

KARABAKH AS INDEPENDENT KHANATE

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(1747–1805)

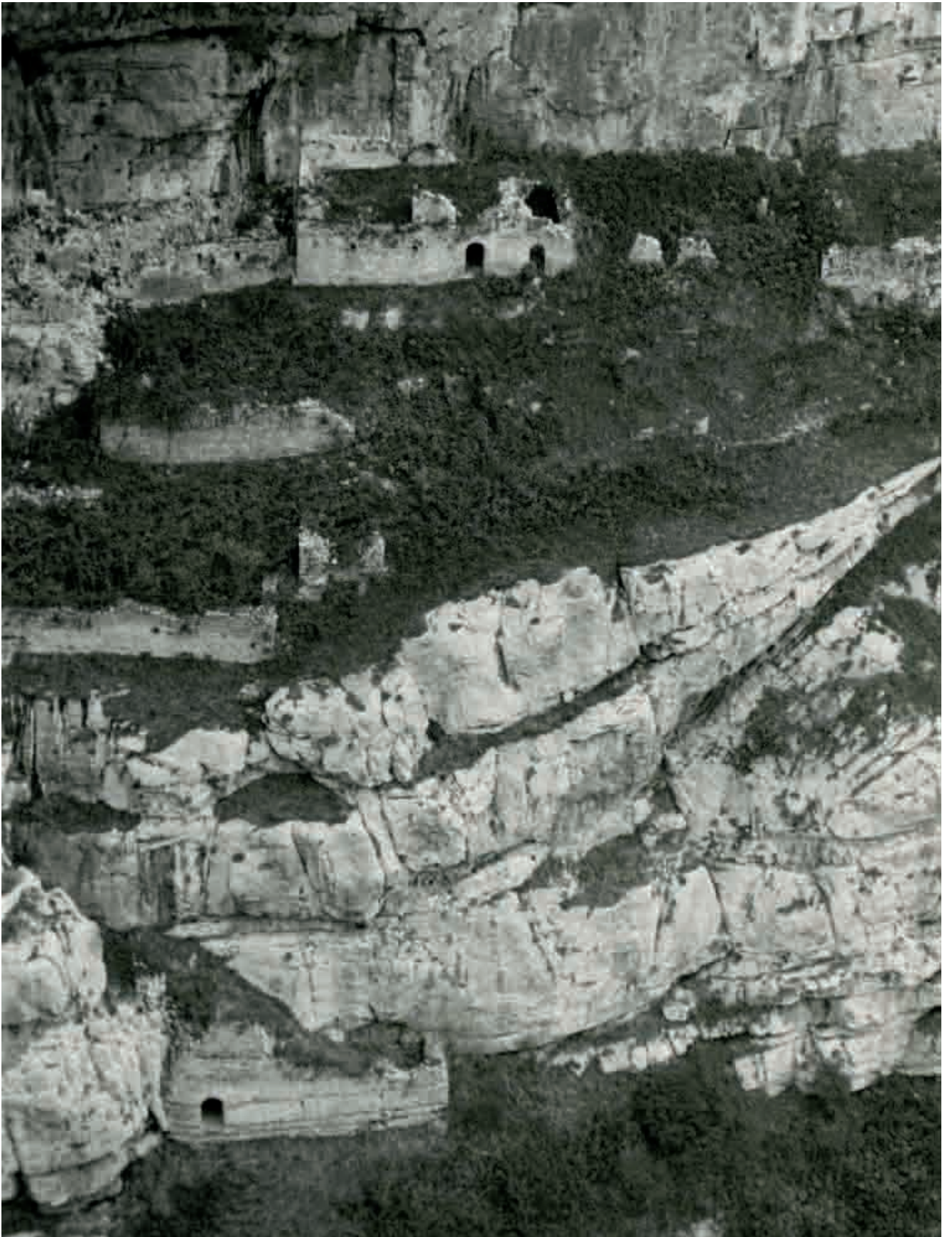
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AFTER PANAH ALI-KHAN, HIS SON IBRAHIM KHALIL-KHAN (1763-1806) BECAME RULER. UNDER HIM, THE KARABAKH KHANATE BECAME ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL IN AZERBAIJAN (MIRZA JAMAL JAVANSHIR. THE HISTORY OF KARABAKH, 1959, P. 77).



The great Azerbaijani poet, Molla Panah Vagif, played a great role in the rise of the Karabakh khanate and in the strengthening of its power. From 1769, he was the main vizier of this state.

At the turn of the 18th-19th centuries, the domestic and international situation of Azerbaijan was very complicated. The country's split into small feudal entities, constant hostility between them and economic decline were very characteristic for Azerbaijan. The aggressive aspirations of the Iranian shah, Ottoman Empire and tsarist Russia with regard to this country made the situation in the region even more complicated.





At the end of the 18th century, Iran, where Aga Muhammad-khan Gajar came to power by the end of 1794, posed a special danger to Azerbaijan. The new ruler of Iran dreamt of restoring the erstwhile greatness of the Safavid Empire. The Gajar danger forced Azerbaijani rulers to think about their security and start looking for allies against the looming threat. At such a responsible and difficult time, the ruler of Karabakh, Ibrahim Khalil-khan, initiated the establishment of an anti-Gajar coalition (**J. M. Mustafayev. The northern khanates of Azerbaijan and Russia (late 18th and early 19th centuries). Baku, 1989, p. 73**). He restored relations with Georgian King Irakli II. To this end, Tiflis was visited by Ibrahim Khalil-khan's vizier, Molla Panah Vagif. Mirza Jamal recorded: *"The Tiflis vali, high-ranking Irakli khan, the ruler of Erivan, Muhammad khan and the ruler of Talish, Mir Mustafa khan, jointly with Ibrahim khan, swore not to obey Aga Muhammad shah and to be allies and to help each other"* (**Mirza Jamal Javanshir. Op.sit., p. 79**).

Along with preparations for defense from Iranian attacks, many Azerbaijani khans established relations with the Russian command in the North Caucasus, asking Russia to help and protect them against the Gajar danger.

The Iranian ruler, Aga Muhammad-khan, was aware of the negotiations between the Azerbaijani khans and the Russian command in the North Caucasus. Therefore, he tried to call on Northern Azerbaijani khans for obedience and submission through his personal representative (**J. M. Mustafayev. Op.sit., p. 83**). However, the mission of the Iranian envoy was not successful. Ibrahim Khalil-khan of Karabakh, who was confident in his forces and the impregnability of his capital Shusha, refused to obey. Not only did he reject

Aga Muhammad-khan's proposal, he also refused to recognize him as ruler of Iran.

For this reason, Aga Muhammad-khan started preparing an attack on Northern Azerbaijan, first of all, on the Karabakh khanate. Just before the invasion, the ruler of Iran sent a firman to all khans, demanding that they immediately recognize his power and release hostages. Most of them did not dare to oppose the formidable ruler of Iran. The well-known 19th century Russian military historian, V. A. Potto, recorded: *"Only the ruler of Karabakh, khan Ibrahim, flatly refused to receive the envoys of the shah, and fortifying his position in Shusha, prepared for desperate defense"* (**V. A. Potto. The Caucasus War, V. 1, Stavropol, 1994, p. 259**).

Aga Muhammad-khan sent an 8,000-strong army led by his best military commanders against the Karabakh khanate. In 1794, the Iranian troops crossed Khudafarin Bridge. Georgian armed detachments under the command of Irakli II's son, Prince Aleksandr, came to help the Karabakhis. As a result of a battle, the Iranian troops suffered a defeat and were forced to retreat beyond the Aras River.

Despite his failure, Aga Muhammad-khan was preparing for a decisive attack on Azerbaijan. In the summer of 1795, an 85,000-strong Iranian army set off from Ardabil. Aga Muhammad-khan himself moved towards Karabakh, leading his choice units. The Iranian soldiers were led by French officers (**P. G. Butkov. Materials for the new history of the Caucasus from 1722 to 1803. Part 2. Ch. P. SPB, 1869, p. 251**). At the end of July 1795, the Iranian troops approached Shusha Castle.

The capital of the Karabakh khanate heroically defended itself. The defense was headed by Ibrahim Khalil-khan and his vizier Molla Panah Vagif.

The huge army was opposed by the 15,000-strong Karabakh army. The defenders of Shusha did not intend to surrender.

The siege lasted 33 days. The Russian historian recorded in this regard: *"The heroic defense of Shusha against the throngs of Aga Muhammad-khan is undoubtedly one of the best minutes of his (Ibrahim Khalil-khan's) life"* (**The establishment of Russian rule in the Caucasus, V. 1, Tiflis, 1904, p. 241**).

All attempts to take the castle suffered a setback. Finding himself in a desperate situation, Aga Muhammad-khan was forced to start negotiations with Ibrahim Khalil-khan. An Iranian representative was sent to Shusha, and he tried to persuade the khan to stop resisting. However, the Karabakh khan told him to tell Aga Muhammad-khan that he had no intention of surrendering his capital: *"I'd rather die in action than surrender the city to a eunuch"* (**Jean Cure. The Crown-Bearing Eunuch. Tehran, 1982 (in Persian), p. 270**).

The Iranian troops stayed in Azerbaijan until February 1796. News of Russian troops' advance and unrest in Iran forced Aga Muhammad-khan to hastily leave the country and restore law and order in his own state.

Aga Muhammad-khan Gajar's desire to subjugate Azerbaijan caused concern in Russia's ruling circles. The Russian government could not allow Gajar to succeed because it ran counter to tsarist plans regarding the Caucasus. In the spring of 1796, the Russian army under the command of General V. A. Zubov invaded Azerbaijan. As a result, they took major cities of the country – Derbend, Baku, Guba, Shamakhi and Ganja.

The occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Russian troops forced Ibrahim Khalil-khan to send one of his sons to the camp of the Russian commander-in-chief with numerous



Molla Panah Vagif's Tomb. 1982. A.V.Salamzade and E.I.Kanukov

gifts. The Karabakh khan also wrote an appeal expressing his loyalty to Catherine II (**Mirza Adigozal-bey. Op.sit., p. 83**).

The Russian troops did not stay very long in Azerbaijan. The unexpected death of Catherine II and the accession of Paul I to the throne suddenly changed the political climate. On orders from the emperor, the Russian military units left Azerbaijan.

The departure of the Russian troops allowed Aga Muhammad-shah to try his luck again. Letters were sent to Azerbaijani khanates again, demanding obedience. The message to Ibrahim Khalil-khan was especially menacing. *"The formidable ruler of Persia could not forget an affront to his dignity from the contemptible khan of Shusha who dared not to recognize his power..."* (**V. A. Potto. Op.sit., p. 259**).

The shah demanded that the

khan abdicate in favor of his son. Moreover, Ibrahim Khalil-khan was supposed to leave his possessions and travel to holy places in Mecca (**J. M. Mustafayev. Op.sit., p. 99**).

The situation in Azerbaijan ahead of Gajar's invasion was complicated. Famine and plague were rife and rampant in the country. Most of Karabakh residents were forced to leave their homes and move to other khanates in search of livelihood. In this situation, it was difficult for the Karabakh khan to organize the defense of his capital and counter the invasion by Aga Muhammad-shah Gajar.

Jean Cure, an eyewitness to those events, recorded the seizure of Shusha by Iranian troops in 1897 in the following way: Aga Muhammad-shah, surrounding the capital of the Karabakh khanate, ordered his artillery to keep firing at one point in

the castle wall. This was supposed to cause serious damage to the wall, which would allow the Iranian troops to enter the city through gaps and breaches in the wall (**Jean Cure. Op.sit., p. 367**).

Then, the Karabakh khan decided to make a foray in order to destroy the Iranian artillery. As a result of a brave operation, Ibrahim Khalil-khan succeeded in achieving his goal – the enemy's artillery was suppressed. However, the enemy cut their way back into the castle. The Karabakh khan and his detachment hardly managed to break out of the encirclement and head northwards to Jar and Tali.

The Iranian troops did not dare to enter Shusha for two days. Aga Muhammad-shah sent a letter to its defenders, suggesting that they lay down their arms. In response to the fears of the city residents, the shah swore on the Koran that he would not touch anybody. Only after that, did the gates of the castle open. The nobility and elders of the city came to welcome the shah, hoping to pay him off with an indemnity.

Thus, the troops of Aga Muhammad-shah seized Shusha. However, the Iranian shah "forgot" about his oath and ordered his soldiers to loot the reviled city. A bloody massacre against the intractable population began in Shusha. Thousands of people were executed or jailed. Among the prisoners was Molla Panah Vagif.

However, Shusha was fated to become the site of the death of the cruel shah. He was killed while asleep at night as a result of a plot by his courtiers. Having lost their commander, the Iranian soldiers left Karabakh and fled to Iran.

Ibrahim Khalil-khan managed to return home only three months later, but his vizier was no longer alive. The Russian historian, V. Potto, recorded that Vagif "was one of the few

people who refused to betray the old khan and was executed together with his son. People still point to their common grave behind the gate of Shusha Castle on a high hill where popular festivities were held" (V. A. Potto. *Op.sit.*, p. 270).

Thus, all the attempts of Iran to conquer the northern khanates of Azerbaijan in the 1790s ended in a failure. After the death of Aga Muhammad-shah, power was taken over by his nephew Baba-khan who ascended the throne under the name of Fatali-shah. The new ruler of Iran, continuing his predecessor's aggressive policy on Azerbaijan, first decided to improve relations with Ibrahim Khalil-khan through so-called "marriage diplomacy". Fatali-shah suggested that the Karabakh khan should marry his daughter to him.

After the attacks by Aga Muhammad-shah, the economy of the Karabakh khanate was too enfeebled. Trying not to exacerbate relations with Iran and fearing an armed attack, Ibrahim Khalil-khan was forced to agree with the shah's proposal (A. Berzhe. *Fatali-shah and his children.// Russian antiquity, 1886, v. 50, p. 553*).

By the early 19th century, the foreign policy of the Russian state on the Central Caucasus suddenly became active. In 1801, a manifesto of Russian Emperor Alexander I on the incorporation of the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom into Russia was announced. Using eastern Georgia as a bridgehead, the tsarist government started implementing its plan on Azerbaijan. The champion of the tsar's colonial policy in the Central Caucasus was Prince P. D. Tsitsianov who was appointed commander-in-chief of the Russian troops in Georgia in 1802.

In conquering Azerbaijan, Tsitsianov attached great importance to the seizure of Jar-Balakan communities who stood in the way of Russian



Panahali Khan's Castle. 18th century

troops advancing deep into the heart of Azerbaijan. In early April 1803, the Jar-Balakan province was devastated, while Balakan was burnt down (ACAC, T. P. Tiflis, 1868, doc. 1387, p. 685).

Having liquidated the danger behind its troops, Tsitsianov directed the blow to the Ganja khanate, which was regarded as a key to Azerbaijan. Ibrahim Khalil-khan of Karabakh realized that after the Russian troops seized Ganja, his khanate would be the next victim. Therefore, he made peace with Javad-khan and sent two cannons to help him (*op.sit.*, doc 1170, p. 588). However, Ganja Castle was taken by storm at the dawn on 3 January 1804, and its khan died a hero's death (*op.sit.*, doc 1182, p. 592).

The tragic death of Javad-khan did not frighten the Karabakh khan. He spirited away his two sons – Ugurlu-aga and Ali-Guli-aga, whom the tsarist authorities tried to arrest and exile to internal provinces of Russia (*op.sit.*, doc. 1185, 1186, p. 592; doc 1189, p. 598).

Soon after his return from the failed military campaign in Iravan, General Tsitsianov started negotiations with Ibrahim Khalil-khan, trying to persuade him to take Russian

citizenship. The tsarist authorities attached special attention to the seizure of the Karabakh khanate because of its strategic position and natural reserves. An official document of that period recorded: "The usefulness of this acquisition for Russia is: 1) that Karabakh can be regarded as a gateway to Azerbaijan due to its position, and therefore, to Persia, which is why it will keep them in fear; 2) Karabakh brings Georgia closer to Baku, which is planned to be taken this fall..." (*op. sit. doc. 1436, p. 703*).

From the very beginning of his presence in the Caucasus, Tsitsianov spoke to khans in a peremptory way and sent them insulting letters. He staked on intimidating them and exerting moral pressure. For example, he wrote to Ibrahim Khalil-khan of Karabakh: "I know that as I was near Ganja, you trembled like a leaf on a tree and would not have replied in this way; I know that before my arrival near Ganja, you, like a cowardly hare and servile vixen..., did not dare to talk like you do now because you thought I was far away. But believe me – even the Ganja army is enough to crush you: believe me that the impregnability of your castle will be effortless for the Russians: you will see it in due time – Javan-khan



Panahali Khan's (18th century) and Ibrahim Khalil Khan's Tombs (19th century). "Imaret" Cemetery

said the same before he fell. I know how to keep my word. Nowhere in the world does a fly talk to an eagle; - the strong issue orders, while the weak are born to obey the strong... I call on you for repentance, not for obedience – I don't need it and if you want to be alive and well, do what I am telling you to do in this letter" (op.sit).

The Iranian invasions of Karabakh and Tsitsianov's demand for the adoption of Russian protection had their effect. Ibrahim Khalil-khan, whose possessions had turned into a battlefield in the Russian-Iranian war of 1804-1813, was forced to agree to meet with him. The meeting took place on the bank of the Kurekchay River.

On 14 May 1805, representatives of the Russian command in the Caucasus and Ibrahim Khalil-khan of Karabakh signed the Treaty of Kurekchay, which officially confirmed the

incorporation of Karabakh into Russia (op.sit, doc. 1436, p. 705). Under the treaty, the Karabakh Khanate had to pay a tax of 8,000 tchervonets to the Russian treasury and host Russian troops on its territory.

While concluding agreements with the Azerbaijani khans, the Russian authorities promised not to change the territorial integrity of the newly-conquered lands. For example, Article 2 of the Treaty of Kurekchay with the Karabakh khan said that "Y.V. gives an imperial guarantee to preserve the integrity of His Majesty and his successors' possessions". Article 10 emphasized that "the treaty is being concluded forever and shall never undergo any changes".

The Karabakh khan maintained his independence in domestic administration and was given a saber richly decorated with precious stones and a special ensign with the coat of

arms of the Russian Empire. The khan and his sons were given high military ranks (op.sit. doc. 1456).

In connection with the Treaty of Kurekchay, it must be noted that St. Petersburg was quite happy with the fact because at the beginning of the Russia-Iran war in 1904-1813, Russia acquired a reliable home front represented by the Karabakh khan.

The "peaceful" liquidation of the independent northern khanates of Azerbaijan began. The treaty helped Russia to subjugate their territories and rulers "with little blood". Thus, the Treaty of Kurekchay furthered Russia's successes in its wars with Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the first third of the 19th century.

Characterizing the Karabakh people and Ibrahim Khalil-khan, the Russian general P. D. Tsitsianov pointed out that the ruler of the khanate is "generally believed to be an especially firm man and is loyal to his word... and his people, especially cavalry, are known for their bravery". (op.sit., doc. 1437).

In the spring of 1806, the Iranian army invaded Karabakh. During these events, Ibrahim Khalil-khan and his family and entourage moved to a place near the Shusha castle. Historian Mirza Jamal recorded that some ill-intentioned people told the commander of the Russian detachment lies about him, and he broke into the khan's camp on the night of 12 June 1806.

Ibrahim Khalil-khan, some members of his family and associates were killed (Mirza Jamal Javanshir Karabagi, op.sit., p. 96).

Thus, all the terms of the Treaty of Kurekchay were made null and void. This brutal execution was not only a violation of norms of international law, but also demonstrated the true intentions of the Russian Empire in Azerbaijan.

Many representatives of the Rus-

sian authorities considered the killing of the 86-year-old Karabakh khan and his family as unnecessary brutality and an unjustified action. For example, the new commander of the troops in the Caucasus, Count I. V. Gudovich, condemned the actions of the Russian officers who "launched an attack on Ibrahim-khan of Shusha without any reason, an act that does not befit the duty and rank of an official..." (ACAC, v. 3. Tiflis, 1869. doc. No 604).

Another surviving document clearly shows that the Karabakh khan, who "did not have troops except for 35 male and female servants, one wife and three small children, was on this side of the Shusha region near the gardens on a mountain without any fortification, and him-

self came out of his tent to meet the detachment without firing a single shot; but the hunters started shooting and stabbing him with bayonets, where Ibrahim-khan was killed and all his belongings were taken away by those who launched the attack". (op.sit. doc. No 605).

Illustration: Ibrahim Khalil-khan's mausoleum

The treacherous assassination of Ibrahim Khalil-khan made a negative impression on other Azerbaijani khans. Soon, an uprising broke out in Sheki, which was ruled by the son-in-law of the Karabakh khan. Salim-khan, whose wife Tutu-bayim, the daughter of the Karabakh khan, was also assassinated, forced the Russian troops to leave the khanate.

Realizing the illegitimacy of the

Russian officers' actions, the official authorities gave the son of the Karabakh khan, Mehdigulu-khan, the rank of major-general in order to appease the population and presented him with "royal credentials" for the Karabakh khanate.

Ibrahim Khalil-khan ruled Karabakh for 43 years. During his rule, he successfully fought foreign invaders and did not bow down to anyone. The well-known Russian historian, I. Segal, recorded about the Karabakh khan: "Ibrahim-khan was an intelligent man: he was famed for his bravery, approachability and honest way of action" (I. Segal. Yelizavetpol Province. (Impressions and Memories). Kavkazskiy Vestnik, 1902, No 3). 🌟

