

# THE CAUCASUS CULTURE - Ancient Period

## OVERVIEW

In almost all aspects the Caucasus is one of the most complex regions in the world. On one hand, as the meeting place of numerous peoples and empires throughout history, the region has been influenced by a variety of outside cultures, languages and religions. On the other hand, its rugged geography has sheltered numerous ethnic and linguistic groups, allowing them to develop their own unique cultures. In addition, the cultures of the Caucasus have deep historical roots, with the earliest distinct cultures first appearing in the 10th millennium BCE.

## EARLY CULTURES

### Mesolithic Age (10,000–8000 BCE)

During the Mesolithic period people learned how to make spears and arrows to use in hunting, and fishing became important.

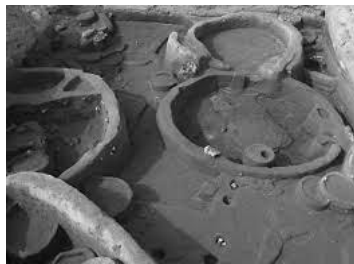
The Gobustan National Historical-Artistic Preserve depicts several human figures using small rafts and boats on the rivers and lakes to move to their new habitats.

*Petroglyphs from the upper terrace of Boyukdash, Gobustan, Azerbaijan (9000–7000 BCE)*



**Imeretian culture:** This was a culture of the south-western Caucasus. With its micro-burin technique and with its geometric microliths, it showed characteristics of the Natufian culture of the Levant during the Holocene. Similar elements have also been found in the north-western Caucasus.

### Neolithic Age (New Stone Age)



**Shulaveri-Shomutepe-Aratashen Culture (6th-5th millennia BCE):** This was a Late Neolithic culture of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Village settlements have been discovered in the middle basin of the Kura river, the Ararat valley, the plain of Nakhchivan and in the south-west of Tbilisi.

The characteristics of Shulaveri-Shomu material culture were one-story and one-room circular mud-brick architecture and dome-shaped roofs.

During excavations, archeologists found handmade pottery with engraved decorations. Local clay was used in the production of pottery, and grog and basalt were used as temper in pottery.

*Shulaveri-Shomu Culture a site in Georgia and Mentesh Tepe in Azerbaijan*



In the South Caucasus, during excavations small human, female figurines made of clay were discovered. The largest collection of female figures was found in Khramis Didi Gora, Georgia.

**Meshoko-Svobodnoe Culture (Darkveti-Meshoko) (4550–3850 BCE):** The remains of the Chalcolithic culture of Meshoko-Svobodnoe were found in the western and central regions of the Caucasus. This culture was named after the settlements of Darkveti (Imereti) and Meshoko (Adygea).

There were clay female figurines found in the settlements that showed similarities with the Shulaveri-Shomutepe-Aratashen Culture in the South Caucasus.

In the vicinity of Kuban approximately ten village sites have been identified, each consisting of 30 – 50 individual dwellings. These dwellings were rectangular in shape and constructed from earth-covered wickerwork. At the center of the village was a large open space, and the village was surrounded by a defensive wall made from stone or clay, and approximately four meters wide. In some villages, a trench provided additional defense.

**Sioni Culture (from 4600 to 3200 BCE):** The Sioni culture, like the Shulaveri-Shomu, was discovered in the middle basin of the Kura.

The Sioni culture is distinguished from neighboring cultures primarily by the composition of its ceramics, and the distinctive ornamental patterns (transverse grooves on the margins of vessels) found on its ceramics. As a result, it is poorly defined and often confused with the later Leyla-Tepe culture.

In addition to their ceramics, based on the discovery of numerous postholes the people of the Sioni culture appear to have constructed stone foundations for their wattle and daub huts (and tents also possibly).



**Leyla-Tepe Culture (from 4350 until 3350 BCE):** A Chalcolithic culture, Leyla-Tepe appeared in the south-east of the central Georgian region of Shida Kartli, in the lowlands of Karabakh and on the southern slopes of Central Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Agdam District). Its name comes from the site in the Agdam district in Azerbaijan.

*Leyla-Tepe culture pottery, Agdam in Azerbaijan*

One of the main characteristics of their architecture was the construction of clay brick, multi-room houses with a rectangular floor plan

The most striking feature of the Leyla-Tepe culture is their burial types. Some kurgans (burial mounds) were discovered in Soyuq Bulaq in Azerbaijan which were used for adult burials. Children, however, were buried in ceramic vessels. In Soyuq Bulaq alone, there were 50 kurgans belonging to the Leyla-Tepe Culture which dated from the early 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE.

## Early Bronze Age



**Maykop - Novosvobodnaya culture (3700-3000 BCE):** The tribes of the Maykop culture mostly settled in the northwestern and central part of the North Caucasus. Two hundred Bronze Age sites have been discovered in an area stretching over 60 miles from the Kuban River to Nalchik. Maykop cultural monuments mostly consist of burial mounds, although a few traces of settlement have been discovered.

*In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maykop animal style the artifacts were discovered.*

The Maykop buried their dead in kurgans which had some similarities with Soyug Bulaq kurgans. Burial goods found in these kurgans included silver vessels decorated with depictions of animals, bull and lion shaped gold plates that were sewn onto garments, bronze weapons and necklaces whose stones attested to the far-flung trade network of the Maykop culture – lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, turquoise from north-eastern Iran and Tajikistan, and red carnelian pearls from western Pakistan.



**Kura–Araks Culture (4000-2000 BCE):** The main archeological findings of the Kura-Araks Culture have been found in the South Caucasus and the eastern part of the North Caucasus. The Kura–Araxes culture shows similarities with the Maykop culture of the North Caucasus.

There are a few sites in the eastern half of western Georgia showing Kura-Araks characteristics and indicate some form of co-existence. The Qanobili site located near Abastumani carried a mixture of Kura-Araks elements and the Upper Imeretian cave cultures.

The majority of Kura-Araks settlements discovered in Armenia are located on the periphery of the inter-montane zone, a region that provided access to fresh water as well as the main routes between the plains of Tsaghkahovit, Shirak and Aparan.



At Mentesh Tepe in western Azerbaijan, the Nakhchivan region, the settlement of the Baba Dervish group in the Akstafa district, and at the site of Ovçular Tepe archeologist have found elements that belong to the Late Chalcolithic Kura-Araks. Kura-Araks elements have also been found in the north and north-eastern boundary of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.

Kura-Araks pottery is distinguished by its distinctive features of black or red colors and geometric designs mostly found in Dagestan and Chechnya.

Kura-Araks settlements are located either in valley floors or on terraces in the foothills of southern Georgia. Although the Kura-Araks initially constructed circular dwellings, they soon transitioned to rectangular structures. In larger settlements, the houses were arranged in rows, had flat roofs, and two rooms – a small antechamber and a larger main room.

**Colchian Culture (7000-600 BCE):** Colchian culture was a Neolithic - early Bronze Age and Iron Age culture of the western Caucasus and western Georgia. Colchian axes, sickles, spears, belts, bracelets, and figurines were found during excavations.

*Headdress Ornament with Animals and Birds, 350–300 BCE, Colchian culture*

The Colchian culture was distinguished by its sophisticated and copious metalwork, wooden buildings often with wattle and-daub walls, black polished and decorated pottery, and iron production.



## Middle Bronze Age

**Trialeti - Vanadzor Culture (2000-1000 BCE):** This culture is named after the Trialeti region of Georgia and the city of Vanadzor, Armenia. Trialeti-Vanadzor culture emerged in the areas of the preceding Kura-Araxes culture.

The Trialeti-Vanadzor culture shows ties with the highly developed cultures of the ancient world, particularly with the Aegean, but also with cultures to the south and east.

The Trialeti-Vanadzor painted monochrome and polychrome pottery is very similar to that found in the other areas of the Near East, in particular, *Urmia ware* (named after Lake Urmia in Iran). In addition, similar pottery was produced by the Sevan-Uzerlik culture, and the Karmir Berd-Sevan culture.



The artefacts found in Georgia and Armenia shows similarities to those found in Iraq and Iran.

*Trialeti Tsalka Municipality in Georgia*

### **Middle Bronze Age**

**Dolmen Culture (3250-1200 BCE)** Dolmens are accessible aboveground burial chambers, usually megalithic in construction, covered by a barrow and intended to house several or multiple individuals. The oldest dated dolmen in the Caucasus is the Shepsi dolmen in the south of Tuapse.



*Dolmen near the Zhane river in the North Caucasus*

Zhane dolmens were constructed from heavy, squared stone slabs placed on edge and then carefully fitted together. Projecting side uprights were used to form a porch whose entrance was sheltered by the massive flat capstone that formed the roof and angled towards the back of the dolmen.

This culture spread to the Caucasus and the Black Sea area. Excavations conducted in Abkhazia and Georgia show that the people of the Caucasus built burial tombs (dolmens) that look like stone tables.

**Yamnaya Culture (3300–2250 BCE):** The Yamnaya culture developed in the steppe area between the Volga and the Don. The Yamnaya culture is identified by the findings in its numerous necropolises. The most important features were a pit-shaped burial chamber and kurgans of various sizes. Most of the Yamnaya kurgans were furnished only with ceramic vessels.

**Novotitarovskaya culture (3300–2750 BCE):** The Novotitarovskaya culture was located in the region in Russia today covered by the Krasnodar Kray, an area that overlapped some of the territory of the Maykop culture. It is distinguished by its burials, particularly by the presence of wagons in them and its own distinct pottery, as well as a richer collection of metal objects.

**Priel'brus culture (1650–900 BCE):** The first stone buildings appeared in the Kislovodsk basin in the North Caucasus. Soon afterwards, kurgans ceased to be built. In the Priel'brus culture de-monumentalization was one of the most significant characteristics; for example, in the Kislovodsk plateau any kind of demonstration of power or wealth was considered taboo. This was not the case in the South where the ruling elite built impressive stone fortresses. Neither the dead nor the living were allowed to distinguish themselves from their community in the form of special monuments.

The layout of dwellings in Priel'brus culture settlements shows distinctive developments over the course of time. The earliest, from the first phase (17<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century BCE), were small, square single-room dwellings constructed as part of a linear terraced-house structure. However, the layout and construction of dwellings in the second phase of the Priel'brus culture (14<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century BCE) gives evidence of greater social organization. In this period settlements typically were laid out in two symmetrical rows with side-by-side rectangular two-roomed dwellings constructed around an open oval or rhomboid space. Stone was the usual construction material, and the walls, approximately 150cm in height, were rubble filled. The rooms appear to have been covered with a wooden gabled roof.



## Late Bronze Age

**Koban Culture (1100-400 BCE):** The new settlements emerging in the valleys of the Kislovodsk basin corresponding to the classical period, are found throughout the central North Caucasus. The Koban culture appeared in the present-day republics of Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and North Ossetia–Alania. It also reached the high north-western regions of Georgia such as Racha and Svaneti. Some areas of the Northeast Caucasus also had Koban settlements, in particular the modern Ingushetia and the western regions of Chechnya.

This culture took its name from the village of Koban, in Northern Ossetia, where large numbers of objects including daggers, battle axes and other goods were discovered in 1869 in a nearby kurgan. Similar sites were discovered in the central Caucasus later.

One of this culture's most distinctive characteristics was the decline in the construction of monumental burial mounds and the appearance of large necropolises with flat graves



*Ram headed Pendant, Koban culture*

The archeological findings show the existence of other cultures that emerged in the North Caucasus. Together with the Koban culture, the Kayakent-Kharachoy and Kobayakov cultures also existed in the same area and they show many similarities.

During this Age, the first tribal unions such as Diaukhi, Kolkha, Cimmerians, etc. emerged.

**Khojaly-Gadabay Culture (13<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> BCE):** This was a culture that existed from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age in the Karabakh region of Transcaucasia.

*Early Iron Age woman from Kharachoy, Chechnya, Northern Caucasus - Kayakent–Kharachoy Culture*



## Early Iron Age

In the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, iron replaced bronze and stone. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, iron was widely used in the Caucasus. This was also the time when the first class societies and state formations such as Caucasian Albania, Kolkhis and Iberia appeared. There were also tribal unions such as the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans who made a contribution to the formation of the Ossetians and neighboring peoples. New kingdoms such as Assyria and Urartu (Ararat) also emerged.

### Questions:

1-How were ancient cultures able to produce such sophisticated cultural artifacts without any form of formal education or training? Why do modern societies in contrast require a formal system of training?

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## LANGUAGE

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, Strabo stated that 300 languages were spoken on the Black Sea coast of Georgia, Pliny the Elder made a similar comment on the languages spoken in the Caucasus.

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

**GEORGIA:** Proto-Georgian language developed as a separate branch 4,000 years ago and evolved separately from Svan (Svanuri), Mingrelian (Megruli), and Laz (Chanuri) languages. It has been claimed that the proto-Georgian language.

**ARMENIA:** The earliest stage of the Armenian language is still subject to debate and it is reconstructed based on a comparative method with Proto-Indo-European languages. The linguists Tamaz Gamkrelidze and Vyacheslav Ivanov proposed an Armenian hypothesis in the 1980s and claimed that the origin of the language dated back to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE.

### SCRIPT

**Georgian Alphabet:** According to Georgian chronicle *The Lives of the Kings of Kartli*, the proto-Georgian script *Asomtavruli* was invented in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE by King Parnavaz I of Iberia. According to the Georgian chronicler Leonti Mroveli, King Parnavaz spread the Georgian language and created Georgian *mtsignobroba* (script or literacy).

**Armenian Alphabet:** The early inscription used by the Urartian Kingdom was the Assyrian cuneiform and the language of the Urartu known as *Urartian* did not belong to Indo-European language family.

## MYTHOLOGY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

**Georgia:** During paganism, each tribe in Georgia had its own deities, who possessed supernatural power to protect and establish order in nature and society. The supreme deity was the male moon. He was depicted as a warrior, and often a bull was sacrifice for him. The second deity was the female sun. She was the deity of fertility and crops. The third one was Kviria who ruled over the world.

**Armenia:** The Armenians were initially pagan, they were nature worshipers. They worshiped eagles, lions, the sun and heaven.

The ancient Armenians were called *Arevortik* (Children of the Sun). The sun deity was called *Ar* (or *Ara*). The pantheon of pagan Armenian deities inherited their main features from the Proto-Indo-European tribes inhabited the Armenian Plateau and later the pantheon was modified under the influence of Hurro-Urartian, Semitic, Persian and Greek.

Armenian mythology was strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism which dates back to the 1<sup>th</sup> millenium BCE after the establishment of Persian dominance in Armenia.

During the late Parthian period, Armenians were under the influence of Mazdaism and they developed a mixed Persian-Armenian beliefs. For example, during the Parthian conquest the Armenian goddess of fertility Nar became Anahit under the influence of the goddess the Persian Anahita.

## Azerbaijan

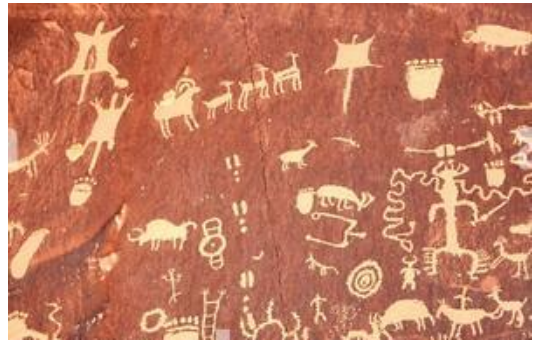
**Zoroastrianism:** Originally, the Caucasian Albanians were pagan. Starting from the 6th century BCE, especially during Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid rule the Zoroastrian monotheism which involved fire and outdoor altars, began to spread in the Caucasian Albanian territory.

## NORTH CAUCASUS

### Chechen

Before the adoption of Islam, the Nokhchii people practised their own religious traditions and beliefs, and their ancient religion was based on cycles of nature and astronomy, with many gods and complex rituals.

*Ancient petroglyphs in Khoy village, Chechnya*



### Questions:

- 1- What was the role of religion in the ancient societies?
- 2- For the conquerors why was religion of critical importance?

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### VISUAL ARTS:

#### Painting:

**South Caucasus:** Cave painting was found in Gobustan, Caucasian Albania, depicting people fishing. This rock art dates back to Paleolithic period.

In Ordubad Rayon, archeologists also found cave paintings (Gamigaya petroglyphs) depicting dancing individuals dating back to the Bronze age.

In the Tsalka Municipality, Georgia the archeologists discovered the Trialeti petroglyphs which carried geometric images and animal shapes.

In Sukhumi a marble stela was found in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, portraying a young man and a women.



There were pieces of the carved stone chancel-barrier found in Tsebelda church portraying scenes from the Old and New Testament from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**North Caucasus:** Around Lake Kezenoyam, the archeologists found cave paintings depicting individuals and boat.

In Khasaut Gorge, near the town of Kislovodsk, in the North Caucasus region of Russia archeologists found cave paintings depicting running and hunting people and animals.



On the walls of the mosque of Old Kahib in Dagestan and Chechnya ancient petroglyphs were preserved.

#### Architecture:

**Georgia:** In the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, the structures were round and built of mud bricks formed like termite mounds. There were also *kurgan* burials which had survived from the early Bronze age

period.



**Cyclopean Buildings:** The *Cyclopean buildings* and *fortresses* like *Shaori* were built with large stone blocks during the Bronze Age in Georgia.

**Armenia:** Urartian architecture has foundations on cut rocks for mud brick buildings as in the Erebuni fortress.

#### Grave Architecture:

These Urartian structures are built in the bulwark. Small burial chambers are constructed inside the main hall.

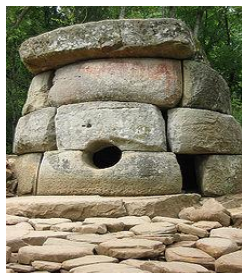
**Urartian Castle (Castle of Van):** The Urartian Castle was built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The building is made of two materials: on the bottom floor non-mortared basalt and in the rest of the building mud-brick is used.

**Fortress of Garni:** The Fortress of Garni is built on a high cliff extending over the Azat River Gorge and was built in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

**Azerbaijan:** A four-column structure, the *ateshgah* (the fire altar) is a castle-like ancient Zoroastrian structure in Baku.



#### North Caucasus



#### Chechnya:

**Dolmens:** Examples of Bronze Age architecture are megalithic structures called *dolmens* (burial chambers) found in the northwestern Caucasus. These monuments are dated to between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium and the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. The dolmens were built with huge stone blocks and look like tables.





Archeologists have found dolmens near the Zhane river and in Gelendzhik in the Krasnodar area and in Abkhazia.

**Wattle Houses:** The Vainakhs had built small wattle houses with flat clay roofs.

### Sculpture:

#### South Caucasus

**Georgia:** One of the best examples of the Bronze age sculpture was *The Tamada Statue*, which was the symbol of the toast master of the earliest wine making, found in Vani, Georgia from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Bronze sculptures which belong to the Hellenistic world from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, were discovered in Vani, Georgia. The most significant piece was called *Torso of a youth*.

A golden lion discovered in Tsnori, Kakheti from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE .



**Armenia:** Large carved monolithic stones are found known as *vishap-k'ar* (serpent or dragon stones) dated from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BCE.



#### Azerbaijan:

**Stone Idols:** On a stone stamp found in Mingachevir the carved pattern is interpreted as the clothes of a human. This stamp is dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and is marked by the sign of a hexagonal sun.



#### North Caucasus

**Chechnya:** This plane-relief grave stele, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>- 5<sup>th</sup> BCE, depicts a man with a dagger in his right hand, and was found in the village of Meskety in Chechnya.

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### Questions:

- 1- What does the number and quality of the varied artifacts found in the Caucasus indicate about the level of culture and sophistication of these ancient people?



## PERFORMING ARTS:

### Theater:

#### South Caucasus

**Georgia:** Traces of an ancient Georgian theater, which dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE have been found in Uplistsikhe.

**Sakhioba:** Georgia has the oldest theater, called the *Sakhioba*, which dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. It lasted until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Armenia:** The theater in Armenia began as a religious ritual, with *gusans* (troubadours) singing songs praising the nobleman's ancestors. There were also *voghbergus* (tragedians), and *katakagusan* (comedians).

The first Armenian theater was built during the reign of Tigran the Great in Tigranakert in 69 BCE. Tigran's son, Artavazd II built the second theater in the old capital of Artashat and became the first Armenian playwright with his numerous tragedies and orations.

**Azerbaijan:** In Azerbaijan, the appearance of the theater was closely linked with ancient holidays and traditional dances. Ancient traditional ceremonies, like *Sayachy*, *Novruz*, and *Gevsech* all carried some theatrical features by having choirs, dancers, and dialogues in dramatic plays. For example, in Novruz, there is a game called Kosa-Kosa that has a plot, dramatic scenes and actors wearing masks and special clothes.

#### North Caucasus

**Chechnya:** Theatrical features were attested in religious festivals, in wartime, at youth parties, and during music and dancing contests.

### Dance:

**South Caucasus:** As depicted in the Gamigaya petroglyphs, dancing is a very old tradition in the Caucasus.

**Georgia:** According to the *Anabasis* written by the Greek historian Xenophon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, dancing and songs were used by the Georgians. The Georgian *Khorumi*, a war dance, originated in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

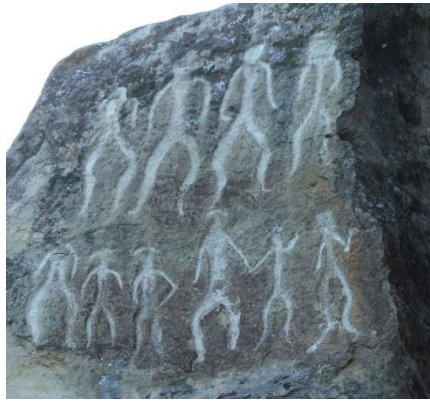
In a bowl dated back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BCE found in Trialeti, a carved circle dance scene shows that in Georgia dance and songs were used for ritual purposes (to show respect to *Shushpa* – the Moon God) and hunting (to show respect to the Goddess Dali).

In Bagineti, a female figure performing ritual dances to show respect to the God of fertility is found carved on a bone dated back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

#### Khorumi

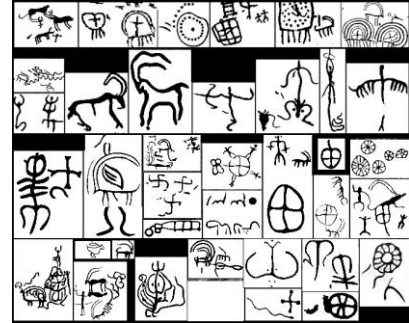
The dance *Khorumi* is an ancient dance which belonged to Diaokh and Colchis. It was an exclusively male dance.

**Armenia:** There are rock paintings depicting scenes of dancing found in the town of Sisian in the Syunik province of Armenia dating back to the Paleolithic Era.



*Maidens.*

**Azerbaijan:** The dance scenes in the Gobustan rock pictures show that people performed dances for ritual purposes and to ensure success in the hunt.



#### **North Caucasus**

**Chechnya:** From the Koban culture, small bronze figures from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE depicted men performing a ritual dance on tiptoes. The dances of the Vainakh people carry some features of the old legends and myths and were accompanied by music, as in the *Dance of Old Men*, *Dances of Young Men*, and *Dances of the*

### **Music**

#### **South Caucasus**

**Georgia:** In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, the Greek historian Strabo wrote that the Georgians performed multi-voiced chants as they went into battle. According to another Greek historian, Xenophon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Georgians sang secular, military and dancing songs.

**Armenia:** Armenians had long tradition of singing songs, both secular and religious. Movsēs Xorenac'i made comments on the ancient ceremonial hymn for the birth of the god Vahagn dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE.

**Azerbaijan:** The Caucasian Albanian culture had polyphonic choral songs. The three most ancient musical instruments were found in Mingachevir Water Basin - a *tutak*, *zurna* and *ney* made of clay or bone.

#### **North Caucasus:**

**Chechnya:** Polyphonic music arose in the Vainakh land in the pre-Christian era. Polyphonic singing was part of their rituals to appease the spirits. The music of the Vainakhs included songs that were secular, for the dance and military.

#### **Discussion / Questions:**

1. What did ancient people depict in cave paintings and petroglyphs? What was their purpose?
2. What were the purposes of sculptures for the ancient inhabitants of Russia?
3. For what purpose were the dolmens and kurgans constructed?
4. How did the ancient Armenian folk dance originate?

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