
BOOK REVIEWS

**Ashot Piliposyan, Hasmik Simonyan, Lianna Gevorgyan,
Hayk Navasardyan,
Metsamor: A Five-Thousand-Year-Old Settlement in Ancient Armenia,
2024, “Antares”, 180 p.**

In 2024, upon the recommendation of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia and by the decision of the Scientific Council of the “Service for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Museums-Reserves and the Historical Environment”, the work “Metsamor: A Five-Thousand-Year-Old Settlement in Ancient Armenia” by Ashot Piliposyan, Hasmik Simonyan, Lianna Gevorgyan and Hayk Navasardyan was published. The scientific editor of the work is one of the authors, Professor Ashot Piliposyan. The authors emphasize in advance that this work on the ancient, multifaceted archaeological site of Metsamor is a brief summary of almost 60 years of fieldwork, and excavations and research are ongoing (page 78). The work consists of an introduction, 10 sub-chapters (although the authors does not divide the work into chapters), a conclusion, references, tables and the list of tables. In addition to the general tables, which total 70 pages (pages 101-171), the work is replete with maps and numerous photographs.

In the Introduction (pages 5-10), the complete history of the Metsamor excavations is presented. The first excavations (1965-2005) were carried out by the archaeologist Emma Khanzadyan (1922-2007) and the geologist Koryun Mkrtchyan (1928-1993). Since 2013, an Armenian-Polish international archaeological expedition has been working in Metsamor, co-led by Ashot Piliposyan and Krzysztof Jakubiak (Poland).

In the work, the archaeological history of the Metsamor monument begins from the Chalcolithic period (Metsamor in the Chalcolithic Period, pages 11-13). Authors note, that the earliest layer of the archaeological site (6th-4th mill. BC) dates back to the Chalcolithic period, when a settlement was established on three volcanic hills near the sources of the Metsamor River. As the authors correctly note, Metsamor is one of the most regularly studied ancient sites of the 5th-1st mill. BC of the Armenian Highlands (and, rightly so, of the entire Ancient Near East). The monument includes a Bronze-Iron Age settlement (a citadel, an industrial complex, urban quarters and a separate platform for astronomical observations) and a large necropolis.

The area is more than 250 hectares. This area contains three volcanic cones: the largest, Mets Blur (Big Hill), rises 27-28 m above the adjacent plain; the second, Pokr Blur (Small Hill), rises 8-10 m; and the third, Karmir Karer (Red Stones), rises 2-3 m in relative height (pages 5-7). It is noted that the Metsamor hill in the Chalcolithic period, was part of the group of contemporary settlements built in this region, which spread in the fertile water basins of the Kura and Araxes rivers and their tributaries (especially the Metsamor) and in the adjacent territories, forming a continuous and viable system of early agricultural and cattle-breeding settlements (Mashtotsblur, Terteridzor, Kghzyakblur, Etchmiadzin, Mokhrabur, Teghut, Aknashen, Aratashen, etc.).

The study of the archaeological material of this period found in Metsamor shows that it has common parallels in the contemporary monuments of the Transcaucasus (Nakhijevan Kyul tepe, Shulaverisgora: the second horizon, Imirisgora: from the first to the fifth horizon, Alikemektepesi, etc.), and can refer to the period, including the middle of the 5th mill. BC to the first half of the 4th mill. BC. (pages 11-13). In the next sub-chapter (The Early Bronze Age Period in the Metsamor Area, pages 14-18), the structure of the Metsamor settlement is described, according to which: the settlement consisted mainly of round or oval dwellings, built close together and, in some areas, side by side, sometimes with rectangular outbuildings. The dwellings had a low stone base and a semi-oval top, made of raw bricks that rose and gradually narrowed, ending in a round **yerdik**, an opening in the roof for light and air. It appears that the entire weight of the structure was supported by the log, placed in the centre of the dwelling, which ended in a horizontal wooden crossbeam, supporting the roof.

Like other early agricultural settlements of the Kura-Araxes culture in the Ararat Valley, Metsamor probably had circular clay hearths, placed in the centre of the dwellings (page 15). It is interesting that Stamp seals also occupy an important place among the Early Bronze Age finds from Metsamor during this period. Moreover, as a result of the comparison of the excavated material, the authors have concluded that these are the earliest types of seals; they were widespread in the Ancient Near East (Amuk Valley, Jericho, Çatal Hüyük, Hacilar, Tell Arpachiyah, Tell Halaf, Ubaid, Jarmo, Tell Brak, Suza, Jafarabad, Hakalan etc.) in the 7th -6th mill. BC and were used up to and including the Late Antiquity (page 17). It is also concluded in the chapter that as in the entire Armenian Highlands, in the same way in Metsamor, the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes early agricultural archaeological realities survived for about a millennium, from the middle of the 4th mill. BC to the second half of the 3rd mill. BC, after which, quickly enough, during about the 24th-22nd cc. BC, under the influence of many factors (including ecological, social, economic, ethnic and others), they left the historical arena (page 18).

In the next chapter, (The Middle Bronze Age in the Metsamor Area, pages 19-22), the cultural changes of the archaeological sites in the Armenian Highland are described, without taking into consideration the consequences and results of the climate's impact on the environment. This is a circumstance that has already found its place in domestic scholarly works for quite a long time. The utilization of these works¹ in this study would greatly contribute to the clear elucidation and final conclusion of the phenomena described below.

So, authors note that in the second half of the 3rd mill. BC, unprecedented and diverse processes began and rapidly spread throughout the Near East (including the Armenian Highlands), significantly changing the ethnic, political, economic, commercial, and socio-cultural panorama of the region. In these conditions, after the decline of the

¹ See, for example, Grekyan, Bobokhyan 2022; Kosyan, Grekyan 2024.

Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes culture, the semi-nomadic pastoralism of the Middle Bronze Age post-Kura-Araxes culture spread over the central, northern, southern and eastern parts of the Armenian Highlands, which is so far known only from burial complexes (settlements are missing). This led the researchers to believe that from around the 23rd/22nd to the 19th /18th cc. BC, the ethnic bearers of the Middle Bronze Age post-Kura-Araxes culture regularly moved through the riverine areas and water basins of the Armenian Highlands in search of new pastures for their cattle. They lived in temporary tent-shaped dwellings (the traces of which have not survived), and along the way (perhaps periodically) built and abandoned their own tribal burial structures according to the needs of the nomadic lifestyle. These ethnic bearers are known in literature as the bearers of the Bedeni-Berkaber and Trialeti-Vanadzor Middle Bronze Age cultures. And then at this stage, it is difficult to say with certainty whether the carriers of the above cultures passed through the territory of Metsamor or not. In any case, the artefacts typical of these cultures do not seem to have been recorded in the archaeological layers of the citadel and the urban quarters of Metsamor, as well as in the burial complexes.

Therefore, it can be assumed that after a thousand years of Kura-Araxes culture, a significant part of Metsamor was temporarily deserted for a certain period of time (perhaps, from the 23rd/22nd to the 20th/19th cc. BC). The picture changed significantly in the second quarter of the 2nd mill. BC, when the bearers of the so-called Sevan-Artsakhian, Karmirberdian and Van-Urmian Middle Bronze Age cultural groups began to settle in the central and eastern regions of the Armenian Highlands (page 19). And there is noted that the above-mentioned means that around the 18th -16th cc. BC, on average every 50-60 years, the Middle Bronze Age population of Metsamor carried out renovations and reconstructions in the territory of the settlement. It seems that this was the time when the first ancient wall of irregular masonry was built to separate the settlement from the outside world, gradually turning it into a fortress (page 20).

The presence of prominent manifestations of the appropriation and effective organization of residential space, hall-like structures, a developed economy, as well as the reconstruction of details of the burial ritual, allowed the authors to conclude that the Middle Bronze Age settlement of Metsamor was already regulated and had social stratification (page 22). The following conclusion of the authors is quite interesting, according to which: The fifty years of excavations at Metsamor show that the members of this society and their descendants never left the territory they inhabited in Metsamor. Instead, they reinforced their fortified settlement, developed the economy and trade, and advanced various crafts, including pottery, stonework, leatherwork, woodwork, and especially metalwork. As a result, they extended the boundaries of the fortress and, together with other societies of the Armenian Highlands, promoted intertribal, economic, trade, construction and socio-cultural developments that are now recognised in literature as realities of the Late Bronze Age (page 22).

The next sub-chapter is the most extensive, covering about 20 pages (Metsamor in the Late Bronze Age Processes, pages 23-41). In this chapter, the authors attempt to correlate the archaeological context with the political history of the Near East during the 17th –14th centuries BC. In the case of the latter, it is necessary to note that the authors' conjectural interpretation never steps outside the bounds of that same conjecture. It is mentioned that in the 17th -16th cc. BC, under the conditions of rapprochement and gradual convergence of the Sevan-Artsakhian, Karmirberdian and Van-Urmian Middle Bronze Age cultural groups established in the Armenian Highlands, and from the last quarter of the 16th c. BC, a qualitatively new and highly universal culture began to be perceptible, which spread throughout almost the entire Armenian Highlands during the 15th-14th cc. BC and received the conventional name "Lchashen-Metsamor" in literature in the 1990s (page 23).

The presence of tin, which emerged as a result of the excavations, is of considerable interest, "On the hill, it is found in the form of black, grey or brown shapeless particles, concretions and hollow grains. The content of copper, zinc, lead and especially tin in the production slag of Metsamor bronze objects is close to or more than 1%, which means that they are not natural formations, but were added to the alloy during the production process" (pages 24-26).

In this regard, the authors mention the assumption of Geologist K. Mkrtchyan, according to which: known occurrences of tin, associated with metamorphic shales in several parts of the Armenian Highlands, indicate the possibility of tin deposits in the central and eastern regions of the Highlands, which could have satisfied the demand for this metal in the Metsamor area (page 24). They simultaneously note that: It appears that the early state formations of the Armenian Highlands in the 2nd mill. BC used two known transit trade for tin: the eastern (from the Iranian plateau and the Persian Gulf) and the western (Mediterranean) routes (page 25).

Without dwelling on the authors' seemingly baseless and unfounded assumptions about Metsamor's involvement in this or that event of Near Eastern political life (even the discovery of The frog-shaped sardonyx pendant weight from Kassite Babylonia or Egyptian scarabs found there, and the claim that the owner of Metsamor had to prove his loyalty to the anti-Hittite alliance (pages 30-33)), and moving forward, we note that the authors conclude the chapter with the following finding for that chapter: All this allows us to conclude that Metsamor experienced a long period of growth and prosperity in the 15th -13th/12th cc. BC, during which the local rulers regularly renovated and expanded the settlement, built sanctuaries, established metal smelting workshops, and business relations with the mighty powers of the Near East, participated in the various military-political, trade-economic and socio-cultural processes, taking place in the region, and as a result of all this, built up and strengthened their subordinate territories. It is not excluded that at this time, they led the early Etiuni confederation, later mentioned in the cuneiform texts of the Van (Urartu) kingdom (page 23).

The next chapter is titled Metsamor in the Early Iron Age Processes (pages 42-51), and the general description of the chapter is as follows: A number of Late Bronze Age sites (Lchashen, Artik, Nerkin Getashen, Karashamb, etc.) began to lose their former role in conditions of gradual decline of domestic and production capacities, and gradually became empty. At the same time, other settlements, located near busy trade routes and providing the necessary resources for economic activity, began to expand, replenishing the population of declining settlements and growing stronger. A similar fate befell Metsamor. In the area to the east of the citadel, excavations, carried out by the Armenian-Polish archaeological expedition in 2013-2022 (co-directors: A. Piliposyan and K. Jakubiak), revealed the formation of residential quarters that gradually began in the 14th-13th cc. BC and reached considerable size in the 12th -11th cc. BC. This means that at the end of the Late Bronze Age, the first processes of urbanization began in the ancient site, which, according to the archaeological data obtained, were completed in the last quarter of the 2nd mill. BC, turning Metsamor into a city with administrative, religious, economic and industrial quarters and a large population. One of the first and most important initiatives of the Armenian-Polish expedition was the creation of a new general plan and topographic map of the ancient site and the division of the area to be investigated into twenty-five equal archaeological sectors; in 2018, geomagnetic aero scanning of the Metsamor necropolis was carried out. Excavations were concentrated mainly in the urban area, extending north-east from the citadel, and are still being carried out mainly in the squares of sectors VIII, IX, XIII and XIV. Remains of material culture from different archaeological periods have been documented here. These include artefacts from the Medieval, Late Antique (Late Roman), Achaemenid, Post-Urartian, Urartian, widespread Iron Age, Early Iron Age, Late, Middle and Early Bronze Age (pages 43-44). It is assumed that starting from the last quarter of the 2nd millennium BC, the areas adjacent to the Metsamor citadel were intensively replenished with new structures, creating a fairly dense network of urban districts. It can be concluded that at this stage, urban development processes in Metsamor of the Early Iron Age were gradually completed, and the local Late Bronze Age fortress had already turned into a real city in the 11th-9th centuries BC, with all the necessary subdivisions characteristic of it (administrative, cult, industrial, economic, domestic, defensive, etc.) (page 51).

In the chapters Metsamor as Part of the Kingdom of Van (Urartu) (pages 52-59), Metsamor in Post- Urartian Period (6th - 4th cc. BC) (pages 60-62) it is noted, that from the first quarter of the 8th century BC, the city-fortress of Metsamor was incorporated into the Kingdom of Van (Urartu). This process was not smooth. Most likely, the troops of Argishti I (786-764 BC) invaded Metsamor, burned down the citadel and the town quarters, killed part of the population and deported the rest. The long-term presence of the Urartians in Metsamor is evidenced by the reconstructions, made in the citadel (especially the new defensive wall and the adjacent economic buildings). Particularly noteworthy is the structure, built outside the citadel, with two parallel rows of tufa columns, which specialists believe may have served as an inn and/or a stable. It can be

assumed that Metsamor, located between the towns of Erebuni and Argishtikhinili, played an important role with them in the various ventures of the rulers of the Kingdom of Van (Urartu) in the northern and eastern regions of the 8th-7th cc. BC. During the decline of the Kingdom of Van (Urartu) at the end of the 7th c. BC or the first half of the 6th c. BC, the settlement was brutally attacked and burned by some forces (possibly the Median tribes or the mercenary Scythians, allies of the Armenian dynasty of the Yervandids who had seized power).

Here it is extremely important to record that the authors, although it is outside their field of research, nevertheless disregarded the modern scientific approaches for the dating and succession of Urartian kings (page 52), as well as for the so-called Yervanduni (Orontid) Kingdom of the 6th century BC (page 60), and structured their interpretations parallel to the stage of scientific development of the previous century².

In the chapters Metsamor in the Antique Period (pages 63-66) and Metsamor in the Middle Ages and Later (pages 67-70), it is mentioned that Antique and Medieval Metsamor is not well illuminated due to the scarcity of sources. Moreover: Excavations, carried out by the Armenian-Polish international archaeological expedition in the urban quarters of Metsamor in 2013-2024, show that some of the destroyed and abandoned parts of the settlement were used as burial grounds in the 1st-3rd cc. AD. And specifically during the excavations from 2020-2024: A Late Antique burial was also found in the necropolis (page 65). This allows us to conclude that there was a Late Antique settlement in part of the citadel and urban area of Metsamor, whose inhabitants carried out burials in different parts of its unused territory when necessary. A silver coin of the Roman Emperor Tiberius (14-37 AD) was found in the partially destroyed clay tomb, while the work states that it is a coin of Emperor Vespasianus (70-79 AD) (pages 65-66; page 164, Table LXIII,3). Regarding Medieval Metsamor, it is noted that the materials found indicate that Metsamor was inhabited in the Early Middle Ages (4th -8th cc.) and that life here continued uninterruptedly until the Late Middle Ages (15th -18th cc.). And it is stated that at present, the Metsamor archaeological site is part of the administrative territory of the Taronik community of the Vagharshapat subdistrict of the Armavir region of the Republic of Armenia. According to the 2011 census, the population of Taronik was 1,892 people, some of whose ancestors migrated here in 1915-1920 from Van, Bitlis, Alashkert and Mush in 1915-1920 after the Armenian Genocide. The chapter "Metsamor" Historical-Archaeological Museum-Reserve (pages 71-73) presents the history of the museum-reserve, and the Conclusion (pages 74-78) summarizes the entire work.

Summarizing the work, let us point out a number of conspicuous shortcomings. Thus, the title page of the work lists the names of four specialists as authors, while every odd page of the work only has "Ashot Piliposyan" written on it, when it should have been "Ashot Piliposyan et al." or "Piliposyan et al.". The map on page 6 (Ancient

² See, respectively: Grekyan 2015; Grekyan 2023; Tsakanyan 2018.

Near East and Eastern Mediterranean in 15th-9th cc. BCE) is highly incomprehensible; it is extremely general and amateurish and not suited for such high-level work. The map of Urartu on page 43 is also general. It is not only general but also has clear demarcation and is undated. Pages 101-171 constitute the tables and figures of the book, which could have been left unpaginated. The bibliography is also neither systematic nor uniform.

It follows from the above mentioned that, despite all its positive aspects, the monograph by A. Piliposyan and others is not without its weaknesses and shortcomings. Nevertheless, it should be appreciated as a definite contribution to the study of the history and culture not only of Metsamor but of the entire Armenian Highland.

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