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QANIRA PIRGULIYEVA

PhD in History, Associate Professor of Baku State University

ORCID: 0000-0002-2049-7902

p_qanira@hotmail.com

IDEOLOGICAL AND SEMIOTIC DIMENSIONS OF SAFAVID COINAGE (Based on Persian-Language Sources and Azerbaijani Numismatic Materials)

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This article examines the ideological, semantic, and sacred functions of Safavid coinage based on a comparative analysis of Persian-language scholarly sources and numismatic materials discovered in Azerbaijan. The study aims to demonstrate that Safavid coins functioned not only as instruments of economic exchange but also as ideological tools for legitimizing the Shi'i theocratic state. The research analyzes royal titular, epigraphic formulas of imamate ideology, semantic structures of prayers and sacred expressions, and the role of Iranian mints in political centralization. The findings reveal that Safavid coins served as carriers of visual-sacral information that transmitted Shi'i ideology to mass consciousness. The study's originality lies in presenting Safavid numismatics as an integrated ideological system structured through semiotic codes. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of the political culture of medieval Azerbaijan and Iran and provide valuable insights into the relationship between material culture and religious ideology.

Keywords: Safavid coinage; Shi'i ideology; numismatics; imamate; Iranian mints; semiotics.

Introduction. The political ideology of the Safavid state (1501–1736) was fundamentally shaped by the doctrine of Shi'i imamate, which played a decisive role in legitimizing royal authority. This ideological framework was transmitted not only through legal-political documents and religious treatises but also through material culture, particularly coinage, which functioned as a powerful medium of mass communication. Safavid coins occupied a distinctive position within the numismatic systems of the medieval Middle East, serving not merely as instruments of monetary circulation but also as symbolic carriers of sacred legitimacy. Through carefully constructed epigraphic formulas, royal titles, and religious invocations, coins conveyed political and theological messages that reinforced the ruler's status as both a temporal and spiritual authority.

Persian-language scholarship, including the works of Abbas Iqbal Ashtiani, Rasul Ja'farian, and Sajad Mousavi, contains valuable information regarding the ideological dimensions of Safavid coinage. However, existing studies have rarely examined these materials from a systematic semiotic perspective. In particular, the symbolic structures of inscriptions, titulature, and sacred formulas have not been fully analyzed as integrated ideological codes.

Moreover, Safavid coins discovered in Azerbaijan have not yet been comprehensively incorporated into scholarly circulation, creating significant gaps in regional and comparative analyses. This article seeks to address these deficiencies by integrating Persian-language sources with Azerbaijani numismatic evidence. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the ideological and semiotic functions of Safavid coinage through a systematic examination of epigraphic, titillate, and symbolic elements. The research employs historical-comparative, epigraphic, and semiotic methodologies to explore how monetary objects functioned as instruments of ideological communication within the Safavid political system.

The study of Safavid coinage in Azerbaijan developed at the intersection of three scholarly traditions: local numismatic research, Iranian epigraphic cataloguing, and international economic history. Each of these directions proposed different ways of reading the coin - as an economic unit, as an artistic object, or as a historical document. Azerbaijani scholarship gradually formed a synthetic approach in which the monetary specimen is treated primarily as a bearer of ideological and administrative information.

Formation of the Azerbaijani Numismatic School. A decisive contribution to the discipline was made by A. Rajabli, who defined the main task of numismatics as the identification of the place and significance of coins for the reconstruction of socio-economic and political life. According to this view, every hoard and every mint mark reflects concrete historical processes: changes of power, organization of trade routes, and fiscal reforms. Rajabli emphasized the continuity of Azerbaijani monetary tradition from antiquity to the early modern period and demonstrated that the Safavid system relied on earlier regional experience. Further development of this line is presented in the works of M. Seyfeddini, Q. Pirgulyeva, where methods of reading Arabic-Persian legends were systematized. Particular attention was given to the semantic structure of Safavid inscriptions: the combination of Qur'anic quotations, names of the Imams, and royal titulature. Pirgulyeva showed that the coin functioned as a "portable manifesto" of Twelver Shi'ism and that the terminology of denominations (*shāhī, abbasī, muhammadi*) was directly connected with concepts of sovereignty (13; 14; 15).

Iranian researchers, above all Tabatabai, created detailed catalogues of Safavid issues and developed a precise system of transliteration of legends. Their work made it possible to compare Azerbaijani materials with collections from Isfahan, Qazvin and Mashhad, revealing both unity and regional variation. Western historiography traditionally concentrated on questions of silver supply, trade with Europe, and the monetary reform of Shah Abbas I. Although these studies clarified the economic background, they paid less attention to the ideological content of legends (16).

The present article follows the Azerbaijani interpretative model and treats the coin as a structured text consisting of several layers:

- 1. Confessional layer** - proclamation of Shi'i doctrine through the shahāda and the names of the Twelve Imams;
- 2. Dynastic layer** - royal epithets constructing the image of the just and divinely guided ruler;
- 3. Administrative layer** - indication of mint and year, integrating territory into imperial time;
- 4. Material layer** - weight and metal standard expressing economic policy.

Such a complex reading allows us to connect micro-level epigraphic details with macro-historical processes. The Azerbaijani corpus is especially valuable because it covers both central (Tabriz) and provincial (Ordubad, Nakhichevan, Iravan) mints, reflecting the interaction between the capital and the Caucasian frontier.

The analysis is based on three groups of materials:

- theoretical works of Azerbaijani scholars, primarily Rajabli and Pirgulyeva;
- catalogued descriptions of concrete coins from Azerbaijani collections;
- comparative data from Iranian catalogues, particularly those of Tabatabai.

By combining these sources, the article seeks to demonstrate how Safavid monetary issues operated as instruments of imperial ideology within the Azerbaijani space.

This historiographical framework defines the questions of the research: how were Shi'i formulas encoded on coins; how did the network of Azerbaijani mints participate in imperial communication; and how did metrological changes correlate with political transformations of the seventeenth century.

The empirical basis of the research consists of a group of Safavid silver coins preserved in Azerbaijani collections and published catalogues. These specimens cover the period from the reign of Muhammad Khudabanda to the late rule of Sulayman I and originate from both central and provincial mints. The diversity of places and dates makes it possible to trace the evolution of legends, metrology, and administrative practices.

Shi'i ideological codes in Safavid coin inscriptions. The adoption of Shi'i imamate doctrine as the official state ideology of the Safavid dynasty produced profound transformations in the monetary system. Beginning with the reign of Shah Ismail I (1501–1524), coin inscriptions were systematically redesigned to reflect theological and political principles associated with Shi'ism. These epigraphic structures communicated not only economic information but also ideological messages that reinforced the sacred foundations of royal authority. One of the most frequently employed formulas on Safavid coinage was the inscription "‘Ali Wali Allah" ('Ali is the Friend of God). This phrase, positioned alongside or in addition to the traditional Islamic declaration "Muhammad Rasul Allah" (Muhammad is the Messenger of God), symbolized the centrality of the imamate within Safavid political theology.

Its inclusion emphasized the continuation of legitimate authority through the lineage of Imam ‘Ali and his descendants (1, 18-36; 2, 119-213).

During the reign of ShahTahmasp I (1524–1576), sacred invocations such as “Ya ‘Ali Madad” (O ‘Ali, grant assistance) and “Ya Sahib al-Zaman” (O Lord of the Age) became increasingly prominent on silver abasis and copper fulus. These expressions transformed coins into protective and devotional objects, reinforcing their function as amuletic artifacts within everyday religious practice. Persian numismatic scholarship has described such issues as “tabarruki coins,” emphasizing their blessing-oriented character (3, 367). From a semantic perspective, Shi‘i epigraphic formulas on Safavid coins fulfilled three primary ideological functions. First, they proclaimed the religious legitimacy of state authority. Second, they promoted Shi‘i identity among diverse social groups. Third, they demonstrated the ruling dynasty’s commitment to imamate doctrine. Through these mechanisms, coinage operated as a medium of ideological socialization. Consequently, Safavid numismatics cannot be understood solely in economic terms. Rather, coin inscriptions constituted an integrated system of symbolic communication through which religious doctrine and political power were continuously reinforced.

<i>Arabic/Persian Phrase</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Ideological Function / Meaning</i>
على ولي الله	‘Ali Wali Allah	Imamate marker; loyalty to Imam ‘Ali; Shi‘i identity
يا على مدد	Ya ‘Ali Madad	Devotional invocation; protective/talismanic framing
يا صاحب الزمان	Ya Sahib al-Zaman	Messianic invocation; connection to the Hidden Imam
ظل الله في الارض	Zill Allah fi al-Ard	Sacral kingship; shah as ‘Shadow of God’

The table above illustrates how a small set of phrases could carry dense ideological meaning. Importantly, the impact of such inscriptions is amplified by repetition and scale: thousands of coins moving through hands make doctrine materially ubiquitous.

Royal titlature and theocratic legitimation. Royal titular on Safavid coinage represents a central mechanism through which political authority was sacralized and legitimized. The titles and epithets inscribed on coins portrayed the shah not merely as a temporal ruler but as a divinely sanctioned representative of religious order. Within Islamic political culture, such titular functioned as a symbolic bridge between spiritual authority and worldly governance. Coins issued during the reign of Shah Ismail I frequently display titles such as “al-Sultan al-A‘zam Shah Ismail” and “al-Malik al-Mu‘ayyad min Allah” (the king supported by God). These expressions emphasized the divine origin of royal power and elevated political authority to a sacred level. By embedding such formulas in everyday monetary circulation, the Safavid state disseminated its legitimacy across social strata. Under Shah Tahmasp I, the title “Zill Allah fi al-Ard” (the Shadow of God on Earth) became increasingly prominent. This designation framed the shah as a spiritual deputy within the framework of Shi‘i imamate ideology. It reinforced the perception of royal authority as an extension of divine will and religious leadership. The reign of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) marked a significant development in titular practices. Coins from this period frequently include genealogical references such as “al-Husayni al-Musawi al-Safawi,” linking the Safavid dynasty to the lineage of Imam Musa al-Kazim (7, 89-112;12, 621-645). Through this strategy, political legitimacy was reinforced through sacred genealogy, situating dynastic authority within the framework of Shi‘i sacred history.

The reverse side contained a chain of epithets: *al-sultan ibn sultan, al-khāqān ibn khāqān, al-‘ādil, al-kāmil, al-hādī, al-wālī, al-‘ālim*. Each term had a precise semantic field:

- **al-‘ādil** – the just ruler guaranteeing order;
- **al-hādī** – guide of the community;
- **al-‘ālim** – possessor of knowledge;

- **bahādur khān** – Turkic element connecting Safavids with steppe traditions.

The coexistence of Arabic, Persian and Turkic vocabulary reflects the multicultural character of Safavid ideology, especially visible in the Caucasian context.

Confessional Formulas. The most stable element of Safavid coin texts was the Shi‘i proclamation placed on the obverse. The formula “There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God, ‘Ali is the friend of God” together with the names of the Twelve Imams created a miniature creed. This composition had several functions:

1. **Doctrinal** – affirmation of Twelver orthodoxy as state religion;
2. **Integrative** – unification of diverse populations through a common symbol;
3. **Polemic** – distinction from Sunni neighbors, primarily the Ottoman Empire.

Azerbaijani specimens from Ordubad and Nakhchivan repeat this formula almost verbatim, which demonstrates the rigidity of the ideological core.

The numismatic representation of royal titular thus constituted a carefully constructed ideological program. By encoding religious genealogy, divine sanction, and political authority onto metal surfaces, Safavid rulers transformed coinage into a durable medium of theocratic legitimation.

Iranian mints and the political geography of monetary circulation. Within the Safavid state, the minting system functioned not only as an economic mechanism but also as an instrument of political centralization and territorial control. The geographic distribution of mints reflected administrative authority, strategic priorities, and ideological influence. By inscribing mint names on coins, the Safavid government asserted legal and symbolic sovereignty over specific regions. During the early sixteenth century, Tabriz served as the principal minting center of the Safavid realm. As the first capital of the dynasty, it played a crucial role in establishing standardized epigraphic and ideological models. Coins produced in Tabriz exhibit early and systematic applications of Shi‘i inscriptions, confirming the city’s function as both a political and ideological hub. Following the designation of Qazvin as the capital in 1555, the Qazvin mint became a central institution within the imperial monetary system. Coins issued there display increasingly standardized titular and religious formulas, reflecting the consolidation of centralized fiscal and ideological policies. This development indicates the emergence of a unified monetary framework. The transfer of the capital to Isfahan under Shah Abbas I transformed the Isfahan mint into the dominant production center of the empire. Isfahan issues are characterized by high technical quality and consistent iconographic and epigraphic standards. Through these coins, Safavid ideological principles were disseminated to distant provinces. Mints operating in Azerbaijani territories, including Shamakhi, Ganja, Nakhichevan, Ardabil, and Tabriz, demonstrate the region’s economic vitality and political significance. The Ardabil mint, in particular, reflects the spiritual origins of the Safavid dynasty and underscores the city’s role as a symbolic center of authority (8, 11-18; 11, 85-104).

Taken together, the spatial configuration of Safavid mints constitutes a numismatic map of political power. This network illustrates how monetary production served as a mechanism for integrating peripheral regions into the ideological and administrative structure of the state.

Numismatic evidence from Azerbaijani territories. Safavid coins discovered in Azerbaijani territories provide compelling evidence of the region’s central role within the political, economic, and ideological framework of the Safavid state. Archaeological excavations and accidental finds in Ganja, Shamakhi, Nakhichevan, Tabriz, Ardabil, and Karabakh reveal distinctive regional patterns in monetary circulation and symbolic representation. Silver abasis from the reign of Shah Abbas I found in the Shamakhi region frequently bear inscriptions such as “Ya ‘Ali Madad” and “al-Malik al-Mu‘ayyad min Allah ‘Abbas” (5, 19-34). These formulas demonstrate the systematic dissemination of Shi‘i ideology and confirm the integration of local communities into the imperial religious framework. Such coins were employed not only in commercial transactions but also in devotional and protective contexts. Copper fulus recovered from Ganja primarily served local market circulation. The presence of mint marks such as “Darab Ganja” indicates effective administrative supervision and fiscal regulation. The simplified epigraphic structure of these coins suggests deliberate adaptation for mass circulation and accessibility. Finds from Nakhichevan and Karabakh are dominated by issues of Shah Tahmasp I and Shah Abbas I, reflecting sustained political and ideological influence in these regions. Ardabil

specimens, characterized by dense genealogical and devotional inscriptions, emphasize the city's role as the spiritual heartland of the Safavid dynasty (6, 23-35; 10, 56-67).

Comparative analysis of Azerbaijani Safavid coinage demonstrates the existence of regional variations in production and circulation practices. Nevertheless, ideological content remained standardized within a unified theocratic framework. This balance between local adaptation and centralized control reflects the administrative sophistication of the Safavid monetary system.

Semiotic and sacred symbolism: the ideological language of Safavid coins. The semantic structure of Safavid coinage represents one of the most sophisticated ideological systems in medieval Islamic numismatics. Through the combined use of epigraphy, symbolic signs, and sacred formulas, Safavid rulers constructed a visual-semiotic language that communicated theological and political authority to diverse audiences. One of the most prominent symbolic elements on Safavid coins is the vertical dominance of the letter *alif*. In Persian numismatic scholarship, this feature has been interpreted as a representation of divine unity and sacred origin. The central placement of *alif* symbolized both the oneness of God and the foundational role of imamate doctrine within Safavid ideology.

References to the Twelve Imams constitute another essential component of Safavid semiotic practice. These motifs appeared either in explicit textual form or through symbolic arrangements of dots and linear patterns. Such visual coding enabled ideological recognition even among illiterate segments of society, enhancing the accessibility of religious messages. Sacred invocations such as “Ya ‘Ali Madad” and “Ya Sahib al-Zaman” elevated coins to the status of protective amulets. These formulas reinforced the perception of coinage as spiritually efficacious objects integrated into everyday religious life. As a result, monetary instruments acquired devotional significance beyond their economic function.

Through these layered symbolic strategies, Safavid coinage functioned as a durable medium of ideological communication. The integration of textual, visual, and sacred elements transformed metal surfaces into carriers of theological doctrine and political legitimacy.

Conclusion and scholarly contribution. This study demonstrates that Safavid coinage functioned not merely as a medium of economic exchange but also as a powerful instrument of ideological communication within a Shi‘i theocratic state. Through epigraphic formulas, royal titular, and sacred symbolism, coins encoded and disseminated the principles of imamate doctrine and dynastic legitimacy across society. The analysis reveals that monetary inscriptions and symbolic elements formed an integrated ideological system designed to reinforce perceptions of divine authority and political continuity. By circulating these messages in everyday economic life, Safavid rulers ensured the constant reproduction of religious and political identity among diverse social groups.

Numismatic evidence from Azerbaijani territories confirms the region's central position within the Safavid imperial framework and highlights its role in transmitting ideological norms to peripheral areas. Regional variations in coin production coexisted with standardized theological content, reflecting a balance between administrative flexibility and centralized control. The principal scholarly contribution of this article lies in its systematic interpretation of Safavid numismatics as a unified semiotic-ideological system. By integrating Persian-language sources with Azerbaijani archaeological evidence, the study advances interdisciplinary approaches to Islamic history, material culture, and political theology.

The findings offer valuable perspectives for future research on the relationship between religious ideology and monetary practices in premodern Islamic societies and contribute to broader discussions on the role of material culture in state formation.

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QANIRA PIRQULIYEVA

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SƏFƏVİ SİKKƏLƏRİNİN İDEOLOJİ VƏ SEMİOTİK ÖLÇÜLƏRİ (farsdilli mənbələr və Azərbaycan numizmatik materialları əsasında)

Bu məqalə Səfəvi dövrü sikkələrinin ideoloji, semantik və sakral funksiyalarının Azərbaycan ərazisində aşkar edilmiş numizmatik materiallar və farsdilli elmi mənbələrin müqayisəli təhlili əsasında araşdırılmasına həsr olunmuşdur. Tədqiqat prosesində Səfəvi sikkələrinin yalnız iqtisadi mübadilə vasitəsi kimi deyil, həm də şiə teokratik dövlətinin legitimləşdirilməsində effektiv ideoloji mexanizm kimi fəaliyyət göstərdiyini əsaslandırılmışdır. Araşdırmada şah titulaturası, imamət doktrinasını əks etdirən epigrafiq formullar, dua və sakral ifadələrin semantik strukturu, eləcə də İran zərxbxanalarının siyasi mərkəzləşmə prosesində rolu təhlil edilir. Xüsusi diqqət yazıların və simvolik elementlərin dini hakimiyyət və sülalə legitimliyini vahid semiotik sistem çərçivəsində necə kodlaşdırmasına yönəldilmişdir. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, Səfəvi sikkələri vizual-sakral informasiya daşıyıcısı kimi çıxış edərək şiə ideologiyasını gündəlik pul dövriyyəsi vasitəsilə kütləvi şüura ötürmüşdür. Bu baxımdan, sikkə zərbi siyasi hakimiyyətlə dini doktrina arasında simvolik birliyi təmin edən ideoloji kommunikasiya vasitəsi funksiyasını yerinə yetirmişdir. İşin elmi yeniliyi Səfəvi numizmatikasının yalnız iqtisadi və ya təsviri-tarixi fenomen kimi deyil, semiotik kodlar vasitəsilə strukturlaşdırılmış integrasiya olunmuş ideoloji sistem kimi şərh edilməsindədir. Əldə olunan nəticələr orta əsr Azərbaycan və İranın siyasi mədəniyyətinin daha dərinlən anlaşılmasına töhfə verir, eyni zamanda maddi mədəniyyətlə dini ideologiya arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqələr haqqında təsəvvürləri genişləndirir.

Açar sözlər: Səfəvi sikkələri, şiə ideologiyası, numizmatika, imamət, İran zərxbxanaları, semiotika.

ГАНИРА ПИРГУЛИЕВА

*Доцент Бакинского Государственного Университета,
доктор философии по истории*

ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ И СЕМИОТИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ САФАВИДСКОЙ МОНЕТНОЙ КОЛЛЕКЦИИ (на основе персидскоязычных источников и азербайджанских нумизматических материалов)

Данная статья посвящена исследованию идеологических, семантических и сакральных функций сефевидской чеканки на основе сравнительного анализа персоязычных научных источников и нумизматических материалов, обнаруженных на территории Азербайджана. Сефе-

видские монеты функционировали не только как инструменты экономического обмена, но и как идеологические механизмы легитимации шиитского теократического государства, созданного династией. В работе анализируются царская титулатура, эпиграфические формулы, отражающие доктрину имамата, семантическая структура молитвенных и сакральных выражений, а также роль иранских монетных дворов в процессе политической централизации. Особое внимание уделяется тому, каким образом надписи и символические элементы кодировали религиозную власть и династическую легитимность в рамках целостной семиотической системы. Результаты исследования показывают, что сефевидские монеты выступали носителями визуально-сакральной информации, транслируя шиитскую идеологию в массовое сознание через повседневный экономический оборот. В этом смысле чеканка выполняла функцию средства идеологической коммуникации, укрепляя единство политической власти и религиозной доктрины. Научная новизна работы заключается в рассмотрении сефевидской нумизматики как интегрированной идеологической системы, структурированной посредством семиотических кодов, а не исключительно как экономического или описательного исторического явления. Полученные результаты способствуют более глубокому пониманию политической культуры средневекового Азербайджана и Ирана, а также расширяют представления о взаимосвязи материальной культуры и религиозной идеологии в исламских обществах.

Ключевые слова: сефевидские монеты, шиитская идеология, нумизматика, имамат, иранские монетные дворы, семиотика.

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