



The golden winged bull (griffins) images in ancient religions

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Keywords: South Caucasus, Early Iron age, golden griffin, winged bull image, ancient art, ethnic relations, mythology

Түйін сөздер: Оңтүстік Кавказ, ерте темір ғасыры, алтын грифон, қанатты бұқа бейнесі, ежелгі өнер, этникааралық қатынас, мифология

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, ранний железный век, золотой грифон, образ крылатого быка, древнее искусство, межэтнические отношения, мифология

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The article analyzes images of fantastic animals accidentally discovered on the territory of the Lerik district in southeastern Azerbaijan. These noteworthy discoveries are currently stored in the valuables collection of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan. These objects testify to the high development of art in ancient times. Considering the resemblance of these images to those in West Asian regions, it is evident that Azerbaijan's ancient metalworking and jewelry art had extensive connections. This can be linked to religious beliefs, cultural-ethnic ties, and longstanding trade relations. Nevertheless, in the South Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan, the origins of these bull images are more ancient, primarily represented by clay and bronze figurines. This underscores the continuity of traditions in ancient art, with these finds likely dating back to the Mannean period (9th–8th centuries BC).

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Ежелгі діндердегі алтын қанатты бұқаның (грифонның) бейнесі

Мақалада оңтүстік-шығыс Азербайжандағы Лерик ауданынан кездейсоқ табылған фантастикалық жануардың бейнесі талданады. Бұл құнды табылымдар қазіргі уақытта Азербайжан тарихы Ұлттық музейінің құнды заттар қорында сақтаулы.

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Образ золотого крылатого быка (грифона) в древних религиях

В статье анализируются изображения фантастических животных, случайно обнаруженных на территории Лерикского района в юго-восточном Азербайджане. Эти ценные находки в настоящее время хранятся в фонде ценностей Национального музея исто-



Бұл заттар ежелгі уақытта өнердің жоғары дәрежеде дамығанын көрсетеді. Сонымен бірге Алдыңғы Азия аймақтарымен бұл бейне түрінің ұқсастықтарын ескерсек, онда Азербайжандағы зергерлік ісі мен металл өңдеудің ежелгі өнері кең байланыстарға ие болғанын сенімді түрде айта аламыз. Бұған ғасырлар бойы қалыптасқан діни сенімдер, мәдени-этникалық және сауда қатынасын жатқызуға болады. Алайда, Оңтүстік Кавказда, әсіресе Азербайжан территориясында бұқа бейнесінің бұл түрінің түп тамыры одан да ертеректе, және олардың көпшілігі саз және қола кішкене фигуралармен берілген. Бұлардың барлығы ежелгі өнердегі дәстүр сабақтастығын бейнелейді. Бұл табылымдарды Манней кезеңіне (б.д.д. IX–VIII ғғ.) жатқызуға болады.

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рии Азербайджана. Эти предметы свидетельствуют о высоком развитии искусства в древности. В то же время, если принять во внимание сходство этого типа изображений с регионами Передней Азии, то можно с уверенностью утверждать, что древнее искусство металлообработки и ювелирного дела в Азербайджане имеет широкие связи. Сюда же можно отнести религиозные верования, культурно-этнические и торговые отношения, складывавшиеся веками. Однако на Южном Кавказе, особенно на территории Азербайджана, корни этого типа изображений быков более древние, и большинство из них представлено глиняными и бронзовыми фигурками. Всё это свидетельствует о существовании преемственности традиций в древнем искусстве. Эти находки можно отнести к Маннейскому периоду (IX–VIII вв. до н.э.).

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Introduction (*Agalarzade A., Karimov S.*)

In the territory of Azerbaijan, the bull was worshiped as a totem starting from the Chalcolithic period, and bull figures made of clay and bronze were found in different parts of Azerbaijan [İbrahimov 2013: 27–34].

The discovery of bull figures from ancient Chalcolithic settlements is related to the belief in the “bull” cult. Researchers associate this with Totemism and state that these figures occupied a place in the religious ideology of ancient farming and cattle-breeding tribes [Ağalarzadə 2007: 80; 2019: 114]. Also, these figures obtained from Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments prove that the bull played a major role in the economy of the ancient farming-cattle-breeding tribes. For example, the clay figure of a young bull’s head found in the Chalagan Tepe settlement in the Karabakh region [Нариманов, Азимов 1985: 9] reflects the spiritual culture of the population living in the area in the Chalcolithic period. The discovery of these types of figures from the monuments of the Leilatepe culture, Beyuk Kesik I (fig. 3, 1) in Aghstafa district [Müseyibli 2020: 159, fig. 235, 2] and Alkhantepe in Jalilabad district [Ахундов 2014: 89, рис. 5, 5] is an indication of certain beliefs of the ancient tribes about the bull. Although researchers note that bull was used as a beast of draught and a means of transport [Müseyibli 2020: 159], we can see that in the later stages, bull took place in people’s beliefs as a sacred symbol.

During the Early Bronze Age, similar to certain regions in Azerbaijan and the broader South Caucasus, the bull held sacred significance and emerged as a central focal point for worship. It is probable that the people of the Early Bronze Age perceived these animals, integral to their daily lives and agriculture, as embodying supernatural forces. Consequently, they likely engaged in religious ceremonies wherein these animals were specifically chosen for sacrificial offerings. Supporting this hypothesis is the observation that numerous hearth devices were crafted directly in the likeness of a bull’s head or adorned with decorative bull horns [İsmayilov 1981: 34].

Early Bronze Age tribes viewed bull as a symbol of strength, power and fertility, worshiped it, and made clay bull figures in connection with it. Based on this type of findings revealed from residential place



of Makhta I (fig. 3, 2) in Nakhchivan, researchers came to the conclusion that they were made as amulets and could be used during certain ritual ceremonies [Aşurov və b. 2020: 24–25].

During the archaeological excavations in the southeast of Azerbaijan, including in the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age grave monuments of the Lerik district along with other items, bronze bull (ox) figures were also found [Махмудов 2008: 139–140; Кəримов 2006: 54; Əлəkbəров, Mirabdullayev 2017: 351–355]. These professionally made figures were discovered in the 90s of the 19th century by French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan from stone bull tombs in Joni (fig. 3, 3), Tulu and Hiveri (fig. 3, 4) villages of Lerik. Among the findings, a bull figure made of clay is also interesting [Ağalarzadə 2019: 141].

From the aforementioned, it can be inferred that the “bull cult” held a certain significance in the beliefs of the people of the South Caucasus from the late 5th millennium BC to the early 1st millennium BC. Undoubtedly, in subsequent periods, advancements in fine art associated with this cult began to be expressed in more intricate and finely crafted examples. The presence of stylized and winged bulls on Middle Eastern monuments indicates the accelerated integration of these animals into the religious-ideological views of the people. Notably, the creation of such images on precious metal objects, as well as the engraving of these depictions on valuable items, garners increased attention.

In recent years, rare and interesting archaeological finds have been found in the southeastern region of Azerbaijan. One of such finds is two exquisitely made gold griffins discovered from one of the stone bull grave monuments in Lerik district during farming work in 2013. Both griffins are professionally made and perfect works of art. These golden griffins indicate the high development of ancient Azerbaijani art.

Description of findings (*Agalarzade A., Karimov S.*)

The first griffin (inv. No. 307) is 4.0 cm long and 4.5 cm high (fig. 1, 1; 2, 1). This bull figure is made in the legendary style, with upward-curling horns, bulging eyes and nostrils depicted with tiny gold balls. The figure is covered with armor from the mouth to the throat, and five wire-like bracelets are depicted on the lower part of the neck. Small balls were added to the last bracelet. Besides, from the waist to the legs, a convex pattern consisting of seven balls were also made. On the waist of the figure, wings are depicted that bend upwards (buta-shaped). Rings are drawn on the inside of the wings. The bull’s back is covered with an ornamented shield and its short tail is clearly visible below the shield. The spine of the animal is as if naked, without a pattern. Its right leg is depicted in a forward position. By giving this description, the master, who made it, tried to show that the animal is in motion.

The second griffin (inv. No. 306) is 3.0 cm long and 3.5 cm high (fig. 1, 2; 2, 2). Although this figurine is crafted similarly to the first one, it has several distinctive features. The main distinguishing feature is the absence of horns and wings, with a convex pattern resembling an eight-pointed star on its back. The throat of the figurine is adorned with armor, similar to the first one, and underneath it, the same number of wire-like bracelets. Its body, front and back legs are covered with patterns made of small gold beads, and a decorated shield is depicted on its tail. Both figurines were made by molding in a perfect form.

Griffins in decorative-applied art: religious rites or just decorations? (*Agalarzade A., Karimov S.*)

Azerbaijan is considered to be one of the countries where the oldest examples of objects made of gold have been discovered. The first gold object found here dates back to the second half of the 5th millennium BC [Муσειбли 2022: 29]. During the archaeological excavations carried out in the territory of Azerbaijan in recent years, great deal of gold items dating back to the 1st millennium BC have been found. Various decorative elements of these findings show that art of the ancient period was highly developed.



Fig. 1. Golden griffins. Azerbaijan National History Museum
1-сур. Алтын грифондар. Азербайжан тарихы Ұлттық музейі
Рис. 1. Золотые грифоны. Национальный музей истории Азербайджана

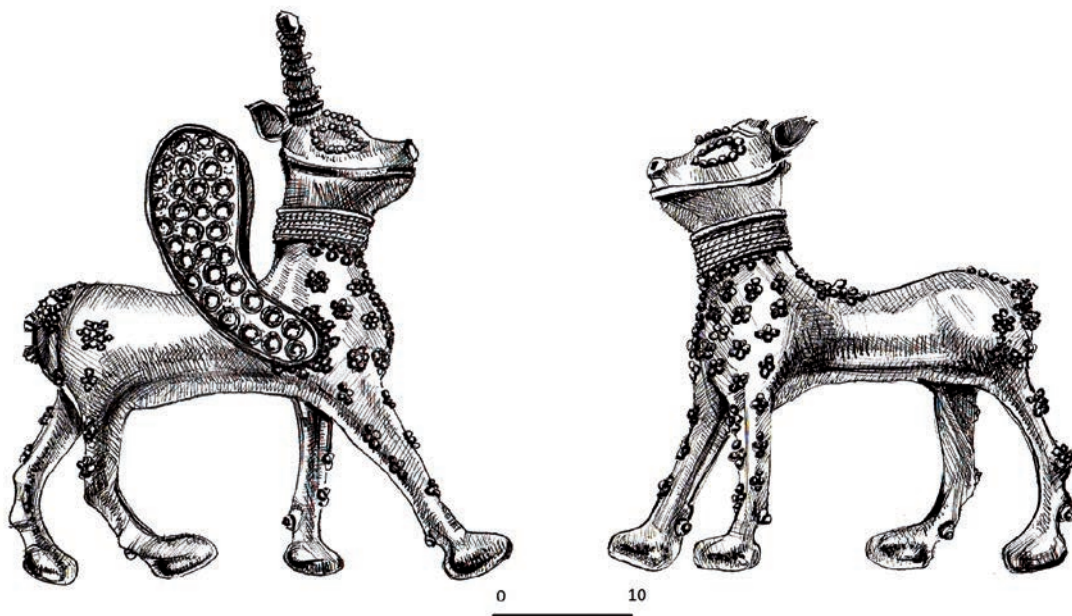


Fig. 2. Graphic representation of the golden griffins. Painter: Seymur Farmanli
2-сур. Алтын грифондардың графикалық бейнесі. Суретші: Сеймур Фарманлы
Рис. 2. Графическое изображение золотых грифонов. Художник: Сеймур Фарманлы



Fig. 3. Clay and bronze bull figures: 1 – I Beyuk Kesik settlement (Chalcolithic period), after – Müseyibli 2020: 573, fig. 235/2; 2 – I Makhta settlement (Early Bronze Age), after – Aşurov və başqaları 2020: 137, fig. 1; 3 – Coni necropolis (Late Bronze-Early Iron Age), after – Morgan 1896: 101, fig. 103; 4 – Khiveri necropolis (Iron Age), after – Ağalarzadə 2019: 141

3-сур. Бұқалардың саз және қоладан жасалған кішкене фигуралары: 1 – Бөук Кесик I қонысы (энеолит) ([Müseyibli 2020: 573, рис. 235, 2] бойынша); 2 – Махта I қонысы (ерте қола ғасыры) [(Aşurov və başqaları 2020: 137, fig. 1] бойынша); 3 – Джони қорымы (кейінгі қола–ерте темір ғасыры) ([Morgan 1896: 101, рис. 103] бойынша); 4 – Хивери қорымы (темір ғасыры) ([Ağalarzadə 2019: 141] бойынша)

Рис. 3. Глиняные и бронзовые фигурки быков: 1 – поселение Бөук Кесик I (энеолит) (по: [Müseyibli 2020: 573, рис. 235/2]); 2 – поселение Махта I (ранний бронзовый век) (по: [Aşurov və başqaları 2020: 137, fig. 1]); 3 – некрополь Джони (поздняя бронза–ранний железный век) (по: [Morgan 1896: 101, рис. 103]); 4 – некрополь Хивери (железный век) (по: [Ağalarzadə 2019: 141])

The incorporation of balls in decoration of the griffins we are talking about was not accidental. Ancient Azerbaijani jewelers began to use complex production methods, including grains (balls), in the preparation of gold objects, even from the 1st millennium BC. When making pattern elements of it were created by soldering them together and the surface of the ancient product was decorated [Rüstəmbəyova 2013: 5]. Undoubtedly, this decoration also reflected a certain religious ritual in itself. Most likely, these patterns used in decoration of both griffins were related to the “Sun cult”.

The craftsman who made the griffins depicted them as dynamic and in motion. Their right legs are demonstratively thrown forward, which also gives to say this. It should be noted that in the Ancient East, the rite of bull sacrifice to Mithras was widespread and the leg gesture played an important role here. The case of regularly placing the left leg behind is often observed in various Mithras’ iconographies (fig. 6, 1) [Bivar 2005: 346–350]. The images of armor and shields on the golden bull-griffins found in



Lerik district also give reason to assume that these figures were made in honor of the “Storm (War)” god. Therefore, the ancient Mannaean art was not limited only to the finds of Hasanli, Ziviyya and Marlik, and it spread to the South Caucasus as well. The gold objects found in Lerik region in recent years prove that the ancient Mannaean art is not limited only to the archaeological monuments of South Azerbaijan, at the same time, the existence of this type of artifacts in the territory of North Azerbaijan.

The presence of rich gold deposits in Mannea determined the high level of artistic metalworking. At the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, the Mannaean craftsmen had a great experience in the field of metallurgy and borrowed the progressive technological innovations of the time from their neighbors.



Fig. 4. Griffin on a golden rhyton (Marlik necropolis, Gilan, Iran), after – Khalatbari 1975: 298, 313

4-сур. Алтын ритондағы грифон (Марлик қорымы, Гилан, Иран) ([Khalatbari 1975: 298, 313] бойынша)

Рис. 4. Грифон на золотом ритоне (Некрополь Марлик, Гилан, Иран) (по: [Khalatbari 1975: 298, 313])

The prosperity and strengthening of the state was based on the high economic level achieved by the Mannaean people. Archaeological findings show great achievements in metallurgy and metal processing craftsmen have great artistic taste and mastery [Qaşqay 2009: 56]. It can be said that the images of armored bulls were the product of the creativity of local Mannaean craftsmen, and their depiction in this way was not accidental. It seems that the image of the bull, which occupies an important place in Mannean art and religious outlook, had an undoubted influence on the later Median and Achaemenid art. The influence of Assyrian traditions can be traced in the depiction of both figures with short horns. Giving the horns of bulls as goat horns or depicting bulls with the horns and ears of mountain goats also suggests that these images underwent certain changes outside the areas where they originated [Boardman 1970: 31].

Images of bulls occupied an important place in the religious outlooks of the ancient Mannaean people and embodied the god “Storm (War)” [Qaşqay 1993: 82]. The images of winged bulls on the Hasanli bowl and on gold vessels of Marlik also give reason to say this. It should be noted that the image of a winged bull is quite widespread in the ancient Eastern pantheon. Images of winged bulls are widely found on various artistic metal samples dated to the end of the 2nd – the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. Researchers consider the winged bull image



to be a creature of Assyrian origin and show that from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, various artistic metal samples of this type were produced in local craft workshops. Scholars have concluded that the flat-winged bull image was made by local Assyrian craftsmen, and the curved-winged bulls were made by Phoenician craftsmen who worked in Assyria using the Egyptian method [Moorey 1967]. The wings of the gold griffin found in Lerik district were also made in a curved shape, which probably indicates that the local Mannaeans craftsmen were familiar with Assyrian traditions. However, the pattern of the wings of this figure is slightly different. Depicting the figures with wings was also intended to bring to the fore the idea that they have extraordinary power. The figure's wings, though similar to the Assyrian animal style, are relatively different. Images of winged bulls are found in the later period on the walls and cylindrical seals of the palaces of Pasargadae and Persepolis of the Achaemenid [Morrey 1967: 93; 1978: 150–153; Baordman 1970: 30–34].



Fig. 5. Gold rhyton from Marlik (Marlik necropolis, Gilan, Iran), after – Negahban 1961: 501

5-сур. Марликтен табылған алтын ритон
(Марлик қорымы, Гилан, Иран) ([Negahban 1961: 501] бойынша)
Рис. 5. Золотой ритон из Марлика (Некрополь Марлик, Гилан, Иран)
(по: [Negahban 1961: 501])

The results of some archaeological excavations also confirm that Assyrian-type samples were brought to the South Caucasus through exchange. Thus, six pieces of Assyrian-type glazed pottery and great deal of gold jewelry were discovered from the kurgan belonging to the Early Iron Age studied in Goranboy district in 2015–2016 [Hüseynov 2017: 145–147]. All these prove that the South Caucasus has close economic and cultural relations with the powerful states of Western Asia.

The pattern elements of the griffins found in Lerik and their depiction with rich decorations are also of particular interest. Bulls are not richly decorated in this form both in Assyrian depictions and in cylindrical Achaemenid seals. One of the interesting aspects is the wire-like bracelets depicted on the necks of these bull figures. Such bracelets have been found quite often as ornaments from Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age sites of Lerik district. As if, these figures were decorated for a special ceremony and special attention was paid to every detail in its preparation. Despite the slightly different presentation and decoration of the bulging bull images on the gold objects found in the rulers' tombs in the Marlik necropolis (fig. 4–5) of Gilan province in Iran, it is highly probable that these type of finds belong to the same production center. Also, the territory of the modern Lerik district is closer to Gilan from a territorial viewpoint. The Late Bronze – Early Iron Age monuments of both regions are almost synchronous [Cahani 2016: 9–20]. During the afore-mentioned period, the same historical and cultural processes took place in both areas. Some researchers are of the opinion that the Marlik culture, previously represented by the Amlash label, spread to the northern borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the Iranian plateau [Negahban 1998: 52–55].



Fig. 6. Griffins on various objects: 1 – after – Bivar 2005: 353; 2 – after – Negahban 1998: 51

6-сур. Әртүрлі заттардағы грифондар: 1 – [Bivar 2005: 353] бойынша; 2 – [Negahban 1998: 51] бойынша

Рис. 6. Грифоны на различных предметах: 1 – по: [Bivar 2005: 353]; 2 – по: [Negahban 1998: 51]

They justify this with the discovered grave monuments.

The comparative analyses conducted above provide grounds for the conclusion that the gold griffins were artifacts of material culture crafted for religious worship and not just decoration. This distinction is evident as many figures of this type have a designated space for suspension in the upper part. However, such a feature is not observed in the griffins mentioned above. Undoubtedly, considering the connection of the golden griffins with religious beliefs, it is evident that ancient decorative applied art was prevalent during the specified period.

Conclusion (Agalarzade A., Karimov S.)

It can be noted that since the Early Iron Age, a production center had been operating in the region including the south-east of Azerbaijan and the Gilan area based on the rich metallurgical traditions of the Mannae state. The rich metal deposits of the region are considered to be one of the determining factors. The expansion of the ancient Azerbaijani tribes to Mesopotamia since the 3rd millennium BC proves that the political and ethnic-cultural relations

with the production centers of the ancient East also had a strong impact on local metalworking. As the Assyrian and Urartian attacks on Mannehad the purpose of robbery, it is certainly not an exception in taking precious metals to their treasury. The Assyrian and Urartian expansion to Mannea also conditioned the influence of Middle Eastern traditions on its art. So, these gold samples were not brought to the territory of Mannea from Assyria and were rather artifacts related to religious beliefs belonging to local metallurgy. These examples of art reflect the level of development of ancient art, artistic and aesthetic features, and differ in the richness of symbolic and meaning shades. It can be noted that art samples made with high taste by artisans in the field of artistic metalworking had a special importance in the history of art. Since each produced item was made in accordance with the demand of the period and reflected a number of historical features of the period on this sample. However, there are three main ideas up to date, that remain unanswered in the field of research of this type of art: 1) the place and history of the production of this type of samples; 2) the iconography of the motifs, and 3) ethnic, linguistic and cultural associations [Winter 1989: 89]. Undoubtedly, all the mentioned problems require a joint investigation of the mentioned art examples and do not exclude that they belong to the same art. Perfectly and very delicately worked similar examples



Fig. 7. Griffins on various objects, after – Moorey 1967: 84
 7-сур. Өртүрлі заттардағы грифондар ([Moorey 1967: 84] бойынша)
 Рис. 7. Грифоны на различных предметах (по: [Moorey 1967: 84])

of this type, indicate the formation of professional craftsmen and their special position in the period of early class societies.

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