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# AZERBAIJAN AS A SPACE OF ISLAMIC ARCHEOLOGY



“Islamic archeology”, which sets the task of accumulating, analytical processing, interpreting substantial materials and further synthesizing these data with written sources in order to reconstruct the history of Muslim civilization and the cultural and religious life of Muslim society, is a dynamically developing direction of modern archaeological science. Islamic archeology covers all regions where archaeological monuments of Muslim culture have been preserved (1, p. 13).

Researchers have long been interested in Muslim monuments of medieval Azerbaijan. Information about some of them was obtained in the course of surveys conducted in the 19th century. Among such monuments, one can note the Friday, i.e. Jama Mosque in Nakhchivan, the Shamkir minaret, the old Muslim cemetery in Baku. For example, the drawing of the Shamkir minaret by Frederic DuBois de Montperreux, who visited the Caucasus in the 1830s, provides an idea of this magnificent example of a cult monument of the Arran school that has not survived to this day (2, p. 146).

During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), a number of activities were carried out to study and establish the monuments of Muslim culture. An active role in this process was played by *Minaret in Shamkir (drawing by Frederic DuBois de Montperreux).*



*Sheikh Babi Khanegah. Remains of the mausoleum.*

the Society for the Study of the Muslim East established within Baku University in 1919. Its priority goal was the archaeological study of the country's Muslim monuments. The Society designed a project to study the country's medieval cities, in particular, the Shabran town, as well as the tombstone of Nizami in Ganja. However, the events of 1920, which involved the invasion of Bolshevik Russia, did not allow these plans to be implemented (3, pp. 191-194).

The years of Soviet power were marked by certain successes in the study of Azerbaijan's archaeological monuments of the Islamic period. Research in this direction was conducted as part of preparations for the anniversary of great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi. In 1938-1940, under the leadership of I. M. Jafarzadeh, large-scale archaeological excavations were carried out at the Old Ganja city (4). The grave and mausoleum of Nizami were also studied. In the same period, archaeological work was also carried out in the khanegah of Pir Huseyn and Sheikh Babi Yagub.

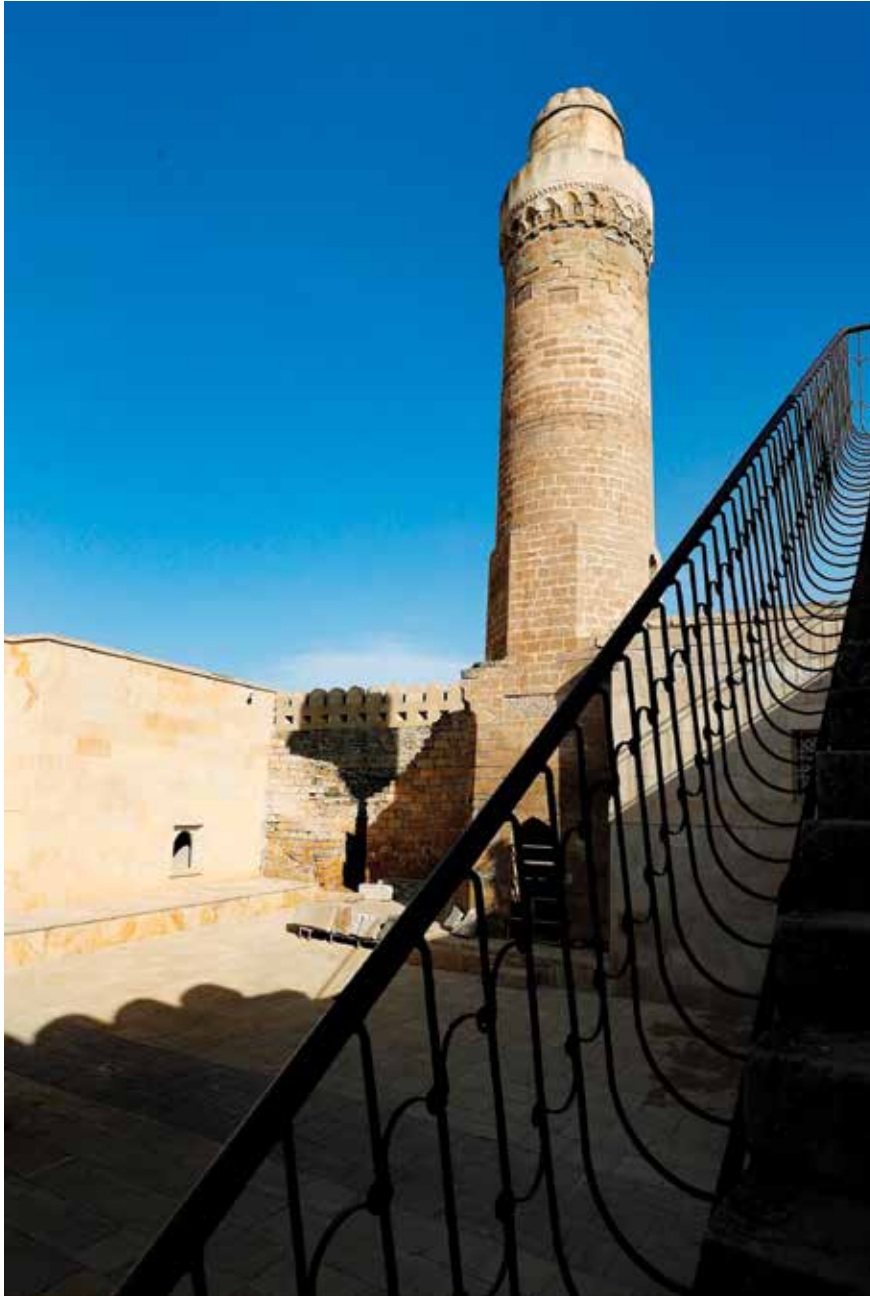
The second half of the 20th century was marked by large-scale archaeological excavations of medieval towns in Beylagan (Oren-gala), Baku, Gabala, Shamakhi, Shabran, Derbent, Ganja, Ordubad district (Kharabagan). Along with other examples of material culture,

religious and memorial monuments, including Muslim burial grounds, were also discovered and studied. The collapse of the USSR and the formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan signaled a new stage in the study of the monuments of Muslim archeology.

The Muslim monuments of medieval Azerbaijan studied through archaeological research testify to the continuity of the historical process for almost a whole millennium.

It is known that the adoption of Islam marked a radical change in the historical destiny of Azerbaijan. Joining the Arab Caliphate, active economic, cultural and spiritual ties gave rise to common Muslim features in the material and spiritual culture, predetermining the common Muslim path of medieval culture development of Azerbaijan (5, pp. 43-44). Archaeological research testifies to the acceleration of urbanization processes. The early Islamic period (8-10th centuries) is characterized by innovations in all spheres of urban culture. In the 9th century, the new type of urban settlements was established and remained without fundamental changes throughout the Middle Ages. As was the case in the entire Muslim East, cities in Azerbaijan mainly had a three-component planning structure: citadel, shahristan and rabad. Archaeological

*Khanegah on the Pirsaat river. 13th century*



research suggests that cities of Azerbaijan of this period turned into major centers of Islam in the Caucasus, having a complex layout and developed structure. At the same time, religious buildings played a very significant part in the architectural appearance of cities and other settlements. Religious architecture – mosques, minarets, madrasahs, mausoleums – dominated the urban landscape. Although relatively few medieval Muslim religious buildings have been unearthed during archaeological excavations, it is still possible to establish, on the basis of findings, as well as the monu-

ments of religious architecture that have survived to this day, the characteristic features of the appearance of various groups of structures.

Mosques are the most important places of worship in Islam. In Azerbaijan, early Jama Mosques have been known since Derbent, Shamakhi and Ardabil. Archaeological surveys of the Friday mosque in Shamakhi have confirmed that despite repeated reconstructions, its planning structure remained unchanged (6, p. 26). Excavations in the courtyard of the mosque established stratigraphy and determined the nature of the cultural layer, which refers to the time period of the 8-17th centuries. Remains of two minarets erected between the 11th and 12th centuries were found, i.e. later than the building of the mosque itself (7, s. 26-27), which was built in the 8th century (126 AH).

Judging by the results of archaeological excavations, the Friday mosque in the city of Ardabil, which was erected on the ruins of a temple of fire worshipers in the 7th century, is even older. It has been established that the building of the mosque, built of brick, consisted not only of a square prayer hall and a deep balcony adjacent to it from the north, but also of numerous utility rooms that covered a fairly large area. Excavations have also established that the mosque once had a minaret (8).

Friday mosques were usually built in the central square of the city. However, there were exceptions as well – for example, al-Muqaddasi notes that the Friday mosque of Gabala was in the distance, on a hill (9, p. 309). This is confirmed by the data of archeological studies of the Kamal-tapa hill located opposite the southern city gates (10, p. 99). Excavations revealed the remains of the northwestern part of the mosque building (10, p. 103).

Most of the quarter mosques of medieval Azerbaijan did not survive or have been rebuilt. It seems



*Khanegah on the Pirsaat river. 13th century*

likely that the first quarter mosques of Azerbaijan were small rectangular structures reminiscent of the Baku mosque of Mohammed ibn Abu Bakr in their layout and compositional solution. The Arabic inscription on the mosque in Kufic style indicates the date 471 AH (1078-1079). Archaeological excavations revealed new data on the three-dimensional structure of the mosque. It has been established that there is an irregularly rectangular room under the prayer hall, which was covered with a vault (11, pp. 65-68; 12, pp. 105-106). It is believed that this mosque was built on the site of a pre-Islamic temple. Archaeological research has also been carried out in the nearby Ashur mosque. It is a two-storey structure. In terms of structure, it is close to the mosque of Mohammed ibn Abu Bakr, although it looks simpler and more laconic (13, p. 218).

The spread and strengthening of Islam in Azerbaijan stimulated the construction of Muslim educational institutions – mektebs and madrasahs. Islam welcomes the expansion of knowledge, but the training of the faithful was initially carried out directly in mosques, and the first spiritual educational institution, the madrasah, was opened in the 9th century. Madrasahs were opened mainly at Friday mosques. As a result of archaeological excavations in the courtyard of the Friday mosque in the city of Shamakhi, carried out

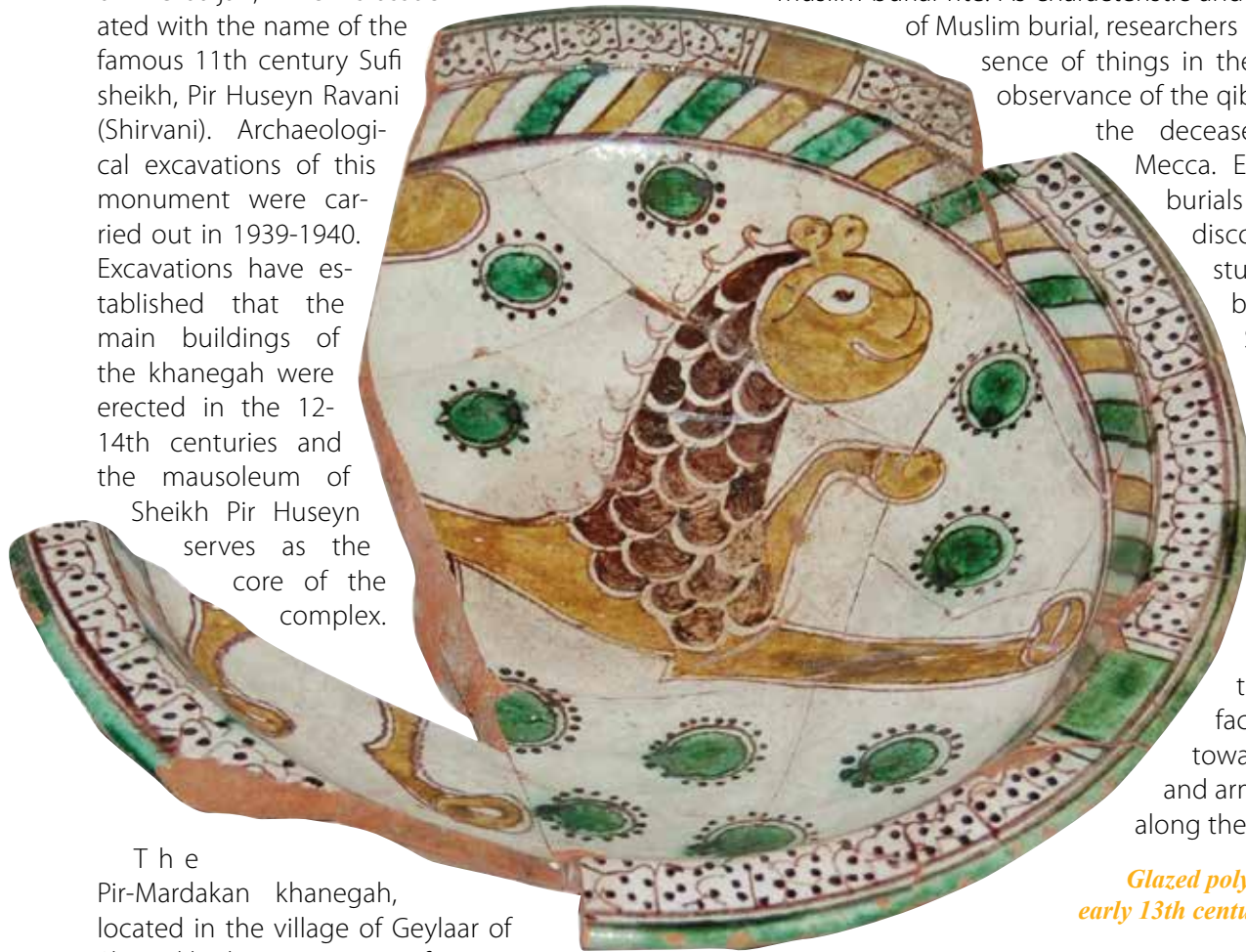
in 1983-1985, the remains of a 12th century madrasah were identified and studied (7, pp. 27-31). Fragments of eight cells were found, four of which are located to the right of the minarets of the mosque and four to the left. All the cells were built of rough-hewn stone.

Archaeological research has also established that cities in the olden days were built up block by block. Vaults, arches, domes, portals with arches, windows with stone bars, stalactite cornices and other structural elements characteristic of the Muslim East were widely used in the construction of public, religious and residential buildings (14). The artistic decoration of building interiors, including places of worship, were dominated Stucco decoration – a technique that became widespread in the Muslim East in the Middle Ages and was mastered by Azerbaijani craftsmen on the basis of existing Islamic artistic traditions. Using Stucco decoration features, artists elegantly decorated the mihrabs of mosques with exquisite epigraphic and floral ornaments. Samples of artistic carving on stucco were found during archaeological excavations in Derbent, Kharaba-Gilan, Shamkir, Beylagan, Ardabil and Dabil.

Archaeological research data testify to the high level of improvement of cities and settlements, which is associated with accelerated urbanization processes in that period, the general development of the country's

economy and culture, as well as the canons of Islam.

It is known that Sufism was widely spread in medieval Azerbaijan. As is clear from written sources, the first carriers of Sufism appeared in Azerbaijan at least in the 10th century. Accordingly, Sufi cult centers, the khanegas, were extensively built in the country. Among the surviving ones, an important place is occupied by the Pir Huseyn khanegah in Hajigabul district of Azerbaijan, which is associated with the name of the famous 11th century Sufi sheikh, Pir Huseyn Ravani (Shirvani). Archaeological excavations of this monument were carried out in 1939-1940. Excavations have established that the main buildings of the khanegah were erected in the 12-14th centuries and the mausoleum of Sheikh Pir Huseyn serves as the core of the complex.



The Pir-Mardakan khanegah, located in the village of Geylaar of Shamakhi district, consists of a mosque, a book depository, a minaret, the mausoleum of Sheikh Tahir Taj al-Khud Madakani ibn Ali, a walled courtyard and a number of auxiliary buildings. Archaeological excavations were carried out here in 1972-1973 (15, pp. 60-61).

Archaeological excavation of the Sheikh Babi Yagub khanegah in the village of Babi of Fuzuli district was carried out in 1939-1940 and 2011-2012. The octahedral mausoleum of the complex was studied before the war (16, p.165). In 2011-2012, archaeological excavations on the territory of the khanegah were carried out on four sites with a total area of 2700 square

meters. A complex consisting of a prayer hall, a cell, a vestibule and ancillary premises, the remains of a quadrangular mausoleum, the remains of a hall with a portal, defensive walls and 10 burials was studied (17). Studies have led to the conclusion that the khanegah of Sheikh Babi was a significant religious and cult center in the 13-14th centuries.

As Islam and Muslim culture spread, so did the Muslim burial rite. As characteristic and stable signs of Muslim burial, researchers note the absence of things in the burial and observance of the qibla – turning the deceased towards Mecca. Early Muslim burials have been discovered and studied in Derbent, Gabala, Shabran and Bandovan. The buried lay on their right side in an extended position, their head turned to the west, face turned towards Mecca and arms extended along the body.

*Glazed polychrome dish, early 13th century (Shamkir)*

Although Sharia does not approve of the erection of tombstones, this norm has not been observed since the 9th century respected. Such forms of tombstone as a stele, sarcophagus and chest were fairly widespread. Starting from the latter half of the 10th century, monumental structures such as mausoleums started to appear (18, p. 117). The memorial structures of Azerbaijan are distinguished by their diversity. Early mausoleums are divided into two large groups: cubic structures with a dome and tower structures.

Tower mausoleums, which were built for rulers and representatives of the highest nobility, are an archi-



tectural phenomenon of the Seljuk era. Square and domed buildings served as a place of burial and commemoration of clergy (13).

As a result of archaeological excavations, a large collection of artifacts has been accumulated, revealing all aspects of the life of the Muslim society. The cultural layers of medieval settlements are filled with samples of glazed and unglazed ceramics dishes, tiles, glass vessels, decorations, coins, etc.

Archaeological data suggest that the spread of Islam in Azerbaijan was reflected in the formation and development of a new art style, which was based on canonical tenets. Handicrafts became particularly diverse and beautiful. One can clearly see a combination of decoration and rhythm in them. Ornaments with abstract forms and a variety of rhythmic sounds became a democratic form of artistic embodiment of the spiritual prescriptions of Islam, which was accessible to all strata of society (19, p. 187). The most widespread type of decorative and applied art was artistic ceramics, which clearly manifested the characteristic features of the Islamic artistic culture of that era, primarily the tendency to synthesize arts. It harmoniously combines ornaments, calligraphy and painting. Glazed ceramic products of the Seljuk period are distinguished by exquisite artistic ornamentation. Ceramics with engraving combined with polychrome tricolor painting were particularly popular. Its decoration was dominated by a variety of geometric, floral and pictorial patterns. We can often see a successful combination of geometric and floral ornaments. The inscriptions on the ceramics are made mainly in Kufic and Naskh script. Their content varied from poems to good wishes to sayings. Good wishes in Arabic were also quite popular. For example, a glazed bowl from excavations of Beylagan has the following inscription on it: "Peace, prosperity ... and happiness from God" (20, p. 24). There are inscriptions associated with the names of 14 undefined ones. In particular, a text of this nature was applied in black ink to the bottom of a glazed bowl from the medieval town of Shamkir (21, s. 115). We can sometimes see a symbolic sign of a verbal wish on pottery.

Archaeological materials show that toreutics items also clearly manifested a characteristic feature of the Islamic artistic tradition – a tendency towards an organic synthesis of arts, including ornamentation, calligraphy and painting. A technological feature of toreutics of this era is the widespread use of products made from non-precious metals – bronze and copper.

*Bronze cauldron of the Seljuk period (National Museum of the History of Azerbaijan)*



One of the reasons for this is the disapproving attitude of Muslim theologians to the use of gold and silver items. Toreutics richly decorated with geometric, floral and epigraphic ornaments, which were applied mainly by chasing, were widely used. The inscriptions on them were often of religious content.

According to archaeological research, inscriptions are also found on jewelry. In particular, there are amulets

*Umayyads. Dirham, silver*



with mystical inscriptions designed to protect their owner from all troubles and ensure success in business. Also found on the decorations are inscriptions associated with the names of 14 undefiled ones. A plate with a seal measuring 21x19x4 mm and made of copal was found in a dwelling of the 11-12th centuries excavated in the settlement of Beylagan. The seal has an inscription in Kufic and Naskh script. The name of Prophet Muhammad is engraved in the center of the seal and the names of 12 imams are engraved on top, in abbreviated form and without epithets (22, p. 38-40).

Calligraphic inscriptions are also common on coins. Particularly expressive are the early Muslim coins decorated with Kufic inscriptions. Printed on the front side of the coins was the main saying of the Muslim faith: "There is no deity but Allah. He is one, He has no partner." Another important saying of Islam was printed on the reverse side: "Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, was sent with the true faith to exalt it above all religions, despite the resistance of the polytheists" (23, p. 358; 24, p. 85-86).

As is clear from the available material and other written sources, the spread of Islam in Azerbaijan had a strong influence on various spheres of life and culture, playing an important part in the consolidation of the people and their spiritual development. Cultural ties with other Muslim countries were expanding. Local pre-Islamic traditions were transformed and played an important part in the formation of Muslim culture in Azerbaijan. There are elements that have arisen as a re-

sult of integration processes and interaction with the cultural traditions of neighboring Muslim countries. The long mutual influence of the cultures of various peoples of the Muslim world who were in day-to-day contact led to the enrichment of Muslim culture as a whole. Azerbaijan, as a significant cultural center of the Caucasus and the Middle East, played an important part in the development of Islamic culture in the Middle Ages. ✨

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*Abbasids. Madinat as-Salam, dirham, silver*

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