

COLCHIS IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM BC: ORIENTAL TRENDS

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Abstract: Oriental impulses are already felt in Colchian culture of the early 1st millennium BC., which, as is known, is attested by the Hasanlu-type daggers (T. Mikeladze). Similar impulses are seen in South Georgia where a dagger, apparently made in Luristan and typical of Calmayer 31-35 (Neo-Babylonian) burials of the 7th-6th c (Mzetamze), has been discovered. The same possibility is underlined by the fact of placing shin rings in the burial which, besides Georgia, is attested in Luristan as well. In the Achaemenid period the territory of present-day Colchis was divided into two parts: the territory of the Colchian kingdom proper, south of the Rioni river (G. Melikishvili), addressed entirely to the Greek world, and Shida Kartli, more or less oriented to the Achaemenid world (O. Lordkipanidze), hence the Achaemenid or "Achaemenized" import and traditions are concentrated here. However, more westward, in v. Chibati, a bronze Achaemenid bit was found by chance, the artistic level of its execution is quite exceptional (the 5th-4th c BC.). The western boundary of Achaemenid interests in the Caucasus is the line joining Sairkhe – Vani – Atsquri – r. Chorokhi. Weak Achaemenid traditions are preserved at Vani of the turn of the 4th-3rd c BC, while from the 3rd c BC, rather weak Hellenistic influence is attested to over the entire territory of Colchis (barring the Hellenized cities of Vani and Eshera).

Key words: *Colchis, Mzetamze, Luristan, the Achaemenids, Chibati.*

Towards the end of the 2nd and early 1st millennium BC the kingdom of Colchis proved the only advanced state association in the Caucasus region [41, p. 1-38; 42, p. 2-37]. Archaeological excavations have brought to light a highly impressive picture of the development of society: advanced metallurgy of iron and bronze, developed farming, traditional construction work, highly artistic specimens of

art, developed society and acute proprietary differentiation. This chronological span in the history of Colchis is an absolutely special period. The majority of researchers are of the view that the state of Colchis existed precisely in this period, being referred to in ancient Assyrian and Urartian inscriptions, as well as in ancient Greek writings in connection with the myth of the expedition of the Argonauts to Colchis, well-known in the Hellenic world [41, p.1-38].

From the archaeological standpoint several specific developments may be identified in the Colchis of this period, of which collective burials constitute one of the significant phenomena of the early 1st millennium BC [37, p. 109-115]. As a rule, such burials (of Ureki, Nigvziani, Dghvaba, Ergeta) ordinarily contain a large number of artefacts and remains of individuals. The characteristic features of Colchian collective burials are: ritual platforms, large-sized collective burial pits, the custom of reburial of the deceased [12, p. 4-19]. An optimal model of such burials is: a table for preparing the deceased for burial, platforms for offerings and cremation [12, p. 4-19]. A typical example is burial 4 (burial ground II) excavated at Ergeta and dated to the second half of the 8th c BC and first half of the 7th c BC [47, p. 152-154]. The outline of the burial pit was revealed at *ca* 70-80 cm from the earth's surface. The dromos was found in the north part of the burial; its width reaches 3m and is directed to the centre. In plan, the burial is pear-shaped. The length of the burial, including the entrance, reaches 11m, and the width is over 5m. The thickness of the habitation layer reaches 40 cm, to the south 10 cm. The floor of the pit is at the depth of 80cm in the north part and 1-6m in the south part. Osteological material has practically not survived. The teeth are disintegrated and differentiated, but lying in their natural position. The total number of artefacts is 596, united in 44 groups. The material used in the manufacture of the grave goods: clay, stone, flint, wood, copper, bronze, iron, lead, silver, gold, semi-precious stones, amber and paste. Their purpose was various: diverse tools, arms, farming implements, elements connected with clothes, beads, necklaces, statuettes, etc. A statuette of a "leopard" and a double-headed ram was found in this burial. In other collective burials (Ureki, Dghvaba, Ergeta) bronze statuettes of mounted females and bulls were uncovered [42, p. 2-22]. Interestingly enough, not only the statuettes

of mounted females have parallels in the Greek world (which is well known) but statuettes of bull as well [49, p. 230-236]. Of palaeobotanical material peanuts, chestnuts and millet were found in the grave.

It is in the collective burials that obvious contacts with the Iranian world are first perceivable. I have in mind the so-called type three all-metal dagger found in the pit of burial 5 of Ergeta burial ground #3 (1 piece), and in burial pit 1 of Dghvaba burial ground. This is the so-called "Near Eastern" type dagger that has the closest analogies with Hasanlu IV daggers [21, p. 43; 20, p. 57; incidentally, the Sevan dagger is also known to come from the same type burial grounds; cf. 13, p. 13-15]. Hasanlu type daggers [cf. 20, p.31-70] are known also from Tlia cemetery (burials 236, 51, 97). It is believed that the discovery of daggers of this type in Colchian cemeteries corroborates the view according to which they continue to exist till 600 BC [20, p. 57].

A bronze dagger found in a cenotaph excavated at Mzetamze cemetery in south Georgia is also related to the Iranian world. It has the closest analogies in groups 31-35, identified by Calmeyer and united in material of Neo-Babylonian type [45, p. 113-129; Diagram of Calmeyer's Groups 31-53]. In the first publication of this dagger I suggested this date: 7th-6th c BC [27, p. 363]. It is safe to say that this dagger was made in Luristan. The fact of placing shin-rings in the grave is attested to at Mzetamze cemetery, where infiltration of Colchian culture of this period is quite clear. It has an analogy not only at Tlia cemetery but a direct and synchronous parallel in Luristan, in particular burial 37 of Gul Khanan cemetery, where the legs of a deceased buried in crouched posture had shin-rings on the legs [28, p. 35]. It is not ruled out that early contacts are indicated by the distribution throughout Colchis of the so-called tubular-handled pitchers [4, p. 34-36; 5, p. 21]. They have been discovered at almost all sites of the 7th-4th c BC: Batumi fortress, Pichvnari, Kokhi, Simagre, Ochamchire, Ergeta, Mtisdziri, Dablagomi, Kutaisi, Qulevi, Brili, etc. In recent years cases of discovery of tubular-handled pitchers have increased at sites excavated in Eastern Georgia. Pottery of this type appears first in Western Iran (in recent years, found in Qalaichi, cf.: Fine Ware, 800-600 BC [44]).

The further stage of Colchian history is linked to two significant developments: activation of contacts with the Greek world and the advent of the Achaemenids. At present I shall dwell on the latter development. A fairly large number of publications have been devoted to the advent of the Achaemenids in the Caucasus, in particular, South Caucasus. Of works of this category the latest was a study by F. Knaus [34], reflecting almost the entire archaeological material that existed by 2006 but as archaeological studies are continuing in the region, sufficient material has accumulated that frequently shows the South Caucasian and Achaemenid relations in an absolutely novel way. At the same time fresh interpretations of old Georgian written sources have appeared, according to which the role of the Achaemenid world is seen to have been more active than it had been presumed earlier.

The Achaemenids appeared in Georgia back in Darius I's time. B. Jacobs points out that "Achaemenid rule in the Caucasus region was established by 513-512 BC, during Darius I's Scythian campaign [31]. The activity of the Persians in the North-Caucasian area was limited and archaeological discoveries show that the Caucasus Range formed the northern boundary of the empire during the entire Achaemenid period or, at any rate, in the period following Darius" [31]. Other researchers too concur with this view [35], though an absolutely differing opinion is also on record [8, p. 141-165]. The archaeological backdrop of the written sources of this period is as follows: two administrative centres have been brought to light on the territory of Colchis where, according to the rich burials dated to the 5th-4th c BC., Colchian aristocracy presumably resided. These are Vani and Saikhe. At the same time, for Colchis this is a period of the commencement of especially intensive relations with the Greek world [3]. The homogeneity of metal products, standardization of pottery, activated monetary circulation, administrative division of the country lead some researchers to the belief that at the time Colchis was a united, politically and economically developed state [9; 10; 6]. As is known, the impact of Achaemenid culture on the territory of Colchis was strong, which was reflected particularly well in Colchian art (specimens of goldsmithing from Vani and Saikhe [17, p. 8]; however, the difference is striking between the coastal zone and Inner Colchis: the

coastal settlements are entirely of Greek orientation and Achaemenid trends are felt less there. A clear example of this is the archaeological material discovered at the Kobuleti-Pichvnari Greek and Colchian cemeteries, dated to the 5th-4th c. BC (cf. 49, p. 2, 43-69). The absolute majority of the items at the cemetery is Greek or local (on the one hand, these are amphorae made at various manufacturing centres, Greek red-figure pottery, including an absolutely unique crater, cylices, lekythoi, cantharoi, aryballoi, bolsals, phialai, coins of various Greek centres, strigils, etc., and on the other, pottery of local manufacture and gold ornaments). At this cemetery the discovery of a Kohl-Tuba of Iranian manufacture (D. Barag's group I, dated to the second half of the 5th c. BC. [33, p. 31-47] and Achaemenid-type gold bracelets with concave back is a rare exception. Against this backdrop Achaemenid trends in the 5th-4th c BC grave goods discovered at Vani and Sairkhe are quite clear. Suffice it to name the theme of the fight of a lion and bull on the Vani diadem, Achaemenid bracelets, or the ornamentation of the silver belt found in burial 24 where an Achaemenid cup is represented [32, p. 293]: or the Sairkhe gold pendants with an image of Ahuramazda [12], the Mtisdziri silver rhyton [26, 211-216], the use of Aramaic along with Greek (5th c cylix from Sairkhe, on which a monogram done in Greek and Aramaic letters survives [25, p. 126], Achaemenid-type bits from Sairkhe, applications for adorning a shroud (representations of gold eagles), corresponding to Achaemenid royal standards, the Sairkhe capital with double protoma [15] etc. It is obvious that, at least culturally, Colchis (according to her modern geographical boundaries) was divided in two: the coastal zone accented to western or Greek centres, and central or inner areas eastward, or Iran. The Sairkhe-Vani zone appears to have been a kind of dividing line, as the former Colchian settlement site Namarnu, where 5th-4th c BC. habitation layers have been attested, does not contain any Achaemenid material [14, p. 46-67]. Namarnu is believed to have been the "barbarous city from where Medea hailed", being mentioned in the "Periplus" of Scylax [cf. 1, p. 50-58]. The Sairkhe-Vani line continued to the south, in Atsquri, where considerable Achaemenid influence is in evidence. From this standpoint importance attaches to the discovery of Achaemenid coins [7, p. 207] on the Vani-Atsquri highway – one of the chief roads for the

transportation of Greek import to South Georgia [37, p. 33-34]. The coins were brought to light on the territory of v. Sulori, which lies at the beginning of the road running from Colchis to South Georgia. The hoard contained up to 700 silver coins, most being Colchian coins (*tetrai*). Among them there also was a so-called croesoid, probably struck in 500 BC. by Darius I. An Achaemenid scylos (with a representation of a crowned king with a lance), which is also considered to have been struck in 490 BC. by Darius I [7, p. 207]. The above-noted line, suggestive of Achaemenid influence, must have run south-west, to the upper course of the Chorokhi river (Xenophon's Phasis). Then it is easy to explain that the Colchians inhabiting this region held the land of the empire [cf. 27] "... The Colchians settled on the territory of the empire, for their estates, as noted by Herodotus and other authors, lay in Phasis, the river could not have been the line limiting the boundary. However, the next natural barrier to the north, or the Greater Caucasus, points to itself as the boundary of the empire" [30; 46; 48]. Contacts with the Achaemenid empire were presumably limited to the hinterland of Colchis, and eastern Colchis really formed part of a satrapy of the Achaemenid empire [31, p. 184; for an opposing view see 7, p. 207; 19, p. 10]; in other words, this nominal submission too referred only to the eastern part of Colchis. Accordingly, it is easy to account for the fact that the Greeks did not encounter Achaemenid opposition on the Black Sea – such conflict of interests did not exist in the 5th-4th c BC, especially in 436/5 BC, in the period of Pericles' becoming active [for details, see 25, 122 ff]. However, it is assumed that the Athenians became active back in the 470s (in 476/5 BC), when they seized the town of Byzantion, took absolute control of the Black Sea straits and controlled commerce [7, p. 203]. From the viewpoint of the spread of Achaemenid items, of special interest is an Achaemenid bronze bit found recently in Chibati, Guria by chance. It evinces more or less similarity with the pieces found at Itkhvisi and Vani, though artistically it is executed at a much higher level. The Chibati bit has firmly attached chin-straps, and on the outer part of the chin-straps three rings. Of these the central hole for the bit is much larger, while the lateral ones are of relatively small diameter. The bridle bars, linked to one another by rings, are adorned with bosses. It is worked in the same way as are the Persian-type bits discovered in

the Athenian layer of Achaemenid destruction, Persepolis and Deve-Huyuk [18, p. 180-188]. The Chibati chin-strap ends in an excellently treated, dynamic sculptural representation. This is a leaping sphinx with its hind legs tensed, while the front ones are folded under the body. The body of the sphinx is done with parallel lines and rings according to the best Achaemenid traditions. From the stylistic viewpoint this representation finds analogies with animal representations on Achaemenid metal vessels [36, p. 177; 23, p. 43]. By its especially high art standards the Chibati bit differs from all, including Persian type, bits brought to light in Colchis and central South Caucasus (for a classification of the region's bits [see 22]. Conjecturally, the bit dates from the 5th-4th c BC, continuing the long-standing West-Iranian tradition of adorning chin-straps in animal style. Bits with representations of various real or mythical animals and creatures are well known in the Luristan and Achaemenid world – chin-straps with images of griffins, ibexes, bull with a human head, sphinx [50, p. 8-15], cf. also the collection dated to the 8th-7th c BC from the Ashmolean Museum [45, p. 33-35].

Despite the activation of Greek influence in Early Hellenistic period Colchis (due to two reasons: the fall of the Achaemenid empire, on the one hand, and infiltration of Greek culture in the hinterland areas of the country, which was generally characteristic of Hellenism, on the other), which was in the first place reflected in the grave goods of the 4th c. BC Vani and the burial custom (e. g. placement of "Charon's obol" and amphorae in the burial), Achaemenid impulses in inner Colchis appear to have continued in the 4th c BC as well, though on a much smaller scale. The excavations at Vani revealed a monumental wall dated to the 4th-3rd c BC, which may be a reflection of these influences. (for comparison, see the fortification walls or Tsikhiagora [16]). It may be presumed that local and Achaemenid cultural traditions coexist in Vani architecture of the 4th-3rd c BC [39, p. 135-156]. By way of example, we may name the fragment of a limestone frieze, discovered in Vani in which the representation of the charioteer and part of the chariot survives. The wheel of the chariot, studded with bosses, is identical with the wheels of the chariots found in Achaemenid representations: e. g. on Darius' signet-ring, on the gold chariot of the Amu-Darya treasure, preserved in the British Museum

[23, p. 191-238] as well as on the relief of Apadana [40, p. 144-149]. Similar wheels have been discovered at Uplistsikhe too. The architectural detail from Vani, which must have been that of the frieze of a monumental building (it was painted, a trace of the paint survives), attests to the fact that Achaemenid tradition was still felt in this "city" [see 7 for a differing interpretation of this frieze]. Besides, the preservation of Achaemenid tradition is proved by the imitation of a double-protoma clay capital and a clay rhyton, painted in Achaemenid style.

From the 3rd century BC the situation changes drastically and on the entire territory of Colchis, against the backdrop of local culture, the Greek element – true, rather weakly, yet geographically, begins to spread widely.

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