

GANJA'S RENAISSANCE IN THE SELJUK ERA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The establishment of the Seljuk Empire stands as a momentous event of considerable significance within the broader Islamic world. Amidst the backdrop of the political and economic decline of the Arab caliphate, the emergence of the Seljuk dynasty marked a transformative juncture. Their ascendancy traversed the geopolitical spectrum, giving rise to a sprawling state that spanned from the Eastern to Western domains. This ascendancy, in turn, precipitated a notable resurgence in both economic and cultural spheres within the realms under their sway. The Seljuk era also wielded its impact upon Azerbaijan, a region that assumed a pivotal role within the empire's geopolitical tapestry. This epoch found Azerbaijan strategically ensconced as a linchpin within the Seljuk dominion. This research endeavor delves specifically into the Seljuk era as it unfolded in Azerbaijan, with a specialized focus on the city of Ganja—an urban center that flourished remarkably during this period. The overarching intent of this article is to accentuate the multifaceted social, economic, and scientific-cultural growth that Ganja underwent during the Seljuk epoch. By engaging with a subject that has been afforded limited scholarly attention, this article aims to contribute to the academic discourse, illuminating dimensions that have hitherto remained relatively obscure.

Keywords: *History, economic history, Azerbaijan history, Ganja, renaissance, Seljuk empire.*

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1. Introduction

The rise of the Seljuk State in 1038 stands as a profound geopolitical event that exerted a transformative influence on the course of global history. With the ascendancy of the Great Seljuk Empire, an expansive realm spanning from the eastern to western reaches, Azerbaijan, strategically situated at the heart of Eurasia, assumed a pivotal role within the domain of the Oghuz Turks. During this epoch, the geostrategic significance of Azerbaijan bore multifaceted implications in both the realms of military-political affairs and economics. Even though the Anatolian territories were regarded as a prominent target for Seljuk sultans and rulers, the discernible importance of the Azerbaijan region played a crucial role in the realization of this aspiration (Soofizadeh, 2023). Azerbaijan held paramount importance as a bulwark against external threats, positioned as it was at the confluence of the vast Turkish empire, spanning from its central core to its northern periphery. To safeguard the empire's integrity, substantial endeavors were undertaken to fortify the Turkic tribes within Azerbaijan. Concurrently, the region's economic significance was underscored, given its strategic location along crucial trade routes radiating in all cardinal directions.

In his book, Najaf (2017), a noteworthy contemporary researcher, undertakes an insightful exploration of the Seljuk period in Azerbaijan, with a particular emphasis on the Aran Atabays. Within the confines of his study, Najaf offers a comprehensive analysis that extends across various facets of this historical epoch, encompassing not only political history but also delving into the realms of economy and culture. Bunyadov (2007), another prominent scholar who has conducted extensive research on the subject, has contributed significantly to our understanding of the historical epoch associated with the Atabays of Azerbaijan. Simultaneously, İsmayilova's significant contributions (2015, 2022) to Azerbaijani archaeology, evident in her extensive body of work, have led to fundamental advancements in the understanding of the region. These articles provide an overview of the economic situation based on examples of local production.

The Seljuk Empire recognized that ensuring economic prosperity necessitated the establishment of military-political stability within this pivotal domain. During this epoch, the prominence of numerous historical cities within Azerbaijan, intricately linked with prevailing global trends, gained ascendancy. The historical city of Ganja, spanning millennia of existence, underwent a renaissance that was far from coincidental. This revitalization of Ganja's political, economic, and scientific-cultural spheres was emblematic of the era's intricate interplay of political exigencies, economic imperatives, and cultural efflorescence. The emergence of the Great Seljuk Empire heralded profound shifts in global history, accentuating Azerbaijan's strategic importance as a locus of both military-political fortification and economic vitality. The heightened significance of historical Azerbaijani cities, epitomized by Ganja's multifaceted resurgence, exemplified the intricate interweaving of social, economic, and cultural dynamics that characterized the epoch.

The titles of Atabay and Malik occupied a position of eminence within the administrative structure of the Seljuk Empire. The conferment of the title of Atabay upon Nizamulmulk, the vizier to three esteemed sultans, including Sultan Malikshah, was a deliberate and consequential choice. Following the demise of Sultan Malikshah, the power struggle among his progeny instigated an escalation in intramural contention, thereby expediting the process of institutionalization. Consequently, within the Aran region, the titles of Malik and subsequently Atabay were established.

Sultan Berkyaruq, emerging triumphant from the power struggle, dispatched his younger sibling, Muhammad Tapar, to Ganja, appointing him as the adjudicator of Aran (Ozaydin, 1989, p.12). The span from 1093 to 1119 witnessed the transformation of Ganja into a pivotal hub within the Aran Seljuk realm, ruled in succession by Muhammad Tapar, Malik Mahmud, and Togrul. The year 1119 marked the emergence of an autonomous Aran atabay principality under the dominion of Gundogdu (Najaf, 2017, p.87). Shamseddin Eldeniz, having been granted the region of Aran as an iqta by Sultan Masud, solidified his authority within the area. In 1136, this culminated in the establishment of the Atabays of Azerbaijan, a state whose territorial boundaries extended to the peripheries of Azerbaijan, Iran, and Iraq. This epoch bore witness to the blossoming of Ganja as a locus of economic progress and cultural resurgence. Notably, Nizami Ganjavi, a preeminent intellectual of the East, found his abode during this era, contributing significantly to the cultural milieu.



Figure 1. During the Eldeniz - Atabay era of Azerbaijan.

Source: <https://www.history.az/images/3/202192.jpg>

In summation, the designations of Atabay and Malik held esteemed positions within the administrative hierarchy of the Seljuk Empire. The conferment of these titles, especially the prominence accorded to Nizamulmulk, and the ensuing power dynamics among Sultan Malikshah's descendants, propelled the establishment of the Malik and Atabay within the Aran region. The ascendancy of rulers like Muhammad Tapar, Malik Mahmud, and Togrul, and the eventual rise of the Atabays of Azerbaijan, marked periods of pivotal development for Ganja, underscored by economic growth and cultural resurgence, as epitomized by the presence of luminaries like Nizami Ganjavi.

2. Socio-economic situation

The ascendancy of the Seljuks within the Islamic geography had multifaceted effects, bolstering not just political prowess but also instigating an economic renaissance. This revival encompassed the restoration of the caliphate's faltering economy, the rejuvenation of trade relations, the establishment of a centralized system with uniform and more lenient tax regulations, and the revitalization of social welfare provisions. The Great Seljuk Empire stands as one of the most prominent examples of a feudal economic system. In "The Great Seljuk Empire" by Peacock (2015), the intricate economic mechanisms of the Seljuk Empire are thoroughly explored, shedding light on how economic factors influenced the empire's rise, expansion, and eventual decline.

The primary source of income for the distinguished maliks and atabays, who enjoyed elevated privileges, was chiefly generated through Iqta feudal lands and the spoils acquired in times of conflict. (Merçil, 2013). The peace treaty concluded between Sultan Barkyaruq and Aran Seljuk Malik Muhammad Tapar delineated the territorial jurisdiction of Tapar, encompassing Ganja and its contiguous regions (Aran), as well as Azerbaijan, Diyarbakır, and Mosul (Mahmud, 1977, p.35). The unique economic advantage of the Aran and Azerbaijan region lay at the core of the pronounced influence enjoyed by the ruling Atabays within the empire.

Preceding the Seljuk era, Ganja held the prestigious status of being the capital of the Shaddadi state. During this period, the city played a pivotal role in the minting of

coins, which served as crucial economic indicators. Initially, the Seljuks did not directly disrupt the existence of the Shaddadis. However, as the geopolitical landscape evolved, the Seljuks eventually brought about the termination of their political and economic presence.



Figure 2. A silver coin issued in Ganja in the 10th-11th centuries.
Source: Author's finding

During the era of the Seljuks and Atabays, the population was comprised of three distinct segments: peasants, urban dwellers, and nomads. The bulk of the tax revenue was amassed from the labor of peasants and townspeople. The Oghuz nomads, on the other hand, were engaged in a lifestyle that necessitated military service. Given that the city of Ganja served as a residence for the Seljuk elite and was surrounded by numerous villages and nomadic territories, all three of these social groups coexisted within its sphere. At the time of the devastating earthquake that struck in 1139, estimates suggest that approximately 300 thousand individuals were inhabiting Ganja. This figure surpassed even the population of Tabriz, which ranked among the largest cities in Azerbaijan. Drawing from the records of Hamdullah Ghazvi, a general approximation can be made that the population of Azerbaijan during the 12th century stood at around 1 million, with Ganja accounting for roughly 30% of this total (Najaf, 2017c, p.291).

During the 10th to 12th centuries, several pivotal factors contributed to the economic advancement of Ganja. These factors encompass:

- Decline of Barda: The decline of the city of Barda in the mid-10th century played a significant role in the rise of Ganja's economic prominence. As Barda diminished, Ganja gained an opportunity to ascend as a vital economic center.
- Capital of Shaddadi: The status of Ganja as the capital of Shaddadi further bolstered its economic growth. Being a political and administrative hub brought increased attention, investment, and resources to the city.
- Military-Political Geostrategic Position of Great Seljuk Empire: Ganja's strategic military-political location was crucial in attracting economic activity. Its position made it a vital hub for defense, trade, and administration, attracting merchants, travelers, and resources.
- Main Center of Aran Atabaylar: Serving as the capital of Aran Atabaylar, Ganja enjoyed a concentration of power and influence. This administrative role contributed to the city's economic prosperity as resources were directed towards its development.

- Position along Trade Caravans: Ganja's location along major trade routes allowed it to benefit from the flow of trade caravans. This facilitated commercial interactions and boosted economic transactions within the city.

Collectively, these factors converged to create a favorable environment for Ganja's economic growth during the specified historical period.

The Seljuk Empire occupied a pivotal position within the global trade network, serving as a principal catalyst for international economic interactions. A significant portion of the trade caravans traversing between China and Europe, or vice versa, traversed through the domain of Azerbaijan. Commodities of trade were conveyed into Anatolia, then onwards to the western realms through the routes spanning Iran and Azerbaijan. Within the landscape of Azerbaijan, four primary trade crossroads emerged as key junctions (Kayhan, 2008):

- Shamakhi
- Beylagan
- Ganja
- South-western road

These four locations underscored the strategic significance of Azerbaijan as a nexus for trade activities during the era of the Seljuk Empire. The Ganja-Tbilisi caravan route was intentionally selected for its strategic significance. Within the pages of *Hudud al-Alam*, it is notable that Ganja was renowned for its prolific output of agricultural commodities, with a special emphasis on the production of superior-quality woolen goods (Hudud al-Alam, 1937, p.142-145). Simultaneously, the practice of sericulture flourished in Ganja. In the context of Nizamülmulk's gulam system, it is documented that those ascending to the visakbaşı rank would don a black cap adorned with intricate silver-thread designs, accompanied by a Ganja kaftan (Nizamülmulk, 151). Ganja's silk products held significant appeal for discerning elite circles, indicative of their high quality. Furthermore, the art of weaving underwent substantial development within this context. Simultaneously, craftsmanship and weapon manufacturing industries also experienced significant growth during this period.

The resurgence of the economic landscape during the Seljuk period is discernible through the lens of overall taxation trends. Approximately 20-25% of the aggregate tax revenue collected from regions encompassing Eastern Anatolia, Georgia, Aran, Mughan, Azerbaijan, and Al-Jazeera was directed towards Azerbaijan. This allocation of tax revenue underscores the economic rejuvenation that transpired within the Seljuk era (Najaf, 2017d, p.356).

The economic prowess of Ganja becomes evident through its response to the devastating earthquake of 1139. Remarkably, the city managed to undergo a full reconstruction within a mere 2-3 years following the catastrophic event (Bunyadov, 2007, p.183). This remarkable achievement was not only facilitated by the immediate restoration efforts initiated by Kara Sungur but was also driven by a strong socio-economic determination. The combined factors of proactive actions and a robust socio-economic resolve played a crucial role in Ganja's swift recovery.

3. Literature and science

During the era of the Seljuk Empire, culture experienced a significant resurgence throughout the Islamic East, with literature and science taking on unique dimensions. The Islamic renaissance, which had its origins in the Caliphate period, reached its pinnacle

during the Seljuk reign. Azerbaijan, notably the city of Ganja during the Atabay era, stood as a notable hub for this renaissance. Over the 11th and 12th centuries, Ganja emerged as a fertile ground for the emergence of remarkable literary and scientific geniuses, enriching the global intellectual legacy.

Nizami Ganjavi, Mahsati Ganjavi, Abul-ula Ganjavi, Omar Ganjavi, Givami Mutarerizi Ganjavi, Raziya Ganjavi, Dochteri Khatib Ganjavi, along with other luminaries, stand as the foremost exemplars of Ganja's prominence during the Renaissance period. Nizami Ganjavi's literary corpus stands as a timeless manifestation of his poetic mastery, transcending both temporal and cultural boundaries, while his scientific contributions intricately weave into the intellectual fabric of his era, collectively bequeathing to humanity an enduring legacy of enriched culture and knowledge. Nizami stands as an emblem spanning a vast geography from the Middle East to Central Asia, celebrated not solely for his invaluable poetry imbued with profound meanings, but also as a visionary who imparts the potency of knowledge to individuals, encouraging them to embrace the path of progress and enlightenment (Huseynova, 2021). In his work "Treasure of Secrets" within the Khamsa, Nizami draws a comparison between Ganja and Babylon, a prominent city of the ancient East renowned for its advanced development (Ganjavi, 2004).

The era witnessed the flourishing of numerous scientific and educational centers within the city. This assertion finds substantiation in the figure of Abulfazl Khaddad ibn Asim ibn Akran al-Nashavi, who not only presided over the operations of the prestigious library established in Ganja but also emerged as a distinguished scholar of his time. An exemplary individual such as Abu Abdulla Muhammad bin Ali bin Muhammad al-Tabari, who conducted his work in Ganja, achieved notable success (Hasanov, 2021). The presence of Qatran Tabrizi, another luminary of the era, in Ganja, where he engaged in literary activities, stands as a key indicator of the city's renaissance ambiance.

4. Conclusion

During the Seljuk era, Azerbaijan became a pivotal epicenter of political, economic, and cultural activity within the state, ultimately evolving into a focal point that exerted considerable influence over the empire's direct administration. The burgeoning political significance of Azerbaijan within the prevailing conditions bore substantial implications for its economic and cultural vitality. This, in turn, led to a pronounced renaissance in the city of Ganja during the 11th-12th centuries. Ganja emerged as a preeminent bastion of civilization during this period, encompassing not only pivotal political and economic decision-making mechanisms like the Maliks and Atabays but also the cultural sphere, which thrived with distinguished scientific and public figures.

In conjunction with its strategic significance, Ganja prospered as a paramount trading hub owing to its unique economic features. The socio-economic revival also fostered an environment conducive to scientific and literary progress, thereby giving rise to numerous luminaries who enriched humanity, all hailing from the city of Ganja. The primary objective of this research endeavor is to meticulously analyze the historical perspective of Azerbaijan and its renaissance city from a regional context, elucidating their roles within the broader global political-economic tapestry of the Great Seljuk Empire of the Islamic East. With this viewpoint in mind, the core purpose of this scholarly article is to illuminate a narrowly focused yet immensely significant topic of inquiry.

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