

ASHABI-KAHF SHRINE RELIGIOUS- CULTURAL COMPLEX IN NAKHCHIVAN



The Ashabi-Kahf Shrine Religious Cultural Complex, mentioned in the holy book of Islam, the Koran, is a natural cave located on an elongated mountain between Mount Hacha and Mount Nahajir and is known as Mount Ashabi-Kahf. Our observations show that among the more than 200 different holy places in the Nakhchivan region, this sanctuary, known as Ashabi-Kahf (“Cave Owners” and “Cave Companions”), takes a special place. It is well-known not only in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, but also in all of Azerbaijan. From 1991, when Azerbaijan restored its independence and the borders were opened, pilgrims from Iran and Turkey began to visit Ashabi-Kahf.

It is known from literature that there are shrines called Ashabi-Kahf in several parts of the world (Balkan Peninsula, Jordan, Scandinavia, etc.). In the third volume of the Islamic Encyclopedia, we read: There are various stories concerning the place where the event took place. Spain, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Afghanistan, and East Turkestan (10, pp. 467). There is a sacred place called Ashabi-Kahf in two places in Turkey. One of them is in the Tarsus district in Mersin and the other is in the Afsin district in Kahraman Maras (4). The Islamic encyclopedia contains a thought that there are shrines called Ashabi-Kahf in three parts of Anatolia (Efes, Tarsus and Ephesus) (10, pp. 467).





There is a great legend on Ashabi-Kahf among the people of Nakhchivan. According to the legend, six young men fleeing the tyranny of cruel ruler Dag Yunus and a shepherd who joined them with his dog on the road woke up after sleeping in this cave for 300 years (309) and disappeared by the will of God after finding out that they had slept so long. After that, the place turned into the Ashabi-Kahf shrine.

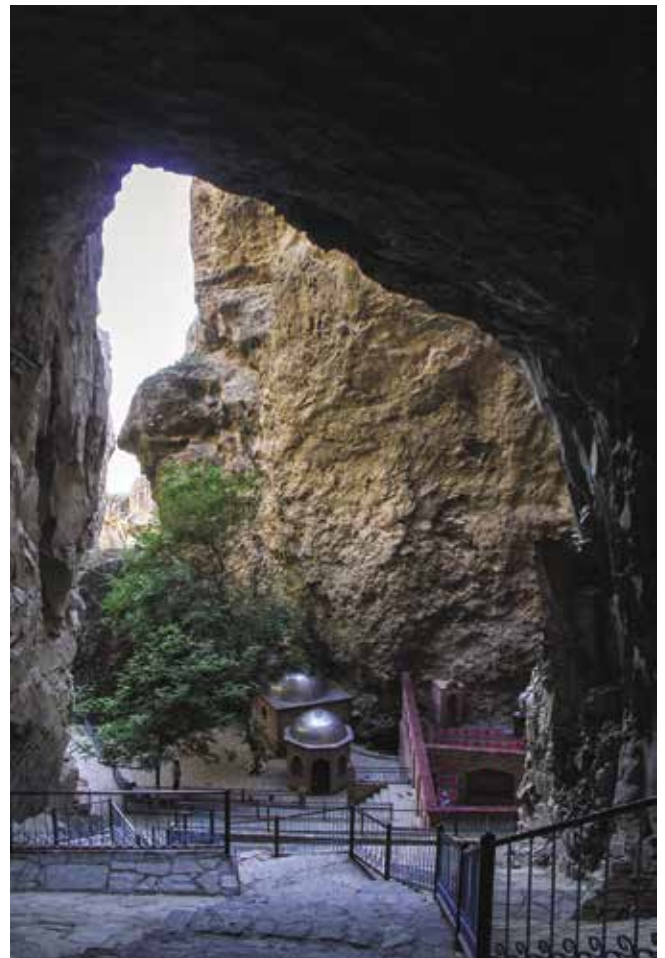
Verses 9-27 of the 18th surah of the Koran, the last of the heavenly books, called Al-Kahf (The Cave), provides detailed information about Ashabi-Kahf. However, it is not yet clear what monument these verses in the Koran refer to.

The entrance to the sanctuary is in the south. Inside the entrance to the cave, there is something called "Yeddi kimsene" on the left side. The seven people who fled the tyranny of Dag Yunus disappeared here. The most important site at Ashabi-Kahf is Yeddi kimsene. In this place consisting of a dent on the eastern side of a large grass stone (approximately 4 meters wide, 2 meters high and 1 meter deep), pilgrims pray and hit the rock with smaller stones to check whether their wishes and intentions will come true or not. If the stone sticks to the wall, it is believed that intentions will come true.



There is a mosque at the end of the shrine cave. Based on the surviving remains of a building, H.G.Gadirzadeh, a corresponding member of the ANAS, believes that the first mosque was built at 55-60 meters from the point called "Yeddi kimsene" (6, p.12-13). However, this mosque was destroyed over time. Therefore, a new mosque was erected at the end of the cave. This mosque was also destroyed over time and later, stones were stacked on each other and a wall was made, and the area designated for prayers was isolated from the surrounding area. A new mosque was built from fired bricks during reconstruction work at the mosque recently.

There are three inscriptions related to Muslim epigraphy in the mosque. There is an altar made from fired bricks in front of the rock on the southern side of the mosque. A large inscription was found in the hole in the middle of the altar. This inscription engraved in Nastaliq script on a yellow-colored marble plaque is a historical source and is a fine example of art. Unfortunately, some parts of the inscription have been erased over the years by pilgrims touching and kissing them. Also, the soot from burnt candles and cotton had its impact over time, filled the space between the letters and damaged the inscription to some extent. For all these reasons, it is somewhat difficult to read the inscription. The surface of the marble plaque was divided into frames and an



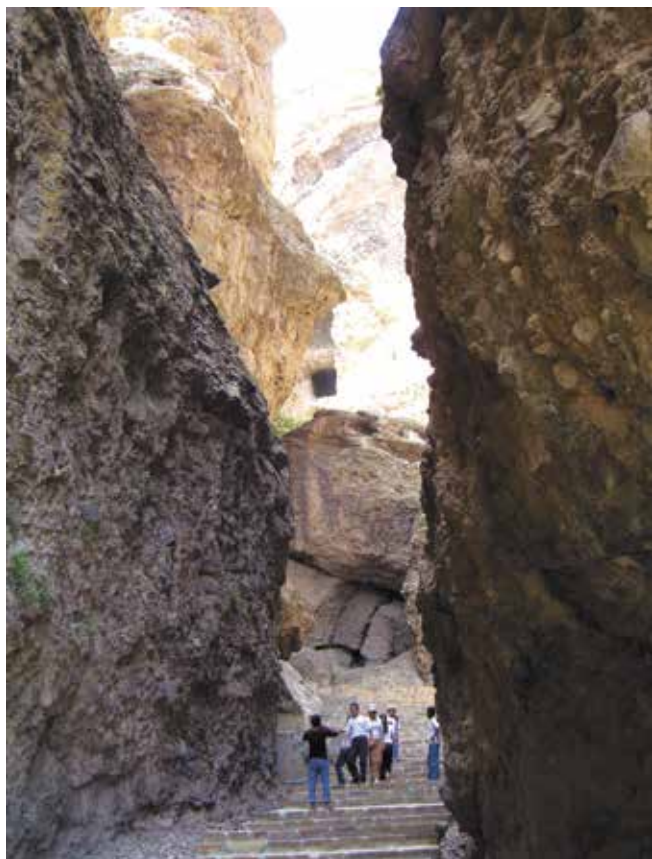




inscription was engraved inside them and on the edges of the surface of the plaque in the form of a ribbon-like outline. The text of the inscription engraved in the center inside the 15 frames consists of verses 9, 10, 11, 12, 17 and 18 taken from the al-Kahf surah of the Koran.

Another inscription is engraved in the form of a narrow outline on the edges of the marble plaque beginning from the top on the right side to the head on the left side. It is clear from the content of the inscription that the lines written here were destroyed by snow and rain. For this reason, the ruler of Nakhchivan, Shukrulla Khan Kangarli – the successor to the former ruler of the aforesaid country and the founder of good deeds,





forgiven Heydargulu Khan, made a decision on the fate of this magnificent place and ordered that the text of the plaque be written accurately on a separate piece of stone again and be installed instead of the former plaque. According to this order, Mohammad Khatib Nakhchivani, the son of the deceased Mullah Mustafa, began work and finished the inscription in the month of Safar Al-Muzaffar in 1190 (8, pp. 24-25). Safar 1190 = 22.03 - 20.04.1776.

As it is seen from the inscription, there was an inscription in the place of the existing marble inscription engraved with verses from the Holy Koran. However, as time passed, that inscription was destroyed by natural forces, and for this reason, its text was engraved on the plaque that is on the altar now as it was and was placed in the place of the old inscription. The name of Shukrulla Khan Kangarli, who issued this order, was also mentioned on the outlines of the inscription.

Heydargulu Khan, who was mentioned in the inscription, is one of the leaders of the Kangarli tribe which has inhabited Nakhchivan since ancient times. Shukrulla Khan, who had the inscription written again and placed on the altar, is his son. Both are referred to in the inscription as rulers of Nakhchivan because Na-

khchivan lands were handed over to the Kangarlis by Tiyul law (land plots temporarily given to tribal chiefs, warriors, etc. in return for certain services) from the 16th century and at the same time, because administration of the territory was assigned to the tribal leaders and because along with being feudal lords of the area they were also considered its rulers.

There is also a point about the name of Shukrulla Khan Kangarli in Ashabi-Kahf. The Russian orientalist K. N. Smirnov, who visited Nakhchivan in the 1930s, recorded that since the family of Shukrulla Khan always visited this place every time they came to the area, it was named "Shukrulla Khan's Throne" (13, p.97).

There are two plaques made from green colored stone with inscriptions near the altar. The texts of these inscriptions that are exposed to erosion are verses taken from the Al-Kahf surah. The first text starting with the words "In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate" consists of verses 8, 9, and 10 of the 18th (Al-Kahf) surah of the Koran. The text of the second inscription consists of the end of the 10th verse of the Al-Kahf surah and the 11th verse.

In our view, these inscriptions are part of an inscription once installed in the mosque and the inscription mentioned in the inscription on the altar. After the inscription was written in the last quarter of the 18th century, these pieces were maintained because verses from the Koran were inscribed on them. Later, pilgrims cemented them on the rock to ensure that they do not get lost. During reconstruction work in Ashabi-Kahf, these inscriptions were placed in a special place made of fired bricks. Both their features, both inscriptions can be attributed to the 16th century.

On the northern side of the mosque, there is a place called "Damjikhana" at a height of about 10 meters. In this cave-type place, pilgrims make a certain wish and sit down. If their intentions are to come true, a drop of water falls on their head from the ceiling of the cave. If no water drops, it means that the wish will not come true.

However, it is not clear what shrine the Ashabi-Kahf, which is mentioned in the Koran, belongs to. It is no coincidence that while talking about this, the Islamic encyclopedia stresses that it is impossible to know this because there is no proof about the time and the place where Ashabi-Kahf lived (10, p.467). At the same time, based on the information about Ashabi-Kahf in the Koran and some historical facts, it is possible to say certain thoughts about the place where the Ashabi-Kahf event took place.

It should be noted that the information contained in the Koran and other literary sources about the structure of Ashabi-Kahf is very reminiscent of the shrine in Nakhchivan. For example, according to the 17th verse of the al-Kahf surah, at Ashabi-Kahf in the Nakhchivan territory, sunlight comes into the cave from the right side at sunrise and from the left side at sunset" (1, p.144).

There is the following idea about Ashabi-Kahf in the city of Ephesus (Efes) in the notes of medieval historian and geographer Abdurrashid al-Bakuvi: "The journey from the cave to the city is one farsah. The (mouth of) the cave is towards the Big Dipper stars. The deceased do not rot inside it. There are seven of them: six of them lie on their backs, and the seventh one lies on his right side on the wall in the farthest corner of the cave. Under their feet there is a dead dog without any injuries. There is a mosque next to the cave, and the prayers of those who come here reach God" (2, p. 113).

The information given in Iranian scientist Allamah Tabatabai's "al-Mizan" interpretation shows that the entrance to the cave in the city of Efes is from the side of the Big Dipper, i.e. the northern side. In this case, there is a contradiction with the Koranic verse "Look at the sun, when it rises, sunlight comes in from the right side of the cave, when it sets, it comes in from the left side", because sunlight cannot come into the cave that is facing the north as described in the Koranic verse. For this purpose, the cave should face the south as in the Ashabi-Kahf that is in Nakhchivan.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning the words "This is the land of Dag Yunus", which is still used about our territory among the Nakhchivan population, as well as the ethnographic phrase "The wheel of Dag Yunus", which is still used in some villages on the bank of the Aras River. Science has already proven that such words, legends and stories (including the stories about Ashabi-Kahf) emerged on the basis of a historical source. These facts once again prove that it is more appropriate to search for the tyrannical ruler Dag Yunus referred to in the legend about Ashabi-Kahf in the territory of Nakhchivan rather than to link him to a foreign ruler.

In our opinion, the cruel ruler Yunus (Dag Yunus), who had the Turkic name Dag (there are names which begin with the word "Dag" in Azerbaijan), is a great ruler of the ancient Turkic land of Nakhchivan and the Ashabi-Kahf event took place in our territory. Also, the fact that the name of Tamlikhan, which was repeatedly mentioned in the legend about Ashabi-Kahf, is of Turkish origin (Tamirkhan, Tamirhan, Temirkhan, etc.) and the



interpretation of the name of the dog (Gitmir) who left with the fugitives as Turkic "getmir", i.e. "not going back" or "not returning" also reinforce the idea that the event took place in the ancient Turkic land of Nakhchivan.

Ph.D. in Philology L. Huseynzadeh notes that the "Dead City" of the "cruel ruler" Dag Yunus and the ruins of the city of Yafs linked to the name of Noah's son Japheth, who was called Abu Turk (the father of a Turk), are near the city of Nakhchivan. Even according to legends and folk stories, Japheth's son called Turk, who was given by God and was the honorable title of all Turkic tribes, was born in Nakhchivan (5, p.139).

Other facts also show that the Ashabi-Kahf mentioned in the Holy Koran is the Ashabi-Kahf in Nakhchivan. When responding to questions about the Ashabi-Kahf during a question-and-answer session between a group of Jewish scholars and first Shia Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, who became the fourth caliph later, at the time of the second Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab (634-644), Hazrat Ali also touched on this issue. For example, when they talked about the six young men fleeing Dag Yunus's oppression and encountering a shepherd who took them to the cave on the mountain, one of the Jews asks Hazrat Ali about the name of that mountain

and the cave. Hazrat Ali answers: O Jewish brother! The name of the mountain was Niclus, and the name of the cave was Vasil. There was a tree and a spring at the entrance (4, p.52).

An article entitled "The secret of Ashabi-Kahf and what is the meaning of the debate about the number of cave owners in the Koran?" published in Sharg Gapisi newspaper writes about the abovementioned question-and-answer session: "The Jewish scholar asked, 'Ali, what is the name of this mountain and cave?' He replied, 'O my Jewish brother, the name of the mountain was Nahacilus, and the cave was called Vasil. There are trees and flowing water near the cave.'" Commenting on the abovementioned idea, the author of the article says that in the dialogue, the mountain climbed by the young men is called Nahacilus. It is known that the endings "us" and "is" are used in special names in the Greek language (for example, Diocletianus). In that case, when we remove the ending of the nominative case from the word Nahacilus, the root will be Nahajil, or if we pronounce it according to the name of the mountain that is near Ashabi-Kahf today, Nuhajir or Nahajir. The Garden of Paradise in Ashabi-Kahf signifies the trees. The spring that once flowed here is still in the gorge on the left side of the road leading to the Ashabi-Kahf shrine (7). As you can see, while analyzing the question-and-answer session mentioned in various literary sources, the author concludes that Ashabi-Kahf, mentioned in the Koran, is the sacred shrine in Nakhchivan.

In the question-and-answer session between the Jews and Hazrat Ali, a question was asked about the city where Dag Yunus and the six young people lived, and Hazrat Ali said: Jew, my beloved Muhammad (may Al-

lah be pleased with him) told me that the city where they lived was a city called Afsus in the Roman state. That town was also called Tartus. It was called Afsus in the pre-Islamic period. After the emergence of Islam, it was called Tartus (4, pp. 47-48).

It should be noted that according to a popular idea among the local population of Nakhchivan, one of the initial names of the city of Nakhchivan was Afsus, or there was a city called Afsus near the city of Nakhchivan in this territory.

The fact that the Ashabi-Kahf event took place in Nakhchivan is also confirmed by medieval sources. Abubakr ibn Khosrov al-Ustad, who was originally from Ganja and spent most of his life in the Palace of the Atabays in Nakhchivan, spoke about Ashabi-Kahf in Nakhchivan in his work called Munisnameh, a collection of aphorisms, stories and anecdotes. The 26th part of 17-chapter Munisnameh, entitled "The Tale of the Cave Owners and Dag Yunus" is devoted to the Ashabi-Kahf shrine in Nakhchivan.

The book notes that Dag Yunus was originally from Turan (3, p.44) and then moved to Nakhchivan province (3, pp. 49) and took power. Also, some issues raised by Abu Bakr ibn Khosrov Al-Ustad in the source confirm that the events had taken place in Nakhchivan. For example, he writes that when Tamleykha, who was heading to the city to buy bread, asked the first person she encountered "What is the name of this city?", she heard "this city is called Nakhchivan" (3, p.90).

Based on all this, it is possible to suppose that the information presented in the Koran relates to the sanctuary in Nakhchivan and the Ashabi-Kahf mentioned in the sacred book is the sanctuary in Nakhchivan.



In the recent period, reconstruction work has been carried out in other shrines in Azerbaijan like in Ashabi-Kahf (for example, Bibihaybat Mosque). The 14-km road connecting the sanctuary with the Nakhchivan-Ordubad highway has been resurfaced and a great deal of work was carried out to provide comfortable conditions for the pilgrims here. In 2006, large-scale restoration work was carried out at the Ashabi-Kahf Religious-Cultural Complex, places were arranged for pilgrims to rest and make sacrifices, water lines were laid, stone stairs were built from the entrance to the end of the shrine, many trees were planted, household service facilities and so on were created. 🌟



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