

Symbols of Salvation? – Function, Semantics and Social Context of Early Bronze Age Ritual Equipment From Central Anatolia¹

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Abstract: *The following contribution re-evaluates some well known metal items from the central Anatolian Early Bronze Age, commonly referred to as “ceremonial standards” or “sistra”. The enormous popularity and even over-familiarity of these extraordinary objects needs to be contrasted with what we actually know about their original function, social context and eventual role as elaborate funerary gifts. This paper therefore aims to critically reappraise and re-evaluate the numerous contributions made on this matter in order to discuss their function and/or cultural affiliation, and in doing so propose some further considerations regarding their actual meaning and social context in the light of recent research.*

One distinctive aspect of Early Bronze Age Central Anatolia’s rich material heritage is owed to a group of peculiar metal items that cannot be squeezed in traditional utilitarian categories such as containers, tools, or weapons. These are the so called “ceremonial standards,” massive artefacts of bronze, copper-arsenic, or silver, sometimes abstract in shape, sometimes theriomorphic (Fig. 2-4), and which have substantially forged our common impression of the “sidereal hour” in early Anatolian metalwork. They first came to light thanks to the utmost importance given to the ancient historical and philological disciplines by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic. His desire to “[explore the] matchless treasures of ancient civilisations buried in almost all corners of our country,”² gave way to an unprecedented wave of pre-classical research missions, under the auspices of the newly founded Turkish Historical Society.³ Within that intellectual context, excavations at the site of Alaca Höyük, in the district of Çorum, were initiated in 1935 upon the advice of German archaeologist Kurt Bittel,⁴ and 13 elaborate cist graves excavated there between 1936 and 1939, the so-called “Royal Tombs”, by far exceeded the expectations of the early generation of Turkish archaeologists working at the site. Apart from other luxury items like gold and silver jewellery, vessels and weapons, the burials contained an overall total of 39 metal “standards”, at that time entirely unparalleled in design, and stunningly innovative in their casting and alloying techniques (Fig. 3 and 4).⁵ Moreover, that fact that all these items come from a professionally conducted, well observed and well published excavation made them indispensable witnesses of an ever-evolving and dynamic stage in Anatolian history towards the end of the 3rd millennium BC.

As such, the results of the early campaigns at Alaca, revealing a rich pre-classical heritage in the largely unexplored Anatolian heartland, coincided rather well with the thrust of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s “Anatolist” cultural and ideological programme: to communicate to the citizens of the young Turkish republic that the cultural splendour of their home-country reached far

¹ The following contribution is a much revised and enlarged version of my presentation given at the „Cult and Sanctuary through the Ages“ conference in Částa-Papiernička, November 17 2007. Once again, it is a great pleasure for me to cordially thank the organizers, especially *professores* Mária Novotná and Klára Kuzmová for their kind invitation and hospitality; I am likewise indebted to Tayfun Yıldırım, Ankara University, for crucial information about some less known literature, and Julian Bennett, Bilkent University, for proofreading the text. *Impavidi progrediamur!*

² Özgüç 1982, XVII.

³ Özgüç 1982, XV-XX; Başgelen 1998, 5; Özdoğan 2005, 34-9.

⁴ Özyar 1999, 80; Özyar 2000, 101; Bittel 1997, 137.

⁵ Arik 1937; Koşay 1938; 1951.



Fig. 1. The old municipal symbol of Ankara (Sıhhiye district), and an "Eti" chocolate bar, with the corporate icon in shape of an Alaca Höyük standard.

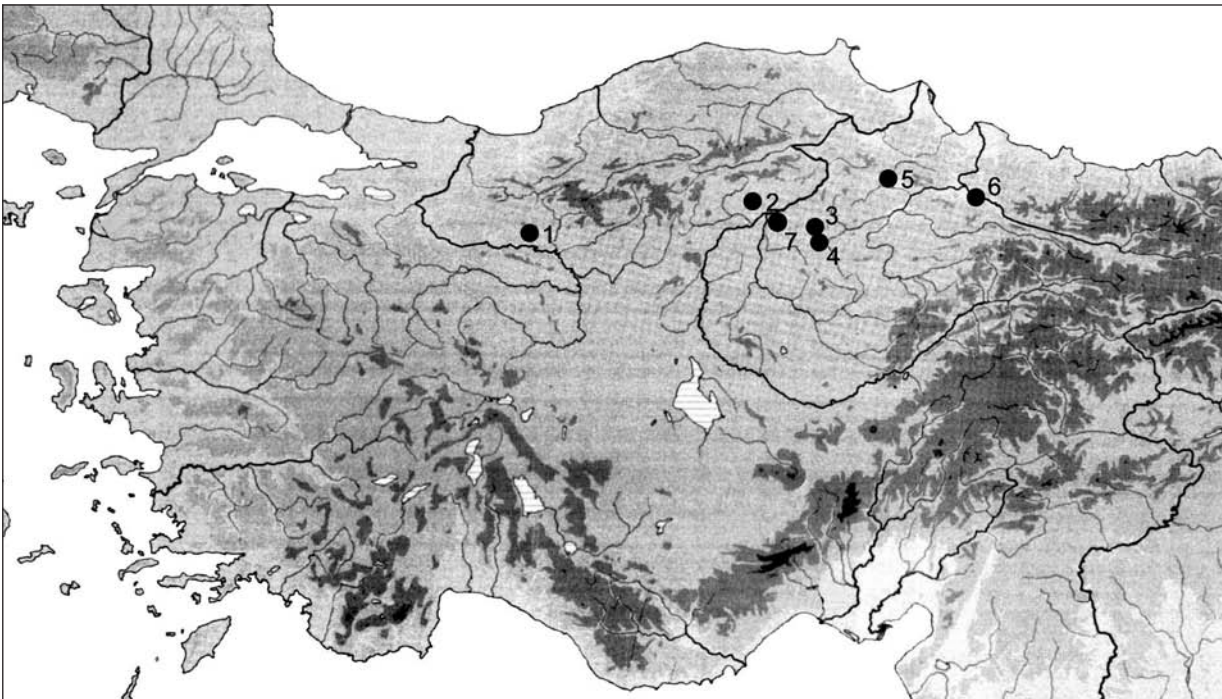


Fig. 2. Findspots of Central Anatolian Early Bronze Age ceremonial standards mentioned in the text: 1 - Nallıhan; 2 - Balıbağ; 3 - Kalınkaya; 4 - Alaca Höyük; 5 - Oymaağaç/Göller; 6 - Horoztepe; 7 - Resuloğlu.

back in history, predating the better-known remnants of the Hellenistic-Roman impact by several thousand years.⁶ And as an echo of cultural politics in the thirties, best characterised by Atatürk's wholehearted promotion of archaeology,⁷ those Alaca standards, as a powerful and highly expressive symbol of "Anatolian civilization", were incorporated into contemporary

⁶ Özdoğan 2005, 30-1.

⁷ Özdoğan 1998, 118-9.

popular Turkish culture, being used, for example as the first municipal symbol of Turkey's modern capital of Ankara, or as the corporate icon of a Turkish sweets company (Fig. 1). However, the enormous popularity and even over-familiarity of these extraordinary items needs to be contrasted with what we actually know about their original function, social context and eventual role as elaborate funerary gifts. The following contribution therefore aims to critically reappraise and re-evaluate the numerous contributions made on this matter in order to discuss their function and/or cultural affiliation, and in doing so propose some further considerations regarding their actual meaning and social context in the light of recent research.

The Alaca standards – a short note on their chronology

Although not the primary aim of this paper, a few words should be said about the approximate temporal setting of the 13 “Royal Tombs” at Alaca that contained ceremonial equipment, especially as this problem has again been addressed in two recent articles. Our standards were associated with cist graves, 12 of them rectangular, one [“Grave B”] trapezoidal, covered with wooden panels. These 13 graves were located in the southeastern section of the mound that was transformed into an Old Hittite centre in the later 2nd millennium BC, and were dug into the slope at the eastern end of a west-east depression,⁸ therefore giving the impression of a theatre-like show of funeral architecture. The fact that the graves were dug into a sloping mound now causes some serious uncertainty over their precise stratigraphic position within the earlier occupation history of Alaca Höyük, especially as a vast area was additionally levelled due to construction works in Hittite times, further obscuring the already complicated stratigraphic context, with an ominous “burnt layer” attested in level 5. More specifically, the peculiar situation of the “burial theatre”, with the graves entrenched along a sloping surface, profoundly biases any attempt at “traditional” dating on the basis of the vertical stratigraphy. This important point has been widely neglected in previous publications about the stratigraphy of the “Royal Tombs” at Alaca, and the diagnostic value of the “associated” pottery,⁹ although it has recently been reconsidered by Aslı Özyar.¹⁰ Furthermore, finds of grey Iron Age pottery (erroneously identified as “Chalcolithic” in previous publications), at depths of up to 8 m, testifies to heavy disturbances and even looting activities hereabouts in post-Bronze Age times.¹¹ In other words, a stratigraphy-based chronological evaluation of the “Royal Tombs” based on the dating of deposits from associated strata would seem to be a complex and difficult (if not impossible) approach.

With regard to the graves themselves, attempts at establishing their relative and absolute date on the basis of their associated burial gifts is also a difficult issue, and one subject to much debate. Quite simply, despite their excellent original documentation, many of the associated metal artefacts – our standards included – are essentially unparalleled, and therefore difficult to correlate with datable material from any neighbouring regions. The early 3rd millennium date for this material proposed by Ruth Amiran,¹² for example, is largely based on the inspection of a single gold plaque decorated in repoussée technique, and has not found favour in the scientific community. Consequently, the pottery, already extensively discussed by Winfried Orthmann,¹³ remains the most diagnostic, and most reliable, means of establishing a chronological “fix” for the burials. That being the case, finds like the pitcher from “Grave K”,¹⁴ a grave considered as “old” or “early” in the sequence on the basis of the “sloping” stratigraphy, take on a greater significance in the light of the good counterparts in the ceramic assemblages from more recently excavated and more precisely dated mounds such as Demircihüyük in the Eskişehir plain.¹⁵

⁸ Özyar 1999, 80.

⁹ Cf. Orthmann 1963, 32-4; Huot 1982, 54-65.

¹⁰ Özyar 1999; Gerber 2006, 379.

¹¹ Gerber 2006, 383.

¹² Amiran 1983, 49.

¹³ Orthmann 1963.

¹⁴ Orthmann 1963, 38; Pl. 50,11/108.

¹⁵ Cf. Efe 1988, 55-9; 110.

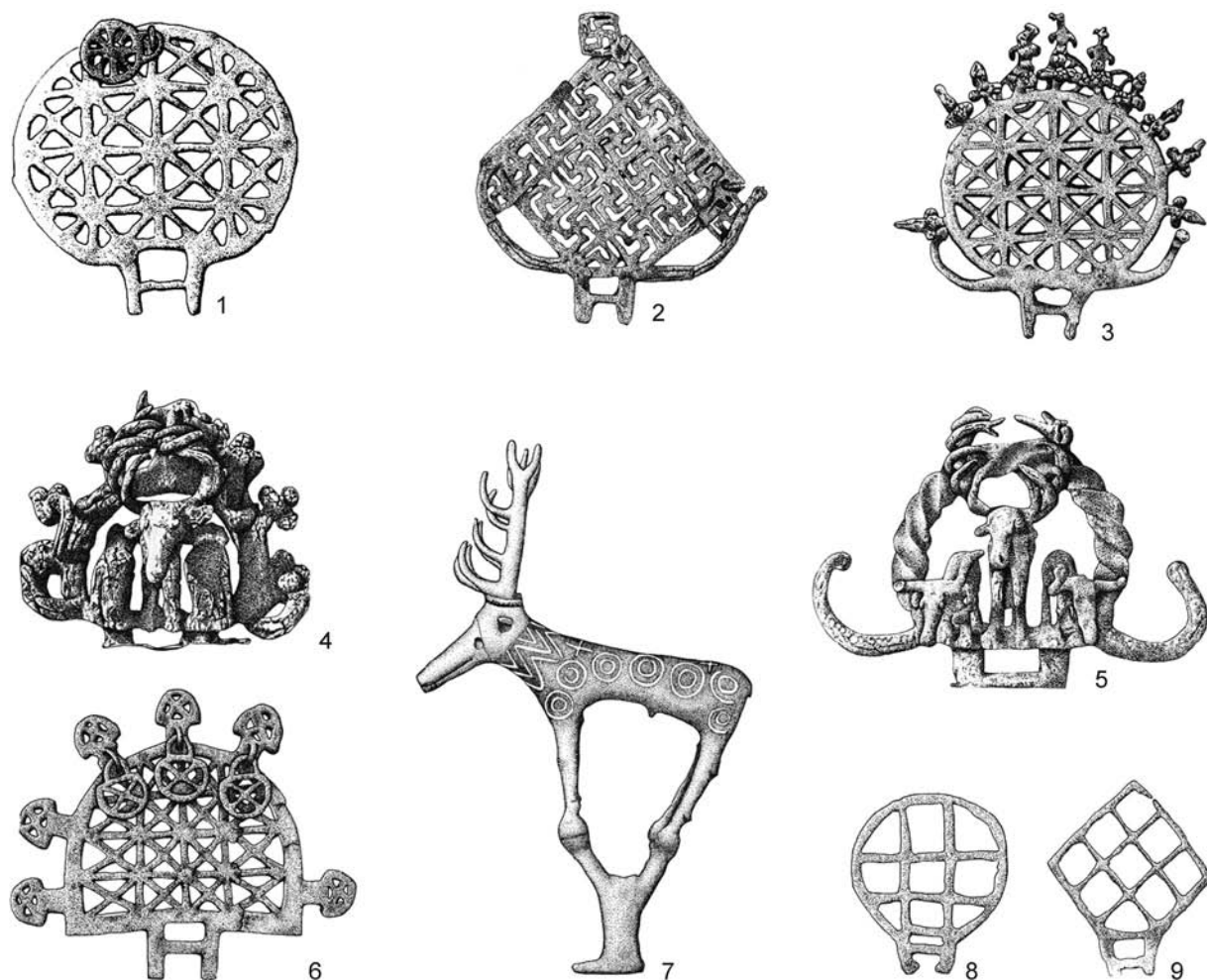


Fig. 3. Selection of abstract and zoomorphic standards from the Alaca Höyük burials (after Müller-Karpe 1974).

This allows to establish an upper limit at around 2,300 BC cal. for the “early” graves, with the youngest burials to be dated around 2,000/1,950 BC.¹⁶ These roughly 300 years at the end of the 3rd millennium BC, calculated to be the maximum chronological span for the 13 “Royal Tombs” at Alaca, would then coincide with the Early Bronze Age phase III according to Anatolian chronology.

Caucasian wagon drivers? – Considerations about the possible secular function of the Alaca standards

The groundbreaking discovery of the 13 “Royal Tombs” at Alaca, the largely unique character of the metal findings provoked much discussion concerning their cultural affiliation, which cumulated in contrasting studies about the possible original function of the enigmatic theomorphic and abstract standards. The Turkish excavators, at first being very cautious in their statements about their possible origin and function, initially agreed on their having a rather poorly defined symbolic function as “sun discs” or “-standards”, on the basis that some standards had a lattice-shaped structure.¹⁷ Kurt Bittel, however, thought that these items were some kind of canopy attachments,¹⁸ an idea that was later adopted by Mahmut Akok for his

¹⁶ Efe 1988, 117; Zimmermann 2006b, 217-8.

¹⁷ Koşay 1936-7.

¹⁸ Bittel 1950, 22; Orthmann 1967, 35 with footnote 8.

famous artwork depicting an imaginary Alaca burial ceremony (Fig. 5). Then in 1957, Tahsin Özgüç and Mahmut Akok, in their publication of material allegedly and securely coming from Horoztepe, argued that some of the standards, at least the ones with smaller metal pendants loosely attached to the main frame (cf. Fig. 2: 1; 2: 6), might have been used rather like the “*sistrum*” of Classical antiquity, as noise-making devices in sacral processions.¹⁹

Although the idea that these might be devices comparable to a *sistrum* gained some currency in the academic world, not all scholars were favourable towards this interpretation. Instead some began to discuss the possibility that these ritual items served as metal attachments for wheeled vehicles. The proposal was first positively evaluated by J. Mellaart²⁰ and then broadly discussed by Winfried Orthmann in 1967,²¹ and was subsequently re-stated by Börker-Klähn and Krafzik in 1986.²² More to the point, Orthmann also further developed a hypothesis (already articulated by Hamit Z. Koşay) that the Alaca graves displayed some Caucasian affiliations, identifying them as wagon burials. Part of the argument was based on the presence of the bucrania and long bones that were placed onto the wooden panels that covered the stone cists, which were considered as *pars pro toto* relicts of draught animals.²³ More specifically Orthmann argued that the standards having served as draught pole figurines, similar to Mesopotamian and, more probably, Caucasian kurgan burial traditions. Indeed the Caucasian Maikop culture has provided examples of analogous theriomorphic standards with similar motifs, although it happens to be the case that their original purpose is also found to be equally enigmatic.²⁴ However, the chronological discrepancy between these two cultural entities has widened dramatically over the past decades, with the apogee of the Maikop horizon now firmly set in the late 4th millennium BC:²⁵ and in any case, aside from some resemblances in animal-shaped artefacts, very little, if any similarities between the Maikop and Alaca inventories are attested.

As it is, the arguments and interpretations initially proposed by Mellaart and more broadly formulated by Winfried Orthmann have again been re-stated in an essay published by Günther Mansfeld in 2001.²⁶ Apart from a brief discussion of the complicated vertical stratigraphy associated with the “Royal Tombs” at Alaca (cf. *supra*), this essay is almost identical to Orthmann’s in its approach, although it does add new evidence for theriomorphic standards and wagon burials from Mesopotamia and (Trans)caucasia. Even so, despite the presentation of fresh evidence, the basic objections for seeing the Alaca material as broadly contemporary (and thus culturally akin) with these analogues still remain. The fact is that most of the material presented by the author, especially those artefacts presumably used as draught-pole decorations or bridle rings,²⁷ fit much better into a late 2nd millennium BC context, not the concluding centuries of the 3rd. And in any case, his idea of the associated chisels and (flat) axes as being part of special “emergency” tool kits for wagon repair is a rather poor foundation on which to base his vehicle theory, even if such items are attested at accepted wagon graves at Kiş and Ur.²⁸ The relative abundance of these artefacts as burial gifts – no more and no less – in most better equipped Bronze Age burials effectively negates any arguments that they might have been reserved for such a special purpose.

¹⁹ Özgüç and Akok 1957, 212 with footnote 7.

²⁰ Mellaart 1966, 155-6.

²¹ Orthmann 1967.

²² Börker-Klähn and Krafzik 1986; while the authors generally adopt Orthmann’s thesis, their focus lies more on a suspected fertility symbolism of the standards, which they consider to be a common phenomenon in Anatolian Early Bronze Age portable art (Börker-Klähn and Krafzik 1986, 55-7; cf. also *infra*).

²³ Orthmann 1967, 52-3.

²⁴ Scholars such as Koşay, Maxwell-Hyslop and more recently Akurgal and Bilgi refer to exactly these Maikop “parallels” (cf. Koşay 1936, 145-6; 153; Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 46-7; Akurgal 1989; Bilgi 2003: 56-7).

²⁵ Chernykh 1992, 67-9.

²⁶ Mansfeld 2001.

²⁷ Cf. esp. Mansfeld 2001, 30 Fig. 8 with bridle rings allegedly from Boğazköy (Fig. 8,1) and Luristan (Fig. 8,2.3); further 35-6, Fig. 10.11.

²⁸ Mansfeld 2001, 39 with footnote 35.

Moreover, while Mansfeld also adduced the presence of the bucrania and long bones onto the wooden panels that covered the stone cists as relicts of draught animals,²⁹ it needs to be stressed that this material was indeed exclusively found *on top* of the graves after they were sealed with wooden planks, not *inside* the cists, and therefore quite different from securely attested Transcaucasian wagon burials where the draught animal remains are put inside the grave pit, together with pottery and small finds.³⁰ The fact is that remains of bull or cattle, and usually their skulls, can also be observed at contemporary pithos burials from the Early Bronze Age cemetery of Resuloğlu, in the same province of Çorum,³¹ giving the impression of being leftovers from a *symposion* or burial feast celebrated by the bereaved. Such an interpretation would fit with the assumed social setting at central places like Alaca, with undoubtedly the representatives of early elites being buried in the 13 elaborate cists, and given a farewell feasting ceremony that would have matched their social status while alive.

There are, in fact, two more objections that need to be raised against the wagon theory as first elaborated by Orthmann and then re-stated by Mansfeld. To begin with, if such highly elaborate standards were indeed a distinctive element in a contemporary Anatolian wagon design, we would expect to see them depicted pictorially or to exist as miniature models in Early and Middle Bronze Age contexts in Anatolia.³² Yet they do not. More to the point, another argument against the thesis that the Alaca standards served as figural wagon or draught pole decorations is quite simply that not even the tiniest remains of any wooden wagons or their other metal fittings have ever been attested at Alaca Höyük. This point takes on a greater importance given that not only were the excavations in the thirties professionally conducted to the highest contemporary levels, but especially as the wooden covers of some of the “Royal Tombs” were well preserved:³³ if wagons or elements of these had indeed existed in association with these burials one would expect some evidence for these on top or inside the burial cists. We can be certain that the excavators would not miss the organic or non-organic remains of disc wheels, yokes, axles or parts of the wagon body itself, no matter how small or deteriorated.³⁴ In short, it is time to lay this wagon hypothesis to rest, and along with it the concept of “Royal” Anatolian wagon-drivers leaving Alaca to traverse the Central Anatolian landscape in their vehicles of Caucasian inspiration.



Fig. 4. Parts of the inventory of Alaca Höyük burial A, arranged 1937 “in situ” for the History Exhibition of the Turkish Historical Society (after Özyar 1999).

²⁹ Orthmann 1967, 52-3; Mansfeld 2001, 39.

³⁰ Cf. Mansfeld 2001, 38, Fig. 12.

³¹ Yıldırım 2006, 7.

³² Cf. Littauer and Crouwel 1973, Pl. XXXIV-XLIVA; Özgen 1986; Kulakoğlu 2003, for Southeast Anatolian metal and clay wagon models tentatively dated to the late 3rd/early 2nd millennium BC (Kulakoğlu 2003, 69); cf. also Börker-Klähn and Krafzik 1986, 47 with footnote 2.

³³ Cf. Mansfeld 2001, Fig. 5,1.3.4.

³⁴ Even Orthmann considers the entire absence of distinctive wagon parts from the “Royal Tombs”, despite the good preservation of the wooden grave covers, as somehow “unsatisfying” (cf. Orthmann 1967, 36 with footnote 12a).

A “Great Goddess” at Alaca? The debateable “divine” symbolism of the ceremonial standards

The unique and exotic character of our Alaca standards at the time of their discovery not only caused debate over their possible practical function as architectural or vehicle decorations, but also inspired many scholars to contemplate their possible sociological nature and deeper symbolism (cf. *supra*). Many then and later felt tempted to go much further and decipher not their purpose, but the underlying religious or transcendental meaning of the abstract ornamentation and naturalistic motifs of the “standards.”³⁵ Thus the expressions “sun standards”, “disques solaires”, or “Sonnenscheiben”, which became almost synonymous with the Alaca standards in most museum guides and other apocryphic literature, and a concept that first came to prominence shortly after the initial preliminary reports on the progress of the Alaca excavations appeared.³⁶ Their equation with a celestial body or the sun itself was obviously generated by their form and especially by the lattice-, sometimes cross- or even swastika-shaped designs of their central areas (Fig. 3: 1.2), but to an extent also reflects attempts at relating these objects to (much) later Hittite sacred texts, cult inventories or –symbolism.³⁷ There is little doubt that some scholars saw evidence for some possible “Proto-Hittite” elites being buried at Alaca Höyük, their graves displaying a ritual symbolism that would be later adopted by their imperial Hittite successors – even though there was then, as now, a complete absence of any equally elaborate Hittite burials to compare them with, by contrast with a substantial number of “regular” Hittite burials³⁸.

More to the point, the unfortunate fact remains that the individuals of Alaca were buried during the final stages of Anatolia’s illiterate period, leaving no written documents that could shed some light on the ideological framework of this Central Anatolian community. Thus while it appears that many aspects of the Hittite pantheon were largely borrowed from the belief systems of earlier Anatolian and Near Eastern ethnicities,³⁹ how and to what degree the ritual traditions of late 3rd millennium Central Anatolia are reflected in late 2nd millennium Hittite religion, at least in terms of an unbroken continuity, remains largely speculative. Yet regardless of the rather limited and dispersed (and debateable) sources for such a complex Anatolian Early Bronze Age ritual system as that so obviously represented at Alaca, speculation on the “ritual” associations of the Alaca standards climaxed with an essay by the late Manfred Korfmann, published in the 1986 proceedings of the Turkish History Congress and quoted (or its content adopted) ever since.⁴⁰ Going much further than any previous commentator, Korfmann saw a direct connection between the Alaca standards and the “Great Goddess”, in the form of a “localized” version of the Mesopotamian/ Near Eastern sky deity Inanna, represented here on these artefacts in all her earthly and celestial aspects. He expressed a firm conviction that

³⁵ Cf. Börker-Klähn and Krafzik 1986, where an attempt is made to link EBA Trojan face-urns, the standards from Alaca, and a host of other items, such as the early 2nd millennium lead figurine moulds from Kültepe-Karum Kanesh as representatives of some (rather unlikely?) “pan-Anatolian”, female-based fertility cult.

³⁶ Koşay 1936-7.

³⁷ Cf. Gonnert-Bağana 1967; Erkut 1992; also H. Baltacıoğlu 2006, for while challenging the theory that Alaca Höyük can be equated with the Hittite city Arinna, named after the Hittite sun goddess, reference is made to the Alaca standards as symbolic nutshells for later Hittite symbolism (Baltacıoğlu 2006, 130-1). Indeed, despite being firmly embedded in a Pre-Hittite sequence and cultural environment, the Alaca standards are still often erroneously referred to as “Hittite” products.

³⁸ So far all central Anatolian cemeteries known from the (early) 2nd millennium BC consist of rather modest pithos-, cist- and flatgraves, maintaining traditions that were already well established in the 3rd millennium BC (cf. Emre 1978, 123-32 for an older overview; a more recent study (Akyurt 1998) suffers from too many technical and methodological shortcomings to be recommended). In any case these cemeteries represent the burials places of the dispersed rural population of the early Hittite empire, with only very little (at least pottery) to associate them with common “Hittite” fashion (Emre 1978, 133-7). Where the elites from the emerging urban centres were buried, and/or why they are archaeologically invisible to date, remains a mystery.

³⁹ Haas 1994, 69-71.

⁴⁰ Korfmann 1986; recently referred to in Özyar 2000, 105.

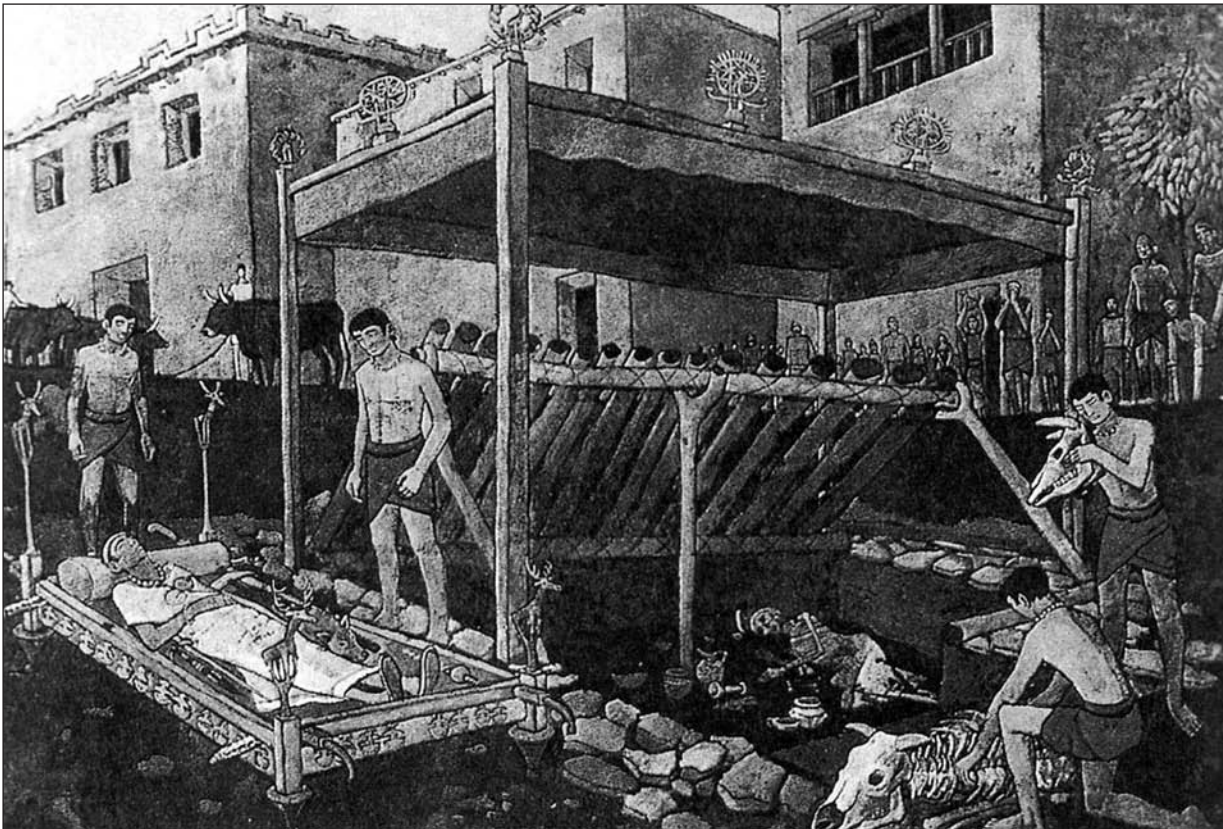


Fig. 5. Mahmut Akok's fictive reconstruction of a burial ceremony at Alaca Höyük (after Temizsoy s.a.).

“almost all standards [represent] the ever-sought ‘mistress of the sky’ [...]”,⁴¹ and that “[we can] recognize symbols of consecration and blessing [...]” in these objects.⁴² Furthermore, stylistic details like the cross- or lattice-type motive applied on many of the abstract standards are set into close relation with specific aspects, qualities or actions of the sky goddess, especially on her way down into the underworld, taking off her *insignia* of power.⁴³

Is this really possible? Could it be that despite the complete absence of any contemporary evidence supporting such a far-ranging assumption, one should unreservedly assume that the community at Alaca Höyük had a not only a very detailed knowledge and understanding of Mesopotamian cultic tales and traditions, but were also able to translate very specific aspects of the complex Inanna canon into some unique symbolic language? The answer has to be “Highly unlikely”. These presuppositions are counteracted by the obvious scarcity of material features at Alaca or its vicinity that can be determined as genuine Mesopotamian innovations. With the exception of a few selected jewellery items,⁴⁴ the majority of the site’s metal artefacts – the primary artefact by which to trace any possible Mesopotamian influences on external regions – show neither any technical nor typological resemblances with, for example, the broadly contemporary products of the Ur-III dynasty. The fact remains that even though some of the more elaborate Alaca metalworks are highly innovative works of casting from a metallurgical point of view, especially some of the bull statuettes with gold and silver coating, they are *local*

⁴¹ “Wir sind der Meinung, daß fast alle Standarten die allseits gesuchte ‘Himmelsherrin’ [...] wiedergeben” (Korfmann 1986, 161).

⁴² “In den Standarten erkennen wir Symbole der Weihe und Segnung [...]” (Korfmann 1986, 163).

⁴³ “Die gekreuzten Linien, diese wichtigen Insignien ihrer Macht, von denen sich die ‘Himmelsherrin’ wohl nicht von ungefähr erst zuletzt beim Gang in die Unterwelt trennen wollte [...] finden wir [...] an der zentralsten Stelle, inmitten der Standarten” (Korfmann 1986, 162).

⁴⁴ Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 44-5.

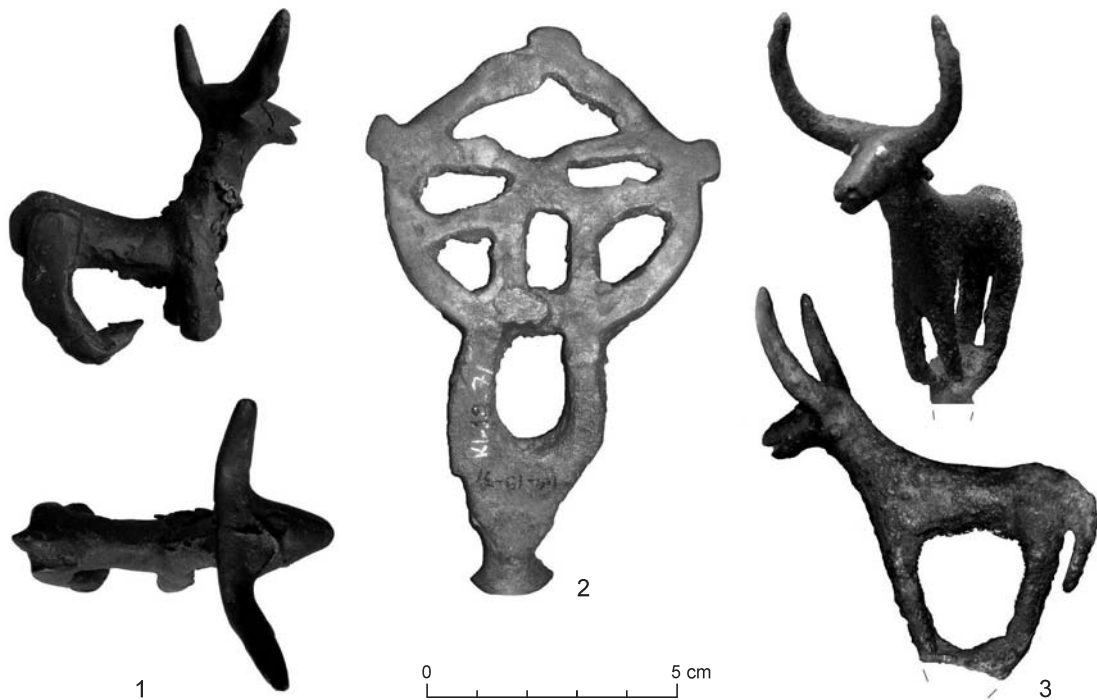


Fig. 6. Bull statuettes (1,3) and abstract standard from Kalinkaya-Toptaştepe burials.

masterpieces.⁴⁵ More specifically, there is no clear evidence for any large-scale and robust Mesopotamian impact on Alaca, and certainly not on the scale that surely would be expected in a community that was adopting the qualities of a major Near Eastern deity to such a holistic degree in their own belief system.

Heraldic insignia? – A secular alternative

Even if the interpretation of our standards as sun-discs or symbols will never be completely abandoned, the possibility that they had a strongly secular facet has likewise not been entirely ignored. Hence the recent study by Aslı Özyar, in which she “deconstructed” the standards to distil three basic disc shapes that could be combined with different cross types, wreaths or animal motifs to produce the artefacts as they now are.⁴⁶ Moreover, she believes that these relevant elements and motifs were combined in a precise and programmed fashion to produce each standard with a unique design appropriate for the individuals buried in each of the 13 elaborate graves. In other words they are to be understood as a distinctive “identity card” or something akin to the heraldic emblem of the individual concerned.⁴⁷

Symbols of Salvation?

Whatever the individual and collective merits of the various hypotheses outlined above, it needs to be remembered that the Alaca standards do not exist in total isolation, for they do have their counterparts and analogues in this central part of modern Turkey, both in the immediate and remote vicinity of Alaca Höyük itself. Unfortunately, however, in almost every case the provenance of these analogues is uncertain, obscure or even unknown: the great majority of these items are either museum accessions of doubtful origin or items that were

⁴⁵ Zimmermann 2006b, 215-6.

⁴⁶ Özyar 2000.

⁴⁷ Özyar 2000, 111.

confiscated from the illegal art market,⁴⁸ not artefacts discovered through controlled excavation in secure contexts. Even the best known counterparts to the Alaca standards, the similar items from “Horoztepe”, can only be provisionally assigned to that site as they were dug up illegally and only by chance discovered and then confiscated by the authorities, with contradictory information being given about their place of discovery.⁴⁹ In fact apart from the Alaca material itself, then other than a few less well known items from Horoztepe, including an abstract figure,⁵⁰ and a simple wreath-shaped item with a central deer figurine from a partly looted grave at the already severely damaged necropolis of Balıbağ, Çorum,⁵¹ the overwhelming majority of these items cannot be (re)placed into anything approaching their original context. Needless to say that this deplorable situation limits our abilities at achieving a better understanding of the social or chronological context in which these standards and analogous items were displayed, consumed, and finally associated with the dead. That said, some new but “old” evidence from a small village settlement and cemetery of Early Bronze Age date at Kalinkaya-Toptaştepe, in the immediate neighbourhood of Alaca Höyük, might help us better understand the social and ritual value of our “ceremonial” standards as this was perceived by communities in the periphery of centres such as Alaca Höyük.

The site of Kalinkaya-Toptaştepe, just 5 kms northeast of Alaca Höyük, was excavated in two short rescue seasons (1971 and 1973) on behalf of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations Ankara. The evidence showed that it was originally settled in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age times, a small associated cemetery at the foot of “Toptaştepe” containing pithos-, cist- and simple earth graves of essentially late 3rd millennium BC date.⁵² Most of the metal inventories recovered from the burials here comprise the traditional range of jewellery, tools and weapons, but three also contained ceremonial items, namely a crude bull statuette, a bull figurine with a silver or arsenic coating, and a small, rather crudely shaped abstract standard with a central cross-motif (Fig. 6).⁵³ All of these items were originally found by grave-robbers, and then confiscated by local authorities, but while the exact provenance within the cemetery of the second of these items is unclear, the other two items could be firmly associated with simple earth graves that had only been partly damaged through looting activities.

At first and superficial glance these two artefacts might seem of little relevance to any discussion of the Alaca standards. After all, what is perhaps especially noteworthy about the crude bull statuette and the abstract standard are their careless finish, with the bronze surface left rough and uneven, as if a less skilled apprentice was attempting to copy the work of a professional metalsmith, like those on duty in neighbouring Alaca. The point being, of course, that the abstract standard at least is of some greater importance, since it obviously copies those better-finished items decorated with a simple cross-shaped motif. However, its frame does not end in two round or rectangular pegs, as is the case with the Alaca specimens (cf. Fig. 3): instead it has a Y-shaped handle ending in a knoblike projection. This detail might thus be seen as support for the idea that the Alaca standards were not originally attached to a massive wooden construct, such as a canopy or wagon, but equipped with either short handles or attached to long shaft so that they could be displayed and carried at special occasions. As such, the combination of their technical and symbolic quality and the identification of their original context transform these ostensibly simple items from Kalinkaya into a much-valued addition to the better-known

⁴⁸ Cf. Özgüç 1980, Pl. 2-4; 11-2 allegedly from the destroyed necropoleis of Oymaağaç/ Göller; further Muscarella 1974, 122; Muscarella 1988, 400-3; Abb. 527, 528, 530; also de Jesus 1980, 430, Fig. 24; 468-9, Pl. 15; 472-3, Pl. 17 and Keller 1996 for Anatolian finds of obscure origin in museum collections; cf. also Zimmermann 2006b, 214.

⁴⁹ The best known of the Horoztepe standards might actually come from a place much further west, allegedly “Nallıhan”, northwest of Ankara (cf. Zimmermann 2005).

⁵⁰ Cf. Özgüç and Akok 1958, 17-20; Taf. 2,4; 7,2; 9,1; 11;14,1 with statuettes and a fragmented abstract standard from a secure context.

⁵¹ Süel 1989, 150; 163, Fig. 20.

⁵² Zimmermann 2006a; Zimmermann in press.

⁵³ Zimmermann 2006a, 285-6; 305, Fig. 5; 310-1, Figs. 10.11.

and more technically accomplished assemblages from Alaca Höyük. To put it another way, the association of the Kalinkaya artefacts with simple flat graves, together with their much less well accomplished finish establishes them rather as the modest ritual equipment or prestige items of local (rural) communities than heraldic signs or elaborate religious icons restricted to isolated elites.

The Kalinkaya material shows how more research activity in the still barely investigated regions bordering the North and Northwest of Çorum district,⁵⁴ as well as the proper and careful publication of material from older excavations, might add better evidence with which to understand the ritual and social dimension of our ceremonial standards. However, as things stand our current impression is that the standards represent a genuine “Hatti” fashion of an indigenous Central Anatolian population prior to their incorporation into the centralised Hittite empire. An immediate connection to (Trans)caucasian customs or Mesopotamian beliefs cannot be accepted with the data currently available, although it should not (perhaps) be categorically rejected either. Nonetheless, until the discovery of archaeological evidence to support the hypothesis that our Central Anatolian standards were inspired by or derived from heavily Caucasian or Sumerian traditions – a possibility that is in my opinion rather unlikely – then the following comment made by late Machteld Mellink, one of the most intimate experts in Anatolian art and archaeology, remains valid until further notice: “The [Alaca standards] are so conventionalized as to be somewhat obscure to us in meaning, but they clearly belong to an established idiom of local symbols”.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ Cf. İpek and Zimmermann 2006, 49 for a recent account of research activities in the districts of Çorum and Çankırı.

⁵⁵ Mellink 1956, 46.

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