

THE FORMATION, INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION, AND CULTURAL LEGACY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a secular, historically multi-ethnic and multi-religious country that has hosted various religious traditions throughout history. Before the spread of Islam, religious forms such as idolatry, fire-worship, Zoroastrianism and Christianity existed in the region. Historical information about Azerbaijan is closely connected with studies on Caucasian Albania, which, according to sources, existed for about a thousand years and was a confederated state composed of 26 ethnic groups. Its territory was inhabited mainly by Turks, as well as Persians and Caucasian peoples, and developed a civilization shaped by diverse religious and cultural elements.

The article examines the formation and development of Christianity in Azerbaijan, with particular attention to the Albanian Christian tradition. The study argues that Christianity in Albania began to spread after 54 CE and became the state religion in 313 under the Albanian king Urnayr. On the basis of historical sources, the article traces Albanian Christianity back to the apostolic period, emphasizing the role of figures such as Bartholomew, one of the apostles of Jesus, and Elisha, a disciple of Thaddaeus. The article also critically addresses Armenian claims regarding the priority of Armenian Christianity and the appropriation of Albanian cultural and religious heritage. The purpose of the study is to clarify the historical development of Christianity in Azerbaijan and to demonstrate, through historical evidence, the problematic nature of Armenian claims concerning Albanian Christian heritage. Another aim is to eliminate misconceptions about the Alban-Udi people and their diophysite belief, which continues to exist today. The research is based on descriptive and phenomenological principles and employs data analysis as its main method.

Keywords: Islamic Geography, Azerbaijan, Christianity, Church, Multiculturalism.

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Әзербайжандағы христиандықтың қалыптасуы, институционалдық трансформациясы және мәдени мұрасы

Аңдатпа. Әзербайжан Республикасы - тарихи тұрғыдан көпэтносты және көпдінді ел ретінде қалыптасқан зайырлы мемлекет. Оның аумағында ғасырлар бойы әртүрлі діни дәстүрлер қатар өмір сүрді. Ислам таралғанға дейін бұл өңірде пұтқа табынушылық, отқа табынушылық, зороастризм және христиандық сияқты наным-сенім түрлері болған. Әзербайжан тарихына қатысты деректер Кавказ Албаниясының тарихын зерттеумен тығыз байланысты. Дереккөздерге сәйкес, Кавказ Албаниясы шамамен мың жыл өмір сүрген, 26 этникалық топтан құралған конфедеративтік мемлекет болды. Оның аумағын негізінен түркілер, сондай-ақ парсылар мен Кавказ халықтары мекендеген. Бұл жағдай діни және мәдени элементтердің көптірілігіне негізделген өркениеттің қалыптасуына ықпал етті.

Мақалада Әзербайжандағы христиандықтың қалыптасуы мен дамуы албандық христиан дәстүрі тұрғысынан қарастырылады. Зерттеуде Албанияда христиандықтың б.з. 54 жылынан кейін тарала бастағаны, ал 313 жылы албан патшасы Урнайр тұсында мемлекеттік дін мәртебесіне ие болғаны негізделеді. Тарихи деректерге сүйене отырып, албан христиандық дәстүрінің тарихы апостолдық кезеңмен байланыстырылады; осы орайда Иса пайғамбардың елшілерінің бірі Варфоломейдің және Фаддейдің шәкірті Елисейдің рөліне ерекше назар аударылады. Сонымен қатар мақалада армян христиандығының бастапқылығы туралы тұжырымдар және албан мәдени-діни мұрасын иемденуге қатысты армяндық талаптар сын тұрғысынан талданады.

Зерттеудің мақсаты - тарихи деректер негізінде Әзербайжандағы христиандықтың даму үдерісін нақтылау және албан христиан мұрасына қатысты армяндық тұжырымдардың проблемалық сипатын көрсету. Зерттеудің қосымша міндеті - қазіргі уақытқа дейін сақталып келе жатқан албан-уди халқы мен олардың диофизиттік ілімі туралы қате түсініктерді жою. Зерттеу дескриптивтік және феноменологиялық қағидаларға негізделген, ал негізгі әдіс ретінде деректерді талдау қолданылады.

Түйін сөздер: ислам географиясы, Әзербайжан, христиан діні, шіркеу, мультикультурализм.

Формирование, институциональная трансформация и культурное наследие христианства в Азербайджане

Аннотация. Азербайджанская Республика является светским государством, исторически сформировавшимся как многоэтническая и многорелигиозная страна, на территории которой на протяжении веков сосуществовали различные религиозные традиции. До распространения ислама в регионе были представлены такие формы верований, как идолопоклонство, огнепоклонство, зороастризм и христианство. Исторические сведения об Азербайджане тесно связаны с исследованиями Кавказской Албании, которая, согласно источникам, существовала около тысячи лет и представляла собой конфедеративное государство, состоявшее из 26 этнических групп. Ее территорию населяли преимущественно турки, а также персы и кавказские народы, что способствовало формированию цивилизации, основанной на многообразии религиозных и культурных элементов.

В статье рассматриваются становление и развитие христианства в Азербайджане с особым акцентом на албанскую христианскую традицию. Обосновывается положение о том, что христианство в Албании начало распространяться после 54 года н. э., а в 313 году при албанском царе Урнайре приобрело статус государственной религии. На основе исторических источников история албанского христианства соотносится с апостольским периодом; при этом особое внимание уделяется роли Варфоломея, одного из апостолов Иисуса, и Елисея, ученика Фаддея. В статье также критически анализируются армянские притязания на первенство армянского христианства и присвоение албанского культурно-религиозного наследия.

Цель исследования заключается в уточнении исторического развития христианства в Азербайджане и выявлении проблемного характера армянских утверждений об албанском христианском наследии на основе исторических данных. Дополнительной задачей является устранение ошибочных представлений об албанском народе и его диофизитском вероучении, сохраняющемся до настоящего времени. Исследование основано на дескриптивных и феноменологических принципах, а основным методом выступает анализ данных.

Ключевые слова: исламская география, Азербайджан, христианство, церковь, мультикультурализм.

Introduction

Azerbaijan has a secular state model and a multicultural social structure. Although 93.4% of the population is Muslim, while the remainder consists of Orthodox Christians (2.5%) and adherents of other denominations, such affiliation is largely nominal and based on spiritual and cultural identification. To properly understand the society's moral values and sacred worldview, it is essential to analyze the region's historical and civilizational transformations and pre-monotheistic layers of belief [1, p. 1].

The emergence and development of Christianity in Azerbaijan are closely linked to the political history of Caucasian Albania. The region's strategic location facilitated the formation, prior to Christianity, of a rich belief system comprising a synthesis of polytheism, animism, Zoroastrianism, and Greco-Roman beliefs. These archaic and totemic beliefs, practiced by the Albanian tribes, did not disappear entirely even after Christianity and Islam became dominant religions, but survived as syncretic remnants within the population's socio-cultural consciousness [2, pp. 358–371].

Although various archaic beliefs shaped the region's early religious landscape, this study focuses specifically on the development, institutional transformation, and cultural legacy of Christianity in Azerbaijan. Consequently, the following sections concentrate on the spread of Christian doctrine – primarily in Caucasian Albania – the establishment of its church organization, and its geopolitical impact.

A question may naturally arise: "Why Christianity specifically in Azerbaijan?" This question is of fundamental analytical significance not only for the study of local religious history but also for the reconstruction of the military-political, confessional, and ethnosociological landscape of the South Caucasus as a whole. The formation and institutionalization of the Christian worldview in the territory of Azerbaijan plays a key role in understanding the region's historical and social realities. Within this context, the present study seeks to address a number of important scholarly hypotheses and research questions:

- Which century corresponds to the earliest chronological stage of the Christianization process in Azerbaijan?

- Which theological-ecclesiological denomination or canonical tradition initially occupied a predominant position in the region?

- Most importantly, how should the ethnocultural identity of the earliest evangelists and ecclesiastical figures who shaped this sacred-liturgical system be characterized?

Based on an extensive comparative-critical source base, this study aims to expose the attempts of the Armenian Gregorian Church and historiography to appropriate the region's early Christian heritage, as well as their scientifically unfounded falsifications.

Source-critical analyses indicate that the roots of Christianity in Azerbaijan date back to the 1st century – the Apostolic Age. The teaching reached the region independently of the Armenian Gregorian milieu, being brought di-

rectly from Jerusalem by Eastern missionaries – the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, and his disciple, Saint Eliseus. According to scholarly consensus, the first institutional foundation of Christianity in the Caucasus was established in the Uti province of Caucasian Albania (Kish Temple) through the mission of Saint Eliseus.

There are a number of fundamental academic studies that comprehensively illuminate the autochthonous roots of Christianity in Azerbaijan, its ecclesiastical architecture, and the Alban-Udi continuity. The theoretical and methodological foundation of the present study comprises Rashid Goyushov's Christianity in Kavkazskoy Albanii (Christianity in Caucasian Albania), which examines the formation of Albanian churches on the basis of archaeological and historical sources; Farida Mammadova's Christianity in Caucasian Albania, which addresses the political history and ethnic map of Caucasian Albania, as well as the canonical status of the independent Albanian Apostolic Church; Nizami Efendiyev's Christian Adventure of the Azerbaijani Albanian Udi People from Past to Present, which explores the sacred-cultural resilience and confessional history of the Udi ethnos; Asma Ozdashli's The History Built on Albanian Cultural Heritage: A Research on the Myth of Armenians Are the "First State" Accepted Christianity, which deconstructs the politicized myth in Armenian historiography concerning Armenia as the "first Christian state"; Anar Alizade's Christianity in Azerbaijan from the Past to the Present, which examines the genesis of Christianity in the geographical territory of Azerbaijan and its confessional evolution through to the modern period; Malachia Ormanian's Armiyanskaya Serkov, ee Istoriya, Uchenie, Upravlenie, Vnutrennee Stroenie, Literatura, ee Nastoyashchee; Yesai Hasan-Jalalyan's A Brief History of the Albanian Country; P. S. Cowe's Church and Diaspora: The Case of the Armenians; S. T. Eremyan's Ideologiya i Kultura Albanii III–VII vv. Ocherki Istorii SSR III–IX vv.; Kirakos Gandzaketsi's History of Armenia; and M. Gosh's Albanian Chronicle. The genesis of Christianity in Azerbaijan, its ecclesiastical architecture, and the issue of Alban-Udi continuity have been examined from various analytical perspectives in both Azerbaijani and foreign historiography. Foundational scholars such as R. Goyushov and F. Mammadova have substantiated the autochthonous character and canonical independence of the Albanian Apostolic Church on the basis of archaeological and written sources, while N. Efendiyev and A. Alizade have demonstrated that this continuity was transmitted into the modern period

through the sacred resilience of the Udi ethnos. The critical analyses of A. Ozdashli and P. S. Cowe, in turn, make it possible to deconstruct the politicized myths constructed by the Armenian Gregorian Church around the ideology of the "first Christian state." Nevertheless, despite the availability of factual material reflected in the works of M. Ormanian, K. Gandzaketsi, M. Gosh, and S. T. Eremyan, the problem of "the evolution of autochthonous Christianization within the Islamic geographical sphere and the institutional falsifications to which it was subjected" has not been comprehensively developed in the literature as an integrated politico-scientific and theological synthesis. Consequently, despite the extensive body of literature on the subject, certain fundamental scholarly gaps remain in existing research, particularly in the context of synthesizing the phenomenon of "Christianity in the Islamic geographical sphere." Thus, authors such as R. Goyushov, F. Mammadova, and S. T. Eremyan have examined Albanian Christianity primarily within the context of Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (3rd–7th centuries), that is, within a pre-Islamization framework. The manner in which autochthonous Christianity was preserved within the Islamic geographical sphere following the region's incorporation into the Caliphate and Islamic civilization from the 8th century onward, the legal and political symbiosis between Islam and Christianity, and the unique status of the Albanian Church against this geographical, theological, sociological, and philosophical background have not yet been comprehensively studied. Filling a gap in the multidisciplinary analysis of the abolition of the Albanian Church by the Tsarist decree of 1836, this article conceptualizes Christianity as an indigenous Apostolic heritage dating to the 1st century, critically cross-examines Azerbaijani (Mammadova, Goyushov, Alizadeh), Armenian (Ormanian, Gosh, Gandzaketsi), and neutral (Cowe, Ozdashli) sources, and provides a conceptual scholarly basis for the restoration of Albanian-Udi sacred heritage in the territories liberated after 2020 (Khudavang, Gandzasar).

Research Methodology and Source Base:

Alongside descriptive and phenomenological principles, the study employs historical-comparative, hermeneutic, and content-analysis methods in an integrated manner. Through source criticism and cross-comparison (*triangulation*), ideological distortions in Armenian historiography are subjected to objective scholarly scrutiny.

The study's source base is grouped into four main categories:

1. Azerbaijani historiography: The ethno-confessional history of the Albanian Church and the Udi people (R. Goyushov, F. Mammadova, A. Alizadeh).

2. Turkish historiography: Deconstructive approaches to Albanian heritage and Armenian historiographical myths (N. Afandiyev, A. Ozdashli).

3. Armenian sources: Texts analyzed to identify the subjective conceptions of the Gregorian Church.

4. Western and Russian academic resources: Studies that assess the region's religious and political landscape from a neutral perspective.

Main Objective of the Study. To comprehensively examine the genesis and institutional evolution of Christianity in Azerbaijan, illuminate the autochthonous Albanian-Udi sacred heritage rooted in the Apostolic Age, and demonstrate the unfounded nature of politicized, appropriation-oriented claims advanced by Armenian historiographical circles.

Borders, Ethnodemographic Structure, and Toponymic Transcription of Caucasian Albania

The study of the historical geography of the South Caucasus in antiquity and the early Middle Ages necessitates a precise delineation of the territorial boundaries and ethno-social structure of Caucasian Albania. Studies based on ancient Greco-Roman sources (Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy) indicate that, during the 3rd–8th centuries, the territory of the Albanian state extended from the Caspian Sea in the east to the borders of Georgia in the west, and from the Greater Caucasus Mountains in the north to the Aras River basin in the south [3, p. 558]. According to contemporary geospatial approaches, Albania was a political-geographical entity situated between the Kura River and the Caucasus Mountains, encompassing the southern territories of Dagestan as well [4, p. 27]. On the basis of this historical-geographical continuity, some contemporary Western historiographical studies identify the northern territories of Azerbaijan as the “historical territory of Caucasian Albania.”

In the heterogeneous structure of Albania, comprising 26 ethnic groups, Turkic-speaking tribes (Saks, Caspians, Gargars, Huns, etc.) played a dominant role, while a common Turkic language became a means of intertribal communication, ensuring the social consolidation of society [5, p. 5]. This ethnic and linguistic pre-

dominance fostered a unique civilizational model in Albania that integrated diverse cultures.

The genesis of the toponym “Albania,” its forms in different languages, and its etymological layers constitute important indicators of its origin. In Arabic sources, the name is recorded as “Arran,” in Persian sources as “Ardan,” in Georgian chronicles as “Rani,” and in Syriac sources as “Aran,” and it has been interpreted through various etymological approaches. In Greek and Latin, it is reportedly associated with the meaning “mountainous region,” in Celtic with “mountain” (alb), and in Turkic with “brave, courageous” (alp/alpine). On this basis, some researchers characterize Albania as the “land of the brave.” Historical sources, meanwhile, associate the name “Alban” with Aran, the first ruler of the country from the Arani dynasty, suggesting that the name emerged in the form “Albanya” [5, p. 5; 6, pp. 26–28].

Toponymic and etymological analyses factually refute claims identifying early Christianity in Albania with the Armenian ethnicity. An objective examination of Albania's ethnodemographic, toponymic, and autocephalous history is of significant academic and strategic importance for exposing these ideological distortions and substantiating Azerbaijan's historical continuity of statehood.

The Apostolic Phase of Christianity in Caucasian Albania and the Dynamics of the Formation of the Autocephalous Church

A scientific and critical analysis of the institutional formation, historical evolution, and stages of sociocultural transformation of the Apostolic Church of Caucasian Albania within its heterogeneous environment is essential for understanding Azerbaijan's spiritual and cultural heritage.

Christianization in Caucasian Albania began in the 1st century through apostles (Bartholomew, Thaddeus [1], Thomas, Saint Nino) and their disciples (Eliseus, Mary), who arrived via the Syrian-Mesopotamian route [7, p. 207]. This early “Syrophile” (pro-Syrian) period, also attested by Movses Kaghankatvatsi, was characterized by individual missionary activity and laid the foundations for the apostolic status of the Church and its sacred centers in the region.

The first stage – the “Syrophile” (Syrian-oriented) epoch – encompassed a period in which Christianity had not yet become institutionalized as a state religion and was characterized by a pneumatological sphere of dissemination through the individual missionary activities of the Apostles Thaddeus [2] and Bartholomew,

particularly those of Thaddeus's disciple Elishe. Rooted in the Eastern Syrian Christian tradition, this initial confessional wave laid the foundations for the apostolic status of the Church in the region and for the establishment of indigenous sacred centers.

The second stage – the “Pilo-Greek” (Greco-Roman) epoch – was marked by a major transformation in the geoconfessional landscape of the entire Eastern Mediterranean basin following the granting of legal recognition to Christianity through the Edict of Milan (313 CE) issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine. Under the influence of this global political and ideological transformation, Christianity attained the status of the state religion in Albania through the joint institutional efforts of the Albanian ruler Urnayr and Saint Gregory, while the Church reorganized its doctrinal and administrative orientation in accordance with the Greek-Byzantine theological model [5, p. 6; 1, p. 201; 8, p. 154].

According to hagiographic and historiographic traditions, Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, extended his missionary activity from India to Western Asia, including Western Azerbaijan and Caucasian Albania. Having crossed the Arax River and entered the territory of Sisakan/Syunik (historical Nakhchivan), Bartholomew is reported to have founded the first church in the Ordubad (Gohtn) region. The thirteenth-century historian Stepannos Orbelian states that the population of Syunik embraced Christianity earlier than neighboring peoples, directly through the preaching of Bartholomew. According to the sources, Bartholomew was later arrested and crucified in the center of Albanapol, which ancient sources identify with present-day Baku. Following his death, the process of Christianization continued through the missionary activities of Elishe; in the second half of the first century, a bishopric was established in Albania, with Elishe becoming its first Catholicos [9, pp. 29–30; 10, p. 32].

The first, Syrophile (pro-Syrian), stage of Christianization in Caucasian Albania is associated with the missionary activities of Elishe, a disciple of Thaddeus. Following the execution of Thaddeus, Elishe returned to Jerusalem and, with the blessing of Saint James, the first patriarch of the Jerusalem Church, was sent to Albania. Passing through Iranian territory, he began preaching in the province of Chola and in the areas inhabited by the Caspian Massagetae. He later founded the first Christian church in the Eastern Caucasus in the village of Kish, located in the territory of present-day Sheki in the province of Uti. Known as the “Mother of the Churches of the East,” this site played a signifi-

cant role in the formation of the theological and institutional foundations of the Albanian Apostolic Church. Initially local in character, this ecclesiastical structure acquired political and ideological dominance in 313, when King Urnayr adopted Christianity as the state religion [11, p. 26; 12, pp. 27–28]. According to the sources, while continuing his missionary activities in areas where pagan cults were dominant, Elishe was killed as a result of confessional conflict [13; 14, p. 11; 15, p. 73]. Thus, the initial doctrinal foundations of Christian monotheism were formed in the province of Uti and subsequently spread to other parts of the region.

A comparative-critical analysis of medieval Albanian historiographical sources is essential for determining the chronological framework of the initial pneumatological transformation of Christianity in Caucasian Albania. Based on the chronological information provided in Moses of Kalankatuk's History of Albania, the Christian mission in the region, led by the Apostle Elishe, began in 56 CE.

Another noteworthy source is the historical parallels presented by Mkhit'ar Gosh. He notes a 300-year difference between the mission of Elishe and the activities of Saint Gregory, who played a role in the Christianization of the Armenians. Based on M. Gosh's dating of Gregory's death to 348 CE, a regressive calculation yields approximately 48 CE. The execution of the Apostle Thaddeus in 43 CE and the return of his disciple Elishe to Jerusalem three to four years later, followed by his dispatch to Albania, further support this chronology. Thus, Elishe's missionary activity in Albania may be dated to the period of 48–56 CE, broadly corresponding to the 51–67 CE timeframe accepted in contemporary source criticism [16, p. 6; 17, p. 262; 9, p. 29].

A synthesis of the sources indicates that, during the second half of the 1st century, the synergistic missionary activities of the Apostles Bartholomew and Elishe resulted in the establishment of the first episcopal structure (bishopric) in Albania, while Elishe came to be regarded in ecclesiastical historiography as the proto-Catholicos (first hierarch). Although a succession of hierarchs appears to have governed the Church during the subsequent period of apostolic succession (Successio Apostolica), information concerning their activities has largely survived only at an onomastic level – that is, primarily in the form of their names [2, p. 202].

The chronological gaps and hierarchical discontinuities in the works of Moses of Kalankatuyk and Mkhit'ar Gosh can be attributed to the destruction of early ecclesiastical documents and confessional archives, including

their deliberate burning. Nevertheless, the lists of *Catholicoi* preserved in the works of both Albanian authors constitute an important historiographical factor demonstrating the uninterrupted institutional continuity of the Church hierarchy in the region.

A synthetic assessment indicates that the Apostle Elishe has been established as the proto-illuminator (earliest evangelizer) and ecclesiological founder of Caucasian Albania. His pneumatological mission, the establishment of the episcopal institution, and the construction of the Kish sacred complex endowed the Albanian Church with the status of an Apostolic-Origin Church (*Ecclesia Apostolica*) within the universal ecclesiastical hierarchy. This historiographical fact is further corroborated by acknowledgments of Albania's autocephalous character and earlier confessional precedence in the archival records of regional confessional counterparts, including the correspondence of the Armenian *Catholikos* Abraham and the acts of the 7th-century Church Council of Partav (Barda).

At the initial stage, Christianity remained socially a faith of a marginal minority. Zoroastrian pressure from the Sasanian Empire and the absence of Christians from the administrative apparatus delayed its institutionalization as a state religion. However, the consolidation of Christian communities by the end of the third century and the geoconfessional transformation brought about in the region by the Edict of Milan in 313 generated an ideological shift in Albania. The baptism of King Urnayr and his proclamation of Christianity as the state religion facilitated the Church's integration into the bureaucratic system. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the translation of liturgical texts from Syriac and Greek into the Albanian language contributed to the formation of a national sacred language and enabled the gradual social diffusion of Christianity. In the subsequent period, Sasanian interventions and Hun-Turkic incursions weakened the development of Christianity and fostered tendencies toward a return to syncretic and archaic beliefs. Nevertheless, Christian monotheism played a significant role in the consolidation of various polytheistic tribal confederations around a unified ethnoconfessional identity [18, p. 32; 19, pp. 215–216; 20, p. 40].

The state–Church symbiosis established during the reign of Urnayr reached its culmination at the end of the fifth century under the rule of Vačagan III “the Pious.” Vačagan carried out ecclesiastical and administrative reforms and established networks of religious education and schools, thereby transforming Chris-

tianity into an important component of Albania's national and cultural identity. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was formed, churches were constructed, and religious texts were translated into the Albanian language. Initially spreading among the feudal elite and nobility, Christianity subsequently extended throughout the entire territory of Albania [9, p. 192; 19, pp. 197–198].

A theological-sociological analysis of Christianization in Caucasian Albania substantiates the unique position of the Albanian Apostolic Church within the broader Christian world. The Church derives its divine legitimacy and unbroken Apostolic succession directly from the pneumatological mission of the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus and Saint Elisheus.

The characterization of the Kish Temple as the “Mother of the Churches of the East” indicates its chronological primacy within the theological development of Christianity and its status as one of the earliest sacred centers connected to the Jerusalem ecclesiastical tradition. The earliest place of worship established in the village of Kish and subsequently known as the “Mother of the Churches of the East” became one of the earliest centers of Christian soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) in the Caucasus. This fact, according to the interpretation advanced in the present study, establishes the independent (autocephalous) primatial status of the Albanian Church from the period of its formation, without dependence on any other regional Church and with a direct connection to the Church of Jerusalem. The transition in the region from the Syrian-Eastern (“Syrophile”) ascetic tradition of early Christian missionary activity to the official Greco-Roman (“Pilo-Greek”) doctrinal model, which attained the status of a state religion in the 4th century, constituted a natural evolutionary sequence in the doctrinal and liturgical development of the Albanian Church. The elevation of Christianity to the status of a state religion, in turn, ensured the institutional establishment of the sacraments (religious rites) and Christological doctrines throughout society and facilitated the integration of the local sacred tradition into the universal ecclesial ontology.

From the perspective of the philosophy of religion, the adoption of Christianity represented a transition in Albanian society from a polytheistic and mythical worldview to monotheistic transcendence guided by the Absolute Being and the Logos. The mission of the Apostles and the martyrdom of Elisheus replaced local systems of worship with a universal moral paradigm and a new ontological reality. The declaration of Christianity as the official reli-

gion by King Urnayr in 313, in the context of the Edict of Milan, reinforced the ideological foundation of statehood within the framework of "political theology" and fostered a unified spiritual-philosophical integration within the polyethnic society. This decision was not merely a political act but an Ontological Transformation in the interpretation of being. The state grounded political authority in divine order, directed society toward a Christocentric ethical-philosophical framework, while the establishment of the Kish Temple shaped a new conception of sacred time and space (hierophany) in the Albanian consciousness.

From a sociological perspective, Christianization played a significant role as a mechanism of social integration and institutionalization in Albania. In Albania, Christianization evolved from early communities into a state-church model (routinization of charisma), becoming a central institution that unified the polyethnic society around a shared identity. The "Top-Down" spread of religion, through the canons, schools, and translations into the Albanian language under Vač'agan III the Pious, established cultural reproduction and a collective sense of "we" (collective identity).

Thus, the Albanian Apostolic Church should be understood not merely as a religious and liturgical institution, but as a significant socio-cultural phenomenon that contributed to the formation of Azerbaijan's ancient traditions of statehood, ethnocultural distinctiveness, and traditions of literacy and education, while constituting one of the earliest historical layers of Christian civilization.

Political-Ecclesiastical Confrontation: The Gregorianization of the Albanian Church, Distortions of Heritage, and the Ethnocultural Resistance of the Udi People

The weakening of central authority and the convergence of the regional interests of external imperial powers constituted major factors that fundamentally transformed not only the political order but also the ideological orientation of confessional institutions. In Caucasian Albania, the disruption of Church-state relations resulted in internal theological divisions becoming instruments of external geopolitical intervention. This historical context created conditions for the Albanian Apostolic Church to lose its independent institutional agency and contributed to long-term transformations in the region's ethnoreligious landscape.

From the second half of the sixth century, Christianity had become the leading institutional and ideological force in Caucasian Albania. At

the beginning of the eighth century, the forced detention of Varaz Trdat in Constantinople in 704 created a political vacuum in the country. Taking advantage of this situation, the Albanian Catholicos Nerses (I Bakur), together with Princess Sypārama, declared that the Church had adopted Chalcedonian (Dyophysite) Christology. In response, at the appeal of the Monophysite faction, the Armenian Catholicos Ilia accused Nerses of pro-Byzantine sympathies and political separatism before the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. With the caliph's support, Ilia came to Partav and effectively abolished the autocephaly of the Albanian Apostolic Church, placing it under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Catholicosate. This ecclesiological annexation, documented by Moses of Kalankatuk, laid the groundwork for the Gregorianization of the Albanian Church and for the long-term confessional and ethnocultural resistance of the local autochthonous communities [7, p. 224; 21, pp. 124–126].

The administrative-theological transformation carried out by the Armenian Church with the military and political support of the Umayyad Caliphate altered the political and confessional structure of Caucasian Albania. The return of the Albanian ruler Varaz Trdat I from captivity in 704 could not halt this process. With Umayyad support, the Armenian Monophysite Church brought the Albanian Apostolic Church under its canonical and administrative jurisdiction and subordinated Albanian clergy to the Monophysite hierarchy. As a result, the independence and autocephalous status of the Albanian Apostolic Church were effectively abolished, while the prolonged ecclesiological struggle between the two churches ultimately resulted in the predominance of the Armenian Church [10, p. 40].

The Pseudosynod held in Partav in 704–705 marked a turning point in the geoconfessional balance of power in Caucasian Albania. Under pressure from the Armenian Catholicos Ilia, the Chalcedonian Albanian Catholicos Nerses I Bakur was anathematized and imprisoned; he died while being deported to Damascus. His personal archive and the Dyophysite texts in the Albanian language are reportedly said to have been destroyed on Ilia's orders. Subsequently, Dyophysite communities were subjected to repression, while in 705 the centralized administration of the Caliphate eliminated the independence of the Albanian religious and secular elites. Albania lost its political sovereignty and was incorporated into the Caliphate, thereby bringing the classical phase of the state–Church symbiosis to an end [14, pp. 16–17; 7, p. 203].

Following the Partav Pseudosynod of 705, the Albanian ethno-religious milieu underwent profound doctrinal and political fragmentation. While the Umayyad Caliphate supported Monophysite Albanian groups, Dyophysite Albanians came under the patronage of Byzantium and Georgia and, in later periods, of other regional political powers. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (1136–1225), under the confessional tolerance of the Eldiguzid state, Dyophysite Albanian communities experienced a period of intellectual and monumental development; monastic complexes such as Gandzasar, Gadik (Goshavank), and Nor Gadik were established, and a rich manuscript heritage emerged. At the same time, the assimilation of Monophysite Albanian communities into the administrative and linguistic system of the Armenian Gregorian Church accelerated. From the thirteenth century onward, the Albanian Apostolic Church entered its second period of institutional revival. The principal center of the state–Church symbiosis that developed under the patronage of Hasan Jalal (1214–1261) in the Principality of Khachen was the Gandzasar Monastery. Constructed between 1216 and 1238 and consecrated in 1238, the complex became an important center of Albanian ecclesiological and sacred architecture. From this period onward, the Albanian (Gandzasar) Catholicosate became the hereditary confessional institution of the Hasan-Jalalyan dynasty and remained one of the principal institutional pillars of Albanian religious identity until its abolition in 1836 [21, p. 4; 22; 1, pp. 205–206; 23, pp. 171–172, 430–456].

From the mid-sixteenth century (1547), against the backdrop of the Russian Tsardom's expansion into the Eastern Caucasus, the selection of the Gandzasar Albanian Catholicosate as a diplomatic instrument affected the confessional balance of the region. Moscow's attempt to establish relations with the Christians of the Caucasus through the Gandzasar hierarchs rather than Etchmiadzin caused concern within the Armenian Church. With the intensification of Russia's South Caucasus policy in the second half of the eighteenth century, Etchmiadzin sought to curtail this influence. In 1766, Catholicos Simeon appealed to Catherine II, requesting the abolition of Gandzasar's autonomy. This process acquired a legal basis through an imperial decree in 1768, while the requirement that hierarchical appointments in Christian churches under Russian control be subject to Etchmiadzin's approval severely restricted Gandzasar's independence. Thus, the legal and political foundations were laid for the abolition of the Gandzasar Albanian

Catholicosate in 1836 and its subordination to Etchmiadzin [1, p. 206].

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the attempts of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin to strengthen its confessional monopoly resulted in further interventions. In 1766, Catholicos Simeon removed Israel, the Albanian Catholicos, from office and appointed Hovhannes in his place. The Meliks of Karabakh, however, defended Israel's legitimacy and sought to preserve Albanian institutional sovereignty. The prolonged struggle between the two Churches culminated in the "Polozhenie" decree of 1836. Under the decree, Christian communities in the South Caucasus were placed under the administrative and canonical jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, and the independent institutional status of the Albanian Church was abolished. As a result, the sacred-institutional designation "Albanian" was removed from sociopolitical usage, while the historical heritage and written sources of the Church suffered substantial losses [7, p. 70; 25, pp. 116–117].

The collapse of Albanian statehood in 705 and the incorporation of the region into the Umayyad Caliphate led to profound ethno-religious and ideological transformations within Albanian society. While the autochthonous Albanian population that converted to Islam entered into sociocultural integration with Turkic-speaking Muslim communities, Christian communities continued to exist as marginal groups in various areas [9, pp. 43–44]. Taking advantage of the political conditions under Umayyad rule, the Armenian Church intensified the Gregorianization and linguistic assimilation of Christian communities. Following the Partav Pseudosynod of 705, the hierarchy of the Albanian Church was effectively subordinated to Etchmiadzin, and its ecclesiological written language was Armenianized. As liturgical texts, chronicles, and epigraphic materials were transferred into the Armenian language, it is reported that no independent literary heritage in the Albanian language has survived to the present day. S. T. Yeremyan regards this as the outcome of the Armenian Church's policy aimed at appropriating the legal and cultural resources of the Albanian Church [26, pp. 327–329; 27, p. 7].

The process of institutional assimilation that began in 705 reached its legal stage in 1836 with a decree of the Holy Synod of Russia. The Albanian Catholicosate was abolished and transformed into a diocese subordinate to Etchmiadzin, thereby formalizing the status of the Armenian Gregorian Church. Following this decision, the Udi communities, as bearers of the Albanian ethnocultural heritage, un-

derwent a prolonged process of confessional and ethnic transformation. The majority of the Albanian population in Karabakh was assimilated in terms of religion, language, and ethnicity into a Gregorian identity. The Christian Udi communities of Oghuz, however, sought refuge under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church and preserved their religious and ethnic characteristics. Therefore, it is not scientifically justified to equate the Gregorianized Albanian population of Karabakh directly with Armenian ethnic origins; terms such as "Gregorianized Albanians" or "Gregorian Turks" may be considered more appropriate [16, p. 5; 3, p. 561; 28, p. 118].

Analysis of historiographic and sociolinguistic sources indicates that the removal of the Albanian language from the institutional sphere of Christian communities resulted from the Armenian Church's policy of Gregorianization and linguistic assimilation. Nevertheless, the Albanian language was preserved at least until the tenth century at the vernacular level among the autochthonous population that had adopted Islam. The thirteenth-century historian Kirakos Gandzaketsi states that Armenian was primarily the administrative and liturgical language of the Albanian nobility, while the common people spoke the "language of Arran." This indicates the existence of language-based social diglossia in the region. Although the Albanian Catholicosate experienced its second institutional revival under the patronage of Hasan Jalal in the early thirteenth century, the administrative and liturgical language of the Church remained Armenian-Gregorian. With Gandzasar as its center, the Albanian Church remained the principal sacred-administrative institution of the autochthonous Albanian Christians until its abolition in 1836 [27, p. 7].

These historiographic facts explain, from theological and sociolinguistic perspectives, why the epigraphic inscriptions on Gandzasar and other autochthonous Christian monuments were written in Armenian. As a result of the institutional pressure exerted by the Armenian Church, sacred literature, registers, funerary inscriptions, and other epigraphic texts associated with Albanian Christians were predominantly composed in Armenian. However, their linguistic form does not negate their Albanian sacred and political affiliation. Although the principal inscription at Gandzasar is likewise written in Armenian, it explicitly states that the monastery was constructed by Hasan Jalal for the Albanians at the command of the Albanian Catholicos [1, p. 208]. This fact demonstrates that linguistic form does not, in itself, determine ethnic or sacred identity.

The synthesis of historical-epigraphic and sociolinguistic sources indicates that the history of the autochthonous Albanian community developed along two distinct trajectories. The Christian Albanian population of Karabakh gradually lost its language, ethnic consciousness, and cultural characteristics as a result of prolonged Gregorianization, linguistic assimilation, and ideological pressure, ultimately becoming assimilated within the Armenian Monophysite milieu. In contrast, the Udis living in Gabala and Oghuz preserved their language, traditions, ethnic consciousness, and sacred-cultural heritage despite institutional pressures. As a result of the spread of Islam in the region and the migration of Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, the "Azerbaijani Turk" identity emerged as a dominant supra-identity integrating diverse ethno-confessional groups. Within this inclusive sociocultural environment, the Udi community succeeded in preserving its language, confessional beliefs, and distinctive micro-cultural characteristics [1, p. 209; 11, pp. 30-41].

Historiographic analyses indicate that the politicization of the ecclesiastical apparatus and confessional assimilation occupied an important place in the strategy of Armenian religious and political circles. Following the abolition of the Albanian-Udi Catholicosate in 1836 and its subordination to Etchmiadzin, the policy of Armenization intensified. One of the sociological manifestations of this pressure was the forced addition of the Armenian-origin suffix "-yan" to the surnames of the Christian Udi population, thereby altering their anthroponymic identity. Following the restoration of Azerbaijan's state independence, however, the Udis entered a process of ethnocultural revival and returned to traditional surname forms bearing the suffixes "-ru," "-ri," "-lu," and "-li" (for example, Danakari, Mobili) [29].

The abolition of the Albanian-Udi Church coincided with the establishment by Tsarist Russia of the Sheikh-ul-Islamate of the South Caucasus for the Muslim population, which formed part of a broader "divide and rule" policy. This administrative-confessional division sought to isolate the Christian Udis from the local Muslim-Turkic community and orient them toward the Armenian sociocultural sphere. However, the Udis boycotted churches under the canonical jurisdiction of Etchmiadzin and continued to practice their faith in homes and other concealed spaces in the Udi language, thereby preserving their ethno-religious and linguistic characteristics. To avoid Gregorian influence, they combined Christian beliefs with ancient religious traditions, thereby developing a syncretic religious structure. This resistance was also

reported by Armenian clergy to Etchmiadzin [1, p. 209]. Thus, despite losing their religious institutions and facing various forms of pressure, the Udi community preserved its historical ethno-religious identity.

Despite the Udis' resistance to assimilation, the administrative and political support provided by Tsarist Russia to Etchmiadzin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries intensified the suppression and appropriation of Albanian churches. New dioceses subordinate to the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin were established, and ancient Christian places of worship in the territory of Azerbaijan were placed under its jurisdiction. The 1857 "Regulation on Religious Administration" strengthened the legal status of Armenian-Gregorian dioceses and removed the term "Albanian Church" from official administrative usage. In 1909-1910, the authorization granted by the Holy Synod of St. Petersburg for the disposal of archival materials facilitated the destruction of manuscripts, registers, and other sources associated with Albanian churches. During the same period, the tsarist government's resettlement of Armenian families from Iranian and Ottoman territories to Nakhchivan, Daralagayaz, Iravan, Goycha, Zangazur, and Karabakh affected the region's ethnodemographic structure [9, p. 46; 1, p. 210]. According to Armenian authors S. Zavaryan and A. Lalayan, in 1905 a total of 75 Turkic villages in Shusha, Javanshir, Jabrayil, and Zangazur were destroyed, and the civilian population was subjected to mass killings [29, pp. 2-3].

One of the principal directions of the ethnocultural reconfiguration policy pursued by Armenian religious and political circles in the South Caucasus was the distortion of the sacred architectural heritage associated with the autochthonous Albanian-Turkic population and the early Christian period. In this process, the original architectural forms, liturgical symbolism, and ecclesiological features of the monuments were altered, thereby weakening their historical and cultural continuity with Albanian heritage. According to the analyses of the Georgian historian A. Chavchavadze, Armenian ideological centers sought to appropriate the Albanian religious and cultural heritage and to present the historical territories of Albania as an integral part of the "land of Hayk" [33, pp. 22-23].

In the process of cultural appropriation and the deconstruction of sacred architecture, the visual and structural features of a number of monuments were altered. One example is the "Aghoglan Sanctuary" (Aghoglan Monastery) complex, located in the village of Kosalar in the

Lachin district, which is regarded as an important monument of the autochthonous Albanian Christian heritage [31, pp. 26-27]. It is reported that the epigraphic inscriptions, cross compositions, and architectural elements were adapted to the Armenian-Gregorian style through subsequent interventions, thereby altering the monument's historical and ethnic identity. In this context, the admission by the Armenian writer Raffi in his novel *Samvel* is also noteworthy: "Our barren history provides historians with very little information. Our literature cannot go beyond church writings" [1, p. 221].

Historiographical evidence indicates that the policy of Armenization and Gregorianization aimed at neutralizing the material and cultural heritage of Caucasian Albania and the institutional memory of the Albanian Apostolic Church did not achieve its intended outcome. The confessional pressures exerted by Etchmiadzin and the imperial administration encountered resistance from autochthonous Albanian Christians, with the Udi community emerging as one of the principal actors in this process. Refusing to accept the authority of the Etchmiadzin Church, the Udis engaged in legal and administrative struggles to preserve their ethno-religious autonomy. In a petition submitted by Udi representatives to the Russian emperor in 1867, they protested against the unlawful administration of Armenian clergy and religious pressure in ancient Albanian churches. Their boycott of churches demonstrates a collective strategy of resistance aimed at preserving their theological and linguistic characteristics. Through this resistance, the Udi communities living in Gabala and Oghuz succeeded in preserving their ethnic identity, native language, and religious traditions into the modern period.

The ethno-religious resistance that emerged in the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for the revival of the Albanian Apostolic Church following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence. The institutional activities of the Albanian-Udi community were legalized, with two religious communities officially registered, and on 14 July 2013, the rite of baptism was restored after a prolonged interruption. In the same year, an international event dedicated to the revival of the Albanian-Udi Church and the 1,700th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Caucasian Albania was held. These developments demonstrate the support provided by Azerbaijan's model of multiculturalism for the preservation of the religious and cultural heritage of the Udi community. In the late twentieth century, historiographical debates

surrounding the heritage of Caucasian Albania also became intertwined with territorial claims. In the early 1990s, more than 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory was occupied, and Albanian Christian monuments were subjected to destruction [31]. As a result of the 2020 Patriotic War, Azerbaijan's territorial integrity was restored. In the post-conflict period, the restoration of the religious and cultural heritage of the liberated territories became a priority of state policy. Today, the heritage of Caucasian Albania is being comprehensively studied at Azerbaijani academic institutions, and its place in the history of Azerbaijan is being examined on the basis of scholarly evidence.

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of the historical facts demonstrates that the Christian heritage of Caucasian Albania was subjected for centuries not only to military and political transformations but also to systematic theological, philosophical, and ethno-sociological influences.

In the contemporary period, following the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the state registration of Albanian-Udi Christian religious communities, the restoration of historical Albanian churches, and the revival of forgotten religious rituals and traditions, including baptism, represent the restoration of collective historical memory. Taken as a whole, this complex historical picture demonstrates, within the conceptual framework of this study, that the Azerbaijani people and the Udi community as an integral part of it constitute the authentic historical successors of the rich tangible and intangible heritage of Caucasian Albania.

Conclusion

The history of the spread of Christianity in Azerbaijan is directly rooted in the apostolic succession associated with the missionary activities of the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus, as well as those of their followers Elisæus and Mary. Belonging to the family of the ancient Oriental Churches, the Albanian Apostolic Church acquired institutional status in 313 CE, when the Albanian ruler Urnayr adopted Christianity as the official state religion, thereby transforming the Church into a major theological center of the region. These theological foundations determined the distinctive ecclesiological position and doctrinal independence of the Albanian Church not only within the Caucasus but also within the broader tradition of Eastern Christianity.

The Albanian Christian architecture that developed between the fourth and seventh

centuries – including the church complexes of Amaras, Kilsədağ, Mamrukh, Lakit, Sand, Khudavang, and Mingachevir – constitutes a material manifestation of sacred philosophy. From the perspective of the philosophy of religion, these temples were not merely places of worship but also sacred semiotic spaces encoding the Albanian people's ontological conceptions of the cosmos, divine being, and spiritual existence. The coherence and distinctive character of their architectural forms demonstrate the objectification of the philosophical and aesthetic worldview of Albanian civilization.

The decline that began following the collapse of Albanian statehood in 705 developed into an institutional crisis in the early nineteenth century within the geopolitical framework of Tsarist Russia's regional interests. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the abolition of the Albanian Catholicosate and its subordination to the Armenian-Gregorian Church by decree of Tsar Nicholas I dated 11 March 1836 constituted an act of "artificial confessional assimilation" resulting from the ethno-confessional engineering policy of the Russian Empire. Within this process, the destruction of archives, the replacement of epigraphic inscriptions with texts in the Grabar language, and alterations to architectural structures formed part of a broader strategy of the desacralization of collective memory and cultural appropriation.

Despite institutional and administrative pressure, the determined resistance demonstrated by the Udis, regarded in this study as the direct ethnic and spiritual successors of the Albanian Apostolic Church, represents a significant phenomenon of ethno-religious identity preservation. Rejecting the policy of forced Gregorianization, the Udis preserved their original apostolic traditions, language, and ethnic consciousness through mechanisms of passive resistance and internal religiosity. This resistance constitutes a notable example, within the sociology of religion, of the self-preservation capacity of small ethnic communities confronted with dominant institutional pressures.

The preservation, restoration, and support of the rich Christian tangible and intangible heritage of Caucasian Albania by the contemporary Azerbaijani state and society at the legal, religious, and cultural levels constitute a manifestation of a pluralist multiculturalism model. Within the scholarly framework of this study, these activities demonstrate on historical, legal, and sociological grounds that the Azerbaijani people, together with the Albanian-Udi community as an integral component of that society, constitute the rightful and legitimate

contemporary custodians and successors of the Christian heritage of Caucasian Albania.

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