

Achaemenids in the Caucasus?

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There are many publications about the Achaemenids and their culture. But who were the Achaemenids or, better yet, what does the term “Achaemenid art” mean exactly?

The Achaemenids were simply a dynasty of rulers of a vast and powerful empire with extremely diverse inhabitants. Unlike the Romans, who also ruled over a huge territory and developed and transmitted their own schemes of planning and architectural types, the Persian satraps simply took over existing palaces and residences.

For the construction of his palace in Susa, Dareios I brought together workmen and materials from different parts of the Empire. The so-called foundation inscription, from about 522 BC, reads:

The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria, which here was wrought. The precious stones lapis lazuli and carnelian which were wrought here, these were brought from Sogdiana. The precious stone turquoise, this was brought from Chorasmia, which was wrought here.

The silver and the ebony were brought from Egypt. The ornamentation with which the wall was adorned, that from Ionia was brought. The ivory which was wrought here, was brought from Ethiopia and from Sind and from Arachosia.

The stone columns which were here wrought, a village named Abiradu, in Elam from there were brought. The stone-cutters who wrought the stone, those were Ionians and Sardians.

The goldsmiths who wrought the gold, those were Medes and Egyptians. The men who wrought the wood, those were Sardians and Egyptians. The men who wrought the baked brick, those were Babylonians. The men who adorned the wall, those were Medes and Egyptians (Curtis & Razmjou 2005, 56, cat. no. 1).

Therefore, is it appropriate to speak of Achaemenid art or architecture? A comparison to the Medici in Florence is perhaps more appropriate. We would never speak of Medici art; we would prefer the term ‘art in the time of the Medici’.

However, the main question under consideration in this article is: how can we interpret the material from burials in the modern states of Georgia, Arme-



Fig. 1. Transcaucasia. 1 – Mingečaur; 2 – Novemberian (after National Geographic).

nia and Azerbaijan, that is, the area of Transcaucasia? (Fig. 1). In particular, do we have proof for any cultural influence or, even more, for the presence of the Achaemenids?

Apart from some stone-built tombs and a coffin in Susa (from the very end of the Achaemenid period, ca. 350-332 BC) (Razmjou 2005, 174-179), we do not know very much about burial customs in ancient Persia. What did the tombs look like? What were the burial customs? What types of burial goods were deposited? In my opinion, no satisfactory answers to these questions have yet been found.

Most scholars dealing with the archaeological material of the southern Caucasus or Transcaucasia and the location of the northern border of ancient Persia refer to Herodotos (3.97):

...Gifts were also required of the Colchians and their neighbours as far as the Caucasian mountains (which is as far as the Persian rule reaches, the country north of the Caucasus paying no regard to the Persians);...these were rendered every four years and are still so rendered, namely, a hundred boys and as many maidens (Curtis 2005a, 47, translated by A.D. Godley).

According to Herodotos, the northern border of ancient Persia extended as far as the Caucasian mountains. But only the region of modern Armenia is mentioned as a part of the satrapy system, as a part of the 13th and 18th satrapies. On the other hand, Colchis¹, mostly located in present-day western Georgia,

seems to have held a special position: it had to pay a tribute in the form of 100 young boys and girls. Nothing is known about the status of present-day Azerbaijan; perhaps it belonged to the 15th satrapy, together with the Sakas and the Caspians.

Except for the remarks of Herodotus, nothing else is known from literary sources about the satrapies (Wiesehöfer 2005, 96), neither about their extension and borders nor about their development during the 220 years of Persian rule.

Therefore, let us take a look at the archaeological material. All three of the modern Transcaucasian republics share one common feature amongst their archaeological material – evidence of a particular burial practice, i.e. the use of stone cists and pit graves, which were common from the Bronze Age.

For Azerbaijan, there is some information about burials from the Achaemenid period, for example from Mingečaur (Fig. 1.1), which, unfortunately, is not yet fully published. However, the short notes of the excavators do not suggest remarkable objects or constructions (Chalilov 1971, 185-187). There is some information about burials with “Achaemenid jewellery and pottery”, for example in Novemberian in northeastern Armenia (Fig. 1.2), though these finds were published without illustrations or any detailed information (Kroll 2003, 284).

Neither in Armenia nor in Azerbaijan has evidence for *rich* burials dated to the Achaemenid period been found. Although some excavations were undertaken during the Soviet era, there is not much evidence about burials of the second half of the first millennium BC. The few graves revealed contained only poor objects.

Only in the northernmost part of Transcaucasia, in Georgia, is there enough rich archaeological material available to distinguish between different burial customs (Fig. 2).

Beside the traditional burials – small cist graves and pit graves with individuals placed contracted on their left or right sides – we also have some huge graves with individuals laying on their backs and with accompanying horse burials; they occur from the sixth century BC, for example in Nižnjaja Ešera (Bill 2003, 205-207, pls. 114.16-24, 115). The size of this burial, the extended position of the deceased, the accompanying horse burial (which is unfortunately published only as a brief description and without any illustrations) and, last but not least, the boar tusk with depictions in the Scythian animal style are strong evidence for a nomadic background (Scythian and/or Sauromatian).

Between the fifth and third centuries BC, the number of large graves placed under burial mounds, with wooden structures, horse burials and rich grave goods, increased. These burials were surrounded by smaller, second-rate or peripheral burials, for example in Itchvisi (Bill 2003, 171-173). The orientation of the peripheral burials, as well as the placement and arrangement of the deceased, were similar to those in the central graves of the kurgans. Only the burial goods were less rich, but, compared with the cist and pit graves in the



Fig. 2. Georgia. Δ – rich burials (after Bill 2003, pls. 1, 5).

other burial grounds, they should still be referred to as 'rich'. They contained gold jewellery, weapons and imported pottery. Unfortunately, the peripheral burials are mentioned only briefly in the publications.

Another very interesting feature is the distribution of the rich burials (Fig. 2). The burials with the greatest dimensions and the wealthiest endowments were situated near the Rioni river and its tributary, the Kvirila, whereas the smaller and less rich burials of the same type were located south of the Kura/Mtkvari river.

On closer examination, these rich burials show some very interesting peculiarities. Their construction differs considerably from the graves prevailing in this region (Fig. 3). They contain wooden structures, the burial pit is sometimes divided by a step or offset into two sections and there are also uncommon burial rites: The deceased is often placed in a supine position, and there are also accompanying burials, probably of persons from the entourage, but also horse and dog burials. These elements can hardly be seen as autochthonous developments of the local burial custom, rather, they indicate an influence from outside.

Close similarities to these peculiarities can be found in the burial types and burial customs of the Eurasian nomads. The division of the burial chamber into two sections by a large step – as in Sairche 5, 8 and 13 (Fig. 3.2.4) – can also be observed in the northern Pontic area, for example in the mound of Konstantinovka-na-Donu (sixth century BC) (Kijaško & Korenjako 1976, 171,

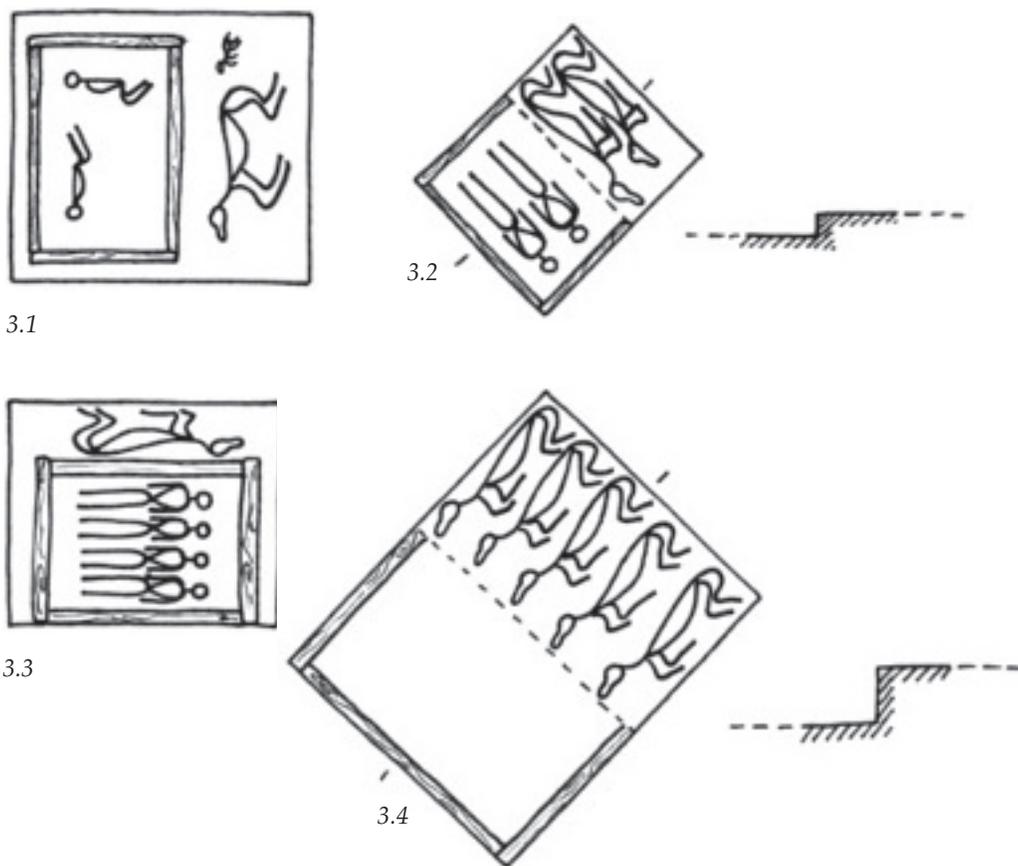


Fig. 3. Rich burials. 1 – Itchvisi 2; 2 – Sairche 13; 3 – Vani 11; 4 – Sairche 5 (drawing S. Schorndorfer).

fig. 1) and in southern Siberia: In the mound of kurgan 8 in Tuékty (Altai) (fifth to fourth century BC) the floor of the southern part was located 65cm deeper than that of the northern part. In the northern part, burials of horses were found (Kiselev 1949, 170; Rudenko 1960, 18-19). The sacrifice of one or more horses or of horse harnesses as *pars pro toto* is a custom of these early nomadic people.

The individuals buried south of the Kura/Mtkvari river had been placed in flexed positions, for example in Ènageti (Bill 2003, pl. 30). This strong contraction can be compared to the Caucasian funeral traditions. On the other hand, the individuals north of the Kura/Mtkvari river were mostly placed on their backs or bent too, but only with a slight contraction as in Itchvisi (Fig. 3.1). This can be compared to burials from the Altai, such as Berel 31, Kazakhstan (Samašev 2007, 139, fig. 12) and Olon-Kurin-Gol 10, Mongolia (Molodin et al. 2007, 152, fig. 8), or from southern Siberia, for example the recently excavated

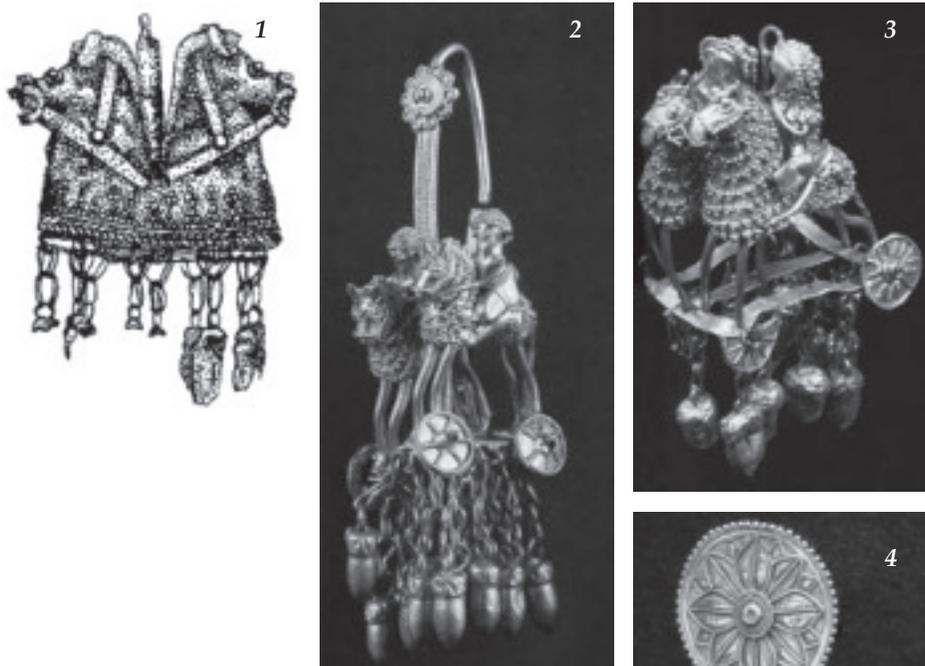


Fig. 4. Earrings.

1 – Gaston Uota 22;

2 – Vani 6;

3 – Sazonkin Bugor;

4 – Sadseguri

(1 after Mošinšij 2006, 90; 2 after Miron & Orthmann 1995, 147, fig. 146; 3 after Anisimova et al. 2005, 84-85; 4 after Miron & Orthmann 1995, 161, fig. 162).

kurgan Aržan 2, which dates to the seventh century BC (Čugunov et al. 2007, 71, fig. 3).

Examination of the burial goods from these Transcaucasian graves reveals that they have no predecessors in this area. Objects of similar types are common in Greece, Asia Minor and Persia. But regarding both the burial goods and the grave constructions of these Transcaucasian graves it becomes obvious that more similarities to Scythian/Sarmatian burials can be found. A comparison with Achaemenid jewellery is hardly possible, because almost no jewellery from greater Iran has been preserved. The only examples of jewellery from the period are – beside those from Susa – found in hoards: the Oxus Treasure (200 BC) (Curtis 2005a, 48), the Lydian Treasure, the hoard from Pasargadae and the so-called Ardebil Treasure (Curtis 2005b, 132). John Curtis has pointed out some characteris-

tics: "Achaemenid jewellery is distinguished for the fine quality of the inlaid polychrome decoration that is characteristic of this period. ... various items of jewellery were inlaid with pieces of stone, glass, faience... the most popular inlay stones were turquoise, lapis lazuli and carnelian" (Curtis 2005b, 132).

In my opinion, there is no evidence for polychrome, cloisonné jewellery in Georgia before the Hellenistic period. On the other hand, the artists in Georgia were (by the way, as much as the Eurasian nomads) more famous for their use of the granulation technique.

There are some specific types of objects that are sometimes taken as evidence for Persian influence, which either existed already before the Persian Empire (seventh century BC) or are to be found within the burials of the Eurasian nomads.

Jewellery

Earrings in the shape of two horses or two horseman have been found in Sadseguri (Bill 2003, 210-212, pl. 122.1) and Vani 6 (Bill 2003, 229-239, pl. 163.10-13). They have good matches or parallels in Gaston Uota, northern Caucasus (fourth century BC) and in Sazonkin Bugor, Astrakhan, Wolga region (fifth century BC) (Fig. 4). The Goryt on the earring of Vani 6 is a typical Scythian element, as we can see, for example on the electron vessel from Kul'-Oba, Kerč (Aruz et al. 2000, 206-210, cat. no. 146).

Bracelets with ends formed as animal heads, as, for example in Vani 6 (Bill 2003, pl. 165.3-5), have also been found within some nomadic burials (Bill 2003, 90). But for the early nomads gold torcs were rather more important than bracelets.

Clothing ornaments, i.e. gold plaques with loops or small rings, which would have been sewn onto fabric (or leather) have been found. From the Achaemenid period we have typical examples of jewellery with polychrome inlays (Curtis 2005b, 134). On the contrary, in Georgia there are gold plaques of eagles, ducks, horses or wild boar which are analogous to items from the burials of Eurasian nomads (Fig. 5).

Metal vessels

Gold and silver bowls or other metal vessels have been found in many burials in Georgia (Bill 2003, 112-115). According to Herodotos (4.5), the plough, yoke, axe, but also the gold bowl or cup, belonged to the sacred tools of the Scythians. As endorsement of this statement, we have found numerous metal vessels – mainly bowls and rhyta – in the burials of the Eurasian nomads (see, for example Aruz et al. 2000, cat. nos. 143, 147).

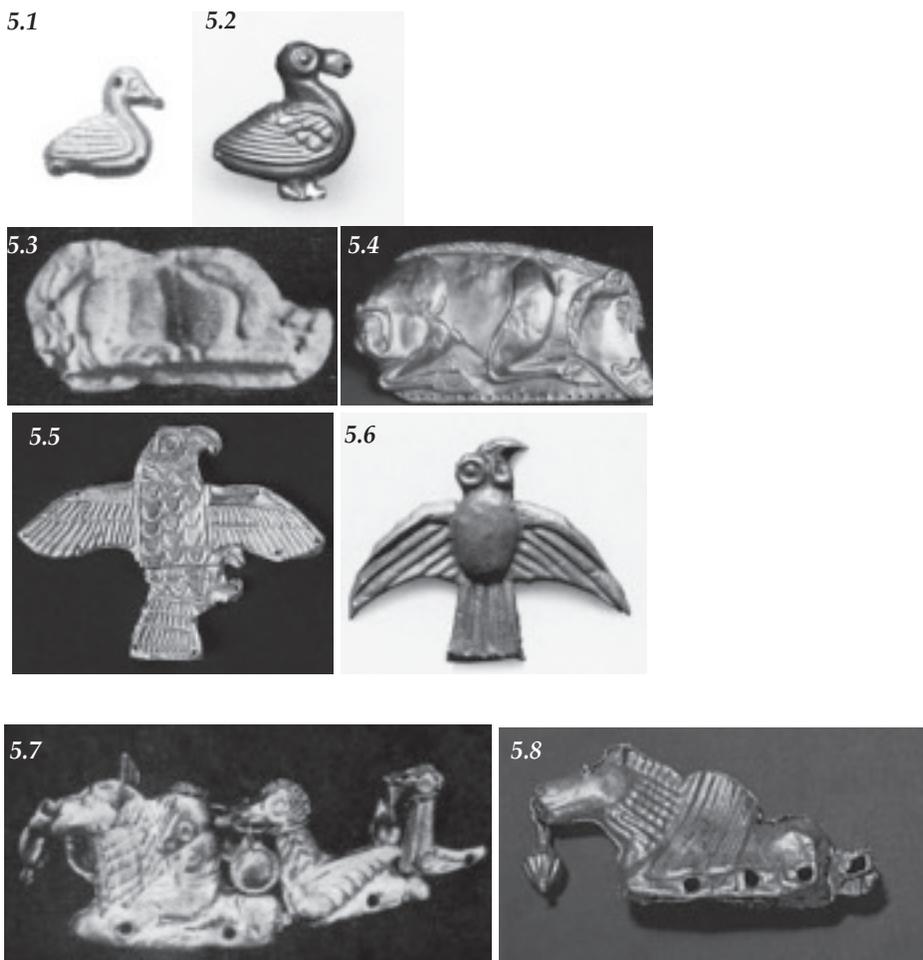


Fig. 5. Clothing ornaments.

1 – Sairche 5;

2 – Uljap;

3, 5, 7 – Vani 16, 6, 9;

4 – Aleksandrovka;

6 – Bajkara;

8 – Kurdžips (1 after Nadiradze 1990, pl. 3.2; 2 after Erlich 2007, 210, fig. 7; 3

after Lordkipanidze 1986, pl. 10.1; 4 after Rolle et al. 1991, 304, cat. no. 88; 5 after

Lordkipanidze 1996, pl. 4.6; 6 after Parzinger et al. 2007, 181, fig. 10; 7 after Lordkipanidze

1972, 166; 8 after Galanina 1980, 83-84, pl. 7, cat. no. 17).

Glass vessels

Altogether, nine glass vessels have been found in Georgia (Bill 2003, 115). This is a considerable number, since glass cups were very valuable and mostly used by the Persian court and its nobles. Aristophanes, who tells of the merciless Persian hosts, gives a short description of a ritual:

They compelled us to drink sweet wine, wine without water, from gold and glass cups (Ar. Ach 72-73) (Simpson 2005, 104).

But how can these rare finds from Transcaucasia be interpreted? Can they really be seen as an indication that Persian palatial ceremonial customs were practised in Georgia, across the border of the Persian Empire? I do not think so, because the best parallels to Georgian glass vessels have been found in the northern Caucasus and the north Pontic area (Fig. 6).

A closer look at the distribution map of the rich burials reveals one striking feature. The burials are located almost exactly along the routes leading to or from the mountain passes. The Kazbegi Treasure, which is probably the earliest so-called Achaemenid find in Georgia, was deposited directly on the road to the "Krestovy mountain pass", the cross-pass, the main connection to the northern Caucasus and to the Eurasian nomads (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, there is evidence not only of Scythian but also of Sauromatian burial goods in the northern Caucasus, such as, for example the spoon from the kurgan of Nartan (Batčaeв 1985, fig. 21.18; sixth century BC). In some burials of the Sauromatian/Sarmatian period in the Wolga district "Achaemenid" objects were found, as in Filippovka (Aruz et al. 2000, cat. nos. 93, 94; Jablonskij & Meščerjakov 2007). The "Achaemenid" objects in this region can hardly be regarded as evidence for the presence of Achaemenid control.

Considering the burial rites, as much as the burial goods, of these specific Georgian graves, the influence of the Eurasian nomads can be clearly recognized. But how can we interpret this nomadic influence?

Herodotos (1.106) refers to the repulsion of the Eurasian nomads, the Scythians, by Kyaxares: the Medians made them drunk and killed them. In my opinion, a section of the nomads stayed behind, settled down and became assimilated. Obviously they preferred areas already known to them, such as Transcaucasia.

A combination of the map of the rich Transcaucasian burials (Fig. 2) with a map of Scythian material from the seventh to the sixth century BC (weapons, horse burials, horse harnesses and different objects in the Scythian animal style) (Fig. 7) demonstrates that the rich burials dating from the fifth to the third century BC are distributed throughout almost the same area as the older ones.



Fig. 6. Glass vessels.

1 – Pichvnari 48;

2 – Vani 6;

3 – Kurdžips (1 after Miron & Orthmann 1995, 295, cat. no. 268; 2 after Lordkipanidze 1983, 37, cat. no. 393; 3 after Galanina 1980, 80-81, cat. no. 8).

To summarize, there are several conclusions that can be drawn. Despite the fact that there was no direct border between the area of modern Georgia and central Persia (they were separated by present-day Armenia and Azerbaijan), we have evidence of burials which are proof of some kind of cultural contact with the Persian Empire. However, they do not indicate the character of these contacts – whether they were friendly (so arrived at by trade, gift exchange or payment of toll) or hostile (perhaps the grave contents were loot in the case of defence or offence).

However, the burial types and burial rites were obviously influenced by the Eurasian nomads (that is, people from the Volga district, the northern Caucasus or Siberia). Since the Eurasian nomads were part of the northern Iranian linguistic (and ethnic?) group, most burial goods, such as the drinking vessels (*rhyta*) and metal cups, are common for both the nomadic people and for other Iranian people, for example the Persians and the Medes. We should remember Aristophanes, who tells of the sweet wine and wine without water drunk at the Persian residence. The very same ceremony is described by Herodotos as a Scythian ritual (6.84).

The only objects of clear Persian origin, without any parallels in the nomadic graves, are the “Ahura-Mazda” medallions (horse harnesses) in Sairche 8 (Nadiradze 1990, pl. 5.3). They should, however, be considered as Persian gifts, rather than proof for a Persian presence in western Transcaucasia.

What are the implications of these observations? Was there a real Persian presence in Georgia, or was there simply contact, or is it that only an influence is discernible?

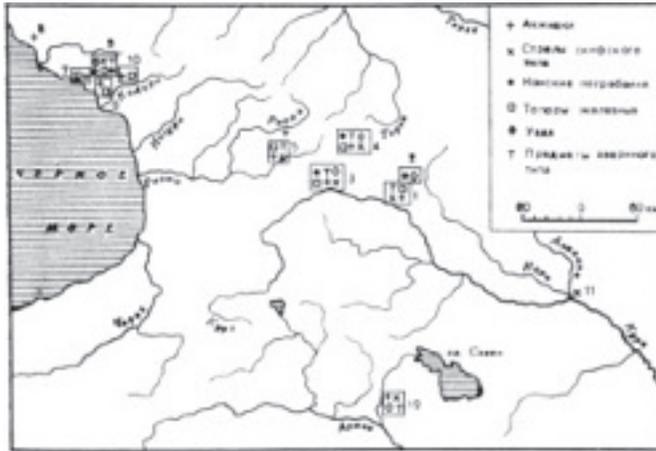


Fig. 7. Scythian finds from the seventh to sixth century BC. 1 – Samtaoro; 2 – Cicamuri; 3 – Dvani; 4 – Tli; 5 – Brili; 6 – Kolchida; 7 – Kulanurchoa; 8 – Guadichu; 9 – Krasnyj Majak; 10 – Mingečaur; 11 – Tejšebaini (after Pogrebova 1981, 45).

1. *Epigraphic/written evidence*: There is no evidence of Persian inscriptions in Georgia like those which have been found in many other places outside central Persia. Only six Achaemenid cylinder seals have been discovered in Georgia, though they were found in burials dated from the fourth to the first century BC (Dzhavakhishvili 2007, 118, 126). On the other hand, there is a mention of “Scythians on the River Phasis” (nowadays Rioni) by Herodotos (6.84).

2. *The onomastic material* is difficult to interpret, since the Eurasian nomads were part of the same ethnic/linguistic group as the Persians.

3. *Coinage*: There is only one find of an Achaemenid sikel in Georgia. It was found in 1856 in the area of Surami (central Georgia), together with some local coins, kolchidki (Golenko 1957, 296). On the other hand, many drachmae of Sinop (fourth century BC) and a few kyzikoi (sixth to fifth century BC) have been discovered (Golenko 1957, 296-297).

4. *Architecture*: There is evidence for the use of mud-bricks – a common building material in the Near East – in Georgia from the Hellenistic period. For the confirmation of the existence of an Achaemenid palace in Gumbati (southeast Georgia) we have – in my opinion – too little evidence.²

5. *Burial customs*: Apart from a few burial goods, the burial customs and burial types of the rich Transcaucasian graves are similar to those found in the archaeological material of the Eurasian nomads. As long as no comparable burials are known within the area of modern Iran, there exists no proof for a strong Persian influence.

Notes

- 1 For a definition of Colchis, see Bill 2003, 37-38.
- 2 F. Knauß (2005, 204) dated the Gumbati "palace" on the basis of the ceramic material "to the later 5th or early 4th c. B.C." However, the pottery of the second half of the first millennium BC in Georgia is still very poorly investigated. Also N. Ludwig (2005, 215), in her analysis of the ceramic material from eastern Georgia, has pointed out that the fifth and fourth centuries BC are represented only by one archaeological site – Gumbati ("das 5. und 4. Jh.v.Chr. ist lediglich durch einen Fundplatz vertreten – Gumbati").

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