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## GRAVE MONUMENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN END OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: LATE BRONZE – EARLY IRON AGE KURGANS

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The article deals with the results of the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age kurgans built in the foothills of the Talysh Mountains at the south-eastern end of the South Caucasus. Saribulag kurgans are located in Alar village of Yardimly district, on the pasture of the same name at an altitude of 2000 m above sea level. These grave monuments are very important in terms of studying the burial customs of the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age communities. Comparative analysis shows that such archaeological patterns are well known from the monuments of contemporary archaeological culture sites of the South Caucasus. When comparing the findings revealed during the excavations and the typology of graves with parallel samples in different regions of Azerbaijan and outside the Caucasus, the Saribulag kurgans can be attributed to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age.

**Keywords:** archaeology, Late Bronze – Early Iron Ages, South Caucasus, Talysh mountains, kurgans, burial customs, chronology.

**Introduction.** The history of archaeological investigation of the south-eastern region of Azerbaijan is more than 100 years. Many monuments known from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also were recorded in the following years and some were explored. In 1924, Davud Sharifov was the first sent to Talysh-Mughan region. He had recorded big kurgans in Astrakhanbazar (present Jalilabad district) and Masalli districts and noted them as Scythian monuments (Махмудов, 2008, с. 14). In 1939, 3 kurgans – 5 m high and 20 m in diameter related to the Bronze Age were recorded at the eastern slope of the Mashkhan Mountain near the village of Lavayin, Astara district (Махмудов, 1973, с. 67). In 1965, in the lowland of Lankaran, near the Telmankend village of Astara, two stone-covered kurgans were discovered and investigated (Mahmudov, 1987, s. 12–21).

Given the importance to the monuments in the region for the ancient history of Azerbaijan, the “Talysh-Mughan archaeological expedition” was organized in 1986. About 70 kurgans were registered by the expedition and studied 1 kurgan located between Osakucha and Vilvan villages of Lankaran district. The acquired archaeological materials indicate belonging of the kurgan to the Bronze Age (Qoşqarlı, Ələkbərov, 1992,

s. 48–50). Although numerous kurgans were recorded in the mountainous and low-lying lands, archaeological excavations have not been conducted in these monuments. Opinions about their period were only uttered during the initial examination. Unfortunately, kurgans in the mountainous area of the region of the period referred to, have remained totally out of the investigation. In this regard, archaeological excavations carried out in recent years by us in the monuments of the mountainous part of Talysh region are considered to be the first research work.

**Saribulag kurgans.** “Yardimly archaeological expedition” (head of archaeological expedition PhD on history, associate professor Anar Aghalarzade) organized by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences has begun archaeological exploration of the Bronze – Early Iron Age monuments in the territory of Yardimly district of Azerbaijan in 2017–2020 (Fig. 1). This archaeological expedition chose monuments on the frontier with Islamic Republic of Iran, in the territory of Alar village as a research object.

The main purpose for choosing these monuments is to trace the settling of cattle-breeders in the high mountain-



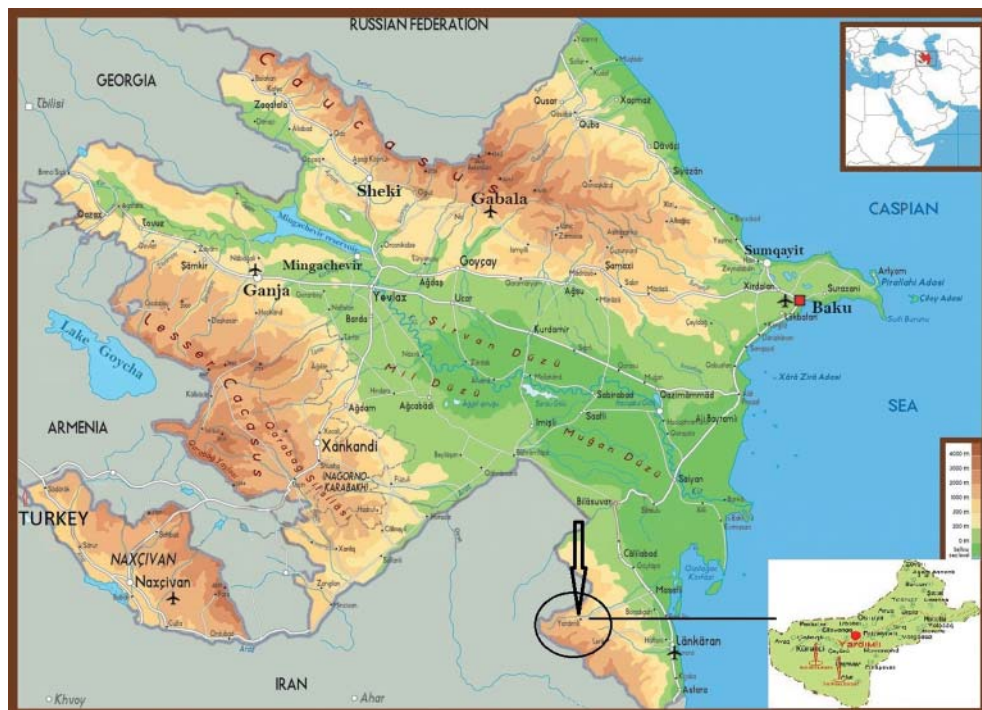


Fig. 1. Location of the Yardimli district on the map of Azerbaijan.

Рис. 1. Месторасположение Ярдимлинского района на карте Азербайджана.

ous area during the Bronze – Early Iron Ages. These monuments located on the frontier with Iran are mainly composed of kurgans, stone box type graves. Late Bronze – Early Iron Age kurgans of the district are located directly on the plateau in the mountainous area of the region. In 2017, 2019 and 2020 archaeological excavations were carried out in the kurgan field in the summer pastures of Saribulag (yellow springs), or *Çiçəkli* (Chichekli – where the flowers are abundant) in Alar village. During the investigations, 2 types of kurgans were recorded here: *stone-covered kurgans (four kurgans excavated) and stone box-type kurgans (one kurgan investigated).*

**Stone-covered kurgans.** Kurgan No. 1, which was investigated by us and conditionally named Alar, chosen among the adjoining kurgans was relatively a small grave monument (Fig. 2).

The kurgan is located at an altitude of 1964 m above sea level. The diameter

of the kurgan was 8.5 m in the east-west direction and 7.5 m in the north-south direction and its height was 1 m. The structure of the stone cover of Alar kurgan No.1 indicated to be undisturbed. At the same time, a large number of pottery fragments and labor tools found between stone covers, charcoal and osteological remains (animal bones) over the grave chamber, and household vessels used in the fire-place give reason to say that the kurgan was built for religious ceremonies and rituals. Archaeological material culture samples discovered in kurgan No. 1 consists of pottery and stone tools. Pottery containers are divided into several types: big pitchers, jars and bowls.

**Pottery.** Pitchers are mostly thick-walled, grey, light grey, greyish-brown and brown, and are mouth fragments of the well-baked big storage containers made of pure clay and sand and fine sand mixed clay. The mouth is funnel-shaped and widely everted to the side. In some



Fig. 2. View of the excavation of the Saribulag kurgan No. 1.

Рис. 2. Вид на археологические раскопки кургана № 1 Сарыбулаг.

the shoulder and the rim are separated with a deep channeled area. Most are thrown in potter's wheel. The surface is well polished. The thickness of the wall of these pottery containers varies from 1.2 to 1.5 cm. Similar containers have been revealed from the destroyed stone-

box graves in the foot of the Bellebur Mountain in Lankaran. F. Mahmudov attributed these findings to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C (Mahmudov, 1969, VII tablo). Fragments of similar big pitchers are encountered in Agyazi kurgans. These type pottery vessels are

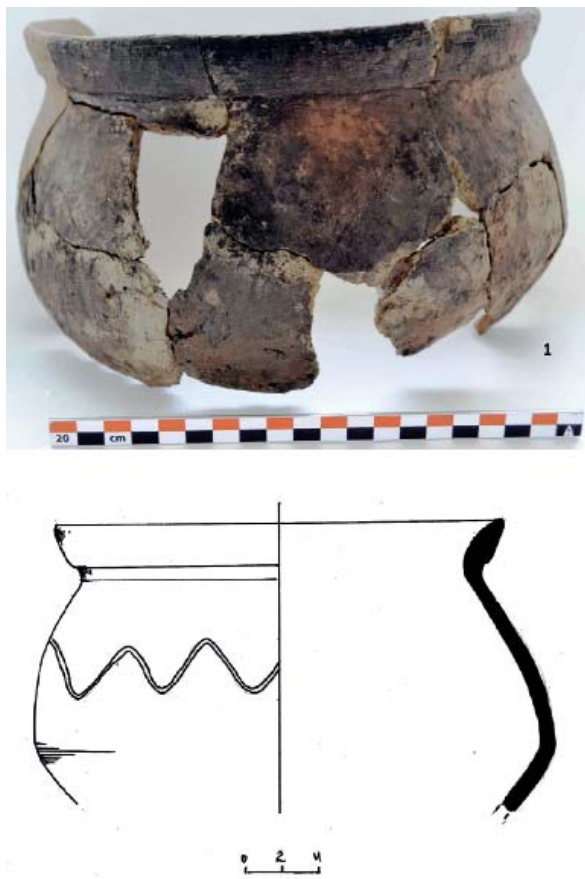


Fig. 3. Pottery from the Saribulag kurgan No. 1.

Рис. 3. Керамика из кургана № 1 Сарыбулаг.

attributed to the coated vessels dated to the Bronze – Early Iron Age, which is considered characteristic for the Qayakend-Khorochoyev archaeological culture (Xəlilov, 1987, s. 49).

1 piece of relatively intact pitcher is of interest. The pitcher is relatively big in size, brown colored, made of clay mixed with sand, and well-baked. The mouth of the pitcher is wide. The body is relatively biconic. The shoulder is covered with wavy patterns made before baking. The surface is smoke black (Fig. 3). This type of pottery in the southern region has been discovered at Toul-e Gilan necropolis in the north-west of the Gilan province in Iran. Professor of Tehran University M.R. Khalatbari at-

tributes these vessels to the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C (Khalatbari, 2004, A, p. 76).

Bowls are mainly thin-walled, of grey, light grey, brown and black colors, made of clay mixed with fine sand, well-baked and biconic. The thickness of the walls hesitates between 0.7–1 cm. Rims are narrow and simple-shaped. Some have the protruded relief patterns on the body. These types of simple-shaped bowls are also known from the coeval monuments of the region (Джафарзаде, 1946, с. 44; Khalatbari, 2004 B, p. 236–237; Agalarzade, 2017, p. 3–4).

Patterned pitchers are thick-walled and fragments of well-baked black, brownish-red, light red, light brown,

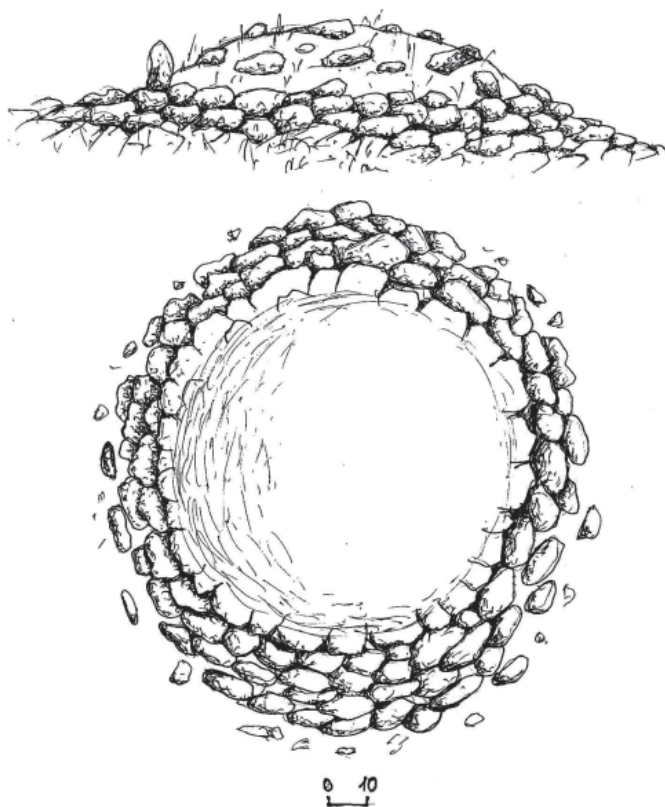


Fig. 4. Plan of the Saribulag kurgan No. 2.

Рис. 4. План кургана № 2 Сарыбулаг.

dark brown vessels made of fine sandy clay. There are salient patterns consisting of reliefs in the vertical position on the shoulder. They have horizontal relief patterns embossed on the shoulder. There are relief patterns horizontally embossed on the body. There are also vessels horizontally decorated with relief patterns embossed on the body in lines. The containers are wheel made. Similar patterned pottery pitchers are encountered in the Niftali kurgans in the Mill-Garabagh Plain belonging to the late phase of the Khojaly-Gedabey culture. Researchers attribute these kurgans to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C (Əliyev, 1992, s. 22).

**Kurgan No. 2.** Kurgan No. 2 is located at an altitude of 1958 m above sea level. The diameter of the kurgan was 7.5

m (Fig. 4). The top cover is covered with river stones and rock grinding. Large stones are also found in the lower layer. Grave chamber wasn't found during the excavation of the kurgan. But large number of pottery fragments (Fig. 5) and stone tools for grain grinding were found from the cover of the kurgan and among the cover stones. In general, also the Alar kurgan No. 2 can be classified as a grave without skeleton as the kurgan No. 1.

**Kurgan No. 3.** The kurgan is located at an altitude of 1952 m above sea level and has a diameter of 8.2 m in the north-south and 9 m in the east-west direction. The top was densely covered with large rock pieces. During the excavation, a stone box-type burial chamber was found on the center of the kurgan. Most likely, this grave does not relate to the kurgan

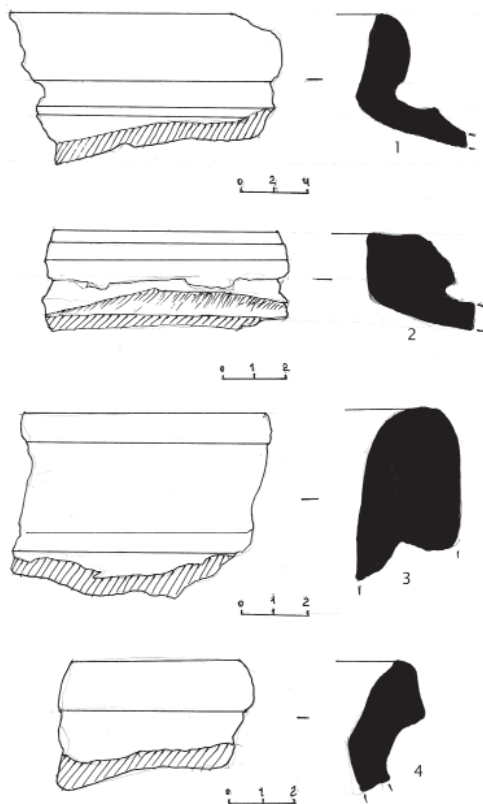


Fig. 5. The graphic description of the ceramic samples from the Saribulag kurgan No. 2.

Рис. 5. Графические рисунки образцов керамики из кургана № 2 Сарыбулаг.

and is simply a grave dug in a later stage (in antiquity). We think that people later saw a small hill here and buried the dead. The stone box grave was 2.2 m in length, 90 cm in width and 1.1 m in depth. A human skeleton was found in the chamber placed on his left side in a bent position, with its face aligned to north-west. The skeleton was poorly preserved and partially rotten. Above the head of the skeleton, in the corner of the stone box, 1 piece of the intact vase was found (Fig. 6), next to it 1 piece of broken pitcher, and next to it 1 pitcher (a small jar) was found broken. The vase was completely intact. As the clay was of poor quality the pitcher was poorly preserved. The jar was also coarsely made of clay of poor quality and was badly deteriorated. Bronze earrings (5 pieces) were found

on the side of the skeleton's skull (Fig. 7: 2).

Also, similar bronze earrings are known from the Loristan, Iran (Overlaet, 2005, p. 20–21). Bronze earrings have also been revealed in the Marlik (Khalatbari, 2001) and Bouyeh (Jahani, 2011, p. 45, fig. 23/63) monuments in Iran. M.R. Khalatbari attributes these findings to the Early Iron Age. Bronze pins (2 pieces) and 8 pieces disc-shaped bronze ornaments (Fig. 7: 1) were found in the part of the stomach, close to the neck. Similar bronze pins are known from the Iron Age graves of the Haftavan monuments in northwestern Iran (Talai, Aliyari, 2009, p. 111–112), graves of the Shakhtakti monuments in Nakhcivan (Araev, 2002, XXXII tablo) and bronze disks are known from the Iron Age graves of the

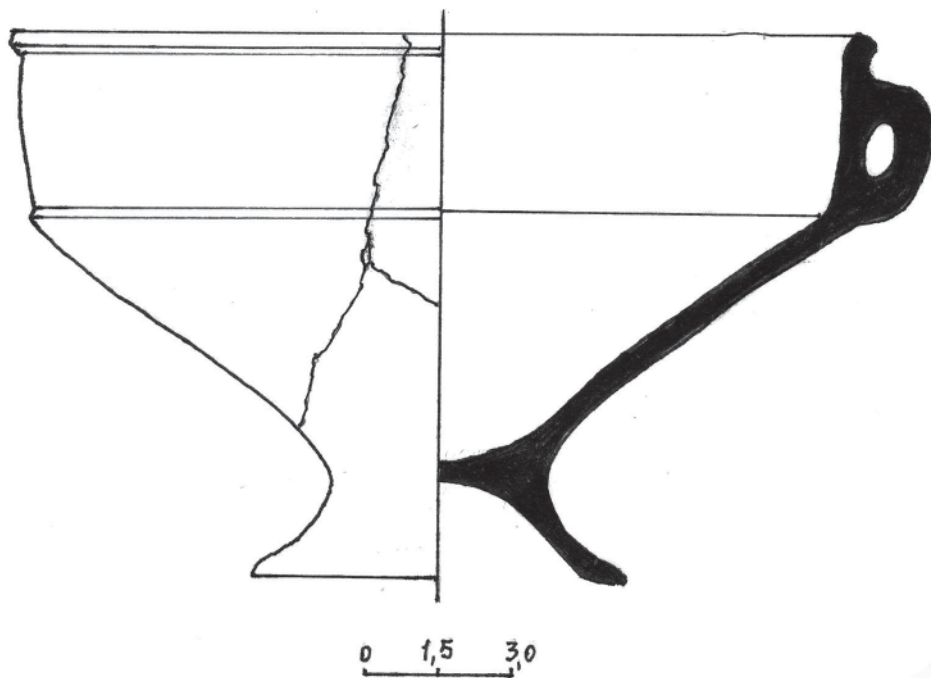


Fig. 6. The graphic description of the ceramic samples from Saribulag kurgan No. 4.

Рис. 6. Графические рисунки образцов керамики из кургана № 4 Сарыбулаг.

Тапа Гиан monuments in Loristan Iran (Overlaet, 2003, p. 54–55).

Numerous pottery fragments coming from large and small pottery vessels were taken from the cover and amidst the cover stones of the kurgan. These vessels are mainly pottery made of thick-walled, grey-black color, sand mixed clay. Because of the thick layer of soot on the surface of the dishes, they are supposed to be used mostly in everyday life. Excavation was continued till 1.6 m depth. But, unfortunately, again no human burial was found in the depth. According to analogical comparison of materials, this monument is also supposed to belong to the second half of the Iron Age.

**Kurgan No. 4.** The kurgan is also located among the kurgans here. The kurgan is located at an altitude of 1956 m above sea level and its cover is densely laid from large rock pieces. Its diameter was 7.4 m in the north-south, 5.4 m in the east-west direction, and its height was 1 m above the ground. Animal bones and

fragments of pottery and handles coming from these potteries and a fragment of a quern were found in the 90 cm thick kurgan cover (Fig. 8). In the central part, at a depth of 1.6 meters a circular structure consisting of rock pieces was revealed. It is believed that this structure was a kurgan chamber. Osteological (animal bones) and charcoal remains, fragments of pottery, 1 clay spindle head (spinner) were revealed inside the 20 cm thick fire-place layer of the chamber. Similar spindle heads (spinners) are known from the Iron Age Kul Tarik graveyard in Iran. The discovery of these items shows that the art of spinning was formed and that sheep-breeding had a dominant position in farming (Rezvani, Roustaei, 2007, p. 178–179). However, no human burial was found in the grave chamber. It is believed that this kurgan was also built as a place of oblation as a ritual. In total, 104 pottery fragments were taken from the kurgan, and through 26 of them was determined the type of pottery.



Fig. 7. The bronze decorations from the Saribulag antique stone box grave.

Рис. 7. Бронзовые украшения из погребения античного времени по типу «каменный ящик» из Сарыбулага.

**The chronology and the first result.**

Based on comparative analysis the monument is assumed to belong last phase to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Ages (10<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC).

The archaeological excavations carried out at Saribulag *stone-covered kurgans* provided us with the following preliminary results:

The kurgans do not contain a skeleton and is probably an empty memorial graves. These kurgans belonged to

cattle-breeders who died in the lowland and this burial monument was built in memory of the deceased in the summer pasture.

The traces of the fire-place in the central grave chamber (in kurgans No. 1 and No. 4), dishes and other items used there give reason to say that this burial custom was of ritual character.

**Comparative analysis.** Burial tradition in stone-box kurgans occurred in the Early Bronze Age. In the follow-

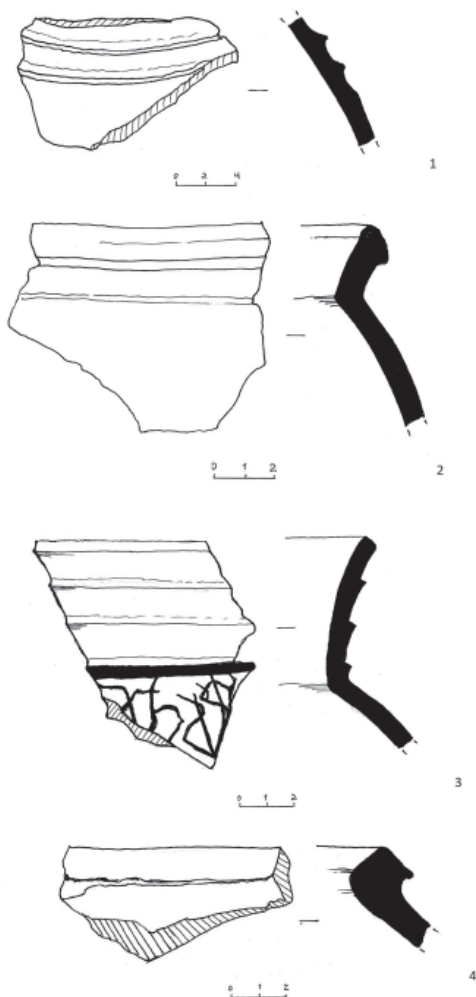


Fig. 8. The graphic description of the ceramic samples from the Saribulag kurgan No. 4.

Рис. 8. Графические рисунки образцов керамики из кургана № 4 Сарыбулаг.

ing Middle and Late Bronze Ages, then in the Early Iron Age, they were transformed into stone box graves, one of the leading burial types spread in the entire Caucasus. This type of burial is considered to be the main type of graves in Talysh-Mughan region, especially in the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age Khojaly-Gedabey archaeological culture of Azerbaijan (Кесаманлы, 1976, с. 74–75), in the Nakhchivan AR (Бахşәliyev, 2002) and the Kobani culture of the North Caucasus (Гошгарлы, 2012, с. 131). While dealing with the Early Iron Age monuments of the Caucasus and Iran research-

ers state that they are close in terms of origin (Tsetskhladze, 2005, p. 440).

Some of the kurgans having stone box-type grave chambers encircled with cromlech setting were found in the area of Divalona village not far from Lan-karan. According to the morphological description and comparison, researchers have attributed the Divalona findings to the Early Iron Age, the 9<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. According to the character and the nature of the materials these monuments are considered to be closely related to coeval monuments in the Talysh Mountains and on the Mughan Plain (Mahmu-



dov, Kəsəmənli, 1974, s. 55–56). Earthen kurgans the burial chambers of which enclosed with stones have also been found in Khachbulag village of the Dashkasan district (Кесаманлы, Гусейнова, 1993, с. 28). V. Jahani attributes burial monuments with stone box-type grave chambers excavated in Deyman province in the northeast of Iran, to the Early Iron Age and writes that the majority of these graves in the area were robbed (Jahani, 2014, p. 280–281). Basing on the Tandabin and Mariyan monuments in the north of Iran M.R. Khalatbari attributes this type of kurgans to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium and considers them to be related to the beginning of the Iron Age (Xələtbəri, 1956, s. 23).

Different opinions were put forward in scientific literature about the reasons on the occurrence of graves containing no skeletons. There are some considerations such as they belong to the tribe members who died far off, or died in unknown conditions or their bodies were not found. According to N.A. Museyibli, absence of the corpse in the graves was part of funeral traditions carried out deliberately (Museyibli, 2004, p. 60) and such burial monuments are the memorial graves in terms of content of funeral tradition (Museyibli, 2009, s. 44). According to the researcher, "... it is more correct to seek the reason of absence of the human skeletons in these graves and not burying people in these graves in the features of the economic life of the late Bronze Age people living in this region. At that time, cattle-breeding in summer pastures in the South Caucasus rose to the highest level of development and occupied a leading position in economic life. The ancient cattle-breeders used to live 3 or 4 months of the year in summer pastures in the mountains with their animal herds. People who died during the summer season were buried there. There are hundreds of graves in these mountainous areas where such people were buried. When they returned to the

lowland, they used to build symbolic memorial graves in the nearby graveyard in honor of the people buried in the summer pastures. As noted, part of life of the ancient cattle-breeders was associated with pastures. So, the graves found without skeletons in the summer pasture areas likely were built in the memory of the dead persons. The varieties of graves in the low-lying lands and mountainous areas are related to geographical conditions and natural resources. The fact that they both belonged to a single culture is confirmed by the uniqueness of the goods found in these graves" (Museyibli, 2009, p. 44–45).

This type of cenotaph (empty) kurgans belonging to the Khojaly-Gedabey culture, which is synchronous to the Talysh-Mugan culture, was excavated by E. Resler (Археологические исследования Э.А. Рёслера..., 1905), Y. Hummel (Гуммель, 1939, с. 63; Гуммел, 1940), V. Nagen, Y. Shtrommenger (Nagel, Ştrommerger, 1999) and H. Kesemenli (Кесаманлы, 1999) in Karabakh and Ganja-Gazakh region. Agreeing mostly with A.A. Ivanovski's idea about the empty graves without skeletons, H.P. Kesemenli notes that the emptiness of the graves can be explained with the relocation of the cattle-breeders settled in this area to other grasslands or winter pastures, thus they used to bury the dead persons in the area they were going to settle (Najafov, 2012, p. 84). That the absence of human skeletons in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age graves dug in the south-eastern region of Azerbaijan, including the grave monuments excavated by French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan (Morgan, 1896) was related to the features of burial customs, not the robbery of these graves. Also, we consider memorial kurgans in the Mountainous Altai region of Central Asia (Табалдыев, 2011, с. 45). Some scientists have noted own considerations about these cultural connections (Güneri, 2002, p. 64). No human burials were encountered

in several kurgans excavated by E. Re-sler in the western region of Azerbaijan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1901–1903, kurgans No. 2 and No. 3 on the left bank of the Goshgarchay, a kurgan near Seyidkend and kurgan No. 8 in the village of Chinarli in Shamkir were of the same type as the Alar kurgans (Археологические исследования Э.А. Рёслера..., 1905, с. 20). Khankendi kurgan No. 125 and Khanlar kurgans excavated by Y. Hummel at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are of similar grave monuments. Besides, cenotaph kurgans were excavated by V. Belk in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the upper stream of the Zayamchay River basin (Гуммел, 1940).

**Conclusion.** The Late Bronze and Early Iron Age grave monuments in the south-eastern region of Azerbaijan are of particular importance in the studying of the ancient material culture of the region. The ancient Bronze Age farmer-cattle-breeding tribes who created the burial monuments settled in certain local areas.

The study of the Alar kurgans proved that the south-eastern end of the South Caucasus, especially the mountainous region, was inhabited since the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BC. Despite the fact that, the low-lying areas in the south-eastern region of Azerbaijan has been studied from archaeological view point, but the mountainous and relatively densely populated areas have been left out of fundamental research. Therefore, scientists have not been able for many years to prove the problem of people's settlement in the mountainous areas of the region since the Bronze Age. As a result

of the excavation of the above-said kurgans it has been revealed that the ancient cattle-breeding tribes settling in high mountainous areas possessed extensive pastures still the beginning and formed the cattle-breeding culture there. Consequently, grave monuments had emerged there. Also, it was revealed that the people widely used the kurgan setting tradition there and the fact that this tradition was widely spread in a vast area.

As noted above, the absence of the skeletons in the majority of the kurgans in the south-eastern region during that period should be described as a type of burial custom, rather than a fact of robbery. Almost most of the views expressed in scientific literature related to the burial process where dead body was not put in some of graves in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age in Azerbaijan have led to the formation of common ideas. It was revealed during the study that these burial traditions are one of the indicators of the spiritual culture of the tribes occupied in cattle-breeding in summer and winter pastures. In the future, it is undoubtedly that rich material cultural items belonging to semi-nomad cattle-breeding tribes of the region will be discovered as a result of systematic archaeological excavations that will be carried out in settlements along with grave monuments. Also it will be possible to obtain full information about the economic life, welfare, the moral and spiritual culture of the Bronze Age inhabitants during systematic researches to be conducted in these monuments.

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### ПОГРЕБАЛЬНЫЕ ПАМЯТНИКИ ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНЫХ СКЛОНОВ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА: КУРГАНЫ ПЕРИОДА ПОЗДНЕЙ БРОНЗЫ-РАННЕГО ЖЕЛЕЗА

**А.М. Агаларзаде**

В статье рассмотрены результаты раскопок курганов периода поздней бронзы – раннего железа, расположенных на яйлажных пастбищах Талышских гор, на юго-восточной оконечности Южного Кавказа. Сарыбулагские курганы расположены в селе Алар, Ярдымлинского района, на высоте 2000 м над уровнем моря, на одноименном яйлаге. Эти погребальные памятники очень важны с точки зрения изучения погребальных обрядов обществ периода поздней бронзы – раннего железа. Сравнительные анализы показывают, что археологические образцы подобного типа хорошо известны на археологических памятниках синхронных археологических культур Южного Кавказа. Сравнивая находки, обнаруженные во время раскопок, и типологию погребений с параллельными образцами из разных регионов Азербайджана и за пределами Кавказа, Сарыбулагские курганы можно отнести к периоду поздней бронзы – раннего железа.

**Ключевые слова:** археология, период поздней бронзы – раннего железа, Южный Кавказ, Талышские горы, курганы, погребальный обряд, хронология.

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