Towards the study of Late Bronze and Early Iron Age settlements and settlement systems of the Colchian Culture in Western Georgia

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To date, over one hundred Late Bronze and Early Iron Age settlement sites in Western Georgia have been studied more or less completely. A considerable part of them belong to well stratified sites of Colchian Culture. These sites are of major importance to the study of settlement types and systems, as well as to the chronology of this culture (Fig. 1; 2).

The geo-climatic conditions of the Colchian Plain determined the emergence of a peculiar settlement type in this region. Due to the high humidity and marshy conditions, dwellings and economic facilities were built on platforms made of thick wooden beams or on clay mounds. This prevented underground water and moisture from penetrating into the settlement. The size of these platforms is usually equivalent to the settlement, even though there are instances of the latter exceeding the former. The Nosiri layer 1 settlement for example, considerably exceeds the boundaries of the clay mound.

Some artificial settlement mounds are noticeably higher than the present-day ground, being elliptical, oval or round in shape. The highest man-made mound on the Colchian Plain is the Patrikhi hillock measuring 9 m². The lowest, only 0.5 m in height, was found on the right-hand bank of the river Tsiavi. The medium height Namamu mound covers the largest area with a diameter of 160 m², while the Lekhaindrao Dikha-gudzuba covers the smallest area with a diameter of 20 m².

The artificial settlement mounds mostly consist of multiple layers, some of them comprising Early, Middle, Late Bronze – Early Iron Age and Classical Period layers. For example, the lower layer 4 (Fig. 4) of the Namcheduri settlement mound (Fig. 3) dates from the end of the Middle Bronze Age, while the layers 5, 4 and 3 belong to various stages of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (Fig. 5; 6). Excavations have shown that the settlement layer 2 belongs to the Early Classical period (6th–5th cent. B.C.), while layer 1 generally can be dated to the Classical period. Occasionally only one of the listed periods is attested, like in Naokhvanu (Fig. 7; 8), Chaladidi Zurga, Abedati dikha-gudzuba etc., where only Late Bronze- Early Iron Age cultural layers were discovered.

It should be noted that in the weak soil zone (settlement sites of zones II–IV according to N. Khoshtaria’s classification) of the Colchian Plain (without the exception of the Imereti Lowland) the present-day height of mounds does not correspond to the actual Bronze Age height. Due to a subsidence of the Colchian Plain a substantial part of the cultural layers of these settlement sites lies 3–5 m below the present-day ground, i.e. the soil surface of the first settlements during the Bronze Age lay much lower than today.

Our picture of the arrangement of the moats and canals surrounding the Colchian Plain artificial settlement mounds is not quite clear. However, to date, fairly interesting and noteworthy evidence has accumulated as a result of archaeological investigations in this direction. Interesting evidence to this question has been preserved in the works of the Ancient Greek physician and traveller Hippocrates. It is known to us that the Naokhvanu and Namcheduri mounds were surrounded by a single artificial moat, while the Anaklia dikha-gudzuba possessed two moats. Moats would have also have been dug around the Nosiri and “Kekeuli Zuga” mounds.

4. Джакиев 1979, 14.
5. Кхосартария 1945, 467.
8. Апакидзе 2002а, 16; 76.
9. Микеладзе/Хахутишвили 1985, 14–19; Апакидзе 2002а, 16; 76.
11. Кхосартария 1945, 465, 466.
12. Чакхчхишвили 1965, 44, 45.
15. Гогадзе 1982, 82.
existing canal systems have been discovered surrounding the Pichori\(^{16}\) and Namarnu\(^{17}\) settlement sites. In Pichori, not far from the coast, four settlement sites have been identified. Each site comprises several man-made mounds, one occupying a central position by its size and location. It has been suggested that the four settlement sites must have been connected with each other through a single canal system, while each mound was surrounded by a moat, connected to the central canal. Moats and canals were filled with water of the Gagida river\(^{18}\).

\(^{16}\) Baramidze et al. 1991, 18; Jibladze 1997, 52; Baramidze 1998, 4; 46.

\(^{17}\) Grigolia 1973, 50.

\(^{18}\) Baramidze 1998, 4; 46.
Thus, e.g., the area between ditch I and II of the Namarnu site totals to 20 ha\(^2\)\(^1\) (Fig. 9), which would have fully ensured the supply of food for such a large settlement. In contrast the farming area around such a small-size settlement as, for example, Lekhindrao Dikha-gudzuba occupies only 1 ha.

From the early Iron Age onwards new settlement types emerged on the Colchian Plain. One such type is an extensive, open-type, unfortified settlement site, located in valleys, mainly on river banks, in close proximity to their confluences. Such settlement types have been discovered in many places of the Colchian Plain. To date, the following settlements have been comparatively well studied: Kistriki (Fig. 10; 11), Machara, Mokvi\(^2\), Nosiri (exploratory platforms I and II)\(^2\), Chalacli (sections I and II of Sabazho)\(^2\), Qulevi (on the right bank of the river Khobi)\(^2\), as well as the industrial settlements at Ochkhomuri (Fig. 12; 13).

\(^2\) Grigolia 1973, 50.
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Fig. 6
Namcheduri settlement mound. General plan of excavations, layer 6 (17th-16th cent. B.C. (after Мхитаряна 1985)).

Fig. 7
Naokhvamu settlement mound. General plan of WE-section and of the excavations in the years 1933, 1934 and 1936 (after Кутфин 1950). – I quadrant 1, layer 1 (15th-14th cent. B.C.), log structure; II quadrant 2; III quadrant 3, layer 1, log structure; IV quadrant 4, layer 1, log structure.

Fig. 8
Naokhvamu settlement mound. A General plan of WE-side; B WE-section (15th-10th cent. B.C. (after Кутфин 1950)).
and "Natsiskvilar". These settlements are quite extensive. Aside from farming implements, materials connected to the production of metal have been found. Thus, in section II of Chaladidi Sabazho a fragment of kiln clay and a mould for a miniature Colchian axe were found. In the manufacturing settlements of Ochkhomuri and "Natsiskvilar" beads of semiprecious stones were produced, in addition to the crafts mentioned above. Material connected with the manufacture of beads has been discovered at manufacturing settlements.

In the Early Iron Age a rather specific settlement type called dune settlement (Fig. 14; 15) appeared in the Colchian littoral zone. As a consequence of the Laz Transgression, which began in the 2nd century B.C. and continues to the present day, western Georgia's former coast is now covered by the sea. Alone between Ochamchire and Enguri, due to an active invasion, the sea has advanced 4–5 m over the last 50 years. Hence, it may be assumed that part of the dune settlements have been submerged.

In the Colchian foothills both settlement mounds (Abedati, Saeliaio "Kurzia") and manufacturing settlements (Ochkhomuri) have been discovered. They are located on hillocks and natural elevations (Khorshi "Lomuri" Gora, "Dida-Kirsa", Dablagomi "Natsikhvara", "Nasaqdvri", Vani "Akhveladianebis" Gora) or on mountain ridges (Letsave).

The settlements in the mountain regions of Colchis have to date not been subject of any in-depth study, which precludes their further discussion here.

Thus, in the early stage of Colchian Bronze culture two principal settlement types were dominant in Colchis (Western Georgia): artificial settlement mounds and settlements on natural hills and elevations. By the last stage of this culture (Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages) already five different settlement types had developed: artificial mounds, settlements on natural hills and elevations, dune settlements, "open-type" unfortified settlements, situated on river banks or terraces, as well as industrial settlements.

As regards the planning of these five settlement types we are only able to reconstruct more or less fully three: the artificial settlement mounds, "open-type" unfortified settlements and industrial settlements. The planning of the other settlement types has been inadequately studied to date, and their investigation is a matter of the future.
On the Colchian Plain, artificial settlement mounds cover an area of in between 1,500 and 3,000 sq. m. Thus, e.g., the total area of Chaladidi Zurga is 1,800 sq. m.,

42 Naokhvamu – 1,200 sq. m., Nosiri – 2,000 sq. m.,

43 Sakulia and Kopitnari – 2,500–2,700 sq. m. In these settlements the buildings appear to have been clustered together, as every inch of land, having been wrested from the marshes by man, was greatly valued. Besides, it should be pointed out that the built-up area of the platform was of much less size than the area of the artificial mound itself.

Besides their function in drainage, land-reclamation and communication, the ditches and canals surrounding the settlement mounds had a defensive purpose as well. In addition to the moats, the settlements were enclosed within a palisade with built-in wooden towers. Such a type of a defensive system often proved to be an inaccessible fortress. Suffice it to say, that even the well-trained and organised Greek troops failed to take a similarly fortified fortress of the Colchian tribe of Drilae. According to Xenophon: "... when they (the Hellenes) failed to capture the fortress by storm, for it was surrounded by a wide pit and banked earth, on which a palisade and numerous wooden towers were erected, they decided to leave it." Such a defence system (consisting of a ditch, embankment, and a palisade with built-in wooden towers) was found surrounding the Namchëduri settlement. The central mound of the Namarnu settlement site was surrounded by a ditch 50 m in diameter. Smaller mounds surrounding the central mound revealed only 4–5 m wide ditches around them, their depth reaching 3–4 m.

Settlements on plains, river banks and terraces represent the open, unfortified type, covering an area of above 1 ha. In addition to dwellings and economic facilities, we also find workshops in close proximity to the other structures. The so-called dene settlements appear in the coastal zone and reveal thick cultural layers.

The Ochkhomuri manufacturing settlement is situated in the village of Ochkhomuri (Chkhorotsqu district) on the river Ochkhomuri terrace. This terrace lies at a distance of 500–800 m from the river. Its altitude above sea level is 110 m. The surface of the terrace on which the site was discovered represents a flat plain. The industrial settlement covers an area exceeding 1 ha.

Dwelling structures have not survived on this site. A large quantity of wooden, charcoal and plaster remnants discovered in the cultural layers of this site testifies to the existence of wooden buildings here. It is difficult to be definite about the planning of workshops and dwellings. The excavations carried out to date seem to suggest
that workshops and various-purpose structures closely abutted on one another.

No buildings have survived in the industrial settlement at "Natsiskvilari" either. However, here too, the existence of wooden structures should be presumed, as indicated by the discovery of a large quantity of charcoal and plaster remnants. The planning of workshops, as well as dwellings and household structures must have more or less corresponded to the Ochkhomuri industrial settlement.

This is in brief the topography, planning, and typology of the Colchian Bronze and Early Iron settlement sites, based on the available data. On the grounds of archaeological data, the author assumes that large and compactly populated settlements of different types flourished in Colchis at the turn of the 2nd to the 1st millennium B.C. They were situated in close vicinity. The Colchis lowland and foothills were intensively developed. According to the author's view, settlements dated to the last stage of the Colchian Bronze Age should be classified as protourban settlements.

For a detailed discussion of the determination and typological classification of settlements of the Colchian Late Bronze to Early Iron Ages and the beginning of a broad adoption of iron, see Lordkipanidze 1986, 61–62; 65–68; Apakidze 2001b, 131–139.
Fig. 12
Oshvimuri manufacturing settlement. Plan of excavation areas (10th–8th cent. B.C. (after Apakidze 2000)).
Fig. 13
Ochkhomuri manufacturing settlement. SW-profile of quadrat 4 (10th-8th cent. B.C. (after Apakidze 2000)).

Fig. 14
Pichvnari dune settlement. A NS-section; B WE-section (8th-7th cent. B.C. (after Ramishvili 1975)).
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Abstract

The geoclimatic conditions of the Colchian Plain with high humidity and marshiness determined the emergence of a peculiar type of settlement here, where buildings were constructed on platforms built of thick wooden beams or on clay mounds, preventing underground water and moisture from penetrating into the buildings. The size of the platforms usually coincided with the area of the settlement, but there are instances of the latter exceeding the former. Some artificial settlement mounds are noticeably elevated from the contemporary surface. They are mainly multi-layered monuments, but here are also single period sites.

The total area of the Colchian settlement mounds ranged from 1500 to 3000 sq. m. It should be noted that the area allotted for construction was much smaller in size than the area of the mound itself. The dwelling mounds were surrounded with intricate drainage and defensive systems. Slightly elevated farming plots, surrounded with ditches, abutted on the dwelling mounds.

At the early stage of the Bronze Age two principal types of settlements prevailed in Colchis (Western Georgia): Artificial dwelling mounds and settlements on natural hills and elevations. At the last stage of this culture (Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages) there were already five different settlement types: Artificial mounds, settlements on natural hills and elevations, dune settlements, and "open-type" unfortified settlements, sitted on river banks and terraces and manufacturing-settlements.

On the grounds of archaeological data, the author assumes that large and densely populated settlements of different types flourished in Colchis by the end of the 2nd to the beginning of the 1st mill. B.C., most situated not far from each other. The Colchis lowland and foothills were intensively developed. According to the author's view, settlements dated by this period were proto-urban settlements.