

ANTHROPOLOGY

A.Yu. Khudaverdyan

*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Academy of Sciences of Armenia,
Charents 15, Yerevan 375025, Armenia
E-mail: akhudaverdyan@mail.ru*

**ARMENIA IN THE EURASIAN ETHNIC CONTEXT
OF LATE CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY:
CRANIOMETRIC EVIDENCE**

Anna Palikyan (Metsoyan) in memoriam

A statistical analysis of measurements of crania from the 2nd and 3rd century AD cemetery at Beniamin, Armenia, indicates considerable morphological heterogeneity. Between-group comparisons reveal affinities between the Beniamin people and Scythians of the North Pontic region, the Sarmatians of the Volga–Ural region, and the Sacae of Western Central Asia. The results attest to intense migrations of nomads to Transcaucasia during Classical Antiquity and to the ethnic diversity of the Caucasian populations.

Keywords: *Transcaucasia, Armenia, Beniamin, Classical Antiquity, craniology.*

Introduction

The population history of Armenia and the Caucasus in general has long been a focus of interest for physical anthropologists and archaeologists alike. In the 20th century many sites relevant for reconstructing the ethnic history of the peoples of the Caucasus and the Ancient Near East were excavated. Longstanding economic and political ties between Armenia and the surrounding areas are an integral part of the region's history.

In Armenia, the period of Classical Antiquity spans nine centuries (7th century BC – 3rd century AD). The Urartu state that had existed in the Armenian Highland, collapsed in the early 6th century BC. It was then that the Armenian state emerged. Shortly afterwards, however, it had to recognize the supremacy of the kings of powerful Media. In 553 BC the Persian leader Cyrus rebelled against the Median king Astyages, and in 550 BC Cyrus defeated

him, subjecting Media to Persia. It would appear that Armenia was thereby liberated from foreign rule, the more so because the Armenian King Tigran Yervanduni had assisted Cyrus in his struggle against Astyages. Instead, having strengthened his state, Cyrus subjected Armenia to his rule. Several nations including Armenia revolted, taking advantage of the rivalry between Gaumata and Darius I for the Persian throne. The Armenian struggle for independence was unsuccessful. The revolt was crushed by Darius, and Armenia, split into two satrapies, remained under Achaemenian rule until the collapse of the huge Persian Empire in 331 BC.

Cimmerians and Scythians in Transcaucasia

Cimmerians were one of the nomadic or seminomadic tribes of the Northern Pontic (Black Sea) region,

apparently related to Iranian and possibly also to Thracian tribes, who in the 8th century BC migrated to Armenia and Asia Minor. The Near Eastern states, from where various cultural innovations had long been reaching areas north of the Black Sea, were an attractive target for nomadic raids. The terror-inspiring Cimmerian troops, which subjected the captured territories to devastating looting, posed a serious threat to ancient civilizations. Prolonged military success of a relatively small group of nomads can be due only to the fact that it was supported by certain seminomadic pastoralist tribes which had already inhabited the peripheries of large states in Transcaucasia and Asia Minor.

The second nomadic Iranian tribe (or tribal union) to have invaded Transcaucasia was the Scythians. Initially this name referred to people who had lived east of the Lower Volga and eventually spread to its western bank and to the Northern Caucasus. From there, the Scythians entered Azerbaijan through the Gates of Derbent. Azerbaijan became the source of their raids to various parts of the Armenian Highland and further into the Near East.

The role of the Scythian invasion in the history of Transcaucasia, the Near East in general, and Eastern Europe was considerable. It led to the establishment of close links between the North Pontic area and the Near East. Possibly the native people of Transcaucasia mixed with Scythian migrants, and the native culture, too, blended with the Scythian culture (Piotrovsky, 1959). The Scythian invasion shattered the military power of the Near Eastern states and ultimately led to their decline, thereby setting the stage for new empires such as Persia and Media.

Materials and methods

The Beniamin cemetery is situated in the former Akhuryan district, in the western part of modern Armenia. One of the excavation trenches, laid down on top of the central hill, revealed walls of a large building, supposedly a palace. Judging by the arrangement of this ceremonial and ritual construction with a utilitarian structure beneath (under the hill), this was evidently the palace of the ruler of Shirak, and the settlement was the administrative center of this province (Ter-Martirosov, 1993). In the late 2nd century BC the palace was destroyed by nomadic invaders (Ibid., 1999: 38) and a necropolis emerged in its place. Crania described here date to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

During the 1989–1997 excavations, led by F.I. Ter-Martirosov, A.A. Khachatryan, and L.G. Yeganyan, 218 burials were unearthed. Two of them were cenotaphs, three were completely destroyed, four partly destroyed, two were double, and the remaining were single. Most burials at Beniamin were cists made of stone slabs. Some human remains were placed in jugs, some in

ground graves. Children's and juveniles' burials in jugs were especially numerous (burials 138, 182, 183, etc.). Most burials were extended (supine or on either side); the heads of most individuals were oriented toward the northeast; however, other burial modes were observed as well (Yeganyan, 2010). Double burials were flexed, and the buried people faced each other (burials 195 and 207). The accompanying goods suggest that the status of the majority of individuals was low. In most graves, no goods were found; some burials were accompanied by copper beads, earrings, needles, processed stones, and bone musical instruments (Ibid.).

The cranial series from the Beniamin necropolis consists of 143 specimens – 95 adult (65 male and 30 female) and 48 immature. Thirty crania (four adult and 26 immature) are artificially deformed, and the teeth of six individuals are artificially modified (Khudaverdyan, 2011b). Postcranial bones reveal a number of pathological changes (Khudaverdyan, 2010, 2011a). This study deals with crania from Beniamin, focusing on their comparison with contemporaneous and earlier materials from Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Western Central Asia.

Eighty-six series were selected for comparative analysis (Table 1). Seventeen of them (Nos. 1–17) are from Caucasus, nineteen (Nos. 18–34, 37, and 38) from Central Asia, thirty-two (Nos. 35, 36, 39–50, 52–65, 83–86) from the Volga–Ural region, three (Nos. 51, 66, and 80) from the Don basin, ten (Nos. 67, 68, 72–79) from the Ukraine and the Dnieper basin, two (Nos. 81 and 82) from the Baltic area, and three (Nos. 69–71) from Moldova.

Fourteen measurements were used – cranial length, breadth, and height, frontal breadth, facial, nasal, and orbital height and breadth, naso-malar and zygoma-maxillary angles, simotic index, and nasal protrusion angle. Measurements were subjected to canonical variate analysis. Groups were compared pairwise using the Mahalanobis D^2 distance corrected for sample size (Rightmire, 1969). Statistical programs written by V.E. Deryabin (CANOCLUS) and B.A. Kozintsev were used. Deformed crania were excluded from the analysis.

Results

Crania from Beniamin are characterized by a large, medium wide and medium high braincase, dolichocrany, and a moderately developed glabella. The face is medium wide and medium high, the horizontal facial profile angles are medium. The orbits are medium high, narrow in males, and medium wide in females. All principal dimensions of the mandible and the ramus angle are medium in both males and females (Table 2).

Coefficients of sex dimorphism of most dimensions and indices fall within the standard limits, implying that males and females do not differ in their basic

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