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The First Field Season (2009) of the Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological Project - by Elena Rova (Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici - Ca' Foscari University)

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The Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli archaeological project was launched in 2009 by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy) in cooperation with the Georgian National Museum and the Ivane Javakhivshvili State University of Tbilisi (Georgia). The project aims at investigating the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age cultures of Georgia and their relations with the contemporary cultures of the northern regions of the Near East. From a geographical point of view, the research focuses on the province of Shida Kartli, the territory of which roughly corresponds to the middle course of the Kura (Mtkvari) River, in the western part of Eastern Georgia (**Fig. 1**).

The first field season in Georgia took place from August the 26th to October the 2nd. The Italian team was composed of Prof. Elena Rova (Ca' Foscari University Venice, Italy, co-director), Eleonora Carminati, Giulia De Nobili and Mirko Furlanetto (MA students in Near Eastern Archaeology at Ca' Foscari University), and Dr. Luca Bertoldi (University of Padova, geomorphologist). The Georgian team consisted of: Prof. Marina Puturidze (Department of Archaeology Tbilisi State University, Georgia, co-director), Nikoloz Gobejishvili and Joseph Papuashvili (MA students at Tbilisi State University), Tamar Meladze, George Khaburzania, Nikoloz Chaduneli and Nino Kobalia (BA students at Tbilisi State University). Dr. Z. Makharadze (Georgian National Museum, Centre of Archaeology- Head of Field Research Department) acted as a representative of the Georgian National Museum. The team was based at in the dig-house at Kavtishkhevi in the Kaspi district kindly provided by the Georgian National Museum, where it carried out its activities. During its stay at Kavtishkhevi, the team received the visit of His Excellency the Italian Ambassador Vittorio Sandalli and of a troupe of the Rustavi 2 television channel.

The main aim of the season was the study of the material from the EBA levels of the settlement of Natsargora in the Khashuri district of the Shida Kartli province. The site had been excavated in 1984-1989 by the late A. Ramishvili of the Khashuri Archaeological expedition, but its EBA levels and graves had been the subject only of very preliminary publications. The importance of the Natsargora material lies in the fact that it might bring new light on a still poorly understood and widely debated chronological phase, namely the transition between the Kura-Araxes culture of the late 4th-early 3rd millennium BC and the following Early Kurgan (Bedeni) culture of the mid-3rd millennium BC. As a matter of fact, Natsargora is one of the few sites where not only Bedeni ceramics have been discovered in a settlement context, but also a certain degree of continuity is supposed between the Kura-Araxes and the Bedeni horizons.

The first two weeks of the season were partially dedicated to the translation into English, to the digitization and evaluation of the original documentation (excavation diaries, unpublished reports by the excavators, museum inventories, field photos, excavation plans, photos and drawings of the finds). At the same time, a complete re-study of the 26 graves from the EBA cemetery was carried out (**Fig. 2**). All burial goods – these mostly consisted of pottery vessels (48 totally or partially reconstructible vessels), but also included a few metal objects (pins, bracelets and "spirals") and flint arrow-heads, some stone and paste beads, a bone spindle-whorl, as well as a few animal bones (**Fig. 3**) – were measured and described anew. They were compared with the original drawings and necessary corrections were made to the latter. New digital photos were taken of all finds: for this aim, several pottery vessels which had fallen apart during the past years were partially restored again. The work on the original material from the EBA graves can thus be considered concluded: the final publication of the Natsargora EBA cemetery is foreseen to appear by the end of 2011.

Work on the settlement material proved to be more time-consuming because of the large amount of preserved finds, and of some serious problems in the interpretation of the original documentation. We completed the digitization of the original excavation documentation and the translation of the published and unpublished preliminary reports, finished the re-study of the artifacts (pottery and small finds) from the 1984 campaign, as well the translation of the 1984 excavation diaries, and began work on the 1985 season, which we plan to complete next year, together with the study of the 1986 campaign. In addition, we undertook preliminary observations of sections and surfaces of Kura-Araxes and Bedeni pottery sherds by a binocular microscope (**Fig. 4**), and, with the help of dr. Luca Bertoldi, carried out a preliminary classification of the main fabric types. As

for lithics, it was decided to entrust their study to one of the Georgian students (Tamar Meladze) who will carry it out under the supervision of a Georgian expert.

Animal bones from both the cemetery and the settlement had not been the subject of any previous study and publication. They were separated from the remaining finds and prepared for being transported to Italy for being analyzed by a specialist there. As for paleo-botany, no relevant material was found among the cemetery and settlement finds preserved at the Khashuri Museum, but we contacted dr. Nana Rusishvili (Archaeological Centre of the Georgian National Museum) who had sampled the site during excavation and carried out some still unpublished analyses, and agreed for her to provide us with a report of her results to be included in our publication. During the last days of our season, dr. Rusishvili visited the team in Kavtiskhevi and took new microscope photographs of selected botanical samples.

A further activity of the season was the collection of samples for archaeometric analyses to be carried out in Italy. Ca 50 sherds of different wares of the Kura-Araxes and Bedeni period and 12 obsidian samples were collected from both the settlement and the cemetery. Comparative material for archaeometric analysis of pottery were also collected from the contemporary sites of Tsikhiagora (Kaspi district) (21 sherds of the Kura-Araxes and Bedeni periods) and Berikldeebi (Kareli district) (15 sherds of the Late Chalcolithic and Bedeni periods).

One week of work (from September the 19th to September the 25th), was devoted to a preliminary survey of the Kaspi, Gori, Kareli and Khashuri districts. The main known Early Bronze Age sites of the area were visited and their exact position was mapped by the help of a GPS instrument, with the aim of inserting the relevant data in the GIS database under preparation. In addition, we mapped the position of selected sites of different periods, in order to test the reliability of our preliminary interpretation of satellite images. In the Khashuri district, we also visited a number of sites where surface finds of Early Bronze Age materials had been reported by the local villagers, and took GPS points for them. One day was devoted to the visit of the EBA site of Zveli in Javacheti province, which, like Natsargora, Berikldeebi and Tsikhiagora, contains remains of the Kura-Araxes and Bedeni periods. Drill core samples for checking the sites' stratigraphy and for soil analysis and/or radiocarbon dating were collected by Luca Bertoldi from the EB sites of Natsargora (**Fig. 5**), Tsikhiagora and Aradeti Orgora (Dedoplis Gora) in the Shida Kartli province, as well as from the contemporary site of Zveli. At the same time, Dr. Bertoldi undertook a preliminary geological and geomorphological study of the region through the analysis of selected exposed sections (**Fig. 6**) in different parts of the study area and collected soil samples from these. Further work in progress concerns the reconstruction, on the basis of satellite images and autoptic observation, of the ancient hydrographical system of the region, as well as a study of the sites location as a function of the terrain topography relief on the basis of ASTER satellite images.

The results of the 2009 study season have been presented at the following international congresses: Symposium "The Caucasus: Georgia on the Crossroads. Cultural Exchanges Across Europe and Beyond" (Firenze 2-9 November 2009, and "7th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East" (London, 12-16 April 2010); both contributions are presently in press.

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