Cultures in Contact
From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.
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Actual Imports or Just Ideas? Investigations in Anatolia and the Caucasus

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The South Caucasus lies far beyond the principal geographic foci of the “Beyond Babylon” exhibition, at what is sometimes conceived as the boundary between Europe and Asia. Although conceptually distant, partly because it was a region without writing until relatively late, the area today containing Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia has had archaeologically well-documented (if sometimes explatorily thorny) connections with the ancient Near East since at least the Holocene period. It is the ancient Near Eastern connections in the Trialeti/Vanadzor culture of the Middle Bronze Age, beginning near the end of the third millennium B.C. according to most chronologies, and extending to about the second quarter of the second millennium B.C., that concern us here.2

The so-called flourishing stage of Trialeti culture began near the end of the third millennium B.C. The strong social differentiation, rich mound burials, and fugal settlements, indicating a mobile population, recall the Early Kurgan group.3 New practices included cremation burial, the creation of ritual roads to the mounds, and the appearance of painted pottery. Arsenical bronzes disappeared.4 What these practices indicate—the introduction of new populations from outside, the transformation of local customs, the shifting and/or intensifying of external relations for political or social reasons, or something else—remains to be fully understood. Based on materials recovered from excavations, in this phase there was an increase in imported objects among the grave goods. Likewise, more goods display what we might call “interconnectedness,” sharing, to a greater or lesser degree, features of archaeological materials found beyond the South Caucasus, especially in the ancient Near East.4 Scholars, myself included, have employed these “interconnected” grave goods to try to date the Trialeti burials more precisely than the broad ranges generally accepted; this endeavor remains a work in progress.5

Precisely why and how ancient Near Eastern and other exotic objects and ideas entered in small villages. Arsenical copper/bronze metallurgy was widespread, and distinctive black handmade ceramics, often with red interiors, were characteristic. Toward the end of the third millennium B.C., a highly stratified, apparently transhumant pastoral economy emerged. Burials under large mounds appeared, containing rich inventories including tin bronzes together with arsenical ones, and large wooden wagons. As Philip L. Kohl has noted, some of these burial mounds covered almost 1 hectare, an area larger than most Kura-Araxes villages.5 The impetus for these changes has yet to be fully explained, and the chronological relationships among the various cultural strands—Kura-Araxes, Early Kurgan, and even the Trialeti culture—remain contested.6

The two goblets are similar in shape and share angular rosette ornaments at the base. The Karashamb goblet (fig. 1a, b) is more complex in composition and iconography, with five registers of figural imagery, compared with the two on the Trialeti example (fig. 2a, b). Both designs contain human figures wearing similar garments and shoes. However, details of the treatment of the figures differ. For example, the Karashamb figures are hairless, while the Trialeti figures have hair on their heads and beards. The puffy figures of the Karashamb goblet contrast with the flatter, more patterned Trialeti ones. There are technical differences as well (see Appendix, p. 2a). But despite these differences, the two goblets share the same principal scene: a large individual holding a goblet sits before a table with legs ending in animal hooves. The figure is flanked by animals, and approached by walking figures also holding goblets.

When he first published the Trialeti excavations, Boris A. Kufkin suggested that the walking figures on the Trialeti goblet resemble the much later figures on rock reliefs from the sites of Carchemish and Zincirli, in present-day southeastern Turkey. Although these were the only comparisons the author illustrated, Kufkin mentioned others from Anatolia, including Cappadocian cylinder seals.7 Investigating Kufkin’s suggestions, my research has demonstrated that the local Anatolian style seals from Kultepe (Kanesh) share highly specific iconographic elements with the Trialeti culture silver goblets. I have argued elsewhere that such clusters of iconographic details tell the histories of non-literate cultures. Despite broader similarities with images from Mesopotamia, Syria, and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the multiplicity of detailed parallels to Anatolian style seals points to an Anatolian source for the imagery on the goblets.8

Certainly the images originated outside the South Caucasus, but the goblets themselves were probably manufactured within the Trialeti cultural sphere.9 While the iconography itself was new to the area, it was presented within local traditions of composition and subject matter. As the Kura-Araxes artistic tradition included both two- and three-dimensional representations of humans and animals, their appearance was not new in the South Caucasus in the Trialeti culture.10 Animals were sometimes depicted in rows on ceramic vessels;10 they could also be presented as discrete elements on ceramics and metalwork.11 Like the earlier occurrences of the animals on the Trialeti and Karashamb goblets are in rows. The appearance of the cast gold lion from Tsnori12 incorporated into existing artistic traditions. For example, in the application of these new
Fig. 1a, b. Silver goblet. Karashamb, Great Kurgan. Middle Bronze Age. History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan.
Fig. 2a, b. Silver goblet. Trialeti, Kurgan 5, Middle Bronze Age. Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi 99–63:348
images to the goblets, the maker may have retained the already familiar composition of rows of animals. In addition, the boundary lines for the scenes may be inspired by the preexisting practice of bounding ornamental patterns, although, as N. O. Dzhaparidze has noted, the figures on the goblets stand on ground lines for the first time in Georgian art, a practice often seen in ancient Near Eastern art of this period and earlier.21 Thus, it may be that the bands dividing the rows on the goblets are part of that new representational practice. Also new in the art of the Trialeti culture at this time is imagery presented as a narrative, with the introduction of the elements of time and trajectory, features already well established in the art of the ancient Near East.

The close interconnectedness of the goblet imagery and that of Anatolian style seals is reinforced by the research of Dominique Collon, who showed that two objects excavated at Trialeti—a copper bronze cauldron and the silver bucket (fig. 3)—had distinctive handles of a type known at Kültepe and other sites west of Trialeti.22 With more materials from the Kültepe excavations now published, we can see that many examples of this kind of intricate handle—a basket handle inserted into a looped piece of metal that is attached by a third metal piece, either butterfly- or barrel-shaped, to the vessel itself—were found at the site.23 Other similar objects occur in both contexts and require further investigation.24 These findings lead me to ask: Could it be that the bucket and cauldron were imported from Kültepe or another Anatolian site, along with whatever carried the borrowed imagery that appears on the goblets?

While the interpretation of the cauldron remains challenging and calls for scientific investigation, it seems possible to demonstrate that the bucket (fig. 3), because of its figural imagery, is an exotic work in the Trialeti culture assemblage. First, there are stylistic similarities between the bucket and local Anatolian style seals.25 A striking element is the overall distribution of the animals on the surface of the bucket, generally without a groundline, sometimes with one animal appearing to stand on the back of another (fig. 4). Such features also appear on Kültepe glyptic (fig. 5). In addition, on both the bucket (fig. 6) and local Anatolian style glyptic (fig. 7), animal hair is represented by an overall pattern of bands or groups of hatched lines.26 When this convention is used on the goblets, it is limited to partial areas of the bodies.

Although no single object identical to the bucket can be found in the assemblage so far
two animals in the lower area of the vessel (fig. 8) are virtually identical to two on the Trialeti goblet (fig. 9) raises some interesting questions about the interrelationship between the two objects. Kufitin suggested that the animals on the goblet were copied from the bucket, where the animals appear livelier. Another image on the goblet that might also have been copied is the tree behind the central figure (fig. 10), which is virtually identical to one on the bucket (fig. 11). The vessels come from two different burial dating to roughly the same century or two (E. M. Gogadze’s Middle Bronze Age II group), but the chronology cannot be more precisely ascertained. Smith suggested that these images were useful to the ruling elite in their effort to consolidate power in an unstable time of social transformation from settled, nonhierarchical village life to a more mobile life in a larger landscape, with power aggregating to a few privileged hands. Accepting that suggestion as an explanation of the imagery on the Karashamb goblet, how do we interpret the iconography of the Trialeti example? I propose that the Trialeti goblet was made later in the sociohistorical process of culture change, when contention and competition had been reduced or become more routine, thus lessening the need to assert violence on the accompaniments of power. What is left, then, is the seated figure drinking from a goblet, with other, smaller figures joining him (fig. 2a). Although the close similarities of the details of these scenes raise questions about whether the maker of the Trialeti goblet had seen the Karashamb vessel, I find another explanation more compelling. Perhaps the scene recorded on both goblets is a living ritual, with details of the performance and practice initially inspired by borrowed imagery. Alternatively, perhaps such a social performance or practice developed locally with the emergence of the new elites, and the ancient Near Eastern iconography, however it reached the South Caucasus, provided an apt visual model.

There has been much recent scholarly discussion about the role of food, drink, and commensality in early society (see Caubet, essay, pp. 226 – 37). In an essay on Mesopotamia, Susan Pollock states:

It is not just food or drink themselves that are important but especially their consumption as a social event . . . and there are typically strong rules that govern . . . the sharing of beverages and food . . . . The ways that food and drink are prepared, presented, and consumed contribute to the construction and communication of social relations.33

I would posit that in the Trialeti culture, the ritual of communal drinking with an elite person had an ongoing role in the apparatus of political authority after early struggles for power abated or had become routine. Most of the images on the Karashamb goblet express and glorify violence, whether human or animal. The Trialeti goblet, by contrast, features the calm repetition of figures in both registers. Thus, I suggest that the goblet from Trialeti dates later than the one excavated at Karashamb. Perhaps the maker of the Trialeti goblet had published from the excavations at Külepe or other contemporary sites in Anatolia, the similarities to the arrangement of the visual field and the treatment of the animals on local Anatolian style seals point to an Anatolian origin. In addition, the bucket handle and its attachment appear to have been a common type at Külepe but rare among Trialeti materials. It would seem, then, that the bucket was made in Anatolian Local Style somewhere in Anatolia. This view is reinforced by the fact that, while the goblets incorporated borrowed imagery into preexisting visual patterns, the bucket does not exhibit such a transformation. The possible exotic origin of the bucket is also suggested by the differences between the figural surfaces on the bucket and on the goblets. The relief on the bucket is lower and flatter than that on either of the goblets; it would be useful to conduct a technical study of the precise mechanical production of the relief surfaces of the vessels to see if the manufacturing techniques are significantly different, as they appear to be.

If we can assume that the bucket is imported, then Kufitin’s observation that things are important but especially their consumption as a social event . . . and there are typically strong rules that govern . . . the sharing of beverages and food . . . . The ways that food and drink are prepared, presented, and consumed contribute to the construction and communication of social relations.33

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seen the Karashamb one and edited the imagery to keep only what remained necessary as a public expression of authority; alternatively, he may have based the main scene of the Trialeti vessel on living ritual, oral tradition, or now local (if rare or rarely preserved) visual tradition. He clearly augmented the pictorial scheme with images based on those found on the bucket, which must have been visible to the maker of the Trialeti goblet, either in use as part of ritual practice or as part of an accumulation of riches by the powerful. The important social and political role of drinking in this context of the Trialeti culture. These exotica and the "documents" as well, and demonstrate that the region was not beyond the world of the ancient Near East in this period.

**Appendix: Technical Note**

Technical differences between the two goblets were observed in the examinations conducted by Jean-François de Lapérouse of the Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Mark Wypski of the Museum’s Department of Scientific Research, with the permission of the History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan, and the Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi, when the goblets were on loan to the Metropolitan for the “Beyond Babylon” exhibition. Variations in the raised decoration on the vessels are visible to the naked eye, and close-up photographs reveal differences in the execution of the repoussé (figs. 12, 13). In addition, although surface scans by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry indicate the use of relatively pure silver in both cases, with only minor amounts of gold and lead, there are variations in how the two goblets were fashioned. As radiographs show, the bottom of the Karashamb goblet (fig. 14) was added as a separate piece and the lip reinforced with an interior metal ring (fig. 15). Conversely, the foot of the Trialeti vessel, although made as one piece with the rest of the vessel (fig. 16), was reinforced at its outer circumference by an interior ring, most likely made of metal given its radiopacity, while the lip appears to have been simply folded over (fig. 17). The rings are probably silver, given the lack of corrosion-related porosity that one might expect to see if they were made of copper alloy in contact with silver for many centuries.

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8. For some commentary and bibliography, see Rubinson 2005; Benzé, Beyond Babylon, p. 93.

11. For the goblets, see Rubinson in Beyond Babylon, pp. 91–92, nos. 55, 56, for the bucket, see Kufﬁn 1941, pl. LXXXVIII, p. 411, and details, pls. LXXXIX, XC, pp. 415–16.


13. For a detailed description of the goblets and speciﬁc parallels to the Anatolian style seals, see Rubinson 2003. Rubinson 2006 discusses an approach to interpreting visual parallels in contexts where texts are absent. For a diﬀerent approach to and interpretation of this evidence, see Abramishvili 2010, pp. 171–72; see also Boehmer and Kossack 2000.

14. Although the goblets were made in the South Caucasus, it is unclear whether the artisans were local individuals. The maker of the Trialeti goblet was probably copying or inspired by embossed silver objects already in the South Caucasus; the case of the Karashamb example is less certain. It may have been made to local taste and requirements by a foreign craftsman for a local Trialeti culture elite. Further examination of the techniques of manufacture may help clarify this question.

15. For example, Kushnareva and Markovin 1994, p. 32, pl. 14; Kushnareva 1997, p. 58, ﬁg. 21, nos. 15, 21–24; Makhiradze 2008, ﬁg. 16, no. 1, ﬁg. 20, nos. 1–3.


17. Kushnareva 1997, p. 26, ﬁg. 20, no. 14; Gomli, Kerikholev, and Palumbi 2008, ﬁg. 5, no. 1. For further discussion in a larger regional context, see Rubinson 2006, p. 259. It should be noted that within the preserved evidence, two-dimensional animal representations are rare in this period.


22. Collon 1978, p. 201 also noted that this handle type, usually found on small vessels, might be associated with vessels that had ritual, ceremonial, or other nonquotidian purposes.


24. See Rubinson 2003, p. 144, for some further elements to consider. See also Abramishvili 2010, p. 174; Puturidze 2005.


26. There are identical guilloche borders on the bucket and seal from Kültepe; however, this is a less complex and thus less determinative element of visual similarity, and such guilloche motifs occur elsewhere in the ancient Near East as well.

27. N. Orgâic and Tanca 2010, p. 145. Seals and their impressions often form the most extensive preserved corpus of visual images from the ancient Near East, providing a database of style and iconography through time and space.

28. It is possible that the silver used to make the goblets was also imported into the South Caucasus from Anatolia. Money (1994, pp. 214–15) notes the importance of Anatolia as the source for silver in greater Mesopotamia and mentions a thirteenth-century B.C. source identifying eastern Anatolia as a rich silver source. See Bobokhlyan 2008, p. 75, where he notes that silver objects are virtually absent in the South Caucasus in the Kura-Araxes phase, and become widespread in the Trialeti culture. The author reviews the sources of silver in Anatolia and the metal’s appearance in greater Mesopotamia (Bobokhlyan 2008, pp. 75–76, and table 6, p. 330f). Dschaparidze (2003, p. 104) states that silver does not occur naturally in Georgia and was imported beginning in Early Kurgan times. Twaltschrelidze (2001, pp. 79–80, 82–84) notes the presence of silver-containing ores in Georgia, and mentions silver mining in modern times near the modern Turkish border. The question of whether the virtually pure silver of the Trialeti and Karashamb goblets could have been derived from these sources requires further study. Abramishvili (2010, p. 173) suggests that silver found within Georgia was exploited in the Bronze Age. I have argued elsewhere that the South Caucasus was part of the same trading network as the well-documented Assyrian trading colonies (Rubinson 2005, p. 142; Rubinson in Beyond Babylon, p. 32); and of course silver was the principal export to Assyria and beyond from Anatolia. New research is being undertaken in Armenia by Idaho State University (Bozicelli) and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography and Institute of Geological Sciences, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (NAS RA, Yerevan). These excavations in the Kotayk region, where Karashamb is located, will yield information about the silver resources there (David Petersen, personal communication).

29. Kufﬁn 1941, p. 88, ﬁg. 89.

30. Bldyryan, Aretynyan, and A. T. Smith 2009, p. 96. n. 37, suggests that both of these kurgans are earlier, but keeps them within a millennium or less internally contemporary group.

31. My thanks to Adam T. Smith for this observation. See also Manzarella 2004, p. 348.


34. McGovern (1999) notes silver-covered grapevines as well from the Trialeti culture. He points that viticulture likely began in the South Caucasus millennia earlier than in the Trialeti culture (p. 18); the signiﬁcant sociopolitical role of drinking wine within the Trialeti culture should be viewed in that context.


36. For a drawing of the Trialeti vessel proﬁle, see Treadway and Barkuja 1914, ﬁg. 1.

37. Jean-François de Lapérouse, personal communication.


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