

## MEDIEVAL TOMBSTONE MONUMENTS OF THE MASHTAGA SETTLEMENT IN THE CITY OF BAKU

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### Summary

One of Azerbaijan's settlements with a rich history is the village of Mashtaga, located on the outskirts of Baku. Overall, there is a great need for a comprehensive study of the northeastern part of the Absheron Peninsula. Archaeological and ethnographic research conducted on the Absheron Peninsula since the first quarter of the 20th century, especially since the 1960s, allows us to make this assertion.

The village of Mashtaga, with its ancient history, also boasts a rich culture. Its territory is home to numerous valuable architectural monuments, testifying to its distant past. The stone inscriptions on these monuments are rare primary sources, allowing researchers to uncover historical truths. The coffins and tombstones at Mashtaga Cemetery date primarily from the 9th to 19th centuries. The construction of the tombs here dates back to the early 20th century.

**Key words:** Mashtaga settlement, Absheron Peninsula, Medieval tombstones, Epigraphic monuments, Islamic funerary architecture, Stone inscriptions, Azerbaijani cultural heritage.

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### 1. Introduction

One of the settlements of Azerbaijan with a rich historical background is the Mashtaga settlement located on the outskirts of the city of Baku. The Absheron Peninsula, where Mashtaga is situated, has historically been one of the most important cultural and economic regions of Azerbaijan. Due to its strategic location along historical trade routes and its proximity to the Caspian Sea, the peninsula has been inhabited since ancient times and has played a significant role in the development of urban and rural settlements. Numerous architectural monuments, archaeological sites, and epigraphic inscriptions preserved in this region testify to its long and complex historical development.

In general, there is a great need for a comprehensive study of the northeastern part of the Absheron Peninsula. Although archaeological and ethnographic research has been carried out in this region since the first quarter of the twentieth century, particularly from the 1960s onward, many monuments remain insufficiently studied or documented. Earlier studies mainly focused on large architectural complexes, religious buildings, and urban monuments in Baku and its surroundings, while smaller rural monuments such as tombstones, sarcophagi, and burial structures often remained outside the main focus of scientific research. Therefore, the investigation of funerary monuments in settlements such as Mashtaga is of great importance for reconstructing the historical and cultural landscape of Absheron.

The village of Mashtaga, which has an ancient history, is distinguished by its rich cultural heritage and its large number of historical architectural monuments. The settlement is

known for its medieval mosques, baths, ovdans (water reservoirs), and numerous sacred places that played an important role in the spiritual life of the local population. Among these monuments, grave memorial structures occupy a special place. Tombstones, sarcophagi, and underground burial chambers located in local cemeteries serve not only as burial markers but also as important historical and artistic monuments that reflect the cultural traditions and religious beliefs of different historical periods.

The stone inscriptions carved on these monuments represent rare primary historical sources. Epigraphic materials preserved on tombstones provide valuable information about the names, titles, social status, and sometimes the professions of the individuals buried there. In many cases, these inscriptions also include precise dates recorded according to the Hijri calendar, which allows researchers to determine the chronological framework of the monuments. Such information contributes significantly to the reconstruction of local genealogies and the historical development of settlements in the Absheron region.

The sarcophagi and tombstones placed on the graves in the Mashtaga cemetery mainly date from the 9th to the 19th centuries. These monuments demonstrate the continuity of burial traditions over a long historical period and illustrate the evolution of funerary architecture in Azerbaijan. The underground burial chambers (crypts) found in the "Pirshahid" cemetery were constructed in the early twentieth century and represent a later stage in the development of burial practices in the region. Despite their relatively recent construction, these crypts are closely connected with older traditions and preserve valuable epigraphic and architectural features.

Another important aspect of the tomb monuments found in Mashtaga is their artistic decoration. Many of the tombstones are decorated with geometric patterns, vegetal motifs, and framed inscriptions that reflect the artistic traditions of medieval Azerbaijani stone carving. These decorative elements demonstrate the high level of craftsmanship of the masters who created them and reveal the aesthetic preferences of the period. At the same time, the use of Arabic inscriptions indicates the strong influence of Islamic cultural and epigraphic traditions that spread widely throughout Azerbaijan after the adoption of Islam.

The study of such monuments is important not only for archaeology and architectural history but also for understanding the broader cultural processes that shaped the region. Grave memorial monuments serve as valuable sources for the study of social structure, religious beliefs, and artistic traditions. Through the analysis of their architectural forms, decorative elements, and inscriptions, researchers can gain deeper insight into the historical development of local communities.

Therefore, the investigation and documentation of medieval tomb monuments in the Mashtaga settlement contribute significantly to the preservation of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and to the broader understanding of the historical landscape of the Absheron Peninsula.

## 2. Main part

The city of Baku, located on the Absheron Peninsula, and the villages surrounding it are among the regions of Azerbaijan with an ancient and rich history.

During research related to the registration and documentation of historical and archaeological monuments, employees of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Idris Aliyev and Alibaba Babayev, recorded new monuments dating to the medieval period in the territory of the Mashtaga settlement of Sabunchu district of Baku city (*Babayev, 2010, p. 3*). The Mashtaga settlement of Sabunchu district can be

considered one of the most important centers of architectural monuments in Absheron (*Babayev 2023, 4, p. 90*). The Mashtaga settlement of Sabunchu district can be considered one of the most important centers of architectural monuments in Absheron (*Aliyev & Abdullayev, 2011, p. 90*). It is no coincidence that the prominent art historian and researcher of the history of architecture, architect Sh.S. Fatullayev, emphasized that Mashtaga ranks second in Absheron after the city of Baku in terms of the richness of historically constructed public buildings, and that the dense concentration of numerous mosques, baths, and ovdans is an exceptional case for Absheron (*Fatullayev, 1991, p. 18*).

Three crypts were recorded in the “Pirshahid” cemetery (Pir of the Martyr – A.H.), located in the northeastern part of Mashtaga. Each of these crypts contains stone inscriptions providing information about the individuals buried there.

The quadrangular inscription on the first crypt contains the following words: “This is the grave of the late Sheikhalı Badkubı, son of the late Agadadash, 1329.” (Hijri year 1329 = 1911–1912). In order to make the inscription clearly readable, the surface of the stone was painted white, while the letters were painted black. The edges of the inscription were framed in black. A six-petaled floral branch is carved on the lower right side of the stone (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1. General view of the crypts located in the Pirshahid cemetery (20th century)**

On the second crypt, an inscription placed on the front side and designed in an arched form symbolizing a doorway states that the late Gasim, son of the late Haji Karim, died on the 12th day of the sacred month of Muharram in the year 1334 (Hijri Muharram al-Haram, 1334 = 1915–1916) (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2. General view of the crypts located in the Pirshahid cemetery (20th century)**

**The inscription of the third crypt reads:** “This is the grave of the late Abdulla, son of Nabi. On the 9th day of the month of Safar al-Muzaffar, 1334 (Hijri 1334 = 1915–1916)” (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3. General view of the crypts located in the Pirshahid cemetery (20th century)**

1. The front parts of the second and third crypts were designed in the form of a double-row arched doorway. The reddish stones on which the inscriptions were carved are framed on all sides with a raised border. The text of the inscriptions is divided into two parts by a raised horizontal line between the rows. The entrance parts of the crypts are sealed with masonry. Simple geometric elements are used around the inscriptions on the second and third crypts.

2. In the “Pirshahid” cemetery, tomb monuments in the form of sarcophagi and tombstones were also identified near the crypts.

3. **Rectangular tombstone.** Part of it remains under the soil. The inscriptions on its sides are carved in relief within a frame. On both sides of the inscription located in the upper part of the tombstone, an eight-petaled floral motif inside a decorative medallion is depicted. The central inscription is carved in two lines from bottom to top. Since a part of the monument remains under the soil, it was not possible to determine the exact date of the inscription (Figure 4).



**Fig. 4. Rectangular gravestone located in the Pirshahid cemetery (18th century)**

4. **Sarcophagus.** Since it is made in a trapezoidal form, at first glance it appears stepped. Usually, an inscription was written in a framed area at the head of the upper surface of the sarcophagus. On its sides, geometric ornaments, vegetal patterns, and architectural elements were carved. The lower two rows are placed within a border and decorated with vegetal motifs (two- and three-petaled flowers with branches). In the wide middle border, an eight-petaled vegetal ornament and a geometric network pattern are carved. In the upper two rows of the border, vertical lines are drawn. As the last border has undergone internal erosion, it is not possible to determine whether an inscription or ornament was originally carved there (Figures 5, 5a).

5. At the foot side of the sarcophagus, a small place was made for lighting candles. The tradition of lighting candles on graves is connected with ancient beliefs. Some researchers associate it with “an ancient belief carrying symbolic meaning related to the afterlife.” According to elderly residents, the sarcophagus remained inside an ancient shrine (pir) until the 1940s, after which the shrine was destroyed. Women who could not have children and people suffering from fear or illness usually visited the shrine in search of healing.

6. There are two stones placed on the sarcophagus. One of them is elongated and shaped like a tall cap. Such stones were usually placed on the graves of Sufi sheikhs. It can therefore be



**Fig. 5. Chest-type tomb (sanduka) with a stepped appearance due to its trapezoidal form (18th century)**

**Fig. 5a Chest-type tomb (sanduka) with a stepped appearance due to its trapezoidal form (18th century)**

assumed that the person buried in the shrine was a religious figure—possibly a scholar or a saint. Based on a comparative analysis of the composition of the inscription and the ornaments on the sarcophagus with other monuments of this type, it can be dated to the 16th–17th centuries.

7. **The tombstone with a pointed arch-shaped upper part** has an inscription placed within a frame along its edges. In the center, the first line is carved separately. The main text is written within decorative medallions. The date inscribed on the monument is Hijri 1191 (1191 AH), which corresponds to 1777–1778 (Figure 6).



**Fig. 6. Gravestone with a pointed arch-shaped upper part (18th century)**

8. **The tombstone with a sarcophagus** has a border carved along the edges of its upper surface. It is assumed that an ornament was carved in the central part of the sarcophagus. The tombstone is rectangular in shape. Zigzag lines are carved along the narrow borders on its sides. The monument bears the date 1172 in the Hijri calendar (1172 AH = 1758–1759) (Figure 7).



**Fig. 7. Chest-type gravestone with decorative borders on the sides (18th century)**

The sarcophagi and tombstones placed on the graves in the Mashtaga cemetery mainly date from the 9th to the 19th centuries, while the construction of the crypts belongs to the early 20th century.

Azerbaijan's grave memorial monuments, tombstones and sarcophagi dating from the 9th to the 19th centuries, are decorated with very delicate geometric and vegetal ornaments and relief compositions (*Nematova, 1963, p. 154*). In addition to ornamental motifs, inscriptions written in various styles of the Arabic script were also carved on these monuments. Unfortunately, unlike many other architectural monuments, the names of the skilled craftsmen who created these valuable and enduring works of art are only rarely encountered on these monuments, although they constitute a significant group within the heritage of Azerbaijani art.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the medieval tomb monuments of the Mashtaga settlement represent an important part of the historical and cultural heritage of the Absheron Peninsula. The tombstones, sarcophagi, and underground burial structures found in the "Pirshahid" cemetery demonstrate the richness of local architectural traditions and funerary practices from the IX–XIX centuries. The inscriptions carved on the stones provide valuable historical information about the individuals buried there, as well as the religious and cultural environment of the period.

The decorative elements observed on these monuments, including geometric and vegetal ornaments, reflect the artistic traditions of Azerbaijani medieval stone carving. At the same time, the presence of Arabic inscriptions indicates the strong influence of Islamic culture and

epigraphic traditions in the region. The analysis of these architectural and epigraphic features allows researchers to better understand the historical development, social structure, and spiritual beliefs of the local population.

Therefore, the medieval grave monuments of Mashtaga should be considered not only as archaeological and architectural artifacts but also as important written and artistic sources for studying the history and culture of Azerbaijan. Their preservation, documentation, and further scientific investigation are essential for protecting this valuable cultural heritage and for expanding our knowledge of the historical landscape of the Absheron Peninsula.

Furthermore, the typological variety of the tomb monuments recorded in the Mashtaga cemetery reflects the gradual evolution of funerary architecture on the Absheron Peninsula. The combination of different monument forms, including sarcophagus-type tombs, rectangular gravestones, and underground crypts, illustrates the continuity of burial traditions over several centuries. These monuments also demonstrate the high level of craftsmanship of medieval stone carvers who skillfully combined architectural composition with decorative ornamentation and epigraphic elements. The study of these monuments contributes significantly to the reconstruction of the historical and cultural landscape of the region. In addition, comparative analysis with similar funerary monuments found in other parts of Azerbaijan and the broader Islamic world may help to identify artistic influences, regional stylistic features, and chronological development in medieval funerary architecture.

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