



# The hidden side of ritual: New palynological data from Early Bronze Age Georgia, the Southern Caucasus



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## ABSTRACT

The mid-third millennium BC, the approximate start of the Early Bronze Age III in the Southern Caucasus, witnessed the emergence of a new cultural horizon characterised by the use of barrow burials (or kurgans). One component of this so-called Early Kurgan Culture is particularly well represented in the Bedeni Plateau of Southern Georgia. Although these barrow burials are noted for their large wooden mortuary chambers and rich assemblages of grave goods, there is a hidden and equally important side of this funerary practice. Through the analysis of pollen and non-pollen palynomorphs, this paper argues that the funerary process involved the use of honey and of medicinal plants, which were probably tied together with flax string and placed in wooden or woven containers.

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## 1. Introduction

The disposal of the dead is a subject that has always attracted the attention of archaeologists. Burial customs have been used not only to explain the wider social process associated with dying, but also to infer the structural complexity of the community involved and its relationship to the deceased (Chapman et al., 1981; Metcalf and Huntington, 1991; Parker-Pearson, 1999). Most would agree that the context of deposition is pivotal in any analysis of ancient burials. Human behaviour is generally inferred by examining the relationship between the mortuary architecture, skeletal remains, grave goods, and position of the burial within the broader landscape (Carr, 1995). This information is usually derived from tangible remains which have survived well enough to be obvious to the naked eye. Less attention has been paid to the 'invisible' aspect of ritual, such as what can be derived from palynological data. This paper will illustrate how palynology can enrich our understanding of the funerary process. We present the results of the analysis of several organic samples collected from three large and rich barrow burials of the Bedeni culture (Gobedzhishvili, 1980), attributed to the end of the Early Bronze Age in the Southern Caucasus (ca.

2500–2200 BC). The Bedeni barrows are well known for their wealth of metalwork and prestige items, including wooden wheeled vehicles, yet they also contain a considerable quantity of smaller, less eye-catching organic items which for the most part have escaped notice.

## 2. Archaeological background

The third millennium BC was a period of great change in the Southern Caucasus, the isthmus that connects the Near East to Europe (Fig. 1). It witnessed the transition between two cultural horizons. During the first half of the millennium, the Kura-Araxes culture complex (or Early Trans-Caucasian culture) was preponderant (Sagona, 1984; Kushnareva, 1997; Kohl, 2007; Palumbi, 2008). Emerging around 3500/3400 BC within the Kura and Araxes interfluvium, this cultural horizon very quickly absorbed and conflated a range of elements found in neighbouring lands. Then, in a relatively short time, the bearers of this archaeological culture migrated, initially occupying Northeastern Anatolia. By 3000/2900 BC they occupied a vast area north of the Taurus Mountains, stretching from the Euphrates River to Northwestern Iran. Represented for the most part by hundreds of small settlement mounds, about 150 m in diameter, these hamlets comprised a variety of architectural forms, including freestanding single-roomed houses of rectilinear, sub-rectangular or circular plan with walls of mud brick or wattle-and-daub. Regionalism is evident across this cultural province. Even so,

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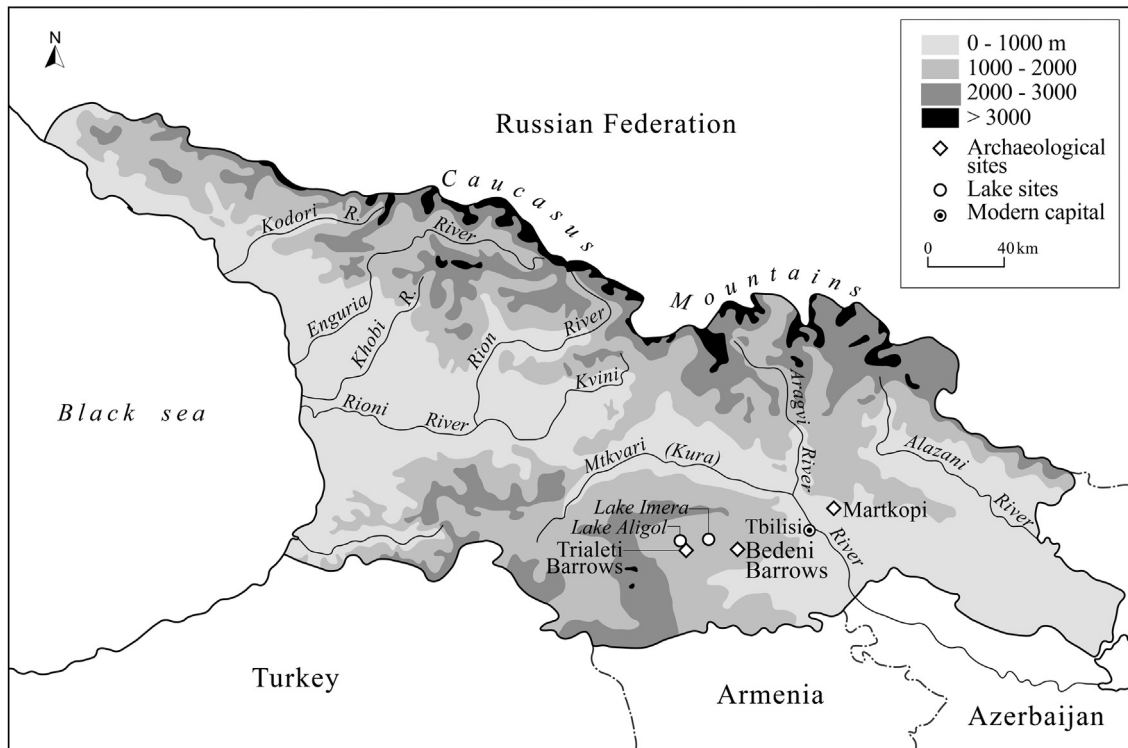


Fig. 1. Map of Georgia showing the location of Bedeni. Created: C. Jayasuriya.

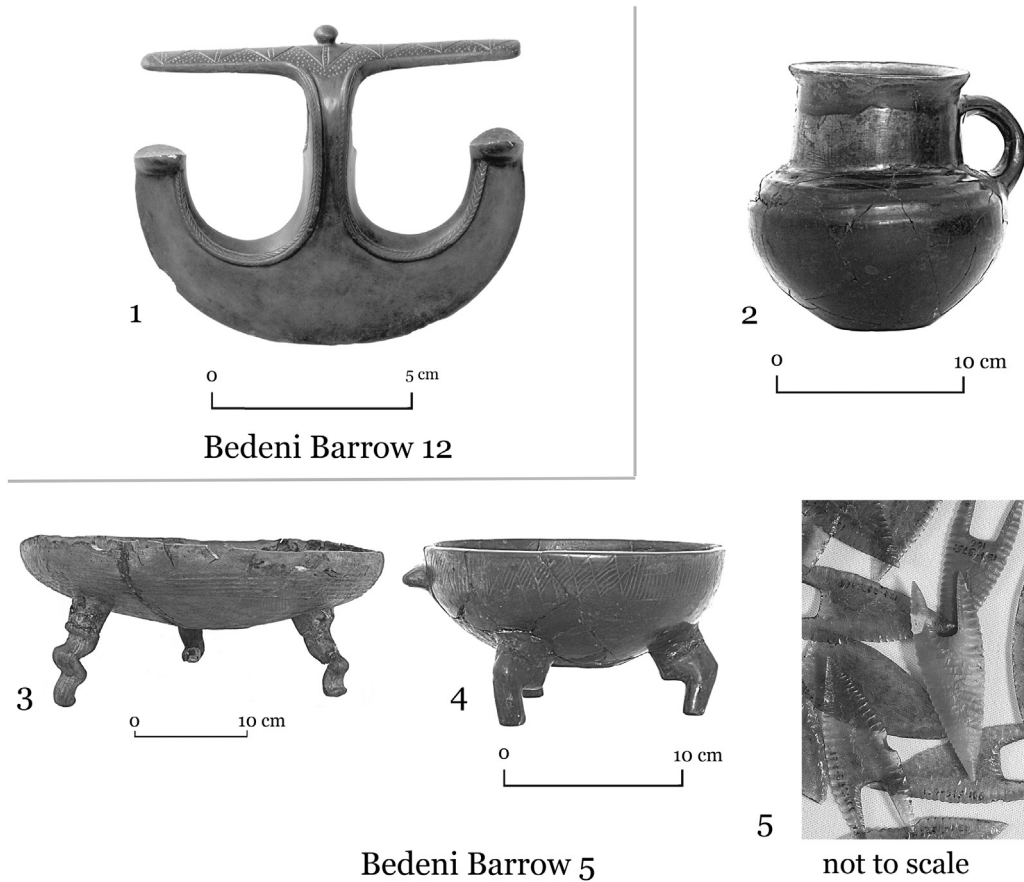


Fig. 2. Selection of items from the Bedeni Barrows: 1 Bronze axe (Barrow 12); 2–5 Black polished handled jar, carved wooden bowl (3) and ceramic bowl (4) with tripod bowl, and finely worked hollow-based obsidian arrowheads. Photographs: A. Sagona.

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