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A Newly Discovered Monument of Persian-Achaemenid Architecture in South Caucasus

In 1956 Azerbaijani archaeologist Ideal Narimanov discovered 5th-4th c. BCE monumental building in Saritepe, near the west Azerbaijani city of Gazakh. In one of the halls of that building, so-called type of bell-shaped column bases, developed in the capitals of the Achaemenid Empire, were uncovered.¹

Fragments of a similar base were found in 1972 in the Alazani Valley (Kakheti, East Georgia), near the village of Jugaani, at a site known as Gumbati. There, in 1994-1995, the Kakheti Georgian-German archaeological expedition led by Kiazoo Fitskhelauri and Andreas Furtwängler unearthed the surviving section of the Achaemenid-style palace made with mud bricks, which had at least two chambers with columns.²

In Northwestern Armenia, close to Beniamin, Felix Ter-Martirossov discovered contemporaneous monumental construction of Saritepe and Gumbati in the 1980s, with columns supported by bell-shaped bases, carved from local tuff.³

If we add the discovery of an Achaemenid-type double-protom capital and a fragment of a bell-shaped base at Tsikhiagora in Kavtishkevi in the 1970s⁴ to the list of above-mentioned Achaemenid period sites, we can say that at the end of the last century, researchers had enough material to prove that the South Caucasus was strongly influenced by the Achaemenid culture in the 5th - 4th cc. BCE.

However, the recent archaeological finds from 2006 to 2023 in Eastern Georgia and Western Azerbaijan have persuaded us to discuss not only the Persian-Achaemenid impact but also the Persian presence in the South Caucasus.

¹ Narimanov, *Nakhodki baz koloni*, pp. 162-164.

² Pitskhelauri, Dedabrishvili, *Kakhetis arkeologiuri ekspediciis shedegebi*, p. 35; Furtwängler, Knauss, *Archäologische Expedition in Kachetien*, pp. 353-387.

³ Knauss, *Ancient Persia and the Caucasus*, p. 100.

⁴ Gagoshidze, Kipiani, *Neue Beobachtungen zur achaimenidischen Baukunst*, pp. 59-65; Makharadze, Kalandadze, Sakhvadze, *Tsikhiagora*, pl. 96, 97, 119.

The Azerbaijani-Georgian-German archaeological expedition (led by Ilias Babaev, Iulon Gagoshidze and Florian Knauss) discovered and excavated the residence of the ruler (satrap) of one of the satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire (according to Herodotus, the XI satrapy where the Caspians lived [Hdt. III.92])¹ near the village of Karajamirli, Shamkor district of Azerbaijan from 2006 to 2012.²

A joint archaeological expedition of the Georgian National Museum and the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich, headed by Iulon Gagoshidze and Kai Kaniuth, resumed work in the Alazani Valley in 2018-2022. Another Achaemenid period palace has been found in Saaklemo, about 2 kilometers northeast of Gumbati. There, several storerooms, including the six-columned hall, have been unearthed. The columns' bases are bell-shaped, however they differ from the bases of Gumbati and Karajamirli in terms of ornamentation. As a result of the field investigation in 2020, radiocarbon analysis of burnt grain from Saaklemo Palace revealed a date earlier than 400 BCE.³

Geophysical surveys determined that the ruins of another capital building, most likely from the same – Achaemenid period, had been preserved to the northwest of the aforementioned site, where a slight elevation was seen.⁴

The nearly equal distances (60–100 km) from the pillared palaces of Saaklemo/Gumbati and Saritepe to Karajamirli prompt us to consider the division of the territory into administrative units: if Karajamirli served as the satrap's seat, Saaklemo/Gumbati and Saritepe might have been the provincial hubs of this satrapy. Since the bell-shaped bases of the Gumbati and Karajamirli are produced of the same limestone in the same workshop and the adobe bricks are of identical size, it is most likely that the palaces of the Gumbati and Karajamirli were constructed concurrently and are part of the same system.⁵

¹ Two more Iranian satrapies reached the South Caucasus: the eighteenth satrapy (southern part of present day Armenia), where the Matiens, Saspers, and Alarodians lived, and the nineteenth satrapy (south-eastern coast of the Black Sea), where the Moskhs, Tibarenes, Macrones, Mosinikes and Mares lived (Hdt.III.94).

² Babaev, Gagoshidze, Knauss, *An Achaemenid Palace*, pp. 31-45; Knauss, Gagoshidze, Babaev, *A Persian Propyleion*, pp. 111-122; Gagoshidze, Babaev, Knauss, *Akemenidebi Kavkasiashi*, pp. 601-615; Knauss, Gagoshidze, Babaev, *Karaçamirli*, pp. 1-28. The German-Azerbaijani team is still working in Karajamirli, and according to Florian Knauss, another complex of Achaemenid period buildings was discovered in 2023 not far from the village of Seidlar, five kilometers east of Karajamirli.

³ Fassbinder (et al.), *Persian Residences*, p. 56.

⁴ Gagoshidze, Kaniuth, *Gumbatis eqspediciis angarishi*, pp. 239-243; Gagoshidze, Kaniuth, Gagoshidze, *Gumbatis arkeologiuri samushaoebis angarishi*, pp. 94-99; Fassbinder (et al.), *Persian Residences*, pp. 55-58.

⁵ Gagoshidze, Babaev, Knauss, *Akemenidebi Kavkasiashi*, p. 605.

Along with the above-mentioned Achaemenid period monuments located in the Kakheti region, we may also mention the limestone column bases discovered in Georgia's far east, close to the village of Sabatlo, on the right bank of the Alazani River.¹ The base of the column (Fig. 1.2), the broken corner of the second base similar to the previous one, and a fragment of an architectural detail carved from the same type of stone, likely the capital of the column, were pulled out by the plow during the plowing of the arable plot on the second terrace of the Alazani river, northwest of the village. These fragments have been moved to Dedoplistskaro, in the archaeological base of Ilia State University, for protection.

Inspecting the ploughed terrain revealed that the plow had also damaged the walls of the charred old building: charcoal, burnt mud bricks, and parts of wall plastering (including painted) were spread over the area. However, it is clear that the plow only partially destroyed the building, leaving the floor unharmed. The exceptional quality of the column base carving, as well as the measurements (the column's lower diameter is 52 cm), indicate that we are dealing with a palace (or temple). A tiny pottery collection suggests that this structure dates back to the 5th - 4th cc. BCE. According to the study of aerial photos the estimated size of the archaeological monument (remains of capital buildings) goes beyond the deeply ploughed plot in both the eastern and southern directions (Fig. 1.1).

Sabatlo's bases are not bell-shaped like Gumbati and Saaklemo's, but similar bases with an angular plinth and a round torus are typical on classical period structures, including Persepolis.² Remember that in numerous rooms of the Karajamirli palace, the bases of the columns had a square plinth, but with two levels,³ identical to that in one of the Pasargadae palaces.⁴

As we can see, the monuments of Persian-Achaemenid architecture are concentrated on the right bank of the Alazani River. Recently, a similar monument was discovered on the left bank of Alazani.

Teimuraz Tkemaladze, the director of the hunting farm "Eden" located in the Alazani grove, about 5 kilometers south of the Chabukiani village in the Lagodekhi municipality, informed the head of the O. Lordkipanidze Research Center of Georgian National Museum Zurab Makharadze, who had archaeologically studied several kurgans there, including the famous Ananauri kurgan of the Early Bronze Age,⁵ that a

¹ Knauss, Gagoshidze, Babaev, *Karačamirli*, p. 4; Knauss, Babaev, *Xerxes in Aserbajdschan*, pp. 70, 75, pl. 2.

² Wesenberg, *Kapitelle und Basen*, p. 105, pl. 217-218.

³ Knauss, Gagoshidze, Babaev, *Karačamirli*, pp. 12, 15.

⁴ Wesenberg, *Kapitelle und Basen*, p. 105, pl. 214-215.

⁵ Makharadze, Kalandadze, Murvanidze, *Ananauris korghani*.

carved stone column base had been found on the hunting farm's property (Fig. 2). The supplied photo made it clear that we were dealing with a significant find.

On November 30, 2023, Zurab Makharadze and the authors of this article visited the hunting farm, where the recently found base is still being preserved. The employee of the farm took us to a high kurgan (near the excavated Ananauri kurgan) located 2 km southeast of the farm office (Fig. 3), on the flattened top of which a 2m x 2.5m and 1.5m deep pit was dug by graverobbers who were threatened by the farm workers.

As we examined the pit, where the base was discovered, we collected pieces of large ceramics. A braided decoration adorns the white engobed piece (Fig. 4.3). Braided ornament are also used to decorate the second straw-colored piece (Fig. 4.2). The third piece has carved ornamentation that depict waves (Fig. 4.1). It's inconceivable to exclude out the Achaemenid period as the dating of these pottery. We determined that the leveled surface area of the kurgan, which is 10-15 meters high, would be sufficient for the construction of a large building.

The height of the column base, made of dense white limestone, is 52 cm, the bottom diameter – 83 cm and the diameter of the support circle of the column – 56 cm (Fig. 5). The peculiarity of the base is that its torus (thickness – 15 cm) is made separately and adjusted to the body (Fig. 6). Unlike the bell-shaped bases of Saritepe, Gumbati, Beniamin and Karajamirli, in which the lotus petals are simple, here the ornament is more complicated: two registers of lotus petals are displayed, and in the upper part of the base the bottom of these petals are formed by a row of semicircular locks (Fig. 7).

All six bases of the six-columned hall of the Saaklemo, as well as another base discovered during the agricultural work in the same location and kept by the landowner in Jugaani village, were decorated in the same fashion as the aforementioned Chabukiani column base.

According to Burkhardt Wesenberg's classification of Persian-Achaemenid bell-shaped bases, four types are distinguished. Chabukiani and Saaklemo bases show some similarity with its C and D types,¹ but we think it should be considered as a different type (fifth).

All of the Persian-Achaemenid structures found in the South Caucasus thus far are located in the steppes. The building, which column base we described above, lies on top of the hill (kurgan), suggesting that it may have had a cult role.

¹ Wesenberg, *Kapitelle und Basen*, pp. 141-145.

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Summary

In the second half of the 20th century, the monuments of Persian-Achaemenid architecture discovered as a result of archaeological excavations in Western Azerbaijan (Saritepe), Northern Armenia (Beniamin), and Eastern Georgia (Gumbati, Tsikhiagora at Kavtiskhevi) allowed us to judge the strong influence of the Achaemenid culture in the South Caucasus in the 5th-4th centuries BCE. However, archaeological investigations in Karajamirli (Azerbaijan) and on Alazani Valley – Gumbat/Saaklemo (Georgia) from 2006 to 2023, demonstrated that we can discuss not only Persian-Achaemenid influence, but also Persian presence in the South Caucasus.

The nearly equal distances (60–100 km) from the pillared palaces of Saaklemo/Gumbati and Saritepe to Karajamirli prompt us to consider the division of the territory into administrative units: if Karajamirli served as the satrap’[’]s seat, Saaklemo/Gumbati and Saritepe might have been the provincial hubs of this satrapy (according to Herodotus, the XI satrapy [Hdt. III.92]).

The right bank of the Alazani River in Kakheti is the location of all monuments of Achaemenid architecture unearthed so far. On the left bank of Alazani, a monument similar to the above was recently found. Approximately five kilometers south of the village of Chabukiani in the Lagodekhi municipality, in the Alazani grove, on the flattened top of a Bronze Age kurgan, was a trench dug by graverobbers. In this trench, a bell-shaped base carved out of limestone was discovered.

The column base of Chabukiani has more complicated ornamentation than the bell-shaped bases of Saritepe, Gumbati, Beniamin, and Karajamirli, and it is identical to the bases of Saaklemo (Radiocarbon dating reveals an earlier date for Saaklemo than 400 BCE).

According to Burkhardt Wesenberg’s classification of Persian-Achaemenid bell-shaped bases, four types are distinguished. Chabukiani and Saaklemo bases show some similarity with its C and D types, but we think it should be considered as a different type (fifth).

All of the Persian-Achaemenid structures found in the South Caucasus thus far are located in the steppes. The building, which column base we described above, lies on top of the hill (kurgan), suggesting that it may have had a cult role.

**სპარსულ-აქემენიდური ხუროთმოძღვრების ახლადმოჩენილი
ძეგლი სამხრეთ კავკასიაში**

რეზიუმე

XX საუკუნის მეორე ნახევარში დასავლეთ აზერბაიჯანში (სარითეფე), ჩრდილოეთ სომხეთსა (ბენიამინი) და აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოში (გუმბათი, კავთისხევის ციხიაგორა) არქეოლოგიური გათხრების შედეგად გამოვლენილი სპარსულ-აქემენიდური მონუმენტური ხუროთმოძღვრების ძეგლების ერთობლიობა საშუალებას იძლეოდა გვემსჯელა ძვ. წ. V-IV საუკუნეებში აქემენიდური კულტურის ძლიერი გავლენის შესახებ სამხრეთ კავკასიაში. მაგრამ 2006-2023 წლებში ყარაჯამირლიში (აზერბაიჯანი) და ალაზნის ველზე – გუმბათ/სააქლემოში (საქართველო) არქეოლოგიური გათხრების შედეგებმა ცხადი გახადა, რომ შეიძლება ვისაუბროთ არამარტო სპარსულ-აქემენიდურ გავლენაზე, არამედ სპარსელების ყოფნაზე სამხრეთ კავკასიაში.

სააქლემო/გუმბათის და სარითეფეს სვეტებიანი სასახლეები თითქმის თანაბარი მანძილებით (60-100 კმ) არის დაშორებული ყარაჯამირლისგან, რაც ძალაუნებურად გვაფიქრებინებს ტერიტორიის დაყოფაზე ადმინისტრაციულ-საგამგეო ერთეულებად: ყარაჯამირლი თუ სატრაპის რეზიდენცია იყო, სააქლემო/გუმბათი და სარითეფე ამ სატრაპიის პროვინციების ცენტრები შეიძლება ყოფილიყო (ჰეროდოტეს მიხედვით XI სატრაპია [Hdt.III.92]).

კახეთში, ალაზნის ველზე აქამდე აღმოჩენილი ყველა აქემენიდური მონუმენტური ნაგებობა მდინარე ალაზნის მარჯვენა სანაპიროზე მდებარეობს. ამ ცოტა ხნის წინ ერთი ასეთი ძეგლი ალაზნის მარცხენა სანაპიროზეც გამოვლინდა. ლაგოდების მუნიციპალიტეტის, სოფელ ჭაბუკიანის სამხრეთით დაახლოებით 5 კილომეტრში, ალაზნის ჭალაში, ბრინჯაოს ხანის ყორღანის დაბრტყელებულ მწვერვალზე შავი არქეოლოგების მიერ გათხრილ ორმოში აღოჩნდა კირქვისგან გამოთლილი ზარისებური ბაზისი. ჭაბუკიანის ბაზისის სარითეფეს, გუმბათის, ბენიამინის და ყარაჯამირლის ზარისებური ბაზისებისგან განსხვავებით უფრო გართულებული ორნამენტი აქვს და ზუსტად ისეთივეა, როგორც სააქლემოს ბაზისები (სააქლემო რადიოკარბონული დათარიღებით ძვ. წ. 400 წელზე უფრო ადრეულია). სპარსულ-აქემენიდური ზარისებური ბაზისების ბურკჰარდტ ვეზენბერგისეული კლასიფიკაციით გამოყოფილია ოთხი ტიპი. ჭაბუკიანისა და სააქლემოს ბაზისები გარკვეულ მსგავსებას იჩენენ მის C და D ტიპებთან, მაგრამ ვფიქრობთ მაინც მათგან განხვავებულ (მეხუთე) ტიპად უნდა იქნენ მიჩნეულნი.

სამხრეთ კავკასიაში აქამდე ცნობილი ყველა სპარსულ-აქემენიდური ნაგებობა ველზეა განლაგებული. ჭაბუკიანის ბაზა კი გორის (ყორღანის) წვერზე აღმოჩნდა, რაც საფუძველს იძლევა ვივარაუდოთ, რომ მას შეიძლება საკულტო ფუნქცია ჰქონდა.



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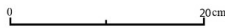


Fig. 1 (სურ. 1)



Fig. 2 (სურ. 2)



Fig. 3 (სურ. 3)

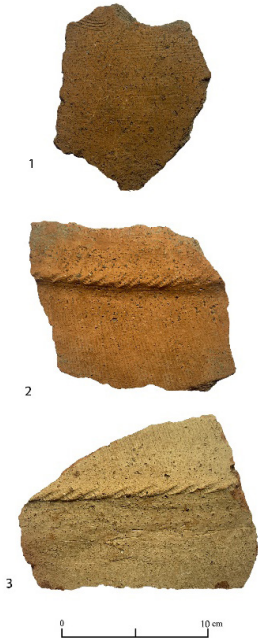


Fig. 4 (სურ. 4)



Fig. 5 (სურ. 5)



Fig. 6 (სურ. 6)

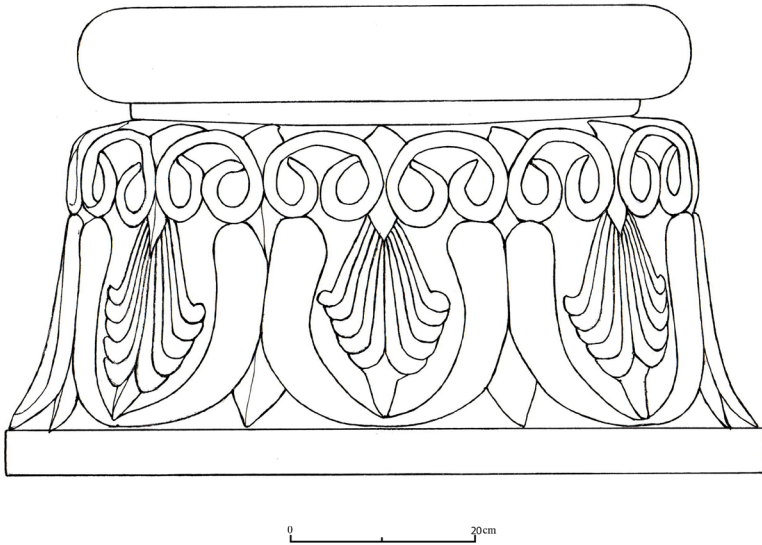


Fig. 7 (სურ. 7)

Illustrations:

Fig. 1 – 1. Sabatlo. 2. Column base found in Sabatlo (photo – Iulon Gagoshidze).

Fig. 2 – Alazani Valley, Kakheti, East Georgia. The location where the column base was discovered is highlighted in black (Google Earth).

Fig. 3 – Bronze age Kurgan, on top of which column base was found (photo – David Gagoshidze).

Fig. 4 – Ceramics collected in the pit where column base was found (photo – David Gagoshidze).

Fig. 5 – Newly discovered Chabukiani column base (photo – David Gagoshidze).

Fig. 6 – Chabukiani column base – separately made torus and the bell-shaped body (photo – David Gagoshidze).

Fig. 7 – Chabukiani column base (drawing – T. Turkiashvili).

ილუსტრაციები:

სურ. 1 – 1. საბათლო. 2. საბათლოში აღმოჩენილი სვეტის ბაზისი (ფოტო – იულონ გაგოშიძე).

სურ. 2 – ალაზნის ველი, კახეთი, აღმოსავლეთ საქართველო. შავი ნერტილით აღნიშნულია ადგილი, სადაც აღმოჩნდა სვეტის ბაზისი (Google Earth).

სურ. 3 – ბრინჯაოს ხანის ყორღანი, რომლის თავზეც აღმოჩნდა სვეტის ბაზისი (ფოტო – დავით გაგოშიძე).

სურ. 4 – თიხის ქურჭლის ფრაგმენტები ორმოდან, სადაც სვეტის ბაზისი აღმოჩნდა (ფოტო – დავით გაგოშიძე).

სურ. 5 – ახლად აღმოჩენილი სვეტის ბაზისი ჭაბუკიანიდან (ფოტო – დავით გაგოშიძე).

სურ. 6 – ჭაბუკიანის სვეტის ბაზისი – ცალ-ცალკე დამზადებული თორუსი და ზარისებური ფორმის ტანი (ფოტო – დავით გაგოშიძე).

სურ. 7 – ჭაბუკიანის სვეტის ბაზისი (ნახაზი – ც. თურქიაშვილი).