

**CAUCASIA AND THE FIRST BYZANTINE
COMMONWEALTH:**

**CHRISTIANIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF REGIONAL
COHERENCE**

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

The Christianization of the three kingdoms of late antique Caucasia—Armenia Major, eastern Georgia, and Caucasian Albania—has long been regarded as a watershed moment, and rightly so. With few exceptions, scholarship has proffered the image of three more-or-less ethnocentric conversions which necessarily resulted in the association of the “exotic” Caucasian frontier with Constantinople. But when the Byzantines’ own projections and understandings of the region are fused with the cosmopolitan and cross-cultural perspectives of those who actually lived within it, Caucasia’s internal dynamics and place on the Afro-Eurasian stage comes into sharper focus. Caucasia was not simply a strategic periphery where the tensions between Byzantium, on the one hand, and the Iranian and Islamic worlds, on the other, were played out. Though it perched on the geographical edge of these imperial and religious worlds, Caucasia—as a coherent and durable region—was an active and integral component of those worlds and was simultaneously affiliated with them. Further, Caucasia’s diverse but tightly interconnected Christianization contributed to the formation of the First Byzantine/Eastern Christian Commonwealth.

Introduction

Since at least the Iron Age, and perhaps much earlier, Caucasia has been a cohesive yet diverse zone of cross-cultural encounter and shared historical experience. Despite their linkage by a web of interconnections which was as dense as it was durable, the peoples inhabiting the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas have seldom exhibited a *conscious* regional identity in their oral, written, and visual monuments. Thus, pre-modern literary sources are devoid of an indigenous toponym designating the entire region which stretched from the steppe in what is now the Russian Federation and Ukraine in the north, to northern Iran in the south, westward into central Anatolia (Asia Minor), and east to the Caspian Sea.¹ Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine writers employed Greek *Kaukasia* and its Latin equivalent in a broad sense for the area dominated by the Caucasus Mountains.² But these authorities show little understanding of the cultural and historical cohesion of the region and instead tend to focus their attention on aspects of Caucasia's legendary diversity. In pre-modern times, Georgian and Armenian authors usually restricted their terms *Kavkasia* and *Kavkas* (variant *Kovkas*) respectively to the highlands of the main range of the Caucasus Mountains and their pastoralists whereas specific toponyms for individual kingdoms, principalities, and districts were customarily applied to the southern zone. There was, however, some appreciation of the linkage of northern and southern Caucasia. Medieval Armenian and Georgian traditions of ethnogenesis, which are based on the *Chronicle* of Hippolytus of Rome and ultimately can be traced to the *tabula populorum* of Genesis 10, subsumed highland pastoralists and lowland sedentary communities within the label "the

¹ "Ciscaucasia" is unwieldy: Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 1963), 11-12 and 33-34.

² The later Russian word *Zakavkaz'ie* and its Western equivalent "Transcaucasia" project later Russian and Soviet perspectives, "across the Caucasus Mountains."

descendants of Togarmah.”³ The biblical Togarmah was the son of Japheth and direct descendant of Noah.⁴ Inspired by ancient Mesopotamian and Palestinian orientations and geographical schemes, locals and outsiders in late antiquity regarded Caucasia as “the North,”⁵ that is to say, the northern edge of the Near East. By the ninth and tenth centuries, an age of increasing Byzantine cultural and political influence, Georgian ascetics and then political élites sometimes referred to their homeland as “the East,” the point of reference having been transferred to Constantinople. As we shall see, this shift exemplifies one of the watersheds of the medieval Caucasian experience.

The unity of Caucasia has always been tempered by internal diversity and distinctiveness.⁶ Famously known to the Arabs as “the Mountain of Languages,” Caucasia has long been one of the planet’s most diverse cultural spaces. Even the various Armenian and Georgian peoples, whose pre-modern histories are in many respects inseparable, speak languages belonging to entirely different linguistic families and written in their own scripts. Ethno-linguistic particularities, political fragmentation, and steady imperial pressure and shifting hegemonies encouraged the articulation of distinctive yet flexible cultures and, in the case of the

³ Arm. *T’orgomay azg*, the “people/nation of Togarmah” and *tan T’orgomay*, the “house of Togarmah.” For these Armenian phrases, see e.g.: the fifth-century Agat’angelos (Aa), paras. 16, 776, and 796, Eng. trans. Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, R.W. Thomson trans. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1976), 314-315 and 334-335; and the seventh-/eighth-century Movsēs Xorenac’i, *Patmut’ivn Hayoc’*, I.10, M. Abelean and S. Yartut’ivnean eds. (Tiflis, 1913), 33₁₆₋₁₇, trans. in Moses Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, Robert W. Thomson trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978), 86. Geo. *T’argamosianni* is found in the ca. 800 *Life of the Kings*, the first component of *K’art’lis c’xovreba*, the so-called Georgian Chronicles: *C’xorebay k’art’velta mep’et’a* in *K’art’lis c’xovreba*, S. Qauxch’ishvili ed., vol. 1 (T’bilisi: Saxelgami, 1955), 6, 7, 11, 12, and 14.

⁴ At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the German scholar Johann Blumenbach coined the racial term “Caucasian” because he considered the peoples of Caucasia, and especially the Georgians, to be the archetypes of the category. Needless to say, this concept has no meaning in the period under review.

⁵ Cf. Robert W. Thomson in his trans. of Agat’angelos, 471-472, §175.

⁶ Nina G. Garsoïan, and Bernadette Martin-Hisard, “Unité et diversité de la Caucasic médiévale (IVe-XIe s.),” in *Il Caucaso: Cerniera fra Culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia* (Spoleto: Centro italiano de studi sull’alto Medioevo, 1996), 275-347; and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Recovering the Pre-National Caucasian Landscape,” in *Mythical Landscapes Then and Now: The Mystification of Landscapes in [the] Search for National Identity*, Ruth Büttner and Judith Peltz eds. (Erevan: Antares, 2006), 13-52.

Georgians and Armenians,⁷ literary and historiographical traditions. What such sources rarely acknowledge—and what modern scholars often fail to perceive—is that Caucasia’s legendary diversity was accompanied by intense cross-cultural communication, interaction, and cooperation which extended deep into Afro-Eurasia.⁸ This nexus peaked in late antiquity when southern Caucasia formed a unity Cyril Toumanoff termed “Christian Caucasian Civilization.”⁹ Pre-national Caucasia was diverse, internally cohesive, and integrated with the Afro-Eurasian world beyond. In present-day metageographical parlance, we may say without any hesitation that it constituted a distinctive world region.

Historians have long grappled with the question of the extent to which Christian Caucasia was incorporated into Byzantine civilization and, more specifically, the nature and depth of the linkages drawing together Caucasia and the Greek core of the Byzantine Empire. The typical image is that once the kingdoms of southern Caucasia began to be openly Christianized in the first half of the fourth century, the entire area entered the Roman-Byzantine fold. Efforts to understand the relationship have been hindered by two factors: the stubborn persistence of outmoded models of cultural diffusion and semantics, particularly regional labels retrojection of modern definitions upon earlier times. While Byzantinists have long claimed Caucasia for the Empire, often proceeding from an uncritical acceptance of civilizational models and their attendant ethnocentric and diffusionist visions, few Byzantinists have seriously engaged it “on its

⁷ And, to a lesser extent, it would seem, the Caucasian Albanians. Movsēs Dasxuranc’i *History of the Albanians* has come down to us only in Armenian. Our understanding of Albanian Christianity has been deeply affected by modern nationalism, particularly as a result of the Nagorno-Qarabagh conflict. For three recent Azerbaijani views, see: Farida Mamedova, *Kavkazskaja Albaniia i albany* (Baku: Tsentr Issledovaniia Kavkazskoi Albanii, 2005); Sara Kasumova, *Khristianstvo v Azerbaidzhanе v rannem srednevekov’e* (Baku: Master, 2005); and Vilaiat Kerimov and Bjornar Storfjell, *Kish: istoriia, arkhitektura, arkhеologiiа* (Baku: Çaşıoğlu, 2003).

⁸ Medieval texts tend to reflect ethnocentric visions of élites, especially monarchs, nobles, and the ecclesiastical leadership, whereas modern scholarship has too often reified such outlooks by examining historical questions within strict ethno-national boxes and treating such sources as integrated expressions of the whole of society.

⁹ See esp. Toumanoff, *Studies*.

own terms” by employing local sources in their original languages. Consequently, the physical distance from the Greek nucleus has often been exaggerated *without adequate regards for the historical context of the integrated region*,¹⁰ thus reducing Caucasia to an exotic, troublesome, uncivilized, violent, and overwhelmingly passive yet strategically-crucial periphery.¹¹ Studies produced within Caucasia since late Russian imperial times have frequently been plagued by narrow ethno-national perspectives, and these specifically modern points of view have been thrust without due criticism upon pre-modern evidence. This seemed to give credence to the durability and permanence of ethnically-constituted nations. Another result has been the unwillingness or incapability to perceive Caucasia’s longstanding cohesiveness and the region’s place within the larger world. Needless to say, this trend also affected the historical discipline as a whole throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And to be fair, a great many specialists based and trained outside Caucasia have also been seduced by the nation.

When the Byzantines’ own images and understandings of the region are fused with the cosmopolitan and cross-cultural perspectives of those who actually lived within it, Caucasia’s internal dynamics and place on the Afro-Eurasian stage comes into sharper focus. Caucasia was not simply a strategic periphery where the tensions between Byzantium, on the one hand, and the Iranian and Islamic worlds, on the other, were played out. Though it perched on the geographical edge of these imperial and religious worlds, Caucasia—as a coherent and durable region—was nevertheless an *active and integral* component of those worlds and was simultaneously affiliated

¹⁰ But the distance was nevertheless important and was noticed by contemporaries. Thus the eleventh-century Georgian hagiographer Giorgi Mc’ire wrote: “And although [the Georgians] possessed the Holy Scripture as well as undefiled and true faith from the very beginning, our land was yet far from Greece [i.e., Byzantium]” (*The Life of Giorgi M’acmideli*, cap. 8, *C’xorebay da mok’alak’obay cmidisa da netarisa mamisa ch’uenisa giorgi m’acmidelisay* in *Dzveli k’artuli agiografiuli literaturis dzeglebi* [hereafter: *DzK’ALDz*], Ilia Abuladze ed., vol. 2 [T’bilisi: Mec’niereba, 1967], 123¹⁹⁻²¹ = *Georgian Monks on Mount Athos: Two Eleventh-Century Hegoumenoi of Iviron*, Tamara Grdzeldze trans. [London: Bennett & Bloom, 2009], 111). See further for this quotation.

¹¹ The application of similar paradigms to modern Caucasia are explored in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*, Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann eds. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007).

with them.¹² Further, Caucasia's cross-cultural condition and its role as a hinge, a cross-cultural mediator, between the Near East and Mediterranean made it one of the primary contributors to the *making* of both Byzantine Commonwealths, the first in late antiquity and the second beginning with the so-called Macedonian dynasty. Christian Caucasia was as important to the First and Second Byzantine Commonwealths as the Slavic peoples who had settled in the Balkans were to its second phase.¹³

Christian Caucasia undoubtedly belonged to the Byzantine Commonwealth and the even more expansive world of medieval Eastern Christendom from their inception and yet the entire area—including the northern Caucasus—also retained strong cultural affiliations with the Near East, the Middle East, and especially Iran. Even centuries after the fourth-century Christianizations of the dynasts and other leading political élites of K'art'li (Iberia) in eastern Georgia, Armenia Major, and Caucasian Albania, the predominant cultural orientation of Caucasia pointed toward Parthia and especially Sasanian Iran and not, say, the central provinces of the later Roman Empire.¹⁴ The unprecedented influx of Parthian and Middle Iranian loans into the Armenian, Georgian, and Caucasian Albanian languages confirms the bond.¹⁵ Five hundred years after their initial conversion in the 320s or 330s, the authority and image of the

¹² For Caucasia and the First Byzantine Commonwealth, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 100-137, esp. 104-109.

¹³ On the Slavs and the Second Byzantine Commonwealth, see Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth, Eastern Europe 500-1453* (New York—Washington: Praeger, 1971).

¹⁴ For the whole of Caucasia, see Toumanoff, *Studies* and *idem*, "Christian Caucasia between Byzantium and Iran: New Light from Old Sources," *Traditio* 10 (1954): 109-189. For Armenia: Nina G. Garsoïan, *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians* (London: Variorum, 1985); and *eadem*, *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). For eastern Georgia: Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "The Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition," *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009): 645-692.

¹⁵ See, e.g.: Rütiger Schmitt, "Iranisches Lehnwort im Armenischen," *Revue des études arméniennes* n.s. 17 (1983): 73-112; Roland Bielmeier, "On Iranian Influences in Old Georgian," *Non-Slavic Languages of the USSR: Papers from the Fourth Conference*, H.I. Aronson ed. (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1994), 34-43; and Mzia Andronikashvili, *Narkvevebi iranul-k'art'uli enobrivi urt'iert' obidan*, vol. 1 (T'bilisi: T'bilisi universitetis gamome'emloba, 1966); and Jost Gippert, *Iranica Armeno-Iberica: Studien zu den iranischen Lehnwörtern im Armenischen und Georgischen* (2 vols.) (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1993).

Christian K'art'velian kings were remarkably similar to those of the Sasanian *shāhan shāhs*. In his ca. 800 royal history, the heroic Vaxtang Gorgasali (r. 447-522), a contemporary of Zeno, is favorably compared not to a Roman or even Christian hero but rather to the biblical Nimrod who, in the medieval Georgian historiographical tradition, was the first king of the world, a renowned giant-warrior, and an Iranian.¹⁶

The Romans and Caucasia

Notwithstanding its primary cultural and social affiliation with the Iranian Commonwealth,¹⁷ late antique Caucasia had substantial ties to the Mediterranean, some of which predated the reign of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to embrace the Christian God. In the mid-first millennium BC, the ancient Greeks established a string of colonies along the far eastern coast of the Black Sea. Some of these were located in littoral Colchis, in what would later become western Georgia. Three Colchian settlements—Phasis, Dioskourias, and Gyenos—are explicitly named in Classical literature. Several others, like the inland site known as Vani, have been revealed through archaeology.¹⁸ When the Romans first penetrated southern Caucasia under the general Pompey in the first century BC, one their main targets was Colchis, which then was under the control of the famous Mithradatēs VI Eupatōr, king of Pontos (120-63 BC). Always in flux, nominal Roman and then Byzantine authority persisted in this region until the formation of the kingdom of Abkhazia (Ap'xazet'i), in what had been northern Colchis, at the very end of the eighth century.

¹⁶ Similar traditions were shared by others in the Near East.

¹⁷ We also possess evidence of Iranian influences in northern Caucasia, e.g., the Nart epics: John Colarusso, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs*, John Colarusso trans. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002).

¹⁸ On Colchis in antiquity, see David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC-AD 562* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 73-151.

In southern Colchis, the kingdom of Lazika expanded northward in the fourth century AD and came to control important passes through the western Caucasus Mountains. The strategic and commercial position of Lazika attracted Roman and Sasanian attention; for a while its rulers received their crowns from Constantinople. The later Roman historian Agathias reports a fictionalized debate among the Lazians about whether they owed their allegiance to the Romans or Sasanians.¹⁹ Following the Lazic War in the mid-sixth century, the Roman Empire extended its hegemony, and many Lazian tribes subsequently migrated toward Pontos. Throughout the period, Roman and Byzantine fortresses, like the Greek colonies of the archaic epoch, were clustered along the coastline and navigable rivers leading to the sea. The occasional depth of Roman power in this region is illustrated by the foundation in the seventh century of the Roman eparchy of Lazika, headquartered at Phasidos, and soon thereafter the establishment of the eparchy of Abasgia centered at Sebastopolis. But Byzantine political and ecclesiastical suzerainty finally unraveled and at the start of the eleventh century when these areas were formally incorporated into the first-all Georgian state governed by the Bagratid dynasty.

The Roman presence in the various Armenian lands can be traced to Ptolemy, who had marched his troops across southern Caucasia to Albania, territories that now lay within the Republic of Azerbaijan. Ptolemy was testing the Parthians, but all-out war over Caucasia broke out only when Nero (r. 52-63) and his successors insisted on supremacy in Armenia. Under Vespasian (r. 69-79), the empire began the long-term annexation of Armenian territories and also strengthened its influence over neighboring eastern Georgia.²⁰ Ascendant Roman power was checked by the early Sasanians. In 244, following their defeat at Mizikē near Baghdad, and again

¹⁹ Agathias, 3.8-14.

²⁰ Giorgi Ceret'eli [Tsereteli]: "Grecheskaia nadpis' epokhi Vespasiana iz Mtskheta," *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 2 (1960) 123-133.

in 363/364 in the aftermath of Julian's assassination and the Battle of Sāmarrā, the Iranians tightened their political and military grip over the isthmus. In the second half of the 380s, the Sasanians acquired full suzerain rights over eastern Armenia, which the Romans called Persarmenia.²¹ At first the Sasanians were content to allow the Christianized Arshakunis—an acculturated branch of the Parthian Arsacids—to retain the throne, but in 428 they suppressed Armenian kingship and thenceforth “the divided lands of Greater Armenia were set on divergent paths.”²²

In spite of the political catastrophe, Armenian social and cultural identity was preserved and even consolidated in Persarmenia. Here the distinctive Iranic social pattern dominated by the aristocratic *naxarar* houses was maintained, Armenian culture was nourished,²³ and the seeds of what would become the Armenian “national” church were sown. Indeed, the three developments reinforced one another, for here in Armenia Major (sometimes called “Greater Armenia”), the former Arshakuni domains, Armenian Christianity was adapted to existing Iranic social structures.²⁴ The situation diverged sharply in the territories administered by the Romans, including Armenia Minor on the western side of the Euphrates River. Here the Armenian social pattern was demolished and over time these lands became so “de-Armenized” that they were “irreversibly transformed into ordinary Byzantine administrative units.” However, Armenians and people of Armenian extraction would remain in the majority for centuries to come.²⁵

²¹ Cyril Toumanoff, “Caucasia and Byzantium,” *Traditio* 27 (1971): 115-116.

²² Nina Garsoïan, “The *Marzpanate* (428-652),” in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, Richard G. Hovannisian ed., vol. 1 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 95.

²³ E.g., the literary outburst of the fifth century. To this period belongs Koriun, Agat'angelos, Łazar P'arpec'i, Elishē, and the anonymous author of *Buzandaran Patmut'ivnk'ē*. Movsēs Xorenac'i claims to have written at this time, though careful, dispassionate analysis has shown it to be a work of the seventh/eighth century.

²⁴ For Armenian communities in late antiquity, see Nicholas Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar System*, Nina G. Garsoïan trans. and rev. (Lisbon, 1970).

²⁵ Garsoïan, “The *Marzpanate*,” 95 and 103.

The outright annexation of their territories helps to explain how the Armenians came to constitute the largest non-Greek population within the later Roman and Byzantine Empires. However, there were a variety of other paths by which Armenians came to reside in Byzantium proper.²⁶ These ranged from forced population transfers to voluntary immigration, including the pursuit of commercial and military opportunities. Armenians were concentrated in eastern Anatolia, but from an early time they could be found Palestine, Syria, and throughout the empire. Eventually, men of Armenian ancestry even ascended to the Byzantine throne.²⁷ If the funeral oration delivered by Leo VI (r. 886-912) is any indication, the “Macedonian” dynasty established by his deceased father Basil I (r. 867-886) is best labeled “Armenian.”²⁸

Roman political and cultural influence upon eastern Georgia, particularly K’art’li, was far less direct than in Armenia Minor and even in Colchis, Lazika, and Abasgia, areas included in the medieval Georgian toponym Egrisi. Owing in large measure to the buffer of the Armenian lands, at no point was any part of the K’art’velian kingdom based at Mc’xet’a (Mtskheta) and, from the sixth century, nearby Tp’ilisi (modern T’bilisi) integrated into the Roman and then Byzantine administrative systems. Until the ninth and tenth centuries, the cultural impact of the Byzantine core upon K’art’li was slight in almost every respect. Surviving documentary sources from eastern Georgia, the earliest of which was composed toward the end of the fifth century, preserve precious little historical information about the late Roman and Byzantine empires prior to the end of the sixth century, over 250 after King Mirian’s conversion. Caucasian Albania,

²⁶ See Nina G. Garsoïan, “The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire,” in *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, Hélène Ahrweiler and Angeliki E. Laiou eds. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks/Harvard UP, 1998), 53-124.

²⁷ Most dramatically, from the enthronement of Basil I most if not all of the Byzantine emperors for the next 150 years had some Armenian ancestry: Peter Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* (Lisboa, 1963), 39.

²⁸ Leo VI claims that his father Basil was descended from the late antique Armenian Arshakunis: *Oraison funèbre de Basile I par son fils Léon VI le Sage*, Albert Vogt and Irénée Hausherr eds., *Orientalia Christiana*, 26/1, no. 77 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1932), 44.

situated to east of K'art'li, seems to have been even less directly affected by Romano-Byzantine culture, and what was received often was transmitted through Armenian and K'art'velian intermediaries. In time, an extension of K'art'velian society in Tao-Klarjet'i whose locus was adjacent to Byzantine Anatolia became a lively point of contact between eastern Georgia and the Byzantine Empire—and, along with several new Armenian kingdoms and principalities, an especially tempting target for Byzantine interference. The importance of Tao-Klarjet'i shall be examined in the companion essay.

The question of Byzantium's cultural influence upon Caucasia is not merely one of two discrete geographical regions, even when reasonably sharp borders can be drawn. It also pertains to the internal cross- and multicultural dynamics of empire and commonwealth. Thus, Caucasia—as a diverse but cohesive unit—cannot be treated merely as an external entity beyond the boundaries of Byzantium, however they might be conceived, or as nothing more than a passive and troublesome frontier on the eastern edge of the empire.

Christianization and the Roots of the First Byzantine Commonwealth

As we have seen, bonds drawing together the Caucasian and Mediterranean regions long predate the advent of the Byzantine phase of the Roman Empire in the seventh century. Some ties were substantial, especially in southwestern Caucasia and along the Black Sea coast. However, despite the valuable remnants of Graeco-Roman material culture and allusions to the isthmus in Classical literature, in almost every respect—socially, culturally, religiously, politically, and economically—ancient and late antique Caucasia's primary orientation was toward the Near East and especially Iran. Roman interests in Caucasia remained high and were further heightened once the imperial capital migrated eastward to Constantinople. Indeed,

Caucasia and its peoples played an important role in the transition of the Roman to the Byzantine Empire and especially in the formation of the First Byzantine Commonwealth, or more precisely, the first phase of Eastern Christianity. From a strictly imperial vantage, this was as much an internal phenomenon as it was an external one. Various Caucasian peoples, particularly Armenians, became citizens of or served the later Roman and early Byzantine empires through a broad spectrum of voluntary and involuntary means. For their part, the élites of the kingdoms of Armenia, K'art'li, and Albania seized upon the cultural and political choices available to them in order to play one great power off another in order to limit the interference of both.

The most dramatic and consequential example of this circumstance is the Christianization of southern Caucasia. Christians were definitely present in Caucasia in the third century, and their numbers were steadily growing. However, archaeological evidence and sporadic written testimony, including that of Tertullian, establishes Christianity's initial presence in the region even earlier.²⁹ The most likely route of early transmission was through Sōphēnē/Cop'k' and other autonomous satrapies in southern Armenia and northern Syria. The enduring, regional success of Christianity was ensured by the conversion of the dynasts of the most powerful, acculturated Parthian dynasties of contemporary Caucasia, the Arshakunis (Arsacids) of Armenia Major and the Xosroianis (Xuasroianis, Chosroids) of eastern Georgia. These royal conversions—which may well have been preceded by the conversions of some Caucasian aristocratic houses—likely took place shortly after Constantine's vision at Milvian Bridge in 312: Trdat was baptized around 314, perhaps even before Milvian Bridge, while his Georgian

²⁹ Nina G. Garsoïan, "The Aršakuni Dynasty (A.D. 12-[180?]-428)," in *The Armenian People*, Hovannisian ed., vol. 1, 83.

counterpart Mirian was baptized in the 320s or 330s,³⁰ and certainly no later than ca. 337, the traditional date calculated by Ivane Javakhishvili. At least one and quite possibly both Caucasian rulers thus preceded Constantine in baptism. Indeed, the kings of Armenia and eastern Georgia were undoubtedly among the first monarchs anywhere in the world to accept Christianity and to facilitate its open propagation with state support.³¹

The Christian conversions of Trdat and Mirian have customarily been interpreted as a sign of their allegiance to the Roman emperor and, consequently, as a clever but practical attempt to counterbalance Iranian and Zoroastrian influence. While the former is plausible if Trdat's conversion postdated Constantine's, there are other explanations. And in any event, the implications of Constantine's acceptance and encouragement of a monotheistic religion—and the formation of the First Byzantine Commonwealth—remained in their infancy at the time of Trdat's and even Mirian's baptisms. In short, the political ramifications of Constantine's acceptance of the Christian God were still being realized. There is, moreover, absolutely no contemporaneous evidence that the early Christian monarchs of Caucasia appropriated any aspect of the embryonic Eusebian theory. For many *centuries* after the Christianizations of the Armenian Arshakunis and K'art'velian Chosroids, Iranic models of kingship predominated, though Christian features were added as was appropriate to the new reality. As late as the ninth century, some five hundred years after Mirian's conversion, Georgian historical texts depict Christian K'art'velian kings as localized Sasanian *shāhan shāhs* endowed with a Christianized *xwarrah*, the divine radiance said to be emitted from legitimate rulers in Iranian and Iranic socio-political contexts. In the historical epics about them, and perhaps in reality, they also

³⁰ For Armenia, see Garsoïan, "Aršakuni Dynasty," 81-84. For eastern Georgia, see, e.g., Toumanoff, *Studies*, 374-378 (for ca. 337) and L. Pataridze, "Gak'ristianeba 'k'art'lis c'xovrebis' mixedvit'," in *K'ristianoba sak'art'velosbi* (T'bilisi: 2000), 8-15 (for 326).

³¹ Less precise information is available for the conversion of two other non-Roman kingdoms in the period: Caucasian Albania and Aksum (Ethiopia).

commanded corps of hero-champions, known locally as *bumberazis* and to the Iranians as the *aswārān*.³²

Ad nauseum claims of Christianization having once and forever thrust southern Caucasia from an Iranian into a Byzantine orbit are overblown and simplistic: they fail to take adequately into account the gradual process of adaptation and synthesis and the fact that Christianity need not be synonymous with the particular forms espoused by Roman and Byzantine ruling élites.³³ Conversion to Christianity undoubtedly enhanced the possibility for a more profound interaction between southern Caucasia and the later Roman Empire. While this began to be realized very quickly, the realization of a new relationship was a process spread across many centuries. Moreover, when we remember that this was precisely the period in which the First Byzantine or Eastern Christian Commonwealth was taking shape, it becomes clear that Armenia Major, eastern Georgia, and eventually Caucasian Albania were actively contributing to the formation of the First Byzantine Commonwealth and the Eastern Christian ecumene; they did not simply benefit from the diffusion and adoption of existing Christian culture, traditions, and texts.

The received sources describing the conversion of the Arshakunis and Chosroids supply valuable information about the foundation of the initial Christian kingdoms in late antiquity, and yet we must not follow others into the trap of reading them too literally. After all, conversion texts were not meant to be objective, multi-perspective explorations. Rather, they were constructed from a definite agenda, and almost always (as in this case) at a later time: the promotion of Christianity and, in most extant cases, particular Christian confessions and constituencies. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to investigate their origin, authorship, and

³² Mohsen Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society: A Discussion of Historical Continuities*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Utah (Salt Lake City, 1993).

³³ E.g.: Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, *Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus* (New York—Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 205.

subsequent transmission and reception not to mention the historical and literary contexts in which they were written, disseminated, manipulated, and read. In their received forms, none of these sources is contemporaneous with the conversions of Trdat and Mirian and their apostles, Sts. Gregory the Illuminator and Nino. Consequently, all were potentially subjected to later scribal manipulation in an effort to explain and justify subsequent values. What is more, the fifth-century Armenian *History* of Agat'angelos³⁴ and two anonymous Georgian texts, the seventh-century *Conversion of K'art'li* and the dependent but greatly elaborated ninth-/tenth-century *Life of Nino*, describe the two royal conversions as isolated ethno-linguistic phenomenon which swiftly and naturally resulted in the Christianization of these societies. But when these texts are scrutinized as belonging to a single body of pan-Caucasian evidence and when we take into consideration ensuing historical developments³⁵ which compelled some scribes to manipulate the received traditions, a rather different picture emerges: the whole of southern Caucasia was caught up and actively participated in repeated and overlapping waves of Christianization which commenced in the second half of the third century. A cross-cultural, bird's eye view reveals the inherent transregional and cross-cultural character of these waves, for the initial ripples of Christianity and the powerful waves that followed originated in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Anatolia and, as time went on, even Palestine and Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, "strangers" and "foreigners" play a prominent role in the early original literature produced by the various Armenian and Georgian peoples.

Can the Christianization accelerated by royal conversions in Armenia and eastern Georgia be reasonably characterized as a Roman or Byzantine cultural contribution to Caucasia?

³⁴ The broad cross-cultural appeal of Agat'angelos is reflected in the numerous languages of its two recensions.

³⁵ Especially the schism declared by the Armenians at the Third Council of Duin in 607 and reorientation of K'art'velian/Georgian Christianity toward Byzantium.

Clearly, some of the areas and immediately adjacent lands affected by this process, including Cappadocia and its capital Caesarea, were within the Empire proper while others, like eastern Georgia, were not. More fundamentally, all these received from *and* actively contributed to the emergent Eastern Christendom and Byzantine Commonwealth. The relationship was dynamic. On the one hand, the core ideas of Christianity were initially transmitted to Caucasia primarily from Syria and Cappadocia and, from the fifth century, Palestine. On the other hand, the Caucasians were among the earliest peoples outside the Holy Land to Christianize and the dynasts of Armenia Major and K'art'li were among the first kings anywhere in the world to convert to Christianity, thus making them key players in the formation of the first Christian states. Imperial Christianity was still in its infancy, and in any event the Christian impulses which led to the conversions of Trdat and Mirian emanated not from Constantinople but from Cappadocia, Syria, and the Armenian satrapies. Judging from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus, who had to seek information about King Mirian's baptism from a high-ranking Georgian informant in Palestine, the *comes domesticorum* and former *dux Palaestinae* Bacurius,³⁶ knowledge about the royal conversions in Caucasia was meager in the Mediterranean provinces.

Rather than Roman influence broadcast directly from the imperial core, the Christianization of Caucasia was a result of the propagation, adaptation, and sharing of religious ideas in the integrated—and, thanks to Christianity's success, reintegrating—Near East at the moment that the First Byzantine Commonwealth was crystallizing. The extraordinary dissemination of Christianity in eastern Anatolia, northern Mesopotamia, and Caucasia benefited Constantine and especially his Christian successors, while, at the same time, the state-support

³⁶ Rufinus, I.10-11.

lent to the faith by the later Roman emperors unquestionably strengthened Christianity's position in the Near East, including Caucasia. But in the early years of Constantine's sole reign, Christianity's success along the eastern edge of the empire in many respects anticipated that of the imperial center. As David Braund reminds us in his *Georgia in Antiquity*: "[i]mperial peripheries are regularly more dynamic than centres: it is precisely at their peripheries that political, cultural, and military systems change most quickly and radically as they face new challenges, new peoples, and new environments."³⁷ But, as the Christianization of the Near East demonstrates, although places like Caucasia were peripheral to Constantinople so far as physical geography is concerned, the vital contributions they made to the formation and life of the Byzantine Commonwealth expose the region as an energetic site of cultural production, syncretism, and mediation. By its nature, the Byzantine Commonwealth was polycentric and the cultural flows within that universe are best understood as dynamic—albeit unequal—encounters and exchanges rather than straightforward, unidirectional diffusion from some uniquely inventive imperial core to alleged peripheries like Caucasia.

“National” Churches and the Cosmopolitan Near East

We observe a similar pattern in the articulation of the so-called “national” church organizations which came to differentiate Eastern Christianity from its Catholic sibling in the western Mediterranean. The Armenians, particularly those who lived in the lands of the former Arshakuni kingdom, and eastern Georgians actively contributed to the concept of the “national” church and were among its initial architects. The strong cultural identifications of southern Caucasia, partly the product of the fierce and constant imperial competition over the region, were

³⁷ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 3.

instrumental in this regard.³⁸ And within the Caucasian milieu, the Armenian Church in many ways provided cultural and religious coherence in the face of political division. The “national” churches which became so fundamental to Eastern Christendom were not created in Constantinople and then diffused throughout the Commonwealth. Instead, they were a product of the cosmopolitan Commonwealth in which the empire occupied a special position.

The positive recognition and promotion of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Near East, including Caucasia, can be traced to the Jesus Movement itself, which did not target the conversion of kings and seek the creation of Christian states, but rather endeavored to prepare the souls of the highly ethnically and culturally diverse population of western Eurasia and northeastern Africa for the end of times. The famous passage from Galatians 3 serves as a poignant reminder of the cultural and social heterogeneity as well as the cosmopolitan outlook commonly embraced in early Christian sects: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”³⁹ This spirit of this passage remained a central pillar of Eastern Christianity throughout pre-modern times. Instead of advocating for the abandonment or dismantling of ethno-linguistic, social, and gender identities, Eastern Christians tended to embrace diversity. Thus, in his report of St. Cyril’s refutation of the “trilingual heresy” in the ninth century, the hagiographer asserts:

When [Cyril] was in Venice... [the Catholics] advanced the trilingual heresy, saying: “... We know of only three languages worthy of praising God in the Scriptures, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.” And the Philosopher answered them:

³⁸ Zaza Aleksidze, “Establishment of National Churches in the Caucasus,” *Caucasus & Globalization* 2/3 (2008): 142-150.

³⁹ Galatians 3.28-29. These ideas also circulated in “gnostic” circles, e.g., *The Gospel of the Egyptians*.

“Does not God's rain fall upon all equally? And does not the sun shine also upon all? And do we not all breathe air in the same way? Are you not ashamed to mention only three tongues, and to command all other nations and tribes to be blind and deaf? Tell me, do you render God powerless, that He is incapable of granting this? Or envious, that He does not desire this? We know of numerous peoples who possess writing and render glory unto God, each in its own language... Armenians, Persians, Abkhazians, Iberians [i.e., K'art'velians], Sogdians, Goths, Avars, Turks, Khazars, Arabs, Egyptians, and many others...”⁴⁰

Positive assessments of diversity were accompanied by a tendency to divide Eastern Christianity into ethno-cultural units. Tolerance, cooperation, and unity were sometimes overwhelmed by intolerance, tense competition, and disunity. This dichotomy was expressed in many ways. For example, at the Monastery of Theodosius in the Mar Saba complex near Jerusalem, several *ethnies* including Greeks, K'art'velians (“Bessoi”), and Armenians possessed churches in which the daily liturgy was conducted in their own languages. But during the Eucharist everyone gathered in the central church for a communal ceremony in Greek.⁴¹ Yet we must not forget that the multicultural fabric of Eastern Christendom also led to rivalry and violence. Such hostilities were rarely, if ever, reducible to ethno-linguistic diversity—despite the prevalence of notions of “ancient ethnic hatreds” in the modern popular imagination—but were reinforced by political and confessional differences, and this could bring out the worst in

⁴⁰ *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, Marvin Kantor trans. (Ann Arbor, 1983), cap. 16.

⁴¹ Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 251.

otherwise fair-minded and cosmopolitan people.⁴² In the second half of the eleventh century Giorgi Mc'ire, author of the *vita* of the Georgian Athonite Giorgi Mtac'mideli, blasted Armenians in his lamentation of the less-than-optimal state of Georgian ecclesiastical literature:

Although [the Georgians] possessed the Holy Scripture as well as undefiled and true faith from the very beginning, our land was yet far from Greece. And the unkind Armenians, evil-doers and cunning, have been implanted among us as impure seeds and caused great harm to us. Although our flock remained pure and undefiled, [the Armenians] by proper and improper means or through temptation brought about that [the Georgians] translated a number of books from their [language].⁴³

While it may be tempting to qualify Giorgi Mc'ire's statement and say that he really had anti-Chalcedonians in mind, Chalcedonian Armenians—large numbers of whom could be found in Tao-Klarjet'i and in Byzantine territories, often as mixed Armeno-Georgian families⁴⁴—were held in contempt by many peoples, including the Georgians, Byzantines, and even anti-Chalcedonian Armenians. This is true of the Cat' (variant Cayt'), communities of Chalcedonian Armenians in the eastern provinces of Byzantium, Caucasia, and the Near East which resisted assimilation into Byzantine and/or Georgian society.⁴⁵

Thus, the establishment of the various “national” churches is not only an expression of

⁴² John Zōnaras, writing in the twelfth century, says that Armenians—along with Arabs and slaves—were a popular subject for mimes in the Byzantine Empire: Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 123. In her twelfth-century *Alexiad*, Anna Komnēnē voices her dislike of the “wicked” Armenians, many of whom, she says, lived in Constantinople (X.1).

⁴³ Giorgi Mc'ire, *Life of Giorgi Mtac'mideli*, cap. 8, Abuladze ed., 123¹⁹⁻²⁷, Grdzeldidze trans., 111.

⁴⁴ V.A. Artiunova-Fidanian, *Armiano-vizantiiskaia kontaknaia zona (X-XI vv.): rezul'taty vzaimodeistviia kul'tur* (Moskva: Nauka, 1994), with English summary, 233-235; A.P. Kazhdan, *Armiane v sostave gosподstviushchego klassa vizantiiskoi imperii v XI-XII vv.* (Erevan: Izd-vo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1975).

⁴⁵ Garsoïan, “Problem of Armenian Integration,” 103-104, fns. 190-191 for an overview of the scholarly literature.

the tremendous diversity, cooperation, and cosmopolitanism of Eastern Christendom, but it is also a consequence of the merger and calcification of particular divisive social, ethno-linguistic, and theological interests. “National” churches thus embody the fundamental tension between cosmopolitanism and particularism in the Caucasia, the Near East, and northeastern Africa. The experience of the Armenian and Georgian—and to a lesser extent, the Caucasian Albanian—“national” churches is representative of these large-scale trends and also speaks to: (1) the formative role played by Caucasia in this essential aspect of Eastern Christianity; and, (2) the dynamic, multidirectional interplay, creative adaptations, and contributions of the various Christian communities and “national” churches to the polycentric and multicultural Byzantine Commonwealth.

The policies and structure of the imperial core were important factors in the formation of “national” churches, and in this respect it may be said that Christian Caucasia adopted—or, more precisely, *adapted*—Byzantine ecclesiastical culture. Two developments intimately tied to the emperor and the patriarchate of Constantinople are crucial: the elaboration of a uniform church hierarchy in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries to fix the relationship of bishops and other officials within the empire and beyond; and, simultaneously, the campaign to institute a single legitimate orthodoxy and the intensifying obsession with defining and rooting out heresy. Constantine set all this in motion when he favored Christianity after 312 and particularly when he established a precedent by intervening in the Donatist and Arian controversies, which culminated in the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. It must not be forgotten that these historic developments unfolded within the framework of the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic heterogeneity of the emergent Commonwealth.

Christian Caucasian Literature

The literary history of early Christian Caucasia is an outstanding record of these ecumenical and cosmopolitan trends. The translated, adapted, and original literatures produced by the Armenians and eastern Georgians in late antiquity have typically been interpreted as expressions of ethno-linguistic distinctiveness and, by extension, discrete “national” church organizations. There is some validity to this explanation, for all of the received medieval documentary evidence must be scrutinized in relation to the subsequent Armenian and K’art’velian “national” churches. Even texts pre-dating their formation have reached us later redactions and recensions. What is more, it is customarily assumed that the “national” churches were established in tandem with the royal conversions in Armenia Major and eastern Georgia. While their seeds had germinated in this and earlier times, the realization of “national” ecclesiastical organizations, autocephalous and built tightly around ethnic nuclei, belongs to a later time. In the case of Caucasia, this development is evident in the sixth and especially seventh centuries when separate, autonomous, hierarchies centered on particular *ethnies* with distinctive theological positions, literatures, and even stories of conversion took shape.⁴⁶

Armenian and Georgian literature was a direct result of Christianization. Scripts for these languages along with Caucasian Albanian⁴⁷ were deliberately invented by Christians around the year 400 in order to solidify gains and to hasten the further expansion of the faith. Despite the rapid, once-and-forever conversions alleged by the cycle of texts devoted to Sts. Gregory and Nino, Caucasia’s Christianization was a process which spread across several centuries. Thus, the fifth-century Armenian *Epic Histories* (*Buzandaran Patmut’iwnk’*, incorrectly attributed to

⁴⁶ See now Nina Garsoïan, *L’Église arménienne et le Grand Schisme d’Orient*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 574, Subsidia, vol. 100 (Louvain: Peeters, 1999).

⁴⁷ Only fragments of texts in Caucasian Albanian survive and the language was only recently deciphered. In English see *The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsests of Mt. Sinai*, Jost Gippert, Wolfgang Schulze, Zaza Aleksidze, and Jean-Pierre Mahé eds. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

P'awstos Buzand) and *The Martyrdom of the Children of Kola*, written by an anonymous Georgian author in the fifth/sixth century, attest the ongoing struggles of Christians against “paganism.” The inventor of the Armenian script, Mashtoc' (Mesrop), deliberately targeted districts of Armenia Major where polytheism and Zoroastrianism remained strong. Through a pan-Caucasian Christian effort, perhaps spearheaded by Mashtoc', distinctive—yet related—Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian scripts were devised at the very beginning of the fifth century. Judging from surviving evidence, with the enthusiastic support of Mashtoc' and the prelate Sahak, Christians in Armenia Major took full advantage of the new script in order to translate a wide range of ecclesiastical literature from Syriac and Greek into Armenian. Armenians traveled to Edessa in Syria, Melitēnē in Cappadocia (and later the capital of Justinian's province of Third Armenia), and even Constantinople for linguistic training.⁴⁸ According to his hagiographer Koriun, Mashtoc' even appeared before Emperor Theodosios II (r. 408-450) and the prelate of the Constantinopolitan church, Attikos (r. 405/406-425), who endorsed his project to propagate Christianity using the new script in the Armenian territories under Roman control.⁴⁹ Indeed, the Armenian script and the literature enabled by it proved a critical factor in creating a Christian Armenian culture across the politically fragmented Armenian communities.

Translated and adapted literature was quickly followed by original works. In Armenia Major, hagiography and historiography flourished already in the fifth century, even as the Arshakuni dynasty was eradicated; in neighboring eastern Georgia, the first hagiographical work was produced at the end of the fifth century, while the first historiographical works appeared

⁴⁸ Robert W. Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988/1989): 37. Among the earliest works translated into Armenian were Solomon's Proverbs, the Jerusalem Lectionary, Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron*, and the *Ecclesiastical History* and *Chronicle* of Eusebius of Caesarea: Thomson, “Armenian Literary Culture,” 203-205.

⁴⁹ Koriun, *The Life of Mashtoc'*, cap. 16 = *Virk' Mashtoc'i* (Erevan: Erevani hamalsarani hrartarakch'ut'yun, 2005), 68-69.

somewhat later, in the seventh-ninth centuries. Literary pursuits in neighboring K'art'li and Albania were also impressive, but they lacked the resources and relatively large population and ecclesiastical hierarchy of Armenia Major. The Armenians' familiarity with Classical literature predated the conversion of Trdat and the invention of the Armenian script, a fact which owed much to the geographical proximity of the Armenian lands to centers of learning in the Near East.⁵⁰ As noted, Mashtoc' and Sahak had directed a massive effort to translate Christian texts into Armenian. Not surprisingly, late antique Armenian authors, including Elishē, Łazar P'arpec'i, Anania Shirakac'i, and the later Movsēs Xorenac'i made frequent use of Classical and early Christian texts. Elishē, for instance, heavily drew upon the book of Maccabees; Xorenac'i patterned his *History of the Armenians* on Eusebius' *Chronicle* and also exploited Josephus, Philo, Ps.-Kallisthenēs, Gregory Nazianzenos, the church historian Socrates, and perhaps even John Malalas.⁵¹ The particular use of Classical and Christian sources by Xorenac'i has been instrumental in dating this important historian to the seventh/eighth century.

Direct Classical influence upon early Georgian literature appears to have been far less extensive: a reasonably deep and sustained knowledge of Graeco-Roman texts becomes evident starting in the ninth century, with the thriving of Tao-Klarjet'i. Thus, all three Georgian "pre-Bagratid" historiographical texts, which were written between ca. 790 and 813, unmistakably paint eastern Georgia and the whole of Caucasia as the northernmost part of the Iranian Commonwealth, even after the Christianization of southern Caucasia. Their application of Romano-Byzantine imagery and literary models, let alone their knowledge about the Roman/Byzantine Empire and even Roman-influenced western Georgia is severely limited. The Georgian analogue to the gargantuan translation efforts of Mashtoc' and Sahak, which first

⁵⁰ Robert W. Thomson, "Armenian Literary Culture," 199, 205.

⁵¹ For Xorenac'i's foreign sources, see Thomson in his translation of Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians*, 10-40.

attempted to find a proper place the Armenian Church within the larger Christian world, belongs to a considerably later time, the tenth and eleventh centuries, with the unprecedented literary activity of Georgian monks residing on Mt. Athos, on the Black Mountain near Antioch in Syria, and on Mt. Sinai in Egypt.

A few original texts focused on religious matters appear to have reached us in substantially the same condition as they were originally written despite their transmission in later manuscripts. Two important examples are preserved in Georgian: *The Passion of Shushanik*, a short hagiographical work written by the priest Iakob C'urtaveli (Jacob of Tsurtavi)⁵² in the late fifth century, and the anonymous, sixth- or early seventh-century *Martyrdom of Evstat'i Mc'xet'eli*. The particulars of these fascinating *vitae* need not detain us here, but when taken together the religious image of late antique Caucasia is clear and consistent: to these hagiographers, affiliation to Christianity was the most important thing, and this trumped ethnic or even confessional identifications. Neither text gives the slightest indication of the existence of “national” churches in contemporary Caucasia. To drive home this point, neither martyr-saint was K'art'velian/Georgian: Shushanik was an Armenian princess, the daughter of the famous Vardan Mamikonean, and was murdered in the Armeno-K'art'velian marchlands by order of her husband, the *pitiaxshi* Varsk'en (who might have been a K'art'velian; his background is uncertain); and Evstat'i, originally named Gwrobandak, was an Iranian and former Zoroastrian and Manichaean who had migrated to Mc'xet'a (Mtskheta), the royal seat of eastern Georgia, from Ganzak (Geo. Gandzak). Somewhat later, in the eighth century, another important local saint, the perfumer Habo, was an Arab immigrant from Baghdad. Thus, two (three, if we count Habo) of the brightest local heroes of the incipient eastern Georgian Church were not

⁵² Korneli Kekelidze, *K'art'uli literaturis istoria*, vol. 1 (T'bilisi: Sabhot'a sak'art'velo, 1960), 113-122, and Michael Tarchnišvili, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur* (Città del Vaticano, 1955), 83-87.

K'art'velians. What is more, the ethno-cultural plurality expressed in these *vitae* is matched by confessional and theological cosmopolitanism. The relative lack of concern with orthodoxy or heresy is most conspicuous in *The Martyrdom of Evstat'i*, where, it would seem, Manichaean ideas are embedded within an unusual Gospel harmony, which itself might have a Manichaean provenance. In a recent essay T'amila Mgaloblishvili and I suggest that Gwrobandak was initiated into a Manichaean congregation in Ganzak before he was baptized as a Christian and took the new name Evstat'i in Mc'xet'a.⁵³ Without any reservations, the hagiographer identifies Ganzak's Manichaean community, which he says made up the religious majority of the city, as "Christian."

A Non-Constantinopolitan Orientation

The initial Christianization of the dynasts of Arshakuni Armenia and Chosroid K'art'li in the first half of the fourth century owed little to Constantine directly. One point of actual contact—should the tradition be genuine—was the embassy King Mirian dispatched to Constantinople to request priests; both Rufinus and the seventh-century *Conversion of K'art'li* enshrine this tradition.⁵⁴ Here we have an example of the distinctiveness of the pre-schism Armenian and K'art'velian churches, for the former was initially dependent upon and in close relations with the see of Caesarea in Cappadocia. While the Christianization of the Armenian and eastern Georgian lands enhanced the possibility of a broad array of connections with the later Roman and then early Byzantine Empire, the fact of the matter is that in late antiquity the Christian leadership of Caucasia looked first and foremost to the south, especially Syria and

⁵³ T'amila Mgaloblishvili and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?," in *In Search of Truth: Manichaica, Augustiniana & Varia Gnostica*, Jacob Albert van den Berg ed. (Leiden—Boston: Brill, 2011), 263-290.

⁵⁴ Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.11; and *The Conversion of K'art'li*, caps. 9-10, trans. in Stephen H. Rapp Jr. and Paul C. Crego, "The Conversion of K'art'li: The Shatberdi Variant, Kek.Inst. S-1141," *Le Muséon* 119/1-2 (2006): 191.

Palestine, and to adjacent territories in eastern Anatolia, especially Cappadocia, for models of practice and belief not to mention texts and training. Caucasian monks active in the environs of Jerusalem and Antioch were pivotal in this regard. Indeed, Syrian ascetics may have been instrumental in the early development—if not the introduction—of cenobitic monasticism to southern Caucasia. Thus, by tradition, the Thirteen Syrian Fathers are said to have implanted monasticism in eastern Georgia in the sixth century, although it is likely that anchorites and other eremitic ascetics were present earlier and, in any event, Christian Caucasians in Palestine would have been acquainted with monasticism before the arrival of the Syrian Fathers.

Translated and adapted ecclesiastical literature in early Christian Caucasia also owed much to Syria, Cappadocia, and Palestine. We will explore this phenomenon below, but suffice it to say here that the liturgy of Jerusalem exerted a great influence upon late antique Caucasia. The eastern Georgians embraced the Jerusalemite Liturgy of St. James from the fifth until the end of the tenth century,⁵⁵ at which time the nascent K'art'velian “national” church based in Tao-Klarjet'i was deliberately attempting to draw itself more fully into the Byzantine world. Some genres of early Georgian literature, including *mravalt'avis* (the equivalent of Byzantine *polykephala*), enshrine K'art'velian Christianity's early connections with the Holy Land. A fascinating example is the tenth-century Klarjet'ian *mravalt'avi*. Of this *mravalt'avi*'s sixty-three lections, fifty-three are translations, and its homilies are precise translations from Greek originals. Significantly, text demonstrates the Jerusalemite basis of the K'art'velian liturgy prior to the end of the tenth century.⁵⁶ Direct survivals of Jerusalem's original stationary liturgy, which fell out of use after the Arab conquest, are relatively uncommon. However, Georgian sources

⁵⁵ *Klarjuli mravalt'avi*, T'amila Mgaloblishvili ed. and comm. (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1991), 470.

⁵⁶ *Klarjuli mravalt'avi*, Mgaloblishvili ed., 470-489.

have allowed scholars to reconstruct “the entire textual repertory of Jerusalem chant,”⁵⁷ particularly in early medieval Georgian *tropologia* or chant books known locally as *iadgaris*.⁵⁸

In the visual arts, too, the influence of the Byzantine imperial core was perceptible but limited. In spite of Caucasia’s tumultuous history, medieval Armenia and Georgia have bequeathed a rich tradition of painting and architecture. Georgian evidence is particularly valuable in this regard: the absence of Iconoclasm in K’art’li has left a nearly complete chronological sequence from late antiquity throughout the medieval epoch.⁵⁹ However, far more remnants of material culture have come down to us for the ninth century and later than earlier times. Insofar as monumental painting is concerned, there was a tendency in earliest period of Christian K’art’velian art and architecture, from the fourth to the tenth centuries, “to achieve as much harmony with general Christian values as possible.”⁶⁰

The embryonic administrative structure of early Caucasian Christianity had very little to do with the localized Roman and early Byzantine hierarchies which had developed within the imperial system of provinces and dioceses. Roman provinces did not exist in Armenia Major and eastern Georgia, and thus the local Christian leadership adapted itself to the existing Iranian social pattern. Bishops were not only attached to the estates of the most powerful aristocrats and the monarchy, but in the case of Armenia, at least, families could hold the position as part of their patrimony. In this way, Gregory the Illuminator and his family were bishops of the Armenian Arshakuni house.⁶¹ Likewise, the bishops attested in *The Passion of Shushanik* were attached to

⁵⁷ Peter Jeffery, “The Earliest Christian Chant Repertory Recovered: The Georgian Witnesses to Jerusalem Chant,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47/1 (Spring 1994), 8.

⁵⁸ Jeffery, “Earliest Christian Chant,” 13-22. See also *idem*, “The Sunday Office of Seventh-Century Jerusalem in the Georgian Chantbook (Iadgari): A Preliminary Report,” *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993): 52-75.

⁵⁹ Zaza Sxirtladze, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis k’art’uli kedlis mxatvroba: f’elovani jvarpatiosani* (T’bilisi, 2008).

⁶⁰ Sxirtladze, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis k’art’uli kedlis mxatvroba*, 304.

⁶¹ Nina G. Garsoïan, “The Enigmatic Figure of Bishop Šahak of Manazkert,” *Handes Amsorya* 101 (1987): 883-885.

the *pitiaxshi*'s estate in C'urtavi/C'urtaw. In subsequent times, bishops in eastern Georgia were frequently headquartered at the most important monasteries, which themselves in some respects functioned and were governed as though they were aristocratic patrimonies.

By the end of the fifth century, the chief prelates of the three principal churches of southern Caucasia—of Armenia Major, K'art'li, and Albania—were headed by prelates styled *katholikos*. The Caucasian terms are based upon the Greek καθολικός, “universal.” This was not, however, a title employed by high-ranking bishops within the empire (cf. archbishop, metropolitan [which seems to be close in function to the early Caucasian *katholikoi*], patriarch); rather, it was used by autonomous and autocephalous church administrations in eastern territories just beyond Byzantine imperial borders (especially within the Iranian Commonwealth), an area which, according to the vague sixth canon of Nicaea I, nominally fell under the jurisdiction of the metropolitanate—and future patriarchate—of Antioch. This circumstance is acknowledged in the anonymous *Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, a Georgian historiographical text composed around the year 800 and now preserved exclusively within *K'art'lis c'xovreba*, the so-called Georgian Chronicles. In its pages we read how King Vaxtang's desire to secure a *katholikos* for the K'art'velian Church was met with fierce opposition from the existing prelate, the bishop Mik'ael, who kicked Vaxtang in the mouth, breaking one of his teeth. Vaxtang sent the disgraced Mik'ael—and the broken tooth!—to the patriarch of Constantinople for punishment; the fallen Mik'ael was exiled to the Stoudion Monastery in the imperial capital. Meanwhile, so the story goes, the Constantinopolitan patriarch dispatched Petre, Vaxtang's candidate for the *katholikosate*, to his counterpart in Antioch, noting in his letter that in the fourth century Constantine had sent priests to K'art'li only because hostilities with Sasanian Iran had disrupted communications between Caucasia and Antioch. The patriarch of Constantinople acknowledged

that jurisdiction over “K’art’li and the east and the north belong to your holy see...” Subsequently, the first *katholikos* of K’art’li and twelve new bishops were consecrated by the patriarch of Antioch.⁶²

Caucasia at the End of Antiquity

Festering Christological controversies (whose ferocity owed much to the imperial center), the eastern Georgians’ alliance with Byzantium following Heraclius’ campaign against the Sasanians (when the emperor himself had passed through southern Caucasia), and, in its wake and perhaps with Constantinople’s encouragement, the consolidation of the K’art’velian ecclesiastical hierarchy into a full-fledged “national” church and its quest for greater autonomy are the chief factors leading to the formal schism between the Armenian and eastern Georgian churches declared by the former at its Third Council of Dvin in 607.⁶³ Although subsequent sources emphasize theological differences, particularly the acceptance or rejection of Chalcedon, the most immediate cause of the schism was, in fact, the successful effort of the strong-willed *katholikos* Kwrion to assert autocephaly and to challenge Armenian ecclesiastical superiority within the Caucasian arena. By the sixth century the Armenian Church based in Persarmenia had come to claim a protectorate over the K’art’velian and Albanian Churches.⁶⁴ Gregory the Illuminator, his successors, and the pioneering literary efforts of Mashtoc’ and Sahak had given the Armenians an advantage in terms of administration and infrastructure. Moreover, compensating religiously for the centuries-old political and cultural fragmentation of the various

⁶² *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, Qauxch’ishvili ed., 197-198, Thomson trans., 215-216.

⁶³ For the historical and theological background, see esp. Garsoïan, *L’Église arménienne et le Grand Schisme d’Orient*.

⁶⁴ Garsoïan, “The *Marzpanate*,” 112: “The immediate result of the Armenian conciliar decision was to extend the dogmatic breach to the Iberian Church, whose *kat’olikos* accepted union with the Byzantine Church in 608, perhaps in part to free himself from the protectorate that the Armenian Church had extended over Iberia [i.e., K’art’li] and Caucasian Albania in the preceding centuries.”

Armenian peoples, Armenian ecclesiastics based in the former Arshakuni realm were perhaps the first Christians to realize “national” church, that is to say, a church organization in which culture, language, and religious confession were fused. The cultural function of Christianity for the divided Armenians is of supreme importance, for it further stimulated the consolidation and expansion of the Armenian ecclesiastical organization. But the building of a pan-Armenian Christian identity came at a high price. Robert Thomson observes: “The use of a common written language no doubt encouraged the growth of a sense of common Armenian identity, but it complicated the unstable balance of Armenians poised between two jealous imperial powers.”⁶⁵ Here it should be stressed that not all Christian Armenians were united in the Armenian “national” church headquartered in Persarmenia, outside Byzantine imperial domains. The Byzantines promoted a rival Armenian Church and, what is more, a sizeable Armenian minority in Caucasia adhered to Chalcedon, as is attested in the ca. 700 *La Narratio de rebus Armeniae*.⁶⁶

For its part, the nascent church in K’art’li retained its cosmopolitan fabric even after the elevation of its chief prelate to the lofty position of *katholikos* in the late fifth century. But this state of affairs took a sharp turn in the early seventh century, at which time an eastern Georgian “national” church—one that was primarily by and for the K’art’velian *ethnie*—began to be realized. The establishment of the K’art’velian “national” church was in no small measure a reaction against the Armenian prelates who had hardened in their theological positions and many of whom cast an eye of distrust toward Constantinople. The resolute *katholikos* Kwrion also desired to preside over an independent organization, and certainly one that would not have to answer to the Armenian Church.

⁶⁵ Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization,” 38.

⁶⁶ Gérard Garitte, *La Narratio de rebus Armeniae*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 132, Subsidia 4 (Louvain, 1952).

The era of Heraclius and Justin III was a social and cultural watershed for Caucasia and the entire Byzantine world. The massive destruction of the last war between the Roman and Sasanian empires marked the end of antiquity;⁶⁷ after this time, we can most properly speak of a Byzantine Empire different from what had come before. Moreover, the Byzantine Commonwealth and Eastern Christianity were in the midst of a fundamental transformation. “National” churches, based in part on the precedent set by the Armenians, mushroomed and quickly became the principal organizational form of Eastern Christendom as Byzantine hegemony waned in the Near East. Despite Byzantium’s loss of its Near Eastern provinces as a result of the Arab conquests, the post-Heraclian age witnessed an unprecedented blossoming of direct Byzantine and Constantinopolitan cultural influence in southern Caucasia, particularly among the Georgians.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Clive Foss, “The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity,” *English Historical Review* 90 (Oct. 1975): 721-747.

⁶⁸ This essay is extended chronologically in my second NCEEER working paper: “Caucasia and the Second Byzantine Commonwealth: Byzantinization and the Endurance of Regional Coherence.”