

## **PICASP PROJECT: A SUMMARY OF A GREAT EXPERIENCE**

### **From the application to the transformations, reorganization and to the results**

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PiCASP has been planned since the beginning as a project aiming to develop an approach based on learning by doing, as training in action, especially through the introduction in Caspian countries of innovative didactic methods in SME Entrepreneurship and Management, as well as in order to contribute to the modernization of university curricula through the development of open educational resources with MOOCs and PE (Practical Enterprise) experiences, developed directly in the Caspian countries. The project has been financed in 2020 by EACEA (European Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) within the call KA2 – Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices – Capacity Building in Higher Education (submission n. 617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). The list of the partners was initially larger (fig.1), including partners from Italy (UdA- Chieti University as Grant Holder, and as partners SerInAr SCpA), Poland (UW – University of Warsaw), Lithuania (VGTU University of Vilnius), Kazakhstan (YESSENOV/CSUTE University of Aktau and UIB University of Almaty), Azerbaijan (KHAZAR and ATMU Universities of Baku and MIRAS Association), Russia (Astrakhan and Volgograd Universities) and including Associate partners from Germany (PEN), Lithuania (GetWeb) and Italy (ICA- Italian Ministry of Culture).

Already during the preliminary meeting with the officers of the EACEA, it has been soon clear how important was to reorganize the PE (Practice Enterprise) and the MOOC courses not as final aims of the project but using them as tools for the development of PICASP, while there was certainly the need to transform the Cultural Heritage of the Caspian countries as the main content of the project. This new view brought soon to a new and wider version of the project, which practically became then definitively a pilot project using PE courses and MOOCs to implement the University-Enterprise Cooperation for the development of Caspian Area in Cultural Heritage and Cultural Tourism.

These adjustments have favoured the implementation and improvement of the contents of the project, which was very effective from the technical point of view, but was needing specific contents concerning Cultural Tourism, Cultural Heritage, sustainability and inclusivity, as suggested by the officers of EACEA and of the National Erasmus+ Offices. In this way the MOOC lectures got more exhaustive and also fascinating contents and more appropriate lectures, which aimed to promote a more sustainable and inclusive Cultural Tourism. Moreover, several meetings have been dedicated during the first year in order to explain the wider meaning for the Cultural Heritage, including Environmental, Geological, Demo-Ethno-Anthropological Heritage and not only Monumental, Artistic and Historical patrimony. The Caspian partners soon liked this wider perspective of their heritage, including tangible and intangible, as well as monumental and movable heritage. This large appreciation determined that soon the Caspian Partners started a more participative collaboration in the implementation of the project and they directly found their possible integrative contributions, working also on the possibility to homogenize more properly their contributions, information and parcourses. Thanks to a closer collaboration with teams working more directly on Cultural Heritage, such as the partners as UW-Poland, UdA-Italy and MIRAS-Azerbaijan, also the Caspian partners dealing generally with Management and Economy of Tourism, as UIB and YESSENOV in Kazakhstan and KHAZAR and ATMU in Azerbaijan, started to project courses in Cultural Heritage and to look for monuments, traditions, geo-parks, natural resources, ancient remains, petroglyphs and so on, which were then part of the courses but also part of the PE courses and laboratories with the students. Moreover, the great experience in MOOCs, PE and e-learning courses of partners as VGTU-Lithuania, SerInAr-Italy, PEN-Germany, has been a fundamental technical support for the creation of the PE labs and MOOCs courses.

However, after the first year of the project, another large and more traumatic change has been necessary in 2022, when, due to the Russo-Ukrainian struggle, new changes and readjustments have been done in order to reorganise the project more properly with the new version of the partnership.

The contents relating to the Cultural Heritage have been implemented, with meetings, events and field activities. In this way the calendar of the activities has not been changed too much; obviously all the activities did not include only technical and economic matters and issues, concerning the creation of PE, the development of MOOC, but also topics concerning courses and events specifically relating to Cultural Heritage in order to build intercultural comparisons, relationships, protocols and collaborations. In particular the cultural contents have been used within each activity and meeting as a base for constructing collaboration, common protocols and best practices and for building together a base for a common cultural resilient view relating to a common patrimony in European and Caspian countries.

Five WP (Work Packages) have been planned, involving all the partners and the associate partners for the preparation and then giving to specific partners (see fig.1) the development, the quality plan and the dissemination and exploitation. Obviously the role of the associate partners has been crucial for the preparation steps (WP1) of the project, both with

seminars, workshops and suggestions concerning methodologies and technologies, but also organised to present similar cases which have been of great help to start the project and build proper PICASP protocols.

ITALY	University of Chieti Pescara UDA (Grant Holder)	UDA	WP5	MANAGEMENT
AZERBAIJAN	Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University	ATMU	WP1	PREPARATION
POLAND	Uniwersytet Warszawski	OBA	WP1	
RUSSIA	Astrakan State University	ASU	WP2	DEVELOPMENT
LITHUANIA	Vilnius Gedeminas Technical University	VGTU	WP2	
KAZAKHSTAN	Caspian State University of Technologies and Engineering Named After Sh. Yessenov	CSUTE	WP3	QUALITY PLAN
KAZAKHSTAN	University of International Business	UIB	WP3	
RUSSIA	Volgograd State Technical University	VSTU	WP4	DISSEMINATION AND EXPLOITATION
ITALY	SERINAR	SERINAR	WP4	
AZERBAIJAN	Khazar University Baku	KHAZAR	WP2	
AZERBAIJAN	MIRAS Association	MIRAS	WP2 & 4	
LITHUANIA	JSC GET WEB	GetWeb	WP1	Associate Partners
ITALY	ICA- ITALIAN MINISTRY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE	ICA	WP1	Associate Partner
GERMANY	Practice Enterprise Network	PEN	WP1	Associate Partners

Fig.1 The partners and the Work Packages of PICASP project.

The first year the partners have dedicated the initial months to build the collaboration within the consortium, in order to become more effective as a group. The first period, with covid pandemic restrictions has been the most difficult and numerous webinars and web-meetings (fig.2) have been organised in order to start working together and to create a consolidated inclusive partnership.

The preliminary meetings and webinars organised by Chieti University have been specifically focusing on the concept of Cultural Heritage, in order to emphasize how wide the concept is and how largely inclusive should have been the view for each partner. According to the UNESCO definition, Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, buildings, sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance. It includes tangible heritage (movable or not and also underwater sites), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) both cultural and natural heritage, but also related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebrations, traditional dances and music and so on. Within the Caspian context it obviously also covers industrial heritage and petroglyphs, which are probably the most popular typologies of Heritage in this area, together with the extraordinary geological heritage.

Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention defines cultural heritage as:

- monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of history, art or science;

- sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.



Fig.2 Some shots from the webinars and web meetings.

This definition was developed in 1972 and concepts of cultural heritage have expanded since that time. Nonetheless, the definition has been interpreted very broadly to embrace the diversity of cultural heritage. The Operational Guidelines offer additional definitions regarding cultural landscapes, historic towns and town centres, heritage canals and heritage routes.

During the first year, therefore, each partner had the opportunity to dedicate webinars to their institutions, their towns and regions and to their countries, with docufilms, powerpoint presentations and conferences of specialists illustrating how wide and polyhedric is the Cultural Heritage of the Caspian area, including tangible and intangible Heritage, from monuments to geoparks, from archaeology to natural landscapes, from museums to local traditions, from traditional dances to local regional cuisine.

Furthermore, the Consortium of partners has been able to enforce the collaboration not only among the involved institutions and professors, but also among students, teachers and practitioners, especially through the training of the trainers, which were then employed locally for a larger and more capillary dissemination in each country of the partnership. Another important goal, which favoured local dissemination, has been the development of MOOC courses both in English, but also in Kazaki, Azerbaijani and Russian languages, in order to be more effective locally.

Among the preliminary steps, the partners have studied the different kinds of BA and Master courses already existing in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and already at this preliminary stage it has been soon clear that in both countries there were numerous courses in Management of the tourism, but the courses in Cultural Heritage were basically lacking in both countries. Therefore, the second year of the project has been dedicated in drawing the possible courses in Cultural Heritage, illustrating first which kinds of courses were well tested in Italy and Poland, but also in Europe in general, and then simulating possible BA and Master courses as models to test for the Caspian countries. It has been a successful operation, because already at the end of the second year UIB and YESSNOV in Kazakhstan and KHAZAR and ATMU in Azerbaijan have started several BA courses in Cultural Heritage as well as Management of Cultural Tourism, with a first group of students. The courses have soon been very effective, also thanks to seminars and practical training in collaboration with MIRAS Association. This step has been soon followed by the creation of groups of students, both from BA and Master courses, which followed the PE laboratories for creating their practical projects of development of touristic offers for the

617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

sustainable exploitation of the cultural and environmental heritage of their regions. At this point the long trip of the PICASP project, from planning the courses, through creating the courses, through training the trainers, arrived, at last, at its final destination: that is to the direct involvement of the students in real activities of PE.

Obviously, the more productive steps for PICASP have been the last two years, because the first BA courses and Masters, as well as PE laboratories and MOOCs have then reached already high standards and have been largely followed and attended.

Moreover, the possibility for the partners to move around the different countries of the partnership, has been also crucial for improving the collaboration. Therefore in 2022 two meetings have been organised in Italy (fig.3 and 4): the first one by Chieti University and ICA- Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, which was held in Rome, Chieti and Pescara, with conferences and field trips concerning archaeological and architectural heritage and how to promote a wider valorisation and dissemination.

This first activity in Italy was soon followed by a second event with practical seminars in Forli, which has been organised by SerInAr; the main topic of this second Italian event was concentrated on PE methodologies and tools for the management of cultural tourism.



Figs.3 and 4 Some shots during the meeting in Chieti, University G.d'Annunzio.]

The following field workshop and meeting has been organised in April 2023 in Warsaw (fig.5), where the University UW have offered the possibility both of conferences and round tables, but also specific tours of the town with professional guides, which have been able to illustrate to the partners how to choose thematic tracks in the town, how to promote local traditions and regional cuisine. The meeting in Warsaw has also been important to organise a roundtable to discuss together

617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

with the partners about the following steps of the project; it was then time to decide if to apply for an extension of the project in order to avoid to close everything in a very short time: the original deadline of the project, that is January 2024, was then approaching fast and most of the activities were still going on. The consortium decided to apply for an extension of 12 more months, especially because there was the crucial need to visit all the countries of the partnership and also to test with field trips the results of the project directly in the Caspian regions.



Fig.5 Some moments of the meeting in Warsaw

In September 2023 another field trip with conferences and seminars, this time concerning the technical aspects of the organization of the MOOCs, took place in Lithuania and Vilnius has been the splendid theatre of a further important improvement of the project (fig.6). Most of the Caspian partners, at that point, were already developing their BA and Master courses, with practical seminars in situ, and all of them were already setting up video recording studios with all the technical support for the MOOCs, but most of them still had practical problems in the exploitation of these new equipment and methodology. The seminars of the VGTU in Vilnius were then crucial to give a new start and when the partners went back home, in a few months already started their MOOC courses, transforming them into operative open source massive courses concerning their heritage and the management of the cultural tourism industry.



Fig.6 Shots of the meeting in VGTU, Lithuania

With the extension of twelve months was then possible to replan the project and together with all the partners it has been decided that for one year all the meetings were online, as sessions for illustrating issues and improvements. Only in November and in December 2024 the visits in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have been planned as final moments for the Caspian partners to properly illustrate their results. These visits have been important moments also for the European partners to meet all the colleagues involved locally in the project and also see the practical works of the students and test directly their proposal of Cultural tours.

Therefore, in November 2024 a long trip has been organised in Kazakhstan, by the partners UIB (Almaty) and YESSENOV University (Aktau), with round tables (fig.7) illustrating the results of the numerous new university courses, as well as the numerous links to MOOCs and docufilm concerning the region of the two institutions. Moreover, large sessions of the students have been organised, with the presentations of their practical projects and PE labs concerning Cultural tours in the region; the projects presented have been numerous and very successful.



Fig.7 some shots with the meetings in Aktau (above) and Almaty (below) with the presentations of the students

It has been also important the participation, to the final meeting in Almaty, of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Kazakhstan (<https://iicalmaty.esteri.it/> and <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61556089220414>), with a presentation of Dr Edoardo Crisafulli, illustrating to the partners and to the students the possibilities of collaboration and future improvements of the consortium for further joined projects of cooperation.

Moreover, during the long trip in Kazakhstan, also interesting visits have been organised with the help and the support of professors and students of the PICASP courses, such as for visiting the breathtaking geological beauties in Boszhyra and Mangistau (fig.8), where all participants were left speechless in front of the rocky panoramas immersed in a surreal atmosphere. The visit of the Museum of Archaeology and Local Tradition (fig.9) in Aktau has given a complete idea of the multifaceted culture of the region. From Aktau the group has moved to Almaty area, where the visits were organised to the National Museum of Almaty, rich in archaeological, historical, paleo-ethnological and anthropological heritage, as well as to the Mountain Park reserve at Shymbulak & Medeu, with snowy panoramas and very engaging views.

617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP



Fig. 8 Shots of the visits to the geological heritage in Aktau region, Kazakhstan

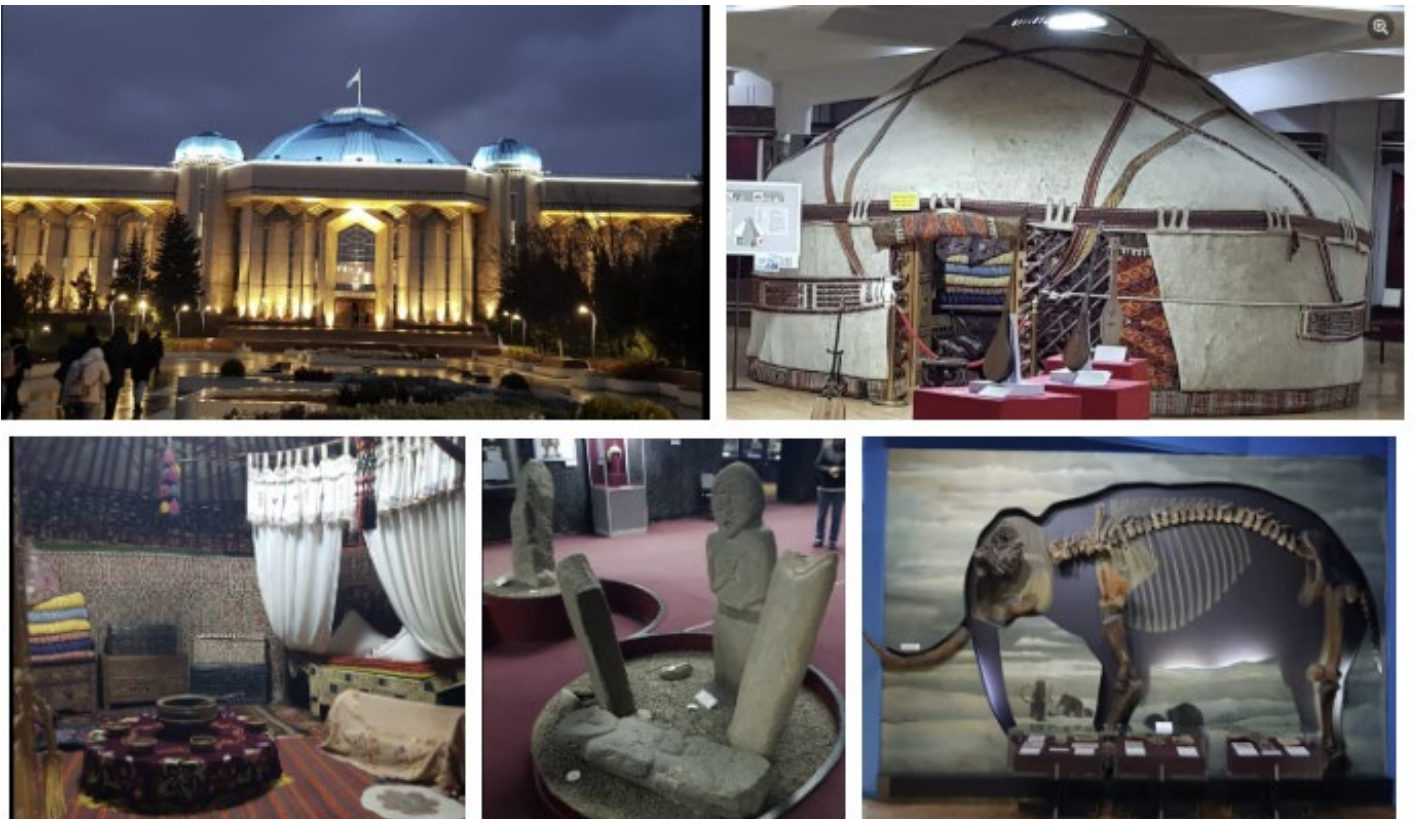


Fig.9 Almaty Central State Museum: archaeological and traditional heritage

Moreover, one day has been dedicated to the exciting visit of the Archaeological and Historical Park of Tamgaly (fig.10) where thousands and thousands of petroglyphs, dating from Neolithic to the Medieval period can be visited through tracks and paths which have transformed the area into a splendid open-air museum, which is also very well illustrated by signs and by very professional guides.

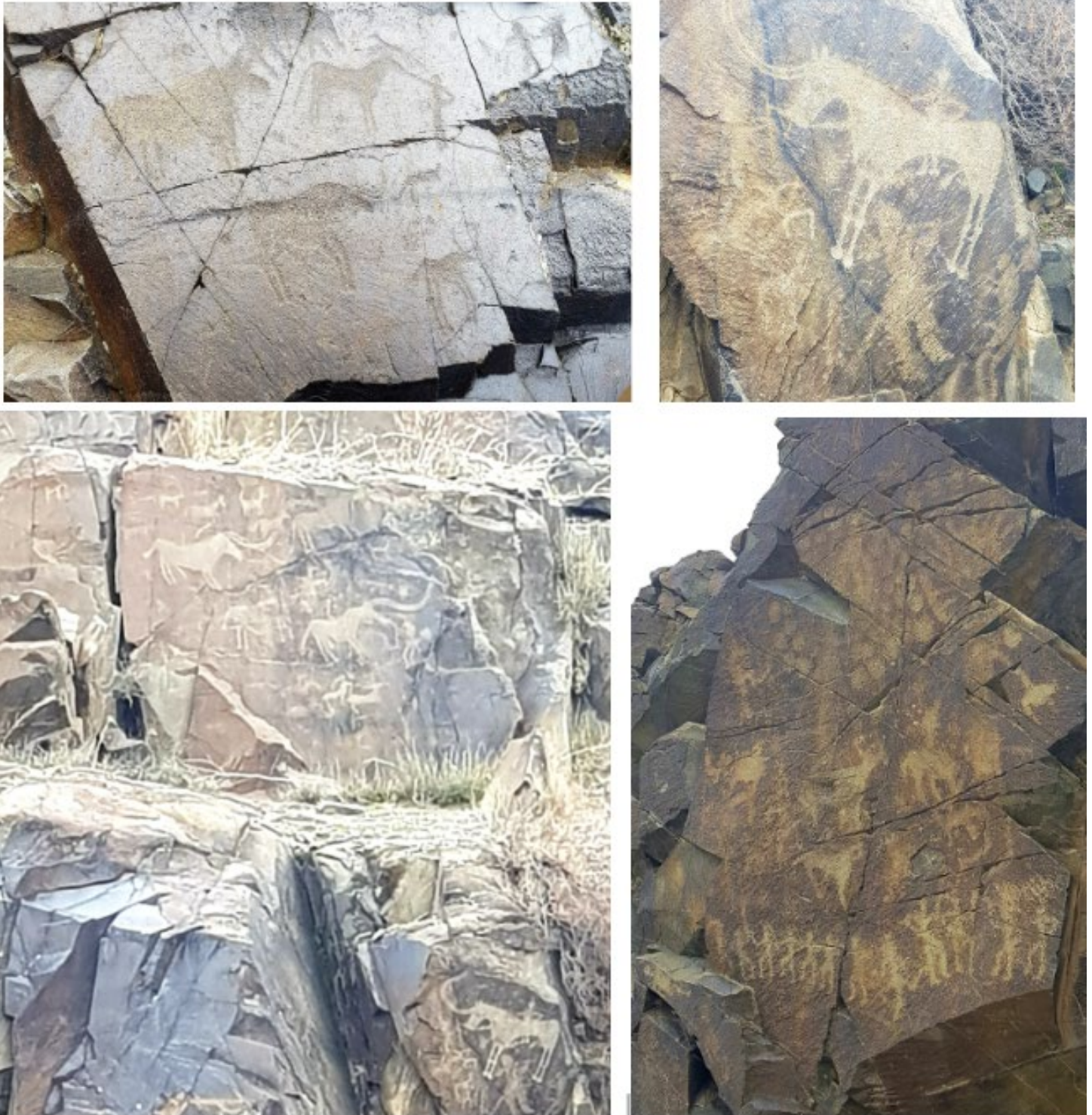


Fig.10 Some of the petroglyphs in the Archaeological and Historical Park of Tamgaly/Tanbaly

The petroglyphs seem to be located in a quite particular topographical context, where ancient volcanic rocky hills create a peculiar landscape, as delimiting a natural passage and forced tracks, where small settlements on the hilltops, ancient tombs on the plains and petroglyphs along the rocky slopes were marking the passages of caravans, goods, animals and ideas, attesting a semi-nomadic trend, but with movements of groups always coming back home to their settlements to the lands of the ancestors, where the monumental tombs (*kurgan* or precincts) were the memento of those ancestral relationships (fig.11).





Fig. 11 An example of a large kurgan (*tumulus*) and some Bronze Age tombs in Tamgaly/Tanbaly park

The long trips along the Kazakh steppe have been dense with an emotional atmosphere, which has been characterized by vast panoramas, wild animals and *kurgans* that marked the immense landscape, as ancient witnesses of the time. The Kurgan culture of the Caspian steppe is ancient and fascinating, with these monuments, known as *kurgan*, which are basically where circular *tumuli* or mounds (fig.11) which were built over a grave, often consisting in the monumentalisation of only a single burial with funerary equipment, as grave vessels, weapons, and even horses. The earliest kurgans in Kazakhstan date even to the Bronze Age, but most of the kurgan which have been seen during the trip in Tamgaly region seem to date to the Iron Age.

The large participation of the partners to the meetings and trips in Kazakhstan has been also important to discuss together about a possible continuity of such a successful consortium and the last day has been closed with the idea to think about possible future projects together and the decision has been taken: think about possibilities and then bring new ideas and suggestions to the last meeting in Azerbaijan, which was planned for december 2024.

The events in Azerbaijan have therefore closed definitively the project in December 2024. Baku was waiting for the partners with its splendid and shiny large boulevards, where the splendid architecture of this capital and the Christmas lights have given a warm and happy welcome to the partners arriving from abroad.

The partners of KHAZAR and ATMU during the first day have largely illustrated the splendid results of the courses and activities of the teachers, as well as the numerous good projects of the students, which have been able at the same time to show the results of their practical projects and to promote their regional heritage.

As in Kazakhstan, also in Azerbaijan the fantastic Cultural Heritage has been not only illustrated during the meetings, but also practical events have been organised (fig.12), as regional dance and music by the students of KHAZAR University (fig.13), as well as visits in Baku promoted by ATMU to the Palace of the Shirvanshahs (fig.12 and 14) and to the

[617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP](#)

Caravanserais (Karvansara), to the Paired Fortress Gates and to Highland Park by Funicular to enjoy a breathtaking view of the entire Baku Bay.



Fig. 12 Baku, some moments around the town

617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP



Fig. 13 Some moments of the presentations in Khazar and ATMU universities, where both professors and students were presenting dances, music and projects developed in PE labs, seminars in situ with archaeologists.



Fig.14 Baku: Some view of the Old town

The following days were then dedicated to professional visits of the Zergaralan Hamam organised by MIRAS partners (fig.15), and professional archaeologists and experts of Cultural Heritage have illustrated the long work of excavation, cleaning and restoration that they have organised in this large monument together with students of ATMU and KHAZAR, thanks to a memorandum of understanding which have been signed by these universities with MIRAS, in order to continue,

617540-EPP-1-2020-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

even after the end of PICASP, the practical laboratories for the students. This has been another important goal for the project, first because during project a complete monument has been saved, excavated, restored, enhanced and opened to the public, even thank to an agreement with the local owner of the building which has been supportive and collaborative, so much so that now the Zergarpalan Hamam is also known as Ali's Hammam.



Fig. 15 Some shots in ~~Zergarpalan~~ Hamam with all the partners and the archaeologists of MIRAS illustrating the works of excavation, restoration and valorisation of the monument

Also the territory around Baku has been visited, with a trip in Gobustan to enjoy the spectacular Mud Volcano Park (fig.16) and Museum (fig.17): a splendid natural resource for the tourism in this area.



**Fig. 16 The mud volcanoes in Gobustan Reserve**

The visit of the park is very well organised and illustrated and offers to the tourists the possibility to enjoy this natural reserve and also a very well organised Naturalistic Museum (fig.17), illustrating the fauna of such a particular environmental context. Moreover, the Gobustan region is also very well known for its Historical and Artistic Reserve, where it is possible to enjoy thousands of petroglyphs with animals and hunting figures dating from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, scenes of cattle and horse breeding of the Neolithic and Bronze Age phases, up to Iron age testimonies and even a mysterious rock cut Roman inscription dating to the first century AD (see in section 3 of this volume the paper 3.8).

The complete view of Natural, Environmental, Geological, Historical, Architectonic and Archaeological heritage has been important for all the partners to understand how variegated and multiform is the heritage in the Caspian context, but at the same time almost unknown and absolutely to be discovered.

Both visits in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have been very engaging and the large and participative involvement of so many participants from the consortium of partners has attested how successful has been to have these two moments of direct visit of the Caspian countries at the end of the project, as the arrival point of a long journey made of gradual steps that found their perfect fulfilment at the end of this fantastic adventure.



Fig. 17 The Naturalistic and Geological Museum in Gobustan

The beauty and peculiarity of these kinds of wide broad European projects lie mainly in the interaction between culturally different and distant people who build very intense human relationships by getting to have knowledge of new and unknown places, sharing each other's acquaintance and cultures, creating deep bonds and strong friendships. Knowledge and respect within a project partnership always lead to constructive dialogue and longlife collaborations, with the hope that this kind of projects may help to contribute to a better world and a future of peace and of dialogue among peoples.