

The Role of the Bodleian Library in the Formation of Relations between Azerbaijani and Western Literature

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Abstract

The Bodleian Library serves as a rich and important source for studying Azerbaijani classical literature. It preserves manuscripts and early printed works of Nizami Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani, and Mahammad Fuzuli in Persian, and Turkish, along with European Orientalist research on these texts. These materials enable the study of Azerbaijani classics from poetic, cultural, and philosophical perspectives. Different manuscript and printed versions of works like Nizami's *Khamsa* help trace their development across regions. The collections also highlight Khagani's complex poetic style and Fuzuli's multilingual творчество. Beyond preserving texts, the library includes studies showing how these works were interpreted in Europe, especially through 19th–20th century Orientalist scholarship. Thus, it is not only a historical archive but also a key intellectual platform for understanding Azerbaijani literature's place in world literary and scholarly contexts.

Keywords: Bodleian Library, Azerbaijani Literature, Oriental Manuscripts, Nizami Ganjavi, Oxford University.

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INTRODUCTION

Relationship of the Bodleian Library's Materials with the Heritage of Nizami, Khagani, and Fuzuli. The materials in the Bodleian Library's Oriental Collection provide an important scientific basis for studying the creative work of the leading representatives of Azerbaijani classical literature, Nizami Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani, and Mahammad Fuzuli, from various aspects (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). The holdings include manuscripts and early printed copies of the works of these authors, as well as research conducted by European orientalists on this heritage (Ethé, 1889). This fact shows that the Azerbaijani classics were perceived in Western scientific thought not only as poetic, but also as a cultural-historical phenomenon (Toomer, 1997).

The examples of classical poetry in the Library are mainly preserved within the Persian-language manuscript fund (Sachau & Ethé, 1887). The manuscripts and early printed editions of Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* occupy a special place in this context (Ethé, 1889). Nizami's works have long been considered by European scholars as one of the pinnacles of Persian classical literature, but modern studies have begun to emphasize his Ganja origins and his connection to the Azerbaijani literary milieu more clearly (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). These sources, preserved in the Bodleian collections, allow Nizami's work to be reread precisely within a regional literary context.

Materials relating to the qasid creativity of Khagani Shirvani are also reflected in the collection of Persian manuscripts of the Bodleian Library (Ethé, 1889). Khagani's complex poetic language and rich metaphorical system have been studied by European orientalists, especially in terms of philological and poetic analysis. These studies more clearly show the role played by the Shirvan literary environment in the medieval Islamic world and highlight the importance of Shirvan as one of the regional centers of Azerbaijani poetry. The legacy of Muhammad Fuzuli is represented in the Bodleian holdings in the context of both Persian and Turkic-Ottoman literature. The fact that Fuzuli's works were written in different languages reflects the multifaceted nature of his creativity, and this feature is also reflected in the library's cataloguing system (Ethé, 1889). European researchers have evaluated Fuzuli as one of the most profound philosophical representatives of Eastern lyricism, analyzing his poetics through the prism of love, suffering, and metaphysical thought. These studies, preserved in the Bodleian Library, serve as sources proving that Fuzuli's work is an integral part of not only the Ottoman, but also the Azerbaijani literary tradition (MacKenzie, 1971).

The 19th–20th century printed books and translations in the Bodleian Library also provide an opportunity to trace how these three classics were presented in the European scholarly environment. Through these publications, it is clear what interpretative models the works of Nizami, Khagani, and Fuzuli were conveyed to the Western reader, and how they were positioned within the concept of “Eastern classics”. Thus, the Bodleian holdings play an important role in studying not only the textual history of Azerbaijani classical literature, but also the history of its reception and interpretation in European scholarly discourse (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). Consequently, the manuscripts and scholarly publications held in the Bodleian Library open up wide opportunities for studying the work of Nizami Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani and Mahammad Fuzuli in a comparative, interdisciplinary and international context (Ethé, 1889). These materials allow for a more complete understanding of the place of Azerbaijani classical literature in the world literary heritage.

This library constitutes a significant source base for the international scholarly study of Azerbaijani literature, offering extensive and diverse materials that support advanced academic research in this field (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). Its holdings include a wide range of manuscripts, classical literary texts, and documents related to European Orientalist scholarship, which collectively provide valuable insight into the historical transmission, reception, and interpretation of Azerbaijani literary works beyond their original cultural and linguistic contexts.

The manuscripts preserved within the Bodleian collections are of particular importance, as they represent primary sources for the study of classical Azerbaijani authors, literary genres, and textual traditions. In addition, the presence of Orientalist studies produced by European scholars reflects the early academic engagement with Azerbaijani literature and its positioning within broader Eastern and Islamic literary frameworks. The systematic use of these archival materials enables a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the role of Azerbaijani literary heritage in world culture, facilitating comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to its study. Consequently, the Bodleian Library's collections serve not only as a repository of rare and valuable texts but also

as a vital platform for situating Azerbaijani literature within a global scholarly and cultural context (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.).

In the Western scholarly environment, large libraries have played an important role in the study of Eastern literature (Toomer, 1997). In this regard, the Bodleian Library acts as one of the leading scientific and cultural centers not only in England, but also across Europe (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). The institution is the leading library service supporting the learning, teaching and research activities of the University of Oxford. The main mission of this library system is to contribute to the academic goals of the university with a high-level information service, at the same time to develop access to Oxford's rich and unique collections and to preserve them for the benefit of the scholarly community and society (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). The library system introduces a wide audience to its collections through public exhibitions, lectures and various scientific and cultural events and plays an active role in the transfer of knowledge to society. Thus, the Bodleian Libraries act not only as a center for academic research, but also as an important cultural institution, acting as a bridge between science and society (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a).

Azerbaijani literature, with particular emphasis on its classical period, represents an essential component of the Eastern literary and cultural tradition. Formed within a complex intellectual environment shaped by Persian, Arabic, and Turkic influences, classical Azerbaijani literature developed distinctive aesthetic, philosophical, and linguistic characteristics. Prominent poets and thinkers contributed not only to the regional literary canon but also to the broader cultural and intellectual life of the Islamic world. From the nineteenth century onward, Azerbaijani classical literature increasingly attracted the attention of Western orientalists, who played a significant role in the collection, cataloguing, and scholarly examination of its manuscripts. As a result, a considerable number of Azerbaijani literary works were preserved in major Western libraries, often in Persian, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, or later in European languages through translation. These archival collections have been instrumental in safeguarding the classical literary heritage of Azerbaijan and have enabled its systematic study within international academic circles. Consequently, the presence of Azerbaijani literary texts in Western repositories has contributed to the recognition of this tradition as an integral part of world literature and comparative literary studies (Browne, 1902).

Historical and Scientific Significance of the Bodleian Library

The Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford is one of the oldest academic centers that played an important role in the formation of scientific library culture in Europe, and in particular in the collection, preservation and study of Eastern manuscripts (Macray, 1890; Craster, 1952). The library was founded in the early 17th century and in a short period of time it became one of the leading scientific funds storing rare manuscripts written in Eastern languages (Toomer, 1997). The development of the Bodleian Library in this direction went parallel to the process of institutional formation of Oriental studies in Europe (Vernon, 2011).

Reestablished in 1602 by Sir Thomas Bodley, the library was granted the status of a “legal deposit library” in Great Britain, giving it the right to obtain a copy of all publications printed in the country (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). This legal status has enabled the Bodleian Library to continuously enrich its holdings and strengthen its position as an international scholarly center (Craster, 1952).

Today, the Bodleian Libraries are recognized as one of the largest library systems in Europe, in addition to constituting the largest academic library service in Great Britain. The library's total holdings include over thirteen million printed items, tens of thousands of electronic journals, as well as extensive special collections that include rare books, manuscripts, classical papyri, ancient maps, musical materials, works of art, and printed ephemera (Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). This rich holding is distinguished not only by the number of materials, but also by their scientific, historical, and cultural value. The collections of the Bodleian Library are of vital importance in preserving the world's scientific heritage and transmitting it to future generations (Craster, 1952).

The Bodleian Library's Oriental Collection is considered one of the library's most valuable holdings. This collection includes thousands of manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages, and provides a rich source base for the study of the literary, religious, scientific and philosophical heritage of the peoples of the East. It should be noted that examples of Azerbaijani literature and culture also occupy an important place within this collection (Vernon, 2011). The fact that some Azerbaijani authors wrote in Persian during the classical period has led to this heritage being presented under various philological and regional headings in the Bodleian catalogs (Toomer, 1997). In particular, the "Weston Library" and "Oriental Collections" sections act as the main centers of work carried out towards the preservation, digitization and inclusion of manuscripts in scholarly circulation (Bodleian Libraries, 2023c, 2023d). The activities of these departments are of particular importance in terms of promoting the literary heritage of the East, including Azerbaijan, in the international scientific environment and studying it with modern methods. The historical and scientific potential of the Bodleian Library allows it to be characterized not only as an archive and library, but also as a platform for global scientific cooperation (Craster, 1952).

Materials Related to Azerbaijani Literature in the Bodleian Library

Although materials related to Azerbaijani literature in the Bodleian Library are not presented as a separate, independent fund, the relevant sources are systematized within the framework of various thematic and philological departments of the library. These materials are mainly kept under the headings "Oriental Studies", "Caucasus Studies", "Islamic Literature", and "Persian Literature", which shows how the Azerbaijani literary heritage is placed in the Western library classification system (Bodleian Libraries, 2023b). While such a classification principle reflects, on the one hand, the mutual relationship of Eastern cultures, on the other hand, it has led to a long indirect presentation of the national context of Azerbaijani literature.

The fact that a significant part of classical Azerbaijani authors wrote in Persian has conditioned the registration of their works in the context of Persian literature in the Bodleian Library catalogues (de Blois, 1992). This fact indicates that the language-based approach has long dominated the Western scientific environment. This approach has led to the regional and national characteristics of Azerbaijani literature not being fully taken into account in Western academic discourse.

However, careful and critical analysis of catalogue entries creates a real opportunity for the identification of works belonging to Azerbaijani classics. The place of copying of manuscripts, biographical information about the author, and comparative textual features of the works act as the main criteria for identifying materials related to the Azerbaijani literary environment. In this regard, the detailed catalogue system of the Bodleian Library can be considered an important methodological tool for researchers.

The library's holdings include various manuscript copies and early European editions of works by classical Azerbaijani poets such as Nizami Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani, and Fuzuli (Ethé, 1889; Sachau & Ethé, 1887; Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). These materials are important not only for the preservation of the texts, but also for tracing how they were received and interpreted in the Western scholarly environment (Toomer, 1997; Vernon, 2011). In addition, the scholarly research of European orientalists on these authors allows for the analysis of Azerbaijani classical literature in the context of world literature. It can be concluded that the materials on Azerbaijan held in the Bodleian Library should be valued not only as archival sources, but also as important scholarly resources for examining the models of presentation of Azerbaijani literature in Western scholarly thought (Vernon, 2011; Bodleian Libraries, 2023a). Systematic study of these materials creates a scientific basis for a more accurate and balanced presentation of Azerbaijani literature in international academic discourse (Toomer, 1997).

Nizami Ganjavi's Legacy at the Bodleian Library

The Bodleian Library's Oriental Manuscripts collection provides an important source base for the study of Nizami Ganjavi's work in the Western scholarly environment. The materials stored in the Oriental Collections section of the library include manuscripts of Nizami's *Khamsa* copied at various times, as well as early European editions (Ethé, 1889). These copies have distinctive features from both textual and literary-historical points of view, and allow us to trace the transformation process of the works over time and space.

The paleographic and codicological features of the manuscripts show how Nizami's texts were preserved and transmitted within the framework of medieval Eastern book culture (Sachau & Ethé, 1887). The textual differences, additions and comments observed between different copies prove that *Khamsa* is not only a stable literary text, but also has a living tradition of interpretation. In this regard, the manuscripts held in the Bodleian Library serve as a primary and valuable source in the study of the written heritage of Azerbaijani classical literature (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.).

In addition, the scientific research of European scholars dedicated to the work of Nizami Ganjavi also occupies an important place in the library's funds (Toomer, 1997). Especially in the 19th–20th centuries, Western orientalists studied Nizami's poetic system, plot structure, and philosophical worldview in the context of the general Eastern literary tradition. In Christine van Ruymbeke's research, Nizami's work is linked to medieval scientific knowledge and perceptions of nature, bringing the intellectual scale of the poet to the forefront (Van Ruymbeke, 2007). This approach reveals not only the aesthetic, but also the scientific and philosophical essence of Nizami's heritage. At the same time, articles dedicated to Nizami Ganjavi in fundamental scientific publications such as *Encyclopaedia Iranica* reflect how his work is perceived in Western academic discourse (Yarshater, 1983). In these sources, while Nizami is presented as a representative of the Persian-speaking literary tradition on the one hand, his connection with the geography of the Caucasus is also separately noted on the other. This dual approach is particularly important for contemporary Azerbaijani literary studies, as it allows for a parallel analysis of the national and transregional aspects of the classical heritage.

The library's oriental manuscript collection contains manuscripts and early printed copies of Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* as well as academic research by European scholars on Nizami's work (Van Ruymbeke, 2007). These sources are of great importance for the study of Azerbaijani classical

literature in the context of world literature (Yarshater, 1983). “As a result of the development of oriental studies in Europe in the 19th century, manuscripts on Nizami’s work began to be systematically collected. This process was not only motivated by scientific interest, but also served to develop intercultural dialogue” (Johnson, 2015, p. 89).

The manuscript entitled “Nizami’s Three Masnavis” is a collection of Nizami Ganjavi’s three masnavis: *Leylâ va Majnûn*, *Haft Paykar*, and *Iqbalnâmah-i Iskandarî*, and is one of the most important examples of the preservation of the canonical textual tradition of classical Persian-Azerbaijani literature in European libraries (Ethé, 1889; Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). Although the exact date of writing of the manuscript is not indicated, the paleographical features and historical context suggest that it was copied before the first half of the 17th century (Sachau & Ethé, 1887). This copy is valuable as a text that preserves the structural integrity, plot continuity, and poetic language of Nizami’s work in the masnavi genre. The manuscript’s association with the Timurid period indicates that Nizami’s legacy had a special influence in court and intellectual circles at that stage. This proves that Nizami was accepted not only as a literary but also as an ideological and didactic model. These three masnavis—*Leylâ va Majnûn*, *Haft Paykar*, and *Iqbalnamah-i Iskandari*—reflect Nizami’s classical epic poetry and show the development of various motifs, including themes such as love, justice, sovereignty, and heroism. The paleographical features of this copy and the mastery of the line indicate that the Persian poetic tradition continued into the sixteenth century and emphasize the importance of preserving Nizami’s legacy in cultural memory (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.).

The Timurnāma by Hâtifi

The *Timurnāma* by Hâtifi is a shining example of the classical tradition of the ode to Nizami Ganjavi’s *Iskendername* (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.; Ethé, 1889). This text demonstrates the continuation of Nizami’s poetics not only on a formal level but also on a conceptual and ideological level. In the work, the image of Alexander is replaced by Timur, and Nizami’s universal ruler model is thus reconstructed on a new historical figure (Sachau & Ethé, 1887). Based on this, we can say that Nizami’s works are used not only as aesthetic texts, but also as literary models that create political legitimacy. This manuscript, preserved in the Bodleian Library, proves to be a key source for the study of topics such as the regional and ideological influence of the Nizami school (Toomer, 1997).

The manuscripts and scientific research on Nizami stored in the Bodleian Library allow us to more accurately determine the position of Azerbaijani classical literature in the world literary process. Critical study of these materials creates a scientific basis for understanding the forms of presentation of Nizami Ganjavi’s heritage in the international scientific environment, as well as for re-evaluating the national literary heritage in a global context.

European Studies on the Caucasus and Azerbaijan

Since the 19th century, the Caucasus region has been a subject of growing interest in European scientific circles, especially with the emergence of Oriental studies as an independent academic field (Browne, 1920; Barthold, 1962). The geopolitical position of the region, its multilingual and multicultural structure made the Caucasus, including the territory of Azerbaijan, an object of complex scientific research for European researchers. The research conducted during this period

was not only descriptive in nature, but also aimed at understanding the mutual relations between Eastern and Western cultures.

In English oriental studies, the work of Edward G. Browne should be specially noted. In his work *A Literary History of Persia*, the works of classical poets of Azerbaijani origin are analyzed within the framework of the Persian-speaking literary environment (Browne, 1920). Although the author emphasizes that Nizami Ganjavi and Khagani Shirvani belong to the literary tradition formed in the Caucasus geography, he presents this heritage mainly as an integral part of the Iranian cultural space. This approach of the author, in addition to reflecting the scientific paradigm of the time, also shows that the issue of national identification of Azerbaijani literature has not yet been fully formed in the Western scientific discourse (Browne, 1920).

In German oriental studies, Wilhelm Barthold's research on the history of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan is of particular importance. In his works, the ethnic and cultural formation of the Azerbaijani Turks is interpreted in the context of the general development of the Turkic-Islamic civilization (Barthold, 1962). Although Barthold's scientific approach is distinguished by its factual richness, it is observed that in some cases the intra-regional literary and cultural differences are not analyzed in sufficient depth. This aspect makes critical reading of these sources necessary for modern Azerbaijani literary studies.

Representatives of the French orientalist school, Clément Huart and Henri Massé, also turned to the works of Nizami and Fuzuli in their studies of classical Eastern poetry (Huart, 1910; Massé, 1926). In their works, Azerbaijani classics are presented as an integral part of the pan-Oriental poetic system, and this approach brings to the fore the transregional nature of regional literary processes. However, it should be noted that in these studies, the internal development dynamics of the Azerbaijani literary environment remain in the background.

Since the second half of the 20th century, methodological approaches have changed significantly in European studies on the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. In the works of scholars such as Julie Scott Meisami, Charles Melville and Christine van Ruymbeke, Nizami Ganjavi's work is no longer analyzed only as a poetic, but also as a carrier of intellectual and scientific-philosophical discourse (Meisami, 1999; Melville, 2001; Van Ruymbeke, 2007). In particular, van Ruymbeke's research reveals the connections between Azerbaijani classical literature and the medieval scientific worldview (Van Ruymbeke, 2007).

European studies of this type, preserved in the Oriental Collections of the Bodleian Library, are not only of historical interest for contemporary Azerbaijani literary studies. These sources not only provide an understanding of how Azerbaijani literature is perceived in Western scholarly thought, but also create important methodological opportunities for the reinterpretation of the national literary heritage in an international context. In this regard, the critical and comparative study of the materials in question can be assessed as an important scholarly task.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that the rich and diverse holdings of the Bodleian Library form an important and reliable source base for the study of Azerbaijani literature on an international scientific level. The library's Oriental manuscripts, early printed examples and scientific works related to European orientalism create broad opportunities for the study of Azerbaijani literary heritage not only within a regional framework, but also within a global cultural and intellectual

context. Through these materials, the integration of Azerbaijani literature into the world literary process, how it was received and interpreted in different periods, can be systematically traced.

The cumulative analysis of the manuscripts stored in the Bodleian Library once again proves that Nizami Ganjavi acted not only as an outstanding poet of the 12th century, but also as a central figure who guided literary and ideological thought throughout the following centuries. His masnavis included in *Khamsa* have been preserved both in their original textual form and have been reworked within new poetic and ideological frameworks at different historical stages. This process demonstrates the dynamic and lasting influence of Nizami's work.

The appeal of Nizami plots and motifs by later poets, especially Hâtîfî, demonstrates that the classical heritage was not passively repeated, but rather kept relevant by adapting it to new political, historical, and cultural contexts. This fact reveals that Nizami's poetry was accepted in the medieval Islamic world not only as a literary example of aesthetic value, but also as an ideological and intellectual model. His epic poetics had a wide sphere of influence in terms of artistic interpretation of historical events, the formation of concepts of power, and the transmission of ethical-normative thought.

The materials held in the Bodleian collections also allow us to trace how Nizami's legacy was received by European Orientalism and incorporated into scholarly discourse. Philological, historical, and comparative studies conducted by European scholars have presented Nizami's work as a connecting phenomenon between Eastern and Western literary traditions. This approach allows for a more complete understanding of the position of Azerbaijani literature within the world cultural heritage.

As a result, the manuscripts and scholarly publications of the Bodleian Library serve as an invaluable resource for the multi-level and multi-directional study of Azerbaijani literature, especially the legacy of Nizami Ganjavi. Research conducted on the basis of these funds allows us to reveal not only the historical past of classical Azerbaijani literature, but also the meanings it acquired in different periods and the role it played in global cultural processes. Thus, the Bodleian Library acts as a solid intellectual platform for the representation of Azerbaijani literary heritage in international scholarly circulation and for future research.

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