

A BRIEF REPORT OF THE PROJECT – “KURGANS OF SOUTH GEORGIA”

„სამხრეთ საქართველოს ყორღანები“ - პროექტის მოკლე ანგარიში

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Abstract

Javakheti, renowned for its archaeological and architectural monuments, is in southern Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Kurgans occupy a prominent place here. As a result of archaeological survey work carried out in 2022-2023 within the framework of the Young Scientists Grant (№YS-21-1724) funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation, more than 3,000 Bronze Age kurgans were discovered in the territories of Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities. Interestingly, burial mounds with ritual roads were discovered in this region. Of particular importance were the burial mounds discovered on the Chatakhi and Shish-Tapa mountains, whose ritual roads, unlike other cases, are strictly oriented on the southeast-northwest axis. It should also be noted that the ritual road revealed on Chatakhi Mountain is cut through scree, which makes it unique. According to Mircea Eliade, the sacred mountain is the centre of the world, to which in some cases a “difficult road” – *dûrohana* leads. This idea is ideologically consistent with the Shaori and Chatakhi Mountains in southern Georgia and the complexes on them. In the case of Shaori Mountain, we are dealing with a temple complex, to which a serpentine road built of unconquerable stone slabs leads, while the Chatakhi Mountain complex and the Shish-Tapas burial mound, whose ritual path is oriented towards Chatakhi Mountain, clearly form a single complex, which indicates the complicated religious roots of the Bronze Age population of historical Javakheti.

Key words: Georgia; Javakheti; Kurgans; Bronze Age; *dûrohana*.

დიმიტრი ნარიმანიშვილი

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აბსტრაქტი

ისტორიული ჯავახეთი, რომელიც ცნობილია არქეოლოგიური და არქიტექტურული ძეგლებით მდებარეობს სამხრეთ საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე, სამცხე-ჯავახეთის რეგიონში. აქ ყორღანებს გამოჩენილი ადგილი უკავია. შოთა რუსთაველის სამეცნიერო ეროვნული ფონდის მიერ დაფინანსებულ ახალგაზრდა მეცნიერთა გრანტის (№YS-21-1724) ფარგლებში

2022-2023 წლებში ჩატარებული არქეოლოგიური სადაზვერვო სამუშაოების შედეგად ნინოწმინდისა და ახალქალაქის მუნიციპალიტეტების ტერიტორიაზე 3000-ზე მეტი ბრინჯაოს ხანის ყორღანი გამოვლინდა. აღსანიშნავია ამ რეგიონში სარიტუალო გზების მქონე ყორღანების აღმოჩენა.

განსაკუთრებით მნიშვნელოვანი იყო ჩათახის და შიშ-თაფას მთებზე გამოვლენილი ყორღანები, რომელთა სარიტუალო გზები, განსხვავებით სხვა შემთხვევებისა მკაცრად სამხრეთ-აღმოსავლეთის ჩრდილო-დასავლეთის ღერძზეა ორიენტირებული. აქვე უნდა აღინიშნოს, რომ ჩათახის მთაზე გამოვლენილი გზა გაჭრილია კარკნალში, რაც მას უნიკალურს ხდის.

მირჩა ელიადეს მიხედვით წმინდა მთა წარმოადგენს მსოფლიოს ცენტრს, რომლისკენაც ზოგ შემთხვევაში მიემართება “რთული გზა” – *dūrohana*. აღნიშნული მოსაზრება იდეურად შეესაბამება სამხრეთ საქართველოში არსებულ შაორის და ჩათახის მთებსა და მათზე არსებულ კომპლექსებს. შაორის მთის შემთხვევაში საქმე გვაქვს სატაძრო კომპლექსთან, რომლისკენაც უშველებელი ქვის ფილებით ნაგები, სერპანტინის მოყვანილობის გზა მიემართება, ხოლო ჩათახის მთის კომპლექსი და შიშ-თაფას ყორღანი, რომლის სარიტუალო გზა ჩათახის მთაზეა ორიენტირებული, აშკარად ქმნის ერთიან კომპლექსს, რომელიც ისტორიული ჯავახეთის ბრინჯაოს ხანის მოსახლეობის რთულ რელიგიურ ჩანასახებზე მიუთითებს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: საქართველო; ჯავახეთი; ყორღანები; ბრინჯაოს ხანა; “რთული გზა”.

Introduction

The historical Javakheti area in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region is rich in archaeological and architectural monuments, including over three thousand Bronze Age kurgans (Narimanishvili, 2024). These kurgans were uncovered during recent field archaeological explorations in the municipalities of Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki (fig. 1). Noteworthy are the kurgans with ritual roads on two mountains in Ninotsminda municipality, emphasising the beliefs and representations of the Bronze Age religion in South Georgia. The kurgans vary in size, with diameters ranging from 10-15 meters to as large as 40 meters.

The survey focused on kurgans, particularly those with a ritual road. These structures were initially discovered in 1999 when the water level of the reservoir in the Tsalka municipality dropped significantly, revealing the kurgans that Boris Kuftin studied between 1938 and 1945 (Kuftin, 1941). Most recorded ritual roads are oriented along the east-west axis, typically showing a slight deviation to the south or north and joining the kurgans from the eastern side. The road banks are constructed with piles of medium or large boulders filled with small rocks. The length of ritual roads mentioned in scientific literature ranges from twenty to four hundred meters (Narimanishvili, 2009), and in some cases, the width exceeds eight meters.

Methods

The project aimed to create a comprehensive catalogue of kurgans in South Georgia, providing detailed documentation and mapping their distribution. Data collection involved archival research in various scientific institutes and the identification of kurgans via satellite surveys. To uncover new sites, both visual and satellite surveys were conducted in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions. Field archaeological surveys further investigated these kurgans, integrating historical insights with modern techniques.

In preparing the report on the field investigations in historical Javakheti, a variety of scientific research methods were utilized to analyse the data and draw meaningful conclusions. These methods included cause-and-effect and quantitative analysis, the comparative-historical method, and practical research methods of abstraction like induction and deduction. Typologization and structural-diachronic analysis were also employed to classify the kurgans and understand their development over time.

By combining thorough fieldwork with robust analytical methodologies, the project successfully documented existing kurgans and discovered new ones, enriching the understanding of South Georgia's Bronze Age cultural landscape.

Results and analysis

As a result of a field archaeological survey in 2022-2023, important discoveries were made on the Javakheti ridge in Ninotsminda municipality, where kurgans with a ritual road were observed on two mountains separated by eleven kilometres. One is located at 3052 meters above sea level, on the crest of Chatakh Mountain (fig. 2), and the second one, on Mount Shish-Tafa (fig. 3), is 2687 meters above sea level. Both kurgans form a single complex, which emphasises the beliefs and representations of the initial stage of the Bronze Age religion of South Georgia and supports the opinion of the existence of certain beliefs of the tribes living in this era, both about solar (sun, moon, and other luminaries) and sacred places (Sacred Mountain).

Mircea Eliade, a renowned Romanian historian of religions and psychologist, hypothesised that the sacred mountain is at the centre of the world, where heaven and earth meet. At times, it is associated with specific celestial bodies. The holy mountain is the axis of the world, where the centre of the earth and the "gate" of the sky align on one axis, serving as the conduit for the transition from one cosmic realm to another. It is worth noting that the ziggurat was regarded as a cosmic mountain, symbolising the cosmos. Its seven levels corresponded to the seven planetary heavens or the colours of the world. The belief that Golgotha is positioned at the centre of the world is preserved in the folklore of Eastern Christians. It is viewed as the peak of the cosmic mountain and where Adam was created and buried. Like the sacred mountain, every temple or palace is considered a Sacred Mountain and becomes a Centre (Eliade, 2005, p. 12).

In South Georgia, the Shaori mountain, where the Shaori megalithic complex is located (Fig. 4), is considered one of the Sacred mountains with a complex of cult purpose (Narimanishvili, 2009, p. 52). Chatakh Mountain, also sacred, features a notable kurgan with a 25-meter diameter, a 150-meter long and 8-meter-wide ritual road, and impressive rock formations on the mountaintop offer the area's best views. Enormous boulders create a 55-60-meter corridor next to the road, leading to a circular dry-stone structure on the eastern crest of the mountain. These structures, including a nearby rectangular one, may be associated with burial rituals.

The unique Kurgan of Chatakhi Mountain has a circular building with a remaining height of one meter and a diameter reaching ten meters. There is also a rectangular structure north of the building, 3-4 meters away, with a height not exceeding half a meter and occupying an area of 2.0x1.5 meters.

The Shish-Tafa Mountain, northwest of Chatakhi Mountain, features a kurgan at its summit with a ritual road. The road is 90 meters long, eight meters wide, and lined with large stones along its banks. It leads to a circular stone wall with a diameter of 15-17 meters. The road is oriented on the southeast-northwest axis and points towards Chatakhi Mountain, indicating the belief of the people living in the historical Bronze Age Javakheti that Chatakhi Mountain was a sacred place—a Sacred Mountain.

From the point of view of the relation of the kurgans to the sacred places, the two kurgans excavated in 2020 south of Shaori Mountain are interesting. Kurgan N1 stone mound was bounded by a cromlech, whose diameter is 7.2 meters. The burial chamber is cut into virgin soil in the central part of the kurgan, aligned on the northwest-southeast axis. From the outside, the cromlech has small, beam-like structures. The monolith east of kurgan is attractive, around which more than two hundred obsidian fragments were found (fig. 5). Kurgan N2 is located 15 meters northeast of kurgan N1. Its stone mound is surrounded by a cromlech, whose diameter is 9.5 meters. The burial chamber is aligned on a northwest-southeast axis. Unlike kurgan N1, the cromlech features platforms in the northwest and southeast, with dimensions of 1.5x2.0 meters (fig. 6). The pottery discovered in both kurgans dates back to the 17th-16th centuries BC (Narimanishvili and Narimanishvili, 2021). Kurgan N1 is built with its centre aligned with Mountain Shaori, and a similar alignment is seen in Kurgan N2, where the northwestern "square" faces Shaori. Another significant site is the kurgan located on Dali Mountain, eleven kilometres northeast of Shaori Mountain, which also has a sub-building on the southeast side. Like kurgans N1 and N2, the kurgan on Dali Mountain is oriented towards Shaori Mountain.

It is worth noting that the cyclopean complex of Shaori can be reached by a road built with huge stones, snaking up to the mountaintop. Its total length is 350 meters, and its width is 2.0-4.5 meters; three menhirs are confirmed along the road (Narimanishvili, 2009, p. 48). Interestingly, the Cyclopean fortress does not have counterforces (Narimanishvili, 2019, p. 69). Considering Mircea Eliade's opinion that the holy mountain, holy city, or king's palace is the centre of the world (Eliade, 2005, p. 12), it can be said that in the Bronze Age Shaori mountain and the complex on it for a certain micro-region (Narimanishvili, 2019, p. 93) was the centre of the world. The centre is the supreme sacred zone where absolute reality reigns. The road leading to the centre is the "difficult road" (*dûrohana*), the path from death to life, from man to divinity. Approaching the "centre" equals consecration, an initiation (Eliade, 2005, p. 18).

It should be noted that in the scientific literature, an opinion has already been expressed that kurgans, i.e. artificial mountains – burial mounds represent a cosmic mountain, an axis (Berishvili and Tortladze 2001; Постунов, 2007, с. 14). As an assumption, it can be said that just like the ascending road to the upper complex of Shaori, the ritual roads near the kurgans served as a transition from death to life or helped its soul to ascend to welkin with the sunrise. The image represented on the menhir from Trialeti should be noted here where from the top of the three-stepped structure (kurgan, mountain, ziggurat - temple) rises a carved line ending with a spiral, on top of which there is also a horizontally carved line, above which a circular shape is cut out. It can be assumed that the ascent of the deceased's soul to the sun - to welkin is depicted here.

Conclusion

The discoveries from the field survey underscore the complex belief systems of Bronze Age tribes in Southern Georgia, where solar symbolism dominated. The sacred mountains, ritual roads, and burial structures all point to a sophisticated religious system that placed significant importance on the transition from death to life and the ascent of the soul to the heavens.

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Figure caption:

Fig. 1 – Map of kurgans distribution on the territory of South Georgia.

Fig. 2 – Mountain Chatakhi.

Fig. 3 – Mountain Shish-tapa.

Fig. 4 – Mountain Shaori.

Fig. 5 – Shaori Kurgan N1.

Fig. 6 – Shaori Kurgan N2.

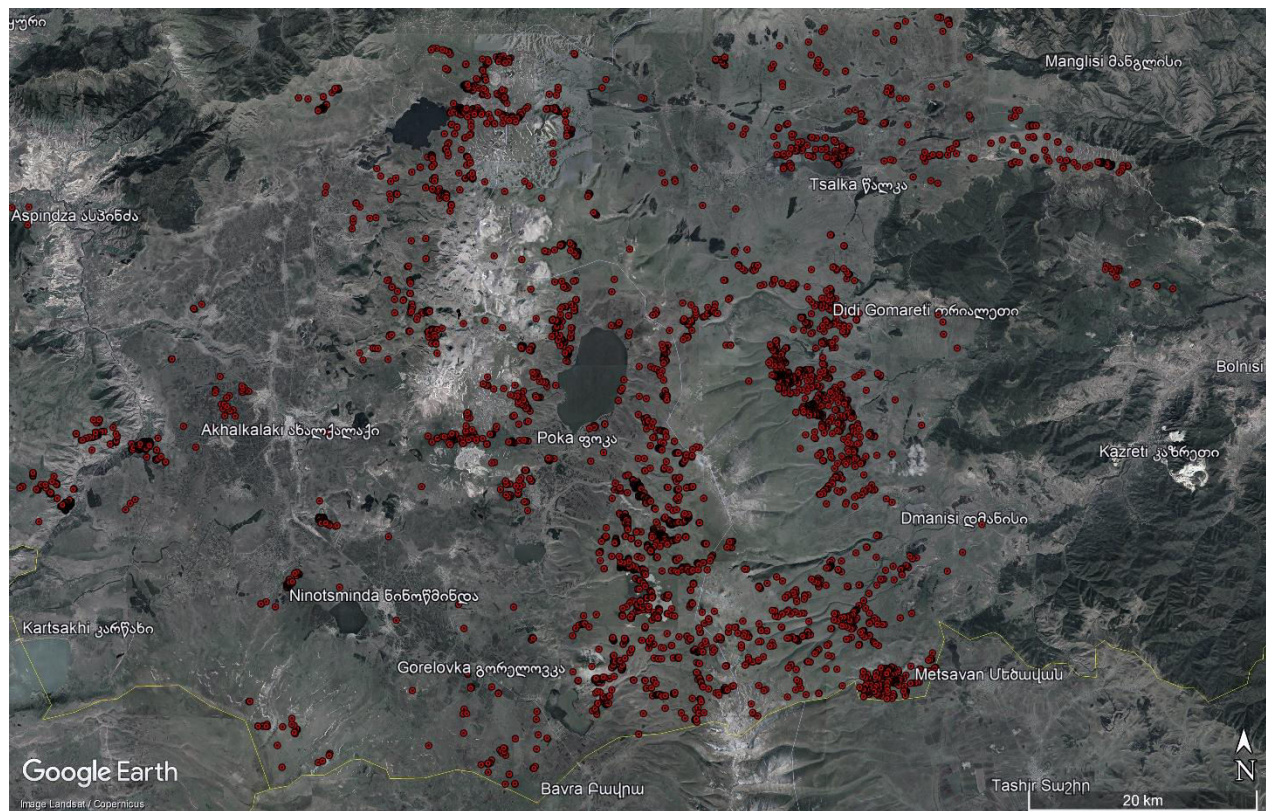


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.