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NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITHIN THE KHARABA GILAN CITY AREA

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Abstract
Although archaeological excavations have been conducted in the cities of Ganja, Beylagan, Shamakhi, Shabran, Shamkir, and Kharaba-Gilan, the study of medieval cities remains a challenge for Azerbaijani archaeology. In Azerbaijan, two types of cities existed in terms of infrastructure. Cities on the plains were built according to a pre-planned layout, while those in mountainous areas were built to suit the terrain. It would be more logical to refer to the cities located in mountainous areas as fortress cities. The best example of a medieval Azerbaijani city in a mountainous area is the Kharaba-Gilan settlement. Among the city's buildings, the citadel is striking for its inaccessibility, perched on a high mountain with a relatively flat summit. The Shahristan, other city quarters, and public buildings are located on hills that are relatively lower than the citadel. Kharaba-Gilan was the second most developed city in the Nakhchivan region from ancient times until the mid-14th century and fell at the end of the reign of the Hulaku ruler Abu Said (1305–1335). Research into this unique monument will allow us to comprehensively study the urbanisation processes that took place in Azerbaijan from the mid-first millennium BC to the 14th century.

Keywords: *Nakhchivan, Xaraba Gilan, Medieval city site, Mausoleum, Archaeological Artefact*

INTRODUCTION

The city of Kharaba Gilan covers an area of more than 120 hectares in the east of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, within the territory of the Ordubad region, on the left bank of the Gilan River, in a mountainous area. The city of Giran (Kiran) existed until the 1330s and declined during the reign of Abu Said (1316-1335). The newly formed city of Aza became the administrative centre of the region (İbrahimli, 2020, s. 32-33).

It should be noted that, from the time of the collapse of the Ilkhanid state until the creation of the Karakoyunlu state (1410), three new cities were formed on the territory of the Nakhchivan region: in the western part of the Alinja (Karabağlar, to the east of the city of Nakhchivan), and in the very west of the region Aza, 1 km south of the city of Kiran (Ibrahimli, 2024, p. 186).

Until now, the inner fortress (*naringala*), the inner city (*shahristan*), the western section of the eastern defensive wall, a caravanserai, and two memorial complexes have been somewhat preserved within the city. However, the necropolis and settlement of antiquity, the medieval quarters, public buildings (baths, mills, etc.), and the western defensive wall were severely damaged. The ruined state of the mausoleums in the Kharaba Gilan settlement was noted by archaeologists who conducted excavations here: S.V. Ter-Avetisyan (Ter-Avetisyan, 1927, p. 173) and V.M. Sysoev (Sysoev, 1929, p. 207).

Since the end of the 19th century, the city has attracted the attention of travellers, historians, and archaeologists. However, systematic archaeological excavations in Kharaba Gilan were carried out from 1980 to the 1990s by an archaeological expedition assigned by National Leader Heydar Aliyev to the President of the Academy, Hasan Abdullayev. Kardashkhan Aslanov, an experienced archaeologist, was appointed head of the expedition.

During the 11 years of the expedition, archaeological research was conducted in two tombs dating to the 12th and early 13th centuries; in the 13th-14th-century caravanserai complex; in the Halikeshan necropolis, dating to the 12th-10th centuries BC; in the eastern part of the settlement towards the Gilan I River, covering the period from the beginning of the 2nd to the beginning of the 1st millennium BC; and in the necropolises of Plovdag and Mardangels, dating to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages (10th-8th centuries BC), Delma (9th-8th centuries BC), and Muncuglutepe (8th-6th centuries BC). The results of this research were reflected in scientific articles published in journals, as well as in two monographs.

The archaeological expedition to Kharaba Gilan, which resumed operations in 2004, continues to conduct systematic research on the monuments of the medieval city and its environs. In 2015-2016, the expedition excavated two residential buildings in the inner city, establishing that two-storey houses, without exception, were built of stone, that all lower floors were covered with arches, and that the inner city was enclosed by separate protective walls and had a water-supply system laid in tunnels.

The Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of ANAS continued the Kharaba Gilan archaeological expedition at Tomb No. 1 in the Second Memorial Complex of the Kharaba Gilan city site from May 5 to July 3, 2025. The newly established expedition of the Institute of History, Ethnography and Archaeology of the Nakhchivan Department of ANAS conducted archaeological excavations covering an area of 180 m^2 in the inner courtyard and at the entrance to the inner city of the Kharaba Gilan city site from June 2 to July 17.

Within the framework of cultural events arising from Decree No. 3910 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated June 5, 2023, "On Approval of the State Program on the Socio-Economic Development of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for 2023-2027", archaeological research at the Kharaba Gilan city site, as well as the protection, restoration, and conservation of its monuments, has been planned.

New archaeological research at the city site began in 2024 in the Second Memorial Complex and, starting in 2025, will also be undertaken at the entrance gate to the inner city. The main goal of the archaeological research is to comprehensively study the ruins of the city of Gilan and the infrastructure of cities in the mountainous area of Nakhchivan. It should be noted that the site of the ruined city of Gilan is the only ancient and medieval monument in the South Caucasus located in a high mountainous area where no residential buildings were constructed and no economic activities were carried out after its destruction. Therefore, archaeological research at the monument is of great importance for studying the internal structure of ancient and medieval urban buildings and infrastructure, including administrative and commercial centres, religious buildings, streets connecting separate neighbourhoods, artisans' quarters, and social and household buildings such as bazaars, bathhouses, and caravanserais. Although research conducted so far has revealed the locations of the city's defensive walls, inner citadel, inner city, neighbourhoods, caravanserai and adjacent bazaar, water mill, and two memorial complexes, the locations of the city's Juma Mosque, bathhouse, and administrative buildings have not yet been determined.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As we have noted, a key goal of the archaeological research is to comprehensively study the site of the ruined city of Gilan, which has preserved its medieval urban infrastructure to a more or less satisfactory extent. During the archaeological research, stratigraphic excavations were carried out in the city's defence system, residential areas, and public buildings. The topographic plan of the selected excavation area, as well as plans and sections of the excavation area, were prepared. The plan structure of the city and the excavation area was studied through aerial photography and photogrammetry of individual objects. The classification of glazed and unglazed ceramic products obtained during excavations by

cultural layer, together with archaeozoological and paleobotanical analyses of animal bones and plant remains, was used to study and reconstruct urban and economic life.

RESULTS

Archaeological Excavations at the Second Memorial Complex

Two major archaeological sites have been explored at the Kharaba Gilan settlement. One is a caravanserai complex (Aslanov et al., 1997, pp. 410-414), and the other is a cubic mausoleum at a second memorial complex. Among the archaeological finds in the mausoleum's crypts, well-preserved textiles drew attention. İn 1980, in the first memorial complex, in the crypt of mausoleum No.2, unique textile products from the 12th century were discovered (Ibrahimli, Ismayilzadeh, 2009, pp. 77-79)

Among the monuments that allow us to study medieval architecture in all its subtlety, the tombs are considered the pearls of Nakhchivan architecture. It is the tombs that reveal the emergence of an architectural school in Nakhchivan during the Middle Ages, distinguished by its unique characteristics and wielding a vast sphere of influence. These monuments are not only examples of material culture but also the product of the people's profound philosophical thought, their history written in patterns (Ibrahimli, 2023, p. 126).

Renowned Azerbaijani architect Jafar Giyasi notes that tower mausoleums are the finest example of memorialising human memory in monumental form in world architecture. Tower mausoleums are most often found in regions (Azerbaijan, Anatolia, and Khorasan) inhabited by the Oghuz people and represent an architectural phenomenon of the Seljuk period. The upper portion of these two-tiered tombs was cylindrical and prismatic in shape and covered with a double ceiling (Giyasi, 2006, p. 20).

The Nakhchivan architectural school had a strong influence on the architectural style of the surrounding regions. Researcher of the architectural monuments of the Golden Horde, E.D. Zilivinskaya, confirms that the tower mausoleums of the Nakhchivan architectural school influenced the tower mausoleums of the Golden Horde (Zilivinskaya, 2016, p. 53). She divides the memorial monuments into two groups based on their construction method: stone and fired brick, and notes that the stone mausoleums of Nakhchivan are close to Anatolian mausoleums (Zilivinskaya, 2018, p. 55).

Researchers note that the construction of brick mausoleums began in the territory of the Golden Horde with the adoption of Islam in the 14th century. These mausoleums served as family tombs, containing various household and luxury items, demonstrating the presence of pagan remnants in the nomadic community, characteristic of the dual-faith period during the Islamization period (Kharlamov, 2018, p. 193).

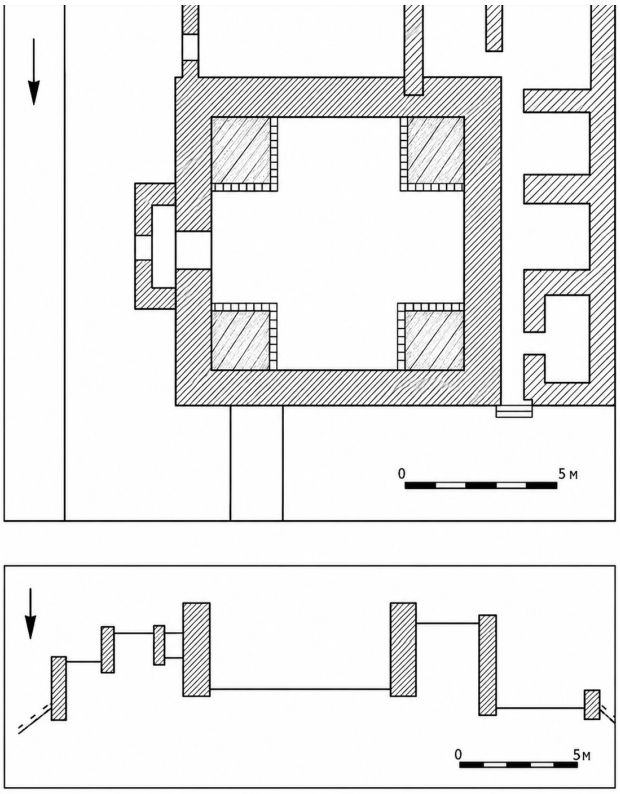

Fig. 1. Plan and cross-section of the crypt of the second memorial complex, tomb number 1.

The Maraga-Nakhchivan school of architecture, recognised as an outstanding national architectural school for the first time in the history of architecture, is the main reason why the names of architects have come down to our time in inscriptions on monuments (Ganbarova, 2011, p. 123). One of the characteristic features of the Nakhchivan architectural school is that complex geometric compositions used in monumental structures of burnt brick were also applied in stone buildings. The most striking example of this is the tomb of Gulistan, dating to the thirteenth century (Salamzade and Mammadzade, 1979, p. 8). But unfortunately, the unique architectural

monuments of the city of Kharaba Gilan belonging to this school, namely its tombs, have been little studied. A complex architectural solution not found in the monuments of the South Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia is the central supporting column in the tombs of the Nakhchivan-Maraga architectural school (Giyasi, 1991, p. 91).

Since 2024, archaeological research has resumed in the city. As a result of archaeological excavations carried out from 2024 through 2025 by the "Kharaba Gilan" archaeological expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of ANAS in domed tomb No. 1 of the second memorial complex in the city, the surroundings, bench, and crypt were studied (Fig. 1).

During archaeological excavations, it was found that the walls of the burnt-brick tomb had been dismantled and moved elsewhere; only the upper part, preserved at a height of 45–50 cm above the column in the southwestern corner of the tomb, remained (Salamzade and Mammadzade, 1979, p. 3).

Based on the remains of this column, it can be concluded that the tomb was built in the style of the Red Dome Tomb (1148) in the city of Maraga. Interestingly, the upper part of the mausoleum was built in the architectural style of the Red Dome Mausoleum in Maraga. In contrast, the tomb itself was built in the architectural style of the Blue Dome Mausoleum in Maraga, as well as the eight-pointed tomb in the First Memorial Complex of the Seljuk period on the site of the city of Kharaba Gilan. It is known that medieval domed tombs were not built according to a single type but in different architectural styles. Thus, in the city of Kharaba Gilan alone, three architectural forms of cube-shaped tombs are known.

Although the ornaments of the cubic and tower tombs are similar, there are certain differences in both the geometric ornaments and the intermediate decorations. In the decor of the cubic tombs, pentagonal and rhombic geometric figures are repeated more frequently (Ibrahimov, 2000, p. 48). Meanwhile, the intermediate, or background, decorations of the tower tombs consist mainly of floral patterns.

The study of memorial monuments in the Kharaba Gilan city area allows us to determine the place and significance of the cubic tombs, which have so far been little studied, in the history of Azerbaijani architecture.

It should be noted that the cruciform crypts of the Nakhchivan architectural school's mausoleums are covered with an arched vault. The lower part of the crypt's interior walls is made of stone, while the upper half is made of square fired bricks with decorative masonry (Architecture of Azerbaijan, 1947, pp. 237-238).

The sides of the cubic tomb in the Second Memorial Complex are 11 m long, and the walls are 1.3 m wide (Fig. 1). The main entrance door of the tomb's crypt, which is 1.3 m wide, is on the southern side. The crypt is made of flat mountain stones in a cross-shaped plan and is covered with burnt bricks forming an arch. When the excavation was carried out to a depth of 0.9–1.0 m, it was discovered that the corners of the tomb had been specially worked with large stones and filled with soil.

The inside of the tomb was cleaned to a depth of 1.8 m. Below it, a destroyed cultural layer 40–60 cm thick was discovered, in which stones, burnt bricks, human bones, fabric remains, fruit pits, and the skeletons of snakes, squirrels, and rabbits were mixed.

In the cultural layer, the remains of a walnut coffin, broken boards, and some items that had been replaced before the destruction were found. Some of the coffins were well preserved but had also been burned. On the south side of the crypt, a coffin partially survived beneath the wall (grave No. 1). The painted parts of the coffin are well preserved beneath the iron connecting the coffin's sides. Apparently, part of the coffin was forcibly torn off during the robbery. Inside the coffin was a human skeleton stretched out on its back, with the arms bent at the elbows and placed over the navel. In some of the cleaned coffins, burials had been carried out under similar conditions.

Burial in the crypt was carried out in wooden coffins with open lids and satin fabric. In the clothing of the deceased placed in the coffins (Fig. 2), along with jewellery, some of it with mattress blankets, the sacrificial part of the thigh of large and small horned animals was found at the sides of some of them, together with various fruits such as apricots, walnuts, and peaches. In total, 24 coffins were found in three of the five examined parts of the crypt, of which coffins No. 1, No. 2, No. 5, No. 8, and No. 19 were better preserved than the rest. Most of the finds came from these coffins.

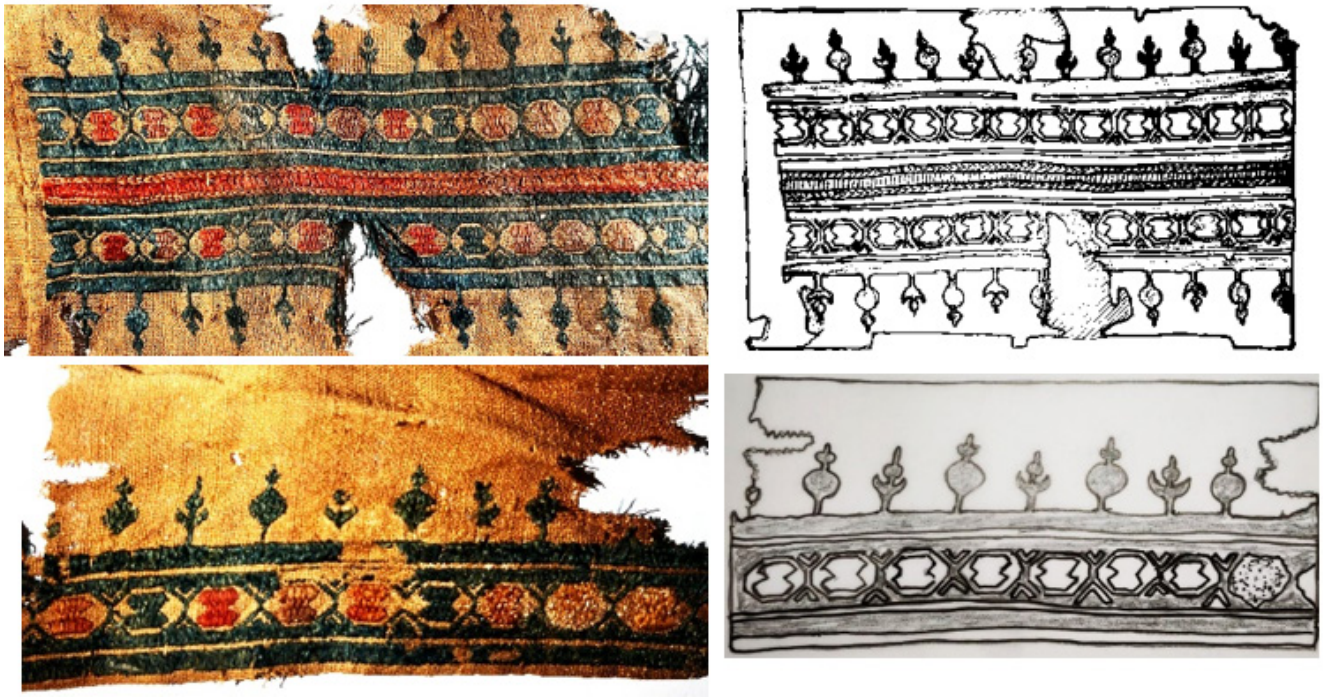

Fig. 2. Fragments of patterned fabric found at the bottom of mausoleum No. 1.

Among the clothes that had retained a more or less recognisable shape, a shirt, trousers, a children's stand, and weaving were found (Fig. 5:1). The trousers bear a stamp. The renowned expert on ancient textiles, Z.V. Dode, notes the presence of seals and stamps on fabrics from the Ilkhanid and Golden Horde periods (Dode, 2022, p. 284). A well-preserved female braid discovered in coffin No. 5 is shown in Fig. 5:2, while the remains of a corner column preserved in the southwestern corner of the tomb are presented in Fig. 5:3.

In general, fabric samples of wool, canvas, cotton, and silk were found. They contain zoomorphic ornaments (horse, bird, lion, dragon, fish, etc.), geometric ornaments (double parallel lines, circles, octagons, etc.), plant ornaments (leaves, flowers, branches of various plants, etc.), and calligraphic ornaments (various types of inscriptions).

Archaeological excavations at the site of residence

The Kharaba Gilan city area (the city of Giran), with its outposts, was the second most important city in the region after Nakhchivan. To protect the cities of the Nakhchivan region, mountain fortresses with powerful defence systems were built around them (Safarli, 2017, p. 140). The remains of the outposts of both Nakhchivan and Giran are still preserved in Kharaba Gilan. A fortress stands, surrounded by cliffs on all sides, situated on a mountain that can only be reached via a steep slope on the northwest side. The inner fortress has fortifications on the west side of the mountain and a double defensive wall. It should be noted that the inner fortress and its surroundings are poorly studied archaeologically.

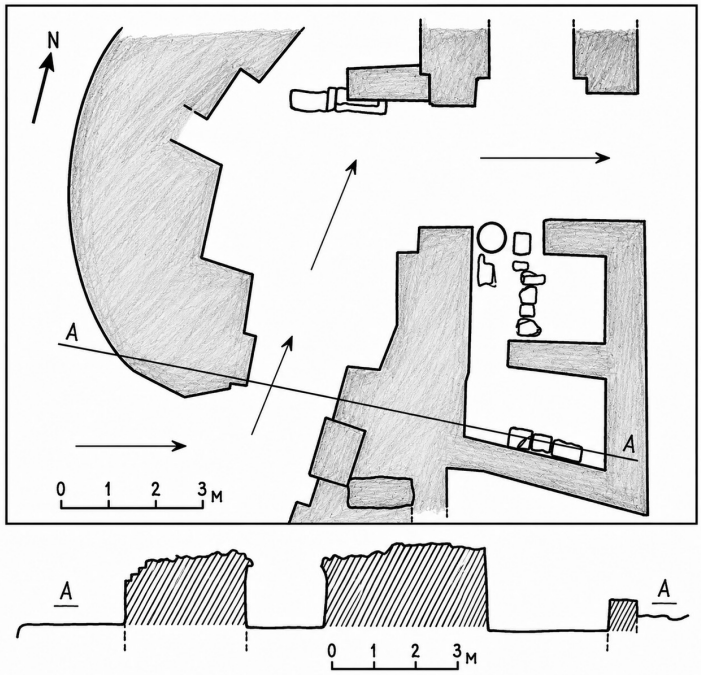

Fig. 3. Plan and cross-section of the Main Entrance Gate Door Complex.

In 2025, as a result of archaeological excavations carried out by the Nakhchivan branch of ANAS between the inner fortress and the inner city, over an area of 180 m^2, the main entrance gates of the city were discovered, leading to both the inner city and the inner fortress (Fig. 3). It should be noted that behind the city's entrance gates, there are also residential quarters, public and religious buildings, a market, an artisans' quarter, a caravanserai, and memorial complexes. Therefore, medieval cities had several gates. The gates were sometimes named after the public building in front of them, sometimes after the direction they faced, and sometimes after their structure. Thus, in Baku, the gates are still called "Shamakhi" (Gosha/Dual Gates) and Salyan Gate, while in Darband, there is the Charshi Gate (Dostiev, 2018, p. 48). Since the names of the main gates in the city of Kharaba Gilan have not survived to this day, we have chosen to refer to them as the Front Entrance Gates because of their purpose and strategic importance. The Ala Qapi is an architectural complex with a rather interesting and intricate layout.

During the construction of the complex, the architects adapted the building's purpose to the relief as much as possible. On the side of the mountain where the inner city is located, the northern defensive wall is conditionally connected here to the southern defensive wall in a depression. Thus, the walls remain parallel for more than 11 m, maintaining a distance of 2.2-4.0 m between them. In this space, the only checkpoint between the inner fortress and the inner city was built: the Front Entrance Gate complex, consisting of buildings for various purposes. The protective walls that make up the core of the complex are not uniform in width, but are relatively narrow in the immediate vicinity of the gates. The width of the wall towards the fortress is 1.5-2.3 m, and the width of the defensive wall towards the city is 2.7-3.7 m.

The western wall of the Main Entrance Gate ("Ala Qapi") is semicircular. Its width is 1.48 m. In general, the defensive walls on the east and west sides of the Main Entrance Gate were not identical; they differed in their recesses and protrusions. The gate has a 0.5 m recess on both sides of the wall. At a distance of 1.29 m north of the wall, another 20 cm recess was left. These indents gradually narrow the wall. Thus, the width of the western wall near the gate was 3.1 m, while on the north side it was 2.8 m. The western wall has a 57 cm recess 5.05 cm north of the gate, and it continues outside the excavation area.

As mentioned above, these indents lead to a gradual narrowing of the defensive walls to the north. Thus, the eastern defensive wall, which is 2.3 m wide at the first gate, narrows to 1.5 m at the second gate. The second gate is 2.78 m wide and lies 8.8 m north of the first gate.

Fig. 4. Decorative baked bricks of the facade decorations of tomb no. 1 (1,2,4) and intermediate decorations (3, 5, 6).

From the second gate eastwards, the second corridor of the Ala Qapi, 4.5 m long, continues towards the inner fortress. At the end of the corridor is the third gate of the complex. Thus, there were three gates in the Main Entrance Gate complex: the first gate at the entrance was 2.16 m wide, the second in the centre was 2.78 m wide, and the third at the exit was 3.07 m wide. In general, there is no standard size for a gate in the defensive wall of a medieval city. Thus, the gates of the cities of Ganja and Beylagan were about 3.7 m wide and slightly less, up to 3.5 m, in height (Ahmadov, 1979, p. 45). As can be seen, the gates

of Giran City (Kharaba Gilan City) were relatively small. The reason is that the gate in Kharaba Gilan is a complex architectural structure with three gates inside, rather than a single gate in the defensive wall.

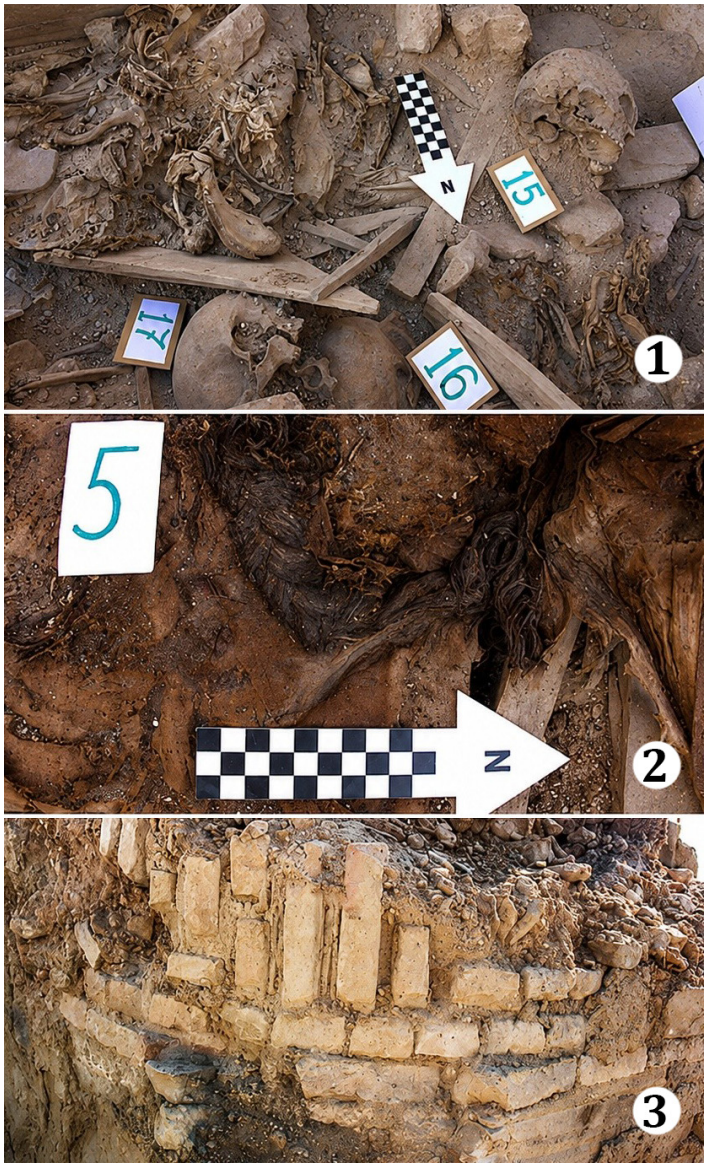

Fig. 5. The crypt of tomb No. 1 (1); western side, a female braid found in coffin No. 5 (2), a corner column with a small part preserved in the southwest corner of the tomb (3).

The recesses in the defensive walls also allowed for the construction of wide rooms between the walls. The corridor from the first gate to the north consists of three parts of varying sizes. The western side of the first part is 1.29 m wide, the eastern side is 2.76 m wide, the southern side facing the gate is 3.3 m wide, and the northern side is almost 4 m wide.

The protrusion on the southern side of the western wall of the Ala Qapi is 32 cm, and on the northern side, 57 cm. The wall on the northern side of the corridor is 4.0 m wide and extends beyond the excavation area. The sides of the protrusion measure 0.55 m on the west and 0.75 m on the east. A wall 1.66 m long and 0.65 m wide was built into the corridor from the north side of the central gate at some point during the restoration. The dimensions of the central wide part of the corridor are 4.04 × 5.05 m.

The northern part of the corridor of the main entrance gate ('Ala-Qapi') complex, extending eastward, was left outside the excavation area. On the southern side of the corridor, there are two rooms inside each other. The dimensions of the first room are 1.85 × 2.90 m, and the dimensions of the second room are 2.4 × 3.51 m (Fig. 3).

The width of the door between the rooms is 0.7 m. The tandoor rooms in the second cultural layer, discovered at the entrance to the first room, indicate that they were built during the Ilkhanid restoration.

One of the interesting and unique buildings in the main entrance gate ('Ala-Qapi') complex is the "serinkesh," with its original plan structure, located on the eastern side of the entrance (Fig. 6:1). The serinkesh is rectangular in plan and has two floors. The dimensions of the lower floor of the building are 75 cm north-south, 80 cm east-west, 66 cm on the door side, and 50 cm in depth. There is a square hole at ground level in the middle, measuring 18 × 20 cm. The second floor is 1.3 m high, and there is a vaulted door on the west side. In the serinkesh, food supplies for soldiers serving at Ala Qapi were stored during the summer.

During the archaeological excavations conducted in the main entrance gate ('Ala-Qapi') complex, unglazed and glazed ceramic products of various shapes, 35 copper coins (Fig. 6:3–6), an inscription engraved with the Arabic alphabet on a mountain stone (Fig. 6:2), previously identified and published by Safarli (2017, p. 2), objects made of copper and iron, an iron shaft, wood fragments belonging to the entrance gate, animal bones, and plant remains were discovered.

CONCLUSION

Archaeological excavations conducted in 2025 at the site of the Kharaba Gilan city area yielded important scientific findings. As a result of archaeological excavations

at the second memorial complex, a tomb was studied in which burials were carried out in accordance with the Buddhist religious rites of the Ilkhanid period (1256–1357).

Signs of Tengrism were clearly visible both in the structure of the tombs and in the burial customs within the coffins. Research shows that Sharia law was not initially fully accepted by society, and the complete victory and spread of Islam in the South Caucasus and Eurasia only became possible in the mid-14th to early 15th centuries (Ibrahimli, 2025, p. 30).

In the cross-shaped tomb, which was very neatly made of stone, baked bricks, and gajla, the burial was carried out in legless walnut-wood coffins, along with clothing and bedding. Although the tomb had been destroyed several times, very well-preserved fabric samples, female hair, beads, the handle of a wooden figure, and various animal bones were discovered in and around the coffins.

During excavations of Tomb No. 1 in the second memorial complex, decorative fired bricks and astral patterns were discovered against a background of geometric designs. The predominant patterns include swastikas, crescents, circles with sun symbols, rays around them, and "Seljuk chain"-type designs with varying numbers of rings. Based on the discovered building ceramics and architectural style, the tomb dates to the 13th century (Ibrahimli et al., 2025, p. 90).

Archaeological excavations at the settlement uncovered and studied the city's main entrance gate. The stratigraphy of the excavation site indicates that the city's main gate was restored several times. Most likely, one such restoration took place during the reign of the Atabeys (1136–1225), who paid close attention to the construction and restoration of mountain fortresses, towers, and castles (Salamzade and Mammadzade, 1979, pp. 151–152). The complex plan of the main entrance gate ('Ala-Qapi') and the multitude of buildings with different purposes once again confirm its importance in the city's defence system.

Fig. 6. Archaeological findings of the Main Entrance Gate Door ('Ala-Qapi") complex (1); Serinkesh (2); Copper coin from the Ilkhanid period (3-4); Byzantine copper coin (5-6).

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