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THE LION SYMBOL IN THE HISTORICAL FLAGS OF AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract. This article examines the cultural, religious, and political significance of the lion symbol in Azerbaijan's historical flags. From its early presence in the Gobustan petroglyphs through the Safavid, Qajar, and various khanate periods, the lion has represented not only power and authority but also cosmological and mythological beliefs. The research draws on primary sources—archaeological findings, historical documents, wall paintings, and related materials—to show that the lion emblem was widespread across Turkic-Islamic culture and other regional civilizations. During the Safavid era, the lion-and-sun depiction became a key indicator of religious and ideological legitimacy, while the Qajars inherited this tradition and introduced different stylistic changes in official emblems and flags. The main aim of this study is to trace the symbol's evolution from antiquity to modern times, highlighting its enduring spiritual and political values. Methodologically, an interdisciplinary approach is employed, including art-historical and iconographic analyses, alongside comparative studies. By examining written sources, numismatic evidence, and ethnographic observations, the findings reveal that the lion served as an ideological instrument under various rulers, firmly embedded within Azerbaijan's state traditions. The study expands scholarly understanding of this motif and lays the groundwork for future investigations. Consequently, exploring the lion's role within both ancient belief systems and Islamic frameworks provides deeper insights into Azerbaijan's political and cultural heritage. Today, the lion continues to serve as a vital element of national identity and historical memory in Azerbaijan.

Key words: lion symbol, flag, Safavids, history of Azerbaijan, Iravan Khanate.

Introduction. The study of the lion symbol in the historical flags of Azerbaijan is highly relevant due to the emblem's enduring influence on the cultural, political, and religious narratives of the region. While many researchers have explored general aspects of Azerbaijani heraldry and iconography, there remains a need for focused analyses that place the lion-and-sun motif within broader historical and cross-cultural contexts. By tracing its evolution over centuries—from ancient rock carvings in Gobustan to its later appearances on Safavid, Qajar, and various khanate flags—scholars gain insights into how political authority, religious ideology, and cultural identity are visually communicated and maintained. This focus also aligns with wider academic interest in the role of symbols and emblems in shaping national consciousness and state legitimacy.

The interpretation of the main material. The primary objective of this research is to systematically examine the lion-and-sun motif within the historical flags of Azerbaijan, highlighting the symbol's religious, political, and cultural dimensions. By analyzing both primary sources (such as extant flags, wall paintings, coins, and archival documents) and secondary literature, the study aims to elucidate how the motif represented political power, religious legitimacy, and cosmological beliefs across successive dynasties. Ultimately, the research seeks to demonstrate how this emblem functioned as a unifying visual device that transcended temporal and dynastic boundaries, thus reflecting enduring continuities in Azerbaijani statecraft and identity.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, art-historical methods, and comparative iconography. Primary sources—including museum artifacts, manuscripts, and architectural decorations—are scrutinized for stylistic and thematic features that reveal the evolution of the lion symbol. Archival research is complemented by a review of relevant scholarly works in the fields of Azerbaijani studies, Islamic art, and heraldry. When possible, the research also incorporates epigraphic and textual evidence from contemporaneous written records. This multifaceted method ensures that the lion-and-sun emblem is contextualized not just as an isolated image, but as part of a broader cultural and ideological framework.

Although the lion symbol in Azerbaijan's historical context has been recognized in earlier scholarship, this study contributes original perspectives in three key ways. First, it situates the motif within a long chronological continuum—from its prehistoric traces to its adoption by various ruling dynasties—thus uncovering deeper cultural and mythological layers. Second, by integrating comparative analyses of contemporaneous emblems in neighboring regions (including the Near East and the wider Islamic world), it highlights transregional exchanges and influences. Finally, the study foregrounds the emblem's role in constructing religious and political legitimacy, underscoring the dynamic interplay of myth, faith, and sovereignty. Through these contributions, the research advances our understanding of the lion-and-sun symbol as a powerful vehicle for cultural continuity and political representation in Azerbaijan.

The lion symbol occupies an important place in the historical flags of Azerbaijan. Although its depiction has changed in different periods, it predominantly appears alongside the sun. Starting from ancient times and continuing through the khanate era and Qajar rule, the lion image was widely used in applied arts, palace wall paintings, and especially in flags. Scholarly literature points out that this motif was tied to both ideological and cultural contexts. In this study, we aim to examine in greater depth the role of the lion symbol in Azerbaijan's historical flags, its religious and political significance, as well as the position it held in the ruling ideology.

Archaeological finds reveal that ancient material and cultural artifacts discovered in the territory of Azerbaijan, particularly the Gobustan rock carvings, contain lion motifs, indicating the deep historical roots of this symbol. These findings confirm that depictions of lions were spread across a wide geography, from Egypt to India, from the Near East to Europe. In ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures, the lion was recognized as a symbol of "power and kingship." The lion figures found on the Ishtar Gate from the period of the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II once again demonstrate how significant this creature was in political and religious terms. Assyrian rulers, meanwhile, portrayed lion hunting as a symbol of the king's bravery and his protection by the gods.

From ancient times on, the lion was also accepted as a symbol of strength, courage, and authority. In Zoroastrian belief, it was considered

the guardian of the sun and light. The sun rising from behind the lion was perceived as a reflection of divine power, revival, and renewal. In Azerbaijani, Iranian, Central and Near Eastern cultures, this symbol expressed the ruler's power.

Cultural and religious foundations of the lion symbol. In Mesopotamian culture, the lion was regarded as a symbol of power and kingship, a concept later adopted by subsequent civilizations. Notably, the Anatolian Seljuk sultan Giyath al-Din Kaykhusraw (1236–1246) had silver coins minted featuring both lion and sun images. Similarly, copper coins minted during the Ilkhanid period—under Mahmud Oljeitu and Abu Saʿid—also carried lion-and-sun depictions.

On the Qosha Qala Gates of the Icherisheher (Old City), the lion figures represent the power and authority of the Shirvanshahs. The bull figure, on the other hand, is associated with ancient Turkic totemic beliefs. The lion carvings were meant to protect the fortress walls, while the bull at the center functioned as the fortress's internal guardian.

The historical entrance gate of the Ganja "Imamzade" shrine, constructed by Karbalayi Sadiq (the father of Mirza Shafi Vazeh), who served as chief architect in the palace of Javad Khan, draws attention with its delicate stained-glass (shabaka) work along its small arches and, more prominently, with the "Shir-o Khurshid" ("Lion and Sun") emblem above the gate. Although this architectural monument has not been fully restored to its original appearance, the presence of this emblem underscores the continuity of the motif. It originated in the Seljuk period and later became the official emblem of most Turkic states in Azerbaijan and Iranian territories. The particular version on this gate reflects the Qajars, to whom the Ziyadoglu lineage also belonged [3].

The development of the lion symbol in Turkic culture. The animal symbols used in Turkic traditions initially stemmed from Gök Tanrı beliefs and Turkic customs, but later came under the influence of Christianity, Buddhism, and Manichaeism [1, p. 442].

In Turkic belief systems, the lion typically appears in a position of victory during battle scenes, in line with celestial elements. As a result of dualistic beliefs—such as good versus evil, light versus darkness—the lion represents the positive side. Therefore, as with many animal symbols, the lion symbolizes triumph in war, the victory of good over evil, and ultimate power. Additionally, it held an important place in pre-Islamic Turkic cosmological

mythology, where the concept of "four directions" was central. The western direction could be symbolized by either a tiger or a lion, highlighting the possibility that in the Twelve-Animal Turkic Calendar, the lion might replace the tiger in certain contexts.

The lion and sun motif under the Safavids. Even before the Safavids used the lion-and-sun imagery for their emblems, it was familiar to the Seljuks, Ilkhanids, Timurids, and Aq Qoyunlu [2, p. 12].

In the 1423–24 manuscript of Shams al-Din Kashani's "Shahname-yi Chingizi," the miniature depicting the banner carried by the envoys Genghis Khan sent to Nishapur is considered the first recorded instance of the "Lion and Sun" symbol on a flag.

With the broad spread of Islam, this symbol acquired new meanings. In Islamic culture, the sun represented the light and truth of God. The lion, accepted in the Muslim world as the emblem of Ali ibn Abi Talib, symbolized courage, justice, and the defense of Islam. Hence, the lion-and-sun emblem took on both religious and political significance, establishing itself as a fundamental element in the state traditions of Muslim-majority regions.

During the Safavid period (1501–1736), the lion-and-sun image featured prominently on flags. The lion was often depicted in front of or advancing on the sun. As champions of Shiism and the legitimate rulers of the Iran-Azerbaijan region (Legitimacy (Lat: legitimus) means the recognition of authority by the people. The people obey a legitimate government, considering it just. [4]) the Safavids used this symbol to reflect their political and religious ideology.

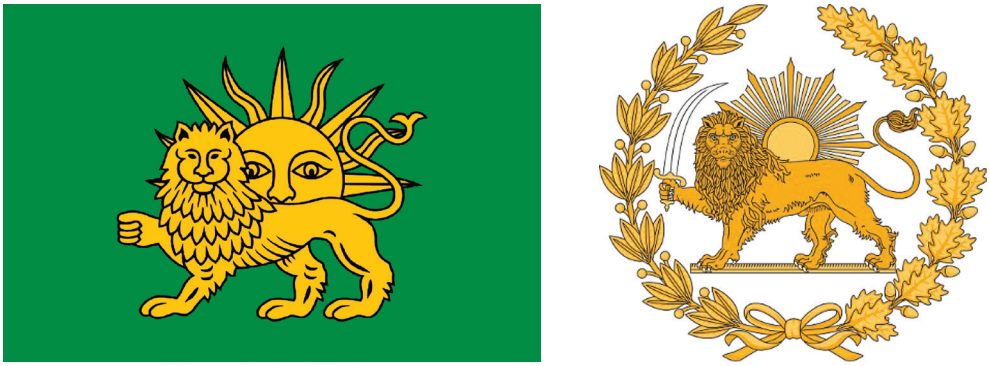

Fig. 1. Flag and coat of arms of the Safavid state

Sometimes the lion is shown holding a sword (or dagger), underscoring the Safavids' warrior spirit and mission to defend Islam. By the reign of Shah Abbas, the motif had become one of the most recognized state emblems in both Azerbaijan and Iran.

The lion symbol during the Qajar dynasty. The Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) continued to use the lion-and-sun emblem extensively. In addition to retaining traditional forms, they also introduced new stylistic features. During the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar and his successors, the motif underwent significant changes, such as the addition of a crown representing the monarchy above the emblem. This underscored the dynasty's absolute authority, highlighting its monarchical ideology as well as the Islamic aspect.

In the official Qajar flags, the lion-and-sun symbol became one of the central elements. This emblem signified the dynasty's strength in confronting both the Ottoman Empire and Russia. Due to alliances and shared heritage, several smaller states and military units also continued to incorporate the motif in their own standards.

Fig. 2. Qajar troops carrying the «Lion and Sun» banner during the Russo-Persian War of 1804–1813.

Because the Qajar state clashed with other major powers, it formed smaller military regiments (alay) in various khanates. For instance, a Qajar-aligned alay was formed in the Sardarabad fortress of the Iravan khanate, including members from the Qajar lineage and commanded by representatives of Hüseyn Khan's family. Their flags featured the lion-and-sun symbol, emphasizing loyalty to the Qajar monarchy.

The lion symbol in the era of the Azerbaijan khanates. Many of the Azerbaijani khanates retained the lion symbol on their flags, reflecting the

Safavid and Qajar legacy. Some of the most notable examples are found in the flags of the Shaki, Iravan, and Nakhchivan khanates. The lion image sometimes appeared alone and sometimes depicted holding a sword—symbolizing these khanates' military ambitions and the continuation of Safavid-Qajar political culture.

Flags of the Iravan khanate. When the Iravan khanate was occupied by Russia in 1827, four of its flags were seized as spoils of war and sent to Tbilisi, where they were stored in the Georgian State Museum. In 1924, Azerbaijan succeeded in securing the return of these items—including the battle flag and the khan's standard. These artifacts, which reflect the khanate's eight-year resistance against the Russian Empire and left a mark on Turkic state traditions, are now preserved at the National History Museum of Azerbaijan. The reconstructed versions, based on these historical flags, are on display at the National Flag Museum. Typically, the standard and the battle flag are designed according to the main state flag's template.

Fig. 3. Flags of the Iravan Khanate

Wall paintings in the Shaki Khan's palace. The Shaki Khan's Palace wall paintings are renowned examples of Azerbaijani architecture and art. Here, the lion is depicted alongside the sun, representing sovereign power. By combining artistry and craftsmanship in the palace's wall and ceiling paintings, local artisans highlight both the Safavid legacy and the wider Turkic cultural continuum.

Flags of the Nakhchivan khanate. The Nakhchivan khanate also preserved the "lion and sun" emblem in its flags. Influenced by strategic alliances with the Qajars, the khanate incorporated this common symbol to affirm dynastic

affiliation and ties. Nakhchivan's geographical significance and the Qajar dynasty's regional influence made it natural for the khanate to continue using the lion-and-sun motif.

Religious and mythical overtones. During the widespread expansion of Islam, the lion-and-sun symbol gained new religious and mythical layers of meaning. The sun came to represent God's light and truth in Islamic culture, while the lion, identified with Ali ibn Abi Talib, embodied valor, justice, and the protection of Islam. Thus, the symbol took on dual roles—both political and religious—becoming integral to the statehood traditions of Muslim countries.

Ideological function. Throughout history, many governments have effectively employed symbols to shape internal and external ideologies. In Azerbaijan—especially under the Safavids and Qajars—the lion represented more than the ruler's power; it also denoted the "divine and legal" legitimacy of authority recognized by the populace. This underscored the dynasty's religious acceptance and the military strength of the state. During the khanate period, flags adorned with the lion motif highlighted the continuation of both dynastic heritage and local governance.

Significance in cultural-historical research. The persistent use of the "lion and sun" emblem, which evolved over time, stands as a crucial component of Azerbaijan's artistic heritage. Scholars view it not only as a symbol of the cultural synthesis of the Caucasus and the Near East but also as a means of understanding the domestic and foreign policies of different ruling dynasties. Numerous museums and archives preserve flags, coins, palace wall paintings, miniatures, and other sources that offer insights into the historical development of this emblem.

For instance, tracing the "lion and sun" motif from ancient origins to the present demonstrates the enduring role of the symbol in Azerbaijan's state ideology. The lion depictions in Gobustan's rock art, which reappear centuries later in Safavid and Qajar flags, highlight its powerful symbolic continuity.

Modern research and preservation. Today, continued scholarly interest in the history of the lion symbol plays a vital role in preserving national identity and cultural heritage. Far from being merely a relic of the past, the emblem also serves as a means of shaping modern cultural identity. Collaborations between the Ministry of Culture, the National History Museum of Azerbaijan,

the National Flag Museum, and related agencies ensure the safeguarding and restoration of original exhibits.

Academic conferences, exhibitions, and seminars spotlight the lion-and-sun motif on local and international stages, fostering broader research. Comparative studies across post-Soviet regions and the Middle East further deepen our comprehension of the lion's shared role in Turkic and Iranian cultures.

Conclusion. The lion symbol has played a pivotal role in Azerbaijan's history, prominently displayed on flags and wall paintings across various periods. From the Safavids through the khanates to the Qajars, it stood for imperial authority, combativeness, and religious-mythical worldviews. Archaeological, historical, and cultural investigations reveal that the "lion and sun" motif was not merely a political emblem but also likely embodied centuries-old cosmological and religious beliefs.

Its uninterrupted usage underscores the symbol's enduring importance in Azerbaijan's historical heritage, illustrating how rulers over many centuries chose the lion to represent their power. Today, this emblem is studied as part of the country's cultural heritage and remains an inseparable component of Azerbaijan's visual tradition. Ongoing scholarly and public discourse around the "lion and sun" motif highlights its crucial role in preserving national identity and historical memory.

Consequently, the lion-and-sun motif occupies a special place in the formation of state symbols in Azerbaijan. Historically signifying the unity of power, justice, and divine guardianship, it served in different eras as a medium for cultural, dynastic, and religious interaction. Deeper investigation of this topic offers valuable insights into both the shared Turkic-Islamic culture and broader cultural-historical processes.

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AZƏRBAYCANIN TARIXI BAYRAQLARINDA «ASLAN» SIMVOLU

Məqalədə Azərbaycanın tarixi bayraqlarında «Aslan» simvolunun mədəni, dini və siyasi baxımdan rolu tədqiq olunur. Qədim dövrlərdən etibarən, bu simvolun Qobustan qaya təsvirlərindən başlayaraq Səfəvilər, Qacarlar və müxtəlif xanlıqların bayraqlarında qorunub-saxlanılması sübut edir ki, «aslan» yalnız güc və hakimiyyətin ifadəsi deyil, eyni zamanda kosmoloji və mifik inancların daşıyıcısı olmuşdur. Təhlil zamanı ilkin mənbələr – arxeoloji tapıntılar, tarixi sənədlər, divar rəsmləri və digər materiallar araşdırılmışdır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, «aslan» rəmzi təkcə türk-İslam mədəniyyəti çərçivəsində deyil, regionun digər sivilizasiyalarında da geniş yayılmışdır.

Səfəvi dövründə «aslan» və günəş təsviri dini və ideoloji legitimliyin əsas göstəricilərindən birinə çevrilmiş, Qacarlar isə bu ənənəni mənimsəyərək rəsmi gerblərdə və bayraqlarda müxtəlif üslub dəyişikliklərinə yol açmışlar. Bu tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi, tarixi dövrlərdən müasir dövrədək simvolun təkamülünü izləməklə onun uzunmüddətli mənəvi və siyasi dəyərlərini ortaya qoymaqdır. Metodologiyada kompleks yanaşma tətbiq edilmiş, sənət tarixi, ikonografik üsul və müqayisəli analiz metodlarından istifadə olunmuşdur. Yazılı mənbələr, numizmatik faktlar və etnoqrafik müşahidələr nəticəsində əldə edilən dəlillərə əsasən, «aslan» simvolu müxtəlif hakimiyyətlərin ideoloji alətinə çevrilmiş və Azərbaycan dövlətçilik ənənələrində davamlı şəkildə qorunmuşdur.

Bu araşdırma mövzunun elmi əhəmiyyətini genişləndirərək, gələcək tədqiqatlar üçün zəmin yaradır. Beləliklə, «aslan»ın qədim inanc sistemləri və İslam ənənələri çərçivəsindəki rolunun öyrənilməsi, Azərbaycanın siyasi və mədəni irsinin daha dərin anlaşılmasına xidmət edir. Bu gün də «aslan» simvolu ölkənin milli kimliyi və tarixi yaddaşının mühüm elementi kimi qalmaqdadır.

Açar sözlər: aslan simvolu, bayraq, Səfəvilər, Azərbaycan tarixi, İrəvan xanlığı.

Рамиль Гулиев ***(Азербайджан)***

СИМВОЛ ЛЬВА В ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ФЛАГАХ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА

В данной статье рассматривается роль символа «льва» на исторических флагах Азербайджана с культурной, религиозной и политической точек зрения. Начиная с древних времен, где изображения льва встречаются в гобустанских петроглифах, и продолжая периодами Сефевидов, Каджаров и различных ханств, этот образ выступает не только эмблемой силы и власти, но и хранителем космологических и мифологических представлений. В ходе исследования были изучены первоисточники – археологические находки, исторические документы, настенные росписи и другие материалы. Результаты показывают, что символ льва был распространен не только в тюрко-исламской среде, но и в других цивилизациях региона.

В эпоху Сефевидов изображение «льва» и солнца стало одним из ключевых признаков религиозной и идеологической легитимности, а Каджары унаследовали эту традицию, внося изменения в государственные гербы и флаги. Основная цель настоящего исследования – проследить эволюцию символа от древности до современности и выявить его долгосрочные духовные и политические ценности. В качестве методологии применяется комплексный подход, включающий историю искусства, иконографический анализ и сравнительное исследование. Использование письменных источников, нумизматических свидетельств и этнографических данных показало, что «лев» служил идеологическим инструментом разных правящих династий и сохранился в традициях азербайджанской государственности.

Проведенное исследование расширяет научное понимание темы и формирует базу для дальнейших разработок. Таким образом, изучение роли «льва» в рамках древних верований и исламских традиций позволяет глубже понять политическое и культурное наследие Азербайджана. Сегодня этот символ продолжает оставаться важным фактором национальной идентичности и исторической памяти страны.

Ключевые слова: символ льва, флаг, Сефевиды, история Азербайджана, Иреванское ханство.