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# Formation in the Highlands of Eastern Turkey: An Overview From the Bronze to Iron Ages

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## ABSTRACT

Archaeological data from the highlands of Eastern Turkey unfortunately does not provide tangible evidence for the transformation of the earliest village communities into the institutional societies of the Urartian State period. The first cities, advanced agricultural activities, mass production and developed commercial activities, however, started to appear after the establishment of the Urartian State, as a result of central authority and institutionalization. There is a sharp difference between the pre-Urartian and Urartian State periods, which makes it difficult to understand the stages of the state transformation process.

This article discusses political and social changes and stages of state formation through the archaeological data, chronologically. The emergence of the first elites in the Eastern Anatolian plateaus goes back to the Middle Bronze Age with the appearance of the kurgan burials, which is mostly observed in Northeastern Anatolia. After a while, another organizational process started in the Van Lake Basin during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age, which is characterized by the construction of fortresses and cemeteries including bronze and iron weapons. This means the state formation in the region and the establishment of the Urartian State rises from the organizational process of the semi-nomadic tribes dealing with animal husbandry during the Early Iron Age, rather than farmer societies engaged in agriculture. In other words, the state formation in the Eastern Anatolian highlands did not develop from the agricultural model of “village, city and state”. Rather, it is observed in the form of “village, state and city”.

**Keywords:** Eastern Turkey, Animal Husbandry, Iron Age, Urartian State, State Formation





## Introduction

The term “Highlands of Eastern Turkey” is used to designate the part of Eastern Turkey which includes the sub-regions: the Erzurum-Kars Region and the Lake Van Basin. It is bordered by the lands of Transcaucasia and Northwest Iran in the east. The sea level in this mountainous area ranges between 1500-3000 meters. Climatic conditions are characteristically harsh and the landscape is generally covered by snow during the winter periods. Animal husbandry is the primary mode of subsistence and semi-nomadic tribes dominated the region until recently.

Although the settlement history of the highlands of Eastern Turkey goes back to the Late Chalcolithic Period, we have little information about communities and the earliest village types before the Early Bronze Age<sup>1</sup>. The stratigraphic data obtained from the mounds are insufficient to illuminate the period between the Early Bronze Age and the Urartian period. This makes it difficult to reveal the historical sequence of the region’s transformation from the first village communities to the complex societies. In other words, the Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Early Iron Age periods appear like a chronological gap in the construction of the cultural sequence of the region. However, this gap in the mounds is filled with another archaeological source, graves and fortresses. At this point, the Middle Bronze Age burials and the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age burials and fortresses provide information about the lifestyle in the region.

From this point forward, archaeological investigations do not witness a gradual settlement development process culminating in the formation of the Urartian State in the Iron Age. Rather, they reflect unusual types of socio-political developments. In this paper, the stages of socio-political organization and state formation will be discussed according to the archaeological evidence, chronologically.

### 1st Stage: “Egalitarian” Communities in the Early Bronze Age

The Early Bronze Age (EBA) in Turkey is represented by the emergence of urbanism with the existence of cities, citadels, palaces and rich grave goods, according to the evidences from the settlements and the graves. These evidences are interpreted as the appearance of a ruling class, social hierarchy and specialization for the EBA societies. However, the Eastern Anatolian highlands (the Erzurum-Kars Region and the Lake Van Basin) present a different structure from the rest of Anatolia, where the rural economy was predominant. According to the archaeological evidence, the Eastern Anatolian highlands were completely dominated by the Early Transcaucasian Culture (Kura-Araxes Culture) from the Southern Caucasian lands during the Early Bronze Age.

<sup>1</sup> However, the Late Chalcolithic period is better known in Iran and Transcaucasia from the point of craft production and material distribution. For detailed information, see Helwing 2016:51-78.



Archaeological excavations both in Transcaucasia and Eastern Anatolia indicate that this culture was characterized by a distinctive pottery tradition and architecture during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. It is characterized by handmade monochrome pottery, especially with the black burnished pottery tradition together with other colors such as grey, brown and buff. Architectural remains indicate that the houses were built from mudbrick walls in rectangular and/or oval plans. Architectural evidence and other finds from both settlements and graves do not present any trace of a public structure, religious or administrative, or status objects indicative of a social hierarchy (Işıklı 2011, pp. 79-95; Işıklı 2015, pp. 257-275). The structures in the settlements are entirely associated with domestic purposes. Thus, many scholars use the term “egalitarian”<sup>2</sup> for the Early Transcaucasian Culture which existed for more than a thousand years, roughly between 3000-2000 BC (Işıklı 2011, pp. 9-95; Işıklı 2015, pp. 257-275; Palumbi 2016, p. 23). In other words, there is no clear inequality in the socioeconomic structure of the communities in this culture. The emergence of village settlements in the Eastern Anatolian highlands is represented by excavations at such sites as Sos, Karaz, Pulur in the Erzurum Region, Dilkaya and Karagündüz in the Van Region during the Early Bronze Age (Sagona and Sagona 2000, pp. 56-127; Çilingiroğlu 1993, pp. 469-489; Sevin, Özfirat and Kavaklı 2000, pp. 847-867) (Fig. 1).

The rural economy of these communities was dominated by sedentary agriculture and animal husbandry. All the archaeological evidence from the settlements and graves indicates that the early village period in the Eastern Anatolian highlands in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC point to an un-hierarchic social and economic model. There is no sign related to a political organization. However, a few exceptional structures in the sites at Transcaucasia, such as Shengavit, Kvatskhelebi and Mokhra Blur diverge from this general pattern. The “defense wall” at Shengavit for example, is the feature in Transcaucasia that might be interpreted as the result of coordinated collective labor in this period (Palumbi 2016, pp. 17-21). Similar fortified settlements are also observed in North-Western Iran, too (Kroll 2017, pp. 253-261). This means, although this period is largely identified with the egalitarian communities, the unusual existence of a defense wall, at least, implies some sort of communal organization could have existed in Transcaucasia and Northwest Iran.

## **2nd Stage: Lighting the Fuse in Northeast Anatolia: Appearance of the First Rural Elites in the Middle Bronze Age**

The Middle Bronze Age in the Eastern Anatolian highlands represents a departure from the traditions of the Early Bronze Age. There is an interruption of the stratigraphy of the mound settlements that indicates a chronological interruption after the Early Bronze Age

2 The term egalitarian refers to the communities who have equal opportunities from the point of social and economic aspects. This term is mostly used for the hunter-gatherer groups. For detailed information about the egalitarian groups in the Early Mesopotamia, see Frangipane 2007: 151-176.



layers, upon which Early Iron Age remains of relatively impoverished construction are built. Above these, sophisticated Middle Iron Age Urartian architecture is found. This means, in essence, that these settlements do not shed much light on the period between the Early Bronze Age and Urartian State period or the sociopolitical developments leading up to the emergence of a strong state in the area. The long intervening period, the Middle Bronze Age, must be understood in the light of burials on the pastures instead of settlements in the plains.

In Eastern Anatolia, the Middle Bronze Age is entirely represented by the burials on the plateau. These reflect radical changes in the way of subsistence, which is completely based on the semi-nomadic pastoral economy (Özfirat 2001, p. 16; Sevin 2004a, p. 105; Özfirat 2014a, p. 26). Scholars explain this period with a radical climate change, which caused the people to move to the plateaus during the Middle Bronze Age (Özfirat 2001, p. 16; Sevin 2004a, p. 105).

A similar situation is observed in Transcaucasia where the Middle Bronze Age is also mainly represented by graves. The appearance of Kurgan burials for the first time at the end of the Early Bronze Age (Early Kurgan Culture) and their continuation into the Middle Bronze Age (Trialeti Culture) are generally assumed to represent a major change in socioeconomic and political structures (Kushnareva 2003, p. 111). During the Middle Bronze Age in Transcaucasia, Kurgan burials are noteworthy for their bigger size and rich burial gifts. Especially, kurgans at Trialeti, Vanadzor, Zurtaketi, Tsalka, Karashamb and Kirovakan are conspicuously furnished with gold and silver artifacts and high-quality painted vessels (Kushnareva 2003, p. 230-233; Puturidze 2003, p. 126; Robinson 2003, p. 130; Özfirat 2001, p. 18-64). Because of the kurgan burials and their rich context, the appearance of the first elites/ruling class in this area dated to the Middle Bronze Age. These burials not only point to a ruling class, but also to social classes in general and craft specialists such as goldsmiths and potters (Puturidze 2003, p. 126).

Kurgan burial customs of Transcaucasia spread into northwest Iran and northeast Anatolia in the Middle Bronze Age (Bahşeliyev 1997, p. 29; Özfirat 2003, p. 350). The existence of kurgan burials in Anatolia, especially in northeast Anatolia, has been identified in the villages of Küçük Çatma and Köprüköy in the province of Erzurum and more than 30 kurgans in Bozkurt Kurgan in the province of Ağrı-Doğubeyazıt (Figs. 1, 2). These are mostly small, with diameters of 8-12 m and heights of 0.60-2.00 m. and no precious objects were found except for a few necklace beads. Pottery made up the majority of the finds (Özfirat 2009, p. 636; Özfirat 2014b, pp. 52-53; Özfirat 2014c, p. 211) (Fig. 2).

All this archaeological evidence permits some inferences about the sociopolitical organization and state formation in the Middle Bronze Age both in Transcaucasia and Northeast Anatolia. The development of a new burial tradition (kurgans) and the appearance



of status objects in these burials indicates that egalitarian village communities of the Early Bronze Age transformed into hierarchic societies associated with status and wealth differentials in the Transcaucasian lands. This process can be divided two phases according to the kurgan burials. The initial stage is characterized with smaller kurgans with lesser burial gifts at the end of the Early Bronze Age (Early Kurgan Culture Period). The second phase is represented by the bigger-sized kurgans and rich burial gifts in the Trialeti Culture in the Middle Bronze Age. As for Northeast Anatolia, although kurgan burials are smaller and do not contain rich burial gifts (Özfirat 2009, pp. 636-63; Köroğlu 2000, pp. 2-11; Özfirat 2014c, pp. 211), the kurgan burial tradition itself indicates similar sociopolitical development processes were at work. However, it is clear that they are less pronounced in comparison to the Transcaucasian examples. The two-phase development process does not appear to apply to Northeast Anatolia where only small-sized kurgans are found (Fig. 2). Although the underlying reason for Anatolia's backwardness is not certainly known, there is no doubt that the advanced metal industry must have provided a great advantage to the Transcaucasian elites in Near Eastern trading activities. In any case, the existence of the kurgan burials in Northeast Anatolia can be accepted as the indicator of the first rural elites in the region because the kurgan burial type is itself an esoteric tradition reflecting status and wealth. This means that, unlike the Early Bronze Age with its egalitarian communities, the Middle Bronze Age sees the first appearance of the rural elites in Northeast Anatolia (Fig. 4). However, these rural elites in Northeast Anatolia did not play a major role in the state formation process of the Eastern Anatolian Highlands. The kurgan burial tradition disappeared around the beginning of the Early Iron Age<sup>3</sup>, and the vanguard of the developmental process shifted to the Lake Van Basin<sup>4</sup>.

### **3rd Stage: The Shifting Winds to the Lake Van Basin: Roots of the State Formation in the Early Iron Age**

During the Early Iron Age, the initial process of the state formation was reshaped in the Lake Van Basin instead of Northeast Anatolia. In other words, although the first steps toward more hierarchical societies were taken in Northeast Anatolia during the Middle Bronze Age under the influence of Transcaucasian cultures, the societies based on more elaborate formal institutions were developed in the Lake Van Basin somewhat later. Sources of archaeological information other than kurgans are available for the region during the Early Iron Age. However, it should be noted that the archaeological evidence is still not particularly abundant for the period (Konyar 2022). No grave or status object related to a ruler has yet been discovered in Early Iron Age in East Anatolia. Although some metal objects were found,

3 The continuation of kurgan burials into the Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age is known from Bozkurt Kurgan excavations, but they also do not contain rich burial gifts (Özfirat 2014a: 17-43).

4 However, it should be noticed that the effects of Transcaucasian cultures never ended up in East Anatolia which continued into the Urartian Kingdom period.



for example jewelry and weapons from the cemeteries of Dilkaya, Karagündüz, Yoncatepe, Ernis and Çatak (Sevin and Kavaklı 1996a, pp. 1-20; Köroğlu 2003, pp. 231-244; Köroğlu and Konyar 2005, pp. 25-38; Erdem 2011, pp. 59-68; Özfiat 2014b, pp. 54-55; Kuvanç et al 2016, pp. 149-194), they are not a direct indication of a ruler or a leader (Baştürk 2015, pp. 6-8; Erdem 2018, pp. 29-36) (Fig. 3). The metal objects, of course, are not comparable to the precious metal artifacts found in the MBA kurgan burials in Transcaucasia. If archaeological evidence is not by itself, conclusive, Assyrian written documents make it absolutely clear that organized political societies existed in Eastern Anatolia during the Early Iron Age (Çilingiroğlu 1994, pp. 1-13). These texts of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC mention *Uruadri Lands* consisting of 8 kingdoms and 51 cities, and *Nairi Lands* with 60 kings (Grayson 2002a, 2002b; Salvini 2006). The rapid political and social development of this area was thus reflected by numerous tribal leaders in these areas, which later records allow us to locate in the areas around Lakes Van and Urmia (Fig. 1). Moreover, Assyrian records also document the existence of strongholds on the top of the hills. Indeed, archaeological surveys in the region indicate the presence of fortresses dating to the Early Iron Age such as Yürek, Papaz, Aşıküseyin, Panz, Şorik, Meydantepe, and Aliler (Belli and Konyar 2003, pp. 6-89; Konyar 2022). These fortresses are the earliest evidence of the fortress-based settlement system of the region<sup>5</sup>.

Cumulatively, this evidence -the existence of organized tribes (chiefdoms) and conflicts; development of metal weapons; and appearance of fortress-based settlements for the first time- reflects a transformation toward state-organized societies although the population was still substantially engaging with animal husbandry and living a semi-nomadic style (Köroğlu 2021, pp. 71-72). Unimpressive architectural remains on the mounds of the lowlands in contrast to the fortresses on the top of the hills, which are thought to have served for controlling pastures for the animals (Belli and Konyar 2003, p. 92), further clarifies the organization of the tribes during the Early Iron Age was adapted to the conditions of animal husbandry.

### Concluding Remarks: Urartian State Formation

Socially differentiated societies in the Eastern Anatolian highlands first appear in the Middle Bronze Age in its northeastern part with kurgan burials. Although these burials do not contain any status objects, the presence of the kurgan burials themselves indicates the existence of varying social status in a population otherwise living as clans without other traces of military or political organization. No further development toward social complexity was in this part of the land.

<sup>5</sup> A fortress-based settlement system is the main characteristic of the Urartian period. There are some differences between the Urartian and Early Iron Age fortresses which are another subject of research and will not be discussed here. For detailed information, see Belli and Konyar 2003; Konyar 2022.



During the Early Iron Age, another organizational system appeared in the Lake Van Basin<sup>6</sup>. In the Early Iron Age, underground chamber tombs with burial gifts such as jewelry, ornaments and weapons made of bronze and iron (Sevin and Kavaklı 1996a, pp. 1-20; Sevin and Kavaklı 1996b, pp. 9-45; Sevin 2004b, pp. 358-373; Çilingiroğlu 1991a, pp. 29-38; Çilingiroğlu 1991b; Çilingiroğlu 1994, pp. 469-491; Kuvanç et al 2016, p. 160) and fortresses on the mountains distinguish the archaeological record. All these data point to the emergence of a more elaborate social and political organization in the Early Iron Age Lake Van Basin (Fig. 4). According to the Assyrian texts, the population was living in the chiefdom/*aşiret* form and with a militaristic structure. Therefore, the chiefdoms in the Early Iron Age completely differ from the Bronze Age ones in the northeast<sup>7</sup>. However, there is no distinction between the two periods in terms of subsistence, which was based on animal husbandry.

In the Early Iron Age, the semi-nomadic lifestyle is attested by sparse archaeological remains in mound settlements and the presence of fortresses guarding the pastures in the mountains.<sup>8</sup> It is known that semi-nomadic tribes turned into a confederation at the end of the Early Iron Age and later succeeded in establishing the Urartian State. This clearly indicates that the Urartian State traces its roots to the semi-nomadic lifestyle based on animal husbandry. We have no information about agricultural activities in East Anatolia until the Urartian State was established. This model of state formation, where sedentary agriculture was inconsequential, implies a completely different development pattern than the traditional one in which field agriculture plays a prominent role. In other words, Urartu's political organization and state formation were first generated in a society dominated by animal husbandry, and after the establishment of the state, fostered agricultural activities such as building canals, dams, fields and gardens, as documented by written documents of Urartian kings<sup>9</sup>. The earliest cities of the area emerged during the Urartian period and were constructed by the state. The contrast to the model of linear development "from village to city and state" on the basis of agricultural development clearly does not apply here. Rather, it is observed in the form of "village, state and city".

In conclusion, semi-nomadic tribes, consisting of different ethnic groups, took a major part in the political changes and state formation in the highlands of Eastern Turkey. Thus,

6 This note refers to the organization in the Lake Van Basin which was completely in the local character. The effects of Transcaucasia, Mesopotamia and Syria can still be observed within the archaeological contexts until the end of the Urartian period.

7 For detailed information about the formation stages of a military system during the Early and Middle Iron Ages, see Batmaz 2012:41.

8 The conflicts between the tribes for the controlling of the pastures was known in the Eastern Anatolian lands until recent times. For detailed information, see Erdem 2011:63-64.

9 For detailed information about the Urartian economy and sociopolitical organization, see Zimansky 1985; Çiftçi 2017:28-90.



Uartian state formation in Eastern Turkey presents a different model, which was directly developed by the semi-nomadic tribes engaged with animal husbandry on plateaus, instead of agricultural activities. Undoubtedly, different ethnic groups were also influential in the establishment of the Uartian State.

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## Figures

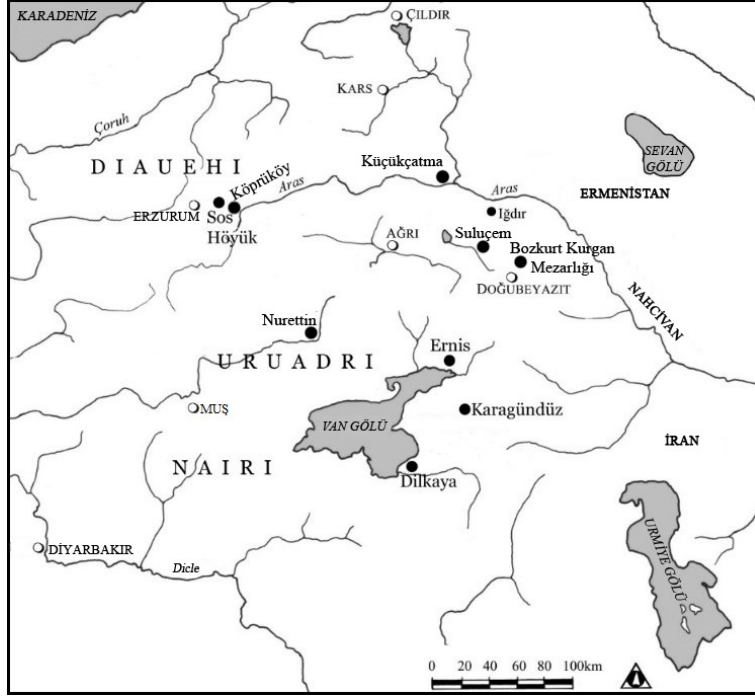


Fig. 1: Map of the sites mentioned in the text (Erdem 2018: Fig.1)



Fig. 2: Kurgan Burial from Northeast Turkey (Özfiat 2014b: Res. 7, 8, 9)



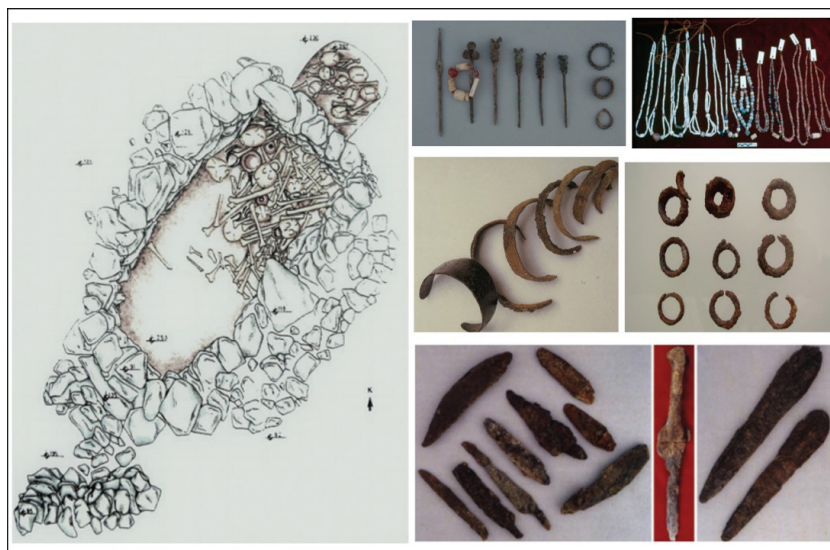


Fig. 4: Burial Gifts from Karagündüz Cemetery (Sevin and Kavaklı 1996b: Figs. 2-5)

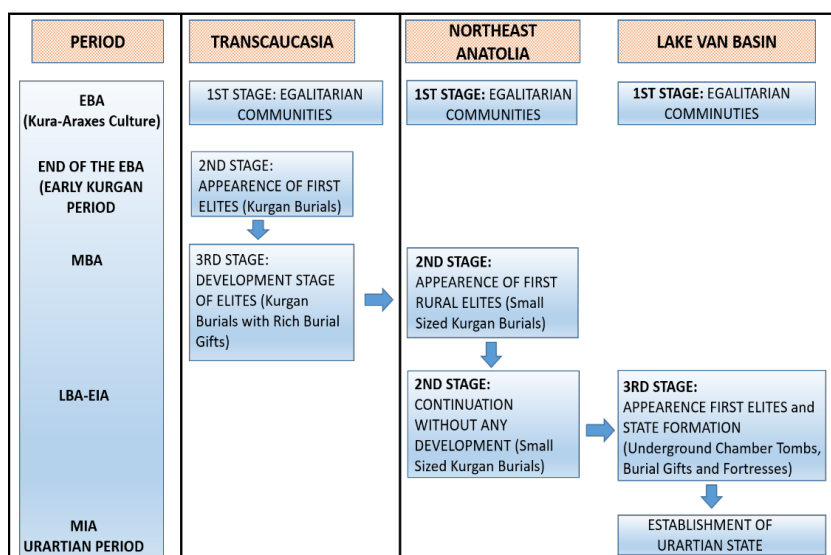


Fig. 5: Stages of State Formation in Eastern Turkey