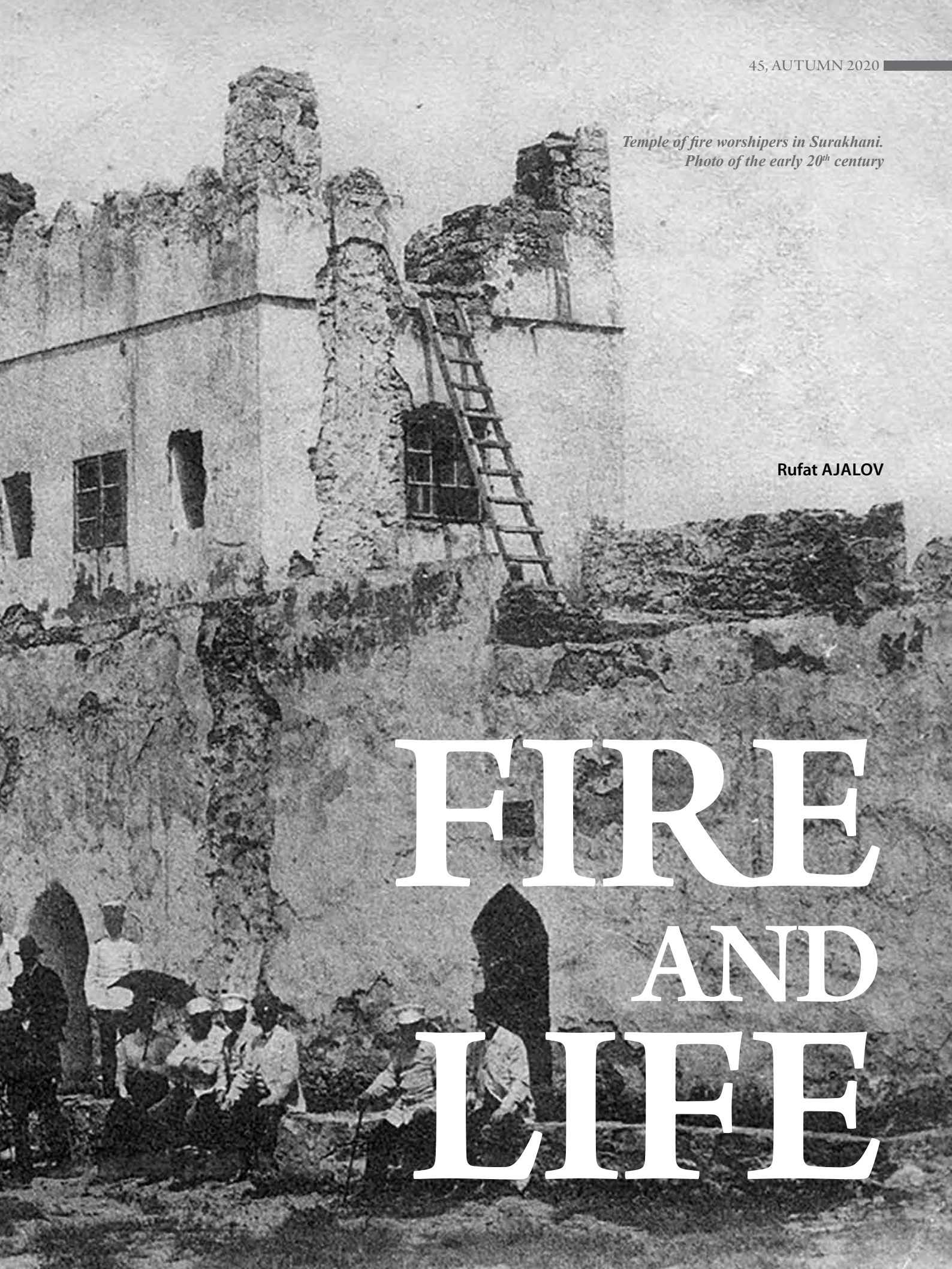




*Temple of fire worshipers in Surakhani.
Photo of the early 20th century*

Rufat AJALOV

FIRE AND LIFE





Azerbaijan has long been called the Land of Fire. In the distant past, people not only used the wonderful properties of “unquenchable fire” here but also worshiped it and created shrines and temples of fire. Thousands of fires burned throughout the country at the time – on the altars of sanctuaries and magnificent temples, on the altars in houses – ordinary and rich ones. Worshiping these natural fires, fire-worshippers of ancient times built shrines around them – called “ateshgah”.

“The city of Baku has many items worthy of the full and deep attention of tourists of all kinds; but without a doubt, the unquenchable fires are a one-of-a-kind phenomenon that attracts the eyes of a traveler,” Russian oriental scientist and traveler I. Berezin, who visited Baku in August 1842, recalled.

Near Baku, in the Absheron village of Surakhani, there is one of Azerbaijan’s most interesting and peculiar historical and architectural sites – the temple of fire worshipers known as Ateshgah. “Eternal fires”, sports of gas coming from under the ground, burnt in this place from time immemorial to the middle of the 19th century. They attracted people’s attention, captivating them with the extraordinary sight of a living flame. The ancient man, for whom fire was a powerful force, sometimes good

and sometimes formidable, equipped the mysterious fires of Absheron with divine power.

The earliest mention of the fires of the Absheron peninsula dates back to the 5th century AD, when the Huns raiding Iran once used a different way to go back and were struck by the sight of fires rising from underwater rocks (1). The Arab geographer of the first half of the 13th century, Yakut Hamawi, mentions the “burning land”. Similar information about the “burning land” was also shared by 13th century historian Zakariya al-Qazwini. Academician V. Bartold noted that the unpublished Persian manuscript of the 13th century, which was a geographical research, described the fires near Baku: “... within Shirvan and Baku, on the surface of the earth there are places where fire constantly burns. There are two such places: one large and the other smaller” (2). Author of the first half of the 14th century Hamdulla Qazwini also mentions unquenchable lights in his description of Baku.

An interesting description of the city of Baku belongs to Abd-al-Rashid Bakuvi, a native of Baku who lived at the beginning of the 15th century: “One farsang [Persian measure of distance equal to about 5 kilometers], from this city there is a place that constantly burns; it is said to be a sulfur mine. There is a village near this fire where Christians make lime and sell it...”

Temple of fire worshipers in Surakhani. Fragment of a postcard from the late 19th century

Turkish traveler of the first half of the 17th century Katib Celebi, in his work "Cehan Nume", mentions the underground fires of Baku. Another Turkish traveler of the second half of the 17th century, Evliya Celebi, also mentions the eternal flames. "In the vicinity of Baku there are salt marshes. If a man or a horse steps on them there, their legs will burn. In some places, caravans merchants dug up the earth and food was ready from the heat of the earth in one instant – an amazing creation of God" (3).

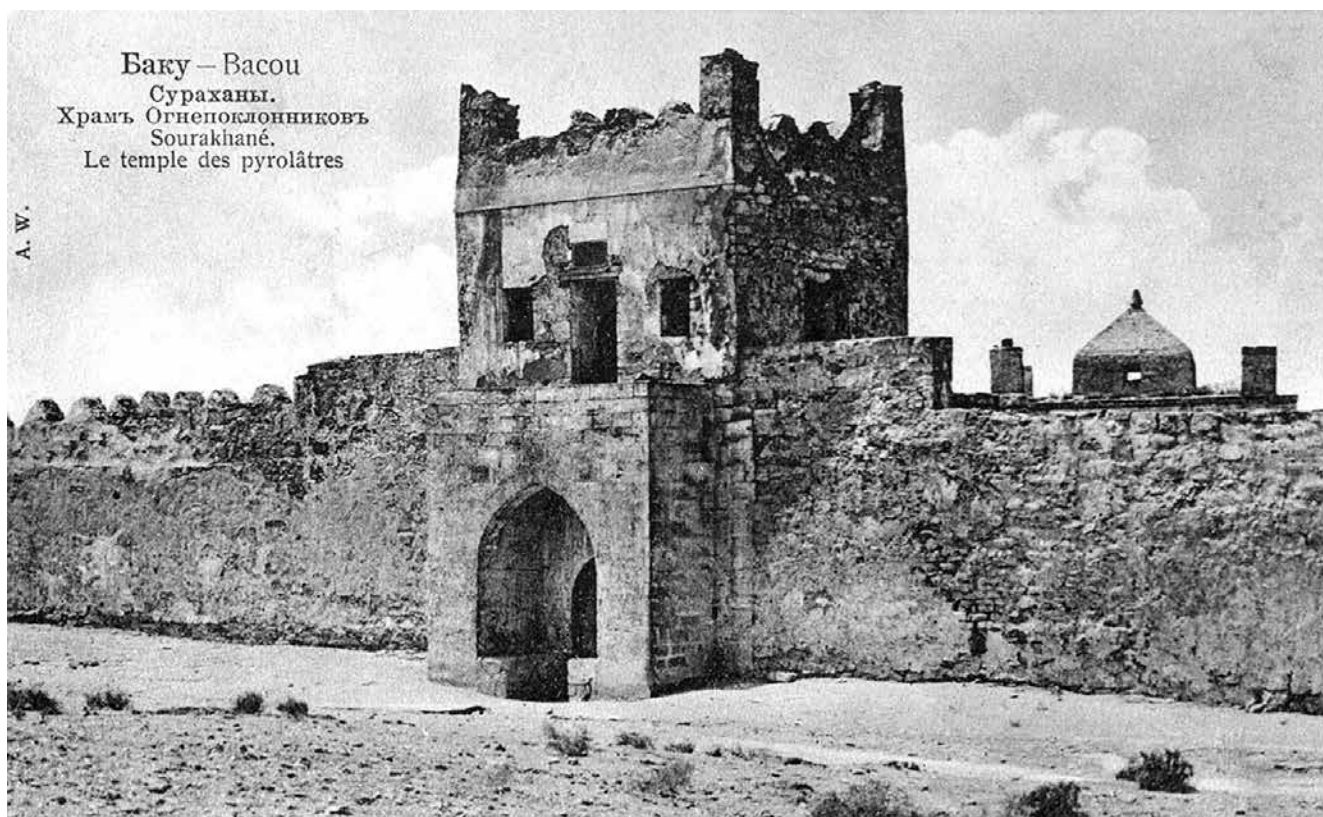
This is some information of eastern authors about the "eternal fires" of Baku. But none of them mentioned the "ateshgah" temple, although Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest religions in the East, was especially widespread in Azerbaijan and Iran, where there were many temples of fire-worshippers. According to Hamawi, there were "sanctuaries of magicians, an ancient house of fire and a high palace built by Key Khosrov in the Azerbaijani city of Gandzak."

In 1683, German traveler Engelbert Kempfer described the Surakhani fires as well, describing the place as a "burning field". "Here we found about a dozen people working near the flames: some put copper and clay



vessels on a not very blazing cleft and cooked food for residents of the neighboring village of Sroganni Stesgava which was named so after this fire. Others placed a heap of stones collected in other places on the fire, burned lime and collected the finished ones to take them away on ships. Two descendants of the ancient Persian tribe, Hindu fire-worshippers, sat idly around the wall they had built and prayed to the eternal deity, looking at the flames coming out of the earth and worshipping them..."

It is evident from the above description that at the end of the 17th century there was a certain structure in





the form of a wall near the Surakhani flames, possibly the remains of an old Zoroastrian temple. This is confirmed by Kempfer's drawing, which shows a semicircular wall half human height.

The French traveler, Jesuit Willot, who lived in Azerbaijan from 1689, reports on the construction of a temple on this site: "... a volcano is visible near the well, spewing fire from eight or 10 different vents. The Persians, once fire-worshippers, call this place Atesh-gia, which means the home of fire. It is still revered by the Hindus and Gyrrs, descendants of ancient Persians whom I call so in contrast to those born long ago and called the Persians ever since. They come here from various places to worship and cast silver and gold coins according to their superstition and constantly have two dervishes or monks of their sect to protect this sacred fire..." This information shows that there was only a temple here and no building with cells yet in 1689.

German traveler I. Lerch, who visited the temple in 1733, already points to buildings near the Surakhani flames: "... in 20 years, a stone house was built there. Before that, there was a small house there. In it, there were six cells, in which there were 12 gebras or ancient Persian fire worshippers, of whom two always read books or

prayed. One of them was 80 years old, he had been to St. Petersburg and spoke Russian quite well" (4).

This information of Lerch suggests that there was one small building here until 1713. Apparently it had been mentioned earlier by Kempfer, whereas the caravanserai building, which then consisted of two wings, was built later, around 1713.

In 1747, during a second stay in Baku, Lerch visited the temple again. He wrote the following about it: "At this time, the unquenchable flames were in poor condition; there were more than 20 fire worshippers. There were also more Indians than before. They built small stone huts with arches around the beautiful fire, so that there were no more than two small places the size of a cart wheel that remained where the fire was still burning. Everything else 20 fathoms long was covered with ground and built up" (5).

A detailed description of the Surakhani temple can be found in the writings of subsequent travelers. Thus, English traveler J. Ganway, who visited Ateshgah in 1746, described the building of the caravanserai and the temple itself, indicating the presence of 40 or 50 fire worshippers whom he also called Indians.

In the same period (1747), another English traveler

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John Cook, a surgeon at the Russian Embassy of Prince Golitsyn in Persia, visited the temple. He gives the following description of Ateshgah: "On 11 February, our messenger, with many people of his retinue, went to see this famous fire. Where there were supposed to be amazing buildings, our company saw only a miserable hall and another very shabby room where believers lived. There were no more than 10 of them then. They let our people in the room quite willingly. There was a detached place there, like our choirs in Protestant temples, which we can describe as their altar."

Academician I. G. Gmelin, who visited Ateshgah in 1770, mentioned three hermit Indians and noted that original buildings fell apart only in some places. All this is reflected in his drawing.

French traveler Ernest Orsol, who visited the temple around 1883, counted about 30 rooms in his detailed description.

The most complete information about the Ateshgah temple is given by English traveler Jackson, who pointed to the presence of 18 inscriptions, of which one in the Persian language dates from 1158 of the Hijra, or 1745 according to the Gregorian calendar.

Outstanding Russian chemist Dmitry Mendeleev, who visited the temple four times (1863, 1880 and twice in 1866), wrote: "... Many centuries ago, fire worshipers settled here on these flames. Indians built a monastery. It stands near a local factory. The monastery is truly amazing. A white stone wall encloses the courtyard. It is a walled area, cells and shacks are clean and coated with clay. Fire burns on the altar – i.e. gas, next to it is the cross and the image of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, an Indian idol, a tambourine and various pebbles. An Indian's prayer (he is now alone, quite handsome, in a white turban, in white clothes with a black beard) begins with him blowing into a shell, then praying, watering the altar, smoking incense, singing, squatting, rattling tambourines, praying for all nations and ranks, and treating you with candy. In the courtyard's interior there are many pits lined with stone and a monk keeping the fire burning in them – gas coming from under the ground always burns. In the middle of the courtyard, there is a temple or a stone gazebo in the Persian and Indian style with four columns towering in the corners. These are pipes bringing gas from under the ground. On their ends, gas burns and its flames sway in the wind



*Inscription in Sanskrit in the temple
of fire worshipers in Surakhani*

– the wind often extinguishes them. Inside the gazebo there is a round pit where gas is also burning. At night, the sight is astonishing, flames burn not only in the monastery, but in many places around it.”

Details are also provided by 19th century traveler Henri (1803) and French consul Gamba (1820), who confirm the presence of the battlement of the altar and 20 cells.

Starting from the first quarter of the 19th century, Ateshgah was visited by a number of Western European and Russian travelers: Eichwald (1825), Keppel (1825), Berezin (1842), A. Dumas (1858), Dorn (1860), Stronovsky (1866) and others, who left detailed information about this amazing temple.

As is evident from the above, the historical roots of the monument go back to ancient times, when the cult of fire, Zoroastrianism, was the dominant religion in Azerbaijan. The temple was built by local craftsmen and, therefore, the features and traditions of Absheron architecture are so clearly visible in this monument.

The temple stands in the depths of a vast desert square. Ascetically rigorous, it does not strike with either size or splendor of architectural forms. Typical Absheron architecture is a strongly protruding portal with a deep lancet niche and the traditional “balakhana” (guest room) towering above it, through which you can go into the vast pentagonal courtyard with 25 cells and the central altar. The walls were built in the tradition of Absheron residential folk architecture. The surface of the wall, made of unclean limestone, is cut through by lancet doorways through which light and air penetrated into the premises. There is a low sidewalk along the wall.

The central altar of the temple is a small quadrangular rotunda crowned with a quadrangular dome. At the corners of the roof there are stone pipes, from which

sheaves of flame burst during the service hours. Fire burned inside the rotunda as well, visible through the arched openings in the walls. The cleanliness of the masonry, the small two-sided ladders adjacent to the arches, the finely carved inscription – all this in the illumination of fiery flashes creates a memorable image of the organic architectural and artistic unity of stone and fire.

“Through a door completely covered with flames, you enter the interior of the building. It consists of a huge square courtyard, in the middle of which stands an altar with a dome. An eternal flame burns in the center of the altar. In the four corners of the dome, as if on giant tripods, four hearths burn”, this is how great French writer A. Dumas, the father, who visited the Ateshgah in 1861, described his impressions at the entrance to the temple.

Indeed, soot from the flames is still visible in the side niches of the entrance.

If you look closely at the soil in the northwestern part of the central altar, you can see the exposed red rocky base, once burnt by tongues of flames bursting from the ground, and imagination will take us to the distant past, when there was no temple here and eternal flames glowed in this deserted place.

The dome of the central altar is of a regular quadrangular shape, turning into a conical top. A trident, a symbol of the deity of Shiva, is stuck in its southern edge, indicating that the Indian merchants who built the altar at their own expense and were the last to leave the temple, belonged to the Shivaite sect.

Despite the semicircular shape of the openings of the central altar, which differ from the lancet openings of the surrounding buildings, it does not fall out of the general architectural background of the temple. Inside the central altar, in the center of its floor there is a cult pit, in which a fire burned during worship. Above the pit, under the dome of the rotunda, a bell once hung, calling for worship.

In the 15-18th centuries, when trade and economic relations of Azerbaijan with foreign countries, especially with India, developed extensively, more and more fire-worshiping pilgrims came to Absheron. At the beginning of the 18th century, the first structure the future temple appeared – the “stable”. It was built quite well, in the style of the Absheron caravanserai. Everything here is adapted for the rest of travelers and animals: an extensive platform “seki” for people, external and internal

Temple of fire worshipers. Contemporary photo



hitching pens and animal feeders. It was a temporary shelter, while residential cells were intended for a long or permanent stay in the temple.

A cell, like all others, is arranged like a traditional rural dwelling that are still available in some parts in Absheron. Smooth plastered walls, vaulted ceiling, a niche in the walls of for household utensils, one or two beds. Light and air come in through a simple lancet aperture. In one of the niches, there is a hearth – here the sacred fire carried the everyday household service: heating, lighting and feeding. Unlike ordinary rural housing, the altar of fire served as a mandatory element in the cells of the temple. In the corner or just against the wall stood a stone elevation on which a gas lamp burned.

One of the most important premises of the temple was a chapel, which was a spacious and very elongated cell. At the north end, right of the entrance, behind the stone partition was an altar. The rest, the southern part, was intended for the inhabitants of the temple who came for the prayer. Narrow sidewalks are arranged along the walls and a stone couch adjoins the outer side of the altars and partitions.

The main attraction of this unique monument of Azerbaijani and world culture is the stone-carved Indian inscriptions placed above the entrances. In addition to Sanskrit religious sayings, inscriptions in the modern languages of India give the names of donor merchants and the date of construction.

Among the inscriptions there are six- and even seven-line ones. The six-line inscription in the nagari

script on the temple's earliest construction, the "stable", begins with the glorification of the god of wisdom and trade Geneshe and further says that the building was constructed in 1714 AD by carpenter Tarachandra. It is worth explaining that Tarachandra was a merchant who belonged to the honorary caste of "carpenters". The seven-line inscription in the Sikh font of gurmukhi on cell No. 20, which begins with the untranslatable religious and mystical syllable "om" and the formula for worshipping the guru, or the teacher, is distinguished by its good quality of carving. It further states that a certain "Bava of Jadusah ... built this sacred place ..." The date of construction is not indicated.

The middle stage in the development of the temple includes two inscriptions placed one below the other above the entrance to the second stable – cell No. 8.



Stone with the image of a lion on the territory of the temple



The upper one is Indian, completed with nagari script and the lower is the only Persian one in the temple. The Indian inscription shows the date of Samvat in 1862 and in the Persian shows 1158 of the Hijra. Both dates correspond to 1745.

On one of the cells of the eastern part of the temple, there is a seven-line inscription in nagari script, beginning with a swastika, which for many peoples symbolized the sun and light.

The manner and quality of the carving of the inscription on cell No. 17 is similar to the Sikh inscription on cell No. 20 – it also begins with the symbol “om” and expressions of respect for the guru. It can be assumed that both inscriptions were made by one carver. The inscription says that this “sacred place was built” by “baba” (Ta) Gasakha, a resident of the city of Bamge.

The architecture of Ateshgah contains traces of similarity with some Zoroastrian temples of India. An example is the Baniyar Fire Temple in the Jelam River Valley in North India, where temple buildings are also located around the quadrangular rotunda of the central altar. The difference is only in the nature of architectural and artistic forms: whereas Ateshgah with its ascetic forms represents a characteristic creation of Absheron archi-

ture, the architecture of India has very complicated forms of architectural and artistic elements.

The temple of fire worshipers Ateshgah has recently been restored. On the basis of documents, descriptions and sketches of the 17-19th centuries, an extensive exhibition has been created, enabling familiarization with the works of Azerbaijani architects and the culture and life of fire-worshippers. 🌟

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