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THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND DIPLOMACY IN ANCIENT CAUCASIAN ALBANIA

Annotation

Religion has been a significant factor in shaping political and social relations throughout history. In the case of Caucasian Albania, a kingdom in the southern part of the Caucasus, religion played a crucial role in shaping diplomatic ties between the state and its neighbors. The adoption of Zoroastrianism and Christianity brought new cultural practices and traditions to the region, contributing to the development of art, architecture, and literature. The article begins by providing an overview of Caucasian Albania's political and religious landscape, highlighting society's cultural and religious diversity. It examines the various religious traditions present in the region, including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and local indigenous beliefs, and their influence on diplomatic practices. Through analysis of primary sources, the article identifies key patterns and strategies employed by Caucasian Albanian rulers in utilizing religion as a tool of diplomacy. It explores how religious affiliations, alliances, and conversions were leveraged to establish diplomatic ties with the Byzantine Empire, and Sassanids and maintain stability in a complex geopolitical landscape. By unraveling the dynamics of religious diplomacy in Caucasian Albania, this article offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion and diplomacy, contributing to broader discussions on the historical and cultural dimensions of diplomatic practices.

Keywords: *Caucasian Albania, Sasanian-Roman wars, religion, diplomacy, cultural diversity, politics*

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Annotasiya

Din, tarix boyu siyasi və sosial münasibətlərin formalaşmasında mühüm amil olmuşdur. Cənubi Qafqazın bir hissəsi olan Qafqaz Albaniyası dövlətinin təmsalın-

da, din dövlətin qonşuları ilə diplomatik əlaqələrinin formalaşmasında mühüm rol oynamışdır. Zərdüştlüyün və Xristianlığın qəbul edilməsi bölgəyə yeni mədəni adət və ənənələr gətirmiş, incəsənət, memarlıq və ədəbiyyatın inkişafına töhfə vermişdir. Məqalə, Qafqaz Albaniyasının siyasi və dini mənzərəsinə ümumi bir baxış təqdim edərək cəmiyyətin mədəni və dini müxtəlifliyini vurğulayır, bölgədə mövcud olan müxtəlif dini ənənələri, o cümlədən Zərdüştlük, Xristianlıq və yerli inancları və onların diplomatik təcrübələrə təsirini araşdırır. Birincil mənbələrin təhlili vasitəsilə məqalə Qafqaz Albaniyası hökmdarlarının dini diplomatiya vasitəsi kimi istifadə etmələrində əsas nümunələri və strategiyaları müəyyən edir, dini mənsubiyyətlərin, ittifaqların və dinin dəyişdirilməsinin Bizans İmperiyası və Sasanilərlə diplomatik əlaqələr qurmaq və mürəkkəb geosiyasi mənzərədə sabitliyi təmin etmək üçün necə istifadə olunduğunu araşdırır. Qafqaz Albaniyasında dini diplomatiyanın dinamikasını açaraq, bu məqalə din və diplomatiya arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqənin xarakterini təqdim edir və diplomatik təcrübələrin tarixi və mədəni ölçüləri ilə bağlı daha geniş müzakirələrə töhfə verir.

***Açar sözlər:** Qafqaz Albaniyası, Sasani-Roma müharibələri, din, diplomatiya, mədəni müxtəliflik, siyasət*

Introduction

Caucasian Albania was a historical polity that thrived in the South Caucasus region, mainly within the borders of modern-day Azerbaijan from the 4th century B.C. until the 8th century A.D. In Caucasian Albania, diplomacy was critical in maintaining its independence and navigating the complex political landscape of the region. The state had to navigate the complex political landscape of the region, which included other states such as Sassanids, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, Khazars, Arabs, and the Huns.

Albania's rich political and religious history has garnered significant attention from researchers [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7], but its diplomatic history remains relatively unexplored. In particular, the role of religion in shaping diplomatic relations within Albania has been largely overlooked. This article aims to fill this scholarly gap by comprehensively analyzing the significant aspects of religion's influence on diplomatic engagements in Albania. By delving into the interplay between religion and diplomacy, the article will uncover Albania's unique perspective and shed light on the understudied dynamics of this nation.

Cultural Diversity in Albania

Historical accounts, such as those documented by Strabo, depict Albania as a region inhabited by a multitude of diverse tribes. These tribes exhibited a remarkable linguistic diversity, with Strabo noting the presence of as many as 26 distinct languages among the Albanian populace. These tribes include Albanians, Gargar-

eans, Udis, Legae, Chilbs-Silvs, Lpins, and Tsodis, all of whom are described as autochthons (indigenous peoples) of Caucasian origin. [1:257] In the past, each tribe maintained its autonomy, being governed separately by its own king. These rulers often corresponded to distinct linguistic groups within the region. However, over time, the governance structure evolved, and a unified monarchy emerged, with one king ruling over all the tribes collectively. [8:229] The existence of multiple languages within the region likely posed challenges to communication and coordination among the tribes. Consequently, it may have led to instances of language assimilation over time. However, it is worth noting that some scholars propose an alternative perspective. They argue that the 26 languages mentioned by Strabo were, in fact, dialects of a common language. This view suggests that although there were variations in speech and regional differences, these languages shared enough similarities to be considered different dialects rather than completely separate ones. Furthermore, according to Arabic sources, the second most widely used language in Azerbaijan was the Arran language. This assertion prompts Ramil Agayev to posit that the Alban language and Arran language are synonymous. Agayev argues that since Arabs did not refer to the country as Albania, but rather as Arran in their sources, it suggests a linguistic connection between the Arran language and the historical Alban language. [6:281]

After discussing the linguistic diversity in Albania, it's essential to explore the religious diversity present in the region. According to Strabo, the Albanians practiced a diverse religious faith, worshipping deities like Helius, Zeus, and Selene, suggesting a multifaceted religious landscape in the region. [8:229] Afterward, the Sasanian triumphs over the Parthians brought about a crucial shift in the political and religious landscape of the Caucasus region. As a result, Zoroastrianism was imposed within Sasanian territories, suppressing the previous amalgamation of Zoroastrianism and local cults that had characterized Parthian governance. Late antique writings offer vivid depictions of the clash between two prominent religious traditions prevalent in the area: Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Albanians were one of the first nations to adopt Christianity as a state religion in the IV century. Albania, known for its cultural diversity and linguistic variations, presented considerable challenges to the proliferation of Christianity due to its strong adherence to traditional religious customs and practices [9:144]. The challenges Christianity faces in Albania's culturally diverse region, as well as King Vachagan III's measures to counter the revival of pagan practices, further highlight the complexity and conflicts surrounding religious beliefs in the area [10:29]. On the other hand, the foreign perception of a unified Caucasus led to collective resistance, seen in the simultaneous adoption of Christianity as the state religion in especially Iberia and Albania, forming a distinctive Caucasian civilization at the crossroads of Western and Eastern influences, resilient against assimilation by major Eastern empires. [9:143]

This religious diversity also served as a tool of diplomacy, as the kingdom established alliances and formed relationships with other states based on shared religious beliefs. For example, the conversion of Albanian king Arnayr to Christianity [10:8] had significant diplomatic implications as it helped to establish alliances with Christian nations and facilitated diplomatic relationships with the Byzantine Empire. On the other hand, it has to be mentioned that the changes that the Eastern Roman civilization underwent only resonated after a period of time in the South Caucasus. They either weren't received on time or had no noticeable effects. Even though Christianity was brought to and established in Caucasia during the fourth century, by the time writings were produced in the following century, nearly all aspects of the Christian life, including monasticism and the cult of saints, had already been established in the West [9:137]. Furthermore, Arnayr's domestic policy also primarily focused on combatting paganism and promoting Christianity as the kingdom's official religion. Despite his efforts, Christianity only became the dominant faith among some Albanians during Arnayr's reign. Although the king, court, and nobility embraced the religion and a portion of the population, some Albanians continued to adhere to their traditional pagan beliefs, while others followed Mazdeism [1:237]. Arnayr sought to unite the multi-ethnic state and resist Zoroastrian Sassanids by relying on monotheistic religion, specifically Christianity. His successors were cognizant of this strategy and maintained its use [1:363].

Despite linguistic and religious complexities, this diversity served as both a challenge and a diplomatic tool, ultimately contributing to the region's unique identity at the crossroads of Western and Eastern influences.

The Role of Religion in the Sassanian-Roman Wars in Albania: A Diplomatic Perspective

The Roman-Sassanian Wars, which took place between the Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire, significantly impacted the kingdom of Caucasian Albania. The kingdom was caught between the two major powers of the time, the Roman Empire to the west and the Sassanian Empire to the east. Each side sought to gain control over the kingdom to use it as a base of operations against their rival. This resulted in frequent military incursions into the kingdom and the destruction of many of its cities and settlements. Despite these conflicts, Caucasian Albania could maintain its independence and retain a significant degree of autonomy. This was due in part to the support of the Sassanian Empire, which saw the kingdom as an important ally in its ongoing conflict with the Romans.

It is worth mentioning that the Sassanids also employed religion as a tool in politics. The importance of religion to the exercise of political will in the Sassanian world can be understood as more pragmatic than genuine, as political considerations and power dynamics often shaped the kings' relationship with religion. This

is evident in their utilization of both Zoroastrianism and Christianity as bases of support, indicating the instrumental use of religion for political purposes [12:181].

The Sassanid religious policy in the Caucasus can also be exemplified by the case of King Vache of Albania. After the death of Yazdegerd, the Sassanid ruler, in 457, his sons engaged in a power struggle for two years. During this time, Vache, the ruler of Albania, capitalized on internal discord and revolted against the Sassanids, promoting Christianity instead of Zoroastrianism [10:9]. Vache had initially followed Christianity under his father's influence. However, he was compelled to convert to Zoroastrianism by Yazdegerd before his rebellion [13:55]. This event underscores the role of religion in shaping the relations between the two states.

On the other hand, The Sassanids had an inconsistent policy towards the Christian populations in Albania. The Sassanids practiced Zoroastrianism as their official religion, and their foreign policy was heavily influenced by their religious beliefs [14:82; 15:99]. The Sassanid Empire engaged in what could be described as "faith-based diplomacy," which involved using religious rhetoric and symbolism to achieve their political and strategic goals. The adoption of Christianity as the official religion in the Eastern Roman Empire influenced the Sassanids to support various Christian sects that opposed the official church in their state [1:364]. That's why The Sassanids sought to use religion as a tool of diplomacy, offering protection and support to Christian sects that were in conflict with the official church in Albania. This policy was designed to weaken the Albanian monarchy and increase Sassanid influence in the region. Furthermore, Sassanids saw the kingdom as a valuable buffer against the powerful nomadic tribes of Central Asia. However, the Albanian kingdom was also able to maintain religious ties with the Roman Empire, which was a major center of Christianity. This dual allegiance allowed the kingdom to maintain a delicate balance between the two major powers of the time and ensured its survival as a distinct entity in the face of repeated military incursions.

The Kingdom of Caucasian Albania faced significant challenges during the Roman-Sassanian wars, as both empires sought to exert their influence over the region. Despite sharing a common Zoroastrian faith with the Sassanids, the Arsacid rulers of Caucasian Albania chose to support Rome in the III century conflicts [16:73]. This decision likely stemmed from a combination of factors, including the benefits of military support from Rome and the desire to maintain the kingdom's independence and territorial integrity. In the IV century, King Urnayr of Caucasian Albania made a significant shift in religious policy by adopting Christianity as the state religion, replacing the kingdom's previous Zoroastrian faith. This decision likely had political, religious, and cultural motivations, including the influence of neighboring Christian states, the benefits of Christian alliances and trade, and the role of Christianity in the cultural and ideological identity of the kingdom. Surprisingly, despite the shift in religious policy, King Urnayr maintained a diplomatic relationship with

the Sassanids by marrying a Sassanid princess [10:8], which helped to establish a political and military alliance between Caucasian Albania and the Sassanid Empire. This marriage symbolized friendship and cooperation and helped maintain the region's peace and stability. Moreover, this alliance facilitated trade and cultural exchange between the two nations. It resulted in King Urnayr standing alongside Sassanids' King Shapur II in significant battles such as the Battle of Amida in 359 and the Battle of Dzirav in 371 [10:18; 11:148]. King Urnayr, despite being a Christian ruler, may have supported the Sassanids and fought against other Christian states to protect his kingdom and ensure his reign's stability.

The Roman-Sasanian Wars had a profound impact on the Kingdom of Caucasian Albania. Despite facing destruction and military incursions, Caucasian Albania managed to maintain its independence and autonomy, largely due to its strategic value and alliances formed through religion and marriage with both the Roman and Sassanian empires.

Religious Dynamics in Diplomatic Maneuvers During King Javanshir's Reign

Javanshir was a king of Caucasian Albania, which ruled from approximately 642 to 681 CE, during a period of great political and religious change in the region.

During Javanshir's reign, the Sassanian Empire, which was the dominant power in the region, was in decline, and the Arab conquest of the region was beginning. Javanshir faced pressure from both the Sassanians and the Arab armies, and he had to navigate a complex political and diplomatic landscape. King Javanshir had to navigate between different religious groups to maintain a balance of power and ensure the security of his kingdom. He supported the spread of Christianity in the region, which was also a strategic decision to strengthen his kingdom's relationship with the Byzantine Empire, a significant Christian power at the time. In his letter, he addresses Emperor Heraclius as the "Lord" and emphasizes his worship of God. He appeals to Heraclius as a Christian lord and offers his vassalage, seeking divine virtue from the emperor's dignity and glory. This demonstrates the religious language employed by Javanshir to establish a religious connection and appeal to Heraclius as a fellow Christian ruler. In response, Heraclius acknowledges Javanshir's love for the worship of God as revealed in his letter. He extends the grace and mercy of the redeeming cross, emphasizing religious symbolism and the power of divine authority. Heraclius expresses his gladness over Javanshir and his eastern country accepting vassalage, suggesting a mutual religious bond and shared faith [10:116;117].

Following this, Albanian historian Movses Kalankatuklu describes Javanshir's and Heraclius's meetings. Upon their meeting, Constantine welcomes Javanshir personally and commands him to end his mourning attire for his deceased wife as a

gesture of honor and respect. Instead, Javanshir is dressed in royal robes, signifying his elevated status. In this context, Javanshir is emboldened to make a request to Constantine for a piece of the cross, which is seen as a sacred relic. The response from Constantine highlights the religious significance attributed to the cross. Constantine cuts off a piece of the cross in Javanshir's presence, presenting it to him as a cauterizer of sins [10:118]. This act symbolizes divine favor, protection, and strength against enemies.

These religious aspects in the diplomacy between Javanshir and Heraclius reflect the significance of religion in shaping diplomatic relations during that time. Both parties use religious language and symbols to establish trust, demonstrate loyalty, and invoke divine blessings in their relationship. Religion serves as a common ground for understanding and fostering a sense of shared purpose and cooperation.

Despite his support for Christianity, King Javanshir was committed to religious tolerance and allowed other religious groups to practice their faith without persecution. He also maintained a good relationship with the Arab Caliphate, despite religious differences, based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. This approach to religion in foreign policy was strategic, pragmatic, and focused on maintaining the security and stability of his kingdom.

The Role of Religious Leaders in Diplomacy in Caucasian Albania

The political dynamics of the time had a significant impact on religion, just as it did on politics. This influence was not limited to external conflicts and internal power struggles among the ruling class but extended to the religious policies of the Constantinople and Ctesiphon courts. The religious institutions in the Caucasus also responded and reacted to these political circumstances, both in terms of dogma and jurisdiction [17:114].

The religious leaders of the Church of Caucasian Albania, also known as the Albanian Apostolic Church, played a central role in diplomacy and political affairs. They acted as intermediaries between the Albanian monarchs and neighboring powers such as the Sassanian and Byzantine Empires. Religious leaders would engage in dialogue with their counterparts in other lands.

An illustration of the involvement of religious leaders in Albanian diplomacy can be found in the story of the Albanian Catholicos Nerses-Bakur. The story of Bishop Bakur-Nerses, Queen Spram, and Prince Sheroy reveals the intricate interplay between religion and politics in the region. Nerses, a Chalcedonian follower, became Catholicos and aimed to convert Albania to Chalcedonianism with Byzantine allegiance. Queen Spram sought this religious unity to secure the release of her family held hostage. However, Prince Sheroy, representing the monophysite Mihranid faction, resisted Nerses and Spram, favoring Arab connections [1:253]. This struggle reflects the complex dynamics of power, religion, and regional alliances, highlighting the diverse religious landscape of Albania during that time.

Armenian Catholicos Elias informed Caliph Abd al-Malik about the activities of Catholicos Nerses and Queen Sparam, who aligned with Byzantium [18:109]. The Arabs, following the Sassanids' strategy, supported Monophysite Christianity to distance the Caucasus from Byzantium. The Caliph ordered the trial and execution of Nerses and Sparam, bringing peace to Albanian churches. Prince Sheroy's rule was brief, as he was captured by the Arabs. After Justinian II's return, Varaz-Trdat accepted Arab rule, and Albania fell under Arab control [3:42]. This historical account reflects shifting alliances, religious conflicts, and the geopolitical dynamics of the time. Z.Aleksidze claims that Albania had long been indecisive between Monophysitism and Dyophysitism, but it eventually embraced Monophysitism around this period. Consequently, the Albanian written and ecclesiastical languages gradually ceased to serve their national purpose, leading to the gradual disappearance of Caucasian Albania as a political entity in the Caucasus [19:149]. Z. Buniatov's claim suggests that the Armenian Catholicos directly informed the Caliph to prevent the separation of the Albanian church from the Armenian. Subsequently, as a result of the Caliph's intervention, the process of Gregorianization took place in the Albanian churches [20:73].

Secondly, Viroy, the Catholicos of Albania, was a prominent figure in the political and religious landscape of Caucasian Albania in the 7th century. He was a skilled diplomat, a wise counselor, and a respected religious leader. After being imprisoned in the Sasanian empire due to political turmoil, he spent 25 years in captivity at the court of Xosrov [2:199]. During this time, he learned the Persian language and gained insight into Sasanian court politics. After his release, Viroy established diplomatic contacts with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who appreciated his intelligence and wisdom. Eventually, Viroy returned to Albania, where he took up his role as Catholicos and sought to restore order and stability, being respected by the people for his piety, wisdom, and compassion [1:244]. The chronicle of Sumbat, son of David, mentions that the Byzantine Emperor personally baptized Varaz Grigor, who was the ruler of Albania. While Albanian historian Movses Kalankatuklu does not specifically mention this event, he does refer to Varaz Grigor's baptism by Viroy, the Catholicos of Albania [21:131].

Viroy played a key role in the political and diplomatic affairs of Albania, negotiating with neighboring states and establishing alliances. He traveled extensively, visiting other regions of the Caucasus and establishing relationships with other religious leaders. He maintained close ties with the Byzantine Empire, a major regional power at the time, while also asserting Albania's independence and autonomy. Viroy also established diplomatic relations with the Khazar Khaganate, a powerful Turkic state that played a key role in the politics of the Caucasus. He negotiated a peace treaty with the Khazar Khagan, which helped to stabilize the region [10:101].

As Catholicos, Viroy was responsible for the spiritual well-being of the Albanian people. He was a respected religious leader who established monasteries and church-

es throughout the country and helped to promote the spread of Christianity. Viroy's diplomatic efforts were aimed at securing political and economic objectives for Albania, but the country suffered from continuous attacks and domination by various powers, including the Khazars. Eventually, exhaustion from the Sasanian-Byzantine Wars and internal strife in Khazar led to Albania gaining its independence.

The involvement of Albanian Catholicos Eghiazar and Bishop Israel in diplomacy during the interactions between the Caucasian Albanians and the Khazars underscores the significant role of religion in shaping diplomatic relations. The Albanian ruler, Varaz-Trdat, and Catholicos Eghiazar employed diplomatic strategies aimed at influencing the Khazars and mitigating their frequent raids. Recognizing the potential of religion as a unifying force, Bishop Israel was dispatched as a mediator to propagate Christianity among the Khazars [10:161]. Remarkably, his mission yielded positive results, resulting in a considerable number of Khazars embracing the Christian faith. This shared religious bond was viewed as a foundation for fostering peace and friendship between the two peoples. Bishop Israel's role as both a spiritual guide and mediator was deemed pivotal in establishing a lasting peace. Nonetheless, despite these diplomatic efforts, the Khazars ultimately invaded Albania, demonstrating that religious ties, while influential, could be overshadowed by other factors such as political dynamics and power struggles. This historical account highlights the multifaceted nature of diplomacy, where religion can serve as a valuable diplomatic tool, but its impact can be contingent upon the broader political context and conflicting interests. Ellada Bekirova assumes that Israel's mission was successful because he spoke the same language as the Huns (Khazars) [7:91].

Conclusion

Religion played a significant role in diplomacy in Caucasian Albania. As a crossroads of multiple cultures and faiths, Caucasian Albania was influenced by and interacted with neighboring states and empires, such as the Parthians, Sassanians, and Byzantines. To maintain political stability and secure peaceful relations with its neighbors, the rulers of Caucasian Albania adopted a policy of religious tolerance, allowing different religious communities to coexist and even flourish within its borders. Given this cultural diversity, it's likely that the people of Caucasian Albania valued multiculturalism and tolerance, recognizing and respecting the differences between different ethnic and religious groups. This is evidenced by the peaceful coexistence and intermarriage between different groups in the region and the region's reputation as a center of religious and cultural diversity. In addition, the fact that the region was located at the crossroads of several major trades and cultural routes likely contributed to the development of a more open and diverse society. The region was a melting pot of different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. The exchange of ideas and goods between these groups likely led to a greater appreciation for

cultural diversity. Moreover, the willingness of the Albanian rulers to accommodate different religious communities helped to foster a peaceful and harmonious society, which in turn made the kingdom more attractive to neighboring states and contributed to its stability and prosperity.

The Albanian kings were known for their religious tolerance, which enabled them to form alliances with neighboring states regardless of their religious affiliations. Christianity and Zoroastrianism all coexisted in the region, and the Albanian kings often used their religious connections to negotiate treaties and form alliances with neighboring states. For example, the Albanian King Urnayr married the daughter of the Sassanid king Yazdegerd II, who was Zoroastrian, to cement an alliance with the Sassanids. The Albanian kings also built churches and promoted Christianity in the region, which helped to strengthen ties with the Byzantine Empire and other Christian states. At the same time, they respected the rights of their non-Christian subjects and did not impose their religion on others. Overall, the role of religion in the diplomacy of Caucasian Albania was complex, but it helped to foster a sense of unity and mutual respect among the various cultures and faiths in the region. The Albanian kings' ability to navigate these religious differences and build alliances based on shared interests and values was a key factor in their success as rulers and diplomats.

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