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## The Kura-Araxes “Chieftdom/State”: The Problems of Evolutionary Labels and Imperfect Analogies

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### Introduction

Over a long and productive archaeological career that has involved primary research in South Asia and Egypt, Walter Fairservis has delighted in standing apart from fashionable models of archaeological theory. Whether it be decrying soulless vulgar materialism, elaborating a psychologically inspired, humanistic vision of the development of culture (Fairservis 1975), or questioning the received, consensual interpretation of the Harappan “state,” Walter has consistently opted for an original reading (literally so in his attempted decipherment of Harappan script) of the archaeological record. Models have been bent or totally reformulated in accordance with the archaeological data, not the reverse. Thus, today Walter has reopened the question of the exact evolutionary status of the archaeological culture conventionally termed the Harappan or Indus “Civilization,” arguing that this culture’s special emphasis on cattle husbandry, as opposed to intensive agriculture, explains its remarkable geographical spread and distinguishes it from the true Bronze Age riverine-based civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt. If label it one must, then the Harappan or Indus Valley culture is classified either as a “first stage” civilization or chieftdom and not a state or true civilization that exhibits much more marked social differentiation and complexity (Fairservis 1989).

This essay wishes to examine briefly another problematic “complex” archaeological culture that was characterized by considerable material culture uniformity and, at its zenith, spread over an extremely large area. This is the Early Bronze culture of Transcaucasia, which

following Soviet usage is termed "Kura-Araxes" and after Burney and Lang (1971) is sometimes referred to as "Early Transcaucasian." Actually both terms are problematic in the same sense as the referent "Indus Valley" is inappropriate to describe the Harappan phenomenon: this culture is distributed over an area far larger than that watered by the Kura and Araxes rivers or today known as Transcaucasia. The purpose of the exercise is to review briefly a complex archaeological phenomenon not well understood in the West; to compare and contrast specific features of this Early Bronze culture with those of the partly contemporaneous, so-called urban civilization of the Indus Valley; and finally to evaluate the utility of evolutionary stages defined largely from the ethnographic literature, for understanding archaeological remains. In the spirit of Walter Fairbairns, it will be argued that such classifications and labelling exercises can obscure understanding as much as enlighten it.

### The Early Bronze Culture of Transcaucasia and Surrounding Regions

Today's Transcaucasia refers to the three republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which was located south of the main Caucasus range and north of the middle course of the Araxes, which flows through and creates the rich Ararat plain. Where the northern boundary can, to some extent, be considered "natural" in that the Great Caucasus range stretches nearly unbroken northwest to southeast for ca. 1200 kilometers between the Black and Caspian Seas, dividing ultimately the south Russian steppes from the northernmost frontier of the ancient Near East, Transcaucasia's southern boundary is more arbitrary, reflecting borders defined by peace treaties signed between the Russian and Ottoman empires and Persia in the early 19th century. In other words, today's Transcaucasia (literally "across the Caucasus" as seen, of course, from Russia) merges in the south imperceptibly with the highlands of eastern Anatolia and northwestern Iran.

Sedentary, food-producing, late Neolithic to early Chalcolithic horizons precede the emergence and spread of the Kura-Araxes culture both in Transcaucasia proper and in eastern Anatolia/northwestern Iran; occasionally, material connections of these early cultures can be traced farther south to the better understood and earlier discovered cultures of northern Mesopotamia, such as Halaf and northern Ubaid. However, the overall picture of the development of food-producing societies largely appears to have been an autonomous process, which was well established at least by the middle of the sixth millennium BC in well-watered areas such as Kymen Kartli, the middle course of the Kura and its southern tributary the Khrami River (Shulaveri-

Shomu culture), or the fertile Ararat plain of southern Armenia and Nakhichevan (Kyu' Tepe I, Tehkut, etc.).

Beginning possibly as early as the mid-fourth millennium BC a new distinctive black and red-burnished handmade "Kura-Araxes culture" ceramic ware appears on sites spread throughout southern Transcaucasia and northeastern Anatolia. These sites also have a characteristic form of domestic architecture and diagnostic architectural features. Despite regional variation, the overall uniformity of Kura-Araxes material remains is striking and consists of diagnostic black, brown, and red-burnished handmade ceramics with characteristic polyspherical handles; highly distinctive portable and stationary ceramic and irons or portable and stationary raised supports encircling a depressed hearth, which are sometimes decorated with anthropomorphic or, more typically, animal representations and are found usually in the center of each dwelling; squared-off, toothed flint sickle blades; fairly unelaborate copper and arsenical bronze tools, such as flat daggers and spear heads, hammer-headed toggle pins, occasional bent metal sickles, and curved axes with tabular shafts (particularly known from tombs excavated near Sachkhere in Imeretia or north central Georgia); and standardized domestic architecture, consisting of undifferentiated, one-room, circular or rectangular (typically with rounded corners) dwellings made of stone with flat thatched and wooden-beamed roofs, or particularly in the Ararat plain, of mudbricks. The Kura-Araxes folk appear to have constructed extensive agricultural terraces, earthen dams, cyclopean stone fortifications, and presumably canal irrigation systems in areas such as the Ararat plain of southern Transcaucasia.

It is not clear what occasioned the rise of the Kura-Araxes culture. The very density of their settlements on the border of a broader north Mesopotamian world may suggest that it was not entirely an internal process of development. That is, the emergence of this distinctive culture, which clearly represented a local adaptation to new economic and technological practices, may also have been associated with or stimulated by the roughly contemporaneous expansion of Urak and Urak-related settlements (Algaze 1989) of the greater Mesopotamian world into adjacent regions of eastern Anatolia, as documented, for example, at Arslantepe near Malatya. In any case, during the course of the late fourth and early third millennium this culture spreads well beyond the areas drained by the Kura and Araxes rivers into: (1) the Zagros highlands of western Iran at least as far as Kernanshah; (2) southwest across the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates, extending as the so-called Khirbet Kerak culture onto the Amuq plain and farther south into Syria and Palestine; and (3) north, northeast along the Caspian littoral into mountainous Daghestan and Checheno-

Ingushetia (for the most complete, though still partial, catalogue of Kura-Araxes sites throughout this vast area, see Sagona 1984).

The date, origin, and internal developmental sequence of the Kura-Araxes culture are not well understood, in part because of the uneven quality of research in the three republics, Daghestan, and eastern Anatolia and northwestern Iran. Farther west in eastern Anatolia, in particular, the Kura-Araxes materials may appear intrusive within a longer culture sequence of sites, such as Norsun Tepe, the earlier levels of which contain highly distinctive remains. This paper cannot review the chronological parameters and internal developmental subdivisions of the Kura-Araxes materials. K.Kh. Kushnareva's synthesis of Transcaucasian prehistory, now being translated into English (Kushnareva, in press), accepts the synchronizations with the eastern Anatolian materials, some of which contain earlier evidence for the so-called Uruk expansion, and uses the available corrected radiocarbon determinations, as compiled by Kavtaradze (1983), to argue that the culture lasted from ca. 3500 to 2300 BC and that it can be subdivided, primarily on the basis of stylistic ceramic analysis, documented on a few stratified sites in Shida Kartli, into four sub-periods (her sequence differing only slightly from that presented by Sagona).

While the proposed, broad chronological limits may be provisionally accepted, questions as to the development and spread of the culture unfortunately cannot be separated from the problem of its origin, and this problem in turn is directly related to the quality and quantity of research undertaken throughout the vast, politically and ethnically heterogeneous area over which the Kura-Araxes materials are distributed. Despite an occasional continuity of occupation on Transcaucasian sites from late Chalcolithic to Early Bronze of Kura-Araxes times, the overall picture on sites throughout Transcaucasia is one of the abandonment of older sites and the establishment of new settlements. On the basis of carefully excavated stratified settlements, such as Khizantant Gora and Khvatskhelebi (or Khvatskela), Georgian archaeologists vigorously argue for the original autochthonous development of the culture along the Middle Kura River in Shida and Kvemo Kartli. This thesis, however, is open to serious question since the crude quality of the Kura-Araxes ceramics in the lowest-lying levels on some of these sites can be alternately interpreted (namely, primitiveness of pottery style may be explained as an original provincial variant). Moreover, these sites exhibit little culture deposit, usually less than a meter, and sites farther south on the Ararat plain and in northwestern Iran, typically with mudbrick architecture, occasionally have underlying Chalcolithic deposits (such as Kyul' Tepe I in Nakhichevan) and much thicker Kura-Araxes remains (8.5 meter deposit at Dzhnavit ca. 20

kilometers south of Yerevan (Khanzadian 1985: 10) and nearly 11 meters at Tappeh Gijlar west of Lake Urmia (Pecorella and Salvini 1984). The most convincing evidence for stylistic ceramic continuity with earlier periods also occurs on sites in southernmost Transcaucasia, such as at Ovchulartepesi in Nakhichevan (Narimanov 1987: 64-65; the Ovchulartepesi materials were kindly shown to me by V.G. Aliev in Baku in 1986).

Thus, while far from proven, a case can be made for the original development of the Kura-Araxes in the later heartland of the Urartean Kingdom, and its subsequent spread farther west, south, and north, first into Georgia along the Kura, then into northern Azerbaijan, and ultimately into Daghestan and Chechno-Ingushetia. The mechanisms for this astonishing and seemingly rapid dispersal, unfortunately, are not clear, but the archaeological evidence suggests the actual movement of peoples, and some scholars have tentatively identified this spread of remarkably similar archaeological materials with the arrival of Hurrian-speaking groups, who later in the second millennium BC controlled parts of northern Mesopotamia and Syria and whose language appears to be ancestral to relic languages spoken today in Daghestan. Regardless of the accuracy of this ethnic identification, the location of the original homeland of the Kura-Araxes culture in southernmost Transcaucasia (primarily the Ararat plain of southern Armenia and Nakhichevan) south into the Lake Van region and east into the Lake Urmia basin would reduce the estimated duration for this Early Bronze culture, since the correlations with the relatively well-dated eastern Anatolian sites with Mesopotamian parallels would occur earlier in the developmental sequence of the Kura-Araxes culture, overlapping with the postulated expansion northwards into today's Georgia. The date of the entire Kura-Araxes Early Bronze phenomenon might thus largely be limited to the final centuries of the fourth and first half of the third millennium BC.

Nevertheless, the strikingly similar and easily recognizable material remains distributed over a broad area, much larger than southern Mesopotamia, and the density of known, Kura-Araxes settlements, is laterally numbering in the hundreds, if not now thousands, is indisputable. Whatever the Kura-Araxes culture represents in terms of its political and socio-organizational complexity, at least four of its archaeological dimensions recall features of the better understood Harappan phenomenon, raising the question of whether or not broadly analogous processes of development and decline characterized both cultures: (1) its relative uniformity of material remains (with, of course, limited, easily explicable regional variation); (2) its exceedingly broad geographic distribution; (3) the extremely large total number of recorded settlements; and (4) its mysterious collapse or disappearance.

A detailed listing of structural similarities between the Kura-Araxes and Harappan culture cannot be pursued here. The one notable difference is the apparent absence of a marked settlement hierarchy and true cities among the Kura-Araxes sites. This is surely significant, if true. However, this distinction too may reflect the uneven character of research on this culture and may obscure a more complex reality. For example, the site of Horom on the fertile Shirk plain of northwestern Armenia, which is overburdened with later Early Iron Age remains, may easily have exceeded 50 hectares in extent during Kura-Araxes times as estimated by the spread of surface Kura-Araxes materials throughout the northwestern quadrant of the site, and E. V. Khanzadjan (personal communication) estimates the Early Bronze occupation of the site of Metsamor in the western Ararat valley, which is also renowned for its later Early Iron occupation, at ca. 30 hectares. The citadal area alone of the Early Bronze site of Sakhne on the edge of the Djavakheti plateau in southernmost Georgia is delimited by a nearly continuous 4-meter thick cyclopean stone wall, encompassing roughly 6 hectares; the entire site itself presumably was much larger. Atypically for most archaeological cultures, Kura-Araxes remains are much better documented on smaller village sites, such as Kivatskhelebi; the middle-sized 10–12 hectare towns, such as Arich on the southeastern edge of the Shirak plain, and even possible cities, such as Metsamor and Horom, are much more poorly investigated, if at all, thus adversely affecting our overall understanding and hindering comparison with the indisputably urban Indus Valley culture.

The very fact that Kura-Araxes sites are located throughout all altitudinal zones of Transcaucasia (save the Colchidean depression of westernmost Georgia) and mountainous Daghestan and Checheno-Ingushetia bespeaks successful adaptation to widely varying ecological circumstances and the development of a variety of distinctive, altitudinally specific subsistence practices, including terracing and the use of rich pasture land in the high mountains. Based stockraising practices must have differed throughout the vast area covered by Kura-Araxes remains in terms of the types of animals kept, particularly flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle, and in terms of the economic significance and importance of livestock relative to agriculture. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions (such as faunal data currently being compiled on Early Bronze sites in Shirak by Dr. R. C. Badaljan), our understanding of these differences is rudimentary. It is still not clear when a true pastoral nomadic, as opposed to transhumant, pattern involving the semiannual long-distance migration of flocks of sheep and goats to and from extensive highland pastures first developed. Based primarily on the uncertain basis of settlement location some

scholars associate this development with the spread of Kura-Araxes settlements throughout all altitudinal zones of the Caucasus, while others consider its practice as linked with advances in transportation technology, particularly the use of wheeled vehicles and horse-riding, which are related to the end of the Early Bronze period and the appearance of an archaeological "culture" known almost exclusively from large burial mounds or kurgans.

Similarly, the types of agriculture practiced and crops raised by Kura-Araxes peoples must have differed greatly from area to area, ranging from intensive irrigation agriculture, possibly including double cropping, in the fertile Ararat plain to the much more extensive cultivation of more durable, frost-resistant crops, such as barley, in highland areas. While extensive agricultural terracing can be documented in the highlands, it is unclear whether or not the agriculture practices there was of a more stationary or shifting, slash-and-burn character (see Mindiasvili 1983). In short, the primary economic bases of the Kura-Araxes culture require more precise delineation through the recovery and analysis of floral and faunal materials from a range of sites, representing the different ecological, altitudinal zones to which this culture clearly adapted. It seems likely, however, that the Kura-Araxes peoples relied relatively less on intensive forms of agriculture than their more civilized neighbors to the south and that stockraising, particularly some form of sheep/goat pastoralism, played a relatively greater role than, say, in Mesopotamia or Egypt.

In any case, sometime during the second half of the third millennium BC, Kura-Araxes sites suddenly seem to have been abandoned, a phenomenon apparently associated with the appearance of very large, richly adorned earthen and stone burial mounds or kurgans containing gold and silver vessels, jewelry made of precious materials, such as gold, silver, and semiprecious stones, as initially documented, for example, by B. A. Kuftin (1941) in his excavations of the famous Trialeti kurgans on the Tsalkskoe plateau; more elaborate metal tools and weapons, including the first tin-bronzes; and mobile carts or vehicles with heavy tripartite wooden wheels. The archaeological record for the late Early Bronze and Middle Bronze periods (ca. 2200–1500 BC) is known almost exclusively from such mortuary evidence, and, rich though this is, the virtual absence of data from settlements makes reconstruction of the societies that constructed these impressive burial mounds difficult. Reasons for the abandonment or at least shift in the location and nature of Kura-Araxes settlements is unclear with explanations ranging from environmental changes, including misuse and over exploitation of cultivated areas, to developments of new economic subsistence practices, such as an ever-growing reliance on sheep/goat

pastoralism and, correspondingly, a further development of mounted pastoral nomadism with annual long-distance movement to seasonal pastures. It is also quite possible on the basis of materials excavated from kurgans in the northern Caucasus and Kuban steppe that some of these changes, particularly the use of wheeled vehicles, were introduced into the area by peoples migrating across the Great Caucasus range from the north. Superficially analogous to the collapse of the Harappan Culture, the early Bronze Kura-Araxes archaeological horizon essentially disappears from the record, though, of course, some aspect of material culture continuity with succeeding Middle and Late Bronze cultures can be observed. Relative uniformity of material remains is succeeded by greater regional diversity, and it is only much later, possibly towards the end of the second millennium BC, that major settlements appear throughout the area, exhibiting strong aspect of continuity with still later sites occupied in early historic (that is, Urartean) times.

### Conclusion

How should one evaluate the enigmatic, historically significant Kura-Araxes culture? Does our understanding increase by our attempting to rank it according to some postulated evolutionary scale, such as a form of chiefdom or even incipient early state? Certainly, the quality of much of the evidence hinders any attempt at comparative interpretation, but it may be fair to argue that this is always the case when the relevant data is exclusively archaeological. Alternatively, is it fair to question whether or not the Early Bronze culture of the Caucasus can be perfectly compared with or find its structural analogue with ethnographically documented complex societies recorded during the last two hundred years or so? The world historical time and circumstances that led to the crystallization of complex chiefdoms and states recorded by early explorers and later ethnologists certainly differed from those of the third millennium BC in greater West Asia that stimulated the rise of the Kura-Araxes (and also Harappan) culture, and it may just be a sad fact that no perfect structural parallel to the Kura-Araxes culture (and Indus Valley Civilization) can be gleaned from travelers' accounts and the annals of ethnography.

Admission of the imperfect, often misleading nature of ethnographic analogies is not to counsel despair, but rather to advocate the approach vigorously sustained for so long by Walter Fairbairns, namely, to examine all aspects of the relevant archaeological record on their own terms and compare and contrast them with other equally unique, if equally deficient and problematic, records. Walter's decade-long investigation of Harappan materials led him to emphasize this culture's unique economic and ideological commitment to cattle pastoralism, a

feature that distinguished it from the more agrarian riverine-based civilization to the west:

What was central was most emphatically cattle. The seal motifs, the abundance of cattle figurines, the faunal evidence, and the character of Harappan settlements underlines the emphasis. Cattle were eaten, used as draught animals, cattle had representation in religion. Most obvious is the emphasis upon cattle as wealth, and in consequence of power. This affected the settlement pattern both as to location and as to kind. . . . The Harappans were one among numerous cultures of the borderlands who laid the basis of village farming on the Indian subcontinent, but their organizational advances were eventually more directed to pastoralism which of itself has never been the foundation of Civilization (1989: 212, 217).

Ignoring momentarily the dictum to avoid misleading ethnographic analogies, one possibly can discern certain parallels between the seemingly rapid Harappan expansion over broad regions and the astonishingly quick 19th century Neur territorial conquest at the expense of the neighboring Dinkha tribes. Following Kelly (1985), this was a process that was intimately associated with Neur cattle-herding practices and the value, as represented above all in the bride-wealth payments, that this culture attributed to cattle. The Harappans, of course, clearly differ from the Neur on many accounts, and it is doubtful whether the segmentary lineage theory Evans-Pritchard devised to explain the social and political organization of the acephalous Neur is directly relevant to unlocking the mysteries of Harappan social structure. But complex archaeologically defined cultures, which seem to have been dependent upon livestock herding, may exhibit common features in terms of their origin, extensive spread, and rapid organizational decline that ultimately are related to this emphasis.

Whatever the Kura-Araxes culture represents in cultural evolutionary terms, it is certainly qualitatively distinct from the better known, more sedentary societies of civilization of the Mesopotamian world. Extensive reliance on some form of sheep/goat pastoralism and the corresponding value attached to these animals (a feature that can be argued for in terms of the iconographic representations of these animals on Kura-Araxes pottery and hearth supports) may have been a distinguishing feature of the culture that allowed for its successful dispersal over broad, environmentally distinct zones, including its advance into the more complex world of northern Mesopotamia and Syria. Although in many respects these two cultures were not directly comparable with that of the urban Indus Valley "Civilization," some shared developmental patterns can be observed, and these, in turn,

might relate to the emphasis accorded animal husbandry relative to that of agriculture that characterized both of these complex, archaeologically defined cultures. Walter Fairservis has well elaborated the distinctive features of the Harappans; much more work and documentation is needed to sustain these preliminary speculations on the equally enigmatic and intriguing Kura-Araxes culture.

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## Socio-ritual Artifacts of Upper Paleolithic Hunter-Gatherers in South Asia

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### Introduction

South Asia is renowned for being the birthplace of some of the world's earliest major religions and yet we know very little about the belief systems of the indigenous communities who inhabited the subcontinent during the prehistoric and Paleolithic periods.

Buddhism, Jainism, and the heterogeneous collection of belief systems included under the term "Hinduism" became prominent approximately 2500 to 2000 years ago, or somewhat earlier in the case of Vedic religion. These religions are well documented from a variety of sources, including religious texts, epic literature, carved edicts, ritual artifacts, and ritual structures.

There were of course more ancient belief systems, the most well known being those of the Indus Civilization of Pakistan and northwestern India (Fairservis 1967, 1975, 1984; Marshall 1931; Parpola 1988). This civilization, often referred to as the Harappan culture, dates to the second and third millennia BC with roots extending even further back in time, to 6500 BC (Jarrige and Meadow 1980). Many ritual artifacts or symbols found in the context of Indus urban society continued to be used in later Jain, Hindu, or Buddhist iconography and various aspects of the Indus belief systems associated with these symbols may have persisted (Kenoyer 1989, 1991a).

While the connections between the Indus Civilization and later urban societies are becoming more defined, little effort has been made to follow the use of specific symbols to the earlier Paleolithic period (Table 1). One reason for stopping at this point is the misconception that historical South Asian civilization were the result of migrations