

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/2592-8813-2026-2-49>

THE HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF AZERBAIJAN'S ARAZ RIVERSIDE MONUMENTS

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Abstract. Archaeological investigations conducted in the ancient settlements of Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Eastern Zangezur have revealed numerous examples of material culture belonging to the Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, Antique, and Medieval periods. In the Islamic-period monuments of Azerbaijan, formed under the influence of shared material cultures during the 11th–12th centuries, common characteristics of the Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Tabriz architectural styles, influenced by Arran architecture and the Central Asian architectural school, have been observed in the remains of religious buildings. Ceramic samples and architectural remains uncovered during archaeological excavations have provided a clear understanding of the culture and daily life of the population living along the Araz River. Archaeological studies emphasize the importance of Nakhchivan, located at the intersection of caravan routes that became one of the main economic centers of trade with the Near and Middle East, as well as the “Khudafarin” bridges built over the Araz River. Field research and archaeological excavations carried out in the 1960s–1970s proved the strategic and commercial significance of the “Khudafarin” bridges and the surrounding areas of Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur, including settlements, ancient cities, fortresses, watchtowers, and urban-type settlements belonging to the Bronze, Early Iron, Antique, and Medieval periods.

Key words: archaeology, Nakhchivan, Araz River, medieval period, Khudafarin Bridge, fortress, Zangilan.

Introduction. One of the pressing issues in the history and archaeology of Azerbaijan is the study of the transitional stage from ancient cities to medieval urban centers. The main stage of archaeological research on medieval cities began in the early twentieth century. In 1923, the Archaeological Committee for the Study of Azerbaijan was established. The Committee’s activities included the registration, protection, and scientific investigation of historical monuments. As a scientific research institution, the Society for the Study and Investigation of Azerbaijan conducted archaeological excavations and field surveys (Archaeology of Azerbaijan, 2008, Vol. VI).

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the growing interest of Russian and Western European scholars in Azerbaijan led to reconnaissance-type investigations at several archaeological sites. In particular, exploratory research in the monuments of Nakhchivan was carried out by N.V. Khanikov in 1852 at the ancient urban ruins of Kharaba-Gilan and several epigraphic monuments in the region. He examined the city ruins and provided information about a stone inscription dated to the Hijri year 712. In 1879, I.S. Polyakov also conducted archaeological investigations in Nakhchivan (Dostiyev T.M., 2016, pp. 12–13).

Beginning from the early twentieth century, with the establishment of local scientific societies and committees and the involvement of Azerbaijani archaeologists in field research, settlements, burial monuments, and religious structures belonging to various periods from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Middle Ages were discovered and investigated. The archaeological materials obtained created a clear picture of the people’s daily life and cultural development. Among the researchers who made invaluable contributions to the study of the monuments of Nakhchivan and the Araz River basin were Ə. Ələkbərov, O.H. Həbibullayev, V.H. Əliyev, V.H. Baxşəliyev, A.Q. Seyidov, B.İ. İbrahimli, Ə.İ. Novruzlu, and others (Archaeology of Azerbaijan, 2008, Vol. VI).

In the middle and second half of the twentieth century, special attention was paid to the archaeological and theoretical study of settlements located in the Araz riverside plains and around the Khudafarin bridges built across the Araz River. In particular, R.B. Göyüşov, Q.M. Ahmadov, A.B. Nuriyev, and Ə.R. Salamzade conducted important research, while in the second decade of the twenty-first century A.M. Mammadov, T.M. Dostiyev, and others continued archaeological excavations and field investigations in these territories.

Discussion. The Araz riverside plains extend along the Araz River and cover the territories of the Sadarak, Sharur, Babek, Julfa, and Ordubad districts of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. In connection with the construction of hydroelectric power stations on the Araz River, archaeological excavations were carried out during the late 1960s and 1970s in medieval urban settlements, including Kharabashahar, Astabad, and Sharifan. These studies played a significant role in the investigation of Azerbaijani cities and urban culture of the thirteenth–seventeenth centuries.

In order to investigate archaeological monuments threatened by flooding, a complex expedition consisting of three groups was established in 1968. The expedition studied the sites of Kharabashahar, Astabad, Bulgan, Garachug, Gizilburun, Garakhanbayli, Boyukduz, and Shahtakhti, which were at risk of remaining under water. As a result of research conducted on the architectural remains near the village of Garachug, located 8 km south of Nakhchivan, residential houses and rich evidence related to the economic life and culture of the late medieval period (14th–17th centuries) were discovered.

The expedition also carried out investigations at the settlement of II Kultapa, where fortress wall foundations, architectural remains, plain and painted ceramics, and bone tools belonging to the cultural layer of the early second–first millennia BCE were uncovered (Nakhchivan Encyclopedia, 2022, pp. 27–28).

Archaeological Research Conducted in the 1960s–1970s

Kharaba-Gilan is located in the territory of Aza village of the Ordubad district, on the bank of the Gilan River. Possessing defensive fortifications and a well-developed water supply system, this settlement was known in the Middle Ages as Kiran and among the local population as Kharaba-Gilan. Situated between Tabriz and Beylagan, Kharaba-Gilan consisted of three parts: the citadel (narinqala), shahristan, and rabat. In 1975, archaeological excavations were carried out at the ancient city site of Kharaba-Gilan with the joint participation of Q.M. Aslanov and B.I. Ibrahimli. Founded during the Antique period in the 3rd–4th centuries, the city later became one of Azerbaijan's major centers of trade and craftsmanship during the Middle Ages. Numerous metal objects dating to this period were discovered there.

Reflecting the characteristic features of the Nakhchivan architectural school, archaeological excavations conducted under the leadership of B.I. Ibrahimli in the shahristan area of Kharaba-Gilan revealed residential houses, large public buildings such as caravanserais and bathhouses, a mill site, and religious structures including the remains of mosques and mausoleums. The residential buildings of Kiran were constructed of mud brick on stone foundations. Imported ceramic wares, ornamented faience vessels, and numerous foreign coins discovered during the excavations testify not only to the development of craftsmanship and trade but also to the extensive international trade relations of the medieval city of Kiran (Dostiyev T.M., 2016, pp. 21, 36–37).

In 1959, during archaeological excavations at Kultapa, O.H. Habibullayev discovered the remains of a Chalcolithic settlement in Azerbaijan and throughout the South Caucasus. These circular structures, built of mud brick and adobe, are considered among the oldest houses discovered in the territory of Azerbaijan (Habibullayev O.H., 1959). In 1969, the remains of a large Bronze Age settlement were discovered at Gizil Vang. The initial investigation of the II Kultapa monument is also associated with the name of O. Habibullayev.

In the 1970s, due to the construction of the Khudafarin reservoir, expeditions were organized in order to prevent the flooding of monuments located in the surrounding territories. The “Khudafarin

Expedition” aimed to determine the role of the Khudafarin bridges in the medieval economy of Azerbaijan. For this purpose, sections of two major ancient caravan trade routes coming from the south and passing through Ardabil, Barda, Nakhchivan, and Hunan were traced, and relevant materials were collected. Research conducted in the territories along the Araz and Hekeri (Akari) rivers within the modern Jabrayil and Zangilan districts proved that these regions historically possessed fertile lands and favorable natural-geographical conditions.

From the perspective of studying the culture of artificial irrigation farming, the famous Gavur Arkh canal, drawn from the Araz River during the Middle Ages, played a significant role in the economic development of the Mil plain (Goyushov R.B., Nuriyev A.B., 1974, p. 2). Medieval historians and travelers also referred to the “eleven-span” and “fifteen-span” Khudafarin bridges in their accounts.

Comprehensive research on the Khudafarin bridges became possible in 1974, when the monument was measured and accurate architectural drawings were prepared (Salamzade Ə.R., 1979, pp. 21–22). Built approximately 800 meters apart at the narrowest point of the Araz River, these bridges represent complex engineering structures of their time. One of the bridges, constructed of white stone, consists of eleven spans. The bridge, which is 12 meters high and 130 meters long, was equipped with specially designed wave-breaking structures of various sizes adapted to the force of the river current.

The Khudafarin bridges were constructed not only on caravan and trade routes but also in a strategically advantageous military location. These bridges were situated neither directly on the Ardabil–Beylagan route nor on the Tabriz–Julfa route; rather, they were built at a crossing point bordered by the mountainous Garadagh region in the south and barren desert areas in the north, which were unfavorable for ordinary travel routes (Goyushov R.B., 1993, p. 69). After the Arab conquest of Azerbaijan, a route connecting Tabriz, Beylagan, Barda, and Tbilisi through the Garachay valley emerged, and bridges were constructed along this route (Goyushov R.B., 1993, pp. 69–70).

The second stone bridge, located further south along the lower course of the river, is 200 meters long, 4.5 meters wide, and consists of fifteen spans. Unlike the first bridge, it was constructed of baked bricks. This architectural monument dates to the thirteenth century, as confirmed by its construction techniques, brick dimensions, and foundation materials. After crossing the Khudafarin bridge toward the north, investigations along the route leading toward Ordubad revealed an Early Medieval settlement, a fortress, and an ancient city site extending as far as the modern Hekeri River. Among the local population, this fortress is known as “Tri.” It was built on a high hill at the confluence of the Hekeri and Araz rivers (Goyushov R.B., 1993, pp. 69–70).

Researcher Q.M. Ahmadov notes that, in addition to its economic significance in the history of Azerbaijan, the Araz River also played an important role as a natural landmark for identifying the ruins of several ancient cities whose exact locations remain unknown, as well as for clarifying the directions of ancient trade routes passing through them. In order to maintain economic and cultural ties with the north, the population of Tabriz had to travel either through Khoy or Ardabil to cross the Araz River. Since the Khudafarin bridge was geographically closer to Tabriz, this suggests that the road coming from Ardabil passed through Khudafarin rather than Barjand, where it divided into two directions: eastward toward Beylagan and Barda, and westward toward Ordubad and Nakhchivan (Ahmadov Q.M., Ahmadov P.C., 1978, p. 4).

While describing the campaigns of the Arab commander Salman ibn Rabia during the Arab Caliphate period, when he traveled from Nakhchivan through the Bichenek pass into Arran, al-Baladhuri also mentioned Tri among the captured territories (Baladzori A., trans. from Arabic by N.K. Juze, 1927, p. 12). According to the scientific literature, such fortresses, usually built on high hills or rocky elevations due to the terrain, functioned both as shelters for the population and as observation posts. Although the “Khudafarin” archaeological expedition mainly focused on the investigation of medieval urban ruins, it also provided valuable information about surrounding monuments. The fortress itself is dated to the ninth century (Ahmadov Q.M., Ahmadov P.C., 1978, pp. 5–6).

The fortress was constructed from fragments of white limestone, river stones, and lime mortar. Wooden beams made from apjan wood were widely used in the construction process. The preserved section of the fortress wall reaches a height of 3 meters, while the wall itself is also 3 meters thick. During construction, wooden beams were placed at intervals of approximately one meter. The spaces between the beams measure between 5 and 19 cm, and the beams were laid across the width of the wall. Inside the fortress, trench-like pits measuring 3×5 meters were identified. It is also noted that the fortress possessed an underground passage on the side facing the Okhchu River (Ahmadov Q.M., Ahmadov P.C., 1978, pp. 6–7).

The Hajalli tower is located on the slope of a mountain near the village. The foundation and walls of the tower were built from river stones, rock fragments, and lime mortar. The structure itself was constructed of baked bricks measuring $23 \times 23 \times 8$ cm. The entrance is located on the eastern side and has an arched form. The inner diameter of the tower measures 3.86×3.65 meters, while the wall thickness is 80 cm. At a height of 80 cm above the floor level, five openings measuring 20×25 cm were identified in the walls. A second row of larger openings, measuring 30×50 cm, is located closer together. One of these openings faces downstream toward Khudafarin on the Araz River, another faces upstream toward the Tri fortress, and the third overlooks a small valley descending from the mountains. These openings (loopholes or embrasures) in the fortress walls functioned as observation points. Through them, it was possible to monitor moving trade caravans and military detachments and obtain information about their movements. The impregnability of the fortress made it a reliable shelter for the local population. Nearby are also the cemeteries of Gumluakh, Hajalli, and Mammadbeyli (Ahmadov Q.M., Ahmadov P.C., 1978, p. 7).

On the right bank of the Araz River, within the territory of present-day Iran, the river flows along the base of steep rocky mountains. Therefore, transportation moving either upstream or downstream along the river was obliged to cross to the left bank in order to continue its route. The valleys of the Araz and Okhchu rivers provided favorable conditions for agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, gardening, and hunting. Information is also provided about the Hajalli tower, the Mammadbeyli mausoleum, and the Sharifan settlement located near the area where the Akara (Hekeri) River flows into the Araz River (Goyushov R.B., Nuriyev A.B., 1974, p. 5).

During the 1970s, archaeological excavations and reconnaissance investigations at the Sharifan settlement and surrounding territories were entrusted to the “Khudafarin Archaeological Expedition,” jointly directed by R.B. Goyushov and A.B. Nuriyev in 1974 (Goyushov R.B., Nuriyev A.B., 1974). In 1978, Q.M. Ahmadov continued the excavation works.

Between 1978 and 1979, excavations were conducted in two areas of the city of Sharifan, while test excavations were carried out in six additional locations. In the northern slope of the monument, within an area of 144 m^2 conditionally identified as the third excavation sector, the thickness of the cultural layer was determined to be 2.75 m (Ahmadov Q.M., Ahmadov P.C., 1978, pp. 2–3).

Archaeological Research Conducted in the Second Decade of the 21st Century

After the Azerbaijani Army liberated the Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur economic regions from Armenian occupation in 2020, investigations of historical monuments were initiated within the framework of the State Return Program. In 2023, the “Eastern Zangezur Archaeological Expedition,” headed by T.B. Dostiyev, was sent to the region. Studies at the Shahri-Sharifan settlement revealed a cultural layer ranging from 1.8 to 2.2 meters in thickness. Archaeologists uncovered architectural remains built from river stones, wells, protective walls constructed along ravines to prevent flood damage, production-related waste materials, and various artifacts of different functions.

Among the discoveries, glazed ceramic fragments predominated. Although preserved mainly in fragmentary form, these ceramics are distinguished by their typological richness. One of their notable local characteristics is the extensive use of cobalt-blue ornamentation on a white background in artistic decoration, reflecting the influence of Chinese porcelain and Timurid faience traditions.

Preliminary research suggests that the settlement at Sharifan emerged in the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries in connection with the intensive activity of the Khudafarin bridges over the Araz River (Dostiyev T.M., Aliyev T., Bashirov R., 2023, p. 90).

It should also be noted that the crypt of the Sharifan mausoleum was first registered in the 1960s and has been the subject of archaeological investigation since 1974. The construction of the mausoleum reflects the Nakhchivan architectural style and the use of baked brick masonry, while limestone typical of the Shirvan and Absheron architectural schools was also employed. The entrance and mihrab arches of the mausoleum are decorated with ornaments, whereas the remaining arches are plain. The mausoleum has a rectangular form both internally and externally. Ceramic vessels such as cups and jars were used in the upper section to fill empty spaces within the structure. The interior of the walls was filled with river stones and lime mortar, while the exterior facades were carefully hewn (Salamzade Ə.R., 1979, p. 21).

The Mammadbeyli mausoleum is located near the left bank of the Akari (Hekeri) River. Research demonstrates that the proximity of Shahri-Sharifan to the Khudafarin bridges and the trade routes passing through the region indicate the strategic transit significance of Azerbaijan's geographical position within the international trade networks connecting Europe and Asia.

The underground section of the mausoleum has a square plan with projecting corners measuring 5.4×5.4 meters. Three sides are covered with intersecting arches, while the fourth western side is roofed with a flat vault. In the southern wall there is a shallow niche-shaped mihrab. Its upper section is decorated with stalactite ornamentation, while the sides are adorned with slender column-like elements. The walls and arches were constructed from carefully polished stone slabs. The architectural and constructional features of the above-ground section of the monument make it possible to classify the structure among the tower-shaped mausoleums characteristic of Azerbaijani medieval architecture. The monument is dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (Salamzade Ə.R., 1979, p. 21).

It is also noted that a village bearing the same name, Sharifan, was established near the ruined city. Based on its architectural composition and construction techniques, Shahri-Sharifan is characterized by the use of baked brick masonry and by architectural features typical of the Nakhchivan–Tabriz architectural school (Salamzade Ə.R., 1958, p. 45).

In 2024, the “Eastern Zangezur Archaeological Expedition,” headed by Professor Arif Mammadov, conducted archaeological investigations at the medieval urban-type settlement of Shahri-Sharifan near Sharifan village in the Zangilan district, specifically in the area known as the “Sharifan Mausoleum.” The settlement covers an area of approximately 300×300 meters, totaling about 9 hectares. The excavation site was determined on a high hill in the northwestern part of the settlement where the Sharifan mausoleum is located. In 2024, an area measuring 15×10 meters (150 m^2) was subjected to archaeological investigation. The monument is situated on the right bank of the Hekeri River near its confluence with the Araz River.

Preliminary archaeological research revealed ceramic materials dating to the 9th–11th, 11th–13th, and 14th–17th centuries. Among the ceramic finds were numerous monochrome and polychrome glazed vessels, as well as stone tools, osteological remains, and small fragments of glass objects. The inscription “Ali (Əli)” was identified inside one of the polychrome glazed vessels. Initial studies suggest that the Sharifan mausoleum was constructed during the 13th–14th centuries. During the excavations, an Arabic inscription and four numismatic samples were discovered above a small structure resembling a mihrab located on the southern side of the mausoleum interior, facing the qibla direction.

The mausoleum reflects architectural features characteristic of Sufi khanqahs and zawiya of medieval Turkic-Islamic architecture. It has also been noted that the monument bears similarities to the Mirali Mausoleum, the Julfa (Nakhchivan) Mausoleum, and the Sheikh Babi Mausoleum in Fuzuli (Mammadov A.M., Aliyev T.V., Yusifova D.S., Mammadzade H.A., 2025, pp. 87–88). Archaeological excavations in the crypt of the “Sharifan” mausoleum, located within the Shahri-Sharifan settlement

first registered in the 1960s and studied since 1974, have been continuously carried out by Professor Arif Mammadov during 2024–2025.

Conclusion. In general, comprehensive investigations, analyses, and generalizations carried out throughout the history of archaeological research on these monuments demonstrate that the Araz River played a significant role in the history of Azerbaijan by helping to identify the ruins of a number of ancient urban settlements and the routes of historical trade roads passing through them. Archaeological research confirms that the historical city of Nakhchivan was situated at the intersection of caravan routes during the Middle Ages and functioned as one of the major centers of trade, craftsmanship, and culture. Urban-type settlements established at the crossings of caravan trade routes over the Araz River positively influenced economic and cultural relations within the region.

One of the medieval urban-type settlements identified through archaeological investigations is Shahri-Sharifan, located in the village of Sharifan in the Zangilan district. Archaeological research conducted at this medieval settlement proves that habitation there continued from the ninth century through the eleventh–thirteenth and fourteenth–seventeenth centuries. Due to its location near the Khudafarin bridges, caravan routes passed through the settlement and connected it with other cities of Azerbaijan through trade relations.

The functions performed by such settlements are archaeologically reflected in the dimensions of the monuments, their internal structures, and the composition of the discovered artifacts. Archaeological investigations also associate the character of the buildings, the topography and size of the site, the presence of public and religious structures, and engineering constructions such as bridges with the broader socio-economic role of the settlement. Based on the existence of archaeological features, researchers are able to determine the type of settlement represented by the site. Cities established during the Early Middle Ages were mainly fortified urban centers. Some of these small fortified towns gradually transformed during the ninth and tenth centuries into large administrative, political, commercial, craft, and cultural centers.

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