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The Oldest Colchian Gold - Cultural Background and International Context

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Abstract: The earliest gold items appeared in the territory of eastern Georgia during the 3rd millennium BC, in the so-called Early Barrows Culture; this continued until the Middle Bronze Age (mid-2nd millennium BC). After the Trialeti Great Barrows Culture period, almost no gold and silver items were found on the sites dating from the second half of the 2nd millennium to the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. Objects dating after this gap, during the 8th-6th centuries BC, have been discovered in various types of archaeological sites of Colchis.

This paper aims to discuss the local and international cultural background based on which pre-classical Colchian goldsmithery was formed.

Keywords: *Gold; Goldsmithery; Colchis; Georgia*

In human history, humans were first introduced to gold in the Paleolithic age. In a cave situated in Spain dating back to 400 000 years BC small pieces of gold, collected by humans, were discovered. Still, it took tens of thousands of years for humanity to figure out the divine nature of this metal.

According to today's data, the oldest gold artefacts are found in Varna, Bulgaria, in Caranavo culture and are dated to the 6th millennia BC.

From the 5th millennium BC, gold started to appear in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where humans could determine its physicochemical characteristics only from the beginning of the 4th millennium BC. These are two significant regions where the complex technological methods of goldsmithing formed, which continue to amaze people today.

Whether the development of goldsmithery in different cultures was independent of each other or due to sharing and transferring experiences is not yet clearly defined and still requires several complex studies. It is probable that in regions rich in gold raw materials, gold was discovered in search of copper or other metals (because for the extraction of quarry gold, the same procedures are required as in the case of copper, silver, or lead).

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Nowadays, archaeological data and interdisciplinary studies, backed by the latest technological advances, allow us to partially identify those intercultural relations which had arisen from searching for metal or other exotic materials or household items. In this regard, it is essential to study the samples of ancient Colchian goldsmiths with the latest approaches, which, according to current data, is the subject of future research. We hope it will provide quite important information. This article will try to briefly present the cultural background in which the oldest Colchian goldsmithing was formed and discuss its status against the main contemporary goldsmithing centres of the outside world.

From ancient times the search for metal has been one of the reasons for the constant migration of people. For example, Mesopotamia is considered one of the oldest centres of craftsmanship and has invented several complex technological processes needed to import metal [12, pp. 17-18]. Because of this, it has previously established trade and economic relations with neighbouring regions. Interdisciplinary studies confirm that gold was imported from Egypt to

Mesopotamia in the 4th millennium BC [17, 27]. Later, Mesopotamia established active ties with Anatolia for metal import. It even created trading colonies (Bogaskoi, Karnis) by the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. From this period, Cilicia became the leading importer of gold in Sumer [12, 18]. Based on Sumerian records, another source of gold in Mesopotamia was identified in the southeast of Iran - in the Persian Gulf and possibly in Pakistan [11, 5].

Egypt, as a source of gold, did not lose its relevance in later times. It is clear from Amarna letters that it still supplied gold to the regions of Babylon, Assyria and Mitanni in the 14th-13th centuries BC (12, Xiv).

Because of natural resources and territory, Anatolia had long been a region where many cultures coexisted and redistributed. In the Early Metal Ages, along with the Eastern connections, impulses from European culture are also felt here. For example, early Anatolian goldsmithing reflected some of the trends in European jewellery: massive, glossy surfaces and harsh forms of accentuated simplicity [14, p. 18]. Some scholars believe that the ancient Helladic and Cycladic bronze cultures were brought to Greece by people migrating from the Anatolian region [9, up. 49]. Linguistic studies and newly discovered archaeological data indicate that the South Caucasus people were most likely involved in these migrations. The close relationship between the South Caucasus and the Aegean world, based on archaeological data, dates back to the Early Bronze Age, from the Kura-Araxes culture [16, pp. 11-14].

Because Transcaucasia, like Anatolia, was an ancient centre of metal-working, it was constantly under the attention of foreign migrants as far back as the 4th-3rd millennia BC. Scholars explain social and cultural changes of this time that characterise this region through the entry of foreign ethnos [4, pp. 121-134; 14, p. 7]. Material cultural sites found in the east, south and northeast of the Caucasus testify to these relations concerning the ancient civilisations of Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine [15, pp. 11-49]. During this time, certain relations between Central Anatolia and the North-West Caucasus region (Maykop culture) are confirmed.

Of interest is the situation in the eastern Black Sea region, in Colchis, during large-scale relations, significant cultural innovations and changes. Researcher G. Pkhakadze characterises the cultural situation of the Western Transcaucasia of this period as follows: The territory of western Georgia, located between these two powerful cultural centres, is undoubtedly influenced by

them. Still, mainly the culture of the farmer-cattle tribes develops here, which reveals a lot in common with the predecessor cultures. In the Early Bronze Age Colchis, there are three areas: 1) Region under the influence of Kura-Araxes culture (In Imereti, Dablagomi and Argveti settlement-hills and Sachkhere kurgans. 2) Region with a close connection with the sites of Maykop and Novosvobodnaya (caves of Imereti and Abkhazia) and 3) Colchian lowland and seashore of Abkhazia which characterised by the continuation and development of Neolithic ceramic traditions and elements that further describe the late Bronze Age Colchian culture [3, p. 22].

It seems that here, in the early and middle Bronze Ages, the local population, distinguished by their strong identity and old traditions, continues to exist. With the gradual development of metallurgy, cattle-breeding and agriculture, they lay the foundation for forming the Colchian culture of the Late Bronze--Early Iron age. The term "Protocolchian" was introduced in the scientific literature to note these up-mentioned early periods [6].

Of interest that, while in the Culture of Trialeti Great Barrows, we find a significant quantity of gold and silver examples of high technological and artistic value, together with the rapid development of bronze metallurgy, why the traditions of gold mining and production are absent in Colchis. In this regard, the researcher Ot. Japaridze suggested that the sharp rise of Trialeti goldsmithing in the Middle Bronze Age resulted from ethnocultural relations that existed in this period [4, p. 73], consequently, the situation in Colchis - the continuation of the indigenous culture and the absence of such relations - led to the lack of those innovations, which was suddenly introduced in the culture of Trialeti. Another probable reason may be that the burials from this period are identified as units in western Georgia when an essential part of the metal and other material culture comes from graves. One more and quite convincing reason may be that the Colchians of this period expressed their spiritual and social ideology so well in bronze products that they did not need gold, which is rarer and hard to obtain in nature. In the developed stage of the Colchian culture, the artistic processing of bronze is so high-level that they are pretty well able to use such sophisticated technological methods with specially selected ligatures, which are mainly used only on precious metal, these are: imitations of open-work filigree and granulation, hammering a sheet of bronze and decorating them with various manipulations and, most importantly, inlaying or in-settings of stones. This is the

most straightforward explanation (if the existing picture will not change based on future archaeological research) of how a precious metal product of such high artistic value suddenly appears in Colchis - artisans who are well-trained in the artistic treatment of bronze quickly master all the technological methods of goldsmithing needed to create high-value products. Based on the trends established in the leading cultural centres of that time, they develop patterns imbued with local ideology and traditions, which have genetic connections with the previous and subsequent epochs.

Archaeological data show that the Proto-Colchian culture was not completely closed. In 18th-12th cc BC, it had some (direct or indirect) connections with the cultures of the Aegean, the Danube, and northern Italy (the Teramars) [1, pp. 49-54]. In this respect, likely, the European impulses of the Late Bronze Age (some inventory) were the result of this relationship.

It seems that Colchis had no connection with Anatolia, Assyria and Mesopotamia. Otherwise, it would have reflected in the precious metal production. Since Anatolia already knew how to extract alluvial gold, in case of relations to Colchis, it would have been seen at least in small doses on Colchian sites.

It is interesting to note that the first appearance of gold items in Colchis and its cultural zenith chronologically coincides with the period of its international recognition.

“The great fame this country had in early times is disclosed by the myths, which refer in an obscure way to the expedition of Jason as having proceeded as far even as Media, and also, before that time, to that of Phrixus.” [XI, p. 2, 18] - these words of Strabo, written at the beginning of our era, were archaeologically documented two thousand years later in the discovery and study of the Colchian culture of the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age. Today, there is no doubt that the main reason for the "celebrity" of Colchis was the rich natural resources available here and the highly developed metallurgy based on it.

In the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. The Megrelian-Chan population settled on the vast territory of Colchis (at this time, the Megrelian-Chan language separated from the Georgian-Colchian linguistic unity [2, p. 72]). Thanks to the development of the economy through the exploitation of rich metallurgical resources, it became an essential region in the international arena, which establishes active trade and economic relations with the outside world.

The fact that a little later, it became part of one of the main stories of Greek mythology illustrates the significance of this region.

The term "rich in gold", established in Greek mythology for Colchis, in recent times has been documented by the numerous and magnificent examples of classical goldsmithing, but this was at least a century away from when the Greeks gave Colchis the status of rich in gold.

According to today's data, enough data has already been accumulated in Western Georgia in the form of old gold items of Colchis to prove the existence of the "rich in gold" Colchis of the early (before antiquity) period, reflected in Greek mythology.

To correctly assess the level of development of Colchian goldsmithing, it is necessary to consider the international cultural context in which the traditions of jewellery were formed in Colchis.

In the Late Bronze Age, two main centres of goldsmithing existed - European and Oriental. The Orientalist style was prevalent in the Middle East and West Asia [18, p. 14] and used sheet gold with various manipulations and adorning them with intricate decorative techniques. In contrast, the European style created massive items with monochromic faces, in some cases decorated with engraving.

In the Late Bronze Age, due to intense international relations and distant land and sea voyages (this may have been peaceful or captive/aggressive relations), uniform art styles were spread in the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East region, which was considered as "international style" products [8].

Among the many luxury items in the international style, there were also examples of goldsmithing. For instance, if we look at the Greek, Minoan, Mycenaean and eastern Black Sea region samples dated to the 16th-13th centuries BC, we see close ties with the materials of Anatolia, Syria and Egypt.

From the end of the 14th c. BC, the situation changed radically in the western and eastern states. At this time, the West is experiencing severe economic disasters, which, in addition to political shifts, must be caused by natural/epidemiological disasters - written sources describe the mass deaths of people in the 14th century BC caused by an epidemic/plague in southern Syria. The disease soon spread east and north and caused severe damage to Egypt [14, p. 45]. These events added frequent "sea peoples" (Pirates) attacks in the Mediterranean region. This is reflected in various civilisations - the vast

Aegean, Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine – with great destruction and disintegration traces. Thus, from the end of the fourteenth century BC, the events mentioned above preceded the emergence of a political and economic crisis in the world, known in the scientific literature as the "Dark Ages" [7, pp. 125-127].

In Greek civilisation, the "Dark Ages" were marked by the collapse of the Mycenaean world [9, p. 90]; in Egypt, by a peculiar crisis period, revealed in the obscurity of their 350-year chronology (the absence of records). The only region that continues to produce records during this period is Assyria [7, p. 129].

Against the background of the massive political migrations and cultural changes characteristic of this period (mainly this is felt in the rule of settlements and burials) which is partly reflected by the transition period of the Late Bronze – Iron Ages, one of the most distinctive features is the few numbers of precious metal objects. This trend, together with the cultural centres of the Oriental world, is observed in the South Caucasus. After the fall of the Trialeti culture, until the beginning of the first millennium, gold items no longer existed in this region (except for small items in units).

R. Higgins explains the rare discovery of jewellery in the "Dark Ages" in such a way: "when Mycenae finally fell in 1100, after a century of unrest, it was a time when jewellery was saved for luxury and was scarce" [9, pp. 88-89].

R. Laffineur, based on the stylistic and technological characteristics of Greek goldsmithing, mentions that the oriental style jewellery of the "Dark Ages" reveals some signs of continuity of Mycenaean traditions, for example, the use of sheet gold granulation and in settings/inlay [10, pp. 9-14]. The re-use of granulation, which had been extinct in the Greek world for almost two centuries, is the first sign associated with the first appearance of the Orientalist style [13, p. 15]. However, it should note here that in the early stages of the Iron Age, together with the Orientalist style products, we find a different type of jewellery that resembles the Aegean Bronze Age industry (engraved fibulae).

According to the data from different countries, we can conclude that the Oriental-style goldsmithing spread from the Eastern civilizations to Greece, Anatolia, Iran and Transcaucasia by the 8th century BC. To the monuments of the Balkans and northern Italy a little later, in the 7th century BC (probably by the influence of the Greek world). Scholars do not attribute the early spread of the Oriental style to Egypt, as granulation in the Third Intermediate Period (1070-945 BC) is not confirmed in any of the specimens [13, p. 16]. in connecti-

on to Colchis, by today's data, we can clearly say that the Colchian goldsmithery of this period follows orientalist style traditions of near East and West Asia (use of granulation, sheet gold and filigree) and together with individual signs (separated shapes of items, semantic) mainly represents a local goldsmith centre.

In Pre-Classical Colchis, gold must have had not only a religious connotation as in other cultural centres of this period. Probably it also expressed social status and was a subject of daily consumption.

Archaeological data show that the advanced layer was actively involved in international contacts, clearly evidenced by the discovery of so-called "Exorcist" items - glass, faience, amber beads, amulets, sales, scarabs, etc.

Thus, the gold objects found on the sites of pre-classical Colchis play a unique role in proving the authenticity of the legendary Colchis "rich in gold" reflected in Greek myths and present this region on an equal footing with traditions and levels of development in leading cultural centres.

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