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Baku panorama, Early 19th century

ZOROASTRIAN LEGENDS OF THE BAKU MAIDEN TOWER

The article focuses on the historical heritage of Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, discussing cultural sediments related to the Baku Maiden Tower. The tower, is Baku's architectural and historical landmark, rooted deeply to the ancient history of Azerbaijan, but its design, purpose and the date of construction remain unknown. The Maiden Tower is a source of legends and epics that enrich Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and identity. The authors refer to legends rooted in the history of Zoroastrians in Azerbaijan, a land of fire. The legends, as the authors believe, mirror the Zoroastrian origin of the tower; however, an academic answer remains a mystery until today.





Introduction

Azerbaijan has a long history that dates back to the Zoroastrian era. As some scholars have indicated, Azerbaijan (Adurbadagan in Pahlavi) was a place where the prophet Zoroaster was born and where one of two copies of Avesta was kept in the sacred fire temple - Adur Gushnasp. The present-day Azerbaijan has many places related to Zoroastrianism as well, one of which is Ateshgah, a pilgrimage and currently philosophical center of Zoroastrians near Baku.

Baku has a rich historical and cultural heritage embedded in the history of Azerbaijan. The Maiden Tower (Azerbaijani: *Qiz qalasi*) is a legendary landmark in Baku. Since 2001, the Tower, along with Baku's Walled City (Old City) and the Palace of Shirvan-Shahs, has been included on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

There has been extensive academic discussions of the origin, purpose and date of construction of the Maiden Tower. Some scholars, particularly Ashurbeyli, believe that the Maiden Tower as being a paramount

example of Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan. Hasanov argues rather that the tower is a pagan monument of Scythian - Sakka - Cimmerian culture and is related to the Scythian Flaming Goddess - Tapati. In other hand, D.Akhundov contrariwise insists that Baku is the ancient Atash-i Baquan fortress which had a fire temple-tower of the Zoroastrian God Ahura-Mazda. He argues that Baku's Maiden Tower is a Holy Fire Temple-Tower of Zoroastrians, which had seven fire exits on the top symbolizing the Zoroastrian "seven steps" or "seven skies" to rich heaven.

Notably, the word "Atash," as it is well-known, has an Avestan origin. Historically, it evolved to "Adur" (Pahlavi) and finally into the Turkified form "Azar" or "Azer" that is a core of the name Azarbaijan or nowadays Azerbaijan, descending from Parthian Aturpatakan "a place where the holy fire is protected". Azerbaijan or the Sassanids' Adurbadagan was a religious center of the empire, with Adur Gushnasp in Adurbadagan proclaimed as the most sacred or "cathedral" fire temple.

Scene from Afrasiyab Badalbayli's "Giz galasi" ballet



Indeed, archaeological and architectural evidence indicates that the Baku Maiden Tower has construction elements built following Sassanian technology. The same technology was implemented in building Darband (now Derbent) – a well-known Sassanian fortress in Adurbadagan (Azerbaijan) on the Caspian Sea. It is noteworthy that the fortress of Darband were built using the same technology as Adur Gushnasp (now Takht-i Sulaiman, Azerbaijan), which has been traced back to the 5th and/or 6th centuries.

According to the above, if the Baku Maiden Tower shows evidence of Sasanian building technology as Darband fortress has, the period of 5th -6th centuries can be considered a reliable estimate of the date of the tower's construction or repair.

Legends and mysteries

There are a large body of mysteries and legends related to Baku's Maiden Tower that have come down to the present day. What is the purpose of the tower? Why does the tower have the kind of design that it has? Above all, however, the key mystery is why the tower was named Maiden Tower, generating a rich pool of legends.

The tower is undoubtedly covered by a cloud of legends and epics deeply rooted in Azerbaijan's history, religion, and culture. Some legends have even become the subject of scenarios for ballets and theater plays that have become a part of Azerbaijan's national heritage and identity.

Thus, in 1923, Jafar Jabbarly, a prominent Azerbaijani playwright, wrote the poem "The Maiden Tower" (*Qiz Qalasi*), which is a jewel of Azerbaijani literature and culture. In 1940, the Azerbaijani composer Afrasiyab Badalbeyli created the "Maiden Tower" ballet, which was the first in Islamic world and a world-class Azerbaijani masterpiece starring Gamar Almaszadeh, the first Azerbaijani ballerina and ballet instructor. A revised version of the ballet was performed in 1999.

Interestingly, up to 20 legends are related to the Maiden Tower, many set in Baku's medieval or Islamic period. However, at least couple of legends (which have come down to the present day) are more deeply rooted, as we believe, in Baku's Zoroastrian or pre-Islamic period.

The most impressive and colorful story of Baku's ancient Maiden Tower is the Zoroastrian legend of the maiden savior with fire-colored hair.

Paul von Franken (German, 1818–1884), Maiden Tower in Baku, 1880, Oil on canvas



Legend of the Fire-Color-Haired Virgin Girl Savior

A long time ago, there existed the ancient town-fortress of Baku. The fortress had a Fire Temple-Tower. At one point in Baku’s history, the enemy managed to encircle the fortress. The enemy demanded that the people of Baku surrender, but they refused. Consequently, the enemy launched a siege to demolish the fortress and capture all the inhabitants as slaves. As a result, many defenders of the fortress died while attempting to stop the enemy’s attacks.

The enemy’s commander ordered the water supply lines cut in an attempt to drive the fortress’s defenders into submission. Everybody in the fortress was thirsty. They had no water, nor food - only blood and death. The Supreme Magi, together with other priests, prayed to the Holy Fire kept in the fortress’s Fire Temple Tower, asking the god Ahura Mazda to help and protect the people. They prayed day and night, asking the All-Mighty and Merciful Ahura Mazda to save their lives and push the enemy back.

Finally, the supreme god Ahura Mazda heard the magi and people’s prayers. One day, people saw a large

piece of the Holy Fire falling from the top of the Fire Temple - Tower. A beautiful girl came up from the fire. She had long fire-colored hair. The crowd went down on their knees and started to pray to her. The girl said: “Don’t be afraid! I am here to help and protect you! Give me a sword and helmet! The enemy must not see my girl’s hair. Open the fortress gate!”

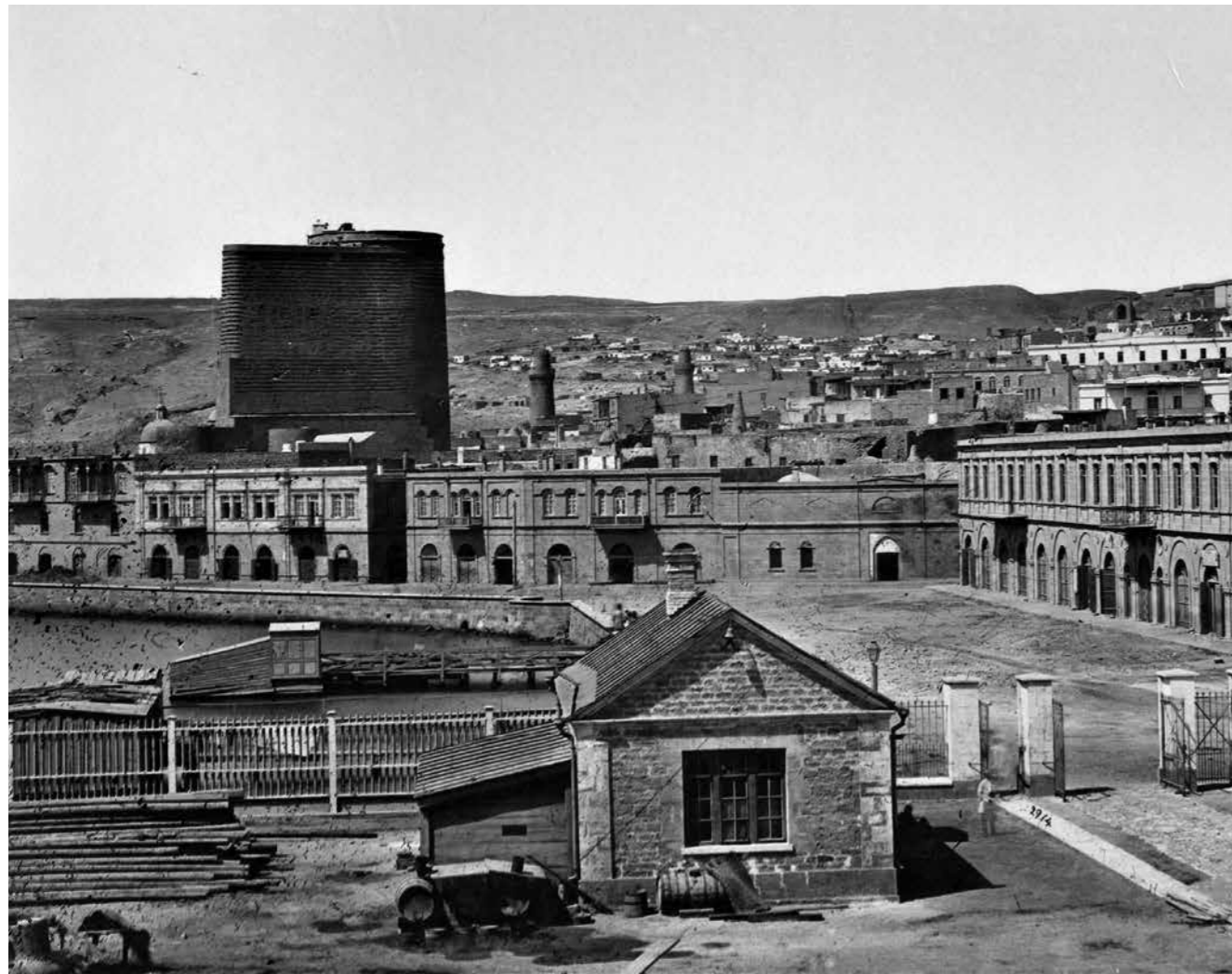
Meanwhile, the enemy commander was waiting outside for a one-on-one fight with the fortress pahlevan (hero). If the fortress pahlevan were to win the fight, the enemy’s army would retreat, but, if the enemy commander were to win, the fortress would be destroyed and the surviving inhabitants would be enslaved.

The fortress gate opened and the enemy commander saw the fortress’s pahlevan is coming to fight. A heavy battle has begun. In one of the god-blessed moments that ensued, the fortress pahlevan unhorsed the enemy and put a sword directly at his neck. The enemy screamed, “Oh, you win! Who are you? Take your helmet off. I want to see your face, Pahlevan!” She took off the helmet and he saw that the fortress pahlevan was a beautiful girl with long, fire-colored hair. He exclaimed,

Tahir Salahov - “Odlar yurdu. Giz galasi”



Baku, Seaside. Late 19th century. Photo by D. Yermakov



"Oh, you are a girl! You are a brave and beautiful girl! If the girls of Baku are so brave, I will never capture your fortress! Do not kill me, beauty!"

He fell in love with her because of her beauty and bravery and asked her to marry him. Of course, the girl did not kill him, fell in love with him because of his open heart.

Ultimately, the enemy did not capture the Baku fortress, and the locals named it the Maiden Tower (Qiz Qalasi).

The Second Legend on Virgin Girl Savoir

For 90 days, the old town of Bade-Qube (Baku) with three lines of defense walls had been encircled by the enemy. Inside the fortress close to the sea, there was a high and black steaming tower temple in which old rituals were performed to save the Holy Fire. The temple's principal magus Egirwand performed old fire rituals, proclaiming to the fire worshippers: "Tomorrow, the

Shah will be killed by the unknow and virginal power." The temple door suddenly opened and a virgin girl with tresses and flaming hair came out. She was illuminated by the temple's holy fire and held a flaming sword in her hands. Covered by the flame, she exited the temple and stood by the principal Magus. The Magus said, "You must save the holy city, a capital of eternal fires, and save the Tower that created you." Thus, the moonface flaming girl looked for the last time on the temple-tower and went into battle with general Nureddin and his troops. She kept her promise and saved her countrymen but she fell in love with general whom she killed. She thus decided to kill herself and stabbed shoulder with her sword, giving her soul to the Holy Fire Tower. As she killed herself, Khazri and Gilavar winds were strong seven days. Since then, the temple fires have stopped burning, and the temple was named the Maiden Tower (Qiz Qalasi) after the holy virgin girl savoir.

The following legend indicates the tower's Zoroastrian roots as well.

Legend of Why Baku Tower's Fires Stopped Burning

Once upon a time, an enemy besieged the fortress of Baku. However, the people of Baku refused to surrender but decided to fight on and defend their lives. They fought with great bravery, but the situation inside the fortress grew increasingly desperate. The enemy launched a tight siege to subdue the defenders by cutting water supply.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Magus and other priests prayed to the All-Mighty God Ahura Mazda in the fortress's Holy Fire Temple Tower for assistance.

After several days of continuous prayers, Ahura Mazda heard the priests' blessings and prayers. A strong and devastating earthquake occurred in which the enemy army perished. Thus, the All-Mighty Ahura Mazda destroyed the enemy and Baku's people escaped slavery, but the Holy Fires stopped burning on top of Baku's Fire Temple Tower.

Our Comment: Why is Baku's Tower named the Maiden Tower?

Apart from the legendary background, there is no historical explanation or archaeological or written evidence describing why the tower was named the Maiden Tower. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility of religious explanations.

We believe that the tower was named the Maiden Tower because it was never destroyed by the enemy. From a religious perspective, this meant that the temple would never be humiliated or desecrated by evil (Ahriman or Angra Mainyu in Zoroastrianism). Therefore, if the tower was not desecrated by the enemy/evil (Ahriman), it continues to be "virgin" (untouched) - hence, a "Maiden" tower temple of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. ❀

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