

The Monumental Kurgans in Bronze Age in River Kura Basin

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Abstract: The article contains with the archaeological excavations of the Deller Jayir kurgans at 322.700 km of the SCPX (South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion Project) pipeline corridor. These kurgans are located in the territory of Deller Jayir village of Shamkir district of Azerbaijan Republic. About 10 kurgans were recorded in the kurgan field located on a relatively high hill on the right bank of the river, about 100-150 m away from the Jayir River, only 2 of them fell into the pipeline corridor, excavated and explored.

The surface of the Deller Jayir kurgans consists of stone formations with a clearly visible circular shape and a relatively concave center. They are located close to each other at a distance of 5-6 m. Preliminary analysis of the structures and burial rites in the Deller Jayir kurgans and the forms of the few pottery fragments found in these kurgans show that these kurgans date the transition stage from Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age, to be precisely, to the 15th-14th centuries BC.

Keywords: Archaeology, Azerbaijan, Shamkir, Deller Jayir, kurgan, archaeological excavations, Bronze Age, pottery fragments

INTRODUCTION

Investigations conducted of the region of Ganja-Kazakh; show that various burial customs were spread among the population living here in the Bronze age. The study and analysis of these customs allows us to explore and reconstruct certain aspects of religious outlooks, social relations, spiritual culture, and cultural and economic ties among the inhabitants of this region during the period under study.

The favorable natural and geographical conditions and climate, as well as rich natural resources of the Middle Kura basin, more preciously, of the Ganja-Kazakh region had favored for the cultural development of the local kin and tribes that settled there in the Bronze Age. This region manifested mainly with local features in Bronze Age and early Iron Ages was included to the area of Kura-Aras and Khojaly-Gedabey cultures that in certain extent differed from the local cultures of the South Caucasus.

Archaeological materials found the monuments of Bronze Age in Ganja-Kazakh region prove the decisive role of farming traditionally associated with the previous periods in the economic development of the local tribes in the afore-mentioned period. Due to more perfect iron tools in the Middle and the Late Bronze Ages and wooden plow farming in early Iron Age the area of arable lands expanded (Ismailzade, 2008). Based on archaeological evidence, it was determined that arable

lands around the large settlements and cultivable untilled lands were completely mastered by local residents at the end of the Bronze Age. Probably, foothill areas of the Kazakh steppe suitable for dry-farming were in the same state. Of course, the growth and expansion of arable lands had been associated with increase of population (Guseynova, 1989). This factor is very clearly reflected in the topography, planning and building of the settlements of the time. Dwellings where starting from the Chalcolithic period people continued to live, in Late Bronze Age had become large and densely populated areas.

The Deller Jayir kurgans are located 300m west of Deller Jayir village at 301m above sea level in the territory of the Shamkir district of Azerbaijan Republic (Figure 1). The burial sites were covered with stones. This is a plain area, while the soil there contains gravel with a small amount of clay mixed with black soil. The local population is mostly engaged in sowing such grain crops as grain and barley.

Interesting scientific conclusions were made during the excavations carried out in the Deller Jayir kurgans. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the entire archaeological excavations planned and carried out in the Shamkir district necessitated repeated and comprehensive comparative researches of the region's Bronze Age archaeological monuments (Asadov, 2018, 2-3). The abundant archaeological materials obtained from the monuments located in the Shamkir district and the Jayir river basin in particular, allow scholars to conduct more extensive researches and prepares generalized view on this matter.

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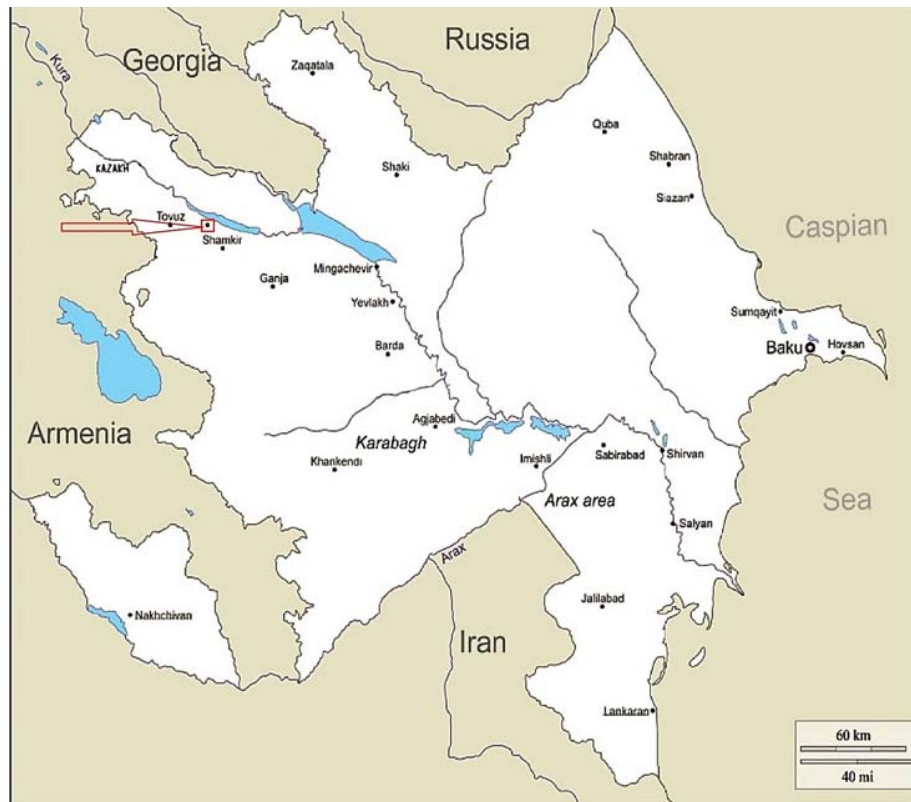


Figure 1: Location of the Dallar Jayir area on the map of Azerbaijan.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS INDELLER JAYIR KURGANS

Both stone-covered and soil kurgans in the Shamkir district have been comprehensively studied. It is known that the kurgans in Shamkir and the Jayir river basin are sparse (Nadzhafov, 2009, 160-161). They are usually located close to the river and around residential areas. The kurgans in the Jayir river basin were built with the use of a single construction material, i.e. river rocks. Some of the burials were piled using a mixture of rocks and gravel, which was definitely due to local relief features. The upper surface of some kurgans researched in the region's mountainous and plain territories, as well as foothills, was paved with stones in a round shape. In rare cases, the foothills of the kurgans were encircled by one or two rows of stones. This feature observed at Borsunlu kurgans and the Zayamchay kurgans 3 and 4, which were excavated along the SCPX route (Nadzhafov, 2009, 160-161; Nəcəfov, 2021, 76-77). No more than 10 graves were usually discovered in the region's kurgans. Although a slightly different structure of burials was tracked during the excavations carried out in Deller Jayir, the discovered burial traditions and the archaeological samples were inherent to most of the Bronze Age kurgans revealed in this region (Asadov, 2018, 3-4).

No occupation layers were revealed as this was not a settlement, purely a burial site. The excavations in the kurgans were carried out in the following order:

Kurgan No. 1. Dimensions of its upper cover were as follows: north-south direction 3.8m, west-east direction 4m, height 13cm. six consecutive layers of river rocks were recorded over the kurgan's oval-shaped cover (Figure 2). Their dimensions were as follows:

1st layer of stones: north-south direction 2.3m, in west-east direction 3.5m.

2nd layer of stones: north-south direction 4.5m, west-east direction 5.4m.

3rd layer of stones: north-south direction 3.9m, west-east direction 5.6m.

4th layer of stones: north-south direction 2.4m, west-east direction 4.9m.

5th layer of stones: north-south direction 2.4m, west-east direction 3.2m

A neck fragment of an average size pitcher with a wide rim element emerged at the depth of 1.2m

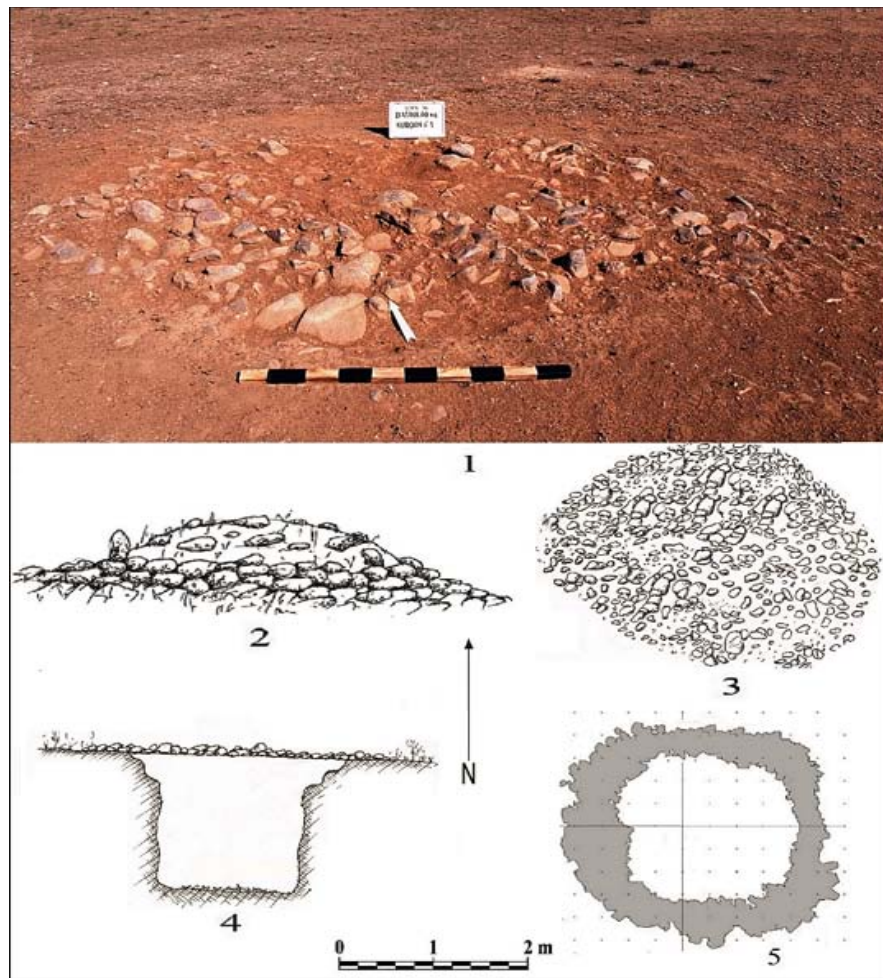


Figure 2: Kurgan No. 1.

the fifth layer of stones. The pitcher's rim element broadens sideways slightly. The rim area is flat. The neck goes directly into the body. A crisscross pattern comprised of dashed dots was applied upon the neck. Two embossed stripes girdle the part transiting from the neck into the body. The walls are thin. The color is brown.

The interchanging layers altered the configuration of the kurgan cover, assuming different dimensions (Figure 2, 2, 3). The burial chamber outline discerned following the sixth layer of stones. The chamber was located slightly to the northwest of the kurgan cover's central part. The surrounding area was girdled by large river rocks. The seventh layer of stones comprised of small river rocks was discovered over the burial chamber (Nəcəfov, 2022, 115).

A total of five more layers (7-11) filled the burial chamber (Figure 2, 4, 5). These included small, medium size and large river rocks. The base of the burial chamber was uncovered after the 11th layer. The oval chamber was sized 1.3x0.95m. It was 1.5m deep

(Figure 3). The chamber's western part was honed from river rocks. Fragments of a teenager's leg and arm bones and two ceramic vessel pieces were found inside the chamber. Some of the fragments were part of a medium size vessel base (Figure 4, 2). The base is wide and flat. The body expands sideways and upward slightly from the base. The color is dark grey.

Another fragment is a part of an average size vessel body. The body is girdled by two parallel faceted stripes (Figure 4, 1). There is a pattern comprised of intersecting polished wave-like lines over the facets. The walls are thin. The color is black. The bones and vessel fragments were scattered over the chamber area (Figure 3). Most likely, the dead bodies were buried in this kurgan by means of fracturing (Nəcəfov, 2022, 115-116).

Kurgan No. 2. This kurgan's cover, which was slightly wider than the first one, had the following dimensions: north-south direction 6m, west-east direction 5m, height 10cm. An area with no stones

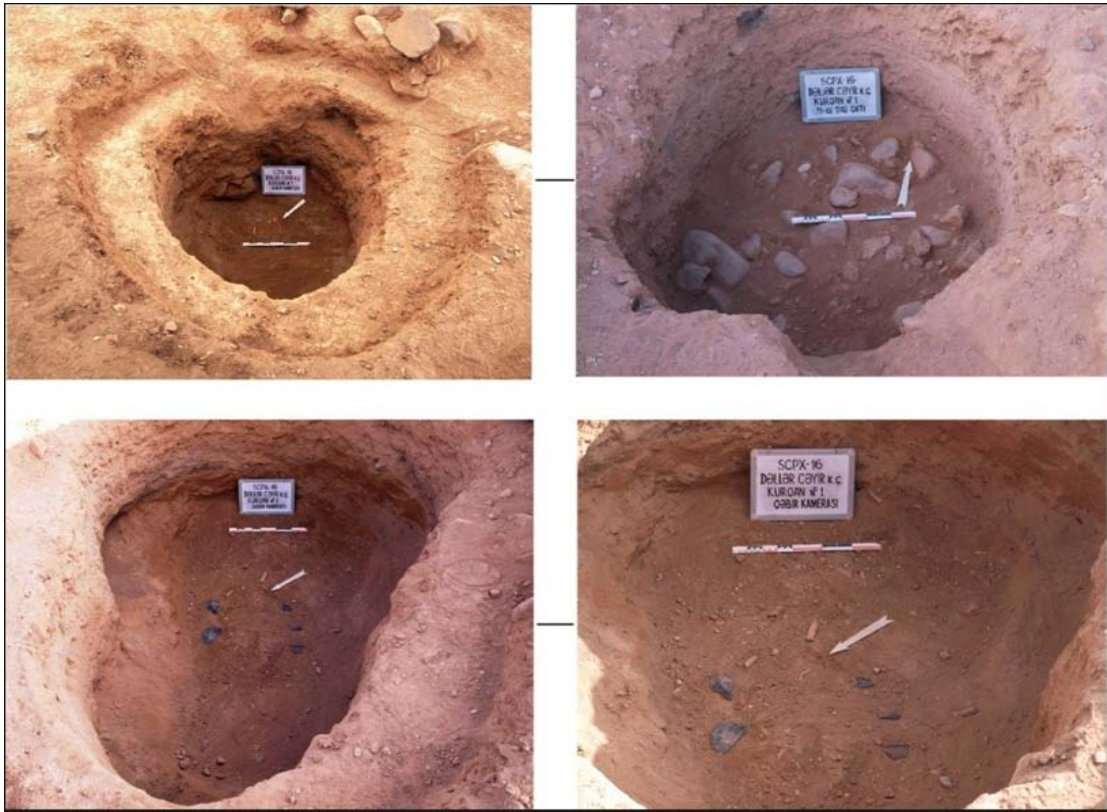


Figure 3: Chamber of kurgan grave No. 1.

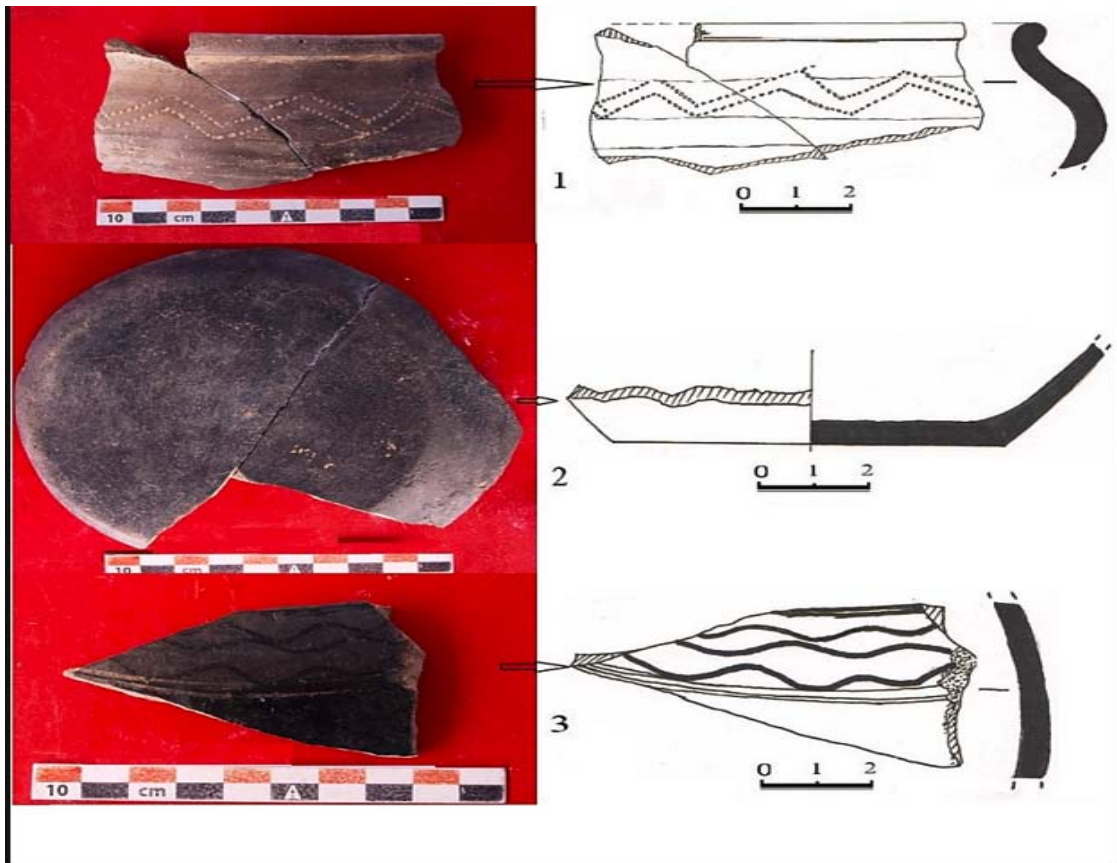


Figure 4: Pottery vessels revealed in kurgan No. 1.

emerged in the northeast part of the kurgan cover after the second layer of stones was removed (Figure 5). This area stretched 2.7m in the north-south direction and 3.3m in the west-east direction. The dimensions of the third layer of rocks were as follows: north-south direction 5.9m, west-east direction 5.5m.

The third set of stones stretched in a round shape throughout the kurgan cover. The revealed empty area narrowed down, becoming 1.8m wide, crossing the kurgan cover's third round-shaped stone layer in the north-south direction. The river rocks around the empty square were large. As mentioned above, the area was 1.8m wide. No burial chamber was discovered during the excavations, which indicates that Kurgan 2 was a memorial site (Nəcəfov, 2022, 117).

This type of cenotaph or memorial (empty) kurgans belonging to the Middle Age, Khojaly-Gedabey culture, which is synchronous to the Talysh-Mugan culture, was excavated by E.Resler (In *Izvestiia Imperatorskoi arkheologicheskoi komissii*, 1905), Y.Hummel (Gummel', 1939, 63; Gummel', 1940), V.Nagel, Y.Shtrommenger (Nagel, Ştrommenger, 1999) and H.P. Kesamanly (Kesamanly,1999) in Karabakh and Ganja-Gazakh region. Agreeing mostly with A.A.Ivanovski's idea about the empty graves without skeletons, H.P. Kesamanly notes that the emptiness of the graves can be explained with the relocation of the cattle-breeders settled in this area to other grasslands or winter pastures, thus they used to bury the dead persons in the area they were going to settle (Najafov, 2012, 84; Agalarzade, 2022, 138-140).



DATING AND CHRONOLOGY

The shape and structure of the burial mound and the artefactual material recovered suggest that the Deller Jayir kurgans is of Middle Bronze Ages date. Similar burial mounds have been excavated in other areas of Azerbaijan and South Caucasus (Xəlilov, 1959;Tekhov, 1977;Pogrebova, 2011). Close analogy of the pottery ware retrieved from the Deller Jayir kurgans were provided by excavations of settlements and graves dating back to the first half of the 2nd millennium, B.C. (Figure 6)

The tradition of piling kurgans over both stone-made boxes and ordinary soil graves observed in the Jeyir river basin originated long before the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age. This observation was made with regard to the plains located between the Zayam and Shamkir rivers, the plateau between the Jayir river and the rivers in the west, as well as the kurgans located in the vicinity of the Chinarli and Chardaqli villages in the Shamkir district (Xəlilov, 1959). Such kurgans were also discovered in the upstream part of Jayir river, i.e. in the Gadabay district. The kurgans, which are rather low, are located apart from one another.

A kurgan cemetery comprised of burial sites with a diameter of 10-12 metres is located in an area spanning 1.5 sq.km between Chinarli village and the city of Shamkir.

The clay vessels found in the kurgan graves in the Jayir river basin reflected high skills of the craftsmen.

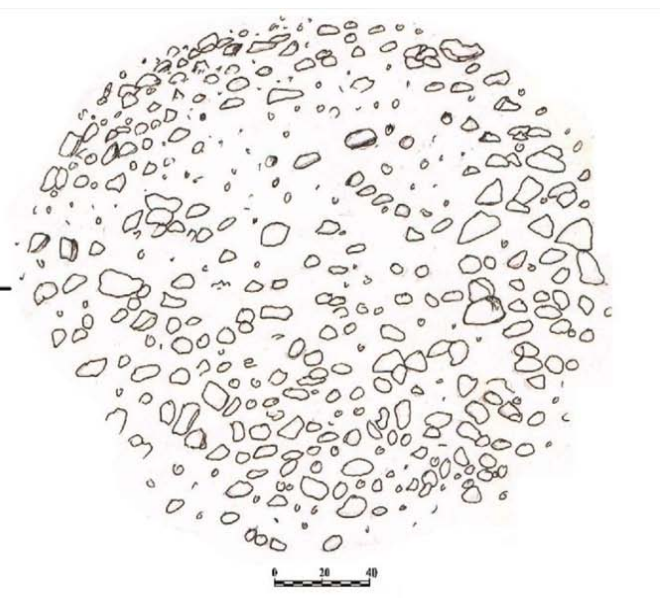


Figure 5: Kurgan No 2. Top stone setting.

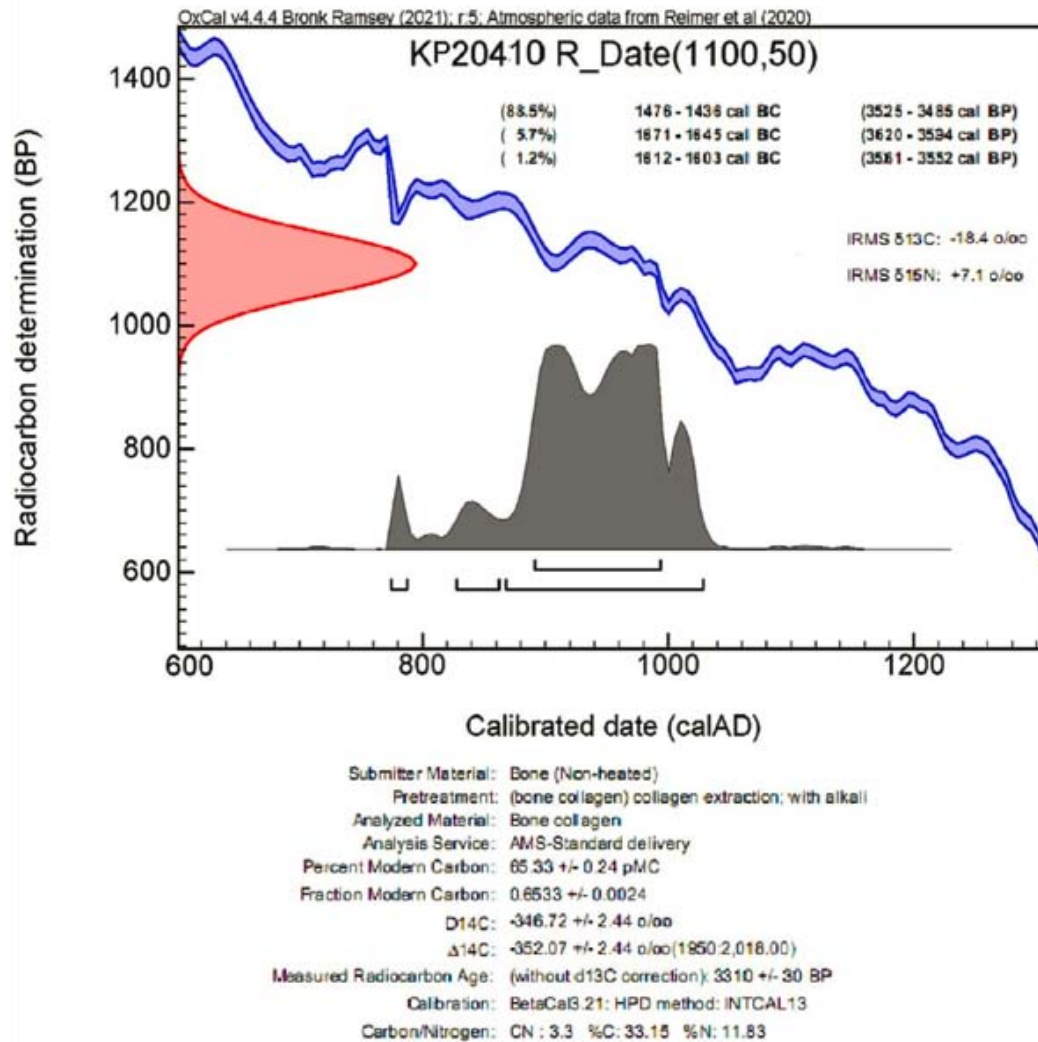


Figure 6: Calibrated radiocarbon dates (C14) of kurgan (No 1) grave (human bone).

Some metal-made items do not differ substantially from the finds recorded in outside areas. Undoubtedly, a version of the Khojaly-Gadabay culture, not an independent culture differing from the neighbouring regions, existed in the Jayir river region during the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (Pogrebova, 2011).

The similarity between metal and ceramic items found in Gadabay, Mingachevir and the Ganjachay basin shows that the Jeyir river basin was an integral part of the Middle Bronze culture & Khojaly-Gadabay culture (the 2nd millennium-early 1st millennium B.C.) in the mentioned period (Pogrebova, 2011).

The burial traditions and analysis of the shape and structure of the vessel fragments found in Kurgan 1 lead to a conclusion that these kurgans date the transition stage from Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age, to be precisely, to the 15th-14th centuries BC.

CONCLUSIONS & ANALYTICAL RESULTS

The traces of culture created by the ancient inhabitants of the Middle Kura River Basin during the Bronze Age are found in the complex of monuments of Kura-Aras, Middle Bronze Age culture and Khojaly-Gedabey archaeological cultures (Nadzhafov, 2013, 88). The archaeological excavations carried out in the settlements and grave monuments and the scientific results of these excavations, have revealed the level of development of the productive forces in the Middle Kura Basin during the Bronze Age, the characteristic features of the residential areas, the customs and traditions of the Bronze Age residents, as well as other socio-economic and ideological changes (Ismailzade, 2008; Najafov, Agalarzade, 2015, 299-301).

The economic advancement in the Bronze Age made a change in public relations. In patriarchal families working in the natural economy, unified

religious out-looks and the customs and traditions that emerged from it were being formed. Housing with rich equipment, various construction forms is a very important source for learning the process of social stratification of the ancient inhabitants of the basin, their spiritual world, demography and economy.

Changes over time in socio-economic and social relations were due to the development of productive forces and new economic progress. The transition to the plough farming, the development of cattle breeding, the extensive use of metal, and the specialization of different craft areas contributed to the formation of patriarchal relations, as well as the settlement of the population among the Central Kura basin. This was the main factor in socio-economic and social relations throughout the Bronze Age in the entire Azerbaijan (Nadzhafov, 2019, 138-142).

The excavations carried out in the Deller Jayir kurgans were successfully completed and relevant scientific conclusions were made. Researchers concluded that the kurgans located mostly in the region's foothills and plain areas have different dimensions. The structure of the kurgans in the late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age was relatively small and these burial sites were rich in artefacts. Despite the scarcity of the discovered samples, the Deller Jayir kurgans reflect the tangible culture of this period.

It should be taken into consideration that in addition to the two researched kurgans, other burial sites were located in the surrounding area outside the pipeline corridor. One burial chamber was recorded in one of the kurgans (1) and human skeletons were found inside. Although there was a three-layer stone cover in the other kurgan, it lacked a burial chamber, which led to a conclusion that it was a memorial site. Similar observations were made during the excavations conducted in the Borsunlu Camp kurgans on the SCPX project. These kurgans were very interesting both in terms of the revealed burial traditions and the significance of the archaeological finds.

The significance of the study of the Middle Bronze Age grave monuments of the Deller Jayir kurgans is that social development in the Jayir river basin of this period is characterized precisely on the basis of these burial monuments.

This widely studied burial site is important for studying the economic life of the ancient population of this region, the development of various handicraft

areas, the level of trade, economic and cultural ties, as well as the establishment of innovative and traditional phenomena in the burial traditions of the local population.

During the excavations of the burials in the Deller Jayir kurgans, the richest and diverse archaeological material was obtained. These are household items used in everyday life, weapon samples and various decorations. Archaeological material discovered there is an invaluable source through which one can reconstruct many aspects of the economic and social life of the ancient inhabitants of the Jayir river basin in the period under study, including the level of development of individual areas of handicraft and economy, such as pottery, metalworking, as well as agriculture, cattle breeding, hunting, etc.

As a result of the classification of the discovered materials and their comparative analysis, it was found that most of the professionally manufactured products revealed in the burials of this necropolis are of local production.

The study of the burials in the Deller Jayir kurgans, their comparative analysis with other synchronous burial monuments allowed to confirm once again not only the belonging of this monument to the agricultural and cattle-breeding population of this zone during the Middle Bronze Age, but also provided with an opportunity to get valuable factual data that would allow to put forward scientifically sound hypotheses about religious beliefs and burial practices of the population of the Jayir river basin during the Middle Bronze Age.

The burial traditions of the population that lived in the Jayir river basin, as in other regions, had some local elements. But, if we reject some small details, in general, the burial traditions of the ancient tribes of the Jayir river basin is identical to those of other tribes of ancient Azerbaijan, which formed and carried the bright and distinctive archaeological culture of the Middle Bronze Age.

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