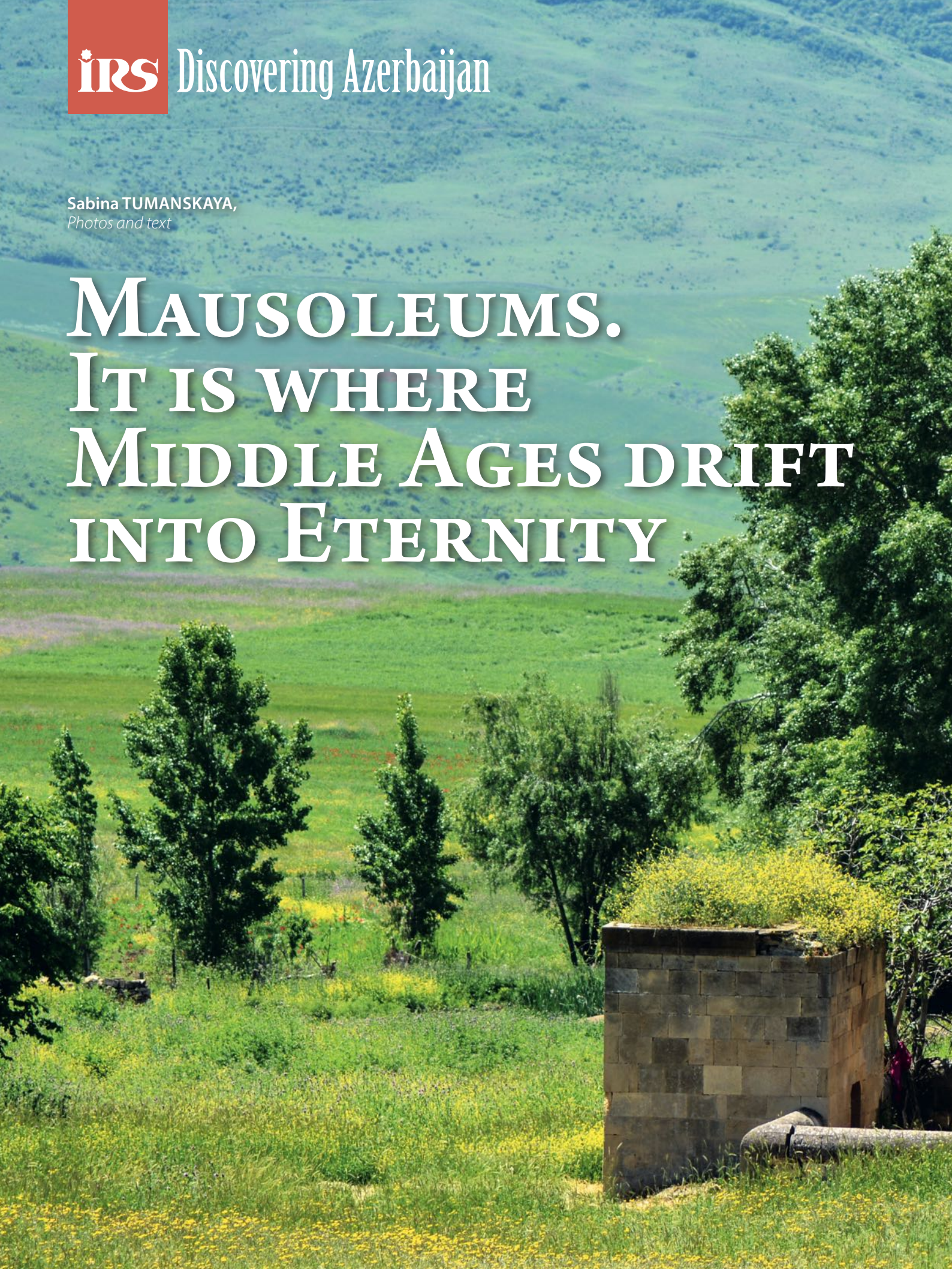




Discovering Azerbaijan

Sabina TUMANSKAYA,  
*Photos and text*

# MAUSOLEUMS. IT IS WHERE MIDDLE AGES DRIFT INTO ETERNITY











**T**he ancient and modern capitals of Azerbaijan are only 120 kilometers away from one another. Shamakhi, which was once the center of the powerful Shirvanshah state, is located west of Baku. The unique Kalakhan mausoleum facility is just 6km away if you take the nearby earth road. It is better to visit this place during arid weather before the rain washes away the soil. Silence and serenity set in here, out in nature, in this quiet place situated away from the noise of cities.

Seven out of the nine remaining tombs dating back to the 17th century are full of greenery and meadow flowers in spring. Their pyramid-shaped roofs are covered by wild grass and birds weave their nests inside. Until recently, mausoleums were not supervised and gradually crumbled. Their initial appearance was being wiped out by the passage of time. A wall with an outlet that made up an inner courtyard was seen near only one of those structures. Scholars presume that all tombs



*Mausoleums of Kalakhan on the engraving of Dutch traveler K. de Bruin. 17<sup>th</sup> century*





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were surrounded by such courtyards originally. They are visible upon an engraving created by Dutch traveler Cornelis de Bruijn, who visited Kalakhan in the 17th cen-



tury. Pilgrims arriving to pay tribute to Sufi sheikhs buried there rested on stone-made benches inside the courtyards. There is still a sign at one of the mausoleum entrances saying "this is the grave of... Sheikh Ibrahim, the son of Amir Ahmad, a descendant of Sheikh Israfil from [the dynasty of] Chilkey Sheikhs. Sernar Abdul-Azim, the son, Amir Ali... 1072" (Hijri - 1663-1664). Chilkey Sheikhs hailed from the Khanchobani generation pertaining to the nomadic Turkic Padar tribe. The latter appeared in Shirvan in the 14th century, bringing with them the shape of mausoleums resembling their tents.

Stone-made mausoleums of the same type with pyramidal roofs are located 200 km north-west of Baku. They are located in a forest in the vicinity of the Khazra settlement close to Gabala. The forest is remarkable because its area is almost entirely covered by an ancient cemetery. Some of the graves date back to the pre-Islamic period. People of different nationalities who had lived in this territory for a long time were buried there. It would be fascinating for those who are fond of history and archaeology to see gravestones with skillfully incised symbols. The identity and occupation of the buried persons may be determined on the basis of the images applied on the gravestones. Images of horses and birds, weapons and items required for prayers are mostly seen on men's gravestones. As for women's gravestones, the most frequently encountered images include such ornaments as rings, earrings, beads and bracelets, as well as mirrors, hair-dye bottles, combs, etc. Very interesting images of a winged horse and hexagrams are visible if one takes a close look at the cemetery. However, the mausoleums, themselves, primarily draw a viewer's attention. An inscription on the dome of the most ancient tomb says, "This is a sacred tomb of Sheikh Badraddin, the son of Sheikh Shamsaddin, who obeyed Allah. Let this land be pure for them! He passed away on the 13th of the Zul-Kada month in 850. Written by Sheikh Sultan." According to the Gregorian calendar, this happened in 1446, while the other three mausoleums were built in the 16th century. Two of those structures are devoted to Sheikh Muhammad and Sheikh Mansur, while the third one could not be identified. Just like in Kalakhan, the Khazra mausoleums were constructed in compliance with the same style. These tombs have precise geometric shapes, concise but very elegant ornaments, which form a kitabe (a panel with inscriptions in Arabic). The entrance to the tomb of Sheikh Mansur is adorned with an excerpt from the Quran. "Do not think that those who lost their lives on the path of Allah are dead. They





receive a reward from Allah," it says. "This tomb of merciful Sheikh Mansur was erected during the tenure of Sheikh Ibrahim, a great and powerful sultan. May the Creator bestow eternity to his rule. May Allah brighten up this grave!"



Sheikh Muhammad's tomb indicates that he was a son of Sheikh Barik and lived during the tenure of Sultan Abdulmuzaffar Shah Tahmasib in 970 (1562-1563, according to the Gregorian calendar).

Almost no information is available regarding the sheikhs buried in the tombs. However, given that mausoleums inherent to Sufi leaders were built above their graves, they were revered representatives of their communities. The emergence of burial vaults in the Khazra forest sparked an influx of pilgrims to this area. In most cases, people come here to pray for the health of their loved ones. Evidently, people sense special feelings and faith as they pray next to the graves of righteous people. Therefore, a great number of grateful people return again and again. Although this is a cemetery, visitors experience fabulous sentiments as if they go back to the distant times when all these people lived. Sun rays that come through old trees and illuminate the domes of the mausoleums add a special mystical aura to this forest. It is not a mere coincidence that people interested in esoterics and spiritual practices often visit this place.

Significant studies and rehabilitation work are in store for both the Khazra and Kalakhan mausoleums. It is beyond doubt that these efforts will shed light on unknown pages of history relating not only to Azerbaijan, but also the entire Transcaucasia region, in the future. ❀





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