

The Historical Development of Symbolic Language in the Azerbaijani Mausoleums

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Abstract

Azerbaijani mausoleums, spanning from the medieval period to later architectural phases, embody a rich symbolic language that reflects the region's cultural, religious, and intellectual heritage. These structures function not only as monumental burial spaces but also as carriers of visual symbolism, cosmological thinking, and artistic identity. This dissertation examines the historical development of symbolic elements in Azerbaijani mausoleums, tracing their origins, transformations, and cultural meanings across centuries. By analyzing architectural forms, ornamental programs, and visual motifs, the study clarifies how symbolism became a central medium of communication in funerary architecture and how it shaped the broader aesthetic character of Azerbaijani architectural heritage.

The research begins by situating mausoleum symbolism within its cultural and historical environment. In medieval Azerbaijan, the intersection of Islamic philosophy, Sufi metaphysics, Turkic cultural concepts, and local artistic traditions created fertile ground for symbolic expression in architecture. Motifs such as geometric figures, arabesques, brick ornaments, and calligraphic inscriptions acquired layered meanings connected to theology, cosmology, and regional identity. Drawing on existing scholarship and historical sources, the study demonstrates how symbolic ornamentation became an integral component of architectural culture in Azerbaijan.

A substantial part of the dissertation is devoted to the analysis and classification of symbolic motifs and their functions in mausoleums across different periods. The study identifies four major categories of symbolism—geometric, epigraphic, vegetal, and cosmological—and examines their placement, structure, aesthetic role, and conceptual significance. Geometric polygons and star patterns express cosmic harmony and metaphysical unity; vegetal and arabesque motifs symbolize divine creativity and the continuity of life; brick geometries demonstrate mathematical precision and local craftsmanship; and Qur'anic inscriptions articulate spiritual meaning while acting as ornamental elements. Through this analysis, the research reveals the sophisticated visual language through which mausoleums communicate philosophical and religious concepts.

While acknowledging the foundational contributions of medieval masters—particularly the Nakhchivan architectural school—the study emphasizes that the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums developed through a broader regional and historical evolution. Following the classical period, mausoleums from the Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and later eras display continuity with earlier symbolic principles while introducing new aesthetic tendencies and construction techniques. Regional traditions in Nakhchivan, Barda/Karabakh, and Shirvan–Absheron illustrate how symbolic vocabulary was adapted to local materials, stylistic preferences, and architectural practices. These variations demonstrate that Azerbaijani symbolic architecture was both coherent and regionally diverse.

Methodologically, the dissertation combines literature review, historical contextualization, and detailed visual analysis. Architectural drawings, field photographs, and comparative observations are used to examine stylistic patterns, regional distinctions, and structural-symbolic relationships. This approach allows the study to highlight both the enduring core of symbolic motifs and their transformation across geography and time.

The findings indicate that symbolism in Azerbaijani mausoleums served multiple functions: it expressed religious and philosophical ideas, articulated socio-cultural identity, and enhanced aesthetic composition. The interplay of geometric systems, vegetal ornament, brick patterns, and sacred texts created a multilayered symbolic language that distinguishes Azerbaijani mausoleums from those of neighboring regions. Moreover, the continuity of symbolic principles from the medieval era through later periods demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of this architectural tradition.

In conclusion, the dissertation provides a comprehensive examination of the historical development of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleums. By documenting the origins, meanings, and transformations of symbolic motifs, the study demonstrates that symbolism is a defining element of Azerbaijani architectural identity. The research highlights not only the achievements of earlier masters but also the long-term processes of reinterpretation and regional adaptation that shaped the symbolic vocabulary of mausoleum architecture. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Azerbaijani cultural heritage and enrich the broader study of symbolic architecture in the Islamic world.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The architectural heritage of Azerbaijan encompasses an exceptionally rich corpus of funerary monuments whose symbolic, aesthetic, and ideological dimensions have evolved over multiple historical epochs (Blair & Bloom, 1994). Among these, mausoleums—ranging from early medieval tower-type structures to later Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and post-classical iterations—occupy a central position in the articulation of cultural memory, spiritual cosmology, and artistic identity (O'Kane, 1995). Their symbolic vocabulary, expressed through geometric articulation, epigraphic programs, ornamental compositions, and spatial hierarchies, constitutes a sophisticated visual language reflecting the religious, philosophical, and socio-political conditions of the societies that produced them (Grabar, 1987).

The emergence of symbolic architecture in Azerbaijan must be understood within the broader intellectual and civilizational trajectories of the Islamic world. From the 9th century onward, the region became a site of intense cultural synthesis shaped by Turkic migrations, Persianate literary culture, Islamic theological scholarship, and exchanges with Central Asian architectural traditions (Nasr, 1987; Ettinghausen et al., 2001). This cultural environment fostered a multilayered symbolic system in which architectural expression served as a medium through which cosmological principles, metaphysical doctrines, and communal identity were materially inscribed (Burckhardt, 1976).

Within this continuum, mausoleums served as privileged architectural forms for the communication of symbolic meaning. Their octagonal or polygonal plans, vertical proportions, astronomical alignments, ornamental registers, and calligraphic inscriptions formed a coherent semiotic framework intelligible to audiences versed in Islamic metaphysics and Sufi hermeneutics (Schimmel, 1975). The recurrence of polygons symbolizing divine order, arabesques representing infinite creation, and kufic inscriptions signaling the primacy of sacred text reflects a shared visual lexicon rooted in Islamic intellectual tradition (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973).

Despite their prominence, the symbolic language embedded within Azerbaijani mausoleums has not been subjected to comprehensive scholarly analysis. Existing research tends to emphasize stylistic description, typological classification, or historical attribution (Wheeler, 2003), leaving semiotic and metaphysical dimensions underexplored. Although major architects such as Ajami Nakhchivani have received attention, the broader evolution of symbolic motifs across regions and periods remains insufficiently theorized (Kuban, 1974).

Given the historical significance of these monuments as carriers of cultural memory, repositories of epigraphic knowledge, and material embodiments of religious worldview,

deeper analysis is essential (Assmann, 2011). Accordingly, this dissertation undertakes a systematic investigation into the historical development of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleums, tracing origins, continuities, and reinterpretations across diverse contexts.

1.2 Scope and Objectives

The scope of this dissertation encompasses a diachronic and comparative analysis of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture from the medieval period to the early modern era (O’Kane, 1995; Blair & Bloom, 2003). By focusing on monuments across regions such as Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Shirvan, and Absheron, the study delineates the geographical breadth within which symbolic forms emerged and evolved.

The primary objective is to elucidate the historical processes through which symbolic elements became formalized within architectural expression—identifying motifs, structural strategies, and iconographic patterns that form a coherent symbolic system (Grabar, 1992). Emphasis is placed on tracing the genealogy and transformation of motifs, situating them within Islamic intellectual and artistic currents (Nasr, 1987; Schimmel, 1994).

A secondary objective involves reevaluating the historiography of Azerbaijani architectural symbolism using interdisciplinary approaches drawn from semiotics, Islamic intellectual history, and architectural theory (Eco, 1976; Panofsky, 1972). Through this approach, the dissertation challenges reductive interpretations that treat ornament as merely decorative, instead arguing for its role in meaning production.

Finally, the dissertation seeks to generate an analytical model for examining symbolic language in Islamic funerary architecture (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973). This model will support future scholarship and heritage preservation efforts, especially given the vulnerability of symbolic forms to erosion, alteration, or loss.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study is guided by a set of core research questions formulated to structure the analytical inquiry into the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture. These questions seek to elucidate both the internal logic of symbolic forms and the broader cultural, historical, and intellectual conditions that shaped their development.

The first research question addresses the origins and early formation of symbolic motifs within the region’s funerary architectural tradition:

(1) What historical, religious, and artistic forces contributed to the emergence of symbolic language in early Azerbaijani mausoleums, and how were these forces visually articulated through geometric, epigraphic, and ornamental strategies?

This question aims to contextualize symbolic forms within their foundational milieu, identifying the intellectual and aesthetic paradigms that informed early design choices.

The second research question concerns the continuity and evolution of symbolic motifs across successive periods:

(2) How did symbolic elements transform over time in response to shifting political dynamics, theological discourses, regional artistic interactions, and technological developments?

This question examines the mechanisms through which symbolism was preserved, reinterpreted, or innovated within different architectural schools and geographical settings.

The third research question turns to the semantic and functional dimensions of symbolic forms:

(3) What meanings were encoded within the symbolic vocabulary of Azerbaijani mausoleums, and how did these meanings operate within the spatial, ritual, and ideological frameworks of funerary architecture?

Here, the focus lies on identifying the epistemic and metaphysical registers through which symbolic motifs communicated religious, cosmological, and cultural knowledge.

The fourth research question concerns regional specificity and comparative identity:

(4) In what ways did the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums converge with, or diverge from, symbolic traditions within the broader Islamic architectural sphere?

This invites an assessment of Azerbaijan's mausoleums within transregional artistic networks, clarifying the distinctive features that constitute an Azerbaijani symbolic idiom.

Together, these research questions form the analytical foundation of the dissertation, providing a structured framework for examining the interplay between symbolism, architectural form, and cultural meaning. Through addressing these questions, the study aims to illuminate the historical depth and conceptual sophistication of Azerbaijani mausoleum symbolism and its place within the intellectual heritage of the Islamic world.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to a theoretically grounded understanding of Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture as a locus of symbolic expression, cultural identity, and intellectual heritage (Burckhardt, 1976; Nasr, 1987). Although previously acknowledged for their aesthetic and historical value, many symbolic systems embedded in Azerbaijani monuments remain insufficiently interpreted. Existing scholarship has often prioritized descriptive typology, structural analysis, or biographical accounts of notable architects, thereby leaving unexamined the complex semiotic systems embedded within funerary architectural forms. By foregrounding symbolism as the central analytical category, this dissertation reorients the discourse toward the intellectual and metaphysical underpinnings of architectural production.

This study is significant in another regard: it articulates a comprehensive framework for understanding the diachronic evolution of symbolic motifs. Mausoleums in Azerbaijan were not merely isolated artistic achievements but participated in long-term regional and transregional exchanges involving theological concepts, philosophical doctrines, and aesthetic principles circulating across the Islamic world. By tracing the diachronic evolution of symbolic motifs, this research positions Azerbaijani mausoleums within a broader network of Islamic artistic and intellectual exchange (Blair & Bloom, 2003). It also contributes to heritage preservation by systematically documenting symbolic elements, which is crucial given environmental degradation and reconstruction affecting monuments (Wheeler, 2003).

Moreover, this dissertation contributes to the field of Islamic architectural studies by situating Azerbaijani mausoleums within comparative contexts. The symbolic vocabulary used in the region—while sharing affinities with Anatolian, Central Asian, and Persianate traditions—developed distinctive characteristics shaped by local cosmologies, political formations, and artistic communities. Identifying these distinctive features not only clarifies the internal coherence of Azerbaijani architectural symbolism but also positions it within wider networks of cultural production. This comparative dimension enhances our understanding of the region's architectural identity and its contribution to the broader Islamic artistic milieu.

The study's significance also extends to heritage preservation, particularly in light of recent challenges affecting historical monuments in Azerbaijan. Many mausoleums have been subjected to environmental degradation, reconstruction efforts, or political conflict, leading to the partial loss or distortion of symbolic elements. By systematically documenting symbolic motifs and interpreting their historical meanings, this dissertation provides a scholarly foundation for culturally informed conservation practices. Such documentation is crucial for safeguarding not only the physical structures but also the intangible knowledge systems encoded within their architectural forms.

Finally, this study holds methodological significance. Through integrating semiotic theory, art-historical analysis, and architectural historiography, it proposes an interdisciplinary model for investigating symbolic architecture. This model can be applied not only to Azerbaijani monuments but also to funerary architecture across other regions of the Islamic world. By demonstrating how symbolic language can be rigorously examined within a structured analytical framework, the dissertation contributes methodological tools that may inform future research in architectural symbolism, heritage studies, and Islamic art history.

1.5 Methodological Note

The methodological framework of this dissertation is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach designed to elucidate the multilayered symbolic language embedded within Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture. Given the inherently complex nature of architectural symbolism—where visual form, material expression, religious meaning, and cultural memory intersect—no single disciplinary method is sufficient for a comprehensive analysis. Accordingly, this study integrates analytical tools from architectural history, semiotics, art-historical iconography, Islamic intellectual history, and comparative cultural studies, enabling a multifaceted interpretation of both the material and conceptual dimensions of symbolic forms.

The dissertation employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework drawing on semiotics (Peirce, 1958; Eco, 1976), iconography (Panofsky, 1972), Islamic aesthetics (Burckhardt, 1976; Nasr, 1987), and architectural history (O’Kane, 1995). Symbolic motifs are read as visual texts, with ornament functioning as a semiotic system embedded in cosmological and theological meaning. Structural features such as spatial configuration, geometric modeling, verticality, and orientation are interpreted as part of a broader symbolic grammar that communicates cosmological concepts and metaphysical principles. Ornamentation—whether geometric, vegetal, or epigraphic—is analyzed through an iconographic lens, identifying recurrent motifs and exploring their semantic functions within Islamic and Turkic cultural contexts. This iconographic reading is complemented by close formal analysis, in which the visual logic, stylistic conventions, and geometric systems underlying these motifs are systematically examined.

A second methodological component involves historical contextualization, recognizing that symbolic language develops within specific socio-political, theological, and artistic environments. For this purpose, the dissertation draws upon historical chronicles, theological treatises, Sufi writings, and epigraphic records to clarify the intellectual frameworks that informed medieval Azerbaijani architecture. By situating symbolic motifs within these broader discursive formations, the study seeks to illuminate the relationship

between architectural expression and the metaphysical doctrines or cultural ideals that shaped it.

In addition, the dissertation adopts a comparative regional methodology, analyzing mausoleums across diverse geographical settings such as Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Shirvan, and Absheron. This comparative approach makes it possible to identify regional continuities, local innovations, and interregional influences. Cross-referencing Azerbaijani examples with analogous monuments from Anatolia, Central Asia, and Persia provides further insight into transregional symbolic networks and artistic exchanges, thereby enabling a more nuanced assessment of what constitutes a distinctly Azerbaijani symbolic idiom.

A further methodological dimension is shaped by architectural documentation and visual analysis, including examination of plans, elevations, sections, decorative programs, and field photography (where available). Such visual materials are treated not only as illustrative evidence but as primary data through which symbolic systems manifest materially. When historical monuments have undergone reconstruction or partial destruction, the study relies on archival photographs, scholarly reconstructions, and archaeological reports to recover symbolic elements that are no longer fully intact.

Finally, the dissertation makes use of a theoretical synthesis, drawing upon semiotic theory (e.g., Peircean and structuralist models), Islamic aesthetics, and contemporary scholarship on sacred space. These theoretical tools enable the study to conceptualize symbolic architecture not as a static repository of meanings but as a dynamic interpretive system shaped by its cultural context. Through the integration of these methodologies, the dissertation constructs a rigorous and coherent analytical framework capable of addressing the historical depth, conceptual complexity, and cultural significance of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleums.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters, each of which contributes a distinct analytical dimension to the overarching investigation of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture. The structure follows a logical progression from contextual foundations to thematic analysis, regional case studies, and interpretive synthesis.

Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual groundwork of the study by outlining the research background, defining the scope and objectives, identifying the central research questions, and articulating the significance and methodological framework. This introductory chapter situates the research within its academic context and clarifies the interpretive lenses through which symbolic forms will be examined.

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework. It surveys existing scholarship on Azerbaijani mausoleums, Islamic architectural symbolism, and relevant art-historical and semiotic theories. The chapter identifies gaps within the current literature and develops the conceptual apparatus through which symbolic motifs, architectural forms, and their cultural meanings are interpreted. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, the chapter provides the theoretical foundations necessary for subsequent analysis.

Chapter 3 offers a historical overview of mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan. It examines the socio-political, religious, and cultural conditions that shaped funerary architectural production across key historical periods. Particular attention is given to dynastic patronage, regional stylistic developments, and the evolving function of mausoleums within local communities. This contextualization clarifies the historical environments in which symbolic language emerged and transformed.

Chapter 4 constitutes the core analytical chapter, focusing on the symbolic language embedded in architectural form. It examines the principal categories of symbolic motifs—geometric, epigraphic, vegetal, cosmological—and explicates their semantic functions and metaphysical resonances. Through formal and iconographic analysis, the chapter reveals the epistemic structures underlying symbolic expression and elaborates how these forms communicate theological, cosmological, and cultural meaning.

Chapter 5 provides regional case studies that demonstrate the variability and continuity of symbolic language across different geographical areas, including Nakhchivan, Barda, Karabakh, Shirvan, and Absheron. Through comparative analysis of selected mausoleums, the chapter identifies distinctive regional idioms while highlighting shared symbolic vocabularies. This chapter illustrates the dynamic interplay between local traditions and broader Islamic artistic networks.

Chapter 6 concludes the study by synthesizing the major findings, reflecting on the broader implications of symbolic language for understanding Azerbaijani architectural identity, and outlining the contributions of the research to the fields of architectural history, Islamic art, and heritage studies. It also identifies limitations of the study and proposes directions for future research.

Together, these chapters form a cohesive analytical trajectory that moves from foundational context to detailed interpretation and comparative synthesis. The structure ensures that the multifaceted dimensions of symbolic architecture—historical, theoretical, visual, and cultural—are examined in a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous manner.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Review of Research on Azerbaijani Mausoleums

Scholarly engagement with Azerbaijani mausoleums has developed unevenly over the past century, shaped by shifting political contexts, methodological paradigms, and disciplinary priorities (Kuban, 1974; Bretanitsky & Salamzade, 1979). Early studies from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily descriptive in nature, focusing on typological classification, chronological sequencing, and stylistic analysis. These works aimed to document monuments within emerging frameworks of architectural history and archaeology, often emphasizing formal attributes such as plan geometry, decorative systems, and construction techniques (Golzio, 2010). While such foundational research provided indispensable empirical records, it largely refrained from interpretive inquiry into the symbolic, metaphysical, or ideological dimensions of funerary architecture. Mausoleums were treated as historical artifacts rather than as carriers of meaning embedded within cosmological, religious, and cultural systems.

During the Soviet period, architectural research in Azerbaijan expanded significantly in scope and institutional support. Extensive surveys were conducted across key regions, including Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Shirvan, and Absheron, resulting in detailed documentation of mausoleum typologies, spatial organizations, and material practices (Bretanitsky & Salamzade, 1979; Sultanov, 1987). Scholars in this era established comprehensive classifications of funerary structures, distinguishing between tower-type, polygonal, and cylindrical mausoleums, and analyzing their structural logic and decorative articulation. These studies contributed greatly to the systematization of Azerbaijani architectural history and remain essential references. However, they were strongly shaped by materialist and formalist methodologies dominant within Soviet academic discourse. As a result, symbolic interpretation, metaphysical speculation, and religious meaning were either minimized or avoided. Architectural form was primarily explained through technological development, economic conditions, and social function, leaving questions of cosmology, sacred symbolism, and spiritual intentionality largely unaddressed.

The post-Soviet period marked a significant shift in scholarly orientation. With the re-emergence of religious, cultural, and national discourse, researchers began to explore Azerbaijani architecture as an expression of identity, belief, and historical memory. Studies increasingly addressed Islamic epigraphy, Turkic cosmological motifs, Persianate artistic traditions, and regional symbolism (Memmedzade, 2009; Alizade, 2013). The mausoleum was no longer viewed merely as a funerary container but as a cultural text, embodying layers of meaning related to power, sanctity, lineage, and worldview. Particular attention has been given to the architectural legacy of Ajami Nakhchivani, whose monuments are frequently analyzed for their geometric complexity, ornamental coherence, and epigraphic sophistication (Mammadov, 2014). His works are often cited as exemplary syntheses of structural innovation and symbolic articulation. Nevertheless, much of this scholarship

remains case-specific and descriptive, focusing on individual monuments rather than constructing a comprehensive interpretive framework capable of explaining broader symbolic patterns across time and region.

International scholarship on Islamic funerary architecture has further emphasized the inseparability of architectural form and symbolic meaning. Studies on Central Asian, Anatolian, and Persian mausoleums have demonstrated how geometry, verticality, ornament, and epigraphy operate as vehicles of metaphysical expression, encoding concepts of eternity, divine order, and cosmic hierarchy (O’Kane, 1995; Blair & Bloom, 2003). Within this literature, mausoleums are understood as mediators between the earthly and the transcendent, articulating theological and philosophical principles through spatial composition. Despite these advances, Azerbaijani mausoleums are often mentioned only peripherally, if at all, resulting in their symbolic richness being underrepresented in global architectural discourse. This marginalization has limited comparative understanding and obscured the distinctive intellectual contributions of Azerbaijani architectural traditions to the wider Islamic world.

A persistent limitation across the existing body of research is the absence of a unified methodological approach capable of integrating formal analysis, historical context, semiotic interpretation, and metaphysical inquiry. Symbolic motifs are frequently catalogued but rarely interpreted within coherent conceptual frameworks. Decorative elements, inscriptions, and geometric patterns are often treated as isolated features rather than as components of an interrelated symbolic system. Consequently, the deeper cultural logic governing the formation of mausoleum architecture remains insufficiently theorized. This fragmentation has hindered the development of a holistic understanding of Azerbaijani mausoleums as complex cultural artifacts situated at the intersection of architecture, belief, memory, and identity.

This dissertation responds directly to these methodological and interpretive gaps by proposing a systematic, interdisciplinary examination of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleums. By synthesizing historical analysis, architectural morphology, semiotic theory, and iconographic interpretation, the study seeks to reveal underlying symbolic structures that persist across periods and regions. Rather than treating monuments as isolated cases, it situates them within both local cultural traditions and broader Islamic intellectual currents, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between regional specificity and transregional influences. In doing so, the research aims to establish a cohesive interpretive model that accounts for the historical development of symbolic expression while acknowledging cultural continuity, political change, and shifts in religious worldview. Through this integrated approach, Azerbaijani mausoleums are examined not only as architectural artifacts but also as carriers of memory, belief, and identity, reflecting evolving conceptions of sacred space and commemoration within the Islamic architectural tradition.

2.2 Symbolism in Islamic and Turkic Architectural Traditions (Expanded Version)

Symbolism plays a central role in Islamic architecture, functioning as a primary medium through which metaphysical, cosmological, and theological concepts are articulated (Burckhardt, 1976; Nasr, 1987). Rather than relying on figural representation, Islamic architectural expression developed a rich symbolic language grounded in abstraction, geometry, calligraphy, and non-figural ornamentation. These elements operate not merely as decoration but as vehicles of meaning, conveying spiritual principles derived from Qur'anic revelation, philosophical inquiry, and mystical interpretation (Schimmel, 1994). Architecture in this context becomes a spatial articulation of belief, translating invisible realities into visible and experiential form.

Sacred geometry constitutes one of the most prominent symbolic systems within Islamic architecture. Polygons, stars, interlacing grids, and proportional modules are employed to manifest mathematical order as a reflection of divine unity and cosmic harmony (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973; Critchlow, 1976). Geometric patterns are not arbitrary but are generated through precise mathematical systems that embody the Islamic conception of the universe as an ordered and intelligible creation. In funerary monuments, geometric articulation assumes particular significance. Octagonal bases often symbolize the intermediary realm between the earthly square and the celestial circle, suggesting cosmological transition. Symmetrical façades evoke balance and equilibrium, while star motifs express the infinite and generative nature of creation. These formal strategies draw upon both ancient mathematical sciences and Islamic metaphysics, which conceptualize the cosmos as a structured manifestation of divine will and wisdom.

Calligraphy similarly conveys sacred meaning and occupies a privileged position within Islamic architectural symbolism. Through the integration of Qur'anic verses, invocations, and divine names into architectural surfaces, epigraphy transforms walls, portals, and cornices into carriers of sacred text (Blair, 1998; Schimmel, 1975). Kufic script, characterized by its angular clarity and geometric rigor, became a defining feature of early and medieval funerary monuments. Its visual discipline and modular structure resonate with the architectural order of the building itself, reinforcing the unity of form and meaning. In mausoleum architecture, inscriptions not only commemorate the deceased but also situate the structure within a sacred textual universe, reaffirming the primacy of revelation and embedding the monument within an ongoing spiritual narrative.

Vegetal ornamentation and the arabesque form another significant symbolic domain, expressing themes of infinite creation, unity-in-multiplicity, and spiritual continuity (Grabar, 1987; Burckhardt, 1976). The arabesque, with its rhythmic repetition, continuous growth, and interlacing patterns, symbolizes the eternal unfolding of existence and the boundless creativity of the divine. Unlike naturalistic representation, these vegetal motifs abstract natural forms into idealized patterns, emphasizing transcendence over materiality.

Within funerary contexts, such symbolism acquires heightened resonance, as motifs of regeneration, continuity, and unending movement visually counterbalance themes of death and finitude. The mausoleum thus becomes a space where mortality and eternity are held in symbolic dialogue.

Turkic symbolic traditions contributed additional layers of meaning to this architectural vocabulary, particularly motifs rooted in pre-Islamic cosmology such as solar symbols, knots, vertical alignments, and the eight-pointed star (Esin, 1978; Kafescioglu, 1999). In early Turkic belief systems, the sky, sun, and vertical axis were central cosmological elements, associated with power, continuity, and divine connection. Following Islamization, these motifs were not erased but reinterpreted and integrated into Islamic symbolic frameworks. The persistence of vertical emphasis, axial alignment, and solar-derived geometries within mausoleum architecture reflects this process of cultural synthesis. In Azerbaijani contexts, such elements contribute to a layered symbolic language in which Islamic metaphysics and Turkic cosmological thinking coexist and interact.

Azerbaijan's symbolic vocabulary was further shaped by sustained cultural exchanges with Central Asia, Anatolia, and Persia. The region's position along major trade and intellectual routes facilitated the circulation of artistic ideas, construction techniques, and symbolic forms. Seljuk brickwork traditions introduced complex geometric articulation; Persianate epigraphy enriched calligraphic expression; and Central Asian innovations in pattern-making expanded the repertoire of ornamental design. Azerbaijani architects assimilated these influences selectively, adapting them to local materials, building practices, and cultural preferences. As a result, mausoleums in Azerbaijan display a distinctive synthesis of geometric brickwork, Kufic inscriptions, and polygonal planning that differentiates them from contemporaneous monuments in neighboring regions.

Despite extensive scholarship on Islamic symbolism and Turkic cultural traditions, relatively few studies have examined how these symbolic systems were specifically adapted, transformed, and localized within Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture. Existing research often treats Islamic and Turkic symbolic traditions as generalized categories, without sufficiently addressing processes of regional reinterpretation, cultural negotiation, and historical layering. As a result, the distinctive configuration of geometry, epigraphy, and spatial form in Azerbaijani mausoleums remains under-theorized, frequently described in formal terms but rarely analyzed as a coherent symbolic system. The interaction between imported artistic languages and local building practices, social structures, and belief systems has not been systematically explored.

This study addresses that gap by examining symbolic elements not as isolated motifs but as components of an integrated architectural language shaped by historical circumstance, cultural memory, and intellectual exchange. It considers how symbols are re-contextualized through local material conditions, patronage patterns, religious practice,

and regional identity formation. By tracing the transformation of shared Islamic and Turkic symbolic vocabularies within the specific socio-cultural landscape of Azerbaijan, the research reveals processes of selective adaptation and creative synthesis. In doing so, it foregrounds the agency of local architects and patrons in shaping symbolic meaning, rather than viewing regional architecture as a passive recipient of external influence. This approach allows Azerbaijani mausoleums to be understood as active sites of cultural production, where universal metaphysical concepts are translated into regionally inflected architectural expressions.

2.2.1 Sufism and Its Position within Islamic Thought and Symbolic Architecture

Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) represents the inward, contemplative dimension of Islamic thought, focusing on spiritual discipline, ethical refinement, and the realization of divine unity (Nasr, 1987; Schimmel, 1975). It is not separate from Islam but constitutes an integral component of the Islamic intellectual tradition alongside law (*sharīʿa*) and theology (*kalām*). While *sharīʿa* regulates outward practice, Sufism addresses inner transformation and metaphysical understanding.

Classical Sufi philosophy conceptualizes the universe as an ordered manifestation of divine attributes, structured through harmony, proportion, and correspondence (Chittick, 1989). This worldview profoundly influenced Islamic aesthetics, where abstraction, geometry, and non-figural ornamentation function as symbolic expressions of metaphysical principles (Burckhardt, 1976). Architecture, in this context, becomes a medium through which spiritual concepts are articulated in material form.

In funerary architecture, Sufi concepts acquire particular significance. The mausoleum is understood not only as a site of commemoration but as a symbolic space mediating between the earthly and the transcendent. Vertical emphasis, centralized planning, and axial orientation reflect notions of spiritual ascent and the soul's return to its divine origin. Epigraphic programs further reinforce this framework by embedding Qur'anic verses and invocations of divine attributes into the architectural fabric.

Within Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture, Sufi influence should be understood as part of a broader intellectual and cultural milieu. The diffusion of Sufi thought across the Islamic world shaped attitudes toward death, sanctity, and memory, contributing to the symbolic elevation of funerary monuments. The integration of geometric rigor, epigraphy, and abstract ornamentation in Azerbaijani mausoleums reflects this metaphysical orientation, revealing architecture as a bridge between visible form and invisible meaning.

2.3 Semiotic and Iconographic Theories

Semiotics provides a crucial theoretical framework for interpreting architectural symbolism, enabling built form to be read as a system of signs embedded within cultural and epistemological structures (Eco, 1976; Peirce, 1958). Within this perspective, architectural motifs—geometric figures, epigraphic inscriptions, ornamental patterns, and spatial configurations—function as signifiers whose meanings are produced through culturally constructed systems of knowledge (Saussure, 1916/1983). Architecture is thus not merely a functional or aesthetic object but a communicative medium through which societies articulate values, beliefs, and worldviews. In the context of Islamic architecture, where abstraction and symbolism are central modes of expression, semiotic analysis becomes particularly relevant for decoding layers of meaning embedded within form.

Semiotic theory, as articulated in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, offers complementary approaches to understanding symbolic meaning. Saussure's dyadic model distinguishes between the signifier, or the perceptible form of the sign, and the signified, or the concept associated with that form. Applied to architecture, this distinction highlights the gap between material configuration and conceptual meaning, emphasizing that architectural symbolism is not inherent but culturally mediated. Peirce's triadic typology—icon, index, and symbol—adds further analytical precision. An icon signifies through resemblance, an index through causal or physical connection, and a symbol through convention. This tripartite model is especially useful in interpreting Islamic ornamentation, where architectural elements often operate across multiple semiotic modes simultaneously.

Geometric patterns, for example, may function as icons insofar as they visually resemble metaphysical conceptions of order, harmony, and cosmic structure. Calligraphic inscriptions act as indices by directly pointing to Qur'anic revelation, divine names, or historical persons. Certain ornamental motifs function as symbols whose meanings are established through cultural tradition and learned interpretation. In many cases, a single architectural element may embody all three modes at once: a geometric pattern may iconically reflect cosmic order, indexically indicate sacred intentionality, and symbolically signify theological concepts understood within a specific cultural context. This layered semiotic operation allows for a nuanced reading of mausoleum architecture as a complex communicative system.

Saussure's concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign also offers important insight into architectural symbolism, though it must be applied with care. While many architectural motifs acquire meaning through cultural convention, others—particularly those grounded in geometry and proportion—derive significance from perceived correspondences between mathematical order and cosmic structure. In Islamic intellectual traditions, geometry is not viewed as arbitrary but as reflective of universal principles governing creation.

Architectural symbols therefore occupy an intermediary space between arbitrariness and universality, shaped both by cultural convention and by metaphysical interpretations of form, number, and proportion. This dual condition is particularly evident in funerary architecture, where symbolic expression is simultaneously culturally specific and cosmologically oriented.

Iconographic theory, developed most systematically through the work of Erwin Panofsky, provides an additional methodological layer for interpreting symbolic language. Panofsky's tripartite model—pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation—offers a structured procedure for moving from visible form to underlying meaning. Pre-iconographic description involves the identification of formal properties such as shape, pattern, and composition. Iconographic analysis situates these forms within established symbolic traditions and visual conventions. Iconological interpretation seeks to uncover the deeper cultural, philosophical, and historical forces that generate and sustain these symbols. This hierarchical approach is particularly well suited to the study of funerary architecture, where meaning is embedded not only in individual motifs but in their spatial arrangement, repetition, and contextual placement.

Within the context of Islamic art and architecture, iconographic interpretation frequently intersects with the study of Islamic metaphysics, Sufi cosmology, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and philosophical aesthetics. Scholars such as Titus Burckhardt, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Oleg Grabar have emphasized that non-figural ornamentation constitutes a symbolic expression of divine unity, transcendence, and the ontological structure of existence. From this perspective, architectural form is not a neutral container but an active participant in the articulation of spiritual reality. Ornament, geometry, and calligraphy are understood as visual theologies, translating metaphysical principles into spatial experience. This approach underscores the necessity of interpreting Islamic architectural symbolism not solely through stylistic or aesthetic lenses but through theological and philosophical frameworks that inform the production of meaning.

The theoretical foundations of this dissertation are further informed by structuralist thought, particularly the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose analysis of myth and symbolic systems emphasizes the relational nature of meaning. According to this perspective, symbols do not derive significance in isolation but through their position within a network of oppositions, repetitions, and variations. Applied to architecture, this suggests that geometric motifs, spatial hierarchies, and ornamental sequences acquire meaning through their structural relationships within the overall composition. The recurrence of particular forms across different mausoleums, as well as their patterned variation, reveals underlying cognitive and cultural structures that shape architectural expression. Such patterns are not accidental but indicative of shared symbolic logic.

In addition, insights from contemporary semiotics and material culture theory highlight the active role of objects and built forms in shaping cultural knowledge. Architecture is not merely a passive reflection of belief but an agent in the production and reinforcement of meaning. Through their scale, materiality, spatial organization, and visual presence, mausoleums participate in the construction of memory, authority, and identity. Symbols embedded in architecture are therefore performative as well as representational: they do not only signify ideas but also shape perception, experience, and social practice.

By integrating semiotic and iconographic theories, this dissertation establishes a comprehensive methodological foundation for analyzing symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleums. This theoretical synthesis enables an interpretation that is simultaneously formal and conceptual, attending to the material specificity of architectural motifs while situating them within broader epistemic, cultural, and metaphysical frameworks. It allows the study to move beyond descriptive cataloguing toward a critical understanding of how symbolic systems are constructed, transmitted, and transformed through architectural form.

2.4 Sacred Space and Memory in Architectural Studies

Sacred space theory, particularly as articulated by Mircea Eliade, defines sacred environments as qualitatively distinct realms that anchor cosmological meaning and orient human existence within an ordered universe (Eliade, 1959). In this framework, sacred space is not merely a physical location but a manifestation of the sacred within the profane world, establishing a point of connection between human experience and transcendent reality. Mausoleums function as axial points—bridging earthly and celestial domains—through verticality, orientation, and spatial hierarchy (Stierlin, 1977). Their architectural form, often marked by domes, towers, and elevated volumes, symbolizes metaphysical ascent and spiritual continuity. Architectural structures that mediate between the material and the metaphysical are therefore inherently embedded within frameworks of ritual practice, spiritual meaning, and communal identity. In Azerbaijan, as in many regions of the Islamic world, mausoleums are not merely burial spaces but spatial articulations of memory, reverence, and worldview.

The concept of sacred space emphasizes the role of architecture in structuring human perception of the cosmos. Eliade's notion of the axis mundi is particularly relevant for funerary architecture, as mausoleums frequently occupy positions of symbolic centrality within their landscapes. Through vertical emphasis, geometric alignment, and axial composition, they express the idea of a cosmic center connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. Their orientation toward cardinal directions, integration of cosmologically significant motifs, and prominence within the urban or rural fabric contribute to their function as focal points of sacred geography. In this sense, the mausoleum becomes a

material expression of metaphysical order, embodying notions of divine presence, cosmic hierarchy, and the continuity of existence beyond death.

Anthropological perspectives further illuminate how sacred spaces operate within social and ritual contexts. Scholars such as Victor Turner have emphasized the importance of ritualized spaces in articulating communal values, structuring social relations, and reinforcing collective identity. Mausoleums serve as sites of pilgrimage, mourning, prayer, and commemoration, functioning as ritual nodes within the cultural landscape of Azerbaijan. Through repeated visitation and ritual practice, these spaces become embedded in the rhythms of communal life. Their symbolic language—epigraphic invocations, geometric configurations, and ornamental rhythms—mediates the relationship between individual memory and collective identity. In this way, architectural form participates in the construction of social meaning, transforming the mausoleum into a cultural text that communicates shared beliefs, moral values, and historical continuity.

The study of cultural memory, particularly as theorized by Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, provides a further analytical dimension by situating architectural monuments within the long-term processes through which societies construct, preserve, and transmit collective identity. According to these theories, memory is not solely an individual cognitive function but a socially mediated phenomenon anchored in material and symbolic frameworks. Mausoleums act as repositories of cultural memory not only because they commemorate specific individuals but because they encode values, cosmologies, and historical narratives in durable architectural form. Their symbolic motifs function as mnemonic devices, enabling successive generations to access, reinterpret, and renew cultural knowledge embedded within the built environment. This mnemonic function underscores the role of funerary architecture in sustaining cultural continuity across temporal rupture and political change.

Architectural phenomenology adds an experiential dimension to this analysis by situating meaning in embodied interaction with space (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). From a phenomenological perspective, architectural significance emerges through the lived experience of light, scale, enclosure, materiality, and spatial sequence. Mausoleums, with their enclosed chambers, vertical emphasis, rhythmic ornamentation, and controlled light, create atmospheres that evoke introspection, reverence, and metaphysical contemplation. The modulation of light through openings, the tactile presence of ornament, and the proportional relationships of space guide perception and emotional response. These sensory and affective dimensions reinforce the symbolic functions of architectural elements, transforming the physical structure into an experiential articulation of sacredness rather than a purely visual object.

Together, theories of sacred space, ritual practice, cultural memory, and architectural phenomenology reveal the multifaceted significance of Azerbaijani mausoleums. They

demonstrate that the symbolic language present in these structures operates simultaneously at visual, conceptual, experiential, and communal levels. Mausoleums are thus understood not only as architectural entities but as dynamic cultural institutions that mediate between the living and the dead, the material and the metaphysical, the individual and the collective. By situating symbolic motifs within these overlapping theoretical frameworks, this dissertation highlights how funerary architecture in Azerbaijan preserves, transmits, and continuously reshapes metaphysical concepts and historical consciousness through spatial form.

Chapter 3: Historical Overview of Azerbaijani Mausoleums

3.1 Early Development of Funerary Architecture in Azerbaijan

The historical evolution of mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan reflects a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and political forces that unfolded across several centuries (Kuban, 1974; Blair & Bloom, 1994). Situated at the crossroads of the Near East, Central Asia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus, Azerbaijan functioned as a zone of continuous cultural transmission, where architectural ideas, construction techniques, and symbolic systems intersected and transformed (Golzio, 2010). This liminal position fostered a funerary tradition that was neither derivative nor isolated but instead emerged through processes of adaptation, synthesis, and reinterpretation. The architectural language of Azerbaijani mausoleums thus developed as a layered palimpsest, incorporating pre-Islamic structural knowledge, Islamic metaphysical concepts, and Turkic cosmological patterns into a distinctive regional expression.

Pre-Islamic architectural influences played a significant role in shaping the structural vocabulary later employed in Islamic funerary architecture. The territories of historical Azerbaijan, including Caucasian Albania and Atropatene, were successively influenced by Zoroastrian, Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sasanian cultural spheres. Although these earlier civilizations did not produce mausoleums in the Islamic sense of monumental tomb architecture, they established critical precedents in spatial organization, construction technology, and symbolic orientation. Sasanian architecture, in particular, exerted a lasting impact through its mastery of domed spaces, squinch systems, axial planning, and cosmological symbolism (Huff, 2008). The use of the dome as a symbolic representation of the celestial sphere, combined with a hierarchical spatial order, introduced an architectural grammar that would later be reinterpreted within Islamic funerary contexts.

Fire temples, palatial complexes, and ceremonial structures of the Sasanian period employed geometric clarity, vertical emphasis, and centralized planning to express metaphysical order and royal authority. These principles, while rooted in Zoroastrian cosmology and imperial ideology, established a visual language that resonated beyond their original religious frameworks. When Islam was introduced to the region in the seventh century, local builders did not abandon these structural traditions but instead adapted them to new theological and cultural imperatives. Thus, the architectural continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic periods in Azerbaijan is not merely technical but also conceptual, reflecting an enduring concern with cosmic order, spatial hierarchy, and symbolic orientation.

The consolidation of Islamic rule between the seventh and ninth centuries introduced new religious paradigms that reshaped architectural practice (Kraeling, 1964). Early Islamic doctrine initially expressed ambivalence toward monumental tomb construction, emphasizing humility and the avoidance of ostentation in burial practices (Grabar, 1987).

However, as Islamic societies became more stratified and politically complex, funerary architecture emerged as a site of ideological negotiation. The commemoration of rulers, scholars, saints, and Sufi masters gradually legitimized the construction of monumental tombs, transforming mausoleums into instruments of political authority, spiritual devotion, and cultural memory (Schimmel, 1975).

In Azerbaijan, this transformation coincided with the region's growing integration into the Islamic world and its expanding role as a cultural mediator between Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Early Islamic funerary structures in the region were modest in scale and relatively restrained in ornamentation, yet they already displayed an emerging interest in verticality, geometric articulation, and epigraphic presence. The gradual incorporation of Qur'anic inscriptions, symbolic motifs, and geometric patterning signaled a shift toward a more expressive architectural language, in which form and ornament served as carriers of metaphysical meaning.

The arrival and consolidation of Turkic dynasties between the tenth and eleventh centuries marked a decisive turning point in the development of Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture. The Seljuks and other Turkic rulers introduced new architectural types, particularly tower-shaped mausoleums with cylindrical, octagonal, or polygonal plans, reflecting Central Asian funerary traditions (O'Kane, 1995; Hillenbrand, 1994). These vertical structures, often crowned with conical or pyramidal roofs, symbolized ascension, authority, and cosmic alignment. Their form echoed the Turkic yurt in its centralized geometry while simultaneously engaging with Islamic cosmological concepts of vertical transcendence.

Brick emerged as the dominant construction material during this period, fundamentally reshaping the expressive possibilities of funerary architecture (Bretanitsky & Salamzade, 1979). Unlike stone, brick allowed for greater flexibility in surface articulation, enabling architects to create complex geometric patterns, interlaced motifs, and rhythmic textures directly within the structural fabric. This integration of ornament and structure represents one of the defining characteristics of Azerbaijani mausoleums. Brickwork was not merely decorative but functioned as a symbolic medium through which mathematical order, metaphysical harmony, and cultural identity were visually encoded.

The adoption of brick as both a structural and ornamental medium facilitated the emergence of a distinctive aesthetic characterized by geometric rigor, surface complexity, and symbolic density. Patterns derived from Islamic sacred geometry—stars, polygons, and interlacing grids—were embedded into façades, transforming the mausoleum into a visual manifestation of cosmic order. At the same time, epigraphic bands in Kufic script introduced a textual dimension that anchored the building within the sacred universe of Qur'anic revelation. This fusion of geometry and script created a multi-layered symbolic system in which visual form, mathematical order, and sacred language converged.

Urban centers such as Nakhchivan, Barda, Ganja, and Shamakhi played a critical role in the development of funerary architecture by serving as political capitals, commercial hubs, and cultural crossroads. The concentration of patronage in these cities fostered architectural experimentation and artistic refinement. Ruling elites commissioned mausoleums as expressions of dynastic legitimacy, while scholars and Sufi communities constructed tombs that functioned as sites of pilgrimage and spiritual authority. This diversity of patrons contributed to a rich spectrum of funerary forms, ranging from austere, introspective structures to elaborately ornamented monuments that proclaimed cultural prestige and religious devotion.

Within this urban milieu, Azerbaijani architects developed a coherent regional vocabulary distinguished by polygonal planning, vertically segmented façades, intricate brick geometry, and the integration of calligraphy into architectural composition. The repetition of these elements across multiple sites indicates the emergence of shared design principles and symbolic conventions. Mausoleums were no longer isolated structures but part of a broader architectural discourse in which form, ornament, and meaning were negotiated collectively across regions and generations.

By the end of the eleventh century, the foundational principles of Azerbaijani funerary architecture had crystallized into a recognizable typology. The synthesis of Turkic cosmological patterns, Islamic metaphysical symbolism, and regional construction practices created a fertile environment for architectural innovation. These early developments established the formal and conceptual groundwork for the flourishing of mausoleum architecture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly within the Nakhchivan school. The masterpieces of that later period did not emerge in isolation but were the culmination of centuries of experimentation, adaptation, and symbolic refinement.

Thus, the early development of funerary architecture in Azerbaijan must be understood not as a linear progression but as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation. Architectural forms evolved through dialogue between inherited traditions and new ideological frameworks, between local craftsmanship and transregional influences. This layered historical context is essential for understanding the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums, which embodies both continuity and transformation. The mausoleum, as it emerged in Azerbaijan, became more than a tomb: it became an architectural articulation of cosmology, identity, memory, and spiritual aspiration.

3.2 The Medieval Period and the Formation of the Nakhchivan School

The medieval period, spanning approximately the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, constitutes the most formative epoch in the development of Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture (Kuban, 1974; O’Kane, 1995). This era coincided with profound political,

intellectual, and artistic transformations across the Islamic world, driven in large part by Seljuk expansion and the consolidation of Turkic-Islamic culture. In Azerbaijan, these changes catalyzed the emergence of a distinctive architectural language that integrated advanced mathematical knowledge, cosmological symbolism, and refined construction techniques. Central to this transformation was the rise of the Nakhchivan architectural school, which became one of the most influential artistic centers of medieval Azerbaijan and a significant contributor to the wider corpus of Islamic architecture.

The Seljuk period was marked by a renewed engagement with the mathematical sciences, astronomy, philosophy, and theology, fields that profoundly shaped architectural conception and symbolic expression (Nasr, 1987). Geometry was not merely a technical tool but a metaphysical language through which divine order, unity, and cosmic harmony were articulated. This intellectual climate fostered an architectural ethos in which form, proportion, and ornament were imbued with philosophical significance. Buildings were conceived not only as functional structures but as material manifestations of abstract principles, translating cosmological and theological ideas into spatial and visual form.

The political and cultural environment of the period provided the necessary conditions for architectural innovation. The Seljuk Empire, extending its influence over Azerbaijan from the late eleventh century onward, institutionalized new artistic practices and facilitated the transmission of architectural knowledge across its territories. Seljuk patronage supported large-scale construction projects, including mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, and mausoleums, creating an environment in which architectural experimentation could flourish. The emphasis on monumental building, precise geometric design, and symbolic ornamentation reflected both imperial ambition and spiritual aspiration.

Within this broader Seljuk cultural framework, Nakhchivan emerged as a major artistic and intellectual center. Its strategic location at the intersection of Anatolia, Persia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus positioned it as a hub of commercial exchange, intellectual circulation, and artisanal mobility. Skilled craftsmen, architects, and scholars converged in the city, bringing with them diverse regional traditions that were synthesized into a coherent local style. The architectural tradition that developed in Nakhchivan was characterized by its exceptional technical sophistication, symbolic density, and aesthetic refinement, culminating in what is now recognized as the Nakhchivan school.

The most prominent figure associated with this school is the architect Ajami ibn Abubakr Nakhchivani, whose work in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries established the foundational principles of the regional style. Although this dissertation does not primarily pursue a biographical study of Ajami, his architectural legacy provides an essential reference point for tracing the symbolic development of Azerbaijani mausoleums. His monuments, including the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum (1162) and the Momine

Khatun Mausoleum (1186), represent the apex of medieval architectural expression in Azerbaijan. These structures demonstrate an extraordinary mastery of geometry, brick craftsmanship, and epigraphic integration, embodying the core aesthetic and symbolic values of the Nakhchivan school.

Defining Features of the Nakhchivan School

1. Polygonal and Vertical Structures

Polygonal planning constitutes one of the most distinctive features of the Nakhchivan school. Octagonal, decagonal, and dodecagonal forms recur throughout the region's mausoleums, reflecting a symbolic engagement with geometries associated with cosmic order, balance, and metaphysical harmony (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973). In Islamic cosmology, the circle represents divine unity, while the polygon mediates between the infinite perfection of the circle and the finite order of the square. By employing polygonal forms, Nakhchivan architects materialized this metaphysical transition, creating structures that symbolically bridge the divine and the earthly.

Vertical emphasis further reinforces this symbolic orientation. Elongated proportions, slender silhouettes, and tapering profiles create an upward visual momentum that evokes spiritual ascent and the axis mundi—the cosmic axis connecting heaven and earth. This verticality is not merely aesthetic but deeply symbolic, expressing the soul's aspiration toward transcendence and the architectural embodiment of metaphysical elevation. The mausoleum thus becomes a spatial metaphor for spiritual journey, guiding the viewer's gaze upward in an act of contemplative alignment.

2. Advanced Brick Ornamentation

Brick emerges as the defining material of the Nakhchivan school, employed not only for structural purposes but as a primary medium of symbolic articulation (Critchlow, 1976; Blair, 1998). The mastery of brickwork in Nakhchivan is unparalleled in the medieval Caucasus. Architects developed sophisticated techniques of patterning, relief, and layering, transforming brick surfaces into intricate fields of geometric complexity. Interlaced patterns, star configurations, zigzag motifs, and rhythmic repetitions animate the façades, creating dynamic visual experiences that shift with light and shadow.

This use of brick transcends decoration. It operates as a symbolic language, encoding mathematical order and metaphysical principles into the architectural fabric. The repetition and variation of geometric motifs express unity-in-multiplicity, a central concept in Islamic metaphysics, while the infinite extension of patterns suggests the boundless nature of creation. Brick, in this context, becomes both material and message, simultaneously constructing the building and articulating its symbolic meaning.

3. Integrated Epigraphy

Epigraphy occupies a central position in the symbolic program of Nakhchivan mausoleums. Kufic inscriptions are integrated seamlessly into the architectural composition, functioning as both visual rhythm and sacred text (Schimmel, 1994). Unlike later cursive scripts, Kufic's angular geometry lends itself to architectural integration, allowing inscriptions to merge with structural lines and geometric patterns. Qur'anic verses, dedicatory inscriptions, and invocations of divine attributes are woven into the fabric of the building, transforming the mausoleum into a textual as well as spatial monument.

These inscriptions serve multiple functions. Didactically, they communicate religious messages and commemorate patrons. Metaphysically, they anchor the structure within the sacred universe of revelation, embedding divine speech into material form. The presence of Qur'anic text transforms the mausoleum into a site of spiritual resonance, where architecture becomes a vessel for sacred meaning. The rhythmic repetition of script also contributes to the visual harmony of the façade, reinforcing the integration of form and content.

4. Harmonized Symbolic Vocabulary

The synthesis of geometric, epigraphic, and vegetal motifs produces a harmonized symbolic vocabulary that reflects both Islamic metaphysical principles and Turkic cosmological traditions (Burckhardt, 1976). Vegetal motifs and arabesque patterns evoke themes of growth, continuity, and eternal renewal, resonating with the funerary context in which death is understood as transformation rather than termination. Geometric rigor conveys order and stability, while calligraphy introduces divine presence. Together, these elements create a coherent symbolic system in which theology, cosmology, and philosophy are articulated through architectural form.

This integration is not accidental but reflects a sophisticated understanding of symbolic correspondence. Each motif contributes to a layered semantic field in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual, textual, and spatial elements. The mausoleum thus becomes a total symbolic environment, engaging the intellect, the senses, and the spirit simultaneously.

Regional Variations and Parallel Developments

Beyond Nakhchivan, the symbolic language of medieval Azerbaijani mausoleums evolved in parallel with regional architectural developments. The Shirvan and Absheron regions, characterized by abundant limestone resources, developed a funerary tradition distinct from the brick-based aesthetics of Nakhchivan. Here, symbolic expression was achieved through stone carving, relief ornamentation, and finely articulated vegetal motifs.

Geometric programs tended to be more restrained, yet no less deliberate, emphasizing clarity and precision over surface density.

In Karabakh, particularly during the Atabeg period, mausoleums display a synthesis of Turkic funerary traditions and Persianate aesthetic principles. The blending of steppe-derived spatial concepts with Persian ornamental refinement produced structures of unique hybrid character. These regional variations demonstrate that Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture was not monolithic but diversified, responding to local materials, political contexts, and cultural influences while maintaining a shared symbolic foundation.

Conceptual Significance of the Medieval Period

The medieval period thus represents a critical juncture in the formation of Azerbaijani architectural symbolism. The innovations of the Nakhchivan school—its geometric precision, symbolic integration, and metaphysical orientation—provided a template that would influence subsequent architectural developments across the region. These innovations did not merely introduce new forms but established a symbolic grammar through which architecture could communicate complex ideas about cosmology, identity, and spiritual aspiration.

This era serves as both the conceptual and visual foundation upon which later symbolic transformations unfolded. The architectural achievements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not emerge in isolation but were the culmination of centuries of cultural negotiation, intellectual exchange, and artisanal experimentation. The Nakhchivan school, in particular, stands as a testament to the capacity of Azerbaijani architecture to synthesize diverse influences into a coherent and deeply meaningful artistic tradition.

In this sense, the medieval mausoleum is not merely a historical artifact but a crystallization of worldview. It embodies a vision of the universe in which mathematical order reflects divine unity, architectural form expresses spiritual aspiration, and material craft serves metaphysical purpose. Understanding the formation of the Nakhchivan school is therefore essential for any comprehensive interpretation of the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums.

3.3 Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and Later Developments

The evolution of mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan during the Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and post-medieval periods reflects a complex sequence of artistic transformation shaped by shifting political structures, cultural exchanges, and theological currents. Each period introduced new architectural concepts while simultaneously reinterpreting earlier traditions, resulting in a layered and dynamic symbolic landscape that continued to evolve

well beyond the medieval era. Rather than constituting discrete stylistic breaks, these phases should be understood as interconnected stages in a continuous process of architectural and symbolic negotiation.

The Seljuk Period (11th–12th centuries)

The Seljuk period established many of the architectural and symbolic foundations that would define Azerbaijani funerary monuments for centuries to come. Under Seljuk patronage, architecture became a primary medium for expressing political authority, religious legitimacy, and intellectual prestige. The Seljuks actively promoted the mathematical sciences, astronomy, and philosophy, fostering an intellectual climate in which geometry and proportion were imbued with metaphysical significance (Hillenbrand, 1994; O’Kane, 1995). These intellectual currents found direct expression in architectural form, where spatial order, geometric clarity, and proportional harmony reflected cosmological ideals.

Seljuk architectural practice disseminated key elements such as polygonal geometry, brick construction, kufic ornament, and star-based geometric systems across its territories. In Azerbaijan, local architects did not merely imitate Seljuk models but transformed them into distinctly regional forms. Brick was exploited for both structural and symbolic purposes, allowing for intricate surface articulation and the embedding of geometric patterns directly into the architectural fabric. Kufic inscriptions were integrated as rhythmic visual bands, reinforcing the unity of text and form.

The symbolic language of Seljuk-era mausoleums emphasized verticality, centralized planning, and geometric rigor. Tower-shaped structures with octagonal or cylindrical plans expressed both political authority and spiritual aspiration, while star patterns and interlacing grids articulated cosmic order. These features formed a structural and symbolic template that Azerbaijani builders adapted creatively, developing a regional aesthetic characterized by density of ornament, precision of proportion, and symbolic coherence. The Seljuk period thus represents the foundational stage in the crystallization of Azerbaijani funerary symbolism.

The Ilkhanid Period (13th–14th centuries)

The Ilkhanid era introduced a new wave of cultural influences following the Mongol conquest of the region. Although the initial impact of Mongol rule was disruptive, the subsequent Ilkhanid dynasty became a powerful patron of Islamic art and architecture, facilitating a renaissance of Persianate culture and artistic production (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Grabar, 1992). In architectural terms, this period is marked by increased monumentality, spatial complexity, and ornamental richness.

Ilkhanid rule introduced and expanded the use of stucco, glazed tilework, and more elaborate spatial planning. While brick remained a fundamental material in Azerbaijan, new decorative technologies broadened the symbolic vocabulary available to architects. The integration of turquoise and cobalt tile, intricate stucco reliefs, and multi-layered surfaces created visually dynamic façades that intensified the expressive potential of mausoleum architecture. These developments did not replace earlier traditions but enriched them, producing hybrid forms in which brick geometry, tile ornamentation, and epigraphy coexisted.

Muqarnas became a prominent feature during this period, serving both structural and symbolic functions (Necipoglu, 1995). Architecturally, muqarnas mediated transitions between vertical and horizontal planes; symbolically, they represented the hierarchical structuring of the cosmos and the gradations of spiritual ascent. The cascading, honeycomb-like formations of muqarnas visually embodied metaphysical concepts of multiplicity emerging from unity, reinforcing Islamic philosophical notions of emanation and divine order. In funerary contexts, muqarnas compositions intensified the vertical symbolism of mausoleums, emphasizing the soul's ascent and the layered structure of the spiritual realm.

Ilkhanid symbolism often incorporated interlacing star patterns, vegetal arabesques, and densely structured epigraphic bands, reflecting an intensified engagement with cosmological representation. The increased complexity of surface decoration corresponds to a broader philosophical and theological preoccupation with the structure of the universe, the nature of divine order, and the relationship between the material and the metaphysical. These symbolic concerns found powerful architectural expression in mausoleums, which functioned as microcosms of the cosmic order.

The Ilkhanid aesthetic thus contributed significantly to the symbolic sophistication of funerary monuments in Azerbaijan. It expanded the expressive range of architectural symbolism, introducing new materials, forms, and spatial concepts while maintaining continuity with earlier Seljuk foundations. This period represents a phase of monumentalization and intensification, in which architectural symbolism became more layered, more elaborate, and more philosophically charged.

Post-Medieval Transformations (15th century onwards)

Following the Ilkhanid era, funerary architecture in Azerbaijan underwent further transformation under the Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, Safavid, and later dynasties. Although the construction of monumental mausoleums decreased relative to the medieval zenith, symbolic language continued to evolve within changing political, religious, and cultural frameworks. The reduced scale of funerary monuments does not indicate a decline in symbolic significance but rather a shift in patronage patterns and ideological emphasis.

The Safavid period introduced a heightened emphasis on Shi'i religious symbolism and courtly aesthetics, which influenced the epigraphic and ornamental programs of funerary structures. Calligraphic styles diversified beyond kufic to include thuluth, naskh, and nastaliq scripts, enriching the symbolic repertoire associated with mausoleum design. These scripts, with their fluidity and elegance, conveyed a different spiritual sensibility, emphasizing devotion, intercession, and dynastic legitimacy. Qur'anic verses, invocations of the Imams, and pious inscriptions reflected the theological priorities of the period.

Tilework became more prominent during the Safavid era, with polychrome tiles introducing new chromatic dimensions to architectural symbolism. Color itself acquired symbolic resonance: blue evoked the heavens and divine infinity, green signified paradise and spiritual renewal, and gold suggested divine light and authority. These chromatic codes added another layer to the symbolic language of mausoleums, enhancing their metaphysical expressiveness.

Regional variations became more pronounced in the post-medieval period. In the Absheron region, stone-based construction and minimalistic ornamentation reflected local material conditions and aesthetic preferences. Here, symbolic expression was achieved through proportion, massing, and subtle carving rather than dense surface decoration. In Karabakh, the integration of khachkar-inspired motifs, vegetal reliefs, and hybrid ornamental forms illustrates the region's unique cultural interactions between Islamic, Christian, and Caucasian traditions. These hybrid forms demonstrate the adaptability of Azerbaijani symbolic language and its capacity to absorb and reinterpret diverse influences.

Although fewer monumental mausoleums were erected compared to the medieval zenith, the symbolic vocabulary persisted through adaptation and reinterpretation. Earlier forms—polygonal planning, vertical emphasis, geometric patterning, and epigraphic integration—continued to inform architectural practice, even as materials, scripts, and decorative techniques evolved. This continuity underscores the resilience of symbolic structures within Azerbaijani architectural culture.

Continuity and Transformation of Symbolic Language

What unifies these successive periods is the enduring presence of symbolic motifs that originated in earlier centuries: geometric star systems, polygonal structures, calligraphic bands, and cosmologically inflected proportions. However, each period reinterpreted these symbols in response to shifting theological frameworks, political ideologies, and cultural networks. The Seljuks established the foundational aesthetic; the Ilkhanids expanded and monumentalized it; and later dynasties preserved its symbolic core while adapting it to new historical circumstances.

This process of continuity and transformation reveals that Azerbaijani mausoleum symbolism is not static but dynamic. Symbols do not merely persist; they evolve, acquiring

new meanings while retaining traces of their earlier significance. A star motif, for example, may shift from expressing Seljuk cosmology to Safavid spiritual ideology, yet its geometric form maintains a visual continuity that links successive generations of builders and patrons.

The cumulative effect of these historical transformations is a richly layered symbolic tradition whose meanings must be understood diachronically. Architectural symbolism in Azerbaijan emerges as a continuous, evolving cultural phenomenon shaped by historical forces, intellectual currents, and regional conditions. Mausoleums thus function as historical texts, encoding the ideological, theological, and aesthetic values of their time within enduring material form.

This diachronic perspective is essential for interpreting the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums. Only by tracing the transformations across Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and post-medieval periods can one fully grasp the depth, complexity, and resilience of this architectural tradition. The mausoleum, in this sense, stands as a witness to cultural continuity amid political change, embodying a symbolic language that adapts without dissolving, transforms without losing its core, and evolves while remaining rooted in its foundational metaphysical vision.

3.4 Regional Variations in Symbolic Expression

The symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture developed through a constellation of regional practices shaped by local materials, craftsmanship, dynastic patronage, and geographic settings. Although unified by overarching Islamic and Turkic symbolic frameworks, each region of Azerbaijan articulated these symbolic principles in distinct ways, producing a diverse yet interconnected architectural landscape. These regional characteristics reflect variations in aesthetic emphasis, construction techniques, and symbolic preferences, forming a rich mosaic of architectural expression across the country.

Nakhchivan: The Geometric-Textual Apex

Nakhchivan represents the most architecturally sophisticated and symbolically saturated region in Azerbaijan. Mausoleums in this area exhibit unparalleled mastery of brick ornamentation, with façades functioning as intricate symbolic manuscripts composed of geometric patterns, kufic inscriptions, and mathematically structured proportions. The prevalence of polygonal plans, rigorous verticality, and meticulously organized surface geometry underscores the region's emphasis on cosmological symbolism and metaphysical order. The Nakhchivan school's symbolic vocabulary—deeply rooted in Islamic metaphysics and Turkic cosmology—constituted a major reference point for subsequent architectural developments in the region.

Karabakh: Monumental Forms and Symbolic Clarity

Karabakh's funerary architecture developed its own distinct symbolic idiom shaped by stone-based construction and local aesthetic preferences. Mausoleums in this region often display strong volumetric clarity, restrained yet elegant ornamentation, and a symbolic language expressed through proportion, structural rhythm, and carefully articulated surface details. Geometric and epigraphic motifs appear in balanced compositions, emphasizing harmony, stability, and the dignified commemoration of the deceased. Karabakh's monuments contribute an important regional variation to the broader Azerbaijani tradition, prioritizing symbolic clarity over ornamental density.

Shirvan: Epigraphic Emphasis and Architectural Restraint

The Shirvan region cultivated a funerary tradition characterized by architectural austerity, refined stone craftsmanship, and a prominent role for epigraphy. Mausoleums in Shirvan frequently employ limestone, favoring clean geometric volumes and well-proportioned structures with minimal surface ornamentation. In this regional idiom, symbolic meaning is conveyed primarily through Qur'anic inscriptions, proportional harmony, and spatial composition rather than extensive decorative programs. Shirvan's symbolic vocabulary is therefore distinguished by its reliance on textual authority and architectural discipline.

Absheron: Material Purity and Minimal Ornamentation

In the Absheron Peninsula, the abundant availability of high-quality limestone shaped a regional symbolic aesthetic centered on material purity and structural simplicity. Absheron mausoleums tend to be compact, with clear geometric volumes and symbolic expression achieved through proportional refinement, subtle carved motifs, and precise alignment. Ornamentation is restrained, reinforcing the symbolic emphasis on purity, stability, and contemplative spatial presence. This minimalist symbolic language offers a counterpoint to the more elaborate ornamental traditions of Nakhchivan while remaining firmly situated within Azerbaijani architectural identity.

Shared Symbolic Horizon

Despite these regional distinctions, Azerbaijani mausoleum symbolism is unified by shared foundational principles:

- the use of geometric order as a metaphor for cosmic harmony,
- the integration of epigraphy as a carrier of metaphysical truth,
- and the articulation of funerary space as a site of spiritual ascent and cultural memory. Artisans, architectural workshops, and intellectual networks facilitated the circulation of symbolic motifs across regions, ensuring coherence within the larger national tradition while allowing for local interpretation.

CHAPTER 4. IMPACT OF AJAMI NAKHCHIVANI'S CREATIVITY IN THE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF AZERBAIJAN

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examined the symbolic language embedded within the architectural creativity of Ajami Nakhchivani, a distinguished master architect of the 12th century whose work played a formative role in the development of traditional Azerbaijani architecture. The chapter focused on the ways in which architectural form, ornamentation, and spatial composition were employed as vehicles for symbolic expression, reflecting broader cultural, religious, and cosmological concepts prevalent in medieval Islamic societies. In this context, architectural symbolism was approached not as a secondary decorative phenomenon, but as a structured language through which meaning was systematically encoded and transmitted (Grabar, 1987; Nasr, 1987).

Within the historical context of Azerbaijan, architecture functioned not only as a response to practical and environmental requirements but also as an intellectual and spiritual endeavor. Religious prescriptions limiting figurative representation encouraged architects to rely on abstract forms, geometry, calligraphy, and ornamental systems as primary means of expression. As noted by Salamzadeh (1976), architecture in Azerbaijan from the late 10th century onward became a principal medium for representing political authority, spiritual belief, and cultural identity. Mausoleum architecture emerged as a significant architectural type, serving commemorative, ideological, and religious purposes simultaneously.

Ajami Nakhchivani's architectural works represented a decisive moment in the evolution of this tradition. Rather than employing ornamental elements solely as surface embellishment, he demonstrated a conscious and systematic integration of symbolic elements into architectural composition. Previous studies have emphasized the exceptional harmonic proportions and mathematical precision of his work, identifying his approach as a significant advancement within the Seljuk architectural tradition (Aliyev, 1996). Through this integration, ornamentation was transformed into a coherent symbolic language grounded in geometry, proportion, and religious meaning.

This chapter was based exclusively on the accepted journal paper and employed the Momina Khatun Mausoleum as the principal case study. The monument was selected because it represents the earliest and most comprehensive example in which all major symbolic elements characteristic of Nakhchivani's architectural language can be clearly observed and analyzed (Salamzadeh, 1976). The primary objective of the chapter was to identify and examine four fundamental symbolic elements—polygonal geometry, arabesque motifs, brick geometry, and Kufic calligraphy—and to demonstrate how their

integrated use formed the foundation of a distinct symbolic architectural school in Azerbaijan.

4.2 Research Methodology

This chapter employed a qualitative research methodology designed to investigate the symbolic language embedded in the architectural works of Ajami Nakhchivani. Given the historical and interpretive nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate framework for examining architectural symbolism within its cultural, religious, and historical contexts. The study did not seek quantitative measurement but rather focused on meaning, interpretation, and structural relationships among symbolic elements, following established approaches in architectural history and symbolism studies (Grabar, 1987; Nasr, 1987).

The research design was structured around a case study method, enabling an in-depth examination of a single architectural monument as a representative and foundational example. The Momina Khatun Mausoleum was selected due to its architectural completeness, historical significance, and the clear presence of all major symbolic elements attributed to Ajami Nakhchivani. Previous architectural historians have identified this monument as one of the most refined and conceptually unified examples of medieval Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture (Salamzadeh, 1976; Aliyev, 1996).

Data collection was conducted through an extensive literature review and visual analysis. The literature review included scholarly works on Islamic architectural symbolism, Azerbaijani architectural history, and analytical studies specifically addressing Ajami Nakhchivani's creativity (Aliyev, 1996; Mammadova, 2005; Salamzadeh, 1976). These sources provided the historical and theoretical foundation necessary for interpreting symbolic elements within their proper cultural and religious contexts.

Visual analysis constituted a central component of the methodology. Photographic documentation of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum was examined in detail, and visual material was supplemented by analytical drawings produced using digital techniques. This approach facilitated precise observation of geometric structures, symmetry principles, and pattern repetition, supporting earlier analytical methods applied to Azerbaijani architectural ornaments (Aliyev, 1996).

The analytical framework of the study was based on the iconographical method, through which architectural elements were categorized and interpreted according to their symbolic meanings. Symbolic elements were classified into four primary categories—polygon, arabesque, brick geometry, and Kufic calligraphy—following the categorization presented in previous analytical studies of Azerbaijani ornamental systems (Aliyev, 1996;

Mammadova, 2005). Comparative analysis of mausoleums constructed between the 12th and 20th centuries was employed to assess continuity in symbolic language, as documented in the accepted paper.

4.3 Concept of Symbolism in Islamic and Azerbaijani Architecture

Symbolism has historically constituted a fundamental dimension of Islamic architecture, functioning as a primary means through which metaphysical, spiritual, and cosmological ideas were articulated within the built environment. In Islamic societies, architecture was not conceived merely as a technical or functional enterprise, but as an intellectual and spiritual act in which form, proportion, and ornament conveyed layers of meaning. Due to the theological constraints on figurative representation, architects and craftsmen developed highly sophisticated abstract languages based on geometry, calligraphy, and vegetal motifs. These elements collectively formed a symbolic system capable of expressing divine unity, cosmic order, and the relationship between the material and the transcendent.

Within this tradition, geometric forms occupied a privileged position. Geometry was understood not only as a mathematical discipline but also as a symbolic expression of universal harmony and divine order. Repetition, symmetry, and proportional systems embodied the concept of infinity and the unity underlying multiplicity. Architectural space, therefore, became a structured reflection of the cosmos, in which each element contributed to a coherent metaphysical narrative. Calligraphy further reinforced this symbolic dimension by incorporating sacred text into architectural surfaces, transforming buildings into material carriers of divine revelation. Vegetal and arabesque motifs complemented these elements by symbolizing growth, continuity, and the eternal rhythm of nature as a manifestation of divine creation.

In the architectural history of Azerbaijan, symbolism assumed particular importance due to both religious and cultural conditions. From the late 10th century onward, architecture became a dominant medium for expressing political authority, social hierarchy, and spiritual values. Mausoleum architecture emerged as a key architectural type through which symbolic meaning was articulated. These monuments were not solely funerary structures but served as ideological statements that immortalized individuals while simultaneously reinforcing religious belief and cultural identity. The architectural form, ornamentation, and spatial organization of mausoleums were carefully designed to communicate messages of permanence, transcendence, and continuity.

Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture developed within the broader framework of Islamic architecture but also incorporated local traditions, materials, and aesthetic preferences. Brick construction became a defining characteristic, allowing for intricate

ornamental compositions and geometric experimentation. Over time, ornamental systems evolved from simple decorative applications into complex symbolic languages. This transformation reflected a growing awareness of architecture as a medium capable of conveying abstract concepts through formal means.

Within this historical context, the work of Ajami Nakhchivani represented a decisive moment in the evolution of symbolic architecture in Azerbaijan. While earlier architectural traditions employed ornamental elements primarily as decorative enhancements, Nakhchivani's work demonstrated a systematic and intentional use of symbolism as a core compositional principle. His architecture did not rely on isolated motifs but integrated multiple symbolic elements into a unified and coherent language. Through precise mathematical calculation, proportional harmony, and controlled repetition, ornamental systems were elevated from surface decoration to carriers of meaning.

Ajami Nakhchivani's approach to symbolism was distinguished by its structural integration into architectural form. Geometry, calligraphy, and ornamental brickwork were not applied independently but were interwoven into the architectural fabric of the monument. This integration ensured that symbolic meaning was embedded at multiple levels, from overall form and massing to surface articulation and detail. As a result, the architecture communicated meaning both visually and intellectually, inviting contemplation and interpretation.

The symbolic language formulated by Nakhchivani was deeply rooted in Islamic cosmology while simultaneously reflecting Azerbaijani cultural identity. By employing abstract forms grounded in universal principles, his architecture achieved a balance between local specificity and broader Islamic tradition. This balance contributed to the formation of a distinctive architectural school that maintained continuity across centuries. The persistence of these symbolic elements in later Azerbaijani mausoleums demonstrated the durability and adaptability of Nakhchivani's architectural language.

In this chapter, symbolism was therefore understood not as a secondary or ornamental feature, but as an essential architectural component that shaped both form and meaning. The analysis of Ajami Nakhchivani's work illustrated how symbolic elements functioned collectively to construct an architectural language capable of expressing complex cultural, religious, and philosophical ideas. This conceptual framework provided the foundation for the detailed examination of individual symbolic elements presented in the following sections.

4.4 Symbolic Elements in Ajami Nakhchivani's Architecture

The symbolic language of Ajami Nakhchivani's architecture was articulated through a carefully structured system of ornamental elements that functioned collectively rather than independently. In his architectural practice, symbolism was not confined to surface

decoration but was embedded within the logic of form, proportion, and material organization. This integrated approach distinguished Nakhchivani's work from earlier traditions in which ornamental motifs were often applied in a more fragmented or decorative manner. Instead, his architecture demonstrated a conscious synthesis of symbolic elements into a unified architectural composition, resulting in monuments that conveyed meaning through both visual complexity and structural coherence.

The Momina Khatun Mausoleum provided a particularly clear example of this symbolic integration. Although each façade of the monument displayed distinct ornamental compositions, no façade repeated the same pattern. Despite this diversity, a strong sense of unity was maintained through consistent proportional systems, shared geometric logic, and the recurrent use of specific symbolic elements. This balance between variation and unity reflected a sophisticated understanding of symbolic communication, in which multiplicity was harmonized within an overarching architectural order. Such an approach aligned closely with Islamic philosophical concepts emphasizing unity within diversity.

Ajami Nakhchivani's symbolic language was primarily structured around four fundamental elements: polygonal geometry, arabesque motifs, brick geometry, and Kufic calligraphy. These elements were not chosen arbitrarily but were deeply rooted in Islamic artistic tradition and Azerbaijani architectural practice. However, Nakhchivani's innovation lay in the way these elements were combined, proportioned, and systematically deployed. Through precise mathematical calculations and an advanced understanding of symmetry and repetition, he transformed inherited motifs into a coherent symbolic system that defined a new architectural school.

Each of these symbolic elements fulfilled both formal and conceptual functions. Geometric forms established the underlying order of the composition, arabesque motifs introduced rhythmic continuity and spiritual movement, brick geometry articulated structural and ornamental unity, and calligraphy embedded sacred meaning directly into architectural surfaces. Together, these elements formed a multilayered language through which architectural space communicated cosmological principles, spiritual values, and cultural identity. The following subsections examine each of these symbolic components in detail, elucidating their formal characteristics and symbolic meanings as they appeared in Ajami Nakhchivani's architectural works.

4.4.1 Polygon

Polygonal geometry constituted one of the most fundamental components of Ajami Nakhchivani's symbolic architectural language. His use of geometric forms was grounded in precise mathematical principles, particularly those governing tessellation and spatial continuity. In architectural ornamentation, tessellation refers to the repetition of geometric

shapes in such a way that they completely fill a surface without gaps or overlaps. From a mathematical perspective, only certain regular polygons—specifically the triangle, square, and hexagon—are capable of forming such continuous patterns, as their internal angles allow for complete rotational closure around a point.

Nakhchivani's architectural compositions demonstrated a masterful application of these principles. By employing tessellated polygonal patterns, he created surfaces that conveyed a sense of infinite expansion and structural coherence. These patterns were not merely decorative arrangements but reflected an underlying cosmological order, symbolizing the infinite nature of the universe and the unity that governs its multiplicity. The repetition of polygonal forms established a rhythmic visual logic that guided perception across the architectural surface, reinforcing a sense of balance and harmony.

In the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, polygonal geometry played a critical role in organizing ornamental compositions across the exterior façades. The geometric patterns were carefully proportioned and aligned with the architectural structure, ensuring that ornamentation reinforced rather than obscured the monument's form. Through the disciplined application of geometric rules, Nakhchivani achieved an ideal harmonic proportion, a quality that distinguished his work within the broader Seljuk architectural tradition. While the ornamental vocabulary shared similarities with Seljuk precedents, the compositional precision and symbolic coherence of Nakhchivani's designs represented a significant advancement.

Symbolically, polygonal geometry functioned as a visual representation of cosmic unity and divine order. The mathematical certainty inherent in these forms reflected the belief that the universe operates according to rational and immutable principles established by a higher power. By embedding these principles within architectural form, Nakhchivani transformed geometry into a medium of metaphysical expression. The architectural surface thus became a symbolic interface between the material world and abstract cosmic concepts, reinforcing the spiritual dimension of the monument.

Moreover, the systematic use of polygonal geometry contributed to the establishment of a distinct architectural identity. By consistently applying these geometric principles across his works, Nakhchivani created a recognizable symbolic language that could be identified and adapted in later periods. The persistence of similar geometric compositions in subsequent Azerbaijani mausoleums attested to the foundational role of polygonal symbolism in shaping the region's architectural tradition.

4.4.2 Arabesque

Arabesque ornamentation constituted a central component of Ajami Nakhchivani's symbolic architectural language, functioning as both a formal and metaphysical element within his compositions. In Islamic art and architecture, the arabesque has historically

served as a visual expression of continuity, growth, and the infinite nature of creation. Rather than depicting natural forms in a literal or representational manner, the arabesque abstracts vegetal motifs into rhythmic, interlacing patterns that suggest perpetual movement and regeneration. In this sense, the arabesque operates as a symbolic bridge between the material world and the metaphysical realm.

In the architectural works of Ajami Nakhchivani, arabesque motifs were not applied as isolated decorative features but were carefully integrated into the overall geometric framework of the monument. These motifs typically emerged from an underlying geometric grid, evolving into spiral and curvilinear forms that appeared to expand beyond the confines of the architectural surface. This compositional strategy reinforced the perception of architectural space as dynamic rather than static, encouraging visual movement and contemplation. The interaction between geometric order and organic flow created a balanced tension that was central to the symbolic impact of Nakhchivani's designs.

The Momina Khatun Mausoleum offered a particularly refined example of this integration. Arabesque ornaments were systematically distributed across the exterior surfaces, where they interacted with polygonal geometry and brick patterns to form a layered symbolic system. These motifs reflected a synthesis of cultural influences, combining the geometric precision associated with nomadic traditions and the vegetal imagery characteristic of settled civilizations. Through this synthesis, Nakhchivani articulated a symbolic reconciliation between different cultural paradigms, emphasizing harmony and continuity within architectural expression.

Symbolically, the arabesque represented the concept of spiritual ascent and the eternal cycle of creation. The spiral and looping forms suggested an unending process of growth, echoing Islamic philosophical interpretations of the universe as a manifestation of divine will in constant motion. In this context, the arabesque functioned as a visual metaphor for the soul's journey toward transcendence, reinforcing the spiritual purpose of mausoleum architecture. The repetition and variation of arabesque motifs further emphasized the idea of infinity, as no single motif appeared to terminate conclusively.

In Nakhchivani's work, the arabesque also served to mediate between architectural structure and symbolic meaning. While geometric patterns established order and stability, the arabesque introduced fluidity and rhythm, softening the rigidity of mathematical forms. This interplay enhanced the expressive capacity of the architecture, allowing it to communicate complex philosophical ideas through visual means. The careful proportioning and placement of arabesque motifs ensured that ornamentation remained subordinate to architectural form while still contributing significantly to its symbolic depth.

The enduring presence of arabesque motifs in later Azerbaijani mausoleums demonstrated the lasting influence of Nakhchivani's symbolic approach. Although stylistic variations emerged over time, the fundamental role of the arabesque as a symbol of nature, continuity, and spiritual movement remained consistent. This continuity confirmed that Nakhchivani's use of the arabesque was not merely an individual artistic preference but a foundational element in the development of a regional symbolic architectural language.

4.4.3 Brick Geometry

Brick geometry represented one of the most distinctive and innovative aspects of Ajami Nakhchivani's symbolic architectural language. In Azerbaijani medieval architecture, brick was not employed merely as a structural material but functioned as an expressive medium through which symbolic meaning was articulated. Ajami Nakhchivani's mastery lay in his ability to transform brickwork into a system of geometric ornamentation that unified structural logic with symbolic expression. This approach elevated brick construction from a practical necessity to a fundamental component of architectural meaning (Salamzadeh, 1976).

The symbolic potential of brick geometry in Nakhchivani's architecture was realized through the disciplined application of symmetry and repetition. His designs demonstrated both bilateral symmetry, in which architectural compositions could be divided into mirrored halves along one or more axes, and radial symmetry, in which patterns were organized around a central point and extended outward uniformly. These symmetrical systems were not applied arbitrarily but were carefully calculated to reinforce visual balance and compositional harmony. According to Aliyev (1996), such symmetry played a crucial role in achieving the ideal harmonic proportions characteristic of Nakhchivani's work.

In the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, brick geometry was used to articulate architectural surfaces through layered compositions that combined structural clarity with ornamental complexity. The arrangement of bricks followed precise geometric rules, allowing patterns to expand rhythmically across the monument's exterior. This repetition created a visual perception of continuity and infinite extension, reinforcing the symbolic association between geometry and cosmic order. The architectural surface thus became a visual representation of universal principles governing expansion, unity, and balance.

Symbolically, brick geometry functioned as an expression of the infinite and the eternal. The repetitive division of space into smaller geometric units suggested the concept of infinite divisibility, a notion closely associated with Islamic philosophical interpretations of the cosmos (Grabar, 1987). Through this symbolic framework, architectural form

transcended its materiality, becoming a medium through which abstract cosmological ideas were made perceptible.

Ajami Nakhchivani's innovative use of brick geometry also contributed to the formation of a distinct regional architectural identity. By exploiting the material properties of brick, he was able to create ornamental systems that were both structurally integrated and visually refined. This approach distinguished Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture from other regional traditions within the Islamic world, where stone or stucco played a more dominant ornamental role. The emphasis on brick geometry thus reflected both environmental conditions and cultural preferences, reinforcing the local character of Nakhchivani's architectural language (Salamzadeh, 1976).

The influence of Nakhchivani's brick geometry extended well beyond his own period. Comparative analysis of mausoleums constructed in later centuries demonstrated the persistence of similar geometric brick patterns, even as stylistic variations emerged. Although the scale and complexity of ornamentation evolved, the underlying symbolic principles established by Nakhchivani remained recognizable. This continuity confirmed that brick geometry was not merely a stylistic feature but a foundational element of Azerbaijani symbolic architecture, rooted in Nakhchivani's original creative vision.

Through the integration of brick geometry into both structure and ornamentation, Ajami Nakhchivani achieved a synthesis of material, form, and meaning. His architectural works demonstrated that symbolic expression could be embedded directly into construction techniques, thereby unifying craftsmanship and cosmological symbolism within a single architectural language.

4.4.4 Kufic Calligraphy

Kufic calligraphy constituted a central and highly significant component of Ajami Nakhchivani's symbolic architectural language, functioning as the most direct manifestation of sacred meaning within the built environment. In Islamic architectural tradition, calligraphy occupies a privileged position as the visual embodiment of the Divine Word, transforming textual content into a material and spatial presence. Unlike ornamental motifs derived from geometry or nature, calligraphic inscriptions convey explicit semantic meaning while simultaneously operating as visual and symbolic forms. In this context, Kufic calligraphy served as both a spiritual and architectural element, integrating religious doctrine directly into architectural composition (Nasr, 1987).

Ajami Nakhchivani's use of Kufic script demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of calligraphy as an architectural medium rather than a purely textual one. In his architectural works, inscriptions were not applied as superficial decorative bands but were embedded

within the structural and ornamental framework of the monument. The angular and rectilinear characteristics of Kufic script allowed it to harmonize naturally with geometric and brick-based ornamentation, reinforcing the visual unity of the architectural surface. This integration ensured that textual and non-textual elements functioned as components of a single symbolic system (Grabar, 1987).

In the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, Kufic inscriptions were carefully positioned to articulate the monument's exterior surfaces and to guide the viewer's perception of architectural form. The inscriptions were arranged in a manner that emphasized rhythm, balance, and repetition, aligning calligraphic composition with the underlying geometric order of the structure. Through this arrangement, sacred text became inseparable from architectural form, transforming the monument into a spatial expression of religious meaning. As Nasr (1987) noted, such integration reflects the Islamic principle of unity in diversity, wherein multiple forms converge to express a singular divine reality.

Symbolically, Kufic calligraphy functioned as a direct representation of divine presence and authority. By inscribing Quranic text into architectural surfaces, Nakhchivani transformed the mausoleum into a medium of spiritual communication. The written word, rendered permanent through architectural material, reinforced the sacred status of the monument and elevated its commemorative function. In this way, calligraphy extended the symbolic scope of architecture beyond visual abstraction, grounding metaphysical concepts in explicit religious language.

The architectural use of calligraphy also contributed to the conceptualization of architecture as a vessel for remembrance and continuity. In the context of mausoleum architecture, inscriptions served to preserve memory, transmit religious values, and reinforce cultural identity across generations. Salamzadeh (1976) emphasized that such inscriptions were integral to the ideological function of medieval Azerbaijani monuments, reflecting both spiritual devotion and social hierarchy. Ajami Nakhchivani's mastery lay in his ability to balance textual content with architectural form, ensuring that inscriptions enhanced rather than disrupted compositional harmony.

The enduring influence of Nakhchivani's calligraphic approach was evident in later Azerbaijani mausoleums, where Kufic inscriptions continued to occupy prominent architectural positions. Although stylistic adaptations occurred over time, the fundamental principle of integrating sacred text into architectural structure remained consistent. This continuity further confirmed Nakhchivani's role in establishing a symbolic architectural language that unified form, meaning, and spirituality.

Through the disciplined and intentional use of Kufic calligraphy, Ajami Nakhchivani completed the symbolic system articulated through geometry, arabesque motifs, and brick construction. Calligraphy served as the culminating element of this system, anchoring

abstract symbolism in explicit religious meaning and reinforcing the architecture's role as a medium of spiritual expression. In doing so, Nakhchivani's architecture exemplified the synthesis of material craftsmanship and metaphysical significance characteristic of the highest achievements of Islamic architectural tradition.

4.5 Results of the Research

The results of this research confirmed the central hypothesis that Ajami Nakhchivani was a pioneering figure in the formation of symbolic architecture in Azerbaijan and that his creative approach established the foundational principles of a distinct architectural school. Through a systematic analysis of architectural form, ornamentation, and symbolic elements, the study demonstrated that Nakhchivani's work represented a qualitative shift from decorative application toward an integrated symbolic language grounded in geometry, material logic, and religious meaning.

The literature analysis revealed that Ajami Nakhchivani held the prestigious title of "Sheikh of Engineers," a designation that reflected both his technical mastery and his elevated social and intellectual status within 12th-century Azerbaijani society (Salamzadeh, 1976). This distinction was significant, as architectural authorship during this period was often anonymous. In contrast, Nakhchivani's personal signature was explicitly engraved on architectural monuments, indicating that architectural creativity was recognized as a highly esteemed intellectual and artistic endeavor. This recognition supported the argument that his work was not merely exemplary within its historical context but was perceived as authoritative and innovative by contemporaries.

The analysis of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum demonstrated that symbolic elements in Nakhchivani's architecture were not applied independently or arbitrarily. Instead, polygonal geometry, arabesque motifs, brick geometry, and Kufic calligraphy were integrated into a coherent compositional system governed by proportional harmony and mathematical precision. As Aliyev (1996) emphasized, the proportional relationships achieved through geometric calculation distinguished Nakhchivani's work from earlier architectural traditions and contributed to its exceptional aesthetic and symbolic unity. The results confirmed that these four symbolic elements functioned collectively as a structured architectural language rather than as isolated decorative components.

Comparative analysis conducted within the scope of the accepted paper further demonstrated the enduring influence of Nakhchivani's symbolic system. Mausoleums constructed in Azerbaijan between the 12th and 20th centuries were examined according to chronological order and analyzed with reference to the symbolic elements present on their exterior surfaces. Although variations in scale, ornament density, and stylistic execution were observed, the persistence of the four primary symbolic elements established

by Nakhchivani was consistently evident. This continuity indicated that later architects adopted his architectural principles as a foundational design framework rather than merely drawing superficial inspiration from his work.

The results also revealed that while the proportional distribution of symbolic elements evolved over time, their underlying meanings remained largely consistent. Polygonal geometry and brick geometry continued to symbolize cosmic order, unity, and infinite expansion, while arabesque motifs maintained their association with nature, continuity, and spiritual movement. Kufic calligraphy consistently functioned as a direct representation of divine authority and religious meaning. This stability of symbolic interpretation across centuries reinforced the argument that Nakhchivani's architectural language possessed both conceptual clarity and cultural durability.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that Ajami Nakhchivani's creativity marked the beginning of a symbolic architectural tradition uniquely adapted to Azerbaijani cultural and material conditions. His systematic use of brick geometry and geometric ornamentation reflected both environmental realities and aesthetic preferences specific to the region. Through this synthesis of universal Islamic symbolism and local architectural practice, Nakhchivani established a model that could be replicated and adapted without losing its symbolic coherence.

In summary, the results of the research provided clear evidence that Ajami Nakhchivani was not only a master architect but also the first creator of a symbolic architectural language in Azerbaijan. His integration of geometry, ornamentation, and calligraphy into a unified system formed the basis of an architectural school that continued to shape Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture across multiple historical periods. These findings confirmed the central hypothesis of the study and provided a solid foundation for the concluding synthesis presented in the following section.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the symbolic language embedded in the architectural works of Ajami Nakhchivani, with particular emphasis on the ways in which symbolism was systematically integrated into architectural form, ornamentation, and material composition. Based exclusively on the accepted journal paper, the chapter demonstrated that Ajami Nakhchivani's architecture represented a decisive moment in the development of traditional Azerbaijani architecture, marking the transition from decorative application toward a coherent and intentional symbolic system.

Through the case study of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, the chapter identified four fundamental symbolic elements—polygonal geometry, arabesque motifs, brick geometry,

and Kufic calligraphy—as the core components of Nakhchivani’s architectural language. Each element was analyzed in terms of its formal characteristics, symbolic meaning, and role within the overall architectural composition. The analysis confirmed that these elements did not function independently but were interrelated through precise proportional systems and compositional logic, resulting in a unified symbolic structure.

The methodological approach, combining literature review, visual analysis, iconographical interpretation, and controlled comparative observation, provided a rigorous framework for examining architectural symbolism within its historical and cultural context. The findings demonstrated that Nakhchivani’s use of geometry and brick construction expressed concepts of cosmic order, unity, and infinite expansion, while arabesque motifs articulated continuity, nature, and spiritual movement. Kufic calligraphy, as the most explicit symbolic element, embedded sacred meaning directly into architectural surfaces, completing the symbolic system through the integration of divine text and built form.

The results further confirmed that Ajami Nakhchivani’s symbolic language exerted a lasting influence on Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture from the 12th century onward. Although stylistic variations emerged in later periods, the persistence of the four primary symbolic elements indicated that Nakhchivani’s architectural principles were adopted as a foundational design framework rather than as isolated stylistic references. This continuity underscored his role as the first creator of a symbolic architectural language in Azerbaijan and as the originator of an architectural school that shaped regional identity across centuries.

In conclusion, this chapter established that Ajami Nakhchivani’s architecture constituted a synthesis of mathematical precision, material innovation, and spiritual symbolism. By embedding symbolic meaning into every level of architectural composition, his work transcended functional construction and achieved a level of intellectual and cultural expression that defined the trajectory of Azerbaijani architectural history. The insights gained in this chapter provide a critical foundation for the concluding discussion of the dissertation, in which the broader implications of symbolic architecture for cultural heritage and architectural continuity are addressed.

CHAPTER 5. SELJUK MAUSOLEUM ARCHITECTURE IN AZERBAIJAN:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITS FAÇADE DESIGN

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examined the development of façade design in Seljuk-period mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan, situating it within the broader architectural framework of the Seljuk Empire while emphasizing its regional specificity. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, Seljuk architecture established a transregional architectural language that extended across Central Asia, Iran, the Caucasus, and Anatolia, shaping the formal and symbolic vocabulary of medieval Islamic architecture (Blair & Bloom, 1994; O’Kane, 1995). Within this expansive cultural and political sphere, mausoleum architecture emerged as a particularly significant building type, combining commemorative, ideological, and symbolic functions.

Although the Seljuk architectural tradition is often discussed as a unified phenomenon, regional variations played a crucial role in shaping its formal expressions. Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums, developed primarily under the Eldiguzid Atabegs, demonstrated a distinctive approach to façade composition characterized by refined brick craftsmanship, integrated ornamentation, and a strong emphasis on surface articulation (Hill, 1963; Necipoğlu, 2005). Despite sharing political affiliation and cultural exchange with Iran and Anatolia, Azerbaijani examples diverged notably in their treatment of exterior surfaces, favoring continuous decorative coverage and symbolic density over volumetric monumentality or sculptural emphasis.

This chapter was based exclusively on the author’s published research investigating façade composition and decorative articulation in Seljuk-era mausoleums in Azerbaijan, with comparative reference to Iranian and Anatolian examples. The primary objective was to clarify how façade design evolved as the central expressive medium of Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture and how this development contributed to the formation of a distinct regional architectural identity within the broader Seljuk world.

The chapter approached the façade not as a secondary or ornamental component, but as a compositional interface through which material logic, geometric order, epigraphic content, and symbolic meaning were integrated. By examining selected case studies—the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, and the Gulistan Mausoleum—the analysis sought to demonstrate that Azerbaijani architects developed a coherent façade-centered design methodology grounded in fired-brick construction, modular segmentation, and inscriptional synthesis. These characteristics distinguished Azerbaijani mausoleums

from contemporaneous Persian and Anatolian examples, where exterior articulation was generally more restrained or localized (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Goodwin, 1997).

Furthermore, this chapter explored the ideological and educational contexts that informed façade design in Azerbaijan during the Seljuk period. As documented in the paper, many patrons and architects in the region were educated within madrasa systems influenced by Sufi thought, which emphasized discipline, symbolic interpretation, and visual literacy (Necipoğlu, 2005; Tabbaa, 2001). This intellectual environment shaped architectural practice by encouraging the embedding of philosophical and spiritual ideas into formal design decisions. Consequently, façade ornamentation functioned not merely as decoration, but as a visual language capable of transmitting meaning across time.

Through a comparative and analytically grounded approach, this chapter aimed to reposition Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleum architecture within the global historiography of Islamic architecture. By foregrounding façade design as a primary architectural language, the study contributed to a more inclusive understanding of regional diversity within the Seljuk architectural tradition and highlighted the importance of Azerbaijan as an independent center of architectural innovation during the medieval period.

5.2 Architectural Context of Seljuk-Age Azerbaijan

During the 12th and 13th centuries, Azerbaijan occupied a distinctive position within the Seljuk world, functioning simultaneously as a political frontier, a cultural crossroads, and an experimental ground for architectural development. Governed largely by the Eldiguzid Atabegs during this period, the region was formally integrated into the Seljuk imperial framework while retaining a considerable degree of administrative and cultural autonomy. This geopolitical condition fostered an environment in which architectural practice could absorb transregional Seljuk principles while adapting them to local materials, intellectual traditions, and aesthetic priorities (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Hill, 1963).

Architecturally, Seljuk-period Azerbaijan developed a vocabulary that synthesized influences from Persian, Central Asian, and Caucasian traditions. However, rather than merely replicating architectural models from Seljuk centers such as Isfahan or Konya, Azerbaijani architects reinterpreted these influences through a localized design logic. One of the most defining characteristics of this regional tradition was the systematic use of fired brick as both a structural and expressive material. Unlike Anatolian Seljuk architecture, which frequently employed stone carving and sculptural portal compositions, or Persian architecture, which emphasized large-scale massing and planar surfaces, Azerbaijani architecture developed a façade-oriented language grounded in brick modulation, geometric articulation, and integrated inscription (O’Kane, 1995; Necipoğlu, 2005).

Educational institutions played a crucial role in shaping this architectural culture. Madrasas operating in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan were deeply influenced by Sufi-oriented intellectual traditions that emphasized ethical discipline, symbolic interpretation, and textual literacy. As documented in previous studies, many individuals who later assumed political authority in the region received education within these institutions, which profoundly shaped their worldview and patronage practices (Tabbaa, 2001; Necipoğlu, 2005). Consequently, architecture commissioned during this period reflected not only political ambition, but also philosophical and spiritual values internalized through education.

Within this intellectual milieu, architecture was conceived as a medium capable of encoding meaning through formal order. Façades were understood as symbolic texts in which geometry, proportion, and epigraphy functioned analogously to written language. This conceptualization aligned with the pedagogical methods of Seljuk madrasas, where visual analysis and textual interpretation were closely intertwined. As a result, architectural surfaces were designed to be “read” by informed viewers, transforming the exterior of the building into an interface between visual perception and intellectual engagement (Necipoğlu, 2005).

Material conditions further reinforced this architectural orientation. The widespread availability of high-quality clay in Azerbaijan encouraged the development of advanced brick construction techniques. Fired brick allowed for precise modular repetition, subtle surface variation, and the seamless integration of ornamental and structural elements. This material logic enabled architects to achieve visual richness without reliance on secondary decorative layers such as stucco or extensive tilework. Instead, ornamentation emerged directly from construction technique, reinforcing the unity of structure and surface (Blair & Bloom, 1994).

The convergence of political autonomy, Sufi-influenced education, and material pragmatism resulted in an architectural culture that prioritized compositional clarity, symbolic coherence, and façade articulation. Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture thus cannot be understood as a peripheral imitation of Persian or Anatolian models. Rather, it constituted a mature and self-aware regional tradition in which façade design served as the primary architectural language. This context provides the foundation for the detailed case-study analyses presented in the following sections, where individual monuments are examined as expressions of this broader architectural and ideological framework.

5.3 Literature Review and Research Positioning

Scholarly research on Seljuk architecture has traditionally focused on the major political and cultural centers of the Seljuk Empire, particularly Iran and Anatolia, where

monumental architectural remains are both numerous and well preserved. Foundational studies by Blair and Bloom (1994) and O’Kane (1995) established the historical framework, typological development, and stylistic characteristics of Seljuk architecture, providing essential reference points for understanding its evolution within the broader context of Islamic architectural history. These works emphasized structural innovation, spatial organization, and ornamental vocabulary, and they continue to shape contemporary interpretations of Seljuk architectural production.

Subsequent scholarship expanded this framework by situating Seljuk architecture within intellectual, pedagogical, and cultural contexts. Hill (1963) contributed detailed documentation of construction techniques and ornamental systems, while Necipoğlu (2005) advanced interpretive approaches that examined architecture as a product of intellectual discipline, geometric knowledge, and educational practice. Studies of Anatolian Seljuk funerary architecture, such as those by Goodwin (1997), further traced the transformation of Seljuk design principles into later Ottoman architectural traditions, reinforcing the centrality of Iran and Anatolia in existing historiography.

Despite these substantial contributions, architectural developments in the Caucasus—particularly in Azerbaijan—remain comparatively underrepresented in Seljuk studies. When Azerbaijani monuments are discussed, they are often treated as peripheral examples or subsumed under broader Persian or Anatolian categories. This tendency has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the regional diversity that characterized Seljuk architectural production. Therefore, the architectural innovations of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums, especially in relation to façade composition and ornamentation, have not been sufficiently analyzed as manifestations of an independent regional tradition (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Necipoğlu, 2005).

Several specific gaps can be identified in the existing literature. First, there is a notable lack of studies that examine Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture as a coherent regional phenomenon. While individual monuments such as the Momina Khatun Mausoleum are frequently cited as exceptional works, they are rarely contextualized within a broader regional framework that accounts for shared material practices, compositional strategies, and symbolic intent. Second, much of the scholarship privileges spatial planning, structural systems, and monumental massing over façade design. As a result, the exterior surfaces of buildings—where symbolic, epigraphic, and ornamental programs are most explicitly articulated—have received limited analytical attention.

A further gap concerns the intellectual and educational contexts that shaped architectural practice in Seljuk Azerbaijan. Although the influence of madrasa education and Sufi-oriented thought has been discussed in relation to Islamic art more generally, its specific impact on architectural design in the Caucasus remains insufficiently explored. Studies addressing the relationship between pedagogy, symbolism, and architectural form

have tended to focus on Persian or Anatolian contexts, leaving Azerbaijani examples under-theorized (Necipoglu, 2005; Tabbaa, 2001).

Finally, comparative methodologies have rarely been applied systematically to façade design across Seljuk regions. While comparative references occasionally appear in discussions of ornament or typology, few studies undertake a structured analysis of how façade composition, material articulation, and epigraphic integration differ among Azerbaijani, Iranian, and Anatolian mausoleums. This absence has limited the ability to identify regional design logics and to assess the extent to which local traditions contributed to the diversity of Seljuk architecture.

The present study positions itself in direct response to these gaps. By focusing explicitly on façade design as the primary analytical lens, it reorients the study of Seljuk mausoleum architecture toward the architectural surface as a site of symbolic and ideological expression. Through detailed case studies of the Momina Khatun, Yusif ibn Kuseyir, and Gulustan mausoleums, the research examines how material choice, geometric organization, and epigraphic programs were systematically integrated into façade composition in Azerbaijan.

Moreover, by employing a comparative framework that situates Azerbaijani examples alongside Iranian and Anatolian counterparts, the study clarifies both shared Seljuk principles and regionally specific adaptations. This approach allows Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture to be understood not as a marginal or derivative tradition, but as a distinct architectural school characterized by façade-centric design logic, material discipline, and symbolic coherence. In doing so, the research contributes to a more balanced and inclusive historiography of Seljuk architecture and underscores the importance of regional analysis in understanding the complexity of medieval Islamic architectural traditions.

5.4 Overview of Seljuk Mausoleums in Azerbaijan

To examine the regional development of façade design in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan, this section presented three representative mausoleums: the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, and the Gulustan Mausoleum. These monuments were selected because they collectively illustrate the evolution, consolidation, and continuity of façade-centered design principles within the Azerbaijani Seljuk architectural tradition. Although differing in scale, decorative intensity, and chronological placement, the three structures share a common architectural logic rooted in fired-brick construction, geometric articulation, and integrated epigraphic programs (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Hill, 1963).

The selection of these case studies allowed for a comprehensive examination of how façade design functioned as the primary medium of architectural expression in Azerbaijan

during the Seljuk period. Rather than emphasizing interior spatial complexity or monumental massing, Azerbaijani mausoleums consistently prioritized exterior surface articulation. Façades were conceived as continuous architectural fields in which structure, ornament, and inscription were inseparably combined. This approach distinguished Azerbaijani examples from contemporaneous Persian and Anatolian mausoleums, where decorative emphasis was often limited to portals or select architectural zones (O’Kane, 1995; Goodwin, 1997).

Despite variations in formal elaboration, the three mausoleums demonstrated a shared compositional framework. All employed polygonal plans—octagonal or decagonal—that facilitated rhythmic vertical segmentation of the façade. This segmentation was achieved through shallow recesses, blind arches, or pilasters, producing a measured articulation of the exterior surface and reinforcing vertical emphasis. Such compositional strategies reflected Seljuk preferences for geometric order and proportional hierarchy while also responding to local material and aesthetic conditions (Hill, 1963).

Material use constituted another unifying factor. Fired brick served as both the structural core and the primary decorative medium in all three monuments. This reliance on brick enabled architects to achieve ornamental richness through modulation of texture, pattern, and relief rather than through applied materials. The integration of ornament directly into construction technique reinforced the unity of structure and surface, a defining characteristic of Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Necipoğlu, 2005).

Epigraphy further contributed to the coherence of this architectural tradition. In each case study, Kufic inscriptions were embedded into the façade rather than applied as independent decorative panels. These inscriptional bands were carefully aligned with the geometric divisions of the exterior, ensuring compositional continuity and reinforcing the façade’s symbolic function as a legible architectural text (Necipoğlu, 2005). The consistent placement of inscriptions in the upper zones of the façades created a visual hierarchy that structured the viewer’s perception of the monument.

Taken together, the Momina Khatun, Yusif ibn Kuseyir, and Gulustan mausoleums illustrate a progressive refinement of façade-based architectural expression in Azerbaijan. From the highly elaborate and symbolically dense design of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum to the restrained yet proportionally precise Gulustan Mausoleum, these structures reveal a coherent regional methodology rather than isolated architectural experiments. They demonstrate how Azerbaijani architects adapted Seljuk principles to local conditions while maintaining a strong emphasis on symbolic clarity, material discipline, and compositional unity.

The following subsections examine each monument individually, providing detailed analyses of their façade composition, material articulation, and symbolic intent. Through

this focused examination, the study clarifies how regional identity was constructed and sustained through architectural design during the Seljuk period in Azerbaijan.

5.4.1 Momina Khatun Mausoleum (c. 1186, Nakhchivan)

The Momina Khatun Mausoleum, constructed around 1186 in Nakhchivan and attributed to the architect Ajami ibn Abubakr Nakhchivani, represents the most advanced and conceptually complete example of Seljuk-era mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan. Commissioned by Shams al-Din Eldiguz, founder of the Eldiguzid Atabeg dynasty, the monument functioned not only as a funerary structure but also as a political and cultural statement within the urban and symbolic landscape of Nakhchivan (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Hill, 1963). Its architectural sophistication and ornamental density position it as a key reference point for understanding the development of façade-centered design in the region (Fig 1).

Formally, the mausoleum is based on a decagonal plan and rises to an approximate height of 25 meters. This polygonal geometry provided the structural framework for a highly articulated façade system, in which vertical emphasis was achieved through shallow recesses and semi-columnar projections. These vertical elements segmented the exterior surface into rhythmic bays, producing a measured visual cadence that guided perception upward and reinforced the monument's verticality. Such articulation reflects Seljuk principles of proportional hierarchy while also anticipating later developments in Azerbaijani façade design (O'Kane, 1995).

Materially, the structure is constructed primarily of fired brick, with selective use of turquoise-glazed tiles to accentuate key architectural transitions. Brick was employed not only as a load-bearing material but also as the primary medium of ornamentation. Geometric brick patterns, including interlocking star motifs and linear friezes, were integrated directly into the façade, creating a continuous ornamental field that unified structure and decoration. This approach exemplifies the Azerbaijani Seljuk preference for material-based ornamentation, where visual complexity emerges from construction logic rather than applied embellishment (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Necipoğlu, 2005).

One of the most defining features of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum is its continuous Kufic inscription band encircling the upper zone of the façade. Executed in carved brick and highlighted with glazed accents, the inscription functions simultaneously as text, ornament, and compositional boundary. Its placement establishes a clear visual hierarchy, separating the main body of the façade from the cornice and reinforcing the monument's symbolic and ideological dimensions. As Necipoğlu (2005) observed, such integration of epigraphy into architectural structure reflects a broader Seljuk tendency to treat inscriptions as essential architectural elements rather than decorative additions.

The façade design of the Momina Khatun Mausoleum demonstrates a high degree of compositional unity despite its ornamental richness. Although each façade panel displays variation in geometric patterning, no motif is repeated identically. This controlled variation within a consistent proportional framework exemplifies a sophisticated design logic in which diversity is subsumed under an overarching order. Such an approach aligns with Islamic philosophical concepts emphasizing unity within multiplicity and underscores the symbolic dimension of the architectural surface.

Symbolically, the mausoleum's façade can be interpreted as a visual synthesis of cosmological, spiritual, and political meanings. Geometric regularity and repetition convey notions of cosmic order and permanence, while the integration of calligraphy embeds explicit religious content into the architectural fabric. The monument's scale, complexity, and refinement further communicate the authority and legitimacy of its patron, situating the structure at the intersection of spiritual aspiration and political representation (Hill, 1963; Blair & Bloom, 1994).

In comparative perspective, the Momina Khatun Mausoleum surpasses contemporaneous Persian and Anatolian Seljuk mausoleums in terms of façade articulation and symbolic density. While Iranian examples often emphasize monumental massing and Anatolian tombs prioritize sculptural portals, the Azerbaijani approach, as exemplified by this monument, foregrounds continuous surface design and integrated ornamentation. This distinction supports the argument that the Momina Khatun Mausoleum represents not merely an exceptional individual work, but the mature expression of a regional architectural school.

As the most elaborate case study examined in this chapter, the Momina Khatun Mausoleum establishes the conceptual and formal benchmarks against which the subsequent examples—the Yusif ibn Kuseyir and Gulustan mausoleums—can be evaluated. Together, these monuments reveal the internal coherence and evolutionary trajectory of Seljuk mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan

5.4.2 Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum (1162, Nakhchivan)

The Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, constructed in 1162 in Nakhchivan and attributed to Ajami ibn Abubakr Nakhchivani, represents an early yet highly refined example of Seljuk funerary architecture in Azerbaijan. Compared to the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, this monument is more modest in scale and ornamental intensity; however, it is of particular significance for understanding the formative stage of the Azerbaijani Seljuk architectural school (Fig 2).

Its architectural clarity, proportional discipline, and façade-based design logic reveal the foundational principles that were later developed more elaborately in subsequent monuments. The mausoleum is an octagonal brick structure with an approximate height of eight meters. Its compact form and reduced scale do not diminish its architectural sophistication; rather, they underscore a deliberate emphasis on proportional balance and compositional restraint. The octagonal plan provided a geometric framework that facilitated rhythmic façade articulation, allowing each elevation to be treated as an integral component of a unified exterior system. This plan-based logic reflects Seljuk preferences for geometric regularity while also anticipating the façade-centric orientation that would come to define Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture.

Materially, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum is constructed entirely of fired brick, with no use of glazed tiles or secondary decorative materials. This material restraint highlights the architect's reliance on brick modulation, relief variation, and precise jointing to achieve visual articulation. Brick is used not only for structural enclosure but also to define architectural elements such as blind arches, cornices, and inscription bands. Through this approach, ornamentation emerges directly from construction technique, reinforcing the unity of structure and surface that characterizes the Azerbaijani Seljuk tradition.

A defining feature of the monument is the continuous Kufic inscription carved directly into the brick façade. Unlike later examples where inscriptions are accentuated with glazed elements, the epigraphy here relies solely on the contrast between raised and recessed brickwork. This integration of text and material establishes the inscription as the primary organizing element of the façade, around which other architectural components are proportioned. The inscription serves simultaneously as a symbolic, visual, and compositional device, demonstrating the early integration of epigraphic logic into architectural design.

Geometric ornamentation in the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum is minimal and strategically applied. Decorative emphasis is concentrated around the entrance zone and the upper cornice, where simple geometric motifs reinforce structural transitions and frame key architectural elements. This selective use of ornament reflects an intentional design economy, in which visual clarity and symbolic legibility take precedence over ornamental density. As noted in the comparative analysis presented in the paper, such restraint should be understood not as simplicity, but as disciplined refinement rooted in architectural intention rather than technical limitation.

From a symbolic perspective, the façade of the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum exemplifies an early synthesis of geometry, material, and epigraphy. The absence of elaborate decoration directs attention to rhythm, proportion, and textual content, encouraging a mode of visual engagement aligned with intellectual contemplation. This approach reflects the broader educational and ideological context of Seljuk Azerbaijan,

where architectural form was conceived as a medium for disciplined expression and symbolic communication.

In comparative terms, the monument differs markedly from contemporaneous Seljuk mausoleums in Iran and Anatolia. While Persian examples often emphasize monumental massing and Anatolian structures privilege sculptural portals, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum foregrounds façade coherence and epigraphic integration. This distinction reinforces the argument that Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture developed an independent design logic at an early stage, one that prioritized surface articulation and symbolic clarity over volumetric or sculptural effects.

As an early work attributed to Ajami ibn Abubakr Nakhchivani, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum occupies a critical position in the architectural history of Azerbaijan. It establishes the compositional and symbolic principles that would later be expanded and refined in more elaborate monuments such as the Momina Khatun Mausoleum. In this sense, the structure serves as both a foundational model and a key reference point for tracing the evolution of façade-based architectural expression in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan

5.4.3 Gulistan Mausoleum (13th Century, Julfa Region)

The Gulistan Mausoleum, located in the Julfa region of present-day Azerbaijan and dated to the 13th century, represents a later and more restrained manifestation of the Seljuk funerary tradition in the Caucasus. Although more modest in scale and ornamental complexity than the Momina Khatun and Yusif ibn Kuseyir mausoleums, the Gulistan Mausoleum is of critical importance for understanding the continuity and consolidation of façade-based architectural principles established earlier by Ajami ibn Abubakr Nakhchivani and his architectural school. Its architectural expression reflects not a decline in design ambition, but a deliberate emphasis on proportional clarity, material discipline, and compositional restraint (Fig 3).

Formally, the mausoleum is based on an octagonal plan and constructed entirely of fired brick. The structure is relatively low in height and is situated in an isolated landscape, without an accompanying architectural complex. This physical context enhances the visual prominence of the monument's exterior, reinforcing the role of the façade as the primary medium of architectural communication. The octagonal geometry provides a clear structural framework that supports rhythmic articulation of the exterior surfaces through shallow blind arches and vertical brick pilasters.

The façade composition of the Gulistan Mausoleum is characterized by a high degree of formal restraint. Each façade panel is articulated by a shallow recessed arch framed by vertical brick elements, producing a consistent rhythm across the exterior. These arches are

non-structural and serve purely compositional and visual functions, emphasizing surface modulation rather than spatial enclosure. Through repetition and proportional consistency, the façade achieves a balanced visual order that aligns with Seljuk principles of geometric regularity and hierarchical organization.

Material articulation plays a central role in the monument's architectural expression. The exclusive use of fired brick, without glazed tile, stone carving, or muqarnas decoration, underscores a reliance on construction technique rather than applied ornament. Visual interest is generated through subtle variations in brick patterning, relief depth, and surface texture. This approach reflects a mature stage of the Azerbaijani Seljuk tradition, in which architectural meaning is conveyed through economy of means and disciplined execution rather than ornamental abundance (Hill, 1963; Necipoğlu, 2005).

Epigraphic integration remains a key feature of the façade, despite the monument's overall simplicity. A Kufic inscription band runs along the upper perimeter of the structure, occupying a compositional position consistent with earlier Azerbaijani examples. Although portions of the inscription have been eroded over time, its placement and proportional relationship to the façade are clearly legible. The inscription functions as a continuous visual boundary between the main wall surface and the upper transitional zone, reinforcing the façade's symbolic and hierarchical structure (O'Kane, 1995).

The restrained ornamental vocabulary of the Gulistan Mausoleum shifts interpretive emphasis toward rhythm, proportion, and material articulation. In the absence of elaborate geometric or vegetal ornament, architectural meaning is communicated through the disciplined repetition of forms and the careful modulation of surface depth. This emphasis aligns with regional building practices that prioritized structural clarity and symbolic legibility over visual exuberance. As such, the monument demonstrates that Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture retained its core design principles even as expressive strategies evolved toward greater minimalism.

From a comparative perspective, the Gulistan Mausoleum reinforces the regional distinctiveness of Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture. While contemporaneous Persian mausoleums often relied on monumental massing and Anatolian examples favored sculptural portal compositions, the Gulistan Mausoleum maintains a façade-centric design logic grounded in surface articulation and integrated epigraphy. This continuity confirms that the architectural school established in the 12th century persisted into the 13th century, adapting to changing conditions without abandoning its foundational principles.

In summary, the Gulistan Mausoleum represents a mature and refined expression of Azerbaijani Seljuk funerary architecture. Its architectural restraint should be understood as a conscious design choice rooted in the same ideological, material, and compositional framework that shaped earlier monuments. Together with the Momina Khatun and Yusif

ibn Kuseyir mausoleums, it completes a coherent sequence of case studies that illustrate the evolution, consistency, and regional specificity of façade-based architectural design in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan.

5.5 Façade Analysis: Material, Geometry, and Inscriptions

The analysis of the Momina Khatun, Yusif ibn Kuseyir, and Gulustan mausoleums revealed a coherent regional methodology governing façade design in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan. Although these monuments differed in scale, chronological placement, and ornamental density, their façades were shaped by a shared architectural logic grounded in material discipline, geometric order, and epigraphic integration. This consistency confirmed that façade composition functioned as the principal expressive and symbolic medium of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleum architecture rather than as a secondary decorative layer.

Across all three case studies, the façade was conceived as a continuous architectural surface in which structure, ornament, and inscription were inseparably combined. Rather than isolating decorative elements in portals or limited architectural zones, Azerbaijani architects distributed visual articulation evenly across all elevations. This approach contrasted sharply with contemporaneous Seljuk traditions in Iran and Anatolia, where ornamentation was often concentrated around entrances or expressed through volumetric massing. In Azerbaijani examples, the façade itself became the site where architectural meaning was constructed and communicated.

The analytical process employed in this section was based on field observation, photographic documentation, and diagrammatic analysis of façade composition. These methods allowed for a precise examination of how material choice, geometric segmentation, and inscriptional placement interacted to produce a balanced visual order. By isolating and comparing these elements across the three monuments, it became possible to identify recurring design strategies and to distinguish regional characteristics from broader Seljuk conventions.

The following subsections examine three core components of façade design—material use and construction logic, vertical segmentation and geometric rhythm, and epigraphic integration. Together, these elements form an interdependent system through which Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums achieved both architectural coherence and symbolic clarity. Rather than functioning independently, material, geometry, and inscription operated as mutually reinforcing elements within a unified façade language.

5.5.1 Material Use and Construction Logic

A defining characteristic of Seljuk mausoleums in Azerbaijan was the exclusive or dominant use of fired brick as both a structural and decorative material. This reliance on brick distinguished Azerbaijani architecture from Anatolian Seljuk traditions, which frequently employed stone and sculptural carving, and from Persian examples that emphasized stucco surfaces and large-scale tile applications. In Azerbaijan, brick was not treated as a neutral construction medium but was actively exploited for its expressive potential.

Brick construction enabled architects to articulate façades through modular repetition, relief variation, and precise jointing. Architectural elements such as blind arches, pilasters, cornices, and inscription bands were formed directly from brickwork, ensuring that ornamentation emerged organically from construction technique. This integration reinforced the unity of structure and surface, eliminating the distinction between load-bearing fabric and decorative layer. As a result, visual complexity was achieved through material manipulation rather than applied embellishment.

The material logic of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums also reflected economic and environmental considerations. Fired brick was locally available, durable, and adaptable to geometric articulation. Its modular nature allowed architects to maintain strict proportional control across façade compositions, contributing to visual coherence and rhythmic consistency. This approach demonstrated a high degree of material intelligence and reinforced the architectural emphasis on discipline, order, and clarity.

5.5.2 Vertical Segmentation and Geometric Rhythm

Vertical segmentation constituted a fundamental compositional strategy in the façade design of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums. Across all three case studies, façades were divided into regular vertical units using shallow recesses, blind arches, or pilaster-like projections. These divisions corresponded directly to the polygonal geometry of the plan—octagonal or decagonal—ensuring alignment between spatial structure and exterior articulation.

This segmentation produced a rhythmic division of the façade surface, guiding visual perception upward and reinforcing vertical emphasis. Rather than serving merely as decorative devices, these vertical elements established a proportional framework that governed the placement of ornament and inscription. Each segment functioned as a modular unit within a larger compositional system, contributing to overall architectural harmony.

The repetition of vertical units also reinforced symbolic interpretations associated with order, continuity, and balance. Through consistent geometric rhythm, the façade conveyed a sense of stability and permanence appropriate to funerary architecture. The disciplined repetition of forms reflected Seljuk aesthetic preferences for hierarchical organization and modular clarity while also embodying regional interpretations that emphasized surface articulation over volumetric expression.

5.5.3 Epigraphic Integration

Epigraphic integration represented one of the most distinctive and conceptually significant aspects of Azerbaijani Seljuk façade design. In all three case studies, Kufic inscriptions were embedded directly into the architectural surface rather than applied as independent decorative panels. This integration confirmed that epigraphy was treated as an essential architectural element rather than as supplementary ornamentation.

Inscription bands were typically positioned in the upper register of the façade, encircling the structure and establishing a clear visual boundary between the main wall surface and the upper transitional zone. Their placement followed geometric logic, aligning with vertical segmentation and proportional divisions of the façade. This careful alignment ensured compositional continuity and reinforced the façade's legibility as a unified architectural text.

Symbolically, the integration of Kufic calligraphy elevated the façade from a purely visual surface to a medium of intellectual and spiritual communication. Qur'anic verses and dedicatory texts conveyed explicit religious meaning while simultaneously contributing to the rhythmic and geometric order of the composition. This synthesis of text and form reflected broader Seljuk intellectual traditions that valued visual literacy and symbolic interpretation, particularly within educational contexts influenced by madrasa and Sufi thought.

Together, material use, vertical segmentation, and epigraphic integration formed a coherent façade language that distinguished Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums from contemporaneous traditions in Iran and Anatolia. Through disciplined construction logic, geometric rhythm, and textual synthesis, Azerbaijani architects developed a façade-centered methodology capable of expressing both regional identity and universal Seljuk principles. This integrated approach laid the foundation for the symbolic and ideological interpretations examined in the following section.

5.6 Symbolism and Function of Façades

The formal and material characteristics observed in Seljuk-period Azerbaijani mausoleum façades were not arbitrary aesthetic choices but reflected a complex interplay between symbolic intention, functional requirements, and ideological context. In this architectural tradition, the façade functioned as the primary interface through which meaning was communicated, serving simultaneously as a visual, symbolic, and intellectual medium. Rather than privileging interior spatial experience, Azerbaijani Seljuk architects emphasized the exterior surface as the locus of architectural expression, transforming façades into structured fields of signification.

In funerary architecture, this façade-centric approach assumed particular importance. Mausoleums were designed to be encountered visually from the exterior, often situated in open landscapes or urban settings where the building's outward appearance conveyed its commemorative and ideological significance. The even distribution of ornament, geometry, and inscription across all elevations ensured that no single viewpoint dominated the architectural experience. This strategy reinforced the symbolic completeness of the structure and underscored its function as a monument of remembrance and spiritual contemplation.

From a symbolic perspective, the façade operated as a compositional interface through which abstract concepts—such as cosmic order, spiritual discipline, and continuity—were rendered perceptible. Geometric organization and vertical segmentation established a visual order grounded in proportional harmony and repetition, reflecting Seljuk philosophical conceptions of the universe as governed by rational and hierarchical principles. The disciplined rhythm of façade articulation conveyed stability and permanence, qualities appropriate to the commemorative function of mausoleums and consistent with Islamic interpretations of eternal order (Fig 4).

Epigraphy further deepened the symbolic dimension of the façade. In Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums, inscriptions were not treated as secondary decorative elements but were integrated structurally into the architectural surface. Executed primarily in Kufic script, these inscriptions contained Qur'anic verses or dedicatory texts that reinforced the spiritual authority of the monument. Their consistent placement in the upper registers of the façade established symbolic boundaries between earthly and transcendent realms, guiding the viewer's interpretation of architectural hierarchy and meaning (Necipoğlu, 2005).

The integration of text and architecture also reflects an intellectual culture shaped by madrasa education and Sufi-influenced pedagogical traditions. In this context, reading and interpretation were central intellectual practices, and architecture was conceived as a form of visual text requiring literacy and contemplation. Façades thus demanded active engagement from the viewer, who was invited to interpret geometric patterns, inscriptions,

and compositional order in relation to religious and philosophical knowledge. This mode of engagement aligns with Sufi-informed approaches to knowledge, which emphasize inward reflection and symbolic interpretation (Tabbaa, 2001).

Functionally, the façade served to mediate between structure and ideology. Material choices, particularly the use of fired brick, enabled architects to embed symbolic meaning directly into construction technique. Brick modulation, relief variation, and geometric repetition were not merely technical solutions but carriers of architectural meaning. Through such material strategies, function and symbolism were unified, reinforcing the conceptual coherence of the building (Fig 5).

The ideological role of the façade was further shaped by patronage. Many Seljuk-era patrons in Azerbaijan were educated in Sufi-oriented institutions, where ethical discipline and intellectual order were emphasized alongside religious devotion. As a result, architectural commissions reflected values of restraint, clarity, and symbolic depth rather than ostentatious display. The façades of Azerbaijani mausoleums thus functioned as ideological statements, materializing the worldview of patrons and architects who regarded architecture as an expression of moral and intellectual order rather than mere visual spectacle.

In summary, the façades of Seljuk-period mausoleums in Azerbaijan fulfilled multiple interconnected functions. They operated as commemorative surfaces, symbolic texts, and ideological interfaces through which architectural meaning was communicated to informed audiences. By integrating material logic, geometric order, and epigraphic content into a unified compositional system, Azerbaijani Seljuk architects elevated façade design to a primary architectural language. This synthesis of symbolism and function distinguishes Azerbaijani mausoleums within the broader Seljuk tradition and provides the basis for the research findings summarized in the following section.

5.7 Results of the Research

The results of this research clarified the distinctive architectural characteristics of Seljuk-period mausoleums in Azerbaijan and demonstrated that their façade design constituted a coherent and regionally specific architectural language within the broader Seljuk world. Through comparative formal analysis of selected monuments, the study confirmed that Azerbaijani mausoleums developed a façade-centered design methodology that differed substantially from contemporaneous Seljuk practices in Iran and Anatolia.

First, the research established that unified façade design functioned as a defining regional signature of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleum architecture. In all case studies examined, ornamentation, structural articulation, and epigraphic content were distributed

consistently across the entire exterior surface. This approach contrasted with Persian Seljuk mausoleums, which tended to emphasize volumetric massing and planar clarity, and with Anatolian examples, where decorative emphasis was often localized around portals or sculptural features. Azerbaijani mausoleums instead treated the façade as a continuous architectural field, reinforcing surface order and symbolic legibility.

Second, the findings demonstrated that material-based ornamentation, grounded in the exclusive or dominant use of fired brick, was central to the Azerbaijani Seljuk architectural tradition. Brick was employed not only for construction but also as the primary medium for geometric articulation, inscriptional framing, and surface modulation. This material strategy enabled a high degree of compositional control and visual coherence without reliance on secondary decorative materials such as stone carving or extensive tilework. The results confirmed that this brick-based logic formed the structural and symbolic foundation of façade design in Azerbaijan.

Third, the study identified vertical segmentation as a core compositional principle governing façade rhythm and proportion. Across all examined monuments, shallow recesses, blind arches, and pilaster-like divisions articulated the exterior surface in correspondence with the polygonal geometry of the plan. This systematic segmentation reinforced vertical emphasis, established rhythmic continuity, and ensured alignment between spatial structure and surface articulation. The consistency of this strategy across monuments of differing scale and ornamentation confirmed its role as a fundamental design rule rather than an isolated stylistic choice.

Fourth, the research confirmed the presence of a highly developed integrated epigraphic program in Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums. Kufic inscriptions were embedded directly into the architectural fabric and aligned precisely with geometric divisions of the façade. Unlike in other Seljuk regions, where inscriptions were often treated as independent decorative panels, Azerbaijani examples demonstrated a compositional synthesis of text and structure. This integration elevated epigraphy to a central architectural element and reinforced the façade's function as a symbolic and intellectual interface.

Fifth, comparative analysis revealed a clear regional distinction within the Seljuk architectural framework. When Azerbaijani mausoleums were analyzed alongside Iranian and Anatolian examples, differences in façade treatment, material strategy, and symbolic density became evident. Azerbaijani monuments consistently displayed greater surface articulation, denser ornamental coverage, and more systematic integration of geometry and inscription. These differences confirmed that Azerbaijani Seljuk architecture constituted an independent regional tradition rather than a peripheral or derivative extension of Persian or Anatolian models.

Finally, the results highlighted the ideological and educational dimensions underlying façade design in Seljuk-period Azerbaijan. The architectural characteristics identified—material restraint, geometric discipline, and epigraphic integration—were closely aligned with intellectual environments shaped by madrasa education and Sufi-informed pedagogical traditions. These contexts encouraged architectural expression grounded in order, clarity, and symbolic meaning. As a result, façade design functioned not only as an aesthetic strategy but also as a medium for transmitting philosophical and spiritual values across time.

In summary, the research results demonstrated that Seljuk mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan was defined by a façade-centric architectural language rooted in material precision, geometric order, and symbolic integration. These findings confirmed that Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums represent a coherent and mature regional architectural school whose contributions are essential to a comprehensive understanding of Seljuk and Islamic architectural history (Table 1).

5.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the development of façade design in Seljuk-period mausoleum architecture in Azerbaijan, situating it within the broader architectural context of the Seljuk world while emphasizing its regional specificity. Based exclusively on the author’s published research, the chapter demonstrated that Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums developed a coherent and façade-centered architectural language that distinguished them from contemporaneous traditions in Iran and Anatolia.

Through the analysis of three representative case studies—the Momina Khatun Mausoleum, the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, and the Gulistan Mausoleum—the chapter clarified how façade composition functioned as the primary medium of architectural expression. Despite differences in scale, ornamental density, and chronological context, these monuments shared consistent design principles grounded in fired-brick construction, modular vertical segmentation, and integrated epigraphic programs. This consistency confirmed the existence of a regional architectural methodology rather than isolated or experimental design approaches.

The detailed façade analysis revealed that material use, geometric rhythm, and inscriptional integration operated as an interdependent system. Fired brick served simultaneously as structural fabric and ornamental medium, enabling visual articulation through construction logic rather than applied decoration. Vertical segmentation established rhythmic order and proportional hierarchy, aligning surface articulation with polygonal plan geometry. Kufic inscriptions, embedded directly into the architectural

fabric, functioned as both symbolic text and compositional device, reinforcing the façade's role as a legible architectural surface.

The chapter further demonstrated that façade design in Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums fulfilled symbolic, functional, and ideological roles. Beyond their commemorative purpose, façades operated as symbolic texts encoding concepts of order, continuity, and spiritual discipline. The integration of geometric order and epigraphic content reflected intellectual environments shaped by madrasa education and Sufi-influenced traditions, in which architecture was conceived as a medium of visual literacy and philosophical expression. In this context, façade design served not merely as an aesthetic strategy but as an architectural language capable of transmitting meaning across time.

Comparative analysis confirmed that Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleums constituted a distinct regional tradition within the Seljuk architectural framework. In contrast to Persian emphasis on volumetric monumentality and Anatolian focus on sculptural articulation, Azerbaijani architecture prioritized surface coherence, material discipline, and symbolic density distributed evenly across the façade. This regional distinction underscored the importance of Azerbaijan as an independent center of architectural innovation during the Seljuk period.

In conclusion, this chapter established that the development of façade design was central to the formation of Azerbaijani Seljuk mausoleum architecture. By foregrounding façade composition as a primary architectural language, the study contributed to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Seljuk architecture and provided a critical foundation for the final synthesis of the dissertation, in which the broader implications of symbolic and façade-based architectural expression are addressed.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has undertaken the first comprehensive and methodologically integrated study of symbolic language in Azerbaijani mausoleum architecture, demonstrating that these monuments constitute not merely artistic achievements but sophisticated cultural texts that articulate metaphysical, theological, and intellectual worldviews. Through a synthesis of architectural history, semiotics, iconographic theory, and cultural memory studies, the research established that the symbolic vocabulary embedded in funerary monuments is neither incidental nor decorative. Rather, it operates as a coherent system of meaning that evolved across centuries, expressing the philosophical depth, cosmological thought, and cultural identity of Azerbaijan's Islamic heritage.

The diachronic analysis presented in this study highlights how symbolic architecture in Azerbaijan emerged through the convergence of Islamic metaphysics, Turkic cosmology, and regional construction practices. The medieval period, particularly the Seljuk and Nakhchivan schools, marked a transformative moment in which geometric rigor, brick craftsmanship, and epigraphic articulation coalesced into a distinctive symbolic idiom. This dissertation has shown with clarity and precision that the innovations of this era were neither local anomalies nor derivative of neighboring traditions, but represented a fully formed indigenous symbolic system whose conceptual foundations were anchored in a sophisticated understanding of geometry, metaphysics, and sacred text.

One of the principal contributions of this study is the demonstration that the symbolic grammar developed during the medieval period continued to exert influence across later architectural developments. The Ilkhanid and post-medieval eras introduced new materials, technologies, and aesthetic tendencies, yet the underlying symbolic logic remained remarkably resilient. By tracing these continuities, the dissertation has established that Azerbaijani mausoleum symbolism should be understood as a dynamic but structurally stable system, capable of adaptation without losing its conceptual core.

A major achievement of this research lies in its demonstration that Azerbaijani mausoleum symbolism is a regionally diversified tradition. The comparative analysis of Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Shirvan, and Absheron has shown that material availability, artisanal practice, and local aesthetic preference produced distinct symbolic idioms. Yet, despite this diversity, these regional expressions remain unified by fundamental metaphysical and theological principles. Nakhchivan's geometric density, Karabakh's proportional clarity, Shirvan's epigraphic emphasis, and Absheron's minimalist purity together create a spectrum of symbolic articulation that is both internally coherent and culturally rich. Through this analysis, the dissertation offers a new national-scale framework for understanding Azerbaijani funerary symbolism as a cohesive cultural phenomenon.

By applying an interdisciplinary semiotic-architectural model, this dissertation has repositioned mausoleums as active carriers of cultural knowledge, rather than as static historical artifacts. It has shown that symbolic motifs—geometric systems, Qur’anic inscriptions, vegetal compositions, and cosmological orientations—function as intentional visual texts that encode doctrinal meaning, articulate metaphysical hierarchies, and anchor collective memory. This interpretive approach represents a new methodological contribution to the field, offering a replicable model for analyzing symbolic architecture across the Islamic world.

This research also contributes to ongoing heritage preservation efforts. By documenting symbolic compositions, analyzing their conceptual frameworks, and situating them within historical contexts, the study provides a foundation for conservation strategies that honor the intellectual integrity of these monuments. In regions where monuments face environmental degradation or reconstruction, the symbolic insights presented here serve as critical resources for safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage.

The dissertation opens several pathways for future research. Further development of digital tools—such as geometric analysis software and photogrammetric modeling—would enable a more precise examination of proportional systems and ornamental patterns. Additional field documentation and deeper engagement with theological and philosophical manuscripts could further refine our understanding of symbolic interpretation in medieval Azerbaijani architecture. These directions extend the foundation established in this study and will support the continued expansion of symbolic architectural research in the Caucasus and Islamic world.

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates that the symbolic language of Azerbaijani mausoleums represents one of the most profound and intellectually rich architectural traditions of the Islamic world. Its geometric clarity, textual sophistication, cosmological depth, and regional adaptability reveal a cultural legacy of remarkable complexity and philosophical resonance. By articulating a comprehensive theoretical and historical framework for this symbolic system, the dissertation not only advances academic understanding but also affirms the enduring importance of symbolic architecture in shaping Azerbaijan’s cultural identity. Through this research, the mausoleums of Azerbaijan are restored to their rightful place—as monuments of thought, embodiments of metaphysical inquiry, and enduring testaments to the intellectual achievements of their builders and the society that produced them.

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Figures

Momina Khatun Mausoleum

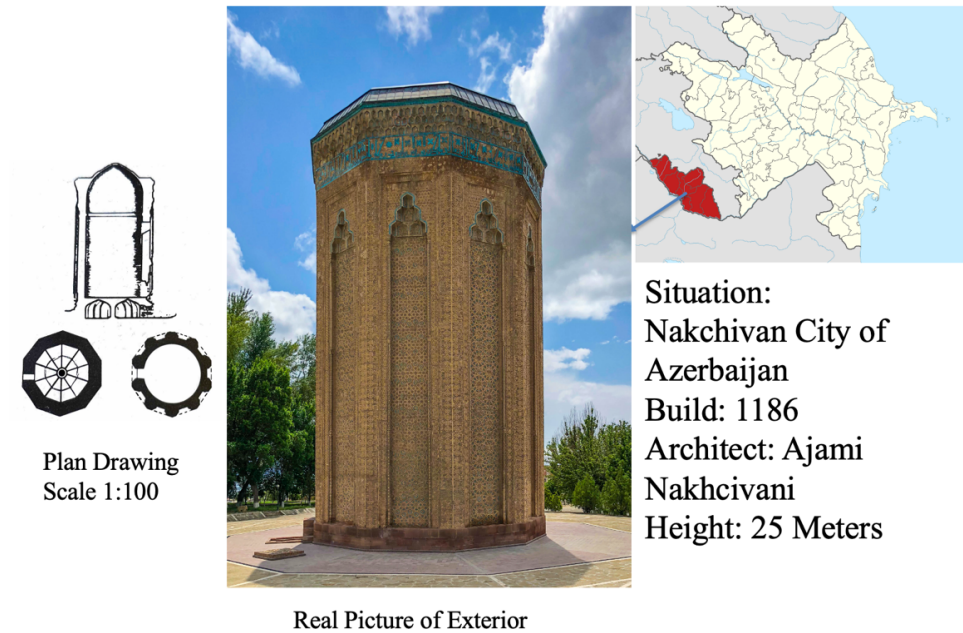


Figure 1. Momina Khatun Mausoleum Description (Plan drawing by Aliyev, 1995; Real Pictures by Tarverdiyeva, 2023)

Yusif Ibn Kuseyr Mausoleum

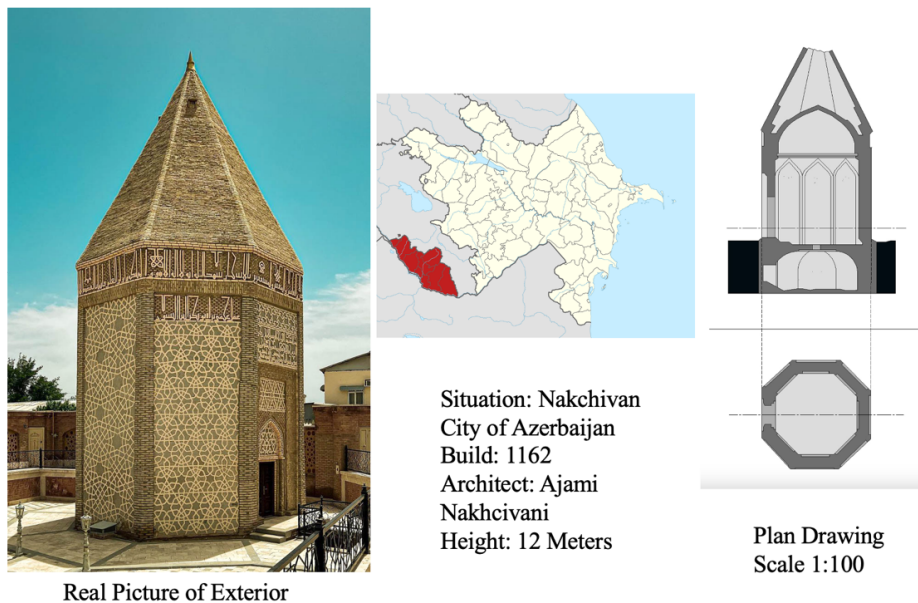
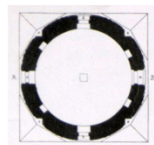
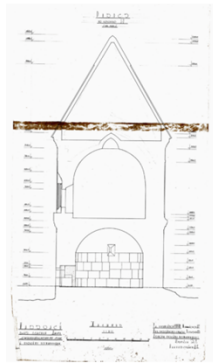


Figure 2. Yusif ibn Kuseyr Mausoleum Description (Plan drawing by Aliyev, 1995; Real Pictures by Tarverdiyeva, 2023)

Gulistan Mausoleum



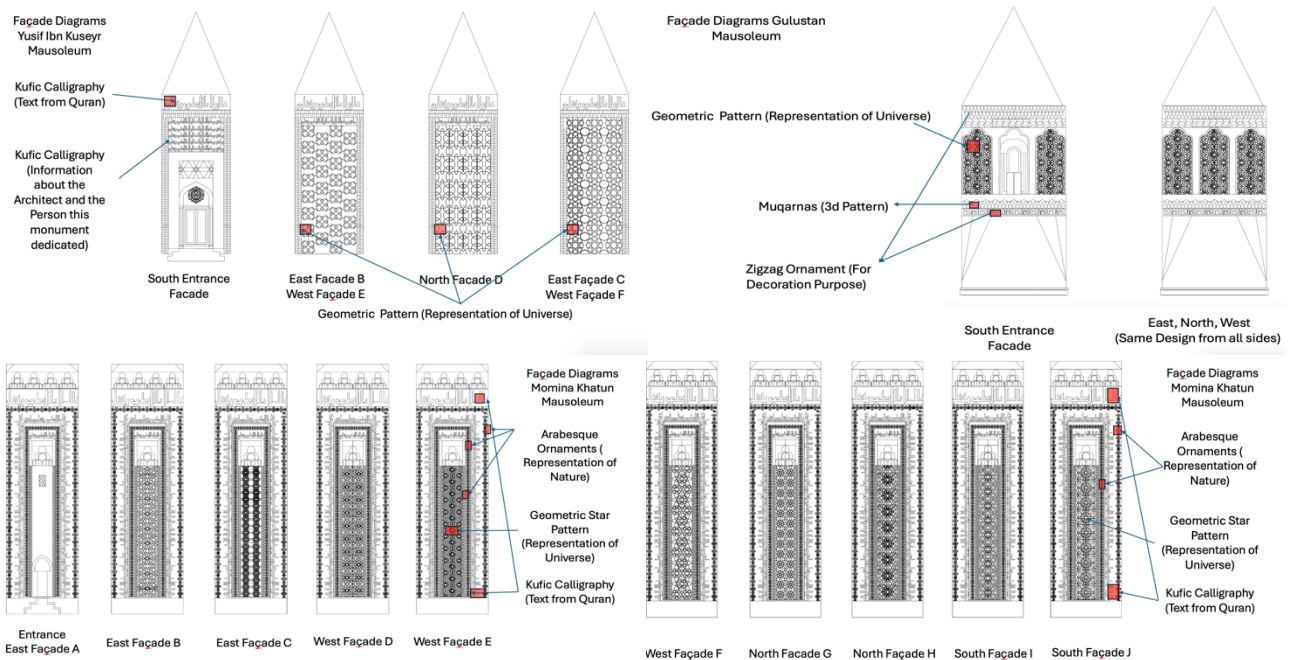
Plan Drawing
Scale 1:100



Situation: Nakhchivan
City of Azerbaijan
Build: 13th century
Architect: Unknown
Height: 17 Meters

Real Picture of Exterior

Figure 3. Gulistan Mausoleum Description (Plan drawing by Aliyev, 1995; Real Picture by Tarverdiyeva, 2023)



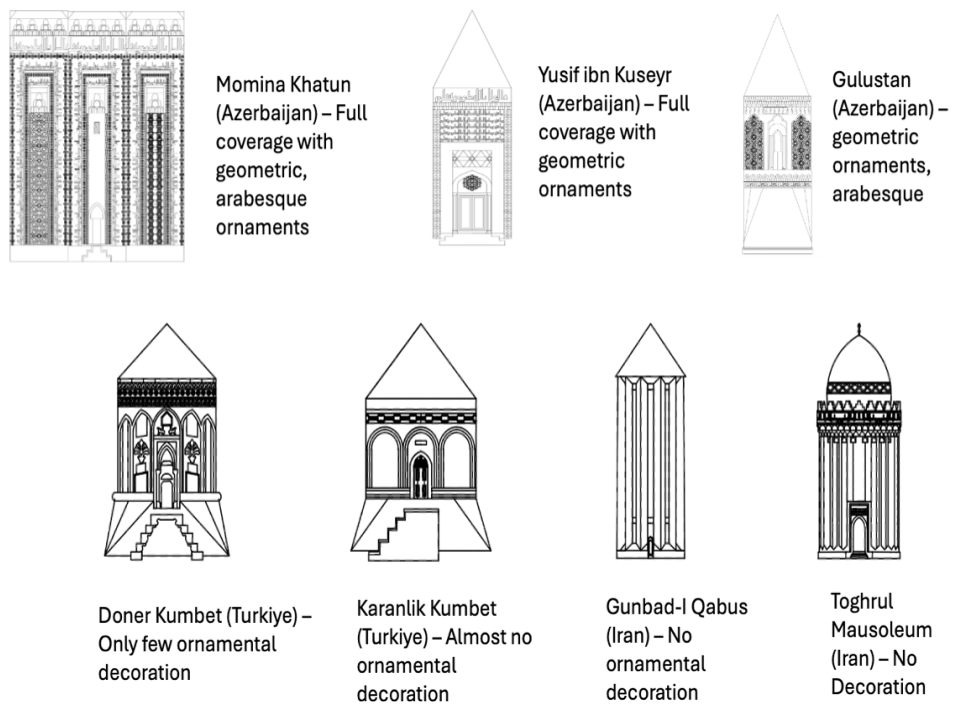


Figure 5. Comparative Exterior Ornamentation of Medieval Mausoleums in Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Iran (Tarverdiyeva 2025).

Tables

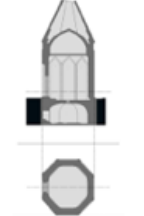
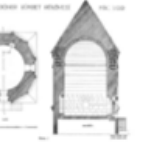
Country	Name	Location	Construction Date	Real Picture	Plan	Facade Fragment
Azerbaijan	Momina Khatun	Nakhchivan	12th century			
Azerbaijan	Yusif Ibn Kuseyr	Nakhchivan	12th century			
Azerbaijan	Gulistan	Julfa District	12th century			
Türkiye	Doner Kumbet	Kayseri	13th century			
Türkiye	Karanlık Kumbet	Ahlat	12th century			
Iran	Gonbad e Qabus	Gorgan	11th century			
Iran	Toghrul Mausoleum	Rey	12th century			

Table 1. Analyze Chart by Tarverdiyeva (2025). Seljuk-era mausoleums—Momina Khatun, Yusif Ibn Kuseyir, Gulistan (Azerbaijan); Doner Kumbet, Karanlık Kumbet (Türkiye); Gonbad e Qabus, Toghrul Mausoleum (Iran)— through their location, date, real images, plans, and façade fragments.