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# The Necropolises of Azerbaijan during the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Lenkoran and the Lerik Areas (NABIALLA): A New French-Azerbaijanese Archaeological Joint Project.

Michèle Casanova, Christine Lorre, Mathias Haze

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## CONTENTS

FOREWORD OF THE EDITORS .....	XI
PROGRAMME OF THE CONGRESS .....	XIII

## VOLUME II

### EXCAVATION REPORTS AND SUMARIES

FARHAD GULIYEV, YOSHIHIRO NISHIAKI Excavations at the Neolithic Settlement of Göytepe, West Azerbaijan, 2010-2011 .....	3
SANDRA HEINSCH, WALTER KUNTNER, VAKHTANG LICHELI Some Remarks on the First Two Georgian-Austrian Excavation Campaigns at Khovle Gora, Shida Kartli, 2011-2012 .....	17
MICHELE CASANOVA, CHRISTINE LORRE, MATHIAS HAZE The Necropolises of Azerbaijan during the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Lenkoran and the Lerik Areas (NABIALLA): A New French-Azerbaijanese Archaeological Joint Project .....	33
KATIA GAVAGNIN, JULIETTE MAS Early Jezirah 3b Pottery from Tell Beydar, Syria. Selected Inventories from the Latest Seasons of Excavation .....	49
STEPHANIE DÖPPER On the Reuse of Early Bronze Age Tombs – the German Excavations at Bāt and Al-Ayn, Sultanate of Oman .....	73
MATHILDE GELIN New French-Kuwaiti Research in the Hellenistic Fortress of Faïlaka-Ikaros .....	87
SÉBASTIEN REY The Fortifications of Mari: Preliminary Results of the 2006-2010 Excavations in the East City .....	101
PHILIPPE QUENET, AHMAD SULTAN New Research in the Area of Malhat ed-Deru, Northeast Syria (Autumn 2010) .....	117
OLIVIER ROUAULT, MARIA GRAZIA MASETTI-ROUAULT Recent Research in the Erbil Region: 2011 Excavations in Qasr Shemamok – Kilizu (Kurdistan, Iraq) .....	133

CHRISTINE KEPINSKI	
Research in the Suleymaniyah Province (Iraq):	
The Upper Tanjaro Survey .....	149
KONSTANTINOS KOPANIAS, CLAUDIA BEUGER, SHERRY C. FOX	
Preliminary Results from the Excavation at Tell Nader	
in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq .....	165
FRANCO D'AGOSTINO, LICIA ROMANO, ALI KADHEM	
Excavation at Abu Tbeirah, Southern Iraq .....	189
BARBARA CHITI, TATIANA PEDRAZZI	
Tell Kazel (Syria), Area II. New Evidence from	
a Late Bronze/Iron Age Quarter .....	205
GIOACCHINO FALSONE, PAOLA SCONZO	
Tell Shiyukh Tahatani – New Light on the Bronze Age Sequence .....	223
BARBARA HELWING, TEVEKKÜL ALIYEV	
A Monumental Neolithic? New Results of the Ongoing	
Azerbaijani-German Investigations in the Mil Steppe, Azerbaijan .....	247
GARY O. ROLLEFSON, YORKE M. ROWAN, MEGAN PERRY	
A Permanent Late Neolithic Residential Structure	
in the Eastern Desert of Jordan .....	259
RÉGIS VALLET	
Tell Feres 2010: Recent Discoveries on the Ubaid	
and Late Chalcolithic in North Syria .....	271
UWE SIEVERTSEN	
New Finds of Iron Age Pottery from Tell Halaf (2008-2010) .....	289
MAHNAZ SHARIFI	
The Archaeological Excavations of Khest Dasht Tepe Damghan,	
Northeast of Iran .....	309
ALVISE MATESSI, MARCO CAPARDONI, ANNA LANARO	
Excavations at Kınık Höyük:	
A Preliminary Report on the First Season (Aug. – Oct. 2011) .....	321
NICOLA LANERI	
Hirbemerdon Tepe 2003-2011: The Chronological Sequence .....	341
JOHN MACGINNIS, TIMOTHY MATNEY, KEMALETTİN KÖROĞLU,	
KRISTINA SAUER, JUDITH DOSCH	
Operations in the Lower Town of Ziyaret Tepe, 2010 and 2011 .....	353
HOLLY PITTMAN	
Chogah Maran in the Central Zagros: The Glyptic Art	
of the Early Bronze .....	367
GIOVANNI BOSCHIAN, ELENA ROVA	
Geoarchaeology and Soil Micromorphology of Early Bronze Age	
Anthropic Features from Natsargora Settlement (Southern Caucasus,	
Georgia). Preliminary Data from the Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli	
Archaeological Project .....	383

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ELENA ROVA, ZURAB MAKHARADZE, MARINA PUTURIDZE New Research on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC Cultures of the Southern Caucasus: The 2010 and 2011 Field Campaigns of the Georgian-Italian Shida Kartli Archaeological Project .....	401
AZARMIDOKHT ESFANDIARI Results of Excavations in the Ancient Cemetery of Gharbalbiz in Yazd Province and a Description of Bronze Age Objects from the Cemetery .....	417
LORENZ RAHMSTORF Early Balance Weights in Mesopotamia and Western Syria: Origin and Context .....	427
BÉATRICE MULLER 'Architectural Models' of the Near-East and Eastern Mediterranean: a Global Approach Introduction (Neolithic – 1 <sup>st</sup> Millenium BC) .....	443
ABBAS REZAEI NIA The Preliminary Report on Soundings in the Site of Qaleh Gabri in Sarpol-e Zahab .....	471
SUSANNE KERNER The Desert and the Sown Project in Northern Jordan .....	489
VICTOR SARIANIDI, NADEZHDA DUBOVA Gonur Excavations in 2000-2010 .....	503
MARCIN WAGNER Yaz II Period on Topaz Gala Depe, Southern Turkmenistan .....	519
ELISE LUNEAU, JULIO BENDEZU-SARMIENTO, SAMARIDDIN MUSTAFAKULOV Ceramics and Chronology at Dzharkutan: a Revision of the Periodization of the Sapalli Culture (Uzbekistan, c. 2100-1500 BC) .....	529
DANIEL VARGA, YIGAL ISRAEL, IANIR MILEVSKI A Multi-Period Site at Amaziya near Lachish .....	543
ANN E. KILLEBREW, BRANDON R. OLSON The Tel Akko Total Archaeology Project: New Frontiers in the Excavation and 3D Documentation of the Past .....	559
LILLY GERSHUNY Excavations at Tel Bahan – An MB II Village/Trade Center in the Sharon Plain .....	575
AVRAHAM FAUST The History of Tel 'Eton Following the Results of the First Seven Seasons of Excavations (2006-2012) .....	585



## POSTER SESSION

CORRADO ALVARO, GIULIO PALUMBI	
New “Pastoral Landscapes” of the Early Third Millennium BC in the Malatya Plain. The Case of Gelinciktepe .....	607
ANNA ANGUISSOLA, LEONARDO BOCHICCHIO, ANTONIO CALABRÒ, SILVANA COSTA	
Research in the South-Western Necropolis at Hierapolis in Phrygia: The Tomb of the Dragons (S2) .....	619
LAURA BATTINI	
The Seal Collection of the Musée des Confluences of Lyon .....	631
SONJA BEHRENDT, DIRK PAUL MIELKE	
Archaeometric Investigation of Phoenician Pottery from the Iberian Peninsula .....	635
SILVIA BERNARDONI, RAFFAELE TROJANIS	
Optical vs Electronical Tools in Near Eastern Archaeology: The Accuracy of the 1920 Map of Karkemish by P. L.O . Guy Checked with a Total Station and GPS Survey .....	645
MARIA BOFILL, MARTA PORTILLO, MIQUEL MOLIST, ROSA M. ALBERT	
Processing Activities during the Levantine Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages Using Phytolith and Use-Wear Analyses of Grinding Stone Tools .....	657
ARWA KHARABI, PATRICE COURTAUD, HENRI DUDAY	
The Place of Children in the Ancient Society of Urkesh (Tell Mozan, Northeastern Syria) in the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1600 BC): An Archeothanatological Approach .....	667
GIOVANNA LIBEROTTI, CORRADO ALVARO	
Comparative Analysis of Building Materials at Arslantepe (Malatya, Turkey). Level VII and VI A .....	677
JULIETTE MAS	
Terqa Ceramic Culture during the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC. Material from 18 <sup>th</sup> -26 <sup>th</sup> Excavation Campaigns .....	689
ANGELO DI MICHELE	
Iron Age II Terrace J at Tell Afis (Syria) .....	703
IANIR MILEVSKI, ELIOT BRAUN, DANIEL VARGA, YIGAL ISRAEL	
The Early Bronze Age Settlement and Large-Scale Silo Complex of Amaziya, Israel .....	713
CRISTINA MONDIN	
Seljuk Potteries at Kemerhisar (South Cappadocia, Turkey) .....	723
KAREL NOVÁČEK	
Arbil, Iraqi Kurdistan: The „Longue Durée“ of the City According to New Data .....	733

---

MAHTA SHEIKHI	
Study of Mythical Creatures of Ziwiye Ivory Plaques in Sanandaj Museum and National Museum of Iran .....	743
AGNIESZKA SZYMCZAK	
Khabur Ware Period Objects of Unbaked Clay from Tell Arbid: a Short Note on the Second Set of Finds .....	757
FÜSUN TÜLEK, BIRGÜL ÖGÜT	
Prehistoric Pottery of Osmaniye Province in East Cilicia: A Holistic Approach .....	765
JACOPO TURCHETTO	
The Via Tauri and the Ancient Road Network of Southern Cappadocia (Turkey). A Preliminary Note Regarding the Topography of a Frontier Territory .....	775
KAROL ZAJDOWSKI	
Transformation of the Mesopotamian Banquet Scene into the Presentation Scene in the Early Dynastic, Akkadian and Ur III Periods .....	785

THE NECROPOLISES OF AZERBAIJAN  
DURING THE BRONZE AND IRON AGES  
IN THE LENKORAN  
AND THE LERIK AREAS (NABIALLA):  
A NEW FRENCH-AZERBAIJANESE  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL JOINT PROJECT

MICHÈLE CASANOVA,<sup>1</sup>  
CHRISTINE LORRE,<sup>2</sup>  
MATHIAS HAZE<sup>3</sup>

ABSTRACT

*Over the last twenty years, many new discoveries have been made as a result of archaeological surveys or during the huge public works at Tbilissi-Baku-Ceyhan in the course of pipeline construction through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey between 2003-2005. The construction was accompanied by a five-phase archaeological international project aiming to reach an understanding of landscape transformation over time. Within this framework, the NABIALLA Project is a new and original joint French-Azerbaijane archaeological project which deals with two special topics: the excavation and study of the necropolises dated to the Bronze and Iron Ages from the Lenkoran and Lerik areas (Republic of Azerbaijan), and additionally, a re-examination of archaeological material formerly discovered and stored in public collections, either in Azerbaijan or abroad (especially in France). This project should result in the better understanding of the funerary practices in the region, and, moreover, in the possible discovery of traces of so far unknown ancient settlements in this region.*

Over the last twenty years, new methods in archaeology have been developed in Azerbaijan and many new discoveries have been made by chance or as a result of archaeological surveys conducted thanks to huge public organisation and the Tbilissi-Baku-Ceyhan pipeline construction through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey between 2003-2005. The construction of the pipelines was accompanied by a five-phase archaeological project intended to investigate and mitigate the effects of this construction. The project included a continuously operating team of around 80 people

1 Professor of Archaeology of the Near East, University of Lyon 2, France, Member CNRS UMR 5133 Archéorient, Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon.

2 Curator of the Comparative Archaeology Department, National Museum of Archaeology, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, Member CNRS UMR 7041 ArScAn, Maison René-Ginouvès, Nanterre.

3 Ph. D. Student, University of Paris I, Member CNRS UMR 7041 ArScAn, Maison René-Ginouvès, Nanterre.

that included members of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography in Baku, together with international archaeologists and local workers. This project attempted to maintain international standards, although the Azeri specialists expressed much more interest in the collection of material for later desk study, while Western archaeologists showed a keen interest in acquiring a general understanding of landscape transformations over time. Many Azerbaijani teams of specialists and foreign archaeological institutions have been involved over the years of collaboration in this important work aimed at recovering the stratification of the past of the whole country, for example, S. Ashurov at Zayamchay or Ovçular Tepe (Nakhchivan), V. Bakhshaliyev and C. Marro (Ovçular Tepe, Nakhchivan), B. Lyonnet and N. Guliyev (Mentesh Tepe), B. Helwing (Kamil Tepe), L. Ristvet (Oğlanqala), and – on the Iranian side of the border – Christian Konrad Piller (Gohar Tepe, Mazandaran, Iran) and Alireza Hejebri Nobari (Khoda Afarin, Eastern Azerbaijan, Iran).<sup>4</sup>

Within this framework, the NABIALLA Project is a new and original joint French-Azerbaijani archaeological project which deals with two special topics (Fig.1). On one hand, it intends to study the necropolises of the Lenkoran and Lerik areas (Republic of Azerbaijan) during the Bronze and Iron Ages (including fieldwork) and, on the other hand, it includes the new study and re-examination of archaeological material formerly discovered and stored in public collections, either in Azerbaijan or abroad (especially in France), in comparison to the archaeological remains recently uncovered (Fig. 2).

This project is being conducted within the framework of a scientific cooperation agreement signed in 2011, which includes the CNRS (UMR 7041 ArScAn, Nanterre, France), the Archaeological and Ethnographical Institute of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, the University of Lyon 2, the French Ministry of Culture with its High Direction for Heritage and the Service of French Museums, and finally the National Museum of Archaeology (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France).

Some new scientific investigations in the Lenkoran area seem currently necessary in order to re-assess the archaeological discoveries brought back to France by Jacques de Morgan when he explored ancient cemeteries in Northern Iran and current Southern Azerbaijan at the very beginning of the 1890s. The new fieldwork may hopefully help to recover some more precise contextual data about the objects formerly excavated, when scientific methods and criteria were quite different from those currently in use. This project also aims to specify the typo-chronological contexts and the occupation sequence of this territory during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age Transition because it seems to have been a key-period for the cultural interactions between the ancient Caucasian countries, Iran and Anatolia (Fig. 3).

4 The Heads of the NABIALLA Project are particularly grateful to Dr Alireza Hejebri Nobari, Professor at Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran (Iran) who helped us to develop the cooperation between the teams.

## 1. THE FIRST SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH DEVELOPED IN THE CAUCASUS

Since Antiquity, Western European people have mused about the fascinating remote countries of the Caucasus, which inspired many great myths popular in the ancient Greek world. Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only a few adventurers, who had been attempting to reach the far eastern part of the globe, made their way through the Caucasian area. Journeys of exploration in the Caucasian mountains increased throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the Georgian Military Route was completed in 1863 and many new ordnance survey maps were produced. At the same time, during the period when Prehistory was beginning to be recognised as an autonomous science, Russian scholars developed their cooperation especially with German and French specialists who, in spite of their traditional classical Antiquity education, began to feel an interest in Near-Eastern history and archaeology.

Thus, a great amount of rich tombs with what seemed to be spectacular protohistorical assemblages were discovered by chance in the village of Koban (North Ossetia), in the heart of the Great Caucasus range of mountains. A great part of the archaeological objects were then examined by G. Filimonov and E. Chantre, and Russian pre- and protohistorical archaeology experienced a crucial opportunity for development as a result of the International Colloquium and the Anthropological Exhibition in 1879 in Moscow. Furthermore, the French Commission for scientific and literary missions (French Ministry for Public Education) founded in 1874 fostered expeditions, especially into the Caucasian mountains, to try to recover evidence on the origin of early metallurgy (Lorre 2008b).

Jacques de Morgan (1857-1924) was one of the Europeans who established systematic scientific exploration of the Caucasus and played one of the greatest roles in the creation of the French National Museum of Archaeology's collection. As a civil mining engineer and French professional archaeologist, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, he made a major contribution to the scientific knowledge of the Caucasian territories. Educated in natural history as well as in geology and prehistoric archaeology since his teenage years, he maintained a keen interest in the origin of the metal ages in the Caucasus throughout his life. He often paid tribute to his contemporary scholars, such as Gustav Radde, to whom he offered some artefacts excavated at Marienfeld, Sartatchalo, Cheithan Tagh, Akthala or Mouçi Yeri (Georgia and Armenia), which were to be sent to the Tiflis Museum (Tbilissi, Georgia) (Lorre 2008a; Fichet de Clairfontaine 2009; Fig. 4).

During his research in the Lenkoran area, geopolitical circumstances placed some pressure on Morgan, so he decided to explore Azerbaijan, which at that time had been part of the Russian Empire since 1827. Following an imperial decree from the Tsar to protect the rights of Russian authorities towards archaeological excavations, the French archaeologist succeeded in bringing some of his discoveries back to France, but he would never again be able to go back to Azerbaijan. He was only able to check his previous and preliminary results during his mission in the Iranian Talych (1901), when

he became the Head of the French Delegation in Persia (the Susa excavations). The objects discovered in the Lenkoran were presented to the French public in Paris (at the Guimet Museum for Asiatic Art) toward the end of 1892 and the beginning of 1893, before being assigned to the National Museum of Archaeology in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (France) as a result of a mission subsidized by the French State (Lorre 1997; Chevalier 2009).

Later on, some specialists discussed Morgan's fieldwork and showed how he had been wrong when he had thought that no Stone nor Bronze Age civilization had ever existed in the Caucasus (Morgan 1889; Schaeffer 1948), and that iron had been in use since the 20<sup>th</sup> century BC. Nevertheless, some comparisons between the material from Morgan's excavations and more recent scientific investigations show us that he had found assemblages dated to the Middle Bronze period, Late Bronze period and – above all – to the Iron Age I period (between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries BC). More recently, other studies seem to confirm Morgan's intuition about the mutual relationships and influences between Caucasus, Iran and Anatolia, which had likely lasted far into the Iron Age (Morgan 1889 and 1896).

## 2. THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS AND THE NABIALLA PROJECT

The National Museum of Archaeology (MAN) keeps a large Caucasian archaeological collection (consisting of a wide range of stone implements, ceramics and metallic weapons, ornaments and figurines) in its Comparative Archaeology Department. This is partly the outcome of the excavations conducted by the two Morgan brothers. This collection has been partially published and several past studies go back to a time when current techniques of observation and analysis were not yet in use. The MAN collection has recently begun to be checked, sorted and restored. An on-line computerized registration and photographic record of items, still very partial, exists in the French national database, Joconde ([www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/fr/pres.htm](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/fr/pres.htm)) (Fig. 5 and 6).

Several students have already passed their Master 2 diplomas (Ecole du Louvre and University of Paris 1-Sorbonne) on the re-examination of parts of the ancient MAN collection, especially from the Lenkoran necropolises of Djönü and Aspa Hiz (Haze 2010 and Manceau 2010). Another PhD thesis about technical working issues and the prehistoric uses of carnelian in the concerned area is now in progress (Debrabant 2013: 61-69).

Since 1997, different methods of studying the material have been introduced by the Department of Comparative Archaeology to sort, define, digitize and restore the artefacts from the ancient Caucasian collection, especially those from Morgan's expedition to the Lenkoran. In the meantime, further research has been conducted to achieve a better understanding of Morgan's personality and scientific activities so that an ex-

hibition could be held in the MAN (December, 12<sup>th</sup> 2007-May, 5<sup>th</sup> 2008) and a special conference organized (April, 5<sup>th</sup> 2008), thanks to cooperation with the University of Paris 1 and the High School for Mining Engineers of Paris.

### 3. THE NABIALLA PROGRAM: RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The first scientists only identified the ancient cemeteries and not the human dwellings from the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Lenkoran because they often did not know how to recognize the sometimes very fleeting evidence of such housing. The funerary material is however numerous and may help us to define the scope of the economic and cultural exchanges in the nearest area, and between the Lenkoran region and other, more distant areas.

Various pieces of war equipment show some cross-cultural influences between Caucasus and Iran. Bronze ornaments – for example bell-pendants or zoomorphic figurines, bronze belt-plaques and sometimes pins – have led specialists to think of North-West Iranian products, as well as zoomorphic pottery (Fig. 7). As Morgan had already noticed, long distance exchanges seem to have existed between Lenkoran, Iranian Talysh and even countries further away, since shells from the Persian Gulf have been found in some graves, as well as an *oudjat*-object in a tomb at Djönü, and some scarabs that suggest distant links with Egypt. A detailed study based on newly published material from archaeological investigations in the region and a number of survey tours conducted by Christian Konrad Piller have revealed the sophisticated structure of the archaeological sites (Piller 2012).

From the chronological point of view, the first attempt to study the archaeological material formerly excavated shows that the Lenkoran necropolises were in use since the Middle Bronze Age, before their occupation was extended to a larger scale during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age Transition. The rich and valuable funerary material may be evidence of a flourishing and even powerful civilization.

*The Lenkoran Project: French-Azerbaijane Archaeological Expedition, Azerbaijan (2012-2015), directed by Michèle Casanova and Abuzar Alakbarov (Fig. 8)*

The fieldwork program was launched in 2012. Last year, a short survey allowed us to locate a few necropolises, partially excavated or simply visited by Jacques de Morgan: Hiveri, Monidigah, Çayrud and Kraeladi in the district of Lerik. The site of Kraeladi has particularly caught our attention. This site is located in the valley of the Lenkarçay River (at only two hundred and seventy meters asl), twenty-five kilometres from Lenkoran city (Fig. 9 and 10).

This necropolis was partly excavated by Jacques de Morgan, where he recognized one hundred and sixteen graves. He published eleven graves and left us a relatively precise map. He listed four types of graves: first of all, the ‘earth tumuli’ type, 3 to 4 meters high and 8 to 10 meters in diameter, then ‘stone heaps’ surrounded by a stone circle

(the grave buried under this kind of structure is similar to the tumuli), some ‘conical or hemispherical stone mounds’, and finally the ‘dolmens’ (Morgan 1896: 18-21). Many funerary structures still remain there today (Fig. 11 and 12). Thus, we will try to begin soundings and excavations in this large necropolis.

Surveys will also be conducted as much as possible, every year until 2015, along the valley of the Lankaran River and its tributaries: the Lakerçay, Veriçay, Konja vu Çay (Lerik District), to try to locate the sites dating from the Late Bronze and Iron Age, in order to establish an archaeological map of this peculiar territory. The project will include geomorphological, palaeoenvironmental, archaeobotanical, anthropological, palaeoparasitological and archaeozoological studies.

*The Jacques de Morgan Project: Study, publication and enhancement of the archaeological collections, conducted by Christine Lorre, Michèle Casanova and Abuzar Alakbarov*

The National Museum of Archaeology (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France) holds a large archaeological collection as an outcome of French excavations conducted in the Lenkoran in 1890 by Morgan. The NABIALLA team will work on the material using new techniques of observation and analysis, as well as examining the data from recent excavations in order to restore a typo-chronological context which is as precise as possible. We will take into account the exploitation and development of ancient and recent archaeological literature, including ancient archaeological records preserved in France as well as in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Artefacts discovered in the necropolises, including the following locations: Djönu, Aspa-Hiz, Tulu, Hovil, Raaz Goour, Veri, Mistail, Hamarat, Kraveladi, Djuodji Kach, Mistan, Hiveri (Azerbaijan), will be studied in comparison with the material discovered during current excavations in Azerbaijan (Nakhchivan: Kulani, Khaj Bolagh, Minageh Chaour, Sari Darreh, Ghizil Boroun, Kul Tepe; Geranboy district: Ilanlitepe, Muncujuglutepe), Persian Talysch (Agha Evlar, Chirchir, Namin, Dokalian, Khodja Daoud Kopri, Qal’a, Tchila Khané, Vadjalik), Geoy Tepe and Khoda Afarin Ddistrict (Larijan, Tou Ali-ye Sofla, Sangar) in Iran. Metallographic structural analysis will be conducted by the Centre of Research and Restoration for the Museums of France (CRRMF) both on the MAN artefacts and on some pieces newly unearthed and housed in Azerbaijan.

As a result and at the end of the project, an international exhibition about the Cultures of the Bronze and the Iron Ages from the Lerik and Lenkoran areas in a wider regional context will be prepared in cooperation with other French and Azerbaijane institutions, such as the National Museum of History (Baku, Azerbaijan), the National Museum of Natural History (MNHN, Paris), the Museum of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of Azerbaijan (ANAS) with the publication of a descriptive catalogue, hopefully in French and Azeri.



## CONCLUSION

Finally, this project should lead us to a better understanding of the funerary practices and perhaps we will be able to discover ancient settlements which so far have remained undiscovered. The NABIALLA project aims to specify the typo-chronological contexts and the occupation sequence of the territory of Lenkoran during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age Transition, which is a key-period for the cultural interactions between the ancient Caucasian countries and the area which consists of the modern Iranian provinces of Eastern Azerbaijan, Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan, as well as the adjacent territory of Azerbaijan (Talysh). As C. K. Piller recently wrote, ‘the importance of the northern east-west connection from Central Asia to the Caucasus and Anatolia along the Caspian Coast has been recognised as one of the “arterial” roads of the Bronze and Iron Age trade networks in the Middle East’ (Piller 2012: 119). The NABIALLA project will attempt to improve our knowledge of the connections between landscape and archaeological sites and to establish their importance for the ancient communication network between the Caucasus and the southern Caspian region.

*Bibliography***Chevalier, N.**

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Fig. 1: View of the mountainous surroundings at the junction of the Lenkoran River and the Lakerçay River, Azerbaijan.

(© M. Casanova, Mission du Lenkoran, the NABIALLA Project)

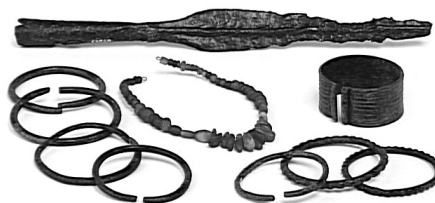


Fig. 2: Some funerary artefacts excavated by Morgan and housed in the National Museum of Archaeology, France.

(© Loïc Hamon, MAN, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)

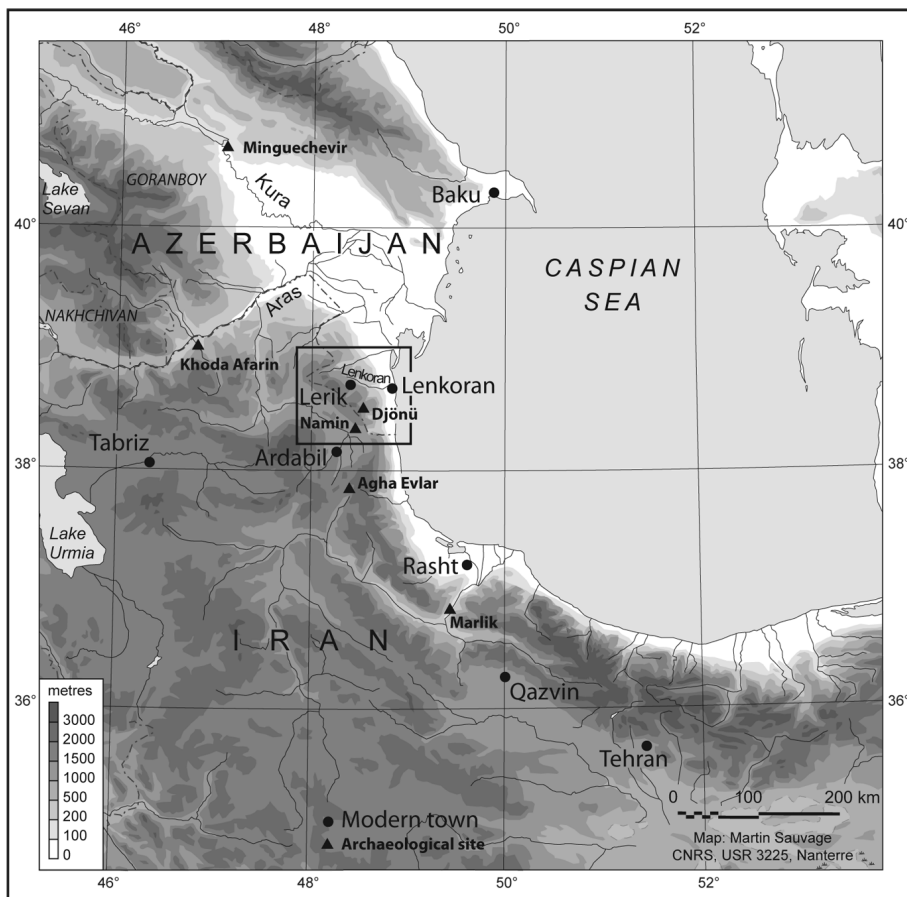


Fig. 3: Regional Map showing the Southern Part of the Caspian Sea and the Lerik and Lenkoran Provinces involved in the NABIALLA Project. (© M. Sauvage, Mission du Lenkoran, the NABIALLA Project)

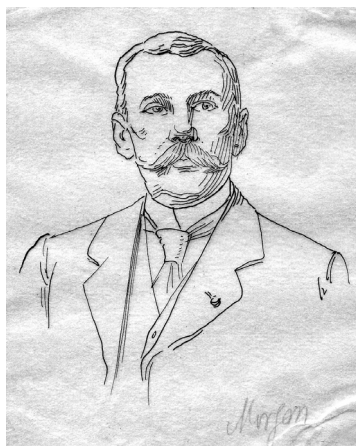


Fig. 4: Portrait of Jacques de Morgan. (© MAN Archives, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)



Fig. 5: Two small zoomorphic figurines in copper alloy from the Djönü necropolis (Azerbaijan).  
(© Loïc Hamon, MAN, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)

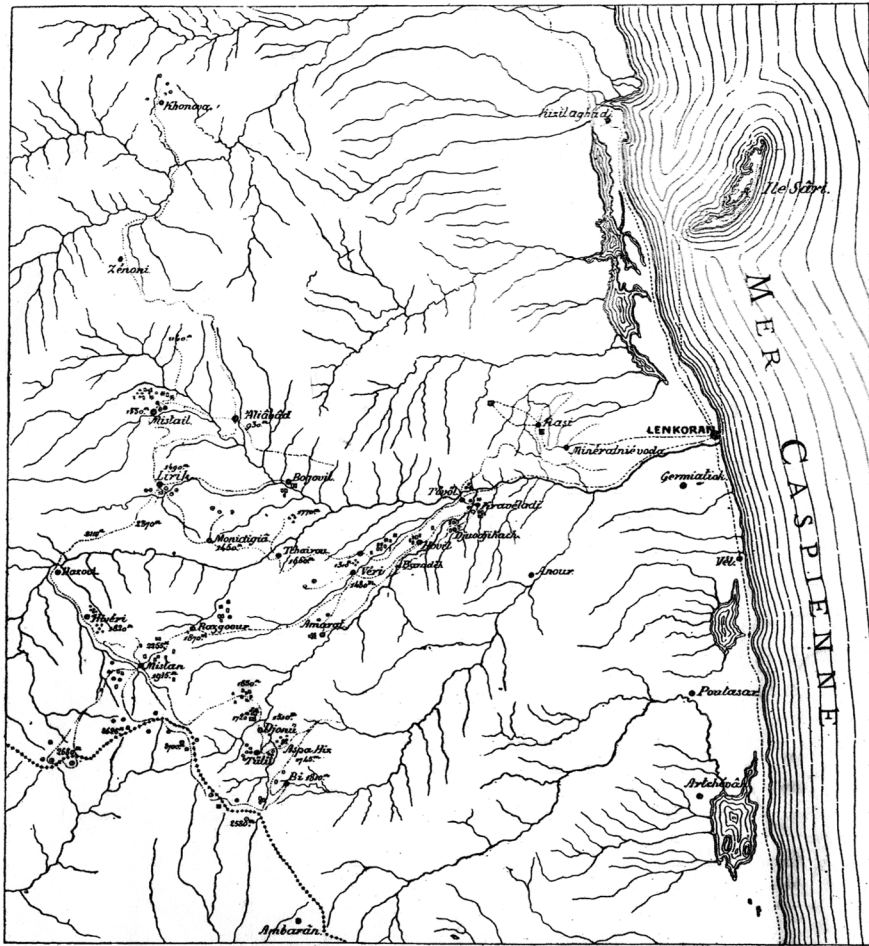


Fig. 6: Terra cotta zoomorphic vase from the Djönü necropolis (Azerbaijan).  
(© MAN and the NABIALLA Project)



Fig. 7: Group of small bell-pendants in copper alloy from the Djönü necropolis (Azerbaijan).  
(© MAN and the NABIALLA Project)

CARTE ARCHÉOLOGIQUE DU LENKORAN



- Monuments mégalithiques.
- Tumuli, 1<sup>er</sup> et 2<sup>e</sup> état du Bronze.
- ◆ Nécropoles, État du Fer.
- Frontière entre la Russie et la Perse.
- Tumuli d'époque indéterminée.
- ◊ Nécropoles, 3<sup>e</sup> état du Bronze.
- Cases mazdéennes d'exposition.
- ∞ Itinéraire de la mission.
- ⊕ Dolmens, 1<sup>er</sup> état du Bronze.
- Tumuli, État du Fer.
- Villes et Villages.
- 1650 Altitudes barométriques.

Fig. 15.

Fig. 8: Map of the area investigated by Morgan in 1889-1890.  
(According to Morgan 1896)

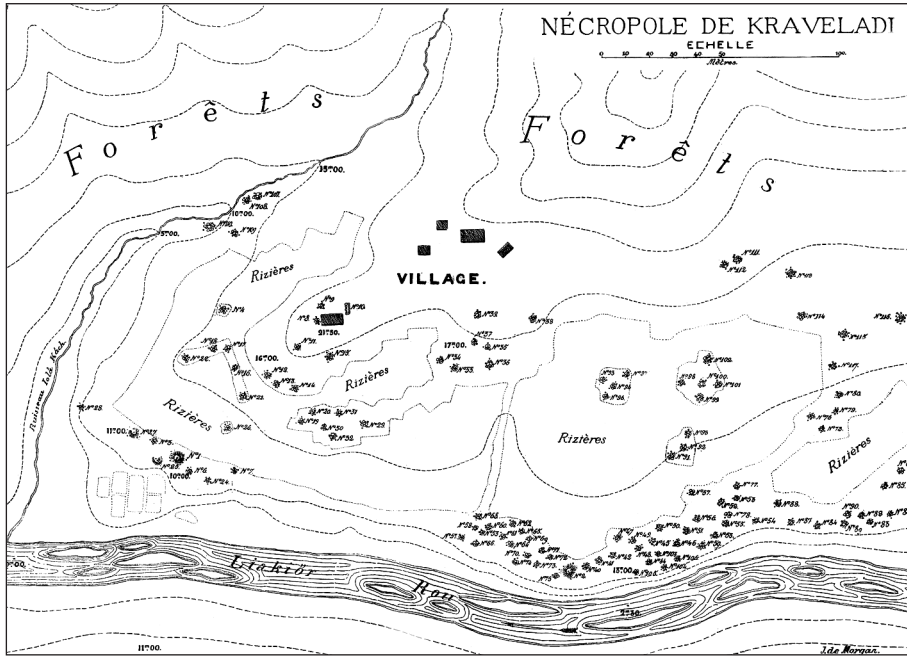


Fig. 9: Map of the Kaveladi necropolis.  
(According to Morgan 1896)



Fig. 10: Present N.-W. view from the surroundings of the Kaveladi ancient necropolis (Azerbaijan).  
(© M. Casanova, the NABIALLA Project)



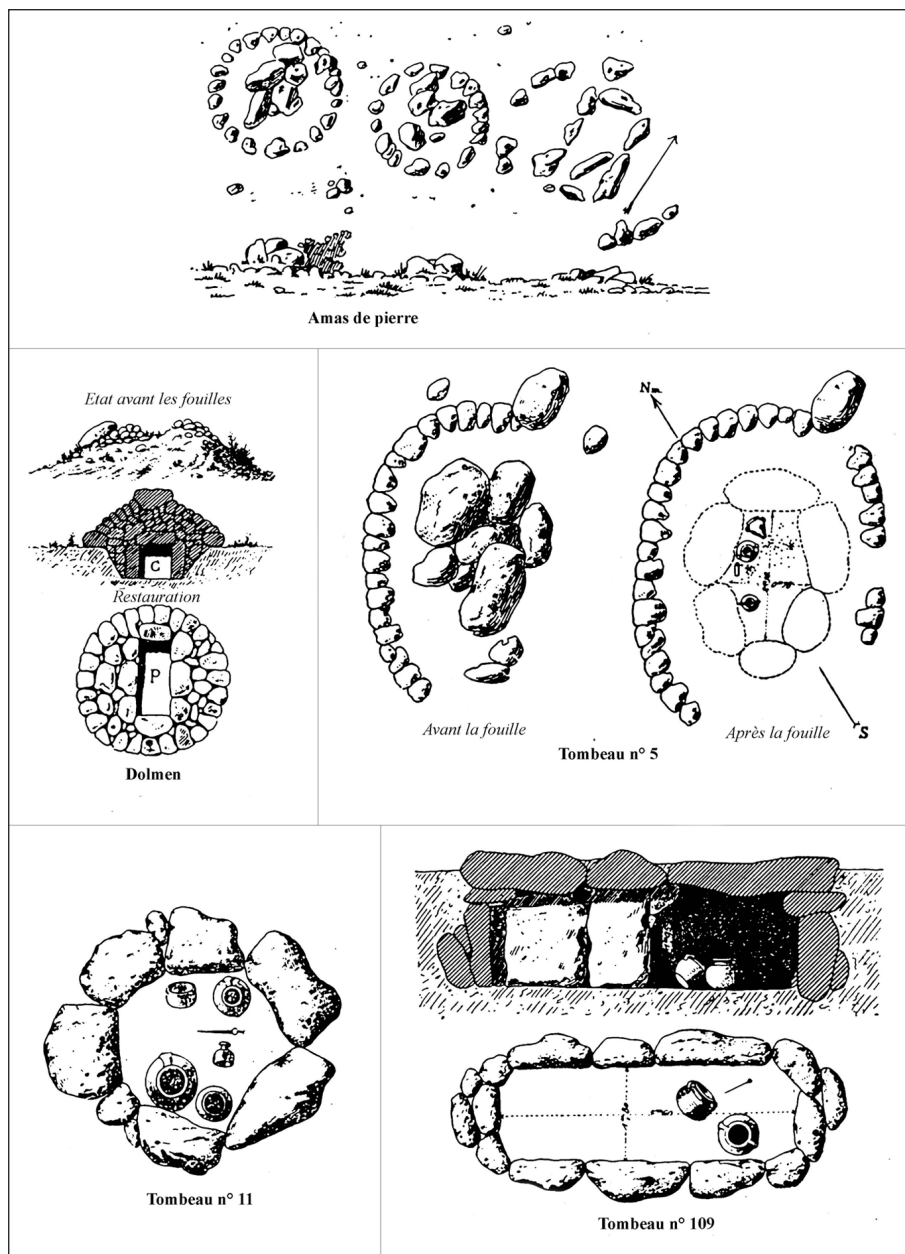


Fig. 11: Morgan's typology of ancient funerary monuments in the Lenkoran Area, Azerbaijan. (According to Morgan 1896)



Fig. 12: Present condition of funerary monuments of the Kraveladi Necropolis, Terrace near the Lakerçay River.

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