Two Cemeteries at Takhtidziri (Georgia)

Late Achaemenid–Early Hellenistic and Late Hellenistic–Early Roman

Edited by

Iulon Gagoshidze, Michael Vickers,
Darejan Kacharava, David Gagoshidze

Archaeopress Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18–24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978–1-80327–243-6
ISBN 978–1-80327–244-3 (e-Pdf)

Front cover: Object number 567, ceramic rhyton, a sculptural image of a horse, H.: 21.7 cm, L.: 26 cm, H. of the tube: 1 cm, 1.6 cm; inv. no. 7-997: 441; 2nd century BC.

Back cover: Object numer 109, 'Calendar', bronze, four protomes of harnessed horses arranged on both (mane and reins visible); ten pairs of holes in two columns, H.: 5.4 cm, W.: 2.9 cm, thickness: 0.2 cm; inv. no. 7-997: 97.

Contents

How was this book written

Takhtidziri settlement site and cemeteries were excavated under extreme conditions. At first the apparently meek River Prone rinsed out and damaged the ancient burials, which was followed by plundering of these burials by local residents. However, the plunderers cannot be incriminated:in 1992–2003, in Georgia, which was ravaged by lawlessness, many would be tempted to steal a gold object, even taken from their ancestors' graves. Robbing or attempts of robbing of the burials did not cease even following the archaeological excavations, which hindered us greatly: the burial revealed throughexcavations had to be cleared as quickly as possible, as delaying its preparation and fixation to the next day was dangerous especially because it contained gold objects. Any archaeologist would understand us.

Fortunately, in the same Georgia there existed (and still do) enthusiasts who, together with my wife - Tinatin and sons – Giorgi and Dato, who selflessly undertook to take part in the first archaeological campaign of Takhtidziri: archaeologists M. Jalabadze and G. Makharadze came with us from Tbilisi, while in Kareli we were joined by the director of Kareli Museum G. Ramishvili. Sh. Oniashvili, topographer from Aradeti, took measurements of Tsitelbegebi, while S. Kipshidze from Breti served the expedition with his car; a group of volunteers of the second campaign of Takhtidziri was joined by E. Koridze and N. Gogiberidze, and in 1997 – by T. Chanishvili and K. Gogichaishvili.

There emerged kind people as well – governor of Kareli district G. Gagnidze and the President of Georgian Academy of Sciences A. Tavkhelidze, who managed to raise minimal funds for the expedition to pay for day laborers, without which it would have been even more difficult to conduct field work.

The archeological material received through excavations was housed in the Georgian National Museum. Scholars started to mention Takhtidziri in specialist archaeological literature more frequently. It became clear that the archaeological information obtained in Takhtidziri was a rather significant acquisition for historical science, which makes it possible to bring up and solve quite a few essential problems of the early period history of the Georgian state.

This is why Takhtidziri finds served as the foundation of the project – 'Georgia (Iberia-Colchis) and the Outside World in the 4th–3rd cc BC', which won the grant of Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation in 2006.

A well-bonded team of professional archaeologists conducted fruitful work and successfully accomplished the work foreseen by the project. The team's synchronized work was ensured by the project coordinator and the only young participant M. Pataridze.

Part of the results of the work carried out by the project, which concerned the late Achaemenid - early Hellenistic period cemetery of Takhtidziri, entered the present book, indeed, with proper changes. Furthermore, the name of the project participant that had worked on specific

problems is mentioned everywhere: the ornaments were studied by N. Gogiberidze, ceramics – by T. Chanishvili, D. Kacharava worked on the problems of 'Charon's obol', and K. Javakhishvili investigated the glyptic material. Therefore, they are my co-authors too. The book was prepared for publishing in the Georgian National Museum. The coins excavated at Takhtidziri were identified by M. Sherozia, while Greek graffitos were investigated by M. Nasidze. Animal bones were studied by N. Vanishvili. Several specimens of metal artifacts were specially studied by chemist-restorers N. Kalandadze and N. Kebuladze.

The late-Hellenistic cemetery of Takhtidziri was researched by D. Gagoshidze (Jr).

Field sketches made by D. Gagoshidze (Sr) and myself were copied by Ts. Turkiashvili, who also made drawings of all the artifacts of the catalog. Field photos were taken by G. Gagoshidze, while M. Machavariani and G. Bumbiashvili took photos of the artifacts.

In the course of working on the artifacts, the depository curator N. Gogiberidze was permanently assisted by A. Sakhvadze. I. Khutsishvili provided computer services and a lot of technical work related to preparation of the book.

In March 2020 National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia published Takhtidziri Cemeteries in Georgian.

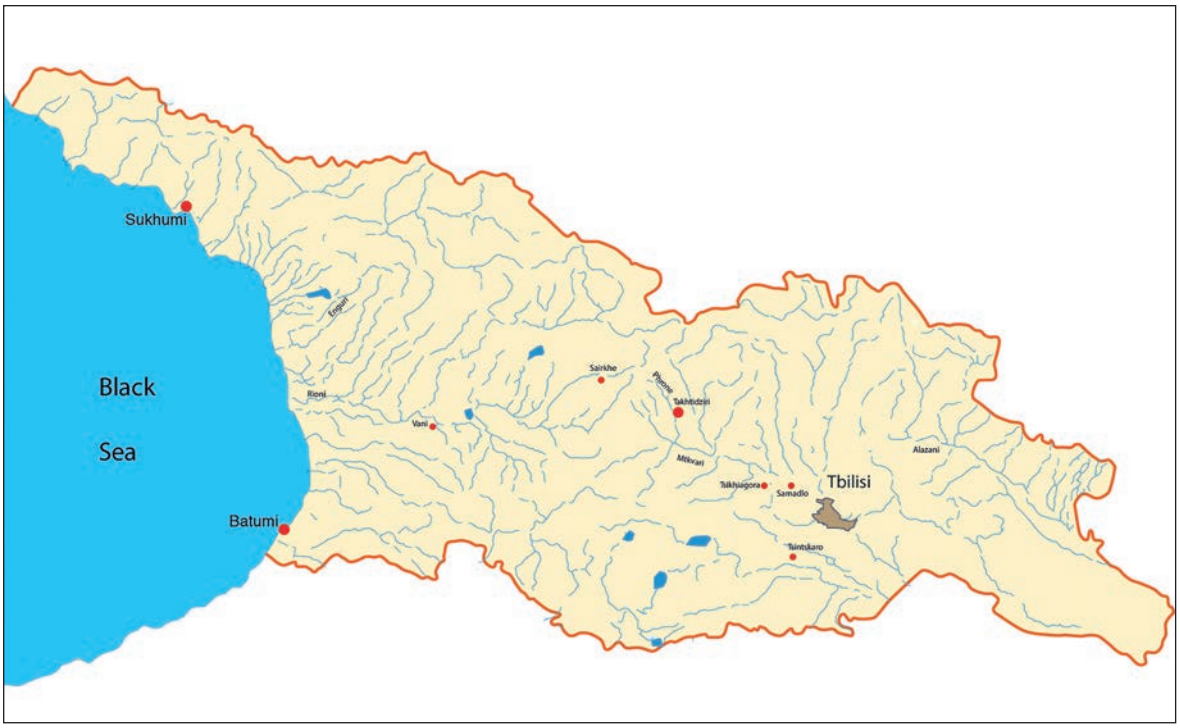
The idea of publishing the book in English was offered by Prof. Michael Vickers, who also undertook to proofread the text. English translation was done by N. Gabunia.

I would like to thank everybody who participated in preparation of this book.

Iulon Gagoshidze

Introduction

Iulon Gagoshidze



Georgia (in Georgian 'Sakartvelo'), is situated in South Caucasia, east of the Black Sea. To the north it is bounded by the Greater Caucasus and only three Georgian provinces – Khevi, Tusheti and Khevsureti – extend as far as the northern slope of the Caucasus. To the south, Georgia borders on Turkey and Armenia, to the east – Azerbaijan. The Likhi Range, a branch of the Greater Caucasus that runs north-south – divides Georgia into two parts: the rivers west of Likhi flow into the Black Sea, while those on its east flow into the Caspian.

A glance at a physical map reveals a Georgia criss-crossed by large and small rivers (rather like the blood vessels in our bodies). Streams head from the high mountains, unite as small mountain rivers, then grow into larger ones that eventually bring life-giving water to the fertile valleys of the plains and, having joined together, merge with the sea. This geomorphological structure conditioned Georgia's fate throughout its history. The hydrographic network proved as essential to Georgia as circulation of the blood to a living body.

The population was engaged in intensive farming on the lower stretches of the river valleys: they grew crops, fruit and vegetables, made wine, extracted oil, and raised livestock. The highlanders living on the upper stretches of the rivers were mainly cattle breeders, while millet and barley were also sowed in the mountains. In ancient Georgia, however, mountains and plains were united and it was this unity that gave real momentum to the country and its economy: highlanders possessed vineyards on the plains [Vakhushti 1973: 319, 355–356], while the lowlanders owned pastures in the mountains where they took their cattle in the summer and, during invasions, would find shelter themselves.[1] The valleys, or gorges, of each of these rivers had in time turned into peculiar, self-sufficient territorial-economic units with their own mountains and plains, and political and religious centres. Later, when the Georgian state was formed, it was a distribution by gorges that determined the territorial-administrative division of the country.

[1] Georgia's enemies were aware of this fact and always tried to sunder this unity. In the 17th century Shah-Abbas of Iran deprived Kvemo Kartli of its highlands (Lore), and Tusheti, Pshavi and Khevsureti were separated from the plain (Kakheti): he uprooted Georgians and got Turks to settle there. Soon Georgia managed to regain control of Kakheti, while Lore was lost forever [Jamburia 1973: 246–248]. This resulted in a dramatic decrease in the Georgian population of Kvemo Kartli. In addition, in the late 19th and the early 20th century, with the encouragement of the Russian authorities (and incidentally with the support of ethnic Georgian Social-Democrats), Ossetians established themselves in the highlands of Shida Kartli [An-Pari 1913], a development of which we are still reaping the bitter fruits.

This peculiarity was spotted already in the 18th century by Vakhushti Batonishvili, the Georgian scholar, historian and geographer, who described Georgia according to the gorges and river valleys in his fundamental work *The Description of the Kingdom of Georgia* [Vakhushti 1973: 305–382], while in the 1950s Academician Niko Berdzenishvili laid the foundations for the methodical historical, geographical and archaeological research of Georgia's historical gorges [Berdzenishvili 1964].

All these gorges are a kind of microcosm of Georgia and in the history of each, the history of the whole of Georgia is reflected, as the ocean is in a drop of water. The gorge of the Eastern Prone, or the Dvanistskali, situated in the western part of Shida Kartli, was one such gorge. It was relatively small but in the event rather significant.[2] This can be demonstrated by simply listing the archaeological sites discovered and investigated in the area: Nuli, Kvasatali, Dvani Cemetery, Dedoplis Mindori, Berikldeebi, Aradetis Orgora with Dedoplis Gora [Kuftin 1949: 31–35; Makalatia 1948; Japaridze 1966: 12–27; Gagoshidze 1977; Gagoshidze 1978; Gagoshidze 2001; Javakhishvili 2017]. These sites are situated within a radius of just ten kilometres.

The ancient name of the river – *Dvanistskali* or *Dvanis Prone* – shows that initially the centre of the valley must have been in Dvani (an assumption that is supported by archaeological data, as we shall presently see). In the second half of the sixth century, however, Piros of Breti, one of the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers who laid the foundations for monastic life in Georgia, settled in a Prone riverside grove five kilometres south of Dvani [Vakhushti 1973: 374] and, following his death, the centre of the valley was transferred from Dvani to Breti, at the church built upon Piros' grave. The River Prone-Dvanistskali rises in the Likhi Range, runs south-west, and flows onto the plain of Shida Kartli near the village of Breti. In early times this part of Shida Kartli was watered by the Saltvisi canal branching out from the Liakhvi (it is now watered by the Tashiskari canal). Above Breti, however, the Prone Valley, which is bounded by low hills on both sides, is watered solely by the Prone. Covered with gardens and vineyards, the broad grove of the river has turned into a paradise, while villages extend over the hillocks. At least, this is what it was like in olden times: a Georgian farmer cherished irrigable land and never let it go to waste for residential purposes. The largest village of the Prone valley – Dirbi - is still set on a barren hill. The ruins of an old castle overlook the valley from Dirbi, whereas at the bottom of the slope there is a minor monastery with a small tenth-century church, the metochion of the Holy Cross Monastery of Jerusalem, where a splendid 14th century mural painting has survived [Gagoshidze, Chikhladze 2006].

Unlike Dirbi and Dvani, Takhtidziri developed relatively recently. In the 19th century the population came down from Dirbi to the Prone grove and the village adopted its name from a truncated hill situated nearby east of the village called Takhtigora, which is apparently a settlement-site of the Classical period. The location referred to as Tsitelbegebi, where an archaeological expedition of the Simon Janashia Georgian State Museum worked in 1996–1997, is situated on the left bank north of the village, about midway between Takhtidziri and Dvani. It is a riverside terrace of about 0.5 ha in area slightly sloping north-south and east-west; it is bordered by a fifty-metre high Takhtiseri and an automobile road running at the bottom of the hillock, while on the west there is a precipice dramatically descending to the riverbank.

In 1944–1945, north of Tsitelbegebi, on the slope of a hill on the same left bank of the Prone, Prof. Sergi Makalatia investigated the renowned Dvani cemetery of the 7th -6th centuries BC [Makalatia 1948]. In 2012, during road construction, the Archaeological Association expedition excavated what was apparently part of the same cemetery. Meanwhile, on the summit of this low hill, a vast settlement-site of the early Bronze Age (3rd millennium BC), of the so-called Kura-Araxes archaeological culture, was revealed.

In 1995, the River Prone changed its course for some reason, cut through its left bank and started watering the bottom of Tsitelbegebi. As a result, the precipice collapsed causing several old graves to be exposed. These were robbed by the locals and artifacts pilfered. Later, seven ceramic jugs and two agate and glass beads ended up in the Kareli Museum of Local History, while the metal items, including gold earrings and a bezel signet ring were lost.

[2] All the rivers of Shida Kartli that rise in the Likhi Range merge together and join the Mtkvari, are referred to as 'the Prone'. Many have second names in addition: Ptsiua, Suramula, etc. [Vakhushti 1973: 743; 374 ff.]. Whether the valleys of all these Prones made up a single territorial-administrative unit is a subject for further research; several tributaries of the River Kvirila in Zemo Imereti that start in Likhi Range are, moreover, also referred to as the Prones. Only the Dvani, or the Eastern Prone gorge will, however, be discussed in what follows.

The Shida Kartli archaeological expedition of the Simon Janashia Georgian State Museum, in cooperation with the Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Fine Arts and the Kareli Museum of Local History, conducted field campaigns at Tsitelbegebi in 1996 and 1997.

The excavations showed that the earliest settlement at Tsitelbegebi emerged in the late 4th millennium BC. This is the period to which the construction with a clay plastered hearth of the Kura-Araxes culture, studied by the expedition, belongs. Three arched burials of the later stage of the same culture were revealed and excavated near the construction [Jalabadze, Palumbi 2008]. They date from the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. It is likely that these burials belong to the early Bronze Age settlement situated on the Dvani hill. However, there is no doubt that when these burials were organised, the original, Kura-Araxes period settlement of Tsitelbegebi had been covered with earth and its existence already forgotten.

In the first half of the 1st millennium BC there was a vast settlement at Tsitelbegebi which left a cultural layer two-metre thick containing ash. Tsitelbegebi was apparently on the outskirts of this settlement where ash and waste were dumped. The Dvani necropolis presumably belonged to this settlement.

The various ceramic fragments of the 8th -7th centuries BC recovered from the ashy layer at Tsitelbegebi are remarkably similar to contemporary pottery discovered in western Georgia, especially in Zemo Imereti. This indicates that at least this part of Shida Kartli, together with Zemo Imereti, was within the distribution area of the so-called Colchian Culture. By the same token, it means that at the time, just as at present, both sides of Likhi Range were inhabited by people who shared the same culture.

In the 4th century BC a small town emerged on the site of the early settlement at Tsitelbegebi. This town must have been called Dvani from the very beginning, and it was probably the administrative centre of the Dvanistskali Valley, where the ruler of the area resided. In the 4th to early 3rd century BC there was a cemetery south of the town where these rulers and their family members were buried.

In the 3rd–2nd centuries BC the town at Tsitelbegebi extended southwards, over the graveyard. Buildings were constructed on top of the burials and it is clear that the existence of a cemetery had already been forgotten. A new graveyard emerged, however, in the northern part of the old town, where in 1997 our expedition excavated eleven graves of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD.

A total of three cemeteries of different periods – Early Bronze Age (three graves), late Achaemenid – early Hellenistic (23 graves) and late Hellenistic – early Roman Age (11 graves) - were excavated by the Shida Kartli archaeological expedition of the Simon Janashia State Museum in 1996–1997 (leader – I. Gagoshidze). The archaeological material received through excavations at Tsitelbegebi is kept in the Dedoplis Mindori depository of the Georgian National Museum (collection no. 7-997).

The present work is a major publication of the archaeological material recovered from 23 graves of the 4th century BC and the beginning of the 3rd century BC at the southern edge of Tsitelbegebi, as well as the inventory of the late Hellenistic – early Roman burials excavated in the northern section.

In terms of richness, the grave goods of the late Achaemenid-early Hellenistic period cannot compare with contemporary artifacts excavated in Vani and Sairkhe, but it is extremely diverse and contains items belonging to a category that differentiates these burials from those of ordinary residents and brings them closer to the burials of the upper-class population from Colchis – Vani [Lordkipanidze 1972], Sairkhe [Makharadze, Tsereteli 2007], Itkhvisi [Gagoshidze, Gogiberidze and Makharadze 2006; Gagoshidze, Gogiberidze and Makharadze 2010]. The burials of Takhtidziri closely resemble the latter in respect of their inventories, burial practices, and construction of the graves. All these allow us to consider that at the time Shida Kartli was part of the administrative system of the kingdom of Colchis. On the other hand, the Takhtidziri burials, which can be regarded as belonging to representatives of upper-class society of the valley, are very similar to the 4th–3rd century BC sites of the so-called Akhalgori treasure circle (Kanchaeti, Tsintskaro, Kavtiskhevi, etc.), which are considered to be the burials of the ruling aristocracy of the kingdom of Kartli (Iberia). This strongly suggests that the kingdom of Kartli, or Caucasian Iberia, formed in the 3rd century BC, was in some respects the heir to ancient Colchis [Melikishvili 1970: 444; Gagoshidze 1979: 99].

The individuals buried in graves no. 3, no. 4 and no. 37 had the insignia of their nobility – gold and silver standards ending with a rosette – placed in their graves (cat. no. 11, 52, 491), the kind known from the rich

burials of Sadzeguri [Смирнов 1934: nos. 56–59] and Kavtiskhevi (Dachrilebi); analogous plates have been found at Khashuri Natsargora [Naridze 1997] and Sasireti [Tskitishvili 2001: 41–46]. Another sign of nobility is the burial of weapons, a harnessed horse, and a hound together with the deceased, which has been attested at Tsitelbegebi as well. And there is more: the high quality of the grave goods also bespeaks the high social status of those buried at Takhtidziri cemetery. This is true for the ornaments and toiletries, as well as for the pottery: grave nos. 6, 12, 17, 19, 36 yielded exquisitely painted jugs (cat. nos. 95, 96, 304, 402, 425, 467) that resemble those placed in the rich 4th-century BC burials no. 9, 10 at Vani [Lordkipanidze *et al.* 1972: 208, fig. 176; Tolordava 1986: 91, cat. no. 11, pl. 71,4] and no. 2 burial at Itkhvisi [Gagoshidze, Gogiberidze and Makharadze 2006: 36–59]. Especially significant in this respect, however, is the abundance of imported items found in the Takhtidziri burials: foreign luxury items have always been restricted to the wealthiest part of the community.

Takhtidziri lies at the easternmost point in Georgia, situated far away from the Black Sea coast, where a large amount of ancient Greek imports – pottery, glass and metal items – have been documented. At Takhtidziri three Attic black glazed kantharoi and two trays from graves no. 6, no. 8 and no. 40 date to the late 4th century BC. Approximately of the same period are two intaglios in gold settings (grave no. 8, cat. no. 233, 234) [Javakhishvili 2012: 17–2]; they are unique for Georgia and only a few examples of their kind are known elsewhere. A ceramic unguentarium discovered in Takhtidziri grave no. 8 (cat. no. 242) belongs to the earliest series of unguentaria and must date to the beginning of the Hellenistic epoch, i.e. the last quarter of the 4th century BC.

A bronze handled bowl (cat. no. 253) is also Greek and must belong to the late 4th century BC or early 3rd century BC. Archaeologists refer to this type of vessel as a patera; they are often encountered on Roman period sites of the 1st–3rd centuries AD, although they are rather rare in the Hellenistic epoch. For instance, apart from Takhtidziri, a single patera of the Hellenistic period was unearthed at Dablagomi [Tolordava 1976: 75]. Unlike Roman paterae, the Takhtidziri bowl has another, mobile, handle attached on the opposite side. Ancient Greeks used such bowls for washing hands at the drinking parties known as symposia, which is why paterae are usually found together with vessels for pouring water. At Takhtidziri the patera was accompanied by a bronze jug. The Romans adopted the practice of washing hands before a feast from the Greeks and, as the discovery of paterae in rich burials at Dablagomi and Takhtidziri indicates, this ancient Hellenic custom seems to have spread across Georgia as early as the beginning of the Hellenistic epoch.

Takhtidziri also produced a Greek iron weapon: a *makhaira* – a short sword with a single cutting edge (cat. no. 240), and a trident harpoon (cat. no. 262), an attribute of Poseidon, god of the sea. The latter could, however, be an ordinary fishing tool produced locally in Georgia, but the reason we might still consider to be of Greek origin is that no other harpoons of the kind have been found to date in Georgia. So far as the *makhaira* is concerned, it is definitely a Greek type of sword, that seems to be common on Georgian territory in the 4th century BC (examples are known at Joisubani, Itkhvisi and Kanchaeti [Gobejishvili 1963: 29; Gagoshidze, Gogiberidze and Makharadze 2006: 42, Gagoshidze 1964: 51]) and it is highly likely that such swords were produced locally. The discovery of a *strigil* has a different significance (grave no. 8, cat. no. 259). The *strigil* was a specific ancient Greek (and Roman) instrument used by athletes for scraping off oil and dirt after exercise and the fact of its discovery in Shida Kartli suggests that the Greek custom of competitive sports had spread in this area.

For the time being, Takhtidziri is the most remote point from the sea-coast where the custom placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased, the so called 'Charon's obol', has been attested. A burial of the 4th–3rd century BC produced a gold stater of Alexander the Great (cat. no. 176), found placed in the mouth of a child buried at Takhtidziri, while a silver coin – a Colchian tetri (cat. no. 177) – was found in another grave.

Excavations of the Takhtidziri cemetery made us believe that not only was the custom of depositing a'Charon's obol' common in Shida Kartli of the 4th century BC, but also that the Greek writing system was known, just as it was in western Georgia [Gagoshidze 1968: 40–41]. The Greek graffito (apparently the name of the owner) on the black glazed kantharos found in grave no. 6 (cat. no. 99) was undoubtedly executed locally, in Georgia. Nobody would buy a scratched vessel nor would Greeks bring such an object here for sale.

Georgia has always been a crossroads where north and south, west and east meet, and this is reflected in the material from the Takhtidziri cemetery. Here eastern imports were found in quantity next to western. However, the two black-polished ceramic vessels – the *amphora-rhyta* (cat. no. 245 and no. 246) discovered in grave no. 8 do not have direct parallels in Georgia. This does not imply that the *rhyta* had necessarily been

imported and that the possibility of their having been produced in Georgia should be excluded. One thing is for certain: the shapes of these drinking vessels are Persian. Similar *amphora-rhyta* are depicted on the Persepolis reliefs [Schmidt 1953, pl. 32 b], carved in the 5th century BC. A pink, red-painted amphora-rhyton of a similar shape has been found in Bazaleti [Miron, Orthman 1995: 160, no. 307].

A beautiful chalcedony signet ring (cat. no. 235) with the Tree of Life between two goats depicted on it is a Babylonian product of the early Achaemenid epoch (6th century BC). Further items include perfume containers of coloured glass of cylindrical or four-faceted shape, so-called kohl-tubes. Three examples – two complete (cat. nos. 144, 145) and the fragment of a third (cat. no. 419) were discovered at Takhtidziri cemetery, and they are believed to be 5th or 4th century BC northern Iranian products. Both undamaged kohl-tubes had their contents (a solid black substance) preserved.

Finally, it should be noted that there were wooden sarcophagi bound with iron nails in two graves (no. 8 and no. 40) at Takhtidziri. They are identical with those found at Itkhvisi (grave no. 2), Vani and Sairkhe.