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Chapter 23

‘Island-like’ Settlements in the Alazani Plain (Georgia, Southern Caucasus): Excavations at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 and Tchiauri 1

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Abstract

Excavations and geoarchaeological research carried out between 2018 and 2022 in the southern part of the Lagodekhi Municipality (Eastern Georgia), along the middle course of the Alazani River, highlighted a distinctive settlement pattern. Small ephemeral single-period sites are clustered on low natural heights rising above the plain, separated by a shifting network of meandering river channels. Excavations at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Early Chalcolithic) and Tchiauri 1 (Late Bronze/Early Iron Age), as well as surface investigations and geological soundings/coring carried out throughout the plain indicate that this peculiar organisation represents the adaptation to the local environmental conditions of a periodically flooded plain.

Introduction

Since 2018 the *Georgian-Italian Lagodekhi Archaeological Project* (GILAP) of Ca' Foscari University of Venice in collaboration with the Lagodekhi Museum and the University of Pisa has been carrying out archaeological and geoarchaeological research in the Lagodekhi district, close to the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan. This district (Fig. 1) includes very diverse natural environments as well as areas with strong anthropic influence; from the northern steep and densely forested foothills of the Greater Caucasus, the landscape changes southwards to densely settled alluvial fans that slope gently into the subhorizontal bottom of the valley of the Alazani River, one of the main tributaries of the Kura. Patches of broadleaf riparian forest (locally even floodplain forest) still survive along the river. Archaeological work was especially concentrated on the southern part of the area, just to the north of the present course of the river, close of the village of Tchiauri (formerly Ulianovka), whereas geoarchaeological survey and sondages were extended northwards until the toe of the alluvial fans.

The Alazani plain lies around 200m above sea level and its climate is warm oceanic/sub-tropical humid (Peel *et al.* 2007). The northern bank of the river is presently flanked by a c. 4km-wide belt of thick temperate broadleaf forest crossed by small streams and

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interspersed with swampy areas. Drainage is poor because the plain is almost horizontal and the subsoil is clayey and poorly permeable: water tends to stagnate and forms oxbows in abandoned river meanders and small swampy areas, and the whole plain is extensively flooded after heavy rains.⁴

The area is crossed by a complex pattern of sinuous and meandering river palaeochannels. These are highlighted by colour differences on old and modern satellite imagery, and on drone images of ploughed fields. On the ground, they often correspond to slightly depressed areas (few tens of centimetres to 1.5-2m) that limit and/or surround 'island-like' topographic highs where ancient settlements are sometimes located. It can be argued that this island-like pattern was shaped by palaeochannels formed in different periods; the present-day topography would therefore not represent the ancient one, but a sort of palimpsest of the hydrologic history of the area. This complex history cannot be fully unravelled without extensive use of radiocarbon chronology, which is unfortunately hindered by a general lack of organic remains in the palaeochannel sediments. Consequently, the archaeological sites situated on the 'islands' would just be remains of different ancient settlement patterns. Nonetheless, there are hints that at least the general aspect of the landscape was characterised by modest topographic highs – suitable for settlement – separated by river channels and marshy areas. Fig. 2 shows a modern example, from a different country, of how the landscape may have looked during the Middle Holocene.⁵

We argue that this particular conformation of the landscape heavily conditioned the ancient human settlement in the region, giving rise to a network of narrow natural channels and artificial drainage ditches interspersed with small settlements, often grouped in clusters, which may have also exploited the watercourses for defence. This pattern probably shifted frequently, due to modifications of the drainage network, but maintained some distinctive features throughout the time. Interestingly, recent research put into light similar features in Bronze and Iron Age sites in the wet lowlands of Western Georgia (so-called Colchian-type settlements) (Laermanns *et al.* 2017: figs. 1, 9, 10; Hamburg and Isakadze 2018; Hamburg and Lorenzon 2022: fig. 6).

Even today, our area is occupied by isolated farms practicing a mix of livestock breeding, agriculture and horticulture. These smallholdings are interspersed with wide uncultivated patches, mainly used for pasture and for exploiting wild resources (wood, reeds, game, etc.), and scattered with mobile structures and temporary shelters for humans and animals.

Our research suggests comparable patterns of occupation for both the pre-classical periods – the Chalcolithic (5th millennium BCE) and the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age (LB/EIA, late 2nd/early 1st millennium BCE) – which are best represented in the area according to the results of surface investigations (Hopper *et al.* 2023). Tsiteli Gorebi and Tchiauri – the clusters of sites we focused on – lie close to the northern edge of the forest, separated from it by an area occupied by artificial basins, mainly retention ponds also used for recreational

4 This was the case in 2021, when ten days after the end of a very rainy week the plain was still extensively flooded.

5 Paludi Pontine, south of Rome (Italy), early 20th century AD. The photo shows large multi-family dwelling huts («lestre»), pens and stockyards, built near channels and ponds. Hut walls were made of reeds, and roofs of straw.

fishing. Excavations were carried out at two representative sites: Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Rova and Kvavadze 2023; Rova *et al.* in press) and Tchiauri 1.⁶

The Tsiteli Gorebi Cluster

The Tsiteli Gorebi cluster dates to the Early Chalcolithic period (first half of the 5th millennium BCE) and was originally composed of several settlements. A Georgian expedition excavated two of these (Damstvari Gora and Kviriatskhali) in the late 1970s-early 1980s, and reported some others indicated by surface material (Varazashvili 1980, 1984, 1992). The GILAP team explored the area between 2018 and 2021. It excavated a third site (Tsiteli Gorebi 5) and carried out intensive survey, finding further traces of contemporary occupation almost completely destroyed by modern agricultural activities.⁷ This kind of destruction is still going on, as proven by a site (LS071) which literally disappeared under our eyes after the construction of a water reservoir, leaving only a handful of obsidian and pottery sherds.

The mounded area of Tsiteli Gorebi 5 presently extends over about 2ha and consists of two adjacent highs, a larger and a smaller one, with a maximum height of 1.30m above the surrounding plain (Rova and Kvavadze 2023: fig. 2). The larger mound is cut to the east by a 2m-high scarp (rather eroded), which represents the limit of a low terrace shaped by the adjacent Kviriatskhali river. Interestingly, the side of the mound and also the scarp are cut by an ancient channel whose bottom is now above the height of the Kviriatskhali plain. The channel infill includes a bottom layer of sediments reworked from the bank of the channel itself, overlain by a layer of dark grey clayey sediments. Chalcolithic cultural remains included at the bottom of the upper layer suggest that the channel was active during the life of the site. During a first phase, relatively high-energy current flowed within the channel and accumulated sediment eroded from the banks. In a second phase, the flow decreased (or stopped completely), so that clayey sediments rich in organic matter accumulated within the channel.

Geomagnetic prospections carried out in 2021 and intensive pedestrian survey clearly showed, however, that the site originally extended over a much wider area (c. 5ha), identified by a low-density scatter of surface material spread by repeated ploughing. The settlement originally consisted of small, elevated areas surrounded by circular ditches, now marked by magnetic anomalies (Fig. 3). The largest excavation area (Field A) intercepted a small section of one of these ditches (Rova and Kvavadze 2023: figs. 4, 5, 7), which embedded small quantities of cultural remains (small sherds, obsidian fragments, animal bones) exclusively of Chalcolithic age. This ditch was infilled with a cyclical sequence of concave-upwards layers of brownish loam mixed with fragments of the substrate, alternating with dark brown clayey layers rich in organic matter, finally overlain by 40-50cm of soft greyish sediments. This alternating pattern suggests repeated phases of moderate-energy in-flow (rainy seasons or thunderstorms) followed by slow deposition of clay in still water, also confirmed by the presence of pollen and remains of freshwater algae. The ditch had been dug into

6 Tsiteli Gorebi 5 was excavated between 2018 and 2021. The preliminary results of the first two seasons (2018-2019) were presented at the previous ICAANE (Bologna 2021) (Rova and Kvavadze 2023). In autumn 2021, after the interruption due to the COVID-19 emergency, the team completed the investigation of this site and in 2022 it moved to the second one: Tchiauri 1.

7 Possible Chalcolithic occupation was recorded at a dozen sites and scatters of material, some of which correspond to those already recorded by the Georgian team. For further details, see Rova *et al.* in press, fn. 16).

the lower horizon of a truncated forest soil which had been flattened and artificially raised (what we called ‘platform’) by accumulating layers of sediments collected from the surrounding area. Poor remains of rectilinear architecture (in particular, a two-room building) were still preserved on top of the ‘platform’, inside the space surrounded by the ditch (Rova and Kvavadze 2023: figs. 4-6, 8).

Unfortunately, excavations on other slightly raised ‘islands’ surrounded (according to the geomagnetic prospection) by similar ditches (Fields B, C, 1) (see Fig. 3) were not equally successful. On all of them the anthropic layer had apparently been almost completely obliterated by modern disturbances, only leaving a surface concentration of pottery sherds and obsidian, and traces of heavy fires overlying natural alluvial layers. On the other hand, small soundings carried out on the presumed location of other ditches indicated by the geomagnetic prospection (Soundings 1-4) confirmed their existence but showed that only their bottom had been preserved in the most low-lying parts of the settlement.

Similar circular ditches had been discovered at Damstvari Gora, another site of the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster at a distance of c. 2km from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Varazashvili 1992, pl. II). They support the idea that this type of settlement layout was common in the region during the Early Chalcolithic period.

The Tchiauri Cluster

The cluster of Tchiauri is the second case-study that was investigated by the GILAP team. It lies few kilometres WNW of Tsiteli Gorebi, at approximately the same altitude above sea level.⁸ Dating back to the LB/EIA, it is much younger than Tsiteli Gorebi.

In this area we identified two low mounds (Tchiauri 1 and 2); intensive survey highlighted other concentrations of pottery sherds in a large field to the north of Tchiauri 1 (Tchiauri 3 site) and in the field to the west of Tchiauri 2 (LS095); archaeological material was also found, according to local informants, on another field east of Tchiauri 1, but this could not be surveyed because it was under cultivation (Fig. 4, left).

Surface pottery was mixed and included numerous Hellenistic to Medieval types. Notably, Chalcolithic material, so prominent in the Tsiteli Gorebi territory, was rather rare here, although the discovery of a large stone axe at Tchiauri 2 suggests that the area was occupied also in earlier times. Preliminary analysis of surface material suggests that the period of most intensive occupation of this cluster was the LB/EIA, as confirmed by our excavations at Tchiauri 1 and by a small sounding we carried out at Tchiauri 2, which yielded a comparable sequence.

The period is typically represented (Fig. 4, right) by dark grey or brown wares, coarse and heavily mineral-tempered, only occasionally burnished but often bearing incised/impressed decorations. They are well known from other sites of the Kakhetian region, e.g. from Tsitelgori Kurgans (Abramishvili and Abramishvili 2008), Nazarlebi (Bukrashvili *et al.* 2019) and Didi Gora (Kibaroglu *et al.* 2009; Ludwig 2010, pl. 5).

Tchiauri 1 (Fig. 5) is situated on a topographic high (a small ‘island’) about 2m higher than the surrounding plain; the mounded area is presently slightly larger than 1ha, but its exact limits are difficult to reconstruct because of the thick vegetation and intensive modern manipulation (excavation of small basins, ploughing etc.). Indeed, the owner of the land claimed that its top had never been cultivated, but we found ample evidence of repeated

8 The top of Tsiteli Gorebi 5 lies at 204.82m a.s.l., the top of Tchiauri 1 at 205.50m a.s.l.

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ploughing and planting, which had completely destroyed the later anthropic occupation, leaving behind only a 30-40cm-thick layer of greyish granular sediments containing mixed Iron Age, Hellenistic and Medieval material. Modern ploughing had also affected the top of the LB/EIA level, which was no more than 20cm thick and rested directly on a sequence of archaeologically sterile alluvial sediments. These were investigated in a small sounding (C) down to a depth of about 5 m. The top 2.5m of this sequence are fluvial silty to sandy clay loam sediments, with minor colour differences (Fig. 6). A poorly developed brown soil, truncated at the top, is intercalated within these sediments, testifying to a short stop in river deposition. The deeper part of the sequence was investigated by hand auguring, putting into light more loamy sediments, and eventually rather coarse dark grey river sand.

Although the top part of this sequence was the same in all the five excavated areas (A, B, C, D and E), remains of LBA/EIA structures were uncovered only in two of them, Fields A and B. The differences in absolute altitude of the individual layers in the different excavation areas suggests that Fields A and B were small ‘islands’ of occupation slightly elevated above the otherwise unsettled (and easily flooded?) alluvial plain.

The structures found in these excavation areas were rather peculiar, as well. The LB/EIA in the Southern Caucasus is generally described as characterised by the widespread diffusion of stone architecture and, at least in the mountainous areas, of hilltop fortresses (cf., among others: Sagona 2018: 382-388; Reinhold 2017). In the lowlands of the Alazani plain, however, we found evidence of a completely different settlement type (Figs. 7, 8).

In Field A we found some remains of poorly preserved rectilinear mudbrick (?) walls without stone foundations (Fig. 7, left). Only the base of the walls was preserved and there was no evident floor associated with them, so that their function is unclear.

The remains of what was apparently the earliest and main occupation of both areas A and B are better documented. This consisted of light, ephemeral structures made of perishable materials – wood, reed, rush, etc. –, which were often re-built, so that their only remains are several series of superimposed post-holes. The structures were standing on small, elevated areas (Fig. 8), possibly delimited by wooden fences. They consisted of circular spaces surrounded by irregular circles of post-holes, which occurred in two dimensional ranges: large and small. Approximately 40 post-holes circles altogether were identified in the two excavated areas, on a total surface of 80m².

The larger spaces (1.50 to c. 3m in diameter) consisted of very shallow flat-based pits (depth was 10-15cm), generally topped by a layer of compact soil. They were surrounded by circles of poles with a diameter of 12-16cm, generally not perfectly centred on the pit’s perimeter.⁹ No traces of possible wall bases – either in stones or clay – were observed around them, as well as no traces of possible roofing. For sure, these slightly sunken structures were frequently dismantled, possibly filled-in and re-built approximately in the same position, thereby cutting into the earlier pits.

Central post-holes, possibly for poles supporting a roofing, were observed in one or two cases. No floor or well-defined surface was found at the bottom of these spaces, which might however have been covered with rugs, mats or wooden planks which were removed when the structures were abandoned. Their filling contained few small pottery sherds and obsidian fragments, some animal bones, and sparse tiny charcoals; it was sometimes slightly

9 No traces of wood or organic material were observed inside any of the post-holes. This suggests that the posts had been removed after the structures went out of use.

more gritty than the surrounding layer. Small pits cutting the large circles were occasionally found inside the latter: their filling yielded a larger concentration of materials, but was not significantly different in texture and contents.

The precise function of these spaces is difficult to identify. Considering the small dimensions (the internal surface does not exceed 7m²), the limited depth and the general scarcity of finds, a use as dwelling units seems rather unlikely¹⁰, although the use as temporary shelters is undoubtedly possible. Alternatively, and more probably, they might have been used as storage structures or areas dedicated to special activities. They probably had a simple, tent-like conical shape and were entirely constructed of locally available perishable materials (wood, branches, reeds, and straw). In theory, they might have been coated with a layer of clay, although this is not supported by the paucity of recovered daub fragments.¹¹

Structures of the second dimensional class were similar but much smaller (they measured 70-100cm in diameter): the diameter of the surrounding 'poles' was 6cm or less. They were sometimes located inside the larger ones, but never in their centre (see for instance area 1174 inside area 1213 and, respectively, area 1233 inside area 1235 in **Fig. 8**). These structures may have been storage or drying facilities with a raised floor, although considering their small size it is difficult to hypothesise what might have been stored in them.

Structures of neither type have been excavated so far at other sites of the Kakheti region, either contemporary with Tchiauri 1 or not: we thus suppose they represent a peculiarity of the swampy or easily flooded environment that characterises this part of the Alazani valley. In the LB/EIA they were probably used as auxiliary features for isolated buildings located in their proximity.

They may however have been less unique than it presently seems: indeed, a possible parallel may be found in Middle Bronze Age levels at Didi Gora, less than 10km from Tchiauri, also located in the Alazani plain and in a similar natural environment, but on the opposite side of the river, although in this case the layout of the post-holes alignments is less clear than in our case (Korfmann *et al.* 2002: figs. 2-8).

Conclusions

Our investigations proved that the landscape of this part of the Alazani plain remained relatively stable, even if the drainage network was affected by frequent river course changes; it led to a very specific pattern of occupation, which is attested at least from the Early Chalcolithic to the Iron Age. The previous phases, on the other hand, represent a still open question. Indeed, neither our survey, nor any previous research discovered any evidence of the Ceramic Neolithic period in the area, a phase which is very well represented, instead, in all the neighbouring regions.

Geoarchaeological investigations corroborate the hypothesis that the Alazani Plain has been stable, with limited depositional rates at least since the times it was occupied by

10 After evaluating much comparative evidence, Cattani 2009: 83, fn. 16 proposes 8-10 m² as a reasonable minimal surface for considering a residential use for so-called "sunken huts", although exceptions are documented.

11 Attempts at graphic reconstructions of how similar prehistoric structures may have looked and ethnographic parallels for them are plentiful in literature: among many others, Cattani 2009 provides numerous examples. Especially intriguing appears the often cited illustration which accompanies Vitruvius' description of primitive Phrygian huts (*ibid.*: fn 10), in the 17th century French translation by Claude Perrault (*Les dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve*, Paris 1673, pl. V, fig. II).

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Chalcolithic people. Even if the general geomorphology of the Kakheti area indicates that the Alazani valley is overflooded – *i.e.* fluvial processes unbalanced towards deposition tended to fill up the valley – it also appears that this process had been dominant in some period before the Chalcolithic, whereas it almost stopped after it. Most of the excavated sites are very shallow, suggesting that deposition has been moderate, even in close proximity of the river. Geological sondages carried out by the Georgian-Italian team at the edge of a mid-late 3rd millennium kurgan near Ananauri showed that the kurgan was built starting from a surface – marked by a forest soil – which is less than one metre deep, showing that depositional rates have been almost null in the last 5,000 years at least. The reasons why overflooding started, and then stopped, are still under study and will be the object of a future communication.

Regarding the preservation of archaeological sites, historical cartography (Специальная Карта Европейской России, Изданная Военно-Топографическим Отделом Главного Штаба. Special Map of European Russia, published by the Military Topographic Department of the General Staff, 1885) shows that several hundred square kilometres of the landscape around Tsiteli Gorebi and Tchiauri were covered by an extensive forest cover until Soviet times. The canopy of this forest protected the underlying soil – and archaeological sequences – from erosion, apart from the areas that were subject to changes in the course of the river and its tributaries. The network of these streams must have almost always been rather dense in order to drain the abundant waters flowing from the Caucasus range. The result of this interaction is the present-day patchy and subtly undulating landscape, characterised by small topographic highs and depressed fluvial channels, which, apart from modern anthropic modifications, probably dates to the Middle Holocene.

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Figure 1. Satellite image of the Lagodekhi district, with location of the two excavated sites (modified from Google Earth).



Figure 2. Paludi Pontine (Italy), early 20th century CE settlement in marsh area (photo I. I. d'arti grafiche).



Figure 3. Results of the geomagnetic prospections on the Tsiteli Gorebi 5 site with supposed circular ditches highlighted in light grey and location of the excavation areas (Fields A, B, C, 1; Soundings 1, 2, 3, 4) in dark grey.

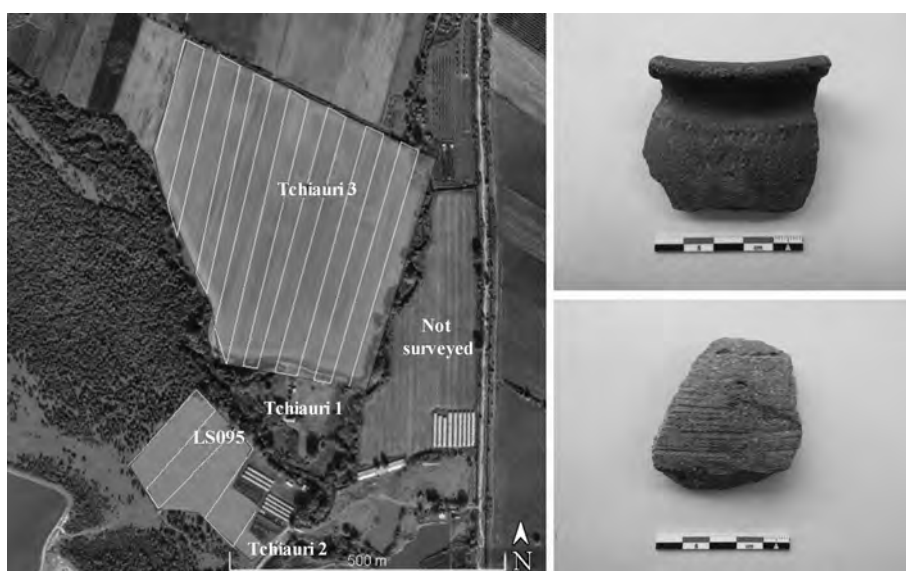


Figure 4. Left: satellite image of the Tchiauri cluster; right: two typical LB/EIA sherds (0145-C-8, 0001-C-74) from Tchiauri 1.

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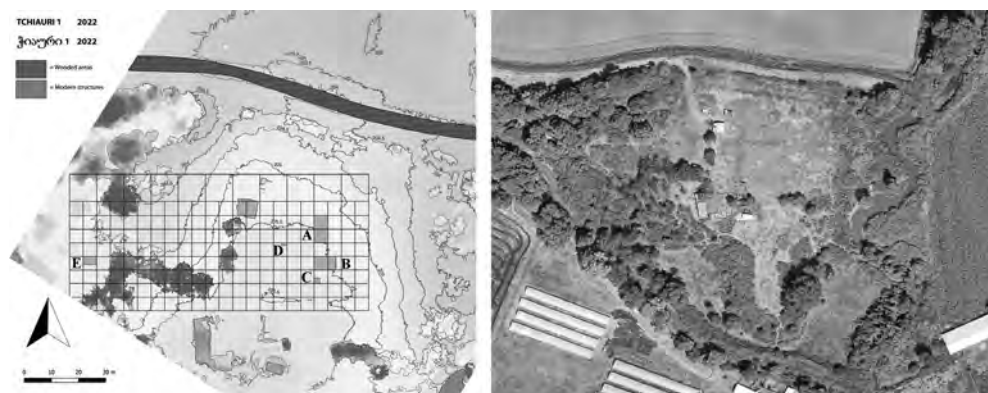


Figure 5. Left: contour map of the Tchiauri 1 site with location of the excavated areas; right: drone photomosaic of the site.

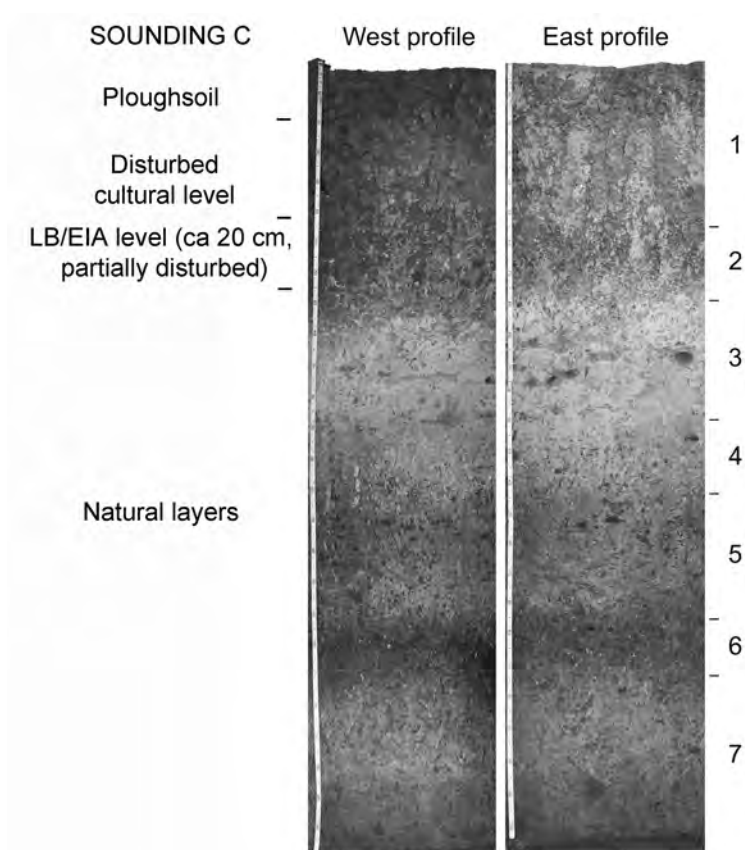
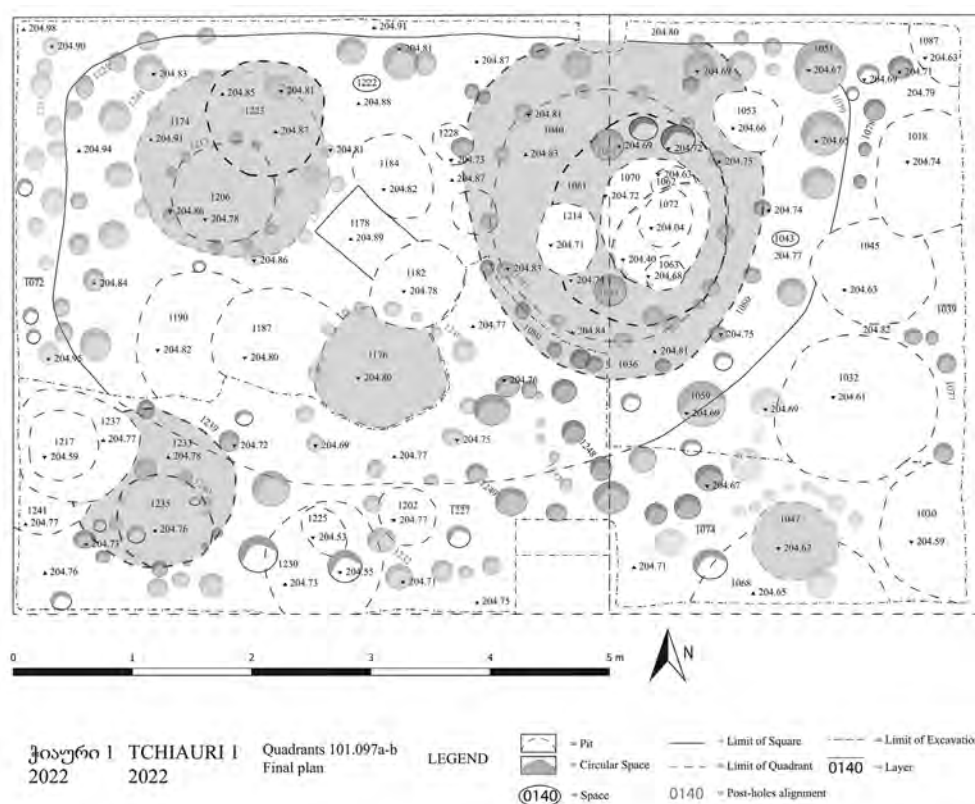
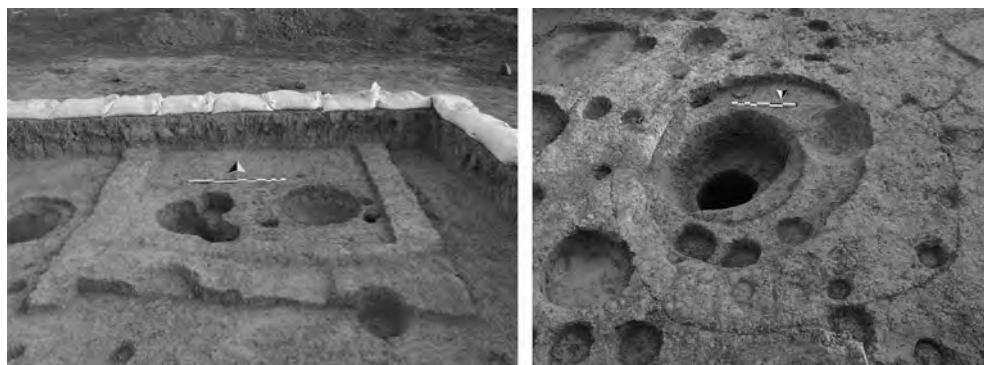


Figure 6. Profile through the top part of Sounding C at Tchiauri 1. 1: modern topsoil; 2: truncated archaeological layers; 3, 4: river sediments; 5, 6: palaeosols; 7: river sediments.



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