

# Barsom or Staff?

## An Inscribed Urartian Plaque

GLENN MARKOE

*Curator of Collections, Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont*

ACCORDING TO ANCIENT Zoroastrian practice, the Indo-Iranian priests traditionally held a bundle of twigs or rods while solemnizing certain sacred ceremonies. Known originally as the *baresman* and later as the *barsom*, this bundle, which had at first consisted of a handful of grasses that were strewn during sacrificial rites, became a common priestly attribute. Numerous attempts have been made to identify representations of it in Iranian art beginning with the Achaemenid period, most notably in plaques and statuettes from the Oxus treasure (Figures 1, 2).<sup>1</sup>

In a recent study, Peter Calmeyer has tried to demonstrate that the sticklike objects carried by a pair of helmeted figures in the upper and lower registers of an Urartian bronze plaque in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 3) are early depictions of barsom.<sup>2</sup> Mary Boyce has in turn cited this identification as possible evidence for the spread of Zoroastrian cult practice in pre-Achaemenid times.<sup>3</sup> In view of the importance of this assertion for the early history of Zoroastrianism, a reexamination of the Metropolitan Museum plaque is justified. In fact, a very different interpretation of the figures and the objects that they hold may be offered.

The Zoroastrian texts clearly indicate that the barsom was carried by the priest during religious ceremonies. By contrast, the scene illustrated twice on the Metropolitan Museum plaque, depicting paired soldiers marching before a chariot with two helmeted occupants, is of a purely military nature. The chariot with its occupants—a driver and a passenger with hands extended in a gesture of greeting—is virtually identical to representations found on a number of decorated sheet-metal objects (belts, plaques, and

helmets) of Urartian manufacture, all of which feature a military procession of chariots and horsemen.<sup>4</sup> In none of these representations is there any suggestion of a religious connotation.

The paired soldiers who precede the chariot carry in their upraised right hands a number of sticks notched or bound near the top. Although it is impossible to determine precisely how many sticks each figure was meant to hold, I would suggest that the “bundle” collectively represents two pairs of sticks

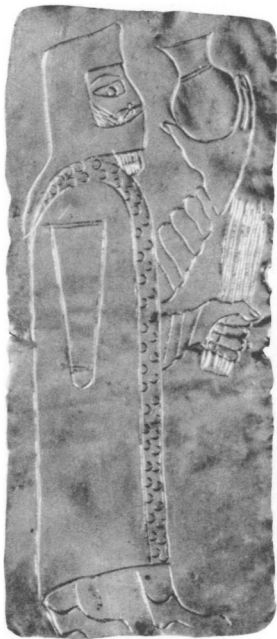
1. For a recent discussion of the barsom, see M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden, 1982) I, p. 167, II, pp. 38–39; and P. Thieme, “Vorzarathustrisches bei den Zarathustriern,” *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 108 (1957) pp. 72–75. For an identification of the barsom on objects from the Oxus treasure, see O. M. Dalton, *The Treasure of the Oxus* (London, 1926) p. xxvi and pls. II:1 (silver statuette); XIII:2 (gold statuette); XIV, XV (gold plaques; Figures 1, 2). See especially Dalton’s remarks (p. 19) concerning the difficulty of identifying barsom for figures that are clearly of a nonpriestly character.

2. P. Calmeyer, “Barsombündel im 8. und 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr.,” *Wandlungen: Studien zur antiken und neueren Kunst. Festschrift E. Homann-Wedeking* (Waldsassen, 1975) pp. 11–15, pl. 1. For other publications of this plaque, see H.-J. Kellner, “Ein neuer Medallion-Typus aus Urartu,” *Situla* 14/15 (1974) p. 50, pl. 3; *Urartu: Ein wiederentdeckter Rivale Assyriens* (Munich, 1976) no. 145, pl. 7; T. Kendall, “Two Bronze Belts and a Mirror,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 75 (1977) p. 33, fig. 3; and O. White Muscarella, *Notable Acquisitions 1975–1979* (MMA, New York, 1979) p. 10, who rightly expresses his reservations about the identification of these rods as barsom, citing the absence of evidence, textual or otherwise, for their use in Urartu.

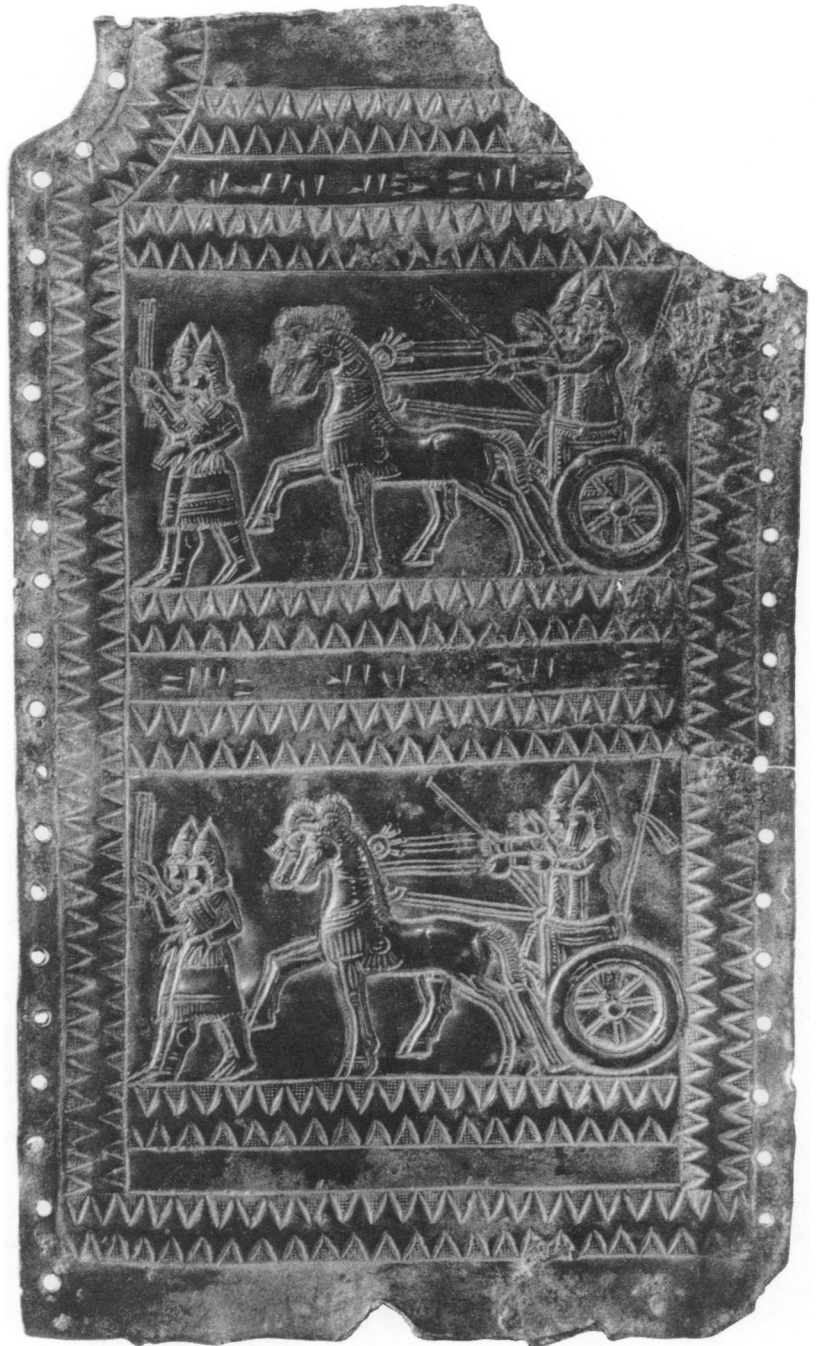
3. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, II, pp. 38–39.

4. Helmet of Argishti I: G. Azarpay, *Urartian Art and Artifacts: A Chronological Study* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1968) pls. 10–13; helmet of Sarduri II: *ibid.*, pls. 16, 17; quiver of Sarduri II: *ibid.*, pl. 21; cf. also a belt in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts: Kendall, “Two Bronze Belts,” p. 33, fig. 4.

1. Plaque, Achaemenid, 5th–4th centuries B.C.; reportedly from the Oxus River Valley. Gold, H. 5.9 cm. London, British Museum, B.M. No. 123949 (photo: British Museum)



2. Plaque, Achaemenid, 5th–4th centuries B.C.; reportedly from the Oxus River Valley. Gold, H. 4.95 cm. London, British Museum, B.M. No. 123970 (photo: British Museum)

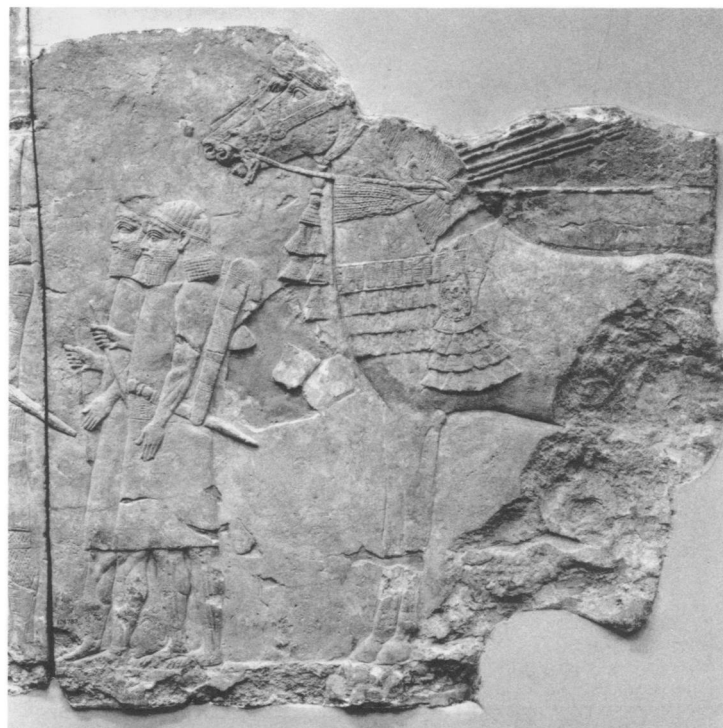


3. Plaque, Urartian, 8th or early 7th century B.C. Bronze, H. 15.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1976.5

rendered in rough perspective. The suggestion is supported by a detail visible in the upper composition: extending below the hand of the nearer figure are the ends of two sticks which are noticeably out of alignment with the three that appear above the hand of his companion. As Calmeyer points out, a seal impression from Toprak Kale illustrates a very similar scene, with the two advancing figures delineated in file rather than as an overlapping pair.<sup>5</sup> Although very cursorily rendered, the object held by each is denoted by a single or a double stroke;<sup>6</sup> there is certainly no indication that the artist meant to suggest a bundle of rods.

If they are not barsom, what other explanation can be offered regarding the significance of these multiple sticks? A comparison with Neo-Assyrian reliefs may provide a clue. A staff consisting of two sticks held together can be found in reliefs dating to the time of Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.) and after,<sup>7</sup> where it is carried by the last official (regularly a eunuch) in procession before the king; the official's function, as Julian Reade plausibly maintains, may correspond to that of royal usher, perhaps to be identified with the *ša pān ekalli* mentioned in Assyrian texts as controlling access to the king.<sup>8</sup> More important, a staff is regularly carried by each of the two grooms who march directly in front of the king's chariot in procession scenes from the time of Sennacherib, thus offering a direct parallel with the Urartian composition (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> Two grooms, shown standing with double sticks in hand before a table supporting the king's saddle, can also be clearly identified on the banquet relief of Assurbanipal (Figure 5).<sup>10</sup>

A ceremonial, *secular* function is thus suggested for the marching figures on the Urartian plaque. The



4. Relief, Neo-Assyrian, Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.); from Nineveh. Limestone. London, British Museum, B.M. No. 124783 (photo: British Museum)

5. Relief, Neo-Assyrian, Assurbanipal (668–626 B.C.); from Nineveh. Limestone. Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, VA 969 (photo: after Meyer, *Altorientalischer Denkmäler*)



5. B. B. Piotrovskii, *Vanskovo Tsarstvo* (Moscow, 1959) p. 152, fig. 16; Calmeyer, "Barsombündel," p. 12, fig. 2.

6. Admittedly it is difficult to infer too much from the published sketch.

7. J. E. Reade, "The Neo-Assyrian Court and Army: Evidence from the Sculptures," *Iraq* 34:2 (1972) p. 95.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., pp. 98ff. These staves may be rendered individually as in Figure 4 or paired in close perspective so as to resemble a double staff (E. F. Weidner, *Die Reliefs der assyrischen Könige, Archiv für Orientforschung* supp. 4 [Berlin, 1939] p. 31, fig. 29 [here following the royal chariot], and p. 61, fig. 53).

10. G. R. Meyer, *Altorientalische Denkmäler im Vorderasiatischen Museum zu Berlin* (Leipzig, 1965) pl. 160.



6. Relief, Neo-Assyrian, Sargon II (722–705 B.C.); from Khorsabad. Limestone. London, British Museum, B.M. No. 118828 (photo: British Museum)

stafflike object that each holds aloft may be interpreted as an insignia or symbol of rank (perhaps associated with the monitoring of access to the king) rather than as a cult object, for which there is no support in the written records or in the iconography of the scene itself.

Concerning the date of the plaque, attention is drawn to the inscription written above each of the panels: "From the arsenal of Argishti." Since the name is presented here without patronymic, the possibilities are reduced to two kings of that name, Argishti I (786–764 B.C.) and Argishti II (714–685 B.C.). The obvious correspondences in style and subject matter with decorated belts and helmets bearing the inscriptions of Argishti I and his successor Sarduri II (764–730 B.C.) render an attribution to the former an attractive one.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, two details in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs (if such comparisons can be consistently relied upon for an indication of Urartian date)<sup>12</sup> may suggest a later dating. One of these details is the staff mentioned above, which, as already noted, first occurs in the reliefs of Sennacherib and which, as Reade points out, appears to be a seventh-century innovation.<sup>13</sup> The second detail is the plumed ornament adorning the headstalls of the two chariot horses. The ornament is an inverted lunate crest, a type that first occurs in Assyrian art in the palace reliefs of Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) and becomes particularly common in the reliefs of his successors (Figure 6).<sup>14</sup> Both of these details suggest a dating for the plaque in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.; thus, an attribution to Argishti II would best conform to the chronological indications suggested by the Assyrian reliefs.

11. See note 4 above.

12. Here we may call attention to the eight-spoked wheel, which occurs in Urartian chariot representations beginning with Argishti I. In the Assyrian reliefs, however, it does not appear until the reign of Tiglath Pileser III (745–727 B.C.); see B. Hrouda, *Die Kulturgeschichte des assyrischen Flachbildes* (Bonn, 1965) p. 95.

13. Reade, "The Neo-Assyrian Court and Army," p. 99.

14. T. H. Madhlom, *The Chronology of Neo-Assyrian Art* (London, 1970) p. 22, pl. VIII:2,3,9,10.