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Two Stone Stelae from Northeast Turkey

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In memory of Tahsin Parlak

The stone stelae that we will deal with here were one of a group of the most interesting cultural proof we came across during the archaeological studies we conducted in the Erzurum and Kars region. The first of these (Fig. 1), discovered at the beginning of the 2000, by Tahsin Parlak¹, a member of Atatürk University, is a stone transported by the Oltu Military Garrison Command to the bottom of the Oltu Vocational School's garden's back wall. The other (Fig. 2) is a stone exhibited among sheep statues in the garden of the Kars Museum. Both of these caught the attention of researchers after being moved to the city center from surrounding villages, as there had been no previous opportunity to research them in their prior locations. While the Oltu stela² was described in a publication immediately after being found, the Kars stela³ was first published after waiting a somewhat long period of time in the museum garden. Both are seen commonly in Armenia under the name *vishap* or *dragon stone*, as well as also being representative of East Anatolia.

Oltu Stelae (Fig. 1)

The stone was examined by me several times while next to the outer wall of Oltu Vocational High School's garden, a short time before being moved to a park in the center of the district. It is made from a type of pink sandstone. The height of the stone is approximately 5.34 meters. Both surfaces were worked to be flattened, and the surfaces have a slightly convex curve. We think the bottom portion that went into the ground was uncarved (or broken?), measures 106 X 53 centimeters and is oval-shaped. The measurements of the top portion, in almost an oval shape, are 75 X 35 centimeters. Therefore, the stone's surface width narrows as it goes from the bottom (105 cm) to the

top (75 cm). With the exception of the damage and breaks acquired during the transportation, the stone can be said to be generally well protected. However, the top portion is broken. Looking at both the condition of the stone and the other widespread examples, the top portion can be assumed to have been sharp pointed before it was broken. A "demon" (*bull -or ram-*, according to Caucasian researchers) with exaggerated eyes and nose features is depicted on the stone's wider lower portion. The arms that extend from both sides of the eyes reach toward one another below. While the fingers (5 fingers) on the right hand can be seen clearly, the left hand's fingers are not clear. The demon was carved on an area measuring 165 X 105 centimeters. Approximately 80 centimeters above the tips of the right hand's fingers, engraved parallel straight lines form a "belt." Six grooved lines form this belt, with a total thickness of 13 centimeters. There are no other decoration pattern on the front surface of the stone. Unfortunately it is impossible to obtain information regarding the back side, but typically we come across circular designs symbolizing the "sun" on the surface of the narrowing tip of this type of stela⁴.

Kars Stelae (Fig. 2)

The stone was brought to the Kars Museum in the 1960's from the village of Pekreşin near Lake Çıldır. The stone, exhibited together with sheep statues inside the museum's garden to the left of the entrance gate, caught our attention during our research in the Kars region and was examined several times. The stone, resembling a fish, has a height of 2.72 centimeters. Its body has a prismatic construction. It was made from basalt. The contours are regular and neatly arranged, the surfaces were carved with care, and the bottom portion was unworked. The top portion is sharp pointed. Like we saw in the Oltu stela, the top section's sharpness is a typical characteristic seen in this type of

¹This paper is dedicated to Tahsin Parlak, my colleague, who died in 2011.

²Gündoğdu 2002

³Belli 2007

⁴According to Gündoğdu (2002), there is a 'sun carving' on unseen side of the stone.

stelae. With the exception of the damage seen on the surfaces and the insignificant breaks, it can be said that the monument was well-protected. The sharp top portion of the stone is wider than the lower portion that we believe had entered the ground. The surface width of the bottom is 50 centimeters, while the widest part of the top portion measures 65 centimeters. Nothing was found on the stone with a clear ornamental purpose. Even if one thinks of the stone's symbolizing a fish, no clear traces of this are found on the surfaces.

General Information of Vishap

In 1909, Russian archaeologists⁵ carried out a series of archeological excavations in Caucasus regarding vishap stone in Garni, Armenia. The majority of them had fish-like forms. All stones were said to have tumbled down to the earth by 1909. The first stones were investigated by Marr and Smirnov during the expedition of 1909, in Azhdahak, Geghama Ridge. By 1910, Marr and Smirnov found a group of identical stones with carved images - vishap - at the side of the Geghama Ridge. Soon similar monuments were found in southern Georgia and also in other areas of Armenia, particularly near Lake Sevan, at the foot of Aragats Mountain⁶.

In this type of stones, in which the style of the sharp section generally resembles a fish-head, rarely a representation of the full body of the fish is also depicted, and sometimes a “demon” made using wave patterns is carved on the surface of the rock using the bas-relief method. This type is found in South Caucasus, especially in the Armenian land⁷, in the mountains, in areas near water sources or near the edges of lakes⁸. These 2-5 meter high type of stelae are mentioned in Caucasian literature with the *vishap* (an Armenian word borrowed from Persian), which means “snake, monster/dragon.” The word was transferred to Western literature as *dragon stone*. Researchers think that these stelae are directly related to the water cult⁹. While some of them are in the shape of fish, some of the stelae appear as if they are covered with stretched ram or bull skin. The examples in which it narrows slightly from bottom to top are the other important group of vishap. On the surface of these stones, waterfowl and wavy lines were carved.

In the approximately 100 years of research of these stones, many ideas have been asserted regarding the meaning of these stones. Piotrovskiy¹⁰ states that these monumental

artifacts represent the dragons that protect the water sources. Armenian researchers think that these stones represent the Armenian literature god *Astghik* (the god of love and fertility) and the god *Ara Geghecik* (Handsome Ara)¹¹. Among these ideas, the one most worth attention is by Petrosyan:

*The basic Indo-European myth tells the story of the battle of the thunder god and his adversary the serpent. The victory of the god results in the origination of cosmic waters (rain, rivers). Certain aspects of the dragon stones reveal their links with the basic myth. In this context, it is evident that the huge fish would represent the water serpent (the dragon-serpents were sometimes conceived in the shape of fish; e.g. in Oppian's Halieutika the dragon Typhon is represented as a fish), while the bull is the symbol of the thunder god in many ancient Near Eastern and Indo-European traditions (Hurrian, Hittite, Indian, Greek, and Armenian). The wavy lines below the bull's head may be interpreted as rainy waters triggered by the battle between the god and the serpent. The name of the serpent in the “basic myth” is derived from the Indo-European stem *wel-. According to the rules of the Armenian language, the Indo-European *wel- would have developed into gel- (New Eastern Armenian pronunciation: gegh-). In this context, it is characteristic that the višap stones are concentrated mainly in the Gelam province, Gelakuni district, on the Gelamay Mountains to the east of Sevan Lake (modern Gegharkunik province of Armenia). The two largest groups of them are located, respectively, on Mt. Gel, at the source of the river Azat, and near the Geli fortress. Characteristically, the mountain beside Gel, the highest of the Gelamay range, is called Azhdahak from the name of the dragon of ancient Iranian tradition "Aždahak". It may be reasonably inferred that the aforementioned place names from the stem gel- < *wel- " *wel-" would have been derived from the name of the Indo-European mythic serpent. Moreover, the dragon stones themselves probably would have been called *gel- < *wel- before the Iranian loanword višap "višap" replaced their original Indo-European name¹².*

In Petrosyan's article, he discussed the theoretic relationship of place names from the Armenian language that have the *gel-* formation and the Indo-European “*wel-“ (snake) formation. In conclusion, he established the existence of a relationship between modern Gelakuni and “Uelikuhi” (“Ueliku” –ni/-hi) from the time of Sarduri II's son Rusa I. In fact, Uelikuhi is thought to be a protourartian city near Lake Sevan that was conquered by the Urartians in the 8th century B.C.¹³. Petrosyan¹⁴

⁵Marr and Smirnov 1931

⁶Marr and Smirnov 1931

⁷These type of stones found in Gegharkunik, Aragatsotn, Javakhk, Tayk of Armenia (Marr and Smirnov 1931).

⁸Martirosyan 1982, Chapter 6; 22, Marr and Smirnov 1931, Piotrovskiy, B.B. 1939, <http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>, Bahanyan and Bahanyan, <http://www.iatp.am/vahanyan/vishaps.htm>, Meşaninov 1925.

⁹Petrosyan, <http://hyeforum.com/index.php?showtopic=16735>, Marr and Smirnov 1931, <http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>,

¹⁰Piotrovskiy 1939, Meşaninov 1925

¹¹<http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>

¹²Author's note in the text is, “...Georgian *gwel- 'snake,' which is borrowed from the intermediate Proto-Armenian stage of IE *wel- (> *gwel- > gel-), corroborates this reconstruction. Notably, the Georgian composite gwel-wešapi 'snake-dragon' combines these two names of the serpent...”

¹³Melikişvili 1960, 256

¹⁴Petrosyan, <http://hyeforum.com/index.php?showtopic=16735>

compares Uelikuhi (“Gelakuni”) with the Hurrian origin god Tes Ullikummi, created by Kumarbi in order to exact revenge on Tesup, grew up and became a ruthless enemy of Tesup. The author, in a sense, identifies Ullikummi, made from a giant rock beside the *cold spring*, with the giant fish stones that are generally found at the mouth of water sources. On the other hand, sometimes the dragon stones are seen with *bull skin* carved into it, here it is as if the bull skin is thrown into the mouth of the fish. In this case, Petrosyan remarks that it shows the struggle between the storm god (“symbolized by the bull”) and the fish (“symbolized by the snake”), with one being sacrificed to another. In other words, the struggle here is the struggle between Tesup and Ullikummi. In conclusion, according to Petrosyan, the protourartian people in the Sevan region's Ueliku and the Hurrian Ullikummi may be a word derived from the Indo-European word for snake (*wel-)¹⁵.

Dating of Vishap

There are serious difficulties in determining the time period of these monumental stones, because in the areas where they were found, no one has come across findings that would make dating easier. In spite of this, medieval inscriptions were found on some of these, and in the first years after these were found, it was thought that these stelae were from the Middle Ages. The most distinctive evidence that these stones do not come from the Middle Ages was an example found in Garni in the 1960's with inscription dating from the period of the Urartian king Argishti I (786-764 B.C.)¹⁶. Caucasian scientists generally date the vishaps between 18th-8th centuries B.C.¹⁷. In the first days after the Oltu stelae was found, O. Belli, in Atlas Magazine's 2005, 143rd^{18a} issue, asserted that it dated from the Pre Pottery Neolithic Age, in other words from the 10th millenium B.C. Belli^{18b} also dated the Kars stelae to the second half of the 8th century B.C., though even that stone's most current dated stone comes from the period immediately before Argshiti I¹⁹. If we look at the example of the ones with Urartian inscriptions, the latest date of the stelae found in Caucasus, including the ones in Turkey, is the first half of the 8th century B.C. However, according to common beliefs, these stones are related not to the Urartians, but rather to the protourartian period²⁰. Though Belli²¹ established an ordered relationship among vishap-Urartu-fish²² on the bases of the Kars stelae, there is no evidence that shows that the stelae being discussed here belong to the Urartian period.

Up to the present day, in the Van Lake basin at the heartland of Urartu, no one has come across any such ruins in the mountains near the lake or springs, around the dams or canalettes. In fact, the inscription found on the stones does not correspond to the date of the actual stones, rather, it serves no purpose other than helping us to determine the latest date, because they are the monuments without even the slightest relationship to Urartian workmanship.

Discussion and Conclusion

First of all, we need to divide these stones into two main types based on their size, type, and detail: Group A, “classical shape” stones represented by the Oltu stela, and Group B, “fish-like” stones represented by the Kars stela. We couldn't say much about the Group B stones, but I would like to emphasize some underlying aspects of the Group A stones. Generally Group A stones are predominantly made up of straight lines. The stones, toward the top, get narrower comparatively from the wider lower portion that entered the ground. As in the Oltu example, the top portion is sharp pointed. This type also includes two Armenian examples (Figs. 7, 8). The bodies are oval shaped. A demon (*bull head*) with exaggerated eyes and nose was carved with an bas-relief technique, sometimes on the surface of the stone's wider side. This figure is not a “clearly definable animal style” or a “type of symbolic creature” that we know of from any cultural district in East Turkey, Caucasus, Iran or Eurasia. As is seen, there is no traditionality, no consistency, and no care concerning which end of the stone the demon was carved into. Within this traditionless state, should it be determined that it is based upon the “figure's position” or upon statics rule? With the exception of very rare examples, countless stela we have been able to examine in Eurasia so far, have been come down to earth with their wider ends. There is no doubt that this position was preferred because of its suitable stance. If we attempt to erect the five meter high Oltu stela according to the position of its figure, keeping up the carved tip in the ground and the wider uncarved tip upward will undoubtedly create a series of inconveniencies from both a static and an aesthetical perspectives. In that case, the demons and other unfamiliar ornamental patterns on the stela may have been carved long after the stela had been first produced and erected in the ground. It is very apparent that the demon engraving on the stelae did not depend on any rules related to conditions and dimensions of the stone, it seems to me, it was carved haphazardly. The inconsistency, lacking of tradition and even randomness of the choice of the space for the figures which were applied on the vishaps requires us to think so. Whereas, stelae are the monuments representing commemoratives in the memory of the Eurasian nomadic-semi nomadic community. Each detail on these stelae is like a key that unlocks a door to traditions of centuries, and this key is neither easily changeable nor applicable in different ways. For example, while the sharp top portion of the Okunev stelae from the Sayan-Altay plains

¹⁵ Author's note in the text is, “...the interpretation of Ullikummi as 'the destroyer of the sacred city of Kummi' is a folk etymology. The name may be etymologized as Ulliku + mmi (Hurrian suffix)...”

¹⁶ <http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>

¹⁷ Petrosyan, <http://hyeforum.com/index.php?showtopic=16735>

^{18a} Belli 2005b; 2005c

^{18b} Belli 2005a; 2006b

¹⁹ Holding 2006, 144, <http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>

²⁰ Holding 2006, 144, <http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>

²¹ Belli 2005a; 2006b

²² Except some fish figures from Urartian period, Batmaz and Uhri 2008, 65 p.

symbolizes life and heaven, the wide portion that was in the ground represents death and the underworld. On the stela's middle portion appears a three-eyed anthropomorphic figure. This general arrangement repeats itself on almost all Okunev stela as an unchanging rule²³. In the same region, in graves from the Tagar period, the giant cornerstone's sharp sides are designed in a manner to always show the direction from which the sun rises²⁴. If we couldn't see the traces that repeat themselves as unchanging traditions on vishaps, we have to examine the reasons for this and find a logical explanation to the question. Thus, I think that the demon designs on the stelae, as well as the figures and designs that could be described as "unfamiliar" were added to the stelae well after they were first made. What is more, I think that most of the vishaps were left in nature in an unerected manner, after having been uprooted from its original erected location and having the newer applications executed on them for a second usage. We should take into account that many of the Caucasus stela, including both the Oltu and Kars stelae, were found in unerected position.

The "second usage" of the vishaps stones is a serious problem requiring discussion. The other two important matters are who first erected the stelae and when they were erected. If we take into account similar examples, we can think that those stones belonged not to sedentary communities, but potentially to nomadic, semi-nomadic peoples.

In Caucasus next to the stelae with images of the "demon" creature are stones that resemble them in shape but contain different patterns²⁵. On some of the examples from this group made up of anthropomorphic stelae, a "belt" carving is found. Despite reflecting all the features that completely define vishap, the Oltu stela also has a belt. We could see the belted stones in Southern Russia, although more in the Southern Siberia and Mongolia²⁶. Without a doubt, the earliest source region of the stone stelae was the Khakassia of Southern Siberia. Stone stelae representing the Okunev art which completed its development in an isolated area, are the earliest examples of the stone stela of Eurasia. The Okunev culture showed an influential presence in the region from the beginning of the second millennium B.C. to the end of the millennium and also deeply influenced the later cultures of the land²⁷. The monumental stone stele was one of the continuing archeological traditions in the cultures that took the place of the Okunev culture (respectively Karasuk, Skif, Tagar, Tashtik, Tes, and Classical Turkic Period). The stelae, named "deer stone," were widespread throughout all of the Mongolian lands from the late second to early first

millennium B.C. On the other hand, widespread anthropomorphic stelae in Southern Russia from the early first millennium B.C.²⁸ are representative of what was probably the same archeological culture originated from Sayan-Altai. In all likelihood, the deer stones from Mongolia and also the anthropomorphic stelae from Southern Russia dating from the early first millennium B.C. came from the Okunev culture. Therefore, we need to look for generally in South Siberia as the origin of the stelae those from East Turkey and Caucasus.

As to the ethnic origins of the real owners of the vishaps; the knowledge we have today is quite far from being helpful in enlightening the problem. Nevertheless almost all of the researchers who weigh in on this matter identify these stones as having an Armenian ethnic root. I want to do to emphasize in this paper that it is necessary to refute this idea. Because, the entire region (the whole of east Anatolia and southern Caucasus) was the land under the Hurrian ethnic totality from the fourth millennium B.C. (simultaneously with the Karaz culture) until the Urartian period. No breaking were survived in the historical flow stretching from the Dark Faced Burnished Ware Culture period of Neolithic to the Karaz Culture period and finally to the Urartian Period²⁹. In other words, any dominantly foreign ethnic element does not appear within the approximately 3.000-year Hurrian ethnic based cultural flow. All geographic points and rulers names in the region are of Hurrian origin, and the Hurrians were an Asianic ethnic group who spoke an agglutinative language. In this situation, how can it be that the Armenian people speak an Indo-European language, and could it be that they may be cultural inheritor to the Asianic Hurrians? Is this possible? Moreover, the earliest date that the Armenians were in the region, based on indirect records, cannot be earlier than the 6th century B.C. However, this date is on one hand contemporary with the Hurrian people dissolving into countless ethnic groups and then disappearing, on the other hand with the time of the complete losing of the vishap tradition. For that reason, I want to give a reminder that we have not been able to obtain clear evidence of the ethnic origin of the people who erected the vishaps in mountain valleys and water sources, therefore requiring us to give up on establishing an ethnic connection between those stones and the Armenians. So then, what was the truth? In this matter, my suggestion is this, these stones date from the 2nd millennium B.C., so they might belong to the Hurrians who were living in that period on that land; however, I think that the real owners of these stelae should be correlated to the nomadic people who had reached the region as a result of drastic population movements from Eurasia.

As to date, the vishaps are generally dated between the second millennium and early first millennium B.C.³⁰. On

²³Güneri 2005, 15 p.

²⁴Güneri 2005, 15 p.

²⁵Olhovskiy, *Monumentalnaya Skulptura*, Leningrad, 2001, 240-245, 247-249

²⁶Volkov 1981, 125 pp., especially Olhovskiy 2005, 169-174, 176, 178-179

²⁷Güneri 2005

²⁸Olhovskiy 2005, 169-174, 176, 178-179

²⁹Güneri 2008, 1-21

³⁰Petrosyan, <http://hyeforum.com/index.php?showtopic=16735>, 31-

the whole, I agree with this dating assessment, but I need to point out some details. These stones were not found next to or inside ancient tombs, nor near any settlement³¹, so it is nearly impossible to completely and accurately date them. However, using some available clues, we can propose a time period close to the true date of origin of the stelae under discussion. Based on an inscription on one of them belonging to the period of the Urartian king Argishti (786-764 B.C.), a *terminus post quem* date of the 8th century B.C. was placed on these stones, meaning no one of these can be later than the 8th century BC. On the other hand, I think that the vishaps came to Caucasus together with the packs of Eurasian nomadic or semi nomadic peoples during the busiest period of the drastic population movement toward Caucasus. This approximately century-long time period was between the rule of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 B.C.) and Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1077 B.C.), when the Iron Age was replacing the Bronze Age in East Turkey³². I assert that the period when it passed into the Iron Age was a “transitional period”³³. This was a period in which the written sources as far as East Anatolia completely became silent; the hybrid cultures, which began in the Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age and were influenced by the flow of the Eurasian nomadic-semi nomadic cultures, reached maturity; the Northeast Anatolia politic unity, based on the Dayaeni kingdom, gained strength; and iron mining throughout Caucasus slowly began to come into use. I would like to see the vishaps from Turkey and Caucasus as one of the symbols of this chaos-filled transitional period.

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³¹<http://barevarmenia.com/travelblog/vishaps>

³²Güneri 2002, 73-75

³³Güneri 2002, 73-75, Güneri 2006, 23arkheologiya, 1987, 1: 145-157

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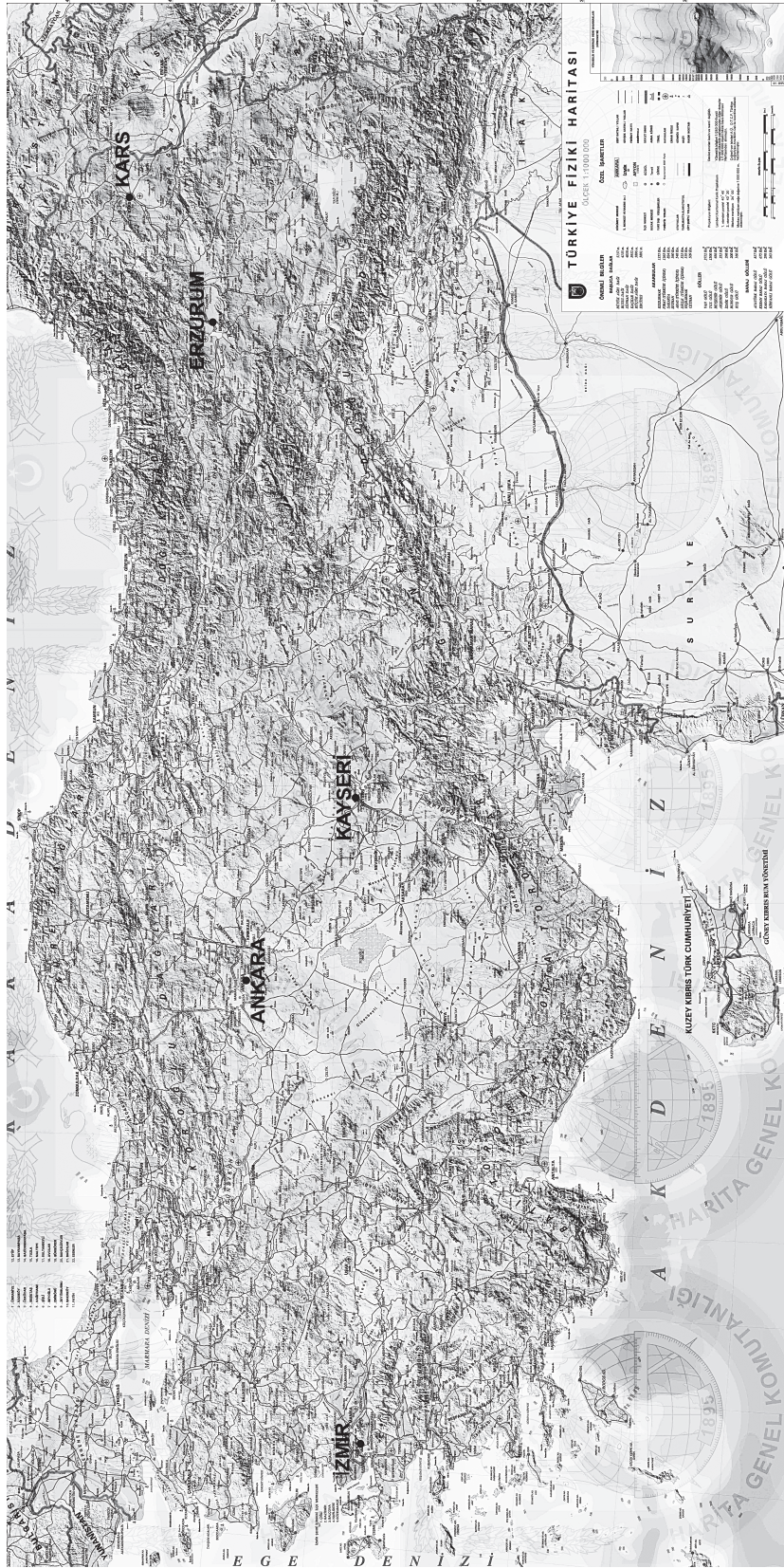
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<http://hyeforum.com/index.php?showtopic=16735>

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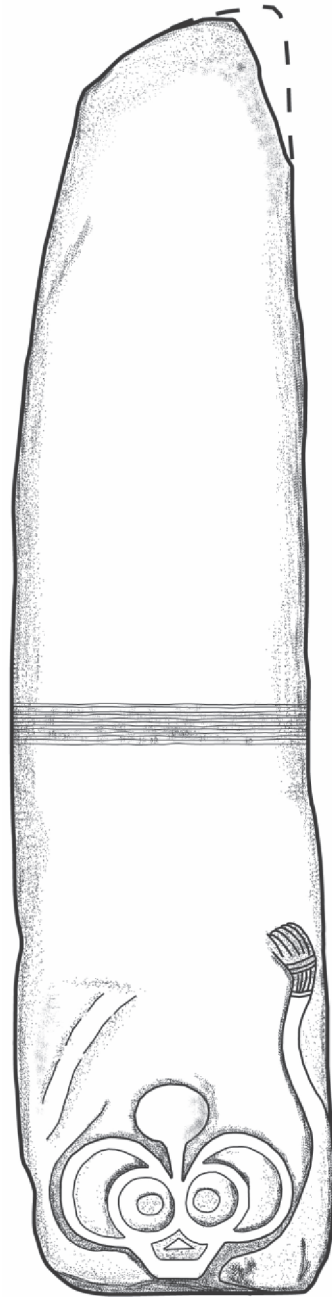
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Harita / Map 1



Resim / Figure 1



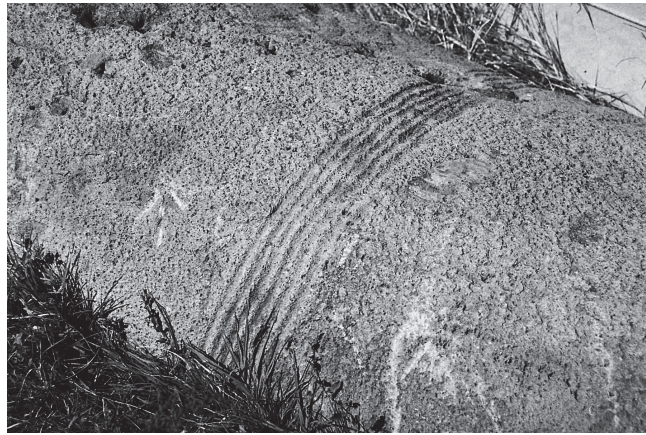
Resim / Figure 1A



Resim / Figure 1B



Resim / Figure 1C



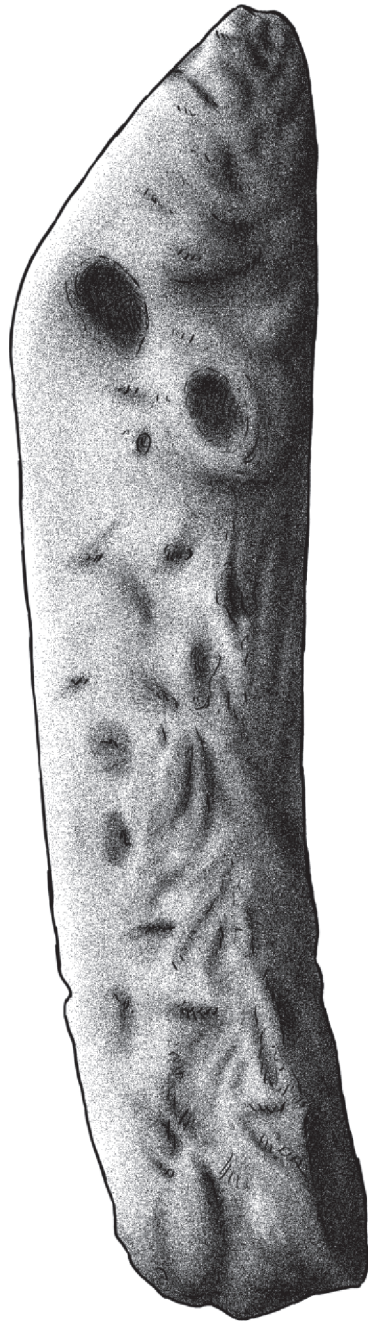
Resim / Figure 1D



Resim / Figure 1E



Resim / Figure 1F



Resim / Figure 2



Resim / Figure 2A



Resim / Figure 2B



Resim / Figure 2C



Resim / Figure 3



Resim / Figure 4



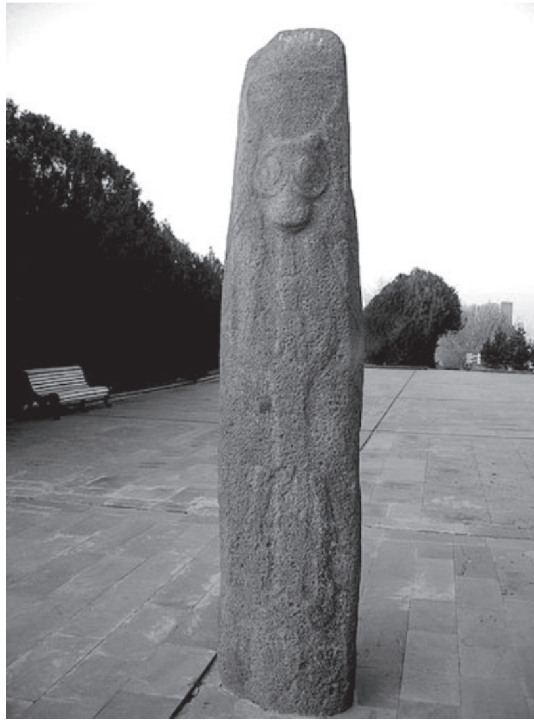
Resim / Figure 5



Resim / Figure 6



Resim / Figure 7



Resim / Figure 8



Resim / Figure 9