox [5, p. 77]. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the deity depicted on this medallion as Haldi.

Further analysis can be drawn from the iconography of the ritual scene. The female figure bears a resemblance to a bronze statuette found in Darabey (Van region, Turkey) [6, p. 183]. This same figure also appears on a gold medallion from Toprak-Kale, which B. Piotrovski [7, p. 84] interpreted as a scene of adoration to the goddess Arubaini (Haldi's wife), and in the artistic decoration of bronze votive plaques from Giyimli (Turkey). The composition adheres to classical Urartian theological iconography, but the distinctive circular emphasis around the deity's head sets this medallion apart.

It appears the contour highlighting on the medallion was a later, poorly executed addition, applied over the existing lower layer images. Notably, other objects with similar iconographic compositions lack the halo (nimbus) around the deity's head.

Another silver medallion from Karmir Blur (Area B, 5 cm, 8th-6th century BCE) also features a circular gilding decoration (Fig. 2). The artistic decoration on both medallions is schematic and simple, created using an engraving technique where a sharp tool incised the metal surface. This second medallion depicts a standing figure offering a goat to a deity. Both examples share a horizontal plane accentuated by a zigzag border, a common motif found in Urartian decorative-applied art. In ancient religions, such as Hittite culture, sacrifices typically occurred at sunrise or sunset [1, p. 25]. It's plausible that goat sacrifices in the Kingdom of Van also took place during these times of day, a notion supported by the depiction of the sun and moon at the top of the medallion's composition [8, p. 87].

The iconography of the halo holds significant importance, particularly given its absence on other canonical Urartian artifacts. This raises a crucial question: does its presence reflect the spiritual ideology of the era, or is it merely the individual artistic approach of a particular craftsman? A halo, traditionally a luminous circle around the head or body of a sacred figure, originates from the ancient concept of sacred light associated with celestial bodies. J. Campbell suggests the halo first appeared in Zoroastrian art [9, p. 521]. However, this view can be challenged by petroglyphs from the Armenian Highlands and Urartian medallions, which may predate or serve as foundational pictorial systems for later cultures.

It's worth noting that ancient spiritual beliefs of the region are deeply embedded in Urartian art. For instance, a petroglyph from the Geghama Mountains (Gegharkunik region, Armenia, dating from the Neolithic to Bronze Age) depicts an anthropomorphic figure with a goat, seemingly representing the sun god (Fig. 3). The symbolic link between goats and the sun in folk beliefs is further supported by the presence of solar discs on the bodies of goats found on some bronze plates [10, p. 89].

In ancient mythology, as well as in Armenian folklore, goats frequently symbolize heavenly luminaries [11, p. 87]. The emphasis on the head, perhaps a significant symbolic component of the body, is apparent. Another petroglyph represents the worship of the sun disk (Fig. 4). These images attest to the sacred reverence held by the ancient people of the Armenian highlands towards the sun and its symbolism. Researchers suggest that Haldi, the principal god of the Kingdom of Van, may have functioned as a solar deity, embodying celestial fire from which, according to ancient beliefs, the sun derived its light [2, p. 13]. This interpretation potentially makes the deity's head covering with a fictitious "sunlight" more comprehensible.

One silver medallion from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (6.3 cm, 7th century BCE, acquired in 1989 as a gift of Norbert Schimmel Trust) differs in that the deity's body is entirely gold and lacks a halo (Fig. 5). The production method for these medallions involves pressing the metal, which creates highly convex images. The artist skillfully attempted to convey the convexity of the sphere in the deity's hand, a feature absent on other Urartian artifacts. Once more, the composition is based on a zigzag pattern. Given the lion-adorned throne, it appears that Haldi is being depicted, as the lion is a known symbol of this deity. S. Hmayakyan claims that the figure depicted in front of the deity is a priest, citing the lack of a sword as evidence [2, p. 11]. Considering the symbolic relationship between Haldi, the sun, and gold, the author proposes that the sphere in the deity's hand represents the sun. In this context, it is appropriate to consider the gold winged disk of the sun found in the ceremonial section of Ayanis, which A. Batmaz links to Haldi [12, p. 75]. However, other scholars argue that the winged sun disc might represent a universal divinity [13, p. 859].

An important question that may be answered by examining the medallions and their iconography is why the halo is exclusive to the decoration of medallions and when this tradition originated. Is the primary deity the only one with holiness attributes? We may infer that, in addition to being the primary deity of the pantheon, Haldi was regarded as the sole supreme deity because the halo is exclusive to the images of this god. A consideration of Haldi's treatment in Urartian cuneiform texts, dating back to Ishpuini (son of Sarduri I), is appropriate. In these texts, the deity is primarily referred to as "Greatness of Haldi" or "with the Power of Haldi" (dHal-di-ni-ni uš-gi-ni, dHal-di-ni-ni uš-ma-ši-ni) [14, pp. 16–17]. It is also significant to note that the worship of Haldi is believed to have originated during the reign of King Ishpuini [15, p. 109]. Haldi is described as the great god of the Kingdom of Van's pantheon, revered as the god of light and the powerful Lord [16, p. 3]. The name Haldi itself is intriguing, as in the languages of Western Transcaucasia, hal is etymologically translated as "sky" [17, p. 275]. Only Haldi is mentioned in the inscriptions as a Lord (dHal-di-e e-ū-ri-e) [18, p. 42]. These forms of naming are maintained in the inscriptions until the fall of the Urartian empire.

Throughout history, a circular halo has been used to highlight the depicted character of holiness. In ancient Egyptian art, the halo is the sun disk on the head of the divine being; for a period, it was referred to as Aten [19, p. 386]. Some deities associated with the worship of the sun, such as Osiris, Isis, or Hathor, were represented with a sun disc on their head. According to the Turin Papyrus and Manetho's history, in Egypt, the sun god acted as the initial ruler of Egypt, the Lord of Heaven, and carried a sun disc [20, p. 148]. In Christian symbolism, the nimbus emerges as a mandorla in the 4th century, and by the 5th century, it becomes an integral component of the representation of Christ, the Madonna, and saints [21, p. 118]. In comparing Urartian Haldi with Osiris, it appears the principal Urartian god, as a Lord and King of the Sky, was also associated with a solar deity, hence his depiction with a disk or halo. It's possible the medallions, with their sacred iconography, were intentionally chosen for their circular, sun-like shape. Localizing the halo's iconography proves challenging due to its widespread use across diverse cultures, from ancient Egypt to India and even Latin America.

In ancient Persian culture, the halo was known as Khvarenah, signifying divinity. The Latin term, adopted from Greek, means "cloud." Before Christianity, the nimbus, in its common form, was used to represent deities in Roman and Sasanian cultures. Ancient Iranian peoples practiced a ritual of gratitude to the deity, where Khvarenah was imbued with a supernatural halo of flames and brightness. It translates as "Glory" and was associated with high-ranking individuals [22, p. 120]. It's also noteworthy that the cult of Haldi later reemerged or merged with the worship of Mithra in the Armenian Highlands, with the nimbus frequently appearing alongside the god's depiction in iconography.

Conclusions

Based on this comparative analysis, Haldi, like other supreme deities of the ancient East, was indeed connected to the sun. The interpretation of ritual scenes on the medallions is also crucial for study. Therefore, on the medallions discussed, the sacred image of the god was represented by emphasizing the head with a circular plate or gilding the figure. This artistic method may be uniquely preserved on these medallions and warrants additional extensive examination.

These Urartian artifacts demonstrate that the tradition of depicting a halo on a deity's head in its recognizable form has ancient origins and is distinguished by its iconographic styles. Unlike the "classic" nimbus of Christian tradition behind Jesus's head, or the sun-disk on the heads of ancient Egyptian gods, the sacred emphasis of the Urartian deity differs by covering the entire head with gold foil. As a result of this study, it can be inferred that in ancient Urartian culture, the sanctity of the main god and his connection with the sun were also represented by the so-called halo.



Fig. 1. Silver medallion, Karmir Blur, History Museum of Armenia

Рис.1. Серебряный медальон, Кармир-Блур,
Музей истории Армении



Fig. 2. Silver medallion, Karmir Blur, History Museum of Armenia

Рис. 2. Серебряный медальон, Кармир-Блур,
Музей истории Армении

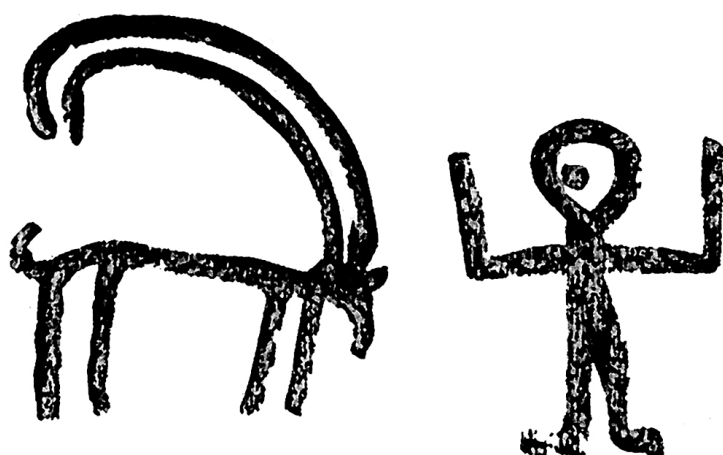


Fig. 3. Petroglyph, Gegham Mountains

Рис. 3. Петроглиф, Гегамский хребет



Fig. 4. Petroglyph, Gegham mountains

Рис. 4. Петроглиф, Гегамский хребет



Fig. 5. Silver medallion, gold foil, The Metropolitan Museum

Рис. 5. Серебряный медальон, золотая фольга, Музей Метрополитен

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Received 06.08.2024

Accepted 25.12.2024

Published 15.06.2025

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Поступила в редакцию 06.08.2024 г.

Принята в печать 25.12.2024 г.

Опубликована 15.06.2025 г.