

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Urartian Lion Figure: The Travelling Motif in the Ancient Near East

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### **Abstract**

Urartians ruled over the shores of Lake Urmia in Iran, Lake Van in Turkey and Sevan Lake in Armenia between 9th and 6th centuries B.C. and they had left a large number of metal artifacts. Urartians illustrated different human, animal, plant and mythical motifs on their metal objects. But lion was more common among those motifs. Urartian lion was depicted with open jaw, wrinkled face, small ears and short mane. The author suggests to study each figure separately in comparison with other cultures therefore it seems that the Urartian lions are similar to Assyrian, Hittite, Achaemenid and Etruscan lions. This Urartian motif could have been affected by the immigration, travel, savory or employing of the artists or workers from Assyrian or Hittite regions to Urartu. Urartian artists could have affected the other regions with the same reasons. A few scholars have been interested on this motif in comparison with pre and post Urartian culture. It is the aim of the author to field and library research the Urartian lion motif along with its comparison with Assyrian, Hittite, Achaemenid and Etruscan lions to trace the possible effects.

Keywords: Lion; Urartu; Art; Metalworking; Effects.

### Introduction

Urartians had glorious achievements in metalworking from about 9<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> B.C. Their metal objects have been decorated by different figures and motifs including animals, plants and mythical creatures. They had pictured varied hunting, banquet, symbolic, ritual and other scenes over their metal artifacts. Illustrating animal figures were more favorable and among them the lion was the most favorite one which could be comparable to other cultures lion figure. This comparison could be due to their position, muscles, face and function of course.

Lion is interpreted as the king, kingdom, power, rage, triumph and dominance more or less everywhere in the ancient Near East (Amiet, 1966: 524-525; Collin, 2002: 198). It is also illustrated along with the War and Triumph Deities as Ninurta and Innana (Black and Green, 1992: 118). Many figures of deities riding the lion have been already discovered in the ancient Near East. Additionally, Lions have been pictured on Göbekli tepe, Çatalhöyük and Boğazköy. It was the symbol of Sekhmet- Power and the Pharaohs's protector Godess (Krappe, 1945: 150). The lion hunting scenes have been very commonly illustrated in Mesopotamia which could be the symbolic picture of the king's great power (Fig 1). Narundi, Elamite Sun Deity, had also been illustrated along with the lion (Harper and Aruz and Tallon, 1993: 87). Lion figures from the first millennium have been discovered in Luristan (Fig. 2) as Kelardasht (Fig. 3) as well. It was also the symbol of the highest rank in Mithraism in Iran (Vermaseren, 2008: 75).

Scholars as Piotrovskij (2004), Azarpay (1968), Merhav (1991a), Roaf (2010), Zimanski (2012), Batmaz (2012) and others have been studied the figure of lion in the Urartian art and sometimes have suggested similarities between the Urartian lion and the lion of other ancient cultures. But rare studies have been fulfilled on the possibilities of more ancient effects on the Urartian lion figure or this motif effects on the more recent cultures. The question of all of these effects and being effected is not published in a paper but some points have been suggested in separate contributions. Therefore it is the aim of this author to study the Urartian lion specifications and compare them with pre and post Urartian lion figures to find out whether there were effects or imitations to be traced in the ancient Near Eastern art. This research has been taken place both by field and library study.

# **Urartian Lion Figure**

As Urartians depicted lion more over their artifacts it has been studied more as well. Urartian lions have been discovered as figurines (Fig. 4), wall paintings (Fig. 5) and engravings on metal (Fig 6), stone (Fig. 7) and seals (Fig 8). The metal -mostly bronze- artifacts including belts (Fig. 6), horse-harness, helmets (Fig. 9), shields (Fig. 10), discs, medallions, pectorals (Fig. 11), vessel handles (Fig. 12), bracelets (Fig. 13), furniture and candlestick legs with the figure of the Urartian lion were discovered. The embossed lion head on the center of the shields or on the helmets (Fig. 14) and rows of walking lions in the concentric circles on the shields (Fig. 10) were commonly produced.

Urartian lions were illustrated with open and roaring jaws, deeply wrinkled snout, infuriate face, triangle eyes, button shaped ears, muscled and strong body and legs and graceful pose. Their tongues and teeth were observable and sometimes their fangs were shown longer. Urartian lion mane was illustrated short





Fig. 1. (Frankfort, 1954: 52) Fig. 2. No. 763 in Reza Abbasi Museum

and sometimes as flames or zigzags. The tale is rather downwards or curled-up. Urartian lions are pictured standing in two or four feet, sitting, walking, running, jumping, fighting, tracing or hunting. The configuration of the Urartian lion figure had to induce the concurrent sense of horror and admiration.

Roaf (2010: 78, fig 7) has compered Urartian lion figures in different Urartian kings' reign (Fig. 15). He suggested that lions were illustrated in different methods during Rusa II and Rusa III's reign. Also the tails and muscled were different during Urartians' reign. Seidl (2004: 123; 2007: 140, Abb. 2a-b) argues that lions' mane were illustrated with wavy lines in Rusa II's reign and with massive short lined during Rusa III's reign (Fig 16). This scholar suggested this as the difference between Urartian art in eight and seventh centuries. Salvini (2007: 154-155) thinks Seidl's suggested lion from Rusa III is very much similar to the one from Rusa II in Ayanis. This could be interpreted as the lions' mane in Rusa II's reign was also pictured with massive short lines. It also means that according to Salvini both methods were used in Rusa II's reign. He (Ibid: 156) also thinks that the lion on the seal impression from Ayanis is similar to the Rusa III's reign (Fig. 17a-b). According to Foietta et al. (2016: 155-156) the lion on Rusa III's shield from Toprak kale is similar to the previous ones as Ispuini's

and Sarduri II's in Karmir-blur (Fig. 17c-d). Although lions were illustrated with fewer details in the end of Urartian era. Azarpay (1968: 37) compered the heads of lions in different Urartian kings' reign. According to this scholar the lions' jaws in the reign of Sarduri (possibly Sarduri II) were similar to the previously illustrated ones. From this king onwards double lines were pictured on the shoulders of the lions which became more like curved lines at the end of Urartian era.

The author does not agree with comparing this motif in different kings' reign as there are few illustrations discovered comparing to the massive production of lion illustration. Additionally, it was possible that contemporary artists and workers used different methods in different regions under the control of Urartu. These could be the causes of different lions' illustration at the reign of the same king. There is the massive number of artifacts that we have not discovered or were destroyed and therefore our conception of the illustration process could be wrong and finally causes false interpretations. Işikli (2016) also agrees to these comments. There is also the possibility of moving artifacts from different regions in control of Urartu to other places even after the reign of a king (Dara, 2015: 75) and the artifacts original production places and times are no longer clear. Therefore this comparison between the lions' fig-



Fig. 3. (Biglari and Abdi, 2014: 91)

ures in the Urartian kingdom according to the reign of the kings could cause the confusion.

### **Urartian Lion Iconography**

It is very possible that the animal in the Urartian art were the symbol of deities. Therefore, it was essential that they were related to the deities' function. In this case, lion could represent the power and triumph of the king and.

Haldi, the supreme deity in the Urartian pantheon, was War Deity. He was associated to the king and his power and triumph. He is believed to be pictured in front of deities' garrison attacking Assyrian soldiers in the shield from Upper Anzaf (Fig. 18). But some scholars mentioned Haldi as the lion rider deity according to a picture in Haldi's temple in Erebuni (Fig. 5). In deed the lion rider deity is rarely pictured in the Urartian art. The deity- with or without the winged disc-riding on the bull is more illustrated in Urartian art (Fig. 19). It seems that the winged disc deity over the bull has been pictured from almost the beginning of the Urartian kingdom – as Upper Anzaf shield. According to Piotrovskij (2004: 309, 312) it is possible that lion could be the symbol of offering to Haldi. It seems that he has associated lion with Haldi according to the Near Eastern model.



Fig. 4. (Seidl, 2004: TAFEL 3c)

He also mentioned bull as the symbol of Teišeba, Weather Deity, and the winged disc as the symbol of Šiwini, Sun Deity. Merhav (1991b: 137) guessed the lion and bull as representations of Haldi and Teišeba as well. There are challenges in recognizing Haldi's symbol. Barnet (1950) called Haldi the sun deity and according to Zimansky (2012: 72) the lion is the symbols of the king and not Haldi and according to Calmeyer (1979) lion is not the symbol for Haldi as there was no district model in the Urartian art for illustrating deities over specific animals. The author thinks the lion and Haldi are both symbols of the Urartian eternal powerful and victorious king. Although, lions are sometimes illustrated in the hunting scenes chasing other animals and not pictured as the symbols (Dara, 2020: 21) (Fig. 20). It seems that the lions on the shield of Upper Anzaf preceded Haldi to show that the Urartian kingdom defeated Assyrians. Haldi is not riding any animal on this shield but carries šuri, his weapon. The next deity holding thunder bolts is riding lion and the third deity with the winged disc is riding a bull. The common Near Eastern model is not observed in this scene. There are still challenges in naming the deities on the shield of Upper Anzaf as some scholars as Batmaz (2012) name the winged disc



Fig. 5. Erebuni Temple

deity over the bull as Šiwini. But the author suggests that Haldi and the lions in front of him represented the power of Urartian king facing the Assyrian army. Therefore, the winged disc deity or any deity over the bull could be the symbol of power or the protective figure as it is illustrated on many objects mostly armors. Additionally, there is no discovered text or inscriptions introducing the lion as the symbol for Haldi. Also, the winged disc has not always been the symbol of Sun Deity even in Mesopotamia and it seems that Egyptian Ra' was the reason some scholars associated the winged disc with all the Sun deities. Šiwini's function is more related to justice according to the Urartian inscriptions (Dara, 2018a: 226) therefore it is also possible that Šiwini as the winged disc deity riding the bull was protecting the objects form the harm of the enemies as it was mentioned in the Urartian inscriptions.

Another association of lion and Ḥaldi has been fulfilled by the hieroglyphic sign of lion head as Ḥaldi (Diakonoff, 1983: 193; Calmeyer, 1979). This sign has been discovered separately or along with a cuneiform inscription. The author called this sign as the king or his power or his command (Dara, 2018b: 44). Also, the lion body (not the head of course)



Fig. 6. No. 132 in Reza Abbasi Museum

was called as the hieroglyphic sign of the king in Mesopotamia (Finkel and Reade, 1996: 249). The head of the animals are the hieroglyphic signs in the Urartian tradition but their meaning could resemble Mesopotamian tradition. The author suggests that the lion head could be written on the royal objects as the offerings or properties of the king.

Urartians sometimes illustrated the lion with the wings (Fig. 21) or lion head was pictured with another animal's body. Also lion tail could be pictured as the fish tail (Tarontsi, 2017: 136). It is very difficult to interpret these mythical creatures but the wings could double the power of lion as the symbol of both the physical and spiritual powers.

# Urartian Lion in Comparison with Lions in Other Cultures

Lions were pictured both similar to (Fig. 22a) and different from (Fig. 22b) the Urartian lions in Mesopotamia. The lion statues were protectors of the gates and temples in Mesopotamia (Majidzadeh, 2009: 122). Most of the Assyrian lions are very much similar to the Urartian lions (Fig. 23) and a few are slightly different (Fig. 24). Most of the lions in both cultures resemble in the paws (Azarpay, 1968: 37), wrinkled snouts, curled-up tails, strung



Fig. 7. Ayanis Bas-relief

bodies, movements and the configurations. According to Azarpay (Ibid: 37, 39) the Urartian lion is very much affected by the Assyrian one but sometimes there are doubled lines on the Urartian lions' neck which are different from Assyrian lions. Also the snouts in the Assyrian art are sometimes longer and less wrinkled. The recognition of Urartian and Assyrian lions are very difficult and sometimes impossible when the Assyrian lions are pictured with wrinkled short snout, curled tails and muscled bodies. The Assyrian male lions are sometimes illustrated with the long mane but when they were pictured as female or with short mane the recognition of the Assyrian and Urartian lions are very difficult. Their walking style was also very similarly depicted (Frankfort, 1954: 80). The Hittite lions were also mostly very much similar to the Urartian ones (Fig. 25) but sometimes slightly different (Fig. 26).

Scythian lions are both similar in figure (Fig. 27) or configuration or very different (Fig. 28). Also, Elamite lions resembled the Urartian lions in figure and configuration (Fig. 29) or slightly different (Fig. 30).

Brown (1960: 14-21) commented that lions from Ziwiye (Fig. 31) have been affected by the art of Assyria, Syria and Anatolia and Azarpay (1968: 40, 119) compared them with the Urartian lions. The author thinks these lions are very much



Fig. 8. Bastam Seal Impression (Seidl, 1988: 146, B 2)

like all Assyrian, Hittite, Scythian and Urartians.

Urartian and Achaemenid lions (Fig. 32) have both wrinkled snouts and very much similar to the extent that sometimes cannot be recognized. Their eyes, muscled, movement and configuration resemble as well. Although the Achaemenid lions sometimes have different ears and the winged lions in Achaemenid art have longer and curled-up wings at the ending. According to Gökce (2017: 3) the deities standing on an animal in the art of Urartians have been affected by late Hittite and new Assyrian art and Urartians were the one to affect this deities" figures in Achaemenid art.

The last lions to be compared with the Urartians are Etruscan lions. According to Azarpay (1968: 74) Urartian art affected western Asia to Aegean Sea and Etruscan lands. Brown (1960: 14-21) suggested that Etruscan lions are affected by the Assyrians and not the Urartian art but they look very much like the Urartian lions with wrinkled snouts and faces (Fig. 33) and the author thinks that it is very possible that both Assyrian and Urartian are affected by the lion figure in the region.

## Analysis

The specifications of Urartian art are not as strict as Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is rather difficult to study the art of Urartu





Fig. 9. Armenian History Museum Exhibition in Iranian National Museum Fig. 10. Armenian History Museum Exhibition in Iranian National Museum

and most of the studies have been fulfilled with its comparison with Assyria. Some scholars believe the artifacts in Urartu were the imitation of the Assyrian art. Some suggested that Assyrian and Urartian art were affected by each other and others think that the Urartian art grew independently. Some of the most significant ideas are esented hereby.

Frankfort (1954: 102-186) suggested Urartian art as a complete copy of the Assyrian art with minimum innovation and creativity. It seems that he was not very much familiar with the huge number of Urartian objects discovered.

According to Piotrovskij (2004: 256), the Urartian artifacts were presented as the Assyrians for years but the Urartian art did not entirely imitate Assyrians although the Assyrian effect on the Urartian art is undeniable. According to Calmeyer (1991: 313) the first phase of the Urartian art was a copy of the Assyrian and became more creative in the later era.

According to Azarpay (1968: 18, 21) Urartian artists and workmen were affected by the Assyrians and the Assyrian effect on Urartian artifacts took place even during the time of conflict. It is also possible that Assyrian workmen worked for Urartians or the Assyrian artifacts

were transferred to Urartu. Azarpay commented (Ibid: 74) that Urartian workmen preferred to create scenes inside the borders and to illustrate repetitive and replicated figures in the eighth century B.C which was similar to Assyrian art.

According to Reade (2019: 443) the effects of Assyrian art on Urartians were very much observable in the metalworking. Winged discs, sacred trees, genies and other similar figures are good examples.

According to Curtis (2007: 180) the metalworking in Urartu and Assyria did not imitate each other. He thinks that two artistic methods were independently grown and they were slightly affected by each other especially in the second half of the eight century B.C.

Mallowan (1966: 428-431) suggested that Urartians affected Assyrian art. This could have taken place after the eight campaign of Sargon II. He commented that objects discovered in Assyria which were affected by the Urartian art. He suggested that they were possibly booties or transferred to Assyria from Urartu.

Piotrovskij (2004: 235) compered Urartian metalworking with Hittite and Mitanni. According to Azarpay (1968: 18) late Hittite culture at the north of Syria





Fig. 11. (Wartke, 1993), Fig. 12. Armenian History Museum Exhibition in Iranian National Museum

could have affected Urartian art. This scholar (Ibid: 18) suggested that Urartians were also affected by Transcaucasian culture and Urartian art affected Scythians and north west of Iran and it is observable through objects of Ziwiye.

The author (2019) suggests that Urartians were affected by more ancient cultures and affected the post-Urartian ones as Achaemenids which is also compered in the fields of architecture and written formulae. The basic development of Achaemenid art and iconography took place in the reign of Darius which is comparable to the era of Akkadian Sargon and Asurbanipal II (Garrison, 2013: 587-590).

Herzfeld (1941: 167, 198-200) commented that Achaemenids were not affected by the Assyrian art as they lived in different eras. He thinks that Urartians had great role in the formation of Achaemenid art. He added that Urartians affected Achaemenids through Medians who were also affected by the Urartian art. Mousavi (2011: 88-90, 262) compered Achaemenid figurines and motifs with the Elamite objects and thinks that Achaemenids were affected by the Urartians through Media and Manna. Azarpay (1968: 47) agrees with Urartian art effect on Achaemenids through Medians and Scythians. According to Zarei et al. (2013) it is possible that Achaemenids used

Urartian art to develop their own.

According to Akurgal (1949: 66-69) and Maxwell-Hyslop (1956: 156-160) Urartian bronze artifacts have been discovered in Etruscan tombs. Akurgal (1949: 66-69) suggested that Aramaic culture was affected by the Urartian art and this happened as these people lived as southern neighbors of Urartu in north of Syria at the end of eight and first half of the seventh centuries B.C.

According to Reade (2019: 443) the technology in the ancient world could have traveled between the nations in a couple of methods: full or part-time training workmen and artists of other regions, conflicts and triumphs of a nation over another, trading and transformation of objects between the regions, colonization and immigration. This could explain the superficial similarities of iconography (Ibid: 440). Therefore, it seems that the elements of training, conquering and travelling (or immigrating) were the main factors. Reade (Ibid: 452) also mentioned the role of Assyrian mercenaries in the ninth century B.C in transferring the cultural elements. Additionally, there is evidence of Urartian mercenaries employed from the reign of Sarduri I that sometimes were Assyrian former soldiers. According to Piotrovskij (2004: 257) the constant relation between Urar-



Fig. 13, Fig. 14. (Işikli, 2016, 436)



Fig. 15. (Roaf, 2010: 78, Fig. 7)



Fig. 16. Right: Rusa II's Shield from Ayanis Left: Rusa III's Shield from Toprak Kale (Seidl, 2007: 140, Abb. 2a-b)

tu and its neighbors created a new artistic method in the Near East although all the regions added aspects to this method. Batmaz (2012: 243 and note 6) commented that it is possible that Urartian artifacts were brought to the west via north of Syria. The author suggests it is possible that metalworking workshops outside Urartian lands were imitation Urartian methods or were affected by them. It is also possible that Urartian artists travelled or immigrated elsewhere.

The author comments that it is confusing to announce that the Urartian art is affected by or affected a culture. This study should be fulfilled on different figures or motifs separately. The details of each motif could be compared with different cultures. Urartian sacred tree and genies is a very much similar scene to Assyrian motif while lions are similar to Hittite, Assyria, Achaemenid, and etc.

Urartian lion is similar to Uruk,

Elamite, Babylonian, Assyrian and Scythian lions although sometimes different. It seems not very probable that all of them affected Urartian art. Uruk and Elamite lions seem impossible to affect Urartian art due to the time and distance. The Hittite and Assyrian lions were mostly more similar to the Urartians in configuration, face and muscles. Achaemenid and Etruscan lions as well look very much as Urartians. The similar lions have also been discovered in Ziwiye as well.

Akurgal (1949: 33-44) and Azarpay (1968: 39) also detected the similarity between Urartian lion with Hittite. Azarpay (Ibid: 73) explained it as the reason of the relationship between Urartu and north of Syria in all the times except for a short period when Assyrians conquered the region. Merhav (1991a: 276) suggested that the bodies of the Assyrian and Hittite lions were more heavily illustrated. In all, the lion figure with wrinkled short snout,





Fig. 17a. From Rusa II's Reign in Ayanis (Salvini, 2007: Abb. 5a)
Fig. 17b. From Rusa III's Reign (Azarpay, 1968: plate 54)





Fig. 17c. From Rusa III's Reign in Toprak Kale(Ibid: plate 58) Fig. 17d. From Sarduri II's Reign in Karmir-blur (Ibid: Fig. 8)

triangle eyes, open jaw, aligned teeth and muscled body was very common in both Assyria and Hittite. It is very possible that workmen and artists played the main role in developing it to Urartian regions as their similarities are undeniable. Urartian accepted this figure in a method that they did not use any other figure. This figure could have been used in Achaemenid illustrations as well even if it is adopted via Medians or other cultures. Etruscan lion as well look very much like Assyrian, Hittite and Urartian lions and could have been affected by any of the three. The author thinks the similarities of Urartian lion and others in the ancient Near East could have been taken place by many reasons as conflicts, immigration, travels, transportation, slavery, trade or marriages of the neighboring nations.

### Conclusion

There are some subjects studied in this paper and the results of the above-mentioned discussion could be summed up as following.

The author does not agree with comparing lions' motif in different Urartian kings' reign as all the figures have not been discovered and it is also possible that contemporary artists and workers used different methods in different Urartian regions. Additionally, it is possible that some artifacts were transported in to different Urartian regions even after a king's reign. Therefore the comparison between the lions' figures in the Urartian kingdom according to the reign of the kings could be confusing.

The author thinks the lion and Ḥaldi are possibly both symbols of the Urartian eternal powerful and victorious king and not just the symbol of each other. It is possible that Ḥaldi and the lions in front of him on Upper Anzaf shield represented the power and victory of Urartian king over the Assyrian army. Also, the winged disc deity or the deity standing on the bull could be the symbol of power or the protective figure as it is illustrated

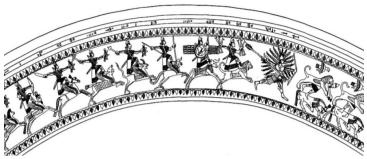


Fig. 18 (Belli 1999: Plate 40)







Fig. 19a. (Konyar et al., 2018: 195) Fig. 19b. (Tarontsi, 2017: Photo 4) Fig. 20. (No. 143 in Reza Abbasi Museum)



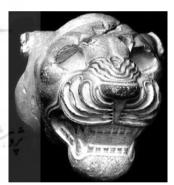


Fig. 21. (Ayanis Bas-relief) Fig. 22a From Sippar (Işikly, 2016: 439, Fig. 10)

on many objects mostly armors. It is also possible that Šiwini as the winged disc deity riding the bull was protecting the objects form the harm of the enemies as the main function of this Judge Deity to punish the enemies.

Regarding the Urartian winged lion the author thinks that the wings added to the figure of Urartian lions could double the power of lion figure and this winged lion could represent both the physical and spiritual powers.

The author thinks that it is confusing to announce that the Urartian art is affected by or affected a culture. This study should be fulfilled on different figures or motifs separately. Regarding the Urartian lion figure the author suggests that Urartian lions were affected by ancient cultures as Hittite and Assyrian and also affected the post-Urartian cultures as Achaemenid and Etruscan. The sim-







Fig. 22b. (Majidzadeh, 2009: 376), Fig. 23a Ninurta Temple in Nimrud from Ashur-Nasirpal (2009: 454) Fig. 23b Ishtar Gate







Fig. 24. Khorsabad (Frankfort, 1954: 115) Fig. 25a-b. Middle or Late Hittite from Kültepe (Yener, 2007: 227, Figs. 4-5)





Fig. 26a. Lion Protectors from Zincirli (Frankfort, 1954: Fig. 87) Fig. 26b. Late Hittite from Tell Tainat (Winter, 2010: 278, Fig. 36)

ilarities include the configuration, face, triangle eyes, wrinkled short snout, open jaw, aligned teeth, angry face and strong and muscled bodies.

The author comments it is very possible that workmen and artists played the main role in developing a figure in different eras. Artists and workmen could have traveled, married, immigrated or been slaved and moved from Urartian lands to other regions of the ancient near east and brought their techniques and skill with them. This could happen even after the end of Urartian kingdom. It was

also possible that the workmen from other regions move to Urartian lands with the above-mentioned reasons to affect the artists and culture of the Urartian lands. Merchants as well could trade the artifacts. Additionally, the royal objects could have been moved from one place to another at the time of a king or after his reign.

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Fig. 27. (Kopovikova, 2006: Fig. 24), Fig. 28. (Kopovikova, 2006: Fig. 24)





Fig. 29. From Arjan (Biglari and Abdi, 2014: 90) Fig. 30. From Susa (Azhand, 2011: 84)



Fig. 31a. Plaque in Reza Abbasi Museum (By Parisa Kordbegli)



Fig. 31b



Fig. 32. (Akbarzadeh, 2012: 53) Fig.



33. Florence Museum

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