

STAGES OF THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN CAUCASIAN ALBANIA**Received: 10 February 2026 | Accepted: 04 April 2026 | Published: 15 April 2026**

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the formation and spread of Christianity in Caucasian Albania as an important factor in the religious, cultural and political development of the South Caucasus. The work covers the main stages of the development of the Albanian state from the ancient period to the early Middle Ages, reveals the role of the apostles Thaddeus, Bartholomew and Saint Elisha in the formation of the Albanian Apostolic Church, and also examines the influence of Jewish communities and migration processes. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of Gregory the Illuminator, King Urnayr and their followers in establishing Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century, as well as on the activities of Vachagan III and Prince Javanshir, aimed at strengthening the church structure, countering pagan beliefs and developing an independent Albanian tradition. The important role of Albanian writing and theological literature in preserving cultural identity is noted, as well as the independent character of Albanian Christianity, which was formed in the mainstream of the Jerusalem tradition against the backdrop of complex socio-political processes in the region.

Keywords: Christianity of Caucasian Albania, King Urnayr, Saint Elisha, Vachagan III, Gregory the Illuminator, sovereign Javanshir.

1. INTRODUCTION

Caucasian Albania is an ancient state in the South Caucasus, distinguished by its diverse ethnocultural and religious interactions, which makes research on this topic particularly significant and relevant. An analysis of the formation of the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church makes it possible not only to recreate a picture of the spiritual life of the region, but also to more fully understand the origins of the multicultural environment in which Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity coexisted for centuries. In modern historical science, this problem has long been studied primarily on the basis of external, primarily Armenian-language sources; however, recent discoveries, including the decipherment of Albanian palimpsests by Z. N. Aleksidze, have formed a new research paradigm. This information provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at previously accepted concepts of the origin of Albanian

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writing and testifies to the existence of its own theological tradition, which was formed already in the 4th century.

The historical background of this study includes the stage of Albania's development against the backdrop of rivalry between the Roman Empire, Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, which forced local authorities to demonstrate particular political and religious flexibility. The informational basis of the work includes the works of famous ancient authors - Moses Kalankatuysky, Stepannos Orbeli, Favstos Buzand and Agathangelos, as well as hagiographic materials dedicated to the martyrdom of Saints Elisha and Grigoris. The research's scientific value is determined by its comprehensive examination of the "Jerusalem" trend in the development of the Albanian Church, which contributed to its significant autonomy from neighboring religious centers. The object of this study is Caucasian Albania as a political and religious entity, while the subject is the spread of Christianity and its development as a state ideology.

The aim of the work is to reconstruct the stages of Christianization of the region and to identify the significance of the activities of Albanian rulers in preserving ethnocultural identity. This research addresses the importance of Jewish communities in shaping the preconditions for the spread of the new religion, distinguishing between the Syrophile and Graecophile stages, and examining the activities of the rulers Urnayr, Vachagan III, and Javanshir. Chronologically, the work covers the period from the 4th century BCE to the early 8th century CE, and territorially, the lands of historical Albania, stretching from Derbent to the Araks River. The scientific novelty of the study lies in its argument for the earlier penetration of Christianity into Albania compared to neighboring regions, as well as in highlighting the problem of confrontation with local religious movements, including the "finger-cutters" sect. The practical significance of the work is determined by the possibility of applying its results in the educational process, the museum sphere and in the protection of monuments of Christian architecture.

Methodology: The research is based on a comprehensive historical-scientific approach based on the principles of historicism, objectivity and systems analysis. The process of the spread and consolidation of Christianity in Caucasian Albania is considered within the framework of broader historical processes characteristic of the South Caucasus and adjacent territories, including the Roman Empire, Parthia, Sassanid Iran and Byzantium. The use of the principle of historicism made it possible to trace the development of the Albanian Church in dynamics, taking into account political changes, interstate relations, ethno-confessional processes, as well as transformations in the religious policy of the ruling elites.

The work also employs a critical analysis of written sources of various origins, including Armenian, Albanian, Byzantine, Georgian and Syriac texts. The study focuses on the works of Moses

Kalankatuysky (History of the Country of Aluank), Movses Khorenatsi, Agathangelos, Favstos Buzand (History of Armenia), Stepannos Orbeli, and other medieval chroniclers. When analyzing the sources, special consideration was given to the time of their creation, the religious affiliation of the authors, the political and historical context, as well as the genre specificity of the texts, including the presence of hagiographic motifs. This approach made it possible to separate church traditions and theological interpretations from the possible historical core of the events under consideration.

The study uses a comparative historical method to reveal the features of the process of Christianization of Caucasian Albania in comparison with similar phenomena in Iberia (Georgia) and Armenia. This comparison makes it possible to identify both the general patterns of the spread of Christianity—the participation of state power, missionary activity, and the formation of a church hierarchy—and the specific features of the Albanian church tradition, including its interaction with the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the peculiarities of the development of church independence.

The study also uses a problem-chronological approach, which allowed the material to be systematized according to key stages of development. These include: the apostolic period associated with the activities of Thaddeus, Bartholomew and Elisha; the stage of state Christianization during the reign of King Urnayr; the period of institutional formation and strengthening of church structures in the 4th–5th centuries; as well as the subsequent development of church organization and religious policy under Vachagan III and Javanshir. This approach allowed us to trace the development of religious beliefs, the transformation of elements of pagan and Zoroastrian beliefs, and the emergence of Christian ideology as a factor in state consolidation. A historical and cultural analysis method was also applied to examine the significance of the Albanian written language and translation tradition in the dissemination of Christian doctrine. The work also draws on modern advances in Caucasian studies, including data on Albanian written monuments and palimpsests, which makes it possible to study the problem of the formation of the Albanian alphabet in a broader scientific context.

2. The first stage of the spread of Christianity in the territory of Caucasian Albania.

Albania is considered one of the most ancient states in the South Caucasus. Historians conventionally divide its thousand-year development into two major periods. The first, the ancient period, spans from the Hellenistic era to the end of classical antiquity (approximately from the 4th century BC to the early 3rd century AD). The second, early medieval period, begins with the emergence of the Sassanid Empire and continues until the Arab conquest, which put an end to the independent existence of the Albanian state in the Caucasus (3rd to early 8th centuries AD). In various ancient sources—Armenian, Persian, Albanian, Georgian, Byzantine, and Arabic—this state is referred to by the names "Albania," "Aran," "Alvan," and "Aghvania" (in Armenian-language sources). It is important to emphasize that various

religions coexisted for centuries on the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It was here that one of the most ancient churches in the Caucasus, the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church, was born, one of the first in the Christian world. Christianity occupies a special place in the system of world religions as a monotheistic faith. Its origin dates back to the 1st century AD. The religion, which appeared in Palestine, was founded by Jesus Christ. The foundation of Christian doctrine is the belief that God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sent to save humanity; after the crucifixion, he was resurrected and ascended to heaven. Christians believe that the prophet Isa is the Son of God, who at the end of time will reappear as a divine savior, defeat the forces of evil, and establish a thousand-year Kingdom of God, where the faithful servants of God will live (Alizada, 2016, p. 15).

It is known that during the apostolic period, the Christian Church had primarily Jewish roots, and its spread occurred through the migration of Jewish communities. Many researchers note that the emergence and spread of Christianity in the Caucasus, particularly within Caucasian Albania, was closely linked to the presence of Jewish communities in these territories. The first Jewish settlements in the Caucasus appeared as early as the sixth and fifth centuries BC, during the Babylonian captivity. After the conquest of Babylon in 536 BC, the Persian king Cyrus permitted Jews to return to their homeland, but some remained in Persian service and gradually adopted the Persian language. When large waves of immigrants from Persia reached the Caucasus, they apparently included a significant number of Jews. Most of these immigrants settled at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains, primarily in the regions of Mamrash, Majalis, Shemakha, Gakh, Derbent, Quba, Sheki, and Jinikh. Far from their historical homeland, Jewish communities strictly adhered to the Mosaic Law and deeply respected its precepts. The religious life of these communities was centered on messianic expectations and faith in the coming Anointed One—Savior and King. In the lead-up to the birth of Jesus Christ, against the backdrop of the strengthening of the Roman presence in Palestine, migration activity intensified, which contributed to the growth in the number of Jews moving to the territory of Caucasian Albania. One of the main reasons for the resettlement of Jewish communities to the Caucasus was the absence of religious persecution: the region supported the peaceful coexistence of various faiths. The activities of the Jewish diaspora did not conflict with the interests of the local population; on the contrary, they contributed to the development of the economy and cultural spheres, as well as the inclusion of the region in broader global cultural processes.

According to Albanian tradition, the history of Christianity in these lands is divided into two successive periods. The first, known as the Apostolic Period, is associated with the work of the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, as well as their disciple, Saint Elisha (Mara-Dadi). This stage is conventionally referred to as the Syrophile period. It spans the period up to the 4th century, when Christianity was spread in Syriac-Aramaic by the Apostles, their followers, and Syrian missionaries and

Nazarenes. According to Moses of Kalankatuy, "we, the inhabitants of the East, inherited the holy Apostle Thaddeus, who first arrived in Armenia and was martyred there by King Sanatruk" (Kalankatuklu, 2006, pp. 533–534). Some time later, a follower of the Apostle Thaddeus, the righteous Elisha, returned to Jerusalem, where he was consecrated by Saint James, a relative of the Lord, the first patriarch of Jerusalem. Having received the blessing, Elisha chose the East as his destiny, which in this sense means Albania, considered the eastern border of the Christian world in comparison with Jerusalem (Kalankatuklu, 2006, pp. 533–534). According to Albanian tradition, the righteous Elisha, having left Jerusalem and heading to Persia, passing Armenia, located in Asia Minor, began missionary work in three regions - Chole, Lpinia, and Albania (Muradyan, 1982, p. 252). Having also arrived in Gish (Sheki), Elisha built a church and offered a pure bloodless sacrifice. This location is considered the fundamental root of the temples of the peoples of the East, the origin of the capital cities and the starting point of Christian missionary work (Kalankatuklu, 2006, p.534).

During the apostolic stage of the development of the Albanian Church, a bishopric and a metropolis were created; Elisha, having established a bishop's see in Kish, became the first bishop and archbishop of the Albanian Church. Elisha died at the hands of pagans and ended his martyrdom for religion in the village of Helmes (in the Zergun Valley), but this did not stop the spread of Christianity. Much later, by order of the Albanian king Vachagan III (487–510), Elisha's remains were found in the area known as Urekan. They were transferred for burial to the village of Khruk, and a small church was built over the grave (Allahverdi, 2025, p. 86).

A different scenario for the development of Christianity is described by the 13th-century Albanian chronicler Stephanos Orbeli, who describes the Apostle Bartholomew's educational works. Contrary to Armenian tradition, which attributes his speeches primarily to Armenia, Orbeli points out that Bartholomew's mission primarily concerned Syunik and Caucasian Albania. According to Stephanos Orbeli, the people of Syunik believed in Christ before the people of Armenia. Coming from Persia, Apostle Bartholomew passed through Atrpatakan, crossed the Araks River, and entered the borders of Sisakan (Syunik). There, he preached in the village of Ordubad in the Arevik region, as well as in Goghtne and the lands of Bagk. These territories accepted the Gospel and were personally baptized by the Apostle. In Goghtne, Bartholomew founded a church (Stepannos Orbeli, Chapter V).

Consequently, the Syunik diocese, which had close contact with Albania, also has apostolic roots. The establishment of Christianity within the borders of present-day Azerbaijan is usually associated with the figure of the Apostle Bartholomew, a follower of Thaddeus and one of the twelve companions of Jesus Christ. According to the notes of Stepannos Orbeli, he opened the path of enlightenment in the Goghtne district of Sisakan, in the lands of today's Ordubad region. For spreading the faith, Bartholomew was captured in 71 AD and killed at the behest of a relative of the Armenian monarch. An Albanian church was later built at the site of his death (Allahverdi, 2025, p. 82).

3. The second stage of the spread of Christianity in the territory of Armenia and Albania.

The fourth century marked the beginning of the next cycle of Christianization, known as the Graecophile period. During this era, Christianity was proclaimed the official religion and became a unified historical process for Armenia, Iberia, and Albania. Gregory the Illuminator and the Albanian monarch Urnayr played a decisive role in this process for Albania. According to Agathangelos, Movses Khorenatsi (II, 74), and Moses of Kalankatuy (I, 14), Gregory the Illuminator was a descendant of the Parthian dynasty. He was the son of Anak, from the Surena-Pahlava clan, one of the seven noble Persian families. He was marked by God in his mother's womb, named a holy martyr and apostle before his birth, and after birth, sent to the heirs of Ashkenaz to spread the faith. After Anak's death, Gregory was taken to Greek lands, where, according to the author, he "was guarded for the deliverance of Armenia and all the eastern regions," namely Albania. Gregory was educated and acquired knowledge in Caesarea, the capital of the Greek region of Cappadocia, where he mastered Syriac and Hellenic scripts. The ruler Tiridates, who revered idols, with the assistance of a ferocious dragon, forced Gregory to serve vice cults, but countless tortures did not break his spirit. His fortitude only grew stronger, and for his triumph over open and hidden enemies, he was awarded a crown. Unable to overcome the righteous man, the monarch's supporters threw him into a deep pit in Artashat, teeming with snakes and other vermin. He remained there for three decades. During this same period, the emperor also killed the martyrs Hripsime, Gayane, and 35 other virgins. The Lord punished the monarch and his retinue: the demons they had extolled rose up against them, driving them mad and forcing them to mutilate themselves. The king took the form of a pig and hid in the thicket, believing the hour of the Great Judgment had arrived (Kazaryan, 2001, p. 34).

While the people were terrified, a celestial being appeared in a vision to Khosrovdut, a relative of the monarch Trdat, informing them that deliverance would come only through Saint Gregory, who was languishing in a dark ditch. Despite the disbelief of those around him, Gregory remained unharmed and was triumphantly released and brought to Vagharshapat. The great righteous man healed the sick and even the sovereign himself through his prayers, and the people were freed from illnesses and vices. He pointed to the righteous martyrs, whose remains were interred at the site of their death. Soon, Gregory baptized the entire Armenian kingdom, directing its inhabitants to the religion of God. Following a divine command, Gregory ascended to the rank of bishop and spread the teachings of Christ. Finding himself in Albania, he enlightened the people about the precepts of Christ, initiated the construction of a church in the settlement of Amaras, and selected assistants to complete it (Muradyan, 1982, pp. 536–537).

Upon returning, he appointed his son Vrtanes as his successor, who inherited his mission, living honestly and condemning vice. Once, during a liturgy in the Taron district, angry idolaters, at the instigation of the ruler's wife, attacked Vrtanes, intending to take his life. However, by divine providence, they were suddenly paralyzed and, after the intercession of the saint, were restored to health and called to reform (Kazaryan,2001, pp. 35–37).

Vrtanes fathered twins: the firstborn, Yusik, possessed of impeccable character, died for his faith, denouncing the sinful monarch; the younger, Grigoris, emulating his ancestor, chose the religious path from an early age. The second brother, endowed with a noble appearance, imbued with pious qualities, and possessed of the highest wisdom, was elevated to the rank of bishop of the lands of Iberia and Albania. He avoided marriage and, at the age of fifteen, ascended to the see over the Iberian and Albanian lands, even reaching the Mazkut territories. Once in place, he restored churches, introducing spiritual statutes, emulating the experience of the great Gregory, his grandfather. The people of Albania subsequently proclaimed the young Grigoris their high priest, for even during his earthly journey, King Urnayr had begged Saint Gregory to appoint him bishop of his lands. This step was not due to necessity or the dominance of the Armenians over the Albanians, but to the voluntary choice of the people themselves, who considered the successor of Saint Gregory worthy of this service (Mamedova,2005, p. 11).

Following the example of the apostles, he performed the rite of baptism of pagans, not attaching importance to material goods, and kept with himself the revered relics - the relics of the great martyr Panteleimon and the blood of the righteous Zechariah "The History of the Country of Aluank" supplements Buzand's account with the report that Bishop Gregory succeeded in converting many thousands of Maskuts to Christianity, including the children of Sanesan himself, who were baptized with the names Moses, Daniel, and Elijah. Sanesan attempted to force them to renounce their new faith, but, confronted with their stubbornness, ordered their execution (Alikberov,2015, p. 59).

Gregory's work consisted of explaining the dogmas of the Holy Trinity and the incarnation of the Divine Word. He prohibited robbery and cruelty, and spoke of the signs of Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to heaven, and future Justice. According to Faustus Buzand, the Maskuts initially heeded him, but soon the fighters rebelled, believing his speeches would deprive them of their gain. On their orders, Gregory was attached to a wild horse and released into the steppe near the coast of the "northern sea," where he met his death. His followers recovered his remains and buried them in the village of Amaras, in the lands of Albania, near the church erected by his ancestor, the great Gregory (Nikonorov,2005, pp. 33–34).

The monarch Urnayr was of exceptional importance in the history of Caucasian Albania, whose leadership was marked by significant changes in spiritual and political life. The Albanian ruler Urnayr,

of Parthian descent, having learned of the deeds and miracles performed by Saint Gregory in Armenia, "moved from the paths of ignorance to the true Lord." Understanding how the Armenian people had found the true God, his thoughts were strengthened. Urnair traveled to the residence of the Armenian ruler Tiridates. There, he received a warm welcome, bowed before Gregory, denounced the errors of paganism, and prayed for cleansing from past misdeeds. Saint Gregory supported him, noting that the Son of God had appeared not to condemn, but for salvation. In 314, Urnair proclaimed Christianity the official religion of Albania. Through the new faith, the monarch Urnayr hoped to unite a multinational state and resist Zoroastrian Iran. This policy was continued by his successors (Mamedova, 2005, p. 537). Following this, the sovereign and his retinue observed a forty-day fast, renounced vices, and performed penance. On the fiftieth day, they underwent the sacrament and were filled with divine grace (Kalankatuklu, 2006, p. 70).

According to Kalankatuysky, "the king descended into holy water, and his entire army with him," and Gregory performed the rite of rebirth into the Holy Trinity over him (Mamedova, 2005, p. 537). Having received a second birth from Saint Gregory, Urnayr returned to Albania and began the Christian enlightenment of his people. It should not be forgotten that Christianity took root earlier in Albania than in Armenia, as evidenced by the writings of Moses of Kalankatuy. The letter of the Armenian Patriarch Abraham notes that the Albanian See arose earlier than the Armenian one, thanks to the Apostle Elisha. Furthermore, the Armenians adopted Christianity 270 years later than the Albanians. This is described in detail above.

The period of Hellenic influence was relatively brief, after which Albania's religious institution entered a period of autonomous cultural growth, which stimulated the development of local literature. The existence of two periods—Syrophile and Graecophile—is also supported by the 8th-century Albanian chronicler Moses Kalankatuy, who notes the existence of texts in Greek and Syriac in Albania. Unlike the Armenian Church, the Albanian Church initially had direct contact with Jerusalem, its liturgical structure, and patriarchate. In this respect, it is similar to the Georgian Church, whose origins similarly trace back to the spiritual milieu of Jerusalem. The formation and progress of Christianity in the Albanian Church were closely intertwined with the fate of Eastern Christianity and echoed the unifying principles of its development, while retaining its distinctive features. Both the transmission of faith and the development of church structure in Albania passed through two main stages: the apostolic phase and the phase that followed the proclamation of Christianity as the official faith in the 4th century.

Throughout its history, the Albanian spiritual organization was able to maintain its sovereignty, and no outside community had the power to interfere in its internal affairs (Allahverdi, 2025, p. 91). During this period, the Albanian Church was less dependent on Byzantium than the Georgian and Armenian Churches and maintained its ties with the Church of Jerusalem (Nikonorov, 2005, p. 59). Nevertheless, despite the fact that Christianity was proclaimed the official faith of Albania, it failed to

become the dominant worldview. The main reason for this was that a significant part of the local population, represented by Turkic communities, remained committed to Tengrism, while the small number of non-Turkic groups did not seek to abandon their traditional beliefs and astral cults. The situation was further aggravated by the increasing persecution of believers, especially during the reign of Shapur II (Allahverdi,2025, p. 92). It is important to emphasize that the establishment of Christianity within Caucasian Albania was conditioned by processes occurring in the Caucasus region and throughout the world. At the dawn of the 4th century, Christian teaching in the Roman Empire became a legitimate religion, and society began to perceive believers as individuals with outstanding moral and spiritual values. The following three hundred years created the conditions for Christianity to become an official religion in large regions (Abdullayev, 2022 p. 137).

A local script, a unique alphabet, made a significant contribution to the process of introducing and consolidating the faith. Thanks to it, the Holy Scriptures and other religious works were translated into the Albanian dialect from Aramaic and Hellenic. A remarkable discovery by the renowned scholar Zaza Nikolaevich Aleksidze, his discovery of ancient signs (Georgian-Albanian palimpsests) and their analysis, confirmed that Albanian script and religious writings already existed in the fourth century. This revelation points to the fallacy of the prevailing Armenian historiography, according to which Albanian script was supposedly created by Mesrop Mashtots in the fifth century. In fact, Mesrop Mashtots did not even construct Armenian letters; he merely adopted them from the Ethiopians(Mamedova,2005, pp. 538-539).

4. The role of Vachagan 3 in strengthening Christianity and eliminating destructive groups.

Vachagan III contributed to the further development of the Albanian state, focusing on strengthening Christian institutions and internal consolidation. Vachagan III, who earned the title of "the Pious" for his work, implemented a strict anti-Persian government line, energetically introducing Orthodoxy and eradicating Mazdaism and idolatry: he "introduced severe punishments and fines for those who built shrines, practiced witchcraft, or venerated certain vile deities, who did not strictly and steadfastly observe the Christian canons. If, even after numerous warnings, magicians, sorcerers, and clergy continued to engage in their evil deeds, they were subjected to cruel torture, beaten with rods, chained, and brought to the ruler's palace, where he severely punished them."(Favstos,1953, p. 85).

Vachagan ordered that those who had apostatized from the faith be reburied, and that those who had been misled from childhood be rebaptized in order to return them to Christianity (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 84). On Vache's initiative, a law on freedom of conscience was proclaimed. The Tsar prayed tirelessly, observed abstinence, helped those in need, and strengthened church dogmas. He appointed episcopates and clergy throughout the territory, and during this period, the prestige of the

faith increased significantly (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 86). Monarch Vachagan ordered that the offspring of magicians and pagan priests be sent to gymnasiums to educate them in the Orthodox spirit, strengthen their understanding of the dogma of the Holy Trinity, and instruct them in the veneration of the Creator. He gathered the children in the village of Rustak, provided them with support, appointed mentors, and trained them to be preachers, closely monitoring their progress and rejoicing in their achievements (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 88).

Chronicles report on demon worshipers and finger-cutters—this group was highly developed and remained invulnerable for a long period until Vachagan was able to destroy it along with other "heresies" in Albania(Trever, 1959, pp. 279-280). The monarch, wishing to destroy such pagan groups, ordered the arrest of all those involved in the reprisals. Despite severe torture—blows and the instillation of a vinegar-saltpeter solution into their nostrils—the perpetrators remained silent. Then the ruler promised the safety of the youngest of them in exchange for a revelation. The youth confessed that the members of the community worshiped Satan, who came to them in human form. By his order, they flayed people alive and cut off their fingers, performing sacrifices on a special podium with a three-legged chair. If there weren't enough dead, the demon forced them to take the lives of close relatives by poison. The teenager also betrayed the remaining members of the sect. The king fulfilled his promise: he spared the youth's life, but ordered him to personally kill his former comrades using their own savage methods. By Vachagan's order, the surviving criminals were taken to their home villages and executed in front of their families, in order to finally eradicate filth (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 90). Other diabolical and pagan rites also existed in the country: some demons blinded people, others afflicted them with leprosy. The ruler sought out such individuals and executed them. He eliminated all pernicious currents and robbers within the borders of Albania.

For these labors, diligence, and adherence to heavenly command, the compassionate Creator revealed to Tsar Vachagan the locations of the remains of the ascetics who suffered for the name of Christ, as well as enormous riches (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 91). The Tsar and his wife followed barefoot as the holy relics were moved, followed by their subjects and crowds of townspeople bearing a cross, incense, and flowers. The Tsar glorified Jesus and ordered the reliquary to be decorated with precious fabrics, stones, and gold, and an altar to be built for the sacred books and relics (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 96).

5. Javanshir's activities in maintaining relations with Byzantium to strengthen the country's position.

At the end of the 7th century, Javanshir, the ruler of Girdman and the de facto head of the Albanian state, played an important role in the history of Caucasian Albania. A letter from the Byzantine Emperor

Constantine IV attests to the international recognition of his authority. In his letter, the basileus addressed Javanshir as the ruler of Girdman and all of Albania, calling him protopatrikios and viceroy of the East, expressing respect and support on behalf of the imperial court. Reflecting on the future of his state, Javanshir, with the support of his loyal retinue and nobles, established himself on the throne. He devoted himself not to entertainment, but to fair justice and the protection of the country's interests. Thanks to his intelligence and political strength, he subjugated the mountain tribes and ruled vast lands—from the borders of Kartli to the Caspian Gates and the Araks River (Kalankatuklu,2006, p. 98). In the nineteenth year of his reign, Emperor Constans entered Persia with a large army. He was carrying a Christian relic—a piece of the Holy Cross. Through his military commander, he invited Javanshir to negotiations. Javanshir boldly approached the emperor with a request to hand over a piece of this relic—a piece of the Cross on which Christ was crucified. The emperor agreed: he separated a small fragment and presented it to Javanshir, saying that this relic would protect him and his descendants in battle. The clergy and nobility solemnly greeted the relic, after which the Christian faith was strengthened in the country. When the emperor left, he bid farewell to Javanshir in front of all the nobility, not as a subordinate, but as an equal and close person—like a brother (Kalankatuklu,2006, pp. 210–211). Javanshir decided to choose a worthy place to keep the relic—a piece of the Holy Cross. On his family estate, in the fortress of Girdyman, he built a church and richly decorated it in honor of Christ (Kalankatuklu,2006, pp. 210–211).

Several years after his victory over the Khazars, Javanshir completed the construction of a magnificent temple in honor of the Almighty. Entering the radiant monastery, he knelt and prayed: "Lord! Now come to Thy monastery!" After this, together with the patriarch and the synod, he visited the monastery he had founded, where he ordered that any traveler be given shelter (Kalankatuklu,2006, pp. 213–214).

The death of the ruler Javanshir occurred in Barda late in the evening. Javanshir was strolling in the park when Varaz suddenly attacked him. Despite his personal bravery, the ruler was unable to change the outcome of the battle, as his sword became lodged in the traitor's armor, and he suffered multiple, severe wounds. However, the ruler remained lucid for several more days and managed to dispose of his property and distribute positions among his heirs. His death caused deep grief and subsequent chaos throughout the Albanian state (Kalankatuklu,2006, pp. 238–241).

After his death, central authority in Caucasian Albania weakened significantly. The Arab Caliphate gradually began to strengthen its influence in the region. A significant number of local rulers recognized Arab authority, which eventually facilitated the spread of Islam in certain areas. Despite these political changes, the Christian faith continued to persist, especially in the mountainous regions and among the nobility. However, the role of the church became more limited and fragmented.

6. CONCLUSION

Christianity in Caucasian Albania developed as a historically stable phenomenon, which went through two key stages of development: the early Eastern and the later Byzantine, which had an organizational and institutional character. This dynamic reflects both the region's ties to the See of Jerusalem and its involvement in the overall development of the global Christian ecumene. The early missionary work of Thaddeus, Bartholomew, and Elisha laid the foundations of the religious tradition and contributed to the formation of the initial Christian identity even before the official formation of the church structure.

In the 4th century, under King Urnayr and with the active participation of Gregory the Illuminator, Christianity was consolidated as the state religion, which became an important stage in the institutional strengthening of the Albanian Church. Despite persistent pressure from Mazdean Iran and the persistence of some of its previous religious practices, the Albanian Church is gradually forming an autonomous system of governance, developing a written culture, and translating biblical texts, which strengthens the processes of religious consolidation and ethnocultural self-determination of the population. Urnayr, Vachagan III and Javanshir played a significant role in establishing Christianity as a state ideology, viewing it as an important instrument for the spiritual and political integration of society. As a result, Christianity in Albania should be considered not only as a religious system, but also as a complex factor in social, political and cultural development, which ensured the formation of a stable church tradition and emphasized the special position of the Albanian Church in the history of the Caucasus region and the Christian world as a whole.

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