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HISTORY UNDER THE WATERS OF THE CASPIAN SEA

Bronze bowl with gilding. 16th century. It was found at sea near Bilgah village



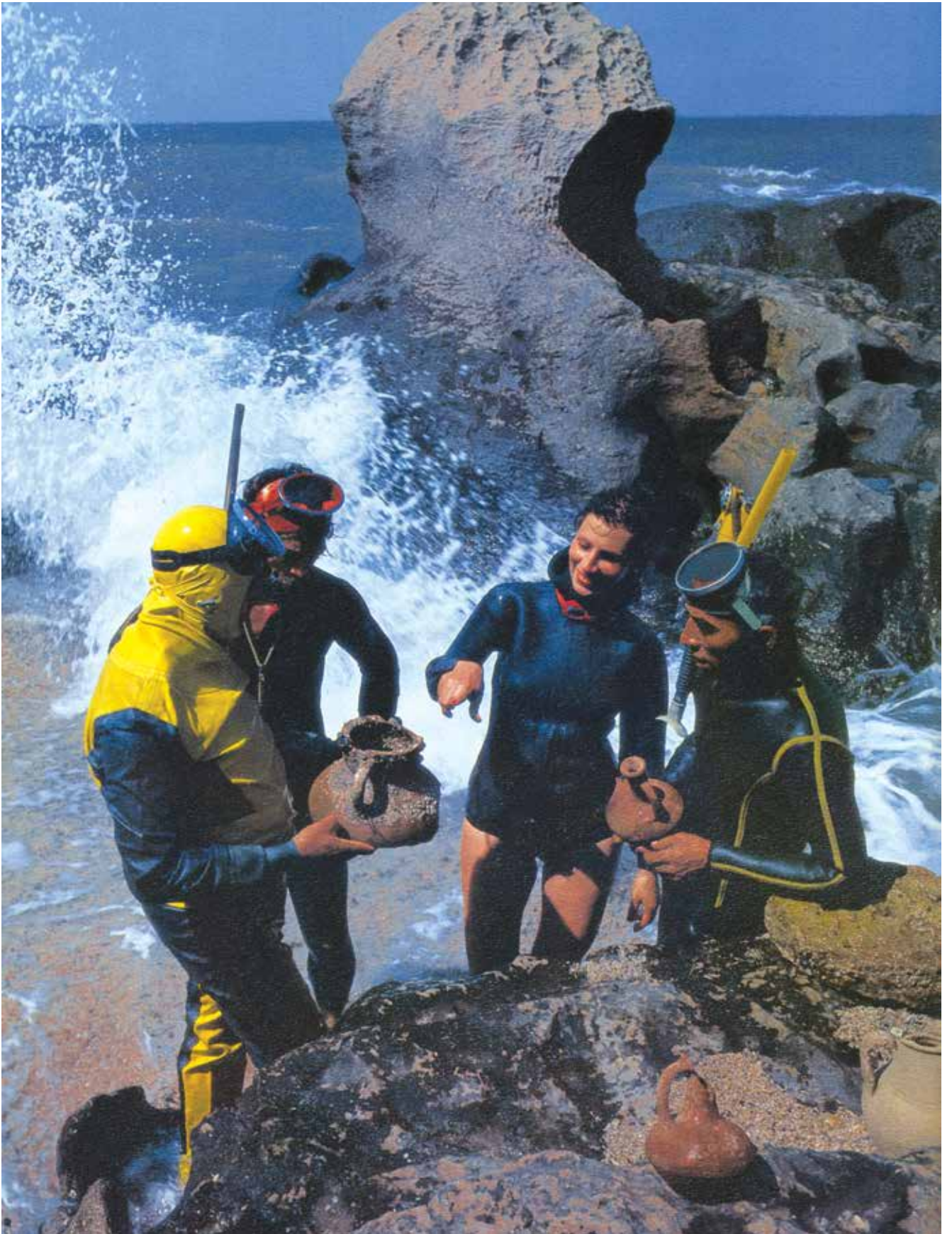
It is known that the Caspian Sea - the largest inland body of water in the world – has stood out for its variability of water levels throughout history. The change of transgressions and regressions of the Caspian Sea led to the fact that traces left on its shores by various cultures for thousands of years alternately ended up either on the seabed or on land. And today some of the traces of the past are under a layer of Caspian water. This prompted **the creation of a historical and archaeological underwater expedition led by V. A. Kvachidze at the Museum of History of Azerbaijan in 1968. Its task was to study the historical and archaeological sites of the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea.** The expedition worked from 1968 during the last decades of the twen-

tieth century, lifting a lot of very valuable material from the seabed.

The first survey yielded results: the remains of the sunken 19th century **expeditionary ship “Guba”, on which well-known researcher N. A. Ivashintsov conducted expeditions for mapping the Caspian Sea and published the “Atlas of the Caspian Sea” in 1877,** which served as a basic guide on Caspian navigation until recently, were found at Cape Shoulan in the northeast of the Absheron Peninsula. The expedition lifted rifles made in 1845 and the ship’s bell from the Guba.

During the first underwater archaeological search, the main areas of coastal waters, which were promising for further work, were identified. One of these areas is

Finds on the Caspian coast





of rectangular houses with significant accumulations of pottery, millstones and remnants of a cultural layer were found under water at the site of Bandovan I at a distance of up to 200 meters from the coast at a depth of 1.8 meters. Nearby, also under water, accumulations of pottery pins, pieces of burnt walls of kilns and semi-ceramic products were found in two separate places. All this material shows that a quarter of potters was once located here.

Remains of dwellings in the form of adobe buildings with hearths and tandirs (ovens for baking bread), as well as household pits and pits for supporting pillars with burnt spears, traces of ditches and drainage grooves leading from dwellings to ditches were discovered on the shore. In addition to these buildings, obviously, there were buildings of stone and fired square bricks (24x24x5 cm). Facing tiles and blocks of stone were also found. A large accumulation of plain and glazed ceramics, tools (millstones, grindstones and whetstones), glass decorations, mostly bracelets, carnelian beads, as well as **copper and silver coins of the Eldaniz, Derbendi and Hulaguid dynasties were also found here. The found silver coins of the Hulaguids (scattered on the shore, apparently, from a treasure), among which are dirhams of Razan Mahmud 1297/8 and Oljaytu 1305/6 (defined by A. Rajabli) indicate**



Bronze sword. 8-7th centuries BC.

the mouth of the Kura River, which was navigable in the middle and lower reaches in antiquity and in the Middle Ages and through which water and land routes passed. Therefore, one would expect traces of settlements at the mouth of the Kura.

Medieval Arabic-language authors mentioned islands opposite the mouth, on which “people breed cattle and grow madder”. The work of the expedition made it possible to localize a vast area called Gushtasfi (Gushtaspi) at the mouth of the Kura. The settlements of Bandovan I and Bandovan II, swallowed by the Caspian, were found in ancient channels and on the bank of the Kura. It was established that **Bandovan I is the ruins of the city of Gushtaspi, which existed in the 11th-13th centuries, and Bandovan II – of the city of Mugan (9th-12th centuries)**. Evidence of ceramic production and other crafts, including pottery kilns and their fragments, was found here on land and under water and a large number of simple and glazed dishes of the 9th-13th centuries was collected. Ordinary ceramics are represented by all types of household and kitchen utensils, which stand out for their careful forming; many items are decorated with ornaments.

Most of the finds at the sites of Bandovan I and II are irrigation and glazed pottery. Irrigation pottery from the settlement of Bandovan II (11th-12th centuries) is ornamented more simply. Basically, the ornament consists of a combination of arcs, ovals and circles, while dotted patterns were also used. Ceramics from the settlement of Bandovan I (11th-13th centuries) stand out for local features and a variety of forms and ornamentation.

In many cups and saucers, the bottom is decorated



Fragment of the Chinese faience dish. 16-17th centuries. It was found at sea near Bilgah

with images of animals. Images of doves and peacocks (symbols of immortality) and “the tree of life” in the center of dishes and bowls are very common. Images of lionesses or cheetahs with tails bent upwards and stylized as “the buta” are also very common. The figure of a deer with branched golden horns is perfectly depicted on one of the fragments of the bottom. Another dish shows a doe flattening itself in a dynamic jump. Only an experienced and observant artist can portray an animal in motion so authentically. Vivid images of wildlife were created with a few meager lines and strokes.

At the bottom of irrigation ceramics various relief brands were placed. There are local brands with the image of a lion against the background of the rising sun, dogs, pigeons, gazelles, a rider with a falcon and different weaves of nodes. Some of the brands have similarities with brands from medieval Azerbaijani cities of Beylagan, Gabala, Baku, Shamakhi and Shabran.

Some fragments of irrigation ceramics have inscriptions on the surface, which contain samples of oriental poetry and wisdom, as well as all sorts of wishes to the buyer and customer: “Made by cup-maker Yusif”; “... As long as work and science are with you...”, “...May the Creator of the World save the owner of this wherever he may be...” and others, as well as an excerpt from poems of the great Persian poet Saadi.

The ceramics that were discovered show the high level of culture in medieval Azerbaijan. This was confirmed by other finds in the sites of Bandovan I and Bandovan II. For example, remains of the foundations

Ceramic jug. 12-13th centuries. It was found at sea near Bandovan II village



the time when the city was destroyed. Obviously, the treasure was buried in the first quarter of the 14th century shortly before the destruction of the city, which soon found itself under the waters of the Caspian Sea.

The site of Bandovan II stretches along the coast 20 km north of Bandovan I between the mud volcanoes of Bandovan and Zayachya. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was under the waters of the Pirsaat Gulf. Traces of the settlement were found along the ancient branches of Kura, and a ceramic oven cut into the hillside was found among them. Such a system of ceramic kilns is also found in the Crimea, in the Ural River basin and other places. The accumulation of defective spherocoques, which is suggested by residues of a kiln at this site, is of special interest. Nearby, several types of oval and round kilns were discovered. A large amount of glass bracelets of different colors, shapes and profiles, as well as beads was also found at the site.

In 1985-1986, the underwater archaeological expedition of the Museum of History of Azerbaijan included groups of the Belarusian History Museum and the Ka-

tran club society from Moscow. **The work then was carried out in the waters of the island of Sangi-Mugan (Svinoy) and the exploratory search - on the islands of Yakorniy, Persianina and Los, and Bezymyanniy.** They examined a vast area of the sea along the island of Sangi-Mugan and its spit stretching into the sea for 2 miles. On the left and right of the spit, many anchors of different designs and different types were discovered under the water. Over twenty anchors were lifted from the seabed. An interesting find was a grapnel with claws found behind the pier of the island to the east at a depth



Ceramics fragments with inscriptions. 12-13th centuries. These were found at sea near Bandovan I village



of 3.4 meters. The grapnel may well be **a relic of a naval battle between the forces of Stepan Razin and the Persian fleet which happened on the island of Sangi-Mugan in summer 1669 and ended in victory for the Russians.** This battle was mentioned in B. Dorn's book "Caspian" and Jan Struys' book "Three Voyages". The discovery of numerous anchors in the waters of the island of Sangi-Mugan suggests that in the past the island served as a refuge from storms for sailors. Apart from anchors, simple and irrigation dishes of the 17th century were found under water off the coast of the island. Wooden parts of ships and stone graters were also found. On the western side of the island there are remains of buildings under water.

Another interesting site for underwater archeology is the sea area near Cape Amburan (Kohna Bilgah) in the north-east of Absheron. **During this period, there was a comfortable moorage for boats near the village of Bilgah (Bild) here.** The well-known researcher of the history of Baku, Sara Ashurbeyli, cites a letter from an English company employee Christopher Barrow, who, describing his journey across the Caspian Sea, mentions the moorage of Bildi (Bilgah) near Baku, which he visited in 1580.

Anchor stones, metal anchors of different designs, an Admiralty-type structure and copper and ceramic dishes of the 16th-17th centuries, both locally-made and imported, were discovered here. Among the anchor stones, in a pit at a depth of 6 meters, three rounded stones lying on each other were found. These are so-called "stringing" stones that were strung like beads on spears or on the end of a rope with a crosspiece. Anchor stones with two and three holes were more perfect. A wooden stake passed through the bottom hole, increasing the holding power of the anchor structure. The weight of anchor stones was from 20 to 80 kilograms. Similar anchor stones were found in the waters of Derbent.

Finds from the Caspian seabed displayed in the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

In conclusion, I would like to recall the words of the famous submariner Dioli: "Archaeologists, learn to dive, the future of your profession is under water." 🌟

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