Oral traditions about early iron-working in the Caucasus mountains

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ABSTRACT: The origin of the smelting of iron is usually attributed to regions to the South and East of the Black Sea. This paper details some oral traditions from the Caucasus Mountains describing the early development of the processing of iron and steel. Most of the mountain regions had no writing until less than a century ago, so the oral records cannot be scientifically dated, but comparison with archaeological and other data suggests that they date from the early development of iron, at the beginning of the Iron Age.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that the development of iron smelting took place over an extended period in the Middle-East region, probably around 1200 to 1000 BC. (Pigott 1989, 67). Its development was slow, partly because until it is converted into steel and hardened, wrought iron is inferior to bronze in its strength properties (Waldbaum 1999, 27). Prior to this time its use was mainly decorative or ceremonial, and most of the early iron artefacts found have been made of native iron, generally from iron meteorites, which usually contain nickel (ibid). The amounts of meteoric iron used were generally small, either because the meteorites themselves had been small, or because with the larger meteorites it was difficult to remove sufficiently small pieces to be handled with primitive forging methods.

This paper presents some oral traditions about early iron-working in the Caucasus, and compares these with historical evidence from other sources. In addition there is a considerable amount of archaeological evidence of early smelting of iron from 1100 BC in Svaneti, in the high Caucasus (Coghlan 1956, 50).

A problem in the early development of iron was that tongs had not been invented for holding hot iron for forging, whereas bronze could be worked in the cold state (Coghlan 1956, 69). A study of primitive methods of working iron among native peoples in Africa showed that, as an example, the anvil would be a granite block, and the hammer would be a small piece of granite held in the hand, without a handle. The hot iron would be held with green sticks as primitive tongs which, although dipped into water, would soon catch fire (ibid, 109).

Oral traditions of the Caucasus Mountains relating to the production of iron

Historians prefer to use written literature as the source of their information, firstly because once it is written, no matter how misleading the information contained, it remains unchanged for ever and so can be studied; and secondly because its recording can usually be dated.