

The Business Journal of Semiology



Semiotic Analysis #3
December 2015

Old City

Also known as the Inner City.
Classified as World Heritage Site
by UNESCO. It is the historical core
of Baku, Azerbaijan.

Tofiq Husein - zadeh



Contents

Old City: Semiotic Analysis Report

Tofiq Husein-zadeh

- Introduction
- Unconscious Code
- Insiders
- Meaning Systems
- Relationship with Fire
- High Psychographics Analysis
- The Cult

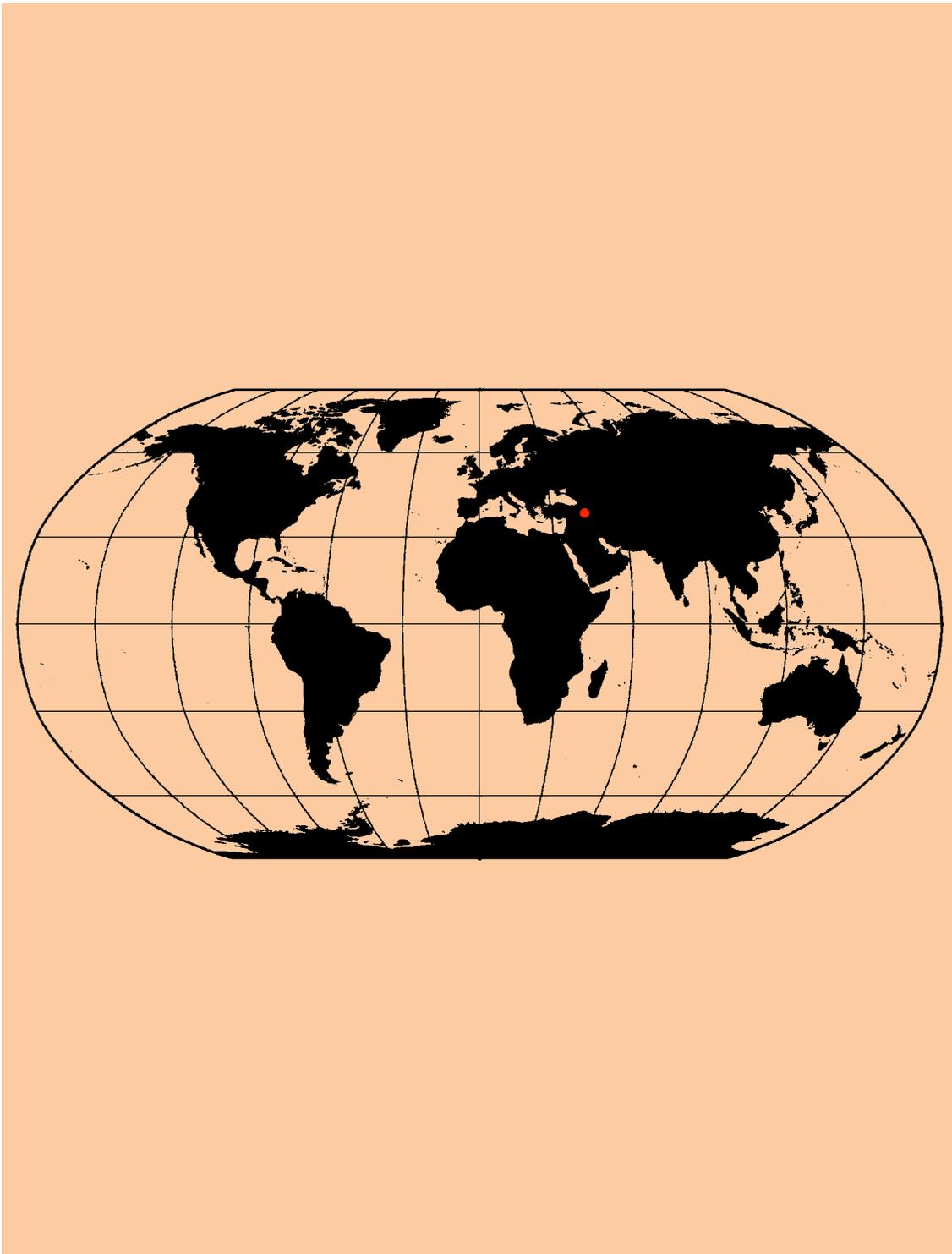
© 2015 Tofiq Husein-zadeh. All rights reserved.



Abstract

This semiotics report is a product that came out of conducting in-depth semiological analysis of the Inner City of Baku that is also called the Old City or the Walled City (Orig. Ichari Shahar or Icheri Sheher). It is neither a mere city center nor it is 'downtown' of Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The Inner City is the historical core of Baku, classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This report systematically decodes symbols, meaning systems and archetypal structures and examines the relationship between the Inner City and the Inner City Bakuvians including the intelligentsia, nobility, aristocracy etc. Using semiological instruments, it is the first analytical work that explores the high psychographics of the Inner City and that unearths unconscious socio-psychological and socio-cultural data.





Introduction

Dr. Sara Ashurbeyli, an Inner City Bakuvian of aristocratic lineage, eminent orientalist, historian and scholar, called Baku the city of Gods. Sir William Flinders Petrie, an English Egyptologist and fellow of the Royal Society, suggested that the words “Bakhay” denoting “the mountain of Bakhou of the rising Sun” written in the Egyptian Book of the Dead in the 2nd millennium BC refer to Baku.¹ There have been many articles and books written about Baku’s Walled City, yet I have never come across a piece of work that deconstructs and decodes the meaning systems, conscious and unconscious, of its anatomy on a semiotic level. This is the first article that aims to explore the high psychographics of a specific site in old Baku with semiological instruments.

The semiotic analysis of the structure of the city makes way for a systematic overview of symbols, icons, archetypes, codes, signs, value systems and the collective unconscious of the site in general. One of the best ways of unearthing data on the high psychographics of old Baku is by concentrating the semiotic analysis on the city’s historical core – the Inner city. It is also called the Old City, the Walled City, Old Town or in Azerbaijani it is either called Ichari Shahar or Icheri Sheher (literally Inner City). This semiotic analysis is more diachronic than it is synchronic. The article examines the space, the times and the key individuals’ energy (efforts, involvement, relationships, integrity etc.) in the state of affairs of the Inner City in old Baku.

Unconscious Code

The Inner City is the first place to start with when one aims to analyze the anatomy and the bio-cultural properties of Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Baku began with this site. It is known that the strongest first experiences or the most powerful first memories encode themselves to the very genetics of a culture. There is no second chance to leave a first impression. The city of Baku has powerful first memories with specifically this site of the Inner City. In other words, one of the first imprints in Baku’s mental structure and system of referential highways became the Old City. Therefore it implies that the Inner City plays the protagonist role in the entire pan-semiotics of Baku. If we decode and decipher Baku’s collective unconscious relationships that were encoded by the Inner City, we find out that the code for the Inner City is - THE ORIGIN.

Historically, this site has been inhabited since the Paleolithic period. Researchers found evidence of Zoroastrian presence in the cultural continuity of the Land of Fire. During the beginning of the 19th century when the city trade was extending beyond the walls the terms Inner city and Outer city came into use. The Inner city has always been the main part as it is the historical core of the city. It is the space that functions as the very identity, the face, and the innate self.

Insiders

In almost all the cities around the world there are two ways of describing the citizens: those that live in the suburbs and the ‘city kids’. It is in this are that old Baku is particularly interesting because there is a third dimension. In this city there those that live in the suburban areas (or those that are from outside of Baku, from villages, from other cities and towns), then there are ‘the city guys’ and finally, unlike in other cities, there are also the Inner city kids. So, in other words, Baku differs from other cities because it is a city that has a city within.

Therefore the Outer city people were perceived as outsiders. Those who lived in the Inner City have always been considered the natives of Baku as it is mentioned in the memoirs of the Bakuvian actor, opera singer and playwright Huseyngulu Sarabski. The Inner City people have always been viewed as the real Bakuvians with old heritage. Most of the families have a lineage of ancestors who were key figures for the historical progress of the city and/or members of the nobility. Huseyngulu Sarabski also describes how “the residents who lived inside the walls considered themselves to be superior to those outside and often referred to them as the “barefooted people of the Outer City”.² This was mainly because many of the outer city people were immigrants from here and there and because it was the mixed part of Baku but, of course, there were very influential wealthy families and many enlightened Bakuvians who lived in the Outer city as well. The Inner City, however, was populated only with the old Bakuvians.





Image 1.1

Coat of Arms of Baku

Courtesy of *Skyscrapercity*:
<http://bit.ly/1JVzDju>



Meaning Systems

The Inner City is also called the Walled City because of its architectural elements. It has defensive walls that date back to the 12th-century. According to UNESCO, some structures of the Inner City date back to the 6th century.³ The walls deliver a clear message of preservation and protection. There are several pieces of artillery on various parts of the wall of that protect the Old City from enemies. Later the walls began representing the clearly stated borders between the insiders and the outsiders. The walls also denote the line between Baku's world within and its world without. So this indicates that there is a strong element of island-defensiveness that is also found within the subconscious of Japan's and the United Kingdom's culture. Hence the character of the Inner City carries a semi-Hermetic characteristic with the surrounding walls. It hesitates to be an absolutely open or exoteric system yet it does not prefer to be fully isolated either. Its hermetic and defensive anatomy signifies a prism that filters the outside forces and influences in the way that would not interfere with its ancient values and integrity. Throughout history of Baku there were many paradigm shift, transitions, cycles and turning points due to political and economic weather however, despite all of these factors, the Old City managed to preserve its ancient cult to this day. So, in a way, it knows how to stand above political or economic weather. Its long walls made out of stones by the finest stonemasons of the time are still standing as strongly as they stood in ancient times. They signify permanence, durability, timelessness and immortality. As in the words of Francis Underwood from *House of Cards* who explains the difference between money and power: "Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that looks good and starts falling apart after a few years. Power is the old stone building that stands forever..."⁴

The meaning system of the site has many elements of fortification but does it signify military masculinity? No. It signifies the feminine nature since using its language it is communicating motherly protection and care.

Some of the fortification elements are the long walls, the Maiden Tower along with other towers, the labyrinth trap or the spider web of alleys within, and usage of the most durable material for building. Only the insiders know their way in the Walled City. They don't get lost. As Mir Teymur states in his article: "Four horses can run abreast on a wide street, but if they hit a narrow alley, the horses have to file behind each other one by one. It's a lot easier to wipe out the enemy one by one. What's the best way to stop invading forces? Build a city with winding, confusing streets and unexpected dead ends."⁵

Relationship with Fire

Azerbaijani people's relationship with the Inner City can be signified with humanity's relationship with fire since fire is at the heart of the oldest belief systems of Baku. 'Azerbaijan' literally means *land of fire*. According to various sources it also can be translated as: *Protected by the Holy Fire, the Guardian of Fire, or the Treasurer of Fire*. The word 'Baku', as several sources suggest, derives from words that mean: *Gates of the Winds or the Holy/Sacred Place of Fire*. Analogically to the ancient tradition of the Gokturks (lit. *Celestial Turks*), fire is accepted as the ambassador of the Sun on Earth. The analogy of human-fire relationship is instructive in many phases of this site's cultural semiotic analysis. Being too far from fire is dangerous for it leads one to darkness and cold but being too close to it is also dangerous as it can set one on fire and gradually burn one to death. The hidden suggestion, then, is "one should not play with fire so that one doesn't burn oneself." As Rafiq Guliyev, classical pianist and Professor in the Academy of Music in Baku, describes: "Kids who grew up there [in the Inner City] walked with their own swagger. They were difficult kids. To tell you the truth, us city guys were a little afraid of the Inner City guys."⁶ Maintaining the balanced distance of not being too far from fire and not being too close to it is the micro equivalent of the perfect distance that needs to be maintained between the earth and the sun (which is essentially made of fire) to be able to exist.



Image 1.2

One of the narrow
alleys of the
labyrinth-like
Icheri Sheher.



Photo link:
<http://bit.ly/1RfdHI4>



The insiders or the citizens of the Old City were very close to the finest craftsmen’s workshops, the bazaar, the teahouses, the mosques, the church, the Maiden Tower, the sea and so forth. The Outer City people always perceived the Inner City individuals to be superior.

The Maiden Tower is one of the most important architectural monuments inside the Walled City. It is located closer to the sea from the southern edge of Baku’s Old City, the Ichari Shahar. The Maiden Tower is a symbol of invincibility. Some researchers suggest that the tower was built for defense while others propose that it was a temple for the Zoroastrians. However, scholars are still looking for more records to find out the real purpose behind the tower and its name.

High Psychographics Analysis

The anatomy of Ichari Shahar gives us crucial clues about the socio-semiological structure of the site. It has a network of winding streets and narrow alleys in between the medieval buildings. This network of interconnected streets and alleys is the extension or the manifestation of Inner City’s network of neural highways. The architectural anatomy of the site is expressed by its collective mental structure. The network of narrow alleys is, at the same time, representative of the quality of relationships between Inner City Bakuvians or their inclination towards maintaining their network. As a reflection of the anatomy of the site, the interconnectedness of Old City Bakuvians upholds the integrity of its intelligentsia and the enlightened class. The network of alleyways serves as a labyrinth for the outsiders who enter the Inner City. There were many soldiers from enemies’ armies that were lost in this labyrinth when trying to attack its citizens. This aspect of the site explains us how this network of narrow streets was familiar area only to the insiders and a trap for outsiders. What was a network of alleys for the insiders was a spider web of streets with a labyrinth-like nature for the outsiders. This orientation and navigational information was known only by the insiders, which helped them protect the Inner City from the outsiders who would often get lost there.

The underlying reason that drives all collective behavior of the Inner City Bakuvians is based on the fact that they are *from* the Inner City. As Betty Blair writes the Walled City Azerbaijanis “were identified by their accent, food and character.”⁶ Their attitudinal and behavioral models function by maintaining balances between the following characteristics shown on the *Table 1.1*.



Oral (acoustic sense)	Written (visual sense)
Introversion	Extroversion
Hipness	Nobleness
Individualism	Collectivism
Physical	Meta-physical
Traditionalism	Liberalism
Western constructivism	Eastern wisdom

Table 1.1

Inner City Bakuvian intelligentsia is inclined to gather intelligence from various sources. It has curiosity and openness and thus it makes room in its collective mind for the Russian (Slavic), European (Anglo-Saxon and Francophone) and Eastern (Turkic, Aryan and Far Eastern) ways of seeing the world. This way, on a pan-semiotic level, the mindset of the Inner City Bakuvian intelligentsia advances with the particular dynamics of unconscious intercultural codes. When we look at other aspects of high psychographics of the Inner City’s segments, we see that the common characteristics among the Old City’s intelligentsia, old families and nobility include the following (*Table 1.2*):



The Cult

- ✦ Proportionate appreciation for both local and foreign art
- ✦ Keeping diaries, journals and memoirs
- ✦ Particular way of dressing, speaking and behaving
- ✦ Sense of dolce vita (celebration, hedonic leisure activities etc.)
- ✦ Sense of cultural identity above the political or national identity
- ✦ An appreciation for the Azerbaijani savoir-faire
- ✦ Family-like integrity among neighbors, friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances etc.

Table 1.2

If we use the hypothesis that all culture is derived from a cult then that means the culture of the entire city of Baku is derived from the cult of the Old City. The question then becomes what is the cult of the Old City all about? The cult is all about being the beginning of things, the beginning of beginnings, the starting point, the source, the first, the cradle, the core, the center of the center, the main, the root or the origin. The notion of origin, in this context, is associated with the notion of originality. The aboriginal nature of the site hints that it is from the origin or it is the original. The cult of the site is developed by the added values during the period the Shirvan Shaks' dynasty. The higher values, aristocracy, regency are some of the main parts that operate within the mechanics of this cult. Despite the fact that after the middle ages there were no royal families the Old City has continued preserving its cult.

The semiosphere of the Inner City creates an abundance of meaningful interpretations when analyzed. For Baku, the Inner City is the beginning of all beginnings. It signifies the first creation of the cosmos out of nothingness. The period when the Inner City was extended beyond its walls is the period when the terms Inner City and Outer City were integrated to the language. This period stands for the process of giving birth, which consequently means that its nature is feminine in this context.

The environmental semiotics of space and architecture also encompass strong sign systems with dynamic dualism. There are many buildings constructed and designed with European Baroque and Gothic architecture and they blend themselves with ancient oriental styles. This duet is on code not only with Baku but also with Azerbaijan's geo-cultural identity because the country is located in between East and West. This is a cultural duet of Eastern and Western charm. In this context, the Inner City demonstrates its role as a microcosm that symmetrically mirrors the macrocosm of the entire country of Azerbaijan.

According to Dr. Hall's definition, the silent language is the language that individuals of a specific culture employ to 'talk' to each other not by using words but by using an entire universe of behavior that functions outside conscious awareness and in juxtaposition to words within their own culture only.⁷ It is essential to note that Dr. Edward Hall's notion of the silent language is very much present within the Old City's culture. So the insiders can speak the silent language that can only be understood by them. The silent language is spoken *without* conscious awareness. When it comes to using encrypted speech that is *with* conscious awareness, however, they use jokes or other messages that have cultural or high cultural references. This type of language cannot be decrypted unless one is an educated and cultured person. However, it is encrypted in metaphorical sense. The reason why some of the Inner City Bakuvians would encode was neither for hiding big collective secrets nor for being esoteric. It was about using coded speech simply to enrich or extend their daily language.





Image 1.3

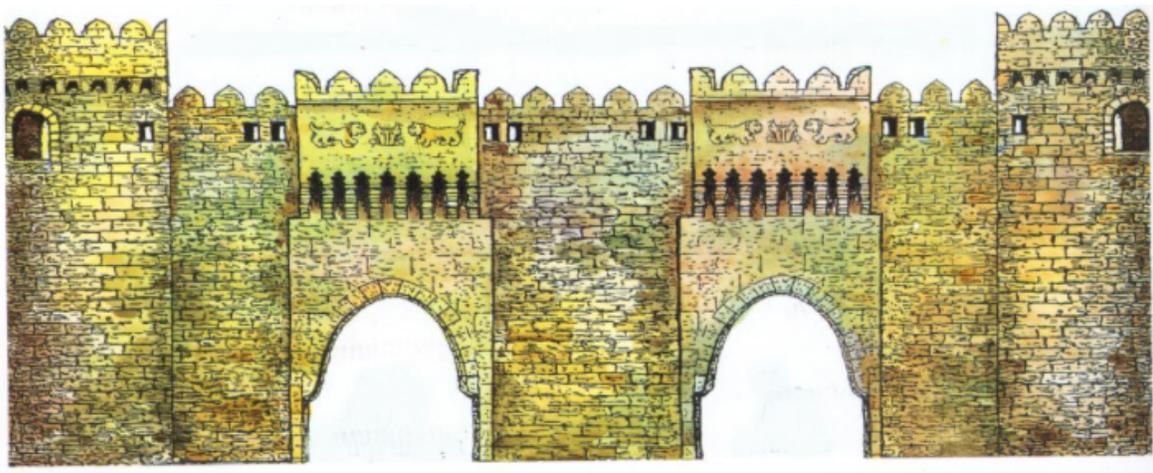


Image 1.4

The symbol of the Inner City is sculpted on top of the central double gates. It consists of a face of a bull in the middle that has two lions on the left and on the right. On both sides of the face of the bull there are also two circular symbols. The bull, that is an archetypal symbol found in various belief systems (Zoroastrianism, Wall St. finance, Tengrism etc.) represents the Inner City itself. The two lions stand as the guardians of the Walled City. The two circles are the sun and the moon. As the German traveler Engelbert Kempfer interpreted the symbol in his journal - the lions protect the walls of the Old City during both night and day. ⁸ (*Image 1.2 & Image 1.3*)



In the architectural language the Inner City, being the internal world of old Baku, also symbolizes the smooth ashlar whereas the Outer City (the outer world) that needs to improve itself is the unfinished ashlar. When we juxtapose Old City to the Outer City we see the kind of differences, some of which are similar to the differences between the Old World and the New World. The mind of Ichari Shahar is mature whereas the mind of the outer city is young which is why the mindset of Ichari Shahar has higher levels of sophistication in taste whereas the outer city has lower levels of sophistication in taste.

The moment when the city began expanding beyond its walls is equivalent to the moment of the first experience of expressing oneself. Therefore, from then on there were two worlds – the internal and the external. The outer had to have something that matches the inner and vice versa. There is a reflective factor however it is not of mathematically symmetrical reflection but of a transformative reflection because the *outer* is not the exact same of the *inner* in terms of size and qualities. So the Outer City is the expression of the Inner City. Inner City sequentially precedes the Outer City. It is first imagined, dreamt, thought within the state of being and only then it is finally expressed, manifested, materialized outside the state of being. This is a dynamic dualism between the inside and the outside worlds. As mentioned before, the Inner City is not a mere center of the city or the downtown of the city. This is the city within a city. This is why it hints to an internal “government” that maintains the overall balance. It is the small world that governs its expression – the big world around it. It may not govern it fully but it knows how to govern simply because it is more mature and because it is the author that created it in the first place.

If we take into account all the elements presented in this semiotic analysis we find that these elements are interdependent parts that operate together in order to keep cult of the Inner City alive. From the holistic standpoint what attracts researchers and visitors to it is the hidden presence of this old cult. One thing is certain and it is the fact that there needs to be more research conducted both by Azerbaijani and international semioticians in order to better understand the hidden dynamics of this site and learn about the contribution of its cult into the cultural heritage of humanity.

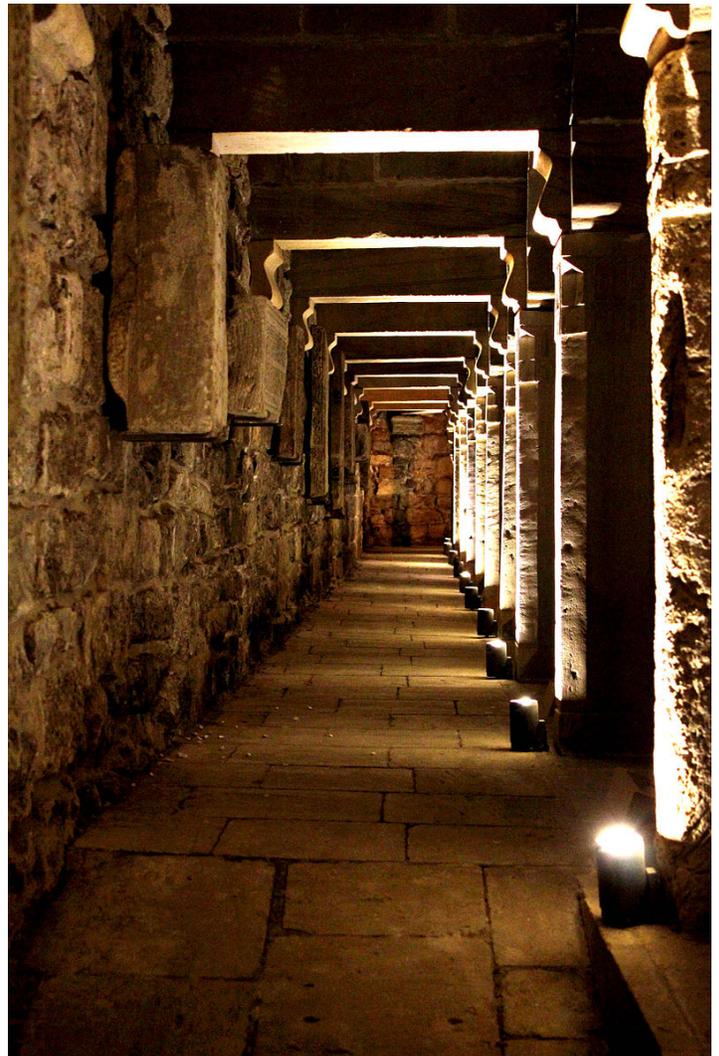


Image 1.5

Pagan temple within the Old City.



Bibliography:

1. Sir William Flinders Petrie
http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai143_folder/143_articles/143_mt_secrets.html
2. Sarabski, Hüseyinqulu. Köhnə Bakı. Bakı, 1958
http://anl.az/el/s/sh_kb.pdf
3. UNESCO
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/958>
4. Francis Underwood from *House of Cards*
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1856010/quotes>
5. Mir Teymur
http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/82_folder/82_articles/82_ichari_shahar.html
6. Prof. Rafiq Guliyev
http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai123_folder/123_articles/123_vagif_mustafazade_eng.html
7. Dr. Edward Hall
<http://www.amazon.com/The-Silent-Language-Anchor-Books/dp/0385055498>
8. Engelbert Kempfer
http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_paytaxt.pdf

