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MAPPING MATERIAL CULTURE: A STATISTICAL SURVEY OF ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIEVAL FUNERARY SITES IN MODERN AZERBAIJAN

This article analyzes archaeological research conducted on burial monuments of the Ancient and Early Medieval periods in Azerbaijan during the years of independence. The investigations encompass diverse geographical regions and monument typologies, emphasizing the pivotal role of mortuary practices in understanding socio-cultural evolution, ethnic composition, and religious beliefs. Although the difficult economic and political conditions of the 1990s led to stagnation in archaeological field work, the subsequent increase in state funding and the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects enabled a significant expansion in the scale and volume of rescue excavations. The research methodology integrates data from systematic field investigations with a multi-disciplinary approach, relying on the typological and functional analysis of artifacts such as ceramics, metalwork, and numismatic finds to trace socio-economic stratification and cultural dynamics. Analysis of key sites, including Qalatəpə, Nərgizava, Piboz, and Çərmədil, reveals a highly diverse typological system, with earth graves dominating the landscape. The main purpose of this research is to comprehensively analyze the archaeological investigations conducted on ancient and early medieval burial monuments in Azerbaijan during the years of independence. The research methodology primarily integrates data from rescue excavations necessitated by infrastructure projects, alongside systematic field investigations conducted across various geographical zones of Azerbaijan. The study employs a multi-disciplinary approach, relying on the typological and functional analysis of archaeological artifacts—including ceramics, metalwork, and numismatic finds to trace socio-economic stratification and cultural dynamics. Furthermore, the research utilizes statistical analysis of burial typologies and typological network analysis to identify patterns of cultural diffusion and social complexity within the studied period.

The main novelty of the study is its comprehensive synthesis of archaeological research on ancient and early medieval burial monuments in Azerbaijan, specifically focusing on the period of independence. This research uniquely integrates findings from various geographical regions and diverse monument typologies, offering a holistic perspective on mortuary practices and their implications for understanding socio-cultural evolution, ethnic composition, and religious beliefs.

Key words: Ancient period, Early Middle Ages, necropolises, socio-cultural stratification, ethnic composition, religious beliefs.

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КАРТОГРАФУВАННЯ МАТЕРІАЛЬНОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ: СТАТИСТИЧНИЙ ОГЛЯД ПОХОВАЛЬНИХ ПАМ'ЯТОК АНТИЧНОГО ТА РАННЬОСЕРЕДНЬОВІЧНОГО ПЕРІОДІВ НА ТЕРИТОРІЇ СУЧАСНОГО АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНУ

У статті проаналізовано археологічні дослідження поховальних пам'яток античного та ранньосередньовічного періодів в Азербайджані, проведені в роки незалежності. Дослідження охоплюють різні географічні регіони та типологічні різновиди пам'яток, підкреслюючи ключову роль поховальних практик у вивченні соціокультурної еволюції, етнічного складу та релігійних уявлень населення. Хоча складні економічні та політичні умови 1990-х років спричинили певний застій у проведенні археологічних польових досліджень, подальше збільшення державного фінансування та реалізація масштабних інфраструктурних проєктів сприяли значному розширенню масштабів і обсягів охоронно-рятувальних археологічних розкопок. Методологія дослідження поєднує дані систематичних польових досліджень із міждисциплінарним підходом, заснованим на типологічному та функціональному аналізі археологічних артефактів, зокрема кераміки, металевих виробів і нумізматичних знахідок, що дає змогу простежити соціально-економічну стратифікацію та динаміку культурних процесів. Аналіз ключових

пам'яток, зокрема Галатепе, Наргізави, Пібозу та Чермаділя, виявляє значне типологічне різноманіття, при цьому в загальній структурі поховальних пам'яток переважають ґрунтові могили.

Основною метою дослідження є комплексний аналіз археологічних досліджень давніх і ранньосередньовічних поховальних пам'яток Азербайджану, проведених у роки незалежності. Методологія дослідження передусім поєднує дані охоронно-рятувальних розкопок, необхідність проведення яких була зумовлена реалізацією інфраструктурних проєктів, із результатами систематичних польових досліджень, здійснених у різних географічних зонах Азербайджану. У дослідженні застосовано міждисциплінарний підхід, заснований на типологічному та функціональному аналізі археологічних артефактів, зокрема кераміки, металевих виробів і нумізматичних знахідок, з метою виявлення соціально-економічної стратифікації та культурної динаміки. Крім того, використано статистичний аналіз типології поховань та аналіз типологічних мереж для виявлення закономірностей культурної дифузії та соціальної складності досліджуваного періоду. Основна наукова новизна дослідження полягає в комплексному узагальненні результатів археологічних досліджень давніх і ранньосередньовічних поховальних пам'яток Азербайджану з особливим акцентом на період незалежності. Дослідження вперше в такому комплексному форматі об'єднує матеріали, отримані з різних географічних регіонів і різноманітних типів поховальних пам'яток, пропонуючи цілісне бачення поховальних практик та їхнього значення для розуміння соціокультурної еволюції, етнічного складу та релігійних уявлень давнього й ранньосередньовічного населення.

Ключові слова: античний період, раннє Середньовіччя, некрополі, соціокультурна стратифікація, етнічний склад, релігійні уявлення.

Introduction. In 1991, Azerbaijan succeeded in regaining its state independence for the second time in the 20th century. For 70 years, Azerbaijan's political and economic administration was organized by Moscow. The years of independence were marked by a tense political situation and severe financial shortages. The difficult economic and political conditions of the 1990s negatively affected scientific fields, including archaeology and ethnography, leading to stagnation in these areas (Azerbaijani Archaeology and Ethnography, 2003:8). In connection with infrastructure renovation works and the implementation of transboundary projects across the country, rescue excavations were carried out to protect archaeological heritage. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the implementation of global projects in Azerbaijan directed the attention of archaeologists towards the study of archaeological monuments located in the areas covered by these projects (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2009:9). Starting from the early 2000s, systematic and continuous field research began across the country. Due to the increase in state funds allocated to archaeological expeditions, the scale, number, and volume of archaeological investigations expanded significantly (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2011:8). Extensive archaeological research has been conducted on ancient and early medieval burial monuments during the years of independence. These investigations covered various geographical areas, including Qalatəpə in the Mil-Qarabağ plain, Nərgizava, Qırlartəpə (Ağsu), Çərmədil, Hacıhətəmlı (İsmayılı) and Yeni Yurd (Şamaxı) monuments in the Shirvan region, Gicanoba and Sandıqtəpə monuments in North-Eastern Azerbaijan, and in the southern and western directions Babazanlı (Salyan), Piboztəpə (Lerik), Qarqucaq (Goranboy) monuments, as well as

the Təpəbaşı necropolis in Shaki district, Kamaltəpə and Yaloylutəpə necropolises in Gabala district, burial monuments in Soltan Nuxa and Quşlar villages, and excavations in Ataçay monuments in Khizi district, which have revealed rich scientific facts about the ancient burial culture of the country (Fig. 1).

Literature review. Complex archaeological investigations carried out to study the ancient and early medieval history of the region have made the study of necropolises and burial monuments of various typologies one of the priority scientific directions. Artifacts obtained during archaeological excavations serve as fundamental sources that allow tracing the socio-cultural and technological development dynamics of the period under study. In particular, the morphological characteristics of ceramic products and the applied artistic decoration methods clearly demonstrate the high level of craftsmanship and the existence of specialization in local pottery production. Moreover, the differences between quantitative and qualitative indicators of grave inventories are of significant scientific importance in determining socio-economic stratification and property differentiation in society. In general, the study of burial monuments provides important information about the ethnic composition and religious beliefs of the region (Goshgarli, 2012:6–7). Complementing this typological perspective, contemporary anthropological frameworks view these structural variations as an active, ongoing process of landscape place-making and ritual communication (Swenson, 2021:45–48).

The main purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze archaeological investigations of ancient and early medieval burial monuments in modern Azerbaijan.

Discussion. Between 2008 and 2012, 14 jar burials and 3 earth graves were investigated in the ancient

necropolis located to the east of Qalatəpə (Aliyev et al., 2023:15). In jar burials, the deceased were mainly interred in a contracted position, lying on their right or left side. The jars were placed horizontally. In earth graves, the deceased were buried on a floor plastered with mud. Various types of jugs, single-handled vessels, jars with geometric patterns in red paint, as well as metal objects, weapons, glass vessel fragments, beads, and animal bones were discovered in the graves (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2011).

Archaeological investigations at the Nərgizava ancient and early medieval monument located in Gəgəli village, Ağsu district, began in 2009. In that year, 30 earth graves dating to the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE were discovered, and in 2010, an additional 69 earth graves were found. The graves are located at depths ranging from 120 cm to 250 cm. Skeletons were mainly found in a tightly contracted position, on their right or left side. The face of the deceased was often oriented towards the northeast or southeast (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2011:186–193). A collective burial was carried out in one of the graves. Additionally, animal remains,

pottery, weapons, tools, and ornaments were found in the graves (Khalili, 2015:38–56). Furthermore, during archaeological excavations conducted in 2023, remains of structures characteristic of early medieval monuments were encountered, (Proceedings of the Scientific Sessions Dedicated to the Results of Archaeological Excavations Conducted in Azerbaijan in 2023:87) as well as fragments of pottery, glass, and tiles dating to the late antique and early medieval periods (Proceedings of the Scientific Sessions Dedicated to the Results of Archaeological Excavations Conducted in Azerbaijan in 2023:88).

During archaeological excavations conducted at the Gicanoba burial monument in Qusar district starting from 2009, earth graves were discovered. Based on the position of the skeletons, it can be said that the bodies were buried supine, extended straight in a northern direction (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2011:207). It was determined that the skull of the deceased found in grave No. II had undergone artificial deformation (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2011:207). In 2010, a late antique period burial monument was registered at the VI Sandıqtəpə

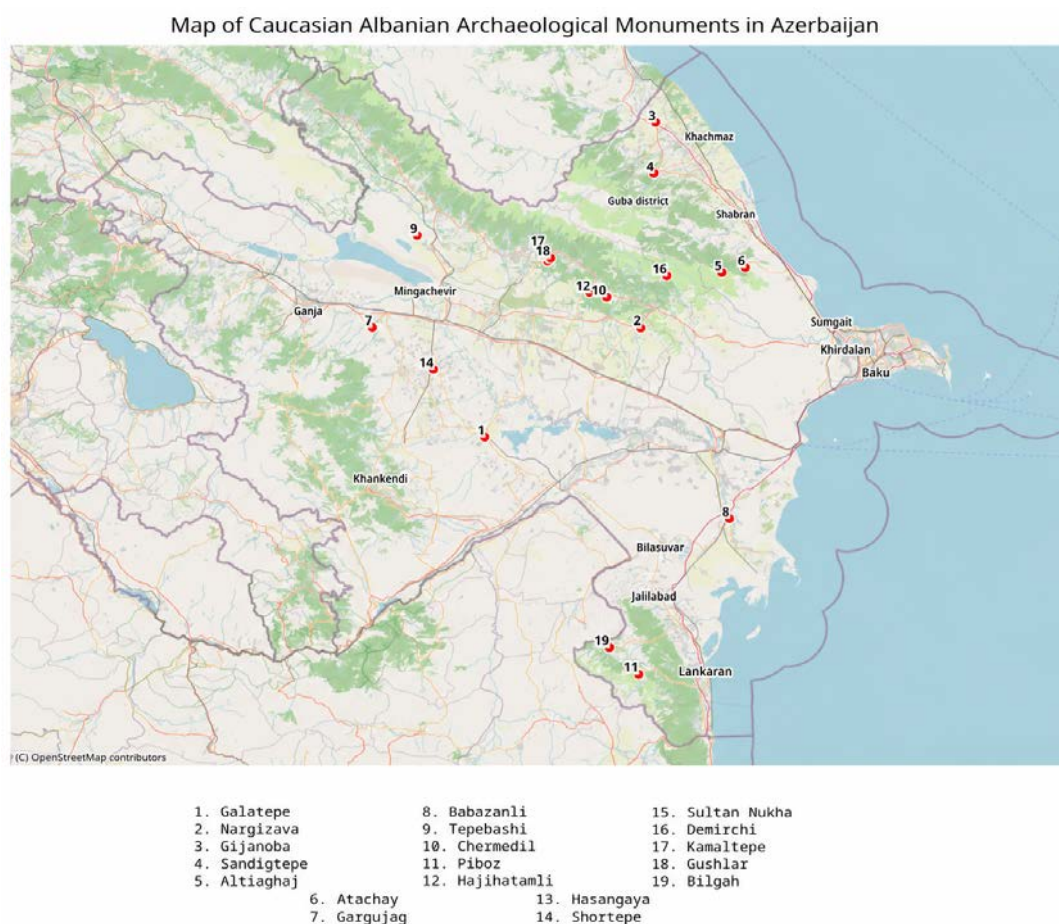


Fig. 1. Archaeological Sites Map

monument in Quba district. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic ceramic samples, bronze pendants, bells, bracelets, various types of buckles, "yolka" patterned necklaces, and hairpins were discovered in the graves. The handles of the discovered jugs were decorated with horse and human head figures, which reflects the high plastic depiction ability in the pottery art of the period. Similar examples of this type of pottery are found in ancient Rustov (Quba) and Canaxır (Xaçmaz) monuments, as well as in Scythian-Sarmatian cultures (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan 2011:210–211). Comparative analysis of the discovered materials allows dating the monument to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE.

During archaeological investigations conducted in Khizi district in 2010, the Altağac and Ataçay necropolises were discovered. Although many graves were destroyed during the construction of a seismological station at the Altağac necropolis, 9 discovered graves showed skeletons buried in various directions, with bronze ornaments, glass beads, and pottery found alongside them. Based on the structure of the graves and the artifacts found within them, it is possible to date the monument to the 1st–3rd centuries BCE (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2011:271–274). In the Ataçay necropolis, 11 stone box graves were discovered. Remains of both adults and children were found in the graves. Bronze earrings, rings, beads made of various materials, and military equipment such as an iron dagger handle were found in the graves. Preliminary research on the discovered objects indicates that this necropolis dates to the 5th–8th centuries CE (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2011:271–274).

In 2010, a jar burial with rich inventory was discovered and investigated near Qarqucaq village, Goranboy district. During the excavation, numerous rare glass vessels, bronze, and various ornaments were found in the grave. As a result of the investigations, the monument was determined to date to the 1st–2nd centuries CE (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2011:195). Between 2011 and 2017, numerous jar burials were discovered as a result of archaeological excavations carried out in the Babazanlı mountain area, Salyan district. Among the findings, various sized burial jars, red pottery, metal weapons, and ornaments hold an important place. The deceased were placed in various sized jars in a contracted position, with knees bent, hands raised towards the chest, lying on their left or right side. The findings suggest that settlement in this region began in the 9th–7th centuries BCE (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2015:222–227).

The Shaki-Gakh-Oghuz archaeological expedition conducted excavations at the Təpəbaşı necropolis

in Fazıl village, Shaki, in 2011, successfully delineating the area of the necropolis (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2012:125). In the same year, an infant jar burial was discovered by the expedition. In 2012, the expedition discovered 4 more graves in the necropolis, including 3 earth graves and one jar burial in 2013, and in 2015, two graves and a burial complex consisting of sacrificial altars, an infant jar burial, and 1 earth grave were found. In 2016, 2 more earth graves were discovered and investigated in the necropolis. Rich archaeological inventory was discovered and studied from the graves to understand the material and cultural life of the period. Among the discovered materials are various types of ceramic samples, weapons, ornaments, and animal bones (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2013:114–115; 2015:205; 2017:183).

In 2012, an ancient and early medieval necropolis covering an area of more than 10 hectares near Çərmədil village, Ismayilli district, was subjected to investigations. Archaeological research conducted by archaeologists B. Jalilov, M. Huseynov, and A. Guliyev determined that the monument dates to the 1st–5th centuries CE. 8 jar burials and 25 earth graves were discovered in the necropolis. During the investigations, various types of weapons, household items, and ornaments were found in the graves. Numismatic samples from the Parthian and Sasanian periods found in one of the jar burials are significant artifacts indicating the trade relations of the period and the social status of the grave owners (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2013:212–222). Archaeological excavations have been carried out at the Piboz necropolis since 2012. The necropolis is located in Gündəsər village, Lerik district, on the Aliabad-Gündəsər road. The findings mainly date from the 5th century BCE to the medieval period CE. This includes Achaemenid, Parthian, and later medieval periods. More than 130 graves were discovered between 2012 and 2016. The sizes of the graves vary. Skeletons were often found on their right or left side, in a contracted (hocker) position. The presence of charcoal and ash layers next to the skeletons indicates the performance of certain rituals. As a result of the excavations, graves of both adults and children were studied. In the 2016 findings, the average age of death for women was determined to be between 25–35, and for men between 25–45. Rich inventory – weapons, ornaments, pottery, various shaped jugs, bowls, and cups – was discovered in the graves. Some vessels have cannellure patterns reminiscent of the metallic luster of the ancient period. According to the results of C14 (radiocarbon) analyses conducted at the University of Georgia in the USA, the monument was used from the 4th–3rd centuries BCE

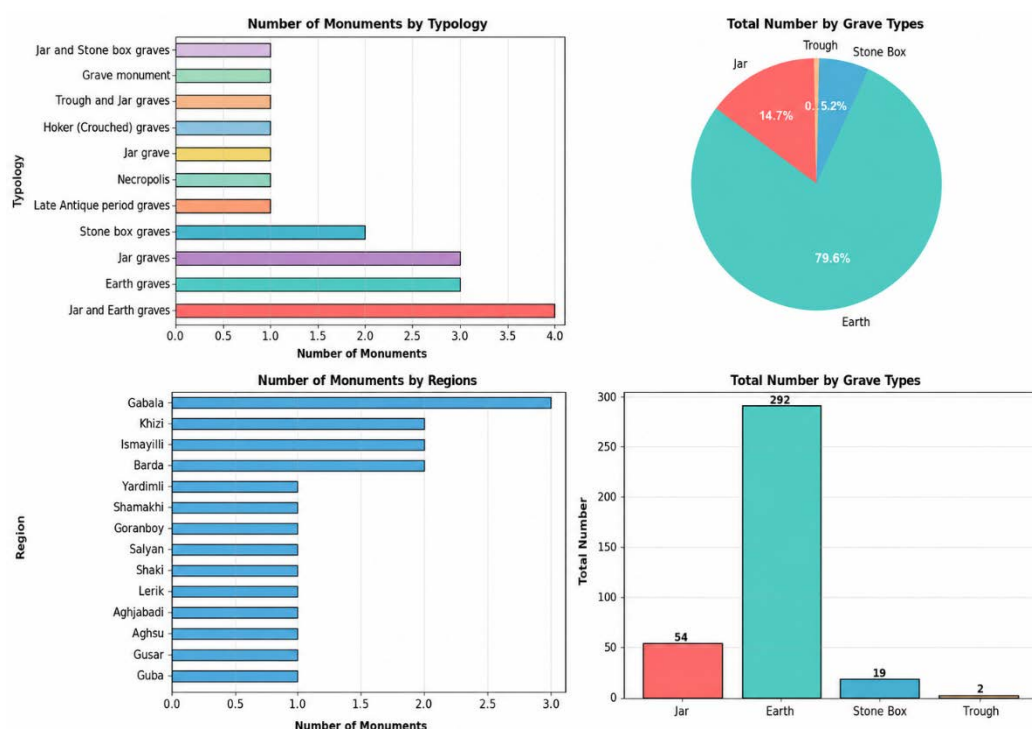


Fig. 2. Statistical Analysis of Burial Typologies

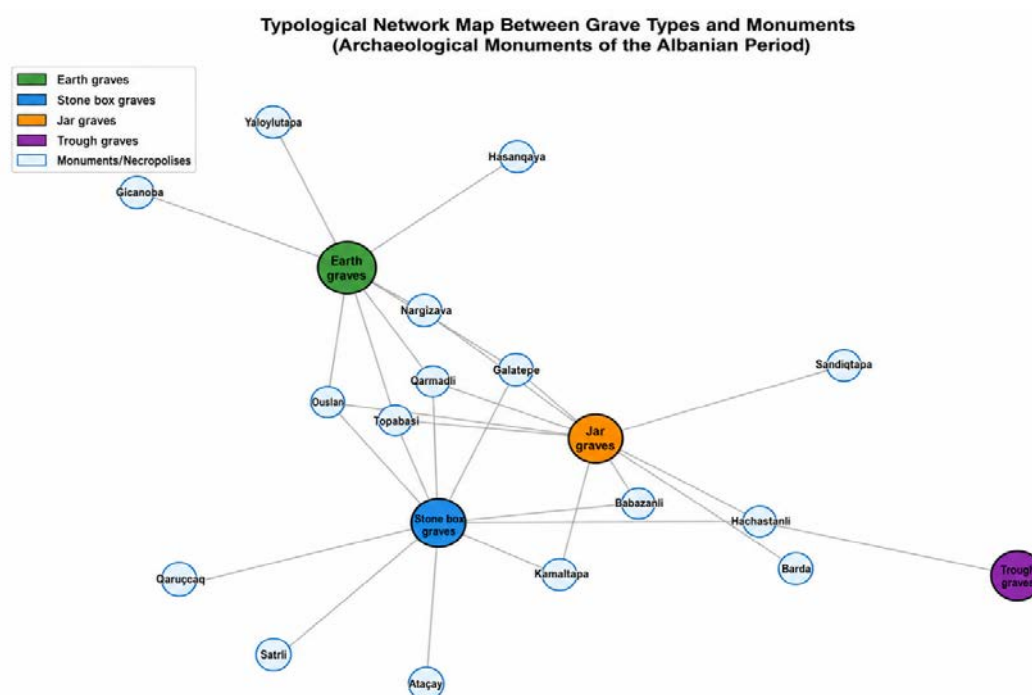


Fig. 3. Typological Network Analysis of Burial Monuments

until the medieval period (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2015:210–215, Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2017:471–475). In 2013, two trough burials and one jar burial dating to the 4th–3rd centuries BCE were discovered in Hachatamli village, Ismayilli district. During the investigation of the trough graves, which were damaged during agricultural work,

it was determined that they were made of light gray clay in rectangular and oval shapes. From these two trough graves, belonging to children, spouted and filtered drinking vessels, single-footed vases, and several beads were found. To the north of the trough graves, a jar burial, whose upper part was damaged and mouth placed towards the north, buried horizontally, was

investigated. Inside the jar, the skeleton was buried in a semi-contracted position, on its left side. An iron sword and paste beads were found in the grave (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2015:272–73).

During archaeological excavations conducted in Hasanqaya and Shatırlı villages, Barda district, in 2015–2016, earth and jar type burial monuments were discovered. During excavations in the backyard area of Hasanqaya village, 3 earth graves were registered, and various types of pottery, bronze and iron metal ornaments were unearthed. In the Şortəpə monument located in Shatırlı village, 4 jar burials were investigated. During archaeological investigations, it was determined that the jars were placed in various directions. During the study of grave inventories, it was possible to say that jar burial No. I belonged to a woman, jar burial No. II to a man, and jar burial No. IV to a child due to its small size. Various types of pottery, glass and paste beads, an iron arrow, a bronze spearhead, and a bronze earring were found in the graves (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2017:234–239).

Systematic and consistent investigation of burial monuments in Gabala district is of exceptional importance for studying the ancient history of Azerbaijan on a scientific basis. Archaeological excavations carried out in Sultan Nuxa, Quşlar village, Kamaltəpə, and Yaloylutəpə areas play an important scientific exemplary role in the study of the historical and cultural heritage of the region. During archaeological excavations in Sultan Nuxa village, 7 graves dating to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE were discovered, three of which recorded double burials. In 4 of these graves, pottery with intentionally perforated bottoms, believed to be related to certain religious beliefs, was found (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan. 2017:255).

In March 2016, during road construction in an area called Gəgəli, 4 km west of Dəmirçi village, Shamakhi district, a late antique and early medieval necropolis covering approximately 1.5 hectares was identified by the Shamakhi-Agsu archaeological expedition. On the left side of the road, 6 stone box graves covered with large flagstones were investigated and studied. During the investigation, it was determined that these graves, located at a depth of 0.7–0.9 m, had an oval shape inside and were built with 5–6 rows of river and rock stones. The graves were oriented north-south. The deceased were buried with their heads to the north, feet to the south, faces to the east, knees tightly bent, hands placed in front of their faces, three on their left side and three on their right side. Four of the graves belonged to men and two to women. From these graves with rich archaeological inventory, pottery placed in various parts of the deceased, iron weapons, bronze ornaments, and paste beads were discovered (Archaeolog-

ical Research in Azerbaijan. 2017:255–259). Between 2015 and 2016, jar and earth graves were discovered as a result of archaeological excavations in Kamaltəpə and Quşlar village. During the investigation of jar burials dating to the 3rd–4th centuries CE in Kamaltəpə, the fact that the graves had been previously destroyed and looted was recorded (Archaeological Research in Azerbaijan, 2017:208–209). In Quşlar village, 1 jar burial and 4 earth graves dating to the ancient period were discovered. Based on the obtained grave inventories, the graves were determined to date to the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE. Numerous pottery, weapons, ornaments, and animal bones were found in the earth graves, and various pottery and glass beads were found on and next to the skeleton in the jar burial.

Conclusion. The statistical analysis reveals clear patterns in the mortuary practices and geography of the Caucasian Albanian period in Azerbaijan.

First, the data shows a highly diverse typological system. Stone box graves and pit graves dominate the landscape. Jar burials appear at 8 sites, while trough burials are rare, found at only 1 site. This variety points to a complex social structure. Burial customs likely varied by social status and changed over time. Geographically, pit graves show a dense concentration. Out of 292 total documented pit graves, 254 sites sit within just three regions. Lerik leads with 130 graves at the Piboz necropolis. Ağsu follows with 99 graves at Nərgizava, and Ismayilli has 25 at Çərmədil. Chronologically, the data suggests a clear progression. Pit graves represent the earliest phase, dating to the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE. Stone box graves appeared later, spanning the 1st–3rd centuries CE. Jar burials show the longest continuity, lasting from the 9th century BCE to the 4th century CE. In contrast, trough burials represent a highly specialized, short-lived practice from the 4th–3rd centuries BCE (Fig. 2, 3).

Social stratification is evident across multiple multi-typology sites. Locations like Qalatəpə, Çərmədil, Hacıhətəmli, Quşlar, and Kamaltəpə contain overlapping grave types. The rich inventories—including weapons, ornaments, and fine ceramics confirm wealth accumulation and high-level craftsmanship. The overlapping timelines indicate that local populations maintained cultural continuity while adapting to internal changes or external influences.

Finally, regional variations point to distinct cultural sub-zones. The Shirvan and Lerik regions relied heavily on pit graves. The Qabala region presents a highly mixed typology. Meanwhile, southern sites like Babazanlı and Qarqucaq favor stone box and jar graves. These patterns highlight localized traditions within the broader Caucasian Albanian cultural sphere.

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