

The Early Bronze age cultural sequence: New investigations in Adigeni Municipality, Samtskhe Region, southwest Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

The prehistoric period has been the one of the main focus of research throughout the years, but even though the Samtskhe Region has received less attention. The majority of basic archaeological data from the area is the result of salvage work conducted during the Soviet period.

Broadly speaking, the 20th century was especially rich in Caucasus archaeology, with many discoveries made during this time period. Several prehistoric cultures have been unearthed through archaeological excavations. One of these was Kura-Araxes, which is one of the most important culture not only for the Caucasus, but also for the Near East. This was a culture that destroyed ideas about cultural boundaries and limitations in space over time. Although its history of research spans nearly 100 years, many questions still exist, especially its origin is enigmatic. Its relation to the following Early Kurgan culture is unclear as well. Studies conducted in Samtskhe over the past few years have shed new light on these issues and provide a perspective for understanding these problems.

Over the years, archeological science has been dominated by the idea that the Kura-Araxes community, because of difficult landscape conditions, was less approachable on the Adigeni side. This conclusion was based on the results of small-scale archaeological survey conducted by professor. O. Japaridze in the 1970s. The expedition did not identified any traces of Kura-Araxes culture in the region (Japaridze et al., 1981:15). However, later archaeological surveys rejected this theory, including at the sites of Amkheris Gora, Benara, Farekha, and more (Orjonikidze 1983; Gambashidze & Kvizhinadze 1981:63). Moreover, recently studied Orchosani settlement has shown that the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes had strong

Chalcolithic cultural prior in the region that overlapped chronologically with the Kura-Araxes culture (Gambashidze et al., 2018:146-449; Gambashidze 2021:133-158).

It should be noted that from 2013 an archaeological survey was initiated in the region and more than 50 archaeological sites have been found (Chilingarashvili 2021:40-98). Among them was Irmis Rka settlement, which is excavating since 2020 by the Georgian National Museum. Two years of work have uncovered traces of Kura-Araxes occupation, stratigraphically followed by a layer of Bedeni culture. This is extremely important for EBA research for several reasons: First and foremost, the Bedeni culture was completely unknown to Adigeni area, and before that, only one site in Samtskhe region Zveli's Rabati was known (Bedianashvili et al., 2019:1-133). Thus, the settlement confirms the cultural continuity of the early Bronze Age and indicates that Samtskhe, including the Adigeni region, is a participant in the cultural processes that took place in the second half of the III millennium BC. in territory of Georgia. The settlement provides an opportunity to observe the transformation of these cultures, including when and how the Kura-Araxes was replaced by the Bedeni culture (Makharadze et al., 2016:11), in addition to the causes of this change, and whether any cultural elements were transferred from the previous period to a later culture. Geographical factors also play an important role, because this area presents the first evidence of this culture. And provides the westernmost limit known to this day for the spread of Bedeni.

METHODOLOGY

The discussed issues are based on findings from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as results obtained from archaeological excavations conducted in the past ten years. Many of the data have been compiled through my fieldwork over several years. Which includes two areas: the first is the results of an archaeological survey project (AAS – Adigeni Archaeological Survey) and the archaeological excavations at Irmis Rka settlement, which includes the results of a two-season large-scale excavation. Radiocarbon dates were used to date the main layers of the settlement. Stratigraphic data were used to date individual complexes based on pottery, its shape, fabric and ornamentation.

AN EXCAVATION AT THE IRMIS RKA SETTLEMENT AND A MAJOR EBA CONTEXTS

The Irmis Rka settlement is located on the Erusheti Mountain in south-west Georgia in the Samtskhe Region, about 2 km south from the village Tsarbastubani, close to the border of Turkey, at an altitude of 1560 m. The site is a high mountain with a flatten summit. Which overlooks the adjacent area and controls the main valleys of the local region (fig.1). Archeological excavations on the settlement were initiated in 2020 by the Georgian National Museum due to the construction work of pipeline and the excavations continue as a scientific project. Since then, a total of three Kura-Araxes structures have been studied in the settlement. the architecture is characterized by dry stone walls. Because the settlement is located on a steep slope, it causes erosion, and only the back walls are preserved (fig.2). The Irmis Rka buildings should also have semi-subterranean construction with rounded corners based on the architectural evidence of the Chobareti settlement of the same period in the region (Kakhiani et al., 2013:1-138). Inside the buildings, a variety of pottery, stone and bone tools, grinders, and more have been found (fig.3).

Additionally, significant materials and information from the same period were collected from the pits. 35 Kura-Araxes pits have been studied in different parts of the settlement (fig.4). Which should have had different functions depending on their contents.

The stratigraphic trench made on the settlement was particularly productive. It was a stepped trench to determine the stratigraphy of the settlement. In total 5 steps were made, but only three of the steps confirmed presence of cultural layers (fig.5).

The first step was on the edge of the summit, which was slightly sloping to the east. It covered an area of 10X2.5 m. At a depth of 30 cm from the surface, in the southern part of the trench a 4,30 m length stone wall was exposed. In the north-west corner, a large concentration of pottery was found, which extended in the unexcavated part in the west and north profile. From this concentration, up to ten vessels of various sizes and shapes have been partially restored (fig.7) (Chilingarashvili 2021B: 252-263).

Later, the first terrace was expanded and covered an area of 150 square meters where in the central part of the trench, a building with rounded corners was identified, which comprised about 30 square meters area (storage room N1). In the interior, clay ovens were installed in both corners of the building (fig.8). The first oven was built on a rectangular platform with a clay floor in the southwest corner, its back, clay wall and remains of roof were also found which had a semicircular shape. Additionally, a vessel was found on the roof, which had been partially damaged by the collapse of the house wall (Chilingarashvili 2022).

The north corner of the building contained a second oven. A semicircular tray made of baked clay was used for the base of the oven, one side of which has been opened. On the 10 cm high and 2 cm thick side walls, a dome-shaped clay roof was built, which partially rests on the structure's back wall. There have been more than 20 vessels discovered *in situ* in this structure that belong to the Bedeni culture. Three of vessels were located along the back wall, while the rest were concentrated in different parts of the interior (fig.8). The pottery repertoire includes cooking and storage vessels. Most of these vessels have their original form and decoration, Relief ornament is especially dominant, although incised and impressed motifs are also present. Aside from the vessels, several small objects were also found in the same context, including single zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, sickle blades, andirons, grindings and a bronze knife.

From the north with an exit, the discussed structure is connected to storage room N2. As the back wall of the second room, bedrock was used. There were some places where stones were preserved on top of the rock. In the mentioned storeroom, near the north profile, a hearth consisted by rectangular stones was exposed, which was filled with ash. A tall, narrow-shouldered jar was found in its original condition in the hearth. There was also a lid which belonged to the same vessel. At the back of the vessel, another intact, relatively small double-handled jar was found on a hearth stone in an inverted position. Only part of this vessel was in the excavated area while the other half continued in profile. Totally, eight pots were found

across the floor of this storeroom, including some near the hearth. There was a stone mortar, flint sickle blades and bone tools as well. It is noteworthy that in the center of the room was found a large flat slab, which presumably supported a roof pillar. It should also be noted that in contrast to the N1 storeroom, N2 mainly contained small kitchen utensils, which clearly illustrates their functional difference.

As we have seen, the east walls of the buildings have not been attested, which is presumably due to the natural relief. In this regard especially noteworthy is the large stone wall exposed along the eastern edge of the trench, oriented toward the S-N line and extending almost to the northern profile of the trench. At this point, it is difficult to determine the purpose of this wall. However, according to orthophotos and drawings, it appears to be a continuation of the earlier, massive building found on the second terrace. This wall may have later been used as a foundation for the eastern wall during the Bedeni occupation. At this stage, it is clear that the separating wall between the N1 and N2 rooms sits directly on top of this large wall. This is significant from a stratigraphic perspective.

As mentioned on the second step/terrace which cover 10X2 m area, a stone wall was exposed. A small part of the large wall, the angle of the building, was attested in the excavated part. The wall consists of a single row of massive blocks, the longest part is almost 2 m, it's running on the S-N line and in the North direction extends in the profile of the first step. The short wall extends 1 m to the west and goes in the profile of the first terrace as well. From the south of this wall is attached relatively smaller wall which follows all the way down the profile then continues horizontally 1m toward the north and joins to the massive wall, for the moment, it's unclear what this wall is, but it almost certainly belongs to the Kura-Araxes culture (fig.9). On this step at depth of 1 m in the south-western part well-preserved ashy deposit was attested, which contained fragments of Kura-Araxes pottery, fragments of an andirons and an obsidian arrowhead were found. While cleaning the interior of the identified building, only Kura-Araxes pottery was found as well. Relying on the materials this layer with the architectural remains belongs to the Early bronze age Kura-Araxes period.

The final step confirmed the presence of the LBA defensive or terrace wall which disturbs early bronze age deposits (fig.5); therefore, no early bronze age contexts were found; however, its profile clearly demonstrates the presence of Kura-Araxes layers to a depth of almost 2 meters, which also points to long-term occupation at the site.

From the excavated part of the settlement at this time particularly noteworthy is existing on the first and second terraces the evidence of stratigraphical sequence. The profile indicates that a homogeneous grayish-yellow deposit extends to a depth of 1 meter and there is no dividing stratum between the level belonging to Bedeni and the level where the Kura-Araxes was attested (fig.9). This can be explained that the settlement was soon re-occupied during the Bedeni period. Currently, three radiocarbon dates have been made from the settlement, two of them come from the Kura-Araxes and one from the Bedeni pit. The settlement represents the early and developed stages of the Kura-Araxes culture, based on the dates. The earliest date is 3353-3101 BC, the second is 2884-2639 BC, and the last for Bedeni culture is 2460-2213 BC, which coincides with the dates from other Bedeni settlements Berikldeebi and Rabati (Sagona 2018:302, fig.7; 320-322, Bedianashvili et al., 2021:1673-1713). Overall, given the dates, there is about a 200-year gap between those two cultures, although in the central part of the settlement, where the stratigraphic sequence of these cultures has been confirmed, no interval can be observed between them. The second step's archaeological material, unfortunately, is small in quantity and does not allow for comparison studies. However, it should be noted that except for the individual elements observed on the vessels, the pottery assemblages of both cultures are completely different. As for the other artifacts, it is notable that the andiron is a characteristic element of both cultures. On the one hand, there are several fragments of andirons in the Bedeni layer, which are obviously Kura-Aaraxes, so we have to consider the second use of the material. However, on the other hand, we also find andirons which with their fabric are very similar to Bedeni pottery and distinctly belong to this period.

The continuation of the Kura-Araxes traditions is most clearly expressed in architecture. The above described Bedeni house directly replicates the features of the previous architectural traditions - a slightly curved back wall and rounded corners are identical to Kura-Araxes single-room buildings from the region (fig.10). In this case, the difference is the additional room on the north side. It is also significant to note that some elements of interior have earliest roots. A similar clay oven was found in the Kura-Araxes settlement in Toloshi, from the same region (Chilingarashvili & Perello 2020: 386-396). It is difficult to speak more broadly at this time. The continuation of these traditions can be seen in other regions or if it is only a local case, since the architecture of this period is found only on the Berikldeebi settlement (Javakhishvili 2017).

CONCLUSION

Recent studies in Irmis Rka have revealed a stratigraphic relationship between early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes and Bedeni cultures. There are some connections between the architecture and some of the artefacts, possibly reflecting a continuation of traditions. Thus, the Irmis Rka settlement represents the Early Bronze Age cultural sequence. Additionally, it is noteworthy that some materials from the Bedeni house clearly indicate a connection with the local culture of the Middle Bronze Age, best known for the Kurgans. Moreover, the existence of the LBA is also confirmed in the settlement. This issue has not been discussed in our interests. However, it clearly indi-

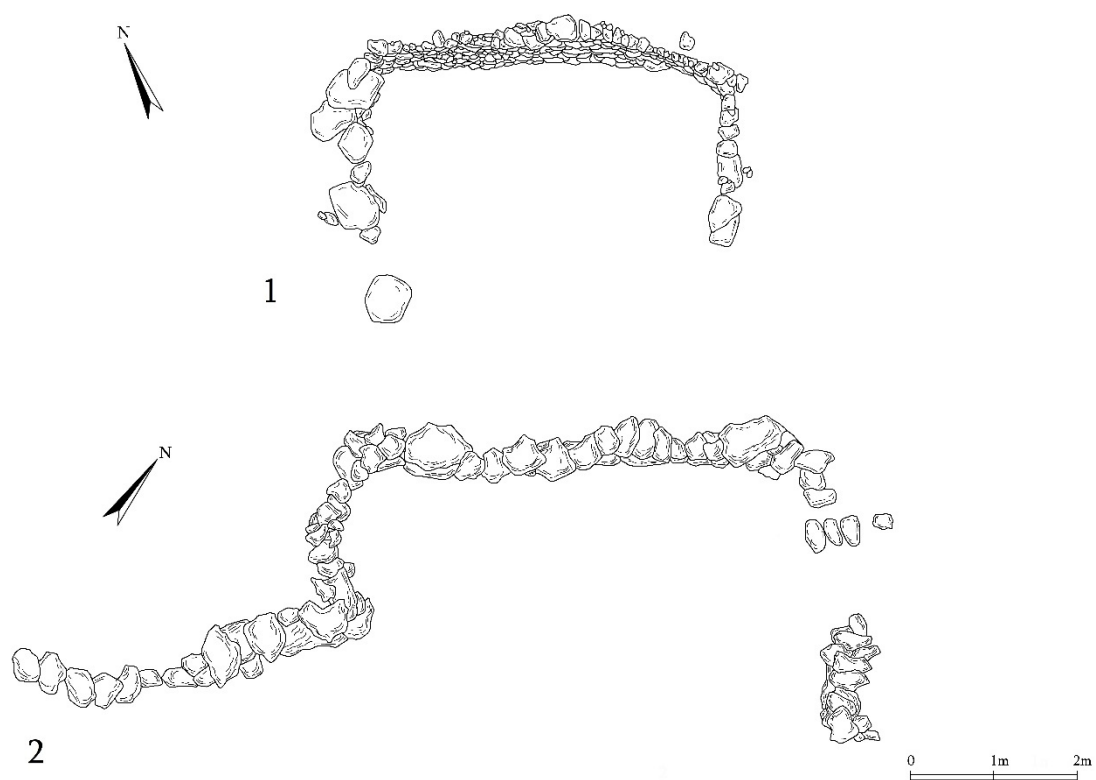
cates that not only the EBA cultural sequence but also the full cultural continuity of the Bronze Age is fully demonstrated. which shows *longue durée* of the settlement.

As we have mentioned, in the same region, which is located 1 km from the Irmis Rka, the Orchosani chalcolithic settlement, which is the prior of the Kura-Araxes culture, has been studied. Thus, the region, which for years has been a *terra incognita* in terms of archeology, has made significant discoveries in the past decade and provides an opportunity to understand a number of problematic issues related to the prehistory of the Caucasus.

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