

**Gudrat ISMAYILZADEH**  
*Doctor of History, Professor*

# DISCOVERY OF A UNIQUE MONUMENT

**T**he historical territory of Azerbaijan is rich in unique ancient monuments, most of which are concentrated on the southeastern slopes of the Lesser Caucasus - between the Guruchay and Kendelenchay rivers, which form the basis of the Karabakh lands.

As a result of early archeological studies that date back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the early

*Vessels with one handle, a characteristic feature of Albanian ceramics. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan*



*Silver bowl from the Caucasian Albania. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan*

1990's, a myriad of economic-household and funerary complexes from a huge length of time were found and studied between the Guruchay and Kendelenchay. The Azikh and Taglar cave settlements of the Stone Age, agricultural settlements of the Chalcolithic, Early and Middle Bronze Ages, rich burial barrows of the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, the remains of ancient and medieval towns and many other archaeological complexes are only a small part of the monuments in the area between the two rivers.

In the 1970's, a peculiar funerary complex with unknown unique items was discovered in the area between the Guruchay and the Kendelenchay. Most of them are close relatives of the Sassanid art of Iran and to some extent, Roman-Byzantine culture.

It has been established that in the second half of the first millennium BC, this territory of Azerbaijan was one of the leading areas of Caucasian Albania, which bordered

*Glassware by masters of the Caucasian Albania. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan*

on the northern areas of historical Atropatena. In these adjacent territories, Sassanid rule was subsequently established. It is known that at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Baylakan, which was located north of the area between the Guruchay and the Kendelenchay, became a center for all the military forces of the Sassanids in the Caucasus.

The necropolis that is being described is located near the city of Fizuli, 25-30 km from the bank of the Aras River, which forms the border with Iranian Azerbaijan. The area represents a vast barrow field of the Bronze Age and is popularly known as "Yeddi Tapa", which means "a field of the seven hills", although currently there are about 20 different barrows of different circumference and height there. Burials from the period of interest to us have been identified on a small flat hill between these barrows.

Twenty-six burials have been studied at the necropolis, and most of them belonged to adults: men and women and two – to children.

Men's tombs stood out for the abundance of various iron weapons and women's - jewelry, although separate items of arms were found in them. All tombs contain one body, and almost all of them represented stone boxes placed in shallow earthen pits from lightly processed limestone boulders. As a rule, their partitions were large slabs weighing about 2-3 tons. Only one burial consisted of a dirt pit, but it was also partitioned by a huge stone slab.

Interestingly, in most of the burials, traces of fire were found on the bottom of the pit. In some cases, traces of fire were seen on the outside of the stone boxes. Both in stone boxes and in the only dirt grave, the skeletons were in a crouched position facing from north to south with a small deviation toward the west or east and surrounded by fairly diverse and rich equipment. It is known that such a burial rite, which had some resemblance with the cultures of Caucasian Albania, was widespread at the subsequent stages of cultural and historical development. The "purification" of burial pits with fire has also been observed here. A similar burial rite has long existed on the territory of the Iranian plateau. In any case, the funeral rite observed in the necropolis we are studying and its massive equipment reflects the religious views and unique culture of ethnic groups that belonged, in all probability, to one of the many Albanian tribes. As for traces of fires in individual graves, they are likely to be traces of the Zoroastrian faith. It is possible that Zoroastrianism dominated the border areas between Atropatena and Caucasian Albania for a long time.



Among the burial equipment that was discovered, a large place is occupied by metal products represented by small chased boat-shaped bowls with a rounded bronze bottom and, in all probability, made from low-grade silver, which were compulsory items for most burials. Currently, we have a large collection of these bowls, which are made with the same technique and differ from each other in size.

Are these bowls locally-made? It is difficult to judge since such vessels in Azerbaijan have been discovered for the first time and are not found elsewhere in the South Caucasus. Recently, Japanese archaeologists have discovered identical large quantities of gold and silver utensils in monuments of the Sassanid period in the northwestern regions of Iran. But can we believe based on this report that our bowls are of oriental origin and products of Sassanid bronze or silver trefectics? We think that something specific can be said only after a careful study of these bowls. Unfortunately, the territory where the unique necropolis is located is currently occupied by Armenian separatists.

It is worth recalling that historical sources contain valuable information about the metal crafts of Caucasian Albania. This is also confirmed by numerous archaeological finds, which, according to the famous scientist K. V. Trever, are the contribution of the South Caucasus to the treasury of Sassanid art. If we take this fact into account, it is quite possible that Albanian, or vice versa, Sassanid trefectics could have borrowed certain forms of metal vessels from each other, including boat-shaped bowls. In any case, at the moment our finds are new and highly valuable data on cultural relations between various tribes of Caucasian Albania and Sassanid Iran.

Numerous bronze rings and stamps found in the



*Ring with an image of a lion. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan*

majority of the burials can be called imitations of Sassanid types. In two burials alone, more than twenty of these items have been found. Apparently, they were donated to the deceased by his loved ones and relatives. Most of them have glass inserts – stamps with various motifs dominated by images of wild animals. If these stamp rings resemble Sassanid types by their nature, they are clearly of local origin by their materials and techniques (they are manufactured by casting).

A large collection of bronze and silver earrings, small hanging figures and other jewels are close to Sassanid products. Two small gem stamps carved from semiprecious stones are typically Sassanid items. One of them carved out from red carnelian stones and shaped like a spheroid depicts the head of a lion and a poorly-preserved Sassanid inscription. It is known that the lion is one of the most common motifs of Sassanid carved stones. The second seal is carved entirely from opaque chalcedony and depicts a nobleman or a magician in a long robe. Both gem stamps were found in one burial.

According to researcher V. G. Lukonin, the place of manufacture of this type of gems was likely Sassanid Iran; such gems were made en masse in workshops and distributed on a vast territory dominated by common ideologies; they were used not only and not so much as personal stamps, but also as amulets and talismans against evil.

Among the metal products, a spoon with a folding handle - a unique find for Azerbaijan – is noteworthy. No such items have been found in other places of the Caucasus. It was found in a women’s burial near one of the abovementioned boat-shaped bowls. The foldable handle of this spoon has a small rod and is decorated

with a thin carved pattern. The spoon made with great technical skill, in our opinion, was created in the style of the Italian art school. Perhaps, the only bronze jug on a low pallet found in one of the opened graves was made in the same style. The jug has a gracefully curved massive cast handle soldered to the jug. The body of the jug is made with a chasing technique and is decorated with three oval indentations resembling flutes, which are characteristic for both Roman-Italic and for Sassanid toreutics.

It should be noted that in 1973, a red clay jug without handles was discovered in one of the graves. By its shape, it was somewhat similar to the abovementioned jug and almost identical to conventional Sassanid silver jugs. And here, in all probability, creative forms of Sassanid metal jugs were borrowed by local potters.

As for ceramic dishes discovered in burials, it should be noted that there are not too many of them and, as a rule, almost every burial contained one ceramic piece. These were mostly small one-handed pitchers with a shape typical for the ceramic production of Caucasian Albania. They have a low neck with a threefold whisk and are decorated with simple incised patterns, notches and sometimes molded buttons. In Azerbaijan, such items are found in large quantities in houses and in the funerary monuments of the early Middle Ages.

In addition to these finds, numerous decorative buckles, massive pendants, waist stripes, belt tips of bronze and silver, openwork metal parts of small wooden boxes, silver and bronze fibulae of various sizes, chest and head jewels, glass, carnelian and garnet beads, bowls

*Vessels with one handle, a characteristic feature of Albanian ceramics. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan*



*Jewelry items by masters from the Caucasian Albania. Museum of National History of Azerbaijan***References**

of glass and many other things have been discovered in graves. Among these items, a glass bowl, the shape of which was not known in Caucasian Albania until recently, is of interest. Comparing it with silver bowls of Mingachevir and Sassanid Iran suggests that it was influenced by both local and Sassanid toreutics.

No equipment or decorations for horses have been found in any of the burials, and two little metal disc-shaped bronze bowls can hardly be attributed to these decorations. One side of them is convex and there is a small hole in the middle. We think that they are likely to be musical percussion plates; there are known paintings from Pompeii, which depict musicians and dancers with the same instruments.

Based on the preliminary study of materials from the area between the Guruchay and the Kendelenchay, the ancient necropolis can be attributed to the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, although some objects are associated to some degree with the earlier ages. There is no doubt that in the early Middle Ages, the metal craft in the area between the two rivers was at a high level and successfully developed, which was largely due to intense political and cultural ties with the Sassanid Iran, Byzantium and Rome. ✨

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