



## BAKU I. GENERAL

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### i. General

*Name and origin.* The form Bākū, used both in literary Persian (see [Dehḵodā](#)) and in European languages, goes back to medieval Islamic sources where it existed alongside the forms Bākūya, Bākūh, and Bākoh (Sara Ashurbeili, *Ocherk srednevekovogo Baku*, Baku, 1964, pp. 35-37). The colloquial Persian form Bādkūba, which popular etymology suggests to be the original name derived from the natural conditions of the site (“wind-beaten”), appears to be of relatively recent date (*ibid.*, pp. 37-38, mentioning texts from the 17th century onward). Finally the local Turkish-speaking population pronounces the word as Bakī, a form that became official with the adoption of Azeri Turkish as the literary language of the republic.

The etymology of the word Bākū, like the antiquity of the settled site itself, is unclear; the country later known as Šervān, an area of which Baku was the port and eventually the capital, lay to the east of Arrān, the classical Caucasian [Albania](#), of which it was sometimes considered to be a part and the easternmost extension; the original population of Arrān was of non-Iranian and non-Turkic stock; in Šervān, however, there was considerable Sasanian influence and political control, especially along the coastal strip through Baku to Darband (for the purpose of defense against invasions from the north), so that theories such as that linking Baku to the form Bagawān = “God’s Place” (possibly due to a fire temple on one of the petroleum sites) are not implausible (*ibid.*, pp. 39-41).



*History.* In written sources, Baku first appears as a distinct, inhabited place only in the Islamic period, when the 10th-century geographers and travelers mention its two principal assets: petroleum and position on the coast with a natural harbor that favored both fishing and merchant shipping. These qualities made Baku one of the targets of Varangian-type maritime raids by the Rūs of Tmutorokan mentioned by Mas‘ūdī (*Morūj* II, p. 21, for the year 301/913-14).

Politically, Baku was throughout the Islamic Middle Ages part of the province of Šervān and, with Šamākī, one of the two residences of the long-lasting dynasty of the Šervānšāhs. While petroleum was the single most remarkable article of Baku’s consumption and export, the city also benefited from its role as a hub of long-distance maritime as well as caravan trade. Silk and silk-products, carpets, salt, and saffron are, after petroleum, among the articles most frequently mentioned as passing through its port and gates. These circumstances as well as Baku’s role as the later capital of the Šervānšāhs, when the political center of gravity shifted there after the damage suffered by Šamākī from earthquakes, also spurred a lively local manufacturing industry (especially carpets); and civil and religious building carried out chiefly by the rulers, local or suzerain (such as the city walls, the celebrated palace of the Šervānšāhs, the formidable Borj-e Doḡtar [Maiden’s tower], or the intriguing *kānaqāh*-type structure in the bay of Baku usually referred to as “Bailov rocks”; see A. S. Bretanitskiĭ, *Zodchestvo Azerbaïdzhana XII-XV vv. i ego mesto v arkhitekture Perednego Vostoka*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 78-90, 215-46 and *passim*).

The prosperity of medieval Baku as a busy port and trading and manufacturing center as well as a residence of the Šervānšāhs has been mentioned by a number of contemporary sources; these also reveal the position of Persian and Arabic as the dominant vehicles of political and cultural expression. Thus the 12th-century poet Ḳāqānī, in a panegyric to the Šervānšāh Aḡsetān b. Manūčehr, praises Baku as a great city collecting customs from Persia and the Khazars (*Dīvān*, Tehran, 1978, p. 34). A description of Baku as a busy oil-exporting port has been left by one of its natives, ‘Abd-al-Rašīd Bākovī (fl. 1403), in his *Ketāb talkīš al-āṭār wa ‘ajā‘eb al-malek al-qahhār* written in Arabic (ed. Z. M. Bunyatov, Moscow, 1971, pp. 120-22 [Ar. text] and 89-90 [Russ. tr.]; an abridged French tr. by De Guignes, in *Notices et extraits* II, Paris, 1789). Bākovī mentions, among other things, an oil well producing over two hundred camel-loads a day, and another, producing a special white petroleum, whose [daily] lease brought [the ruler] a revenue of



1,000 dirhams; a curious animal addition to this mineral oil was that obtained from seals which the people of Baku hunted on a nearby island (the present-day island of Zhiloī); they also used the skins of these seals to pack the mineral oil and export it. On the religious front, Bākovī states that the people of Baku were Sunni Muslims of the Shafe‘ite creed, while there were some Christian villages in the countryside.

Throughout this period Šervān, like the rest of former Arrān, continued to be distinct from medieval Azarbaijan, whose territory’s northern limit was the rivers Aras and Kor. We can infer that the population of Baku continued to speak for some time the indigenous language mentioned by Arab authors as the original idiom of Arrān. With the spread of the Saljuq Turks in the 5th/11th century and their suzerainty over the Šervānšāhs, there began a process of Turkicization that brought a common linguistic denominator to both the paleo-Caucasian population of Šervān and the Iranian population of Azarbaijan.

Baku, like the entire principality of Šervān, was annexed to Iran by the Safavids in several stages during the 10th/16th century, so that the long reign of the Šervānšāhs, along with the region’s independence, came to an end. Persian rule was briefly replaced by the Ottoman one (1578-1607), and then continued until the middle of the 12th/18th century when a weakening of central control made possible, in the Caucasian provinces, the formation of several smaller khanates, among them that of Baku.

In the meantime the growing strength and proximity of the Russian empire began to affect Baku as well. This is already palpable in the account of the 11th/17th-century Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi (Awliā’ Čalabī), who stresses Baku’s importance as the Persian shahs’ bulwark against the “King of Moscow”; he also mentions the attacks of Russian Cossacks raiding the area of Baku with their boats from bases in the Volga estuary—a noteworthy analogy to the 4th/10th-century raids by the Rūs. At the same time, however, the Turkish traveler’s account reveals that the participation of Russians in Baku’s long-distance trade rose to a privileged position: Russian merchants brought sable and gray squirrel skins, walrus tusks, and Russian leather, mostly to be re-exported to Persia, and bought petroleum, salt, saffron, and silk (*Sīḥat-nāma*, Istanbul 1314/1896-97, II, pp. 300-02).

An expedition led by Peter the Great in 1723 led to a temporary Russian occupation of Baku; this occupation ended in 1735 with the treaty of Ganja.



Definitive Russian annexation, carried out in October, 1806, was ratified in 1813 by the [Treaty of Golestān](#). The first decades of Russian rule changed little in the traditional physiognomy of Baku, but a dramatic growth set in from the middle of the century onward: This was caused by a rapid modernization of both the technological and commercial exploitation of its high quality petroleum, and by the designation of Baku as the capital of the *guberniya* (principal administrative unit in Tsarist Russia) of the same name in 1859. Thus Baku, a town inhabited by some 3,000 people in 1806, had 222,000 inhabitants in 1909; by 1901, the region's oil fields produced over one-half of the world's output of petroleum.

The upheavals of the October Revolution in 1917 led to a collapse of Russian rule and, by September, 1918, to the establishment of a republic dominated by the Turkish-speaking majority of the area. This republic, with Baku as its capital, assumed the name of Azarbaijan, until then used only for territories south of the Kor and Aras. The fragility of this political formation, made precarious also by the presence of large minorities (chiefly Armenian and Russian, each of whom formed one third of the population of Baku), was demonstrated in April, 1920, when the Soviet forces put an end to its existence. Soviet administration, however, retained the Turkish linguistic identity of the region's majority population and in this sense also the aspirations of the short-lived independent republic, a step that removed it even further from the Persian cultural orbit of which Šervān had been a part throughout the Middle Ages. Since 1936, Baku has been the capital of one of the sixteen constituent republics of the Soviet Union, and a modern city of over 1,700,000 inhabitants (in 1985), with Azeri Turkish and Russian as the two official languages.

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*Et*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Baku," *Azərbaycan Sovet Ensiklopediyası* I, Baku, 1976, pp. 550-57.