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THE LOWER AND MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC IN NORTHWESTERN AZERBAIJAN: PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM TEST EXCAVATIONS AT SHISH-GUZEY AND GADIR-DERE

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The Lower and Middle Palaeolithic record of Azerbaijan is underresearched, and currently contributes little towards the developing models concerning hominin behaviour and migration in the Caucasus Region. Rich sites such as Dmanisi (Gabunia et al. 2000; De Lumley *et al*. 2002), and Kudaro I (Liubin 1959), Georgia, and Nor Geghi (Adler *et al*. 2014), Armenia, are often used as proxies for describing patterns across the entire region. However, Azerbaijan possesses around 40 sites attributed to the Palaeolithic, which although often overlooked, do offer potential for understanding regional and more local patterns in hominin technological behaviour, though very few have been stratigraphically excavated. The country's most famous, and possibly also most ancient site, Azykh cave (Hüseinov 1963; Hüseinov *et al*. 1974), was excavated before the adoption of modern methods, therefore much of the information regularly obtained by archaeologists today has been lost. Other than Azykh cave, only a handful of cave sites are known, primarily Dashsalakhly and Damjili (Hüseinov 1959), Taglar (Djafarov 1983), Gazma cave (Zeynalov 2016), and Buzeir caves (Djafarov 1999). Most other information comes from surface collections found in open environments, where material has been observed eroding out of weathered soils. A large concentration of sites exists in the north-west of Azerbaijan close to the borders with Georgia and Armenia. Most of this material was discovered during extensive survey in the 1960s and 70s along the banks of the north-west to south-east running River Kura. In 2017 fresh research was drafted by the author as part of his doctoral studies at the University of Leicester, aiming to characterise material from a few of these sites to help understand technological markers and chronology of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic tool typologies. This short report will present some initial results of this work.

In 2018, lithic analysis of material from Shish-guzey and Gadir-dere (Figure 1) was undertaken at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku. The assessment of these assemblages revealed mixed collections of possible Lower and Middle Palaeolithic implements. The sites are in close proximity and are both located on the south-western banks of the River Kura, north-west Azerbaijan. Due to the mixed nature of material and the lack of intrusive site investigation, a period of fieldwork was scheduled for summer 2019 to excavate test pits at each location in order to understand site formation, assess deposits for OSL dating and for the retrieval of further artefacts.

The site of Shish-guzey is positioned at an elevation of 591m on a ridge that looks north-west across the vast River Kura floodplain. Artefacts made on volcanic tuff are eroding out of the surface soil and are scattered across the entire top of the ridge. A test pit was excavated, but produced little evidence for deposition. Instead the soil is

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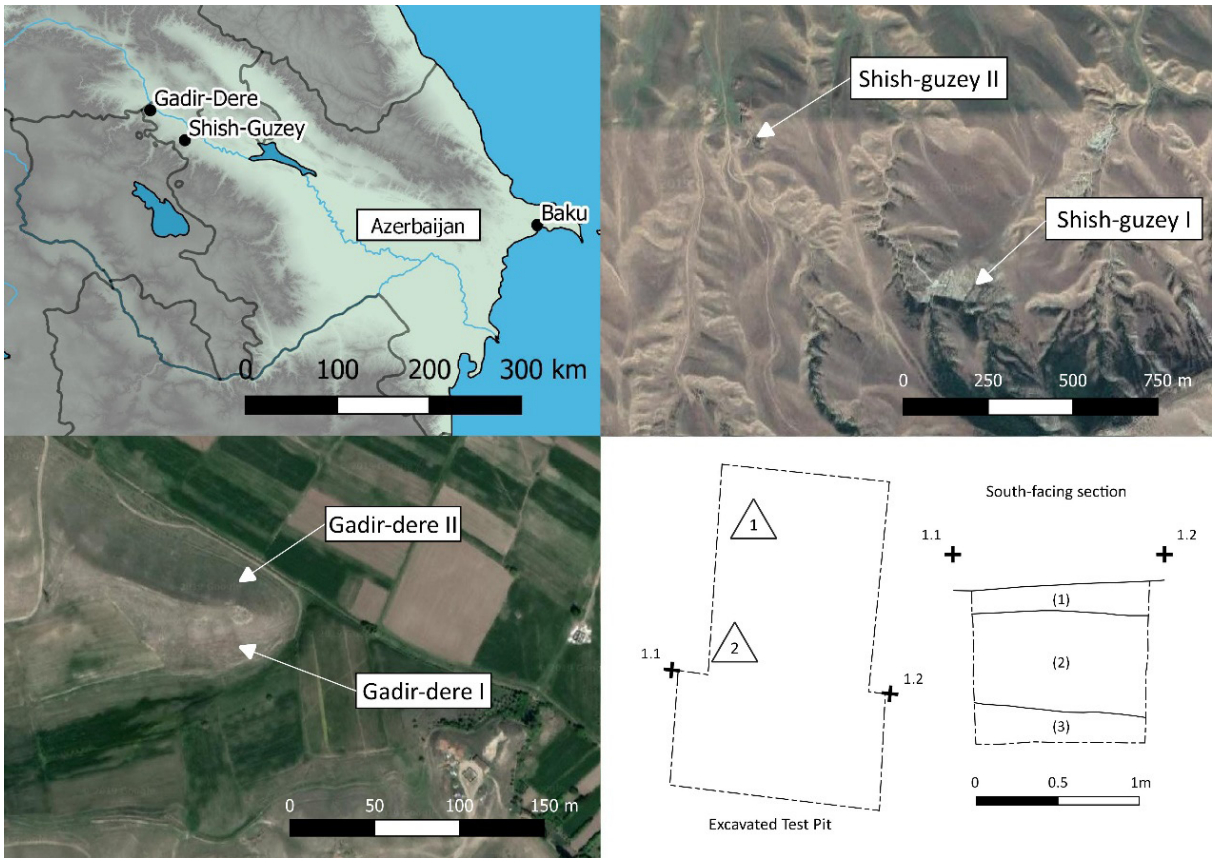

Figure 1: Top left: map of Azerbaijan showing location of sites, Top right: Shish-guzey sites, Bottom left: Gadir-dere sites, Bottom right: excavated test pit at Gadir-dere I with location of artefacts recovered from layer 3 represented by the numbered triangles.

formed by weathering of the underlying geology. Survey of the surrounding area revealed a number of other possible sites, most notably, Shish-guzey II, located across a deep valley c. 900 m away to the north-west. The Shish-guzey II site was found near a rocky outcrop and produced a Levallois point, large flakes and a large core. Further bifaces, scrapers and flakes were discovered at the base of large hills and across the valley floor and are likely to have derived from the upper slopes and hilltops in the area. A wide range of raw materials were used to fashion implements, namely volcanic tuff, basalt and obsidian. Further survey and test pitting is required to help distinguish *true* sites from derived material to better understand hominin movement, raw material acquisition and tool curation in this rich area.

Following the work at Shish-guzey, attention was turned towards Gadir-dere, where large handaxes, flakes and scrapers had been recovered in the 1960s. Gadir-dere is situated on the northern bank of an old tributary of the River Kura at the confluence with the main river itself. The site was discovered by the retrieval of artefacts at the base of the bank around 20 m from the valley floor to the south. The artefacts extend along the bank for approximately 80 m and are restricted to a 10 m wide band. The site would have been very attractive to humans and animals seeking resources provided by both rivers. The large bank left by this alluvial system was surveyed on its northern slopes and a second, slightly smaller, but more concentrated site, Gadir-dere II, was identified through the presence of a number of Levallois implements. The artefacts seemed characteristically

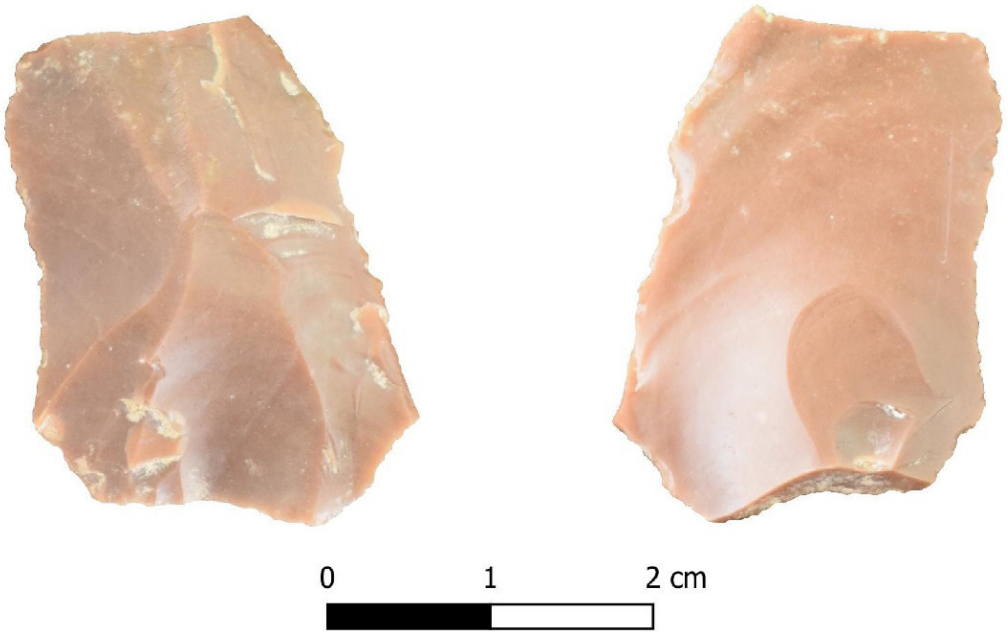

Figure 2: Broken flake with radial dorsal scars recovered from layer 3 at Gadir-dere I.

Levallois in nature and not contaminated with Acheulean implements as with Gadir-dere I nearby. A test pit was excavated in the area that produced the highest concentration of finds during survey at Gadir-dere I.

The results were extremely exciting. Three layers were identified, and two artefacts were recovered from the lowermost layer (layer 3): a broken flake with radial dorsal scars and a small flake (Figure 2). The broken flake was made of flint and its radial dorsal pattern appeared indicative of Levallois technology. Some potential retouch is present along the right edge, and the butt resembled a chapeaux de gendarme type. Samples were taken of the sediments in layers 2 and 3, in an attempt produce an OSL date, which will be carried out at the University of Leicester, with results scheduled to be available in early 2020. The discovery of artefacts in the third horizon below the surface is tantalising, and is of high importance to Palaeolithic studies in the region for two reasons: If the artefact bearing sediments are later than the terminus for Acheulean cultures in the Caucasus, then the surface material is derived, but if an early date is realised, then this technology may share affinities with early Levallois material from Nor Geghi in Armenia. Either way, the recovery of these two flakes represents the only occasion where *in-situ* artefacts have been recovered from a stratified open locality in Azerbaijan. The investigations are set to continue in 2020 and will hopefully determine the true age, chronology of events and nature of occupation at Gadir-dere I.

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