

## Archaeological Excavations at Irmis Rka







# **Archaeological Excavations at Irmis Rka**

## **An Investigation of a Multi-Layered Settlement in Southwest Georgia: Results from the 2020 Season: Early Bronze Age to Medieval Occupations**

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Cover: Mount Irmis Rka, view from the north. Photo by G. Kirkitadze.

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# Contents

List of Figures .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	vi
List of Contributors .....	vii
Introduction: Historical and geographical settings of the region.....	viii
The site description .....	xiii
<b>Excavations at the Irmis Rka Settlement .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Excavation of lower debris: Pits .....	1
Pit 4 .....	1
Pit 5 .....	1
Pit 6 .....	6
Pit 7 .....	6
Pit 8 .....	6
Pit 9 .....	6
Pit 10 .....	6
Pit 11 .....	6
Pit 12 .....	6
Pit 13 .....	6
Pit 14 .....	14
Pit 15 .....	14
Pit 16 .....	14
Pit 17 .....	14
Pit 18 .....	14
Pit 19 .....	29
Pit 20 .....	29
Pit 21 .....	29
Pit 22 .....	29
Pit 23 .....	29
Pit 24 .....	29
Pit N39 (E8.1) .....	32
Pit 31 .....	38
Pit 27 .....	38
Pit 28 .....	38
Pit 32 .....	38
Pit 33 .....	38
Pit 37 (E8.1) .....	38
Pit 38 (E8.1) .....	38
Pit 40 (E8.1) .....	48
Burial .....	48
Excavation of the hill slope.....	48
Trench N1 (E7.4; F7.3; E8.1; E8.2; F8.1 & F8.2) .....	48

Trench N2 (J7 & J8) .....	60
Trench N3 (N7; N8; O7 & O8) .....	64
Radiocarbon dates .....	67
Pottery Assemblage.....	69
Kura-Araxes Pottery.....	69
Bedeni Pottery.....	90
Late Bronze-Early Iron Age Pottery .....	101
Medieval pottery .....	106
Artefact Collections .....	111
Ceramic Artefacts .....	111
Metal Artefacts.....	121
Lithic Assemblage from the Irmis Rka Settlement (Nikoloz Tskvitinidze) .....	123
Bone tools from the Irmis Rka Settlement (Mariam Eloshvili).....	128
Kura-Araxes period worked bone tools.....	128
Bedeni period worked bone tools.....	129
Zooarchaeological materials from the Irmis Rka settlement (Nikoloz Vanishvili).....	135
Kura-Araxes.....	137
Bedeni .....	137
Late Bronze-Early Iron Age .....	137
Palynology of organic remains obtained from the archaeological deposits and ceramic vessels of the Irmis Rka Settlement (Eliso Kvavadze and Maia Chichinadze) .....	138
Kura-Araxes .....	138
Bedeni .....	140
Settlement deposit .....	140
Preliminary report of the archaeobotanical study of the Irmis Rka settlement (Nana Rusishvili) ....	143
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>150</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Settlement views and a map showing the location of Irmis Rka (Created by G. Kirkitadze). .....	xiii
Figure 2. Gas pipeline terrace on the southern slope of the settlement.....	xiv
Figure 3. Grid pattern generated for the settlement (Created by G. Kirkitadze).....	xiv
Figure 4. 1-3 - Pit 4; 4-6 - Pit 6. ....	xv
Figure 5. Pottery collection from Pit 4.....	2
Figure 6. Pottery Collection from Pit 4. ....	3
Figure 7. 1-4 - Pottery Collection from Pit 4; 5-8 - Pottery Collection from Pit 5. ....	4
Figure 8. Pit 5. ....	5
Figure 9. Pottery collection from Pit 6: 1-3 - Kura-Araxes; 4-7 - Late Bronze Age pottery. ....	7
Figure 10. 1-3 - Pit 7; 4-6 - Pit 8. ....	8
Figure 11. Pottery collection from Pit 7. ....	9
Figure 12. Pottery collection from Pit 8: 1 - Kura-Araxes; 2-3 - Late Bronze Age; 4-5 - Pottery from Pit 9. ....	10
Figure 13. Pit 9. ....	11
Figure 14. 1-3 - Pit 11; 4-6 - Pit 12. ....	12
Figure 15. 1-2 - Pottery collection from Pit 11; 3-5 - From Pit 12.....	13
Figure 16. 1-3 - Pit 13; 4-6 - Pit 14. ....	15
Figure 17. 1-3 - Pottery collection from Pit 13; 4-5 - Pottery collection from Pit 14.....	16
Figure 18. 1-3 - Pit 15; 4-6 - Pit 16. ....	17
Figure 19. Pottery collection from Pit 15. ....	18
Figure 20. Pottery collection from Pit 16: 1-5 - Kura-Araxes; 6-8 - Late Bronze Age. ....	19
Figure 21. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 16.....	20
Figure 22. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 16. ....	21
Figure 23. 1-3 - Pit 17; 4-6 - Pit 18. ....	22
Figure 24. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 17.....	23
Figure 25. 1-10 - Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 17; white paste bead from Pit 17.....	24
Figure 26. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 18.....	25
Figure 27. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 18.....	26
Figure 28. 1-3 - Pit 19; 4-6 - Pit 20. ....	27
Figure 29. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 19.....	28
Figure 30. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 19.....	30
Figure 31. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 20.....	31
Figure 32. Pit 21. ....	32
Figure 33. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 21.....	33
Figure 34. 1-3 - Pit 22; 4-6 - Pit 23. ....	34
Figure 35. Early Bronze Age pottery collection: 1-9 - Pit 22; 10-13 - Pit 23. ....	35
Figure 36. Intersecting pits: 1-2 - Pits 24, 29 and 31 before cleaning; 3-4 - Pit 24; 5 - Drawing of the excavated Pits 24 and 31. ....	36
Figure 37. Bedeni pottery collection from Pit 24. ....	37
Figure 38. Kura-Araxes pottery collection from Pit 31. ....	39
Figure 39. Pit 27 (1) before and (2) after cleaning.....	40
Figure 40. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 27.....	41
Figure 41. Pit 28 (1) before and (2) after cleaning.....	42
Figure 42. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 28.....	43
Figure 43. 1-3 - Pit 32; 4-6 - Pit 33. ....	44
Figure 44. 1 - A cluster of pits in square E8.1, top view; 2-4 Pit 37.....	45
Figure 45. Pit 38. ....	46
Figure 46. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 38.....	47
Figure 47. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 38.....	49
Figure 48. Pit 39. ....	50
Figure 49. Early Bronze Age pottery collection from Pit 39. ....	51
Figure 50. Pit 40. ....	52
Figure 51. Burial 1 at different stages of excavation. ....	53
Figure 52. Schematic plan of Irmis Rka settlement showing the excavated areas (Created by I. Esvanjia). ....	54
Figure 53. Trench 1, Squares E7.4; F7.3; E8.1; E8.2; F8.1 and F8.2; Plan.....	56
Figure 54. Trench 1, Aerial view (Photo G. Kirkitadze). ....	57
Figure 55. Trench 1, Square E7.4, disturbed area west of Structure N1 and Kura-Araxes vessel exposed on the border. ....	59
Figure 56. Kura-Araxes pit exposed in profile of square F7.3. ....	59
Figure 57. A large tray of Kura-Araxes culture, placed between structures. ....	60
Figure 58. Trench 2, Squares J7 and J8, plan. ....	61
Figure 60. Trench 2, first and second steps indicating Kura-Araxes and Bedeni contexts. ....	62
Figure 59. Trench 2, Aerial view (Photo G. Kirkitadze). ....	62
Figure 61. Concentration of Bedeni pottery at the northwest corner of the first step. ....	63
Figure 62. Profiles of each of the steps from Trench 2.....	65

Figure 63. Decorated stone block unearthed at the third step .....	65
Figure 64. Trench 3, Squares N7; N8; O7 & O8; Plan.....	66
Figure 65. Trench 3, Aerial view (Photo G. Kirkitadze).....	66
Figure 66. Late Bronze Age pit has disturbed an earlier wall.....	68
Figure 67. Trench 3, view of the exposed wall.....	68
Figure 68. C14 Calibrated dates from the Irmis Rka Settlement.....	69
Figure 69. Rim sherds from jars: 1-2 - from Structure 1; 3-5 - from Structure 2.....	72
Figure 70. Rim sherds from jars: 1-3 - from Structure 1; 4 - from Structure 2; 5-7 - from cultural layers. ....	73
Figure 71. Jars from Trench 1: 1, 4 - from Structure 2; 2-3, 6 - from Structure 1; 5 - from surface. ....	74
Figure 72. Jar sherds from Trench 1: 1-2, 7-8 from Structure 1; 3-6 from Structure 2. ....	75
Figure 73. Jar sherds from cultural layers of trench 1; 1-2 - Handles, 3-7 - Bases. ....	76
Figure 74. Kura-Araxes pottery collection from step II of Trench 2 (selected): 1-4 - Bowls; 5-10 - relief decoration patterns from jars; 11 - incised decoration; 12-16 - incised decorated sherds from mugs.....	77
Figure 75. Kura-Araxes pottery from step II of Trench 2: 1-5 - Jars; 6-8 - Mugs. ....	80
Figure 76. Kura-Araxes pottery collection from Trench 3: 1-2 - Jugs; 3 - Rim sherd from the jar; 4-6 - Bowls; 7-8 - Decorated jar sherds from Trench 3. ....	81
Figure 77. Burnished bowl collection from Trench 1: 1-4 from Structure 1; 5-7 from Structure 2. ....	82
Figure 78. A collection of rough-surface bowls from the first trench:1-4 - from cultural layers; 5-6 - from Structure 2.....	83
Figure 79. 1 - Upper portion of the decorated jug from Structure 1; 2 - Jug rim from the second structure; 3 - Jug rim from the first structure; 4 - Small cup from Second structure; 5-6 - Undetermined category from the first structure and the second terrace of the step trench.....	84
Figure 80. Mug sherds from different contexts: 1-6 - from the first structure of Trench 1; 7-8 - surface collection.....	85
Figure 81. Trays from various contexts: 1 - from Structure 1; 2-3 - from Structure 2; 4-5 - Kura-Araxes tray sherd with vegetal inclusions from Structure 2; 6 - Bedeni tray rim sherd from I terrace of the step trench. ....	86
Figure 82. Trench 1. Lid forms from different contexts.....	87
Figure 83. Trench 1. Decorated lids 1, 3-5 - from Structure 1; 2 - from Structure 2. ....	88
Figure 84. 1 - Lid from Pit 37; 2 - Lid with angular sectioned lug from Structure 1 of Trench 1; 3-5 - Lid fragments from Trench 1 demonstrate glue evidence; 6-7 - Animal figurines (remaining torsos) handles for lids from Structure 1. ....	89
Figure 85. Scoops from different trenches: 1 - Cultural layer of Trench 1; 2 - From the first terrace of the step trench; 3-5 - From II terrace of the step trench; 6 - From Structure 2 of the first trench. ....	91
Figure 86. Bedeni period large storage vessels from the first terrace of the step trench. ....	92
Figure 87. Bedeni pottery from the first terrace of the step trench: 1-2 - Cooking pots; 3-4 - Deep jars. ....	93
Figure 88. Bedeni pottery from the first terrace of the step trench: 1 - Tankard; 2-3 - Handles from Bedeni period scooped-like vessels; 4-7 - Lids; 8-9 - Rope-like decoration pattern; 10-11 - Bedeni fine wares.....	95
Figure 89. Bedeni pottery from the first terrace of the step trench: 1-8 - Open and hole mouth pots from Bedeni horizon; 9-12 - Bowls with incised decoration; 13 - Rim sherds with a deep cut surrounding the lip. ....	96
Figure 90. Bedeni pottery from the first terrace of the step trench: 1-8 - Base sherds of various vessels; 9-14 - Example of handles of different sizes and types of vessels; 15-16 - Different sized holds. ....	97
Figure 91. Bedeni pottery from the first trench: 1-4 - Jars storage vessels; 5-6 - Bowls. ....	98
Figure 92. Bedeni pottery from the first trench: 1-2 - Handles; 3 - Lid with relief decoration; 4 - Small vessel (possibly crucible) decorated with incised lines. ....	99
Figure 93. Bedeni pottery from the third trench: 1-6 - Jars; 7 - Bowl; 8 - Body sherd from large vessel with relief decoration; 9 - Bedeni fine ware with pre-firing decoration. ....	102
Figure 94. Bedeni pottery from the third trench: 1 - Lid ornamented with deep finger impressions near the edge; 2-3 - Double-handled jars; 4 - Base from the jar with pierced walls. ....	103
Figure 95. Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the first trench: 1-6 - First Group; 7-8 - Second group.....	104
Figure 96. Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the second trench and surface: 1-6 - First group; 7-9 - Surface collection.....	105
Figure 97. Bowls belonging to the second group of Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the third terrace of the step trench. ....	107
Figure 98. Second group of Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the third terrace of the step trench: 1,3-6 decorated sherds; 2, 7 - handles. ....	108
Figure 99. Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the second and third terraces of the step trench: 1-2 - Second group; 3-4 - Third group. ....	109
Figure 100. Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pottery from the third trench: 1-3, 5-7, 9 - First group; 4-8 - Second group.....	110
Figure 101. Early Medieval Pottery: 1 - From topsoil of the first trench; 2 - From topsoil of the second trench.....	112
Figure 102. Andirons from various contexts: 1, 3 - From the first structure of Trench 1; 2 - Pit 22; 4 - From third trench; 5 - Anthropomorphic detail from Pit 11; 6-7 - Anthropomorphic details from topsoil of the step trench; 8 - Pit 18; 9 - Phallus-like shaft from second terrace of the step trench; 10-11 - Phallus-like shaft surface finding; 12 - Andiron detail with remains of handle on the back part, surface finding. ....	113
Figure 103. Horseshoe-shaped andirons from various contexts: 1 - Second structure of the first trench; 2, 5 - Pit 15; 3 - Bedeni context of the step trench; 4, 6 - Pit 16; 7 - Pit 14; 8 - Pit 18; 9 - Pit 27. ....	114
Figure 104. 1 - Ceramic Bead from topsoil of Trench 1; 2 - Uncertain ceramic object; 3-4 - Uncertain ceramic objects from Bedeni period; 5 - Animal figurine from the first structure of Trench 1; 6 - Animal figurine from the second structure of Trench 1; 7 Animal figurine torso, surface finding.....	116

Figure 105. Stone Objects from various contexts: 1 - From the second structure of Trench 1; 2 - Pit 18; 3 - Pit 16; 4 - Pit 14; 5 - From the first structure of Trench 1; 6 - From Bedeni context of the step trench; 7 - Mortar from Bedeni context of the step trench; 8 - Pestle from Kura-Araxes deposition of the third terrace of the step trench; 9 - Pestle from surface; 10-11 - Pestles from Pit 16; 12 - Polisher from Bedeni context; 13 - Polisher surface finding; 14 - Possible weight from top soil of the step trench. ....118

Figure 106. 1-2 - Wet stones from Bedeni context of the step trench; 3 - Wet stone from Pit 16; 4-5 - Querns from topsoil of the second trench; 6 - Andesite hammer from Bedeni deposition of the step trench; 7 - Andesite hammer from first structure of Trench 1; 8 - Hammer with perforation, topsoil of the step trench; 9 - Hammer with notch from Trench 1. ....119

Figure 107. 1 - Multi-functioned andesite tool from Pit 16; 2 - Conical-shaped threshing sledges from topsoil; 3 - Decorated stone block from the third terrace of the step trench: a) photo; b) graphical drawing. ....120

Figure 108. 1 - Detail of Ottoman period silver candle stick from topsoil of the step trench; 2 - Iron knife possible belonging to soviet period; 3 - Kura-Araxes bronze pendant from trench 3 and its chemical composition. ....122

Figure 109. 1 - Distribution of different types of artefacts and debitage made from three materials: flint, obsidian, and chalcedony. The artifacts and debitage are categorized into two types: sickle blades and projectile points, and debitage and atypical artifacts. The chart shows the following data: Flint: 8 sickle blades and projectile points, 450 debitage and atypical artifacts, with a total of 458 items. Obsidian: 8 sickle blades and projectile points, 80 debitage and atypical artifacts, with a total of 88 items. Chalcedony: 8 sickle blades and projectile points, 15 debitage and atypical artifacts, with a total of 23 items. 2 - the distribution of different types of artifacts made from three materials: flint, obsidian, and chalcedony. The artifacts are categorized into two types: sickle blades and projectile points. The chart shows the following data: Flint: 12 sickle blades, 4 projectile points, and a total of 16 artifacts. Obsidian: 2 sickle blades, 2 projectile points, and a total of 4 artifacts. Chalcedony: 2 sickle blades, 2 projectile points, and a total of 4 artifacts. ....124

Figure 110. 1 - First type of projectile points; 2-5, 9 - Second Type projectile points; 6-8 - Third Type projectile points. 1 - Pit 12; 2 - From the first structure of Trench 1; 3-4 - From Trench 3 locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 5 - Second terrace of the step trench; 6 - Topsoil from Trench 1; 7-8 - From topsoil of Trench 3; 9 - Spearhead from Trench 3 locus associated to Kura-Araxes. ....125

Figure 111. 1-3 - First type of sickle blades; 4-6, 8-14 - Second type; 5-6 and 11-12 - First subcategory of second type sickle blades; 4, 8-10, 13-14 - Second subcategory of second type sickle blades; 7 - Third type. 1-4, 6 - Sickle blades from Structure 1; 5 - From Pit 24; 7-8, 12 - From topsoil of Trench 3; 9-10 - From Kura-Araxes context of Trench 1; 13 - Surface finding; 14 - From topsoil of Trench 1. ....127

Figure 112. Bone tools: 1-2, 4 - From Trench 3 locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 3 - From the second terrace of the step trench; 5 - From Trench 1 locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 6 - First structure of Trench 1; 7 - Bedeni context of the step trench; 8 - Pit 27. ....130

Figure 113. Bone tools: 1 - Pointed tool from the second structure of trench 1; 2 - Animal tusk, possibly red painted, originated from the cultural layer of Trench 1. ....131

Figure 114. Pointed tools from various contexts: 1 - Bedeni context of the step trench; 2-5 - From Trench 3 locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 6 - From Trench 1, locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 7 - From the second structure of Trench 1. ....132

Figure 115. 1, 3 - Spindle whorls from Bedeni context of the step trench; 2, 4 - Spindle whorls from Trench 1 locus associated to Kura-Araxes; 5 - Antler from Bedeni context of the step trench. ....134

Figure 116. Quantity of Worked Bone Tool Assemblage from the Kura-Araxes period. ....135

Figure 117. The number and percentage of identified specimens (NISP) and minimum number of individuals (MNI) and age groups from the Kura-Araxes layers. ....135

Figure 118. The number and percentage of identified specimens (NISP), minimum number of individuals (MNI) and age groups from the Bedeni layers. ....136

Figure 119. The number and percentage of identified specimens (NISP), minimum number of individuals (MNI) and age groups from the Late Bronze Age layers. ....136

Figure 120. (1) The ratio of domestic and wild animals from Kura-Araxes layers, NISP - the number of identified specimens, MNI - the minimum number of individuals. ....136

Figure 120. (2) Quantity of bones according to species. ....136

Figure 121. (1) The distribution of Cranial and postcranial specimens according to species. ....138

Figure 121. (2) Quantitative percentage ratio in different species age groups according to the minimum numbers of individuals (MNI) and the number of identified specimens (NISP). ....138

Figure 122. Irmis Rka. Pollen diagram. ....139

Figure 123. Irmis Rka. NPP diagram. ....140

Figure 124. Irmis Rka. Pollen grains and spores found in Pit24 (Locus 501): 1. *Abies*; 2 *Polypodiaceae*; 3 - *Polypodium vulgare*; 4 - *Picea orientalis*; 5 - *Caryophyllaceae*; 6 - *Chenopodiaceae*; 7,12 - *Carduus*; 8- *Pinus*; 9,10 - *Vitis vinifera*; 11- *Polygonum*; 13, 14 - *Cichorioideae*. ....141

Figure 125. Irmis Rka. Pollen grains found in Pit.24 (Locus 501): 1, 2, 3, 4, 7-*Triticum*; 5, 6 - *Cereal*. ....142

Figure 126. Irmis Rka. Non-pollen palynomorphs found in Pit 24 (Locus 501): 1,4 - Phytoliths; 2,3 - starch grain + Phytolite; 5- Tephra; 6 - Tracheal cell of *Pinus*; 8- Flax textile fiber. ....143

Figure 127. Irmis Rka. Non-pollen palynomorphs found in Pit 18/s.217: 1 - *Glomus* + Phytolite; 2 - Phytolite + starch grain. ....144

Figure 128. Irmis Rka. Non-pollen palynomorphs found in Pit 18/s.217: 1- Acari remains; 2, 3, 4 - Acari. ....145

Figure 129. Irmis Rka. Tephra found in Pit 18/s.217. ....146

Figure 130. Identified plant species along with their respective quantities. ....147

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## Introduction

# Historical and geographical settings of the region

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a region in southwest Georgia that amalgamates two historical-geographical provinces of the country: Samtskhe in the west and Javakheti in the east. The central and eastern parts of the region are predominantly characterised by the basin of the Kura (Mtkvari) River and its surrounding mountain zones. Our focus area is the extreme southwestern frontier of the Samtskhe province, covering the modern-day administrative district of Adigeni - an area that has not been extensively introduced to the scientific community.

This region is distinguished by difficult terrain, with elevations ranging from 1100 to 2500 m asl, bordered by three large mountain ranges, namely, Meskheti ridge in the north; Erusheti ridge in the south; and Arsiani ridge in the west. The main river in the region, Kvabliani, flows between the Erusheti and Meskheti Mountains. It has several major tributaries, such as the Otskhe, Dzindze, and Ghaghvi rivers, as well as numerous small seasonal streams. Modern settlements are located in the valleys of these rivers and on the slopes of the mountains.

It should be noted that there are several large and small passes bridging Adigeni to western Georgia. To the west lies the Goderdzi Pass which connects Adigeni to the Adjara region, while the Zekari Pass heads north towards the Imereti region. This passage has been one of the most significant roads in the region. It had great trading and economic value in historical epochs and was actively used until the 20th century, before the Soviet occupation. According to the numerous sites found in this valley, it is evident that this passage was equally significant during prehistory.

The river networks also play a crucial role in the area, particularly along the Turkish border where the Potskhovi River flows into the region. By using this road, contacts could have been made to the south, towards Anatolia. The Orchosani site located in the Potskhovi valley provides evidence of such contacts or interactions during the Chalcolithic period. To the east, this region shares an administrative border with the Akhaltsikhe district and the Kura (Mtkvari) valley, although they are not geographically separated. The enduring influence of the Kura River throughout millennia is well-known and no further discussion is required.

Due to the challenging terrain of the region and dense forests, there is a scarcity of land suitable for agriculture. Fields are artificially held on terraces of different sizes, sometimes including more than 20 terraces, especially in the Kura Valley (Berishvili 1970: 59-69). Hence, the economy in this region is primarily based on livestock. The remaining alpine areas are used by seasonal nomads for pasture. These seasonal hamlets consist of wooden dwellings called “Yayla” or “Heila”, and traditionally, every village has its own Yaylas and pasturelands with defined boundaries<sup>1</sup>.

To better understand the origins of this lifestyle and how landscape factors influenced ancient people in general, it is necessary to conduct future research using anthropological and archaeological approaches.

Despite challenging landscape conditions, archaeological records indicate that the region has been continuously inhabited since prehistory. Archaeological research has a long tradition in Samtskhe-Javakheti dating back to the 1920s, and excavations have revealed sites from various periods.

Despite scholars being focused on the Adigeni area, along with the rest of the region, little is known and documented about it. The first evidence of an archaeological find in this part of Samtskhe dated back to

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<sup>1</sup> Yayla is the Turkish word for highland/plateau; it also means summer uplands pastures or summer mountain resorts; “Heila” is a transformed, modified version of this word, which is used only in this part of South Georgia. For the locals, it symbolises a wooden house, in a different context than its original meaning.

the late 19th century when a small clay jug and three coins were found while digging the foundation for a house at the confluence of the Kurtskhana and the Otskhe Rivers (Jorbenadze 2005: 217–219).

Another accidental discovery occurred during the construction of the Abastumani sanatorium in 1935. Stone cists dating to the Early Bronze Age were discovered and destroyed without being studied. Only one vessel has survived from the cemetery (Orjonikidze 1983: 24).

The first systematic archaeological excavations in this area were initiated by L. Muskhelishvili in the 1930s at Bodoklde, near Abastumani. The goal of this research was to find the political center of Samtskhe, called Odzrkhe, which has not yet been identified. Also, the results of the excavation have never been published (Gambashidze 1978: 4).

Since 1950, when a Colchian hoard dated to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age was accidentally discovered in the village of Ude (Javakhishvili and Chubinishvili 1959: 59–64), archaeologists increased attention to the Adigeni area. In the same years, T. Chubinishvili conducted a small-scale excavation at Zadengora near the village Benara, where he found the Early Bronze Age Kura-Araxes settlement and artifacts of the classical period as well (Chubinishvili *et al.* 1957: 127).

In the 1960s, studies of the region were carried out by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, primarily focused on historical geography issues. These field campaigns involved numerous activities, including small-scale excavations at various locations in the Otskhe valley (Gambashidze 1978: 4). In fact, the results remain unpublished.

In 1973, a salvage archaeological excavation was conducted in Abastumani at the Kanobili site. The settlement was damaged during the construction of a ropeway. Following excavations revealed remains of stone architecture and pottery assemblages dated back to the Chalcolithic period. Due to the scarcity and uniformity of the obtained materials, the unambiguous cultural attribution of this settlement could not be achieved. However, some materials are clearly related to the Chalcolithic of western Georgia, while others are associated with Eastern Georgia (Tsopi group<sup>2</sup>). The site appears to have been at the crossroads of the regions and cultures (Kalandadze 1974: 10–14; Kalandadze 1976: 371–390; Orjonikidze 2004: 74–75). This settlement, along with Orchoshani, is of particular importance for understanding the role of the region in prehistoric times. A second attempt to carry out a small-scale excavation at the Kanobili settlement in 1977, albeit at a different location, did not identify Chalcolithic remains. Instead, Kura-Araxes and Late Bronze Age materials were found (Pkhakadze and Orjonikidze 1978: 487; Pkhakadze *et al.* 1982: 20–21).

A particularly successful study of the region was conducted by the Meskheta-Javakheti Archaeological Expedition, directed by O. Gambashidze. With increased construction activities across the region, expedition teams worked on various locations and excavated sites from different period in the Adigeni region, especially in the villages such as Parekha, Benara, Khevasheni, Varkhani, etc. (Gambashidze and Kvijinadze 1981: 63; Gambashidze and Gambashidze 1995: 53–54).

Apart from the major rescue operations, the expedition also conducted archaeological surveys and recorded a number of significant sites. Notable among them is a Late Bronze Age hill settlement near the village Ude (Gambashidze *et al.* 1980: 84). The expedition also explored the multi-layered settlement of Amkheris Gora, dated to the Early Bronze Age, Late Bronze-Early Iron Age, and Medieval periods. A large assemblage of Paleolithic tools was also collected at this site (Gambashidze and Gambashidze 1995: 54; Gambashidze and Gambashidze 1997: 47). This triggered interest and excavations began at Amkheris Gora in the 1990s by M. Gabunia. However, Paleolithic cultural layers have not been confirmed (Gabunia and Fanchulidze 2001: 5–11). The same expedition also initiated a small-scale survey in the adjacent area. As

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<sup>2</sup> More broadly about Tsopi and so called Tsopi group sites see Nebieriedze 2010.

a result, at Kvemo Tskise, close to the village of Ude, another Paleolithic site attributed to the Acheulean tradition was identified (Gabunia and Fanchulidze 2001: 5–11; Gabunia *et al.* 2015: 84).

It is also noteworthy that in 1996, a local farmer in the vicinity of Ude accidentally discovered bronze artifacts. The following year, the archaeological expedition led by I. Gambashidze conducted excavations at this location. However, no archaeological context was found. Soon after, investigations began near the medieval Buzmareti Church, where stone cist graves were discovered by the same farmer. Test excavations revealed a medieval collective tomb and a cultural layer from the same era. The lower deposit also contained pottery sherds from the Late Bronze Age period (Gambashidze 1997). After these initial findings, the site has not been further investigated.

Subsequent excavations in the Adigeni area are related to the construction project of the BP pipeline. In the last decade, several archaeological sites were discovered in the territory of Samtskhe (Gamkrelidze 2010), including the multilayered settlement of Orchosani located in the Potskhovi River basin. The site comprises a Late Medieval settlement with a contemporary cemetery, as well as remnants from the early Middle Ages, late Antiquity, Hellenistic, and Chalcolithic periods (Gambashidze *et al.* 2018: 146–449; Gambashidze and Mindorashvili 2018: 449–549).

The review of archaeological research over a century illustrates that this study area has a long history, but on the other hand, the available information is sparse. Generally, these sites are described in short reports, providing only general and limited information. Consequently, relocating those sites based on these short descriptions is impossible. In response to this lack of information, systematic archaeological surveys

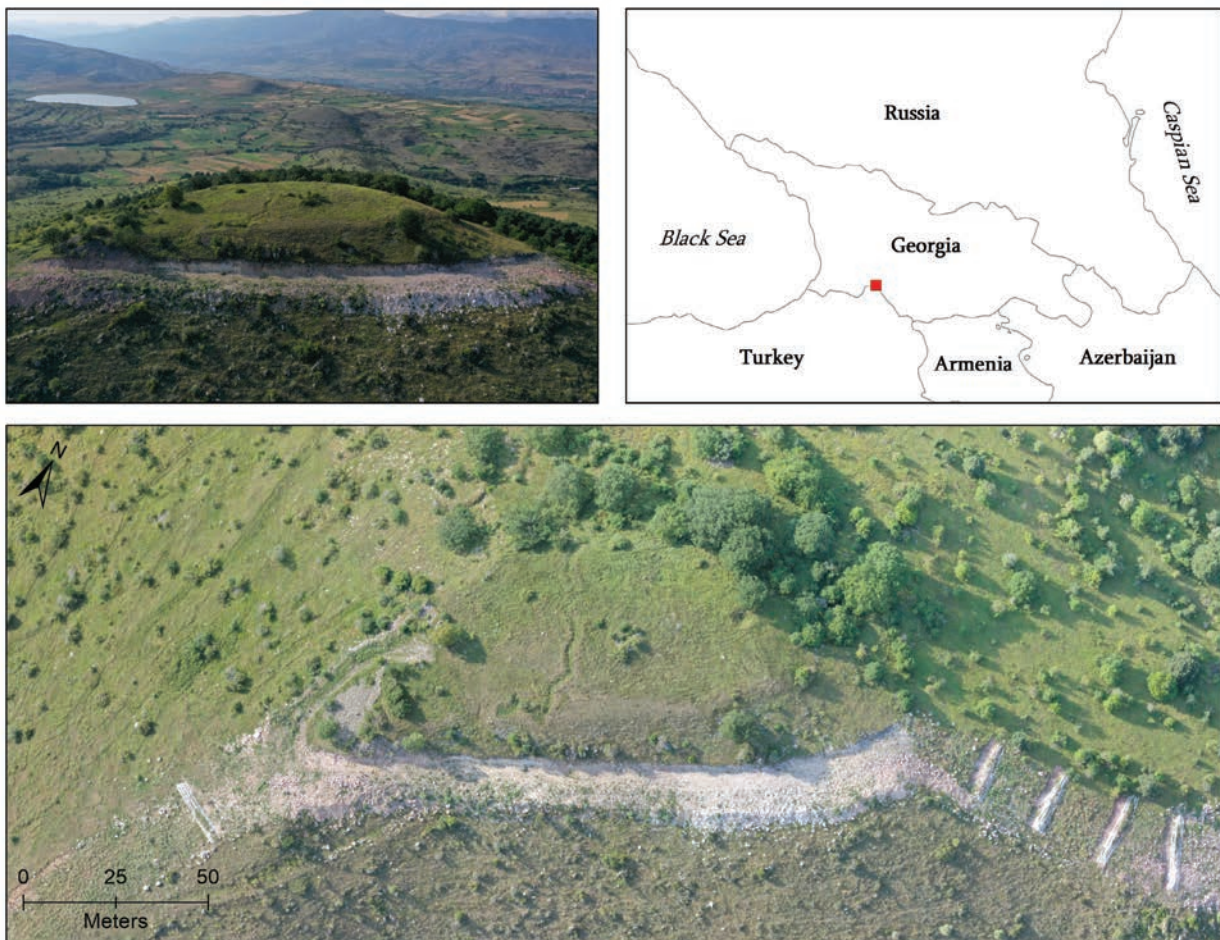


Figure 1. Settlement views and a map showing the location of Irmis Rka (Created by G. Kirkitadze).



Figure 2. Gas pipeline terrace on the southern slope of the settlement.

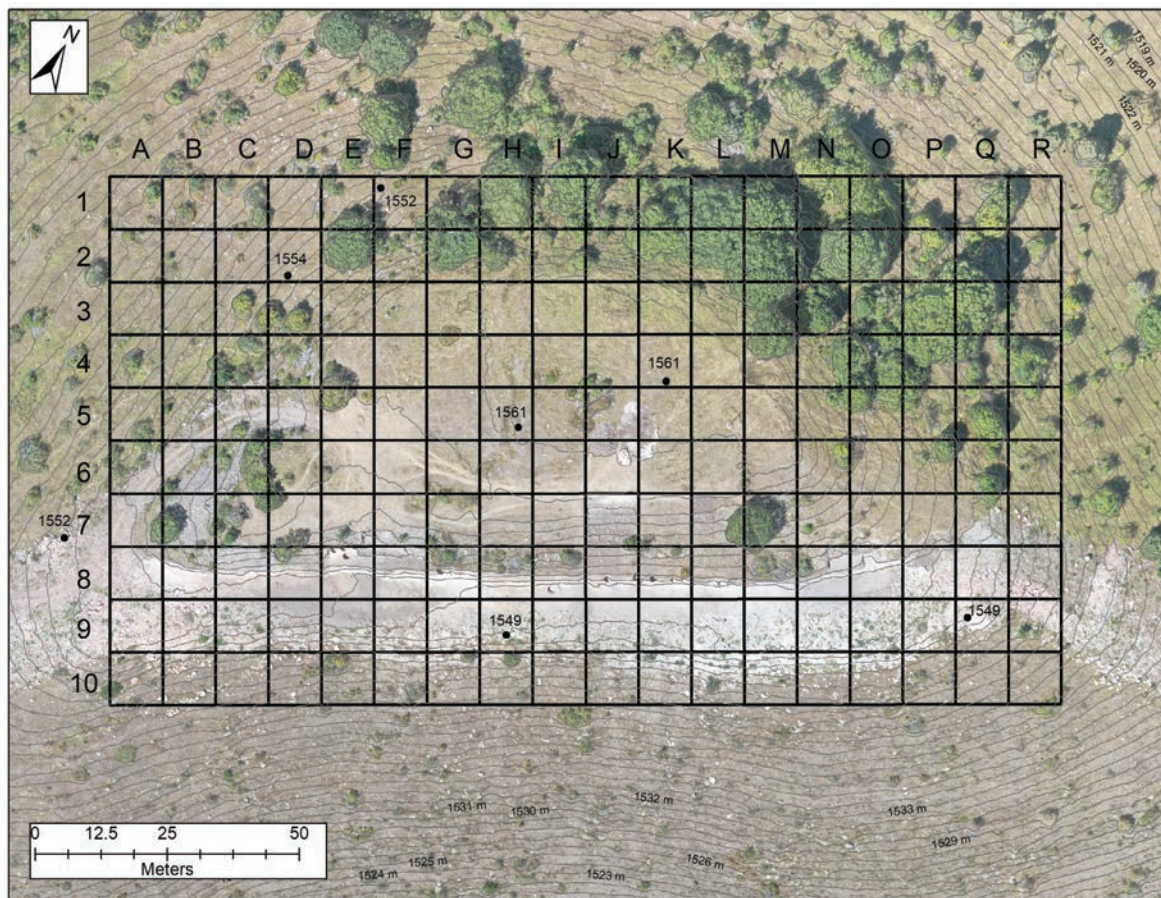


Figure 3. Grid pattern generated for the settlement (Created by G. Kirkitadze).

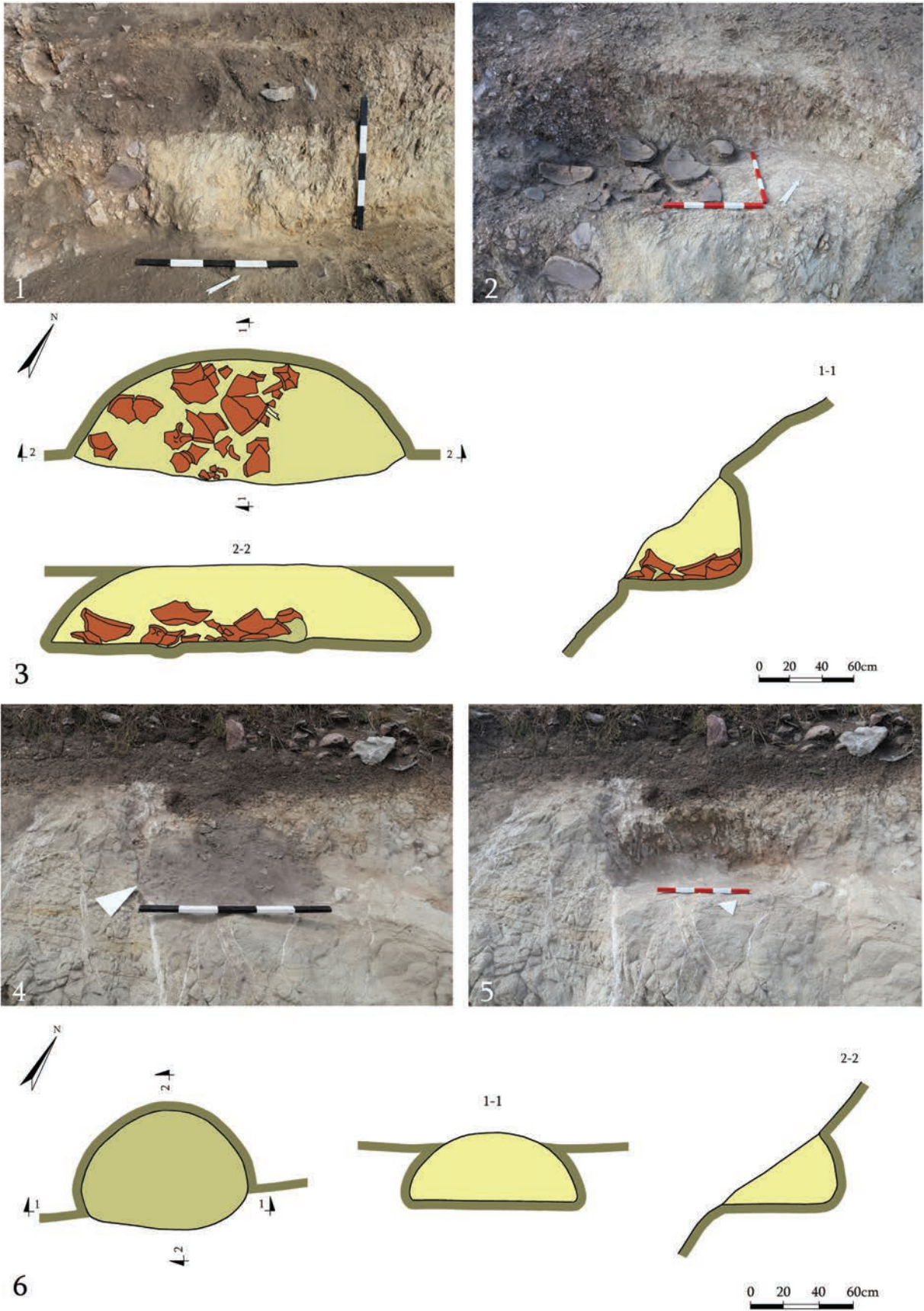


Figure 4. 1-3 - Pit 4; 4-6 - Pit 6.

were initiated in this region starting in 2013. This effort led to the discovery of numerous archaeological sites with a wide chronological range, including the Irmis Rka settlement, a key site discussed in this paper (Chilingarashvili 2021: 40–98).

Turning to the history of Samtskhe-Javakheti, the region's past 300 years cannot be ignored. Since the 16th century, the area had been occupied by the Ottomans, and as part of the empire, a taxation document called the Great Book of Gürcistan Vilayet (Province) was created (see Jikia 1958). According to this document, more than 50% of the villages no longer exist, and these settlements have not been mapped and recorded. In this regard, work dedicated to locating these lost settlements and surveying unstudied landscapes has recently begun in the area of Aspindza by colleagues (Anderson *et al.* 2014: 11–33; Anderson *et al.* 2018: 1–22; Negus Cleary *et al.* 2018: 381–405). However, much work remains to be done in the rest of the region.

### The site description

The settlement is located on the Erusheti Ridge, atop mount Irmis Rka<sup>3</sup>, 2 km south of the village Tsarbastumani, close to the border of Turkey, at an altitude of 1560 m. The site is a high mountain with a flattened summit (Fig. 1). From this vantage point with a panoramic view, the site controls the hinterlands and main valleys of the area. Northward overlooking the Kvabliani and Otskhe river valleys and further to the Meskheti Ridge. To the west, viewing the plains and alpine mountains; to the south and east, the Potskhovi valley unfolds.

As mentioned above, the settlement was identified during a survey in the 2014 season, and in 2019, it suffered damage due to the construction of a gas pipeline. Along the southeastern slope of the mountain, a terrace measuring 160 meters long and 15 meters wide was cut by machines (Fig. 2). It should also be noted that even before the recent damage, the site had been significantly disturbed during the Soviet time when military bunkers, canals, and trenches were built on the summit and slopes. The northern and western slopes of the mountain were also artificially terraced and forested.

Remains of the settlement can be primarily seen on the south and east slopes, as well as on the summit, covering an area of approximately 100 X 40 meters. To estimate the settlement's size, we conducted a survey around the mountain. On the upper slopes, fragmentary materials are scattered. It is unclear if the settlement encompasses such a vast area. The dispersion of artifacts could be attributed to Soviet activities and, more recently, the construction of a pipeline.

The presence of the walls visible on the surface indicates that the top of the mountain was likely fortified at some point. It is interesting to note a significant concentration of stones on the south edge of the summit, possibly remnants of the fortification. Our preliminary assumption is that the pile, a result of Soviet military activities, was gathered in one place and repurposed for constructing defensive structures. Notably, the megalithic ruins were identified on the northern slope within the forest, approximately 30 meters north of the summit. These ruins may be associated with the -previously mentioned fortification features.

For the 2020 season, the main objective was to investigate the cultural remains exposed within the damaged section. The aim was to determine the nature of the site and its general stratigraphic context. Excavations were conducted at two locations: one within the damaged area and another on the slope above the section, where three trenches were open.

At the beginning, a grid was established for the settlement, comprising 10 X 10 m squares divided into four equal segments of 5X5m. The grid is aligned with the gas pipeline and deviates by 28 degrees from true geographical north. The grid was labeled on a horizontal line with the Latin alphabet and on a vertical axis with numbers (Fig. 3). The arrow on the excavation photos indicates the direction of geographical north. Field documentation was carried out using a special notebook, adopting a model from the GAIA project (Kakhiani *et al.* 2013: 10; fig. 4).

<sup>3</sup> The toponym of the mount „Irmis Rka” is its original name, which was forgotten. The mount no longer had a name, but the slope still had a Turkish toponym, “Bal Kay” - honey rock. After the AAS survey project, Soviet maps were explored and its historical name was given back.