



THE ROLE OF MOSQUES AND SANCTUARIES IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF NAKHCHIVAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Research has revealed that scientists studying mosques and sanctuaries have focused their attention mainly on solving the volumetric structure of architectural monuments and their architectural structures. The role of mosques and sanctuaries in the socio-political life of society has not been sufficiently studied. Research shows that mosques and sanctuaries were not only places of worship, but also played an important role in solving social and economic issues. Marriages were also registered in mosques, and judicial and cultural and educational events were held. Some mosques were also important political centers in the fight against foreign invaders that emerged around the sanctuaries, as in the case of Alinjachay Khanaga. In the course of our research, it was established that mosques and sanctuaries, which were important socio-political and ideological centers of the Middle Ages, played an important role in the formation and development of settlements. We have established that the Alinjachay Khanaga sanctuary, located in the Julfa region, and the Astabad sanctuary in the Babek region turned into an urban-type settlement, and many villages appeared around the Asabi-Kahf sanctuary, including the settlement of Khachaparag.

Key words: Architecture, Nakhchivan, monument, mosque, sanctuary, city, settlement.

NAHÇIVAN TOPLUMUNUN SOSYAL VE SİYASİ HAYATINDA CAMİLERİN VE KUTSAL ALANLARIN ROLÜ

Özet

Araştırmalar, cami ve kutsal mekanları inceleyen bilim insanlarının dikkatlerini ağırlıklı olarak mimari anıtların hacimsel yapısı ve mimari yapıların çözümüne odakladığını ortaya koymuştur. Cami ve kutsal mekanların toplumun sosyo-politik yaşamındaki rolü ise yeterince incelenmemiştir. Araştırmalar, cami ve kutsal mekânların yalnızca ibadet yerleri olmadığını, aynı zamanda sosyal ve ekonomik sorunların çözülmesinde önemli bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Evlilikler camilerde kaydedilmiş, adli, kültürel ve eğitimsel etkinlikler düzenlenmiştir. Bazı camiler, Elinceçay Hanegahı örneğinde olduğu gibi, kutsal mekanların çevresinde ortaya çıkan yabancı işgalcilere karşı mücadelede önemli siyasi merkezler olmuştur. Yapılan araştırmalar sonucunda, Orta Çağ'ın önemli sosyo-politik ve ideolojik merkezleri olan cami ve kutsal mekânların, yerleşimlerin oluşumu ve gelişiminde önemli rol oynadığı tespit edilmiştir. Julfa bölgesinde bulunan Elinceçay Hanegahı ve Babek bölgesindeki Astabad kutsal mekanının şehir tipi yerleşime dönüştüğü, Asabi-Kehf kutsal

mekanının çevresinde ise Kaçaparag yerleşimi de dahil olmak üzere birçok köyün ortaya çıktığı belirlenmiştir.

Keywords: Mimari, Nahçıvan, anıt, cami, kutsal mekan, şehir, yerleşim.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traces of religious beliefs were also discovered at Paleolithic sites studied in Azerbaijan. Throughout history, sanctuaries were regarded as the house of animistic deities, gods and monotheistic god and became objects of worship. Research shows that religious structures, especially mosques, held an important place in the layout of medieval cities. Although there were many mosques in medieval cities, the Juma mosques (Juma mosques) located in the city center played a key role as places where people gathered (14). Nevertheless, researchers studying mosques and sanctuaries have mainly focused on resolving the planning and volumetric structure of architectural monuments and their architectural constructions. The role of mosques and sanctuaries in the socio-political life of society has not been sufficiently studied. Therefore, our goal is to clarify the role of mosques and sanctuaries, which are remarkable architectural monuments of that period, in the socio-political life of society.

2. MOSQUES

Medieval rulers paid special attention to the construction of mosques as a means of strengthening their power. Mosques were located in the centers of cities. In the twelfth century, the Juma Mosque situated in the center of the city of Nakhchivan also occupied an important place in the architectural appearance of the city (7, p. 29). This mosque, which held significant importance for medieval architecture, was built in the city of Nakhchivan near the mausoleum of Momuna Khatun. Unfortunately, this mosque has not survived to the present day (3, p. 74, 131). Tavernier, who visited Nakhchivan in the 17th century, described this mosque as one of the most magnificent monuments of Asia. Information about the structure of the mosque can be obtained from a photograph taken by the French traveler Dieulafoy, as well as from photographs by Jakobstal, both of whom visited Nakhchivan in the 19th century. Based on the preserved photographs, it can be said that the mosque had a rectangular plan, divided into two parts by polygonal columns- the columns were crowned with buttresses, creating a transition to the dome. On the exterior surface of the mosque, the transition from the rectangular base to the spherical dome was achieved through special triangular constructions. Researchers note that this mosque formed a single complex with the adjacent madrasa and mausoleum, and there were auxiliary structures between them (5, p. 48–49).

Medieval mosques served as unique cultural centers of their time. The population received important news about the country in the mosques. Decrees of rulers on significant matters were also engraved on mosque walls. One such document is the decree of I Shah Abbas, engraved on the Juma Mosque in Ordubad. Certainly, Shah Abbas I had a political goal of winning over the residents of Ordubad, but this decree had an important influence on the development of the city.

The fact that the decree was placed on the walls of this mosque shows that the mosque was also an important political center of that time (12, p. 71). One of the mosques that played an important role in the socio-political life of the Ordubad district was the Vanand Mosque. This mosque is located on the central square of the village of Vanand, on the southern side

of the square. In front of it grows a large tree called a *chinar*. Currently, the main entrance of the mosque is on the northern side, but there is also a door on the western side (Fig. 1; Fig. 2).



Figure 1. Exterior view of the mosque in the village of Vanand. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov, 2025)



Figure 2. Interior view of the mosque in the village of Vanand. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov, 2025)

On the northwestern side of the mosque, there is a small annex. The entrance door to this structure is made of reddish marble in the shape of an arch, with inscriptions engraved in the Persian script and eight-pointed stars surrounded by a circle (Fig. 3).

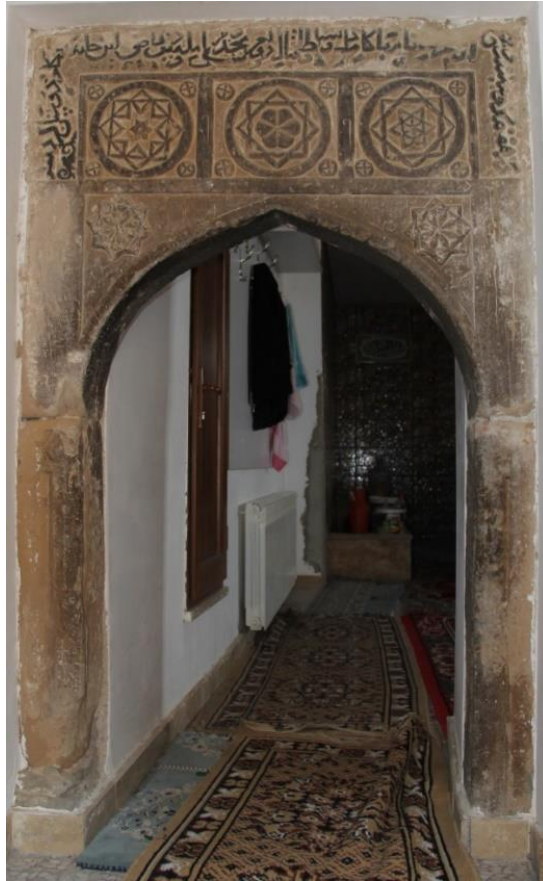


Figure 3. Entrance door of the Vanand mosque. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov, 2025)

The inscription states that the mosque was built in the year 725 of the Hijri calendar, that is, in 1325 AD. Researchers write that the mosque was originally a small structure, which was later expanded (20, p. 190).

The prayer hall of the mosque has seven columns, five of which are octagonal (Fig. 4). The other two columns have a square shape. The prayer hall is currently divided into two parts, one of which is designated for women. Therefore, three of the columns remain on the women's side. During renovation, the outer wall of the mosque was covered with fired brick, and the interior was plastered. According to V. M. Sysoev, the mihrab of the mosque was decorated with stalactites and red, yellow, and blue paintings (11, p. 178–180). However, since the mihrab was covered with a special wooden panel during restoration, it is now impossible to see the stalactites mentioned by V. M. Sysoev. The inscription on one of the boards of the balcony built for women provides information about the restoration of the mosque in 1732 and notes that in that year there was a rise in prices in the country. This inscription was read by N. V. Khanikov (16), I. Azimbekov (1), M. Nemat (6), and Kh. F. Safarli (21, p. 183). Thus, it can be said that the mosque was built in 1325 and restored in 1732.

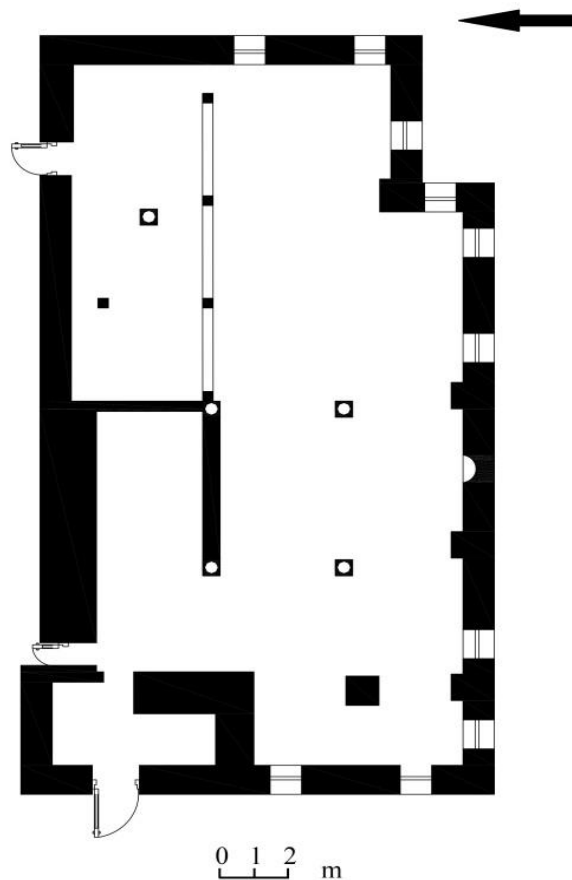


Figure 4. Plan of the Vanand mosque. (Source: Author's own drawing, 2025)

3. SANCTUARIES

In the Middle Ages, great importance was also attached to sacred sites. After the Arab invasion of Azerbaijan, special attention was paid to the construction and development of mosques in order to establish their ideological foundations and spread Islam. However, those who fought against the Arab occupation also used religious centers. In the medieval period, khanagahs and imamzadas played an important role in the formation of settlements as religious and ideological centers. These religious centers also served as bases for the spread of various sects. In the Middle Ages, khanagahs existed in the city of Nakhchivan, one of the important cultural centers of Azerbaijan and the Middle East, and they played a significant role in the socio-political and ideological life of the country (20, p. 150). However, very few of these centers have survived to the present day. The Alinjachay Khanagah was one of the main centers of resistance against the Timurids in the medieval period. Fazlullah Naimi, a prominent political figure of the Middle Ages, and his followers played an important role in fighting the invaders and expelling the Timurids from Azerbaijan. The Pir Yagub Khanagah was one of the sanctuaries located in the center of the city of Nakhchivan. This khanagah was first mentioned in the 1930s by the Russian scholar K. N. Smirnov (9, p. 100). In terms of architectural style, this sanctuary can be attributed to the 18th century. This sanctuary belonged to representatives of the Bektashi sect (Fig. 5). The main leaders of this sect were Pir Ali and Pir Yagub. The Bektashi sect had great influence in the Ottoman state and served as the ideological support of the Janissaries, who

formed the backbone of the Ottoman army. The Hurufis, Bektashis, and Safavids emerged on the basis of Shiite teachings and therefore worked together in Nakhchivan (20, p. 167). However, it should be noted that these sects were also used by political authorities seeking influence in the Middle East and the South Caucasus.



Figure 5. Exterior view of the Pir Yagub Khanagah. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov, 2025)

After the Safavids came to power, in addition to khanagahs, sanctuaries known as Imamzade also began to be built. One such sanctuary is the Imamzade in the city of Nakhchivan (Fig. 6; Fig. 7). The sanctuary building consists of three rectangular structures built next to one another and differing in volume. The buildings are constructed from square-shaped fired bricks. The core of the Nakhchivan Imamzade is a tower-shaped mausoleum rising on a square base. The square base first transitions into an octagonal shape, then into a cylindrical form, and is completed with a semicircular dome. The transition from the square base to the octagonal and cylindrical body was achieved through arched constructions, namely squinches. The decorative ornaments on the cylindrical body of the tower-like part of the mausoleum are similar to those of the Karabakhlar and Barda mausoleums. The word “Allah,” written repeatedly in turquoise tilework on the cylindrical body, gives its exterior an original and striking beauty. Both the exterior and interior surfaces of Nakhchivan’s religious architectural monuments were decorated with tiles. Unfortunately, only a few of these tiles used in religious buildings have survived to the present day. One of such monuments is the Nakhchivan Imamzadeh. The tile decoration of the Nakhchivan Imamzadeh is identical to the patterns found on the Barda Mausoleum and the Zeynal Bey Mausoleum in Turkey (22, p. 46).



Figure 6. Exterior view of the Imamzade in the city of Nakhchivan. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov)

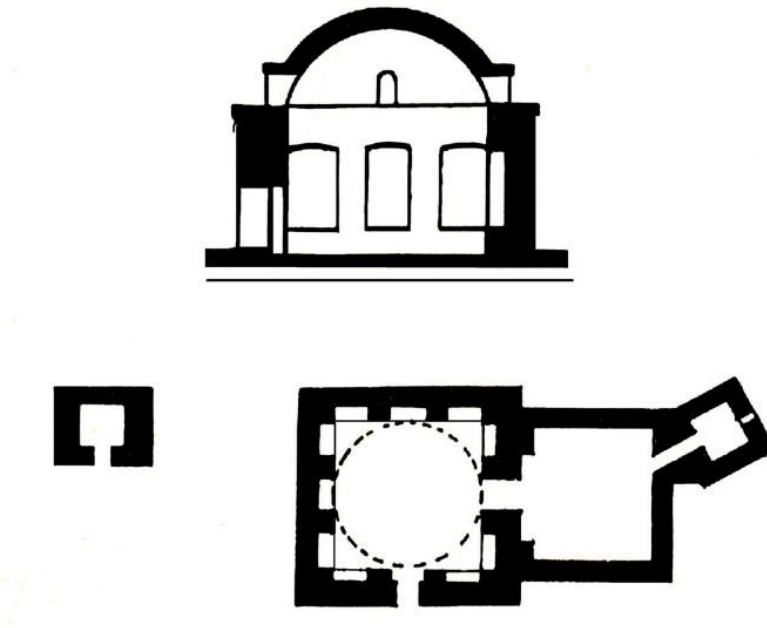


Figure 7. Plan of the Imamzade in the city of Nakhchivan. (Source: Salamzade, Memmedzade, 1985).

Inside the mausoleum lies the grave of the saint, and around the grave there are black stones. The rooms added to the mausoleum at a later time were connected to each other by a doorway. One of these rooms has a flat roof, and the other has a domed one. The transition from the square structure to the dome was achieved through arches. The domed structure is illuminated by windows located in the dome. This type of illumination is also known from the Amir Khan and Yarali Sultan mausoleums. An inscription has been preserved on the front part of the mausoleum. The text of the Imamzade inscription was written by Hazrat

Rufai-bey, son of Hadji Fulad-bey, during the reign of the Safavid ruler Tahmasib II (1722–1732). When V. M. Sysoev was in Nakhchivan in the early 20th century, he drew a plan of the Imamzade (11, p. 125) and recorded the dimensions of the rooms belonging to the complex (10, p. 107–108). Based on Khanikov, he wrote that the Imamzade tomb was built during the time of Tahmasib II.

4. THE ROLE OF MOSQUES AND SANCTUARIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SETTLEMENTS

Initially established as places of worship, mosques later evolved into spaces where larger segments of the population gathered and came to play a significant role in the life of the country. Mosques were not only sites of religious practice but also centers where crucial social issues were discussed and resolved (21, s. 252-253). Information from sources shows that in the Middle Ages in Azerbaijan, rulers supported the construction of mosques and sanctuaries. This contributed to the development of settlements. The Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi, while in Nakhchivan in the 17th century, wrote in his notes that in the city of Karabaglar there were 70 mihrabs, including 40 minarets, and in the city of Nakhchivan there were 70 mosques and 40 neighborhood mosques (13, p. 231–232). Mosques and sanctuaries, including khanagahs, served as ideological centers and played a role in the formation of settlements. They contributed both to the development of existing settlements and to the creation of new ones. One such sanctuary is the Alinjachay Khanagah in the village of Khanagah in the Julfa district (Fig. 8; Fig. 9).



Figure 8. Exterior view of the Khanagah in Julfa. (Photo by Mahammad Bayramov)

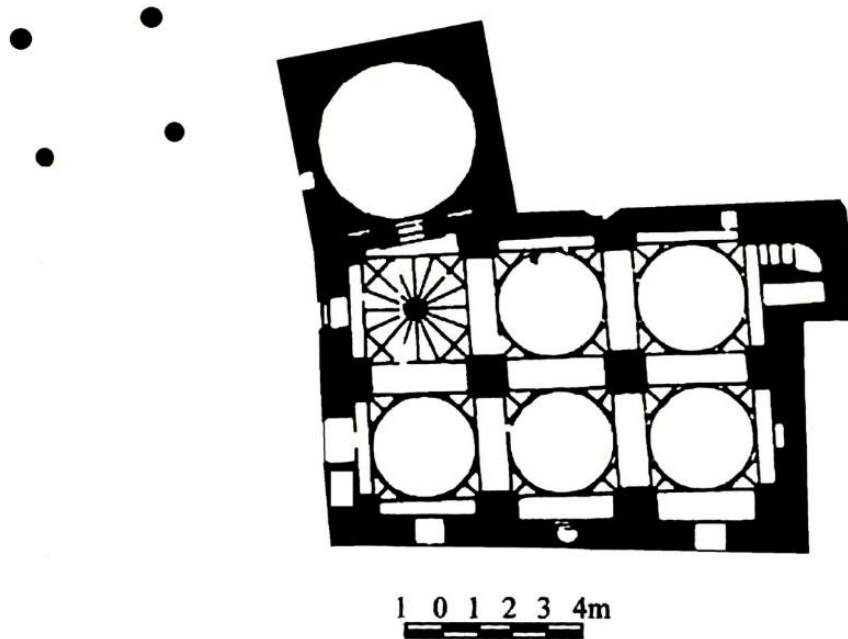


Figure 9. Plan of the Khanagah in Julfa. (Source: Salamzade, Memmedzade, 1985)

The khanagah became known as a center of Hurufi sheikhs. However, the study of inscriptions on the tombstones in the cemetery surrounding the khanagah shows that the khanagah and its surroundings were inhabited in the 15th–17th centuries (19, p. 27–46). In 1991, during archaeological research, it was discovered that a large settlement once existed on the hill near the khanagah. The remains of this settlement have survived to this day. There are houses made of sun-dried brick built on stone foundations. This settlement was established around the khanagah and surrounded it.

During the research carried out here, remains of an aqueduct constructed from earthen pipes were also found. The study revealed that the settlement extended along both banks of a small mountain river flowing near the khanagah. To protect the riverbanks from erosion, both banks were reinforced and paved with stones (4, p. 173). This type of stone paving is characteristic mainly of urban settlements. This shows that the Khanagah residence was an important cultural center. Archaeological finds, especially ceramics, indicate that life here continued until the 18th century (4, p. 174). The presence of two large necropolises near the Khanagah settlement attests to the scale of life in this settlement.

One of the cities that developed around religious centers was the city of Astabad, located in the Babek district (4, p. 97). The remains of this city have survived until recently. The famous Azerbaijani philosopher-poet and founder of the Hurufi school, Fazlullah Naimi, was born and lived in this city. He had his residence there and spread his teachings. The information provided by medieval sources about this city mostly corresponds to the period after the 14th century, which indicates that the Hurufi center played a certain role in the city's development.

The village of Khachaparag is one of the settlements that developed around sanctuaries. Today this village is abandoned, though once it had a vibrant life (4, p. 106). Pilgrims visiting the Ashabi-Kahf sanctuary had the opportunity to live and rest in this village before and after their pilgrimage. There was a mosque in the village, built of sun-dried brick and *kyagriz*

(underground water channel). The mosque building was destroyed due to natural weathering, but the *kyagriz* still exists.

5. CONCLUSION

Research shows that mosques and sanctuaries were not only places for performing religious rituals but also centers where crucial societal issues were discussed and resolved. In the Middle Ages, mosques played an important role in addressing social and economic matters. Marriages were registered in mosques, and judicial, cultural, and educational activities were held there. Some mosques also served as important political centers in resistance against foreign invaders, as seen in the case of the Alinjachay Khanagah. Our research has established that mosques and sanctuaries important socio-political and ideological centers of the medieval period played a key role in the formation and development of settlements. We have determined that the Alinjachay Khanagah sanctuary located in the Julfa district and the Astabad sanctuary in the Babek district developed into urban-type settlements, and around the Ashabi-Kahf sanctuary many villages emerged, including the settlement of Khachaparag. Extensive research has demonstrated that Nakhchivan possesses a rich and diverse heritage of religious architecture, with its architectural monuments embodying the distinctive features and stylistic characteristics of Nakhchivan's architectural tradition. The development of religious buildings in Nakhchivan was shaped not only by local architectural practices but also under the influence of broader architectural trends and traditions present in Azerbaijan and the wider Middle East. As a result, these monuments represent an integral and harmonious part of both regional and transregional architectural history. Moreover, mosques in Nakhchivan were not merely sites of worship; they played a crucial role in shaping the urban landscape, contributing significantly to the social and spatial organization of the cities. Their architectural and functional presence underscores the centrality of religious structures in both the cultural identity and the urban development of the region.

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