



The Interaction of Urartian Rock Signs with Phrygians

Esra Alp¹ 



¹Dr., İstanbul University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Ancient History, İstanbul, Türkiye

ORCID ID: E.A. 0000-0003-4897-8326

Corresponding author:

Esra Alp,
Tahtakale Mh. T32. Sk. Kanuni Sultan Süleyman
Cd. Avrupa Konutları 2, 1B-21,
Avcılar/İstanbul, Türkiye
E-mail: esraalp@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Urartu had significant rock-carving works, including a series of carvings on massive rock formations in various V-shaped, U-shaped, sickle-shaped, circular, and channel forms. Research has shown that these “signs” were not made randomly, but within a standard framework and according to certain measurements. These carvings were initially called “Monumental Rock Signs.” Although there are some other signs dated to the Hittite and Late Hittite periods that have been called rock signs in the literature, these more identifiable signs—which fit certain standards and consist of geometric shapes—appeared only in the first millennium. These signs are observed predominantly in the areas around the Lake Van basin; in other words, at sites within the Urartian region. On the one hand, this distribution suggests that almost all such rock signs emerged from Urartu; however, this type of rock carving also appears in certain areas within the land of the Phrygians (the western neighbors of Urartu), raising the question of the exact origins and interactions of these signs. This essay will discuss the interaction between these two regions within the framework of the rock signs found in the Urartian region and data from Hamamkaya and Zey Necropolis in the Phrygian region.

Keywords: Urartu, Phrygia, Rock Signs, Cultural Interaction, Iron Age



Introduction

Geometric shapes carved on surfaces of large rock formations, found mostly in rocky areas outside Urartian fortresses, have been called “Monumental Rock Signs” (Belli, 1989, p. 66; Belli, 2000, p. 403).¹ These signs are among the most significant examples of rock carvings (Işık, 1995, p. 45). These signs were often carved on the bedrock as 10–15 centimeter wide, 4–10 centimeter deep grooves in circular, V, U, sickle, or channel shapes (Fig. 1–2). These signs vary between 6–30 cm in width and seem to have been made within a standard scheme. Large groups of such signs as well as smaller groups of one or two signs have been found across the Urartu region (Konyar, 2008, p. 311). The most common shape is circular, followed by V-shapes, then U-shaped and sickle-shaped signs (Konyar, 2006, p. 114; 2008, p. 312).

The area in which the signs are observed most frequently is the Lake Van basin; in other words, the core of Urartu (Belli, 1989, p. 66; 2000, p. 403). Signs have been identified in this region and in the Northeastern Anatolian region, as well as at some sites in Northwestern Iran and Armenia (Belli, 1989, p. 66; 2000, p. 403).

There are two main opinions about the purpose of these signs and debates on their functions are ongoing. The first of these opinions is that the signs had religious-cultic meanings. According to this opinion, the places in which the signs are found were sacred and the channels carved onto the rock may have drained the blood of sacrificed animals (Kleiss, 1981, p. 26; Belli, 1989, p. 86; 2000, p. 406; Işık, 1995, p. 60).

The second opinion is that the rock surfaces on which these signs were carved were used to make chariot wheels, yokes, and other chariot parts and similar wooden pieces.² This opinion adds a more plausible functionality for the rock signs and does away with the problem of associating certain finds with religious faith when they cannot otherwise be attributed with an explicit meaning through texts and other data. The signs are generally located outside the walls of fortresses, in areas without any kind of religious association, which further supports this opinion.

While the opinion supporting cultic functions builds on the general opinion that the locations of these signs are related to cemetery areas, Konyar (2013) presents a different perspective in his work on the Atabindi signs. These signs are in the same area as a

1 Although some rock carvings associated with the Hittite and Late Hittite kingdoms have been called rock signs, these are deep grooves carved onto rock faces and far from being identifiable as circles, V's, U's, sickles or channels. These carvings were identified at sites such as Fraktin, Sirkeli, Yazılıkaya, and Karasu.

2 According to this opinion, timbers softened with water and steam were placed within the grooves carved onto the rocks, and as they drained, they hardened into the desired forms. In this possibility, these channels acted as molds. The idea is that the molds were used to make chariot wheels, yokes, and other chariot parts, which is supported by some ethnographic data. For details of this opinion, see Konyar (2006, pp. 113–126; 2008, pp. 311–320; 2013, pp. 239–245).

multichamber rock tomb. Multichamber rock tombs are associated with Urartu through many of their characteristics. The tomb here also likely belongs to the Urartian period based on its structural characteristics, architectural features like niches, and the typical red slip Urartian pottery found in its vicinity. However, it was also observed that the dromos that provided access to the rock tomb from above had cut through a rock sign, leading to the conclusion that this sign, which must have predated the construction of the burial chamber, was not associated with the tomb. In other words, it does not seem possible to define the two elements as being synchronously used.

There is no clear information on rock signs either reflected in the visual arts or the written sources of Urartu. Hence, it does not seem possible to associate the rock signs that are mostly encountered outside of cemetery areas with burials. Therefore, that association of these signs with burials and cults is likely not valid (Konyar, 2013, p. 242).

The rock carving signs appear at the sites of Atabindi, Çelebibağı, Harput Fortress, Pekiç/Çadırkaya, Van Fortress, Yukarı Anzaf, Çavuştepe, Edremit, Deliçay, Keçikıran, Panz, Ardıç, Aşık Hüseyin (Belli, 1989, pp. 65–88; 2000, pp. 404–406; Ceylan, 2019, p. 34, res. III–V), Van Sarıtaş Necropole (Erdoğan, 2017, p. 69),³ Tatvan (Özfirat, 2002, p. 23, res. 8), Palu (Danışmaz, 2018, p. 194, fig. 1–4), Bahçecik (Payne & Sevin, 2001, fig. 3), Kuh-i Sambil (Kleiss, 1975, abb. 4) in northwestern Iran, Bastam (Kleiss, 1968, abb. 14), Mağara Tepe (Başgelen, 1988, pp. 14–17; Belli, 1989, L. VIII/2), Aliçeyrek (Özkaya, 2014, p. 407, res. 13), and Hasanbey (Ceylan, 2015, p. 308) (Fig. 3–5; Map 1).⁴ In addition, Umut Parılı and his team identified such rock signs in Erzurum Hınıs in 2023.⁵ This distribution shows that these signs are all within the wider Urartu area.⁶

As can be seen through their distribution across the abovementioned sites, these signs seem to belong to Urartu. However, the phenomenon of rock signs also exists in various cultures to the west of Urartu (Kleiss, 1981, p. 26; Köroğlu, 2011, pp. 44–45). To the west of Urartu, some rock carvings associated with the Hittite and Late Hittite Kingdoms Period have been identified as rock signs.⁷ These are in the form of deep grooves carved onto the rock faces. The signs in Urartu; however, are in the specific shapes of circles, V's, U's,

3 Numerous rock signs are reported from the necropolis in Sarıtaş Mevkii, which sits four kilometers southwest of Çelebibağı in Erciş, Van. However, work on the subject does not include visual images of these rock signs.

4 In addition to all these sites, mention can be made of rock signs in the region of Agsal in Nahchevan. A bronze belt found at this site and an Urartian inscription (reported as “lost”) suggest that the area was used as a transit area by the Urartians, meaning the signs could be Urartian. See Bahşeliyev and Bahşeliyev (2019, pp. 15–34, fig. 4).

5 Ten rock signs have been identified in this area. These are mostly circular. A metal object with triangular motifs, also thought to be Urartian art, was found in the same area.

6 For the distribution of these rock signs, see Danışmaz (2018, fig. 5).

7 Related grooves identified as rock signs have been found at sites such as Fraktin, Sirkeli, Yazılıkaya, and Karasu. See Ussishkin (1975, p. 85, fig. 1–9) and Hellenkemper and Wagner (1977, p. 173, Pl. XXXIV a–b).

sickles, or channels: a different, more defined repertoire. In this context, it seems that the only similarity is in how they are named. The signs that have been identified as Hittite or Late Hittite are quite different from those rock signs in Urartu and are interpreted to have been likely associated with local cults.

Also to the west of Urartu, recent finds at Zey Necropolis in Eskişehir and Hamamkaya Necropolis near Midas City are noteworthy. Zey (or Kale) Necropolis is in the village of Zey in Eskişehir. This necropolis consists of 12 rock-cut tombs on steep cliffs. These are identified as Phrygian rock tombs located outside the Highlands of Phrygia (Sivas, 2012, p. 273). While some tombs in the area display small variations, the tombs share the general characteristics of other Phrygian rock tombs. About 10 meters to the north of Tomb 1 in this necropolis are multiple circular rock signs carved on a low rock mass (Fig. 6–7). Around these signs, which measure around 0.90–1.00 meter in diameter, there are smaller circular grooves that are 15 centimeters wide and 15–25 centimeters deep (Sivas, 2005, p. 222, fig. 10; 2007, pp. 80–81; 2012, p. 279, fig. 22). In general, the Zey Necropolis signs as taking the form of multiple circular rock signs on a rock mass. The second example, the Hamamkaya sign (also located in Eskişehir), was identified on a 5.5 by 3.3 meter smoothed rock platform just behind a Phrygian chamber tomb. This sign is also surrounded by a circular channel (Sivas, 2005, p. 222, fig. 11; 2007, p. 81) (Fig. 8-9).

These finds are considered unique examples of Phrygian rock carving. Viewing these signs within the framework of Urartian rock signs discussed above, both the Zey and Hamamkaya examples are highly similar to the circular rock signs found at Urartian sites. In fact, the signs are almost identical. Such rock signs are found at sites in Urartu lands, such as Çavuştepe (Belli, 1989, res. 1), Yukarı Anzaf (Belli, 1989, res. 9; 2000, fig. 2), Deliçay (Belli, 1989, res. 2), Edremit, Palu (Danışmaz, 2018, p. 195, fig. 2–3), Bastam (Kleiss, 1968, abb. 14) and Kuh-i Sambil (Kleiss, 1975, taf. 7/2; 1981, abb. 2) in northwest Iran, and Pekerçi/Çadırkaya (Ceylan, 2019, p. 34, res. III–V). Among Urartian sites, only the Edremit example was found near rock tombs like the examples at Zey Necropolis and Hamamkaya.⁸ In terms of their other attributes, the Urartian circular signs all measure 1.00 meter in diameter, almost exactly like the Zey Necropolis and Hamamkaya examples. However, while the Zey Necropolis and Hamamkaya signs have no parallels in Phrygian rock art, they have been interpreted as having Phrygian cultic functions by T. T. Sivas and H. Sivas (Sivas, 2005, pp. 221–222; 2007, pp. 80–81; 2012, p. 279).

8 Lehman-Haupt thinks that the signs found in Edremit near Kadembastı were probably associated with a nearby rock tomb (1926, p. 105).



Map 1: Distribution Map of Urartian Rock Signs.



Figure 1: Rock Signs from Anzaf (Photo: Erkan Konyar's Archive).

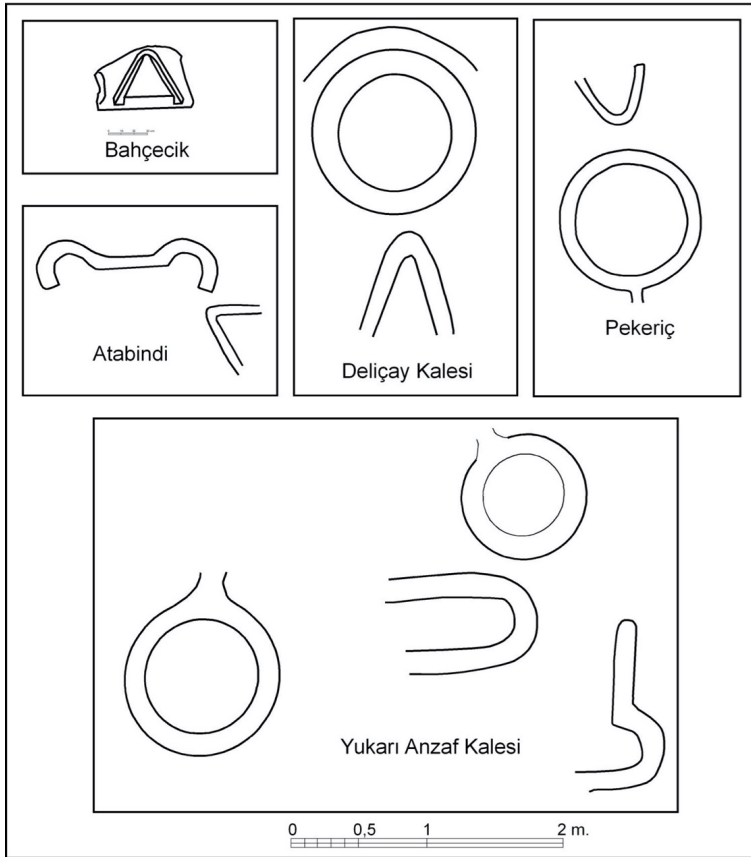
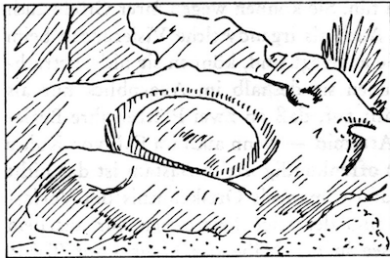


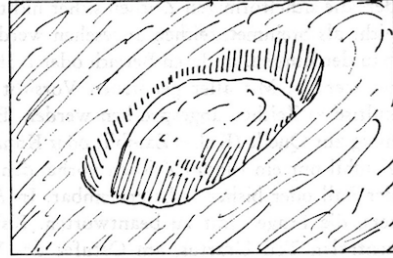
Figure 2: Rock Signs Drawings from Urartian Sites (Photo: Konyar, 2006, fig. 3).



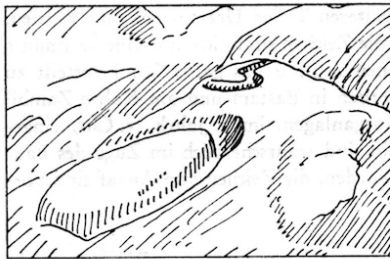
Figure 3: Rock Signs from Atabindi (Photo: Erkan Konyar's Archive).



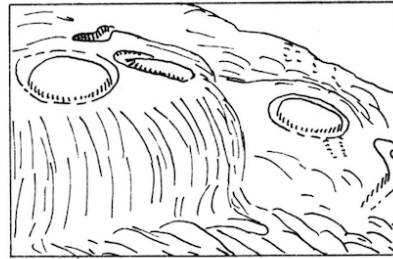
Edremit



Kuh-u zambil



Bastam



Anzaf

Figure 4: Rock Signs drawings from Eastern Anatolia and Northwestern Iran (Photo: Kleiss, 1981, abb. 2).



Figure 5: Rock Signs from Deliçay (Photo: Erkan Konyar's Archive).



Figure 6: Rock Signs from Zey Necropolis (Photo: Sivas, 2012, fig. 22).

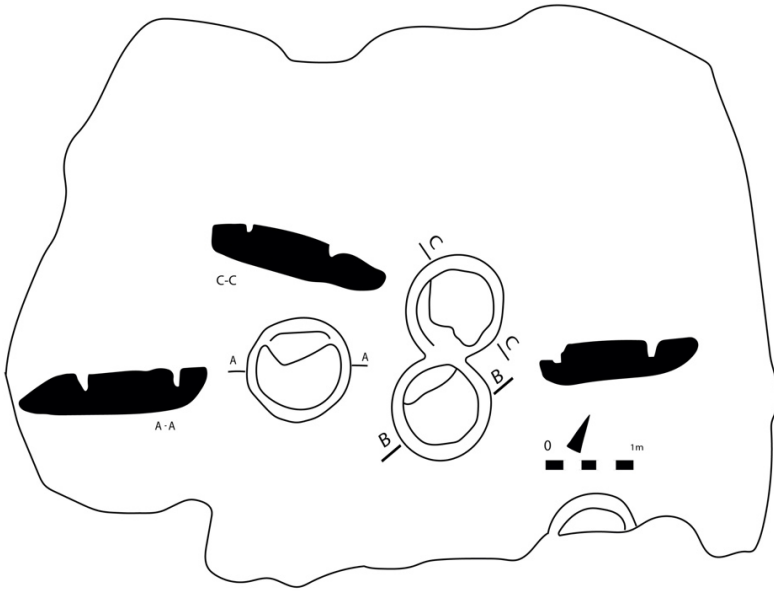


Figure 7: Rock Signs Drawing from Zey Necropolis (Photo: Sivas, 2005, fig. 10).



Figure 8: Rock Signs from Hamamkaya (Photo: Sivas, 2007, 80).

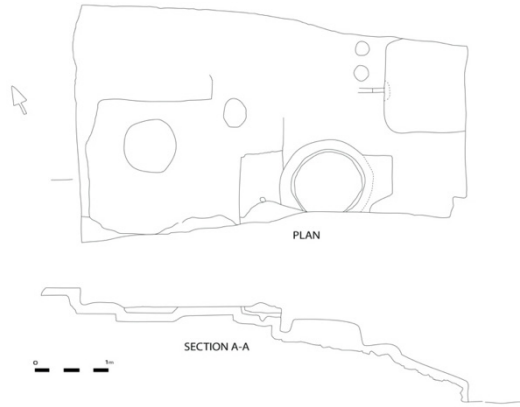


Figure 9: Rock Signs Drawings from Hamamkaya (Photo: Sivas, 2005, Fig. 11).

Conclusions

The distribution of rock signs found at more than 20 Urartian sites, including the capital Tušpa, show that they were a staple of Urartian rock carving. It is worth noting that circular rock signs at Zey Necropolis and Hamamkaya parallel the Urartian rock signs in dimension, and they are considered unique examples within their own region. Therefore, regardless of whether these signs are interpreted as having cultic significance or practical meaning as molds for chariot wheels and other parts, the Zey Necropolis and Hamamkaya signs and the Urartian examples seem to have been produced according to the same system of thought and likely served the same purpose. Rock signs are not easily transferable to small craft objects like pins, fibula, or belt buckles, which can be transported easily between regions by individuals carrying them on their person. The existence of a rock sign at a place or its purpose seem to have involved multiple people, unlike products that are small handicrafts. Therefore, such rock signs should not be considered singular, individual examples.

In this context, within the framework of opinions on the function of rock signs, it is to say that these signs were made as a result of interactions between these two regions, whether as part of shared crafting methods or in the context of religious faith. Considering that circular rock signs are more frequently found in the Urartian region, it is likely that these elements were brought from Urartu to the west.

If we consider these signs—almost all of which have been identified in the lands of Urartu—as characteristic of Urartu itself, how they were carried from Urartu to the area outside the Phrygian Highlands in modern Eskişehir? Although texts reveal that Urartu had a connection with the west through campaigns and alliances in Central Anatolia, these texts do not present any clear information specifically about this area outside of the Phrygian Highlands. Therefore, it is not yet possible to propose a clear picture of how this transfer happened. Nevertheless, based on the level of similarity between the circular rock signs at Urartian sites and those at Zey Necropolis and Hamankaya, they were very likely produced within the same system of thought, seem to have served the same purpose, and may have been an element that was brought from Urartu to the west.

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