



İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY'S
CONTRIBUTIONS TO
ARCHAEOLOGY IN TURKEY
(1932-2000)

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Van-Karagündüz Excavations¹

Veli Sevin and Aynur Özfirat



Fig. 1: Karagündüz necropolis grave number 1.

Van is one of the richest cultural sites of the Near East, and this is why archaeological researches has been conducted there since the 19th century. The attention of many scientists has been drawn to the region to find a trace of Chalcolithic civilization which spans the 5th millennium BC, to examine remains that date back as far as the Early Transcaucasian culture that belongs to the 3rd millennium, which can be found almost in every mound, or to examine the splendid remains that belong to Urartian Kingdom dating to the 1st millennium.

The connection between the Van region and İstanbul University goes back a long time. The first studies were conducted by Prof. Dr. Afif Erzen of the Faculty of Letters in 1959 and studies have continued and increased there steadily ever since. Despite all the hard work that has been accomplished, we are far from completing the list of the main line cultural developments in eastern Anatolia. For example, we still have some questions about how Halaf culture reached Tilkitepe; the origin and development of Early Transcaucasian culture; the situation in the region during the 2nd millennium which is called the dark ages, the dynamics that led to the establishment of the Urartian Kingdom and the conditions after the Urartian Kingdom collapsed.

Through a cooperation between the Van Museum

and the İstanbul University Faculty of Letters' Center for Historical and Archaeological Researches in Van, excavations of the Karagündüz höyük (mound) were begun in order to find some answers to the above-mentioned unsolved questions. We obtained the permission of the Ministry of Culture's General Directorate of Museums and Monuments and obtained sponsorship from the Researches Center of İstanbul University and the Administration Office of the Van.

The mound of Karagündüz is 35 km southwest of Van city and is connected to old Karagündüz village on Erçek Lake. Today the mound appears to be an island off the north-west shores of the village, because of the lake's rising water level (1890 m alt.). Up to the recent past, the mound was in the middle of the fertile plain which covers an area of 80 km and which used to be full of fresh water sources. According to the studies of English scholar C. A. Burney² who traveled the area in 1956, the dimensions of the mound are 75x50x5 m. Nearly 1.5 km west of the mound there is a necropolis dating to the 1st millenium BC. Rescue excavations started on the necropolis in 1992, and when the rising water also threatened the mound, we directed our attention there in 1994.



Fig. 2: Karagündüz necropolis grave number 2.

¹ We give our sincere thanks for the support given to this work by the İstanbul University Research Fund (No. 613/210494), the Van Regional History and Archaeology Research Center, and the "Eastern Anatolia-Transcaucasian Cultures" project (No. 1092/010598).
² 1958:178; Russel 1980:127, no. 203.



Fig. 3: Pottery from the Karagündüz necropolis.

Work in the Necropolis

Karagündüz Necropolis is based on an alluvial plain that slopes slightly from north to south. In that area, nine graves were excavated during the years 1992-1996. Six of them were tomb types. The ceilings of the rectangular tombs had collapsed, but their heights are estimated at 2-2.5 m. (figs. 1-2). Depending on their dimensions, there were 20 to 80 human burials in each grave. When a new burial became necessary the earlier one was pushed towards the end of the grave to make space. We are familiar with that practice from the Urartian grave chambers³. Trying to bury too many people in one chamber caused insufficient space, so they tried to solve the problem by carving niches in the walls⁴.

Many burial gifts were left in the grave which were wrapped up or placed with the dead person's clothes. It was standard to leave with every burial a wide-mouthed earthen clay bowl and a narrow-mouthed, high- or low-necked pot (fig. 3). It has been observed after analysis that the presents left in the bowls were lamb or goat meat in one and a liquid in the other (Sevin, Kavaklı 1996a: fig. 7). In addition, an oven has been found next to each gravesite.

The forms and decorations of the hundreds of pots that were found can be divided into a two main groups. Those in the first group are pink colored and wheel-made. The most prevalent ones are bowls that

have a horizontal incision just below the mouth edge, and small pots that are sharp S-profiled and with bubbles at the widest part. Those of the second group are covered in a shiny reddish-brown slip. In addition there are pots made with metal that are the forerunners of the classic Urartian pottery⁵.



Fig. 4: Iron bracelets from the Karagündüz necropolis.

The most interesting grave presents are ornaments and ceremonial weapons made of iron, all of them done by forging. Among them are bracelets (fig. 4), anklets, rings, holed needles and daggers, spear points, big and small knives, a mace and chain, and long iron sticks that could be swords (Sevin, Kavaklı 1996a: fig. 12-25).

The use of iron for jewelry and ceremonial weapon in early graves shows that these are contemporary with the beginning of Hasanlu IV, Kordlar Tepe IIA and Dinkha Tepe II. Bronze made were very rare but the most eye-catching

ones are ornamental needles. We see same needles in Urartian art which are opium-tipped, a double rooster back to back, an eagle or a flower bud (Sevin, Kavaklı 1996a: fig. 26-27). We also find a lot of beads left as grave presents (fig. 5) made of bronze, iron and different stones but among these were also found many made of frit and kornalin.

The Karagündüz Early Iron Age necropolis shows a cultural unity in the area north of Erçek Lake and Van Lake, and even between the east and west shores, before the Urartian Kingdom. The finds in this nomadic tribe's necropolis that dates to the beginning of the 1st millennium BC will enable us to solve the questions regarding the Early Iron Age in Eastern

³ Ögün 1978a:661; 1978b:62 vd, fig. 5.

⁴ Sevin, Kavaklı 1996a: fig. 2; 1996b:5.

⁵ Sevin, Kavaklı 1996a: 44 vdd. figs. 36-39; 1996: 89 vd.

Anatolia and the ancestors of the Urartian Kingdom. Furthermore, grave architecture, burial customs, metal technology and pot producing prove that the Early Iron Age culture of the Van region and the Urartian lifestyle have a close relationship.

The Mound Studies

As mentioned above, the studies began at the mound in 1994 because of the rising water level of Lake Erçek. From the excavations that were conducted between 1994 and 1999, it has been observed that there were 7 settlements at the mound from the Early Transcaucasian Period to the two most recent settlements from the Medieval period. At the first level on top of the mound there is evidence that it was used as a cemetery⁶.

In general, the third settlement level is contemporary to Hasanlu Mound IIIa settlement in northwest Iran. Three times calibrated ¹⁴C results from Hasanlu IIIa indicate 400 BC (Dyson, Muscarella 1989: 4, 8).

The excavations in Karagündüz provide evidence that, after the collapse of the Urartian Kingdom in the second half of the 7th century BC, significant changes took place throughout the Van Lake area leading to major overall decline.

The fourth settlement of Karagündüz Mound has several periods, the most important of which is 4b, the period of the Urartian Kingdom.

Excavations prove that the Urartian Kingdom period had a very strong influence there, just as it did at Van Fortress. Despite the extensive damage, an impressive architectural complex has been discovered on the north side of the mound. This complex, which extends northeast to southwest, has foundation walls that are 1 to 1.40 m thick, an open courtyard and covered sections. The connection can be observed between that structure, which covers an area of at least 400 m, and the classic Urartian covered courtyard finds. Included baked earthen bob-



Fig. 5: Beads from the Karagündüz necropolis.

bins, kornalin, blue beads, bronze rings, circles and a bronze plaque with a person's face inscribed implying it is for votive offering. Among the notable pottery pieces found are clover mouthed jugs with shiny bright red glaze, pieces of long-stemmed cups and pieces with simple mouths or thick rims that turn out. There are plenty of cups with mouths that turn in, flat-bottomed bowls and wide belly and neckless pots. Some of them have seals placed near the base, which we are familiar from the Urartian pottery. Two other objects that have been found are definitely fixed at the Urartian period of the settlement: Two seals, one is bronze and the other is black stone (diomite) (Sevin-Kavaklı-Özfirat 1997: 577). This complex is very important for demonstrating that Urartians lived not only in high fortresses but also in mounds. However, we do not know the exact function of the complex.

Level 5 settlement of the mound, which is below the Urartian settlement, belongs to the Early Iron Age. A few items from this settlement are contemporary to the Karagündüz Early Iron Age necropolis. In the excavated fields we did not find any architectural remains, only grain pits. Their pottery is mostly wheel-made. The clay of the cups are always fired in pink, lined with the same clay and burnished. The most popular form is a jar with a simple mouth that is turned in and that has several incision lines just below the mouth. Clover-mouthed jug pieces that resemble the metal cups are also found. These forms and motifs are identical to the Van region Early Iron Age necropoleis⁷. In spite of its bad condition, it is a very important discovery that the Early Iron Age is represented with a one level of settlement in the Karagündüz Mound. This situation give us the first clues that at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, before the Urartian Kingdom, pastoral life had come to an end there and it is confirmed by the information on Assyrian cuneiform inscriptions of the mid-13th century BC.

A sixth settlement at the north part of the mound belongs to the Middle/Late



Fig. 6: A potsherd that belongs to the Late Iron Age from the Karagündüz mound.

⁶ Sevin, Kavaklı 1995:339 vdd.; Sevin, Kavaklı, Özfirat 1997:573 vdd.

⁷ Sevin 1996:441; Sevin, Kavaklı 1995: 345, fig. 15; 1996a:44 vdd.



Fig. 7: A general view of the Early Bronze Age settlement from the Karagündüz mound.

Bronze Age. We determine this obscure period from survey finds and previous excavations. Below the Urartian architectural complex, a thorough search covering nearly a 600 m area uncovered no significant traces. It is observed that from this period there were also such lacklustre finds in Transcaucasia and northwestern Iran as well as the Van Lake region (with certain exceptions being Üzerliktepe, Kültepe II and Şahalti at Nahçıvan; Haftavatepe and Geoytepe in northwestern Iran). It is as if the continuous settled way of life of the Early Bronze Age took a break. The most reflective finds of that time are painted potteries. Tile-brown clay pots, lined either with the same or a darker colored clay, are painted monochrome or polychrome. The Karagündüz excavations provide us the most beautiful collection of very interesting Eastern Anatolian and transcaucasian painted potteries (Özfirat 1997: 89 vdd.).

The thickest settlements of Karagündüz Mound are related to Early Transcaucasian Period (fig. 7). The mound height is 8-9 m. The last eight settlements' total thickness is just over 2.50 m and the remaining 6-7 m belongs totally to the 3rd millenium BC.

We have discovered a structure from the seventh settlement that has no stone foundation and only mud-brick walls. The same type of plan is noted in all the structures at this level. Two hearths were found next to each other adjacent to the inner walls. The entrances were probably at the ceilings as there are no entrances to the outside or

between rooms.

These early Transcaucasian Period pots are copies of Eastern Anatolia and Kur-Aras region pottery (fig. 8). The most popular form is an S-profiled pot with a flute on the neck and mostly rounded but sometimes a flat base. These pots have double spirals placed diagonally on their bellies. Some pots have thin-lined decorations on them but it is rare to see reliefs. It is obvious that there is a tendency toward fluted cups with scratched ornamentation. These distinct characteristics at Karagündüz are shared with the finds at Ernis and Dilkaya in Van region. The apparently very rich remains of the Early Transcaucasian Age settlement in Karagündüz mound will certainly enhance our understanding of the developments during the 3rd millennium BC around Van Lake region.

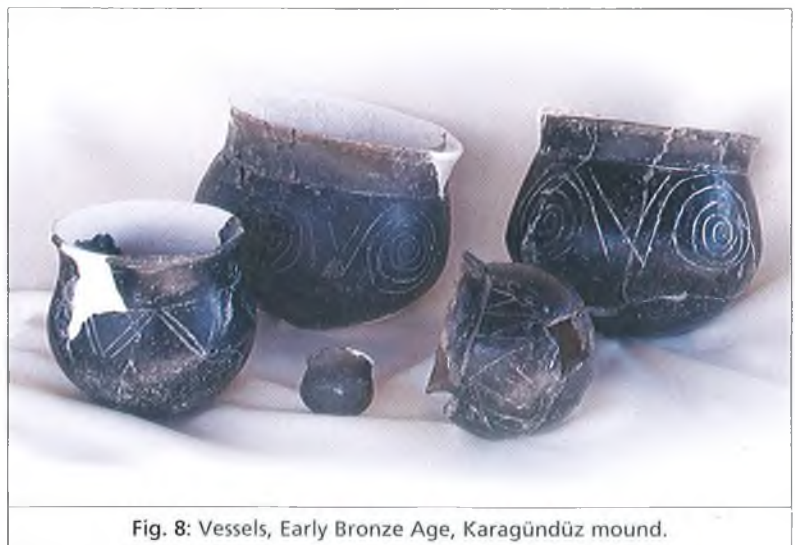


Fig. 8: Vessels, Early Bronze Age, Karagündüz mound.

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