

ARCHAEOLOGY

Essential Socio-Cultural Innovations of the III–II Millennia BC Trialeti Culture: The Determining Causes of Their Appearance

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a special study of the socio-cultural innovative processes and a certain group of valuable artifacts of the III–II Millennium BC Trialeti Culture. Determining the causes of their emergence, and thus of the onset of this developed (II) stage of Middle Bronze Age culture is considered in the context of numerous essential artifacts from the Near East. The detailed evaluation of such items enabled us to better understand the intercultural relationship between the mentioned Ancient Oriental region and the South Caucasus. Attention is drawn to the various materials, which provide extensive information on the innovations and changes in the cultural and socio-economic life of the Trialetian society. Concentrate on burial traditions and the different types of luxury goods from the rich kurgans, enabling you to connect all this data to traditional Near Eastern features. Flourishment of high artistic craft also appears to be one of the most characteristic trends of this South Caucasian cultural unit.

Keywords: Trialeti culture, innovations, socio-cultural and craftsmanship development, Old World

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INTRODUCTION

During the developed (II) stage of the Middle Bronze Age, the most significant part of the South Caucasus was populated by the ethno-cultural group bearing the Trialeti culture, contemporary with the Old Hittites, Old Assyrians, and Hurrians, who inhabited different areas of the Near East. The role and importance of the Trialetian society, which reached its peak between the XXI and the mid XVII centuries BC, are clearly perceptible in ancient history, not only in the Caucasus but also in the Near East. Owing to this, there is an ever-growing feeling of necessity to conduct a detailed study of numerous assemblages of this culture in accordance with southern civilizations. Elucidation of the Trialeti culture in this context seems necessary to address the problem of its origin and the causes of the sudden appearance of several innovative features in material culture and across different spheres of life. The development of this culture was determined by several factors, among which we can mention the increasingly brisk contact with the Near Eastern world and the acceptance of the achievements that characterized the previous Bedeni culture period. The local tradition appears to be the strong background on which the further progress of the culture considered here was founded.

METHODS

Based on the research goals, we initially collected all types of archaeological data and source materials from both the South Caucasian and the Near Eastern cultural spheres. We critically examined all known scientific viewpoints in the literature. During the research process, all specific and concrete reasoning was generalized by comparing it with available data, forming the basis for our position on the main topic. Accordingly, the presented assumption about the determining causes of the socio-economic and cultural innovations of the late III-early II millennium BC Trialeti Culture elucidates the processes that happened in the remote past. Our aim is to develop a scientifically justified position and interpretation grounded in the analysis of all obtained results. While working on the article, we also applied descriptive, analytical, and historical-comparative methods.

RESULTS

The article evaluates the principal factors that determined the emergence of essential innovations and various categories of material culture, as reflected in the famous sites (almost exclusively burial mounds) of the Trialeti Culture. At present, there is an ever-growing need to conduct a thorough study of the Trialeti Culture assemblages in comparison with the rich complexes of different civilizations of the Near East. This is especially important for understanding the cultural change that occurred in the developed phase (II stage) of the Middle Bronze Age South Caucasian cultural unit under consideration.

Elucidation of the Trialeti Culture in such context seems necessary for understanding the reasons for the sudden and abrupt appearance of an ‘alien’ stylistic tradition, as well, for

solving the problem of the origin of this fascinating culture, which remains debatable chiefly because of the marked differences between it and the previous so-called Early Kurgan local culture. Concentration on those and other problems would facilitate the identification of obvious causes of visible changes, leading to the flourishing of the Trialetian cultural unit.

DISCUSSION

Since the 30s of the 20th century, when the first sites of the Trialeti culture were discovered, investigators have shown keen interest in this culture. However, the basic questions concerning it have been more or less studied and the gaps filled in, owing to a number of objective reasons (among them are tenuously studied settlement sites). Some problems still remain unsolved. Among them is the question of the determining causes underlying the emergence of the various innovative trends recorded in the Trialeti Culture. Among the many publications evaluating different aspects of the culture (Kuftin, 1941, 78-100; Japaridze, 2006, pp. 341-359; Gogadze, 1972, pp. 55-61; 71-79; 82-89; Abramishvili, 2010, pp. 167-178; Narimanishvili, Shanshashvili, 2010, pp. 205-221; Oganesyan, 1988, pp. 145-160; Japaridze, 1981; Rubinson, 2003, pp. 128-143; 2013, pp. 12-25; Puturidze, 2002, pp. 100-113; 2003, pp. 111-127; 2017, pp. 213-227; 2020, pp. 194-209, etc.), it is possible to identify both previously noted issues and additional problems that remain unresolved. One of the essential tasks is to identify the main factors that ultimately determined the prosperity of the Trialeti Culture. From the point of view of determining all the causes of the unbelievable flourishing of this culture, it should be especially investigated the appearance of certain innovations, the measure of influence of outer civilizations, and the reasons for the evident successive progress in the economy and craftsmanship fields. Our analysis is focused precisely on these issues.

It is first necessary to outline briefly the distribution of the Trialeti Culture, which was distributed in the north adjacent area of the vast Near Eastern region and comprised the modern territories of Georgia, Armenia, and part of Azerbaijan, that is, nearly all of the South Caucasus. A notable exception in terms of distribution is western Georgia, where no Trialetian sites have been recorded. The Likhi mountain range – a geographical barrier between western and eastern Georgia – served as a natural boundary that halted the westward spread of this culture. The Middle Bronze Age Colchian culture does not relate to the Trialetian one at all and shows no apparent affinity with it. All other territory in the South Caucasus, including the Araxes River basin, was part of the Trialeti culture. Their bearers, whose ethnic affiliation is virtually unknown, inhabited most of the southern Caucasus and, presumably, extended further southwest into the easternmost regions of present-day Turkey (Puturidze, 2003, pp. 112, 114, fig. 5.1)

The appearance of the new, flourishing Trialeti culture on the map of the Old World at the very end of the 3rd millennium BC marks not only a developed stage of the Middle Bronze Age but also the beginning of profound social and cultural changes in local society. In our viewpoint, these changes are related to the process of activated interrelation with outer civilizations, first of all with the Anatolian region and Sumer. Supposing that, as a result

of the interaction of various cultural traditions at the crossroad area of the Caucasus, the formation of the new Trialeti Culture should be understood as a process in which multiple cultural layers can be distinguished. All of them create an attractive assemblage of this culture, among which are distinguishable some samples that stand apart from any ‘alien’ influence and are evidently of local origin, as well as another group of artifacts typical of the Ancient Near Eastern style.

Among the Trialetian materials, there is no detailed information about the farming activities of the communities buried in well-known kurgans. Economic data on societies, which usually contain such information, mainly come from settlement sites. Exactly this type of dwelling house, containing important evidence about the economic life of the bearers of the Trialetian community, unfortunately, is still lacking. The exception is the two so-called summer-type constructions, which scholars do not consider the basic housing habitations of Trialetians, but rather seasonal summer houses for groups engaged in cattle-breeding activities ([Pitskhelauri, 2013, pp. 126-182](#)). This simple dwelling cannot be considered a stable settlement for the elite population, who mostly constructed very complex, large-scale stone burials and was well-trained in engineering. Owing to the undiscovered main settlements of this culture, associated with the famous kurgans, it is impossible to judge their economy, constructional abilities in housing habitation, and daily life. Surveys using modern high-technology equipment have not yet been carried out. As for the surveys conducted in the late 50s and 60s of the 20th century ([Muskhelishvili, Tskitishvili, 1960, pp. 185-196](#)), they do not have any results. Therefore, scholars are limited by such insufficient evidence to discuss their farming activity in detail or with any certainty.

The Trialeti culture is well known for its burial complexes. Our knowledge of construction engineering capabilities and achievements is mainly based on kurgan buildings, which provide important insights into this field. In essence, the kurgan appears to be the only type of burial of the Trialeti culture. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the kurgan, as the principal burial construction, was well known in the so-called Early Kurgans culture (the earliest stage of the Middle Bronze Age) and in a few cases also even earlier, in the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes culture or Chalcolithic period’s certain site ([Museibli, 2014; Makharadze, 2007, pp.123-131](#)). So, it is important that this type of burial was familiar to previous cultures and was not news to the Trialeti alone. Burial sites contain extensive information about a society’s social structure. The process of deep social stratification is quite evident in numerous kurgans and burial goods. The giant kurgans provide evidence of a massive concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the ruling elite and likely signal significant ideological and profound social changes. Changes in political structure in the South Caucasian region cannot be determined with any certainty, as in the Near Eastern civilizations, and can only be guessed at.

When focusing on excavated data related to burial constructions and detailed burial rituals, we should note that different types of burial constructions and rituals currently exist. Excavated kurgans in Zurtaketi and Tsalka (Lower, i.e., Kvemo Kartli) or in Kakheti districts, as well as in Vanadzor, Lori Berd, and Karasham tombs (Armenia), are of particular interest for their precious burial goods and constructional characteristics. Important features of Zu-

rtaketi burial assemblages include the large stone buildings and dromos unearthed beneath the kurgan's embankment (Japaridze, 1969). Scholars remarked that these buildings can be compared with the Hittite king's 'stone houses' (Kuftin, 1941, p.83). Another burial custom's similarity with the same Asia Minor's civilizations is the ritual of cremation recorded in Tsalka burials, and it is supposed to have been borrowed from the Hittite tradition of kings and queens' funerals, which is known from contemporary sites and also, cuneiform written archives (Kuftin, 1941, p.81). Kuftin deemed the existence of a cremation tradition plausible in the Tsalka burials he excavated, as animal bones were frequently documented in contexts where human skeletal remains were absent.

Thus, it is evident that cremation represented a quite new, non-traditional ritual in the South Caucasian region, and this 'alien', clearly non-local, funeral element was adopted only by the ruling strata of Trialetian society. This seems quite understandable, as the elite often created new and prestigious traditions from famous civilizations. Therefore, cremation was a remarkable feature of sharing an important 'alien' tradition, by which the Trialetian elite emphasized their privileges, at a time when the less wealthy or 'middle' class practiced inhumation, and their burial constructions were distinguished by limited size.

It is also important to focus on high-quality craftsmanship, which reveals many innovative features. In goldworking craft, 'alien' and innovative features are evident not only in the artistic-stylistic aspect but also in the clearly visible new technical methods used by craftsmen. Both contributed substantially to the onset of a critical transitional phase in this field. It seems reasonable to begin with consideration of toreutics, which are an important and richly represented group of precious metalwork. The beginning of their production clearly indicates a high level of artistic craft. Notably, this type of artifact is numerous and diverse in artistic style, indicating that craftsmen were already well-trained in this field. Their scale and characteristic details make it evident that they were shaped by intensive international contacts with a more southerly, "alien" cultural world. In Ancient Anatolia, Sumer, and other civilizations of the Near East, toreutic was widely known not only in the contemporary period but also in earlier periods, indicating the highest level of its development. Different characteristic features of the mentioned regions are clearly visible among the same type of items of the Trialeti culture, which allows many scholars (Rubinson, 2003, pp. 128-143; Boehmer, Kossack, 2000, pp. 9-71) to emphasize the significant influence of external civilizations. We suppose that metal vessels of the famous Trialeti culture might not have been reached so quickly at such a high level of elaboration without the impact of 'alien' cultural achievements. It seems highly symptomatic that in Trialetian, rich burials contained the same categories of precious goods as are usually found on Near Eastern sites. In both cases prestige patterns represented with gold plaques and foils (ornamented and as well with plain surface), pins, hanging spirals, gold figurines and pedestal boxes where they were attached, great number and various fashions beads, yet unrecognized gold items, which should be considered as the details of the certain artifacts, upholsteries, pendants of various shapes, details of standards, attaching decoration for the hair and, what is very important, precious metals vessels. All these artifacts indicate the existence of a single repertoire of prestigious burial goods, suggesting that Sumerians, Hattians, and early Hittites buried

their elite with a similar tradition and a similar set of artistic craft production categories.

Since the XXI century BC and afterward, quite a new production, like the precious metal vessels, began to appear in Trialetian assemblages, which can be considered as an indication not only of the extreme social stratification of this society, but also of the Near Eastern cultural influence and its certain push on the first one. Direct evidence of this is the innovative features revealed by many effective, well-designed samples. Precious-metal vessels from the developed stage of the Middle Bronze Age mark a turning point in artistic craft. The metal vessels known from Tsalka-Trialeti barrows (Kuftin, 1941, pls. LXXCVII, LXXXVIII, XCI, XCII, CI, CII) and from Armenian kurgans (Devedjian, 2006, p. 261, fig. 141; Oganesyan, 1988, pp. 145–160; Kushnareva, 1994, pp. 100–102) represent new, formerly unknown materials, which have no prototypes in preceding common tradition in the local region but clearly indicate an ‘alien’ style imagery. The choice in favor of making metal vessels and adopting the specific Near Eastern traditional style was conditioned by an activated interrelation and a certain contact with its well-organized trade-exchange system during the Trialeti culture period. The appearance of such vessels was quite sudden and unexpected, and at the same time, revealed the surprisingly high level of production of the elaborate samples. Therefore, it is reasonable for scholars to search for analogies among the production of neighboring civilizations. On the other side, it proves the economic strength of Trialetian’s ruling stratum, who can order precious metalwork patterns and semiprecious stones. Their wealth became evident in giant kurgans, complex burial rituals, various burial goods, and, above all, distinctly fine metal vessels. The concentration of power and the wealth it brought to the Trialetian elite undoubtedly allowed them to increase their riches, gain fashionable status, and thereby underline their social privileges. Such burial complexes, notable for precious metalwork, are mainly localized not in an entire territory but in a certain area of distribution of the Trialeti culture, situated adjacent to the upper part of the Near East. The giant kurgans of Tsalka-Trialeti, Kvemo Kartli, Vanadzor, Lori Berd, and Karashamb regions (Kuftin, 1941, pp. 78–100, pls. LXIV–LXVII, LXXII; Japaridze, 1969, Figs. I, II, IV–VI, VII, VIII–X, XVIII; Devedjian, 2006, figs. 5–65, pls. XV, XVI; Oganesyan, 1988, pp. 145–160) provide certain information about a huge concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the ruling elite. This fact makes it evident that the above-mentioned regions and their surrounding parts represent the area where the infusion of Near Eastern cultural traditions was obvious. Thus, exactly this area can be supposed to be the place where local and ‘alien’ cultural traditions met. Another part, namely Kakheti district, also yielded some rich burials (Pitskhelauri, Orthmann, 2013, pp. 113–118), but they are not as widely characterized by the same traits as the above-mentioned regions.

Trialetian metal vessels featured different types, styles, and ornamental designs depending on the metal they were made of. Therefore, technical methods used for the decoration with varied motifs usually differ in cases of gold, silver, and bronze facture. It is clear that, for the Trialeti culture, the mentioned metal vessels were characteristic in roughly the exact quantities, indicating that local jewelers were familiar with all kinds of fabrication. Among the metal vessels discovered in burial sites, two general categories can be distinguished: items that represent a distinctly “pure” local tradition with no identifiable external parallels,

and those that display apparent similarities – and in some cases even direct correspondence – to specific Near Eastern artifacts or stylistic motifs. Accordingly, to these types, it is possible to judge the creativity, original stylistic tendencies, and the well-adapted from the Ancient Old World, an ‘alien’ and at that time widespread, achieved by the gold-workers of the Trialeti culture.

Here will be presented only the last type of items, as they indicate the innovative tendencies that have emerged widely from the beginning of the Trialeti culture. Such patterns, distinguishable by ‘alien’ stylistic traits, were well-known in the contemporary Near Eastern world and, for commercial purposes, reveal a real tendency to be widespread in adjacent areas through cultural influence and/or exchange-trade communication. It seems necessary to consider some characteristic examples, first of all, the silver ritual goblets from Tsalka # V and Karashamb # I kurgan. Both are exclusively richly designed cultic-ritual and similar pattern types that closely resemble the Near Eastern artistic style. One was unearthed in 30s of the 20th century in Tsalka (Kuftin, 1941, pls. XCI, XCII), and another was discovered much later in Karashamb kurgan (Oganesyan, 1988, pp. 145-161; Oganesyan, 1993, pp. 26-35, 159-168, Tabs. XXII- XXXII; Boehmer, Kossack, 2000, pp. 9-71). Despite the diversity of certain ornamental motives, these two goblets, by general image, are closely similar objects of the same artistic value, and supposing that the same workshop produced them. The entire surface of the Trialetian sample, like the Karashamb one, is covered with low-relief motifs and cultic-ritual narratives, represented in separate, following one another, friezes of different thicknesses. Their ornamentation presents diverse themes. The upper figural register of the Trialetian goblet depicts a complex ritual procession of 22 male human figures wearing tunics and what are usually described as ‘wolf tails’ as they approach a deity or an elite figure. Following it, and separated by the low-relief, narrow plain band, the lower figural register shows a motion of five female deer and four bucks. The upper and lower registers feature different geometric designs, making the entire decoration more effective. The slightly larger goblet from Karashambis is richly ornamented, with six registers containing a total of 25 human figures, 36 animal figures, and more than 60 objects on its decorated surface (Boehmer & Kossack, 2000, pp. 9-71). Many images of the decoration, such as humans and their garments, furniture, musical instruments, vessels, weapons, altars, fauna or flora, and the iconographic program and certain representations on both vessels, are obviously closely related and have direct analogues in Near Eastern imagery. For example, we can note that the drinking vessel, the Trialeti goblet, which holds every member of the ritual procession and stands apart from those known among the ceramic assemblages of the Trialeti culture, is frequently attested at Anatolian sites. A similar consideration can be made about the swords depicted on the Karashamb goblet. Identical images possible to observe on both goblets, like: a) the altar with long double feet’s, ended by the cloven-hoof and the lying down animal on altar’s background; b) the bigger than others, human figure, in the center of frieze, seated on a stool with crossed legs; c) iconographical representation of lions, deer and eagle with spread wings and etc., which finds closest similarities, or even identity, among designs recorded on several Near Eastern artifacts and as an example of it might be mentioned those one, which observed on a large clay, ritual Old Hittite vessel from Inandiktepe (Özguç, 1989, p. 163, pl. 40). In many publications (Kuftin, 1941,

pp. 78–100; Japaridze, 1981; Rubinson, 2003, pp. 128–143; Rubinson, 2013, pp. 12–25; Boehmer & Kossack, 2000, pp. 9–71; Puturidze, 2003, pp. 111–127; Puturidze, 2006, pp. 66–76), which are devoted to the detail analyses of these fashionable objects, are argues about the infiltration of the Near Eastern style in South Caucasian Trialeti culture. When underscoring the close similarities between the numerous details of the Trialeti culture goblets and various Near Eastern artefacts, first of all, scholars are focusing on the male figures, with their face and body in profile but eye given En face, as well, their peculiar manner of standing, cloths and shoes with specific upturned point and especially, the ritual procession's course. All the details mentioned, which closely parallel those in the Anatolian world, provide clear evidence that many of the images on these vessels and others presented in the Trialetian burial goods were derived from Near Eastern art.

Another sample revealing the resemblance between the mentioned regions is the handled silver bucket with golden appliqué work and rich ornamentation (Kuftin, 1941, Tab. LXXXVIII), which lacks a similar shape in southern civilizations. Though based on the style of representation of animals and vegetation, as well as the method of organizing the different images on the entire surface of a thin silver sheet, this sample stands very closely to those already evaluated silver goblets from Trialeti and Karashamb kurgans. It is symptomatic that the bucket's ornamental motifs and imagery are the same as those familiar from various Ancient Near Eastern artifacts.

From the point of view of outer influence, the handled 'basket-shaped' bronze bucket (Kuftin, 1941, Tab. LXXXVII), the origin of which, it seems to me, can apparently be discussed based on existing Near East evidence. The split pin of this vessel is held in position by a metal strip, decorated with an incised design and secured by four rivets. The rim of the vessel has been reinforced, and a flaring pedestal base ornamented with bands of *repoussé* decoration has been added to the object. D. Collon specifically studied this type of vessel, recorded in different areas of the Near East (Collon, 1982, fig. 1a), and compared it with the identical item from Trialeti kurgan #15. Exactly this type of vessel is known in Aegean world (shaft-grave #5 at Mycenae) (Collon, 1982, fig. 2) and, as well, in Kültepe-Karum Kaneš II (Central Anatolia) at the beginning of the II millennium BC (Özguç, 1986, p.123, fig.58). An earlier handled bucket, though of a different, cylindrical shapes come from the rich assemblages of Assur grave #20 (Müller-Karpe, 1995, 300, Abb.49,1) and Kültepe-Kaneš I b (Müller-Karpe, 1995, p. 304, Abb.49,2) dated by scholars at the end of III–beginning of the II millennium BC. The bucket from the Royal Cemetery of Ur in Sumer (Collon, 1982, fig. 1a) is considered one of the earliest examples of this type of vessel. All the listed analogues make it obvious that the tradition of producing this style of handled buckets and, even the manner of attaching the handle, was common for the ancient Near Eastern and Mycenaean regions and might be considered as the direct prototypes for the Trialetian bronze item, which itself represents a clear manifestation of this type's distribution far to the north (Puturidze, 2016, Tab. IV). It is symptomatic that nearly all forms of metal vessels known in Western and Central Anatolia became characteristic also for the Trialeti culture in the first quarter of the 2nd millennium BC: examples of this phenomenon are the above-described bronze bucket, the bronze wide-mouthed cauldrons (for detailed

discussion about this last specimen, see: [Puturidze, 2002, pp. 193-104; Puturidze, 2016, pp. 139-162, Tabs.I-III](#)), and some other vessels considered here.

Discussing about the high artistic value of Trialetian vessels, special attention should be pointed to the small, undecorated gold cup from the # VII kurgan of Tsalka ([Kuftin, 1941, pl. CI](#)), which finds the relative analogy by hemispherical shape, if not a more horizontally stretched form, among the silver and bronze cups dated back from Akkadian including the Old Babylonian period, found in Kültepe, Byblos, Assur, Tell Harmal, Tell Sumeila, Nippur, Tello, Susa and other sites of the Near East ([Müller-Karpe, 1995, 269,270m Abb.9,10](#)). A typologically similar shape to the Trialetian one, but a richly ornamented golden cup, was discovered in Vanadzor (Armenia) kurgan #1 ([Devedjian, 2006, p. 261, Pl. 141](#)). Unlike the Trialetian, the Vanadzor sample is decorated with a few pairs of lions in heraldic pose, which encircle its surface with a large horizontal band. The lions with an aggressive, open mouth and upturned tails, depicted on the given cup, obviously recall a pair of lions on the golden standard at the top of # V kurgan of Tsalka ([Kuftin, 1941, pl. C](#)). The lion's image closely resembles all those well-known iconographical motifs found in Hittite and Hurrian art ([Wilhelm, 1989, pl. 21](#)).

From the point of view of Near Eastern parallels, attention is drawn to the different style of silver vessels with plain, undecorated surfaces, which belong to a different category than the above-considered, richly ornamented ones. Such artifacts with the plain surface and sometimes only miserly decorated handle ([Devedjian, 2006, p.262, pl.142₁₋₄](#)) in the Trialeti culture are presented by two different types, namely, hemispherical and cylindrical. Both shapes are related and reveal clear analogues in different, adjacent sites to the south of the South Caucasus, like Qal'e Nisar, Tepe Gurian, Assur grave # 20, and Kültepe, Karum-Kaniš ([Müller-Karpe, 1995, p. 266, Abb. 713, 14; 300, Abb. 385; 311, Abb. 491, 2](#)).

All the described items of the rich metal vessels clarified that among them, in general, are distinguishable a few categories: especially richly ornamented ones, another with surface decoration of limited extent, and the last with an absolutely plain surface. All of them were represented in rich kurgans and simultaneously were characteristic of the Trialetian barrows.

Besides the discussed precious-metal vessels, some types of jewelry clearly demonstrate a connection to Sumerian culture. Among this type of gold-working should be noted the agate pendant ([Kuftin, 1941, Tabs. XCIV, XCIV](#)), which was the central component of the fascinating necklace from Tsalka # 8 kurgan. This semi-precious stone pendant was set in a gold frame, with small carnelian stones proportionally inset in three places. It remains the unique pattern for the Trialeti culture and evidently reflects the closest identity with the Uruk (Sumer) agate necklace, the several pieces of the agate details of which, is also upholstered by the golden frame ([Maxwell-Hyslop, 1971, pp.65,102, pl.45](#)). Another similar fashion agate beads, fitted with gold caps, existed in Ur cemetery's burial goods ([Maxwell-Hyslop, 1971, p.26, Fig.19_{a,b}](#)). The artistic-stylistic resemblance, as well as the facture of agate stone with its characteristic white strand, of the mentioned gold-working samples, proves in favor of Sumer's influence on the jewelry production of the Trialeti culture. This assumption is not a debatable issue and is accepted by many scholars ([Puturidze, 2020, pp. 203-206](#)). Another item of jewelry from the Trialeti kurgan # 8, which is also related to

the Sumerian gold-working craft, is the hanging spirals (Kuftin, 1941, Tab. XCVII). The Trialetian one is an absolutely identical item to those that were recorded in Queen Pu Abi's burial at the Royal cemetery of Ur (Woolley, 1934, Pl. XXIX) and specially discussed by scholars (Maxwell-Hyslop, 1971, pp. 29,69, Pls. 19_{b,c}; 26; Puturidze, 2020, pp. 202-203, Tab III b₁₋₃), therefore, we will not in detail stop on it.

It should be noted that, because of the great quantity of gold-working artifacts, in the presented article, it is unable to consider many of them. Therefore, we offer only an essential item, which undoubtedly supports Near Eastern cultural influence, particularly from Sumer, central Anatolia, etc., at the end of the III-beginning of the II millennium BC. A comparative study makes it possible to define an 'alien' image, i.e., non-local peculiarities in some valuable Trialetian patterns. Analyzing all gold-working assemblages raises certain legitimate questions. First, it is very important to understand whether the Trialetian craftsmen only shared and repeated the well-known Near Eastern cultural tradition or whether they were trying to relate and merge it with the original, local cultural onflow. Prevailing, it seems to me, is the last idea, which supports connectivity and the merging of the mentioned different cultural traditions. Exactly this approach of the Trialetian craftsmen makes it possible to create a production closely related to the Near Eastern, yet somehow original, which in the scientific world is known as the Trialetian gold-working phenomenon.

All the above assemblages are obvious manifestations of the unexpected flourishing, top-level artistic craft, and building-engineering achievements in the socio-economic field of the Trialetian society. The questions that, for sure, need explanation are as follows: a) what were the reasons that defined and stimulated all these processes of the development of various spheres of the South Caucasian Middle Bronze Age society? b) Is it possible that it might be caused by the external factor or only by the help of the economic strength of an already deeply stratified society? c) might be considered an intensive and broad use of natural sources (metal or any other) as a cause of established and activated international trade-economic network? , etc. All these factors need to be studied in detail, but the various kinds of existing data allow us to discuss and make some assumptions. It is well known that the III and early II millennia BC were a period of intensive development of metal production in the Old World, which implies, first of all, the acquisition of various sources, their technical organization, and the development of trade over a vast area. All this was a complicated process and required the involvement of certain communities/individuals, specialized in different fields of business. In the Near East and adjacent northern regions during the mentioned period, all processes connected with metalworking were particularly pronounced and involved a hard struggle and conflict between the various urban centers of certain cultural units. Different types of metalworking fields were connected with the organization of trade-exchange networks, which formed the main centers of economic relationships between various ethnicities.

All those artifacts, individual ornamental representations within the rich metal assemblages or separate traditions, which are so widely found in Trialetian burial sites, reveal a close analogy among the patterns recorded in trade-exchange colonies of the Near Eastern region. It is a clear indication that the considered South Caucasian culture was in some way

(directly or indirectly) connected with the economic centers of the Ancient Old World and, from there, provided with new, fashionable style productions. Otherwise, such close resemblance, or even the certain identity of some items discussed above, is inexplicable. Without access to such modern techniques and artistic craft patterns, the local Trialetian goldworkers could not adopt the characteristic technical methods and stylistic features that were exclusive to the neighboring Near Eastern civilizations. The topic of the international communication system is directly related to processes that occurred in the remote past and are reflected in the different types of excavated artifacts. What is required today is that the scholars delve into the processes that happened in the Old Near Eastern World and understand how they reflected in the neighboring South Caucasian region.

CONCLUSIONS

In our view, the widening of external interrelations and the great changes in the local South Caucasian community are directly related to the activation of intercommunication with the outer world, and first of all with the Anatolian and Sumer regions. The best illustration of this is the numerous patterns of artistic craft. It is thus that the beginning of the Trialeti culture means at the same time the start of a cultural orientation of the South Caucasian main area toward the Near Eastern civilizations.

With respect to the main aim of the present research, i.e., ascertaining the causes that determined the emergence of innovative developments and cultural tendencies, it seems possible to summarize that there may be different factors. From them, with more certainty, it is possible to accentuate the following: a) a high economic level of inhabitants of the Trialeti culture, with an increase in cattle breeding and occupation of higher altitude areas of the region. Exactly this activity contributed to economic strengthening and the flourishing of the upper and middle strata of society; b) development of the metalworking field, which enables an increase in economic strength and the productivity of the metal industry. The derivation of metal sources, necessary for the production of different types of bronze artifacts and, afterward, their trade, was one of the essential activities of the Middle Bronze Age society ([Shanshavili et al., 2016, pp. 33–83](#)). These processes require establishing and managing metalworking workshops, as well as the specialization of craftsmen trained in these fields. All the above-mentioned spheres contributed to the economic flourishing and the accumulation of wealth; c) an extreme social differentiation of society determines the wealth privileges of already stratified (even in the previous stage Bedeni culture) elite strata. An economic stimulation of an affluent layer and gained in their hands wealthy and power was the main reason of top social stratification, which evidently reveals the burial sites of the Trialeti culture; d) development and sudden promotion of gold-working appears a direct result of the well-organized intercultural relations of elite and traveler merchant's and craftsmen's groups of society; e) strength of elite's power implied the exclusive richness and obtaining the precious, rare and an 'alien' items, which can emphasized their privileges. One important issue that must be clarified is how Trialetian craftsmen designed the iconographic programs on their metal vessels. Did they create new depictions by only slightly modifying characteristic Near Eastern artistic styles and iconographic concepts, or

did they base their work on these models while organizing a repertoire that was sufficiently similar yet still original? It may be assumed that Trialetian gold-workers developed their own stylistic versions and specific features, although in many cases they remained dependent on the established “pure” Near Eastern tradition. From these Old-World civilizations, the Trialetian craftsmen adopted numerous technical innovations, ornamental motifs, and methods of jewelry manufacture (Rubinson, 2003, pp. 128–143). The abrupt and distinct changes observed across various spheres of life within the Trialetian cultural milieu (following the Bedeni culture, where gold-working artifacts were first recorded) are unmistakable (Lordkipanidze, 2002, pp. 83–101; Puturidze, 2002, pp. 100–113).

These undoubted facts inevitably raise further questions, one of which is: what kind of events happened during the last century of the 3rd millennium BC that stimulated the extreme flourishing of the gold working craft? Supposing that this was determined by the simultaneous combination of different factors: the deepest social stratification of society, the accumulation of wealth by the elite group, the strengthening of the economy, increased intercultural relations and influences, and active participation in Near Eastern trade-exchange networks. Many close similarities and stylistic identities, considered above, lead us to conclude that, in the process of the formation of gold-working and burial ritual, the Trialeti culture was certainly involved with Near Eastern cultural traditions. What is obvious, anyway, is that the Trialeti craftsmen were very well aware of the Near Eastern artistic tradition. In sum, it seems acceptable to state that the formation of the new Trialeti culture should be understood as the result of interactions among several cultural orientations: a traditional one, a local one, and an “alien” tradition characteristic of the bordering southern regions. The coexistence of these diverse cultural traditions created a complex cultural milieu and endowed the culture under consideration with a distinctive and incomparable character.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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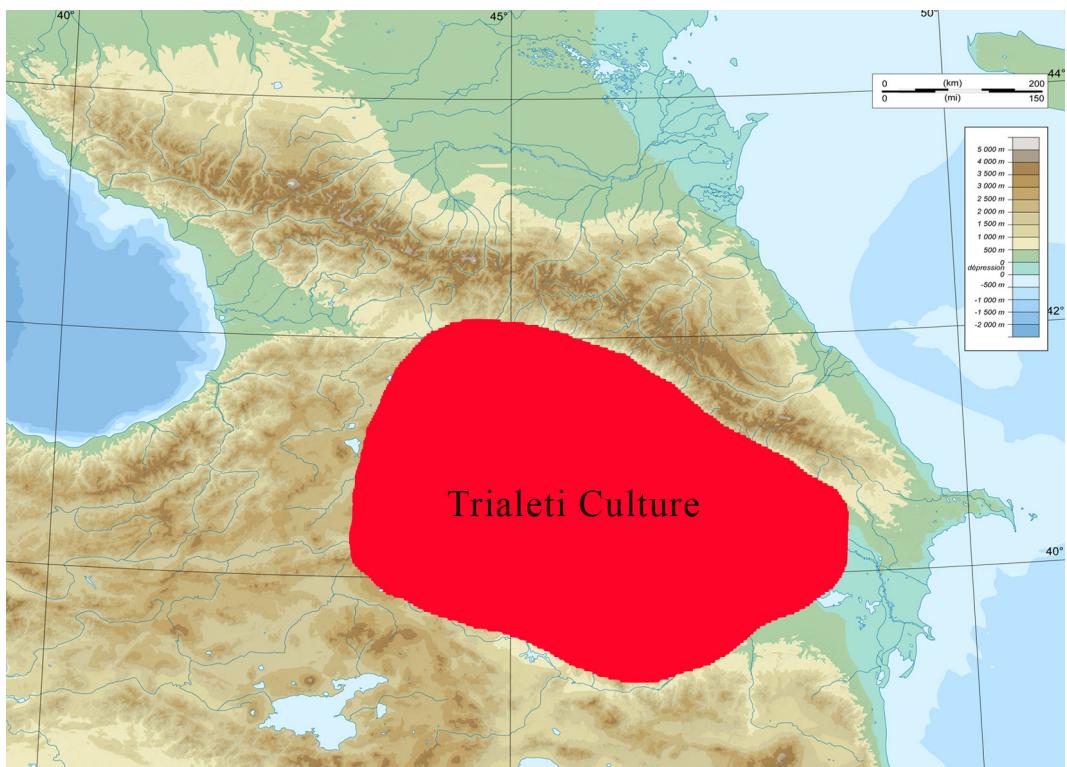


Figure 1. Map of distribution of the Trialeti Culture (after Puturidze M. For the artifacts depicting Sumer's influence in the Trialeti Culture. in: Oriental Studies, # 9, Tbilisi, 2020, Tab. I)

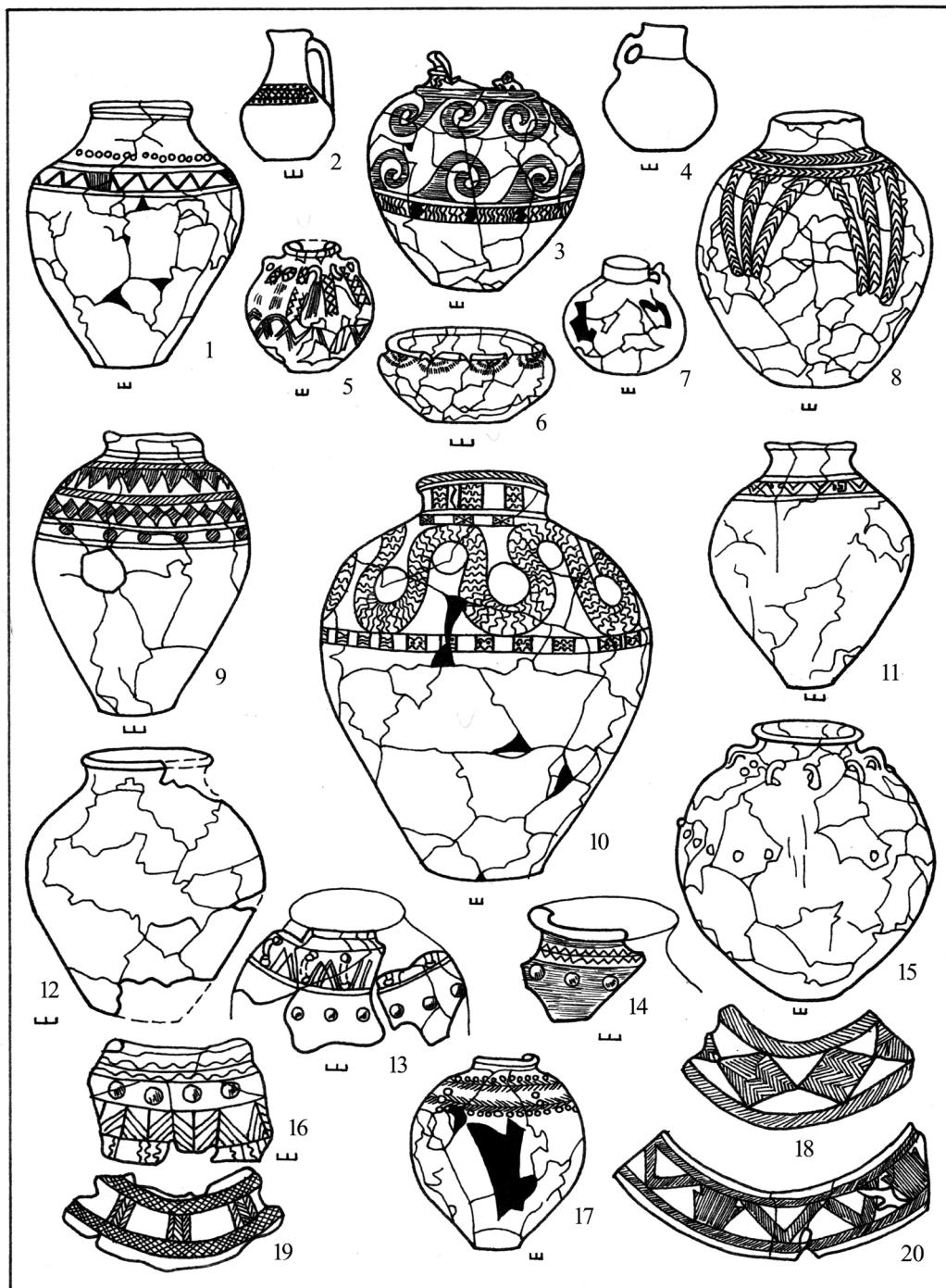


Figure 2. Typical black burnished, richly ornamented pottery and one (#3) painted brown on beige surface and ornamented with the curved spirals vessel of the Trialeti Culture



Figure 3. Painted black on the red surface by the so-called “water scheme motif” pottery



Figure 4. Gold jewelry of the Trialeti Culture (after Puturidze M. On the origins and development of the gold working in the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti Culture. in: At the northern frontier of the Near Eastern archaeology. Recent research on Caucasia and Anatolia in the Bronze Age. SUBARTU, XXXVIII, Turnhout, 2017, Fig. 1).



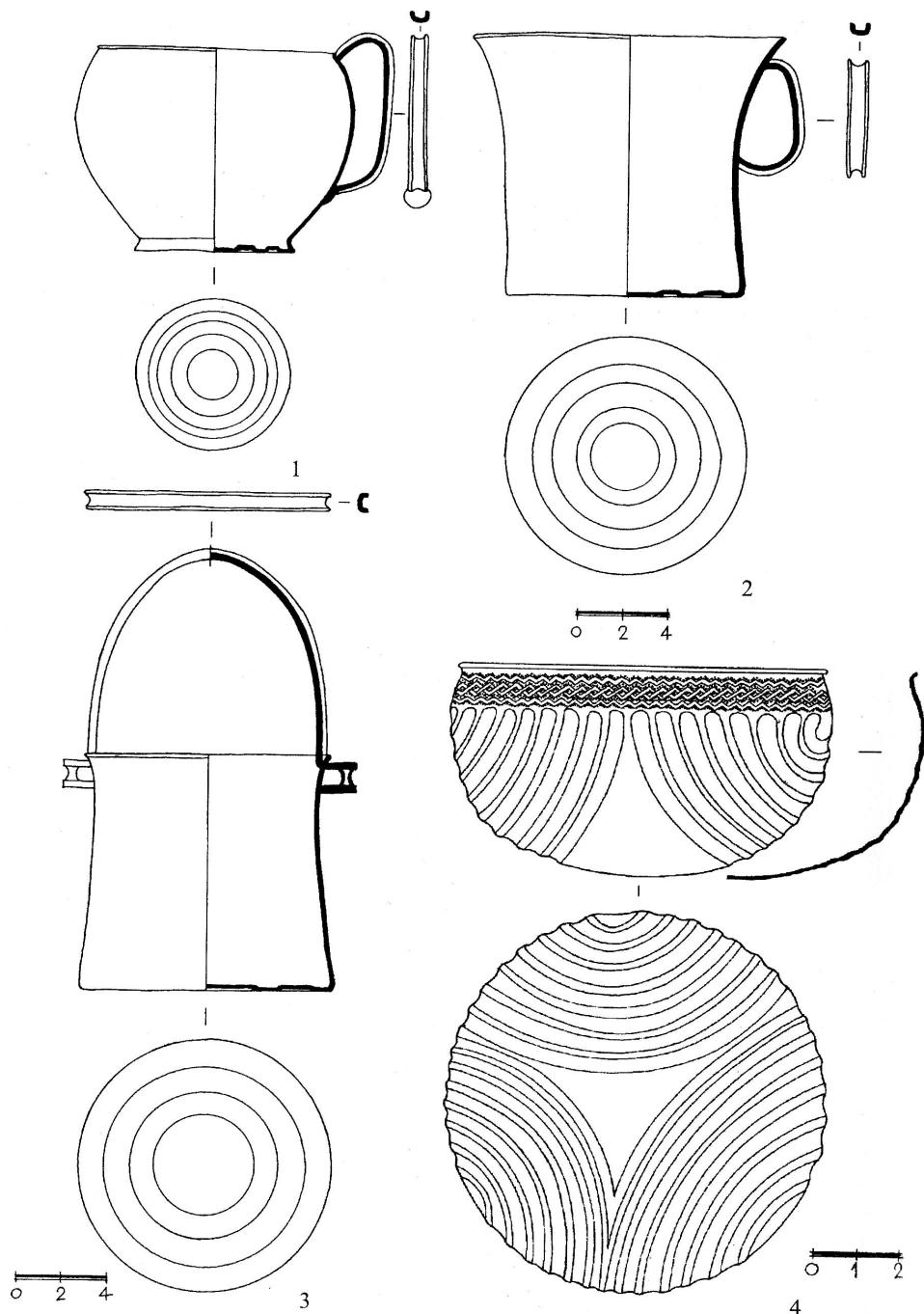
Figure 5. Gold and silver toreutics & one painted vessel (2) of the Trialeti Culture (after Puturidze M. *On the origins and development of the gold working in the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti Culture. in: At the northern frontier of the Near Eastern archaeology. Recent research on Caucasia and Anatolia in the Bronze Age. SUBARTU, XXXVIII, Turnhout, 2017, Fig. 3).*



Figure 6. Silver vessels, two gold spirals and silver pin of the Trialeti Culture (after Puturidze M. *On the origins and development of the gold working in the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti Culture.* in: *At the northern frontier of the Near Eastern archaeology. Recent research on Caucasia and Anatolia in the Bronze Age.* SUBARTU, XXXVIII, Turnhout, 2017, Fig.2).



Figure 7. Gold toreutics and different types of beards of the Trialeti Culture (after Puturidze M. On the origins and development of the gold working in the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti Culture. in: At the northern frontier of the Near Eastern archaeology. Recent research on Caucasia and Anatolia in the Bronze Age. SUBARTU, XXXVIII, Turnhout, 2017, Fig. 5).



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Figure 8. Silver vessels of the Trialeti Culture (1 – Lori Berd kurgan # 65; 2-5 Vanadzor royal kurgan # 1 (after Puturidze M. On the origins and development of the gold working in the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti Culture. in: At the northern frontier of the Near Eastern archaeology. Recent research on Caucasia and Anatolia in the Bronze Age. SUBARTU, XXXVIII, Turnhout, 2017, Fig. 4).



Figure 9. Gold and silver artifacts from the Trialeti Culture (Lori Berd kurgans: # 65 (Pl. IV 1-3,5) and # 94 (Pl. IV 4,6,7) (after Devedjian S. Lori Berd, II (Bronze Moyen), Erevan, 2006, Pl. IV).



Figure 10. Gold beaker, decorated with filigree, granulation and inlays with various semi-precious stones from Tsalka # 17 barrow (B. Kuftin, Archaeological excavations in Trialeti, I. An attempt of period-ization of sites, 1941, Pl. XCIII).