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Luka Papac, Bastien Llamas, Alan Cooper, Varsha Pilbrow and Wolfgang Haak
Preliminary ancient DNA screening results from first to eighth century AD sites in Samtavro and Tchkantiskedi, Georgia

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CONTEXT AND CONNECTION

Studies on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East
in Honour of Antonio Sagona

edited by

ATILLA BATMAZ, GIORGI BEDIANASHVILI,
ALEKSANDRA MICHALEWICZ and ABBY ROBINSON



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	XI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	XV
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES	XVII

REFLECTIONS

Medea MENABDE	3
Altan ÇILINGIROĞLU	5
Christopher MACKIE	7
Charles BURNEY	9

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Mehmet ÖZDOĞAN Some considerations on the emergence of Neolithic way of life in the Caucasus	15
Catherine MARRO and Yasemin YILMAZ The infant jar-burials from the Late Chalcolithic village of Ovçular Tepesi (Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan): A Mesopotamian tradition?	29
Tufan AKHUNDOV The South Caucasus on the threshold of the metal age	49
Giorgi Leon KAVTARADZE Some problems concerning the chronology of Late Neolithic–Early Metal Age cultures of Caucasia	77
Evgenij N. CHERNYKH The Caucasus in the system of the circumponitic metallurgical province: The bridge between the south and north.	93
Marilyn KELLY-BUCCELLATI Urkish insights into Kura-Araxes social interaction.	107
Mitchell S ROTHMAN Modelling the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition	125
Louise A. HITCHCOCK and Aren M. MAEIR Fifteen men on a dead Seren’s chest: Yo ho ho and a krater of wine	147

Aynur ÖZFIRAT	
Nairi Ware: A Late Bronze to Early Iron Age pottery tradition in the Lake Van Basin	161
Roderick WHITE	
Power vacuums, adaptation and settlement: A computer model of Early Iron Age settlement patterns in northern Syria	175
Kemalettin KÖROĞLU	
Iron Age chronology in the Upper Tigris region and archaeological traces of the crisis in the Neo-Assyrian period	187
Şevket DÖNMEZ	
Early Zoroastrianism at Oluz Höyük, north-central Anatolia	205

LANDSCAPE STUDIES

Bastien VAROUTSIKOS, Ana MGELADZE, Jwana CHAHOUD, Manana GABUNIA, Tamar AGAPISHVILI, Lucie MARTIN and Christine CHATAIGNER	
From the Mesolithic to the Chalcolithic in the South Caucasus: New data from the Bavra Ablari rock shelter	233
Arsen BOBOKHYAN, Alessandra GILIBERT and Pavol HNILA	
Karmir Sar: New evidence on dragon stones and ritual landscapes on Mount Aragats, Armenia	255
Eleonora CARMINATI	
Landscape management during the Early Kurgan period: The Bedeni plateau case study	271
Stephan KROLL	
Bastam in the Bronze Age	277
Jessie BIRKETT-REES	
Persistent places in the South Caucasus landscape	285
Giorgi KHABURZANIA and Abby ROBINSON	
Nature and local knowledge combine in powerful strongholds: Preliminary findings of the Archaeological Survey in Samtskhe-Javakheti project	303
Atila BATMAZ	
Experiences of the Urartian kingdom with seismic activities: An attempt to reconstruct the earthquakes' effects	325
Lynn E. ROLLER	
Rock-cut monuments in the Rhodope Mountains: Gluhite Kamani and its neighbours	345
William ANDERSON	
The medieval afterlife of ancient mounds	359

Michelle NEGUS CLEARY, Nikoloz TSKVITINIDZE, William ANDERSON, Damjan KRSMANOVIC and Jessie BIRKETT-REES Mapping the Vilayet of Gurjistan: The southern Caucasus highlands in the Late Medieval–Early Ottoman periods	381
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ARTEFACTS AND ARCHITECTURE

Zurab MAKHARADZE Rich kurgans of the Early Bronze Age from eastern Georgia	409
Jarrad William PAUL Investigating the prehistoric worked bone and antler assemblage at Uğurlu, Gökçeada	449
Eşref ABAY Some decorated bone objects from Beycesultan, Turkey	453
Andrew JAMIESON Long-stemmed vessels in the Euphrates River valley and evidence from an Early Bronze Age burial at Tell Qumluq, north Syria	465
Karen S. RUBINSON An inquiry into the Middle Bronze/Late Bronze transition in the South Caucasus: What does ceramic evidence say?	487
Mehmet IŞIKLI and Jan BAILEY The inanity of political borders in archaeology in light of a striking group of artefacts from the Turkish/Armenian borderland	499
Iulon GAGOSHIDZE and Elena ROVA New investigations at Aradeti Orgora, a multi-period centre in the Shida Kartli region in Georgia	521
Bertille LYONNET Rethinking the ‘Sioni cultural complex’ in the South Caucasus (Chalcolithic period): New data from Mentesh Tepe (Azerbaijan)	547
Giorgi BEDIANASHVILI Pottery from the Koban cemetery: Ernest Chantre’s Late Bronze–Early Iron Age Caucasian collection.	569
Geoffrey D. SUMMERS Burials of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age at Yanik Tepe, northwestern Iran, excavated by Charles Burney.	589
Paul ZIMANSKY The free-standing Urartian house.	617

Özlem ÇEVİK	
The development of urbanism in Western Anatolia and the Aegean prior to the Late Bronze Age.	629
Altan ÇILINGIROĞLU	
A scale, a stele and a boiling cauldron on an Urartian sherd	645
Heather JACKSON	
An Egyptian at Hellenistic Jebel Khalid? A rare faience amulet.	651
Giorgi MANJGALADZE	
Roman-period glazed ceramics in Georgia	661
Aleksandra MICHAŁEWICZ and Claudia SAGONA	
An example of the so-called ‘Dancing Man’ figures from the Samtavro burial ground in Georgia.	671

SCIENTIFIC PARTNERSHIPS

Simon CONNOR, Catherine LONGFORD and Ian THOMAS	
Prehistoric plant use and highland vegetation change in the Pasinler Valley, Eastern Anatolia.	687
Peter Ian KUNIHOLM	
Dendrochronological investigations at Sos Höyük	711
Kakha KAKHIANI, Eliso KVAVAZE, Inga MARTKOPLISHVILI and Nino PATARIDZE	
Archaeological and palynological investigation of the Paravani kurgan, Georgia	721
Eliso KVAVADZE and Inga MARTKOPLISHVILI	
The significance of pollen and non-pollen palynomorphs in archaeological material for human paleodiet reconstruction.	749
Marine CHKADUA	
Samtavro cemetery and the history of physical anthropology in Georgia	769
Natalie LANGOWSKI	
Dual subsistence strategies in first to sixth century AD Greater Mtskheta, Georgia	775
Peter MAYALL	
Intentionally modified crania at Samtavro.	779
Luka PAPAC, Bastien LLAMAS, Alan COOPER, Varsha PILBROW and Wolfgang HAAK	
Preliminary ancient DNA screening results from first to eighth century AD sites in Samtavro and Tchkantiskedi, Georgia.	783
Varsha PILBROW	
Establishing the global affinities of the Samtavro population through dental traits	787

RETROSPECTIVES AND OVERVIEWS

Giulio PALUMBI	
At the northeastern Anatolian frontier: A project gallery	801
Veli SEVIN	
A new fortress on the western frontiers of the Urartian kingdom	819
M. Taner TARHAN	
The mysteries of the Urartian capital city Tušpa	827
Jan-Krzysztof BERTRAM and Gülçin İlgezdi BERTRAM	
The later prehistory of the Ankara region	847
Vakhtang NIKOLAISHVILI	
Greater Mtskheta	867
Gela GIUNASHVILI	
The history of investigation of the Samtavro valley and its importance to the archaeology of the Caucasus	891
Holly JONES-AMIN	
Archaeological ceramics conservation	911
Oscar WHITE MUSCARELLA	
Chasing museums	927
Andrea ARGIRIDES	
The protection of archaeological and cultural heritage in conflict zones: The case for Iraq	939
Ronald T. RIDLEY	
Where archaeology meets history: The enigma of Nefertiti	945
Cliff OGLEBY	
The aerial perspective: The evolution of mapping archaeology from low altitude aerial photographs	959
Rüstem ASLAN	
The Turks and Troy: The ‘Treasure of Priam’ according to Ottoman documents	967
Christopher MACKIE	
Gallipoli, the beautiful city	977
TURKISH ABSTRACTS	987
GEORGIAN ABSTRACTS	1009
INDEX	1035

PRELIMINARY ANCIENT DNA SCREENING RESULTS FROM FIRST TO EIGHTH CENTURY AD SITES IN SAMTAVRO AND TCHKANTISKEDI, GEORGIA

Luka PAPAC, Bastien LLAMAS, Alan COOPER,
Varsha PILBROW and Wolfgang HAAK

ABSTRACT

Ancient DNA allows the analysis of the genetic makeup of past populations. However, due to the highly variable nature of DNA preservation it is often useful to screen samples in order to assess the quality of DNA preservation before deciding how to invest resources into further sequencing efforts. Here we present screening results of 34 human bone and teeth samples showing a high variation in DNA preservation not only across the whole cemetery but also within tombs of the same cemetery. Preliminary analyses show that preservation levels are satisfactory for genetic characterisation of this ancient population.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

A major hurdle in ancient DNA studies is the quality of biochemical preservation. Shortly after death, repair mechanisms that uphold the integrity of the DNA within each cell cease to function and DNA begins to degrade.¹ In addition, microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi then colonise the organism and often the majority of DNA extracted from archaeological organic remains, for example, from human or animal bones or teeth, comes from such environmental contaminants.²

The quality of DNA preservation can be estimated by assessing the percentage of DNA fragments of human origin in each DNA extract. This can be done by sequencing a random assortment of fragments from a DNA extract (a so-called DNA library) and determining the proportion of fragments which match DNA sequences found in the human reference genome.³ Here we report on the screening of 34 samples dated from the first to eighth centuries AD from Samtavro and Tchkantiskedi, sampled as part of Georgian-Australian Investigations in Archaeology, and funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project awarded to Professor Antonio Sagona and Professor David Lordkipanidze.

¹ Pääbo *et al.* 2004.

² Carpenter *et al.* 2013.

³ Carpenter *et al.* 2013.

METHODS

We collected 38 bone and tooth samples, representing 33 individuals, currently held in the Mtskheta excavation house near the Samtavro cemetery, Mtskheta. Protective gear and clothing including body suits, gloves and facemasks were worn throughout sampling to minimise risk of modern contamination. Tough, rigid and fresh-looking bone was preferentially sampled and sent to the facility at the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA, Adelaide, Australia. There, all samples were wiped with bleach and UV-irradiated for 20 minutes on each side before having their outer surface mechanically removed using a Dremel drill and disposable cutting disc. 4 of the initial 38 samples were deemed unsuitable for further processing. 34 samples were pulverised in a bone mill and 200 mg of the resulting bone powder was used for DNA extraction.⁴ We performed a test polymerase chain reaction (PCR) followed by gel electrophoresis in order to amplify, visualise and determine whether DNA from each sample has been successfully extracted. The gel showed that 28 of the 34 extracts contained human DNA. From these samples we then prepared barcoded genomic DNA libraries following established protocols.⁵ DNA libraries were quantified using a Nanodrop and quantitative PCR, and subsequently indexed and pooled (final concentration 2 nano-Molar) for a DNA sequencing run performed on an Illumina MiSeq machine.

Since DNA libraries were pooled together to increase sequencing efficiency, raw sequence data was first sorted into respective samples (demultiplexed). Adapters were removed and the resulting fragments were aligned to the human genome.⁶ The proportion of reads (sequenced fragments of DNA) from each DNA library that could be aligned to the human reference genome allowed us to calculate an estimate of endogenous DNA within each library.

RESULTS

The quality of DNA preservation not only varies considerably across the cemetery, resulting in quantities of endogenous human DNA ranging from as low as 0.08 per cent (Samtavro T15 SM3) to 37 per cent (Samtavro T27 SM3) but also between samples coming from the same tomb (**Table 1**).⁷ In Tomb 27 the quality of preservation varies between 0.27 per cent and 37 per cent; likewise, in Tomb 15, it varies between 0.08 per cent and 27 per cent.

CONCLUSION

The high variation in endogenous DNA preservation across the cemetery makes the investment of screening prior to further sequencing worthwhile.

With this information, resources can be invested according to each sample's quality of preservation. Sequencing of better-preserved samples is more efficient, as a greater proportion of the sequencing effort is invested in the target of interest, in this case human DNA. Samples with preservation levels of greater than 25 per cent ($n = 3$) can be targeted for

⁴ Brotherton *et al.* 2013.

⁵ Meyer and Kircher 2010.

⁶ Laziridis *et al.* 2014; Llamas *et al.* 2014.

⁷ Michalewicz 2014.

Table 1. Summary of sample information and corresponding quality estimates of DNA preservation, *i.e.* proportion of endogenous human DNA.

Specimen	Burial Type	Year Excavated	Skeletal Element	% Endogenous DNA
Samtavro T27 SM3	Stone cist	2009	Bone	37.02
Samtavro T1 SM2	Stone cist	2008	Molar	32.64
Samtavro T15 SM1	Stone cist	2010	Bone	27.07
Samtavro T20 SM1	Stone cist	2009	Canine	18.95
Samtavro T20 SM3	Stone cist	2009	Canine	11.87
Samtavro T21 SM1	Stone cist	2009	Bone	8.29
Samtavro T740 2167	Stone cist	1984	Bone	7.28
Samtavro T608	Stone cist	1982	Bone	7.07
Samtavro T308 SM1	Stone cist	1977	Bone	6.65
Samtavro T36 SM2	Clay sarcophagus	2009	Bone	3.43
Samtavro T33 SM1	Earthen pit	2009	Bone	3.40
Samtavro T576 SM1	Tile lined	1980	Bone	2.36
Samtavro T15 SM1	Stone cist	2010	Canine	2.27
Samtavro T206	Stone cist	1977	Bone	1.88
Tchkantiskedi I11N SM1	Extended pit	2011	Bone	1.80
Samtavro T15 SM2	Stone cist	2010	Bone	1.69
Samtavro T292 1872 SM1	Stone cist	1978	Bone	1.36
Samtavro T290 1889 SM1	Stone cist	1978	Bone	0.70
Tchkantiskedi Q6/R6 4002	Clay sarcophagus	2011	Bone	0.64
Samtavro T21 SM3	Stone cist	2009	Molar	0.64
Samtavro T46 SM1	Composite	2010	Bone	0.63
Samtavro T23 SM2	Stone cist	2009	Bone	0.49
Samtavro T308 SM3	Stone cist	1977	Bone	0.40
Samtavro T478 SM1	Earthen pit	2010	Bone	0.31
Samtavro T6 SM1	Tile lined	2008	Bone	0.27
Samtavro T27 SM1	Stone cist	2009	Bone	0.27
Samtavro T543 SM1	Earthen pit	1979	Bone	0.19
Samtavro T15 SM3	Stone cist	2010	Molar	0.08

cost-effective whole genome sequencing, samples with preservation levels between 5 and 25 per cent ($n = 6$) are candidates for genomic single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) analyses, while samples with preservation levels between one and five per cent ($n = 8$) can still have their mitochondrial genomes sequenced after targeted capture.

Sequencing a greater portion of the genome can aid in better understanding of population history, affiliations and demographic events. It is clear from these results that the remains at Samtavro and Tchkantiskedi have levels of DNA preservation conducive to population genetic studies of these ancient human populations.

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