

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH213542-558>

Research paper

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UNDERWATER ARCHEOLOGY IN AZERBAIJAN: CURRENT STATE AND PROSPECTS

Abstract. The article discusses archaeological research conducted within the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea over a period spanning nearly nine decades. Underwater archaeological investigations in the territory of Azerbaijan can be categorized into four chronological phases: 1) 1938-1940, 1946, and 1962; 2) 1968-1987; 3) 2008; and 4) 2022-2024. The primary archaeological investigations of the initial phase were undertaken in 1939 under the direction of Professor E. Pakhomov, in collaboration with archaeologists I. Jafarzade and O. Ismizade. This research focused on the island of Bayil Qasri, also known as Sabail City, situated approximately 300-350 meters southwest of the Baku coastline, as well as on the adjacent seabed. During the second phase (1968-1987), Z. Yampolsky served as a consultant, and diving operations were executed by V. Kvachidze. These efforts led to the identification of over 4,000 material and cultural artifacts, along with the potential localization of submerged settlements. The third phase, conducted by archaeologist I. Aliyev in 2008 on the Absheron Peninsula, approximately 500 meters from a site known as Shahri-Gurgan, documented the underwater remains of a medieval settlement and its associated cemetery. The fourth phase commenced in 2022. Consequent to the decline in the water level of the Kura River during 2022-2023, archaeologist M. Mustafayev undertook the investigation of pitcher burials and domestic artifacts in the villages of Pirabba and Shorkand within the Neftchala region. Subsequently, in August-September 2024, an expedition under the leadership of Professor A. Seyidov conducted archaeological reconnaissance in the deeper areas of the Caspian Sea, off the coast of Zira and Pirallahi on the Absheron Peninsula. This expedition resulted in the discovery of pottery dating from the 12th to the 14th centuries and the remnants of two shipwrecks from the 19th century. Photographs of Gashtasbi and Mahmudabad silver dirhams, housed within the Numismatics Fund of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, have been included in this article. The analysis of these discoveries facilitates the determination of coin denominations prevalent in Azerbaijan during the 14th and 15th centuries and aids in tracing the political and economic history of the period.

Keywords: underwater archeology; Caspian Sea; Gashtasbi; Mahmudabad; Kura; silver dirham

For citation: A.G. Seyidov, A.M. Mammadova, L.M. Rustamova. Underwater archeology in Azerbaijan: current state and prospects. History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus. 2025. Vol. 21. N. 3. P. 542-558. doi.org/10.32653/CH213542-558

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH213542-558>

Исследовательская статья

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ПОДВОДНАЯ АРХЕОЛОГИЯ В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ: СОСТОЯНИЕ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются археологические исследования, проводившиеся в азербайджанском секторе Каспийского моря на протяжении почти десятилетий. Подводные археологические исследования на территории Азербайджана можно разделить на четыре хронологических этапа: 1) 1938–1940, 1946 и 1962 гг.; 2) 1968–1987 гг.; 3) 2008 гг.; и 4) 2022–2024 гг. Основные археологические исследования начального этапа были проведены в 1939 г. под руководством профессора Э. Пахомова в сотрудничестве с археологами И. Джафарзаде и О. Исмизаде. Исследования были сосредоточены на острове Баил-Гасри, также известном как город Сабаил, расположенном примерно в 300–350 м к юго-западу от побережья Баку, а также на прилегающем морском дне. На втором этапе (1968–1987 гг.) консультантом был З. Ямпольский, а водолазные работы проводил В. Квачидзе. В результате этих работ было выявлено более 4000 материальных и культурных артефактов, а также установлена возможная локализация затопленных поселений. Третий этап, проведенный археологом И. Алиевым в 2008 году на Апшеронском полуострове, примерно в 500 метрах от памятника, известного как Шахри-Гурган, позволил задокументировать подводные остатки средневекового поселения и связанного с ним кладбища. Четвертый этап начался в 2022 году. В связи с падением уровня воды в реке Кура в 2022–2023 гг. археолог М. Мустафаев провел исследование кувшинных погребений и предметов быта в селах Пирабба и Шорканд Нефтчалинского района. Впоследствии, в августе–сентябре 2024 г., экспедиция под руководством профессора А. Сеидова провела археологическую разведку в более глубоких районах Каспийского моря, у побережья Зирия и Пираллахи на Апшеронском полуострове. В ходе этой экспедиции были обнаружены керамические изделия XII–XIV веков и остатки двух затонувших кораблей XIX в. В статью включены фотографии серебряных дирхемов Гаштасби и Махмудабада, хранящихся в Нумизматическом фонде Национального музея истории Азербайджана. Анализ этих находок способствует определению номиналов монет, распространенных в Азербайджане в XIV–XV вв., и помогает проследить политическую и экономическую историю этого периода.

Ключевые слова: подводная археология; Каспийское море; Гаштасби; Махмудабад; Кура; серебряный дирхем

Для цитирования: Сеидов А.Г., Мамедова А.М., Рустамова Л.М. Подводная археология в Азербайджане: состояние и перспективы // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2025. Т. 21. № 3. С. 542–558. doi.org/10.32653/CH213542-558

Introduction

Owing to its geographical position, the territory of Azerbaijan has historically served as a bridge between Western Asia and the North Caucasus, as well as Central Asia and Asia Minor. This region has frequently been the site of conflicts among major powers and empires. Consequently, these wars have led to the destruction of settlements, the displacement of populations, and the devastation of agricultural lands. Two major rivers, the Kura and the Aras, traverse the territory of Azerbaijan, while its eastern border is defined by the Caspian Sea. Periodic flooding of these rivers, coupled with the transgression and regression of the Caspian Sea, has led to natural disasters that submerged numerous cities, villages, settlements, and necropolises. The research presented in this article deals with the underwater archaeological investigations. Nearly ninety years have passed since the beginning of underwater archaeological research within the territory of Azerbaijan. These investigations can be categorized into four chronological phases: 1) 1938-1940, 1946, and 1962; 2) 1968-1987; 3) 2008; and 4) studies commencing from 2022-2024.

Main text

The Caspian Sea, the largest inland body of water situated between the South Caucasus and Central Asia, serves as a natural boundary between Europe and Asia. Its economic and strategic significance has long attracted the attention of historians, geographers, and travelers. Spanning approximately 1,200 km in length, with a maximum width of 554 km, the Caspian Sea boasts a coastline extending between 6,500 and 6,700 km, of which over 800 km falls within the Republic of Azerbaijan (Fig. 1).

In the Avesta, the Caspian Sea is referred to as “Vouru-Kashap,” meaning “wide body of water.” Researchers believe that the Caspian, Aral, and Black Seas were once interconnected, forming what was known as the “Sea of Khvalin” [10, pp. 6–7, 26].

The Caspian Sea has been known by approximately 70 different names throughout history. Its oldest known designation, for this unique body of water, is associated with the Kassii people who inhabited the region during the 2nd millennium BC. Researchers have linked the Kaspi (where “-pi” is a plural suffix), who resided in the southwest of the Caspian Sea in the 1st millennium BC, to the earlier Kassii [20, p. 104]. The appellation “Caspian” is derived from the Khazar Khaganate, which existed along its coast and surrounding territories for roughly three centuries, from the latter half of the 7th century to the mid-10th century [17, p. 3].

In the 4th century BC, Alexander the Great commissioned an expedition to investigate the Caspian Sea. Arrian recorded that Alexander (Iskander) “sent Heraclid... with shipbuilders... to Hyrcania, ordering him to cut down the forests in the Hyrcania mountains and build long ships of the Hellenic type, both covered and open. His aim was to ascertain which sea the body of water known as either the ‘Caspian’ or ‘Gyrkan’ was connected to...” [4, p. 57]. However, this objective was not realized during his lifetime but was pursued approximately 40 years after his death. The participants of that expedition concluded that the Caspian Sea was not an inland sea. Nevertheless, Arrian believed this conclusion to be erroneous, asserting that the Caspian Sea is a landlocked body of water, not connected to any ocean [6, pp. 13–14].

Information regarding the Caspian Sea and its resources from figures such as the Greek geographer and historian Strabo (64 BC–24 AD), C. Ptolemy (70–147 AD), the medieval Arab travelers and historians Abu Dulaf, Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179–1229), Hamdullah Qazvini (1280–1349), Abd al-Rashid al-Bakuvi (14th–15th centuries), and the German scientist Adam Olearius (17th century), among others, has been documented in historical sources [5, pp. 14–15, 23, 119, 167, 174, 181].

Underwater archaeological research

The first stage of underwater archaeological research in the Caspian Sea, led by Professor E. Pakhomov and archaeologists I. Jafarzade and O. Ismizade, covers the period of 1938–1940. These investigations were

subsequently continued in 1946 and 1962. Primarily in 1939, archaeological research was concentrated on the island known as “Bayil Qasri” or “Sabail City,” situated approximately 300-350 meters southwest of the Baku coastline, as well as on the adjacent seabed. This island measures 140 meters in length and 35 meters in width and is encircled by a stone wall (1.2-2 meters wide) featuring 3 circular and 12 semicircular towers (Fig. 2; Fig. 5). Discoveries at the site include construction remnants, ceramic vessels, a grainstone, copper coins bearing the name of Shirvanshah Gershasb (1203-1224), and various other artifacts. Over 700 inscribed stones, each measuring 70 cm in length, 25-50 cm in width, and 12-15 cm in thickness, were retrieved from the water (Fig. 3). These stones bear Arabic inscriptions, Quranic verses accompanied by depictions of humans (Fig. 4), birds, and animals, the construction date of the fortress in 1234/35, and the names of different cities, artisans, and Shirvanshahs. Archaeological investigations conducted both underwater and on the island have indicated that the fortress walls were erected in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, during a period of low Caspian Sea water levels. However, in the early 14th century, tectonic shifts (earthquakes) led to the collapse of the castle walls. The island remained submerged for an extended period. By the early 18th century, in 1723, the monument began to re-emerge due to the regression of the sea [2, pp. 129–133]. The incomplete construction work and subsequent abandonment of the island at that time are likely attributable to the transgression (rise in water level) of the Caspian Sea.

In the early 20th century, as a result of the Caspian Sea’s regression, the fortress walls of “Sabail City” (Fig. 6) were exposed once again (photograph taken in 1904). Some scholars suggest that this structure served as a defensive fortification, a customs facility, and a place of worship. It is also believed that a significant temple associated with fire worshipers was situated in the island’s central area [1, pp. 104–105].

The Sabail Fortress is distinctly depicted in the writings and illustrations of Engelbert Kaempfer, a scholar and traveler who visited Baku in 1683 (Fig. 7) [12, pp. 264–267].

Although archaeological research in the coastal areas and seabed of the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea experienced a pause for several years, the second phase commenced in the late 1960s. By Order No. 358 of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR, dated July 24, 1968, and Resolution No. 702 of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, dated August 9, 1968, the responsibility for studying underwater historical and archaeological monuments of the Caspian Sea was assigned to the Azerbaijan History Museum. Upon the recommendation of Z. Yampolsky, the head of the “Submarine Group,” diver V. Kvachidze initiated underwater archaeological investigations. Over a period of 20 years (1968-1987), research was conducted periodically along the Caspian coast and islands, resulting in the discovery of more than 4,000 material and cultural remains (Fig. 8). The primary investigations were conducted at Cape Shuvalan, in the eastern part of the Absheron Peninsula opposite Cape Gurgan, within the Baku Bay and at the Sabail underwater fortification, in the ancient Kura River channel, and at Cape Bandovan in the Salyan region. The research undertaken at Bandovan Cape is considered a significant phase in the history of underwater archaeology [7, pp. 3–5]. Numerous pottery vessels dating from the 9th to the 14th centuries were observed at two locations there. Cultural layers and remnants of furnaces, stone anchors, metal artifacts, and silver and copper coins were discovered both underwater and along the coastline. These urban settlements were provisionally designated as Bandovan-1 and Bandovan-2. The two medieval settlements, situated approximately 20 km apart, were subsequently identified as the submerged cities of Gashtasbi and Mugan. Alongside V. Kvachidze, G. Agayev also participated in the underwater research efforts. These expeditions further involved specialists and amateur divers invited from Leningrad, Moscow, and Rostov. Underwater archaeological research was discontinued due to the socio-political events of 1987 [13, pp. 31–33].

Numismatic material

Medieval sources provide information about the province and city of Gashtasbi, significant trading ports situated on the Caspian Sea coast between the Aras and Kura rivers, as well as the nearby city of Mahmudabad. According to these accounts, the city of Mahmudabad was founded by the Mongol ruler Mahmud Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) following his conversion to Islam. He relocated the population of the province and city of Gashtasbi, which had been destroyed by Hulagu Khan (1256-1265), to this new location [3, pp. 171–176]. Both Gashtasbi and Mahmudabad were important settlements that played a notable role in the medieval history of Azerbaijan. Evidence of this includes the presence of mints in Gashtasbi (14th century) and Mahmudabad

(14th–15th centuries), as well as in Baku, Nakhichevan, Shamakhi, Barda, Ganja, and other major cities in Azerbaijan. Medieval silver coins minted in these cities are preserved in the Numismatic Fund of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (NF NMHA) of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS). The coins from Gashtasbi and Mahmudabad represent numismatic relics that have survived to the present day from these cities, which are now submerged in the Caspian Sea. Among these are dirhams minted in Gashtasbi during the reign of the Ilkhanid ruler Anushirvan (AH 745-757 / AD 1344-1357), the Jalayirid sultans Sheikh Uways (AH 757-776 / AD 1357-1374), Husayn (AH 776-784 / AD 1374-1382), and Ahmad (AH 784-813 / AD 1382-1410), as well as coins minted in Mahmudabad during the rule of the Golden Horde khan Tokhtamysh (AH 788-792 / AD 1386-1389) and the Qara Qoyunlu ruler Qara Yusuf (AH 809-823 / AD 1406-1420). The majority of these coins are documented in the works of numismatic scholars [8; 14; 15; 16; 18].

The silver dirham minted in the city of Gashtasbi in the name of the Ilkhanid ruler Anushirvan (1344-1357) (Fig. 9) bears the title *khan* rather than *sultan*. This coin, weighing 1.04 g and measuring 15 mm, is dated AH 756 / AD 1355 (NF NMHA), inventory no. 6482).

Gashtasbi dirhams were discovered in the 20th century in Russia, specifically at the Selitrennoe settlement in the Astrakhan region, alongside coins of the Golden Horde, Ilkhanids, Jalayirids, and Muzaffarids (288 pieces) [16, p. 75].

In 1382 CE (AH 784), the Jalayirid Sultan Ahmad (Qiyas ad-Din, r. AH 784-813 / CE 1382-1410) initiated a campaign against the city of Tabriz, overthrowing his brother and assuming power. A silver dirham attributed to his reign features the following inscription on the obverse (translated): “The just Sultan | Sultan Ahmad Bahadur | Khan, may God make his reign everlasting.” This coin is preserved in the collection of the Numismatic Fund of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (NF NMHA), inventory no. 24772. It weighs 1.1 grams, has a diameter of 13 mm, and is dated AH 785 (1383 CE). The word signifying “minted” is inscribed above, while “Gashtasbi” appears on the bottom line. The reverse displays a three-line symbol of Islam, surrounded by the names of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Fig. 10).

In 1907, a dirham of Sultan Ahmad minted in Gashtasbi was discovered in the city of Tetyushi in the Republic of Tatarstan. The latest known coin produced at the Gashtasbi mint dates to 1490 [15, pp. 61, 115].

A silver dirham bearing the name of the Mongol Khan Tokhtamysh (Fig. 11) is housed in the NF NMHA, inventory no. 6642. The inscription reads (translated): “The majestic Sultan | Tughtamish Bahadur | Khan may his power endure,” with the mint name Mahmudabad inscribed above. The date, translated as “Minted in the year 792 [1389 CE],” is engraved in the surrounding segments. The coin weighs 1.3 grams and has a diameter of 17 mm.

Numismatic analysis has confirmed the presence of Mahmudabad dirhams from the period of Tokhtamysh Khan in coin hoards discovered in 1851 in the village of Voskresensky, Dnipropetrovsk region, Ukraine [14, p. 74]; in 1902 in the village of Vinnovki, Syzran region, Kuybyshev Oblast [15, pp. 58, 61, 115]; and in 1986 in the village of Karatun, Apastovsky District, Republic of Tatarstan [11, p. 220]. The discovery of Gashtasbi and Mahmudabad silver coins across various locations within the modern Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) corroborates the trade connections of that era.

In a hoard unearthed in 1973 in the village of Amili, Qabala region, dirhams resembling the Jalayirid coinage produced by the Shamakhi, Baku, Ardabil, Derbent, and Mahmudabad mints were minted in the names of Pirbudag Khan (1410-1418) and Shah Yusif Noyan [8, p. 176]. The weight of the silver coins minted in Mahmudabad and held in various collections ranges from 1.82, 1.85, and 1.91 to 5.05 grams.

The third phase of underwater archaeological research was conducted by archaeologist I. Aliyev in 2008. Ceramic samples dating from the 11th to the 13th centuries were collected from a site known as Shahri-Gurgan (Gurgan city) on the Absheron Peninsula, near the lighthouse. The underwater remains of a medieval settlement and a cemetery were discovered approximately 500 meters from the coast. Exploratory work was also undertaken in the Shirvan State Reserve in the Salyan region. Within the ruins of the ancient city of Mugan, fragments of glazed and unglazed pottery dating from the 9th to the 13th centuries were found. The island of Sangi-Mugan was inhabited by Russian-Normans from the 9th to the 11th centuries and by the pirates of Stepan Razin in the 17th century, and numerous naval engagements occurred there. Remains of ship anchors and pottery samples were observed in the southern part of the island [9, pp. 114–117]. This third phase of underwater archaeological research concluded in the same year. The work was suspended in 2008 due to a lack of technical equipment, suitable vessels, and trained divers, despite some advancements being made (Fig. 12).

The fourth phase of underwater archaeological research in Azerbaijan commenced in 2022. The decrease in the water level of the Kura River that year led to the discovery of material and cultural remains in certain coastal zones. Consequently, by the directives of the Director General of the Institute of Archaeology, Ethnography and Anthropology of ANAS, A. G. Seyidov, archaeologist M. Mustafayev undertook the investigation of pitcher graves in the village of Pirabba, Neftchala district, and household utensils found scattered in the riverbed near the village of Shorkand (Fig. 13) during April-May 2022 and March 2023. A jar burial, discovered in the northwestern part of Pirabba village within the Kura River bed, was excavated from the water. Several other jar burials were also found in the vicinity. One of the jars measured approximately 1.8 meters in height. Pottery vessels were discovered inside these jar graves. Analysis of the recovered material and cultural samples indicates that they date to the 1st-2nd centuries AD. These findings suggest the presence of a jar burial necropolis along the Kura River. The “jar burial culture” in the territory of Caucasian Albania spans from the 4th century BC to the 8th century AD.

Considering the significance of the aforementioned discoveries, the “Caspian Archaeology” department was established at the Institute of Archaeology, Ethnography and Anthropology of ANAS to conduct underwater archaeological research in the Caspian Sea and other water bodies. In August-September 2024, under the direction of Professor Dr. A. G. Seyidov, archaeological explorations were undertaken in the vicinity of Zira and Pirallahi, situated in the Khazar district of the Absheron Peninsula, as well as in the medieval city of Shahri-Gurgan [19, pp. 3–12]. These investigations led to the discovery of pottery dating from the 12th to the 14th centuries and the remnants of two shipwrecks from the 19th century in the Caspian Sea (Fig. 14).

Currently, the exhibition titled “Caspian Atlantis: Material Culture of the 9th–19th Centuries” at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan features artifacts (ceramics, metal, stone, bone, etc.) recovered by an underwater archaeological team with the involvement of museum staff during the 1968–1987 period (Fig. 15).

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the considerable positive outcomes resulting from nearly 90 years (albeit with interruptions) of underwater archaeological research in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea, there remains a significant necessity for further investigation of the seabed. The recent regression of the Caspian Sea has exposed construction remnants, material and cultural samples, artifacts related to maritime history, and the remains of submerged vessels in coastal areas. Undoubtedly, numerous undiscovered monuments and cultural artifacts lie on the seabed, awaiting systematic investigation. We believe that, notwithstanding the existing limitations in technical resources (such as ships, divers, diving equipment, and aerial survey capabilities), opportunities should be maximized to continue underwater archaeological research throughout the year.

Given the constraints on conducting archaeological research at any time in the Caspian Sea, collaborations with relevant organizations should be established to facilitate more efficient underwater archaeological investigations utilizing specialized equipment, tools, and devices mounted on their vessels.



Fig. 1. Map of the Caspian region

Рис. 1. Карта Каспийского региона

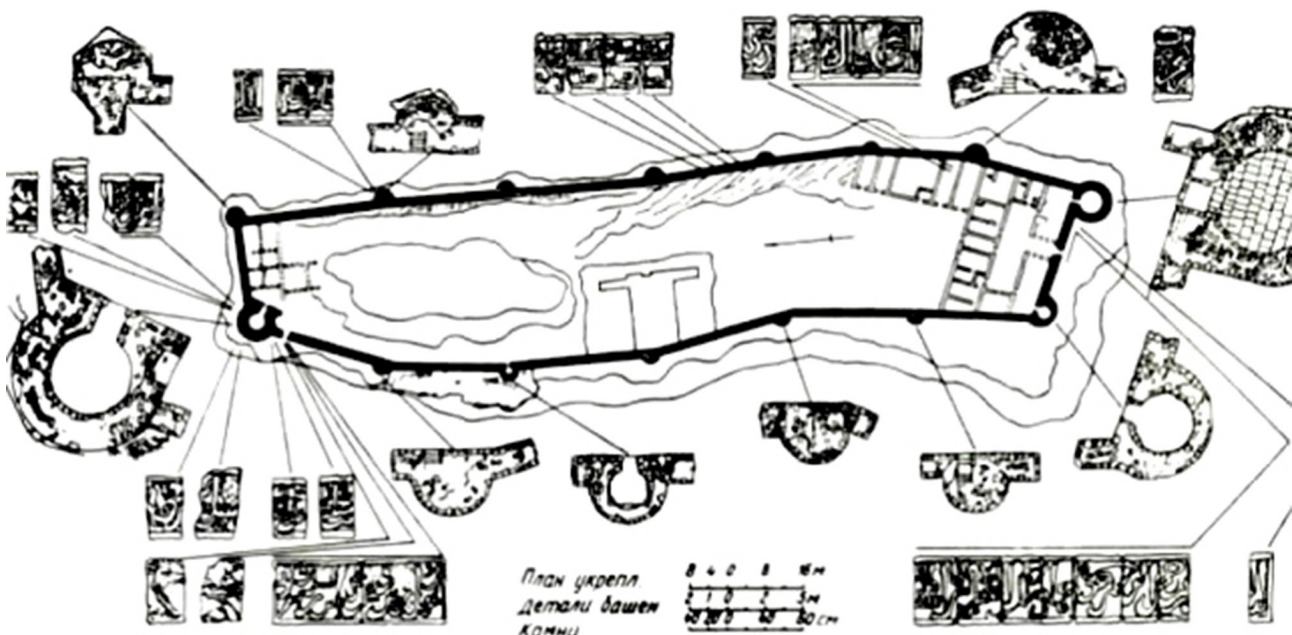


Fig. 2. Plan of Sabail Fortress

Рис. 2. План Сабайльской крепости



Fig. 3. Inscribed stones

Рис. 3. Камни с надписями



Fig. 4. Stone depicting humans

Рис. 4. Камень с изображением людей



Fig. 5. Sabail Island (2020)

Рис. 5. Остров Сабаиль (2020 г.)



Fig. 6. Sabail Island. Qala Fortress (1904)

Рис. 6. Остров Сабаиль. Крепость Кала (1904 г.)

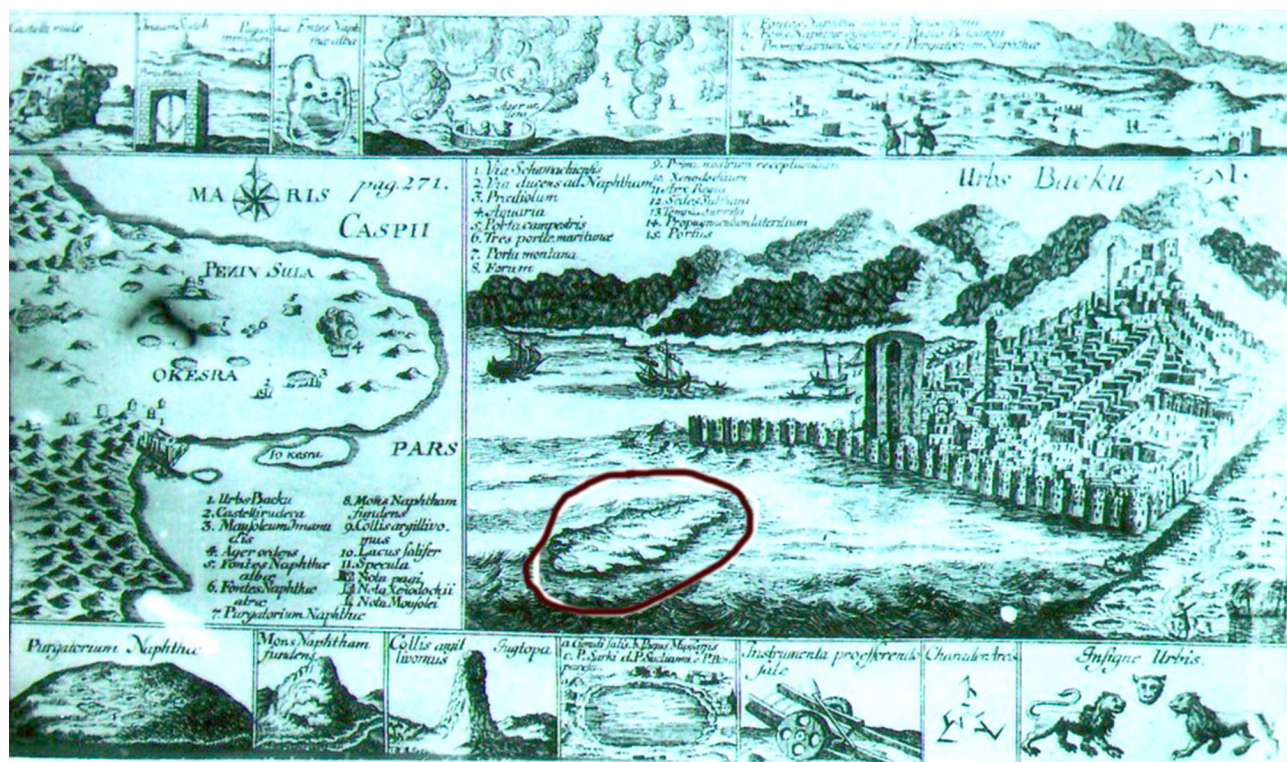


Fig. 7. E. Kaempfer's illustration (1683)

Рис. 7. Иллюстрация Э. Кемпфера (1683 г.)



Fig. 8. Pottery and stone anchor. V. Kvachidze's findings of 11th-14th centuries (1968-1987)

Рис. 8. Керамика и каменный якорь. Находки В. Квачидзе XI–XIV вв. (1968–1987 гг.)



Fig. 9. NF 6482. Silver dirham. Gashtasbi, 14th century. Weight – 1.04 g, diameter – 15 mm (NF NMHA)

Рис. 9. NF 6482. Серебряный дирхем. Гаштасби, XIV в. Вес – 1,04 г, диаметр – 15 мм (NF NMHA)



Fig. 10. NF 24772. Silver dirham. Gashtasbi, late 14th – 15th century. Weight – 1.1 g, diameter – 13 mm (NF NMHA)

Рис. 10. NF 24772. Серебряный дирхем. Гаштасби, конец XIV – XV в. Вес – 1,1 г, диаметр – 13 мм (NF NMHA)



Fig. 11. NF 6642. Silver dirham. Mahmudabad, late 14th century. Weight – 1.3 g, diameter – 17 mm (NF NMHA)

Рис. 11. NF 6642. Серебряный дирхем. Махмудабат, конец XIV века. Вес – 1,3 г, диаметр – 17 мм (NF NMHA)



Fig. 12. Aliyev's findings of 2008

Рис. 12. Находки Алиева 2008 года



Fig. 13. M. Mustafayev's findings of 2022-2023

Рис. 13. Находки М. Мустафаева 2022-2023 годов





Fig. 14. A. Seyidov's investigation of 2024

Рис. 14. Исследование А. Сеидова 2024 года







Fig. 15. Exhibition titled “Caspian Atlantis: Material Culture of the 9th – 19th Centuries” in the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

Рис. 15. Выставка «Каспийская Атлантида: материальная культура IX–XIX веков» в Национальном музее истории Азербайджана

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Received 22.04.2025

Accepted 03.06.2025

Published 15.09.2025

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Поступила в редакцию 22.04.2025 г.

Принята в печать 03.06.2025 г.

Опубликована 15.09.2025 г.