The Lčašen Culture and its Archaeological Landscape

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Abstract
During the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age the lands around the Lake Sevan basin witnessed the emergence of a distinctive local culture, marked by characteristic burial practices, abundant metalwork and varied pottery production generally called the "Lčašen Culture". It was named after the numerous finds from the village of Lčašen, but its features are spread throughout the lake basin also seen in neighbouring regions. Its intriguing nature has attracted the attention of numerous scholars, and different interpretations, as well as definitions, have been proposed. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the main archaeological features of the Lčašen Culture, with particular reference to its landscape archaeology, burials and material culture.

Keywords
Lčašen, Culture, Late Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, Kurgan, Archaeological Landscape

Lčašen is a large village located on the north-western shore of Lake Sevan. It became internationally famous in the Soviet period when a team led by the Armenian scholar A. Mncakanyan investigated several kurgans, previously covered by the water of the lake, in which astonishing finds dated to the Late Bronze Age were found. Among these were the remains of wooden chariots, now on display in the National Historical Museum of Yerevan. The Lčašen finds, however, did not represent an isolated discovery, but resembled previous evidence unearthed around the Lake Sevan basin during the Tsarist period and in the early Soviet epoch. Archaeological investigations greatly improved after Second World War and the lands around Lake Sevan furnished additional remarkable evidence from the Early Bronze Age to the mediaeval period. Such rich discoveries are not surprising considering the economic and strategic role played by the basin. Lake Sevan is the largest water body in Armenia and the Caucasus...
region, and also one of the largest high-altitude freshwater lakes in all Eurasia. The lake is located in Gegharkunik Province, at an altitude of 1900 m above sea level. The total surface area of the lake measures 940 km², while the area of its drainage basin covers about 5000 km². It is fed by 28 rivers and streams, but only 10% of the outgoing water is drained by the River Hrazdan, which continues southwards through Kotayk Province and flows into the Araxes River; the remaining 90% evaporates. During the Soviet period the lake was heavily exploited for irrigation and hydroelectric projects, which ultimately reduced the water level by around 20 m and the total volume by more than 40%.

The Sevan basin is bordered to the east, and partially to the north, by mountains. A direct link between the lake and the surrounding mountainous areas is, however, provided by several narrow river valleys. The southern shore features a long, narrow fertile plain enclosed to the south by the Vardenis Mountains. To the west the Gegham range separates narrow flat areas along the western shore of the lake and the Kotayk plateau. At least three main roads connected the Lake Sevan basin with the Ararat Valley; one followed the line of the present Yerevan-Sevan highway. Another road cut across the Gegham range, which runs north-south parallel to the western shore of the lake, at a 2700 m high pass, while the other took a route further south through the Selim Pass.

Most of the remarkable discoveries around its shores date to the period between the Late Bronze Age and the Middle Iron Age. This chronological span saw several noteworthy innovations regarding different aspects of the material culture of the populations of the southern Caucasus and neighbouring regions. These innovations were particularly evident during the Late Bronze Age. This period is generally dated in Transcaucasia from 1500 to 1200/1100 B.C., while in the northern part of the Iranian plateau it is named Iron I (Dyson/Muscarella 1989; Dittman 1990); the same problem partially regards eastern Anatolia too, especially the lands east of the Malatya-Elazığ-Altinova area where Late Bronze and Early Iron are often grouped together due to the lack of detailed distinguishing evidence (Biscione 2003: 170–71; Marro/Özfırat 2003: 393; Özfırat 2006: 186–194).

The most important innovation regards the human landscape. From the Late Bronze Age it is possible to observe a clear change in the socio-
political structure of the local population. The mountainous highlands of southern Transcaucasia, eastern Anatolia and northern Iran show the emergence and diffusion of numerous fortified settlements located in naturally strategic positions. Due to their massive defensive walls built with very large, irregular stones, they are conventionally known as "cyclopean fortresses". As pointed out by Biscione (2009: fn. 1), "cyclopean" is a rather loose and subjective term, and it would be better to use more generic terms, such as "hill-fort", to indicate forts, fortresses and fortified settlements built on hilltops or promontories. Fortified settlements are also often associated with large burial grounds; a notable increase in the presence of weapons among grave goods is also seen. The marked increase in weaponry and fortified settlements can be interpreted as a shift toward a highly militarised society.


Moreover, metalwork production strongly increased, both in quantity and variety; several new typologies of objects appeared, such as battle-axes, daggers, horse-bits, belts, forks, open-work pendants and statuettes.

Connections with Mesopotamia are clearly indicated by the discovery of a number of Mitanni-style seals throughout Transcaucasia (OAK 1882–1888: 57; Uvarva 1900: 324; Džafarov 1984: 34–40; Pogrebova 2000; Badalyan et al. 2003: 154, 166; Badalyan et al. 2009: 81; Pogrebova 2011: 44–51).

Considering all these data, the central part of Transcaucasia—i.e. the area covering most of present-day Armenia, western Azerbaijan, Karabakh and south Georgia—began to show a certain uniformity that can be seen in the archaeological evidence. This has been interpreted as the result a shared material culture, which appears to unite the Late Bronze—Early Iron Age into a single archaeological horizon; diverse interpretations have been proposed.
The presence of a common culture covering the mountainous highland around Lake Sevan was firstly suggested by the Austrian scholar F. Hančar (1934), who named it the “Ganja-Karabakh Culture”. This term referred to the rich finds from numerous burial grounds excavated by German and Russian teams in the late 19th and early 20th century in western Azerbaijan and the Karabakh region. The term Ganja-Karabakh, along with the synonymous Chodžali-Kedabeg, located the centre of the culture in the mountainous area west of Lake Sevan at a time when the neighbouring regions were not yet well investigated. The most distinctive features of this culture consisted of clearly-identified kinds of metal 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 adornment. Burial typology is also a distinguishing feature, characterised by extensive burial grounds in which large kurgans with underground chambers, stone cist-graves and dolmen-type tombs are attested. The nature of this culture also attracted the interest of a number of scholars in the following periods. Minkevič-Mustafaeva carried out a detailed study of the material from western Azerbaijan and subdivided the Chodžali-Kedabeg Culture into regional groups (Minkevič-Mustafaeva 1962); another important contribution was made by Džafarov (1984). The presence of an identifiable culture west of Lake Sevan was also discussed by the German scholar Schachner in his study of the cultures of ancient Azerbaijan (Schachner 2001).

The most detailed analysis to date of the subject was recently conducted by the Russian scholar Pogrebova who carefully analysed the Lake Sevan basin during Late Bronze – Middle Iron Age, its distinctive metalwork production, and the distribution and features of burials (Pogrebova 2011). She proposed that the centre of this culture was on the western shores of Lake Sevan, especially around the area of Lčašen, and named it the “Lčašen Culture”.

The very same period was also recently studied in detail by the American and Armenian members of the Aragats team, who carried out a careful examination of the pottery assemblage. Their study resulted in a well-considered analysis in which the term “Lčašen-Metsamor horizon” was coined, further subdivided into six chronological phases (Badalyan et al.
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2009: 68–93), with the addition of evidence from the Araxes Valley to the south. Another recent view proposed linking this culture with evidence from Georgia and suggested the name “Lčašen-Tsitelgori Culture” (Sagona 2012: 257).

As we have seen, several interpretations have been proposed but all of these recognise the central role of the Lake Sevan basin, which was probably the place of origin of this hypothesised common culture. Considering the rich finds from its necropolis and the presence of the largest fortress in the whole Armenian highland, Lčašen has been viewed as the most important centre. Subsequently, starting from its core on Lake Sevan, this culture spread well beyond the basin, probably following the traditional routes of cattle-breeders; major settlements located in other parts of Transcaucasia have furnished finds clearly analogous to those from the Sevan area, such as sites in the Mingečaur basin (Kaziev 1949; Aslanov et al. 1959), northern and western Armenia (Xačatryan 1975; Devedžyan 1981; Torosyan et al. 2002) and eastern Georgia (Picxelauri 1979). Relationships with Karabakh and the northern part of the Iranian plateau have also been highlighted (Pogrebova 1977).

Despite the presence of several common features and the general assumption of the existence of a unique culture, there are also marked differences between these various geographic areas of Transcaucasia. Metalwork and partially burial typology seem to be most closely shared similarities.

The landscapes west and south of the lake basin were characterised by the presence of a number of fortified settlements. The wooded areas of western Azerbaijan and Karabakh, on the contrary, are almost totally devoid of fortified settlements (but it should be borne in mind that these areas have not been well surveyed). Further eastwards, fortresses are present in the Syunik region, while many more have been found in the present-day Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (Castelluccia 2015: 340–353).

The pottery assemblages also exhibit some remarkable differences. In western Azerbaijan and Karabakh there is a rich repertoire of figurative elements with both animal and human decorations, while the Lčašen-Metsamor pottery tradition features mostly geometric designs.

Considering the several proposed denominations listed above, and the presence of these intrinsic differences, I would suggest that only the term
"Lčašen" be used to define the most distinctive features of this culture, in line with Pogrebova’s view. The present analysis is thus limited to the lands immediately surrounding the lake basin.

The landscape of Lake Sevan was firstly studied in depth during the Soviet period by Mikaelyan (1968), who built on previous publications by B. Piotrovskij and others (Adžyan et al. 1931/1932; Piotrovskij/Gjuzal’yan 1933).

Mikaelyan’s work is still the most complete available source concerning the western and eastern lake shores.

From 1994 to 2000 a joint Armenian-Italian team carried out an extensive survey on both the southern and western shores of the lake (Biscione et al. 2002). The data concerning the southern part have been fully published, but those regarding the western shore are yet to be presented.

The settlement record of the lake basin shows a landscape characterised by the presence of several fortified settlements (Fig. 1), mostly located on the foothills overlooking the plain areas, with a prevalence along the southern shore.

![Fig. 1. Map of sites around Sevan (after GoogleEarth)](image)

On the western shore the most important site is the large fortress of Lčašen, which covers an area of 35 hectares and extends over fifteen ridges (Fig. 2). It is probably the biggest fortified settlement in the whole Armenian highland. Traces of Early Bronze Age occupation were found, but most of the evidence dates to the Early Iron Age. Associated with the
fortress is a large burial ground, 1.5 km long and 200 to 300 m wide in which the world-famous chariots were found.

The walls of the fortress are very thick, up to 3.5 m, reinforced by buttresses and consist of a single linear structure. At the centre of the fortress, there is a small second line of walls, probably enclosing some sort of citadel with the main entrance on the north-west side and a postern on the opposite side (Fig. 3a). The masonry of part of the citadel’s south wall was built with great care; this, together with the presence of buttresses, might suggest an Urartian participation in the construction of this part of the fortress. Several excavations were performed in the fortress in the Soviet era, but almost nothing was published. In 2006, an Armenian-Italian mission carried out some soundings in the citadel, which demonstrated that the foundation of the fortress dates to the Early Iron Age (Biscione/Parmegiani 2004).

A series of strongholds—such as Metsep, Norashen and Tsovagyugh—were identified around the main fortress; they all mostly date to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age, and were probably dependent on the Lčašen fortress. Mikaelyan reported the presence of at least ten fortresses in the Sevan district, but only few of them are shown on a map (Mikaelyan 1968: pls. 2–10). Near the village of Norashen is located the fortress of Agbel; it is circular in shape with several towers/buttresses along the perimeter (Fig. 3c), whereas Tsovagyugh has just a simple enclosing wall (Fig. 3d). The
Further south, around the modern city of Gavar, a large cluster of fortresses is reported by Mikaelyan, who counted 22 fortified sites (Mikaelyan 1968: 53). Establishing a precise date for all of them is not an easy task, considering the lack of published material. However, most of them probably date to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age. Some of them were also used in later times, such as the large fortress of Berdi Glukh, located on the outskirts of Gavar, where an Urartian inscription has been found (CTU A 10–1). Several finds dating to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age also come from local burial grounds associated with these fortresses.

Other Early Iron Age remains have been identified in Airivank, but consist most of pottery and a little metalwork from a local burial ground (Xačtryan 1957).

The southern lake shore has furnished the best documentation thanks to the long-term study carried out by the Armenian-Italian team (Biscione et al. 2002).
Starting from the very beginning of the Iron Age the number of fortified settlements increased, although some had been founded during the Late Bronze Age. The Armenian-Italian expedition identified about 27 fortified settlements dating to this period (Sanamyan 2002: 331), all characterised by the use of cyclopean masonry. Their military architecture is generally simple, since most of the fortresses have only one line of defensive walls; in some cases, such as the sites of Tsovak and Nagharakhan, multi-line fortifications are attested. Moreover, the walls were sometimes strengthened with buttresses and towers, thus anticipating a typical feature of Urartian military architecture.

Through a careful analysis of the spatial distribution of settlements along the southern shore, the identification has been proposed of at least five regional political complexes, each consisting of a large settlement with minor ones depending on it in the surrounding area (Fig. 4). This would suggest that already in the Early Iron Age a hierarchy of settlements existed, and the fact that they were all fortified indicates the military character of these political entities.

Urartian inscriptions dating to the reign of Argishti I refer to the presence of at least five political entities, “the city and land of Tulihu” and “the four kings of Uduri-Etiuni”. On the basis of the topographic information provided by these inscriptions, it has been proposed that Tulihu corresponds to Sangar, where a fortress with a perimeter of 935 m is attested, and Nagharakhan—the site of one of the largest structures with a perimeter measuring 1420 meters—to one of the Uduri-Etiuni settlements. It
seems likely that this fortress functioned as the capital of some sort of confederation.

Establishing the nature of these entities is problematic (chiefdoms? early or primitive states?) because differences between these models are difficult to recognise with any certainty (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1994: 405; Arnold/Gibson 1995: 2–3; Marcus-Feinman 1998: 5–7).

Unfortunately the evidence concerning the eastern shore of the lake is much scarcer: just two fortresses are known. The fortress of Daštī-Ler, north of the modern village of Jōl, has four concentric circular walls, whereas the hill-fort near the village of Artanish possesses just one line of fortification.

Along with numerous fortified sites, the archaeological landscape of the “Lčašen Culture” also comprises several burial grounds. The funerary evidence of the Late Bronze—Early Iron Age is very abundant, and cemeteries are often associated with fortresses, scattered around the lake shores. They are most common, however, in the mountainous areas east of the lake—where fortresses, on the other hand, are rarely found.

Fig. 5. Kurgans nos. 1 and 2 of Lčašen (after Mnacakanyan 1961: 66, fig. 22)

The most important necropolis is that of Lčašen, one of the largest in all of Transcaucasia, with about 500 excavated graves (although very few of them have been published). The Lčašen necropolis is famous thanks to the discovery of wooden chariots dating to the Late Bronze Age. Before
1956 the funerary complex lay beneath the water of Lake Sevan; it came to light as a result of the shallowing of the lake. It was subsequently investigated by Mncakanyan (1957; 1960; 1961; 1965). The burial ground consists largely of kurgans of various dimensions, each surrounded by a cromlech and with a funerary pit in the centre, usually lined internally with stone slabs (Fig. 5).

Just a few km north of the lake there are two important cemeteries. One, named Redkin Lager, was first excavated by F. Bayern (1885) and is characterised by very large underground stone-built chambers (Fig. 6). Another remarkable cemetery was investigated nearby, close to the town of Golovino; several kurgans with cromlech have been excavated (Mncakanyan 1952; Martirosyan 1954). Along the western shore other cemeteries are reported, some discovered by chance, but most have not been fully published.

Several noteworthy burial grounds have been investigated on the southern shore, such as the necropolis of Nerkin-Getašen, which dates from the Middle Bronze Age to the Urartian period. It is composed of large mounds, often with large burial chambers inside; two mounds dating to the Late Bronze Age—Early Iron Age have been published by Xnkikyan (2002: 43–47). These measure more than 10 meters in diameter, and several individuals were buried within.

The greatest density of cemeteries is, however, attested in the mountainous areas east of the lake, especially around the present-day city of Ganja and in Karabakh. These wooden areas were investigated in detail.
by German and Russian teams at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, and several important burial grounds were excavated, most notably those of Helenendorf, Bajan, Chodžali, Kalakent, Kedabeg, Sushi, Artchadzor, Achmachi, Damgolu, Sirchavande-Ballukaja, Vank and Karabulag. Reports of these excavations appeared regularly in the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie and Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte, and in the Izvestiya Imperatorskoj Arxeologiceskoj Komissii.

Other remarkable burial remains come from near the town of Kalakent where hundreds of Early Iron Age graves were unearthed (Ivanovskij 1911; Nagel/Strommenger 1985).

Burial structures are rich and various. Several very large kurgans were excavated containing, for example, big underground chambers with several individuals buried inside, as well as various independent single-burial cist-graves (Fig. 7a-d). Of interest is the discovery of complete deer and horse skeletons in a large kurgan in present-day Goygol (Gummel 1941). The remains of horses have been found in several cemeteries.
All the aforementioned burial grounds have yielded a very large number of objects. Male individuals are usually accompanied by a rich repertoire of metalwork, such as daggers, battle-axes, arrowheads, spearheads, bracelets, collars, torques, pendants of various shapes and belts. Female individuals are mostly associated with a wide range of items of personal adornment. Most of these objects are made of bronze, but — starting from the 12th century B.C. — the first appearance of iron, used to produce weapons and tools, is seen. Pottery assemblages are also rich and comprise several types with geometric or figurative decorations (Fig. 8).

Many of these objects can be considered as typical markers of the Lčašen Culture, especially one-piece cast daggers with bell-shaped pom-
mel, crescent-shape axes, open-work pendants in the shape of birds, cage-bells and decorated belts (Fig. 9). Some metalwork is of particular interest. Bronze forks are often found in male graves, but their actual use remains obscure. Horse-bits are also common and, along with the discovery of horse bones and representations on bronze belts, constitute one of the earliest demonstrations of the use of mounted horses, indicating that at the very end of the Late Bronze Age cavalry began to play an important role in local warfare.

Within the geographical and chronological limits of the “Lčašen Culture” may be included most of the finds of Mitanni-style seals made in Transcaucasia. It is striking that many of these seals were found in similar funerary contexts, in which rich burials with mounds which show the close cultural relationship between those who possessed them.

Moreover, relations with Mesopotamia are also shown by the discovery of a bead bearing a series of cuneiform signs on its surface referring to the Assyrian king Adad Nirari I who ruled at beginning of the 13th century (OAK 1895: 51, fig. 102).

In conclusion, the emergence of the “Lčašen Culture” around Lake Sevan coincides with noteworthy transformations of the archaeological landscape in Transcaucasia. The marked development of settlements might be linked both to a population increase and the formation of early complex societies. The dramatic increase in military equipment, both territorial facilities (fortresses) and weaponry (metalwork) reflect a sociopolitical development toward the militarisation of society.

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