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REVIEW. РЕЦЕНЗИЯ

Castelluccia, Manuel: Transcaucasian Bronze Belts. BAR International Series 2842. BAR Publishing, Oxford 2017. – 419 p.

I had great expectations when I started to read the monograph of Manuel Castelluccia on Caucasian on bronze belts, as it is a long-awaited work that has been filling a gap. Leafing through the volume it was a pleasant surprise to see on the initial pages that the introductory lines were written by John Curtis, who has an especially thorough knowledge of the region, made excavations himself and as the former head of the Middle East Department at the British Museum is one of the persons with the best knowledge of the collection material. This well reflects that the research of the region and the topic is quite in the focus of international interest. This gives a special meaning to the way he closes his lines: this catalogue will be the indispensable and generally used basic work for all researchers dealing with the archaeological material of the Transcaucasia.

In his catalogue Manuel Castelluccia collected almost 350 plate belts from 81 sites, most of which were found in the territory of the South Caucasus (South Ossetia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). However, a great many of the artefacts — approximately 150 pieces — that can be dated back to the 13th–7th centuries B.C. appeared at one single location, in the famous South Ossetian Tli graveyard of the Koban culture. Most of the belts analysed are richly decorated with geometric motifs, but on almost a hundred artefacts figures are also represented. Most of the time the belts feature deer, goat and antelope species, wild boars, predators, birds, snakes and fish, but even turtles are shown. The images, interpreted by the author as military, festive, religious and hunting scenes, show horses, wagons, hunters and soldiers. Breaking with the earlier tradition of analysing the spectacular images of belt plates by taking an approach of art history, he examines the objects in a complex manner, in their archaeological and environmental context corresponding to the place where they were found. The author is seeking an answer to such fundamental questions as to who and when created these objects and for whom, for what occasion, when and why those were worn, what the content and meaning of the decoration was, whether

these belts were intended for general wearing or they were rather prestige objects, and where the style of the representations is positioned in the system of the region's cultural and art traditions?

In the course of the analyses, though, it was not possible to find clear answers to some of the questions, as, for instance, the plate belts were basically worn on men's waists, but belts were also found in the tombs of women and children. The belts were not linked to social position either, as they appeared in the burials with both poor and rich grave goods. The author finds it likely that the ornamented belts were custom-made and worn over a lifetime. In relation with that, however, I would recall the well-known events of the Trojan war, when for the funeral of Patroclus the goldsmith make the jewellery for the dead at the graveside. My own experience shows that even upon the examination of original objects it cannot always be decided whether or not the belts show the signs of wear or damages that would suggest a longer period of use, but in the future special attention should also be paid to that.

For understandable reasons, the analysis focuses on decorations. In relation with the often stylized depiction of animals, research often connects these findings with the so-called animal style of the steppe peoples. However, as the author calls attention to it, even despite the apparent similarity, this is a far too simplified view, especially because of the images of humans. The peoples of the Caucasus, lying between the Ancient East and the steppe country, played an especially important bridging role in the Iron Age. Therefore, the author attached a great significance to the fact that wedged between two areas representing significantly differing economic and cultural worlds, an independent mode of metallurgy and artistic representation emerged, expressing the traditions of the local population, as it is also indicated by the bronze belts. For instance, as opposed to the bronze belts from Urartu, dating back to the 9–7th century B.C., often depicting wondrous creatures, mythological scenes and being under the influence of the art of the Ancient East, and within that mainly Assyria, the Transcaucasian belts are not typically characterised by combining different animal figures and depicting wondrous creatures. Taking this also into account and the circumstances of how they appeared, and analysing the images on the other object types, the author all in all comes to the conclusion that Transcaucasian art is a deep, locally rooted and independent sub-group, though strongly influenced by the surrounding areas, within the wider art Koine of the Eurasian cultures. I think the majority of today's researchers agree with this statement.

Even a brief list of the results of the complex analyses described in the monograph would go beyond the limits of a book review; the reader will see those anyway. However, I would like to call attention to some additional important aspects that might be of assistance for determining the course of new

research. I know that the author did not elaborate on some of these aspects due to the lack of data, and is planning to rethink some other issues in the future. One of the long-debated crucial points is from which direction the region was affected by various impacts and how strong these were. The data used in this work also reflect that the territory of the Transcaucasia, right up until the appearance of the Scythians was a lot more strongly connected to the art of the Ancient East than to the steppe. This is well reflected by a significant part of the archaeological artefacts and the animal representations found in the region. Although based on the Tli IV. graveyard the excavator himself highlighted the significance of cattle in the farming practice of the people living here, in fact in this period it has almost no trace whatsoever. In addition to a number of sheep and goat images, we can hardly find data in the presentations and grave goods that would suggest the presence of cattle. This is especially thought-provoking in light of the epic works of the Caucasian peoples, reflecting their traditions reaching back to the Bronze Age, where the bull sacrifice for the people of the Nart plays a well-traceable important role. At the same time, as it is known from the legend of the Golden Fleece, for example, the role of ovine is especially important in the Colchis area, which raises a number of further interesting questions. Now, however, considering strictly the monograph, it has to be noted by all means that following the earlier data of literature the author also fell into the trap that based on the toposes he included cattle among the animals depicted on the belts. The way he grouped the drawings, it is apparent just by looking at it that he brought completely different figures to common denominators. He identified the animals of Chodžali (299), Tli (295), Maralyn Deresi (303), all as cattle, while in addition to hooves, nails and claws, the completely different way of holding their tails, their posture and shape are all apparent. Identifying the species is naturally not an easy task, as, apart from the different quality of the representations, it is also because of the strongly mixed cultural background that there are few features depicted in a consistent manner that would allow the identification of animal species. This is exactly why it is obvious that all such attempts similar in nature to that of the author may only have limited success, however, would induce even more debates. At the same time, however, to understand the message of the images or possible allusions to the belief system we see all such types of attempts necessary and extremely important. And this is perhaps not a completely hopeless enterprise. In this case, for instance, I would call attention only to the fact that the creatures on the belts and other archaeological finds are mostly expressly male wild beasts — except the horse — that occur in the natural environment. In the summary table the types of representations categorised as cattle also rather suggest the above animals: based on the end of their feet, the shape of their horns, strong growth rings they may be East Caucasian ibex, the tur; based on

the clawed paws, the long tail held high, the shape of the head and posture the Caucasian leopard, locally called bars; based on its head, hooves and full hairy tail a horse. At the same time, looking at it from the other side, he categorises images as being cattle based on the squat body despite the claws, and long and curling tail, characteristics of the bars (Pasanauri 312, Maralyn Deresi 303, Sagaredžo 313, Tli 293, Samtavro 290). The animal species thus determined just reinforce the author's opinion on the determining, local and independent traditions, especially if we take into account that the objects in the Tli graveyard that were surely prepared locally despite the strong influence of Urartu, depict bars clearly, which lived in their own environment, instead of the maned lion, for instance (Tli 295).

The question naturally arises: if the artistic style of the plate belts radiates so strongly the adherence to the local tradition, is it reflected and tangible in any way in the messages formulated in the images and their meaning conveyed? Probably it is partly the uncertainties of the identification of animals why the author did not find a sufficient amount of data to be able to link the images to the belief system and the legends reflecting the local traditions. Thus, the data related to deer, just because their images seem obvious, offer an especially good possibility for that — for the steppe peoples, in the Caucasian Nart sagas, and in the Ancient East, too, these well traceably related to both the earthly things and also to the belief system. According to N.L. Chlenova, also referred to by the author, the spread of the deer images is attributable to the Sacas, that initially spread in the nomad areas between N. Iran and lake Zaisan. In his view their origin roots in the art of the Ancient East. As an example of deer with bent legs he mentions the seal of the Kerkuk dated back to the 2nd millennium B.C. However, it slipped his attention that despite the apparent similarity it is the most important details where the fundamental difference lies. The seals show the deer with pulled-up legs indeed, but there the legs are not positioned under the animal, but near it on both sides and they do not touch, do not cover each other! This apparently minor difference, however, has a determining significance for interpretation. As opposed to the artificially pulled-up and bound limbs of the deer depicted in a number of finds from the Scythian age from Central Asia to the Carpathian Basin in a position similar to that of Kelermes (Malij Telek, Chilikti, Kostromskaia, Soloha, Ziwie, Tápíószentmárton, etc.) the seals show deer in a natural, resting pose. As it lies slightly sideways, the head looks to the side or backwards, and the legs pulled to its side do not touch. Therefore, actually, the assumed genetic relationship is missing between the two manners of representation, seemingly similar in form. The two images depict completely different things and according to recent research one is a bound sacrificial animal, while the other version shown on the seal is an animal resting in a natural

position. Therefore, not only their representation, the depicted position, but also the related meaning differs fundamentally. (To do away with the topos of the galloping deer once and for all, just think of the images of wild boars — in addition to ibex and horses — with the same position of their legs, while a boar can hardly be described as flying or fleeing in the air.)

According to B. Tehov in the representations of the Koban culture deer are characterised by a standing posture, raised head, and calm and peaceful air, as opposed to the galloping Scythian deer, flying with their legs pulled up which radiate vivacity in his opinion too and at the same time he refuses to accept a stylistic relation between the two manners of representation assumed by others. The data of this monograph also confirm that the custom of tying up sacrificial animals was not spread in the area of the Transcaucasia in the period under review. However, in the case of deer in a standing position in some of the images, also interpreted by the author as a hunting scene, no reference is made to the sex organ of the deer. In some cases by drawing its calf next to it (Tli 350) it is expressly emphasised that the deer is an antlered doe despite the antlers depicted, the Miraculous Deer known from the Nart sagas, the symbol of origin, fertility and rebirth, part of the astral world, while in other cases the deer appears as an antlered creature leading to the new homeland and helping to pass through the different worlds.

Perhaps these ideas well express that there are a great number of important and open issues related to the Caucasian bronze plate belts that need rethinking. They indicate that if we manage to accurately identify the depicted animal species and to differentiate between the types of the image messages communicated by the one-time metalworkers, then we'll have a chance to link the representations described in the volume to the underlying content, and to understand the meaning related to the customs, traditions and belief systems from the contemporary written sources, or legends and sagas spread by oral tradition. The extremely wide scale and thorough data collection, the findings discussed in their archaeological context and the presentation of data that sometimes are hardly accessible indeed make the monograph of Manuel Castelluccia indispensable in the further research of the Transcaucasian region.

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