

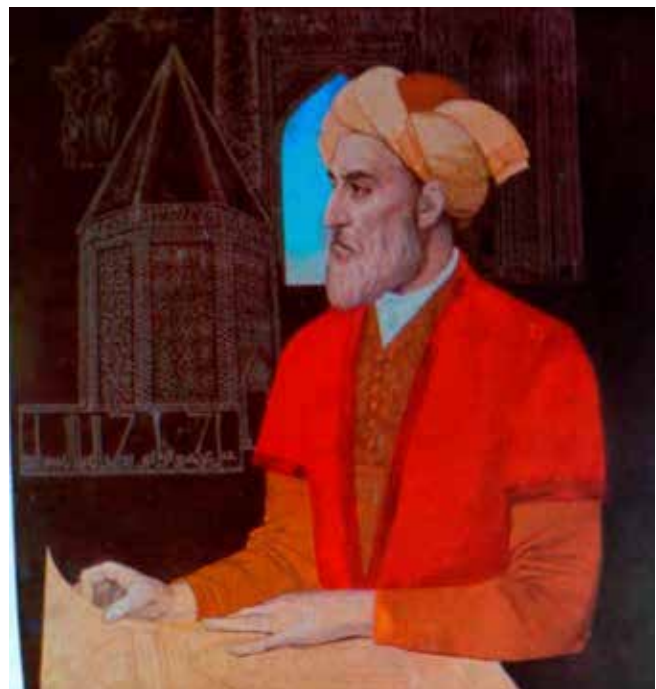
Ajami Nakhchivani - a genius architect of the Seljuk era

The decree signed by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev on the erection of a monument to Ajami Nakhchivani, one of the most prominent architects of the Near and Middle East, in the city of Nakhchivan is a vivid manifestation of the invaluable place and enormous respect for the activities of this great artist in the history of Azerbaijani and Turkic-Islamic architecture in general. This important decision is an indicator of the state's appreciation of Ajami Nakhchivani's legacy, which has become a common cultural value for the entire Turkic world.

The 900th anniversary of the birth of the Azerbaijani medieval architect Ajami Abubakr oglu Nakhchivani was celebrated internationally within the framework of UNESCO's celebration program for 2024-2025.

Like most Muslim countries, Azerbaijan has a serious shortage of books dedicated to the lives and works of prominent medieval architects. The primary reason for this is the lack of a centuries-old tradition of writing treatises reflecting the biographies and activities of architects in Muslim collections. The scanty and brief information about the builders found in historical sources is more of a panegyric praise than informative. There is practically no written record or project of the architects and decorators of the Middle Ages. Today, the only and most durable documents that reveal the identity and works of medieval architects are the few books on architectural monuments that have survived to this day.

In the architectural history of Azerbaijan, the action of architects putting their signature on their works thereby showing their identity in inscriptions originated during the Great Seljuk period: the oldest Kufic inscriptions with the architect's name were discovered in two Harraqan tombs erected in the latter half of the 11th century. This very important process developed and expanded in the



12th century, and the architect's name began to be commemorated more often in construction epigraphy. The names of more than ten Azerbaijani architects were revealed in the compact inscriptions on the monuments of that century. Besides Ajami Nakhchivani, one work

Momine Khatun Mausoleum, entrance portal

of each of the architects whose names have been revealed has survived to this day. Four 12th century works of architect Ajami, three of whom are signed, have been revealed to science. These are the tombs of Yusif Kuseyir oglu and Momina Khatun, the double-minaret bastagh (portal) and the Gizil Arslan mosque. Two of these rare monuments were demolished at the beginning of the last century, and only two tombs have survived to this

day. All of Ajami's works known to science were erected in Nakhchivan - when this ancient city was the capital of the Azerbaijani state of Atabegs (1136-1225).

The three-line inscription at the entrance arch of the Yusif Kuseyir oglu tomb, which is also known of the Atababa dome, states: "This is the tomb of the great chief, the great leader, the decoration of science, the leader of sheikhs, the bezzaz Yusif bin Kuseyir. 557, the

*Atabegs Architectural Complex (photo by Eduard Jakobsthal, 19th century)*



month of Shawwal". According to this inscription, the tomb of Khaja Yusif oglu was built in the fall of 1162 AD. To the left of the entrance arch, the architect carved his signature in a concise manner: "Banna Ajami bin Abubakr Nakhchivani". The plan of the tomb, which has a double-layer structure consisting of an underground and an above-ground chamber, is in the shape of a regular octagon. The tomb is entirely built of square-shaped brick.

Just as the plan of the tomb of Yusif Kuseyir oglu is very simple and compact, its volume composition is not complicated either. It derives its form from an octagonal prismatic body and a corresponding pyramidal dome. Straight lines dominate the external volumes and elements of the tomb. In this work, architect Ajami even refused to use any pointed arches, which were seemed to be an inevitable element of the façades of almost all tombs of this type. All the arches of the body are enclosed in a standard rectangular frame. The angular Kufic script, where the straight line is the leading one, was used, while the working surfaces of the arches were filled with various geometric ornaments formed by the intersections of straight lines. The simple frame basis of the constructive system gave the architecture of the façades a subtle and special tectonics. The tomb attracted the attention of specialists not only with its large dimensions, but also with the proportionality of the architectural masses, the accuracy of the division, the variety of ornamental motifs, as well as the beautiful composition.

It is evident from the inscriptions on the tomb of the Momina Khatun – the Atabey Dome that "this masahed, or the tomb was built by Banna Ajami bin Abubakr Nakhchivani in 582 AH - 1186 AD for Momina Khatun, the glory of the world and religion, the honor of Islam and Muslims." According to the opinion of most researchers, Momina Khatun was the wife of Shamseddin Eldegiz, the founder of the state of Atabegs. The ruler's political power, his claims to greatness and vast economic opportunities are reflected in the unusual monumentality of Momina Khatun's tomb. Its underground crypt chamber is regular octagonal in plan with a ten-sided solid pillar installed in the middle. The plan of the upper floor is regular and circular inside and regular octagonal outside. Today, the interior of the upper chamber has an ascetic appearance. Traces of two inscription friezes and four circular medallions remain inside it. These works were made by carving, and the organic unity of Kufic script and ornaments is truly astonishing.

Momine Khatun Mausoleum

The brick body of the Momina Khatun tomb, which rises on a solid pedestal covered with stone, has lost its upper pyramidal cover. All surfaces of the huge prismatic body of the tomb are richly decorated with facing blocks. The latter differ in shape and size and were prepared in the same way as in the tomb of Yusuf Kuseyiroğlu. They were fixed in the appropriate place with the mortar. However, in the Momina Khatun tomb, the ornaments of the blocks covering the inner areas of the arches, columns and borders were more complex and colorful. Blue glazed brick is included only in the ornamentation of the surfaces of the arches, the stalactites of the arches, and the blocks of the capitals of the columns below the large inscription frieze. There is no glazed brick in the frames of the faces or on the columns themselves.

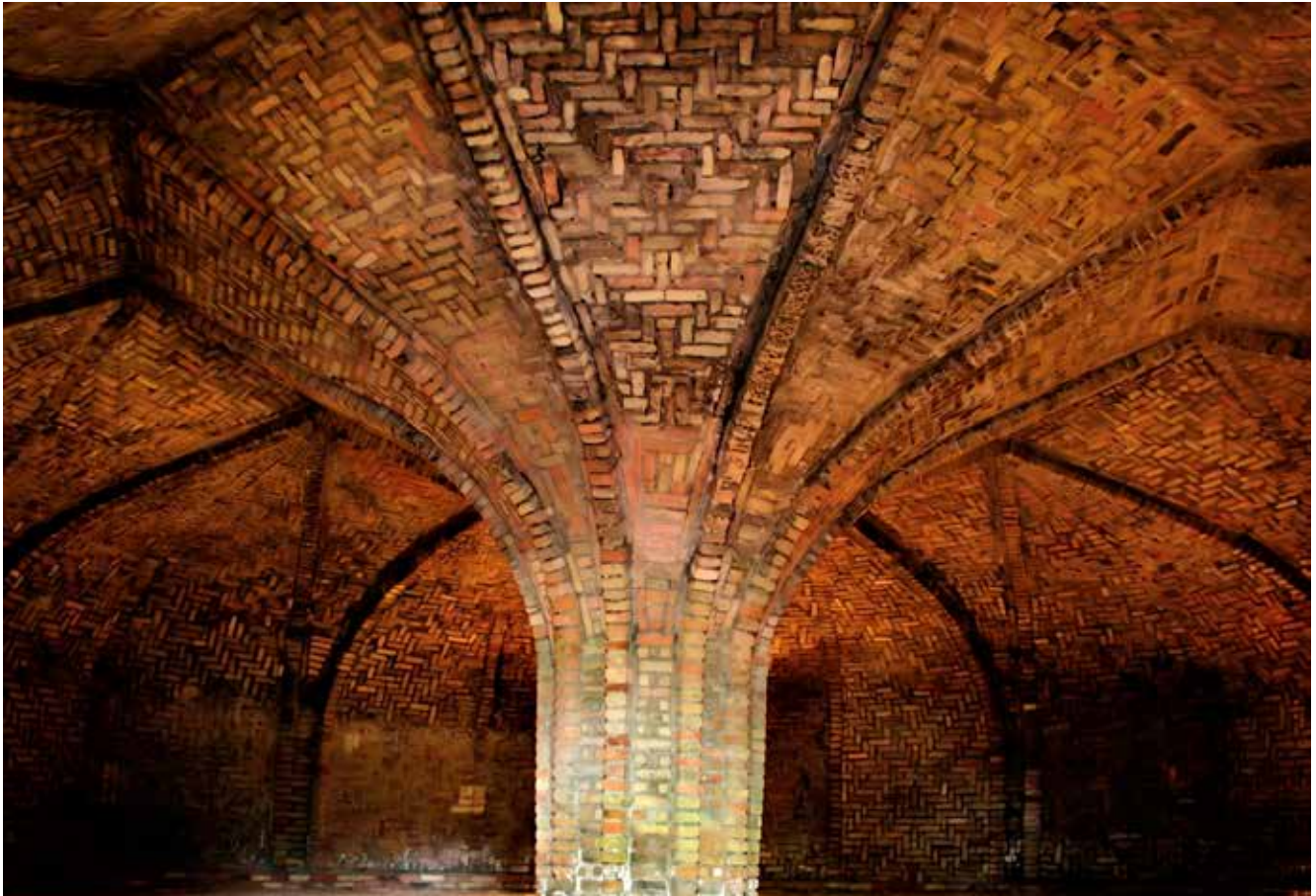
The tomb of Momina Khatun is distinguished from the tower tombs built before it by its large size, the perfection of its volume-spatial composition and constructive system, as well as the unusual richness and diversity of its architectural decor. In its current state, the height of the pyramidal roof of the tomb is about 25 meters. In its original state, the height of the Atabey dome was about 35 m. As a tower tomb, its volume and spatial composition is designed to be viewed from all sides.

The huge prismatic body covered with a large pyramidal dome with a sharp tip, the vertical orientation of the main elements, the rich decor with intricate and delicate patterns have formed a magnificent monument that immortalizes the memory of a famous woman. The tomb of Momina Khatun is one of the masterpieces of medieval architecture of Azerbaijan in every respect.

The third discovered work of architect Ajami, according to the author's signature on it, is the double-minaret arch, which was erected a year after the tomb of Momina Khatun, a little further away from it. The arch, which once served as the entrance to the large madrasah that also included the tomb, was demolished at the beginning of the last century. However, the available photos and drawings create a complete idea of the volume-spatial composition of this rare architectural element. This monument is the oldest known example of the minaret-arched composition in the region, which later became widespread in the religious architecture of the Islamic world. Ajami Nakhchivani was one of the creators of the double minaret arched composition during the Seljuk period.

The monumental Juma Mosque, which was certainly the work of Ajami Nakhchivani and was part of an architectural complex with the Momina Khatun tomb,

Momine Khatun Mausoleum, crypt column



was also demolished and destroyed at the beginning of the last century. Based on historical sources, it was revealed that this mosque was built by the order of the

Atabeg ruler Gizil Arslan. Drawings and photos made by European artists and travelers, as well as written information from specialists who saw the mosque in person,



Momine Khatun Mausoleum, fragment

make it clear that the Gizil Arslan Mosque is one of the most perfect examples of the Juma mosques created during the Seljuk period. The main feature of this type of mosque is that its central part, or the maqsura, is a square-shaped space covered with a large dome. The old builders who lived in Nakhchivan at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries claimed that the Gizil Arslan Mosque, which was built shortly before the Momina Khatun tomb, also had a separate double minaret spire. The attention of European travelers was attracted more by the dilapidated mosque building near the tomb of Momina Khatun, and they expressed their amazement at its large size with epithets such as "one of the most magnificent mosques in Asia", "a gigantic building" and others. Architect Ajami rebuilt the inner fortress of the capital city of Nakhchivan and created a magnificent architectural complex of numerous buildings with different functions on its territory - the Atabey ensemble. A highly valuable panoramic photo taken by German architect and researcher E. Jacobsthal at the end of the 19th century reflects the three surviving buildings of this large ensemble – the Momina Khatun tomb, the double minaret bastaq and the Gizil Arslan mosque.

Architect Ajami Abubakr oglu Nakhchivani was one of the brilliant personalities who grew up in the cultural

environment of the Seljuk period of Front and Central Asia and showed an outstanding level of creativity. No other architect has been found in the architecture of this region that can be compared to him in terms of the number of known works. In Nakhchivan city, four works of the master remained in good condition until the beginning of the 20th century. He raised the development of the prismatic and tower-shaped tomb type to the peak with the tombs of Yusif Kuseyir oglu and Momina Khatun, which he erected in the 12th century, and created one of the monumental examples of religious architecture of the period with the Gizil Arslan Mosque. By putting his signature on the madrasah, Ajami took an honorable place among the founders of a long-lived architectural composition of the architecture of the Islamic world - the double-minaret bastaq.

Ajami Abubakr oglu was a master architect and engineer. The fact that his four works, which did not undergo any repair or reinforcement work for centuries, have stood for more than 700 years is a significant indicator of his engineering genius. The dome, which the architect built with great skill and later became one of the important constitutions of European Gothic architecture, is a rare engineering phenomenon in the construction art of that era. The facing of large wall surfaces

Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum (after restoration)



with pre-prepared complex patterned blocks was also a very important and progressive construction technique of the period.

Ajami Nakhchivani developed the brick architecture from both a constructive and artistic-aesthetic point of view, raising the “bare brick style” to its peak.



The Momina Khatun tomb he erected became a magnificent architectural symbol of that era, like the Sultan Sanjar tomb in Merv (12th century). Ajami also played a major role in the development of the spatial structures of the centrally composed monumental buildings of Seljuk architecture. He gave his monumental works a unique artistic appearance with new and richer means of expression. High professionalism and innovative spirit were the driving forces of Ajami's creativity.

As the chief architect of the State of the Atabegs of Azerbaijan, Ajami Nakhchivani played an exceptional role in the development of architectural and urban planning in his native city of Nakhchivan in the 12th century. It can be said with great certainty that he led the construction of the new stone citadel of the capital city and the large architectural complex inside it, creating a magnificent Atabey ensemble of palace buildings, pavilions, a madrasah, a Juma Mosque, the Atabey dome and other buildings of various types on a hill facing the Araz river. Many years of rich and significant experience in the works of the brilliant architect were combined with deep scientific knowledge, which led to the emergence of architectural works of various types and compositions. The amazing variety and charm of complex geometric ornaments, as well as delicate floral motifs are the product of the artist's profound knowledge in the field of exact sciences, especially mathematical thinking, as well as his high artistic taste. The master's religious knowledge was manifested in the texts selected for the construction inscriptions and in the very logical placement of these texts in the decorative compositions according to their content. The use of different types of Kufic script for each text has also been successful. The tomb of Momina Khatun is an encyclopedic monument of Seljuk architecture in terms of the diversity, richness of geometric ornaments and Kufic types, as well as their organic connection with each other.

The placement of the architectural inscription right above the entrance door of the dynastic tomb of the Azerbaijani state of atabegs in Nakhchivan, and in the most beautiful place of the structure, is an indication that Ajami Nakhchivani was one of the most influential artists in the palace. He was truly one of the great figures of the great rise of medieval culture in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijani architectural studies, Ajami is usually referred to as the founder of the architectural school to which he belonged. It would, however, not be correct to attribute the founding of any regional art school to the name of one artist. Schools of this type are formed by several generations of artists over many years. The construction inscriptions of the surviving monuments prove the existence of the Maragha-Nakhchivan school both before and after Ajami. With his productive and highly artistic creativity, Ajami deserves to be regarded as the leader of the regional architectural school that existed in central Azerbaijan in the 11-13th centuries. What the great poet Nizami Ganjavi is to the literature of the Seljuk period of Azerbaijan, Ajami Nakhchivani is to its architecture. 🌟

References:

1. Jacobsthal E. *Mittelalterliche Backsteinbauten zu Nachtseheüan im Araxesthale*. Bauzeitung. Berlin, 1899.
2. Qiyasi C.Ə. *Memar Əsəmi Naxçıvani*. Astana, 2026.
3. Salamzadə Ə.V. *Əsəmi Əbubəkr oğlu Naxçıvani*. Bakı, 1976.
4. Алексерзаде А.А. *Надписи архитектурных памятников эпохи Низами. Архитектура Азербайджана. Эпоха Низами*. Москва-Баку, 1947.
5. Бретаницкий Л.С. *Зодчество Азербайджана XII-XV вв. и его место в архитектуре Переднего Востока*. Москва, 1966.