

New Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Colchis

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Abstract. In 1875, the correspondence of the great Georgian writer and public figure Akaki Tsereteli's brother, Davit Tsereteli, was printed in "Droeba" under the pseudonym "Skhvitoreli", in which he informed the readers that during the excavation of the foundation of the house on the southern slope of the Todadze Fortress, a certain Zabakhidze found a tomb in which gold items were found and they he sold to local Armenians and Jews. Davit Tsereteli also names musical instruments, which were found in the same tomb and notes that they were very similar to "military orchestra plates". Exactly two such pairs of bronze plates were discovered at Modinakhe in the 1970s during the archaeological excavations led by J. Nadiradze. It was these accidental discoveries that became the prerequisite for conducting archaeological excavations in these places in 2022.

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In 2022 archaeological excavations were carried out in Sachkhere municipality, on the eastern and southern slopes of Todadze Fortress (Fig. 1). It is located in the south-east of the city of Satskhere, on the southern branch of the Racha-Imereti ridge. Trenches were cut on the southern slope of the fortress (Fig. 2). From the archaeological point of view, a particularly interesting development was observed in trench № 1 (Fig. 3). At a depth of 40 cm from the surface of the ground, a concentration of stones was discovered (Fig. 4), during the cleaning of which faceless ceramic fragments appeared. After deepening about 70 cm, the remains of the wall were revealed. After removing the fallen and weak stones, a fragment of a flat stone wall was clearly visible, the length of which reached 3 meters, and the height was 40 cm. The wall was located directly on the bedrock (Fig. 5). Fragments of clay vessels were found along the wall, among which the bottoms of pots and dergs, ornamented and plain faces of pots or jugs, a fragment of a zoomorphic ear (Fig. 6), sides of pots decorated with grooved and concentric grooves, were found. Stones and bone items, of which the toy anvil is noteworthy (Fig. 7). The presented archeological material dates well to VIII-VII centuries BC. A large number of archeological monuments of the same period have been identified in Western Georgia, including in the upper part of the Kvirila gorge (in Sachkhere and Chiatura districts), but the discovery of a stone wall together with archeological material is a rare case, and it has never been observed anywhere in the archeological monuments of Upper Imereti. In order to determine the extent of the wall and the area of the possible building, a trench was cut 1 meter west of trench № 1, which showed that the wall continues in the western direction (Fig. 8) and its complete archaeological study is a matter of the future. To the north of the wall, after penetrating 20 cm, a grayish-yellow layer cut into the soil was discovered (Fig. 9), which extends to the northwest of the trench (Fig. 10). Ceramic fragments and floor contours (Fig. 11) were clearly visible in the cut. As mentioned, the layer is cut directly into the bedrock (Fig. 12), the archaeological material is represented by pottery, obsidian and flint tools (Fig. 13). Among the ceramic artefacts, the polished, brownish and black colored pink-coated fragments on the surface of the faces and sides of the jars, the black-faced and brown polished fragments of the ears and sides of the pots stand out (Fig. 14). The mentioned material and layer belong to the Early Bronze Age, to the middle of

the 3rd millennium B.C. and the developed stage of Kura-Araxes culture beforehand. It should belong to XXVII-XXVI centuries B.C. Future archaeological research will specify the date of the layer as well as its distribution area and settlement type. The area of Sachkhere is rich in archaeological monuments of the Kura-Araxes culture. Back in the 40s of the 20th century, academician B. Kuptin discovered and studied the tombs of the final stage of this culture in Sachkhere (B. Kuptin, 1950). It should also be noted that one of the first scientific works dedicated to the archaeological monuments of Georgia will concern the scientific research of the early Bronze Age kurgan discovered in Sachkhere (E. Takaishvili, 1913). The archaeological layer of Kura-Araxes culture was also excavated on the Modinakhe, (Dj. Nadiradze, 1975) near Todadze fortress. It is recognized in the scientific literature that the Sachkhere region is one of the important centers of the spread of the Kura-Araxes culture in the Caucasus (O. Djaparidze, 2003), and the discoveries of the Todadze Fortress confirm this.

In the first trench, in addition to the archaeological layer of the Kura-Araxes culture, the wall of the pre-ancient period draws attention (Fig. 4-5), which, according to the accompanying archaeological material, dates well to VIII-VII centuries B.C. Archaeological layers of this era can be found all over Colchis and are usually characterized by intense traces of life. (T. Mikeladze, 1990). Despite this reality, stone buildings of the ancient period have not yet been confirmed anywhere at the archaeological monuments of Western Georgia. It is for this reason that we believe that this trench can offer us important news in the study of the problems of the Early Bronze Age as well as the pre-antiquity, and its detailed archaeological research promises great novelties.

50 meters west of trench № 1 reconnaissance trench № 2 was cut. After deepening by 40 cm, the bedrock was observed. Plain fragments of jugs, pots, bases and ears were found in the trench (Fig. 15), which mostly belong to the pre- and early antiquity period and dates back to VII-VI centuries B.C. A fragment of iron slags can be distinguished in the extracted material (Fig. 16), which does not exclude the existence of an iron smelting workshop in these areas.

In the western corner of the trench, at a distance of 0.5 m from the rubble, the contour of the pit was outlined (Fig. 17). It was cut into the bedrock. After digging, a pit burial surrounded by stones was

observed, measuring 1.6 m. X 1.40 m. One person was buried in a grave in a bent position, on the left side, with the head towards the southwest (Fig. 18). The concentration of burial inventory was confirmed in the area of the deceased's right shoulder (Fig. 19). The following artifacts were found in the tomb: a reddish clay jug, bronze bracelets, bronze earrings, a bronze fibula, a bronze ring with an image of Hermes engraved on it, 16 bronze bells, 4 sink items - amulets and three eye beads (Fig. 20). Taking into account contemporary parallels, the tomb dates back to the Early Hellenistic period, IV-III centuries B.C.

Tombs of this era have been excavated near Todadze fortress, on the southern slope of Modinakhe fortress (Dj. Nadiradze, 1975). The tombs of Modinakhe are dated exactly the same as the tomb of Todadze Fortress - the second half of IV century B.C. (G. Makharadze; M. Sereteli, 2000).

Two meters to the south of the third trench, another tomb was found, which was surrounded by stones. The length of the tomb was 1.5 m, width 1.2 m. The deceased was buried in a bent position, on the left side, with the head towards the west (Fig. 21). It seems that the tomb has reached us in a damaged form. It is located on a rather steep slope. The burial site was specially repaired and surrounded by stones. It seems that the tomb was looted. Only two bone items (Fig. 22) were saved, which are probably fragments of Ilar. If we take into account that Ilars appear massively in tombs in the Late Antiquity, then Tomb № 2 should generally date from the Late Antiquity (I-III centuries).

It should be noted that Upper Imereti is a rich region in terms of Late Antiquity tombs. The abundance of the 4th century cemeteries is especially noteworthy (Modinakhe, Rgani, Sveri, Tsinsopeli). Against this background, the complexes of the early stage of the Late Antiquity (I-III centuries), which have been excavated and studied only in two places (Itskisi and Jieti), have been less identified and studied. Therefore, this discovery of Todadze Fortress is, of course, of some importance to fill this lacuna.

A rather strange situation was observed in the process of excavation of pits № 1 and № 2. Both of them were covered with stones (Fig. 23). Particularly impressive was the stone circle of pit № 2 (Fig. 25), which at a glance gave the impression of Cromlech (Fig. 26). During the cleaning of the stones of the second pit, mainly fragments of faceless ceramics of the early Middle Ages appeared (Fig. 28). After

cleaning from stones, absolutely empty pits were confirmed in both of them (Fig. 24 and 27). We encountered a similar situation in 2020 during the excavations in the village of Itkhvisi, where we also observed uninventory and stone pits cut into the rock (Z. Bragvadze; K. Digmelashvili; D. Darejanashvili, 2021). At this stage, we do not know what event we should be dealing with in the cases of Itkhvi and Todadze fortress. We may be dealing with some ritual dedicated to chthonic deities. In any case, this problem needs future research, because in the early Middle Ages (VI-VII), when Christianity is the official religion in Georgia, there seems to be no place for such rituals to exist. However, the existence of pagan community in these areas of Upper Imereti cannot be excluded. Although the cases of Itkhvisi leave more the impression of burial grounds, while the Todadze Fortress is represented by pits, these events may have the same key. The existence of pagan traces is not at all a strange phenomenon for Georgia in the early Middle Ages, and in this regard, the discoveries of Dedoflisgora in Shida Kartli provide an interesting picture. The data of this very important archaeological site confirm that paganism dominates over the Christianity in the early Middle Ages and not even a trace of the latter can be felt, while pagan rituals often appear (Iu. Gagoshidze).

Such were the results of the archaeological excavations conducted in 2022 at Todadze Fortress. The mentioned works confirmed that we are dealing with a very promising archaeological monument from a scientific point of view, whose systematic research and search will turn a new page in the archeology and history of Eastern Colchis. Of particular interest is the southern slope of the fortress, which seems to have been inhabited since the Early Bronze Age, and life has been going on here since the early Middle Ages. As a result of reconnaissance work, it was established that there is a multi-stage archaeological object here.

Has been discovered:

- Early Bronze Age settlement
- A settlement of the pre-ancient period
- Early Hellenistic age tomb

- Burial ground of the Late Antiquity
- Early medieval settlement

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Description of illustrations

1. Interior of Todadze Fortress



2. The southern slope of Todadze Fortress



3. Trench №1



4. Remains of the building of the previous antiquity



5. The wall of the pre-antiquity



6. Archaeological material discovered in the layer of the pre-antiquity



7. Archaeological material discovered in the layer of the pre-antiquity



8. South of trench №1 the trench was cut



9. Early Bronze Age layer



10. Cobbled floor of the earlier Bronze Age



11. Cobbled floor of the earlier Bronze Age



12. Early Bronze Age layer



13. Early Bronze Age archaeological material (obsidian and flint objects)



14. Early Bronze Age ceramic materials



15. Trench №2



16. Archeological material discovered in trench №2



17. Contours of the burial pit



18. Tomb of the Hellenistic period



19. Concentration of archaeological material in the tomb



20. Artifacts of the Hellenistic burial



21. Tomb of Late Antiquity



22. Late Antiquity burial items



23. Concentration of stones at pit №1



24. Pit №1 after removing stones



25. Stone circle №2 before excavation



26. Stone circle №2 after cleaning



27. Stone circle №2



28. Stone circle №2. Archaeological Artifacts Discovered During Cleaning



29. Graphic plan and stratigraphic section of the trench №1

