

# Argishti I in the Arax valley: consequences of the conquest

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**Abstract:** The conquest of the fertile Arax valley by Argishti I in the mid 8th century BC was a major point in Urartian imperial policy, the valley having been a target of Urartian expansion from the start. The article outlines Argishti's actions, including the evidence of violence discovered during recent excavation at Metsamor in Armenia, thus highlighting the dynamics and significance of Urartian expansionism. A contribution is also made to a study of the emergence and development of urban settlement in the Arax valley through an examination of surviving Urartian inscriptions.

**Keywords:** Urartu, Argishti I, Erebuni, Argishtikhinili, Oshakan, Metsamor, Arax valley

Recent work at Metsamor in Armenia (excavated since 2013 by a Polish–Armenian joint expedition) has uncovered telling evidence of a turbulent times accompanying Urartian expansion in the 9th–8th century BC. The burning and abandonment of the city of Metsamor is written into the history of the Urartian kingdom, highlighting the dynamics and significance of the processes of expansion, accompanying the emergence and development of urban settlement in the Arax valley.

From the time of its emergence in the region of Lake Van the Urartian kingdom was set on a policy of expansion, constrained at first by the vulnerability of its economy. Unable to sustain dynamic growth on the available arable land and pastures (Zimansky 1985: 9–31), the kingdom embarked on a long-lasting process of

subjugating and exploiting new territories around Lake Van and gradually advancing further east into the lands west of Lake Urmia. This secured a solid base for economic growth (Kleiss 1969–1970).

The Arax valley and adjoining territories with their fertile arable lands and mild climate were attractive from an economic point of view, but also seminal in terms of the anticipated political implications of the expansion. Relentless and methodical territorial expansion by Urartian kings led to the establishment of most likely tribal proto-states. The state-forming process was analyzed extensively by Smith (1996; 2012), yet the underpinnings and dynamics remain unknown. The results of recent excavation at Metsamor, attesting to sweeping violence that destroyed the settlement and fortress in the times of Argishti I, stand

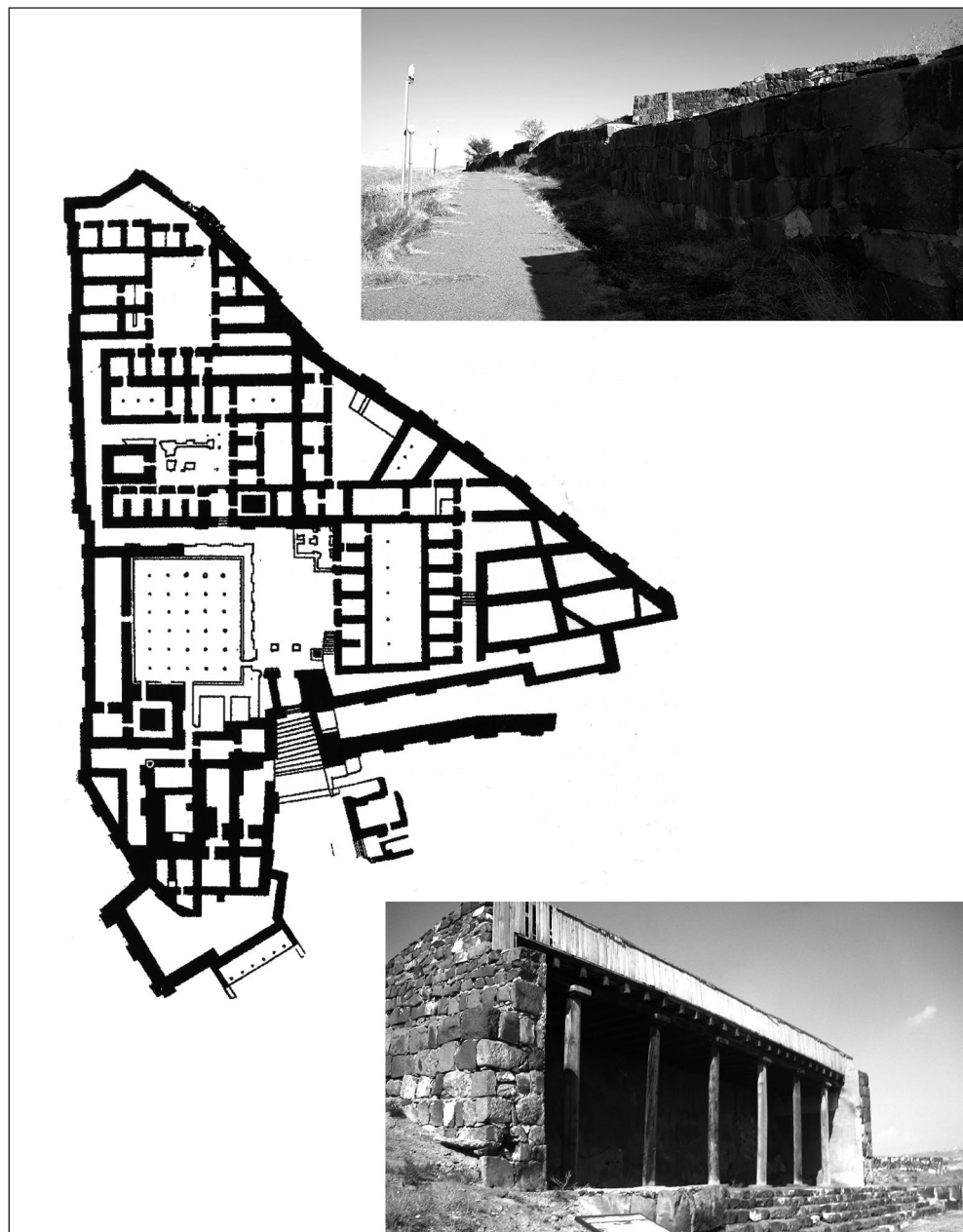
at the base of the present contribution delving into the nature and consequences of Urartian expansionary politics in the 9th through mid 8th century BC.

The reign of Argishti I corresponded to a marked development of the Urartian kingdom (Wartke 1993: 35–45; Piotrovskij 1970: 67–82) [Fig. 1]. He was doubtless one of Urartu's greatest rulers, incorporating the territories in the central part of the Arax valley and developing Erebuni into one of the most important fortresses in the region (König 1955–1957: 109–110; Oganessian 1960; 1973; Forbes 1983: 18–19) [Fig. 2]. He also built Argishtikhinili and presided over the growth of smaller fortified centers like Oshakan. These three will be discussed below, seeking to shed light on the nature of the threats that Argishti I faced during his rule.

Another important fortress and city named after king Argishtikhinili was established in the western parts of the provinces of Etiuni and Luqiuni just after Argishti's conquest in 853 BC (Martirosyan 1974) [see Fig. 1]. Its location was chosen carefully to suit the purpose of creating one of the largest Urartian military and economic centers. Two citadel structures, western and eastern, were constructed on two hills, in order to control the entire valley [Fig. 3]. The western citadel, which has been examined much more thoroughly than the eastern one, provided information on the fortification system from the time of Argishti I [Fig. 4]. Unlike Erebuni, this was a genuine fortification system, ready to serve as a strong point of resistance [Fig. 5 left]. The structure was built on a natural hilltop, the layout with the heavily



Fig. 1. The kingdom of Urartu in the times of Argishti I  
(Map after Tübingen Atlas des Vorderen Orients (TAVO), 785–753)



*Fig. 2. The citadel in Erebuni; inset top right, southern part of the defense wall; inset bottom right, the peristyle hall facade viewed from the south (Plan after Hodžaš, Truhtanova, and Oganesyanyan 1979: Fig. 3 on page 21; photos K. Jakubiak)*



Fig. 3. *The Arax valley with Mount Ararat in the center, view from the citadel in Argishtikhinili looking southwest (Photo K. Jakubiak)*

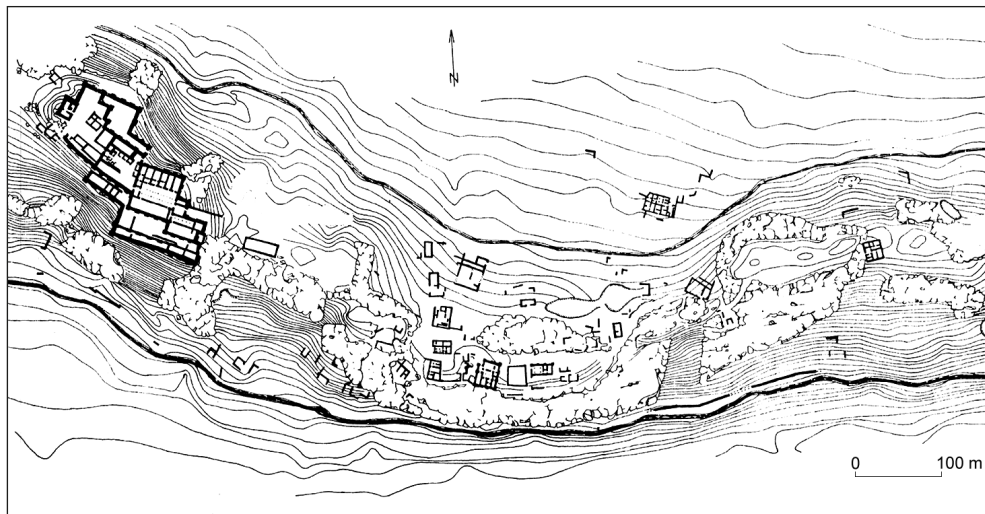


Fig. 4. *Argishtikhinili: plan of the western citadel (After Martirosyan 1974: Fig. 11)*



buttressed circuit wall taking advantage of the terrain [Fig. 5 top]. The stone work and the building methods reflect good knowledge of military architecture and building skills. The eastern citadel shows equally good use of the natural topography and the application of the same technical and architectural criteria, indicating a well-prepared fortification concept, which ensured maximum security and offered protection to the newly conquered lands.

Inscriptions discovered in the ruins of Argishtikhinili and in the vicinity shed light on land use, reflecting the policies

of Argishti I with regard to control over that part of the Arax valley. Inscription K91 found in the vicinity of Armavir gives the ancient name of the site and states Argishti's role in the development of the surrounding region: "Through the god Haldi's power, Argishti, son of Menua, speaks: a city for my power I erected, and gave it the name of Argishtihinli. The land around was never inhabited, nothing was established here, therefore I have led four canals from the Manu river, I had vineyards and orchards established, I have done good things here. I am Argishti, son of Menua,

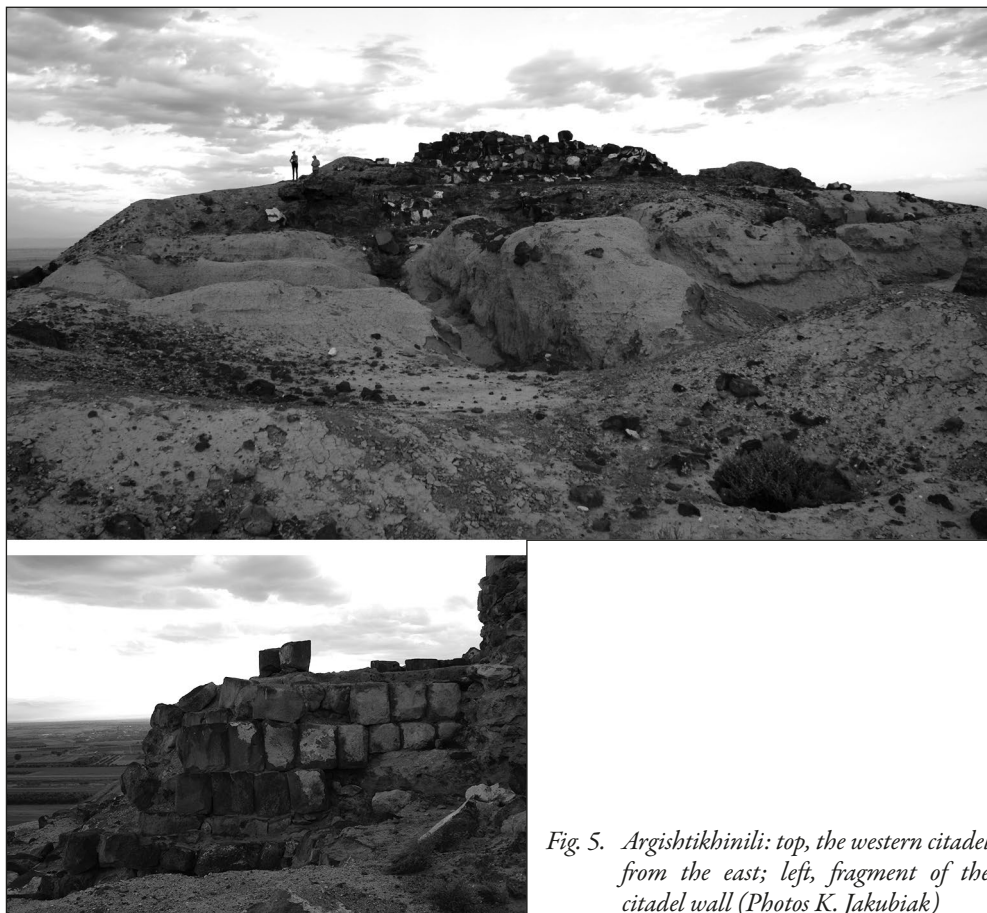


Fig. 5. *Argishtikhinili*: top, the western citadel from the east; left, fragment of the citadel wall (Photos K. Jakubiak)

powerful king, the great king, the king of the Land Biai, the Lord of the city of Tushpa” (König 1955–1957: 109; Salvini 2008: 354). The text makes it clear that this part of the valley had not been exploited before for either economic, agricultural or colonization purposes. Taken at face value, the text highlights Argishti’s role as the one who established real power and brought civilization, kick-starting a period of economic prosperity. It can also be read as a piece of propaganda, making it one of the most important inscriptions discovered in Armavir. After all, it is hard to believe that such a fertile part of the Arax valley had been uninhabited and unused before the Urartian conquest. Whichever the case, the discoveries in the western citadel and lower town of Argishtikhinili imply new opportunities for dynamic development of this part of the province resulting from Argishti’s endeavors. This certainly went along with the process of the ever growing administrative control over the conquered territories.

The Argishtikhinili fortress appears to have been planned as a local religious center as well with at least three structures in the western citadel interpreted as temples (Forbes 1983: 74). The deities worshipped in these establishments are not identified for lack of epigraphic evidence. However, Inscription K97 mentioning several deities from the Urartian pantheon (König 1955–1957: 110–111) can be of some help in this regard. It was discovered in the vicinity of the fortress and listed some sacrifices to the gods worshipped in Argishtikhinili in the times of Argishti. The list opens, as usual, with Haldi, to whom a lamb, a sheep and an ox (or rather a bull), were offered in sacrifice. Another deity mentioned there is Uarabani, more commonly known as

Arubani, the wife of Haldi, to whom a bull was offered. Armavir must have thus been a sacred center of the main deities of the Urartian pantheon from the beginning of its functioning. It cannot be excluded however that the absence of indigenous deities means that the people living there had been resettled from the central zone of the Urartian kingdom. If the supposition is correct, theirs was the responsibility of organizing a new administrative, religious and military center. Theirs was also the task to supervise one of the most important, strategic roads leading to the heart of the kingdom.

The territorial expansion and growth of the Argishti kingdom led to the emergence of some lesser fortresses as well, like the relatively small fort of Oshakan (Esayan and Kalantaryan 1988) [*Fig. 6*]. Constructed on a steep hill, it nevertheless does not seem to have been intended as a defense point against possible attack, rather as a checkpoint situated at an important crossroads, supervising the flow of people and goods. It cannot be excluded that it was constructed to protect and supervise local trade, acting probably as a local tax collection unit. Taking into consideration the size of the fortress, it could house only a small military force.

Irrespective of its size, the fort might have benefited from some sort of settlement in its vicinity, facilitating its maintenance. The settlement or rather set of dwellings located near the military structure, most probably only partly enclosed by walls, is unique in Urartian territories and may have served a different purpose altogether [*Fig. 6*]. The wall protected or rather hid the dwellings, most certainly not being designed to resist a serious attack; however, its refugial role seems to have been

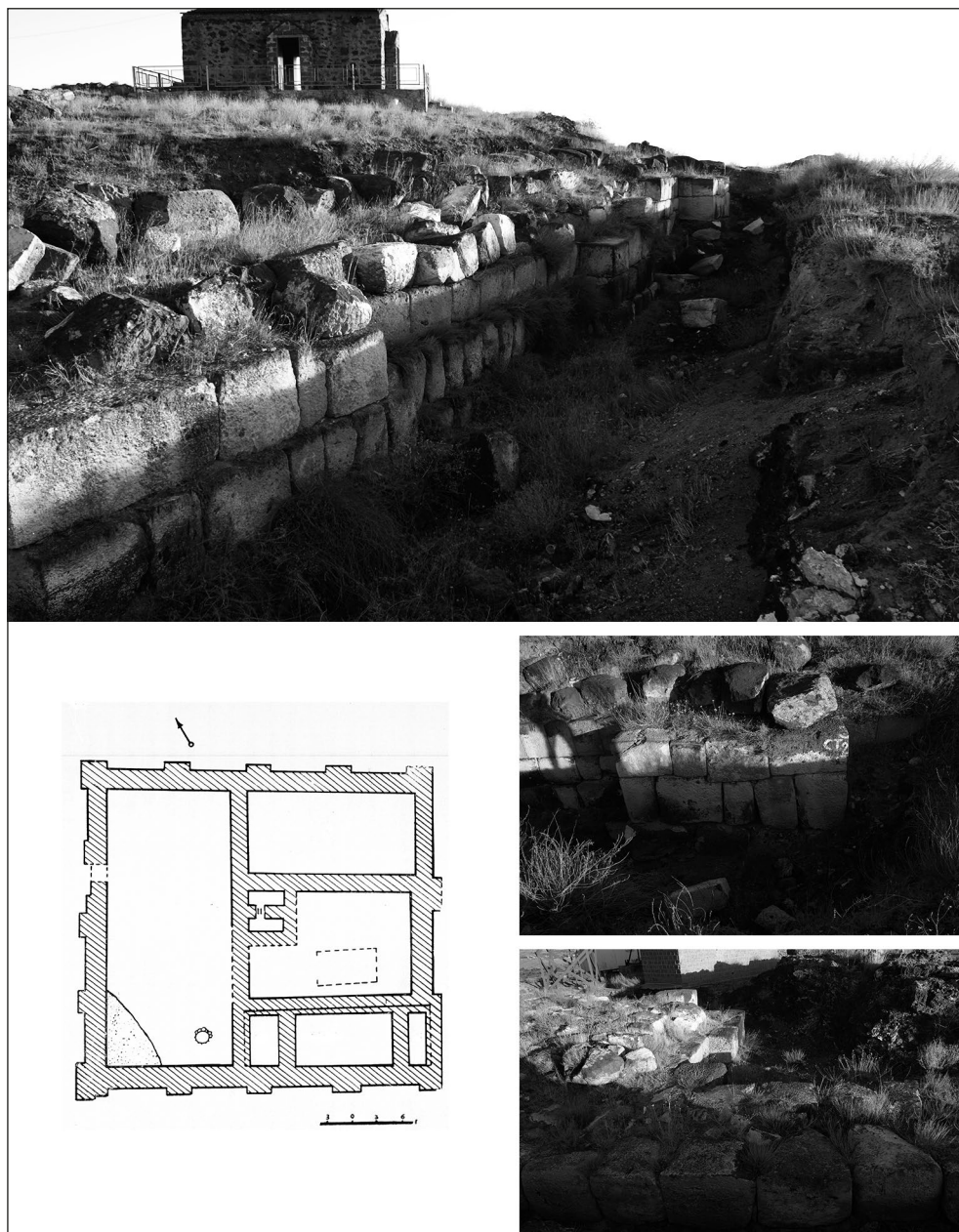


Fig. 6. Oshakan: bottom left, plan of the hilltop fort; top, remains of a defense wall; center and bottom right, a corner buttress and stone blocks from the curtain wall (Plan after Esayan and Kalantaryan 1988: Fig. 110; photos K. Jakubiak)



appreciated. The question is what kind of menace was involved in this area. Assuming that Argishti's conquest was not complete and that strong local resistance to Urartian rule remained, Oshakan could be seen as proof of the less than comfortable situation of the Urartians outside the big cities and large fortresses, such as Erebuni and Argishtikhinili, which constituted an ostentatious demonstration of Urartian power. It is very likely that Urartian presence was still quite unstable and not grounded enough to give the Oshakan dwellers full protection. Guerrilla fighting tactics may have still been in use against the Urartian invaders. Speculatively speaking, the settlers who decided to build a village on the top of the hill in the area of the already functioning fort must have been

counting on the protection of the Urartian military unit in case of an attack.

The Oshakan fort may have been constructed in the times of Argishti I considering its layout, building techniques and materials. The characteristic buttress system of the curtain wall layout, so different from the large and heavy buttresses distinctive for early Urartian military architecture, was an innovation introduced in the first half of the 8th century BC.

While the fortresses of Erebuni and Argishtikhinili show Argishti's involvement in this part of the Arax valley, the recent excavations in Metsamor shed light on the brutality of the incorporation of the provinces of Liquini and Etuini into the Urartian kingdom. The archaeological evidence from the settlement located



*Fig. 7. Metsamor: skeleton discovered in the ruins of the settlement  
(Photo K. Jakubiak)*



north of the Metsamor citadel reveals traces of a conflagration and destruction of the buildings, including bodies apparently left in the rubble (both discovered in 2014). One was of a woman who had been beheaded, the skull being found about 10 m from the rest of the body. The other belonged to an adult male who had been fleeing the disaster (Mkrtchyan and Simonyan 2016: 566–567) [Fig. 7]. At the time of his death he seems to have been clutching for safekeeping a small pitcher with an engraved trident symbol usually associated with the god Haldi. The relevant stratigraphic evidence dates the skeleton to the rule of Argishti I, making it thus an unfortunate victim of this ruler's push to the north.

To conclude, Argishti's taking of the Arax valley was a dynamic and sometimes brutal process, in keeping with the times when local rulers and their holdings had to bow to the new political and military power from Van. From an economic perspective, local communities could have benefited from the prosperity coming with the Urartian kingdom, but it is equally possible

that some of the indigenous peoples were resettled to other regions of the Urartian kingdom, being replaced by others who came to settle in the Arax valley, a process of population exchange that was not uncommon in the ancient Middle East.

Argishti I presumably embarked on the incorporation and unification of the newly acquired provinces supposedly right after the conquest, based on administrative and military supremacy. The process was quick and apparently violent as the Metsamor perspective would suggest. The main goal was to fully incorporate the most important provinces because of their economic and strategic potential, as well as to dismantle the barriers between the old and new provinces. The success of the project depended on a flurry of economic, military and architectural undertakings. In the end, this part of the Arax valley can be seen as one of the most important, if not crucial economic and agricultural centers of Urartu. It can be even postulated that under Argishti I the Arax valley flourished to an extent not enjoyed at any other time after the kingdom's fall.

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