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WEAPON IMAGERY ON LATE MEDIEVAL TOMBSTONES IN AZERBAIJAN AND EASTERN ANATOLIA: SOCIAL STATUS AND MILITARY IDENTITY AS VISUAL EVIDENCE

*The article examines weapon imagery on late medieval tombstones in Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia as a class of visual-historical evidence rather than as a set of self-explanatory emblems. The central problem is that swords, daggers, bows, arrows, shields and mounted equipment are frequently assigned direct meanings – warrior occupation, martyrdom, nobility or masculine status – although many monuments are uninscribed, displaced from their original setting or known only through legacy documentation. The focused corpus comprises the AH 736 / 1336–1337 stele of Ahi Fahreddin ibn Mehmed Shah from Erzurum; ram-shaped tombstones from Ahlat, including the inscribed AH 803 / 1400–1401 monument of Yar Ali and an anonymous weapon-bearing example; Lerik-region ram stones combining weapons and shears; a Qobustan sanduka with a horse, a checked field and a sword; and decorated tombstones from the Erzincan region. The method integrates formal and iconographic analysis, epigraphic contextualization, tomb typology, motif placement and source criticism. The results show that weapon images are polyvalent. On the Ahi Fahreddin monument, the convergence of an inscription using the terms *saʿīd*, *shahīd*, *ghāzī* and *maqtūl* with sword-and-dagger reliefs provides the strongest evidence for a relationship among martial identity, violent death and memorial representation. In Ahlat, the regional proximity of explicit *shahīd* terminology and uninscribed weapon motifs demonstrates a shared visual vocabulary, but it cannot identify every anonymous deceased as a warrior or martyr. The mixed weapon-and-tool assemblage in Lerik supports an interpretation in terms of composite social memory, whereas the ordered horse-ornament-sword sequence on the Qobustan sanduka constructs public prestige without establishing an individual profession. The article proposes a four-level evidentiary model: epigraphically corroborated identity; contextually probable martial status; symbolic representation of prestige; and indeterminate or workshop convention. This model enables tombstones to be read as historical sources while avoiding a reductive, one-to-one dictionary of symbols.*

Key words: tombstone, weapon imagery, military identity, social status, Azerbaijan, Eastern Anatolia.

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ЗОБРАЖЕННЯ ЗБРОЇ НА ПІЗНЬОСЕРЕДНЬОВІЧНИХ НАДГРОБКАХ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНУ ТА СХІДНОЇ АНАТОЛІЇ: СОЦІАЛЬНИЙ СТАТУС І ВІЙСЬКОВА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ ЯК ВІЗУАЛЬНЕ ДЖЕРЕЛО

*У статті досліджено зображення зброї на пізньосередньовічних надгробках Азербайджану та Східної Анатолії як особливий тип візуально-історичного джерела. Проблема полягає в тому, що мечі, кинджали, луки, стріли, щити та спорядження вершника нерідко тлумачаться як прямі й однозначні ознаки професії воїна, мученицької смерті, шляхетності або чоловічого статусу, хоча значна частина пам'яток не має читабельних написів, була переміщена з первісного середовища або відома лише за давніми публікаціями. Для перевірки цих інтерпретацій зіставлено стелу Ахі Фахреддіна ібн Мехмед Шаха з Ерзурума, датовану 736 р. гіджри / 1336–1337 рр.; бараноподібні надгробки Ахлату, зокрема написаний пам'ятник Яр Алі 803 р. гіджри / 1400–1401 рр. та анонімний зразок із мечем і кинджалом; пам'ятки Лерікського регіону із поєднанням зброї та ножиць; сандуку з Гобустану з образом коня, шаховим полем і мечем; а також декоровані надгробки Ерзінджана. Методика об'єднує формально-іконографічний аналіз, епіграфічну контекстуалізацію, типологію надгробків, дослідження розташування мотиву та критичну оцінку джерел. Встановлено, що зображення зброї є полісемантичними. У пам'ятці Ахі Фахреддіна збіг напису з термінами *saʿīd*, *shahīd*, *ghāzī* і *maqtūl* та рельєфів меча й кинджала створює найсильніший доказ зв'язку між воєнною ідентичністю, насильницькою смертю і меморіальним представленням. В Ахлаті*

сусідство епіграфічного означення shahīd та анонімних збройних мотивів свідчить про спільну регіональну візуальну лексику, але не дозволяє вважати кожне безіменне поховання могилою воїна або мученика. Змішаний набір на лерікських пам'ятках вказує на складну соціальну пам'ять, а композиція гобустанської сандуки – на публічну мову престижу без надійної біографічної атрибуції. Запропоновано чотирирівневу модель доказовості: епіграфічно підтверджена ідентичність; контекстуально ймовірний військовий статус; символічна репрезентація престижу; невизначена або цехова конвенція. Така модель дає змогу використовувати надгробки як історичні джерела без редуції їхніх образів до фіксованого «словника символів».

Ключові слова: надгробок, зображення зброї, військова ідентичність, соціальний статус, Азербайджан, Східна Анатолія.

Statement of the problem. Funerary monuments are not passive containers of decoration. They are public interfaces through which a community organized the memory of the deceased, articulated social difference and made claims about lineage, piety, profession or status. In Islamic societies, the normative simplicity of burial coexisted with substantial regional variation in commemorative architecture, inscriptions and surface imagery (Petersen, 2013: 241–258; Bullion et al., 2022: 628–645). A tombstone therefore has to be read as an integrated cultural product in which text, image, material, form and location are mutually dependent rather than as separate channels of information (Lambourn, 2008: 252–256). This principle is particularly important in Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia, where stelae, sandukas and zoomorphic tombstones formed visually dense funerary landscapes and participated in the public representation of families, urban groups and regional communities (Pancaroglu, 2021: 117–121, 145–150).

Weapon imagery presents a specific source-critical problem. Swords, daggers, bows, arrows, shields, quivers and mounted equipment are often treated as transparent labels for a warrior, a martyr, an aristocrat or a male burial. Yet the same motif may occur on monuments with and without inscriptions, as an isolated emblem or as part of a hunting narrative, on a stele, sanduka or ram-shaped stone, and in objects that have been displaced from their original cemetery. A visual resemblance to a weapon is certain; the social identity inferred from it is not. The key research gap is thus not the absence of documentation, but the absence of an explicit evidentiary scale separating a confirmed biographical statement from a probable status marker, a generalized prestige symbol and a workshop convention.

The present study addresses that gap through a comparative reading of a restricted corpus from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, supplemented by regional comparative material. The geographical terms Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia refer to present-day locations and do not imply that the medieval objects belonged to modern national frameworks. The analysis asks when weapon imagery can legitimately support a claim about military identity and when the

evidence permits only a more cautious interpretation as social prestige, normative masculinity or collective memory.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The foundational regional literature documented a wide range of weapon motifs and proposed several recurrent meanings. Yunus Berkli connected swords, daggers, bows and flags with heroism, cause of death, nobility and profession, drawing attention to the Erzurum stele of Ahi Fahreddin, Ahlat ram-shaped stones and Lerik examples (Berkli, 2007: 67–80). Haldun Özkan identified a gendered repertoire in Erzincan and its surroundings: weapons and equestrian motifs were associated with male graves, while weaving and household implements were associated with female graves. At the same time, he noted that local informants no longer possessed detailed knowledge of the motifs and that later monuments could combine formerly differentiated signs (Özkan, 2000: 35–36). This internal qualification is methodologically important because it shows that a regional visual code may be remembered as a convention after its precise semantic distinctions have weakened.

For Azerbaijan, Delefruz Baghirova systematized the artistic treatment of tomb monuments and described narrative sandukas and zoomorphic stones from Qobustan, Lerik and other regions. Her published summary records a Qobustan sanduka divided into a horse image, a checked ornamental field and a sword at the head end, as well as ram-shaped monuments in the south of Azerbaijan bearing bows, arrows, swords, daggers and shears (Bağirova, 2018: 17–18). Telman Ibrahimov interpreted horse-shaped tombstones as a long-lived medieval phenomenon related to martial valor, power and social status, emphasizing that zoomorphic form itself carried cultural memory beyond the individual motifs carved on its surface (Ibrahimov, 2024: 80–87).

Recent research has expanded the methodological range. Kazempour and Shokrpour combined field documentation, inscription reading and comparative symbolic analysis for Ahar Museum tombstones, distinguishing isolated bow-and-arrow images from narrative hunting scenes in which weapons, riders, dogs and prey interact (Kazempour, Shokrpour,

2021: 1065–1086). Ali and co-authors integrated spatial recording, high-resolution photography, petrographic testing, epigraphy and iconography at the Shakhanda cemetery in Shamakhi, demonstrating how a motif acquires meaning within a larger architectural and ritual program (Ali et al., 2026: 177–184). Bingöl's comparative study of Bitlis and Ahlat likewise stresses regional style, epigraphy and artisan mobility, reminding us that motif repetition may result from workshop transmission as well as from shared identity (Bingöl, 2026: 164–170). Mortuary archaeology and material-culture studies further establish that memorial forms encode identities relationally, through the interaction of monument, cemetery space, viewers and later acts of commemoration (Mytum, 2004: 137–178; Mortensen, 1996: 219–228).

Despite this substantial scholarship, weapon imagery is still frequently interpreted through a one-to-one symbolic equation. The present article does not reject earlier interpretations; it tests the degree to which each interpretation is supported by convergent evidence on the same monument and within the same historical context.

Purpose of the article. The purpose is to establish a source-critical model for reading weapon imagery on late medieval tombstones in Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia. The research questions are: (1) which combinations of inscription, tomb type and motif placement allow a military or martyr identity to be inferred; (2) how do mixed assemblages of weapons, tools and animal imagery modify that inference; and (3) how can regional and workshop conventions be distinguished from individual biography? The object

of study is the funerary monument as a composite historical source; the subject is the evidentiary relationship between weapon imagery and social identity. The material is limited to published and visually documented monuments. The methods are formal-iconographic analysis, epigraphic contextualization, comparative typology, semiotic analysis and source criticism. Because several objects are lost, displaced or incompletely published, the study evaluates the quality of documentation as part of the interpretation.

Presentation of the main material. The analytical protocol records six variables for every case: monument type; date and provenance; preservation status; inscription; weapon motif and its position; and corroborating or competing motifs. A weapon image is treated first as an icon – a recognizable representation of an object. It becomes an index of martial biography only when it is anchored by independent evidence, such as an inscription, a narrative scene or a securely documented social context. It functions as a symbol of prestige when the image is conventional, publicly visible and not tied to a specific biographical statement. This distinction prevents an image from being asked to carry more historical information than the monument preserves.

1. An epigraphically anchored case: Ahi Fahreddin in Erzurum

The strongest case in the corpus is the stele of Ahi Fahreddin ibn Mehmed Shah, dated AH 736 / 1336–1337. Berkli reports that its Arabic inscription characterized the deceased with the terms *sa'īd*, *shahīd*, *ghāzī* and *maqtūl*. A sword and dagger were carved on the side of the stele together with a

Table 1

Comparative corpus and the status of the evidence

Object / context	Date	Textual evidence	Visual evidence and source condition	Provisional level
Ahi Fahreddin stele, Erzurum	1336–1337	<i>sa'īd</i> , <i>shahīd</i> , <i>ghāzī</i> , <i>maqtūl</i>	Sword and dagger on the same stele; monument reported lost	I
Yar Ali ram stone, Ahlat	1400–1401	Explicit <i>shahīd</i>	Epigraphic control; weapon imagery is not documented on the same object in the source used	Control
Anonymous ram stone, Ahlat	Late medieval	No readable inscription in the published comparison	Sword and dagger; museum / regional context	II-III
Lerik-region ram stones	15th–16th c.	No corroborating inscription in the sources used	Sword, dagger, bow-arrow, quiver and shears; simplified relief	II-III
Qobustan sanduka	Medieval; exact date not supplied in the summary used	No corroborating inscription reported	Horse, checked field and sword at head end	III
Erzincan regional group	Medieval to later continuations	Uneven	Weapons on male-associated stones; weaving tools on female-associated stones; later mixing of motifs	III-IV

rosette, while a lamp motif occupied the footstone. The monument is now reported lost, so the analysis depends on the published transcription and photographs (Berkli, 2007: 71).

Here, image and text converge on the same object. The terms *ghāzī* and *maqtūl* create an explicit martial and violent-death frame; *shahīd* adds a religiously valorized memory of death. The sword and dagger reinforce that frame without independently proving the precise weapon or circumstances of death. The significant point is not that the image decodes the inscription, but that each channel restricts the range of plausible readings of the other. This is an epigraphically corroborated identity: the weapon motif can legitimately participate in a historical statement about how the deceased was publicly remembered. The loss of the original stone, however, prevents renewed epigraphic, technical and spatial examination and must remain part of the evidentiary assessment.

2. Ahlat: textual and visual codes within a regional funerary landscape

Ahlat offers a more complex comparison. One ram-shaped tombstone in the museum, dated AH 803 / 1400–1401, names Yar Ali and explicitly uses the designation *shahīd*. Berkli juxtaposes this inscribed object with anonymous ram-shaped stones from the same regional corpus on which sword and dagger motifs appear in place of a readable text (Fig. 1; Berkli, 2007: 72–73). The pairing is valuable because it demonstrates that written and visual codes of valorized death coexisted in Ahlat. It does not, however, establish that every anonymous stone with weapons belonged to a person killed in battle.

Ahlat was not merely a collection of isolated graves. Its cemeteries and tomb towers constituted a monumental landscape in which family, corporate and urban identities were materialized over time (Pancaroglu, 2021: 117–121, 145–150). Within such a landscape, a weapon image could identify the deceased, commemorate a social ideal shared by a lineage, reproduce a recognized local formula or display the patronage of a particular workshop. The anonymous weapon-bearing ram is therefore best classified between contextually probable martial status and symbolic prestige. The regional analogy makes a martial interpretation plausible, but the absent inscription prevents a biographical conclusion.

3. Lerik, Karabakh and Qobustan: mixed visual assemblages in Azerbaijan

The Lerik material shows why the entire motif assemblage must be read rather than a single emblem. Berkli describes a sixteenth-century ram-shaped tombstone carrying a sword, dagger, bow with an arrow, quiver and shears (Fig. 2; Berkli, 2007: 76).

Bağirova also records ram-shaped stones in the Lerik region and a fifteenth – to sixteenth-century example in the courtyard of the Khalifa Zakariyya complex at Cangamiran, where bow, arrow and sword motifs are executed in a deliberately simplified manner visible from a distance (Bağirova, 2018: 17–18). The two publications may refer to overlapping regional material, but they do not provide enough information to identify the examples as the same object; they are therefore treated as a Lerik cluster rather than double-counted monuments.

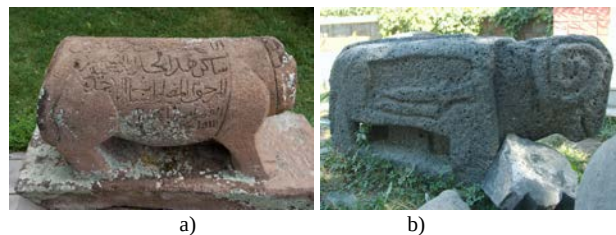


Fig. 1. Ahlat ram-shaped tombstones: (a) the inscribed Yar Ali monument, AH 803 / 1400–1401; (b) an anonymous weapon-bearing example from the same regional corpus. Original published illustrations reproduced from Berkli (2007: 72)

The coexistence of weapons and shears complicates a purely military reading. Shears may refer to pastoral production, craft practice or a broader social economy in which animal husbandry and martial readiness were not mutually exclusive. The weapon cluster gives the monument a strong martial register, but the tool transforms it into a composite statement. It may represent the social persona expected of an adult man, the economic world of a household or community, and the prestige of a mounted or armed way of life. Without an inscription naming an office, profession or manner of death, the safest conclusion is that the stone performs social memory rather than records a narrowly defined occupation.

A museum-based visual control from Karabakh further demonstrates why weapon-related imagery must be separated from unsupported biographical inference. A ram-shaped gravestone preserved in the Museum of History of Azerbaijan bears a prominent human figure with a round shield within a broader relief composition (Fig. 3). The image strengthens the association between zoomorphic funerary sculpture and martial visual language; however, the accessible image record does not securely identify the deceased or establish a specific military office. It is therefore used here as comparative visual evidence rather than as Level I biographical proof.

A Qobustan sanduka described by Bağirova presents another arrangement: the side is divided into

three fields containing a horse, a checked ornamental panel and a sword placed toward the head end (Bağirova, 2018: 17). The sequence creates a visual syntax. The horse invokes mounted mobility and prestige; the checked field mediates between figural and emblematic zones; the sword closes the composition near the head. This ordering is more informative than the sword alone because it constructs a public narrative of status. Nevertheless, the published summary does not provide a corroborating inscription or a precise individual biography. The monument therefore supports an interpretation of prestige and martial association, not a definitive attribution to a professional warrior.



Fig. 2. Lerik-region ram-shaped tombstone with sword, dagger and bow-arrow motifs. Original published illustration reproduced from Berkli (2007: 72, Resim 8; discussed at p. 76)



Fig. 3. Ram-shaped gravestone from Karabakh, Museum of History of Azerbaijan, Baku: shield-bearing human figure within a narrative relief field. Selective analytical redrawing after the source photograph. Photo: Urmen19 (metadata: Hajizade), 14 April 2014; Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0. Derivative analytical drawing distributed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

4. Gender, narrative context and workshop transmission

The Erzincan material helps distinguish individual identity from regional convention. Özkan observed that male-associated stones commonly bear swords, daggers, shields, bows, firearms, saddled horses or rams, while female-associated stones display weaving and household implements. Yet he also noted that local informants lacked detailed semantic knowledge and that later monuments could mix formerly separate motifs (Özkan, 2000: 35–36). The pattern is therefore

significant at the level of a regional gendered repertoire, but it cannot automatically determine the sex, profession or rank of every uninscribed burial. A conventional code is probabilistic, not self-authenticating.

The Ahar Museum corpus provides a useful external control from Iranian Azerbaijan. Bow-and-arrow motifs occur both in isolation and within hunting scenes that include riders, dogs and prey. In the narrative scenes, the weapon is linked to an action and a social performance, making elite leisure, hunting skill or martial competence more plausible. When the bow and arrow appear alone, the interpretive range remains wider (Kazempour, Shokrpour, 2021: 1065–1086). This contrast confirms that motif syntax – what is shown together, where and in what action – is more evidentially powerful than motif inventory.

Workshop transmission introduces a further alternative explanation. The continuity of forms between Ahlat and Bitlis has been connected to regional artistic exchange and the mobility of named craftsmen (Bingöl, 2026: 164–195). Repeated weapon motifs may thus encode a shared visual language produced by artisans and patrons rather than a stable biographical category. The same applies to simplified Lerik reliefs designed for visibility at a distance. Stylistic repetition is historical evidence, but its first referent may be a workshop, market or community convention rather than the occupation of the deceased.

5. A four-level evidentiary model

The comparative material supports a four-level model. Level I, epigraphically corroborated identity, requires the weapon image and explicit martial, death-related or occupational language on the same securely documented monument. The Ahi Fahreddin stele is the principal example. Level II, contextually probable martial status, applies when a weapon assemblage is supported by monument type, date, cemetery context or a narrative scene, but no explicit inscription survives. Anonymous Ahlat and some Lerik examples approach this level. Level III, symbolic social identity, applies when weapons participate in a public language of prestige, masculinity, mounted life or collective memory without identifying an individual profession. The Qobustan sanduka and the broader Erzincan repertoire fit this category. Level IV, indeterminate or workshop convention, applies to displaced, undated, fragmentary or highly repetitive motifs for which alternative explanations cannot be excluded.

This scale is not a hierarchy of artistic quality. It is a hierarchy of historical inference. A Level III monument may be visually richer than a Level I monument; it simply permits a different kind of conclusion. The model also allows an object to move between levels

Table 2

Four-level model for interpreting weapon imagery

Level	Minimum evidence	Permitted inference	Principal risk
I	Weapon image + explicit inscription on the same secure object	Documented martial, occupational or violent-death identity as memorialized	Over-specifying the actual circumstances of death
II	Weapon assemblage + secure date, context, tomb type or narrative scene	Probable martial status or role	Treating regional analogy as personal biography
III	Weapon motif within a coherent prestige or gendered visual program	Symbolic social identity, valor, masculinity or mounted prestige	Turning a conventional symbol into a factual title
IV	Fragmentary, displaced, undated or repetitive motif without context	Only motif presence and workshop / regional distribution	Inventing meaning from resemblance alone

when new evidence appears. A newly read inscription, reliable archival photograph, documented cemetery plan or petrographic match could strengthen an interpretation, while proof of displacement or restoration could weaken it.

Conclusions. The comparison demonstrates that weapon imagery on late medieval tombstones in Azerbaijan and Eastern Anatolia cannot be reduced to a fixed symbolic dictionary. Swords, daggers, bows and related equipment formed a shared regional visual vocabulary, but their historical meaning depended on the convergence of inscription, monument type, motif syntax, spatial context and preservation history. The Ahi Fahreddin stele provides the clearest case because martial and violent-death terminology and weapon reliefs occur on the same dated monument. The Ahlat comparison shows that explicit shahīd language and anonymous weapon imagery belonged to the same regional commemorative field, yet the visual analogy alone does not identify every deceased as a martyr. Lerik weapon-and-tool assemblages articulate composite social memory, while the Qobustan horse-ornament-sword sequence constructs prestige without proving an individual occupation.

Accordingly, weapon motifs are best understood as relational signs. They may index a documented military biography, but they may also symbolize valor, normative masculinity, lineage prestige, mounted mobility, pastoral economy or workshop tradition. The proposed four-level evidentiary model makes those distinctions explicit and prevents interpretive certainty from exceeding the source. It also clarifies the contribution of art-historical analysis to historical research: formal placement, visual syntax and object type are not supplementary illustration but evidence that must be tested alongside epigraphy and context.

The study is limited by reliance on published documentation and by the loss or displacement of several monuments. Future research should create object-level records combining GPS location, high-resolution photography, three-dimensional documentation, material analysis, inscription transcription and cemetery mapping, following the integrated direction demonstrated in recent Azerbaijani funerary research (Ali et al., 2026: 177–210). Such documentation would permit the model proposed here to be tested on a larger corpus and would make it possible to distinguish more securely among personal identity, communal memory and regional artistic convention.

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