

RELIGION AND POLITICAL POWER IN THE CAUCASIAN ALBANIA PRIOR TO AND DURING THE ARAB CONQUESTS**Lala Aghamirze Aliyeva**

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of 7th century political and military developments in the region on the position of the Caucasian Albanian Church.

Holding a weak position among the common people, who preserved ancient traditions, the Caucasian Albanian Church proved unable to maintain its position after the Arab conquest, which created new political conditions. Prior to and during the Arab conquest the struggle between dyophysitism and monophysitism created uncertainty and weakened the status of Christianity in the region. Studies show that the Caucasian Albanian Church was an adherent of monothelitism and maintained close ties with Byzantium and the Georgian Orthodox Church throughout most of the Mihranid dynasty's reign. However, with the strengthening of the Arab Caliphate during Umayyad rule, the political situation changed and the Armenian Church, holding good relations with the Caliphate, achieved the subordination of the Caucasian Albanian Church.

The study reveals a number of reasons for the weakening and subordination of the Albanian Church to the Armenian.

Keywords: *Caucasian Albanian Church, Mihranids, Armenian Catholicosate, Arab Conquest, Spread of Islam*

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this research is to examine the religious processes that took place in the early Medieval Eastern Caucasus, primarily in the territories of today's Azerbaijan Republic. This was a turbulent and changeable time, when domination of one religion was gradually replaced by another. In turn, this process impacted the identity of the local population, creating the conditions for long term assimilation and ethnic consolidation.

Many studies confirm relations between religion and identity. Among them, Pamela King suggests that ideological, social, and spiritual contexts, generated by religion, provide a distinct setting for identity exploration [King P.E. (2003): 197]. Religious processes, with accompanying social, political and cultural characteristics, influenced the identity of the Christian population of Caucasian Albania following the spread of Islam in the region.

Aiming to study the processes that took place in the Caucasian Albanian church on the eve of and during the initial period of the Arab conquests, which coincides with the reign of the Mihranid dynasty, a number of primary sources prove relevant. It should be noted that many issues of Caucasian Albanian studies, as well as the history of the Albanian Church and the Arab conquest, have been widely studied by modern

historiography. The latest publication on Caucasian Albanian studies, an edited volume recently released by De Gruyter, *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*, despite some chapters with politicized overtones, contains very valuable research. Noteworthy to mention is Jasmine Dum-Tragut's chapter, "One or two? On Christological and Hierarchical Disputes and the Development of the "Church of Albania" (4th–8th centuries)" [Dum-Tragut (2023): 285-331]. Her research concludes that the Church of Albania was in Christological and Hierarchical dependence of the Armenian Church. At the same time, the author agrees that in the post-Chalcedonian period all churches of the South Caucasus, including the Albanian one, developed more ethnic and independent characteristics, and the period from the 6th to 8th centuries is considered the main period of discord and separationism in the South Caucasian Churches [Dum-Tragut (2023); 286-287]. Although the purpose of this paper is not to study the status of the Albanian Church during the period of the Arab conquests, it can definitely be stated that at least on the eve of the liquidation of independence in 705, the Caucasian Albanian Church was not in a state of dependence on the Armenian Church. Otherwise, why would the Armenian Catholicos complain about the Albanian Church to the Caliph Abd-al-Malik and accuse it of being connected with Byzantium, the enemy of the Caliphate.

Without denying or minimizing the influence of the Armenian Church in Georgia and Albania, debates around this issue can be summarized as follows: one side assesses the state of affairs in the 6th to 8th centuries as "discord and separatism", while another side sees it as a struggle for the independent existence of the Albanian church.

A Brief overview on the Establishment of Mihranid Ruling Power in The Caucasian Albania

The existence of the Apostolic Christian Church in Caucasian Albania, which gained an official religious status from the reign of Urnayr, a representative of the Arsacid dynasty, is confirmed on the basis on "The History of The Caucasian Albanians" by Movses of Kalankatuyk [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 7-8]. However, following the Arab invasion, the Albanian church failed to maintain its position. External factors, especially the Arab invasion under the banner of Islam and the new social and political conditions brought by it, should be noted. Moreover, the processes taking place within the Albanian Christian Church, such as uncertainty regarding how to choose between the two main doctrines of Christianity at that time, dyophysitism and monophysitism, also played an important role. When we compare this church with its neighbors, we see that, at the end of a long process the majority of Armenians chose the Monophysite doctrine of Christianity, and in the case of Georgians, the Dyophysite.

For additional details one should examine certain issues related to the Mihranid dynasty, the period of their semi-independent rule, their origin, and the issues of the territory they ruled. If Mihran, the founder of the dynasty, took possession of the Gardman province with a letter, sent by the Sassanian ruler Khosrow, this event could not have happened before the 6th century, regardless of whether it was Khosrow I or II, because Moses of Kalankatuyk's *The History of The Caucasian Albanians* does not specify whether it was Khosrow I or Khosrow II [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 108]. However, the same source shows that Mihran's grandson Vardan the Brave, the ruler of Gardman, was one of the nobles who participated in the Church Assembly of Aguyen in 488

[Dowsett J. F. (1961): 54]. Thus, the Mihranids were already the rulers of the Gardman province in the 5th century, and Moses of Kalankatuyk likely confused the Sassanid rulers. Farida Mammadova attributes Mihranid rule over the Gardman province to the 5th century. She writes that this area began to play an important role in the political life of Albania in the 5th to 8th centuries, after the Mihranid dynasty was established and came to power [Мамедова, Ф. (2005): 261].

In the sources, the establishment of Mihranid power, initially in a vassal status dependent on the Sassanids, by Varaz-Grigor Mihranid, is suggested as the year 628 [Бунияттов, З. (1965): 52; Еремян С. (1939): 130] or 630 [Мамедова, Ф. (2005): 357]. Presumably, around the same period the dynasty extended its power throughout most of Albania, not only the Gardman province. Given Cyril Toumanoff's research on the subject, the date indicated by Ziya Bunyadov, 628 CE, seems more appropriate. Cyril Toumanoff notes that following the accession of the Khosrowid dynasty of Mihranid origin over Georgia in 627, other branches of the dynasty were soon brought to rule over the Gogarene and Gardman, other Caucasian thrones [Toumanoff, Cyril (1969): 22; Toumanoff, Cyril (1963): 83].

Thus, sources and studies support the idea that all three dynasties came to power in the Caucasus with a slight difference in time. After Sheroy, the heir who had the right to continue power, was taken to Syria by the Arabs in 705 [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 191], the Albanian principality, a semi-independent state, fell [Мамедова, Ф. (2005): 173]. To clarify the specific time, it should be noted that Justinian II, the Byzantine emperor, who was overthrown in 695 as a result of a coup, restored his power on August 21, 705 [The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor (1997): 522], and thus once again achieved a strengthening of Byzantium. Moreover, the Umayyad caliph Abdul-Malik died of cholera on October 5, 705. It is clear that these two events were preceded by the end of the Mihranid dynasty. It should be noted that the dynasty retained the right to manage its possessions for a longer period of time, according to Moses of Kalankatuyk, until about 821/2 [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 213-214], and the end of the dynasty was put with the assassination of Varaz-Trdat II, the last representative of the Mihranid dynasty [The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsest of Mt. Sinai (2008): XIX]. Thus, this study mainly considers the changes that took place in the Albanian church and its environment in the historically short chronological framework of 628-705. This time coincides with the beginning of the Arab conquests, and by the 8th century the power of the Arab Caliphate was completely established in almost the entire territory of the Eastern Caucasus. As is known, in the early days of the Caliphate, Islamisation of the local population did not take place on a massive scale. Therefore, Christianity and other local religious beliefs were preserved for a very long time. The purpose of this article is to consider the Albanian Church and the overall position of Christianity within the region during this period.

As mentioned above, sources emphasize that of all three peoples, branches of one family, the Mihranid dynasty, ruled Albanians, Georgians and Armenians. [Toumanoff, Cyril (1963): 83]. In addition, Moses of Kalankatuyk repeatedly underlined that the Mihranids were of Arsacid origin and related to the Sassanids, called Mihran a blood relative of Khosrow [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 108], and for Varaz-Grigor he used the expression "Varaz-Grigor, the ruler of Albania, a nobleman from the Arsacids" [Dowsett

J. F. (1961): 109]. The Danish orientalist Arthur Christensen, on the basis of Sassanian written sources, concluded that the Mihranids of Parthian origin were one of the seven noble families that ruled Sassanian Iran [Christensen, Arthur (1944): 102]. Considering that the Arsacids and Sassanids were genealogically separate dynasties, the information of Moses of Kalankatuyk may appear ambivalent. However, the information should not be considered contradictory, since the Sassanids always established family ties with the Arsacids. In any case, like the Khosrowids in the Caucasian Iberia, the Mihranids of Albania were not a local dynasty in origin.

As for the location of the Gardman province that was possessed by the Mihranids, it is likely that its territory was the same territory where *Qal'at al-Gardman*, mentioned in Arabic sources, was located [Vəlixanlı N. (2016): 212]. Of course, we must distinguish between the territory of this province and the semi-independent principality, ruled by the Mihranid dynasty since 628. Apparently, the appearance of parallel toponyms in the territories of Shamkir and Shirvan, where the river Girdmanchay flows, is connected with the rule of one dynasty and inhabited by the same tribes. It was not by chance that Moses of Kalankatuyk, describing Viro, liberated by the Sassanid ruler Kavād in 628, named him “Catholicos of the great Albanian principality (dominion)” [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 93]. In other words, during this period, the dynasty extended its power beyond the boundaries of one province unequivocally.

Caucasian Albanian Church between Monophysitism and Dyophysitism. Strengthening Monothelitism

The Byzantine Empire clearly used Christianity as a political instrument for gaining hegemony in the Caucasus, aiming to completely eliminate or reduce the influence of its rivals, the Sassanids, and later the Arab Caliphate. However, Juan Signes Codoñer writes that in the 7th and 8th centuries Byzantium launched no new missions among these neighboring nations [Codoñer (2014): 152]. This confirms that it was the state itself that carried out the missionary work through political and military activity.

In 608/609 the Georgian Church broke off relations with the Monophysite Armenian Church, preferring to follow the Chalcedonian teaching adopted in Constantinople. Icons that were not accepted by the Armenian Church were warmly received in the Georgian lands, and Byzantium allowed the Georgian monastery of Iviron to be founded on Mount Athos [Hewsen Robert H. and Salvatico Christopher C (2001): 92]. As for the Sassanids, they were not limited to forcing the spread of Zoroastrianism against Byzantine influence. The Sassanian emperors also took advantage of the feud between Christian teachings. In accordance with the Sassanid policy of separating the traditional Caucasian countries from Byzantium, Khosrow II gathered Christians subject to his empire to the famous Ctesiphon Church Council in 614, and here, in opposition to the doctrine of dyophysitism in Byzantium, the churches under Sassanid rule officially recognized monophysitism as their main teaching [Мамедова Ф. (2005): 361]. In the chapter "The piety of the Christian wife of King Khosrow, Queen Shirin" in the "History" by Sebeos, Khosrow's decree on the issue is reproduced. It states: "Let no infidel dare to accept Christianity, and let no Christian accept blasphemy. On the contrary, let each follow the religion of his father. Whoever does not keep the faith of his fathers, he who rebels

against his religion will be killed” [Sebeos (1999): IV]. Khosrow II's edict defined the dyophysitism, espoused by rival Byzantium, as "godlessness".

Having achieved an advantage during their war with the Sassanids, Byzantium, in order to strengthen their positions in the Caucasus, persuaded local nobles to accept Christianity. Varaz-Grigor, a representative of the Mihranid dynasty, who had previously worshiped the Zoroastrian religion, converted to Christianity and became the principle of Albania. As already mentioned, Vardan the Brave took part in the Aguen Church Assembly [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 54], which means that the dynasty had already converted to Christianity. This confusion was clearly removed by Cyril Toumanoff. He shows that the Albanian Mihranid family most likely converted to Mazdaism at the end of the 5th century, as did the Mihranids of Gogarene [Toumanoff, Cyril (1963): 476]. Following the end of the Arsacid dynasty in Albania at the beginning of the 6th century, the region was under the rule of Sassanid governors [Мамедова Ф. (2005): 208, 357]. The provincial rulers of Gardman took advantage of their kinship with the Sassanids and became even stronger under their rule. Since the Mihranids already had a strong influence over one province of Albania, at the beginning of the 7th century they were able to extend their power to other Albanian lands. The history of this dynasty shows that they were willing to re-convert to Christianity in order to maintain their prestige.

In “The Life of Vakhtang Gorgasal” by Juansher Juansheriani, which is included to the Georgian chronicles “Kartlis Tskhovreba”, it is mentioned that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius in 627, during the reign of Georgian ruler Stepanos, took Tbilisi and killed him [Kartlis Tskhovreba (2014): 77]. Another Georgian chronicle, “The Life and Story of Bagrationi” by Sumbat Davitidze, shows that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who marched against Tbilisi, later met Varaz-Gageli / Varaz-Grigoli in Gardabani (identified with the Gardman province) [Hewsen and Salvatico (2001): 102; Мамедова (2005): 109]. The source writes, “Heraclius came to Gardabani to see Varaz Gageli, and camped in a place called Khuzasheni. He converted Varaz Gageli and all his people to Christianity and began to build a church that would surpass anything that had been built before him. From there he went to Berduchi and camped in the center of the village. Heraclius erected a stone cross, laid the foundation of the Church of St. Mary, and crowned it with a dome.” [Kartlis Tskhovreba (2014): 212]. From this we can conclude that Varaz-Grigor was baptized by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and brought to the throne of Albania as a ruler. This information from the Georgian chronicle contradicts the local Albanian source, since Moses of Kalankatuyk states that Varaz-Grigor was baptized by the Catholicos of Viro. [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 109]. It is unreasonable for him to be baptized twice, as this is contrary to the traditions of the Christian religion. It is no coincidence that Dowsett translated it as "was consecrated" instead of "baptized". This contradiction can be explained by the fact that most likely Varaz Grigor first accepted the dyophysitism of Byzantium, and then Viro led him into monophysitism.

As it is also known that after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Christianity was already divided into two main doctrines, the Chalcedonian dyophysitism and the anti-Chalcedonian monophysitism and miaphysitism. These doctrines further were divided into different religious and philosophical streams. There are also some streams that take a conciliatory position between the two doctrines, such as monoenergism and monothelitism. During the period when monoenergism became a political instrument for

the Byzantine Empire, Varaz-Grigor could be baptized by the emperor to the Chalcedonian dyophysitism and monoenergism, and later change to monophysitism.

Strengthened after their victory over Sassanian Iran, Byzantium tried to use new trends as a means of uniting the Christian church. Therefore, the transition from one teaching to another was a characteristic feature of that period. Walter E. Kaegi notes that Heraclius convened a synod in Theodosiopolis in 633, and personally participating in it, united the Armenian Church with the monothelitism one [Kaegi, Walter E. (1995): 181]. There is an inconsistency here. In fact, Heraclius led the Armenian Church to the Chalcedonian doctrine [Hovorun C. Will (2008): 53-102]. The reason for the discrepancy is the omission of a small piece of information. Namely, after "Ecthesis", the letter of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, in 638, monothelitism began to be used as an official religious teaching. Until then, in the religious policy of the Byzantine Empire, one can speak of monoenergism [Meyendorff (1999): 36].

Although reliable research indicates that Viro was a Chalcedonian [The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsest of Mt. Sinai (2008): XIX], it is not possible to unambiguously conclude that he was a Chalcedonian dyophysite or, conversely, an anti-Chalcedonian monophysite. If the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and the Albanian Catholicos Viro were both Chalcedonians, then it is not logical to think that Varaz-Grigor was baptized twice. It could be assumed that Catholicos Viro belonged, most likely, to the anti-Chalcedonian monophysite doctrine.

It should be noted that two facts are recorded in the sources. First, during the advance of the Byzantine army, Heraclius, who defeated the Sassanids, went to the South Caucasus and met with the local nobility, including Varaz-Grigor [Kartlis Tskhovreba (2014): 212; Rayfield (2012): 52]. Secondly, Viro [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 93], freed from prison by the son of Khosrow and returning to his country, converted a representative of the influential noble dynasty Varaz-Grigor to Christianity in order to restore local rule against the backdrop of political events [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 109]. According to Ziya Bunyadov, this event took place in Ctesiphon in 627 [Буниятов З. (1965): 41]. Taking into account that these two events can be considered historical reality, however the question in what year they occurred remains controversial. For example, the first event, the baptism of Varaz-Grigor by Heraclius can be dated earlier than 627, during his offensive in 624, when Heraclius retreated with booty and captives to the Caucasian Albania [Zuckerman, Constantine (2002): 190-191]. Assuming this, then the second event could have occurred after the conclusion of peace by the belligerents. That is, Viro, returning to his homeland in 628, consecrated Varaz-Grigor to monophysitism, since the country again found itself in the bosom of Sassanian Iran.

It can be concluded that Varaz-Grigor had to lean towards the victorious Byzantines until it became clear which empire Caucasian Albania would belong to on the basis of the pending Byzantine-Sassanian treaty and adopted the doctrine of Christianity compatible with the policy of Heraclius, Chalcedonian dyophysitism. However, the peace treaty concluded in 629 [Sebeos (1999): XXV] returned Albania to the sphere of influence of the Sassanids. Under such conditions, the return of the Mihranids to the policy of rapprochement with the Sassanids was inevitable. It was at this time that Catholicos Viro led Varaz-Grigor to monophysitism. This alliance prompted the Mihranids to support the Sassanids at the start of the Arab invasions.

It follows from this that, firstly, in the Sassanian-Byzantine rivalry for hegemony in the Caucasus, and then the Caliphate-Byzantine conflict that came to replace it, religion was used as a means of influence in politics, and secondly that the changes associated with it determined the fate of Albanian statehood, as well as the religious and ethnic identities of Albanians.

Looking over the changes in religious theories, associated with the political events of that time, it can be seen that soon after the emergence of Christianity, starting from the 2nd-3rd centuries, there were disagreements between the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools about the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ. The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 resulted in the two schools becoming competing doctrines. After their victory over the Sassanids, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius conquered a number of territories in the Near and Middle East. These areas were dominated by anti-Chalcedonian monophysites, miaphysites and the Nestorian doctrine, which recognized the dual nature of Jesus, but differed from dyophysitism. In such a situation, monothelitism seemed to many, especially the then emperor Heraclius and prominent clergy of that time, to offer a compromise position between the Chalcedonian and the anti-Chalcedonian doctrines [Daniel J. Sahas (2022): 152].

Having decisively defeated the Sassanid empire, Heraclius, first of all sought to establish confessional peace in the Christian world through the formula *Mia theandrike energia* or monoenergism, which concretized the dual divine-human nature of Christ as a single energy unity of the Chalcedonians. But the monoenergism formula faced serious opposition, prompting Heraclius to announce a new formula for the unity of Christ in 638. In the same year, the emperor signed the “Ecthesis”, confirming the formula that in Christ there are not two different wills, but only one will. Monothelitism, which recognizes the dual divine-human nature of Christ, is based on the idea that the will of Jesus and the will of the Father are one. Even Nestor accepted the unity of will in Christ [Pannenberg (2011): 293]. That is, monothelitism could be attractive to the Nestorians as well. Thus, the Byzantine Empire began to use the doctrine of monothelitism, which claimed to create unity in the Christian world. The Byzantine emperors, who tried to subjugate the peoples of the Near and Middle East not only by military means, but also by religion, continued this policy after Heraclius.

As a matter of course, during the formation of Christian doctrines and in a changing political environment, Christian theologians continued religious discourse, putting forward new ideas, and causing new tensions and disagreements. First, supporters of dyothelitism, that is, the idea that Jesus Christ has two separate wills, just as He has a dual human-divine essence, argue that monothelitism is unfounded. After the initial condemnation of monothelitism in Rome in 649, the final victory of dyothelitism was won only at the Council of Constantinople in 681. By this time, the monophysite lands had already been taken from Byzantium; Palestine and Syria were conquered by the Arabs in 638, and Egypt in 641. Now, instead of making peace with the Monophysites, Constantinople had to seek peace with Rome [Pannenberg (2011): 294].

Christian theologians constantly discussed monothelitism in order to discredit it as a church doctrine. Maximus the Confessor, one of the closest clerics of Emperor Heraclius, considered both monoenergism and monothelitism to be a betrayal of the decision of the Council of Chalcedon that Christ was fully human. Because if there is no real person

without having will and “movement”, so without will Jesus cannot have human nature [Meyendorff (1999): 38]. Finally, the IV Ecumenical Church Assembly gathered for its first meeting on November 7, 680 and ended its meetings, of which there were eighteen, on September 16, 681. Although this meeting ended the religious doctrine of Monothelism, adherents of this doctrine remained active for a long time.

Monothelism did not immediately give way to the new teaching in all Christian communities. When the Fourth Universal Council of Constantinople took place, Pope Agatho sent a letter to Constantine IV, urging him to continue monothelism. This letter is interesting for two reasons. First, it is clear behind the front lines that Byzantium used religion as a political tool. In his letter, he emphasized the ability of divine power to subordinate the barbarian peoples to the empire and faith [The Letter of Agatho (1955)]. Agathon's correspondence urged Constantine IV and the clergy to expect divine help while observing proper teaching and behavior, despite the military defeats of recent decades [Kaegi, Walter E. (1995): 219]. The second problem was that various Christian communities, who were followers of Pope Agatho and tried to defend themselves as an independent church after 681, continued to adhere to the doctrine of monothelism.

In a word, Christian religious teachings and the Byzantine Empire, which turned them into a political instrument, influenced political events in the Near and Middle East, as well as in the Caucasus during the wars, waged with both the Sassanids and the Arab Caliphate, the new rival of Byzantium. Against this background, the position taken by Varaz-Grigor, in his transition from one teaching of Christianity to another, is an exemplary one.

The question of what doctrine of Christianity adhered to by Javanshir, who succeeded his father on the throne, is one of the issues worthy of attention. Interestingly, the years of his reign (638-680) coincide with the period (638-681) when Byzantium turned monothelism into a political tool. The Albanian prince Javanshir Mihranid was, of course, one of the followers of this teaching, and, logically, the church under his patronage also supported monothelism. Unlike the Albanian Church, the Armenian Miaphysite Church in 653, headed by Theodore Rashtuni, preferred the policy of cooperation with the Arabs rather than with Byzantium [Sebeos (1999): 164]. In contrast to the information of Sebeos that the Georgian and Albanian rulers had followed him [Sebeos (1999): XXXV], Moses of Kalankatuyk states that, contrary to the advice of his father, Javanshir entered into a fraternal alliance with the Byzantine emperor against the Caliphate and met with him personally after receiving a positive answer to his letter [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 115-118]. Later, the source mentions the Albanian patriarch Ukhtanes, who was happy that Javanshir brought the holy cross, donated by the emperor, and the church built in Gardman [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 119]. Although the author of the pro-monophysite influence does not give here any information about the Christian teaching of Ukhtanes or the church, it is clear that in this case we can talk about the Chalcedonian doctrine of the dyophysites and the teaching of monothelism supported by Byzantium.

After Javanshir's meeting with Caliph Mu'awiyah I, it seems that there was no change in the teaching of the church. After returning from a meeting with the caliph, Javanshir visited the church he built in Gardman and gave instructions on its decoration [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 126]. Most importantly, the positions of Byzantine supporters in his palace and

in the Church remained strong, and their dissatisfaction with his cooperation with the caliphate resulted in the assassination of Javanshir [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 142-144].

Jasmine Dum-Tragut does not confirm or deny the connection of the Albanian Church with monothelitism, referring to the insufficiency of written sources [Jasmine Dum-Tragut (2023): 311]. However Moses of Kalankatuyk, a reliable source on the topic, describes how and when Javanshir received the cross from the emperor and how the Armenian noblemen reacted to this [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 118]. Paying attention to all this, it can be confidently asserted that during the reign of Javanshir Mihranid, the Albanian Church followed monothelitism.

The Albanian Church during the reign of Varaz-Trdat I.

The End of the Independent Church

There are grounds to assert that Varaz-Trdat I, the successor of Javanshir, pursued the same religious policy for a long time. According to Theophanes the Confessor, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik asked the Byzantine emperor to renew the agreement that had been signed with Muawiyah I, in 686/7. However, despite the agreement, Emperor Justinian II sent the Byzantine commander Leontius with his army against the Arabs, and Iberia, Albania, Bukaniya (Mugan) and Midia (present Iranian Azerbaijan _L.A.) were subordinated to him. He imposed tribute on these countries and sent a large sum of money to the emperor [The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor (1997): 503]. So, Byzantium became more active in the region and created favorable conditions for dyophysitism.

During the reign of Javanshir and Varaz-Trdat I, the Albanian Church had extensive ties with the Georgian Dyophysites. Firstly, it is not by chance that the palimpsest found in the church of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, turned out to be composed of the Nuskhuri Georgian script of the 10th century as the superior text and the Albanian script as the inferior text [The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsest of Mt. Sinai. (2008): XXI]. Thanks to extensive connections with the Caucasian-Albanian Church, the Albanian Bible could naturally be transferred to the Georgian Church. In addition, many ancient Georgian words passed into old Udi, the church language of Caucasian Albania. For example, the ancient Georgian “akvseba” (Easter) as “akhsiba” in old Udi, “madli” (grace) as “madil”, “savrdzeli” (throne) as “sa’ourzel”, and “sakhe” (picture) as the same. A number of Greek terms also entered the ancient Udi language through the Georgian language [Rayfield (2012): 41].

It is appropriate to consider the international situation that had developed by the end of the 7th century. The Albanian ruler Javanshir (638-680) regulated relations with the caliphate, while maintaining his internal independence; he undoubtedly supported the independence of the Caucasian-Albanian Church. According to J. Dowsett, the Albanian ruler Javanshir was killed between September 680 and June 681 [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 138]. Most of his nephew Varaz-Trdat I's reign (680-705), who came to power after him, fell during the period of the second civil war (680-692) in the Umayyad Caliphate, which was called the "second fitna". This period is characterized by the political dominance of Byzantium in the region and the frequently allied Khazar Khaganate.

Asoghik of Taron in his "World History" writes that in the third year of the reign of Justinian II, he sent his army to Armenia, and that at that time 25 regions were destroyed,

and 8000 families were sold into slavery [Asoghik of Taron (2017): II, 2]. He further states that in the fourth year of Justinian's reign, in 689, he himself led a campaign in the South Caucasus, dividing his army into three parts and sending it to Georgia, Albania and Armenia [Asoghik of Taron (2017): 166]. As a result of a successful campaign, Justinian II, calling the rulers of these countries, took some of them prisoner, and took the children of others as hostages. Some of them he awarded and appointed as principles in their countries. The source writes that he appointed Nerseh Kamsarakan, lord of Shirak, to Armenia, and Varazdat (Varaz-Trdat I) to Albania as the Exarch, second in rank after the emperor, and appointed an army of 30,000 to support these rulers, and himself returned to Constantinople [Asoghik of Taron (2017): 167]. It is not difficult to determine the dyophysite religious policy of Varaz-Trdat I, who was appointed exarch by the Byzantine emperor and kept troops for his protection. At that time, the Albanian Church seems quite independent and following dyophysite teaching, different from the Armenian Miaphysite Church, and yet inclined towards Monothelitism. The political dependence of the country on Byzantium and its ally the Khazar Khanate reached the highest point when Varaz-Trdat I and his sons, who visited Constantinople, were arrested [Dowsett J. F. (1961): III, 12]. This event apparently coincided with the coup d'état of 695 by Leonitius, the general who deposed Justinian II, temporarily seized power, and presumably Leonitius imprisoned Varaz-Trdat I. Leontius was deposed by Apsimar in 698, who came to power under the name of Tiberius III (698-705). Although he freed Varaz-Trdat in 699, his sons remained hostages in Constantinople for another 12 years. As for their release, it was not Justinian II who restored his power, but Philippicos Bardanes, the next emperor of Byzantium, who came to power in November 711 [Asoghik of Taron (2017): 167].

Since the focus of the study is on processes related to religion, it is necessary to briefly dwell on whether the Khazar Khaganate had religious relations with Albania. The Khazar Khanate did not use religion as a political tool in the region either before or after the adoption of Judaism as their official religion by Obadiah in 790. However, the Albanians, according to the description of Moses of Kalankatuyk, tried to introduce Christianity among the Khazars. Adding a religious coloration to the Khazar-Albanian relations, Moses of Kalankatuyk emphasizes that the Albanian Bishop Israel converted the Khazars to the faith. The title of chapter 42 in Book II of his work already conveys this message: "The consultation of the great prince of the Huns Ilituer with his nobles in order that the bishop Israel might remain with them to establish a patriarchal see there" [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 166]. Moses of Kalankatuyk describes that after meeting with the Albanian Bishop Israel, the prince of the Huns, Ilituer, equipped and prepared the *il-tigin* of Khorasan and *Chat'n Khazr* from among the chieftains of their country to follow holy Israel as ambassadors of goodwill. [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 168]. The content of the letter they brought to the Albanian ruler was as follows: "Greetings to you, holy lord Eliazar, the great patriarch of Albania, and our beloved brother Varaz-Trdat, the sovereign prince of Albania ... we recognized our creator and found peace." [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 168]. It is interesting that during the meeting, emphasizing faith in one God, the phrase is used, as if the Khazars want to spread Christianity to the whole world: "Let us take as our model all the lands believing in this faith, and the great kingdom of the Romans." [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 167]. This part of the chapter glorifies the faith of the Romans, the Byzantine

Empire. It is also a sign that the Caucasian Albanian Church had the same church as the Roman-Byzantine Empire at that time.

Let us turn to some Byzantine and Eastern sources to clarify information about the Khazars' desire to convert to Christianity under the influence of the Bishop of Israel and make a political tool out of this. Of these, the Byzantine monk and chronicler Theophanes the Confessor (c. 758-818) gave consistent information on the period and topic under study in his *Chronicle* [The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor (1997)]. Given that Theophanes served at the court of the Byzantine Emperor Leo IV the Khazar before becoming a monk, he is undoubtedly a reliable source on the subject. So, Leo IV was actually the son of Chichak, the daughter of the Khazar Khagan Bihar. Another source is the chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa, an astrologer at the Abbasid court in Iraq in the second half of the 8th century, which lacks materials on the church and Christianity, but gives a tense political picture of that period [Hoyland Robert G. (2011)]. Also, Agapius or Mahbub ibn Qustantin, who was the bishop of the city of Manbij in Northern Syria, and his work "*Kitab al-Unwan*", completed in Arabic in 940, is one of the reliable sources for 630-750 years [Agapius (Mahboub) de Menbidj (1909)]. These sources point to the campaigns of the Khazar Khaganate to the Caucasus, including Albania, either as an ally of Byzantium or as a rival of the Caliphate, and they are consistent with similar information in the "History of Albanians". However, the adoption of Christianity by the Khazars and its transformation into a political instrument like Byzantium, such information is absent in them. It is also true that there were attempts to spread Christianity among the Khazars, who still were followers of the Tangri cult. [Golden P. (2007): 135] Moses seems to have described one such attempt.

Monothelitism, a conciliatory doctrine, was replaced completely by the dyophysite teaching during Nerses-Bakur, who succeeded Elizar as Catholicos of Albania. In this regard, Moses of Kalankatuyk, an opponent of dyophysitism, accuses the Albanian Catholic Nerses Bakur and Spram, the wife of Varaz-Trdat I, of a conspiratorial deal. Nerses Bakur, bishop of Gardman promised Spram, the queen of Albania, who followed the same "heresy", that 'If you will proclaim me catholicos of Albania, I will convert all Albania to Chalcedonism. She listened to him and conferred with the bishops and nobles of Albania, and all agreed unanimously to grant her request. [Dowsett J. F. (1961): 189-190]. The author of the "History of Albania" in Book III calls them "antichrist", meaning dyophysitism, which he was opposed to. During this period, fluctuations in the choice of religious doctrine and political strife between the prince Shero and the queen Spram led to the weakening of the state and the church, and allowed the Armenian Church to take advantage of this weakness. The Armenian Catholicos Elia was finally able to carry out his efforts to subdue the Albanian Church using the power of the Caliphate. Elia, in his letter to the Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705), where he accused the Albanian Catholicos in betrayal to the Caliph, stating: "[the] catholicos of Albania has come to an agreement with the emperor of Greece, mentions him in his prayers and forces the land to adopt his faith and unite with him. [Dowsett J. F. (1961): III, 5]. And the Caliph's response was, of course, positive. Thereby, Elia achieved subordination of the Albanian Church to the Armenian one, and also created pretext for the annulment of the internal independence of the Albanian state.

As for the further position of the Albanian Church, it, like the Georgian Church, was often set to struggle against the Armenian Church, which was considered by the latter as a form of separatism and heresy. A very interesting statement on this subject was made by Robert Hewsen, an American scholar of Armenian origin. He writes that if it were not for the Armenian Church, which suppressed this step with the help of the Arabs in 705, the Albanian church and palace would have followed the path of the Georgians and adopted Chalcedonian Christianity. [Hewsen Robert H. and Salvatico Christopher C (2001): 92]. The Albanians found themselves in a desperate situation due to the invasion of the Arabs and the break of the Armenian Church's connection with Byzantium, and its joining the Caliphate.

After the new Byzantine-Caliphate conflict that began in 705, the balance of political forces in the South Caucasus was very changeable and divided into two different camps: 1) Varaz-Bakur, Arshushu, Varazo and, in general, the pro-Byzantine forces, which included most of the Kartli nobility, as well as part of Albania; 2) Armenian *ishkhan*, Albanian *ishkhan* and pro-Arab forces, which include most of the secular and religious figures of these two countries. Here, the pro-Byzantine forces supported the dyophysite orientation, while the pro-Arab forces supported the Monophysite doctrine, and therefore the political struggle had a pronounced religious content [Tavadze L. (2020): 71].

The Manzikert or Manaskert Council of 726, convened by the Armenian Catholicos John of Odzun or Jovannes Ojnetsi, was an important step for the Armenian Monophysite Church, which completely separated its paths from the Dyophysite Church. Michael the Syrian, the Syriac philosopher, in his "Chronicle" in the twentieth chapter of book 9, lists the bishops who participated in the Church Council. We do not see among them the names of Albanian clerics [Chronicle of Michael the Great (2013): XI, 20]. However, N. Adonts, in his work "Armenia in the Age of Justinian" included Bishop of Gardman in the list of bishops participating in the Council [Адонц Н. (1908): 339]. Anyway, a very difficult period began for the Caucasian Albanian Church. This created favorable conditions for the Islamic religion, which spread and strengthened as a result of the Arab invasions.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the Albanian Church, during the turbulent period of the late 6th and early 7th centuries, had to change its position several times in relation to religious teachings. The inconsistency in belonging to one or another doctrine of Christianity was aggravated by the desire of powerful empires in the region to use religion for hegemony in the region and also by the attempts of the Armenian Church to completely subjugate the Albanian one. Christianity could not continue to be the main religion of the Eastern Caucasus in such conditions and later lost its position to the Islamic religion, spread as a result of the Arab invasions. Only the Udi people, the ethno-linguistic group and the Christian minority in the Republic of Azerbaijan, have been able to preserve their cultural and religious identity to this day.

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