Field Report 2025 Excavation Campaign Yedditepe Burial Ground, Kurgan No. 5 (Fuzuli District, Azerbaijan)

Azerbaijani-Korean-Swiss Joint Expedition (2023-2025)

Contributors: Zaur Hasanov (Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences) · Kim Jong-Il (Seoul National University) · Gino Caspari (University of Bern / Max Planck Institute)

Abstract

In 2025, the Azerbaijani-Korean-Swiss Joint Expedition partially excavated Kurgan No. 5 at the Yedditepe burial ground (Fuzuli District, western Azerbaijan). The excavation documented a clear sequence of mound construction, including deposition of chamber-excavation spoil, sod-based mound build-up, and a mixed build up layer affected by central subsidence consistent with burial-chamber collapse. Portable finds were extremely limited, and bone preservation was poor. The main contribution of the 2025 season is therefore the architectural and stratigraphic documentation of mound building practices within the Yedditepe cemetery. 2025 has to be seen as a preparation campaign for 2026 when we will further approach the main entrance shaft of the burial chamber.

1. Introduction

The Yedditepe burial ground is located in western Azerbaijan (Fuzuli District) in an open steppe landscape. The cemetery occupies a natural ridge that was deliberately used as the foundation for a line of monumental earthen burial mounds (kurgans). Nineteen mounds can still be identified with confidence. The best-preserved burial mounds are arranged in two north-south rows along the ridge, and faint traces of additional mounds suggest that parts of the funerary landscape have been substantially reduced or erased by modern agriculture.

Yedditepe is significant for Iron Age archaeology because it preserves steppe-style funerary monumentality in a region where comparable complexes have seldom been excavated under controlled conditions and the use of modern interdisciplinary scientific methods. The construction logic of the monuments and the material assemblages recovered in earlier seasons show affinities with Scythian traditions from the northern Black Sea region but also exhibit local traditions and ideas. At the same time, regional chronologies remain underexplored: absolute dating is limited, and much of the Iron Age falls within the Hallstatt radiocarbon plateau, which ultimately reduces chronological resolution and requires a reliance on stylistics as a dating method. Within this setting, the expedition's programme aims to document grave architecture, construction sequences, and ritual practice at Yedditepe in a manner that supports both intra-site comparison and integration into wider Eurasian debates.

The 2025 season (Kurgan No. 5) was designed as a comparative campaign within this multi-year project, building on two previously excavated burial mounds that provide the key contextual baseline.

The previous excavation of one of the largest mounds in the line (height about 5.6 m; diameter about 45-50 m) exposed a large burial chamber. The chamber architecture included an oval upper outline and a more rectangular floor, and the ceiling had been covered by substantial wooden beams running north-south. The burial assemblage was exceptional: a two-wheeled wooden chariot was deposited with a human individual; two oxen were buried beneath the yoke and equipped with elaborate bronze headgear; multiple horses were placed alongside the vehicle; and further animal deposits, weapons, beads, and numerous ceramic vessels were recorded. This mound demonstrates the potential for complex, high-status funerary deposits at Yedditepe and provides a key reference for interpreting ritual practice and interregional connections. The recovery of relatively well-preserved wood inside a heavy bronze axe head recently yielded a number of tree rings. This is great, because it allows us to process the wood with multiple radiocarbon dates and narrow down the construction period through statistical modelling.

The expedition investigated Kurgan No. 4, which had been flattened by agricultural activity. Despite the destruction of its upper mound stratigraphy, excavation revealed a deep entrance feature and two catacomb chambers whose entrances had originally been sealed with large mud bricks. Recording included quadrant-based excavation and high-resolution digital documentation. Evidence for looting was clear, but significant finds remained, including Scythian-style horse harness elements, animal sacrifices, decorative metalwork, ceramic vessels, and extremely large numbers of beads recovered through sieving a mixed layer inside the burial chamber. Typological comparisons suggest a placement in the later 7th to 6th centuries BCE for key components of the assemblage. Together with the 2022 mound, Kurgan No. 4 demonstrates that Yedditepe preserves both architectural solutions (catacombs and chambers) and material signatures relevant to Scythian cultural traditions in the Lesser Caucasus.

Kurgan No. 5 was selected for excavation in 2025 to complement these earlier results in two ways. First, it offered an opportunity to document mound construction and stratigraphy in a monument that retained substantial mound deposits, enabling direct observation of building sequences that cannot be reconstructed for the truncated Kurgan No. 4. Second, field observations suggested that Kurgan No. 5 shares construction characteristics with other Yedditepe mounds, making it suitable for evaluating the degree of standardisation in monument building across the cemetery and for testing how chamber construction and collapse are expressed in mound profiles.

The excavation documented a coherent sequence of mound construction. The kurgan was built on an ancient ground surface. Yellow subsoil excavated during the construction of the burial chamber was deposited adjacent to the central feature. The early mound build-up employed stacked cut grass sods, visible as stepped deposition surfaces. The burial chamber area was then covered with yellow soil and sealed beneath a final mixed capping layer. Importantly, the upper mixed unit slopes downward toward the mound centre, consistent with subsidence into a collapsed chamber void. Portable finds were scarce, and a single disturbed burial context with poorly preserved human and animal bone was identified in upper deposits without diagnostic objects.

2. Site and research context

The ridge-top placement of the Yedditepe barrows creates a highly visible funerary corridor overlooking the surrounding steppe. Such positioning is consistent with the role of kurgans as enduring statements of rank and territorial marking, and it may also relate to movement routes linking

lowland and foothill zones of the Lesser Caucasus. The combination of monumentality, strategic placement, and rich material assemblages in some mounds suggests that Yedditepe has the potential to illuminate local expressions of steppe funerary traditions and their interaction with southern cultural spheres.

Across seasons, the expedition has integrated excavation with systematic spatial documentation. Due to the relative proximity of an airport, obtaining drone licenses remains extremely difficult. The comparative framework established by the previous campaigns highlights strong variability in both architectural form and artefact assemblages. The 2025 campaign contributes to this framework primarily by providing well-recorded mound stratigraphy that supports the interpretation of construction processes and post-depositional deformation.

3. Methods

Kurgan No. 5 was divided into four quadrants using strings and stakes aligned to the cardinal directions. This layout ensured controlled excavation and provided clear reference surfaces for documentation. Because the upper mound deposits were sterile, a mechanical excavator was used selectively under continuous archaeological supervision to remove sterile soil efficiently. Hand excavation and fine cleaning followed whenever stratigraphic interfaces, construction surfaces, or features required detailed recording. Documentation focused on: (i) identifying the pre-kurgan construction ground surface; (ii) distinguishing deposits interpreted as spoil from burial-chamber excavation; (iii) recording sod-based mound building units; (iv) describing closure deposits above the burial zone; and (v) mapping deformation patterns in upper units consistent with subsidence and collapse.

4. Results

4.1 Mound stratigraphy and construction sequence

Kurgan No. 5 exhibits a simple but well-defined stratigraphy. The basal unit is the natural surface on which the kurgan was built. A distinct yellow subsoil deposit adjacent to the central zone is interpreted as spoil derived from excavating the burial chamber and deposited alongside it. Above this, the mound build-up includes a sod-based unit with stepped deposition surfaces, consistent with the placement of cut grass sod blocks during construction.

The burial chamber area was subsequently covered with yellow subsoil. A final mixed layer was then deposited across the mound. This upper unit slopes downward toward the centre, a pattern consistent with subsidence into an underlying void and therefore with the collapse of a chamber after burial. Such deformation is a key proxy for recognising collapsed chamber architecture even where the chamber itself is not preserved or accessible. Whether this collapse is also associated with a robbery of the chamber is difficult to determine at the current point in time. We have not found clear robbery tunnels that would suggest a more recent destruction of the mound but an ancient looting can unfortunately not be excluded. The 2026 campaign will provide clarity here.

4.2 Finds and preservation

Artefactual material was extremely limited. A single disturbed burial context with fragmentary human remains and associated animal bone was identified in the uppermost mound deposits. No diagnostic objects were associated with this context, and its relationship to the primary kurgan burial remains unclear. Bone preservation was poor. Skeletal remains were very brittle and, in places, disintegrated during excavation, indicating an unfavourable geochemical environment. This has implications for sampling and conservation. While radiocarbon dating is possible, chronological resolution for much of the Iron Age is limited by the Hallstatt plateau, and any future dating strategy needs to prioritise well-contextualised samples and complementary approaches where feasible. Both DNA and protein molecules are not well-preserved on this site.

5. Preliminary interpretation

The 2025 excavation campaign of Kurgan No. 5 provides limited evidence for burial wealth or diagnostic material culture apart from the very large mound structure. The campaigns principal contribution is the documentation of mound construction. The recorded sequence demonstrates sod-based building, the deposition of chamber-excavation spoil, deliberate closure deposits above the burial zone, and central deformation consistent with chamber collapse. The observed construction logic aligns with patterns recorded in other Yedditepe monuments, supporting the interpretation that parts of the cemetery were built according to shared templates.

6. Conclusions and outlook

The 2025 excavation of Kurgan No. 5 strengthens the comparative framework for the Yedditepe cemetery by providing well-recorded evidence for mound construction and post-depositional collapse. Although diagnostic artefacts were not yet recovered, the stratigraphic observations refine expectations for how burial-chamber excavation, closure, and collapse are expressed in mound profiles. For 2026 we will focus on the same mound and our work will integrate these results with the architectural and artefactual datasets from previously excavated mounds.