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CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN GEORGIA

(In the Context of History of Relations with the Greek World)

Classical archaeology in Georgia is oriented on the study of the history and culture of two ancient Georgian states: Colchis – situated on the territory of present-day western Georgia, as well as Iberia – in eastern Georgia.¹ One of the most fascinating problems put forward nowadays in the Classical Archaeology of Georgia is the relations between the Greek world and Georgia.

The well-known Greek stories on the Argonaut-expedition for the Golden Fleece as a symbol of the first successful navigation of the Hellenes to the shores of the Black Sea, was employed by Greeks to designate the collaborating with the Ancient Georgia: Western Georgian Kingdom of Colchis was the land where the Golden Fleece was preserved.

Why was the Argonautica addressed namely to Colchis and not to other countries of the Black Sea?

The answer on this question did give already Strabo: "The Argo that is in all men's mind is also properly used [by Homer], inasmuch as the expedition is supposed to have taken place in well-known and populous regions".² And it's worthy to note that the modern classical archaeology confirms the reality of words of the great Greek geographer.

A comparative study of the demographic situation in the Black Sea area of the second half of the 2nd and the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. shows that namely the east Black Sea region was distinguished for the presence of settled and most developed society. A powerful demographic explosion is evidenced both in the coastal line and in the hinterland. Almost everywhere we find the remains of this period: settlements, necropolis, metal hoards, bronze and iron manufactories. The local culture of this period is illustrated by wooden architecture, pottery and especially by very numerous and varied bronze items, such as fine bronze axe-heads, sometimes decorated with engraved or sculptural representations.³

The introduction of large-scale iron-working is also noteworthy. Remains of the iron-smelting foundries are discovered, especially in the coastal zone,⁴ as well as very numerous and quite different utilitarian products – tools and weapons: ploughs, hoes, axe-heads, spearheads, arrowheads...

It is important to note that typologically the iron objects repeat the shape of bronze wares of the preceding period.⁵

Of special interest is an unusually great number of not only weapons but of agricultural implements in graves.⁶

I think, all these finds are an eloquent illustration of the high level of farming as well as of large scale of the iron-working already before the Greek colonization.

Here arises another question: is there any evidence of contacts of the Greeks creating the famous stories on the Argonaut expedition with Colchis, i.e. with the land where, according to these stories, the Golden Fleece was preserved?

¹ On the history and archaeology of Colchis and Iberia see Lordkipanidze O., *Archäologie in Georgien*, Weinheim, 1991, pp. 93-145 and 146-176 (with Bibliography).

² Strabo, I, 2,40, *Archäologie in Georgien*, Weinheim, 1991, pp. 93-145 and 146-176 (with Bibliography).

³ Lordkipanidze O., Mikeladze T., *Le littoral oriental de la Mer Noire (Colchide) durant de la colonisation grecque*, – in: "Dialogues d'histoire ancienne", 6, 1980, pp. 41-58.

⁴ Khakhutaishvili D., *Proizvodstvo zheleza v drevnei Kolkhide (Iron Production in Ancient Colchis)*, Tbilisi, 1987 (n Russ.).

⁵ Lordkipanidze and Mikeladze, *Op. cit.*

⁶ Mikeladze T., *Große kollektive Grabgruben der frühen Eisenzeit in Kolchis*. – in: "Archäologischer Anzeiger", I, 1955, pp. 1-22.

According to the Greek mythological tradition, the Argonaut expedition took place one generation before the Trojan War. Thus, we could suppose the first navigation of the Greeks to the shores of the Black Sea already in the Mycenaean period.

But unfortunately till nowadays we haven't any eloquent archaeological materials proving the appearance of Greeks-Achaean on the shores of the Black Sea in the Mycenaean time.⁷ But I believe in the Greek mythological tradition and we can hope that the further archaeological excavations will reveal more reliable evidence on the presence of the Mycenaean Greeks on the Black Sea littoral.

Evidence on possible, more or less active contacts of the Greek world with the Black Sea area from the 9th-8th cent. B.C. becomes more convincing when there occurred a fresh powerful upsurge of Greek society (still called "renaissance"), the formation of the polis, intensive development of handicrafts and commerce (partially Euboean), the planting of the first colonies both in the west (Pithecosa) and in the east (Al-Mina, Tell-Sukas).

Nowadays in Colchis the most ancient Greek import is represented by a 8th-century bronze figurine of a charioteer from Mukhurcha⁸ – doubtlessly a Greek late Geometric votive well-known from Olympia and Delphi.⁹ It must not be ruled out that some bronze female figurines in spread-armed positions from Colchis¹⁰ are also Greek imports or a local adoption of the motifs from Greek Geometric art. On the other hand, the famous 8th-century Samian rider with a baby¹¹ has now good analogies in the newly discovered in Colchis side-saddled female figurines, as well as in a throned female with a baby.¹²

And some innovations in the material culture of the 8th-7th century Colchis we can regard as a result of contacts between the late Geometric Greek world and Colchis: such as terracotta figurines with heads on the opposite sides,¹³ bronze single arched fibulae (the so-called sub-Mycenaean type, especially "a navicella" type),¹⁴ in the local pottery kantharos- and kalathos-like vessels, as well as the widespreading on the Colchian pottery, bronze and gold objects of the rich geometric ornamentations, especially meanders and swastikas, not being familiar in Colchis of previous periods, but so characteristic of the Greek Geometric art.

Regular contacts of Greeks with Colchis started from the very end of the 7th or beginning of the 6th centuries B.C. and are connected with the so-called Great Greek Colonization.

Three Greek colonies (Dioscurias, Gyenos, Phasis)¹⁵ are mentioned in classical literary sources, most frequently Dioscurias and especially Phasis. Unfortunately, they are not yet discovered.

Dioscurias is presumed to have been located in the Sukhumi Bay, but it is either sunken in the sea or destroyed by it.¹⁶ The most striking evidence of the existence of the Greek colony is a marble grave stele, discovered in the Sea.

The three-figured composition on the stele represents the scene of the parting with a deceased. This stele is a provincial work under the influence of the Classical art of Attica. The Sukhumi stele must be dated to the last quarter of the 5th century B.C.¹⁷

The city of Phasis has not yet been discovered either. It is repeatedly mentioned in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine sources as a city founded by the Milesians and situated at the mouth of the river of the same name, i.e. the Phasis.¹⁸ The identification of this river is absolutely certain. This is modern

⁷ The finds of Mycenaean pottery at Mashat in Turkei (Özgtüç T., Maşat, Ankara, I, 1978, p. 66, Pl. 83-84; II, 1982, pp. 102-103, pl. 46) are doubtless of enormous interest, however, the route of their penetration still remains debatable.

⁸ Mikeladze, op. cit., p. 21, fig. 22.

⁹ Sweitzer B., *Die geometrische Kunst Griechenlands*, Köln, 1969, pp. 156-158; Heilmeyer W.-D., *Frügrüchische Kunst*, Berlin, 1982, p. 47; Byrne M., *The Greek Geometric Warrior Figurine*, Lovain-la-Neuve, 1991, pp. 43 f.

¹⁰ Mikeladze, Op. cit. p.18.

¹¹ Voyatzis M., *Votive Riders Seated-Saddle at Early Greek Sanctuaries*, – in: "Annual of the British School of Archaeology at Athens", 82, 1992, p. 21.

¹² cf. Mikeladze, Op. cit. fig. 19-20.

¹³ Lordkipanidze O., *Über zwei Funde aus Vani*, – in: "Archäologischer Anzeiger", 1, 1995, pp. 41-45.

¹⁴ Sulava N., *Boat Fibula Found in Georgia*, – in: "Trade on the Black Sea in the Archaic and Classical Periods: Historical Perspectives of the Silk Road (The 9th International Symposium in Vani)", Tbilisi, 1999, pp. 63-64.

¹⁵ Ps. Scyl., *Asia*, 81.

¹⁶ Kacharava D., Kvirikelia G., *Goroda i poselenia Prichernomorja v antichnyu epokhu (The Cities and Settlements of the Classical Period of the Black Sea Area)*, Tbilisi, 1991, sv. Dioskurias.

¹⁷ Lordkipanidze O., *La Georgie et le monde Grec*, – in: "Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique", XCVIII, 1974, pp. 899-904; Pfuhl E., Möbius H., *Die ostgriechischen Grabreliefs, I*, Mainz am Rhein, 1977, pp. 28, no. 65, Pl. 17.

¹⁸ Herod., IV, 38 and 86; Ps.Scyl., *Asia*, 81; Ps. Hyp., *Peri Aeron*, 15; Arist., *Fr. 72 (=Heracl. Lamb., Polit., 46)*; Ps. Scymn., 930 (= Anonym., PPE, 44), Strabo, XI, 2, 17; XI, 3, 4; Arrian, PPE, 11-12; Sch. ad Theocr., Id., XIII, 23; St. Byz., *Ethn.*, sv. $\Phi\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma$; Plin., *NH*, VI, 1, 13 and 52; Pomp. Mel., *De Chorograph.*, I, 108.

Rioni. It means that Phasis has been located at its mouth.¹⁹ We have used all possible methods of search for Phasis: archaeological surface survey of a vast area, geological drilling, different geophysical methods, as well as deciphering of the aerial photographs, as far as it was possible in the Soviet times, but in vain. The search of Phasis is difficult because of the highly variable geomorphologic structure of this region, i.e. Poti. We see here the incredibly frequent change of the bed of the River Rioni within the radius of almost 3-4 km, as well as expansion of land at the expense of the sea. Thus, the location of Phasis, one of the most famous Greek colonies in Colchis, still remains an unsolved mystery. But, nevertheless, we have some archaeological proofs of the real existence of Phasis and its activity.

Silver coins of the 5th century B.C. are discovered near the hypothetical location of Phasis. They are represented by 9 examples kept in various museums of the world. The obverse of the coins bears an image of a lion typical for Milesian coins, while reverse – a kneeling nude male figure with a bull's head. As it is known, the image of a man with bull's head features in Greek iconography a River-God. Hence, it may be hypothesized that we are dealing with the River-God Phasis, mentioned in Greek and Roman sources.²⁰

The next, highly interesting, relic is a silver phiale with an omphalos, discovered in a Sarmatian burial in Kuban. It dates from the end of the 5th cent. B.C. The omphalos bears the representation of the Python, reflecting ancient Delphic notions of the omphalos as the tomb of the Python killed by Apollo. The inner walls of the phiale feature deer heads, while the outer walls bear a Greek inscription: "I belong to Apollo the Hegemon, that is in Phasis". Here "Hegemon" is the epithet of Apollo, as the leader of the city and principal god-protector. The inscription points out that the phiale belonged to the temple of Apollo in Phasis.²¹

We have exceptionally interesting 3rd-cent. A.D. evidence on the existence of a temple of Artemis in Phasis. The information belongs to the historian Zosymus. Thus, we have proof of the existence of the temples of Apollo and Artemis and their cult in Phasis. But perhaps of the cult of their mother Leto as well? As is known, so-called Apollinarian triad was worshipped in Miletus, the mother-city of Phasis. In this respect, special attention is drawn to the iconographically unique coins (to-day represented by up to 20 specimens) discovered near Phasis. The obverse a representation of a human head in profile, while the reverse depicts two heads with features characteristic of Apollo and Artemis. It may be hypothesized that these coins represent the Apollinarian triad: Leto, Apollo and Artemis.²²

But I'd like to repeat the above-said: Phasis is not yet discovered and its location still remains the greatest mystery of our century. A new programme is worked out for the search of Phasis for the coming twenty-first century. It comprises, together with archaeology, the deciphering of aerial photographs, geophysical and underwater archaeological investigations. In this programme the scientists from the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany, are taking part. I hope that our Greek colleagues will also be included in this international programme of searching Phasis. Phasis deserves the great interest since it was undoubtedly a big urban centre that is testified by archaeological finds. This very city played an outstanding role in the interrelations of the Greek world with Colchis, and ancient Georgia in the whole. The spread of Greek imports along the river of Phasis is an eloquent testimony of these relations. The Greek imports are found in all more or less important centres of Colchis. For example, at the Simagre settlement the 6th century Ionian and Attic pottery is revealed,²³ in Vani the earliest Greek import is represented by a Chiot chalice style, as well as by outstanding examples of Greek toreutics.²⁴

Of great importance is the recently discovered coin-hoard from village of Sulori not far from Vani.

The hoard contains up to 700 local silver coins, triobols with a head of the goddess on the obverse, and a bull's head on the reverse, and three foreign silver coins: so-called croeseid and a siglos struck by Darios ca. 500 B.C., and a small coin with a lion-head on the obverse and a star on its reverse,

¹⁹ Kacharava and Kvirkvelia, *Op. cit.*, s.v. Phasis.

²⁰ Lordkipanidze O., Phasis, le dieu-fleuve – in: "La Mer Noire zone de contacts (Actes du VII^e Symposium de Vani)", Paris, 1999, pp. 129-141.

²¹ Lordkipanidze O., Les divinités de la ville Phasis: Apollon ou la triade Apollinienne? – in: "Religions du Pont-Euxin (Actes du VII^e Symposium de Vani)" – 1997, Paris, 1999, pp. 129-159.

²² Lordkipanidze O., Towards the Interpretation of the Images on the so-called Colchian Didrachma. – in: "Mythes et cultes. Études d'iconographie en l'honneur de Lilly Kahil" (= BCH, Supplément 38, Paris, 2000, pp. 333-338.

²³ Kacharava D., Greek Imports of Archaic and Classical Times in Colchis, – in: "Archäologischer Anzeiger", 1, 1995, pp. 63-73.

²⁴ Vani (Archaeological Excavations), VII, Tbilisi, 1983, pp. 1983, pp. 7-111.

i.e. it is a Milesian obol struck before the Ionian revolt, i.e. between 500 and 491. This is the first find in Colchis of a coin from Miletos, the mother-city of Phasis.

Greek imports found in Eastern Georgia, known in the classical world under the name of Iberia, could be also regarded as the results of trade activities of Phasis – the main centre for distribution of imports.

At the settlements situated in the valley of the Kura river finds are known of Archaic and Classical Greek imports (Attic black-figured pottery in Khovle). It is worthy to note that imported Greek items have been found along the tributaries of the Kura river – in the valleys of the Phrone (Fikellura style and Attic black-glazed pottery)²⁵ and the Aragvi rivers (Qasbegi: an East Greek silver phiale decorated with swan heads – an exact copy of the East-Greek silver bowl from Rhodes).²⁶

Active Greek trade with Colchis, so clearly demonstrated by archaeology, contributed to a deeper familiarity of Greeks with this land. This has found reflection in the appearance of many interesting evidences about Colchis in the Greek literature, for example, in the works of Herodotus, Ps. Scylax, Hyppocratus, Strabo and so on. As a result of close familiarity of Greeks with Colchis we can regard the emergence of a new explanation of the essence of the Golden Fleece. If originally in Greek mythology it meant probably the symbol of a protector of royal power, later arose a new, rationalistic explanation: Golden Fleece symbolized, on one side, the richness of Colchis in Gold, on the other side, the obtaining of the gold in rivers of Colchis with help of sheepskins.²⁷ This technique of obtaining gold, so eloquently described by Strabo and Appianus, was preserved in mountainous regions of Western Georgia until recently.²⁸

The richness of Colchis in gold is attested also by finds of numerous gold items in rich burials of the local aristocracy, especially of the first half of the 5th-3rd centuries B.C.: magnificent diadems, various earrings, and temple ornaments, as well as necklaces. The originality of shapes as well as the stylistic and technical peculiarities points to their local manufacture.²⁹

The exceptionally large number of gold ornaments – occasionally hundreds in each grave – is a clear proof of the realness of the reports of those Greek writers, who sought to link the myth of the Golden Fleece to the richness in gold of Colchis.

²⁵ Lordkipanidze O., Trade on the Black Sea – the historic premise of The Great Silk Road, – in: "Trade on the Black Sea in the Archaic and Classical Periods: Historical Perspective of the Silk Road (The 9th International Symposium in Vani)", Tbilisi, 1999, pp. 58-59.

²⁶ Lushey H., Die Phiale. Bleicherode am Harz, 1939, p. 61, = 3 (from Qazbegi) and = 2 (from Rhodes), cf. Ibid, p. 65.

²⁷ Strabo, XI, 2, 19; Appian, Mith., 109.

²⁸ cf. Severin T., The Jason Voyage, London, 1985, pp. 220-223.

²⁹ Lordkipanidze, Archäologie..., pp. 123-124 (with references).