

ALBANIAN CULT SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

This article gives a brief overview of the Albanian cult symbolism found on objects of material culture (ceramics, items of decoration, weapons, and cult relics) during archaeological excavations on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the 20th and early 21st centuries and studied on the facades and inside the interiors of Albanian Christian temples, on tombstones, as well as on the facades of residential and religious buildings constructed presently. The multi-ethnic and multi religious nature of Azerbaijan's population enabled a syncretism of pagan, Christian and Muslim religious beliefs, rituals, rites, and traditions. Some elements of pre-Christian beliefs are still preserved in the genetic memory of the country's population and are an integral part of the modern Christian and Muslim beliefs of Azerbaijan's ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. A number of national traditions have emerged as a result of the syncretism of faiths. This is evidenced by the celebration of Nowruz holiday (which honors the four primary elements: water, air, fire, and earth), the preservation of reverence for the Moon cult, the honoring of the sanctity of trees and stones in various shrines, and other commonly accepted rites. The Albanian ethno-cultural heritage, which undeniably also includes cult symbolism, is the most significant part of Azerbaijan's rich historical and cultural heritage, reflecting the mutual influence of various ethnic and cultural processes that have occurred in this region over the centuries.

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Introduction

Azerbaijan's Albanian cult symbolism starting from the 4th century BC allows us to trace the syncretism of pagan cult beliefs with other traditions and beliefs. It is a repository of valuable information about the religious worldviews of the Caucasian Albanian population (4th century BC–early 8th century AD), which were traditionally passed down from generation to generation over the centuries with some elements surviving to the present day.

The majority of the cult symbols were carefully studied by scientists such as S.M. Gaziyeu, I.M. Jafarzadeh, T.I. Golubkin, R.M. Vahidov, O.S. Ismizadeh, D.N. Rustamov, F.M. Muradova, J.A. Khalilov, I.H. Narimanov, F.L. Osmanov, A.B. Badalov, A.I. Alakbarov, G.O. Goshgarli, I. Babayev, G. Jabiyev, G.M. Aslanov, N.I. Rzayev, R. Efendi, N.B. Guluzadeh, F.S. Khalilli, G.K. Akhundova, S. Rzayeva, and T. Aliyev.

Albanian cult symbolism in objects of material culture

According to image types, Albanian cult symbolism signs dating from the 4th century BC to the 3rd century AD are classified as **anthropomorphic, astral, geometric, zoomorphic, floral, polymorphic, brands, and signs** (P3aeba, 2013, c.280-292; 2015), and according to the method of representation, as two-dimensional graphics (both as individual symbols and combined in compositions) and plastic three-dimensional figures.

The **anthropomorphic type** includes the following: 1) graphic composite cult images (priests in front of the fire altar; a man in front of the tree of life; a man next to an animal; a man with a star); 2) plastic monumental stone sculptures, chamber sculptures made of limestone, clay, and bronze; anthropomorphic vessels, and figurines on pottery. Monumental stone anthropomorphic sculptures have been found in the village of Shatirli near Barda, as well as in the villages of Khinisli, Dagħ Kolani, and Chiragli of the Shamakhi region. The full-body or knee-to-head statues were carved from large processed blocks of stone, and many of them retained their heads and had crudely depicted facial and body features. According to J. Khalilov, tombstone statues of gods and ancestors with cult characteristics were produced in Albania. N. Rzayev postulated that plastic figures of brave and noble warriors were

used as grave markers. An anthropomorphic vessel has been found in the village of Khinisli (Shamakhi, 3rd century BC–1st century AD) (Ахундова, 2020; Akhundova, 2021, p.57-68; Rzayeva, 2021, p.206-208).

Astral cult symbols have been present on ceramics, metal artifacts, and rock paintings since ancient times.

Strabo's Geography contains the earliest recorded information about the religious beliefs of the Albanian people (1st century BC–1st century AD). "Of the gods, they revere Helios, Zeus, and Selene, especially Selene," the ancient geographer writes (Strabo XI, IV, 7). It's intriguing that some of the grave goods, including ceramic vessels from the Yaloylutepe culture (Rzayeva, 2021, p. 208), are decorated with depictions of the Moon in the shape of a crescent, indicating the existence of a cult dedicated to the goddess of the Moon. Strabo mentioned a temple area of the goddess of the Moon, which included a temple of Selene, on the territory of Albania, close to Iberia. There still exist traditions in Azerbaijan and Eastern Georgia to make crescent-shaped amulets for children as well as for adults to wear gold decoration items, amulets, and beads against the evil eye (Malikov, 2021, p.160-170).

Researchers associate signs of a circle (a simple circle, concentric circles, and three types of a circle with rays) (Müseyibli, 2004, s.75-76) or a spiral (on bronze pendants) with the Sun cult and the flow of life. The symbol of a star (one with eight rays on a ceramic vessel found in Mingachevir near the figures of geese and deer, and one with six rays on a seal found in Mingachevir next to a man-figure) signifies worship of celestial bodies (Rzayeva, 2021, p.208).

The symbols of a cross and swastika, which are associated with the Sun cult, the passage of time, the spread of solar rays to the four cardinal points, and the "tree of life," have been found on the following: Gobustan and Gamigaya rock paintings (Müseyibli, 1998, s.15; Müseyibli, 2004, s.75-76); ceramic tableware (in Kultepe, Nakhchivan; 2nd millennium BC), vessels of Khojaly Gadabay culture (14th–7th centuries BC), kurgans Borsunlu (13th–12th centuries BC) and Sarichoban (12th–11th centuries BC) in Karabakh (Əliyev, 2005, s.61; Aliyev, 2022); decoration items (on a ring and next to a sideways image of a bird on a bead found in Mingachevir) (Rzayeva, 2021, p.208).



Figure 1. Earthenware with symbols of Sun, swastika, deer, and mountains found in Garajamirli village of Shamkir region. The National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

Among the cult symbols on ceramics and decoration items (Ахундова, 2020; Akhundova, 2021, p.57-68), **geometric signs** used as talismans were common: straight or wavy line decoration on ceramics, triangles (gold earrings found in Mingachevir, 7th century BC–5th century AD), rhombuses (ceramic vessel found in Galatepe, 3rd–2nd centuries BC; a seal found in Mingachevir, 3rd–8th centuries AD) (Рзаева, 2015, с.13-14; Rzayeva, 2021, p.208-210).

Zoomorphic cult symbols of a bird, snake, deer, horse, bull, goat, ram, dog, feline predatory animals, wolf, and hare, which are linked to totemism, sun cult, and other pagan beliefs, have been found on Gobustan rock paintings, in the decoration of ceramic dishes, on clay rhytons, seal rings, items of chamber plastic arts made of clay, and decoration items (bronze pendants, a bone comb, and a bronze medallion) (Ахундова, 2020; Akhundova, 2021, p.57-68), in zoomorphic clay vessels and their details, terracotta chamber figurines and graphic images, a clay tableau, and on a silver platter. Images of birds and animals were the primary elements of the religious and mythological ritual system, whose semantics changed in accordance with shifts in people's religious beliefs (Rzayeva, 2021, p.210-211).



Figure 2. A bird symbol on a 5th-6th century stone capital of a column of a Christian church with an Albanian inscription discovered near Mingachevir in Sudagilan settlement. The National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

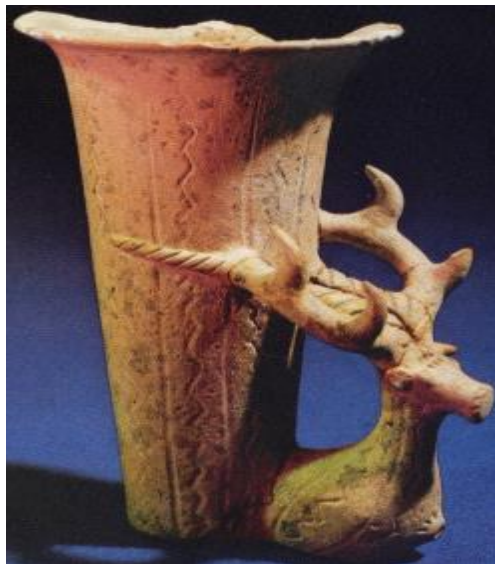


Figure 3. Zoomorphic vessel. Mingachevir, 1st century BC–1st century AD

Floral cult symbols were associated with the Sun cult, fertility, and the overall unity of nature (images on a ceramic vessel found in Mingachevir, 1st century BC–1st century AD).

Graphic and plastic **polymorphic symbols** in the Caucasian Albanian art included a winged man, a winged dog, a griffin (a silver dish found in Garabulag, Gakh region, 2nd to early 3rd centuries AD), and a centaur. Anthropomorphic plastic terracotta figurines from the Albanian period included a human body with a bird head as well as a frog-man, a snake-man, and a three-headed dragon. These symbols combined pagan religious and mythological beliefs with Zoroastrian elements.

In a Mingachevir settlement from the 3rd to 5th centuries, images were found on ceramics - apparently personal seals of potters - which R. Vahidov categorized into about 20 **brands** (quadrangle, circle, oval), **200 signs, and seal rings** (Vahidov, 1961). They featured cult-magical, astral (circle, crescent, cross, swastika, spiral), geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic (deer, aurochs, etc.), floral and pictographic signs, bows, and arrows.

According to N. Rzayev and S. Rzayeva (Рзаяев, 1976, с.190; Rzayeva, 2021, p.212-217), the art of Caucasian Albania reflected all the religious and mythical beliefs of the country's population linked to Zoroastrianism and pagan beliefs in astral cults, the cult of nature, personified in the figure of the goddess of fertility, and totemic cults (animals and plants). As previously stated, Albanian religious symbols were present in the daily lives of Caucasian Albanians in everything: ceramic dishes (which were used daily), decoration items (which was frequently worn), monumental and chamber sculptures, seal rings (used to imprint objects of material culture and to brand horses), and so on. This was reflected in a variety of funeral rites and rituals. The symbols that expressed these beliefs were polysemantic, changing their semantics at various historical stages. Subsequently, as Christianity and Islam spread, some of these ideas were syncretized with them and survived for centuries to the present day, existing in Azerbaijan as cherished age- old national traditions and rites.

Syncretism of Albanian symbolism in architecture and tombstones

The following three Albanian temples were constructed over the centuries in the village of Tugh, the administrative center of the Dizak melikdom, (Qarabaği Mirzə Yusif. Tarixi-safi, 1991, s.15-16; Гаджиева, 2021, p.93-105) which is now a part of the

Khojavend region of Karabakh: Church of the First Martyr St. Stephen, Anapat ¹ (dating approximately to 12th–13th centuries), and St. John's (St. Hovhannes) Church (18th century) (Бархударянц, ч.I, с.72, 74). The St. John's Church shares exterior architectural characteristics with the 18th-century Albanian Church of Saint Eliseus (Jotaari Church) in the village of Nij, Gabala region, demonstrating the commonality of the architectural traditions of Albanian religious structures on the right and left banks of the Kura.



Figure 4. St. John's Church before restoration. Tugh village of Khojavend region

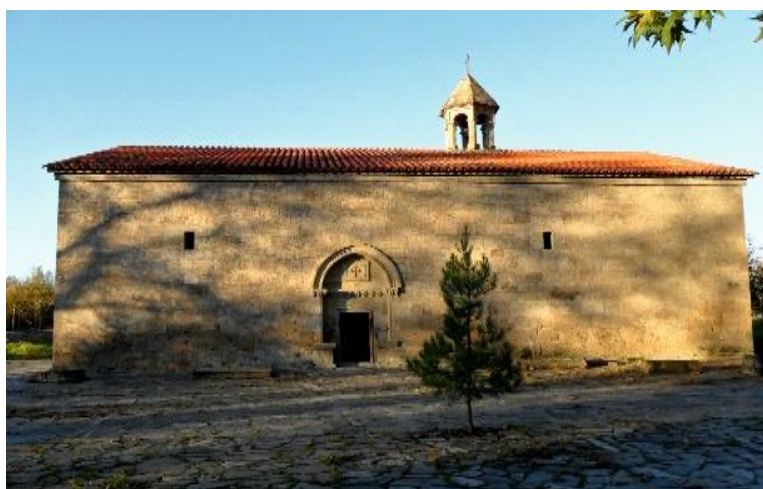


Figure 5. Church of Saint Eliseus (Jotaari Church). Nij village of Gabala region
The more ancient graves behind St. John's Church are arranged in a specific

¹ An unnamed church, chapel, or skete built outside the village was referred to as anapat.

order. Some of them have tombstones with tops that, when carefully examined during archaeological excavations, can help accurately determine the direction in which the corpse is buried. The drawings on some tombstones are typical of Albanian burials found throughout Karabakh and on the Kura's left bank. This indicates that the individuals buried here belonged to the same ethnocultural community.

Some tombstones have images on their sides framed by ornaments of a repeating pattern of flowers with three petals that resemble a grape leaf or woven waves with a Sun symbol in the center of each wave. In general, the drawings depict the Sun symbol, horsemen, women, and men holding jugs and bowls used for wine (considering grape bunches occasionally depicted nearby), as well as a sword in the shape of an Albanian cross.



Figure 6. Sun symbol



Figure 7. Images of horsemen



Figure 8. Sun symbol and Albanian cross

It should be noted that symbols of a grape leaf and the Sun are depicted inside two crossed triangles (similar to the Jewish symbol of the Star of David) on the Albanian cross of the temple in the Nij village of the Gabala region, on the 9th-century mouflon-shaped tombstone in the Boyuk Mazra village of the Basarkechar region, and on the tombstone in the Gandzasar monastery of the Kalbajar region.

Given the presence of Jewish communities in Azerbaijan since ancient times (Гаджиева, 2018, p.110-119), symbolism resembling the Star of David is quite understandable. The preaching of Christianity in Albania was associated with the missionary activity of the Apostle Bartholomew, as well as St. Eliseus and St. Dadi, disciples of the Apostle Thaddeus. For centuries, the Albanian Apostolic Church maintained contact with Jerusalem, where the Albanians built nine monasteries (Каланкатуйский, 1861, II, с.230).

As for ram-shaped tombstones found in Azerbaijan, it should be noted that they are most typical of Turkic burials. One of the Turkic ethnic groups of the Albanian period, for example, were the Khazars, who attacked Albania more than once. The Albanian clergy attempted to convert them to Christianity by sending missionaries. The Khazars, however, as is well known, adopted Judaism.



Figure 9. Albanian-Udi cross. Nij village of Gabala region



Figure 10. 9th-century mouflon-shaped tombstone. Boyuk Mazra village of Basarkechar region



Figure 11. Tombstone of Prince of Lower Khachen Jalal III, a member of Hasan-Jalal family (1431). Gandzasar monastery. Vank village of Kalbajar region

The primary symbols - the Sun, a flower (or a grape leaf crowning three sides of a cross), an ornamental flower, and a representation of a tree - are identical when we compare the Albanian Udi cross image to the drawings on the tombstones of St. John's Church studied in the village of Tugh. This identity implies a shared set of religious rituals and traditions. Albanian cult symbols are very common in Christian burials on the Kura's left bank and throughout Karabakh.

The Sun symbols have survived to this day, both on ancient tombstones in Karabakh and on the Kura's left bank, and on wooden or stone elements of various buildings. This reflects the age-old genetic memory, as well as the continuous syncretism of religious traditions. The Abu Muslim mosque in the village of Griz in Azerbaijan's Guba region is one example. The Griz are descended from one of the 26 Albanian tribes. The mosque's wooden beam bears carved Albanian Sun symbols, which are frequently seen on structures in the Guba region's villages of Khinalug, Budug, and Dzhek, where the descendants of the Albanians, or the Shahdag group of ethnic groups, reside. As you can see, these Sun symbols are identical to the designs on the tombstones in the village of Tugh.



Figure 12. Abu Muslim Mosque in Griz village of Guba region
Images of horsemen (sometimes holding a bird) and women and men holding

jugs and bowls can also be found. Viticulture was one of the economic sectors in Karabakh. Images of grapes and people with jugs and bowls make sense when we consider that Christian Albanians used wine both in everyday life and during religious rituals (communion, weddings, and funerals).

The family mausoleum of the Melik Shahnazarov was built in the Khojaly region of Karabakh, south-west of the village of Chanakhchi (Avetaranots)², near the ruins of Kusanats Anapat (Maiden Hermitage), presumably dating back to the 5th-7th centuries, during the early period of the melikdom of Varanda. A typical Albanian tombstone design, including symbols of the Sun, a horseman holding a bird, and individuals holding wine bowls, has been preserved on a tombstone from the 18th century in the church's vestibule (Баратов, 1992, с.133, 135; Мкртчян, 1988, с.143).

The cult **symbol of a snake** seen on Albanian-era ceramics and jewelry likely served as an amulet or talisman and was linked to concepts such as the snake goddess, the underworld (Пзаева, 2015, с.8-10; Rzayeva, 2021, p.210), the flexibility of female nature, and secret forces unknown to man.

The 5th-6th century Albanian monastery Agoglan in the Lachin region of Karabakh is associated with a legend about a snake that got into the cauldron of food for the temple's builders and a bird that saved them from poisoning.

The carved relief image of a snake on the left side of the window in the central part of the southern nave of the 17th-century Albanian temple in the village of Hunarli (now part of the Khojavend region of Karabakh), formerly known as Tsakuri and subject to the meliks of Dizak, is of particular interest. It should be noted that proper name endings in -uri, -ori, and -ari are very common in the Udi language, so it can be assumed that the residents of the village were Udi. According to Bishop M. Barkhudaryants, in 1682, "Archimandrite Hakob, a disciple of the great Esayi, Archimandrite of Krtchevan, from the village of Taghlar, appointed by Bishop Yeremia³, the Patriarch of Aghuank, as the eparchial head of several Guz villages ..."⁴ built the temple of Tsaghkavank in the center of the village (Бархударянц, ч.I, с.71). This church was part of the cult heritage of the Albanian Catholicosate until 1836.

Since ancient times, when a new moon appeared, people in Azerbaijan stretched their hands to heaven and prayed to the moon. This tradition, which is still practiced

² The center of the melikdom of Varanda

³ Albanian Catholicos Yeremia Hasan-Jalal (1676–1700) (Nikonorov, 2005, p.182).

⁴ Guz villages - villages located on the northern slope of the mountain

in many parts of the country, merged with Islamic ideology, and at the sight of the new moon, Muslim believers still recite salawat according to Islamic canons.



Figure. 13. Snake symbol in a 17th-century Albanian church. Village Hunarli of Khojavend region

Conclusion

The study of Albanian cult symbolism allows for a more in-depth and comprehensive examination of the syncretism of pre-Christian, Christian, and Muslim religious beliefs and rituals of Azerbaijan's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. This, in turn, enables a better understanding of the succession of religious traditions that have been reflected in the worldviews of ethnic and sub-ethnic groups residing in this territory over the centuries, and expressed in objects of material culture, architecture, and funeral rites.

It was the syncretism of all these beliefs that prevented any of the religions existing in this territory from becoming more orthodox, and was one of the factors in the establishment of tolerance amongst ethnic groups over the centuries. Tolerance has laid the groundwork for multicultural values in the relationship between ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in the Republic of Azerbaijan at this stage of our statehood's development.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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