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Diversification of the funerary practices in the Southern Caucasus from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic



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ABSTRACT

The funerary practices of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic populations of the Southern Caucasus are poorly known. However, in the last few years, research in funerary archaeology intensified in the region, using recently developed approaches such as archaeoethnatology. Thanks to the excavation of burials according to this method as well as to the reassessment of the published data, it is possible to achieve a state of knowledge on funerary behavior of these populations. Across the whole region, 23 sites with burials have been recorded: Neolithic (2), Chalcolithic (15), Neolithic and Chalcolithic (2) and uncertain chronological attribution (Neolithic and/or Chalcolithic) (4). All data collected revealed a diversification of the practices from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic. Neolithic funerary practices are less homogeneous than previously thought and burial sites appear to have been closely related to living places. During the Chalcolithic, a diversification of the ways of burying the dead occurs with the appearance of new types of tombs (burials in ceramic vessels and kurgans) and an evolution of the relations between the place of life and the place of the dead can be seen.

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1. Introduction

From a geographical perspective, the Southern Caucasus presents important subdivisions due to the mountainous terrain, but also a network of ancient communications over the valleys of major rivers and tributaries that connects the various components and ensures their contacts with neighboring cultural centers (Chataigner, 1995). This region has always served as a privileged way of passage for humans and cultures but the prehistory of the Southern Caucasus was until recently poorly known. In the past fifteen years, archaeological research on ancient societies in the Southern Caucasus experienced a new development and a growing interest in the international scientific community as shown by the many ongoing research programs in the region: e.g. *Azerbaijani-*

Japanese Project (directors: F. Guliyev and Y. Nishiaki); *Mission Caucase* (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, director: C. Chataigner); *Mission Boyuk Kesik* (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs: director: B. Lyonnet); ANR-DFG project *Ancient Kura* (ANR-09-FASHS-002, directors: B. Lyonnet and B. Helwing); ANR-DFG project *Kura in Motion* (ANR-12-FRA-0011, directors: B. Lyonnet and B. Helwing). International excavations have multiplied, producing new data (e.g. ¹⁴C dates, environmental data, data regarding metal objects, ceramics, lithics) which, thanks to current methods of study, helped to review the chronology and the diffusion of the prehistoric cultures.

In the Southern Caucasus, the Neolithic is primarily known through the Shomu-Shulaveri culture, identified in the 1960s in Azerbaijan and Georgia (Kushnareva, 1997; Kiguradze and Menabde, 2004) and long regarded as dating from the 5th millennium. Recent research has shown that this culture actually appeared at the end of the 7th millennium and that it extended further south in the Ararat plain (Kiguradze and Menabde, 2004; Badalyan et al., 2007; Guliyev and Nishiaki, 2012; Lyonnet et al., 2012). Another Neolithic culture, the Kamiltepe culture, was recently described in the Mil plain in Azerbaijan where it has been highlighted from 5600 BC (Helwing et al., 2012; Lyonnet et al.,

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2012). This culture is partly characterized by short-term occupations. The ceramic is painted with geometric patterns that resemble those found on ceramics from the Iranian Highlands. In addition, bone industry is limited and flint and obsidian are both used to make lithic tools (Helwing et al., 2012; Lyonnet et al., 2012).

During the 5th millennium, a new culture, the Sioni culture, developed and extended over a wide area, covering Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, but also part of the North Caucasus, north-western Iran, and eastern Turkey. Houses were still round, but consist of semi-buried huts, and mudbricks disappear. In addition, heavy material such as grinding wheels or sling projectiles become less frequent. All these elements reflect a more mobile lifestyle than during the Shomu-Shulaveri culture (Kiguradze and Menabde, 1981; Kiguradze, 2000). Another culture, the Leilatepe culture, dated to the first half of the 4th millennium, is also known in the region (Aliev and Narimanov, 2001; Lyonnet, 2007, 2009). This culture, with features of the “pre-Uruk expansion”,

has been noted on several sites (including Leilatepe, Boyuk Kesik, Soyuk Bulaq in Azerbaijan and Berikldeebi in Georgia) (Lyonnet, 2007). At Berikldeebi and Leilatepe, a new architecture made of mudbricks and using a rectangular plan, has been observed. The common ceramic seems connected with that of the “Late Chalcolithic” horizon of Mesopotamia (Akhundov, 2007).

Until recently, the funerary practices of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic populations in the Southern Caucasus were very poorly known, due to the small number of burials uncovered (Chataigner, 1995). The available information was characterized by a lack of ^{14}C dates. The description of bodies in the burials was sketchy, when it existed, and the illustrations were rare (Tables 1–3). The published data focused, for the most part, on the grave architecture and on the grave furniture. It thus appears that these data were too uncertain to reach any firm conclusion. The recently collected data are still very few but they suggest new hypotheses which will be tested against data from future excavations.

Table 1

Available information regarding burials of uncertain chronological attribution (Neolithic and/or Chalcolithic) in the Southern Caucasus.

Site	Country	Number of burials	Number of burials with illustration	Number of burials with description	Number of skeletons for which anthropological data have been published	References
Alikemek	Azerbaijan	8	0	Brief general description of the graves	0	Chataigner, 1995
Baba Dervish	Azerbaijan	2	0	Brief general description of the graves	0	Chataigner, 1995
Chalagan Tepe	Azerbaijan	20	0	Brief general description of the graves	0	Chataigner, 1995
Kul Tepe	Nakichevan	85	5	40	0	Abibullaev 1982

Table 2

Available information regarding Neolithic burials in the Southern Caucasus.

Site	Country	Number of burials	Number of burials with illustration	Number of burials with description	Number of skeletons for which anthropological data have been published	References
Aknashen	Armenia	3	3	3	3	Poulmarc'h, 2014a
Mentesh Tepe	Azerbaijan	2	2	2	1	B. Lyonnet and L. Pecqueur, pers. comm.; Lyonnet et al., 2012, this volume; Poulmarc'h, 2014a
Kamiltepe	Azerbaijan	3	3	3	3	Poulmarc'h, 2014a; B. Helwing and M.B. D'Anna, pers. comm.
Aruchlo	Georgia	1	0	1	1	Hansen et al., 2007; J. Wahl pers. comm.

NB: The description of the burial as well as the anthropological study of the human remains have been made by the authors of this article except of Aruchlo and the multiple burial (31 individuals) of Mentesh Tepe.

Table 3

Available information regarding Chalcolithic burials in the Southern Caucasus.

Site	Country	Number of burials	Number of burials with illustration	Number of burials with description	Number of skeletons for which anthropological data have been published	References
Aknalich	Armenia	1	1	1*	1 ¹	F. Muradyan, pers. comm.; Poulmarc'h, 2014a
Areni	Armenia	At least 3	0	3	3 ²	Wilkinson et al., 2012
Godedzor	Armenia	2	2	2*	2 ¹	Poulmarc'h et al., 2011; Poulmarc'h, 2014a
Alkhantepe	Azerbaijan	At least 12	3	3*	0	Akhundov et al., 2010, 2011; T. Akhundov, pers. comm.
Boyuk Kesik	Azerbaijan	6	3	6	0	Museyibli, 2007; Museyibli and Huseynov, 2008
Chinartepe	Azerbaijan	Unknown	0	0	0	Akhundov, 2007
Kamiltepe (MPS 16)	Azerbaijan	1	1	1*	1 ¹	Lyonnet et al., 2012
Leilatepe	Azerbaijan	4	0	4**	0	Akhundov, 2007
Mentesh Tepe	Azerbaijan	1	1	1*	1 ¹	B. Lyonnet and L. Pecqueur, pers. comm.; Poulmarc'h, 2014a
Ovçular Tepese	Azerbaijan	At least 1	0	1**	0	C. Marro, pers. comm.; Marro et al., 2011
Polutepe	Azerbaijan	5	0	0	0	Akhundov et al., 2010
Poylu II	Azerbaijan	6	1	5	1 ³	Museyibli, 2008b, 2009
Soyuk Bulaq	Azerbaijan	27	12	27	0	Lyonnet et al., 2008; Museyibli, 2008a, 2010
Berikledebi	Georgia	1	0	1**	0	Makharadze, 2007; A. Sagona, pers. comm.
Kavtiskhevi	Georgia	1	1	1	No skeletal remains	Makharadze, 2007
Tsiteli Gorebi	Georgia	3	0	0	0	Chataigner, 1995
Tsopi	Georgia	1	0	1**	0	Chataigner, 1995

*Description made by the authors of this article; ** Short description; ¹Study by the authors of this article; ²Only age and sex are available; ³Typological study.

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