

Metsamor (Armenia) after five seasons of excavations



Abstract: The Metsamor site in the 2017 season was excavated in two areas. The main area was the so-called town area where several dwellings from the Early Iron Age were cleared. Evidence of violent site destruction included two human skeletons belonging most probably to victims of a sudden attack, left unburied after the town had been destroyed. The cemetery was the second investigated area. Exploration of kurgan XIX demonstrated that it had been looted. Nevertheless, some human remains and several artifacts in the form of bronze snake head bracelets were recorded inside the burial chamber.

Keywords: Early Iron Age, dwelling structures, graves, storage jars, stamp seal, Urartian fibula, snake head bracelet

The fifth season of archaeological fieldwork in the northern part of the hill at Metsamor, in the area of the so-called lower town, was a continuation of earlier research on this archaeological site situated around 37 km west of Yerevan, the capital city of the Republic of Armenia. The western part of the already excavated area (see Jakubiak et al. 2016; 2017) was not extended significantly, the main target being confirmation of the stratigraphic sequence and interpretation of the architectural structures, fragments of which had been brought to light in preceding seasons. Investigations were conducted also in the cemetery.

Krzysztof Jakubiak¹

Ashot Piliposyan²

Mateusz Iskra¹

Artavazd Zakyan^{2,3}

¹ Institute of Archaeology,
University of Warsaw

² Service for the Protection
of Historical Environment and Cultural
Museum-Reservations NCSO

³ Metsamor Museum

Team

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Co-directors: Assist. Prof. Krzysztof Jakubiak (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Prof. Ashot Piliposyan (Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO)

Archaeologists: Tatiana Adamowska (PhD candidate, Antiquity of Southeastern Europe Research Center University of Warsaw), Elisabeth Bastien (freelance), Mateusz Iskra (PhD candidate, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Levon Mkrtchyan (PhD candidate, Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO), Dan Socaciu (PhD candidate, Institute of Archaeology, University of Liverpool), Marek Truszkowski (PCMA UW), Dr. Zuzanna Wygnańska (PCMA UW), Karol Zajdowski (PhD candidate, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Artavazd Zakyan (PhD candidate, Metsamor Museum, Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO)

Pottery specialist: Tigran Zakyan (Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO)

Anthropologist: Hasmik Simonyan (PhD candidate, Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO)

Archaeozoologist: Kinga Bigoraj (PhD candidate, Antiquity of Southeastern Europe Research Center University of Warsaw)

Documentalist: Deborah Gawlikowska (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw)

Topographer: Menua Gevorgyan (Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO)

Archaeology student-trainees: Otto Bagi, Jerzy Ciastek, Kornelia Kasperkiewicz, Aleksandra Konrad, Ludmiła Krukowska, Julia Maczuga (all Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Lusine Aleqsanyan, Nerses Mamikonyan (both Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO), Astghik Simonyan (Yerevan State University), Maciej Sobczak (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

Volunteers: Jakub Gronowski, Małgorzata Reszka (both University of Wrocław)

SETTLEMENT

In the western part of the excavated lower town, the work focused on two smaller, practically adjoining sectors [Fig. 1]. The first trench was situated against the northwest wall (context 1003) of structure S2;¹ it extended toward the stone walls that made up architectural structures S6 (context 1023) and S4 (context 1005). A relatively large rectangular chamber (S11), 5.80 m by 2.70 m in size, was uncovered [Fig. 2]. The chamber had a clay

floor initially. Sunk halfway into the floor, about 0.65 m, in the eastern corner of the structure was a large storage jar.

This part of the building was abandoned in an equally dramatic way as the neighboring S2. A skeleton (No. 7) was found against one of the walls excavated this season, adding to skeletons Nos 2 and 3 discovered here earlier (Jakubiak et al. 2016: 560–561). The body had evidently not been buried in any formal manner,



Fig. 1. Structures S11 (in the foreground) and S2, aerial view from the northwest (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photo M. Truskowski)

1 A new system for designating architectural structures was introduced to ensure better identification of units forming part of larger structures, like pit houses for example. Under the new system each structure is classified separately without defining any mutual connections. So far, 11 architectural features have been given a new number: S (=structure) 1 to 11; the following is a concordance list for the NSB numbers from previous reports: NSB 1.1 = S1, NSB 1.2 = S7, NSB 1.3 = S8, NSB 2 = S2, NSB 3 = S3, NSB 4 = S4, NSB 5 = S5, NSB 6 = S6.

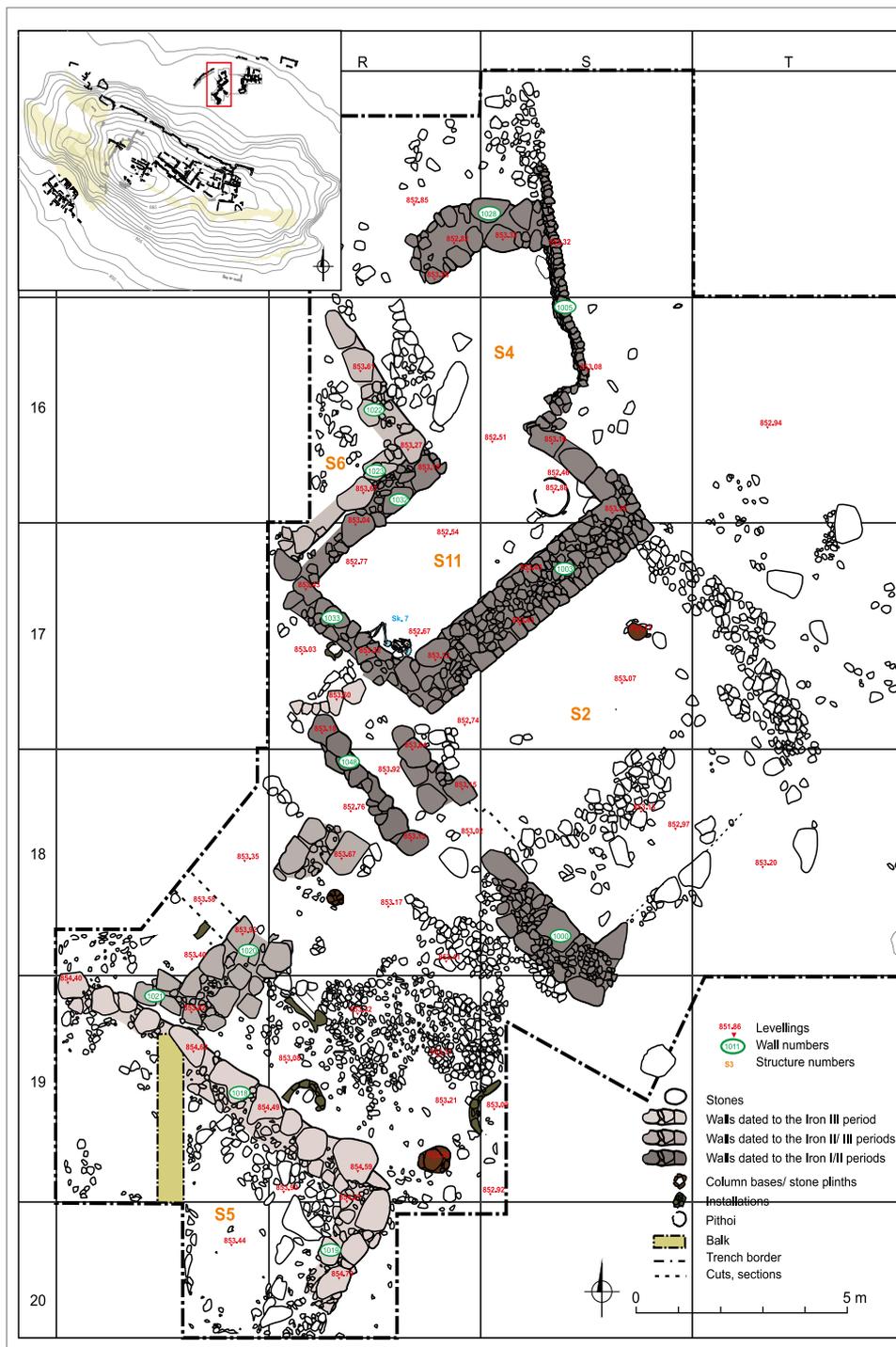


Fig. 2. Western part of the excavation area (sector VIII) (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/ drawing M. Iskra)

the skeleton lying in a foetal position, but with the bones of both hands unnaturally twisted and bent backwards, still gripping iron knives which the man had used to defend himself. Another skeleton (No. 6)

was found in square C15. The deceased was a young male lying supine with bent legs [Fig. 3]. The upper parts of his skull as well as the feet bones were missing. The finds near the skeleton included two



Fig. 3. Skeleton No. 6: top, the skeleton *in situ* in square C15; bottom, two Urartian fibulae, fragmentary ring, knife blade; on right, “Scythian” arrowhead found among the bones, all objects of bronze (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photos T. Adamowska, M. Iskra and T. Zakyán)

bronze fibulae, iron forceps, a knife and a sickle. The fibulae, U-shaped in form with straight needles, can be classified as Urartian jewelry. Similar artifacts were found also in an Urartian grave (No. 4) in the Metsamor cemetery (Khazadryan, Mkrtch'yan, and Parsamyan 1973: XL. 4,5).

The space between structures S5 and S2, south of S11 (squares R18/R19) turned out to be a partly stone-paved, open courtyard or square between buildings, evidently constructed on top of the Iron Age I settlement and dated by the assemblage, e.g., red-polished Toprakale Ware from the mid-7th century BC, to the Urartian period. This material was discovered together with a local pottery assemblage that could be linked to an earlier production associated with the Lcheshen-Metsamor 5 and 6 pottery horizon. These ties with an earlier tradition widespread across the Ararat plain (Avetisyan 2009: 62–65) indicate

a cultural and technical production continuity of the potter's craft at Metsamor. The paved floor was still in use, in spite of some damage to its substance, when structure S5 was constructed. The latter structure, not fully recognized yet, can be dated to the Iron Age II period or Urartian times as attested by radiocarbon dates for a carbonized wooden beam found close to the pavement (¹⁴C age of 2450 ± 60 BP calibrated against the IntCal13 atmospheric curve produced a calibrated age of 764–409 BC [2 sigma range]) [Fig. 4].

Most of the effort in the 2017 season was focused on the eastern part of the settlement in squares A17, B15–B16, C15–C17, D15–D17 [Fig. 5]. Structures S1, S7, S8 and S9 were tested to fill out and verify the chronological sequence, concentrating for the most part on structure S1, which was identified earlier as a kind of pit house, that is, a dwelling

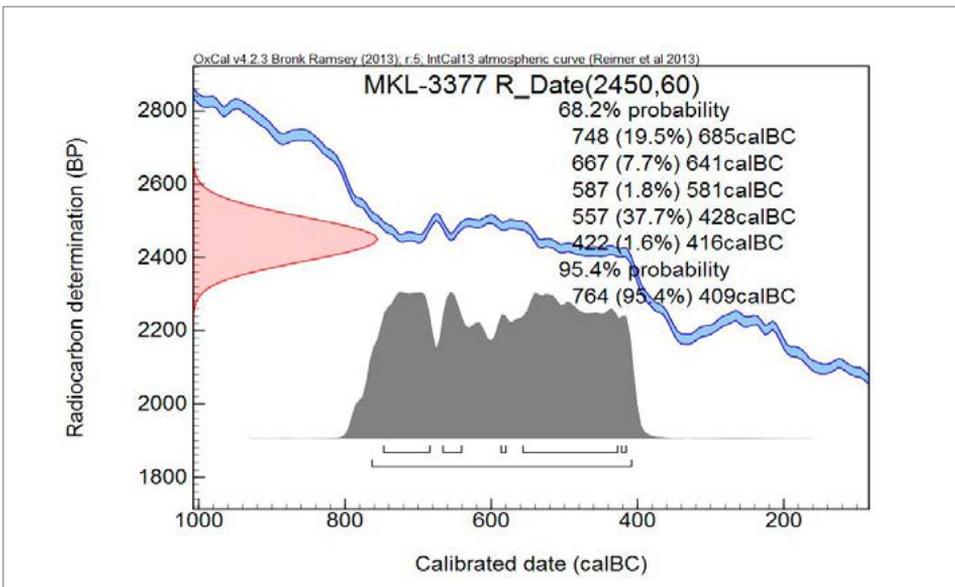


Fig. 4. Radiocarbon dating chart for a carbonized wooden beam from structure S5

structure partly sunk in the ground, for storing goods.² Two clay floor levels were recorded inside the structure. The upper floor level, which was already unearthed during the 2013 and 2014 seasons (Jakubiak et al. 2016: 564, 565), corresponded to a stone installation situated against the south wall (context 1004) of the structure, consisting of four pumice mortars and two large basalt breadboards. Four

pumice plinths were found in the center of the excavated room; they must have supported the wooden beams holding up the roof of the building. Scattered around the installation were numerous broken vessels and fragments of burnt beams, attesting to a violent destruction.

An earlier floor level was found approximately 20–30 cm below the above-described floor [Fig. 6]. A large pithos,

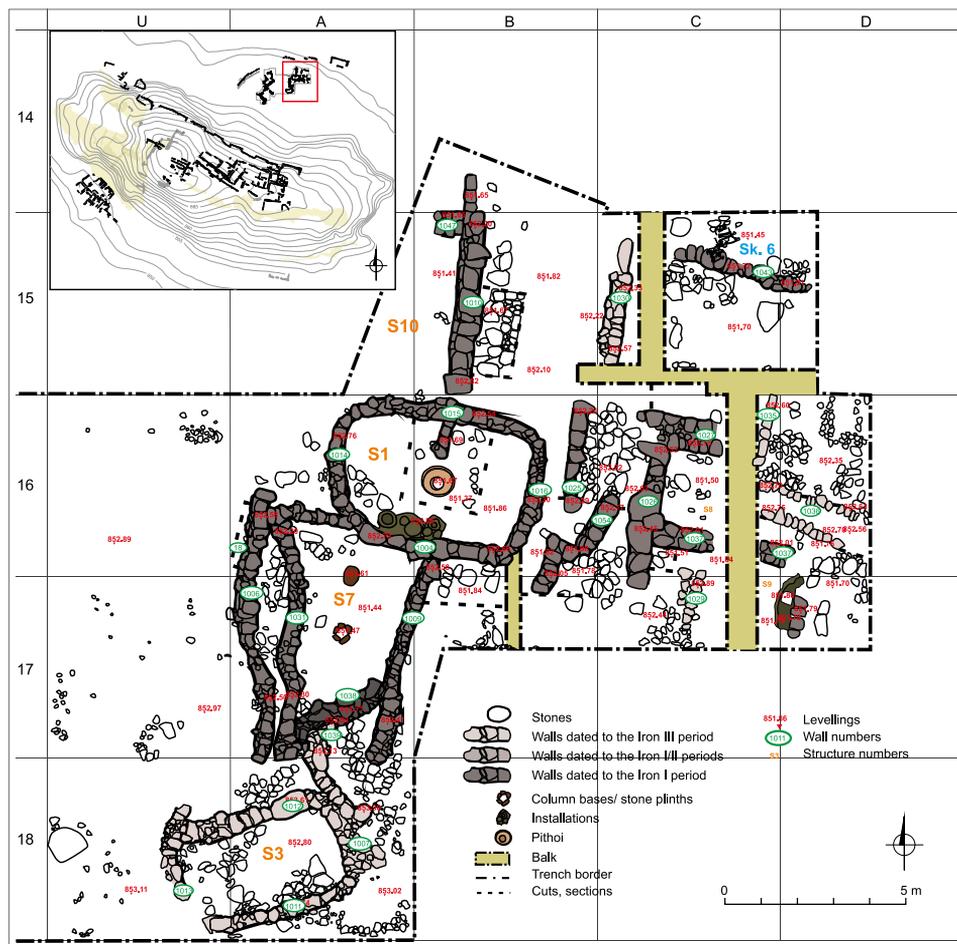


Fig. 5. Eastern part of the excavation area (sector IX) (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/drawing M. Iskra)

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These types of structures were widespread across the southern Caucasus starting from the Bronze Age; Late Bronze/Iron I and II examples include Khanlar (Baxseliyev 2007: 192), Azatan (Mauermann 2015: 14), Keti (Petrosyan 1989: 28–31), Tsaghkahovit and Gegharot (Badalyan, Smith, and Khatchadourian 2010: 268), Karmir Blur (Sorokin 1958).

measuring 83 cm in diameter, occupied the center of the room, directly under the pumice plinths. It was sunk into the floor with only the uppermost part, decorated by a wide band of wavy lines at the top, visible above the ground. The pithos is a characteristic form of the so-called Lchashen-Metsamor phases 5 and 6. Other forms of table and cooking ware vessels from the area are paralleled by

finds from the Iron Age settlements of Dvin (Kušnareva 1977: Pls IX.1,2 XXIX.1), Elar (Khanzadyan 1979: Pl. XX), and Shirakavan (Torosyan, Khnkikyan, and Petrosyan 2002: Pls LIX–LXVIII), as well as mortuary contexts from the same period, e.g., Talin (Avetisyan and Avetisyan 2006: Pls 40–55). Fragments typical of pottery produced in the Urartian period (early 8th/mid-7th century BC) in the Van re-

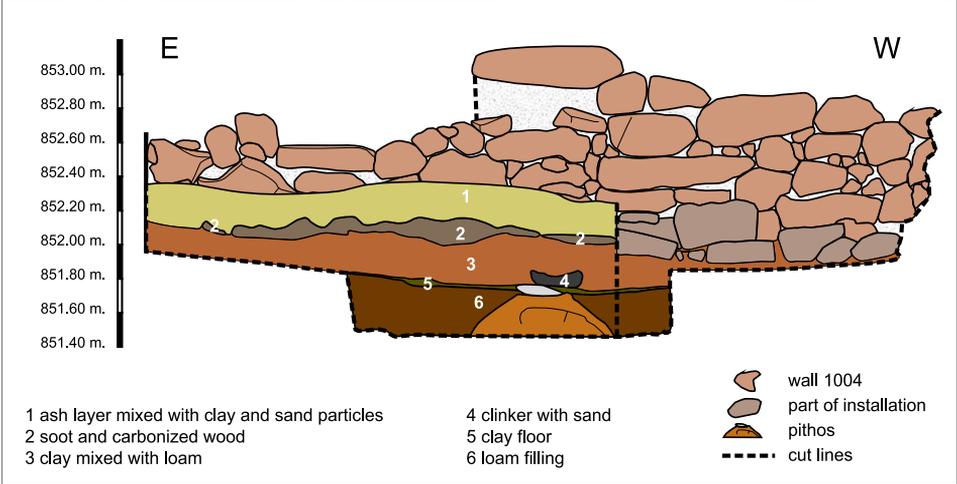


Fig. 6. Large pithos inside structure S1: top, view from the north; bottom, section through the room and the pithos feature (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photo and drawing M. Iskra)

gion merit special attention among the locally made wares [Fig. 7].

A longitudinal stone structure, S7, was attached to the south wall of building S1 (context 1004) [Fig. 8]. It was slightly trap-ezoid in plan, 5.70 m by 3.10 m, built of small and middle-sized irregular stones. Considering its character, it would have been sunk partly into the ground. Its relatively large size required at least two wooden pillars to support the roof. The only surviving evidence of the wooden posts are the circular stone structures that reinforced the beams at the base.

A kind of ramp built of stones, uncovered in the southern part of the chamber, led down into the building interior. This ramp presumably took advantage of standing ruins, conveniently using them as an entrance to the pit house located upon earlier architectural remains, which were most likely

too difficult to remove. The ramp could have been plastered with clay, which would have made the way in quite comfortable. It could have also been used by the animals kept in the building. The construction was most probably similar to the pit houses from Armenia known from Xenophon's account in *Anabasis* (IV,5).

The accumulated deposits inside the structure indicated at least two exploitation phases in S7 (chronologically corresponding with the two floor levels unearthed in S1). The building was probably a dwelling house at first and became a dump site after it was deserted. The pottery material from both levels was similar, but the sherds found on the upper floor level inside S7 resembled the tableware fragments recorded on the lower floor level of structure S1. It is likely that units S1 and S7 once formed a relatively large dwelling complex compared

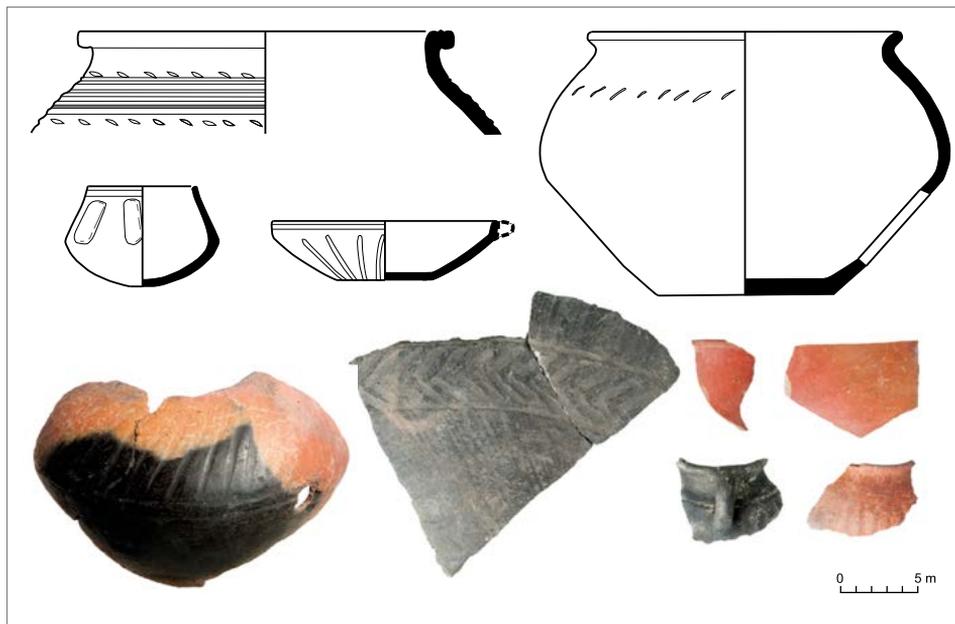


Fig. 7. Pottery from Iron I and Iron II Ages from the eastern part of the excavation area (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photos E. Bastien, drawing D. Gawlikowska)



Fig. 8. Structure S7, view from the south (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photo O. Bagi)

to the other structures of the settlement. The organic waste that accumulated inside the abandoned structure comprised a large number of animal bones, mostly of cattle and small domestic ruminants, that is, sheep and goat. Considering the anatomical and species distribution, as well as attested chopping, cutting and generally dismembering marks, it should be assumed that the deposit was the result of a relatively long process of accumulation of meat consumption waste.

Structures S8 and S9 were uncovered in an extension of the trench dug east of the S1 and S7 complex (squares C16/C17, D16/D17). These were apparently chambers belonging to a single building constructed on the other side of a narrow street separating it from the S1/S7 complex. The building technique in the case of these two units dif-

fered from that of the architectural structures discovered so far in Metsamor. It was a casemate-like wall (e.g., context 1027), the space between the stone faces being filled with highly compacted clay, sometimes mixed with small pebbles. The structure should probably be associated with an apparent stone pavement (context 1025) by the west wall of the building (Jakubiak et al. 2017: 560). The S8/S9 building is intriguing not only because of the unusual wall construction. The assemblage of artifacts discovered inside is also interesting in view of the relatively thick deposit of intensively burned ashes accumulated mostly on the floor in S9 and in the upper layer of S8. Some fragments of small fineware jars were brought to light near this deposit. Moreover, a crescent-shaped installation of clay was discovered inside chamber S9



Fig. 9. Clay installation in structure S9: left, view from the south; right, clay stamp seal, underside and side view (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photos K. Kasperkiewicz, T. Zakyán)

[Fig. 9]. Its shape suggests use as an andiron or quern basin (Badalyan et al. 2014: 182, Fig. 18). A flat longitudinal object made of basalt with semicircular endings found inside the installation was a quern stone or grinder usually used for bread-making. The bakery idea was further supported by the discovery of a flat circular stamp seal made of clay with a cross motif as decoration. Other contexts where similar stamp seals were discovered (Khazadzyan, Mkrtch'yan, and Parsamyan 1973: Figs 134, 135; Badalyan et al. 2014: Fig. 22, 8–9) indicate that these objects were used in all likelihood for marking sacrificial bread. Thus, the object from S9 may have been used in cultic practices performed in Metsamor; consequently, the partly excavated chamber S9 could be interpreted provisionally as a place of some religious meaning: a sanctuary or shrine of some kind. An extension of the trench to the southeast should resolve this issue.

The northern part of the alleged shrine was overlain by a large stone structure, which was preserved at the wall foundation level, directly under the ground surface in this part of the site. It should be associated with the last occupation phase in this part of the settlement. Remains of the walls and pavements from this phase, dated to Iron Age III, have already been discussed in earlier reports (Jakubiak et al. 2016; 2017).

Two other stone structures (separated by wall 1010) were uncovered north of the described remains (squares B15, C15). An analysis of the stratigraphy indicated that this architecture, which was better built and more solid, was earlier in date than the structures described above. It is also evident that these early structures were reused in a later period. At least

five stone walls from this early phase of site occupation have been recorded at Metsamor so far and the pottery finds show that they could have been constructed during the Early Iron I period. The regularity of these remains suggests that the settlement from before the Urartian invasion was well organized and even better planned than in later times when the Urartian Kingdom incorporated the Ararat plain into its dominion.

The apparent regress in architectural sophistication at Metsamor during the Urartian period is surprising in view of the conviction that the Urartians were bearers of civilization and progress to the proto-state societies that were believed to be less civilized. In this context, the roughly constructed pit houses of Metsamor are entirely unexpected. Perhaps simply the Urartians did not settle Metsamor.

Similarities of architectural tradition can be observed with the numerous small settlements from the Early Iron Age I in the Aragats massif. At Gegaroth, which is earlier than Metsamor, similar structures were dated to the Late Bronze Age. At other sites, like Argatsi-Berd and Keti, the architectural remains, including similar pit houses, were most probably contemporaneous with the Urartian-period structures from Metsamor. The evolution of building strategies and structures between the Iron Age I and II periods may be interpreted as a consequence of a shifting population, with people migrating from small villages like those in the Aragats area to the valley of the Aras, bringing with them their own architectural traditions and building skills. In effect, the earlier proto-urban Metsamor was downgraded in the period of Urartian

dominance into a village with numerous pit houses representing an architectural regress. Separating the two phases was a settlement hiatus, which ceased with the arrival of human groups coming from

the Aragats area or from the Shamiram plateau. Another possibility is that the Urartians dislocated local communities and settled people from the mountain region in the fertile land of the Aras valley.

CEMETERY

Continued work in the cemetery area comprised exploration of another kurgan. The burial structure was recorded as kurgan XIX (following Khanzadyan's numbering system, see Khanzadyan 1995: 1). The stone chamber was oriented NE–SW. It was of a trapezoid shape, measuring 4.30 m by 2.40 m [Fig. 10]. An earthen mound of soil mixed with small stones and pebbles, approximately 8 m in diameter, once covered the chamber, but virtually nothing remains of this structure apart from a partly preserved stone circle. Inside the chamber there were two burial levels separated by a 20-cm-thick layer of small stones and pebbles. This layer was probably same with the fill of the kurgan mound. The lower deposit was 20 cm thick and is associated with the initial phase of tomb construction, while the upper deposit, recognized more than dozen centimeters higher, was formed after the mound had been destroyed and should subsequently be associated with a re-arrangement of the original chamber. During the second phase of the tomb usage, a large basalt stone slab divided the chamber into two parts, forming two smaller cist graves (1.95 m by 2.40 m and 1.70 m by 2.40 m respectively).

Both burial levels were considerably affected by the long usage of the chamber and the post-depositional processes. It is almost impossible to reconstruct the ar-

range of particular burials and to estimate the number of buried individuals. The upper level revealed a huge quantity of fragmented human bones, including skull parts, collected in two spots close to the northeastern and southwestern corners of the chamber. Interspersed among the bones were seven bronze bracelets, various stone beads, a bronze earring and pottery sherds. Three bracelets with serpent-headed terminals, which are frequent in graves from the Urartian/Iron II periods (Khanzadyan, Mkrtch'yan, and Parsamyan 1973: Pl. XL,1–3; Esayan and Kalantaryan 1988: Pls LXIX,1,2 and XCI-II,3), supply a date for the upper burial level.

The lower deposit, which can be roughly dated to the LBA III/Iron I period (13th–9th century BC), yielded the remains of human and animal bones, as well as personal ornaments scattered mostly in the center of the chamber. It may be postulated on the grounds of this evidence that the burial in this level was less collective. The presence of horse skulls with bronze harness parts and, especially, five golden beads and a golden pendant indicate that the chamber was built for a rich member of the town elite. No larger artifacts were found, hence it is likely that the burial was robbed in antiquity previous to the installation of the Iron II interments. A pendant made of

golden sheet with an embossed ornament in the shape of four spirals is worth noting from this earlier level. Golden pendants having four spirals made of golden wire were found in Shirakavan (Toros-

yan, Khnkikyan, and Petrosyan 2002: Pl. XXXII,18), Lori Berd (Devedjyan 2006: Pl. IV,4) and in Lchashen (Kalantaryan 2007: Pl. 36).

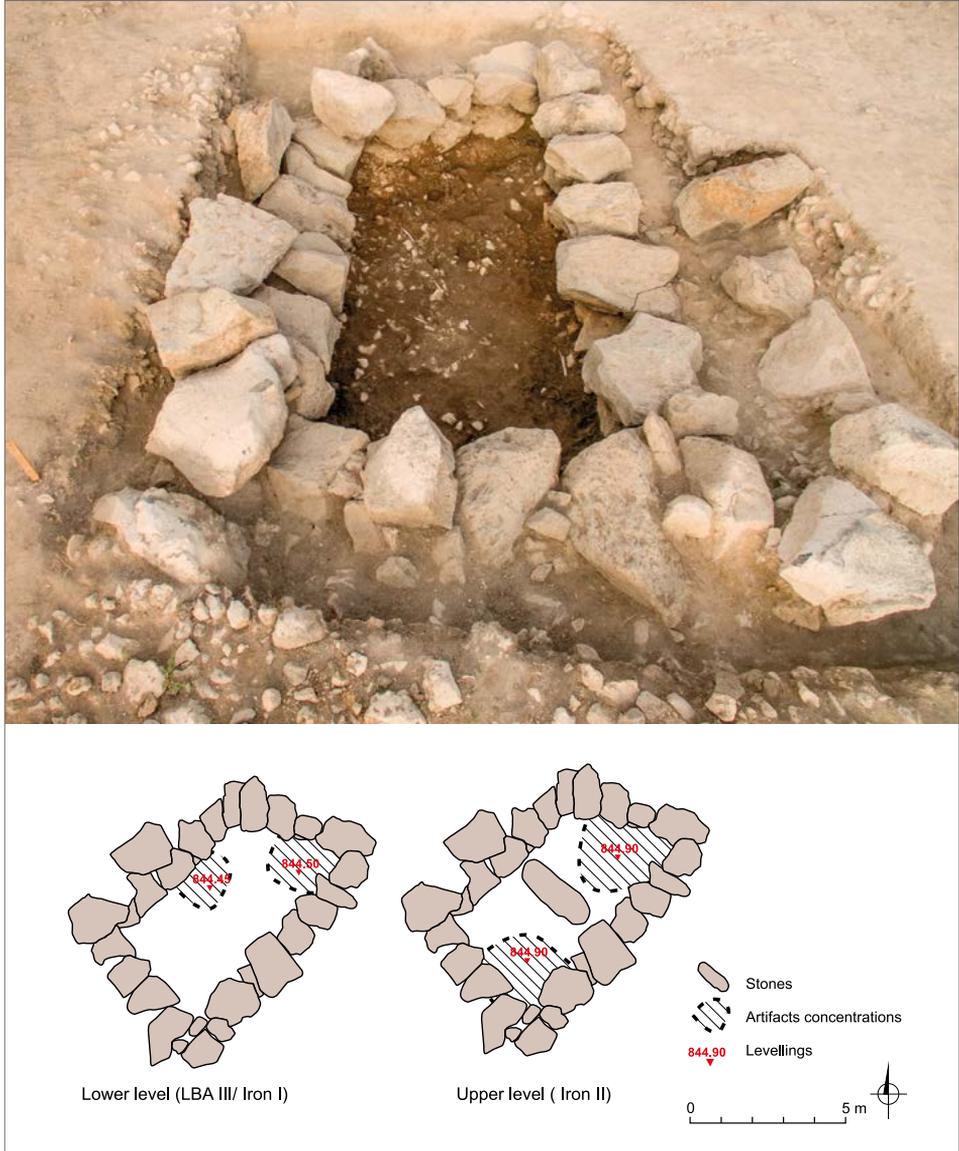


Fig. 10. Chamber of kurgan XIX: top, view from the southwest, during exploration; bottom, plans of the lower and upper burial levels (PCMA UW Metsamor Project/photo M. Truszkowski, drawing M. Iskra)

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding upon the results of the latest season in the field, the most important finding undoubtedly is the changed layout and character of the settlement at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. It is now clear how the earlier proto-urban arrangement of the city was destroyed and then resettled by newcomers. These may have been hypothetically people from

the mountain regions, who would have brought with them the pit houses previously unknown at Metsamor that now occupied the central part of the site. This village-like settlement arrangement functioned most probably during the Urartian period. It cannot be excluded, of course, that for whatever reason the pit houses were built only in a part of the site.

Assist. Prof. Krzysztof Jakubiak

ORCID 0000-0003-3123-7564

Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw
00-970 Warszawa, Poland,
ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28
jakubiakk@interia.pl

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Prof. Ashot Piliposyan

Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO
piliposyan@yahoo.com

Mateusz Iskra ORCID 0000-0001-6927-514X

PhD candidate, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw
00-970 Warszawa, Poland, ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28
iskramateusz87@gmail.com

Artavazd Zakyan

PhD candidate, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography,
National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia
Metsamor Museum

Service for the Protection of Historical Environment and Cultural Museum-Reservations NCSO
artavazd.zaqyan@gmail.com

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