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The Nakhchivan – Van – Urmiye Painted Pottery of the Middle Bronze Age

The Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, a province of the Republic of Azerbaijan, located in the Araxes basin known as the Northern Silk Road, has reflected a particular archeological importance not only during the Middle Ages but also in the Middle Bronze Age. Nakhchivan was the main commerce and economic corridor of communication between India and European countries, through Tabriz, Erzurum and Constantinople. Nakhchivan is located in a great strategic location of Southern Caucasus; it became a region of significant importance including a rich history in Transcaucasia, the Near East, Middle East and the Mediterranean. According to Prof. Veli Bahşaliyev, “the Araxes Valley has the shape of a wide corridor running from West to East between the high peaks of lesser Caucasus to the North, and the Zagros and the Oriental Taurus to the South. During the Lower Paleolithic, the Araxes Valley probably had a central function in the migrations of hominids from Africa into Europe, as suggested from the discovery of early hominid skeletal remains in Dmanisi, Georgia.”

Its strategic location combined with a myriad of natural resources, including minerals, copper and salt, made Nakhchivan a highly important location of Azerbaijan during the pre-industrial economies. Moreover, Nakhchivan is the cradle of Van – Urmiye Pottery Culture; an important sector of painted pottery culture that carries the regional particularities and impressive unique features of the Middle Bronze Age culture and production. However, over the years has been somewhat difficult to identify the Van-Urmiye Culture even though there have been many non-systematic excavations carried out in Kizilvank Hüyük and its necropolis. The painted pottery culture discovered shows a characteristic of Nakhchivan's Middle and Late Bronze Age pottery culture. Based on the scientific studies carried on the stratified hüyük of Göytepe, Haftavantepe, Kordlartepe and Dinkatepe in the Urmiye region, we can clearly observe an admirable development of painted pottery culture during the Middle Bronze Age. According to Prof. Bahşaliyev, “the Painted Pottery found in Haftavantepe demonstrates the progress of monochrome and polychrome painted pottery in the Middle Bronze Age. The results of these scholarly studies show that this tradition has continued until the Early Iron Age.” In an extensive interview for Foreign Policy News, Prof. Veli Bahşaliyev states that: “in comparison with stratified settlements in the Urmiye Basin, Middle Bronze Age stratigraphy has scarcely been observed in the Lake Van and Northeastern Anatolia regions. For the time being, the painted pottery culture of the Middle Bronze Age is represented by unearthed items from the necropolis areas. One should also keep in mind that until today recent archeological excavations have been rarely executed in the hüyük of this region. On the other hand, hundreds of painted pottery dating from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages acquired by illegal plowing exceed by far the quantity of discovered items from the other cultural strata.”

Based on the studies undertaken in Transcaucasia and North-West part of Iran there is a cultural gap founded in the settlements of Van region during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. It suggests that such a cultural vacuum in the hüyük of the plain fields was caused due to draught and climate hardships. As a result the economic production of these communities experienced a major shift, while giving a greater priority to sheep and livestock breeding than agricultural production. The local people started immigrating to higher altitudes and plateaus that were not as much affected by draught, in order to secure water resources and pastures for their animals. As a result we observe the spread of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Therefore the cultural layers in the plain, during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages were very poor, meanwhile the necropolis areas in higher mountainous regions begun reflecting the rich and lively aspects of the painted pottery culture of the same community; the cultural stages from the Middle Bronze to the Iron Age can be examined in a great detail based on the discovered painted pottery in the Van region. The monochrome painted pottery found in the necropolis of the Yoncatepe Fortress of the Early Iron Age, located 9 km southwest of Van, shows that the Middle and Late Bronze Age painted pottery tradition has continued in the Van region. Although the Yoncatepe Fortress and its necropolis are the only examples available, the number of archeological artifacts and items will increase with further excavations in northeastern Anatolia. It is believed that with the discovery of new settlements we will observe parallel characteristics between the cultural layers and the painted pottery founded through illegal excavations. In an interview with Foreign Policy News Journal, Prof. Oktay Belli stated that “during our excavations in the Yoncatepe necropolis in the past two years, we did not come across any examples of black painted pottery. Diagonal and zigzag lines drawn on light brown slip can be observed below the rim of bowls or the bottom

parts of pots. We can notice that the decorations do not cover the whole body. We hope to find new examples during our excavations in the following years.”

The impressive regional features of Middle and Late Bronze Age painted pottery discovered in the Nakhchivan region, are a real treasure for the world’s archeology, they demonstrate the evolution of knowledge, perception of life and cultural development of this ancient part of Azerbaijan. The map of painted pottery culture (shaped by similar archeological characteristics) includes not only the Nakhchivan region; it also encompasses the Van region and the Urmiye basin. Based on the unearthed characteristics in the stratified Middle and Late Bronze Age hüyüks located in these regions of ancient Azerbaijan, it is utterly certain that such a unique culture has been established from the settlements of semi-nomadic people of the Van region, Nakhchivan and the Urmiye Basin. According to Prof. Oktay Belli, “our thesis is confirmed due to a wide usage of the polychrome painted pottery after a monochrome pottery founded in Nakhchivan region, Van region and Urmiye basin.” At the beginning such a pottery culture has extended to the Mil-Muğan Steppes and the Sevan (Gökçe) Lake and its vicinity, while considerably influencing the ‘Trialeti Culture.’ In their upcoming excavations and research, the current international archeologists and scientists together with their colleagues from Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan hope to find the reason why polychrome painted pottery has been found only in certain ancient settlements.

Sources:

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