AZERBAIJAN COVERS A RELATIVELY SMALL AREA IN THE ISLAMIC EAST. THIS, AS WELL AS THE FACT THAT IN VARIOUS HISTORICAL PERIODS AZERBAIJAN WAS PART OF DIFFERENT EMPIRES, HAVE SERIOUSLY HAMPERED FULL RESEARCH OF AZERBAIJAN’S ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE AND ARTS. AZERBAIJAN’S GREATEST WORKS OF ART ARE MOSTLY PERCEIVED IN SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE AS BEING ISLAMIC OR PERSIAN.
However, the history of Azerbaijani art is worthy of an independent study not only in terms of ethno-social environment, but also from the standpoint of the level of its development, originality and influence on other cultures. Although Azerbaijani scientists have conducted researches in this direction, unfortunately the level of their international spread leaves much to be desired.

The achievements of medieval Azerbaijani culture in the fields of literature, arts, music, carpet-weaving and other forms of decorative art were of global importance. Along with this, Azerbaijan's medieval architects contributed a lot to the world heritage of town-planning and architecture. Town-planning in medieval Azerbaijan reached its peak in the Ilkhanid rule (1256-1357). This is when some towns (Maraga, Tabriz, Salmas, Uchan, Baku, Derbent) experienced revival and expansion and new towns (Gutlug Balig, Mahmudabad, Sultanabad, Soltanieh) emerged. Expanding and evolving rapidly, Tabriz became the central city of the Middle East. Spanish ambassador Clavijo said in 1403 that Tabriz had a population of 200,000 families (around 1 million people). In this period, Tabriz was a major trading city linking Europe with Asia. European travelers who visited Tabriz in the 14th century described it as "the richest and largest city in the world". One of them, Odortko Pordeone, wrote: "Christians are saying that the Khan of the city gets more revenue than the French king does from his kingdom."

As a result of urban development carried out by Ghazan Khan, Tabriz obtained all the functions inherent in major capital cities. Shopping centers were established at all six fortress gates of the city. They were linked with each other and with the central market. The significant cultural role Tabriz played in the Muslim world led to the establishment of a scientific and educational center Rashidiya there. After taking on some administrative and trade functions, the town of Ghazanis became a satellite of Tabriz in the modern sense of the word.

In the Ilkhanid rule, Tabriz was a rare example of medieval town-planning from the standpoint of spatial completeness and functionality. Due to a high level of production, developed money economy, advanced water supply system, broad economic opportunities and urban development, Tabriz left the majestic cities of the Arab caliphate far behind.
The effective distribution of major architectural sites and ensembles throughout the city gave its spatial and compositional structure a certain functional order and balance. In the early 14th century Tabriz had a multi-functional planning structure and was close to modern multi-polar cities.

The town-planning experience obtained in Tabriz in the Ilkhanid rule subsequently spread to neighboring states. According to Turkish scholar H. Z. Ulken, this experience established “an ideal and a program for the periods of Amir Timur and Shah Abbas.”

One of the most valuable international contributions of Azerbaijani town-planning is central city squares. The diversity of Tabriz served as the basis for establishing a multifunctional central square. This square was the venue for important public events and meetings, military parades and maneuvers, festivities and religious ceremonies, performances and sporting events. Established in the Ilkhanid rule, the Sahib-abad (Sahibul-amr) square gradually developed into a fully-fledged urban center in the Safavid rule. The enormous rectangular square was surrounded by administrative, religious, cultural and commercial centers of Tabriz. Later Safavid rulers used this urban planning system in their capital cities of Qazvin and Isfahan. Only the Meydani Shah square in Isfahan has survived to the present day in its original form.

Azerbaijani architects contributed a lot to the development of architectural typology in the Middle East. During the Ilkhanid rule, mosques with a large prayer hall covered with a dome emerged in Azerbaijan. Perhaps the most graphic example of such a mosque is the Alishah mosque constructed by vizier architect Haji Alishah Tabrizi in 1311-1324. The total area of its prayer hall is about 2000 square meters. It was covered by a 30-meter vault. The structural stability was ensured by the side walls 10.4 m thick.

The transformation of the grand iwan with angled minarets into the main façade was an architectural innovation. The Alishah mosque was one of the most important religious complexes of the Islamic world. It was the prototype of iwan mosques erected by the Timurids in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran. Its influence extended even to Egypt. Now a small section of it, called Ark Kalasi (the Ark fortress), has become a symbol of Tabriz.

Unlike the Alishah mosque, the Blue Mosque in Tabriz, built by the architect Ali Haji Kuchachi in 1465,
had a central domed composition. Covered with a large 16.5-meter dome, the central part of the prayer hall was surrounded by galleries on three sides. In the south it adjoined a small room. From engineering design and operational standpoints, this is perfect structure for the Blue Mosque. The spatial solution was also dynamic. Small domes surrounding a large central dome and two elegant minarets erected in the corners of the main façade gave the mosque a solemn appearance.

As a product of evolution of Seljuk mosques in Azerbaijan, the Blue Mosque occupies a worthy place among the jewels of the world architectural heritage. The mosque served as a prototype for other mosques. For example, the Juma Mosque built by the Mughals in India, Shiite mausoleum mosques in Iraq and a number of mosques in Iran and Turkestan were erected under the influence of the Blue Mosque in Tabriz.

The tower mausoleums, which were a great example of perpetuating the memory of man in monumental forms, were an architectural phenomenon of the Seljuk period.
Such mausoleums are found mostly in places inhabited by Oghuz Turks (Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and Khorasan). The upper part of their two-tier structure – cylindrical, cubic and prismatic in form – was covered with a double-layer dome. Azerbaijani architects were quite good at constructing each of the three types of mausoleums.

The Mausoleum of Momine Khatun in Nakhchivan (architect Ajami, 1186) can be safely described as the best tower mausoleum with a prismatic body. Erected in a prominent place of Nakhchivan, the mausoleum was primarily distinguished by its large size (its original height was about 35 meters) and planning complexity. The mausoleum’s decahedral tower has a perfect support system and tectonic structure. On the outside the mausoleum has carved patterns
and epigraphic ornaments.

A role commensurate with the one played by Ajami Nakhchivani in the development of tower mausoleums with prismatic bodies was played by architect Ahmed al-Hafiz Nakhchivani in the development of cylindrical tower mausoleums. A perfect example of a cylindrical tower mausoleum was Kudi Khatun erected in the village of Karabakhlar by Ahmed Nakhchivani (14th century).

One of the most valuable examples of traditional tower mausoleums designed by Nakhchivani architects is the Gulistan mausoleum in Julfa (Nakhchivan). A special feature of the mausoleum is the sepulcher brought onto the surface and the resulting two-tier tower. Such towers were widely spread in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. Transforming from a square basement into a dodecahedron, the Gulistan mausoleum is far superior to Anatolian ones for its proportions, form, elegance of patterns and completeness of style.

Tower mausoleums were mostly covered with pyramidal or conical domes. The mausoleums covered with sphero-conical domes also underwent development in Azerbaijan. The most majestic and best-known of them were the mausoleums of Ghazan Khan and Oljaitu Khan. Once the key structure of the Shanb Ghazan charity complex, the mausoleum of Ghazan Khan (Alishah Tabrizi, 1297) is now completely destroyed. However, the surviving written and art sources provide an idea of its architecture. For its unusual monumentality it can be compared only to Gunbad-e Qabus in Gorgan. The majestic and complete architectural composition...
of the Ghazan Khan Mausoleum affected not only Azerbaijani but also Timurid architecture.

The Oljaitu Khan Mausoleum (architect Alishah Tabrizi, 1305-1309) is the most successful example of the mausoleums built on the architectural principles underlying the Ghazan Khan Mausoleum. Erected in the new capital of the Ilkhanids, Soltaniyeh, the mausoleum was primarily distinguished for its size. The inner diameter of its dome was 24.5 m and the height 52 m.

The spatial and volumetric composition of the Oljaitu Khan Mausoleum was also unique. The refined minarets erected along the rim of its large conical dome on the corners of an octagonal prismatic body highlight its uniqueness. Compositions with a large number of minarets were an innovation in the Islamic world architecture.

In terms of the engineering solution, the Oljaitu Khan Mausoleum was also a rare monument of architecture. Authors of scientific works on architectural heritage of the world, such as French scholar O. Choisy (19th century), have emphasized its unusual architectonic features. From the perspective of architectural decoration, this mausoleum was an encyclopedia of its time. As in all other classical monuments, architect Alishah Tabrizi followed the principles of harmony based on a deep understanding and subtle rhythm.

As an example of the Oljaitu Khan Mausoleum’s influence on world architecture we can point to the Timurid mausoleums in Turkestans, of the Mughals in India and of Ahmad Shah Durrani in Afghanistan (Kandahar, 18th century). The best indicator of the international recognition of Azerbaijani architecture in the Ilkhanid rule is the influence the works by Alishah Tabrizi have had on the Salimia mosque (Koca Sinan, 1569-1575) in Turkey and the Santa Maria della Fiore church in Florence (F. Brunelleschi, 1418-1419).

The theocratic nature of the Safavid state mostly affected the development of memorial architecture. Safavid rulers erected monumental mausoleums over the graves of Shiite imams and their descendants, their own ancestors and prominent religious figures. A crucial role in spatial concept of such mausoleums was played by their transformation into influential and lucrative places of pilgrimage. While the dynamic form of tower mausoleums of the Seljuk contained a spirit of heroism, the spatial complexity of Safavid mausoleums symbolized asceticism and Sufism.

The design of monumental Safavid mausoleums was based on a dynamic Eight: four vertical and four horizontal lines were crossing each other to form nine squares - one central and eight extreme. Symbolically resembling the Garden of Yahweh, this scheme lent Safavid mausoleums a model reminiscent of paradise.

The conceptual form, the deep symbolism, the special architectural expressiveness, the perfect and effective engineering structure of Safavid mausoleums have spread their influence well outside Azerbaijan. It was particularly noticeable in countries where Shia Islam was the leading religion. Such mausoleums were most common in Iran and Iraq. However, the development of Safavid monumental mausoleums peaked in India through the architecture of the Mughals. A pupil of the Tabriz school of architecture, Aga Mirza Giyas, while erecting the mausoleum of Humayun, continued the Safavid architectural tradition. Subsequently this mausoleum became the prototype of Taj Mahal.

The idea of coating the domes of Shiite Imam mausoleums in gold belongs to Safavid Shah Tahmasib I. The main idea behind the concept is identification of the domes with the Sun. There was a unity of meaning and form between the gold dome and the Kizilbash turban (Safavid headdress). Golden domes are still preserved in Iran and Iraq.

The Ilkhanid rule was also marked by the development of the palace architecture. Many palaces were built in capitals and places where rulers had rest. The best known of them are the palace of Abaqa Khan in Shiz and the Adiliya palace in Shanb Ghazan (13th century). They had a symmetrical structure: in the center there was a domed hall for receptions which adjoined several side rooms. The ruler’s alcove was on the symmetrical axis. The entrance was designed in the form of a veranda and overlooked a large swimming-pool. Subsequently, such palaces in Tabriz developed into complete compounds with a central domed hall and side rooms. This is how the famous Hasht Behesht palace emerged. The design of Timurid palaces in Central Asia, Safavid palaces in Iran (Hasht Behesht in Isfahan, 1670) and the Chinili Koshq (Istanbul, 1472) was based on the principles of the Abaqa Khan palace. The main reason for the spread of this architectural model was a convenient and functionally expressive spatial and design solution, as well as the development of international cultural relations.

Of the surviving palace complexes, the Palace of Shirvanshahs is per-
fect from all standpoints. The main part of the palace was built in the 15th century – during the heyday of the Shirvanshahs. This complex is the best monument not only of the Shirvan but also the stone architecture of Azerbaijan.

The Palace of Shirvanshahs was built on the highest location of the city. It is an example of how a palace can be placed on a complex terrain and still meet the functionality and composition requirements. Its small buildings form an ensemble and have different functions. At the same time, each of them, including the palace, the mosque, the bathhouse, the mausoleum, etc. is a classic example of centuries-long art of polishing. They are in harmony both among themselves and with the environment.

It is difficult to determine the area of its influence. But at the same time, I would like to point to the following fact. At the junction of the 19th and 20th centuries, when Baku was surprising the world with its oil, Frenchman Henri Ater who saw the Palace of Shirvanshahs said, “Why should the fame of oil wells exceed the glory of these historic buildings? ” The Palace of Shirvanshahs is a great school of art for professionals.

The most magnificent architectural monument of Hulaku Khan’s reign is the Maraga observatory built under the guidance of brilliant astronomer Nasir al-Din al-Tusi in 1259. The biggest observatory of the Middle Ages, it was located on a hill near Maraga. The complex covered a large area (347x137 meters). The buildings forming the complex were grouped around the central building Gunbad – the dome. The Maraga observatory became famous not only for its research under the guidance of al-Tusi but also for its architectural design. Prominent mathematician and astronomer of the 14-15th centuries, Jamshid al-Kashi, wrote in a letter to his father that the Ulugh Beg Observatory in Samarkand was built on the basis of Maraga.

Azerbaijan's architectural monuments have attracted the attention of researchers also due to a high professional level of engineering solutions. Most researchers of medieval architecture believe that Azerbaijan is the homeland of the two-tier system of domes, which is considered one of the main systems in this region.

Azerbaijani masters have often dictated fashion for different architectural styles. This can also be attributed to monumental calligraphy, which has become a separate sphere in Islamic architecture. Another fact confirming the skill of medieval Azerbaijani architects is that they were actively involved in construction work across the region. The geography of their work stretched from Berke (Tatarstan) to Cairo, from Delhi to Sarajevo. As one of the most influential centers of the Middle East, Azerbaijan played an important role in the development of medieval architecture of the Muslim world.

REFERENCES: