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Development-Led Archaeology in Azerbaijan along the South Caucasus Pipeline Corridor and at Sangachal in 2017–2018

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Abstract

Large infrastructure works expose archaeological contexts that surface surveys may miss, but the resulting record is shaped by the location and depth of construction. This study examines archaeological monitoring and rescue excavations undertaken in Azerbaijan in 2017–2018 for the South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion and at the Sangachal Terminal. It compares field reports, published site studies, ceramic and architectural evidence, and previously reported radiocarbon determinations to assess burial practices, settlement activities, and the effects of recovery conditions on interpretation. Late Chalcolithic jar interments and Bronze Age kurgans document repeated use of burial grounds, while later cemeteries show both recurring practices and local variation in vessel placement and associated offerings. Storage jars at Hasansu, stratified domestic deposits at Poylu II, and architectural and production features at Kerpijlitepe illuminate different aspects of settlement organisation. Radiocarbon determinations anchor selected contexts in the Bronze Age, the late first millennium BCE, and the medieval period, although their relationship to individual events varies with sample material and provenance. Deeply buried graves at Gazyan and Amirarkh, shallow burials at Bayimsarov, and surface pottery at Sangachal illustrate why site visibility varies across the project footprint. The comparison establishes context-level patterns of mortuary and domestic activity and identifies where construction damage, groundwater, and restricted excavation constrain regional inference. It also shows how field monitoring and explicit recording of context integrity can strengthen the research value of development-led archaeology.

Citation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure construction creates a distinctive archaeological record. An excavation corridor can intersect deeply buried remains that have no surface expression, including features below the depth of cultivation. It can also cut through deposits before their limits, associations, and stratigraphy have been established. The same project may consequently yield closely documented graves, fragments displaced by machinery, surface scatters, and isolated vessels with limited contextual information. The significance of these discoveries depends on how the circumstances of recovery are incorporated into interpretation.

The 2017–2018 programme in Azerbaijan comprised monitoring near the Sangachal Terminal under the Shah Deniz II project and monitoring and rescue excavation associated with the South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion (SCPX). The pipeline investigations followed a construction footprint through the Aran and Ganja–Gazakh regions. Excavations in the corridor documented contexts ranging from the Late Chalcolithic through the late medieval and early modern periods. The full SCPX archaeological programme covered 48 localities from 2013 to 2018 (Maynard et al., 2022). This study examines selected cases presented in the 2017–2018 synthesis, using earlier field seasons where they establish the context for those cases. At Kerpijlitepe, the three excavation stages spanned 2016–2018, while published totals for Tovuzchay II cover four stages from 2014 to 2018. The wider field sequences provide context for the focal years (Najafov & Maynard, 2020; Qoşqarlı et al., 2019).

The project generated field reports on individual interventions and subsequent studies of selected sites. This publication record makes it possible to compare discoveries that would usually be interpreted separately, such as jar-grave cemeteries, Bronze Age burial mounds, storage features, and fortified architecture. A comparison across these contexts can show which practices recur, which associations are locally distinctive, and which differences may reflect the conditions under which archaeological deposits were exposed. For example, the absence of a human skeleton can result from decay or disturbance, whereas an intact stone enclosure or upright storage jar provides a different kind of evidence about the original arrangement of a feature.

Previous studies provide two important bases for the comparison. Regional research on jar burials, including finds at Ashagi Laki and Yaldili, situates the first-millennium BCE and early CE cemeteries in a longer history of ceramic burial containers in Azerbaijan (Ağalarzadə & Hüseynova, 2017; Əsədov, 2006; Goshgarly, 2012; Osmanov, 1987). Work on Soyuqbulaq and nearby sites places early burial mounds and their material assemblages within wider debates on Chalcolithic practices in the South Caucasus (Courcier et al., 2008). These studies provide comparanda of different kinds. A formal resemblance can inform typology, while the strength of a proposed chronological or cultural association depends on independent context and dating.

This article asks three questions. First, what patterns and variations in burial construction, container use, and deposition can be established from the excavated features? Second, what do storage installations, occupation deposits, and architectural remains reveal about settlement activities at different scales? Third, how do recovery conditions and the association of radiocarbon samples with features affect the conclusions that can be drawn? The analysis treats each burial, architectural horizon, or activity feature as the primary unit of interpretation. Regional comparisons build on these units, taking into account the narrow corridor and the uneven completeness of the excavated record.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mortuary evidence and regional comparison

Research on burial archaeology in Azerbaijan has established a typological basis for comparing graves by construction, container form, and associated objects. Goshgarly (2012) examines the funerary monuments of the classical period, while Osmanov (1987) addresses the distribution and development of jar burial practices. Site studies at Yaldili and Ashagi Laki provide local comparanda against which the corridor finds can be assessed (Ağalarzadə & Hüseynova, 2017; Əsədov, 2006). The comparison is most informative when a distinct feature, such as the placement of vessels beside a burial jar, can be separated from broader categories such as ceramic burial or the presence of grave goods. Khalilov's (2007) study of early medieval jar burials also illustrates the chronological breadth of ceramic interment in Azerbaijan.

The prehistoric cases call for a separate comparison. Independent excavations of early kurgans at Soyuqbulaq identified Late Chalcolithic contexts through monument structure and associated material, including metal objects in some graves (Courcier et al., 2008). The SCPX contexts add evidence of vessel interments and contrasting stone arrangements elsewhere at Soyuqbulaq and Khojakhan. These finds pose a different problem from the classical-period cemeteries, as the cultural attribution rests on combinations of architectural, ceramic, and depositional traits specific to the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age.

2.2 Site studies and corridor evidence

Reports on the 2017 and 2018 construction-season investigations identify the geographical extent and variety of the discoveries (Nəcəfov et al., 2019; Qoşqarlı et al., 2017, 2019). Subsequent studies examine individual sites at greater resolution. The published account of Tovuzchay II documents successive campaigns across an extensive cemetery (Najafov & Maynard, 2020), while the studies of Kerpijlitepe and Poylu III describe substantial architectural remains within different historical settings (Asadov & Najafov, 2024; Najafov, 2026). Together, these works provide well-documented examples of what excavation can recover at particular sites. They also make it possible to compare the detailed records from larger exposures with the more fragmentary evidence from chance finds and trench sections. This study extends the site-level literature by examining the same interpretive questions across those different recovery settings.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Project footprint and field documentation

The archaeological programme involved reconnaissance before ground disturbance, monitoring during earthworks, and excavation of threatened features where access permitted. Archaeological monitoring and excavation along the SCPX corridor were undertaken within a contractual arrangement between BP and the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. At Sangachal, work between January and May 2017 covered the project section from the pipeline landfall to the terminal entrance, where observations were limited to surface material. Pipeline kilometre points (KP) refer to distance along the project route.

The documentation comes from different types of intervention. Some features became visible in a trench face following machine excavation, while others were detected during topsoil removal or investigated in larger open areas. At Amirarkh, access varied with the depth of the trench and groundwater. At Hasansu, jars seen in section prompted a gridded excavation. At Kerpijlitepe, a larger excavation and supplementary test pits exposed two construction horizons. At Poylu III, the excavated strip crossed part of a building whose walls continued beyond the available area. These differences are relevant to the completeness of each plan and to confidence in associated finds.

3.2 Comparative approach and criteria for attribution

This study synthesises the available field and publication records. For each locality, it considers how the feature was encountered, its stratigraphic and architectural setting, the reported assemblage, and the basis for its proposed date. The corridor-wide publication provides an independent point of comparison for reported site locations, counts, and period assignments (Maynard et al., 2022). Published case studies supplement the project reports for Tovuzchay II, Kerpijlitepe, and Poylu III (Asadov & Najafov, 2024; Najafov, 2026; Najafov & Maynard, 2020). Localities near the same chainage are treated separately where the records describe discrete interventions. More precise positions are given where internally consistent. Site boundaries are recorded at the scale of the excavation where the wider archaeological extent remains unknown.

Mortuary comparison takes account of container type, orientation, the placement of accompanying vessels, human and animal remains, and indicators of disturbance. A jar is attributed a funerary function where finds or the arrangement of the deposit support that interpretation. Upright vessels and grouped storage jars at settlement sites are considered in relation to nearby features and associated assemblages. A potentially domestic function can be proposed from these associations even where stored products and the full extent of the structure are unknown.

Ceramic, metal, and architectural comparisons support relative dating. A regional parallel helps establish the range of plausible attributions, particularly where a closed assemblage survives. Surface finds and mixed fills carry weaker chronological resolution. Long-lived forms and similar treatments can recur across phases. Consequently, similar jars are compared within their contexts, and the Late Chalcolithic vessel interments are discussed separately from the much later jar-grave cemeteries. Period labels are used at the resolution supported by the source records. BCE and CE refer to calendar years unless used as general period designations.

3.3 Radiocarbon evidence

The radiocarbon evidence consists of 15 previously reported determinations from seven localities. Tables 1–3 preserve the laboratory identifiers, conventional ages, and reported calibrated calendar intervals. Conventional ages in years BP refer to the radiocarbon scale before 1950. The quoted uncertainties are given as reported. Disjoint calendar intervals retain their individual probabilities. Small deviations in summed probabilities can arise from rounding. The source materials do not include the original certificates or calibration inputs. The published ranges are therefore reproduced without recalibration or combination into a formal chronological model, and the calibration curve and software remain unverified. This follows the principle that a conventional determination and its laboratory identifier should accompany any calibrated range to permit subsequent checking or recalibration (Bayliss & Marshall, 2022).

Chronological interpretation depends on what was sampled and how it entered the deposit. A human tooth has a direct biological association with the person buried, although its carbon reflects tissue formation during life. An animal bone may date an offering or another depositional event depending on its provenance. Charred material may be contemporary with a use episode, displaced from an older deposit, or older than the feature if it derives from long-lived wood. The source records identify the material for most determinations but give limited information about these formation processes. Dates are applied to the sampled contexts, and proposed periods of site use are evaluated through the combined evidence.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sangachal surface ceramics

Monitoring at Sangachal produced a surface assemblage consisting of pottery. Most vessels were reported as wheel-made. The assemblage predominantly comprised thin-walled red and light-red wares, with fragments attributed to storage jars, smaller jars and pouring vessels, and plates. Glazed and unglazed sherds preserved slip coatings. On unglazed pottery attributed to the thirteenth through eighteenth centuries, the slips were described as clay suspensions of different colours (Qoşqarlı et al., 2017). The observations concern surface treatment and appearance. No compositional analyses or production provenances are reported.

The scatter establishes the presence of pottery within the investigated area, with forms that represent storage, serving, or pouring. The original interpretation proposed that vessels were brought into the area and reflected seasonal use. The surface context allows that possibility alongside redeposition or other intermittent activities. The monitoring record provides no stratified assemblage or associated structures through which to establish production origin or seasonality. Sangachal is therefore included as a distinct class of evidence in the corridor comparison.

4.2 Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age burial and domestic contexts

At Soyuqbulaq, separate interventions at KP 409.332 and KP 412.100 encountered mortuary features. At KP 412.100, cultivation had removed surface evidence of the mounds and obscured the extent of the burial ground. Excavation documented three interments in medium-sized ceramic vessels surrounded by small river stones. The recovered assemblages were sparse. The field report associates the vessels and burial arrangement with the Leylatepe tradition (Museyibli, 2018b). Regional excavations at Soyuqbulaq have independently documented Late Chalcolithic kurgans, providing a comparative setting for the stone arrangements and ceramic deposits at this locality (Courcier et al., 2008).

At KP 409.332, a dense covering of small and medium river stones lay above a chamber of modest size. Small obsidian pieces were recovered among the stones. The draft attributes the assemblage from the chamber to the Middle Bronze Age, while the underlying field-report title and the corresponding site entry in the project synthesis identify it as Early Bronze Age (Maynard et al., 2022, Section 2.47; Museyibli, 2018a). The published date and the attribution in the draft require reconciliation against the assemblage. The emplacement of the stone cover and the presence of a chamber can be reported independently of the period assignment.

The Khojakhan necropolis occupies a hill between Eyyublu and Duz Qırıqlı in Tovuz District. The archaeological remains were reported across an elevated strip approximately 100 m long and 50 m wide. The published site register distinguishes a burial locality at KP 339.9 from a nearby settlement with burials at KP 340.6 (Maynard et al., 2022, Sections 2.36–2.37). The exact correlation of the features below with the published locality records requires checking. The excavation area included hearths, localised sherd concentrations, and animal bones. Topsoil stripping exposed a ceramic container, and excavation recorded a vessel interment at a reported depth of about 0.5 m. The vessel had a rounded base and was assigned to the Late Chalcolithic on ceramic grounds. The field account interpreted this feature as a possible child burial by analogy with Leylatepe contexts. No preserved skeletal material was available for an osteological age estimate (Kirichenko, 2018c).

Excavators also documented three kurgans attributed to the Early Bronze Age through material associated with the Kura–Araxes tradition. Two whole vessels and a vessel fragment were recovered from disturbed earthen graves associated with the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age Khojali–Gadabay tradition. The combined sequence supports repeated mortuary use of the hill across widely separated periods. The construction corridor intersected only part of the site. It is therefore difficult to establish the spatial relationship between the clusters or the length of intervals between episodes of activity.

Poylu II, near KP 389.2 in Agstafa District, produced domestic evidence from a multilayer settlement excavated in three stages. Hearths and pits occurred within cultural deposits and, in some cases, cut into natural sediment. Deposits generally measured about 2–2.2 m thick, reaching 3.2 m in square 1A. The field account associates the increased depth with local relief. The assemblage included pottery attributed to the Late Chalcolithic Leylatepe tradition and the Bronze Age, with material from both periods found together in some units. Grinding stones, obsidian and flint cutting implements, obsidian saw or sickle elements, clay spindle whorls, a bronze hair ornament, and stone and bone pendants attest to varied domestic activities (Asadov, 2018f; Kirichenko & Farmanly, 2017b).

Two bone determinations came from a large jar and the fill of a furnace in Unit 24. Their calibrated intervals fall in the later second millennium BCE (Table 1). The dates establish the presence of Bronze Age material within the sampled deposits. The association of the bone from the furnace fill with the installation's construction or first firing is unknown. Likewise, the jar sample dates material placed inside the vessel, with the interval between manufacture and deposition unestablished. The combination of early ceramics and later radiocarbon samples supports a multiperiod sequence. Evaluating continuity requires secure associations between independently dated layers.

4.3 Bronze Age kurgans and the Tovuzçay II cemetery

The Kechili kurgan at KP 311.892 in Shamkir District was identified during monitoring in the centre of the corridor. Excavation revealed a crescent-shaped upper stone arrangement with ochre between the stones. Removing the third stone course exposed vessel fragments to the southwest, alongside small charcoal traces and an ash deposit. Further fragments occurred in a scatter approximately 1.9 m across in the southeastern sector. An animal bone from the burial context yielded a conventional age of 3440 ± 30 BP (Beta-464795), with the largest calibrated probability component falling between 1785 and 1664 BCE (Table 1). Its main calibrated range is consistent with the Middle Bronze Age attribution in the field assessment (Kirichenko, 2018a; Kirichenko & Farmanly, 2017a).

The Zayamchay II kurgan, at KP 336.200 on the right bank of the Zayam River near Duyerli, was one of six mounds identified in that sector. It was detected during earthworks in 2016 and excavated in January–February 2017. An oval cover of medium-sized river stones measured approximately 6.3 m north to south and 9.1 m east to west. The chamber lay at a depth of 2.6 m and measured roughly 3 × 2.5 m. It contained cattle and dog skeletons, intact ceramic vessels and fragments, and a bronze sword reported to measure 1 m in length (Kirichenko, 2018b). Beta-498810 yielded its largest calibrated probability component at 1776–1636 BCE. The assemblage was assigned to the transition between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages in the project documentation. The overlap with Kechili permits a comparison within the second millennium BCE. The record does not identify the material or exact association for Beta-498810, which limits the precision of the comparison.

The Mahmudlu kurgan, at KP 310.720 in Şəmkir District, was encountered in a damaged condition during earthworks. Layers of large and medium river stones and limestone slabs covered a chamber measuring about 1.5 × 0.8 m, exposed at 1.4 m below the surface. Partly degraded human remains attributed in the field report to an adolescent and an older individual were recovered from the chamber. The assemblage included globular narrow-necked pouring vessels, wide-mouthed jars, bowls, a handled vessel, a bronze bracelet, and two bone beads near the reported position of the adolescent's skull. The ceramics and associated objects support a Late Bronze to Early Iron Age attribution (Asadov, 2018d). The degree of disturbance limits reconstruction of the order in which the individuals and objects were placed in the chamber.

The Tovuzchay II cemetery, between Alimardanlı and Bozalqanlı in Tovuz District, contained stone-covered burials and earthen graves. The site study reports 135 graves and one feature interpreted as a cult place across four stages of fieldwork in 2014–2018 (Najafov & Maynard, 2020). The corridor-wide synthesis lists 138 graves at the locality (Maynard et al., 2022, Section 2.38). The difference in inventory totals should be resolved before their use in quantitative comparison. The graves produced ceramic vessels, daggers, knives, projectile and spear points, and ornaments including beads, bracelets, and chest ornaments. Some features contained no recovered human remains. The range of grave forms and the state of preservation must be considered before classifying such features as deliberately empty (Najafov & Maynard, 2020).

The human teeth from burials 106 and 107 produced calibrated intervals in the late second to early first millennium BCE, with the principal components between 980 and 830 BCE and between 895 and 798 BCE, respectively (Table 1). Together with the assemblages, these determinations place the two sampled burials within the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age sequence. The

ranges overlap, and two dated graves cannot establish the start or end of activity at a cemetery of this size. The larger excavation nevertheless makes Tovuzchay II a useful point of comparison for the smaller, incompletely exposed groups of graves elsewhere along the corridor.

Table 1 Radiocarbon determinations for Kechili, Zayamchay II, Poylu II and Tovuzchay II

Site and context	Lab code	Age (BP)	Material	Reported range (cal BCE)
Kechili, burial deposit	Beta-464795	3440 ± 30	Animal bone	1785–1664 (71.1%), 1878–1838 (15.4%), 1829–1792 (8.9%)
Zayamchay II kurgan	Beta-498810	3420 ± 30	Unspecified	1776–1636 (88.5%), 1871–1845 (5.7%), 1812–1803 (1.2%)
Poylu II, Unit 24, large jar	Beta-483543	2930 ± 30	Bone	1220–1025 (95.4%)
Poylu II, Unit 24, furnace fill	Beta-483544	3010 ± 30	Bone	1310–1157 (78.9%), 1386–1340 (12.2%), 1147–1128 (4.4%)
Tovuzchay II, Burial 106	Beta-483547	2760 ± 30	Human tooth	980–830 (94.9%), 992–989 (0.5%)
Tovuzchay II, Burial 107	Beta-483549	2670 ± 30	Human tooth	895–798 (95.4%)

Note. Project sample IDs for the determinations listed are SCPX 311S10 (Beta-464795), SCPX Samples 19 and 20 (Beta-483543 and Beta-483544), and SCPX Samples 37 and 40 (Beta-483547 and Beta-483549). Conventional ages and calibrated components are reproduced as reported. Individual percentages refer to the respective calendar ranges. Calibration settings remain unverified.

4.4 Jar and earthen graves of the classical period

At Qazyan, in Ucar District at KP 149.840, machine trenching partly damaged two jar burials that had left no visible surface indicators. One survived only in fragments. The other lay approximately 2 m below ground on its side with the mouth facing west. Three vessels were recorded in front of it, described as a large jar, a vase, and a smaller pouring vessel. A flat limestone slab closed the mouth of the large accompanying jar. The burial container held small bones attributed to a young child. Groundwater had substantially degraded their preservation. The draft assigns a second-century CE date on ceramic grounds, citing (Huseynov, 2018a). The published project synthesis describes a north-east to south-west alignment and 11 accompanying vessels (Maynard et al., 2022, Section 2.1). The discrepancy in orientation and vessel counts limits comparison of the grave layout until the context inventory can be checked.

Six jar graves were investigated at Amirarkh, in Agdash District at KP 181.900. They lay between 2.1 and 4.5 m below the recorded ground surface. Construction of an earlier water channel had disturbed the graves, and groundwater impeded full investigation of Grave 2 at 4.5 m. Grave 1, at 3.8 m, preserved parts of a large storage vessel reused as a burial container. Its mouth faced west, and fragments of small vessels and a human arm bone were recovered nearby. Grave 3 lay at the same depth east of Grave 1 and contained pottery fragments and human and animal bones. Grave 4 was heavily damaged but yielded an intact red narrow-necked jug with a lobed mouth and human skeletal fragments. Grave 5, at 3.8 m, survived as a scatter over approximately 1.3 × 1.1 m. Grave 6 appeared in the trench face at 2.1 m and yielded dispersed sherds and human bone. A broad second-century BCE to second-century CE attribution is based on ceramic comparison (Asadov, 2018a).

At Bayimsarov, in Terter District near KP 206, eleven jar graves were investigated at just 0.3–0.5 m below the surface (Figure 1). Condition varied considerably, and loading and groundwater damaged some vessels and their contents. Most burial jars were large globular storage vessels with narrow bases, sometimes with impressed or notched rims. They generally lay on their sides on a west–east axis. Grave 10 differed in its north-west to south-east alignment, a more elongated vessel with two broad strap handles, and its location somewhat apart from other graves. Accompanying medium and large pots were generally placed beside the burial jars, with Grave 3 recorded as an exception. Grave 8 included unusually large storage jars among its associated vessels (Figures 2 and 3). The surviving interiors yielded human remains, small ceramics, bronze ornaments, and iron implements (Asadov, 2018b). Ceramic and contextual evidence suggests a second- to first-century BCE attribution. A cattle bone associated with Grave 10 yielded 198–47 cal BCE (Table 2). This supports the general attribution but cannot establish whether Grave 10 was among the latest burials because comparable measurements for the other graves are unavailable.

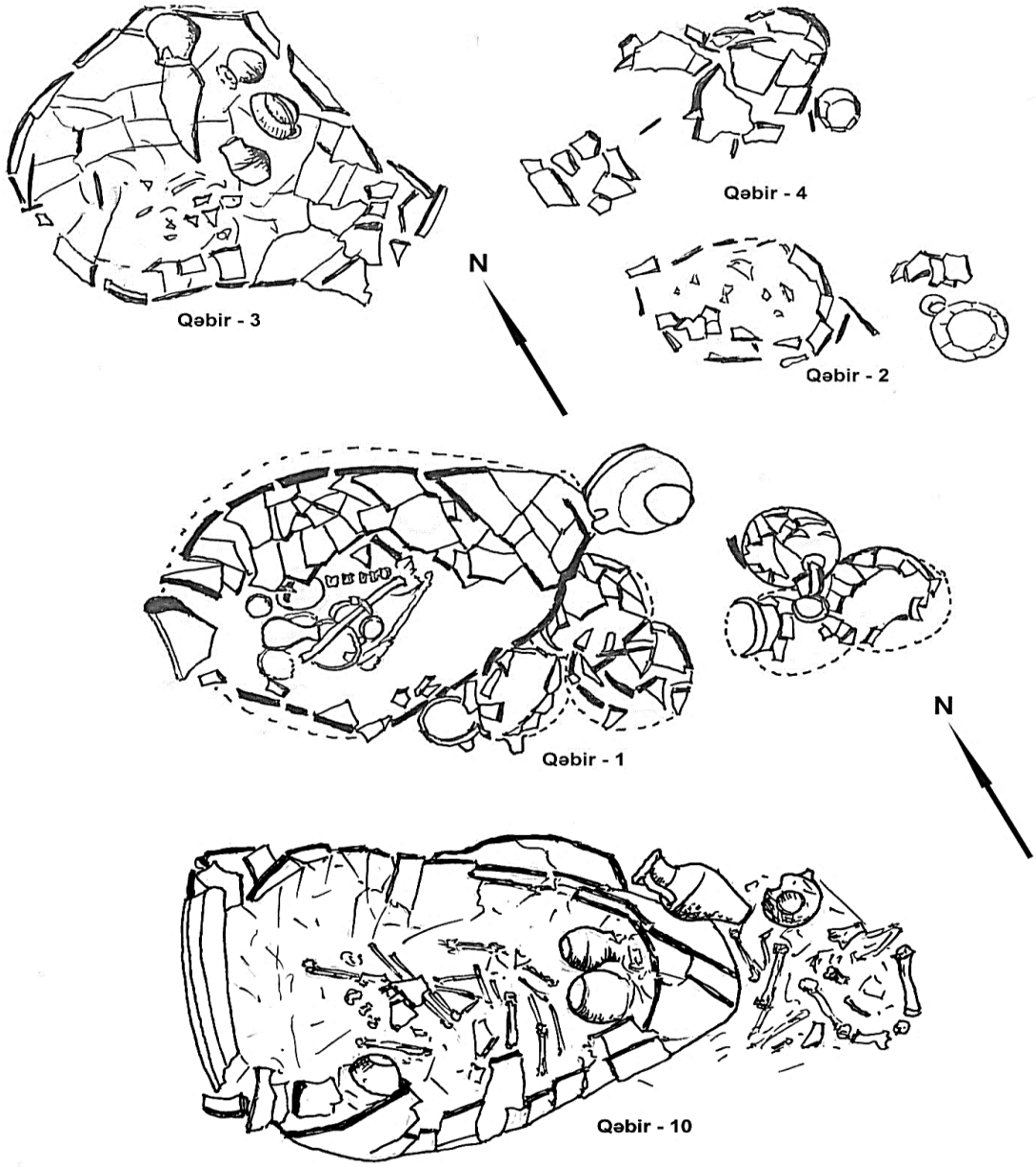

Figure 1 Bayimsarov graves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 10. Drawings by F. S. Farmanov. Image from the authors' source manuscript.



Figure 2 Ceramic vessels from the Bayimsarov cemetery. Image from the authors' source manuscript.



Figure 3 Additional vessels from the jar graves at Bayimsarov. Image from the authors' source manuscript.

Eleven graves were excavated in the Samadabad interventions in Yevlakh District, at the sectors registered as KP 209.2 and KP 211.5 (Maynard et al., 2022, Sections 2.7–2.8). Most were damaged during trench excavation. Only Graves 3, 4, and 9 were reported intact on discovery. The field record identified Graves 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9 as jar burials and Graves 4 and 7 as earthen graves. The condition of Grave 6 precluded classification, and the account does not resolve the forms of the other graves. This leaves a conservative minimum of two grave types without supporting proportions for the cemetery as a whole. Fragments of human and animal bones were recorded in the intact graves and in Grave 7. Grave 8 yielded jar fragments and associated finds but no preserved skeleton. Grave goods included numerous ceramic vessels, bronze and glass ornaments, and iron fragments (Asadov, 2018c; Figures 4 and 5).

Ceramic comparisons place Samadabad broadly between the second century BCE and second century CE. Two determinations reported from the KP 211 sector support activity in the late first millennium BCE, with a secondary fourth-century BCE interval for Beta-498815 (Table 2). Neither sample material nor grave association is specified in the available summary. These measurements therefore inform the sector's chronology, while the beginning and end of use remain unresolved. Variations in burial depth may reflect differing grave cuts, topography, sedimentation, or successive use. Vertical separation alone cannot establish the duration of burial activity.



Figure 4 Ceramic vessels from jar graves at Samadabad. Image from the authors' source manuscript.



Figure 5 Additional ceramic vessels from jar graves at Samadabad. Image from the authors' source manuscript.

Table 2 Radiocarbon determinations for Bayimsarov and Samadabad

Site and context	Lab code	Age (BP)	Material	Reported range (cal BCE)
Bayimsarov, Grave 10	Beta-483542	2100 ± 30	Cattle bone	198–47 (95.4%)
Samadabad, KP 211 sector	Beta-498815	2140 ± 30	Unspecified	213–88 (71.2%), 353–295 (19.5%), 77–57 (3.2%), 230–220 (1.5%)
Samadabad, KP 211 sector	Beta-498816	2100 ± 30	Unspecified	198–47 (95.4%)

Note. Beta-483542 was labelled SCPX Sample 1. Conventional ages and calibrated components are reproduced as reported. Individual percentages refer to the respective calendar ranges. Calibration settings remain unverified.

4.5 Storage and settlement evidence

At Hasansu, near KP 379.500, a surface scatter included fragments from vessels of several sizes. Two large jars were visible in the trench face. The excavation area was divided into four squares and recovered five comparable large jars, together with pink, black, and grey pottery, livestock bones, iron objects, and numerous grinding stones (Asadov, 2018e). The concentration of vessels and processing equipment is compatible with a storage or work area on the edge of a settlement. The exposed area establishes the presence of grouped storage capacity. Defining the size of the settlement and the commodities stored would require evidence beyond the excavated strip and analysis of vessel contents. The assemblage was assigned a broad date from the second century BCE to the second century CE.

At Sarıtepe, near KP 327.350 in Shamkir District, a large jar and a smaller vessel were found near the edge of the construction trench. The report attributes both to the classical period on formal grounds. No surrounding occupation layer was recorded in the exposed area. The vessels may have been deliberately installed for storage, perhaps near a settlement beyond the trench (Huseynov, 2018b). The find represents a lower-resolution counterpart to Həsənsu because its interpretation rests primarily on the association between the two jars.

At Gıraq Kasaman in Ağstafa District, topsoil stripping at KP 384.700 revealed an upright storage jar about 0.5 m below the ground surface. It was reported to be 80 cm high, with a mouth diameter of 24 cm, a base diameter of 20 cm, and a maximum body diameter of 110 cm. The fill contained pink and black jar fragments and an obsidian flake. An ash deposit 2 cm thick and measuring about 40 × 20 cm lay 1.2 m to the southeast and was interpreted as a hearth. The jar was attributed by analogy to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The published project inventory lists the vessel separately from the classical-period settlement at KP 386.8 (Maynard et al., 2022, Sections 2.41–2.42). The obsidian flake could have been incorporated from

older deposits. The proximity of the hearth suggests a local activity area, while stratigraphic contemporaneity with the vessel remains unestablished.

4.6 Fortified and domestic architecture

The fortified site of Kerpijlitepe lies on the Gazanbulaq River, approximately 3 km southeast of Borsunlu in Goranboy District at KP 247.250. The mound measured about 52 m north to south by 50 m east to west and rose to approximately 1.8 m. Three excavation stages from 2016 to 2018 investigated a 624 m^2 strip measuring 12 × 52 m, with additional 4 × 4 m test pits on the eastern and western slopes. The larger exposure documented walls, towers, and two construction horizons, providing a basis for comparing architectural changes within the excavated sector (Asadov & Najafov, 2024; Nəcəfov et al., 2019; Qoşqarlı et al., 2019; Figures 6 and 7).

The upper horizon included river-stone walls, clay tandirs or bread ovens, heating installations, and a water well. The lower horizon exposed part of a substantial structure interpreted as a fortified residence, a kiln for firing ceramics and bricks, multiple tandirs and hearths, and pits or wells associated with domestic activities. Baked brick and river stone were used in the fortified structure, and unfired brick was recorded in an oven. Finds included glazed and unglazed wares, animal bones, copper coins, glass vessels and bracelet fragments, clay and paste beads, iron and bone objects, and a small assemblage of stone tools (Figures 8 and 9). The combination of enclosed architecture, ovens, and a kiln shows several activities within the investigated footprint. The relationship between the kiln and individual recovered vessels would require direct production evidence.

Architectural remains, pottery and coins support a principal phase of activity from the late tenth to the early thirteenth century. Six determinations on charred material have a broader span (Table 3). Beta-489688 has calibrated components between the late eighth and late tenth centuries, while Beta-489691 extends into the later thirteenth century. The oldest result may relate to earlier occupation or to the age and redeposition of the charred material. The youngest interval is compatible with later activity. Evaluating either possibility requires the context of each sample and its relation to the documented building horizons. The architectural phases and sample determinations are consequently interpreted at their respective scales.



Figure 6 Overhead view of the Kerpijlitepe excavation. Photograph by David Maynard. Image from the authors' source manuscript.

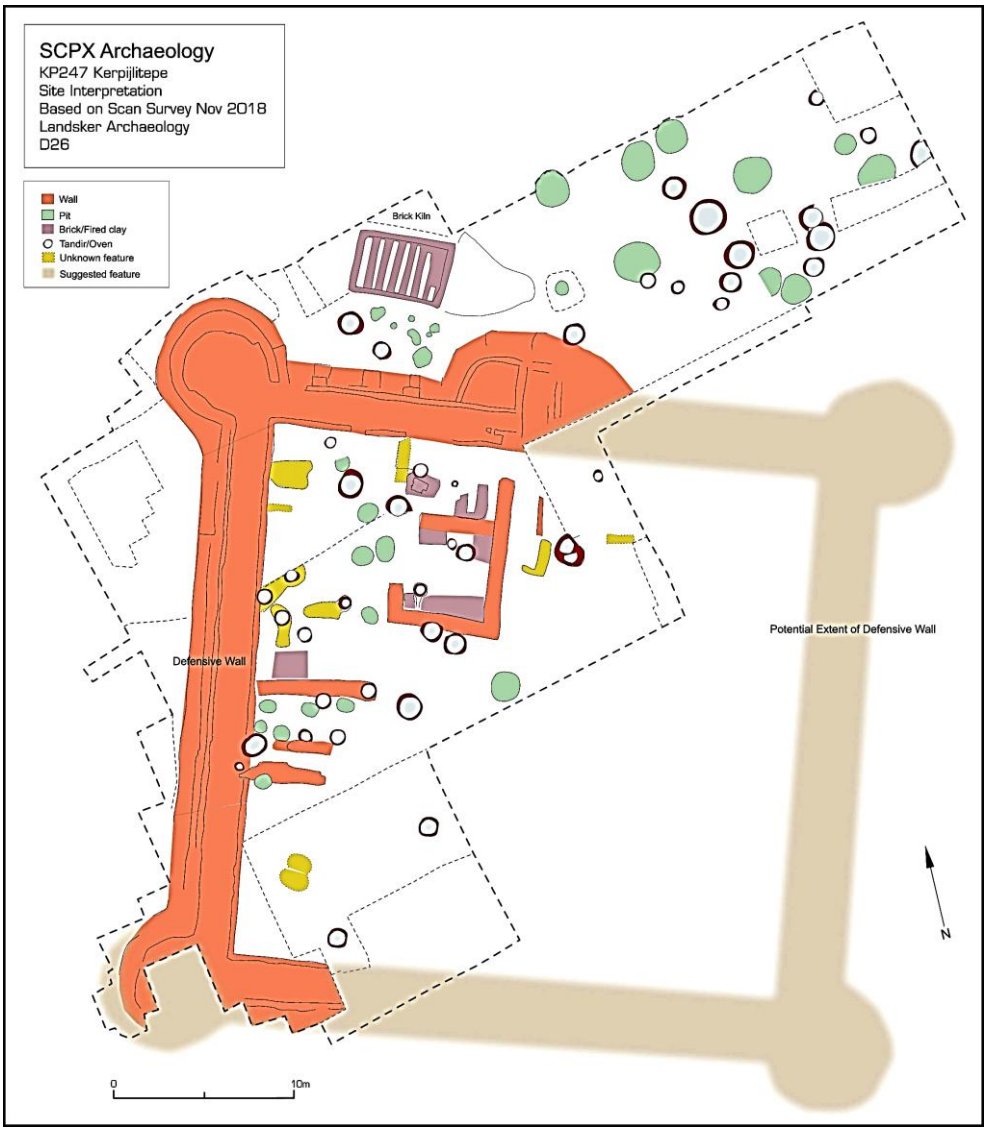

Figure 7 Three-dimensional excavation plan of Kerpijlitepe by David Maynard. Image from the authors' source manuscript.



Figure 8 Ceramic finds from Kerpijlitepe. Image from the authors' source manuscript.



Figure 9 Impressed decoration on Kerpijlitepe pottery. The field account notes parallels with Dashbulaq ceramics. Image from the authors' source manuscript.

Table 3 Radiocarbon determinations for Kerpijlitepe

Field sample ID	Lab code	Age (BP)	Material	Reported range (cal CE)
SCPX247 23	Beta-489687	930 ± 30	Charred material	1025–1165 (95.4%)
SCPX247 50	Beta-489688	1140 ± 30	Charred material	854–981 (78.6%), 802–848 (11.3%), 776–792 (5.5%)
SCPX247 51	Beta-489689	950 ± 30	Charred material	1024–1155 (95.4%)
SCPX247 53	Beta-489691	820 ± 30	Charred material	1164–1265 (95.4%)
SCPX247 54	Beta-489692	1030 ± 30	Charred material	962–1040 (91.9%), 901–920 (2.8%), 1108–1116 (0.7%)
SCPX247 59	Beta-489697	860 ± 30	Charred material	1150–1256 (83.5%), 1049–1084 (9.9%), 1124–1136 (2.0%)

Note. Conventional ages and calibrated components are reproduced as reported. Individual percentages refer to the respective calendar ranges. Calibration settings remain unverified.

At Poylu III, excavations in June 2017 sampled 96 m² along the pipeline centreline near KP 390.110 in Agstafa District. A carefully laid stone surface near the junction of squares 1 and 4 preceded the exposure of a larger and a smaller room. Large stone slabs paved much of the larger room. Excavation through successive stone courses reached the foundations at the base of a cultural deposit about 1 m deep. The walls extended beyond the investigated area, so the full ground plan could not be recovered. The field account attributes the exposed remains to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, within a wider site chronology extending to the early nineteenth century in the published architectural study (Kirichenko & Farmanly, 2017b; Najafov, 2026). The exposed rooms provide evidence of investment in paved interiors, with specific functions and the arrangement of the remainder of the building still open.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Repeated burial practices and local variation

The cemetery evidence establishes recurring acts of deposition at several scales. In the Late Chalcolithic, interments at Soyuqbulaq and the vessel burial at Khojakhan place ceramics within mortuary features, with stone arrangements documented at Soyuqbulaq. At the much later classical-period cemeteries, large jars again served as burial containers and often occurred

with a group of accompanying vessels. The chronological gap between the traditions is considerable. Their resemblance supports comparison of how containers were used to enclose or structure burials. Evidence for transmission across the intervening periods would require intermediate sequences, which the corridor sample does not supply. Jar burials also occur in later regional records, illustrating why this broad feature category needs to be dated from context and associated finds (Khalilov, 2007).

There is greater scope to compare the four classical-period cemeteries within a broadly overlapping time frame. One jar at Amirarkh had a west-facing mouth, and most jars at Bəyimsarov were placed on a west–east axis. The published orientation of the Qazyan burial differs from that given in the draft. These observations concern the burial container. Directions of the body may differ and are difficult to reconstruct where bone has decayed. Similarly, the accompanying ceramics at Qazyan and Bəyimsarov show a repeated concern with objects placed outside the container, but the quantity and form varied among the graves that survive. Grave 10 at Bəyimsarov demonstrates that an individual burial could depart from several local conventions at once, while Səmədabad shows the coexistence of jar and earthen graves within the investigated sectors. These patterns can be discussed as shared practices with local variation across the Aran region (Ağalarzadə & Hüseynova, 2017; Goshgarly, 2012; Osmanov, 1987).

The Bronze Age examples also show substantial variation in how burial settings were constructed and furnished. At Kechili and Zayamchay II, some of the radiocarbon probability ranges overlap, and both features used river stones. The documented arrangements differ in plan, chamber evidence and associated material. The Zayamchay II deposit included distinct animal skeletons and a large bronze sword. The record from Kechili emphasises ochre, fragmented vessels, and burning traces. Mahmudlu provides a later example of a chamber with human remains attributed to two individuals. Tovuzçay II documents extensive cemetery use with several forms of burial and a range of ornaments and weapons. The differences suggest multiple ways of structuring funerary deposition. An explanation in terms of social rank or ritual identity would require a larger, consistently recorded sample of comparable graves, together with better evidence for the attribution of objects to individual burials.

These results also constrain the social claims that can be based on artefact similarity. Common vessel forms or orientations are consistent with access to related craft repertoires, the adoption of widely distributed practices, or interaction among communities. Ceramic fabrics, exchange mechanisms, and the direction of movement are unresolved. Establishing production links would require evidence such as petrography, elemental analysis, or matching kiln material. Burial styles alone provide an insufficient basis for identifying ethnicity. This distinction matters in the Aran and Ganja–Gazakh comparison because the corridor follows a modern engineering alignment, and the assemblages represent several historically distinct periods.

5.2 Storage facilities and the scale of settlement inference

The domestic contexts permit a comparison of what is visible at different scales of excavation. At Hasansu, five comparable large jars occurred with grinding stones, ceramics, metalwork, and animal bones. These associations support interpretation as a storage or processing sector within a broader settlement. At Sarıtepe, two adjacent vessels are compatible with a storage installation, although the surrounding infrastructure remained beyond observation. At Gıraq Kasaman, the upright position of the vessel and the presence of a nearby ash feature indicate activity on a small scale. These finds show how a limited exposure can document investment in storage before houses, work spaces, or the settlement perimeter become visible. They also serve as a functional comparison for the storage vessels used in the jar graves. A large ceramic container could be selected from a familiar domestic technology and incorporated into a different depositional practice.

Poylu II offers a different temporal resolution. The depth of the occupation sequence, the range of tools, and the occurrence of hearths and pits indicate recurring domestic activity. The combination of grinding stones and cutting elements is consistent with processing plant resources, while the spindle whorls support fibre-working activities. Identifying particular plant taxa, textile fibres, or the scale of production would require suitable contextual or analytical evidence. The differences in deposit thickness among squares also caution against equating depth with the duration of occupation. Sediment can accumulate unevenly, and pits can move material among layers. A phase model for Poylu II would require samples tied to secure stratigraphic interfaces and individual activity deposits, with greater chronological coverage of the early components.

The medieval and early modern architectural contexts complement the storage record. The extent of excavation at Kerpijlitepe allows the comparison of walls, ovens, wells, and production installations within two horizons. The discovery of a kiln establishes that the excavated area included a production feature, while coins and ceramics provide information about circulation and date. At Poylu III, a narrower exposure allows more precise description of individual rooms than of the whole building. The architectural evidence in both cases demonstrates the value of recording floor construction, rebuilding, and

activity installations together. A single catalogue entry for each site would obscure the difference between an inferred settlement boundary, a partially excavated building, and a documented construction horizon.

5.3 Radiocarbon dates and the events they represent

The radiocarbon results are especially useful where the dated material has a clear association with a feature and provides a check on a date inferred from typology. At Bayimsarov, the cattle bone from Grave 10 supports the broad second- to first-century BCE assessment. It does not order the rest of the burials. At Samadabad, both reported determinations support a late first-millennium BCE component in the KP 211 sector, but their unidentified materials and grave associations limit interpretation at the individual level. The overlap between the determinations for Kechili and Zayamchay II likewise supports placement within a broad part of the second millennium BCE. The strength of an argument for contemporaneous construction depends on the source of the samples and a model of the deposits.

The chronological implications differ at Poylu II and Kerpijlitepe. At Poylu II, dates from bone in two distinct depositional settings establish a late second-millennium BCE component in Unit 24. These dates cannot be extended to the Chalcolithic component or establish whether occupation continued between ceramic phases. At Kerpijlitepe, the associated coins, pottery, and construction horizons support a medieval occupational sequence, while intervals from charred materials span a longer period. The discrepancy provides a specific question for further stratigraphic assessment. If the older charcoal came from sealed deposits demonstrably predating the fortification, it could support an earlier activity phase. If it came from redeposited fill or old wood, it would provide limited evidence about the timing of construction. Recording the physical relationship of each dated sample to a wall, surface, fill, or destruction layer would help resolve those alternatives.

Where individual determinations have several probability ranges, the gaps between them are meaningful to interpretation. Combining the earliest and latest limits into a single interval would conceal the differences in probability along the calendar scale. Equally, the strongest probability component of a result cannot by itself identify a historical event or a precise building date. The tables retain the source's disjoint intervals and conventional ages for future checking. The missing calibration metadata, limited sample documentation, and absence of stratigraphic constraints restrict the analysis to comparison of the reported determinations. A future study could consult original certificates and re-evaluate the results against documented phase relationships (Bayliss & Marshall, 2022).

5.4 Visibility and preservation in a construction corridor

The contrasts in depth and preservation are informative in their own right. Bayimsarov's graves lay near the surface, whereas those at Gazyan and Amirarkh were exposed at depths of about 2 m or more. Without comparable sediment profiles and excavation histories, these figures describe present depth rather than the original depth of the grave cuts. They help explain why site detection was uneven. Deep features may be invisible to reconnaissance, while surface indicators for shallow burial mounds may disappear under cultivation. Excavation after discovery is therefore integral to the research record, particularly where monitoring captures a new trench exposure before further disturbance.

Preservation differed within and among the cemeteries. Waterlogged trench conditions limited access at Amirarkh, and the reports describe poor bone survival at several jar-grave sites. Intact ceramics and metal objects can survive in graves where human remains are fragmentary or absent. At Samadabad, disturbance further reduced the proportion of securely classifiable features, and at Gazyan the first jar burial survived only in fragments. An estimate of the relative frequencies of burial types or the occurrence of offerings based on the excavated counts would therefore combine actual historical variation with recovery and survival. The most defensible comparison identifies which arrangements can be demonstrated and marks where absence may have resulted from destruction or decay.

The study area is also a modern route through a larger archaeological landscape. The corridor has sufficient reach to record several types of context, but discoveries concentrate wherever construction intersected suitable deposits at a visible depth. The apparent clustering of jar graves or storage features along particular parts of the corridor therefore needs to be interpreted alongside detection conditions. A regional distribution model would need systematic survey and comparable information about geomorphology and depth of exposure off the route. The present comparison supports observations at the level of individual deposits, site sectors, and recurring features.

5.5 Implications for heritage management

The cases illustrate why recording should follow the changing information available during construction. The Sangachal scatter records surface material. The Gazyan and Amirarkh discoveries required observation of newly exposed, deeply buried features. Khojakhan shows the value of closely observing topsoil removal, especially where no mound survives. In each case, the

conditions of exposure are part of the archaeological evidence. Linking observations to the ground elevation, trench face, construction phase, and condition at discovery would make comparisons between interventions more reliable.

Field records can also make later synthesis easier by giving a stable identifier to each feature, distinguishing material found in place from displaced finds, and recording the link between samples and individual contexts. At a cemetery, even a disturbed grave can retain measurable orientation, evidence of vessel position, or an identifiable association with surviving goods. At a settlement, the same practices allow a later reader to judge whether a jar was set into a floor, cut into an abandoned deposit, or recovered from a secondary fill. Retaining field drawings, photographs, conventional radiocarbon ages, material identifications, and calibration metadata reduces dependence on broad period labels and helps later researchers test alternative interpretations.

5.6 Limitations

The synthesis relies on project reports, published studies, and the data assembled in the source manuscript. The available documentation lacks a complete set of original section drawings, context registers, laboratory certificates, and artefact catalogues. Excavation extents differed among sites, and some features were already damaged when reported. Field descriptions permit qualitative comparison of preserved contexts, while differences in collection and recording make aggregate frequencies inappropriate. Some project-wide totals include seasons outside 2017–2018. Those totals describe the full reported excavations at the respective localities. Period assignments at undated sites remain typological, and disagreements in the underlying account are retained where they affect interpretation.

6. CONCLUSION

Monitoring and rescue excavation in Azerbaijani construction areas in 2017–2018 recovered evidence of burial, storage, production, and building activity from the Late Chalcolithic to the late medieval and early modern periods. The corridor exposed repeated mortuary use at Xocaxan, diverse stone-covered burials in the Bronze Age, and ceramic burial practices that varied across the classical-period cemeteries. Domestic and architectural sites recorded a different set of activities, from isolated storage jars at Sarıtepe and Gıraq Kasaman to stratified occupation at Poylu II and differentiated work and domestic areas at Kerpijlitepe. Each interpretation depends on the association of finds with the excavated features and the completeness of the exposure.

The radiocarbon determinations strengthen the chronology of selected contexts, particularly the sampled graves at Tovuzchay II and the Bronze Age component at Poylu II. They also show where sample provenance matters to dating burial and building events. The resulting regional picture is one of recurring practices and local variation. Integrating recovery conditions and context integrity into the analysis makes it possible to use the corridor's extensive but uneven record for comparative research.

Declarations

Project context. Pipeline monitoring and excavation were conducted under a contractual arrangement between BP and the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. The authors should confirm the funding statement, the role of the project partner, and any competing interests before submission.

Data availability. The radiocarbon determinations used in the synthesis are reproduced in Tables 1–3. The References identify the field reports and publications used. The public project archive is available through the Archaeology Data Service (Müseybli et al., 2022). The authors should confirm access conditions for any excavation records and collections outside that archive.

Permits and human remains. The authors should supply the excavation permit details and document the applicable authorisations, curation, and access arrangements for archaeological human remains.

Author contributions. The authors should confirm their individual contributions and designate the corresponding author.

Use of generative AI. ChatGPT assisted with translation of the manuscript. The authors should verify the revised text against the field records and approve the final version before submission.

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