This article reviews the interpretation and research of the prominent Norwegian traveller and world-renowned scholar, Thor Heyerdahl, and his visit to the village of Nij in Gabala District, a place mainly inhabited by Udi, one of the autochthonous peoples of Azerbaijan. According to Thor Heyerdahl’s theory, Odin, who in Scandinavian mythology was chieftain of the Asi tribe, came from the Caucasus. He also gave a hypothetical interpretation of, and scientific credence to, the modern-day Udi being the remnants and ancestors of Norwegians. While meeting the Udi, Thor Heyerdahl learnt about their cuisine, ethnography, customs and national traditions.

In the attempt to maintain identity and culture against the backdrop of world events some ethnicities have clearly disappeared from the face of the earth, while others, some relatively small in number like the Udi, have struggled for their independence, historical past and integrity and withstood the difficult trials that have befallen them. The surge of interest of Norwegians in Azerbaijan and of Azerbaijanis (including Udi) in Norway began with the work of the great Norwegian traveller, ethnographer, archaeologist and scientist, Thor Heyerdahl. The huge interest of Thor Heyerdahl led him to Azerbaijan at the end of the 20th century and only then to the lower reaches of the Don in Azov.

The differentiation of the ethnogenesis of the Udi people constitutes a lengthy process which took place on the basis of contacts of various cultures of east and west. The Udis, whose origins and history have for nearly 200 years been attracting the attention of the academic world, are indigenous peoples of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan (as the historical Motherland). Since the early 19th century more than 300 works have
This text represents the key that led to the deciphering of the ancient Caucasian Albanian script. Having noticed that one chain of letters is repeated various times, Dr Zaza Aleksidze realized that the text was taken from the New Testament and was able to read it. Dr Aleksidze of the Georgian Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi also concluded that the language represented here developed into the Udi language of today.

Thor Heyerdahl visited Azerbaijan several times where he amazed everyone with the sensational results of his research and, specifically, his scientific interpretations of rock drawings and migration of peoples.

1 Arutinov 1905, pp. 93-94.
2 Gukasyan 1974, pp. 3-34.
6 Jayadov and Huseynov 1999, pp. 18-86.
7 Melikov 2002, pp. 78-81.
8 Jayadov and Huseynov 1999, pp. 87-95.
From his study of the rock drawings at Gobustan, he came to the conclusion that the Norwegians and Azerbaijanis have close, even kindred, ties and described Gobustan as an open-air museum. The Udi have a special place in both this interest and his travels. According to the legend, the first Scandinavian king, Odin, led his people from a land called Azer. He also asserted that the Udi, an aboriginal ethnos in Azerbaijan, were direct relatives of the Scandinavians. The juxtaposition of Odin with the ethnonym ‘Udi’, ‘Uti’; the search for the Asi in Azerbaijan, whose name comes from Atropat, a satrap of Darius III; the representation of Urartu as ‘Hittite civilization’; the Albanians who migrated from the Caucasus to the Balkans – all this and much else besides is grounded in place-names and is a scientific interpretation of the settling of the area to the north. It’s unlikely that there is another popular concept on which such a range and variety of information about the ancient connections between the peoples of our country could be set out with such ease, love and knowledge of the matter in hand. It was Thor Heyerdahl’s dedication and interest that brought him to Azerbaijan and the village of Nij in particular, a place of compact settlement of the Udi.

In the history of Scandinavian mythology compiled by 13th century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson, the main figure in all the traditions and legends is Odin (Udi) – a religious figure who embodies the qualities of deity, priest-king and hero chieftain, defender of military honour. Odin is presented as a real, historical figure who was subsequently deified by his descendants. Not local in origin, the chieftain of the Asi (Azi) tribe came to Scandinavia from a distant country, bringing with him a very limited number of his people. The harsh polemics surrounding the theory about Odin were largely typical of relations between Heyerdahl the scholar and academic circles. His theories rarely received scientific recognition, while Heyerdahl the traveller himself rejected scientific criticism and concentrated on publishing his theories in popular, accessible literature, and in the case of “The search for Odin: On the trail of our past” – a book targeted at a mass readership.

The great ocean sailor searched long and hard for the traces of his ancestors in the Caucasus too. His attention was caught by people living

10 Herodotus, Book 3, Chapter 93 and Book 7.
11 Gukasyan 1974, p. 17.
12 Original Norwegian title: Jakten på Odin: På sporet av vår fortid.
an isolated life on a plateau near the foothills who call themselves Udi – a name which Thor Heyerdahl associated with ‘Odin’, and which aroused his interest in our people. Thor Heyerdahl’s theory posited that one of the branches of the Azi did not go north with Odin but south, which makes it even more timely and intriguing to look for the geographic and ethnic centre of localization of the Udi and their migration. A second, more mobile branch of the tribe which split in Azov went west, to the Balkans, where they dispersed. This is confirmed in many place-names (Nij in Macedonia, Udine in Italy, etc.). Thor Heyerdahl put forward the theory that the Udi, an ethnic minority in Azerbaijan, were ancestors of the Scandinavians. In the last 20 years of his life, he travelled to Azerbaijan several times and visited the Albanian churches in Kish, Nij, Oghuz and elsewhere.

Thor Heyerdahl twice visited the village of Nij during his tours of the Shaki-Gabala region (1999 and 2000). His route included the Udi

Thor Heyerdahl in dialogue with Udi representatives. Sitting, from left to right, George Kechaari, head of the office of cultural affairs for the Udi people, two school directors and Mais Kechaari. Standing behind the latter is Sergey Antonov. Heyerdahl visiting them and taking interest in their culture meant a lot for the preservation of their language and its development as a written language.
Church of St Elisha (Eliseus) and he showed a very lively interest in the medieval Albanian temple. He was struck not only by the rich ethnocultural and religious heritage, but also by a whole raft of similarities which referenced and confirmed his point of view. Thor Heyerdahl was impatiently awaited in Nij though his trip was postponed several times.

Thor Heyerdahl finally arrived in September 2000. The whole village came out to welcome the great Norwegian during the chestnut and hazelnut harvest. The news about Thor Heyerdahl’s visit spread across the region like wildfire. The legendary seafarer, traveller and scholar walked round the historical and cultural focal points of the village with his wife Jacqueline Beer like an ordinary citizen, and even the presence of interpreters, other guests and representatives of the local authorities could not spoil this impression of approachability and humbleness.

Everyone who came into contact with Heyerdahl was immediately charmed by him. He was not at all arrogant and had no ‘celebrity complex’. At his advanced age (he was then 85!) he maintained his curiosity and enormous interest in the new and unknown and his unquenchable thirst for discoveries and the comprehension of mystery. He was always smiling, benevolent and convinced of the benevolence of everyone on the planet. Before Thor Heyerdahl no-one had posited a possible link between the Udi and the semi-mythical, legendary Odin and his fellow tribesmen, the heroes of Scandinavian legend. A banquet was given in honour of the important guest. More than 60 people took part in the celebration – Norwegian intellectuals, representatives of the local authorities, teachers in Udi schools, the local intelligentsia and others. During the lunch Thor Heyerdahl acquainted himself with the cuisine, ethnography, customs and national traditions of the Udi people. He was amazed by the variety of dishes, the preservation of dining traditions, hospitality and recipes for the preparation of different Udi dishes. Above all he was surprised by the appearance and shape of an ordinary, village axe, which the Udis still use today in their gardens; it was an exact copy of a tool used by the Vikings.13

Thor Heyerdahl’s official visit to the ‘land of Odin’ was soon shrouded in modern myths and legends. For example, it is said that sensing that his end was near, he wanted to spend his last days in Nij and even to acquire a small house and garden here. This question was never

13 See also Tore Seierstad’s article, pp. 00–00 in this volume.
resolved, however. Now we, the modern-day Udi – scholars who are not indifferent to their history and ordinary people – are interested in something else. Will anyone be found in the foreseeable future to compare in scope, influence and importance with Thor Heyerdahl, who was so hard-working and energetic and at the same time such a romantic dreamer?

The great Thor Heyerdahl did not consider his last trip to be his final one. He was engrossed by something more important than the difference between the right answer and the wrong. He thought and acted like the austere knights of Odin once did: the aim of the epic journeys was not personal success but honour and truth. ‘I don’t have to prove that I’m right and that before Oslo there was Azov and before Azov there was Nij,’ he said during a meeting with the Udi, ‘I just want to find the truth about what the world was like several thousand years ago, where the peoples came from and where they went.’ Finding the truth is the worthiest of tasks, and the adventures will definitely be continued, because the great seeker is a perfect projection of the militant ethic of the Azi and Vikings and will in the future be a shining example of scientific research for the scholars amongst our descendants.

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