



An Evaluation on Ram-Shaped Tombstones with Model Chapels on their Back in Tbilisi, Georgia

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chapel.

Abstract

Ram has had an important place for different art themes in many parts of the world since early ages. Ram shaped sculptures and/or tombstones have been among the most common art works in the world, as well. Considering the Asian continent, it can be seen that ram shaped tombstones have emerged with similar purposes and with similar forms and decoration in many countries from Mongolia to Turkey. Taking into consideration the art works related to ram in Georgia, besides coming across ram-horn motif on many architectural structures, it is possible to see ram shaped tombstones in many places.

When considering ram-shaped art works in Georgia, it can be seen that the motif of ram has been widely used in the religious architecture as a decorative element. It appears that most of the sculptures are exhibited in the gardens of the museums in different places. Each ram shaped tomb stone in Georgia appears to be a masterpiece. Both the formal characteristics and different decorations on them have significant meanings. When examined, it can be seen that they not only reflect the belief and culture of the era, but also of the past.

In this notification; we will try to make a remark about the general thoughts and beliefs about ram and then make an evaluation about the ram shaped sculptures on which you can see model chapels in Tbilisi, Georgia.

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1. Introduction

Considering the early historical development of Georgia, it is suggested that Georgia history dates back to Early Stone Age. Its first settlements are thought to be the areas along the Black Sea coast and East Georgia. In 400 BC the Greek, in 8th-7th centuries BC Urartian and also the influence of Roman can be seen in this region. After that Byzantine influence continued. However, there was also the influence of Persian. From the 8th century Arabs and then in the 11th century Turks had influence in this region. Considering all this information, it is possible to say that Georgian was under the influence of many states and beliefs in Medieval Era.

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However, when having a look at the characteristics of the art works in Georgia, it can be seen that the influence of Christianity dominates.

Ram is one of the animals that have had a significant place in the lives of the communities both in ancient times and in divine religions, especially in Christianity and Islam. We can see this influence in art works in various forms and themes in the worldwide since ancient times. In this study, we have tried to mention about the beliefs in different periods and how they reached and effected the art works related to ram in the medieval era in Georgia.

2. Ram

“Ram and sheep” are among the earliest (10000 BC) domesticated animals. This extraordinary animal had an unbelievable effect on nomadic inhabitants as a consequence of being so intertwined with them. The effect of this animal on former nomadic people is likely to be not only a result of meeting their daily needs, but also likely to be conceived as different creatures with extraordinary powers.

2.1. The Bonds of Ram with Ancient Nomadic

The ram is one of the remarkable animals that has had close bonds with humanity since ancient times. Although nomadic people, firstly, hunted them and then domesticated them for nourishment and for other needs, over the course of time, different bonds were formed and they gained a meaning beyond being ordinary animals. They took part in their beliefs, culture, burial rituals, art and many more fields of their lives. In short, it can be said that human and animal bonds are as old as history and we can see a great influence of the animals on every field of life of human-being since ancient times, not only in a narrow boundary, but also worldwide. The general bonds and interactions are summarized as follows:

‘Interactions with animals shaped the world of the ancient people of the Near East: they shepherded flocks, guarded against dangerous wild animals, travelled long distances with the help of pack animals, hunted for subsistence and for sport, rode horses into battle, and marvelled at powerful beasts and exotic creatures from distant lands. Ritual observance, whether in the form of a sacrifice, a ceremonial hunt, or in the decoration of sacred objects, was deeply connected with the animal world’ (Benzel et al, 2010: 30).

Each creature has a purpose of being created. Ram also played an important and wide-ranging role in the life of peoples, especially nomadic. Although the bond between ram/sheep and human first originated in the needs of nourishment/food as in other animals, it can be seen that it went far beyond these needs in later periods:

‘The ram as a sacred animal/mythological character; the ancient stock-breeders valued the ram for his leadership qualities, perseverance, desire for dominance and fertility. These characteristics define his place in the cosmogony of the ancient societies – he occupies the middle area of the space, i.e. he acts as a mediator between worlds, between humans and gods, between this world and afterlife’ (Kamenova, 2011: 9).

2.2. The Base of Ram-shaped Tombstones

In addition to “animal style”, the ram-shaped sculptures are considered to be based on rock paintings, menhirs, and dolmen, stalagmites and deer stones (**Photo 1**): “There had been some reflections of **rock paintings** in the emergence of the gravestones and the stalagmites in the function of gravestones”(Tanyu, 1968: 86). Servet Somuncuoğlu also adds that: What is certain and indisputable is that the human beings transferred their first knowledge to the rocks and there was “belief” on the basis of this transfer. In past ages, mankind made paintings in order to transfer their beliefs first. We have always encountered four elements in the field of paintings: “death”, “sun”, “ancestor cult” and “tomb tradition”(Somuncuoğlu, 2007: 138-139).

Photo 1: Dolmen. Open Air Ethnography Museum, Tbilis, Georgia. By Hasan BUĞRUL



As for the Menhirs, there seems to be a great effect of them, as well; “The main source of the sculpture type is the **menhirs** which can be seen in Europe and Asia from the primitive era. Each menhir is an Idol, that’s worshiped God, spirit, or used as gravestones (Çoruhlu, 2007: 198)”.

The other source, which ram-shaped sculptures are thought to be based on, is “**deer stones**”: “In particular these deer stones are probably the source of ram/sheep-shaped stones. Because ram, sheep and horses, as a symbol of many things are the symbol of the deceased in Turkish art and culture. Ram is also the symbol of protection from evil. For this reason, the ram/sheep or horse-shaped gravestone is quite normal to be done...”(Çoruhlu, 1999: 243-259).

Though deer stones are the source of ram-shaped sculptures, it doesn’t mean that there wasn’t ram related art work previously. “Ram” related art work such as, warriors’ tools, ornaments with ram head / ram horns, terra cotta in the shape of

ram, altar with ram head and stones with the illustration of ram can be traced back as far as the art of deer stones because both are based on the same culture.

Deer stones can be seen (intensively) “in Mongolia, (1200-700BC), in surroundings areas of Tuva, Russian Altai, Kazakhstan, and China and also found as far west as the Ural, Crimea, and Georgia (600-300BC)”(Fitzhugh, 2009: 185-186). And they are categorized into three geographical-stylistic types; Eurasian deer stones, Saian-Altai stones and Mongolian deer stones. Although there are some differences between deer stones from region to region / from type to type, the majority of common characteristics and functions among them outweigh.

When considering the reason of preferring depicting deer figures on the stones to other animals, it can be explained with their importance for the nomadic people: Deer “spirit protected these individuals in life”, “deal with the day-to-day life of rearing and protecting animals, families, and communities” and “assisted their final journeys” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 194).

It is still discussed about whether “deer stones” are in the function of gravestones. On the one hand the scholars put forward that: “They were originally believed to be grave monuments, but absence of human remains and artefacts made this hypothesis tenuous” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 185). It is also added that: “They may represent rites for individuals whose bodies were lost to their societies during war or other circumstances” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 195). On the other hand we can see contrasting views: “In the absence of associated human burials, deer stones present a contradiction. The stones appear to represent warriors, chiefs, or heroic persons shown with their personal weapons, belts, and body tattoos” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 194).

“While the shape of the deer icon is very rigidly standardized, their number, sizes, and placement varies in every case, as probably also occurred with tattoos on a person’s body according to wealth, social status, prowess, or other attributes, including an artist’s skills and the desires of the subject... They are frequently aligned north–south with the deer stone’s ‘face’ oriented east” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 188-189).

Deer stones are associated with human burials, as well. It is explained that ceremonies were held for the deceased and the most precious possession, often horse, was “offered (sacrificed) at a deer stone” and also they were “illustrating totemic animals of special importance, incidents in the person’s lives, or personal helping spirits. Among these animals are horse, boar, moose, mountain sheep, leopard, tiger, and, rarely, fish” (Fitzhugh, 2009: 194).

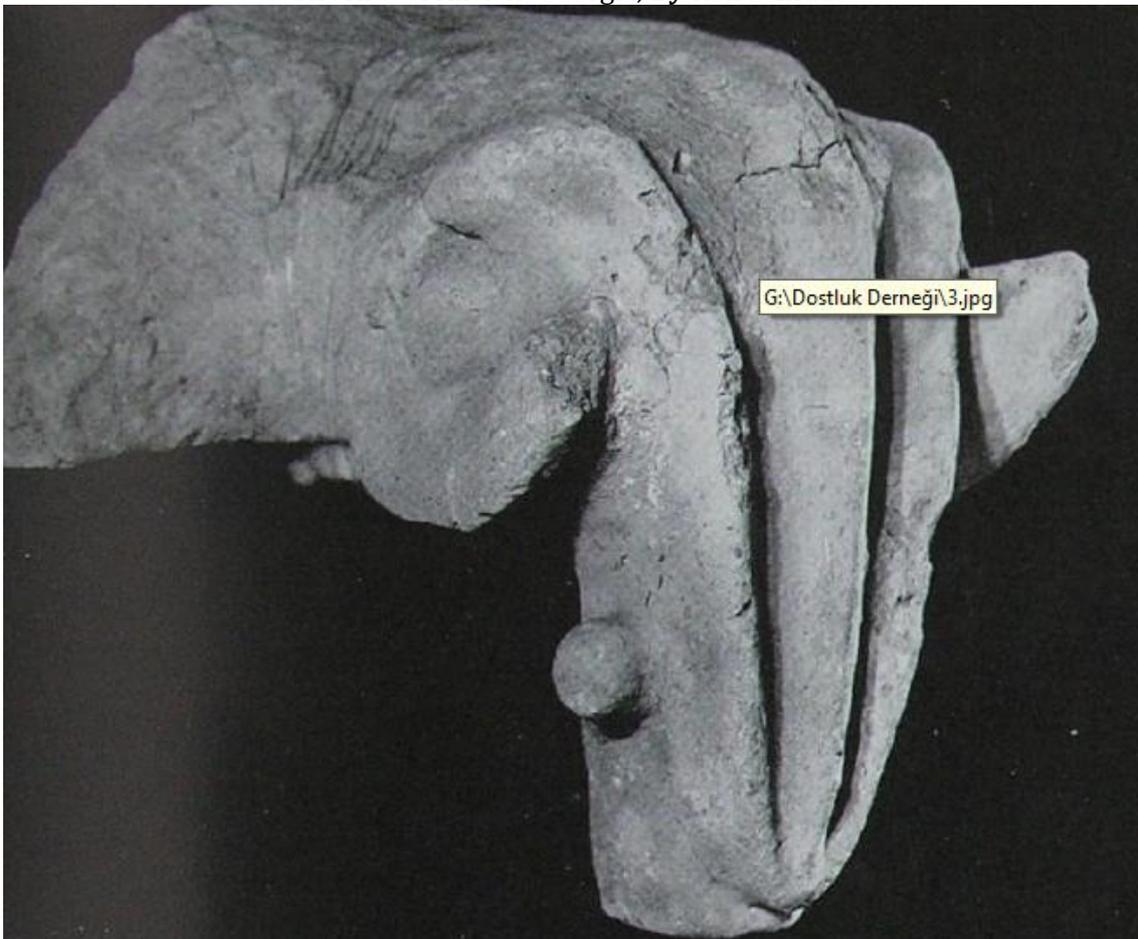
2.3. Ram Shaped Images

Besides the other animals, the images ram can be appeared on various objects: ‘It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the art of the ancient Near East includes some of the most vivid images of animals to be found anywhere, appearing in forms ranging from painted pottery and clay sculptures to carved stone and sculpture in precious metals. Concepts of divinity, kingship, and the fertility of the natural world were frequently expressed through compositions depicting animals that

decorated temple equipment, ritual and ceremonial objects, and votive gifts' (Benzel et al, 2010: 30).

As for ram images, we see them on pottery, terracotta, and ceramics and as a figurine depicted on various objects, including ornaments and war tools mainly from the Iron Age (**Fig.2**). From the first millennium BC, we can see the representation of the horse and rider carved into stones as steppe rock art. And After Common Millennium the images relating to the deceased began to appear on the graves with obelisks and other forms in the function of tombstones. Most of the ram-related images can be seen in tools produced in materials depicting the ram's head. We see ram head images mainly with ornaments, tools of day-to-day use, weapons, terra-cotta, altar / models of temples. And this is thought to be one of the features of nomadic art called 'animal style': 'Sometimes objects or a portion of the objects are in the form of an animal or in the form of an animal's head' (Çoruhlu:1988:40).

Photo 2: Ram head made from clay. 12-10th century BC. State Museum, Georgia.
The Arts of Ancient Georgia, **By** Rolf Schrade



Animal shaped sculptures and images had been made for different purposes and due to this they may have different meanings. It is known that, including ram, some of the animals were also considered as deities. So, some of the figures of the ram might have been depicted in the function of an idol (**Fig.3**).

Photo 3: A ram-shaped idol. Region Museum, Satmtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia.
By Hasan BUĞRUL



When considering the geographical area where one comes across ram sculptures, it can be seen that the breadth extends from Central Asia to westward. Besides Turkey, we can see ram-shaped sculptures in Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia, and Nakhichevan with various size, shape and decorative elements. Although ram associations have been treated differently from period to period and we can see such dominant themes:

3. The Reflection of Ram on the Art of Georgia

It is thought that depiction of the animals on various items such as jewelry, the goods used in daily life and worshipping, weapons, ceramics and etc. by the ancient nomadic societies, including the ones in Georgia, besides various factors, there is a significant effect of the animal style. One of these features of the animal styles which was common is explained as follows: Sometimes an item or a part of an item is in the form of an animal or an animal head' (Çoruhlu, 1988: 40). Such items can be seen widely in Asian countries, including Georgia. When such art works of ram are compared with the items on which there is depiction of other animals, they are beyond compare. These works are often made from materials such as clay, metal and stone **(Photo 4)**.

Photo 4: Necklaces in the form of ram horns, Region Museum, Satmtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia. **By** Hasan BUĞRUL



As the ram was also believed to be a messenger between the two worlds (this world and the heaven), like horses and deer, and carry the spirit of the dead people to the other world, their reflection can be seen on tombstones and memorial stones, as well. The ram-shaped tombstones in Georgia are very remarkable both in form and in terms of the ornaments depicted on them. The influence of both ancient beliefs of the old nomadic people and Christianity can clearly be seen. The old art, culture and art are blended with the new beliefs and the art of this area and they are gained a different point of view **(Photo 5-6-7-8)**.

Photo 5: Ram-shaped sculpture/tombstones, Region Museum, Satmtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia. **By** Hasan BUĞRUL



Photo 6: Ram-shaped tomstones / sculptures with the depiction of inscription and plants. Open Air Ethnography Museum, Tbilis, Georgia. **By** Hasan BUĞRUL



Photo 7: A ram-shaped tomstone / sculpture with a model chapel on its back. Open Air Ethnography Museum, Tbilisi, Georgia. **By** Hasan BUĞRUL



Photo 8: A ram-shaped tomstone / sculpture with a model chapel on its back. Open Air Ethnography Museum, Tbilisi, Georgia. **By** Hasan BUĞRUL



When having a look at the animal or human shaped art works in Georgia chronologically, their trace is dated to Copper Age: “A more original form of ceramic ware characterizes the culture of the Copper Age in Transcaucasia. Many cult statuettes depicting human or animal form (bulls, rams, horses, and birds) have survived” (Mepisashvili & Tsintsadze, 1979: 14). What arouse our interest in the list of the animals mentioned here is that they are animals have close relations with tombstones.

Following terra-cotta art works, we can see the art works made from bronze, silver and gold in Late Bronze Age in Georgia: “The first iron implements appeared at that time (Late Bronze Age). The abundance of copper ore deposits in the southern Caucasus was widely exploited by the local tribes, and bronze, silver and gold were also known to Georgians, who manufactured axes, bodkins, daggers, blades and lances, clubs, pendants and many other things” (Mepisashvili & Tsintsadze, 1979: 15).

The open-work bronze buckles made between the 2nd century BC and 3rd century AD have a distinctly national character. They represent the final stage of artistic metal working in the pre-Christian era and the culmination of the ancient traditions of this art form. In the center of the buckle is portrayed a fantastical creature representing the queen of the animals in the form of a stag, ibex or horse, accompanied by its acolytes (a bird, snake, bull or dog). These figures, closely linked with indigenous notions about the goddess of animals and fertility, at the same time show connections with the ideas and forms of the animals’ art of steppes (Mepisashvili & Tsintsadze, 1979: 19).

In 400 BC the Greek, in 8th -7th centuries BC Urartian and also the influence of Roman can be seen in this region. After that Byzantine influence continued. However, there was also the influence of Persian. From the 8th century Arabs and

then in the 11th century Turks had influence in this region. Considering all this information, it is possible to say that Georgian was under the influence of many states and beliefs in Medieval Era. However, when having a look at the characteristics of the art works in Georgia, it can be seen that the influence of Christianity dominates.

4. Evaluation

Today, when considering the geographical area where you can come across ram-shaped works, we can see them in various Asian countries, widely, in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia, and Nakhichevan and in the eastern part of Turkey, with various sizes, shapes and decorative elements. When you look at the works of art related to this extraordinary animal in Asia and the beliefs and cultures of the societies of the era, despite the regional characteristics, it is seen that the periods of their emergence and artistic characteristics are very close to each other. The ram is among the most valuable animals of the ancient nomadic societies and we can see its importance and influence has been continued up to now. Today, we can see many ram-shaped sculptures / tom stones in cemeteries, in front of the houses, in the garden of the museums and besides that we can see that ram-shape is processed on painting, knitting, weaving, household goods and many more items. This animal was regarded as a symbol of power, strength, courage, loyalty, nobility, freedom, health and happiness, honor, pride and respect by old nomadic societies. **Some of other influences of the ram on ancient nomadic societies can be listed as follows:**

- They were associated with the gods,
- They were characterized as messengers between the two worlds,
- They were sacred (heavenly) beings,
- They were accepted as Totem,
- They were believed to have protective qualities against ghost, devil and other dangers,
- They were among the most precious sacrifices offered to the gods,
- They were associated with the very important persons (VIP) and social status.
- They had an important place in burial customs.

As for their reflections on works of art, they can be listed as follows:

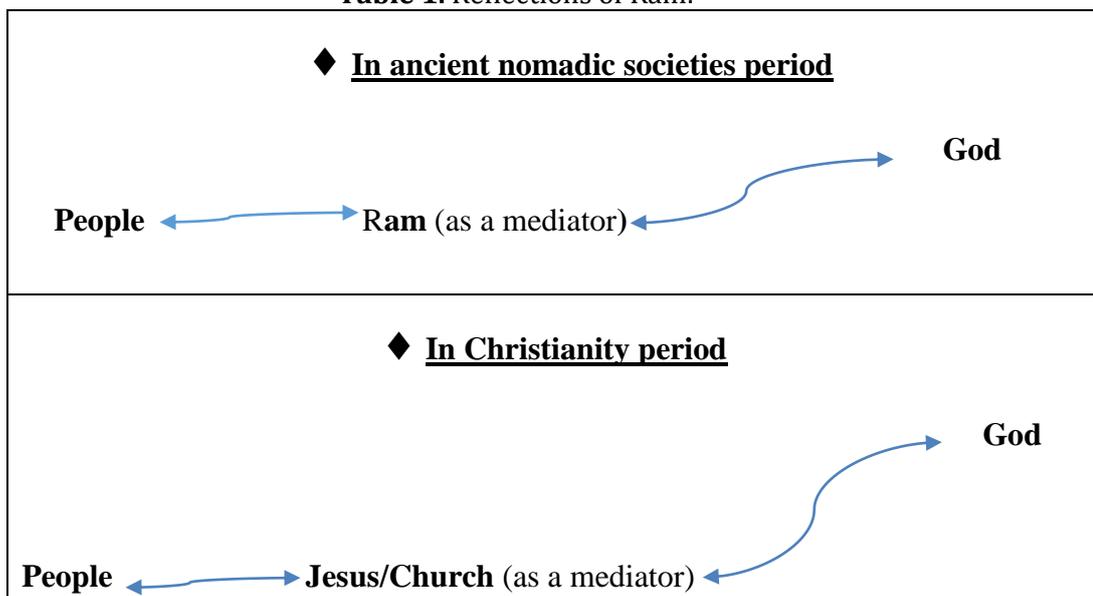
- They were processed on jewelry, garment, weaving and knitting in various forms,
- They took their place as a ram-shaped tombstone for the deceased, wealthy people and warriors,
- Their stylized figures were depicted on religious architectural artifacts,
- Ancient nomadic societies regarded them 'totems', so ram-shaped artworks were often made for the purpose of worshipping,

- An intense influence of animal style is observed in ram-shaped artworks belong to ancient nomadic societies.

The beliefs and culture related to ram in Georgia and their connection to art are very similar to those of other countries in Asia. So, it is possible to link this similarity with the same art (animal style) and similar interactions of all the former nomadic societies in Central Asia. When considering the works of ram and sheep in Georgia, the reflections of these two extraordinary animals in this region can explained as follows:

- The earliest ram-shaped artifacts are generally in the form of sculptures. There are also ornaments on which its head was depicted on the ornaments. It is probable that they were made in the totem function because in the ancient period, ram was seen as an animal which had contact with gods and sometimes it was even regarded as an idol.
- There are various ram-shaped works of art made of ceramic, metal and stone belonging to the Late Iron Age. In this period, it was believed that this animal had links to the gods. That you come across a large number of ram-shaped jewelry belonging to that and later periods, it is possible to associate this animal with both sacred and protective qualities.
- With the Christian era, there are reflections of the ram on the tomb stones and religious architectural works in Georgia. Although we can see ram head in relief form on religious architectural artifacts, the stylized form is more common.
- When you consider ram-shaped works of art in Georgia, it is possible to say that the influence of ancient beliefs and cultures has been maintained. It is seen that instead of ending the old art traditions, they are continued by blending with the new belief (Christianity). That's what we can also realize about the ram-shaped sculptures/tombstones with model chapels on their back. This can be reflected in such a way:

Table 1. Reflections of Ram:



As in the ones in other countries, besides carrying their own characteristics, we can see some similarities between the concepts of art, including "ram" related works, seen in other ancient communities in Central Asia. In this, there is an intense influence of the nomadic art (animal style) and beliefs based on the relation of the communities with each other for different reasons. As in other Central Asian countries, ram-shaped works in Georgia can be interpreted according to their period, their formal features and their intended use. Their emergence might be based on stalagmites, such as menhirs, deer stones, sculptures and stones in different forms that were erected on the tombs as the ones in other Asian countries. The fact that this extraordinary animal was once regarded as an animal carrying the human spirit to the gods is likely to cause the formation of ram-shaped tombstones in the form of these animals for people with certain characteristics and status in later periods. As for the reasons of giving a place to models chapels on the ram-shaped tombstones might be based on the following points:

- Chapel models on ram-shaped tombstones indicate the power of the church,
- They reflect the viewpoints of the rulers of the state (Georgia) of the era they belong to,
- Besides being a sacrificial animal, the ram also represents Jesus. So, while the ram symbolizes Jesus, the chapel on the ram's back might represent the responsibility given to Jesus by God. The art work (a ram-shaped tombstone with the model chapel on its back) reflects the responsibility Jesus shoulder in a way,
- We can see that the divine religions have had great effects on art; however, they couldn't eliminate the influence of ancient beliefs on art. Instead of eliminating the old art conception completely by the craftsmen of the era, they created a new style which comprised both old and new beliefs. We can see that the ram sculptures with temples (chapels) on their backs are also good examples for this combination. While the ram was considered as a mediator between people and gods / the worlds (this world and the other world / heaven) in ancient times, in the new belief (Christianity), Jesus / church is the mediator between people / this world and the other world / heaven / God.

As a result we can say that; the ram-shaped tombstones in Georgia are among the most interesting works of art in this country. Traces of works of art related to ram can be traced to Copper Age in this country and they are very similar to the ram related art works in other countries in Central Asia. As for common features, the ram-shaped art works both in Georgia and in other Asian countries emerged in the animal style conception and the beliefs of the era they belong to. The meanings and understandings that have been attributed to them vary and mankind has reflected their feelings and thoughts in artworks depending on how they have been impressed. So, different understandings have resulted in the production of a wide variety of related artworks. Today we can come across many different forms of ram-shaped artwork and this variety results in the richness of the art in this field. The close interaction between societies is another contribution of this richness and

wide-spread appreciation. You can come across ram-shaped sculptures and the other art works wherever you go, especially in Asia continent. When we consider the issue in terms of the effects of divine religions, it seems that there is a respect for the art of the ancestors. Instead of changing or eliminating completely, they combined it with the new beliefs. It seems that the close bonds with the ram and related art works will be continued forever.

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