

The Archaeological Heritage of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in the Context of South Caucasian and Near Eastern Cultures

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Abstract. *The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic stands out as one of the oldest settlement areas of the South Caucasus, distinguished by a continuous and multi-layered archaeological heritage from the Paleolithic period to antiquity. Its strategic location between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the South Caucasus has made this region a zone of intense cultural interaction and human mobility during prehistoric and early historical periods. Paleolithic sites such as Gazma, Kilit, and Dashgala, as well as Lower Paleolithic materials discovered at Ovchulartepesi, indicate that human settlement in the region dates back to very ancient stages. During the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, based on the I and II Kultepe sites, sedentary life, agriculture, and early production relations were formed. Grain storage facilities and stone tools reflect the economic structure of this period. In the Early Bronze Age, Nakhchivan became one of the important centers of the Kura-Araxes culture, where ceramics and metallurgy developed significantly. In the Middle Bronze Age, the “Painted Pottery Culture” demonstrates the region’s connections with the South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia, and the Urmia Basin. The rock carvings of Gamigaya reflect the development of religious and mythological thinking. The planned urban layout uncovered at II Kultepe confirms early urbanization processes. In the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, social structures became more complex, and administrative centers such as Ogghlangala were formed. The salt mining activities at Duzdag further increased the region’s economic importance. Consequently, Nakhchivan served as an important crossroads in the formation of the cultures of the South Caucasus and the Near East.*

Keywords: *Nakhchivan, archaeology, South Caucasus, Kura-Araxes culture, Painted Pottery Culture, Neolithic, Chalcolithic*

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Naxçıvan Muxtar Respublikasının arxeoloji irsi Cənubi Qafqaz və Yaxın Şərq mədəniyyətləri kontekstində

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Xülasə. Naxçıvan Muxtar Respublikası Cənubi Qafqazın ən qədim məskunlaşma areallarından biri kimi Paleolit dövründən Antik dövrədək fasiləsiz və çoxqatlı arxeoloji irsi ilə seçilir. Anadolu, Mesopotamiya, İran və Cənubi Qafqaz arasında strateji mövqeyi bu ərazini tarixəncəsi və erkən tarixi dövrlərdə mühüm mədəni əlaqələr və insan hərəkətliliyi zonası etmişdir. Qazma, Kilit və Daşqala Paleolit düşərgələri, eləcə də Ovçulartəpədən aşkar edilən Alt Paleolit materialları burada insan məskunlaşmasının çox qədim olduğunu göstərir. Neolit və Kalkolit dövrlərində I və II Kültəpə abidələri əsasında oturaq həyat, əkinçilik və erkən istehsal münasibətləri formalaşmışdır. Taxıl anbarları və daş alətlər bu dövrün iqtisadi strukturunu əks etdirir. Erkən Tunc dövründə Naxçıvan Kür-Araz mədəniyyətinin mühüm mərkəzlərindən birinə çevrilmiş, keramika və metallurgiya inkişaf etmişdir. Orta Tunc dövründə “Boyalı qablar mədəniyyəti” regionun Cənubi Qafqaz, Şərqi Anadolu və Urmiya hövzəsi ilə əlaqələrini göstərir. Gəmiqaya qayaüstü təsvirləri isə dini-mifoloji düşüncənin inkişafını əks etdirir. II Kültəpədə aşkar olunan planlı şəhərsalma erkən urbanizasiya proseslərini sübut edir. Son Tunc və Erkən Dəmir dövrlərində sosial struktur mürəkkəbləşmiş, Oğlanqala kimi inzibati mərkəzlər formalaşmışdır. Duzdağ duz mədənçiliyi isə iqtisadi əhəmiyyəti artırmışdır. Nəticədə, Naxçıvan regionu Cənubi Qafqaz və Yaxın Şərq mədəniyyətlərinin formalaşmasında mühüm kəsişmə zonası olmuşdur.

Açar sözlər: Naxçıvan, arxeologiya, Cənubi Qafqaz, Kür-Araz mədəniyyəti, Boyalı qablar mədəniyyəti, Neolit, Kalkolit

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Introduction

The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is an autonomous region located in the southwestern part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, possessing a special administrative status. While its northern and eastern parts are surrounded by Armenia, it shares borders with Turkey to the west and Iran to the south. The Zangezur and Dereleyiz mountain ranges form the natural border between Nakhchivan and Armenia, while the Aras River constitutes the main natural frontier along the borders with Turkey and Iran. One of the highest points in the region is Mount Kömürlü (2064 m), located within the Sharur district. Geographically extending approximately 158 km in a northwest-southeast direction, the north-south width of Nakhchivan reaches up to 75 km in some areas.

The contemporary political-geographical structure of Nakhchivan has been shaped by geopolitical changes occurring throughout the historical process. Particularly, the cession of the Zangezur region to Armenia by the Soviet administration in 1920 caused Nakhchivan to become separated from the main territories of Azerbaijan. The administrative status of the region has also been defined by different names depending on the historical period. In this framework, the region was successively named the Nakhchivan Soviet Socialist Republic (1920–1923), the Nakhchivan Autonomous Territory (1923–1924), the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1924–1990), and after 1990, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Due to its geostrategic location, Nakhchivan has

historically functioned as a significant transition zone between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the South Caucasus. This situation has made the region one of the important centers where different cultures met and interacted. Owing to its favorable natural conditions, water resources, and communication routes, Nakhchivan has witnessed intense human settlement since prehistoric times. Archaeological research and scientific excavations conducted in recent years have more clearly revealed the scope of the region's cultural heritage. Archaeological layers spanning from the Paleolithic period to Antiquity demonstrate the existence of long-term and continuous cultural development in Nakhchivan. The caves of Kazma, Kilit and Taşkala in the region are considered among the living spaces of the first human communities in Nakhchivan. The stone tools, animal bones, and various archaeological materials uncovered in these centers provide important information about the lifestyle and economic activities of Paleolithic humans. Furthermore, archaeological centers such as Ovçulartepesi, Kültepe I, Kültepe II, Gamigaya, Oğlankale, and Tuzdağ are of great importance for understanding the historical and cultural development processes of the South Caucasus. Research conducted at these settlements reveals that Nakhchivan was not merely a local cultural center but also a significant civilization area where cultural interaction between the Near East and the South Caucasus took place. The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the major archaeological settlements identified within the borders of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in light of the scientific literature, to examine the region's place in ancient cultural history, and to demonstrate Nakhchivan's importance in the archaeology of the South Caucasus.

Materials and Methods

This research has been prepared to evaluate the historical and cultural significance of archaeological settlements identified in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. A qualitative research method was adopted for the study; archaeological reports, excavation results, academic monographs, and scientific articles published on the region were examined using a comparative analysis method. The main data sources of the research consist of findings obtained during archaeological excavations in Nakhchivan, stratigraphic data, radiocarbon dating results, and scientific studies published by previous researchers. Within the scope of the study, centers such as Kazma, Ovçulartepesi, Gamigaya, Kültepe I, Kültepe II, Oğlankale, and Tuzdağ were particularly evaluated. Methodologically, a historical-comparative approach was applied in the research. Archaeological materials from Nakhchivan were compared with the cultures of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the South Caucasus; similarities and differences were analyzed. Additionally, ceramics, metal artifacts, rock carvings, architectural remains, and burial traditions were examined typologically and chronologically. Another methodological dimension of the study is the intercultural interaction model. In this context, it has been evaluated that Nakhchivan is not only a local cultural center but also an important transit zone where cultural transmission between the Near East and the South Caucasus took place.

Findings

As a result of the research, it was established that the territory of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic remained one of the major settlement zones of the South Caucasus from the Paleolithic Age through the Ancient period. Archaeological evidence recovered from caves, settlements, necropolises, fortifications, mining sites, and rock-art complexes demonstrates continuous human occupation and cultural development throughout prehistory. Stone tools and faunal remains discovered in Kazma, Kilit, and Taşkala caves confirm the presence of Paleolithic hunter-gatherer communities in the region. Excavations at Ovçulartepesi further revealed Lower Paleolithic artifacts, significantly extending the chronology of human occupation in Nakhchivan. The petroglyphs of Gamigaya provide important evidence regarding symbolic thought, ritual practices, and early belief systems.

Research conducted at Kültepe I and Kültepe II demonstrated the existence of a developed agricultural economy during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages. Storage facilities, grinding stones, agricultural implements, and botanical remains indicate intensive cultivation activities and food production. The settlements also yielded evidence of craft specialization, including pottery production and metallurgy. Metallurgical remains discovered at Mahta, including furnaces and stone molds, indicate that metalworking constituted an important branch of the regional economy. Archaeological materials from Ovçular tepesi, Mahta I, and Helec reveal that Nakhchivan played a significant role in the emergence and spread of the Kura-Araxes cultural tradition. The widespread distribution of painted ceramics throughout Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements demonstrates the region's importance as a center of ceramic production. Architectural remains, stone-paved streets, drainage systems, and planned settlement layouts uncovered at Kültepe II indicate advanced urban development and social organization. Investigations at Oğlanqala revealed monumental fortifications and administrative structures reflecting the formation of complex political institutions during the Iron Age. Likewise, archaeological studies at Tuzdağ confirmed the existence of one of the earliest known salt-mining centers in the world, highlighting Nakhchivan's importance in prehistoric resource exploitation and long-distance exchange networks.

Archaeological Heritage of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic

The territory of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic harbors numerous archaeological settlements belonging to different cultural stages, starting from prehistoric times. These settlements hold great scientific importance for researching the ancient history, material, and spiritual culture of not only Nakhchivan but also the South Caucasus. As a result of archaeological research conducted on mounds, necropolises, fortresses, rock carvings, and ancient settlement areas in the region, significant data have been obtained regarding the chronology and cultural characteristics of periods spanning from the Paleolithic Age to the Early Iron Age. The research reveals that Nakhchivan is one of the oldest settlement centers in the South Caucasus.

Archaeological findings show that human life in Nakhchivan began in the Paleolithic Age. Particularly, stone tools, animal bones, and various archaeological materials uncovered in Kazma, Kilit, and Taşkala caves provide important information about the lifestyle, economic activities, and environmental conditions of the first human communities in the region (Cəfərov, 2012, s. 105–108; Zeynalov, 2012, s. 108–116). The fact that most of the bone remains recovered from Kazma belong to large animals indicates that hunting was one of the main sources of subsistence during the Mousterian culture period. The stone and bone tools and weapons found at the same center reveal that stone working and bone processing developed quite early in Nakhchivan. One of the important centers shedding light on the ancient history of Nakhchivan is the Ovçular tepesi settlement. The discovery of stone tools dating back to 500,000–300,000 BC, belonging to the Lower Paleolithic period, during archaeological excavations carried out here indicates that human settlement in Nakhchivan is older than previously thought (Bakhshaliyev, 2005). Additionally, carbon analyses obtained from Ovçular tepesi have revealed that the settlement was inhabited between 4335–3980 BC (Baxşəliyev və b., 2010, s. 34).

The architectural remains and archaeological findings uncovered during excavations at the Kültepe I mound are of great importance for understanding the cultural structure of Nakhchivan during the Chalcolithic Age. Numerous building remains, grain storage units, stone pavements, and tools related to agricultural activities were identified in the cultural layers of the settlement (Abibullayev, 1982, pp. 36–38). Among the grain remains found in the settlement are common wheat (*Triticum sativum*), club wheat (*Triticum compactum* Hest), and various barley species. These findings show that Nakhchivan was one of the centers where agriculture developed early in the South Caucasus (Abibullayev, 1982, p. 211). At the same time, grinding stones, mortars, and other agricultural tools reveal the advanced level of the production economy in the region. Ornaments, metal objects, and ceramic samples found at Kültepe I indicate that metallurgy and craft production began to develop in

Nakhchivan from the Chalcolithic Age onwards. Metal finds recovered from the settlement prove the formation of a local production tradition in the region. Furthermore, the discovery of various ornaments reveals that jewelry art also showed significant development. The fact that the finds from the Helec settlement, which hold an important place among the Late Eneolithic ceramics of Nakhchivan, show similar characteristics to ceramics belonging to the Uruk, Halaf, and Ubaid cultures, reveals the region's connections with the Near Eastern cultural sphere (Baxşəliyev, 2011, s. 77–86). Traces of Halaf and Ubaid cultures have also been found at Ovçulartepesi and Zirincli settlements (Baxşəliyev və b., 2010, s. 11–15). Furthermore, the discovery of Proto Kura-Araxes ceramics (Fig. 1) in archaeological centers in Nakhchivan (Baxşəliyev, 2013, s. 105–107) shows that the region played an important role in the formation and development process of the Kura-Araxes culture.

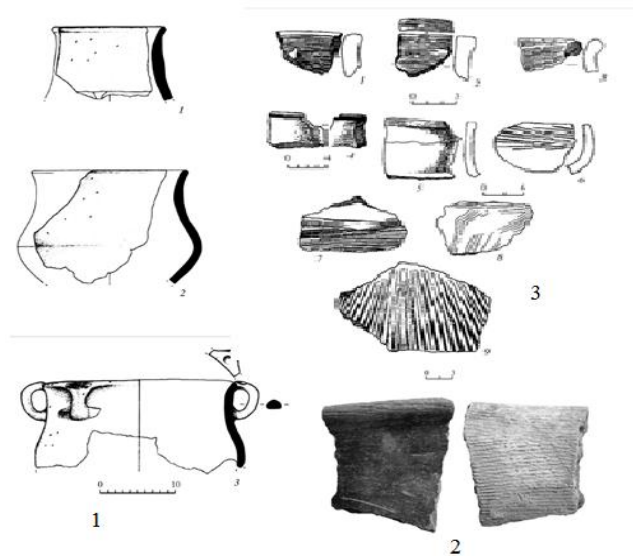


Figure1

Proto Kura-Araxes ceramics

1- Ovçulartepe, 2-Sortepe, 3-Mahta (Baxşəliyev, 2013).

As a result of archaeological research conducted at Oğlankale, it was determined that this settlement was an important political-administrative center covering the Sharur plain during the Atropatene period. Additionally, finds indicating the existence of a local governance system and a unique writing tradition were uncovered here (Baxşəliyev və b., 2011, s. 339–348). Research at Tuzdağ shows that Nakhchivan is one of the world's important centers in terms of prehistoric mining activities. As a result of excavations carried out here, it was determined that salt mining began from the second half of the 5th millennium BC (Katherina, 2010, pp. 229–244). Ceramics and stone tools from the Late Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages found at Tuzdağ reveal that this settlement was used over a long period. Among the Early Bronze Age settlements in Nakhchivan, Mahta holds an important place. The stone molds and metal smelting furnaces found here show that metal production was at an advanced level in the region. These findings reveal that all stages of metal production were carried out in Nakhchivan and that Mahta was one of the important metallurgy centers of the period. During the Middle Bronze Age, the Nakhchivan region became one of the most important centers of the "Painted Pottery Culture." Particularly, the polychrome ceramics found at settlements such as Kültepe II, Şahtahtı, Kızılburun, and Nehecir demonstrate the developed ceramic production tradition in the region (Khalilov, 2023, pp. 2048–2072). The intensive identification of multi-colored painted decorations, rarely seen in Transcaucasia, in Nakhchivan reveals the region's close relations with the Eastern Anatolian cultural sphere (Çilingiroğlu, 1990a, s. 160–174; Çilingiroğlu, 1990b, s. 25–44). Furthermore, the presence of decorative motifs belonging to the Khojaly-Gadabay culture on Nakhchivan ceramics indicates the interaction between these cultures. The stone-paved streets and

sewerage system uncovered at Kültepe II prove that urban culture developed in Nakhchivan during the early periods. Ceramic production areas and potters' quarters found in the settlement show that Kültepe II was an important production center during the Middle Bronze Age (Halilov, 2022, pp. 177–191). Numerous pottery kilns have been uncovered in Bronze Age settlements in the Nakhchivan region. Pottery kilns belonging to the Early Bronze Age were identified in building levels III and V of Kültepe I, and in building levels VII and XI of Kültepe II. These kilns reflect advanced ceramic production technology in terms of their architectural features. The fact that the kilns found at Kültepe I were built of mudbrick and plastered with clay indicates the level of technical knowledge of the period. The discovery of ash, painted, and unpainted pottery fragments in the potters' workshops uncovered at Kültepe II proves that intensive production activities were carried out here (Halilov, 2022, pp. 177–191; Khalilov, 2023, pp. 2048–2072). Clay animal figurines (Fig. 2) recovered from Early Bronze Age settlements in Nakhchivan are among the important archaeological materials reflecting the religious and ideological thoughts of the period. These figurines generally consist of depictions of bulls, horses, and dogs (Halilov, 2020, pp. 189–193).



Figure 2

Animal figurines Early Bronze Age

1-Ovçulartəpəsi yaşayış yeri (Baxşəliyev, Marro, Aşurov, 2010; 2, 3, 4- Kültepe I (National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (AF 937, Inv. 7823, SU 136; AF 938, Inv. 27278, SU 266; AF 913, Inv. 7784, SU 92) (Toğrul Khalilov).

Most of the figurines found at Kültepe I, Mahta, and Ovçulartepesi are in the form of bulls. It can be said that these figurines were used in religious rituals, fertility cults, or as amulets. The depiction of the horns of bull figurines in a crescent shape shares common iconographic features with the Gamigaya petroglyphs (Halilov, 2011, pp. 23–29). Depictions of bulls, goats, and dogs are common not only in Nakhchivan but also in rock carvings of Gobustan, Anatolia, and the Near East (Fərəcov, 2009, s. 17–21; Baxşəliyev, 2002, s. 42–44). Furthermore, the identification of burials made together with dogs at Kültepe I (Abibullayev, 1982, p. 225) and the Saridere necropolis (Baxşəliyev, 2002, p. 23) shows that the animal cult held an important place in the religious beliefs of Nakhchivan. As a result of archaeological excavations carried out in Early Bronze Age settlements, numerous examples of pots, pans, bowls, and various ceramic vessels have been uncovered. While some of these ceramics are plain and undecorated, others are decorated with different techniques. Geometric motifs, zigzag lines, "S", "L", "M", "Y"-shaped marks, and oval and round compositions were commonly used in the decoration of the vessels. Examples of ceramics with oval and round decorations were identified especially at Kültepe I, Kültepe II, and Mahta I settlements (Halilov, 2017, pp. 1–7). It has been determined that ceramic vessels decorated with relief technique and bearing "M"-shaped motifs obtained from Kültepe I share similar characteristics with examples uncovered from the Yaniktepe

settlement (Kusnareva & Çubinaşvili, 1970, p. 89). At the Mahta I settlement, numerous pottery fragments with incised decorations were recovered. Furthermore, parallels to vessels with zigzag motifs found at Kültepe I and Kültepe II (Seyidov, 1993, s. 123; Seyidov, 2002, s. 1–10) are also encountered in contemporary archaeological centers of the South Caucasus (Kuşnaryeva & Çubinaşvili, 1970, p. 166) and the Near East (Sevin və b., 2000, s. 852). This situation shows that Nakhchivan was part of wide cultural interaction networks during the Early Bronze Age. Proto Kura-Araxes ceramics identified at Ovçulartepesi, Mahta I, and Helec settlements reveal that the Kura-Araxes culture began to form in Nakhchivan from quite early periods. Examinations of the distribution and symbolic meanings of motifs used in ceramic decorations show that these signs were not only for aesthetic purposes but also carried specific intellectual and cultural meanings. While motifs with simple compositions consist of wavy, straight, or broken lines; the combination of geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, and rectangles draws attention in complex compositions. Technical methods such as stamping, incising, and scraping were used for decorating the vessels. Some decoration traditions from the Chalcolithic Age continued into the Early Bronze Age, besides which ceramic masters developed new motifs and compositions. It is understood that oval and round motifs, zigzag lines, swastikas, horn-shaped figures, and "S" and "M"-shaped signs in ceramic decorations have a wide geographical distribution and strong symbolic meanings. Examples obtained from settlements such as Kültepe II, Yaniktepe, Amiranis Gora, Karaz, Babadervish, and Mahta show that these motifs had a common symbolic meaning between the cultures of the South Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia. The earliest examples of "S"-shaped motifs are seen on ceramics belonging to the Trypillia culture. In later periods, different variations of this motif are encountered on metal artifacts of Scythian-Saka communities, in archaeological finds from Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan, on ceramics of the Chirik-Rabat culture, on Khwarezm coins, and in the architecture of Southern Turkmenistan. The same motif has also been identified at the Yaniktepe and Amiranis Gora settlements (Kuşnaryeva & Çubinaşvili, 1970, p. 125; Kuşnaryeva & Markovin, 1994, p. 28).

It is noted that this motif, known as "karmak" in Azerbaijan and "çengel" (hook) in Anatolia, is used as a protective symbol in carpet art and is believed to protect people from the evil eye (Qurbanov, 2003, s. 260). This sign, known by different names in Central Asian societies, is described in Mahmud al-Kashgari's "Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk" as the tamga of the Beydili tribe of the Oghuz Turks (Kaşgarlı, 2011, p. 227). Furthermore, it is stated in the "Shajara-i Tarakima" (Genealogy of the Turkmens) that the horizontal form of the sign is associated with the İğdır and Kınık tribes (Əbulqazi, 2002, p. 100). It is known that "M"-shaped motifs also have a wide distribution area and are intensively used in Azerbaijani carpet art. It is observed that these motifs are also an important decorative element in the carpet weaving traditions of Anatolia, the North Caucasus, and Turkmenistan. The presence of similar examples on ceramics from Kültepe I, Babadervish, and Amiranis Gora settlements shows the regional cultural continuity of the motif (Abibullayev, 1982, p. 291; Kuşnaryeva & Markovin, 1994, pp. 29–68).

Additionally, it is stated that these motifs bear similarities to the khan tamgas and symbols of sovereignty used in the Turkish tamga system. It has been noted that some signs found in the Orkhon-Yenisey inscriptions also have the same form (Tekin, 2008, s. 115). Ram horn-shaped motifs also hold an important place in the Early Bronze Age ceramics of Nakhchivan. This type of decoration is found outside Nakhchivan in different regions of Azerbaijan and in Eastern Georgia (Kuşnaryeva & Markovin, 1994, p. 19). In Turkish mythological thought, the ram horn is considered a symbol of fertility, power, and sanctity. It is known that the ram was accepted as a sacred being that carries the souls of deceased people to God and held an important place in sacrificial rituals. For this reason, the ram horn motif was widely used not only in ceramics but also in metal artifacts, carpets, and rock carvings. It is observed that the motif is known by different names such as "koçkar", "köçkar", "koç müyüz" among Turkish communities in Anatolia, Central Asia, Crimea, the Volga region, and the North Caucasus (Qurbanov, 2003, s. 259, 305, 307). It also shows similarities with some tamga signs found in the Orkhon-Yenisey inscriptions (Tekin, 2010, s. 101). The presence of the ram figure on

the flags of the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu states reveals the historical continuity of the motif. Another decorative element drawing attention in the Early Bronze Age ceramics of Nakhchivan is the spiral motif. Single or intertwined spiral depictions are common, especially on Kültepe I, Kültepe II, and Mahta ceramics. Similar examples have also been identified at Babadervish, Karaz, and other centers of the South Caucasus (Kuşnaryeva & Markovin, 1994, p. 26). One of the earliest examples of the spiral motif was found in the megalithic structures of Newgrange in Ireland, dated to around 3200 BC. There are various opinions that this symbol represents the infinity of the universe, the continuity of nature, and the cycle of life. Archaeological materials with spiral decorations have also been uncovered in kurgans in the Dnieper-Azov region of Ukraine. Different scientific evaluations have been made regarding the meaning of the spiral motif. S.H. Aşurov suggests that this symbol is associated with the ram cult and carries mythological content related to animal husbandry (Aşurov, 2002, s. 37). K. Kuşnaryeva and T. Chubinishvili evaluated the spiral symbol as a sign of continuous movement and the sun (Kuşnaryeva & Çubinaşvili, 1970, pp. 65–66). Q. İsmayilov also states that the spiral pattern reflects the sun belief (İsmayilzadə, 2008, s. 50). While L. Karimov notes that spiral motifs in Azerbaijani carpets symbolize the element "water" (Kərimov, 1983, s. 129), it is stated that the same symbol carries the meaning of "rebirth" in the mythological thought of African societies. Spiral motifs drawn clockwise are accepted to represent the sun in ancient Eastern societies. Despite these different interpretations, the common aspect of spiral motifs is that they carry astrological and cosmological meanings.

In archaeological excavations conducted in the Middle Bronze Age settlements of Nakhchivan, numerous clay vessels and human figurines belonging to ceramic art were uncovered. The finds are divided into two main groups based on the color of the clay, paste structure, and decoration techniques. The first group consists of pink-slipped and painted ceramics. In Azerbaijani archaeological literature, this tradition is defined as the "Painted Pottery Culture". This culture is widely represented not only in Nakhchivan but also in the Urmia Basin and Eastern Anatolia. Ceramic workshops identified in recent years at Kültepe II, numerous potter's kilns, and vessels containing paint residues inside show that this center was one of the main ceramic production sites of Nakhchivan during the Middle Bronze Age (Aliyev, 1991, p. 38; Halilov, 2022, pp. 177–191). The density of painted ceramic examples in Nakhchivan is more pronounced compared to other regions of Azerbaijan. Based on stratigraphic data from Kültepe II, Veli Aliyev stated that the "Painted Pottery Culture" went through four developmental phases from the Middle Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (Aliyev, 1977, pp. 43–89). Ceramics belonging to this culture have been identified in centers such as Kültepe I, Kültepe II, Şahtahtı, Nehecir, Yaycı, and Çalhankale (fig.3).



Figure. 3

Ceramic vessels of the Middle Bronze Age:

1, 2, 4 – from the Yaycı Necropolis (NDTM-27174, A-10751) (Togrul Khalilov); 3 – from the Kültepe II Settlement (National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, inv. 15527) (Togrul Khalilov);

5 – from Yaycı (Sharur District History and Ethnography Museum, inv. A-135/2) (Togrul Khalilov); 7–10 – from the Shortepe Necropolis (NDTM-53, A-53). (Togrul Khalilov).

Parallels to some of the vessels are found in cultural levels D and C of Göytepe (Brown, 1951, p. 21), levels V and VI of Haftavan Tepe (Edwards, 1981, p. 189), and cultural level IV of Dinkha Tepe (Hamilin, 1977, p. 126). This situation shows that Nakhchivan held an important position as a center in the cultural relations between the South Caucasus, the Urmia Basin, and Eastern Anatolia throughout the Middle Bronze Age. The second group consists of unpainted and plainer vessels. The surfaces of these examples are decorated with geometric motifs using incising, scraping, and engraving techniques. Triangles, angled lines, circles, wavy lines, and straight lines stand out among these decorations. Some of these motifs show similarities with ceramics recovered from different archaeological centers of the South Caucasus and the Near East. This situation reveals that Nakhchivan's ceramic art was not only the product of local traditions but was also influenced by the intercultural interaction processes of the period. Decorations consist of compositions where adjacent triangles combine with rhombus motifs, dot patterns, wavy and curved lines, upward or downward angular motifs, single or combined triangles, rhombuses, vertical-horizontal lines, and variations of semi-circular lines. Compositions where wavy lines are used together with angular motifs, circular decorations, and different geometric arrangements are also common on ceramic surfaces. These decorations were applied in both simple and complex compositions. Particularly, it is understood that compositions consisting of adjacent triangles and rhombus motifs have a wide distribution area in the Caucasian painted ceramic tradition.

Unlike Early Bronze Age ceramics, it is observed that zoomorphic motifs were used more extensively during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Such figurative decorations are especially concentrated on painted vessels. Examples with bird figures hold an important place. Bird depictions on Middle Bronze Age painted vessels recovered from Yaycı, Kızılburun, Kültepe I, Kültepe II, and Şahtahtı are rendered in both simple and combined compositions (Khalilov, 2023, pp. 2048–2072). Parallels to these figures are found at Kızılburun (Aliyev, 1977, p. 62) and Göytepe (Kuşnaryeva & Markovin, 1994, p. 130). These similarities show that the Nakhchivan painted ceramic tradition shares common iconographic features with other cultural centers in the South Caucasus. Plain, unpainted, incised, and scraped ceramics from Nehecir, Kültepe II (Aliyev, 1991, p. 53), and other centers are common not only in Nakhchivan but also in the Mil-Karabakh, Talish-Mugan, Gobustan, and Northeastern Azerbaijan regions. This situation shows that the region was part of common cultural traditions throughout the Bronze Age.

One of the important finds reflecting the Middle Bronze Age art of Nakhchivan is the human figurine recovered from the Kızılburun settlement. Approximately 20 cm in height, the face of this figurine is depicted as flat; the head, body, and limbs are proportionally rendered. It is noteworthy that the figurine is depicted as clothed, with boots and a hat. The placement of the left hand on the belt lends a symbolic meaning to the composition. It is observed that the hat and legs are painted red, the clothing is white, and the body surface is decorated with thin black and brown lines. The cape-like garment suggests that the figurine might be related to ceremonial or social status. The presence of similar depictions on some ceramic vessels recovered from Kızılburun shows that this iconography formed a tradition in local ceramic art. Although it shows similarities with Iranian examples, it is noted that the Kızılburun figurine possesses some unique characteristics and is dated earlier (Aliyev, 1977, p. 62).

Nakhchivan potters continued intensive production during the Late Bronze Age, as in the Middle Bronze Age. Vessels from this period consist of both unpainted and painted examples. The presence of painted ceramics in Late Bronze Age settlements shows that the "Painted Pottery Culture" continued into the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. As in Eastern Anatolian examples, the polychrome painting technique was widely used in Nakhchivan ceramics (Çilingiroğlu, 1990(b), s.

170; Çilingiroğlu, 1990(a), s. 25–44). Furthermore, examples of white-painted ceramics were recovered from Kültepe I and Qazhan settlements. It is known that this type of ceramics, seen over a wide geography from Central Europe to Asia Minor and China, was also common within the Khojaly-Gadabay culture. Therefore, it is thought that these ceramics reached Nakhchivan through economic and cultural relations established with the communities forming the Khojaly-Gadabay culture. On teapot-shaped vessels recovered from Late Bronze Age settlements in Nakhchivan, round relief decorations specific to the Khojaly-Gadabay culture are also seen. The application of painted decoration on such vessels shows that this ornamentation tradition has a deep-rooted history.

As in the Middle Bronze Age, geometric decorations are common on Late Bronze Age ceramics. It is understood that geometric patterns, along with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs, also carry specific symbolic meanings. Such motifs are encountered from the Trypillia culture onwards, in Gamigaya, around Lake Göğçe and in rock carvings of Kazakhstan, Altai, and Siberia. Particularly, there are findings suggesting that rhombus and angular motifs are associated with the continuity of lineage, life, and the tree of life. While there are opinions that broken and diagonal lines represent rain and snowfall, some researchers state that these lines symbolize flowing water or rows of mountains. Sources record that ornaments consisting of single wavy lines are called "yılan" (snake), and double wavy lines are called "ayak" (foot) or "dayak" (strike/cane) tamga. In the "Shajara-i Tarakima", it is stated that this motif appears as the "ılan" (snake) tamga and is a symbol belonging to the Yaparlı tribe of the Ayhan Oghuz (Abulgazi, 2002, p. 101). Furthermore, it is stated that this sign represents the sound "d" in the Orkhon-Yenisey alphabet (Rəcəbli, 2009, s. 33; Tekin, 2010, s. 85). The prevalence of legends and narratives connected to the water cult in Nakhchivan, as well as in other regions of Azerbaijan, supports the interpretation of wavy lines as the "water motif".

One of the remarkable decoration types in the Middle and Late Bronze Age ceramics of Nakhchivan is the semi-concentric motif. Examples of these are found at Çalhankale, Karaçuk, Şahtahtı (Baxşəliyev 2004, s. 106, fig. 16/3–7), and İliklikaya settlements. The earliest examples of the motifs are seen in Sumerian and Elamite pictograms, the Trypillia culture (Qurbanov, 2013, p. 67), and Bulgarian rock carvings (Yengi & Tuncay, 2013, p. 77). It is stated that the tamgas of the Karabölük and Çuvaldar tribes among the Oghuz are shown similarly in Mahmud al-Kashgari's "Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk" (Xəlilov, 2009, pp. 20–21; Kasgarlı, 2011, pp. 55, 66). This situation shows that the symbolic motifs in Nakhchivan ceramic art are not only local but also part of a common symbolic system spread across the wide Turkish cultural geography.

The ceramic finds obtained from the Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic are of great importance for understanding the artistic and symbolic thought world as well as the material culture of the region. In archaeological excavations belonging to these periods, numerous clay vessels, figurative finds, and decorated ceramic examples have been uncovered. Ceramics are divided into two main groups based on the quality of clay used, production technique, and ornamentation characteristics. The first group consists of red or pink-slipped painted vessels. This tradition, defined as the "Painted Pottery Culture" in Azerbaijani archaeology, is common not only in Nakhchivan but also in the Urmia Basin and Eastern Anatolia. Particularly, the ceramic workshops, kilns, and vessels with paint residues uncovered at Kültepe II prove that the region was an important ceramic production center during the Middle Bronze Age (Aliyev, 1991, p. 38; Halilov, 2022, pp. 177–191). The second ceramic group consists of unpainted, plain-surfaced vessels decorated with incising, scraping, and engraving techniques. Geometric motifs such as triangles, rhombuses, angles, circles, wavy lines, and parallel lines are used intensively on these ceramics. Decorations sometimes consist only of dots, sometimes of interlocking geometric compositions. The wide distribution of combined triangle and rhombus motifs in the South Caucasian painted ceramic tradition is noteworthy. Compared to the Early Bronze Age, zoomorphic decorations are used more intensively in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages; especially bird depictions are common. These figurative decorations reflect not only the aesthetic understanding but also the

religious and ideological thought system of the period. Geometric motifs should also be evaluated not merely as decorative elements but as signs carrying symbolic meaning. It is thought that rhombus and angle motifs are associated with concepts such as fertility, lineage continuity, and the tree of life. It is understood that wavy lines are connected to the water cult and nature beliefs. The origin of semi-concentric motifs extends back to Sumerian and Elamite pictograms, and the similarity of these symbols to Oghuz tribal tamgas reveals the place of Nakhchivan ceramic art within a broad cultural context. Complex compositional scenes consisting of animal figures such as goats, horses, and wolves were identified on Late Bronze Age clay vessels recovered from the Şahtaxtı archaeological settlement (Aliyev, 1977, p. 110). Parallel examples of such figurative compositions have not yet been encountered in other contemporary archaeological settlements of the South Caucasus. Furthermore, such animal depictions are also common on bronze belts belonging to the Khojaly-Gadabay culture. This figurative tradition is not limited only to the borders of Azerbaijan, but also appears in similar forms across a wide geography from Mesopotamia to Central Asia and the Black Sea basin. This situation shows that the iconographic tradition of animal representation should be evaluated not regionally but within wider cultural interaction networks.

Results

The Gamigaya rock carvings hold special importance for understanding the prehistoric cultural development of Nakhchivan. The Gamigaya monument is located in the territory of the Ordubad district of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, at an altitude of 3906 meters above sea level. A large number of rock carvings have been found on the volcanic basalt stones there. They differ from each other in form and characteristics, being created by carving, drilling, and abrasion methods using stone or metal tools. All of the rock carvings reflect the lifestyle and material-spiritual culture of ancient people. In terms of form and characteristics, they hold great scientific importance historically, similar to the petroglyphs of Kelbajar, Afyon, etc. A group of rock carvings at the Gamigaya monument, establishing connections with Middle Eastern culture based on form and characteristics, demonstrates the existence of intercultural relations. Among the petroglyphs dating to the 4th–1st millennia BC are depictions of humans, bulls, goats, and various symbolic figures. Research shows that some rock carvings may belong to earlier periods. The petroglyphs at Gamigaya share similar compositional features with examples of rock art from Anatolia, Iran, Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and Siberia. This situation shows that Nakhchivan interacted with different cultural environments throughout history. Furthermore, the similarity of some motifs seen in the petroglyphs to ceramic decorations of the Kura-Araxes, Painted Ware, and Khojaly-Gadabay cultures reveals that intercultural relations were strong (Halilov, 2008, pp. 54–58; Halilov, 2011, pp. 23–29).

Discussion

The archaeological evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that Nakhchivan occupied a central position in the cultural development of the South Caucasus from the Paleolithic period through the Early Iron Age. The region's geographical location at the intersection of major communication routes connecting Eastern Anatolia, the Urmia Basin, Mesopotamia, and the South Caucasus facilitated continuous cultural interaction and technological exchange. One of the most significant findings is the evidence for long-term cultural continuity. Archaeological data from cave sites, settlements, mining centers, and ritual landscapes indicate that human occupation persisted throughout successive prehistoric periods. This continuity was accompanied by substantial social and economic transformations, including the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture, the emergence of metallurgy, and the development of increasingly complex settlement systems. The results also demonstrate that Nakhchivan played an important role in broader cultural processes affecting the South Caucasus. The appearance of Proto-Kura-Araxes materials and the subsequent development of the Kura-Araxes Culture suggest that the region participated actively in the formation of one of the most influential cultural traditions of the Early Bronze Age. Likewise, the concentration of painted

ceramics and production facilities indicates that Nakhchivan was one of the principal centers of the Painted Pottery Culture during the Middle Bronze Age. Technological innovation constitutes another important aspect of the archaeological record. Evidence from metallurgical workshops, ceramic production facilities, and mining complexes demonstrates that local communities developed specialized forms of production. These innovations contributed to economic diversification and supported the emergence of more complex social structures. The symbolic dimension of cultural development is particularly evident in the Gamigaya Petroglyphs and the iconography of ceramic decoration. The recurrence of similar motifs across different categories of material culture suggests the existence of shared symbolic systems that structured social and religious life. At the same time, regional variations indicate the persistence of local cultural identities within broader interaction networks. The archaeological record therefore challenges interpretations that view Nakhchivan primarily as a peripheral zone influenced by neighboring civilizations. Instead, the evidence suggests that the region functioned as an active cultural center that contributed to technological innovation, artistic development, and intercultural communication throughout prehistory and early history.

Conclusion

The archaeological record of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic demonstrates that the region was one of the principal centers of cultural development in the South Caucasus from prehistoric times onward. Archaeological evidence obtained from settlements, caves, necropolises, fortifications, mining sites, and rock-art complexes reveals a continuous sequence of occupation spanning from the Paleolithic Age to the Early Iron Age. The results of archaeological investigations indicate that Nakhchivan made significant contributions to the development of agriculture, animal husbandry, metallurgy, pottery production, urbanization, and long-distance cultural interaction. Major archaeological centers such as Ovçulartepesi, Kültepe I, Kültepe II, Mahta, Oğlanqala, Tuzdağ, and Gamigaya provide valuable evidence concerning technological innovation, social organization, and ideological traditions. Material culture recovered from these sites demonstrates intensive contacts between Nakhchivan and neighboring regions, including Eastern Anatolia, the Urmia Basin, Mesopotamia, and the wider South Caucasus. Similarities observed in ceramic traditions, architectural features, symbolic motifs, and artistic expressions reflect the region's active participation in broader intercultural networks.

The symbolic imagery preserved on ceramics and rock carvings further contributes to our understanding of ancient belief systems and cultural identities. Particularly, the Gamigaya petroglyphs constitute an exceptional source for studying prehistoric symbolic behavior and cultural communication. Overall, the archaeological heritage of Nakhchivan represents a key resource for reconstructing the ancient history of the South Caucasus and understanding the processes of cultural interaction, technological advancement, and social transformation that shaped the region throughout prehistory and early antiquity.

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