

# CA' FOSCARI UNIVERSITY VENICE SHIDA KARTLI PROJECT

## PROPOSED AIMS AND PROGRAM

### OF THE FIRST SEASON (2009) ACTIVITIES

#### **Scientific Background and Long-term Aims of the Project**

The project, which will develop over a period of several years, will concern the study of the Transcaucasian cultures of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (Fourth and Third Millennium BC) and of their relation with the contemporary cultures of Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia. This was a period of deep cultural transformations in the Transcaucasian region, when the communities of this metal-rich area were progressively involved into a complex network of relations with the regions of Near East located to the South, where the first urban civilizations had developed since the mid-fourth millennium BC., and as a consequence developed more complex forms of social organization, which are reflected, e.g., in the archaeological documentation by the accumulation of wealth in the burials of the Early Kurgans culture of the second half of the Third Millennium.

After a long period in which, mainly due to the difficulty of communication between Georgian and Western scholars caused by the post-world war II international situation, these subjects have been relatively neglected by the scientific community, a new interest has recently arisen on them, as proved, e.g., by the publication of a number of miscellaneous volumes partially or entirely devoted to them (see, among others, A. Smith, K. Rubinson, (eds.) *Archaeology in the Borderlands: Investigations in Caucasia and Beyond*, Los Angeles 2003; B. Lyonnet (ed.), *Les cultures du Caucase (VIe-IIIe mill. avant notre ère): Leurs relations avec le Proche-Orient*, Paris 2007; K.S. Rubinson, A. Sagona (eds.) *Ceramics in Transition: Chalcolithic Through Iron Age in the Caucasus and Anatolia*, Louvain, in press; A. Sagona, M. Abramishvili, (eds), *Archaeology in Southern Caucasus: Perspectives from Georgia*, Louvain, in press).

It has become fully clear, in particular, that the attempt at evaluating cultural developments in Southern Caucasus exclusively in connection with those of the Northern World (which prevailed until the early 90-s of the last century) had mainly political goals and was, therefore, quite artificial. As far as Southern Caucasus represents the northernmost periphery of the Near East, geo-cultural development in the Transcaucasian area should be evaluated in the general framework of near eastern civilizations, in particular of those of Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia, their nearest southern neighbours.

In spite of this recent scholarly interest, available data are still insufficient for a comprehensive interpretation of the historical phenomena involved, and numerous uncertainties remain. Especially controversial points concern: the relative and absolute chronology of the period, the relations between the local Late Chalcolithic/Eneolithic cultures and the Uruk cultures of Mesopotamia, the relation of the latter with the Maikop culture, the origin, diffusion and local variation of the Kura-Araxes culture, the relation of this with the following Early Kurgan culture, and the relation between the Martkopi/Early Trialeti and the Bedeni cultures.

The Ca' Foscari University research will focus, more specifically, on the region of Shida (Inner) Kartli. For several reasons, this appears to be an especially promising area for the investigation of the above mentioned problems. First of all, its central position within Georgia makes it an area of contacts between Western and Eastern Georgia on the one side, and between the Caucasus to the North and the regions located to the South of Georgia on the other one. Secondly, the presence of the plain of the Mtkvari (Kura) river allows the presence, in the region, of permanent settlements of relatively large size, which could play the role of "central places" in the settlement pattern. Thirdly, there are a number of already excavated archaeological sites of these

periods in the region (among the most important ones, Berikldeebi and Tsikhiagora) which could provide important comparative study material.

Another important long-term aim of the project is to develop the collaboration and the exchange of results between Georgian and Italian archaeologists. This will be obtained through the participation of Georgian colleagues and students to the activities of the Italian expedition in Georgia, through the implementation of the exchanges of students and professors between Venice and Tbilisi Universities, and finally through the publication in English language, on Italian journals and series, of the results of the excavations carried out by Georgian archaeologists and of those of jointly carried out researches.

### **Preparatory stage (2007-2008)**

On the occasion of two successive trips to Tbilisi by the present writer (October 2007, November 2008), preliminary contacts have been taken both with the local authorities and with a number of Georgian archaeologists specialising in the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze cultures who promised their future collaboration to the project (see *infra* for details). During the first of these trips, the present writer presented, together with M. Tonussi, a paper about “Interactions between the Kuro-Araks and the Syro-Mesopotamian Cultures during the End of the IVth and the First Half of the IIIrd Millennium B.C.” at the I ICC (International Congress of Caucasiologists): “Caucasian Civilizations in Linguo-Cultural Context of the Near East”. On both occasions, she visited archaeological sites and collections of archaeological materials of the relevant period stored at the following Museums and institutions: Georgian National Museum (Tbilisi), Signaghi Museum, O. Lordkipanidze Centre for Archaeological Studies of the Georgian National Museum, archaeological expeditions in Kaspi, Zhinvali and Kashuri districts.

At the same time, study of IV and III millennium Transcaucasian Cultures has been carried out by students of the Ca’ Foscari University under the supervision of the present writer. A PhD thesis about “The phenomenon of “Early Transcaucasian cultures” within the framework of the international relations between the Late IV and the Early IIIrd millennium BC” by Monica Tonussi, MA, will be completed by the end of the year, and an MA thesis on the Early Kurgan cultures has been started by Eleonora Carminati, BA. The collection of a comprehensive corpus of literature is being carried out with the help of students of the Ca’ Foscari University.

### **First phase of the project**

The first phase of the project will be mainly devoted to the study of the EB layers of the settlement of Natsargora (Khashuri district). The site was excavated in 1984-1987 by the late A. Ramishvili. While the later (Late Bronze and Classical Period) finds have been published in various contributors by the excavator, the Early Bronze age remains are still largely unpublished<sup>1</sup>. A first survey of the material, presently stored at the Khashuri Expedition house in Gomi, has been carried out by the present writer in November 2008. It has confirmed the importance of the site for investigating a still poorly understood chronological phase, namely the transition between the



<sup>1</sup> Preliminary reports have appeared in *Polewije Archaeologitscheskie Issledowanija w ....godu*; a few significant finds have been published in I. Gambaschidze, A. Hauptmann et al. (Hrsg.), *Georgien. Schätze aus dem Land des Goldenen Vlies*. Katalog der Ausstellung Bochum, Bochum 2001, and a preliminary study has been carried out by A. Ramishvili and Marina Puturidze (grant of Georgian National Academy of Science for 2004-2005 : “About the Problem of Interconnection of Kura-Arax- and Early Kurgans Cultures on the Background of Shida Kartli Sites”).

Kura-Araxes culture and the following Early Kurgan (Bedeni) culture. As a matter of fact, Natsargora is one of the few sites (together with Tsikiagora, whose EB levels have been published by Z. Macharadze, and Berikldeebi, whose EB layers are in course of publication by M. Jalabadze and Badaani settlement, excavated by G. Mirtskhulava and still unpublished) where not only Bedeni ceramics have been discovered in a settlement context, but also a certain degree of continuity seems to be attested between the Kura-Araxes and the Bedeni horizon.

### **2009 field season activities**

The first field season will take place in August-September 2009 and will have a foreseen length of 30-40 days.

The Italian team will be composed of the following members:

Prof. Elena Rova (archaeologist, director of the team), Dr. Monica Tonussi and two MA students of Ca' Foscari University (Eleonora Carminati, Mirko Furlanetto), archaeologists, and Prof. Aldino Bondesan (Department of Geography, University of Padova), geomorphologist.

The Italian team will work in strict collaboration with prof. Marina Puturidze (Tbilisi State University) and Bidzina Murvanidze, present director of the Khashuri Archaeological expedition, and will integrate two Georgian students of Tbilisi State University (probably Nino Kobalia, MA, and Nika Gobegishvili, MA or Soso Papuashvili, MA).

The season will be devoted to the following activities:

- 1) Revision, translation into English (with the help of the Georgian students and under the supervision of Prof. M. Puturidze) and digitalization of the original excavation documentation (excavation journals, objects catalogue, plans, drawings, photographs) of the EB levels of Natsargora settlement, which will be provided by the present director of the Khashuri expedition (B. Murvanidze).
- 2) Study (by the Italian and Georgian archaeologists) of the original artefacts (ceramics, lithics, metal etc...) from the settlement, to be carried out preferably at the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, or at another location chosen by the Georgian authorities. If necessary (it was not yet possible to examine the original documentation), new drawings and photos of the finds will be made. A new catalogue of finds will be prepared for the publication, and analysis of selected finds by binocular microscope will be carried out. As for animal bones, which, according to a preliminary survey seem to be few in number, it is proposed to transfer them to Italy to be analysed there at a later moment. The same procedure could be followed for vegetal remains, if any will be found.
- 3) Sampling of pottery sherds of both Kura-Araxes and Bedeni pottery for archaeometric analysis to be carried out in Italy by Prof. L. Lazzarini (LAMA Laboratory - IUAV University – Venice) and Prof. D. Visonà (Department of Geological Sciences – University of Padova). For comparative purposes, a small sample of sherds from the same periods will be collected, courtesy of the excavators, from the contemporary sites of Tsikiagora and Berikldeebi;
- 4) Sampling of metal objects for analyses to be carried out either by the specialists of the Georgian National Museum, or elsewhere.
- 5) Geomorphological survey of the Khashuri area, by Prof. Aldino Bondesan (Department of Geography, University of Padova) or by one of his collaborators, to be carried out with the collaboration of the present director of the Khashuri expedition (B. Murvanidze). If possible, with the agreement and the collaboration of the local responsables, the survey may extend to the neighbouring districts of the Shida Kartli region, in particular to the areas surrounding the sites of Tsikiagora and Berikldeebi. The aim of the survey will be to investigate the location of the archaeological sites within their natural environment and to identify further archaeological sites of the relevant periods. During the survey, clay samples will be as well collected, in order to compare their composition with that of the analyzed samples of archaeological ceramics (see *supra*, 3).
- 6) visits to different sites of the region, both in order to examine comparative excavated material and to discuss it with the different excavators, and as a preliminary step toward the choice of a significant site, either in the Khashuri or in a neighbouring district, on which to carry out, if

possible, during the following stages of the project, some excavations or soundings which could confirm the results obtained through the analysis of the Natsargora material.

- 7) revision of the English translation of the manuscript M. Jalabadze, L. Ghlonti, I. Khoridze, M. Khetskhoveli, L. Chilashvili, Early Bronze Age Cemeteries from Shida Kartli (Kura-Araxes, Bedeni) (Research Grant project 19-56-04, Tbilisi 2004-2005) for its publication in an Italian scientific journal (presumably "Rivista di Archaeologia").

- 8) completion of the collection of relevant literature, which has been mainly carried out by the author on the occasion of her previous visits to Tbilisi (October 2007, November 2008), by Dr. Monica Tonussi for her Ph.D. Thesis and by Ca' Foscari University students in 2008-2009. Literature in Georgian and Russian languages will be partially translated with the help of Georgian students and colleagues.

After the end of the field season, work by the members of the mission will continue both in Tbilisi and in Venice/Padova with the following aims:

1) completion of archaeometric analyses

2) study of the collected documentation and preparation of the relevant publication.

For this stage of the project, we plan to make use of the existing agreement between the Ca' Foscari University Venice and the Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University for the research and exchange of students and professors, in order to invite Georgian students and scholars in Venice, and *vice versa*.

### **Expected results**

The main result of the first phase of the project will be the final publication (in English language, foreseen within two-three years from the end of the field study) of the EB layers of Natsargora. Preliminary reports about special topics (archaeometric analyses, ceramic morphological studies, study of the intra-site distribution of finds of different types), as well as more general studies about the EB cultures of the region, may be published as separate contributions by different members of the mission (possibly as parts of theses by Ca' Foscari and TSU students involved in the project).

### **Future developments**

After the successful completion of the first field season and after discussion and agreement with the Georgian colleagues and authorities, the project may develop according to one or more of the following lines:

1) Selection of a IV-IIIrd millennium archaeological site in the Shida Kartli region to be excavated by the Ca' Foscari team in collaboration with Georgian archaeologists;

2) Carrying out of a number of small-scale soundings on different sites of the region, with the aim of verifying the comparative stratigraphy of the area and of collecting samples for C14 and archaeometric analyses;

3) Carrying out of an archaeological survey of a section of the Shida Kartli region, in order to study the long-term development of settlement patterns in the region;

4) Study and publication of unpublished material of different phases of the Late Chalcolithic/EB period from other excavations in the area, with the aim to obtain a complete comparative chronology.

Finally, we plan to coordinate our project with those of other archaeologists of different nationalities working on the cultures of the same periods both in Georgia and in the neighbouring areas. Preliminary contacts have been taken with various colleagues from Georgia and other countries.