

# THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CAUCASUS<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The crown of Mesopotamia's Fertile Crescent, the protracted arc giving rise to some of humanity's first societies, dissolves into an isthmus bounded by the Black and Caspian Seas. To its north soars a leviathan of granite, the Caucasus Mountains, beyond which unfurls the expansive Eurasian Steppe, the fulcrum of cross-cultural and economic networks spanning pre-modern Eurasia. Owing to its strategic location and bountiful resources, Caucasia<sup>2</sup> has long been a thoroughfare for migration, trade, and invasion. And it was home to some of the oldest hominin communities outside East Africa, as is attested by the fossils unearthed at Dmanisi in southern Georgia. The oldest of these remarkable remains have been carbon dated to 1.8 million years ago. Early societies subsequently flourished in Caucasia, including the Mesolithic Trialetian Culture and the Bronze Age Kura-Araxes Culture, the last of which reached as far south as Syria and Palestine. Beyond the isthmus, faraway Caucasia became the stuff of legends. Ancient Hebrews believed Noah's ark to have made landfall near the Armenian Plateau. Greeks recited stories about the chaining of Prometheus to a Caucasian<sup>3</sup> peak and of Jason and the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece in Colchis. To Iranians, the foreboding Caucasian North was the habitat of demons.<sup>4</sup> Although Caucasia's depiction as an exotic periphery of Eurasia's famous 'civilisations' persists even today, across pre-modern times the region has been a durable epicentre of cross-cultural interplay, a status paramount for understanding Caucasia's early Christian history (e.g. Garsoïan and Martin-Hisard 2012; Toumanoff 1963).

## Caucasian conversion tales

The standard account of Caucasia's Christianisation is a fragmented vision concentrated upon three royal conversions in late antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Although these events are habitually situated within stringent ethnocentric frameworks, in reality they were expressions of a pan-regional phenomenon inextricably tied to the Afro-Eurasian ecumene. When the monarchs of Armenia Major,<sup>6</sup> Kartli (Iberia) in eastern Georgia, and Albania<sup>7</sup> embraced Christianity in the first half of the fourth century, they enabled public Christianisation across southern Caucasia, especially along the interlocked basins of the Araxes and Kura Rivers. In the fifth century, rulers of Lazika in western Georgia, a littoral area often under Roman control, also converted (Khrushkova 2017).



Map 4.1 Early Christian Caucasus. Reprocessed satellite photograph imaged by Terra-MODIS, September 2004. Courtesy of Reto Stöckli, NASA Earth Observatory

Through Lazika, as well as eastern Georgia and Albania, Christianity also penetrated Northern Caucasia, including the strategic area of Suania (cf. modern Svaneti).<sup>8</sup> The Christianising Roman Empire had not engineered the conversions of Caucasia's inland realms, yet Constantinople appreciated the potential for alliance based on shared religious affiliation. The ecclesiastical histories of Rufinus and Socrates as well as other Graeco-Roman sources thus interpret Caucasia's royal conversions as proof of the mighty gravitational pull of the Roman Empire and its hegemonic projection along the frontier with Iran.

In Caucasia, Christianisation was a chief catalyst for the fashioning of local scripts at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries (Gamkrelidze 1994; Seibt and Preiser-Kapeller 2011).<sup>9</sup> The Armenian cleric Mashtots (Mesrop) was instrumental in the invention of the Armenian script and possibly the Georgian and Albanian ones, too (Koriwn 1941, 2005–2007). The translation of biblical and other essential Christian texts ensued. Distinctive Caucasian literary cultures were born. Within several decades original narratives were produced in Armenian, Georgian, and probably Albanian. This early literary output included stories about royal conversion. Thus, fifth-century Armenians wrote the story of King Trdat's ca. 314 baptism. Towards the early 600s, eastern Georgians composed a tale celebrating King Mirian's ca. 326 Christianisation. By the dawn of the medieval epoch, Albanians likely wrote about the conversion of their monarch Urnayr in the mid-fourth century.<sup>10</sup> All these Caucasian conversion tales were grounded in earlier oral and/or written traditions. And all exhibit later adjustments and accretions, the result of which is that more is known about how the royal

conversions were remembered and infused with subsequent political and ideological meaning than about the fourth century itself.

Apostolic connections are a mainstay of Christian conversion stories. Those created in Caucasia are no exception. By the twilight of late antiquity, the Armenian Church traced its origin to the proselytisation of two apostles, Thaddaeus and Bartholomew (van Esbroeck 1984). The older Thaddaeus tradition, whose most ancient Armenian witness derives from the fifth century (Garsoïan in *Epic Histories* 1989, 21 and 26), has the apostle venture to the Armenian district of Arzan where he was martyred by command of King Sanatruk (Agatangeghos, Syriac Vs redaction, #1; *Epic Histories*, III.i; and Movses Khorenatsi, II.33–34). Gregory the Illuminator—whose labours secured Trdat's baptism—had reputedly been conceived on Thaddaeus' grave, thus magnifying his pastoral status (Agatangeghos, Syriac Vs redaction, #7; Khorenatsi, II.74). The composite *History of the Albanians* adapts key aspects of Armenia's Christianisation, proclaiming Thaddaeus (of Edessa?) to have converted 'us easterners' (Movses Daskhurantsi, I.6). It further inserts the missionary commission of Eghishay (Elišay), reputedly a disciple of Thaddaeus. In the first century, Eghishay is said to have achieved the initial Christian conversions in Albania and, prior to his martyrdom there, to have raised the first church edifice, audaciously dubbed 'the original source of all the churches and cities and the conversion of us easterners' (Daskhurantsi, I.6 and III.23, Dowsett trans., 4–6 [quotation] and 228)<sup>11</sup> (see Figure 4.1). No later than the eleventh century, Georgians professed two apostles having visited the eastern rim of the Black Sea: Andrew and Simon the Canaanite/Zelot. Simon was martyred in the city of Nikopsi on the Roman frontier whereas Andrew the First-Called continued to Scythia, in accordance with Byzantine accounts (*Life of the Kings in Kartlis tskhovreba* 1996: 50–51). Because eastern and western Georgia had not yet been politically conjoined in apostolic times, early-modern scribes projected Andrew and Simon's trek inland, to the central eastern Georgian district of Kartli (*Life of the Kings in Kartlis tskhovreba* 1996: 359).

Caucasia's conversion narratives trumpet other Judaeo-Christian connections prior to the royal baptisms of the fourth century. Eastern Georgians alleged the presence of Christ's tunic and the mantle of Elijah in Mtskheta, which served as Kartli's royal seat until the rise of Tbilisi in the sixth century CE. The oldest Georgian-language conversion tale, whose received form was attained in the seventh century, identifies the first bishop in Kartli as a Greek prelate sent by Constantine the Great in response to an embassy sent by the newly converted King Mirian. Bishop Iovane (John) confirmed Christ's tunic and Elijah's mantle to have been hidden in Mtskheta (*Conversion of Kartli*, #15; Lerner 2004: 143). The source communicates that Jews from Kartli had witnessed the Crucifixion and then had conveyed the tunic from Jerusalem (*Conversion of Kartli*: #16). Yet other relics associated with Christ were asserted by Christians in pre-modern Caucasia. Nails from the Crucifixion were claimed by the Eastern Georgian church at Manglisi (*Conversion of Kartli*: #14). Considerably later, in the thirteenth century, the Armenian Monastery of the Caves was renamed the Monastery of the Spear, Geghardavank, once it sheltered a sumptuous reliquary containing the lance from the Crucifixion (Mahé 2017). In a similar vein, Caucasia's Christians held the Theotokos in especially high esteem. Maximus the Confessor's *Life of the Virgin*, penned in the seventh century, survives exclusively in a Georgian variant (Maximus 2012; Mgaloblishvili and Khoperia 2009).

Despite the challenges posed by extant sources, Christianity undoubtedly established an early presence in Caucasia. Already in the second century, the famous Christian apologist Tertullian understood Christianity to have permeated the Armenians. In the mid-third century, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, exchanged letters with his Armenian colleague Meruzanes (Garsoïan 1997: 83). So far as can be discerned, Christian numbers remained small

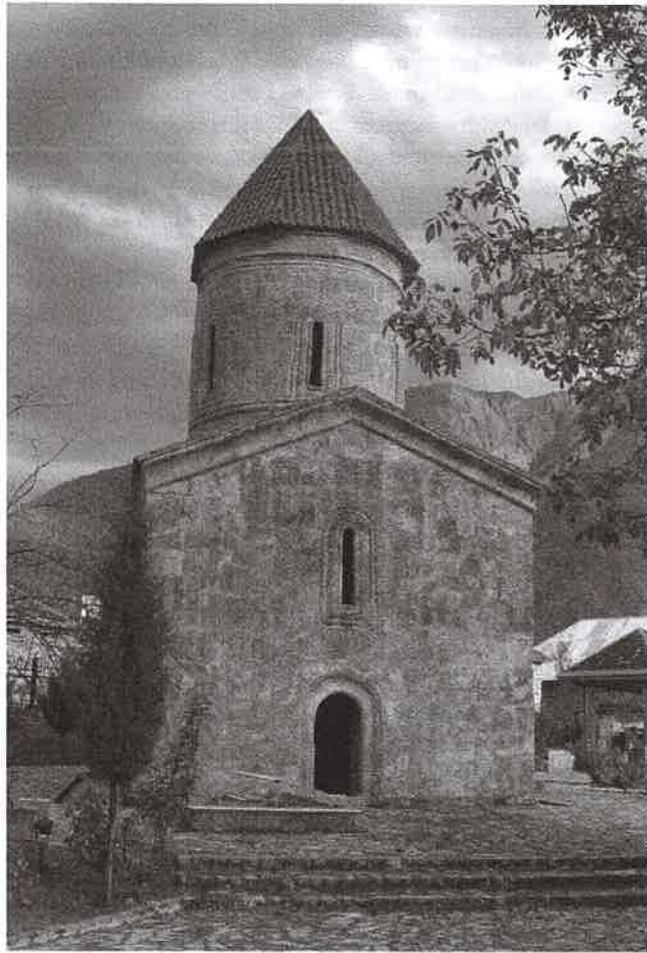


Figure 4.1 Medieval Albanian church at Kiş, Azerbaijan. Author's photo

prior to Caucasia's royal conversions. Extant conversion stories report no large Christian groups in Caucasia in the late third and initial years of the fourth centuries. But in eastern Georgia, Nino's success hinged on a Jewish community speaking Hebrew. Archaeologically, the influx of Christian ideas is attested by supine burials and a reduction in luxury grave-goods from the end of the second and especially the third century (Braund 1994: 239). Remains of church buildings from the fourth and fifth centuries are strewn across Caucasia, including the Roman-dominated shoreline of the Black Sea.<sup>12</sup>

### Third and fourth centuries

Across the third century, Christianity grew in Caucasia as it did in the Roman Empire and western half of the Parthian and then Sasanian (Sassanid) Empires. But our view of this pivotal epoch is blurry. The mobility of Christians, including missionary endeavours and flights from persecution, hastened the faith's numerical and geographical expansion. Many of the women and men in Caucasia's early Christian literature had direct ties to Syria, Mesopotamia, and

Cappadocia.<sup>13</sup> Gregory the Illuminator was a Christianised Parthian who was educated in Cappadocia. After Trdat's conversion, Gregory received his episcopal ordination in its capital Caesarea. During Diocletian's reign, Hripsime's band of female ascetics reportedly trekked from Roman territory to Armenia, where they were martyred by Trdat (Agatangeghos: #138) (see Figure 4.2). The oldest written witnesses describe Nino, illuminatrix of eastern Georgia, as a 'Roman'. By the tenth century, Georgians traced her provenance specifically to Cappadocia. Other institutions associated with long-term Christianisation, including a distinctive Armenian script and the introduction of cenobitic monasticism in eastern Georgia, are endowed with Syrian connections.<sup>14</sup>

More broadly, Caucasia's early Christianities looked principally to the south, towards Syria-Mesopotamia and the Holy Land (Stone, Ervine and Stone 2002; Mgaloblishvili 2014; Tchekhanovets 2018), as well as neighbouring Cappadocia. This orientation resonates in the Georgians' prioritisation of the Jerusalemite liturgy of St. James until the ninth/tenth centuries (Galadza 2013; Jeffery 1992). The early connection to the Holy Land is also exhibited in the ca. 335 letter written by Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, to the Armenians as well as the monastic exploits in Palestine of the fifth-century Peter the Iberian (Horn 2006; Macarius 2008). The Church of the East based at the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon fostered relations with Caucasia's churches. On the whole, early Christian Caucasia's orientation towards Syria-Mesopotamia, the Holy Land, and Cappadocia was a continuation of the region's longstanding integration into the Iranian cultural world.

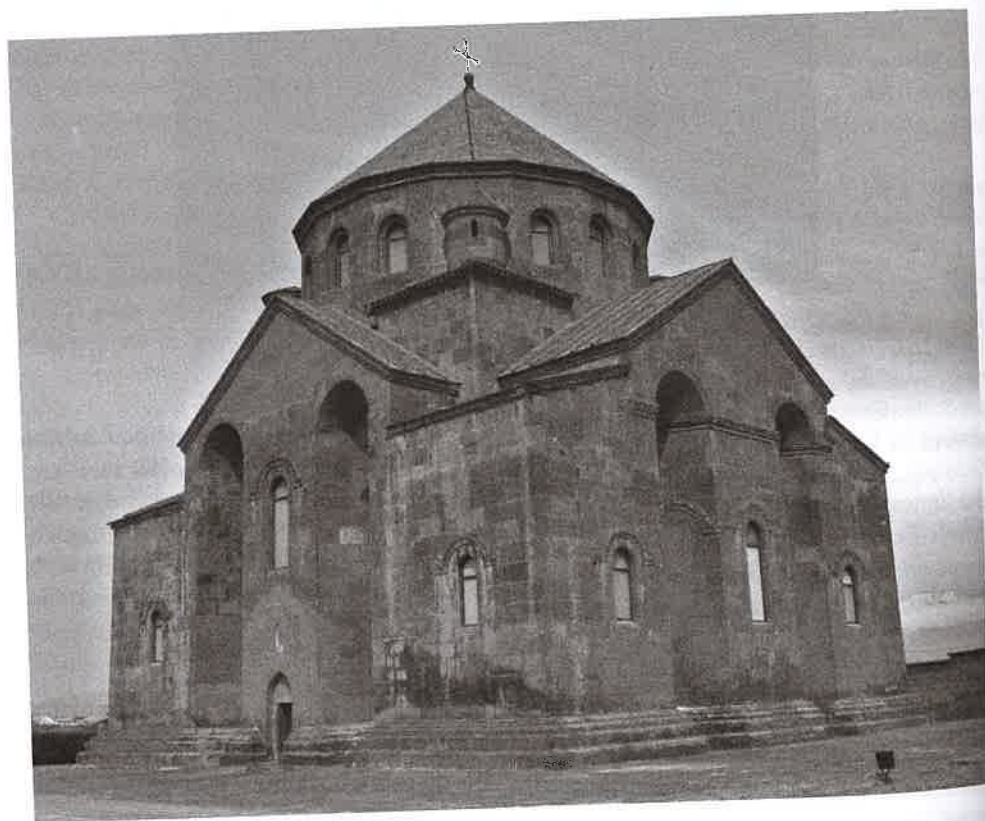


Figure 4.2 Church of Hripsime at Vagharshapat/Ejmiatsin (Etchmiatzin), Armenia. Author's photo

located in Cappadocia, capital Caesarea. From Roman territories (see Figure 4.2). 'Roman'. By the institutions associated with the introduction of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> To the south, towards the Caucasus (Glablshvili 2014; this resonates in the ninth/tenth centuries is also exhibited in Armenia as well as the north (Marn 2006; Macarius) in fostered relations and orientation towards the region's



Armenia. Author's photo

The historical picture of Christianity in Caucasia achieves finer resolution after the fourth century. At this time, the kings of Armenia Major, Kartli, and Albania shunned their ancestral adherence to regional strains of Zoroastrianism in favour of Christianity. As we have seen, the process of Christianisation was augmented by the invention of local scripts and the creation of local literatures. None of the surviving conversion tales from Caucasia are contemporaneous with the events they describe, though all incorporate older traditions. Successive waves of Christianisation washing across the Caucasian isthmus culminated in three royal baptisms: of Trdat, the Armenian Arsacid king; of Mirian, the acculturating Parthian Mihranid ('Chosroid') king of Kartli; and of Umayr, the Albanian Arsacid king. What transpired next, according to extant sources, was large-scale Christianisation underwritten by royal and certain aristocratic families. But these sources depict Christianisation as having been mostly confined to the three distinctive political, cultural, and linguistic environments. They narrowly associate Christianisation with royal conversion, a literary image consistent with Eusebius' accounts about Constantine and especially the foundational monarchs of the Iranian epic tradition. Nevertheless, other constituencies, including non-elites (about whom little is known), also converted to Christianity. In the Armeno-Kartvelian marchlands, dynastic margraves bearing the Iranian title *bidakhsh* adopted Christianity in the fourth century. But their commitment could waver. The *bidakhsh* Va[r]skan apostatised to Zoroastrianism in order to win the favour of the Sasanian king of kings. His Armenian wife, Shushanik Mamikonean, refused to follow suit and was martyred. Thereafter, hagiographic celebrations of Shushanik were composed in Georgian and Armenian (Iakob Tsurtaveli 1976; Arm. Iakob Tsurtaveli 1999).

A certain Agatangeghos (Agathangelus) is credited with the cycle of texts commemorating the conversion of Trdat, king of Armenia Major. The cycle was broadcast in multiple recensions and languages, including Armenian, Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. The main Armenian redaction, designated 'Aa', commences not with Christ, apostolic missions, or Constantine the Great but with an emotional lamentation of the Parthian Empire's demise in 224 CE. After the Sasanians had usurped power in Iran, acculturated and acculturating Parthians remained on the thrones of Caucasia's three principal kingdoms. These were the first monarchs in Caucasia to embrace Christianity. According to Agatangeghos, the conversion of the Armenian Arsacid (Arshakuni) Trdat was propelled by three factors: the murder of King Xosrov, Trdat's father, by Anak, a Sasanian agent and Gregory the Illuminator's father; the arrival in Armenia of a band of holy women, including Hripsime and Gaiane and their subsequent martyrdom; and Trdat's discovery of the Christian Gregory, the son of his father's murderer, Gregory's endurance of the king's brutal tortures, and Trdat's conversion after his miraculous transformation into a lowly boar – an intentional ridicule of a sacred Zoroastrian animal.

One of the oldest Armenian historical works, *The Epic Histories*, emphasises the missionary travails of Gregory's grandson Grigoris to the north and east of Armenia Major.<sup>15</sup> The anonymous fifth-century historian identifies Grigoris as the bishop of eastern Georgia (Virk) and Albania (Aghuank) (*Epic Histories*, III.vi). He was reportedly martyred at Amaras in modern-day Nagorny Karabakh. The memory of Grigoris is tinged with later geo-political sentiments. His genuine activities, particularly outside the bounds of Armenia, remain uncertain. For example, Grigoris features in the conversion story embedded in *The History of the Albanians*. In its extant condition, the composite narrative was written starting in the tenth century. Notwithstanding, the history attributed to Movses Daskhurantsi (Kaghankatuatsi) is undoubtedly based on earlier oral and written materials, including a lost seventh-century chronicle (Howard-Johnston 2010: 103–13). Writing in Armenian during a desperate time for Albania, Daskhurantsi's aim was to preserve memories and to establish Albanian viability, legitimacy, and autonomy as Albanian culture was vanishing. His story of Albania's

Christianisation is scattered throughout the patchwork narrative. But the central message is clear: Albania had initially been Christianised in apostolic times by Eghishay, who had direct apostolic and Jerusalemite ties. Though the seed cultivated by Eghishay had not taken root, permanent Christianisation was achieved by Gregory the Illuminator and Grigoris in the fourth century. According to Daskhurantsi, King Urnayr

... was reborn through St. Gregory the Illuminator and clothed in the Holy Spirit, and he converted the Albanians ... After his death the Albanians asked for the young Grigoris to be their *katholikos*, for our king Urnayr had asked St. Gregory to consecrate him bishop of his land—not by necessity or because the Armenians are senior to the Albanians. They decided to *submit voluntarily*, summoned the worthy heir of St. Gregory, and were well pleased.

(*Movses Daskhurantsi*, I.9, *Dowsett trans.*, 8 [slightly modified, emphasis added])

This Albanian conversion story allocated a central role in Albania's second, and permanent, Christianisation to Gregory, the martyrdom of Hripsime, and the missionary labours of Grigoris. Yet Daskhurantsi's account continually stresses Albanian autonomy and agency.

Grigoris is absent from received Georgian traditions about Nino's conversion of King Mirian. The earliest witness, the anonymous *Conversion of Kartli*, was probably composed in the seventh century, though certainly on the basis of older sources. Constantine did not orchestrate Caucasia's Christianisation, yet this text exploits Constantine's prestige and begins with his surprising defeat by an unspecified opponent. Constantine, Helena, and the imperial camp were baptised following the intervention of a mysterious figure from Ephesus. Meanwhile, a group of Christian women shepherded by Hripsime fled the Roman Empire and sought refuge in Armenia. There, all the holy women except Nino were butchered by Trdat. Alone, Nino trekked northwards and reached Mtskheta, where she secured Queen Nana's conversion. Mirian eventually followed thanks to 'Christ's miracles'. Additional details are related in Rufinus' ca. 400 account and later Georgian-language narratives, including *The Life of Nino* of the ninth/tenth centuries. In these traditions, Mirian was separated from his hunting party after the Sun was obscured, perhaps because of an eclipse. If so, this may be a deliberate emulation of Constantine's solar vision at Milvian Bridge. A desperate Mirian beseeched the Christian God and daylight was restored. Mirian subsequently raised a church in Mtskheta's royal garden, the precursor of the medieval cathedral of Sveti-tskhoveli. He also dispatched an embassy to Constantine requesting priests to perform his baptismal rites and to speed the conversion of his subjects.

The martyr Hripsime was venerated across Caucasia's cultural and linguistic communities. In Armenian and Albanian traditions, the ruthless murder of Hripsime and her female companions by Trdat was a vital step towards his conversion. Gregory chastised King Trdat for this vicious act. The received Georgian tradition exhibits some noteworthy divergences. The most ancient Georgian-language account presents Nino as a companion of Hripsime who, through divine intervention, alone survived Trdat's brutality. Is the nucleus of the Georgian account accurate in terms of what actually happened in the fourth century? If so, Nino's absence in Armenian and Albanian conversion tales must be explained. Was Nino's memory deliberately suppressed? If so, by whom, when, and why? It is noteworthy that the Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi devotes a chapter to Nino (Nune).<sup>16</sup> Khorenatsi (II.86) describes Nino as a 'scattered companion' of Hripsime who escaped to eastern Georgia. The basic thread of Khorenatsi's account matches that of Rufinus, the Armenian adaptation of Socrates (Arm. Socrates 2001) (upon which it is probably based), and *The Conversion of Kartli*. However, Khorenatsi introduces substantial variations. He portrays Nino as

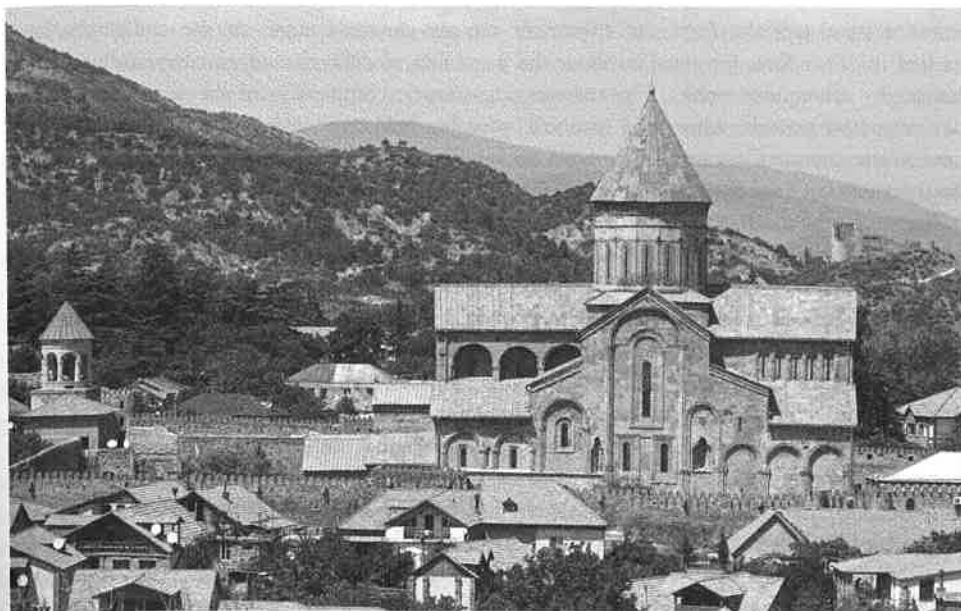


Figure 4.3 Mtskheta and the medieval church of Sveti-tskhoveli, Georgia. Author's photo

a subordinate of Gregory the Illuminator and makes Mirian a prince whereas Trdat is a king. Khorenatsi thus acknowledges Nino's role in converting King Mirian, but he subordinates both figures to their Armenian counterparts. Such language does not appear in any version of Agatangeghos. We must also consider the veracity of Nino as a companion of Hripsime in the Georgian tradition. In this case, an ancient story of a holy woman having been at the forefront of Mirian's conversion might have been calculatingly merged with the popular story of Hripsime. Whichever interpretation is correct, Caucasia's Christianisation was assuredly a cross-cultural process unfolding across many decades. Moreover, the conversion tales generated by Armenians, Georgians, and Albanians were in dialogue across the long term even as they came to espouse privileged, ethnocentric conversion events.

Both explanations demonstrate the malleability of conversion stories. Across Christendom, such narratives were adjusted, revised, and expanded over time so as to capture later values and attitudes. Further, both explanations speak to the pitfalls of reading such sources uncritically and quarantined from their historical and historiographical contexts. Textual flexibility is obvious in the divergences between the two surviving Armenian recensions of the conversion tale associated with Agatangeghos (Thomson, in Agatangeghos 2010, esp. 13–24). The 'V' recension, preserved in Greek and Arabic, has the newly converted Trdat announce his conversion to the kings of Kartli, western Georgia, and Albania. By implication, the whole of Caucasia was Christianised directly as the result of Trdat's conversion (Agatangeghos: #775–776, Vg and Va redactions). There are signs of manipulation within the Georgian tradition, too. The succinct seventh-century *Conversion of Kartli* was expanded into a full-fledged hagiographical work, *The Life of Nino*, in the ninth/tenth centuries. Unlike *The Conversion*, *The Life* expounds on Nino's origin, her worthiness as a female missionary, the miracle achieving King Mirian's conversion, and Mirian's project to Christianise nearby highlanders in Kakheti and, more broadly, the marchlands of Kartli and Albania. Early Caucasian texts survive in manuscripts produced



centuries later, typically from the thirteenth century onwards; none of the autographs have reached us. Therefore, we must consider the possibility of deliberate adjustments and accidental changes by subsequent scribes. The stalwart ethnocentric complexion of the received traditions may echo later periods, when rival 'national' churches held sway, instead of the plural environment of late antique Caucasia. This crucial era is addressed in Nina Garsoïan's magisterial *L'Église Arménienne et le Grand Schisme d'Orient* (1999a).

Events of the sixth and seventh centuries lie at the heart of the animosity that came to envelop Caucasia's churches. At this time, rivalries between the Romano-Byzantine and Sasanian Empires reached fever pitch. The fallout included the abeyance of all three of Caucasia's crowns; the Sasanians' suppression of the Armenian Arsacids commenced already in 428, and the Kartvelian Chosroids – acculturated Parthian Mihranids parading as Sasanians – were deprived of royal standing ca. 580. Meanwhile, eastern Georgian bishops increasingly claimed autonomy, an act provoking their excommunication at the Armenians' Third Council of Duin in 607. Although our sources' fragmentary nature makes it difficult to reconstruct the actual events of contemporaneous Caucasian history, memories of the schism evolved and calcified over time. The Armenians' hardening theological position is crucial, including the codification of Armenian canon law under *Katholikos* Yovhannes Ojnetsi in the eighth century and Ukh-tanes' polemics in the tenth century.<sup>17</sup> Ever since, tensions undergirding these memories have framed the parcelling of Caucasian history into self-contained ethnic registers. All these developments sparked adjustments and re-editing of conversion stories, which were increasingly inculcated with notions of primacy and orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup>

### Persianate Caucasia

A partisan reading of such sources gives the false impression of a politically, culturally, and linguistically fractured Caucasian history stretching deep into the mists of antiquity. But a critical, contextualised, and collective reading suggests a different picture: Caucasia was a durable and diverse cross-cultural zone from the early Hellenistic age through early modern times. Across two and a half millennia, the sturdy foundation of Caucasia's social coherence was a Persianate structure based on dynastic aristocratic families, called *nakharars* in Armenian. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the implantation of Christianity across Caucasia did not snuff out existing Persianate social structures but instead was grafted onto them (Adontz 1970; Toumanoff 1963; Garsoïan 1985, 1999b; Rapp 2014a). Aspects of Caucasian society having obvious connections to Zoroastrianism were Christianised to bring them into harmony with the evolving religious environment. Early Caucasian Christianity was adaptable and pluralistic, much like the hybrid strains of Zoroastrianism that preceded it.<sup>19</sup> In fact, polemical tracts are unusual in early Christian Caucasia, the most famous example being *On God* by the fifth-century Armenian Eznik of Koghb (Eznik 1998).<sup>20</sup> None survive from late antique Georgia. From a regional standpoint, obsessions with demarcating Christian orthodoxy and heresy did not gain sustained traction until the sixth and seventh centuries. At that time, non-Chalcedonian – especially miaphysite – Christology was embraced by many Armenian prelates whereas Chalcedonian dyophysitism became entrenched among Georgians, whose elites increasingly aligned themselves with Constantinople. But so ingrained was the pluralism of late antique Caucasia that Manichaeism, a syncretic faith engineered in third-century Iran drawing creatively upon Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism, could be envisioned as a heterodox Christian confession until the early seventh century (Mgaloblishvili and Rapp 2011; and for Armenia, see Gardner 2018).

Caucasia's active membership in the Iranian world – what Sasanians called Eranshahr – exhibited itself in many ways beyond Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. One of the most obvious is the

dominance of a Persianate onomasticon throughout the early Christian period and beyond. Even after Christianisation, eastern Georgian rulers bore names belonging exclusively to the Iranian world until Stepanoz I (r. ca. 590–627), a presiding prince during the interregnum stretching from ca. 580 to 888. Prior to Stepanoz, the onomasticon of Christian monarchs of eastern Georgia comprised names like Mirdat, Bakur, Trdat, Parsman, and Vakhtang. Analogous patterns existed in Armenia and Albania. Early Christian Armenian kings down to the Sasanians' suppression of royal authority in 428 possessed names such as Trdat, Khosrov, and Arshak. Their counterparts in Albania included Vachagan, Vache, and Mihran. Among aristocrats, Iranian and Persianate names also predominated. Some Christian leaders and converts, however, wished to set themselves apart from Caucasia's Persianate traditions by assuming Judaeo-Christian names. Peter the Iberian was originally named Murvan. Upon conversion, foreigners who had taken up residence in Caucasia sometimes adopted new names. The Iranian Gwrobandak became Evstati (Eustathius). Significantly, the proliferation of Judaeo-Christian names did not lead to the disappearance of Persianate ones.

As elsewhere, Christianisation was a long-term process that, as a rule, did not entail the wholesale dismantling of existing institutions. Conversion was dynamic: the prevailing social fabric and the new faith adjusted to one another, achieving a new equilibrium. In Caucasia, existing models of kingship were not exterminated and replaced as a result of conversion. Instead, received political models were Christianised. This pattern is observed throughout Christendom. In the Roman Empire, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, argued that the empire should endure, though he diverted the emperor's source of power to the Christian God. Roman institutions were Christianised, though those with particularly obvious polytheistic connections might be retired. This process even predated Constantine's purported visions at Milvian Bridge in October 312. For example, bishops within the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire had already conformed to existing imperial administrative units. Influential bishops sat in provincial capitals and administered dioceses coterminous with imperial provinces.

When Christianity gained traction among the royal dynasties of Armenia, eastern Georgia, and Albania, entrenched royal models were Christianised and perpetuated. But existing Caucasian models were quite unlike those of the Roman Empire. Caucasia's dynastic noble families governed by dynastic kings proliferated across the pan-regional Persianate landscape. At the time of the royal conversions, many Caucasian aristocratic houses had robust Iranian and especially Parthian components. Some, like the royal Arsacids and Chosroids (acculturated Mihranids), were offshoots of acculturated Parthian houses. This social arrangement did not change as a result of Christianisation. Early Caucasian bishops were often attached to noble families and their estates. Later, with the establishment of cenobitic monasticism, bishops might be associated with powerful monasteries.

Prior to Christianisation, the dynastic monarchs of Armenia Major and eastern Georgia, and presumably Albania too, promoted a royal image that was deeply embedded in the Iranian world. The existing Persianate image was bolstered by the influx of Parthian nobility. One of the most striking testaments to this phenomenon is *The Epic Histories*. In the late fourth century, at which time the Armenian monarchy lay in abeyance, a Sasanian invasion of Armenia Major came to Angegh (Angl), where

... they opened the tombs of the former kings of Armenia, of the most valiant Arshakuni, and they carried off into captivity the bones of the kings ... For they said, according to their heathen beliefs: 'This is the reason that we are taking the bones of the Armenian kings to our realm: that the glory of the kings and the fortune and valor of this realm might go from here with the bones of the kings and enter into our realm'.

(*Epic Histories*, IV.xxiv, Garsoïan trans.: 157-58)

'Glory', 'fortune', and 'valour' correspond to crucial elements of kingship employed throughout the Iranian socio-cultural world. *Park*, 'glory', is the Armenian rendering of Middle Iranian *khwarrah* (*xwarrah*, *farnah*), the sacral light enshrouding legitimate monarchs. *Bakht*, 'fortune', transcribes Middle Iranian *bakht*. A term of uncertain origin, *kaj*, denotes 'the supernatural valor that is one of the main characteristics distinguishing the legitimate ruler of Iran in the Zoroastrian tradition. This quality was bestowed on them by the god Verethragna (Arm. Vahagn)' (Garsoian in *Epic Histories* 1989: 534–35). According to Agatangeghos, the pre-conversion Trdat – an Arsacid – proclaimed:

May there be health and prosperity by the help of the gods, abundant fertility from noble Aramazd [i.e. Ahura-Mazda], protection from Lady Anahit, valour and valiant Vahagn, to you and all our land of Armenia. May there be the wisdom of the Greeks to the province of the Caesars, protection from our heroic Parthians, from the glory of [our] kings and brave ancestors.

(*Agatangeghos*: #127, Thomson trans.: 207–8)

Comparable attributes adorned the early Christian kings of eastern Georgia, though some of their historians struggled with concepts still glimmering with Zoroastrian facets. On his deathbed, the Chosroid Vakhtang Gorgasali (r. 447–522) thus instructed: 'You, inhabitants of Kartli, remember my good deeds, because first from my house you received eternal light [i.e. Christianity], and I honored you, my kin, with temporal glory' (*Life of Vakhtang in Kartlis tskhovreba* 1996: 222–23). *Khwarrah* is not rendered by a transcription from Middle Iranian or Armenian, though *par-* is reflected in some ancient Georgian names. In Old Georgian, *khwarrah* is communicated by the local term *didebay*, 'greatness'. Vakhtang's allusion to 'temporal' *khwarrah* excised residual Zoroastrian connotations from the royal image and harkened back to his heroic victories in single combat. Throughout Caucasia, Christianised *khwarrah* was applied to saints and was also appropriated in art through the 'spread wings' motif often adorning crosses (Compareti 2010).

As both a genuine activity and a literary device, single combat was a mainstay of elite identity throughout the Persianate world. This holds true for Caucasia before and after Christianisation. According to his epic biography, Vakhtang bested many opponent champions, called *bumberazis*. Single combats were typically waged before rival armies engaged in all-out fighting. In one instance, the Christian Vakhtang defeated a Christian Roman *logothete* named Polykarpos:

They both shouted out with a fearsome cry of warriors, and there was a noise like the sound of thunder, from which the ground shook. With his lance Polykarpos smote Vakhtang's shield... The king left his shield to the lance and rushed forward face-to-face. He struck his sword on [Polykarpos'] helmet and sliced his head in two down to his shoulder-blades. He put out his hand and took the half of his head; placing it before the cross, [Vakhtang] said: 'Let such be the lot of all who rebel against you.'

(*Life of Vakhtang in Kartlis tskhovreba* 1996: 192–93)

Vakhtang defeated a range of warriors in single combat, including Christian Romans, northern Caucasian Alans (Ovsis), 'Khazars', and 'Sinds', yet none of his sparring opponents were Iranians. Indeed, Vakhtang's retinue included Iranian *bumberazis*. Vakhtang's portrayal as a Persianate hero-king is remarkably consistent with the pre-Christian monarchs of eastern Georgia. *The Life of the Kings* describes Parsman II Kueli (r. 116–32) as a hero-king

commanding titanic *bumberazis*. Parsman and his general Parnavaz vanquished many Iranian champions (*Life of the Kings* in *Kartlis tskhovreba* 1996: 61–62). It should be noted that in Old Georgian ‘general’ is rendered by *spaspeti* which, along with Armenian *sparapet*, echoes Middle Persian *spahbed*. Indeed, a multitude of administrative terms from antique and late antique Caucasia are loans from, or have close parallels in, Iranian languages.

Armenian and Albanian traditions are also replete with Christian Persianate hero-kings and nobles. In *The Epic Histories*, King Varazdat (r. 374–78) battled the *sparapet* Manuel in single combat. The two men came forward as ‘champions’, *akhoyeank*, with lances in hand. The king perceived Manuel’s ‘greatness of ... stature, the splendor of his person, the extremely strong and impenetrable iron armor [that covered him] from head to foot ... [and] compared him in his mind to a tall and impenetrable mountain...’ (*Epic Histories*, V. xxxvii, Garsoïan trans.: 219). The texts associated with Agatangeghos (#45) describe Trdat, the first Christian Armenian monarch, as a Persianate hero-king. Prior to his conversion, Trdat fought in single combat against the king of the Goths on behalf of Diocletian, even disguising himself as the emperor. Unsullied as a champion, Trdat’s notable defeat was by the holy woman Hripsime as he attempted to rape her in the royal palace. Having been

strengthened by the Holy Spirit, [Hripsime] struggled like a beast and fought like a man. They fought from the third hour until the tenth, and she vanquished the king who was renowned for his incredible strength... So [Trdat], who was so famous in every respect, now was vanquished and worsted by a single girl through the will and power of Christ .

(*Agatangeghos*, ##180–192, Thomson trans.: 245–58)

Hripsime escaped but eventually was apprehended and martyred. Persianate notions of heroism persisted for several centuries after the initial royal conversions. The Armenian historian called Sebeos paints the sixth-century noble Smbat Bagratuni in comparable heroic colours:

Such was his power that when he passed through dense forests under strong trees on his big-limbed and powerful horse, grasping the branch of a tree he would hold it firmly, and forcefully tightening his thighs and legs around the horse’s middle he would raise it with his legs from the ground ... ’

(*Ps.-Sebeos*, ch. 20, Thomson trans.: 39)

Unlike the Armenian Arsacids, the Chosroids of eastern Georgia possessed no historical royal heritage. Having been established by the Parthian Mihranid prince Mihran, who acculturated to Kartvelian society and became known as Mirian, the Chosroids evolved Persianate models of kingship that stretched back to early Hellenistic times. Their commitment to Christianity could heighten their earlier lack of royal status. Accordingly, the Chosroids creatively manipulated their kingly image so as to solidify their claim at home and abroad.

Towards the end of the sixth century, a Georgian epic tradition was first put into writing. It celebrated both pre-Christian and Christian hero-kings and integrated Georgian and Caucasian history into existing Iranian epic traditions. Substantial remnants of this lost Georgian epic are the bedrock of two early Georgian histories: *The Life of the Kings* and *The Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali*. Both are exclusively transmitted in the medieval compendium *Kartlis tskhovreba*.<sup>21</sup> In these texts, Chosroid advocates brazenly manipulating Mirian’s Parthian pedigree so as to represent him as a Sasanian prince who had been brushed aside in an Iranian succession dispute

(Rapp 2014a: 243–58). This explains the dynastic appellation Khosroiani (in anglicised form: Chosroid), ‘progeny of Khusro’, the imagined Sasanian forefather. But the Chosroids’ genealogy expounding Iranian royal origins was yet more sophisticated. In his royal biography, the Christian hero-king Vakhtang declares to his troops – during an alleged joint Iranian–Georgian campaign in Roman Anatolia! – that he was the direct descendant of the biblical Nimrod (Rapp 2014b). Early Christian Georgians remembered Nimrod in positive terms. He was the world’s first great monarch, an Iranian, the founder of Iranian kingship and imperial power well before the Arsacids and Sasanians. Accordingly, the Chosroids endeavoured to equal, if not to surpass, the royal status of the Sasanians by connecting themselves to the fount of Iranian royal authority. Although most aspects of Chosroid kingship were deliberately abandoned once the Georgian Bagratids revived the monarchy in 888, the Chosroids’ strategy was maintained. Instead of envisioning themselves as the progeny of Nimrod, the ‘Byzantinising’ Bagratids built upon an existing Armenian legend about the Bagratids’ Jewish origins by claiming to be the progeny of the King-Prophet David. But like the Chosroids before them, the Georgian Bagratids sought to circumvent the pretensions of a neighbouring empire by asserting a primordial basis of power.

### Conclusion

In retrospect, the main historical thrust of early Christian Caucasia is one of continuing adaptation instead of revolutionary change.<sup>22</sup> While the new faith gained elite support and approval, Christianity – like Zoroastrianism before it – was adapted to an existing pan-regional social structure, one that happened to be robustly Persianate. But there is a palpable difference: Zoroastrianism, and other strains of Mazdaism, was indigenous to Eranshahr, that cross-cultural enterprise stretching from Central Asia to Caucasia and eastern Anatolia, whereas Christianity was not. Instead of overturning Caucasia’s integration into the Iranian Commonwealth, Christianity tended to be adjusted to the existing social fabric, thus assuming many local and regional characteristics. At the same time, the Romans’ adoption of Christianity enhanced the possibility for future alliances between the Caucasian polities and the Romano-Byzantine Empire. While later Romans might argue that Christian affiliation necessarily subordinated Armenians, Georgians and Albanians to Roman institutions, the peoples of Caucasia continued to exhibit remarkable autonomy and creativity as their Persianate societies endured in the shadow of some of Eurasia’s greatest empires.

### Notes

- 1 This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Professor Robert W. Thomson.
- 2 Scholars of late antiquity and the medieval era frequently use the term ‘Caucasia’ to denote the ‘Transcaucasus’ (whose Russian perspective is anachronistic for the period examined here) and the highlands of the Caucasus Mountains, what is typically called Northern Caucasia.
- 3 As used here, ‘Caucasian’ is the attributive form of Caucasia. Transcaucasia projects a Russian/Soviet perspective and is anachronistic for the period addressed here.
- 4 For Caucasia as ‘the North’, see Vacca (2017).
- 5 For the scholarly extension of late antiquity across Eurasia, see Di Cosmo and Maas (2018). Late antiquity stretched from about the second through the eighth century.
- 6 Across the pre-modern period, there have been multiple Armenias. For the ‘Lesser Armenian’ kingdoms, see Hewsen (2001): 37–38.
- 7 An extinct kingdom in today’s Republic of Azerbaijan.
- 8 Suania was central to the Romans’ defense of Lazika (Menander 1985).

- 9 Caucasian elites had long been acquainted with written foreign languages, e.g. Greek and Aramaic. Prior to Christianisation, Armazic, a local written dialect of Northern Mesopotamian Aramaic, is attested in eastern Georgia and Armenia Major (Tsereteli 2001).
- 10 Little survives of Albanian letters (see Aleksidze 2003; Gippert et al. 2008–2010).
- 11 Some modern observers have identified Eghishay's reputed church at Gis with the medieval church of Kiş in Azerbaijan (Kerimov and Sturfiel 2003). Scholarly assessments of Albania's early Christian history vary widely (e.g.: Kasumova 2005; Mamedova 2005; Svazian 2009; Trever 1959).
- 12 On the enormous variety displayed by church buildings from the eastern Black Sea, see Khrushkova (2002).
- 13 On Syrian architectural influences, see Leeming (2018).
- 14 On Syria and Armenia, see Ter-Minassiantz (1904) and Abeghyan (Abeghyan 1946)–46.
- 15 In harmony with Persianate custom, Gregory instituted a hereditary line of Gregorid bishops.
- 16 The date of Khorenatsi is fiercely debated. He claims to be a fifth-century figure, though some scholars have situated his history to the eighth century. Whichever date is accepted, the talented Khorenatsi undoubtedly exploited earlier oral and written sources.
- 17 On memories of the Armeno-Georgian schism, see Aleksidze (2018).
- 18 For the fascinating recasting of Trdat in Cilician Armenia, see Pogossian (2010).
- 19 On Zoroastrianisms in Caucasia, see Russell (1987), de Jong (2015) and Shenkar (2014).
- 20 On Georgian polemic, see Tarnishvili (1955): 368–86.
- 21 Though based on a lost sixth-century epic, the surviving *Life of the Kings* and *Life of Vakhitang* took shape around the year 800. Both were re-edited by the eleventh-century Leonti Mroveli. See Rapp (2017).
- 22 But there were contrary claims in late antiquity, e.g. (Eghishe 1982).

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