A Decorated Bronze Belt from Gargul, Iran

Megan Cifarelli, Kazem Mollazadeh & Ali Binandeh

To cite this article: Megan Cifarelli, Kazem Mollazadeh & Ali Binandeh (2018): A Decorated Bronze Belt from Gargul, Iran, Iran, DOI: 10.1080/05786967.2018.1505441

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2018.1505441

Published online: 02 Aug 2018.
A Decorated Bronze Belt from Gargul, Iran

Megan Cifarelli, Kazem Mollazadeh and Ali Binandeh

Department of Art History, Manhattanville College, Purchase, NY, USA; Department of Archaeology, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, Iran

ABSTRACT

During the early first millennium BC, the southern Lake Urmia basin in northwestern Iran was in the throes of political, military and cultural upheaval. Its material culture, as exemplified by the finds at Hasanlu, Marlik and in Luristan, suggests the elite in the area were consumers of fine, locally produced metalwork. This paper discusses the discovery of an artifact that expands our understanding of the material culture of northwestern Iran during the ninth century BC: a decorated bronze belt found at Gargul, Iran. The chance discovery of this belt, which is closely related to a type known only from the most elite contexts at Hasanlu, Iran, provides a hint of the richness and complexity of the entire region. This belt demonstrates that Hasanlu was not the only regional polity wealthy and powerful enough to employ skilled artisans for the creation of sophisticated luxury goods. While the craftsmanship of this belt does not match that of exemplars from Hasanlu, it clearly evidences similarly advanced metallurgical skills, awareness of a range of contemporary and ancient iconographic traditions from the highest reaches of power in Assyria to local sites like Hasanlu, and the means and desire to combine them to aggrandize the bodies and identities of the local elite.

Keywords
Northwestern Iran; bronze belt; Gargul; Iran; Hasanlu; iconography

Introduction

During the early first millennium BC, the southern Lake Urmia basin was in the throes of political, military and cultural upheaval. As exemplified by the finds at Hasanlu, the elite in the area were consumers of fine, locally produced metalwork. Outstanding craftsmanship in metal is also well documented in the archaeology of the broader region through excavations at Marlik and in Luristan. Contemporary Assyrian royal inscriptions, however, mention the metalwork of this part of Iran only once. An epigraph accompanying a relief on the Black Obelisk from Nimrud, made during the reign of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), records bronze vessels amongst the tribute of the king of Gilzanu (A.O.102.87), a region that has been identified as encompassing parts of the southern Lake Urmia basin.

Sheet Metal Belts

Decorated sheet metal belts made of bronze (copper alloy) are an artifact class that played a small but important role in elite metalworking and consumption traditions in this region. Metal belts appear to have originated as early as the fourteenth century in the southern Caucasus. In the Late Bronze Age their use spreads to the Talesh, a region along the Caspian Sea with close cultural links to the southern Caucasus. By the early Iron Age, belts are found in northern Iran, and to a much lesser extent Assyria. This type of object would become strongly identified with the state artistic production of the kingdom of Urartu in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. West of Urartu in central Anatolia, Phrygian tombs yielded metal belts of various types, and examples and imitations of Phrygian metal belts are found in Greek sanctuaries.

CONTACT Megan Cifarelli megan.cifarelli@mville.edu

1See for example Dyson, “Problems of Protohistoric Iran”; Winter, A Decorated Breastplate from Hasanlu; Muscarella, Bronze and Iron; de Schauensee, “Northwestern Iran as a Bronzeworking Centre.”
3See Reade, “Hasanlu, Gilzanu, and Related Considerations,” for the identification of the Assyrian toponym “Gilzanu” with the region in the southern Lake Urmia basin. While this association has been generally accepted, the locations of Assyrian toponyms such as Hubuska are far less secure, see Radner, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” especially footnote 1.
4Moorey and Ryder, “Some Ancient Metal Belts”; Rubinson, “Urartian (?) Belts and Their Antecedents”; Castelluccia, Transcaucasian Bronze Belts. While images on Assyrian reliefs from the ninth-eighth century BC are cited as evidence for the Assyrian use of armored metal belts, e.g. Calmeyer, “Gürtel”; Moorey and Ryder, “Some Ancient Metal Belts,” 85, the only examples of belts found at an Assyrian site were two metal strips excavated by Layard in Room AB of the Northwest Palace in Nimrud, see Layard, Nineveh and Babylon, 59; Curtis, An Examination of Late Assyrian Metalwork, 199, pl. XCV.

© 2018 British Institute of Persian Studies
Relatively few belts have been discovered through documented excavations in northern Iran. Fragments of 15 metal belts were discovered in burials at Marlik, accompanied by extraordinarily wealthy grave goods. At Hasanlu excavators discovered approximately 94 belts or belt fragments, three of which were found in elite, militarised, male burials termed “Warrior Graves.” It is evident at Hasanlu that imported belts from the southern Caucasus region spurred the development of belts produced in local styles during Period IVb (1050–800 BC) at the site, including studded belts that imitate South Caucasian style belts in the local decorative vernacular, and elaborately embossed and chased examples (Figure 1). Beyond Hasanlu and Marlik, a single gold belt was excavated by the Japanese mission to Dailaman, and finally, an undecorated metal strip was found at the waist of an individual buried in Tomb A6 of the so-called “Zagros Graveyard” in Kurdistan, dated to the seventh century BC.

The Gargul Belt

To this corpus of belts in northern Iran we add the recent, accidental discovery of a unique and nearly intact belt, found in fragments in 2009 at the village of Gargul in the Lajan district of Piranshahr, in the Western Azerbaijan province of Iran (Figures 2 and 3). This site lies approximately 39 km from Hasanlu in the mountainous margins of the Solduz plain, a region where other tombs have been discovered recently. A local farmer digging in an area that had previously been looted came upon the belt along with some beads in what appears to have been a grave, and brought the belt to local heritage officials. It was subsequently given to the Urmia Museum. This paper discusses the iconography of the belt and its relationship to Assyrian imagery and to the artistic production of its much nearer neighbour, Hasanlu, as well as its significance for the material culture of the region.

The Gargul belt consists of nine fragments of bronze sheet (Figure 3). Reconstructed, its fragments add up to a length of ca. 95 cm, much longer than the belts found at Hasanlu and Marlik, the average length of which are ca. 60 and ca. 50 cm, respectively. Its body is 9.5 cm wide, and it has a 15 cm diameter medallion “buckle” which is a decorative element rather than a fastening device. A tapered terminal emerges from the medallion and ends in a hook. Between the hook at the very end and the tapered terminal is a slightly thicker section that appears to be cast. This element cradles the narrow end of the tapered section in much the same manner that a crescent shaped sword guard holds a blade. The sheet of metal that constitutes the body of this belt is quite smooth and uniform with no obvious seams. Its decoration includes both embossed figures and chased details. Small perforations around the edges of the belt and medallion likely functioned to attach the metal sheet to a leather substrate. The opposite end of the strip is finished in a rounded shape. The last 10 cm section of the belt at this end is undecorated, perhaps providing space for a fastener of some type, although there are no evident perforations for attachment. The salient features of this belt—a long strip with embossed and chased decoration, a medallion with a diameter at least 1.5 times the width of the belt, a tapering terminal ending in a hook—are shared by three of the belts found in elite contexts in Level IVb at Hasanlu.

The Decoration of the Gargul Belt

The majority of the surface of the Gargul Belt displays embossed and incised decoration (Figures 3–6). The cast “guard” between the hook and tapered terminal is marked with fluid rows of deep linear grooves. The tapered terminal that emerges from this element is covered by a reticulated pattern of scales with incised double outlines and tiny circles within (Figure 4). This pattern

---

1 Castelluccia, Transcaucasian Bronze Belts, 10–12.
3 Rubinson, “Urartian (?) Belts and Their Antecedents”; Danti and Cifarelli, “Iron II Warrior Burials at Hasanlu, Iran”; Cifarelli, “Masculinities and Militarization at Hasanlu, Iran”; Castelluccia, and Dan, “Copper Alloy Belts from Hasanlu.” Most of the metalwork from Hasanlu remains unpublished, aside from a few targeted studies of particular artifact types or materials, see e.g. Pigott, The Question of the Presence of Iron; Winter, A Decorated Breastplate; Muscarella, Bronze and Iron; de Schauensee, Northwest Iran as a bronzeworking centre; Pigott, The Emergence of Iron at Hasanlu; Thornton and Pigott, Blade-Type Weaponry of Hasanlu; Fleming, Nash, and Swann, “The Archaeometallurgy of Period IVB Bronzes at Hasanlu”; de Schauensee, Furniture Remains and Furniture Ornaments.
4 Castelluccia, Transcaucasian Bronze Belts, 10–12. The original length of the Gargul belt is difficult to estimate due to its fragmentary nature and does not include the terminal hook.
5 Winter, A Decorated Breastplate; de Schauensee, Northwest Iran as a bronzeworking centre; Danti and Cifarelli, Iron II Warrior Burials at Hasanlu, Iran; Cifarelli, Castelluccia, and Dan, “Copper Alloy Belts from Hasanlu.” HAS58-450 (University Museum 59-4-113) and HAS58-244 (University Museum 59-4-158) were found in the destruction of the elite residence BBW, and HAS64-288 (UM65-31-726) was the wealthiest burial excavated at the site, Warrior Burial SK493a. The decoration of the Hasanlu examples, particularly the medallions, is distinct from the Gargul example. Each of the Hasanlu medallions features a high relief scene of protome-headed lions paired with other animals, crafted in a style that is characteristic of the finest artistic production of Hasanlu (and Marlik).
resembles the enduring ancient Near Eastern visual convention for depicting mountains, well known in Near Eastern glyptic as far back as the fourth millennium BC.\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps more importantly, this pattern appears

\textsuperscript{16}Mountainous landscapes indicated by a scaled pattern occur in proto-Elamite glyptic of the fourth millennium BC, see Amiet, \textit{La glyptique Mésopotamienne archaïque}, nos. 457 and 537, as well as in Mesopotamian during the third millennium, see the Early Dynastic wall plaque depicting Ninhursag found at Tello (Louvre AO 276) and numerous Akkadian cylinder seals, e.g. Collon, \textit{First Impressions}, nos. 103, 105. Examples of second millennium depictions of mountains are gathered in Stein, \textquotedblleft Winged Disks and Sacred Trees at Nuzi\textquotedblright.  

\textbf{Figure 1.} Metal Belts from Hasanlu, Iran. HAS59-262 (MMA60.20.21a-d); HAS59-232 (Tehran Museum); HAS64-288 (UM65-31-726) Courtesy of the Penn Museum.
left-hand which terminate in two-forked lightning bolts. The streamers that are emitting from the winged disk and in greeting, and with their left hands they touch or hold their headdresses and are wearing shin length, wrapped garments. Their right hands are raised

Figure 2. Map of the region.

on seal impressions from Hasanlu, and is nearly identical to a design element appearing on the Hasanlu Gold Bowl (Figure 7). According to Edith Porada, the scales on the Gold Bowl indicate the rocky cavern in the mountains from which Ullikummi, the stone monster, emerges.

The terminal connects seamlessly to the medallion, which, positioned in the centre of the wearer’s body, is the most visually prominent section of the belt when worn. Its imagery is therefore of paramount importance to the iconography of the belt decoration. Concentric embossed lines divide the medallion into two circular visual fields—a double line surrounds the circumference of the medallion and a single line separates the central circular field from the outer ring of imagery (Figure 4). The central scene depicts two human figures flanking a “sacred tree” motif, which is surmounted by a right-facing, diminutive figure within a winged disk. The human figures appear to be male. They appear without headdresses and are wearing shin length, wrapped garments with fringed borders. Their right hands are raised in greeting, and with their left hands they touch or hold streamers that are emitting from the winged disk and which terminate in two-forked lightning bolts. The left-hand figure is perhaps bearded, appears to be slightly larger and more robust than the figure on the right, and wears more elaborately decorated clothing.

The “sacred tree” between the figures has a tall, narrow trunk, six fronds arranged symmetrically at its top with a possible seventh frond at the centre, and is surrounded by ribbons of water and clusters of fruit in much the same fashion as the sacred trees surmounted by winged disks that appear in the Neo-Assyrian royal imagery of the ninth century BC (Figure 8(a,b)). Of course, the iconography of the sacred tree and its attendants juxtaposed with a winged disk is not original to the Neo-Assyrian visual repertoire. It is present in Middle Assyrian glyptic and can be traced to late court imagery at Nuzi, where it carries the inflection of the highland culture of the Hurrians. The juxtaposition of figures (often winged or otherwise supernatural), sacred trees and winged disks is known as well from slightly later Urartian art, although Urartian “sacred trees” are generally more stylised and less tree-like than this example, and the winged disks above them are more rarely peopled. This imagery appears in the more immediate neighbourhood of Gargul at Hasanlu, where a cylinder seal and a seal impression found in Period IVb contexts feature two versions of mythological figures flanking the sacred tree and winged disk. One features kneeling bearded genies and the other scorpion-tailed, human-headed genies.

The overall composition of this scene on the Gargul Belt, and particular aspects such as the forked ribbons (rays? blessings?) that issue forth from the winged disk deity, closely resemble mid-late ninth-century BC Assyrian cylinder seals, at least one of which belonged to an official (Figure 8(b)). In imagery from Assyria itself, however, the flanking figures are generally either crowned kings or supernatural figures (apkallu, winged genies, etc.). When bareheaded human males approach the sacred tree, they are usually accompanied by attendants. While the scene on the Gargul Belt medallion does not precisely reproduce the Assyrian seal iconography, the seals can perhaps provide a terminus post quem in the late ninth century BC for the Gargul belt.

The outer ring of the medallion features scenes of humans and animals in opposition (Figures 3(A) and 4).

17Marcus, Emblems of Identity and Prestige, 127–8, no. 81, Fig. 103, Pl. 25.
18Porada, “Notes on the Gold Bowl and Silver Beaker from Hasanlu.”
19For more comprehensive treatments and bibliographies of the “Assyrian Sacred Tree” (AST) as an iconographic motif, see Albenda, “Assyrian Sacred Trees in the Brooklyn Museum”; Porter, Trees, Kings and Politics; Giovino, The Assyrian Sacred Tree; and Karlsson, Relations of Power in Early Neo-Assyrian State Ideology, 64–72, particularly fn. 65.
22E.g. van Loon, Urartian Art, Pl. VIIb. 
23Marcus, Emblems of Identity and Prestige, no. 62, 81. These are the seal HAS62-1022 (Tehran Museum) and the sealing HAS64-324 (Tehran Museum). Both were found in Room 5 of the temple BBII on Hasanlu’s citadel, fallen from the second story.
24Collon, First Impressions, no. 341.
25Ibid., nos. 340, 345.
At the bottom of the field, two human figures in *knielauf* position brandish spears and hold rounded, lunate shields (slightly more than semicircular) in outstretched arms. A lion and a large horned goat confront the human figures, and the rest of the field is filled with additional goats, winged goats and lions, two of which face each other at the top. While it is possible to read this scene independently of the central field, there is a lengthy iconographic tradition in both Mitanni and Middle Assyrian glyptic of scenes in which hunters and apparently lions are depicted protecting the sacred tree from aggressive goats, often in mountainous landscapes. A similar tension between the threats to the sacred tree and its protection is evident as well in the visual culture of Hasanlu, where fragments of a low relief Egyptian blue vessel depict juxtaposed scenes of rampant goats leaping on a sacred tree growing on a mountain, and bird-headed genies attending a sacred tree (Figure 9). The human figures in the outer ring of the Gargul Belt medallion may serve as guardians of the sacred tree ritual taking place in the centre, set in the mountainous environment suggested by the decoration on the terminal.

The horizontal body of the belt is bordered at the top and bottom with an incised guilloche pattern (Figures 3 (A–E), 5, 6). The use of the guilloche as a decorative element is widespread throughout the ancient Near East, and this example resembles most closely the style of the borders of the elegantly decorated vessels in precious metals from Marlik, the Gold Bowl from Hasanlu, four belts found in the Period IVb levels at Hasanlu, and a fragment of what appears to have been a belt found on the surface at Ziwiye in 1960 by members of the Hasanlu expedition. Directly within the guilloche borders is a

---

26 Stein, “Winged Disks and Sacred Trees at Nuzi,” suggests that these “sacred trees” may in fact be *cannabis*, a plant she argues played a critical role in religious rituals that produced enlightenment, depicted as the winged sun disk. Protecting the “tree” from consumption by the goats, who are emboldened by eating the foliage, would therefore be a sacred responsibility.

27 Several fragments of this vessel (or vessels) were discovered in 1960 (HAS60-269 location unknown) and 1964 (HAS64-611 and 832 in the Tehran Museum) in the destruction of a second-floor storeroom (Room 7a) in the temple BBII. In addition, the Hasanlu Project purchased a joining fragment at nearby Naqadeh in 1968, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA 69.66).

28 Negahban, *Marlik. The Complete Excavation Report*, pl. XI–XIII, Porada, “Notes on the Gold Bowl and Silver Beaker from Hasanlu”; Winter, “The Hasanlu Gold Bowl”; Cifarelli, Castelluccia, and Dan, “Copper Alloy Belts from Hasanlu”; Dyson, “Archaeological Scrap,” 36 (Ziwiye). Regarding the extensive corpus of metalwork that has been, over the years, attributed to Ziwiye as a find spot, as Oscar Muscarella, “Ziwiye,” has pointed out, there is no evidence than any of these
secondary bordering motif consisting of lightly and irregularly incised alternating triangles. The pendant triangles are plain, the complementary triangles are each filled with three large embossed dots. A line of very small punched dots separates the border from the pictorial field.

The decoration on the horizontal body of the belt is divided vertically into two main visual fields. The first of these is immediately adjacent to the medallion, about 25 cm in length, and its larger scale figures encompass the full height of the belt (Figure 3(B)). The second field is divided by a guilloche band into two narrow, horizontal registers, with commensurately smaller figures in each (Figures 3(C,D), 5 and 6). The larger scale scene adjoining to the medallion features an animal contest with a lion rearing up on its hind legs to attack a humped bull with its head lowered (Figure 3(B)). A large bird, perhaps an eagle or vulture, lands on the bull’s back.29 Behind the bull is a human figure wearing a tall pointed cap and brandishing a spear (?) or arrow at the tail of the bull. A second, similarly sized and capped human figure walks behind him carrying a spear or arrow with its point up. The rectangular object projecting upward from the shoulder of the second figure is likely meant to represent a quiver.30

The narrow horizontal registers display scenes of hunting and animal contests. The upper register shows a total of seven human figures, and the lower register eight (Figure 3(B,C,D)).31 These figures face forward and backward, and all but the three at the right-most end of each register engage animals. At this right end of each register, three small human figures carrying spears, shields, a bow and arrow and unidentified objects approach from the left (Figure 3(B)). Behind this group are figures facing the opposite direction, raising their shields as if to ward off approaching lions (Figures 3(C,D), 5, and 6). Behind these lions are aggressive human figures with raised shields and arms held up to throw spears. This unusual composition suggests that the figures behind the lions are driving them toward the other humans, as is the case in the lion-hunting images.

29Birds of many types appear on South Caucasian belts, and in at least one case a bird is shown on the back of a larger animal, see Castelluccia, Transcaucasian Bronze Belts, no. 266.

30As is the case in ivories from Hasanlu, see Muscarella, The Catalogue of Ivories from Hasanlu, Iran, 28–9, no. 53.

31The belt is somewhat fragmentary, and it is possible that not all the figures have been preserved.
from the Throne Room of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (879–853 BC). The use of shields and spears in addition to bows and arrows in a non-royal hunting scene is somewhat unusual, as these are weapons that are more closely associated with warfare. Prey animals depicted in these registers include lions, humped bulls (?), goats and winged goats. While the animals are primarily engaged with the human figures, in one instance a lion is shown attacking a goat, and in another a lion appears to pursue a goat. At the far-left end, decoration in each register terminates in a stylised plant or bud, and the remainder of the belt is undecorated.

Nine of the fifteen figures hold, in outstretched arms, shields of the same sort depicted in the outer ring of the medallion, some with the addition of spikes, clearly indicated by incised lines, projecting from their convex surfaces. The lunate form of the shields depicted in the Gargul Belt is quite different from those seen in the local artistic production at Hasanlu during Period IVb (1050–800 BC) and on metalwork from South Caucasus, both of which depict shields as being entirely circular.32 Spiked shields appear but briefly in Assyrian monumental art. They show up for the first time on palace reliefs from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, continue in smaller scale reliefs from the reign of Shalmaneser III (Figure 10), and then disappear entirely from the corpus of Assyrian imagery.33 This small but significant detail may contribute to a terminus post quem for the Gargul Belt.

This imagery of conflict among humans, wild animals and domestic animals—more broadly classed as cosmic contests or ritual performances34—continues and perhaps amplifies the iconography of the medallion. As a whole, the imagery on this belt seems to refer to control over potential threats to the divine and human order, and protection of some iteration of a sacred-tree ritual. This belt, then, provides one of a myriad of variants on the imagery on this belt seems to refer to control over potential threats to the divine and human order, and protection of some iteration of a sacred-tree ritual. This belt, then, provides one of a myriad of variants on the imagery.31 This small but significant detail may contribute to a terminus post quem for the Gargul Belt.

Despite its iconographic complexity, the overall quality of craftsmanship of the Gargul Belt is somewhat crude relative to similar objects from Hasanlu. If we compare, for example, the execution of the human and animal figures on the Gargul Belt to those appearing on a group of bronze plaques with scenes of archers and heraldic lions found at Hasanlu (Figure 11),36 the Gargul figures appear cursorily drawn, poorly proportioned and clumsily positioned. Similarly, the incised depictions of animals on a belt from Hasanlu show gracefully executed contours with delicately incised details (Figure 1(C)), while the chased contours on the Gargul Belt are thicker and less fluid (e.g. Figure 5). In fact, stylistic attributes of figures depicted on the Gargul Belt—in particular the use of rows of thick, hatched lines to define edges and internal contours as seen in the body of a lion (Figure 5)—align with wood and ivory carving traditions exhibited by local style ivories from Hasanlu (Figure 12),37 suggesting that the Gargul artisans may have been more familiar with those crafts. The herringbone pattern in the wings of the winged disk above the tree in the medallion of the Gargul belt, too, resembles herringbone patterned wings on Hasanlu ivories.38 It is important to point out, however, that at Hasanlu these chunky incisions are not the primary mode of surface articulation as they are on the Gargul belt, but are most often accompanied by more complex linear treatments and patterns.

The high quality of local artistic production at Hasanlu is attributable in large part to a lengthy tradition at the site of collecting and preserving imported and locally made objects in temple treasuries and inventories. At Hasanlu, these objects provide a nearly inexhaustible supply of models from which artisans and elite patrons forged the local visual culture.39 While certain features of the Gargul Belt—particularly the streamers emitting from the winged disk and the spiked shields—suggest that the artisans may have been familiar with Assyrian monumental and (more likely) portable art, its lack of artistic refinement suggests less expertise and direct exposure to Mesopotamian models than was the case at Hasanlu. The deviations from standard Mesopotamian iconography on the belt—the use of shields in animal confrontations and the non-royal figures interacting with the sacred tree—further demonstrate that the

32Muscarella, The Catalogue of Ivories from Hasanlu, Iran, 54, 58, 64, 70; Castelluccia, Transcaucasion Bronze Belts, 82, fig. 135a, b.
33De Backer, The Neo-Assyrian Shield, 48. In addition to appearances in monumental art, a miniature gold plaque depicting a soldier holding a spiked shield was excavated in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud “under the threshold of a niche in the south wall of Passage P” (Mallowan, Nimrud and Its Remains, p. 121; Curtis, An Examination of Late Assyrian Metalwork, 199, pl. XCIII). These shields conform to De Backer’s, “Hérisson, Type B,” 47–54, which disappears from Assyrian reliefs after the reign of Shalmaneser III.
35Giovino, The Assyrian Sacred Tree.
36de Schauensee, “Furniture Remains and Furniture Ornaments,” 31–3, fig. 1.18–1.19. These plaques are HAS62-1054 (UPM63-5-177) and 62-1060 (MMA 63.109.3).
37E.g. Muscarella, The Catalogue of Ivories from Hasanlu, Iran, e.g. 73, 140–1, 144, 146, 183, 156, 183.
39Cifarelli, Castelluccia, and Dan, “Copper Alloy Belts from Hasanlu.”
artisans of the Gargul belt were not slavishly reproducing Assyrian imagery. Rather, it would seem that, as was the case at Hasanlu, the local elite and craftspeople at Gargul drew upon the complex intercultural heritage of North-western Iran – an environment in which the material cultures of the South Caucasus, Iran and northern Mesopotamia interacted to produce a new, locally significant, visual culture. As a local product distinct from South Caucasian, Urartian and Assyrian traditions, this belt is a rare survivor of a culture (Mannean?) that is not yet well understood.

Dating

Without precise contextual information, the date of the Gargul Belt can only be suggested based on stylistic and iconographic features, in light of historical information. The similarity of the forked streamers that emit from the winged disk deity on the Gargul belt and those found on the seal of an Assyrian official from the mid-late ninth century BC suggest a date within that timeframe. The spiked shields carried on the Gargul belt, seen elsewhere only in the art of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), occupy the same chronological window, suggesting a terminus post quem in the latter half of the ninth century BC. The construction of the sheet metal belt—with a tapering, hooked terminal, a circular medallion, a horizontal body bordered by a guilloche, and perforations for attachment to a substrate—clearly link it to belts found in the Period IVb (1050–800 BC) at Hasanlu. As that site was destroyed by Urartian forces around 800 BC, that date provides a terminus ante quem for the Hasanlu examples, which are, to our knowledge, the only excavated exemplars of this belt type. It seems likely, then, that the belt in question was produced in the last half of the ninth century BC, although the first part of the eighth century BC is certainly possible.

40A belt in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts has a similar central medallion with a scene featuring a sacred tree attended by two winged genies, surmounted by a winged disk and surrounded by concentric rings of animals and may be related to these belts. While numerous features of this belt align with the courtly art of Urartu as well as Assyrian monumental imagery, it is unprovenanced and thus of limited utility for comparison, see Peck, “A Decorated Bronze Belt in the Detroit Institute of Arts.”
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank N. Rezaei, Director of the Urmia Museum, for her help, as well as S. Basheri of the Piranshahr Cultural Heritage Office, P. Ghadernejad, who drew this find, and M. Safi, who cleaned and conserved it in 2010. Thanks are due to Richard Zettler of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and Michael Danti, ASOR-CHI, for permission to study and publish the Hasanlu material, and to Celina Coss, for her additions to the drawing. Finally, we are grateful to Stephan Kroll, Karen Rubinson and John Curtis who read drafts of this paper, and offered valuable corrections and advice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Megan Cifarelli http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2054-5118

Bibliography


