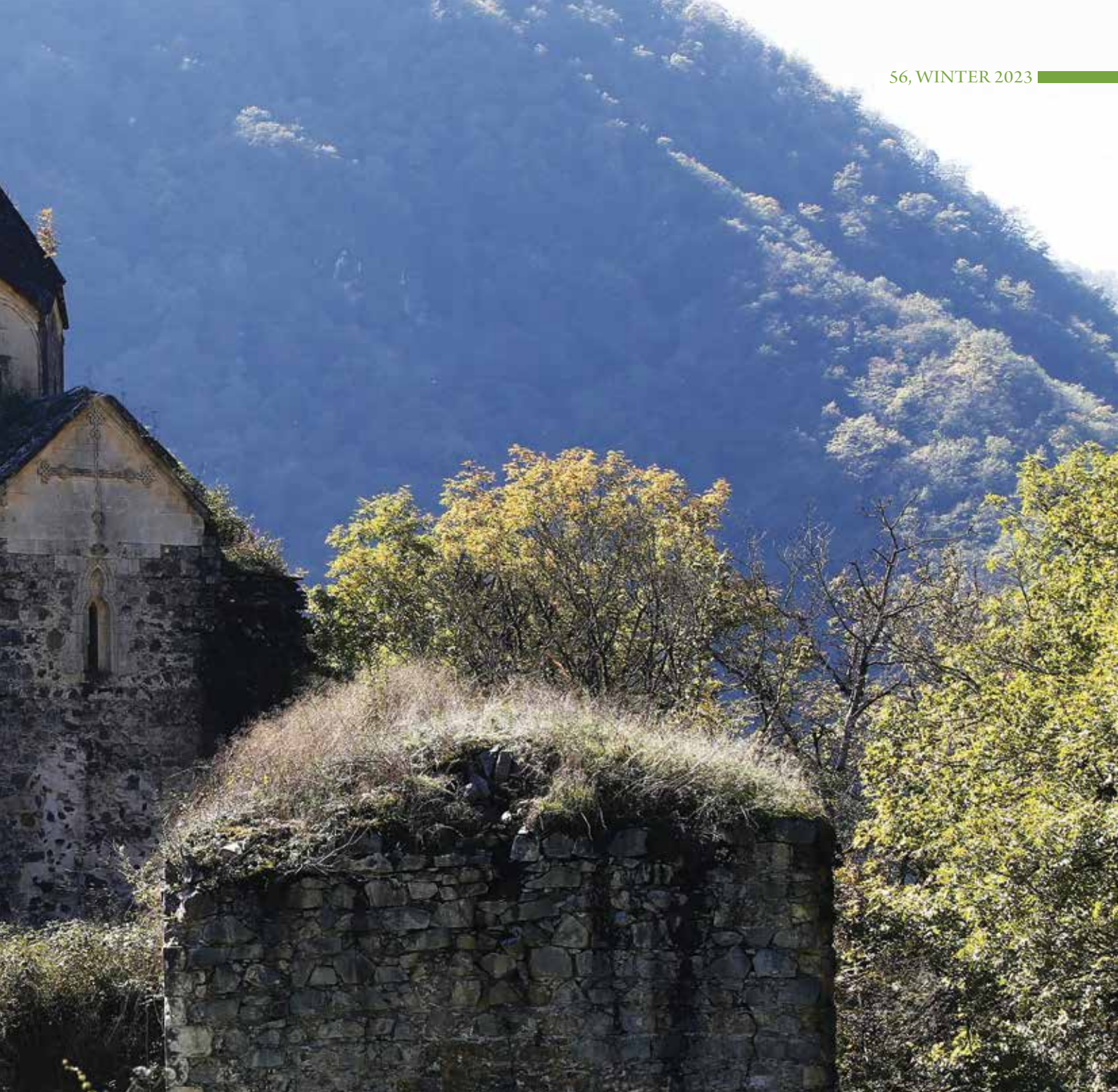




By Naziya MAMMADOVA

*Albanian Church near Aghdara settlement of
Azerbaijan's Tartar district*

Shrines of Caucasian Albania in Karabakh



Falsification of history for the sake of political interests is widespread in Armenian historiography. The efforts aimed at politicizing and distorting history include religious misrepresentation of the architectural monuments of Caucasian Albania.

Armenian scholars have been seeking throughout decades to prove the unscientific **theory suggesting that the unique architecture of Caucasian Albania was the outcome of Armenian architects' activity. This is an integral part of an extensive and long-term campaign aimed at "Armenianizing" the his-**

torical and cultural heritage in the vast territory of the South Caucasus, including the previously occupied Azerbaijani land.

The falsification of the Christian architectural monuments of Caucasian Albania has been carried out by pursuing so-called "restoration", forging various inscriptions, replacing symbols, applying special sacred identification marks and "khachkar" crosses to monuments, etc.

It is worth mentioning that any attempts **to falsify monuments of material culture in an occupied**



Aghoghlan Monastery in Lachin district of Azerbaijan

territory completely run counter to the principles of international law, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, etc.

Caucasian Albania, which occupied a significant part of the territory of present-day Azerbaijan and a part of the Armenian territory, existed from the 4th century BCE to the 8th century CE. **This state stood out for a high-level development of material and spiritual culture**, including construction, architecture and artistic crafts. It also played a leading role in the spread of Christianity in the Caucasus region.

The history of Christianity in Azerbaijan dates back to the 2nd century. **Saint Elisha, a disciple of Syrian Apostle Faddei, is considered to be the first Christian preacher in the region. Urnayr, an Albanian king, proclaimed Christianity as the state religion in the early 4th century.** The historic **Aguen meeting**, convened in the 5th century by Albanian king Vachagan III, was instrumental in pass-

ing this decision. The **Aguen canons**, comprised of 21 clauses, have remained to date. It is a written historical monument that contains valuable data on issues pertaining to Christianity, the clerical structure, as well as the social system of Caucasian Albania, relationships among the classes and the country's legal system. In particular, the Aguen canons reflect the process of asserting the independence of the clergy and church and its gradual strengthening.

According to the Aguen canons, the hierarchy of the Albanian church was headed by the archbishop or the Catholicos. Unlike the Armenian catholicoi, **Albanian ones were ordained by Albanian bishops. The Catholicos was elected at a council meeting** attended by the king, princes and noblemen, as well as representatives of each diocese. As a rule, an influential senior representative of the clergy was elected to this position.

General Christian norms and special rules served as sources of canon law for the Albanian church. The norms of ecumenical councils, edification of the apostles and senior clergymen were deemed mandatory and common for all Christian communities. These prin-

One of the surviving structures of the Urek Fortress

ciples, which were mainly of dogmatic and organizational nature, defined the clergy's competence and the responsibilities of believers.

From the 4th century, the Albanian church became **autocephalous**, i.e. it had its own monastic institution, order of worship and dogmatic principles. The establishment of autocephaly was stipulated by the political independence of the Albanian state and the quest of the authorities, clerics and people for both political and canonical independence.

The existence and activity of Christian temples and monasteries in Caucasian Albania is evidenced by written sources dating back to the early Middle Ages, in particular, the works of Albanian historians **Moses Kalankatuksky and Kirakos Gandzaksky**. These sources contain information regarding the churches and monasteries built by Albanian kings and princes in different periods of history. Building churches and monasteries upon the foundations of ancient shrines was a common practice in Caucasian Albania. It is noteworthy that the construction of Christian temples was launched following the endorsement of Christianity as the state religion, i.e. from the 4th-5th centuries.

The construction of a church is regulated by certain canons. The composition of the building is developed

from the west eastward, heading toward the altar from the entrance. The first room in the building is the lobby. Afterwards, visitors enter the main premises, i.e. the aisle whence one may proceed to **the main room of the church, which has an altar with a throne. The main part of the divine service takes place in this room.**

The altar room, located to the east of the nave, is covered by an iconostasis and on the outside it is adjacent to apses, i.e. semicircular extensions. There are drums or round-shaped towers with windows above the centerpiece of the shrine to provide lighting. The drums end in a conic or hemispherical dome. Both the porch and the flight of steps may be used as the entrance. Dining halls usually adjoin the main facility. The arrangement of the shrine may include bell towers and chambers. Initially, shrines consisted of a long nave and an apse, which was a semicircular altar room ending at the top with a conch, a shell with a mosaic image inside.

Throughout the 5th–8th centuries the architecture of the Christian East underwent **the stages of the emergence and development of vaulted basilica and cross-domed temples** whereby the dome was mounted on a drum supported by pillars. The basilicas, which had a rectangular shape, were divided into several rooms by longitudinal rows of columns.



Along with temples, the construction of monasteries and adjacent facilities assumed a wide scale. A host of cultural and educational institutions were set up around the monasteries. Monastic complexes were built in a way that naturally correlated with the surrounding landscape, becoming its inseparable part. **A temple conventionally served as the central structure of the monastery complex.** Its size prevailed over the rest of the structures. Depending on the local terrain, auxiliary structures were erected, such as refectories, scriptoriums (rooms for storing books and census-related activities), bell towers, residential and ancillary facilities. As a rule, the monastery compound was surrounded by a firm stone-made wall, turning into a small fortress.

Basilicas and cross-domed religious buildings, which emerged with the adoption of Christianity in Caucasian Albania, became highly advanced over time in terms of planning and design solutions.

In fact, Albanian churches originate from **the early basilica structures dating back to the 5th-9th centuries, which existed mainly in Karabakh and north-western Azerbaijan.** The period starting in the 5th-6th centuries saw changes in the layout and the volumetric-spatial structure of church buildings in Caucasian Albania, along with an increase in the number of the basilica-type domed structures equipped

with deep horseshoe-shaped altar apses. The latter subsequently turned into semicircular apses as their length shortened. The trend toward the prevalence of rectangular shrines led to the creation of multi-nave basilicas. The cross-domed space planning structure of buildings was widespread in Azerbaijan and the neighboring Georgia, but the solutions applied in numerous locations varied.

The architectural planning and construction techniques applied to build monuments in Caucasian Albania are significantly different than those used on the architectural monuments of Armenia. Medieval Armenian religious architecture could not develop separately from the architectural craft of the neighboring countries, including Syria, Byzantium, Georgia and Caucasian Albania. The links to the monumental architecture of Syria and Byzantium are quite noticeable in the Armenian temple architecture. It is no coincidence that **western European scholars interpret Armenian architecture as a branch of Byzantine architecture.** Moreover, some prominent researchers regard it as nothing more than an imitation of Byzantine architecture. On the other hand, the design featuring four and six-column three-nave basilicas, which is inherent to Albanian temples, is rarely encountered in Armenian architectural monuments.

Gandzasar Monastery in Vangli village of Azerbaijan's Kalbajar district



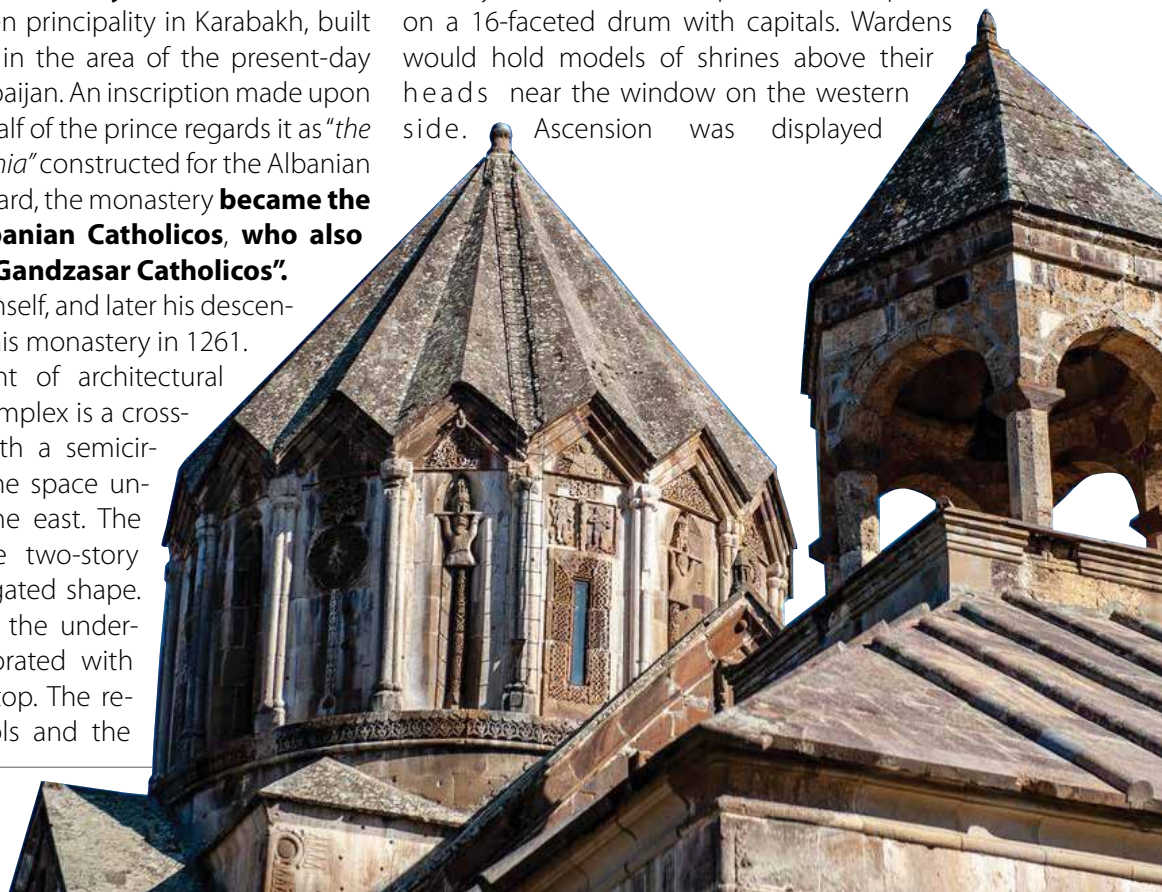
The best Christian temple facilities of Karabakh are shining examples of Albanian church-building.

1. The Gandzasar monastery. In 1240, Hasan Jalal, the ruler of the Khachen principality in Karabakh, built the Gandzasar temple in the area of the present-day Kalbajar district of Azerbaijan. An inscription made upon this monument on behalf of the prince regards it as *“the throne cathedral of Albania”* constructed for the Albanian people. From then onward, the monastery **became the residence of the Albanian Catholicos, who also started to be called “Gandzasar Catholicos”**.

Both Hasan Jalal, himself, and later his descendants, were buried in this monastery in 1261.

From the viewpoint of architectural style, the Gandzasar complex is a cross-dome composition with a semicircular apse adjoining the space under the dome from the east. The angular rooms of the two-story building have an elongated shape. The pointed arches of the under-dome area were decorated with a plain bowtel at the top. The religious worship symbols and the

decorative components of the gables in the northern, southern and western facade of the cathedral are particularly remarkable. Sculptures were placed on a 16-faceted drum with capitals. Wardens would hold models of shrines above their heads near the window on the western side. Ascension was displayed



Khudavenk Monastery Complex



above the western window and there was a figure of Virgin Mary with her baby above the southern window; there were also two female figures on the sides of the window with a bird hovering above them. Moreover, there were two bull heads above the eastern window, an ornament above the northern window, as well as two birds with outstretched wings next to it.

The carvings on the ledges, window frames, in the recess of the eastern wall, as well as on large crosses and portals, were made thoroughly and artistically as well. The shrine is divided inside into eight pairs of semi-columns that cross over into hanging arches. The completeness of the composition and the perfection of the architectural shapes of this remarkable monument is also worth mentioning. Numerous dyophysite elements indicate that the Gandzasar complex refers specifically to the Albanian church, not the Armenian one.

2. Amaras Monastery was built during the reign of Albanian king **Vachagan III** in the territory of the present-day Khojavand region of Azerbaijan. The facility is comprised of a church or basilica, the underground section, residential and household facilities. The church building has a rectangular design, while the interior

space is divided into three naves and ends in an altar apse raised above the floor of the hall and crowned with a semi-dome. The facades of the shrine are lined with well-made stone blocks produced by pure hewing. A small six-column bell tower with a hipped pyramidal top rises above the roof. The doorway is located in the western wall.

3. The Aghoglan cathedral. The three-nave cathedral of the Aghoglan monastery located in the Lachin region was built in the 6th century. The monumental basilica building, made of local grey basalt, naturally suites the surrounding landscape. The middle nave, covered with a pointed vault, ends in a deep apse, while the lateral naves, covered with a cylinder-shaped vault, end in two built-in chapels. The apse is covered by a semi-dome.

The interior part of the cathedral was decorated with fresco paintings. Decorative stone carvings used in the upper tiers of the building were illuminated well from the windows of the higher nave located in the middle. As for its external appearance, the shrine is a conventional basilica with a higher middle nave, as well as clearly and simply designed facades.



One of the distinct features in the design planning is worth mentioning. **Powerful columns were set up in front of the main entrances, which is also the case with regard to the Ledit temple and the Kuma basilica. This pagan feature has been preserved in a number of Christian shrines located in the Azerbaijani territory. However, it is not encountered in the Christian architecture of Armenia and Georgia,** which proves that the monument is attributed to the architecture of Caucasian Albania.

4. Khudavang. The Khashavank or Khudavang monastery, an ancient architectural monument of Caucasian Albania in Azerbaijan's Kalbajar district, emerged in the region in the early period of Christianity and **significantly differs from the pieces of religious architecture of the neighboring countries.** The facility includes a cathedral church, designed asymmetrically both from the spatial and planning points of view. The bell tower was constructed uniquely on a high stylobate with a semi-circular vaulted passage created underneath.

The Albanian patriarchate in Karabakh existed independently until the beginning of the 19th century and

had no affiliation to Etchmiadzin whatsoever. In the 6th-13th centuries, the Albanian church was based in Barda (Partav) and prior to that it was located in Kabala (currently, Gabala), the capital of Caucasian Albania.

The Albanian Catholicate was located in the Gandzasar cathedral from the 13th century till 1836. **Furthermore, Russian Emperor Nicholas I issued a decree in 1836 titled "Regulations on handling the affairs of the Armenian Gregorian Church in Russia," which included clauses on the abolition of the Albanian Church** and the transfer of its entire property, archives, libraries, and dioceses to the Armenian Church. Two dioceses based in Shusha and Shamakhi were established in lieu of the abolished Albanian Catholicate and handed over to Etchmiadzin's jurisdiction.

A previous imperial decree issued in 1815 abolished the position of the Albanian Catholicos. **The abolition of the Albanian autocephalous church gave an impetus to the "de-ethnicizing" of the Albanians. The process of pursuing either destruction or falsification and appropriation of the Albanian historical and cultural heritage by the Armenian Church considerably intensified as well.** Henceforth, the Armenian Apostolic Church acted as a political ally of the Russian Empire, which used the "Armenian issue" to assert its geopolitical interests in the region.

The abolition of the Albanian Catholicate in Karabakh became a major event in the history of the South Caucasus. As a result of the measure enacted by the Russian authorities, a significant layer of the material and spiritual culture of not only Azerbaijan but also the whole region was actually erased from existence. 🌱

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