

NOVELTIES FROM THE VANI CITY SITE

Darejan KACHARAVA*

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Abstract: *Archaeological excavations carried out at the Vani site in 2002-2007 proved to be successful. Juxtaposition of the recent finds with the previous ones brought to light some novelties. Four cult constructions, dated to the second half of the 4th-3rd centuries BC were studied on the upper terrace of the site. Besides architectural and constructional similarities all the sanctuaries reveal some common features: all of them are connected with graves; inside or outside of some sanctuaries ritual burials of metal (bronze, iron) figurines were located.*

In the majority of the graves a platform was arranged along the western wall of the grave-pit, on which retainers have been buried.

The recent finds revealed one more shape borrowed by Colchian jewellers from the Greek world, namely, a pin-brooch. Two spacer-beads constitute innovations in the jewellery collection from Vani. One is swastika-shaped, while the other is rectangular.

Recent finds attest to the richness of Colchis in silver, too.

Beads seem to be used in all possible cases. They were primarily used to decorate the shroud of the principal deceased; some of them composed necklaces and bracelets, while others were sawn on the headdress. Beads were used also to decorate a silver phiale.

The Vani site, located in western Georgia (in some 25 km from Kutaisi), is dated to the 8th-1st centuries BC. The first scientific excavations were carried out in 1896, but systematic studies of the site started from 1947. On the grounds of the obtained materials the site is dated to the 8th-1st centuries BC¹.

Archaeological excavations carried out at the Vani site in the beginning of the 21st century, namely in 2002-2007, proved to be very successful. There were revealed stone constructions, graves, ritually buried bronze figurines, a hoard of

*Darejan KACHARAVA: Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi, 3, Purtseladze str. Georgia, e-mail: dkacharava@rambler.ru.

¹ On the site see: LORDKIPANIDZE 1991, p. 151-195; LORDKIPANIDZE 1995, p. 353-401; LORDKIPANIDZE 1995a.

bronze and iron artefacts, habitation layers densely packed with various archaeological materials². Juxtaposition of the recent finds with the previous ones brought to light some novelties.

1. On the upper terrace of the site four stone buildings are revealed (**Fig. 1**). All the buildings (NN 1-4) are of one and the same construction: they are erected on a platform deliberately cut into the rocky slope of the terrace; the platforms are levelled, surrounded on three sides with rock-cut walls, and open to the south-east; since the slope goes downhill naturally, the walls of the platform lessen gradually. The structures themselves are rectangular, open to the east, built of rusticated sandstone ashlar.

In one case (building N 1) double-faced masonry is composed of alternating stretchers and sleepers, the interface filling consisting of rough fragments of sandstone and limestone, and clay. Above the two courses of masonry at some places layers of clay were found. Most likely clay walls were erected above the stone foundations, or else the upper surface of the uppermost course of the masonry was covered with the clay plastering. This structure measures 6.50 by 4.20 m. Inside the construction an altar or sacrificial table was uncovered attesting to its cult character (**Fig. 2**). The western wall of the building is erected on a 10 cm high platform, shaping a kind of a channel (0.8 m wide) between the platform and the western rocky wall. Along the southern rocky wall, at a distance of 1-1.3 m from its edge, a channel was revealed (depth 0.10-0.15 m, width – 0.10-0.12 m). Most likely the channels served as drains. No channel was attested on the northern side of the rocky complex. It is worthy to note that this side is badly damaged³.

Building N 2 is badly damaged (approximate length – 2.5 m, width – 9.10 m). Of the walls only interface filling of pebbles is preserved (**Fig. 3**). Outside the sanctuary on the platform a jar-burial was found, testifying the cult function of the building. The burial is dated to the first half of the 3rd century BC. Rocky walls surrounding the platform are comparatively low (h – 1 m). Along the northern and western ones the channels are revealed (depth - 0.25 m, width - 0.15 m). The northern channel is connected with a rectangular pit, the function of which could be rain-water collection⁴.

Building N 3 was erected on a semi-oval platform cut in the rocky ground (**Fig. 4**). The platform is situated along the south-north axis. The stone socle (11 x 3.60 m) is composed of three courses of sandstone ashlar (h – 0.70 m). The interface filling is composed of unhewn sandstone and limestone blocks. The masonry is dry. Most likely above the socle a clay wall was erected, since a layer of unfired clay was evidenced there. The piles of unhewn blocks of sandstone

² KACHARAVA 2004b; KACHARAVA 2005; KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2008a; KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2008b; KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009.

³ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 240-241, fig. 2; KACHARAVA & KHARABADZE 2016, p. 60-63, pls. II-VI.

⁴ LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1991, p. 73-74, pls. 177-178; KACHARAVA & KHARABADZE 2016, p. 63-64, pls. X-XIV.

abutt the walls outside the construction (w – 1 m, h – 0.30 m)⁵. Very probably the function of the abutting was to support the walls, since the floor of the platform is sloping to the rocky walls. Remains of rain-water drainage were attested, too⁶.

Building N 4 is better preserved (**Fig. 5**). The socle of the walls (h – 0.20-0.25 m) is built of rusticated sandstone blocks, above which a 0.60-0.70 m high clay wall is erected. The building (3.95x6.20 m) is situated along the east-west axis. The north-eastern part is demolished, though most likely the entrance was from this side. Evidently, the floor was covered with clay plastering, since its small fragment was attested in the eastern part of the building. From three sides the building is surrounded with a channel (w – 0.30 m, depth – 0.15 m). The finds in the shape of a silver *phiale* and a bronze *thymiaterion* attest to the cult function of this construction. Shallow canals were also evidenced⁷.

On the grounds of architectural peculiarities (small-sized, U-shaped, open to the east, unroofed) these constructions were defined as sanctuaries; in addition, an altar or sacrificial table was evidenced inside of one of the constructions (sanctuary N 1), while a grave was revealed on the platform of sanctuary N 2, a bronze *thymiaterion* and a silver *phiale* were found in sanctuary N 4.

Besides architectural and constructional similarities all the sanctuaries reveal one more common feature: all of them are connected with graves. Namely, sanctuary N 1 seems to be linked with graves NN 1-4, one of which (N 1) is actually a burial of an iron figurine to be discussed below; sanctuary N 2 constitutes a complex with the above-mentioned pithos-burial; sanctuary N 3 could be connected with graves NN 16 and 17; while sanctuary N 4 represents a portion of a complex together with graves NN 20-24, 26, and 28 (**Fig.1**). All the graves are dated to the second half of the 4th-3rd century BC⁸.

One more thing is characteristic for a part of the discussed sanctuaries. Namely, inside and outside of sanctuaries N 1 and N 4 ritual burials of metal (bronze, iron) figurines were located. Thus, on the platform of sanctuary N 1, outside the sanctuary proper, a small pit (0.50 x 0.30 x 0.25 m) was uncovered, in which a bronze figurine was placed on a cover-tile (**Fig. 6**), covered by yet another one. The figurine was 0.25 m high (**Fig. 7**). It was adorned with a headdress comprising five rosettes, a torque, ten pendants, pairs of bracelets and earrings, and two glass beads, covered with a gold foil. On the grounds of jewellery parallels the figurine should be dated to the first half of the 3rd century BC⁹. One more figurine seems to be connected with this very sanctuary - an iron ithyphallic figurine, found in a pit (0.50 x 0.30 x 0.25 m) cut out in the rocky ground outside the platform, between graves N 2 and N 3. It was laid between two cover-tiles.

⁵ LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1985, p. 48-49, pl. LXXIV; KACHARAVA & KHARABADZE 2016, p. 68, pls. XXII, 1; XXIII.

⁶ KACHARAVA & KHARABADZE 2016, p. 68, pls. XXII, 1; XXIII; LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1985, p. 48-49, pl. LXXIV.

⁷ LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1984, p. 53, pls. LXX-LXXI; KACHARAVA & KHARABADZE 2016, p. 68-69, pl. XX, 2.

⁸ KHOSHTARIA 1979, p. 115-134; KACHARAVA, LORDKIPANIDZE, PUTURIDZE & KIPIANI 1979, p. 25-28.

⁹ KACHARAVA 2004, p. 225-226; KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2008, p. 97-111.

This male figurine (**Fig. 8**) was adorned with golden jewellery – a torque, earrings, and appliques¹⁰.

Four figurines, two iron and two bronze, are linked with one and the same cult building – sanctuary N 4. Specifically, in a pit cut in the corner of the sanctuary (**Fig. 9**) the iron figurines were found (**Fig. 10**). One bronze figurine was found inside the building in the shallow cutting (**Fig. 11**), while another figurine (female) was placed in an earlier channel, on the platform at the outer façade of the wall of the building (**Fig. 12**). Both bronze figurines had been laid face downwards. All the figurines were adorned with gold jewellery (**Fig. 13**); on several of the figurines traces of textile were noticed.

One more anthropomorphic figurine was found inside a cult structure located in the north-eastern part of the central terrace. The construction seems to have been built at the turn of the 4th-3rd centuries BC and destroyed in the Late Hellenistic period. It is something of a novelty for the Vani site, with a stepped socle on which semi-columns were set (observed only on the western façade). Inside the building traces of a rectangular altar were revealed with a sacrificial pit, and a grave (**Fig. 14**)¹¹, attesting to its cult character together with the altar. Thus, the building typologically differs from the above-discussed ones, though some similarities are evident. Namely, this sanctuary makes a group with two graves (NN 25 and 27): one, as was mentioned above, was located inside it, while the other was found at a distance of 1 m from the sanctuary. Moreover, inside the sanctuary, in a rectangular cutting (0.30 × 0.26 m) a bronze figurine (21 cm high) was found (**Fig. 15**). The figurine seems to be a specimen of Greek sculpture, representing a nude youth in a free standing pose. The head is adorned with an ivy wreath. The pointed ears and ivy wreath, as well as traces of the tail on the back side of the figurine, indicate its connections with the Dionysiac circle, namely with a Satyr. The protuberances surviving on the feet were apparently designed for attachment to another object (pedestal?). Thus, the original design of this figurine seems to have been of a decorative character. The figurine is decorated with golden jewellery: a torque and bracelets (**Fig. 16**). Around the figurine appliques of various forms were revealed, finding analogies among the materials of the 3rd century BC from Vani¹².

It is noteworthy, that six of these seven figurines were specifically prepared for the fulfillment of some sort of designated ritual – none of the figurines can stand without support, while the figurine of the Satyr, of secondary use, was reemployed in this ritual.

2. Some peculiarities are notable in the recently excavated graves. In the majority of them a platform (approx. 1 m long, 0.50-1.0 m wide, and 0.80-0.85 m high) was cut along the western wall of the grave-pit (**Figs. 17-18**). In one case (grave N 24) the platform was made of sandstone lumps. On the platforms a horse and/or a retainer were buried. During previous excavations a platform, though a lower one (0.10 m high), was evidenced in one grave only, namely in grave N 9,

¹⁰ KHOSHTARIA 1979, p. 115-116.

¹¹ KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 107-108, figs. 1-2.

¹² KVIRKVELIA 2005, p. 187-188; LORDKIPANIDZE 2011, p. 53-68.

belonging to a noble warrior dated to the third quarter of the 4th century BC (**Fig. 19**). On the platform two individuals and a dog were buried¹³. The whole set of evidence gives us the grounds to suppose the appearance of a new element in the burial rights in the second half of the 4th century BC: namely, a platform is arranged in the grave pits, intended for sacrificed retainers and animals. This element seems to be characteristic, to a certain extent, of the Sairkhe necropolis (western Georgia, Sachkhere municipality). For instance, in grave N 8 of this necropolis the chamber intended for sacrificed individuals and animals (horses, dogs) is 0.80 m higher than the one destined for a principal deceased¹⁴. The sacrificed individuals were buried in the grave-pit together with the principal deceased, too. This fact is evidenced in grave N 24 of Vani¹⁵.

3. Finds from the undisturbed graves (NN 22 and 24) attest once again to the richness of Colchis in gold: in grave N 22 more than 300 golden personal ornaments were placed in a clay jar, while grave N 24 contained more than 1 300 golden items (**Fig. 20**). Among these finds some novelties in the Colchian jeweller's art are evidenced. This is primarily obvious in the ornamental repertoire, which has been enriched with several new types. These are: a clip, a pin-brooch, spacer beads, and ring with the swivel stone. The clip composes a complicated head-dress decoration together with eight appliques of stylized griffins, a forehead band, granulated tubes, a pair of temple rings, and glass paste beads. The top of the clip is adorned with two rows of birds and two lions, while both sides of it are decorated with representations of a deer and three baby-deer, produced in the openwork technique, which is also a novelty (**Fig. 21**). This head ornament finds no analogies elsewhere, though connections with the engraved representations on Colchian axes of the 8th-7th centuries BC could be supposed.

Until now crescent-shaped ear-rings were thought to be the only Greek type ornament produced by Colchian jewelers¹⁶. The recent finds from Vani revealed one more shape borrowed by Colchians from the Greek world, namely, a pin-brooch¹⁷. This innovated form of ornament is decorated by figurines of birds (**Figs. 22-23**) – an ornamental feature characteristic of Colchian goldwork in the 5th-4th centuries BC. Birds of this type decorate earrings and temple rings. They compose necklaces and represent parts of details of the headdress decorations¹⁸.

Two spacer-beads from grave N 22 also constitute innovations in the jewellery collection from Vani. One is swastika-shaped (**Fig. 24**), while the other is rectangular (**Fig. 25**)¹⁹. Both are unique, finding no analogies elsewhere. Of interest is a ring with swivel stone. Regrettably, the stone is not preserved (**Fig. 26**).

¹³ LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1972, p. 202-203, fig. 161.

¹⁴ MAKHARADZE & TSERETELI 2007, p. 61-62.

¹⁵ KACHARAVA 2005, p. 291-309.

¹⁶ CHQONIA 1981, p. 26-27.

¹⁷ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 288, fig. 45b.

¹⁸ CHQONIA 1981, p. 37-38.

¹⁹ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 259, fig. 17a-b.

Of interest are dress ornaments of the principal deceased of grave N 24 in the shape of numerous eagle and duck appliques (**Figs. 27-28**). Eagle appliques defined the neck opening and decorate the back side of the garment. Rows of eagles and ducks ran down the length of the arms. A row of eagles covered the ends of the sleeves. Supposedly duck appliques formed a pattern in the chest area, while interchanging eagles and ducks decorated the lower part of the garment (**Fig. 20**)²⁰.

4. It is also worthy to note that in graves NN 22 and 24 groups of small-sized silver ornaments (pyramidal, semi-spherical, spherical and tubular – **Figs. 29-36**) were revealed²¹. In both cases the silver jewellery made a group together with glass paste minute beads (**Figs. 29-30**). Analogous groups of silver jewellery have already been attested at the Vani site (in graves NN 6 and 11, belonging to the representatives of the elite). It is worthy to note that in grave N 11 more than 5,000 silver ornaments were found, of which only 500 were more or less well preserved (caused by the dampy soil). A definite regularity in the disposition of different elements is observed in all cases²², except grave N 22, where silver jewellery was badly damaged. Most likely silver ornaments were sewn on the textile. It is worthy to note, that a headdress decoration composed of analogous elements was evidenced in grave N 13 of the Sailkhe necropolis (western Georgia), dated to the first half of the 5th century BC²³. Obtained materials give us grounds to suppose, that beads and tubules were sewn on some textile (together with paste beads), while semispheres and pyramids served as tassels. It is worthy to note that silver tubules and fluted semispheres had another function as well – in grave N 22 they decorated a silver horse belt or band (**Fig. 36**).

Thus, recent finds attest once again to the richness of Colchis in silver²⁴, mentioned by Greek and Roman literary sources (Strabo, *Geogr.*, 1. 2. 39; Plin., *NH*, 23. 52).

It is worthy to note that a definite continuity is evidenced in the development of some elements. Namely, bronze jewellery in the shape of semispheres and pyramids has been produced already in the 8th-6th centuries BC, while silver spherical and tubular beads, as well as details of semishperical and pyramidal shapes are evidenced in the contexts of the 5th century BC.

5. Beads occurred in great profusion in grave N 24 (17,000 pieces – **Fig. 20**.) They are made of glass, glass paste, amber, jet, cornelian, and agate (**Fig. 37**). Glass beads predominate, and more are plain than coloured. Among polychrome glass beads the largest in number are so-called eye-beads. In all probability glass beads mimicked semi-precious stones. They seem to be mostly imported. As for jet and cornelian beads, their local production is not excluded, since the remains of workshops of the 8th-6th centuries BC, specializing in jet and cornelian bead-production are archaeologically attested in western Georgia²⁵.

²⁰ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2008, p.179-180, figs. 9-10.

²¹ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 288, fig. 44.

²² See LORDKIPANIDZE *et alii* 1981, p. 228, fig. 33.

²³ MAKHARADZE & TSERETELI 2007, p. 90, fig. 82.

²⁴ CHQONIA 1990, p. 264-265.

²⁵ GOGADZÉ, DAVLIANIDZE & PATSKHAVA 1990, p. 195-200.

One can say that in this grave the beads were used in all possible cases. Namely, they were primarily used to decorate the shroud of the principal deceased; some of them composed necklaces and bracelets, a few beads were sewn on the headdress of the principal deceased. The headdress of one of the retainers (N 1) was decorated with hundreds of minute glass paste beads. The modern stringing of these beads is seven meters long. Its worthy to note that in this grave beads were used also to decorate a silver *phiale*²⁶.

Noteworthy is the fact, that in grave N 22 one more instance of beads usage is attested: namely, beads decorate a horse band or belt made of silver (**Fig. 37**)²⁷.

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²⁶ For details see: KACHARAVA, KHARABADZE & TURMANIDZE 2013, p.148-173; KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 267-268, 271, 285-288, figs. 22, 36, 38c-d, 42, 43.

²⁷ KACHARAVA & KVIRKVELIA 2009, p. 256-257, fig. 33.

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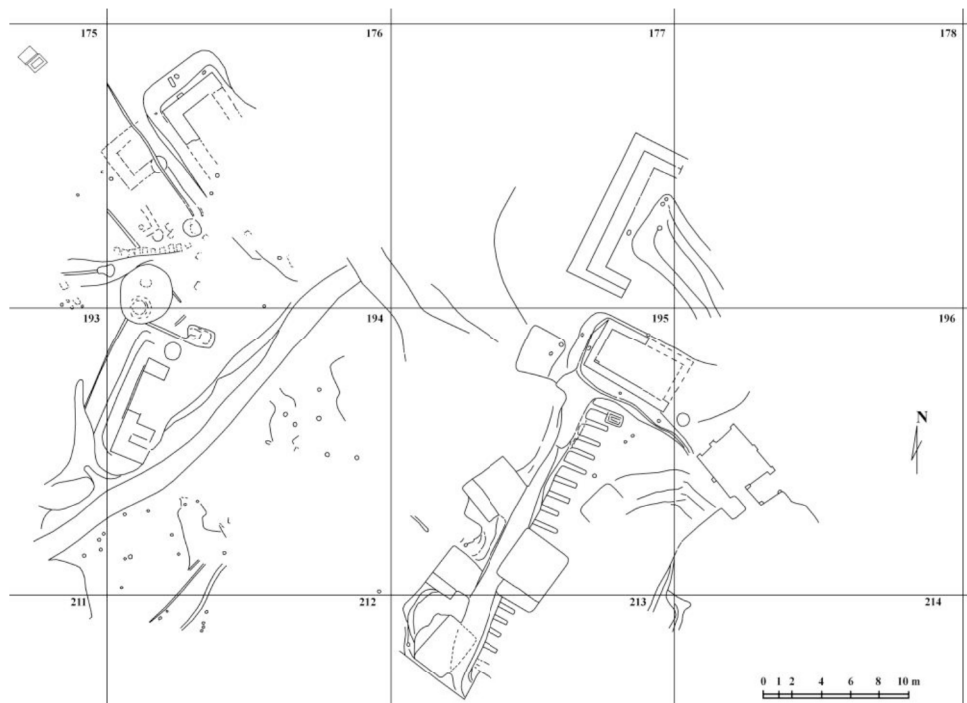


Fig. 1. Sanctuaries NN 1-4, plan.



Fig. 2. Sanctuary N 1, general view.

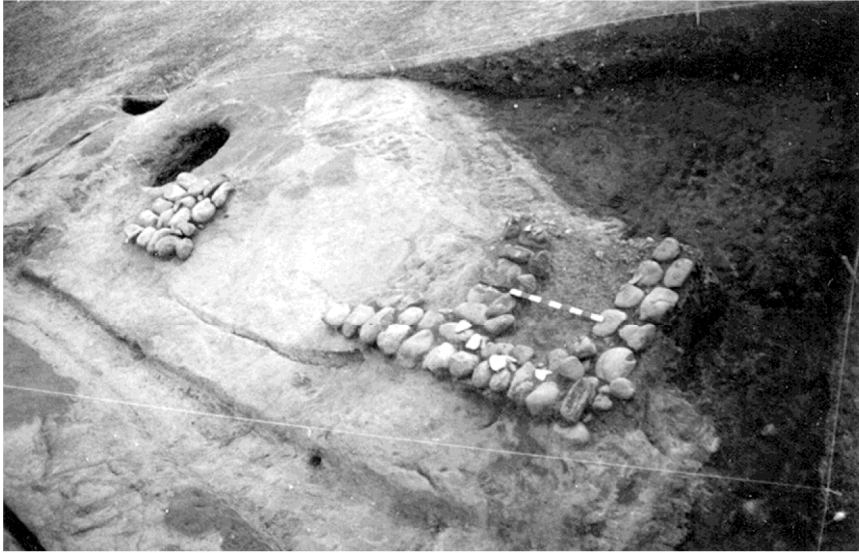


Fig. 3. Sanctuary N 2, general view.



Fig. 4. Sanctuary N 3, general view.



Fig. 5. Sanctuary N 4, general view.



Fig. 6. Bronze figurine from sanctuary N 1, *in situ*.

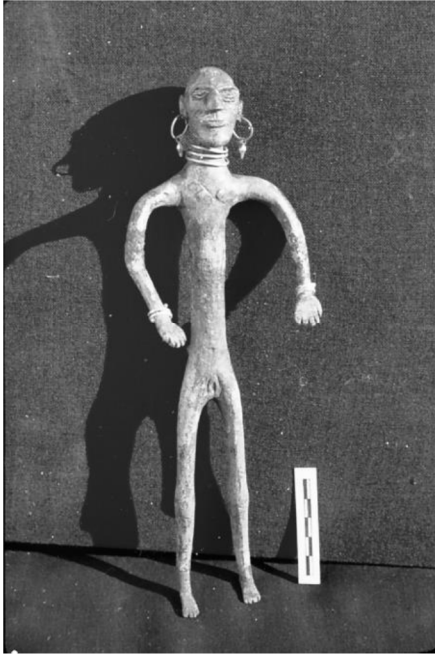


Fig. 7. Bronze figurine from sanctuary N 1.



Fig. 8. Iron figurine, connected with sanctuary N 1.



Fig. 9. Iron figurines from sanctuary N 4, *in situ*.



Fig. 10. Iron figurines from sanctuary N 4.



Fig. 11. Bronze figurine from sanctuary N 4, *in situ*.



Fig. 12. Bronze female figurine from sanctuary N 4, *in situ*.



Fig. 13. Bronze figurines from sanctuary N 4.



Fig. 14. Sanctuary from the central terrace.



Fig. 15. Figurine of Satyr *in situ*.

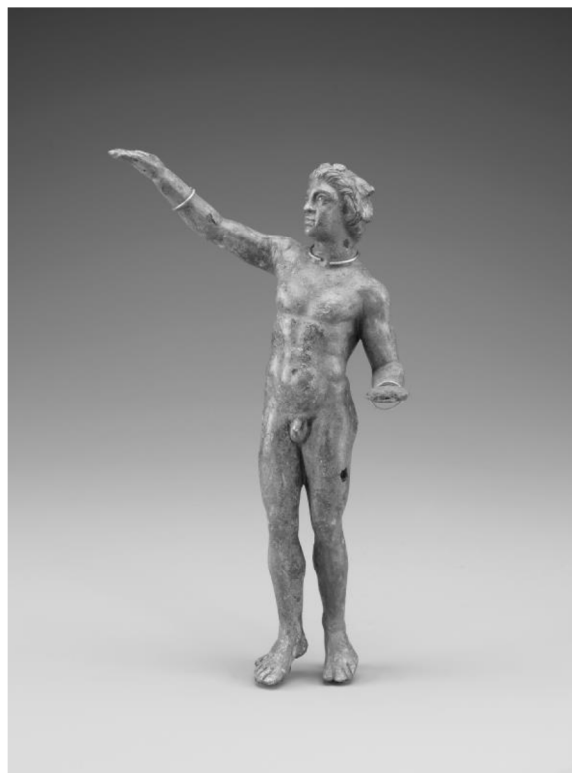


Fig. 16. Figurine of Satyr.



Fig. 17. Grave N 22, with a platform.



Fig. 18. Grave N 23, with a platform.



Fig. 19. Grave N 9, general view.



Fig. 20. Grave N 24, general view of the central part after cleaning.



Fig. 21. Gold clip from grave N 24.



Fig. 22. Gold pin-brooch from grave N 24.



Fig. 23. Gold pin-brooch from grave N 24, inner side.

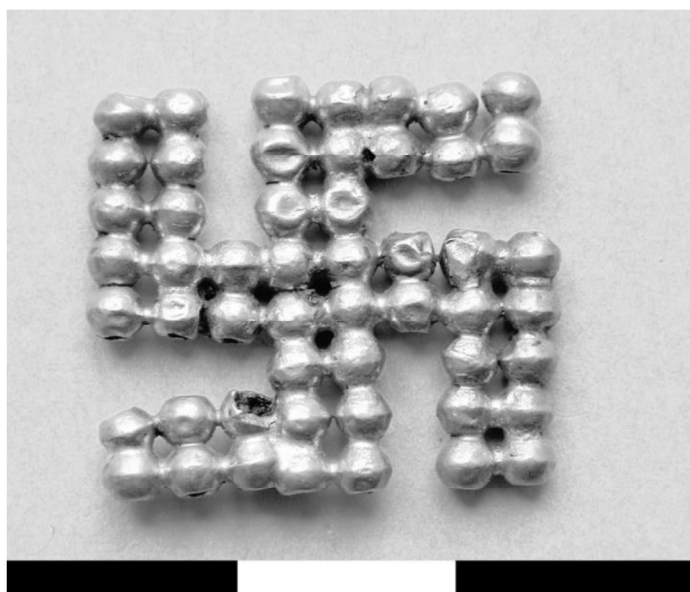


Fig. 24. Spacer bead from grave N 22.



Fig. 25. Spacer bead from grave N 22.



Fig. 26. Gold ring with a swivel stone.



Fig. 27. Appliques in the shape of ducks.



Fig. 28. Appliques in the shape of eagles.

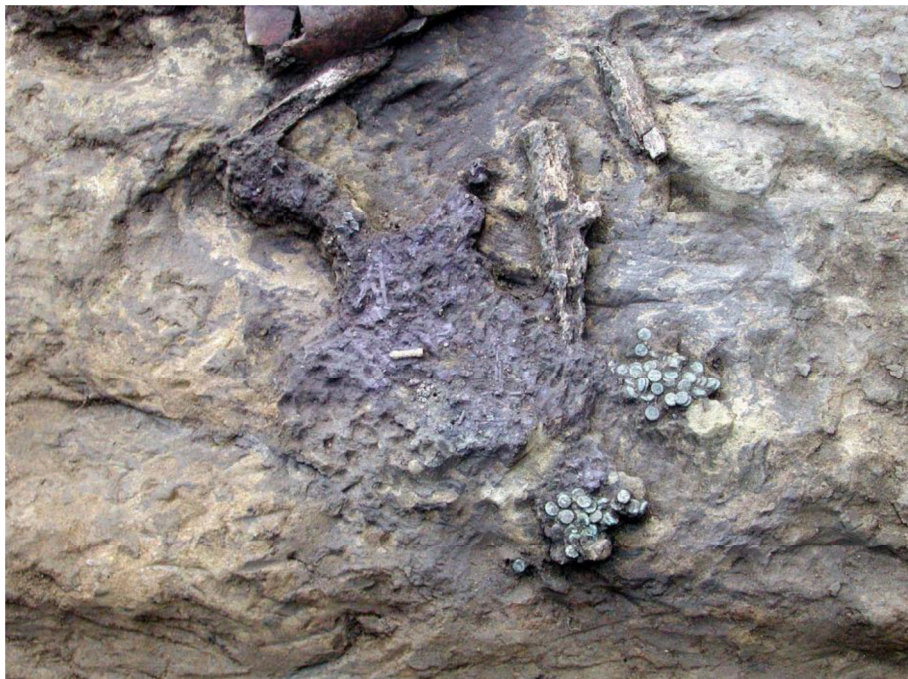


Fig. 29. Silver jewellery and groups of coins in grave N 22, *in situ*.

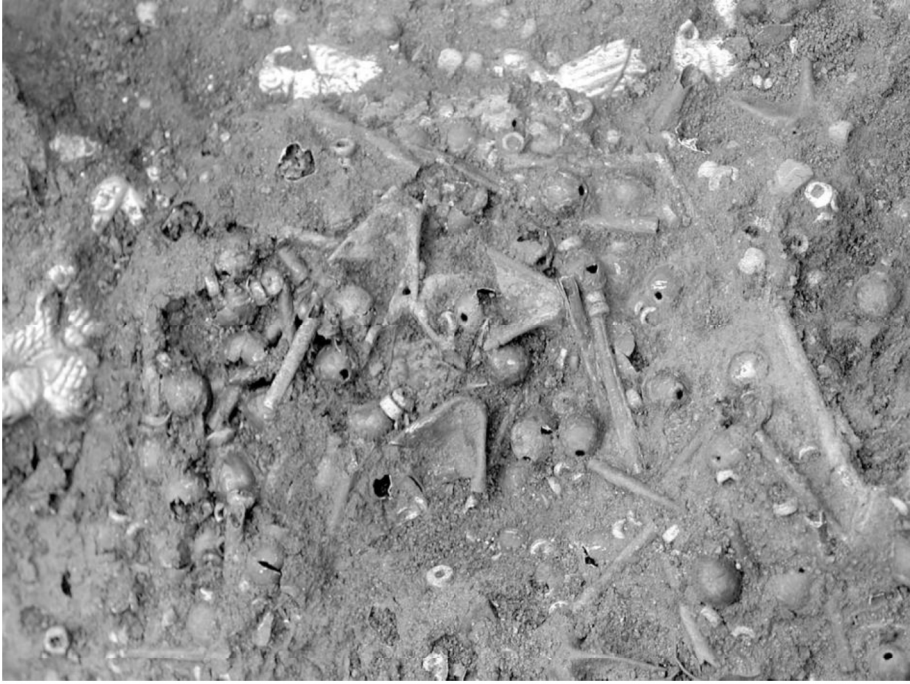


Fig. 30. Silver jewellery from grave N 24, *in situ*.



Fig. 31. Silver jewellery from grave N 22.

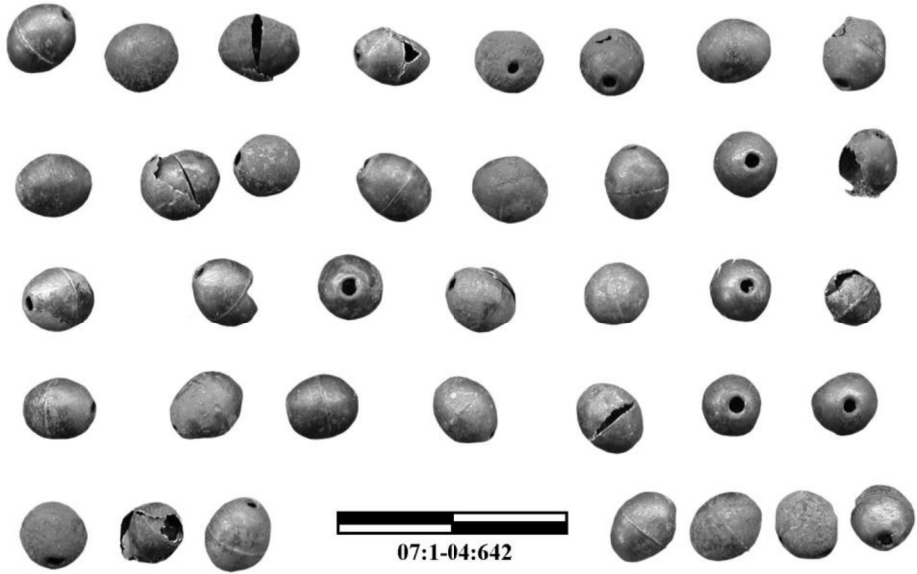


Fig. 32. Silver beads from grave N 24.



Fig. 33. Silver tubular beads from grave N 24.



Fig. 34. Silver jewellery from grave N 24.



Fig. 35. Silver fluted semi-spheres from grave N 24.



Fig. 36. Horse harness decorations in grave N 22.

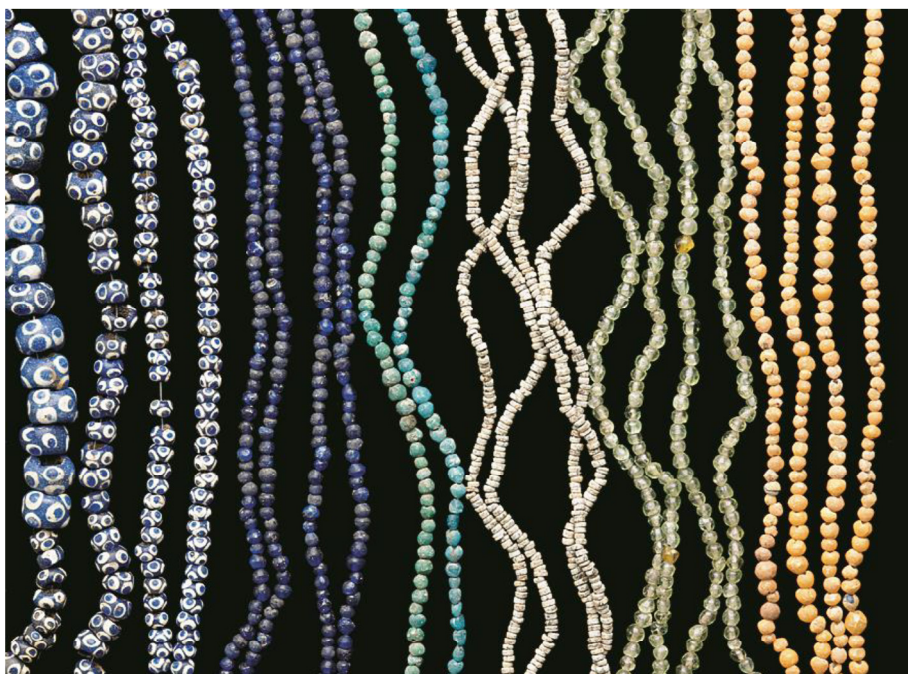


Fig. 37. Beads from grave N 24.