

Archaeology

New Light on the Caucasus in the System of Old Civilizations

Konstantine Pitskhelauri

Academy Member; Georgian National Academy of Sciences; Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT. Conducting archaeological studies with the use of modern digital technologies and analyzing the obtained material on the basis of the natural sciences will create an important innovative base that is designed to conduct the research process in the right direction and will reclaim the Caucasus its rightful place in the system of Middle East civilizations. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Keywords: South Caucasus, tribal alliances, political system, civilization

The Caucasus, a narrow strip of land lying between two seas the Black Sea (west) and the Caspian Sea (east), is the major artery linking two great worlds – the northern steppe cultures and southern civilizations, where the deposition of their material culture drastically different from each other occurred. This obviously attaches particular importance to the antiquities of the Caucasus, as it provides an opportunity for joint study of the activities of the ancient societies in the north and south. However, while studying this issue, naturally the main thing is to determine the level of development of the Caucasus past and establish its rightful place in the surrounding world.

A number of dogmatic views on these issues, which require significant correction and new interpretation has been established in Caucasian studies .

The participation of the outside world in the development of Caucasian culture was quite

significant since it had a certain impact on it. However, at the same time, it is also important that it never changed the cardinal line of its progressive advance.

Over the millenia, at any stage of the development, from economic and cultural viewpoints the community living around the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain area was formed as a single phenomenon on the basis of successful, mutual use of local natural conditions exceptionally rich in the outside world.

In the early stages of the past, one of the main stimulators in the development of the Caucasian community seems to have been favorable conditions for irrigation farming. However, according to all data, a main lever in the development of the Caucasian community must have been the wealth of natural resource of copper and iron necessary for metallurgical production - that put the Caucasus in the sphere of interests of

the outside world. Another solid basis for the successful economic advancement of the Caucasian community was created by the existence of mountain and meadow pastures, the necessary conditions for cattle-breeding – the earliest agricultural activity of mankind.

Based on this, it was quite natural to assume that in the early stages of the Bronze Age the highest level of socio-economic and political systems must have already been formed in the Caucasus, but the reality currently established in the scholarly literature is quite different. Particularly, according to the Assyrian and Urartian written sources, the kingdom of Qolha (Colchis) is recognized as the oldest state in the South Caucasus, which is supposed to exist since the late 2nd millennium BC and in eastern Georgia the state of Kartli – Iberia is implied only from the 4th century BC [1, 2]. Until recently, there has never been any other evidence pointing to the existence of an ancient state system on the territory of the Caucasus. Until today, it is generally believed that throughout this territory in the 4th-2nd millennia BC the society of the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age from the social point of view did not go beyond the level of association of tribes and the livestock breeding is recognized as the main direction of their economic activity with agriculture staying at an early stage.

This viewpoint was first expressed by Professor B. Kuftin. When identifying the Kura-Araxes culture, he mentioned its inhabitants as indigenous cattle-breeder farmers [3] but after discovering the Trialeti culture, he made conclusion that this culture coined as “barbaric splendor” truly made a certain contribution to the creation of the advanced cultures of the ancient East, but from social point of view it still remained at the level of unification of pre-class tribes with no exploiting classes, slaves whose main kind of economic activity supposedly was nomadic herding. He based his supposition on the fact that in one small-sized tomb under study among

numerous items from the Bronze Age, he did not find any ceramic artifacts and in rich tombs he did not note traces of human sacrifice [4; 5].

Naturally, these facts are not sufficient for the in-depth understanding of such an important issue. Particularly, in Trialeti of that time, in connection with construction work the accelerated archaeological excavations and, moreover, only in burial grounds, could not provide the necessary material for obtaining such conclusions. Obviously, the possibility of carrying out interdisciplinary research at that time was entirely excluded.

Despite this, because of the great scientific authority of the author of this idea, the scholarly community accepted this view as indisputable truth without any analysis and extended it to the entire Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age of the Caucasus, which is still firmly grounded and repeated in all scholarly studies.

Now let us consider how this point of view correlates with the archaeological findings obtained in the central part of the South Caucasus for today and the results of interdisciplinary studies conducted on the monuments of that time.

At the end of the 5th and the first half of the 4th millennium BC, the penetration of large masses of people, the bearers of Mesopotamian the so-called Uruk culture in the Caucasus begins. This process has a significant impact on the rhythm of local culture development, mainly from the viewpoint of its rapid “explosive” progress, in which metallurgical bronze manufacturing acquires a leading function [6].

As a result of this, from the 4th millennium BC the main direction of agricultural activity in the Caucasus compared with the previous period radically changes, the Caucasus is transformed into metallurgical country, that later became the dominant force of its economic life for millennia and defined socio-economic face of the community. This marks a new time period in the Caucasus: the Early Bronze Age.

Initially, as can be seen, the large masses of Uruk migrants penetrate the Caucasus in search for the raw materials necessary for the bronze metallurgical manufacturing. They came to the Caucasus both along the upper and lower reaches of the Mtkvari River, and then settled permanently in all areas of the Caucasus. In the southern or northern part of the Caucasus there is not a single site in the mountains or the lowland, where their traces do not appear. Due to their metallurgical interests, they first of all get acquainted with the ridge of the Greater Caucasus, where the main deposits of copper ore are located. The trace of their intensive activity is found in almost every valley, on the southern or northern slope of the ridge.

The joint activity of the Uruk and Caucasian metallurgists seems to have been so successful that since that time a rapid growth of the bronze metallurgical manufacturing began throughout the Caucasus, which until the end of the 2nd millennium BC remains the main direction of local manufacturing activity.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the metallurgical production of bronze developed in the Caucasus mainly due to these contacts laid the foundation for the formation of the magnificent Maikop culture in the North Caucasus [7] and the powerful Kura-Araxes culture of the Early Bronze Age in the South Caucasus with a well-developed socio-economic system. There exist real data to discuss this issue. The date of the Kura-Araxes culture is restricted to the second half of the 4th and almost entirely 3rd millennia BC.

This is the largest and most powerful Caucasian culture whose sphere of influence covers the entire central part of the South Caucasus and the central and eastern regions of the North Caucasus, is compactly distributed in eastern Anatolia, in northeastern Iran, and reaches the coast of the Mediterranean as a satellite Krebet-Kerke culture. The signs of the influence of the Kura-Araxes culture are established in the

extreme western part of Asia Minor and on many contemporary monuments of Eastern Europe. It is believed that this culture has played a very important role not only in the history of the Caucasus, but also in the whole history of Anterior Asia.

Although especially extensive research has so far been carried out to study this culture, finally, still remained unanswered the most important questions - on the basis of what economic data the Kura-Araxes culture of the Early Bronze Age was formed, what was the basis of its power, and specifically at what stage of development this society stood in the period of cultural upswing.

Previously, there was an attempt to reconstruct the main economic activity of the Kura-Araxes society according to archaeological data. Such was considered agriculture that does not need irrigation, which, at the zenith of development, in the main territory of its distribution in the lowland of Mtkvari, leads to a catastrophic change in natural conditions and a crisis of their main agricultural activity, as a result of which the majority of the population moves to the mountains, completely changes the economic activity and becomes a cattle-breeder [8]. This fully corresponds to B. Kuptin's assumption that the tribal culture of the Middle Bronze Age of the post-Mubarak era is nomadic herdsman. Actually, this is in full compliance with professor B. Kuptin's assumption that the society of Trialeti culture after Kura-Araxes culture of the Middle Bronze Age is a nomadic breeders.

The search for the foundations of the development of any archaeological culture and the attempt to reconstruct its socio-economic form cannot reflect the reality if the leading direction of its manufacturing activity is not properly understood. Thus, without reconstruction of the paleoenvironment of the Kura-Araxes culture of the Early Bronze Age it is completely unreliable to consider dry-land farming as the driving force of economic activity of that time and its entire socio-

economic development, moreover that today according to new researches, bronze production must be considered main force of the advancement of that time culture.

As it was mentioned, in the Caucasus already from the beginning of the 4th millennium BC, the metallurgical manufacturing of bronze was in the forefront thanks to the mutual efforts of local metallurgists and those from the Anterior Asia. On the basis of large-scale laboratory works, it is now widely recognized that since the Early Bronze Age, i.e., Kura-Araxes epoch, metallurgical manufacturing of bronze in the Caucasus has taken on such a large scale that during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, all archaeological cultures located in the area around the Black Sea were supplied with raw materials [9], which naturally must have been the basis for the colossal scale of obtaining and processing of copper raw materials in the Caucasus. It is completely unacceptable that a society that was mainly engaged in cattle breeding and farming standing at a low level would have the opportunity to plan and carry out such a complex engineering, large-scale and time-consuming works for the extraction and processing of the required amount of ore, which undoubtedly was accompanied by the most difficult task of selling the finished material to the extremely remote areas of the country.

In the Caucasus in the Early Bronze Age, these works seem to have been carried out on such a large scale that only a well-organized social and economic structure with a powerful centralized administration was able to carry them out.

In the central part of the South Caucasus in the 3rd millennium BC, in the depths of the Kura-Araxes culture, a completely different magnificent Alazani-Bedenic culture emerges [10-12], which seems to be completely alien to the Caucasus. Apparently, it gradually merges with the finale of the Kura-Araxes culture (which is also referred to as the Martkopi culture) and enriches it with many novelties.

The graves of different sizes of the final stage of Alazani-Bedenic and Kura-Araxes cultures were found in almost all corners of present-day Eastern Georgia, and the existence of settlements of that time contains only indications, which makes it very difficult to get an idea of the cardinal problems of this culture. However, currently well-documented archaeological evidence and their interdisciplinary research provide quite important information about the socio-economic level of the development of the society of this era.

Together with the culture of Alazani-Bedenic for the first time in the Caucasus appear grandiose, individual burial mounds (kurgans), whose dimensions often exceed more than a few hundred meters in diameter and two dozen meters in height. Their above-ground or underground funeral halls are especially large-scale and are mainly represented by wooden structures, which, as can be seen, were built by carpenters with extensive experience in house-building and all their data clearly indicate the social hierarchy that exists in the society of indigenous people for centuries. This is also indicated by the fact that in almost all large-scale kurgans, both in the Alazani-Bedenic period and in the era of the final stage of Early Bronze, there is an evidence of human sacrifice.

Particularly noteworthy is the funeral inventory made with special skill - ceramic items, high-quality armored weapons made of bronze with tin, encrusted with precious metals, wooden tableware and jewelry made of gold and semiprecious stones, etc., indicating the highest experience of craftsmen which seems to have been perfected over the centuries.

An interdisciplinary study of the monuments of that time also points to the existence of a highly developed socio-economic system of society in the epoch of Alazani-Bedenic culture, both in the Alazani valley and on the Bedenic ridges, polynological studies [13] show that the population

of that time used cloth weaving on a loom, grew five wheat varieties and other grain crops; was engaged in beekeeping, gardening, and especially intensively in viticulture; from a medical viewpoint, they used different medicinal herbs, etc.

At the next stage of the development in the central part of the South Caucasus in the first half of the second millennium BC, there are three cultures of the Middle Bronze Age – Trialeti, Karmirberd and Sevan-Uzerlik [14]. Among them, only the Trialeti culture is a typical Caucasian culture, although according to specific data, it is very difficult to determine its genetic connection with previous cultures. It covers the entire central part of the South Caucasus. The Karmirberd culture seems to be spread only in a small part of the South Caucasus and by numerous peculiarities it is more similar to the materials of the territory of Iran of that time. As for the culture of Sevan-Uzerlik [15, 16], which is entirely different from the Trialeti culture in all its core components and seems to be widespread only in a small part of the South Caucasus. According to my recent studies, it reveals more linkage with the catacomb culture of the northern steppe world, and in my view it is the culture of the foreign factor people to settle their metallurgical interests [17].

Numerous monuments of Trialeti culture are known in the central part of the South Caucasus. The burial monuments of this culture have been studied particularly well [18]. They are presented as small burial grounds containing poor inventory, as well as grand impressive barrows with large funeral halls and a rich inventory, which is evidence of social differentiation of the contemporary population. The high level of socio-economic development of the community belonging to the Trialeti culture is evidenced by the high quality of ceramic and precious-metal dishes, jewelry and armor weapon made by highly skilled craftsmen being carriers of great traditions.

It is essential that there are no exact parallels of them in the entire outside world because of

which they can be considered as a local production.

Unlike the 3rd millennium BC cultures, more than one settlement of Trialeti culture dated from the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, have been found for today. Although none of them have been investigated properly, they still provide essential information for defining the socio-economic development of this culture community.

First of all, it should be emphasized that in Trialeti cyclopean constructions and the grandiose burial grounds of Middle Bronze Age built with stones are built with exactly the same construction technique and it should not be excluded that both one and another resident is the work of one and the same population, and accordingly, contemporary too. The fact that the cyclopean structures built by complex planning and the most difficult constructing technique of that area of Trialeti culture can be dated by Middle Bronze Age, points out to the powerful cultural layer found in the interior of the seven meters wide stone slope in Loriberd, [19] on the territory of the present northern Armenia with the material of a typical Trialetian culture. It is noteworthy that cyclopean structures also contain the layers of the Early Bronze Age.

Thus, according to these data, it is possible to link the cyclopean settlements with the epoch of Trialeti culture of the Middle Bronze Age and consider it proto-urbanic by its scale and planning.

However, due to the fact that during the study of the monuments of the Trialeti culture the latest achievements of modern digital technologies have not yet been used and the existing material has not been investigated using the natural sciences, the natural environment of this epoch has not been reconstructed, and the obtained conclusions regarding the socio-economic development of this epoch society and its political status are obviously preliminary and cannot go beyond the scope of the assumptions.

In connection with the study of this issue, we have a completely different picture in one section

of the central part of the South Caucasus – on the Iori plateau, where using modern technologies and interdisciplinary studies it becomes possible to reconstruct the natural environment of the Late Bronze Age of the second half of the second millennium BC. It was substantially different from today's conditions and created much better conditions for agricultural activities. Its entire mountainous part was covered with dense deciduous forests flowing from full-flowing rivers were the best basis for the development of agriculture. Artificial irrigation canals of the second millennium BC were discovered; their network, as can be seen, covered fertile fields between the mountains, which were the main arena of successful farming. There have been recorded a great number of two part settlements of one and the same planning around them with a citadel on the top of mountains, which at the same time is a chapel with well-protected powerful fences and defensive ditches; there are the quarters of ordinary tribesmen also with well protected strong fortification system on the mountain slope. These settlements are distinguished by two large groups of one and the same culture and, as can be seen, were separate socio-economic and political entities with their centralized large prayer centers. These unions have their own paleourban, especially large-scale settlements, which are built

by professional architects with strict adherence to a predetermined plan, with regular planning and represented the administrative-political and religious centers of these unions.

According to these data, it is quite clear that in the central part of the South Caucasus, from the second half of the second millennium BC, there existed a strictly established several-level scheme of sectoral governance regulating the activities of the community headed by a leading force endowed with large rights.

The existence of such socio-economic and political centralization in the second half of the second millennium BC is attested by finding the burials in the central part of the South Caucasus with a special pomp for funeral [20,21].

Thus, the presently established view that the Caucasian community in the epoch of Early, Middle and Late Bronze did not go beyond the level of a tribal association definitely requires revision.

We strongly believe that archaeological studies with the use of modern digital technologies and analyzing the obtained material on the basis of the natural sciences will create a new and important innovative base that is designed to conduct research process in the right direction and reclaim the Caucasus its rightful place in the system of Middle East civilizations.

არქეოლოგია

ახალი ხედვა კავკასიის შესახებ ძველი ცივილიზაციების სისტემაში

კ. ფიცხელაური

აკადემიის წევრი, საქართველოს მეცნიერებათა ეროვნული აკადემია; ილიას სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

არქეოლოგიური კვლევა-ძიების წარმართვა თანამედროვე ტექნოლოგიების გამოყენებით და მონაპოვარი მასალის საბუნებისმეტყველო მეცნიერებების საფუძველზე გაანალიზება შექმნის მონაცემთა მნიშვნელოვან ინოვაციურ ბაზას, რომელიც სწორი მიმართულებით წარმართავს კვლევით პროცესს და კავკასიას თავის კუთვნილ ადგილს დაუმკვიდრებს მახლობელი აღმოსავლეთის ცივილიზაციების სისტემაში.

REFERENCES

1. Melikishvili G. (1955) On the issue of the formation of class society and state in Georgia, Tbilisi (in Georgian).
2. Melikishvili G. (1970) Studies of Georgian History, vol.I. From ancient times to IV century BC, Tbilisi.
3. Kuftin B.A. (1943) Urartskii "kolombarii" u podoshvy Ararata i Kuro-araksskii eneolit. Vestnik Gosudarstvennogo muzeia Gruzii, XIII-V, Tbilisi (in Russian).
4. Kuftin B.A. (1941) Arkheologicheskie raskopki v Trialeti, I, Tbilisi (in Russian).
5. Kuftin B.A. (1948) Arkheologicheskie raskopki v Tsalkinskoi raione, I, Tbilisi (in Russian).
6. Pitskhelauri K. (2012) Uruk Migrants in the Caucasus. *Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*, 6, 2:153-161.
7. M.V. Andreeva (1977) K voprosu o iuzhnykh svyaziakh maikopskoi kul'tury. *Sovetskaiia arkhologiiia*, 1: 39-56 (in Russian).
8. Kikvidze I. (1976) Farming and agricultural cult in Georgia (according to archeological materials), Tbilisi (in Georgian).
9. Chernykh E.N., Avilova L.I., Orlovskaiia L.B., Kuzminykh S.V. (2002) Metallurgiiia v tsirkumpontiiskom areale: ot edinstva k raspadu. *Sovetskaiia arkhologiiia*, 1: 5-23 (in Russian).
10. Gobejishvili G. (1981) Bedenic kurgan culture, Tbilisi (in Georgian).
11. Dedabrishvili Sh. (1979) Kurgany alazanskoi doliny. *Trudy kakhetskoi arkhelogicheskoi ekspeditsii*, II, Tbilisi (in Russian).
12. Japaridze O. (1998) On the ethno-cultural history of Georgian tribes in III millennium BC (early Korgan culture). Tbilisi (in Georgian).
13. Kvavadze E. (2016) Palynological study of organic remains from the Ananauri Kurgan. *Ananauri Big Kurgan*, 3: 156-171, Tbilisi (in Russian).
14. Kushnariova K.Kh. (1983) K probleme videleniia arkhelogicheskikh kul'tur perioda srednei bronzy na iuzhnom Kavkaze. *Kratkie soobshcheniia Instituta arkhologii AN SSSR*, vip. 176 (in Russian).
15. Kushnariova K.Kh. (1959) Poselenie epokhi bronzy na kholme Uzerlik-Tepe, okolo Agdama. *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkhologii SSSR*, 67, M.-L. (in Russian).
16. Kushnariova K.Kh. (1965) Novye dannye o poselenii Uzerlik-Tepe, okolo Agdama. *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkhologii SSSR*, 125, M.-L. (in Russian).
17. Pitskhelauri K. (2014) South Caucasus and North Steppe World in the Middle Bronze Age, "Matsne", Tbilisi, 83-96.

18. Gogadze E. (1972) Trialeti Korgan Culture. Periodization and Genesis, Tbilisi.
19. Devedjan S. (2006) Lori Berd II (Bronze moyen), 5-419. Erevan.
20. Dzhafarov I. F. (2000) Azerbaidzhan v kontse IV tis. do n.e. i v nachale I tis. do n.e. Baku (in Azerbaijani).
21. Quliyev F. E. (2008) Azerbayjanin kurgan gebirlerinde at defni (Pogrebeniia s konskimi zakhoroneniiami v kurganakh Azerbaidzhana, Baku (in Azerbaijani).

Received January, 2019