

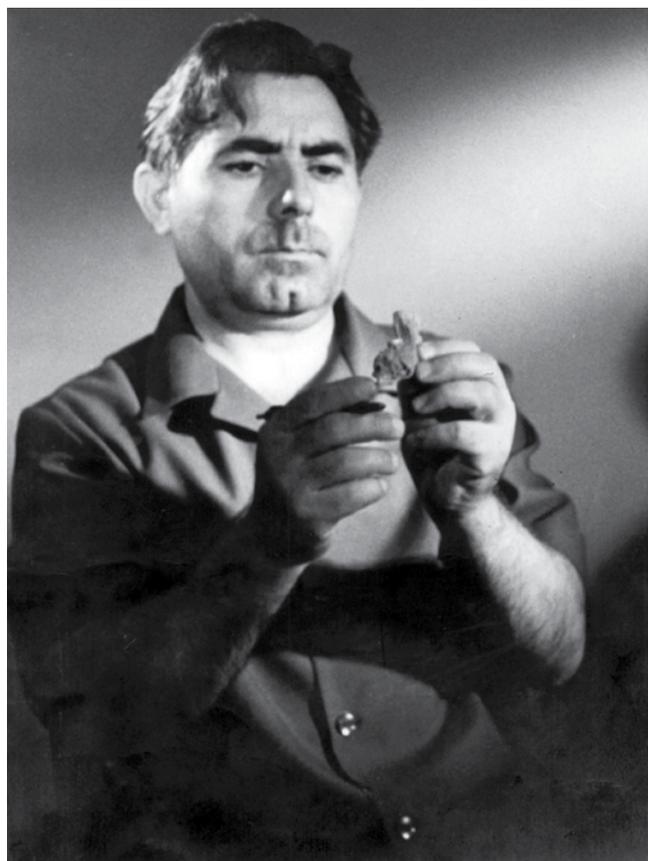
# AZYKH – FIRST OLDOWAN SITE OUTSIDE AFRICA

*First researcher of the Azykhantropus  
Mammadali Huseynov*

**H**istory is one of a handful of sciences both scientists and people far from science are interested in and to which they turn to one degree or another if they want to learn more about the past. In this article, we will talk about the most ancient period of history, or rather, about prehistoric Azerbaijan, when the process of the formation of man was just beginning.

Year 1960 went down in the history of science due to the great contribution to understanding the origin and evolution of man and material culture, as a year of the most important contribution to the study of prehistoric Azerbaijan. Strictly speaking, the discovery by Mammadali Huseynov of the Paleolithic site in the Azykh Cave was a logical consequence of the purposeful study of the Paleolithic era in Azerbaijan, which had begun seven years earlier. Azykh turned out to be a unique site not only with traces of at least three Paleolithic industries of different times preserved in its sediments, but also because a comprehensive study of the site gave rise to hypotheses that gave impetus to new searches and discoveries.

Taking into account the uniqueness of the site and its scientific significance, by Decree No. 158 of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR dated 21 April 1969, the “Azikh Cave zone” was declared a reserve of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. Along with archaeologists, specialists from other disciplines were involved in the study of the site – geologists, geomorphologists, paleogeographers, paleontologists, anthropologists, palynologists, etc.



In the Azykh Cave, a team of archaeologists led by M. Huseynov excavated a 14.5-meter stratum of deposits, in which 10 layers were revealed. Ten meters of them occurred in the first six layers. These deposits were excavated for 14 years – from 1960 to 1973. The most

*The Azykh Cave, 1960. Employees of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan*

interesting of them are layers III, V and VI, containing archaeological materials from the Mousterian and Acheulean cultures. In the remaining 4.5 meters of sediments, four occupation layers were identified – VII, VIII, IX and X with preserved artifacts of the pebble culture (Oldowan). In 1979, based on the local differences between Azykh material from the lower layers from the “classical” Oldowan culture, M. Huseynov identified a new culture – the Kuruchay culture (10, pp. 71-72). One of the criteria for distinguishing a new culture were large two-handed choppers weighing up to 4-4.5 kg, called by M. Huseynov “gigantoliths”. So Huseynov was the first to introduce the phrase “Kuruchay culture” and the term “two-handed gigantolithic chopper” into scientific circulation (10, p. 71; 11, p. 15) – a culture-forming shape of the Kuruchay culture.

Decades later, two-handed gigantolithic choppers were discovered not only at the Paleolithic site of Garaja in Azerbaijan, discovered 300 km north of Azykh in 2012 (14, p. 22), but also at the Early Paleolithic sites far from Azykh. Large tools weighing 4-4.5 kg were also found in Early Paleolithic sites in Dagestan and also began to be called two-handed gigantolithic choppers (13 et al., 2012: 28; 13).

*The famous lower jaw of an ancient man from the Azykh cave. National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*





To determine the age of the occupation layers of Azykh, paleomagnetic studies were carried out for the first time in relation to cave deposits. It was established that the main stratum of deposits (layers I-VI) was formed in the modern magnetic era – Brunhes. Since the last reversal of the Earth’s magnetic field occurred 780 millennia ago, the lower layers VII-X, lying under layer VI were formed in the previous magnetic epoch – Matuyama (12, p. 44), which means that their age is older than 780 millennia. According to various estimates, the age of the most ancient layers of Azykh ranges between 1.2 to 2.5 million years (8, p. 11-13; 4, p. 225; 1, p. 186; 5, p. 49).

Even though Paleolithic sites about 2 million years of age had already been discovered in Africa by that time, the path to the recognition of finds from the lower layers of Azykh as the most ancient stone tools of man turned out to be quite difficult – from a complete denial of M. Huseynov’s statements by a number of leading Soviet specialists to international recognition. The first step towards international recognition of finds from the VII-X layers was made in Tbilisi in 1978 – at a Soviet-French field seminar on “Dynamics of interaction between the natural environment and prehistoric societies”. Due to its remoteness, the Azykh Cave was not included in the itinerary of the meeting participants. However, a separate meeting was devoted to this site in Tbilisi (9, p. 139). This was when the point of view of M. Huseynov was supported at the international level for the first time. In particular, French archaeologists A. de Lumley and J. Combier spoke out in defense of the Azerbaijani scientist (15, p. 26).

Comprehensive studies of Azykh cave deposits, begun in 1975, allow us to determine the chronological time frame of the site’s habitation. In the Azykh sediments, three different Paleolithic cultures were record-

ed corresponding to three episodes of the settlement of the cave.

The first episode of the settlement of the cave, recorded in layers VII-X, represents the earliest, the Kuruchay (Oldowan) Paleolithic culture. The layers are extremely poor in faunal finds. Rare bone fragments are difficult to identify. The definable ones include the tooth of the Asia Minor mountain jerboa (*Allactaga ex gr. Williamsi*) [Velichko et al., 1980, p. 31] and eight remains of the ancestral forms of the later Pleistocene voles (*Microtus ex gr. Arvalis-socialis* Pall) (6, pp. 21-22).

The industry is extremely primitive, is characterized by the absence of tools with two-sided processing, bifaces, the predominance of pebble forms of tools and, as noted above, with local features that differed from other pebble cultures. This enabled Huseynov to distinguish a new Kuruchay culture. According to Mamadali Huseynov, the presence of primitive tools on the rocky bottom of the cave suggests that creators of this culture came to the cave with the skills of making tools they had developed in the valley of the Kuruchay river about 2 million years ago (11, p. 40). Typologically, some objects from the lower layers of the Azykh Cave are more archaic than the tools from Dmanisi dated 1.85 million years ago.

Thus, most likely, the earliest settlement episode of the cave about 2 million was done by the creator of the Kuruchay culture – a species of *Homo erectus*, possibly the same species that was found in Dmanisi.

The second episode of the settlement of the cave is recorded in layers V-VI. Typologically, the artifacts are characterized as mid- and early-Acheulian respectively. There are bifaces appearing in the collection. Among tens of thousands of faunal remains, cave and brown

*Material from the Azykh cave exposition in the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*



bears, red and giant deer, wild boar, Merka rhinoceros and dozens of other species have been identified [Azərbaycan arxeologiyası, 2008, p. 46-50].

Acheulean layers V and VI presented the researchers with a series of sensational discoveries:

- remains of several foci, the largest of which reaches 10 m<sup>2</sup>;
- remains of primitive limestone slabs and a ring-shaped fence made of deer antlers;
- skulls and upper jaws of bears, systematically laid in one of the secluded crevices of the cave.

Of particular interest for researchers was the skull of a cave bear cub with notches in the form of crossing lines, which, as M. Huseynov believes, were applied artificially. The presence of a "cache" and "notches", according to M. Huseynov, testifies to progressive changes in the consciousness of the Acheuleans and the birth of their spiritual life.

But the biggest sensation of Azykh was the discovery of a fragment of the jaw of a fossil hominid about 400 millennia old in layer V in the ninth year of excavation. The find received the specific name of Azykhanthropus (7, p. 19).

Thus, the second episode of the settlement of the cave took place in the Acheulean era. The carriers of the Early Acheulean culture (layer VI) lived here in the pre-Oka and Oka times (at least 600-400 millennia ago), while the

Middle Acheulean culture (layer V) already in the Likhvin interglacial times (400-250 millennia ago) (6, p. 22).

Taking into account the anthropological find from Middle Acheulean layer V, called the Azykhanthropus, it is possible to conclude that one of the varieties of Homo erectus, probably close to Heidelberg man, lived in Azykh in the Middle Acheulean era.

During the period of accumulation of the upper sediments of layer V, judging by the analysis of the material composition, a cooling took place and the site was abandoned (this is evidenced by sterile layer IV) (6, p. 35). Most likely, during the period of general cold, the Azykhanthropus migrated to the regions with a warmer climate and returned there after more than a dozen millennia, already as a Neanderthal with the Early Mousterian culture.

The third episode of the settlement of the cave is reflected in layer III. Mousterian layer III, belonging to the Middle Paleolithic, is separated from the Middle Acheulean layer V by sterile layer IV 1 meter thick, which in itself speaks of a long break in the habitation of the cave. Stone tools of layer III are typologically characteristic of the early Mousterian, while the presence of tools with double-sided processing in the collection, such as bifaces characteristic of the earlier Acheulean culture, allows us to classify the industry type of layer III as a Mousterian with Acheulean traditions.



*The Azykh Cave*

The presence of the remains of brown bears and some other fauna in the sediments of layer III makes it possible to attribute this layer to the late Khazar, i.e. the beginning of the Late Pleistocene: the Mikulin interglacial and the beginning of the Valdai cooling (6, p. 22).

Thus, the third, the latest episode of the settlement of the cave took place in the Middle Paleolithic, more precisely, in the Early Mousterian era, about 150 millennia ago, most likely by Neanderthals to whom the Middle Paleolithic culture is inextricably linked.

We can therefore state three episodes of the settlement of the Azykh Cave, each of which corresponds to three different cultures of the Paleolithic and probably to different species of the genus Homo.

Unfortunately, the Azykh Cave and hundreds of other architectural, historical and archaeological sites of Azerbaijan were under Armenian occupation from 1993 to 2020. Historical and cultural sites in the occupied territories were either barbarously destroyed or falsified as Armenian, which contradicts the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and is assessed as a crime against humanity. Contrary to the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, adopted on 26 March 1999 and prohibiting any archaeological excavations in occupied territories, the occupying authorities of Ar-

menia had been carrying out excavations in the Azykh Cave for years with the financial support of a number of foreign organizations (Note 1). Mostly paleontologists, climatologists, paleobotanists, paleoecologists and geologists from Spain, England and Ireland were involved in these illegal excavations, who are hardly aware of the illegality of these actions. Much to their credit, specialists in the Ancient Stone Age from Russia and a number of European countries rejected the offers of the occupying Armenian authorities to take part in the excavations in the Azykh Cave.

The archaeological fund of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences contains thousands of stone artefacts and tens of thousands of paleontological materials obtained during more than 20 years of research in the Azykh Cave. These materials are available and have been repeatedly provided without any restrictions to specialists from around the world for research. In 2002, as part of the INTAS program, more than 20 scientists from France, Spain, Georgia, Holland, Russia spent almost a month in Baku and had the opportunity to study materials from Azykh and other Paleolithic sites of Azerbaijan (2, p. 163).

Azykh is a site of universal significance. The part of the cave sediments excavated by Mammadali Huseynov currently gives a complete picture of the nature of the site,

the time of its settlement, the environment during the period of human habitation, objects of hunting, etc.

The quality of the studies carried out by Azerbaijani and Russian scientists in the Azykh Cave, despite their age, meets current requirements for such studies, and the results they achieved remain in demand in the scientific world. New excavations have little to add to existing data. Further excavations can rather be compared with the actions of a vandal, tearing out and irrevocably destroying leaves from the only surviving book of antiquities. The participation of citizens of other countries in them was contrary to the ethical and moral standards adopted both in science and in relations between people in general.

Note. Foreign organizations that have financed excavation in the Azykh Cave in the 2000s: The Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales (CSIC), Madrid; The Spanish Ministry of Science and Education (projects BTE2000-1309, BTE2003-01552; BTE2007-66231); The Graduate School, University College London; and The University of Galway, and AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union chapter in UK) (London Trust) ❀

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*Azerbaijani soldier at the entrance to the cave. 2020*