

Message from the Dead: Megalithic Art from the Middle Bronze Age Kurgans in the Southern Caucasus

Abstract

This paper examines the megalithic art found within the Middle Bronze Age Zurtaketi Kurgans of the South Caucasus. The kurgans, dating to the Trialeti culture (ca. 2000-1700 BCE), showcase a variety of engraved motifs, including geometric patterns, zoomorphic figures, and depictions of dwellings. Similar carvings found across the South Caucasus likely held symbolic or ritual significance and reflect broader megalithic tradition throughout the region. The analysis of these designs offers insights into the cultural and religious beliefs of the Trialeti communities during the Bronze Age.

Introduction

Megalithic burials are part of the widespread megalithic tradition that emerged in the Old World. Megalithic burials come in various forms with the most common being dolmen, tholos, mound, chamber tomb, passage grave, and kurgan (Krzemińska et al. 2018; Srivastava 2023). This tradition likely appeared around 4800-4500 BCE along the Atlantic coast of Europe and gradually spread across the continent by seafaring people, covering the areas of Western Europe including the Iberian Peninsula and part of the Mediterranean basin in the south, and the British Isles and Scandinavia in the north (Blank et al. 2020; Moorti 2008; Sánchez-Quinto et al. 2019; Schulz Paulsson 2019). Nevertheless, the studies indicate a broader, albeit later, distribution of megalithic burial-ritual monuments throughout the Eurasian continent, including the Middle East, the Caucasus, and beyond (Akkermans and Brüning 2017; Sharon et al. 2017; Sharon and Berger 2020; Tallgren 1933; Sagona 2017; Narimanishvili et al. 2019; Patel et al. 2022; Kovalev 2022).

The communities that established the tradition of megalithic structures were actively engaged in decorating these monuments, particularly burial sites, as they were associated with sacred rituals of the afterlife. Common decorative designs include concentric circles, spirals, ring marks, cup marks, zigzag lines, and chevrons (Shee Twohig 1981; Nash 2014). In addition to this abstract repertoire, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs are also present (Nash 2014). We have a comprehensive understanding of megalithic burials with such decorations across Europe, including some of the most remarkable sites such as Newgrange, Fourknocks, and Knowth in the British Isles (Powell 1994; Shee Twohig 1981; O'Sullivan 1986), Dolmen de Soto, Dolmen de Antelas, and Portela do Pau in the Iberian Peninsula (Garcés et al. 2022; Sanches 2018), Gavrinis, Barnenez, and Petit Mont in Brittany, north-west France (Cassen et al. 2015; Ramírez et al. 2015), and Kivik tomb, Sandagergård, and Sandbrauta in Scandinavia (Bertilsson et al. 2016; Goldhahn 2010; Henriksen 2021).



Fig.1 – Map of the region with the key sites mentioned in the text

Meanwhile, this paper focuses on the Caucasus region, where a megalithic tradition occurred at the dawn of the Bronze Age, around 3500 BCE. Initially, it appeared in the form of dolmens and spread throughout the Western Caucasus, along the northeastern coast of the Black Sea (Trifonov 2013). By the third millennium BCE, megaliths had become widespread across the South Caucasus, where kurgans were the main type of megalithic burials (Narimanishvili et al. 2019; Narimanishvili et al. 2022; Sagona 2017). In this regard, it is especially intriguing to look beyond the Eurocentric perspective through time and space and explore the diverse nuances of a less-studied area of the megalithic world. In this paper, I present evidence of significant megalithic art from the South Caucasus that is yet to be widely recognised (Fig.1).

Archaeological Context of the Zurtaketi Kurgans

The Zurtaketi Kurgans are part of the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti culture, prevalent in the South Caucasus during the first half of the second millennium (ca. 2000/1900–1700) BCE. This culture is renowned for its intricate objects made of precious metals

and bronze, as well as for constructing rich barrows for the elite social class, who practised cremation. The ashes of the dead were placed on a wooden cart or a litter, as evidenced by the remains of four-wheeled vehicles, which were likely considered prestige items (Sagona 2017).

The kurgans comprised a mound of earth and stone that covered a burial area. They varied in shape and size, mostly round or oval, with some exceptions featuring rectangular-shaped construction with rounded corners. The largest kurgan measured 100 m in diameter and rose 8 m above the plain, while smaller mounds averaged 30 m in diameter and 1-2 m in height. The chambers within these barrows also varied in size, with the largest measuring 14.5 X 10.5 m (Kurgan 3) and the smallest – 6 X 5.3 m (Kurgan 7) (Fig.2) (Japaridze 1969; Sagona 2017).

The Trialeti culture kurgans can be categorised into three types: directly on the earthen surface, in a grave pit, or within a stone-built chamber. Typically, human skeletons are absent from the Trialeti culture barrows, while animal bones, particularly cattle, are frequent and most likely were



Fig.2 – Reconstruction of the kurgans (after Narimanishvili et al 2019)

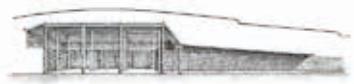


Fig.3 – Photographs of the passageway (dromos) and chamber of the Zurtaketi Kurgans (after Japaridze 1969)

part of the funerary rites. The Trialeti communities preferred to cremate their dead and place their ashes in wooden containers (Narimanishvili 2015; Sagona 2017).

Graves with the passageway reached their peak with stone-built chambers. Stone-built chambers required the most effort as their chamber walls were carefully constructed with stone slabs, wooden posts to support its wooden roof, and a passageway (dromos) leading to the tomb entrance (Fig.3) (Sagona 2017).



Geography and Geology

The Zurtaketi Kurgan field is located on the Gomareti Plateau (Fig.4), at an elevation of 1400 m asl, on the eastern slope of the Javakheti Range, within the basin of three rivers: Akha, Useinkendi, and Karabulaghi. The Karabulaghi River (also referred to as Shavtskarostskali, translated into Georgian from the local Azerbaijani toponym Qarabulaq, meaning „black spring“) is the largest among these three and serves as a tributary of the Khrami River. The kurgan field lies between the villages of Karabulaghi and Useinkendi within the municipality of Dmanisi (Fig.5). Geologically, the Javakheti Range features two main effusive formations: Neogene-Goderdzi suites and Quaternary-Zurtaketi suites. The narrow gorges, such as that of the Karabulaghi River, are better developed on the eastern slopes, with

Fig.4 – A view of the Trialeti highlands (after Japaridze 1995)



Fig.5 – The Zurtaketi Kurgan field photographed in 2022 (photo credit Dr Nathaniel Erb-Satullo)



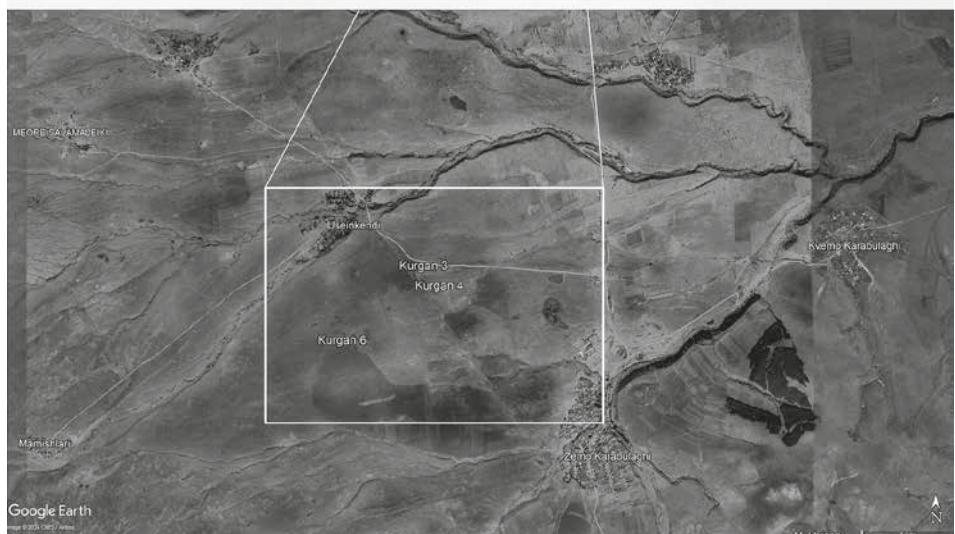
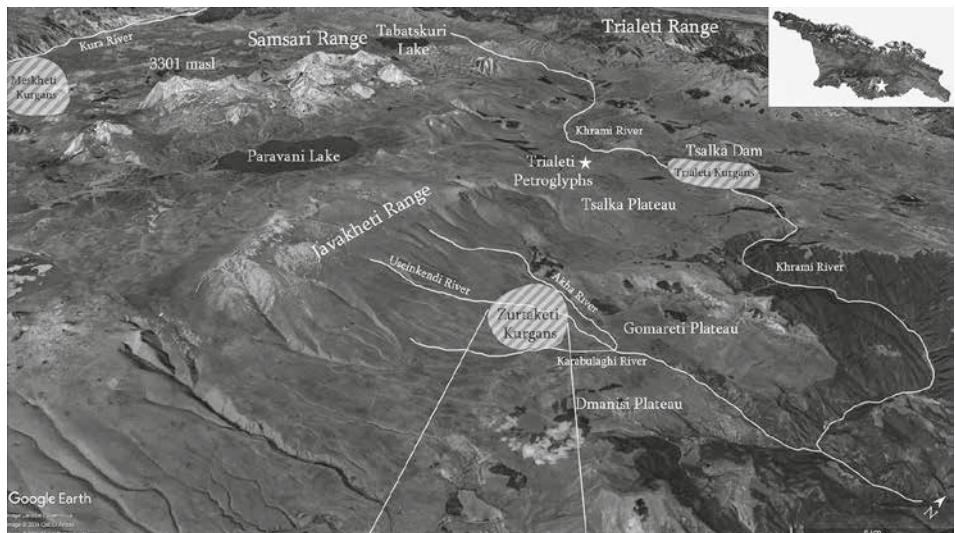


Fig.6 – Data on the distribution of the Trialeti culture kurgans (collected from Sagona 2017; Rubin-son 1976, Narimanishvili et al. 2019, Zischow 2004)

depths of 150-200 meters within the Khrami River basin (Fig.6) (Tielidze et al. 2019).

From a palynological perspective, the paleoenvironment of this area in the second millennium BCE was characterized by an oak savanna landscape. Oak (*Quercus macranthera*) was the dominant tree based on pollen records. Despite the presence of oak

trees on the Tsalka and Gomareti Plateaus during the Bronze Age, there is no evidence that they formed a dense forest in these areas (Connor and Sagona 2007).

Materials and Methods

During 1959-1964, the prominent Georgian archaeologist Otar Japaridze carried out ar-

chaeological excavations at the kurgan field near the village Karabulaghi in the Kvemo Kartli province of southern Georgia. The locality is known as the Zurtaketi Kurgan field, where archaeologists studied nine burial mounds of various sizes. Within three kurgans, they discovered over 250 engraved slabs decorated with a variety of motifs (Japaridze 1969).

Because many of the engraved slabs, especially the horizontal ones, were used as building material, they were merely traced in place. Only a limited number of the slabs were taken to the museum, however, today they seem to be lost. Hence, without physical access to the artefacts, I was unable to reassess the materials, including measurements, direct tracing, digitisation, and understanding the nature of the engravings and, therefore, superimpositions.

As a result, given the limited materials, the approach was processing original photographs and providing new tracings in order to produce high-quality illustrations.

Because the slabs were not individually numbered by the discoverers, I assigned new numbers that had not been used elsewhere, either in original field recordings or museum registrations. They will be used in this paper for the sake of clarity for the readers.

Artistic repertoire of the Zurtaketi Kurgans

Incised or deeply carved marks were observed on the stones within the chambers and passageways of three massive kurgans (Nos. 3, 4, and 6). Many of the motifs consist of linear scratches, haphazardly depicted on the stone surfaces. Zigzags, rhombs, triangles, nets, and chevrons are among the recognisable geometric motifs. Very few figurative images are found, and they mostly are animal portrayals. There is no order in the placement of these stones within the walls. They were found at different levels and comprised different dimen-

sions (Japaridze 1963; Japaridze 1964a; Japaridze 1964b; Japaridze 1969). (Table 1 and 2).

In total, 265 engraved slabs were recorded in these three kurgans, but only 32 were provided as photographs or tracings. Of these 32 slabs, the vast majority have a horizontal shape because they were used as a building material for the chambers. Nine of the 32 slabs show only chaotically intersecting lines, while six present more organized variations of intersecting lines, forming net-like motifs; Ten slabs predominantly exhibit a range of geometric motifs such as zigzag lines, triangles, chevrons, conifer shapes and dotted rectangular forms; One engraved stone, less likely to be a slab, shows an abstract sign. In addition to the non-figurative motifs, two slabs display dwelling-like figures, and three slabs feature zoomorphic figures. One slab is exceptional, vertically displayed like a stele, and contains four segments (Fig.7).

Geometric motifs

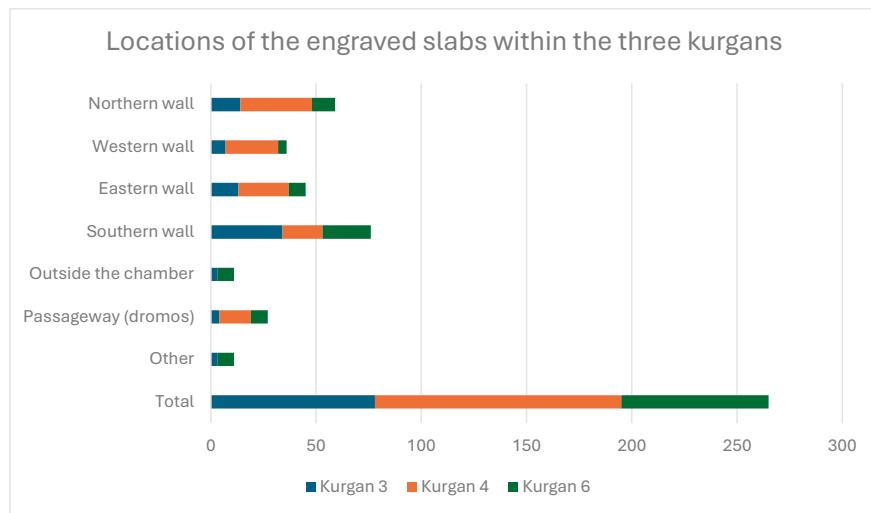
Among the slabs with clear geometric motifs predominantly shown on the surface, C1 and C2 are two of the best-preserved examples. C1 displays zigzag lines, incised in good order. C2 also depicts zigzag lines, in addition to chevrons, net-like motifs, and wavy lines. Another zigzag line, however fragmentary, is observed on C3. To its left, depicted lines are chaotically incised. Three more slabs with zigzag lines, C4, C5 and C6 are present, but at the same time, they give the impression of triangles due to horizontal lines placed above and below the zigzags. C7 is decorated with about ten vertical sections representing diagonal lines, zigzags, triangles, and chevrons. Chevrons are predominantly shown on C8 slab. C9 represents rectangular forms decorated with dots, while C10 displays a rectangle with a combination of spiral, rhomb, and triangle designs (Fig.7).

Meanwhile, Group A features chaotically intersecting lines, and Group B showcases net-like patterns. Besides, the figures of

Kurgans Settings	Kurgan 3	Kurgan 4	Kurgan 6
Plan of the kurgan			
Diameter	100 m	90 m	84 m
Height	8 m	2.6 m	7 m
Length and Width of the passageway	L - 40 m; W - 10 m	L - 35 m; W - 4 m	L - 28 m; W - 6 m
Area of the chamber	150 m ²	100 m ²	110 m ²

Tab. 1 – Measurements of the kurgans

Tab. 2 – Locations of the engraved slabs within the three kurgans



Group D are particularly intriguing due to the depiction of dwellings. D1 shows a pair of house-like figures portrayed with rectangular shapes and a triangle-shaped roof. D2 represents three images of a hut-like figure (Fig.7).

Zoomorphic motifs

Animal figures are observed on three slabs. Due to their schematic nature, the identification of the species is relatively difficult but it is apparent that the vertical slab displays a cervid image. The area where its

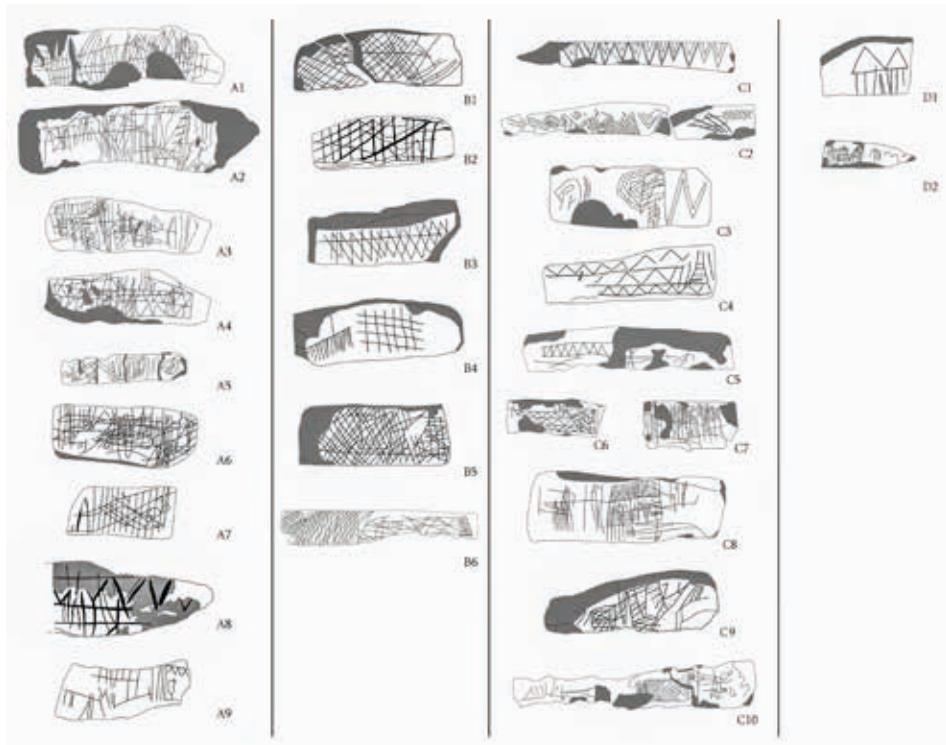


Fig.7 – Typology of stone slabs with geometric motifs (modified by author)

face should be depicted is damaged and faded, but its characteristic antlers indicate it is likely a deer (Fig.8).

Another animal figure is even more schematic and superimposed by chaotic lines that make its portrayal more obscure. Some identifiable features are that it is a quadruped and has a tail and horns. It possibly represents a bovid (Fig.9).

The third zoomorph is also schematic. Its body is represented with a single horizontal line that is connected to two pairs of vertical lines representing legs. On the left end of the body line, two curved lines extend upward, representing horns. This figure may depict a caprid (Fig.10). To the left of the animal figure, near its front legs, an image of a bow and arrow is identified. Depicting a bow and arrow alongside the animal is

likely interpreted as symbolizing a hunted animal (Losaberidze and Zavadashvili 2024).

Discussion

The reassessment of the engraved slabs from the Zurtaketi Kurgans provides new insights into the artistic endeavour, symbolic meanings, and ritual practices of Middle Bronze Age communities in the South Caucasus.

The complex societies of the Trialeti culture played a significant role in stimulating innovations in the region. Their complexity and monumentality are most prominently demonstrated through the burial rituals and funerary practices, as little is known about the nature of their inhabitance. The Trialeti society was closely engaged with more developed neighbouring regions, which is

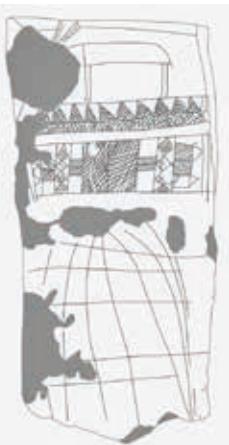


Fig.8 – Vertical slab (photo after Japaridze 1969; tracing by author)

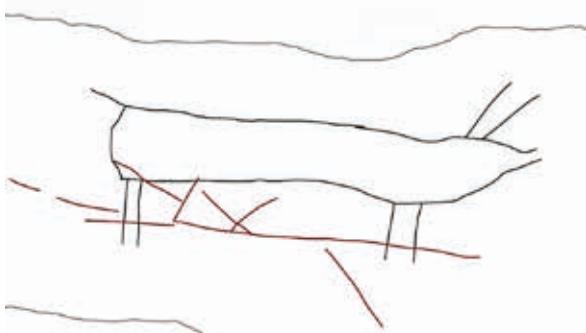
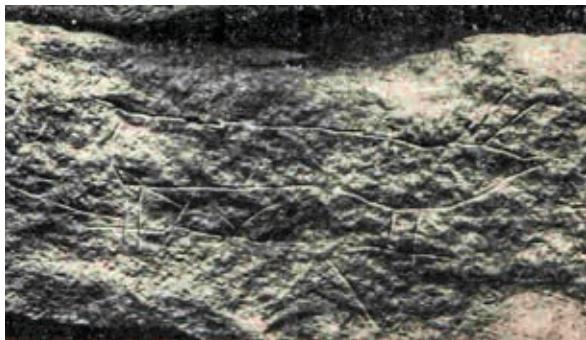


Fig.9 – Zoomorphic figure (photo after Japaridze 1964b; tracing by author)

why materials found in the Trialeti barrows show parallels with those from the Middle Eastern and Aegean world, indicating long-distance cultural relations (Sagona 2017).

It is widely accepted that megalithic art comprises mainly non-representative motifs and is found within a burial context (Nash 2013). Also, common geometric motifs in megalithic art across distant regions may share a symbolic language or aesthetic preference (Nash 2013; Yakar 2005; Yakar 2016). In general, megalithic motifs have often been considered as landscape features (Nash 2014). Zigzag lines, for example, might symbolize snakes or serve as a warning sign about the presence of snakes in the area (Petersen 2021). They could also represent water or mountains (Siegleluch 2017). The presence of these motifs on the Zurtaketi slabs could indicate similar symbolic associations linked to the cultural or religious beliefs of the Trialeti communities.

Zigzag and spiral ornaments are often found on menhirs or other types of standing stones in the South Caucasus (Narimanishvili 2019), though more famous examples are known from Western Europe, such as those at Barclodiad y Gawres in Wales and Gavrin in France (Nash 2013).

Zigzags, triangle patterns, nets, chequerboards, and chevrons are also well-known motifs in the Trialeti Middle Bronze Age pottery (Narimanishvili 2015). On the stones of the Zurtaketi Kurgans, as well as on Trialeti culture ceramics, checkered patterns, interlocking rhombs, triangles, net-like ornaments, rectangles filled with dots, and vertical twisted lines have been identified (Narimanishvili et al. 2022).

Regarding the meaning of the abstract-geometric signs, Japaridze proposed that they might be related to a counting process. In order to carry out such difficult and time-consuming work as constructing the large kurgans of Zurtaketi, precise accounting here would undoubtedly be of great importance. Moreover, this work required quite a large team of builders. It should be noted that there are no marked stones in the smaller kurgans at Zurtaketi, nor were such stones observed in the kurgans on the Tsalka Plateau. Perhaps, this absence is due to rather smaller size of the kurgans on the Tsalka Plateau compared to the three large kurgans at Zurtaketi, which may have not necessitated special recording. Japaridze assumed that some of the signs likely demonstrated group participation in the construction.

For example, in Crete, at the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, linear marks on building stones indicated the work of individual stone cutters. It is conceivable that representatives of different clans within the same tribe participated in constructing the great kurgans of Zurtaketi, with some signs possibly belonging to certain families (Japaridze 1969).

On the other hand, zoomorphic motifs in megalithic art are relatively less prevalent compared to geometric designs (Nash 2014). Similarly, in the Zurtaketi Kurgans, animal portrayals are fewer in number, yet they provide valuable insights into the symbolic importance of certain animals to the Trialeti culture and reflect the Bronze Age fauna of the region. The deer figure, identifiable by its antlers despite damage to the head area, suggests the significance of cervids in this area during the Bronze Age, as evidenced in the Trialeti petroglyphs site (Losaberidze and Zavadashvili 2024). Additionally, bovid and caprid figures have been identified at numerous later prehistory rock art sites in the South Caucasus (Losaberidze et al. 2022; Losaberidze and Zavadashvili

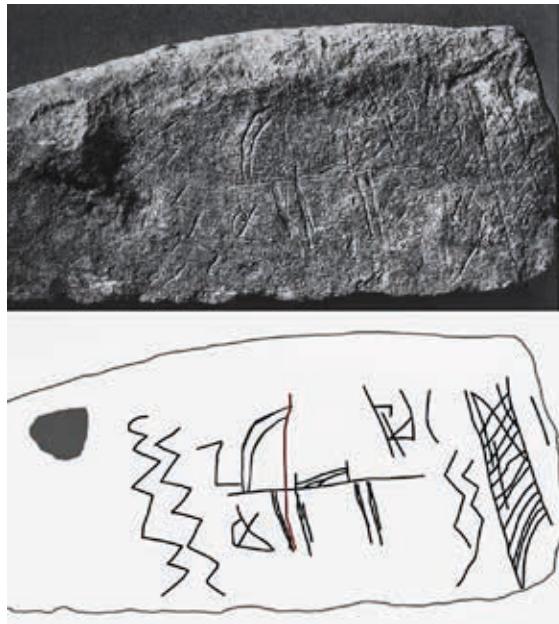


Fig.10 - Zoomorphic figure (photo after Japaridze 1995; tracing by author)

2024; Khechyan and Gasparyan 2014; Shirinli and Abdullayev 2021).

Another significant group of figures in the Zurtaketi corpus is dwelling/hut images. Considering the fact that our knowledge of the settlement patterns of the Trialeti societies is extremely limited (Narimanishvili and Amiranashvili 2010), their perception of the dwellings is particularly interesting (Fig.11). Although, these depictions are rather schematic and simplified. Meanwhile, depicting dwellings is evident in various places, with one of the most famous examples found in the Valcamonica Iron Age rock art (Anati 2008; Savardi 2007; Robb 2020).

At the end of the discussion, it is especially intriguing to mention that in addition to the Zurtaketi Kurgans, there are several more, yet less known discoveries of megalithic art in the South Caucasus, suggesting the existence of a broader and longer-lived tradition of decorating burial-ritual monuments during the Bronze Age. Here, I present relevant data from kurgans across the South Caucasus containing diverse artistic repertoire (Table 3).

To summarize the discussion in light of diverse yet limited regional comparisons, the presented sites span a long chronology from the late 4th to the mid-2nd millennium BCE. This vast phenomenon appears to have lasted for over 1,500 years during the Bronze Age. The available data does not indicate a strong but rather brief and incomplete evidence for further interpretations. The current state of key sites leaves room for the need for continued research on this topic where an important goal would be getting a better hold of the chronology.

Conclusion

The Zurtaketi Kurgans provide a glimpse into the artistic, symbolic and ritual practices of Middle Bronze Age communities in the South Caucasus. The engraved slabs, with their rich array of geometric and zoomorphic motifs at Zurtaketi and elsewhere in the region, suggest a somewhat broad, long-lasting and previously unexplored tradition of megalithic art in the South Caucasus. The studied sites from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, with a primary focus on the Zurtaketi Kurgans, shed new light on the significance of decorating burial-ritual monuments in the Bronze Age South Cau-

casus and reinforcing the idea that these communities shared a symbolic repertoire across vast geographical and chronological boundaries.

However, due to limited access to the materials, the current study relies on old data. On the other hand, the absence of calibrated dates limits the conclusions to a relative chronology. Future research, in case of recovering lost artefacts or discovering new materials, could advance the study of the megalithic art in the region through digital techniques, such as 3D modelling, to better visualize and analyze the engravings.

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Fig. 11 – Main types of motifs at Zurtaketi (Typological approach adopted from Valdez-Tullet 2021)

NET-LIKE MOTIFS	ZIGZAGS	CHEVRONS
		
SPIRAL-LIKE MOTIFS	WAVE MOTIFS	DOTTED RECTANGLES
		
DWELLINGS	ABSTRACT SIGNS	WEAPONS
		
ZOOMORPHS		
		

Tab. 3. Data from the parallel sites in the region with the evidence of megalithic art

Site	Region/Country	Date
Satkhe	Javakheti, Southern Georgia	Mid-to-late 3rd millennium BCE
<p>The excavated kurgan lies north of the ancient fortifications. The kurgan was roughly oval in plan, approximately 19 x 10 m, but less than 2 m high. The excavation revealed many large stones immediately below the sod surface; a number of these bore incised curvilinear marks. Three of the largest stones capped the burial chamber. The masonry walls of the chamber itself enclose a 3.5 x 8 m space; constructed of small flat stones, the chamber walls stand to 1.5 m high. The contents of the chamber had been plundered in antiquity. Based on the parallels of the materials, this kurgan is dated to the middle to late 3rd millennium BCE (Kohl et al. 1992).</p>		
Kichikdash	Gobustan, Baku Province, Eastern Azerbaijan	Early 3rd to early 2nd millennium BCE
<p>During the excavation of Bronze Age burial mounds in Gobustan, archaeologists discovered animal figures carved onto burial stones. These carvings were found on the cromlech stones surrounding the stone chamber and on the roof slabs. The animal figures depicted goats, supposedly domesticated (Rustamov and Muradova 2008).</p> <p>A total of 34 engraved stones were found in Gobustan, originating from Bronze Age settlements and burial sites. The engravings primarily depicted goats but also included anthropomorphic figures, oxen, celestial bodies, net designs, and hunting scenes.</p> <p>The kurgans where these engraved stones were found date to three distinct phases: early 3rd millennium BCE; late 3rd millennium BCE; and early 2nd millennium BCE (Muradova 2003; 2011).</p>		
Amili	Gabala, Northern Azerbaijan	Late 4th to late 3rd millennium BCE
<p>All the large stones used in the construction of the Amili Kurgan No.3 were carved. The carved lines were applied in chaotic and abstract manner. The author suggests that the carved stones were part of the burial rite. Most of the decorated stones had flattened and elongated pear shape. The edges of most of the stones were slightly shaped, possibly to give them an anthropomorphic shape.</p> <p>Kurgan No.3 is dated to the late 4th millennium BCE; Kurgan No.2 is dated to the third quarter of the 3rd millennium BCE (Museibli et al. 2023).</p>		
Aparan	Aragatsotn Province, Western Armenia	First half of the 2nd millennium BCE
<p>11 burials were dated back to the 18th-14th centuries BCE. Abstract signs were discovered on the cromlech of three burials of the 16th-14th centuries BCE. Similar signs were also applied to the lower surface and the northwestern edge of the floor slab of burial No.7. The signs were placed on the stones in a certain sequence (Muradyan 1993).</p>		
Lchashen	Gegharkunik Province, Eastern Armenia	Second half of the 2nd millennium BCE
<p>One distinctive appearance of depictions of deer in the Late Bronze Age is carved into the wooden seat box of a 4-wheeled wagon from Lchashen Kurgan No.11. This image, on a vehicle that certainly could not be used for hunting a swift animal like a deer, stands in vivid contrast to the bronze models of deer hunts from spoked-wheel chariots pulled by horses which adorned the yokes of some vehicles from Lchashen and elsewhere in the LBA. The kurgan is dated to the second part of the 2nd millennium BC (Rubinson 2022).</p>		
Lori Berd	Lori Province, Northern Armenia	First half of the 2nd millennium (19th-17th centuries) BCE
<p>Lori Berd kurgans dated to Middle Bronze Age contain some images. The burial chamber of the Kurgan No.79 was built with stone walls and it was roofed with wooden piles. The stone walls of the burial chamber were painted with yellowish-greenish pigments. Deer, oxen, snake, and bird figures are depicted on the chamber walls (Devedjian 2006).</p>		

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