



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

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Van-Altıntepe Excavations

Veli Sevin and Aynur Özfirat

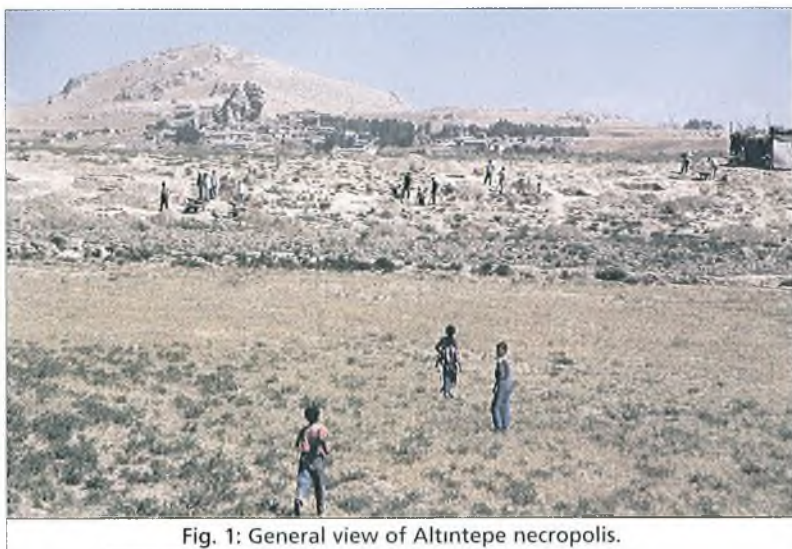


Fig. 1: General view of Altıntepe necropolis.

Urtians have a special place among the Near Eastern civilizations of the 1st millennium BC. It is very impressive that this civilization emerged in a region of such a rocky terrain and harsh climate. The contribution of Istanbul University to Urartian studies is very important. The first steps were by Prof. Dr. Afif Erzen from the Istanbul University Faculty of Letters in 1950s by excavating Toprakkale, Van Kalesi and Çavuştepe. The establishment of the Center for the Historical and Archaeological Research of the Van Region, which is connected to the I.U. Faculty of Letters, has made Urartian studies a much more highly qualified and permanent field. Since that time, many excavations and surveys have been conducted about Urartians and the results published in the scientific journals.

The Altıntepe excavation is part of the above-mentioned effort to shed new light on every aspect of Urartian civilization. The excavation was begun through the cooperation of the Faculty of Letters, the Center for the Historical and Archaeological Research of the Van Region and the Van Museum. The main purpose of the excavation was to

discover the Urartian beliefs regarding the afterlife and their grave architecture, as well as to protect the area from grave pillagers and draw further attention to the importance of the region. Permission for the excavation was obtained from the Ministry of Culture's General Directorate of Monuments and Museums, and financial support was obtained from the Istanbul University Research Fund and the City Special Administration Office of the Van Governor's Office.

Tuşpa, now called the Fortress of Van, was the capital of the Urartian Kingdom. It was one of the most densely populated and splendid capitals of the 1st millennium. Tuşpa had been the capital of the Urartians for about 200 years. Between 830 and 630 BC, powerful kings like Sarduri I, Minua, Argiştı I, Sarduri II and Rusa II had ruled the kingdom. Kings, priests, generals and officials resided in the splendid buildings that were lodged atop Van Fortress. Therefore palaces, temples and official buildings were situated inside the fortress. The general population settled on the huge plain at the foot of the fortress. The capital was over populated.

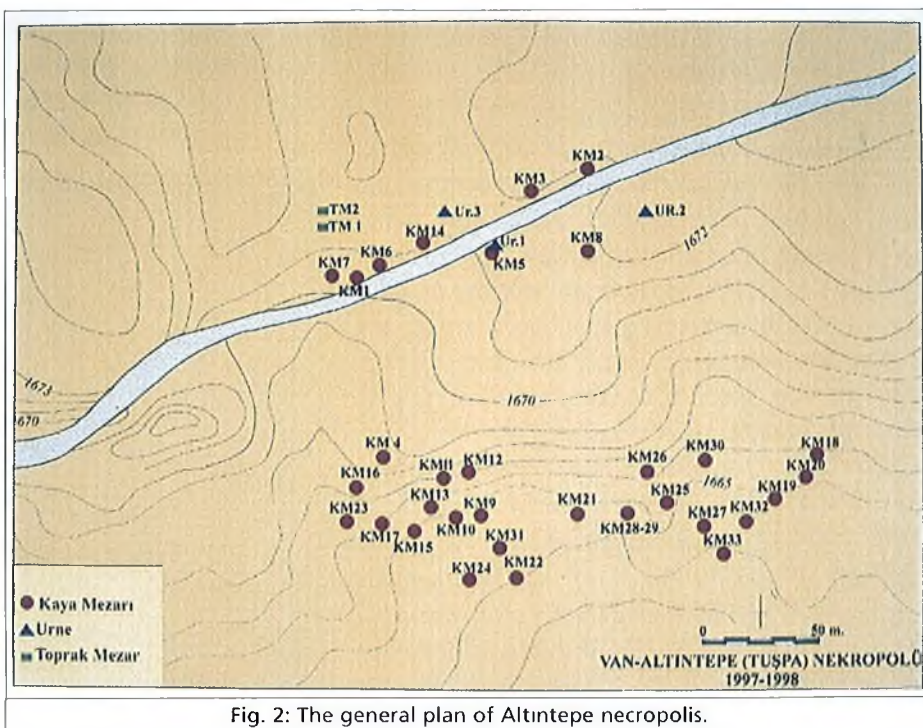


Fig. 2: The general plan of Altıntepe necropolis.

There should have been a necropolis belonging to that splendid capital. Kings and their relatives were buried in the rock graves inside Van Fortress, but where was the public cemetery. We had been unable to answer this question before the discovery of Altintepe. The Urartian necropolis was located 2 km north of the citadel. The necropolis had been damaged, partly during the construction of the modern Van-Erciş-Ağrı highway that runs north of the necropolis and mostly because of illegal digging at the necropolis. Because some golden objects have been found there, the present dwellers named it Altintepe (golden hill). The northeastern point of the elevation begins west of Kalecik, which dates to the 9th century BC, and inclines toward the Plain of Van (fig. 1). A new industrial park borders the necropolis on the north, a railway borders it on the south and the Iskele district on the west, thus making it highly probably that the necropolis extended as far as the shores of Van Lake. The area stretches 1-1.5 km from north to south and spreads out several kilometers to the west.

The necropolis, which had been pillaged over a long period of time, was discovered in 1965 during the highway construction. In the same year a minor excavation was conducted and two graves were found, one of which is a cremation and the other an inhumation (Öğün 1978a: 672; Öğün 1978b: 64); however, at that time it had not been considered that the two graves were part of a big necropolis.

To date 37 graves have been examined at the Altintepe necropolis. Three types of burial customs have been observed: (a) rock graves (b) urn graves (c) simple earthen graves.

Rock Tombs

These tombs, numbering 33, are located in the southern slope where the elevation declines and there are rocks just below the surface. A large number of them were pillaged. All of the tombs were of soft limestone. However, the direction, dimensions and hand work are not the same in each. Probably according to a family's economic situation, the tombs were built big or small, carefully or without care. Some of them resemble simple holes and their dimensions are 1.30 x 1.26 x 1.10 m but some are 3.20 x 2.65 x 1.75 m; 3.55 x 2.20 x 1.90 m and 3.80 x 2.80 m.

The tombs, which were placed under the surface, all have a deep and narrow dromos-type square entrance measuring on the surface 0.90 x 0.90 m (fig. 3). Small indentations were made to serve as steps for easier access. The



Fig. 3: Altintepe necropolis, dromos of rock tomb no. 3.

narrow and low doorway to the tomb was sealed with long thin sandstone slabs. Generally the door opened to a lower room. At the time of a funeral ceremony, the dromos, which was filled with stones, was emptied, the sandstone slabs were taken up and the body was placed in the room. Following the ceremony the slab stones were placed over the doorway and the dromos was filled up with stones and soil. The same operation was repeated at the time of a new burial in the same tomb.

All the rock tombs except one have a single room and they vary in height between 0.86 and 2.00 m (fig. 4). Only one has a regular rectangular plan. The rest are of poor workmanship, unlike Urartian official graves, and with elliptical, round or roughly square shapes, or L-shaped, and even shapeless. The walls are not upright, the ceilings are generally uneven, though some are flat. Small or big niches on the wall 0.50 m above the floor are a common specification in these tombs. The upper part of the niche is slightly arched. Some niches have a small hole at the base to place a cup and some of them are as small as 0.13 x 0.10 m. Arched niches are at the left wall of the graves in two examples. These holes might be for an



Fig. 4: Altintepe necropolis, rock grave no. 1.



Fig. 5: Altintepe necropolis, urn grave no. 2.

oil-lamp to illuminate the burial ceremony. Some graves are without a niche; some of them just have slight raised places along the wall.

Some graves with their rough and irregular plans were left uncompleted. The digging had started but for some reason stopped at the dromos stage. Some also had the entrance and burial chamber or just a hole. It is our observation that the stone masons first tried to find a rock bed and started to dig. If they understood early on that the rock was not thick enough, they stopped digging. But if they understood that only at the end of their work, they tried to build a wall by means of stones where the existing rock wall was not sufficient to carry the weight of the ground above. Sometimes, in order to find harder rock, they dug in a different direction from the dromos. This means that the direction of the entrance of the tomb was not important for the Urartian inhabitants. They just tried to find a rocky place that was strong enough to carry the earth above and buried their dead.

We do not have clear information about burial styles in the graves because of the pillaging. But many urn pieces and unburned human bones were found together among the remains left behind by grave pillagers. So, when we compare this situation with the previous excavations like Erzincan Altintepe (Sevin 1980: note 3),

Adilcevaz (Öğün 1978b: 64 vd.), Dilkaya (Çilingiroğlu 1999: 30) and Karagündüz Early Iron Age Necropolis (Sevin-Kavaklı 1996a: 7; 1996b: 24), we are able to say that multi-burial chambers have inhumation and cremation burials in them. Those skeletons that have remained were left in hocker position.

Urn Graves

Some Urartian inhabitants used to cremate their dead, put the ashes and bones into the urn and then bury it. So both cremated and buried dead can be found in the same grave. This custom extends over a very large area. We are unable to say why there are two burial styles conducted in the same necropolis.

This might be explained by the existence of two different ethnic group or different regulations among different public groups.



Fig. 6: A bowl from Altintepe necropolis.

So far only three urn graves have been discovered in situ, although these constitute the second largest burial group. After the cremation, the ashes and bones were placed in the urn and sealed with a bowl top. Then the urn was placed either into a natural rock hole or into a niche surrounded by stones on three sides, and the hole was filled with soil (fig. 5). Unlike the rock tombs, these are single burials. It is not clearly understood whether or not the urn graves have a particular place in the necropolis.



Fig. 7: A bronze bracelet from Altintepe necropolis.

The urns, which are all placed with the mouth up, all have the same shape. They are mostly painted a shiny red that is typically Urartian. They have a narrow and short neck, puffed up belly and are rounded deeply. There is a usually loose ring around the neck, behind which are double or triple holes (Derin 1994). We have also found urns that are roughly made and some that are egg-shaped. Like some urn burials at Iğdır (Barnett 1963: fig. 12), Adilcevaz (Öğün 1978a) and Dilkaya (Çilingiroğlu 1991), burial gifts are placed next to the urns. The dead were often cremated with their clothing and ornaments and everything placed into the urn. Semi-precious stones, rarely wooden bead necklaces, bronze ornamental needles, rings and bracelets can be considered as personal belongings. Some ornaments were left outside of the urn. In the group of objects that was not burned, bronze belts take the lead. They were folded, making it impossible to use them again.

Simple Earthen Grave

In this third type of burial in the Altintepe necropolis, the body was placed directly into a simple hole that was dug in the earth. We have examined only two graves so far. We are unable to determine whether or not these burials occupy a particular place in the necropolis. The head was directed to the northeast; in one case the body is laid straight and the other in half hocker position. In the first grave, which lays 1 m beneath the surface, the in situ skeletal remains were the bones of two different people. This means that if there was no

practice of mixing, the same hole was used at different times, a practice with which we are familiar from the rock graves. Bright red polished potsherds and some bronze pieces have been found around the head of the first burial. In the second grave, which was covered with limestone, the corpse was buried with her spiral shaped earrings, several rings on her fingers, a beaded bracelet and necklace. Two bronze ornamental pins were found at her neck and chest. At the center of the bracelet, which is made of cylindrical, double-conical and sphere-shaped semi-precious stones and sea shells, there is a large black bead in the shape of a bull's head which survives though it was burned in the cremation.

The incised wooden beads, spiral-shaped hollow bronze earrings and ornamental beads makes this grave different from the Urartian ones. Hence this grave has been dated to the pre-Urartian Early Iron Age. We are not, however, well informed about the same age necropoleis from Dilkaya, Giyimli, Iğdır (Barnett 1963: 154 vd.) and Liç (Öğün 1978a: 674 vd., fig. 13).

Even though every rock tomb has been pillaged, the materials left behind are sufficient to gain limited information. They consist in large part of pottery (fig. 6). The most prevalent ones are bright reddish polished round and clover-mouthed jugs, some with hieroglyphics incised on the handle. The goblets have the same characteristics. Among the metal findings, iron swords and knives in their wooden or bronze sheaths, bronze bracelets with dragon head (fig. 7), ornamental pins and fibulae are found. There is a large number of bronze and silver rings. The technique of granulation, with which we are familiar from Urartian art, is frequently used. There were plenty of semi-precious stones like agate, kornalin and manyezit in the graves (fig. 8).

The Van Altintepe necropolis is the most studied public necropolis belonging to the Urartian capital. The data gathered from this necropolis where rock tomb, urn and ordinary burials were performed side by side, will help us understand not only the Urartian burial customs but also other aspects of their culture; furthermore, it may help us to gather information regarding different ethnic groups among the Urartians.

So far we have been able to examine only an insignificant



Fig. 8: A string of beads from Altintepe necropolis.

portion of the entire necropolis. In view of the crowded rock tombs, it is clear that the inhabitants could hardly find an appropriate place for their burials. They preferred to dig tombs in the rock rather than stone-walled tombs in this kilometers wide cemetery. It seems as though there was a problem for those people who preferred a rock grave, because only a limited amount of rock was both close enough to the surface and suitable to carve. With the exception of royal burials, we do not yet have exact information about the people who preferred rock tomb burials.

We think that Tuşpa and environs had dense settlements even before the Urartian Kingdom. Several

Early Iron Age necropoleis have been discovered recently, one of them being Yoncatepe, which is 10 km southeast of Van City at the slope of Mount Ereğ, and the other one Karagündüz next to Erçek lake and Dilkaya on southeastern shore of Lake Van. On the Van Fortress mound, it is believed that there is Early Iron Age settlement (Sevin 1991) even though there is no definite architectural remains in that mound from that period. These necropoleis indicate that there must have been such a settlement, but the graves that have been examined so far belong mostly to the 8th-7th centuries BC.

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