ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA
ANALECTA
268

# CONTEXT AND CONNECTION

## Studies on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of Antonio Sagona

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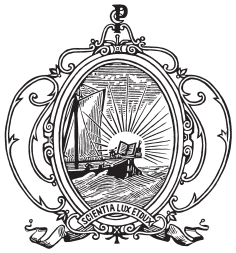

PEETERS
LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT
2018

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# NEW INVESTIGATIONS AT ARADETIS ORGORA, A MULTI-PERIOD CENTRE IN THE SHIDA KARTLI REGION IN GEORGIA

Iulon GAGOSHIDZE and Elena ROVA

ABSTRACT

Aradetis Orgora is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Shida Kartli region of Georgia. Its main mound, Dedoplis Gora, was occupied from late prehistory to the Early Medieval period, but is especially famous for a Late Hellenistic-Early Roman palatial building, where excavations have been ongoing since the late 1980s. In 2013, the investigation of the Hellenistic palace was supplemented—within the framework of a joint Georgian-Italian project by the Georgian National Museum and Ca' Foscari University of Venice—by two stratigraphical soundings. The aim was to highlight the pre-classical sequence of occupation at the site, which amounts to more than 10 metres. The results of the first two seasons confirm the importance of the settlement during the Kura-Araxes period and from the second half of the second millennium through the first millennium BC (the Late Bronze and Iron Ages). They also suggest more sporadic occupation in the later part of the Early Bronze Age (Early Kurgan period), followed by a possible hiatus during the first half of the second millennium BC. Very important discoveries were also made in the Late Hellenistic-Early Roman palace. Three more rooms of this monumental building were excavated; one of them revealed a fire altar, on which several bronze and silver figurines of Greco-Roman divinities were found. The finds of the new excavations are summarised here as far as they contribute to the reconstruction of the history of the site. The site's importance as a regional centre in different periods is also discussed.

* * *

## INTRODUCTION (I. G., E. R.)

Aradetis Orgora ('the two mounds of Aradeti') lies in the Middle Kura valley, in the Kareli district of the Shida Kartli province of Georgia (**Fig. 1**).[1] It is one of the most important archaeological sites of this region, which represents the core of historical Georgia, and is rich in archaeological remains of all periods.[2] The site occupies a highly strategic position on what was, and still is, one of the main communication routes in the South Caucasus, presently corresponding to the line of the modern highway crossing Georgia in the east–west direction. Located at the southern edge of the gently sloping Dedoplis Mindori plain, at the

[1] Thanks are due to Prof David Lordkipanidze (General Director, Georgian National Museum) and Dr Zurab Makharadze (Director of the Archaeological Centre, Georgian National Museum) for granting us the permission to excavate at Aradetis Orgora and for their constant support for our activities. The 2013–2014 campaigns at Aradetis Orgora were carried out with the financial support of Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, and Ca' Foscari University.

[2] For example, for the fourth and third millennia BC, see Rova 2014; for the Achaemenid period, Gagoshidze and Kipiani 2000; for the Hellenistic/Roman period, Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

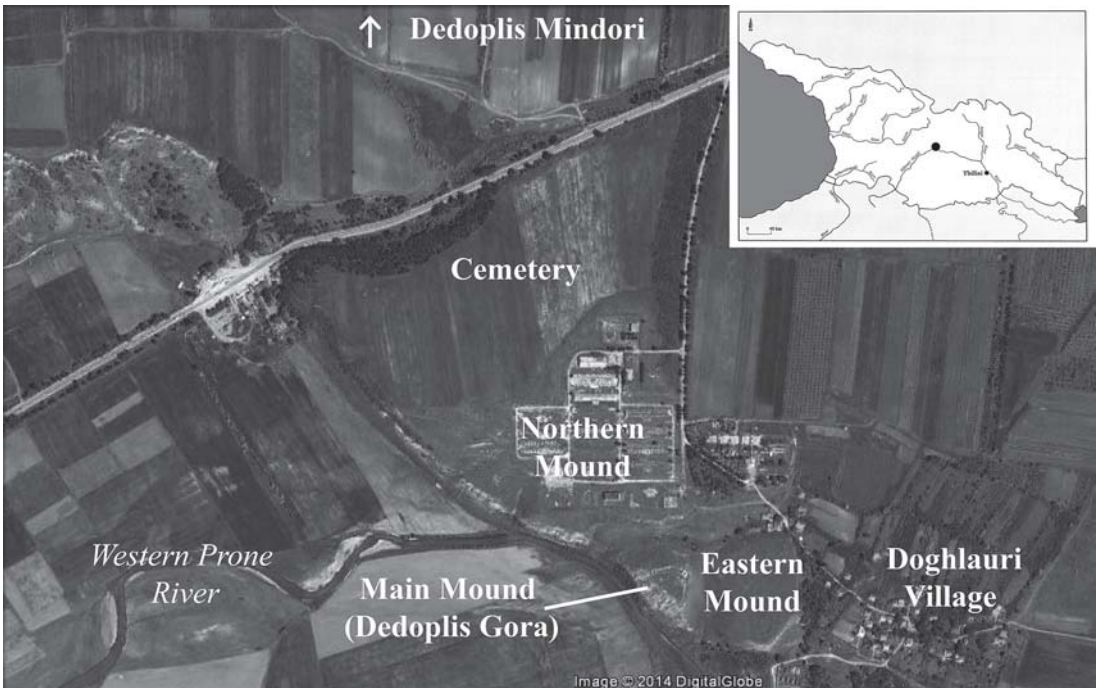


**Fig. 1.** Satellite view of Aradetis Orgora (modified from Google Earth), with location of the site in modern Georgia.

confluence of the Western Prone River and the Kura, the site dominated the river plain and had easy access to the fertile soil of the adjoining terraces. The archaeological area extends over a maximal surface of *c*. 40 ha. The ancient settlement develops on three different hills: the Main (Western), the Northern and the Eastern Mounds, whereas the cemetery ('Doghlauri cemetery'), occupies the space between the settlement and the present highway. The area was the object of sporadic human frequentation since earliest prehistory, as shown by the occasional recovery of Palaeolithic stone tools, and was continuously settled, possibly with short interruptions, from at least the fourth millennium BC to the sixth century AD.

The Northern and Eastern Mounds have been only sporadically investigated, but both seem to have been mainly occupied during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The Main Mound, also known as Dedoplis Gora ('the queen's hill'), named after a local legend connecting its origin to the famous Queen Tamar (1184–1207 AD), represents the core of the ancient settlement and the part of the site which shows the most continuous occupation (**Fig. 2**). It is a steep-sided hill of triangular shape overlooking the Western Prone River, isolated from the surrounding river terrace by two deep incisions derived from former water streams, along one of which a number of small springs are presently situated. Its easily defensible position, the dominant view over the Kura valley, and the availability of good-quality fresh water are undoubtedly the main factors that attracted the first settlers there and explain its continuous occupation.

At an altitude of *c*. 680 m a.s.l., the Main Mound was 34 m high on the level of the river bank before the beginning of excavations. Its lower part is composed of a succession of gravel layers of natural (fluvial) origin, while the upper part (up to 14 m thick) entirely consists of anthropogenic deposits. Its southwestern side had been severely eroded by the Prone River, while the other sides, which measure *c*. 70–80 m on the top and approximately twice

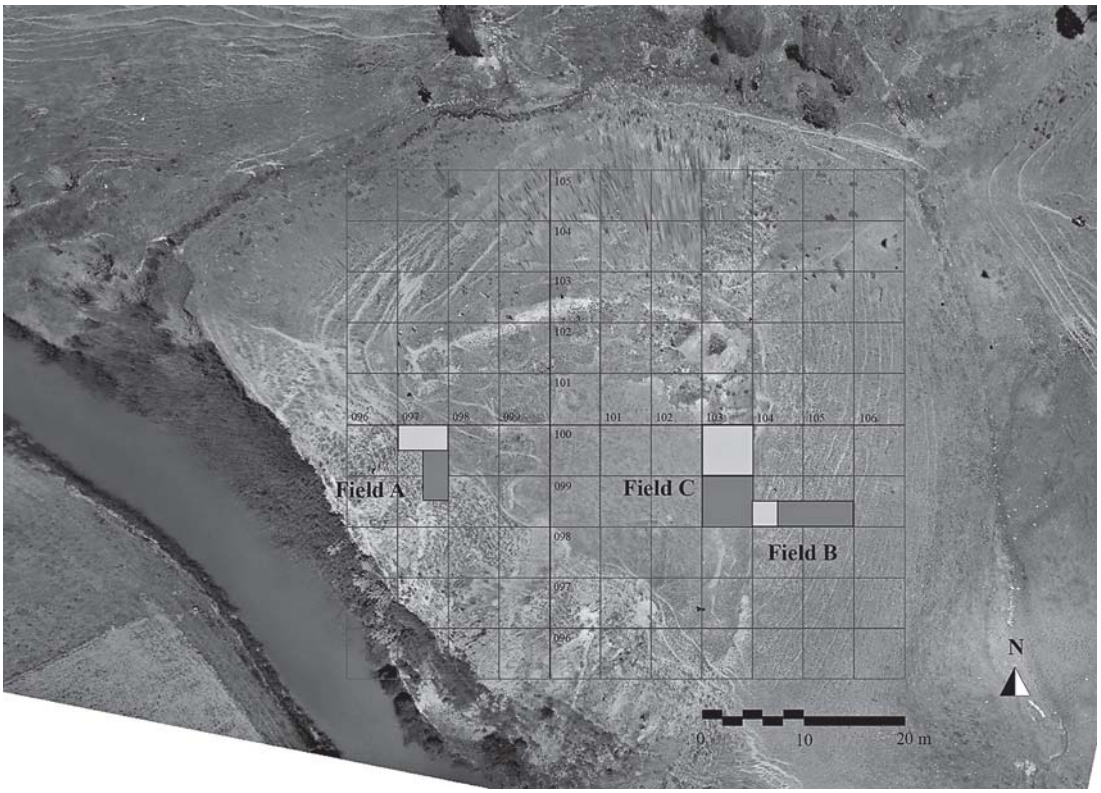


**Fig. 2.** Orthophoto of the Dedoplis Gora mound with location of the 2013 and 2014 excavation areas (areas excavated only in 2013 in light grey, areas excavated in 2014 in dark grey).

as much at the base, have been only slightly affected by slope erosion. The total area occupied by the ancient settlement, including the top of the mound and its terraced sides, must have amounted to between 0.5 and less than 1 ha. The site is presently dominated by an impressive fortified palatial building of the Late Hellenistic–Early Roman period (first century BC–first century AD),[3] which probably originally occupied the whole hilltop, and was partially covered by the remains of Early Medieval occupation.[4] The underlying pre-classical levels are more than 10 m thick; according to our present knowledge, they date from the early fourth to the mid-first millennium BC, the main periods of occupation being the Kura-Araxes period (late fourth to early third millennium BC) and the Late Bronze–Early Iron Ages (second half of the second to the early first millennium, 15th–seventh century BC), which apparently correspond to the main phases of use of the neighbouring cemetery area as well.[5]

The Main Mound attracted the attention of local archaeologists by the first half of the 20th century and was repeatedly explored by different Georgian expeditions,[6] none of which, however, reached the pre-Hellenistic levels. Annual excavations were conducted under the direction of Iulon Gagoshidze of the Shida Kartli Expedition of the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia from 1985 until 1993, when they had to be interrupted due to

[3] Gagoshidze 2000, 2001; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.
[4] Gagoshidze D. 2013; Gagoshidze 2001, pp. 262–263.
[5] Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, p. 41; Koridze in Puturidze and Rova 2012, pp. 75–82; Gagoshidze 2012.
[6] Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, p. 41 n. 368; Gagoshidze 2013, pp. 110–112; Gagoshidze D. 2013, pp. 104–106.

the difficult political situation in Georgia. The excavations resulted in the exposure of 14 rooms of the northern wing of the Hellenistic palace.[7] Excavations were resumed in 2003 and continued until 2007, when they were suspended again; during this period, seven additional rooms belonging to the eastern wing of the palace were explored.

In 2013, in concomitance with renewed excavations of the Hellenistic palace, the investigation of the until-then virtually unexplored pre-classical site's sequence was initiated within the framework of a joint Georgian-Italian project by the Georgian National Museum and Ca' Foscari University of Venice.[8] The aim of the 2013 and 2014 seasons was to verify the settlement's occupational sequence, the extent of its occupation, and the state of preservation of the earlier levels and, at the same time, to obtain a corpus of stratigraphically secure artefacts and ecofacts from the different occupational phases.

Excavations concentrated on three different areas. Fields A and B consist of two stratigraphical soundings dug on the western and eastern sides of the mound respectively, with the aim of reaching the natural soil. By the end of the 2014 season, a sequence in excess of 4 m deep of Iron Age, transitional Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and Late Bronze Age levels has been investigated in Field A (**Fig. 3**); to judge from preliminary observations of the section exposed by the Prone River, virgin soil in the area may lie about 4 m deeper, below *c*. 1 m of Late (and Middle) Bronze Age deposits and *c*. 3 m of Early Bronze/Late Chalcolithic (Kura-Araxes and, notably, Bedeni) deposits. In Field B (**Fig. 4**), excavation reached a depth of more than 13.50 m, and virgin soil was reached at the base of a sequence of Hellenistic, Iron, Late Bronze/Early Iron, Late Bronze and Kura-Araxes levels. Field C is devoted to the continuing exploration of the eastern wing of the Hellenistic/Early Imperial palace: three additional rooms and a section of the pillared portico of this monumental building were exposed and very important finds were made there during the 2013–2014 seasons.

Below, the results of the new excavations will be summarised as far as they contribute to the reconstruction of the site's history,[9] the importance of the site as a regional centre in its different periods of occupation will be highlighted, and future research perspectives will be discussed.

## THE PRE-CLASSICAL PERIODS (E. R.)

### *Fields A and B, Summary of Excavation Results*

#### Field A

Field A (see **Fig. 3**) is situated in a portion of the mound's slope that originally lay inside the limits of the Hellenistic building (actually under its southwestern wing), where this had, however, completely disappeared due to erosion by the Prone River and had left a very steep exposed section. Excavation began on an area of four 5 × 5 m quadrants, but two of them

[7] Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

[8] In 2013, excavations of the Hellenistic palace were carried out by a team from Ilia State University headed by Iulon Gagoshidze, while the investigation of the pre-classical site's sequence was initiated by the Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological Project, under the field responsibility of Elena Rova (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) and Mindia Jalabadze (Georgian National Museum). In 2014, work was continued by a unified team of researchers jointly headed by Iulon Gagoshidze and Elena Rova within the framework of the Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological Project.

[9] A detailed report on the 2013 and 2014 seasons appears in Gagoshidze and Rova 2016.

**Fig. 3.** View of the western stratigraphical sounding (Field A) at the end of the 2014 season, from N, with the Prone River at the back.

**Fig. 4.** View of the eastern stratigraphical sounding (Field B) at the end of the 2014 season, from the Eastern Mound, with the Northern Mound on the right.

were abandoned after reaching the base of the Hellenistic level. The hitherto excavated occupational sequence of this area has been provisionally divided into ten different levels: Level 1 corresponds to the base of the Hellenistic occupation, Levels 2, 3 and 4 belong to the Iron Age,[10] Levels 5, 6 and 7 represent the transition between the Late Bronze and the Iron Age, and Levels 8 to 10 belong to the Late Bronze Age.

During the Iron Age (Levels 2–4), the investigated area belonged to an open space showing a sequence of superimposed horizontal surfaces paved with grit or small pebbles, and/or plastered with mud, separated by thicker layers of pebbles. The space yielded only scanty remains of flimsy stone or mud-brick walls and installations. It contained a considerable number of pits, most of them for storing cereals, to judge from the large quantities of charred seeds that were recovered inside them. Level 4 was underlain by a very thick artificial filling entirely composed of pebbles, which covered a heavily sloped surface of the ancient mound. This pebble layer, up to 1.60 m thick as preserved, marked an important discontinuity in the area's sequence—we suppose that it was connected with important terracing operations aimed at increasing the settlement's available space and levelling its top.

During the earlier (transitional Late Bronze/Early Iron) phases (Levels 5–7), the layout of the area in Field A was rather different, since the mound's slope seems to have been stepped. The northern portion of the sounding, where only almost sterile fill and pebble layers were encountered, corresponds to the slope between the top of the mound, where some flimsy walls (Level 5) were found, and the next step, which occupies the southern part of the sounding. Here, Level 7 yielded a room of approximately square shape (measuring *c*. 4.70 × 5 m) surrounded by thick stone walls partially dug into the mound's slope (**Fig. 5**), into which a

[10] Preliminary study of the recovered material suggests a date between the ninth–eighth centuries BC and the Achaemenid period; two unpublished $^{14}$C dates (courtesy of Elisabetta Boaretto) tend to support the earlier part of this range (ninth–seventh centuries BC).

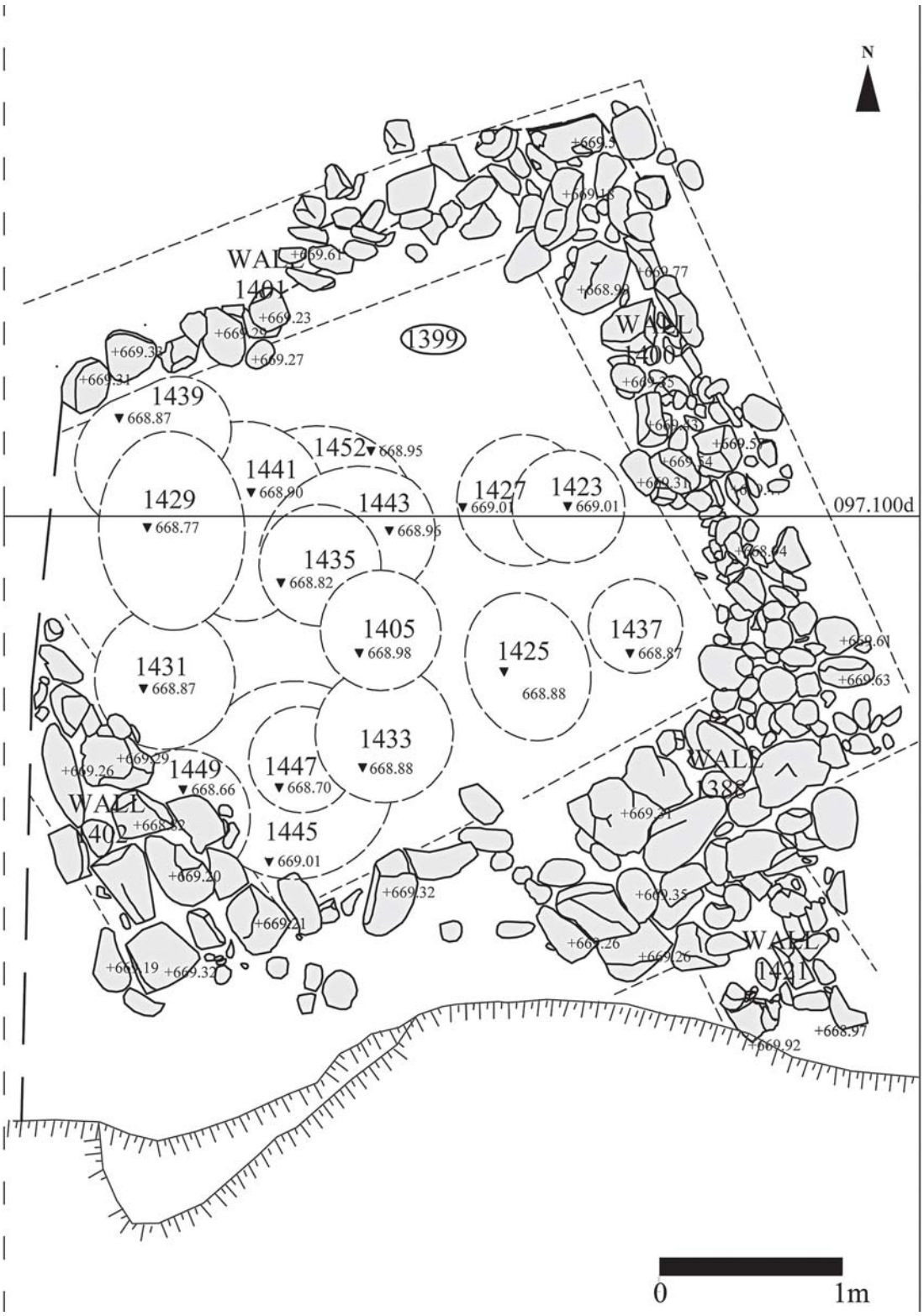


**Fig. 5.** Field A, plan of the Late Bronze Age (Level 7) stone walls, with Level 8 pits.

**Fig. 6.** Field B, view of the sequence of pebble layers (W section of the second excavation step) from E.

new room with mud-brick walls had later been built (Level 6). No floor was preserved in either room.

During the Late Bronze period (Levels 8–9, with different sub-layers), this part of the sounding corresponded to the outer edge of the mound. The portion near its southern limit had a sloping surface into which a large number of pits were dug at different times. To the northeast of this surface were an area occupied by small firing installations and an area possibly used for butchering and other food-processing operations. The latter contained a huge number of animal bones and pottery sherds, some stone tools (mainly fragments of grinders and pestles) and a considerable amount of charcoal. Only the top of Level 10 was reached, but the layout of the area does not appear to be radically different from that of the overlying layers. Pottery from the deepest excavated layer finds parallels with materials from elsewhere in Georgia and dated to the earlier phase of the Late Bronze Age (possibly 14th century BC), which represents a good *terminus post quem* for the levels excavated so far.

Field B

Excavation in Field B consists of a 'step trench' sounding over a sequence of five 5 × 5 m quadrants extending from the present top of the mound in an easterly direction (see **Fig. 4**). In the first of the quadrants, excavation stopped at the top of the outer walls of the Hellenistic palace. In the second, it proceeded from the basal level of this building on its external side, down to the base of the Iron Age levels; these consisted of a succession of external surfaces interspersed with pebble layers, underlain by a 1.95 m-high sequence of pebble layers (**Fig. 6**) resting on a compact fill of reddish clay.

The pebble layer and the underlying reddish clay fill were also encountered on the third step of the excavation. The levels underneath are provisionally dated to the transitional Late Bronze/Early Iron and the Late Bronze period, as a precise synchronisation with the sequence unearthed in Field A is not yet possible. The latest layers of the sequence contained the remains of badly preserved mud-brick and stone walls. During the earlier phase, the area appears to have been an open space, occupied by a number of repeatedly renewed installations. Among these, most notable are a large square-shaped fireplace surrounded by a raised band of clay whose bottom consisted of river pebbles overlain by multiple layers of pottery sherds (**Fig. 7**), and a stepped clay platform, possibly used for ritual purposes, topped by a small plastered basin bearing traces of burning. Pottery from this part of the excavation has been tentatively dated to the 14th–13th century BC.

The excavated area was located on the inner side of a huge stone wall which delimited the slope, the outer face of which was found in the next step of the excavation, under the slope-wash accumulation. The wall's face was made of squared blocks of sandstone, *c*. 50 cm wide and more than 20 cm high, and its filling consisted of large pebbles. The wall was reinforced by thinner stone walls leaning on its outer side and running perpendicular to it (**Fig. 8**). These Late Bronze walls were erected from the level of an ancient mound's slope, which had apparently been left exposed for a considerable time, and cut into the levels sealed by the slope. Those levels exclusively belonged to the Kura-Araxes period (KA II and III phases) (see **Fig. 11**),[11] and consisted of a *c*. 4 m deep densely packed sequence of thin occupational layers, two of which, in particular, produced rather interesting architectural remains. Two round-shaped structures, cutting each other, were found in the later of them: one of the structures had a diameter of *c*. 2.50 m and was surrounded by a clay wall, on the outer side of which a row of stones set in vertical position was deeply embedded in the clay; the other structure was larger (*c*. 3.50 m in diameter) and delimited by a simple clay wall (**Fig. 9**). The earlier level yielded remains of rectilinear structures with *in situ* material built using a wattle-and-daub technique similar to examples known from the main Kura-Araxes sites in Shida Kartli.[12]

The lowest portion of the Kura-Araxes sequence was reached in the bottom step of the trench, where it was covered by the old eroded mound's surface underlying the thick slope-wash layer. It consisted of a succession of clay platforms whose tops and sides were covered with whitish clay plaster, on the surfaces of which two differently aligned sets of postholes were observed (**Fig. 10**). The base of the sequence was represented by a thin layer of small pebbles, which lay directly on the natural soil.

[11] For the periodisation of the Kura-Araxes period in Shida Kartli, see Rova 2014, pp. 52–55.
[12] See Rova 2014, pp. 55–57.

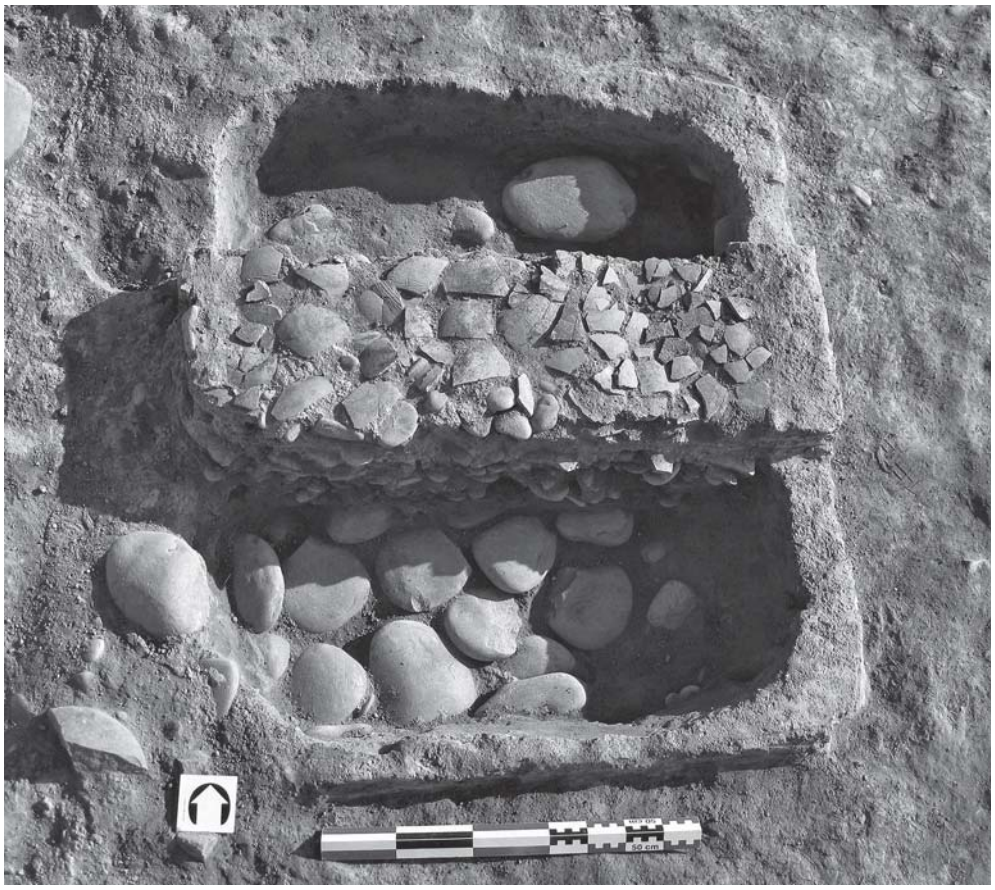

**Fig. 7.** Field B, view of Late Bronze fireplace from S.

**Fig. 8.** Field B, W section of the fourth excavation step, from E, with Late Bronze supporting walls and top of the underlying sequence of Kura-Araxes levels.

**Fig. 9.** Field B, view of the Kura-Araxes round-shaped structures, from E.

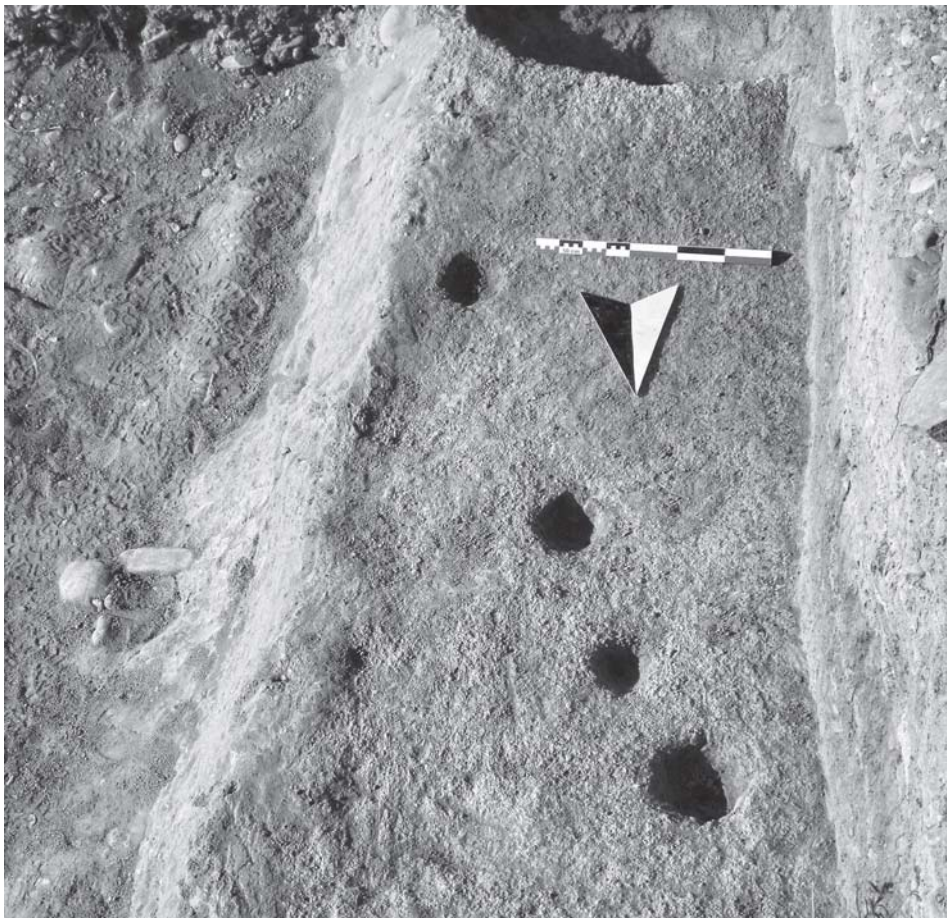

**Fig. 10.** Field B, View of the Kura-Araxes platform with row of post-holes, from N.

*A Reconsideration of the Settlement's Pre-classical History*

Both Fields A and B lie at the mound's periphery and mainly consisted of open-air spaces, located near the settlement's outer limit, for much of the site's occupation history. It appears that, since at least the Kura-Araxes period, the settlement extended over the whole mounded surface and onto the hill's slopes as well, and that the latter were repeatedly subjected to terracing operations. From the Late Bronze Age, in particular, this involved the construction of terracing/supporting walls, the space inside which was levelled by filling it with thick layers of river pebbles, most probably with the aim of increasing the available space for a growing population. The presence of these successive pebble layers, which divide the different horizons by sealing each of the underlying occupational layers, represents a good opportunity for creating a secure stratigraphically linked ceramic sequence from areas which are otherwise characterised by little, if any, material in primary contexts.

Another interesting feature is the discovery, in both excavation fields, of heavily sloping eroded surfaces, which correspond to ancient slopes of the mound. These suggest the existence of significant phases of abandonment, at least of these outer portions of the settlement, which may have involved the complete loss of the last pre-abandonment occupational phase. There are also indications that the main construction episodes (re-shaping of the mound's outer limit during the Late Bronze period, erection of the Hellenistic palace) may have almost completely obliterated some of the underlying levels.

While excavations in Field B proved that this part of the site was first settled during the Kura-Araxes period, the possibility of an earlier, Late Chalcolithic occupation of the Aradetis Orgora Main Mound, which had been supposed on the basis of the recovery of sporadic sherds and of contemporary occupation at the neighbouring site of Berikldeebi, cannot be excluded, since on the one hand virgin soil has not yet been reached in Field A and, on the other hand, it is possible that the original settlement's core lay closer to the present mound's centre. The Kura-Araxes period (**Fig. 11**) without doubt represents one of the most important phases at the site. This is proved by the thickness of the occupational sequence and by the area of the occupied surface, which apparently corresponds to the whole top of the mound and the upper part of its slopes. It is also confirmed by the number of Kura-Araxes graves (*c*. 60 examples to the present stage of excavations) discovered in the adjacent cemetery.[13] The presence in the Kareli and Gori districts of a number of contemporary sites with similar features, located at regular distances from each other in the valley of the Kura River and along the courses of its main tributaries, proves that Aradetis Orgora was not an isolated case and shows that this part of the Shida Kartli region was a focus for stable and relatively intense occupation during the Kura-Araxes period.

It is common knowledge that contrasting occupational trends (widespread settlement abandonment, 'nomadisation', etc.) characterise the following Early Kurgan period in the Shida Kartli region, as elsewhere in the South Caucasus.[14] Aradetis Orgora represents no exception to this general rule, since remains of these phases are definitely much less substantial than those of the Kura-Araxes period. However, it ought to be highlighted that traces of Bedeni occupation have been observed in both excavation areas—floors with *in situ* material, not yet reached by the excavation, can be seen on the exposed section corresponding to Field A and out-of-context sherds were collected from the Late Bronze levels in Field B—and Bedeni pits have been discovered on the Northern Mound. It therefore appears that

[13] Koridze in Puturidze and Rova 2012, pp. 75–82; Gagoshidze 2012.
[14] Rova 2014, pp. 62–63, with previous literature.

**Fig. 11.** Selection of finds from the Kura-Araxes levels.

Aradetis Orgora was still occupied at least during part of the Bedeni period, like Berikldeebi, which lies at a distance of only a few hundred metres from it. It is actually possible that the extent of the Bedeni occupation at Aradetis Orgora has been underestimated because the relevant layers have been either obliterated by erosion during the following period of abandonment or destroyed by the large-scale terracing activities which took place at the time of the mound's reoccupation at the end of the Middle Bronze Age or in the early phase of the Late Bronze Age.

Clear evidence for Middle Bronze occupation, by contrast, has not come to light so far at the site. Together with the discovery of the eroded mound's slope in Field B, this suggests a real occupational hiatus of significant length, although it cannot be completely excluded that traces of this period may be present in other sections of the mound. In any case, the date of the Late Bronze re-occupation at the site must have been quite early. This is proved by the fact that out of context sherds reminiscent of Middle Bronze types have been found in the Hellenistic palace area,[15] and that a 1 m-thick sequence of 'Late Bronze' layers underlies the hitherto reached 14th century BC layers in Field A.

[15] I. Gagoshidze, pers. comm.

The 2013–2014 excavations brought especially interesting results concerning the later second and earlier first millennium history of the site. Evidence from both fields proves that the slopes of the Main Mound underwent repeated episodes of re-shaping, consisting of the erection along its perimeter of massive stone walls (partially lost because of erosion), the space inside which was filled with alternating layers of river pebbles and compacted clay. Rather than being parts of a fortification system, these stone walls appear to be retaining walls, probably belonging to an extensive terracing system aimed at consolidating the mound's slope. They also created horizontal surfaces in the mound's upper part, mainly to be used for outdoor activities, as mentioned above. According to our present understanding of the site's chronology, these activities continued at least from the 15th-14th to the seventh century BC, and suggest an especially flourishing time for the settlement. A significant growth of the settled population is also suggested for the same period by the expansion of the settlement onto the Northern and Eastern Mounds, as well as by the large number of contemporary graves discovered in the cemetery. These developments agree with well-known general trends of sedentarisation and settlement nucleation elsewhere in the South Caucasus during this period,[16] which are connected with the emergence of more complex forms of political organisation and increasing warfare, and are possibly a consequence of indirect pressure on the region from its powerful southern neighbours: the Hittite and Middle Assyrian empires during the Late Bronze, and the kingdom of Urartu and the Assyrian empire during the Iron Age.

The recovery, albeit in secondary contexts, of a number of significant finds from the Late Bronze and Iron Age levels further confirms the site's affluence during these periods and represents evidence for its regional importance and far-reaching connections. Some finds from pits and filling layers from Field A (**Figs 12–15**), in particular, suggest that important, possibly public building(s) may have been located on top of the mound's slope in this portion of the Main Mound. For the Late Bronze period, this is the case in relation to a fragment of a clay plaque with impressed decoration (**Fig. 13**) and a bead of gold foil with tubular mid-rib string-hole with bitumen(?) traces on the back (**Fig. 14**). The latter belongs to a type, which is very common all over the Near East (and beyond) in the late fourth and third millennia,[17] but was still occasionally in use in the later second millennium BC, as proved by an item from a grave at Metsamor in Armenia.[18]

Even more interesting is the fragment of a small stone plaque (**Fig. 15**), later reused as a mould for small jewels, whose surface bears an unfinished incised nine-pointed star, which we consider a derivation from the Mesopotamian symbol of the goddess Ishtar, as represented, for instance, on second millennium BC golden medallions from different areas of the Near East, and on Middle Babylonian *kudurrus*.[19] As for the Iron Age, mention should be made of the head of a small terracotta figurine of very fine manufacture, recovered in a pit (**Fig. 12**), whose style may be compared to that of bronze figurines from different areas of Georgia dated to the ninth to seventh centuries BC.[20]

[16] See, e.g., Smith *et al*. 2009, pp. 29–32; Smith 2012, pp. 682–686.

[17] Aruz *et al*. 2003, p. 240, fig. 72; p. 243, with references.

[18] Piliposyan 2014, tab. 9, fig. 4.

[19] Rova 2016. *Kudurrus* are large polished stones carrying inscriptions concerning land grants or sales, which were in use in Southern Mesopotamia from the Kassite period down to the neo-Babylonian period. Their upper parts or their faces often bear symbols of deities, apparently supposed to solemnise the agreements (Black and Green 1992, pp. 113–114).

[20] See Miron and Orthmann 1995, pp. 273–274, nos. 201–202.


**Fig. 12.** Head of terracotta figurine (Iron Age).

**Fig. 13.** Fragment of clay plaque with impressed decoration (Late Bronze Age).


**Fig. 14.** Gold bead with tubular mid-rib string-hole (Late Bronze Age).

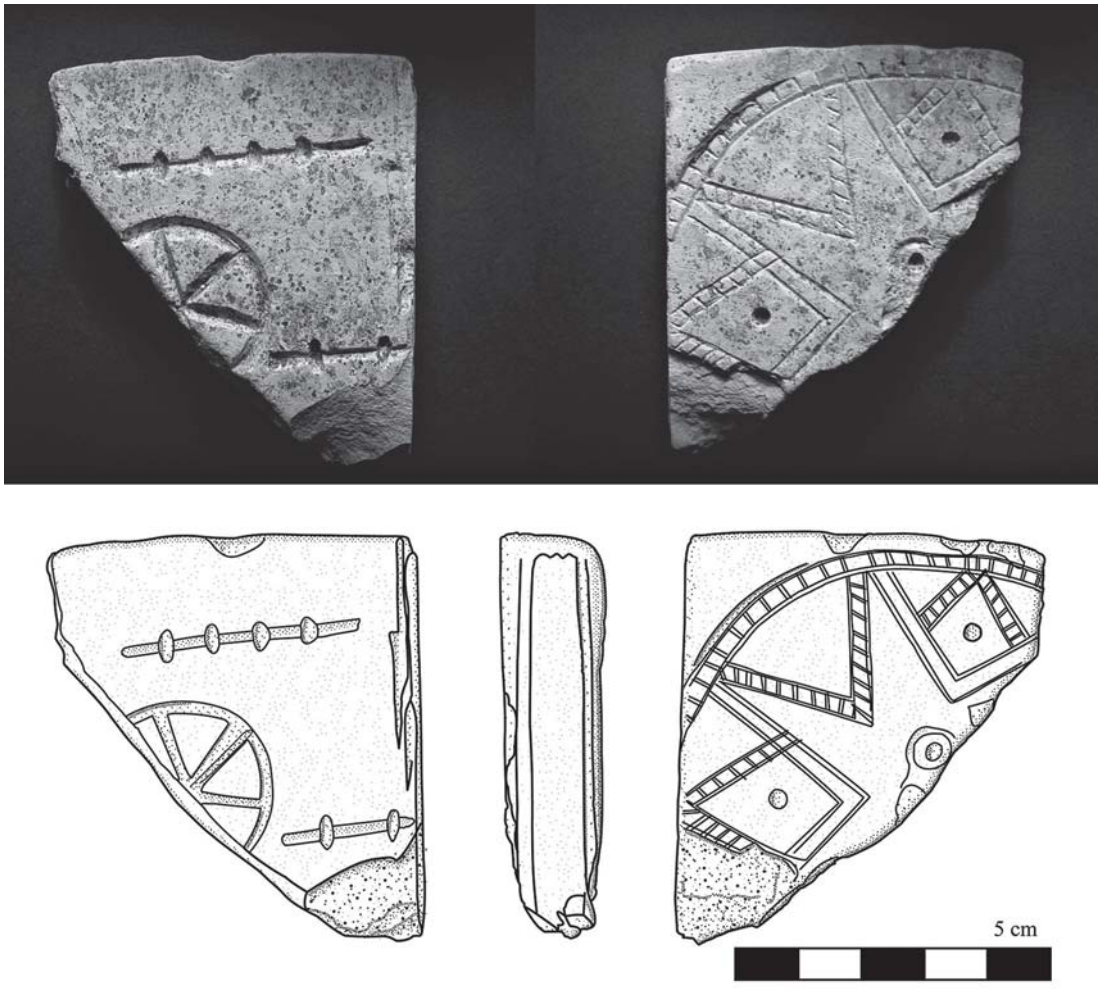


**Fig. 15.** Fragment of incised stone plaque (Late Bronze Age).

In contrast to the Late Bronze and earlier Iron Age, the later part of the Iron Age (in particular the Achaemenid period), as well as the earlier part of the Hellenistic period, prior to the erection of the palatial building, are hitherto only poorly represented in both soundings, and not attested in the excavated part of the Hellenistic palace. In Shida Kartli and elsewhere in the Southern Caucasus, the Achaemenid period and its aftermath are quite well attested by official architecture and persistent cultural influence.[21] Their absence at the Aradetis Orgora Main Mound suggests that they were almost completely destroyed by levelling activities carried out in preparation for the construction of the later Hellenistic palatial building.

## THE HELLENISTIC AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIODS (I. G.)

### *Hellenistic Occupation at Dedoplis Gora*

The palace on top of the Aradetis Orgora Main Mound (**Fig. 16**) represents a unique example of monumental architecture of the Hellenistic/Early Roman period in Georgia.[22] Founded at the end of the second or in the early first century BC and destroyed by an earthquake and fire around 80 AD, it bears witness to a period of deep transformations throughout Georgia, the time of the flourishing of the Kingdom of Kartli (Caucasian Iberia) and of the growing influence of the Roman Empire. The palace was probably the residence of a local vassal of the king of Kartli, responsible for administering the royal domain in Shida Kartli. A site on the plain called Dedoplis Mindori, located 3 km north of the residence at Aradetis Orgora and partially excavated in 1972–1984 by a Georgian expedition headed by I. Gagoshidze, hosted a complex consisting of eight temples and two monumental propylaea. It extended over a rectangular area of 5 ha, and was joined by a regularly planned settlement of *c*. 80 ha, including a craftsmen's quarter and the remains of a palace.[23] The main function of the palace at Dedoplis Gora was undoubtedly that of an administrative building in which the revenues from the royal estates were stored and processed. Its isolated position and fortified aspect suggest that it may have also fulfilled a military function. However, it has been convincingly argued that it was also used as a temporary residence of the Iberian royal family, notably on the occasions when they visited the neighbouring Dedoplis Mindori sanctuary.[24]

The building originally occupied the whole hilltop surface (an area of more than 3000 $m^2$). It had an irregular triangular shape (the sides measured about 70 m), which approximately followed the mound's outline, and was provided with massive corner towers of squared shape. Surrounded by an almost 3 m-wide outer wall, in which—on the ground floor at least—no windows were found, it consists of a row of rooms which open onto a large central peristyle court. Two entrances to the complex have been identified: at the western limit and in the eastern part of the northern wing. The whole southwestern wing has been washed away by the river, but its location can be approximately reconstructed from the remains of some of the peristyle's pillars. The building originally had at least two storeys and was covered by a tiled roof. The rooms of the ground floor were mainly devoted to everyday

[21] Gagoshidze and Kipiani 2000; see also Knauss 2005, 2006.

[22] Gagoshidze 2000, 2001; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

[23] Gagoshidze 1992; see also Gagoshidze 2000, pp. 50–51; 2001, pp. 260–261; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, pp. 31–32.

[24] Gagoshidze 1992, 2000, 2001; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

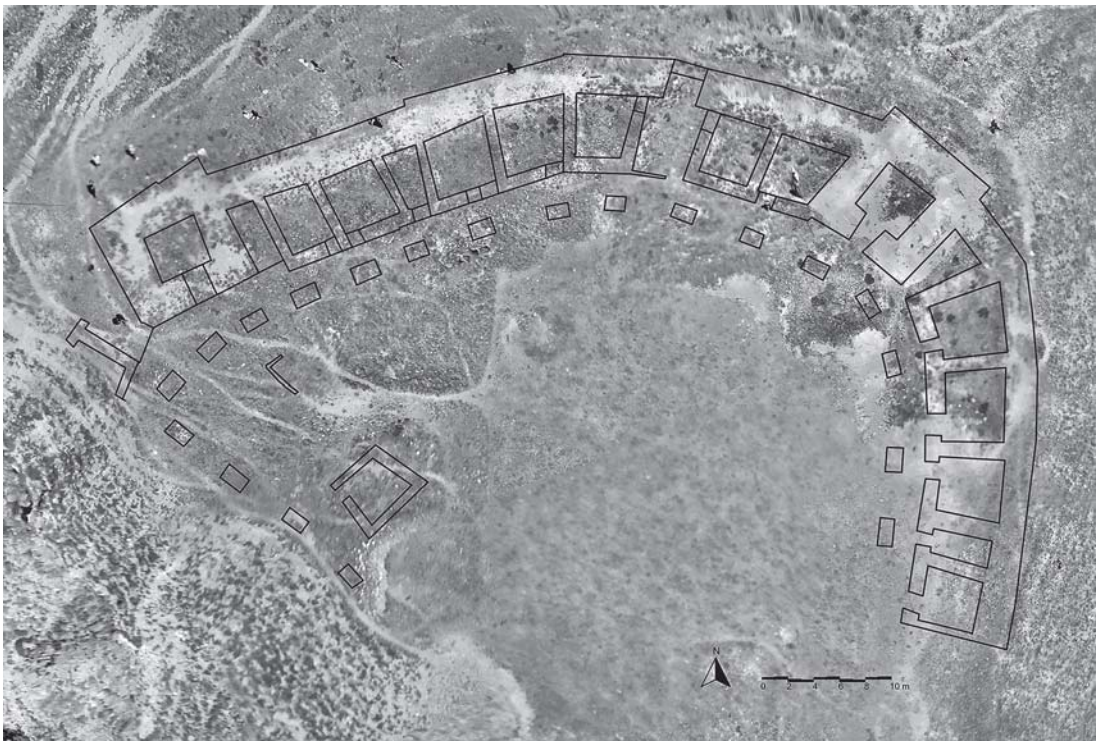


**Fig. 16.** Tentative schematic plan of the Late Hellenistic/Early Imperial palatial building updated after the 2014 excavations (adapted from Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, figs 3–7, unpublished plans and 2014 excavation plan), with orthophoto in the background.

activities and to the storage of less precious wares. Residential units were probably located on the upper floor(s), where luxury goods were also kept, while the central court and the peristyle were occupied by less monumental structures (among them a bakery and a wine cellar), mainly devoted to processing agricultural products.

The remarkable preservation of the complex, which was destroyed by an intense fire that turned its walls into a mass of pumice-like substance, has allowed a detailed observation of its construction techniques, which are typical of the Hellenistic period in Kartli. The base of the walls and gates is a rectangular or square framework of beams set perpendicular to one another, the intervening space being filled with pebbles and adobe (so-called *opus gallicum*); their upper part, which is preserved up to 2–3 m, is made of mud bricks. The walls are either faced with sandstone ashlar masonry, or, alternatively, coated with a clay plaster.

Before the beginning of the new excavations in 2013, the whole northern wing of the building, what was left of its southwestern wing, and approximately half of its eastern wing had been investigated.[25] The rich inventory of finds includes local and imported ceramics, metal and glass vessels, weapons and tools of different types, pieces of furniture, coins, and numerous valuable objects (jewels, ornaments, ivory and bone objects, etc.). It offers a vivid picture of the material culture of Kartli-Iberia in the first century BC–first century AD, and exemplifies the region's strong contacts with the western (Hellenistic-Roman) as well as the eastern (Iranian) worlds, and the originality of its production. Especially interesting

[25] Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

among the finds is the large corpus of clay *bullae* bearing the impression of seals in different styles, which testifies to the administrative activities carried out in the building, and a collection of small engraved plaques made of deer horn, probably used as game-pieces and/or fortune-telling devices.[26]

### *The Early Medieval Period*

The remains belonging to the Early Medieval phase are equally informative, since they shed light on a lesser-known phase of the history of the region.[27] The site of the former palace remained uninhabited until, at the beginning of the fourth century AD, it became the seat of a village, which was occupied until the end of the sixth century AD, when the mound was finally abandoned. The thickness of the Early Medieval level varies between 0.50 and 3–4 m. It includes four building horizons, the earliest of which has multiple floor layers. Single-room domestic units of squarish shape were established along the mound's perimeter on the ruins of the palatial building, approximately following the limits of its former rooms, and incorporating part of its still-standing walls. The rooms had mud-brick walls set on a stone base and clay-plastered floors; they had front-yards, in which large wine pithoi were often set into the floor.

The depression in the centre of the hill's top, which corresponded to the inner court of the Hellenistic palace, was occupied by a sanctuary, in which a number of altars located in small spaces enclosed by wattle-and-daub walls were excavated. The altars were of cubic shape, made of stone and clay, and a rectangular brazier was set atop them; their surface had been accurately plastered, and they had been repeatedly renewed in the course of the settlement's life. Some infant burials, a number of entire piglet skeletons, and pits—possibly of ritual purpose, notably containing numerous spindle whorls and pierced clay discs—were also found in the area. All this suggests that traditional astral and fertility gods, whose tradition goes back at least to the Bronze Age, were worshipped by the local villagers. The Early Medieval sanctuary at Dedoplis Gora thus attests to the survival of traditional pagan cults among the local population long after Christianity had been declared the state religion, and in spite of the fact that during the time of Achaemenid rule the Kartlian royal family had adopted a variant of Zoroastrianism as its official religion.[28]

### *Field C: Summary of the New Excavation Results*

In 2013–2014, excavations in Field C were carried out over an area of 200 $m^2$, corresponding to eight 5 × 5 m quadrants (103.099a, b, c, d, 103.100a, b, c, d), joining the southern limit of the previously excavated eastern wing of the palatial building (**Fig. 17**, see also **Figs 2, 16**). Ceramic sherds and different types of tiles dated to the fourth–sixth century AD, recovered from the topsoil, allow us to hypothesise that this sector of the settlement contained important remains of the Early Medieval period. However, no clear architectural plan of this period could be recovered, since the corresponding level (Level I) had been severely damaged by wind erosion and stone-quarrying activities carried out by the local population in the early 20th century. Level 1 yielded a heavily burnt outer surface (**Fig. 18**) and remains

[26] Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008.

[27] Gagoshidze 2001, pp. 262–263; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, pp. 43–44; most recently, also Gagoshidze D. 2013.

[28] Gagoshidze 2001, p. 263; Fürtwängler *et al*. 2008, pp. 43–44; Gagoshidze D. 2013.

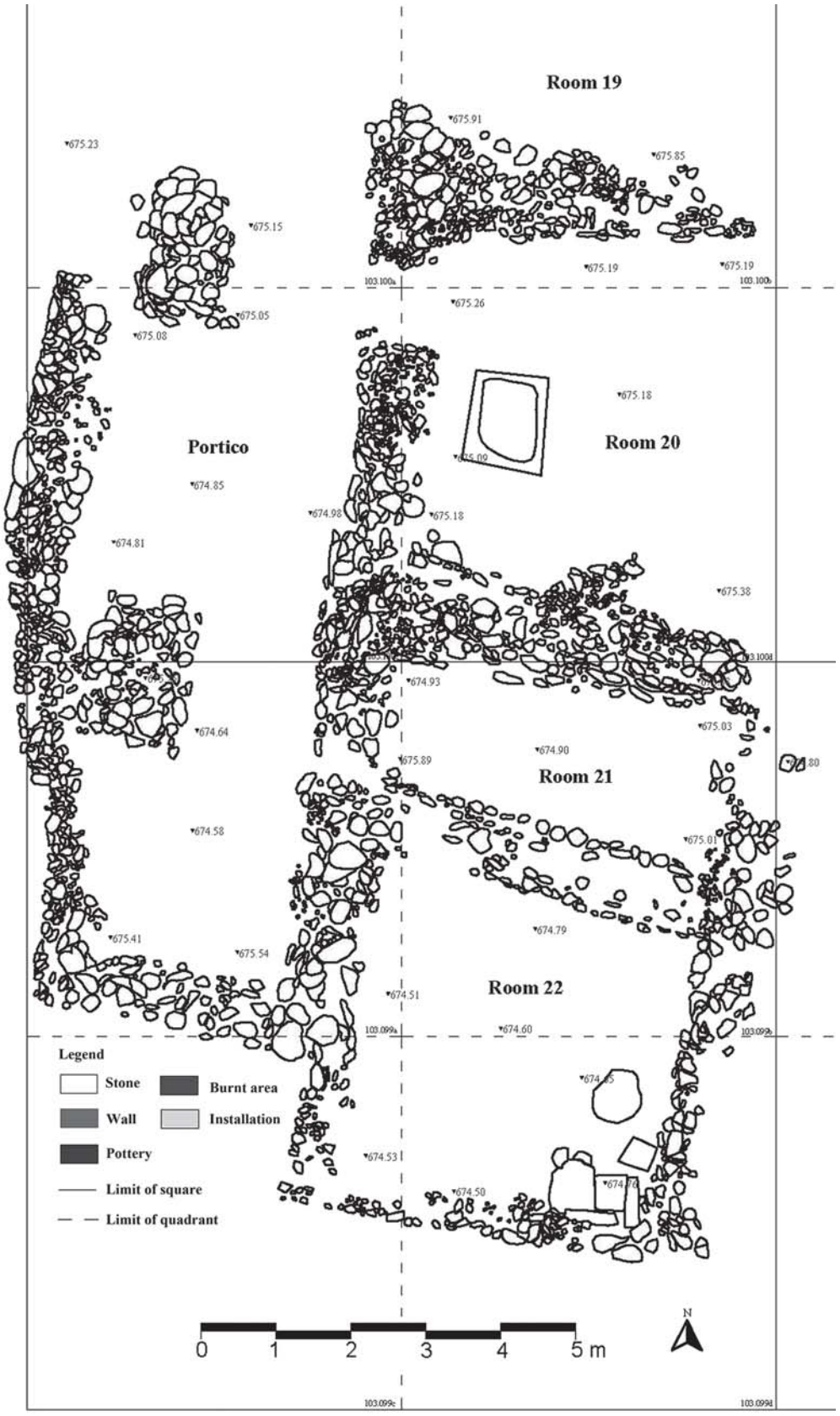


**Fig. 17.** Field C, plan of the 2013–2014 excavation.

**Fig. 18.** Field C, view of the Level I burnt floor with *in situ* material, from N.

**Fig. 19.** Field C, view of Rooms 20, 21 and 22, from S.

of a room containing some large pithoi, which had been cut into the collapsed ruins of the Hellenistic palace. The new excavations confirmed that the Early Medieval building had been built in the fourth century AD—or at the outside, between the third and the fourth centuries AD—and restored (or re-built) at least twice before the sixth century, when the Dedoplis Gora settlement ceased to exist.

Level II corresponds to the remains of the Late Hellenistic/Early Imperial palace (**Fig. 19,** see also **Fig. 17**). In this part of the building, a large part of the eastern, outer wall of the rooms had been destroyed by villagers quarrying building material for their houses. This situation allowed the excavation of a small sounding in order to expose the wall's base, which was found at a depth of 40 cm under the level of the palace's floor. The wall's base was 2.80 m wide and was constructed of cobbles. Three rooms of the building (Room nos. 20, 21, and 22) and the corresponding portion of the pillared portico were excavated in 2013–2014.

The northernmost room (no. 20) yielded the most important finds. The room was of 'standard' size, measuring 4.70 m east–west and 5.30 m in the north–south direction, with the door located on the northwestern side. The room's walls were plastered and the floor consisted of compacted clay. A complete, undamaged fire altar was discovered in the central part of this room. A mass of materials melted together by fire lay on the altar's upper surface (**Fig. 20**). After restoration, it turned out to be composed of bronze and silver figurines of Artemis, Apollo, the mother-Titaness Leto, Tyche-Fortuna, Silen, an eagle, a raven and a dolphin (**Fig. 22**), along with a silver censer, a gold ivy(?) branch, two pheasant's eggs, and a total of 15 coins—13 denari of Augustus, and two local imitations of Alexander the Great's staters (**Fig. 21**). The room also yielded other interesting items, including several iron objects and two sealed *bullae*.

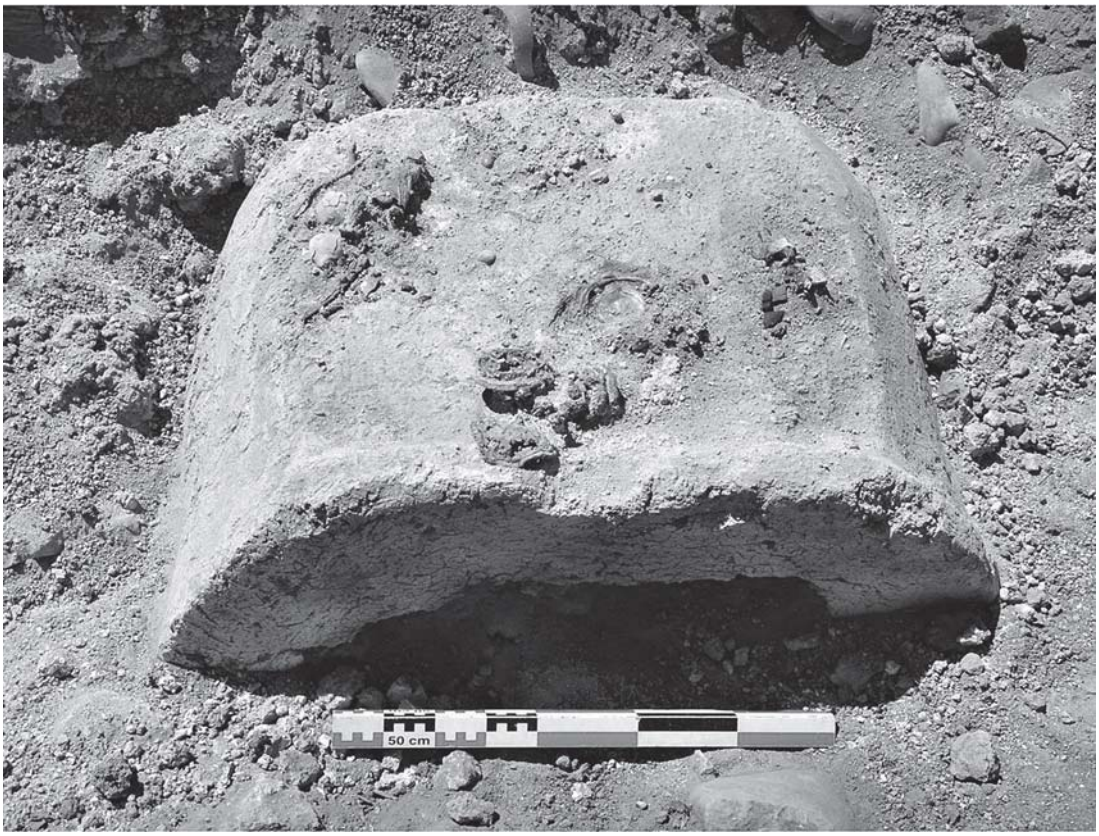


**Fig. 20.** Detail of the altar in Room 20, with remains of *in situ* votive deposit, from E.

**Fig. 21.** Coins from the votive deposit in Room 20.

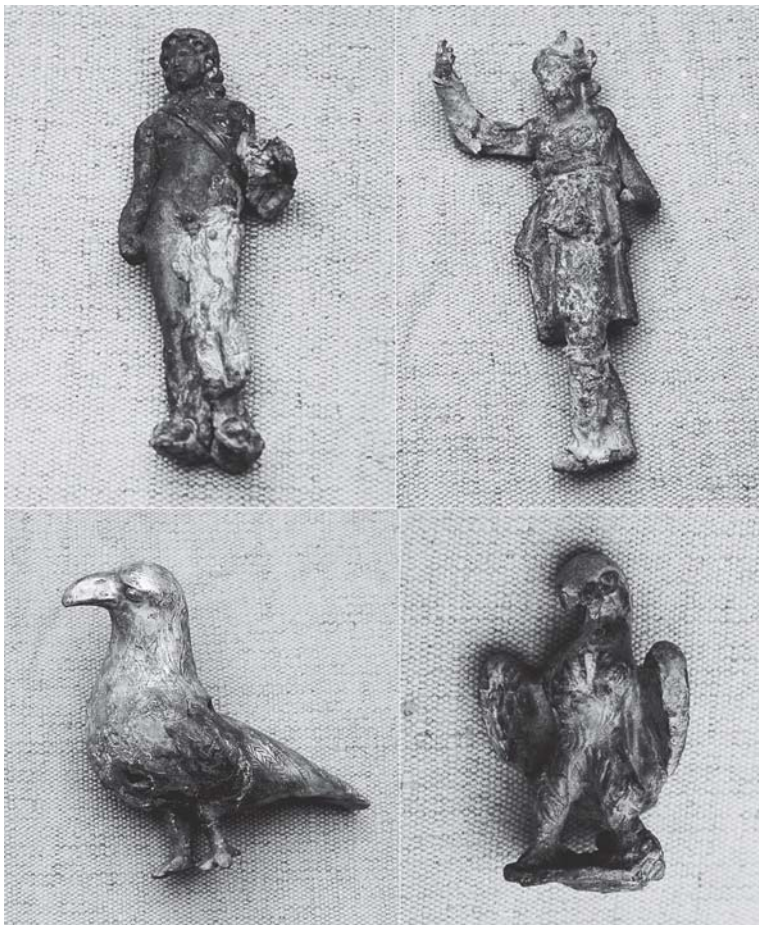

**Fig. 22.** Selected finds from the votive deposit in Room 20 (not to scale).

Room no. 21, to the south of Room no. 20, was an elongated space of trapezoidal shape, whose function was probably to accommodate the stairway leading to the upper floor. The doorway was located on the western side and opened into the pillared portico. Room no. 22, also accessed from the portico, was probably a kitchen, since a mud-brick oven was discovered in its southeastern corner. The oven consisted of two different sections: the proper baking surface (a flat tile—*solenos*—placed upside-down on its bottom) and a narrow ashy area. Several ceramic vessels and fragments thereof, two basalt grinding stones, and two heaps of grains were found on the floor of the room.

Similar to Room no. 20 and to the rooms of the building excavated in previous years, Room nos. 21 and 22 were filled with a heterogeneous mass of melted material, which looked like metal slag, created by the intense fire, which destroyed the building. This included a large number of objects: especially interesting among them is a set of bronze scales, the remains of which were found in the filling of Room no. 21, and a door-lock consisting of a flat iron plate with a keyhole in it from Room no. 22.

The excavated section of the portico included two complete pillars, in front of the doorways of Rooms no. 20 and 21 respectively. They had the usual rectangular shape (measuring 1.60 × 1.30 m), and were built using the same technique as the palace walls. The portico was filled with stone pebbles and mud-brick debris deriving from the collapse of the building's upper storey following the destruction of the pillars during the dramatic events that caused the building's final abandonment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES (I. G., E. R.)

After two field seasons, the joint Georgian-Italian investigations at Aradetis Orgora have already provided new, important information about the site's ancient history and confirmed its paramount significance for the archaeology of the Shida Kartli region of Georgia. While the Hellenistic/Early Roman palatial building on the Main (Dedoplis Gora) Mound, whose investigation is now nearly complete, continues to yield spectacular finds and undoubtedly remains one of the most significant examples of public architecture in the region, the stratigraphical soundings have also underscored the site's potential for research on the pre-classical periods.

The Main Mound's sequence of occupation, which spans (with only minor interruptions) more than four millennia, represents an invaluable resource for analysing historical developments from a longue-durée perspective, and may become, in the future, the backbone of the comparative stratigraphy of a region in which settlements continuously occupied for such a long time are relatively rare. In addition, it offers an invaluable opportunity to carry out palaeoenvironmental research that yields data spanning several millennia.[29] Finally, the presence of a contemporary cemetery and the existence in the site's close neighbourhood of significant, already explored settlements and cemeteries of different periods (e.g., Beriklbeebi, Khizanaant Gora, Kvatskhelebi, and Dedoplis Mindori, to name just a few) opens up interesting perspectives for the analysis of settlement dynamics at a micro-regional level.

Up until now, the Main Mound's chief periods of pre-classical occupation have been confirmed as the Kura-Araxes period (with the 4-m thick occupational sequence in Field B) and the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age. These two periods represent, in Georgia and, in general,

[29] On palaeoenvironmental research at the site and its preliminary results, see Gagoshidze and Rova 2016.

everywhere in the South Caucasus, phases of intensive settlement and/or re-settlement, apparently separated by phases of more sparse, or less sedentary, occupation of the territory. On the other hand, the sporadic recovery of materials belonging to the Late Chalcolithic (early to mid-fourth millennium BC), the Early Kurgan (later Early Bronze Age, second half of the third millennium BC) and the (later) Middle Bronze Age (first half of the second millennium BC), allows us to suppose that the site, due to its regional importance, may have been one of the few that were settled during these periods of less intense occupation of the territory. It could therefore provide important information for reconstructing these still obscure phases of Shida Kartli's ancient (pre)history.

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