



Ritual Practices in the Kura-Araxes Culture: Hearths and Figurines as Markers of Religious Identity

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Pp: 229-267</p> <p>Article Type: Research Article</p> <p>Article History:</p> <p>Received: 29 October 2024</p> <p>Revised form: 02 November 2024</p> <p>Accepted: 04 December 2024</p> <p>Published online: December 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Kura-Araxes Culture, Hearth, Figurine, Ritual Practices, Religious Identity, Northwestern Iran, South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia.</p>	<p>The investigation and characterization of the Kura-Araxes culture is a key focus of archaeological research in this field. One of the enigmatic aspects of the Kura-Araxes culture is the role of religion, rituals, and associated ritual evidence among its people. This aspect holds particular significance not due to its spiritual or supernatural dimensions, but rather because of the limited, scarce, and largely unknown nature of the cultural evidence. Archaeological findings related to this facet of Kura-Araxes culture, such as figurines, hearths, and possibly architectural elements, have been uncovered across the entire expanse of this culture's territory, from northwest Iran to eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus. One of the primary objectives of this research is to explore the social identity and ritual beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities, and to identify the symbols, elements, and religious signs of the Kura-Araxes culture. This investigation is based on a combination of library-documentary studies and first-hand archaeological data from excavations in Iran and the broader Kura-Araxes cultural sphere. This research also aims to address the following questions and uncertainties: What insights do archaeological evidence and documents provide regarding the ritual-religious beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities? Additionally, what are the key differences and similarities in the religious beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities across Iran, the Caucasus, and other regions within the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere? More broadly, can we definitively discuss belief systems, religion, rituals, and associated sacred spaces in relation to these communities? The forthcoming study will focus on answering these questions and addressing the stated objectives to clarify some of these ambiguities. The results indicate that while the Kura-Araxes culture and its people did not have dedicated religious spaces or distinct places for their rituals (based on current findings and evidence), it is important to consider two factors: first, the temporal span (3500–2400/2500 BCE) and the continuity of this culture; and second, the contemporary cultures, such as Uruk, which were characterized by established religious practices. Additionally, religious and ritual practices were prevalent among Bronze Age cultures. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Kura-Araxes communities were devoid of religion and rituals. However, rather than a sedentary and fixed culture, if we accept the hypothesis of the Kura-Araxes culture being semi-nomadic pastoral, then their ritual artifacts, such as figurines and hearths, were likely small and portable. Consequently, these artifacts reveal traces of their ritual beliefs, allowing us to consider ritualistic characteristics as part of this culture.</p>

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1. Introduction

During the period from the mid-fourth to the mid-third millennium B.C. (3500–2500/2400 B.C.), significant socio-political, and cultural transformations occurred globally, particularly in West Asia. These transformations included the rise of kingdoms, the establishment of cities, the formation of armies and bureaucracies, the emergence of large-scale economic and specialized production, and the development of official systems of trade, both inter-regional and extra-regional. These changes prompted nomadic herders, rural farmers, and merchant artisans to adapt their lifestyles to the evolving circumstances (Batiuk and Rothman, 2007). The changes and transformations observed during this period were primarily of local (endogenous) origin, although some were influenced by external factors. The initial exogenous influence can be attributed to the spread of Beveled Rim Bowls, a characteristic of the Uruk culture, which reached the Iranian plateau in the 4th millennium B.C. Another significant external cultural impact was the influence of the Kura-Araxes culture on the Iranian plateau, particularly in the northwest and western regions (Abedi *et al.*, 2014a-b; Maziar, 2010; Alizadeh *et al.*, 2015; Abedi and Omrani, 2015; Abedi, 2016a-b; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022). The Kura-Araxes culture, which existed from the mid-4th millennium B.C. (approximately 3500 B.C.) to the mid-3rd millennium B.C. (2500 B.C.), was primarily composed of semi-nomadic pastoralist who were also engaged in agriculture. This culture extended across a vast region encompassing the Caucasus, the Upper Euphrates, the area around Lake Urmia, Eastern Anatolia, and the Levant (Sagona 2018). It played a significant role in the region until its decline at the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. This decline was likely due to a combination of internal pressures, external conflicts, and notably, the occurrence of droughts at the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. (Omrani, 2006). Summarizing a large-scale and long-term phenomenon like the Kura-Araxes culture is challenging due to its significant regional variation and extensive temporal development. Nonetheless, despite this regional and temporal diversity, it is possible to identify a set of cultural markers that emerged with the formation of the Kura-Araxes culture and have consistently been reproduced across both spatial and temporal dimensions (Sagona, 1993). During the excavations, artifacts such as figurines, hearths, and possibly architectural remains have been recovered. These cultural materials and the information derived from them suggest the presence of a specific religious identity and ritual practices within the Kura-Araxes culture. Furthermore, there appears to be a correlation between the persistence and recurrence of these cultural materials across various times and locations and their association with ritual and religious identity within the culture. Religious and ritual identity represents a key aspect of the Kura-Araxes culture. Evidence and related cultural materials, including figurines, hearths, burials, and architectural remains, exhibit commonalities that likely affirm the presence of this cultural characteristic among the Kura-Araxes peoples.

This research utilizes published sources and primary reports from archaeological excavations, incorporating data from cultural materials found at Kul Tepe Gargar, Kul Tepe Sarein, and other relevant sites. A primary objective of this study is to examine the social identity and ritual beliefs of the Kura-Araxes communities, as well as to identify religious symbols, elements, and signs associated with the Kura-Araxes culture. This analysis is based on previous studies, surveys, and excavations, supplemented by first-hand data from recent excavations across Iran and the broader Kura-Araxes cultural region. This research aims to address the following questions and uncertainties: What

insights do archaeological documents and evidence provide regarding the ritual and religious beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities? Additionally, what are the differences and similarities in the religious beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities across Iran, the Caucasus, and other regions within the Kura-Araxes sphere? More broadly, can we discuss belief systems, religion, rituals, and associated sacred and ritual spaces in relation to the Kura-Araxes communities? The forthcoming study will focus on answering these questions and addressing the related objectives to clarify these issues and resolve existing ambiguities.

2. The background of archaeological research on the Kura-Araxes culture in the South Caucasus and Northwestern Iran

The Kura-Araxes culture was first identified in 1869 in Azerbaijan through surface surveys that revealed its characteristic pottery within the South Caucasus (Areshian, 2005). Subsequent investigations by Russian archaeologist Boris Kuftin, who conducted extensive research in the region, formalized the term “Kura-Araxes” and contributed to its recognition as a distinct archaeological culture (Kuftin, 1940). In the mid-20th century, scholars such as Kavtaradze, Martirosian, Khanzadian, and Munchaev focused on establishing the chronology and developmental phases of this culture. Later discoveries extended the known geographical distribution of the Kura-Araxes culture. In eastern Anatolia, Kuşay identified the Karaz site in 1942 and 1944, while in northwestern Iran, Brown introduced the culture at Geoy Tepe in 1948 (Burton-Brown, 1951). Further evidence emerged in the Amuk Plain, where a joint British-American excavation project confirmed the culture’s presence. Since the 1950s, numerous excavations and surveys have expanded our understanding of the Kura-Araxes culture across diverse regions. Prominent examples include investigations in the South Caucasus (Burney and Lang, 1971), Tell al-Judaidah and Tell Dhahab in Syria, and Sos Höyük in eastern Anatolia (Sagona, 2000). Additional research has been conducted at sites in northwestern Iran, such as Yanik Tepe (Burney, 1961), Godin Tepe in the Central Zagros (Young, 1969), Haftavan Tepe (Burney, 1970), and Tepe Gijlar (Pecorella and Salvini, 1984). These studies collectively highlight the extensive spatial distribution and cultural significance of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon, underscoring its role as a pivotal early Bronze Age culture spanning the South Caucasus, Anatolia, and northwestern Iran (Fig. 1).

Recent research-driven excavations have substantially advanced our understanding of the Kura-Araxes culture, particularly in northwestern Iran. Key sites subjected to extensive study include Kohneh Pasgah (Aqalari, 2008; Maziari, 2010), Kohneh Tepesi (Zalghi and Aqalari, 2007), Kul Tepe Gargar (Abedi *et al.*, 2014a; Abedi and Omrani, 2015; Abedi, 2016; Davoudi *et al.*, 2018), Kohneh Shahr (Ravaz) (Alizadeh *et al.*, 2015; Alizadeh *et al.*, 2018), Kul Tepe Sarein (Ebrahimi, 2019), and Tepe Pirtaj (Sharifi, 2021). In addition, investigations in the Central Zagros region—including Tepe Pisa (Mohammadifar *et al.*, 2009), Tepe Ghurab Malayer (Khaksar and Hemmati, 2013), and Tepe Qaleh Sarsakhti Shazand (Abedi *et al.*, 2014b)—as well as studies on the Qazvin and Tehran plains (Fazeli and Ajourloo, 2013) have contributed significantly to the broader understanding of this cultural horizon. Notably, prior to the past decade, Early Bronze Age research in northwestern Iran was primarily concentrated within the Lake Urmia basin. However, excavations in the Khodaafrin region, prompted by dam construction projects (Zalghi and Aghalari, 2007; Aghalari, 2008), alongside renewed investigations at Kul Tepe Gargar (Abedi *et al.*, 2014a; Abedi, 2016a-b), marked a pivotal expansion of research efforts

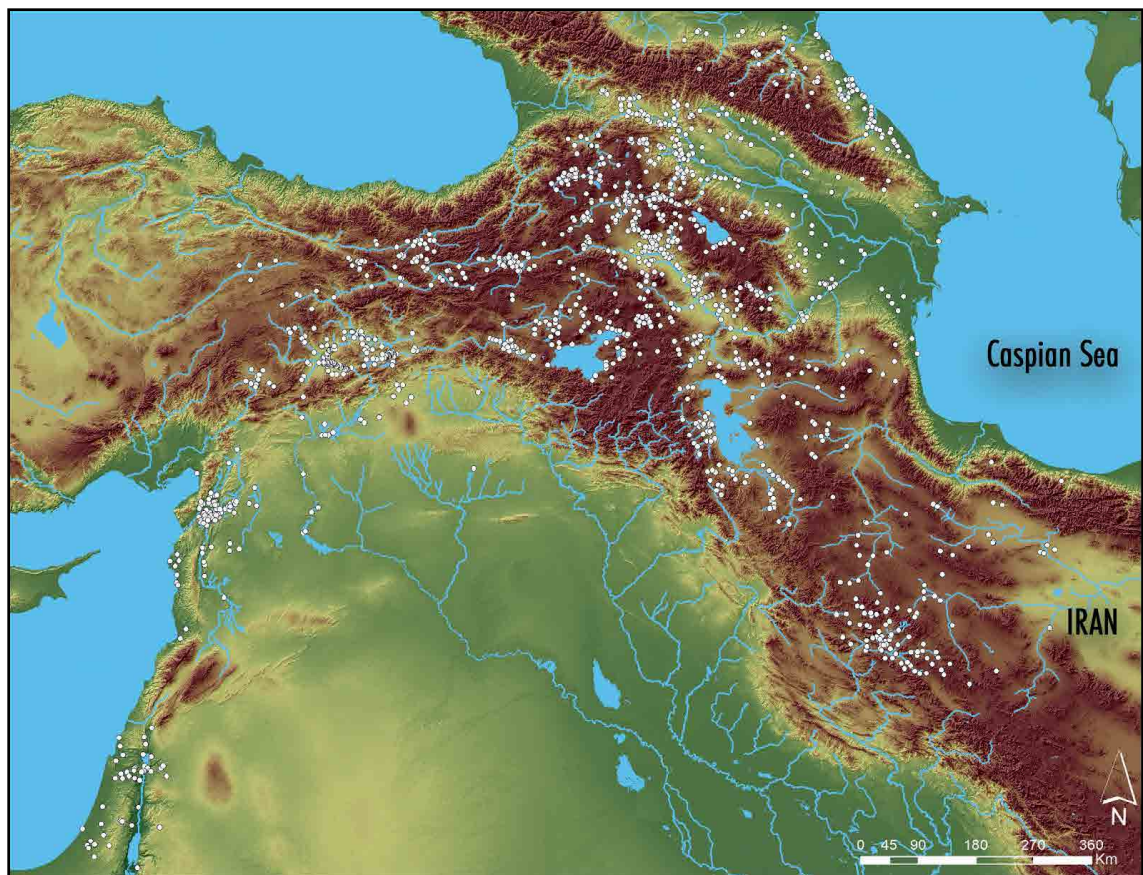


Fig. 1: Distribution map of sites bearing Kura-Araxes Material Culture (after: Batiuk, 2022).

into this cultural domain. These projects have generated critical new data on the Kura-Araxes culture and prompted a partial reassessment of its broader spatial and temporal framework. The resulting publications have contributed to a revised understanding of the cultural dynamics and geographical extent of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon within northwestern Iran.

Research into the ritual and religious identity of the Kura-Araxes culture has been notably advanced by Antonio Sagona, whose 1998 study provided a comprehensive analysis of the social and ritual-religious aspects at Sos Höyük in Eastern Anatolia (Sagona, 1998). Further contributions to the understanding of the ritual landscape of this culture were made by Simonyan and Rothman (2015), who highlighted significant findings from Shengavit. More recent works, including Sagona's 2018 publication and studies by Batiuk and colleagues (Batiuk *et al.*, 2022), have further explored the beliefs and ritual practices associated with the Kura-Araxes culture. Despite these advances, much of the existing scholarship has primarily focused on specific cultural materials—such as hearths and figurines—analyzed in isolation, leaving broader interpretations of the ritual and religious framework of the Kura-Araxes culture relatively underexplored.

3. Ritual Evidence and Practices in Kura-Araxes Culture: Insights from Archaeological Findings in the South Caucasus, Northwestern and Western Iran, Eastern Anatolia, and the Levant.

Social identity theory posits that individuals possess multifaceted self-concepts that

fluctuate across diverse social settings. An individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors may be shaped by personal, familial, or national identities depending on the specific social context. This conceptualization of social identity offers a fruitful avenue for exploring the interregional convergence of cultural forms and the dynamic processes of cultural transmission (Stein, 2010). The Kura-Araxes traditions shaped their worldview, fostering a shared identity and collective ideals that unified communities. These practices not only reflected their cultural values but also served as a means of social cohesion. Additionally, the integration of ritualized daily activities, such as communal feasting and the symbolic use of hearths, reinforced bonds and expressed their connection to ancestral heritage (Batiuk *et al.*, 2022). The presence of shared cultural phenomena, including pottery styles, burial customs, metalworking techniques, and small artifacts, points to a substantial transformation from earlier periods. The widespread use of animal and human figurines and portable hearths within the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere provides further evidence for a shared socio-religious identity extending across the South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia, and Northwestern Iran (Fig. 2).

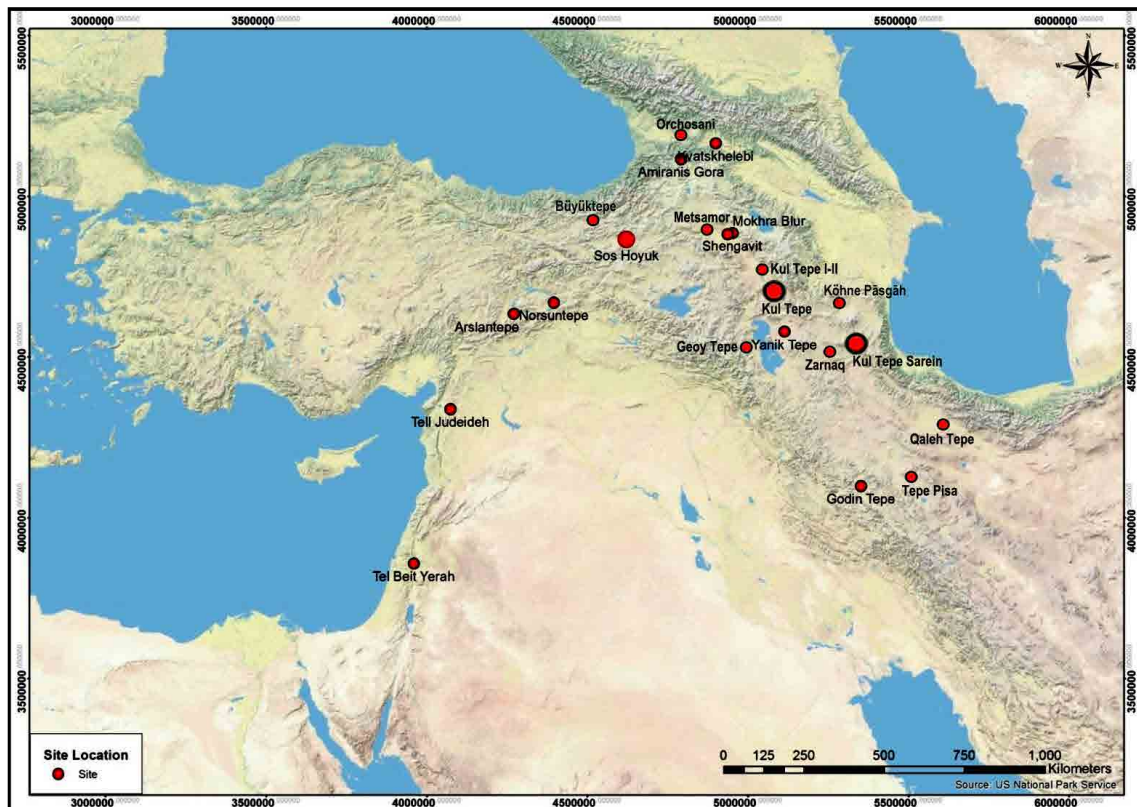


Fig. 2: A map showing the distribution of significant sites with evidence of ritual activities in the Kura-Araxes culture mentioned in the text.

3.1. Architecture

The sacred spaces associated with Kura-Araxes rituals were primarily centered around the household rather than dedicated temples typically used as gathering places for congregations, with a few potential exceptions (Sagona 1998; Simonyan and Rothman 2015; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022). In the Kura-Araxes culture, two architectural styles are predominant: circular and rectilinear plans. To date, no confirmed evidence has been found that distinguishes residential buildings from ritual structures within this culture. In modern

societies with organized Great Tradition religions, the authority of religious leaders—such as priests, ministers, rabbis, mullahs, or monks—is reflected in the spatial arrangement of worship. Congregants typically face a designated front where the leader stands or sits, alongside prominently displayed sacred symbols. In contrast, more egalitarian or kinship-based societies often orient their sacred spaces around a central focal point, emphasizing communal equality. This principle is similarly reflected in the sacred spaces of the Kura-Araxes culture, where the central orientation is evident. Benches positioned along the outer walls of rooms with sacred symbols suggest a communal focus on the center of the space. Examples of this arrangement can be observed at various sites from the KA2 phase, including the public feasting center at Kura-Araxes Godin IV:1 (Fig. 4J), the “Red House” at Kvatskhelebi C1 (Fig. 3:7-10; 4J), Building 36 at Arslantepe, and potentially at Shengavit (Fig. 3:1-3; 4I) (Batiuk *et al.*, 2022).

However, there are notable examples, such as in the Pulus (Sakyol) site, where a fire destroyed the structures on Level X, yet a horseshoe-shaped hearth adorned with human and geometric reliefs remained well-preserved (Fig. 3: 4-6; 4K). Similarly, hearths in several small residential houses were also well-preserved, suggesting these locations may have held particular significance (Yalçın, 2020). These hearths were found in association with a large jar featuring an engraved face and several small cups (Fig. 4E) (Koşay, 1976). At Sos Höyük in Anatolia during the Early Bronze Age II (2800-2500 BCE), the residential structures remained relatively unchanged. A single-room house, constructed with brick walls on elevated stone foundations, featured a round ceramic hearth initially equipped with three central projections on the floor and decorated with a double spiral motif. Behind the hearth was a bench positioned along the rear wall, though the precise function of this architectural feature remains unclear (Fig. 3:11,12) (Sagona and Sagona, 2000). At Shengavit, architecture features both circular and rectangular plans that are closely situated. Additionally, two-story grain storage pits, carefully sealed with circular lids, have been found containing wheat and barley. The interior is surrounded by defensive walls, and a hidden tunnel leading towards the Hrazdan River, along with a substantial collection of stone tools, gold beads, and marble and agate scepters, provides strong evidence that Shengavit was a city with advanced agricultural and industrial capabilities, including spinning and symbols of power (Simonyan and Rothman, 2015). At Shengavit, there are rooms located below ground level where hearths are installed, requiring descent via several steps, and these rooms exhibit small-scale architecture with offerings and burned plants found within the hearths (Fig. 3:1-3; 4I). This pattern is also observed at the Pulus / Sakyol Höyük (Simonyan and Rothman 2015). At Kul Tepe in Nakhchivan, an architectural structure, possibly a ritual space, has been discovered. This structure consists of the remains of a circular building. During the excavation, a hearth constructed with stamps, animal bones, and ceramic fragments was found, along with a hearth shaped like a bull's horn. This architecture can be attributed to the early stages of the Kura-Araxes culture. The lower part of the walls is built with river stones, while the upper part is constructed with clay bricks. On the eastern side of the wall, the walkway is covered with river stones and bricks. On the western side, a circular hearth filled with ash was found, surrounded by a mound of ash, animal bones, and ceramic fragments (Baxşəliyev and Quliyeva, 2017).

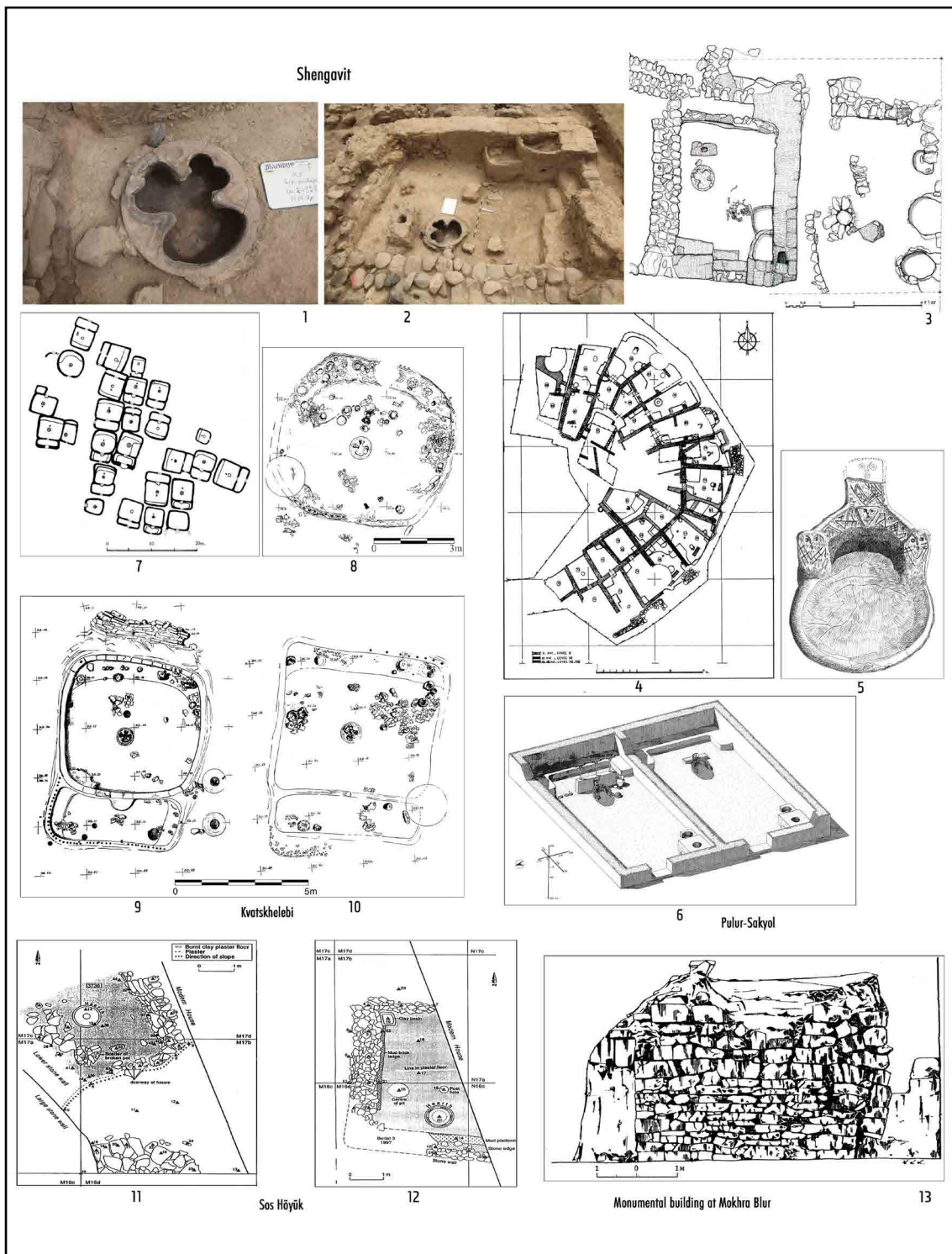


Fig. 3: Ritual buildings of the Kura-Araxes; Shengavit (1) three-lobed hearths (ojagh/ocak), (2) multi-room construction for cult rituals discovered in M:5, (3) plan of cult ritual M5 building (after Simonyan 2015: Figure 7, 8, 14); (4) Pulus-Sakyol (5) radial plan of the village of levels XI and X, (6) a reconstruction of the interior of the houses and one of the “sacred” hearths (after Koşay 1979: Pls. 120, 38, 37); (7-10) Kvatskhelebi, the village and the domestic architecture from level C1. (7 after Sagona 1993: Fig. 6; 8-10 after Džavakhishvili, Glonti 1962: Pls. XI, XIX, XXI); Sos Höyük VB and VC, (11) domestic structures from the Early Bronze Age I (12) and II. (from-Sagona, Sagona 2000: Figs. 1, 2); (13) The monumental building at Mokhra Blur (after Areshian, Kafadarian 1975: Fig. 1) (Figure 4-13 after from Palumbi 2008).

1.3. Heart and Andirons

Sagona and Sagona (2009) propose that the distinction between secular and sacred spaces in the Kura-Araxes context may not align with the perspectives of the culture itself. Instead, they highlight the importance of physical symbols in ritual practices, with the hearth serving as the central sacred emblem (Fig. 3-6). In the Kura-Araxes culture, hearths, like other archaeological evidence within the three regions of this culture's distribution, are found in both fixed and portable forms. In Iran, at Yanik Tepe, Burney describes a fragment of a hearth that features a schematic face decoration on its upper part, with a geometric, checkered pattern of engraved diamonds beneath it (Fig. 5: 17). Some of these hearths are adorned with ringed openings, while others are filled with smaller concentric diamonds (Burney, 1961; Smogorzewska, 2004). A fragment of an engraved object, which is incomplete, may have been part of a hearth or fire altar (Burney, 1961). At Geoy Tepe, a small portable hearth with a burnt black surface was discovered. Its size is unclear, the original design is unknown, and it has undergone restoration (likely similar to the tripod hearths found in Armenia). The hearth's walls contain two nearly identical holes. While the exact height is indeterminate, the form is angular/rectangular (Table 1). This hearth is one of the early excavated examples of the Kura-Araxes culture in northwestern Iran, confirming the presence of this culture (Burton-Brown 1951).

At Godin Tepe, each house contained two hearths: one situated in the corner of the room and another in the center. These houses resembled a type of nomadic tent, featuring a bench made of mudbrick or stone that was used for resting, storage, or protecting goods from moisture. A small internal hearth provided heating and was used for minor cooking, while a larger external oven was primarily used for cooking meals for the household. Several hearth stands from Godin IV, of the simplest cylindrical type, have also been found. The designs and decorations of these hearth stands show stylistic links with those from Yanik Tepe, located east of Lake Urmia. The hearth stands often had handles, facilitating easy transportation by semi-nomadic pastoral groups. The hearth was communal for all household members and did not require formal management (Gopnik and Rothman, 2011:149-152) (Fig. 4J; Table 1).

During the KAI phase of the Kura-Araxes tradition, three-lobed hearths (*ojagh/ocak*) were positioned near the center of structures at sites such as Norşuntepe, Kvatskhelebi C1 (Fig. 3: 7-10), and the early roundhouse phase at Shengavit (Fig. 3: 1-3; 4I). While this specific hearth design was not universally adopted across the entire Kura-Araxes cultural sphere, it was a prevalent feature in the homeland zone and extended into the Taurus diaspora. In the KA1 phase, sites like Sos Höyük featured ceramic hearths with a distinctive small hole in their otherwise closed tops, often adorned with carved designs, much like the three-lobed hearths. However, ceramic hearths were absent in other regions of the diaspora. Instead, andirons became the primary feature, especially in areas such as the Southern Levant and the central Western Zagros. These andirons, which often coexisted with hearths in homeland sites like Shengavit, were crafted in forms resembling animals, human-like faces, or simple bumps suggestive of facial features (Takaoğlu 2000; Smogorzewska 2004; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022).

Outside of Iran, four fixed hearths resembling horseshoes were discovered at sites such as Orchosani. The hearth bases were placed on a specially prepared soil foundation composed of multiple layers designed to act as thermal insulation. The hearth bases were constructed from pottery fragments, painted with a fired red band, and the walls were filled

with additional pottery pieces (Gambashidze *et al.*, 2018). One of the features of Shengavit is the round (spherical) ceramic hearths, with a diameter of 75 to 100 centimeters, a flat base, and walls 25 centimeters high. These hearths have a wide decorative rim at the top and interior surfaces adorned with cloverleaf-like indentations (Fig. 4: A-B; 5:3). Kufthin

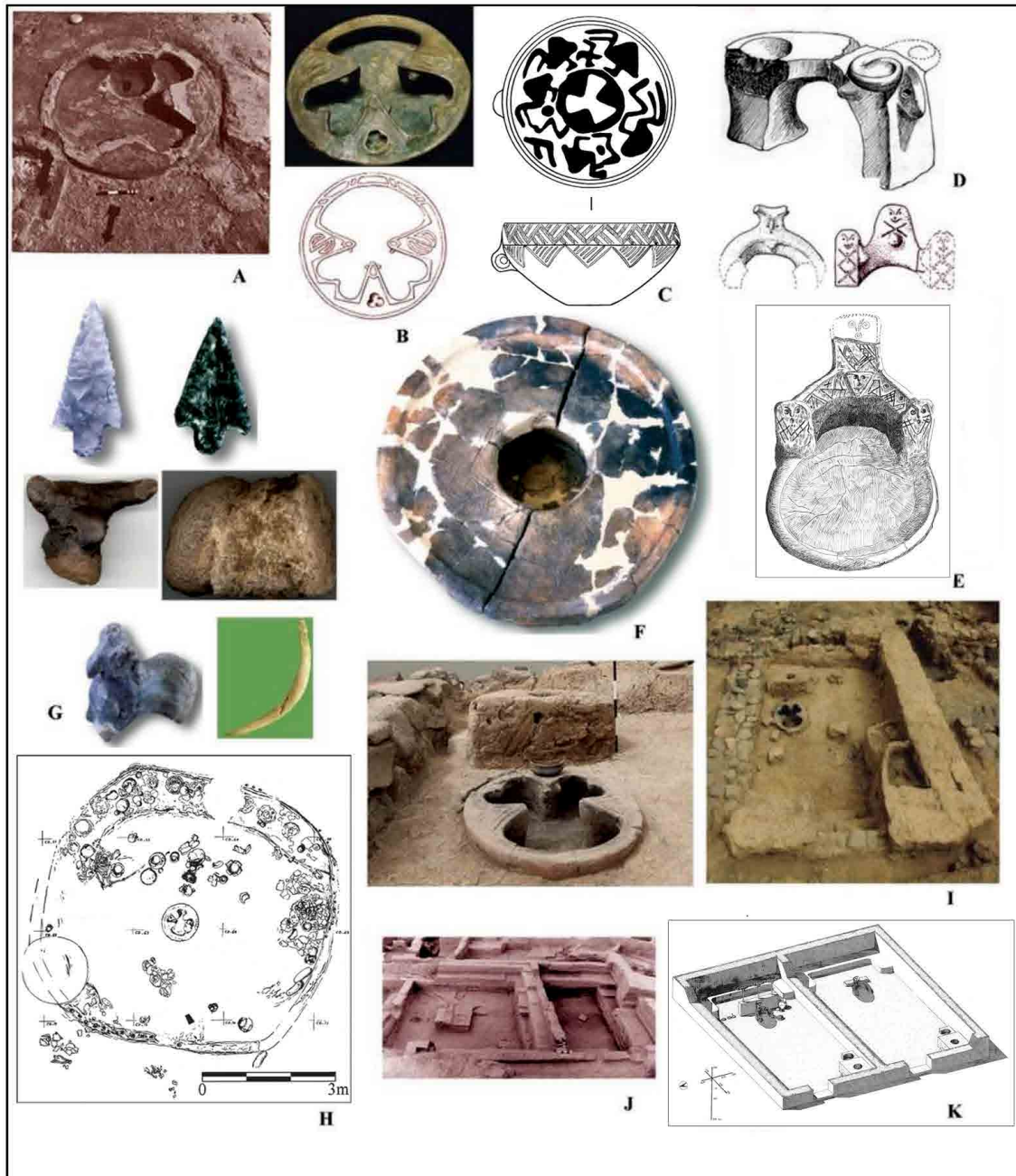


Figure 4: Ritual elements of the Kura-Araxes. A) ceramic hearth at Norşuntepe (after Hauptmann 1982, fig. 18,2); B) Shengavit hearths (after Sardarian 1967, p. 175, fig. 1; Badalyan et al. 2008, p. 1, fig. 102:162); C) bowl from Shengavit (after Badalyan et al. 2015, fig 496); d) Shengavit andiron (after Bayburtian 2015, fig 15); E) andirons and serving vessels in Shrine at Pulur Sakyol (after Koşay 1976, fig. 19:2; Rothman 2003); G) obsidian blades, bull and sheep figurines, phallus, and red deer horn from Erzurum and Shengavit (Simonyan and Rothman 2015, fig. 13); H) Kvatskhelebi round, red house (after Palumbi 2008, fig. 5:3.); I) M5 shrine at Shengavit (Simonyan and Rothman 2015, fig. 10, 11); J) feasting center at Godin IV:1 (after Rothman 2011, fig. 5:3); K) ritual emplacement in houses at Pulur Sakyol (after Koşay 1976, fig. 37) (the whole figures after Batiuk et al. 2022: Fig. 4).

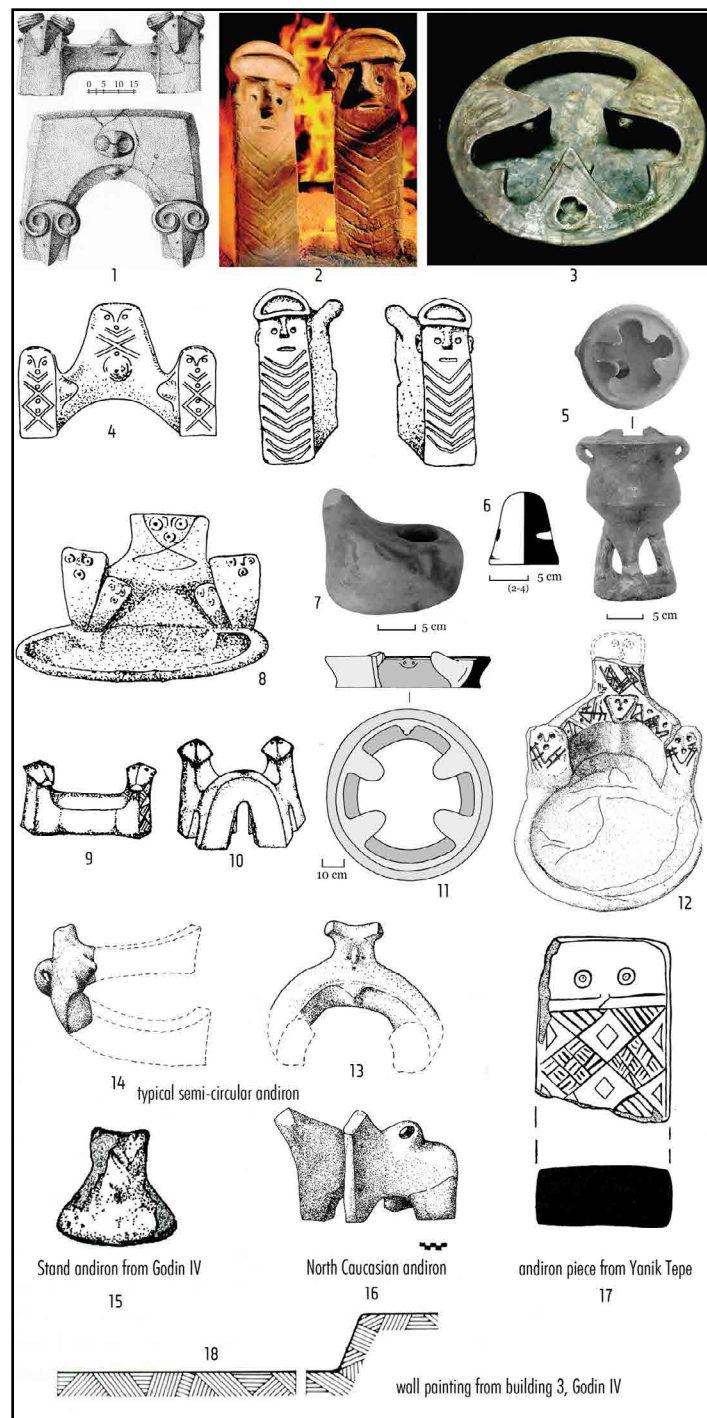


Fig. 5: “Kura-Araxes Kura-Araxes hearths” (1) Kharnut: zoomorphic (after Badalyan, R. 1985), (2) Cinis: anthropomorphic (after after Işıklı 2010) (3) Shengavit: three-leaf shaped fireplaces (after Badalyan et al. 2015); (4) Tabara el-Akrad (after Hood 1951; Takaoglu 2000: Fig. 2b); (5) Kvatskhelebi C2, pedestalled pot with miniature hearth around the rim (after Sagona 2018: Figure. 5.7 (4)); (6) Takhtidziri, andiron (after Jalabadze and Palumbi 2008); (7) Sos Höyük VA, horned andiron (after Sagona 2018: Figure. 5.7 (2)); (8) Pulur (Sakyl) portable hearth (after Koşay 1976); (9-10) Güzelova (after Koşay 1967); (11) Tsikhiagora B2, clay hearth (after Makharadze 2008); (12) Pulur (Sakyl) portable hearth (after Koşay 1976, fig. 19:2; Rothman 2003); (13-14) semi-circular andiron from Caucasus (after Gopnik and Rothman 2011: Figure 5.10); (15) Stand andiron from Godin IV (after Gopnik and Rothman 2011: Figure 5.10); (16) North Caucasian andiron (after Gopnik and Rothman 2011: Figure 5.10); (17) andiron piece from Yanik Tepe (after Burney 1961: PLATE LXXIV: 60); (18) wall painting from building 3, Godin IV (after Gopnik and Rothman 2011: Figure 5.10).

mistakenly described them as portable hearths, but excavations in 2012 confirmed that their bases were actually plastered and fixed with stones (Simonyan, 2015). At Kul Tepe I in Nakhchivan, heating for homes was provided by rectangular and circular hearths. Additionally, at Kul Tepe II in Nakhchivan, alongside rectangular hearths, horseshoe-shaped hearths resembling human figures were also found in the center of the houses. The presence of such features in all homes suggests a form of ritual unity among the people, indicating that each house served as a sacred space or, in other words, a personal



Fig. 6: Hearth, andiron and stove from different sites of Kura-Araxes realm (after Smogorzewska 2004)

temple (Fig. 7) (Baxşəliyev and Quliyeva, 2017). The hearths at Tell Beth Yerah are categorized into two types and three different sizes. These hearths are generally made of mudbrick derived from local soil, with skillfully crafted engraved decorations. The diversity and categorization of the Tell Beth Yerah hearths are remarkable, as they are not identical; they differ in color, surface finish, internal proportions, decorations, and durability. This variation likely suggests that they were considered personal or family

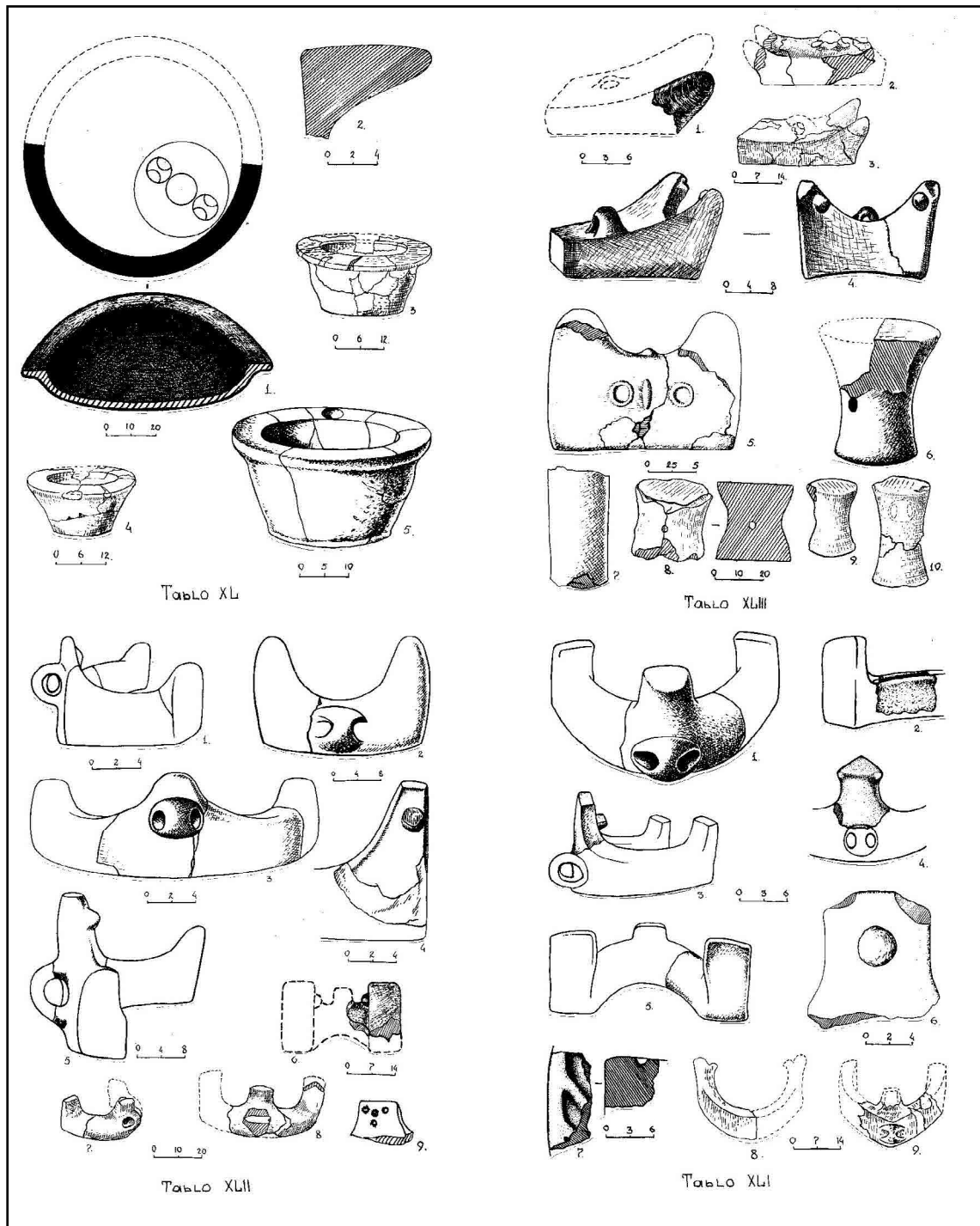


Fig. 7: Hearth, andiron and stove from the Kura-Araxes site of Kul Tepe in Nakhchivan (after Ashurov 2002: Tablo: XL-XLIII).

possessions (Ishoev and Greenberg, 2019). Batiuk and his colleagues (2022) suggest that the symbols associated with the hearth, andiron, and similar ritual objects may hold significant meaning. The three-lobed hearth's shape, resembling a grapevine leaf (Fig. 4: A-B), aligns with the region's ancient tradition of wine production and the ritual role of intoxicants in various cultures, further emphasizing the hearth's symbolic importance (McGovern *et al.*, 2017; Batiuk 2013).

In the M5 shrine at Shengavit (Fig. 3:1-13, 4I) a deep bowl featuring incised designs was placed within one of the lobe depressions. A distinctive bowl from Shengavit (Fig. 4:C) displays a painted depiction of a three-lobed object surrounded by figures, possibly wild birds, circling its interior. The exterior bears an abstract motif, similar to designs identified in ritual contexts at Godin (on the wall of Building 3), on an andiron from Yanik Tepe, and on pottery frequently associated with ritual spaces (Simonyan and Rothman 2015; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022).

Carvings on hearths and andirons, often depicting faces, may symbolize spiritual presence. Supporting evidence includes male tufa statues and female clay figurines linked to rituals, recovered from homes, graves, and ritual spaces. The hearth's resemblance to a grapevine leaf, coupled with the Caucasus' history of wine production, suggests its ritual significance. Objects like zoomorphic figurines, phallic symbols, arrowheads, and red deer antlers buried near hearths likely symbolize fertility, masculinity, and sustenance. Ritual rooms, typically subterranean with steps, further emphasize their sacred nature (Sagona 1998; Batiuk 2013; Simonyan and Rothman 2015; McGovern *et al.*, 2017; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022). Sagona and Sagona (2009) propose that metallurgy, associated with fire, was part of this symbolic system, though metals are primarily found in burials rather than near hearths.

Fire and smoke creation, along with food and drink, were central to rituals. Andirons show no signs of carbon staining, implying they were positioned above a heat source fueled by coal rather than directly over flames. Ishoev and Greenberg (Ishoev and Greenberg 2019) suggest that andirons may have functioned as a platform where cooking pots were moved from the hearth for serving purposes. At Pular Sakyol, a hearth and decorated andiron were accompanied by a jar with an incised face and small cups. Sites like Shengavit, Godin IV, and Arslantepe revealed remains of butchered animals, mainly sheep, goats, and cattle, suggesting ritual feasting. Raised platforms at Shengavit and Pular Sakyol may have been used for burning sacrificial offerings, with liquid channels carved into them. At Aradetis Gora, zoomorphic rhyta, likely for libations, were found in a structure near a hearth. Palynological evidence suggests the use of wine or a grog mixture in rituals, while pure wine was identified in funerary practices at Doghauri cemetery and Nachivchavebi, indicating beverage choices varied by ritual context (Kvavadze *et al.*, 2019; Batiuk 2021; Batiuk *et al.*, 2022).

2.3. Figurines

The figurines associated with the Kura-Araxes culture can be broadly classified into two primary types: human figurines, which have been recovered from four key archaeological sites (Table 1): Kul Tepe Sarein in Iran (Fig. 15: 2) (Ebrahimi, 2019), Orchosani in Georgia (Fig. 8: 1-11) (Gambashidze *et al.*, 2018), Shengavit (Fig. 7) (Rothman, 2010), and Metsamor in Armenia (Piliposyan, 2014). The human figurine from Kul Tepe Sarein, attributed to the Kura-Araxes II phase, represents a rare example of such artifacts within

Table 1: Comparison of Cultural Materials from Prominent Sites Inside and Outside Iran

Sites outside Iran			Sites within Iran		
Hearth/Andiron	Figurine	Site	Hearth/Andiron	Figurine	Site
		Orchosani			Yanik Tepe
		Shengavit			Geoy Tepe
		Metsamor			Tepe Godin
		Kul Tepe I, II			Ghaleh Tepe
		Sos Höyük			Tepe Pissa
		Büyük Tepe			Kohne Pasgah
		Pultur / Sakyol Höyük			Tepe Zarnagh
		Tell Beth Yerah			-

Iran. Crafted from underfired, brown-colored clay and exhibiting a naturalistic style, the figurine is fragmentary and headless, with only the upper torso preserved (Ebrahimi, 2019). At Metsamor, a significant discovery includes a three-dimensional terracotta figurine depicting a nude, crouching woman adorned with a pointed hat—possibly featuring horns. This figurine constitutes one of the few known female representations from the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere. The possible depiction of horns has been interpreted as a ritualistic element, inviting comparisons with ancient Near Eastern deities, such as Ishtar and Lilitu, who are often associated with fertility and divine symbolism (Fig. 8: 16) (Piliposyan, 2014).

At the Orchosani, notable human figurines have been reported. Due to significant damage, it is not possible to determine the gender of all these figurines, but they include three kneeling women, two human figurines, the heads of two other figurines,

and a fragment of a human figurine's arm. These figurines share common features such as schematic torsos, elongated arms with the right arm slightly bent, long necks, protruding chests, and straight backs. The eyes are depicted as deep holes, which appear to emphasize certain religious aspects (Fig. 8: 1-11) (Gambashidze *et al.*, 2018). The male and female figurines from Shengavit, crafted from stone cores and baked clay, measure approximately 80 centimeters in height. They exhibit vertical, rectangular forms with rounded edges that narrow towards the top. The eyes are represented by carved holes on both sides, possibly symbolizing an omnipresent deity capable of perceiving both front and back. These figurines were found in a standing position near hearths (Fig. 7) (Simonyan, 2015). According to Sagona, the scarcity or absence of human figurines in many Kura-Araxes sites is not coincidental, but rather indicative of a form of worship in which the presence of the deity is represented not through human images, but through hearths, decorated vessels, and horned animal figurines (Sagona, 1998). The second category includes animal figurines that are distributed across Iran, Anatolia, and the South Caucasus. These figurines represent various animals, such as cattle, ram, sheep, birds (?), and aquatic species. They generally measure between 3 and 8 centimeters in height. Characteristically, these figurines exhibit a vertical row of shallow depressions on the shoulder area and beneath the horns. The figurines are found in both male and female forms and are often small, fragmented, and incomplete. The context and setting of these findings are predominantly domestic, associated with hearths and food storage facilities, or storage areas, alongside various cooking vessels. The figurines typically exhibit a brown, black, or gray color and display a range of firing conditions and textures, from finely finished to somewhat coarse. Their hands and feet are conical and pointed, suggesting forward movement. These figurines are characterized by a highly stylized and abstract appearance, with minimal complexity, focusing more on the essence of the figurines themselves rather than detailed features (Fig. 10-12; Table 1) (Rothman 2011; Abedi *et al.*, 2014; Abedi 2016; Brown 1951; Simonyan 2015; Ashurov 2014; Rothman 2021; Ishoev & Greenberg 2019; Sagona *et al.*, 1993; Sagona *et al.*, 1991; Yiğitpaşa 2016; Sagona, 1998; Gambashidze *et al.*, 2018; Mohammadifar *et al.*, 2009; Baxşəliyev and Quliyeva, 2017; Naqshineh, 2017; Nobari *et al.*, 2016; Aqalari, 2008).

3.4. Mortuary practices in the Kura-Araxes culture

Mortuary practices in the Kura-Araxes culture represent a second significant category of ritual activity, exhibiting considerable variation in both design and ceremonial elements, even surpassing the diversity observed in the architectural traditions of this culture (Fig. 3-4). Archaeological investigations have identified over 154 sites containing Kura-Araxes graves, with the majority located within the culture's core territories and relatively few discovered in peripheral regions.

Early burials, which include both individual and multiple interments, were typically situated away from settlements. Examples of such isolated graves have been documented at Talin, Jrvezh/Avan, and Maisyan in Armenia; Trelis and Kiketi in Georgia; and Ozman Bozu and Uzun Rama in Azerbaijan. These isolated burial practices have often been interpreted as indicative of mobile groups engaged in pastoral economies. However, such examples are exceptions rather than the norm. Most burial grounds, comprising several dozen graves, are located near settlements. Notable examples include the necropolis adjacent to the wall at Shengavit, the cemetery approximately 350 meters northwest of



Fig. 8: Shengavit. Anthropomorphic figurines: A) Female figurine: 1–4, 10 (1–3, 10 - baked clay, 4 - tufa): 1. 2008, necropolis, square A:14; 2. 2003, section 1, square 0:10, locus 015; 3. 2004, grave-field, square B:14/15; 4. 2000, section 2, square L:6; B) Male figurines: (6, 9 - baked clay, 5, 7 - tufa); 5. S. Sardaryan, 2004, p. 459, fig. 52; 6. 2010, square L:6, locus 4008; 7. 2010, square L:6, locus 4021, red tufa; 8. Leg of a red-painted figurine of baked clay, 2005, necropolis, square B:14/15; 9. S. Sardaryan, 2004, p. 461, fig. 54:3; 10. S. Sardaryan, 2004, p. 461, fig. 54:2. (After Simonyan 2015; Table 10).

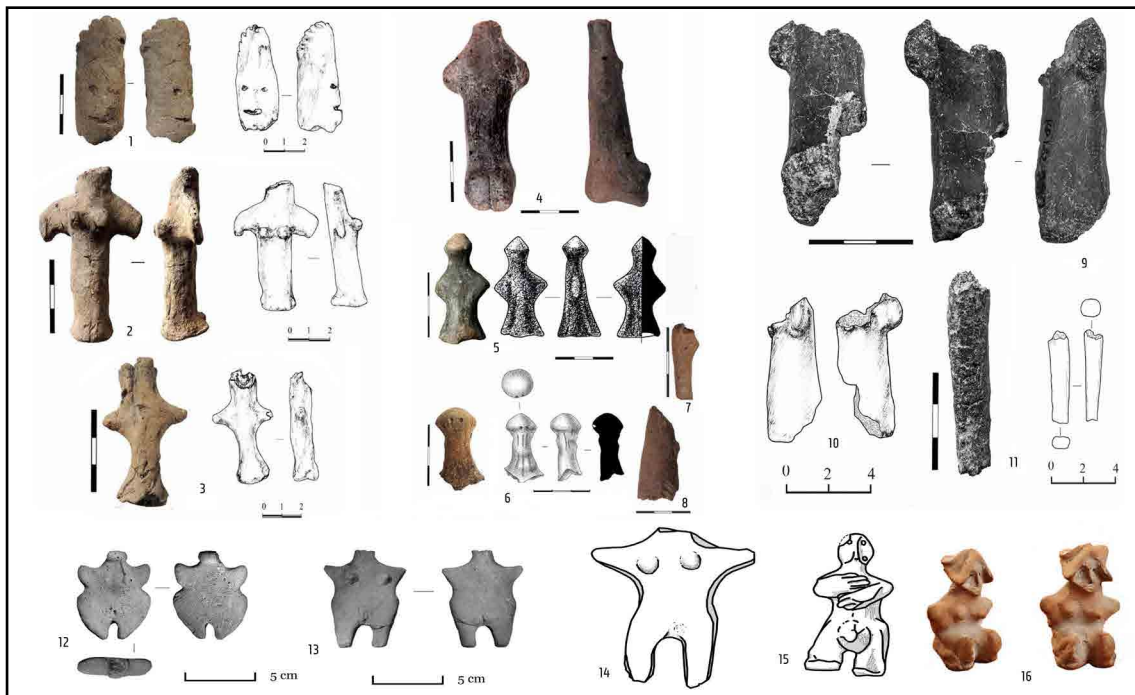


Fig. 9: Orchosani. Late Chalcolithic/Kura-Araxes Anthropomorphic figurines: (1-11) (after Gambashidze et al. /Pl. 159-161); Kura- Araxes human figurines: (12– 13) Agarak (after Badalyan and Avetisyan 2007); (14– 15) Shengavit (after Simonyan and Rothman 2015).

the fortified settlement at Köhne Shahar, and Karnut in Armenia, where graves are closely associated with the settlement. In rarer instances, burials were placed beneath domestic floors, as seen at Chobareti, Amiranis Gora, and Ortsklebi in the Samtskhe-Javakheti plateau of Georgia.

The diversity of burial structures in the Kura-Araxes tradition is striking. Burial types include:

1. **Surface burials**, where the body was placed on a cleared surface surrounded or covered by stones, or within simple pit graves (e.g., Aradetis Gora, Natsargora, Kvatskhela, Kalavan, Jrarat, Lchashen, Jrvezh/Avan, Talin, and Tsaghkalanj).

2. **Rectangular and horseshoe-shaped stone constructions**, found at sites such as Nachivchavedi, Chobareti, Kiketi, and Karnut.

3. **Cist burials**, such as those at Takhtidrizi, Trelis, and Elar.

4. **Kurgans**, ranging from simple stone-covered shaft graves to elaborate structures lined with mudbrick and featuring wooden floors, as observed at Mentesh Tepe and Uzun Rama (Fig. 13).

Multiple burials were common across these burial types, as evidenced at Elar, Berkaber, and Shengavit. Some graves were designed for repeated use, incorporating dromoi or corridor-like entrances, often adorned with stone pylons or thresholds covered by slabs (e.g., Jrvezh, Talin, and Karnut). Bodies were typically positioned on their backs or in a crouched posture with bent arms and legs, and there is emerging evidence for secondary exposure practices at sites like Tsaghkalanj and Gegharot.

Batiuk and colleagues (2022) correctly point out that collective burials in crypts were a distinctive feature of the Kura-Araxes tradition, with examples containing anywhere from three to over 80 individuals. These crypts, such as those at Mentesh Tepe and Uzun

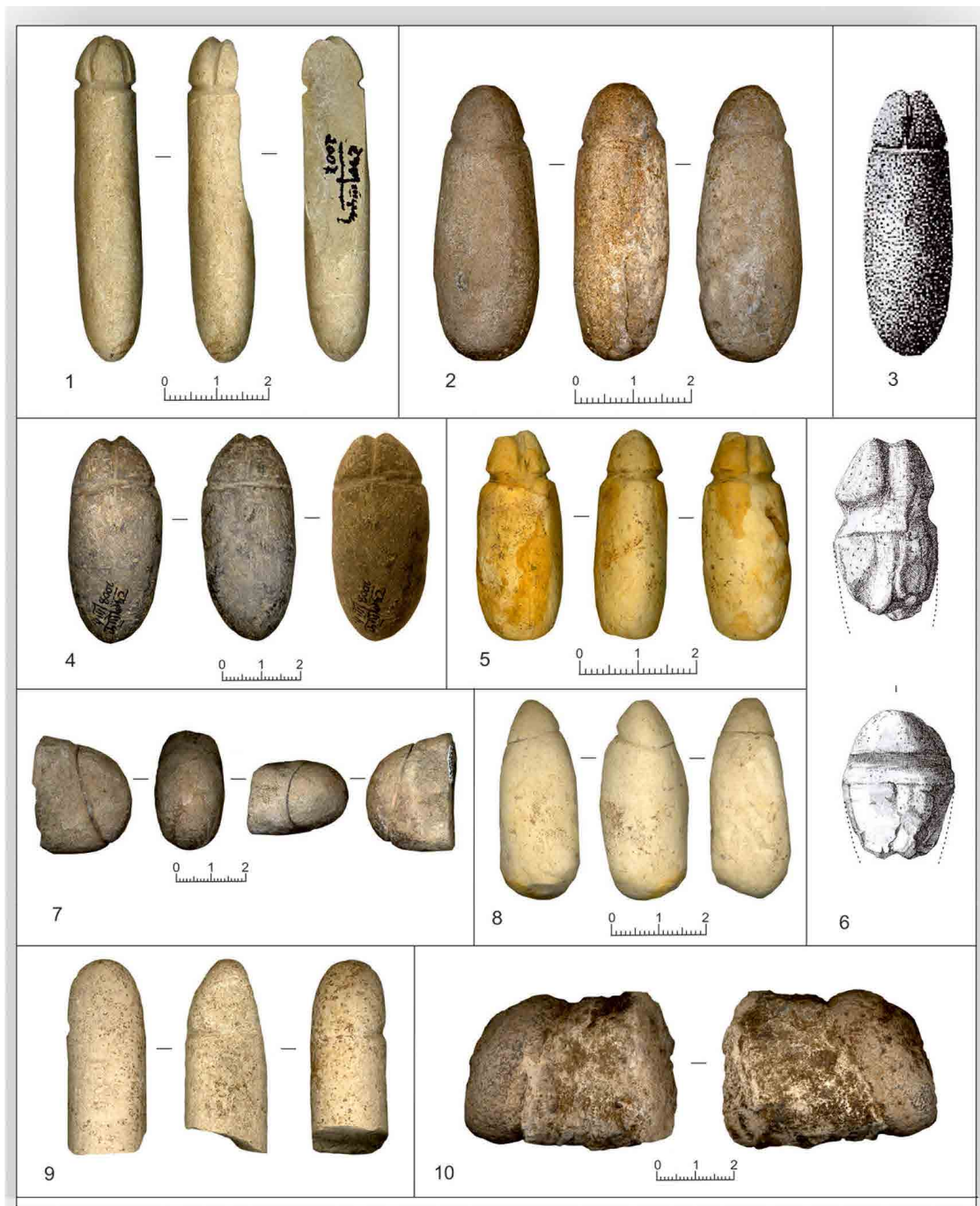


Fig. 10: Shengavit. Phallus-shaped pendant-amulets: 1. 2007, necropolis, square A:15, river-stone; 2. 2009, square J:5, locus 2002, sandstone; 3. S. Sardaryan, 2004, p. 223, table. LIX; 4. 2008, grave-field, river-stone; 5. 2012, square I:14, upper layer, tufa; 6. S. Sardaryan, 2004, p. 224, tab. LXXXIV; 7. 2008, grave-field, sandstone; 8. 2012, square K:5, locus 0000, sandstone; 9. 2009, square J:5, locus 2033, sandstone; 10. 2012, square M:5, locus 24025, limestone. (After Simonyan 2015; Table 11).



Fig. 11: Shengavit. Figurines of animals of baked clay: 1. Lion, 2010, square L:4, Locus 5055; 2-4. Horse: 2. 2010, grave-field, square IV, Locus 13007; 4. 2012, square K:6, locus 1104; 3. Ram, 2010, square L:4, Locus 8010; 5. Goat, 2010, square L:3, locus 8046, “small room”, unbaked clay; 6, 7. Goat horn: 6. 2000, site 1, square 0:11, Locus 014; 7. 2012, square M:4, Locus 23001; 8-15. Bull: 8. 2000, square N:11, Locus 061; 9. 2009, square L/M, 12/13; 10. 2012, square M:5, room 1, locus 25002; 11. 2010, square K:6, Locus 1052; 12. 2009, square K:6, locus 1000; 13. 2010, square K:4, locus 6006; 14. 2012, square L:4, Locus 23001; 15. 2010, square L:4. (After Simonyan 2015; Table 9).

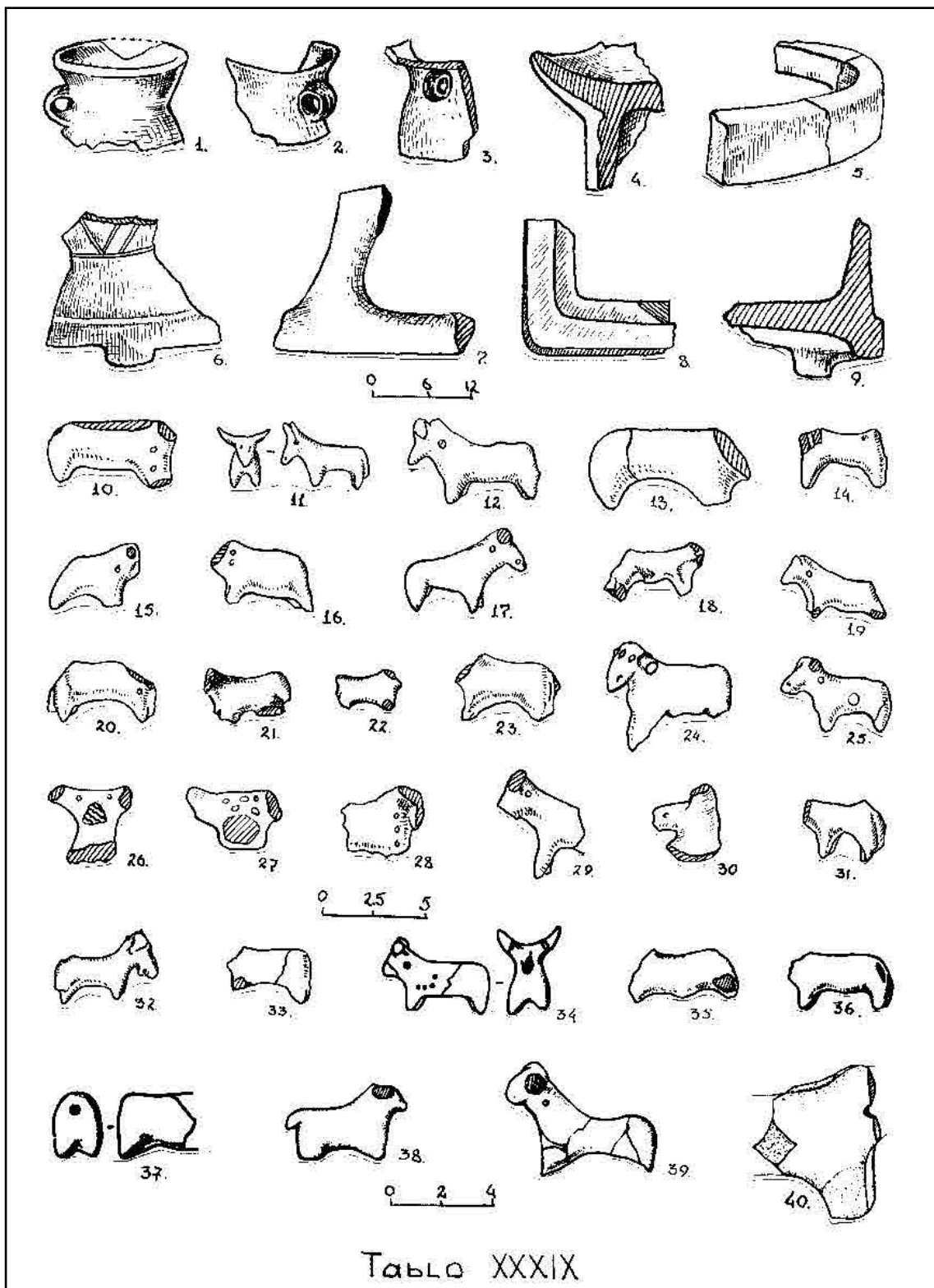


Fig. 12: Animal figurines from the Kura-Araxes site of Kul Tepe in Nakhchivan (after Ashurov 2002: Table XXXIX).

Rama, were used sequentially, with earlier remains rearranged to accommodate new interments. The remains, including men, women, and children, likely belonged to related individuals, though this hypothesis awaits confirmation through genetic studies. Some crypts, particularly those in the Kura Basin, were burned after the community's relocation.

They further note that the coexistence of multiple burial types and customs within the same site or region, and across both KA1 and KA2 phases, suggests an absence of centralized planning or uniform ritual traditions. Notably, Kura-Araxes burials lack evidence of significant wealth or status differentiation. Grave goods were modest and standardized, typically including one to three ceramic vessels, obsidian or flint arrowheads, bone spindle whorls, and beads. Copper-bronze items, mainly personal ornaments or simple weapons, were quantitatively limited and did not indicate significant social stratification. Even rare prestige objects, such as a bronze diadem from Kvatskhelebi, were not associated with extraordinary graves, underscoring a lack of overt symbolic markers of status (Batiuk *et al.*, 2025).

4. Ritual Evidence from Kul Tepe Gargar and Kul Tepe Sarein, Northwestern Iran

4.1. Kul Tepe Gargar

The Kura-Araxes phenomenon represents one of the most significant prehistorical periods in northwestern Iran, marking the threshold of urbanization in the Near East. Radiocarbon dates from Kul Tepe Gargar provide an opportunity to reassess the cultural developments and chronology of the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE in northwestern Iran. According to the absolute chronologies established at recently excavated sites in northwestern Iran, the Kura-Araxes culture is proposed to span from approximately 3400/3350 to 2600/2500 BCE (Abedi *et al.*, 2014; Abedi and Omrani, 2015; Abedi, 2016a-b; Davoudi *et al.*, 2018; Khazaei *et al.*, 2011; Maziar, 2010; Alizadeh *et al.*, 2015; Alizadeh *et al.*, 2018). Cultural changes at Kul Tepe reveal a greater transformation compared to the continuity between the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes period. While the use of stone and mudbrick architecture and the continuation of circular plans are characteristic of both periods, the pottery evidence shows significant changes both technically and typologically. Pottery with organic temper from the Chalcolithic has been replaced by Kura-Araxes pottery with inorganic temper. Kura-Araxes layers are directly superimposed on the Late Chalcolithic layers, although a 300-year gap separates these two settlement phases. Thus, Kul Tepe can play a key role in defining Kura-Araxes phases I to II and in clarifying the material culture sequence and chronology of the Jolfa Plain and northern parts of northwestern Iran (Fig. 14) (Abedi *et al.*, 2014; Abedi, 2016 a-b; Abedi and Omrani, 2015).

From this strategically significant site, which has been briefly described as having a key role, cultural materials related to the Kura-Araxes ritual, such as sacred building, figurines and hearths, have been reported with great precision. The architectural structure uncovered at Kul Tepe, within Locus 4006, represents a unique and potentially sacred space associated with the Kura-Araxes II period (ca. 2900–2850 BC). This structure stands out from other Kura-Araxes layers at the site due to its distinct design and the remarkable integrity of its contents. Despite the limited excavation area of 2×2 meters, the visible features suggest a specialized and perhaps ceremonial function.

The building contains a well-preserved oven, possibly used for ritual baking, accompanied by related implements such as rolling stones and a bread rolling pin. These

features are complemented by the discovery of Nakhichevan Lugged pottery, a hallmark of the Kura-Araxes culture, emphasizing the cultural significance of this space. The structure's flooring underwent three distinct stages of preparation, highlighting the care and intention involved in its construction and maintenance.

One of the most significant finds from this context is a cylinder seal, located directly on the building's floor. This artifact, dated by C14 analysis to 2900–2850 BC, represents one of the earliest securely dated seals from northwestern Iran and the Caucasus during the Early Bronze Age. The seal's association with such a specialized architectural context strongly suggests that the building served as a ceremonial or leadership space, possibly linked to a local chieftain or religious practices. Together, the architectural features and associated artifacts underscore the ritual and cultural importance of this structure within the Kura-Araxes cultural framework (Fig. 14).

These cultural materials exhibit similarities and comparative characteristics with other key Kura-Araxes sites. Specifically, nine clay figurines (Fig. 14: 4-12) dating to the Early Bronze Age have been found, representing various animal species. Based on their appearance, these figurines are categorized into three groups: cattle, ram, and sheep. The figurines are made from fired clay, with a mixture of organic and inorganic materials used in their paste, and were not produced using molds. Due to erosion and moisture, all these figurines exhibit a highly abstract and simplified appearance, with features such as eyes, ears, mouths, and other small body parts often missing. The emphasis is on the overall nature of the figurines rather than their detailed complexity. None of the figurines exceed 4 centimeters in size, and they are found in a range of colors including gray, dark brown, and light brown. The color and finish of the figurines indicate an artist's attempt to approach naturalism or realism. Among the figurines, both intact and broken examples are present. The broken figurines have parts of their legs and heads missing, which appears to be a deliberate act, potentially symbolizing a ritualistic practice or representing a moment of animal sacrifice. These figurines are comparable to the prominent clay figurines recovered from other Kura-Araxes sites in Iran, the South Caucasus, Anatolia as well as Levant. Another aspect of the ritual evidence from this culture is the hearths and andirons, which, like those from other Kura-Araxes sites, include both portable and fixed types. Despite significant damage from erosion, the remaining evidence indicates adequate firing and relatively good durability. The recovered hearths exhibit a somewhat rough and irregular texture, with the base being wider and standing on the ground, suggesting their use as base hearths or possibly as three-legged hearths or andirons. Based on the excavations, the hearths at this site have been found in a variety of forms. These include two-piece hearths, those with opposing symmetrical halves, and others that appear to be cylindrical. The fragments typically feature two holes aligned in opposite directions, which likely served to connect the pieces with a rod for better stability or for hanging purposes. It is probable that these types of hearths were either discarded naturally after use or intentionally broken before being abandoned (Fig. 14: 1-3).

4.2. Kul Tepe Sarein

Kul Tepe Sarein, also known as Anahita, is situated 20 kilometers west of the city of Ardabil and at the center of Sarein. This site encompasses both a mound and a cemetery. Archaeological studies at this site have been conducted with two main objectives: first, to sounding for stratigraphy of its central area and to sounding for demarcating core

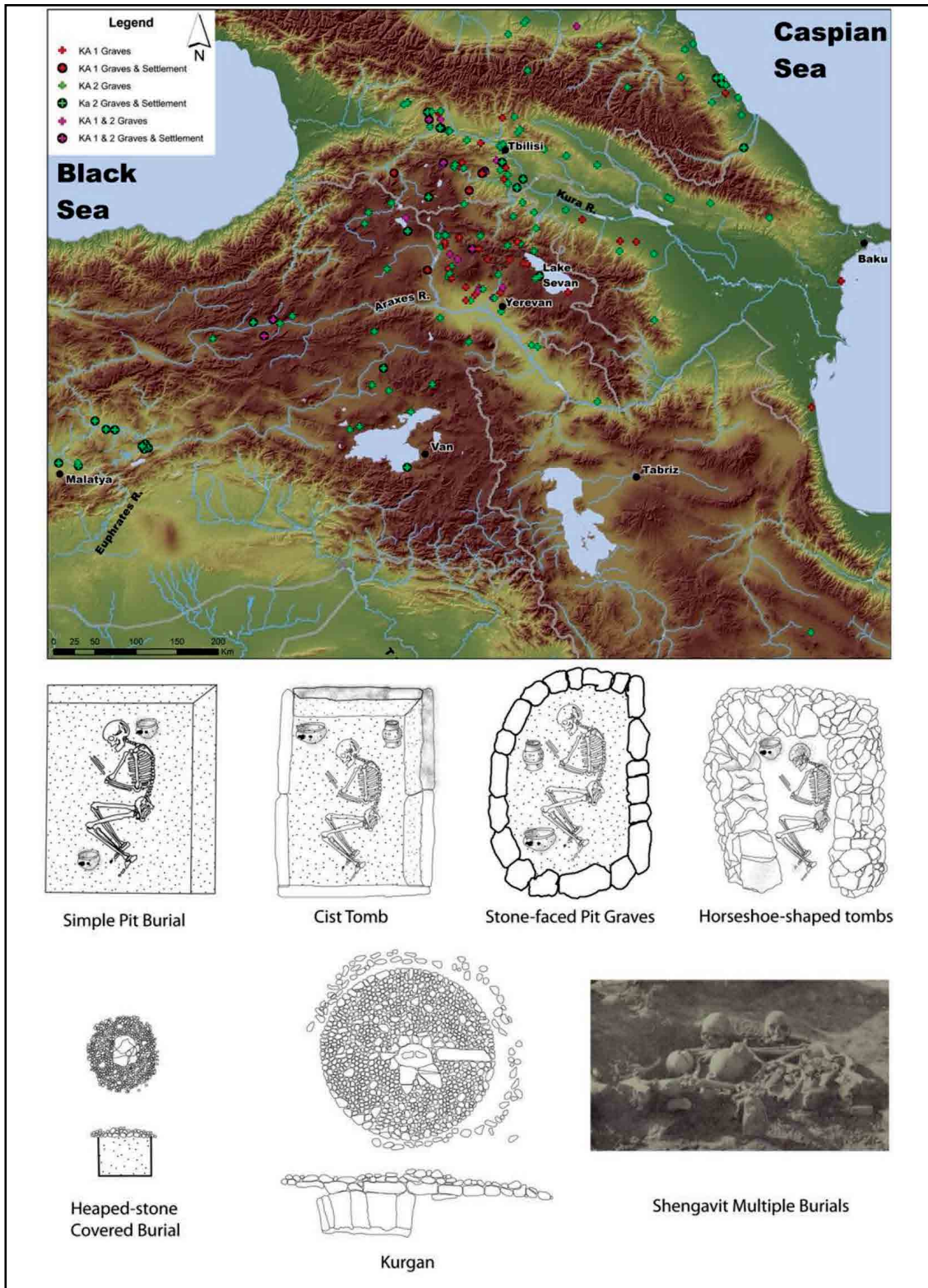


Fig. 13: Burials location and Burial types in the Kura-Araxes (after: Batiuk et al., 2022: Fig. 5).

and buffer zones, and second, to investigate the historical settlements within the site. Among the findings from the excavation are 5,300 different types of ceramics from various phases of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age, historical periods, and Islamic periods. Additionally, the remains include animal and human bones, needles and nails made of bronze and iron, human and animal figurines made of ceramic, and various ceramic and stone beads. One of the significant discoveries from this season was the identification of a human figurine from the Early Bronze Age layers, specifically associated with the Kura-Araxes culture (Ebrahimi, 2019). In northwestern Iran, at the Kul Tepe Sarein, one of the most significant and aesthetically striking phases of Kura-Araxes architecture has been identified. This architectural phase features thick mudbrick walls with a circular design. Unlike other architectural phases, this one includes two rows of bricks, making it unique in its category. The large mudbricks used in this wall, along with its considerable thickness, and the intricate carved decorations and colored coating on the inner part of the wall, indicate the structure's importance to its inhabitants. This suggests that the building was not a residential structure but served a different purpose. Additionally, the distinctive internal design of the space, the platform within it, and the decorative carved motifs on its facade further support this interpretation. The mudbricks used in this row range in color from light to dark brown, with a dark brown mortar between them, demonstrating high durability. The bricks exhibit various shapes, including rectangular, square, and complete quadrilateral forms (Fig. 15: 1) (Ebrahimi 2019). A total of four figurines (Fig. 15: 2-4) were recovered from this site, which, based on their appearance, include both animal and human types. The animal figurines are categorized into three types: cattle, ram, and sheep. A notable feature of these animal figurines is intentional head fragmentation. Among the human figurines, there is only one, which is incomplete, with only the upper torso remaining, as the head and arms are detached. These breakages are likely not accidental. An important and notable aspect of the human figurines is the absence of any protrusions in the chest, buttocks, and female genitalia, suggesting that the purpose of these figurines was likely to represent male forms. The breakage of these specimens, similar to other sites, appears to be deliberate and may have been intended to symbolize a ritual act or a depiction of animal sacrifice. No molds were used in their creation; instead, they were made from fired clay with a mixture of organic and inorganic materials. These figurines can be compared with those from other sites of the Kura-Araxes culture in Iran, the South Caucasus, and Anatolia. Due to erosion and moisture, all these figurines exhibit a very abstract and simplified appearance, with no discernible eyes, ears, mouth, or other small body parts. Both categories are rendered in a straightforward manner, lacking complexity, likely reflecting the naturalistic tendencies of the maker and the focus on the essence and function of the figurines. None of the figurines exceed 4 centimeters in size, and they are found in shades of gray, dark brown, and light brown.

5. Figurines, Hearths and Andirons: The Principal Evidence of Ritual and Religious Practices in the Kura-Araxes Culture

5.1. Hearths and Andirons

One of the distinguishing elements of the Kura-Araxes culture is the presence of hearths and andirons, which may potentially be related to harsh climatic conditions. However, the fact that these hearths are widespread across different regions cannot be overlooked, indicating a cultural connection among peoples who adhered to their traditions over an

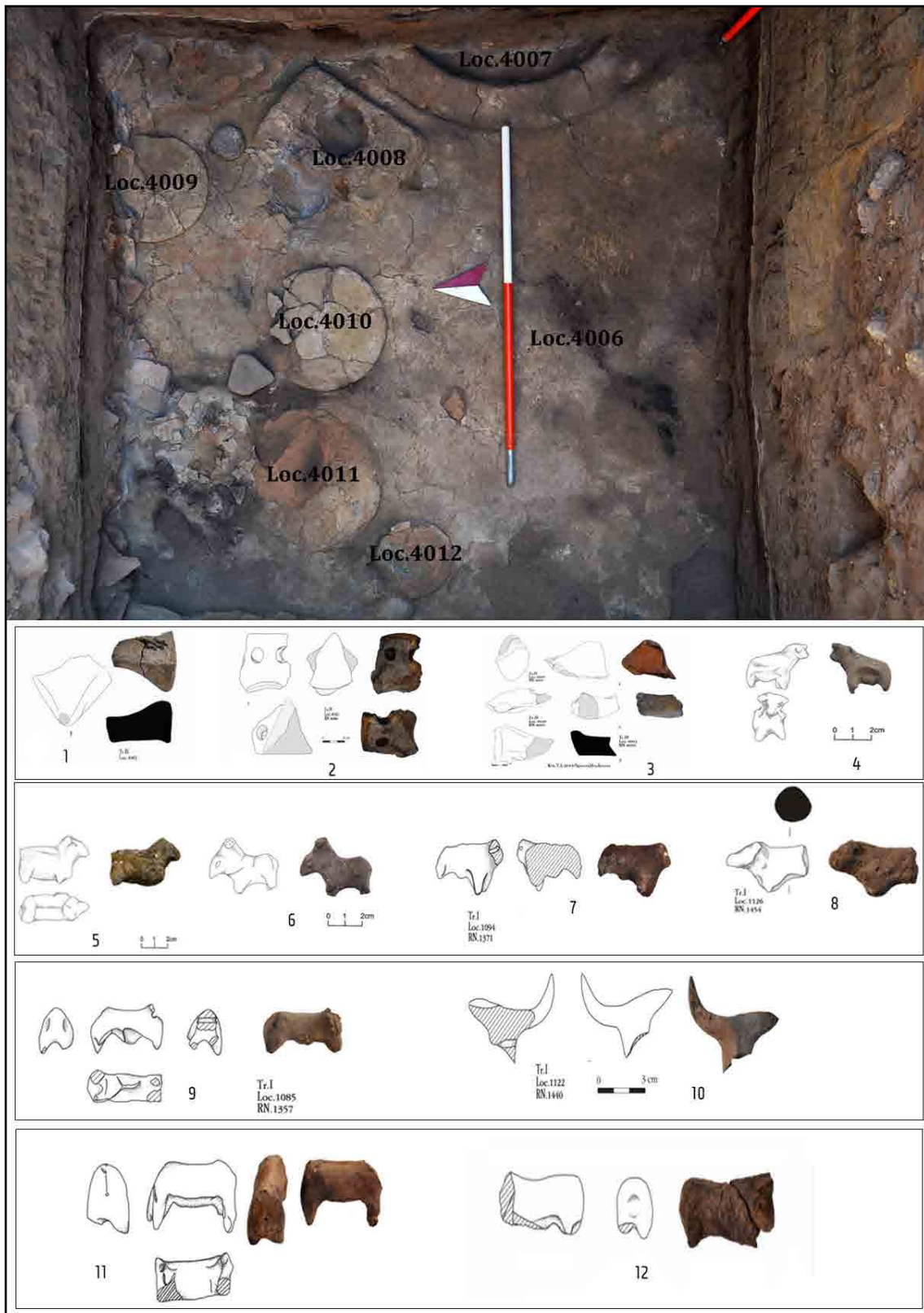


Fig. 14: (1) A unique ritual structure from Kul Tepe Gargar (Kura-Araxes II period); (1–3) Andirons and portable hearths from Kul Tepe; (4–12) Animal-shaped figurines discovered at Kul Tepe.

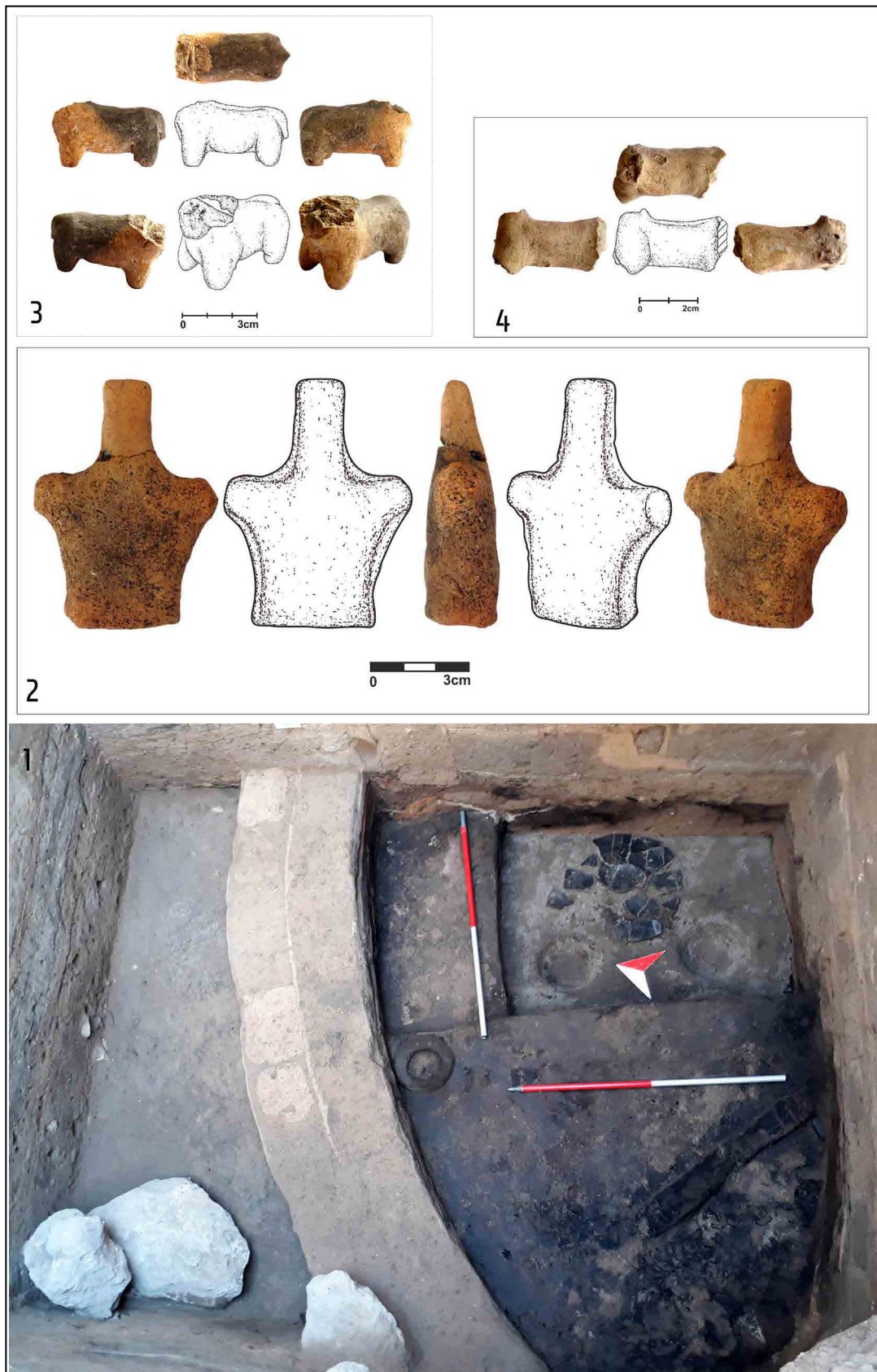


Fig. 15: (1) A unique ritual structure from Kul Tepe Sarein (Kura-Araxes II period); (2-4) Human and animal figurines of Kul Tepe Sarein.

extended period (Yalcin, 2020). This characteristic, along with the handmade red-black burnished wares, defines the regional homogeneity of the culture, which is recognized and appears in a distinct form. This diversity and quantity, in addition to their everyday function, also support the hypothesis of their ritualistic role (Smogorzewska, 2004). hearths are a notable feature and characteristic present in all settlements, regardless of the layout or type of dwelling. They can be either stationary or portable (Table 2).

Table 2: Classification of Hearths in the Kura–Araxes Culture

Site	Classification		Hearth/Andiron	NO
Anatoli (Elaziğ-Malatya, Erzurum, Gozalova, Norşuntepe , Pulur/Sakyol, Tepe Cinic, Sos Höyük, Buyuk Tepe; Georgia (Amiranis Gora, Orchosani, Khizanat Gora, Ozni; Armenia (Shengavit, Tigshin, Gharni, Mokhra Bulur, Armavir, Shresh Blur); Iran (Yanik, Kul Tepe Gargar, Kul Tepe Sarein, Kohneh Pasgah Tepesi); Azerbaijan (Kul Tepe I, II); Levant (Tell Beth Yerah)	Horned (Pierced), horseshoe-shaped (U-shaped), and anthropomorphic	1. Simple and segmented (Functional)	Portable (Functional and Ritual)	1
		2. Decorated and segmented (Ritual)		
	Adhered to the wall on the floor and elevated above ground level (Functional)		Wall-mounted or fixed (Functional)	2

In most cases, they are made from clay, and the remains of hearths represent some of the best-preserved components of a house, indicating that considerable effort was invested in their construction (Sagona, 1998). These hearths have been a fundamental feature of the Kura-Araxes culture since the beginning of the 4th millennium BCE and have continued as an important cultural element across the extensive cultural and geographical expanse (Table 3).

Table 3: Geographical Distribution of Kura-Araxes Figurines and Hearths

Period	Figurine Type	Hearth/Andiron Type	Key Sites	Country	No
KA II	Animal and Human	Portable and Fix	Kul Tepe Gargar, Kul Tepe Sarein, Tepe Zarnagh, Godin, Tepe Gijlar, Ghaleh Tepe, Tepe Pissa, Kohneh Shahar, Geoy Tepe, Kohneh Pasghah	Iran	1
KA II	Animal and Human	Portable and Fix	Shengavit, Metsamor	Armenia	2
KA I, II	Animal	Portable and Fix	Sos Höyük, Buyuk Tepe	Anatolia	3
KA I-II	Animal and Human	Portable and Fix	Orchosani	Georgia	4
KA I-II	Animal	Fix	Kul Tepe I, II	Azerbaijan	5
KA II	Animal	Portable and Fix	Tell Beth Yerah	Syro-Palastine	6

The quantity and prominence of hearths in architecture, their continuity over time and space, their distinctive forms, and their anthropomorphic and zoomorphic decorations can be interpreted as part of a collection of artifacts associated with specific ritual activities of the society (Buccellati 2004). From a holistic perspective, the precise typology and chronology of various stove types present challenges, largely due to the complex research history and the diversity of terminology across regions. The most common type of fixed hearths consists of a simple, coated depression surrounded by a clay ring or platform. Fuel would be placed in the central depression, often requiring supports at the edge to keep the cooking vessel at an adequate height (Ishoev and Greenberg, 2019). The hearths, which are generally either portable or floor/wall-mounted/fixed, vary in shape, size,

and decoration depending on their intended use. Horseshoe-shaped hearths with horned projections have been found in Eastern Anatolia and Armenia, made of clay with a central protrusion. The horn and body sections of some specimens are decorated with animal motifs, created through engraving. U-shaped and anthropomorphic portable hearths have been discovered in the Elazığ-Malatya region of Anatolia. The facial features of a human, such as eyes, nose, and ears, are distinctly visible on the hearth components. The neck, extending prominently below the chin, is adorned with wide, engraved V-shaped lines stacked beneath each other. These hearths likely represented a deity and indicate a social structure where religious elements were predominant (Yiğitpaşa, 2016). In Kura-Araxes architecture, benches are aligned along the walls of rooms, all oriented towards the center. These features have been observed in Godin IV, Kvatskhelebi C1, Building 36 at Arslantepe, and possibly in Shengavit, all of which are associated with Kura-Araxes II. This architectural layout emphasizes the importance of physical symbols within Kura-Araxes culture (Batiuk *et al.*, 2022). In households, the hearth occupies a central physical position, representing the core of family life. It is where food is prepared, offering warmth and light, and serving as a gathering place where men and women can sit together, converse, organize, and discuss various matters. A range of activities, from daily routines to the most intimate family moments, such as preparing meals and drinks or welcoming guests, unfolds around this central element of the home. Moreover, in contemporary languages, the hearth (Ojagh) is often synonymous with the concept of “home.” The preparation of daily meals can itself be considered a ritual activity, possessing its own symbolic characteristics, without necessarily being a religious act (Fiese, 2006). Family and social rituals provide a predictable structure, encompassing a momentary time commitment that is regularly repeated. Through symbolic meaning, they contribute to the creation and continuity of group membership and are passed down through generations, encompassing celebrations, traditions, and interactions. These practices help reinforce the reliability of relationships and traditions (Spagnola and Fiese, 2007).

The rituals and customs surrounding the lighting and maintenance of fire among tribal and ethnic communities had their own distinct style and method. Neglecting or disrespecting the fire was considered a grave and detrimental act, viewed as a severe and fatal sin. Fire was always seen as a protective force, capable of neutralizing the dangers posed by harmful and ominous creatures and animals. Even today, despite the urbanization and modernization of most former tribes and communities, the belief in the sanctity of fire and its derivatives, as well as the preservation of its sacredness and reverence, remains deeply ingrained among the elders and middle-aged generations (Siahpour, 2016).

5.2. Figurines

Archaeological excavations at Kura-Araxes sites have yielded a variety of movable cultural artifacts, including numerous human and animal figurines. These artifacts, dated to the early third millennium BC, depict sheep, cattle, rams, and bulls, among other species, and have been recovered from both highland and lowland regions. The specific function and significance of these figurines remain a subject of scholarly debate. While some researchers propose that the figurines may have served as children’s toys, others suggest they held religious or symbolic significance. The striking similarity and wide geographic distribution of these artifacts, however, imply a multifaceted purpose, extending beyond simple playthings or exclusive use in official rituals or as talismans.

Consistent with figurines from many ancient contexts, Kura-Araxes examples are frequently small, fragmented, and incomplete, which may reflect their usage, symbolic meaning, or both (Rothman, 2011).

The figurines (Fig. 11-12; Table 1 and 4) primarily depict domesticated animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, rams, and, in rare instances, birds. These figurines are made from clay that matches the clay used for local pottery production. The figurines typically measure between 4 to 8 centimeters in length, 2.5 to 5 centimeters in height, and 1.5 to 3 centimeters in width. They exhibit compact bodies, clearly defined features, and intricately designed limbs, which are relatively smaller compared to other cultural artifacts. The figurines have short, pointed, or simply rounded legs, allowing them to stand securely. Their cross-sections are generally triangular or square with rounded corners. The front quarters, particularly the shoulders, are robust, while the tails are narrow, naturalistic, and occasionally horned. The eyes are depicted as punctured holes, and there is often a horizontal hole through the snout or neck, sometimes accompanied by a narrow indentation. These perforations may have been designed for suspension, allowing the figurines to be carried by individuals or hung on hooks for easy storage. Occasionally, one or two holes may be present beneath or near the tail. The figurines were often painted in red or white with random cross-hatched stripes, but they were not burnished and polished, and the firing was controlled. Some of the figurines appear to have been deliberately broken, with the fractures being too consistent and repetitive to be merely accidental or due to simple separation (Knudsen and Greenberg, 2019). Color has also been used in the figurines, serving as an abstract phenomenon with significant importance in shaping the world, describing it, and facilitating visual communication. On one hand, humans utilized color and decorative patterns to enhance the aesthetic appeal of objects; on the other hand, they found that colored motifs provided a suitable medium for conveying symbolic meanings. Despite spatial and temporal distances, there are remarkable similarities in the methods of construction and finishing observed. This, to some extent, confirms the shared beliefs and ideologies of humans across different cultures (Eslam Maslak and Haririan, 2011).

Table 4: Classification of Kura-Araxes Figurines

Similar Sample	Regions	Classification	Figurine	No
Kul Tepe Gargar, Kul Tepe Sarein, Zarnagh, Godin, Ghaleh Tepe, Tepe Pissa, Geoy Tepe, Kohneh Pasghah, Shengavit, Buyuk Tepe, Sos Höyük, Orchosani, Kul Tepe I, II, Tell Beth Yerah, Other sites	Armenia, Eastern Anatolia, Georgia, Northwest Iran, Azerbaijan, Syro-Palastine	Cow, ram, sheep?, bird, and aquatic animals	Animal	1
Kul Tepe Sarein, Tepe Zarnagh, Shengavit, Orchosani, other sites	Northwest Iran, Armenia, Georgia	Sexual organs and upper torso	Human	2

Before the invention of writing, humans expressed their thoughts through the creation of figurines made from clay, stone, and other materials. The ancient peoples of millennia BCE were not strictly bound to mere imitation of nature. Instead, they often preferred to carve out their imaginative recollections with the chisel or shape them artistically with their fingers from clay and stone, bringing each figurine to life according to their desires, thoughts, and ritualistic beliefs. These small animal and human figurines likely held religious and ceremonial significance. Psychological analyses of these artworks

suggest that the artist's intent was not merely to create a piece of art; rather, there was an underlying thought or belief driving the creation of these figurines (Mousavi Haji *et al.*, 2012).

When figurines are uncovered by archaeologists, they are revealed, displayed, reframed, and recontextualized. Their attributed functions—whether as toys or ritual objects—are assumed to be mechanisms for conveying certain concepts. Figurines are not static objects; they are dynamic and inherently mutable artifacts that enable material and social connections. Part of their potential lies in their capacity to shift identities, tell stories, and evoke memory. Detached heads and clay bodies of human and animal forms, often featuring holes or evidence of broken or severed heads, signify a process through which both animals and humans were preserved, surviving death and destruction. It can be argued that figurines do not seek to belong exclusively to the history of imagery or art. Instead, they should be recognized as complex indices, representing multiple contexts and situations that embody fluid and multifaceted identities (Meskell 2017).

Archaeological data on the Kura-Araxes culture is often incomplete due to its widespread distribution across multiple countries, making access difficult and interpretation particularly challenging—especially regarding beliefs and perceptions of the people. In the Kura-Araxes culture, the concept of the afterlife held significant importance. This is evident from the various burial practices, such as kurgans, cists, megalithic structures, and accompanying grave goods, which reflect the deep-rooted beliefs in life after death and, consequently, the existence of a higher power (Poulmarc'h and Le Mort, 2016). The representation of ritual, religious, and social identity in the Kura-Araxes culture can be articulated as follows: it involved the inclusion of objects in graves and the decoration and display of distinctive cultural materials, such as figurines and hearths. Each of these cultural markers reflects their beliefs and traditions; figurines, for instance, may have served as a reflection of how they represented their ritual behaviors and beliefs. However, the quantity and quality of the construction of archaeological artifacts are crucial. Regarding figurines, their numbers are relatively low, which can be considered an indication of the cultural significance of this marker among the people. Unlike pottery, which was produced in large quantities and had daily functional use, figurines should not be viewed in the same context. Three methods were used for the quality and decoration of figurines: molding, perforation, and painting. Regarding Kura-Araxes figurines: 1) No specific location for their manufacture and storage has been identified (based on current findings). 2) The figurines were small in size and weight (which supports the hypothesis of their use by nomadic groups). 3) They feature holes for suspension, either from the neck or from a fixed point; these features may indicate their personal, domestic, and ritual significance among the people. However, it can be asserted that figurine-making in this culture represents an artistic practice with specific and relatively consistent construction techniques. The diversity among Kura-Araxes figurines is relatively limited based on available publications and reports. The few examples recovered, such as cattle, rams, and others, were likely more accessible to people and may have played a significant role in their daily lives.

6. Discussion

Around 3500 to 3300 BCE (Kura-Araxes I), a shared material and cultural package emerged across the South Caucasus, northwestern Iran, and eastern Anatolia. This

package included a range of artisanal crafts (from pottery to metallurgy), traditions, tastes, and ornaments, as well as architectural spaces centered around symbolic hearths and surrounding platforms. Burial practices also reflected this shared identity. These elements collectively supported a common identity among small rural communities characterized by an agro-pastoral economy and the absence of centralized institutions. The family likely served as the primary economic, social, and political unit within these societies (Palumbi and Chataigner 2014). The evidence and remnants from the excavated Kura-Araxes sites emphasize the repetition of three elements: animal and human figurines, primarily animal figurines (bulls, rams, and sheep), portable and fixed hearths, and potentially ritual spaces, often in domestic architectural contexts. However, our definition of ritual and religion influences our understanding of religious markers and their recurrence in Kura-Araxes culture. Are we considering ritual and religion from a modern perspective, or as concepts that historically brought people together in the past? From a holistic perspective, any attempt to define ritual in Kura-Araxes culture struggles with a number of concepts and ultimately leads to an archaeological enigma. Most researchers agree that ritual and religion can be understood in two aspects: textual (which does not include Kura-Araxes) and material culture (symbols) (Sagona 2018). It is widely accepted that what distinguishes modern humans from other species is their ability to use symbols (Hodder 2001). Symbols are a central component of ritual, religion, and the key actors in these domains, exercising their agency (Winter 2007). Societies integrate symbols to shape social relationships and group identity (Fogelin 2007). The creation of these symbols also reflects the self-awareness of the creator and carries multiple meanings (Hamilton 1996).

In this period, rituals and religion did not have a public or communal presence; rather, they were practiced within domestic and familial settings, with fire being a central element. People of this era incorporated symbols and ritualistic elements into their lives, with Kura-Araxes culture exemplifying this through figurines (both animal and human) and hearths, which were likely used for ritual and religious practices. These items reflect a reverence for nature and its constituent elements. These beliefs and practices were not confined to northwestern Iran alone but were also present among the people of the Caucasus, eastern Anatolia, and other regions within the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere. The ritual identity of the Kura-Araxes culture during this period differs from that observed in neighboring regions. This divergence can be attributed to the culture's isolation and lack of influence from other cultures. Although religion does not appear to be cohesive and fully developed in this period, ritual beliefs are shared within this culture and are represented by specific symbols. Ritual symbols are evident among the archaeological finds, with their significance increasing over time through repetition and preservation. In this culture, while it cannot be stated that there was a formal worship of symbols (such as hearths and figurines), the appreciation and reverence for fire and the preservation of nature's gifts, such as animals and people, were crucial for their survival. This is symbolized by the broken figurines and both fixed and portable hearths, whether heated or unheated and decorated, found in the excavations. The hearths and figurines of the Kura-Araxes culture exhibit significant similarities in terms of subject matter, technique, style, and appearance across different regions. While they also display regional diversity (due to local environmental factors), similar to pottery, the overall cultural framework remains consistent. Additionally, although the Kura-Araxes culture can be recognized as a distinct people and culture, and while religious practices were common among contemporary societies, identifying

specific rituals and religious practices within the Kura-Araxes culture is somewhat more challenging due to the lack of religious structures or shrines/temples in their settlements and domestic artifacts. In efforts to define the role of hearths and figurines and reconstruct the ritual domain, it is important to consider the natural conditions and lifestyle that may have influenced the form of religious beliefs held by the people. Animal husbandry played a significant role in the local economy of this culture. Many earliest Early Bronze Age sites were merely temporary camps used during the migration of herds to seasonal pastures. Hearths, along with other components of the material culture, reflect the nomadic lifestyle of the Kura-Araxes community. Notably, the number of stoves increased in the late fourth millennium BCE, coinciding with the growing importance of animal husbandry and human mobility. In a mobile context, these portable objects could have played significant and potentially religious roles, and they might have been used as portable shrines/temples (Smogorzewska, 2004). The figurines exhibit a naturalistic style and predominantly represent animal groups that are found in the surrounding natural environment and have various uses. The remaining cultural materials from humans reflect their way of life in nature, and the climatic and geographical conditions of the region have influenced their creation. Animal figurines and stoves are lightweight, and their numbers are limited, small, and compact. Specifically, the figurines depict animals such as rams and cattle, which played a significant role in the subsistence of the people, such as the use of their meat, hides, and milk. Additionally, these cultural materials were crafted from the local soil of the settlement area and were readily available. Regarding the figurines, there are perspectives that consider them as toys, educational tools, or ritual objects. If we consider these figurines as toys, a pertinent question arises: why was a nearly identical technique and method used for their creation, despite the lack of a specific place or facility for their production and the significant distance between sites? It can be hypothesized that they were made domestically and personally. In this case, there would have been a significant mindset behind their creation, reflecting a shared cultural practice and nearly uniform construction methods. The educational aspect suggests that these figurines were likely intended to convey a high degree of conceptual and instructional content. In terms of the ritual aspect, nearly all the sites where these artifacts have been found exhibit similar characteristics, such as volume and weight, which facilitated their transport from one location to another. Additionally, intentional breakage on these figurines may symbolize ritualistic practices such as animal sacrifice for the purpose of ensuring fertility and the preservation of the animals themselves, indicating the significant ritualistic role of these figurines.

Another significant aspect is the hearths, which not only attest to the uniformity of material culture but also indicate that similar rituals might have been practiced across the Kura-Araxes culture, from the Transcaucasus to Iran. It should be noted that the presence of a specific factor likely contributed to the creation of symbols: the presence of fire, which made the stoves sacred, and the presence of animals, which endowed the figurines with power. Fire was a crucial cultural and domestic element during this period, and the hearth symbolized the place of fire and its blessings. Regarding the function of these hearths, they have been interpreted as either tripods (pot supports) for holding containers over the fire or as having ritualistic functions. In many cases, these hearths are accompanied by intricate decorations, raising the question of their purpose when subjected to direct fire and eventually discarded after multiple uses. The shape and size of these hearths,

as well as their decorations, are consistent, yet their construction is time-consuming, suggesting that there was both a practical and symbolic motivation behind their creation. Despite the lack of comprehensive information and excavations in northwestern Iran and incomplete access to reports from sites outside Iran during the Kura-Araxes period, it can be concluded that nearly all cultural materials, such as figurines and hearths, convey an ideological perspective.

Ritual practices within the Kura-Araxes culture served as a unifying mechanism, fostering cohesion among community members by transcending household and kinship boundaries, thereby contributing to long-term societal stability (Simonyan and Rothman 2015). These rituals, primarily domestic in nature, indicate a social structure that lacked centralized political leadership. However, the potential existence of communal ritual spaces cannot be ruled out. Shrines may have functioned as gathering points for multiple smaller groups within the community. For instance, analogous shrines at Late Bronze Age Gegharot (Smith and Leon 2014) have been interpreted as possible divination centers accessible to various community members (Batiuk *et al.*, 2022).

7. Conclusion

During the Bronze Age in northwestern Iran and its neighboring regions, various distinct ethnic groups coexisted in close proximity, though they were not uniformly distributed. Each cultural group exhibited unique sub-groups, identifiable through symbols and motifs that affirmed their distinctiveness. The religious and ritual identity of the Kura-Araxes culture, as well as the interpretation of ritual data from this period, remains an underexplored topic within Bronze Age archaeology. This study sought to investigate the religious beliefs of Kura-Araxes communities by analyzing archaeological data from two key sites—Kul Tepe Gargar and Kul Tepe Sarein—as well as comparing these findings with evidence from other prominent sites beyond Iran.

The primary aims of this research were to identify religious symbols, elements, and signs associated with this culture and to compare them with similar materials from other regions. The findings revealed that sites yielding significant ritual data consistently displayed shared cultural artifacts across excavated contexts. The most notable evidence included portable and stationary hearths, figurines, and, in rare instances, ritual architecture, all of which were instrumental in identifying and analyzing ritual practices of the Kura-Araxes period.

The analysis indicates that while the Kura-Araxes culture lacked fixed, dedicated spaces for rituals (with a few exceptions), its practices were embedded within a temporal framework (3500–2400 BCE) and closely related to contemporary cultures, such as Uruk, which emphasized religious activities. The portable nature of ritual artifacts, such as figurines and hearths, aligns with the hypothesis of the semi-nomadic or agro-pastoral lifestyle of this culture, reflecting domestic and familial religious practices rather than centralized, institutionalized rituals. This suggests that ritual behavior was an integral characteristic of the Kura-Araxes culture despite the absence of permanent sacred spaces.

In conclusion, the artifacts and findings from both Iranian and non-Iranian sites linked to the Kura-Araxes culture consistently point to their ritual significance. This research provides a foundational perspective on the religious and ritual practices of the Kura-Araxes culture, offering a basis for future studies to further explore this fascinating aspect of Bronze Age archaeology.

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بررسی و تحلیل شواهد آئینی در قلمرو فرهنگ کورا-ارس؛ اجاق‌ها و پیکرک‌ها بارزترین شواهدی از رفتار آئینی و هویت دینی مردمان کورا-ارس

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تاریخچه مقاله

چکیده

گسترده‌گی و مطالعه شاخصه‌های فرهنگ کورا-ارس یکی از موضوعات مورد مطالعه باستان‌شناسان این حوزه است. یکی از مقوله‌های مبهم این فرهنگ، جایگاه دین، آئین، شواهد و مدارک آئینی در بین مردمان کورا-ارسی است. این ویژگی نه به دلیل جنبه معنوی و ماورا طبیعی، بلکه بیشتر به دلیل منابع کم، کمبود و ناشناخته بودن شواهد فرهنگی از اهمیت ویژه‌ای برخوردار است. شواهد این قسمت از فرهنگ کورا-ارس در کاوش‌ها همانند پیکرک، اجاق و شاید معماری (؟) ظاهر می‌شود و در تمامی قلمرو این فرهنگ از شمال غرب ایران تا شرق آناتولی و قفقاز جنوبی تقریباً در همه جا رایج بوده است. از مهم‌ترین اهداف این پژوهش، چگونگی هویت اجتماعی، باورهای آئینی جوامع کورا-ارس و شناخت نمادها، عناصر و نشانه‌های مذهبی فرهنگ کورا-ارس بر مبنای مطالعات کتابخانه‌ای-اسنادی و داده‌های دست اول کاوش‌ها در ایران به صورت آخص و کل قلمرو فرهنگ کورا-ارس بوده است. همچنین این پژوهش در پی پاسخ به پرسش‌ها و ابهامات پیش‌رو است؛ مدارک و شواهد باستان‌شناختی چه پیشنهادهایی را در رابطه با باورهای آئینی-مذهبی جوامع کورا-ارسی در اختیار می‌گذارند؟ و به عنوان یکی از مهم‌ترین پرسش‌ها، باورهای مذهبی جوامع کورا-ارسی در ایران و قفقاز دارای چه تفاوت‌ها و چه تشابهاتی است؟ به‌طور کلی آیا می‌توان از باور، دین، آئین، مکان‌های مذهبی و آئینی در رابطه با جوامع کورا-ارسی صحبت به میان آورد؟ پژوهش پیش‌رو عمدتاً در تلاش برای پاسخ به پرسش‌ها و اهداف مطرح شده، خواهد کوشید تا بخشی از این پرسش‌ها و ابهامات را مرتفع سازد. نتایج به دست آمده نشان می‌دهند که این فرهنگ و مردمان آن، اگرچه مکان خاص و جایگاهی جدا برای دین و آئین خود نداشته‌اند (بر اساس یافته‌ها و نتایج به دست آمده تا کنون) اما از یک سو بازه زمانی (۳۵۰۰-۲۴۰۰/۲۵۰۰ پ.م.) و تداوم این فرهنگ، و از سوی دیگر فرهنگ‌های هم‌زمان، چون اوروک و غیره از دین و آئین بهره‌مند بوده‌اند و همچنین در میان فرهنگ‌های عصر مفرغ رایج بوده است، مردمان و جوامع کورا-ارس را نمی‌توان یک فرهنگ بدون دین و آئین تصور کرد؛ اما نه به صورت یک فرهنگ یکجانشین و ثابت، بلکه اگر فرضیه نیمه‌کوچ‌چوردن این فرهنگ را بتوانیم بپذیریم، شواهد آئینی کورا-ارس همانند پیکرک‌ها و اجاق‌ها از نظر حجم و وزن کوچک و قابل حمل بوده‌اند؛ پس در نتیجه، ریشه‌هایی از این اعتقادات آئینی را در این شواهد می‌توان دید و شاخصه آئینی را برای این فرهنگ می‌توان در نظر گرفت.

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