

# **Libiamo ne' lieti calici**

**Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented  
to Lucio Milano on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup>  
Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends**

edited by  
Paola Corò, Elena Devecchi, Nicla De Zorzi,  
and Massimo Maiocchi  
with the collaboration of Stefania Ermidoro  
and Erica Scarpa

# Alter Orient und Altes Testament

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und des Alten Testaments

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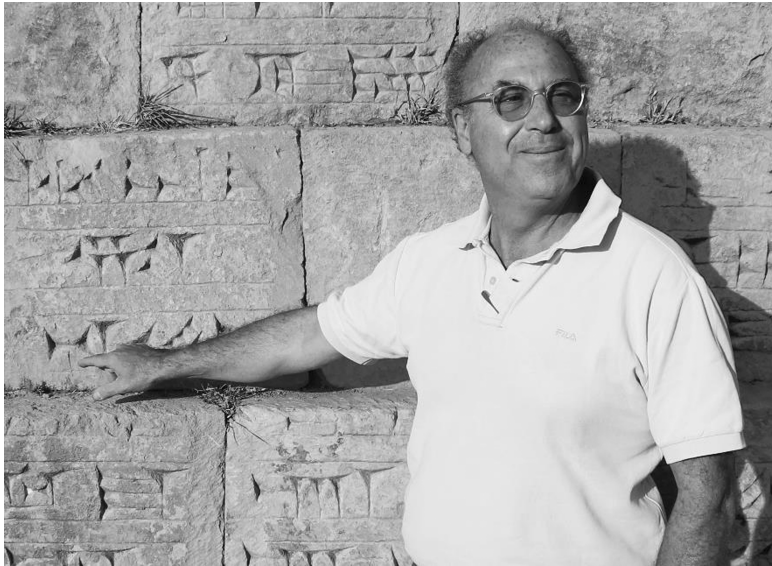
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Lucio at Jerwan (October 2013)



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## Foreword

This book celebrates Lucio Milano's many scholarly achievements in the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies. As former pupils of his who have all greatly benefitted from his wide-ranging scholarship, guidance and support, we felt it was time for us to reciprocate by presenting him with this collection of essays from pupils, friends, and colleagues, as a token of our gratitude and affection on the occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. On the other hand, we could also imagine his reaction: "*Oh ragazzi!*... what are we celebrating? It's too early for my retirement!". Our excuse is that in offering the present volume to Lucio at this time, we arbitrarily picked his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday as one occasion among the many special events that could have been chosen instead. We have no doubt that there will be many other celebrations for our dear friend Lucio in the future.

Although Lucio's Assyriological interests are manifold, we sought to narrow the scope of this volume to topics that over the course of his career have grown particularly close to his heart.

Lucio's wide-ranging work and interests reflect his intellectual formation. He studied Classics at "La Sapienza" University in Rome and graduated *summa cum laude* in 1975 with a thesis on "Viticoltura e enologia nell'Asia anteriore antica", written under the supervision of Mario Liverani. Appointed in 1977 to the Institute of Ancient Near Eastern Studies ("Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente") in Rome, he continued to work at "La Sapienza" University as "ricercatore universitario confermato" (1981–1993) at the Department of History, Archaeology and Anthropology ("Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Archeologiche e Antropologiche dell'Antichità") and as Professor of History of the Ancient Near East (1984–1987) for the post-graduate course in Oriental Studies ("Corso di Specializzazione in Studi Orientali"). In 1993 he moved to "Ca' Foscari" University in Venice as Associated Professor and since 2001 he has held at that university the chair of History of the Ancient Near East as Full Professor.

Lucio's research focuses on the social, economic, and political history of the third millennium BC, with special focus on Syria and northern Mesopotamia, especially Ebla and Tell Beydar, an area on which he has published extensively. His scholarly publications include several text editions and studies on a wide range of topics, which he explores through a multi-faceted approach, ranging from linguistics to prosopography, to digital tools for the study of the Ancient Near East. He is a leading scholar in the history of palaeonutrition, to which he has contributed articles and congress volumes, as a director of research projects and as a supervisor of doctoral theses. Since the early part of his career he has been heavily involved in archaeology as well, participating as an epigraphist in the expeditions to Ebla, Tell Ashara, Tell Mozan, Tell Leilan and Tell Beydar. In addition, he was active between 1997 and 2010 as director of the "Ca' Fosca-

ri” team at the Syro-European archaeological mission of Tell Beydar. Always ahead of his time, he has worked in digital humanities since the early 1980s, taking part in 1982–1983 in the “Project in the Computer Analysis of the Ebla Texts” initiated by G. Buccellati at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since 2010, he has been the chief editor of the project “Ebla Digital Archives” at “Ca’ Foscari” University.

Lucio has not only been a prolific researcher. Over the years, he has invested an enormous amount of time and energy in activities aiming at the divulgation of knowledge on the Ancient Near East to a wider audience, stimulating at the same time pertinent research. All of the undersigned – and many besides us – have benefitted from his inspirational teaching, from general courses for undergraduates to specialized seminars for doctoral and post-doctoral students. He has succeeded in establishing his own “school” of Ancient Near Eastern studies at “Ca’ Foscari” University. The defining characteristic of our “Venetian school” is not a single theme – far be it from Lucio’s mind to impose a single area of specialization on those who study with him – but is rather its *spiritus rector*’s historical methodology and openness to different approaches to elucidating the multifaceted realities of the Ancient Near East. This attitude is exemplified by Lucio’s endeavours under the auspices of the “Advanced Seminar in the Humanities: Literature and Culture in the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece, Rome and the Near East” at the Venice International University, which he has co-organized since 2005. A volume recently published under his editorship, *Il Vicino Oriente antico dalle origini ad Alessandro Magno* (2012), is on its way to becoming a standard manual for Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian history in Italian universities. Mention must also be made of the journal *Kaskal*, founded in 2003, of which Lucio is co-director, and which has grown into an internationally recognized and increasingly influential forum for the multi-disciplinary study of Ancient Near Eastern cultures.

International recognition for Lucio’s scientific achievements is reflected in his activities, under various titles, at “Ca’ Foscari” University, as well as at universities outside Italy, such as UCLA, Cornell University, and the École Pratique des Hautes Études.

Lucio’s contagious enthusiasm, gentleness, and wit immediately captivate all those who work with him. Only he – as students, colleagues, and friends have learned – could turn brisk walks with him through the Venetian *calli* towards Venice’s railway station into unique opportunities to discuss Assyriology and the vagaries of life. Moreover, his advice is delivered not only in this peripatetic form, but also in the many toasts offered during the numerous informal dinner parties held at his home for welcoming visiting scholars, or for celebrating shared successes.

All this is clearly reflected, we believe, in the contributions to this volume, which stand as a token of appreciation, certainly of Lucio Milano as an out-

standing scholar, but also, and perhaps more significantly, of Lucio as a *Mensch*.

Thus, once more, let us stand and raise our glasses to celebrate Lucio's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. *Salute!*

Venice, Turin, Vienna  
March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Paola Corò  
Elena Devecchi  
Nicla De Zorzi  
Massimo Maiocchi

# Ishtar in Shida Kartli?

## About a Recently Discovered Fragment of Stone Plaque

*Elena Rova*

*For Lucio, in the hope to attract his attention on an area apparently so far away from our common Syro-Mesopotamian interests*

### Introduction

Among the finds from the 2014 season of excavations at Aradeti Orgora<sup>1</sup> in the Shida Kartli province of Georgia in the Southern Caucasus is the fragment of a small stone plaque bearing an unusual incised decoration which has no known parallels in the region, and is therefore most probably of foreign derivation. The design on the plaque's obverse, in particular, is strongly reminiscent of Mesopotamian astral symbols, and especially of the eight-pointed star which is a well-known symbol of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. It may be suggestive of still to be investigated far-reaching connections of this region of the Southern Caucasus with Mesopotamia and, more in general, with the Near Eastern civilisations during the later second millennium BC. Were this the case, the plaque would represent a small welcome addition to the corpus of evidence demonstrating the existence of continuing relations, from the Neolithic period to the first millennium BC, between the Southern Caucasus and its southern neighbours, to which scholars have been devoting growing attention in the course of the last twenty years.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, after briefly describing the object and its context of discovery, we will concentrate on the Near Eastern parallels and probable forerunners for its decoration, and bring forward some hypotheses about the possible meaning of the latter in the context of the local south-Caucasian Late Bronze cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Excavations at Aradeti Orgora are carried out since 2013 by the joint "Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological Project" of Ca' Foscari University of Venice in cooperation with the Georgian National Museum of Tbilisi. The 2013–2014 seasons were funded by Ca' Foscari University, Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, and Ministero degli Affari Esteri.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, on the connections between the south-Caucasian Trialeti culture and the Anatolian, Syro-Mesopotamian and Aegean civilisations in the early second millennium BC, see Abramishvili 2010; Rubinson 2003, 2009; Aruz *et al.* 2008, 91–93; already Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 73–76.

### The plaque

The fragment (AO 2014 1674–M–1) is 6.2 cm long and 5.6 cm wide, and corresponds to less than half of the original object,<sup>3</sup> which was a small flat plaque, 1.5 cm thick, of probably roughly squarish shape, of light-coloured stone (Fig. 1, 2). The stone, a kind of fine-grained sandstone, is yellowish in section and in the fresh break, but greyish-whitish on the smoothed surface; there are some traces of reddish colour on the upper right corner but, since these do not correspond to the incised design, they are probably the result of post-depositional alteration. One of the four corners, a large part of the two adjoining sides, and the probable centre, are preserved; considering that the design is rather irregular and not perfectly symmetrical, a length of approximately 7.5 cm can be reconstructed for the side (Fig. 3). Both surfaces, as well as the corners of the plaque, have been carefully smoothed; one of the sides (the left one in the orientation proposed in the figures) has been accurately finished so as to create a relieved band in its centre.

In contrast to these features, which suggest a high-quality manufacture, the plaque's decoration is somehow rough, and appears to have been left unfinished. In fact, both surfaces of the plaque bear incised designs, but these are of different character, and are probably not contemporary with each other. In our opinion, the plaque was intended to be decorated on what is presently its obverse; for some reason, however, its decoration was left unfinished and abandoned. Later on, an attempt was made to re-use the plaque by engraving its reverse, but it is not clear whether this second version of the object was ever completed and used, either.

The design on the obverse consists of an encircled six-pointed star with three additional points (alternating with empty spaces) in-between the main points, which brings the total number of points to nine. Both the outer circle and the star's points are delimited by double lines filled with an (incomplete) hatched pattern. An incised encircled dot marks the centre of the figure, and three similar dots are located in the centre of the additional points of the star. The straight lines were produced with a pointed tool, the dots with a simple drill, while the circles were possibly produced with the help of a pointed tool mounted on a compass-like device. The design appears to have been rather clumsily drawn: *e.g.*, the central point does not lie in the actual centre of the outer circle, which by the way is not perfectly circular; the star's points are all different in shape from each other, and their tips do not exactly meet the limits of the outer circle. Possibly for this reason, the design was left unfinished, as shown by different details: the incomplete hatched pattern marking the limit of the star's points,<sup>4</sup> the unfinished small central circle

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<sup>3</sup> The break is definitely old, although a small flake of the surface, in the lower right corner, may have been further damaged in the course of the excavation.

<sup>4</sup> If one observes the design's reconstruction, it appears possible that the hatched pattern was not intended to continue over the whole star's outline, but that hatched sections alternated with undecorated ones instead.

and, furthermore, the varying depth of the incision delimiting the outer circle, and the presence of “unmasked double incisions”. Another bizarre feature is that the outer circle clearly exceeds the borders of the plaque on the left side; this may be the result of a drawing mistake, because of which work was abandoned, or of a later re-shaping of the plaque.<sup>5</sup>

Considering that one is dealing with an unfinished object, it is difficult to judge about its intended function. The possibility of a mould for producing metal objects, as in the case of the plaque’s secondary use (see below), would certainly be in agreement with the strong metallurgical vocation of the contemporary south-Caucasian cultures,<sup>6</sup> but appears improbable, or anyway impossible to prove, since in the present state the incisions are too shallow for producing metal objects either by repoussé on a metal sheet or, especially, by casting (should one consider bivalve moulds, dowel-holes and pour-channels would also be missing, and there appears to be no place available for them on the plaque’s surface). Alternatively, one could rather think about a decorative plaque, or, for instance, a votive object of some kind.

The incised designs on the reverse, on the contrary, are fully compatible with a use as a mould for producing multiple small ornaments and/or figurines in different metals. Stone objects of this type, comparable in shape and dimensions to our plaque, are widely distributed, since the second half of the third millennium BC,<sup>7</sup> in different areas of the Near East (especially well represented is, for instance, a group of small moulds from Central Anatolia dating to the first half of the second millennium, which were mainly used for producing “trinkets” and small figurines in lead).<sup>8</sup> By the second half of the second millennium BC, they

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<sup>5</sup> Another, less probable, possibility is that the plaque was part of a larger composition, formed by different square-shaped sections. In this case, the outer circle would have continued on the adjoining plaques, and the function of relieved band on the side could have been to fit into a recess of the neighbouring plaque.

<sup>6</sup> In general on metallurgy in ancient Georgia, see Miron – Orthmann 1995; Gambashidze *et al.* 2001; Gambashidze *et al.* 2010. More in particular, consider, for instance, the large pendants with “solar” designs from Late Bronze Age Meskheta in Southern Georgia (Miron – Orthmann 1995, 99, 265, fn. 179; Gambashidze and Yalcin, Gambashidze in Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, 168–181; *ibid.*, 296–310, nos. 132, 142–143, 146–147, 158, 168, 170) and elsewhere (Miron – Orthmann 1995, 248, fn. 123, from Eastern Georgia), which are dated to the 15<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to observe that the earliest (third millennium) examples of this tradition appear to be distributed between northern Mesopotamia (Assur, Tell Brak, etc.) the Turkish Upper Euphrates (Titriş Höyük), and Western Anatolia (Tonussi 2007, 112–134, with complete catalogue and distribution map); for illustrations of some early examples, see Aruz – Wallenfels 2003, 257–259, nos. 163a, b, c, 164.

<sup>8</sup> In general, on stone “trinket moulds” in the Near East, see Moorey 1999, 295 *et passim*, with references to previous literature. For Anatolian items see especially Emre 1971; Müller-Karpe



were widespread not only in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, but also in Syro-Palestine. Contrary to our object, Near Eastern examples are generally made of soft stones of dark colour, such as steatite, grey limestone, and serpentine. As for the Southern Caucasus, we were not able to find any published examples from the territory of Georgia;<sup>9</sup> a few unpublished examples are said to exist,<sup>10</sup> but we have no precise information about their date and appearance.

Among the incised designs, one can recognise a small (incomplete) six-spoked circle – similar patterns, which probably ultimately derive from the rosette design, are very common, in different variants, in all periods and geographical areas<sup>11</sup> – and two rectilinear elements with four and, respectively two evenly spaced oval-shaped depressions (*i.e.* small protrusions on the actual produced object).<sup>12</sup>

The incisions on this side of the plaque, though deeper than those on the obverse, are still too shallow and too thin to be used for metal casting; in addition, dowel-holes and pour-channels are also missing. It therefore seems that this side of the object was also left unfinished (as the presence of working traces near the upper edge could also suggest).

### The context of discovery

The context of discovery is not very informative about the intended function of the plaque, but can provide an approximate date for it. The object comes from a stratigraphic sounding (Field A) on the western side of the main mound of Aradetis Orgora (Fig. 4), a large multiperiod site in the middle valley of the Kura river. The site is located in the Kareli district, ca 85 km to the north-west of the

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1994, 151–153, 213–223, pls. 51–60. For a published collection of such moulds (of different periods) from German excavations, mainly from Assur, see also Wartke 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Moulds for jewels and other small items were probably present in the country since an early date (see *e.g.*, Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, 397, cat. no. 355: a stone mould for a single bird-shaped pendent, from Svaneti, dated to the Early Bronze Age, or, *ibid.* 396, cat. no. 353b, a multiple clay mould for beads from Late Bronze Age Ajaria), but none of them appears to be very similar to the Aradetis Orgora example.

<sup>10</sup> Iulon Gagoshidze, personal communication.

<sup>11</sup> Among the second millennium examples most similar to the Aradetis Orgora ones, see, for instance, Müller-Karpe 1994, pl. 52, 2A (from Alalakh), pl. 54, 1A and B, pl. 55, 1B (from Boğazköy), pl. 55, 5 (from Alalakh); in all these cases, different items occur on the same mould. It is interesting to observe that simplified star-patterns often occur on the same group of moulds, as well. Small metal elements of similar shape can also be found in Georgia, as elsewhere, in the first millennium BC (see, *e.g.*, Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, 390).

<sup>12</sup> For some possible parallels, see Müller-Karpe 1994, 213–214, pl. 52, 1A, 2A (from Troy and respectively Alalakh), maybe also pl. 57, 1B (from Karahöyük-Elbistan); Wartke 1980, cat. no. 10, from Assur (see also p. 255, fn. 185), which are interpreted as negatives for “chains” of small pierced beads. See also, however, a clay mould from Western Georgia, which is dated to the 12<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century BC (Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, 396, cat. no. 353b).

Georgian capital Tbilisi as the crow flies, at the edge of the terrace dominating the Kura valley, near the confluence of the Western Prone with the Kura.

The main mound (also known as Dedoplis Gora, “the queen’s mound”) was occupied from the Chalcolithic to the Early Medieval period,<sup>13</sup> and shows an imposing (14 m thick) sequence of anthropic levels, more than ten metres of which are of pre-classical date. During the Late Hellenistic/Early Imperial period it was the seat of the palace of a vassal of the king of Iberia,<sup>14</sup> but it was most probably a regional centre in most of the earlier phases as well. According to preliminary investigations, it appears that the most important phases of occupation were the Kura-Araxes period in the late fourth-early third millennium and the Late Bronze Age in the second half of the second millennium BC, when the settlement expanded from the Main Mound to the neighbouring areas (Northern and Eastern Mounds).

The plaque was found in the few cm thick filling (locus 1674) overlying a surface of greyish mud (locus 1678) in an area which presently lies very near to the steep eroded mound’s slope overlooking the Western Prone River, and during the Late Bronze and Iron Age was located not far from the terraced edge of the settlement (Fig. 5). During this periods, the area was constantly used as an open space occupied by grain-storage and refuse pits and by flimsy installations, mostly connected with food processing; its shows a long sequence of successive “floors” of trampled mud, at times separated from each other by very thick layers of pebbles.

The plaque, therefore, was found in a secondary, but well stratified context, which can be used as a terminus *ante quem* for its date. Associated material (especially pottery) can be attributed to the earlier phase of the Late Bronze, which is traditionally dated to the 14<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>15</sup> It is also interesting to observe that the area yielded other remarkable finds – a flat golden bead with tubular midrib string-hole, and a terracotta plaque with stamped decoration. It can be suggested that all of them represented discarded material originating from some sort of official building located nearby, on top of the mound’s slope.

### The star design

The general features of the plaque’s reverse (shape, presence and layout of multiple incised designs) and the designs incised on it are already suggestive of strong

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<sup>13</sup> For general information on the site’s occupation and on previous excavations, see Furtwängler *et al.* 2008, esp. 41–42. Preliminary information on the recent Georgian-Italian excavations can be found at the following web pages: <http://venus.unive.it/erovaweb/New/2013/report2013.html> (2013 season), and <http://venus.unive.it/erovaweb/New/2014/report2014.html> (2014 season).

<sup>14</sup> Furtwängler *et al.* 2008.

<sup>15</sup> <sup>14</sup>C samples from the area have been taken and are presently being processed.

Near Eastern connections. By the second half of the second millennium BC, however, small stone moulds for jewels are so widely distributed that it would be vain to try to connect it to a specific area, or route of interregional exchanges. Much more interesting in this respect is the object's obverse.

As we anticipated, we were not able to find any precise parallels either for its material (stone) and decoration technique, or, even more interestingly, for the star design incised on it. Star designs by themselves are almost ubiquitous, and appear in the most different cultural contexts. This one, however, shows such specific details, and is so unique in its layout, that it is its worth discussing its possible comparisons in depth.

When reproduced in a two-dimensional drawing,<sup>16</sup> the openwork designs which decorate the hemispherical pommels of a widespread type of bronze swords from Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Georgia often resemble six- or eight-pointed stars, but we believe that the similarity in this case is probably fortuitous, since it is not evident on tri-dimensional views of the objects,<sup>17</sup> and since the latter are completely different in type from the Aradetis Orgora plaque. On the other hand, the only other vaguely comparable items from Late Bronze Age Georgia we were able to find, the large metal pendants with “solar” designs mentioned above,<sup>18</sup> actually bear completely different designs.

Similar elements cannot be found in the iconographic repertoire of the preceding Middle Bronze Age Trialeti culture,<sup>19</sup> either, not to speak of the still earlier third millennium BC cultures of the Southern Caucasus. On the other hand, star-like designs occasionally occur on metal buttons or pendants of the first half of the first millennium, mainly from graves, from different regions of Georgia:<sup>20</sup> they are provided with a number of points which varies between six and ten (nine being also, though rarely, attested). None of them, however, is really similar in its details to the Aradetis Orgora motif.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, fig. p. 146, above.

<sup>17</sup> See Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, nos. 212–213, 215, 219–221.

<sup>18</sup> See above, fn. 6.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to notice, in this respect, that a disc with a plain centre surrounded by “rays”, surrounded in their turn by multiple points, probably to be interpreted as a solar symbol, is visible in front of the sitting figure holding an axe on the third register of the Trialeti silver vessel from Karashamb in Armenia (Aruz *et al.* 2008, 91, no. 55, figure above; Behmer – Kossack 2000, 21, Abb. c, Beilage 1). The Near Eastern analogies of this vessel and of its Trialeti “twin” have been underlined by different scholars (see Rubinson 2003; *id.* 2009, with previous literature; also, with different views, Boehmer – Kossack 2000). In any case, the disc on the Karashamb vessel is rather different, in its details, from the star on the Aradetis Orgora plaque. More similar could be, on the other hand, the decoration on a spherical golden bead from Trialeti barrow VIII (Aruz *et al.* 2008, 93, no. 57, detail view in Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, pl. 51).

<sup>20</sup> See, *e.g.*, Gambashidze *et al.* 2001, 378, nos. 310–311; 390, nos. 336–337.

On the contrary, parallels with Near Eastern astral symbols are widespread, and range from at least the later third millennium to the first millennium BC. Especially close to the star on the Aradeti Orgora plaque seems to us to be the eight-pointed star symbolising Inanna/Ishtar<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 6, left), as it appears, for instance, on later second and earlier first millennium BC Babylonian kudurrus<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 7). All of these stars share rather specific details with the item from Aradeti Orgora (e.g., the star is always inscribed into a circle, there is always a smaller, generally double, circle, in its centre, the line delimiting the star's points is generally double), the most distinctive element being, in our opinion, the presence of the “secondary” points alternating with the main ones. Unparalleled on Babylonian kudurrus and, to our knowledge, also elsewhere in Mesopotamia and in the Near East are, on the contrary, the hatching on the symbol's outline, the small circles inside the “secondary points”, and especially the number (three) of the latter,<sup>23</sup> which might be considered as local innovations. The main elements the Aradeti Orgora star has in common with the Ishtar symbol are present also on another well-known Mesopotamian symbol: the solar disc of the sun-god Shamash<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 6, centre), in which the secondary points of the star are substituted by radiating wavy lines, as it appears, for instance, on the same Babylonian kudurrus (see Fig. 7).<sup>25</sup>

Astral symbols appear on Mesopotamian stone reliefs since the Akkadian period,<sup>26</sup> and continue being attested on this category of finds in all the following

<sup>21</sup> Black – Green 1992, 169–170 (s.v. “star (symbol)”), see also *ibid.*, 109, (s.v. “Inana (Ištar)”), and fig. p. 96; see also Seidl 1957–1961, 485; Hrouda 1957–1971, 491; both on the symbol in general and, more specifically, on its occurrence on Babylonian kudurrus, also Seidl 1989, 100–101. The Akkadian name of the symbol was *kakkabtu*, “little star”: Krecher 1957–1971, 498.

<sup>22</sup> Seidl 1989, 100–101 *et passim*. Babylonian kudurrus date between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (*ibid.*, 75–76); according to Seidl (*ibid.*, 101) the variant of the Ishtar symbol which most resembles the item from Aradeti Orgora would be especially common in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ishtar-stars are also frequent on Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian works of art of different type, but these later examples are in general less similar to the Aradeti Orgora item (see Ornan 2005, 151–152 with relevant literature, *et passim*; for Neo-Assyrian glyptic in particular, Herboldt 1992, 102).

<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the number (six) of the main points is not unparalleled, as six-pointed stars are not unusual in Mesopotamia as well (see Seidl 1989, 100–101; Black – Green 1992, 170); it is not clear whether they merely represent an iconographic variant of the Ishtar symbol, or may have, at least in some cases, a different meaning.

<sup>24</sup> Black – Green 1992, 169–170 (s.v. “solar disc”), and Fig. p. 96. See also Seidl 1989, 98–100 both on the symbol in general and, more specifically, on its occurrence on Babylonian kudurrus. The name of the symbol in Akkadian was *šamšatu* “little sun” (Krecher 1957–1971, 498).

<sup>25</sup> Seidl 1989, 98–100 *et passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. for instance, the eight-pointed stars with eight groups of radiating lines in-between represented on top of the well-known Naram-Sin stela (Börker-Klähn 1982, Taf. 26). Considering their very number (at least three, possibly up to seven), it is probable that they do not represent

phases, down to the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.<sup>27</sup> The canonised versions of the Ishtar and Shamash symbols, which are most common since the late third millennium BC, are joined by a smaller number of star-like designs differing from them in small details, in particular in the number of points,<sup>28</sup> whose interpretation is still debated (they may represent just graphic variants of the two more common symbols, or symbols of different deities, or generic divine symbols).

Be that as it may, in spite of the close similarity, it is of course extremely unlikely that Babylonian kudurrus or Mesopotamian stone reliefs in general represent the direct source of inspiration for the design incised on the Aradetiš Orgora plaque. In view of the wide distance separating Shida Kartli from Mesopotamia one should rather consider small, easily transportable objects, which could be distributed along the routes of long-distance trade (like, typically, stone or metal ornaments or vessels, ivories, seals, etc.) and also take into account the possibility of indirect inspiration through regions lying between Mesopotamia and Georgia.

Although we were not able to find any closer comparanda to the Aradetiš Orgora star design than the Mesopotamian ones discussed above, we could indeed find a number of objects from different areas of the Near East and of the Eastern Mediterranean, which may suggest a wide circulation of similar designs of Mesopotamian origin in the course of the second millennium BC.

First of all, we would like to draw the reader's attention on an hitherto unique find: a silver plate of circular shape with gold-covered studs from one of the Middle Bronze Age Royal Graves at Ebla, dated to 1800–1600 BC ca<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 8). Interestingly enough, this disc shows a variant of the classical solar disc, in which the typical radiating wavy lines have been substituted with zig-zag-shaped lightnings, possibly, according to the excavator, in order to symbolise the Syrian storm-god Hadad. Rather close in their details to the Aradetiš Orgora design are also the eight-pointed stars attached to a golden diadem, allegedly from the neighbourhood of Tell el-Dab'a on the Eastern Nile, which is dated to the Hyksos dynasty (17<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries BC): in this case, the eight-pointed Ishtar stars appear to have been locally re-interpreted as plant elements.<sup>30</sup>

More in general, a class of golden pendants – or medallions – with star-like motifs, which have a wide circulation during the second millennium throughout

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a specific deity, but are used as generic divine symbols (Seidl 1989, 98–99; on the meaning of the astral symbols on Naram-Sin stela, see also Ornan 2005, 43).

<sup>27</sup> Börker-Klähn 1982, *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> Most common is the combination of 4 (+4) points, but examples with 6 (+6) points, and simple six-pointed stars are also relatively common. Interestingly enough, uneven numbers, e.g., 5 (+5) and 7, are also occasionally attested (Seidl 1989, 98–101 *et passim*).

<sup>29</sup> Da Ebla a Damasco 1985: 226–227, no. 99.

<sup>30</sup> Aruz *et al.* 2008, 115–116, no. 64. For the connection with the Ishtar star, see *ibid.*, 116, fn. 10.

Western Asia<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 9), the most famous of which are the ones from the so-called “Dilbat Hoard”,<sup>32</sup> may be considered as possible sources of inspiration for the Aradeti Orgora design. These pendants, which probably adorned divine statues and/or were worn by members of the royal family and of the upper class, bear numerous variants of both the Shamash and the Ishtar symbols,<sup>33</sup> some of which probably represent local syncretic divinities of the different regions.<sup>34</sup> In many cases, these pendants have small circles or hemispheres, either plain or granulated, between the star’s points; these are vaguely reminiscent of the small incised circles found on the Aradeti Orgora plaque.

Complex star-like designs are also occasionally found on the multiple jewelry moulds discussed above in connection with the Aradeti Orgora plaque’s reverse,<sup>35</sup> as well as, though rarely, on second millennium BC ivories.<sup>36</sup> Seals may also be considered as a possible source of inspiration: star-like symbols – though generally rather schematic and not particularly similar to the one from Aradeti Orgora – are in fact common on several classes of second millennium cylinder seals.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For a selection of illustrated examples, see Aruz *et al.* 2008, 24–25, no. 4 (three pendants, one with a six-pointed Shamash symbol, and two with eight-petalled rosettes, allegedly from Dilbat, in Southern Iraq, 18<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries BC); *ibid.* 40, no. 14 (three pendants with six-pointed stars from the Tomb of the Lord of the Caprids at Ebla, Syria, 18<sup>th</sup> century BC); *ibid.* 352–353, no. 218 (one pendant with a four-pointed star with four curved rays from the Royal Tomb at Qatna, Syria, 15<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries BC); *ibid.* 350–353, nos. 217a, b (two pendants with four-pointed stars with four and respectively eight curved rays in-between, from the Uluburun shipwreck, ca 1300 BC). Further examples are mentioned, with relevant literature, in the descriptions of these catalogue’s entries (*ibid.*, *passim*, esp. 350–353, with special reference to Anatolian and Levantine samples), and additional ones can be found in K.R. Maxwell-Hyslop’s volume on Western Asiatic jewellery (1971, *passim*). In general on “star pendants” and “sun discs” see also *ibid.*, 140–149.

<sup>32</sup> For a thorough discussion of the “Dilbat Hoard”, with additional parallels, see Lilyquist 1994.

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to observe, for instance, that on these pendants the star is sometimes substituted by the rosette, another well-known symbol of a female deity in general and of Inanna/Ishtar in particular (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 151–153; Ornan 2005, 152).

<sup>34</sup> See esp. Aruz *et al.* 2008, 350–352; also Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 141, 143–144, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Wartke 1980, 233, 250, Abb. 14, no. 12 (an eight-pointed star, from Assur); Müller-Karpe 1994, 213, Taf. 51, 4b (from Tarsus, Late Bronze period), 223, Taf. 60, 14, (from the antiquity market, possibly Western Anatolia, Middle Bronze Age). It is interesting to observe that the star on the item from Tarsus has a double hatched outline.

<sup>36</sup> Aruz *et al.* 2008, 351. A possible derivation of the Shamash symbol is also the Hittite *signe royal*, or “Cappadocian symbol”, which is attested in Anatolia since the Middle Bronze Age (*ibid.* 350, fnn. 7–8; Alexander 1977; Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 147), which occurs on seals, pottery (see Seidl 1972, 16–23, A1–A39, 65–68) and ivories. For the occurrence of similar symbols on other media, see also Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 144–146.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, on so-called “Cappadocian seals” (see Collon 1987, 41–44).

All of these are actually less similar to the Aradetis Orgora star than the symbol on the Babylonian kudurrus discussed above – it would be useless, therefore, to cite additional examples; they nevertheless prove that a wide range of similar designs, deriving from the Mesopotamian symbols of Ishtar and Shamash, were common all over the Near East in the second millennium BC. They could therefore have reached Georgia at any time from the Middle Bronze Age onwards, *e.g.*, at the time of the Trialeti culture, possibly through the intermediary of the Assyrian trading colonies in Cappadocia.<sup>38</sup>

If one considers, however, that the closest parallels are approximately contemporary to the date of the level in which the plaque from Aradetis Orgora was discovered, Late Bronze Age prototypes appear more probable. In this case, the design may have reached the Southern Caucasus either from Hittite Anatolia,<sup>39</sup> or from Assyria, possibly through the intermediation of mobile groups moving along the traditional routes of transhumance across the Lesser Caucasus, and from there along the valley of the Kura.<sup>40</sup> The Aradetis Orgora star does not show any Anatolian element, and actually looks “quite Mesopotamian”, so we would rather incline for the second possibility. It is worth, in this respect, to remind that recent salvage excavations in the Ilisu Dam area (Diyarbakır province) of the Turkish Upper Tigris not only proved that the area was occupied by the Assyrians starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, but also showed that the Middle Assyrian presence there was preceded by a more sporadic Mittanian presence.<sup>41</sup>

In any case, the star design on the plaque from Aradetis Orgora shows that the site had access to foreign objects and iconographies, and thus testifies that the Shida Kartli region was integrated, in spite of its apparently peripheral position, into the wide-ranging network of international connections of the second half of the second millennium BC.

### **Ishtar in Shida Kartli?**

If one accepts the hypotheses formulated above, and considers the star on the Aradetis Orgora plaque as a derivation of the Mesopotamian symbol of Ishtar, the next question to be posed would be: “Besides its generic appeal as an exotic design, how could this symbol appeal to the local population’s ideology and beliefs and, especially, how would it be understood and re-interpreted in the local environment?”.

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<sup>38</sup> For the Near Eastern connections of the Trialeti Culture, see above, fn. 2.

<sup>39</sup> We still know very little about the eastern and north-eastern neighbours of the Hittite empire. For a recent discussion, see Devecchi in print.

<sup>40</sup> See Marro 2004, carte 2.

<sup>41</sup> For a recent synthesis, see D’Agostino 2014.

Astral symbols are present in Georgia since at least the Kura-Araxes culture of the late fourth-early third millennium BC,<sup>42</sup> and continue being common there during all the following periods. It is usually their connection with the sun which is emphasised in literature, since most of them actually appear as rayed circles rather than as stars, and are associated to, or composed of, circular or rotational designs (such as concentric circles, spirals, swastika-like designs, etc.), which are universally recognised as solar symbols.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, in many cases they show a strong association with the female gender: the large Late Bronze pendants with solar symbols from Meskheta mentioned above (fn. 6), for instance, have been discovered exclusively in female graves.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, they are generally connected, in archaeological literature, with a Caucasian type of “solar” goddess, whose features could be reflected by much later folkloric sources,<sup>45</sup> in particular by hunting myths from the mountain region of Svaneti in northwestern Georgia, in which scholars recognise the relicts of a local pre-Christian religion.<sup>46</sup>

Mesopotamian Inanna/Ishtar is definitely not a solar goddess – it is common knowledge that her astral aspect is connected with the Venus planet instead –; furthermore, on the other hand, the sun in Mesopotamian religion is a male deity (Utu/Shamash). If one considers, however, that even in Mesopotamia astral symbols show a certain amount of variability and do not always appear to be specific of, or exclusive to, individual divinities, and that this variability increases with the diffusion, in the second millennium BC, of these symbols into other areas of the Near East, it does not appear fully unlikely that a version of the Ishtar star was used in the Southern Caucasus during the Late Bronze period to symbolise the local, female, sun goddess. This is even more true since, as discussed above, the design on the Aradeti Orgora plaque is also somehow reminiscent of the Mesopotamian symbol of Shamash and, on the other hand, the two symbols have oft been confused, mixed or hybridised elsewhere in the Near East.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> For an early example, see Makharadze 2008, 65, Fig. 9.

<sup>43</sup> The large pendants cited above, fn. 6, offer a good selection of such designs dated to the Late Bronze period.

<sup>44</sup> Notice also that “sun” is a feminine noun in Caucasian languages.

<sup>45</sup> In the absence of written sources, it is nearly impossible to give even approximate dates for the origin of this mythology, but in scholars’ opinion it is probably extremely ancient, and goes back to well before the Christian era, as proved by the fact that in later times it was somehow integrated into Christian beliefs by associating it with figures like St. George (see Hunt 2003, 83–84).

<sup>46</sup> For a short summary of current opinions on the issue, with selected references, see D’Acchille 2012, 22–23.

<sup>47</sup> Consider, for example, the similar case of the Hittite *signe royal* (Alexander 1977), a solar symbol which also became associated, in the course of time, with female (solar and non-solar) deities.



In our opinion, however, the connection with the Ishtar symbol may be much less generic than this. In fact, if one analyses the personality of the “Caucasian goddesses” as preserved in local folklore more in depth,<sup>48</sup> one is struck by the presence of a number of astonishingly “Ishtarian” features. These have effectively been highlighted by K. Tuite in a recent contribution,<sup>49</sup> on which we rely for most of the following remarks.

One of the most popular figures of Svan popular poetry and songs is Dæl (Georgian Dali), the divine patron of the ibex and other horned beasts of the mountains. She resembles a woman of extraordinary beauty (one of her main epithets is “radiant”), who resides high up in the mountains, usually out of the reach of humans, where hunters may meet her. Wild animals being under her special protection, she is prepared to allow a certain number of them to be killed, as long as certain conditions are respected. The goddess is always ready to enter into love relations with hunters, who then become especially successful. Sooner or later, however, the hunter would anger the goddess in some way, either by betraying her with a woman, or by killing too many animals, or by killing her favourite, specially-marked animals. The destiny of the hunter, in this case, is often fatal; typically, he is abandoned to fall from a cliff, or pushed over it.<sup>50</sup>

Some of the aspects of Dæl’s personality are obviously deeply embedded in the local Caucasian environment, and show no specific connection with Ishtar: this is the case of the high mountain location of her actions,<sup>51</sup> and of the link with wild animals,<sup>52</sup> and especially with hunting. Other aspects of the two goddesses, however, appear to be surprisingly similar. To start with, although Dæl is generally considered to be a solar goddess, her “radiant” aspect, as rightly pointed out by Tuite,<sup>53</sup> is rather connected with the appearance of the light at dawn, and she is associated, in both narrative poetry and ritual,<sup>54</sup> with the morning star, *i.e.* with the Venus planet. As Tuite observes, similar aspects also characterise Greek Aphrodite and a proto-Indoeuropean “Dawn” goddess (\**áusôs*), a descendant of which

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<sup>48</sup> Mainly Tuite 2008, with relevant literature; among others, see also Hunt 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Tuite 2008.

<sup>50</sup> For a short description of different myth cycles and songs featuring Dæl, and for their many variants, see Tuite 2008, 166–168; Hunt 2003, 84–87.

<sup>51</sup> Mountain landscapes, on the other hand, are also typically connected with Mesopotamian deities, Ishtar included, and are not therefore, in contrast with the association of the latter with Dæl.

<sup>52</sup> “Mistress of Animals” aspects are not totally alien to Ishtar’s representation (see her special connection with lions and other felines, or her role as a patron and guarantor of herds’ fertility), but are not specific to her. It may be worth observing that Dæl also has a special connection with a feline: the “snow leopard” (Hunt 2003, 87).

<sup>53</sup> Tuite 2008, 178–180; see also Hunt 2003, 85.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–167.

is Greek Eos; therefore, they could have reached the Caucasus at different times and through different routes.<sup>55</sup> However, according to this same scholar,<sup>56</sup> Dæl's similarity to Ishtar is especially close and, interestingly enough, it also concerns rather specific details, which do not feature prominently in their Greek counterparts.

Besides the association with dawn and the morning star, Tuite lists the following common features between Mesopotamian Inanna/Ishtar and Svan Dæl, as particularly significant:

- Sexual predation, especially of mortal men, who often die, or are otherwise punished as a consequence of their relationship with the goddess;
- Fertility, patronage or herding of beasts;
- Ambiguous nature, attractive yet dangerous, *i.e.* characterised by beauty, eroticism and the granting of prosperity and success, on the one hand, and by a war-like nature, potentially lethal for her human partners, on the other one.<sup>57</sup>

He connects all these features – as well as other minor aspects, which do not need to be extensively discussed here –, to the concept of liminality<sup>58</sup> (between darkness and light, life and death, wild and civilised, love and war, etc.), a concept which very appropriately applies to Inanna/Ishtar's multifaceted personality.<sup>59</sup>

Among the specific details, especially suggestive is the connection of both goddesses with beads and necklaces: thus, in “Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld” the goddess' adornments are clear symbols of her power,<sup>60</sup> while Dæl is described as wearing golden ornaments, and she typically gives beads to her lovers as a token of love. This aspect is also shared by another Caucasian goddess, which is in some respects related to Dæl: Samdzimari or Samdzivari, whose name literarily means “necklace-wearer”.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *E.g.*, through the Greek colonisation, or even later, during the Hellenistic/Roman period.

<sup>56</sup> Tuite 2008, 179–184.

<sup>57</sup> The list could be continued with further similarities: *e.g.*, both Inanna/Ishtar (see Harris 1991, 264, fn. 15, 269) and Dæl (Tuite 2008, 167, fn. 149), although the mother of sons, are not involved in the normal feminine tasks of child care, and are definitely not mother-goddesses. Their special relation with kings (Inanna/Ishtar) or human heroic, legendary hunters (Dæl) may also be investigated in this respect. One might also, furthermore, elaborate on the aspect of “radiance” in connection with the Mesopotamian “*melammu*” (cf. Cassin 1968) or on the association of both Inanna/Ishtar and Dæl with New Years's ceremonies (Tuite 2008, 179, 181).

<sup>58</sup> Tuite 2008, 181–182.

<sup>59</sup> See, *e.g.*, Harris 1991. For a synthesis on Inanna/Ishtar, cf. Wilcke 1976; more summarily, Black – Green 1992, 108–109; more recently, on different aspects of the goddess' personality, cf. also different contributions in the first number of the *Nin* journal (2000).

<sup>60</sup> Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 153–154.

<sup>61</sup> Tuite 2008, 169. On Samdzimari and her relation with Dæl, see *ibid.*, 168–174.

Considering the huge chronological distance between the stone plaque from Aradeti Orgora and the oral sources pertaining to Dæl and similar Caucasian goddesses, it would be vain to further elaborate on this issues; suffice it to conclude that the collected evidence appears suggestive enough not to exclude the possibility of the existence during the Late Bronze Age in the Shida Kartli region, of one, or more, female deities, some features of whom were similar enough to those of the Mesopotamian Ishtar for the symbol of the latter to have been consciously chosen by the local population in order to symbolise a local goddess. In view of the existence of long-standing connections, dating back at least to the Neolithic period, between the Southern Caucasus and the Near East, and of their intensification in the course of the second millennium BC, these similarities should probably be interpreted not as evidence for a “penetration” of Ishtar into the Southern Caucasus but, rather, as possible evidence for the existence of a corpus of still unexplored shared beliefs between the local cultures and those of the urban civilisations of the Near East, which each region articulated in different ways.

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## Figures



Fig. 1. Photo of the stone plaque fragment AO 2014-1674-M-1. Left: obverse, right, reverse

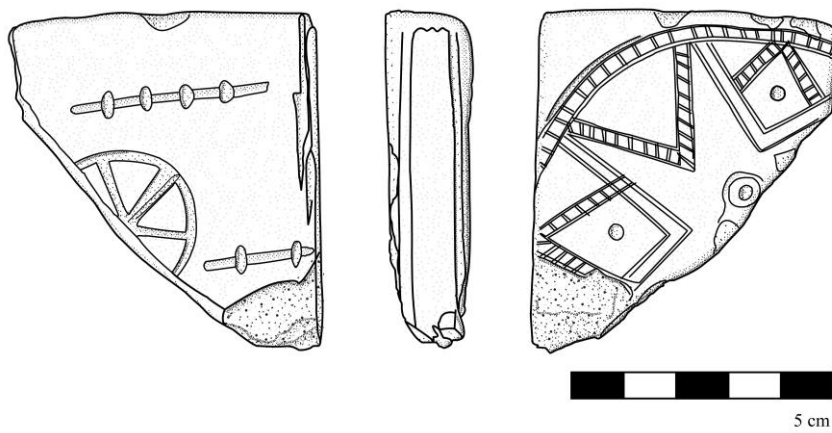


Fig. 2. Drawing of the stone plaque fragment AO 2014-1674-M-1. Left: reverse, right, obverse (drawing by E. Girotto)

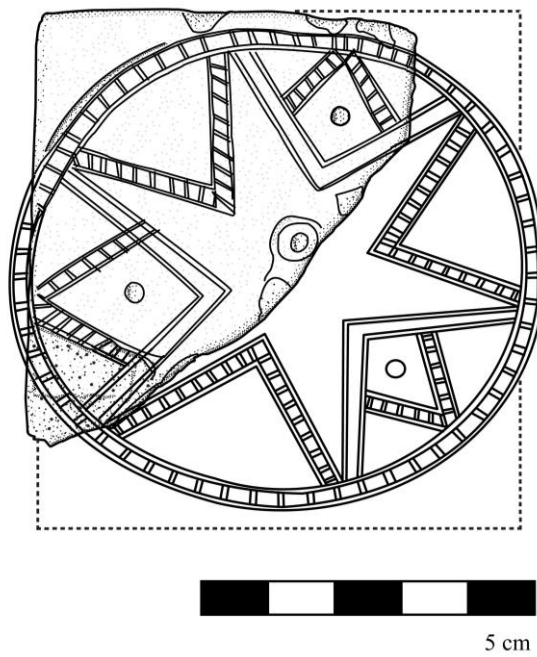


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the plaque's original shape and decoration (drawing by E. Girotto)

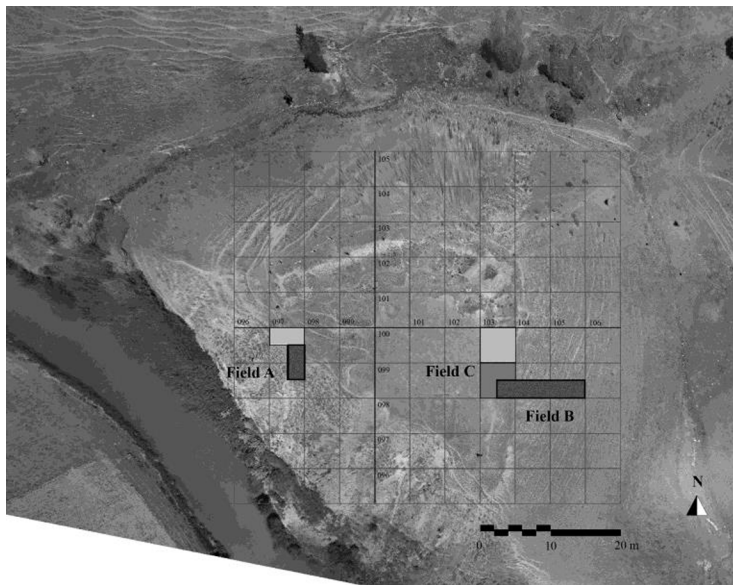


Fig. 4. Aerial view of the Aradeti Orgora site with location of the excavation areas (areas excavated in 2014 in darker grey)

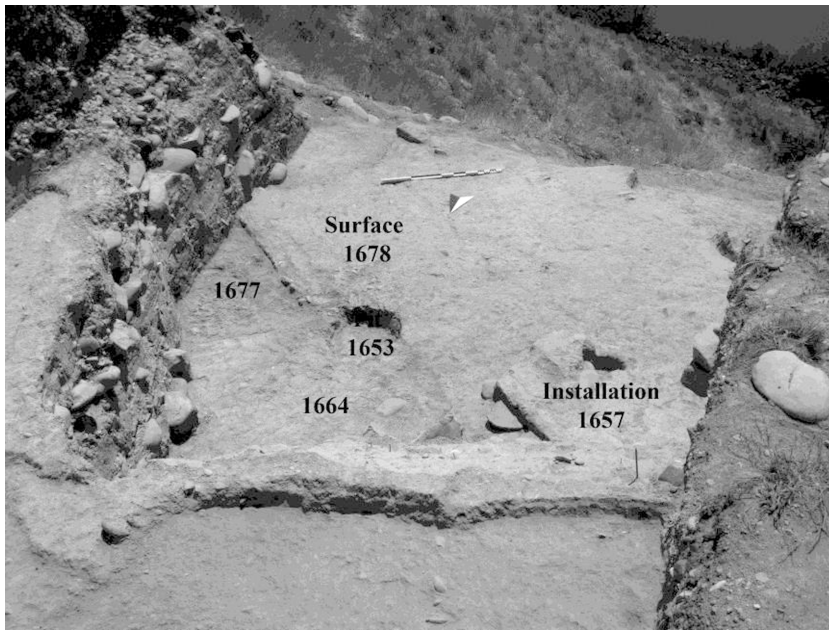


Fig. 5. Photo showing the plaque's finding spot, from N

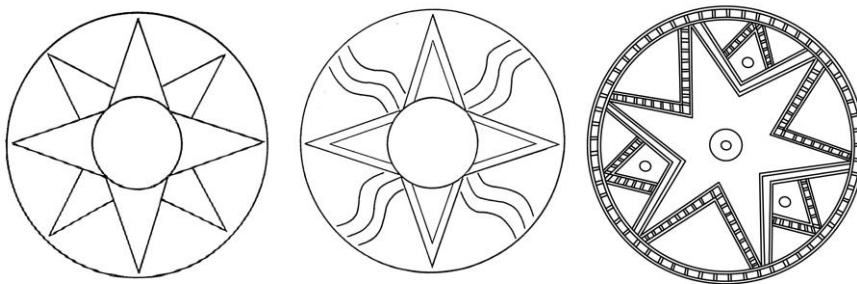


Fig. 6. Sketch of Ishtar's eight-pointed star, to the left, of the solar disc of Shamash, in the centre, and reconstruction of the Aradetis Orgora symbol, to the right



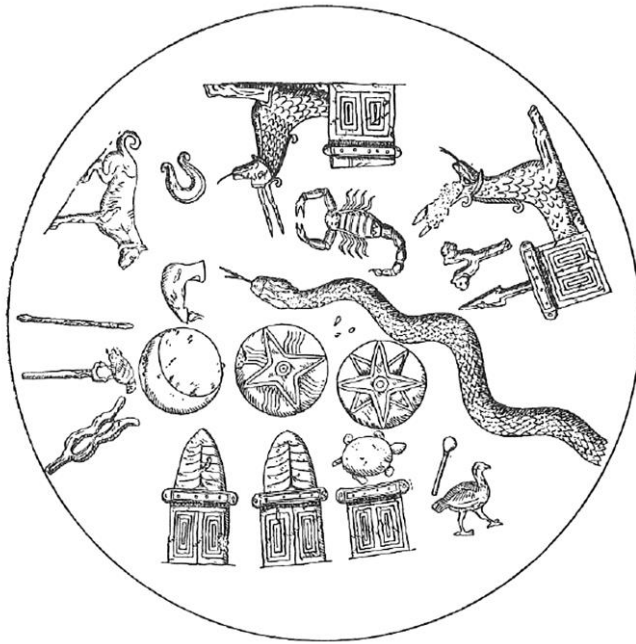


Fig. 7. Symbols of Mesopotamian gods on a Babylonian kudurrû of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC  
(from Seidl 1989, 47, Abb. 13)

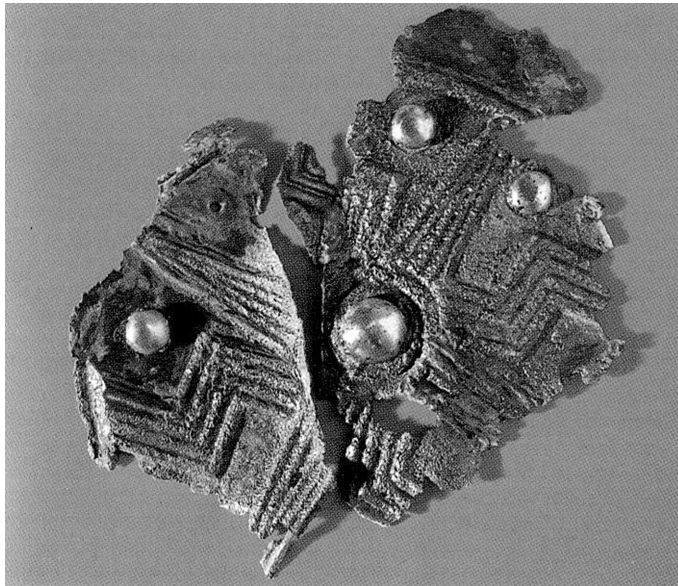


Fig. 8. Silver plate from the Middle Bronze Age Royal Tombs at Ebla, 1800–1600 BC ca.  
(from *Da Ebla a Damasco* 1985, 227, no. 99)



Fig. 9. Examples of second millennium BC golden pendants with star-like divine symbols from different regions of the Near East (not to scale). Above: "Dilbat hoard" (Southern Iraq); below, from left to right: Ebla, Qatna (Syria), Uluburun shipwreck (from Aruz *et al.* 2008, figg. p. 24, 40, 350, 352)