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CHRISTIAN HERITAGE OF KARABAKH AS ‘APPLE OF DISCORD’: OVERVIEW OF CONFLICT HISTORY

*One of the most common ornaments
of Albanian monuments*

A new era started in the history of the South Caucasus after Azerbaijan liberated its territories from Armenian occupation as a result of the 44-day war in fall 2020. A significant chance emerged for resolving the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which has been flaring up incessantly for over a century. Thousands of destroyed cities and villages, cemeteries, mosques, churches and other historical and architectural monuments remained in the liberated territories. Restoration of this heritage, including primarily religious and historical sites, is currently in full swing.

Meanwhile, some foreign commentators expressed concern over the future fate of the Christian monuments in Karabakh, erroneously regarding all of them as part of the Armenian spiritual and architectural heritage. Azerbaijan reasonably reminds the international community that the overwhelming majority of these sites pertain to the Christian heritage of the ancient Albanian autocephalous church, the period of the an-

cient Caucasian Albania, and in particular, the Udi people, who have preserved their Albanian faith to date and cherish their memorable history.

The process of revitalizing the Albanian Autocephalous Apostolic Church on the basis of local Albanian-Udi communities is underway in Azerbaijan. Registration of the Albanian Udi Christian community in the Azerbaijan Republic in 2003 was the first step taken in this direction. In 2010, the Christian Udi community of the town of Oguz was registered (1). These communities, which include thousands of Christians, own several churches. Following the liberation of the occupied territories, Albanian Christian shrines will be restored and some of them transferred to the Christian communities of Azerbaijan.

In this regard, it would be appropriate to provide a brief description of the history of Caucasian Albania, the Albanian autocephalous church and the subsequent “Armenianizing” of this abundant legacy. The ancient Caucasian Albania (endonym-Aran) existed as various



Khudavank monastery, the pearl of Albanian architecture of the Middle Ages

state entities (in the 4th century BCE-8th century CE), for more than 1,000 years and further for another millennium in the form of small semi-independent formations up until the 18th century. The ancient Albanian state, which was located approximately within the same boundaries from the ancient time period to the early Middle Ages, spanning from the Araz river in the south to the spurs of the Greater Caucasus mountain range in the north, played an important role in the history of the Caucasus peoples. In some periods of history, the borders of Albania stretched along the Kura river or split between several state entities. The Aranshahs, Aran Atabays and other rulers governed these states in the Middle Ages.

The Azerbaijani people are among primary heirs of the historical and cultural heritage of Albania, whose territory essentially coincides with the pres-

ent-day borders of the Azerbaijan Republic. Currently, the title "Albania", derived from ancient Greek sources (**Ἀλβανία**) (2), is widespread in the historical science, while "Aran" (ar-Ran or Ran) remains the original geographic name of this area.



Monastery complex Gandzasar, the largest monument of Christian Albania



The Anabasis of Alexander, a piece of work written by ancient author Arrian, contains initial accounts regarding the population of Caucasian Albania. Arrian refers to the involvement of Albanians in the Achaemenid army fighting the troops of Alexander the Great during the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE. Therefore, as early as in the 4th century BCE, Albans (Agvans) were famed for their military deeds. According to Strabo, the Albanian nation emerged on the basis of 26 tribes and each of these once spoke its own language and had its own czar; they were later united and ruled by a single czar (3).

The Albanian written language, which was instrumental in spreading and asserting Christianity in the region, facilitated the translation of the Bible and other theological literature from the Syrian and Greek languages from the middle of the 4th century. This is proven by an Albanian rescript (M/8t-13, M/5sh-50) found in 1996 by Academician Z. N. Aleksidze, an associate member of Georgia's Academy of Sciences, in St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. Aleksidze noted that the discovery of a complete lectionary created in the Albanian script and language in Sinai directly indicates that advanced Christian writing was applied in Albania. Aleksidze wrote that the information in various sources about available translations of the books

of prophets, Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles into the Albanian language was fully confirmed by the Sinai discovery. Only a nation that possesses a full text of the Bible in its mother tongue may have a lectionary.

"The fact that some of the readings discovered in the Albanian lectionary are not encountered in the most ancient Armenian and Georgian lectionaries is worthy of attention as well. This is proof of the fact that the Albanian Lectionary is not a translation from any of these languages, but was compiled independently on the basis of the currently missing Greek Lectionary," Aleksidze said (4).

Armenian Catholicos Babgen I wrote back in the 6th century with regard to the Christian faith of the Caucasus states, "As we wrote to you earlier, we have such a faith that is in accord with those of the Georgians and Albanians and each of these is in our own language" (5).

In the 8th-12th centuries, Albanian state entities and the church started to weaken, largely due to the Arab invasion and the fact that Arab rulers were seeking to subordinate the Albanian Church to the Armenian one, which advocated for the Caliphate's interests in Asia Minor and the Caucasus in that period.

It is noteworthy that Gandzasar was mentioned for the first time in the mid-10th century by Armenian



Catholicos Ananias I in a message titled "On the Rebellion in the House of Aghvank", which listed the Gandzasar ruler among senior Albanian clergymen that were independent of the Armenian Church (6). The existence of the Gandzasar Patriarchate was also mentioned in the commentary to the translation of the "Book of Stories" by 17th century author Arakel Davrijetsi.

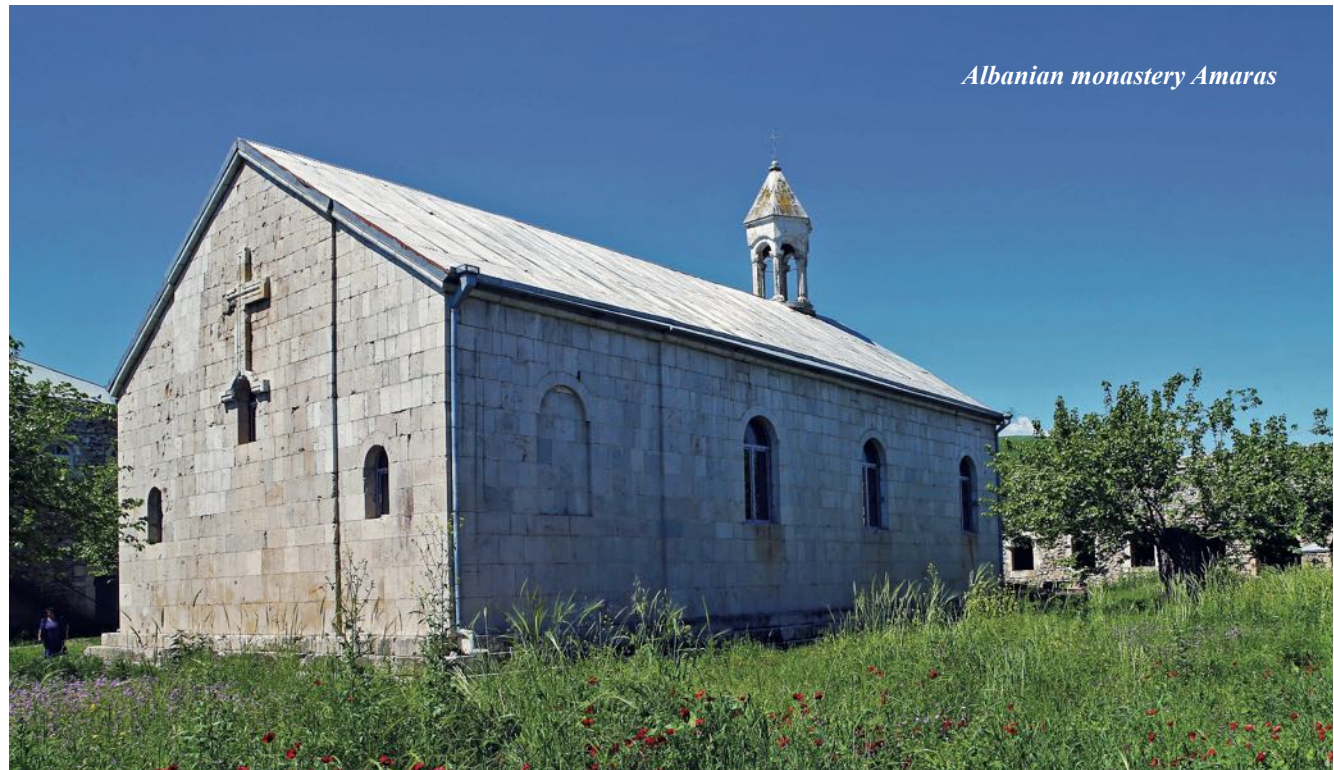
"Patriarchal thrones also existed in Jerusalem, Sis, Akhtamar and Gandzasar (the latter was abolished in the early 19th century)," Davrijetsi wrote (7).

The subsequent period, i.e. the 12th-13th centuries, saw a decline of the Arab Caliphate and its power began to be taken over by Turkic tribes. The spread of Turkic domination in Asia Minor and the Caucasus allowed numerous Christian communities and rulers to bolster their presence, since the Turkic rulers were known for their acceptance of non-Muslims and were often followers of the Christian faith themselves. This period of history was remembered by the flourishing of the Albanian Principality of Khachen and the Patriarchy based in Gandzasar, which housed the department of the Albanian Catholicos. A great number of religious buildings were constructed in the area, which indicated the high level of architecture. Monastery facilities were becoming centers for the construction of religious worship sites. Many of these were built as ancestral tombs

of large feudal families. Most of the remaining domed temples were built in the 13th century. These shrines are part of the monastery complexes of Gandzasar. The grand appearance of the Gandzasar temple reflects the abundance and strength of the Principality of Khachen and an emerging hope that the Christian population of Albania bound for unification of divided principalities and revitalization of the Albanian state (8). It is particularly worth mentioning that the Khachen ruler called himself "atabay", which indicates a Turkic trace and influence upon this partially independent principality.

The role of Gandzasar bishops from the Hasan-Jalal dynasty increased from 1240. In the late 14th-early 15th





Albanian monastery Amaras

century, Gandzasar Monastery served as the chair for the Albanian Catholicoi. From then onward, the Albanian Catholicate had been called Gandzasar. In 1634, the Gandzasar Patriarchate had to recognize the supremacy of the Etchmiadzin Catholicate, but it continued to surpass Armenian clergymen on matters related to the ordainment of Albanian Catholicoi.

Unfortunately, the Gandzasar monastery, just like many other shrines located in Azerbaijan's Karabakh territory, sustained numerous changes, significant rebuilding or so-called "restoration" aimed at Armenianizing this sample of Albanian spiritual, cultural and historical heritage. Therefore, the original state and significance of Gandzasar may be perceived strictly based on ancient manuscripts, as well as old researches and books.

A significant amount of factual data may be derived from the scientific research of Academician J. Orbeli (1887-1961) and the publications of Bishop Makar Barkhudaryants (1834-1906), which reference the condition of temples, inscriptions and tombstone epitaphs prior to their complete "Armenianization", which started from the beginning or the middle of the 19th century and continues to this day.

Interesting excerpts on the history of Caucasian Albania and Albanians in particular are available **in Orbeli's book titled "Selected works"** (Yerevan, 1963). The scholar noted that **the Armenians had**

captured Albania, in particular, the present-day Nagorno-Karabakh and Khachen. Referring to "northern Armenia", Orbeli explained that in fact, the term implied the land of Albania.

"The images of men armed with swords, bows, quivers, spears, battle axes and spades with little flags waving in the background, as well as warriors that come to the forefront when we research boilers and relief types and those that are very closely consistent with technically much less perfect ornaments of slightly rough cross stones in northern Armenia, more precisely, the southern regions of Albania seized by Armenian feudal lords, just like the current Nagorno-Karabakh and in particular, the region adjacent to Gandzasar, are particularly valuable for keeping chronicles about the everyday life of feudal noblemen of the Caucasus during that epoch (the 12th-13th centuries – R.H.)," Orbeli wrote (9).

Orbeli repeatedly said in his works that the names of **Albanian** patriarchs, princes and well-known people are mentioned on the gravestones and inscriptions encountered in Gandzasar.

Orbeli also places an emphasis in his writing on the personality and tenure of Albanian ruler, Khachen Prince Hasan Jalal Davla.

The Principality of Khachen emerged in the Albanian province of Artsakh in Karabakh in the 12th-13th centuries. According to Orbeli, **"it was part of ancient**

Albania”. The principality’s center was based in the basins of Khachenchay and partially Tartarchay rivers. Hasan Jalal (1215-1261), a descendant of the Albanian Mihranids, became the ruler of this principality.

Hasan Jalal was a suzerain prince of Khachen and Artsakh (partially). According to Armenian, Georgian and Persian sources, as well as epigraphic inscriptions, Hasan Jalal had been granted such high titles as “the prince of princes”, “the king of Albania” and “the great borderland possessor of Albania”. Hasan Jalal, himself, was called the tsar and autocrat. His reign may be considered a period of economic, political and cultural revival of Albania.

The ancient Gandzasar Monastery existed long before Hasan Jalal’s tenure, serving as a family tomb of the Khachen rulers, i.e. Jalalids. Hasan Jalal, himself, was buried there.

Hasan Jalal built the Gandzasar cathedral in 1216-1238 at the insistence of Albanian Patriarch Nerses. Hasan Jalal, himself, regarded it as “the Albanian patronal cathedral”. Nearly all of the Albanian Catholicos or patriarchs of the latest period were buried in Gandzasar, which is evidenced by the epigraphy on gravestones dated until as late as 1828.

According to Orbeli and other researchers, Prince Hasan Jalal Davla had two brothers, Zakaria Nasr Davla and Ivane Atabeg (10). **Evidently, their names and an indication of their affiliation with Azerbaijani Atabays make it clear that this generation of princes has absolutely no bearing on Armenians.** It is noteworthy that **A. Saint-Martin, a well-known 19th century French scholar dealing with Caucasus studies, also wrote that Hasan Jalal’s brothers and entourage were part of the Eldeguzid dynasty, i.e. Atabays of Azerbaijan** (11). **The epigraphic inscriptions of Gandzasar traced back to Hasan Jalal’s tenure cited his title as “the Atabay of Khachen”.**

Orbeli said in an article titled “Hasan Jalal, Prince of Khachen” that the Gandzasar monastery (built in 1216-1238) was sanctified in 1240 in the presence of Albanian Catholicos Nerses (12). Hasan Jalal’s complimentary note on a book of Gospel that he presented to the Albanian Patriarchy in Gandzasar is particularly worth mention-

Medieval Albanian tombstones during the Armenian occupation of Karabakh were doomed to destruction



ing. According to Orbeli, this Gospel is currently kept in the Etchmiadzin library. In that note, Hasan Jalal refers to his trip to Mongolia where he would meet Sartak, a son of Batu Khan.

“I (Hasan Jalal Davla) ...went to see the king of shooters in the East ... Thus, in the summer of 1261, I (brought) this holy Gospel, decorated in memory of the God-loving lady (Mamkan), to our bright and holy patronal (monastery) of Albania, the spiritual father Nerses ...” (13).

Mamkan, Hasan Jalal’s wife, built a magnificent architectural facility at the gate of the Gandzasar church. It was solemnly consecrated in 689 Hijri (1240 AD) in the presence of the Albanian Catholicos. A relevant inscription that remained to date reads, “This church was consecrated in 689 (1240) during the patriarchate of Ter-Nerses, the Catholicos of Albania.”

Some inscriptions made on gravestones say “This herein is the grave of Gregory, the Catholicos of Albania, in 1102 (1653)”, “This is the grave of Yeremin, the Catholicos of Albania from the dynasty of Jalal Dola, in 1149 (1700)” and “This is the grave of Albanian Catholicos Yesayi...1177 (1728)”.

Local residents referred to Gandzasar as Albanian land even in the late 17th century. Having restored the roof of the monastery, Apav, a priest from the Talysh village, left an inscription there that says, “We built roofs and [rebuilt] the collapsed walls of churches in the holy throne of the Albanian Gandzasar at the expense of our righteous funds”(14).

The significance of the Gandzasar patriarchy started to diminish gradually from the 17th-18th centuries.



Clay candlesticks with Albanian inscriptions. National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

Despite having lost their political secular power, representatives of the Hasan Jalal dynasty remained spiritual leaders. They continued to serve as patriarchs, i.e. the Catholicoi of the independent Albanian church until the early 19th century, a period of history that saw the beginning of northern Azerbaijan's accession to the Russian Empire. First, the title of the Albanian Patriarch (Catholicos) was abolished by the Czar's decree in 1815. From then onward, the senior priest of the Albanian Church served as a metropolitan bishop. On March 11, 1836, Emperor of Russia Nicholas I signed special "Regulations" on the status of the Armenian Church consisting of 10 chapters and 111 clauses (15). According to this document (16), the Czar's mandate abolished the Albanian Catholicate (Gandzasar Patriarchate) (17). It was replaced by the two newly established dioceses (Artsakh-Shusha and Shamakhi) under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Catholicate (Etchmiadzin Patriarchate) and the vicariate of Ganja, created as part of the Tiflis consistory of the Armenian Church. In 1909-1910, the Russian Holy Synod authorized the Etchmiadzin Synod and the Erivan Armenian-Gregorian consistory to destroy the old archival files of the subordinate dioceses. Apparently, the Albanian Church archives that had remained available until then were among those documents.

Bishop Makar Barkhudaryants noted the deplorable condition of the Gandzasar monastery in the late 19th century when the shrine was already overseen by the Armenian Church. He wrote that "the wonderful monastery is crumbling morally and materially as stones are gradually falling out and breaking up". He also said "a great number of precious manuscripts have been looted, while the remaining manuscripts, as we have seen, succumbed to dampness and negligence; services have not been performed in the monastery for months, because there are no literate people, schools, monks or just ordinary lectors" (18).

The information provided by Barkhudaryants also makes it clear that the Albanian Church had nine episcopacies in the mountainous part of Karabakh alone back in 1828. Its institutions were entirely "in a flourishing state" and "the monasteries were inhabited". The monasteries were gradually abandoned, losing monk communities, after the abolition of the Albanian Catholicate. Afterwards, the unattended shrines mostly started collapsing, according to available data (19).

The 1836 order of Russian Emperor Nicholas I on the abolition of the Albanian autocephalous church and the handover of its property, books and churches to the jurisdiction of the Armenian Church had tragic

The wall of the courtyard of the Amaras monastery

consequences for the Albanian culture and people. Following the loss of churches' independence and amid ongoing mass settlement of Armenians in the Karabakh region (the territory of the former Caucasian Albania), the process of "Gregorianization" (Armenianization) of the local Christian population (descendants of Caucasian Albanians) was launched and Albans began to be considered Armenians. Later, this fact was admitted by Armenian scholars. A book by historian B. Ishkhanyan, published in Petrograd in 1916, notes that "the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh are partly aborigines, descendants of ancient Albanians, and partly refugees from Turkey and Iran, for whom Azerbaijani land became a shelter from persecution" (20).

The mentioned "Armenianization", which started long before Russia's entry to the region, also affected the dynasty of Hasan Jalal and its members started to be called "the Jalalyans". Albanian Catholicos Yesai, who held the patriarchal throne in 1702-1728, described the roots and origin of the Albans in "A Brief History of the

Country of Albania" (21). He noted frequent Armenian attempts to appropriate Albanian culture and faith with the support of major powers. The Albanian Catholicos aired grievance over the fact that the Armenians were accomplishing their goal time and time again and said he was probably the last descendant of the Albanians who "ruled his land".

The entire 18th century was marred by rivalry over domination between the Armenian Etchmiadzin church and the Albanian Church of Gandzasar and the latter was ultimately defeated. Following the arrival of tsarist Russia in the Caucasus in the early 19th century, the Albanian church lost its status and the Russian authorities relied on Etchmiadzin instead. Raffi (Hakob Melik-Hakobyan), a 19th century Armenian writer, said the following with regard to Gandzasar in "The Princedoms of Khamsa", "It is known that the Catholicate of Aghvank existed for 15 centuries, i.e. from the times of Grigoris (a grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator- R.H.) until 1828. Various monasteries of the country of Aghvank



had been the residence for the Catholicoi. Recently, the Gandzasar monastery in the Khachen province of Karabakh served this purpose," Raffi wrote (22).

"We should not forget that not only Karabakh, but also Gandzak, Shamakhi, Nukha, Derbent and other provinces were the dioceses of the Aghvank Catholicate," he said (23).

Referring to Karabakh Christians, Raffi wrote that **"these people are accustomed to being independent of Etchmiadzin and having their own special spiritual leadership, which was fulfilled by the Catholicate of Aghvank for many centuries"** (24).

Russian documents (25) include **a letter written by Israel, the latest Albanian patriarch, who indignantly noted gradual abolition of the Albanian Church and its re-subordination to the Ararat (Etchmiadzin) Catholicos**, who previously had no bearing whatsoever on Albanians, whose patriarchy was located in Karabakh at the Amaras monastery (in Azerbaijan's Khojavand district). The patriarch stressed that they were Armenians by faith (Monophysites/Gregorians) and had never reported or belonged to the Ararat (Etchmiadzin) Patriarchate.

The mentioned document said it was **"a letter of Aghvan Patriarch Israel to Count Gudovich, dated August 19, 1806"**.

"About 1,400 years have passed since Grigoris, a grandson of great Armenian Saint Gregory, was ordained as Patriarch," the letter said. It reads further that **"all Armenians living in Karabakh, Yelizavetpol, Shaki**

and Shirvan... i.e. the Aghvan province, was assigned to his diocese at his full disposal". This right with regard to this monastery has been valid to date **"and former Ararat patriarchs had no business and never dealt with it"**, the cleric wrote, adding that **decision-making depended entirely "on a single Amaras patriarch"** (26).

Despite the Albanian patriarch's request, the czarist autocracy reassigned the Albanian churches to Etchmiadzin. **The Russian authorities neglected the fact that the congregations of the Armenian and Albanian churches included representatives of completely different peoples.** This was followed by a riot led by Albanian Patriarch Israel (27). In the long run, the autocracy quelled the rebellion. The Albanian churches and worshippers were subsequently subordinated to the Etchmiadzin Catholicos, while **the Albanian patriarch who spearheaded the riot was exiled and died shortly thereafter. Afterwards, the Etchmiadzin church started insistently asking the czarist autocracy to subordinate the churches and congregations in Karabakh and Ganja to it as well** (28). **Etchmiadzin's request was fulfilled; the Armenian Church completely took over and destroyed the heritage, temples, culture and peoples of Caucasian Albania at the hands of the autocracy.**

These developments occurred against the backdrop of mass settlement of Armenians from Turkey, Iran and the Middle East to the South Caucasus, in particular, Karabakh, Zangazur and Erivan, in the 19th and 20th

centuries. Russian scholar N. Shavrov, who was closely involved in enforcing the measures on colonizing the Caucasus, said **“more than 1 million out of 1.3 million Armenians living in Transcaucasia were not among indigenous residents and we settled them in the region”** by the early 20th century.

The historian mentioned the “highland part of the Yelizavetpol governorate”, i.e. the present-day Nagorno-Karabakh, among the areas populated by Armenian settlers. Shavrov particularly stressed that **“Armenians from among landless newcomers, having widely used perjury, seized vast state-owned land”** (29).

The mass settlement of Armenians in the South Caucasus continued during the USSR period and after its collapse. It was marred by consistent expulsion of local Azerbaijani population in 1918-20, as well as in 1947-53 and 1988-1993. About a million Azerbaijanis were ousted from Armenia and Karabakh during the Karabakh conflict alone. However, this matter is a topic for another research project. This article briefly references the reasons for the conflicting views between Armenian and Azerbaijani people concerning historical, spiritual and architectural heritage. Our goal is to prevent any attempts to plant “an apple of discord” and trigger conflict between the two nations. In doing so, it is necessary to take stock of the historical developments and political pre-conditions that caused the conflict in order to avoid its reoccurrence in the future. 🌟

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