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Research paper

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THE LATE BRONZE – EARLY IRON AGE CERAMICS FROM CHOVDAR NECROPOLIS IN AZERBAIJAN: OVERVIEW AND CHRONOLOGY

Abstract. The present study aims to provide a systematic analysis of the ceramic complex from the Chovdar necropolis in order to determine its chronological position and to clarify its place within the developmental framework of the Khojaly-Gadabay culture of the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age in Azerbaijan. The research is based on the results of archaeological excavations conducted in 2019 in the north-western region of the country, at the site of Chovdar village in the Dashkasan district, situated at an altitude of 1,733 m above sea level. Field investigations were carried out under the direction of Dr. S. Ashurov and Dr. B. Jalilov. During the excavation season, 156 burials were examined, resulting in the recovery of 662 ceramic vessels. Of these, 171 vessels were preserved intact, 69 were partially preserved, and 422 were reconstructed for analytical study. The methodological framework includes typological and morphological classification, comparative analysis with synchronous archaeological assemblages, elements of statistical evaluation, and laboratory-based technological analysis. The results demonstrate that the Chovdar ceramic complex is characterized by considerable morphological and functional diversity and corresponds to the developed stage of the Khojaly-Gadabay culture. The ceramic repertoire comprises storage vessels, cooking pots, jars, bowls, basins, jugs, cups, and churn-like vessels. Comparative and radiocarbon analyses confirm that the necropolis dates to the 13th–8th centuries BCE. Technological features and decorative elements indicate a high level of ceramic production during the late 2nd – early 1st millennium BCE. Overall, the materials from the Chovdar necropolis make a significant contribution to refining the chronology of the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age in Azerbaijan and enhance our understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and technological processes in the South Caucasus during this period.

Keywords: Caucasus; Late Bronze Age; Early Iron Age; Khojaly-Gedabey culture; Chovdar necropolis; ceramics; radiocarbon dating

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Исследовательская статья

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КЕРАМИКА НЕКРОПОЛЯ ЧОВДАР ЭПОХИ ПОЗДНЕЙ БРОНЗЫ – РАННЕГО ЖЕЛЕЗА В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ: ОБЩИЙ ОБЗОР И ХРОНОЛОГИЯ

Аннотация. Целью настоящего исследования является системный анализ керамического комплекса Човдарского некрополя с целью определения его хронологического положения и уточнения места в структуре развития ходжалы-кедабекской культуры эпохи поздней бронзы – раннего железа в Азербайджане. Материальную основу работы составляют результаты археологических раскопок 2019 г., проведённых в северо-западном регионе страны, на территории села Човдар Дашкесенского района, на высоте 1733 м над уровнем моря. Полевые исследования осуществлялись под руководством д-ра С. Ашурова и д-ра Б. Джалилова. В ходе сезона было исследовано 156 погребений и восстановлено 662 керамических сосуда, из которых 171 экземпляр сохранился полностью, 69 – частично, 422 сосуда были реконструированы для аналитического изучения. Методологическая база исследования включает типологическую и морфологическую классификацию, сравнительно-аналитический метод, элементы статистической обработки данных, а также лабораторно-технологический анализ. Основные результаты показывают, что керамический комплекс Човдара характеризуется значительным морфологическим и функциональным разнообразием и соответствует развитому этапу ходжалы-кедабекской культуры. Керамический репертуар представлен тарными сосудами, горшками, банками, мисками, тазами, кувшинами, чашками и маслбойками. Сравнительный и радиоуглеродный анализ подтверждают датировку некрополя XIII–VIII вв. до н. э. Технологические особенности изготовления и элементы декора свидетельствуют о высоком уровне развития гончарного производства в конце II – начале I тыс. до н. э. В целом материалы Човдарского некрополя вносят существенный вклад в уточнение хронологии позднебронзового – раннежелезного периода Азербайджана и способствуют более глубокому пониманию социально-экономических и технологических процессов в Закавказье указанной эпохи.

Ключевые слова: Кавказ; ходжалы-кедабекская культура; поздний бронзовый век; ранний железный век; некрополь Човдар; керамика; радиоуглеродное датирование

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Introduction

The Khojaly-Gedabey culture represents the most widespread cultural phenomenon in Azerbaijan during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. This culture has been studied in three chronological phases and grouped into three regional variants. The archaeological sites of the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age in the western regions of Azerbaijan belong to the Gedabey group of the Khojaly-Gedabey culture. From its earliest historical stage, this cultural complex began to spread throughout the region. The Late Bronze – Early Iron Age in western Azerbaijan has primarily been investigated through burial monuments, which have yielded important results. The comprehensive study of these funerary sites has been particularly valuable for reconstructing the settlement landscape of the period and addressing a range of research questions. Among these sites, the necropolis of Zeyemchay, Tovuzchay, and Chovdar have been the focus of intensive investigations in recent years, allowing scholars to reconstruct a detailed picture of the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age in Western Azerbaijan.

The Chovdar Necropolis

The Chovdar necropolis, investigated since 2019, is situated in Western Azerbaijan, nearby the village of Chovdar, Dashkesan district, Azerbaijan Republic (40°33'49.4N, 46°16'18.3E) and consists mainly of rectangular stone-box tombs covered with large, flat stone slabs [3]. The gaps between these slabs were filled with smaller stones. In all undisturbed burial chambers, the entrance door is clearly visible. After the side and upper stones of the chamber were placed and the burial was completed, the entrance was sealed with a stone slab, reinforced on the exterior with a layer of smaller stones. In some cases, a thin layer of soil was deposited beneath the entrance stone [14]. The entrance slab, often higher than the side or even the top stones, stands out architecturally. In several cases, the protruding ends of entrance stones visible on the ground surface suggest that the tombs were looted in antiquity (Fig 1) [1, 2, 3].

Although the tomb chambers exhibit structural uniformity, their dimensions vary. Among the 156 graves excavated in 2019 near the mountain slope, the largest chamber (grave No. 18) measured 345 cm in length, while the smallest (grave No. 95) measured 110 cm [3, p. 94, p. 378].

Orientation of the Graves

The graves at Chovdar do not conform to a single orientation principle. A total of 79 graves are aligned north-south, 65 – east-west, 43 – northeast-southwest, and 27 – northwest-southeast. Initially, the diversity of orientations suggested a lack of planning in the placement of the graves. However, the consistent relationship between each orientation and its corresponding entrance direction indicates a deliberate ritual system rooted in a shared belief. Specifically, the north-south-oriented graves have entrances facing south; the east-west-oriented graves face west; the northwest–southeast ones face southeast; and the northeast–southwest graves face southwest.

In our view, these variations are connected to the position of the sun at different times of the year – namely, sunrise and sunset during seasonal transitions. Graves belonging to the same group and aligned in the same direction likely represent family burials. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the spatial organization of the necropolis – possibly corresponding to a settlement area – was not disrupted during the burial process.

For example, graves Nos. 56, 57, and 58 – constructed side by side and oriented north-south – contained the remains of three children aged between six and twelve. Similarly, graves Nos. 62 and 63, oriented northeast-southwest, contained a child and an adult woman, respectively. Graves Nos. 116–119, aligned north-south, contained two children, an adult man, and an adult woman. It is possible that these individuals were members of the same family and may have perished simultaneously, perhaps as a result of a catastrophic event.

The reverence for the sun evident in these burial orientations reflects a deeply rooted religious belief that can be traced back to the Early Bronze Age [8, p. 28; 18, p. 96; 19, p. 175]. A similar pattern is observed at the Tavatapa site, which encompasses all stages of the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age [25, p.70]. Serving both as a sanctuary and a burial area, the entrance of this monument is oriented toward the sunrise. This interpretation

aligns with the observations of Skinder, who conducted excavations at Chovdar in the early twentieth century. He noted that the deceased were interred according to the direction of the sun's rise and set, with grave goods placed around them so that they would "accompany the dead from sunrise to sunset" [32].

Likewise, Iranian archaeologists have interpreted similar burial orientations as expressions of solar worship, linking the direction of burials to the time of day when interment occurred [20, p. 112; 26, p. 109]. The organization of graves in clusters without disturbing adjacent burials further supports the notion that each group belonged to a close-knit social or familial community [4, p. 310].

Burial Customs and Grave Goods

Most of the graves excavated at the Chovdar necropolis contain single burials, although graves Nos. 23, 25, and 153 include multiple interments. However, radiocarbon analyses have confirmed that the secondary burial in Grave No. 23 was conducted approximately two centuries later than the others. According to anthropologist V. Gasanov, individuals were buried in a flexed position, resting on either the right or left shoulder, with hands directed toward the face and legs bent at the knees – either partially or fully. Similar burial practices have been documented at other regional sites such as Tovuzchay, Zeyemchay, Gedebe, Dashkesen, and Muncuqlutepe, suggesting a shared funerary ideology across the region during the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age [9, 20, 22, 26, 29].

In several cases, only partial skeletal remains were found, indicating that some tombs had been plundered. Grave goods – placed around the bodies – include decorative and utilitarian objects. The material culture of the Khojaly-Gedebe culture is represented by artifacts made of ceramic, metal (bronze and iron), bone, and stone (obsidian, flint, agate, and cowrie shells).

Material and methods

During the field survey, several graves were identified with partially visible upper stones. These graves were prioritized for inclusion in the excavation program due to their accessibility. The upper surfaces of the stones were first cleaned, photographed, and documented. In cases where the removal of the cover stone was possible, the slab was carefully lifted, and the burial chamber was cleared of soil and debris. Measuring instruments were placed inside accessible chambers, followed by detailed photography. A plan of each grave was drawn, and a descriptive record was prepared. All discovered materials were numbered, catalogued, and collected for further study.

Thousands of artifacts uncovered from the Chovdar necropolis were transferred to the Scientific Exhibition Department of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS), where they are currently preserved and curated. Human remains, ceramic artifacts, metal objects, and beads obtained from the necropolis were analyzed and studied using various analytical methods in laboratories in Turkey, Italy, Japan, and France.

The author of this paper personally participated in the Chovdar excavations, contributing to the documentation and analysis of the archaeological materials. All graphic drawings of the ceramic artifacts presented in this study were prepared by the author based on the original excavation materials.

Results

Various types and forms of ceramic vessels were discovered among the burial monuments. These include jars, bowls, pots, pitchers, mugs, jugs, cups, as well as vessels of the churn and basin types [13, p.736]. According to their manufacturing technology, the ceramics are divided into two groups: hand-made and wheel-made vessels. Among the hand-made vessels, bowls and cauldron-type pots are predominant. Most of these vessels were used for everyday domestic purposes.

The thickness of the ceramic walls ranges from 0.4 cm to 1.1 cm. Hand-made vessels are generally thicker-walled, while wheel-made examples have thinner walls. The thin-walled vessels are more delicately crafted and often decorated with incised or polished patterns. Their surfaces were burnished to a shine, and the motifs – engraved using the burnishing technique – display a variety of ornamental designs [15, p. 27]. Such vessels were not intended for daily use but likely served as household ornaments or grave offerings. The thin-walled examples demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship, as producing them requires considerable technical skill. The thick-walled vessels, by contrast, were utilitarian in nature, many showing soot marks on their bases, indicating frequent use for cooking. Hand-made thick-walled ceramics were coarsely fashioned, with the clay tempered with gravel or small stones, whereas thin-walled examples contain fewer micro-inclusions [13, p. 737].

In terms of color, the vessels vary widely – black, gray, reddish, and brown – with brown and light-black hues being the most common. A noticeable change in color is observed in ceramics recovered from tombs located along the slope toward the mountain base, where reddish and light-brown vessels increase in number. This variation is likely related to differences in manufacturing technology, clay preparation, or firing temperature, and may reflect developments in pottery production techniques over the centuries. Ongoing laboratory analyses of ceramic samples from Chovdar, currently being conducted in several laboratories in Turkey, are expected to clarify the technological reasons behind these distinctions.

Alongside plain pottery, the Chovdar necropolis yielded a significant number of finely decorated vessels. The ceramic assemblage exhibits geometric, floral, and zoomorphic motifs, as well as swastikas, crosses, goats, and meander patterns. These decorations were executed using various techniques, including burnishing, incision, carving, modeling, and scratching [15, p. 28]. On hand-made vessels, the ornamentation was mostly achieved through incision and carving. Similar coarse, poorly fired, and deeply incised pottery has been identified in the Bayan tombs, located near the Chovdar necropolis [4, p. 233]. Hand-made vessels also dominate at the Khachbulag site, dated to the 13th–12th centuries BCE [22].

In her typological study of the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age ceramics, M. Huseynova likewise identifies hand-made, coarse-textured pottery with surface decorations [12]. Some vessels from the Chovdar necropolis display multiple symbols at once (fig. 4, 1), possibly representing the artisan's interpretation of specific themes, events, or beliefs. Similar decorated ceramics are widespread at sites in the Ganjachay region [12].

The forms and decorative motifs of the Chovdar ceramics remain consistent across the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age burials [11, p. 41, 43, 46, 48], suggesting the existence of centralized production traditions and possibly unified workshops [2].

Most of the polished and patterned vessels from the necropolis were wheel-made, with geometric and astral motifs predominantly applied by burnishing. Such patterns are found on jars, cups, jugs, basins, as well as certain bowls and plates. Serpent and ram figures, created through modeling, appear on jar and cup-shaped vessels. In the 2019 excavation season, 14 zoomorphic-patterned vessels were recovered from 12 tombs, with modeled decorative motifs being the most frequent.

Many of the vessels from the necropolis exhibit small perforations, measuring 1.0–3.5 cm in diameter, typically located on the body or base; this feature is especially common among jar and cup-shaped vessels.

No uniform rule was observed for the placement of ceramic vessels within the burial chambers. The vessels were generally arranged around the skeleton, most often on the side opposite the chamber entrance. In some tombs, vessels were found placed upside down—a practice believed to be intentional rather than accidental, as similar arrangements have been observed in other sites across the region [4]. The Chovdar ceramics demonstrate remarkable diversity of form and function.

Large pots (storage vessels). Among the vessels, pots are the most numerous, typically characterized by round bodies and short necks. Many pots lack a neck entirely, with the rim expanding directly into the body. The rims of such jars often feature incised, carved, or burnished decorations.

Some pots (*küp*) have necks up to 4 cm long and are frequently handleless. Others possess mushroom-shaped, looped, single, double, or – more rarely – triple handles, attached either to the rim or the body. Mushroom-shaped handles are the most common type. In several cases, vessels with three handles arranged in a circular pattern on the body or rim were identified. Thin-walled, fully decorated vessels were most likely intended as funerary offerings (fig. 2, 1–7).

The small pots (*küpe*) resemble larger pots in form but differ in size. They have a smaller capacity and are generally more compact (tab. I, 8–12). Such jars and small vessels have been found in various sites, including

Tovuzchay [29, p. 241–316], Zeyemchay [26, p. 255, 269, 286, 319, 326, 330, 366, 375, 391], the 5th burial mound of Khocalı [12, p. 97, 99, 101], Khanlarda [12, p. 112; 11 p. 14, 54], Xachbulag [22, p.119], Quschuda [12, p. 118], Gedabekh [17, p. 68–69,27], İlanlıtepe [9, p. 97], Zeylik stone boxes [10], and other analogous sites from the same period.

Bowls. Among the pottery from the Chovdar necropolis, bowls constitute the second largest group in terms of quantity. These bowls are primarily hand-formed and vary in shape, including round-bodied, triangular, protruding-edge, ewer-like, and pitcher-like forms. Even within a single group, there are variations, particularly in terms of size, rim shape, and base form. Regardless of their body shape, the bowls either lack a rim or have the rim turned outward (wide and thin) (fig. 3, 1–16).

Incised patterns are most commonly observed on the bowls from the Chovdar necropolis. Additionally, the bowls often feature burnished decorations extending from the base toward the body, with motifs symbolizing a cross or the sun. In the Khocalı-Gedabey cultures, bowls were among the primary utilitarian and accessible household items. This is evident not only in the numerical dominance of bowls at Chovdar but also in other sites associated with the same culture. These bowls are found not only in burial sites but also in settlements. For example, recent studies on the Tava Tepe settlement in the Ağstafa region of western Azerbaijan, which is considered a sanctuary, show that representatives of the Khocalı-Gadabay culture performed rituals in a circular space of a building, placing hundreds of ceramic vessels, including pots, basins, and bowls, in the area [21]. Bowls of all sizes are represented, with some containing food residues. It is noteworthy that a portion of the recovered vessels does not correspond to local production. This circumstance suggests, rather than large-scale trade activity, that visitors brought with them ordinary, inexpensive, and widely available ceramic vessels from their home regions for everyday use.

The bowls found at Tava Tepe are primarily standardized in form and vary in size. Each of them is burnished and framed with incised or deeply incised patterns. However, the bowls from the Chovdar necropolis are sharply differentiated from each other in terms of their shape, ceramic color, and decorative motifs. If we consider that the bowls taken from cists are burial offerings, it suggests a high level of reverence and belief in the afterlife. The bowls and other vessels placed around the deceased were likely specially selected, perhaps as expensive items acquired by the family, to be placed in the tomb.

Interestingly, the bowls from the Chovdar necropolis are, in terms of form, size, and decoration, scaled-down versions of other vessels found in the same necropolis. These similar vessels likely originated from a single artisan's workshop. The analogues of the bowls from the Chovdar necropolis can be found at various sites, including Zeyemchay [26, p. 244], Xanlar [12, p. 98, 112–114], the Gencechay Valley [12, p. 99–102; 17, p. 77; 32, p. 140], Kilikdagh [12, p. 103, 110], Qarabulaq burial mound [12, p. 106], the 2nd burial mound at Boyuk Xanlar [12, p. 108–109; 11, p. 14, 23, 28], Gedabekh [22, p. 121], and Goygol [9, p. 100].

Large bowls or basins. Other vessels found in the cists at the Chovdar necropolis are *khayeras* (large bowls or basins). These *khayeras* were found in 40 out of 156 graves. The preservation of these vessels is generally poor, with almost 90% of them recovered in fragmentary form. The colors of the *khayeras* are uniform, mainly ranging from light black to brown and reddish-brown. These vessels can be categorized based on their shape, size, intended use, and the presence or absence of handles. What is particularly interesting is that, although the shapes of the *khayeras* are similar, their decorative patterns do not repeat. The *khayeras* were used for various domestic purposes, including the storage of dairy products. It is likely that liquid items were kept in *khayeras* with inwardly turned rims, as these vessels have thick walls (fig. 3, 17–22) [13].

Overall, *khayeras* (big and deep bowls) hold significant importance among the pottery of the Khocalı-Gadabey culture [13, p. 740]. They are most commonly found in burial chambers, while they appear in fewer numbers in settlements from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. For example, only a small number of *khayeras* have been found in the Tava Tepe settlement, where approximately 1000 pottery items have been accounted for. Particularly, in the burial sites of the Gedebe group from the 2nd–1st millennium BCE [30, p.19], various types of *khayeras* have been discovered. The *khayeras* found in the Chovdar necropolis are indicative of the pottery used by the Khocalı-Gadabey communities over a period of 300 years [13].

Similar *khayeras* have been found at several other sites, including Zeyemchay [26, 27, 28] Tovuzchay necropolises [29, p. 241–316], Qazaxbeyli [24], Qushchu, Mingachevir [4; 12], Sarıtepe site [33], Xanlar [11, p. 14, 23], and the stone boxes excavated by Davud Sharifov at Chovdar [34].

The necropolis also contains about ten miniature vessels. These miniatures are scaled-down versions of larger vessels and include types such as jars, small jars, bowls, and pitchers. Similar miniature vessels have

been found at Zəyəmchay [26, p. 268, 285] and at sites in the Seyfeli village of Shamxor [17, p. 60, 68].

Churns. Four churns (*nehre*) (fig. 4, 1–4) were discovered at the Chovdar necropolis. These vessels were predominantly found in female graves. All four *churns* share the same form, with a handle placed vertically along the body near the upper section, and a protruding hole beside the handle. The *churns* found in Grave 50 is decorated with geometric patterns that cover the entire surface, created using a burnishing technique (tab 4). This type of decoration is characteristic of *churns* from the Khocalı-Gadabay culture. Similar *churns* have been found at other sites, including Zeyemchay [26, p. 249, 262, 268, 270, 325, 358], the Agdam region [5, p. 91], and the İlanlıtepe burial mound [9, p. 97].

Jars. The finely decorated vessels from the necropolis also include *kuzes* (jars) (fig. 4, 5–12). *Kuzes* are divided into two main groups based on their shape. The first group consists of *kuzes* with long, thin necks, while the second group includes those with short, wide necks. Some of these vessels feature raised patterns on the necks, created by rotating the clay during the shaping process. A few *kuzes* have paired holes on the neck, indicating that they were designed to be suspended. Most of the *kuzes* with burnished decorations feature stamped patterns. These patterns can also be observed on a small number of the *kups* found in the necropolis. Similar *kuzes* have been discovered at Tovuzchay [29, p. 241–316], Zeyemchay [26, p. 272, 285], Gencechay [12, p. 101], Xanlar [12, p. 107], and the Seyfeli village site [17, p. 58].

Jugs. The jugs (*bardag*) found at the Chovdar necropolis vary in size and are primarily decorated with burnished patterns (fig. 5). These vessels typically have short, wide necks, and each features a loop-shaped handle that extends from the rim and curves down to the body. Some *jugs* have twisted patterns on their handles. The bodies of the vessels are generally spherical or wide in shape. Jugs were primarily used for holding liquid products. Analogues of these vessels have been found at Tovuzchay [29, p. 241–316], Zeyemchay [26, p. 249, 253, 259, 265, 348, 357–358], Axmaxı mounds, and at Qushchu and Xanlar mounds [12, p. 106, 118–119].

Mugs. The mugs (*dolchas*) at the Çovdar necropolis are mostly standardized in shape, but their details vary. In one case, the rim of the vessel is turned outward, while the loop-like handles are placed at the rim, extending either to the middle or lower part of the body (fig. 6, 1–10). The bodies of the cups decorated with burnishing techniques feature raised patterns that curve outward, forming evenly spaced ornamental motifs. Two mugs resembling cups, but with wider bodies and shorter handles, were found at the necropolis (graves No. 34 and 155) (fig. 6, 9, 10). Identical vessels have also been found at Zeyemchay and Xanlar mounds [11, p. 14]. Both the cups and mugs were primarily hand-crafted.

Pitchers. Other types of vessels found in the necropolis in small quantities are narrow tall pitchers or *dopuls* (fig. 6, 11, 12). Two examples were discovered in 2019. These jugs are almost entirely hand-crafted and are colored in light brown (orange) and dark brown hues. The brown-colored *dopuls* are poorly fired, while the dark brown ones are burnished and have incised and burnished patterns on their necks. These jugs have loop-shaped handles that connect the rim to the neck. Identical *dopuls* were also found during excavations at Chovdar in 2021 and at the Tovuzchay necropolis [29, p. 241–316].

Pots. Another type of vessel occurring with higher frequency is the pot (cauldron). The rim of each pot opens outward, and in some cases, the rim is turned outward (fig. 7). They have very short necks and seem to consist primarily of the body. Compared to *küp* (large pots), these pots are of medium size. These vessels are poorly fired, with only a small portion of them burnished and decorated. The decoration consists of geometric patterns created by burnishing and incision techniques. Some pots have suspension holes near the rim [24]. The handles of the pots are identical to those of the jugs. The pot found in Grave 94, taken from a cist, is similar to the hundreds of pots discovered at the Tava Tepe site. Similar to our discussion of bowls, the same observations can be made for pots, supported by the variety of pots discovered at Chovdar. Analogous pots have been found at Tovuzchay [29, p. 243, 249, 262, 264, 267–269, 278, 280, 289, 312], Zeyemchay [26, p. 242, 246, 316], and at the Seyfeli village site [17, p. 58].

The necropolis also yielded vessels that do not have analogies in other burial sites. One example is the jar-like vessel found in grave 71 (fig. 6, 13). The base of this vessel is circular, with the rim folded outward and a circular indentation on the upper part of the body. At first glance, the vessel resembles a jar. The bowl discovered in the same grave is also of a “pot-type”, differing from other bowls. Another unique find is the trapezoidal vessel found in the stone box of grave 63, which we have referred to as a *cam* (pots). It has a base

that is perfectly parallel to the surface, with straight walls that slant outward (fig. 6, 14). The vessel is made of rough, brown-colored pottery with a thickness of 1.1 cm. The other vessels found in this grave include a *pot* and *pitcher* (small jars). This grave belonged to a woman aged 30–50.

In general, the sizes of the bases of the vessels from the Chovdar necropolis vary between 3.5 cm and 12.7 cm. Based on their shape, the bases can be classified as convex (outward bulging), concave (inward curved), or flat. In some cases, the imprint of the potter's wheel is clearly visible on the base. Vessels made on the potter's wheel feature bases decorated with burnished patterns, while handmade vessels have bases decorated with incised and carved designs.

The date of pottery was determined by radiocarbon analyses, conducted on several skeletal remains recovered from the Chovdar necropolis. The C-14 dating was carried out at the University of Tokyo, Japan. According to the results, the studied site dates to the 13th–9th centuries BC. The research was based on skeletal samples obtained from eight burials. These findings made it partially possible to determine the chronological framework of Chovdar ceramics, although not all pottery types were represented in these graves.

The precisely dated ceramic assemblage includes jugs, pitchers, jars, cups, bowls, pots, churns, and storage vessels. Among these, the most recent pottery was found in grave No. 50 (fig. 8), which is dated to the 10th–9th centuries BC (1000–890 BC). This cist grave belonged to a young female aged approximately 18 years. The burial inventory comprised a bracelet, earrings, faience, agate and paste beads, bronze hair rings, and head discs [3, p. 221].

Considering that faience production in Azerbaijan dates to the medieval period, these faience beads were likely imported from neighboring regions. This suggests that the mountain communities of the area maintained cultural and trade connections with distant lands. Among the diagnostic pottery of the period are a churn (previously discussed above), a jug, and a medium-sized basin vessel.

Several of the chronologically identified ceramic vessels were recovered from grave No. 12 (fig. 9, 1–6). This burial, dated to the 12th–11th centuries BC (1150–1010 BC), belonged to a male individual. A bronze dagger was also discovered within the burial chamber. A comparable grave of a similar date is grave No. 137, dating to 1130–1010 BC. This grave contained the remains of a woman buried on her left side, whose skeleton was remarkably well preserved. The burial inventory included ceramic vessels (fig. 9, 9–11) numerous agate and paste beads, a pinhead, and bronze bracelets [3, p. 72].

It is noteworthy that pinheads are consistently associated with left-sided burials at the Chovdar necropolis, regardless of age. Such items have been found beside individuals ranging from children to adults up to approximately 50 years old.

Another contemporaneous burial is grave No. 14, dated to the 13th–11th centuries BC (1210–1020 BC). The grave, oriented along a north–south axis, belonged to a woman aged 25–30 years. Excavations of the burial chamber revealed fragments of five ceramic vessels (fig. 9, 7, 8), six pendants, parts of a diadem, three large agate beads, five shell ornaments (possibly cowrie shells), and beads made from bird claws. The diadem fragments were found beneath the skull. It should be noted that diadems, have generally been discovered in graves belonging to young women [3, p. 80].

Graves No. 53 and No. 68, recorded approximately 50–60 years apart, date to the 13th–11th centuries BC (grave No. 53: 1220–1050 BC; grave No. 68: 1260–1000 BC).

Grave No. 53 (fig. 10, 1) is a cist burial, the eastern wall of which was completely destroyed, while one stone from both the northern and southern walls had collapsed. The human skeleton was uncovered in the central part of the chamber; however, the bones were severely decomposed. Only several elements of the lower and upper extremities were relatively well preserved. It was inferred that the individual had been interred in a flexed position, facing west.

This grave stands out for the richness of its burial assemblage. A considerable number of bronze adornments were recovered from the burial chamber, which belonged to a child buried on the left side in a flexed position. Since sex determination for subadult individuals was not feasible, the burial orientation and associated artifacts suggest – albeit tentatively – that the remains may have belonged to a young girl [3, p. 233].

The skeletal remains recovered from the contemporaneous grave No. 68, a cist burial, were found in their original anatomical position, with no evidence of post-depositional disturbance. The deceased was positioned facing south-west, with the arms bent at the elbows and the legs flexed at the knees. A single bronze bracelet was recovered from the arm and leg bones. The funerary offerings had been placed in front of the body.

The burial chamber yielded five ceramic vessels (fig. 11), one bronze dagger with a lattice-patterned hilt, five bronze buttons, two bracelets, one bronze pendant, one large garment ornament, one crescent-shaped pendant, numerous agate beads, five large white beads, and one cylindrical white bead. Among the ceramic assemblage, two vessels are bowls, while the others include a jug, a basin (handled pot), and a jar.

The grave belonged to a male individual aged approximately 30-50 years, who had been interred on his right side in a flexed position [3, p. 297].

Discussion

In archaeological literature, the period known as the “Khojaly-Gedabey culture” encompasses the territories of Central and Western Transcaucasia [31, p.109]. This culture, covering the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, has been interpreted in various ways by researchers in terms of its chronological stages. Since the late nineteenth century, the culture has been extensively excavated and studied.

N.V. Minkevich-Mustafayeva, who conducted comprehensive research on this period, divided the Khojaly-Gedabey culture into three chronological phases:

- 1) 13th–11th centuries BC;
- 2) 11th–9th centuries BC;
- 3) 9th–8th centuries BC.

She also classified the culture into three groups based on the specific characteristics of the archaeological materials and included the Chovdar necropolis in the Gedabey group [30, p. 19].

Minkevich-Mustafayeva dated the kurgans and stone-cist graves in the Çovdar area to the 13th–9th centuries BC. Particularly, D. Sharifov’s excavations in Çovdar revealed stone-cist graves that were attributed to the middle phase of the Khojaly-Gedabey culture [34]. Minkevich-Mustafayeva notes that bronze weapons are absent in the earliest phase of the Gedabey group, while incriminated pottery belongs to the later two stages. Interestingly, no such decorated ceramics were found at the Chovdar necropolis; instead, bronze weaponry predominates among the artifacts.

According to the author, the use of bronze weapons increased during the developed phase of the culture. A total of 11 bronze knives, used both as weapons and as domestic tools, were discovered, represented in three distinct forms. Except for the specimens from chambers No. 105 and 133, which have pointed tips, the others feature oval-shaped, upward-curving blades. Such knives were mainly used for domestic purposes—particularly for skinning animals without damaging the hides. One knife was found in stone-cist No. 2, two in No. 26, and another in No. 66.

Minkevich-Mustafayeva classified these upward-curved knives as belonging to the first phase of the Karabakh group and the second phase of the Gedabey group within the Khojaly-Gedabey culture [31, p. 114]. Chronologically, they correspond to the 11th–9th centuries BC. The researcher also dated meander-decorated pottery to the 13th–11th centuries BC. At Chovdar, such bowls were uncovered in graves Nos. 65 and 132, corresponding to the early stage of the second phase of the culture.

Minkevich-Mustafayeva further associated bird – and spoon-shaped bronze ornaments with the second phase. Except for those from cist No. 29, the bird figurines were found in pairs connected by chains. Although similar in form, their surface decorations vary. Each figurine has a small bronze loop on its back for attachment to a chain. Figurines Nos. 19 and 136 were found with their chains intact, while two bird figures from cist No. 53 had rings in their beaks with elongated conical pendants attached. Additional decorated bird figurines were discovered in graves Nos. 25 and 111.

In total, 13 spiral-decorated bronze rings were discovered in eight graves of the necropolis, typical of Late Bronze – Early Iron Age burials. Among the head ornaments, only those from graves Nos. 52 and 75 were found intact. These circular cross-section rings do not meet at their ends; instead, one side continues as a spiral, coiling at the opposite end. Fragments of similar rings were unearthed in chamber No. 60, while deformed examples were found in graves Nos. 103, 111, 131, 132, and 136. The author attributed these items to the middle and late phases of the Khojaly-Gedabey culture.

Based on the excavations conducted by D. Sharifov, pottery uncovered from burial groups Nos. 9 (graves 186–204) and 19 (graves 294–316) (MATM, Inventory Book No. 1) was dated by M. Huseynova to the 14th-13th centuries BC in her study on pottery from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages [12, p. 201].

The Zeyemchay necropolis, which displays the characteristic features of the Khojaly-Gedabey culture, contains earthen graves dating from the 14th to 8th centuries BC, with the majority belonging to the 13th–11th centuries BC [26, p. 98]. Chronological analyses indicate that embossed, leaf-shaped bronze spearheads represent the developed stage of the culture.

At the Çovdar necropolis, bronze spearheads are represented by three types. The earliest type has a leaf-shaped blade and an incompletely tubular socket. These socketed spearheads, often with perforations at the base, were manufactured by hammering technique and were found in graves Nos. 15, 20, 35, 45, 80, and 111 [26, fig. 128, grave 117]. Dagger fragments with lattice-patterned hilts were dated to the 12th–11th centuries BC, and numerous examples of this type were also found at Chovdar.

Parallels between the Chovdar, Zeyemchay, and Tovuzchay necropolises indicate shared burial traditions. In all three sites, the orientation of the burials correlates with the sex of the deceased: right-side burials accompanied by weapons belong to males, while left-side burials with head ornaments correspond to females. Anthropological studies confirm that diadems were found in the graves of women aged approximately 25–30 years. In each of the mentioned necropolises, diadems occur exclusively in left-side (female) burials.

Radiocarbon analyses of samples from the Zeyemchay and Tovuzchay sites date the burials to between the 13th and 9th centuries BC, consistent with the chronological range of the Chovdar necropolis.

Based on the analytical results of the samples taken from grave No. 185 excavated during the 2021 archaeological investigations at the Chovdar necropolis, the burial has been dated to the 13th–12th centuries BCE [20]. It should be noted that the artifacts from this grave display analogies with the materials obtained from the chamber tomb excavated and studied in 2019. Furthermore, the radiocarbon (C14) analyses of the Emirvar kurgan, which shares typological and cultural similarities with the Chovdar necropolis, indicate a date corresponding to the early 9th–10th centuries BCE [6]. The materials from the Xoshbulaq settlement, excavated by B. Jalilov in 2020, also fall within the same chronological framework of the 9th–10th centuries BCE [7]. All of these archaeological sites are attributed to the Khojaly-Gedabey culture.

Conclusion

Considering both radiocarbon results and comparative analyses of metal artifacts and ornaments, it has been determined that burial practices in Chovdar took place between the 13th and 8th centuries BC [16]. This evidence suggests that the potters – bearers of the Khojaly-Gedabey cultural tradition – maintained a continuous settlement and stable ceramic-production tradition, with only minor stylistic variations over several centuries.

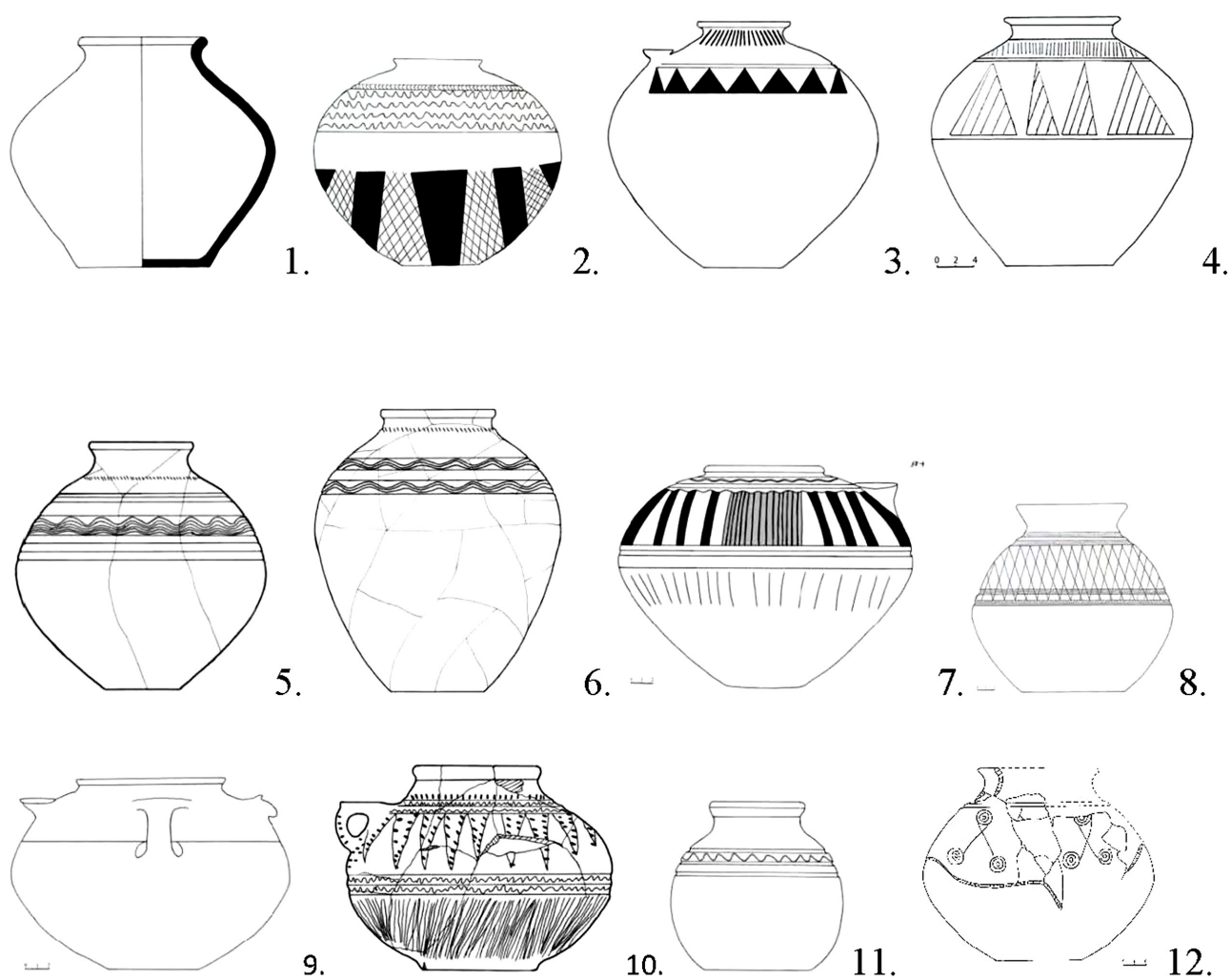
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Fig. 1. The Chovdar necropolis. Structure of the cist graves: burials on the left (a) and right (b) side

Рис 1. Некрополь Човдар. Структура каменных ящиков-гробниц некрополя Човдар. Погребения на левом (a) и правом (b) боку

Fig. 2. Chovdar necropolis. Storage vessels. *Küps* (1–7), pots (8–12)Рис. 2. Некрополь Човдар. Тарные сосуды. *Кюпы* (1–7), горшки (8–12)

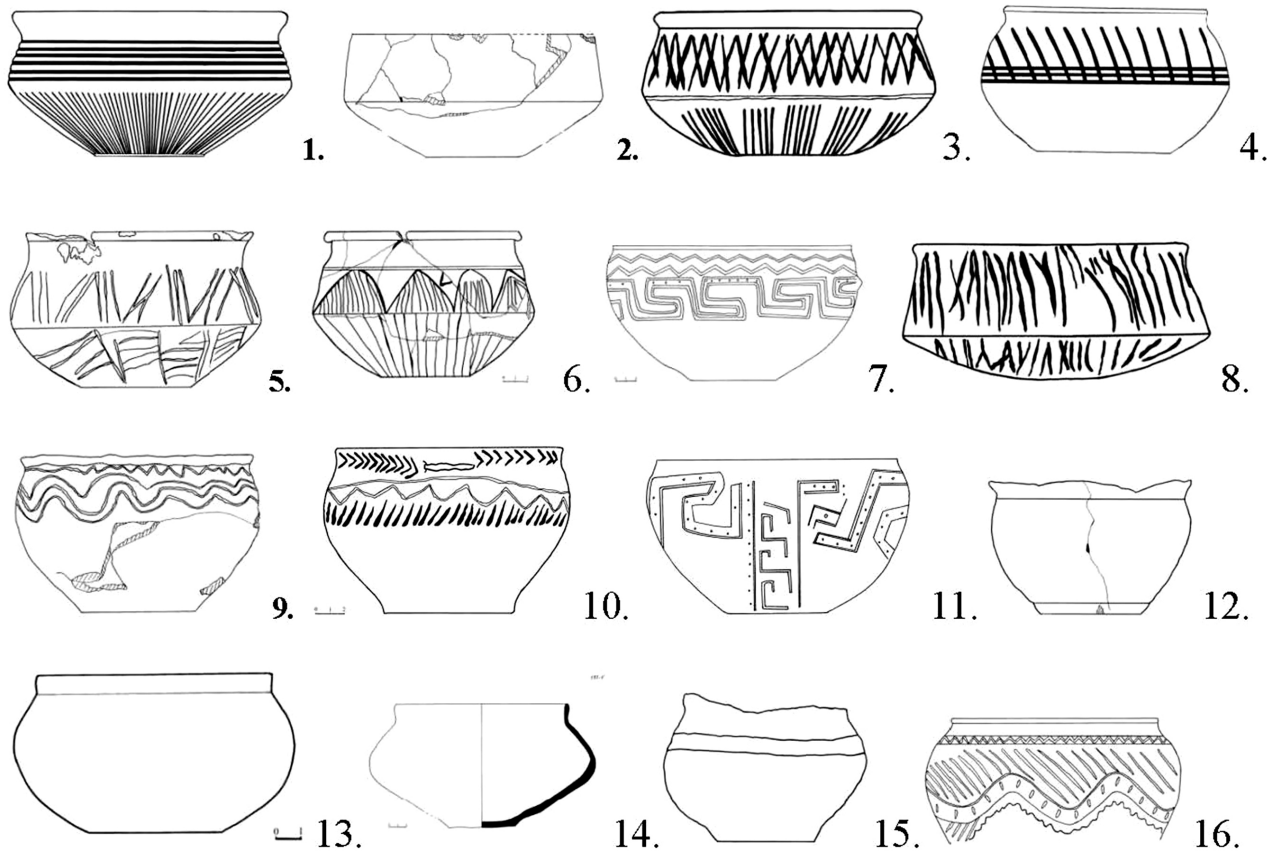


Fig. 3. Chovdar necropolis. Bowls (1-6) and basins (large bowls) (17-22)

Рис. 3. Некрополь Човдар. Миски (1-16) и тазы (17-22)

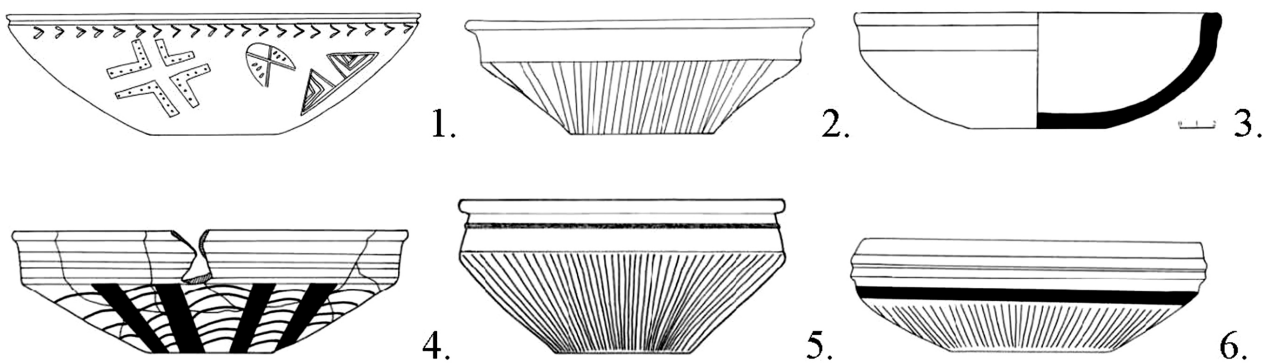


Fig. 4. Chovdar necropolis. Churns (1-4) and jars-kuzes (5-12)

Рис. 4. Некрополь Човдар. Маслобойки (1-4) и баночные сосуды-кузе (5-12)

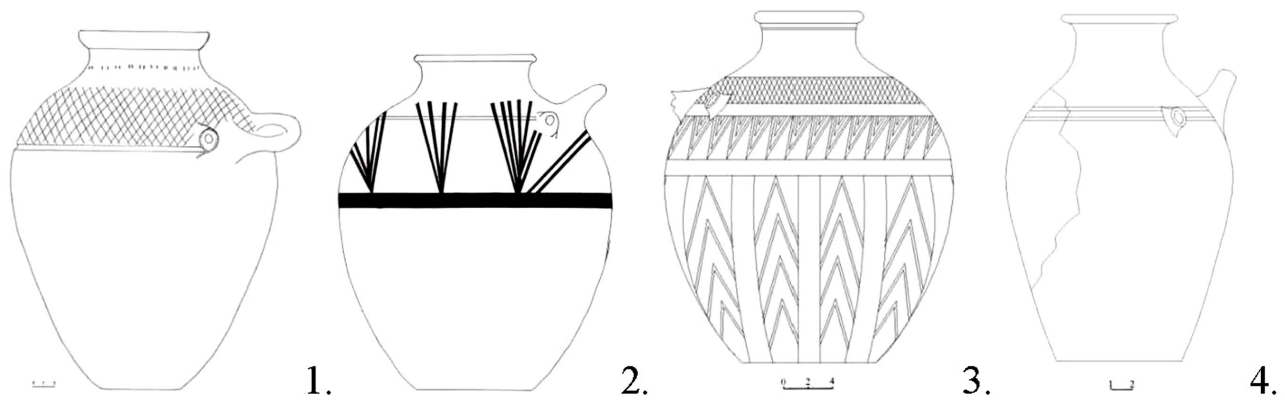


Fig. 5. Chovdar necropolis. Jugs-bardags

Рис. 5. Некрополь Човдар. Кувшины-бардаг

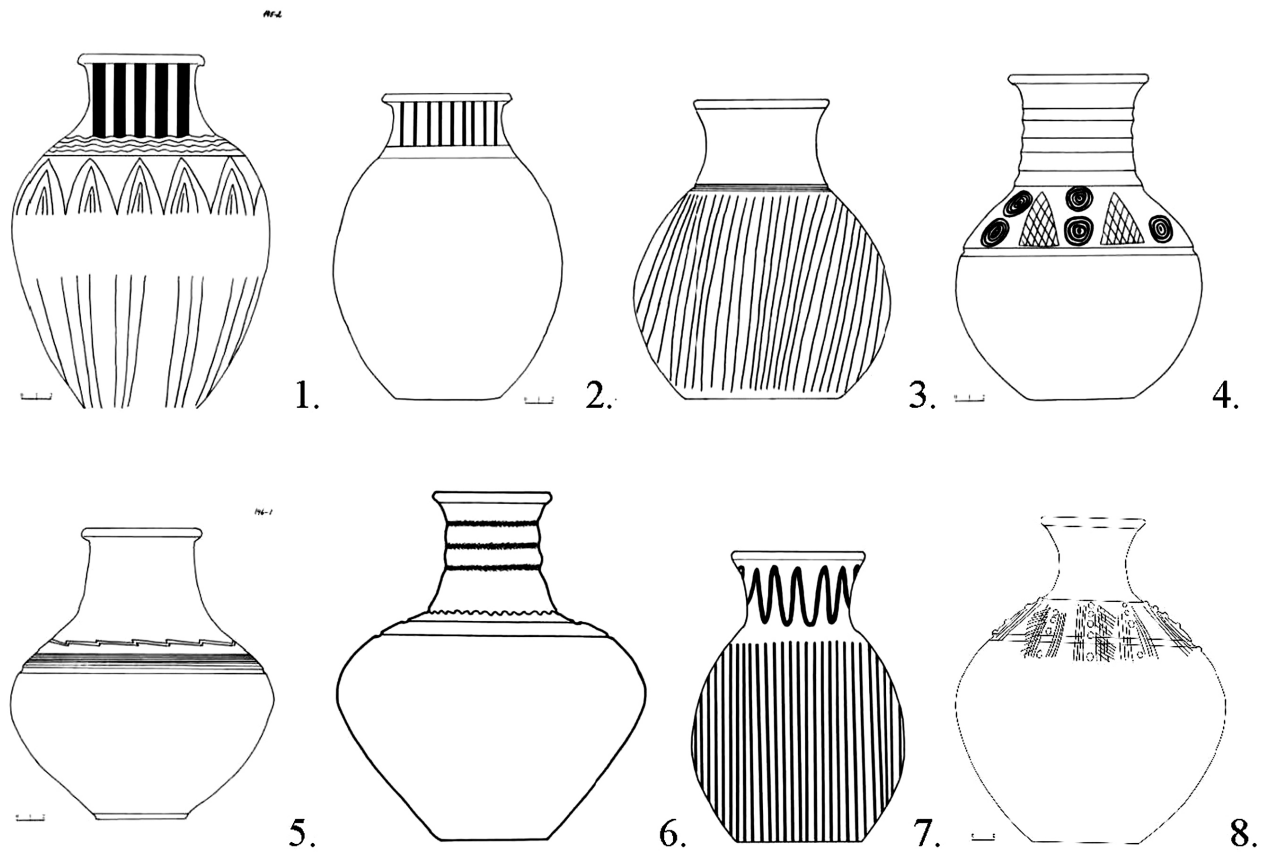
Fig. 6. The Chovdar necropolis: *dolcha* mugs (1–10), *dopul* pitchers (11, 12), and vessels without parallels (13, 14)

Рис. 6. Некрополь Човдар. Кружки-дольчи (1–10), кувшины-допулы (11, 12), сосуды без аналогий (13, 14)

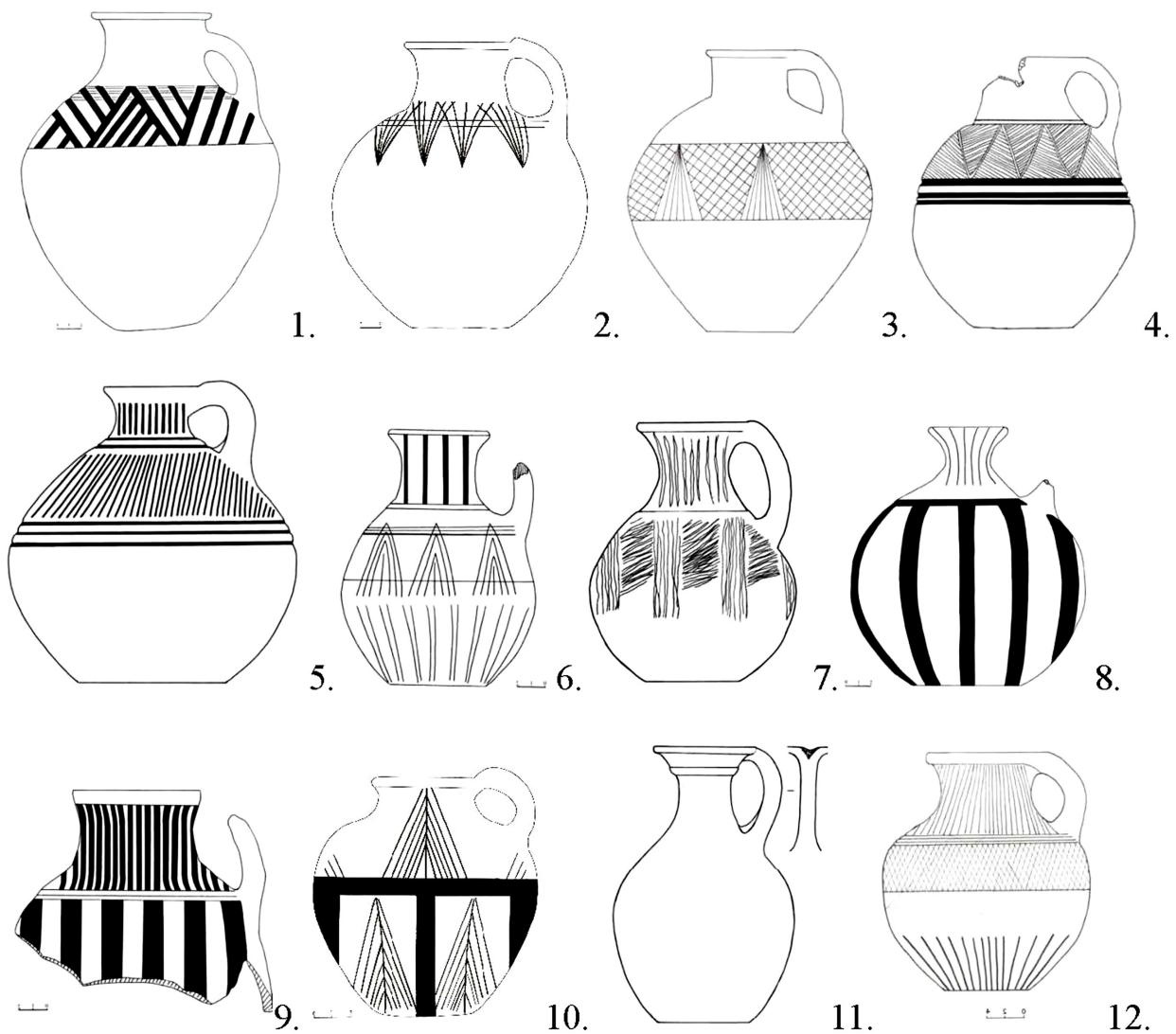


Fig. 7. Chovdar necropolis. Pots

Рис. 7. Некрополь Човдар. Горшки

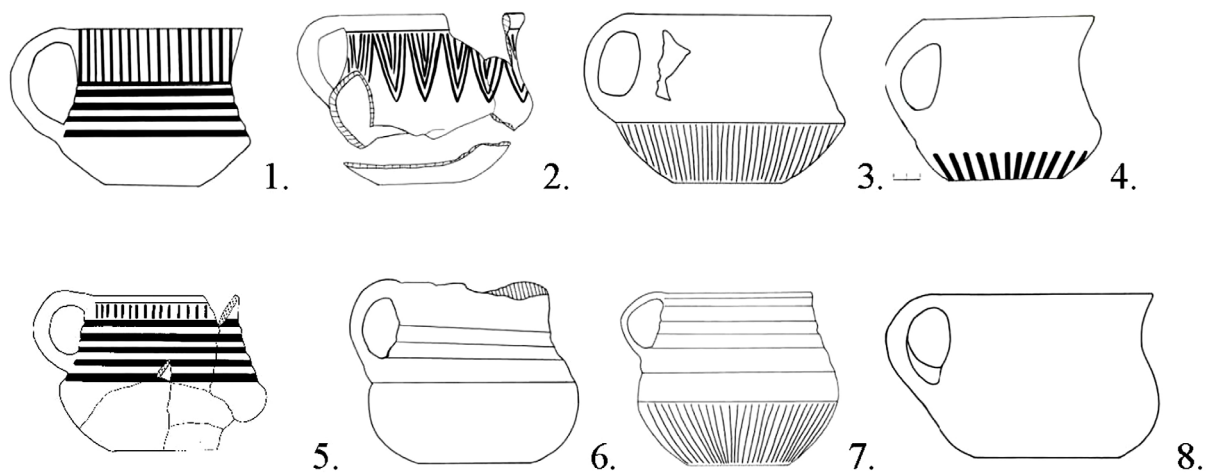


Fig. 8. Chovdar necropolis. Cist grave No. 50. Ceramic vessels

Рис. 8. Некрополь Човдар. Могила № 50. Керамические сосуды

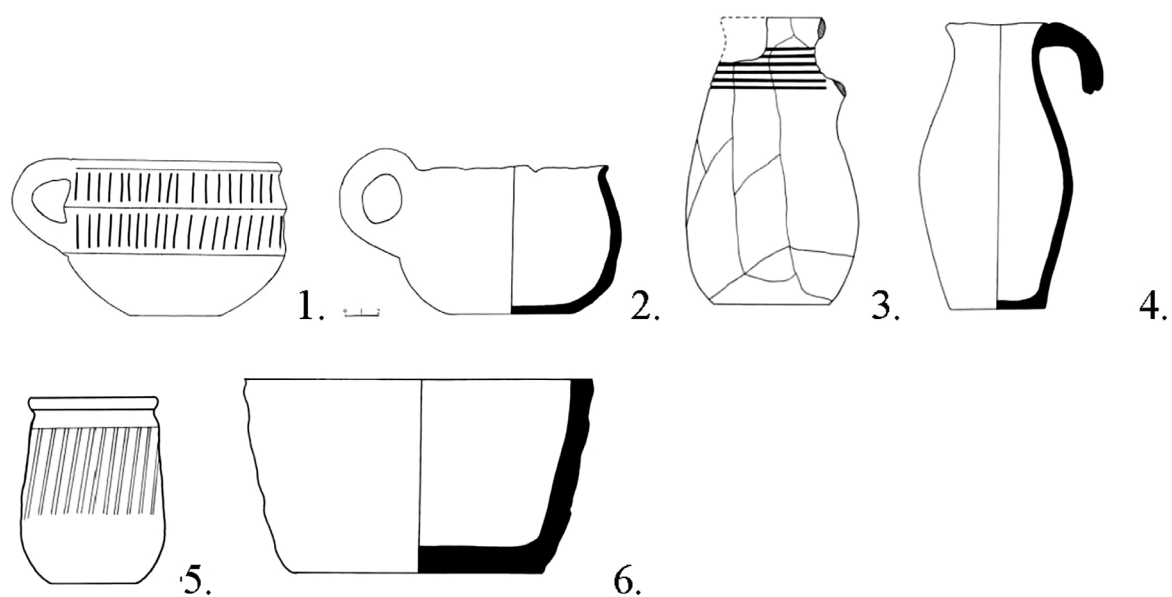


Fig. 9. Chovdar necropolis. Ceramic vessels from the cist graves No. 12 (1-6), 14 (7, 8), 137 (9-11)

Рис. 9. Некрополь Човдар. Керамические сосуды из могил №№ 12 (1-6), 14 (7, 8), 137 (9-11)

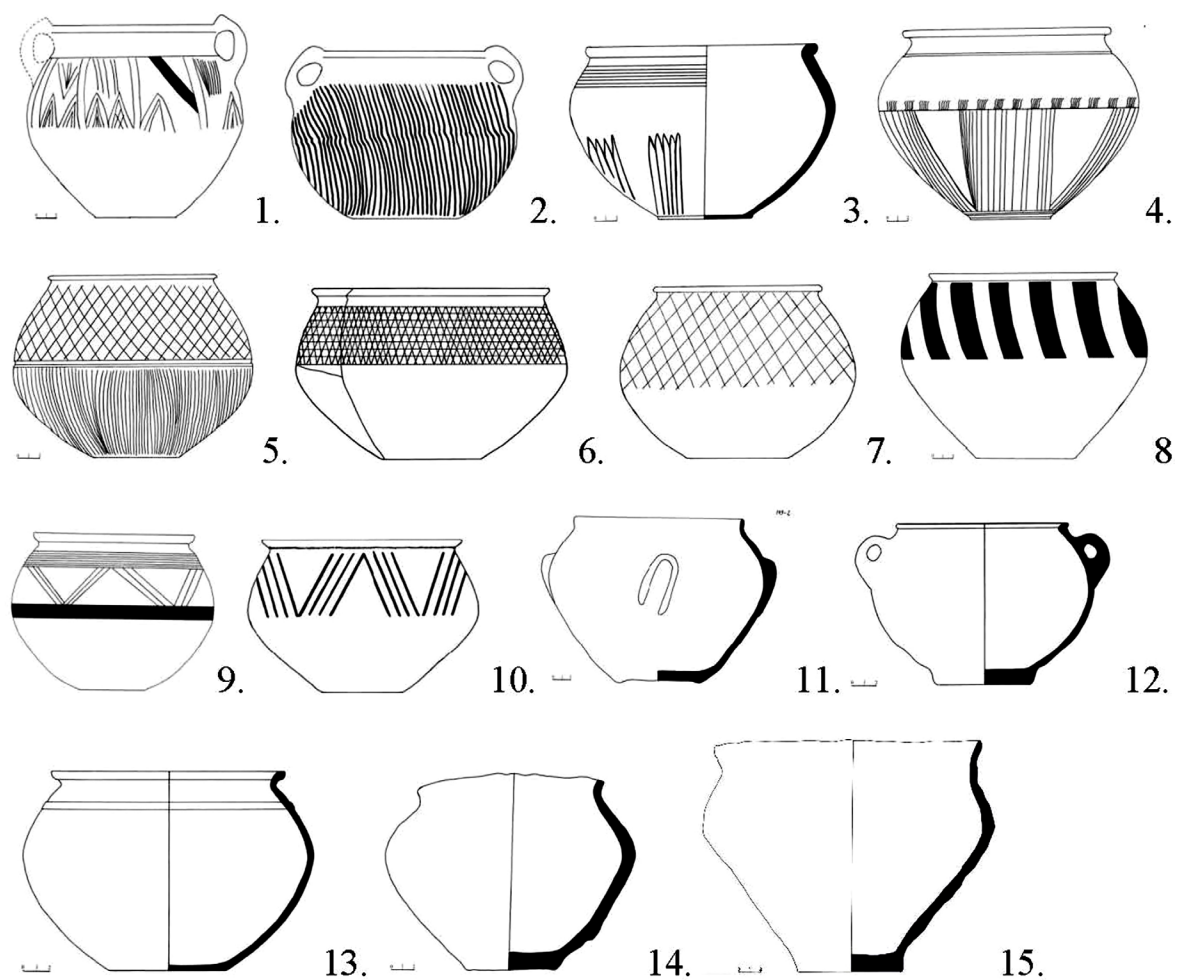


Fig. 10. Chovdar necropolis. Cist grave No. 53. General view (1) and ceramic vessels (2-4)

Рис. 10. Некрополь Човдар. Могила № 53. Общий вид (1) и керамические сосуды (2-4)



Fig. 11. Chovdar necropolis. Cist grave No. 68. Ceramic vessels

Рис. 11. Некрополь Човдар. Могила № 68. Керамические сосуды



Grave No.12



Fig. 12. Chovdar necropolis. Ceramic vessels from the stone-box graves No. 12 (1-6), 14 (7, 8), 137 (9-11)

Рис. 12. Некрополь Човдар. Керамические сосуды из могил №№ 12 (1-6), 14 (7, 8), 137 (9-11)



Grave No. 53



Fig. 13. Chovdar necropolis.
Stone-box grave No. 53. General view (1)
and ceramic vessels (2-4)

Рис. 13. Некрополь Човдар.
Могила № 53. Общий вид (1)
и керамические сосуды (2-4)



Fig. 14. Chovdar necropolis. Stone-Box grave No. 68. Ceramic vessels.

Рис. 114 Некрополь Човдар. Могила № 68. Керамические сосуды

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