

Gippert, J. and Dum-Tragut, J, eds. 2023. *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. xi, 735 pp. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110794687>.

Rarely in modern scholarship do researchers get the chance, with but a single volume, to establish the state of the art for an entire discipline. With the publication of *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*, we can rightly say this has been achieved for the study of the ancient Caucasian Albanian people, who ruled much of the lower-middle Kura river basin in what is now Azerbaijan from the earliest attested texts to the Islamic era in the eighth century C.E. By bringing together scholars with expertise in historiography, palaeography, linguistics, ecclesiology, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and conflict studies, the authors of this volume have created, like a richly endowed library laid out with all wings visible from a single point, a kaleidoscopic panopticon of this poorly studied civilization and state of the late antique Caucasus.

The *Handbook* is subdivided straightforwardly into five subsections, each with its own subchapters: (1) studies of Caucasian Albania in the Greek, Roman, Armenian, Georgian and other ancient external sources; (2) an investigation of the rediscovery of the Albanians' own textual tradition, along with a comparison of how their language of these texts relates to modern Udi; (3) an exploration of the origins of the Albanian church's liturgical basis and the ecclesiological and Christological disputes that ultimately laid the foundation for the long-term union of the Albanian and Armenian churches; (4) a survey of the architectural and archaeological heritage of Caucasian Albania, including its churches, fortresses and other monuments; and (5) an examination of how the historiographical sources suggest ethnogenesis of the Caucasian Albanian people might have occurred and what responses Albanians had to outside cultural and political domination. Included amongst these chapters are not just discursive articles detailing specific aspects of Albanian culture, language and history, but also auxiliary chapters featuring translations of primary documents relevant to that history, which set the analytical chapters in an empirical light. Rather than rehearsing each detail of this wealth of facts, I will concentrate on the *Handbook's* portrayal of three subjects: its approach to historiography, its contributions to our understanding of paleography and language, and what the *Handbook* can tell us about the identity of the Caucasian Albanians themselves.

As with Georgian and Armenian history, the earliest accounts of Albania do not so much burst into full view as coalesce into something like a historical narrative, as individual historical characters move on and off stage. Many of

CAUCASUS SURVEY

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/23761202-BJA10038

© THOMAS R. WIER, 2024 | ISSN: 2376-1199 (print) 2376-1202 (online)

the articles in the *Handbook* are concerned with this ephemeral character of the extant sources: exactly what kinds of information do they provide to us, who wrote them, and what kinds of biases did their authors bring to bear on their subject? We learn for example (Ch. 2, p. 49) that the author of the famed tenth century primary chronicle *History of the Country of the Albanians* not only remained formally anonymous for three centuries after its production, his very identity as Movses Khafankatuatsi is still very much an act of paleographical reconstruction. The *Handbook* provides a helpful chart on page 76 describing precisely which parts of such original primary narratives by Faustus of Byzantium and Movses Khorenatsi, along with the aforementioned *History*, became the foundation for later, secondary sources.

Another even more consequential kind of reconstruction follows in a series of chapters that focus on the story of the creation, subsequent obsolescence, and fabulous rediscovery of the Albanian writing system beginning with Ilia Abuladze's rediscovery of the Albanian alphabet in 1937 and Zaza Aleksidze's initial decipherment in the 1990s of Old Georgian palimpsests, which only narrowly survived a fire at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai in 1971. Much of the narrative in the original primary sources about this act of literary creation reads like a hagiographical 'just-so story' in which the Armenian cleric Mesrop Mashtots 'with his usual God-given vigour' created a writing system for the Albanians, along with the help of his Albanian-speaking attendant Benjamin. Given that these sources directly say that Mashtots himself could not speak Albanian, and given that the phonology of Albanian is radically different from that of Armenian and other regional languages, this seems unlikely as literally stated. The transliteration and translation of texts into Albanian involved very substantial commitment from within the Albanian community itself.

A number of the features of this alphabet also seem unexpected if one thinks of it as springing into existence from a single hand, or even from a single monastic center. When one compares the three Caucasian alphabets commonly attributed to Mashtots, the glyph order and phonetic and numerical values do not regularly coincide except for the first seven or eight letters, and the actual manuscript letter shapes and letter names only occasionally resemble each other directly. So for example, while Georgian Asomtavruli Ⴀ *gani* /g/ has the numerical value '3' corresponding to Armenian Գ *gim* /g/ '3' and Albanian Ɔ *gim* /g/ '3' and each is the third character in its respective alphabet, this is not true of Georgian Ⴁ *p'ari* /p'/ '80', Armenian Մ *men* /m/ '200' and Albanian Ʊ *ar* /v/ '700', glyphs which otherwise resemble each other but are found in totally dissimilar sections of their respective alphabet orders and with totally dissimilar phonetic and numerical values. That is, similar sound-values have different glyphic shapes or numerical values across the three alphabets,

while similar letter-shapes often have different sound or numerical values. Many of them also look like they have been rotated by 90 or 180 degrees. All of this suggests either that the alphabets' creator(s) (Mashtots or his attendants) made arbitrary decisions when developing a new script about the shape, phonetic and numerical value and alphabetic order with respect to the three different alphabets, or they were in fact created in different contexts at different times and not by a single hand, and perhaps evolved in different directions over time. None of this is expected when compared with other much better documented cases of writing system creation by specific known individuals, such as that of Cyril and Methodius's creation of Cyrillic, or King Sejong's invention of Hangul in Korea, each of which arose in a well-understood pre-existing culture of writing by which it was deeply influenced directly both in the shapes of glyphs and in writing methods. One plausible explanation for this state of affairs would hold that Mashtots merely formalized and standardized preexisting Caucasian writing traditions based on alloglottography, the use of a foreign language and script for writing (such as Aramaic), while speaking out-loud and translating into an indigenous language (Gamq'relidze 1989, Rubio 2006). Although the Georgian historiographical tradition directly states native writing systems existed in the Caucasus before the advent of Christianity, this proposal too leaves much to be explained.

The *Handbook* does not attempt at great length to address these problems surrounding the poorly understood origins of the Albanian script itself at its birth, and instead focuses on the much better understood and well-documented story of how the specific palimpsests with Albanian undertext were created and transmitted. The *Handbook* is richly illustrated, one might even say 'illuminated', with often full-color photographs of the specific manuscripts and artefacts bearing Albanian texts that were crucial in understanding this whole process. Important developments in technology including transmissive light imaging allowed the members of the Sinai Palimpsests Project to greatly increase the legible percentage of text of the Gospel of John to 75% over their prior publication in 2008 (Ch. 3, p. 104), which illustrates the rapid pace of change in this field. Because of these advances, it is now possible to piece together a much more precise history of translation and transmission of the Albanian gospel and lectionary texts from Greek, Aramaic, Armenian and Georgian equivalents; in many ways it has become clear that the Albanian corpus is not reducible to texts in any of these languages, but shares influences from all of them (Ch. 4, pp. 211–25).

Yet maybe the most important new contributions in the *Handbook* lie with the exegesis of the grammar and comparative phylogeny of the Caucasian Albanian language itself. This section contains almost wholly new information

about the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language never before published, or published only in disparate sources. We learn for example that Albanian possessed a grammatical gender system related to but distinct from its sister Lezgc languages, that it had pharyngeal consonants later rephonemized as pharyngealized vowels, a number of palatalized consonants, and gendered definite articles. One chapter is exclusively devoted to analyzing how precisely Albanian (or: an Albanoid dialect) evolved into the modern Udi language spoken in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Though Udi has undergone great change by innovating entire new paradigms of case-marking on nouns, tense-marking on verbs, and a typologically unique system of endoclitics for verb agreement (in which clitic agreement affixes can attach *inside* verb roots, but also move around elsewhere in the clause – something almost unheard of amongst linguistic typologists), while it entirely lost gender marking and definite articles, these chapters show with crystal clarity that Albanian and Udi evolved from the same late antique Lezgc milieu: they are about as closely related as early Middle and Modern English, or Grabar and modern East Armenian.

But how did this culture, apparently so vibrant in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, become so threatened that its unique written culture died out entirely in late antiquity? Equally, why is Albanian's descendant Udi not more widely spoken through Azerbaijan today? The *Handbook* does not directly address these questions in a single chapter, but in a dispersed fashion through several, in part because these are much harder questions to answer on account of the fact that our understanding of the contemporary sociolinguistic context is so limited. What we can say, based on modern models of language endangerment and obsolescence, is that in the sixth century and succeeding centuries, Albania experienced several different kinds of demographic, ideological and institutional crises that upended the foundations upon which a distinct Albanian kingdom and church could rely, and consequently the language used to administer them:

- The abolition and annexation of the Kingdom of Albania after the reign of Vachagan III the Pious (r. 485–523) by the Sasanian Empire (Ch 12, p. 479);
- The destructive war 602–28 C.E. between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, much of which took place precisely in this part of the southern Caucasus;
- In 705, the abolition of Albanian autocephaly and realignment with the non-Chalcedonian Armenian church, after which Albanian writing disappears (so ably discussed in the *Handbook*, Chs. 2 and 7)
- After the 1030s, an increase of Turkish migrations into Azerbaijan, forever altering the ethnolinguistic demographic balance of the region;

- On 30 September 1139, a catastrophic earthquake measuring approximately ~7.7 MLH occurs in and around the city of Ganja, with at least 20,000 but perhaps as many as 200,000–300,000 deaths (Brosset 1851, Rayfield 2013, Berberian 2014)
- In 1220–23, the Mongol invasion leads to total destruction of Ganja, Barda, and Baylagan;
- In 1346–47, the bubonic plague reaches the Caucasus, killing perhaps one third to half of the population (Rayfield 2013, 145; Benedictow 2004, 60);
- In 1614–17, the Persian king Shah Abbas I devastates all Christian communities of eastern Georgia and northwestern Azerbaijan, killing perhaps 100,000 and deporting another 200,000 to Iran, in what was effectively an act of early-modern genocide (Blow 2014).

These crises surely undermined the demographic basis of the Udi and other language communities in the region, engendered economic and social dislocation which affected the geospatial distribution of speakers, weakened the urban infrastructure of their communities, and eroded the institutional supports that underlay the social integrity of Albanian society as a whole.

It is in this context where the *Handbook's* discussion of Albania's ethno-genesis becomes relevant. Noting that Strabo describes '26 languages' of the Albanian state of his day, the *Handbook* (Ch. 12) makes a convincing case that the kingdom's very diversity marked it out as different from its bigger neighbors to the west in Iberia (Georgia) and Armenia. Unlike those other two kingdoms, the Albanian state did not consist of a single dominant *ethnos*, but rather many tribes, chieftainships, and phratries over which the Albanian king was merely paramount. In other words, not only did Caucasian Albania undergo different socioeconomic challenges during its centuries of decline, it started out as a fundamentally more diverse, complex society to begin with, too.

All in all, while much yet remains to be understood about the history and culture of Caucasian Albania, both in the breadth of the details covered and the analytical acuity of its authors, as a single go-to source, the *Handbook* has set the groundwork for all future discussion.

Thomas R. Wier

Faculty of Humanities, Free University of Tbilisi, Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia
t.wier@freeuni.edu.ge

AQ 1

Works Cited

Benedictow, O.J. 2004. *The Black Death, 1346–1353: the complete history*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer.

CAUCASUS SURVEY (2024) 1–6 | 10.30965/23761202-BJA10038

AQ 1: Please provide ORCID if you have one

- Berberian, M., 2014. *Earthquakes and coseismic surface faulting on the Iranian Plateau*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Blow, D., 2014. *Shah Abbas: The Ruthless King Who Became an Iranian Legend*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Brosset, M.F., 1851. *Additions et éclaircissements à l'Histoire de la Géorgie depuis l'antiquité jusqu'en 1469 de J.-C.* St. Petersburg: l'Académie impériale des sciences.
- Gamq'relidze, T. 1989. წერის ანბანური სისტემა და ძველი ქართული დამწერლობა. [Alphabetic writing and the Old Georgian script]. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press.
- Rayfield, D., 2013. *Edge of Empires: A history of Georgia*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rubio, G., 2006. 'Writing in another tongue: Alloglottography in the Ancient Near East'. *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures*, Seth Sanders, Ed. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, pp. 33–66.