The Late-Hellenistic Burial from Samshvilde (Georgia, South Caucasus)

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62343/cjss.2024.243

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study of the Late Hellenistic burial (1st century BCE) discovered in Samshvilde (Georgia, South Caucasus) in 2023. Although Georgian traditional historiography associates the formation of Samshvilde as a political-economic center with the Hellenistic era, no archaeological evidence of this period has been identified here yet. In this regard, the discovery of the aforementioned burial is significant, as it may provide more answers to the studies of the past of the Samshvilde archaeological complex.It should be noted that the burial was damaged due to construction activities in the Middle Ages; however, despite this, the pottery, metal objects, beads, and the silver coin discovered there allow for at least an approximate dating of the burial.The scientific importance of this discovery is also enhanced by the fact that it represents a well-stratified archaeological context, which can be used to determine other archaeological contexts located in the same section of the settlement and to understand the stratigraphic sequence in general.

Keywords: *Samshvilde, South caucasus, Hellenistic grave, Phraates IV, Parthian coin*

INTRODUCTION

Samshvilde archaeological complex is one of the significant sites in Kvemo Kartli, where cultural layers cover a broad chronological range (Chilashvili, 1970; Bakhtadze, 2007; Sanadze, 2019; Berikashvili & Pataridze, 2019; Narimanishvili, 2019–2021, 2023) (see Fig. 1). From a stratigraphic point of view, the earliest materials here belong to the final stage of the Stone Age (Grigolia & Berikashvili, 2018, p. 87), followed by archaeological contexts of the Kura-Araxes culture of the Early Bronze Age (Bakhtadze, 2007, p. 27; Narimanishvili, 2019, 2023), the Middle Bronze Age (Bakhtadze, 2007, p. 26; Berikashvili, Grigolia, Kvavadze, Müller-Bieniek, & Coupal, 2017, p. 9; Gabelaia, 2019, p. 55), and the Late Bronze Age (Bakhtadze, 2007, p. 25; Berikashvili & Coupal, 2019, p. 120; Narimanishvili, 2021, pp. 8–9). Strong fortification structures, household premises, hydrological structures of the medieval period, churches, and residential complexes built in various periods are located above these prehistoric layers.

Naturally, such intensive activities during the Middle Ages significantly damaged the early layers of the site and made their discovery particularly difficult. Despite this, recent archaeological surveys have provided significant information about the periodization and chronology of Samshvilde's former settlement. At the same time, the discovery of archaeological and numismatic (Berikashvili & Pataridze, 2019; Berikashvili, 2020, p. 120) materials, both local and imported (Berikashvili, 2016, p. 110), is significant for the correct determination of the site's character and its understanding in a broader historical context.

Although archaeological surveys have been conducted at the Samshvilde archaeological site for more than ten years, many questions about the site's prehistoric and historic periods remain unanswered. However, it is now possible to define significant components of the site, such as stratigraphy and periodization.

Before delving into the central issue of this paper, which is the review of the Late Hellenistic burial discovered in the vicinity of the main citadel, we will first present the stratigraphic and chronological sections of the site that are currently available to us.

METHOD

The Molas methodology (Museum of London Archaeology) was used while working on the site. All the methods are appropriate for the excavation of archaeological contexts, burials, and graves. These include stratigraphy and single-context

planning methods, grave context recording methods, environmental archaeological sampling methods, and archaeological context photography and drawing methods (Museum of London Archaeology, 1994).

DISCUSSION

Stratigraphy and Chronology of Samshvilde

The stratigraphy and periodization of Samshvilde remained vague until recently. However, the new reality discovered as a result of archaeological excavations carried out in recent years provided us with significant data based on which the issues of chronology and stratigraphy of the site can be defined as follows[1]:

The tools common to the early period of the Stone Age were discovered in Samshvilde in limited quantities and do not belong to the original, intact archaeological contexts. Despite this, the discovery of Mousterian pointers and rough flakes to the north of Samshvilde's former settlement, on the left embankment of the Chivchava River, suggests that early Homo sapiens resided in Samshvilde and its surroundings as early as the Mousterian period (Grigolia, 1963, pp. 121–122).

Clogged and so-called "beaky" sickle insertions made of flint, obsidian, argillite, and other stones discovered in trenches made on the eastern section of Samshvilde's former settlement resemble the materials of Kvemo Kartli's former settlements of the Early Agricultural Period (Grigolia & Berikashvili, 2018, p. 87; see fig. 12–14, tab. IV). These artifacts suggest that early agriculture spread in Samshvilde Cape during the 6th–5th millennia BCE and that the groups residing here were engaged in household and agricultural activities.

The Early Bronze Age layer and the residential structure of the Kura-Araxes culture, referred to as the "House," were discovered on the eastern section of the former settlement in 2019–2020. Even though the middens of the high Middle Ages significantly damaged these contexts, it became possible to collect pottery fragments in sufficient quantities to date the Kura-Araxes contexts of Samshvilde's former settlement to the 18th–17th centuries BCE (Narimanishvili, 2023, p. 15; see tab. LXV).

Materials from the Middle Bronze Age are present in the eastern section of the former settlement in fragments. They are separated from the intact archaeological layers and

1 When defining the stratigraphy-chronology model, we rely on the analysis, typology and analogy of archaeological materials, as well as identification of immovable cultural layers which were observed on various sections of the former settlement and the architectural monuments of various periods and designations preserved on the site territory.

represent the remains of ceramic products. Despite this, it is evident that materials of this period could not have appeared on the territory of Samshvilde Cape as a result of natural processes; their existence here must be associated with the activities of a group of individuals from this period. Based on analogous materials, fragments of ceramic products from the Middle Bronze Age discovered in Samshvilde's former settlement belong to the first half of the second millennium BCE (Gabelaia, 2019, p. 55).

Materials from the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age are represented by large amounts of ceramic fragments and middens. Intact archaeological layers containing these materials have been discovered in fragments so far, which can be explained by extensive construction and economic activities in the Middle Ages. Despite this, there are instances when immovable archaeological contexts of the same culture have been identified. For example, one of them is so called "cist burial," discovered in Samshvilde citadel, which dates back to the 9th century BC and belongs to a male individual (Berikashvili & Coupal, 2019, p. 120)[2]. It is supposed that the earliest cyclopean fortification wall of Samshvilde, whose remains have been preserved in fragments at the narrowest part of the cape, must have been built during the same period.

Archaeological contexts of the Antique Period are represented on Samshvilde Cape by single ceramic fragments and burial complexes. During fieldwork carried out as early as 1968–1969, academician L. Chilashvili mentioned that ceramic fragments from the Antique era were discovered in survey trenches made in the citadel (Chilashvili, 1970, p. 119). Similar ceramic materials were discovered later as well, as a result of archaeological excavations carried out in Samshvilde citadel and the adjacent territory from 2015 to 2023. It is certain that during this period, Samshvilde Cape represented a significant strategic unit throughout Kvemo Kartli and the South Caucasus. However, this epoch's most well-stratified and immovable archaeological complex was discovered during excavations carried out in 2023, when a 1st-century BCE burial was found to the east of the citadel in archaeological trench no. 45. The following part of this paper is dedicated to this burial; therefore, we will not focus on it here. It should also be noted that several fragments of painted ceramics from the Hellenistic period were discovered during excavation work carried out in the vicinity of Samshvilde Sioni.

The Early Middle Ages represented the stage in the history of Samshvilde when the city became a significant military, political, and economic center of the region. At the

2 In the article published in 2019, based on the analogues of the ceramic items discovered in the burial, the burial's period was identified in advance as the 2nd half of II millenium BC. However, in 2023, after dating the bioarchaeological remains discovered in the burial using a radiocarbon method (AMS Laboratory of Arizona University, USA), the date of the burial was defined as 9th century BC.

same time, this was the period when the expansion and influence of Sassanid Persia notably strengthened in the Caucasus, and the eastern part of Georgia was almost entirely under its influence (Sanadze, 2020, pp. 16, 22). The construction layer of Samshvilde citadel, built using the so-called isodomic masonry technique construction technique and clearly visible in the lower part of the citadel's western wall and also in the northwest abutment, belongs to this period. Based on archaeological and historical surveys, it can be stated that the rulers of Samshvilde had intensive and official connections with the high-level rulers of Persia during that period, which is confirmed by the discovery of a 5th–6th century bitumen bulla of Sassanid origin (Berikashvili, 2018, p. 128).

Samshvilde became the capital city of the Kingdom of Tashir-Dzoraget in the 970s when representatives of the Armenian Kiurikian dynasty managed to annex historic Kvemo Kartli and declared Samshvilde the capital city of the newly founded kingdom (Kutateladze, 2001, p. 83). However, their rule here lasted only until the 1060s, when Bagrat IV successfully seized Samshvilde in 1065 and again placed it under the rule of the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty (Kutateladze, 2001, p. 126). After their defeat in battles with the Seljuks and later with Bagrat IV, the Kiurikians moved the capital city of Tashir-Dzoraget from Samshvilde to Lore. However, they failed to maintain their power, and soon, in 1118, this kingdom ceased to exist (Japaridze, 1995, p. 55).

The High Middle Ages represent a period of significant revival in the history of Samshvilde and all of Georgia. After King David IV, the Builder, finally freed Samshvilde from the Seljuk Turks in 1110, extensive construction activities were carried out there. Samshvilde Hall Church must have been built during that period, specifically in 1119 (Gagoshidze, 2021, p. 63). Additionally, other significant buildings and structures in the city, whose artifacts, architectural details, and numismatic artifacts of that period were discovered in large quantities, date back to the 12th century.

The so-called "Royal Bath," located in Samshvilde citadel, is a bath of Oriental style that belongs to the Late Middle Ages. Although archaeological excavations of this structure have not yet been carried out, the architectural elements suggest that it dates to the 16th–17th centuries. This is the period when East Georgia was under the influence of Qizilbash Iran and, later, the Ottomans. These processes would certainly have been reflected in the significant fortress city of Kvemo Kartli – Samshvilde. It is noteworthy that archaeological excavations carried out in the vicinity of Samshvilde Bath in recent years have already uncovered certain items analogous to Ottoman materials (Berikashvili et al., 2021, p. 5).

Furthermore, the period corresponding to the conflict between Erekle II and Abdulla Beg (Archil Bagrationi) in 1747–1748 is presented most clearly in the history of

Samshvilde. The palace structure with a complicated layout discovered in the northern part of the citadel, where a large number of various items from the same period – including everyday utensils of fortress guards, household tools, combat weapons, missiles, and leftover bones from their daily food – were discovered as a result of excavations, belongs to this period (Berikashvili et al., 2023, Part I, pp. 9–19).

This is how the historic-archaeological periods of Samshvilde's former settlement can be identified based on a combination of current data and written sources. Therefore, the burial of the Late Hellenistic period discovered in the vicinity of the citadel in 2023 adds clarity to the issues of chronology and periodization of the site and, as presented below, becomes particularly important.

RESULTS

Burial 1. Trench 45. Samshvilde Citadel.

Burial no. 1 was discovered in trench no. 45, located to the east of Samshvilde citadel in 2023 (see fig 2). It was located at a depth of 60 cm from the ground surface and was partially damaged as a result of construction activities carried out in the Middle Ages (Berikashvili & Kvavadze, 2023, Part II, p. 9). The damage was evident on the southern part of the burial, which was cut by the foundation of the medieval wall and resulted in the loss of the tibiae and feet of the person buried there. As for the remaining section of the burial, the items located here were found almost undamaged in situ.

Detailing the burial's structural and stratigraphic aspects provides a comprehensive understanding of the burial site.

From a structural point of view, the burial was a 35–45 cm deep, oval trench cut into the brownish clay soil layer spread on the cliffy bedrock. From a stratigraphic point of view, no earlier contexts were discovered under the burial trench. The top was partially covered by a medieval wall and the cultural layer of the same period.

As a result of excavations, it was found that the deceased person was buried with the head to the north, lying on the right side, in a bent position. The individual was male, and his age was estimated to be between 35 and 45 years based on the rib ends and the auricular surface (Berikashvili & Kvavadze, 2023, p. 138)[3]. The cranium of the deceased person was fragmented, and the mandible was slightly damaged. The teeth of the right row of the maxilla – I2, C1, M1, and the tooth of the left row –

3 Bioarchaeological materials discovered in the burial were studied and their age and gender were identified in advance by the anthropologist N. Tavartkiladze.

M1 – were strongly worn out. Dental caries were also observed on the right teeth of the mandible - M2, M3 (according to N. Tavartkiladze). A bracelet and beads were discovered on the arm and neck of the person buried in the burial when the cranium and post-cranial remains were removed. Two pieces of small clayware were also discovered and are reviewed below (see fig. 3).

Exciting results were provided by the examination of soil samples obtained from the burial, specifically from the areas adjacent to the cranium and abdomen of the deceased person, as well as from the "khelada" (jug) and the "kochobi" (small pot) discovered in the burial. The discovery of ash particles near the cranium of the deceased was particularly noteworthy, which provides a basis for assuming the use of certain medications (Berikashvili & Kvavadze, 2023, p. 113). Medications made from ash obtained as a result of burning various organic remains, which had various pharmacological properties, including the treatment of skin diseases and wounds, are described in a scientific paper published in 2009 (Shaikh & Shaikh, 2009, pp. 77–78). According to Professor El. Kvavadze, it is not excluded that the person buried in burial no. 1 of Samshvilde trench no. 45 was trying to treat various diseases using such medications in the last period of his life.

In addition to bioarchaeological remains, archaeological items were discovered in the burial. These included a small "khelada" (jug), a small "kochobi," two forehead rings, two iron bracelets, various colored beads, and a silver coin. This material proved decisive for determining the burial date, as its parallels are well documented in other burial complexes of the same region, and the silver coin defined the chronological period of the burial more precisely (see fig. 4).

"Khelada" (Jug) (see fig. 5), which was discovered in the vicinity of the deceased person's head (height - 18 cm, bottom diameter - 9 cm, head diameter - 8 cm), was made of red clay, fired to a brownish color, and painted with red, scarlet paint. The neck of the "khelada" was surrounded by a low-relief rib. The handle with an oval cross-section was modeled below a rounded bandelet on the front side. It was evident from the beginning that this "khelada" resembled the materials of the Papigora and Shavsakdara burials studied in the same region, which date back to the second half of the 4th century BCE and the first half of the 3rd century BCE (Margishvili & Narimanishvili, 2004, p. 131, tab. XXVIII.5; tab. CLXVII.2). However, since it had a relief rib on the neck, it suggested being an item of a later period.

"Kochobi" (Small Pot) (see fig. 6) was discovered nearby, close to the head of the deceased person (height - 8.2 cm; bottom diameter - 6.5 cm; head diameter - 6 cm). It was also made of well-processed, reddish clay and was fired to a brownish color.

The head of the "kochobi" was broad, the bandelet was rounded, the bottom was flat, the front side was rounded, and the surface was slightly polished. Similar to the "khelada," such "kochobis" were discovered in Papigora (13 pieces) and Shavsakdara burials (14 pieces), where, considering other burial data, they date back to the Early Antique and Hellenistic periods (Margishvili & Narimanishvili, 2004, p. 131, tab. LIV.2; tab. LXV.6, 7, 9; tab. CXII.1; tab. CLXXII.3; tab. CLXXII.1, 3).

Two pieces of bronze forehead rings were discovered in the burial (diameter of the first one – 1.8 cm; diameter of the second one – 1.6 cm) (see fig. 7). Both were found in the vicinity of the cranium. It appears that the deceased person wore them near the temples during the burial ceremony. Both rings have open ends. One of them, which is less covered by patina, has well-visible 1 mm diameter holes on flattened ends. Such types of rings are often found in burials of the Hellenistic period in East Georgia. They were gradually withdrawn from use during the Late Hellenistic epoch and are rarely seen in burial complexes of later periods.

Two iron bracelets (see fig. 8), strongly corroded and fragmented, were worn by the deceased person on the wrist of the right hand. Both bracelets were so damaged that they could only be removed from the burial in parts. Despite this, it was evident that both bracelets had open ends and flat sections, and formed circles resembling ellipses. Similar bracelets are known from East Georgian burials, particularly from the Early Antique and Hellenistic eras. The quantity of such items in the Papigora burial (Algeti Valley, Kvemo Kartli) reaches 23 pieces, including 16 bracelets made of bronze and seven bracelets made of iron (Margishvili & Narimanishvili, 2004, p. 24, tab. CXCIX; tab. CC).

Beads (see fig. 9) discovered in other burials of the Hellenistic period in East Georgia and the Samshvilde burial were made of various materials (canary stone, paste, glass, black amber, etc.). The beads were collected from the neck area of the deceased person, indicating that the he wore them around the neck. In total, 24 pieces of round, flattened, biconical, barrel-like, and pipe-like beads were discovered in the burial, and their color range was very diverse. According to parallel materials, such beads date back to the Early Antique-Hellenistic period (Davlianidze, 1983, pp. 89–106, tab. LXXI.17–35, 37–39; tab. XI.32–35; tab. XIX.10–11; Margishvili & Narimanishvili, 2004, p. 28, tab. CXXI.2; tab. CXXVIII.4; tab. CCIII). The beads discovered in the Samshvilde burial are attributed to the same period.

However, the silver coin placed in the mouth of the deceased person appeared to be the most significant among the burial materials. It was discovered during the removal of earth from the bioarchaeological remains, specifically the maxilla, in

the laboratory (see fig. 10). The well-preserved condition of the coin, as well as the image and inscription on the obverse and reverse, determined not only the origin and date of the coin but also the entire chronology of the burial complex.

It was established that the coin represented the silver drachma cut by the representative of the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia - Phraates IV, which was put into circulation from I century BC and was circulated for too long[4]. The king's profile is shown on the averse of the coin, with his face directed to the left, and his facial features, mustache, beard, and haircut depicted in detail and with deep relief (Rezakhani, 2013). Behind the head of the king, to the left, a bird's image is shown in relief, symbolizing the "royal bird," "royal power," or khvarenah (xwarra(h): Avestan: xᵛarənah), which appears to be an indicator of the divine origin of the royal dynasty (Curtis, 2016, pp. 179–203).

As for the coin's reverse, the inscription and the image shown here are in relatively low relief and more worn out, making it difficult to read and decipher the images. However, parallel materials allow for the establishment of the content of the inscription. In particular, the royal title of Phraates IV is written here in Greek and is read as follows: "of the King of Kings Arsaces the Renowned/Manifest Benefactor Philhellene" (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ) (Bigwood, 2004, pp. 35–70).

Phraates IV occupied the royal throne of the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia from 37 to 2 BCE (Bivar, 1983, pp. 21–99; Strugnell, 2006, pp. 239–252). He was succeeded by Phraates V in the 1st century BCE (Kia, 2016; Richardson, 2012). During the reign of Phraates V, the silver drachma minted by his predecessor remained in circulation. Therefore, it is complicated to precisely define the upper chronological limit of the coin's circulation. However, it is universally accepted that the emission of the aforementioned drachma must have started in the period close to the initial years of Phraates IV's reign (37 BCE). Therefore, the discovery of this coin in Samshvilde's burial dates the burial to the 1st century BCE, more precisely, to the second half of the 1st century BCE. This date is also supported by the artifacts discovered in the burial, which were reviewed above and are typical of burial sites of the same period in East Georgia.

4 We express our gratitude to the numismatist Irakli Paghava for identification of the coin and providing a respective consultation.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the burial discovered in trench no. 45, which contains archaeological materials from the Late Hellenistic period and a coin dated to the 1st century BCE, represents a new and significant complex for the history of Samshvilde's former settlement.

Given that intact archaeological contexts of this period have not yet been discovered on the site's territory, the scientific value and significance of this specific burial increase even more.

Moreover, the discovery of the 1st-century BCE burial near the citadel raises positive expectations that other burials from the same period will also be discovered in the adjacent territory. All of the above is extremely important for the study of a specific period in Samshvilde's long history.

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Figure 1.

Location of Samshvilde

Figure 2.

Thench 45. General View

Figure 3.

Burial 1. General View

Figure 4.

Burial 1 and Archaeological materials in the grave

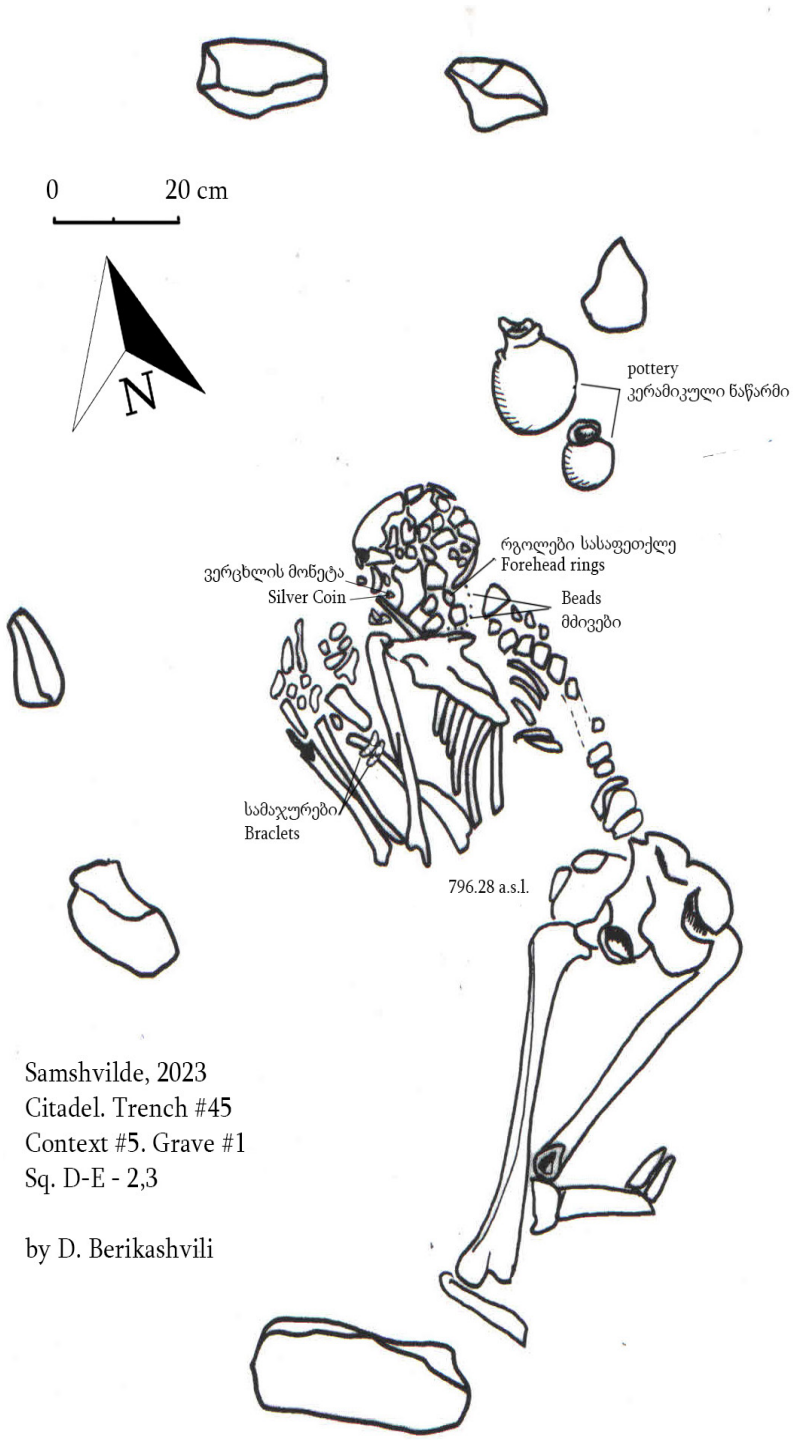

Figure 5.

,,Khelada" (Jug) from the burial 1

Figure 6.

,,Kochopi" (Small pottery) fro the burial 1.

Figure 7.

The Bronze forhead rings from the burial 1

Figure 8.

Fragments of Iron bracelets from the burial 1

Figure 9.

Beads from the burial 1

Figure 10.

Silver Drachma of Phraates IV of Parthia from the burial 1