

THE PROBLEM OF STRATIGRAPHY AND PERIODISATION OF THE KHALAJ MONUMENTS

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Abstract

This article analyses the 2024 results of the Khalaj Archaeological Expedition, whose main goals were to trace cultural transitions, establish monument stratigraphy, and examine inter-site relationships. Stratigraphic observations, C-14 dating, and typological comparison formed the basis of the research. Fieldwork was carried out at Khalaj I and the newly recorded Khalaj II, both located in the village of Khalaj, Sharur District. At Khalaj II, excavations in areas A–D reached a depth of 1.7 m, allowing the identification of the cultural layer and the chronological placement of the site, providing valuable material for understanding the poorly studied transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages in Nakhchivan. At Khalaj I, a 4.2-m trench revealed five cultural layers, including Bronze and Early Iron Age deposits, while surface finds indicated Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic activity. The thick Iron Age layer (2 m) is particularly significant for studying ties between the Khojaly-Gadabay culture and Eastern Anatolia. The first absolute dates for the site were obtained: two C-14 samples from the fourth layer (1295–1046 BC; 1370–1335 BC) confirmed the presence of a Middle Bronze Age horizon. Although Neolithic red-painted pottery was recovered, the absence of a distinct layer likely reflects the limited excavated area. In total, 679 ceramic samples from Khalaj I and 1,631 from Khalaj II, along with immovable artefacts, were deposited in the archaeological collection of the Nakhchivan Branch of the National Academy of Sciences, thereby providing new data on the ancient cultures of Azerbaijan from the Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages.

Keywords: *Khalaj I, Neolithic ceramics, C14 analyses, Khalaj II, Antiquity, Stone column base*

INTRODUCTION

One of the key issues in archaeology today is the study of cultural transition. In this context, the role of multi-layered archaeological sites is undeniable. The ancient settlement in the village of Khalaj, in the Sharur District, is one such site. Due to its significance and the abundance of surface materials, it ranks alongside other multi-layered sites, such as Kültepe I and Nakhchivan Tepe. However, unlike these sites, it has not been designated as an official protected site. As a result, the area has been shrinking and is gradually losing its surface features due to intensive agricultural activity in the surrounding fields. Geographically, the area occupies a strategically important position on the left bank of the Araz River, along the South Caucasus–Near East transit corridor. For

this reason, the site (first recorded in 1982 by V. Aliyev and A. Seyidov) has attracted the attention of numerous researchers, including S. Ashurov, V. Bakhshaliyev, L. Ristvet, K. Marro, B. Parker, and K. Nicol. The primary focus of scholarly discussion has been its chronological attribution. Based on the earliest finds, the site was initially dated to the Chalcolithic and the Early and Middle Bronze Ages (Seyidov et al., 2009, pp. 63–64). Later, ceramic artefacts recovered during small-scale excavations in 2009 led to its reassignment to the Late Chalcolithic period (Bakhshaliyev, 2021, p. 105). Additionally, the red slip-painted ceramics from Khalaj were correlated with those from the Davagoz settlement (dated to 5400 BC) and attributed to the Late Neolithic period (Bakhshaliyev, 2019, pp. 80–81). In the author's

2024 dissertation, part of the Khalaj assemblage was characterised as belonging to the final stage of the Ceramic Neolithic, while other materials were identified as Middle Chalcolithic (Guliyeva, 2024a, pp. 123–129). All of these studies confirm the multi-layered nature of the site; however, the chronologies proposed were limited to relative dating. Considering this, the site was selected for renewed investigation.

During reconnaissance surveys conducted by the author on April 11–12, 2024, in the village of Khalaj, local residents reported the presence of another archaeological site in the area. This area, locally known as the “Old Post,” is located 2.5 km east of the previously identified site, the “Old Cemetery.” Unlike the earlier site, which is located in a mountainous area, the newly discovered site lies in a flat plain surrounded by cultivated fields. Because both sites are located within the same village, the newly identified site was designated Khalaj II. The previously known site was designated Khalaj I for research purposes. Among the nearly 300 surface finds collected from Khalaj I, a portion dates to the Neolithic period (Figure 1).

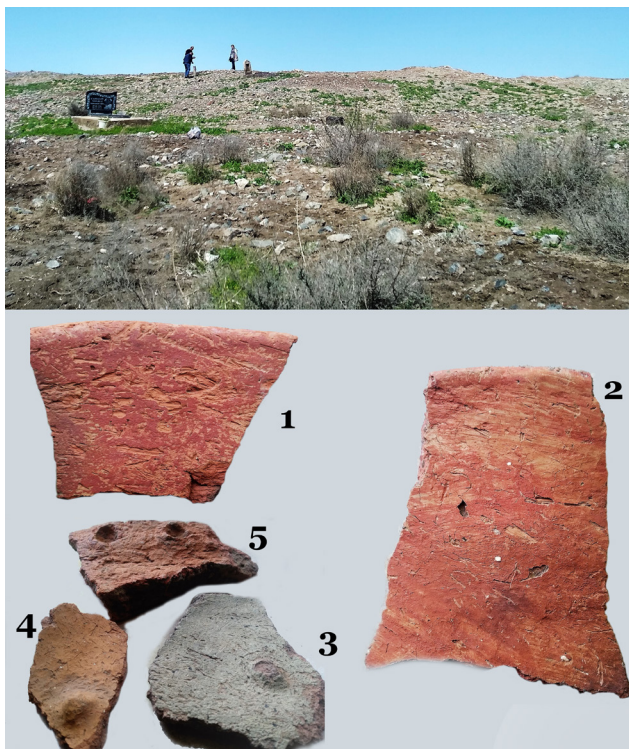


Fig. 1. Survey investigations and surface finds (Khalaj I, 2024).

During reconnaissance at the Khalaj II settlement, surface materials dating to Antiquity, the Early Middle Ages, and, to a lesser extent, the Iron Age and Late Chalcolithic periods were collected

(Guliyeva, 2024b, p. 89). To assess the degree of connection between the two sites (particularly to verify the presence of a Neolithic layer at Khalaj I and to clarify its stratigraphy), it was considered necessary to conduct archaeological excavations at both locations. These excavations, conducted by the Khalaj Archaeological Expedition, began on June 20, 2024, and concluded on July 29.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

During the excavations at the Khalaj sites, research methods appropriate to the objectives established for each site were employed. At Khalaj II, the investigation aimed to determine the period and character of this newly recorded site, as well as to explore its degree of connection with Khalaj I. Excavations were conducted in Areas A, B, C, and D. Two distinct layers were identified in Area A. The upper layer, associated with medieval graves, had been disturbed by the construction of a post office building during the Tsarist period, resulting in the recovery of only a small number of ceramic fragments. Below a depth of 0.4 meters, the soil began to turn reddish. This layer, 0.8 meters thick, contained remains of a rectangular structure, a stone column base, three hearths, and a substantial amount of ash and ceramic fragments (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Archaeological excavation process (Khalaj II, 2024).

After removing thick ash layers, the floor of a large structure, plastered with light-green lime plaster, was uncovered along the wall. It was determined that the wall extended beyond the excavation area. To avoid damaging the floor, excavations in Area A were halted upon reaching a depth of 1.2 meters. Excavations in Area B were also discontinued after reaching a depth of 0.3 meters, and the focus shifted to Areas C and D, which were opened to trace the continuation of the public building identified in Area A.

Remains of a rectangular structure, a stone column base, portions of the floor and wall belonging to a public building, hearths, thick ash layers, and 1,631 ceramic fragments were documented. Based on comparative analysis and C-14 dating, the newly discovered site was determined to date to the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods.

Archaeological excavations at the Khalaj I site. Since the primary objective was to clarify the site's stratigraphy, excavations were designed to proceed in depth. For this purpose, a 10 × 10-meter excavation unit (Khalaj I A) was opened. The stratigraphy of cultural layers from different periods was traced in a trench extending to a depth of 4.2 meters (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Stratigraphy of Area A: Layer I (1) and layers observed in the test trench (2) (Khalaj I, 2024).

Since the settlement is located at the foot of a mountain, the layers are slightly inclined. On the side facing the slope, the layers are thicker, while those toward the plain become thinner. This difference is most clearly observed in Layer I. This

layer begins at the surface and continues to a depth of 0.6–0.9 meters. It consists of sandy soil containing sparse ceramic fragments (Figure 3 (1)). To penetrate the sandy layer and reach the underlying cultural strata, the excavation area was divided into two sections, with the northern half excavated to a greater depth.

In Layer II, although the quantity of ceramics increased slightly, their association with different periods suggests that the cultural layer is mixed. At a depth of 0.9–1.2 meters, the sandy layer was replaced by a yellowish soil layer. This mixed deposit is relatively thin (approximately 0.4 meters). The area was likely used as a cemetery during the Medieval period, which disturbed the stratigraphy. This assumption is supported by the discovery of scattered human skeletal remains and a small number of ceramic fragments.

In Layer III, the soil colour shifts toward red and differs from the others in thickness. This layer reaches a thickness of up to 2 meters, and yields remains such as a stone wall (A-028), a stone cist grave, paving stones, and a substantial quantity of Iron Age ceramics. The wall was documented in the eastern part of the excavation area. It was part of a rectangular structure and consisted of double rows of stone alignments extending from southeast to northwest (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. The wall remains uncovered from Layer III (Khalaj, 2024).



Fig. 5. Grave goods of the stone cist recorded in Layer III (Khalaj I, 2024).

The stone cist grave (A-027) was discovered in the lower layer beneath the wall remains, specifically in the northwestern corner of the excavation area. A portion of it extended beneath the section boundary. The grave was constructed of paving stones along its southern side. The smooth surfaces of the large stones faced inward, and a 0.3–0.4 cm thick layer of clay plaster was applied over them. Although most of the red-colored plaster had peeled away, small traces remained. Because other parts of the grave extended beyond the square trench, its dimensions were determined based on the compact soil layer surrounding the floor. The interior length measures 1.85 m, the

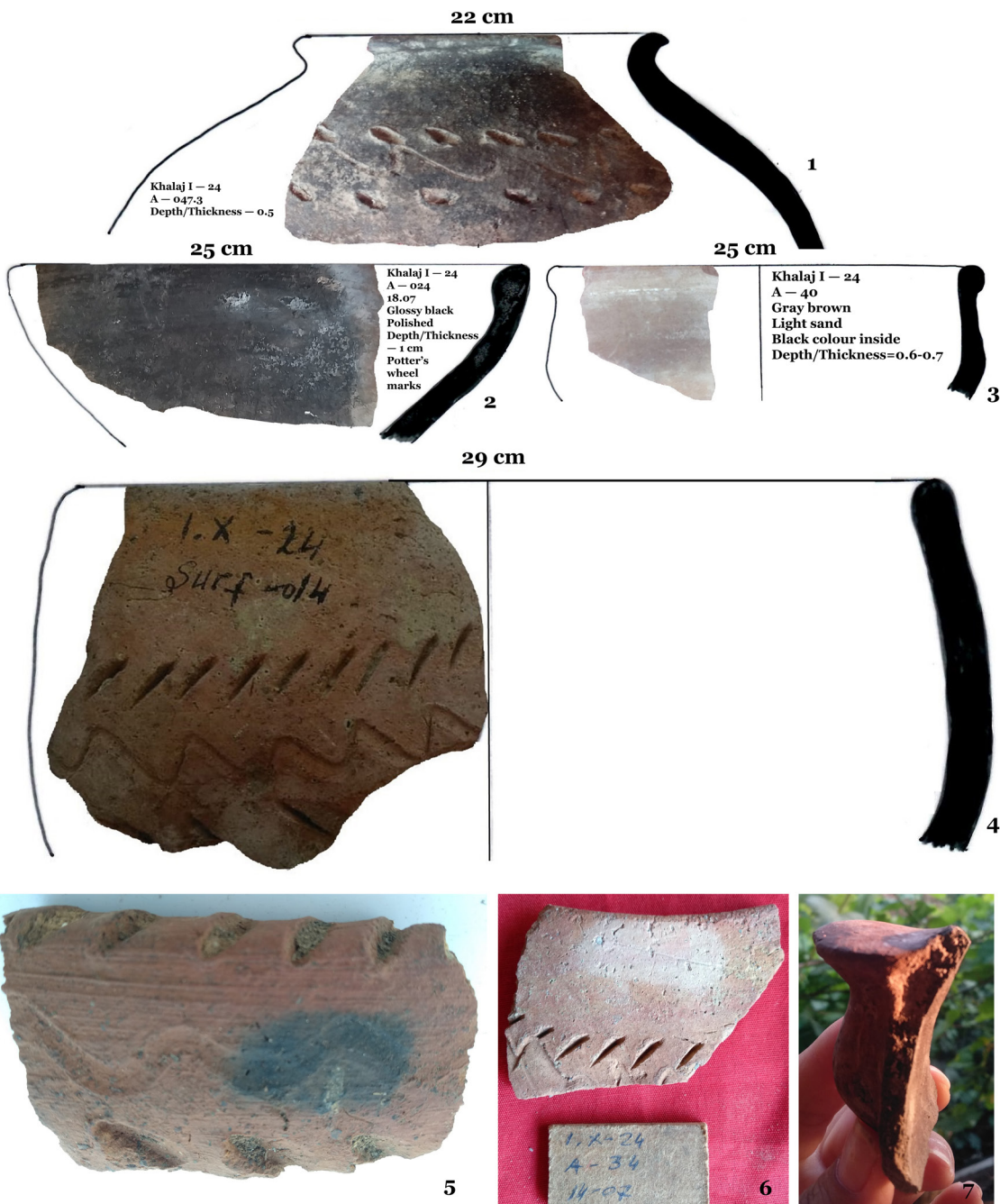


Fig. 6. Group I (1–3) and Group II (4–7) ceramics from Layer III (Khalaj I, 2024).



Fig. 7. Incised-pattern vessel uncovered from Layer III (Khalaj I, 2024).

width 0.9 m, and the depth 0.5 m (Guliyeva et al., 2024, p. 23). The grave is oriented from southeast to northwest. Inside, a considerable amount of ash was found along with six vessels. Three of the pots were grouped in the southeastern corner. One pitcher, with its mouth facing west, bears incised decorations on its surface (Figure 5(4)) and is extremely fragile. The second consists of large, glossy, polished fragments (Figure 5(3)). A small black jar with round relief ornaments and a handle on the body was recovered intact (Figure 5(2)).

Four additional vessels were placed along the northern side of the grave. One of them was embedded in the floor; its edges surrounded by a compact layer of soil. Because of its fragility, only the conical base was recovered intact, while the remaining parts were collected as fragments. The second specimen consisted of rim and body fragments from a small bowl. The third belonged to a large vessel positioned vertically and consisted of a body section. The fourth was a small vessel with a base diameter of 8 cm and a body diameter of 12 cm.

The ceramics recovered from this layer can be divided into two groups. The first group comprises

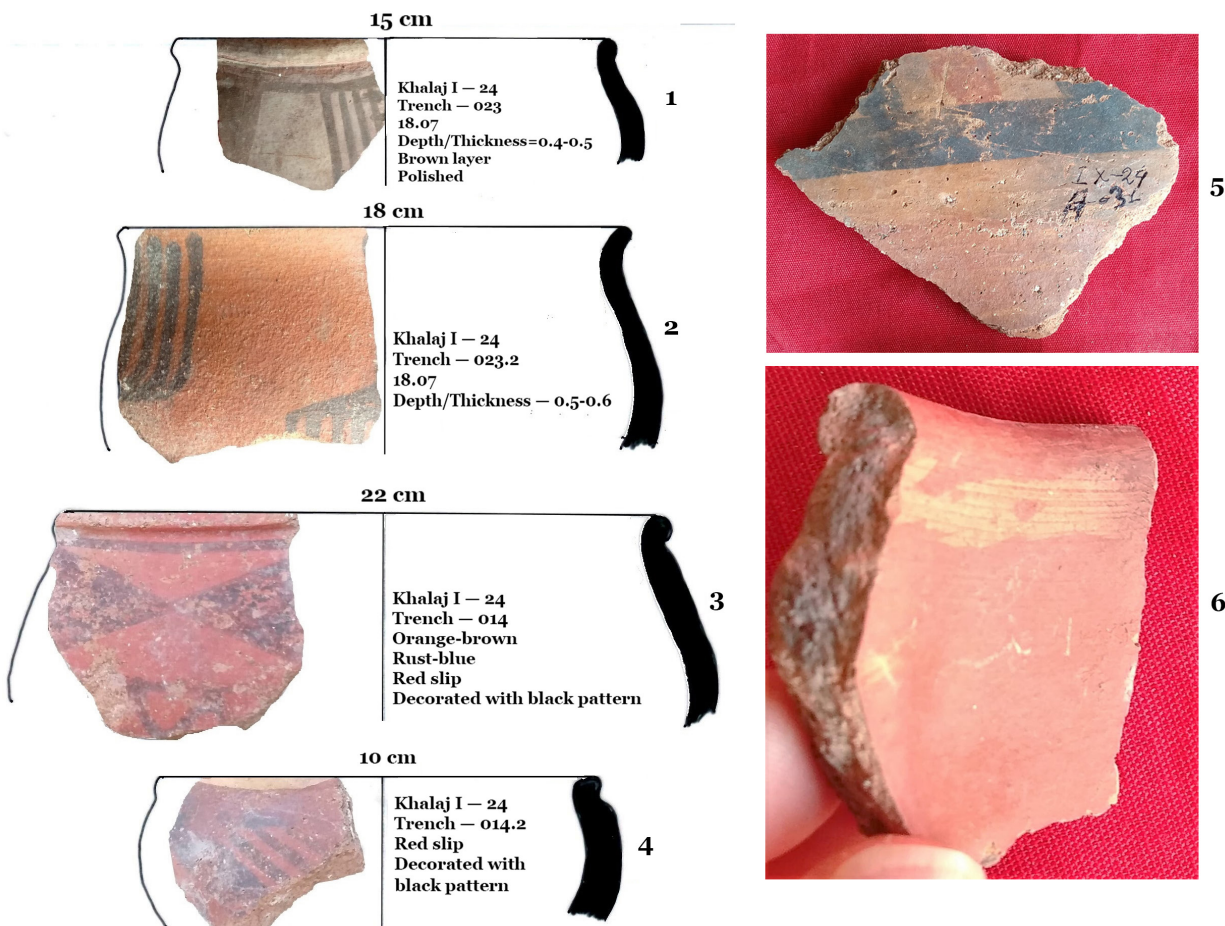


Fig. 8. Painted pottery uncovered from Layer IV (I Khalaj–2024).



Fig. 9. Ceramic specimens uncovered from Layer V: sand-tempered (1–3), painted (5), and straw-tempered (4, 6) vessels (Khalaj I, 2024).

grey to black vessels with a sandy composition that were well-fired (Figure 6(1–3)). Most of their surfaces are polished to a smooth finish. Although they share a similar manufacturing technique, they differ typologically and ornamentally. Some are plain, while others are decorated with light corrugation patterns on the exterior and, occasionally, on the interior as well. On the surfaces of several specimens, patterns resembling wheat ears created by incision, along with wavy scratched designs, can also be observed (Figure 6(1)).

The ceramics assigned to the second group (Figs. 6(4–7)) were made from light-brown or pink clay. They have thick walls and coarse surfaces. Incised decorations appear on the bodies of some vessels and occasionally along the rims (Fig. 6(5)).

Typologically, fragments of pitchers and small bowls predominate, while complete vessels are

rare. Among the latter, one is a small jar, and the other is a vessel open at both ends, widening from the centre toward each end. Its surface is smoothly polished and decorated with incised concentric circles (Fig. 7).

Layer IV begins at a depth of 3.4 meters. The cultural deposit is 0.4 meters thick, and the soil colour transitions to a light green hue. The finds from this layer consist of painted pottery fragments, which can be divided into two groups: monochrome and polychrome. The patterns on the monochrome specimens were applied using two distinct techniques. In the first method, black parallel bands were painted directly onto the vessel surface (Fig. 8(1–2)). In the second method, the vessel surface was coated with a thin red slip before black patterns—such as parallel, oblique, and triangular lines—were applied (Fig. 8(3–4)).

Specimens assigned to the second group are few in number. The polychrome patterns were applied to their slipped surfaces using red and black paint (Fig. 8(5)). In some examples, red paint was applied to the interior surface—either near the rim or covering the entire interior (Fig. 8(6)).

Layer V extends from 3.8 to 4.2 meters below the surface. In this layer, the soil becomes darker in colour, and moisture is present due to groundwater influence. Ceramic finds are scarce in this layer. They are made of pink clay, although light brown examples also occur. These primarily consist of rim and base fragments from jar-type vessels. One fragment belonging to a grey handle was documented (Fig. 9(2)). Some of the light brown specimens derive from vessels with bulging bodies. Such examples are well-made, well-fired, thick-walled, and durable. Typologically, they differ from the vessels of the preceding layers (Fig. 9).

These samples, in pink and light brown tones, were made of sand-tempered clay. One of the specimens is painted red (Figure 9(5)). Its composition includes coarse sand and a small amount of straw. Another specimen, yellow-pink in colour, contains a straw admixture (Figure 9(6)). to their slipped surfaces using red and black paint (Fig. 8(5)). In some examples, red paint was applied to the interior surface—either near the rim or covering

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DISCUSSION AND DATING

The systematisation of the finds uncovered during investigations at the Khalaj II settlement, organised by excavation area, has enabled the character of the site to be conveyed and the overall results of the archaeological excavations to be summarised in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Preliminary Results of Archaeological Investigations at Khalaj II (2024)

Main parameters	Excavation Sites Uncovered at the Khalaj II Settlement				
	A		B	C	D
	Site	Test pit			
Volume	11x6	2,5x2,5	10x5	10x5	10x5
Depth	1,2 m	1,7 m	0,3 m	0,9 m	0,6 m
Wall remains	4		-	-	1
Column base	1		-	-	-
Hearth	3		-	2	1
Ceramics		523	300	480	328
Bone remains		+	-	+	+
Tools	2				
Ornament	1				

Similar elements to those found in the settlement's archaeological materials can be observed in monuments from the ancient period in other regions of Azerbaijan. From an architectural perspective, the Antique constructions of the Mil-Garabagh region can be compared with those at Nargiztepe (Aliyev et al., 2017, Fig. 6), the ancient settlement of Gabala (Babaev, 1990, p. 51), and the public buildings of Phase II of the ancient period at

Oglangala (Ristvet et al., 2012). The column base uncovered in Area A of Khalaj II—with a circular upper part and a quadrangular seating section forming a two-part structure—shows the closest analogy to examples from cities of Caucasian Albania dating to the Antique period (Babaev, 1990, p. 51, Fig. 15), differing only in the smooth finish of its upper part and the presence of a relief band separating the two sections (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Stone Column Base (Khalaj II, 2024).

The ceramics from Poylu I, dated to the 4th–3rd centuries BC, exhibit typological similarities with ancient ceramics (Museyibli & Najafov, 2021, p. 48, Fig. 1), particularly with vessels from Oglangala (Bakhshaliyev, 2002, Fig. 39(1–11)). Based on

the dating of these comparative sites, the relative chronology of Khalaj II has been synchronised with them. Radiocarbon analyses of the site, conducted in Italy, indicate a date within the 2nd–3rd centuries BC (Fig. 11).

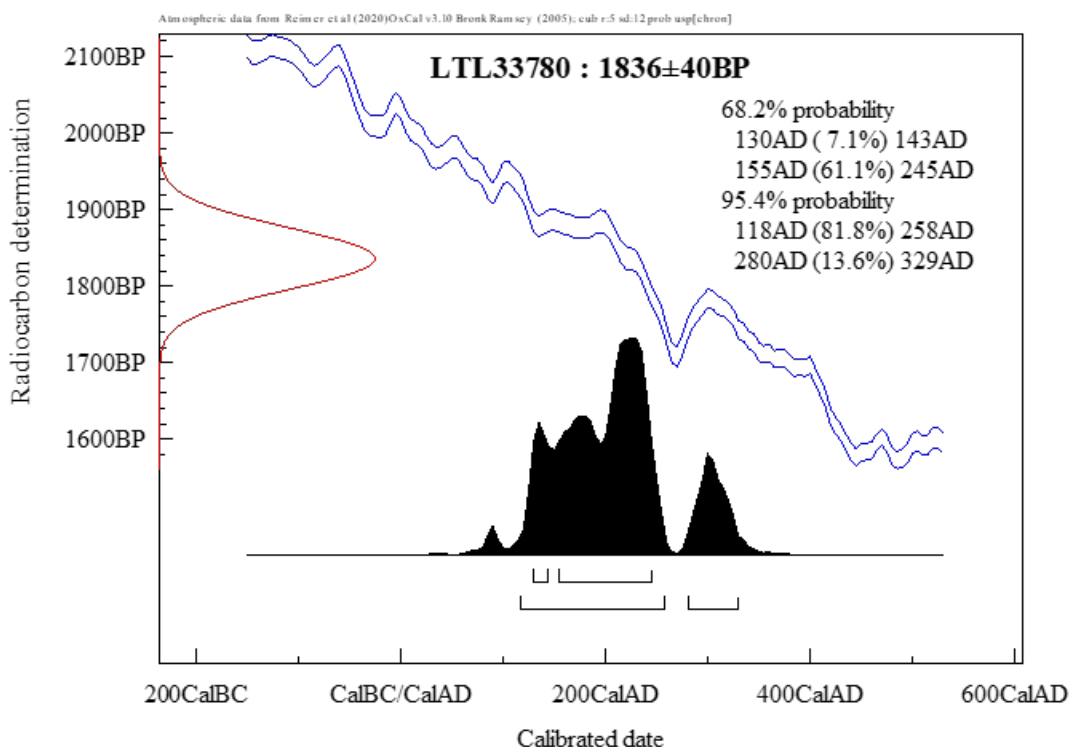


Fig. 11. C14 Dating of the Khalaj II Settlement

We conducted the dating of Khalaj stratigraphic layers. To clarify the settlement's stratigraphy, Test Pit 4 was deepened to 2 meters, revealing five layers distinguished by colour and artefacts (Table 2).

The first two upper layers did not provide a clear indication of the site's period. Layer I consists of sandy soil, while Layer II served as a cemetery during the Medieval period, yielding

Table 2. Khalaj I. Stratigraphic Distribution of Finds (2024)

Finds from Area A of Khalaj I (by layers)								
Layers	Depth (m)	Bones			Ceramics			
		Wall remains	Stone box grave	Obsidian flint	Pink 33%	Black 43%	Red-painted 15%	Painted with a pattern 10%
Layer I	0-1							
Layer II	1-1,4		+++++		+			
Layer III	1,4-3,4	+	+	+obsidian +flint	++	++++	+	
Layer IV	3,4-3,8			+flint	++	++	++++	+++
Layer V	3,8-4,2			+++obsidian	+++		+	+

mixed cultural deposits. In contrast, Layer III is better preserved. In terms of dating, the stone cist grave uncovered in this layer is of particular significance. Similar graves in Azerbaijan have been found at Gyzylyburun (Early Iron Age) (Ibrahimli & Ismayilzade, 2013, p. 16; Bakhshaliyev, 2002, p. 9), Paya Deresi (Bakhshaliyev & Guliyeva, 2024, p. 16), Plovdag (Ibrahimli, 2015, p. 52), Agha Evler, Kravelidi (Goshgarli, 2012, p. 230, Table XXV, 4–5), and in Eastern Anatolia at Yondjatepe (Belli & Konyar, 2001), Karagunduz (Sevin & Kavaklı, 1994, pp. 337–338), Dilgaya (Çilingiroğlu, 1999, p. 30), and the Garagoyunlu necropolises. Among these, the latter shows the closest analogy to the example at Khalaj I in terms of construction—a quadrangular pit lined with stones of various sizes, covered with flat stones on top, measuring 2 × 1 m, with the smooth sides of the stones facing inward, topped with large rough stones, and lacking a skeleton (Akbaş, 2022, p. 25, Fig. 9).

The ceramic assemblage exhibits analogies with Early Iron Age materials from Kültepe I (Abibullaev, 1982, Table XXXIII.6), Oglangala (Bakhshaliyev, 2002), the Demirchi I and II necropolises, and the Sadarak settlement (Guliyeva, 2022, Fig. 1(1–5)).

Regarding the dating of this layer, a comparative

analysis of the main artefacts establishes a relative chronology. The period of the stone cist grave is particularly significant in this respect. Graves discovered at Gyzylyburun are dated to the 10th–9th centuries BC (Abibullaev, 1982, p. 204), while the stone cist graves at Plovdag belong to the late second millennium–early 1st millennium BC (Ibrahimli, 2015, p. 52). Early Iron Age ceramics from Kültepe I correspond to these dates, being dated to the 11th–8th centuries BC (Abibullaev, 1982, p. 203). Comparative analysis allows Layer III of Khalaj I to be assigned to the second phase of the Early Iron Age (Guliyeva, 2024c, p. 112).

The second group of painted samples from Layer IV (Figs. 8(3–4)), in terms of form and painting technique, resemble the painted ceramics of Layer III from Kültepe I (Abibullaev, 1982, p. 307, Table XXVII, 5), particularly the face-to-face triangles drawn in black over red slip, which are similar to painted ceramics from Gyzylyburun (*ibid.*, Table XXIX, 12), Yaydji (Guliyeva, 2012, p. 164, Fig. 1), and Tezekend. The first group of ceramics from this layer is also ornamentally similar to materials from contemporary sites, reflecting the Painted Ware cultural tradition.

Layer V consists of pink ceramic specimens

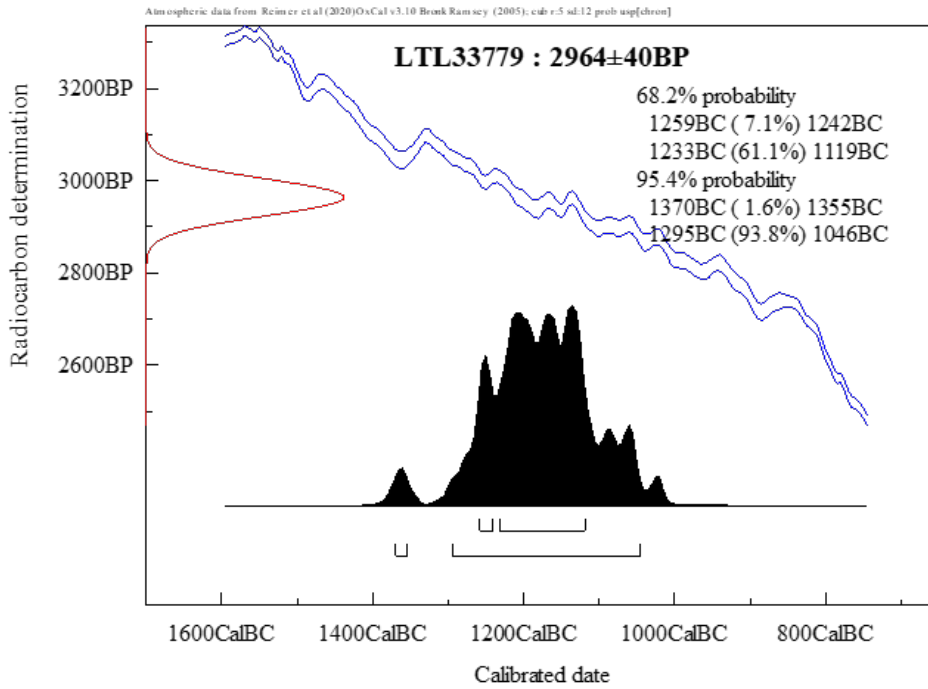


Fig. 12. C14 Dating of the Khalaj I Settlement (2024).

along with a small number of obsidian and flint artefacts. Between 3.8 and 4.2 m, this layer exhibits typological similarities in ceramic forms (Fig. 9(1)) and manufacturing techniques with Early Bronze Age vessels from Nakhchivan, particularly cylindrical-necked jars with wide mouths (Abibullayev, 1982, Table XIX, 1-12; Ashurov, Table XIV, 11, 15). A flat-based fragment

(Fig. 9(2)), containing a straw and sand mixture and of primitive manufacture, distinguishes this layer from the earlier ones. Several red-painted ceramics were also recorded in this layer (Fig. 9(5)). Previously, the red-painted ceramics discovered here were described by researchers as “Khalaj ceramics” due to their uniqueness (Seyidov et al., 2010, p. 59). The discovery of a

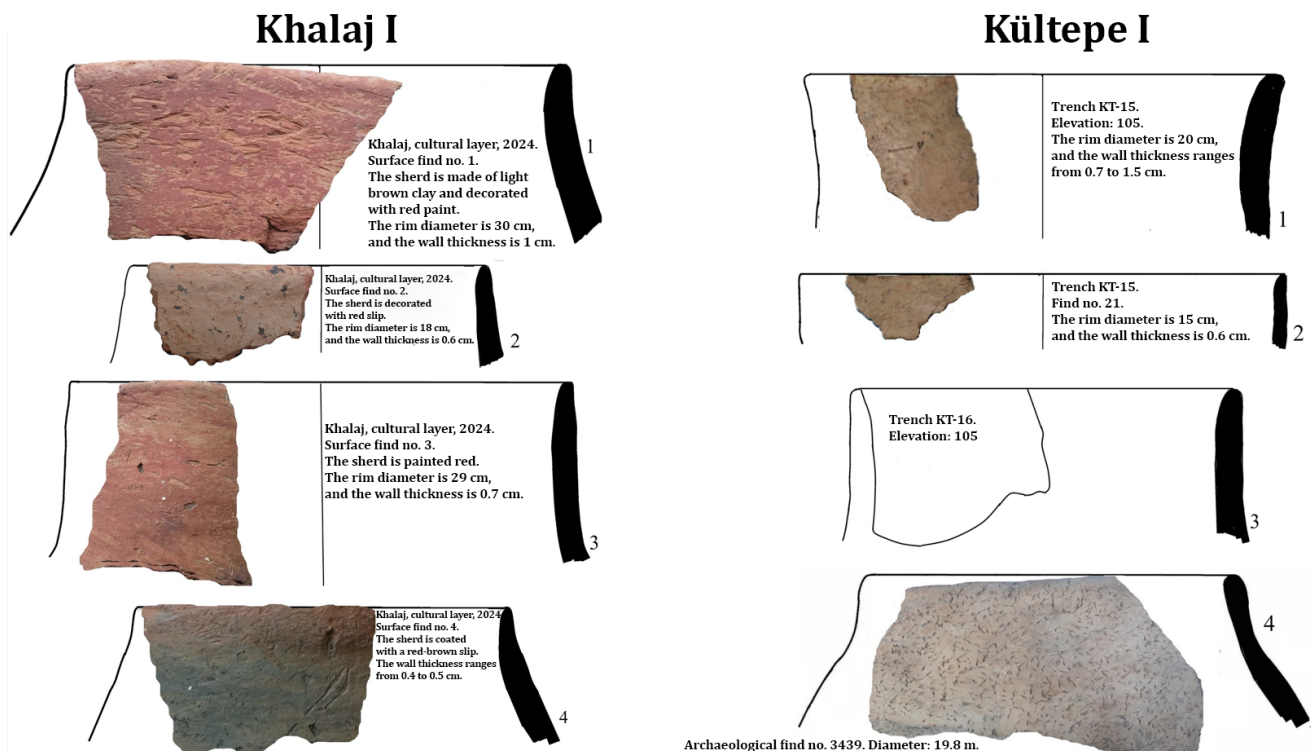


Fig. 13. Surface finds from the Neolithic period (Khalaj I, 2024) showing elements similar to I Kültepe ceramics

straw-tempered ceramic fragment in this layer may indicate signs of Neolithic occupation (Fig. 9(6)), although radiocarbon analyses have not yet confirmed this.

Analysis of charcoal samples taken from a depth of 3.5 m in the trench at Khalaj I shows that this layer dates to the Bronze Age (Fig. 12).

Among the surface materials from Khalaj I, eleven ceramic fragments dating to the Late Neolithic period were recorded. They are mostly red in colour, with occasional brown tones, and feature a red or yellow slip and a greyish layer (Guliyeva, 2024b, p. 92). Some fragments have both surfaces painted bright red, with voids on the surface caused by impressions of straw. The wall thickness averages 1 cm. Other fragments are light brown, and their fired surfaces also display traces of straw. The graphic decorations on the red-painted, straw-tempered fragments are typologically analogous to those on Neolithic vessels from Kültepe I (Fig. 13).

CONCLUSIONS

During the 2024 excavations at the Khalaj I and Khalaj II settlements, rich assemblages of material culture were uncovered. Their study, along with the analysis of charcoal samples collected from both sites, helped clarify the research questions posed at the initial stage of the investigation.

For the first time, the period and character of the newly investigated Khalaj II site were determined. The results indicate that the site was used in two phases. The first phase is represented by a cultural layer that extends from 0.4 m to 1.2–1.7 m below the surface. Comparative analysis of the architectural and hearth remains, along with a substantial quantity of ceramics from this layer, suggests that the site functioned as a settlement during the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. This interpretation is further supported by radiocarbon analyses obtained from the same layer.

The upper 0.4–0.5 m of the site consists solely of graves, and the small number of ceramics from different stages of the Medieval period suggests

that during the second phase, the site had already been used as a cemetery. The table compiled from the processed archaeological materials not only provides an overall picture of the site's character but also serves as a preliminary guide for selecting excavation areas for future research. Expanding future excavations around Area A will also help prevent time loss in determining where to begin.

Research at the Khalaj I settlement clarified the site's stratigraphy. Archaeological excavations allowed for the identification of cultural layers based on artefacts. In a trench excavated to a depth exceeding 4 meters, five layers were identified. Although the top two layers were mixed, Layers III–V confirmed earlier research indicating occupation during the Early Iron, Middle Bronze, and Early Bronze Ages. Notably, new data related to the Iron Age were obtained. The walls, stone cist grave, and numerous ceramic remains uncovered from the 2-meter-thick layer indicate long-term settlement during the Early Iron Age. Radiocarbon analyses confirmed the presence of the Bronze Age layer.

While the Neolithic and Chalcolithic materials from the Khalaj I settlement were obtained from surface finds, no Neolithic layer was discovered during excavations. A similar situation was observed at Khalaj II, where surface surveys yielded ceramics from different periods. However, radiocarbon analyses from the excavated areas date to the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. These results suggest that different parts of the sites were inhabited during distinct phases.

The 2024 research at the Khalaj sites demonstrates that human population at Khalaj I, from the Neolithic through the Early Iron Age, continued at Khalaj II during the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. The rich material culture assemblages obtained from surveys and excavations enable the study of the continuous development of ancient cultures in the Arpachay Valley, from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval period. These new findings are particularly significant for the study of intercultural transitions, a key issue in Azerbaijani archaeology.

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