



## Craft production at Köhne Shahar, a Kura-Araxes settlement in Iranian Azerbaijan



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### ABSTRACT

Considerable investigations and studies, especially during the past two decades, have substantially increased our information about the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition of the 4th and 3rd millennia BC. Yet, fundamental questions remain about the social and economic makeup of Kura-Araxes communities that require further investigation. In particular, our knowledge about societal organization within Kura-Araxes communities is still very limited. Kura-Araxes communities are known as either pastoral/nomads or sedentary/agriculturalist that possibly were socially undifferentiated. In this paper, we present evidence of workshop units and craft activities from the Kura-Araxes site of Köhne Shahar in the Chaldran area of Iranian Azerbaijan. We argue that Köhne Shahar represents a craft production site and Kura-Araxes community with signs of societal complexity.

### 1. Introduction

Specialized craft production and division of labor are usually considered key factors in the economies of complex societies, as they fostered and accompanied the development of social complexity (Clark and Parry, 1990; Peregrine, 1991; Stein, 1996; Costin, 2001, 2015; Hruby and Flad, 2007). Craft specialization as indicator of social complexity is often linked to the rise of middle-range societies (Stark, 1991; Cross, 1993; Earle, 2002). However, we should note that there are some examples such as some of the 5th millennium BC Vinča culture settlements in Balkans with highly specialized metallurgy that do not fit into this model (Radivojević and Rehren, 2015). In middle-range societies, a major concern of political leaders is maintaining their status through control of some essential activity and often public symbolism. The durability and sustenance of status is directly related to the processes by which leaders gain control over labor. Among these processes are warfare, ceremonial events, feasting, intensive food production, craft production, and control over group accumulation and storage (Manzanilla and Rothman, 2016). Control and management of craft production by a leadership group, can lead to the creation and institutionalization of social inequality (Brumfiel and Earle, 1987: 3; Hayden, 1995; Stein, 1996, 1998; Earle, 1999; Hayden, 2001; Arnold, 2009: 122). It should also be noted that because of insufficient studies

on non-elite economies our understanding of how goods were produced and used in the past is very biased (Wattenmaker, 1998: 1–2).

Abundant evidence of craft production from Köhne Shahar, an Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes settlement, inspired us to put the results in a theoretical framework which in turn may provide useful insights into the societal organization of Kura-Araxes cultural communities. Kura-Araxes cultural communities are not generally considered to be “complex” and understanding the context of craft production at the site may shed some light on these communities. In this paper, we present evidence of craft production from excavations at Köhne Shahar and discuss the findings and their implications.

### 2. Kura-Araxes communities

Kura-Araxes communities first emerged throughout the southern Caucasus in the mid-4th millennium BC (Sagona, 1984; Rothman, 2005; Kohl, 2009) or possibly earlier in Nakhchivan (Marro et al., 2014; Palumbi and Chataigner, 2014: 250; Marro et al., 2015; Palumbi and Chataigner, 2015). By the late 4th-early 3rd millennium BC, their characteristic material culture, particularly hand-made black burnished pottery, spread throughout much of Southwest Asia after 2900 BCE (Fig. 1). The widespread dissemination of this material culture, along with the small size of most sites, the ephemeral nature of their

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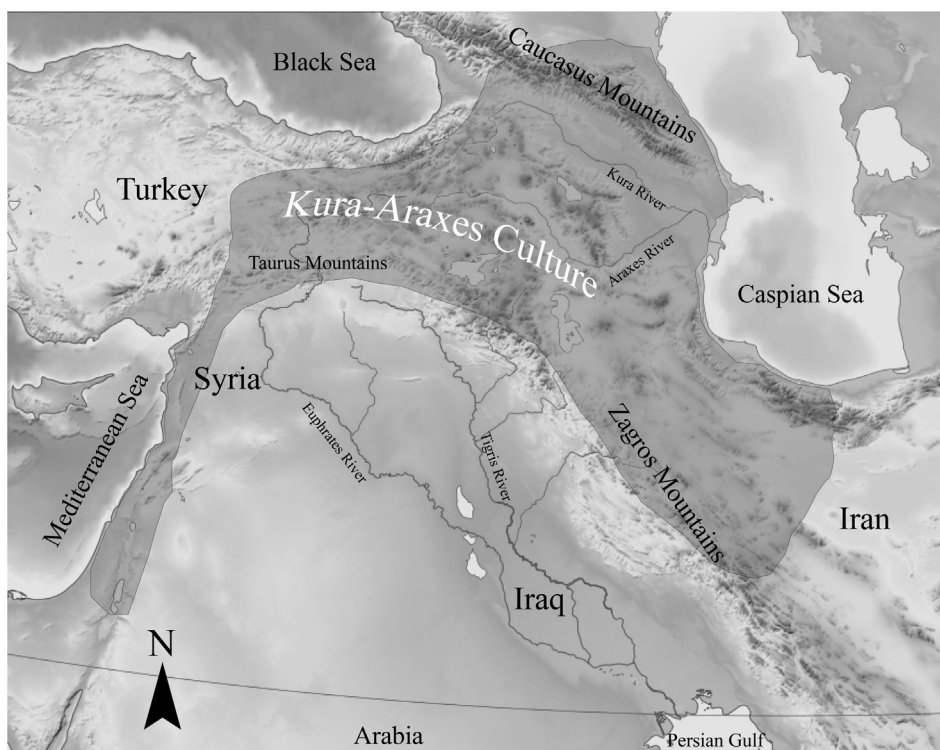


Fig. 1. Distribution of Kura-Araxes material culture in the Near East (modified from Wikimedia).

architectural remains in these smaller sites, and their presence in both fertile lowlands and seasonally-inhospitable highlands, have been used to portray Kura-Araxes communities as small, egalitarian communities of mobile pastoralists or sedentary agriculturalists; economically undifferentiated and socially non-hierarchical (Smith, 2005: 258; Frangipane and Palumbi, 2007; Kohl, 2007: 113; 2009: 250). Limited evidence for craft production and trade among Kura-Araxes communities has further strengthened the argument that Kura-Araxes economies were dominated by domestic and subsistence-related activities (Palumbi, 2008: 53). With some rare exceptions (Marro et al., 2010; Stöllner, 2014; Simonyan and Rothman, 2015), Kura-Araxes settlements lack any evidence of craft production, mining, or resource extraction.

Kura-Araxes communities, however, are also implicated in the evolution and transformation of regional trade in the Near East. Cause and effect of the spread of Kura-Araxes material culture beyond the Caucasus “homeland” and the establishment of diaspora is hotly debated. Among proponents of emigration, the strongest arguments for movement out of the Caucasus include the presence of strong pull factors, notably productive activities like meat and wool production, viticulture, and metals and metallurgy (Rothman, 2003). Kura-Araxes populations primarily inhabited mountains and intermontane valleys of the highland zone surrounding Mesopotamia. Kura-Araxes communities had access to metals, precious and semi-precious stones, stones for tool making, wood, and animal products; resources that were abundant in the mountain zone, yet critical to the evolution of Mesopotamian societies. The frequent appearance of simple bronze and copper objects at temporary camps of Kura-Araxes herders suggests that mobile agropastoralists engaged in metallurgy and trade in metals, especially with societies of the Upper Euphrates (Frangipane et al., 2001; Hauptmann et al., 2002; Rothman, 2003; Connor and Sagona, 2007; Frangipane, 2014). Wool and textiles products from sheep herded by mountainous communities may have been major exports of the mountain zone to Mesopotamia (Anthony, 2007: 284; Nosch et al., 2013; Breniquet and Michel, 2014).

It is argued that by the second half of the 4th millennium BC

(Surenhagen, 1986; Algaze, 1989, 2004, 2007), Uruk polities of southern Mesopotamia established colonies across northern Mesopotamia, southern Anatolia, and western Iran to better control regional trade. Although the nature of these colonies and local developments is still debated (Stein, 2002, 2014), co-occurrence of the sudden abandonment of these colonies and regional expansion of Kura-Araxes communities by the end of the 4th millennium BC has led some scholars to argue that Kura-Araxes communities were emergent competitors of Mesopotamia whose economic activities possibly contributed to the decline and eventual collapse of the Uruk system (Algaze, 2001: 76; Kohl, 2007: 97–98; Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2008: 10).

These conflicting descriptions of Kura-Araxes communities as small, agropastoral, and undifferentiated, on the one hand, and as significant regional agents of economic and political transformation on the other, have resulted in an intellectual dissonance in our understanding of this cultural tradition. The unexpected suite of evidence for specialized craft production at Köhne Shahar provides a rare opportunity to address this incongruity (Alizadeh, 2015; Alizadeh et al., 2015).

### 3. Köhne Shahar

Köhne Shahar was first surveyed by a German team (Kleiss and Kroll, 1979) in the 1970s and it is considered one of the Pre-Urartian “Hillfort” sites in NW Iran (Biscione, 2009). Köhne Shahar is located 20 km northwest of the city of Chaldran in Iran’s Western Azerbaijan province (Fig. 2). It is situated at 1905 m asl, in a narrow valley between small intermountain plains and high pastureland (Fig. 3a). It consists of a fortified citadel, an extramural residential area, and a cemetery. The site has a total area of approximately 15 ha, making it one of the largest known Kura-Araxes sites (Kroll, 2004: 46, 2005: 117). The 2.5 ha citadel sits atop a basaltic promontory 20 m above two riverbeds flanking its south-eastern and south-western margins. The close proximity of the final occupational phase (Phase 5) to the present-day ground surface facilitated initial mapping of structures and public spaces of the citadel, including the central plaza, its radial alleyways, and its northern defensive wall (Kleiss and Kroll, 1979).

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