

ARCHEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS ALONG THE ROUTE OF THE BAKU-TBILISI-CEYHAN CRUDE OIL PIPELINE AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS GAS PIPELINE, 2002-2005

Archeological excavations in new land development zones have played a major role in the advancement of archeological knowledge. In the Azerbaijan Republic, the first archeological studies of this type were carried out from 1946 to 1953, during the construction of the Mingyachevir hydropower station. These excavations, both in scale and scientific value, have made a special contribution not only to the field of archeology in Azerbaijan, but in the entire Caucasus region.

As in the Mingyachevir excavations, the archeological material collected in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and South Caucasus pipeline construction corridor is highly diverse. In fact, according to certain criteria, the material collected in the pipeline corridor is even more diverse (for example, the pipeline excavations cover a greater number of historical periods). Although approximately 20,000 cultural artifacts were unearthed at Mingyachevir, roughly twice as many have been identified in the pipeline corridor.

A total of 41 sites have been excavated within the 44-meter wide pipeline corridor. Most archeological fieldwork in support of this project was carried out from 2001 to 2005, when hundreds of burial sites and ancient settlements were discovered, ranging in age from the Eneolithic (first half of the fourth millennium BCE) to the medieval period inclusive. Most of these sites are concentrated along the middle reaches of the Kura River in the western part of Azerbaijan. Even in remote antiquity, the favorable geography of this area made it attractive for mixed arable and livestock farming.

As noted above, the most ancient sites along the pipeline route date to the end of the Chalcolithic (Eneolithic), i.e. the settlements of Khojakhan and Agyly-dere in the Tovuz district, and Poylu I, Poylu II, and Beyuk Kesik I and the Soyugbulag kurgans (barrows) in the Agstafa district. The numerous artifacts discovered at these sites have shed light on the material and spiritual culture, the living conditions and way of life of the area's ancient inhabitants. Amongst the finds, the remains of dwellings and domestic outbuildings, stone and bone tools, metal objects, a huge cache of clay vessels, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines made of clay or bone, and similar items were identified. Excavated grain residues, along with the fragments of sickles and other stone

agricultural tools, provide an accurate glimpse into the economic life of the farming communities on the territory of Azerbaijan during the late Eneolithic. The presence of cattle and small livestock and other domesticated animals in these settlements is supported by a wealth of osteological evidence. All of these finds point to the high level of sophistication attained by the settled farming and livestock raising communities in industries such as pottery making, bone, stone and metal working, and weaving.

Except for the Khojakhhan settlements, all of the Eneolithic sites are associated with the Leiletepe archeological culture, which emerged during the first half of the fourth millennium BCE as a result of the migration of near-eastern tribes from Mesopotamia to South Caucasus, especially to Azerbaijan. The Leiletepe culture got its name from the site excavated during the 1980s in the Agdam district of Azerbaijan. Among the sites associated with this culture, the Soyugbulag kurgans (barrows) are of special importance. The results of the excavations in these kurgans (barrows) have proved the existence of burial ceremonies in the kurgans of the South Caucasus during the Eneolithic, in particular on the territory of Azerbaijan. Moving farther to the north, and having settled in the North Caucasus, the bearers of the Leiletepe culture contributed largely to the formation of the Maykop archeological culture. Keeping in mind what was mentioned above; we can say that the study of the significant sites of the Leiletepe culture plays an important role in our understanding of the history of the migration processes from the Middle East to the Caucasus.

Kurgans of the Early Bronze Kura-Araks kaya culture were identified and excavated along the route of the pipelines. These kurgans pertain to the developed period of this culture, i.e. III millennium BCE. Three such kurgans were studied on the left bank of Shamkirchai. They were formed by a mixture of soil and pebbles. The diameter of these kurgans occasionally exceeded 20m. Dead people were buried in these kurgans in a crooked position, on their right or left side. Clay vessels, various ornaments, household items and various weapons were found in these burial grounds in the course of the excavations. Gold beads and a bronze mirror stand out among these finds. Cornelian beads, beads made of paste, mother-of-pearl and bones of various animals were also found. The excavations of Shamkirchai kurgans provided valuable information about the burial rituals of the Early Bronze epoch on the territory of Azerbaijan.

The kurgan excavated on the left bank of the Hasansu river in the Agstafa district is the only significant site of the Middle Bronze period found in the BTC and SCP pipeline corridor. According to the radiocarbon dating method, this kurgan can be assigned to the XVII-XVIII centuries BCE. The luxurious burial site of a young man was found in this kurgan with an interesting structure. Funeral paraphernalia was placed on the floor of the grave chamber; heads of sacrificial bulls were placed in the corners. All these articles were covered with a roof, possibly wooden. On top of this roof, a special place (probably a bed) for the burial was arranged. It was made of limestone plates and tree trunks. After the burial, the whole grave chamber was filled first with soil, and then covered with a mixture of soil and pebbles. It should be mentioned that the main focus was on the accompanying accessories (the funeral paraphernalia) and the burial ritual, rather than on the dead person. The special position of the bulls' skulls and the various containers suggest that the burial had taken place on a bull-drawn cart. 72 clay containers and ornaments were found in this kurgan. Most black containers were ornamented with a white encrustation.

During the Late Bronze – Early Iron period (second half of II millennium BCE – beginning of I millennium BCE) intensive economic development was observed all over the South Caucasus, and on the territory of Azerbaijan. Crop farming and cattle breeding expanded, various crafts developed, and cultural-economic relations reached unprecedented levels.

Various burial grounds were excavated in the Zayamchai (Shamkir district) and Tovuzchai (Tovuzchai district) necropoleis of the Late Bronze – Early Iron period. The types of graves were different – kurgans, soil (dirt) graves and graves with stone covers. Dozens of graves (especially in the Zayamchai necropolis) were found without any human remains. In terms of the burial ritual they were commemoration burials. Women in these necropoleis were buried lying on their left side, and men were buried on their right side.

Archeological materials found in the necropoleis of this period are numerous and diverse. Various clay containers, stone and bronze weapons, cornelian, paste and bronze beads, pendants of zoomorphic nature, belt ornaments, bracelets, rings, earrings and other articles were found in the graves. Some graves of the Zayamchai necropolis in the Shamkir district were backfilled with red ochre.

Burials of people alongside a dog were found in the Tovuzchai necropolis of the Tovuz district. This is explained by the fact that during the Late Bronze – Early Iron period dogs played an important role in rural economic activity, especially in cattle breeding, and this probably led to a cult of dogs. According to ancient peoples, dogs were buried with their masters in order to guard the dead person in the other world. Skeletons of horses and bones of small cattle were also found in the graves of the Tovuzchai necropolis.

The Borsunli kurgan in the Geranboy district has also attracted attention. A soldier was buried in this kurgan in a sitting position. The kurgan dates from the XIII century BCE. A horse skeleton was found in this grave. A bronze dagger and arrow heads made from bronze and stone were also found.

Horse skeleton finds in the Tovuzchai and Borsunly necropoleis were probably related to the cult of this animal.

The significant ancient sites (IV century BCE – III century CE) in the pipeline corridor were represented by jars and soil (dirt) burials, one catacomb grave and one grave in the form of a wooden coffin. Significant sites from this period were excavated in the Agdash, Yevlakh, Geranboy and Agstafa districts. Dead persons in these graves, like in earlier periods, were buried on their right or left side, in a crooked position (Figure 9). Jar burial paraphernalia was found within this jar, whilst large containers were arranged around it.

In ancient soil graves, dead persons were buried in a slightly crooked position. Women were buried lying on their left side, with men on their right side.

It is known from history that one of the predecessors of the Azerbaijan people - Albanian tribes that lived in western and north-western Azerbaijan professed to Christianity. In some places along the pipeline corridor graves belonging to early Christians were excavated. The Early Christian monument excavated near the village of Chaparly in the Shamkir district was the most interesting.

In the course of excavation, the remains of a Christian church, and Christian graves inside the church and around it were discovered.

Archeological excavations carried out over many years in Azerbaijan at the sites of medieval settlements (VIII-XVIII centuries CE) – Baku, Gyanja, Shamakha, Beylagan, Barda, Shamkir, Nakhchivan, etc., have provided extensive scientific information. However, rural settlements from this period on the territory of Azerbaijan have not been studied enough. From this point of view, excavations in the pipeline corridor presented the opportunity for such monuments to be investigated, in Fakhraly, Lyaki, Hajjaly, Dashbulag, Gyrah Kesaman, etc. As a result of these excavations, the remains of material culture were found that contributed to the study of the economic life of rural people in medieval Azerbaijan.

Thus, the implementation of the Century Contract, along with the growth of the economic-political potential of Azerbaijan stimulated the comprehensive study of archeological monuments in the pipeline corridor, which allowed the stagnation in the archeological field observed in the 90-s of the XX century to be eliminated.