

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31110/consensus/2026-03/020-031>

УДК (UDC) 902 : 903.23 (479.25) «637»

## POTTERY PRODUCTION TRADITIONS OF THE UZERLIKTEPE SETTLEMENT OF THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

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### Abstract

**The purpose of this study** is to determine the place and significance of the Uzerliktepe settlement within the system of Middle Bronze Age archaeological monuments of Karabakh through a comprehensive analysis of archaeological evidence and a comparative examination of synchronous settlements in the region. Special attention is devoted to identifying the settlement's role in the socio-economic, cultural, and historical development of the South Caucasus during the second millennium BC.

**Methodology.** The research is based on a multidisciplinary approach combining archaeological, historical-comparative, chronological, typological, and contextual methods. Published results of previous excavations and data obtained during more recent archaeological investigations were analyzed. Comparative analysis of stratigraphy, architectural remains, ceramic assemblages, production complexes, burial evidence, and other categories of archaeological materials from Uzerliktepe and contemporaneous settlements of Karabakh was conducted. The study also considers the natural and geographical environment of the settlement and its influence on the development of economic activities and settlement organization.

**Scientific novelty.** The study provides a comprehensive synthesis of available archaeological evidence concerning the Uzerliktepe settlement and clarifies its position within the settlement network of the Middle Bronze Age in Karabakh. The integration of data from early and recent excavations allows a more complete reconstruction of the settlement's developmental stages, spatial organization, material culture, and economic specialization. Particular attention is paid to the ceramic assemblage, construction horizons, architectural structures, and production complexes, which distinguish Uzerliktepe from other contemporaneous settlements. The research also contributes to a better understanding of regional cultural interactions and socio-economic processes in the South Caucasus during the Middle Bronze Age.

**Conclusions.** The analysis demonstrates that Uzerliktepe represents one of the most significant archaeological settlements of the Middle Bronze Age in Karabakh. Its extensive cultural deposits, several construction horizons, developed architectural and production complexes, and diverse material culture reflect a high level of social and economic organization. The archaeological materials provide valuable evidence for reconstructing settlement development, craft production, agricultural and pastoral activities, and interregional cultural contacts. The findings confirm that Uzerliktepe functioned as an important cultural and economic center and should be regarded as one of the principal reference sites for studying the Middle Bronze Age in Karabakh and the broader historical development of the South Caucasus.

**Keywords:** Uzerliktepe settlement, Middle Bronze Age, Karabakh, South Caucasus, archaeology, material culture, settlements

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## ТРАДИЦІЇ ВИРОБНИЦТВА КЕРАМІКИ ПОСЕЛЕННЯ УЗЕРЛІКТЕПЕ ДОБИ СЕРЕДНЬОЇ БРОНЗИ

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### Анотація

**Метою дослідження** є визначення місця та значення поселення Узерліктепе в системі археологічних пам'яток середньої бронзи Карабаху шляхом комплексного аналізу археологічних матеріалів і порівняльного вивчення синхронних поселень регіону. Особливу увагу приділено з'ясуванню ролі поселення в соціально-економічному, культурному та історичному розвитку Південного Кавказу у 2 тис. до н.е.

**Методологія.** Дослідження ґрунтується на комплексному використанні археологічного, історико-порівняльного, типологічного, хронологічного та контекстуального методів. Проаналізовано результати ранніх і новітніх археологічних розкопок, а також опубліковані матеріали щодо стратиграфії, архітектурних залишків, керамічних комплексів, виробничих споруд та інших категорій знахідок. Проведено порівняльний аналіз матеріальної культури поселення Узерліктепе із синхронними пам'ятками Карабаху. Також враховано природно-географічні умови розташування поселення та їхній вплив на господарську діяльність населення.

**Наукова новизна.** У дослідженні здійснено комплексне узагальнення наявних археологічних даних про поселення Узерліктепе та уточнено його місце в системі поселень середньої бронзи Карабаху. Поеднання даних ранніх і новітніх археологічних розкопок дає змогу повніше реконструювати етапи розвитку поселення, його просторову організацію, матеріальну культуру та господарську спеціалізацію. Особливу увагу приділено керамічному комплексу, будівельним горизонтам, архітектурним спорудам і виробничим комплексам, які вирізняють Узерліктепе серед інших одночасних поселень. Дослідження також сприяє кращому розумінню регіональних культурних взаємодій і соціально-економічних процесів на Південному Кавказі в період середньої бронзи.

**Висновки.** Проведене дослідження засвідчило, що Узерліктепе є одним із ключових археологічних поселень середньої бронзи Карабаху. Археологічні матеріали дозволяють реконструювати соціально-економічний розвиток населення, рівень розвитку ремесел, землеробства, скотарства та міжрегіональних культурних контактів. Отримані результати підтверджують важливу роль поселення в культурно-історичних процесах Південного Кавказу та дають підстави розглядати Узерліктепе як одну з еталонних пам'яток середньої бронзи регіону.

**Ключові слова:** Узерліктепе, середня бронза, Карабах, Південний Кавказ, археологія, матеріальна культура, поселення

**Цитування:** Valiyeva, G. (2026). Pottery Production Traditions of the Uzerliktepe Settlement of the Middle Bronze Age. *Consensus*, 3, 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.31110/consensus/2026-03/020-031>

**URL:** <https://www.konsensus.net.ua/index.php/konsensus/article/view/234>

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**Introduction.** The settlement of Uzerliktepe is one of the most significant monuments of the Middle Bronze Age of the South Caucasus and occupies a special place in the study of the ancient pottery production of Azerbaijan. Thanks to the long-term archaeological research of the settlement of Uzerliktepe, numerous materials were obtained that made it possible to reconstruct the features of the pottery production of Karabakh of the II millennium BC. At the same time, the issues of the technological organization of ceramic production, differences in the methods of manufacturing certain categories of vessels and the nature of the coexistence of different production traditions have not been sufficiently studied to date.

The present study is based on the materials of the archaeological excavations of Uzerliktepe conducted by the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of ANAS in 2022–2025, as well as on the results of previous studies of the monument. The main objective of the article is to identify and compare the technological traditions of making various categories of ceramics, determine their features and assess their significance for the reconstruction of the development of pottery and socio-economic processes of the Middle Bronze Age.

Unlike traditional studies, in which ceramic materials are considered as independent typological categories, in this work they are analyzed as different technological traditions that existed simultaneously within the same cultural complex. This approach allows us to trace the level of craft specialization, identify the features of the production skills of ancient craftsmen and assess the ratio of traditional and innovative technologies in the ceramic production of Uzerliktepe.

The development of pottery production of the Middle Bronze Age in the territory of Azerbaijan represents the most important stage in the history of the formation of handicraft production and technological culture of ancient societies. Clay products reflect the level of technical skills of the population and serve as an indicator of social and cultural changes<sup>1</sup>.

On the territory of Karabakh, the monument of Uzerliktepe occupies a key place in the study of the processes of formation and development of pottery in the Middle Bronze Age. This unique complex has a powerful cultural layer, including traces of the centuries-old development of a settled agricultural and handicraft settlement<sup>2</sup>.

The study of the monuments of Karabakh dating back to the Middle Bronze Age began in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the summer of 1954, the head of the Azerbaijani archaeological expedition, A.A. Iessen, together with K.H. Kushnareva conducted a survey of the hill of Uzerliktepe, near the city of Agdam. During the inspection, many fragments of ceramics, fragments of obsidian and other artifacts were found on its surface, which testified to the ancient origin of the monument.

Over the next two years, large-scale archaeological excavations were carried out here, which made it possible to reveal the significance of this settlement more deeply. The materials discovered as a result of the research have become a valuable source for studying

<sup>1</sup> Агамалиева С.М. *История развития гончарного производства в Азербайджане*. Баку: ЭЛМ, 2007. с. 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Аразова Р. Археологические данные о развитии гончарного ремесла в Карабахе в эпоху бронзы. *Azerbaijan Archeology*. 2005. № 3–4. С. 45–56.

the culture and economic life of the population of the Middle Bronze Age. Uzerliktepe became the first domestic monument of the specified period in Azerbaijan, investigated by the archaeological method, and played a key role in clarifying the chronological sequence of similar settlements in the region<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1980s, the archaeologist, professor of ANAS G.F. Jafarov continued his research on the territory of Karabakh. Thanks to his work, new monuments of the Middle Bronze Age were identified – Rasul Tepe, Goy Tepe, Chinar Tepe, Tohmag Tepe, Nargiztepe, Ag Tepe, Boyuk tepe, Duyu tepe, Ger Tepe and Chaggally tepe. Among them there are both multi-layered settlements (Goy Tepe, Rasul Tepe, Chaggally tepe, Ag Tepe, Duyu Tepe) and monuments belonging exclusively to the Middle Bronze Age (Tohmag tepe, Chinar Tepe)<sup>4</sup>.

After an approximately 70-year hiatus, archaeological research at the settlement of Uzerliktepe, recognized as one of the largest monuments of the Middle Bronze Age in the South Caucasus, was resumed.

Archaeological research on the settlement began in February 2022 and continued until November of the same year. The 2022 excavations were led by Ph.D. in History, Associate Professor Farhad Guliyev, and the deputy head of the expedition was Ph.D. in History, Associate Professor Parviz Gasimov. In 2023 and 2025, field work resumed under the supervision of Associate Professor P. Gasimov. No excavations were carried out in 2024<sup>5</sup>. Other employees of the Institute, including the author of the presented article, also took part in the archaeological research.

The published materials, as well as the results of the latest research, provide an extensive understanding of the technological techniques, typology and features of the artistic design of Uzerliktepe ceramics. Based on these data, it is possible to reconstruct the transition from traditional domestic pottery to a specialized craft, as well as identify innovative elements that characterize the technological progress and cultural ties of the region.

The development of pottery production in the Middle Bronze Age was accompanied by the improvement of vessel manufacturing technologies, the complication of their functional specialization and the expansion of artistic design techniques. Along with the preservation of stable traditions of home molding production, more advanced technologies for preparing clay paste, controlled firing and surface treatment were gradually formed, indicating an increase in the professional level of artisans and the development of specialized production<sup>6</sup>.

When identifying technological traditions, the peculiarities of the preparation of the

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<sup>3</sup> Valiyeva G. About Ceramics from Karabakh Settlements of the Middle Bronze Age. *Scientific Achievements of Contemporary Society: Proceedings of the IV International Scientific and Practical Conference*. London, 2024. P. 645–648.

<sup>4</sup> Гулиев Ф. Поселения эпохи бронзы в Восточном Карабахе. *Археология Азербайджана*. 2012. Т. V. С. 72–73.

<sup>5</sup> Guliyev F., Gasimov P. Recent Research on Uzerliktepe: A Middle Bronze Age Settlement in the Aghdam Region, Azerbaijan Republic. *Azerbaijan Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology*. 2025. Vol. 1. No. 1. P. 55–56.

<sup>6</sup> Касьянова Н.А. *Керамика как исторический источник (по материалам Южного Кавказа)*. Москва: Восточная литература РАН, 2009. с. 11–12.

clay paste, the method of manufacturing vessels, the nature of firing, surface treatment, ornamentation, morphological features and functional features of the products were taken into account. A comprehensive analysis of these features made it possible to consider various categories of ceramics not in isolation, but as elements of a single production system reflecting the level of development of the craft of the people of Uzerliktepe in the Middle Bronze Age.

As noted by ethnographer, Ph.D. in history S.M. Agamalieva, the development of pottery took place against the background of the increasing complexity of the economic structure, the growth of exchange and the formation of specialized craft centers, which naturally led to the emergence of local workshops and stylistic traditions<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, the settlement of Uzerliktepe is a unique example that allows us to trace the centuries-old evolution of pottery within the framework of one cultural center.

**Materials and research methods.** The materials obtained during the archaeological research of Uzerliktepe made it possible to carry out a typological and technological analysis of ceramics based on observations of the clay paste composition, firing quality, color, surface texture and ornament. The ceramic complex is based on three main technological groups: household, black-burnished and painted ceramics. At the same time, brown vessels and fragments of inlaid black-burnished ceramics are also represented in small numbers, which do not form independent mass categories, but are of considerable interest for characterizing the technological diversity of the complex. However, in this article, the study of these fragments plays a special role in revealing an accurate picture of pottery from the Middle Bronze Age. The study was carried out using comparative typological and technological methods of analysis. When studying ceramics, the composition of the clay paste, methods of manufacturing vessels, the quality and nature of firing, surface treatment, wall thickness, morphological features, ornamentation and the intended functional purpose of the products were taken into account. A comprehensive review of these features made it possible to identify various technological traditions of pottery production and conduct their comparative analysis.

This article is based on the materials obtained during the research in 2022. For 9 months of continuous research, 7 excavation squares of 100 m<sup>2</sup> were uncovered here. Ceramics became the main type of identified artifacts. The huge variety and quantity of ceramics allowed us to take a fresh look at the pottery traditions of the Middle Bronze Age. In contrast to traditional typological studies, in this work the ceramic complex of Uzerliktepe is considered as a set of different technological traditions that coexisted within the same settlement. This approach allows us to trace the features of the manufacture of household, black-burnished, inlaid, brown and painted ceramics, determine the degree of development of handicraft production and assess the importance of technological innovations in the socio-economic development of the population of Karabakh in the Middle Bronze Age. In interpreting the data obtained, the results of studies of ceramic

<sup>7</sup> Агамалиева С.М. *История развития гончарного производства в Азербайджане*. Баку: ЭЛМ, 2007. с. 11–13.

complexes in the South Caucasus, primarily the monuments of Karabakh, Nakhchivan and neighboring regions, were used, which made it possible to compare the technological features of Uzerliktepe with the general trends in the development of pottery production in the Middle Bronze Age.

**Household ceramics.** The household ceramics of Uzerliktepe represents the most stable technological tradition of pottery production in the settlement, associated with the manufacture of utilitarian tableware for everyday use.

Household tableware is represented by rough molded vessels made of light clay with numerous impurities (resin, chamotte, mica). The clay paste is porous, poorly ground, the surface is rough, often smoothed by hand or a bunch of grass. The firing is weak and uneven, the vessels are brittle and fragile. The ornament is completely missing.

Such vessels were made by hand. Their forms are simple. These are mainly large pots with bent corollas, narrow bottoms and a swollen body, as well as small cups and bowls. Traces of soot on the walls and burnt food remains indicate that these vessels were used for cooking and storing food (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Fragments of household utensils from the Middle Bronze Age settlement of Uzerliktepe.  
Black-burnished ceremonial tableware

Rough kitchen utensils can be traced throughout the life of the settlement, without changes. This stability reflects the sustainability of home production and traditional skills passed down from generation to generation.

Household tableware is the most common category of ceramic material. Judging by the number of identified fragments, its share in the total volume of the ceramic complex was quite high.

Thus, cookware represents a local tradition of household production based on sustainable techniques<sup>8</sup>.

Analogues of household utensils were also identified in other settlements of Karabakh of the Middle Bronze Age – Rasultepe, Chinartepe, Nargiztepe<sup>9</sup>.

The production of black-burnished ceramics in Uzerliktepe has become an important stage in the development of pottery production in the region. It differs from rough molded tableware not only in its workmanship, but also in its aesthetics. Such dishes are represented in considerable quantities within the ceramic assemblage.

The clay paste of black-burnished vessels is fine and well-tempered, and the vessels are characterized by high-quality, uniform firing. The vessels are handmade, but much more carefully: the surfaces are blackened and burnished to a shine. The black color of the surface is the result of controlled smoke during firing.



Fig. 2. Fragments of corollas of black-burnished dishes from the Middle Bronze Age settlement of Uzerliktepe

It is important to note that, according to the researchers, the black-burnished ceramics can also be divided into two groups. Earlier examples of black-burnished tableware are distinguished by their simplicity or lack of decoration, weak uneven firing, color, and sloppy shape. This indicates firing at an insufficiently high temperature. The irregularity of the vessel shapes may indicate the use of relatively simple forming techniques; however, this feature alone does not provide sufficient evidence to determine whether the potter's wheel was used. But over time, the production of such dishes improves, and they acquire an ideal shape. Ceramics acquire a black or dark gray color, an

<sup>8</sup> Иессен А.А., Кушнарера К.Х. Узерликтепе – поселение эпохи бронзы в Карабахе. *Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР*. Вып. 67. Москва-Ленинград: Изд-во АН СССР, 1959. С. 397-398.

<sup>9</sup> Сәғәров Н.Ф. Qədim Qarabağ. Bakı: Elm, 2020. s. 98-102.

'agate' luster, perfect shapes, and rich decor. The increased regularity and standardization of vessel forms may indicate the introduction of more advanced forming techniques; however, the use of the potter's wheel requires additional technological evidence (Fig. 2).

The shapes vary from miniature handleless vessels with narrow necks to larger pots and cups. The thickness of the fractures is also different – from thin-walled 4mm to larger 8mm. The ornamentation was done with a dotted line, a comb, or a wheel; zigzags, wavy lines, and so-called "walking" inscribed semicircles are the most common.

It is important to note that as the study progresses, combinations of ornaments are increasingly discovered: stamped + patched patterns, scratched+ stamped, and sometimes a combination of all types of ornaments (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Fragments of walls with an ornament of black-burnished ceramics from the settlement of Uzerliktepe

The ornament on the black-burnished vessels is not only decorative, but also carries a symbolic meaning associated with ideas about water, fertility and protection. Some vessels had drilled holes – traces of repair, which indicates the high value of these products.

Black-burnished tableware was mainly used as a dining room or ritual. There are no traces of fire on the fragments of these vessels, therefore it was ceremonial dishes. Its spread in the middle and upper layers of the monument indicates an increase in the status of artisans and the formation of specialized workshops.

Analogues of black-burnished ceramics are found both in the neighboring monuments of the Middle Bronze Age of Karabakh – Agtepe, Gertepe, Goytepe<sup>10</sup> and in the monuments of neighboring regions, especially in Armenia – Mukhannattepe, Karmir Berd, Verin Above<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Cəfərov H.F. Qədim Qarabağ. Bakı: Elm, 2020. s. 92-104.

<sup>11</sup> Avetisyan P., Bobokhyan A. The Pottery Traditions of the Armenian Middle to Late Bronze Age "Transition" in the Context of Bronze and Iron Age Periodization // In: Rubinson K.S., Sagona A. (Eds.). *Ceramics in Transitions: Chalcolithic through Iron Age in the Highlands of the Southern Caucasus and Anatolia*. Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Peeters Publishers, 2008. P. 127-128.

**Inlaid ceramics.** Fragments of inlaid ceramics have been found in very limited quantities. This type of tableware was made from carefully sifted clay with a pure composition. And the manufacturing technology is the same as that of ordinary black-burnished vessels. That is, these vessels are a subgroup of black-burnished ornamented ceramics. It is noticeable from the fragments that they were executed very skillfully. The thickness of the shards is 4–5 mm. The ornament executed on the surface repeats typical motifs for the Middle Bronze Age. Basically, the ornament on the inlaid dishes is made by stamped technique. Most often, an arched pattern made with a pointed tool. Next, this ornament was filled with a white substance. White-inlaid ceramics make up a very small percentage of the total number of ceramic products from the settlement of Uzerliktepe (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Inlaid ceramics from the settlement of Uzerliktepe

**Ornamented light-washed ceramics.** Among the identified fragments of ceramics at the settlement of Uzerliktepe, there were brown ornamental potsherds in small numbers. According to the fractures, it can be seen that the clay paste was carefully prepared and contained no large particles. The ornament made on fragments repeats the same motifs as on black-burnished ceramics (Fig. 5). In most cases, these are scratched zigzags and stamped walking patterns. The thickness of the fractures (from 4mm to 7mm) suggests that the sizes and shapes of such products were diverse.



Fig. 5. Light-colored or brown ceramics from the settlement of Uzerliktepe

**Monochrome painted ceramics.** The pottery production of Uzerliktepe reaches the highest level of artistic and technological development in painted ceramics. These vessels were made of fine red clay, well-baked and covered with red angob with black painting (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Fragments of monochrome painted ceramics from the settlement of Uzerliktepe

The surface is carefully polished, the ornament is applied with a brush and includes parallel, wavy and zigzag lines, diamonds and hatching<sup>12</sup>.

Just like on the black-burnished vessels, there are no traces of fire on the painted ceramics. And this may be a sign that this type of vessel was not used for cooking or reheating food. Consequently, they were used only for a specific purpose.

<sup>12</sup> Иессен А.А., Кушнарева К.Х. Узерликтепе – поселение эпохи бронзы в Карабахе. *Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР*. Вып. 67. Москва–Ленинград: Изд-во АН СССР, 1959. С. 378–401.

These ceramics are quite rare and are represented in small quantities within the ceramic assemblage. Despite their small number, they are of exceptional importance as evidence of the emergence of specialized decorative pottery<sup>13</sup>.

A comparison with the materials of the central and southern Transcaucasia shows that the Uzerliktepe painted tableware developed in line with common cultural processes. It shows echoes of Nakhchivan's traditions and parallels with the ceramics of Trialeti and Kirovakan, where similar motifs are found on metal and ceramic vessels. The appearance of miniature bowls on pallets, clay analogues of metal cups of the Trialeti culture, is especially significant<sup>14</sup>.

The painted ceramics of Uzerliktepe are the result of a synthesis of local traditions and external influences, reflecting the development of artistic taste and the expansion of cultural contacts. The evolution of Uzerliktepe ceramics reflects not only artistic, but also social changes. The improvement of technology, the emergence of specialized forms and exquisite paintings indicate the growth of craft specialization and the formation of professional workshops.

**Conclusions.** Rough kitchen utensils were a product of home production, while black-burnished and painted ceramics, characterized by high quality and aesthetics, were probably created by craftsmen with high skills. These processes indicate the division of labor and the emergence of exchange, which, in turn, contributes to the formation of early economic relations in society. Thus, the development of pottery production becomes an indicator of the emergence of elements of proto-urban culture.

The materials from Uzerliktepe demonstrate both local specifics and connections with neighboring regions. Analyses and comparisons show that the Uzerliktepe ceramics have analogies with the monuments of Nakhchivan (Kultepe I, Shakhtakhty) and the Mil-Karabakh plain.

This indicates the existence of a cultural area of painted ceramics, covering a significant part of Transcaucasia. At the same time, the Uzerliktepe tradition retains local features, which is expressed in the absence of handles for vessels, the miniaturization of shapes and the use of geometric ornaments<sup>15</sup>.

The pottery production of Uzerliktepe from the Middle Bronze Age is a vivid example of the harmonious combination of traditions and innovations in the material culture of ancient Karabakh.

Traditional molded (household) tableware testifies to the strength of home craft traditions that have been preserved for centuries. Black-burnished ceramics reflect technological innovations. Here we can highlight improved firing, the use of more advanced forming techniques and a well-developed variety of ornamentation<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Аразова Р. Археологические данные о развитии гончарного ремесла в Карабахе в эпоху бронзы. *Azerbaijan Archaeology*. 2005. № 3-4. С. 46-47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. С. 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Нариманов И.Г. *Культура древнейшего земледельческо-скотоводческого населения Азербайджана*. Баку: ЭЛМ, 1987. С. 67-68

<sup>16</sup> Кушнарева К.Х. *Древние культуры Южного Кавказа*. Ленинград: Наука, 1977. С. 55-57.

The pottery of the settlement of Uzerliktepe shows a gradual transition from utilitarian domestic production to professional craft, accompanied by the complication of the social structure and the development of aesthetic ideas.

Thus, Uzerliktepe occupies a special place in the history of pottery in the South Caucasus, as a monument in which traditions and innovations have merged into a single process of cultural development.

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Отримано 09.06.2026

Отримано в доопрацьованому вигляді 20.07.2026

Прийнято до друку 24.08.2026

Submitted 09.06.2026

Received in revised form 20.07.2026

Accepted for publication 24.08.2026