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REFLECTIONS OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE HISTORY OF GANJA CITY (9TH–17TH CENTURIES) IN HISTORICAL SOURCES

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Abstract. Ganja, considered one of the most ancient cities of Azerbaijan with a history of nearly three millennia, has repeatedly been destroyed and rebuilt as a result of earthquakes and devastations caused by foreign invaders. On several occasions, the city was even relocated and re-established. Despite these displacements, Ganja has mainly remained situated in the western region of Azerbaijan, in a picturesque area – the Ganja–Gazakh plain that connects the northwestern foothills of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains with the vast Kura–Araz lowland.

Archaeological research plays a crucial role in the study of Ganja's history. Taking into account that a considerable portion of the written records about the ancient history of our country in different languages does not accurately reflect historical reality, cultural monuments and archaeological materials undoubtedly serve as more reliable historical sources.

Located on the Great Caravan Route, Ganja was not only a center of international trade but also a hub of highly developed craftsmanship and architecture. According to written sources, in this period the city contained many monumental structures, including the ruler's palace, mosques, madrasas, markets, bathhouses, caravanserais, as well as well-planned residential quarters and numerous gardens. The remains of Old Ganja and the archaeological excavations conducted in its territory confirm the authenticity of these accounts to a significant extent.

Key words: “Capital of Arran,” archaeological research, Mongol invasions, culture, economy, craftsmanship, trade.

Introduction. Having withstood the trials of centuries, the city of Ganja has long been one of the renowned centers of science and culture of the East, both economically and culturally. Although the majority of source materials on the foundation of the city are contradictory, archaeological findings suggest that the emergence of Ganja as a settlement dates back at least to the middle of the first millennium BC. In 859–860, during the governorship of Muhammad ibn Khalid over Azerbaijan and Arran, the city was enclosed with fortress walls, and in the mid-10th century, following the decline of Barda, Ganja rose to prominence as an administrative center.

The 11th–12th centuries are characterized as the renaissance period of Ganja. As one of the cultural centers of Azerbaijan, Ganja contributed to the treasury of world literature such eminent figures as Abul-Ula Ganjavi, Nizami Ganjavi, Mahsati Ganjavi, Qivami Mutarrizi, and others.

Archaeological investigations reveal that while craftsmanship already occupied a certain place in the economic life of Ganja in the 10th century, by the 12th–13th centuries it had reached a stage of significant development.

During the 11th–13th centuries, towers, mausoleums, fortress walls, mosques and madrasas, caravanserais, and other structures were erected in the city. These constructions attest to the presence of professional architects, builders, and other specialists in Ganja.

In the period of the Mongol invasions, the tall fortress walls of Ganja played an important role in its defense. While the Mongols failed to capture the city during their first assault, in their second attempt they employed more advanced weaponry of the time.

Although weakened during the Mongol incursions, Ganja regained its former significance in the Safavid era.

Archaeological excavations within the territory of Ganja provide evidence of an intensive life in the region during the early Middle Ages. Archaeological finds are also of great importance in studying the information pertaining to the medieval period.

Discussion. Historical sources play a significant role in the study of the history of Ganja, one of the ancient cities of Azerbaijan. There exist diverse historical considerations regarding the formation of Ganja as a city. Historians have put forward differing views concerning its foundation. Based on historical sources, it can be stated that Ganja initially existed as an ancient settlement and gradually developed into a city. The earliest written reference to the foundation of Ganja appears in the works of the 15th-century Iranian historian Mirkhwand. According to him, the establishment of the city was associated with the Sasanian ruler Kavad I. In his work *Rawżat al-Şafā*, Mirkhwand states that Ganja was founded by Kavad I (489–531). The source claims that Kavad ordered the construction of magnificent buildings and numerous cities, among which Ganja is mentioned.

However, Mirkhwand's account does not correspond with other historical sources. It seems that the narrative he presents reflects the popular memory of the Ganja of Southern Azerbaijan preserved in folk tradition. The 14th-century historian Hamdallah Qazvini wrote that Ganja was an Islamic city founded in the year 39 of the Hijri calendar (659–660 CE). A 16th-century source, *Darbandnamah*, records that the repeated incursions of the Khazars into Azerbaijan (late 7th–early 8th centuries) also reached Ganja. According to this source, neither Shirvan nor Ganja was adequately fortified to resist enemy attacks (Altman, 1991, p. 8). Although the author of *Darbandnamah* drew upon many sources, the exact identity of these remains unclear.

Academician V. V. Bartold suggested that in Hamdallah Qazvini's record the date "39" might have been a scribal error for "239," which corresponds to 853/854 CE. The orientalist Minorsky, academician Bartold, and Professor M. Sharifli all accept 859–860 as the foundation date of Ganja. In M. M. Altman's book *A Historical Sketch of the City of Ganja*, the emergence of the city, its earliest references, and its history up to the 17th century are briefly presented.

Archaeological research holds considerable importance in the study of Ganja's history. From the early 19th century onward, Russian and other foreign archaeologists showed interest in its exploration. However, their investigations were unsystematic and lacked scientific rigor. Systematic research on the city began only in the 1920s. The first systematic excavations in Ganja were conducted under the direction of archaeologist I. M. Jafarzadeh between 1928 and 1941, in connection with preparations for the 800th anniversary of Nizami Ganjavi's birth (Mammadov, 2014, p. 5).

The date of Ganja's foundation is given differently in various sources, and many contradict one another. The principal reason for the diversity of opinions is that the city was repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt as a result of foreign invasions, internal conflicts, and earthquakes. According to I. M. Jafarzadeh, Ganja developed from an ancient settlement with an already advanced culture. Y. A. Hagermeister believed that Ganja was older than both Barda and Beylagan.

The medieval fortifications of Ganja were constructed of alternating rows of mudbrick, raw brick, river stone, and baked brick. Excavations revealed that the city was surrounded by three concentric defensive walls (Dzhafarzade, 1949, pp. 35–39). Bartold emphasized that after the destruction of Barda, Ganja rose in power and became the center of Arran (Zahidov, 1994, pp. 58–59).

In the archaeological study of Ganja's history, the excavations carried out by I. H. Narimanov along the Ganja River and by H. Kasamanli on monuments situated along the Ganja–Dashkasan road are also of great significance (Narimanov, 1958). From the 10th century, when Barda lost its status as capital, Ganja became increasingly important in the socio-economic and cultural life of the country. Trade and the arts became vital elements of urban life, with favorable conditions for the flourishing of artistic activity.

In the 9th–10th centuries, during the weakening of the Arab Caliphate, several feudal states emerged in Azerbaijan, including those of the Shirvanshahs, Sajids, Salarids, Shaddadids, and Rawadids. By the mid-10th century, Ganja was under the rule of the Salarids. In 971, the Shaddadid state was founded with Ganja as its capital. Exploiting the decline of the Salarids, the Shaddadids captured Barda, transferring its economic, political, and commercial primacy to Ganja.

During the reign of Fadl I (895–1030), Ganja experienced one of its most powerful periods. Under the Shaddadids, fortresses, palaces, bridges, and caravanserais were constructed, and coin minting began in the city. In 1063, strong defensive walls were built around Ganja, and according to medieval writers, the city doubled in size. The surviving remnants of Old Ganja's fortress appear to date from these reconstruction works. The fortifications reflect the city's strategic importance, as situated in a wide intermountain plain, its defense system was always carefully reinforced (Qiyasi, 1991, pp. 17–18).

In the mid-11th century, faced with incessant Seljuk attacks, the Shaddadid ruler Fadl III, realizing the insufficiency of resistance, ultimately surrendered, later regaining power when circumstances permitted. In 1086, the Seljuk ruler Malik-Shah (1072–1092) dispatched his commander Bugha to Ganja. Despite strong local resistance, the Seljuks managed to capture the city, taking ruler Fadl III prisoner, thereby bringing to an end the century-long Shaddadid dynasty (Mövqe Newspaper, 2011, p. 10).

Following the fall of the Shaddadids, the Seljuks governed Arran from Beylagan, although control of Mughan, Arran, and Shirvan remained with the Yaqutids. Nevertheless, in 1086/87 Ganja was placed directly under the authority of the Seljuk sultan. Sultan Barkiyaruq, wary of the power of his uncle Ismail, entrusted the territories formerly belonging to the Shaddadids to his brother Muhammad Tapar (Najaf, 2024, pp. 181–182). From Malik-Shah's reign onwards, Azerbaijan was declared the “appanage” and heir territory of Seljuk princes destined to become great sultans. Muhammad Tapar and his sons Tughrul and Masud successively ruled in Azerbaijan, with Ganja as their center (Najaf, 2010, p. 9).

In this period, Azerbaijan developed in close connection with the flourishing culture of the Islamic world, often referred to as the “Muslim civilization.” From the 11th century until the early 13th century, Ganja developed into one of the most important cities of the Near East. During the Seljuk era, alongside socio-political interactions, religious and cultural ties within the Islamic world intensified. The number of scholars visiting Ganja in the 11th century also increased. Some Arab authors who visited the city provided information about its mosques, libraries, educational institutions, hadith gatherings, and scholarly debates with local intellectuals (Aliyeva, 2015, p. 31).

Ganja also attracted the attention of Yaqut al-Hamawi, one of the most prominent geographers in Islamic cultural history. He emphasized that many renowned scholars hailed from the city. His works are of great value for understanding the cultural life of the period, as they provide unique information about Azerbaijani cities on the eve of the Mongol invasions, as well as about prominent scholars and cultural figures of the 9th–13th centuries not mentioned in other sources, and about the intellectual and cultural connections across different centers of the Islamic world (Aliyeva, 2020, p. 104).

In the first half of the 12th century, during the city's flourishing, Ganja suffered the destructive impact of a devastating earthquake with a magnitude estimated at 11 on the intensity scale. The 13th-century historian Kirakos Gandzaketsi writes that thick fog and mist covered the mountains and plains, and as a result of the terrible earthquake, Ganja, then the capital city, collapsed. The number of men, women, and children who perished could not be counted (Bunyadov, 1960, p. 182).

At the beginning of the 13th century, historians and geographers praised Ganja as a wealthy, strongly fortified, and beautiful city, referring to it as the “capital of Arran” and describing it as a populous and flourishing center. Hamdallah Qazvini, citing a quatrain, noted that among the prominent cities of the era, “in Arran, the treasury is Ganja; in Iraq, Isfahan; in Khorasan, Merv and Tus; and in Rum, Aksaray.” This comparison suggests that the architecture of Ganja could be measured against that of the Seljuk capital cities named in the verse.

The Strategic Importance and Historical Development of Ganja

The location of Eastern Ganjabasar around the city of Ganja, as well as the passage of trade and caravan routes that both entered and traversed the city during the medieval period, significantly enhanced its importance. During attacks on Ganja, invading armies often stationed themselves in this area. For the purpose of withstanding such assaults, protecting the city, and ensuring the safety of the surrounding agrarian population, defensive fortifications were constructed in Eastern Ganjabasar (Mammadov, 1993, pp. 6–7).

It should be particularly emphasized that by the late 12th and early 13th centuries, Ganja had become a city with formidable fortifications. Zakariya al-Qazvini specifically notes Ganja's position on the frontier of the Muslim world, its strong fortifications, and the bravery of its inhabitants. For this reason, the Mongols were unable to capture Ganja during their first incursion into Azerbaijan in 1221 (Azadlıq newspaper, 2011, p. 13).

In 1225, Jalal al-Din, the son of Khwarazmshah Muhammad, seized Ganja and turned it into his residence. In 1231, however, a rebellion broke out in Ganja against Jalal al-Din's supporters, led by a certain Bandar. The uprising was brutally suppressed. Jalal al-Din Mangburnu, who had previously taken over all the territories of the Eldiguzids, continued his activities until 1231. However, he was unable to mount an effective resistance against the second Mongol invasion, and in August of 1231, while in Anatolia, he was killed by a nomad.

It is well established that the second Mongol campaign into Azerbaijan took place in 1231. The inhabitants of Ganja resisted for a long time, and the Mongols were only able to capture the city in 1235 after much difficulty. During this assault, Ganja suffered great destruction. In fact, following the Mongol conquest of Azerbaijan, flourishing centers of trade and craftsmanship such as Beylagan, Ganja, Shamakhi, Ardabil, and Khoy were left in ruins.

Only four years after this devastating assault, in 1235, Ganja was struck by another natural disaster – an earthquake. It was only after this event that the Mongol governor permitted the reconstruction of the city. However, this rebuilding was not the result of any benevolence on the part of the conquerors, but rather due to the military, political, and economic importance of Ganja, which necessitated its restoration after the earthquake.

During the Ottoman–Safavid wars of 1578–1590 (particularly 1585–1588), Ganja once again became one of the principal arenas of conflict. The city suffered considerable destruction as a result of attacks by Ottoman and Crimean Tatar forces. Consequently, one of the first measures undertaken by Ferhad Pasha, after seizing control of the city, was to strengthen its defenses. At this point, the urgent need to construct a powerful fortress became apparent. This task was accomplished by the Ottoman commander Ferhad Pasha in 1588.

Examining the available materials on the construction of the Ganja fortress, it may be stated that the foundation of the present-day city of Ganja was laid with the building of this fortress by Ferhad Pasha. Nevertheless, its development into a fully formed urban center is associated with the reign of Shah Abbas I.

Information regarding the city following its relocation to its present site remains approximate. The traveler Evliya Çelebi, who visited Ganja in 1647, reported that the city contained 6,000 houses. Based on an average of seven persons per household, A.V. Salamzade estimated the population at 40,000, which was not insignificant for that time (Ahmadov, 1998, p. 59). Thus, even after its relocation by Shah Abbas, Ganja remained an important settlement with a considerable population.

Throughout the periods of the Ilkhanids (13th–14th centuries), the invasions of Timur (1386–1400), and the rule of the Aq Qoyunlu, Qara Qoyunlu (15th century), and Safavid (16th–18th centuries) states, Ganja and its surrounding territories were repeatedly subjected to attacks by both internal feudal lords and foreign invaders.

Economic and Craft Production in Ganja

Written sources and archaeological excavations provide valuable insights into the economic life of early medieval Ganja. Like other contemporary cities, Ganja's economy was multifaceted. In addition to craftsmanship and trade – characteristic features of urban life – the population also engaged in various branches of agriculture.

Excavations in Ganja and its environs have uncovered agricultural tools, storage pits and jars for grain, as well as grinding stones and querns, which are analogous to finds from nearby areas such as Mingachevir and Barda. The natural and geographical conditions of Ganja and its surroundings – abundant rivers and fertile soils – created favorable circumstances for the development of agriculture since ancient times.

Historical accounts and archaeological discoveries also indicate that wool production expanded in Ganja and its environs during antiquity and the early medieval period.

In the 11th–early 13th centuries, pottery-making in Ganja reached a new stage of development. The abundance of similar-shaped vessels, together with wasters and slag, provides evidence for the existence of pottery kilns in the area.

The proximity of Ganja to metal deposits fostered the development of metalworking crafts.

The principal centers of the Arran school of architecture included Barda, Ganja, Shamkir, Beylagan, and Dabil. According to scholars, the origins of this architectural school appeared in Barda in the 9th century, developed in Ganja, Shamkir, Dabil, and Beylagan in the 10th–11th centuries, flourished in the 12th century, and lost its former significance after the Mongol invasion.

The Arran ceramic school – especially its Ganja and Shamkir branches – was characterized by red-polished, burnished jars decorated with ornamental bands applied by stamping. Complete examples of these vessels have been unearthed in Ganja.

Medieval craftsmen of Ganja and its surroundings often inscribed their names and professions on cultural artifacts. One such example is the celebrated “Gate of Ganja,” bearing the inscription of the blacksmith Ibrahim.

With the development of trade in Azerbaijan, textile production also expanded significantly. The Arab authors al-Muqaddasi and al-Mas‘udi, writing in the 10th century, note that Azerbaijani craftsmen produced wool, cotton, and silk fabrics and garments for sale. Woolen clothing from Ganja, the famed cloaks (chukhas) of Nakhchivan, the fine satin of Tabriz, men’s outer garments, and the delicate linen textiles of Khoy were especially renowned during this period.

In the 11th–12th centuries, under Seljuk rule, textile production increased markedly in Azerbaijani cities, with Ganja’s silk goods gaining particular fame. The textile patterns of this period were distinguished from earlier examples by their lighter, less rigid ornamentation. Unlike earlier times, craftsmen produced more delicate fabrics, decorating them with multicolored threads rather than a single one (Əfəndiyev, 1960, p. 11).

During the 11th–13th centuries, crafts such as woodworking, felt-making, dyeing, carpet weaving, and bone-carving also flourished in Ganja and its environs.

The glazed ceramics of Ganjabasar from the 9th–10th centuries reveal stylistic similarities in form, while displaying considerable variety in coloration and decorative motifs. By the early 11th–13th centuries, notable advances were made in stamped ornamentation used in glazed ware. In the 12th–13th centuries, vessels with incised designs overlaid with glaze predominated. In producing such ceramics, artisans attempted to harmonize colored and graphic designs.

Although extensive excavations have been conducted primarily in urban ruins (Gabala, Ganja, Beylagan, Shamakhi, Shabran, Kharaba-Gilan, Baku, Barda, Derbent, etc.), relatively few agricultural tools and implements have been discovered. Nevertheless, even these limited finds provide valuable evidence for studying the city’s connections with its rural hinterland.

Archaeological research has confirmed that irrigation canals drawn from the Ganjachay River, which survived until recent times, were widely used in the medieval period to irrigate suburban farms, fields, orchards, and gardens (Jafarzadeh).

Architecture and Cultural Monuments

The architecture of medieval Azerbaijani cities served diverse purposes. The artisans of the time, endowed with creative imagination and extensive construction experience, achieved harmony and refinement in ornamental design and architectural elements.

The memorial monuments of Ganja and its surroundings consist mainly of mausoleums, bridges, and similar structures. All are built in the Arran architectural style, known in the archaeological literature as the “Ganja bond,” consisting of rubble stone walls framed with baked brick. Notable examples include: the 11th-century mausoleum in the village of Ahmadli (Dashkasan district); the 16th-century mausoleum in the village of Qarasaqqal (Samukh district); the 19th-century mausoleums in Ashaghi Oksuzlu (Tovuz district); the 12th-century mosque-madrassa; the Xudu Baba mausoleum in Safikurd (Goranboy district); the Haji Babis and Tekgoz bridges (12th–13th centuries) near Buzlug and Todan villages; the 12th-century Gulustan fortress; the early medieval Kurekchay fortress; and bridges over the Shamkirchay dating to the 12th and 18th centuries (Mammadov, 2008, pp. 133–134).

A number of the memorial monuments in Ganja and its vicinity are mausoleums. These commemorative structures served as burial sites for notable figures of the time – scholars, travelers, poets, and others (Mammadov, 1992, p. 108).

Overall, the architecture of Ganja has always stood out. Despite destructive earthquakes and invasions, ancient Ganja preserved its beauty and distinctive architectural style. The surviving monuments testify to the skill of Ganja’s master builders. The incomplete preservation of these monuments to the present day is attributable not only to natural disasters but also to invasions and warfare.

Most of the mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, and bathhouses of Ganja were constructed during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629).

Cultural Development

The emergence of independent states in Azerbaijan created favorable conditions for the development of culture. During the 9th–12th centuries, science and culture flourished at a remarkably high level throughout the Muslim East. In the 12th century, Abul Ula Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani, Izzaddin Shirvani, Falaki Shirvani, Mujiraddin Beylagani, Nizami Ganjavi, and others introduced new styles and forms of expression into Azerbaijani literature, thereby laying the foundation for the Azerbaijani literary school that arose in Ganja and Shirvan.

Historical sources attest that the great thinker and poet Nizami Ganjavi never left his native city of Ganja. The homeland he cherished and glorified with particular affection – Ganja – was, in the medieval period, one of the most prosperous and renowned cities in the world, distinguished for its progress in science and technology, its economy and culture, and the quality of life of its inhabitants. One of the testimonies to the antiquity of Eastern Ganjabasar is the fact that the village of Hamdunya, gifted to Nizami Ganjavi by Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan and subsequently granted to him by his brother Qizil Arslan in fulfillment of that bequest, was located in this very region. The Mausoleum of Nizami Ganjavi stands 7 kilometers east of present-day Ganja, in the area known as “Shikh duzu,” on the Ganja–Baku highway. For centuries, the poet’s grave has borne witness to numerous violent events that unfolded in its vicinity. In 1231, near this cemetery, in the southwestern sector, Bendar – who led the uprising against the tyranny of Jalal al-Din – fought heroically in a bloody battle and ascended to the rank of martyrdom. The Arab traveler and geographer Ibn Haykal wrote of Ganja: “Ganja is a large, wealthy city with a considerable population. Its people live densely, and they are generous, of mild disposition, benevolent, courteous, and inclined to welcome foreigners and scholars.” (Nizamisoy, 2013, p. 12) A significant number of neighborhood names (mahallas) from the medieval period have been recorded within the territory of Ganja. Some neighborhoods derived their names from the places of origin of their inhabitants – for example, Qazakhlar Mahalla, Jirdakhanlar (from Tovuz district), Qizilhajili Mahalla (from Qazakh), and others. Other neighborhoods were named in relation to crafts and professions – for instance, Ozanlar Mahalla, Kharratlar Mahalla, and Attarlar

Mahalla. Each neighborhood had its own mosque, which bore the name of the corresponding mahalla (Mammadov, 2008, p. 156).

Conclusion. In the modern period, there is a pressing need to study the cultural heritage of the past and to investigate more thoroughly the medieval cities of Azerbaijan. Archaeological evidence shows that the territory of ancient Ganja was continuously inhabited from early times until the first half of the 17th century. Following this period – during the reign of Shah Abbas I – the population of Ganja resettled in the location of the new city of Ganja.

Present-day Ganja was founded in the early 17th century, based on the architectural plan of the renowned architect Bahaddin Muhammad. Excavations conducted in the closing decades of the last century have unearthed a considerable number of archaeological materials. Among the surface finds collected from Ganja and its surrounding areas are remains of monuments representing different historical periods.

The archaeological materials uncovered from the ruins of the city provide broad opportunities for a comprehensive study of the history of Ganja, one of the most celebrated cities of the Near and Middle East. Findings from archaeological research conducted in Ganja and its environs allow us to conclude that, owing to its strategic location at the intersection of trade and internal routes of Azerbaijan, this region played a crucial role in the economic, political, and cultural life of the Azerbaijani people during the medieval period.

Today, Ganja – currently the second industrial and cultural center of the Republic after Baku, and historically one of the most prominent cities of the Caucasus and the Near East – has also gained worldwide fame as the homeland of the great Nizami, whose masterpieces adorn the treasury of world literature.

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