

A Persian Propyleion in Azerbaijan Excavations at Karacamirli

Florian Knauss, Iulon Gagoshidze & Ilias Babaev

Since the summer of 2006, archaeological excavations have been carried out at Karacamirli in western Azerbaijan (Fig. 1).¹ While the chance find of a column base had led us to this site, which is situated just 2km south of the Kura river, already at the end of the first season it had become clear that a monumental building of the Achaemenid period had once been erected on Ideal Tepe, a small mound approximately 200m north of the find-spot of the above-mentioned column base.

By the end of the second campaign in 2007 we had uncovered a huge mud-brick building. Its rectangular ground-plan is almost complete (Fig. 2). Measuring 22m by 23m, it is nearly square in plan, and its dimensions come close to similar buildings in Pasargadae and Susa.² The construction consists of a suite of three columned rooms on the central axis: an eastern portico with probably two columns, a central hall with four and another portico to the west with, again, four columns. These rooms were flanked by symmetrical subsidiary elements to the north and south. Visitors had access to these side rooms only from the central hypostyle hall.

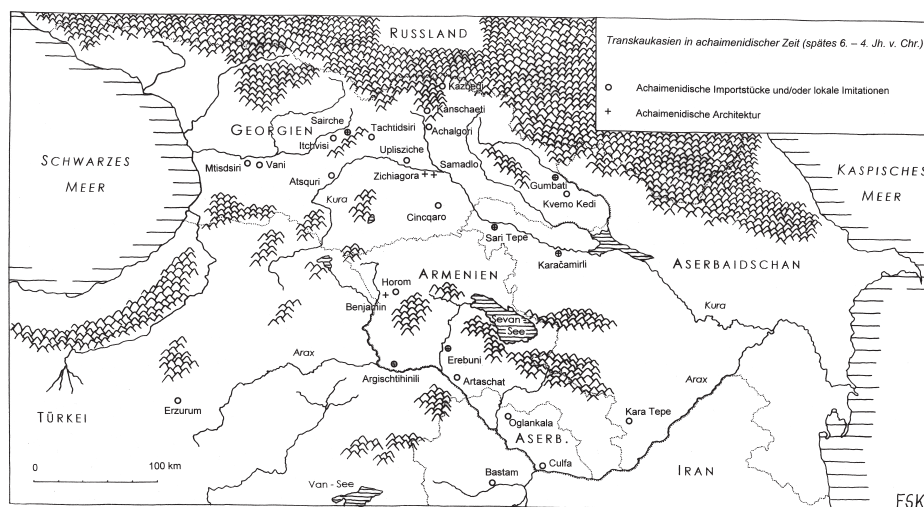


Fig. 1. Achaemenid monuments in the Caucasus.

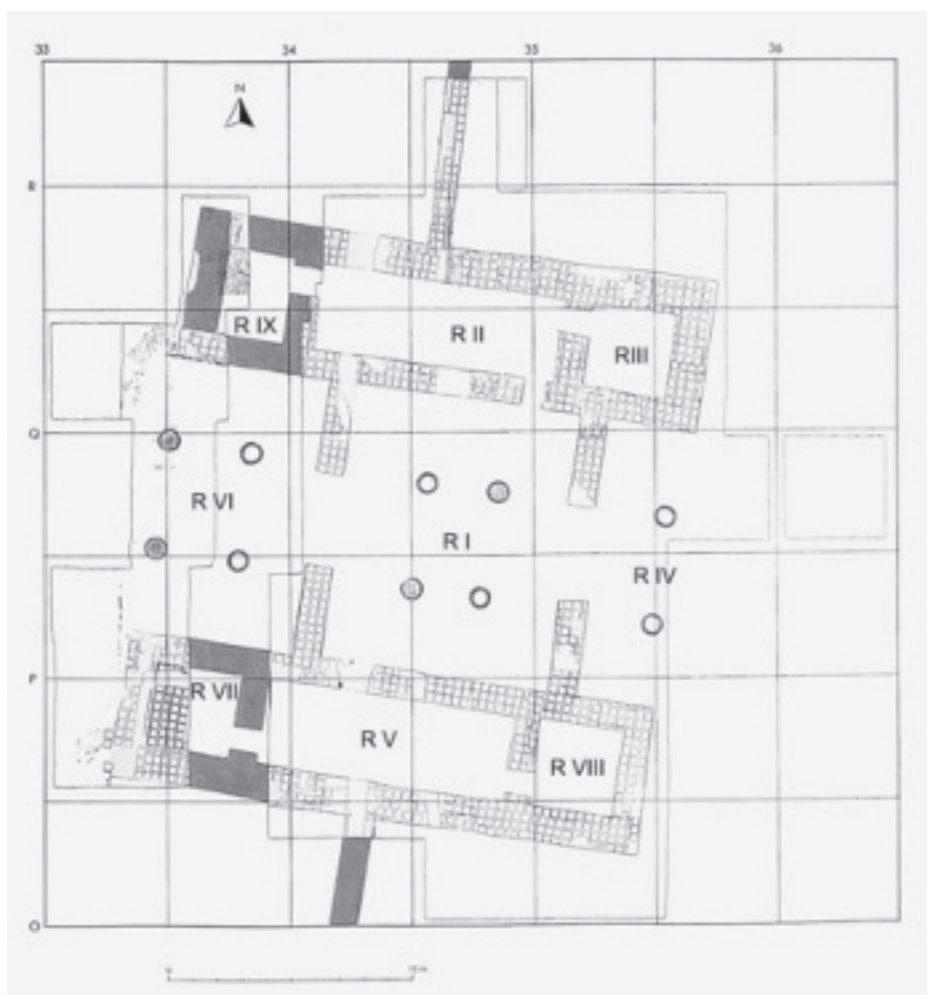


Fig. 2. Plan of the propyleion on Ideal Tepe. Excavated walls are shown in light grey, reconstructed parts are dark grey, bases in situ are blue, the positions of the remaining bases are encircled.

The outer walls are almost 1.5m (four bricks) thick, whereas the inner walls measure a little more than 1m (three bricks) in width. The building lacks any ornamentation by means of pilasters and niches, which is characteristic of many Achaemenid structures. A conspicuous mud-brick construction might indicate that there was once a staircase or a kind of podium in the room in the southwestern corner of the building.³ At the most, four layers of mud-bricks, but sometimes not more than one, were preserved, measuring approximately 34cm by 34cm and 12cm thick.⁴ The use of half-bricks facilitated the bonding of the bricks. In cases of uncertainty, a pebblestone foundation, serving as a drainage system, clearly showed us the run of the walls.⁵

We can only guess the former height of the building. However, inferring from the diameter of the column bases, as well as from the width of the walls, a height of 5m or even 6m seems appropriate.⁶ The bases measure 89cm in diameter at the bottom, while incisions on top of the bases, on the *torus*, give us a lower diameter of the column shafts of 52cm, i.e. approximately one royal Persian cubit.⁷

Fine traces left by chisels and incisions on the bottom as well as on the front of the bases⁸ show that these were worked by skilled stonemasons. The column drums as well as the capitals must have been made of wood, as no limestone fragments of these have been identified among the more than 150 pieces of architectural sculpture that have been found at Karacamirli so far.

It may be worth mentioning that, up to the present day, no column shafts and only two or three capitals made of stone from the Achaemenid era have come to light in the whole of the Caucasus. One of them is the well-known double-bull protome capital from Zikhia-Gora.⁹ This piece has been discussed by several scholars in great detail, and I have argued in the past that it had been worked in Achaemenid times.¹⁰ Irrespective of this question, a wooden construction must once have borne the roof of the building on Ideal Tepe, which would have been flat as Mesopotamian roofs generally were.¹¹

The wide alleyways on the central axis leave no doubt that this edifice was a monumental gate, a propyleion, a conjecture further supported by the fact that two corresponding walls join the building from the north and south (Fig. 2).

From the beginning, it was clear that this monument had been erected in Achaemenid times due to the characteristic pieces of architectural sculpture (Figs. 3-4). Bell-shaped column bases of the type found are exclusively known from this period and from within the Persian Empire.¹² Outside the major centres in Iran and Babylon the only find-spot so far is the Caucasus. They appear in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, but nowhere else within or beyond the borders of the vast Persian Empire. Such column bases and stone masonry in general had no tradition at all in this region north of the former Urartian Empire. The rectangular plan of the building, the architectural ornamentation and the use of mud-bricks of regular size prove that this monumental structure at Karacamirli had been planned and built by architects and craftsmen who were familiar with Achaemenid architecture. A comparison of the column bases from Gumbati and from Karacamirli suggests that they were both executed in the same workshop. Good limestone quarries are easily accessible on the banks of the Kura river, not far from the modern city of Shamkir. It was no problem to transport them from here to Gumbati following the Kura and Alazani rivers. Before the arrival of the Persians in the Caucasus, no architecture of a similar size and sophistication had been known to the local population.¹³ According to the scarce archaeological evidence, the material culture in neighbouring western Azerbaijan in the second quarter of the first millennium BC was almost identical.¹⁴



Fig. 3. Column base.

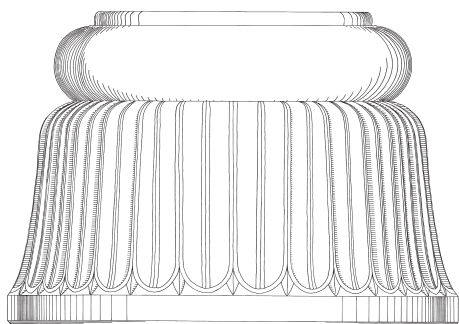


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of a column base.

In trying to date Achaemenid art and architecture by stylistic means we still meet a serious problem. The pottery from the propyleion dates to the mid-fifth to the late fourth century BC (Fig. 5).¹⁵ However, the building may have been founded earlier. For historical reasons, we should expect that the propyleion had been erected not too long after the Persians had conquered this region in the late sixth century BC, probably in the course of the campaign of Dareios I against the Scythians in 513/512 BC.¹⁶

The site was probably abandoned when the Empire fell apart following the assault of Alexander the Great. Since we have no evidence for a violent destruction at the end of the Achaemenid occupation,¹⁷ it may be that the Persians took their goods and chattels and went home when they received notice of the final defeat of their army and of the death of their Great King, i.e. around 330 BC.

Shortly after – we cannot say whether a few weeks, months or years – local peasants or herdsmen sought shelter in this building. After some years, the central part collapsed and was never rebuilt, but an oven, fire places, pits, grain deposits and pottery in the side rooms tell us that life went on there for quite a while. In particular, the painted pottery, which has been found in significant quantities, helps us to fix a date for this post-Achaemenid level in the late fourth or early third century BC;¹⁸ so far, parallels exist only in eastern Georgia. The central hypostyle part of the building had not been re-

Fig. 5. Pottery from the Achaemenid levels.

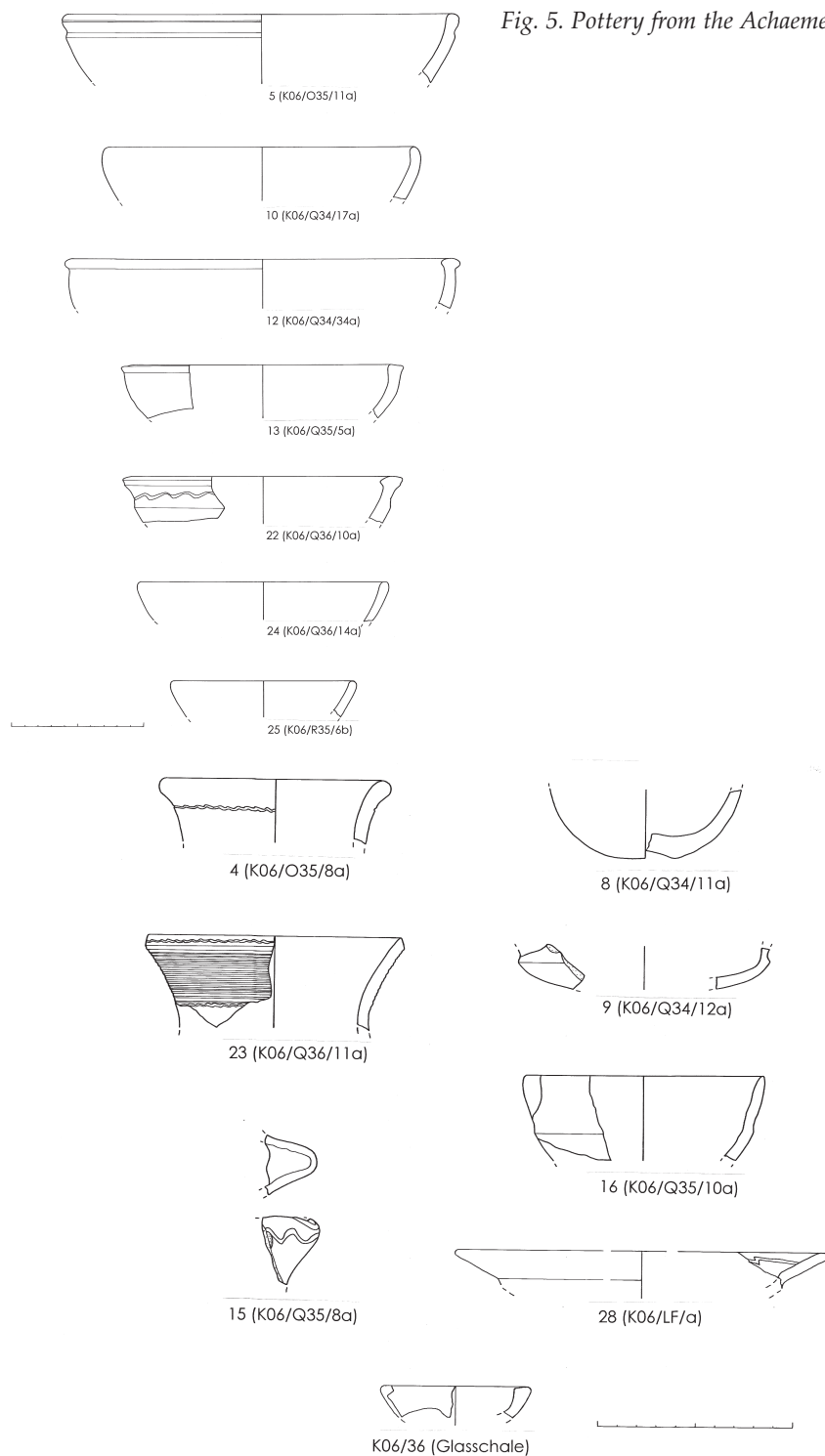




Fig. 6. View of Ideal Tepe from the east, Absinth Tepe in the background.

paired when it collapsed – probably, with a width of more than 11m, it was too wide for the later inhabitants and they had no use for such a large room. However, in the side rooms fragments of roof tiles¹⁹ allow us to assume that some rooms might have received new tiled roofs after a while.

The existence of a monumental propyleion with joining temenos walls is striking evidence that there was once an important Achaemenid residence at Karacamirli. This main building – a temple or, rather, a palace of a Persian chief magistrate – was most probably situated on Absinth Tepe, a flat mound just 200m west of the propyleion. The view from the east through the suite of columned halls points exactly to the top of this tepe (Fig. 6). Here, irregular pits dug by local peasants brought to light mud-bricks as well as a number of limestone fragments and Iron Age pottery.

More limestone fragments and lots of late Iron Age pottery have been found on a third mound 550m southeast²⁰ as well as at another spot 300m north of Ideal Tepe. Finally, we found large fragments of three column bases of a different type at a place called Daraya Takh between 500m and 950m north of the propyleion (Fig. 7). Their shape is similar to that of the bases from the propyleion and their diameter is a little bit smaller. However, they have no sculpted ornamentation and their surface was smooth, probably painted.²¹

Fig. 7. Fragment of a column base from Daraya Takh.



Judging from the archaeological evidence, there was once a spacious architectural ensemble at Karacamirli in Achaemenid times.²² Even these preliminary results give ample proof that the site was definitely of a higher rank than those Achaemenid building complexes already known from Sari Tepe,²³ 80km to the west, and from Gumbati, about 70km to the north.²⁴

The number of Achaemenid remains in Caucasia, in architecture as well as in the minor arts, is very impressive.²⁵ However, while Achaemenid golden bracelets, silver phialae, etc. still might be explained as objects of trade or as political gifts for the indigenous aristocracy from a mighty neighbour, propyleia, palaces and temples of a distinctive Persian type which have no fore-runners at all in this region prove that the Caucasus was part of the Persian Empire, at least up to the Surami ridge which divides Colchis and Iberia. However, even in rainy Colchis, in Sairkhe and in Vani, strong Achaemenid influence can be detected in the architecture as well as in the grave goods of the rich burials.²⁶

The propyleion is a Greek invention. Of course, there are lots of impressive monumental gate-houses in Near Eastern and Egyptian architecture, but they are part of city or fortification walls, whereas the Greek propyleion is a building in its own right, without military importance. The intended purpose of the Greek propyleion was to form an impressive, well-adorned entrance to an architectural complex, usually of a sanctuary. From the Greeks, the Persians adopted the idea of the propyleion already during the reign of Cyrus the Great. There are different types of propyleia at Pasargadae and Susa, as well as on the great terrace at Persepolis.²⁷ The closest analogy for the ground-plan of the propyleion at Karacamirli is the so-called "Central Building", with its central hall,²⁸ two porticoes and narrow side rooms (Fig. 8), which has been erected during the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. As in Azerbaijan, there are small square rooms in the corners and a long corridor between them. Whereas the purpose of the "Central Building" at Persepolis was to divide the visitors and to lead them in different directions, at Karacamirli the visitors walking through the propyleion probably just entered a courtyard or a garden – similar to the situation in Pasargadae.

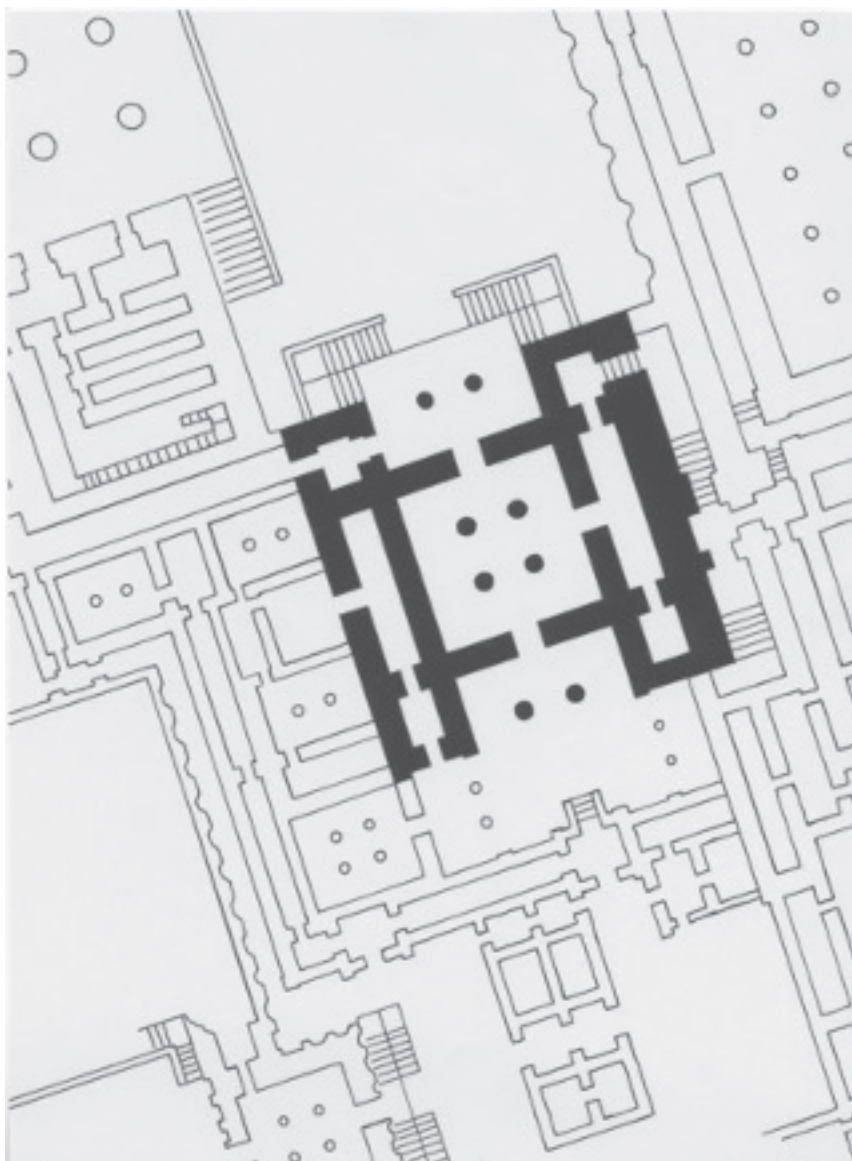


Fig. 8. The "Central Building" at Persepolis.

Karacamirli is situated in a remote part of the Empire. Of course, similar structures from satrapal residences, rather than buildings from Persian capitals, would be the most adequate comparisons for the propyleion on Ideal Tepe. However, our archaeological knowledge of such minor Achaemenid residences, of satrapal or governors' palaces, etc., is still insufficient.²⁹

Achaemenid models had a significant impact on Caucasian art and architecture, even in Hellenistic times and especially in the Kingdom of Iberia (central

and eastern Georgia).³⁰ However, not before the late second century BC do we find buildings similar to the propyleion at Karacamirli in this region. In the huge sanctuary of Dedoplist Mindori there was a Zoroastrian fire temple in a sacred precinct, enclosed by a temenos wall measuring approximately 180m by 250m.³¹ Two propyleia in the east and in the west of a square courtyard formed the impressive entrance to the sanctuary. They remind us of the propyleion at Karacamirli, insofar as they also have a deep hall at the outside with four columns and a small one with only two columns. However, here the great hall is on the outside, whereas in Karacamirli the inner (western) portico is twice as deep as the outer (eastern) portico. Furthermore, the propyleia at Dedoplist Mindori lack a third central hall as well as side rooms. The latter elements can be found in the ground-plan of the huge fire temple at Dedoplist Mindori. It has narrow subsidiary rooms and three columned halls: a portico in the south with four columns, a cella in the centre with a square altar and four columns, and, towards the courtyard, a small iwan-like chamber with two columns.

Karacamirli fills a gap in our knowledge of life under the Achaemenids in this area. It shows us that, even at the periphery of the Empire, Persian rule left its grandiose mark. The Achaemenid era was a major turning point in the history of Georgia and Azerbaijan.³²

Notes

- 1 Preliminary reports on the first campaign in 2006 have been published: Babaev et al. 2007, 31-45; Babaev et al. 2008, 291-330. In 2007, again, excavations were conducted by Ilyas Babaev (National Academy of Science Baku) and Florian Knauss. Iulon Gagoshidze (National Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi) was an indispensable advisor in many respects. Nadine Ludwig and Gundula Mehnert (both Halle University) took care of the small finds as well as of their graphic documentation; Henryk Löhr (Halle University) and Hagen Schaaff (Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek München) were responsible for the photographic documentation; all of them supervised the work in their trenches. Ceyhun Eminli and Emil Iskenderov (Baku) helped us in the field as well as during negotiations with local authorities. The National Academy of Sciences at Baku and the Governor of Shamkir district gave us all the necessary support. Again, Gurban Mehdiiev was a perfect host to our entire team. He protected the site all year long and addressed any potential problems. As in 2006, the Gerda Henkel Foundation financed all our activities.
- 2 Cf. Perrot et al. 1999, 160 (Susa), 162 (Pasargadae).
- 3 Even if the building did not have a second storey, we should assume that steps gave access to the roof.
- 4 Cf. the bricks from Susa measuring 0.33m on average (Perrot et al. 1999, 160).
- 5 Cf. Perrot et al. 1999, 158.
- 6 If we assume the same proportions as at Susa or Persepolis, a height of up to 8m is possible.
- 7 For a detailed description of the column bases, see Wicke in Babaev et al. 2008, 303-309.

- 8 Babaev et al. 2008, 307, figs. 22-23.
- 9 Zkitišvili 1995, 88, figs. 5-6. Two stone capitals have been found at Sairkhe; they resemble strange versions of Doric capitals (Boardman 1994, 222, fig. 6.52). However, Shefton (1993, 178-209) has convincingly argued that the leaf pattern is indebted to Achaemenid models.
- 10 Knauß 1999a, 180-181; Knauss 2006a, 92, fig. 13. 'Recently, a miniature double-bull protome capital of similar form has been found at Vani (Kacharava & Kvirkvelia 2008, 66) in a context of the first half of the fourth century BC (Guram Kvirkvelia, personal communication).
- 11 The reconstruction of the upper part is conjectural, whether the central part was higher than the side rooms or not; cf. Perrot et al. 1999, fig. 6.
- 12 On bell-shaped column bases of the Persian type in the Caucasus, cf. Furtwängler & Knauß 1996, fig. 10; Knauss 2001, 132-133; Wicke in Babaev et al. 2008, 307-309.
- 13 On early Iron Age architecture in eastern Georgia, cf. Knauß 2005a.
- 14 Even though they are not from well-documented excavations, several early Iron Age objects – pottery, so-called "Brotstempel" and terracotta animal masks – in the regional museum at Shamkir show significant similarities with the small finds from Iron Age sites in nearby Kakheti (east Georgia); cf. Babaev et al. 2008, 325.
- 15 Cf. Ludwig & Mehnert in Babaev et al. 2008, 316-317.
- 16 Jacobs 2000, 93-102.
- 17 Babaev et al. 2008, 325.
- 18 Cf. Ludwig & Mehnert in Babaev et al. 2008, 316-318.
- 19 Only calypters have been found.
- 20 Babaev et al. 2008, 293-295, fig. 5: Tepe III.
- 21 Sens in Babaev et al. 2008, 309-313, figs. 26-29.
- 22 In 2008, a geophysical investigation of the site provided a more precise impression of the architectural remains at Karacamirli. The propyleion forms the eastern entrance to a rectangular enclosure wall measuring approximately 450 m by 425 m. The structures on Absinth Tepe lie in the centre of it whereas another huge building is situated at the northwestern corner of the enclosure wall.
- 23 Cf. Narimanov 1960, 162-164; Furtwängler 1995, 183-184; Knauß 1999a, 94-96, 101-103, figs. 9, 10c, 11, 15.
- 24 Cf. Furtwängler 1995; Furtwängler & Knauß 1996; Furtwängler & Knauß 1997, 353-354; Knauß 2000a, 119-130; Knauss 2001, 125-143.
- 25 For a recent survey, cf. Knauss 2005b, 197-220; Knauss 2006a, 79-118.
- 26 Cf. Knauß 2000b, 86-87; Knauss 2006a, 84-85, 92; Knauß 2009. The latest excavations in the necropolis of Vani again provided impressive evidence for significant Achaemenid influence; cf. Kacharava & Kvirkvelia 2008, 60-61, 66, 130, 151, 153, 180-182. For instance, a Colchian silver belt with the depiction of a male, reclining on a *kline* wearing earrings and a tiara and holding a Persian cup in a distinctive eastern manner, clearly shows that at least the Colchian aristocracy was eager to adopt Persian habits.
- 27 Cf. Perrot et al. 1999, figs. 2-7. For the latest surveys of Achaemenid monumental architecture, cf. Curtis in Curtis & Tallis 2005, 30-49; Curtis & Razmjou in Curtis & Tallis 2005, 50-55; Knauß in Speyer 2006b, 100-111.
- 28 The preference of the early Achaemenid architects for a module of a square room with four columns, seen at Susa, Pasargadae and Persepolis, has been noted previously; cf. Perrot et al. 1999, 162 – additional evidence for an early date of the structure at Karacamirli.

- 29 Although excavations have been carried out at Daskyleion, Sardis and Meydancikkale, we have mainly literary evidence for the satrapal residences of Asia Minor. The situation is similar in other parts of the Empire; cf. Nielsen 1994, 51-72; Knauß 1999b, 99-100; Klinkott 2005.
- 30 Knauss 2006a, 107-114.
- 31 Cf. Gagoshidze 1992, 27-48; Knauss 2006a, 103-107; Furtwängler & Gagoshidze 2008.
- 32 Gagoshidze 1996, esp. 136.

Bibliography

- Babaev, I., I. Gagoshidze & F. Knauss 2007. An Achaemenid “palace” at Qarajamirli (Azerbaijan). Preliminary report on the excavations in 2006, in: A. Ivantchik & V. Licheli (eds.), *Achaemenid Culture and Local Traditions in Anatolia, Southern Caucasus and Iran* (AncCivScytSib 13/1-2, special issue). Leiden-Boston, 31-45.
- Babaev, I., I. Gagošidze & F. Knauß 2008. Ein Perserbau in Azerbaijdžan. Ausgrabung auf dem Ideal Tepe bei Karačamirli 2006, *AMIT* 38 (2006), 291-330.
- Boardman, J. 1994. *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*. London.
- Curtis, J. 2005. The Archaeology of the Achaemenid Period, in: Curtis & Tallis (eds.) 2005, 30-49.
- Curtis, J. & Sh. Razmjov, The Palace, in: Curtis & Tallis (eds.) 2005, 50-55.
- Curtis, J. & N. Tallis (eds.) 2005. *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia* (exhibition catalogue, The British Museum). London.
- Furtwängler, A. 1995. Gumbati. Archäologische Expedition in Kachetien 1994. 1. Vorbericht, *EurAnt* 1, 177-211.
- Furtwängler, A. & F. Knauß 1996. Gumbati. Archäologische Expedition in Kachetien 1995. 2. Vorbericht, *EurAnt* 2, 363-381.
- Furtwängler, A. & F. Knauß 1997. Archäologische Expedition in Kachetien 1996. Ausgrabungen in den Siedlungen Gumbati und Ciskaraant-Gora. 3. Vorbericht, *EurAnt* 3, 353-387.
- Furtwängler, A. & I. Gagoshidze (eds.) 2008. *Iberia and Rome. The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplis Mindori (2nd century BC – 1st century AD) and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*. Langenweißbach.
- Gagoshidze, I. 1992. The temples at Dedoplis Mindori, *EastWest* 42, 27-48.
- Gagoshidze, J. 1996. The Achaemenid influence in Iberia, *Boreas* 19, 125-136.
- Jacobs, B. 2000. Achaimenidenherrschaft in der Kaukasus-Region und in Cis-Kaukasien, *AMIT* 32, 93-102.
- Kacharava, D. & G. Kvirkvelia (eds.) 2008. *Wine, Worship and Sacrifice: The Golden Graves at Vani* (exhibition catalogue, New York University, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World). New York.
- Klinkott, H. 2005. *Der Satrap. Ein achaimenidischer Amtsträger und seine Handlungsspielräume*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Knauß, F. 1999a. Bocksdaemon und Perserin. Untersuchungen zur Ikonographie und Chronologie der späten graeco-persischen Glyptik, *AMIT* 31, 161-189.

- Knauß, F. 1999b. Achämeniden in Transkaukasien, in: S. Lausberg & C. Oekentorp (eds.), *Fenster zur Forschung*. Münster, 81-114.
- Knauß, F. 2000a. Der "Palast" von Gumbati und die Rolle der Achaimeniden im transkaukasischen Iberien, *AMIT* 32, 119-130.
- Knauß, F. 2000b. Ein silbernes Rhyton aus Mtisdziri, in: E. Moorman & R. Docter (eds.), *Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Classical Archaeology, Amsterdam 1998*. Amsterdam, 85-89.
- Knauss, F. 2001. Persian rule in the north. Achaemenid palaces at the periphery of the Empire, in: I. Nielsen (ed.), *The Royal Palace Institution in the First Millennium BC* (Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens 4). Aarhus, 125-143.
- Knauß, F. 2005a. Zur eisenzeitlichen Hausarchitektur Ostgeorgiens, *AncNear-EastSt* 42, 187-210.
- Knauss, F. 2005b. Caucasus, in: P. Briant & R. Boucharlat (eds.), *L'archéologie de l'empire achéménide: nouvelles recherches* (Persika 6). Paris, 197-220.
- Knauss, F. 2006a. Ancient Persia and the Caucasus, *IrAnt* 41, 79-118.
- Knauß, F. 2006b. Pasargadae, Susa, Persepolis. Die Paläste der Achämeniden, in: Speyer 2006, 100-111.
- Knauß, F. 2009. "Medismos" in Kolchis, in: R. Einicke, St. Lehmann, H. Löhr, A. Mehnert, G. Mehnert & A. Slawisch (eds.), *Zurück zum Gegenstand. Festschrift für Andreas E. Furtwängler*. Langenweißbach, 291-305.
- Ludwig, N. & G. Mehnert 2008. Die Keramik und sonstige Kleinfunde, in: Babaev et al. 2008, 313-321.
- Narimanov, I. 1960. Nachodki baz kolon V-IV vv. do n. e. Azerbaidcanie, *SovA* 1960, X.4, 162-164.
- Nielsen, I. 1994. *Hellenistic Palaces. Tradition and Renewal*. Aarhus.
- Perrot, J., D. Ladiray & F. Vallat 1999. The propylaeum of the palace of Darius at Susa, in: A. Alizadeh, Y. Majidzadeh & S.M. Shahmirzadi (eds.), *The Iranian World. Essays on Iranian Art and Archaeology presented to Ezat O. Negahban*. Tehran, 158-177.
- Sens, U. 2008. Drei ungewöhnliche Architekturfragmente, in: Babaev et al. 2008, 309-313.
- Shefton, B. 1993. The white lotus: Rogozen and Colchis: The fate of a motif, in J. Chapman & P. Dolukhanov (eds.), *Cultural Transformations and Interactions in Eastern Europe*. Aldershot, 178-209.
- Speyer 2006. *Pracht und Prunk der Großkönige. Das Persische Weltreich* (Historisches Museum der Pfalz Speyer). Stuttgart.
- Wicke, D. 2008. Die achaimenidischen Glockenbasen, in: Babaev et al. 2008, 303-309.
- Zkitišvili, G. 1995. Der frühhellenistische Feuertempel von Kawtiskhevi, *AA* 1995, 83-98.