Our investigations in the Lesser Caucasus arose from a visit to the site made by Tania King in 1998 while on a six month academic visit to the Institute of Geology, National Academy of Sciences, The Republic of Armenia. At that time there was increasing interest in discoveries being made at the site of Dmanisi, Georgia, which is located approximately 30 km from the border of Armenia. Armenian scientists were keen to collaborate on survey projects in the region with scientists from overseas.

One of the sites that Tania was shown during that first visit was the cave at Azokh. She noted that a large amount of sediment had been excavated from the front of the chamber, but she also saw that sediments still remained in situ at the rear of the cave, and hence, there was a potential for further excavation and discoveries. On returning to the UK, a collaboration was formed with Yolanda Fernández-Jalvo (who was then an EU Post-doctoral Research Fellow at The Natural History Museum), Peter Andrews (then head of the Human Origins Program of The Natural History Museum – NHM), and Levon Yepiskoposyan (who was a visiting researcher at University College London). We first carried out a survey of regions in northern, western and southern Armenia in collaboration with Yuri Sayadyan and other members of the Institute of Geology, the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, in 1999. This was followed in the same year by a short visit to Azokh Cave and nearby Tughlar Cave in Nagorno-Karabakh.

After a second survey in 2001 (King et al. 2003; Fernández-Jalvo et al. 2004), we agreed to undertake excavations at Azokh Cave to investigate archaeological, geological and palaeontological context of this site. The Azokh sites are located in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory at the southeastern end of the Lesser Caucasus range. This volume describes the results from the eight excavations from 2002 to 2009 and the scientific research conducted on the excavated material. This work is still ongoing.

At the time when we started this project, there were no specialists in Paleolithic Archaeology, Anthropology, Geology or Palaeontology at the State University of Arstakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), and few in The Republic of Armenia, and so we brought together a group of specialists that would continue the work at the site of Azokh and other localities, with the long term intention of setting up relevant departments in the local university, and ultimately increasing science capacity in Nagorno-Karabakh. We placed particular emphasis on the training of local students. In this respect, two local students are receiving postgraduate training in Archaeology and Palaeontology at European institutions (IPHES/University of Tarragona – under the direction of Isabel Caceres and Ethel Allué) supported by the Erasmus Mundus (Master’s degrees in Quaternary and Prehistory) and Wenner-Gren (Wadsworth International Fellowship for Ph.D. research) Foundations. Additional students from both local and overseas participate in the excavations, we have a number of field assistants from Azokh village who joined the excavation team each year. Several have received training in excavation techniques and also in the field laboratory, and some of the assistants are now well qualified in excavation techniques and are included in the excavation team.
The project has received support from a great number of individuals, academics, and officials, institutions and organizations, particularly from the Government of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK). We are especially grateful to the Ministers for Culture, Education and Sport, NK, from 2002 to 2009, who have provided permissions to work at the site, supported the work in numerous ways, and have generously provided access to materials and loaned parts of the collection for conservation and study at institutions outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Since 2009 the Department of Tourism and Protection of Natural Monuments has been responsible for the site, and the project has benefitted from the support and interest of Mr. Sergei Shahverdyan, Head of the Department of Tourism, NK. We are extremely grateful for the interest and support of Mr. Ashot Ghulyan, Head of the National Assembly, and Ms. Narine Aghalbalyan, Minister for Culture, NK. Since the start of the project Dr. Melanya Balayan, Director, Artsakh State Museum for Country and History, has provided support and assistance in numerous ways, and has been extremely generous with providing access to the material. We also thank the staff of the museum for their help in many ways over the years.

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Most importantly, we thank the people of Azokh village whose generous support has made possible the fieldwork that is now in its 14th year. We thank the mayors of the village (2002–present) – Mr. Levon Asryan, Mr. Gevork Gevorkyan and Mr. Georgy Avanesyan, for their assistance and interest over the years. We are especially grateful to Mr. Ilias Poghosyan, Headmaster of Azokh Village School, who was instrumental from our very first visit to the site in 1998 and who generously accommodated us and facilitated our visit in 1999 during which we visited several caves in addition to Azokh caves. We thank Mr. Poghosyan for his interest and help in numerous ways, and especially for the use of the school premises as a field laboratory in recent years. We thank all our field assistants past and present. We are very grateful to a large number of local staff who has provided essential support for the project during the field season each year.

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This book is in memoriam of Patricio Domínguez-Alonso, a good friend, an important scientific member of the Azokh team, and an invaluable field manager and researcher. He has recently left us (15 November 2013).

Yolanda Fernández-Jalvo
Tania King
Levon Yepiskoposyan
Peter Andrews

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