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## **Cultural Attribution of Early Bronze Age Tombs Under Kurgans in Azerbaijan**

*This study focuses on the cultural attribution of a distinct category of Early Bronze Age burials in the eastern piedmont of the Lesser Caucasus, northwestern Azerbaijan, known as “tombs under kurgans” or “kurgans with collective burials in tombs”. There was an opinion that such burials belong to the early period of the Kura-Araxes (or proto-Kura-Araxes) culture. To test this idea, we analyzed ceramics from tombs under kurgans at Shadyly, Uzun-Rama, and Mentesh-Tepe, all of which have radiocarbon dates. Results suggest that the vessels are hand-made, their paste contains no organic temper, and they are a coarse imitation of the Uruk ceramics. This tradition is unrelated to the Kura-Araxes culture, marked by a handmade red-and-black burnished pottery. Also, at the highly developed stage of the Kura-Araxes in any of its local versions, collective burials in tombs were not practiced. Thus, before the emergence of the Kura-Araxes culture in the Southern Caucasus, there was a population practicing the tradition of kurgans with collective burials in tombs. The origin of this tradition is a contentious matter. What we know only is that it emerged in the 34th century BC and disappeared around the 31st–30th centuries BC, following the Kura-Araxes expansion in the Southern Caucasus.*

**Keywords:** *Tombs under kurgans, collective burial, Kura-Araxes culture, Early Bronze Age, Southern Caucasus, Leyla-Tepe culture, Pit-Comb Ware culture.*

### **Introduction**

A special group of kurgans of the Early Bronze Age has been found in northwestern Azerbaijan, along the eastern piedmont of the Lesser Caucasus (Fig. 1) in Dashly Tepe (Qabala District), Dashly Tepe (Shamkir District), Borsunlu (Tartar District), Dashuz (Shaki District), Osman Bozu (Shamkir District), Mentesh-Tepe (Tovuz District), Uzun-Rama and Shadyly (Goranboy District), as well as Ganja, Göygöl, and Khankendi (near the towns of the same names). They all have chambers with collective burials, rectangular or round in plan view. Burials of this type are known by scholars under the name of “tombs under kurgans” and have been attributed to the early

stage of the Kura-Araxes culture. Their classification in accordance with various features was made by T. Akhundov (1999).

For quite a long time, it was assumed that tombs under kurgans existed during the transition from the Early to Middle Bronze Age. Only three kurgans of this type, studied in the beginning of the 2010s (Shadyly, Uzun-Rama, and Mentesh-Tepe) have radiocarbon dates. Their dating has disproved the opinion about the age of these sites. Moreover, common features of the kurgans of this type, belonging to the second half of the 4th millennium BC, that is to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, are not typical of the Kura-Araxes culture. Information on the Uzun-Rama kurgan has been published by

B. Jalilov (2018); the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan is described by B. Lyonnet (2014), as well as in collective studies of Azerbaijan and French scholars (Lyonnet, Guliyev, Bouquet et al., 2011; Lyonnet, Guliyev, Helwing et al., 2012; Lyonnet, Pecqueur, Guliyev, 2013; Lyonnet, Guliyev, Baudouin et al., 2017).

Despite the opinion that tombs under kurgans belong to the early stage of the Kura-Araxes culture (or to the proto-Kura-Araxes culture) (Poulmarc'h, Pecqueur, Jalilov, 2014: 231, 239), the analysis of the evidence from these sites suggests a lack of unity between the funerary rite and pottery complex of the Kura-Araxes population and the population who created the tombs under kurgans, which disappeared for unknown reasons during migration of the Kura-Araxes people to the Southern Caucasus. The similarity of their traditions is associated with common cultural roots (the Uruk tradition).

### Problems of cultural identification

Before addressing this issue, we should mention the problem of the chronology of the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan, discovered at the Neolithic settlement of the same name. Judging by the evidence from the site, Lyonnet (one of the leaders of the Azerbaijan-French archaeological expedition) identified four periods, the latest of which lasted from the second half of the 4th millennium BC until the mid 3rd millennium BC (Lyonnet, Guliyev, Helwing et al., 2012: 87). On the basis of  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates, three chronological periods were identified: 3500–2900 BC (stage 1), to which the kurgan with the collective burial in the tomb belongs; 2800–2450 BC (stages 2 and 3), and 2536–2300 BC (stage 3) (Lyonnet, 2014: 118–119, 121, 125, 127).

We have already mentioned the chronological paradox associated with the radiocarbon dates of the Mentesh-Tepe burial tomb. Similar kurgans at Uzun-Rama and Shadyly functioned in the 34th/33rd–32nd centuries BC (Poulmarc'h, Pecqueur, Jalilov, 2014: 242), that is, for no more than two hundred years. This gives reason to doubt the dating of the Mentesh-Tepe tomb to 3500–2900 BC (36th–30th centuries BC) or to the second half of the 4th millennium BC (Lyonnet, Guliyev, Helwing et al., 2012: 92–93; Lyonnet, 2014: 119; Lyonnet, Guliyev, Baudouin et al., 2017: 137–139; Poulmarc'h, Pecqueur, Jalilov, 2014: 240–242). It is hard to imagine that the kurgan could have functioned for six hundred years, especially since only 39 persons were buried in it (Lyonnet, Pecqueur, Guliyev, 2013: 103). We also face the problem of sampling for radiocarbon analysis (Qasimov, 2019: 34–36). In a brief report published in 2015, the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan was attributed to 3100–2900 BC, and the period of the tomb functioning was established as 150–200 years (Guliyev, Lyonnet, 2015: 363), which looks more realistic.



Fig. 1. Location of kurgans with collective burials in tombs. 1 – Dashly Tepe (Shamkir District); 2 – Ganja; 3 – Göygöl; 4 – Dashuz; 5 – Dashly Tepe (Qabala District); 6 – Osman Bozu; 7 – Khankendi; 8 – Borsunlu; 9 – Shadyly; 10 – Uzun-Rama; 11 – Mentesh-Tepe.

The tombs under the kurgans of Mentesh-Tepe, Shadyly, and Uzun-Rama have been dated to the period corresponding to the early stage of the Kura-Araxes culture. M. Poulmarc'h defined such sites as a “special group of kurgans” and attributed them to that culture (Poulmarc'h, Pecqueur, Jalilov, 2014: 239). However, is this really the case?

Lyonnet observed that the pottery found in the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan at the level of stages 2 and 3 was similar to pottery discovered in the Uzun-Rama and Borsunlu kurgans, in the tomb under the kurgan in Qabala District, at the settlement of Garakopaktapa in Fuzuli District, and at the sites of the Early Kura-Araxes culture in Georgia. The analysis of pottery from the tomb under the kurgan at Mentesh-Tepe has shown that the vessels were not made using a potter's wheel. The main part of the pottery was made of low-quality clay of reddish or grayish color with brown tint, which was not thoroughly mixed. Pure black pottery has not yet been discovered. Fabric imprints have not been observed on the fragments. Most of the vessels had pot-like shapes; the handles were located between the rim and the upper part of the shoulder (Lyonnet, 2014: 118–119, 120, fig. 4).

At first sight, the tombs at Mentesh-Tepe, Shadyly, and Uzun-Rama contained pottery of the same type. Similar pottery has been found in other regions of the Southern Caucasus and Anatolia. There is a serious disagreement between the views of Lyonnet and Jalilov on the problem of cultural identification of tombs under kurgans. Pottery found in the Shadyly (in 2011) and Uzun-Rama (in 2012) kurgans by the Göygöl-Goranboy archaeological expedition was similar to the evidence from the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan. Jalilov observed that the Mentesh-Tepe pottery differed from the classic Kura-Araxes pots. This difference was especially evident in

the shape of the handles. Handles on vessels from tombs under kurgans were simple and oval in cross-section. There were no hemisphere-shaped handles resembling a bull's nose, or handles with convex decoration, like the classic Kura-Araxes pots. The latter have a clearly distinct transition area from the body to the neck, which was not the case with the vessels from the burial tombs. Specific shapes of the body have also been observed (Jalilov, 2012: 151; 2013: 132, ill. 6; 2018, fig. 9–11; Lyonnet, 2014: 120, fig. 4). Comparative analysis of artifacts from the tombs under kurgans and the Kura-Araxes sites has shown that they have different typical features. According to the opinion of Jalilov, supported by historical and analytical studies, the evidence from the burial tombs belongs to the same period as the Kura-Araxes evidence, yet it was a different culture (Jalilov, 2012: 146–152; 2013: 128–134). Initially, he dated these sites to the transitional period from the Early to Middle Bronze Age, following the classification by T.I. Akhundov (1999: 46, 84–87). However, after obtaining the  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates of the Shadyly and Uzun-Rama kurgans, Jalilov accepted that these kurgans belonged to the initial stage of the Early Bronze Age (Poulmarc'h, Pecqueur, Jalilov, 2014: 242).

According to Lyonnet (2014: 118–119), pottery from the tomb under the kurgan at Mentesh-Tepe shows parallels to the pottery complex of the VIA stage at Arslantepe. According to the studies of J. Palumbi, that complex is divided into two groups: dishware made on the potter's wheel in accordance with Uruk traditions, and hand-molded and burnished red-black pottery. Palumbi also emphasized that pottery from the first group was not a simple imitation of the Syrian-Mesopotamian pottery of the same period, but revealed a mixture of Uruk and local pottery traditions. The second group gradually increased by stage VII of Arslantepe. Palumbi associated the roots of this pottery with the traditions of Central and Northeastern Anatolia (2008: 79, 81).

There are significant differences between pottery from tombs under kurgans of the Early Bronze Age and stage VIA at Arslantepe both in terms of paste and shape of the vessels. The difference in shape is evident when we compare pottery from Arslantepe (Ibid.: 82–87, fig. 3, 15, 20) and from kurgans in Mentesh-Tepe (Lyonnet, 2014: 120, fig. 4), Shadyly, and Uzun-Rama. The only exception was the tomb under the kurgan of Dashly Tepe (Shamkir District), where four ceramic vessels out of 11 had hemispherical handles similar to the Nakhchivan (“bull's nose”) handles typical of classical Kura-Araxes pots (Akhundov, 1999: 15–16, pl. XI, 1, 2, 4, 5). However, this was the only tomb under a kurgan containing vessels similar to the Kura-Araxes pottery.

It can be concluded that during the development of the Kura-Araxes culture in the Southern Caucasus, there existed a completely different community with the

tradition of collective burials in tombs under kurgans. If this community was transformed into one of the components of the Kura-Araxes culture, the tombs under kurgans should have been built in the Southern and Northern Caucasus, Anatolia, or the Levant after 3000–2900 BC. However, they have not been found in the area of the advanced Kura-Araxes culture.

The pottery from Mentesh-Tepe was similar to the pottery from the Shadyly and Uzun-Rama kurgans with known  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates. Similar pottery has been found in other tombs under kurgans, which have been explored, such as kurgan 103 at Khankendi (Hummel, 1939: 87–88, pl. VI, 18).

We should mention another interesting point. According to Lyonnet, textile imprints (on the inner or outer surface?) have not been found on the pottery from the Mentesh-Tepe kurgan (Lyonnet, 2014: 118–121). However, such imprints have been discovered on the inside or in the fracture of wall fragments on some vessels from the Uzun-Rama kurgan. According to Jalilov, this feature manifests a continuation of the Chalcolithic pottery traditions: “...the specimens were shaped in molds using fabric bags. In this case, relatively large particles of sand and small stones were added to the clay mixture. Then, the inner and outer surfaces of the finished vessels were smoothed and burnished. Nevertheless, in some areas, fabric imprints are clearly visible at the base of the pot, especially in hard-to-reach places” (Jalilov, 2018: 99). It should be mentioned that textile imprints on the inner surface of pottery from the Uzun-Rama kurgan were discovered after the first publication of evidence from the site (Jalilov, 2013: 132–133). On the basis of this, it would be have been interesting to reexamine the evidence from the Shadyly and Mentesh-Tepe kurgans for the presence of such imprints on the inside of pots. Pottery made using fabric bags (“bag pottery”) has been found at the settlements of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age in the Southern Caucasus and Dagestan (Gadzhiev, 1983: 6–15; 1991: 23, 140–143). Y.I. Hummel described the weave of the fabric (“plain/tabby/linen/taffeta weave”) on the imprints on the inner surface of some pots from the tombs of kurgans 103 and 119 at Khankendi (1939: 87–88, pl. VI, 18; 1948: 19).

The technology of pottery production using fabric bags, combined with the tradition of collective burials in tombs under kurgans, gives grounds to support the opinion of Jalilov that we are dealing here with a completely new archaeological culture (2012: 146–152; 2013: 128–134).

### Problems of origins

Tombs under kurgans have been discovered along the eastern part of the Lesser Caucasus (Lyonnet, 2014: 118–119). We completely agree with the opinion of Lyonnet



that it is not yet possible to confirm the hypothesis on their location only in this region, because the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan near the Caspian Sea has not yet been sufficiently explored; there has not been a targeted search for sites of this type (Ibid.: 128). It is difficult to establish the origins of the tradition of collective burials in tombs under kurgans. For a long time it was assumed that it existed during the transition from the Early to Middle Bronze Age. The radiocarbon dates of three tombs under kurgans (Shadyly, Uzun-Rama, and Mentesh-Tepe) have refuted this claim. We can no longer speak about the introduction of this tradition by tribes from the north, as it had been previously assumed (Akhundov, 1999: 77–87), nor can we associate its origins with the Maikop or Novotitorovka cultures (Gey, 2000: 197–198; 2009: 16), which lack a similar funerary rite.

The tradition of collective burials in chambers with the *dromos*, the ritual of burning them at the end of their use, as well as most pottery varieties are mainly concentrated in the western part of Azerbaijan. According to Lyonnet, this may indicate that these were introduced from the west, that is, from Georgia (2014: 128). However, similar tombs under kurgans belonging to the first half of the 4th millennium BC have not been found in Georgia (perhaps, as yet). Similar types of mass burials in chambers in Georgia (kurgans in the Alazani Valley, Kiketi, Koda, Bedeni, and Samgori) were dated to the late stages of the Early Bronze Age (Jalilov, 2018: 95).

Could the carriers of the Leyla-Tepe culture have participated in the genesis of tradition of tombs under kurgans? As is known, the emergence of the kurgan burial rite in the Late Chalcolithic was associated with that culture (Museibli, 2014: 65–72). Kurgans of the Southern Caucasus are earlier than those from Northern Eurasia (Kohl, Trifonov, 2014: 1577). Late  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dates of the Leyla-Tepe kurgans indicate the mid 4th millennium BC (Museibli, 2010), which is two hundred years earlier than the dates of the tombs under the kurgans. Lyonnet pointed out that structural elements of the objects under consideration show parallels to the dwelling structures such as dugouts and semi-dugouts of the Leyla-Tepe culture and to the use of raw bricks in burial chambers. However, the tombs under kurgans of the Early Bronze Age do not contain children's burials in vessels typical of the Leyla-Tepe culture; and the tradition of collective burial with the custom of burning the tomb at the end of its functioning has not been registered in the Leyla-Tepe culture (Lyonnet, 2014: 120–121).

The main information on the Leyla-Tepe culture is derived from ancient settlements, while dwelling places of the creators of the tombs under kurgans have not been discovered. It is possible that scholars have still not been able to connect the settlement complexes of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age with these sites. There are also some differences between the pottery of the Late



Fig. 2. Examples of pottery similar to Pit-Comb ware from the upper layers of the Neolithic site of Alikomek Tepe in Jalilabad District (from the archaeological collection of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Inv. Alikomek Tepe-71, No. 2, 8).

Chalcolithic (Museibli, 2016: 284–287; Almamedov, 2009–2010; Museibli, 2012a: 21) and pottery from the tombs under kurgans.

The conclusions of T. Akhundov and H. Almamedov on cultural processes in Southern Transcaucasia on the eve of the development of the Kura-Araxes culture are of interest to the present discussion. Pottery (very similar to the Pit-Comb ware) unknown from the local settlements of the previous period, and from Southwestern Asia and Anatolia, has been found (Fig. 2) in the upper layers of Neolithic settlements of the first half of the 4th millennium BC in the region from the Mugan steppe to the plains of the Middle Kura River\*. According to Akhundov and Almamedov, the carriers of the Uruk tradition, who were expanding their habitation area, reached the Southern Caucasus in the second quarter of the 4th millennium BC. They contributed to the genesis of the Leyla-Tepe culture, which subsequently spread to the Northern Caucasus. In that region, it influenced the development of various local cultures and later the Maikop culture. The “Uruk expansion” was interrupted by the appearance of the Kura-Araxes tribes in the

\*I am grateful to T. Akhundov for providing photographs of these pottery fragments.

areas adjacent to the Southern Caucasus, which cut off communication routes and halted the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age. The carriers of the Maikop culture moved southwards, primarily to the Southern Caucasus. This advance was interrupted in the early 3rd millennium BC, when the Kura-Araxes tribes, settling in the Southern Caucasus, blocked the passageways to the north (Akhundov, Almamedov, 2009: 33–34).

Some ceramic vessels from the tombs under the kurgans were similar in shape to the Uruk or even Ubaid pottery. For example, pottery from the Shadyly (Jalilov, 2012: 151) and Uzun-Rama (Jalilov, 2018: 102, fig. 11) kurgans shows parallels to the pottery from the northwestern area of the Uruk tradition (Meskene area, Northern Mesopotamia, Western Syria, and the basin of the Upper Euphrates) from the collection of M.G. Trentin (1991: Vol. 2: 22, pl. XVIa, 1–4; p. 26, pl. XXIa, 1, 1–5; p. 77, pl. Ib, 4, a–c; p. 86, pl. VIIb, 1, 4; p. 100, pl. XXIIb, 1, 2; p. 141, pl. LXIIIb, 4; p. 149, pl. Ic; p. 151, pl. IIIC, 13–15; p. 171, pl. XXIIc, 3; p. 276, pl. LXXIIId, 1, 5, 9, 10), while two specimens from the tomb under the kurgan at Mentesh-Tepe (Lyonnet, 2014: 120, fig. 4, 1, 2) show parallels to the pottery of the Uruk period from Northern Mesopotamia and Western Syria (Trentin, 1991: Vol. 2: 77, pl. Ib, 4, a–c; p. 149, pl. Ic, 2, 6; p. 207, pl. Id, 6, 6a). However, the vessels from the tombs under the kurgans were not made using a potter's wheel; their paste composition does not contain organic temper, and they were not skillfully and variegatedly decorated. It seems that these specimens constituted crude imitations (reminiscences) of some varieties of pottery belonging to the Ubaid-Uruk circle.

Ceramic vessels from the tombs under the kurgans were made in molds using fabric bags; most of them had one or two horizontal clay band handles on the sides, and in some vessels handles connected the shoulder and rim or neck (Jalilov, 2018: 99). How should this pottery be interpreted: as the “proto-Kura-Araxes” tradition or the “pre-Kura-Araxes” tradition, which existed on the eve of the advancement of the Kura-Araxes population to Eastern Transcaucasia?

The Azerbaijan-French archaeological expedition in Mentesh-Tepe discovered a collective burial of the Late Neolithic. This can be considered an important find not only for the Southern Caucasus, but also for the entire Middle East. It should be emphasized that no “transitional tombs” in terms of space and time have been found, which suggests that the tradition of collective burials in tombs under kurgans of the Early Bronze Age was not rooted in the Neolithic. Over 2300 years (!) separates the tombs under the kurgans and the Neolithic collective burial, which was dated to 5700 BC (Pecqueur et al., 2017: 163–164).

However, we should point out that some features of the tombs under the kurgans were similar to collective burials

(*tholoi*) of the Namazga III period (Bonora, Vidale, 2013: 143) in Turkmenistan, which were dated to 3200–2800 BC, such as the use of mudbricks, presence of *dromoi*, the custom of moving the bones of those buried earlier to the walls during the burial of new bodies, etc. (Alekshin, 1986: 22–24). Nevertheless, these are the monuments of different cultures, and no “transitional tombs” have been found on the territory dividing them. At present, it can be assumed that we are dealing with similar traditions, which emerged in approximately the same period in different regions, that is, with convergence (Qasimov, 2019: 40).

## Discussion

It is worth addressing one more question: is the custom of burning the tomb at the end of its functioning representative of all tombs under kurgans? For example, the tombs in kurgan 7 at the Borsunlu cemetery (Akhundov, 1999: 20–21) and in kurgan 103 (Ibid.: 22–23; Hummel, 1939: 82–88) and 119 (Akhundov, 1999: 24–25; Hummel, 1948: 15–19) at Khankendi were not burnt, and the position of bones was not changed. However, the information of Hummel about the latter two barrows shows some inconsistencies associated with tombs under kurgans (Jafarov, 2000: 31, 34). Generally, the problem of correlating chronology and cultural attribution of kurgans at Shadyly, Uzun-Rama, and Mentesh-Tepe (whose <sup>14</sup>C dates are known) with other tombs under kurgans discovered in the 20th century is still awaiting study.

The influence of the Ubaid-Uruk tradition in the Southern Caucasus is undoubted (Museibli, 2012b). As we have mentioned above, Palumbi also observed the Uruk component in the proto-Kura-Araxes pottery. The Ubaid-Uruk traditions (pottery, construction, etc.) appear in varying degrees in the Leyla-Tepe, Maikop, and Kura-Araxes cultures. Could they be one of the constituents in the culture of the population that left burial tombs? Can this population be considered “proto-Kura-Araxes” or “Kura-Araxes” only on the basis of traditions common to the entire region (Ubaid-Uruk)? Should in this case, the Leyla-Tepe and Maikop cultures also be interpreted as “proto-Kura-Araxes” cultures (?), that is, should we “blur” the boundaries between archaeological cultures?! We suggest that the ancient society that left the tombs under kurgans existed on the eve of the movement of the Kura-Araxes tribes to the Eastern Transcaucasia. It was influenced by the Uruk culture, but retained its distinctive identity in funerary and pottery traditions.

There is another more general research problem, namely, the correspondence between the name of the type of archaeological site, similar to tombs with collective burials under an artificial mound (in our study, these are “tombs under kurgans”), and the term “kurgan type of burial monuments”. According to archaeology and

ethnography, nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples did not bury many of their dead tribesmen in tombs under artificial mounds. Such tombs were used for a short span of time as compared to collective burial tombs of the Early Bronze Age from the eastern piedmont of the Lesser Caucasus. We are possibly dealing here with a burial in a burnt tomb (tomb-dugout or tomb-semidugout), and not with the kurgan type of burial monuments. Generally, there is the problem of designating archaeological sites of this type. There is a need for extensional and intentional definition of the terms, such as “burial mound”, “kurgan”, “tumulus”, “tomb under kurgan”, etc.

### Conclusions

Thus, the available information has not yet produced sufficient knowledge of cultural and social life of the population that left tombs with collective burials. We can only summarize the following points. The tradition of collective burials in tombs appeared in the 34th century BC (mid 3rd quarter of the 4th millennium BC) and disappeared at the turn of the 31st and 30th centuries BC (in the late 4th to early 3rd millennium BC). The carriers of this tradition lived along the eastern piedmont of the Lesser Caucasus. They were mobile cattle breeders, who did not have long-term settlements. Only the Uruk tradition connects this population with the people of the Early Kura-Araxes culture, who lived in the same period. No archaeological sites are known, which indicate the migration of the creators of tombs under kurgans to the above region from other regions of the Southern Caucasus or from more distant neighboring regions. This tradition ceased to exist in 3000–2900 BC, when the Kura-Araxes tribes came to this territory. Specific pottery and collective burials from tombs under kurgans are not known in the advanced Kura-Araxes culture (even after 3000–2900 BC) and its local versions. The disappearance of that tradition may be associated with depopulation caused by famine, infectious diseases, etc., or by synthesis of cultures, or by assimilation of the local population by a migrant population. Once again, a reservation should be made that these conclusions were formulated in the context of a working hypothesis, and can be corrected by further research.

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