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## ИЗУЧЕНИЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ В РАННЕМ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЬЕ НА ВОСТОЧНОМ КАВКАЗЕ

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**Аннотация.** Изучается религиозная трансформация в период раннего Средневековья на Восточном Кавказе, в основном на территории современной Республики Азербайджан, путем детального анализа исторических хроник и других письменных источников. Тщательно интерпретируются и комбинируются работы мусульманских историков и географов, а также армянские и грузинские хроники. При помощи комплексного подхода к исследованию раскрывается постепенная религиозная трансформация в регионе.

**Ключевые слова:** Азербайджан; Восточный Кавказ; христианство; зороастризм; иудаизм; ислам; арабское завоевание; религиозная трансформация.

## ВЫВЧЭННЕ РЭЛІГІЯНАЙ ТРАНСФАРМАЦЫІ Ў РАННІМ СЯРЭДНЕВЯКОЎІ НА ЎСХОДНІМ КАЎКАЗЕ

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**Анотацыя.** Вывучаецца рэлігійная трансфармацыя ў перыяд ранняга Сярэднявекі на Усходнім Каўказе, у асноўным на тэрыторыі сучаснай Рэспублікі Азербайджан, шляхам дасканалага аналізу гістарычных хронік і іншых пісьмовых крыніц. Уважліва інтэрпрэтуюцца і камбінуюцца працы мусульманскіх гісторыкаў і географіаў, а таксама армянскія і грузінскія хронікі. З дапамогай комплекснага падыходу да даследавання раскрываецца паступовая рэлігійная трансфармацыя ў рэгіёне.

**Ключавыя словы:** Азербайджан; Усходні Каўказ; хрысціянства; зараастрызм; іўдаізм; іслам; арабскае заваяванне; рэлігійная трансфармацыя.

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## TRACKING THE RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL EASTERN CAUCASUS

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**Abstract.** The author of the article studies the religious transformation in the early Medieval Eastern Caucasus, mostly in the territories of contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan, by the thorough analysis of the historical chronicles and other written sources. Muslim historians and geographers works, Armenian and Georgian chronicles are interpreted and combined. The article embarks upon a comprehensive research, unraveling gradual religious transformation in the region.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan; Eastern Caucasus; Christianity; Zoroastrianism; Judaism; Islam; Arab conquest; religious transformation.

### Introduction

In the Medieval era, when the political salience of religion had a considerable impact on any society, regardless of whether it was a European or Middle Eastern, conversion from one to another religion had a crucial effect on the identity and cultural transformation. The history of humanity witnessed numerous instances of religion being used as a tool for conquest and domination, leading to mass conversions by force and invasion. The expansion of the Arab caliphate in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries was accompanied by the forced conversion of many countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe. Azerbaijan is one of those countries where Islamisation began as a result of the Arab conquest.

Aiming to study the transition from one religion to another in the case of early medieval Azerbaijan, this research attempts to contribute to a better understanding of the process by which Islam was able to become a major religion in many countries in the Middle East. For this purpose, it is necessary to examine the written sources of the time in combination with the archeological findings that testify the conversion process. Based on the goal, the study seeks to scrutinise factual material from various historical written sources, applying method of comparative historical analysis. Moreover, combination of written sources and archaeological evidence helps to track a more complete picture of religious transformation in early medieval Azerbaijan. For example, al-Baladhuri suggests a dominance of Islam during the reign of Ali ibn Abi Talib and states that when his appointee governor ibn al-Ash'ath arrived Azerbaijan, he found that most of its residences had converted to Islam and were reading the Quran [1, p. 460; 2, p. 332]. However archaeological data reveal the coexistence of multiple religious traditions in the region [3; 4].

It should be underlined that the research bases on the archaeological data, related largely to the territory of the modern Azerbaijan Republic (the historical Azerbaijan includes the northern regions of modern Iran) and the southern part of the Republic of Dages-

tan (Russian Federation). Due to this, the data from the written sources of the period under study also mostly relate to these territories, mainly to Arran and historical Shirvan and Shaki.

To identify the political, social and cultural aspects of religious transformation, medieval Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Georgian and other sources are of great importance. Undoubtedly, one of the most important sources for the tracking of the religious picture of the region, in particular Christianity, is the Caucasian Albanian palimpsest of Mount Sinai [5], which proves existence of the Bible in one of the languages of the local Albanian population. Also «The History of the Caucasian Albanians» by Movses Kaghankatvatsi<sup>1</sup> provides enormous information about the events of the region until the 10<sup>th</sup> century. C. J. Dowsett's English translation has been used in the paper [6].

In order to deeply understand the reasons of religious transformations and dynamics in the early medieval Eastern Caucasus, as well as shed light on the motives and factors that prompted people to change their faith, it is also important to consider the socio-cultural context of that time, which could influence people's decision to change their religion. This case requires considering the reports of medieval historical texts through the prism of sociology and cultural anthropology. In respect to this statement of problem, the methodological framework of the study is determined.

Studying the difference between people who changed religion due to a genuine shift in beliefs and those who switch religions for other reasons, R.M. Carrothers terms the first group as conversion and the second one as alternation. The latter group represents the people who fulfill all the requirements to join a new religion, but does so primarily for external benefits, like gaining social status. In contrast, the conversion group is motivated by a personal change in beliefs. The convert seeks a religious community that aligns with their newfound faith and values. Simply, alternation means a change

<sup>1</sup>We can speak about Kingdom or Principality of Shakin, as al-Masudi calls it «Mamalakat».

in religion for practical reasons, while conversion is a change driven by a personal transformation in belief [7, p. 151]. The results of this study provide the basis for our research efforts to understand the social and cultural aspects of religious conversion.

In modern historiography, studying the reasons for the conversion to Islam by the local population of conquered countries, in some works there is an opinion that in order to avoid the payment of the *jizya* poll tax, non-Muslims were forced by the economic reasons to adopt a new religion. And other authors completely reject this idea and consider it as unthinkable [8, p. 134]. The study shows Mawali, despite the adoption of Islam, were not exempt from the *jizya* tax for a long time. Of course, some people may have their own interests, mainly economical, for conversion to Islam, but it could not be simply for a tax exemption or other economical benefits. First of all, the local elites could quickly accept the new rules and new religion of the conqueror in order

to preserve their property and social status in the new conditions. In addition, the adoption of Islam could have been facilitated by a simple desire to survive, since it is known that by the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, many local nobles were taken to Samarra and executed.

Modern historiography also indicates the fact of the gradual adoption of Islam by many non-Arab countries. E. A. Belyaev writes that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century the overwhelming majority of the population in Egypt were local Christians (Copts), and Muslims began to dominate no earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century [9]. Scrutinising the Islamic conversion in Zoroastrian Iran, T. Daryaee came to the conclusion that the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries is the age of conversion in Iran [10, p. 103]. In the case of Azerbaijan nearly the same period can be considered as a period of religious transformation. Although Christian communities continued to exist in later periods, the dominant position of Islam in the country had already become a fact by the end of the early Middle Ages.

### Religious processes in the early Islamic Eastern Caucasus

Islam in Azerbaijan could not occupy a dominant position in the first stage of its spread for many reasons, if only because the very concept of religion does not allow forcible introduction. Although this postulate soon turned into a farce, the first treaties, signed between the Arabs and the local population, prove that the main concept of Islam was respected at first. To this we also need to add the fact that Islam treated *Ahl al-Kitab*, Christians and Jews that have the holy book, with a special position. And all these moments could be considered as the reasons for the gradual spread of Islam in the first stage.

The text of the peace treaty with the Dabil dwellers and the Arab commander Habib ibn Maslama states that its Christian (*Nasara*), Zoroastrian (*Majus*) and Jews (*Yahud*) population will be in safety, as well as their temples for worship and city walls, if they pay the *jizya* and the *kharaj* [1, p. 282; 2, p. 212]. In short, after conquering a country, the Arabs demanded obedience and payment of a special tax, without requiring them to adopt a new religion. Considering that similar agreements were signed with the residents of other cities, the picture becomes clear. In addition, this quote from al-Baladhuri clearly shows a presence of different religions in the region on the eve and during the period of the Arab invasions, as he mentions adherents of three religions. So, it evidences quite diverse religious picture and most likely preserved for reasonably a long time.

As we see from the reports of al-Masoudi, a mid-10<sup>th</sup> century author, to the north of the country in the Shaki region, the majority of the population were Christians. He states that after the Kingdom of the Sanariye, comes the Kingdom of Shakin<sup>2</sup>, which residence are Christians, and among them are a group of Muslims, included mer-

chants and others, and their king at that time, as mentioned in our book, is named Azer ibn Nabih ibn Muhajir [11, p. 156]. Al-Masoudi's report confirms the conclusions of modern historiography that urban merchants and artisans were the first to accept Islam. Taking into account that medieval cities were mainly centres of trade and crafts, then this information confirms that the urban population adopted Islam earlier than the population of villages, especially mountainous ones. As al-Masoudi particularly emphasises the Muslim merchants among the Christian population, this suggests that merchants, local and foreign, could convert to Islam to move freely and safely throughout the territories of the Abbasid Caliphate, the vast areas with the political dominance of Islam.

According to the works of Arab authors, it is clear that by the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the north of the country Islam was not yet the dominant religion. However, at the same time, part of the population, as indicated previously, mostly city dwellers, were already followers of the new religion. Ibn Rustah in his book «*Kitab al-Alaq al-Nafisa*» describing Sarir, a Christian state in the Northern Caucasus, gives an account of a neighbouring country and its local ruler, Adarnerse (*Azernerse*). The author reports a situation when the ruler hesitates to change his religion from one to another. Ibn Rustah writes: «He adheres to three religions: he prays with the Muslims on Friday, then he prays with the Jews on Saturday, and prays on Sunday with the Christians»<sup>3</sup> [12, p. 147–148]. And it should be noted that he explains this by the desire to contemplate all religions. Moreover, this description shows what religions «competed» in the region in the early Islamic period. Compellingly, the name of the ruler derives from the Zoroastrian root «-atr/-adr-» ('sacred fire'). Most likely, the

<sup>2</sup>Hereinafter translated by us. – L. A.

<sup>3</sup>He is called Siwnik in C. J. Dowsett's edition.

name of Shaki ruler, Azer ibn Nabih, also comes from the same Zoroastrian root, although the name Adrnerse is written with ܐ [ða:l] and Azer with ܐ [za:j].

Along with the north of the country, the same picture can be observed in the western and central regions, where by the mid of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Christianity still had a strong position. The local Christian nobles are mentioned by al-Baladhuri in his work «Futuh Al-Buldan» in connection with the Khurramite movement led by Babak. Bugha al-Kabir carried out the Christian nobles of Arran, who were rebelling and resisting, to Samarra, where they were executed in the mid of the 9<sup>th</sup> century [1, p. 297; 2, p. 220].

It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that the Arab conquest had a strong influence on Barda. In 552, due to the Khazar raids [6, p. 70], the patriarchal throne of Albania was transferred from Chola to the city of Partav (Barda in Arabic sources), hence the city became the centre of Christianity in Caucasian Albania. After the Arab conquest, the city lost this status, which was passed to Ganja. Describing the Arab conquest Movses of Kaghankatvatsi wrote: «Great privations occurred in Albania for the Tajiks [Arabs] wrested the capital Partav from the Albanian princes» [6, p. 213].

Transfer of the centre of Christianity from Barda to Ganja demonstrates the religious transformation of the region: in the east the position of Islam was strengthening and enlarging, and in the west Christianity still persisted until approximately the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lord Esayi, lord Sahl-i Smbatean Eranshahik, lord Vasak<sup>4</sup> and other Christian princes and nobles are mentioned in connection with the events of the 9<sup>th</sup> century by the author of «History of Albanians» [6, p. 214]. The tragic end of the Christian aristocracy of Albania is known to us from the account of al-Baladhuri.

This period is not only characterised by religious diversity, but also linguistic diversity. Ibn Hawqual writes that more than seventy languages are spoken here [13, p.159]. Among the ethno-linguistic diversity in the region, it must be noted out that there was a strong Turkic pattern in this mass, and as ibn Hisham points out, they owned Azerbaijan during the reign of Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah I [14, p. 199]. There is no doubt that this obviously speaks of the Khazar possession of the country.

The reports of Muslim sources create a picture that in the initial stage, Islam was accepted by local elites of society, merchants, wealthy city dwellers, most likely for the purpose of preservation their status and property, and local rulers their power, and all of them, simply, for the physical survival. It is obvious that the long lasting political dominance and rule of Muslim dynasties is one of the reasons for the further Islamisation of the region. That part of the aristocracy that escaped execution with the adoption of Islam could assimilate among the masses of the Muslim community. Nevertheless, partially some of them re-converted to Christianity. Hasan Jalal, who built monastery Gandzasar [15, p. 80] is a prime

example of the re-conversion. His Arab-Muslim name gives us reason to believe that his dynasty adopted Islam at some point in its existence, but later they returned to Christian principles.

Therefore, Islamisation began with the Rashidun caliphs and continued with the rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Subsequently, the political strengthening of Muslim dynasties undoubtedly led to the fact that Islam became the dominant factor. There is no doubt that at the first stage of spread of Islam, among the masses could be real converts, who sincerely accepted Islam as a believer. However, in general, written sources describe the situation in such a way that clearly, majority of the local population accepted Islam for their own benefit and were alternators. Muhammad Narshakhi, Central Asian historian of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, gives us a valuable account of how Arab commanders tried to maintain and increase the number of converts. After the first fitna, during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty, the Arab commanders tried their best to convert the locals to Islam. Although it might seem outwardly that the population had accepted Islam and become Muslim, inside they remained pagans [16, p. 89]. For this reason, Qutayba ibn Muslim, the Arab commander, built mosque in the places where the idols were kept. Muhammad Narshahi writes what specific order was given: «He ordered the people of Bukhara to gather there every Friday, and in the same way he ordered the herald every Friday [to announce]: “I will give two dirhams to everyone who attends the Friday prayer”» [17, p. 53].

Despite the fact that his report is about Bukhara, a city in Central Asia, and does not directly apply to the Caucasus and Azerbaijan, however this conversion practice could be used anywhere in the invaded countries by the Arab commanders. It is a clear example of alternation, when person adopts religion for reason other than faith.

Compared to Shaki in the north and the regions on the west of Arran, such cities as Ganja, Shamkir, Beylagan and others, Shirvan underwent Islamisation earlier, as archaeological data indicate. This is primarily due to the strategic location of Shirvan and the roads leading to Derbend to the north, which was taken control by the Arab army. Written Arab sources of this period do not report the existence of a broad and stable Christian community in Shirvan, although it took place here as well as in other regions of Caucasian Albania. However, firstly, the Sasanids resettled Iranian peasants in the region as a base and implanted Zoroastrianism, somehow weakening position of Christianity. Then the Arab Caliphate provided the same politics. We can assert with confidence that the resettlement policy of the Arabs played a decisive role in the Islamisation of Shirvan and Mughan. As a way to take control of the strategic routes and prevent danger from the Khazars, the Arabs first established a garrison in Derbend and most likely the first mosque was built here for them to pray at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup>He is called Siwnik in C. J. Dowsett's edition.



The migration and settlement of Arabs to the occupied countries began only after the establishment of complete control over these countries, leading to strengthen the Arab power in the newly captured territory. By giving land to the first Arab colonists in the region, the Umayyad caliphs achieved two goals simultaneously: firstly, they freed the treasury from the cost of paying pensions, and secondly, they strengthened the power of the Arabs in the newly conquered provinces.

However if earlier migrations took place individually, then soon the entire tribes began to move to the new lands [18, p. 215–216]. Al-Baladhuri states that when the Arabs conquered Azerbaijan, their families came to them from al-Misreyn<sup>5</sup> and Syria, and each group captured everything they could, and some bought land from non-Arabs, that is, the local residence. Native peasants asked for their protection (khifara) and became their sharecroppers [1, p. 460; 2, p. 332].

### The Caucasian Albanian Church in the early Islamic period

The position of Christianity in Azerbaijan in the early stages of Islamisation was weakened because of multiple reasons. In the period of political turmoil in the Eastern Caucasus, between the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, when first, Sassanids, later the Arab Caliphate, waged wars with the Byzantine Empire, the Albanian Church, a Christian denomination in the region, was forced by the conditions to change its doctrines from the monophysite to dyophysite and vice-versa several times. This instability stemmed from two sources. On the one hand, powerful empires in the region sought to use religion as a tool to exert political control. On the other hand, rivalry and in many cases, enmity between different teachings of Christianity caused more problems than invasions. The Armenian Miaphysite Church, trying to subordinate the Albanian Church and struggling against dyophysite Byzantine and Georgian churches, colluded with the authorities of Arab Caliphate. These conflicts weakened positions of Christianity in the Eastern Caucasus, and Islam, spread as a result of Arab invasions, eventually replaced Christianity as the dominant religion [19, p. 15].

After fateful events of 704–705, the Armenian Catholicos Elia was finally able to subordination of the Albanian Church. However the Albanians continued

struggle for their church independence. In accordance to Michael the Syrian's «Chronicle», Albanian bishop did not participate in the Manaskert Council of 726 [20, p. 20]. The struggle of Albanian aristocracy for independence was supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church. As Movses Kaghankatvatsi writes, Michael, who succeeded to the throne of the patriarchate of Albania, did not recognise the marriage of Varazoy to his first cousin Vardanuhi, both grandchildren of Varazman, and excommunicated them. In these conditions, Varazoy sought support from T'alile (Talale), Catholicos of Georgia, asking him to bless their marriage. The latter's response actually demonstrates attempts of the Georgian Church to support Albanian's efforts for independence even by endorsing the marriage between blood relatives, which is unacceptable to all Christian denominations. Then Movses of Kaghankatvatsi describes the horrible end of this attempt. Varazoy was decapitated by the Arabs, who were in alliance with the Armenian Church, and they killed the other son by dragging him behind a horse [6, p. 204].

Despite the struggle to preserve an independent Albanian Church, it found itself in a position of subordination to the Armenian Monophysite Church.

### Position of Islam in the consequent period

Transformation of Islam into the dominant religion in Azerbaijan became an accelerating factor in the integration of various ethno-linguistic groups in one ethnocultural unity. Even after the weakening of the Abbasid Caliphate from the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and soon reduction of its authority as the figurehead of the Muslim world, throughout the region political power was largely in the hands of Muslim dynasties, such as Shirvanshahs, Sajids, Salarids, Shaddadids and Ravvadids, which contributed to the strengthening of Islam. And with the arrival of the Seljuks and their approval by the Abbasids, the dominance of Islam further intensified.

After the Seljuk influx, the role of the Turks was so indoctrinated that in Europe, as well as in the Caucasus, the name Turk began to unambiguously mean Muslim. The locals who were converted to Islam were considered to be Turks and those, who preserved Christianity, were

considered Armenian [21, p. 83], as Albanian Church subordinated to the Armenian Church and this led to the Armenianisation for the part of Caucasian Albanians. The same can be observed in Georgia. A person of Georgian heritage, who might adopt Islam, while still speaking Georgian, was not even acknowledged as Georgian, but as Tartarised [22, p. 183]. J. de Thevenot, a French traveler and author, writes that Armenians believe that it is better to be a Turk than a Catholic [23, p. 112]. Here, attention is drawn to the fact that the name «Turk» was considered almost synonymous with the word «Muslim». The identification of the words «Turk» and «Muslim» had such a scope that further in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Azerbaijani Turks called themselves «Muselman» (Muslim) and language «Muselman dili» (Muslim language). Of course, this is due to the influence of religion on the ethnic identity during the Middle Ages.

<sup>5</sup>In accordance to Ziya Bunyadov, al-Misreyn refers to Kufa and Basra [18].

## Conclusions

Considering and comparing historical written sources of Middle Ages we see that Islamisation was a gradual process, in the lands of historical territories of Arran, Shirvan, Shaki and other regions of the modern Azerbaijan Republic.

In the east of the country, in regions closer to the Caspian Sea, Islam, brought as a result of the conquest, faced with Zoroastrianism, pagan rituals, and partly with Judaism and Christianity. The wars between the Arab Caliphate and the Khazars and also the goal of taking power over the Derbend fortress, a key point in the north, required full control of Shirvan. To strengthen here, the migration policy of the Arabs played a decisive role and this in turn strengthened the position of Islam in Shirvan by the 8<sup>th</sup> century. However, even after this, other religious practices are observed from archaeological data.

And to the west and north of the country, Christianity had a stable position for a long time. Only towards the end of the early Middle Ages did the new religion begin to surpass these previously dominated religions.

Although Christianity community of Azerbaijan was weakened, it was able to survive as the Christian minority of Udis in the Qabala and Oghuz districts of Azerbaijan Republic. Judaism, represented by the Jewish community of Azerbaijan, has been preserved in the same form. In the case of Zoroastrianism, it should be noted that there is a lack of evidence about the preservation of Zoroastrian communities throughout the country in the medieval Islamic Azerbaijan with the exception of Surakhany village with the Zoroastrian temple in Absheron peninsula.

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