# NEW DATA OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF THE UNIQUE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONUMNT "TSIKHIAGORA" [1]

# უნიკალური არქეოლოგიური ძეგლის „ციხიაგორას" ინტერდისციპლინური კვლევის ახალი მონაცემები.

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## Abstract

"Tsikhiagora" is one of the significant archaeological monuments of East Georgia. It is located in Kaspi municipality, northwards from a village Kavtiskhevi. Multi-horizon monuments of Tsikhiagora reflects three millennia development of the culture, starting from Early Bronze and inclusive Antique era.

The upper, first layer of Tsikhiagora, with 8 construction horizons, is attributed to Hellenistic epoch, is dated by 3rd -2nd cc B.C. This layer is presented by unique cathedral complex. There is no such good condition and comprehensively studied monument in Eastern Georgia. The 2nd layer, of Achaemenid period is attributed to the 5th -4th c. B.C. It is presented in the form of remnants of cult constructions. The 3rd layer, of Late Bronze - Early Iron period is presented by 2 construction horizons, is attributed to the second half of the 2nd millennium B.C – first half of the 1st millennium. It is a former settlement. The 4th layer, of Middle Bronze period, is attributed to the first half of the 2nd millennium and is presented by small size kurgan type tombs.

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The 5th layer of Tsikhiagora archaeological monument of the Early Bronze period is attributed to the 3rd millennium BC and is presented by 5 construction horizons. 3 lower construction horizons are *Kura–Araxes* archaeological culture former residences. The upper 2 horizons unite complexes which followed early Kurgan and Bedeni cultures. This is a very rare case and is very important with the view of a problem of transition from Early Bronze to Middle Bronze epoch. Artifact remnants fixed in this layer include hand-made ceramic, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statues, metal, stone and bone tools. The paper deals with the new X-ray Fluorescence study results of metal artifacts and with the new radiocarbon dates of Tsikhiagora settlement. Stratigraphic data from the Tsikhiagora settlement and new data allow us to assume the initial period of this cultural transformation in the first half of the 3rd millennium BC, which is important in the study of synchronization with other cultures and the genesis of the Bedeni culture.

**Key words:** Kura-Araxes; Bedeni; Tsikhiagora; Archaeological Culture; radiocarbon dating.

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## აბსტრაქტი

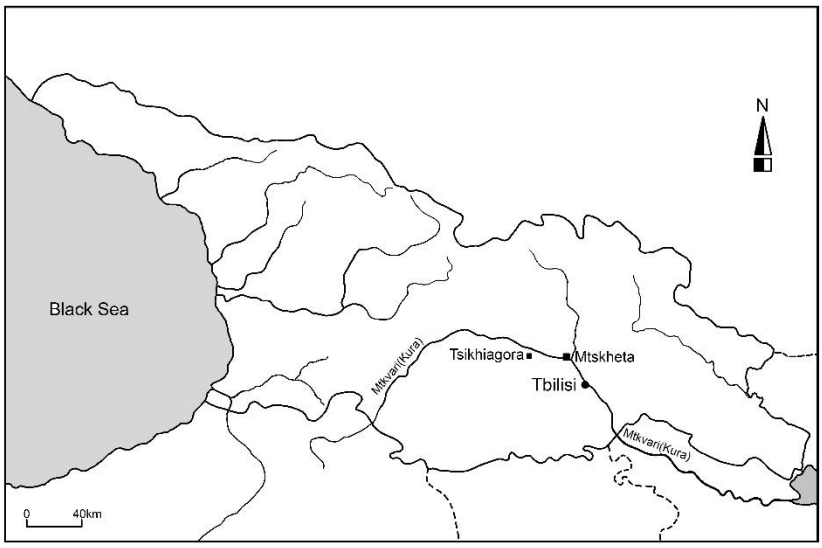
„ციხიაგორა“ ერთ-ერთი მნიშვნელოვანი არქეოლოგიური ძეგლია აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოში. იგი მდებარეობს კასპის მუნიციპალიტეტში, სოფ. კავთისხევის ჩრდილოეთით. ციხიაგორას მრავალფენიანი ძეგლი ასახავს კულტურის სამიათასწლიან განვითარებას ადრებრინჯაოს ხანიდან ანტიკური ხანის ჩათვლით.

ზედა, I ფენა, 8 სამშენებლო ჰორიზონტით, ელინისტურ ეპოქას მიეკუთვნება, ძვ.წ. 3-2 საუკუნეებით თარიღდება. ამ ფენას ეკუთვნის უნიკალური სატაძრო კომპლექსი. ასეთი დაცულობის და მაშტაბურად შესწავლილი ძეგლი ამ ეტაპზე, აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოში არ გაგვაჩნია. II ფენა, აქემენიდური ხანის, ძვ.წ. 5-4 საუკუნით თარიღდება. წარმოდგენილია საკულტო ნაგებობების ნაშთებით. III ფენა, გვიანბრინჯაო - ადრერკინის ხანის, 2 სამშენებლო ჰორიზონტით, ძვ.წ. II ათასწლეულის მეორე ნახევრით - I ათასწლეულის პირველი ნახევრით

თარიღდება. წარმოდგენილია ნასახლარით. IV ფენა, შუაბრინჯაოს ხანის, ძვ.წ. II ათასწლეულის პირველი ნახევრით თარიღდება. წარმოდგენილია მცირე ზომის ყორღანული სამარხებით.

ციხიაგორას არქეოლოგიური ძეგლის V ფენა, ადრებრინჯაოს ხანის, ძვ.წ. III ათასწლეულით თარიღდება და წარმოდგენილია 5 სამშენებლო ჰორიზონტით. ქვედა 3 სამშენებლო ჰორიზონტი, მტკვარ-არაქსის არქეოლოგიური კულტურის ნასახლარს წარმოადგენს. ზედა 2 ჰორიზონტი, მტკვარ-არაქსის ადრე ყორღანული და ბედენური კულტურების შემცვლელ კომპლექსებს აერთიანებს, რაც იშვიათი შემთხვევაა და მეტად მნიშვნელოვანია ადრებრინჯაოს ხანიდან შუაბრინჯაოს ეპოქაზე გადასვლის პრობლემის თვალსაზრისით. ამ ფენაში დაფიქსირებულია არქიტექტურული ნაშთები, ხელით ნაძერწი კერამიკა, ანტროპორმორფული და ზოომორფული ქანდაკებები, ლითონის, ქვის და ძვლის იარაღები. სტატიაში წარმოდგენილია ლითონის არტეფაქტების რენტგენო ფლუორესცენტული სპექტრალული კვლევის შედეგები და ახალი რადიონახშირბადული თარიღები. ციხიაგორას ძეგლის სტრატიგრაფია და ახალი მონაცემები საშუალებას იძლევა ამ კულტურული ტრანსფორმაციის საწყისი პერიოდი ძვ. წ 3 ათასწლეულის პირველ ნახევარში ვივარაუდოთ, რაც უდაოდ მნიშვნელოვანია სხვა კულტურებთან სინქრონიზაციის და ბედენის კულტურის გენეზისის კვლევის თვასაზრისით.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** მტკვარ-არაქსი; ბედენი; ციხიაგორა; არქეოლოგიური კულტურა; რადიონახშირბადული დათარიღება.




Map showing the location of Tsikhiagora

## Introduction

The Kura–Araxes or Transcaucasian archeological culture was widespread in the South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia, Northwestern Iran, and the Eastern North Caucasus in the 3rd millennium BC. The Kura–Araxes culture of the Early Bronze Age is considered as a single cultural-historical event, but with its local peculiarities. The difference between the local variants was manifested in the topography of the settlements, the architecture of the buildings and the construction techniques, some elements of the material culture, and so on. In the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, the stable character of the Kura–Araxes culture in the South Caucasus, and in particular in Eastern Georgia, was disturbed, which, among other reasons, must have been caused by the appearance of new elements, northern and southern. At this time a new rule of burial applies - grand Kurgan individual tombs, chariots were buried with the deceased, feeling great shifts in social relations, and so on (Djaparidze 1993) .

In the early Kurgans, two groups are distinguished: "Martkopi"(Japaridze 1998), (Makharadze 2018) and "Bedeni" (Japaridze 1998), (Makharadze, Ordzhonikidze, 2007). The Kura–Araxes culture and the early Kurgans are considered to be the next stages of each other, and in terms of kurgans, the Bedeni group is considered to have come later. This scheme of gradual development is acceptable, but the relationship between the Kura–Araxes cultural monuments and the burial monuments and the early tombs itself shows a more complex picture, which is reflected in the materials of the later stages of the stratified settlements of the Kura–Araxes culture. At the time, in Inner Kartli, in the valley of the river Mtkvari, Khizanant Gora (Kikvidze 1972), Kvatskhela (Javakhishvili, Glonti 1962), Tsikhiagora (Makharadze 1994), (Makharadze 2008), Berikldeebi (Glongti , Javakhishvili, 1987), (Javakhishvili 2017), (Sagona 2018) well-stratified settlements studied on the basis of the data, we developed a chronological scheme(Makharadze,1994) )of Kura–Araxes and Bedeni crops:

Phase I - Khizanaant Gora E level

Phase II - Khizanaant Gora D, C, B, Kvatskhelebi C level

Stage III – Kvatskhelebi B level , Tsikhiagora B3, B2 layers

Stage IV (or Bedeni I stage) - Tsikhiagora B1 layer, A level

Phase II of Bedeni - Berikldeebi, Bedeni layer.

Most obviously, in our opinion, the late period of development of the Kura–Araxes culture in Eastern Georgia and its relation to the early tombs was reflected in the materials of Tsikhiagora Early Bronze Age.

Stages III and IV are presented in Tsikhiagora settlement. Stage III is characterized by the continuation of the construction traditions of the previous stages. The construction of the walls of buildings, which is typical for the lower B3 and B2 layers of Tsikhiagora, is a major construction tradition of the Kura–Araxes culture in Inner Kartli region (Javakhishvili, 1973) .Continuation of construction traditions, similarity of settlement planning and types of buildings, which develops by the end of this stage in the form of buildings of Tskhiagori B2 layer(Fig.1) . It can be said that by the end of the III period the traditional Inner Kartli architecture reached the peak of its development. There is more difference in pottery, which allows us to distinguish stage III from the previous one. Stage II is

characterized by a biconical shape of the vessel, with a sharp ridge around the middle of the bod. The lack of graphic ornamentation and individual character, also at the end of the II period, manifests itself in the C1 layer of pebbles. Stage III is characterized by the appearance of a relatively clean, thin-walled, well-polished black-surfaced pottery with a large, thick-walled pottery, with a higher degree of burning. Further differentiation of the overall shape and parts of the vessel, mainly the three-part shape(Fig.2). Formed kind of graphic ornament that creates continuous, rhythmic, ornamental belts. Great closeness, both in the forms of pottery and in the style of ornamentation, is seen with the materials of the early tombs, the "Martkopi" group (Fig.3) .At this stage, a hollowed-out ornament appears, which was completely foreign to the ceramic complex of Inner Kartli (Fig.4). Changes in the development of the intra-Georgian variant of the Kura–Araxes culture, in its III stage, should include impulses coming from the south, where the Ararat variant of the Kura–Araxes culture is characterized by a three-part pottery shape and a hollow-convex ornament. The fact that only cultural impulses took place in Inner Kartli and not the migration of the southern Kura–Araxes tribes can be seen in the fact that the traditional architecture, stable character of life, the main components of the ceramic complex have not changed. On the contrary, enriched with new impulses, the Inner Katlian variant of the Kura–Araxes culture rises to a higher level and reaches its highest level of development at the end of Stage III, during the existence of the B2 layer of Tsikhiagora, and then the development of the intra-Georgian variant of this culture ceases. If we also consider that layer B2 is destroyed by strong fires, and the floor of building B1 is laid directly on the ruined plasters of layer B2, the change in the construction tradition was probably due to a change in population. However, the Kura–Araxes culture continues to exist in Inner Kartli. Phase IV is the age of destabilization of the Kura–Araxes culture in the South Caucasus. There is a movement of tribes carrying Kura–Araxes culture. The materials in the B1 layer of Tsikhiagora reflected the rather drastic changes introduced by the newcomer tribes - the construction of rectangular buildings of masonry and gravel, some peculiarities of the ceramic complex, suggesting that this wave may have originated in southwestern, possibly eastern Anatolia. It is difficult to say what caused the displacement of the Kura–Araxes tribes and the crisis of this culture, but perhaps these events were related to the emergence of a new, Bedeni culture in the South Caucasus, the signs of which also appeared at the beginning of Phase IV in the B1 layer of Tsikhiagora. The settlement layer B1 did not develop on Tsikhiagora, it seems abandoned. The fixation of a 2-3 cm sterile layer between levels B and A suggests that, after about a century, the settlement ceases to exist, after which it begins to function again and two settlement layers of level A are formed. The fourth stage of the Kura–Araxes culture in Eastern Georgia is at the same time the first stage of the Bedeni culture takes place, these two cultures coexist in this region for a long time. The B1 layer of Tsikhiagora is from the beginning, and its level A belongs to the final of the IV stage and reflects the end of the Kura–Araxes culture in this region and the establishment of the Bedeni culture. 60-70% of Tsikhiagora level A pottery is typical of the Kura–Araxes, it is of Martkopi look(Fig.5), but there is also a jar-shaped pottery typical of the Bedeni culture, with a landscape belt or ridge ornament with round fossae (Fig.6),often with thin clay Dotted stamp completely covered surface vessels (Fig.7) and thin-walled black ceramics (Fig.8). Phase II of the Bedeni culture is represented by the Bedeni layer of the Berikldeebi and is a transitional stage from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age. ). Traditional chronological schemes and small radiocarbon dates of the Kura–Araxes cultural monuments and early tombs existing at that time were used to date the Tsikhiagora layer of the Early Bronze period. III stage BC. 24-23, and phase IV was dated to 22-21 (Makharadze, 1994) . For B2 layer of Tsikhiagora we have C14 date - BC. 2900 ± 110 years (ТБ-831), which we considered too early and unsuitable for the existing traditional chronology

and did not consider it. Over the past thirty years, a considerable number of radiocarbon dates have been accumulated, both from settlements and tombs, which has confirmed the chronological position of many monuments (Sagona, 2018: 296-304), (Rova , 2014: 47-69), (Bedianashvili et al 2022: 1673-1713). The new, radiocarbon dates of Tsikhiagora are important because the appearance of the Bedeni culture and its coexistence with the Kura–Araxes culture was chronologically unclear.

## Methods

Three bone (Level A and B1) and one dentine (Level B2) were measured for radiocarbon dating. Nondestructive elemental analyses of the two metal artifacts (dagger from Level B2, spiral from Level A) were conducted using an ElvaX portable bench top X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometer.

## Results

In 2021 at D-REAMS Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory (Weizmann Institute of science. Rehovot, Israel) samples from **Tsikhiagora** were measured for radiocarbon dating by the Prof. Elisabetta Boaretto. The results are showed in the table 1.

Table 1.

| Lab# | Field ID | Type | %Eff | C % | C-14 age ±1σ year BP | Locus | Calibrated range ±1σ | Calibrated range ±2σ | d13C | d15 N | Archaeological Context |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RTD 11233 | Tsikhia gora 1 | Bone | 6.49 | 43 | 4025+/-28 | Pit 79 Level A | 2574 (15.5%) 2556BC<br>2544 (49.0%) 2488BC<br>2482 (3.7%) 2476BC | 2622 (5.9%) 2598BC<br>2584 (89.6%) 2468BC | -18.5 | 6.7 | Kura-Arax, second part of III Millennium BC |
| RTD 11234 | Tsikhia gora 2 | Bone | 3.95 | 43 | 3983+/-27 | pit 78 Level A | 2566 (37.4%) 2531BC<br>2495 (30.8%) 2468BC | 2574 (95.4%) 2460BC | -21.5 | 1.7 | Kura-Arax, second part of III Millennium BC |
| RTD 11237 | Tsikhia gora 5 | Bone | 11.85 | 43 | 4180+/-28 | pit 17 Level B1 | 2878 (14.7%) 2855BC<br>2808 (38.5%) 2750BC<br>2724 (15.1%) 2700BC | 2886 (21.6%) 2836BC<br>2818 (72.4%) 2666BC<br>2648 (1.5%) 2636BC | -19.3 | 7.1 | Kura-Arax, first half III Millennium BC. |
| RTD 11236 | Tsikhia gora 4 | Denti ne | 6.5 | 43 | 4180+/-27 | Level B2 | 2878 (14.4%) 2856BC<br>2807 (39.4%) 2750BC<br>2722 (14.5%) 2701BC | 2886 (21.6%) 2836BC<br>2818 (72.6%) 2666BC<br>2647 (1.3%) 2636BC | -19.6 | 7.5 | Kura-Arax, first half III Millennium BC. Approx 2900 BC |

In the table all the information about the samples, their radiocarbon age and the calibrated ranges according to ±1σ (±1 standard deviation, meaning 68.2% probability that the true age is included in those limits) and ±2σ (±2 standard deviation, meaning 95.4% probability that the true age is included in those limits).

C-14 ages are reported in conventional radiocarbon years (before present =1950) in accordance with international convention. Thus, all calculated C-14 ages have been corrected for the fractionation so as to refer the results to be equivalent with the standard $\delta^{13}C$ value of -25‰ (wood). Calibrated ages in calendar years have been obtained from the calibration tables in (Reimer, *et al.* 2020) by means of OxCal v. 4.4 of Bronk Ramsey (2010) (Bronk-Ramsey 1995; Bronk-Ramsey 2001.

The new, radiocarbon dates of Tsikhiagora are important because the appearance of the Bedeni culture and its coexistence with the Kura–Araxes culture was chronologically unclear.

Two metal artifact were analyzed by XRF to chemically determine their alloy content. Analyses shows that dagger was made by arsenical cooper (Cu: 94.0 ± 0.3%; As: 5.2± 0.08% ;Fe: 0.70 ± 0.06%,Sb: 0.10 ± 0.05% ), and the spiral was made by cooper (Cu: 99.1 ± 0.19% ,Ca: 0.8 ± 0.3% Fe: 0.1 ± 0.04%).

## Discussion

In the central part of the South Caucasus, at the end of the Early Bronze Age, the process of ongoing culturogenesis seems complex and multifaceted. The fact that after the appearance of Martkopi and Bedeni, the Kura–Araxes culture continues to exist in the area, allows us to consider this event as a new stage in its evolutionary development. Innovations, on the other hand, are so essential that this process represents a more stimulated cultural transformation when a new culture is formed on a local basis under the influence of external impulses. The metal artifacts from Phase IV of the Kura–Araxes culture of Tsikhiagora Archaeological monument is characterized by a copper (spiral ornament,) and arsenical copper (dagger). As we know in the South Caucasus, several dozen mines of copper and arsenic were exploited in the Bronze Age and mostly in this period metal objects were made of arsenical cooper.

Stratigraphic data from the Tsikhiagora settlement and new radiocarbon dates allow us to assume the initial period of this cultural transformation in the first half of the 3rd millennium BC, which is important in the study of synchronization with other cultures and the genesis of the Bedeni culture.

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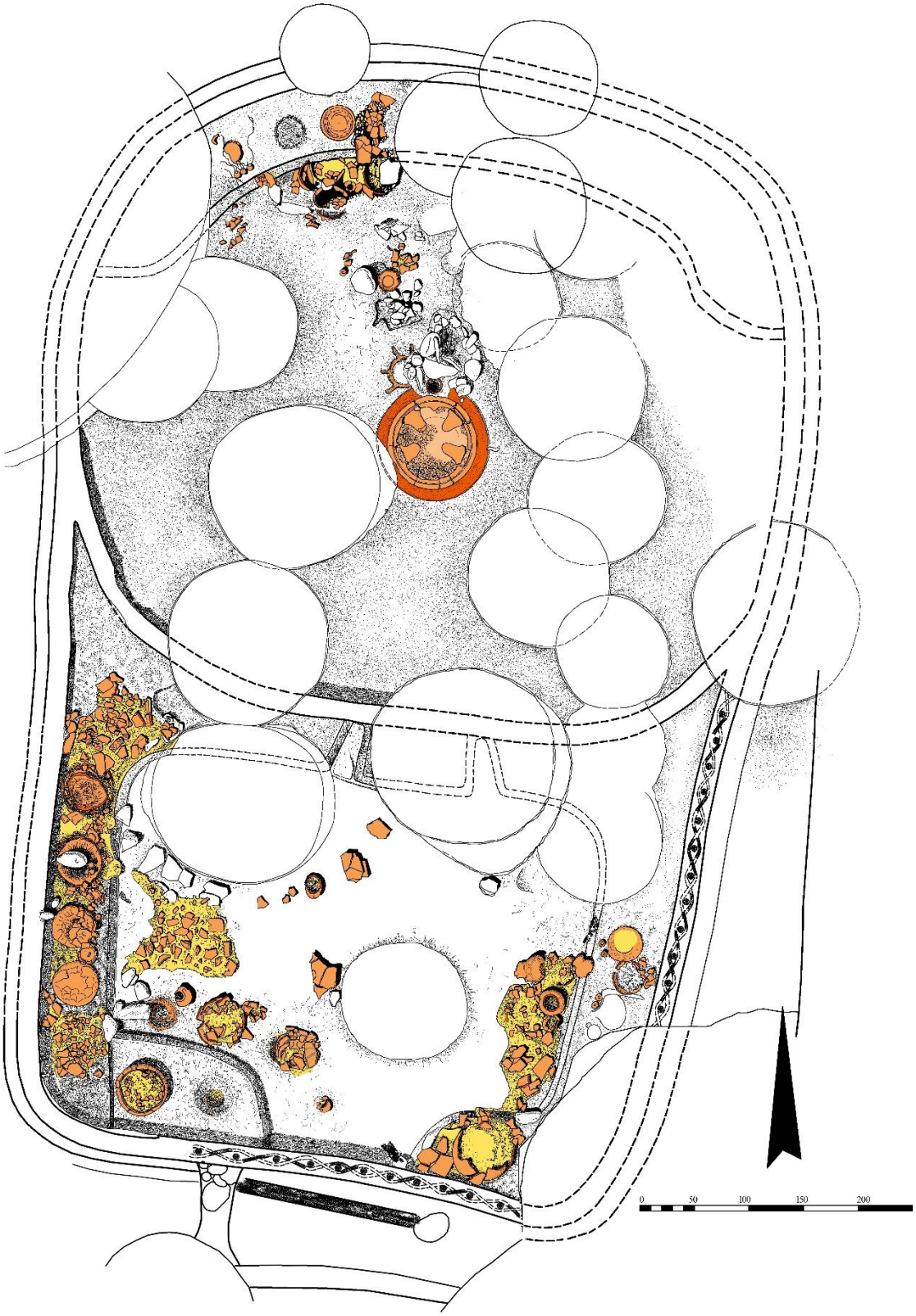


fig. 1. Tsikhiagora, Level $B_2$. Plan of Building (Graphic drawing by E. Sakhvadze).

fig. 2. Tsikhiagora, Level $B_2$. Pottery (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 3. Tsikhiagora, Level $B_2$. Pottery (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 4. Tsikhiagora, Level $B_2$. Pottery (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 5. Tsikhiagora, Level A. Ornamented Pot-Sherds (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 6. Tsikhiagora, Level A. Ornamented Pot-Sherds (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 7. Tsikhiagora, Level A. Ornamented Pot-Sherds (Photo by Sh. Lejava)

fig. 8. Tsikhiagora, Level A. Ornament (Photo by Sh. Lejava)