HAKKARİ BAY FORTRESS GOD

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1. Introduction

Toward the close of the second millennium BCE, the socio-political landscape of the Armenian Highland and eastern Anatolia witnessed the gradual crystallization of the polity that classical sources call the Kingdom of Urartu. Emerging in the early ninth century BCE as a coalition of local principalities, Urartu transformed what had previously been a network of highland communities into a centralized state with a remarkably coherent administrative and religious ideology [1]. The kingdom's heartland lay in the basin of Lake Van, but its power extended far beyond this core. At its zenith, Urartu's dominion stretched southward to the Taurus Mountains, northward to the valley of the Aras River, westward as far as the middle Euphrates, and eastward across the Zagros into the Lake Urmia basin, creating one of the most formidable highland states of the Iron Age in the Near East [2].

Within this extensive geography the Urartian kings established a highly organized settlement system. Fortified royal centers, provincial citadels, and satellite habitation units combined administrative, military, and cultic functions. Excavations and surveys in the Lake Van basin – at sites such as Van Fortress (Tušpa), Ayanis, and Karmir Blur – demonstrate a standardized repertoire of architecture and storage facilities, revealing the mechanisms by which the state mobilized resources and projected ideological control [3-4]. Yet this pattern of dense, planned settlement appears more sporadically in the Hakkâri region to the southeast. The rugged topography, steep valleys, and long winter conditions of Hakkâri posed natural barriers to large-scale agricultural exploitation and to the movement of armies or caravans [5]. Nevertheless, systematic surveys and rescue excavations have documented fortified sites, rock-cut tombs, and scattered habitation mounds that attest to a sustained Urartian presence. These remains show that the region was not merely a temporary military outpost but functioned as an integrated provincial zone within the Urartian administrative network [6-7].

Urartu's interest in Hakkâri was not accidental. For nearly two and a half centuries the kingdom sought to secure the approaches to the Lake Urmia basin, a strategic corridor linking the highlands of eastern Anatolia with the Iranian plateau. Ancient routeways reconstructed from both topography and epigraphic evidence indicate a path that

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led from Van through the Harami Pass and Gürpınar Plain, along the Hırsız Creek valley and the Kasrik (Kırkgeçit) defile, then across the Şahmanis and Karadağ passes to the Barçelan Plateau – an itinerary already recognized in Belli's synthesis of Urartian mining and road systems [8]. Control of these corridors enabled Urartu not only to challenge Assyrian influence in north-west Iran but also to safeguard its own supply lines and access to the mineral resources of the Zagros (Figure 1).

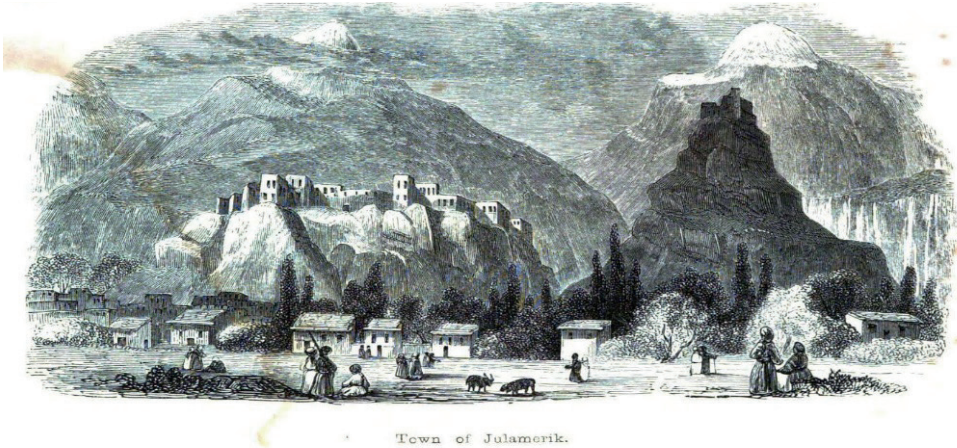

Figure 1. Town of Julamerik [9]. *The image shows Julamerik (Hakkâri) and Bay Fortress.*

Geopolitically, therefore, Hakkâri formed a liminal zone: the frontier where the expanding powers of Assyria and Urartu met and sometimes clashed. This frontier character endowed the region with a significance out of proportion to its difficult environment. As Sevin observes, the borderland setting made Hakkâri both a buffer and a bridge, shaping the strategies of fortification and diplomacy pursued by Urartian kings. Archaeological investigations of fortresses in this area, designed for both defense and the display of royal authority, have consequently provided valuable insight into the mechanisms of Urartian frontier policy.

Among the remains of these fortifications, certain figurative reliefs occupy a special place. In particular, the fragmentary depiction now known as the **Bay Fortress relief**, securely dated to the Urartian period and located within the modern province of Hakkâri, is of exceptional interest. Although weathering and surface loss have obscured details, the formal composition is still legible: a figure standing upon an animal while extending one arm forward (Figures 2 and 3). Such a pose is a well-attested iconographic formula in Urartian art, signifying the exalted power of a deity or the divine mandate of kingship [10]. Similar compositions – divine or semi-divine beings poised upon lions or other animals – are known from major sites such as Adilcevaz-Kef and Karmir Blur and serve as visual proclamations of cosmic and political order [3].

Figure 2. Photograph of the Bay Fortress God relief.

Figure 3. Drawing of the Bay Fortress God.

What renders the Bay Fortress example especially intriguing is the costume of the figure. The surviving outlines suggest a polos-type headdress and a long trailing robe, attire that parallels not only the ceremonial garb of Urartian deities such as Šiuini but also the divine vesture depicted in the art of the Neo-Hittite principalities and the Neo-Assyrian empire. These cross-regional affinities invite a broader comparative analysis: before assessing the Bay Fortress deity in detail, it is necessary to examine the religious ideology, artistic conventions, and territorial strategies of Urartu itself, particularly as they played out in the highland frontier of modern Hakkâri (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Urartian relief column element from Adilcevaz Kef Fortress Ankara Museum of Anatolian Civilizations [11].

2. Urartian religion: The belief system as an instrument of state formation

The Kingdom of Urartu emerged on the historical stage in the ninth century BCE as a coalition of highland principalities and tribal groups inhabiting the mountainous plateaus of Eastern Anatolia. This transformation from loosely connected polities into a centralized state involved far more than military unification: it generated a new ideological and religious framework that bound diverse communities into a single political order [1]. Religion, in this context, functioned as both a theological and an administrative instrument, providing the symbolic grammar through which royal authority and social cohesion were expressed.

Urartian society encompassed Hurrian, Anatolian, and Transcaucasian elements, yet the monarchy successfully articulated a shared belief system that transcended local identities. By shaping a polytheistic pantheon into a state religion, the kings of Urartu constructed a hierarchy of gods whose celestial order mirrored and legitimized the terrestrial hierarchy of royal rule [5]. Priesthoods and temple officials thus became integral to governance, their ritual activities reinforcing the authority of the palace and anchoring Urartian ideology in sacred space [3].

The Urartian pantheon drew upon the mythological and cultic traditions of neighboring Mesopotamia and of the Late Bronze Age Hittite world. As with the Hittites before them, the Urartians integrated local deities from conquered territories into their national cult, using religious syncretism as a means of consolidating political control. This process is clearly visible under the joint reign of King Išpuini and his son Minua in the early ninth century BCE. These rulers systematized the state cult and promoted the warrior god Ḫaldi to the position of supreme deity [2]. The pantheon that emerged – headed by Ḫaldi and flanked by the storm god Teišeba and the solar deity Šiuini – embodied a cosmic order that validated the king's claim to universal dominion [12].

One of the most important documents for reconstructing this religious ideology is the Meher Gate (Meher Kapı) inscription, carved into the rock face of the Zımzım Mountains near Van. This monumental text, more than four metres high, records the names of dozens of gods and goddesses together with the prescribed numbers and types of sacrifices for each [3]. The inscription illustrates the complexity and scale of the official cult and suggests that large public rituals, probably performed on the terraces before the gate, reinforced the visibility of the pantheon and the authority of the state.

Ḫaldi's primacy is further underscored by the appearance of so-called "Ḫaldi Gates," niche-type monumental portals that proclaimed his sanctity and simultaneously the king's divine mandate. In these monuments – and in bronze belts, stone reliefs and ceremonial weapons – Ḫaldi is consistently portrayed as a warrior deity, wearing a conical helmet and belted tunic, often brandishing a bow or spear [4]. His image served as a visual analogue for the Urartian monarch himself, who was thereby represented as the earthly counterpart of the god of war and order. Through such iconography, religious symbolism and political authority became inseparable.

Urartian religion was therefore more than a set of cultic practices: it was a carefully constructed political theology [1]. By embedding royal power in a cosmological hierarchy and by integrating the deities of newly conquered territories, the kings of Urartu created an ideological framework that not only unified a multi-ethnic realm but also provided the spiritual rationale for imperial expansion across the highlands of the ancient Near East [5].

3. Divine costumes in Near Eastern art: Comparative examples from Urartu, the Neo-Hittite Principalities, and the Neo-Assyrian Empire

From the closing centuries of the second millennium BCE onward, the polities of the ancient Near East developed highly codified visual languages in which the representation of gods and their attributes was inseparable from political ideology. Divine costume, in particular, operated not merely as an aesthetic embellishment but as a material expression of cosmic order and a visual guarantor of royal legitimacy. Across the highlands of Eastern Anatolia, northern Syria, and Mesopotamia, the clothing and regalia of deities – headdresses, belts, robes, and insignia – communicated theological concepts and the very structure of sovereignty [13].

3.1. Urartian traditions

During the ninth–sixth centuries BCE, the Kingdom of Urartu, centered on the Lake Van basin, forged an artistic idiom that blended Mesopotamian and Anatolian traditions while articulating its own theology of kingship [1,4]. Urartian reliefs, bronze belts, and cultic objects depict deities wearing distinct ensembles whose components carry layered symbolic meaning [3]. Conical or polos-type headdresses proclaim divine authority;

belts encircle and "order" the body as an analogue of the ordered cosmos; and long robes – sometimes decorated with star or spiral motifs – visually link the god's presence to celestial forces [14].

The chief god Ḫaldi is typically portrayed as a warrior figure equipped with a tall conical helmet, a short belted tunic, and weapons such as the bow or spear, his military dress embodying both cosmic order and the protective ideology of the Urartian state [15]. The storm god Teišeba is associated with undulating lightning motifs, while the solar deity Šiuini is shown in long robes ornamented with radiating patterns [3]. These images not only convey theological roles but also mirror the ceremonial attire of Urartian kings, thereby fusing the visual rhetoric of divinity and monarchy [4] (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Relief from Adilcevaz at Van Museum depicting the Deity Teišeba [16].

3.2. Neo-Hittite (Syro-Anatolian) principalities

In the twelfth–eighth centuries BCE, after the collapse of the Hittite Empire, a constellation of Syro-Anatolian states – Karkemish, Melid, Tabal, Gurgum and others – reinterpreted the Hittite religious tradition in local idioms. Stone orthostats and monumental gateways depict storm-gods such as Tarḫunza wearing double-horned conical crowns, long tunics, and footwear with up-turned toes – elements that demonstrate both continuity with Late Bronze Age Anatolian practice and dialogue with contemporary Assyrian styles [17-18]. Necklaces, bracelets, and elaborately patterned belts mark divine status and function as further visual emblems of rank. Regional variation is evident: Karkemish preserves classical Hittite formulas, Tabal and Gurgum betray stronger Assyrian influence with armor-like garments, and Melid favors more abstract geometric ornamentation, reflecting diverse trajectories of cultural interaction [14].

3.3. Neo-Assyrian Empire

In ninth–seventh century BCE Mesopotamia the Neo-Assyrian kings deployed divine costume as an explicit instrument of imperial ideology. Reliefs from the palaces of Ashurnasirpal II and Sennacherib present gods and genii wearing multi-tiered horned crowns – the most recognizable emblem of divinity in Assyrian art – together with radiant robes and rosette or star motifs symbolizing cosmic light [13-14]. By visually aligning the king's ceremonial garments with those of the gods, these programs naturalized the notion that the monarch was the earthly representative of the divine assembly.

3.4. Comparative perspectives

When viewed against this broad canvas, the costumes of Urartian deities – particularly the polos-type headgear and long ceremonial robes seen in reliefs from Adilcevaz-Kef and related sites – emerge as part of a regional conversation on sacred authority. They share with the Neo-Hittite world a preference for conical or horned headgear and with the Neo-Assyrian tradition a programmatic use of astral motifs and radiant garments. The Bay Fortress relief, with its figure standing upon an animal and clad in a long robe and distinctive headdress, thus exemplifies a frontier synthesis: an Urartian divine image articulated through a Near Eastern vocabulary of cosmic kingship.

4. The God of Bay Fortress

Archaeological research in the Hakkâri highlands has steadily enriched our understanding of the southern frontier of the Urartian kingdom. Among the discoveries of recent decades, a small but striking stone relief – popularly known as the Bay Fortress relief – offers rare evidence for the visual articulation of divine power in this borderland zone. Unearthed in association with Urartian-period ceramics, the relief is carved on a stone slab measuring approximately 26 cm in height and 39 cm in width. Despite surface erosion and partial breakage, key iconographic features remain visible: the figure of a bearded male, a polos-type cylindrical headdress, and a long trailing robe of ceremonial character. The figure raises one arm forward while standing upon, or perhaps riding, an animal – likely a horse or a feline – although the attribute held in the outstretched hand is no longer discernible.

4.1. Iconographic context within Urartian art

In the established canon of Urartian religious imagery, the motif of a deity or divine agent standing on an animal is well attested. From bronze belts and ritual objects to large-scale stone reliefs, such compositions proclaim the god's mastery over the natural world and his sanction of royal authority [3-4]. The Bay Fortress figure therefore fits a recognized Urartian convention in which the animal base functions as a visual metaphor for cosmic dominion and for the subordination of the earthly realm to divine order.

Yet the relief also invites comparison beyond Urartu. The polos-type headdress and the elongation of the robe recall Syro-Anatolian (so-called Neo-Hittite) treatments of divine costume, where storm-gods such as Tarḫunza are frequently shown with conical or horned crowns and long garments [17-18]. This hybridization of style is consistent with the Bay Fortress location on a cultural and political frontier, where Urartian and Syro-Anatolian artistic idioms could intersect.

4.2. Rock reliefs and the Adilcevaz–Kef parallel

Rock-cut divine images are rare in Urartian art; the few known examples are typically associated with sites of exceptional political or cultic significance. The most instructive parallel is the Storm God relief from the Adilcevaz–Kef Fortress on the northern shore of Lake Van, attributed to the reign of Rusa II (Figure 6). This program, carved directly into the rock and integrated with temple architecture, represents one of the clearest instances in which Urartian state ideology and religious ritual were spatially fused [19-20]. The Bay Fortress relief, though more modest in scale, participates in the same visual logic: the stone surface itself becomes a medium through which the divine presence is inscribed into the landscape, reinforcing the sanctity of a militarized frontier.

Figure 6. Relief stone block from the Adilcevaz Museum depicting the deity Haldi mounted on a lion.

4.3. Karmir Blur and the apotropaic tradition

Comparative insight is also provided by the clay figurines recovered from the storerooms of Karmir Blur, one of the major Urartian centers in the Ararat plain. Excavations revealed numerous small sculptures of bearded male figures with one arm extended forward, some holding spears or branch-like objects. Others are covered with a fish-skin cloak draped over the head and back, and traces of light-blue pigment remain on their reverse surfaces [10]. A separate discovery in an adjacent room yielded a hybrid scorpion-man figurine, combining anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features [9]. Piotrovsky famously classified such objects as 'fish gods,' suggesting an apotropaic function: they were likely intended to guard storerooms and protect the contents – especially wine – from malevolent forces.

These Karmir Blur figures illustrate the flexibility of Urartian divine imagery and the ease with which hybrid beings could be enlisted for protective rituals. By analogy, the Bay Fortress relief may have served a similar protective or legitimizing purpose, visually asserting divine guardianship over a strategic corridor that linked the Lake Van basin with the highlands of modern Hakkâri and the approaches to the Lake Urmia basin. Its combination of Urartian animal-stance iconography and Syro-Anatolian costume thus encapsulates the cultural entanglements that characterized Urartu's southern frontier.

5. Conclusion

When the garments of divine representations in Urartu, the Neo-Hittite principalities, and the Neo-Assyrian Empire are examined, it becomes clear that these costumes were not merely decorative, but served as important symbols reflecting concepts of belief and political authority. Elements such as headdresses, patterned garments, and belts were used to express both the divine order and the position of kings within that order.

In Urartu, the state god Ḫaldi is generally depicted as a warrior-protector, wearing a conical helmet, a belted tunic, and weapons. This imagery reinforces the idea that divine protection also extended to the king's earthly rule. The frequent repetition of this visual language on reliefs and metal objects from Van, Karmir Blur, and Altıntepe was intended to maintain the association between god and king within collective memory.

In the Neo-Hittite principalities, deities such as Tarḫunza and Kubaba are depicted wearing double-horned crowns and long, decorated garments. These costumes not only clarified the identity of the gods but also served as a means for smaller principalities to emphasize their traditional and religious values in relation to neighboring great powers.

In the Neo-Assyrian Empire, divine costume conveyed a more systematic message. In palace reliefs, the god Aššur and other major deities are shown wearing multi-tiered horned crowns and radiant garments. These imposing representations support the idea that the Assyrian king was a divinely chosen representative, transforming dress into a visual instrument that communicated imperial power.

Within this context, the relief from Bay Fortress in Hakkâri constitutes an important example. While the headdress and garments of the divine figure reflect Urartian stylistic conventions, the treatment of the face and the rendering of garment folds display Neo-Hittite influences. This situation demonstrates how central state iconography could merge with local artistic traditions in frontier regions, and how such works expressed both political affiliation and regional cultural interaction.

In conclusion, divine costumes in these three cultural contexts carried both religious and political meanings. Through clothing and accessories, the attributes of the gods and the hierarchical structure of society were emphasized, while simultaneously conveying the idea that royal authority was grounded in a sacred framework. The study of this visual language provides an important key to understanding how ancient societies shaped their concepts of belief and power.

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Summary

The Kingdom of Urartu emerged as a major highland polity at the dawn of the first millennium BCE, crystallizing from the flourishing Late Second-millennium civilization centered around Lake Van. At its apogee, the Urartian realm extended from the Taurus Mountains in the south to the valley of the Aras River in the north, and from the middle

Euphrates in the west to the Lake Urmia basin in the east, exercising political and cultural authority across Eastern Anatolia, Transcaucasia and north-western Iran for nearly two and a half centuries. Because of the steep and climatically harsh environment of the Hakkâri highlands, the density of Urartian settlements here is lower than in the Van basin or the Ararat plain. Nevertheless, systematic surveys and excavations – documenting fortified citadels, habitation mounds and rock-cut tombs – demonstrate that Hakkâri functioned not merely as a peripheral outpost but as a fully integrated provincial zone and a strategic corridor controlling the approaches to the Lake Urmia basin. Within this frontier landscape, a relief discovered at Bay Fortress, depicting a human figure poised upon an animal and therefore plausibly representing a deity, offers a particularly eloquent testimony to the intersection of political control and religious expression.

This study analyses the Bay Fortress figure in relation to the wider Urartian religious system and to the iconography of divine costume in the arts of the Late Hittite principalities, the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Urartian kingdom itself. By situating the relief within these interconnected cultural traditions, it illuminates both the regional strategies of Urartian frontier administration and the broader Near Eastern discourse on the visual articulation of divine authority.

Riassunto

Il Regno di Urartu si affermò come grande potenza montana all'inizio del I millennio a.C., sviluppandosi dalla fiorente civiltà del Tardo II millennio con centro nel bacino del Lago di Van. Nel momento della sua massima espansione, il dominio urarteo si estendeva dalle montagne del Tauro a sud alla valle del fiume Arasse a nord, e dall'Eufrate medio a ovest fino al bacino del Lago di Urmia a est, esercitando per quasi due secoli e mezzo un'autorità politica e culturale sull'Anatolia orientale, la Transcaucasia e l'Iran nord-occidentale. A causa della morfologia impervia e delle condizioni climatiche severe, l'area montuosa dell'Hakkâri presenta una densità di insediamenti urartei inferiore rispetto al bacino di Van o alla piana dell'Ararat; ciononostante, indagini sistematiche e scavi archeologici – che hanno documentato fortezze, tell e tombe rupestri – dimostrano che l'Hakkâri non fu un semplice avamposto periferico, ma una provincia pienamente integrata e un corridoio strategico per il controllo delle vie di accesso al bacino del Lago di Urmia. In questo paesaggio di frontiera, un rilievo rinvenuto presso la Fortezza di Bay, raffigurante una figura umana eretta su un animale e dunque verosimilmente interpretabile come divinità, costituisce una testimonianza eloquente dell'intreccio tra controllo politico ed espressione religiosa.

Il presente contributo analizza tale figura della Fortezza di Bay in rapporto al più ampio sistema religioso urarteo e all'iconografia delle vesti divine nelle arti dei principati tardo-ittiti, dell'impero neo-assiro e del regno urarteo stesso. Collocando il rilievo all'interno di queste tradizioni culturali interconnesse, lo studio illumina sia le strategie regionali di amministrazione di frontiera dell'Urartu, sia il più ampio discorso vicino-orientale sulla rappresentazione visiva dell'autorità divina.