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Note about one case of cranial trepanation from catacomb burial of Mingachevir (Azerbaijan Republic)

Dmitriy A. Kirichenko¹

Abstract. In this note, we discuss a case of cranial trepanation that originated from a catacomb burial discovered in the Mingachevir area of Azerbaijan. The catacomb burials on the territory of Azerbaijan date back to the 1st-7th centuries AD. The studied skull comes from an old adult male (*senilis* category), is brachyranic and relates to the southern branch of the Caucasian phenotype – Caucasian Albanian. This man probably was a representative of the local Caucasoid population. An oval-shaped trepanation was identified on the left parietal bone, measuring 0.9 × 0.8 cm, which was performed for medical/therapeutic purposes.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, cranial trepanation, catacomb burials, Caucasian Albanian phenotype.

Notă despre un caz de trepanație craniană dintr-un mormânt în catacombă de la Mingachevir (Republica Azerbaidjan). În această notă discutăm un caz de trepanație craniană care provine dintr-un mormânt în catacombă descoperit în zona Mingachevir din Azerbaidjan. În mormântările în catacombe de pe teritoriul Azerbaidjanului datează în secolele I-VII d. Hr. Craniul studiat provine de la un adult bătrân de sex masculin (categoria *senilis*), este brahicran și aparține ramurii sudice a fenotipului caucazian albanian. Probabil că bărbatul era un reprezentant al populației locale caucazoide. Pe osul parietal stâng s-a identificat o trepanație de formă ovală, cu dimensiunile de 0,9 × 0,8 cm, care a fost efectuată în scop medical/terapeutic.
Cuvinte cheie: Azerbaidjan, trepanație craniană, morminte în catacombă, fenotip caucazian albanian.

.....

The paper presents a skull found in a catacomb burial discovered at Mingachevir (**Fig. 1**) in Azerbaijan during rescue excavations between 1946 and 1953. This article is the first to describe a skull with trepanation from the catacomb burials of Azerbaijan, where craniotomy was probably performed for medical/therapeutic

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purposes. Currently, we know only ritual/symbolic trepanations from this burial type in our republic.

The oldest catacomb burial in Azerbaijan was discovered in the lower layer of the Galayeri settlement in Gabala district, which dates to the 4th millennium BC (Leilatepe archaeological culture). In this grave, a 4-5 years old subadult was buried (Museibli 2016). Catacombs from the period between this date and the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC have not been found in the territory of Azerbaijan (Museyibli, Najafov 2021, p. 52).

More than 200 catacomb burials were studied in Mingachevir area during excavations in the middle of 20th century (Qoshqarly 2013). Different burial types were found at Mingachevir necropolis on both sides of the Kura River, which are dated from the Bronze Age to the Mediaeval period (kurgans, soil burials, jar burials, catacombs, timber burials, timber-catacombs burials, jar-catacomb burials, Christian burials, burials of Mongolian warriors, Muslim burials). Burials in catacombs were widespread in the territory of Azerbaijan in the 1st-7th centuries AD.

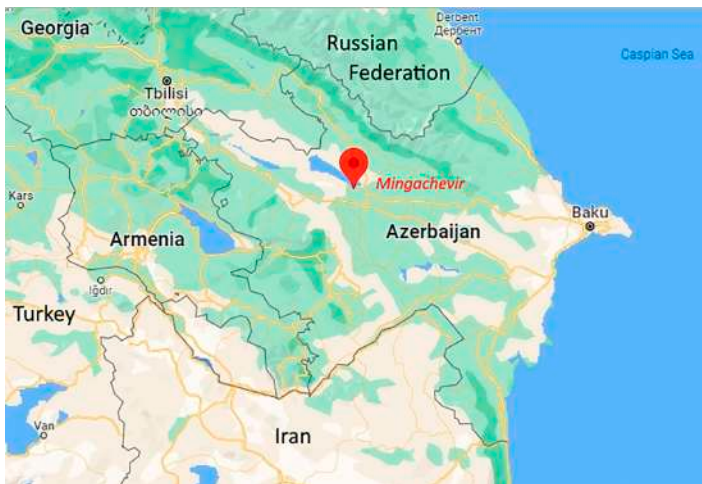


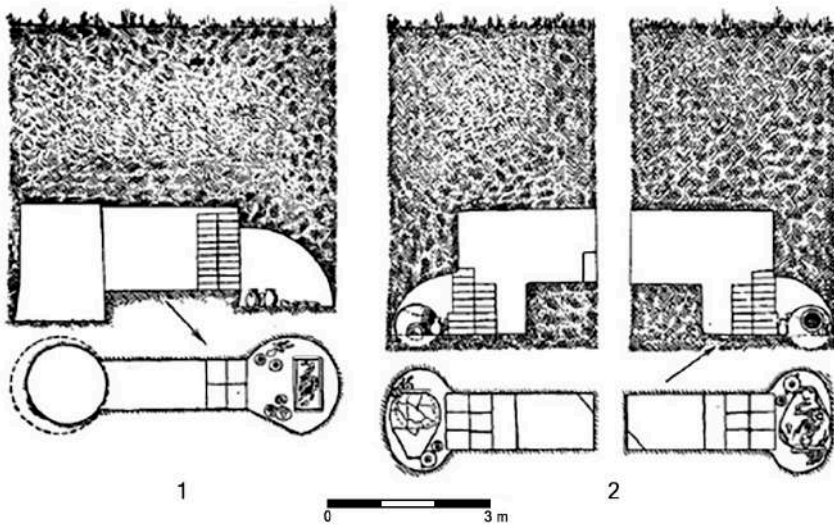
Fig. 1. Location of the archaeological site.

Fig. 1. Localizarea sitului arheologic².

According to archaeologists, these burials belonged to the circle of Sarmatian-Alanian tribes and can be divided into two groups: early (1st-3rd centuries AD) and late (4th-7th centuries AD) catacomb burials. Early catacomb burials on the territory of Azerbaijan were found in Mingachevir, Babadervish (Kazakh district), Torpakhqala

² <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Mingecevir,+Azerbaijan/@40.763481,46.9638033,12z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x4038c0167a73481b:0xd57ec8576d39862c!8m2!3d40.7702563!4d47.0496015?hl=en>

(Gakh district), and late ones in Gabala (Gabala district), Kukhuroba (Kusary district) and Mingachevir. This burial custom came to the territory of Azerbaijan from the North Caucasus. Among the grave furniture of catacombs, we mainly notice weapons, ceramic vessels, coins, various ornaments, and glass products. Burials in catacombs are either individual or contain multiple skeletons. The early catacombs sometimes consisted of wooden burials (Fig. 2/1) or jar burials (Fig. 2/2).



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Fig. 2. 1. Timber-catacomb burial; 2. Jar-catacomb burial (after Aslanov 1955, p. 65, Fig. 1-2); 3. Catacomb burial no. 13 from Gabala, Salbir site (after Jabiyev *et alii* 2022, p. 35, Fig. 11).

Fig. 2. 1. Catacombă din scânduri; 2. Catacombă de tip borcan (după Aslanov 1955, p. 65, Fig. 1-2); 3. Mormântul-catacombă nr. 13 din Gabala, situl Salbir (după Jabiyev *et alii* 2022, p. 35, Fig. 11).

These cases can be explained by the burial traditions of the local population of Caucasian Albania (Qoshqarly 2012). Some skulls from catacomb burials were artificially deformed (Kirichenko 2020).

Archaeological research in recent years has revealed new findings on catacomb burials in Azerbaijan – Zayamchai (Aghalarzade 2008), Alyhodja (Khalilov 2009) in Shamkir district, Poylu I, II (**Fig. 3/1-2**) in Aghstafa district (Museyibli, Najafov 2021) and Selbir in Gabala district (**Fig. 2/3**) (Jabiyev *et alii* 2022).



Fig. 3. 1. Poylu I, catacomb No.1 (after Museyibli, Najafov 2021, p. 49, Fig. 3);
2. Poylu II, Catacomb No. 3 (after Museyibli, Najafov 2021, p. 51, Fig. 5).
Fig. 3. 1. Poylu I, catacomba nr. 1 (după Museyibli, Najafov 2021, p. 49, Fig. 3);
2. Poylu II, catacomba nr. 3 (după Museyibli, Najafov 2021, p. 51, Fig. 5).

Unfortunately, the archaeological or anthropological report where this complex (in the present article) was described, respectively its number and context are inaccessible. Available information shows that this skull was discovered during archaeological excavations of one of the catacomb burials in the Mingachevir area.

The studied skull (**Fig. 4**) is currently stored in the repository of the Department of Human Anatomy and Medical Terminology of Azerbaijan Medical University, and is on public display at the Museum of Human Anatomy (Baku, Azerbaijan Republic). We note that the marking on the left side of the skull does not correspond to that on the right side. The skull was renumbered and marked with a different code when taken over by the university.

The craniological material was studied using the paleoanthropological study methodology recommended by R. Martin (Martin, Saller 1957; Alekseev, Debets 1964). The method of the trepanning technique was described according to the classifications of F. P. Lisowski (1967), D. R. Brothwell (1972) and M. B. Mednikova (2001).

This male skull (*senilis* age group) is brachycranial, characterised (Table 1) by a very short cranial length, medium cranial width, and low cranial height. The forehead is wide. The face is narrow and very low, with a mesenic facial index, well-

profiled in the horizontal plane. The orbits are wide and high, mesoconch. The nose is very narrow but not high, moderately prominent, leptorine. The skull probably belongs phenotypically to the southern Caucasian branch – Caucasian Albanian.



Fig. 4. The male skull from Mingachevir seen from the facial, right lateral and vertical views.
Fig. 4. Craniul masculin de la Mingachevir văzut din normele facială, laterală dreapta și vertical.

No. Martin	♂, <i>senilis</i>	No. Martin	♂, <i>senilis</i>
1 (<i>g-op</i>)	168.4	52	36
8 (<i>eu-eu</i>)	139.5	54	22.5
5 (<i>n-ba</i>)	98.4	55 (<i>n-ns</i>)	50
9 (<i>ft-ft</i>)	99	8:1	82.8
17 (<i>ba-b</i>)	129.4	48:45	50.6
20 (<i>po-b</i>)	126.1	52:51	83.7
40 (<i>pr-ba</i>)	85	52:51a	87.8
45 (<i>zy-zy</i>)	126.3	54:55	45
48 (<i>n-pr</i>)	64	77	127.4
51 (<i>mf-ek</i>)	43	∠ Zm	123.7
51a (<i>d-ek</i>)	41	75 (1)	28

Table 1. Craniometrical measurements (mm) of the male skull from catacomb burial.
Tab. 1. Măsurătoril (mm) relative ale craniului masculin din înmormântarea catacomb.

This anthropological type has been widespread in Western Azerbaijan since the Bronze Age (Kirichenko 2022). Perhaps this man belonged to the local population of Caucasian Albanians, members of which were buried in a new “smart” type of newcomer burial. Perhaps some of the deceased were buried in wooden or jar-type catacombs. We remind you that we do not have any archaeological data on this tomb.

The first cases of cranial trepanation in Azerbaijan date back to the Neolithic period (Qasimova 1988; Kirichenko 2023). We can find trepanned skulls even later,

in the Early Bronze and the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages. The types and methods of trepanning used were different. Craniotomy was performed for medical or symbolic ritual purposes (personal data from the author).

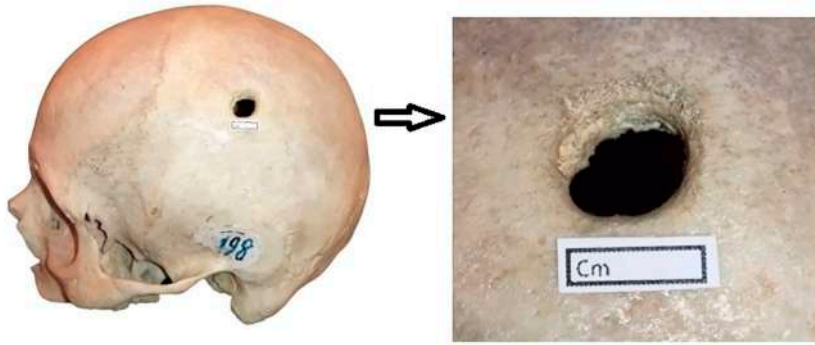


Fig. 5. The trepanated skull from Mingachevir.

Fig. 5. Craniul trepanat de la Mingachevir.

Description of craniotomy. An oval-shaped trepanned opening on the left parietal bone can be clearly seen (**Fig. 5**). Its dimensions are 0.9×0.8 cm. In our opinion, the trepanning methods used in this case are drilling and cutting. The bone regeneration process can be observed at the edges of the opening. The patient probably survived the craniotomy for some time after the operation. Trepanation was done for medical purposes. Probably, the operation aimed to try to remove the pressure on this old man's brain to “expel the evil spirits” out of his head.

Only a few cases of cranial trepanation in the skeletons were discovered in catacombs in the Mingachevir area. These trepanations were mostly performed for symbolic/ritual purposes. In two cases (one from a non-deformed skull and another from an artificially deformed skull), part of the human bone was taken, probably for amulets (personal data from the author). The third case of cranial trepanation from catacombs is the one made by the drilling method, which can also be classified in the category of trepanations made with a symbolic/ritual purpose (Kirichenko 2020).

The skull presented in this note is the fourth case of trepanation identified in burials from the Mingachevir catacombs. Unlike the other three trepanated skulls, craniotomy in this case, as noted earlier, was performed for medical purposes. Further excavations may shed light on this subject.

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