

Muslim Shia pilgrimage sites in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula

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Abstract

This article outlines the key pilgrimage sites in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula in Azerbaijan, offering a comprehensive discussion of the history of Shia Islam in this region, with a particular focus on the Republic of Azerbaijan. Each site is examined in terms of its historical development, the figure of devotion associated with it, architectural features, surrounding environment, and religious practices, encompassing both orthodox and heterodox traditions. By integrating personal observations and an analysis of existing literature, this study discusses the main patterns of worship and devotion, providing insights into the broader context of Shia religious practices in Azerbaijan.

Keywords

Shia Islam, pilgrimage, Azerbaijan, Baku, Absheron Peninsula, religious practices, sacred sites

Introduction

Shia Islam in Azerbaijan has been the focus of numerous academic works and articles, spanning scholarly, journalistic, and more sensationalist levels. Researchers have examined the similarities and differences with Persian Shiism, the connections and influences from Persian Shia centres, as well as the interactions and mutual relations with Sunni Islam, both within Azerbaijan and in neighbouring countries.

This article seeks to describe and analyse the pilgrimage sites and places of worship associated with followers of Shia Islam in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula. The author aims to build upon existing research by incorporating her own observations, derived from

fieldwork and an analysis of the relevant literature. The data presented were collected during the author's extended research stays, primarily in the years 2016 and 2017.

The author has critically reviewed both printed and online literature on related topics, as outlined in the Bibliography, although not all sources are directly cited in the footnotes. A substantial portion of the data, however, was obtained through the author's visits to the sanctuaries under discussion. The insights, guidance, and advice of individuals residing in these areas, who regularly attend the pilgrimage centres, proved invaluable. While these individuals generously shared their knowledge and facilitated access to the sites and practices, they requested to remain anonymous.

Islam in Azerbaijan

The history of Islam in Azerbaijan dates back to the 18th year of the Islamic era, corresponding to 639 CE. Prior to this, the region was home to established Christian and Jewish religious communities, as well as Zoroastrians. Subsequently, the successors of the Prophet Muhammad embarked on a policy of expanding their dominion far beyond the cradle of Islam, thereby extending the influence of the religion. In that year, the local ruler, İsfəndiyar ibn Fərruxzad, capitulated to the Arab invaders, resulting in the conquest of areas such as Ardabil, Tabriz, Nakhchivan, Beylagan, Barda, Shirvan, Mugan, and Aran. The northernmost extent of Arab rule reached as far as Derbent. It is generally assumed that by 661, the majority of the inhabitants in this region had embraced Islam¹.

The new rulers implemented a taxation system that varied for different groups: pagans who accepted Islam were required to pay *zəkat* and *xərac*; if they participated in battles alongside the Muslims, they were entitled to claim any spoils of war they had seized. The followers of the Book, namely Jews and Christians, were subject to the *cizyə* tax and, in return, remained under the protection of the Muslim authorities. Those who did not accept the new government, religion, or taxation system engaged in conflict.

The history of Islam in this region can be divided into several distinct stages. The first stage extended from the mid-7th century to the early 8th century. During this initial phase, the majority of the population, particularly the local elite, adopted the new religion. It was also during this period that the independent status, or autocephaly, of the so-called Caucasian Albanian Church came to an end.

¹ *Azərbaycanda İslam*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <http://irs.gov.az/religion/azerbaycanda-islam>.

The second stage, which spans from the 8th to the mid-10th century, saw the gradual disappearance of groups practising fire worship. The Caucasian Albanian Church experienced a revival during this period, although it became dominated by Armenian adherents. The Jewish community, however, continued to maintain their faith.

The third stage, extending from the mid-10th century to the end of the 11th century, was characterised by the significant development of Shiism and Sufism in these regions.

The fourth stage, which took place between the 11th and 13th centuries, coincided with the reign of the Seljuqs. During this era, Sunni Islam consolidated its presence in the area.

The fifth stage, from the 13th to the 15th centuries, was marked by the Mongol invasions. Sufism, particularly Hurufism, experienced a resurgence during this time.

The sixth stage, from 1501 to 1736, corresponded to the period of Persian rule under the Safavid dynasty. It was during this time that Shiism gained preeminence and dominance in the region.

The seventh stage, from the mid-18th century to 1918, was characterised by the influence, conquest, and eventual incorporation of the Azerbaijani territories into the Russian Tsarist Empire. Additionally, the treaties concluded after the Russo-Persian wars of 1813 (the Treaty of Gulistan) and 1828 (the Treaty of Turkmenchay) established the Aras River as the border between these two empires, resulting in the division of Azerbaijan. Southern Azerbaijan remained within the boundaries of Persia, while Northern Azerbaijan fell under Russian control. The subsequent history of Islam in Southern Azerbaijan lies beyond the scope of this article.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this period in the history of Islam was the gradual formalisation and codification of the roles and responsibilities of the Muslim clergy within the administrative structure of the state. Until 1867, only the *şeyhülislam*, the leader of the Shia Muslim community, and the *müfti*, the principal spiritual leader of the local Sunnis, received a state salary. From that year onwards, other senior clerics also began to receive state remuneration. The headquarters of the Muslim clergy for the South Caucasus was established in Tbilisi, with delegations—known as *məclis*—in three other cities: Baku, Ganja, and Yerevan. In this period, 16 religious *kazi* judges were appointed for the Sunni community and 20 for the Shia community in the region. This stage is of exceptional importance in the history of Islam in Azerbaijan, as it marked the establishment of a formal state framework, along with

clearly defined responsibilities, requirements, and expectations for the existing religious communities.

The next stage was the almost two-year period of existence of the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, between 1918 and 1920. The official division into two factions was maintained but the former *şeyhülislam* resigned, and in his place the Minister of Social Affairs and Religious Affairs appointed a new clergyman, Ağa Əlizadə². At that time, modernization trends were intended to be introduced in Azerbaijani Islam.

The next stage is the time of Azerbaijan as part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1920-1991. After the Red Army entered and occupied the territory of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, the offices of spiritual leaders were abolished, clergy were persecuted and most of the mosque was closed. In the 1930s, the Bibiheybət mosque was demolished³. The situation changed when, during the fights between the Russians and the Germans during World War I, in 1943, the religious policy towards the peoples of the Soviet state was changed to gain their sympathy and encourage them to fight sacrificially against the enemy. Azerbaijani Muslims were then allowed to organize themselves into administrative and management structures. The Clerical Office of Transcaucasian Muslims – *Zaqafqasiya Müsəlmanları Ruhani İdarəsi* – was established in Baku, and the office of *şeyhülislam* was restored, once again Ağa Əlizadə became the head of Azerbaijani and this time also Transcaucasian Muslims. Shia-Sunni dualism was then abolished. *Müfti* became the first deputy of *şeyhülislam*. This structure of religious administration continues to nowadays.

After the Republic of Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991, another chapter in the history of religions, including Islam, began. The Republic became a constitutionally secular state⁴. In the ensuing years, existing mosques were renovated through local initiatives or with state support, and additional ones were constructed. The religious significance of many sites has been restored, while maintaining a broad level of religious tolerance, with Shia Islam continuing to hold its traditionally dominant role for several centuries.

² QILMAN, İlkin: *Bakı və bakiylər. Bakı*, Kitab Klubu 2015, p. 350.

³ ƏBDÜLRƏHİMOV, Ramiz, ABDULLAYEVA, Nəbat: *Ərkən kapitalizm dövrünün məmarlığı (XIX–XX əsrin əvvəli) = Architecture in the early period of capitalism (the XIX-begining of the XX c.c.)*. Bakı, Şərq-Qərb 2013, p. 257.

⁴ 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Azerbaijan. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/> .

Pilgrimage sites in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula – description

Buzovna

Buzovna is an urban-type settlement, known as a *kənd*, with a population of over 25,000, forming part of the Baku metropolitan area. Situated on the north-eastern edge of the Absheron Peninsula, it lies approximately 37 km from the centre of Baku. The settlement has an industrial character, while also serving as a recreational destination due to its beaches. Several historic structures have been preserved in the area, including mosques in varying states of preservation, tombs of local saints, enclosed bathhouses, water reservoirs, and the remains of what is likely an Albanian church.



Figure 1. Buzovna. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

For centuries, the settlement was inhabited by Tatars who practiced Shiism. The increase in the population defined as Tatar (Turkic, Azerbaijani) was recorded in the 19th century.

The etymology of the name of the town is unclear, and several versions are accepted: in the Tat language it would mean the place of "entrance to the sea"; in Azerbaijani language

buzov means a young, unweaned calf⁵; the Tat tribe living here was referred to as Bozok, which inexplicably became the name of the town. The Azerbaijani etymological explanation relates to the custom of ancient inhabitants who would settle in this area with their belongings during the winter months and then migrate to the mountains in the summer.

According to the records of the Russian orientalist Ilya Berezin (1818–1896), Armenians also resided in the town and maintained two places of worship: the tombs of Saint Elijah and Saint Andrew. The subsequent fate of these sites remains uncertain. In the mid-18th century, the Khan of Baku, Hacı Mirzə Məhəmməd I, established his residence here. Evidence of this can be found in a location known as *Xan bağı*, or the Khan Garden. During the Soviet era, a children's sanatorium was situated in the town.

In the town, there are ruins of the so-called Albanian church, known as *Alban kilsəsi*. The local inhabitants refer to this site as *Tərsa piri*. It is believed by the faithful that visiting this place with sincere prayer can influence the fulfilment of their requests.⁶ Additionally, the *çıldıq* ritual is celebrated here, discussed in more detail in the description of the facilities in Mərdəkan.

There are four mosques in Buzovna. Closed during Soviet times, they have been restored for cult purposes in the 21st century. There are 6 objects here, referred to as *pir*; smaller ones: Seyid Qasim, Şeyx Cavad, Seyid Gülşan, Qara Paltar and two larger ones. This is the tomb of a local *xəlifə* and his son: *Əli və Məhəmməd Mömin Türbəsi*. *Xəlifə* in the Shia tradition does not mean the caliph, the head of Muslims from the Sunni tradition, but the mullah's assistant in the religious school⁷.

Another significant and relatively new sacred site is the sanctuary known as *Mir Mövsüm Ziya Ağa Ziyarətgahı*. It is a well-maintained and frequently visited location, featuring a rich and characteristic decoration composed of ceramic, colourful tiles dominated by shades of blue, along with geometric and floral patterns, reportedly sourced from Isfahan, according to the local guardian. Its appearance bears a resemblance to the Şüvəlan sanctuary, which is discussed later. It is not without significance that Mir Mövsüm Ziya Ağa, the grandson of Mir Mövsüm Ağa's brother, is buried here. Like his great-uncle, Mir Mövsüm Ziya also passed away with a reputation for sanctity. This example illustrates the emergence

⁵ *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə, ABCÇD, Cild I*, red. Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası. Bakı, Şərq-Qərb 2006, p. 368.

⁶ AZƏRİ, Lalə: *Buzovna kəndinin əhvalatları*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.medeniyyet.az/page/news/58182/.html>.

⁷ *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə, EƏFGHXİJK, Cild II*, red. Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası. Bakı, Şərq-Qərb 2006, p. 444.

of a new lineage of local saints and the development of places of worship associated with their burial sites.

However, the most prominent pilgrimage site is the so-called Sanctuary (Footprint) of Ali, *Həzrəti Əli Ayağı Ziyarətgahı*, also referred to as *Qədəmgahı*, situated near the sea coast in the north-eastern part of the town. The faithful believe that this site contains a footprint of the Prophet Ali imprinted on the rock, and thus regard it as a location specially chosen by God. Moreover, Shia Islam maintains a strong tradition of visiting the graves of Ali, his descendants, subsequent Imams, and their families. Although there are no written records, only oral tradition confirms Ali's presence in Absheron or even Azerbaijan, suggesting that there might be any material trace of his stay. The faithful, however, believe that certain individuals possess the gift of bilocation, and that this was also the case here. The appearance of Ali's footprint on a rock in the village of Buzovna is explained through various legends.

According to one legend, an elderly man from the village had a dream in which he saw a figure dressed in green robes and armed with a double-bladed sword, which is the typical depiction of the Prophet/Imam Ali. Furthermore, in the dream, this figure appeared on a rock by the seaside. Upon waking, the old man went to the location he had seen in his dream and discovered the imprints of a man and a horse left on the rock. The human footprint, believed by devotees to be a sign of Ali's presence at this site, is now preserved in a display case within a brick mausoleum, which is adorned with colourful ceramic tiles. The mausoleum itself is modern in design yet maintains a modest appearance. Adjacent to it, on a rock outside the structure, is a small metal house that covers the imprint of Ali's horse's hoof. According to local beliefs, visiting this site with sincere intent and prayer, correctly kissing the display case containing Ali's footprint, and making donations can lead to the fulfilment of one's requests.

The reconstruction of this site began in 1987⁸. Nearby, there is a mosque built in the 1990s, along with the complex's administrative buildings, libraries, and prayer rooms designated for women. The mosque, named *Fatiməyi Zəhra Məscidi*, is said to have been constructed on the spot not only of Ali's footprint but also on the tomb of one of the daughters of the Imam, most likely the fifth Imam, Musa Kazim, a descendant of Ali. However, the dedication of this mosque is not entirely clear, as it could also refer to Fatima, the wife of Ali and the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who shares the same name. If the version about the daughter of the Imam is accepted, it would be one of at least five centres in the Baku area

⁸ *Əli Ayağı məscid-ziyarətgah kompleksi*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://scara.gov.az/az/xeber/dini-abideler/ziyartegahlar/eli-ayagi-mescid-ziyaretgah-kompleksi>.

devoted to the veneration of subsequent members of Ali's family, who are significant figures in the Shia tradition.

Zığ

The second Shrine of Ali's Footprint, *Həzrəti Əli Ayağı Ziyarətgahı*, is located in another Absheron town called Zığ. It lies between the eastern outskirts of Baku and the salty Zığ Lake, in the south-eastern part of the Absheron Peninsula, and has a population of approximately 15,000.

The origin of the town's name is unclear; it may be linked to a tribe that once lived or travelled nomadically in the area. Alternatively, it could be derived from the word *zığ*, meaning mud or wetland.

The towns of Buzovna and Zığ, each housing a similar Ali's Footprint sanctuary, are approximately 30 kilometres apart.

At the sacred site in Zığ, there is a horse's hoof print embedded in the stone. Various interpretations of its origin circulate among the faithful. According to the most widespread belief, it is the hoof print of the horse belonging to the Prophet/Imam Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, who is said to have passed through this area on horseback. Another version suggests that it is the hoof print of the horse ridden by the Prophet Muhammad himself, and that the creator of this site was a certain Master Ali. This latter legend, therefore, attributes the name to a different Ali, unrelated to the prophetic family.

After years of neglect during Azerbaijan's time under Soviet rule, the villagers began renovating the sanctuary in the 1990s at their own expense. They constructed a dedicated room for women's prayers, known as *Hüsəniyyə*, and restored the access road. While it primarily serves as a place of worship of local significance, pilgrims from Iran occasionally visit. Within the sanctuary, there is also a sacred stone image of a ram, known as *qoç daşı*, which stands as a monument to the local pre-Islamic culture. Similar animal figures have been transferred to the lapidarium near the Maiden Tower in central Baku, where they are currently displayed.

According to one of the legends associated with this site, the daughter of the seventh Imam, Musa ibn Jafar (also known as Musa Kazim), who was simultaneously the sister of the eighth Imam, Ali ibn Musa, primarily recognised as Rza (ar-Rza, Reza), found refuge here. In Azerbaijani tradition, this woman is referred to as Hökümə (or Həkimə) and is believed to have lived in Zığ until her death. Her grave was once venerated, but over time, another

individual who was regarded as a saint was buried in the same spot, resulting in the original tomb of the Imam's sister no longer existing today. This version contradicts the tradition that claims the grave of Hökümə exists in the Bibiheybət district, as described later. There is, however, some explanation for the connection between the graves of the Hökümə figures in Zığ and Bibiheybət. Persian Shah Tahmasp I (1514–1576) donated the village of Zığ to the *waqf* – a religious foundation – of the sanctuary at Bibiheybət, which might account for the recurrence of this revered figure's name. Furthermore, the official designation of the figure at Bibiheybət is Fatma Suğra (Zəhra), which is also the dedication of the mosque at Ali's shrine. This would suggest that there are three sanctuaries associated with this descendant of the Imam in the vicinity of Baku.

In this town, a holiday called *Əli süfrəsi*, or Ali's Table, is celebrated with particular solemnity. This ceremony, held four times a year, has both religious and social significance. The faithful sing special hymns in honour of Ali, engage in prayer, and share food.

Additionally, there is a *türbə*, or mausoleum, and a crypt in this town. Local tradition holds that descendants of Shah Abbas are interred there, although the identities of these individuals remain unclear.

Bibiheybət

One of the most significant pilgrimage sites in the Baku region is the mosque known as *Bibi Heybət məscidi* in Bibihəybet, now a district of Baku. It is also referred to as *Şıx* and is situated approximately 6 kilometres from the city centre, on the seashore of Baku Bay, nestled between the beach, oil ports, and rocky hills to the southwest of Baku.

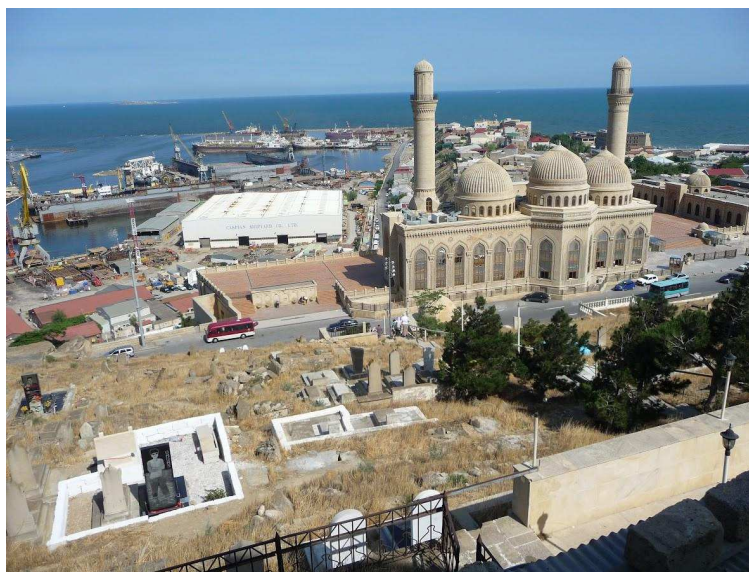


Figure 2. Bibi Heybət məscidi. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

According to tradition, the site of the mosque was originally the burial place of the daughter of the seventh Imam, Musa Kazim. The Imam himself died at the hands of the Abbasid caliphs, who were persecuting him, while Musa's daughter sought refuge first in Rasht in Persia and later moved to Baku, where she lived to a safe and advanced age. Her grave quickly became a pilgrimage destination. It is believed that in the early 14th century, a mosque was constructed at this site, founded by the ruler Fərruhzad ibn Əhsitan and designed by the architect Mahmud ibn Səid, who was also responsible for designing the fortress in Nardaran and one of the preserved mosques in the Inner City of Baku, *İçəri Şəhər*. The building underwent several expansions over time, culminating in a new layout in 1911 when the Baku millionaire Ələsqər Dadaşov financed further development of the centre.

The site became an important pilgrimage and religious destination, as well as an expanding necropolis. In earlier centuries, a sheikh dynasty assumed the management of the sanctuary. The lands belonging to the sanctuary estate were granted official tax exemptions on multiple occasions by the Persian rulers, who controlled these territories for centuries. As mentioned earlier, there are notable connections between the Bibiheybət sanctuary and the village of Zığ. It is speculated that the name of the local village *Şıx* is derived from the term for sheikhs (*şeyx*).

The sanctuary was frequented not only by Shia Muslim believers but also by travellers exploring Baku and its surroundings. Alexandre Dumas (Père; 1802–1870), in his memoirs from his journey through the Caucasus (*Le Caucase*) in 1858, described the mosque in Bibiheybət as a place where women who were unable to have children would come to pray for the blessing of offspring. One such example was the poet Xurşidbanu Natəvan (1832–1897), the daughter of the last Khan of Karabakh, Mehdiqulu Cavanşir. She visited the temple and the tomb, praying for motherhood, and subsequently gave birth to her son in 1855.

After the Red Army occupied the territory of Azerbaijan, the days of the Bibiheybət sanctuary became numbered. Between 1934 and 1936, the mosque and the tomb of the Imam's daughter were devastated, blown up, and demolished as part of the communist campaign against religion. During this period, two other significant religious buildings that dominated Baku were also destroyed: the Orthodox Church of Alexander Nevsky and the Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary⁹. Shortly after the mosque's demolition, a directive from Moscow arrived instructing that the building be preserved as a valuable historical monument. However, it was too late, and the mosque had

⁹ KRAJCARZ, Julia. Catholic minority in modern Azerbaijan. *Studia Orientalne*, 2018, 2 (14), p. 73.

already been destroyed. As punishment for failing to comply with this directive, the Azerbaijani People's Commissar, Salamov, was sent to Siberia for 20 years of imprisonment. Tombstones from the cemetery surrounding the mosque were destroyed, with some, such as those belonging to the Guban Khans, being relocated to the Azerbaijani History Museum in the centre of Baku. An asphalt road was subsequently constructed through the area where the sanctuary once stood. Nevertheless, the local population continued to remember the site's sacred significance, and drivers would pass along the road cautiously, as if to avoid dishonouring the memory of the sanctuary and the cemetery.

Changes arrived with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent declaration of independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1994, the then-president, Həydar Əliyev, made the first promise to rebuild this symbolic building. By 1998, the initial reconstruction and construction work commenced, and the plots of 113 houses built near the former mosque were acquired.

Yellow limestone blocks of the *gölbaht* type were used to build the mosque. The new mosque was partly modeled on the previous ones existing on this site, both before and after the reconstruction in 1911. However, the resulting structure is much larger than the previous ones. It consists of three main parts: a centrally located hall with the reconstructed tomb of the Imam's daughter, a northern hall intended for women's prayers and a southern hall intended for men. The central room is decorated with mirror cladding in green and turquoise colors. The windows have stained glass windows in the Persian *orosi* style, in which small colored glasses are framed in wooden, carved frames. Bibi's tomb is surrounded by a wooden cage with jewelry decorations. The mosque has three domes decorated with grooves and two 22-meter-high minarets. The building was given features referring to the medieval architecture of this part of Azerbaijan. This is the so-called style Shirvan-Asheron school. It is characterized by the use of unplastered limestone blocks, domes, entrances with so-called donkey-back arches, *livans*, stalactite decorations of entrances and niches, sometimes arabesque, flat floristic or geometric decorations, incorporating various types of Arabic writing encoding Quranic content. A large square with a terrace overlooking the sea, offering views of the nearby oil ports, was constructed adjacent to the mosque, along with auxiliary buildings housing toilets. A busy road continues to run through the area of the former cemetery that once surrounded the mosque. However, a portion of the cemetery has been preserved on the opposite side of the road, on a rocky slope, featuring both older and more modern tombstones, with the latter now being more prevalent.

According to legend, one of the daughters of Imam Musa Kazim was buried here. This Imam was the father of 21 daughters, none of whom married or had children. Four of them bore the name Fatima (Fatma). Persian tradition suggests that one of these daughters, known as Fatima Qubra, was buried in the city of Qum in Iran, where her tomb remains an important pilgrimage site today.¹⁰ Another daughter, Fatima Suğra or Zəhra, is believed to be buried at Bibiheybət, near Baku¹¹. As previously mentioned, the connection between the towns of Buzovna, Zığ, and Bibiheybət, as the supposed resting place of this descendant of the Imam, remains unclear. Other daughters of the seventh Imam have well-established tombs and temples dedicated to them, such as Bibi Həkimə Xatun in Gachsaran, located in southeastern Iran¹². Nearby, there is a temple dedicated to her Persian guide and protector, known as Kaka Mubarak. There is a noticeable resemblance between the name of the Imam's daughter and the narrative of the guardian to the story from Bibiheybət. It is possible that the legends and place of worship surrounding Baku are a replication of the cult of a distant and hard-to-reach temple in the mountains of Iran. According to popular tradition, the sisters – the Imam's daughters – fled together and then parted ways; however, Azerbaijani tradition places the grave of Fatma Suğra (Zəhra) / Həkimə / Hökümə in Buzovna, Zığ, or Bibiheybət.

Other daughters of the seventh Imam include Fatima Vusta, also known as Fatma Sitta, who has her temple in Isfahan¹³, and Fatima Uhra in the city of Rasht¹⁴. In turn, Bibi Ruqaiyye has his tomb in Natanz, Persia¹⁵. However, across the Absheron Peninsula, there are purported tombs of entirely different daughters of this Imam.

Another legend offers an explanation for the altered name of the daughter buried near Baku. Fatma Zəhra did not use her real name out of fear of being discovered by the spies of the Abbasid caliphs. Additionally, the man who served her during her stay in Baku was known as Heybət. She became affectionately known as Bibi, and over time, the servant's name was associated with the Imam's daughter. Consequently, her original name faded from memory, replaced by her nickname. The mosque in Buzovna, built adjacent to the Shrine of Ali's Footprint, is dedicated to Fatmeyī Zəhra. As mentioned earlier, this may be connected to the figure of Bibi Heybət.

¹⁰ *Princess of Qum*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eFPaFGDFIM>.

¹¹ *Bibi Heybat*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a798HygrTg>.

¹² *Bibi Hakimeh Khatun*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=q_4yaUv_5aE.

¹³ *Bibi Fatima Wusta*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp7ymHCh7Q0&t=319s>.

¹⁴ *Bibi Fatima Ukhra*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oVI5CdBNiU>.

¹⁵ *Bibi Rukhaiyeh Khatun*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLcdwSIYyws>.

Today, the renovated mosque, architecturally reminiscent of the former structures of this region and rebuilt on its original site over the grave of a figure who is partly historical and partly legendary within Shia Islam, serves as a significant pilgrimage site of more than just local importance. The tradition of pilgrimages and prayers by women desiring children still endures here, and the mosque also attracts visits from foreign tourists. The mosque's terrace offers a sweeping view of Baku, the Gulf of Baku, and the nearby ports.

Bilgəh

An important sanctuary for the local community is located in the town of Bilgəh, approximately 30 km northeast of central Baku, on the northeastern edge of the Absheron Peninsula. The name of the town likely derives from the Persian word *piləgah*, meaning a place of silk production.

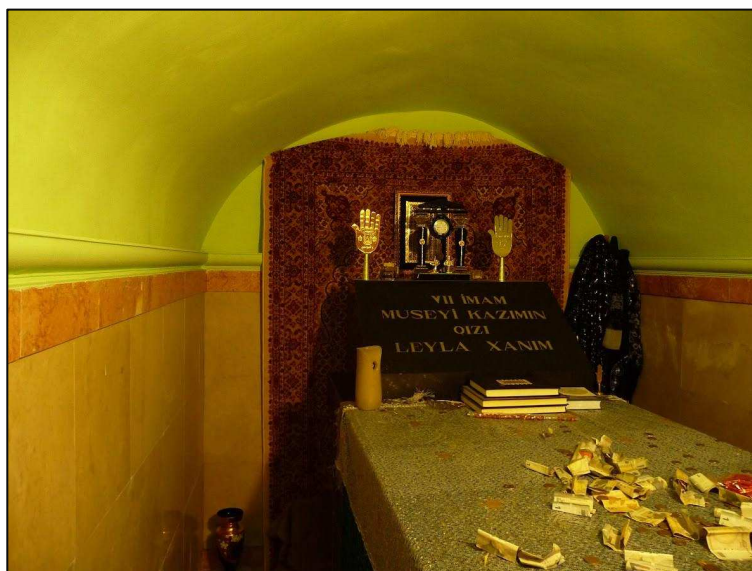


Figure 3. Bilgəh. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

This is the shrine of Leyla, the daughter of the aforementioned seventh Imam, Musa ibn Jafar, also known as Musa Kazim. Although, according to tradition, none of the 21 daughters of the seventh Imam married, Leyla is believed to have wed but died a week after her wedding. This gives rise to another name for this shrine: *Pir Həftəxar*, meaning "Weekly Bride."

The current structure, built of white cut limestone, dates back to the late 19th century. It is a low, elongated building with a small dome. Outside, to the right of the entrance, a modern plaque indicates that this mosque was originally built in the 8th century, attributed to Shah Shirvanshah, Fərruhzad ibn Əhsitan II. However, in the 1380s, another mosque on this site was designed by the architect Mahmud ibn Səid, who also designed numerous medieval

structures in Baku. On the opposite side of the main entrance, a black flag, the symbol of Shia Islam, is flown. Inside, a corridor leads to the burial place of the Imam's daughter, with separate prayer rooms designated for women and men. The tomb itself is protected by a wooden wall, and nearby are metal forms of *khamisa*, also known as Fatima's hand. Devotees often throw coins and banknotes onto the grave.

During Soviet times, the building was repurposed as a warehouse, and its religious functions were only restored in the late 1980s when the local community undertook its renovation. At that time, a porch was added from the courtyard side.

However, in the official Shia tradition, the seventh Imam did not have a daughter named Leyla. Nevertheless, a modern plaque at the entrance, based on local tradition, indicates the familial connection between Leyla and Musa Kazim.

Nardaran

Another site of religious worship, one that extends beyond local significance, is the mosque and tomb in Nardaran. This town is situated to the northeast, approximately 25 km from the centre of Baku, on the northern coast of Absheron. The name of the town is of Persian origin: *nar* means pomegranate, and *daran* means tree, indicating that it was once a place of pomegranate groves.



Figure 4. Nardaran. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

According to tradition, another daughter of the aforementioned seventh Imam and sister of the eighth Imam, Rəhimə, lived here. She fled from the repression of the Mamluk ruler, Caliph Harun al-Rashid of the Abbasid dynasty, who was responsible for poisoning her

father and brother. Rəhimə found refuge in Nardaran, near Baku. In various versions of the legends, she either arrived with her family or married a certain Mirabdulla in Nardaran, which contradicts the tradition that none of the seventh Imam's daughters, who were forced to flee from their native Arabia to Persia, ever married. Upon arrival, she and her family are said to have stayed with a local farmer named Səid Yusif. According to popular belief, as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Rəhimə possessed an extraordinary ability to heal people. Additionally, she was highly knowledgeable about the properties of plants and prepared medicines herself. She died at a young age, around 22 years old, with some folk stories suggesting she passed away during childbirth. She, her children (or perhaps just her daughter), and her husband were buried in Nardaran. Her grave subsequently became a site for prayers and local pilgrimages. This motif, involving the local guardian of the descendant of the Prophet and the Imam, echoes the narrative found in the Bibiheybət sanctuary.

By the 15th century, the tomb of the Imam's daughter likely fell into obscurity. This was due to changes in the coastline of the Caspian Sea north of Nardaran, where coastal winds blew in large amounts of sand that eventually covered the tomb's structures.

The revival of this site as a sanctuary occurred in 1950, when a local villager reportedly had a dream in which Rəhimə appeared to him. In this vision, she instructed him to locate her grave and indicated the exact place where it should be found. Following this guidance, a grave was discovered, along with three sources of drinking water.

The complete renovation of the site took place only in 1994, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The dissolution of the USSR facilitated greater contact between the local population and religious centres in Iran. Funding from Iran also supported the construction of a madrasa in Nardaran. This town is perceived by Azerbaijani government circles as a centre of Iranian influence, and extremists were arrested there in 2015. Moreover, Nardaran's Shia faithful are regarded as extremely conservative throughout the country.

The new mosque was constructed from white and yellow limestone and gained an additional floor compared to the single-story building that houses the tomb, as well as a dome and four minarets.

The new structure, whose design reflects the architecture of the Shirvanshah era, encloses the old building, which was uncovered beneath a layer of sand and earth in 1950. On the ground floor, there is access to Rəhimə's tomb. The interiors of the two elongated rooms

are adorned with small mirrors. Before entering the tomb, visitors are required to remove their shoes, and women are asked to wear a headscarf.

Interestingly, near the new mosque containing the Rəhimə tomb, there is a small, two-room tomb, which also serves as a mosque, known as *Səyyid Yusif ziyarətgahı*, where Səid Yusif, the man who, according to tradition, took Rəhimə into his home, is buried. This site is also visited by pilgrims. Surrounding the mosque with the Rəhimə tomb is a cemetery with modern tombstones. To the north of the mosque, there is a lower square accessible via a broad staircase, and below it, a madrasa building has been constructed.

Bülbülə

In the former Baku village, and now an urban settlement, Bülbülə, there is also a place associated with persecuted members of the Imam dynasty. The village is located east of the center of Baku, between the road leading to the Baku airport and the salt lake Bülbülə. The name comes from the term for muddy volcanoes: *pilpilə*¹⁶. In the past, similar earth formations also existed in this region, and over time, the word evolved into its current form.

According to tradition, Məhəmməd Sadiq, one of the persecuted sons of the fifth Imam, Məhəmməd Bağır, sought refuge here in exile. The name of this shrine, along with others dedicated to the sons of the same Imam in Ganja, Shamakhi, and Barda—located at their burial sites—became renowned pilgrimage centres, known as *İmamzadə*, which means "Son of the Imam." The hill in Bülbülə, where the *İmamzadə* structures stood, was referred to as *Salam zirvesi* – the Hill of Greetings, as pilgrims journeying to the major sanctuaries in Persia, Iraq, or Arabia would pass by this site and offer their greetings to this holy place.

The *İmamzadə* sanctuary near Baku was less fortunate. Although it developed over the centuries, it only attained a new, monumental form in 1624, funded by the then ruler of these lands, the Persian Shah Abbas I.

The 17th century German traveler and naturalist Engelbert Kempfer described Baku and its surroundings in his account, including the Sadiq sanctuary in Bülbülə¹⁷.

However, in 1930, following the establishment of Soviet power and during the most intense phase of the fight against religion within the Soviet state, the sanctuary was demolished, and the remaining ruins were levelled. The building materials were repurposed to

¹⁶ QILMAN, İlkin. *Bakı və bakılılar*, p. 255.

¹⁷ CƏBİYEVA, Təranə. *Səyyah Engelbert Kempfer və Bülbülə İmamzadəsi*. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://medeniyyet.az/page/news/12957/Seyyah-Engelbert-Kempfer-ve-Bulbule-Imamzadesi-.html?lang=en>.

construct a kindergarten. During the Great Patriotic War, after 1941, the kindergarten was converted into an orphanage, and in 1972, it was rebuilt into what is now School No. 140 nearby.

The situation changed in 1988 when residents discovered remnants of the original sanctuary behind the school building, in the form of stairs that once led to the underground tomb of the Imam's son. Since 1993, this location has regained its sacred status. The symbolic graves of Sadiq, his wife, and servant were recreated. Although the small structure, topped with a dome, appears modest, the locals are hopeful for a complete renovation of the site, with the aim of restoring its status as a pilgrimage destination beyond just the local community. As with many holy sites associated with the tomb of a male descendant of an Imam, it is traditionally accompanied by the grave of a (local) guide or companion located nearby. Today, it remains a modest building but is gradually regaining a following among local believers and pilgrims.

Mərdəkan

Mərdəkan, formerly a village, today an urban-type settlement, located approximately 30 km east of Baku, in the central and eastern part of Absheron, derives its name from the words *Mard*, meaning the Mard tribe, and *-kan*, meaning a place.



Figure 5. Mərdəkan. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

According to legend, it was a place of refuge for Xədicə, one of the daughters of the seventh Imam, Musa Kazim. Her resting place has since evolved into an expanded sanctuary, encompassing additional tombs, places of worship, and healing spaces.

This site was devastated during the Soviet era, but following Azerbaijan's independence, the local community and authorities mobilised to rebuild it. In 2000, under the initiative of İlham Əliyev, who was then the deputy head of SOCAR and is now the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the tombs were reconstructed, and the surrounding area was revitalised. Trees were planted, lawns were established, and a fountain and ponds were constructed.

In the front section of the sanctuary, just beyond the main gate, there stands a bust of the Azerbaijani millionaire, benefactor, and patron Zeynalabdin Tağıyev (1838–1924). Mərdəkan served as the suburban headquarters of this oil magnate before World War I, and his villa and park were located near the sanctuary, in what is today the Dendrological Park of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. During the Soviet era, the villa was repurposed as a hospital. In independent Azerbaijan, following the Karabakh war, displaced persons from Karabakh resided there. The villa was subsequently abandoned and fell into ruin over the years. However, in 2019, it was taken over by the Həydar Əliyev Foundation and restored.¹⁸

In the central part of the sanctuary is the grave of the Muslim cleric Axund Mirzə Əbu Turab Axundzadə (Axundov), who lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He was a man who supported the development of education and contributed to the creation of the so-called Russian-Tatar school in the native Əmircan near Baku. He was a colleague, teacher and spiritual authority of the millionaire Tağıyev¹⁹. The decorative stone dome over Axund's grave was funded by another Baku millionaire, Murtuza Muxtarov. Tağıyev died in 1924, following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and Azerbaijan's incorporation into Soviet Russia. He was interred next to the clergyman whom he held in high regard. Tağıyev's daughter, Sara, as well as other individuals who fell victim to Soviet persecution in the 1920s, were also buried nearby. The dome over Axund's grave is characterised by an eclectic style, drawing inspiration from the architecture of the Shirvanshah era, as well as Persian and Indian influences.

¹⁸ *Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyevin Mərdəkandakı evi təmərdən sonra* – VİDEO. [online] [2024-09-23] Available: <https://www.yeniavaz.com/az/news/139538/haci-zeynalabdin-tagiyevin-merdekandaki-evi-temirden-sonra-video>.

¹⁹ QILMAN, İlkin: *Bakı və bəkililər*, p. 343.

Deeper within the square stands a single-storey building made of limestone blocks, covered by a small dome, housing a tomb known as Pir Həsən. This saint likely lived in the 15th century, but the current modest mausoleum was founded in the 17th century, funded by Shah Abbas in 1613.

An important aspect of visiting the saint's tomb involves undergoing healing through a practice known as *çildaq*. The name of the entire sanctuary complex, as used by some, is also derived from this practice – *Çildağ*. The healing process consists of several stages. First, the tomb is circled three times. Next, one descends underground to kiss the grave and offer a donation or gift. A healer specialising in this practice brings a narrow tube close to the pilgrim's body, with the end smouldering like a large cigar. Inside, dried wormwood leaves are burnt. The forehead, chest, and limbs are then incensed with the smoke. As pilgrims and believers claim, this treatment cures ailments, neuroses, and stress, and wards off the "evil eye." According to tradition, this healing method with wormwood incense was effectively used by Pir Həsən, who is buried here. However, less orthodox theories suggest that this treatment method originated in China and was introduced here during the Mongol invasion in the 13th or 14th century. The healing process, as well as the pilgrimage to the sanctuary, should be undertaken with a reverent attitude and faith in the efficacy of these practices.

Outside, near the saint's tomb, another healing ritual takes place. For a symbolic fee, a specially appointed individual whispers a prayer over the pilgrim and symbolically "draws out" negative energy with hand gestures. As a sign of removing this energy from the patient's body, the healer breaks a glass bottle with a loud noise, throwing it behind the patient.

Near Pir Həsən's tomb, in a slight depression in the landscape, there is a modest, domed mausoleum where, according to tradition, Xədicə, another daughter of the seventh Imam, was buried. Inside the tomb, worshippers line up for individual blessings with the Quran. This ritual is performed by a specially designated person, who lifts the Quran over the bowed head of the pilgrim.

Within the sanctuary buildings there is also a modern mosque and *qurbangah* rooms, used for the ritual slaughter of animals during the Festival of Sacrifices. Mulberry trees were planted near the mausoleums, and a few poplar trees were planted closer to the exit from the sanctuary area. This sanctuary is the most wooded, green and flowery of all Baku and Baku-around places of worship.

Şüvəlan

An important local pilgrimage site is the town or urban settlement of Şüvəlan. Its name is of Persian origin and means a lowered place. Formerly, this area was a pasture near the nearby village of Qala.



Figure 6. Şüvəlan. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

Mir Mövsüm Ağa, who died with a reputation for sanctity, is interred here. Born in 1883 into a wealthy family, Mir Mövsüm Ağa's father belonged to a family of *səids* (*səid*), meaning descendants of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. He had moved from Karbala in Iraq to Baku in the second half of the 19th century.

Ağa was born paralysed and was never able to live independently. His limbs were so severely deformed that he was believed to be "boneless," which led to his alternate name, *Et Ağa* (with *et* meaning "meat" or "flesh," used here to imply "boneless"). One of his sisters devoted her entire life to caring for him, foregoing her personal life and the prospect of starting her own family to look after her infirm brother. Ağa was exceptionally pious and was believed by some to possess miraculous abilities. His guardian sister passed away in 1948, and he himself died in 1950. They were both buried in the cemetery in Şüvəlan, and Ağa's grave soon became a local pilgrimage site.

Between 1992 and 1994, a structure was erected over the saint's grave, serving to protect the tomb and facilitate religious practices for pilgrims. The building features two

domes covered with blue ceramic tiles. The entrance to the sanctuary is located in a *livan* adorned with ceramic cladding featuring floral motifs. The interior of the sanctuary is decorated with silver-tinted mirror tiles. Adjacent to the sanctuary is a mosque, equipped with a single minaret that is also clad in blue ceramic tiles. Next to the sanctuary there is a sanitary building, which also houses a poor children's canteen²⁰. All buildings were built from pilgrims' contributions and were erected by faithful volunteers. The sanctuary is located in an active cemetery where the brother of Saint Ağa is also buried. This place, although architecturally arranged only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent Azerbaijan, was already known and frequented by believers during the years of Soviet rule. Those who sought healing from various ailments came here. Anecdotes mention the wife of the Soviet-era Azerbaijani Minister of Finance, who did not find healing in the best Moscow hospitals, but recovered after visiting Ağa's grave.

Pictures with the image of Mir Mövsüm Ağa and brochures in the form of small books about his life and the sanctuary are distributed at the sanctuary for a voluntary fee.

Baku – İçəri Şəhər

Another place of worship associated with Mir Mövsüm Ağa is his family home in Baku's Old City – *İçəri Şəhər*, located at 3 Firdousi Street. It was in this house that Mir Mövsüm, regarded as a saintly figure, lived from birth until his death.

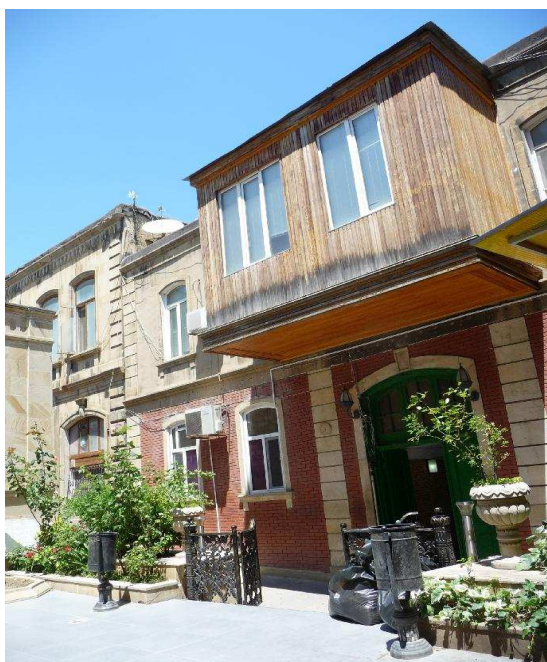


Figure 7. Baku – İçəri Şəhər. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 252.

In the square in front of the entrance to the unmarked and modest single-story tenement house, there are benches for waiting worshippers, a fountain, and a drinking water source known as *Ehsan Bulağı*. Just before entering the prayer hall, there are small areas covered with climbing roses on either side.

On the ground floor of the single-story tenement house, there is a room where the faithful gather for prayer. This room has no windows and is illuminated solely by lamps. In Baku, street vendors frequently distribute images depicting this saint, portraying him as an elderly man seated in a chair, thus making his disability not immediately apparent.

Baku – Təzə Pir

For some time now, the mosque called *Təzə Pir*, located in the Baku district of the same name, has been considered one of the most important mosques in Baku, Azerbaijan and the entire Caucasus. The current building was erected between 1905 and 1914. It was built on a site that had long been surrounded by cult. According to tradition, a theologian who died in the opinion of sanctity, a certain Abu Səid Adbulla, was buried in this place.

Since the 15th century, his burial place has acquired a cult and pilgrimage character²¹. Over time, the building was renovated and arranged anew. In 1905, a millionaire from the Aşurbeyov family decided to build a mosque on the site of the tomb. Hence the present name of the mosque – *Təzə Pir* – i.e. New Pir, otherwise: New Sanctuary. Nabat Aşurbəyova, a wealthy woman who participated in charitable endeavors. She also partially financed the construction of waterworks from Şollar to Baku. In 1911, after the outbreak of the Balkan War, the construction of the mosque slowed down a bit. The founders had their access to their own funds restricted because the Russian authorities feared that Azerbaijani Muslim millionaires who had funds deposited in Russian banks would begin to financially support the Ottoman government in a new war. Therefore, the accounts of Baku millionaires were blocked. Construction works were further slowed down by the death of the founder in 1912. Later, the financing of the construction was taken over by the deceased's son, who completed the mosque and opened it in 1914.

The first designer of the mosque was Kərbəlayi Əhməd, but the final design was created by a talented architect known as Zivər bəy Əhmədzadə. He was the first Azerbaijani builder to complete architectural studies at Western European universities. Əhmədzadə additionally made numerous trips to the countries of the Middle East, where he visited local

²¹ QILMAN, İlkin: *Bakı və bakılılar*, p. 338.

mosques, sketched, and collected data, in order to later use the acquired knowledge to design a building combining the features of native Azerbaijani architecture with building motifs from other areas and cultures.

The mosque operated for only three years and was closed after the October Revolution in 1917. After Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Soviet Union, the mosque building served as a cinema and warehouse. It regained cult functions in 1943, when during World War II the policy of the Soviet authorities towards various ethnic and religious groups living in the USSR changed, and the freedom of worship was expanded when subsequent groups were sent to the war fronts.



Figure 8. Baku – Təzə Pir (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

Between 2006 and 2009, the mosque underwent extensive renovation, and its surroundings were redesigned. Nearby, religious administration buildings were constructed, which now serve as the office of the religious head of the Muslims of the Caucasus. The site of the historical tomb is located underground. At the entrance to the mosque, on the right side, lies the grave of the mosque's founder and her son.

The mosque itself was constructed from light-coloured limestone blocks. The centrally located men's prayer room is covered with a dome, gilded on the outside. Other elements of the wall decoration are also gilded, as are the roofs of the two minarets situated on either side of the mosque's entrance.

While the mosque was built on the site of a tomb that has been visited and venerated for centuries, today it holds significance for other reasons. It stands as an interesting religious structure, blending elements of traditional architecture from this region with decorative styles typical of other Muslim countries. It is also a well-maintained and renovated building, situated along the route frequented by tourists visiting Baku. Moreover, it serves as the headquarters for the leader of all Shia Muslims in the Caucasus.

Maštağa

In the town of Maštağa near Baku, there is a famous pir where believers go with the intention of finding help and healing. Maštağa was formerly a village, now an urban-type settlement within the metropolis of Baku. The etymology of the name is explained by its origin from the word *Məşqətə*, the Azerbaijani term for the Massageta tribe.



Figure 9. Maštağa. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

In the Seyid district of this town, a mausoleum known as *Aqil Baba*, *Qorxu piri* (Sanctuary of Fear) or *Səkkiz Qapı* (Eight doors) is located in the cemetery. It is a place where people go to seek healing from problems, mainly related to stress or fear. The most important building of this complex has an octagonal plan. Each of the eight walls is a passage topped with an arch, and the entire building has no roof. There are no doors in the passages.

To perform the ritual, one must pass through each of the eight passages in such a manner that they enter with the right foot and exit with the left, all while maintaining a clear and focused intention seeking resolution or assistance. Above the eighth passage, there hangs a plaque, along which the person overseeing the complex and conducting the ritual suddenly

drags a piece of metal, creating a harsh, jarring sound. This is considered the most crucial moment of the healing process. This location is well-regarded as a healing sanctuary, with reports in the press and online from individuals claiming that they were cured of physical and mental ailments here.

Meanwhile, the tomb of Aqil Baba, also known as Seyid Hüsəyn or Seyid Kamil, is situated near the Pir of Eight Doors. According to tradition, Seyid came here from Arabia in search of refuge, presenting a story similar to those of the children of the Imams who sought sanctuary in the lands of Azerbaijan. However, he is believed to have lived during the time of Shah Abbas I.

Baku – Müqəddəs Məryəm Ana kilsəsi

The square in front of the entrance to the Roman Catholic church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Mükkədəs Məryəm Ana kilsəsi*, in Baku's Xətai district, is also a site frequented by the faithful, not only Christians but also Shia Muslims. The focal point for visitors is the approximately 2-metre-high stone figure of the Virgin Mary, positioned above the church entrance. Local Shia Muslim women regard this figure as a *pir* – a place of pilgrimage and veneration.



Figure 10. Baku – Mükkədəs Məryəm Ana kilsəsi. (Photo by Julia Krajcarz).

It is believed that childless women who pray before this figure will have their prayers heard and will become mothers. As a result, this location has acquired a status similar to that

of the Bibiheybət sanctuary – serving as a destination for pilgrimages and for similar prayers and requests. The fact that the statue is part of a Christian temple does not deter the praying Muslim women.

Conclusions and summary

The described places of worship in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula belong to the realm of both Muslim and Christian sacred traditions. These include mosques, tombs of individuals who died with a reputation for holiness—some widely known and others only recognised locally—as well as a Roman Catholic church.

Since 1991, with the emergence of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, freedom of worship has been established, and the religious life of various denominations has been reconstructed, albeit under constant state supervision. Since the 1990s, there has been a trend of restoring former places of worship, both by the local community and with the support of state organisations.

All these places are sometimes referred to as *pir*. This word, with Persian etymology, carries multiple meanings. According to the dictionary of the Azerbaijani language, *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti*, the primary definition of this term is "old man," "very old man," or "an elderly and pious man." In further meanings, it refers to the founder and/or leader of a group or sect.

He is also a master, a teacher²². The definition refers to the third meaning of the definition of the word *ocaq*: a holy place, a place of pilgrimage²³. In the Azerbaijani language it is *ziyarətghah* and this term also appears when referring to these places. The word *ibadətghah* – temple – could also appear, but it is less frequently used by Azerbaijani speakers in this context. *Pir* is a term for individual, smaller objects. *Ziyarətghah* usually refers to larger objects, sometimes groups of *pir* objects. The best example is the complex from Mərdəkan: the whole is the *ziyarətghah* pilgrimage site where there are particular, individual objects – *pir*. A special type of *pir* / *ziyarətghah* is the *imamzadə*, i.e. a shrine dedicated to the son of the Imam²⁴ and *qədəmgah* – "sanctuary of the foot", "place of the trace". The word *qədəm* means

²² *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə, QLMNOÖPR, Cild III*, red. Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası. Bakı, Şərq-Qərb 2006, p. 604.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 511.

²⁴ *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə, EFGHXİJK, Cild II*, p. 536.

a step or a trace²⁵, adding *-gah* one creates names of places of accumulation, destination for something, connection with something.

Admission to all these sites is free, unrestricted, and without charge. The faithful believe that visiting a holy place with sincere intentions, offering prayers, paying respects at the graves of saints—if present at the site—and making a donation is the appropriate way to conduct oneself. However, the most crucial element is having faith in the meaning and power of these practices.

In addition to performing these typical and well-known rituals, visitors to some of the described locations can participate in unusual ceremonies, which not all believers consider befitting followers of the Prophet. At least five such practices are observed at sites frequented by Shia Muslims and non-Orthodox forms of worship in the region:

1. *çıldag* in Buzovna and Mərdəkan,
2. breaking a bottle in Mərdəkan,
3. passage under the arcades in a certain way in Maştağa,
4. blessing with the book of the Holy Quran in Mərdəkan,
5. cult of sculpture *qoç daşı* in Zığ.

All these practices are intended to heal the body or spirit, soothe the nerves, reduce stress, and dispel fears.

Two locations, the mosque and tomb at Bibiheybət and the statue above the entrance of the Roman Catholic church, are regarded as sites of pilgrimage and prayer, particularly for women wishing to conceive a child.

It is likely that some *pirs* were established on the sites of earlier, perhaps Christian, tombs of individuals locally renowned for their sanctity, as may be the case in Buzovna.

Graves and other pilgrimage sites on the Absheron Peninsula are associated with figures widely recognised in the Islamic world, as well as those known only on a local level. On Absheron, there are two sanctuaries connected with the figure of the Prophet Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, located in Buzovna and Zığ. Additionally, in Zığ, the local legend includes the figure of the Prophet Muhammad himself. The figure of Ali is fundamental to the emergence of Shia Islam. Both sanctuaries are linked to the Prophet's alleged footprint on a rock.

The figures known to followers of Shia Islam include the descendants of Imams. In Absheron this is one sanctuary associated with the son of the fifth Imam, the so-called

²⁵ *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə, QLMNOÖPR, Cild III*, p. 99.

İmamzade, in Bülbülə and the graves of the daughters of the seventh Imam in Bibiheybət, Bilgəh, Nardaran, Mərdəkan, Buzovna. While the names of some of these daughters appear in Muslim tradition and literature, some do not appear on the list of descendants of this Imam. Tradition always points to the figure of the fifth imam, Musa Kazim. They are: Rəhimə, Xədicə, Leyla, Fatma Suğra/ Zəhra and/ or Hökümə.

A local figure known in Baku and on the Peninsula is Mir Mövsüm Ağa, who died in the opinion of sainthood, was paralyzed all his life and depended on the help of his family. In places related to him, near the Baku house and at the grave of Mərdəkan, as well as on the streets of Baku, pictures with his image, similar to Catholic confessional pictures, are distributed. The grandson of his brother, Mir Mövsüm Ziya, buried in Buzovna, is known only locally.

People living in Azerbaijan, familiar with the sanctuaries in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula but sceptical about the beliefs associated with them, have expressed doubts about the family ties between members of the Imam's family and those around them, viewing this cult as a model of nepotistic relations of power and influence in Azerbaijan. These individuals, who preferred to remain anonymous, did not wish their names and surnames to be quoted.

The analysis of pilgrimage sites in Baku and Absheron reveals a tendency for certain narrative threads to be repeated in the history of these sites. Notably, there is a belief in the presence of the graves of several daughters of the fifth Imam in this region.

While some of these claims are supported by the common beliefs of devotees beyond Azerbaijan, others are not corroborated, and even the names of the women allegedly buried are absent from generally accepted traditions. This points to a pattern of replicating figures around whom cults have formed. It is worth noting that, in the tradition of local believers, the life stories of these women are remarkably similar: they all fled from Arabia to Persia and beyond at around the same time to escape persecution by the Abbasids. These women were accompanied by devoted local followers who became their servants. The descendants of the Imam lived in the reputation of holiness, and after their deaths, their graves were venerated, along with the graves of their loyal servants, which are typically located nearby.

Another recurring pattern is the discovery of the location of a saint's grave through a dream. This motif appears in the case of the Shrine of Ali's Footprint in Buzovna and the tomb of a descendant of the Imam in Nardaran.

The tendency for the multiplication of similar sanctuaries is evident in Buzovna and Zığ, where there are sites related to the cult of the Prophet Ali's Footprint. These sanctuaries are situated relatively close to each other and are in competition.

The imitation tendency is also noticeable in the concept of the graves of the descendants of the Imams. There are numerous similar venerated tombs of the descendants of the prophets in Persia. In Azerbaijan, where the Shia tradition predominates, such tombs create a community of similar cult practices and customs.

The theme of familial connections is evident in three sites related to the cult of Mir Mövsüm Ağa and his brother's grandson. As with many other places of worship, the family ties of those regarded as having lived in sanctity play a significant role in these cases as well.

The tendency to accumulate the graves of individuals regarded as having lived in sanctity, those who were meritorious, respected, and venerated, is evident in the example of the sanctuary in Mərdəkan. At the site where, according to tradition, Xədicə, the daughter of the fifth Imam, is believed to be buried, one also finds the tomb of Həsən – *Pir Həsən*, as well as the graves of Axund Mirzə Əbu Turab Axundzadə, Zeynalabdin Tağıyev, and his daughter Sara. During pilgrimages to this location, visitors pray at all these graves and tombs.

The existing places of worship include both ancient, authentic structures and modern reconstructions or buildings currently undergoing renovation. The preserved ancient buildings typically feature a dome. It is worth noting that reconstructions and new buildings reference the traditional religious architecture of this region. The use of white or cream stone blocks, along with ceramic cladding decorated with geometric and floral motifs in dominant colours such as blue, navy blue, yellow, and white, is common. There are no modern architectural elements, with the exception of a modest building within the sanctuary in Buzovna. Door and window openings are typically fashioned in the so-called "donkey-back" shape. The stone structure above the grave of Axund Mirzə Əbu Turab Axundzadə in Mərdəkan is adorned with unique decorations inspired by Indian architecture. New or renovated buildings are characterised by a commitment to harmonious design that respects traditions familiar to the faithful. The emphasis is more on respect for the past than on fascination with the present.

The arrangements of most of the described sites are devoid of trees, greenery, flowers, water features, and fountains. Notable exceptions include the sanctuary in Mərdəkan, renovated in the early 21st century, the Baku residence of Mir Mövsüm Ağa, and the sanctuary in Buzovna. In Mərdəkan, there are ponds with a fountain, lawns, and trees,

including poplars and mulberries. Climbing rose bushes can be found in front of Mir Mövsüm Ağa's house, while within the complex in Buzovna, a few olive trees are present.

The cults, rituals, and beliefs associated with the described sanctuaries are neither prohibited nor regulated by any institution. Local administrative or spiritual authorities do not intervene, even in controversial practices such as *çildaq* and others. Belief in the authenticity and effectiveness of religious practices at these sanctuaries does not stem from religious authorities' teachings but rather from individual, familial, or societal beliefs passed down through generations.

Admission to all the *pirs* and *ziyaratgahs* is free and open to everyone. Visitors and pilgrims are not questioned about their faith or beliefs.

The movement to renew religious life, the resumption of free practices, and the reconstruction of destroyed or entirely demolished sanctuaries in the years following the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan indicates a growing trend in the number of places of worship and pilgrimage in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula. It is possible that new sites will emerge if a new individual is recognised as having lived in sanctity. Moreover, the rediscovery of the tomb of the Imam's daughter in Nardaran, after several centuries of obscurity, occurred following a dream vision experienced by a local resident. The existence and location of the grave were apparently revealed to him in a dream. This form of revelation does not require any special qualifications of the faithful and is accessible to all. The case of the Virgin Mary statue at the Roman Catholic church demonstrates that the faithful can treat various objects, including non-Muslim ones, as places of worship and pilgrimage. This statue currently represents the newest *pir* in the region.

The Absheron Peninsula and the city of Baku are home to several Shia cult and pilgrimage centres. They are not characterised by strict orthodoxy but rather by a diversity of religious and quasi-religious practices. While these sites are not world-renowned centres, they are consistently visited by believers and remain places of active worship.

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