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Shusha - 270

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# SHUSHA: THE KARABAKH PHENOMENON



*The famous Ganja gate of the Shusha fortress*



**T**he Azerbaijani city of Shusha, once the capital of the Karabakh Khanate, is celebrating its 270th anniversary. The age is relatively young against the background of most Azerbaijani cities, some of which have long crossed the mark of two or even four millennia. The annals of the events unfolding within their walls, wars and sieges, the reign of various dynasties, decline and prosperity make up tens and hundreds of plump volumes. Nevertheless, young Shusha is definitely included in the list of cities significant for the history of Azerbaijan. In fact, in terms of the number of world-famous natives of the city, it is well ahead of many more "older" brothers.

Many truly stellar names are inscribed in the history of Shusha. These include researcher and doctor Mirza Muhammad Gulu, warrior and philanthropist Jafar Gulu khan Javanshir, educator and prominent theatrical figure Badal bey Badalbayov, architect Karbelai Safikhan of Karabakh, poet Gasim bey Zakir, playwrights Najaf bey Vazirov and Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev, father of the Azerbaijani historical novel Yusif Vazir Chamanzeminli, philosopher,

public figure and one of the key theorists of the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic Ahmed bey Aghaoghlu, music theorist Aghalar bey Aliverdibayov, writer Safarali bey Valibayov, organizer of healthcare in Karabakh, doctor and scientist Abdul Karim Mehmandarov, genius of oriental monumental painting Usta Gambar of Karabakh, the successor of Przhevalsky's traditions, General Riza Gulu Mirza Qajar, who has authored geographical research in the Amu-Darya region, the hero of the defense of Port Arthur and the battles of World War I, General Samad bey Sadikh bey oghlu Mehmandarov – just to name a few. You would probably agree that for a small town, which numbered only 40,000 residents by the beginning of the 20th century, the list is more than impressive, especially if we consider that it doesn't include everyone. The list of military leaders who were awarded for commanding talent and personal courage alone, including the highest military award of Imperial Russia, the Order of St. George and the equivalent Golden Weapon, would take no less than a page. But there were also composers and music theorists, philosophers and theologians, musicians

and singers whose voices reverberated all over the world.

In other words, one could speak of a certain phenomenon in relation to small Shusha. But are there sufficient grounds for such a conclusion?

The founder of the Karabakh Khanate, Panahali Khan, founded Shusha in 1752. He built a new city on a high mountain plateau and populated it with the people of Karabakh – residents of the region in the north-west of historical Azerbaijan. Along with household belongings and tools, these people brought with them a colossal store of knowledge they had been accumulating for centuries.

in the manufacture of tools, which made it possible to name the tools found in the lower layers of the Azykh as the Guruchay culture. The age of the Guruchay culture is older than 1 million 200 thousand years."

In addition, as it turns out, there was a cache in the cave in which bear skulls were kept. On one of them, there were notches indicating that the idea of counting first appeared in those distant times. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this discovery, which testifies to a revolution in human thinking. The unknown hunter who inscribed these notches with a sharp stone is no less great than the creator of cybernet-

*The International Folklore Festival "Kharibulbul" in Shusha has been revitalized*



First, along with East Africa and some areas of the Middle East, this region was one of the oldest centers of human civilization. This is confirmed by the sensational finds of archaeologists in the famous Azykh cave located 14 kilometers northwest of the city of Fuzuli on the banks of the Guruchay River. Azerbaijani archaeologist Mammadali Huseynov, who has been exploring the Azykh cave for almost a quarter of a century, said: "The studied culture of tools made of river stone in Azykh is close to the complex of the Olduvai culture of East Africa. At the same time, there are distinctive features

ics Norbert Wiener, Archimedes or Lobachevsky. Having invented the elements of counting, our distant ancestor from the Azykh cave not only became the forerunner of the emergence of such a science as mathematics, but also, more importantly, tried to fix his thoughts and save knowledge for the first time.

The vast material collected by Mammadali Huseynov allowed him the opportunity to put forward a bold hypothesis that human labor activity in this region began 2 million years ago. Thus, there are all grounds to classify Karabakh as one of the ancestral homelands of mankind.

Centuries and millennia passed... Like a railway locomotive which has to run thousands of kilometers without stopping, history slowly picked up pace. The inhabitants of Karabakh learned how to build dwellings, graze cattle and cultivate the land. In the second half of the 4th millennium BC, the Bronze Age came and with it

the unique Kura-Araz culture, linking for a long time the inhabitants of the central and eastern parts of the South Caucasus, the North-Eastern Caucasus, South Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia. This long period was marked in the history of the region by the special role of Karabakh, whose rich reserves of copper ore made it possible to develop metallurgy on a fairly significant scale.

There is another interesting fact. The results of archaeological research in Karabakh are evidence of an unusually high population density in the 4th-3rd millennia BC. Neolithic villages with 80 to 100 inhabitants were located at a distance of only 1.5-2 km from each other.

In the second half of the and beginning of the first millennium BC, the Iron Age came to the Caucasus. And with it came the enemies. Equipped with all-conquering iron weapons, hordes of invaders swept across the entire ecumene, leaving behind a barren desert. The golden childhood of mankind was coming to an end, and this end was marked by the collapse of Mediterranean kingdoms, wars and raids, burned cities and villages, oblivion of culture and traditions. It would seem that the waves of such a universal cataclysm, which writer Robert Druce described as the "bronze collapse", could not but reach Karabakh. But where people were powerless, the mountains helped. When Urartian invaders attempted to invade Nakhchivan, Zangazur and Karabakh, they met such a decisive rebuff that they forgot the way to these places for a long time. Civilizational processes in the South Caucasus were not interrupted. At a time when darkness and chaos descended on the recently flourishing cities and states of the Mediterranean, a new culture was successfully developing on the lands of Azerbaijan.

Already from the third millennium BC, the process of formation of proto-kingdoms started on the territory of Azerbaijan. They became the forerunners of larger state formations and even empires, and Karabakh inevitably fell under their orbit of influence. In the 4th century BC, the state of Atropatena appeared. It was a state commonly named after its founder, the Achaemenid satrap Atropat. A wise ruler and a successful military leader, he was also lucky to have had good successors who expanded the borders of the state so much that the lands of Karabakh partially became part of it. But it so happened that the history of this region turned out to be connected with the legendary Caucasian Albania, which arose on the territory of the present Republic of Azerbaijan in the 4th-3rd centuries BC. Karabakh be-



*An art gallery, the first cultural site to open is Shusha*

came an integral part of this state which has existed for more than a thousand years. The Karabakh nobility was connected with the Albanian kings by strong vassal ties that were manifested in joint military campaigns, was maintained through kinship with the royal nobles and strengthened thanks to a common religion. In addition, the second capital of Caucasian Albania, Barda, stood on their land. In other words, this state was native for the people of Karabakh. The plains of Karabakh were crossed by roads, bridges were built across its turbulent mountain rivers, clusters of adobe houses turned into cities with underground water conduits, fortifications and watchtowers stood on strategic passes.

In 313, Albanian king Urnair declared Christianity to be the state religion. The construction of temples, monasteries and chapels was launched throughout the country. Many of them have been preserved in Karabakh. Albania had its own written language. The names of treatises cre-

ated by Albanian scientists and clergy are known to this day. Unfortunately, a significant part of them were subsequently destroyed by the Armenian clergy.

In the 8th century, under the blows of the Arabs, Caucasian Albania lost its independence, but Karabakh remained under the rule of Albanian princes until the 13th century. Most of the population converted to Islam, but there were many who retained the old faith. Whereas the Koran quickly supplanted the Bible in the country's valleys controlled by the garrisons of the Caliphate, people living in the mountains continued to believe in Christ right until the 19th century. As a matter of fact, tolerant Muslim rulers did not interfere with that.

During the period of Muslim domination, as well as the era of Christianity, Karabakh continued to be the center of cultural achievements. In the 9-12th centuries, the Karabakh city of Barda was the center of the spiritual life of Muslims throughout the South Caucasus. It was

*The first museum to be restored in Shusha is the house-museum of composer and singer Bulbul*



referred to as the Baghdad of this region. Scientists and poets famous in the Muslim world such as Said ibn Amr Abu Usman al-Azdi al-Bardai, al-Hussein ibn-Sufan ibn Ishaq ibn Ibrahim Abu Ali al-Bardai, Makaiyu ibn Ahmad ibn Sadawaih al-Bardai, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Yahya

Khalal al-Bardai, Saadin Sadallah al-Bardai, whose names are still remembered with great reverence, were all natives of Barda. According to contemporaries, the cathedral mosque in Barda was distinguished by its extraordinary beauty. In general, the wealth of the city was legendary throughout the East.



*Interior of Bulbul's house-museum*

Another famous city of Karabakh was Beylagan (Baylakan). Located at the crossroads of trade routes, it became an important trade and craft center, and it was Beylagan that became the largest city in the Caucasus after the role and influence of Barda had weakened. Archaeological excavations in the town of Oren-gala (on the site of the Beylagan settlement) revealed fortress walls, avenues and streets, palaces and mosques, workshops and shopping arcades.

Then came the devastating Mongol invasion. Beylagan,

*Natives of Karabakh return home only to find ruins*

which offered fierce resistance to the enemy, was wiped off the face of the earth. True to their policy, the Mongol conquerors tried to completely destroy the cities that resisted them in order to erase even the memory of such resistance. Karabakh fell under the rule of the Ilkhanids, who were later replaced by Emir Timur and the Timurids. As a result of all these developments, the Turkic ethnic group clearly prevailed in the region. As early as the end of the 13th century, the author of the treatise "Adja'ib ad-Dunya" ("Wonders of the World") reported that at least 100,000 Turkic horsemen lived in Karabakh.

In the 15th century, Karabakh was part of the Azerbaijani Turkic states of Qara-Qoyunlu and Aq-Qoyunlu. One of the manuscripts of the Aq-Qoyunlu era refers to an incredible fact: a community of Khurramites, descendants of participants in the popular uprising led by Babek who fought against the Arab invasion in the 9th century, was hiding in the mountains of Karabakh. Starting from 1501, the fate of Karabakh was controlled by the descendant of Ardabil sheikhs from South Azerbaijan, the founder of a new dynasty, Shah Ismail Safavi. This fearless commander adopted the pseudonym of

Khatai and wrote wonderful gazelles and poems that became classics of Azerbaijani and Turkic poetry. Under his rule, Azerbaijani became the language of the court, and Azerbaijan was the heart and foundation of the Safavid state. Karabakh turned into a large beylerbeylik with a center in Ganja, and it headed by the Turkic family of the Qajars, the future shahs of Iran. The following two centuries were marked by a series of wars between the Safavid and Ottoman powers, and in the 18th century the region became the arena for military and political activity of the Russian Empire. And this was the time of brave warrior Panahali bey from the noble Karabakh family of Javanshirs. Taking advantage of the anarchy that prevailed in Azerbaijan, he created an independent Karabakh khanate.

One shouldn't think, however, that the foundation of the capital of the Karabakh Khanate was only preceded by long centuries of wars and raids. Of course, they also happened, but most of the time was taken up by creative work: people laid roads and built cities, huts and palaces, planted gardens and herded cattle, wrote poems and scientific treatises, tried to unravel the secrets of skies and ground.



*Shusha fortress walls have experienced a number of wars*



One of the last Sufi poets of the Turkic world, Mir Hamza Seyid Nigari, wrote this about Karabakh:

“Radiant, gratifying, and sparkling land.

If the world is a paradise, then it is more beautiful than paradise.

It is a blessed shelter, a majestic space

Where the ears rustle, leading a conversation...”

Such fertile land was only waiting for an opportunity to produce a rich harvest of talents. It first sounded in Shusha through the lips of poet and statesman Molla Panah Vagif. The language of Vagif is close to the style of legends of the ashugs and is understandable to the people. His poetry is free from mystical symbols. He was an innovative poet. What he wrote about was close to everyone. People copied his poems from each other and memorized them.

Speaking about Vagif, it is absolutely imperative to mention someone without whom he would never have received such conditions for creativity – it was Ibrahim Khalil, the khan of Karabakh. Admiring Vagif’s talent and

knowledge, he appointed him his vizier, and then became his friend and patron.

An equally important role in the emergence of the Shusha phenomenon belongs to the granddaughter of Ibrahim Khalil Khan, the poetess Khurshid Banu Natavan. Her house was a center of the city’s cultural life. Members of the literary and musical circle “Mejlisi-uns” she was leading gathered there to discuss literature, poetry and music. The best folk singers, khanende, were invited to Natavan’s meetings. On her recommendation, the singers and musicians attending the meetings were also granted access to other rich well-to-do in Shusha. The evenings at Natavan’s gave an impetus to the professional improvement of Azerbaijani musicians, laid the foundations for the democratization of musical life and the emergence of mugham concerts – the very art that UNESCO declared one of the masterpieces of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of mankind.

The “Meeting of the Forgotten” (“Mejlisi-faramushan”) and the “Society of Musicians”, which were led by scien-

*Graphic evidence of Armenian barbarism - ruined neighborhoods*

tist, musicologist and poet Mir Mohsun Navvab, also enjoyed great popularity in Shusha. He wrote the famous treatise “Vuzuhul-argam” (“Explanation of Numbers”), which discusses the features of Eastern musical science, formulates the rules of performance and conditions for the perception of music.

Also, on the initiative of a connoisseur of classical oriental music Harrat Gulu, a community was organized in the city, which could be rightfully described as one of the first vocal schools. Students of this community include the legendary singer Haji Gusi. No less famous is Jabbar Garyaghdi. Mughams performed by him were a true sensation for the fans of vocal art. Experts who happened to hear Jabbar singing claimed that his voice was stronger than that of Caruso and the range was two and a half octaves. The well-known singer Seyid Shushinsky, whom Jabbar described as “the crown jewel of oriental music”, is considered to be a student of Navvab and Jabbar Garyaghdi. Seyid Shushinsky passed on his skills to another native of Shusha, Khan Shushinsky – a wonderful singer and author of many songs that became extremely popular.

Already in the 19th century, was talked about Shusha as the center of Azerbaijan’s musical culture. And

this was by no means something unexpected, but only a statement of fact. Poet Samad Vurgun wrote: “Almost all the famous singers and musicians of Azerbaijan are natives of Shusha. No wonder Shusha is called the cradle of music and poetry.” A total of 95 poets, 22 musicologists, 38 khanende singers, 12 calligraphers, five astronomers, 18 architects lived and worked in Shusha. It was in Shusha that the first Oriental Concert was held in 1901 through the efforts of enthusiasts and philanthropists. In essence, it was the first festival of oriental music which brought together representatives of many countries of the Near and Middle East.

Indeed, Shusha was a real realm of music. It was a miracle in the full sense of the word. Music and songs were sung everywhere here – by water peddlers, shepherds gathering their flock and children playing in the street. Every native of Shusha played some instrument. It was possible to assemble a band in a matter of minutes. Not a single event was held without music. Guests were greeted and seen off under a musical accompaniment, music was always in the background in a teahouse, not to mention weddings and ceremonial receptions, sports competitions or horse races. It is no coincidence that poet Sergey Yesenin wrote in one of

his letters: "If someone does not sing, then they are not from Shusha."

The 20th century turned out to be just as fruitful in the way of talents in Shusha. On 22 June 1897, the year Khurshid Banu Natavan died, a man was born in Shusha, whose vocal art glorified Azerbaijan all over the world. His name was Murtuza Mashadi Rza oglu Mammadov. He began his concert performances at the age of 12 and already at 13 he became the most famous khanende. The people named him Bulbul, or a "nightingale". He was a completely new type of a singer who combined the national style and the world's vocal technique. The patriarch of the Russian Drama Theater, Konstantin Stanislavsky, having heard Bulbul's performance at the first All-Union Vocal Competition in 1933, wrote to the singer: "When a brilliant and bright talent is combined with mature skill, nothing can be better, more attractive and stronger! You sing like a nightingale and singing is a vital necessity for you. You shouldn't stop singing."

But Bulbul was not alone. His voice organically blended in the enchanting choir singing from Shusha. The flesh of the flesh of musical Shusha is the founding father of opera in the Muslim world, Uzeyir Hajibayov, who has authored such epoch-making works as "Leyli and Majnun" and "Koroglu". His operetta "Arshin Mal Alan" ("The Cloth Peddler"), written in 1913, was staged in 187 theaters in 76 countries around the world. Uzeyir

Hajibayov became one of the founders of the Azerbaijan State Conservatory.

Composer and conductor Zulfugar Abdul-Huseyn oglu Hajibayov, conductor and composer Niyazi, author of the symphonic mughams, now being performed in numerous concert halls around the world, Fikret Amirov, brilliant musical theorist Ashraf Jalal oglu Abbasov, author of operas and operettas, cantatas and symphonies, talented teacher and wonderful conductor Suleyman Alasgarov were all natives of Shusha. Another native of Shusha whose popularity was envied by the brightest pop stars was Rashid Majid oglu Behbudov. He sang on the opera stage, played in the operetta theater, acted in films, traveled the Soviet Union and dozens of countries with concerts. Possessing a unique tenor, Behbudov could sing even the most complex vocal parts.

For many years, Shusha has been showing the music world with a multitude of talents. Dozens of opera and pop singers, musicians, conductors and composers consider this extraordinary city to be their homeland. And it is quite logical that it became the venue for the first International Folklore Festival "Kharibulbul" in 1989. A third festival, organized in 1991, brought together performers from 25 countries. Unfortunately, tragic events followed, interrupting musical, cultural and, in general, normal life in Shusha and the rest of Karabakh for a long time. On 8 May 1992, the city was seized by

*Shusha commands spectacular views of the surroundings*

Armenia's military units. Residents had to leave at gunpoint. Loaded with bundles and suitcases, with children in their arms, the refugees rushed out of the city...

Having expelled the legitimate owners, the invaders began to settle down in the city. This envisaged complete extermination of any evidence that this was an Azerbaijani city. The task was difficult and practically impossible, given that Shusha was founded by the Azerbaijani khan and the Azerbaijanis built it. However, the Armenian invaders undertook its implementation with enthusiasm and achieved considerable "progress" during the 30 years of occupation. The damage they have caused is so great that it is still being assessed. But even preliminary results are staggering. Almost 300 historical, cultural and religious monuments, three dozen libraries, 17 clubs, two cinemas, eight culture centers, and eight museums were destroyed. The houses of Natavan, Bulbul, Uzeyir Hajibayov were knocked down, their busts, which stood in the central square, were fired at, and the mausoleum of Vagif was plundered. All this was done by those who love to advertise themselves as successors of perhaps the oldest culture in the world.

During the years of occupation, not a single large-scale project was implemented in the city, not a single house was built, not a single tree was planted, not even a meter of asphalt was laid. Instead, the occupiers engaged in looting, which, without exaggeration, had

reached industrial proportions. Shusha was dying. Had the occupation lasted another 10 years, the once prosperous city would have descended to ruins and only a name of it would have remained on the map.

The result of the second Karabakh war of 2020, which became a response to Armenia's endless armed provocations, was the liberation of Karabakh and Eastern Zangazur. After several days of fierce battles, the invaders were expelled from the city of Panahali Khan. Shusha finally returned to peaceful life. One of the important steps towards its revitalization was the decision by President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to give Shusha the status of the cultural capital of the country. Festivals and competitions, conferences and meetings are already being held there, including the main one, the "Kharibulbul" Music Festival. The latest fifth festival, held in May 2022, was joined by representatives of nine countries.

There is no doubt that it won't be long before Shusha will be spoken of as a musical phenomenon of the East again. Its potential is far from being exhausted. People who continued to consider themselves to be natives of Shusha during the years of occupation will return to their beloved home city. This phenomenal city has never been short of talent. Therefore, we should expect new musical works, new beautiful voices and bright works of poets and writers. Shusha will definitely have its say. 🌱