

Preface

This catalogue gathers together ancient Caucasian and related material in the British Museum, most of which is now in the Department of the Ancient Near East. It does not include Greek and Roman objects, coins, or material of early Christian date.¹

Outside the former Soviet Union, there are significant collections of Caucasian antiquities in the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin,² in the Musée des Antiquités Nationales in St Germain-en-Laye,³ and in the Natural History Museum in Vienna. By comparison the British Museum has only a small collection of ancient material from the Caucasus, but it has been decided that it merits a separate volume for a number of reasons. Firstly, the collection contains some items of unusual interest. Secondly, largely because it is now more accessible than hitherto, the Caucasus region is attracting a good deal of attention in the west, but much of the literature on the area remains obscure. Thirdly, although none of the objects in this catalogue comes from a proper archaeological excavation, much of the material has a good provenance and is reliably associated with the Caucasus region. Further, many of the objects were acquired a long time ago, in some cases in the 19th century. This is of course one of the great strengths of the British Museum collection, and applies just as much to the Caucasus as it does to other parts of the Ancient Near East.

The catalogue has been divided into four parts, covering the Central Caucasus, Transcaucasia, objects of general Caucasian type, and objects that may be loosely associated with the Scythians. The largest section of the catalogue (part 1) is devoted to Koban culture material from the central Caucasus, and here the British Museum's holdings are largely made up of two groups. The first is a collection of material presented to the British Museum in 1913 by Prince Naourouz of Urusbieh in the northern Caucasus (**nos. 1–97**). These objects are thought to come from graves of the Early Iron Age. The second group (**nos. 98–113**) belonged to Edward Dent (d. 1930) and is thought to have been inherited from his younger brother Clinton Dent (1850–1912), a surgeon and mountain climber who obtained them in the Caucasus. In the Transcaucasian section objects of particular interest include four items (**nos. 152–62**) that were presented to the British Museum in 1898 and are said to have been found in a single grave at 'Karabakh, Erivan'. Six Georgian belt-clasps (**nos. 133–8**) also have an interesting provenance. Three of them (**nos. 134, 136, 138**) were obtained in the Caucasus in the 19th century by W.J. Myers, and two (**nos. 133, 137**) were presented to the British Museum in 1921. The relatively small section on miscellaneous objects of Caucasian type includes items that are possibly of Caucasian origin, or have at some stage been attributed to the Caucasus, but cannot be very precisely

identified. Most of the objects of Scythian type in the last part do not actually come from the Caucasus, but are included in this catalogue because of the Scythian connection with that region. As we shall see, the Scythians not only passed through the Caucasus but settled on the north side of the mountain range. In many ways, Scythian art is at the interface between the animal style art of south Russia and the art of the Ancient Near East, and for this reason it seems appropriate to include it here, even though some of the pieces are of Achaemenid date and probably come from greater Iran.

We have remarked above that many of the objects in this catalogue are old acquisitions, but there are some that were obtained on the art market more recently. Here, perhaps, a word of explanation is needed, particularly with regard to a collection of daggers, arrowheads, pendants and items of harness in the Transcaucasian section (**nos. 120, 122–131, 141–5, 147–58**) that were bought at auction in 1993. At the time it was thought most probable that these derived from an old collection, and the circumstantial evidence supports that view. Caucasian material appeared on the market for only a brief period after the collapse of the Soviet Union (which would be consistent with the dispersal of an old collection or collections) and there is no evidence of large-scale looting of sites in Transcaucasia.

The genesis of this catalogue goes back to November 1989 when Dr Vera Kovelevskaya from Moscow visited the British Museum in order to view the Caucasian material. She was accompanied by Mirosław Kruszyński, then a PhD student at the Institute of Archaeology (University College London) working on connections between the northern Caucasus and eastern Europe, who was acting as guide and interpreter. It was soon obvious that not only was Mr Kruszyński very knowledgeable about this kind of material, but he also (unlike myself) had some familiarity with the relevant Russian literature. As I already had the intention of preparing a catalogue of the ancient Caucasian material in the British Museum, it seemed logical in due course to invite Mr Kruszyński to collaborate in this work, which he was happy to do. The long period of time which it has taken to complete this work is in part due to Mr Kruszyński's absence abroad. He was able to visit London for extended periods, however, with assistance from the British Museum, the Marcus Aurelius Trust, and the Ancient Persia Fund.

A number of other people have been involved in the preparation of this catalogue, to whom grateful thanks are due. Foremost amongst them is Anne Searight, who has produced the drawings of the objects. The photography has been undertaken by Barbara Winter, and Claire Burton has been of great assistance with typing and editorial work. The analytical work was undertaken by Alistair Pike while he was

Ancient Caucasian and Related Material in The British Museum

on a short-term contract at the British Museum. This work was supervised by Mike Cowell, who has generously given up his time to check the text and update the two diagrams. Dr Roger Moorey, formerly Keeper of Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, kindly agreed to referee this work on behalf of the British Museum, and we are grateful to him for undertaking this work although of course all errors

and opinions are the responsibility of the authors. Last but not least thanks are due to Josephine Turquet who prepared this volume for the press with great skill and efficiency. In the early stages of the process she was assisted by an intern, Melissa Tanouye from New York, whose help must also be acknowledged.

1. Introduction

Along its western shore (the Caspian Sea) stretches the range of Caucasus, which has more and higher mountains than any other range. Many and all manner of nations dwell in the Caucasus, and the most of them live on the fruits of the wild wood. Here, it is said, are trees growing leaves that men crush and mix with water and use for the painting of figures on their clothing; these figures cannot be washed out, but last as long as the wool, as if they had been woven into it from the first. Men and women here (they say) have intercourse openly, like beasts of the flock.

Such was the view of the Greek historian Herodotus (Book I. 203), but far from being inhabited by savages in antiquity, the Caucasus region was host to a number of remarkable cultures. Some of these cultures had links with the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, others with the steppelands to the north of the Caucasus. Sometimes, as in the case of the Koban culture, the inspiration seems to have been indigenous.

The Caucasus region is sandwiched between the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, and traditionally marks the boundary between Europe to the north and Asia to the south (Figs. 1–2). The region is mostly mountainous, and is dominated by the massive east-west mountain range that stretches almost from coast to coast. Amongst the highest peaks are Mount Elbrus (5642m), Shkhara (5201m), Dych-Tau (5203m) and Kazbek (5047m). South of the main range (the Great Caucasus) is another chain of mountains known as the Little Caucasus, and these provide the setting for the largest lake in the region, Lake Sevan. The south-eastern extension of the Little Caucasus chain is the Talish Mountains which are partly in Iran. Between the Great Caucasus and the Little Caucasus, on the

west side bounding the Black Sea, is the plain of Kolkhida, ancient Cholcis, while on the east side, north of the Talish Mountains and bordering the Caspian Sea, is the Kura-Araks lowland. The region is drained by a number of major rivers. On the north side of the main range the River Kuban flows into the Sea of Azov, and the Kuma, the Terek and the Sulak flow into the Caspian Sea. On the south side, the Rioni and the Inguri flow into the Black Sea, and the Kura with its tributary the Araks (Araxes) flows into the Caspian Sea.

For Russians and other Europeans, the area on the north side of the mountains is often known as Ciscaucasia (Predkavkaz, Hither Caucasia), while the area on the south side is known as Transcaucasia (Zakavkaz, Farther Caucasia) (Gvozdetsky 1984). On the north side of the mountains, there is now a chain of small autonomous republics that belong to the Russian federation. These are Karachai-Circassia, Kabardin-Balkar, north Ossetia, Chechen-Ingush and Dagestan (Kolomiets and Solovyev 2000: 26). Except for north Ossetia, most of the people here are Muslim. Here on the north side of the mountains, the foothills gradually give way to the vast steppelands which stretch over much of south Russia. To the south of the mountains are the republics of Armenia and Georgia, which are old-established centres of Christianity, and Azerbaijan which is Muslim. Beyond these Transcaucasian states are the countries of Turkey and Iran where Near Eastern civilisation has flourished since ancient times. The main cities and towns of the Caucasus region are now Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Krasnodar, Grozny and Ordzhonikidze, but outside these centres there are many smaller towns and villages. The

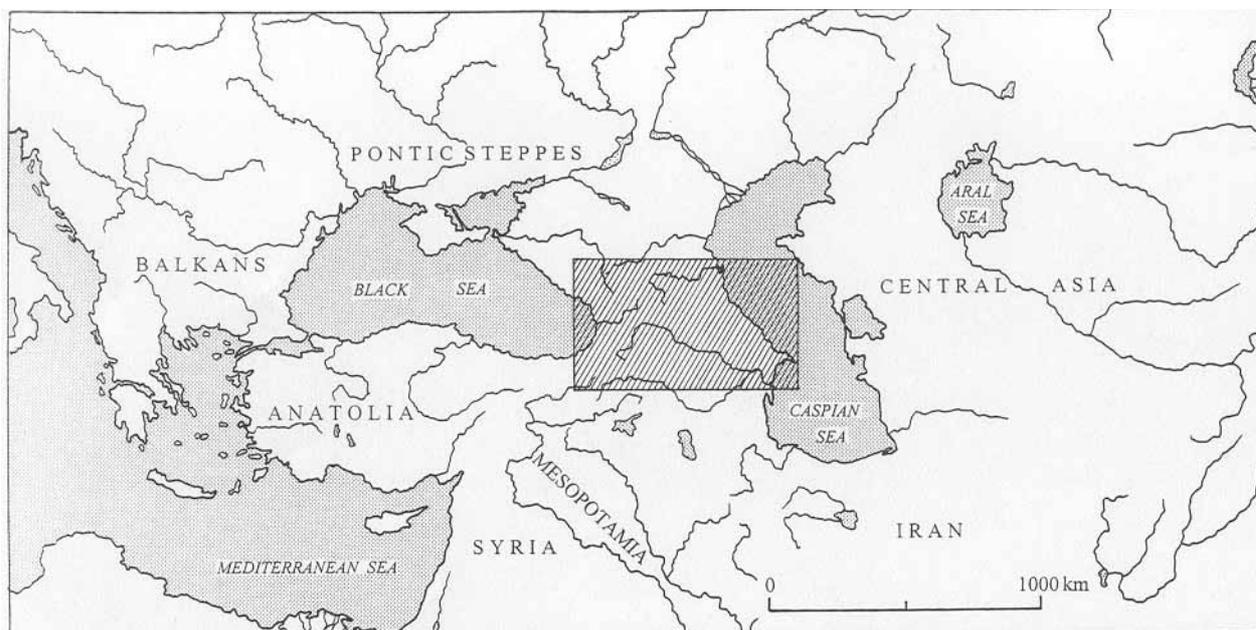


Figure 1 Western Asia showing location of the Caucasus region.

population of the Caucasus region is very diverse, and it is estimated that the area is inhabited by more than 50 different ethnic groups speaking a large number of languages and dialects. Many of these (including Georgian) are classified as Caucasian.

The diversity that is evident today has been characteristic of the Caucasus region from the earliest times, with the result that the history of the area is very complex and the threads are difficult to draw together. At most periods the different parts of the region evolved independently, but at the same time there are some common features that can partly be ascribed no doubt to the mountainous terrain that extends throughout much of the area.

In common with the surrounding areas, there is evidence for palaeolithic and early neolithic sites in the Caucasus, principally in Transcaucasia (Burney and Lang 1971: 17, 28, 34–42; Kohl 1995: 1053–4), but they are neither so numerous nor so sophisticated as those in the Ancient Near East. The growth of permanent agricultural settlements with mudbrick buildings in the late neolithic and early chalcolithic periods is best demonstrated by sites of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture which dates from the 6th millennium BC. This culture flourished in lower Georgia and western Azerbaijan, but there were in addition a number of local chalcolithic cultures, particularly in the 5th and 4th millennia BC. Some of these sites, such as Kultepe/Nakhichevan (Fig. 2) were occupied for long

periods, showing the gradual transition towards the Early Bronze Age. The period immediately preceding the appearance of the Early Transcaucasian culture is particularly well represented at Shengavit near Yerevan in Armenia.

In the Early Bronze Age the Early Transcaucasian or Kura-Araxes culture spread over much of the area to the south of the Caucasus chain (Fig. 3). This culture flourished in the late 4th millennium BC and for much of the 3rd millennium BC. It has been suggested that it was originally centred in the Araxes valley around Erevan, with Shengavit being one of the main sites, but from there it rapidly spread into Georgia and beyond. There are naturally many regional variations within the Early Transcaucasian culture, and there are also chronological divisions, but on the whole there is a surprising uniformity in the material culture. The pottery is distinctive and consists of 'black, brown, and red-burnished handmade ceramics with characteristic polyspherical handles' (Kohl 1995: 1055). Important sites where Early Transcaucasian culture is represented include Kultepe/Nakhichevan and Horom in north-west Armenia. Pottery of Early Transcaucasian type is also found in north-west Iran, for example at Yanik Tepe (Burney 1961: 139, pls LXX–LXXV) and Haftavan Tepe (Burney 1972: 129–32, pl. Id), and in eastern Anatolia.⁴

In the steppes to the north of the Caucasus there was also a flourishing Bronze Age civilisation at this time, attested by a number of rich burial mounds or kurgans, such



Figure 2 The Caucasus region showing modern political boundaries.

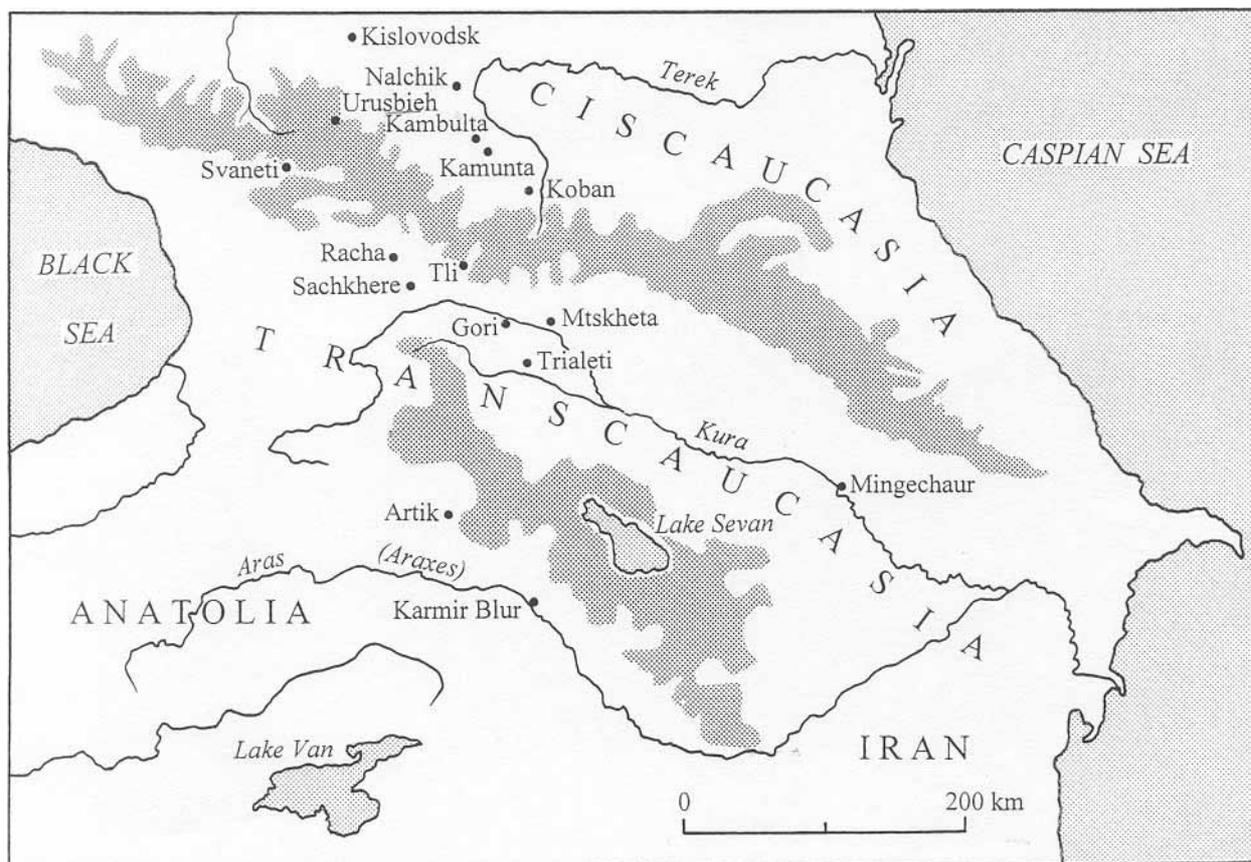


Figure 3 The Caucasus region showing location of principal archaeological sites.

as those at Maikop and Novosvobodnaya (Kohl 1995: 1054). The kurgan at Maikop in the northern Caucasus, containing a rich assortment of gold and silver objects, was excavated in 1897. It is thought to have been 'the tomb of a chieftain of a rich tribe of livestock breeders that had dealings with the more civilised countries to the south' (Piotrovsky 1975: 12). The principal burial had been placed under a canopy decorated with gold plaques, many showing lions or bulls, supported by poles bearing figures of bulls in gold or silver. There were many vessels including two remarkable silver vases with relief decoration (Frankfort 1954: 115, figs. 45–6, pl. 124 A–D). The beads made of exotic stones testify to long distance trade connections, and many of the precious items show evidence of contact with the Ancient Near East from the 4th millennium BC onwards.

Following the decline of the Kura-Araxes culture there is a dearth of settlement sites in Transcaucasia, and the first half of the second millennium BC is characterised by the appearance of a large number of burial mounds (kurgans). The most famous of these are at Trialeti in Georgia, where excavations were undertaken by B.A. Kuftin in 1936–1940 (Kuftin 1941). The richest of the Trialeti kurgans belong to the Middle Bronze Age II period (early 2nd millennium BC).⁵ In a number of them, the bodies, thought to be of prosperous chieftains, were placed on wooden four-wheeled bullcarts surrounded by the corpses of cattle and sheep. The burials were often accompanied by a rich collection of grave-goods. Outstanding finds included a footed silver goblet from barrow 5 with embossed decoration showing a banquet scene and a frieze of deer, and a decorated silver bucket and gold cup from barrow 17.⁶ These kurgans at Trialeti and the

later graves at Lchashen (see below) are seen by Stuart Piggott as a late form of the pit grave wagon burials that earlier extended 'over the great area of steppe from north-east Bulgaria to the Volga' (Piggott 1992: 20, 27).

Other particularly rich burial mounds of the Middle Bronze Age containing gold and silver vessels have been discovered at Kirovakan and Karashamb in Armenia (Kohl 1995: 1056; Curtis 1993: 11–12; Piotrovsky 1975: 13).

Around the middle of the 2nd millennium BC a distinctive type of polychrome painted pottery known as 'Urmia ware' appears at sites in Azerbaijan. It has geometric and animal designs in red and black on a white background. This type of pottery has also been found at sites in Iranian Azerbaijan, notably Haftavan Tepe (level Late VI B), Dinkha Tepe and Geoy Tepe, and in eastern Turkey (Edwards 1981, 1986; Rubinson 1994). At around the same time or later, other but related types of painted pottery occur at sites in Georgia (e.g. Trialeti) and Armenia (e.g. Artik, Metsamor) (Edwards 1981: 109).

The graves at Lchashen on the north-east corner of Lake Sevan in Armenia cover a long period from the late 3rd millennium BC onwards, but the richest graves date from the beginning of the Late Bronze Age in the late 2nd millennium BC. From the graves at Lchashen come both chariots with spoked wheels and heavy four-wheeled wagons. The latter are clumsy vehicles with their solid wheels, but show evidence of sophisticated woodworking techniques. Connections with the Near East are demonstrated by the discovery here of gold quadruple spiral beads (Culican 1964: 38, fig. 1). Beads of this distinctive type, where the ends of the spirals are wound round the central tube as opposed to

beads made from a single piece of metal, have been found at a number of Near Eastern sites, including Marlik, Babylon and Mari, in contexts dating to c. 1350–1050 BC (Curtis 1984: 4–6). There is also from Lchashen a Near Eastern cylinder seal of Mitannian type (Curtis 1993: 12–13).⁷ Other important Late Bronze Age sites in Transcaucasia, all of which continue into the Early Iron Age, include the cemeteries of Samtavro in Georgia and Artik in Armenia, and the extensive settlement at Metsamor in the Araxes valley in Armenia. Here there was a central citadel surrounded by a Cyclopean wall, and extensive evidence for the smelting of metal (Barnett 1982: 327). From a tomb at Metsamor comes a remarkable carnelian cylinder seal with a hieroglyphic inscription mentioning the Kassite king Kurigalzu I (Brentjes 1991; Curtis 1993: 13; Kohl 1995: 1058). Another tomb at Metsamor contained an onyx weight in the shape of a frog with a cuneiform inscription of the Kassite ruler Ulam-Buriash (Kohl 1995: 1057–8).

Further evidence for contact with Mesopotamia is provided by an agate eye-stone from Khodjali in Azerbaijan which has an inscription of Adad-nirari I (1305–1274 BC). It is inscribed 'Palace of Adad-nirari, king of the universe' (Schaeffer 1948: 498; Culican 1964: 39–40; Grayson 1987: A.O.76.46, ex.8).

In the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, from about the 12th century BC down to the 7th century BC, the central and northern parts of the Caucasus region were dominated by the Koban culture (Fig. 4), which is discussed in more detail below. This culture is named after a village in northern Ossetia, and is characterised by cemeteries containing a rich assortment of bronze objects. Particularly characteristic are bronze axes with incised decoration, sheet bronze belts, bronze animal pendants, and elaborate bronze pins. A form of the Koban culture also spread into the southern Caucasus, particularly to western Georgia where it is known as the Koban-Colchian culture (Lang 1966: 60–3; Kohl 1995: 1056; Braund 1994: 107). The bronze axe with incised decoration (no. 114) is an example of this phenomenon.

In the first half of the 1st millennium BC part of Transcaucasia was dominated by the powerful state of Urartu (Piotrovsky 1967; Barnett 1982). This kingdom was

originally centred on Lake Van now in eastern Turkey, but it expanded to include the whole of the mountainous region of Armenia as well as into north-western Iran. Among the main Urartian sites are Van and Toprak Kale in the vicinity of Lake Van and Karmir Blur and Arinberd in the region of Yerevan on the north side of the River Araxes to the south-west of Lake Sevan. By the 9th century BC Urartu was already a power to be reckoned with, and inevitably clashed with neighbouring Assyria which was the dominant state in the Ancient Near East at this time. Hostilities began in the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), several of whose campaigns against Urartu are depicted on the bronze gates from Balawat in Assyria that are now in the British Museum. A number of subsequent Assyrian kings were also involved in wars with Urartu, notably Sargon II (721–705 BC) whose so-called eighth campaign in 714 BC against the Urartian king Rusa I took him right round Lake Urmia and Lake Van.

Although there was a significant Urartian presence in Armenia, Urartian objects are not included in this catalogue, partly because the British Museum's large and important collection of Urartian objects is published, mostly in a series of articles by R.D. Barnett (1950, 1954, 1972),⁸ and partly because the material culture of Urartu was essentially Ancient Near Eastern rather than Caucasian. In fact, the culture of Urartu was very much influenced by Assyria, as reflected in the adoption of the cuneiform script and the partly Assyrian style of the magnificent bronzes for which Urartu is justly celebrated. It is likely that the Urartian state finally collapsed in about 590 BC or a little later when it was overthrown possibly by the Medes alone (Piotrovsky 1967: 14) or by the Scythians acting in conjunction with the Medes (Barnett 1982: 364). Other scholars, however, believe the end of Urartu may have come earlier, in the middle or the second half of the 7th century BC (e.g. Kroll 1984: 169–170).

Beginning in the late 7th century BC, or perhaps even earlier, a number of Greek cities were founded around the coast of the Black Sea (Rolle 1989: 11–14; Boardman 1980: 238–55; Piotrovsky 1975: 20–21). Amongst the best-known of these colonies are Olbia (Borysthene), Chersonesus in the Crimea, Trapezus (Trebizond), Amisos (Samsun) and Sinope (Sinop). To the east of the Sea of Azov, and north of

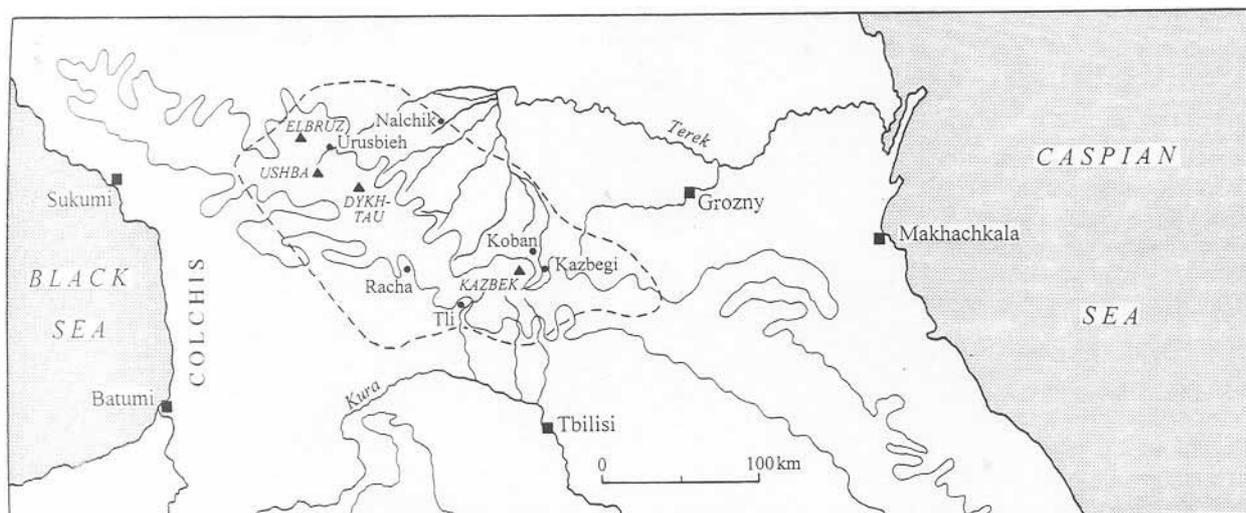


Figure 4 Distribution of the Koban culture.

the Caucasus Mountains, were Phanagoreia near the mouth of the River Kuban (Boardman 1980: 253–4), and Tanais in the Don delta (Boardman 1980: 254). Further south was Phasis in western Georgia (Boardman 1980: 254). This part of Georgia was known to the Greeks as Colchis,⁹ while eastern Georgia was known as Iberia. Greek interest in the area – and presumably its commercial possibilities – is reflected in the story of Jason and the Argonauts, who travelled to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece.¹⁰ Phasis was founded, according to Boardman (ibid.) ‘to give immediate access to the Caucasus and its mineral wealth.’ These were trading colonies, exporting local agricultural produce and minerals in exchange for Greek luxury goods. Boardman conjectures that ‘the search for metals had probably inspired the foundations along the southern shores of the Black Sea and in the east, where the resources of the Caucasus and of Armenia might be tapped. The Chalybes were the traditional iron producers for the Greek world (Strabo 549, 551), and they were generally thought to live in north-east Asia Minor, supplying their raw material to the Greeks through Amisos, on the coast. There was gold at Phasis, and remoter sources might also have been exploited’ (Boardman 1980:245).¹¹

In the 8th–7th centuries BC several Indo-European tribes passed through the Caucasus region, in particular the Cimmerians and the Scythians. According to Herodotus (Books I.103–6, IV.1, 4, 11–12) the Scythians drove the Cimmerians out of their homeland north of the Black Sea, later to become Scythia (see below),¹² and pursued them across the Caucasus. The Scythians did not, however, take the direct route along the east side of the Black Sea, and go via Colchis, but they missed their way ‘and came by the upper and much longer road, having on the right the Caucasus mountains.’ This part of the account is confused, but presumably means they either followed the modern Military Highway through the centre of the Caucasus chain or they went further east and came down the western shore of the Caspian Sea. They then defeated the Medes in battle, according to Herodotus, and proceeded to spend the next 28 years terrorising Western Asia as far as Syria and Palestine, laying waste the land and carrying off booty and tribute. Eventually, they were defeated and driven out of Asia by the Medes.¹³ Although Herodotus’ account should certainly not be taken at face value, and many of the details may be fabricated, there is no reason to doubt that the story is based on a historical reality.

On the south side of the Caucasus the Cimmerians first encountered the Urartians (Barnett 1982: 354–61) and then infiltrated Anatolia. Here they had a considerable impact which included mounting successful attacks on Phrygia and Lydia (Sulimirski and Taylor 1991: 559). It is clear from Assyrian texts that the Cimmerians were a thorn in the side of Assyrian kings from the reign of Sargon onwards (Grayson 1991: 92–3, 127–9, 141, 145–6, 160), and even though in the reign of Esarhaddon a Cimmerian army led by Teushpa was defeated in Turkey in about 679 BC, the threat was not dissipated. In spite of this well-attested presence in the Caucasus and western Asia, traces of the Cimmerians remain elusive. Ghirshman claimed to be able to recognise examples of Cimmerian art in Iran and Anatolia (Ghirshman

1983), but these identifications are not generally accepted.¹⁴ According to Sulimirski and Taylor (1991: 558), some graves at Artik in Armenia can be attributed to the Cimmerians, and Burney (1977: 197) remarks that the cemetery of Samtavro near Mtskheta in Georgia may be Cimmerian, but these identifications remain speculative.

Like the Cimmerians, the presence of the Scythians in Western Asia is also attested in contemporary texts. Thus, they are mentioned in texts dating from the reign of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) (Grayson 1991: 180). As with the Cimmerians traces of Scythian material culture in Western Asia cannot be identified with any confidence. It is sometimes thought that a wealthy burial allegedly discovered at Ziwiye in Iranian Kurdistan was that of a Scythian prince, but this is most unlikely. There are, then, few traces of the Scythians in the Ancient Near East or in Transcaucasia.

The Scythian heartland is actually the area of steppeland to the north of the Black Sea between the River Danube and the River Don in what is now the Ukraine (see **Fig. 40** and map in Rolle 1989: 12–13).¹⁵ Throughout Scythia there are burial mounds (kurgans), mainly dating between the 7th and 4th century BC.¹⁶ Most of the burial mounds are in the Crimean peninsula and to the north of the Black Sea, for example those at Melgunov and Chertomlyk, but they also occur in the area to the east of the Sea of Azov and to the north of the Caucasus Mountains, particularly around the River Kuban and its tributaries, for example the kurgan at Kelermes. There is also the famous Five Brothers kurgan on the estuary of the River Don near Rostov (**Fig. 40**). Many of the kurgans contained an astonishing wealth of material, with many items made of gold or silver. However, some of the best known pieces from Scythian kurgans, such as the gold comb from Solokha and the gold vase from Kul-Oba, depict Scythians but are actually of Greek workmanship.

Although Scythia proper was to the north of the Black Sea, as described, the term ‘Scythian’ is often used to refer to a culture extending over a much wider area, even as far as Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains¹⁷ (Piotrovsky 1975: 20). This whole area was inhabited by closely related tribes who shared a similar nomadic lifestyle based on the breeding of horses and cattle. The material culture of the Scythians is distinctive, and an important ingredient is the animal style art that is found throughout the steppes of south Russia. Reclining stags and panthers are particularly popular. Scythian horse harness and trappings are distinctive, as are certain of their weapons, such as the *akinakes* (short sword) and the battle-axe. The Scythians have also given their name (in archaeological parlance) to a distinctive type of three-winged socketed arrowhead, but the form was in reality widespread both in south Russia and, later, in the Ancient Near East.

In 539 BC, an event took place that was to have a profound impact on the Ancient Near East and surrounding areas. In that year, Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid empire and king of the newly united Medes and Persians, captured Babylon and made himself master of the Near East. Within a short time, Transcaucasia came under Achaemenid influence. Herodotus records that Persian rule extended as far as the Caucasian mountains, but did not

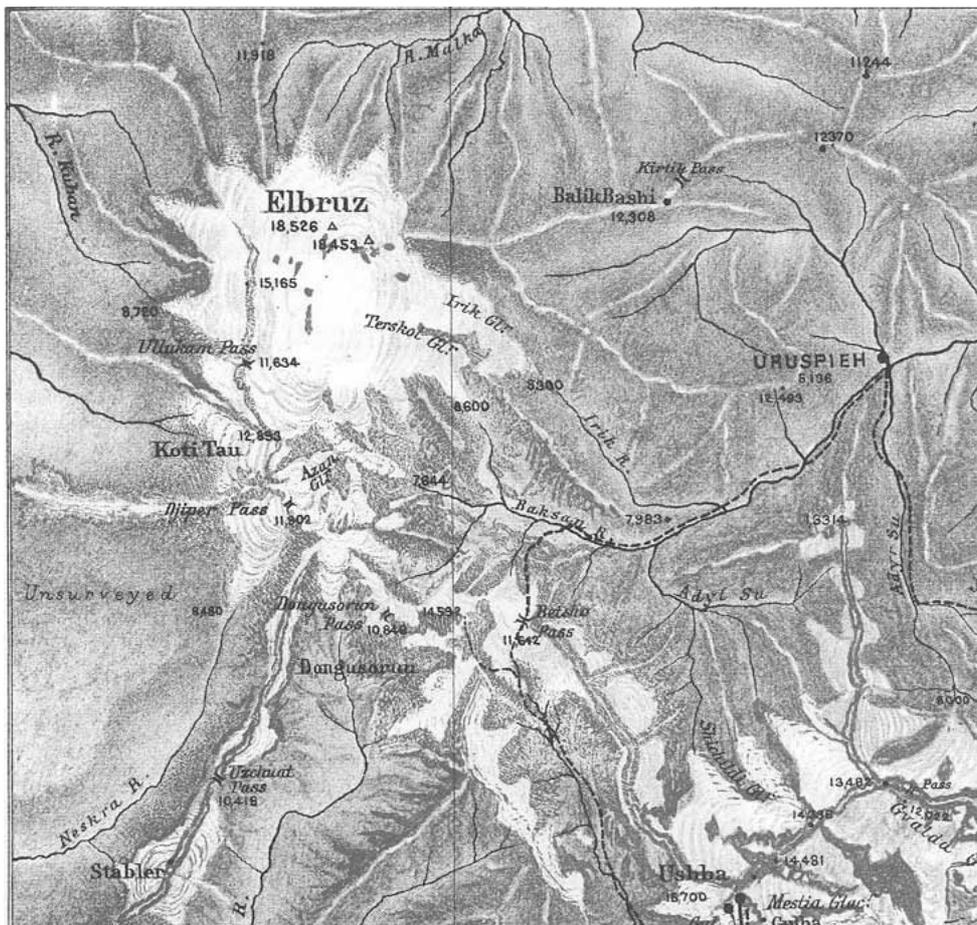


Figure 5 Part of the central Caucasus range showing Uruspieh and Mount Elbruz (from the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* XI, 1889).

include the country north of the Caucasus (Herodotus III. 97). It does not appear, though, that there was uniform control, and Xenophon records that some peoples encountered by the Greeks in their march from northern Mesopotamia to the Black Sea in 401–400 BC ‘were not subjects of the king’ (*Anabasis* V. v.17). Also, it does not seem that Colchis was actually included as a province (satrapy), as after describing the provinces and the tribute that each should pay, Herodotus tells us that ‘gifts were also required of the Colchians and their neighbours as far as the Caucasian mountains’ (Herodotus III. 97). Whatever the status of Colchis at this time, it was certainly prosperous in the 5th–4th centuries BC as attested by discoveries at sites in western Georgia such as Vani, Sairkhe and Pichvnari (Braund 1994: 126–131; Tsetschladze 1993–94; Vickers and Kakhidze 2001). The gold and silver plate and jewellery found in the graves of this date show influence from both Greece and Achaemenid Persia. Contemporary Armenia seems to have been renowned for vases in precious metal and horses, as these are the presents being brought by the Armenian delegation (no. III) to the Persian king, as shown on the Apadana reliefs at Persepolis (Walser 1966: pls. 10, 38–9).

Apart from evidence for Achaemenid-period objects from Transcaucasia,¹⁸ there are also traces of monumental buildings of the Achaemenid period. These are attested by the discovery of bell-shaped column bases of Persian type at sites like Gumbati in eastern Georgia, Beniamin in Armenia, and Qaracamirli and Sari Tepe in Azerbaijan (Zardarian and Akopian 1994: 185–7; Knauss 1999a; 2000; Gagošidze and

Kipiani 2000: figs. 1–2; Boardman 2000: 241, n.56).¹⁹ There is also limited textual evidence. Thus, Xenophon reports that on their way through western Armenia (now eastern Turkey) his army of mercenaries passed by two palaces, one of them for the satrap (*Anabasis* IV. iv. 2,7).²⁰

The Achaemenid empire collapsed when the last Persian king, Darius III, was finally defeated by Alexander at Gaugamela in northern Iraq in 331 BC. Alexander himself never invaded Transcaucasia, but with his victories he effectively inherited the old Persian empire. After his death in 323 BC, however, his generals quarrelled over his legacy, and while Ptolemy seized control in Egypt, Seleucus did the same in Mesopotamia and Syria. There is little evidence, but it seems likely that Colchis and Iberia became part of the empire of Seleucus I Nicator (305–281 BC) (Braund 1994: 144). Amongst material of Hellenistic date is a splendid bronze statue from Vani in western Georgia (Lordkipanidze 1994). In spite of such finds, this was apparently a period of decline for Colchis, but of prosperity for Iberia (Braund 1994: 144–5). Armenia also came under Seleucid domination, but here the Orontid dynasty enjoyed a certain measure of independence until the early 2nd century BC (Redgate 1998: 62–64). The history of Transcaucasia in the last centuries BC and early centuries AD is very complicated, and all we can do here is draw attention to a few of the more significant events.

A new political power came onto the scene in about 238 BC, when an Iranian people who came to be known as the Parthians seized control of the Seleucid province of Parthia, to the east of the Caspian Sea. In due course, they

established control over much of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia. Possession of the areas of Media Atropatene and probably Balasgan, to the south-west and west of the Caspian Sea (Wiesehöfer 1996: 144–5, maps on pp. 116, 152), suggests that their influence possibly extended into what is now Azerbaijan.

At about the same time as the province of Parthia broke away from the Seleucid empire, both Iberia and Armenia obtained some measure of independence (Braund 1994: 144–5). In Armenia, a period of growth was ushered in with the accession of Artaxias I (c. 189–160 BC). Under him and his successors, particularly Tigranes the Great (95–55 BC), the frontiers of Armenia were pushed forward. Dating from around this time are some splendid works of art including the head of a bronze statue now in the British Museum (Walters 1899: no. 266).²¹ It is in Hellenistic style but has been identified as a representation of the Iranian goddess Anahita. The head was found in about 1872 in the ancient Armenian city of Satala (modern Sadak in north-eastern Turkey). Before long, however, largely because of its geographical location, Armenia was to be caught up in the struggle between the Roman and Parthian empires. This dispute was temporarily resolved by the agreement that Tiridates, brother of the Parthian king Vologases, should be crowned king of Armenia by the Roman emperor, Nero (Redgate 1998: 88), effectively making Armenia a Parthian client kingdom. For a while there was peace, but hostilities flared up on a number of occasions over the next couple of centuries, most notably in the time of Trajan (AD 98–117) who briefly annexed Armenia.

By about 100 BC, Colchis and some other parts of Transcaucasia were under the control of Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus, who had carved out for himself a considerable empire around the Black Sea and possibly even extending north of the Caucasus (Braund 1994: 153–5). These successes were surely the catalyst for Roman intervention in the area, which took the form of an invasion by Pompey in 66–65 BC. Colchis and Iberia were conquered, after which both areas were controlled by local rulers who were answerable to Rome. This was a period of great

prosperity for Georgia, as indicated by the richness of some of the tombs. For example, some tombs in the Samtavro cemetery on the outskirts of Mtskheta, the capital of the kingdom of Iberia, contained a wealth of gold jewellery, silver plate and coins (Apakidze and Nikolaishvili 1994). In these tombs the Roman and to a lesser extent Parthian influence is clear, but there was also a strong local element in the art of this period, as shown by the large number of highly distinctive and elaborate belt buckles that have been found in graves (nos. 133–8).

In the mid-3rd century AD the Parthians in Iran were overthrown and replaced by another Iranian dynasty, the Sasanians. Fortunately, we have from the time of the second Sasanian king Shapur I (AD 240–272) written information about the extent of Sasanian control over Transcaucasia at this time. Thus in his long inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam in Iran, Shapur claims to possess ‘Balasagan up to the Caucasus and to the gate of the Alans’²² (i.e. Azerbaijan and eastern Georgia), ‘Virozan’ (Iberia) and ‘Armen’ (Armenia) (Wiesehöfer 1996: 184). Shapur’s son Hormizd-Ardashir, the crown prince, was installed as ‘great king of Armenia’ (Wiesehöfer 1996: 185; Redgate 1998: 94). This information is supplemented by the Paikuli inscription of Narseh (AD 293–302) (Wiesehöfer 1996: 154, 184–5; Braund 1994: 240–2). But the Sasanian hold over Transcaucasia, certainly the western parts of the area, seems to have been tenuous, and Roman and Byzantine influence remained strong. Nevertheless, the discovery in Georgia of Sasanian silver vessels of the late 3rd century AD is indicative of contacts with Sasanian Iran (Harper 2000: 48; Braund 1994: 242–3).

The first part of Transcaucasia to embrace Christianity was Armenia. Thus in AD 303, Tiridates, following his conversion by St Gregory the Illuminator, established Christianity as the state religion. This incidentally led to tension with Sasanian Iran which was potentially damaging for Armenia. Georgia followed suit in about AD 330, during the reign of Constantine the Great. The conversion here is popularly ascribed to a woman slave from Cappadocia called St Nino.

