

THE HISTORICAL BUILDING IN BAĞLIK, KUTLU VILLAGE, ARDANUÇ

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Abstract. In 2024, archaeological excavations began in a historic structure known locally as the “Kutlu Village Vineyard Building,” located in Bağlar Mevkii, Kutlu Village, Ardanuç District, Artvin Province. The work was conducted under the direction of the Artvin Museum Directorate, with scientific consultancy by Dr. Osman Aytekin. The building was first identified and recorded in 1995 during Dr. Aytekin’s doctoral research, where it was briefly mentioned. In 1996, the Trabzon Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Assets registered the site as a “castle” (decision no. 2415, dated 08.03.1996). However, based on its architectural features, topographical setting, and the surrounding agricultural land, researchers believe that the structure may have served as a summer palace rather than a defensive castle. The aim of the excavation is to clarify the function of the building, its construction phases, and its historical context through scientific methods. This paper presents preliminary findings from the first year of excavations, along with general information about the site. During the first season, priority was given to preparing the area for archaeological research. Small trees within the site were carefully cut, and the dense surface vegetation was cleared. Geophysical surveys, especially ground-penetrating radar (GPR) measurements, were carried out to detect possible underground features. The first results allow deeper analysis of the spatial organization of the complex, its possible functions, and its contribution to the regional history. These studies not only shed light on the cultural heritage of the area but also represent an important step toward understanding the lesser-known settlement patterns of the Eastern Black Sea region.

Keywords: Vineyard, Ardanuç, Roman Period, Bagratli, Garrison

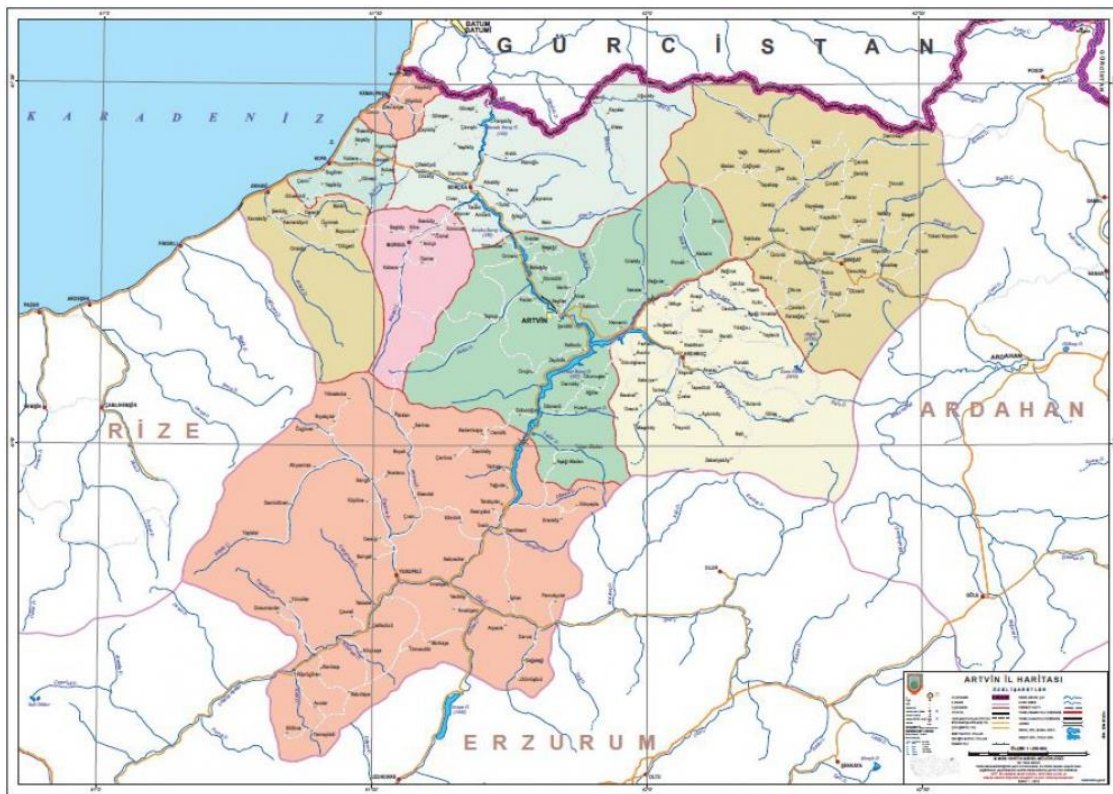
Introduction. Located between the Eastern Black Sea and the Caucasus, Artvin Province has historically functioned as a transitional zone, possessing a settlement pattern enriched by both its geographical and cultural diversity. Since antiquity, the region has stood at the intersection of various civilizations, political entities, and trade routes. Its natural defensive features, network of valleys, and fertile agricultural lands have supported continuous habitation throughout history. The archaeological remains found in Ardanuç and its surroundings demonstrate that the area served not only as a military or strategic site but also as a significant economic and cultural center.

The architectural remains known locally as the “Bağlık Structure” (Bağlık Yapısı), situated in the Bağlar locality of Kutlu Village within the Ardanuç District, provide valuable clues concerning the settlement history

of the region. First identified in 1995 during Dr. Osman Aytekin's doctoral research and later registered as a "fortress" by the Trabzon Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Assets in 1996, the building exhibits features that distinguish it from a traditional defensive structure in terms of architectural form, building materials, and topographical placement (Aytekin, 1999). The dense agricultural lands surrounding the structure and the plan characteristics of the architectural remains suggest that the complex may have served as a summer residence or a rural settlement complex rather than a military fortification. Consequently, in 2024, under the supervision of the Artvin Museum Directorate and the scientific consultancy of Dr. Osman Aytekin, systematic excavations were initiated to reveal the building's function, construction phases, and historical context through scientific methods.

The first excavation season focused primarily on preparatory work, including cleaning the surface area, removing vegetation, and conducting geophysical measurements. Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) analyses carried out during this phase provided the first clues regarding subsurface remains. The preliminary data obtained from these studies constitute a solid foundation for future analyses concerning the building's spatial organization and patterns of use.

This study aims to evaluate the findings from the 2024 excavation season at the Kutlu Village Bağlık Structure and to discuss its architectural characteristics as well as its significance within the broader archaeological context of the region (Map 1).



Map 1: Physical map of Artvin.¹

Historical Geography of the Region

Tao-Klarceti, located in the northeastern part of Anatolia, is an important region that contains numerous monumental examples of Georgian architecture from the Middle Ages. In the medieval period, Tao-Klarceti referred to the geographical area of the principalities in southwestern Georgia. The region, which lies within the borders of present-day Turkey, encompasses the entirety of Artvin and Ardahan provinces as well as the

¹Access: <https://www.harita.gov.tr/urun/artvin-mulk-idare-il-haritasi>

northeastern part of Erzurum and the northern and northwestern parts of Kars (Djobadze, 1992; Author, 2018). It is a mountainous and fertile area, rich in mineral deposits such as copper, lead, and zinc, situated between the branches of the Çoruh River and the Tortum and Oltu streams (Orhan, 2015).

Archaeological excavations indicate that the first settlements in the region began after the Paleolithic period. The earliest written records about the region appear in Assyrian inscriptions and Urartian sources (9th–6th century BCE). These sources suggest that the Georgians (Kartveli), referred to as Diohils, established their first political unity within the borders of present-day Erzurum (Brosset, 2003). In the ancient period, the term “Kolhi” was used culturally in the Eastern Black Sea region, which was later replaced by the term “Lazi” during the Byzantine era (Zehiroğlu, 1999). Artvin, a region partially referred to as “Iberia” in Assyrian sources, was invaded by the Scythians in the 8th century BCE. Georgian tribes established their second political union in the 6th century BCE in Eastern Georgia (Kolhi) as the Egrisi, and around the same period, their third political union, the Kartli Kingdom, was founded in Western Georgia (Ünsal, 2010). The Kolha (Kolhi) Kingdom, formed by Georgian tribes, controlled extensive territories along the eastern Black Sea. Tao and Klarjeti are known as historically significant regions within Kolkh culture (Salia, 1972).

In the 4th century BCE, the Kartvelians founded the Kingdom of Sakartvelo in the Caucasus, composed of independent provinces, gradually expanding into the valleys along the Çoruh River and its tributaries (Subaşı, 2013). During this period, settlements such as Klarjeti (Ardanuç), Shavsheti (Şavşat), Tao (Oltu), Ispiri (İspir), Artahani (Ardahan), Kola (Göle), and Tchildirli (Çıldır) gained prominence. Since Tao-Klarjeti was the most important center, the entire valley became known by this name (Bayram, 2005).

By the late 3rd century BCE, Rome and neighboring Persia had emerged as dominant powers. In 66 BCE, the Romans gained control over Georgia. Western Georgian Kolha first came under the Pontic State and then the Roman Empire, followed by the conquest of Kartli lands. After completing the occupation of the Caucasus region in 66 BCE, the Roman Empire established Georgia as its ally for the next 400 years (Lordkipanidze, 1983).

In the first half of the 4th century CE, as a result of the influence of Saint Nino of Cappadocia (d. 338) on King Mirian III and the coercive policies of the Roman Empire, Christianity began spreading in the region from 330 CE onward, with King Mirian III officially adopting the faith (317/327). By embracing Christianity, the Georgians sought alliance with the Romans, who had also firmly embraced the religion, against the rising Sasanian threat (Bayram, 2015).

From the early 4th century onward, Georgia was a battleground between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires for approximately three centuries. While the western Georgian Lazica Kingdom came under Byzantine control, the Eastern Georgian Kartli Kingdom, which reached its peak in the 5th century, was forced to submit to Persian authority (Salia-Beridze, 1972). King Vakhtang Gorgasali relocated the capital of Kartli from Mtskheta to Tbilisi. Sasanian King Khosrow (Firuz) ended the Kartli Kingdom’s sovereignty. In 654, Arab armies affiliated with the Caliphate entered the country and established an emirate in Tbilisi (Subaşı, 2013).

As the power of the Arab Emirate in Tbilisi declined, the Georgians took advantage of the weakening caliphal authority in the second half of the 8th century to declare independence, initially in the Kakheti region east of the Aragvi River. During the same period, movements for autonomy emerged in western Georgia under Byzantine control, resulting in the establishment of the Abkhazian Kingdom with its capital in Kutaisi. Under the Bagratid dynasty, Tao-Klarjeti declared independence with Ardanuç as its capital (Aytekin, 2018).

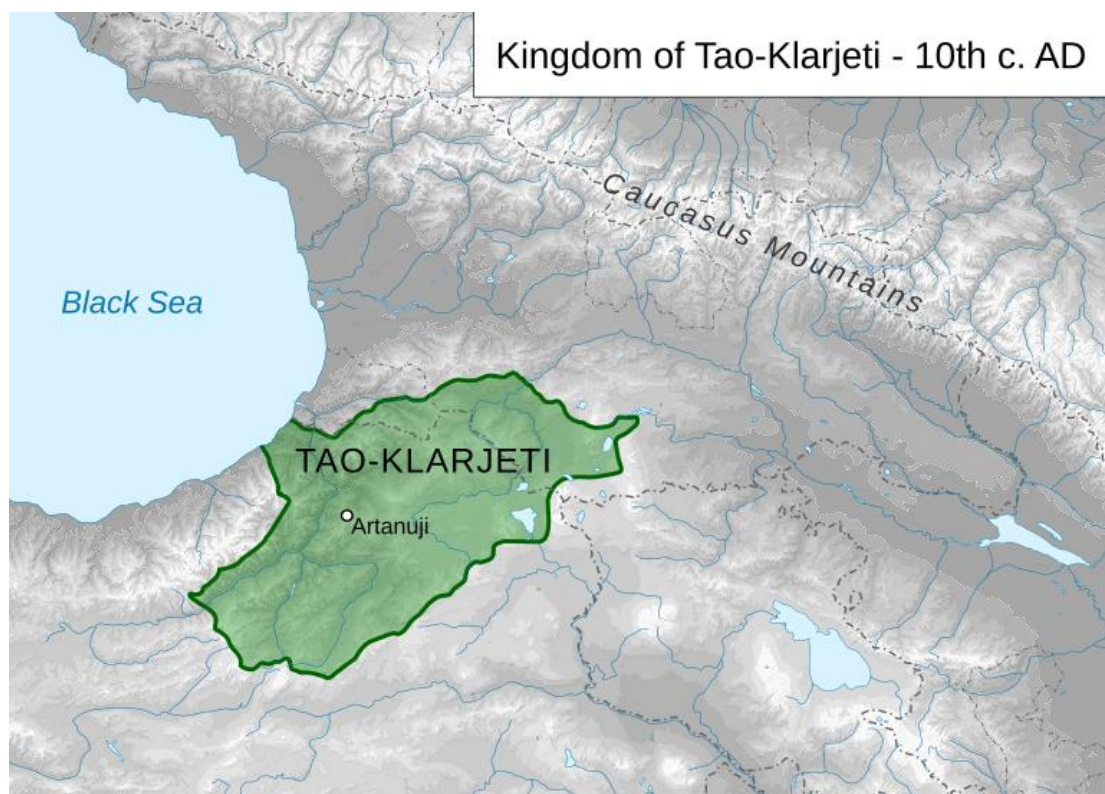
By the late 8th century, Georgia’s situation diverged between east and west. While a local prince governed Eastern Georgia, Tbilisi and its surroundings were ruled by an Arab emir. Western Georgia was under an independent king. Tao-Klarjeti was administered by the Tao branch of the Bagrationi dynasty under the suzerainty of the Byzantine Empire.

The Tao branch of the Bagrationi dynasty began with Adarnase (d. 809), son of Prince Vasak from the Guramid lineage (Brosset, 2003). Adarnase, prince of Erušeti (Western Javakheti and Artani regions), settled in Klarjeti in 772 alongside his Guramid cousins. Between 786 and 807, he inherited one-third of the Guramid lands, thereby placing Klarjeti, Shavsheti, Nigali, Lower Tao, and Upper Tao under his rule. His son, Ashot I, or Ashot the Great (780–826), became the first Bagrationi to bear the title of “king.” After 813, he received the title of “Curopalate,” and his realm was referred to as the “Kingdom of Iberia” or the “Georgian Kingdom” in Armenian and Byzantine sources (Kadiroğlu & İşler, 2010) (Map 2).

During the reign of Ashot I, construction activities increased, particularly with the material and spiritual support provided for monastic architecture by Priest Grigol Handzta. Consequently, alongside political developments, the region gained cultural and religious significance (Bayram, 2005). The newly adopted faith influenced various art forms: liturgical objects fostered craftsmanship; hymns promoted music; translations and reproductions of the Bible and other sacred texts supported literature; calligraphy and miniature arts developed; and the interior and exterior relief decorations of churches flourished (Kadiroğlu & İşler, 2010).

However, from the 11th century onward, Seljuk incursions, followed by Mongol and Turkmen rule, altered the political balance in the region (Kırzioğlu, 1998).

In the 16th century, during the reign of Sultan Selim I, the region was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and organized as the Liva-i Ardanuç within the Çıldır Eyalet (Kaya, 2012). Under Ottoman administration, Islamization accelerated, while local architectural traditions based on stone masonry persisted. Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, the region came under Russian administration for a brief period, before being reincorporated into Turkey under the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the 1921 Treaty of Kars (Balci, 2008). Consequently, Ardanuç and its surroundings preserve a multi-layered cultural continuity from antiquity to the late Ottoman period (Yılmaz, 2015).



Map 2: Tao- Klarjeti (MS 992-994)²

²Access: <https://au.pinterest.com/pin/493636809169064006/>

Excavation Works

The structure located in Artvin Province, Ardauç District, Kutlu Village, Bağlar Area, Plot 168, Parcel 94, known among the local population as the “Kutlu Village Bağlık Structure,” underwent excavation and cleaning works in 2024 in accordance with the provisions of the relevant legislation in force. The works are being carried out under the supervision of the Artvin Museum Directorate and the scientific responsibility of Dr. Osman Aytekin, Assistant Professor. The aforementioned structure was registered as a “castle” by the Trabzon Cultural and Natural Heritage Preservation Board with decision no. 2415 dated 08.03.1996. However, considering its architectural formation, topographical location, and the extensive surrounding agricultural lands, it is evaluated that the structure may have functioned more as a summer palace or rural settlement complex rather than a defensive castle. Excavation works are ongoing to reach a definitive conclusion on this matter (Photo 1).

As this is the first year of the excavation, priority has been given to the infrastructure works of the site. Since there was no access road, a new route was opened with the support of the Artvin Provincial Special Administration, and containers were installed to meet the accommodation and storage needs of the excavation team. Correspondence was conducted with the relevant authorities to remove the electrical poles within the area, and work was initiated with the Special Administration to draw a water line from a nearby source.

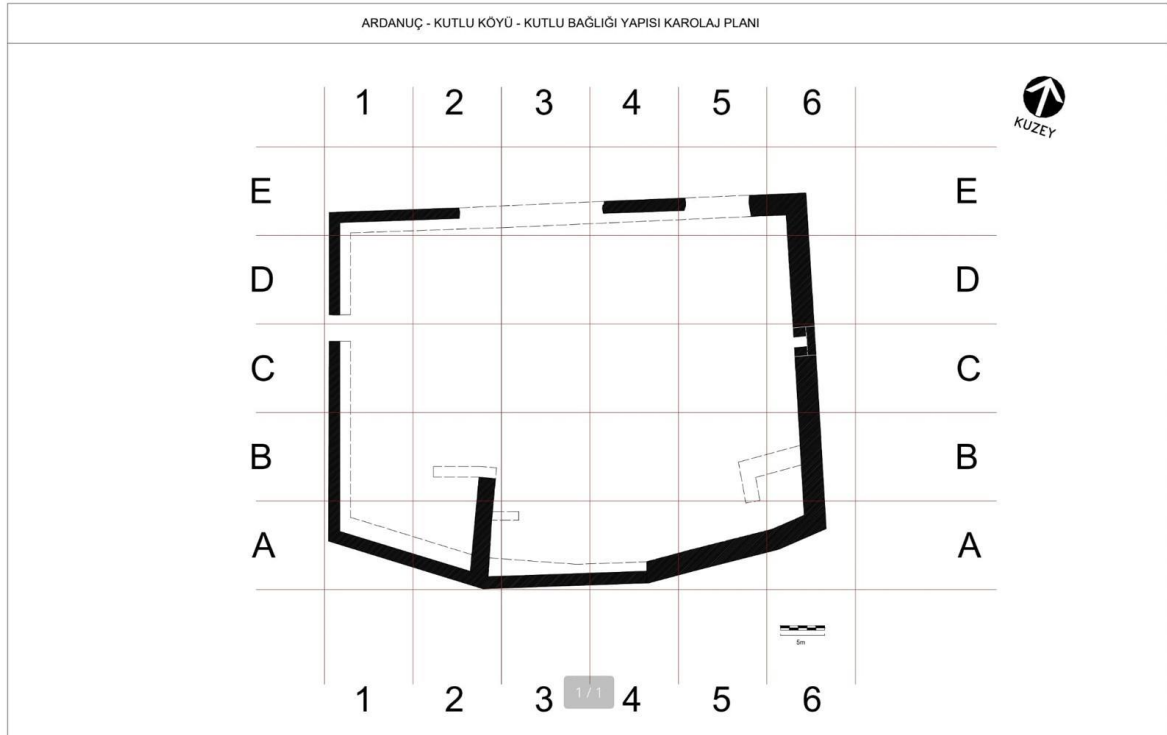
The excavation works commenced on 02.09.2024 under the supervision of the Artvin Museum Directorate. In the initial phase, dense vegetation and small trees covering the surface of the area were cleared to improve visibility. Discussions were held with the Forest Directorate regarding the sale of large walnut trees within the site to contribute to the excavation budget; however, due to transportation constraints, the process could not be completed. It is planned to finalize this procedure following the site’s official allocation by the Ministry in the upcoming period.

Geophysical (georadar) measurements have been conducted on the excavation site. According to the obtained report results, the structure contains dense wall remains from the recent period extending to approximately 3.5 meters deep. Furthermore, it has been determined that the building’s floor level is reached at 5.8–6 meters, architectural density continues between 6–10 meters, and the existing structure was constructed atop an older building located at a depth of 9–10 meters. These findings indicate that the Kutlu Village Bağlık Structure is not merely a superficial ruin but potentially possesses a multi-layered settlement history, suggesting that the structure was reused during different periods or underwent various construction phases.

A 10×10-meter grid system was established over the site, dividing the excavation area into sections according to scientific methodology. During the initial phase of the excavation, three trenches, labeled A1, A2, and A3, were investigated within this system (Plan 1–2; Photo 1–2).



Plan 1: Aerial Photograph-Based Plan



Plan 2: Grid Plan



Photo 1

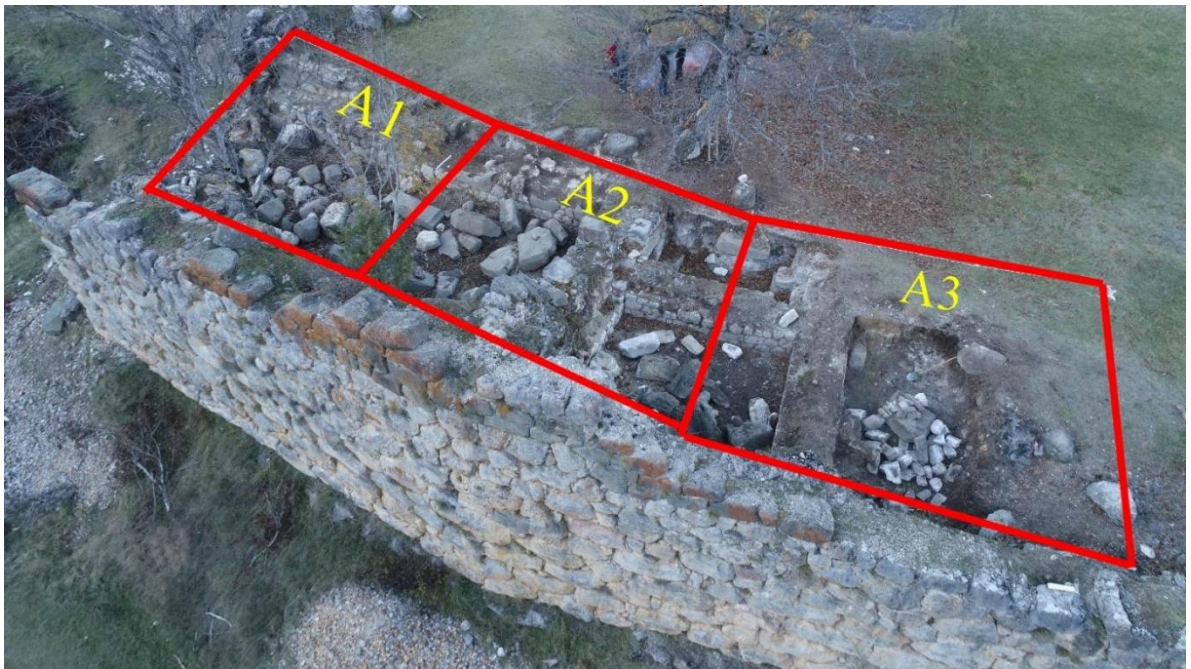


Photo 2

Excavation Works in Trench A1

Excavation commenced from the southwest corner of the structure, in Trench A1. The excavations revealed that the levels descending from the surface are densely covered with fill soil. Within Trench A1, a rectangular-plan space (M1) was identified (Photo 3).

This space measures approximately 15 × 7.40 m and appears to extend towards Trench A2. The southern and western walls of the space function as thick outer walls. Three window openings were observed on the

southern wall (along the outer fortification line), and a doorway providing access to an adjacent room was identified in the northeastern corner (Photo 4–5).

During the excavation, displaced (in situ) architectural block stones and amorphous ceramic fragments were recovered. Due to the large size and weight of the block stones, it was not possible to move them manually; therefore, the installation of a fixed crane system for the site has been planned. Some of the equipment for the crane system has already been procured, and the remaining equipment is planned to be completed in the 2025 excavation season.

Although excavation in Trench A1 has reached a depth of 150 cm, the original floor level has not yet been reached.



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5

Excavation Works in Trench A2

Excavation works in Trench A2 revealed that the space M1, identified in Trench A1, continues eastward. Immediately south of M1, and just south of its entrance opening, a second space (M2) measuring approximately 5.20×5.70 m was uncovered (Photo 6).

At the levels reached during the excavation, no door or window openings belonging to M2 were identified. Considering the current architectural fabric and wall construction of the structure, it is evaluated that the northern and southern walls of M2 may have been added at a later period.

Non-in situ stone blocks within the area were planned to be individually numbered and removed; however, this procedure could not be completed due to unfavorable weather conditions. As in the previous trenches, amorphous ceramic fragments and architectural stone blocks were also identified in Trench A2.



Photo 6

Excavation Works in Trench A3

Excavation works in Trench A3 were conducted with some difficulty due to the dense root systems of the trees cleared from the surface. It was observed that plant roots were damaging the structure and particularly hindering the identification of wall lines. The eastern wall of space M2, identified in Trench A2, continues within Trench A3. Within the boundaries of this trench, a third space (M3) was uncovered. M3 measures approximately 6 × 4 meters, and its northern wall was found to be partially collapsed (Photo 7–8).

The wall construction observed in this part of the structure shows similarities with the masonry in the previous trenches, suggesting that these spaces may belong to the same construction phase. North of the M3 space, outside the room and at a distance of 1 meter, two pithoi were identified (Photo 9–10).

The mouth of the pithos was leveled with stone material and used as a cover. The diameter of the mouth measures 30 cm, while the body is approximately 1 meter in height (Photo 11). The pithos clay, reinforced externally with stone fragments and mortar, is of relatively low quality and appears plaster-like (Photo 12–

13). The interior is empty; during excavation, the soil that had filled it was cleaned and sieved. Small charcoal fragments, three bone fragments presumed to have fallen in from outside, and two small pieces of baked clay were recovered (Photo 14). As the pithos lay below the current excavation level, its top was covered, and work continued around it. A second pithos was identified 1 meter east of the first pithos, with a broken and cracked mouth. The soil that had filled its interior was cleaned. The tops of both pithoi were covered, and excavation continued at the current level (Photo 15–16). No findings of survey or inventory significance were encountered. However, architectural fragments and amorphous ceramic artifacts were observed.



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13



Photo 14



Photo 15



Photo 16

Conclusion. The data obtained during the 2024 excavation season at the Kutlu Village Bağlık Structure provide a new perspective for understanding the historical geography and architectural heritage of the region. The archaeological findings suggest that the structure may possess a multi-layered settlement history, indicating that the socio-cultural and architectural continuity in the area extends back to the Roman, Medieval, and Bagratid periods. Detailed stratigraphic analyses to be conducted in upcoming excavation

seasons will allow for the precise chronology of the construction phases, clarification of usage patterns, and a clearer understanding of the relationships between the Bağlık Structure and surrounding settlements.

This study makes a significant contribution to the archaeological-topographical mapping of Artvin and its surroundings and offers a unique example for evaluating rural architectural typologies in the context of archaeology and art historical research in the Eastern Black Sea region.

The architectural stone blocks identified at the excavation site are planned to be transported in a controlled manner outside the working area. However, the absence of a suitable “stone depot” area on private property has prevented the completion of the necessary consent procedures. Moreover, the size and weight of some blocks render manual transportation impossible, necessitating the use of mechanical lifting systems. Accordingly, technical preparations for the installation of a fixed crane on site have been made; however, due to the high cost of the system, implementation has been postponed to the 2025 excavation season. Some of the equipment for the crane system has already been procured, and inventory registration has been completed, with installation planned for the next working period (Photo 17-18).



Photo 17



Photo 18

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