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# SUFI SHRINE - THE PEARL OF MUSLIM ARCHITECTURE

Lithography of architect Hippius, 1861



THE INSTITUTE OF KHANAGAHS, WHICH HAS WON GREAT RECOGNITION IN THE MUSLIM WORLD, EMERGED AT THE TURN OF THE 9-10<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES.

– Junior Shirvani («Shirvani Sagir»). According to historian Hamdullah Qazvini, Pir Huseyn died in the 467<sup>th</sup> year of the Hijrah, i.e. in 1074 by the Gregorian calendar; this information shows that the khanagah was founded in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It should be noted that reports by written sources on the use of the building of the khanagah by Sufis belong to the time before the late 11<sup>th</sup> – early 12<sup>th</sup> century, so this khanagah can be considered one of the first in Azerbaijan.

Pir Huseyn was honored as a saint not only in Shirvan, but also in surrounding regions, and pilgrims from many regions flocked to it. Therefore, the Pir Huseyn Khanagah had significant vakuf property and vast areas of land. Perhaps, one of the most important items of revenue for the khanagah was international trade; this conclusion

**K**hanagahs, which also became one of the most important types of architectural structures in Azerbaijan, served as a refuge for Sufis who had no home and as a venue for joint religious rituals (worship, fasting, Sufi ceremonies, etc.), meetings, debates, and sometimes educational institutions. In many cases, khanagahs formed in a long time near the graves of saints - pirs. For the perfection of architectural and spatial solutions and reliability of functional load, the Pir Huseyn Khanagah, which is a monument of national importance, notice-

ably stands out among khanagahs of Azerbaijan. It is located in the village of Gubalibaloglan in Hajigabul District on the banks of the River Pirsatchay, and is associated with the name of the famous 11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Sheikh Pir Huseyn Ravani (Shirvani), the younger brother of the great Sufi poet and philosopher, Muhammad Bakuvi (948-1050), who was known in the Middle East under the name of Baba Kuhi and was buried in Shiraz. In Sufi literature sources, Baba Kuhi is mentioned under the name of Senior Shirvani («Shirvani Kabir»), and Pir Huseyn ibn Ali



now kept at the Museum of History of the Azerbaijani National Academy of Sciences reads: «The architect of this building is Sheykhzadeh Habibullah Bin Sheikh Haji Muhammad». In a report on this inscription in 1861, the famous orientalist B. Dorn noted that the stone inscription «was lying at the entrance to the mosque».

The carved mihrab of the mosque of the khanagah, which has a great artistic value, was removed in 1940 and installed at the Nizami Literature Museum of the Azerbaijani National Academy of Sciences. The name of Shirvanshah Abulfat Farrukhzad bin Akhsitan and the date of construction – the 665<sup>th</sup> year of the Hijrah, i.e. 1266/67 by the Gregorian calendar – are embossed with glazed bricks on the mihrab. Above the entrance to the minaret of the khanagah, there is a large stone inscription, which is embossed with Suls script characteristic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and reads that the minaret was built «under the fair ruler Menku Buga kha-gan... with money and support from

Mr. Argun». In the octahedral pedestal of the minaret, on the left of the entrance, right on the masonry, there is an inscription saying that the minaret was built in the 654<sup>th</sup> year of the Hijrah (1256) under Shirvanshah Akhsitan II. Another inscription made above the cylindrical body of the minaret under a stalactite cornice says that the building was erected in the 693<sup>rd</sup> year of the Hijrah on orders from Shirvanshah Gershasb bin Akhsitan. To the right of this inscription, on a stone plate, we read: «The architect of the minaret is Shamsaddin Muhammad Ali Abbas, it is the work of Mahmud bin Ibrahim.»

All these inscriptions suggest that the construction of the minaret began in 1256 under Shirvanshah Akhsitan II and was completed in 1294 under his son Gershasb. As is evident from the many inscriptions, active construction work at the khanagah on the Pirsaahtay was carried out in 1243-1303. **These inscriptions also attest to close attention to the khanagah by the Shirvan-**

**shahs and Ilkhanids, who rendered all assistance and support for the construction work.** Building work in the confined space of castle walls strongly affected the size, layout and architecture of the buildings, but the work was done with sufficient quality. The first in-depth research into the khanagah was carried out by orientalist B. Dorn, who gave information about the building inscriptions, which is still of great value.

The latest of the inscriptions he found at the khanagah belong to 823 and 1049 of Hijrah (1420 and 1639). The first of these inscriptions, according to him, reports the conduct of restoration and fortification work on the castle walls on orders from Shirvanshah Khalilullah I, and the second inscription on a tombstone mentions Sheikh Jamaladdin.

The Pir Huseyn Khanagah, with its semi-circular towers, battlements and representative entrance portal, looked like a small Shirvan fortress from a distance, though the sharply rising minaret





is drawn from the fact that it was built on the left bank of the River Pirsaaatchay, a very lively caravan route linking the major cities of Shirvan to Muslim and northern countries.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the khanagah on the Pirsaaatchay has served as an object of study for many scientists - I. Bartolomey (1858), B. Dorn (1861), R. Khaki (1923), V. Sysoyev (1923), B. Denike (1936), S. Raygorodskiy, E. Kanukov, M. Aliyev (1939), K. Krachkovskaya, A. Alasgarzadeh, L. Bretanitskiy, M. Neymat and others. Along with archaeological excavations, a special expedition in 1939-1940 carried out an architectural survey in the khanagah and made sketches, photographs and prints. In the 1970s, very incomplete and low-quality «restoration» work was carried out here.

Unfortunately, **no information about the khanagah on the Pirsaaatchay has been found in medieval sources yet, and therefore, the history of its construction and the personality of the architects can be judged only by the architectural-artistic particularities of the buildings of the complex and inscriptions on them.**

The Pir Huseyn Khanagah is a compact architectural ensemble consisting of adjacent one-story buildings surrounded by walls of irregular rectangular shape. All the buildings of the khanagah, except for the tomb of Pir Huseyn and

the prayer hall of the adjoining mosque, reached the present day badly damaged.

The Pir Huseyn Khanagah can be seen as a complete sample of a specific architectural type. It has a number of significant differences from other Azerbaijani khanagahs located in Ahar, Ardebil, Nakhchivan, Shamakhi and other places. The special importance of the khanagah is proved by the impressive walls with towers surrounding it, which give an impression as reinforced stronghold. The main buildings, a leading place among which is taken by the small-sized tomb of Pir Huseyn adjacent to the western wall, are grouped around the courtyard. There are two large rooms, six rooms like cells, two walk-through lobbies, one minaret and the remains of an eight-pointed tower mausoleum. As in other khanagahs, the prayer hall of the mosque is adjacent to the tomb of the sheikh, which serves as a place of pilgrimage. The tomb of Pir Huseyn and the corridor located in front of it are adjacent to the narrow northern side of the rectangular prayer hall of the mosque. By its spatial and constructive structure, the mosque is similar to Ashura Mosque (1169) in Baku's Ichari Shahar. In both mosques, arch walls have been installed in order to strengthen the partition of the prayer hall with an ogive, which is why entrance doors asym-

metrically lead to the eastern façade, and walk-through lobbies were later installed before the doors.

Khanagahs of the time, as a rule, had a room for the sheikh – the head of the Sufi Order, while the remaining cells and rooms were used by permanent and temporary dervishes for living, for conducting classes, etc. There was also a separate room for the reading of the Koran in singsong. Apparently, in the Pir Huseyn Khanagah, Sufi rituals and ceremonies were held mainly in the courtyard.

The last building discovered inside the Pir Huseyn Khanagah was the remains of an eight-pointed tower stone mausoleum at the southern wall with a ruined dome, but a preserved crypt - a typical example of tower mausoleums with a prismatic frame and pyramidal dome common in Shirvan. Researchers attribute the date of its construction to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

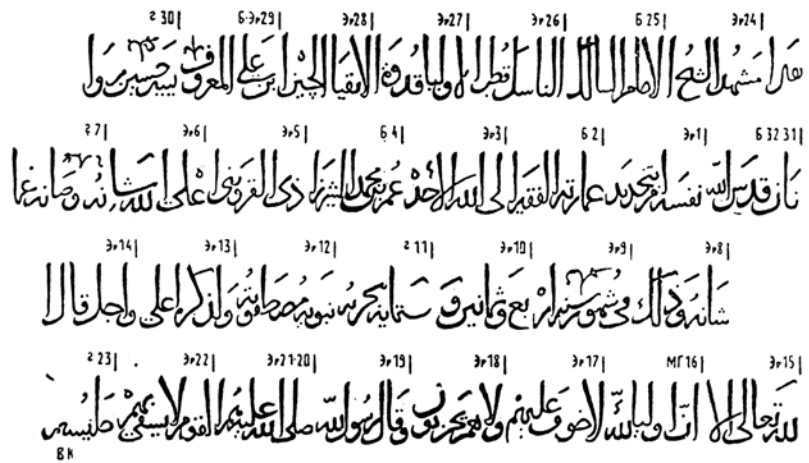
**Stages of the formation of the ensemble of the Pir Huseyn Khanagah within the walls can be traced only on the basis of building inscriptions.**

The oldest of these inscriptions was made above the current entrance and consists of six large stone tiles. According to this inscription, the construction of the entrance was finished in the 641<sup>st</sup> year of the Hijrah, i.e. in 1243 by the Gregorian calendar. Another inscription

### Graphic depiction of the large frieze of the Pir Huseyn mausoleum

gave an impression about its true function. The small gate of the khanagah, built in the form of a three-dimensional portal, led to the cobbled courtyard of complex configuration; the entrance to the mosque is on the opposite side. All buildings surrounding the courtyard were blocked by arches and created a kind of three-dimensional structure thanks to multi-layer flat roofs.

The prismatic body of the tower mausoleum, of which only the crypt remained, ended with a characteristic pyramidal dome. The minaret dominating the khanagah reflects a new stage in the development of Shirvan minaret compositions. Like the minaret of the Baku mosque Sinig Gala (1078), it has no direct connection with nearby buildings. **The minaret of the Pir Huseyn Khanagah reflects the artistic and technical progress experienced by cult architecture after the Sinig Gala mosque.** The fact that the name of the mason was indicated in the building inscription along with the name of the architect points to increasing specialization in construction. All the buildings of the khanagah are severely damaged, so it is very difficult to judge the artistic and architectural features of their façades facing the courtyard. Only the entrance to the mosque, which is shaped as a small simple portal, testifies to fairly high-quality masonry. **Only the mosque and the tomb of Pir Huseyn adjacent to it from the northern side have remained relatively intact; thanks to the ornaments of their interior, the Pir Huseyn Khanagah took a place of honor in the history of Muslim architecture.** Here's how I. Bartolomey, who visited here in 1858, described the mosque of the khanagah: «The mosque is nothing interesting from the outside, they enter it through a low door, but inside, it is remarkable for its richness of ornamentation: the wall, which faces the qiblah, is totally covered with convex plaster ornaments that intertwine with inscriptions from large letters Kufic letters. These huge ornaments form a kind of frame for the niche with a height of up to 3 and



width of up to 2 arshins, which is totally decorated with mosaic from faience tiles of different colors and even gold. These ornaments from tiles (faience tiles) are extremely good, and I had almost not seen such ornaments even in the mosques of Qazvin and Sultaniyah.» Alas, none of the ornaments described in the above passage, has survived, and today, the interior of the mosque is made from time-blackened stone walls and a long vaulted ceiling.

One of the particularities of the plaster mihrab in the Pir Huseyn Khanagah is that the inscription over the large niche that tells the name of the Shirvanshah and the date, the 665<sup>th</sup> year of the Hijrah (1266/67), is made from green glazed plates. There is no doubt that it is the date of the installation of the mihrab, while the very building of the mosque was probably built earlier – at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**The Pir Huseyn Khanagah became known in scientific literature, primarily due to its internal architectural decoration.** First researchers enthusiastically talked about interior decoration of the tomb of Pir Huseyn, and in the middle of the last century there appeared a solid monograph about its tile cladding. The tomb was built close to the castle walls in the northwestern corner of the khanagah, is blocked with an ogive and has a rectangular 2.80 by 2.50 meter shape. The door of the tomb leads to a dark 3.30 by

2.20 meter room in the east and is also connected with the prayer hall.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century historian, Vassaf, described the wealth of the Pir Huseyn Khanagah not only from estates and vakuf land, but also from international trade, as well as from donations by rulers and major feudal lords. The same Vassaf recorded that in 1318, the Golden Horde Khan Uzbek, who had seized Shirvan, visited the Pir Huseyn Khanagah and ordered his emirs to free the prisoners kept here and return all the loot to its owners, after which he gave this sanctuary rich gifts - gold ingots and valuable fur. All this found its manifestation in the architectural design of the khanagah, in the quality of construction work and in the fine decorations of the interior of buildings. Unfortunately, the interior of the tomb was also completely looted. Here is what I. Bartolomey wrote about the tiling inside the tomb in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: «All the walls... are covered with faience tiles, where bright green and purple colors prevail. The jewelry is not as rich as in the mosque, but the long inscription made on all the walls of the room decorates it at a human height; light comes in through the only small narrow window which is placed pretty high in order to give this semidarkness a mysterious nature. The tomb formed a square elevation in the middle of this room and was totally covered with wonderful and rich faience.» Academician B. Dorn, who visited this



building three years later, does not hide his admiration in his report: «It's hard to find something similar to the interior decoration of the tomb... of Pir Huseyn.» According to him, the glazed cladding gives a complete idea «about all the beauty and grandeur» of the tomb.

Glazed patterns covered the interior walls of the tomb to a height of 145 cm, whereas before, according to V. Sysoyev, they occupied the walls to a height of 2.25 arshins, i.e. 160 cm. The lower main stage was made from standard tiled plates in the form of alternating eight-pointed stars and a cross with a diameter of 20-21 cm, which were quite typical of the classical Muslim architecture of the East. According to Krachkovskaya, in order to decorate the interior walls of the

made from two dark blue thick lines with Koranic texts and to a lesser extent, Persian classical rubais inside. Incidentally, some stars indicate years of work to decorate the interior of the tomb – the 682<sup>nd</sup>, 683<sup>rd</sup> and 684<sup>th</sup> years of the Hijrah (1283-1284). The internal surfaces of the stars are covered with vegetable patterns, which in some cases, is supplemented with symmetrical figures of animals, birds and fish. In the center of one of the stars, there is an image of castle gates. On the basis of the style of the inscriptions, style of ornaments and color of dyes, specialists concluded that the work to decorate the interior walls of the tomb was carried out by several teams of craftsmen.

For architectural and artistic perfection, skill and aesthetic qualities of deco-

in it a completely unique atmosphere, which makes a lasting emotional impression on pilgrims.

The first researchers of the Pir Huseyn Khanagah stressed its important place in the history of Muslim art in general. All the buildings of the architectural complex of the khanagah, in accordance with the traditions of the Shirvan school, were built of limestone. There is no subtle carving and examples of monumental stone plastics that we see in the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, the Bayil castle and other architectural monuments of national importance in Shirvan. The fortifications of the khanagah are similar to the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century castles that survived in the villages of Absheron, while the mosque, for its spatial and constructive solutions, does not differ from the vaulted quar-



tomb, a total of 300 of such standard eight-pointed stars and crosses were used. The eight-pointed stars, as a leading element of the tiled decoration of the khanagah, are unique examples of patterned techniques known in literature as luster tiles. In this technique, a special pigment, in which salt metals prevail, is applied to ceramic plates, and after firing, metallic or pearlescent shine appears on the surface of the plate. The eight-pointed stars were cast in moulds; patterns of dark blue and green turquoise copper oxide were applied on their surface. The patterns and colors of stars are very diverse; the color of luster tile is mainly dark brown and yellowish, although there are also some reddish-brown and red plates. Around the edges of the stars, a rim is

rations, the tomb of Pir Huseyn is among the most significant monuments of this kind not only in Azerbaijan but throughout the region. According to V. Krachkovskaya, **the internal design of the Pir Huseyn tomb, for its high technical, artistic and aesthetic parameters, as well as information wealth and compositional completeness, belongs to unique works of Islamic architecture**, with which only the tomb of Imam Reza in Mashhad can compete. It is owing to these decorations that the sheikh's tomb has become an ideological and artistic center of the khanagah. With the help of the extraordinary mix of color and ornamental decorations, masters were able to completely compensate for the lack of space in the premises and create

terly mosques of the Baku castle built in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Pir Huseyn Khanagah can be seen as an important monument that combines traditions of the northern and southern regions of Azerbaijan in the field of architectural decor, namely, Shirvan stone plastics with southern plaster carving and multi-color tiled decor. In this case, the plaster component goes back to the famous plaster mihrabs of mosques of Tabriz, Marand, Urmiya, Nakhchivan and Hamadan, and the luster glazed decorations – to the decorations of monuments of Tabriz, Shiz (Takht-i Suleyman), and Sultaniyah.

It is not known yet when the khanagah ceased its activities and was abandoned. Here's what Academician B. Dorn, who carefully examined this

architectural monument and its neighborhood in 1861, recorded: «It is clear that this place was a favorite place for neighborhood residents, and therefore, its entire territory was well cultivated. Now, of course, all this reflects a heavy picture of desolation.»

Regrettably, being abandoned, the khanagah remained without any supervision and care for many years and even hundreds of years, and was in fact doomed to destruction. Back in 1858, the famous orientalist I. Bartolomey found the Pir Huseyn Khanagah in a deplorable condition and in order to save the tiled internal design of the tomb, he suggested moving it to Tbilisi and St. Petersburg, but the proposal was not heard. Since then, individuals started taking away tile plates. After

the khanagah were particularly actively sold in Paris, which led to a sharp reduction in the area of glazed decorations in the tomb of Pir Huseyn.

Nevertheless, the greatest damage to the Pir Huseyn Khanagah was caused by armed Armenian Dashnaks. Russian scientist V. Sysoyev published an article in 1925, saying that **«most of the tiles were broken by an Armenian military unit that captured the khanagah in 1918 and then left for Armenia».**

Of course, the Armenian bandits did not confine themselves only to damaging the internal decorations of the sheikh's tomb and ruined all the buildings of the khanagah. In the same year, 1925, a considerable number of stars and crosses from the large picture of the tomb were taken to St. Petersburg, and today the city's State

**museums. Yes, the khanagah gained world fame, but the price was too high - devastation and looting.**

Today, aiming to restore this valuable architectural monument, it is necessary to approach this issue on a strictly scientific basis and think about the numerous elements of the decoration of the premises of the shrine taken away in the past and now kept at various museums around the world. 🌟

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three years, Academician B. Dorn took a small fragment of the frieze of the tomb to Moscow, where he handed it over to the Asian Museum (now the Museum of Culture of the Peoples of the East). Made in 1907 by members of a scientific expedition, photographs show how barbarously the tile decorations of the khanagah were destroyed – you can see empty sockets of torn out tiles. The expedition took some of the decorations to Tiflis and handed them over to the Caucasian museum. At present, more than 15 glazed tiles of the Pir Huseyn Khanagah are kept at the State Museum of Georgia. The looting and sale of tiles and decorations from the khanagah acquired a large scale in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It should be noted that in 1913, tiled plates from

Hermitage Museum exhibits 123 luster stars, 325 cross-shaped plates and other pieces of tile decorations of the khanagah. In October 1936, only three small fragments of luster decorations remained in the khanagah - two in the tomb and one in the mosque, and in 1940, together with the plaster mihrab, they were all taken to the Nizami Literature Museum, where, incidentally, five fragments of the frieze from the tomb with inscriptions are also kept. We have no specific information about the tiles from the Pir Huseyn Khanagah kept in private collections in Europe and America. We only know that **no other architectural monument of Azerbaijan can be compared with the Pir Huseyn Khanagah by the degree of «representation» in world**

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