



Reviving Ara the Handsome Exploring the Protohistoric, Uartian, Orontid, and Medieval Armenian Heritage of Aralesk/ Kalecik in Van, Turkey

Roberto Dan

ISMEO - The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, Italia;
Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Italia

Abstract This article examines the archaeological site of Aralesk/Kalecik, in the Van plain (eastern Turkey), traditionally linked to Queen Semiramis. Excavated in the 1940s by an American mission, the site poses interpretative challenges. It was likely a fortified outpost controlling the northern access to the Uartian capital and shows signs of occupation during the Orontid/Achaemenid periods. The article also considers nearby evidence from protohistoric and historic phases, stressing the need for further investigation and protection of the site's endangered remains.

Keywords Uartu. Early Bronze Age. Fortress. Inscriptions. Van Fortress.

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1 Introduction

One of the most intriguing sites in the Van plain is the small fortress of Aralesk/Kalecik, built on an imposing rocky promontory approximately 4.6 km north of the Van rock [fig. 1]. The village of Aralesk/Kalecik and its promontory are inextricably linked to Armenian mythological tradition and the legend of Semiramis, the legendary queen whose actions are symbolically connected to Urartian antiquities, particularly the founding of Van. The site also holds significance for the pioneering period of investigations into the archaeology of the Bia/Urartu state. It was explored during two seasons by an American expedition just before the outbreak of World War II. However, much of the documentation produced during this mission has been lost or mixed with records from contemporary excavations at the Van rock and the site of Tilkitepe, leading to considerable confusion in interpreting the occupation phases of these sites. Aralesk/Kalecik was particularly important during the Urartian period as it guarded the northern approach to the capital [fig. 2]¹ and formed part of a systematic fortification project securing all access routes to the city, constructed between the second half of the ninth century and the early eighth century BCE² [fig. 3]. The site, however, appears to have been occupied as early as the Protohistoric Period, during the Early Bronze Age, and later during the period when the Armenian Highland became part of the Achaemenid Empire under the local Orontid dynasty, and during several stages of the Middle Age. The data used to reconstruct the site's occupation chronology remain largely uncertain and are critically discussed in this text. Both the site and, more broadly, the entire Van plain are under constant threat from the relentless expansion of the modern city. Continuous construction has already destroyed or endangered much of this extraordinary area and its archaeological remains. The Aralesk/Kalecik promontory and the archaeological mound at its base are themselves threatened by new building projects.

I would first like to express my gratitude to Prof. Mirjo Salvini for the opportunity to visit the site of Aralesk/Kalecik alongside him, one of the many sites we explored together, and for the invaluable discussions on Urartian studies, both in the field and within the rooms of the Anatolian section of ICEVO-CNR. I would also like to extend my thanks to my friends and colleagues Bülent Genç and Kenan Işık, with whom I had the chance to engage in extensive conversations about Urartian sites in the Van region. Special thanks are also due to Onofrio Gasparro for his valuable suggestions on the dating of Armenian Khatchkars. All images reproduced in this contribution were created by the author, except where otherwise indicated. The images of the various sites were taken in 2008 and 2009.

1 Lehmann-Haupt 1931, 622-3; Burney 1957, 40; Çilingiroğlu 1994, 52.

2 On this ring of fortifications, see Dan 2014 and Dan 2025. For the Urartian control of the Van plain, including the fortress of Aralesk/Kalecik, see Dan, Salaris 2022.

Today, virtually nothing remains of the ancient mudbrick village visible in archival images [fig. 4]. A modern cemetery lies just a few dozen metres west of the site, surrounded by newly constructed residential complexes. Furthermore, other medieval remains are progressively disappearing, such as a recently destroyed Armenian medieval cemetery. This contribution represents the first systematic publication entirely devoted to the site of Aralesk/Kalecik and the initial attempt to contextualise it within the archaeological landscape of its immediate surroundings, including several burial areas and a puzzling zone marked by the presence of hundreds of small stone stelae. Additionally, historical and chronological considerations will be made regarding these significant findings. In addition to archival material, this study is based on a series of visits conducted by the author to the various sites discussed, carried out over the three-year period between 2008 and 2010.

2 Aralesk/Kalecik: Topographic Variants and Connections with Mythology

We do not know the ancient name of the fortress of Aralesk/Kalecik, as historical sources provide no information on this matter, nor is it possible to hypothesise an association with a toponym not directly connected to the site. The name *Aralesk*, along with its variants *Araleszk*, *Lesk*, *Lezk* and *Avalessk*, is associated with aspects of ancient mythology, which will be discussed shortly. The Turkish-derived name *Kalecik* (literally 'small castle') and its phonetic variations found in the literature (*Kaladjyk*, *Kaladjug*, *Kalehjic*, *Kalatchik*, *Kalachik*, *Kaléjik*, *Kaledshick*) underscore the defensive or fortified character of the site, aligning with its strategic significance across various historical periods.³ These variations reflect linguistic adaptations influenced by Ottoman and modern Turkish usage, layering over earlier nomenclatures. The name *Aralesk* appears to be deeply connected to Armenian mythology. Indeed, the site is considered to be the place where, according to folk etymological legend, Semiramis is said to have revived her lover Ara from death by licking his wounds

3 Mordtmann 1872, 488-90 (*Kaledshik*); Sayce 1882, 454-60 (*Kalachik*, *Kaléjik*); Sayce 1888, 6; Sayce 1893, 14, 22; Belck 1893, 78 (*Kaladschik*); Sandalgian 1900, 250-1 (*Kalatchik*); Maspero 1900, 105 (*Kalajik*); Lynch 1901, ii.38, 112 (*Kalajik*); Marr 1915, 1731 (*Laza*, *Lēzoy*, *Lesk*, *Kaladjuk*); Lehmann-Haupt 1928-35, 22, pl. XLII (*Aralesk*, *Kaladjyk*); Meščaninov 1931-32, 263-6 (*Lesk*, *Kaladjug*); Piotrovskij 1959, 51, 105 (*Kaladjik*, *Araleszk*); Melikišvili 1960, 122-3, 272 (*Lesk*); König 1955-57, 2, 17 (*Aralesk*, *Lesk*, *Kaladjyk*); Harutyunyan 2001, 17-18, 205 (*Lesk*); Salvini 2008, 107, Salvini 2018, 41-4, CTU A 2-1 (*Aralesk*, *Lesk*, *Kalecik*).

(Thomson 2006, I.15).⁴ The name Aralesk is interpreted through folk etymology as being composed of *Ara* and a derivative of *lezel* which mean 'to lick' (Lehmann-Haupt 1926, 5*). The term *Arlez*, or Armenian *aralez*, *aralezk'* or *yaralez*, refers to a supernatural creature, with uncertain etymology. The *Arlez* were believed to have brought the dead Ara back to life by licking his body. The fifth-century writer Eznik Kolbac'i described the *Arlez* as a type of dog, and Movsēs Xorenac'i recorded a legend where a dog saved a prince Sanatruk and his nurse in a snowstorm. In the tenth century, T'ovma Arcruni mentioned a village where the legend of Ara's resurrection by the *Arlez* was recited. Some scholars suggest the legend may originate from Assyria, where the god Marduk, associated with resurrection, was also known as 'lord of the dogs'. The *Arlez* may also be linked to ancient Asianic legends, particularly that of Attis (Ara), and viewed as a Zoroastrian spirit-dog associated with funeral rites. Even in Christian times, Armenians revered dogs, and some continued to worship dogs during religious observances, as noted by Armenian and Byzantine writers (Russell 1986, 412).⁵ The only mention of the place where Ara's attempted resurrection occurred is found in the text of T'ovma Arcruni, where it is stated that the village was called *Lezu*, which would literally mean 'tongue'. The issue, however, lies in the historian's description, which places the village on the opposite bank relative to the current location of Aralesk/Kalecik. Furthermore, the discrepancies do not end there: according to T'ovma Arcruni, Ara was healed in that location, whereas Movsēs Xorenac'i recounts that Semiramis was unable to resurrect him (Thomson 2006, I.15). In any case, as with other places described by Moses of Chorene, it is interesting to underline how there seems to have been a direct association between locations from Armenian mythology, particularly those connected to Semiramis, and places of the ancient Urartian state (Belck, Lehmann 1895, 605-6). The attribution of these works to Semiramis is consistent with a literary *topos*, widespread since the Hellenistic period throughout Greece,⁶ which portrays her as the archetypal queen-builder. Semiramis, a legendary figure of great power and ingenuity, was celebrated for her architectural feats in numerous ancient stories. The works attributed to her were admired in many regions of Asia, reflecting her prestige and reputation as a symbol of power and skill. This literary *topos* helped shape the image of Semiramis as a central figure in ancient mythology and history, whose name became associated with remarkable architectural

⁴ On the cult of Ara the Handsome, see the seminal work by Kapantsyan (1945).

⁵ See Aiello's detailed study (1978) on the Armenian deities known as *Arlez*. On this topic, see also Areshian 2006, 292.

⁶ Diod. Sic. 2.96-102; Str. 11.14.8; 12.3.37; 16.1.2; Plin. HN 6.31.

and civil achievements. This association suggests that mythical and historical landscapes may have overlapped, with mythological narratives intertwining with real-world locations that held political, cultural, and military significance during the Urartian period. The connection between Semiramis and Urartian sites like Aralesk/Kalecik could reflect the enduring influence of Urartian monuments and their symbolism in later Armenian traditions, reinforcing the continuity of cultural and mythological ideas through successive eras.

3 History of Studies

The site of Aralesk/Kalecik was among the first to be visited as part of the journey that marked the beginning of archaeological research in the field of Urartology. An inscription from the site (Inscription XXXVI = CTU A 2-1) called Kalatchik was seen and copied by Friedrich Eduard Schulz during the summer of 1827 [fig. 3A-C]. It was inscribed on a column base that had been repurposed as an altar stone in a recently constructed church within the village. Regarding this, Schulz provides the following intriguing details:

Sur les rochers au nord de la ville je n'ai trouvé aucune trace d'un monument antique. Un roc bien escarpé, isolé et de forme pyramidale, tout près du village arménien de Kalatchik, qui porte aujourd'hui sur son sommet une petite église, est regardé dans le pays comme un endroit consacré, dans la plus haute antiquité, au culte des divinités. Il y avait là, dit la tradition, un temple et une idole fort célèbres, que le christianisme a fait disparaître jusqu'à la moindre trace. Tout près de ce rocher on m'a indiqué un endroit où l'on a trouvé, il y a quelques années, sous la terre, une grande pierre que l'on a transportée dans l'église nouvellement construite du village, où l'on s'en sert de pierre d'autel. C'est un grès rougeâtre, rond et travaillé comme une pierre à moulin. Il a un diamètre de deux pieds et demi sur six pouces de hauteur. Sa partie supérieure et celle d'en bas sont unies et sans inscriptions, mais sur le bord elle est entourée d'un double rang de caractères cunéiformes, gâtés en plusieurs endroits par des croix que l'on y a gravées il n'y a pas encore longtemps. Les deux lignes de cette inscription, comme celles de la pierre ronde de Schouschanz, sont séparées l'une de l'autre par un vide de dix-huit lignes. (Schulz 1840, 320-1)⁷

The rock of Aralesk/Kalecik is mentioned by Lynch, who, however,

⁷ On this inscription, see also Saint-Martin 1828, 187-8.

was probably unaware of the existence of the site (Lynch 1901, 112). The territories around the site discussed in this contribution were, however, defined as follows:

On the other hand, the alluvial plain which is confined by Mount Varag upon the east, and which may be said to extend from a headland near the village of Kalajik on the north to the high ground just north of Artemid upon the south, affords a considerable area of rich soil, capable under irrigation of producing the choicest fruits of the earth. (Lynch 1901, 38)

Many years later, in 1938-39, the site called in that occasion Kalehjic, was excavated by an American mission led by the Lake couple, Kirsopp and Silva, as part of a broader exploration program in the Van region. This program also included excavations at the Van Fortress and Tilkitepe, but these initiatives were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II.⁸ These excavations will be discussed in more detail in a specific section of this text. Subsequently, the site was visited between mid-June and mid-August 1956 by Charles A. Burney during his pioneering survey around Lake Van. The site is briefly described as follows:

This small stronghold overlooked the approach to Van from the north, along the shore of the lake. It stands on an impregnable pinnacle, overhanging on two sides. On the S.W. side a small ravine allows a fairly easy ascent, but the defenders blocked this path with a masonry revetment wall. (Burney 1957, 45)

The site (No. 201), unlike others, was not drawn, and only three ceramic fragments were collected from the surface. These fragments were analysed in the volume by H.F. Russell, which is based on the ceramic materials collected by Burney (Russell 1980, 50-1, 127). In 1964, near the village, traces of a Urartian cemetery were discovered during the construction of the road connecting Van with Ağrı (Öğün, Bilgiç 1973, 14). This was later discovered to be a vast burial area known as Altintepe, excavated by V. Sevin between 1997 and 1999. However, it will not be analysed in this text, as it is more closely related

⁸ Lake, Lake 1939; Lake 1940; Pfeiffer 1940; Otto 1941-44, 87-95; Korfmann 1977; 1982.

to the capital than to the site of Aralesk/Kalecik.⁹ In 1972-73, Veli Sevin explored a series of rock-cut tombs, which he later published in 1986. One of these tombs was located near Aralesk/Kalecik. It was a rock-cut tomb, which Sevin believed to date to the Urartian period, identified within a rocky complex approximately 500 m from the fortress. This burial was considered the first rock-cut chamber in the Van plain, following those already known in Van fortress (Sevin 1986, 336-9, figs 21-4). Later, the site was included in the *Topographische Karte von Urartu*, a volume that compiled known Urartian sites up to that point in the form of a gazetteer. The site, listed as number 5 among the Urartian sites in Turkey, was described as: “Burganlage mit Treppentunnel und Inschrift des Išpuini (9. Jahrh. V. Chr.) und Argišti I (Anfang 8. Jahrh. V. Chr.), Nekropole” (Kleiss, Hauptmann 1976, 10). Near the fortress lies an important necropolis, commonly referred to as Kalecik. Since at least 1998, it had become a target for illegal excavations. Scientific investigations of the site were first conducted between 2003 and 2004 by the Archaeology Department of Van Yüzüncü Yıl University. These preliminary studies provided sufficient data to justify formal excavation efforts. Consequently, in 2004, archaeological excavations commenced under the joint direction of the Van Museum Directorate and the university's archaeology department, with scientific coordination by Rafet Çavuşoğlu. The excavations, which continued until 2007, identified a total of 25 underground chamber tombs. Among these, 24 had been looted by illegal excavators, and one remained unopened (Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2012).¹⁰ This necropolis is discussed in detail in a dedicated section of this text. In more recent years, the site has been revisited by Aynur Özfirat as part of an extensive survey program covering the

9 During the construction of the road from Ağrı to Van, several tombs were destroyed around 8 km before Van and 2 km south of Kalecik in 1965 (in 1964 according to Ögün, Bilgiç 1973, 14, and in 1965 according to Ögün 1978, 672). Shortly afterward, emergency excavations were carried out in an area where a series of burials had been looted by inhabitants of the nearby village. Of the three typically Urartian urn burials identified, only one was intact, containing burnt bone remains and a bronze ring inside the vessel. These cremation burials were compared to tombs excavated by Petrov in 1914 near Iğdır. At a distance of 1 m, an inhumation burial was also found, consisting of a skeleton buried in a pit and covered with a layer of gravel 0.08-0.10 m thick. A 0.25 m thick layer of sand covered the body, with a large stone measuring 1.50 m placed on top. At the head of the skeleton, two plain bowls and a footed bowl were recovered. Inside one of these bowls was a necklace, a large glass bead, and typical Urartian bronze pins (Ögün, Bilgiç 1973, 14; Ögün 1978, 672-3; Sevin 2012, 125). Several years later, it was understood that these tombs were part of a vast necropolis known as Altintepe, where excavations documented numerous tombs, nearly all of which were damaged. A total of 38 tombs were investigated and documented, including 33 rock-cut chamber tombs, two inhumations, and three urn cremations (Sevin, Özfirat 2001, 179-83; Sevin 2012, 107-34).

10 For this site, see the specific paragraph within this same text.

Van region and its surrounding areas. The site was catalogued with the code O70/9. These surveys identified the presence of pottery from the Middle Bronze Age, as well as from the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age pottery, and Late Iron Ages.¹¹ As part of the epigraphic research conducted by CNR-ICEVO under the direction of Prof. Mirjo Salvini, the author of this contribution had the opportunity to visit the site of Kalecik multiple times over the three-year period from 2008 to 2010. During these visits, photographic material and measurements were collected, as presented in this text, covering the fortress, the necropolis, and the area of the small stelae. The site was visited in 2017 as part of a research project focused on the study of road routes during the Urartian period (Gokce, Genc, Kacmaz Levent 2019, 328-9, 332, fig. 1).

4 The Urartian Inscriptions (CTU A 2-1 and A 8-41)

Two inscriptions originate from the site of Aralesk/Kalecik [fig. 5]. The first is a column base with a brief inscription of King Išpuini, son of Sarduri (CTU A 2-1), which is integral to the beginnings of Urartian studies, having been first seen in 1827 by Friedrich Eduard Schulz (Schulz XXXVI) [fig. 5A-C]. Schulz provided information on the original discovery and the inscription's finding. In fact, it seems that the stone was found several years before 1827, buried not far from the rock of Aralesk/Kalecik, and was later transported to the newly built church in the village, where it was used as an altar stone. It has been described as a reddish sandstone, round and shaped like a millstone, with a diameter of two and a half feet and a height of six inches (approximately 76 cm in diameter and 15 cm in height). Its upper and lower parts are smooth and without inscriptions, but along its edge, it is surrounded by a double row of cuneiform characters, damaged in several places by crosses carved after the discovery (Schulz 1840, 320-1). The information reported by Schulz was subsequently referenced in numerous studies on Urartian inscriptions that followed.¹² At an unspecified time, likely in connection with the destruction of the church where the stone was kept, the inscription was lost, and its fate remains unknown. However, Lehmann-Haupt was able to see it in the early twentieth century and made a cast of

¹¹ Özfirat 2009a, 347, 349, 354, 359; Özfirat 2009b, 215, 217, 226; 2022, 561, figs 1, 11f.

¹² On this inscription, see Mordtmann 1872, 488-90, Inscr. 2; Sayce 1882, 454-60 Inscr. no. 3; Sayce 1888, 6; Sayce 1893, 14, 22; Sandalgian 1900, 250-1, Inscr. no. 53-53*; Lehmann-Haupt 1928-35, 22, pl. XLII, CICH 10; Melikišvili 1960, 122-3 UKN 17; König 1955-57, 2, HchI 5a; Harutyunyan 2001, 17-8 KUKN 19; Salvini 2008, 107, CTU A 2-1; Salvini 2018, 41-4, CTU A 2-1.

it, which he published in his corpus [fig. 5D] (Lehmann-Haupt 1928-35, pl. XLII). The short inscription repeats the same text twice on two overlapping lines:

(1) ^miš-pu-ú-i-ni-iš ^msa₅-duri(BĀD)-ḫi-ni-še bur-ga-na-ni ši-di-ši-tú-ni ^hal-di-ni-ni uš-gi-ni ^miš-pu-ú-i-ni-iš mdsar₅-duri(BĀD)-ḫi-ni-še É i-ni ši-di-ši-tú-ni i-nu-^rki' [ba]-^rdu'-si-ni [ú-i] gi-e-i ši-da-^rŠE?'

(1) Išpuini, son of Sarduri, built a *burganani*. Through the help(?) of the god Ḫaldi, Išpuini, son of Sarduri, built this building. [No] thing had been built to this [per]fection (before).

(2) ^miš-pu-ú-i-ni-iš ^msa₅-duri(BĀD)-ḫi-ni-še bur-ga-na-ni ši-di-ši-tú-ni ^hal-di-ni-ni uš-gi-ni ^miš-pu-ú-i-ni-iš mdsar₅-duri(BĀD)-ḫi-ni-še É i-ni ši-di-ši-tú-ni i-nu-ki ba-du-si-ni be-^rdi' ú-i ^rgi'-e-i ši-da-ŠE?

(2) Išpuini, son of Sarduri, built a *burganani*. Through the help (?) of the god Ḫaldi, Išpuini, son of Sarduri, built this building. Nothing had been built to this perfection (before). (Author's transl.)

The text refers to the construction of a structure called *burganani*, a term yet to be fully interpreted, which was likely situated at the foot of the Kalecik fortress, according to the information provided by Schulz. The interpretation of the term *burganani* has been debated for over a century. Sandalgian suggested that the term signifies a 'high place' (*lieu-élevé*), possibly denoting a site of sacred or religious nature (Sandalgian 1900, 251); in his 1938 study, Adontz analyses the term *burganani* found in the Urartian inscription of Aralesk/Kalecik and identifies it as meaning "fortress-tower" or "palace". The author highlights the striking coincidence between the Urartian term *burgana* and the Armenian *burgn* (gen. *burgn*), already attested as the translation of *pyrgos* in Classical Armenian biblical texts. According to Adontz, this linguistic correspondence suggests not only a direct contact between the Urartian and Armenian languages, but also a possible Asiatic origin of the term, which may have spread into the Greek (*pyrgos*) and Italic (*burgus*) worlds – possibly even through Etruscan mediation (Adontz 1939, 465). Melikishvili and Harutyunyan, on the other hand, interpreted *burganani* as possibly referring to a fortress (*krepost'* крепость) (Melikishvili 1960, 123; Harutyunyan 2001, 17). According to König, the term *burganani* possibly referred to a grazing district or pasture area (*Weidebezirk*) or a sheepfold or livestock pen (*Hürde*) (König 1955-57, 179). According to Balkan, *burganani* referred to an area where animals destined for sacrifice were gathered, or an enclosure for the temple courtyard and the defence of the temple complex (Balkan 1960, 110-12). Yakubovich suggests an etymological comparison with Classical Armenian *brgn*

meaning ‘fortress’ (Yakubovich 2016, 148). Salvini, in his recent corpus, opts to leave the term *burganani* untranslated. The term is attested exclusively during the reign of Iṣpuini (CTU A 2-1; A 2-9A-B), the so-called co-regency between Iṣpuini and Minua (CTU A 3-1; A 3-11), and the reign of Minua alone (CTU A 5-28; A 5-29; A 5-30; A 5-31). The term *burganani* appears in diverse contexts. In some instances, it precedes the planting of trees (CTU A 3-1), while in others, it is linked to the creation of gardens and orchards (CTU A 5-28, A 5-29, A 5-30). Balkan’s hypothesis remains valid: until an excavated structure is found with an *in situ* inscription explicitly referring to its foundation, assigning a definitive meaning to the term will remain impossible (Balkan 1960, 112). The second inscription (CTU A 8-46) is carved on a stone slab that was believed to be lost for a long time but is actually preserved at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, where it is currently stored [fig. 5E-F]. The uncertainty regarding the location of the inscription stems from the information provided by Marr, the first to publish the epigraph, which was later referenced by various scholars. Marr stated that the inscription was cut from the original rock without damaging the text and was transported from Van to Tbilisi by A.A. Florensky. However, according to König, the inscription was not taken to the museum, as it is absent from Tsereteli’s Tbilisi catalogue.¹³ However, Marr also informs us that the slab, considered part of an altar, was later documented by the artist G. Kelchevsky, and a negative print was made for the Caucasian Museum (Marr 1915, 1732). This confirms that before being transported to Moscow, the inscription indeed passed through Georgia. The inscription is said to have been discovered in a small niche in the western wall of the Aralesk/Kalecik site (Marr 1915, 1732; König 1955-57, 17). It remains unclear whether the inscription was carved into a niche in the stone, where the inscription was created, or if the inscription was placed within a stone block embedded in the western fortification wall of the fortress [fig. 10]. After Marr’s initial publication, the inscription has been revisited by many scholars.¹⁴ The inscription, which is rectangular in shape, measures approximately 20 cm in height and 30 cm in width, with a thickness of about 5 cm (Salvini 2008, 367; 2018, 236). However, it is important to note that these are likely approximate measurements due to the carving of the original stone to facilitate its transportation. The area with the inscription measures 12 cm in height and 25.5 cm in width.¹⁵ As correctly pointed out by

13 Marr 1915, 1731-2; Meščaninov 1931-32, 264; König 1955-57, 17.

14 On this inscription, see Meščaninov 1931-32, 263-6; Lehmann-Haupt 1928-35, 128, CICH 114A; König 1955-57, 17, HchI 94; Melikišvili 1960, 172, UKN 153; Harutyunyan 2001, 205, KUKN 183; Salvini 2008, 367; Salvini 2018, 236, CTU A 8-41.

15 Marr 1915, 1732; König 1955-57, 17; Salvini 2008, 367; Salvini 2018, 236.

Meščaninov, it is impossible to determine which Argišti is referred to in this inscription, due to the absence of the patronymic (Meščaninov 1931-32, 264). However, it has almost always been attributed to Argišti (I), son of Minua.¹⁶ According to Salvini, the paleographic aspects, such as the form of the sign -ni, would suggest a dating before the reign of Sarduri (II), son of Argišti, thus attributing it to Argišti (I), son of Minua (Salvini 2018, 236). The brief inscription, which contains some terms that remain untranslatable (*úḫini* and *šua*) and lacks a verb, though it is likely complete, reads as follows:

1 ṁar-gi-iš-ti-še 2 a-li-e 3 i-ni ú-ḫi-ni 4 NA₄.šú-a-i-e

Argišti says: this *uḫini* of *šua*

The significance of this inscription lies primarily in its evidence of construction activities at the site still occurring in the first half of the eighth century BCE.

5 The American Archaeological Excavations in 1938-39

As previously mentioned, the only controlled excavations ever conducted at the site were carried out by the American expedition in 1938-39, under the direction of Kirsopp and Silva Lake.¹⁷ To better understand the site and its chronology, it is necessary to summarise in this section the most significant findings of these investigations.¹⁸ The excavations at Kalecik were undertaken in an effort to identify a site that could be compared with the discoveries at Van Fortress and Tilkitepe, with the aim of establishing a chronological sequence

¹⁶ For example, see König 1955-57, 17; Harutyunyan 2001, 205.

¹⁷ Regarding these excavations, in addition to the literature that will be cited in this paragraph, see Dan 2023, 86, which refers to the issue of the sinking of the *Athenia* during World War II, which led to the loss of much of the documentation from these American excavations.

¹⁸ It is important to note that the materials from the excavations at Van Fortress, Tilkitepe, and Kalecik are believed to have been mixed. In this regard, Korfmann wrote that “it should be noted that the Tilkitepe material is marked with Greek excavation inventory numbers (in letter form), the Kalecik material apparently with Hebrew, and the Van material with Roman ones” (Korfmann 1977, 181; Korfmann 1982, 37, 220). Despite this, some materials remain impossible to separate (Korfmann 1982, 87.8).

for the materials recovered.¹⁹ The site was chosen because the surface was rich in fragments of typically Urartian highly polished red ceramics, as well as other types described as “plain” and “painted buff” (Korfmann 1977, 186-7; Korfmann 1982, 197). In 1938, a trench was initially opened running east-west, measuring 5 m in length and reaching a depth of 8 m on the western side of the rock spur (Lake 1940, 189). At a certain depth, the archaeologists reached Urartian archaeological levels, beneath which they identified a thin layer containing ceramics described as *pre-Urartian* (including *highly glazed black* and *incised grey sherds*). Below this, they encountered a sterile clay and pebble level, interpreted as virgin soil.²⁰ During this campaign, the presence of a cave and a stepped tunnel at the site was also noted.²¹ The archaeologists identified two levels of Urartian ceramics: a later level characterised by *highly burnished red ware* and an earlier one where this ceramic type was mixed with *painted buff ware*, a pattern they had also observed in some levels at Van Fortress (Korfmann 1977, 192; 1982, 198). We will return to this painted pottery later in this text. In 1939, it was decided to continue the work at the trench from 1938, initially by widening it, before attempting to dig deeper into what was initially defined as virgin soil, which, after an additional depth of about 3 m, turned out to indeed be virgin soil. The widening yielded results consistent with those of the previous year. The conclusion of the work on the eastern slope was that there was a fortress-citadel, but no settlement to the west of the rock spur (Korfmann 1977, 192-4; 1982, 199-200). In any case, it is worth noting the discovery of a hearth where a large cooking pot was found resting on a bed of ashes, and beside it, a fragment of a plate, an obsidian knife, and a large number of animal bones. The pottery associated with the hearth has been described

19 Among the reasons for the Kalecik excavations was the verification of data obtained from the excavation conducted by the American mission on the southern side of the Van Rock. Here, 5 m of debris and materials were identified, related to the destruction of the city of Van during the events of World War I. In the subsequent 2 m, levels with highly burnished red pottery, typically Urartian, were identified, but no building remains were found. At approximately 8 m in depth, sandy virgin soil was encountered (Korfmann 1977, 185-6). These pieces of information are very interesting, although limited. On one hand, they seem to suggest that the medieval settlement might rest directly on Urartian layers, while on the other, the constraints imposed by the small size of the trench prevent excluding the possibility that the ancient settlement of the Urartian capital lies directly beneath the medieval city of Van.

20 The letters from Lake are inconsistent with each other. At the end of the 1938 campaign, it was clearly stated that the depth reached led to the decision to stop the work, despite not having reached the bedrock, with the plan to move the trench the following year (Korfmann 1977, 187-8). However, in the letters at the beginning of the 1939 expedition, it is clearly stated that a level was reached that could have been virgin soil (Korfmann 1977, 192; 1982, 198).

21 Lake 1940, 189; Korfmann 1977, 187-9, 192; 1982, 198.

as plant or grit-tempered, handmade, usually brown or black, with a well-burnished slip (Korfmann 1982, 198). In connection with this hearth, two skeletons were found, one of an adult, probably female, and a child, seemingly crushed by the collapse of a stone wall. A fragment of an obsidian knife buried in the forehead of the mother suggests that it was probably driven into the skull by the fall of the wall. Deeper in the trench, the remains of a stone foundation of a dwelling were found (Korfmann 1982, 199), which was later extensively exposed. Here, two earthen floors were found, spaced about 45 cm (18 inches) apart, with a number of less well-laid floors in the middle. The dwelling was initially dated to the Chalcolithic based on ceramic materials (Korfmann 1982, 200), but it was later determined to belong to the Early Bronze Age (Kura-Araxes culture). In the final part of the second and last excavation season, the work focused on the excavation of the stepped rock-cut tunnel that started at the summit of the site. Initially, it was correctly interpreted as a cistern, but later reinterpreted as an entrance to the citadel. However, at the end of the excavation, once the virgin rock was reached and debris and ceramics were removed, it was reinterpreted once again as a cistern. Two ventilation windows for light entry were identified, which were used to dispose of excavation materials and accelerate processes. At the end of the excavation, it was concluded that, given the presence of modern materials in the terminal section of the tunnel, it had been in use until just a few years before, likely until World War I, when many of the buildings at the top of the rock were destroyed (Korfmann 1977, 198-200; 1982, 201-2). Regarding the results of these excavations and the ongoing issues concerning the chronology produced by the excavations at the site, refer to the specific paragraph on the chronology of the site in this same text.

Summary of the Stratigraphy of Kalecik

1. From 1 to 7 m deep, modern materials were mixed with ancient ones.
2. At a depth of 7 to 8 m, primarily red burnished ceramics were found alongside kitchenware.
3. At 8 m, painted yellow-brown pottery became almost as abundant as the fine red ceramics.
4. Below 8 m, at unspecified depths, layers from the Early Bronze Age were uncovered.

6 The Archaeological Evidence

The term Kalecik refers to a series of archaeological features located near the village known as Aralesk/Kalecik. All these features, which are clearly interconnected across various periods, are presented in the following paragraphs of this text. They include the rocky outcrop and surrounding areas excavated by the American mission, which hosted the Urartian fortification and other structures, as well as the origin of the two inscriptions previously discussed. Additionally, near the outcrop, a rock-cut chamber, a couple of Iron Age cemeteries, and a puzzling area marked by rows of small stelae have been discovered. The medieval archaeological features, particularly the two Armenian churches and the cemetery, are addressed in a dedicated section. All these highly significant archaeological findings are constantly threatened by uncontrolled construction activities, illegal excavations, and the intentional destruction of archaeological evidence, particularly those from the medieval period. Unfortunately, the area of the Kalecik site was selected for the construction of new housing following the devastating earthquake in the Van region in 2011. The table below provides the names, key characteristics, and chronologies of the sites discussed in the text. These will be further discussed in a specific section later. The coordinates of the various areas were collected by the author during surveys conducted in the region between 2008 and 2010.

Table 1 Archaeological Sites in the Aralesk/Kalecik Area

Site name	Site type	Chronology	Coordinates	State of conservation
Aralesk/ Kalecik	Fort	MIA/Urartu, MA	38°32'45.56"N 43°20'15.68"E	Damaged by new constructions, vandalism
Aralesk/ Kalecik	Settlement	EBA, MIA/ Urartu, MA	38°32'44.51"N 43°20'13.79"E	Damaged by soil removal, illegal excavations and new constructions
Aralesk/ Kalecik	Village	MA	38°32'44.51"N 43°20'13.79"E	Completely destroyed
Surb Amenap'rkich'	Chapel	MA	38°32'45.28"N 43°20'15.98"E	Completely destroyed
Surb Mariam Astvatsatsin	Church	MA	38°32'44.64"N 43°20'17.19"E	Completely destroyed
Kalecik	Rock-cut tomb	MIA/Urartu?	?	Unknown

Site name	Site type	Chronology	Coordinates	State of conservation
Kalecik	Cemetery	MIA/Urartu	38°33'21.11"N 43°20'55.54"E	Partly damaged by new constructions, illegal excavations
Kalecik	Cemetery	MA	38°32'40.77"N 43°20'33.07"E	Completely destroyed by mechanical machines
Kalecik	Stone Circle-I	Protohistoric?	38°33'24.54"N 43°20'56.72"E	Damaged by agricultural fields and illegal excavations
Kalecik	Stone Circle-II	Protohistoric?	38°33'20.39"N 43°21'4.95"E	Damaged by agricultural fields and illegal excavations
Kalecik	Stone Circle-III	Protohistoric?	38°33'19.61"N 43°21'5.10"E	Damaged by agricultural fields and illegal excavations
Kalecik	Stone Circle-IV	Protohistoric?	38°33'19.30"N 43°21'6.47"E	Damaged by agricultural fields and illegal excavations
Kalecik	Stelae area	Protohistoric?	38°33'20.13"N 43°21'7.71"E	Damaged by agricultural fields and illegal excavations



Figure 1 Satellite image showing the archaeological sites mentioned in the text (satellite base from Google Earth 2024)



Figure 2 View of the capital of Urartu, the Van-Tuspa fortress, seen from the summit of the Aralesk/Kalecik rock in 2008. Photo by the Author

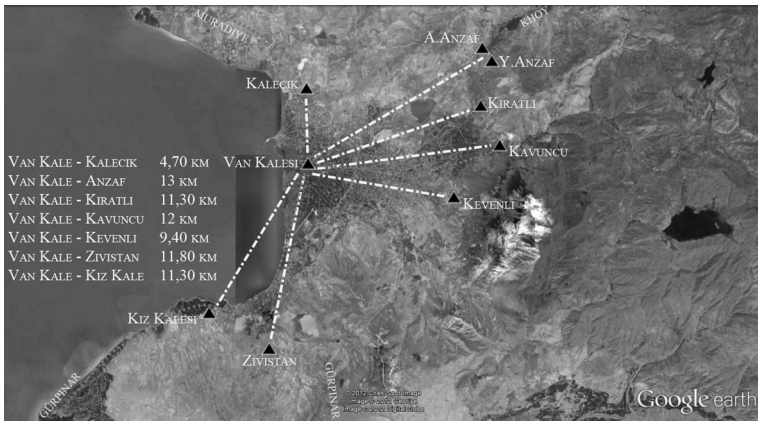


Figure 3 Reconstruction of the ring of fortifications that protected the capital of Urartu, with the aerial distances between it and the eight fortresses that protected it. Photo by the Author



Figure 4 Period image depicting the Aralesk/Kalecik rock from the southwest. Note the chapel, now vanished, on the top of the spur (image available at <https://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van/kaza-of-van/local-characteristics/popular-medicine.html>)

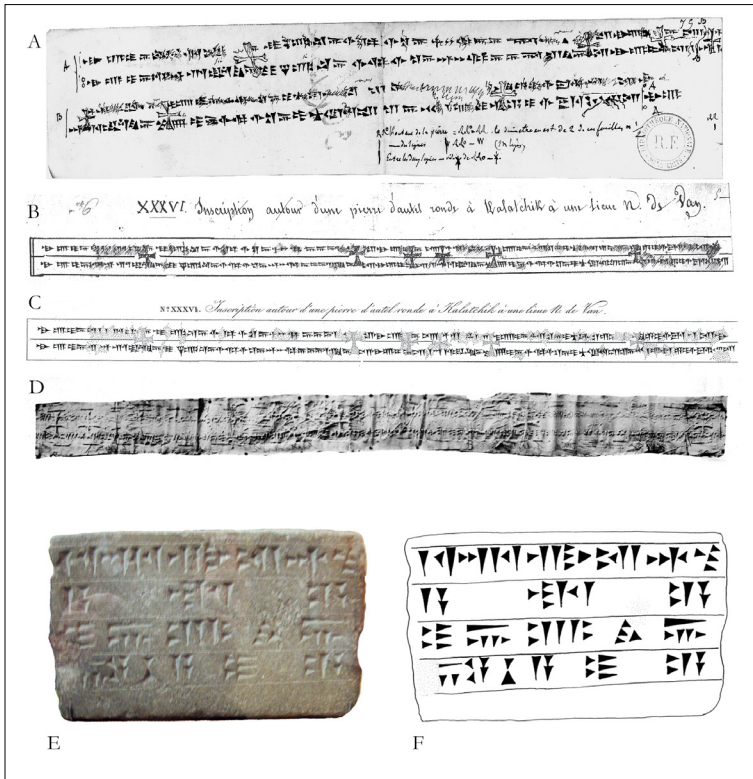


Figure 5 Urartian inscriptions from the Aralesk/Kalecik site. A-D) Base of the column of King Išpuni, son of Sarduri (CTU A 2-1) (A-C are the copies made by Schulz and taken from Salvini 2018, 41-3; D is the cast made by Lehmann-Haupt, from Lehmann-Haupt 1928-35, pl. XLII). E-F) Inscription of Argišti (I), son of Minua (CTU A 8-41) (E, photo courtesy of Mirjo Salvini of the inscription at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow; F, copy by Mirjo Salvini modified by Salvini 2008, 248)

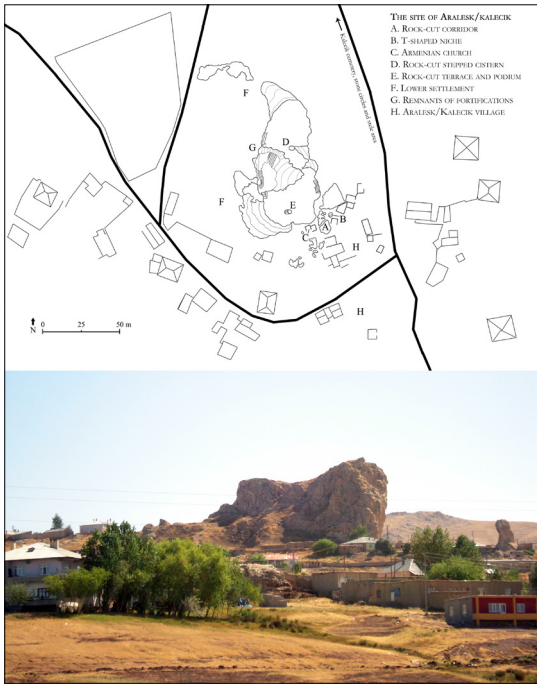


Figure 6
Top, schematic plan of the
Aralesk/Kalecik site with
key features indicated
(adapted after Dan 2010,
fig. 2). Bottom, view of the
Aralesk/Kalecik rock from
the northeast

7 The Fortress on the Rock-Spur and the Surrounding Areas

The small fortress of Kalecik is situated on a prominent rocky promontory²² overlooking the modern village below, approximately 4.6 km north of ̐uşpa in a straight line [figs 4, 6-7]. The promontory is located about 4.5 km west of Ak Köprü (Sinclair 1987, 189) and roughly 800 m north of the D975 Van-Ağrı road. The spur, approximately 25-30 m high, features a single access point on the northwest side, facing the lake.²³ The rocky spur hosting the remains of the fortress measures approximately 90 m along the north-south axis and 60 m along the east-west axis.²⁴ The destruction of many of the site's

22 Coordinates: 38°32'45.63"N 43°20'15.90"E; Elevation: 1750 m. a.s.l. The rocky promontory is located near the modern villages of Kalecik and Iskeleköy (Harta Genel Müdürlüğü 1:200,000, Van Sheet 86).

23 For the investigations conducted by the author of this contribution at the site between 2008 and 2009, see Dan 2010, 49-50, fig. 2.

24 75 × 15 m according to Russell (1980, 127), who was probably referring only to the upper part.

remains dates back to the First World War (Korfmann 1977, 200) and the systematic demolition carried out by the village inhabitants. There is no trace of the deep trench excavated by American archaeologists to the west of the cliff. From the ruins of a possible small Armenian church [fig. 6C], on the southern slopes of the rocky spur, the remains of a rock-cut corridor [fig. 6A] have emerged, which closely resembles those found in the fortresses of Minua at Lower Anzaf, Upper Anzaf, and Kavuncu. This must have been the ancient access to the fortress. Immediately after this corridor, in almost perfect alignment, there is a characteristic T-shaped niche [figs 6B, 8], likely intended to contain urns, similar to those found in large quantities at Van Castle and other sites in Van region.²⁵ The horizontal arm of the niche is 1.92 m long, with a total height of 1.75 m from the ground, and the vertical arm has a width of 0.40 m. The depth of the niche is approximately 0.50 m. Its lower section is oval and carved directly into the bedrock.²⁶ From here, the road runs along the eastern and northern sides of the small rock, leading to its summit; indeed, the western side, the least naturally protected, bears significant traces of rock-cut steps and terraces, and it is here that the actual entrance to the fortress must have been [figs 6G, 9]. This coincides with the presence of the two section of wall still visible [figs 6G, 10]. One is about 1 m long, with three/four layers of stones placed on foundations cut into the rock, allowing us to observe the significant original depth of the wall. Another small section, built between two rocky ridges, is preserved with two courses of stones, but until 1973 it was well-preserved with at least four superimposed courses, as shown in photographs taken by Rudolf Neumann and stored in the archives of the D.A.I. On the western side of the spur, an artificial terrace is visible, closely resembling many found on the summit of Țușpa and at several other Urartian sites. It measures approximately 6 by 3 m. Rather than a cultic terrace, such structures should be considered partially rock-cut and partially masonry-built spaces, whose exact function remains to be determined. Furthermore, the systematic destruction over the years of the structures preserved on the summit of the rock by the inhabitants of the village below has exposed all the characteristic Urartian stepped foundations. At the foot of the rocky spur, there are piles of construction blocks that once belonged to the walls. To the right of the entrance, a rock-cut terrace is partially preserved, though heavily eroded by weathering agents. It measures 11.30 m in length, with a maximum preserved width of 2.80 m; the height of the back wall is about 3 m. The summit of the spur has an approximately

25 On these T-shaped niches in Urartian culture, see Dan forthcoming.

26 On the T-shaped niche of Kalecik, see Dan 2010, 49; Gokce, Genc, Kacmaz Levent 2019, 329, fig. 1.

oval shape, narrowing in the central section along the east-west axis, with a sloping surface descending from south to north. No discernible traces of structures are preserved, but evidence of stonework is visible throughout. At the centre, at the narrowest point of the spur, is located the entrance of a rock-cut stepped tunnel [figs 6D, 11]. This is the only structure visible on the summit of the rock, archaeologically investigated in the 1930s by Kirsopp and Silva Lake (Korfmann 1977, 198, 200). This tunnel has a depth of 19 m and an opening diameter of 2.80×2.55 m (Dan 2010, 50; 2020, 176). It was not possible to visit the interior of the structure due to the erosion of the rock-cut steps, but a previously unidentified window was noted on the eastern side of the rock, which illuminates the deep tunnel. This was also a characteristic feature of Urartian architecture, found in the rock-cut stepped tunnels of Toprakkale and Delibaba.²⁷ At a height of 3.60 m from the water level, a drainage channel has been carved into the rock in the eastern direction. The channel measures 1.30×1.20 m. At the end of the fifteenth step of the tunnel, the interior is 1.70×1.75 m. This section is arched, with a width of 80 cm. The arch was likely needed due to a rock fissure. After the tenth step, there is a levelling on the right side for 15 steps. The drainage channel is 2.5 m long, with a base width of 20-15 cm, a top width of 70 cm, and a depth of 70 cm. The cistern's floor measures 4.10×3.00 m. After 3 m of steps, 8 rows of steps lead to a section 2.60 m long, 50 cm deep, and 15-20 cm wide, consisting of 15 steps. The total number of steps is 40 (Gokce, Genc, Kacmaz Levent 2019, 328-9). This is a well/cistern designed for water supply in case of a siege, likely intended for collecting rainwater. Given that the opening of the well is located at the top of the rocky spur, nearly 20 m high, even more, it is highly unlikely that it could have reached an aquifer (Dan 2010, 50). On the summit of the rock [fig. 12], in the southern terrace overlooking the capital, there is a rock-cut podium accessible via three steps [figs 2, 6E, 13]. In some historical photographs, remnants of ancient walls – possibly Urartian and medieval – are still visible, along with the Armenian chapel that once stood at the summit [fig. 4]. According to the legends, the chapel is said to have been built on the site of a pagan temple, of which no remains are preserved. Of the medieval and late medieval village, characterised by mudbrick houses, virtually nothing remains today, whereas between 2008 and 2010 some ruins were still visible. Traces of a settlement have been identified beneath the ruined village; however, the archaeological investigations were limited. Of all the fortresses built to defend the capital, this is the only one that

27 On the rock-cut stepped tunnels (known in literature with the German terms of *Felstrepptunnel*), with reference to previous literature, see Koroğlu, Danişmaz 2018; Dan 2020.

exclusively exhibits military and territorial control characteristics. It was established as a territorial control station (Belli 1989, 66). It was therefore established as a territorial control station along the route that ran along the eastern shore of Lake Van, connecting the capital with the Muradiye area at the northeastern end of the lake. The entire area is constantly threatened by the construction of new buildings, the removal of archaeological soil on the western side of the site, and the presence of an expanding modern cemetery on the northwestern side of the site.



Figure 7
Top, view of the Aralesk/Kalecik
rock from the south. Bottom,
view from the north, with
the area where the American
mission excavated.
Photo by the Author

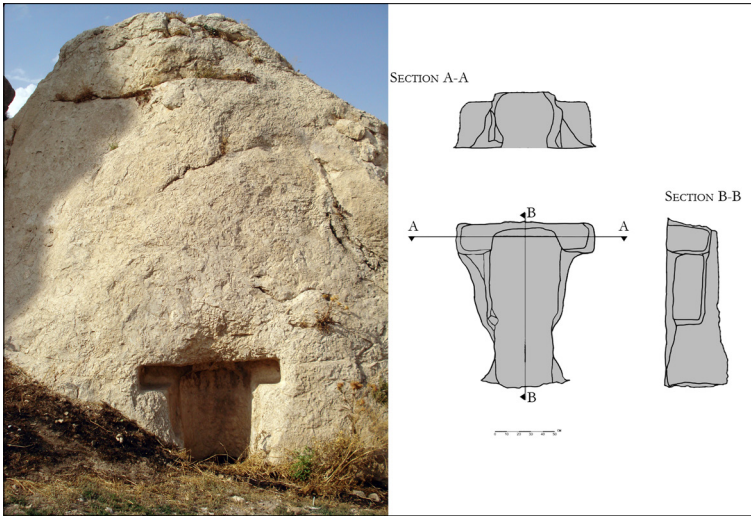


Figure 8 Photo and drawing of the T-shaped niche at the southern part of the Aralesk/Kalecik rock. Photo by the Author



Figure 9 View of some rock-cut foundation terraces on the western side of the rock. Photo by the Author

Figure 10
Remains of Urartian
megalithic walls on the
western side of the rock
corresponding to the
possible access to the
fortress. The inscription
of Argišti I (CTU A 8-41)
may have come from here.
Photo by the Author



Figure 11 Two views of the stepped rock tunnel access at the central part of the summit of the rock.
In the right photo, note the opening to the exterior of the rock for air circulation
and light entry. Photo by the Author



Figure 12 Two views of the summit of the Aralesk/Kalecik rock. Top, view from the north to the south. Bottom, view from the south to the north. Photo by the Author



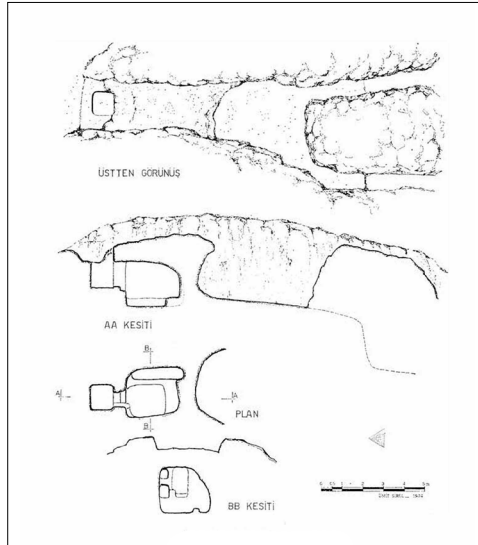
Figure 13 The rock podium on the southern summit of the Aralesk/Kalecik rock. Top, general view, bottom, close-up of the medieval Armenian crosses engraved on the podium, which was likely incorporated into the vanished medieval chapel. Photo by the Author

8 The Rock-Cut Chamber

Between 1972 and 1973, Veli Sevin explored a series of tombs, some of which were rock-cut, in the Van region, which had unfortunately been looted and partially destroyed by illegal excavations. Despite the diverse morphologies of these tombs and the absence of grave goods, the complex of these tombs offered valuable insights. One rock-cut chamber was discovered 500 m northeast of the Aralesk/Kalecik Fortress [fig. 14]. The tomb was created by carving into a soft tuff layer within a natural limestone fissure, approximately 2.25 m wide, which had been filled with softer tuff material. Its north-facing entrance (1.10 × 1.25 m) takes the form of a shaft approximately 1.30 m deep. From there, the door (1.10 × 0.60 m) is accessed, leading into the burial chamber, which is reached via two steps. The chamber itself measures roughly 2.50 × 2.25 m, with a flat ceiling that slopes downward to the south, reaching a maximum height of 2.10 m. Although heavily damaged by looters, the tomb's features were still discernible. To the immediate right of the entrance are two niches carved one above the other, although their forms have been significantly eroded due to the softness of the tuff. In front of the eastern and southern walls of the chamber is a bench measuring 0.70-0.75 m in width and 0.35 m in height. In the eastern bench, a trough measuring 2.40 × 0.50 m and 0.30 m deep was carved in a north-south orientation. Sevin noted similarities between this burial and the tombs at the Inner Castle of Van and Kayalıdere, while also recognising unique features in the tomb at Aralesk/Kalecik. Although this did not lead him to consider the tomb as belonging to a princely figure, as seen in the aforementioned comparison tombs, it nonetheless led him to conclude that it was the tomb of an important individual. Sevin concluded his presentation of the tomb with a chronological proposal based on the presence of niches and carved troughs inside the niches, similar to those found in the tombs at Van Castle (the western chamber of the İç-Kale tomb) and Kayalıdere (Tomb A, Room 3). According to Sevin, the use of these rock-cut features would have ceased with the mausoleum of Arğiști (I) at Van Fortress, the only tomb among those mentioned that could be dated thanks to the presence of the king's annals on its façade. This mausoleum, known as the Great Hırhır, was believed to be the last burial where these rock-cut features were found, features that are also present in the tomb at Aralesk/Kalecik. Sevin thus concluded his analysis by dating the tomb to a period prior to the eighth century BCE, and specifically before the reign of Arğiști (I), the son of Minua (Sevin 1986, 336-9). The dating of the rock-cut tomb to the Uartian period has also been reaffirmed by other scholars, who have confirmed the association of the site with this historical period based on supposedly common stylistic and morphological elements of

the funerary structures (Çevik 2000, 9-10). Despite Sevin's proposal, caution must be exercised when dating these rock-cut chamber tombs unless there are definitive diagnostic elements, which, in the specific case of this tomb, do not appear to be present. The burial could belong to the Middle Iron Age, but it might also be earlier or later.

Figure 14
Plan and sections of the rock
chamber near Aralesk/Kalecik
(from Sevin 1986, fig. 21)



9 The Middle Iron Age/Urartian Period Cemetery of Kalecik

In addition to the rock-cut chamber discussed in the previous paragraph, there is another funerary archaeological context that appears to be directly connected to the site of Aralesk/Kalecik. It is located 1.4 km northwest of the Aralesk/Kalecik rock spur. This is a necropolis known in the literature as Kalecik [fig. 15]. The necropolis, located in a flat area between two hills known as Sığır Hill on the west (1881 m. a.s.l.) and Şahbağı Hill (1968 m. a.s.l.) became known starting in 1998, when it became a target for illegal excavations, and was subsequently excavated between 2004 and 2007 under the scientific direction of Rafet Çavuşoğlu. During the excavations a total of 25 underground chamber tombs were identified.²⁸ Of these, 24 had

²⁸ On the results of these excavations, see Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2005a; Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2005b; Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2006; Biber 2006; Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2007; 2008; Çavuşoğlu, Biber, Başar 2008; Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2012; Çavuşoğlu 2015.

been looted by illegal excavators, and one remained unopened. This one unfortunately consisted only of an entrance dromos without a burial chamber, and was clearly left unfinished. The excavations were carried out progressively, with 9 tombs investigated in 2004, 6 in 2005, 8 in 2006, and 2 in 2007. The tombs in this area were opened in a soft limestone layer 1 m under the ground surface, and were similar to the close cemetery of Altintepe. The burial chambers, which are also deeper than the well-type dromos, are accessed by ascending a few steps. The entrance to the chamber tomb is also blocked with flat stone slabs. The dimensions of the Kalecik tombs vary from 4.50 × 2.40 m to 1.80 × 2.90 m. The presence of niches for cremation urns on the side walls was characteristic of the larger tombs. Smaller burial chambers do not have niches. The burial chambers generally have a rectangular or square plan with rounded corners, and some are equipped with benches. The height of the burial chambers is not very high, not exceeding 1.30 m. Giving the architectural plans of the tombs, along with ceramic and metal artefacts recovered, was suggested that the necropolis was in use from the ninth century BCE until the end of the Urartian Kingdom (Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2008, 192-3; Çavuşoğlu, Biber, Başar 2008, 276). Particularly interesting was the discovery of typical Urartian lamps, which clearly were not part of the grave goods but were used in ancient times during the reopening of tombs at the time of new burials, as in nearly all cases the tombs were multiple burials. As for the materials, both ceramic and metallic, with red polished pottery clearly of Urartian production, as well as metals where short curved blades and swords with typical Urartian characteristics are distinguished,²⁹ it is difficult to provide an exact dating for these tombs and their materials without referring to a general Urartian period.

29 See especially the pottery and the metal objects in Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2012, figs 11, 13.

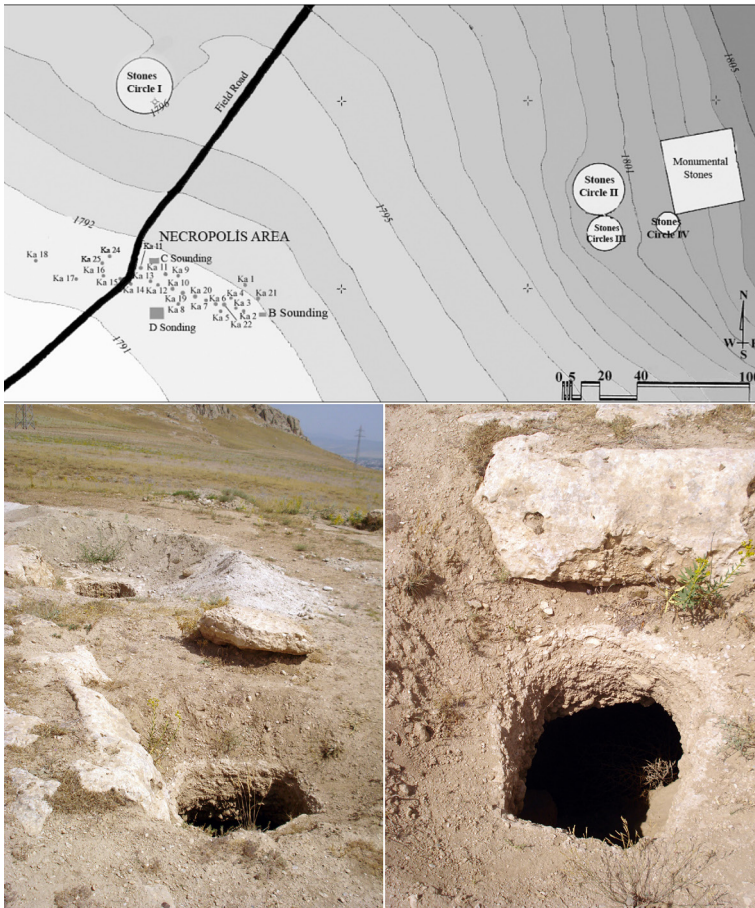


Figure 15 The Kalecik necropolis. Top, plan of the structures (from Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2012, fig. 1). Bottom, two images of the burial entrances in two different structures

10 The Stone Circles and Stelae Area

Relatively close to the necropolis, there are other archaeological remains that are both intriguing and problematic in terms of their functional and chronological contextualisation. In the easternmost part of the necropolis, there are three separate stone circles with diameters of 13 m, 18 m, and 30 m, as well as an area where standing stones form an enigmatic monument. This group of stone circles is directly associated with the stelae area and is situated approximately 160 m northeast of the MIA/Urartu cemetery. A fourth stone circle, located 200 m west of the standing stones is found on flat land about

90 m north of the MIA/Urartu cemetery. The standing stones of the stelae area are arranged in a 39 × 40.5-metre area, with each stone carved from regional limestone and varying in height between 1.00 and 1.30 m [fig. 16]. The stones are set in a regular East-West alignment, spaced approximately 0.50 m apart. Originally, the standing stones were arranged in 45 rows, each containing 55 stones, suggesting a total of 2,475 stones. However, the number has significantly decreased due to illegal excavations. The stone circles adjacent to the southwest corner of the standing stones include one with a 13-metre diameter, and another pair of stone circles on an artificial hill about 20 m to the west, with diameters of 30 m and 18 m. Between the stone circles and the standing stones, there is a canal running in a north-south direction. The purpose and function of the standing stones and stone circles remain uncertain. It has been proposed that their precise arrangement may indicate a connection to astronomical observations. Supporting this hypothesis is the existence of similar stone rows and circles in other parts of the Near East and Europe, and the stone circles located between Lake Aral and the Caspian Sea, both believed to represent sacred or ritual sites. These structures often functioned as astronomical observatories, potentially linked to the measurement of time, lunar cycles, or solar rituals. No architectural remains were discovered around the stones and circles to suggest the area was a settlement. This absence has led to the hypothesis that the site was primarily dedicated to cult ceremonies rather than daily activities. Consequently, it has been suggested that the individuals buried in the nearby necropolis may have had roles associated with the religious or ceremonial functions of the complex, possibly overseeing its operation or maintenance (Çavuşoğlu, Biber 2012, 333, 335, 337). While the interpretative proposals are intriguing, it must be acknowledged that, given the current state of our knowledge, it is not only challenging to determine the function of these structures but also to establish their chronological framework. There is no definitive evidence to associate these features with the nearby Urartian-period necropolis. An alternative hypothesis could suggest that these structures might be linked to the Protohistoric phases of the nearby Kalecik fortress, specifically to the Early Bronze Age. In this regard, a compelling comparison can be drawn between the large circular stone structures (so-called 'ring plateaus') identified in the Ashotsk Valley near Hartashen (province of Shirak, Armenia) and the stone enclosures at Kalecik, near Lake Van in modern-day Turkey. The Hartashen monuments - some of which are associated with kurgans - have yielded material evidence suggesting a construction phase in the Early Bronze Age (twenty-eighth to twenty-seventh centuries BCE), particularly linked to the Kura-Araxes culture (Schunke, Yeganyan, Khachatryan 2011). This chronology supports the view that the stelae at Kalecik may predate the Urartian period and correspond

instead to an earlier phase of occupation in the Early Bronze Age. The morphological and spatial similarities between the two sites, including their positioning between natural ridges and their large, ring-shaped ground plans, reinforce the hypothesis of a broader and older cultural continuum across the Armenian Highlands. Unfortunately, this entire archaeological area is under significant threat from the relentless urban expansion of the city of Van. Part of the necropolis has already been destroyed to make way for new residential buildings, and it is highly likely that the site will be completely obliterated in the coming years.



Figure 16 View of the stelae area in 2009. Photo by the Author

11 The Armenian Chapel, Church and Cemetery

Very little information is available about the Armenian village that once stood on the rock outcrop of Aralesk, which was almost entirely destroyed during the events of the First World War. In the 1850s, the village had 76 households (501 inhabitants), and by 1914, it had grown to 130-80 Armenian families engaged in agriculture and fruit farming (Hakobyan, Melik-Bakhshyan, Barseghyan 1988, 566). Apparently, on the rock outcrop and in the village below, there were two churches. One chapel dedicated to Armenian pilgrims was located at the summit of the rocky spur, known as Surb Amenap'rkich' (Savior of

All),³⁰ apparently, built on the site of an ancient pagan temple, which, according to tradition, was connected to the myth of Semiramis and Ara.³¹ As already introduced, the legend has it that Queen Semiramis of Assyria placed the body of King Ara the Handsome, slain in battle, in this temple so that the mythical creatures called Aralezs could lick his wounds and bring him back to life. According to tradition, the pagan temple was later destroyed by Apostle Thaddeus, who built the chapel of the Savior of All in its place (Hakobyan, Melik-Bakhshyan, Barseghyan 1988, 566). In an old photograph, likely from the late 1800s or early 1900s, the chapel can still be seen at the summit of the rock outcrop [fig. 4]. Another church was located at the foot of the rock on its southern side, corresponding to the area where the Urartian rock-cut access corridor to the site, described earlier in this text, has resurfaced. This church was likely named Surb Mariam Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God, Saint Mary) (Dan et al. 2023, 108). This last church was the one described by Schulz as the place where the base of the column with the inscription of Išpuini (CTU A 2-1), discovered underground nearby, was transported and used as an altar stone. The church is completely destroyed, and possibly the inscription with it, although copies made by Schulz and the cast made by Lehmann-Haupt have survived.³² Approximately 250 m east of the fortress, an Armenian necropolis rich in Khachkars with remarkable decorations has been identified [fig. 17]. Among the tombs, several Urartian construction blocks originating from the fortress have been found; one of these stones features five axial holes (Dan 2010, 50). This is the same cemetery briefly mentioned by Marr (Marr 1915, 1732). The khachkars observed,³³ based on their decorative features, would likely date to the fourteenth-fifteenth century AD. They belong to the group identified by Thierry as khachkars carved on roughly shaped schist stones (Thierry 1989, 119), a category characterised by limited distribution, predominantly confined to the areas within the historical

30 The day of Surb Amenap'rkich' vow was Red Sunday, celebrated two weeks after Easter. Many visitors from Van and surrounding villages flocked to the village on this occasion. Especially smartly dressed young men and women participated in this visit to find their life partners. Thus, the holiday became an occasion for the search for a groom and a bride (Sherents 1902, 69). For ethnographic information on the village of Aralesk/Kalecik, see Srvandztyants' (1874). For historical images of the village, see Lisitsian 1958.

31 Schulz 1840, 320-1; AA.VV. 1878, 180; Marr 1915, 1732; Hakobyan, Melik-Bakhshyan, Barseghyan 1988, 566-7.

32 Refer to the paragraph on inscriptions in this same text.

33 For an introduction to the Armenian khachkars, see Petrosyan 2007.

region of Vaspurakan.³⁴ What distinguishes these khachkars from more traditional forms is the absence of preliminary preparation of the support. Unlike conventional practices, which involved carving and squaring the base of the stele, in these cases, the crosses and their intricate and detailed decorations were engraved directly onto the flat surface of the stone block, utilising its natural morphology and the relative 'softness' of the material. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the beautiful khachkar photographed by R. Naumann, which was still present on the site in 1973.³⁵ This elaborate khachkar, with an Armenian inscription at the base, should date back to the fourteenth century AD. Regrettably, the cemetery was completely destroyed in 2021 through the use of bulldozers, as reported by several media.³⁶ Many of the crosses, likely carved by pilgrims at the foot of the upper terrace of the rocky outcrop that hosted the pagan sanctuary and the chapel, appear to be part of a clear process of Christianization of ancient monuments. In this context, the several crosses carved on the base of the column of Išpuini can be interpreted, as they fortunately did not obscure the full understanding of the inscription (Mordtmann 1872, 488).³⁷ These crosses were likely carved in the first half of the nineteenth century, if the information reported by Schulz is correct (Schulz 1840, 320-1). Two large crosses are carved on the upper terrace and were evidently connected to the now completely vanished chapel. Crosses are visible everywhere, also at the foot of the site, although many have been destroyed today. At a short distance from the village, there is another rocky hill called *Adamantsqar* (Adam's Stone) (Hakobyan, Melik-Bakhshyan, Barseghyan 1988, 567).

34 Establishing a precise range for this category of khachkars proves to be challenging, primarily due to the significant loss of Armenian cultural heritage, including khachkars, in the western area corresponding to present-day Turkish territory. This difficulty is further compounded by the absence of a systematic study dedicated to the stone crosses in the region, which further limits the ability to clearly define the geographical distribution and specific characteristics of these artefacts.

35 Image numbers: D-DAI-IST-KB 4533 and D-DAI-IST-KB 4534.

36 See, for example the article "Van: Armenian Cemetery Bulldozed, Tombstones and Bones Smashed" available at <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Van:-Armenian-cemetery-bulldozed,-tombstones-and-bones-smashed-53901.html>.

37 For the processes of Christianization of Urartian epigraphic monuments, see Dan et al. 2023.



Figure 17 Two khachkars still in situ in 2009 in the now-destroyed Armenian cemetery. Photo by the Author

12 The Chronology of the Site and the Problem of the Painted Pottery

The definition of the chronological phases of occupation for the sites discussed in this text will be addressed in this paragraph. The most complex situation concerns the prehistoric and Urartian occupation of the Aralesk/Kalecik site, but other evidence, except for the Kalecik necropolis, also presents challenges in establishing precise periods of occupation. Despite destruction and vandalism, the Aralesk/Kalecik rock formation shows clear signs of occupation dating back to the Urartian period, particularly in the distinctive rock-cut foundations, the T-shaped niche, and the corridor located immediately at the southeastern base of the rock, as well as the few remaining wall sections on the western side. The stepped rock-cut tunnel, already discussed in the text, should also be considered a Urartian feature of the site. All these findings are reinforced by the discovery of inscriptions, previously mentioned in this text, found in this location or its immediate vicinity. The medieval and late medieval occupation of the rock is evidenced both by period photographs, the accounts of travellers and explorers, and the presence of hundreds of crosses carved into the rock. Practically no pottery or soil remains on the rock to help clarify its occupation, which is naturally closely connected to that of the underlying mound. The mound, which is constantly threatened by soil removal and illegal excavations, is the

area where the American mission excavated and where A. Özfirat likely collected ceramics during her survey of the area. The materials collected by the Americans are the most complex to analyse because, as is well known, they were mixed.³⁸

The cataloguing system of ceramic artefacts used at the three sites of Kalecik, Tilkitepe, and Van Fortress, which involved codes in three different languages, cannot be considered a completely reliable criterion. Indeed, the person in charge of the excavations Immanuel Ben-Dor, who likely also assigned the ceramic artefacts Hebrew inventory numbers, did not work at the site during the entire 1939 campaign (Korfmann 1982, 199). Therefore, it is possible that a different system of labelling the materials was later used. In any case, from the controversial data produced by the excavation carried out on the west side at the foot of the rock, it was determined that the site had an occupation phase during the Early Bronze Age, more specifically within the Kura-Araxes cultural horizon, as suggested by some ceramic evidence from the site.³⁹ This layer, attributed to the beginning of prehistory, was interpreted by Lake as a prehistoric layer, dating back to the Chalcolithic. The situation becomes even more complex when considering the Urartian layers. As previously introduced in this text, the American mission identified two levels of red-polished pottery, with the lower, older layer showing a mixture of red-polished pottery and painted productions. The issue of these painted productions is particularly interesting and problematic. Usually, painted pottery – specifically the so-called Triangle Ware or Festoon Ware – is considered a marker of the post-Urartian phases, or more precisely, of the Orontid elite in Achaemenid period.⁴⁰ Today, unlike at the end of the 1930s, we also know that red-polished ceramic productions continued into the post-Urartian period. However, it remains unclear whether these productions should be specifically attributed only to the immediate post-Urartian or pre-Achaemenid phase, usually labelled as ‘Median’, or if they continued to overlap with painted productions from the Orontid/Achaemenid period. Furthermore, we are now aware of the existence of painted

38 For the possible materials from Kalecik, see Korfmann 1982, 87.8, 119.5-6, 121.7, 127.1-7, pls 25-8.

39 The majority of the finds shown in figs 25-8 in Korfmann 1982 most likely originate from the excavations at Kalecik, as evidenced by their assignment of Hebrew inventory numbers. Among the ceramic finds, the handle depicted in fig. 27.4 is particularly striking from a typological perspective, as it belongs to the group of the so-called ‘Nakhichevan handles’, a highly distinctive form of the Early Bronze Age (EBA) (Korfmann 1982, 186).

40 For a brief discussion on this issue related specifically to the sites excavated by the Americans at Van, see Korfmann 1977, 192 and footnote 50. On the Triangle Ware, see Khatchadourian 2018 and Dan, Cesaretti 2021.

Uartian pottery from the seventh century BCE, which imitates contemporary Phrygian productions. These cultural exchanges, still largely unexplored, are beginning to be illuminated. In this context, one should consider the painted vessels from Karmir-blur in Armenia and the Phrygian metal belts found at Toprakkale.⁴¹ In light of these data and considering the reliability of the information provided by the Lakes, several possible scenarios can be proposed to justify this stratigraphic sequence. The first scenario suggests that the uppermost layer containing the red-polished pottery could be a late or, more likely, immediately post-Uartian layer, where the production of red-polished ceramics continued. This layer could be dated to the second half of the seventh century BCE and into the sixth century BCE. The lower layer, on the other hand, would correspond to the first half of the seventh century BCE, where the coexistence of Uartian red-polished pottery and contemporary local painted productions of Phrygian inspiration, which we could classify as 'Uartian-Phrygian style pottery', would be evident. Especially in fragmentary form, the painted Phrygian-like productions and those from the post-Uartian Orontid/Achaemenid periods could be easily confused. Of great importance are some of the details reported by the Lakes, which also involve the chronology of the Toprakkale site:

"The difficulty of the painted buff ware is this: it must be roughly contemporary with the Uartian red ware, not only because we have found the same potter's mark on both, yet it does not always occur with Uartian red ware. Last year on 'B', the trial trench on the south side of the Kale, we found the level where Uartian red ware was common, but not a single sherd of painted buff turned up. On Van Kale, and at Kalecik, in unstratified areas on the hillsides, both types are common, but at least at Kalecik, it seemed more probable that the painted buff was slightly earlier than the Uartian red. This is confirmed by the fact that previous investigators have stated that at Toprak Kale they found only Uartian red, no painted buff. This statement, however, must be accepted with some reservations, in view of the fact that in walking over the hillside at Toprak Kale, this summer, we have picked up several sherds of painted buff. Finally, as I said above, two sherds of painted buff turned up in the lowest level yet reached in 'D'. Unfortunately one was lost by a workman before it reached the pottery room and could not be carefully studied, and the other is of a type somewhat unlike anything we have had before. If, however, we can get rid of enough water to dig down another metre at 'D' that should tell the story" (Korfmann 1977, 198).

Toprakkale, as is well known, is a site with debated chronology. There is discussion over whether it was founded in the eight or

41 On this topic, see Bonfanti, Dan 2021 and Bonfanti, Cesaretti, Dan 2024.

seventh century BCE, but the scientific community is unanimous in considering it a site exclusively occupied during the Urartian period. Unfortunately, the ceramic materials from the site are mostly unpublished, but we are aware of the presence of Urartian red-polished pottery, as this is the site where this type of pottery was first recognised (Toprakkale Ware). The discovery of Painted Buff Ware on the hill of the site might indicate an additional phase of occupation, previously unknown, or suggest other possibilities, as we will explore further. This introduces the second chronological hypothesis for Kalecik, which was suggested by the Lakes: that the upper layer, containing only red pottery, was entirely Urartian and thus could be placed in the third quarter of the ninth century BCE, the time of the fortress's foundation, continuing into the seventh century BCE. Consequently, the lower stratum of Aralesk/Kalecik could be associated with the Early Iron Age, where it appears that both red pottery and some painted pottery production already coexisted, even though these are rare.⁴² The information provided by Lake regarding the discovery of painted pottery on the hill of Toprakkale suggests three possible scenarios. The first, in agreement with the idea that Toprakkale was only occupied during the Urartian period, is that the painted pottery fragments belong to the Urartian-Phrygian Style, which would also align with the discovery of Phrygian-imported belts identified at the site. The other two options concern the possibility that the site was inhabited either during the Early Iron Age or during the Orontid/Achaemenid period, opening up an entirely unexplored chapter of the site's history. All of these hypotheses can only be tested with new archaeological investigations at both Kalecik and Toprakkale, given the confusion surrounding the materials from these sites, Tilkitepe and Van Fortress, which has already been mentioned earlier. The vast online archive of the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut* (DAI) holds several photos of materials stored at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, inventoried under the name "Grabung Lake 39", some of which are attributed to Kalecik. Among these, there are some examples of fragments or complete vessels of Triangle Ware and Festoon Ware⁴³ that are labelled as possibly coming from Kalecik. The case of a fragment of Triangle Ware⁴⁴ labelled as possibly originating from Kalecik is emblematic, as the original inventory code is marked with Greek letters, a circumstance that should indicate it originates from Tilkitepe. The problem is that

42 On this, see Özfırat 2018, 166, fig. 4.

43 See the almost complete vessel decorated with the Festoon motif, confidently attributed to Kalecik, although its original inventory number is unknown (Arachne ID, 1167840).

44 Arachne ID, 2004404.

we do not know whether the materials from Kalecik were labelled with Hebrew letters until the end of the 1939 campaign, due to the circumstances previously discussed. In addition to the information derived from the American excavations, it should be noted that Russell, based on three fragments drawn by Burney, only recognised ceramics of the type he called JJ, which correspond to “gritty cream slipped ware”, identified as Urartian pottery through comparisons with Toprakkale, which is apparently a single-phase site, and Norşuntepe. MM was described as “miscellaneous first millennium wares and cooking pot (Russell 1980, 50-1). The inability to verify these data is further complicated by the preliminary information provided by A. Özfiat. The scholar, commenting on ceramic materials she collected at the site, which have not been published, reported the first identification of painted pottery at Kalecik, attributing it to the Middle Bronze Age. Specifically, she referred to monochrome painted pottery, red-brown burnished ware. Additionally, she mentioned the identification of ceramics that could be generically attributed to the Late Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, and Late Iron Age, but without specific elements related directly to the Kalecik site that would allow for the verification of these details (Özfiat 2009a, 347, 349, 354, 359; Özfiat 2009b, 215, 217, 226). The absence of images or drawings makes it difficult to contextualise most of the data discussed so far. Given the information currently available, it is possible to reconstruct the following hypothetical chronology for Aralesk/Kalecik:

Phases	Archaeological evidence
I – Early Bronze Age	Archaeological evidence
II – Middle Bronze Age	Pottery
III – Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age	Pottery?
IV – Middle Iron Age/Urartu	Pottery, Architecture and Inscriptions
V – Late Iron Age/Orontid/Achaemenid	Pottery?
VI – Middle Age	Pottery, Architecture and Inscriptions

As previously discussed, the nearby Kalecik necropolis provides data on the tomb architectures and the few materials inside, which point to a confirmed dating to the Middle Iron Age/Urartian period. The situation is different regarding the stelae area and the large stone circles, which appear to be a Protohistoric site that do not seem to have any relation to the Urartian presence in the area. However, the rock-cut chamber located 500 m northeast of the rock can be attributed to a general Iron Age context.

13 Conclusions

The analysis of the Arolesk/Kalecik site, located in the Van plain of modern eastern Turkey, has revealed several significant aspects crucial for understanding its history and its place within the broader archaeological and historical context of the region. The site, associated with the Armenian mythological figure of Queen Semiramis, has been the subject of pioneering studies since the late 1940s, when an American mission-initiated excavation. However, the results of these early investigations remain a topic of debate due to challenges in evaluating the findings and the need to refine the site's chronology. The archaeological evidence discovered at Arolesk/Kalecik suggests a possible continuous occupation from the protohistoric period to later historical phases. The evidence indicates that the site was inhabited during the Early Bronze Age, associated with the Kura-Araxes cultural horizon, when the area at the foot of the rock appears to have been occupied by a settlement. The archaeological evidence suggests that the peculiar features found to the north and northeast of the site, such as four stone circles and an area characterised by rows of hundreds of small stelae, may also date to the Early Bronze Age. Sparse ceramic evidence seems to be associated with occupation levels that can be placed between the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. The evaluation of the Iron Age occupation phases is closely linked to the investigations carried out by the American mission. This paper has outlined all the potential reconstructions of these phases, particularly focusing on the presence of painted pottery associated with what is thought to be Urartian pottery. Resolving these issues is directly related to the initiation of a new season of excavations at the site. The Urartian occupation of the rocky promontory and, more broadly, of the site is evident during the Urartian period, with numerous epigraphic and archaeological data attesting to the site's occupation beginning in the second half of the ninth century BCE. King Išpuini, the son of Lutipri, chose this location as part of an ambitious project to fortify all access points to the capital city of Դւշքա, a project that was later continued by his son Minua. The prolonged Urartian occupation is further attested by an inscription from the first half of the eighth century BCE, commissioned by Arğišti, son of Minua. It is likely that the site remained in use until the late seventh century BCE. The necropolis of Kalecik, located to the north of the rocky promontory, also appears to date to the chronological horizon between the late ninth and seventh centuries BCE. Assessing the possible presence of occupation layers from the Orontid/Achaemenid period is challenging. At present, there is no documentation of the nature or characteristics of the painted pottery excavated by the American mission. If future investigations confirm post-Urartian

occupation, it would be of significant importance, as it would make Aralesk/Kalecik the only site within the Urartian fortification system around the capital that remained continuously in use during the Orontid/Achaemenid periods. All other fortresses in this system, such as Lower and Upper Anzaf, Kıratlı, Kavuncu, Kevenli, Zivistan, and Kız Kalesi, appear to have been destroyed and abandoned. The site also shows significant medieval and late medieval occupation levels, though much of this evidence has been lost over time. The need for further archaeological investigation is clear, not only to clarify the site's chronology but also to protect its remains from the ongoing threats of systematic destruction. The site is facing considerable damage and erosion, which jeopardises its preservation and limits the potential for new discoveries. Immediate action is required to protect and conserve the archaeological evidence that still exists, as it may provide crucial insights into the history of the region and the dynamics of its ancient societies. In conclusion, the Aralesk/Kalecik site is an essential resource for understanding the history and archaeology of the van region. However, its preservation and further study are critical to unlocking its full historical significance. The future of the site depends on continued research, conservation efforts, and international collaboration to ensure its protection from further deterioration. Through such efforts, we may gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and historical developments in the region, particularly in relation to the Urartian and Achaemenid influence.

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