

# Architectural Structure of the XVI–XIX Century Nakhchivan Shrines

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Received: 26 Dec 2024

Revised: 14 Feb 2025

Accepted: 22 Feb 2025

The religious architectural monuments of Nakhchivan, including shrines, are of great significance in terms of both the historical and cultural heritage of the region. These monuments belonging to different periods of Nakhchivan are not only places where religious life and belief systems are represented, but they also reflect the development and change of local architectural traditions. Despite the paucity of research conducted on the subject, there is a dearth of information in the scientific literature concerning these monuments. The primary rationale for this phenomenon pertains to the architectural design of these monuments, which is characterized by a simplicity that has hindered their integration into scientific research over an extended period. However, the architectural features and forms exhibited by these monuments are of paramount importance in facilitating comprehension of their historical evolution and the development of associated belief systems. Despite the ostensible simplicity of certain shrines, their significance must not be understated. Indeed, these monuments serve as invaluable repositories of knowledge, providing a comprehensive understanding of Nakhchivan's profound religious and cultural heritage, as well as the daily lives and spiritual beliefs of our ancestors. For instance, in certain monuments, architectural structures, particularly construction methodologies, doors and other components demonstrate the utilization of local construction techniques and materials. These monuments facilitate the elucidation of the evolution of the local architectural school of Nakhchivan and the cultural influences on the historical monuments of the region. The architectural features of some of the shrines, especially their structure and construction materials in accordance with local traditions, serve as a significant indicator for comprehending the cultural heritage of Nakhchivan. Despite undergoing certain alterations in different periods, these monuments have maintained their fundamental architectural style and functions. These sacred sites play an important role in maintaining the region's ancient belief systems and preserving its cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Nakhchivan, shrines, architectural elements of the holy places (pir), architectural style, comparative research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The shrines of Nakhchivan are of exceptional importance in the history and religious and cultural heritage of Azerbaijan. These shrines are not only places where religious rituals are performed, but also occupy an important place as an expression of the spiritual life and socio-cultural development of the region. These sacred sites, covering different periods of Nakhchivan, reflect the beliefs and lifestyles of our ancestors, as well as the ways in which people in each period met their religious and cultural needs. The architectural features of these shrines are of particular interest, as they provide insight into the historical and cultural development of the region. The shrines of Nakhchivan encompass not only places of worship related to Islam, but also holy places existed in pre-Islamic periods. These monuments, which belong to both the ancient and medieval periods, serve as a testament to the

religious and cultural life of each period. Furthermore, these places reflect the interaction between belief systems and cultures that emerged in the historical context of the region. The architectural composition of these shrines provides a comprehensive understanding of their structural characteristics. While the majority of shrines are characterized by a modest architectural style, each shrine is distinguished by its distinct plan structure. The architectural plan of the shrines offers a comprehensive study of their spatial organization, internal and external construction, materials utilized, and construction technology. The majority of the shrines were constructed in rectangular or circular forms, with some exhibiting distinctive planning and decorative elements. The plan structure of the shrines also reflects their adaptation to the social and religious life of the era, with simpler designs intended to meet the daily religious needs of the local population. The development of certain shrines was influenced by various empires and dynasties over the course of centuries and on the other hand by the beliefs and traditions specific to the local populace.

## 1. SHRINES

The 16th–19th century shrines in Nakhchivan are distinguished by a simplicity and minimalism in architectural structure. The majority of these shrines comprise a single room, with only a few monuments featuring a two-room plan. Some of the two-room sanctuaries have undergone expansions, with additional rooms added to their original designs, resulting in alterations to their original forms. The architectural structure of the majority of shrines of the XV–XIX centuries is rectangular (square), though some feature hexagonal and octagonal plans. These varied plan forms, in conjunction with the simplicity of the architectural style, reflect the unique characteristics and local traditions inherent in each shrine. The ideological elements incorporated into religious buildings are more pronounced, and their architectural and constructive features are more intricate and complex (Mammadova & Mammadova, 2013).

## 2. BABA YAGUB PIRI

Baba Yagub piri is a religiously significant shrine located on the banks of the Araz River in Dasta village, Ordubad region of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. This shrine, as one of the most magnificent shrines of Nakhchivan, attracts attention with both its architectural features and cultural and spiritual significance. The initial architectural structure of Baba Yagub piri was built in a simple and functional style. In earlier times, the shrine was a square-shaped building consisting of a single room. However, over time, as a result of renovation and expansion works carried out here, the structure of the shrine has changed significantly and the dimensions of the complex have been increased.

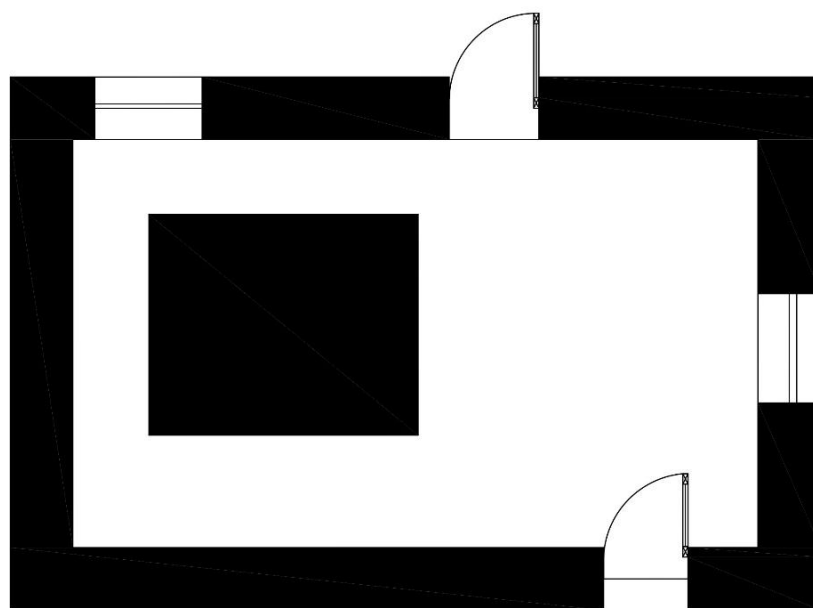


Figure 1. The plan of Baba Yagub piri (Mahammad Bayramov)

The expansion of the shrine has resulted in the addition of various buildings, including structures specifically constructed for the purpose of hosting religious ceremonies. These alterations have served to further consolidate Baba Yagub piri's role not only as a site of religious devotion but also as a center that caters to the spiritual needs of the local community. Within the precincts of the shrine lies a sacred tomb, which is the grave of Baba Yagub. Thousands of pilgrims annually come to this sacred place to visit this tomb. It is noteworthy that the layout of Baba Yagub piri bears a striking resemblance to that of another renowned sanctuary, Pirmaqsud piri, situated in the village of Vanand in Ordubad region. Initially, both shrines comprised a simple room, which underwent expansion through the addition of various structures and rooms over time. However, these alterations have had a profound impact on the shrines' original architectural integrity, hindering the preservation of their historical components. Despite the significant alterations that the original architectural form of Baba Yagub piri has undergone in the present day, its historical and religious significance has remained unabated. This shrine plays a crucial role in the preservation of both the cultural and religious heritage of Nakhchivan and the maintenance of the historical and belief systems of this region. This shrine is not merely an architectural monument; it also serves as a significant center in the religious life of the surrounding community. This is the place uniting the ancient belief systems of Nakhchivan, the spiritual life and social structure of the people.



*Figure 2. Previous photo of Baba Yagub piri*



*Figure 3. Recent photo of Baba Yagub piri (Mahammad Bayramov)*

Dasta piri, located in the eastern part of Dasta village in Ordubad region, shares architectural similarities with the original form of Baba Yagub Pir. The structure of the Dasta Pir is characterized by a simple, one-room design. Subsequently, an additional square-shaped room was built on the east side of the shrine for visitors' praying. A white stone bearing footprints is located in the center of the room. The shrine was preserved and maintained only due to the care and efforts of the local population. A comparison of Baba Yagub piri with Haji Aslan Bey's mosque in Mashtaga village reveals certain similarities in the configuration of the plan structure (Fatullayev, 2013). Both monuments feature a rectangular plan and two rooms. However, while the original plan of Baba Yagub piri featured a single room, the expansion work carried out at a later date resulted in the addition of a second room, situated adjacent to the primary room. This architectural feature serves to underscore the structural parallels between the two edifices. From the perspective of the plan solution based on a simple rectangular architectural structure, Haji Aziz Mosque located in Mashtaga also parallels the plan structure of Baba Yagub piri, and there are structural similarities between these two monuments (Fatullayev, 2013).



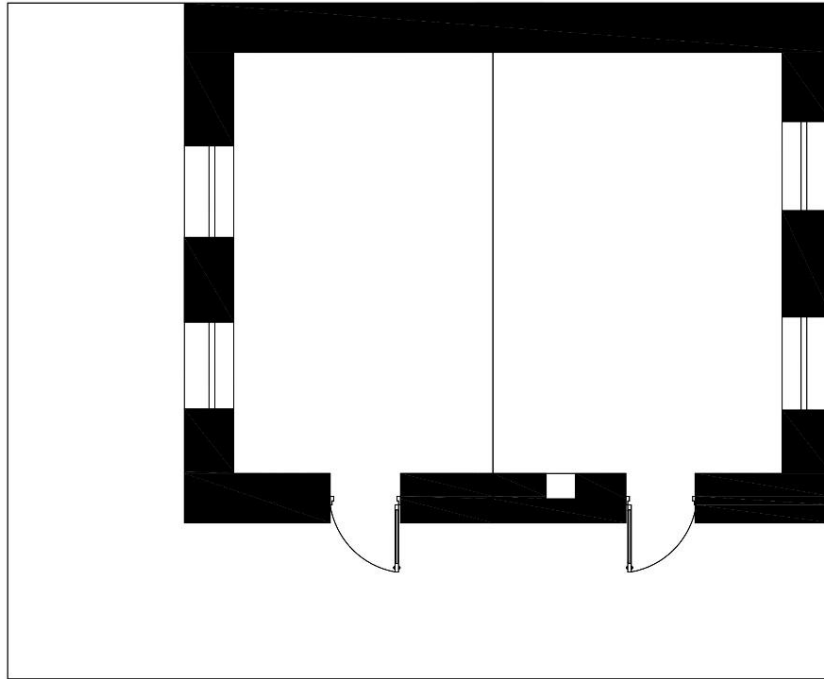
*Figure 4. Exterior appearance of Dasra piri*

### **3. ARAFSA PRI**

Arafsa piri is a shrine located in Arafsa village of Julfa region in Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which occupies a significant position in the religious and cultural heritage of the region. This shrine is situated on a high hill and attracts visitors with both its natural landscape and religious significance. The architectural structure of Arafsa piri, in accordance with its historical and religious meaning, is simple, but in a unique style. The original structure of the shrine consisted of two rooms and a rectangular shaped building. Internally, the shrine contains the graves of holy saints, which are of great spiritual and religious significance. These graves are located in the inner area of the sanctuary, thereby reinforcing the faith and spiritual bonds of those who visit. On the south and west sides of Arafsa piri, there is a large and long balcony that complements the exterior of the building. This balcony is distinct from other parts of the shrine in both aesthetic and functional terms, thereby creating favorable conditions for visitors to perform religious rituals. The shrine, dating back to the XIX century, also houses the graves of several saints in its courtyard, thus rendering it a significant religious site for visitors. Celtis shrub, located on the east side of Arafsa piri, is another notable feature of the shrine. In antiquity, this shrub was regarded as a sacred site in its own right, and the initial phase of shrine consisted of this shrub. Subsequently, during the construction of the shrine, later the building of the shrine was erected around this sacred shrub.

The black stone, situated in proximity to the shrine, is imbued with significance within the context of local beliefs. The architectural and plan structure of Arafsa piri bears notable similarities to that of other renowned shrines in Nakhchivan, particularly Baba Yagub piri and Pirmagsud piri. The original design of these three shrines comprised a single room, which underwent subsequent expansion and augmentation. However, each shrine exhibits distinctive architectural features and historical and religious content. These similarities were attributed under the shared influences of the construction technique and religious beliefs that prevailed during that historical period, reflecting the significant role these shrines played in the collective spiritual life of the community.

In terms of location and architectural structure, Arafsa piri bears a resemblance to Ulavi piri, situated in Ustupu village of Ordubad region. Ulavi piri dates back to the XIV-XVI centuries, Ulavi piri has undergone significant repair and restoration, and is surrounded by a Muslim cemetery. The local population considers the plane tree near the shrine to be sacred, and it is presumed that the shrine originated on the grave of one of the Islamic saints.



*Figure 5. The plan of Arafsa piri (Mahammad Bayramov)*

The Almazzade mosque in Mardakan village is a quadrangular structure in terms of its plan shape (Fatullayev, 2013). The architectural plan of the mosque, exhibits certain similarities with Arafsa piri, yet also displays marked differences. A distinguishing feature of the Almazzade mosque is the dome at the top, which is absent in the Arafsa piri.

The architectural complex "Nardaran piri" in the village of Nardaran includes several mausoleums, a mosque, historical and artistic masonry in the form of headstones and sanduqas (tomb chests). One of the interesting structures of the complex is the mosque and mausoleum monument, which was excavated from under the sand in 1950.

This building, which has a rectangular plan, consists of two rooms: the first of these is the mosque, and the second is a tomb. The tomb itself does not have a separate door, and access is only possible through the double leaf door, which opens from the mosque (Mashadikhanum, 2010). The above monument demonstrates certain similarities with Arafsa piri in terms of structure. As in Arafsa piri, this monument consisted of two rooms and was built in a rectangular plan.

The Dede Gunesh Piri, located in the forest of the Dede Gunesh village in Shamakhi, is locally referred to as "Pir-i Sultan Dede Gunesh". This mausoleum comprises two rooms and previously featured a dome, with two graves located within one of the rooms (Mashadikhanum, 2010). A comparison of the plan structure of the Dede Gunesh piri with that of the Arafsa piri reveals a high degree of similarity, given the presence of two rooms in the former and three graves in the latter. This observation is further supported by the finding that both monuments possess analogous features.





*Figure 6. Exterior appearance of Arafsa piriç previous photo*



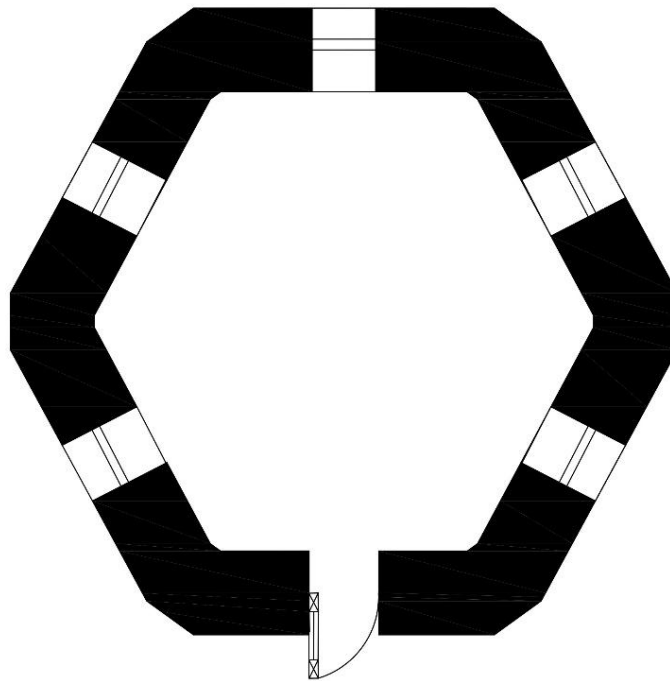
*Figure 7. Exterior appearance of Arafsa piri, recent photo (Mahammad Bayramov)*



*Figure 8. Exterior appearance of Ulavi piri*

#### 4. SEYIDLER PIRI

Seyidler piri is located in Aza village of Ordubad region. The building's hexagonal plan is a rarity in Nakhchivan, being observed primarily in the construction of tombs in medieval Islamic architecture. The interior of the structure consists of a single room, which houses a grave. The monument previously featured open windows in each wall; however, these were subsequently closed. These elements were of particular significance in terms of the lighting and ventilation of the space. The shrine was constructed from local stone. Using rough-hewn stones serve both to enhance its durability and to stylistically align it with other regional tombs. Seyidler piri stands as a fascinating example of the Nakhchivan architectural school, distinguished by its plan structure and constructive features.



*Figuer 9. The plan of Seyid piri*

The dome of Seyid piri represents one of the most striking architectural features of the monument, situated atop a hexagonal structure that serves to accentuate the symmetrical shape of the entire edifice.

Another shrine that shares similarities in terms of materials used in the architectural plan and facade with Seyid piri is Seyidler Piri, located at the entrance to Shahtakhti village in Kangarli region, situated on the right side of the asphalt road. This shrine building was constructed in a contemporary architectural style and features a hexagonal prismatic shape. The upper part of Seyidler piri is encased within a dome-like iron structure, which contrasts with the flatness of the dome adorning the Seyid piri. The edifice is distinguished by the presence of doors on one façade and windows on the opposing façade. In contrast to the architectural style of Seyid piri, which is located in Ordubad, the doors and windows of Seyidli piri are oblong in shape and their heads are arched. This sacred place has been the final resting place of prominent representatives of Shahtakhti village Seyids (sacred people). The construction of the shrine dates back to the XX century.

The architectural design of Seyid piri features a hexagonal plan structure, exhibiting notable parallels with the Haji Khan mausoleum situated in Shakhhandan cemetery in Shamakhi. While the plan structure aligns, the design of Seyid piri is distinguished by its hexagonal configuration, contrasting with the octagonal form of Haji Khan's mausoleum. However, a closer examination reveals striking similarities in the facade imagery of both monuments. The inner corners of Haji Khan's mausoleum are decorated with octagonal faces, and the mausoleum itself dates back to the XVIII century, reflecting the architectural features of the era (Salamzade, 1964). The octagonal plan of the mausoleum of Panah Khan in Aghdam region clearly demonstrates the typological features of the octagonal memorial buildings of Azerbaijan.



*Figure 10. Exterior appearance of Seyid piri in Aza village*

## CONCLUSION

The shrines of Nakhchivan represent a pivotal component of the region's religious and cultural heritage, particularly with regard to their architectural characteristics and historical evolution. This study demonstrates that these shrines function not only as places of worship but also as intricate architectural structures that embody local traditions established in diverse historical eras. The architectural structure of the shrines dating back to the 16th–19th centuries is simple, but their plan-spatial solution reflects the specific characteristics of the region. The study determined that although most of the shrines in Nakhchivan have a square plan, hexagonal and octagonal plan solutions are also observed. The materials and construction methods employed in their construction exemplify the continuity and immutability of the region's construction traditions. Despite undergoing various alterations through time, the shrines have retained their fundamental architectural style and functional purpose. Consequently, the shrines of Nakhchivan, despite their simplicity, are of significant importance in understanding the historical and cultural heritage of the region. A more in-depth study of these monuments will facilitate a more complete assessment of their role in the architectural history of Azerbaijan and encourage broader academic discussion.

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