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Scientific report

Armine A. Gabrielyan  
PhD (History), Senior Researcher  
Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of NAS RA, Erevan, Armenia;  
Lecturer of the Department of Culturology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia  
[arminegabriel.iae@gmail.com](mailto:arminegabriel.iae@gmail.com)

Inesa A. Karapetyan  
PhD (History), Senior Researcher  
Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of NAS RA, Erevan, Armenia  
[nanakarap18@gmail.com](mailto:nanakarap18@gmail.com)

Armenuhi A. Petrosyan  
Postgraduate student (Archaeology)  
Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of NAS RA, Erevan, Armenia  
[petrosyanarmenuhi@yandex.ru](mailto:petrosyanarmenuhi@yandex.ru)

## THE AGARAK JAR BURIALS IN ARAGATSOTN: PRELIMINARY REPORT

*Abstract.* The archaeological complex of Agarak is located in the Aragatsotn province of the Republic of Armenia, on the western bank of the Amberd river, on the territory of Agarak and Voskehat villages. During the excavations carried out in 2001-2012 the expedition of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA revealed residential areas and burials, indicating a long occupation of the site – from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Ages. The burials discovered in Agarak belong to Classical Antiquity and differ from each other in funerary rites and burial structures (stone chests, cist, ground and jar burials). In the Hellenistic period, jar burials were common in the region, and already in the first centuries AD they acquired a mass character and have been recorded both on the ancient burial grounds of Armenia (Artashat, Garni, Dvin, Vagharshapat, Avan, Shirakavan, Beniamin, Artsakh Tigranakert, etc.), and neighboring Georgia and Caucasian Albania. The ten jar burials, excavated in Agarak, were mostly placed in a horizontal position with no specific orientation. The deceased was placed in a jug in a flexed position on the right or left side, after breaking the upper part of the vessel. Then the fragments were returned to their place. The grave goods of jar burials give an idea of the life and beliefs of the society of that period. The study of the Agarak jar burials reveals the use of this type of burials from the 6th century BC to the 3rd century AD, and the analysis of the accompanying grave goods indicates that it does not differ in any way from the inventory of other types of burials of the Agarak burial ground. This fact testifies to the uniformity of material culture, differences in funeral rites, while maintaining cultural unity and a similar worldview of the population of the synchronous sites of Armenia.

*Keywords:* Aragatsotn province; Agarak; jar burials; funerary rite; blue glass polyhedron; Charon's obol; Classical period.

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Научный отчет

Габриэлян Арминэ Араратовна  
к.и.н., старший научный сотрудник  
Институт археологии и этнографии НАН, Ереван, Армения;  
преподаватель кафедры культурологии  
Ереванский государственный университет, Ереван, Армения  
[arminegabriel.iae@gmail.com](mailto:arminegabriel.iae@gmail.com)

Карапетян Инеса Ашотовна  
к.и.н., старший научный сотрудник  
Институт археологии и этнографии НАН, Ереван, Армения  
[nanakarap18@gmail.com](mailto:nanakarap18@gmail.com)

Петросян Арменуи Андраниковна  
аспирант  
Институт археологии и этнографии НАН, Ереван, Армения  
[petrosyanarmenuhi@yandex.ru](mailto:petrosyanarmenuhi@yandex.ru)

## КУВШИННЫЕ ПОГРЕБЕНИЯ АГАРАКА В АРАГАЦОТНЕ: ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНОЕ СООБЩЕНИЕ

*Аннотация.* Археологический комплекс Агарак находится в области Арагацотн Республики Армения, на западном берегу р. Амберд, на территории сел Агарак и Воскеат. В ходе раскопок, произведенных в 2001-2012 гг. экспедицией Института археологии и этнографии НАН РА, были выявлены жилые участки и погребения, свидетельствующие о продолжительной жизни на памятнике – с эпохи ранней бронзы до средневековья. Обнаруженные в Агараке и относящиеся к эпохе античности захоронения отличаются друг от друга по погребальным обрядам и конструкциям (каменный ящик, циста, грунтовые и кувшинные погребения). В эллинистический период кувшинные погребения в регионе встречаются часто, а уже в первых вв. н.э. они приобретают массовое явление и зафиксированы как на античных могильниках Армении (Арташат, Гарни, Двин, Вагаршапат, Аван, Ширакаван, Бениамин, Арцахский Тигранакерт и др.), так и соседней Грузии и Кавказской Албании. Раскопанные в Агараке десять кувшинных погребений в основном были установлены в горизонтальном положении и не имели конкретной ориентировки по частям света. Усопшего укладывали в кувшин в скорченном положении на правом или левом боку, предварительно разбив верхнюю часть сосуда. Затем фрагменты возвращали на место. Погребальный инвентарь кувшинных погребений дает представление о быте и верованиях общества того периода. Изучение кувшинных погребений Агарака позволяет выявить использование данного типа захоронений с VI в. до н.э. до III в. н.э., а анализ сопутствующего погребального инвентаря указывает на то, что он ничем не отличается от инвентаря других типов погребений Агаракского могильника. Этот факт свидетельствует о единообразии материальной культуры, различиях в погребальных обрядах при сохранении культурного единства и сходного мировоззрения населения синхронных памятников Армении.

*Ключевые слова:* область Арагацотн; Агарак; кувшинные погребения; синий стеклянный многогранник; обол Харона; античный период

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## Introduction

The archaeological complex of Agarak is located on the western bank of the river Amberd, on the territory of Agarak and Voskehat villages, and occupies an area of approximately 200 ha (tabl. 1, 1, 3, 4). From 2001–2012 an expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the NAS RA, under the direction of Dr. Pavel Avetisyan, conducted excavations that revealed an important multi-period settlement with occupations from the Early Bronze Age through the Late Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

The burials belonging to the post-Urartian and Roman eras were spread across different parts of the highest terrace of the site's northern complex, and on the eastern and southern slopes and foothills. The burials differ in terms of funerary structures and associated burial rites. The excavations revealed 10 jar burials mainly concentrated on the southern slopes of the northern complex (tabl. 1, 2).

## Localization of the jar burials

The first jar burial was excavated in Square K3 (*Burial 1*).<sup>2</sup> It measures 120 cm high, with a body diameter of 70–80 cm, and thickness of 2 cm. The jar was placed in a horizontal position with the base oriented roughly to the north, offset westward by about 40 degrees. It is brownish in color, the base is flat, and the rim is everted. Only the lower part of the vessel was intact. Based on the preservation of the sherds, it is evident that the rim and part of the shoulder were removed in order to place the deceased inside. The person was buried on the right side in the fetal position, facing north. The sediment in the jar contained potsherds, obsidian chips, and a small piece of a bronze bracelet. The burial dates to the 1st century BC – 1st century AD.

The next burial (*Burial 6*) was uncovered in Square O5, next to the jar Burial 12 and the Urartian rock-cut tomb, on the bedrock surface of the slope, where traces of a construction covered with 40 cm thick sediment were discovered. The masonry resembles the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb with in the details of the stonework. A polyhedral glass seal, 2 bead pendants of an earring, a small pot, a bronze ring, a fragment of a twisted object, beads made of glass and glass paste were found in the jar burial. The inventory allows to date the burial to the 2nd–1st centuries BC (tabl. 2, 1, 3; tabl. 3, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6).

*Burial 9* also was excavated in Square O5. A red-burnished and evenly fired two-handled jug (height – 32.5 cm, body width – 34.5 cm, rim diameter – 22 cm, base diameter – 15.5 cm; tabl. 2, 2) made of clay with sand inclusions was used as a funerary vessel. The handles are placed on the widest part of the body. A 7 mm hole was drilled in the bottom (tabl. 2, 2).

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2. Numbering is given according to field diaries.

The burial vessel was placed vertically. Both its external and internal surfaces were partially covered with soot. The jug was empty apart from the skeletal remains of a child. The burial dates to the 1st–3rd centuries AD.

*Tomb 10* of Square O5 was revealed inside a large jar under the western facade of the wall that extended from NE to SW. The jar was placed horizontally, oriented to the south. It was badly damaged by building activity in the medieval era. The jar had been used for domestic purposes and was restored, as evidenced by 6 repair holes drilled on its walls and 2 more on the base. Inside the burial there were various beads made of glass, glass paste, and amber as well as a ring. Based on the objects found inside the jar as well as the features of the jar itself, it is possible to date the burial to the 1st century BC – 1st century AD.

Among all the burials revealed at Agarak, the earliest one is a child *Burial 12*, made in a small vessel, and discovered in Square O5. The burial survived thanks to the medieval wall stretching from the rock in a southern direction and placed above the jar. The burial jar was deposited horizontally and oriented from north to south. The vessel height is 45 cm, the body diameter is 35 cm, and the rim diameter is 23 cm. The skeleton preserved poorly, but the head of the deceased was clearly in the upper part of the vessel. Among the finds discovered in the burial there are 2 pendants, disk-shaped beads made of stone, spherical beads made of glass, a fragment of an indeterminate bronze object, and a stone seal with a broken loop. Considering the worn condition of the seal and the evidence of re-use, as well as the shape of the vessel and fabric and finish of the jar, it can be dated to the 6th century BC [1, p. 152; 2, p. 60].

Another jar burial (*Tomb 15*) uncovered in Square O5 was placed horizontally and oriented north-south. It was badly damaged due to building activity in the Middle Ages. The top of the jar was covered with a large red-polished bowl, most fragments of which were found near the broken rim of the jar. The burial did not contain any skeletal or artifactual materials.

Jar burial (*Tomb 16*) in Square O6 was found in an interesting stratigraphic context. The floor plaster and the pavement of the upper layer damaged the jar, and, as a result, fragments of the neck appeared under the pavement. A slab was placed instead of the foot of the jar, on which the phalanges of a deceased's feet rested. Inside the jar there were a pinhead made of glazed paste, a biconic four-faceted carnelian bead, a corroded iron object, a greenish infant tooth, and a worn-out coin of Alexander the Great (tabl. 3, 4, 12).<sup>3</sup>

The next *Burial 8* (*Tomb 17*), of the same square, was discovered in the corner of the wall and the bedrock, extending from north to south, under the compacted floor at a distance of 20 cm from the jar *Burial 16*. The vessel opening faced the west-facing wall. This jar burial was 190 cm from the surface of the bedrock, and 65–95 cm below the bottom stones of the retaining wall. The vessel was damaged as a result of medieval building activity. The large burial jar was deposited horizontally with the top facing south-west, surrounded by a pile of small stones. The individual was placed on the left side in fetal position. Its head reached the rim of the vessel, facing west. The remains of the individual decayed, and the burial was otherwise empty. Comparative morphological and stratigraphic analysis of the jar *Burial 15* of Square O5, and *Burial 16* and *17* of Square O6 suggest that these burials date to the 1st century BC – 1st century AD [2, p. 60].

The jar *Burial 9* was opened in Square N9, at a depth of 220 cm from the surface of the bedrock. The jar was in a compressed condition and filled with sediment. A bronze snake-shaped bracelet, an earring, a ring, ceramic fragments, and a bone knuckle were found inside

3. We express our gratitude to numismatist Dr. R. Vardanyan for identifying the coin and providing us with photographs.



(tabl. 3, 7-10). An earthen layer of ash containing animal bones was observed near the jar, which may be the remnants of funeral feast.

Finally, the jar *Burial 10* was uncovered in the northern part of Square D11. The red vessel (60 cm high, 50 cm wide, with a base diameter of 18 cm) was placed horizontally, with the mouth facing east (tabl. 2, 4). There was a hole 1 cm in diameter in the center of the flat base. The mouth of the jar was covered with a small bowl, which also had a hole in the center. The jar burial contained no finds, except for a few infant teeth.

### *Grave goods*

Although the inventory of the Agarak burials is not abundant, it is nevertheless notably diverse, and includes pottery, jewelry, seals, a coin, a knuckle bone, and other small artifacts.

*Ceramic assemblage* is represented by burial vessels associated goods such as an intact small pot and different potsherds. The ten burial jars can be classified into 3 types: large jars, mid-size jars, and pots (two-handled or handleless) with heights varying from 32.5 cm to 120 cm. All pots were used for household purposes and all had a hole in the middle of a plain base. The only intact pot found inside the jar burials was a small, red-slipped, well-polished vessel with convex body and everted rim (height – 8 cm, diameter of the widest part – 9.6 cm, rim diameter – 6 cm, base diameter – 4.5 cm).

Although *jewelry* artifacts are few, the small collection dates to the Late Hellenistic period. *Bracelets* are represented by a single copy. It is 5.5 cm wide, round in section, with slightly flattened snake-shaped terminals. The eyes of the snakes are emphasized on the slightly widening and elongated heads. The heads were separated from the smooth body by stripes. Snake-head bracelets first appear in the Armenian Highlands at the beginning of the first millennium and existed until the Middle Ages [3, p. 81]. They became particularly popular in the Hellenistic period. Similar bracelets were found in Artashat, Garni, Dvin, Oshakan, Beniamin, Tsaghkahovit, and other ancient sites [4, pp. 81–82; 5, p. 52; 6, p. 74; 7, pp. 87–88; 8, p. 77; 9, p. 169, Fig. 50].

*Earrings* can be divided into 2 types: circular earrings and pendant earrings. The circular earrings are presented by a single copy. It is a bronze ring that widens slightly at the bottom. Such earrings were widespread in the Hellenistic period and were found in Dvin, Artashat, Garni, Beniamin and other synchronous sites [3, pp. 64–65; 5, p. 52; 10, pp. 81–82; 7, p. 131]. Earrings of this shape are seen also on the coin of king Artavazd II [11, p. 30].

There are four earrings with pendants. Two of those are represented by spherical pendants made of light blue glass paste (probably imitation of turquoise, diameter – 7–8 mm). One of those bears the preserved bronze detail of the hanger attached to the ring. Other two earrings occurred from the post-Urartian jar burial and have bone pendants decorated by grooves [1, p. 153; 12]. The rings made of bronze wire, from which the hangers were attached, were not preserved.

Two *rings* were found in the jar burials. The rings are circular and very thin. One of the rings is made of bronze, the other – of low-grade silver (1.5 in diameter).

The conical paste *pinhead* with a wide hole, about 2 cm in diameter, stands out from the jewelry collection (tabl. 3, 11). It was originally covered with blue glaze, the traces of which can be seen in some places.

Among the items of adornment found from the Agarak jar burials *beads* make up the majority. They differ in a wide variety of shapes, materials, and crafting techniques. Disk-shaped, triangular, spherical, biconical, square, and inlaid beads are made of glass, paste, amber and carnelian.

The carnelian bead is biconic and four-faceted. It is 1.25 cm long, with a hole diameter of about 2mm (tabl. 3, 4). The amber pendant is dark brown. It is well polished, biconic, flat on one side and convex on the another. The longest part is 1.6 cm.

As in other tomb complexes of the Hellenistic period, glass paste beads are the most widespread at Agarak. Glass beads were originally intended to replace precious gemstones made for jewelry, which is why they often mimic stone beads with their colors and shapes.

One of the paste beads found from a jar burial is disk-shaped. It is 9mm long. Probably it bore decorations, as traces of a red paint were preserved around the bead hole.

Barrel-shaped beads from Tomb 6 were also made of blue glass paste (28 pieces, length varying from 7.4 to 9.7 mm) (tabl. 3, 2).

Eight of the paste beads are spherical (one is large, three are mid-sized, and four are small, with diameters ranging from 5.1 to 8.2 mm), and one is cylindrical – 8.8 mm long and 2.4 mm in diameter.

Beads with inserts (44 items) are no less remarkable. These are spherical, slightly compressed in the hole area, which hint at possible silver inserts. The diameter of this kind of beads ranges from 4.8 to 5.5 mm (tabl. 3, 3). It is quite difficult to make such beads. Production was carried out only in developed glass-making centers; it required a high degree of artistic craftsmanship, as the craftsman had to have both deep knowledge of glassmaking, and jewelry [13, p. 27]. Similar beads with silver inserts were also found in Avan [14, p. 11]. A biconic bead made of dark blue glass was discovered together with beads with inserts (7–7.8 mm in diameter). One of the beads is four-faceted, and made of light blue transparent glass. It is 22mm long, width of the facets is 5.5–6.5 mm.

A quite noteworthy bead, the so-called “eye-bead” or a “*nazar*” charm was also found in Agarak. It is 9 mm in diameter and made of dark blue glass. Three drops of yellowish glass are applied on a manner of eyes on its surface, and the pupils are made of dark blue glass. According to the beliefs of Iran, India, and Asia Minor, such eye-beads brought their owners well-being and wealth [15, p. 80]. The presence of such beads in the jar burials suggests an apotropaic function, aimed at “repelling the evil eye”.

Ones of the most interesting finds from the Agarak jar burials can be considered *seals*. The first seal is cylindrical, made of stone, with a broken handle. The seal depicts a man on his knees with open arms under a sun disk. A figure in the praying position wearing a flattened headdress is situated to the left. The preserved traces of the engraving suggest that such an image was depicted on the right side, too. On the lower flat surface, a horse head is depicted, with eyes, hair, and mane emphasized. Above it is an image of a winged disk [1, p. 154]. The seal is in a very worn-out condition. Seals with a similar image are known from Karmir Blur [16, fig. 42], and Ayanis [17, p. 336, fig.16, p. 353, pl. II, 2].

The second seal is a polyhedron made of light blue glass (jar burial 6, 19×12×8 mm). Its lower flat surface depicts a fight between a bear and a horseman (tabl. 3, 1) [18, p. 197]. The upper part of the decorative composition is not well stamped, so the head and a raised hand of the horseman are indistinguishable. Nevertheless, according to the hand position, we can assume that the horseman holds a spear and is ready to fight the bear attacking him,

standing on its paws very close to the horse. The images on the seal are quite schematic and generalized.

The bear-god cult was widespread in pre-Christian Armenia [19, pp. 6–7]. This is evidenced by the seals [15, pp. 74–75; 20, p. 65; 6, p. 52] and bear-shaped ritual pottery dating to the Hellenistic period from Artashat, Armavir, and Areni [21, p. 238, fig. 242, 243]. The bear was the personification of the god Ara in ancient Armenia, and was a bringer of good fortune. It served as a patron in ancient societies, then as a patron of the family and mothers-to-be [19, pp. 31–32].

The polyhedral seals cast from blue glass, which date to 5th–4th centuries BC, are copies of stone polyhedral seals spread across Asia Minor are found at the archaeological complexes of Armenia, Georgia, and in the territory of Caucasian Albania and date to the 2nd – 1st centuries BC [18; 22; 23; 24, pp. 85, 89–90; 25; 26, p. 263]. The polyhedral seals from Agarak belong to the same period.

Due to high demand in the 1st century BC – 1st century AD, these seals were mass-produced. A series of identical polyhedral seals were cast in the same molds, depriving the seal of its main feature – of being personal and unique.

The blue glass polyhedral seals are mostly found in infants' and women's burials, together with several samples of beads. This fact, as well as mythological and symbolic themes depicted on them, confirms that they were used as charms and amulets [18, p. 201].

The polyhedral seal with the bear clearly had the same ritual-magical significance.

The imitation *drachma* of Alexander the Great depicts the head of Heracles on its obverse, and Zeus sitting on the throne. The diameter of the coin is 16.4 mm, weight – 3.35 g (1 g less from its initial weight). A check cut is made on the edge of the drachma (tabl. 3, 12).

About 40 silver coins of Alexander the Great have been found in different regions of Armenia, 85% of which were drachmas. Most of them are fairly worn, weighting about 3.7 g (the initial weight is approx. 4.3 g). These coins were widespread in the Hellenistic world. They continued to be issued after the death of Alexander and remained in use for about two centuries. Since the worn coins are so common, we can assert that they circulated for a long time in Armenia. There are also copies of coins of Alexander the Great, often with a check mark on the edge of coin [27, p. 10]. The coin of Alexander the Great found in Agarak was most likely placed in the mouth of a person who was buried in a jar, since the greenish infant tooth was found in the same jar.

In the ancient Greek world, money (or an obol) was placed in the mouth of the deceased as a reward to Charon for crossing the river Styx [28, pp. 435–438]. This ritual was also widespread in Armenia. Burials with such a ritual are known from Karmir Blur, Artashat, Garni, Tigranakert, Avan [29; 14, p. 13; 10, pp. 28, 30; 7, p. 131; 30, pp 63–64]. A localized version of that ritual was found in Shirak province, in the tomb field of Benjamin and Vardbakh, in which jewelry was put into the mouth of the deceased instead of money [3, p. 131].

A *bone knuckle* (talus of cattle, astragalus bone) was found in the jar burial in Agarak. Bone knuckles appear in archaeological assemblages in Armenia as early as the Bronze Age, and are thought to have been used both as a game piece and a charm [31]. Their usage continued into the Classical period. These bone artifacts were found in the settlements and burial mounds of Garni, Artashat, Benjamin, Arapi, and Karchaghbyur [3, p. 91; 10, p. 58; 8, pp. 18, 20], synchronous sites of Georgia and the Greater Black Sea area [31, p. 170; 32 p. 79; 33, p. 50].

Charms continued to be used into the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the Dvin finds [31, p. 172]. The amulet from Agarak found in the burial complex was an integral part of the burial rite. If we accept that knuckle was an early medium of monetary exchange, which later was replaced by metal coins [34, p. 156], it is possible that it was placed in this tomb instead of “Charon’s obol”, representing another localized version of the Greek ritual.

## Conclusion

In the Armenian Highlands the earliest jar burials were recorded at Areni-1 cave (4200–3900 BC) [35, p. 26]. The burial jars of predynastic Egypt date to same period. This kind of burials appeared in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC, and in the 3rd–2nd millennia BC they became widespread in Asia Minor. After a hiatus, in the 7th century BC jar burials again appeared in Asia Minor [36, pp. 3–4]. In Armenia after Areni-1 cave, jar burials are recorded at the site of Argishtikhinili and date to the Urartian – Early Armenian periods [37, pp. 51, 55. This kind of burial practice became more common in the Hellenistic period, and in the 2nd–1st centuries BC they become widespread, recorded at the burial mounds of the Classical period of Armenia (Artashat, Garni, Dvin, Vagharshapat, Avan, Shirakavan, Beniamin, Tigranakert, etc.) [38; 29; 39, p. 279; 4, p. 148; 14, pp. 11–14; 5, pp. 25–29; 6, pp. 54–60; 10, pp. 31–32; 7, pp. 23–25; 40; 41, pp. 68–69], and neighbouring Georgia [36, p. 11–75; 42; 43 p. 41] and in Caucasian Albania [44; 45; 46].

Ten jar burials excavated at the Agarak site are placed mainly in a horizontal position (except the vertical two-handled pot, Burial 9). The jars have different orientations. The deceased was placed in a vessel after breaking a part of the jar’s shoulder and rim, then the fragments were put back together. The deceased was buried in these jars in a fetal position on the right or left side.

Although some of the jar burials did not contain any accompanying grave goods, the items found in others shed light on everyday life, adornments, and beliefs of the society represented by this assemblage.

In the vicinity of the jar burials opened in Squares O6 and N9 at the burial field of Agarak, remnants of a funerary feast represented by animal bones and broken pottery were recorded as a layer of earth and ash.

Thus, the study of the burial field located on the southern slope of the first northern platform of Agarak in Aragatsotn province allows us to document the use of jar burial practices from the end of the 6th century BC to the 3rd century AD. The study of the materials of the above-mentioned jar burials excavated in Agarak also indicates that these contained the same goods (ceramics, adornments, and coins) as other types of burials of the same burial field did. This fact testifies to the uniformity of material culture: there were differences in funeral rites, but the cultural unity and a similar worldview of the population of synchronized sites of Armenia was maintained.

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Fig. 1. The archaeological site of Agarak. 1, 3 –Location of the site on Google Earth; 2 – The first platform of the northern complex; 4 – the aerial photograph of the site

Рис. 1. Археологический памятник Агарак. 1, 3 – Расположение памятника на Google Earth; 2 – Первая платформа северного комплекса; 4 – аэрофотоснимок памятника





Fig. 2. The vessels and the inventory of the jar burials:  
1, 3 – jar burial No. 6; 2 – jar burial No. 9; 4 – jar burial No. 10 in square D11

Рис. 2. Сосуды и погребальный инвентарь:  
1, 3 – кувшинное погребение № 6; 2 – кувшинное погребение № 9;  
4 – кувшинное погребение № 10, квадрат D11



Fig. 3. The inventory of the Agarak jar burials: 1- a blue glass polyhedron; 2-6 – beads, 7-8 – a snake-shaped bracelet; 9-10 – earrings; 11- a pin head; 12 – a imitation of Alexander's the Great drachma

Рис. 3. Инвентарь кувшинных погребений Агарака: 1 – синий стеклянный многогранник; 2-6 – бусы; 7-8 – браслет со змеевидными концами; 9-10 – серьги; 11 – головка булавки; 12 – подражание драхме Александра Македонского



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