The Kura-Araxes Culture in Kakheti Region of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

The definition of the Kura-Araxes culture was established in the early 1940s. Despite the long history of studying the Kura-Araxes culture in Georgia, many aspects related to this culture are still under investigation. One of the significant issues is the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture within the territory of Georgia. This article aims to examine the current state of the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture in one of the regions of Georgia, Kakheti. It gathers and analyzes information about all known sites and accidental finds. In the territory of contemporary Kakheti, 18 Kura-Araxes period sites and four accidental finds from different locations have been identified to date. Even considering only the data from existing older research, it can be said that Kakheti is one of the critical regions for the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture, with the potential to investigate the genesis of this culture further.

Keywords: *The Kura-Araxes culture, Kakheti region, East Georgia*

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological findings of the Kura-Araxes culture in the South Caucasus have been known since the accidental discoveries of the 1860s. However, the definition of this culture was established only in the early 1940s by the renowned scientist Boris Kuftin. He studied the sites and archaeological finds in the South Caucasus known at that time, identifying characteristic features of this culture and naming it the "Kura-Araxes Eneolithic Culture" (Kuftin, 1943, pp. 85-127). This work was partly due to his studies of several sites from this period during excavations carried out in the historical region of Trialeti from 1936 to 1940 (Kuftin, 1941, pp. 106-108).

It is now known that this culture's distribution area extends beyond the Kura and Araxes River basins. At a particular stage of development, the Kura-Araxes culture spread to Iran, Anatolia, and the Levant (Batiuk et al., 2022, pp. 237-241).

The study of Kura-Araxes culture sites in Georgia has a long history. In 1910, E. Takaishvili studied materials from this period, which was revealed in Sachkhere (Takaishvili, 1913, pp. 167-172). In 1920, a Kura-Araxes burial was excavated near the village of Kiketi (Pchelina, 1928, pp. 156-159). However, before Kuftin's research, it was not yet known to which archaeological culture these discoveries belonged.

Despite the long history of studying the Kura-Araxes culture in Georgia, many aspects of this culture are still being examined. Each discovery raises new scientific questions. One of the significant issues is the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture within the territory of Georgia. Sites and accidental finds of this culture are published in various monographs, scientific articles, and archaeological excavation reports. To date, there is no modern map that records all these discoveries. This article aims to study the current state of the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture in one of the regions of Georgia, Kakheti. It gathers and analyzes information about all known sites and accidental finds.

Recent publications dedicated to the Kura-Araxes culture abroad have shown that data on the cultural sites of the Kakheti region are only partially accessible to foreign colleagues (Poulmarc'h et al., 2014, fig. 2; Batiuk, 2022, fig. 10). Several sites have not yet been introduced into scientific circulation, complicating further research on various issues related to the culture.

The Kura-Araxes culture in the Kakheti region is poorly studied. A long-term, purposeful study of this culture has not been conducted in this region. Notable sites in the region were mainly discovered during archaeological rescue work, along with the study of several burial sites in various parts of the region.

DISCUSSION

The Georgian National Museum and various regional museums in Kakheti house several artefacts from this period. These include one clay vessel from Gurjaani (Koridze, 1955, pp. 44-45); another from the village of Gulgula in the Telavi district (Pitskhelauri, 1965, p. 31); one more from Zemo Kachreti; and a metal pin from the village of Kvemo Magharo (Dedabrishvili, 1969, pp. 36-37). The pottery found in Gulgula parallels the materials from Didube (Pitskhelauri, 1965, p. 31), dated to the Early Kura-Araxes period (Djafaridze, 1991, p. 105). For instance, the pottery found in Gurjaani is similar to that known from Zilicha's No. 4 mound burial (Asatiani & Maisuradze, 1992, Pl. VI-2) and Chaliankhevi's No. 1 mound burial (Varazashvili, 2010, Pl. V-1), both complexes belonging to the Late Kura-Araxes period. Meanwhile, the pottery found in Zemo Kachreti has numerous parallels and occurs at various stages of this culture. Such pottery is known, for example, from Dalis Mta No. II.10 (Asatiani & Maisuradze, 1992, Pl. VIII-12) and Kachreti's No. 3 mound burials (Varazashvili, 2010, Pl. II). The pin found in Kvemo Magharo is similar to those primarily known from the Sachkhere area, dating to the mid-3rd millennium BC (Gambashidze et al., 2010, p. 182, Pl. 016c).

Kura-Araxes settlements in Kakheti are known in smaller numbers compared to other regions of Georgia. These include the settlements of Gremi, Zemo Bodbe, Alaverdi, Ilto, and Cheremi.

Gremi Temporary Settlement: It was discovered accidentally in 1964, and small-scale rescue work was carried out in 1965. It is located northwest of the village of Gremi, at the beginning of a narrow valley at the foothills. The cultural layers were identified in the valley profile. One agricultural pit and a fragment of a clay earthen floor were studied. It is considered to have been a temporary settlement rather than a long-term habitation site (Dedabrishvili, 1969, pp. 67-72).

Zemo Bodbe Temporary Settlement: Discovered in 1964 near the village of Zemo Bodbe in the so-called "Protected Forest," small-scale rescue work was also performed here. The archaeological site consisted of a hill protected by artificial ditches. It was situated at an elevation of about 880 meters above sea level. Several agricultural pits with Kura-Araxes material were studied. The site was used as a temporary shelter for shepherds during the Soviet era. Archaeologist Sh. Dedabrishvili considered that it might have also served the same function in the Early Bronze Age (Dedabrishvili, 1969, pp. 72-75). The material from both Zemo Bodbe and Gremi sites dates back to the Early Kura-Araxes period.

Alaverdi Settlement: Sparse data is known. Located northeast of the village of

Alaverdi in the Alazani valley, it was discovered at a depth of three meters, with cultural layers identified in the water channel profile, where material dating to the Early Bronze Age was gathered (Dedabrishvili, 1969, pp. 66-67).

Ilto Settlement: Comparatively better studied, this site constitutes a multi-layer settlement. It was studied during rescue works carried out from 1965 to 1967. They studied both the settlement structures – residential buildings and agricultural pits – as well as several pit burials of the settlement. Archaeological discoveries date back to the Late Kura-Araxes period (Dedabrishvili, 1969, pp. 39-66).

Cheremi Settlements (Saghandzile and Kvirias Gora): In 1983, approximately one kilometer northwest of the village of Cheremi, an Early Bronze Age settlement was discovered at the site of Saghandzile, which was studied only through small-scale excavations during rescue operations. A total of two trenches with an area of 12 square meters were excavated. Despite the small scale of the excavations, significant discoveries were made, confirming a building with a clay earthen floor and one hearth. The archaeological materials were dated to the Early Kura-Araxes period based on parallel materials (Varazashvili, 2006, pp. 62–65). About a hundred meters south of this site, materials from the same period were found (Varazashvili, 2012, p. 51). This concerns the Kvirias Gora settlement, discovered at the end of the 1980s. It was also studied only during rescue operations. Fragments of several stone-built walls and agricultural pits were revealed here (Pitskhelauri et al., 2004, p. 22). To date, it is not entirely clear whether we are dealing with two independent contemporary settlements or two districts of one site. Existing data support the latter assumption.

Notably, an even earlier accidental find from the same area is known – a stone insignia (scepter) attributed to the Uruk culture circle (Pitskhelauri, 2012, p. 156).

Regarding the settlements, it is noteworthy to consider the geographical environment and landscape in which the Kura-Araxes settlements in Kakheti are located and whether they differ from the settlements of the same period in other regions of Georgia. The Ilto settlement was situated on a riverside terrace on the mountain slope, where the Ilto River emerges from a narrow gorge and joins the Alazani valley. The settlement was spread over several terraces at an elevation of approximately 620-640 meters above sea level.

The temporary settlement of Gremi resembles the Ilto settlement in its location. It was situated in the foothill zone at the beginning of the gorge, where the narrow gorge joins the Alazani valley at an elevation of approximately 480 meters above sea level.

The temporary settlement of Zemo Bodbe was located approximately 880 meters above sea level, in the highest part of the Iori Plateau, on a hilly and ravine-dissected terrain.

The Cheremi settlements are located in the valley of the Chermiskhevi River at an elevation of approximately 1050 meters above sea level. The exact location of the Saghandzile settlement is known (Varazashvili, 2012, p. 51). It was situated on the high, well-protected left cape of the Chermiskhevi River, with an elevation difference of 130 meters between the southern part of the settlement and the riverbed. Additionally, the settlement was protected by dry ravines from the east and west. In contrast, from the north, the cape and, consequently, the settlement were separated from the adjacent mountain by an area lowered by approximately 20-30 meters. Thus, the settlement was located in a naturally well-protected place (Pl. III). In terms of topography, it is very similar to the Kura-Araxes settlements in Shida and Kvemo Kartli; for example, it can be compared to the Kvatskhela settlement (Javakhishvili & Ghlonti, 1962, Pl. II).

In contrast to the sites mentioned above, the Alaverdi settlement has a different topography. It was located in the Alazani valley, at an elevation of approximately 440 meters above sea level, near the contemporary riverbed. However, only a few finds have been published from this site, complicating its cultural identification.

The first Kura-Araxes burial in the Kakheti region was excavated near the village of Khirsa in 1962 (Pitskhelauri, 1965, pp. 32-35). Before that, it was known that two mound burials near the village of Mashnaari had been destroyed during groundworks (Pitskhelauri, 1965, pp. 31-32). Both of these sites were located in the Alazani Valley. In the Alazani Valley, mound burial No. 1 at Enamta (Asatiani & Maisuradze, 1992, pp. 158-159, 162) and a pit burial near the Naomari Gora settlement were also studied (Mindiashvili, 1977, pp. 19-23). In the Iori Plateau, burials at Dalis Mta No. II.10 (Asatiani & Maisuradze, 1992, pp. 161-162), Zilicha No. 4 (Asatiani & Maisuradze, 1992, p. 160), Ole (Pitskhelauri et al., 1995, p. 76), Didiserebi No. 2 near the village of Nukriani (Pitskhelauri et al., 1979, p. 19), Zeiani No. 2 (Kapanadze, 1986, pp. 12-28), Kachreti No. 3 (Pitskhelauri et al., 1982, p. 30), Tetri-Kvebi No. 2 (Pitskhelauri et al., 2004, p. 22), and Chaliankhevi No. 1 (Varazashvili, 2008, pp. 7-8) were studied. Another looted mound burial, No. 14 at the Dalis Mta cemetery, likely belonging to the Kura-Araxes culture, has also been studied (Maisuradze & Rusishvili, 2004, p. 35). Information about another Kura-Araxes burial is known from archaeological excavation reports. This concerns the site excavated in 1965 at Meligele, which is considered contemporaneous with the Didiserebi No. 2 burial (Pitskhelauri et al., 1979, p. 19). The still-unpublished

catacombs discovered at the Fevrebi cemetery are dated to the early phase of the Early Bronze Age (Pitskhelauri et al., 1980, p. 86). The latest discovery in the region to date is the mound burial Taribana No. 1, excavated in 2002 (Varazashvili, 2010, pp. 8-9).

Additionally, several burials were studied at the Ilto settlement.

Out of the burials listed above, the exact location is known for only one case (Taribana No. 1) (Varazashvili & Pitskhelauri, 2011, p. 76). For the Ilto settlement and the burials situated there, the location can be determined with an accuracy of several tens of meters. In other cases, the margin of error for determining the location can reach up to 2-3 km (Pl. I, II).

Thus, to date, 13 Kura-Araxes burials are known from the Kakheti region. Additionally, three more burials likely belong to the same period (Dalis Mta No. 14, Fevrebi, and the Meligele burial). As we have seen, most of the burials are found on the Iori Plateau, with a relatively smaller number in the Alazani Valley. Almost all these burials are found in different locations, with the exception, of course, of several burials at the Ilto settlement. Thus, to date, no Kura-Araxes cemetery is known in the region.

Most of the burials are small mound burials. In the case of the burial at Naomari Gora, it is presumed to be a small pit burial. The largest mound (40 meters in diameter, 2 meters in height) was the Taribana No. 1 mound burial. In other cases, the mound diameters range from 5 to 30 meters, with heights of less than 2 meters. The Taribana No. 1 mound burial is also notable for having approximately twenty stone stelae erected on its mound, ranging in size from 0.4 to 1.2 meters. The information about the structure of the mounds is inadequately presented in publications. In four cases (Didiserebi No. 2, Kachreti No. 3, Khirsa, Mashnaari), it is indicated that they were stone mounds. In two instances (Enamta, Ole), it is indicated that they were stone-earth mounds. In individual cases, it is noted that the mound had a stone circle (e.g., Mashnaari mound burial). The Mashnaari mound burial lacked a burial chamber; the deceased were buried on the ground surface. Kachreti No. 3 and Didiserebi No. 2 mound burials were constructed similarly. Most of the burials, however, had burial chambers dug into the ground. The data on the sizes and orientations of the burial chambers are incomplete. Burial chamber orientations include both east-west and south-north directions. The volume of the burial chamber ranges from 1.4 m³ to 10 m³. The Enamta No. 1 mound burial (16 m³) had a relatively large burial chamber. The depth of the burial pit reaches a maximum of 2 meters (Tetri Kvebi No. 2). One construction detail is noted in the Khirsa mound burial: the bottom of the burial pit

was covered and compacted with small river stones, while the walls of the burial pit were built with dry-laid river stones. Dromoi were present in the Zilicha No. 4, Taribana No. 1, and Zeiani No. 2 mound burials. The Chaliankhevi No. 1 mound burial is notable for being a catacomb-type burial (Varazashvili, 2008, pp. 7-8, Pl. II).

In these burials, we typically encounter inhumation burials. In the cases of the Khirsa, Naomari Gora, and Tetri Kvebi No. 2 burials, only one deceased was recorded per burial. All other burials are collective, with six or more deceased buried in them. The most significant number of deceased (63) was recorded in the Taribana No. 1 mound burial, which is also the largest by proportion. In the Kura-Araxes burials in the Kakheti region, a total of approximately 200 deceased individuals have been recorded. Based on existing data, it is quite challenging to draw conclusions about the burial position and head orientation or whether the sex and age of the deceased played any role. Publications sometimes indicate that in collective burials, the bones of the deceased were mixed together (Dalis Mta No. II.10). The orientation of the deceased's heads varies, with some facing north and others facing south. The use of fire in burial rituals is rare but confirmed. In Zilicha No. 4 mound burial, skulls and other bones of seven deceased were found. In the western part of the burial pit and along the southwest wall, the heavily burned bones of the deceased were recorded. A similar ritual was encountered in the Zeiani No. 2 burial. Fifteen deceased were buried here, seven in the dromos and eight in the burial chamber. Six of the deceased in the burial chamber showed signs of heavy fire damage.

The burial inventory is not abundant. Twenty and 29 ceramic vessels were found in the Dalis Mta No. II.10 and Taribana No. 1 burials, respectively. In other burials, the number of ceramic vessels ranges from 1 to 20. A single flint arrowhead was found in the Khirsa burial, while one obsidian arrowhead was found in the Taribana No. 1 mound burial. Among the bone artifacts, bone spindle whorls were discovered in the Ole and Taribana No. 1 mound burials, with seven and two whorls, respectively. One spindle whorl (presumably bone) was found in the Tetri Kvebi No. 2 burial. A fragment of a hand grinder stone was found among the pebbles that had fallen into the pit at the Khirsa burial.

Kura-Araxes burials in the Kakheti region do not feature numerous metal or stone artifacts. A relatively larger inventory was recorded in the Enamta No. 1 mound burial, where items such as a gold wire-made ring, a bronze arrowhead, a bronze pin, carnelian beads, triangular bone beads, and paste beads were found. This inventory makes the complex more similar to early Kurgan period sites and distinct from Kura-Araxes sites. Aside from Enamta No. 1, paste beads were found only in the Kachreti No. 3 burial.

Regarding faunal remains, two bull skulls with horns but without lower jaws were found in the Khirsa burial. Five small cattle skulls were found in the Kachreti No. 3 burial, and one skull was found in the Taribana No. 1 mound burial. A sheep skull and limb bones were found in the Khirsa burial, and sheep bones were found in the Naomari Gora burial.

As mentioned above, several burials were also studied within the Kura-Araxes layers of the Ilto settlement. Establishing burials in prehistoric settlement layers is characteristic of the Kura-Araxes culture, as seen at the Chobareti settlement (Kakhiani et al., 2013, pp. 14-17), as well as in many other regions during various periods (Müller-Scheeßel, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Therefore, to date, 18 Kura-Araxes period sites and four accidental finds have been identified in contemporary Kakheti. Additionally, at least three unpublished burials are presumed to belong to this period. The majority of these sites are burials, while settlements remain relatively poorly studied. However, most of the discovered sites belong to the early stages of this culture. Collective burial customs have been confirmed in most of the burials, with approximately 200 human remains discovered in total. The burial inventories in this region are not particularly distinguished by variety; metal artifacts, in particular, are exceedingly scarce. This scarcity is likely since most of the complexes date back to the early stages of the Kura-Araxes culture.

It is noteworthy that the majority of Kura-Araxes sites in Kakheti have only been published in a limited manner, mostly within low-quality archaeological excavation reports. Descriptions of the burials, burial rituals, and accompanying photographic and graphic documentation are often incomplete. In most cases, anthropological and other natural science studies have not been conducted, leaving significant gaps in the understanding of these sites. However, these deficiencies can still be partially remedied through further research and re-examining the available materials.

The collection and analysis of existing published data alone have significantly altered the current understanding of the distribution intensity of Kura-Araxes culture in Kakheti. Considering the above, it can be stated that despite the non-systematic nature of the research on sites from this period in the Kakheti region, very important archaeological sites and finds have been discovered. The re-publication of museum collections according to modern standards, the application of natural science meth-

ods to old finds, reconnaissance work to identify new sites, and new archaeological excavations will provide significant new data for studying the scientific problems of the Kura-Araxes culture.

Even when considering only the data from older research, it is evident that Kakheti is one of the key regions for the distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture, with substantial potential for research on its genesis.

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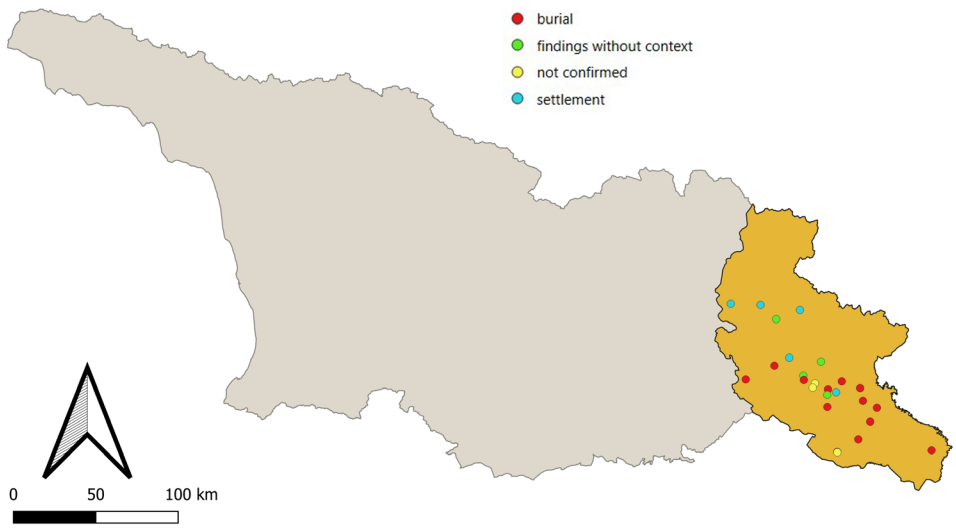
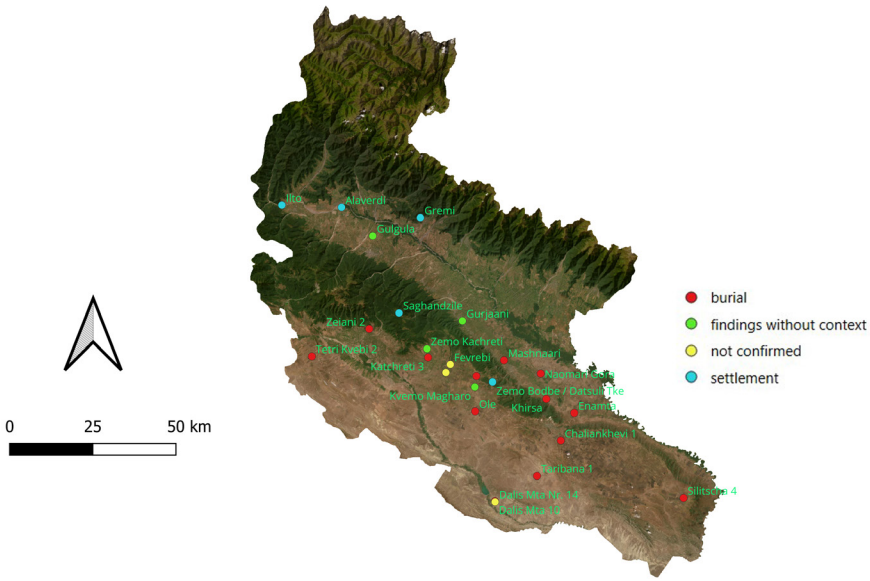
Pl. I.

The Distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture in Kakheti region. Map of Georgia



Pl. II.

The Distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture in Kakheti region. Map of Kakheti



Pl. III.

Digital elevation model of the Saghandzile settlement