

### 3 Georgia as Homeland of Winemaking and Viticulture

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It has long been claimed that the earliest 'wine culture' in the world emerged in the mountainous regions of Transcaucasia – modern Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – during the Neolithic period (c.8500–4000 BC). The wild Eurasian grape subspecies (*Vitis vinifera sylvestris*) still thrives at higher elevations in this region. Permanent Neolithic communities had been established here by at least 6000 BC, in which other essential preconditions for this momentous innovation (e.g. pottery-making) also came together for the first time in human history. Once viticulture had taken hold in Transcaucasia, it appears to have radiated out to other parts of the Near East and eventually to Europe and the New World. Supporting this contention, the proto-Indo-European root meaning 'wine', from which the modern Indo-European (including Slavic, Germanic, Italic, and Hellenic branches) and Semitic words are all derived, is believed to have had its origin in the Transcaucasus.

The earliest Neolithic evidence for the beginnings of a true wine culture, in which wine dominated social and economic life, comes from Georgia. Shulaveri, along the River Kura in southeast/central Georgia, has yielded what may well be the oldest domesticated grape pips (*Vitis vinifera vinifera*), dating from the early sixth millennium BC. The domesticated vine's main advantage over the wild type is that it is self-pollinating, and thus able to produce a large and predictable fruit crop. Besides selecting plants that yielded larger, juicier, and tastier fruit with fewer seeds, the early Neolithic horticulturalist also discovered how to duplicate a desirable grapevine by rooting and grafting branches.

The invention of pottery during the Neolithic period was crucial for processing, serving, and storing wine. Again, sixth-millennium BC sites in Georgia – Shulaveri and Khramis

Didi-Gora – have yielded the earliest, most important evidence. Jars with reddish residues on their interiors (wine 'lees') were decorated with exterior appliqué that appear to be grape clusters and jubilant stick-figures, with arms raised high, under grape arbors.

The importance of viticulture in Georgian life seems to have intensified in later periods, finding new forms of cultural expression. For example, impressive and unique artifacts characterize the so-called Trialeti culture of the early second millennium BC. Large burial mounds (*kurgans*; see III.4, 5) at Trialeti itself, west of modern Tbilisi, and other sites of the period have yielded marvelously ornate gold and silver goblets, often depicting drinking scenes or ceremonies (see note on Trialeti goblet, p. 66). Grapevine cuttings were even encased in silver, accentuating the intricate nodal pattern of the plant. The latter specimens, with their nearly 4000-year-old wood still intact, are on display, together with several Trialeti goblets, in the treasury room of the Georgian State Museum.

In parts of Georgia today, especially in the regions of Kakheti (to the east) and Rioni (to the southwest), wine is still made in the traditional way by being fermented, sometimes for several years, in large jars (*kvevri*) buried up to their necks underground or in artificially created hillocks (*marani*). While the earliest instance of this tradition can be traced back to the Iron Age (eighth–seventh centuries BC), numerous *maranis* of the Roman and Byzantine periods have also been excavated. Wine production continued unabated after the country's conversion to Christianity and throughout medieval times, which was partly assured by the centrality of wine in the Eucharist. Today, as any modern visitor to Georgia will discover, secular life is permeated by wine conventions:



hardly a meal passes without the host assuming the role of toastmaster (*tamada*).

Long-standing traditions of cultivating the grapevine itself are reflected in the numerous modern red and white grapevine varieties, with such exotic names as *Saperavi* and *Rkatsiteli*, whose origins are probably to be found in the Neolithic period. Professor Revaz Ramishvili, the head of the Georgian Agricultural University's viticultural institute, identified the domesticated grape pips at Shulaveri. Both he and his father were pioneers in the botanical study of the Eurasian grape. An intermediate type between the wild and domesticated varieties, first identified by and named for the elder Ramishvili, attests to Georgia's crucial role in domesticating the plant.

Modern scientific analysis and further archaeological investigation of Neolithic sites are needed to fill out this brief overview of Georgia's wine culture. Chemical research on what may be the lees inside the early Neolithic jars will

Cat. 72 | Fragment from a large wine vessel, called a *kvevri*, from Samadlo, 3rd century BC (see also cat. 73)

establish whether or not wine was actually being produced. DNA analysis of ancient grape remains, along with modern cultivars, will enable the genetic history encoded in the Georgian grape varieties to be reconstructed. This will help to determine when and where the Eurasian grapevine was first domesticated. The so-called Noah hypothesis, named after the biblical patriarch who is said to have planted a vineyard on Mt Ararat (in modern-day Turkey, not far from the current Georgian border) after the Flood, posits that this horticultural advance very probably occurred in Georgia. If this is substantiated, Georgia's impact on human civilization will have been very significant and far-reaching indeed.