THE KURA-ARAXES CULTURE FROM THE CAUCASUS TO IRAN, ANATOLIA AND THE LEVANT: BETWEEN UNITY AND DIVERSITY. A SYNTHESIS

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One of the aims of this thematic volume is to give space to a multiplicity of voices offering different perspectives on the diachronic developments of the Kura-Araxes culture as well as its unity and diversity on both geographic and chronological scales. We think that these twelve contributions, which will be followed by other articles dedicated to the Kura-Araxes culture in the next issue of Paléorient, have achieved this aim.

The following overview attempts to correlate a selected part of the impressive amount of information contained in this volume and to add our small contribution of knowledge and information. It is organised according to a very traditional narrative structure—the birth, life and death of the Kura-Araxes culture. Although subject to criticism, we decided to adopt this approach to facilitate, hopefully, the reading of a phenomenon of bewildering complexity.

THE ORIGINS OF THE KURA-ARAXES CULTURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHALCOLITHIC CULTURES

As mentioned in the Introduction, the origin of the Kura-Araxes culture is one of the key topics of this volume. The matter is intricately linked to the nature of the Chalcolithic cultures and communities present in the regions where the Kura-Araxes tradition first developed. The data presented in this volume help to define, with growing certainty, the chronological and spatial coordinates of the beginnings of the Kura-Araxes culture (fig. 1).

Beriklddeebi, in Georgia, has long been held to be the site with the earliest evidence of the Kura-Araxes pottery in the Southern Caucasus: the Late Chalcolithic level V, dating to the first half of the 4th millennium, has yielded abundant chaff-tempered ceramics and some fragments of small jars foreshadowing some Kura-Araxes manufacturing traditions (grit-tempered, with brown or grey burnished surfaces). Contributors to this volume have used different terminologies and interpretations for these findings. According to E. Rova, these ceramics should be referred to as ‘Proto Kura-Araxes’, for this terminology defines a chronological stage in which a minority of Kura-Araxes ceramics with archaic features coexisted with a majority of chaff-tempered pottery linked to Chalcolithic traditions. On the other hand, Marro et al. consider them as already typical of the Kura-Araxes traditions due to both manufacturing techniques and morphological repertoires.

Considering the quantitatively low and sporadic occurrence of these ceramics at Beriklddeebi V and the absence of comparison with other 4th-millennium sites in the Caucasus, it would be wise to use some caution when inferring the precise cultural value of these sherds. However, there is no doubt that the ceramic assemblage from the following level IV at Beriklddeebi (Rova) can be firmly placed within the Kura-Araxes traditions.

More recent, fine-grained data come from the 2 sigma calibrated dates at Chobareti in Southern Georgia and Sos Höyük in North-Eastern Turkey showing that material culture associated with the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition was in use in these regions at least since 3400-3300 BC (Sagona). These

1. It has to be stressed that the Kura-Araxes vessels illustrated in figures 5 and 6 of the Beriklddeebi publication (Dzhavakhishvili 1998) were erroneously attributed to level V1, while they belong to the following Kura-Araxes level IV (see also Kiguradze and Sagona 2003: note 5).
absolute datings are further confirmed by others from Armenia (Badalyan), where the sites of Gegharot and Aparan III on the slopes of the Mount Aragats, Horom in the Shirak plain and T’alin in the Ararat plain, seem to unanimously record Kura-Araxes levels dating to the same time-range as the sites from Georgia and Eastern Turkey.

In Azerbaijan, the earliest phase of the collective kurgan at Mentesh Tepe (Lyonnet) has yielded two radiocarbon readings between 3500 and 3400 BC, while the later phase of use of this kurgan overlaps with the dates from the nearby Kurgan of Uzun Rama (Jalilov) and with those from the above mentioned Southern Caucasian sites. Finally, there is a similar picture at Velikent (Kohl and Magomedov), where a single early date (3690-3500 BC) has been recorded at the site of Karasu-Tepe (Velikent II) and a later batch of dates (3360-3100 BC) corresponding to the same time-span as the above mentioned sites from Georgia, Armenia and Eastern Turkey.

By summarising this data, it is possible to surmise that between 3500 and 3300 BC a new ceramic tradition had developed over a large area encompassing the entire Southern Caucasus (Daghestan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia), Eastern Turkey and also North-Western Iran, where Kura-Araxes

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Fig. 1 – Synoptic chronological table of the Kura-Araxes culture according to the contributors in the present volume.
ceramics dating to 3300 cal. BC have been found at the site of Kütlepe near Jolfa (Abedi forthcoming). From the shores of the Caspian Sea (Velikent) to the valleys of the rivers Kura and Araxes as far as the regions of mountains and highlands of Southern Georgia and Armenia, this ceramic tradition was the material expression of ‘new’ communities living in the entire Caucasian region.

Since its beginning these communities shared a set of key material elements of their cultural package, among which certainly their pottery traditions. As Marro et al. and Iserlis et al. (forthcoming) point out, the technical differences between Kura-Araxes and Chalcolithic ceramics also implied a divergence in terms of investment of time and labour that could have also affected the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to pottery making. Often characterised by an accurate finishing of the surfaces (burnishing), the Kura-Araxes ceramics from Southern Caucasus were brown, grey or mottled black in its early phases, whilst by the late 4th millennium a fixed red-black colour effect had became a common feature (black exterior and red interior surfaces) (Sagona, Rova, Badalyan).

It is worth re-emphasising that this red-black Kura-Araxes ceramic horizon must be distinguished from the 4th millennium Red-Black Burnished Wares of the Upper Euphrates (Arslantepe VII and VIA); the latter are not only characterised by a different red-black pattern (with black shifting from the interior to the exterior surface of the vessel in bowls and jars accordingly) but their morphological repertoire mirrors that of a homologous production from Central Anatolia (Palumbi 2008 a and b).

Even in its earliest forms the morphological repertoire of the Kura-Araxes vessels differs from Chalcolithic traditions. The consistent presence of handles on both jars and bowls is one of the most distinctive elements of the Kura-Araxes vessels. New shapes were developed also, including flat, circular lids that may suggest the systematic introduction of new food processing practices (boiling) and, presumably a new culinary tradition (stews) (Wilkinson). Furthermore, according to Badalyan the morphological repertoire in the earlier phase (Kura-Araxes I, 3600/3500-2900 BC) was also characterised by a trans-regional homogeneity.

However important it may have been, pottery was not the only break with earlier Chalcolithic traditions; the appearance of the new Kura-Araxes ceramics went hand in hand with a large number of changes.

Sites where an apparently uninterrupted Chalcolithic-Kura-Araxes sequence of occupation is recorded are very rare, which would appear to suggest that there was a break in settlement patterns. A systematic and stable occupation of the highlands and mountains, including settlements found at above 1500 m asl, has been noted from the second half of the 4th millennium. As Connor points out, the arid phase that started around 3300 BC may have transformed the highlands of Southern Caucasus into a warmer environment where to settle on a more stable basis and carry out cereal-based agriculture (Hovsepyan forthcoming).

To date, the architectural evidence of the earliest Kura-Araxes settlements consists exclusively of mono- or bi-cellular free-standing houses, as opposed to the multi-cellular rectangular architecture commonly seen in Late Chalcolithic settlements, suggesting that the way domestic space was organised had also changed.

Metal repertoires (Courcier 2014) and funerary traditions are also transformed. As concerns the latter, the present evidence (Poulmarc’h) shows that the Kura-Araxes stone-cist or rectangular stone-built tombs appear for the first time in the Southern Caucasus from ca 3350 BC in strong contrast to the earthen-pits or jar-burials common to most Chalcolithic traditions.

Burial customs also change with the widespread appearance of collective inhumations, unheard of during the Chalcolithic period. This marked change from single to collective burials is for instance visible in the Chalcolithic and then in the Kura-Araxes kurgans in Azerbaijan. The recent excavations have shown that these large burial mounds were probably the only element of cultural continuity shared by both the Chalcolithic and Kura-Araxes funerary traditions in Azerbaijan. However, in this case, changes are detectable in the burial customs and in funerary representations. While the Chalcolithic kurgans— with single burials containing prestige and luxury goods—hint at the existence of forms of social differentiation and point to the existence of community leaders (Lyonnet et al. 2008), the burials in the Kura-Araxes kurgans held collective burials (Pecqueur; Jalilov) with a very homogenous repertoire of grave goods. ‘Exotic’ or prestige goods were usually absent, suggesting that the new Kura-Araxes burial traditions emphasised group membership, horizontal relations and possibly an egalitarian funerary ideology.

From the second half of the 4th millennium, a broad range of radical changes encompassing settlement patterns, material production, the organisation of daily activities, ritual life, social rules and values point to the formation of a new cultural and social identity certainly different from that of the Southern Caucasus Chalcolithic communities.

Taking into account these radical breaks, another key topic that we wanted to investigate in this volume relates to the
forms of interaction (if any) that may have existed between Chalcolithic and Kura-Araxes communities.

According to Marro et al., Chalcolithic and Kura-Araxes communities coexisted in some form in the Southern Caucasus during the final quarter of the 5th millennium BC. This theory is based on the findings from Ovčular Tepesi in Nakhichevan, consisting of around twenty red-black Kura-Araxes sherds found in three different loci of the Chalcolithic sequence. According to Marro et al., this is sufficient to hypothesise the coexistence of separate communities (Chalcolithic and ‘Late Chalcolithic Kura-Araxes’) that occupied alternately the site during the last quarter of the 5th millennium.

However, the presence of Kura-Araxes ceramics in the late 5th millennium remains an isolated and rather enigmatic case in the archaeology of the Southern Caucasus for several reasons. Indeed, Ovčular Tepesi has no other comparisons in the existing documentation of Southern Caucasus and neighbouring regions. Neither Berikldeebi V nor Arslantepe VIA, both used by Marro et al. as comparative case studies recording an analogous coexistence between Chalcolithic and Kura-Araxes populations, can be compared with Ovčular Tepesi as both sites date to the 4th millennium.

Secondly, it has yet to be clearly demonstrated that the dark-brown (certainly not red-black) burnished vessels found with chaff-tempered ceramics at Berikldeebi’s level V have parallels with the Kura-Araxes morphological repertoires so typical of the second half of the 4th millennium. The Red-Black Burnished Ware from Arslantepe’s phase VIA, as emphasised by Frangipane in this volume and as introduced in this overview, cannot be grouped within the Kura-Araxes traditions. Instead, it was most probably a local production from the Upper Euphrates region in use throughout the second half of the 4th millennium (Palumbi 2008a; Frangipane and Palumbi 2007).

Furthermore, the Late Chalcolithic Kura-Araxes (henceforth LCKA) ceramics from Ovčular Tepesi is an isolated case in terms of chronology. In Nakhichevan, apart from Ovčular Tepesi, the earliest Kura-Araxes remains date to the last quarter of the 4th millennium (Ristvet et al. 2011) and a similar picture is also emerging from the nearby site of Kültepe near Jolfa in North-Western Iran (Abedi forthcoming).

As a whole, the LCKA ceramics from Ovčular Tepesi appear to be separated by at least 700 years from the earliest appearance of Kura-Araxes ceramics in the rest of the Southern Caucasus. The absence of traces of Kura-Araxes ceramics and the latency of Kura-Araxes populations throughout the first half of the 4th millennium are an enigma that needs to be adequately explained. The findings at Areni Cave in Armenia, where Kura-Araxes ceramics have been dated to the first half of the 4th millennium, are still too controversial (Areshian et al. 2012; Wilkinson et al. 2012).

The LCKA ceramics from Ovčular Tepesi are also isolated as regards their place in a wider cultural assemblage; no other finds associated with the Kura-Araxes ‘package’ have been found in these levels. Finally, when these ceramics (most of which are red-black) are compared with the larger technical, decorative and typological trend of the Kura-Araxes ceramics in the Southern Caucasus, several discrepancies emerge, not least because in this region the earliest Kura-Araxes ceramics were monochrome or mottled black and not red-black (Sagona; Badalyan; Lyonnet; Rova).

What is more, as also Marro et al. state in their paper, all of the manufacturing, typological and decorative features of the LCKA ceramics from Ovčular Tepesi (going from surface treatments,2 to rail-rims, ‘Nakhichevan’ lugs and ‘dimple’ decorations) compare better with those of the 3rd millennium than with the earliest (3500-3300 BC) Kura-Araxes pottery. As a whole, we think that the thesis presented by Marro et al. in this volume cannot be excluded a priori, but does not fit the rest of the existing evidence and is insufficiently supported by the documentation provided so-far. Further verifications are needed: the LCKA tomb 5313 (Marro et al. this volume p. 137 and fig. 6) containing Kura-Araxes red-black ceramics and assigned to 4500–4350 BC should be radiocarbon-dated.

This LCKA tomb would predate by more than 1300 years two other tombs (Marro et al. 2009) attributed to the ‘Early Bronze Kura-Araxes’ of the site (ca 3000-2650 BC), characterised by “the same funerary ritual and the same pottery as the LCKA one”3; such an amazing continuity in terms of funerary traditions would certainly deserve further confirmation. Furthermore, the stratigraphic position of this tomb and of dial 5167, which are both key features related to the presence of LCKA sherds, and their relationships to the surrounding architectural features should be better clarified.

A final report of Ovčular Tepesi will be able to clarify some of these questions, and radiocarbon datings (as in the case of the LCKA tomb) will prove indispensable in clarifying the stratigraphic sequence. Meanwhile, we prefer to adhere to the now ‘traditional’ chronology, largely confirmed by this volume in all the other sites of Southern Caucasus, North-Western Iran and

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2. The use of red paint/slip is also recorded at Arslantepe in phase VIBI, dated to 3000-2900 BCE (see Frangipane).

Eastern Anatolia, according to which the earliest attestations of the Kura-Araxes material package date from the middle of the 4th millennium BC.

This dating would also appear to concur with the latest evidence of Chalcolithic material culture in the same regions. However, what has often been considered as a simple and straightforward ‘hand over’ between Chalcolithic and Kura-Araxes traditions was probably a complex and regionally composite cultural process.

The data from the site of Godedzor, in South-Eastern Armenia, which we will briefly summarise, provide a precious source of information concerning the dynamics of social and cultural development at work in the Southern Caucasus in the mid-4th millennium. The settlement of Godedzor lies in the valley of the Vorotan river and is located on the high volcanic plateau of Syunik, at about 1800 m asl. It is also near a crossing of the Vorotan river that links the steppe of Azerbaijan (Agdam region) to Nakhichevan and the Araxes valley and to North-Western Iran and the Urmia basin (Chataigner et al. 2010).

The excavations, carried out by a French-Armenian expedition since 2005, have revealed two main phases of occupation that date to the Iron Age and Late Chalcolithic. In this earlier phase, the architectural evidence consists mainly of the remains of circular walls and several levels of post-holes, suggesting the use of wooden architecture possibly for the construction of fences or sheds. In these levels, the majority (more than 95%) of the pottery clearly belongs to the chaff-tempered tradition. The Chalcolithic ceramics from Godedzor were hastily and roughly made without special care for surface treatments, finishing and other aesthetic traits. The firing of these vessels was also rather hasty, as suggested by the irregular colours of the surfaces and by the grey or blackish cross-sections. The morphological repertoire shows a general prevalence of jars over bowls. Jars feature collared rims and globular bodies (fig. 2: 1-3,5) and often have single or double handles (fig. 2: 4) or lugs applied on the rims.

The predominance of chaff-tempered ceramics strongly links Godedzor to the Chalcolithic chaff-tempered ware horizon of Southern Caucasus and Northern Iran. However, apart from the manufacturing and technical similarities (chaff-tempering, quick and low-temperature firing), the ceramic assemblage from Godedzor shares very little with the chaff-tempered Chalcolithic traditions from these regions. Some of the most distinguishing traits of the Chalcolithic ceramics from the Southern Caucasus and Northern Iran, such as combing of the surfaces, trays with rows of holes through the rim, potter’s marks, and at times relief or painted decorations (Marro 2010; Helwing 2012), are all absent at Godedzor.

However, chaff-tempered pottery was not the only production in use at Godedzor, because a group of painted ceramics occurs, in a very small percentage (about 5%), in the Chalcolithic levels (fig. 2: 6-9). This is characterised by a whitish or yellowish slip on the external surfaces and pink or light-yellow fully oxidized cross-sections. The clay is tempered with mixed inclusions, such as fine to medium chaff and fine grit. Paint is applied on the external surfaces only, and it is matt-black or dark brown. The painted motifs tend to be rather repetitive and standardised consisting of single or double wavy lines running horizontally on the base of the neck and on the lower body of the vessel. These lines create horizontal spaces filled with triangular, lozenge-shaped and rectangular motifs in turn filled with densely cross-hatched lines. The painted motifs of this ceramic group can be generally attributed to the Pisdeli Tepe ‘ceramic tradition’, but more tight comparisons can be drawn with painted ceramics from the Chalcolithic sites of the Urmia basin, such as Geoy Tepe level M and Tappeh Gijlar phase C.5

The location of Godedzor at 1800 m asl in a region covered by a thick layer of snow from November to March, the use of light architecture, prevalence of sheep in the herd, cattle bones bearing traction deformations and finally the frequency of tools (spindle-whorls, awls, shuttles and combs) relating to textile production suggest that Godedzor may have been a seasonal camp-site used by groups practicing transhumance. The proximity of the site to the obsidian deposits of Sevkar and Satanakar that supplied Southern Armenia and North-Western Iran (Khademi et al. 2013) during this period would seem to suggest that these movements may also have been related to the procurement of obsidian.

Fourteen radiocarbon dates prove that the Chalcolithic occupation at Godedzor took place between 3650 and 3350 BC (table I). Despite the fact that these dates go beyond the second half of the 4th millennium (3500 BC is commonly considered as the chronological milestone marking the passage from Chalcolithic to Kura-Araxes traditions), the argument that both chaff-tempered and painted ceramics from 4. A collaboration between the Mission “Caucasus”, funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of Yerevan, funded by the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia.

5. See figures and plates from Burton-Brown 1951: 20-21; Dyson and Young 1960: 21, PI III; Belgiorno et al. 1984: Fig. 77-85; Henrickson 1983: 397.
Table 1 – Calibrated radiocarbon dates from the Late Chalcolithic layer of Godedzor.

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Fig. 2 – Chalcolithic ceramics from Godedzor. 1-5) chaff-tempered; 6-9) painted.
CONTINUITY AND CHANGES OF THE KURA-ARAXES CULTURE IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

By 3300 BC, a common Kura-Araxes material and cultural package developed throughout Southern Caucasus, North-Western Iran and Eastern Anatolia. This package was composed of shared practices related to craftwork (ranging from pottery to metals), culinary traditions and tastes (Wilkinson), body ornaments and fashion (as suggested by the common use of hair-spirals and double-spiral pins), the organisation of domestic space, the formalisation of some cultic and religious practices (expressed by the symbolic centrality of fireplaces and ‘totemic’ zoomorphic/anthropomorphic andirons), as well as of funerary structures and burial customs. The combination of all these cultural elements supports the idea of the ‘Kura-Araxes’ culture as a largely shared identity expressed by communities living in a broad area encompassing different geographies, ecologies and historical backgrounds.

As several authors from this volume have pointed out, the Kura-Araxes groups of the Southern Caucasus were small village-based communities practicing a mixed agro-pastoral economy, and lacking centralised common institutions where, as is also suggested by the collective burial practices, the household may have represented the main economic and kin-related social unit, one that structured the political identity of these communities (Greenberg and Palumbi in press).

However, many contributors have also observed that this apparently homogeneous cultural ‘skin’ concealed a richness of local and regional diversities. This is certainly true for the Kura-Araxes built environment, which encompassed such a variety of building traditions, house and village plans, that comparison is difficult (Sagona; Rova; Kohl and Magomedov; Alizadeh et al. forthcoming). Likewise, the heterogeneity of Kura-Araxes funerary structures in the Southern Caucasus is rather striking (Poulmarc’h). In other words, the very diversity of the Kura-Araxes material culture may call into question this alleged cultural and social unity of Kura-Araxes communities.

As introduced above, the concept of a single Kura-Araxes ‘culture’ could in fact be a modern construct, and this is why one of the crucial questions in this volume is: where does the unity of the Kura-Araxes end and where or when does its diversity begin? Pottery, for instance, is usually considered the marker of this culture and ‘yardstick’ of its developments, yet Badalyan has noticed that the Kura-Araxes ceramic traditions
in Armenia (techniques, morphologies and decorations) were more homogenous during phase KA I than in phase KA II (fig. 1), the latter characterised by a fragmentation and regionalisation of both morphological and decorative repertoires. Rather interestingly, this same process was not limited to Armenia and in fact it was also recorded in Inner Georgia, where from the 3rd millennium onwards, the region of Shida Kartli (Rova) has repertoires that differ from those in the nearby South Caucasian regions.

While it is difficult to assess the extent to which changes in ceramic traditions represented transformations of a different nature (social, cultural or political), it is however striking that these communities often went through comparable processes of change and development during an extraordinarily long span of time of approximately 1500 years.

On the other hand, funerary traditions show a broad variability (Poulmarc’h), all of which seem to correspond to well defined regional traditions dating back to the beginnings of the Kura-Araxes culture (e.g., the preferential distribution of Kurgan burials along the lower valley of the Kura river valley and of the stone-cist or stone lined graves on the highlands of Western Armenia and Central Georgia).

At present, it is difficult to identify common patterns linking the different elements of unity and diversity of the Kura-Araxes culture in a coherent way. It is, however, possible to observe that some changes seem to have taken place roughly in the same period. For instance, regional trends in the ceramic traditions seem to develop in the early 3rd millennium at the same time as a break in settlement patterns in the Southern Caucasus. Between the end of the 4th and beginning of the 3rd millennium, some cemeteries became settlements, some settlements were abandoned (for brief or longer periods) and new settlements were occupied.

Once again, while these processes seem to have involved the entire Southern Caucasus, the reasons behind these changes still need to be explained. Could geographic factors, different regional connectivity, local economic vocations (see for instance the role of metallurgy hypothesised by Rova for Shida Kartli) have played their role in favouring diversified ceramic developments to the detriment of the apparent more homogenous trajectory of the 4th millennium? Could changes in settlement patterns have reflected a different territorial organisation of the Kura-Araxes communities and eventually (Rothman forthcoming) other wide-reaching changes involving their political or economic organisation?

Finally, how can we explain the correlation between these apparently simultaneous changes in the early 3rd millennium? We hope that the answers to these questions will be illuminated by future research on the Kura-Araxes culture; however, we want to stress that in spite of the apparently conservative characterisation of the Kura-Araxes traditions, the Kura-Araxes communities were not endlessly reproducing a static model, instead they were undergoing a dynamic, possibly slow but always active processes of transformation.

In fact, the development of the Kura-Araxes traditions took place on both regional and chronological scales. While regional factors and local dynamics must certainly have played a role in these changes and processes of diversification, we also think that the involvement of the South Caucasian communities in the dynamics which were developing in adjacent regions could have played a determining role in the transmission, adaptation and transformation of the Kura-Araxes traditions.

**THE KURA-ARAXES ’EXPANSION’**

Starting from ca 3000 BC, the Kura-Araxes culture is found outside of its traditional territory, in regions that had played no part in its previously pristine development. This ‘process’ followed two main geographic directions: the Iranian plateau; and the Anatolian highlands, the latter also being the axis along which the Kura-Araxes tradition reached the ‘Amuq region and the Levant by ca 2800 BC.

The process behind this expansion has traditionally been interpreted within the framework of migratory paradigms, according to which the geographic diffusion of the Kura-Araxes material culture was the result of one or several migratory waves. Surely, this ‘expansion’ implied some form of movement. However, as several papers in this volume point out, different forms of movement may have been involved in this process, from unidirectional shifts to cyclic seasonal movements and finally to ‘movements of ideas’, none of which necessarily imply the physical transfer of Kura-Araxes populations from one region to the other. What is more, none of these forms of movement exclude the others, as they may have coexisted according to different historical or regional contexts.

Concerning the development of the Kura-Araxes culture in Iran, our understanding is still fraught with uncertainties. Summers assumes that the Kura-Araxes culture (ETC) was originally extraneous to North-Western Iran and that it ‘arrived’ there as a result of migrations at the end of the 4th millennium. However, new data from Kültepe near Jolfa would seem to suggest that the Kura-Araxes culture is found in the
northernmost areas of Iran from at least 3340 cal. BC, suggesting that some communities of North-Western Iran had already aspects of this culture from its early phases with apparently no significant delay when compared to the Southern Caucasus.

It is possible, however, that the inhabitants of the Urmia region only became involved in the Kura-Araxes dynamics at a later date. According to Summers, a break with the Chalcolithic settlement patterns (Maziar forthcoming) and the fact that this region recorded a fully developed Kura-Araxes ‘package’ slightly before 3000 BC are both evidence that there was a migration of Kura-Araxes peoples into the Urmia basin.

While this hypothesis cannot be excluded, it is important to stress that the Iranian Kura-Araxes was not a simple ‘copy’ of the Caucasian Kura-Araxes package. Ceramic traditions show local peculiarities: the use of grog in the clay (Mason and Cooper 1999); the fact that black or grey burnished wares seem to be more common than Red-Black Burnished Ware (Gopnik and Rothman 2011); and, finally, the fact that excised or incised decorations filled with white paste are typical of the Iranian region (Fahimi 2005: Fig. 3; Piller 2012); all are elements suggesting that the Kura-Araxes traditions went through processes of adaptation, change and re-elaboration according to local tastes and technologies. Unfortunately, little can be said as concerns Kura-Araxes metallurgy and funerary traditions in Iran.

While this picture is certainly skewed by the fragmentary status of the documentation at present, this large region may have witnessed multiple dynamics of encounter and interaction with Kura-Araxes people and traditions and, as Summers points out, multiple dynamics (and presumably also vectors) may have generated different developmental trajectories of the Kura-Araxes culture in Iran. This is why the migratory paradigm may not be the only model for interpreting the expansion of the Kura-Araxes culture in Iran, and thus the role of the indigenous populations and of local developments could have been equally important.

Among other factors to be taken into account is the role of the Uruk phenomenon in the Kura-Araxes expansion. The connection, suggested by Summers, between the Uruk ‘collapse’ and the Kura-Araxes ‘expansion’ offers a new ‘relational’ and historical perspective on the Kura-Araxes dynamics in Iran. This may have been the case in some regions of the Iranian plateau, such as the Kangavar valley: the setting for a direct diachronic development from Uruk to Kura-Araxes. At Godin Tepe for instance, the Uruk level V was followed, ca 3000 BC, by the Kura-Araxes level IVB, where remains of dwellings (presumably huts) built with wattle and daub technique and ceramics with clearly diagnostic Kura-Araxes traits were found (Gopnik and Rothman 2011). However, what has been interpreted as the process of filling a vacuum left by the demise of the Uruk phenomenon by intrusive Kura-Araxes populations could in fact have been a more complex process than that hypothesised to date.

In fact, the twin sequence characterising Godin Tepe and Arslantepe (in the Anatolian Upper Euphrates Valley) between the end of the 4th and beginning of the 3rd millennia adds support to the idea that the diachronic dialectic between Uruk and Kura-Araxes was repeated in different regions in the same historical moment.

Light has been thrown on this matter by new data (Palumbi 2012 and in press). This suggests that the impact of the centralised ‘Uruk’ model over the Anatolian and possibly also Iranian highlands could have created the structural prerequisites for an intensified interaction with the Kura-Araxes communities towards the end of the 4th millennium. The formation of a specialised pastoral sector, resulting from the implantation of centralised political and economic institutions in the 4th millennium, could have been a determining factor. In fact, the development of a specialised pastoralism focusing on sheep and goat was one of the main economic changes to have taken place during the second half of the 4th millennium in the regions affected by the Uruk phenomenon (Zeder 1988: 21; Vila 1998: 90-91, 123-129).

The intensification of caprine-focused husbandry strategies represented one of the main economic pillars of the centralised economies to emerge in the Uruk period (Porter 2012: 8-24). The example of Arslantepe, described by Frangipane in this volume, shows how the specialised pastoralism that emerged in phase VIA as a result of the establishment of a centralised economic model (Frangipane 2010) may have been crucial in the interactions with the Kura-Araxes communities immediately after its collapse. At Arslantepe, the Uruk-Kura-Araxes diachronic sequence is represented by phase VIA, recording the construction of a monumental public complex (ca 3300-3100 BC), followed by phase VIB1 (ca 3100-2900 BC). Phase VIB1 at Arslantepe is characterised by the widespread use of wooden and wattle and daub architecture and, like at Godin Tepe level IV, by a ceramic repertoire clearly reminiscent of the Kura-Araxes traditions (Frangipane).
Several contributors to this volume have dated the appearance of Kura-Araxes ceramics at Arslantepe to the second half of the 4th millennium. This is due to the significant presence of red-black ceramics in late phase VII and in phase VIA. However, as already pointed out above, not all the red-black ceramics from Anatolia were linked to the Kura-Araxes ceramic horizon and this was certainly the case of the red-black ceramics of the Upper Euphrates in the 4th millennium. As also observed by Frangipane in this volume, there is no archaeological evidence of interactions between Arslantepe and the Kura-Araxes communities in the 4th millennium.

Actually, it is only at the very beginning of the 3rd millennium that the interactions with the Kura-Araxes ‘sphere’ became clearly evident, as it is documented in phase VIB1 at Arslantepe. As to the cultural and possibly ethnic identity of the pastoralist community at Arslantepe during phase VIB1, there are signs of continuity stretching back to the 4th-millennium economic and cultural traditions of the site during phase VIA (see Frangipane).

One of these is the specialised husbandry strategies focused on caprines, as specialised as those practiced in phase VIA (Siracusano and Bartosiewicz 2012) and another is the ceramic traditions, as Red-Black Burnished Ware from phase VIB1 was characterised by the same red-black alternate pattern as that in use in the Upper Euphrates during the 4th millennium. However, unlike the latter, during phase VIB1 Red-Black Burnished Ware reproduced a hybridised repertoire composed of Kura-Araxes (jars and lids), Central Anatolian (hemispherical ‘black-topped’ bowls) and local shapes (cylindrical pot-stands) (Palumbi 2012).

It has already been suggested that the pastoral community that settled at Arslantepe during phase VIB1 was not a ‘foreign’ community of Kura-Araxes migrants but more probably a local community, possibly the direct descendants of the same specialised pastoral communities of the Uruk period (Palumbi 2012 and in press). These pastoralists seem to have mixed local, Central Anatolian and Kura-Araxes traditions, thus suggesting that in the early 3rd millennium the cultural and territorial boundaries between the Anatolian and Caucasian highlands could have been, especially for the mobile groups, more fluid than before.

From this point of view, the hybridised ceramic repertoire of Arslantepe phase VIB1 may have expressed practices of mobility stretching from the Anatolian Plateau to the eastern Anatolian highlands that could have activated more stable interactions with the Kura-Araxes world. Data from Arslantepe, as much as those from the contemporary Tepeck in the Altinova plain (Palumbi in press), suggest that the intrusion of Kura-Araxes elements in the Upper Euphrates at the beginning of the 3rd millennium could have been the result of dynamics acted out by indigenous communities, possibly aimed at the construction of new cultural identities in the region (Palumbi 2008a; Greenberg and Palumbi in press).

This hypothesis also seems to work well with the data available from Godin Tepe. As at Arslantepe, the ‘squatters’ who occupied Godin Tepe after the abandonment of the Uruk Oval Compound were characterised by a Kura-Araxes oriented ceramic assemblage; they lived in wooden or wattle and daub dwellings and practiced specialised husbandry strategies that focused on caprines. The fact that these strategies were analogous to those recorded at Godin Tepe in the Uruk period suggests a direct continuity between the ‘squatters’ of phase IVB and the populations of the Kangavar region in the 4th millennium BC.

The cases of Arslantepe and Godin Tepe are important because they open up the possibility that the ‘expansion’ of the Kura-Araxes culture in regions that had played no part in its pristine developments, such as the Upper Euphrates and the Kangavar Valley, could have been initially resulted from the adoption of some traditions by local populations rather than by the intrusive migrations of ‘outsider’ Kura-Araxes communities.

Exactly why the local pastoral communities of the Upper Euphrates and Kangavar Valleys were particularly receptive to the Kura-Araxes cultural system is unknown, but it remains a crucial question that would benefit from future studies. However, it is important to underline that in the early 3rd millennium it was possible to become a Kura-Araxes community and to acquire a Kura-Araxes identity without being either of Kura-Araxes descent or born in its ‘homeland’.

This is not meant to exclude the possibility that ‘external’ factors, such as movements and migrations of Kura-Araxes people, may have taken place in the 3rd millennium thus playing a role in the expansion of the Kura-Araxes culture.

As suggested in the case of Iran, the Upper Euphrates Valley probably experienced different types of interaction with the eastern Kura-Araxes communities. In this case, the adoption of a Kura-Araxes identity by the indigenous pastoral communities of the Upper Euphrates Valley could have created a favourable cultural environment which then acted as a ‘pull’ factor (Rothman 2003) for later movements of Kura-Araxes populations into the region. In fact, during the Early Bronze Age II (ca 2750-2500 BC) the Upper Euphrates Valley, and especially the region of Elazığ, underwent a process of deep absorption into the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere. In this period, the striking analogies of the local ceramic traditions, build-
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ing techniques, house plans, fireplaces and anthropomorphic andirons with those from the contemporary Eastern Anatolian and Southern Caucasian communities may justify the hypothesis that migratory flows from the Eastern regions (like Inner Georgia / Shida Kartli) could have taken place in this period (Sagona 1984; Rothman 2003; Rova).

During approximately this time-span, ca 2800 BC, what ‘macroskopically’ appears to be a selected package of Kura-Araxes traits starts to be found in the ‘Amuq plain and coastal Syria (such as at Ras Shamra) and as far as the Southern Levant. This was apparently the first moment when the Kura-Araxes culture entered regions that were radically different in geographic and ecological terms from the highlands and mountains where it had first been developed.

One example is the tradition that developed in the Levantine region, usually referred to as the ‘Khirbet Kerak’, which can be identified with specific markers including red-black ceramics (with a fixed black-outside/red-inside chromatic pattern) and anthropomorphic portable andirions. As both Wilkinson and Greenberg et al. have argued in this volume, these markers may be material signs of the diffusion of traditions related to the household sphere, implying specific forms of rituality, consumption and, as a consequence, culinary practices that were directly linked to those practiced in the Anatolian and Caucasian highlands (for hypotheses on how the ‘Khirbet Kerak’ vessels were used and what was consumed, see Paz 2009 and Batiuk 2013).

Indeed, following intensive research at Bet Yerah during the last few years (Greenberg et al.), scholars have argued that this ‘cultural’ intrusion was not only the result of movement of ideas and/or circulation of artifacts (contra Philip 1999).

The Khirbet Kerak tradition, they maintain, did not only consist of red-black ceramics and ‘totemic’ andirions, but encompassed life-styles, daily activities, gestures and technical savoir faire. This reasoning substantiates the hypothesis that this tradition was the expression of communities of practice that differed from the ‘indigenous’ Levantine ones and that the spread of this tradition in the Levant may have been the result of movements of people. However, as also Wilkinson has put it, “migration does not provide an explanation in itself”, and the new agenda for future research on the Khirbet Kerak tradition in the Levant still needs to identify factors and dynamics that may have triggered these movements towards regions that were so remote and geographically different from the Anatolian and Caucasian highlands.

END AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE KURA-ARAXES CULTURE

The final moments of the Kura-Araxes culture date, in almost all of the regions involved, to the middle of the 3rd millennium or shortly thereafter. From the Caucasus to the Levant, the transition to ‘Post Kura-Araxes’ was characterised by more breaks than continuities, as these changes were connected to the emergence of new cultural models and social orders.

In the Southern Caucasus, disruption of the Kura-Araxes settlement patterns is marked by temporary occupations with flimsy architectural remains coupled with the diffused adoption of the Kurgan funerary tradition. The cultures of Martqopi first and Bedeni later (see Rova) were characterised by the construction of monumental funerary tumuli (hence ‘Early Kurgans cultures’) which, judging from the display of rich inventories of luxury and exotic goods, emphasised the emergence of elites and of new forms of leaderships in the region.

According to Lyonnet, these new funerary traditions were the expression of intrusive (Northern Caucasian?) communities into Eastern Georgia and Western Azerbaijan, that were involved in husbandry and trade activities, which coexisted, at least for some time, with the Kura-Araxes communities. However, according to Rova, in spite of certain (mainly technical) elements of continuity of the Kura-Araxes traditions in the Martqopi ceramic assemblage, evidence for the coexistence between Kura-Araxes and Martqopi communities in Shida Kartli is in fact rather scanty.

A long-lasting use of Kura-Araxes ceramics has also been hypothesised for North-Eastern Anatolia, where, according to Işkıli, a picture of long-term coexistence between Kura-Araxes and ‘Early Kurgans’ cultures can be hypothesised. This hypothesis is mainly based on data from Middle Bronze Age levels at Sos Höyük where Kura-Araxes ceramic traditions survived as long as the 2nd millennium, showing both extraordinary continuity and conservativism in this region (Sagona and Sagona 2000).

As concerns North-Western Iran, Summers’ hypothesis that the Kura-Araxes culture lasted until at least 1600 BC is not entirely justified by present data. In the Urmia region for instance, a generalised pattern of abandonment of the Kura-Araxes settlements dates well into the second half of the 3rd millennium. In the Kangavar valley, clear signs of change are recordable in the passage between Godin Tepe level IV (Kura-Araxes) and the following level III6, which dates to the middle of the 3rd millennium (Gopnik and Rothman 2011).
The only element of continuity linking phases IV and III6 are the grey and grey black burnished wares, while the rest of the material assemblage shows significant changes from one phase to the other.

The picture of the remaining regions involved in the Kura-Araxes ‘expansion’ is more complex: various processes of elaboration or abandonment of the Kura-Araxes package emerge with the adoption of new models characterised by political and territorial hierarchisation and by specialization in production. In the Upper Euphrates Valley, the mid-3rd millennium sees the reconstruction of large regional centres, such as Arslantepe, Norsuntepe and Korucutepe, characterised by the presence of large-scale architecture (defensive walls, ritual buildings and monumental residences). The main elements of continuity with the old Kura-Araxes traditions include the presence of Red-Black Burnished Ware (with a fixed scheme) and the symbolic centrality of the horse-shoe shaped andirons in both domestic and ritual buildings. However, during the second half of the 3rd millennium, these elements seem to be incorporated into newly reconstituted systems of production (red-black ceramics could have been in the hands of specialised workshops) and different socio-cultural models.

As concerns the Khirbet Kerak tradition, in the ‘Amuq plain, red-black ceramics and ‘totemic’ andirons continued until Phase I (Braidwood and Braidwood 1960), dated to the mid-3rd millennium, and disappeared in the following phase J. Phase J records the peak of the ‘caliciform’ horizon in Western Syria, the latter represented by a widespread and highly standardised production of wheel-made goblets, markers of new and intensive modes of pottery manufacture and of new practices of drinking and liquid consumption, presumably wine (Mazzoni 1994; Batiuik 2013), and supposedly different from those related to the red-black ceramics. It is during this period that the ‘second’ urbanisation of Syria developed, with the emergence of new city states (such as Ebla). These may have disrupted former networks of interregional movement and communication that linked the Syrian lowlands to the Anatolian highlands during the first half of the 3rd millennium.

The interruption of this Anatolian-Levantine corridor (Greenberg and Palumbi in press) may have definitively isolated the Anatolian communities that had been moving down to the Southern Levant since the early 3rd millennium. According to Greenberg et al., it is in fact from the mid-3rd millennium that the Kura-Araxes traditions of migrant communities were gradually absorbed or assimilated into local Levantine societies (Greenberg and Palumbi in press).

In this overview, we have attempted to provide a picture of the multiplicity of actors and complexity of dynamics at work in the formation, developments and end of this phenomenon in the context of a broad variety of interregional relations and historical processes. The Kura-Araxes culture was a ‘global’ phenomenon in the 3rd-millennium Near Eastern world, from the beginning to the end. In order to explain this process of large-scale convergence, characterised by both unity and diversity, future studies must go beyond the conceptual and geographic boundaries which so often circumscribe the Kura-Araxes culture. They must attempt to relate the developments in the Caucasus—both synchronic and diachronic—with those from Anatolia, Iran, Mesopotamia and the Levant.

This is why the end of our overview does not intend to be read, nor could it be, as a conclusion not least because the Kura-Araxes culture, as a cultural, anthropological and historical phenomenon, cannot be briefly or easily summarized, its geographic extension is too huge and its longevity too great. Instead, we hope that the information, observations, ideas and interpretations presented by the authors in this volume and in the forthcoming volume may serve as a point of departure for future studies on the Kura-Araxes culture.

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