AN URARTIAN GRAVE IN AGHAVNADZOR, VAYOTS DZOR, ARMENIA

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VDP021 Municipality of Areni, Aghavnadzor-3, cemetery, elevation 1611 m a.s.l. (p. 147)

In 2013 an Urartian grave was identified during construction work in the front yard of a private house in Aghavnadzor, Vayots Dzor region (Figs. 1-2). It was probably part of an ancient cemetery that has been largely erased by the modern village. The study of this important discovery is now part of the VDP – Vayots Dzor Project, an Armenian – Italian archaeological project devoted to a wide-ranging archaeological investigation of the Vayots Dzor Region. The project includes survey and excavations across the entire region. The archaeological investigation revealed a collective burial, unfortunately partially disturbed, which features a repertoire of identifiable grave goods with distinctive pottery vessels pertaining to the Urartians.

The burial consists of a rectangular cist, 4.35 x 2.5 m, partly built on worked bedrock (Fig. 3). It is oriented south-west/north-east and bordered by a single line of roughly worked medium-sized stones. These rocks are bigger on the north side and preserved for just two courses. An unusual cobbled surface is present to the east, made of the same kind of stones laid flat with loose pebbles in between, for a width of 0.60 m. Externally to the east, in front of the cobbled area, two slight almost rounded depressions were identified, suggesting the imprints left by heavy objects, perhaps vessels used during the rituals or earthenware urns – as attested in contemporary Urartian graves with the coexistence of cremation and inhumation practices. The burial shows traces of disturbance, indicated also by scattered, disarticulated bones and grave goods pushed against the short sides. A few bones are also present on the cobbled flooring. The grave was unfortunately partly destroyed during gardening activities by local inhabitants of the village. The situation made it difficult to determine the exact number of individuals present, but the remains are currently under study.

GRAVE GOODS

The grave goods include pottery, metal objects and a bone pendant. The ceramic repertoire features 9 complete vessels of local productions and typical Urartian ware (Fig. 4). The latter is represented by four high quality red polished Urartian vessels: a typical trefoil jug, a small globular jar, a spouted jar (undergoing conservation treatment), and a miniature dish/plate. A further two specimens may be identified as Urartian ware only on the basis of their form, which is unknown in local assemblages; they might have been used as lids. All these vessel forms are known from similar contemporary contexts. Another vessel of Urartian manufacture is a pinched lamp with inner division, in this case equipped with a single hole for insertion of the wick. In addition, there is locally produced material, notably two cooking pots with evident traces of burning on the outer surfaces and a roughly decorated brown burnished jug. Of particular interest is the presence of so-called “maker’s marks” executed before firing on two of the miniature dishes, with ‘X’ and ‘T’ shapes, and on the Urartian globular jar, on which two asterisks were incised after firing on the lower part of the vessel. Some parallels are known for the two fibulas, the bone pendant and the curved knife from contemporary burials, especially the knife, that seems to have been widespread during the Middle Iron Age and is quite frequently found in non-local Urartian contexts.

Lastly, the glazed *alabastron* vessel could be an import from Assyria or Mannea, in any case it is a result of the Assyrianization of Urartian culture (Fig. 5).

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

It was possible to obtain a reliable C14 chronological determination for one human bone of the inhumation burial; another sample is currently under examination. The chronological range spans the 9th and 8th centuries BC. If confirmed by the second analysis, this will have various significant historical implications. The first point is that this is the earliest archaeological evidence of Urartian presence in the region at the end of the 9th century BC. The inscription of Odzasar (Ilandagh) (CTU A 3-8), currently located in the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, testifies to the entry of the area into the Urartian orbit at the time of the co-regency of Išpuini and Minua and is substantially contemporary to the grave discussed here.

The tomb of Aghavnadzor, together with other archaeological remains found in Vayots Dzor, such as the fortresses of Kyoshk and Getap, testify to the stable possession by the Urartians of the Vayots Dzor area and the valley of the River Arpa. It confirms once again that the present-day Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan was also an integral part of the territories controlled by Urartu. This is the only conclusion possible if we take into account that the Sharur plain, where the important fortress of Oğlan Qala is located (dated to the Urartian period thanks to unequivocal elements such as *pitboi* with cuneiform inscriptions), lies between the River Arpa valley in Vayots Dzor and the Ararat valley. In the latter, now divided between Nakhchevan and Iran, there are unmistakable traces of the Urartian occupation (for example the sites of Verahram and Ališar). Another element of great importance is the fact that the tomb of Aghavnadzor, if future C14 analysis confirms current findings, will constitute the oldest evidence of the introduction of the typical red-polished Urartian pottery currently known.

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Fig. 1 - General Map of South Armenia.

Fig. 2 - Localization of Aghavnadzor.

Fig. 3 - 3D reconstruction of the Urartian's burial.

Fig. 4 - Urartian and local pottery from the Aghavnadzor Grave.

Fig. 5 - Objects from the Urartian Grave of Aghavnadzor.