

## A TENTATIVE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE URARTIAN CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS

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Aspects of the Urartian culture, including its religion have already been investigated by several scholars who contributed to their general understanding<sup>1</sup>. Since König's pioneering work in 1954, however, the subject of the Urartian religious calendar has not been given much attention.

This paper aims to demonstrate that the seasonality of the Urartian religious festivals may have been guided by considerations other than purely religious ones. To this end, information derived from Urartian and Assyrian sources is combined with the archaeological data relevant to the religious activities of the Urartians.

### *THE URARTIAN CALENDAR*

Urartian inscriptions provide no direct information about the nature or structure of the Urartian calendar. Only the inscription of Meher Kapisı (HChI 10) provides a clue for the possible existence of an Urartian calendar. In this inscription the month of the Sun God is mentioned as the time of a specific cultic event<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately Urartian inscriptions do not contain a clear reference concerning the number of months in the year, nor the

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1 See Piotrovsky 1967 and 1969, Van Loon 1966, Salvini 1995, Wartke 1993.

2 (HChI 10) : «They established the following order (ardise) : in the month of the Sun God must take place a ceremony (?) (asuse) in favour of Haldi, the Weather God, and the Assembly of Gods» (Salvini 1994 : 206).

length of each month. The remote possibility that the numbers 14 and 34 mentioned several times on the offering list to the Urartian gods in the Meher Kapısı inscription, may perhaps indicate the number of days in a month, and the number of months in the year has been suggested by König (1953 : 160). As already pointed out by König, the moon seems to have been an important celestial element in the Urartian pantheon (1953 : 160). The name *Silardi*, the Moon God, contains the word *Ardi* translated by König as «order». König maintains that *Silardi* means full-moon while *Sinuardi*, another god in the Meher Kapısı inscription, is the moon in its crescent phase. The appearance and disappearance of the moon in a monthly cycle was considered an important natural phenomenon by most ancient peoples and, marked and celebrated by special rituals in the their respective religions<sup>3</sup>.

For instance, the ancient Hebrew calendar, which originated in the Middle Iron Age but still in use today, is based on the moon cycle. All the main festivals are connected with seasonal and agricultural activities and celebrated in the middle of the month upon the appearance of the full-moon. In order to synchronize it with the movement of the sun, every four years a 13th month is added. According to the tradition of the ancient Israelites, which is later recorded in the *Talmud*, the appearance of the moon and the beginning of the new month was officially declared following a ceremonial act, despite the fact that they knew mathematically how to calculate the months. This simple ritual involved two persons giving evidence in a religious court to the fact, that they witnessed the appearance of the moon. Obviously this tradition reflected an ancient ritual practice. The first day of the month considered to be a sacred day which required special prayers. One of them is the «*Halel*» (glorification) recited

3 According to König, in the Iranian religions the phases of the moon were used as a metaphor to compare the cycle of human life on earth : the moon in its crescent form is his birth, full moon is his active life, and its disappearance is his death (1953 : 169). In Mesopotamia, for instance, the completion of each phase of the moon's cycle was celebrated as «a manifestation of a divine power». See Frankfort 1948 : 265.

only on the occurrence of a miracle, and the birth of a new moon which is considered as a miraculous natural phenomenon.

Since the religions of the ancient Near East placed particular emphasis on the moon cycle and celebrated it in various forms, it may well be, that the Urartians to used the phases of the moon as a time factor for celebrating their annually held festivals.

#### *THE RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE FESTIVALS*

The background of the Urartian religion and its festivals should be sought in the historical context of the kingdom. The Urartian kingdom was made up of several ethnic entities, probably with a Hurrian majority. The kingdom was most likely founded by one of these tribes or tribal confederation whose original territory included several towns and cult centers such as *Kumanu*, *Gilzanu*, *Hubushkia* and *Mussasir*<sup>4</sup>. With the emergence of the Urartian Kingdom the political center that united the tribes of Uruatri was transferred to the area of Lake Van. In order to unite all these groups as a nation, the founding kings of Urartu must have deemed it necessary to create a state religion under the regionally prominent cult of *Haldi*. Indeed there seems to be a correlation between the emergence of *Haldi* as the national god and the formation of the Urartian kingdom. With the formation of the kingdom, *Haldi* seems to have been promoted from a provincial deity, whose cult was based in the city of *Mussasir*, to a national god representing the authority of the Urartian kingship in all the provinces of the kingdom. Furthermore, *Haldi's* character seems to have been transformed by adding new aspects to its divine personality. Formerly, the principal aspects of *Haldi* seem to have been related to vegetation and fertility. In line with the political considerations of an emerging kingdom, *Haldi* was given national responsibilities. In his new image as the national god of Urartu, *Haldi* was transformed into

<sup>4</sup> On the background and the formation of the Urartian kingdom see : Barnett 1982.

a fighting god, regarded as a fearless hero whose glance terrorized the enemy, and considered the commander in chief of the Urartian armies. As the national deity combining all these aspects, *Haldi* was provided with temples shaped like fortified towers<sup>5</sup>.

In order to achieve a long-lasting political, economic and military stability in the kingdom, the Urartian kings must have realized that a large proportion of the population in their land had to be attached to the land as farmers. To this end, the Urartian kings founded new settlements, including villages and administrative centers also in areas which they conquered. In addition to nomadic pastoralist groups, refugees and civilian captives too were settled in the new settlements. To encourage agriculture in a land where pastoralism was rather deep-rooted, irrigation systems which included large water reservoirs and canals were constructed. These canals dug deep and wide served to bring the water needed by farmers to the more arid areas of the kingdom.

Celebrations dedicated to *Haldi's* different aspects reflect the major events in the annual cycle of activities in the kingdom. The king participated in the important religious festivals taking in cult centers. The fact that he usually received parts of the sacrificial animals (HChI 56) may suggest his additional role as the high priest. Seasonal festivals were celebrated with the participation of the entire population of the districts. Such festivals must have played an important role in strengthening the relation between the people and the kingship.

The Urartian king did not regard himself as the Son of God, as was the case in Egypt, nor his chosen servant, being the case in Mesopotamia. In the Urartian society the king derived his power from his people and not from the gods. This explains the

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5 The new warlike aspect of *Haldi*, although originating from different reasons, remind one of the attributes that Mesopotamian deities received in times of national crises. For instance, following the death of Tiglath Pileser III in 1076 B. C., the Assyrian kingdom entered a period of decline due to the Aramean invasions and ecological disasters caused by floods and famine (Roux 1980 : 259). According to Jacobsen, these events led to changes in the Assyrian religion, and a hardening of the image of gods (1976 : 226-227).

different relationship between the Urartian kingship and its god. Although *Haldi* was the most important god in the Urartian religion, his name was not used by the Urartian kings as a theophoric component in their names. The range of names of Urartian kings is very limited; from the time of *Sarduri I* on, they used more or less the same names. This indicates a continuation of the ruling dynasty on the one hand and a strong tradition of tribal names on the other. The relation between the Urartian king and *Haldi* fits the model initially suggested by Frankfort that, kingship emerging from tribal structures does not constantly seek the god's recognition (1948 : 337).

#### THE NATURE OF THE FESTIVALS

The major Urartian celebrations with the participation of the king can be divided into four groups :

1) Royal Celebrations : The most important ones involved the king's coronation day in *Mussasir*; the king's seasonal visit to this cult city of *Haldi*. Concerning the importance of *Mussasir* to the Urartian kingship, the letter of king *Sargon* to his God *Assur* (ARAB 171) is the major source of information. It concerns the coronation day of the Urartian king in the city of *Mussasir*. According to this text the whole population of *Mussasir* took part in the celebrations during which thousands of animals were sacrificed to the God *Haldi*<sup>6</sup>. The Topzawa inscription (HChI 122) and its parallel from Mergeh Karavan (Salvini 1984 : 80) mentions some celebrations to commemorate the king's visit to this area.

Another source is the letter of *Urzana*, governor of the city of *Mussasir* to LÚ. NIMGIR. É. GAL (ABL 409). This document shed light on the role of *Mussasir* in the Assyrian and Urartian religious activities. According to this letter the Assyrian kings used to come to *Mussasir* for their own cultic celebrations (Deller

6 «Heavy cattle, numberless fat sheep they sacrificed before him. For the whole of the city they spread a banquet. Before *Haldia*, his god they crowned him with the royal crown and gave him the kingly scepter of Urartu...» (ARAB 171).

1984 : 144). The Assyrian King ordered *Urzana* to stop or to prevent the Urartian king from celebrating in the city of *Mussasir*. *Urzana's* refusal to comply with the king's request reflects on his strong political position and the independent status of *Mussasir*. In fact, he explains to the Assyrians that the Urartian King had every right to come and to celebrate in *Mussasir* as the Assyrian King does and therefore he cannot stop his visits to the city<sup>7</sup>. On the part of *Urzana* this was also a political decision since every royal visit brought wealth and prestige to *Mussasir* and strengthened its economy.

Although we ignore the details of the Urartian coronation day celebrations, the Assyrian sources provide some details concerning the coronation day of their own kings (Frankfort 1948 : 246-247). The picture provided by the Assyrian sources can help to reconstruct partly the Urartian coronation day celebrations at *Mussasir*. The Urartian kings were coronated in this remote cult center on the border of their powerful Assyrian enemy and not in one of the numerous temples they constructed for Haldi all over the kingdom. The reason which comes to mind is the strong affiliation of the Urartians to this mountainous area. In fact, the main theme in the coronation ceremony is «continuity». It emphasizes the strong foundations of the royal dynasty whose continuity is assured by the ascent of the new king. The celebration in itself can be seen as part of the effort invested to preserve the internal stability, legitimacy and strength of the ruling dynasty during the periods of changing kings. This aspect is well documented in the Urartian sources. The sentence «I sat on the throne of my fathers» is mentioned by *Sarduri II* (HChI 103) and *Rusa II* (HChI 122). This short declaration may be taken as a mataphore stressing the legitimacy of the new king. At the same time the sentence could be referring to an actual throne that was used by his ancestors. In fact, the Urartian kings are known to have kept in their possessions the objects donated

<sup>7</sup> *Urzana's* strong political position can be inferred from ARAB 169. Sargon II criticizes him because he prevented passage through his land to the Assyrians, did not bring presents and did not kiss the king's feet and he was disrespectful to the king and the Gods Šamaš, Nabu and Marduk.

by previous kings to the gods, including thrones. Pieces of a very elaborated throne dated to king Menua was found in Toprakkale (Merhav 1991 : 248). Since Toprakkale was founded in the 7th century by *Rusa II*<sup>8</sup>, one can postulate that some furniture and other items were transported from the ancient citadel of Van, and that the ancient throne was indeed used by several generations of kings.

2) *Ceremonies Inaugurating Agricultural Activities* : The fact that agricultural activities are mentioned in the Meher Kapisı inscription proves, that their canonization by the early kings of Urartu was accomplished through religious rituals. Additional information about certain ceremonies of inauguration relating to the agricultural activities in the kingdom is provided by some Urartian inscriptions. These included the inauguration of orchards/newly planted trees and vineyards (HChI 76 III); the sowing of fields (HChI 76 IV); and the harvesting of grapes (HChI 41). When the wine was produced, libation ceremonies were performed near the Gates (KÁ) of *Haldi* and the Goddess *Erebuni*<sup>9</sup>. As for the harvest celebration dedicated to the Goddess of Barley, the only source is the text

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8 The citadel of Van (Tušpa) may have been abandoned in favour of Toprakkale (Rusahinli), probably because of the rising level of the lake's waters preventing easy access to the palace. Changes in the lake's level recorded during the 19th century may corroborate this view. See also Lynch 1965 : 49. If Van citadel was abandoned due to flooding, this may explain not only the absence of royal and religious objects at the site, but also their presence at the nearby Toprakkale. Such transfer of palace objects in Urartu is also known at Arin Berd where a rich assemblage of artifacts dated to Argisti I and Sarduri II were later moved to Karmir Blur. See also Piotrovsky 1969 : 160.

9 The Meher Kapisı inscription HChI 10, 29-30 specifies the cultic activities in the orchard and vineyards in accordance with the ripening of the fruits : «Wenn die Früchte der Bäume geerntet werden, soll man dem Haldi drei Schafe schlachten, (und) drei Schafe der... Götterversammlung. Wenn der Weinberg... soll man dem Haldi drei Schafe schlachten (und) drei Schafe der Götterversammlung; wenn der Wein gekeltert, soll man dem Haldi drei Schafe schlachten (und) drei Schafe der Götterversammlung und Wein soll man libieren». Another version of such activities is found on the Köşk inscription (HChI 41) of Menua : «Wenn der Weinberg... schlachtet man für Haldi ein Rind und drei Schafe und man libiert dem Tor des Haldi und vor der Stele».

describing the eighth campaign of Sargon in connection with the city of *Ulu*<sup>10</sup>.

Since agriculture consists of seasonal activities, we can postulate that festivals took place during the months of plantation, sowing, and harvesting. In other words, the plantation of trees and vineyards in this highland region must have taken place following the melting of the snow cover which could have been as late as the month of May. The sowing of the fields, particularly barley, would have been carried out either in autumn (late September/early October), and/or in Spring (in April/May). Harvest would have been carried out in August/early September. Harvesting the grapes in the vineyards too must have been carried out in September. So, one can recreate a tentative calendar of agricultural festivals, perhaps with slight regional variations due to climatic factors.

Concerning the ceremonial planting of trees or dedication of forests to certain deities, there are additional evidence from royal inscriptions. According to the Qalatgah inscription (van Loon 1975 : 201-207), the list of dedications to various gods by *Ispuini and Menua* also included a forest in the land of *Sapali* dedicated to the Storm God. The dedication of a forest is most likely connected to the foundation of a new cult center near the Kelishin pass. The ceremonies celebrating Haldi as the God of Vegetation and Fertility involved the offering of lambs to him. Offerings consisting of lambs are both mentioned in texts and depicted in Urartian iconography<sup>11</sup>. Since the lam-

10 See Van Loon 1966 : 19.

11 a) In the Meher Kapısı, Haldi is mentioned twice as the recipient of offerings. Once he is given 6 lambs in his capacity as the God of Fertility, as suggested by Riemschneider (1963 : 153). And a second time 17 bulls and 34 sheep perhaps as the head of the Urartian pantheon.

b) In HChI 41 a lamb is sacrificed to Haldi once after the planting of vineyard or orchard and again after the gathering of the fruit.

c) In the inscriptions HChI 5, 12, 13 King Menua asks Haldi for prosperity, peace and mercy and offers him a lamb.

d) The Yeşilalıç inscription (HChI 8), Haldi is given an offering of lamb.

e) In the Inscription UKN 448 from Karmir Blur, Haldi is offered a lamb.



bing season in this region is in early spring, it may be postulated that the month of May and/or June, the time that the lambs (2-3 months old lambs) are separated from their mothers, was ideal to conduct some of these religious celebrations.

3) Ceremonies of State Functions : These include the foundation of new cities (e. g. HChI 76), naming of cities, vineyards, lakes, canals etc., and the inauguration of new irrigation canals (e. g. HChI 126). Many Urartian inscriptions deal with the foundation of new cities usually followed by the planting of vineyards and orchards. Cities were named either after the main deities or after kings. Names given to canals, lakes, gardens or vineyards included kings and royal personalities, such as the «*Sarduri's* vinyard» (HChI 109, 110) named after Saduri II, or «The garden of the lady *Tariri*» (HChI 40). It seems that during the name giving a ceremony was performed, which involved among other things the preparation of a stone inscription on a block or stele.

The Urartian Kings, starting with *Menua*, invested much effort in building irrigation canals to bring water to the more arid parts of their kingdom<sup>12</sup>. *Haldi*, probably as the God of Fertility is also connected with the construction of these canals as described in several inscriptions dealing with ceremonies related to them. Inscription HChI 126, found on a stela near Yerevan describes the inauguration of a water canal by the King *Rusa* II. During the ceremony, offering were made to the God *Haldi*. In this inscription we learn of the different stages of canal main-

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The offering of lamb to Haldi is also documentad in the iconography :

a) On a medallion from Karmir Blur, a worshiper is depicted standing in front of the god holding a lamb (Piotrovski 1970 : Pl. 86).

b) On one of the Giyimli plaques a woman worshipper standing before Haldi is depicted with a lamb next to her feet (Erzen 1974 : Pl. XXXVIb).

c) The Doğubeyazit relief depicts a man holding a lamb before a deity (Huff 1968 : 65 Abb. 2).

d) A stone relief from the Evoghlu cemetery depicts a deity holding a lamb and in the other hand a weapon (Kleiss 1976 : 39 Abb. 21).

12 On the irrigation installations in Urartu, see : Belli 1994; Salvini 1995 : 125-132.

tenance. When the water flow again through the canal a lamb is sacrificed to *Haldi*. The Sun God and God *Aniqugi* whose role is unknown, are also offered a sheep each (HChI 126 V). Considering that irrigation canals could not have been repaired or cleaned before the end of the winter season, preferably after the spring rains, it is logical to assume that this activity was carried out in late spring or early summer. The mention of lamb sacrifice in this connection may corroborate this view.

The literary style of most of the Urartian inscriptions shows great similarity to that of the Assyrian royal inscriptions<sup>13</sup>. One of the expressions used frequently in the Urartian inscriptions on the occasion of the foundation of a new city or the inauguration of a new canal is: «Before (previously) nothing was there» (King *Rusa* II HChI 128). This figure of speech was also taken from the Assyrians whose kings saw it their duty to conquer the derelict lands («the LULU lands») and turn them into fertile areas. In this respect the Assyrians admired the efforts made by the Urartian kings. Indeed, when Sargon II reached the city of *Ulhu* in his eighth campaign he was impressed by the fact that the previously arid surroundings of the town was turned into green fields «shining in the sun like Lapis Lazuli», due to the irrigation system created by «King *Rusa* under the guidance of *Haldi*» (ARAB 161)<sup>14</sup>.

4) Warfare Competitions: The Warrior God aspect of *Haldi* was probably celebrated in different kind of ce-

13 The Assyrian king ruled the land by the power given to him by his gods. As god's servant he was responsible for the prosperity of his land. This duty also demanded the preservation of the link connecting the kingdom's past and the present by repairing and refurbishing the old temples and cultic installations. In this respect the Urartian kings seem to have adopted this perception of kingship from the Assyrians. See also Liverani 1979.

14 «City of *Ulhu* a stronghold at the foot of Mt *Kispal*... and their people like fish... they did not drink, they did not satisfy their hunger... *Ursa* their king and counselor following his heart's desire... showed them where the waters gushed forth. A ditch carrying these flowing waters he dug and... brought plenty like the *Euphrates*. He made numberless channels lead of from its bed... and irrigated the orchard. Its waste land which from days of old... and made fruit and grapes as abundant as rain... His pleasant fields which were spread out like a platter painted lapis lazuli...» (ARAB 161).

remonies. This may be inferred from two outstanding inscriptions (HChI 75, 123) found in the Van region<sup>15</sup>. These inscriptions commemorate sportive events involving two kings. One of the inscriptions<sup>16</sup> found in a village situated 10 Km north of Van describes King Menua riding on his horse and jumping a distance of 12 m. The second inscription from the Van area (HChI 123) is dedicated to the outstanding ability of King *Argišti* II as an archer<sup>17</sup>. Cavalry and arrow shooting troops being of major importance to warfare, one may postulate that ceremonial war games involving riding and archery competitions were celebrated in special festivals dedicated to *Haldi* as the Warrior God<sup>18</sup>.

To sum up, one may conclude that in view of the scarcity of relevant sources, it is only possible to combine a tentative calendar of Urartian festivals, taking into consideration the seasonality factor of their respective activities carried out in the countryside.

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15 Unfortunately both inscriptions carved on stone were not found in situ, therefore their archaeological contexts are not known.

16 «Menua son of Išpuni says : From this place the horse named Artsibi (the eagle) ridden by Menua leapt 22 cubit» See Piotrovsky 1969 : 156.

17 «Argišti son of Rusa fired an arrow from this spot in front of the grove called Giluriani, as far as the garden belonging to Ishpilini son of Batu : 950 cubits» See Piotrovsky 1969 : 160.

18 Mock fights or war games that were performed during the Hittite Spring Festival of the AN. TA.H. ŠUM is described in KUB XVII 35, II-III 22. The fight took place in an open area near a HUWAŠI of the Storm God (may be an open cult area). Two groups of people representing rival armies fought one another in memory of a historical fight. On the 19th day of the festival some kind of a race is performed from the wooded area near the cult center. See also Gurney 1990 : 129.

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