

Towards the Ethnocultural Genesis of the Population of the 4th-1st Millennia in the Central Part of the South Caucasus

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Abstract: In the central part of the South Caucasus the boundaries of the spread of archaeological cultures from the 3rd millenium BC are traditional and they almost precisely fit in the new modern limits of Eastern Georgia. This phenomenon should be taken into account in the research in to the ethnoculteral issues of the local population.

Key words: *Kura-Araxes culture, Bedeni culture, Trialeti culture, Central Caucasian culture*

The Caucasus is an is isthmus linking Europe and Asia and lying between two seas. Here, over the millennia, based on diverse natural conditions and attending numerous peculiarities, three cultures took shape, with differing material culture and social-economic systems: one in the North and two in the South Caucasus – in its western and central parts.

It should be noted specially that notwithstanding the cataclysms so often caused by external strong influences, marked by many innovations over the epochs, the Caucasian cultures, throughout their existence, continued the main line of their internal development and firmly preserved the stable character and boundaries of diffusion of their inimitable individuality.

The central part of the South Caucasus constitutes one such geographic region of the Caucasus [Table 1]. From the north it is bounded by the south slopes of the Greater Caucasus Range; from the west by the Likhi mountain, forming a barrier to the stream of the Black Sea subtropical climate; from the east it is strongly bounded by the climate of the central part the South Caucasus and, accordingly, the directions of the economic activity of the society settled here. At

the same time, the existence in this region of rich metal ores and other resources necessary for human activity determines, in all epochs, the social-economic make-up of the local society. The mountain region of the Lesser Caucasus is an area distinguished for its geoclimatic peculiarities and the adjoining territory down to the Araks river.

At the present stage of development the boundaries of archaeological culture of the Caucasus in the Aeneolithic period are too amorphous, owing to which the concrete boundaries of their diffusion are so far not clearly defined.

At the end of the 5th millennium BC and in the 4th millennium a large wave of Uruk migrants from Mesopotamia overwhelmed the entire Caucasus [15; 32; 33; 24; 35].

The process of integration of this culture entering the Caucasus with the local population was predominantly expressed in a special advance of bronze metallurgy imparting "explosive" character to the socio-economic development of the society. Apparently in the initial period, as a result of a merger of these cultures, the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes culture took shape in the central part of the South Caucasus in the 4th millennium BC [pl. II] [6; 7; 16; 27; 28; 31; 42]. On the basis of its various internal demands, this culture gradually left the boundaries of its established area. To the south the Kura-Araxes culture embraced almost entirely the territory of modern Iran and eastern Anatolia to the eastern Mediterranean Shore [40; 41; 43; 44; 45; 46; 47]. To the north it covers the eastern part beyond the Caucasus Range [21; 27; 30; 31] and presumably a large section of Europe [5]. It should be noted here that the spread of the Kura-Araxes culture over a large area coincides with the heyday of its development. To the south both the northern and southern variants of the Kura-Araxes culture, in the North Caucasus culture partly covers the territory of the northern variant.

At the end of the past century the existence of Bedeni culture was confirmed in the central part of the South Caucasus; the chronological limits of its existence were determined – with fair precision – as the second-half of the 3rd millennium BC [2; 1010; 18; 22]. At present, the discovery of Bedeni material, along with that of the Kura-Araxes, at Khashuri Natsargora, with rigorously stratified habitation layers [9;36] points to the need for the expansion of the

chronological frame, which must apparently embrace the second half of the 3rd millennium BC as well.

As to the genetic relation of Bedeni culture to the Kura-Araxes, as well as to its subsequent period Trialeti culture, this issue is extremely problematic, raising many unanswered questions, for according to available material it must, at least for the time being, be absolutely ruled out. Nevertheless, I believe it highly significant that the boundaries of the spread of Bedeni culture almost coincide (pl. II) with the boundaries of the spread of typical Caucasian Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Iron Age cultures (pl. II) of the subsequent 2nd millennium BC and 1st millennium BC of the central part of the South Caucasus – all closely linked to each other genetically.

Thus, although Bedeni culture is genetically not related to its preceding or following local cultures, the almost precise overlapping of the limits of their spread may become the precondition for future studies to reveal at least intermediate links between them, allowing us to involve Bedeni culture in the system of development of local cultures.

Trialeti culture that chronologically followed Bedeni culture in the central part of the South Caucasus is at present placed within the chronological frame of the first half of the 2nd millennium BC [3; 17; 20; 25; 27]. Although in this period according to the archaeological material of the Central part of the South Caucasus special activation of relations is felt with Near Eastern cultures [3; 25], by recourse to the characteristic features of Trialeti culture – basically local ones – it is possible to strictly limit its territory [26; 27] [pl. III]. Significantly enough, from this time to the mid-1st millennium BC one can trace uninterrupted development of culture in this region, which is most important, within the same central part of the South Caucasus. However, it should be stressed here that numerous and hitherto unpublished materials are exhibited in the museums of Eastern Turkey (verbal communication of Acad. O. Japaridze and Acad. D. Muskhelishvili) that evince striking resemblance with the 2nd millennium cultures of the central part of the South Caucasus of this region.

Earlier, a group of scholars [3] believed that Trialeti Middle Bronze Age cultures suddenly ceased to exist; it was genetically not related to subsequent period Late Bronze Age cultures, hence from

this time a change of culture was implied here. However, as a result of subsequent research, according to the archaeological material of the central part of the South Caucasus, three new stages of development between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages were identified. On this basis the cultures of the 1st millennium BC in the central part of the Caucasus became genetically related to one another, attesting to the existence of a stable system of uninterrupted development [11; 12; 13]. It is important to note that the limits of the spread of the newly-identified three stages of cultures remain within the bounds of spread of the local cultures of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC and, similarly to its predecessors preserves a single character on this entire territory, obviously with minor nuances in one or another area.

Special note should be made that the early, first stage culture of the newly-identified culture that has earned the name of central South Caucasus culture [13; 14]¹, has been found to be genetically closely related not only to its preceding but following cultures as well. True, in the period it bears features of a stable link with the Asia Minor-Hittite world, but it is obvious too that it remains within the traditional bounds of its preceding culture (pl. II), preserving its individuality. It adapts, remakes and gives a peculiar air to all incoming progressive innovations.

What happens in the subsequent period in the central part of the South Caucasus, which covers entirely the end of the 2nd millennium BC and the first half of the 1st millennium BC, the classical period of the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age? The most important feature of this period is that at this time begins the most significant, revolutionary process in the development of culture – gradual transition to iron metallurgy and its attendant segmentation of the central South Caucasus culture into small, related associations. Most important in this is the fact that all these constituent parts are genetically related to their preceding culture and all of them in aggregate are placed with their boundaries within its frame [pl. II].

¹ At present, some authors, in my view without ground, try to replace this term with the designation Lchasheni-Tsitolgorebi [1,4], with which I cannot concur, for it does not reflect the reality and causes superfluous uncertainty.

Initially, in ca the 13th c. two groups of archaeological material are identifiable by a number of peculiarities: one in the plain of the middle course of the Mtkvari and in the foothills surrounding it and the second in the Iori-Alazani basin. At the time in question the culture of the middle course of the Mtkvari is characterized by a number of peculiarities, which are alien to its preceding culture. In the cited region, dated to the 13th century BC, which is a direct continuation of its predecessor Central South-Caucasian culture, entirely covers the territory of the Iori-Alazani basin [13; 38]. Subsequently, at the end of the 2nd millennium BC, it breaks up into three local groups [13; 38] [pl. II]. I link all of them to definite Georgian ethnic groups found in the Georgian written source, for the boundaries of their diffusion coincide with those of the ancient Georgian ethnic entities given in the Georgian written source [13; 38].

From the first stage of the Late Bronze Age in the southwestern part of the Lesser Caucasus mountain region a peculiar culture takes shape, distinguished from the Central South Caucasian culture in its many features [23; 24; 28; 29; 45], preserving its individual character in the subsequent stages of development. Thus far there is no clearly defined view on its genesis and boundaries of diffusion.

I cannot bypass two major developments of the first half of the 1st millennium BC referring to the South Caucasus.

The first is related to the Urartian expansion into the central part of the South Caucasus. It should be stressed from the beginning that this process occurred only in the extreme south of the South Caucasus. The Urartians did not penetrate deeper into the central part of the South Caucasus. Contacts with this culture are marked by the discovery of a few Urartian items in the northern section of the South Caucasus. These finds (Tlia, Khirsa) must have found their way here in the form of military spoils, bronze belts. However, considerable influence resulting from the relationship with this strong neighbour is obvious. This is indicated by the presence of a large number of iron weapons and the imitations in the archaeological cultures of the central part of the South Caucasus in the first half of the 1st millennium BC.

The not infrequent occurrence of Urartian words in Georgian vocabulary is quite natural and may be accounted for by the close

contact with the neighbour country. However, this phenomenon does not give ground for far-reaching conclusions.

Also important is the trace of Scythian expansion into the South Caucasus in the 1st millennium BC, which they left here on their way south and then on their return movement [39]. According to the available archaeological material, their stay here was not of long duration. I do not believe the development of an opposite view along this line (R. Abramishvili) has any firm ground.

In the mid-1st millennium BC the central part of the South Caucasus came under a strong influence of Achaemenid culture. Nevertheless, the local culture continued to exist, preserving its individuality. It should be noted that from this period it lost the features distinguishing its local variants. Becoming leveled, it turns uniform. According to the available material it is difficult to point out concrete boundaries of its diffusion.

The same may be said about the subsequent period when a state structure takes shape within the boundaries of the central part of the South Caucasus. It is necessary to note here that at the turn of the old and new eras, the easternmost part of present day Eastern Georgia is covered by the Ialolitapa culture, alien to the Caucasus [37]. Its features, along with local material, are attested rather compactly only in the easternmost part of the Alazani plain, failing to penetrate deeper. It may have existed for some one hundred years and then vanished without leaving a trace and without introducing a final change in Georgia's state borders.

Thus, it is absolutely clear that the boundaries of the spread of archaeological cultures in the central part of the South Caucasus from the 3rd millennium BC is traditional and it almost precisely fits in the present-day boundaries of Eastern Georgia. At present this is only a statement of a fact, to which I am not inclined to attach too much importance, but I think it is a development to be taken into account in researching the ethnocultural questions of the local population.

Research along these lines will yield the desired result only if it is planned and conducted on the basis of achievements in all interdisciplinary branches of science. The tradition noted by me is only a feature promising success if work is continued.

Description of the plates

Pl. I Physical Map of the Caucasus, with indication of the central part of the South Caucasus.

Pl. II Physical Map of the Caucasus, with indication of the boundaries of the diffusion of the archaeological cultures of the 4th-1st millennia BC.



Pl. 1



Pl.2

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