



**HAL**  
open science

## **GaRKAP 2018: The first season of the Azero-Italian Ganja Region Kurgan Archaeological Project in Western Azerbaijan**

Nicola Laneri, Bakhtiyar Jalilov, Lorenzo Crescioli, Guido Guarducci, Jutta Kneisel, Modwene Poulmarc'H, Andrea Ricci, Stefano Valentini

### ► To cite this version:

Nicola Laneri, Bakhtiyar Jalilov, Lorenzo Crescioli, Guido Guarducci, Jutta Kneisel, et al.. GaRKAP 2018: The first season of the Azero-Italian Ganja Region Kurgan Archaeological Project in Western Azerbaijan. *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* , 2019. hal-02409061

**HAL Id: hal-02409061**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02409061>**

Submitted on 18 Dec 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# GaRKAP 2018: The first season of the Azero-Italian Ganja Region Kurgan Archaeological Project in Western Azerbaijan

Nicola LANERI, Bakhtiyar JALILOV, Lorenzo CRESCIOLI, Guido GUARDUCCI, Jutta KNEISEL, Modwene POULMARC'H, Andrea RICCI and Stefano VALENTINI

## Abstract

*The Ganja Region Kurgan Archaeological Project (GaRKAP) is a joint Azero-Italian project that aims at investigating the spread of the tradition of burying the dead in large funerary chambers covered with circular tumuli — that is, kurgans — in the southern Caucasus during a period ranging from the fourth to the first millennium BCE. It is in this region that large numbers of kurgans, dating to the Early Bronze Age (that is, the Kura-Araxes period) through to the Iron Age, have been identified. In particular, the funerary tumuli dated to the Kura-Araxes period reveal a common mortuary custom of multiple human depositions inside a large chamber that is burnt at the conclusion of ritual practices; the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age burials, on the other hand, are smaller in size and usually present single or double human depositions, furnished with bronze objects and, in some circumstances, the skeletal remains of equids.*

*This paper will present the results of the first season of the archaeological work performed in western Azerbaijan, in the Ganja-Gazakh region. More specifically, it is focused on 1) the city of Ganja, where a series of Late Bronze/Early Iron Age kurgans are located, and 2) the steppe of Uzun Rama, along the valley of a creek affluent of the Kura River in the Goranboy district, which is marked by the presence of large kurgans dated to the late fourth millennium BCE and characterised by collective burials.\**

## Introduction

(N. Laneri and B. Jalilov)

The Ganja Region Kurgan Archaeological Project (GaRKAP), initiated in the summer of 2018, aims at tackling questions about the spread and nature of the funerary tumuli tradition in western Azerbaijan between the fourth and first millennia BCE.<sup>1</sup> For the project, an international team

\* We would like to thank the Director of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Dr Maisa Rahimova, for having authorised and supported this scientific project as well as our counterpart, Carla Guarducci, head of the Italian International Institute Lorenzo De' Medici. Our greatest acknowledgements go to: the Italian Ambassador in Azerbaijan, S. E. Augusto Massari, for the incredible support received before, during and after the period of excavation and especially for having invited us to represent the field of archaeology during the visit of the President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, to Baku; to the Governor of the city of Ganja, Elmar Veliyev, and the director of the Ganja office of Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Prof. Fuad Aliyev, for financial and logistical support; and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for financial support. We would like to thank Dr Zaur Hasanov (Azerbaijan

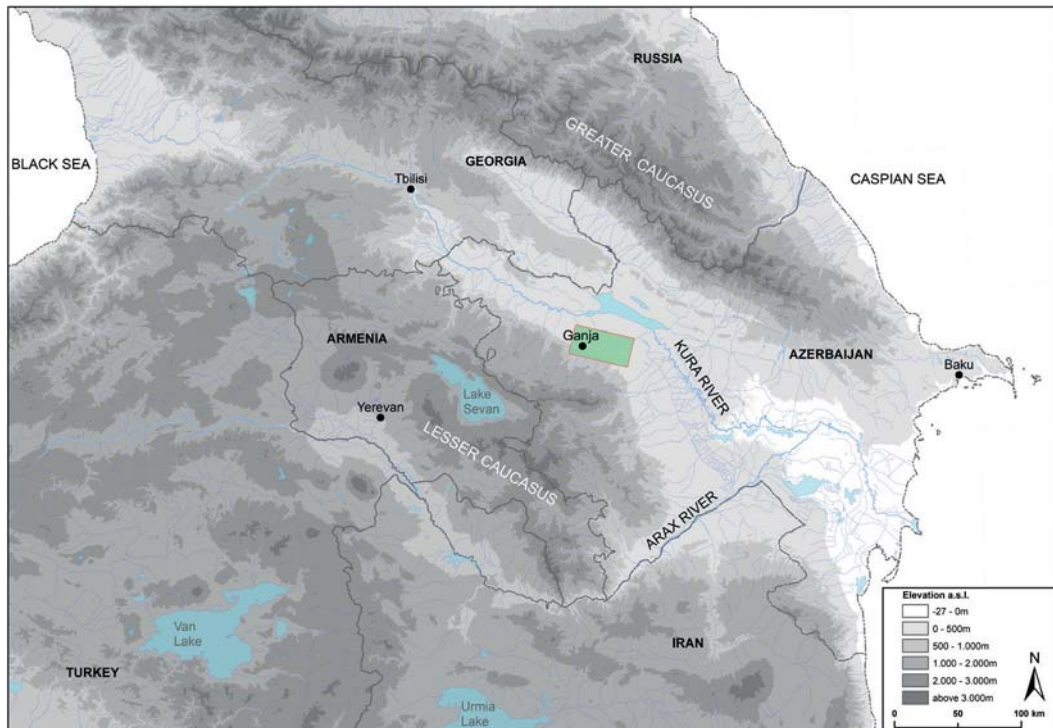


Fig. 1. Map of Azerbaijan highlighting the areas investigated by GaRKAP (Map by A. Ricci).

of scholars combined to begin investigating areas with a high density of kurgans in the districts of Goranboy and Ganja city in western Azerbaijan (Fig. 1). In particular, two main areas have been of interest to GaRKAP. They are:

- 1) The Uzun Rama plateau: A limestone plateau located south of the Kura River along the Kurekçay, an affluent of the Kura, and near the village of Şadılı in the Goranboy district. The area is geologically marked by a lack of vegetation and a distinctive white lime geological stratum, which is still used by the locals to make a very fine white plaster. It is in this area that a high density of large communal kurgans belonging to the Kura-Araxes period, as well as smaller burial mounds dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age chronological phase, are still recognisable. In this context, our project has focused its attention on surveying the plateau and tracing the funerary landscapes of the different periods, as well as starting the archaeological excavation of one of the communal kurgans of the Kura-Araxes period ('Kurgan 8', Fig. 2).

National Academy of Science, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography) for his incredible support in the field, Sergio Russo (British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara) for excavating Kurgan 8 with us, for the drawings, for the photos and for entering the data in the database, and two Azeri students, Lola Huseynova and Vusal Gasanov, who worked with us in the field.

<sup>1</sup> Akhundov 1999, 2001; Poulmarc'h 2014a, 2014b.



Fig. 2. Kurgan 8 in the Uzun Rama plateau (Photo by GaRKAP).

- 2) The area located on the western outskirts of the modern city of Ganja that is part of the Heydar Aliyev Park: The area along the Ganja River, another affluent of the Kura River, marked by the presence of a concentration of kurgans dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age. This area has been under investigation since the 20th century, but more recently, due to the creation of the Heydar Aliyev Park, the governor of Ganja created a task for local scholars, directed by Bakhtiyar Jalilov of the National Academy of Science of Baku, who excavated some of the kurgans located in this region. The aim of GaRKAP is to excavate all the remaining kurgans, then create an archaeological park to be presented to the local communities at the end of the archaeological work. In particular, during the summer of 2018 GaRKAP excavated a medium-sized kurgan ('Kurgan 6', Fig. 3), which had been badly disturbed by looters, but still brought to light archaeological materials that can be associated with the Chodžali-Kedabeg archaeological phase, dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age.

### **A funerary landscape: The survey of the Uzun Rama plateau**

*(A. Ricci and J. Kneisel)*

In June 2018, an initial survey investigation was carried out to document the archaeological signature of the Uzun Rama plateau and the immediately adjacent areas. This pilot study combined geological observations with intensive systematic surveying and remote sensing analysis





Fig. 3. Kurgan 6 in the city of Ganja (Photo by GaRKAP).

of historical and contemporary datasets. Detailed topographic mapping was also completed in a selected area of *c.* 150 × 100 m along the northern margin of the Uzun Rama plateau to document the density and morphology of the different kurgans in this area. In the context of this methodological approach, it should be noted that due to the geomorphology of the area, it was easy to distinguish artificial funerary mounds (kurgans) from natural mounds during the reconnaissance survey of the Uzun Rama plateau.

The Uzun Rama plateau lies in the piedmont of the Lesser Caucasus. It is located at the northern margins of the eroded slopes connecting the higher forested lands and the lower Pliocene and Quaternary formations of the Kura River Basin system.<sup>2</sup> The tributaries of the Kura River flow in a generally SW to NE direction in this area. To the south of Uzun Rama the gradient is steeper, and the rivers cut deeply into the eroded slopes. Where the rivers reach the lower formations, the declivity of the slopes and rivers decreases. This change of declivity creates the conditions for the formation of alluvial fans, stretching towards the north, and frequently these alluvial-fan zones accommodate prehistoric settlements.<sup>3</sup> Uzun Rama lies in the area where the degree of declivity changes (Fig. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Sosson *et al.* 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Ollivier *et al.* 2015; Ricci 2017.

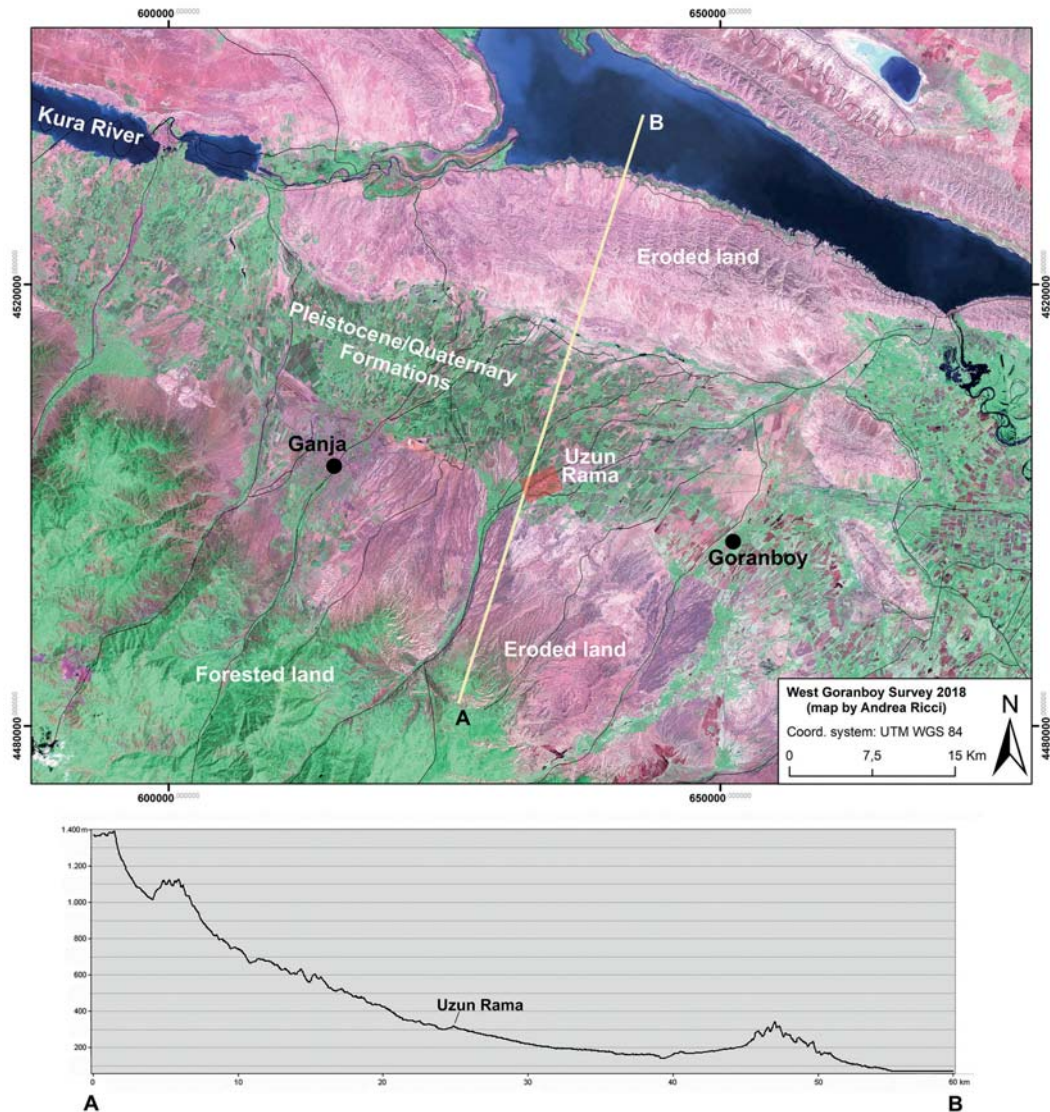


Fig. 4. Overview map with indication of the main land units and an elevation profile from south to north. The rectangle indicates the position of Uzun Rama (Map by A. Ricci).

Specifically, the plateau lies immediately north of the Kurekçay River, north of the village of Şadıllı and east of the village of Garadaghli (Fig. 5). It lengthens along the SW–NE axis for a total of *c.* 2.6 km, reaching a maximum width of *c.* 750 m at its greatest extent. The plateau’s surface declines along the SW–NE orientation, with a difference in elevation between the highest point of the plateau (located at the SW edge; 330 m a.s.l.) to the lowest point (the NE edge; 286 m a.s.l.) of *c.* 45 m. In the northeastern part, Uzun Rama rises some 5–10 m above the



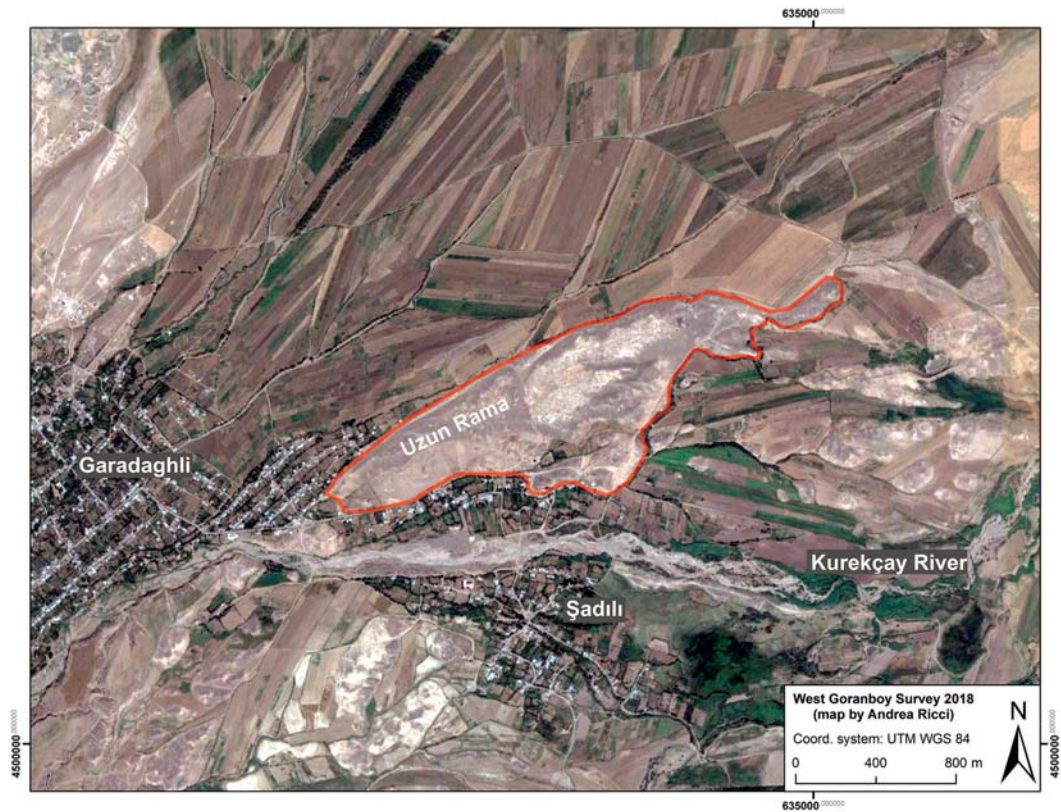


Fig. 5. Map of the investigated area. The polygon indicates the limits of Uzun Rama (base map: WorldView; Map by A. Ricci).

surrounding fields (Fig. 6). The height difference is most evident in the southwestern part, where the slopes of the plateau are steeper and higher (Fig. 7). These topographical conditions make the plateau of Uzun Rama clearly visible from both the eroded slopes to the south and the lower plains to the north.

The plateau is composed of permeable Miocene sediments, which originated from the mountains of the Lesser Caucasus. Uncemented conglomerates and sand deposits are recorded close to the modern surface of the plateau, along with a distinctive white lime material, which is found in large quantities over the entire area of the Uzun Rama plateau. The white chalky material was used to erect the outer surface of the kurgans (see below). Locals employed this material as a plaster in building until recent times and its extraction led to the partial destruction of the archaeological record in the area. A comparison of three remote sensing imageries (Gambit KH-7 from 20 October 1963, Quickbird from 14 October 2003, and WorldView-3 from 11 August 2003) shows that modern extractive activities have encroached upon a large part of the archaeological record, especially in the central part of the plateau (Fig. 8). Destruction had already occurred prior to 1963; for example, a number of kurgans that are visible on the Gambit images are no longer



Fig. 6. View from Uzun Rama of the fields stretching north of the plateau. Here, the difference of elevation between the upper part of the plateau and the lower fields is *c.* 5 to 10m (Photo by A. Ricci).



Fig. 7. View from south of the southern steep slopes of the Uzun Rama plateau (Photo by A. Ricci).





Fig. 8. The central portion of Uzun Rama viewed on three imageries (from upper to lower): Gambit KH-7 from 20 Oct 1963; Quickbird from 14 Oct 2003; WorldView-3 from 11 Aug 2003. A comparison of the images illustrates the encroachment of modern extractive activities in the area (Maps by A. Ricci).

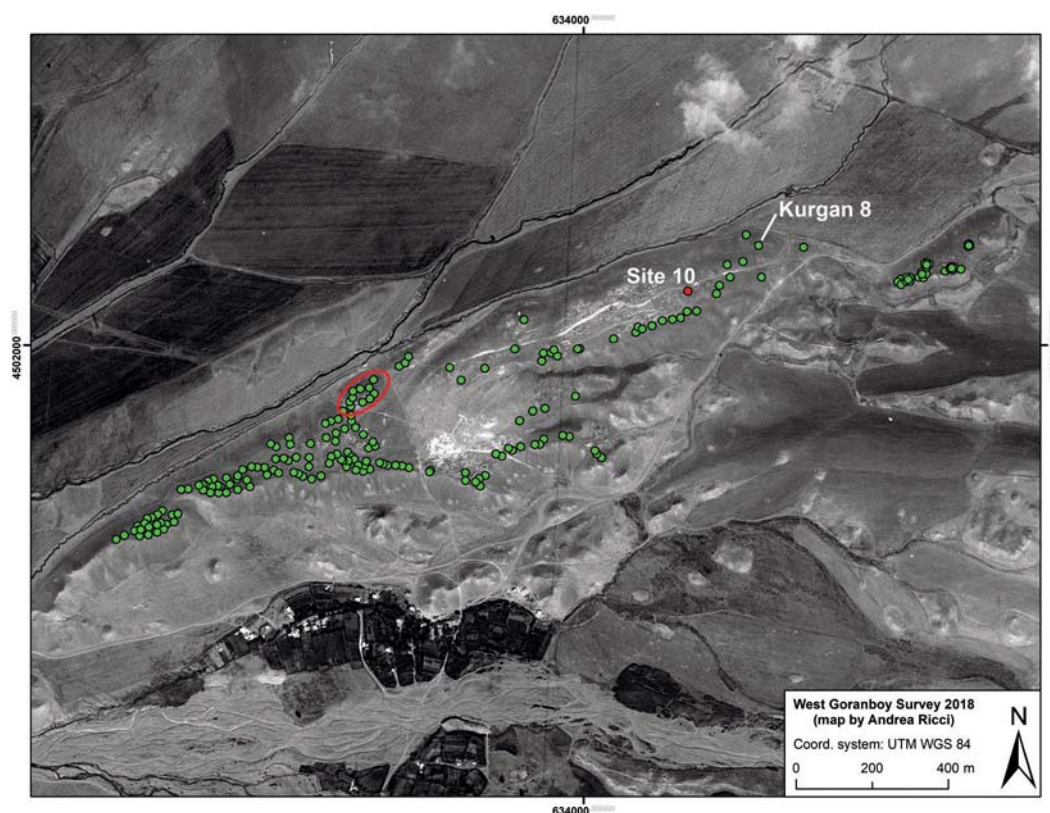


Fig. 9. Overview map of Uzun Rama with indication of the location of: the 205 kurgans (dots); the area where we conducted the detailed topographic survey (ellipse); the Late Chalcolithic site (Site 10). The position of Kurgan 8 is also indicated (base map: Gambit KH-7 mission 4403, recorded on 20 Oct 1963; Map by A. Ricci).

present in the imagery of the 21st century. The local authorities, in cooperation with the National Academy of Science of Azerbaijan, have recently prohibited extractive activity on the Uzun Rama in recognition of the value of the cultural heritage of the area.<sup>4</sup> The geological composition of the plateau prevents the growth of vegetation, except for sparse low *Artemisia*-like plants. The meaning of the name Uzun Rama — ‘empty land’ — also testifies to the bare landscape on the surface of the plateau. It follows that visibility on the ground is ideal for survey investigation.

Archaeologically, the presence of a large number of kurgans characterises the Uzun Rama area. Their position has been recorded by handheld GPS, and a total of 205 kurgans that are currently visible on the ground have been located on a map (Fig. 9). The kurgans are located along the margins as well as in the internal part of the plateau, but never on its slopes. Concentrations of kurgans are found, for example, in the southwestern area of the plateau. Alignments of kurgans are visible especially along its southern margins. There is a high dimensional and morphological

<sup>4</sup> Jalilov 2012.

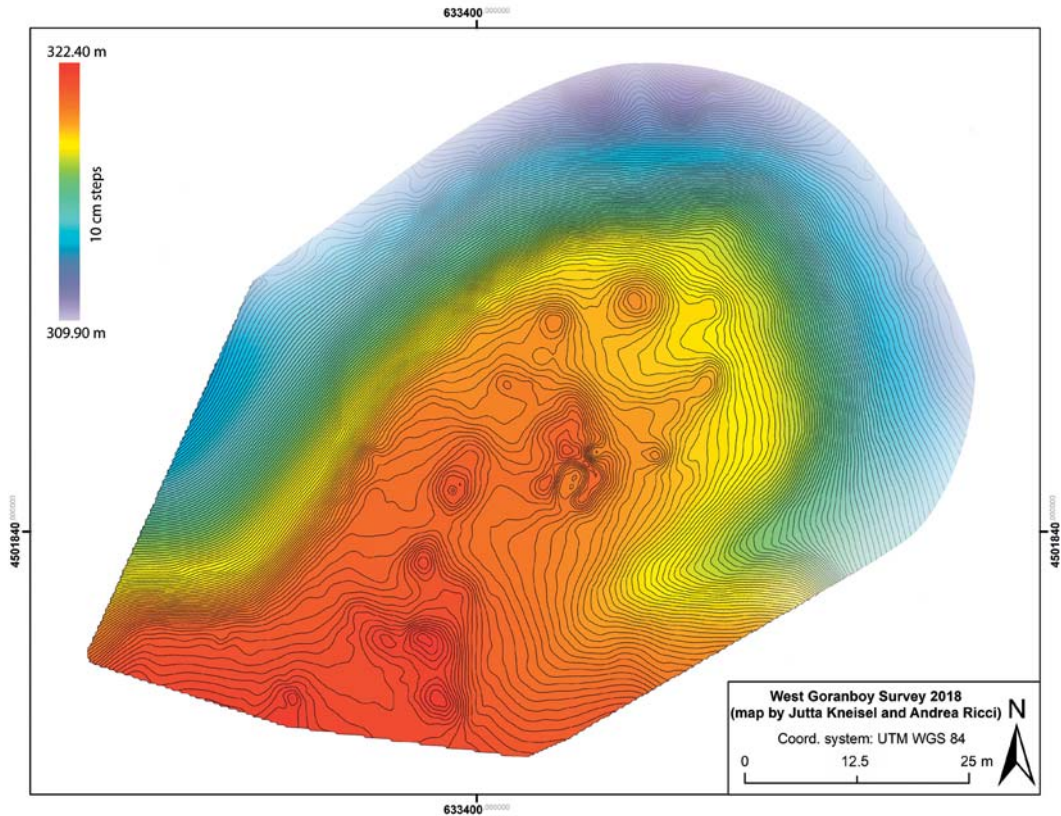


Fig. 10. Detailed topographic mapping of the central area along the northern margins of the Uzun Rama plateau (Map by J. Kneisel and A. Ricci).

variability among the kurgans, as illustrated by the detailed topographic mapping completed along the northern margins of the central part of the plateau over an area of *c.* 150 × 100 m (see ellipse in Fig. 9). The topographic mapping was executed with a total station and measurements were taken at a regular distance of *c.* 6 m. More dense readings were recorded on the kurgans and along their margins. Thirteen kurgans were mapped using this method (Fig. 10). In this area, the extent of single kurgans ranges from *c.* 3 × 3 m to 26 × 26 m. Their height is from approximately +0.50 m to +5 m above their surroundings.

Previous excavations of seven kurgans by Bakhtiyar Jalilov documented two phases of use of the plateau as a funerary area: the Kura-Araxes/Early Bronze Age period — *c.* 3500–2500 BCE; and the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age — *c.* 1500–1100 BCE.<sup>5</sup> Jalilov documented that large communal kurgans belonged to the Kura-Araxes period and smaller ones dated to the later period. At this stage, it is impossible to determine the absolute and relative chronology of the unexcavated

<sup>5</sup> Jalilov 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014.



kurgans without further investigation. Systematic walking transects have documented that no archaeological material was found on the surface of Uzun Rama, apart from in the areas where modern encroachments had occurred. Here, a few sherds that date to the Early Bronze, Late Bronze or Iron Age were collected, but they cannot be associated with any single kurgan, as they come from mixed contexts.

No further archaeological remains were identified on Uzun Rama, with the exception of a concentration of a few Late Chalcolithic sherds found in a single location (site 10) *c.* 220 m to the southwest of Kurgan 8. These pottery fragments were spread over an area of *c.* 25 × 30 m on flat ground with no visible cultural deposit. They represent the only evidence for the use of the area during the period prior to the erection of the Kura-Araxes kurgans.

In ancient times, the kurgans remained in place and were visible from afar; they were not destroyed by the erection of later burial mounds. At this stage, no “stratigraphy” of the kurgans is apparent, as they were not built on top of each other, nor do they cut into each other. Thus, we can assume that the selection of the location for erecting a kurgan implied the recognition of earlier burial mounds and then necessity to respect them. The excavation of Kurgan 8 does, however, highlight a later re-use, but within the same cultural horizon, of a funerary mound dated to the Kura-Araxes period. Thus, a re-appropriation of the cultural memory of a kurgan is plausible, but without the construction of a new mound on top of an earlier one.

In analysing the area of Uzun Rama, it is clear that the local topographic features of the plateau make the area highly visible from multiple directions. Furthermore, the geological characteristics of the Uzun Rama plateau do not offer suitable conditions for habitation. Probably for these two reasons combined, the area was entirely dedicated to the construction of kurgans during the Kura-Araxes period as well as during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Ages. Thus, the conditions were created for establishing Uzun Rama as the place dedicated to housing the dead. The plateau was in use for this purpose for a long time and was not utilised for other human activities, except for pastoralism or nomadic movements between the Kurekçay creek and the fields to the north.

Early kurgans perhaps remained visible because the local communities recognised them as the place where their ancestors were buried. Most likely, soon after the erection of the first larger communal burial mounds, the entire Uzun Rama plateau and its kurgans became a *lieu de memoire*<sup>6</sup> for the local communities (Fig. 11).

However, Uzun Rama was not the only place for burying the dead in the region. Preliminary analysis of remote sensing datasets and targeted visits also confirm the presence of kurgans on the eroded slopes stretching south and in the fields to the north of Uzun Rama. Future investigations will shed light on the patterns of location of the kurgans during and between different periods. Moreover, continued study will aid in detecting contemporary sites in order to better understand the socio-cultural and physical relationship between areas dedicated to the dead and areas used by the living in the foreland basins of the Lesser Caucasus during the Bronze Age. A principal research aim going forward will therefore be to contextualise the kurgans of Uzun Rama within the broader regional socio-cultural landscape during the Bronze and Iron Ages.

<sup>6</sup> Nora 1984–1986.



Fig. 11. An overview of the Uzun Rama plateau from its southern edge: the entire area was the place dedicated to housing the dead (Photo by A. Ricci).

### An attempt to reconstruct the biography of a kurgan: The case of Kura-Araxes Kurgan 8 in the Uzun Rama plateau

(*N. Laneri, B. Jalilov, L. Crescioli, M. Poulmarc'h and S. Valentini*)

Kurgans in the southern Caucasus dating to the Kura-Araxes period have rarely been investigated using detailed stratigraphic analysis of the different phases of construction, use, closing, and, finally, monumentalisation. It is with this perspective in mind that GaRKAP tackled the excavation of one of these kurgans, Kurgan 8 (Fig. 2). Kurgan 8 consists of a large tumulus that is slightly oval in shape, with a diameter of *c.* 16 m NW to SE and 17 m NE to SW (Figs 12, 13). The stone tumulus is made up of two rings of medium-sized stones separated by a soil path that might have served a ritualistic purpose in the end-use phase of the kurgan, when it was monumentalised as a memorial locale embedded in an ancestral landscape. Unfortunately, one quarter of the kurgan was destroyed by a tractor employed to unearth the precious white lime used by the villagers.

Three later intrusive pits are recognisable on the central ring. We were able to fully excavate one of these, a burial (Gr1-1, Figs 14, 15) consisting of an earthen pit filled with stones and dirt at the end of its use. The pit was 1.6 m deep with an elliptical section of *c.* 2.70 × 1.60 m. The burial contained the remains of one adult individual, whose age at death is estimated at between 20 and 39 years.<sup>7</sup> The lower limbs are found in a flexed position on the right side. In fact, the skeleton is incomplete probably due to later graverobbing and only a few hand phalanges, the pelvic girdle and the lower limbs are present. A detailed analysis of the position of the bones, especially those that have been in disequilibrium since decay of the soft tissues, indicates that the body decomposition occurred in a filled space, which means that the pit was filled with earth immediately after burial.

<sup>7</sup> The age at death was estimated according to the method developed by Schmitt (2005).

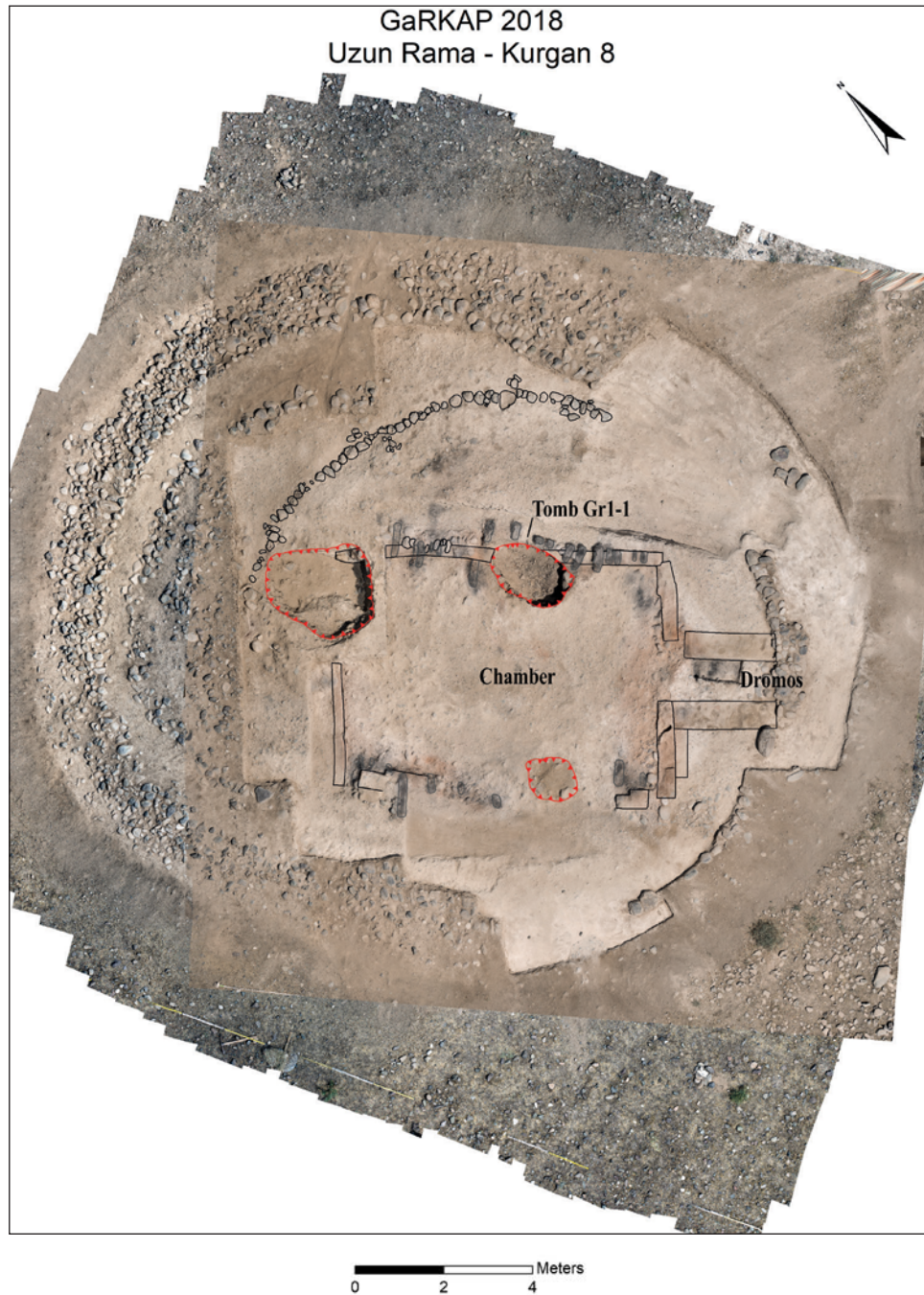


Fig. 12. General overview of the different phases of construction and use of Kurgan 8 (Uzun Rama plateau) dated to the Kura-Araxes period (Orthophoto rendered using Photoscan by Lorenzo Crescioli).





Fig. 13. Topographical map of Kurgan 8 (Map rendered using Photoscan by Lorenzo Crescioli).



Fig. 14. Earthen pit grave (Gr 1-1) of the end of the Early Bronze Age showing the skeletal remains and funerary goods (Photo by GaRKAP).

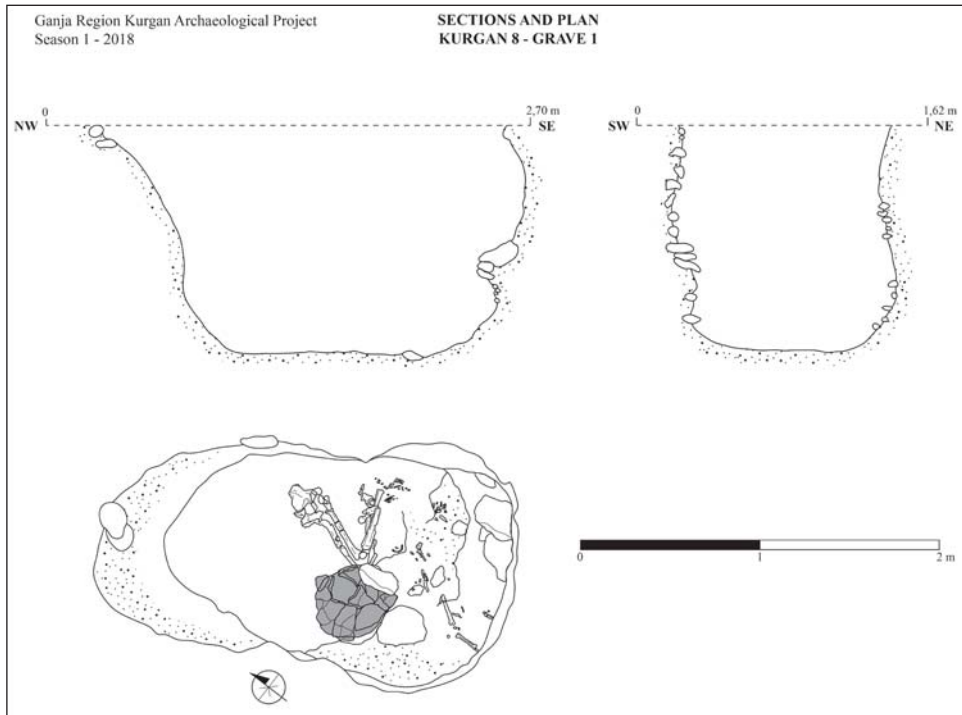


Fig. 15. Drawing and section of Grave Gr 1-1 (by Sergio Russo).

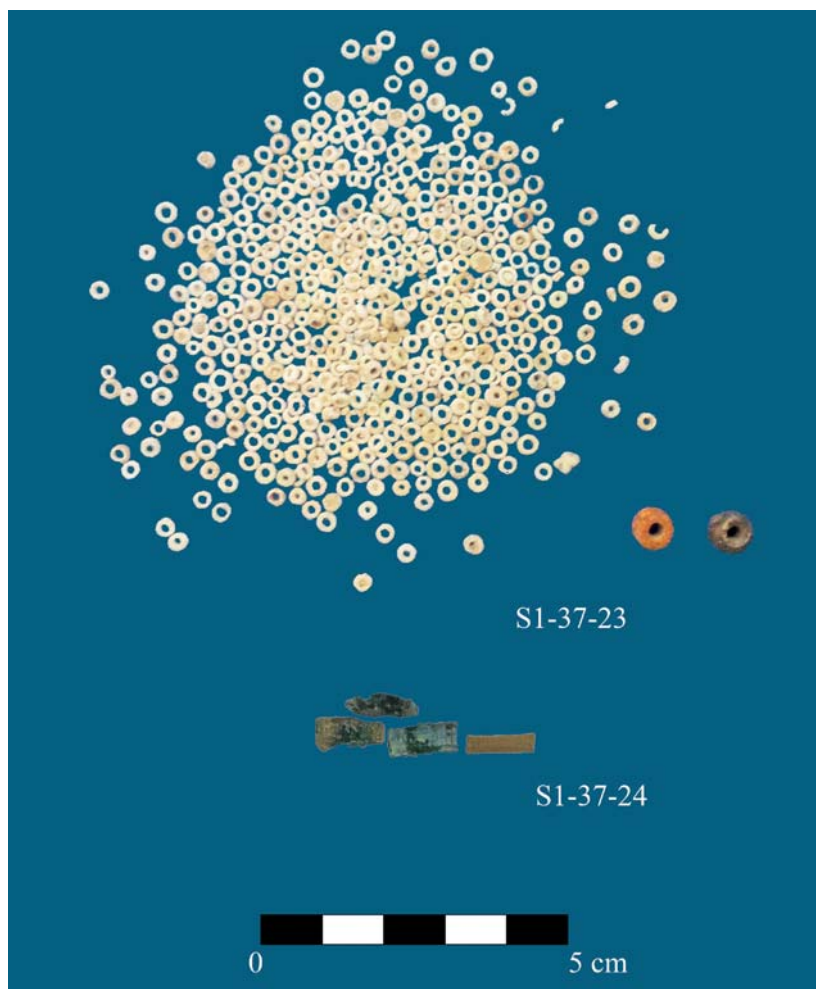


Fig. 16. Stone beads and bronze clasp of a necklace that was part of the funerary goods of Grave Gr 1-1 (Photo elaborated by Sergio Russo).

The funerary goods associated with the grave consist of a stone bead necklace with a bronze clasp (Fig. 16) and a Black Burnished handled jar typical of the very end of the Early Bronze Age (Fig. 17).<sup>8</sup> In addition, an important deposit of animal remains was found on the south-southeast side of the burial, including a complete snake and a sheep/goat skeleton in anatomical connection.<sup>9</sup> The presence of disseminated stone beads and metal fragments in the north-northwest part of the tomb, along with the fact that only the lower part of the human skeleton and a few

<sup>8</sup> A C14 date is currently in progress, on one of the human bones, in order to determine the chronological attribution of this tomb.

<sup>9</sup> The study of the animal bones is currently underway by R. Berthon (Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, UMR 7209, Paris).



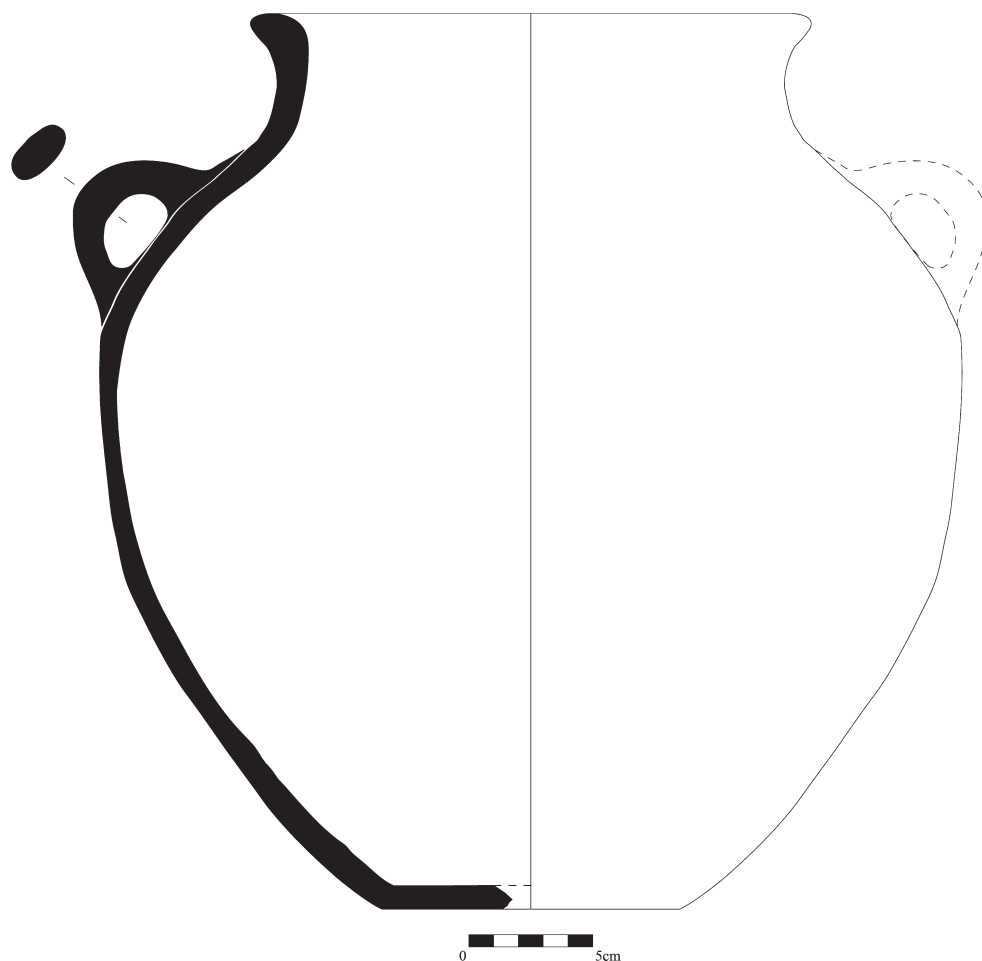


Fig. 17. Drawing of a handled Black Burnished jar that was part of the funerary goods of Grave 1-1 (by Sergio Russo).

hand phalanges are present, suggest that the burial was probably looted in ancient times by people who had some memory of what it might contain. The discovery of this pit burial is important for several reasons, including: first, single Kura-Araxes pit burials are rare in western Azerbaijan, especially from the very end of the Kura-Araxes culture; and second, the presence of animal deposits in burials is also very uncommon for this culture. These new data allow a better understanding of the behaviour of the populations when confronting death.

The other two pits, not yet completely excavated, are also probably burials. All three have in common the fact that they disturb only the sides and corners of the main funerary chambers of the kurgan, and this does not seem accidental. In fact, it probably testifies to a continuity of use of the kurgan during the Kura-Araxes period, probably linking specific individuals with the memory of the community deposited within the large funerary chambers located underneath the tumulus.



Fig. 18. Photo (from east) of the dromos and funerary chamber of Kurgan 8 highlighting Levels 1–3 of use of the funerary mound (Photo by GaRKAP).

The funerary chamber of Kurgan 8 (Fig. 18) is oriented SW–NE and it has an entrance *dromos* — about 2.2 m long and 1 m wide — carved into the bedrock with a few steps cut into the virgin soil. It provides access to the large square funerary chamber, also excavated from the bedrock, which is 5 m wide and *c.* 7 m long. Both the dromos and the funerary chamber have internal walls *c.* 30–35 cm thick and made of mud bricks; in the funerary chamber, they rise 20–30 cm above the edge of the pit. On top of the walls, long wooden beams were placed perpendicular to the entranceway in order to create the roof. The entranceway might have been supported by a wooden beam acting as an architrave, but only future excavations will confirm this.

Other kurgans dated to the Kura-Araxes period in the Uzun Rama plateau and at Mentesh Tepe<sup>10</sup> have shown that once the dead had been disposed of inside the funerary chamber, the whole chamber was set on fire. In the case of Kurgan 8, this practice is recognisable in the burnt beams visible along the edge of the mudbrick walls (Fig. 19) that define the sides of the funerary chamber as well as the *dromos*. This intentional burning of the funerary chamber and *dromos* must have been visible from a long distance away, creating a theatrical spectacle in association with the bright white of the structure. At the end of this ritual process, probably associated with an act of purification, the roof collapsed inside the chamber and the *dromos*.

Although the excavation has been temporarily interrupted at the level corresponding to the top of the walls of the chamber, it is possible to hypothesise a tentative sequence of the building phases of the kurgan, aimed at the reconstruction of its biography.

<sup>10</sup> Lyonnet *et al.* 2015; Jalilov 2012, 2014; Pecqueur 2014; Poulmarc'h 2014a.



Fig. 19. A wooden beam that was part of the roofing system of the funerary chamber of Kurgan 8, which was purposely set alight in Level 3 (Phase 6) (Photo by GaRKAP).



- Level 1: Construction of the 1st Mound
  - Phase 9: pit cut for both the *dromos* and the chamber, directly onto the virgin soil.
  - Phase 8: construction of the *dromos* and the chamber (inner perimeter walls in mud bricks or pisé and roof with long wooden beams). The covering of the top of the structure with the material (white limestone) derived from the excavation of the pit, making up the mound in its original circular shape. Consolidation of the northern side of the mound with a small supporting wall made of stone to prevent erosion.
- Level 2: Use of the chamber. Not excavated.
  - Phase 7: inhumation of the bodies and of the associated funerary goods in the chamber.
- Level 3: Ritual destruction of the chamber. Not excavated.
  - Phase 6: intentional burning of the funerary chamber and *dromos* and collapse of the roof.
- Level 4: Monumentalisation of the kurgan. Creation of the 2nd Mound.
  - Phase 5: filling and sealing of the chamber and *dromos*. Preparation of the reconstruction.
  - Phase 4: building of the lower and upper rings of stones. Creation of the dirt path between the two circles, probably used for ritual circumambulation. Covering with stones of the top of the mound. Strangely, these two circles appear to not be concentric with the inner ring of stones of the earlier tumulus.
- Level 5: Memorialisation of the kurgan.
  - Phase 3: Re-use of the mound as cemetery. Excavation of graves to bury single adults that do not significantly disturb the main funerary chamber of the kurgan.
- Level 6: Abandonment of the kurgan.
  - Phase 2: modern scattered temporary semi-nomadic occupation.
  - Phase 1: destruction through use of a tractor.

These large communal kurgans are typical of western Azerbaijan and represent communal graves probably dedicated to the burial of an entire familial group.<sup>11</sup> The long chronological range and the high density of buried individuals noticed in some other Kura-Araxes kurgans might represent lineages that link a kinship for at least four generations. In the case of the kurgans previously excavated in the Uzun Rama plateau by Bakhtiyar Jalilov, the minimum number of individuals buried within ranges between 80 and 120, but according to the physical anthropologist on that project these numbers could be even higher.<sup>12</sup> During the fire, the beams composing the roof would have burnt and collapsed into the chamber, disturbing the whole deposit and making the bone count difficult. According to Jalilov, in order to facilitate the spread of the flames within the chamber, a sort of chimney was probably located either in the middle of the chamber or at its rear.

Setting up an intentional ritualised fire in the funerary chamber appears to be a distinguishing aspect of the Kura-Araxes-period kurgan of western Azerbaijan. In fact, another example was discovered at the site of Mentesh Tepe.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the kurgans of this region appear to be linked with nomadic groups, due to the fact that no contemporaneous settlements can be found in their vicinity. This testifies to the important role of these kurgans in framing the funerary landscape of the people seasonally transiting this region and depositing the dead members of the group in this specific context.

<sup>11</sup> Palumbi 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Yilmaz Erdal personal communication; Jalilov 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Lyonnet *et al.* 2015; Pecqueur 2014; Poulmarc'h 2014a, 2014b.

**The kurgans of Ganja city: The excavation of a Late Bronze/Early Iron Age kurgan in Ganja**  
(*N. Laneri and G. Guarducci*)

The other region investigated by GaRKAP is the area west of the modern city of Ganja that is part of the Heydar Aliyev Park. Along the southern ridge of this park is a series of small- to medium-sized tumuli. Even though they have been disturbed by modern agricultural machinery and heavily looted, remains of archaeological material found inside the funerary chambers indicate a chronology within the range of the numerous kurgans found in the area that have been dated to the Chodžali-Kedabeg culture, also known as Khojaly-Gedebey (*c.* 14th–10th century BCE).<sup>14</sup> Belonging to this period is Kurgan 6, excavated during our first season (Figs 20, 21).

Kurgan 6 consists of a large mounded area marked by a natural layer of white limestone and small-pebbled bedrock in which the ancient inhabitants excavated a circular pit. In the middle of this pit a *c.* 1 m-deep earthen pit was excavated in order to create the kurgan's funerary chamber, which would be used for depositing the body of the deceased and the associated funerary goods. Even though the kurgan has been greatly disturbed, it is possible to reconstruct the overall architecture. It consists of two concentric circles of compacted stones with larger stones along the outer profile of each circle. Small-sized stones together with the pulverised limestone are used as binding, serving the purpose of cementing the whole structure. The total diameter of the mound is *c.* 8 m. The central section marked by the pit and the funerary chamber is *c.* 4 m in diameter. The funerary chamber is 1.80 m by 1 m and *c.* 1 m deep; its corners are at the cardinal points and it is oriented along a SW–NE axis. No traces of roofing have been found, but a few signs of burnt wood are visible along some stones, suggesting a roofing system similar to that seen in other kurgans found in the area. The floor as well as the walls of the chamber consist of the natural bedrock, comprised of small- to medium-sized pebbles mixed with sand and soil.

As mentioned above, the chamber was looted, and traces of this action can be seen in the eastern quarter of the kurgan, where most of the stones have been removed. In fact, in the last 20 cm, human and animal bones together with some elements of material culture have been unearthed, mixed together and without any coherence. The human bones appear to belong to one adult individual, whose age at death and sex are unknown due to absence of the coxal bones. The presence of small bones (carpal bones, hand and foot bones, the patella) indicates the primary deposit of the subject, which was disturbed thereafter, during the looting. The animal bones are still under examination by the archaeozoologist, but it is interesting to notice the presence of a fully articulated snake. This element is common to numerous other kurgans of the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age period, especially those found along the valley of the Ganja River (for example, the kurgans of the Göygöl area excavated by Hummel in 1941<sup>15</sup>), as well as to the Early Bronze Age kurgans. Thus, a possible common long-lasting religious belief associated with the snake and the netherworld is indicated. The importance of the snake in the afterlife of Iron Age groups inhabiting the Caucasus is further highlighted by its use for decorative purposes on ceramic as well as metal funerary goods.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jalilov 2010, 2011; Sagona 2018, p. 380 and references within.

<sup>15</sup> See Gummel 1992 and Castelluccia 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Sagona 2018, p. 445.



Fig. 20. General overview of the external ring and funerary chamber of the Late Bronze /Early Iron Age Kurgan 6 (Ganja city) (Orthophoto rendered using Photoscan by Lorenzo Crescioli).



GaRKAP 2018  
Ganja - Kurgan 6

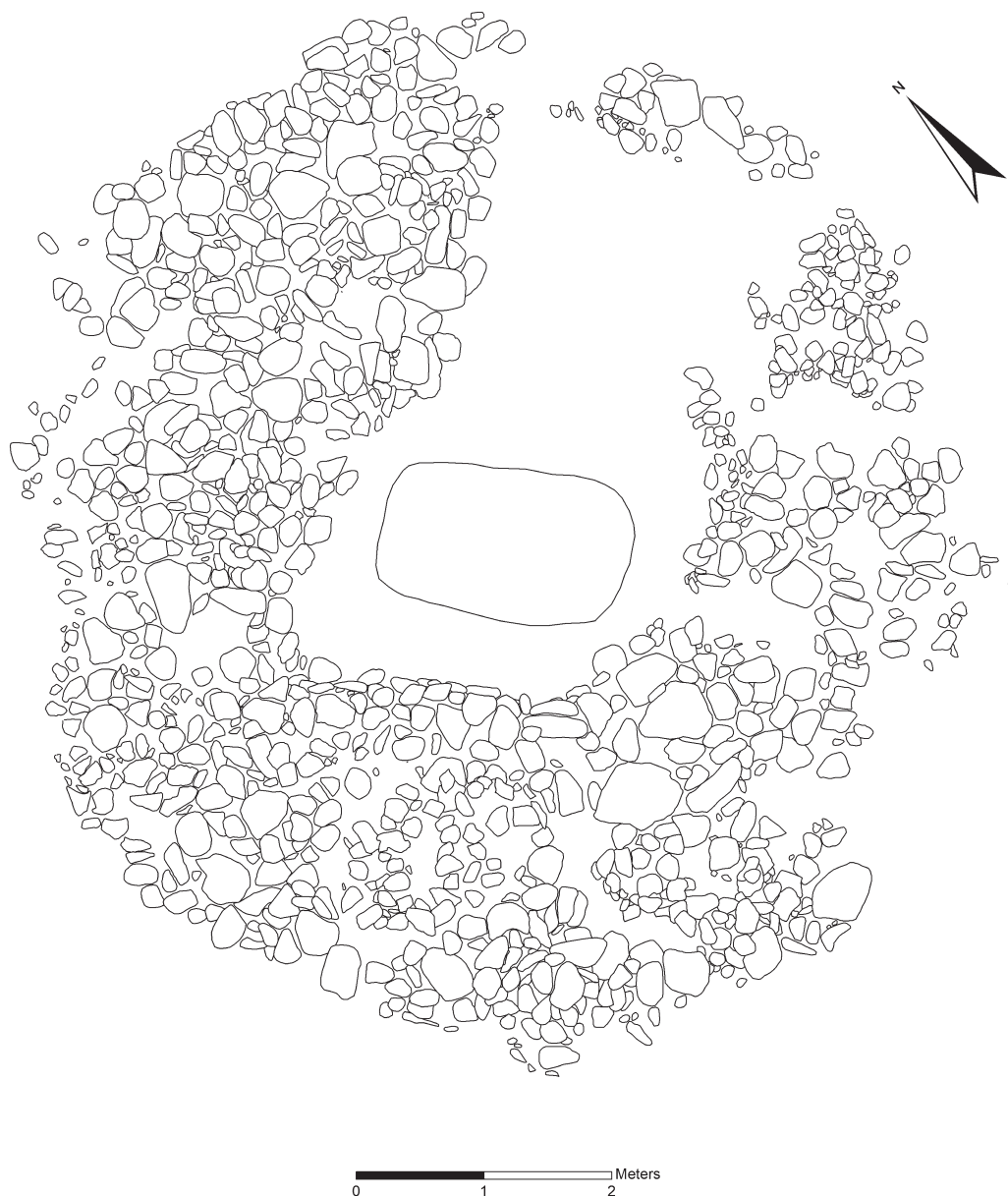


Fig. 21. Topographical map of Kurgan 6 Map rendered using Photoscan by Lorenzo Crescioli).

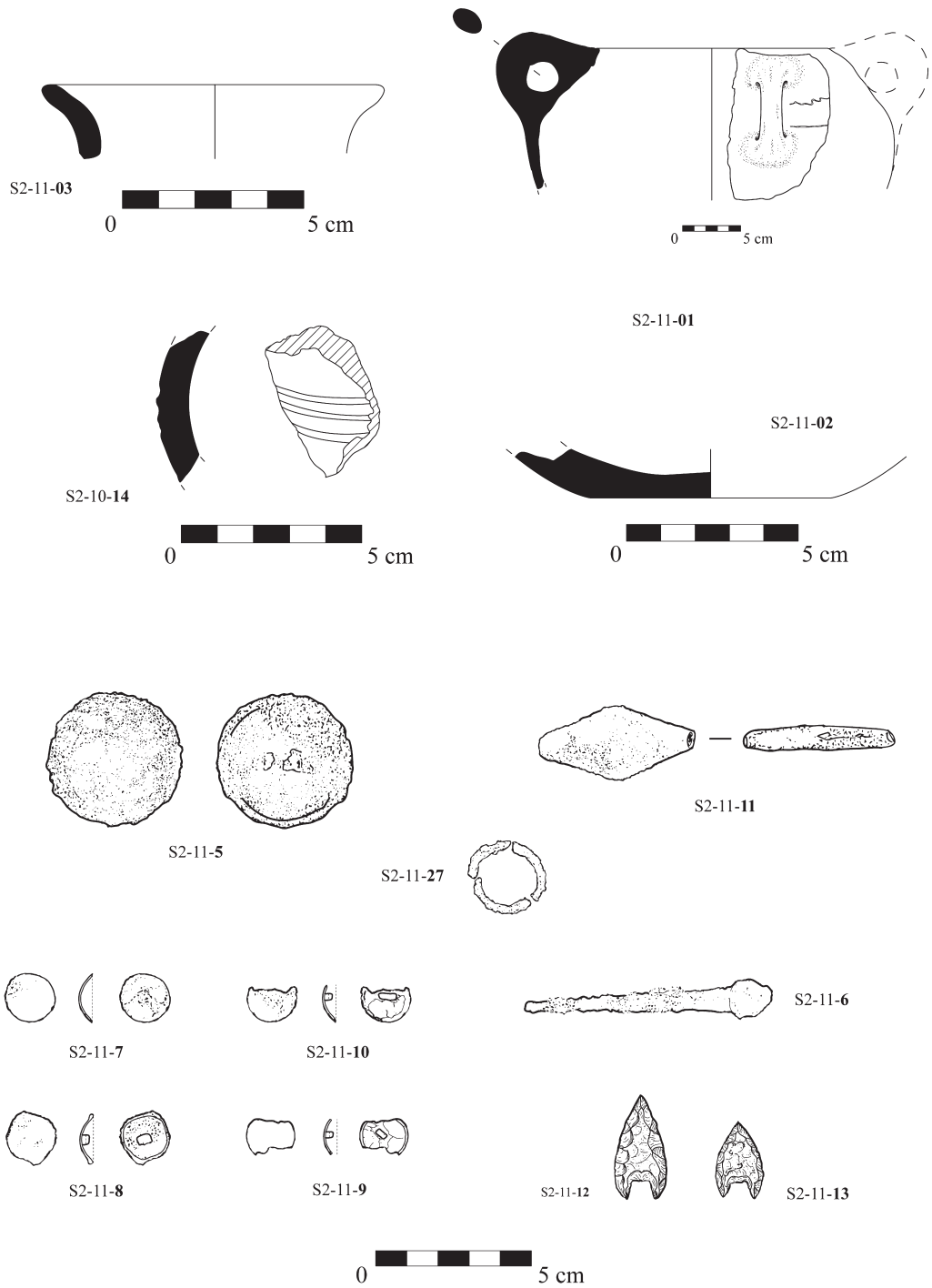


Fig. 22. Drawings of the pottery, bronze objects and obsidian arrowheads found in the funerary chamber of Kurgan 6 (by Sergio Russo).



Fig. 23. Bronze objects and obsidian arrowheads found in the funerary chamber of Kurgan 6 (Photo elaborated by Sergio Russo).

Among the few examples of material culture found within Kurgan 6 are sherds of black or brown burnished ware (Fig. 22). The sherds that are decorated with grooves and incised decorative patterns are of particular interest, because they clearly belong to a cultural horizon, the Chodžali-Kedabeg, that geographically links western Azerbaijan with other southern Caucasian regions, as well as eastern Anatolia and western Iran.<sup>17</sup> A pendant, a pin, a ring, a belt buckle and buttons, all in bronze, as well as obsidian arrowheads were also found in the grave (Fig. 23). These few objects found inside the funerary chamber of Kurgan 6 that have not been looted by local illegal excavators confirm the Chodžali-Kedabeg cultural horizon of this grave, as previously suggested, and can be considered part of a more general central Caucasian cultural tradition. In particular, the widespread use of bronze for making objects appears to be a consequence of “a process of commoditisation” of this precious metal across the whole Caucasus during the

<sup>17</sup> Guarducci 2012, 2019.



Late Bronze/Early Iron Age period.<sup>18</sup> In addition, and as mentioned by Antonio Sagona, the use of “leather belts sewn onto bronze hooks and buckles [became] fashionable, but only in the central Caucasus range.”<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

The first season of archaeological work by the Azero-Italian Ganja Regional Kurgan Archaeological Project (GaRKAP) has provided a scientific opportunity to intensify research on understanding the development of the funerary custom of using tumuli (kurgans) in western Azerbaijan between the fourth and first millennia BCE. Of particular interest is the transformation in the use of Kurgan 8 during the Early Bronze Age, which testifies to a shift from collectivity to individuality in beliefs related to the afterlife among the community using the Uzun Rama plateau for burying their dead. Such a transformation is correctly posited by Adam Smith when, dealing with the kurgans of the Middle Bronze Age in southern Caucasus, he states that a kurgan became “earthly machinery for the reproduction of social difference into a cosmic order ... and into the transcendent sphere of the deities.”<sup>20</sup> Such a perspective is also recognisable during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age — as in the case of Kurgan 6 in Ganja — when the kurgans are most often dedicated to burying individuals accompanied by goods usually comprising a set of pottery vessels, weapons, metal objects, amulets, and special animals; for example, the snake.

## Bibliography

Akhundov, T.

1999 *Drevnejšie kurgan juzhnogo Kavkaza kultura podkurgannykh sklepov*. Baku: ELM.

2001 *Severo-Zapadnyj Azerbajdzhan v Epokhu Eneolita i Bronzy*. Baku.

Castelluccia, M.

2017 “The kurgans of Chanlar and some thoughts on burial customs in Transcaucasia in the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age,” *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 54: 121–141.

Duday, H.

2009 *The Archaeology of the Dead: Lectures in Archaeoethnology*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Gummel, Ja. I.

1992 “Raskopki k jugo-zapadu ot Chanlara v 1941 godu,” *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* 4: 5–12.

Guarducci, G.

2012 “Nairi Ware: la produzione ceramica in Anatolia sud-orientale fra l’Età del Bronzo Tardo e l’Età del Ferro Medio,” in *Studi di archeologia del Vicino Oriente: scritti degli allievi fiorentini per Paolo Emilio Pecorella*, edited by S. Mazzoni, pp. 245–274. Florence: Florence University Press.

2019 *Nairi Lands: The Identity of the Local Communities of Eastern Anatolia, South Caucasus and Periphery During the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. A Reassessment of the Material Culture and the Socio-Economic Landscape*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

<sup>18</sup> Sagona 2018, p. 439.

<sup>19</sup> Sagona 2018, p. 445.

<sup>20</sup> Smith 2015, p. 142.

- Jalilov, B.  
 2010 “Göygöl-Goranboy Expedition 2009,” *Archaeological Researches in Azerbaijan / Azərbaycanca arxeoloji tədqiqatlar 2010*: 94–101.  
 2011 “Göygöl-Goranboy Expedition 2010,” *Archaeological Researches in Azerbaijan / Azərbaycanca arxeoloji tədqiqatlar 2011*: 95–102.  
 2012 “Göygöl-Goranboy Expedition 2011,” *Archaeological Researches in Azerbaijan / Azərbaycanca arxeoloji tədqiqatlar 2012*: 146–155.  
 2014 “A collective burial under kurgan at Uzun Rama (Azerbaijan),” in Poulmarc’h, M. (with Pecqueur, L. and Jalilov, B.), “An overview of Kura-Araxes funerary practices in the southern Caucasus,” *Paléorient* 40/2: 242–244.
- Lyonnet, B., Guliyev, F., Bouquet, L., Pecqueur, L., Poulmarc’h, M., Raymond, P. and Samzun A.  
 2015 “Mentesh Tepe (Azerbaijan) during the Kura-Araxes period,” in *International Symposium on East Anatolia-South Caucasus Cultures Proceedings 1*, edited by M. Işıklı and B. Can, pp. 189–200. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nora, P.  
 1984–1986 *Les lieux de mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Ollivier, V., Fontugne, M. and Lyonnet, B.  
 2015 “Geomorphic response and 14C chronology of base-level changes induced by Late Quaternary Caspian Sea mobility (middle Kura Valley, Azerbaijan),” *Geomorphology* 230: 109–124.
- Palumbi, G.  
 2016 “The Early Bronze Age of the southern Caucasus,” in *Oxford Handbooks Online*. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935413.013.14
- Pecqueur, L.  
 2014 “The collective burial under kurgan dated to the Early Bronze Age in Mentesh Tepe (Azerbaijan): Preliminary results,” in Poulmarc’h, M. (with Pecqueur, L. and Jalilov, B.), “An overview of Kura-Araxes funerary practices in the southern Caucasus,” *Paléorient* 40/2: 239–242.
- Poulmarc’h, M.  
 2014a *Pratiques funéraires et identité biologique des populations du Sud Caucase du Néolithique à la fin de la culture Kura-Araxe (6<sup>ème</sup> – 3<sup>ème</sup> millénaire av. J.-C.): une approche archéo-anthropologique*. Unpublished PhD diss. University Lumière Lyon 2.
- Poulmarc’h, M. (with Pecqueur, L. and Jalilov, B.)  
 2014b “An overview of Kura-Araxes funerary practices in the Southern Caucasus,” *Paléorient* 40/2: 233–248.
- Ricci, A.  
 2017 “Archaeological landscape studies within the ‘Kura in Motion’ project: The 2012–2014 activities,” in *The Kura Projects: New Research on the Later Prehistory of the Southern Caucasus* (Archäologie in Iran und Turan 16), edited by B. Helwing, T. Aliyev, B. Lyonnet, Q. Fahrad, S. Hansen and G. Mirtsckhulava, pp. 305–323. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Sagona, A.  
 2018 *The Archaeology of the Caucasus: From Earliest Settlements to the Iron Age*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, A.  
 2005 “Une nouvelle méthode pour estimer l’âge au décès des adultes à partir de la surface sacro-pelvienne iliaque,” *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d’Anthropologie de Paris* 17/1–2: 89–101.

Smith, A. T.

2015 *The Political Machine: Assembling Sovereignty in the Bronze Age Caucasus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sosson, M., Rolland, Y., Müller, C., Danelian, T., Melkonyan, R., Kekelia, S., Adamia, S., Babazadeh, V., Kangarli, T., Avagyan, A., Galoyan, G. and Mosar, J.

2010 “Subductions, obduction and collision in the Lesser Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), new insights,” in *Sedimentary Basin Tectonics from the Black Sea and Caucasus to the Arabian Platform* (Geological Society of London, Special Publication 340), edited by M. Sosson, N. Kaymakci, R. Stephenson, F. Bergerat, V. Starostenko, pp. 329–352. London: Geological Society.

Nicola LANERI

Center for Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies (CAMNES), Florence  
University of Catania  
Email: nicola.laneri@camnes.org

Bakhtiyar JALILOV

Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography

Lorenzo CRESCIOLI, Guido GUARDUCCI, Stefano VALENTINI

Center for Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies (CAMNES), Florence

Jutta KNEISEL, Andrea RICCI

Graduate School in Human Development in Landscapes,  
Christian Albrechts University of Kiel

Modwene POULMARC'H

Archéorient, UMR 5133 CNRS, Université Lyon 2, France