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The collective burials of the Kish-Dokhun necropolis

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Keywords: Caucasian Albania, collective burials, Sarmatians, Scythians, Alans, repeated burials, tiered burials

Түйін сөздер: Кавказ Албаниясы, ұжымдық жерлеу орындары, сарматтар, скифтер, аландар, қайта жерлеу орындары, қабатты жерлеу орындары

Ключевые слова: Кавказская Албания, коллективные погребения, сарматы, скифы, аланы, повторные захоронения, ярусные погребения

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This article examines the characteristics of burial practices at the Kish-Dokhun site, located in the northwestern region of the Republic of Azerbaijan, based on the collective graves and ritual areas discovered during archaeological investigations conducted in 2020. The research of two graves revealed that they featured multiple interments. The study suggests that the collective nature of these burials was not a result of mass death events, but rather related to specific religious and ritual traditions. One three-tiered collective grave and another with repeated collective interments alongside an extended skeleton show parallels with certain Sarmatian and late Scythian burials. Due to their complex structure, these graves are considered unique within the region. The presence of ritual areas indicates that the observed burial practices were not limited to the physical act of interment but also carried social and religious significance. The collective and repeated burials recorded at the necropolis, along with the associated grave goods, were compared to Sarmatian and Alan burials at the Klin-Yar III necropolis near Kislovodsk, Sarmatian burials in the North Caucasus (Dagestan–Garabudaghkend), and those in the Aral Sea region of Kazakhstan, revealing significant parallels. At the same time, local burial customs and artifacts were also observed – such as secondary burials in jars, local ceramics, and other features. These analogies suggest that the Kish-Dokhun necropolis was located at a cultural crossroads, where burial traditions evolved through localized modifications influenced by various cultural interactions. The research concludes that the collective graves at Kish-Dokhun are not merely rare archaeological finds, but also manifestations of widespread and ritualized burial traditions in the region. They exhibit similarities with Sarmatian, late Scythian, and Alan burial forms, while also demonstrating local architectural and ritual particularities.

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Киш-Дохун қорымындағы ұжымдық жерлеу орындары

Мақалада 2020 жылы жүргізілген археологиялық зерттеулер барысында анықталған ұжымдық жерлеу орындары мен ғұрыптық орындарды талдау негізінде Әзербайжан Республикасының солтүстік-батыс бөлігінде орналасқан Киш-Дохун ескерткішіндегі жерлеу тәжірибелерінің ерекшеліктері қарастырылады. Екі жерлеу орнына жүргізілген зерттеу олардың ұжымдық жерлеу орындары екенін көрсетті. Зерттеу нәтижелері бұл жерлеудің ұжымдық сипаты жаппай өлімнің салдары емес, белгілі бір діни және салттық дәстүрлермен байланысты деп болжам жасауға мүмкіндік береді. Жерлеу орындарының бірі үш қабатты құрылымнан тұрады, ал екіншісі созылған қаңқа мен қайталанатын ұжымдық жерлеу орындарын қамтиды. Бұл олардың сармат және кейінгі скиф қабірлерімен ұқсас екендігін көрсетеді. Күрделі құрылымына қарай бұл жерлеу орындары осы аймақ үшін бірегей болып саналады. Ғұрыптық алаңдардың болуы жерлеу рәсімінің тек мәйітті жерлеумен ғана шектелмегенін, сонымен қатар әлеуметтік және діни маңызы бар екенін көрсетеді. Қорымда тіркелген ұжымдық және қайта жерлеу орындары, сондай-ақ оларға ілеспе заттар Кисловодск маңындағы

Клин-Яр III қорымындағы сармат және алан жерлеу орындарымен, Солтүстік Кавказдағы (Дағыстан – Гарабудагкенд) сармат жерлеу орындарымен, сондай-ақ Қазақстандағы Арал теңізі аймағының жерлеу орындарымен салыстырылды. Бұл айтарлықтай ұқсастықтарды анықтауға мүмкіндік берді. Сонымен қатар жергілікті жерлеу ғұрыптары мен артефактілер — құмырада қайта жерлеу, жергілікті керамика және басқа да ерекшеліктер тіркелді. Бұл ұқсастықтар Киш-Дохун қорымы мәдениеттер тоғысқан жерде орналасқанын, онда жерлеу дәстүрлері әртүрлі мәдени ықпалдардың әсерімен жергілікті бейімделулер арқылы дамығанын пайымдауға мүмкіндік береді. Киш-Дохундағы ұжымдық жерлеу орындары сирек кездесетін археологиялық олжа ғана емес, сонымен бірге осы өңірде кең таралған әрі ұрыптық жерлеу дәстүрлерінің айқын көрінісі болып табылады. Бұл жерлеу орындарының жергілікті архитектуралық және ұрыптық ерекшеліктері сарматтардың, кейінгі скифтердің және аландардың жерлеу дәстүрлерімен ортақ белгілердің болғанын көрсетеді.

Сілтеме үшін: Маммадли Н. Киш-Дохун қорымындағы ұжымдық жерлеу орындары. *Қазақстан археологиясы.* 2025. № 3 (29). 118–134-бб. (Ағылшынша).
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Коллективные погребения некрополя Киш-Дохун

В статье на основе анализа коллективных захоронений и ритуальных мест, выявленных в ходе археологических исследований, проведённых в 2020 г., рассматриваются особенности погребальных практик на памятнике Киш-Дохун, расположенном в северо-западной части Республики Азербайджан. Исследование двух захоронений показало, что они включают коллективные погребения. Результаты исследования позволяют предположить, что коллективный характер этих погребений не был следствием массовой гибели, а, скорее всего, связан с определёнными религиозными и ритуальными традициями. Одно из захоронений имело трёхъярусную структуру, а другое включало повторные коллективные погребения наряду с вытянутым скелетом, что демонстрирует параллели с сарматскими и позднескифскими захоронениями. Благодаря своей сложной структуре, эти погребения считаются уникальными для данного региона. Наличие ритуальных участков указывает на то, что погребальные практики не ограничивались только физическим актом захоронения, но также имели социальное и религиозное значение. Коллективные и повторные захоронения, зафиксированные на некрополе, а также сопутствующий им инвентарь, были сопоставлены с сарматскими и аланскими погребениями на некрополе Клин-Яр III около Кисловодска, сарматскими захоронениями на Северном Кавказе (Дагестан — Гарабудагкенд), а также с погребениями в Приаралье (Казахстан), что позволило выявить значительные параллели. Одновременно были отмечены и местные погребальные обычаи и артефакты — такие, как вторичные захоронения в кувшинах, местная керамика и некоторые другие особенности. Эти аналогии позволяют прийти к выводу, что некрополь Киш-Дохун находился на культурном перекрёстке, где погребальные традиции развивались посредством локальных модификаций под влиянием различных культурных взаимодействий. Коллективные захоронения в Киш-Дохуне являются не просто редкими археологическими находками, но и проявлением распространённых и ритуализированных погребальных традиций в этом регионе. Они демонстрируют сходство с сарматскими, позднескифскими и аланскими формами захоронений, одновременно отражая местные архитектурные и ритуальные особенности.

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1 Introduction

The archaeological heritage of Caucasian Albania, particularly its burial traditions, provides essential insights into the cultural processes that unfolded in the region. The structure of graves, funerary rituals, and associated material culture offer a comprehensive understanding of these communities' belief systems and their interactions with other peoples. In this context, the collective graves uncovered through archaeological research in the South Caucasus attract particular attention. These are not merely post-mortem ceremonies but complex rituals that reflect ancestor worship and religious belief systems.

Excavations at the Kish-Dokhun necropolis also offer valuable information about the cultural and religious life of the region. The aim of this article is to determine the functional character of the burial complexes at Kish-Dokhun by analyzing the collective burial practices and associated ritual areas. The study seeks to provide a new perspective on collective burial traditions by combining the analysis of archaeological data obtained at the Kish-Dokhun site with comparisons to analogous materials.

The examination of the Kish-Dokhun necropolis aims to identify both the similarities and distinctions between these burial traditions and the funerary models of late Scythian, Sarmatian, and Alan cultures. The burial customs discovered at the necropolis incorporate elements that were widespread in the South Caucasus as well as practices that are atypical for the region. Thus, this article will also explore the interactions between collective burial traditions and regional cultures in the South Caucasus.

The Kish-Dokhun necropolis is located in the northwestern part of Azerbaijan, within the Dokhun district, situated between the villages of Kish and Okhud in the Sheki region. The site is bounded to the north by the Kish–Okhud village road and to the south by the right bank of the Kish River, while its eastern and western edges are flanked by natural ravines.

The necropolis was first documented in 1982 by Nasib Mukhtarov [Mukhtarov 1985: 11], and several rescue excavations were conducted at the site during the 1980s [Mukhtarov 1985; 1986]. Although double and collective burials were identified during these investigations, the rescue-oriented nature of the excavations and the disturbed condition of many of the graves limited researchers' ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the burial forms and associated rituals at that stage.

Archaeological fieldwork at the necropolis was resumed in 2019–2020 within the framework of the Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan international archaeological expedition, led by Zaur Hasanov and Zainolla Samashev [Hasanov, Samashev et al. 2020].

One of the main characteristics of the necropolis is the presence of collective burials with disrupted anatomical order. The orientation of the graves is generally towards the north and northeast. Ritual areas have been observed in close proximity to the burial sites. Both in the burial areas and the ritual spaces, large and medium-sized stones appear to have been deliberately placed, indicating purposeful structural planning.

2 Materials and methods

During archaeological fieldwork at the necropolis conducted in 2019–2020 within the framework of the Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan archaeological expedition, collective graves and ritual areas were identified. The author of this paper was directly involved in the fieldwork, participating as a member of the expedition team.

Currently, the expedition leaders are preparing a comprehensive article that examines various aspects of this monument and includes detailed plans of the monument and the burials. The present article, however, focuses solely on the aspects of collective burial rituals recorded at this site and their comparison with similar monuments in neighboring regions. In order to avoid duplication, the plans of the site and burials will not be included in this article.

The coordinates of the site are 41.238624, 47.172736. Photos of the site were taken with UAV. Using these photographs, orthophotograph of the site was generated (fig. 1). Ground control points were installed and their geographic references were taken.

After that the excavation process started. Due to the position of the monument on a steep rocky slope, the southern portion of the necropolis has been periodically affected by landslides, resulting in the partial destruction and erosion of some graves into the river. Currently, the preserved area of the site covers approximately 0.5 hectares.

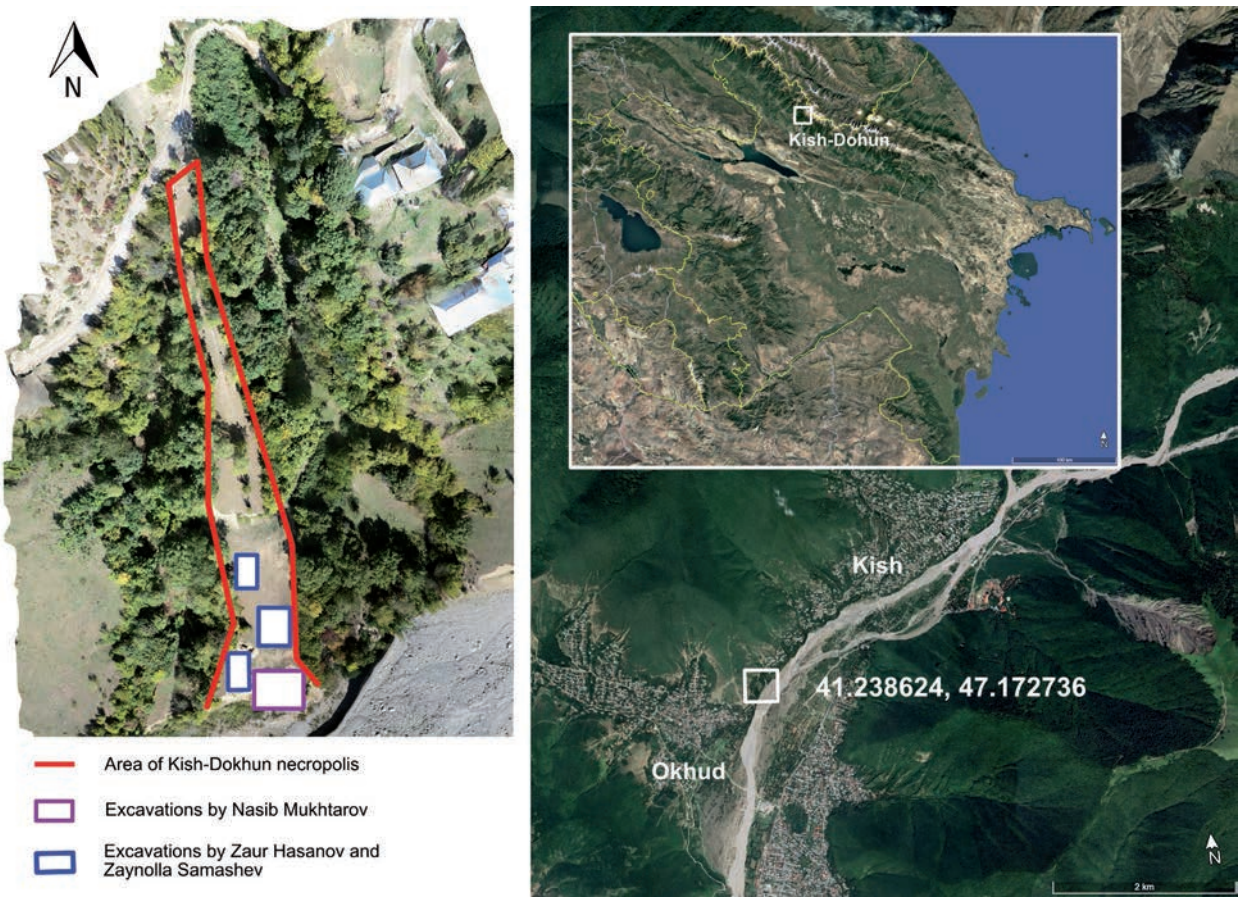


Fig. 1. Kish-Dokhun necropolis. Location of the site
1-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы. Ескерткіштің орналасқан жері
Рис. 1. Некрополь Киш-Дохун. Расположение памятника

Taking into account the gradual destruction of the southern part of the monument, it was decided to place Trench 1 in this area. The trench was positioned as close to the edge as possible, while considering safety and the risk of collapses. Trench 2 was placed at a close distance to the northeast of the first trench, in a part of the necropolis that had not been disturbed by the excavations of the 1980s. The trenches were oriented according to the cardinal directions.

Two anthropologists, who were participating in the work of expedition were documenting the bone remains and separating animal and human bones for the purpose of statistical research. This data used to calculate the number of human skeletons in the graves was mainly based on the number of sculls and large bones.

For the purpose of drawing parallels, sites containing collective burials and tiered (multi-level) burials from the Classical Antiquity period in the Caucasus, the Northern Black Sea region, and Kazakhstan were examined. In comparing the materials from these sites, the following characteristics were considered: grave structure, grave goods, weaponry, imported items, tamgas (tribal or clan symbols) on ceramics, as well as the placement and concentration of human bones within the burials. This study employs a contextual archaeological analysis alongside a comparative-typological approach.

3 Results

3.1 Collective Burials

Grave No. 2 – Three-Tiered Burial

This grave consists of three distinct tiers and is notable for its rich assemblage of grave goods. The uppermost tier was used as a ritual area, while collective burials were conducted in the second and third tiers (fig. 2)[1].

In the top tier, a human deciduous tooth, several animal bones, and a rounded jug-type ceramic vessel were discovered. The placement of rounded jug-type vessels on the surface of graves is also noted in other burials within the necropolis. The site's initial investigator, Nasib Mukhtarov, noted that such vessels were found at depths of 40–70 cm below the surface, often accompanied by animal bones and occasionally horse skulls [Mukhtarov, Bedelova 2003: 11].

In the southern part of the second tier, fragments of a large, horizontally placed gray jar and a dense concentration of disarticulated human bones were found. The bones were largely contained within an area of approximately 65×100 cm, bordered by the jar fragments. Whole ceramic vessels, various pottery fragments, and numerous metal artifacts — including beads, buttons, and a chain — were also uncovered in this tier (fig. 2, *1*).

In the central and northern parts of the grave, human remains appeared more sparsely, along with ceramic vessels and burial goods. Four large stones were placed in the central area, and one in the southeastern section. From the second tier, iron spearheads, ornamental items made of bronze and iron, and a Roman-style eye bead were discovered (fig. 3, *5–6*). Despite the high number of human remains recovered from the grave, no skulls were found [Hasanov, Samashev et al. 2020: 20–21]. A roughly 20 cm thick layer of red, ochre-like material, primarily observed on the grave walls (but not on the surface), separated the second and third tiers. In the third tier, anatomically intact animal bones were found in the center of the grave, alongside a vessel laid on its side in an east-west (slightly northwest–southeast) orientation (fig. 2, *2*). A bronze bead and goat horns were discovered at the mouth of the vessel.

From the third tier, a total of 18 human skulls and various anthropological remains were recovered. The bones were not found in anatomical order, except for a section where vertebrae and rib bones were partially preserved in sequence. Some of the ceramic vessel fragments bore Sarmatian-style stamps (↑) (see: [Yatsenko 2001: fig. 27; Hasanov 2025: fig. 6]). Additional finds included an iron spearhead, a knife-like iron object, amulets made from bone and wild boar tusks (fig. 3, *1*), as well as ornaments made from bronze and iron.

The ceramics from the third tier were better preserved and more often intact than those from the second tier. Notably, medium and small-sized ceramic vessels were mostly found whole, while large storage jars were discovered in fragmentary condition.

Grave No. 3 – Supine Skeleton

The deceased was buried in a supine position. The head was slightly turned to the right, and the legs were crossed. Medium-sized stones were arranged around the skull, and a biconical bowl-type ceramic vessel was placed beside the left arm. A greenish circular stain was observed on the frontal part of the skull. Only the skull and lower limbs of the skeleton were fully preserved; parts of the arm, pelvis, and rib bones also remained (fig. 4, *2*).

Medium-sized storage jars were vertically placed at the head and foot ends of the extended skeleton. The jar at the head end was empty. From the jar at the foot end, fragments of a spearhead, an amulet made from wolf tooth (fig. 3, *10*), pieces of an iron plate, and the cranial remains and other anthropological

[1] All photographs in this paper were taken by Zaur Hasanov.

1

2

Fig. 2. Kish-Dokhun necropolis. Grave No. 2, three-tiered grave: 1 – second tier of the grave, containing artifacts and skeletal fragments other than human skulls; 2 – third tier of the grave, mainly consisting of human skulls and other anthropological and archaeological materials

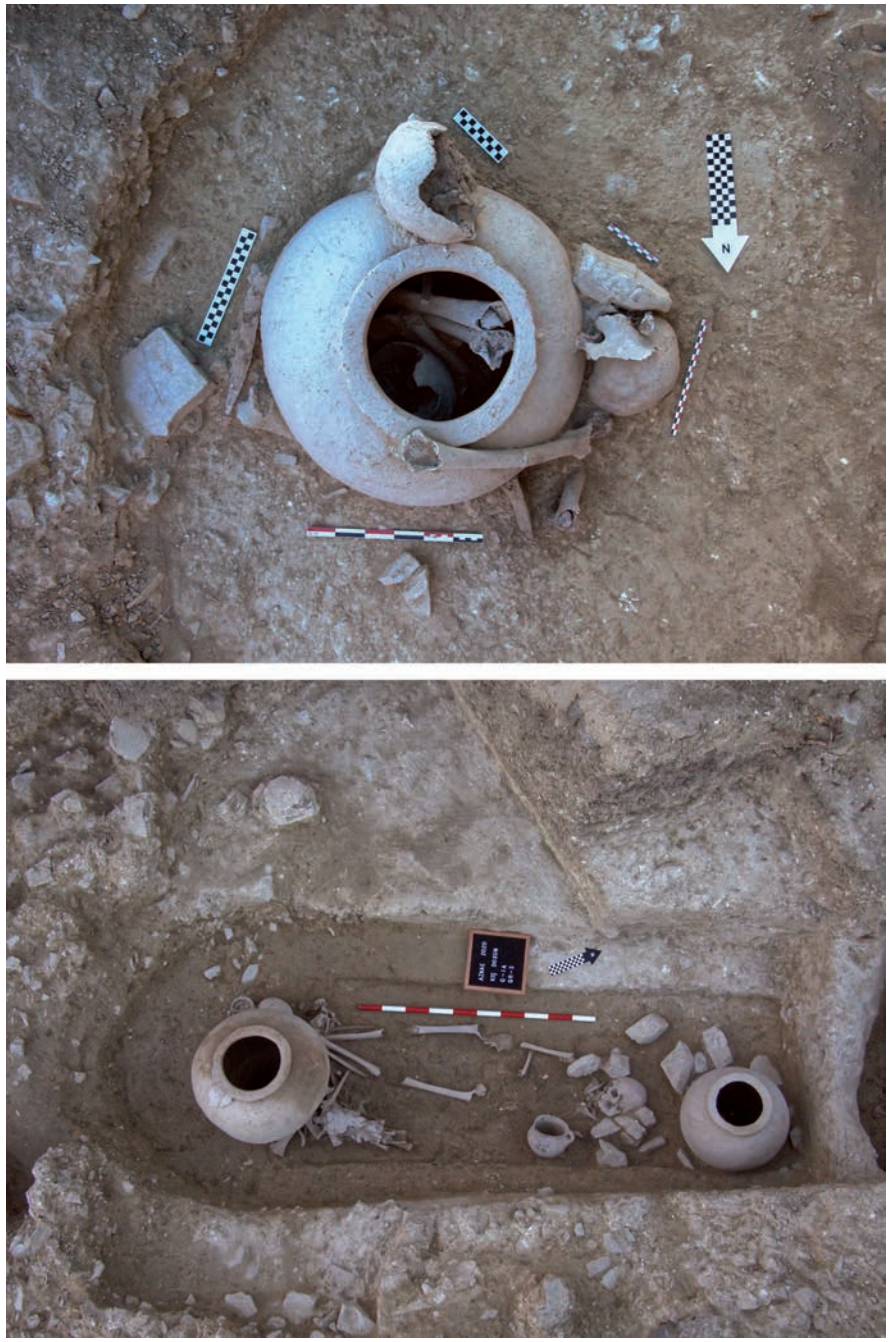
2-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы. № 2 қабір, үш қабатты: 1 – адамның бас сүйектерінен басқа артефактілер мен қаңқа фрагменттері бар қабірдің екінші қабаты; 2 – қабірдің үшінші қабаты, негізінен адамның бас сүйектерінен, сондай-ақ басқа антропологиялық және археологиялық материалдардан тұрады

Рис. 2. Некрополь Киш-Дохун. Могила № 2, трёхъярусная: 1 – второй ярус могилы, содержащий артефакты и фрагменты скелетов, кроме человеческих черепов; 2 – третий ярус могилы, в основном состоящий из человеческих черепов, а также других антропологических и археологических материалов

Fig. 3. Kish-Dokhun necropolis. Grave inventory: 1 – amulet made from wild boar tusk; 2 – pendant; 3 – amulet made from deer antler; 4 – necklace; 5 – earring with eye bead; 6 – eye bead; 7 – glass bead; 8 – pendant; 9 – bell; 10 – amulet made from wolf tooth; 11 – dagger; 12 – spearhead (1, 2, 5–9 – grave No. 2; 3, 4, 10–12 – grave No. 3). 2, 4, 5, 9 – бронза; 11, 12 – iron

3-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы. Жерлеу орындарынан табылған заттар: 1 – қабанның азу тісінен жасалған тұмар; 2 – салпыншақ; 3 – бұғының мүйізінен жасалған тұмар; 4 – алқа; 5 – көз моншағы бар сырға; 6 – көз моншақ; 7 – шыны моншақ; 8 – салпыншақ; 9 – қоңырау; 10 – қасқырдың тісінен жасалған тұмар; 11 – қанжар; 12 – найзаның ұшы (1, 2, 5-9 – №. 2 жерлеу орны; 3, 4, 10-12 – № 3-ші жерлеу орны). 2, 4, 5, 9 – қола; 11, 12 – темір

Рис. 3. Некрополь Киш-Дохун. Находки из погребений: 1 – амулет из клыка кабана; 2 – подвеска; 3 – амулет из оленьего рога; 4 – ожерелье; 5 – серьга с бусиной-глазком; 6 – бусина-глазок; 7 – стеклянная бусина; 8 – подвеска; 9 – колокольчик; 10 – амулет из зуба волка; 11 – кинжал; 12 – наконечник копья (1, 2, 5–9 – погребение №. 2; 3, 4, 10–12 – погребение № 3). 2, 4, 5, 9 – бронза; 11, 12 – железо



1

2

Fig. 4. Kish-Dokhun necropolis. Grave No. 3, Supine skeleton: 1 – top view of the jar: human remains observed inside and around the jar; 2 – skeleton buried in an extended position, accompanied by jars placed near the head and foot areas
4-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы. № 3 қабір, арқасымен жатқан қаңқа: 1 – ыдысқа жоғарыдан қарағаң көрініс: ыдыстың ішінен және сыртынан адам қалдықтары табылды; 2 – созылған күйінде көмілген қаңқа, басы және аяғына қойылған ыдыстарымен
Рис. 4. Некрополь Киш-Дохун. Могила № 3, скелет, лежащий на спине: 1 – вид сверху на сосуд: человеческие останки обнаружены внутри и вокруг сосуда; 2 – скелет, захороненный в вытянутом положении, с сосудами, размещёнными у головы и у ног

material from three individuals were recovered. One of these skulls also displayed a green stain similar to the one observed on the main skeleton. Additionally, around the same jar, remains from three other individuals, including skulls, bones, a ceramic vessel, and items made of metal and bone were documented. One skull was found at the rim level of the jar, to its south, while the other two were found to the west — one at an upper, the other at a lower level (fig. 4, *1*).

A vertically placed spearhead was discovered embedded in the ground at the southwest side of the jar. From this area, a ceramic vessel, a bronze necklace, and a curved iron blade (resembling a knife) were also found. To the east of the jar, an iron necklace, a bronze bracelet, a pendant amulet made from deer antler (fig. 3, *3*), and an iron dagger with an oval-shaped ring pommel positioned northward were discovered (fig. 3, *11*). Additionally, two spearheads were found stacked on top of each other, their tips oriented toward the northwest [Hasanov, Samashev et al. 2020: 9–10].

3.2 Ritual Areas

In addition to the graves, three ritual areas were identified within the Kish-Dokhun necropolis. These ritual spaces were primarily demarcated by large stones, which may have served to define their spatial structure and functional boundaries. Other archaeological elements associated with ritual activity — such as ceramic artifacts, charcoal deposits, human or horse teeth, and animal bones — were predominantly discovered around these stones. Two of the three ritual areas were located in close proximity to burial sites, suggesting a potential connection with funerary structures.

Fig. 5. Kish-Dokhun necropolis. Ritual area surrounded by stones with vessels placed on top
5-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы. Тастармен қоршалған, үстінде ыдыстары бар ғұрыптық алаң
Рис. 5. Некрополь Киш-Дохун. Ритуальная площадка, окружённая камнями, с сосудами, установленными сверху

1

2

Fig. 6. Kish-Dokhun necropolis: 1 – ritual site located near Grave No. 2;
2 – ritual site located near Grave No. 3

6-сур. Киш-Дохун қорымы: 1 – № 2 қабірдің жанында орналасқан ғұрыптық алаң;
2 – № 3 қабірдің жанында орналасқан ғұрыптық алаң

Рис. 6. Некрополь Киш-Дохун: 1 – ритуальный участок, расположенный рядом с могилой № 2;
2 – ритуальный участок, расположенный рядом с могилой № 3

In one of the ritual areas, seven ceramic vessels were arranged in a southeast–northwest orientation. The vessels were bordered by one large stone to the northeast, two to the south, and one to the west. Similar stones were also observed beneath some of the vessels. A thick layer of ash and charcoal was found around the stones in the southwest section. From this ash layer, a horse tooth and several animal remains were recovered, while beads were discovered beneath the vessels [Hasanov, Samashev et al. 2020: 24–25]. The floor of this ritual area was covered with a mortar mixture composed of stone and clay (fig. 5).

The second ritual area is located approximately one-meter east of Grave No. 2. This area is enclosed by large stones on its southern and western sides. Numerous ceramic fragments were found within this space. While some complete ceramic vessels were preserved in the upper layers, the lower layers mostly yielded fragments of large storage jars. Among these fragments, the rim of a jar decorated with a Sarmatian-style stamp was identified [Hasanov 2022: 55]. Additionally, an iron pin-like object, a biconical bead, and a bronze chain ring were discovered among the vessels. Layers of ash and charcoal were observed in certain parts of the area. The finds from this ritual space show significant material and typological parallels with the inventory of nearby Grave No. 2. Notably, another fragment of the stamped jar found in this ritual area was recovered from the grave itself, reinforcing their interconnection (fig. 6, *1*).

The third ritual area is bordered on the south by three elongated stones placed atop one another in a slanted arrangement, and on the north by a large vertically positioned stone. Around these stones, charcoal particles, a few small ceramic fragments, and a single human deciduous tooth were documented (fig. 6, *2*). This ritual area lies to the southeast of the grave containing the extended skeleton (Grave No. 3), and both features form a small mound-like elevation in the local topography [Hasanov, Samashev et al. 2020: 6].

4 Discussion

At first glance, Grave No. 3 gives the impression of a typical jar burial, but closer examination reveals that it cannot easily be equated with the classical jar burial tradition. A detailed analysis of the burial practice suggests the implementation of multi-staged funerary rituals. Alongside human remains found inside and around the jar, a fully extended skeleton buried in a supine position was also documented — this key detail enriches the understanding of the burial configuration. It appears that, in the initial stage, the deceased was buried in a supine position. In subsequent stages, additional human remains were deposited by relocating earlier skeletal elements into the jar. Once the jar was filled, further remains were placed around its exterior.

In this context, while it is difficult to classify this burial strictly within the conventional jar burial typology, the intentional placement of human remains within the jar during secondary burials demonstrates an adaptation of the jar burial concept.

Furthermore, green circular stains observed on two skulls (one inside the jar and the other belonging to the supine skeleton) support the hypothesis of a secondary burial. These marks likely resulted from the oxidation of copper-based objects previously placed on the skulls. However, the absence of such metal items in the archaeological record suggests that they were deliberately removed in later stages of burial reuse.

The organized structure and ritualized manipulations observed in the burial point not to looting but to ceremonial intervention. Had looting occurred, one would expect disturbed skeletons, disordered grave goods, and signs of forced entry — all of which are absent. It should also be noted that a considerable number of artifacts were found in these burials. Thus, the evidence strongly favors ritual reuse rather than grave robbery.

According to M. Bakushev, in cases where burials lack grave goods, have very few of them, or only contain fragments of pottery, they should be regarded as secondary reburials [Bakushev 2008: 108].

In grave 20 of the Bolshoy Buynaksky Kurgan (Dagestan), a looted central burial was discovered, along with the burial of 13 skulls with some skeletal bones, as well as a skeleton lying in a crouched position on its right side. M. Bakushev notes that the presence of such a combination may indicate that repeated burials were carried out here. With each subsequent burial, the anatomical order was disturbed [Bakushev 2008: 101].

The presence of a significant amount of burial inventory, along with a single skeleton in anatomical order in each grave, indicates that the burials at the Kish-Dokhun cemetery are not secondary, but rather reflect repeated use and grave reuse.

Grave No. 3 of the Kish-Dokhun necropolis exhibits features consistent with Sarmatian earthen graves from the North Caucasus dated to the Albanian-Sarmatian period. Supine skeletons became widespread in northeastern and northwestern Azerbaijan from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, a trend often attributed to Sarmatian influence [Khalilov 2009: 69]. K.F. Smirnov noted a similar burial tradition in Garabudaghhkent, Dagestan, where older skeletons were moved toward the foot end when new interments occurred. He associates these graves with the Sarmatians [Smirnov 1961: 176, 201]. In the case of Kish-Dokhun, earlier remains were gathered into a jar placed at the foot of the newly buried body — possibly a localized adaptation of the broader Sarmatian ritual [Hasanov 2022: 56]. Items such as the iron dagger with an oval-shaped ring pommel also align with Sarmatian weapon typologies.

It should be noted that in the Brut 2 burial ground (North Ossetia), which is associated with the Alans, the majority of skeletons preserved in anatomical position were found in supine position – more than 70% of cases [Gabuyev, Malashev 2009: 73].

The burial traditions under Sarmatian influence are also clearly connected to local Caucasian Albanian traditions through material culture artifacts. In particular, the one- or two-handled jars, dishes on tripod bases and rounded or pear-shaped jugs discovered at the Kish-Dokhun necropolis correspond to Jabbar Khalilov's classification of Caucasian Albanian material culture. The dishes on tripod bases and rounded or pear-shaped jugs are dated to the end of the 1st millennium BC and the 2nd–3rd centuries AD. Similar types of artifacts are also known from other monuments of the Caucasian Albanian culture in Mingachevir, Gabala, and Shamkir [Khalilov 1985: 112, 118–119]. This indicates that Kish-Dokhun functioned within a regional material culture network. Thus, the findings demonstrate that although Sarmatian influence shaped certain ritual aspects of the burials, the ceramic assemblage strongly reflects local tradition and integrates imported ritual concepts with local craftsmanship.

The presence of a vertically planted spearhead in Grave No. 3 parallels funerary practices observed among the Scythians and their successors. Such customs are known from Scythian kurgans in the Dnieper forest-steppe of Ukraine [Skory 2003: 47] and from Pazyryk culture graves in Siberia [Polosmak 2001: 36], dating from the late 6th century BC. This practice has also been documented in other burials of the Kish-Dokhun necropolis studied by N. Mukhtarov and at the Tepebashi site in the Sheki region [Mukhtarov, Bedelova 2003: 13].

The above-ground features associated with the collective graves in Kish-Dokhun are also noteworthy. Although these features are not prominently visible today, evidence suggests that such structures may have once been marked. For instance, Grave No. 3 and its adjacent ritual area were covered with small to medium-sized stones, lime fragments, and clay mortar, forming a slight mound. These materials were not found directly atop the grave but rather arranged around its perimeter, likely to delineate the area for repeated access. If multiple burials occurred over time — as indicated by disarticulated bones and secondary placements — then the existence of entry markers or access points becomes a practical necessity.

This peripheral treatment of the grave may reflect a functional architectural strategy meant to preserve the integrity of the central burial area while maintaining visibility for future rites.

Regarding Grave No. 2, it is evident that multiple burial phases took place. The skulls, long bones, ceramic vessels, and spearheads found in the third tier suggest a carefully staged burial event. In the second tier, bones were accumulated within the boundary of large jar fragments, surrounded by ceramic vessels and grave goods. Finally, the upper tier appears to have been used as a ritual platform. Despite the chaotic condition of the bones, all materials remain in situ, indicating the absence of looting. Zaur Hasanov associates this disorderly placement with a "ritual of neutralizing the dead," known from Klin-Yar III necropolis near Kislovodsk, in which the remains were deliberately disturbed to prevent the return of spirits. The burials of Klin-Yar III necropolis are associated with Sarmatians and Alans [Hasanov 2022: 55; see: Flerov 2007: 12, 372].

The three-tiered burial is unique within the context of Azerbaijani archaeology, as no other structure of this complexity has been previously documented in the region. Similar patterns are, however, seen in late Scythian and Alan graves in Crimea and in Sarmatian burials of the Aral Sea region [Dashevskaya 1991: 24; Khrapunov 2011: 5–6, 22; Samashev 2004: 230–266].

In the monograph by G. Goshgarly devoted to the types of burials in the archaeology of Azerbaijan during the Classical Antiquity Kish-Dokhun necropolis is only shortly mentioned in the supplements. In the first mention the graves are classified as jar burials, in the second one as earthen burials. Goshgarly does not provide any additional information on these burials. There is no information on the existence of collective burials, or three-tiered burials in his research [Goshgarly 2012: 175, 178].

In terms of collective burial practices, other examples have been recorded at Yonjali necropolis, Cumaykend-Mammadali kurgan, and Tepebashi site in the Sheki district. At Tepebashi, one grave contained 20 skulls and numerous other human remains, as well as cattle and dog skeletons [Almammadov 2006: 67–68]. Though some of these skulls were arranged, this practice was not typical for those sites.

Collective burials have also been observed in the large earthen mounds of Khojaly, where three supine skeletons and cremated human bones were found in a burial dated to the mid-8th century BC [Pogrebova 2011: 196]. At the Shamkir necropolis, 16 out of 44 earthen graves contained double and collective burials, with 2 to 12 individuals per grave and grave goods like spearheads, earrings, and Scythian arrowheads [Aslanov 1986: 11].

From the Iron Age onwards, collective burials in Azerbaijan show clear Scythian, Saka, and Sarmatian-Alan influences. Comparable burial patterns are documented in the Altai Mountains, especially within the Pazyryk culture. Similar practices are also known from Kamensk and Bystrianskaya cultures in Russia, with six necropolises (Aerodromny, Biysk-I, Bystrianskaya, Pervomayski, Stepnoy Chumish-III, Surtayka-I) featuring collective interments [Radovsky 2023: 90–91].

The Nezlobnensky-6 kurgan in Russia's Stavropol region also exhibits Sarmatian-era collective burials. In Grave No. 5, three individuals were buried with three iron swords placed at the back of their skulls, all oriented northward [Berezin 2021: 122]. A similar arrangement was observed at Grave No. 3 at Kish-Dokhun, where spearheads were placed one atop the other, pointing north. Both sites also contain large stones within the burial chamber, suggesting their integration into the grave architecture. In fact, the systematic use of stones across all graves and ritual spaces at Kish-Dokhun indicates deliberate design. V.S. Flerov drew attention to the presence of large stones in some burials of the Klin-Yar III necropolis. In one case, a stone was lying directly on the skull of the buried woman. He does not explain the possible reasons for this ritual, but notes that the presence of these stones in the burial is not accidental [Flerov 2007: 129].

Although collective burials are present in all these comparative sites, individual burials remain predominant. Scholars often attribute collective burials to mass deaths (e.g., war, epidemic), but this explanation does not align with the evidence from Kish-Dokhun. Instead, research indicates frequent repeated burials and grave reuse. If collective interments were only associated with mass mortality, we would expect a greater proportion of individual burials. However, fieldwork in both the 1980s and 2020s shows that collective burials dominate, suggesting that this was a normative, traditional burial practice. The repeated use of graves, the movement of skeletal elements, and their intentional repositioning reflect a long-term "family" burial custom. These practices go beyond spatial efficiency—they represent the symbolic reinforcement of social memory.

As Shanks and Tilley (1982) emphasized, ritual is not merely a reflection of social relations, but a means of manipulating and naturalizing ideology [Nilsson 2003: 122–123]. In this light, the burial manipulations and ritual structures at Kish-Dokhun can be interpreted as tools for constructing and transmitting collective identity. The presence of similar ceramics, beads, bronze rings, and vessels with Sarmatian-style stamps in both ritual spaces and adjoining graves indicates that these areas were used in a coordinated manner across multiple stages of funerary rites.

5 Conclusion

The two graves investigated at the Kish-Dokhun necropolis represent examples of collective burials characterized by repeated interments. However, their forms and burial structures differ from each other. In Grave No. 3, earlier remains were collected and placed initially inside a large jar and, in later stages, around its exterior with each new burial. The final interment was preserved in a fully extended (supine) position. Grave No. 2, on the other hand, features a three-tiered structure: skulls and selected long bones were arranged in the lowest tier, while other anthropological remains were gathered in the second tier within a space framed by large jar fragments.

The three-tiered collective grave and its unique characteristics may be interpreted — based on current archaeological evidence — as a new type of burial from the Classical Antiquity period of Caucasian Albania. The presence of ritual areas adjacent to the graves indicates that the funerary rites were conducted in a complex and structured manner, incorporating specific ritual practices. This reinforces the idea that ritual areas were integral components of the burial process, used for conducting ceremonial activities with social and religious significance.

Moreover, the coexistence of South Caucasian artistic elements, Roman-style decorative elements, and Sarmatian burial practices and artifacts within the necropolis suggests intensive cultural interactions. These connections may have been facilitated by trade networks, migration, or military encounters — historical processes that shaped the region.

Research shows that the Kish-Dokhun necropolis reflects a synthesis of both local Albanian traditions and Sarmatian–Scythian–Alan influences. The analogues of ceramic samples found at other Albanian-period monuments in Azerbaijan confirm this connection not only in a geographical but also in a cultural context.

The presence of collective burials at Kish-Dokhun demonstrates that this practice was not solely related to instances of mass death, but rather reflects a sustained burial tradition.

Future stages of investigation, including radiocarbon dating, will help establish the precise chronology of the necropolis. Additionally, genetic analyses will provide insights into the origins, potential kinship relationships, and population dynamics of the individuals buried there. Such analyses will enable a more detailed and accurate understanding of the funerary practices and cultural connections at the Kish-Dokhun necropolis.

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