

Metsamor after the 2019 season



Abstract: The 2019 season in Metsamor confirmed the functioning of the settlement in the Urartian period. House II, discovered during the fieldwork, is the first architectural structure built at the beginning of the Early Iron Age period which, after some possible rearrangements, retained control over the Araxes valley during the Urartian kingdom. Pottery discovered there confirms that the already excavated part of the settlement was extensively used after the fall of Urartu. A pit grave dated to the 7th century BC yielded a late Urartian cylinder seal.

Keywords: Early Iron Age, Urartu, settlement, grave, pottery, dwelling structures

Fieldwork in the seventh season of the University of Warsaw archaeological project at Metsamor in Armenia continued to focus mainly on the area of the so-called “lower town” or settlement as having the greatest research potential in the context of the known history of Metsamor. Methodical exploration of the site, layer by layer, may be time-consuming, but it affords an excellent opportunity for a thorough and considered study of all the finds, the small and insignificant artifacts as well as the large-size architectural remains.

“LOWER TOWN”

The “lower town” spreads north of the citadel mound towering above the local landscape. So far, only the central part of the settlement has been recognized

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to some extent. The excavation area was extended significantly eastward, including in 2019 new trenches opened in the part of the settlement where the remains of a large architectural structure had been discovered the year before [Fig. 1]. House II, as this structure was designated, turned out to be a large rectangular dwelling. In its final form, the house was dated to the Iron Age III (600–200 BC) period. It consisted of four parts, the largest of which was a rectangular courtyard (S15) in the northern part of the building [Fig. 2]. The first chamber (S12), attached directly to the south wall of the courtyard, is quite narrow and looks rather like a corridor. It separated the courtyard from the next, large chamber (S13), which seems to be the most important one in the dwelling. A small rectangular room was attached to the west wall of S13 and to the south wall of S12. That room had no direct connection with either S12 or S13, but was accessed via an independent entrance in its south wall. Installations discovered inside it indicate that this small chamber could have served as a potential kitchen with an open fireplace. The need to prevent a fire from spreading could have actually been the reason for separating the chamber from the rest of the house.

The “kitchen chamber” (S9) is probably the oldest fragment of the large house. This part of the dwelling was originally included in an older structure, parts of which were most likely reused for the large house structure from the Early Iron Age I (1150–800 BC). Some traces of earlier structures were also brought to light near the recently excavated house.

The structure (House II) was built of irregular stones and boulders [see Fig. 2]. Relatively large stones were used for the wall façade, while the space between the outer and inner faces was filled with small stones, rubble and compacted clay. Although this type of construction was commonly applied in the architecture recorded at Metsamor, this particular building stands out because of its careful execution. The courtyard (S15) hidden behind the stone walls was the largest and apparently the most distinguished part of the building. Of particular importance is the lowermost part of the yard, recorded in its northern section on the level corresponding to the disassembly of the northern part of the north wall; the removal of almost all of the stone elements of the outer façade in this phase nicely exposed the foundations. It turned out that the lower stones of the wall were laid on a substructure of the same kind of mud brick that was used to level the ground and construct a sound and stable platform for the foundation. A meter of the height of this stone wall was preserved, the upper parts being made presumably of mud brick, although no traces of these were found inside the structures.

Excavation of the northern part of the courtyard uncovered a stone-paved floor, actually two layers of a stone pavement, representing two different phases of occupation. Remains of the lower pavement, made rather untidily of irregular stones, can be observed throughout the structure, while the upper pavement is attested only in the center of S15 [Fig. 3]. The upper pavement may be linked to the rearrangement of the house,

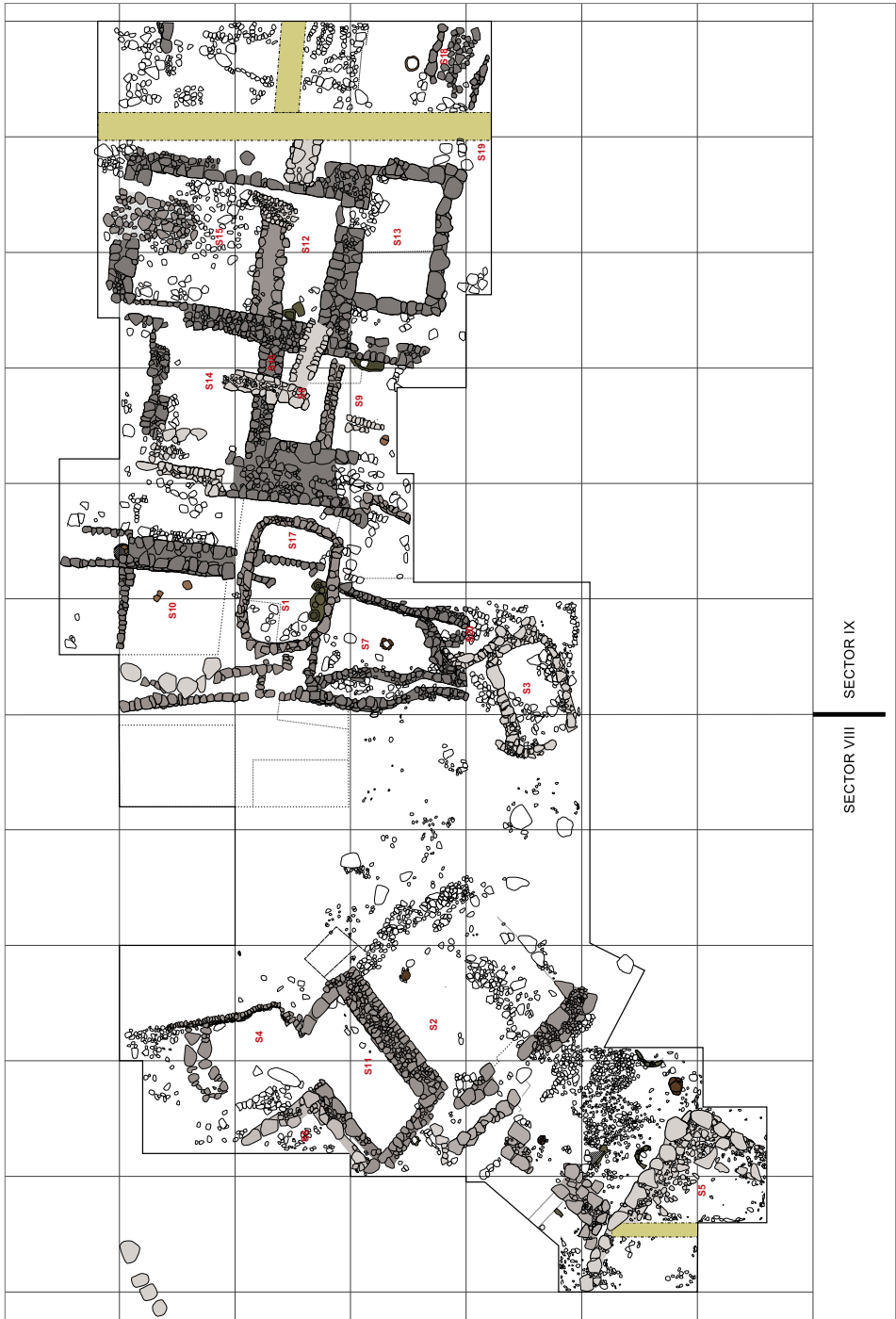


Fig. 1. The "Lower Town" in Metsamor: general plan (2019) (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | drawing M. Iskra)

which took place still in the Iron Age III period. It partly damaged the north wall of the building. Structure S15, rebuilt(?) at that time, belonged to the older, original part of the house constructed in the Iron Age II (800–600 BC), a dating apparently corroborated by the pottery finds. Of particular importance in this regard is a ceramic deposit, found in a broken churn, close to the northern edge of the trench; it contains a red-burnished Urartian jug and a clay oil lamp, both typical of the local Iron II pottery production, as well as three different bowls [Figs 4, 5].

Moreover, the original Iron Age II structure was reduced in size and its southern part rearranged. A partition wall separated out a long rectangular unit (S12). This newly formed chamber was also paved in part with stones of irregular shape. The pottery assemblage, as well as the small finds and other artifacts, indicate a date in the Iron Age II period for the refurbishment. The partition wall is later than the primary features of the building, but it is still difficult to estimate when the change occurred. A doorway in the southeastern corner of S12 led to the next chamber.



Fig. 2. House II: top view (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | orthophoto M. Truszkowski; processing M. Iskra)

It was well made, of square stone blocks forming smooth walls. A door socket found by the eastern edge of the doorway, already inside chamber S13, proves that the doors here opened inward. Compared to the other parts of the house, this chamber was built of the largest stones.

Notwithstanding the alterations, which were sufficiently drawn out in time to obscure the final arrangement, the layout of the structure in its final phase appeared to be rather regular. This particular architectural form has already been recorded at some other Urartian sites. Remains of a similar house



Fig. 3. House II: stone pavement and remains of the Iron Age III phase (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | orthophoto M. Truszkowski; processing M. Iskra)

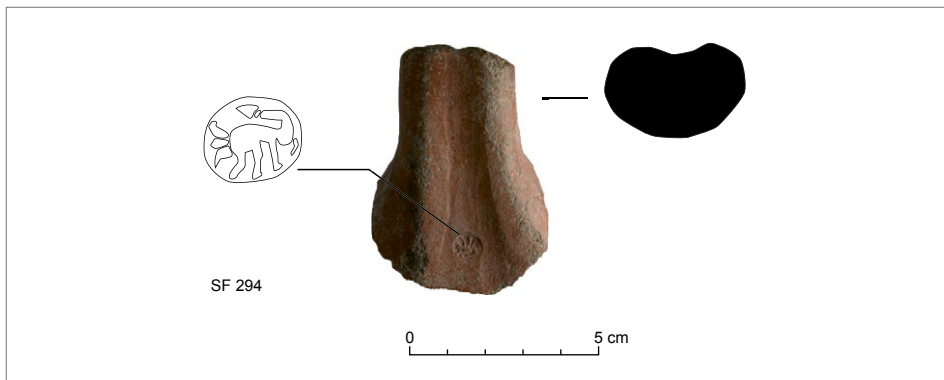


Fig. 4. Seal imprint on an Urartian jug handle (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photo M. Truszkowski, drawing D. Storey, processing M. Iskra)

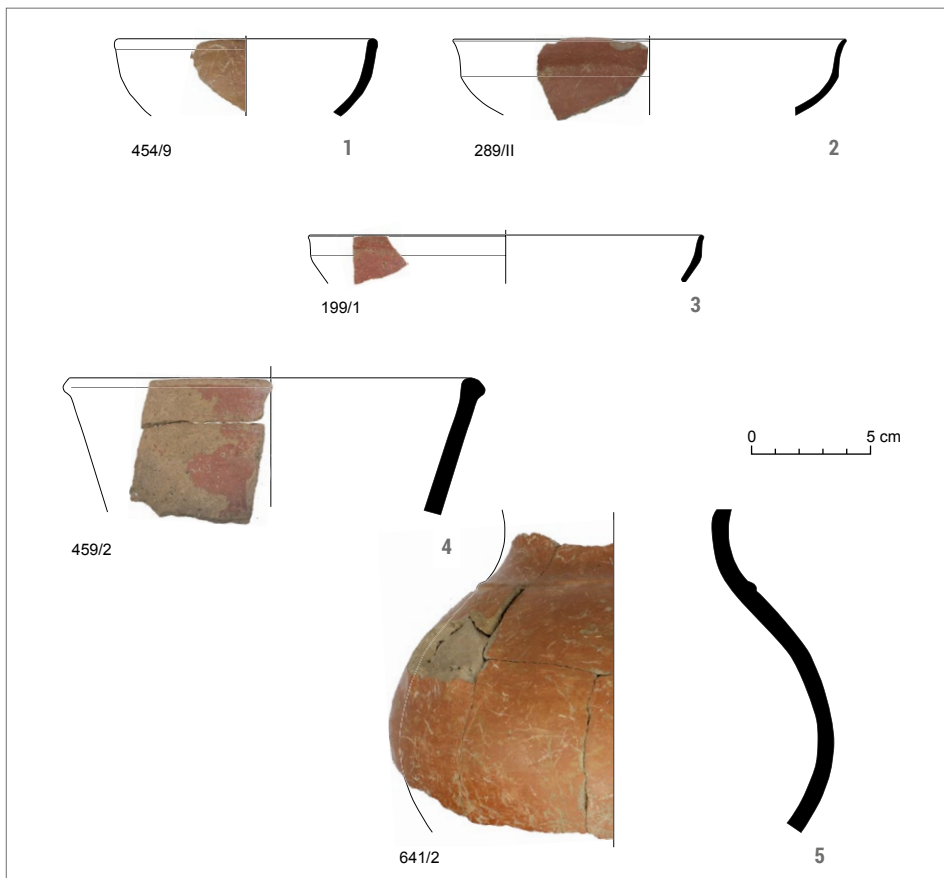


Fig. 5. Selected pottery from House II: 1 – oil lamp; 2, 3 – bowls; 4 – basin; 5 – Urartian jug (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | drawing D. Storey, J. Pawlik, photos M. Truszkowski, processing M. Iskra)

were discovered during the excavations of the lower town in Van (Tarhan 1994). A dwelling structure in the L9–L10 area had at least three chambers. The similarities included two small chambers situated in the southern part of the structure and an entrance from outside in a chamber (B₁) interpreted as a kitchen. The courtyard was arranged in the northern part of the building; only a quarter of its surface was paved.

Other parallels are known from the Eski Norguh site (Tarhan and Sevin 1977). Three comparable houses investigated there consisted of two chambers each, adjoining a large internal courtyard. They were oriented differently. Two of them had courtyards in the southern parts of the buildings. The architectural structure at Agaclik also resembles the house from Metsamor, although in reverse: the courtyard was in the southern part of the building and two dwelling chambers in the northern one (Tarhan and Sevin 1977). Moreover, two corner buttresses in the south wall added a grandiose character to this structure, making it comparable to the large house at Metsamor.

Another type of building with three chambers from Urartian sites merits attention. Houses discovered in Govalek and Gymli feature small rectangular courtyards with two adjoining rooms or chambers of a rectangular shape (Tarhan and Sevin 1977). The stone material used for their construction was generally the same as in the case of the large house from Metsamor. All these structures in their lowermost parts were built of regular stones creating a stable base for the upper parts constructed most probably of mud brick.

Several structures discovered in Karmir Blur also represent a form of house with three separate units/chambers (Oganesyan 1955). The layout of these dwellings is basically different because of the agglutinative building technique. Still, a suite of two chambers and a courtyard appears to have been a common feature for houses 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8 from Karmir Blur. Compared to other sites, Karmir Blur appears to have been fairly densely built-up, which might have been the reason for the irregular layout of the building (Martirosyan 1958; 1961).

Considering the parallels described here, House II at Metsamor appears to be typical of the time and place, being associated with a kind of “middle class” at the core of the local society. The pottery assemblage supports this idea. Locally manufactured pots of mediocre quality turn up side by side with the well-made and well-finished red-burnished pottery, which is so characteristic of the Urartian period. Moreover, Urartian pottery (Red Burnished Ware) was fairly scarce, if not accidental, in buildings of the period. The rectangular building with two chambers and courtyard was an exception in this regard.

The pottery collected from House II also contributes to a better understanding of how and why the building was abandoned. The material from the latest occupation layer is dated to the 8th–7th century BC. It includes red burnished (Urartian) wares and locally manufactured pots [Fig. 5:1,3,4,5]. A few trash pits filled with remains of organic material and potsherds were found in the ruins. Most of the pottery fragments were dated to the 7th and 6th centuries BC, indicating

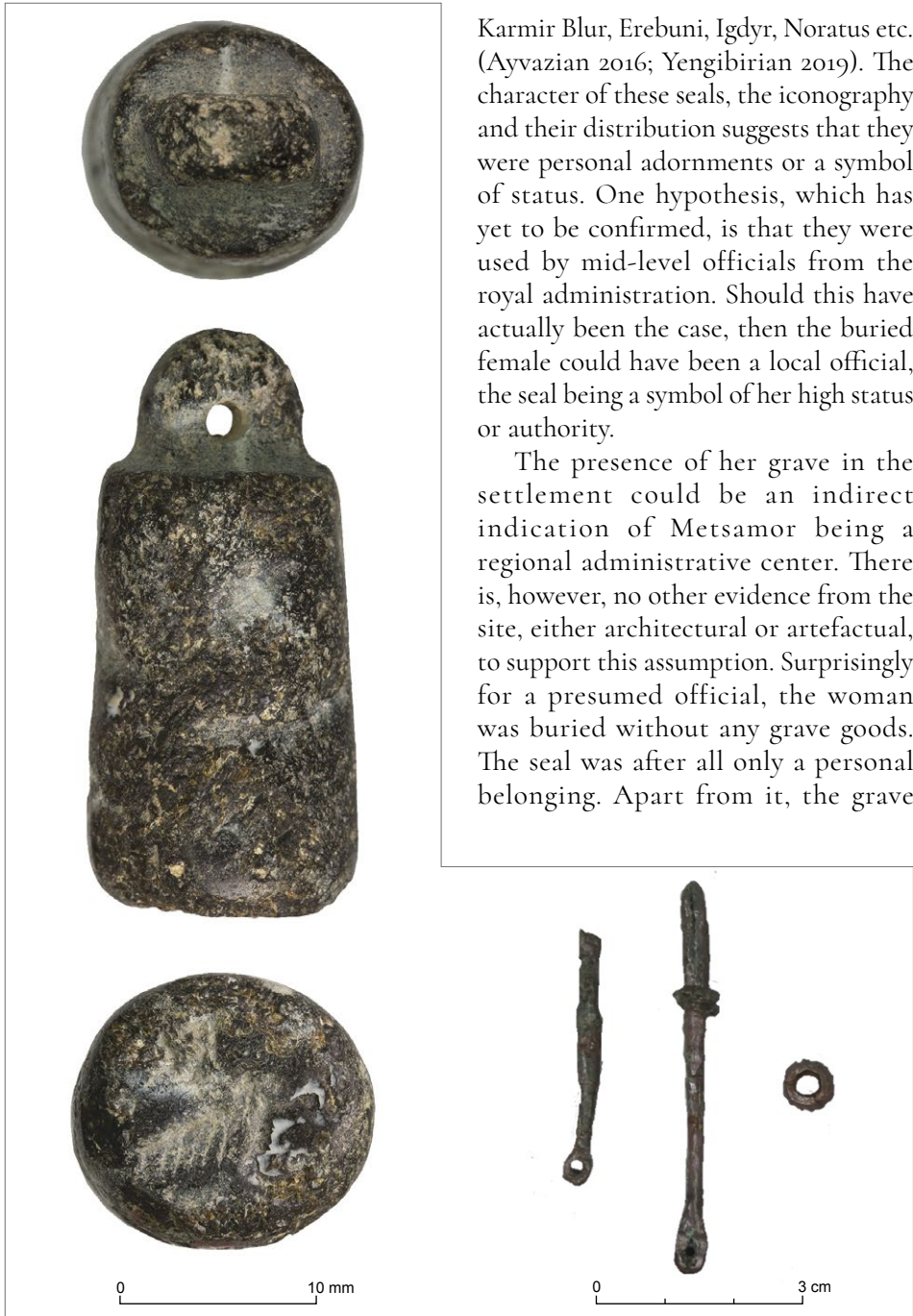
tha the rectangular houses were deserted most probably in the 7th century BC, presumably because of the destruction of the whole settlement.

The hypothesis that the house was destroyed along with the rest of the lower town is supported by the discovery of a single grave in the eastern part of the former courtyard (S15). The grave, dated to the end of the Urartian period (late 7th century BC), was placed next to the entrance to chamber S12. The burial was of a woman, some 30 years of age, laid to rest on her right side, face turned east/southeast [Fig. 6]. The grave should be considered as rather modest with only personal belongings deposited with the body. The most conspicuous of these

was a cylinder seal of stone. Its style and execution point to an Urartian date [Fig. 7]. A more precise date is suggested by certain details like the top finished with a loop for threading a twine for suspension and a conical-like shape formed by the facets slightly bent at the edges. The decoration, engraved on the lateral surfaces, is badly weathered and practically impossible to identify. A representation of a hybrid creature on the bottom of the seal is in only slightly better condition. An analysis of the decorative elements puts the seal in one class with the so-called common style types of Urartian seals, which are dated to the 7th century BC. Seals of this type were fairly common at other sites like Armavir,



Fig. 6. Urartian-period 7th-century-BC grave discovered in the courtyard of House II (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photo E. Bastien)



Karmir Blur, Erebuni, Igdyr, Noratus etc. (Ayvazian 2016; Yengibirian 2019). The character of these seals, the iconography and their distribution suggests that they were personal adornments or a symbol of status. One hypothesis, which has yet to be confirmed, is that they were used by mid-level officials from the royal administration. Should this have actually been the case, then the buried female could have been a local official, the seal being a symbol of her high status or authority.

The presence of her grave in the settlement could be an indirect indication of Metsamor being a regional administrative center. There is, however, no other evidence from the site, either architectural or artefactual, to support this assumption. Surprisingly for a presumed official, the woman was buried without any grave goods. The seal was after all only a personal belonging. Apart from it, the grave

Fig. 7. Grave goods from an Urartian-period (7th century BC) burial: left, stone cylinder seal from the Urartian period; right, two needle-like bronze artifacts and bead (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photos O. Bagi and T. Zakyán)

yielded two small long needle-like bronze objects [Fig. 7]. One of these “needles” is fragmentarily preserved; its original length could have been about 11 cm, as in the case of the second, fully preserved object. Both objects had a loop at one end and a bronze bead stuck onto the other end. The bead on one of the the fragmentary “needles” is rather simple with a single circular groove, while the other one is more elaborate with numerous diagonal cuts adorning its surface. Indeed, both items can be interpreted as jewelry. Found next to the woman’s chest the beads may have been pendants from a modest necklace. Otherwise, bound together with a string or a leather strap, they could have been a fastening for the fairly thick and heavy clothes that were presumably worn during the cold season. Should this assumption be correct, then one could suggest that the burial had taken place in the winter months.

The mysterious burial, devoid of grave goods, installed inside an allegedly abandoned building, seems to reflect the situation of the settlement at the time. The lack of funerary equipment appears striking in itself in the context of Urartian burial rituals. It may have been due to a pauperization of the local community for reasons as yet unknown. A similar grave, also without any grave goods, was recorded in 2018, in the western part of the excavated area. Two knives, presumed to be personal belongings, were the only objects found with the skeleton. One is entitled to assume that the 7th century BC witnessed hardship on a scale unrivaled only a century earlier.

As said above, the large rectangular house had apparently been abandoned already when the woman with the seal was buried within its walls. Several rubbish pits were dug near the eastern façade of the rectangular house, about 0.50 m above the latest floor level. The pits were filled with pottery material dated to the 7th century BC, mixed with organic material. The potsherds represented mainly locally produced pots. Some of them, however, represented high-quality Urartian Red Burnished Ware (Toprak Kale Ware; see Kroll 1976: 122–124).

Two additional trenches were opened east of the rectangular house, but the work there was not completed in the 2019 season for lack of time. Some parts of a stone wall were traced in the northern of the two trenches, whereas the southern trench yielded fragments of stone and clay structures (such as S18 and S20). They were apparently part of much bigger structures of unknown character and layout, which are assumed to have been dwellings from the Iron Age II and III periods.

A mid-sized jar was discovered partly sunk into a clay pavement recorded at the northern edge of the southern trench. The pavement may belong to another supposedly large house located next to the rectangular house (S15), but in much worse condition than S15. Sections of stone walls forming another rectangular chamber and a flagstone pavement were recognized in the southern part of the trench. The other stone structures and installations have proved difficult to classify and interpret.

SOUTHWESTERN CITADEL SLOPE

A new trench on the southwestern slope of the citadel mound [Fig. 8], 100 m east of a complex of sacral buildings, revealed a hiatus that should be considered as a local event. The temples are dated to the Late Bronze Age (1500–1150 BC), although they may well have been used past that time, in the Iron Age I (1150–800 BC) period (Jakubiak and Zakyan 2019). Postholes and pits dug in compacted clay were numerous in this part of Metsamor while the additional archaeological material was very modest. The pits were filled mainly with sherds dated to the 8th through 13th centuries AD and the Persian Khanate period, attesting to

a relatively large local community, in post-antiquity times, which left behind profuse rubbish. A medieval settlement must have been located on the citadel.

A circular kiln or oven of an unknown function, supposedly industrial, was unearthed on the slope here. The pottery from the pits suggests that this quarter of Metsamor was abandoned after the 4th century AD, that is, in late antiquity. The pits were dug in a clay leveling deposit, but the time of the leveling of this area remains unknown. The stratigraphic sequence is therefore the only tool to enhance an understanding of the deposits accumulated before the 4th century



Fig. 8. Trench on the southern slope of the citadel hill (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | drone photo M. Truszkowski)

AD. The compacted clay level yielded few artifacts capable of contributing to a precise dating of the leveling layer. However, an underlying layer with a pottery deposit, associated with a stone wall recognized in the southern extension of the trench, supplied the needed chronological data. The wall was built of large blocks and boulders. Taking into consideration the shape of the southern slope of the citadel, the excavated wall appears to have been part of a much larger defensive structure. However, the building technique recorded here is different from the other massive wall structures known from Metsamor. The material

excavated in the layer associated with the wall is dated to the turn of the Late Bronze and the Early Iron Ages (Khantzadjan 1979: Pl. XVI, 11, 12; Avetisyan and Avetisyan 2006: Pl. 37:4,6). However, research has shown that most of the pottery discovered in this area should be associated with the building of a circumferential wall around the settlement, which did not occur earlier than the later Late Bronze Age, most probably, however, at the beginning of the Early Iron Age period. This observation fits well with the presumption that a sacral complex functioned in the area west of the trench.



Fig. 9. Selected pottery fragments from the rescue excavations (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photo M. Truszkowski)

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Road construction providing access to the local museum called for salvage operations. Two stone chamber graves damaged by heavy caterpillar bulldozers and diggers were cleared. The only finds which survived the operation were a few scattered bones, some pottery sherds, and two complete jars. The number of buried individuals, their original placement and, likewise, the presence of grave goods could not be determined.

The type and plan of the two graves resembled other tombs known from the cemetery, but the pottery assemblage belonged to a type thus far unknown at the site. The pottery, dated to the Late Bronze Age, was decorated with geometric patterns, while some potsherds belonged to jars decorated with cut or relief representations of lions or other felines [Fig. 9]. This kind of pottery is typical of the Karabakh region (Pogrebova 2011: Pls XIX, XXII) and was extremely rare in the Araxes river valley, especially in funerary contexts.

One possible reason for the atypical assemblage was that it was brought from the Karabakh mountains possibly as a mark of the high status of the deceased. A “migrant” theory is equally possible. Bearing in mind the distribution of the graves and the grave goods, one could speculate that this part of the necropolis was dedicated to members of the Metsamor community who were native to the Karabakh region and who had migrated from there at some point to settle in the Araxes valley. It is not an accident that at least two graves with similar deposits were located side by side in an area situated the shortest distance from the settlement. At first glance, it looks as if a special sector of the necropolis was addressed to a non-native group of settlers.

The data from the salvage operations are too limited for a more conclusive interpretation without further regular excavation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The 2019 season in Metsamor brought to light new evidence concerning site development and changes of local community behavior across several centuries. Of greatest importance for studies of settlement development is the presence of structures suggesting a possible transformation of the village into a small town. The excavations in the trench situated on the southern slope of the citadel confirmed that during the post-transition period, from the Late Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age I,

circumferential walls were constructed to organize the space inside the settlement on the top of the hill. An examination of the pottery indicates that the walls could have been erected at the beginning of the Early Iron Age I period (about 1000 BC), dating the sacral complex west of the already opened trench not earlier than the beginning of the Early Iron Age I period (Jakubiak and Zakyan 2019). This corroborates an earlier assumption, which could not be confirmed because of a less than fully precise documentation.

Recent research demonstrated that the shrines had been in operation here from the Early Iron Age. The stone wall appears to have run along the south slope of the citadel, enclosed and protected behind the wall curtain.

The excavations in the “lower town” have shed new light on the settlement developed in the Urartian period, but in the light of the pottery assemblage, it appears to have been an Urartian-period settlement rather than a town settled by Urartians. The percentage of locally manufactured pottery distributed in the same levels and a

context with Red-burnished Urartian ware (mainly Toprak Kale-type wares) indicates that the local community still formed the core of the settlement, although influenced by Urartian culture. Moreover, the local community was strong enough to survive the collapse of the Urartian kingdom and local traditions were still vibrant even in post-Urartian times (Khazadjan, Mkrtch'yan, and Parsamyan 1973).

Further work in the “lower town” may yet supply surprising new evidence that will confront old theories about the past of the Araxes valley.

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