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**Zayamchay Cemetery Report
On Excavations of a Muslim Cemetery
At Kilometre Point 356 of
Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and South Caucasus Pipelines Right Of Way**

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ABSTRACT

This report gives an account of the excavations of a Muslim cemetery discovered at Kilometre Point (KP) 356 of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Right Of Way (ROW) in 2004. The site was located on the right bank of Zayamchai and covered an area measuring 35 m in length and 30 m in width.

A total of 74 graves were revealed at the site. In several occasions, deviations from established Muslim burial practices were observed, as for instance, discovery of an iron pin, obsidian, beads and buttons in some of the graves.

All the skeletons excavated from the graves were carefully cleaned and then reburied observing all Muslim funereal rites in the nearby nineteenth to early twentieth century Baydarli Muslim cemetery (not currently in use) 2 km north of the excavation site.

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I. Introduction

- *Description of the BTC and SCP Archaeology Programme*

Archaeological excavations in connection with the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) pipelines were conducted prior to, and during the construction of these pipelines. These excavations generally were carried out within the 44 m wide pipeline corridor from 2001 to 2005. The archaeology programme consisted of five phases of which the first four phases constituted field investigations:

Phase I – actual and potential archaeological sites were visually identified during walkover or baseline surveys during the selection of the pipeline route.

Phase II – the sites that were identified during Phase I as archaeologically potential were tested by digging test pits and conducting small-scale trial excavations.

Phase III – small and large-scale excavations were carried out within the BTC ROW.

Phase IV – small and large-scale excavations were carried out within the SCP ROW.

In addition to these, all the construction activities were monitored by watching brief archaeologists.

In general, during the core Phase III and Phase IV archaeological excavations were carried out at 41 sites with thousands of artefacts discovered. None of these sites had been previously known to archaeological science.

Phase V – preparation of scientific reports on the archaeological excavations carried out during the previous phases.

- *Discovery of the Archaeological Site*

This site was not discovered during the initial stages of identifying archaeological sites along the BTC and SCP pipelines route. The reason was the absence of any surface markers of Muslim graves in this area. The site is located near Bayramli (Shamkir District) on the right bank of Zayamchai at KP 356 (Photos 1 and 2). It was discovered during topsoil stripping in January 2004. The archaeological excavations at this site were carried out in February 2004 with participation of Yagil Danyalov, Anar Agalarzade, Vagif Asadov, Anver Kazimov and Fuad Huseynov under the direction of Najaf Museyibli and Viktor Kvachidze from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (IoAE). The excavation work was supervised by the BTC archaeological representative David Maynard.

II. Field and Office Methods

- *Field Methods*

No machines were used for the archaeological excavations at site. The excavation work was undertaken by the project labour force using shovels, barrows, trowels, brushes and other hand tools to clean and expose skeletons as they were located. The plan of the excavation site was drawn up (Figures 1, 2 and 3) and the burials were photographed (Photos 3-10, 12-16).

The skeletons excavated from the graves were carefully cleaned and then reburied observing all Muslim burial rules in the Baydarli Muslim cemetery nearby, which dates to the 19th-early 20th Centuries (not currently in use).

- *Office Methods*

The jewellery found in some graves were washed and cleaned, photographed and drawn up at the IoAE and the text of this Report was produced.

- *Archive Disposition*

All the jewellery items recovered from the site was handed over to the IoAE special archive set up for the storage of finds discovered on the BTC and SCP ROW.

III. Excavations results

- *Site Description*

As there were no surface indicators of graves, this site had been used as a cotton field and later as a vineyard from the pre-soviet times. Additional layer of soil was spread over the graves by tractors and other agricultural machinery used for cultivating those plants, as a result of which the chances for their visual identification came to nought. The local population had no information about any old cemetery that once existed here. In recent years this site has not been used as an arable land for growing crops. The site is located at Pulkovo coordinates 8574747, 4534070 at a height of 295m above sea level.

- *Description of Graves*

The cemetery stretches along the river bank. 74 graves were found in the 30 x 35 meter area on the right-hand bank of Zayamchai at the point where the BTC pipeline intersects the river. Most of the graves were covered with specially selected oblong (40-50 cm long) cobblestones, laid across grave chambers (Photos 3 and 4). As time passed the overlying soil seeped through the stones and filled the chambers. No doubt, all these cobblestones were brought from the Zayamchai gully nearby. One group of grave chambers was covered with white monolith limestones. Their average size was 15 x 30 x 50 cm. Most probably they were brought from the limestone deposits that can be still seen in the nearby mountains approximately 10 km south of Zayam village. Currently there is an operating quarry over there.

Table illustrating results as below, mainly collated from photographic evidence

KP 356 Zayamchai Muslim Cemetery						
Grave	Age	Head	Lt Arm	Rt Arm	Cover	Comments
1	Adult					Disturbed by construction
2	Adult					Disturbed by construction
3	Adult	Right				Disturbed by construction
4						Disturbed by construction
5						Disturbed by construction
6	Adult	Straight		Across		Disturbed by construction
7						Disturbed by construction
8						Disturbed by construction
9						Disturbed by construction
10	Adult					Disturbed by construction
11	Adult	Right	Across		Stone	
12	Adult	Right	Across		Stone	
13	Child					
14	Adult	Right	Across			
15	Child					
16	Adult	Right				
17	Adult	Right			Stone	1 iron pin, 8 beads, 2 buttons
18	Adult	Right	Across		Stone	

19	Adult	Right		Stone	
20	Child			Stone	
21	Adult	Right		Stone	
22	Child			Stone	
23	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
24	Adult	Straight		Stone	
25	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
26	Adult				Body jumbled
27	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
28	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
29	Adult	Right	Across		
30	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	Limestone cover
31	Adult	Right		Stone	
32	Adult				
33	Adult	Right		Stone	
34	Child				
35	Adult	Right			
36	Adult	Right		Stone	
37	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
38	Child				
39	Adult				
40	Child	Straight			
41	Adult	Right		Stone	
42				Stone	
43	Child				
44	Adult	Right			
45	Adult	Right		Stone	
46	Child				
47	Adult	Right	Across		
48	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
49	Child				
50	Adult	Right	Across		
51	Adult	Right			
52	Adult	Right			Body twisted to right
53					
54	Adult	Straight			
55	Adult	Right			
56	Adult	Right	Across		
57	Adult	Right			Body twisted to right
58	Adult	Right	Across		Stone beside the skull
59	Adult	Right			
60	Adult	Right	Across		
61	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
62	Child			Stone	
63	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
64	Adult	Right	Across	Stone	
65	Adult	Right		Stone	
66	Adult	Right	Across		
67	Adult	Right			
68	Adult	Right			
69	Adult	Straight	Across		

All grave chambers were aligned south-west to north-east according to Islamic traditions. A slight deviation from this orientation could be observed in a few cases, however this should not be viewed as a tendency to go beyond the accepted practice. Simply, certain mistakes could have

been made in finding the proper direction while digging these grave chambers. As required by Islamic burial practices the width of grave chambers was 40 cm, the length depended on the height of the deceased.

The skeletons' position in the graves was in line with the chamber alignment. The deceased were buried on their backs or right shoulders with their heads at the south-west end of the chamber. The skulls were turned to the south-east to face Mecca, (Photos 5-10). In some of the graves the position of skeletons was slightly different. Moreover, the bones in Grave 26 were all in a disorderly state. Here the skull turned upwards was found at the opposite end of the chamber by the skeleton's legs. The hip-bone was also at that end of the grave close to the skull. Photo 14).

The arm bones in Grave 10 were seen resting on the belly region of the skeleton (Photos 12-13) although according to Muslim traditions the dead person should be buried with the arms aligned parallel to the body. Around the hand bones a piece of obsidian was found with no marks of being worked.

In Grave 58 a small 6 x5 x 3 cm stone was rested against the skeleton's forehead (Photos 15-16).

- *Archaeological Material Recovered from Graves*

According to Muslim burial practices no object is placed in the grave together with the deceased. This rule has been strictly observed through centuries. Therefore finding of jewellery in Muslim burials is an extremely interesting phenomenon.

One iron pin on the skeleton's chest and 8 beads and 2 buttons around the leg bones were found in Grave 17. In Grave 74 only one button was found.

Grave 17

1. A 7.5 cm long iron pin made of round profile wire. The head of this slightly bent pin is flat. (Photo 11, No. 1).
2. There are 3 beads made of red agate. One of them is biconical, the second is cone-shaped and the third one is ball-shaped. The holes in the beads were made by one way drilling (Photo 11, No. 2-4).
3. The number of kauri type beads is 2. Their state of preservation is satisfactory (Photo 11, No. 5-6).
4. There are two faience buttons. Although they are different in size, their shape could be said to be identical. Each of them has two holes. Their shape is flat and oblong (Photo 11, No. 7-8).
5. Two small paste beads. One of them is broken right in the centre. These beads made of blue paste have a grey coat (Photo 11, No. 9-10).
6. A bead made of black substance has an oval-cylindrical shape. The surface of the bead is decorated with a line that was scratched along its centre with a sharp tool. Two parallel wavy lines run on either side of this central line. These wavy lines are so made that the resulting ornament resembles a fish (Photo 11, No. 11).

Grave 74

One faience button was discovered in this grave. This flat-oval button has two holes. For all other characteristics it is identical with the buttons found in Grave 17 (Photo 11, No. 12).

IV. Analytical results

- *Interpretation of Excavation Results*

Although the archaeological excavations carried out at this site for the purpose of reburial of Muslim graves have in general yielded results that were expected, nevertheless there are a few interesting observations to be made in this connection. As mentioned above the position of the skeleton in Grave 26 where the bones were found in a mixed order is not typical of Muslim burials. It would not be correct to relate this disorder to the damage that might have been caused by later ploughing or other agricultural activity as the top of this grave and the neighbouring graves had not been destroyed. Moreover, all the graves at the cemetery were found at 0.8-1.2 m depth which is not affected by ploughing. It is very likely that the skeleton disorder in Grave 26 was caused by its reburial.

In Grave 10 the skeleton was found with the arms on the stomach. One splinter of black obsidian lay close to the skeleton's hand bones. Its skull was not facing south-east but was turned upward. Unfortunately the leg bones of the skeleton had been destroyed by machines working in the pipeline easement. It appears the deceased was not buried according to Muslim funeral rites. This position of the skeleton should probably be accounted for by pre-Islamic, pagan relics. Ethnographic investigations show that until recently in most areas of Azerbaijan, including the Shamkir District where the Zayamchai cemetery is located there used to be a custom to put a black stone in the dying man's palm to "quickly let his spirit out of the body" and allow the agonizing man to pass away comfortably. According to the belief the spirit of the dying man allegedly transfers to the black stone and the man dies comfortably. Most likely that the piece of obsidian found close to the hand bones of the skeleton in Grave 10 had something to do with that custom.

- *Discussion and Analysis of the Results of the Work Compared with Other Sites of a Similar Nature on the Pipeline Route*

In addition to the Zayamchai site dozens of Muslim graves were found and reburied at Seyidlar I ancient settlement, Samukh District, and Girag Kasaman I medieval settlement, Agstafa District located accordingly at KP 316 and KP 405 of the pipeline route. However the graves at these sites though lacking surface markers were outliers of a Muslim cemetery nearby. As to the Zayamchai Muslim cemetery it was entirely covered with soil and no surface indicators were detected prior to the pipeline construction.

- *Discussion of the Site Within a Regional and National Context*

As is said above a stone was found resting against the skeleton's forehead in Grave 58. The custom to put a stone under a dead person's head is known to have begun in Azerbaijan way back in the Eneolithic Period. Ethnographic research proves that this custom is still alive in some of the regions of Azerbaijan.

Because of absence of any artefacts it is extremely difficult to date the Zayamchai Muslim cemetery, in a wider sense, any Muslim cemetery that has no epigraphic inscriptions. As to the finds in Graves 17 and 74 it should be noted that such jewellery samples were widely used through the entire middle Ages and the period preceding it. However a number of facts may serve as a starting point to put forward certain ideas about the age of the graves at this site. In the first place, deviation in the position of some of the skeletons from the common Islamic practice is characteristic of the pre-Islamic pagan traditions. During the excavations conducted in Mingachevir some of the graves dating to early Christian period (fifth to eighth centuries) yielded the archaeological material consisting of various items of decoration. Researchers explain this fact as relics of paganism. In Zayamchai too the archaeological material found in some of the graves should be classified as relics of paganism. From this point of view the iron pin found on the skeleton's chest in Grave 17 could be an exception. The pin might probably have been used to fasten the cerement. This idea is also supported by the bent in the middle of the pin. As was noted above, no graves excavated in the Zayamchai cemetery produced epigraphic inscriptions. All this

strongly suggests that the Zayamchai Muslim cemetery dates back to the early stage of expansion of Islam (eighth to tenth centuries), when the Arabic script was not widely used in Azerbaijan.

V. Illustrations

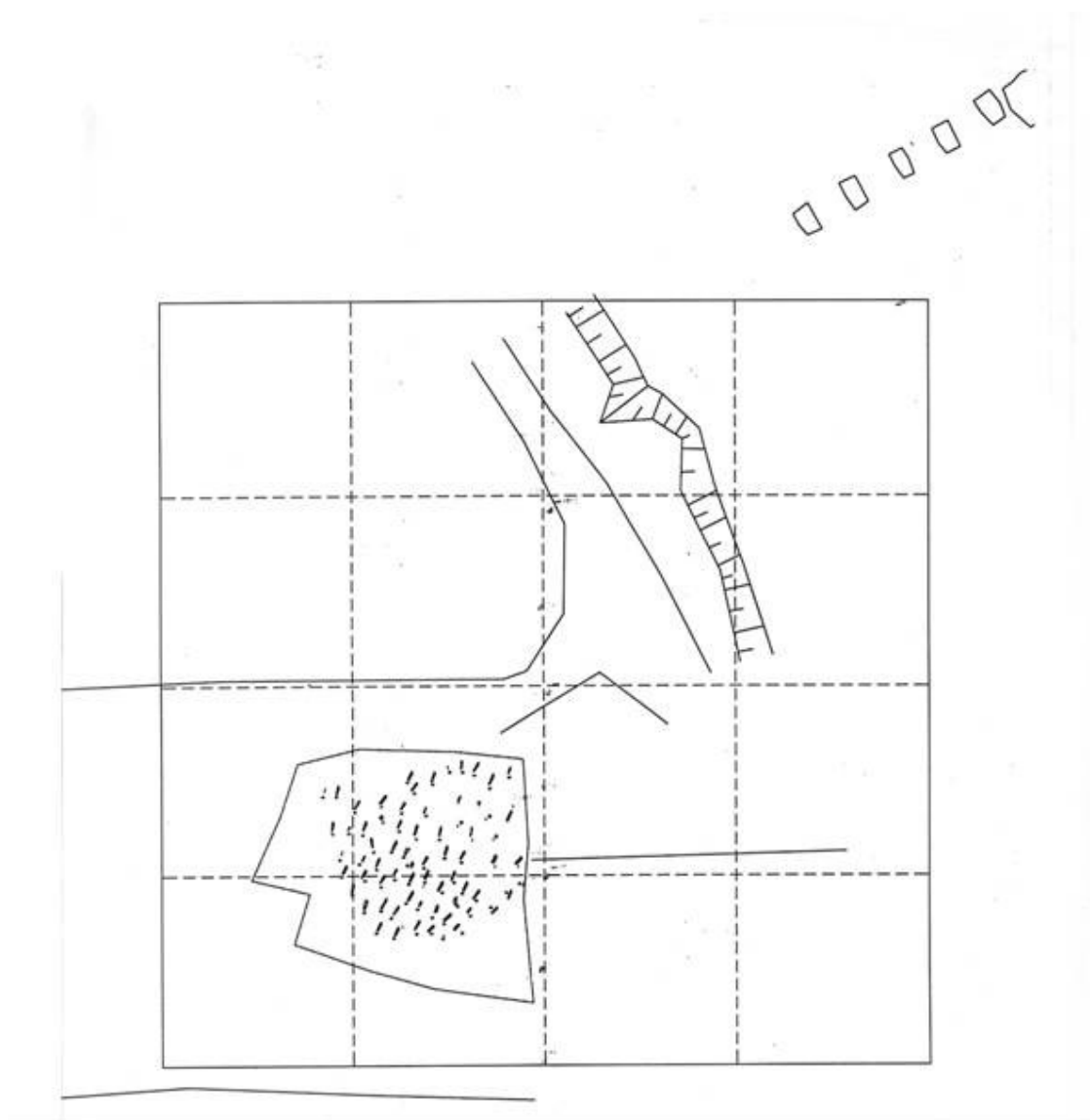


Figure 1.

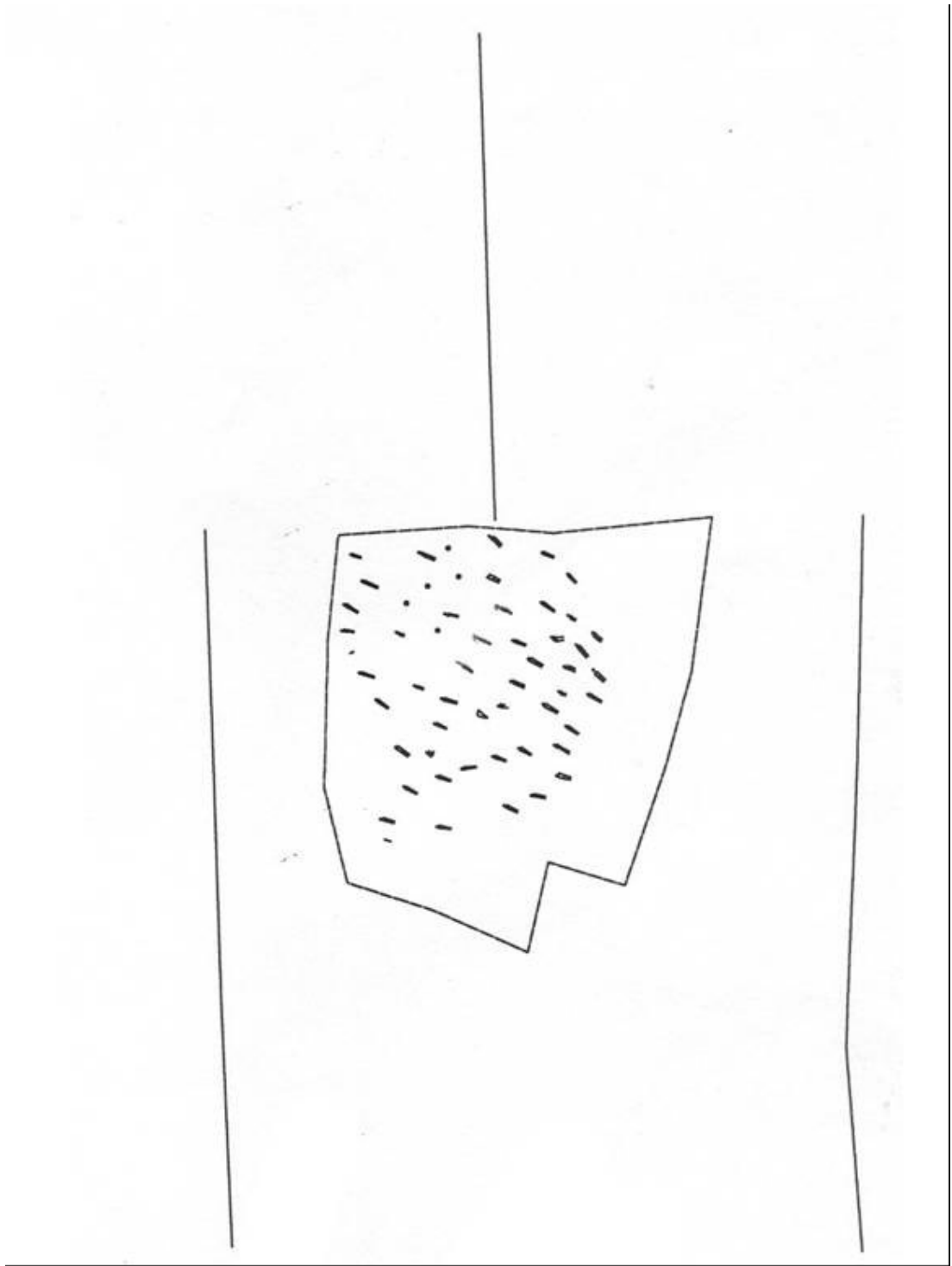


Figure 2.

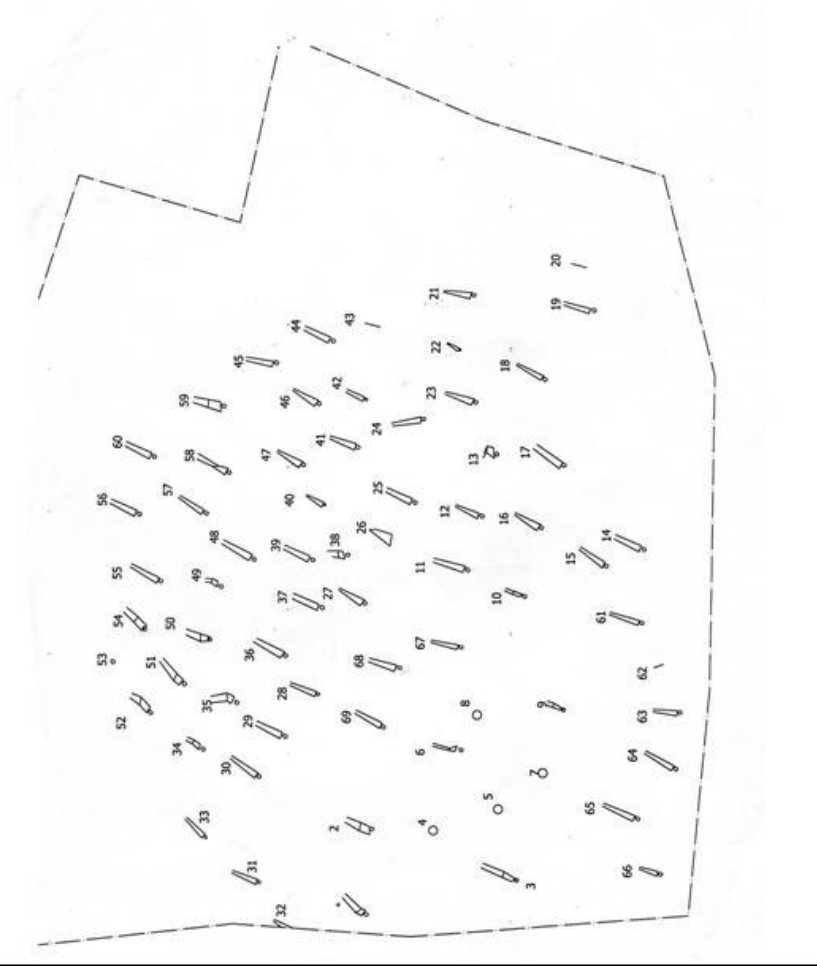


Figure 3.



Photo 1.



Photo 2.



Photo 3.



Photo 4.



Photo 5.



Photo 6.



Photo 7.



Photo 8.



Photo 9.



Photo 10.



Photo 11.



Photo 12.



Photo 13.



Photo 14.



Photo 15.



Photo 16.

VI. Inventory of Artefacts

	KP	Type of Site	Material	Find	Qnt.	Comment
1	356	cemetery	iron	pin	1	Grave 17
2	356	cemetery	agate	bead	3	Grave 17
3	356	cemetery	kauri	bead	2	Grave 17
4	356	cemetery	faience	button	2	Grave 17
5	356	cemetery	paste	bead	2	Grave 17
6	356	cemetery	alloy	bead	1	Grave 17
7	356	cemetery	faience	button	1	Grave 74