

AMBROYI, ARMENIA

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Continuing Excavations

The 2014 excavation season at the medieval settlement site known as Ambroyi continued the work started by the Project for Medieval Archaeology of the South Caucasus (MASC) in 2013: the second season expanded upon established excavations and developed ongoing research questions directed at the material contours of social life at the village level in the late medieval period (AD 1200–1500). This season's research, undertaken with support from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and additional support from the American Research Institute of the South Caucasus (ARISC), also broadened and developed our ongoing collaborations with scholars in Armenia and the US, thus furthering the Project's ongoing commitment to engaged and cooperative research into the social world of the medieval South Caucasus.

The second season of excavations at Ambroyi also continued our long-term focus on the archaeological landscape of the Kasakh Valley, located within the Aragatsotn Province of central Armenia. Defined through the geophysical dynamics of Mt. Aragats, the bed of the Kasakh River, and the curve of the Tsaghkunyats mountain range to the east, the Kasakh Valley also marks a zone of transition between the broad Ararat Plain to the south, and the increasing altitude of the highlands to the north as the Lesser Caucasus build into the Caucasus ranges. The Kasakh Valley thus represented in the medieval period (as it does today) one of the primary points of passage in and out of the mountains which separate the plains on which medieval cities such as Dvin, Tbilisi, and Partaw (Barda'a) were situated. Additionally, valleys like the Kasakh were the site of locally situated social life, both for Armenian princes and lords who controlled the region, and people living in towns and villages.

In the 2013 excavation season the MASC Project successfully confirmed the existence of late medieval settlement within an area of visible architectural remains located one kilometer to the south of the contemporary village of Arai-Bazarjugh, and known ethnohistorically as Ambroyi.¹ The 2013 excavations at Ambroyi consisted of a 4 × 4 meter sounding in an area of the site which was designated Hin Bazarjugh (HB) for the purpose of site recording, to distinguish it from coextensive areas of later (seventeenth–eighteenth century) abandoned village contexts. The 2013 sondage (HB1) uncovered an interior space containing a cut bedrock floor and a clay oven or *tonir*; the space appeared to have been deliberately filled and then abandoned, as indicated by a problematic relation between the northwestern wall, floor, and a thick layer of fill.

The expanded excavations in 2014 also provided key data on the nature of architecture and building techniques at medieval Ambroyi. The four excavation units intersected sections of four double-faced walls, three of which were orthogonal to one another and thus judged to be roughly contemporary. These contemporary walls were constructed in the same manner: a layer of dense mudbrick (though “mud-ball” might be more accurate) laid on top of the carved bedrock surface to a variable thickness of about 40 centimeters, followed by courses of basalt stones on either side of a core of smaller stones and earth. The secondary wall, built

on top of the fill within HB1 and HB2, is notable in its lack of a mud foundation — it was laid directly on top of the room fills.

Excavations in the 2014 season consisted of three 5×5 meter trenches laid out on a grid to the north of the first, and situated so as to clarify architectural and stratigraphic relationships. The first trench (HB2) opened immediately north of the 2013 excavation revealed occupation very similar to that of the previous season, continuing on the other side of the wall feature and most probably constituting an original single occupation space with HB1. Notable finds from this unit included a whole pot (dating to the fourteenth century) and continued expanses of paved and cut bedrock flooring, as well as a fill event contiguous with that in HB1. Significantly, the unified stratigraphy of HB1 and HB2 indicates that the occupation space intersected by these two trenches was not filled and abandoned (as was preliminarily concluded in 2013) but was deliberately filled and packed, transected with a secondary wall, and used in some ongoing capacity.

The other two trenches exposed different types of architecture in the village, which points to the variety of activities that were going on within those village spaces. After exposing a single, chronologically and regionally typical oven in HB1, the discovery of additional ovens was not surprising. But the activity area to the north, intersected by trench HB4, was more intense than the first so-called work space or activity area with a *tonir* oven found in 2013. The exposed area of HB4 contained a number of *tonir* ovens clustered in a single floor. This included not only ovens built on top of and inside other ovens once the earlier ovens had ceased to be in use, but also a more elaborate round oven, with a specially built flue system (see figures). This specially built flue system distinguished it from the other ovens found in the excavation area, but further studies of material discovered inside this and the other ovens will be needed to determine whether they were used for different purposes. This southern *tonir* oven consisted of a solid ceramic drum with indentations on its lower rim, which indicated where poles had been used to carry it from its place of firing to its current location. All of the standing *tonirs* had been destroyed in abrupt events of stone collapse from nearby walls. The oven and oven-cluster in HB4 were accompanied by nearby “work stations”: pits of various sizes and depths dug into the bedrock floor. While one bell-shaped pit was more than 2 meters deep and was almost certainly for storage, some of the pits were quite shallow and may have been constructed for the different activities that took place in this space.

Co-extensive and eastward from this activity area of nested ovens, trench HB3 intersected an area used for storage and perhaps other forms of work. This area consisted of a narrow pavement abutting one of the thick double-faced walls which enclose the space. A bell-shaped pit, carved from the bedrock, was installed in the center of the pavement and integrated into it using stone corbelling. Based on contemporary comparanda from eastern Turkey, it is speculated that this pit was used for grain storage.² This is also suggested by the paving stones found covering the floor of this area and the stone storage cover of the pit. The flagstones would have protected the pit from any type of water damage seeping from the surface into the large pit, which would have been particularly useful if this area was not roofed. The rather heavy flagstone cover of the pit argued that it was probably not opened particularly frequently. Naturally, this did not protect the storage items in the pit against any sort of rising groundwater and when it was excavated, the pit was filled with water due to changes in water levels since the medieval period.

During the 2014 season, soil samples were taken from numerous contexts within the village exposures and floated for macrobotanical analysis. Sampled contexts included mud wall

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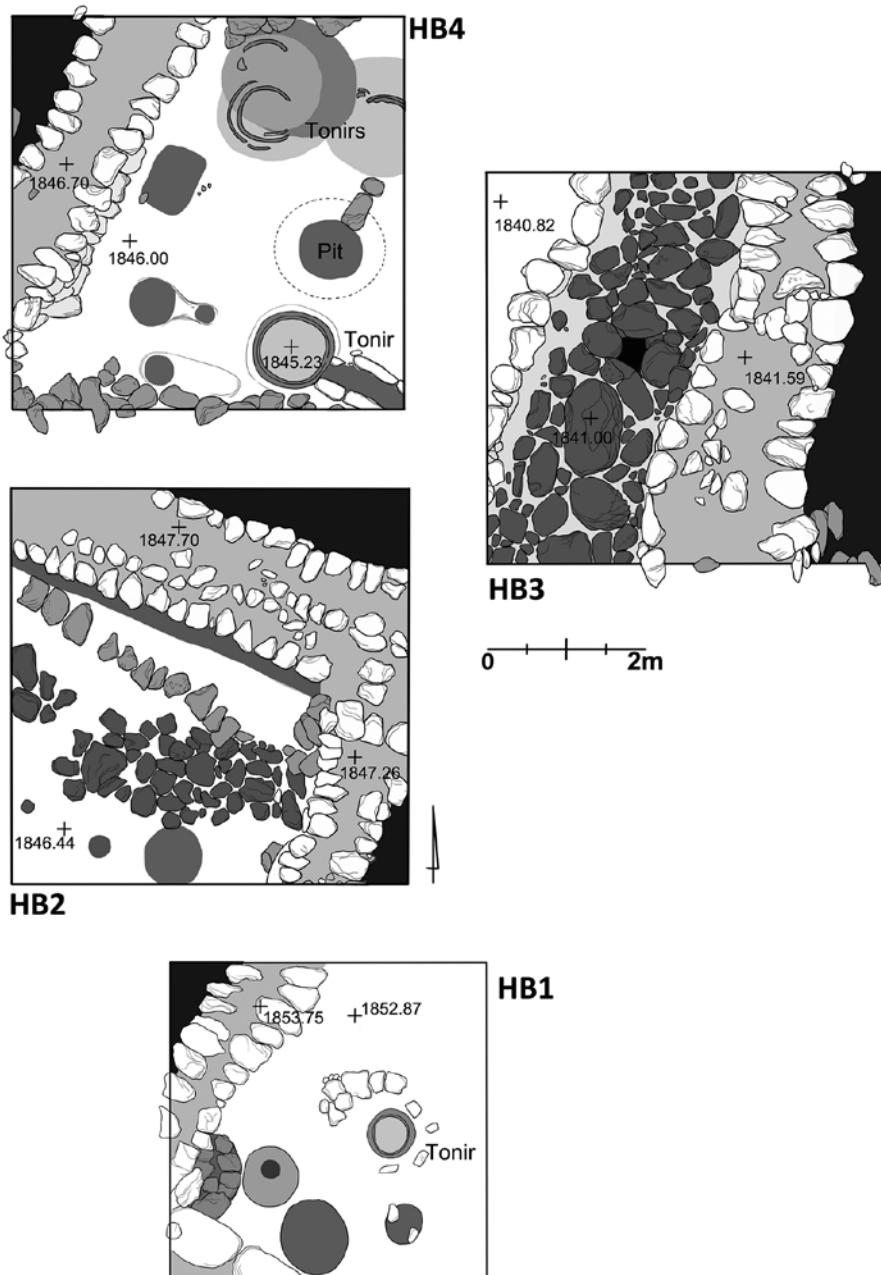


Figure 1. Plan showing total area excavated at Ambroyi, including 2013 (HB1) and 2014 seasons



Figure 2. Completed excavations in HB2 photographed from the west, showing bedrock and paved flooring and primary (left) and secondary (upper right) walls



Figure 3. Completed excavation of HB3 photographed from the north. Note the bell-shaped pit opening to the right of center trench, covered with a stone lid

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Figure 4. Completed excavations of HB4, photographed from the west

foundations, pre-floor deposits, pit contents, and the ashy layers within *tonirs*. The 7-liter samples were floated in the field by K. Franklin and transferred to the archaeobotanical lab of Dr. J. McCorriston at the Ohio State University for qualitative and comparative analysis. Ultimately these macrobotanical remains should contribute to the limited archaeobotanical research done in this region (Anatolia³ and the South Caucasus⁴) for the late medieval period. Limited faunal remains were also collected and submitted for diagnostic analysis. The faunal remains were badly preserved, however, probably due to the chemistry of the soil. Therefore, this will make it difficult to reconstruct the animal remains from the site but some insights should be possible.

As in the 2013 season, the HB2, HB3, and HB4 excavated areas yielded an assemblage of ceramics, consisting primarily of red wares, which dates to the late medieval period (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries AD). The red ware assemblage includes unglazed wares (including red-slipped, applique, and stamped decorated ceramics) as well as an assortment of monochrome and polychrome sgraffiato glazed wares, primarily bowls. The ceramics are currently undergoing analysis but from a preliminary assessment a few observations are possible. The range of ware types within the relatively small exposure of the excavations is quite interesting, including both coarse-ware pans and trays as well as glazed dishes. In addition, a few of the more expensive stone-paste ceramic fragments were also found, arguing that some luxury wares imported from outside the village were also available. Secondly, the formal array recovered in 2014 contributed to the assessment that the red-ware assemblage at Ambroyi is closely comparable not only to other contemporary assemblages in Armenia and eastern Turkey, but also more acutely to the red-ware assemblage recovered from the

adjacent Arai-Bazarjugh caravanatun in 2011.⁵ Ongoing work with this assemblage is directed at tracing regional and temporal relationships not only in ceramic production but also in the implications for cuisine practices in the South Caucasus and adjoining regions.

More fragments of dark blue glass bracelets were found in the course of the excavations as they had been in 2013. These bracelets are of a type which is commonly found throughout the Middle East as well as more locally in Armenia itself. These bracelet fragments were found in the courtyard around the ovens and activity area in HB4, which suggests that they were broken in the course of conducting domestic activities. Very few other pieces of glass were found in the course of the excavations, suggesting that glass vessels were not in common use in the parts of the site that have been excavated. That is not to say that they might not have been used elsewhere, but were not used in the activity areas that the excavations had uncovered. The other possibility is that glass items, other than bracelets, were not in use at the village itself.

Further evidence of economic activities of the village came from the presence of two very abraded coins. These coins, which had been identified by Dr. Armine Zohrabyan of the State History Museum of Armenia as being local coins dating to the early thirteenth century, suggests that the village was at least partially monetized and the villagers used coinage in some transactions. Previous publications of coinage from Armenia have focused on coins excavated from cities,⁶ meaning that these coins, despite their condition, are important evidence of coin circulation in the countryside of medieval Armenia.

Discussion

Ongoing analysis and exploration of the datasets from Ambroyi are focused not only on how these assemblages speak to the content of “daily life” within this village locale, but also on the ways in which the Ambroyi data contributes to a preliminary problematization of the role “the village” has long played in constructions of the medieval South Caucasus and the Near East more generally. Firstly, the Ambroyi data suggest that some of the work of craft production, which was historically presumed to have been exclusively located in urban centers, was practiced within local, village contexts. Secondly, rather than acting as a pastoral backdrop to social life centered elsewhere, the inhabitants of Ambroyi apparently consumed goods (and attendant material practices) such as glazed pottery in connection with towns and cities — and also participated in the practices of travel along the mountain roads.

Notes

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¹ F. Babayan, K. Franklin, and T. Vorderstrasse, “Preliminary Excavations at Ambroyi Village, Armenia: A House on the Silk Road.” *Oriental Institute 2013–2014 Annual Report*, edited by Gil Stein, pp. 12–21.

² S. Redford, *The Archaeology of the Frontier in the Medieval Near East: Excavations at Gritille, Turkey*. Philadelphia: University Museum Publications, University of Pennsylvania for Archaeological Institute of America, 1998, p. 68.

³ Studies of paleobotanical remains in eastern Turkey include, N. F. Miller, “The Crusader Period Fortress: Some Archaeobotanical Samples from Medieval Gritille,” *Anatolica* 18 (1992): 87–99; N. F. Miller, “Patterns of Agriculture and Land Use at Medieval Gritille,” in *The Archaeology of the Frontier in the Medieval Near East: Excavations at Gritille, Turkey*, by S. Redford, pp. 211–52 (Philadelphia: University Museum Publications, University of Pennsylvania for Archaeological Institute of America, 1998); E. Oybak

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⁴ E. Kvavadze, L. Rukhadze, V. Nikolaishvili, and L. Murnladze, “Botanical and Zoological Remains from an Early Medieval Grave at Tsitsamuri, Georgia,” *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 17 (2008): 217–24; A. Smith, T. Bagoyan, I. Gabrielyan, R. Pinhasi, and B. Gasparyan, “Late Chalcolithic and Medieval Archaeobotanical Remains from Areni-1 (Birds’ Cave), Armenia,” in *Stone Age of Armenia: A Guide-Book to the Stone Age Archaeology in the Republic of Armenia*, edited by B. Gasparyan and M. Arimura, pp. 233–60 (Kanazawa: JSPS-Bilateral Joint Research Project. Center for Cultural Resource Studies, Kanazawa University, Japan 2014).

⁵ K. Franklin, “This World Is an Inn”: Cosmopolitanism and Caravan Trade in Late Medieval Armenia. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago Department of Anthropology, 2014.

⁶ K. Mousheghian, A. Mousheghian, and G. Depeyrot, *History and Coin Finds in Armenia: Coins from Ani, Capital of Armenia*. Collection Moneta 21. Wetteren: Moneta; idem, *History and Coin Finds in Armenia: Coins from Duin, Capital of Armenia* (Collection Moneta 18. Wetteren: Moneta, 2000); idem, *History and Coin Finds in Armenia: Coins from Garni* (Collection Moneta 20. Wetteren: Moneta, 2001).
