

# Early Islamic Caucasus

Alison Vacca: *Non-Muslim Provinces under early Islam. Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, 273 pp. ISBN 9781316979853, online 9781316979853. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316979853>

**Miklós Sárközy**

*Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest, Hungary*

## Foreword – Iranian influences in the Caucasus

The Caucasus, especially Transcaucasia has a very unique place in Iranian history both before and after the emergence of Islam. Deeply divided by geographic, ethnic and religious diversity, the areas south of Porta Caucasia and the Pass of Darband were frequently conquered by several major dynasties of the Iranian plateau.

The three major preislamic Iranian empires of the Achaemenids (6–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), the Parthians (or Arsacids, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC – 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), and finally the Sasanians (3–early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE) characteristically shaped the history of Armenia, Caucasian Albania and Iberia before the advent of Islam. The only exception was perhaps the region of Colchis in present-day western Georgia, where Iranian influences appear to have been weaker at the expense of Graeco-Roman traditions.

This almost uninterrupted Iranian (both western and eastern Iranian) political presence south of the Pass of Darband and the Darial Pass led to numerous consequences by the late antiquity (or perhaps earlier): a gradual Iranisation of local elites and cultural attitudes (and to a lesser extent that of the local ethnic groups). On the other hand, the non-Iranian character of local people (Armenians, Albanians, Georgians) remained obvious throughout the antiquity.

These provinces of Armenia/Hayastan, Albania/Arran, Iberia/Kartli represented the northern fringes of several major Iranian empires until the fall of the Sasanians, elites were also imported from these major Iranian empires (such as the Arwandids in Armenia, numerous cadet branches of the Arsacids and Mihrānids). Iranian influences can also be seen in the religious life of pre-Christian Armenia, Caucasian Albania and Iberia, confirmed by numerous sources and archaeological findings. Gradually, local variants of Zoroastrianism and Zurvanism developed in Transcaucasia, being nativist versions of religious movements

prevalent in the western Iranian empires. Transcaucasia became part of *Ērānšahr* before Islam, but linguistically these southern Caucasian provinces maintained their non-Iranian background, although in the case of Armenian there is a tendency towards repeated Iranisation of its vocabulary (due to contacts held with several western and eastern Iranian idioms).

Iranian ethnic and cultural influxes could also have come from the north of the Caucasus, the presence of Scythians and Cimmerians in north-western Iran and Anatolia before the formation of the Achaemenid Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC could have left its mark on the political surface of the Caucasus, later the incursions of several Alan tribes, a group of eastern Iranian people residing mainly north of the Caucasus, also heavily affected the Transcaucasia from the late Parthian period on (1-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE) until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century when Mongol invasions devastated the Alans. The nomadic pressure on Transcaucasia continued well into the Middle Ages (those of the Huns, Khazars, Pechenegs and Cumanians), these later nomadic invasions against Transcaucasia were results of major Eurasian nomadic movements of mainly Turkic speaking tribal confederations.

The arrival and establishment of Christianity in the fourth century CE made a significant impact on Transcaucasia and partly on North Caucasus, as well and strengthened tendencies of self-governance in the region. The three major kingdoms of the Caucasus (Armenia, Iberia and Caucasian Albania) sided with Christianity in the first half of the fourth century CE. This change in the religious background of Transcaucasia added a distinctive local character and somewhat weakened but did not completely eliminate the Iranian political legitimacy of the region. The arrival of Christianity and the creation of a massive network of Christian religious institutions greatly helped to establish the national literacy in Armenian, in Georgian and in Caucasian Albanian languages supporting nativist movements in the Caucasus against the Iranian Sasanians (such as the movements of Mamikonian family in Armenia or that of Vakhtang Gorgasali in Iberia in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE). Ironically these nativist movements were sometimes led by local dynasties of Iranian background (such as that of Khosroids in Iberia), whose ancestors had come to the Caucasus centuries before, mainly during the Parthian period.

Despite the short-lived successes of these families, the Sasanians eventually managed to re-establish their rule in the Caucasus in the course of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Until the Islamic conquest, much of Transcaucasia with all of its ethnic complexities remained in the hands of the Sasanians, who used the region as a battlefield with the Eastern Romans and the Khazars. The Sasanian military outposts were strong enough to control even parts of North Caucasus. Zémarchos, the Byzantine envoy around 568 CE, on his way to Central Asia was warned to avoid the valley of the Kuban river due to the alleged Sasanian military presence well beyond the Darial Pass.

Islamic armies reached Transcaucasia as early as 640 CE when we hear of the earliest Arabic attacks against Armenia; soon armies of the caliphate quickly occupied Dvin, the centre of Armenia in 640 and then continued their expansions against the Khazars well

beyond the Pass of Darband/Bāb al-Abwāb. One has the impression that the early Arab armies hastily wanted to reach the peaks of the Greater Caucasus in order to minimize the possible cooperation between the Byzantines, the Sasanians and the Khazars. Indeed, the armies of the caliphate were fairly successful in conquering the south Caucasus before 650. These early Arabic wars, waged against the *Kūst-i Ādurbādagān* military district of the Sasanian Empire, completely eliminated the Sasanian rule in Transcaucasia and also significantly weakened Byzantine expansionist tendencies.

## A new and important volume dedicated to the early Islamic period and doctrinal history of the Caucasus – Alison Vacca’s book

But what happened then? How did the early caliphate consolidate its power in Transcaucasia? How did Islamic rule come to dominate these provinces? Did pre-Islamic Iranian legitimacy in the Caucasus survive into the 8th–9th centuries? The book of Alison Vacca is a purely fascinating and insightful read which successfully addresses these questions by mapping primary sources often neglected in modern scholarship on the Umayyad and Abbasid North. Undoubtedly, studies on the early Islamic narratives of Transcaucasia (as well as of North Caucasus) are rather neglected in modern scholarship. It seems that nobody addressed aspects of early Islamic perceptions on Transcaucasia in their entirety before Vacca’s book. Indeed, this book explores the expressions of the surviving Iranian political legitimacy in the region as reflected in Arabic and Armenian sources of the early Islamic period.

As far as the studies on the early Islamic period of Transcaucasia are concerned, the first major steps in European scholarship were made by the Armenologists, such as Laurent with his *L’Arménie entre Byzance et l’Islam* published in 1919, which book was reprinted and reedited several times in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later, in Soviet Armenia Ter-Levondyan and Melik-Bakhshyan wrote seminal works on early Islamic Armenia. It is perhaps Ter-Levondyan’s main work (*The Arab Emirates of Bagratid Armenia*, 1976) that has gained more recognition due to its English and Arabic translations, while Melik-Bakhshyan published mainly in Armenian. In Azerbaijani scholarship, attempts have been made to elevate Caucasian Albania to the level of Armenia and Iberia, especially by Bunyadov and his pupils.

Besides these regional studies, which focus almost exclusively on Armenian and Caucasian Albanian history (based partly on modern political ideas of Armenia and Azerbaijan), the number of works with a more holistic attitude towards early Islamic Transcaucasia is very limited in modern European scholarship. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, works of Markwart and Minorsky are worth mentioning, since both great scholars wrote extensively on late Sasanian and early Islamic geography and political history. Recently

works of Patricia Crone (*The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* published in 2012) and of Parvaneh Pourshariati (*Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* published in 2008) offer a detailed description on political and religious history of late Sasanian and early Islamic *Ērānšahr* including parts of the Transcaucasia. Therefore Vacca's new book is a laudable and excellent work which tries to shed light on hitherto overshadowed aspects of early Islamic Transcaucasia.

Vacca's book has seven main chapters, two of them focus on administrative geography, concepts, ideas of Abbasid-era Arabic geographers on Caliphate-ruled Caucasus, whereas four other chapters address the history of caliphal administration before the disintegration of the Caliphate in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of local dynasties (both Islamic and Christian). The last chapter tries to shed light on the multi-layered character of the Iranian traditions in Transcaucasia.

Besides summarizing elements of methodology, Vacca's first chapter (*Non-Persian Provinces of Iran, Non-Muslim Provinces on Islam, An Introduction to the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd North*) already suggests her main argument that can be detected in her entire book: it is the Iranian legacy, the Iranian-influenced local traditions that play the key role in shaping Islamic concepts on the region of the Caucasus (according to Vacca, Byzantine and Armenian traditions exerted much lesser influence on later Islamic authors). Later, as Vacca notes, these Iranised Islamic (mainly Abbasid) concepts laid the ideological foundations of local dynasts in the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Not only local Muslim rulers such as the Širwānšāhs (themselves of Arabic origin) became Iranised claiming the Iranian title 'šāhānšāh' and naming their male members as Ānūširwān and Qubād, but also mighty Christian Armenian families such as the Bagratunis (along with their Georgianised cadet branch of the Bagrationis) and the Artsrunis relied on the Islamized Iranian concepts of kingship. The sculptural depiction of Smbat Bagratuni on the facade of the Haghpat monastery suggests elements of Iranisation in his royal ideology. On Smbat's turban we can decipher the Islamized Iranian title 'šāhānšāh' with Arabic letters, similar Sasanian symbols appear on the surface of the Akhtamar church of the Artsruni dynasty. Even Sarir, the tiny Christian kingdom of the Caucasian Avars in North Caucasus received its own Sasanian foundation legend.

In the second chapter of the book (*Whence the Umayyad North? Byzantine, Sasanian and Caliphal Administrative Geography of the North*), the author traces the origins of Caucasus-related Islamic maps. It appears that it is the Sasanian geographical unit called *Kūst-i Ādurbādagān*, which stands behind the concept of *Jarbī*, a Marwānid-created administrative unit around (after 685 CE) according to Vacca. This idea is further supported by textual and numismatic evidences. This chapter once again proves that Byzantine and Armenian traditions were rather marginal in shaping the Umayyad administrative innovations in the Marwānid period (after 685 CE) as it was suggested by descriptions of Transcaucasia in the so-called Balkhī geographies. Instead, Sasanian traditions mainly ruled the narrative of Arabic geographers. In this regard, Vacca primarily questions the idea of *Super Armenia*,

arguing that the caliphal representatives did not organize Armenia, Georgia and Albania into a single province in Islamic Transcaucasia in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Chapter 3 (*Lost Greek kings and Hoodwinked Khazars, Sasanian and Byzantine Legacy in the Construction of Caliphal Frontiers in the North*) is perhaps the most important part of the book. Here Vacca discusses the borderlands of Transcaucasia and their representation in Arabic geographical traditions. From her analysis it becomes clear that Arabic and Armenian sources on caliphal geographical units do not seem to emphasize the religious values of *ribāṭs*, *ḥudūd*, *thuḡūr* as in the case of other borderlands of the Caliphate (as in Syria or in Central Asia) and generally are less enthusiastic in promoting Islam among local 'infidels' north of the Pass of Darband or west of Erzurum. Here again, Sasanian traditions and legends dominate the narrative almost completely, and the Islamic borderland descriptions of the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries tend to focus on miraculous deeds of Sasanian kings and the alleged foundation of cities attributed to Sasanian rulers. These anecdotes enjoy greater prestige in the eyes of these Arabic authors than any anecdote about the spread of Islam in Transcaucasia and beyond. The popularity of certain Sasanian-related legends seems to have persisted in these local Arab and Armenian sources composed even centuries after the fall of the Sasanians. However, these 'Sasanian' legends on the foundations of Darband/Bāb al-Abwāb and other places recorded in the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries by Islamic authors hardly contain any historical accuracy, therefore they should be treated with great caution. Thus, the legends preserved in the *Darbandnāma* (an important and still largely unprocessed source on the history of the Caucasus, rich in early Islamic material) on the foundation of two Hungarian cities in present-day Azerbaijan by the legendary Sasanian king Khusraw Ānūšīrwān (531-579) require more textual criticism in the light of Vacca's new researches.

Chapter 4 (*The So-Called Marzbāns and the Northern Freeman, Local Leadership in the North from Sasanian to Caliphal Rule*) continues the narrative of the previous chapter. Here we can see similarities and parallels between Sasanian and post-Sasanian/early Islamic administrative methods preserved in the accounts of 9-10<sup>th</sup> century Arabic and Armenian authors. Here Vacca employs the method of comparative analysis to demonstrate the similar character of these pre-Islamic and Islamic accounts.

Arabic and Armenian sources speak of a tripartite governmental system run by both the Sasanians and the Caliphate: foreign governors (*ostikān/marzbān*), local rulers (Armenian, Caucasian Albanian and Iberian) and the local aristocracy (often called in Arabic as *abnā' al-mulūk* or *aḥrār*). In many cases these sources put a strong emphasis on the idea of administrative continuity before and after the Arabic conquest. Vacca reminds us, however, that nearly all of these Arabic and Armenian sources were penned in the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries in the period of the emergence of new local families, during the so-called *Iranian intermezzo*, where a neo-Sasanian cult began in the Persianate world and this fact might have affected our sources on the status of early Islamic administration practices in the Caucasus. In other words, the emphasis put on the concept of an almost uninterrupted continuity with the Sasanian past may reflect the new political realities of the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries following the

decline of the Abbasid caliphate, when old-new local elites came to power in Transcaucasia promoting nativist traditions contrary to the ideology the Abbasid Caliphate.

Similar parallelisms can be drawn in Chapter 5 (*Caliphs, Commanders and Catholicoi: Mechanisms to Control the North under Byzantine, Sasanian, and Caliphal Rule*), where cases of administrative practices both from the Sasanian era and from the early Islamic period are discussed. Here, local hierarchism and imperial approaches are confronted in our Arabic and Armenian sources, where the highly decentralized imperial North faced numerous challenges from the Sasanian/Caliphal courts. Similar trends and behaviours are recorded in our sources in both cases: local elites resisting attempts of forced conversion to Zoroastrianism/Islam, carefully defending their mostly non-Chalcedonian Christian social institutions. Apparently, this resistant attitude also seems to have been instrumental in protecting the integrity of local societies. Here, however, the same question arises as before: are these stories in our sources based entirely on real episodes, or are they merely popular expressions intended to meet the expectations of the 9-10<sup>th</sup> century readers?

Vacca poses the same question when she delves into the analysis of the taxation system of the early Islamic period (Chapter 6: *Taxing the Dead and Sealing the Necks of the Living: Sasanian and Caliphal Treaties and Taxation in the North*). Here, she finds evidence of a sharp discontinuity with the Sasanian past due to the taxation reforms introduced by the Marwānid caliphs of the Umayyad period after 683 CE. She once again argues that it is the description of our sources and their pro-Sasanian attitude that makes Sasanian and caliphal fiscal practices largely similar 'by a sustained engagement with Iranian social mores.'

After these fascinating and well-written chapters on the Iranian legitimacy in the Caucasus in the early Islamic period, Vacca – with a sudden twist – aims at deconstructing the Iranian legitimacy itself (chapter 7 *Collective Historical Amnesia – The Case for a Parthian Intermezzo*). She argues that the origins of this frequently mentioned Iranian political legitimacy in the case of Armenia, Caucasian Albania and Georgia are rooted rather in the Parthian (Arsacid) period than in the Sasanian one. Vacca thinks that the expressions of this surviving Iranian legitimacy are linked to local elites, families of Parthian background or to a Parthian-related local idea of kingship (such as those of the Arsacids, Mihrānids and other cadet branches of the Parthian aristocracy still present in early Islamic Caucasus). Vacca thus believes in a multi-layered Iranian legitimacy in the Caucasus, where Parthian traditions are primarily reflected in the traditions of the Iranian (Parthian) locality, while the Sasanian legitimacy is represented by the conquerors from Sasanian Iran and later by the armies of the Caliphate.

## Conclusion

Alison Vacca's book is a seminal and very useful work for scholars of various fields interested in Caucasian studies, Iranian history as well as early Islamic intellectual history. It is also important to stress that this book can contribute significantly to early Hungarian history as well. The well-known Hungarian ties to the Caucasus, the presence of early Hungarian groups in certain parts of the Caucasus requires a more thorough knowledge of Islamic sources relating to the Caucasus in early Hungarian historical studies in the light of Vacca's new results. Last but not least, Vacca's textual criticism, the comparison drawn between Armenian and Arabic sources, the contextualisation of these written materials, the assessment of doctrinal aspects operating behind these sources are also of great help for those involved and interested in Hungarian aspects of the Caucasian history. ■



Fig. 1. Smbat Bagratuni's portrait, Monastery of Haghpata, Armenia. Photo by the author

