

From Rocks to Buildings. A Study of the T-shaped Motif in Urartian Architecture and Iconography

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Il regno di Bia/Urartu è una delle entità politiche più interessanti nel panorama del Vicino Oriente antico del I millennio AEC. La sua cultura fu il risultato di un secolare processo di sincretismo tra gli elementi dell'Altopiano armeno e componenti esogene provenienti principalmente dalla Mesopotamia settentrionale, ma anche dall'Anatolia e da altre regioni limitrofe. In diversi casi gli Urartei svilupparono elementi di grande originalità sia nella cultura materiale che nell'architettura. Il presente contributo propone la prima analisi complessiva di un motivo simbolico che trovò espressione in vari campi della produzione urartea, ovvero le "nicchie a T". Il testo analizza tutti gli esemplari attualmente noti in letteratura, sia per quanto riguarda gli esemplari rupestri che quelli su roccia, nonché le rappresentazioni iconografiche.

The kingdom of Bia/Urartu is one of the most interesting political entities in the panorama of the ancient Near East of the 1st millennium BCE. Its culture was the result of a centuries-old process of syncretism between the cultural elements of the Armenian Highlands and exogenous components coming mainly from Northern Mesopotamia, but also from Anatolia and other neighbouring regions. In several cases the Urartians developed elements of great originality in both material culture and architecture. This paper is dedicated to the first overall analysis of a symbolic motif that found expression in various fields of Urartian production, namely "T-shaped niches." The text analyses all the specimens currently known in the literature, including both rock-cut examples and carved representations, as well as iconographic depictions.

Introduction

The kingdom of Bia/Urartu is one of the most interesting political entities in the panorama of the ancient Near East of the 1st millennium **BCE**.¹ Its story can be divided into three eras. A first phase that we could define as protohistoric, that is formative, can be dated to the 10th and 9th centuries BCE. In this era, the progressive reception of cultural elements from Northern Mesopotamia took place; together with ingredients of the local cultures of the Armenian Highlands, these came to constitute the substratum of the Urartian culture. The second phase, the main one corresponding to the apogees of Urartu's political power, took place between the mid-9th and mid-7th centuries

¹ This contribution arises from an idea developed over the years, but which originated during three epigraphic expeditions to Van between 2008 and 2010. I would like to thank Prof. Mirjo Salvini with whom I had the opportunity to examine many of the niches and the finds discussed in this text, as well as to talk about the issues addressed here. All images are produced by the author except where otherwise indicated.