

# The Rich Architectural Heritage of Azerbaijani Fortresses: Gulustan Fortress

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of Gulustan Fortress, one of the most prominent medieval fortresses in the Shamakhi region of Azerbaijan. Through a combination of historical-analytical, archaeological-ethnographic, and source-critical methodologies, the research explores the castle's evolution, strategic role, and architectural features. The study particularly focuses on the period of the Shirvanshahs (11th–16th centuries), when Gulustan Fortress served as a major political center and military stronghold. Archaeological findings, including ceramic artifacts, metalwork, underground water systems, and architectural remains, are analyzed to shed light on the region's material culture and architectural traditions. Historical records from travelers such as Adam Olearius, Fyodor Kotov, and Anthony Jenkinson are used to reconstruct the castle's historical context and its role during major political-military events, including the Mongol invasions and Safavid-Shirvanshah conflicts. The article concludes that Gulustan Castle not only played a vital defensive and political role in medieval Azerbaijan but also represents a significant element of the country's architectural heritage, whose study contributes to understanding the broader evolution of fortress construction in the region. The research highlights the importance of preserving and promoting Azerbaijan's historical-architectural heritage for future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Gulustan Castle, Shamakhi, Shirvanshahs, Azerbaijani architecture, cultural heritage.*

## Introduction

The rich and diverse historical geography of Azerbaijan has, since ancient times, stood at the crossroads of major political, military, and cultural developments. The fortresses and defensive structures constructed across these territories have not only served military purposes but have also played a decisive role in shaping the historical trajectory and political fate of the country. One such structure of particular significance is the **Gulustan Fortress**, located near one of Azerbaijan's oldest cities — **Shamakhi**. Due to its strategic

location, architectural characteristics, and involvement in key historical events, the Gulustan Fortress has long been regarded as a crucial element in the defense system of the Shirvan region.

As a rare example of medieval fortress architecture in Azerbaijan, the Gulustan Fortress attracted the attention of various ruling powers and dynasties throughout history. Constructed during the medieval period, this impressive fortress gained particular political, military, and economic significance during the rule of the **Shirvanshah dynasty** between the

11th and 16th centuries. For the Shirvanshahs, the fortress was not only a defensive stronghold but also a symbol of statehood, a center of governance, and a site where important political decisions were made.

The geographical location of the fortress — perched atop a steep rocky mountain and surrounded by a complex natural relief — significantly enhanced its military and defensive potential. It is no coincidence that during the **Mongol invasions**, the **Safavid-Ottoman conflicts**, and the military campaigns of the **Jalayirid dynasty**, the Gulustan Fortress served as a strategic stronghold and safe refuge. Historical sources and archaeological research indicate that the fortress's internal infrastructure, including **underground water pipelines**, **secret passages**, **massive defensive walls**, **watchtowers**, and other military features, reflects the advanced military architectural knowledge of the period.

In recent decades, archaeological excavations and scholarly studies have revealed not only the architectural details of the fortress but also new information about the region's **trade networks**, **intercultural relations**, and socio-economic life. The discovered material artifacts demonstrate that the fortress functioned not only as a military stronghold but also played an active role in the cultural and economic life of Shirvan.

All these factors once again highlight the historical and cultural significance of the Gulustan Fortress within the architectural heritage of Azerbaijan.

The aim of this research is to investigate the origins, architectural features, and historical role of the Gulustan Fortress based on scientific evidence, as well as to provide an objective evaluation by referring to recent archaeological and ethnographic studies.

### **Historical and Strategic Importance of Shamakhi**

Shamakhi, one of the oldest and richest historical regions of Azerbaijan, has for centuries been recognized as a political, economic, and cultural center. Its favorable geographic location, fertile climate, and strategic importance have consistently attracted both local and foreign powers. Consequently, a series of impressive fortresses and defensive structures were constructed to protect the city and its surrounding areas. These fortresses were not only intended for military purposes but also hold great architectural and cultural significance. Over time, however, some of these monuments have been destroyed due to natural disasters and human activity, while others have been preserved.

Shamakhi, one of Azerbaijan's most ancient cities, served as one of the political, economic, and cultural hubs of the Shirvanshah state. Its location on the Silk Road further enhanced its trade and economic significance. Additionally, the city's strategic position at the crossroads of major military routes necessitated the construction of robust fortifications and castles. The region's mountainous terrain and natural barriers provided favora-

ble conditions for building these structures, further strengthening the city's defense<sup>1</sup>.

Shamakhi became renowned during ancient and medieval times for its architectural monuments, especially its defensive fortresses. Constructed during different historical periods, these fortresses stand as witnesses to the city's historical development. The area features both nationally significant and locally important fortresses, some of which are still awaiting comprehensive research. The region is rich with cultural heritage sites scattered across nearly every part of Shamakhi.

The fortresses and defensive structures in the Shamakhi region were constructed in various stages from ancient times to the medieval period. These fortifications were primarily built to defend the city, protect trade routes, and safeguard the population, while also symbolizing the power of rulers and governing elites.

The Shirvan rulers' desire to pursue independent policies from the caliphate, along with tribal invasions and internal political strife, compelled the Shirvanshahs to construct more formidable defensive structures, primarily fortresses. In general, fortresses in Azerbaijan can be divided into three main types: those built to protect religious temples and property, those constructed to defend feudal cities, and those used as shelters. All three types of fortresses can be found in the Shamakhi region. In particular, the Shamakhi Fortress played a crucial role in directly defending the city. From ancient times, especially during

the medieval period, Shamakhi experienced rapid growth and development, most notably during the 11th–12th centuries<sup>2</sup>.

Shirvanshah Qubad ibn Yazid (1043–1049) commissioned the construction of massive fortress walls around the city. These walls, built from finely carved white stone and reinforced with iron gates, have been partially uncovered through archaeological excavations. Research indicates that the walls were approximately 2.5 meters thick, enclosing the central part of the city. Locals referred to this area as Bala Fortress or Inner Fortress, where the Shirvanshah palace complex was also built<sup>3</sup>.

These impressive defensive structures were no coincidence, as Shamakhi was one of the most important centers of art, trade, and culture in the East. Travelers, diplomats, and foreign guests visiting the city recorded valuable information about its beautiful monuments, architectural style, population, and economic life. These historical accounts remain invaluable sources for studying Shamakhi's defensive fortresses and architectural heritage<sup>4</sup>.

The fortresses were primarily constructed using local materials such as limestone and volcanic rock. Architecturally, these structures reflect the traditions of the Shirvan architectural school. The fortresses of Shamakhi served not only defensive purposes but also played an integral role in the city's social and economic development.

## **Historical Development and Architectural Features of Shamakhi and Gulustan Fortresses**

One of Shamakhi's most famous and historically significant fortresses is the Gulustan Fortress. According to historical sources, its construction dates back to the 6th–7th centuries. During the Arab Caliphate and later under the Shirvanshahs, the fortress held substantial military and strategic importance. The settlement that developed around the Gulustan Fortress also played a crucial role in defending Shamakhi. Various legends exist regarding the fortress's name. According to folklore, the area was named “Gulustan” (meaning “land of roses”) due to the unique beauty of the flower gardens surrounding the fortress<sup>5</sup>.

The Gulustan fortress is situated northwest of Shamakhi, atop a steep rocky mountain surrounded by cliffs, near the village of Angakharan. Historical records indicate that the Gulustan fortress once served as one of the main residences and military strongholds of the Shirvanshah state. However, over time, destructive wars and earthquakes severely damaged the fortress, leaving behind only ruins of towers, walls, and other structures. The eastern side of the fortress faces Pirdireki Mountain, separated from Gulustan's rocky peak by a deep, steep valley. To the south lies the village of Khynysly, and approximately 6-7 kilometers to the west are Meysar Mountain and Meysari village<sup>6</sup>.

As city walls alone were insufficient for defense, the Shirvanshahs made extensive use of the strategically located Gulustan fortress near Shamakhi. The fortress not only served military purposes but also functioned as the seat of supreme political authority. Historical sources reveal that during the 9th–11th centuries, the Gulustan Fortress, also known as “Yazidiya,” was considered the main defensive stronghold of Shamakhi<sup>7</sup>.

The fortress was built at an elevation of 200 meters above sea level on the summit of a steep, rocky mountain. Legends suggest that the Gulustan fortress was initially intended as a summer residence for the ruler's daughter but was later fortified due to its strategic importance. References to the fortress appear in the works of renowned literary figures such as Khagani Shirvani and Arif Ardabili, who praised its beauty in their poetry.

The fortress's defense system consisted of two main sections. The first included the lower defensive structures surrounding the former settlement site, visible from the village of Khynysly. The second and most crucial part was the “Inner Fortress,” located at the highest point of the mountain, resembling a truncated cone. These fortifications held significant strategic and defensive value<sup>8</sup>. The fortress was surrounded by strong towers, walls, and watchtowers. The construction primarily utilized local stones and lime mortar, providing natural protection due to its mountainous location.

Since the mid-20th century, several archaeological and historical studies have been conducted at the Gulustan fortress. Although some parts of the fortress are partially destroyed, its foundation and sections of the walls remain well-preserved. Restoration and conservation efforts have been undertaken by the state, and the fortress holds significant potential as a tourism site<sup>9</sup>.

### **Political and Military Significance of Gulustan Fortress**

On March 21, 2009, during archaeological excavations in Shamakhi, a significant discovery was made, shedding light on Azerbaijan's history. Initial results indicated that the structure uncovered belonged to the Shirvanshah period and served as their residence.

In fact, several years earlier, during excavations in the yard of Shamakhi secondary school No. 1, remains of an ancient defensive structure known as Narin fortress were discovered. In 1990, renowned archaeologist Huseyn Ciddi also uncovered remnants of a medieval bathhouse in the area, along with ancient jars, a kahriz (subterranean water supply system), and ceramic water pipes<sup>10</sup>.

According to Shirzad Ahmadov, leading expert at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences and head of the Shamakhi archaeological expedition, the recent discovery provided answers to many historical questions.

During construction work for a new school building, remnants of an ancient structure were uncovered. The building, with walls over 2 meters thick, featured complex architectural characteristics. Constructed from limestone and reinforced with lime mortar, the structure displayed considerable durability.

Excavations between 2010 and 2014 revealed remains of a significant ancient structure with an oval plan approximately 25 meters in diameter, containing nine rooms—five rectangular and four triangular. The structure's arched walls indicated its unique architectural design. Although the rooms were excavated to their full depth, door and window openings have not yet been identified, suggesting a complex, multi-level structure<sup>11</sup>.

The use of river and tuff stones in construction, coupled with 2–2.5-meter-thick walls and lime mortar, enhanced the structure's earthquake resistance—a necessity for the seismically active Shamakhi region. Unfortunately, during the construction of a school building in 1940, parts of these ancient walls were dismantled and reused<sup>12</sup>.

Archaeological research confirmed that the structure served not only residential or economic purposes but also strategic and administrative functions. These findings highlight the advanced architectural traditions and construction technologies of ancient Shamakhi, as well as the development of earthquake-resistant building principles.

Historical sources indicate that this residence was destroyed during the Mongol invasions in the early 13th

century (1221–1225). Experts believe the structure was built in the 9th–10th centuries. Artifacts such as fragments of Chinese ceramics, pottery, clay water pipes, and other household items found at the site demonstrate the high level of craftsmanship in Shirvan during the 11th–12th centuries<sup>13</sup>. Throughout history, Shamakhi's rich history and strategic location have attracted not only local historians but also European and Asian travelers and scholars. Foreign researchers described not only the city's economic and cultural life but also its impressive fortresses and defensive structures.

The German traveler and scholar Adam Olearius visited Shamakhi in 1636–1637, collecting valuable information about the city's fortress walls. He noted that Shamakhi's mountainous location made it invisible until one approached the city. According to Olearius, the city was once much larger, with nearly 5,000 homes, but had significantly diminished, particularly following Safavid ruler Shah Abbas's campaigns. He wrote that Shamakhi consisted of two parts, both enclosed by fortress walls<sup>14</sup>.

One of Shah Abbas's strategic decisions was to dismantle the southern part of the city walls, exposing the primary attack direction to Turkish forces. Olearius compared Shamakhi's northern section to Leipzig in terms of terrain and area, though its walls were weak and easily accessible. The city had five main gates.

Russian merchant Fyodor Kotov visited Shamakhi in 1613 and reported on the city's tall, strong fortress walls,

surrounding trenches, and reinforced iron gates, describing Shamakhi as one of the most fortified cities of its time. Russian traveler and statesman A.P. Volynsky visited in 1715, noting that Shamakhi lay at the foot of the Gulistan mountains and that the city's buildings were mainly constructed from carved stone. He observed that the central fortress was already partially ruined<sup>15</sup>.

The Mongol invasions also left a lasting impact on Shamakhi's history. The city fiercely resisted, but invaders eventually breached the fortress walls with great difficulty. Experts believe that some remaining fortress walls and towers date back to that period, with towers originally standing 10–12 meters high. In the 1960s–1970s, parts of the fortress walls were restored under the guidance of architect Karim Mammadzadeh, based on old plans drawn by Russian engineers<sup>16</sup>.

English traveler Anthony Jenkinson, who visited in the mid-16th century, described Shamakhi and other cities as being in decline, attributing the downturn to weakened trade routes and reduced maritime activities in the Caspian Sea. Jenkinson also noted the negative economic impact of the Safavid–Ottoman wars on Shamakhi and surrounding areas<sup>17</sup>.

The high-quality materials, artistic details, and decorative stone carvings used in construction demonstrate that the Gulistan fortress symbolized the political and cultural power of the Shirvanshahs. The poet Arif Ardabili praised the fortress's exceptional beauty and noted the presence of stone

sculptures, underscoring its significance as both a military stronghold and a testament to the era's architectural achievements.

Throughout the Shirvanshah period, the Gulustan fortress held immense military and political importance. According to the earliest sources, the fortress served as the primary refuge of the Shirvanshahs in the 11th–12th centuries. During the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, the Shirvanshah sought refuge within the fortress, confirming its strength. While the Ilkhanid period saw relative peace, the fortress was reactivated during subsequent attacks on Shirvan, particularly in the 14th and 15th centuries. During the campaigns of Malik Ashraf and Sultan Uways, the Shirvanshahs repeatedly took refuge within the fortress<sup>18</sup>.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the Gulustan fortress once again served as a military stronghold during the Safavid-Shirvanshah conflicts. Despite several sieges, including those by Sheikh Junayd, Sheikh Heydar, and Shah Ismail in 1500, the fortress withstood prolonged attacks<sup>19</sup>.

By the mid-16th century, sources indicate that the fortress had weakened and become partially ruined. English traveler Anthony Jenkinson noted the fortress's dilapidated condition in 1562. From the 17th century onward, the fortress lost its military significance and was primarily used as a summer pasture and temporary settlement.

Over the centuries, the fortress has attracted the interest of European and

Russian travelers. Visitors such as Schildberger, Afanasy Nikitin, Adam Olearius, Stuess, and Kaempfer documented the fortress's location and defensive strength<sup>20</sup>.

Archaeological excavations conducted in the mid-20th century by Y.A. Pakhomov in 1939 and J. Khalilov in 1958 uncovered the fortress's underground tunnels, water supply systems, and robust architectural remains. These findings confirmed that the Gulustan fortress was not merely a military stronghold but also an essential example of Azerbaijan's medieval architecture and trade history. Research has reaffirmed the fortress's enduring role in the country's political and cultural life.

This scientific article is primarily based on historical-analytical, archaeological-ethnographic, and source-research methods. The main purpose of the article is not merely to list historical events but to conduct an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes, consequences, and objective features of these events, as well as to study the castle as an architectural and cultural heritage monument.

First and foremost, the historical-analytical method is widely applied throughout the article. This method entails not only presenting historical events and periods in chronological order but also uncovering the cause-and-effect relationships between them. In particular, the military-strategic significance of Gulustan Fortress during the Shirvanshahs' period, as well as the role of the castle during the Mongol invasions and the Safavid-

Shirvanshah conflicts, have been deeply analyzed through the application of this method. Historical processes are examined not only in chronological order but also within a broader political and social context.

The second essential component is the archaeological and ethnographic research method. In the article, special attention is paid to the study of Gulustan and other Shamakhi fortresses based on the material-cultural findings revealed during archaeological excavations. The main focus is placed on archaeological discoveries such as ceramic vessels, bronze and iron artifacts, architectural remains, underground water systems, and others. In addition, the architectural structure, construction materials, and affiliation of the castles to specific architectural schools have been analyzed, thus identifying the architectural features and technologies of the period.

Furthermore, the study makes use of the source-based and archival document analysis method. The travel records of early explorers such as Adam Olearius, Fyodor Kotov, Anthony Jenkinson, as well as the expedition materials from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, historical sources, and chronicles constitute the fundamental basis of the research. Through a systematic analysis of these sources, the author has objectively presented the historical development, defensive role, and subsequent fate of the fortresses.

Both descriptive and interpretive methods are applied within the struc-

ture of the article. Through the descriptive method, detailed information is provided about historical events occurring around the castle, its architectural features, and its geographical location. The interpretive method, in turn, is used to reveal the socio-political and cultural causes behind these descriptions.

Moreover, the research incorporates a complex and comparative methodological approach. Gulustan fortress is compared with other fortresses in Azerbaijan to determine its place and role within both the regional and national architectural systems. This approach plays a crucial role in revealing the evolution and specific features of Azerbaijan's castle architecture.

As a result of the combined application of these methodological approaches, the significance of Gulustan Fortress has been scientifically revealed not only as an architectural monument but also from political, military, and cultural-historical perspectives. Additionally, the research outcomes possess practical importance in terms of the preservation and transmission of Azerbaijan's historical-architectural heritage to future generations.

## **Conclusion**

The Gulustan fortress holds a significant place in Azerbaijani history as a major military and political center during the Shirvanshah period. Histor-

ical sources and archaeological findings demonstrate that the fortress served as a defensive stronghold from the 12th to 16th centuries. Particularly during the Mongol invasions and the Safavid-Shirvanshah wars, the fortress provided a resilient refuge for the population and rulers.

The fortress's underground water supply, strong walls, and towers attest to its long-term defensive capabilities. By the late 16th and early 17th centuries, its military role diminished, and the fortress was gradually abandoned. However, the discovery of medieval

ceramics and Chinese celadon pottery fragments reflects the region's historical trade relations.

Beyond its military role, the Gulustan fortress served as a political center for the Shirvanshah state, holding a special place in Azerbaijan's medieval history. Archaeological and historical research has provided new insights into its architectural and cultural heritage. The Gulustan fortress remains one of the most valuable examples of Azerbaijan's medieval history and architecture, deserving further research and preservation.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> R. Q. Əliyev, *Şirvanşahlar dövləti və memarlıq irsi*, Nurlan, Bakı, 2012, p. 280.
- <sup>2</sup> Şamaxı qalaları- <https://shamakhi-encyclopedia.az/samaxi-qalaları/>
- <sup>3</sup> R. Q. Əliyev, *op. cit.*
- <sup>4</sup> S. Əliyeva, “Azərbaycanın qala memarlığında Şirvan məktəbi”, Elm və Təhsil, Bakı, 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> V. Həsənov, “Gülüstən qalası və onun tarixi əhəmiyyəti”. *Azərbaycan Arxeologiyası*, nr.4,2018, pp. 90-105.
- <sup>6</sup> Şamaxının Gülüstən qalası, *op. cit.*
- <sup>7</sup> Y.A. Рахмонов, “Гюлистанская крепость и её значение”, *Труды Института Истории*, 1940, nr. 3, pp. 112-127.
- <sup>8</sup> Şamaxının Gülüstən qalası- <https://shamakhi-encyclopedia.az/samaxinin-gulustan-qalasi/>.
- <sup>9</sup> S. M. Rzayeva, “Şirvan ərazisində orta əsr qalaları və onların memarlıq

xüsusiyyətləri”, *Azərbaycan Memarlığı*, 2020, nr. 3, pp. 88-95.

- <sup>10</sup> Şamaxının kolizeyi, *op.cit.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*
- <sup>12</sup> F.M. Babayev, *Şamaxı tarixi abidələri*, Şərq-Qərb, Bakı, 2008, p. 168.
- <sup>13</sup> F. Ş. Məmmədov, “Şamaxı Gülüstən qalası və onun tarixi əhəmiyyəti”, *Azərbaycan Arxeologiyası*, nr. 1, 2005, pp. 54-63.
- <sup>14</sup> A. Olearius, *Səyahət qeydləri: İran və Şirvan səfəri (1636-1637)*, Şərq-Qərb, Bakı, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Şamaxı qalaları, *op. cit.*
- <sup>16</sup> Ş. Əhmədov, “Şamaxı arxeoloji tədqiqatları və yeni tapıntılar”, *Azərbaycan Arxeologiyası*, nr. 2, 2010, pp. 55-63.
- <sup>17</sup> Şamaxının Gülüstən qalası, *op. cit.*
- <sup>18</sup> R. Q. Əliyev, *op. cit.*, p. 280.
- <sup>19</sup> F. Ş. Məmmədov, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-63.
- <sup>20</sup> Şamaxının Gülüstən qalası, *op. cit.*

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