

The end of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon and  
the EB/MB transition in the South Caucasus:  
the chrono-cultural aspect



International  
Webconference

2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup>  
December  
2021

# International Webconference

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# Abstracts

## *Kura-Araxes Culture and Its Various Ends*

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After the spread of Kura-Araxes material culture (Early Transcaucasian) from the Southern Caucasus into much of southwest Asia at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, it declined in a relatively short period of time. Ultimately, it disappeared from almost all regions around the middle of the third millennium BCE. Despite a considerable body of knowledge and research on the origins and spread of the Kura-Araxes Culture, its end remains one of the most tantalizing subjects in the archaeology of the region. The end of the Kura-Araxes culture in the various areas and sites of the Southern Caucasus, eastern Anatolia, and Iran appears to have transpired with varying material evidence, and scholars have set forth a variety of explanations. In this paper, first, I will review current hypotheses on the end of the Kura-Araxes culture and then use results from excavations at Köhne Shahar in Iranian Azerbaijan to propose the possibility of a non-violent end or a planned abandonment.

## *Towards the chronology of archaeological complexes of Armenia in the third-beginning of the second millennia BC in a context of transformation and fragmentation of the cultural environment*

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In recent years, various authors have tried to analyse the peculiarities of the cultural landscape transformation in the territory of Armenia during the third and beginning of the second millennia BC in a number of studies, with the emphasis on the clarification of chronological and phasing issues. New data suggest that the transformation of the cultural landscape in Armenia is manifested both in the emergence of uncharacteristic elements compared to the previous period, as well as in the fragmentation of the Kura-Araxes (KA) cultural community.

The segmentation of the late KA and its obvious heterogeneity raise the question of isolating and recognising the truly final KA complex, associated with the problem of the cultural attribution of the Early Trialeti-Martkopi complexes (“Kura-Araxes” vs “Early Kurgan Culture”, “breakpoint” definition), and the synchronization of local variants in the South Caucasus in the mid and second half of the third millennium BC.

We think that the final KA stage in Armenia is represented by “Aygevan-Shengavit” and “Ayrum-Teghut” clusters of sites. The peculiarities of the corresponding inventory leave no doubt that we are dealing with a certain stage of transformation of the cultural landscape in the KA II. C14 data make it possible to synchronize the sites of these groups with the 27/26<sup>th</sup> - first half of 25<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Examples of pottery of these (post-“Karnut-Shengavit”) groups are found in tombs attributed to the Early Kurgan culture, and



the lower limit of their radiocarbon dates coincides with the upper boundaries of the mentioned dates.

A new stage of transformation is evidenced by a small group of burial complexes with Early Kurgan pottery, following the “Aygan-Shengavit” and “Ayrum-Teghut” clusters, located either in abandoned settlements of the Araxes Basin or in areas previously uninhabited by KA and dating to the second half of the 25<sup>th</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. The next transformation stage of the post-Kura-Araxes cultural landscape is represented by early Trialeti-Vanadzor culture complexes, dated to the 23<sup>rd</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup> - beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

## *Late Kura-Araxes sub-complexes of Armenia: synchronization problems in the light of new data*

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The outlines of the chronological framework of the Kura-Araxes period, based on radiocarbon dates, are now well defined with two main phases: KA I between 3600/3500 - 2900 BC and KA II between 2900-2600 BC. New radiocarbon dates from Armenian settlements (Karnut, Voskeblur, Haghartsin, Sotk II, Artanish, Aygavan), confirm this general framework, and the synchronicity of the main local variants of KA II in Armenia: Karnut-Shengavit, Shresh-Mokhrablur, the sites of the Lake Sevan basin and the Aghstev river basin. On the basis of this new series of 14C dates, a refined, more fractional version of the periodization and chronology of the late KA is proposed. Our research shows that regarding the material culture and relative chronology in the middle of the third millennium BC, an intermediate post-“classical” “Aygavan-Shengavit” stage is detectable, preceding Martkopi-type complexes. The paper also considers scenarios of simultaneous abandonment of settlements of different facies throughout KA II in geographically and climatically diverse subregions of Armenia and the dynamics behind their reoccupation.

## *Archaeology at the Frontiers: Investigations at Rabati, Southern Caucasus*

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This paper reports on recent archaeological investigations at the ancient frontier fortress of Rabati, in southwest Georgia, a collaborative research project involving archaeologists from the Georgian National Museum and the University of Melbourne. Rabati was continuously occupied for millennia (from the Chalcolithic onwards). From the first three seasons (2016, 2018 and 2019), it has become clear that significant Middle Bronze Age remains capped most of the summit of the site. Levels with distinctive Bedeni vessels and a range of contemporary local domestic wares, pits and some traces of architecture seal underlying Early Bronze Age levels. The Early Bronze Age levels themselves include massive architecture



rarely seen in Kura-Araxes settlements. Some finds can only be described as unique and extraordinary while others suggest that the core population was stable with long-held traditions, yet open to new influences infiltrating this highland site. We will present the key discoveries at Rabati – stratigraphy, architecture, ceramics.

## *From foothills to high mountains: new data on distribution and chronology of Kura-Araxes tradition in Armenia*

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The present contribution aims at revealing some new data concerning C14 chronology and the spatial distribution of the Kura-Araxes tradition based on materials from Armenia. Three sub-regions in particular were chosen, situated in three diversified geographic regions at different altitudes.

The first is the south-eastern part of the Lori region, where archaeological excavations were carried out by an Armenian team in the settlement of Margahovit. The site is located in the immediate vicinity of metal mines, at an altitude of ca. 1,800 m a.s.l. and is characterized by a forested landscape.

The second region is the south-eastern shores of Sevan Lake, where two sites were excavated by an Armenian-German expedition – Sotk 2 and Artanish 9. These sites are situated around gold mines at ca. 2,100 m a.s.l., characterized by arid conditions.

The third is the southern slopes of Mount Aragats where, in alpine pastures, ca. 2,900 m a.s.l., an Armenian-Italian team is currently excavating the sacred landscape of Karmir Sar with twelve monumental stone stelae called *vishap*. The geophysical survey conducted there revealed a rounded multi-cell construction, which, among others, also contains Kura-Araxes sherds.

All these sites reflect materials connected to the second stage and the final phase of the Kura-Araxes tradition. They are situated in various diversified environments and at varying altitudes, but they all reflect similar traits typical of the final stage of this tradition. The discovery of Kura-Araxes tradition in the high-altitude pastures of Karmir Sar is particularly important, as this is the highest distribution point for sites of this tradition known thus far.



# *‘Early Kurgan’ Pottery: A Comprehensive Reassessment and New Perspectives on Material Assemblages and Archaeological Contexts*

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The ‘Early Kurgan’ period in the Southern Caucasus (ca. 2500–2000 BC), straddling the Late Early and Middle Bronze Age, witnessed major innovations and social changes marking clear differences from the Kura-Araxes. The spread of mound burials (the kurgan phenomenon), the emergence of social complexity and inequality, metallurgical advances, and the development of a more mobile lifestyle are a few examples of these. In this context, the typological study of material assemblages can be a valuable indicator. However, past studies of Early Kurgan material culture have mostly focused on analyses of luxurious items, such as metal artefacts, whereas more recent studies - thanks to the spread of new scientific disciplines - have enlarged the focus to perishable items or samples collected during excavations. This research, in particular, has shed new light on previously unknown Early Kurgan traditions.

Surprisingly, the analysis of pottery assemblages is still very preliminary. Its study is still defined through site-based or, at the most, regional typologies, not always agreed upon by scholars. A major comprehensive and up-to-date typology is still lacking, as well as a precise attribution of material finds to securely dated contexts.

The aim of this contribution is to define the state of the art of pottery studies focusing on the Early Kurgan period, to tackle issues related to terminology, cultural attributions, typology and archaeological contexts. What is still most needed is secure cross-referencing of the identified pottery types with archaeological contexts, which should eventually result in an accurate periodisation of this still too understudied and - to some extent - still unknown period.

## *The KUR(A)GAN project. State of the art of the Early Bronze-Middle Bronze Age transition in the Kura River valley and preliminary results*

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Why did the Kura Araxes communities and their socio-cultural system disappear around 2600 BCE and were replaced by hierarchized communities with a mobile lifestyle and different cultural traditions, including the burial custom of funerary tumuli (Kurgans)?

The KUR(A)GAN project intends to answer this question in the frame of an interdisciplinary approach combining field and laboratory activities. The aim is to characterise and compare Kura-Araxes and Early Kurgan societies in terms of subsistence strategies, diet, the economy and cultural practices, to produce a new absolute chronological framework for these changes and finally new environmental data to investigate the role of environmental and climatic evolution in these radical transformations.

In this paper, we summarise the state of the art in the valley of the Kura River regarding the all-encompassing “systemic” change that marked the beginning of a new “Bronze Age” era, and present new preliminary data resulting from field and laboratory activities carried out in Georgia and Azerbaijan.





## *The demise of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon in its wider context: interregional comparisons in the light of the Late Third-Millennium BCE climatic change and its impact in South-Western Asia*

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The demise of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon spans several centuries and occurs in various historico-regional contexts at a different pace. Following the abandonment of valley sites in the Caucasian highlands ca. 2500 BCE, and the smooth transformation of material assemblages on a few West Iranian sites, the end of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon in Eastern Anatolia materializes ca. 2150 BCE through the collapse of the regional central polities located in the Upper-Euphrates basin. In certain regions, as in North-Eastern Anatolia, a few Kura-Araxes sites apparently linger on until the first centuries of the second millennium BCE.

Judging by its multi-faceted character, the wane of the Kura-Araxes world can probably not be attributed to a single factor. Systemic contradictions, external or internal warfare, as well as inter-group competition for resources, may all have played a role in the progressive disappearance of a cultural complex that from the outset, stands out a perplexing mixture of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Moreover, the correlation between the collapse of the Kura-Araxes world and changing climatic conditions evidenced during the 2500-1500 BCE period suggests the possibility of a causal link between the end of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon as a system, and the increasing aridity that marks the second half of the third and the first half of the second millennia BCE in many regions.

This paper draws on archaeological, historical and environmental data from the Caucasus and other regions in south-western Asia to bring out the specificities of the Kura-Araxes, in particular through a comparison with the urban collapse attested in the Near East during the last centuries of the third millennium BCE.

## *Metamorphism of the end: A close look at the end of the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition*

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In the middle of the third millennium BCE, most of the Kura-Araxes sites were abandoned throughout the oikumene of western Asia. As of yet, there is no explicit understanding of the final scenario. Should we conceptualize it as a collapse and hence the “end” of the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition? If so, did they collapse “into social oblivion or in historical memory”? How can we conceptualize this “end”? In this context, uncovering the deposits of the final phases of Kura-Araxes sites in recent excavations recounts different stories and raises several challenges.

Based on a review of past and new excavation data, this article will go through these scenarios to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what we may consider as the “end”.

Furthermore, the underlying factors or triggers for social and cultural transformation around ca. 2500 BCE will be scrutinized. It seems that there is no single end to all of the Kura-Araxes sites but diverse “scenarios”. Accordingly, there are also different post-Kura-Araxes situations; some sites demonstrate continuity, some a gap, and a totally different tradition replaced other sites.



Focusing on Iran, the post-Kura-Araxes period will be analysed. Due to the scarcity of excavated sites from this phase, current data failed to provide a comprehensive picture, but nonetheless provide a solid basis for interpreting cultural/social transformations from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age in the Iranian highlands.

## *Late Stage of the Kura-Araxes culture in the medieval city of Samshvilde*

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Sites corresponding to the final stage of the Kura-Araxes culture are found almost throughout the whole territory of Georgia. However, up until now, local versions stand out more, including the versions of Kvemo Kartli, which could be considered separately. The sites excavated in the region (Dangreuli Gora, Ghaitmazi, Shulaveris Gora, Imiris Gora) indicate that during this stage, ceramics with more complex decor than tableware from the previous stage, started to spread. Some examples of such ceramics were discovered in Trialeti (Ozni, Beshtasheni) and Shida Kartli (Kvatskhelebi, Tsikhia Gora). Spirals still prevail in the ornamentation of these ceramics, but they are depicted with a different technique and more complex images. Ceramics of this type were discovered by us in 2020 on the territory of the medieval city of Samshvilde, situated in the municipality of Tetrtskaro, 2.0 km south of the village of Samshvilde, where the early stage of the Kura-Araxes culture was excavated in 1968-70. The distance between these two sites is 4 km and they are separated by the deep canyon of Tchivchava. The floors of the Early Bronze Age houses in Samshvilde medieval city are located at a depth of 0.5-0.6 m from the current ground level. Houses are damaged by utility pits of the medieval period. Small fragments of houses survived. A shelf is attached to the north wall of one house. There were five mortars and vessels on the shelf. On the bottom of the shelf, there was placed a rectangular clay plaque. On the plaque, there are depicted spirals and pin with double volutes. Fragments of large vessels were found near the shelf. All the ceramics are ornamented with rich decors: spirals and broken lines. The south of the shelf comprised Early Bronze Age fragments. The Early Bronze Age site from Samshvilde medieval city belongs to the final stage of Kura-Araxes culture and dates from 28-27 cc. B.C.

## *Understanding the end of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon: the radiocarbon perspective*

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The end of the third millennium BCE in the South Caucasus is marked by substantial shifts in settlement patterns and socio-cultural traditions. This period saw the fragmentation of the Kura-Araxes (KA) culture and its replacement by post-KA communities belonging to the so-called “Early Kurgan” horizon. Although a degree of material continuity or partial co-existence between the late-KA and Martkopi and Bedeni assemblages has been suggested, the chronological aspects of this transition are still elusive. Increasing series of  $^{14}\text{C}$  datasets in recent years have shed light on the overall chrono-cultural sequence. However, the reversals and plateaus of the  $^{14}\text{C}$  calibration curve between 2600/2500 and 2000





BCE pose particular problems. The ambiguity of  $^{14}\text{C}$  calibration during this period fosters an impression of continuity that may mask the finer synchronic or diachronic processes at stake in the late KA/post KA transition—whether cultural, social, or climatic. Hence, discerning change from continuity becomes problematic. This paper critically addresses chronometric challenges in the dating of the late KA/post KA transition through a reappraisal of legacy  $^{14}\text{C}$  data and a preliminary examination of recent datasets. By addressing the potential of site-based Bayesian approaches for high-resolution  $^{14}\text{C}$  chronologies, the paper discusses how the integration of Bayesian thinking in sampling strategies can help maximize the efforts of archaeological research related to the EB/MB transition and streamline its efficacy in answering relevant research questions.

## *The post-Kura-Araxes period in the Southern Caucasus: reflections on definitions and terminology, and a view from Shida Kartli*

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This presentation is divided into two parts. First, it tackles the general issue of defining and delimiting the different south-Caucasian “cultures” of the second half of the third millennium BC, thereby highlighting cases of ambiguity and conflicting definitions, suggesting how they may have originated, and how they may be solved. In particular, it focuses on the definition of the different ceramic assemblages (“Late Kura-Araxes” vs “Martqopi”, “Bedeni”, etc.) and on the question of funerary customs and occupation patterns.

Subsequently, it presents some still partially unpublished evidence from sites in the Georgian province of Shida Kartli investigated during the last ten years by the “Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological project” (Natsargora and Aradeti Orgora settlements; Natsargora, Doghlauri and Okherakhevi cemeteries) and compares these data to those from other sites from the same region and from elsewhere.

## *Shengavit from Kura-Araxes to Early Kurgan*

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The transition from the Kura-Araxes to the Early Kurgan Periods is one of the great unexplained developments of the South Caucasian archaeology. In order to explain it, it is necessary both to understand why the long-lasting Kura-Araxes adaptation ended and why the subsequent Early Kurgan adaptation took its place. Shengavit is a rich source of information on the later, KA2, sub-phase of the Kura-Araxes, and has some evidence of subsequent Early Kurgan activity. This paper will address the first question and show how elements of the Early Kurgan cultures were developing within the Kura-Araxes period there.



## *The Later Phases of the Early Trans-Caucasian: A Heretical view from Yanik Tepe in NW Iran*

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There have been several recent attempts to set the chronological parameters of the Early Trans-Caucasian (ETC) or Kura Araxes (KA) based, encouragingly, on radiocarbon dates. These dates are, however, still insufficient in both number and distribution, particularly from the Urmia basin and the Central Zagros in Iran and the Van region in Eastern Turkey, for a comprehensive. Likewise, there are attempts to reach an agreed terminology for the entire ETC/KA phenomenon stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Euphrates River and from the Pontic Mountains to the Levant. For the most part these schemes ignore the Urmia basin, although they have included recent Iranian research in the southern sector of the Araxes valley. This paper focusses on the Urmia basin, and Yanik Tepe in particular, in an attempt to redress this situation

Preparation for publication of the pottery and other finds from Charles Burney's excavations at Yanik Tepe has made it possible for Rémi Berthon (Natural History Museum, Paris), to obtain a small number of new radiocarbon dates. Although these do not provide precision regarding either the start or end of the ETC settlement, they do permit construction of more refined chronological parameters than hitherto possible. Of particular interest is the probable raising of the date of transition between ETCII and ETC III, defined by the change from round to rectilinear building, and thus the date abandonment to no later than 2000 BCE, probably earlier.

I will attempt to examine how the Yanik Tepe sequence might be integrated into a broader terminological and chronological schemes firstly for the Urmia basin and, secondly, the Southern Caucasus and Eastern Turkey. This will necessarily be based on combined analysis of material culture, stratigraphy and the few available radio-carbon dates.

