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NEW DISCOVERIES IN COLCHIS AND AN INTERPRETATIVE VERSION

The first millennium B.C. was marked in Colchis with significant advancements in metalwork and agriculture. Especially noticeable is the unparalleled development of stylized bronzework attested by the archeological materials from the Colchian territory. We may say that Colchian metalworkers tested their craftsmanship with every kind of metal product (Lordkipanidze O., 1972, 16-60). In this regard, I should mention such artifacts as Colchian axes, buckles and fibulas, mainly discovered in Colchian graves, distinguished for a particular burial manner (Mikeladze T., 1995, 2-22).

Thousands of artifacts found with hundreds of bodies buried in those grounds are distinguished for surprising diversity, and at the same time point to the obvious advancement of Colchian society, which reached a new stage of development at that very period. Such an intensive development logically resulted in the expansion of Colchian culture, which is clearly evidenced on the territory adjacent to Colchis (Inner Kartli, Samtskhe, the North Caucasus) and which was logically followed by an increasing number of articles characteristic of Colchian culture outside the Colchian territory. Archaeological attestation of Colchian elements within Greek environment is especially relevant to the present theme. I mean the patterns found on the Sammos Island, in Heraion, which N. Jansen, M. Voiatsis and O. Lordkipanidze unhesitatingly assign to the Colchian cultural circle (Lordkipanidze O., 2002, 184-193). Allow me to remind you that those articles are an equestrian female figurine, bells and buckles dated to the 8th-7th centuries B. C. Specialists have repeatedly noted that the information about Colchis first appeared in ancient Greek literature at that very period – i.e. as soon as these two worlds started actual and more or less regular contacts, they were immediately reflected in Greek written records (mostly in Homer and Eumelos of Corinth).

Admittedly, such a coincidence is not accidental, which has repeatedly been underlined by scholars. The appearance of the information about Colchis in Greek sources became a corner stone for the relations between these two worlds. A most natural question comes up in such circumstances: were those relations reflected only unilaterally, i.e. only in the Greek world, which has been attested by factual evidence, or the bilateral process was more or less reflected in both worlds?

This question has long become the focus of scholarly interest and some of the elements of material culture revealed in Colchis have been found relevant for the description of the period on a number of occasions. I mean metal and pottery, which is believed to attest to the contacts between these worlds as early as prior to the colonization.

First of all, this concerns equestrian female figurines found on Greek as well as Colchian territory. Immediately upon the discovery of this category of articles they were assigned to the Colchian cultural circle, which is justified by thematic identity. However, it is also obvious that equestrian female figurines used to be produced in various workshops in compliance with this general concept. This becomes clear through comparing, for instance, the figurine from the Benaki museum with the ones recently found in Colchis (Tsaishi) by R. Papuashvili. I believe that particularly relevant is the very fact of parallelism as it points to a certain common concept uniting these worlds (Papuashvili R., 1998, 3-18).

As concerns fibulas, the question is posed differently. It is believed that the earliest samples of fibulas appear from the second half of the 9th century B. C., although another assumption, which I find inadequately substantiated, names even an earlier date (the second half of the 11th century B. C. see: Apakidze J., 2002, 21-66). It is noteworthy that recent studies find invalid an assumption shared by part of scholars (Kozenkova, Scheffer, Tekhov and others), that bow fibulas were not produced any more in the 8th-7th centuries B. C. and consequently they could not have been imported into the Caucasus. Sapouna-Sakellarakis believes that they continue to exist in the archaic age as well. Besides, according to John Boardman's research, that very period is characterized by increasing production of Phrygian fibulas moulded after their Greek originals (Boardman J., 1975, 83-86). He points out that the modification of Greek fibulas into the Phrygian type was caused by a far higher level of Phrygian metalwork. Remarkably, a mould of a Phrygian fibula of that period was found in Smyrna. Moreover, again according to John Boardman, the image of a fibula on an early western Greek electrum coin may point to the use of fibulas as an informal currency. With respect to morphological identity, especially important are silver bow fibulas recovered from Gordion, which are identical with Colchian ones. As concerns Colchis, a

particularly large number of bow fibulas appear from the 8th-7th centuries, i.e. from the same period when the practice of producing equestrian female figurines is characteristic of both worlds.

According to O. Lordkipanidze's researches, the shapes of ceramic ware discovered apart from metalwork closely resemble the synchronic Greek materials (cantharos and calathus-shaped vessels).

Consequently, it should not raise doubts that early Greek and Colchian relations developed as early as the 8th-7th centuries B. C., and were crowned by the legend about the Argonauts' voyage to Colchis.

Now, I will not dwell on various problems related to the myth, and will draw your attention only to one point – If Greek and Colchian worlds enjoyed contacts, as mentioned above, could the myth, reflected in Greek literature, have found its way in this or that shape in Colchian culture as well?

First of all, I would like to mention that Greek literature, composed 4-7 centuries later than the events in question; describe some Colchian rituals with marvelous precision. I mean the Colchian burial ritual. According to T. Mikeladze, the information from written sources (by Apollonius Rhodius, Niphodore of Syracuse, Nicolaus of Damascus, Claudius Elianus) on a double burial (wrapping a body in skin, hanging it on a tree, and afterwards burying it together with some artifacts) is archeologically attested during the excavations of Colchian burial grounds (Mikeladze T., 1990, 32-67). I believe that another piece of information from written sources can be likewise authentic: Phrixus' arrival in Colchis and later the visit of the Argonauts could have certainly been popular and significant events among Colchians.

In this connection, I should once again recall the information offered by Ariane (131 A. D.) that he was himself shown in Phasis 'the iron anchor of the Argo'. 'Here I was shown', he continues, 'pieces of an old stone anchor, which is more likely to have been a piece of Argo's anchor.' I believe that this obviously points to a vernacular tradition, the folk memory of the Argonauts' voyage.

Another evidence of the popularity or democratization of the Argonaut legend among the Colchians is later but no less interesting information found in *De Bello Gothico* (VIII, 2) by Procopius of Caesarea (the 5th century). It is obvious that the population was not only aware of the myth in general terms, but even pointed to a more or less specified location. According to Procopius, 'somewhere in this part of Lazica, as the **local population** (sic!) said, was kept the Golden Fleece, for whose sake, as poets have it, the Argo was built.' It is clear that even in the 5th century, the local population remembered well enough the plot of the myth. This can be assumed from another fragment in which Procopius argues with the locals. 'In my opinion', he writes, 'they talk about this (the obtaining of the Golden Fleece – V. L.) without any grounds. I

think Jason, together with Medea, having the Golden Fleece on them, could not have got away from here secretly of Aeetes unless the King's palace and other residential places of the Colchians were detached by the Phasis River from the spot where that Fleece was protected.'

Is it possible to trace the initial date of this information? Or to put it in other words, when, in which period did the local population become aware of the stories of Phrixus and the Argonauts?

Recent discoveries provide grounds for building certain assumptions. I mean extremely specific ram figurines dating back to the 7th-6th centuries B.C. It should be stated from the very start that although individual ram figurines appear as early as the Bronze Age, ram images become especially popular in Colchis exactly in the 8th-7th centuries B.C. They are used as decorative elements to ceramic ware (for example, the pottery recovered from Pichori, Tsarche and Tamish residential sites), or represent bronze sculptures. Hardly any of such images belong to a later period. It is likewise important that the increasing role of sheep / ram in farming is not archeologically attested. Therefore, the growth of the cult of ram in Colchis should have some other explanation.

The figurines in question were discovered in Nokalakevi, Vani and Kulevi.

A multifunctional workshop (producing jewelry and bids) dated to the 8th-7th centuries B.C. was discovered in the eastern part of the lower terrace of Nokalakevi. Even more important is the cult complex discovered in the same place with hundreds of fragments of broken ceramic figurines, where cattle bones and intentionally broken ceramic utensils were also found. All the sculptures are zoomorphic and are directly analogous of the Vani finds of the same type. The figurines are made from the same clay as the ceramic ware and their surfaces were also treated in a similar way.

The use of terracotta figurines in Vani is obviously connected with a certain ritual – apart from the ram and other statuettes, large and small-size cannellured vessels, drinking vessels with cone-shaped bases, bowls, pots and other articles made on a fast-revolving wheel were also found on the offering ground. The pottery is embellished with various ornaments (concentric circles, polished lines, imprinted spiral, and shaded triangles). In Nokalakevi and Vani complexes particular attention is paid to four-legged and double-protome figurines, whose semantics is not completely revealed. Apart from the figures of ram, calf and swine, the finds also included two- or three-headed creatures with prolonged snouts and raised crowns on their heads. All the figurines were produced locally. Out of different assumptions about the origin of such statuettes (Asian, Urartian, Luristan, Greek), I find the most logical (following O. Lordkipanidze's opinion) the one relating their

appearance in Colchis to the Greek world, in the same way as locally produced Cantharus- and Calathus-shaped vessels found in the same layers.

In this context, particular attention should be paid to the Kulevi complex of terracotta figurines. The multi-layered Kulevi settlement is among the most important monuments of the Colchian coast as it clearly reflects the general development tendency of the country. Together with other finds, this is attested by uncovered moulds pointing to a broad scale of metal production. Here, as well as in Vani, terracotta figurines should be analyzed with respect to the context. First of all, I should mention that the ram figures found in Colchis are different from each other; they feature the same animal through different shapes.

In connection with the interpretation of ram figures, I should mention structural elements, quadrangle ceramic details of a small-size model discovered in Kulevi. They are relevant to our study as far as they attest to the use of models. Another model is also made from earthenware – a stylized figure of a ram found in Kulevi, which is different from other figurines as it lacks an ordinary, earthy look. The article in question is stylized to a greater degree than any other statuettes and is undoubtedly a part of a small structure, which is attested by the survived grooves on its body. A closer look reveals that the figurine represents a frontal part of a model of a certain item as the grooves broaden towards its back side. Although other finds belonging to the same context do not facilitate interpretation of the figurine in question, we may still venture an assumption – it can be a decorative front part, a prow to a model of a boat. Such an assumption is prompted by archeological as well as written materials: 1. Archeological – Chronological affiliation of the figurine – a bronze boat model recovered from Tsaishi by A. Papuashvili belongs to that very period and no such model is found either earlier or later. The bronze model replicates the shape of Colchian boats, clearly attested in Colchian ethnography and described in ancient Greek literature (Strabo). 2. A written source – according to one of the versions, Phrixus came to Colchis exactly in a ram-prowed ship. I mean the information ascribed to Hecateus of Mileth (appr. 549-472 B.C.: ‘some say that (Phrixus) sailed in a ram-prowed ship. The same is attested by Diodorus Siculus (the 1st century B.C.) He writes: ‘The same story is included in traditions about Phrixus. Some say that he sailed across the sea in a boat with the image of a ram on its prow.’ Later Eudocia also linked a ram with the sea: ‘The ram ... took (the children) on his back, went into the sea, sailed off and took them away ...’ In view of these facts, we may assume that the story of Phrixus’s arrival in Colchis was known to and could even have been popular among Colchians in the 8th-7th centuries B.C. I believe that this can be explained by pre-colonization contacts, which as mentioned above, was equally reflected in written sources as well as in

archeological materials. However, it still remains unclear to me why Phrixus' arrival in Colchis became such a significant event to the local population.

Now I would like to touch one issue, which has likewise been repeatedly discussed and archeologically attested. It is well known that the epitaph ascribed to Aristotle describes Colchis as 'gold-abounding', like the wealthiest centers of ancient world – Mycenae, Sardes and Babilon. The riches of Colchis are attested by Strabo as well (let us recall his famous phrase 'The richness of this country in gold, silver, iron and copper explains the true motivation for the campaign'.) Otar Lordkipanidze's studies repeatedly attested to the authenticity of this information and the ancient Greek tradition about gold-abundance of Colchis was once again confirmed by recent discoveries in Vani. After late O. Lordkipanidze, these archeological operations are headed by Ms. Darejan Kacharava. I am particularly grateful to her for providing us with visual materials. I believe that the burial ground presented does not need many comments.

This burial ground was discovered in the eastern part of the Vani settlement. Along with other structures studied, a wall dated to the 2nd-1st centuries B.C. was also unearthed. When the lower, the first row of the stone structure was being prepared, a burial inventory was discovered directly at the base of the wall. The inventory included glass bids, silver vessels and golden ware. It was clear that the wall had damaged a far earlier burial ground. The ground, as typical of Vani, was cut out in the limestone layer and was covered with cobblestone. After the preparation work was over and cobblestones were removed, a Heracleian amphora was discovered, while the cleaning of the remaining part of the ground revealed the basic contents of the inventory and the contours of a burial ground. The human skeleton was hardly preserved, which is typical of Vani excavations, but the arrangement of the inventory pointed that the body was laid with its head to the East, in an embryonic posture. This is indicated by the surviving in situ line of duckling images to be fastened to the shroud, and the concentration of ornaments. The cleaning of the burial ground revealed that it contained inventory made of different materials in Colchis as well as outside its borders (for example, a Colchian jug with a handle and a Heracleian amphora). At the same time, in the course of the archeological operations by the head of the body, a very interesting ornament started to appear. Greater part of it was made of gold. The complete cleaning of the burial ground exposed the following picture. To make it clear, I will present several details: golden tubes and a head ornament recovered by the head of the body; a golden brooch pin, pendants and bids from the same place; pendants and ornamented tubes; the images of ducklings and eagles to be fastened to the shroud; a triangle pendant, whose earliest analogue, dated to the 6th century B.C., was found in the Simagre settlement site. This attests

to the hereditary character of Colchian goldsmithery. Such tradition was maintained from the 6th century to the third quarter of the 4th century B.C.; pendants, which likewise vividly include the elements of Colchian goldsmithery – rose images and birds decorated with granulations; and finally, an altogether unique example of Colchian goldsmithery – a head ornament having diverse scholarly value. It suffices to mention that its shape is totally different from the shape of other surviving head ornaments. However, the central decorative motif is the same – the upper part of the frame is embellished with zoo-morphic figures, whose basic technical element is traditionally a granulation. Another traditional element is bird images. I would like to pay particular attention to the compositional details of the inner space of the image placed in frames. The zoomorphic plot, which in this particular head ornament is completely developed, remains unmodified throughout the 4th century B.C. and in the 1st century B.C. as well as at the outset of the new era can frequently be found in various parts of Georgia in the shape of bronze openwork buckles. In my opinion, this best attests to the hereditary character of Colchian metalwork.

In the end, I would like to repeat that my above assumption about the Colchians' awareness of Phrixus', and later, of the Argonauts' story in the 8th-7th centuries is rather hypothetical and requires more evidence. However, the materials presently available provide no grounds for any other suggestion either, because as stated above, archeological operations performed in Colchis attested some information from Greek written sources with unique precision.

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