

NAVAL BUSINESS IN AZERBAIJAN (9TH-17TH CENTURIES)

The naval business in Azerbaijan is rooted in the depths of centuries. With the appearance of Azerbaijani feudal states in the 9th-10th centuries, especially with the strengthening of the state of the Shirvanshahs, the naval business in Azerbaijan received significant development.

As an important part of the armed forces in the 10th-13th centuries, the Shirvanshahs paid special attention to the construction of fortifications on the coast and to the development of military shipbuilding. In the 10th-12th centuries, the fleet of the Shirvanshahs had several dozen ships. During this period, the Shirvanshah fleet took an active part in repulsing attacks from the sea. The fleet became especially strong under Shirvanshah Akhshitan I (1160-1196) in the 12th century.

The 10th century saw the significantly increased role of Baku, of which Muqaddasi (985) wrote: "Baku on sea

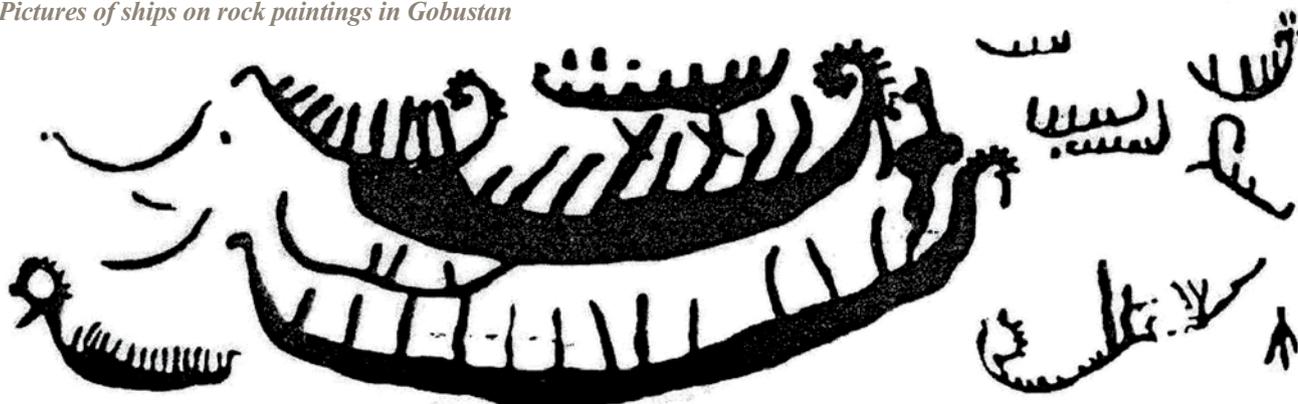
is the only harbor in the region" (1, p. 70) after the capital of the state was relocated here as a result of the destruction of the former capital Shamakhi by an earthquake in 1192. According to 12th century Azerbaijani poet Khaqani, Baku became a major port and the center of international transit trade on the Caspian Sea, which had a positive impact on the development of shipbuilding and the construction of fortifications.

Thus, under Shirvanshah Fariburz III (1225-1243), the Sabayil fortress, which served as a military base for the Shirvanshah fleet, was built on one of the islands near Baku.

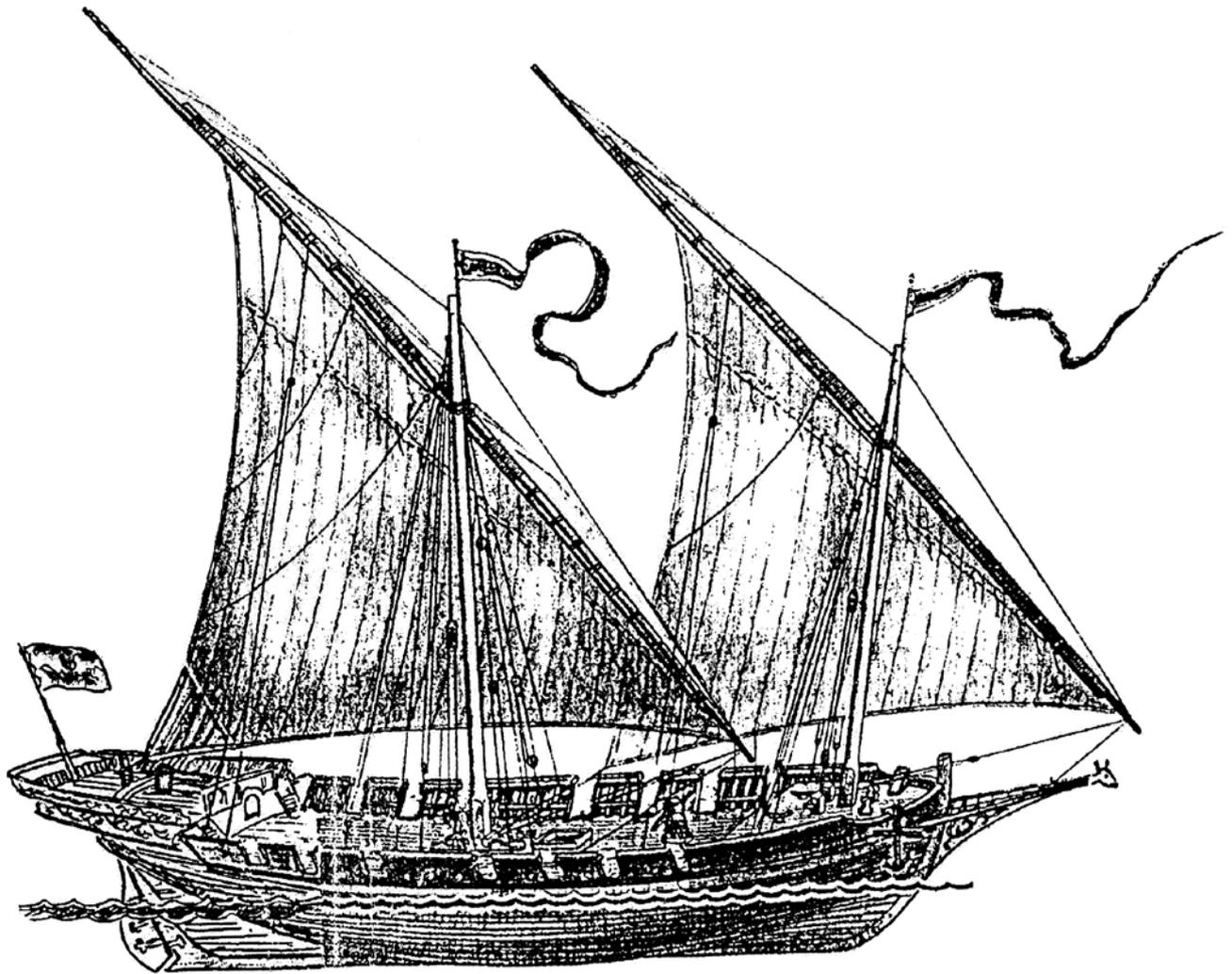
In connection with the acute need to protect the coast from attacks by Vikings and Russians at the end of the 9th century, the construction and strengthening of sea fortifications in Derbent and in Baku intensified.

Ibn Khordadbeq wrote in his book "The Book of

Pictures of ships on rock paintings in Gobustan



Shebeke – a warship of the State of the Shirvanshahs. 12th century. Reconstruction by S.Ahmadov



Ways and States" (840-850) that Russians "go to the sea of Jurjan (i.e. Caspian) and call at any shore" (2, p.3). Ibn Fakiḥ (10th century) and Ibn Fadlan (10th century) wrote about this too. Two stages are distinguished in the history of the Russians' naval expeditions to the Caspian Sea: until the middle of the 10th century, they were undertaken for the purpose of trade and only occasionally had the nature of military campaigns; Subsequently, the Russians tend to firmly establish themselves in the western Caspian regions. At the end of the 9th century and during the 10th century, the Russians launched several major military campaigns across the Caspian Sea.

Perhaps, the brightest trace in the history of the naval business in Azerbaijan was left by 1175. In that year, Akhsitan I defeated the Russian fleet near Baku, destroying 73 enemy ships (3, p. 141). This fact allows us to judge the size of the Shirvan fleet and the high qualities of its warships.

In order to restore the appearance of 13th century Shirvan military ships, chroniclers' notes, travelers' notes and drawings, as well as archaeological excavations were used. Travelers' sketches depict ships with an extended nose, raised stern, two masts with inclined edges and oblique (triangular) sails.

Venetian Ambassador Ambrogio Contarini (15th century) noted that Caspian ships were inferior to European vessels, as they were very outdated (4, p. 138). Indeed, the absence of an enemy at sea in the 15th century led to the almost complete withering away of the Shirvan navy. Contarini writes that the ships used on the western coast of the Caspian Sea "outwardly resemble a galley, but have the dimensions of a tartan" (4, p. 138). His information is confirmed by the authors of the 16th-17th centuries Oruj bey Bayat, Pietro della Valle and Jan Struys, who speak about morally obsolete ships. They report that some of these ships could lift up to 30 tons of cargo (5, pp. 34, 6, p. 239).



Thus, the main type of Shirvan ships (travelers also describe fishing vessels, merchant ships and even large boats) had to have an extended nose, a raised stern, two masts with inclined edges and oblique sails, look like a galley, had the size of a tartan and carry up to 30 tons of cargo. A tartan was a ship 30-35 m long and 6 m wide, and a galley was a sailing-rowing vessel with 15-20 pairs of oars, a foremast and a mainmast with oblique sails (7, p. 27, 28, 63). Interestingly, the peoples of Central and Northern Europe called oblique sails "Latin", the peoples of Southern Europe ("Latin" peoples) - "Arab", and the Arabs - "Indian" (8, pp. 24, 25). Consequently, as an eastern invention of the period of the slave-owning system, slanting sails could be and probably were available on Shirvan vessels.

A comparison of all available information gives us grounds to believe that Shirvan ships had a length of 30 m, a width of 5-6 m, a raised stern, an extended nose,

a foremast and a mainmast, oblique sails with inclined edges and up to 15-20 pairs of oars, while their contours outwardly resembled those of a galley. The search for analogues among the ships of other Muslim countries led us to a "Shebeke"-type ship (Arab.). Shebeke was a sailing-rowing vessel used for military purposes in the 7th-18th centuries (in the Persian Gulf, shebekes are still common). The hull of the ship was made of acacia or teak wood with the stems attached to the keel, the shell had a safety margin due to the frames and sealing cable in the grooves between the boards of the hull. Instead of nails, wood spikes were used, since Muslims believed that there was a kind of super magnet on the seabed that pulled metal parts out of the hull. The stern was adorned with carvings and was regarded as a visit card of the ship. Small shebekes had two, and more advanced large shebekes of the 15th-17th centuries in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea - three masts with inclined edges and oblique sails (8, pp. 88, 89). The nose decoration (it was always available on all shebekes), perhaps, resembled the head of a bull. This image is most often found on Shirvan buildings in the 12th-13th centuries. On the shebekes of Shirvan there was a steering wheel and a tiller. It is known that they had been used in the East since the 11th century and in the West since the 12th century (9, p.30). According to travelers, of all Caspian types of ships only the "fish"-type



Facing stones of Sabayil Castle. 13th century. The Palace of the Shirvanshahs historical-architectural complex

Shirvanshah Ahsitan I inspects the navy. Painter O.Sadikhzadeh

ship had a steering oar (10, p. 93). Consequently, all the others, including shebekes had a rudder and a tiller. The anchors of the shebeke were reconstructed on the basis of anchors found during archaeological studies at the bottom of the Baku bay and at the bottom of the sea near the village of Bilgah in the north of Absheron (11, pp. 283, 12, pp. 52-54).

In the annals concerning the medieval history of Azerbaijan, there are several terms on the maritime business, and all have Arab roots. Consequently, the naval terminology of the Shirvanshah fleet was created on an Arab basis. The book of the medieval marine theorist, the greatest pilot of his era, Ahmed ibn Majid, "The book of use on the foundations and rules of marine science" is a kind of Arab maritime encyclopedia describing in detail the sea terms used in the Mediterranean, Black, Caspian, Red Seas, the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean (12). We can use this work to restore the marine terminology of Shirvan. The masts of the ship were described with the terms dakal (foremast), sarin (mainmast), cabins - balanj, malikh, anchors - anjur, mirsa, gangways - sakala,

holds - batn al-markab, sails - kil, kunb, shira (depending on the material - strands or cotton fabric) (12, pp. 152, 155-159, 162, 165, 168, 173). Ships used navigational instruments such as water clocks, astrulabs (astrolabe), compasses ("needle house"), burds (lot), kamal, bilsiti, alvah (meanings not established). Also, sailing directions - rakhmandaj were used too (12, pp. 124, 144, 156, 168-170). The whole personnel of the ship was called Mallah or Bahri ("seafarers") and was divided into higher, middle and lower personnel. The top personnel consisted of the captain (on large warships - the amir, on small warships - the rais, on auxiliary ships - the ishtiyam) and the pilot (rubban). The middle personnel consisted of the helmsman (sukkan-gir), boatswain (tandil), ship carpenter (pola) and lookout (pirjari, dibbon). The sailors were designated by the terms "nuti", "navvat", shots-oil throwers - naffat (12, pp. 168, 171, 173, 328).

As military transport ships (marcab), bagala ("mule" - Arab.) ships were used. The bagala was a sailing vessel with two masts and slanting sails. The wooden hull was covered with boards, and the elements of the hull and



Caspian Sea on a medieval European map. Baku, Derbent and Shirvan are shown as port cities

covering were fastened with vegetable ropes (8, p. 89). The underwater part of the bagala, as well as the she-beke was covered with a special mixture of vegetable fat and lime. The bagala had a continuous deck without superstructures, a sloping stem with a short bowsprit. In Muslim countries, the bagala had been used since the 11th century, and in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea they are still common. The size of the bagala: length - up to 30 m, width - up to 5 m, crew (depending on the size of the ship) - up to 25 people (8, p. 89).

The Mongol invasion at the beginning of the 13th century severely inhibited the economic development of the region and had a negative impact on the development of shipbuilding.

From the end of the 13th century, the importance of international maritime trade in the Caspian Sea seriously increased. The development of commodity-monetary

relations in northern Italy in the 14th century resulted in trade and political competition between Genoa and Venice, whose struggle for the excess profits of "over-seas trade" led to the appearance of Italian merchants, missionaries and pirates in the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Caspian. Genoese and Venetian merchants sailed in the Caspian on their ships and founded their factories on the shores (3, p. 118). These were the first ships of the European type in the Caspian, as reported by travelers from Western Europe. The Dutch traveler Jan Struys (16th century) pointed out: "It's good to sail in the Caspian Sea on a flat boat with a capacity of 40 to 50 tons, larger ships and those which sit deeper cannot go everywhere" (14, p. 301).

In an ancient Catalan atlas compiled in 1375, the Caspian Sea is shown as the Baku Sea and the Sea of Sarra. Hence it can be concluded that the Catalans sailed

in the Caspian Sea and knew its coast very well (14, p. 118). According to Marco Polo, already in the 13th century, Genoese merchants traveled across the Caspian Sea on their ships brought here (10, p. 33). Here appeared new types of ships adapted for the transportation of oil. In particular, oil was transported from Baku by Gilan merchants on their booses to the port of Mangyshlak (3, pp. 292). According to Italian traveler and diplomat Ambrogio Contarini, in the 15th century Shirvan military vessels of the “fish” system, built of tarred oak boards with two masts and long poles, sailed in the Caspian Sea. According to Contarini, they “are shaped absolutely like a fish and bear even this name, for they are narrow in the stern and nose and are very convex on the sides.” Further, Contarini noted: “Caspian seafarers sail on the off chance, without a compass, observing the currents of stars, and generally keep to the shores, from which they never go too far. In bad weather, they resort to sails; sometimes they also use oars” (13, p. 93).

These vessels accommodated 10 people with cargo. Oruj bey Bayat, Petro Della Valle and Jan Struys report on flat-bottomed galleys sailing in the Caspian Sea capable of carrying up to 30 tons of cargo. These galleys had two types: zenzil galley - a narrow but extremely maneuverable and high-speed vessel, and bastard galley - a broad vessel with a rounded shape of the stern intended primarily for the transportation of goods. All these galleys were considered military ships. They were made from corresponding tree species from the forests of Shirvan, or from the southern and south-western coast of the Caspian Sea. The main shipyards were located in Baku, Niyazabad and Derbent (15, p. 69).

It should be noted that Azerbaijani vessels of the 14th-16th centuries in the Caspian were inferior in quality to modern European vessels. This can be explained by the fact that during this period Azerbaijani states in the Caspian had no strong competitors, and as a result, the military fleet consisted only of customs, patrol and military transport ships. The latter, for example, were used in 1487 during events related to Sheikh Heydar’s attack on Shirvan for the transfer of military equipment by sea (15, pp. 68, 69). During the siege of Baku by the Qizilbash forces in 1584-85, gunpowder and weapons brought here by sea from Derbent helped the Turks defend the city (3, pp. 282).

From the 16th century, more sophisticated booses, boats, canoes, galleys, etc. began to be widely used in the Caspian. The largest of them were “booses” (a term having Norman or Dutch origin), which were mainly



Picture of a ship on a medieval Arab miniature

made in Astrakhan. They were sharp-nosed vessels with one sail, which had spare ropes, anchors and sails. The crew included, in addition to the commander, a carpenter, a foreman and a signalman, and an experienced pilot, who knew the fairway very well, was taken to the sea. The lofts for members of embassies, merchants and crew were higher and roomier than on boats; On booses there were storage compartments for goods. In addition to the crew, two dozen archers and gunners were often present on the ship. The carrying capacity of this vessel was 200 tons, not counting two guns, usually a harquebus and a copper “tufak” (from “tufang”), ammunition in the form of 40 balls and other (15, p. 41).

According to contemporaries - Western travelers of the 17th century. - these ships and their ways of driving were primitive. According to Adam Olearius, “the Persians, the Tatars (meaning the Azerbaijanis - author) and the Russians sail in the Caspian Sea, but since they have bad or badly equipped ships that sail only downwind, they never dare to descend to the middle of the sea and keep to the coast where they can stop at anchors.” The booses themselves were unsafe in sailing, since their structure did not allow them to maneuver. They sailed downwind with a big sail, and if the wind changed, they raised a



*Russian attack on Barda. X c.
Only by creating a navy, did the State of the Shirvanshahs manage to stop the Russian invasion*

small sail called "walk-sail" and went into some bay (15, p. 42). In the 17th century, English ships, which differed from "eastern" ships with their greater strength and reliability, also sailed in the Caspian Sea (16, pp. 28, 17, p.151).

An important factor that played a great role in the development of navigation and shipbuilding during this period was the fact that the main trade route linking Russia to Azerbaijan and Iran, the sea route along the western coast of the Caspian Sea, had an advantage over the land route and was not associated with daily relocation, which inevitably led to the spoilage of goods, and therefore, was cheaper. In addition, the waterway was less dangerous.

Meanwhile, with the emergence in the middle of the 15th century of the powerful Ottoman Empire and strong Azerbaijani states - Aq-Qoyunlu and then the Safavid state at the beginning of the 16th century, the military-strategic situation in the Caspian region radically changed. The region becomes one of the key areas in relations between Asia and Europe, which acquired the nature of a military-political confrontation in that period. Having embarked on the path of wide conquests both in Europe and in North Africa and Asia, the Ottoman Empire, having taken control of the traditional trade centers in the eastern Mediterranean, which linked Western countries with the eastern ones, aspired to strengthen its hold on the basin of the Caspian Sea in the second half of the 16th century. This would make it possible to get in direct contact with the Sunni states

of Central Asia and form a united front against the main competitor in the region - the Shia Safavid state, and at the same time, establish full control over all Asian-European trade (18, p.158, 159, 177).

The Ottoman-Safavid wars, in particular the campaign of 1578-1590, were directed at resolving this most important military and strategic task. It should be noted that during this campaign the Turks managed to break through to the western coast of the Caspian Sea and capture Baku (17, pp. 208, 209), where they took a number of steps to create their fleet in the Caspian Sea (19, p. 28). As for naval building in the Safavid state under the rule of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), after retaking the Azerbaijani coast from the Ottomans, he engaged in the military strengthening of the coastal cities, including Baku and Derbent (20, p.171).

In the 16th-17th centuries, the scale of piracy increased in the Caspian. Don and Terek Cossacks especially distinguished themselves in this. They went out to sea on sailing vessels with a small draught, a length of 10 to 20 m and a width of 2-3 m. Up to 80 people were taken on board. They were armed, apart from cold and light small arms, with several light cannons. Their attacks on merchant vessels often violated interstate trade relations and even led to diplomatic complications (21).

In general, tracing the history of the naval business in Azerbaijan in the Middle Ages, one can come to the conclusion that it developed in the context of the general development of world navigation. The population of the coastal regions of Azerbaijan, whose life was inextricably linked with the Caspian Sea, reached a fairly high level of the naval business for its time during the Middle Ages, which is evident in the naval fortifications of Baku and Derbent, as well as in the construction of sea-going vessels, including for military purposes, in the state of the Shirvanshahs and in the Safavid state. This made it possible to effectively repel foreign raids from the sea and not to allow them to gain a foothold on the Azerbaijani coast of the Caspian Sea. ✪

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*Exhibits found by underwater archaeologists of Azerbaijan on the Caspian seabed.
The National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*

