

KNIGHTS IN AZERBAIJAN

Article 3

(12-13th centuries)

Continued from the previous issue



Knights in a miniature from the manuscript "Varga and Gulshah". 13th century

The heyday of chivalry in Azerbaijan as a socio-political institution occurred during the existence of the Azerbaijani state of Atabays (the State of Eldenizid Atabays) (1136-1225). The state with its first capital in Nakhchivan and then in Tabriz had powerful armed forces, the core of which was knights.

If in earlier periods the term "faris", i.e. rider, was used to refer to knights, in the period under review, a knight was referred to as a "cəngavər", i.e. "man of battle". Thus, society is aware that having a horse is not enough for considering a rider to be a professional warrior.

A professional warrior - knight received a land plot called "iqta" from the ruler and had to serve him for it. The bigger the "iqta", the better the knight had to be equipped and the more warriors he had with to bring with him. On the borders of the state the structure was somewhat different. For example, larger land plots here were distributed among Turkic tribes or major feudal lords true to the ruler. These large border land plots were called "uc" ("limit") and their rulers - "uc-bəy" (1, p. 149). Control over the "iqta" and "uc" possessions, as well as knights, was carried out by a special department -

A warrior of the palace guards. An image on a ceramic plate from Shamkir. 13th century

“divan al-jaysh”. This military ministry was also responsible for recruiting soldiers and compiling and keeping the military registry (1, p.148). The knight’s readiness for war was checked through regular parades, and they were often attended by the ruler of the state himself. At the parade, the weapons and equipment of a knight, as well as the number of his troops were checked according to the lists and the land plot that was allocated. A knight who did not fulfill the conditions of the contract could lose his land, and on the contrary, one who fulfilled all conditions could expect to receive a larger land plot (11). The largest, longest and most careful review was conducted every year on the 13th day after the Novruz Bayram (Spring Festival).

Besides the iqta, small plots of land or monetary compensation were also allocated for the purchase of equipment (camaqiyya) and food for detachments (*nanpara*) (1, p. 220). The careful regulation of the recruitment of knights was carried out based on a structure founded by the vizier of the Seljuk state, Nizam al-Mulk (1018-1092) (10).

A knight was not engaged in housekeeping at all because he was responsible for the purchase of weapons and equipment, learning to wield these weapons and equipment, and most importantly, participating in wars. Gradually, chivalry turned into a special class. Only outstanding personalities could hope to get into this class without a fortune and relying solely on their military potential. For the rest of the population, access to it was closed. Knights began to unite into chivalry organizations among which “ayyar” (literally - “comrade”) stood out. To make sure that a knight takes a worthy place in his class, knights’ fathers tried to teach their children everything a knight should know from an early age. In addition to purely military knowledge (wrestling, horse riding, possession of weapons, tactics), children learnt to read and write, history, literature, the game of polo (“çouqan”), hunting and even chess (2, p.103).

The process of educating knights on military business, as well as all the necessary knowledge was reflected even in poetry - for example, in the poem “Iskandar-nameh” by the great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), a contemporary of these events (3, p. 362-363). Knights developed special class psychology – i.e. a set of unofficial rules of what a knight should and should not do. Interestingly, soon it became necessary to write down these rules - so there appeared special chivalric literature - “fursiyya” (2, p. 103-104).

Taking part in battles and campaigns, knights sought



to ensure that their feats are reflected in literature and visual arts. For this reason, this era is replete with heroic poems, legends and ballads. The largest known and widespread story about the adventures and exploits of knights was presumably created in Southern Azerbaijan during the existence of the state of Eldenizid Atabays and was called “Samak - Ayyar” (Samak is the name of the main character, a member of the knightly association of ayyars) (4).

A tombstone depicting a knight. 13th century. Baku





The fight of a knight and a dragon. An image on a ceramic plate from Shamkir. 13th century

Exploits of knights are reflected in miniatures illustrating heroic works. The most famous battle miniatures were created by Azerbaijani artist Abdul Mumin Khoyi (a native of the town of Khoy) for the poem "Varga and Gulshah" in the 13th century (5).

Ceramic objects with a plot found during archaeological excavations show that images of knights and battles were the favorite motif of ceramists.

Each knight tried to stand out not only for his exploits, but also for his military clothes and weapons. Azerbaijani miniatures of the 13th-15th centuries show the diversity of knights' clothes. The protective clothing and headgear consisted of the same elements: a helmet, ringed or plate armor, bracers (hand protection) and greaves (leg protection). But each warrior tried to decorate his armor with notches, gold and silver ornaments and inscriptions. They also wore a thin cloak of fabric over armor, and its colors and patterns allowed a warrior to be recognized among others. Each knight and then each clan became owners of their own coats of arms. Thus, the heraldry of the Muslim East evolved, and unfortunately, it still has not been studied well enough (2, p. 104 -105).

Interestingly, the graves of the knights of that era stand out among the graves of other classes. For example, in ancient times the tombs of illustrious warriors were covered with a barrow, and rich military equipment was placed in the grave. With the adoption of Islam, funeral rites changed. Graves of representatives of virtually all classes represented gravestones, and *turba*-mausoleums were built only on the graves of prominent religious figures. However, from the 12th-13th centuries, the graves of knights began to stand out sharply. For

example, chest-shaped slabs were installed on the graves, on which the name, title, description and often exploits of the dead knight were carved. Later they even began carving a picture of the rider and his weapons - bow and arrow, sword, shield, quiver and others - on these plates. In 1964, archaeological excavations were carried near the monument of medieval architecture Giz Galasi in Baku, during which, along with other monuments, up to 50 graves of the 13th-14th centuries were identified. The gravestones of most of them depict riders or separate weapons.

In 1924, a Moscow archaeological expedition discovered stone reliefs in the village of Kubachi (Zirehgeran) in Southern Dagestan. In 1928, Academician I. A. Orbeli examined them more thoroughly, determined that they belong to the 12th-13th centuries and are an extension of the graphic tradition of Caucasian Albania – an ancient and early medieval Azerbaijani state (6).

Both the epigraphic materials of Baku and petroglyphs of Southern Dagestan are a valuable source in the study of the history of chivalry in Azerbaijan.

Considering the history of chivalry in Azerbaijan, as well as in other countries of the Muslim East, it is necessary to touch on such a social institution as "qulams". Initially, qulams in the Arab Caliphate represented slaves purchased in childhood and trained specifically for military functions. In the 9th century, after the suppression of the Khurramite uprising, qulams of Turkic origin played a leading role in the armies of the Arab Caliphate and then in other countries of the Muslim East (7, p.29). Gradually they started to recruit slaves as qulams, picking teenagers from among free people. Qulams received special military training, were equipped and kitted out at the expense of the governor or suzerain and were professional soldiers. In Azerbaijan, the institute of qulams existed in the 9th-13th centuries (1, p. 147).

The whole process of training qulams is reflected in the work "Siyasat-nameh" by Nizam al-Mulk, who believed that qulams supported the central apparatus of power. In the first year of training, a qulam trained as a foot soldier; in the second year, he was given a horse and learned all the tricks of riding. In the third year, he received a sword; in the fourth year, a bow and arrows; in the fifth year - a heavy weapon (mace, etc.) (8, p. 379). In the first year of service, young qulams were given only a chainmail, while more experienced ones received armor over the chainmail. Thus, in five years a qulam perfectly mastered all skills for using all kinds of weapons. A qulam who showed a special talent was recruited for palace

service and could even reach high public positions. It is the qulams who replenish the lists of knights. Having distinguished himself in battles and shown his loyalty to the ruler, a qulam could expect to receive an iqta. Images of qulams are also common for fine arts in medieval Azerbaijan. During archaeological excavations in 1959-1961 and 1968, samples of polychrome ceramics of the

Azerbaijani knight, 13th century. By A. Yunusov



Qulam, 13th century. Artist A. McBride

9th-10th centuries were found in the medieval Azerbaijani city of Beylagan (Orengala). A fragment found during excavations in the rooms in the northeast corner of the ancient city wall depicts a qulam wearing a helmet, armor and a spear in his hand on horseback (9, Figure 19a). The accuracy and detail of the image make it possible to determine the ethnic and social affiliation of the warrior. So he had almond-shaped eyes, eyebrows are at an angle with one another and a sharp nose with broad wings. Typically, with this typological pattern, medieval

artists portrayed soldiers of Turkic origin. A distinguishing feature of qulams was an earring in the right ear (7, p. 28-29). A warrior is illustrated with an earring in his right ear, which indicates that he belonged to the corps of qulams.

The principle of recruiting and creating qulams was slightly modified during the reign of one of the most prominent statesmen of Azerbaijan, the ruler of the state of Eldenizid Atabays, Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan (1174-1186). Under him, the regular guard of the ruler received



A knight's tombstone depicting weapons. 13th century. Baku

the title of Mamluks (məmlük) (1, p. 235). A distinctive element of the Mamluks was long hair braided in pigtails. The most dedicated, trained and experienced Mamluks

A knight's tombstone depicting a battle scene. 13th century. Gobustan



were later appointed as rulers of regions and cities by Jahan Pahlavan.

The Mongol invasion changed the consecutive course of the development of the social institution of chivalry. The first fights with the Mongols showed that a new era has come and the enemy prefers to achieve victory not in a "knightly" way, but by any means and methods. Jousting and fighting between small units were replaced by an era of mass armies. However, Genghis Khan and other Mongol rulers and commanders appreciated the heroism of individual soldiers, but they treated these same soldiers not as stand-alone units, but as cogs in a large military-state mechanism.

The revival of elements of chivalry is observed again only at the beginning of the 15th century with the establishment of the Azerbaijani state of Qara Qoyunlu and then the state of Ag Qoyunlu. 🌟

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