

The Kurgans of Chanlar and Some Thoughts on Burial Customs in Transcaucasia in the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to make available to the academic community the results of the excavations of three kurgans by J. Hummel in 1941, in Chanlar, Western Azerbaijan, which brought to light the exceptional presence of deer and horses in the burials, along with other animals. These results remained unpublished for many years and then appeared only in a Soviet-era journal. The finds from Chanlar are exceptional, since they have no parallels in any other funerary context of this period in the Caucasus. The intriguing and important nature of the finds encourages further analysis of the coeval cultures of Central Transcaucasia and some thoughts about burial practices and cults.

Keywords: *kurgan; Transcaucasia; Late Bronze Age; Early Iron Age; burial of deer; cults;*

Introduction

Jakov Ivanovič Hummel¹ was born in 1893 in the former village of Helenendorf (now Göygöl, formerly Chanlar) in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Helenendorf was at that time a German colony, founded in 1819 by settlers from Württemberg and established by Czar Alexander to help populate the region that had just been acquired from the Safavid dynasty under the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan. During his career, Hummel was director of the local museum, archaeologist and member of the Academy of Science of the Azeri Soviet Republic. He led several archaeological research campaigns, the most important of which involved investigations around his native village. The beginning of Second World War, however, brought to an end his professional career. Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 led to a massive Soviet ethnic cleansing operation, with the deportation of entire nationalities classified as anti-Soviet, mainly to underpopulated and remote areas. All German communities were thus affected and Hummel himself was deported to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, where he died in 1946.

¹ Cyrillic names and words have been transliterated according to the system ISO: 9. On the basis of other existing systems of Cyrillic transliteration, in the specialised literature the name is also written as Khanlar or Hanlar. The name Hummel (which originates from the German version) might be transliterated as 'Gummel' when using the Cyrillic version of the name.

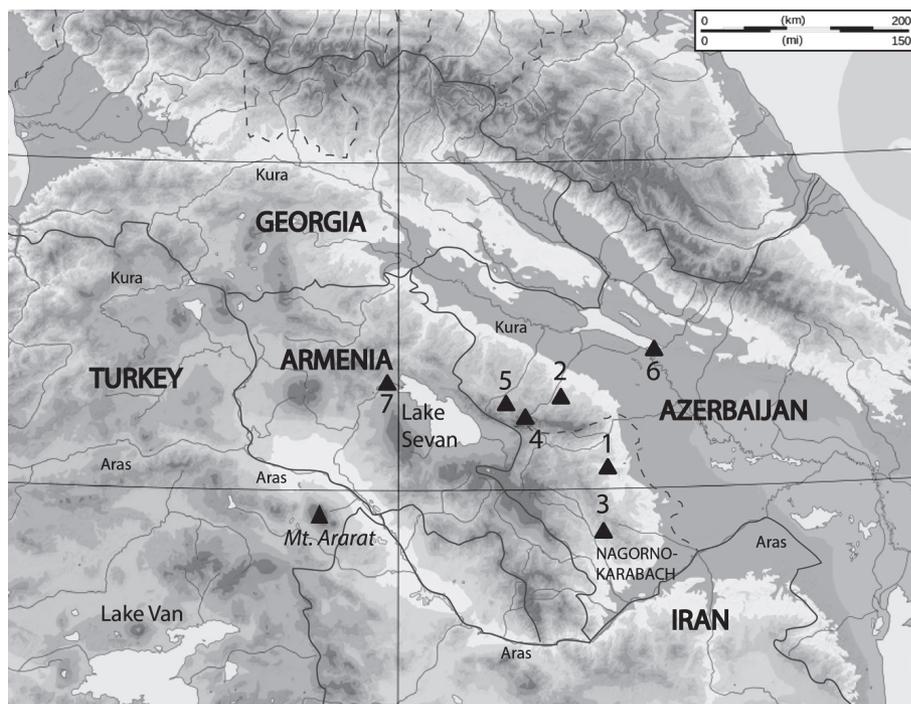


Fig. 1. Transcaucasia and sites cited in the text: 1. Artschadsor; 2. Chanlar; 3. Chodžali; 4. Kalakent; 5. Kedabek; 6. Mingečaur; 7. Redkin Lager

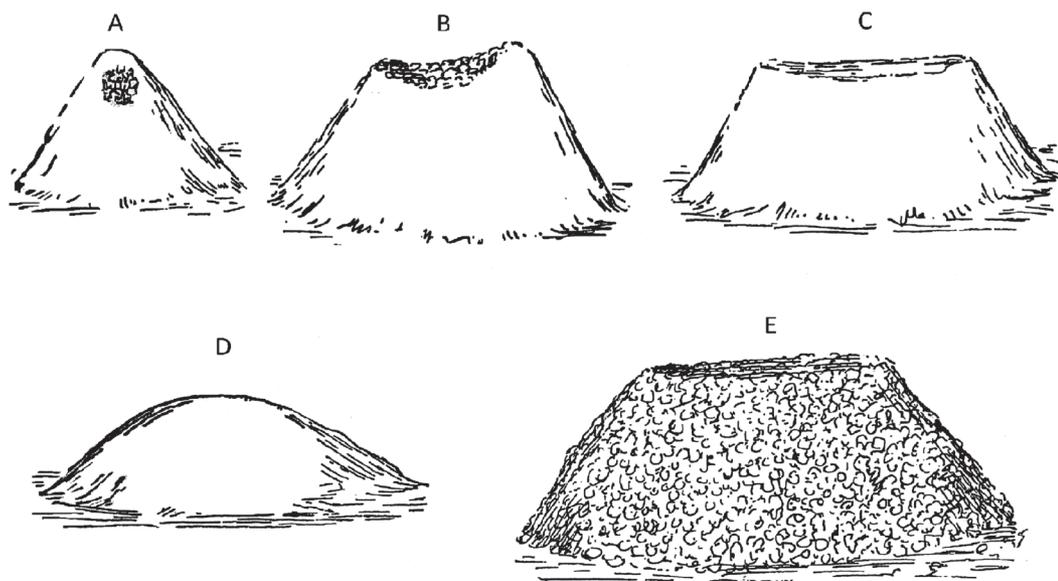


Fig. 2. Different type of kurgans from Chodžali (after Rösler 1896, p. 79, figs 1-5)

Hummel first carried out excavations in his native village in 1930 and published the results shortly afterwards.² His final investigation was conducted in 1941, just before war came to the region, and he did not have time to publish the results. After Hummel's death, the excavation records were kept in his private archive as manuscripts. In 1990, they were sent by his son to Boris Piotrovskij, former director of the Hermitage Museum and one of the leading scholars of ancient Caucasian cultures. Piotrovskij prepared the manuscripts for publication,³ adding some comments of his own and a proposed dating for the finds.⁴ These works were also Piotrovskij's last, since he passed away a few days after their completion. Hummel's discoveries, despite their importance and singularity, passed almost unnoticed by Western academia; they have recently been described in part by Areshian.⁵

Hummel was not, however, the first to carry out archaeological research in the village of Helenendorf. The presence of ancient graves around the village had been known of for several decades. At the end of the 19th century, the well-known German scholar E. Rösler, working together with the Russian 'Imperial Archaeological Commission' (*Imperatorskaja arheologičeskaja komissija*), carried out extensive digs around the village.⁶ Rösler excavated several kurgans and graves, unearthing important remains relating to the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age cultures of the mountainous highlands of Central Transcaucasia. These discoveries are associated with a local culture which developed in the Late Bronze Age around the area of Lake Sevan, Karabach and Western Azerbaijan. It is known in the archaeological literature as the 'Chodžali-Kedabeg' or 'Ganja-Karabach' culture. Other important finds belonging to this culture come from the cemeteries of Artschadsor, Chodžali, Mingečaur, Kalakent, Kedabek and Redkin Lager (Fig. 1). The nature of this culture will be further discussed below.

The investigation of the necropolis

The area surrounding the village of Helenendorf was extensively investigated by both Hummel and Rösler and was extremely rich in funerary remains, which were scattered all around the village. Tens of kurgans were excavated and they yielded a huge amount of evidence, unfortunately not yet well studied. The burials mostly date to the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age. They were mainly in large kurgans, built with stones and earth (Fig. 2), and could contain simple stone-cist graves or a larger, more complex funerary chamber (Fig. 3). Multiple burials are also often attested (Fig. 4). Grave goods were numerous, including abundant pottery, often painted, and a wide repertoire of metalwork, both of which are characteristic of Chodžali-Kedabeg culture (Fig. 5).

The cemetery pertinent to this study is located southwest of the village, on the right-hand bank of the River Gandža-čaja (Fig. 6). In the very same area, about 1–1.5 km south of the village, Rösler previously excavated some kurgans;⁷ namely, nos. 8–13, 34 and 35 on the map (Fig. 6). They

² Hummel 1933.

³ Gummel 1992.

⁴ Piotrovskij 1992.

⁵ Areshian 2006.

⁶ Rösler 1901, 1902.

⁷ OAK 1899, pp. 79–86; 1900, pp. 70–72; Rösler 1901, pp. 126–138; 1902, pp. 144–145.

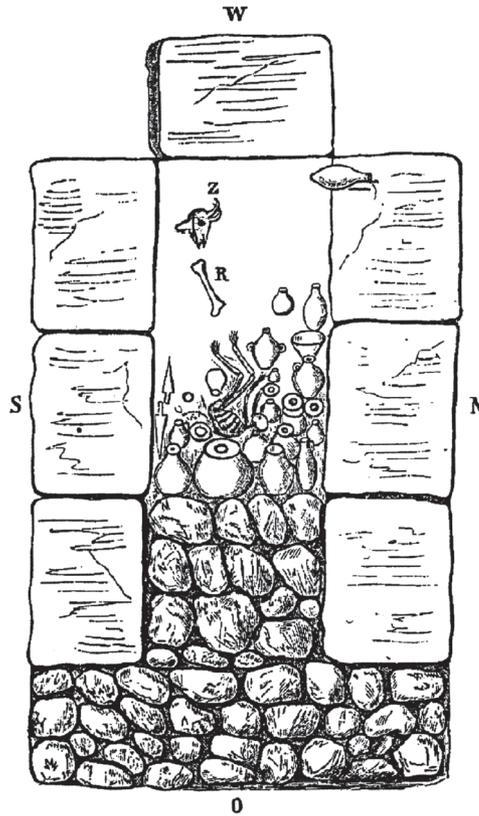


Fig. 3. Underground stone chambers from Redkin Lager (Bayern 1885, fig. 5)

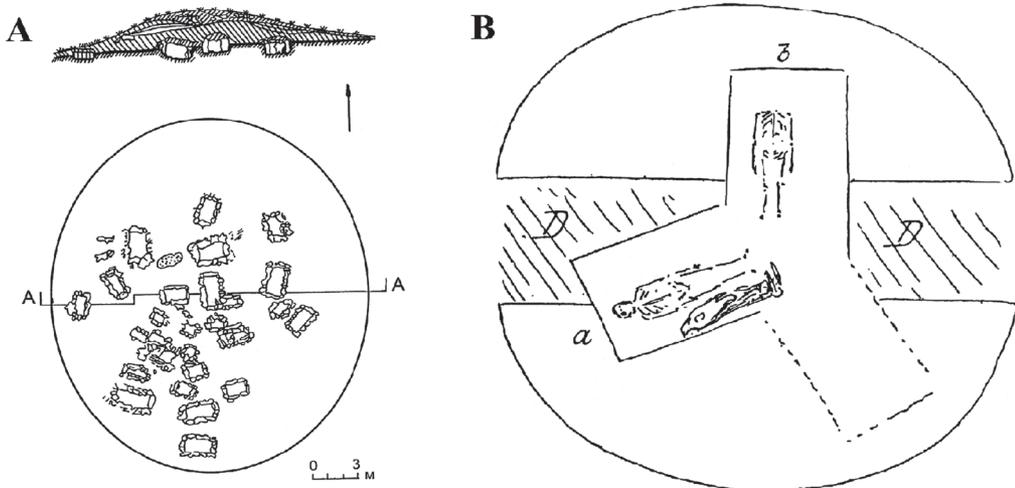


Fig. 4. Kurgans from Chačbulag (A) and Dawschanli-Artschadsor (B) with multiple burials inside (Pogrebovs 2011, p. 333, pl. 36; Rösler 1896, p. 91, fig. 24)

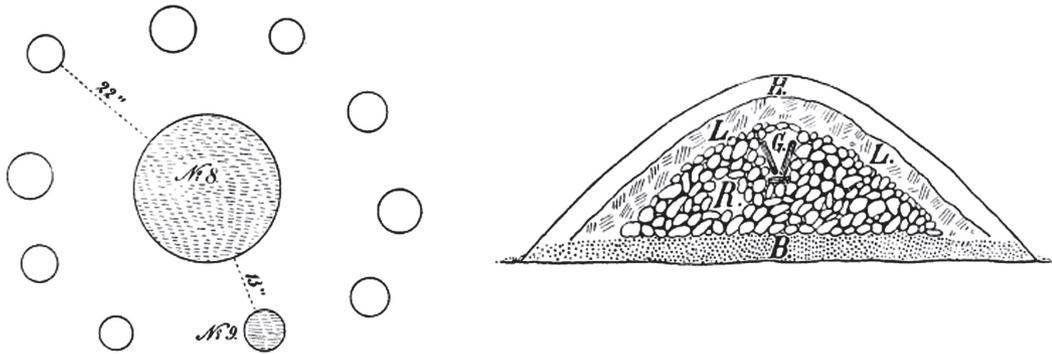


Fig. 7. Sketch made by Rösler of kurgan no. 8 (Rösler 1901, p. 128, fig. 47; p. 129, fig. 48)

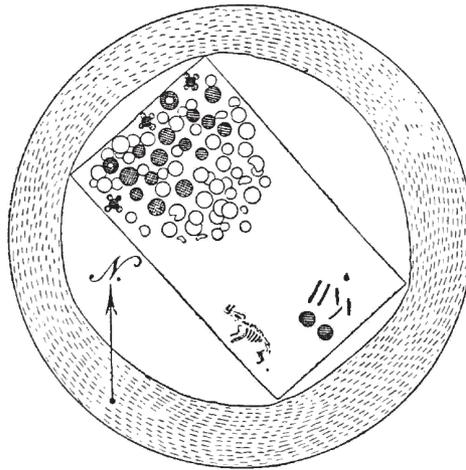


Fig. 8. Kurgan no. 12 (Rösler 1901, p. 136, fig. 56)

contained a number of finds; in particular, a large assortment of pottery. Bronze objects, on the other hand, were very few and the human bones had almost totally disappeared. These burials mostly dated to the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age, although some — with different features — were older. The most important is kurgan no. 8, which, however, was not excavated right down to the base. It was surrounded by 10 smaller kurgans (Fig. 7). Also worthy of note is kurgan no. 12, which contained about 50 pottery vases and no human bones or metal objects, but the skeleton of a wild boar (Fig. 8). Hummel resumed Rösler’s work and excavated three additional kurgans, which are described below.

Kurgan no. 148 (Fig. 9). This mound did not have any clearly recognisable marker on the surface and was discovered by means of a probe. The surface was marked only by a river pebble. The grave measured 5×1.7 m, with a depth of 1.7 m, and was orientated northwest–southeast.

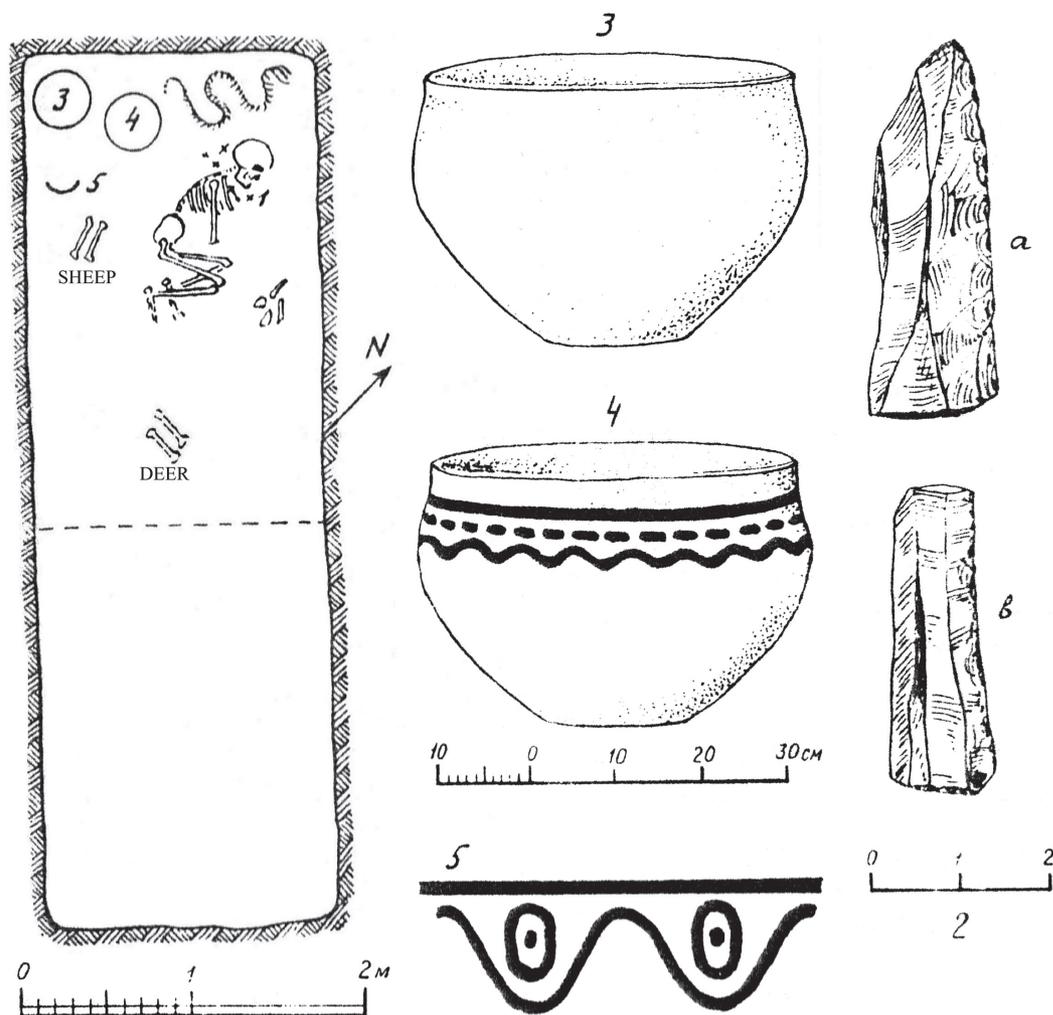


Fig. 9. Kurgan no. 148 (after Gummel 1992, p. 7, fig. 2)

The southern part of the grave did not contain any artefacts, but in the northern part, the bones of a deer were found, and beside them, next to the southwestern wall, were the bones of sheep. In the northern corner lay the complete skeleton of a large snake. The bones of the human occupant were located more or less at the centre of the grave, lying on the left side in a crouched position. They belonged to a female individual about 30–35 years old. Grave goods were quite scarce, consisting of some stone tools, 12 carnelian beads found near the skull and two complete pottery vases, plus another fragmentary one. Vase no. 4 is decorated with red lines. Between vases nos. 3 and 4, various animal bones were found.

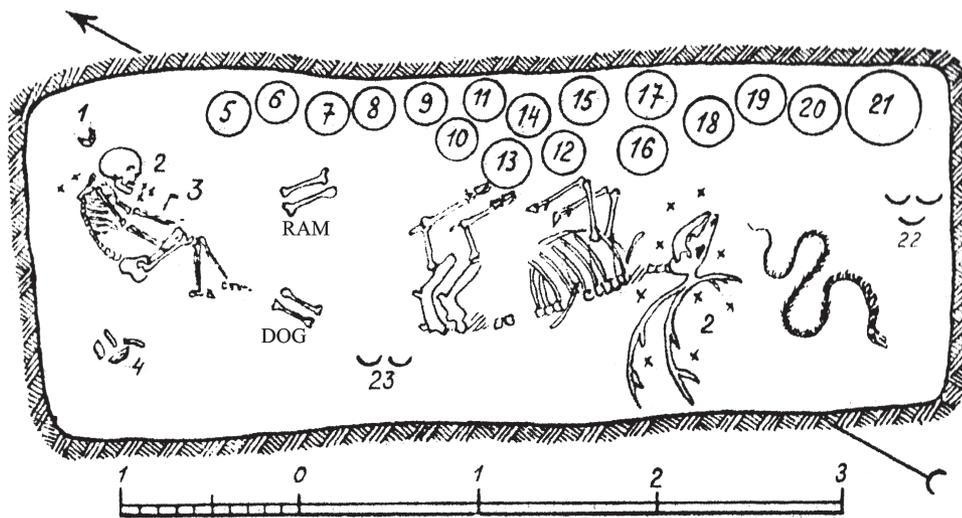


Fig. 10. Kurgan no. 149 (after Gummel 1992, p. 8, fig. 3)

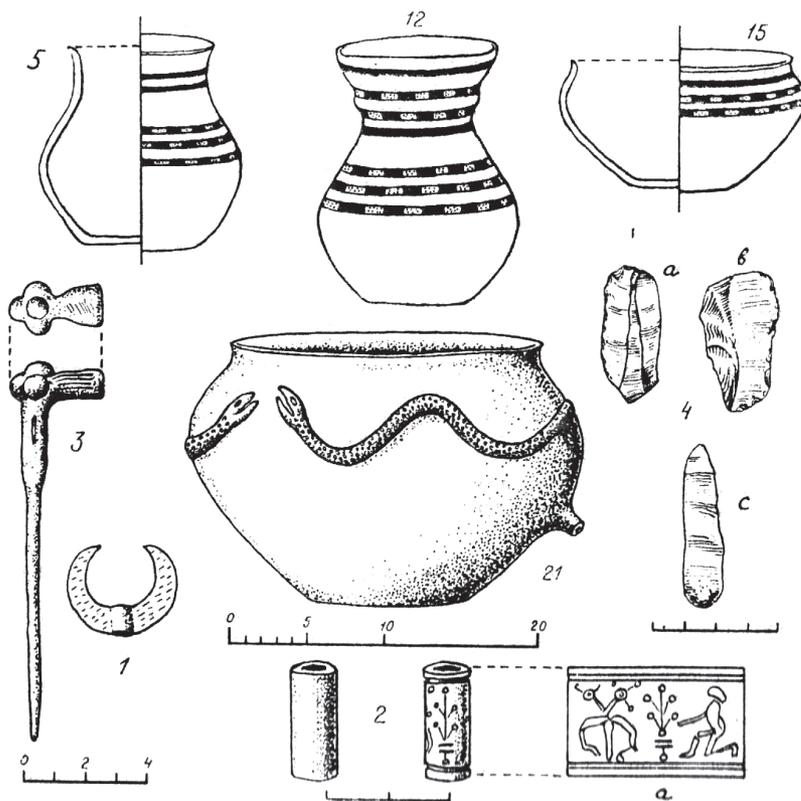


Fig. 11. Funerary set of kurgan no. 149 (after Gummel 1992, p. 8, fig. 3)

Kurgan no. 149 (Figs 10, 11). The grave was marked on the surface by a low mound. The base of the kurgan, encircled by a series of stones, was slightly higher than the surrounding ground level, since this area was not protected and had been eroded by rainwater. The pit was covered by a layer of river pebbles. The cut was rectangular in shape and measured $5.1 \times 1.9 \times 2.25$ m; it was located at a depth of 1.8 m, with a northwest–southeast orientation. Below the pebble layer lay another layer, 2 cm thick, formed of rotten wood, the remains of a wooden structure which had once covered the grave-cut. The area underneath was filled with a clayey deposit, which had protected the contents of the grave from breakage when the overlying soil and stones collapsed.

In the northeastern corner, over a pile of ash, lay the well-preserved skeleton of a woman of about 30 years old, in a crouched position. Near the skull there was a crescent-shaped copper object and several white glass paste beads. Roughly on the breast of the dead woman lay a Mitanni-style white glass paste seal, and another seal without any decoration. Near the hand was a long copper pin (13 cm in length) with an unusual termination, and in the southwestern corner, seven cores of jasper. In front of the human skeleton lay dog and ram bones and at the centre of the grave, the complete skeleton of a deer, placed on its right side, with antlers and skull decorated with several white glass paste beads lying on the floor around them. These beads were slightly smaller, but more elegant than those associated with the human skeleton. Behind the deer skeleton lay that of a large snake.

Along the side of the grave were 17 well-made pots, all hand-made with fine, dark clay and smooth, polished surfaces. Vases nos. 5–11 are jugs of the same style as Fig. 5, no. 3. The surface is dark brown, decorated with horizontal lines of red pigment and appliqué horizontal bands of white and red clay. Vases 13–20 are similarly decorated bowls. Vase no. 21 is the most interesting, black in colour, with, on the surface, an appliqué of a snake's body with heads at both ends. The curving body is stamped with small holes filled with white clay. Inside the vases were found many seeds of *Atriplex* and *Chenopodium album*. Nos. 22 and 23 represent fragments of other vases and bowls.

Kurgan no. 150 (Fig. 12). The grave is orientated north–south; the mound has an irregular shape and measures 24 m long by 14 m wide. The grave-cut is about 6 m long and 3 m wide and is orientated northwest–southeast. Near the walls there is a wooden frame made of logs about 15 cm in diameter. On the longer sides, there are four logs placed vertically, while on the short sides there are two. The frame supported a further 19 logs (each 4.25 m long, with diameters of up to 75 cm), which formed a cover over the whole pit. Against the sides of the wooden frame there was a layer of clay 40 cm thick. Analysis has shown that the wood was juniper.

At the centre of the grave lay the remains of a wooden sled, with two runners connected by shorter perpendicular beams. The runners were of linden, and the shaft and transverse beams of juniper. The runners curved upwards about 25 cm. Inserted into the end of the shaft was a big copper pivot, about 20 cm long. In the rear part of the sled lay a large pile of ash, charcoal and burnt human bone. In the middle there were two black bowls (nos. 2, 3), with reddish and whitish decoration similar to that of vase no. 5 of the kurgan no. 149. One bowl contained the complete skeleton of a snake; another snake lay outside. Beside vase no. 3 there were three obsidian arrowheads (nos. 4–6). Not far away were 27 cores and scrapers of obsidian and other silica-based rocks. In the forward part of the grave lay a human skeleton, probably that of the sledge-rider. Behind him was the skeleton of a bird.

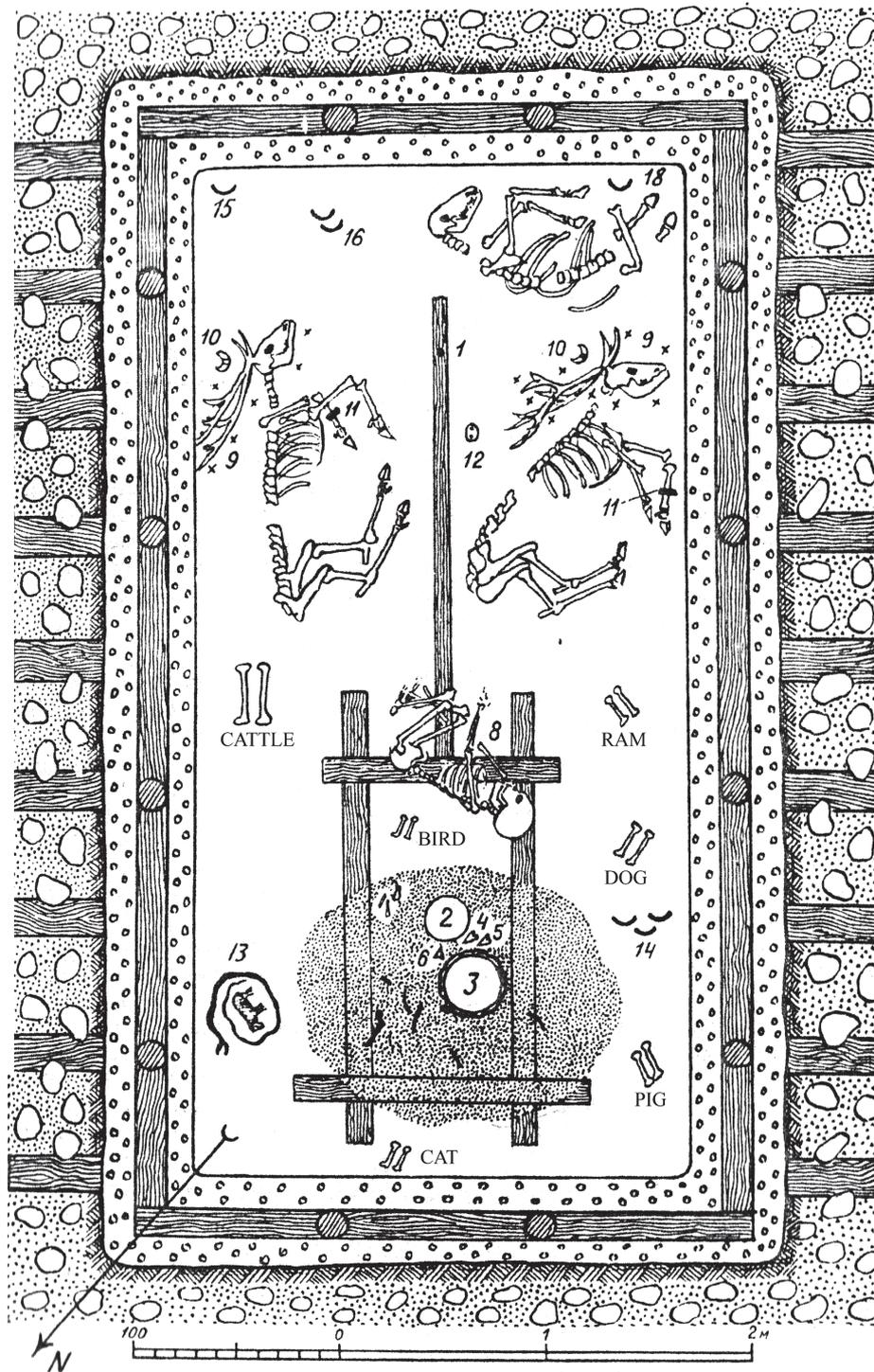


Fig. 12. Kurgan no. 150 (after Gummel 1992, p. 10, fig. 4)

The most interesting feature was the presence of two complete deer skeletons, one on either side of the shaft. These too were decorated with white clay beads on the antlers and head. A crescent-shaped bronze object (no. 10) was also found, as well as some bronze ‘ankle bracelets’ placed on the feet. Between the two skeletons lay a small copper plaque with two holes (no. 12). The southern corner contained the complete skeleton of a horse. Around the sled were bones of several other animals: sheep, pig, bull, dog, cat and numerous snakes. In the northern corner, the clay figure of an animal, probably a lamb, was found, encircled by a complete snake skeleton. On the plan, no. 14 represents vase fragments, which are also attested in other places in the grave.

The Late Bronze Age cultures of Central Transcaucasia

The finds from Chanlar fit chronologically into the final phase of the Late Bronze Age, which is dated in Transcaucasia from 1500 to 1200/1000 BCE. In Eastern Anatolia, east of the Malatya-Elaziğ-Altinova area, Late Bronze and Early Iron are often treated together, since the available information is more scarce;⁸ the same applies to the northern part of the Iranian plateau, where the period is named Iron I.⁹ In this period, Transcaucasia witnessed several noteworthy transformations, involving several categories of archaeological remains. Burials still represent one of the best sources of information, and several new types of metal objects appear (axes, maces, daggers, horse bits). The tombs of the richest burial grounds, often represented by large kurgans like those at Lčašen, Lori-Berd and Metsamor, contain rich sets of bronze objects and precious materials, but the amount of work and wealth invested in the funeral ritual was considerably less than was the case in the rich tombs of the Middle Bronze II.

The most distinctive feature is the appearance of fortified sites throughout the mountainous areas; they are also well attested in Northern Iran and Eastern Anatolia. A detailed study of the human landscape of some areas reveals that the level of socio-political integration was much higher than in the previous period. In the Aragats and Sevan areas, well-defined political entities are identifiable, centred around a main fortress, with cemetery, settlements and small outposts for controlling the territory.¹⁰ In the Late Bronze Age, the southern Caucasus was open to wide-ranging contacts with Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau,¹¹ as shown by a Kassite weight and a seal with Egyptian hieroglyphics from Metsamor,¹² and a series of Mitanni seals unearthed in various cemeteries throughout Transcaucasia.¹³ In the very same period, historical sources begin to mention the Armenian Plateau,¹⁴ with numerous Hittite and Hurrian references to the clearly defined political entities of Hayasa-Azzi, perhaps a confederation in the current Bayburt¹⁵ region, Sivas,¹⁶ and Ishuwa¹⁷ in the Euphrates valley, as well as Assyrian inscriptions that mention Uruatri and Nairi.

⁸ Biscione 2003, pp. 170–171; Marro and Özfirat 2003, p. 393; Özfirat 2006, pp. 186–194.

⁹ Dyson and Muscarella 1989; Dittman 1990.

¹⁰ Badalyan *et al.* 2003, pp. 159–163; Smith 2009a, pp. 30–31; 2009b, pp. 396–397.

¹¹ Pogrebova 1977.

¹² Khanzadyan and Piotrovskiy 1992; Khanzadyan *et al.* 1992.

¹³ Džafarov 1984, pp. 34–40; Pogrebova 2000; Badalyan *et al.* 2003, pp. 154, 166; Badalyan *et al.* 2009, p. 81; Pogrebova 2011, pp. 44–51.

¹⁴ Diakonoff 1984, pp. 45–57.

¹⁵ Diakonoff 1984, p. 46.

¹⁶ Yakar 2000, p. 431.

¹⁷ Klengel 1976–1980.

During the Late Bronze Age, especially in its final stages, new cultures emerged in Transcaucasia, such as the Koban, Colchis, Ganja-Karabakh, Lelvar, Samtavro and Lčašen-Metsamor, but their territories, limits and characteristics are not clear-cut, as in certain areas they seem to overlap, disappear or interact. It is also possible to see an increase in the interchange between the North and South Caucasus, as well attested by the spread of Koban culture, which extended over almost the entire northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains and part of the southern side.¹⁸ There are also well attested interactions between the Caucasus and northern Iran, in which the region of Talish played a key role.¹⁹

The area comprising present-day Western Azerbaijan, Central Armenia and Karabakh has furnished a huge amount of archaeological data, mainly from funerary contexts that generally present similar features. These features have traditionally been considered part of one common culture, originally named ‘Ganja-Karabakh’. This term was first coined by the Austrian scholar F. Hančar,²⁰ who grouped together the finds from a series of cemeteries excavated by German and Russian teams at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, such as Helenendorf, Bajan, Chodžali, Kalakent, Kedabeg, Sushi, Artchadzor, Achmachi, Damgolü, Sirchavande-Ballukaja, Vank and Karabulag.²¹ The features of this culture are mainly represented by a series of bronze objects, such as one-piece, cast daggers with bell-shaped pommel, crescent-shaped axes, open-work pendants in the shape of birds and cage-bells, decorated belts, forks, horse bits, arrowheads and other types of adornments (Fig. 13). Also typical are large kurgans with underground chambers, often made of stones.

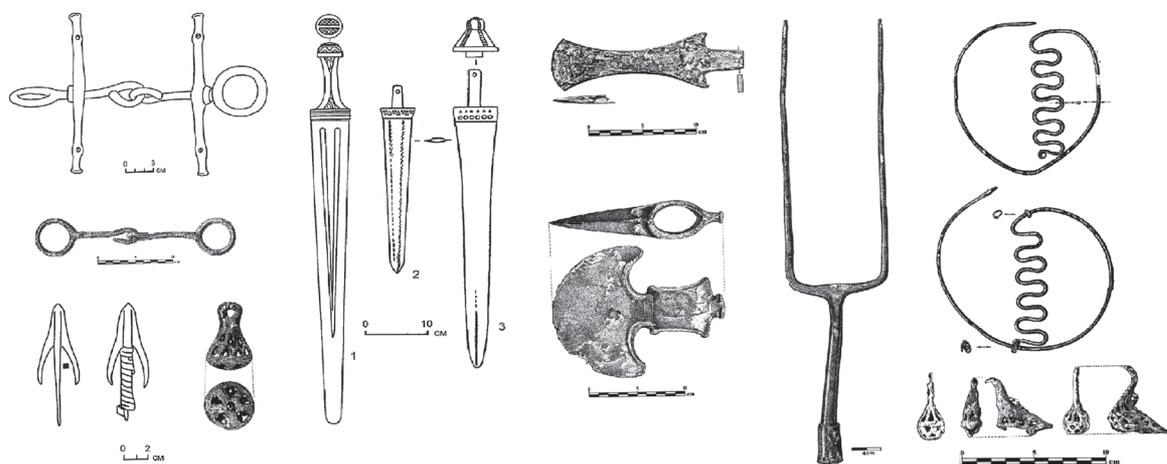


Fig. 13. Metalwork of the “Ganja-Karabakh culture” (Pogrebova 2011, pl. 40, nos. 12, 13; pl. 42, nos. 1–3; pl. 43, no. 5; Nagel and Strommenger 1985, pl. 19, no. 8; pl. 30, nos. 11–12 ; pl. 33, nos. 5–7 ; pl. 42, no. 6 ; pl. 46, no. 1)

¹⁸ Kozenkova 1996, fig. 26.

¹⁹ Piller 2013; Castelluccia 2015.

²⁰ Hančar 1934.

²¹ The results of these investigations are scattered among many reports published both in the German journal *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* and in the Russian journal *Otčety Imperatorskoj Archeologičeskoj komissii*.

The term Ganja-Karabakh, along with the synonymous Chodžali-Kedabeg, locates the centre of the culture in the mountainous area west of Lake Sevan. The name was given due to the rich finds known from this area before neighbouring regions were well investigated. During the Soviet era, a large amount of archaeological research took place in Transcaucasia and a number of remains similar to those of the Ganja-Karabakh culture were discovered. Analogous features, both for bronze objects and burial typology, were found especially in the Lake Sevan basin, and much similar metalwork was also discovered in the Mingecaur basin, Northern Armenia and Eastern Georgia,²² although these areas differ slightly with regard to burial practices.

The Soviet scholar Minkevič-Mustafaeva carried out a detailed analysis of the subject and defined the term Chodžali-Kedabeg, further subdividing it into regional groups.²³ The German scholar Schachner, in his study of the cultures of ancient Azerbaijan, used the term ‘Hocalı-Kedabeg’.²⁴ The most detailed study on the subject was recently carried out by the Russian scholar Pogrebova, who proposed that the centre of this culture was in the Sevan area, on the basis of the rich finds from the necropolis of Lčašen,²⁵ further developing a view proposed in the past by both Esajan and Martirosjan in their wide-ranging studies of the culture of Bronze Age–Iron Age Armenia.²⁶ The western and southern shores of the lake also yielded the same object types, but their human landscape was much more rich and complex, and characterised by numerous cyclopean fortresses, as was highlighted by the studies of Mikaeljan and others.²⁷ The wooded areas of Western Azerbaijan and Karabakh, on the contrary, are almost totally devoid of fortified settlements, although it should be borne in mind that these areas have not been well surveyed. Further eastwards, fortresses are present in the Syunik area, while many more have been found in the present-day Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.²⁸ The Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age was also recently studied in depth by American and Armenian members of the ArAGATS team, who proposed the term ‘Lčašen-Metsamor horizon’ in order to define the culture which appears to unite Central Transcaucasia. This tradition, also referred to as the ‘Lčašen-Tsitelgori’ culture,²⁹ has been further subdivided into six chronological phases.³⁰

This terminology is often ambiguous and contradictory; using a specific term with a geographical connotation to denote a precise culture can be problematic and confusing. Most of the terminology was coined during the Soviet period and it has not been always been subject to review. Moreover, the available information is often incomplete, since several excavations have never been fully published, and some areas have been investigated more thoroughly than others; especially in the Soviet period, archaeological projects mainly involved the excavation of burial grounds rather than the study of the archaeological landscape. For these reasons, it is not easily possible to determine the exact features of a culture and its geographic and chronological limits.

²² Aslanov *et al.* 1959 (Mingecaur); Chačatryan 1975, Devedžjan 1981 (Armenia); Picchelaury 1979 (Georgia).

²³ Minkevič-Mustafaeva 1962.

²⁴ Schachner 2001.

²⁵ Pogrebova 2011.

²⁶ Martirosjan 1964; Esajan 1976.

²⁷ Mikaeljan 1968; Biscione *et al.* 2002.

²⁸ Castelluccia 2015, pp. 340–353.

²⁹ Sagona 2012, p. 257.

³⁰ Badalyan *et al.* 2009, pp. 68–93.

Taking into account Pogrebova's work especially, it appears that the so-called Ganja-Karabakh culture represents a local branch of a wider culture covering Central Transcaucasia and probably centred in the Sevan area. However, Ganja-Karabakh has some peculiarities, especially concerning burial structures. Large kurgans with sizeable chambers built from stones and earth are common and may be found along with simpler stone cist graves. The kurgans are characterised by the presence of a mound and large underground stone-built tombs. In many cases, they are multiple burials, at times with independent stone cist graves. Cremation and inhumation are both attested, with the latter more prevalent. Unfortunately, many of the remains from the mountainous area east of Lake Sevan are yet to be studied in detail, since the results are scattered among many publications, often of limited availability.

The role of the deceased

Kurgan no. 150 is noteworthy for its massive, complex structure. Its construction would have required a huge amount of work, suggesting that the deceased was important. Such manifestations of social status in burial practice are common in this period in Transcaucasia.

The most distinctive sign is perhaps the presence of chariots, found, for example, in Lčašen and Lori-Berd.³¹ These are massive four-wheeled wooden structures, which seem to be ceremonial, since they do not possess any military features and are essentially too heavy to have been effective in battle. Apart from chariots, other elements emphasising the importance of the burial rite and of the deceased are sometimes present in the grave. In Vardenis, located on the southern shore of Lake Sevan, the corpse was placed on a wooden funerary bed bearing a slight similarity to the aforementioned sled.³² When such additional elements are present, the deceased is also accompanied by plentiful grave goods, usually comprising weapons, metal adornments and pottery. Precious metal objects are rare, being more typical of the Middle Bronze Age.

Another possible marker of high social status is the presence of horse skeletons. Graves containing these have been found, for example, in Artschadsor,³³ with features and dates similar to the Chanlar finds, and in the graveyard of Kalakent,³⁴ which is slightly later in date. Complete horse skeletons are, however, rarely encountered during the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age; the scattered bones of equines are more frequent, but in general, their occurrence is not widespread. Much more common is the presence within graves of the scattered bones of various other animals, such as cattle, sheep, lambs, snakes and wolves. These bones are probably signs of some sort of ritual banquet which took place during the funerary rites.

With regard to the Chanlar tombs, the main question concerns the role of the deceased: who were they? Considering the absence of weapons in kurgan no. 150, where the principal occupant is male, it seems unlikely that he had great political/military power. The funerary grave goods are modest, consisting mainly of pottery. The importance of the deceased is, however, very clear, since the complexity of the structure required a considerable amount of resources, material and

³¹ Mnacakanjan 1957, 1960, 1961 (Lčašen); Devedžjan 1981 (Lori-Berd).

³² Mnacakanjan 1955.

³³ Rösler 1894, 1896.

³⁴ Nagel and Strommenger 1985.

manpower. In the other two kurgans, the skeletons are of women. Female interments with rich grave goods are common throughout the Caucasus, even in tombs of simple construction. In kurgan nos. 148 and 149, the grave goods are neither abundant nor special, again consisting mainly of pottery.

The presence of one decorated Mitanni-style seal in kurgan no. 149 is interesting. Mitanni seals have been found far beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Mitanni and it appears that they were mass-produced. To date, about 20 cylindrical seals which can be attributed to the so-called Common Mitanni style have been found in Transcaucasia, mostly south of the River Kura.³⁵ Just one item came from the North Caucasus.³⁶ The seals from Caucasia are all of a style widely found in Western Asia in the 15th and 14th centuries BCE, probably continuing also into the 13th century. The Russian scholar Pogrebova studied the distribution of Mitanni seals in the Caucasus,³⁷ and highlighted the similarity of several of the seals' discovery contexts: they were often located in rich kurgans belonging to the 'Lčašen culture'. Pogrebova hypothesised that the occupant of Chanlar kurgan no. 149 also came directly from the Lčašen area at an early stage of the Late Bronze Age.

A shamanic cult?

Notwithstanding the complexity of the grave construction and the presence of an imported object, of still greater interest is the burial of complete animal skeletons in kurgan nos. 149 and 150. The most distinctive feature is undoubtedly the presence of deer. In both cases, as mentioned, the antlers and heads of the deer were decorated with semi-precious stone beads, indicating they were of much greater importance than mere sacrificial animals. The location of the two deer in kurgan no. 150 further strengthens their significance in the funerary rite.

The appearance of kurgan no. 150 suggests that the burial was laid out with the intention of representing some sort of funeral procession — with all the obvious possible implications connected with a journey to the afterlife on a funerary sledge pulled by two deer, probably playing the role of psychopomps. The presence of large numbers of bones from other animals, especially the complete skeletons of a horse and numerous snakes, point to a cultic significance for the whole context, although the exact meaning is difficult to identify.

The main obstacle to a reliable interpretation is our current lack of knowledge about the religions and rituals of the ancient peoples of the Caucasus area. This topic has yet to be studied in detail with a complete and thorough analysis of the archaeological data. A bronze belt found in a grave in the Iron Age cemetery of Chačbulag, near the town of Daškesan in Western Azerbaijan, geographically very close to Chanlar, shows a remarkable scene (Fig. 14). It depicts a procession of both humans and animals. The first figure on the right is particularly interesting. He leads the procession, followed by a chariot pulled by two horses, and then a human figure holding a large bow. He is just ahead of a deer and another deer is preserved at the left end of the fragment, following two other animals, probably bulls. The leading figure has an apparently bird-shaped head, judging from what seems to be a curved beak and a kind of plume on top of the head; these

³⁵ Džafarov 1984, pp. 34–40; Pogrebova 2000; 2011, pp. 44–51.

³⁶ OAK 1882–1888, p. 57; Uvarova 1900, p. 324.

³⁷ Pogrebova 2000; 2011, pp. 44–51.

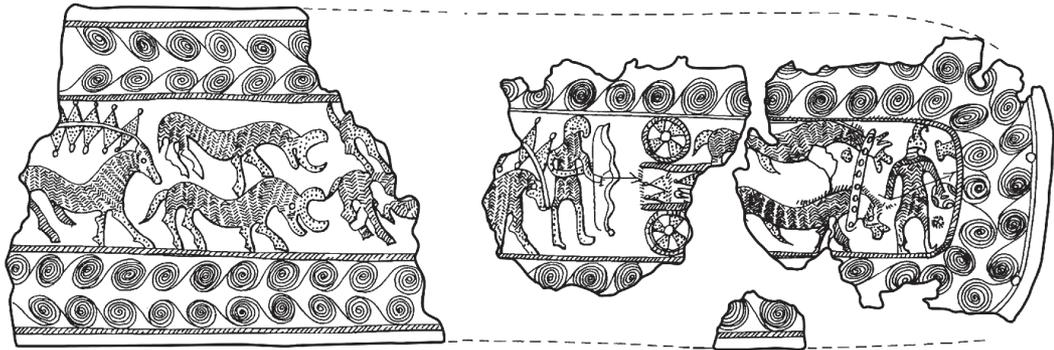


Fig. 14. Bronze belt from Chačbulag (Kesamanly 1966, fig. 4)

are probably part of a costume. In one hand he holds a circular object, perhaps a drum, and in the other a pointed object which might be a spear; it is also possible that the circular element is a shield, as this type of round shield is well known.

If we take the round object to be a drum, the interpretation of the subject as a priest, or shaman, seems quite plausible. The role of the shaman among certain peoples, especially Central Asian nomads, is well known and has been widely studied by modern scholars. The bibliography on the subject is enormous³⁸. It is more difficult to track the evolution of the role from ancient times, but the presence of shamanic cults in the Bronze Age and Iron Age of Eurasia is fairly well documented. Caucasian and Anatolian evidence has been highlighted in a study by Sagona and Sagona.³⁹

A shaman is not a priest, but rather a intermediary between the world of the living and that of the spirits. He reaches altered states of consciousness, often by using narcotics, to gain access to the spirit world. He perceives and interacts with the spirits by entering into a state of trance during a ritual. The roles of the shaman are, however, more important and complex than those of a simple messenger. He practises divination and healing. He has a therapeutic role, treating illness by curing the soul and might also enter supernatural dimensions in order to solve problems afflicting the community. Furthermore, by means of precise ceremonies, centred on specific dances and music, he can call up and embody spiritual entities inherent to the animal world. For this reason, the shaman wears animal costumes, usually of deer and less often of bears and wolves. Bird costumes are also very popular; in numerous cultures birds are seen as messengers of the spirits. Dressed as a bird, the shaman is supposedly able to fly and so feathers are often used in ceremonies and individual healing rituals.

The tools used by shaman are rich in symbolism; instilled with magical powers and manufactured by the shaman himself, they are consecrated by means of elaborate rituals.⁴⁰ Among the various religious instruments, the drum is certainly the most remarkable. Since most of the shamans'

³⁸ See, for example, Hoppal 1984; Jacobson 1993.

³⁹ Sagona and Sagona 2009.

⁴⁰ Jacobson 1993, p. 173.

objects and vestments were made of perishable materials, they are rarely encountered in archaeological contexts. In the Chanlar kurgans, no unambiguously religious objects were found, which limits our interpretation of the whole context. Nevertheless, the presence of such unusual and peculiar features within these kurgans, especially no. 150, strongly suggests a link between the burials and some sort of cult connected with animals, which might be well considered 'shamanic'.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the kurgans of Chanlar constitute an extraordinary and unique discovery in the context of Transcaucasian archaeology. Understanding the meaning of the entire context is, however, somewhat problematic due to the lack of sufficient parallels and reliable sources of information. On the basis of the features outlined above, it seems plausible to suggest that the occupants of the kurgans might have had some sort of religious role within their community, which devoted so much effort and so many resources to their entombment. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence connected to religion and cults in Transcaucasia is very scarce. It consists mainly of some ritual buildings and related objects excavated in Metsamor, Gegharot, Dvin, and other sites in Georgia,⁴¹ and, despite this evidence, it remains difficult to draw a clear picture of the cults and religions of the ancient peoples of Transcaucasia. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of the ancient cultures of the region, thanks to the renewed activity of both local and foreign expeditions. New data and discoveries are continually enriching our knowledge and we may hope and expect that new data will advance the interpretation of religious beliefs and cults.

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⁴¹ Chanzadjan *et al.* 1973 (Metsamor); Smith and Leon 2014 (Gegharot); Martirosjan 1964, pp. 179–181; Smith and Leon 2014, p. 559 (Dvin); Pizchelauri 1984 (Georgia).

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