

Vakhtang Licheli (Tbilisi)

GRAKLIANI HILL - 2008 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

The Grakliani settlement site and burial ground are located in Caspi region, on the territory of Samtavisi village, on a hill on the right bank of the river Lekhura, very near to Tbilisi-Senaki-Leselidze highway. It extends on the most part of the territory and lies between two little rivers – Lekhura and Tortla (pl. I. Grakliani Hill. Aerial photo). In connection with the expansion of the highway (Igoeti-Sveneti Section), rescue excavations were carried out on the southern slope of the hill. The excavations revealed the traces of a multi-layer settlement as well as graves of various periods.

Stratigraphy of the Settlement

Layer 1

It is an affected layer of grey ground with admixtures – pieces of plaster, tile, which had slid down from the upper terrace, and foundation stones. Material dated to various periods has also been found in this layer, namely:

Chalcolitic:

1. Retouched flint lamellas inserted in a sickle;
2. Flint javelin;
3. Small axe.

Late Bronze - Early Iron Age:

Fragments of black-burned jugs and jars with grey lining and band-like and zoomorphic handles;

Neck and shoulder fragments of small black-burned cooking pots. The neck is encircled with incised lines;

Fragments of black-burned pots.

6th-4th cc. BC

A fragment of a bowl with a concaved flank (an imitation of Achaemenid bowls).

Early Hellenistic Period

Red-painted fragments of jugs burned to straw colour (chevrons, net patterns).

The 3rd-2nd centuries BC

Fragments of wine vessels and craters of the Samadlo type;
Red-painted tiles.

The 2nd century – first half of the 1st century BC

Fragments of jars with profiled rim edge.

Layer 2

The upper part of this layer has been partly damaged because of construction works. However, here and there parts of isolated structures can be found. These are simple structures: a wattle and daub wall erected on a foundation made of the mixture of clay and rubble-stone. The structures have survived mainly as a mass of amorphous clay. Several structures are quite well preserved – they are placed up to the half in a space cut in the ground, i.e. they are semi-underground structures with completely preserved interior arrangement (a stove for baking bread, an altar, central pillar) (pl. V. Oven (bakery), 5th c. BC). Remarkably, fragments of a public altar have also been found in the same layer. This fact is particularly important as the like diversity of altars is very rare in other sites dated to the same period (Khovle, Narekvavi, Mtskheta, Treli Gorebi).

According to the materials so far available, their majority belongs to the 8th-7th BC (pl. IV. Representation of the 'God of Fertility', 8th-7th c. BC); however, some of them were apparently destroyed as early as the 5th century BC.

Layer 3

This layer is located at 1.7 meter below the zero point and presumably dates to the early Hellenistic period (ceramic ware burned to straw colour have been found). So far, traces of buildings have not been detected.

Layer 4

The layer has been singled out tentatively. It does not offer a clear picture. The layer is located at the depth of 2 meters from the zero point. It contains shapeless black-burned fragments. So far, there is no evidence of the fragments of structures.

Archaeological materials uncovered in the central terrace of the southern slope of the settlement

The uncovered materials mostly include ceramic ware of the following types:

Structural ceramics

Two types of tiles have been traced – solen and kalipter. Almost all of the pieces are painted with red ochre. Along with ordinary kalipters, several fragments of barrel-tiles have been found. Presumably, the tiles uncovered in the layer belonged to the structures on the top of the hill. They have been partly unearthed and it can be assumed that they used to be towers dated to the 2nd century BC- 1st century AD (Mirianashvili, 2003: 53).

Pottery

Wine vessels. The numerous fragments of wine jars are of Samadlo type and date generally to the 4th-2nd centuries BC.

Crater

Several painted fragments have been found – rectangular lines are drawn on the rim edge. They are exact copies of the 3rd century BC and the start of the 2nd century BC Samadlo craters. It should be noted that the like craters are very rare among Georgian ceramics (Narimanishvili, 1998).

Jars

Mainly grey-burned, with profiled rim edge. Some of them have an incised ornament all around their shoulders.

Pots

Most of them are burned to black, which is mainly due to their frequent use. Ornaments are infrequent (they are mostly found on the Late Bronze-Early Iron materials).

Jugs

The jugs are mostly pear-shaped. Especially noteworthy is the one with distinct red chevrons, presumably dating to the third quarter of the 4th century BC. Likewise noteworthy are red-painted fragments of an Urartian oinochoe and bowl, unearthed in the 7th-6th century layers.

Bowls

Among the numerous fragments, noteworthy are those of a concave bowl, which is analogical of the one recovered from the Kamarakhevi burial ground and dating to the 5th century BC – the start of the 4th century BC.

Phials

Especially remarkable are black-burned fragments bearing an incised image of traditional Greek ornament – palmette (Licheli, 1991: 53-62).

The imitation, which is very rare for Kartli, dates to the 2nd-1st centuries BC. Before that, an analogical piece was found in Mtskheta.

Utensils

The finds belonging to this category are made of stone and can be divided into three groups: navicular handmills, mortars and whetstones.

Apart from these commonplace finds, due attention should be paid to the above-mentioned altars. They are of several types: round, shelved, domed, monumental and double-protome.

The round altar is a small bisectonal structure arranged in the central part of a specially designed chamber. The main part of the round altar is a 0.7 meter high small semispherical clay structure, its diameter being 0.9 meter. From the front, it is sided by a 0.9 meter diameter semispherical cinder pit. The chamber, presumably intended for praying, was open to the south. To the west from the altar, there was a special site for placing offering vessels, mainly trays. Especially noteworthy is that unlike other altars, the floor of this particular one is wooden, which, in my opinion, is suggestive of its significance. The altar dates to the 8th-7th centuries BC.

The shelved altar is a small open structure consisting of two parts – a circular clay edging with a large ‘wall’ inbuilt in its northern part. The ‘wall’ is 0.6 meter high and 1.2 meter wide, 0.20-0.25 meter thick, while the shelf is 0.3 meter wide. The shelf is fixed to the northern part of the altar, while in the southern part the edging is narrower in diameter – or more precisely, from the south the ‘wall’ is sided by a small circle, its diameter being 0.7-0.8 meter. Offering vessels are laced in this circle.

The shelved altar dates to the 5th-4th cc. BC.

The domed altar is an open structure. The central element of its design is an E-W wall made from vertically set poles plastered with clay. In the southern part of the wall there are clay domes. The altar is strongly damaged, which makes its complete restoration difficult. Two surviving domes can be certainly identified. In front of the central (?) dome, there is a small 0.2m diameter pit where small offering vessels were placed. Among the offerings there was also a jar placed in the western part of the wall. Only a fragment of the jar has survived. A small biconical single-handled drinking vessel had the same function. Drinking vessels of similar shape were found in Colchis (e.g. those recovered from Burial chamber 1 of Ergeta burial ground III, dated to the end of the 7th century BC or the beginning of the 6th century BC). In Kartli, however, the like shapes are found in the sites dated to 1100-900 BC (e.g. grave #51 of Samtavro, Zemo Avchala grave). However, the items analogical with the ones found in Samtavro and Zemo Avchala have been recovered from much later sites, which suggest that the dates mentioned in the present article will be modified in the future. I pay special attention to this ceramic ware because they are con-

nected to another type of altar, the monumental one (pl. VIII. Monumental Altar, 1100-900 c. BC), which will be dealt with below. In view of possible parallels with Colchis, another noteworthy item is a fragment of terracotta figurine found in the 7th century BC layer – a protome, in particular, an animal's head. Although it is difficult to identify precisely the animal, in my opinion it is a somewhat stylized version of a horse's head. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the figurine is exactly identical with one of the small sculptural pieces found in the common burial site in Tsaishi, Colchis. The figurine in question is an equestrian statuette of a female goddess (Mikeladse, 1995: 20). The sculptures of horses are similar not only in terms of style, but also owing to the rings over the animals' snouts resembling a bridle. In my opinion, this very item suggests that the statuette is a horse figurine.

According to the present operating chronological scale, the vaulted altar dates to the 12th-10th centuries BC.

A monumental altar was uncovered in the western part of the settlement site. Only northern part survived from the building where it was arranged. The building was a log structure. The impressions reveal closely set horizontal massive logs plastered with a thick clay layer. The floor was also leveled with a thick clay layer. No other case of the like working of floor has been discovered. The altar was arranged on the north-western part of the building. From the east it sided with a cinder pit, which on its part borders with a platform along the northern wall. It was a site for placing offerings. Among the vessels of various size burned to light colour and placed on the platform were the ones resembling by shape the above-described drinking vessels with one handle. In one of the offering vessels a cylinder seal (pl. IX. Mesopotamian Seal, 4th millennium BC) was found, which deserves special attention. It is a cylinder item made from well precipitated light clay, with slightly conical bottom surface. Its surface was meticulously decorated with neatly incised lines. On the impression the lines make up a schematic image of a tree with down turn branches all in one row. In the lower register there are distinct chevrons. There is an image of a cross on the top of the seal. The bottom surface is slightly concave. A hole was made in the center of the seal obviously after the image was applied, which contradicts to the rules of manufacturing seals. The seal is 5.2. cm high, the bottom surface diameter is 2.8 cm, while the upper surface diameter is 1.6 cm. Professor N. Samsonia finds direct parallels between its décor and that of Jemdet-Nasr Group IV seals. The like chevrons are characteristic of the first part of seals belonging to this group (Samsonia, 2008: 37; Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals; pl. 35. Collon, 1987: 13-22). Hence, the Mesopotamian origin and the early date (3000-2800 BC; according to Domenic

Collon - 3000-2334 BC) of the seal may seem to be out of doubt. However, it requires further special study. On the other hand, the fact that it was found in the temple of the later period, dating to 1100-900 BC can be easily accounted for as the like fact, i.e. finding a seal of earlier times in a temple erected later is quite typical of the period in question. Naturally, it is very important to find out when the Mesopotamian seal was brought to the territory of modern Kartli - at the turn of the 4th-3rd millennium BC (or later, by the end of the 2nd millennium?). At the present stage of research, it is very difficult to give a definite answer; however, the high degree of expansion of the Kura-Arax culture, which was almost simultaneous with the mentioned period, allows of any kind of assumptions. In this respect, special attention should be paid to another seal with a round loop rising on a rectangular plate (pl. X. Mesopotamian Seal, 4th millennium BC with the representation of the 'House of God'). The item is made from a light-color whitish sandstone with highly refined technique. The painting surface is so skillfully filled that the consummate mastery of the craftsman is out of question. The incisions are deep, the impression presents itself an emanating 'House of God' (Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals; pl. 22-25; Amiet, 1980: 386-390). The seal is 3.2 cm high, the loop is 2.2 cm high, while the decorated surface is 3.6X3.4 cm. The seal was recovered in an affected layer, and therefore, can be dated only according to the analogical seals. Since the latter were found among the material of Jemdet-Nasr period, the seal in question is to be dated to 3000-2800 BC (or earlier). However, it should be noted that the item must be studied separately. Remarkably, among the finds discovered in the settlement site, there are a number of local late Bronze Age seals with various images depicted on their painting surface.

Another unique altar was unearthed in the same eastern part of the settlement - this is a circle made from baked clay with around 10 cm high borders; the diameter of the circle is approximately 40 cm; from the west it borders with a double-protome ram sculpture, sided from the west by three bulges. An altar with bulges has been unearthed at various sites (Samtavro, Narekvavi); however, none of the altars has a double-protome ram sculpture. The altar was arranged in the western corner of a small temple, which is oriented to the east, and thus the altar also faces east. There was a row of offered vessels in front of the altar. It should be noted in brief that the 8th-7th century double-protome sculptures invite several diametrically different ideas and the question of their origin remains disputable (cf. Lordkipanidze, 2002, 188-191) for the simple reason that it is related to very difficult ethnicity - and culture - related questions and embraces such an extensive region as Luristan, the Aegean world and the Caucasus.

In the western part of the a 1st millennium BC structural complex was unearthed (pl. VI-VII. Western Temple, 5th c. BC. Excavations; Western Temple, 5th c. BC. Excavations. Plan.). The four structures of the complex follow the same design.

Preliminary Interpretation of the Settlement Site

The majority of the structures unearthed at the site in 2008 are the terraced part of the 8th-6th BC protourban settlement built on a hill slope. Some of the finds belong to the upper temple complex, located on the top of the hill, while another part had slid down from the terraces above the excavated ones because of the sloping landscape. The unearthed finds are marked by abundance of temples and altars irrespective of the period, which distinguishes the settlement in question from other sites of the same period. This may point to its cult function, which evidently started to shape in that period and by the 4th-3rd centuries BC must have logically yielded such cult centres as Uplistsikhe, Tskhia-Gora and Samadlo, as well as Grakliani Hill itself by the end of the Hellenistic period. Another noteworthy point is the comparative abundance of imported ceramic – in particular, Urartian jugs and bowls. As concerns the recovered seals, the appreciation of their significance can not be called exaggerated.

The Burial Ground

The burial ground is located on a slope west to the settlement. Its chronological boundaries are quite broad ranging from the 4th millennium BC. (pl. II. Grave. 4th millenium BC.) to the 2nd-1st millennium (pl. III. Bronze from the grave of 11th -10th BC) with apparently prevailing 8th-7th pit graves.

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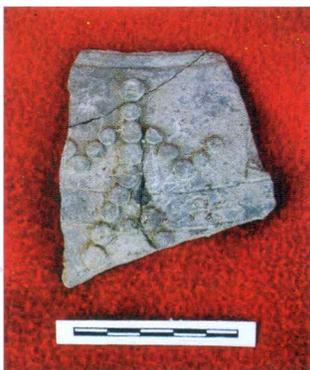
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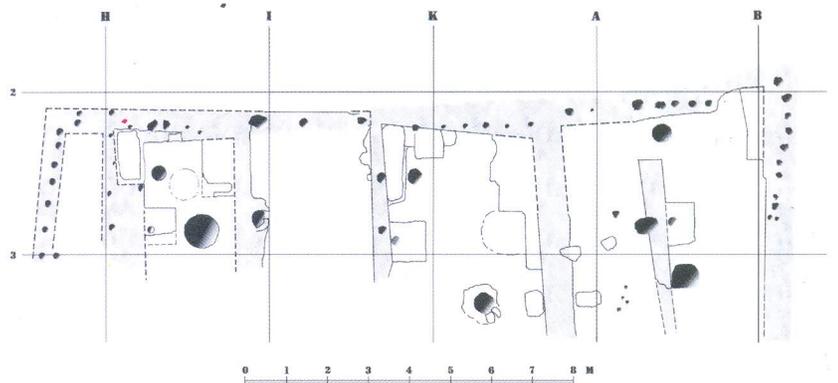
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