The Rich Kurgans of the Ancient Bronze in Eastern Georgia

Zurab Makharadze
The Ancient Bronze Age in the southern Caucasus is dated from between the second half of the fourth and the third millennium BCE. It is linked to the Kuro-Aras culture. This ancient farming culture extended all the way to eastern Anatolia, north-western Iran and Syria-Palestine.

During the second half of the third millennium BCE, in the central part of the southern Caucasus, in other words in eastern Georgia, rich inhumations appeared under large kurgans. Two groups have been distinguished, the Martkopi and the Bedeni. The appearance of inhumations under kurgans is linked to the activity of nomadic groups from the Eurasian steppes: in the third millennium BCE, peoples from the steppes of the north began infiltrating the farming cultures of central Asia, the southern Caucasus and the Balkans, with various degrees of intensity.

In the southern Caucasus, the appearance of these new peoples led to significant transformations of the local culture, though there was no mass migration. It is most likely that this concerned small groups that took control of the war and political spheres while the local traditions of the material culture were preserved. As yet, this period of the Ancient Bronze kurgans has received little attention. In Georgia, some remains were excavated during the 1960s and the 1980s, and have been interpreted in various ways. The recent discovery of new, more monumental kurgans is therefore important.

Archaeological excavations carried out over the last few years in Georgia have brought to light many interesting sites from different periods. The most significant ones include those of the mission of the Archaeological Centre of the National Museum of Georgia,
undertaken under the author’s supervision. These are the sites of the Ananauri 3 Great Kurgan in the Lagodekhi district, on the left bank of the Alazani River, excavated in 2012.

The kurgan’s tumulus was 100 metres in diameter and 12 metres high. It was entirely made of earth but was covered by a layer of stones. Under the tumulus, at the centre, at the former level of the plain, an area made of two layers of 25 by 15 metre oak beams was discovered. It was covered by a 20 centimetre-thick layer of wood shavings and sprinkled with ochre. This served as a roof to the burial chamber. The latter, measuring 9 x 6.5 metres, was dug into the ground 2.25 metres deep and surrounded by logs. Its floor was also made of wood and three poles supported the roof.

Although the kurgan was pillaged a long time ago, probably soon after the inhumation, many exceptional finds were made: two wooden four-wheel carts, a wooden armchair, decorated pottery and wooden crockery, flint and obsidian arrowheads, jewellery made of gold, of semi-precious stones and of amber, an so on.

Owing to the region’s microclimate, the organic material was exceptionally well preserved: leather and fabric objects, wickerwork, nuts, sweet chestnuts and even forest berries were found. These unique data revealed during the excavation are currently under study in laboratories. They are significantly enriching our knowledge of this Ancient Bronze period in the Caucasus. The Ananauri 3 kurgan, which dates back to the second half of the third millennium BCE, is now one of the major sites of this period.

- M. Zurab Makharadze was invited by the Faculty, on Prof. Franz Grenet’s suggestion.
- A video of the lecture is available at www.college-de-france.fr, on Prof. Frantz Grenet’s page.

AUTHOR

ZURAB MAKHARADZE

Director of the Georgian National Museum Otar Lordkipanidze Archaeology Research Centre.