

2ND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM OF GEORGIAN CULTURE



The Caucasus: Georgia on the Crossroads

CULTURAL EXCHANGES ACROSS
THE EUROPE AND BEYOND

Proceedings

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*The Caucasus: Georgia on the Crossroads.
Cultural exchanges across the Europe and Beyond*

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The Proceedings of the 2nd international Symposium of Georgian Culture “The Caucasus - Georgia on the Crossroads” are dedicated with great respect to the memory of Professor Nino Kaukhchishvili, noted Georgian scholar.



I am very thankful to all organizers of this informational conference, which I consider the continuation of the conferences we organized in 1974 for the first time. Later there were further conferences every three years one in Georgia and one in Italy: in Bari, Lecce, in Pavia and in Northern Italy – there was also a photo exhibition of Georgian architecture which we presented in different Italian towns with a roundtable talk on Georgian History, Art and Literature. I do hope that this is the beginning of revive of Georgian culture in Italy and other European countries.

*With thousand thanks,
Gratitude*

Nino Kaukhchishvili
Florence , November 7, 2009

Nino Kaukhchishvili

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***ANCIENT HISTORY
&
ARCHAEOLOGY***



AIMS AND FIRST RESULTS OF THE GEORGIAN-ITALIAN SHIDA KARTLI ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

The Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological project is a new endeavour of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice in collaboration with the Georgian National Museum, the aim of which is to investigate the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age cultures of Georgia and their connections with the contemporary cultures of the Ancient Near East, in particular with those of Upper Mesopotamia and Eastern Anatolia.

The 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. represent a period of deep cultural transformation in the Transcaucasian region, when the communities of this metal-rich area were progressively involved into a complex network of relations with the regions of the Near East located to the South, where the first urban civilizations were developing since the first half of the 4th millennium. The exact dynamics and timing² of this process are still uncertain; it is however clear that it involved different phases, characterized by different, and at times contrasting features, which can be provisionally summarized as stated below.

(1) During the first half and around the mid-4th millennium there appeared, at different sites of the Transcaucasian region – e.g., at Berikldeebi in Georgia (Z. Makharadze, 2007), at Leilatepe, Boyuk Kesik, Soyuk Bulaq in Azerbaijan (T. Akhundov, 2007; see also B. Lyonnet et al., 2008) – a distinctive ceramic assemblage, characterized by heavy vegetal tempering, which shows evident north-Mesopotamian affinities,³ accompanied, at Berikldeebi for instance (A. Javakhishvili, 1998), by architectural elements of probable Mesopotamian origin. This suggests that the region was invested by a penetration of southern influences, the interpretation of which is however still debated (for different opinions, see T. Akhundov, 2007; C. Marro, 2005, 2007; B. Lyonnet, 2006).

(2) During the 2nd half of the 4th millennium a

new cultural complex, the Kura-Araxes, developed in Transcaucasia and in the neighboring regions of Eastern Anatolia (T. Kiguradze, A. Sagona, 2003; G. Palumbi, 2003), approximately at the same time as Upper Mesopotamia was invested by the so-called “Uruk colonization” of south-Mesopotamian origin. The Turkish Upper Euphrates area, as represented by the site of Arslantepe/Malatya, period VII, VIA-B1 (M. Frangipane, G. Palumbi, 2007), was witness to the interaction of these two different cultures, which is probably to be connected to the circulation of metal ores and metal objects.

(3) Between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C., contemporary with the collapse of the Uruk culture and with the development in Upper Mesopotamia of regional cultures characterized by distinctive pottery assemblages – Ninevite 5, Reserved Slip ware – (E. Rova, H. Weiss, 2003; E. Rova, 1996, 19-22), the Kura-Araxes cultural complex showed a remarkable expansion in southern direction, both toward the East, in western Iran, and toward the West, in western Syria and Palestine, as shown by the distribution not only of the distinctive red-black burnished pottery, but also of other equally distinctive categories of objects with clear Transcaucasian affinities (fixed and mobile hearths and andirons, metal pins, weapons, crucibles and molds for casting metal objects, etc.).⁴

(4) Finally, around the end of the 2nd quarter of the 3rd millennium, while Upper Mesopotamia and Syria witnessed a new wave of urbanization (the so-called “2nd urban revolution”) and fully developed city states appeared everywhere in the region, from Ebla in western Syria to Nineveh and Ashur in Northern Iraq, Transcaucasian elements disappear from the area while, in the territory of Transcaucasia, the Kura-Araxes culture is superseded by the so-called Early Kurgan (Martkopi, Bedeni) cultures (O. Japaridze, 1995; C. Edens, 1995). These are especially characterized by monumental barrow graves (kurgans), the burial goods of which show a considerable accumulation of wealth. Though barrow graves in themselves were not a typical Near Eastern feature, it is certainly not casual that similar forms of wealth accumulation in burial contexts appeared, approximately at the same time, in several regions of the Near East – the “Royal Cemetery of Ur” (C.L. Woolley, 1934) being only the most sensational example – in the framework of a renewed net of interregional exchanges where the

trade in metals undoubtedly played a significant role. This suggests that the Transcaucasian region was also involved in this general phenomenon, and that this set into motion a trend in the area toward social stratification and more complex forms of socio-political organization.

None of this is new knowledge; all of it is well known to the specialists of both Near Eastern and Transcaucasian archaeology. However, only in the last decades has a strong interest arisen to analyze these development in a specifically comparative perspective. In spite of this recent



Map of Georgia with approximate location of the research area and of the Khashuri Natsargora site (modified from A. Sagona, M. Abramishvili, 2008).

scholarly interest, available data are still insufficient for a comprehensive interpretation of the historical phenomena involved, and numerous uncertainties remain.

Especially controversial points concern the relative and absolute chronology of the period (14C data are few and not always reliable); the relations between the local Late Chalcolithic/Eneolithic cultures and the Late Chalcolithic/Uruk cultures of Mesopotamia; the origin, diffusion and regional/local variants of the Kura-Araxes culture; and the relation of the latter with the following Early Kurgan cultures, as well as the relation between the Martkopi/Early Trialeti and Bedeni cultures.

The general aim of our project is to clarify some of these issues by means of new investigations by Georgian and Italian scholars and students made in the very center of Transcaucasia, with collaborative work in each step from the preparatory stage to the publication of results. We thus hope to be able to overcome one of the main difficulties of this research

field; namely, the problems in communication between specialists of the different areas due to different scholarly traditions and languages of publication.

More specifically, our research will focus on the Shida (Inner) Kartli region of Georgia (Fig. 1), which for several reasons appears to be an especially promising area. First of all, its central position within Georgia makes it an area of contacts between Western and Eastern Georgia and between the Caucasus to the North and the regions located to the South of Georgia. Secondly, the presence of the Mtkvari (Kura) river plain allows the existence in the region of permanent settlements of relatively large size, which could play the role of "central places" in the ancient settlement pattern. Thirdly, there is a large number of already excavated archaeological sites of these periods in the region, which can provide important comparative study material.

From the chronological point of view, in the first stage of the project special attention will be paid to the transition between the Kura-Araxes and the Early Kurgan cultures, a transition which is still far from clear both in its chronology and in its general historical meaning.⁵

The first field season took place from 26 August to 2 October 2009.⁶ The first aim of the 2009 season was the study of the material from the EBA settlement and cemetery of the site of Natsargora in the Khashuri district. The site, which is located near the present village of this name (Fig. 2) had been excavated in 1984-1992 by the late Alexander Ramishvili of the Khashuri Archaeological Expedition, but its EBA levels and graves have been the subject of only very preliminary reports by the excavator (A. Ramishvili, 1991, 1995). The importance of this material lies in the fact that Natsargora is one of the few sites in the region (together with Tsikhiagora, published by Zurab Makharadze (Z. Makharadze, 1994, 2008, 64-67), and Berikldeebi, in course of publication by Mindia Jalabadze) where not only Bedeni ceramics have been discovered in a settlement context,⁷ but also where a certain degree of continuity is supposed to have existed between the Kura-Araxes and the Bedeni horizons.

The site is a 20-25 m-high oval-shaped mound (Fig. 3), oriented in NW-SE direction, which measures ca 90 x 50 m. According to the information derived from drill-cores taken by our geologist at the site,

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it was originally a low natural hill, the isolation of which from the surrounding plain had been artificially augmented, and the height of which increased in the course of time (from the EBA to the LBA) through the accumulation of anthropic debris.

The cemetery was located in the flat area to the South-East of the mound. It was in use, with interruptions, from the Early Bronze until the Classical period. Out of ca 500 excavated graves (A. Ramishvili, 1991, 1995), 26 were EBA in date. Our work consisted first of all in reconstructing their location within the cemetery, and in translating into English and digitalizing the original excavation documentation. All burial goods were measured, restored and described anew; digital photos and, when necessary, new drawings were made of them. All relevant data were inserted into a database, which will represent the basis for the final publication (M. Puturidze, E. Rova, in prep.), which we hope to be able to complete in the near future.

All the EBA graves belong to the Kura-Araxes culture (more specifically to its Shida Kartli variant), and can be tentatively dated to a relatively advanced stage of the culture. Most of the graves were simple pits of rectangular shape, oriented in a N-S direction, occasionally lined with stones or covered by a group of stones. A grave almost always contained only a single corpse in contracted position, with the head to the South (Fig. 4). One grave (no. 240) contained the remains of an adult and a child. The only other significant exception was grave no. 355, a multiple

grave covered by a large circle of stones with a stone chamber inside, which contained the remains of seven different individuals.

Burial goods were rather modest on the whole (see Fig. 4). They mostly consisted of pottery vessels (generally from 1 to 3 in number, all of them of very well-known Kura-Araxes types) occasionally associated with a few copper objects (pins, bracelets and hair-rings) and a few carnelian or paste beads. Grave no. 355, the multiple grave, contained 6 pottery vessels, 4 flint arrow-heads, a copper bracelet and the remains of a toggle pin. Both burial customs and burial goods find numerous parallels in Kura-Araxes graves of different areas (see A. Sagona, 2004, 480), but especially of the Shida Kartli region, as represented, among others, by examples from Takhtidziri (M. Jalabadze, G. Palumbi, 2008), Aradeti Orgora (I. Koridze, G. Palumbi, 2008), and Kvatskelebi (L. Glonti, M. Ketskhoveri, G. Palumbi, 2008). All this confirms the strong homogeneity, in this field at least, of the Kura-Araxes culture over its distribution area, as well as its nature of a weakly stratified society.

As for the settlement, we completed the translation and digitalization of the original excavation documentation (plans, photos, drawings, etc.), finished the re-study of the artifacts (pottery and small finds) from the 1984 campaign, and organized the study of palaeobotanical and archaeozoological materials from the site, which is at present underway. We also began working on the 1985 season artifacts, the re-study of which we plan to complete next year, together with that of the 1986 campaign finds.

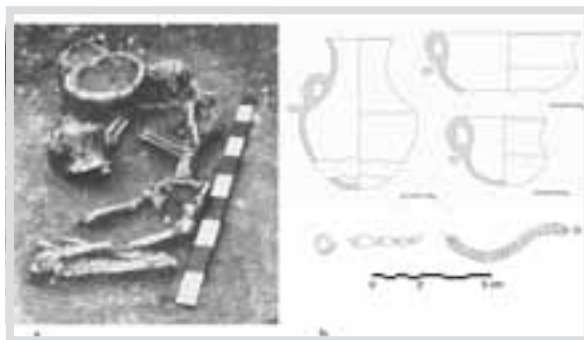
Since this work is still in progress, we will not describe its results in detail here. Suffice it to say that, in spite of a rather poor preservation of the archaeological layers, it is clear that the investigator is dealing with a sequence of domestic occupation layers with remains of wattle-and daub-architecture (post-holes), floors with in situ fixed and mobile hearths and other installations, and pits. As for ceramics, the most interesting feature is the co-existence – in all levels with the exception of the deepest one, according to the final description by the excavator (A. Ramishvili, n.d.) – of Kura-Araxes and Bedeni pottery (Fig. 5). The former is generally undecorated. At first sight at least, it does not differ significantly in its repertory from the pottery discovered in the Kura-Araxes graves at the site, except for the presence of shapes (e.g., lids), which are not represented there. Bedeni



Satellite image of Natsargora village, with location of the ancient settlement and cemetery (from Google Earth).



View of the Natsargora mound from S-E (photo E. Rova 2008).



Natsargora cemetery, grave no. 244: view of the burial during excavation, from N, and burial goods.

pottery is represented both by fine and by coarser wares. The former, in particular, are generally of a remarkably high quality: vessels are often provided with elaborate handles⁸ and decorated with incised, grooved or relief decoration (knobs, cannelures); their surface is carefully burnished/polished.⁹ We hope that a complete re-evaluation of the different contexts of discovery will allow us to better clarify the stratigraphical relation between these two pottery groups.

After a preliminary binocular-microscope-assisted classification of the main fabric types (both Kura-Araxes and Bedeni) attested at the site of Natsargora, we selected ca 50 sherds for archaeometric analyses to be carried out in Italy. For comparative purposes, ceramics samples were also collected from the contemporary sites of Tsikhiagora in the Kaspi district (21 sherds) and Berikldeebi in the Kareli district (15 sherds).

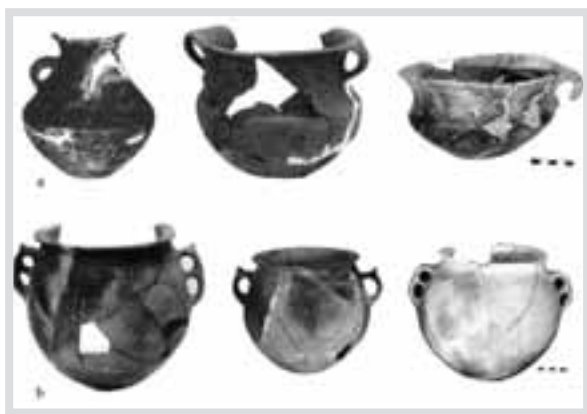
The most significant find from the Natsargora settlement is a cultic terracotta relief depicting an anthropomorphic image with large obsidian-inlayed eyes (illustrated in G. Mirtskhulava, 2005, pl. III, 1), different fragments of which were found, out of context, in various parts of the site. In spite of the presence of parallels for some of its features at other Kura-Araxes and Early Kurgan period sites of Georgia,¹⁰ the Natsargora relief is by many respects unique.

In addition to the work on the Natsargora material, we devoted one week of the 2009 season to a preliminary survey of the Kaspi, Gori, Kareli and Khashuri districts, as a first step of a project aimed at reconstructing the ancient landscape and settlement distribution in Shida Kartli province

during the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. Some 30 known Early Bronze Age sites were visited and their exact positions were mapped with the aid of a GPS instrument in order to insert the relevant data in the G.I.S. database under preparation at Ca' Foscari University. We also mapped the position of a number of archaeological sites of different periods, with the purpose of testing the reliability of the preliminary study of satellite images carried out in Italy during last year. At selected locations, Dott. Bertoldi undertook a preliminary geological and geomorphological study through the analysis of selected exposed sections and took drill core samples for checking the sites' stratigraphy and for soil analysis and/or radiocarbon dating.

Further work is in progress. One element, based on the study of satellite images, aerophotos and on autoptic observation, concerns the reconstruction of the region's ancient hydrographical system. A second element, based on ASTER satellite images, is a study of the sites' locations as a function of the terrain topography relief. Preliminary observations suggest that sites were generally located on high fluvial terraces or low natural hills in the flat alluvial plain formed by the braided River Mtkvari (Kura) and its tributaries, with the exception of the Khashuri district, where the majority of them was situated in the neighboring hilly zone.

The next field season, which is foreseen for September 2010, will be devoted to the completion of the study of the Natsargora material and to the continuation of the survey activities. In addition, we plan to carry out stratigraphical soundings at one or two selected sites, in order to collect additional



Kura-Araxes (a) and Bedeni (b) pottery from the Natsargora settlement.

material for a comparative stratigraphy of the Shida Kartli region.

Notes:

1. Acknowledgments. The author wishes to express her gratitude to Prof. David Lordkipanidze, General Director of the Georgian National Museum, who granted us permission to publish the Natsargora material and to undertake the survey of the Shida Kartli province, and to the Italian Ambassador, H.E. Dr. Vittorio Sandalli, for his support to our expedition. Special thanks are due to Mr. David Makhatadze (International Expedition Logistic Manager of the GNM) who greatly helped us during our stay in Georgia. The 2009 field season was funded by Ca' Foscari University.
2. For an updated chronological scheme, the reader is referred to B. Lyonnet, 2007, 13, Table 1.
3. See especially C. Marro, 2005, 2007. On the North-Mesopotamian Late Chalcolithic ceramic assemblages and their relative date, see E. Rova, 1999-2000; more in general on the Late Chalcolithic period in the Near East, M. Rothman, 2001.
4. The literature on the Near Eastern expansion of the "Early Transcaucasian Culture" is too large to be mentioned here. For a recent synthesis, the reader is referred to S. Batiuk, 2005.
5. For a synthesis of the problems involved, see C. Edens, 2005; A. Sagona, 2004.
6. The team from Ca' Foscari University was directed by the author and was composed of: Dott. Luca Bertoldi (Padua University), geologist, and three Ca' Foscari students (Eleonora Carminati, Giulia De

Nobili, and Mirko Furlanetto). The Georgian team consisted of: Prof. Marina Puturidze (Tbilisi State University), co-director, Dr. Zurab Makharadze (representative of the Georgian National Museum), and five students of Tbilisi State University (Nikoloz Chaduneli, Nikoloz Gobejishvili, Giorgi Khaburzania, Nino Kobalia, Tamar Meladze, and Joseb Papuashvili). The expedition was based at the dig-house at Kavtiskhevi in the Kaspi district kindly provided by the Georgian National Museum.

7. Outside of the Shida Kartli province, Bedeni ceramics in a settlement context are also known from Zhinvali in the Aragvi gorge (G. Gogochuri, 2008), and from Badaani in the Tianeti highland district of northern Georgia (G. Mirtskhulava, 2008).
8. Close parallels can be mentioned, for instance, from Berikldeebi (A. Miron, W. Orthmann, 1995, 225, n. 54; Sagona 2004, fig. 27, 2) and Modinache (G. Lomtadze, 2000, fig. 1).
9. Interestingly enough, the surface of these vessels can be black (as is most often the case at other Bedeni sites), but in numerous cases it is light (i.e. grey to pinkish) in color.
10. For the obsidian-inlaid eyes, see, for instance, an anthropomorphic andiron from Zveli in Javakheti province, Southern Georgia (Ph. L. Kohl, 2007, fig. 3.20); for the stylization of the eyes, a clay, prism-shaped "sculpture" from Akhali Zhinvali (G. Gogochuri, 2008, 37-38, figs. 11-12; cf. also G. Mirtskhulava, 2005, pl. III, 2).

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