

Report on the outcomes of a Short-Term Scientific Mission¹

Action number:

Grantee name:

Details of the STSM

Title: Cultural Heritage of Games in Azerbaijan

Start and end date: 20/07/2024 to 11/08/2024

Description of the work carried out during the STSM

Description of the activities carried out during the STSM. Any deviations from the initial working plan shall also be described in this section.

¹ This report is submitted by the grantee to the Action MC for approval and for claiming payment of the awarded grant. The Grant Awarding Coordinator coordinates the evaluation of this report on behalf of the Action MC and instructs the GH for payment of the Grant.

(max. 500 words)

My work with Aslan Gasimov at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan focused on various aspects of research, networking, and capacity building regarding the research of the cultural history of games in Azerbaijan. The work progressed with two main objectives: to foster better understanding of the evidence for games in the archaeological and ethnographic record and how to record them, as well as to better understand, document, and research the cultural heritage of games in Azerbaijan itself.

To accomplish this, Aslan and I met with many people in Baku, Gobustan, Sheki, Nakhchivan, Sherur, Salyan, and in rural communities to learn more about the games they play. We also met with scholars at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, the Gobustan Preserve, the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, the Nakhchivan Academy of Sciences, and Nakhchivan State University to learn about the kinds of research on games that people had conducted previously. We also conducted archival research at the National Library of Azerbaijan to consult research that had been done on games but which is inaccessible anywhere else.

Over the course of this research we recorded the rules for many different kinds of games as recounted by people who once played them as well as those who have researched them. For the most part, people remembered children's games and sports that, while technically not board games, provide insight into the playful culture of Azerbaijan. We did successfully record rules for backgammon, dominoes, and draughts as they are played in Azerbaijan.

The greatest success was in tracking down rules for mancala-style games, which were mentioned in the literature but incompletely described, as shown in the Ludii implementation of Mərəköçdü, which was shown to never end. We found two people who play this game which is played primarily by shepherds and is being forgotten. We found two different versions of it, called *qığ mərə*. Coupled with the evidence for slight variations in the ways that backgammon and draughts are played, we observed that local variations in play exist in these kinds of traditional games.

We furthermore explored the archaeological evidence for games, examining objects that could have been used for play. We focused on patterns of cupules arranged in a circle around a central, larger hole, as well as clay tokens, which are often interpreted as administrative tools, but which may have a playful use as well. Discussions around these relevant topics occurred with colleagues at the Gobustan Reserve, with archaeologists in Nakhchivan, as well as at the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. This has been identified as a potentially fruitful avenue of future research, especially once the new archaeological lab of the National Academy acquires digital microscopes, making use-wear analysis a possible way to examine such clay tokens in greater detail.

Description of the STSM main achievements and planned follow-up activities

Description and assessment of whether the STSM achieved its planned goals and expected outcomes, including specific contribution to Action objective and deliverables, or publications resulting from the STSM. Agreed plans for future follow-up collaborations shall also be described in this section.

(max. 500 words)

The main achievements of this STSM were the documentation, for the first time in a western European language, for the games of backgammon, draughts, dominoes, and mancala in Azerbaijan. The identification and discovery of other mentions of gaming material in publications has also brought to light more of the material culture of games in the region from prehistory until the present day, and provides great opportunity to highlight this material and to further develop game studies in the region.

As the work of this STSM has been particularly fruitful and wide-ranging, Aslan and I have planned five publications to disseminate the results. We feel strongly that these results need to be published in Azerbaijani, so that they are accessible to local scholars and other interested parties, as well as in international journals in English to bring more awareness to the heritage of Azerbaijan outside of the country.

The first article will be published in the Journal of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, and will focus on the details of the games we documented. A draft of this article has already been started, and it should be submitted before the end of September.

A second article, to be published in English in a games-focused journal, will describe the board games we documented in Azerbaijan and their connections to the histories of those particular games, as well as discussing the theoretical implications of traditional games and their variations.

The third article will focus on the archaeological material of games in Azerbaijan from prehistory until more recent periods, which will also include GameTable member Mircaavid Aghalarov. This will be published in an international archaeological journal. A fourth article with a similar focus will be published in the Journal of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan or another archaeological journal in Azerbaijani.

Finally, we are planning a book on playful culture in Azerbaijan from past to present. We will invite many of the colleagues that we spoke with over the course of this STSM, who focus on other playful aspects of culture (music, dance, horse games, toys) to contribute chapters to this volume. We intend to publish this in English and Azerbaijani.