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HISTORY OF THE BAY OF BAKU

*View of the Maiden Tower from the bay.
Postcard of the early 20th century*



Nature is beautiful. For millions of years man has lived surrounded by it and generously used its gifts. During this period there was constant harmony between nature and man. However, the last two centuries of history have violated this system. Man and his creations have started to grossly interfere and influence processes taking place in nature, violating the orderly harmony of relations.

The development of science, technology and industry, signifying progress on the one hand, had a negative impact on the ecology of nature and the environment on the other. The Caspian Sea basin and particularly, the Bay of Baku, which has been the center of commercial life in Azerbaijan for 150 years already, were unable to avoid that damage. Today its condition is bad, and the reason is the excessive pollution of its waters. In order to vividly imagine the scene, let's look at some points in the history of the Bay of Baku.

The Bay of Baku is one of the most convenient bays in the Caspian Sea protected from prevailing winds and roughness. The coast of the Bay of Baku with a total length of 24 km begins from the Zikh Spit in the east and extends to the Shikhov Spit in the west.

The bay has been known since ancient times. An-

cient Greek, Roman, Arab and Iranian geographers and travelers wrote about it. One of the earliest mentions of the Baku coast is reports by the Byzantine author of the first half of the 5th century, Priscus of Panium, who cites Romans describing a road leading from Scythia to Media and mentions a place "where flames burst from the sea stone." Scientists believe the report about a flame bursting from the sea stone undoubtedly relates to the eternal fires of Baku.

There is also a view that ancient settlements around Baku stood where there is the sea now, particularly in what is now the bay. Scientists and explorers of different times noted changes in the Caspian Sea level at which the named area became land. For example, Professor S. Kovalevskiy believes that in the first several centuries AD, islands around Baku were connected to land and the bay was dry, and notes possible settlements on the site of the current bay. According to this scientist, the lowest level of the Caspian Sea, when the banks of the Baku archipelago completely merged with the continent and the entire Bay of Baku was dry, falls to the period from the 1st to the 7th centuries. Then, in the 7th century, the level of the Caspian Sea begins to increase up to the 11th century, when the Bay of Baku formed. Some researchers believe that **the**

View of the boulevard from the sea. Postcard of the early 20th century



Bay of Baku formed much earlier in the 7th century and that old Baku was built as a port city on the beach, while the bay was already there, otherwise the strong increase in the sea level would have been noted by Arab geographers of the 9th-11th centuries.

The latest research about changes in the Caspian Sea level showed that the latest transgression (sea encroachment on the land as a result of the lowering of the latter) of the Caspian Sea began somewhere at the turn of our era. However, at the beginning, the level of the sea rose





slowly being replaced by a rather strong drop. The Caspian Sea level rose by more than 10 meters. Then, for more than 600 years, the level was high until the early 20th century when it began to fall. A particularly sharp drop in the sea level occurred in 1929-1945 when it dropped by 2 meters in 16 years.

During construction work in the first half of the 19th century, the remains of ruined walls were found, which

stretched from the Maiden's Tower far out to the sea in the direction of a flooded fortification in the bay, whose construction dates back to 1234/1235.

In connection with the aforesaid changes in the Caspian Sea level, a number of authors reported legends handed down by local people from generation to generation about the flooded city of Sabayil, or Shahbag, which stood at the site of the present-day Bay of Baku, and as evidence of this fact, they pointed to the tops of towers that could be seen from under the water and dilapidated walls of sunken fortifications inside the bay. Some legends link the flooding of the ancient city standing at the site of Baku with the name of Alexander the Great. However, it is known that Alexander the Great was not in the territory of Absheron. All these legends and traditions, despite being fantastic, talk about the antiquity of Baku and reflect the probable flooding of the ancient settlement at the site of the present-day Bay of Baku.

The basis of all legends about the flooding of a whole city by the Caspian Sea - the well-known researcher of the history of Baku, Sara Ashurbeyli, believes - was an actual fact about the lowering of the level of the mainland and a settlement or a city submerging on the seabed as a



Shipyards in the Bay of Baku. Photo of the early 20th century



result of an earthquake. The place where this city was located is the area of the Bay of Baku.

Academician E. Lents, who visited Baku in 1830, recorded what he had heard from local residents: "... A long time ago, the sea was 20 miles further than it is now, and the islands of Boyuk and Dash Zira, as well as Pirallahi and Jilov were part of a solid continent: the sea once went far ahead and gave the coast the shape it has now."

Famous Azerbaijani geographers Bakuvi (14th century) and Shirvani (17th century) left us a detailed description of the Bay of Baku in the Middle Ages. **A comprehensive scientific study of the Bay of Baku begins in the 18th century.** Pioneers in this field were Russian hydrographs - navigators. The first printed map of the Bay of Baku was compiled by I. Saymonov in 1719 under the name of the "Gulf of Baku". He also gave a detailed description of the bay, which was placed in his sailing directions composed in 1731. Later the Bay of Baku was studied by Voynovich, Lieutenant-Captain Mikhailov, navigator Kolodkin and others. In 1876, O. Grimm gave a detailed description of the flora and fauna of the bay.

In 1830, instrumental observations of the sea water level and, in 1881, hydro-meteorological observations

began in the Bay of Baku. Beginning from the 1920s, hydrographic, hydrometeorological design services and Azneft began to study the Bay of Baku.

The Bay of Baku area has a unique climate. The highest air temperature throughout the year is observed in the northwestern part of the bay and on the coast, where the central part of the city is located. Northerly winds have the greatest frequency throughout the year, while the second highest frequency belongs to southerly winds. The highest wind speed is observed on the hills bordering the Bay of Baku.



Baku bath houses. Photo of the mid-1920s



By the magnitude of the average annual air temperature (14.3 °), the climate of the Bay of Baku is warm subtropical judging by the number of warm months (up to 4); by the amount of precipitation (less than 200 mm) – very dry; by the hydrologic cycle (precipitation distribution throughout the year: the main maximum in autumn and the minimum in summer) - maritime; and by the annual average air temperature – continental. By definition, based on the integrated genetic method of the bay, the climate is subtropical dry with moderately hot summers and warm winters.

The economic importance of the Bay of Baku is defined as its natural wealth and enormous value in the economy of Azerbaijan and especially in Baku, which is located on its shores.

Baku is a city of “black gold”. Baku’s location on the sea coast and in the center of oil fields contributed to its rapid growth and transformation into one of the country’s largest industrial cities in the late 19th century. The rapid development of the oil industry begins after the abolition of the farming-out system in 1872. In 1898, Azerbaijan took first place in the world in terms of oil production and manufacture of oil products. The development of the oil industry makes Baku and the Bay of Baku a major trading port. In 1877, the first oil carrying ship Zoroaster, constructed by the oil tycoon Nobel, was released into the waters of the Caspian Sea. Soon, the number of such ships increases rapidly. Almost all exported oil was transported via the Caspian Sea. Ships from 49 countries

exported oil from the Baku port. **In 1900, the Baku port takes first place in the world by the transportation of oil and other products.** Every day, more than 25 tankers loaded with oil left the Bay of Baku.

The development of the oil industry continued under the Soviets. On 7 November 1949, the first offshore well in the open Caspian Sea produced oil for the first time in world practice.

After gaining independence, a new period began in the history of the country’s oil industry. Intensive exploitation of offshore oil fields got under way. After signing the “Contract of the Century” on 20 September 1994, Azerbaijan again became one of the largest centers of the oil industry in the world, and the role of the Bay of Baku further increased. For the past half century, the fate of the Bay of Baku has been inseparably linked to the country’s oil industry, but the Bay of Baku serves not only the needs of the oil industry. Dozens of passenger and freight ships visit and leave the Bay of Baku every day.

The gradual increase in the role of the Bay of Baku in the country’s life demands the same constant care. This care encompasses the protection of its environmental cleanliness.

In order to prevent the environmental problem of the Caspian Sea, the decree of the USSR Council of Ministers “On measures to prevent the pollution of the Caspian Sea” was published in 1968. Urgent implementation of this project led to a significant purification of the Caspian Sea basin. In addition, there were several bodies coordinating

research on the Caspian Sea issues: the Scientific Council on the complex study of Caspian Sea problems at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the Azerbaijan SSR, the Ichthyological Commission of the Ministry of Fisheries of the USSR, the inter-faculty comprehensive Caspian expedition of Moscow State University, the Aral-Caspian Unit of the Oceanographic Commission of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

Azerbaijan's membership in various international conventions on environmental issues can help to further the prevention of pollution in the Bay of Baku and around the Caspian Sea. For the record, we should note that the first multilateral agreement in the history of international cooperation, which established certain legal restrictions on activities that result in the pollution of the marine environment with oil, was the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution of the Sea by Oil in 1954/1962. The Convention was adopted in London in 1954. Specialists dealing with problems of the Caspian Sea may be interested in such an idea as "special areas", which are introduced by the Convention and provide for a special

and stricter regime of environmental protection for a specific region than for the world's oceans as a whole. These areas have already been announced: the Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf of Bothnia, the Gulf of Finland, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, including the Suez Canal and the Arab Gulf, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. In the "Special Areas" it is illegal to discharge any oil or oily mixture into the sea from any oil tanker and any ship with a gross capacity of 400 tons and more. An important milestone in the history of cooperation between the states in the area of conservation, research and sustainable use of ocean resources was the 3rd UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, which agreed the Convention on the Law of the Sea. In a number of articles, the Convention articulates the need for the further improvement of regional measures to protect the marine environment. The Convention also emphasizes the need to consider the characteristics of individual regions while developing rules to prevent marine pollution from land-based sources. Joining these conventions is important not only for Azerbaijan, but also for other Caspian countries. ❁

Boulevard in Baku. Modern photo

