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THE ROLE AND PLACE OF MIDDLE PERSIAN LANGUAGE AND WRITING IN CAUCASIAN ALBANIA

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Abstract: A significant political influence of Sasanian Iran on Caucasian Albania gives reasons to consider the spread of Middle Persian language and writing among Albanian nobility and authorities. This process contributed by the existence of close dynastic ties between the Arsacids of Albania and the Sasanian royal family at least since from the reign of King Urnayr (ca. 350–375) up to the abolition of Albanian kingdom at the beginning of the 6th century. Written sources provide the correspondence of the rulers of Albania, Armenia, Iberia with the Sasanians and the written decrees of the *shāhanshāhs* sent to the Transcaucasian provinces of Iran, which indirectly indicates the spread of Middle Persian language and writing here.

Currently, there are three known unique gem-seals that date back to the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 6th century and belonged to the representatives of higher secular and church authorities. These are the seals of the King of Albania Aswahan, Crown Prince Asay and the Great Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan. They are of great interest for the study of cultural and political ties between Sasanian Iran and Albania, Albanian sphragistics. The title inscriptions on these official seals are made in *pārsīg* (*pahlavī*), which shows the role of Middle Persian language and writing among the highest Albanian nobility and the highest Christian clergy of the country, clearly indicates the huge political and cultural influence of Sasanian Iran on Caucasian Albania. These monuments of glyptics show that Middle Persian language and writing had the official status in Early Medieval Albania.

Keywords: Caucasian Albania, Sasanian Iran, Middle Persian, Sasanian gem-seals, Asay, Aswahan, Great Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan.

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In memory of Sara Kasumova

A significant political influence of Sasanian Iran on Caucasian Albania (*Gr.* Ἀλβανία, *Lat.* Albania, *Arm.* Ałuank', *Georg.* Rani, *Syr.* Aran, *Parth.* Ārdān, *Mid. Pers.* Ārān, Ālbān, *Arab.* ar-Ran/Arran) since the 330s AD (to the expiry of the forty-year Nisibin Treaty) and its subsequent incorporation into Eranshahr, the presence of large Sasanian military contingents, the Iranian administration, and the acolytes of Zoroastrianism allow us to consider the spread of Middle Persian language and script among Albanian nobility and administration. This process was facilitated by the establishment of close dynastic ties between the Arsacids of Albania and the Sasanian royal family.

At least since the reign of King Urnayr (ca. 350–375), we can speak of the establishment of these dynastic ties, which became habitual and continued right up until the abolition of Albanian

kingdom at the beginning of the 6th century. Thus, King Urnayr of Albania (*ca.* 350–375) was married to the sister (or daughter) of the *shāhanshāh* Shapur II (309–379); King Aswahan (*ca.* 415–440) was the son of the sister of Shapur III (383–388) and the husband of daughter of *shāhanshāh* Yazdagird II (439–457); King Vache II (*ca.* 440–462) was the son of the sister of the *shāhanshāhs* Hormizd (457–459) and Peroz (459–484) and was married to their niece; and finally, a passionate follower of Christianity, King Vachagan III the Pious (*ca.* 485–510) was also “from the royal family of Persia”, son (or nephew) of Yazdagird II and brother (or nephew) of Vache II [Gadjiev, 2015, p. 68–75; Gadjiev, 2020, p. 29–35]. Prince (*ishkhan*) of Gardman¹ Mihran (late 6th century), whose descendants founded a new dynasty of rulers of Albania, was also of Iranian origin.

There is some discernible confusion surrounding the nature of the degree of kinship – brother or nephew, sister or niece – for which an explanation is revealed in the forms of marriage that were practiced among the higher nobility of Sasanian Iran. The above-mentioned Albanian king Vache II, as the nephew of Yazdagird II (i.e. son of a sister) and Peroz I (i.e. son of his sister, who was also the sister of Yazdagird II, as Peroz was married to his own aunt – sister of Yazdagird II), was married to the niece of Peroz, that is, to his own sister or cousin. Along with dynastic and property considerations, Zoroastrian religious norms also played the significant role here [Perikhanyan, 1983, p. 65].

Written sources provide the correspondence of the rulers of Albania, Armenia, Iberia with the Sasanians and the written decrees of the *shāhanshāhs* sent to the Transcaucasian provinces of Iran, which indirectly indicates the spread of the Middle Persian language and writing here. For instance, Eghishe (5th century), writing about the preparation of Yazdagird II for the war with the Kushans, reports that the *shāhanshāh* sent an order to the vassal countries to provide and collect troops: “... the edict was received in the lands of the Armenians, Iberians, Albanians, Lpink[‘], Tsawdeik[‘], Korduk[‘], Aldznik[‘], and in many other distant parts ...” [Eghishe 1971, p. 30; Elishē, 1982, p. 64]. Later, early in the 6th century, the incorporation of Albania into the Sasanian Empire on the rights of *marzbāndom* assumed its inclusion in the sphere of administrative office work and the written culture of Iran.

The use of Middle Persian language and *pārsīg* (*pahlavi*) in Albania is evidenced by the Middle Persian inscriptions of Derbent, dating from the time of the *shāhanshāh* Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–579), more precisely 568–569 AD [Gadjiev, 2008, p. 1–15]. These inscriptions can be considered monuments of the Middle Persian epigraphy of Caucasian Albania, given their location in the historical territory of Albania (as an integral part of Eranshahr), at the same time taking into account the fact that they were written by the Iranians, as indicated by the proper names in them – Dariuš, Ādurgušnasp, Mōšīg, Rašn(u) [Gadjiev, Kasumova, 2006].

There are, however, three unique monuments of lapidary paleography, which are monuments of the Middle Persian epigraphy of Albania – gem-seals that belonged to representatives of the highest secular and religious nobility of Caucasian Albania. These are unique intaglios of the Crown Prince of Albania Asay, King of Albania Aswahan and the Great Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan. They are of great interest for the study of cultural and political ties between Sasanian Iran and Albania, Albanian sphragistics.

The seal of Asay, the Crown Prince of Albania (fig. 1).

The seal is made of banded brown and white agate in the Sassanian style. The central field of the gem is occupied by a deep three-dimensional image of a recumbent deer with branched antlers; there is a clear Middle Persian inscription below it and on its side. Unlike most images of a deer in Sasanian glyptics, this intaglio shows the animal in a rather realistic and expressive

¹ Gardman – one of the provinces (*ghavar*) of Albania.



Рис. 1. Оттиск печати наследного принца Албании Асая, рубеж IV–V вв. (по: [Lerner, 2009]).

Fig. 1. Seal impress of Asay, Crown Prince of Albania, at the turn of the 4–5th c. (see: [Lerner, 2009]).

manner, which demonstrates the high professionalism of the gemcutter and the prestigious nature of the product. This gem-seal, the origin of which is unfortunately unknown, was first published in 2009 by J.A. Lerner [Lerner, 2009, p. 83–89]. In her paper, in particular, a detailed description of the gem, its historical and cultural analysis are given along with a translation of the Middle Persian inscription on it (without transliteration and transcription) made by P.O. Skjærvø: “Asay, Prince of Alan” [Lerner, 2009, p. 83]. Based on its overall carving style, J. Lerner dates the print to the 4th–5th century; she notes that “its actual style, however, is not completely typical and sets it apart, as will be seen, from seals of this time. The orthography of the inscription, too, is not completely typical but “is in part provincial, an assessment that... fits well with the seal’s ownership and choice of image” [Lerner, 2009, p. 83]. Based on the translation of the inscription and the image of the deer, the gem is attributed to the Scytho-Alanian culture [Lerner, 2009, p. 83–89]. However, this conclusion, as well as the translation of the inscription, are incorrect.

In 2013 E. Khurshudyan in his article [Khurshudyan, 2013, p. 191–201] gave the historical attribution of the gem and the correct translation of the inscription on it:

‘s’dy ZY’ld’n BRPYT’y

Āsāy ī Ārān vispuhr

“Āsāy, the Crown Prince of Ārān”.

The researcher not only pinpoints the reading of Ārān (not Ālān) as a well-known Parthian and Middle Persian name of Caucasian Albania, but also compares the name of its owner mentioned in the inscription on the gem with the famous king Asay, mentioned in the list of kings of Caucasian Albania by Movses Dasxurantsi/Kalankatuatsi [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 15; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I, 15]. According to the chronology of the kings of Caucasian Albania proposed by me, Asay ruled in around 405–415 AD [Gadjiev, 2015, p. 68–75; Gadjiev, 2020, p. 29–35]. Since Asay has the title of the Crown Prince in the seal inscription – *vispuhr* (Av. *vīsō puθra* – literally “son of the [royal] clan / house”), and not the king, then the gem should be dated to the previous period, i.e. to the boundary of the 4–5th centuries. It can be assumed that Asay was the son or younger brother of one of the previous kings – Mrhavan (Merhavan) (*ca.* 385–395) or Satoy (*ca.* 395–405). Thus, we have a gem with an absolute date, which serves as a chronological marker for dating the monuments of the Sassanian glyptics with the Middle Persian texts.

The seal of Aswahan, the King of Albania (fig. 2).

This cornelian gem-seal from M.A. Pirousan’s collection of the Sasanian intaglios was published by Ph. Gignoux in 1975. The seal has a monogram (*nīšān*) – so called “Moon chariot” – in



Рис. 2. Оттиск печати царя Албании Асвагена (ок. 415–440) (по: [Gignoux, 1975]).

Fig. 2. Seal impress of Aswahen, King of Albania (ca. 415–440) (see: [Gignoux, 1975]).

the center and a circular Middle Persian inscription. Ph. Gignoux provided the reading of the inscription, performed in a traditional formula and lapidary style as follows:

'hyphy ny ZY 'ld'n MLK'

"A....., roi de Alains".

In doing so, author noted that "le nom du roi ne se laisse pass faciliement identifier, mais sa titulature me paraît certaine" [Gignoux, 1975, p.17, pl. I, fig. 2.2].

Later S.Yu. Kasumova paid attention to the gem and justly pointed out that we deal with "la première gemme avec le nom et le titre d'un roi albain" and the word *'ld'n* means "Albania", not "Alans" [Kasumova, 1991, p. 31–32]. She also suggests to read the inscription "Axipxin (?), roi d'Albanie" and noted that "sur la base moyen-perse (et plus largement, en iranien) le nom *'h/wphy/wny* n'a pas d'étymologie; il paraît vraisemblable que ce nom est "caucasien" (Lezgingo-Daghestani)" [Kasumova, 1991, p. 32].

In my paper regarding this seal [Gadjiev, 2003, p. 102–119], I highlight the fact that the said variant of the reading of the name of the Albanian king cannot be considered correct; one should keep in mind that such a name is not mentioned anywhere in written sources. I have also noted that the third mark in the name of the king represented in the shape (must be interpreted as c (*sādē*), not as y (*yōd*) – the same spelling of the letter *c* is characteristic for the Middle Persian inscriptions on the Sasanian seals, – and a forth mark in the name representing 2-shaped form may clearly be interpreted as w (*wāw*), not as p (*pē*) – such a denoting of the letter *wāw* is widely spread in Middle Persian orthography. Basing on the said definitions of these alphabetical marks, I offered the reading of the seal inscription:

'hchwiny ny ZY 'ld'n MLK'

Āhzwahēn i, Ārān šāh

"Āhzwahēn, King of Aran (Albania)".

The king of Albania appears in the works of his contemporaries – Koryun [Koryun, 1962, 17], Movses Khorenatsi [Khorenatsi, 1990, III, 54], as well as in the works of later authors – Dasxurantsi/Kalankatuatsi [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 15, 23, II, 3; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I, 15, 23, II, 3], Kirakos Gandzaketsi [Gandzaketsi, 1976, X, 193], Stepanos Orbelyan [Orbelyan, 1910, p. 15].

In manuscripts this name is presented in the forms of *Arsval*, *Arsvalēn*, *Esvalēn*, *Esvalēn*, *Ēsvalēn*. Obviously, the variations of the spellings of the name are accounted for by the adaptation of this (Eastern Caucasian?) name to another language, by its non-native written transformation. And the Middle Persian form *Āhwahēn* on the seal is quite conformed to the spelling in Old Armenian language.

According to the written sources, Aswahlen was contemporary of *shāhānshāhs* Yazdagird I (399–421) and Varhran V (421–439) and possibly Yazdagird I (439–457). He was a son of a sister of *shāhānshāh* Shapur III (383–388) and a grandson of Shapur II (309–379). By permission of Aswahlen, King of Albania, and Jeremiah, Bishop of Albania, original Albanian system of writing was invented in the early 5th century (*ca.* 420 AD). According to my chronology of the Albanian Arsacids, King Aswahlen ruled in *ca.* 415–440 AD [Gadjiev, 2015, p. 68–75; Gadjiev, 2020, p. 29–35].

The “Moon chariot” monogram in the center of the seal may be considered as Aswahlen’s royal emblem, and perhaps the emblem of other Arsacid-Sasanian kings of Caucasian Albania. This symbol, also called “Halbmond über gestürztem Wagen” (R. Göbl), “Mondwagenwappen” (H. Jänichen) or “le symbole des Ephtalites” (E. Specht), “signe hephtalite” (R. Ghirshman), “Hephtalitentamga”, “das Tamga der Alxon” (R. Göbl), is not unique and can be seen on some Sasanian gems and Kushan-Sasanian and Chionite, Alkhon/Alkhan (Alxano), Napka/Nezak and Bamiyan (Hephtalite) princes’ coins (and seals [Staviskiy, 1961, p. 54–56²]). I suggest to interpret the “Moon wagon” monogram as a symbol of dynastic ties with the Sasanians and of belonging to this powerful royal family, “descending from gods” [Gadjiev, 2003, p. 106–117].

The seal of King Aswahlen determines the title *šāh* (MLK’) for Albania for the first time. Later, the title was reflected in the family name of influential Albanian princes of the 8th–9th centuries *Aranšahik* // *hEranšahik* [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 22; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 22], who ruled in Shakki, and then was adopted in the Arabic form *Arranšah*, according to the chronicle “Tarikh al-Bab wa-Sharwan” (early 12th century)³, by the Muslim Shaddadid dynasty, established in Ganja in the end of the 10th century.

In this regard, it should be noted that A.I. Kolesnikov, examining the administrative-territorial structure of the late Sasanian Iran, came to the conclusion that granting the title *šāh* to the *marzbans* and some of the *spahbeds* of Eranshahr was the recognition of the considerable independence of border rulers [Kolesnikov, 1970, p. 55]. This conclusion can be rightfully applied to the East Caucasian rulers – holders of this title – well known from Arab and Persian authors of the 9th–10th and later centuries. Granting the rulers of small but strategically important state formations of the Eastern Caucasus the title *šāh* was in accordance with the norms of the Sasanian nomenclature, hierarchical practice, reflected, in particular, in the order of the “Letter of Tansar”: “No other man, not being of our house, shall be called king (*šāh* – *M.G.*), but the Lords of the Marches – of Alān and the western region, of Xwārezm and Kābul” [Boyce, 1968, p. 35]. In view of the abovementioned close dynastic ties between the Albanian kings and the Sassanians, as well as the well-known information of al-Baladhuri and other Arab and Persian authors of the 9th–10th centuries and afterwards (al-Masudi, Ibn Khordadbeh, Ibn al-Faqih, Hamza Ispahani) about granting the title *šāh* to the owners (Arab. *mulūk*) and leaders (Arab. *kuwwad*) of various regions of the North-Eastern Caucasus and Caucasian Albania⁴ by Khosrow I Anushirwan (531–579), it

² The gem, published by B. Y. Stavisky, depicts not only the Moon chariot, but also the so-called “wing ornament”, placed in the base of the bust of King Aspurabakh (ОСБОПОБОО – V.A. Livshits’ reading), which appears in the number of Sasanian type coins of kings of Alxano (for example, kings Khingila, Javukha/Zabokho, Mehama, Mihirakula) in the same place.

³ This title was held by the ruler (*malik*) of Arran Fadl b. Shavur (1067–1073) [Minorsky, 1963, p. 61 (Arab. Text: p. 17)].

⁴ These titles are Aran-šāh, Širwan-šāh, Lakzan-šāh, Filan-šāh, Tabasaran-šāh, Liran-šāh, Vahrarzan-šāh (Vahraran-šāh), Jurjan-šāh (*Gurgan-šāh) and others, formed both under the name of a region (corresponding to the name of the

seems to be reasonable to read *Arans* (*ʾl'n'n* = *Ārānān*), i.e. “Albanians”, and not *Alans*, given that in Middle Persian the letters *l* and *r* were indicated by the same symbol⁵. Such reading fully corresponds to the data of written sources, the historical situation and the significance of the border regions of the Eastern Caucasus in the late Sassanian period.

It seems that the misreading of the toponym *ʾld'n* of the Middle Persian inscriptions on the seals of Prince Asay and King Aswahan was the result of researchers' poor knowledge of Albania compared to their better expertise in Alans.

The seal of Great Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan (fig. 3).

This carnelian gem-seal is part of the collection of carved stones of the National Library in Paris; however, it is not presented in the catalog of L.J. Delaporte [Delaporte, 1920; 1923]. R. Göbl first published it in 1973 as one of the samples of gems with a cross, providing no commentaries to it [Göbl, 1973, taf. 33.102a]. The image of a cross with slightly widened arms, almost equilateral with a slightly elongated lower descending arm, occupies the central field on the front of the intaglio. A crescent with horns upward and a six-rayed star are carved under the side arms; under the cross there is a ring, on which the Christian symbol seems to stand. On both sides of the central image, there is a Middle Persian inscription in cursive, similar to the Late Sasanian paleography.

Later the seal was published by J.A. Lerner in her monograph [Lerner, 1977, p. 31, pl. I, 3], in the appendix to which R.N. Frye proposed the first reading of the inscription - *ʾlšn W bl'nyk' ʾtlykwny*, and attributed the gem by paleographic features to the 7th century [Frye, 1977, p. 41]. A year later, Ph. Gignoux gave a generally correct reading of the legend, with the exception of one toponym word: *[kws]ty Y hlb'n W bl'skn wcwlk <k> ʾtlykws* “Grand Catholicos de Hulvān et de Balāsagān”. Relying on the specific spelling of the letter *k* in words *bl'skn*, *wcwlk*, *k'ʾtlykws*, he cautiously dated this seal 6-7th centuries [Gignoux, 1978, p. 64, no.7.5, pl. XXIII; 1980, p. 299–314, pl. I, fig. 1].

Later A.I. Kolesnikov, studying the administrative toponyms on the Sasanian seals, drew attention to a number of circumstances: firstly, the fact that the toponym *Hulvān* on the gem's impression on a bulla at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad is written like *hlw'n*, and not *hlb'n*; secondly, which is especially important, Hulwan is located close to Baghdad, but at a distance of about 700 km from the Balasakan region. This made it possible for the researcher to give preference to the variant *ʾlb'n / ʾrb'n / ʾrr'n*, “interpreting it as an indication of Caucasian Albania, Arran – a province that traditionally bordered on Balasakan and in certain periods of history constituted a single administrative unit and ecclesiastical diocese with it” [Kolesnikov, 1985, p. 182–183; 1989, p. 249–250]. Thus, researchers accepted the reading of *kust ī Ālbān ud Balāsagān wuzurg kātolikos* as the “Great Catholicos, [province] of Albania and Balasakan” [Kasumova, 1991, p. 23–24; Gyselen, 1993, p. 155, No. 60.13, pl. XLII, 60.13⁶].

S.Yu. Kasumova noted that “the paleography of the inscription does not allow us to give the exact dating: cursive letters on gems appear no later than in the 5th century, and were used in the same varieties for several centuries” [Kasumova, 1991, p. 28–29]. She was inclined to date the seal to the 6th century. At the same time, she views the title “Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan” as a reflection of the situation that developed after the anti-Sasanian uprisings in 481–484, when, in her

dominant ethnic group), and under the name of animals depicted on a granted robe-kaba [Ispahani, 1844, p. 57].

⁵ Middle Persian “Letter of Tansar”, composed in the mid-6th century, was translated to Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa in the mid-8th century, and in the early 13th century it was translated from Arabic to Persian by Ibn Isfandiār, who included it in his “*Tarih-i Tabaristan*”. Apparently, an *error lapsus* occurred during the translation. For to the same reason, Hamza Ispahani translated the title *Ārān-sāh* as the *King of Ranens*, and not the *King of Aran (Albania)* [Ispahani, 1844, p. 57].

⁶ The publication of R. Gyselen has some discrepancy: *kust ī ārrān ud balāsagan wuzurg kātolikos* “Le grand katholikos, “region” d’Arran et de Balāsagan”, in which the name *ālbān* was replaced by *ārrān*.



Рис. 3. Печать Великого католикоса Албании и Баласакана, начало VI в. (по: [Lerner, 1977]).

Fig. 3. Seal of the Great Catholicos of Albania and Balasakan, early 6th c. (see: [Lerner, 1977]).

opinion, Balasakan “united with Albania” [Kasumova, 1991, p. 31; 2005, p. 49]. But the sources lack documentary data on the unification of these two state formations, and this point of view is based on an assessment of the general political situation in the region. According to the researcher, Shubkhalishoy could be the first to accept this title (Syr. *šubhā l-išōf* – “glory to Jesus”) – “Chief Episkoposapet”, “Archbishop of Partaw”, “Catholicos from Jerusalem” [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 23, 26, III, 24; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I, 23, 26, III, 24], and this title itself existed until mid-6th century, when a new one was introduced – “Catholicos of Albania (Ałuank’), Lpinia (Lpink’) and Chor” [Kasumova, 1991, p. 31; 2005, p. 50].

In the article devoted to the attribution of this intaglio, based on the paleographic comparison of the inscription on it with the inscriptions of the 6-7th centuries on seals from the collection of the State Hermitage and bullas from the Archive of the Ādur Gušnasp temple (Taxt-e Solaymān; no later than 624 AD), I dated the seal of the Great Catholicos from the 6th to the early 7th century [Gadjiev, 2004, p. 466–467]. In the same article, I noticed that in the inscription the term *kwsty* (district, province) is reconstructed by researchers – there are only final letters in the text – *[kws]ty*... This does not exclude the possibility of seeing here not the indication of the administrative unit, but the name of the Great Catholicos himself. In this case, we are dealing with the usual construction “name – toponym (region, city, temple) – title”, standard for lapidary Middle Persian texts. Such a structure is presented, for example, in the inscriptions on the seals of Prince Asay and King Aswahan (see above), in the Middle Persian inscriptions of Derbent (*Dariusš ī Ādurbādagān āmārgar*) [Gadjiev, 2000, p. 116–129; Gadjiev, Kasumova, 2006, p. 35–61, 73–83] and on many other Sasanian gems (for example: *Warahrān Kermān Šāh*, *Vehdenšapuhr ī Ērān āmbarakpat*, *Bāfarak ī Mēšan magupat*, *Wēšahpuhr ī Ārdahšir-Hwarra magupat* etc [Borisov, Lukonin, 1963, p. 21, 39–40, 48–49]). Taking into account the names of the heads of the Albanian Church known to us, we can reconstruct the name on the seal – **Pānty* / **Pāndy* [Gadjiev, 2004, p. 472].

Catholicos Pant appears in the lists of the heads of the Albanian Church by Movses Daskhurantsi/Kalankatvatsi, Kirakos Gandzaketsi, Mkhitar Ayriyanetsi and Mkhitar Gosh [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 23; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 23; Gandzaketsi, 1976, Gosh, p. 8; Ayriyanetsi, 1860, p. 19]. An analysis of these lists made it possible to attribute the reign of Catholicos Pant to the beginning of the 6th century [Gadjiev, 2004, p. 472–473]. Apparently, one of the monasteries of the Albanian Church in Jerusalem, mentioned by Dasxurantsi/Kalankatuatsi in the list of Albanian monasteries

and located east of the Mount of Olives [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 23; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 23], was named after him.

Thus, we currently have three unique individual (personalized) gem-seals, dated back to the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 6th century, that belonged to the representatives of the highest secular and ecclesiastical authorities of Caucasian Albania.

The title inscriptions on the official seals of the Albanian king, under which the Albanian script was developed and introduced, of the Crown Prince and the Great Catholicos of Albania, are made in *pārsīg* (*pahlavi*) script. This proves the significant (and obviously prestige) role of Middle Persian language and writing among both the highest Albanian nobility and the highest clergy of the country, and clearly demonstrates the huge political and cultural influence of Sasanian Iran on Caucasian Albania. These monuments of glyptics and epigraphy clearly indicate that Middle Persian language and writing had the official status in Early Medieval Albania.

It is no coincidence that on the seal of the Catholicos, the central image of the Christian symbol (cross) is accompanied on its sides by images of the main Zoroastrian symbols – a crescent moon and a star, and on the seal of the Christian King Aswahan – the Zoroastrian, Sasanian symbol of the “Moon chariot” is used as the state emblem. This clearly demonstrates the dynastic ties with the Sasanians, belonging to this powerful “divine” royal family.

As we know, the Sasanian official gem-seals with personal names and titles belong exclusively to representatives of the secular nobility (*shāhanshāhs*, *shāhs*, *vispuhr*, *spāhbeds*, *shahrahs*, *marzbāns*, *kanārangs*, *shāhryārs*, *ostandārs*, *satraps*, *āmārgars*, *framadārs*, lawyers, judges, scribes etc.) and religious officials (*magupats*, *mags/mobeds*) [see, for example: Ritter, 2017, p. 284–288]. Having a seal with a personal name and title/position engraved on it was a legal privilege of the upper strata of Iranian society. In Caucasian Albania, judging by the available data (gems-seals, Dasxuranci/Kalankatuatsi's information), the possession of the seal was also the prerogative of the secular aristocracy (*shāh*, *vispuhr* (crown prince), *hramanatar* (vizier, chancellor), *hazarapet* (steward), *sparapet* (commander-in-chief), *azgapet* (head of noble clans), *nahapet* (patriarch, head of princely families), *azat* (nobility) and clergy (catholicos/archbishop, bishop, chorbishop, abbot, priest).

In addition to the seals considered, there are specific, documentary facts from written sources about the use of seals in Albania among both secular and religious people. For example, the Ordinances (Canons) of the Council of Aluēn in 488, called by King Vachagan III the Pious (*ca.* 485–510), is a legal document sanctioned by the state and the church, that were sealed with the seals of the representatives of the secular nobility who were present at the council. The text of the Canons reads as follows:

“I, Vačagan, king of the Albania, with Šup‘hališoy, archbishop of Partaw, Manasē, bishop of Kapalāy, Yunan, bishop of Hašu, Anania and Sahak chorbishop of Uti, Yovsep‘, priest of Kalankatuk‘, Mataw, priest of Part, of the royal court, Pōlos, priest of Gegač, Šmawon, chor-episcopus of Tsri, Mat‘ē, priest of Darahoč, Abikaz, priest of Bed, Ubat, priest of Ayrmanušay, Yovel and Parmidē and Yakob, priests, and the nobles and heads of clans (*azgapetk‘*) of Artsakh, Bakur, head of clan of Kalankatuk‘, and many others who have assembled before me in my summer-residence at Aluēn, ordained thus ...” [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 26; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I, 26].

The text of the Ordinances ends with the words:

“These ordinances were signed (sealed) by Mucik, the king's chancellor (*hramanatar*), Mirharik, the steward (*hazarapet*), the heads of clans (*azgapetk‘*) Marut‘, Tirazd, Sprakos, Lama, Bakur, Ratan, Arš‘ēs, Vardan the Brave, lord of Gardman, Xurs, Bermusan, Xoskēn, P‘iwrog, patriarch (*nahapet*), and all the nobles of Albania. As confirmation of this writ the seal of Vačagan, king of Albania, was affixed” [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 26; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I, 26].

The same Vachagan, according to the story of Daskhurantsi/Kalankatuatsi, sealed with the royal ring the casket with the relics of St. Grigoris [Dasxuranci, 1961, I, 23; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, I,

23]. In other passage, Movses Daskhurantsi/Kalankatuatsi provides information on the discovery in the chapel under the altar of two silver kiots, sealed with lead seals [Dasxuranci, 1961, II, 29–30; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, II, 29–30].

The information of the Albanian historian about the collection of gifts for the Hun and Khazar nobility dates back to the time of the reign of Catholicos Viroy (596–630), more precisely to 628 AD: “for the nobles, princes, barons (*naxarark*), generals, and the chiefs of the various tribes in the entire army”. These gifts were actually a payoff to the nomads who invaded Albania under the leadership of the king’s son Shat, son of Jebu Khakan. Viroy “distributed the gifts accordingly, having regard to the names of the families; writing these on each of them, he sealed them and ordered them to be carried by bearers and carts” [Dasxuranci, 1961, II, 14; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, II, 14].

A number of evidences on the use of seals to certify official acts and legal documents can be attributed to the post-Sasanian time, specifically, to the very beginning of the 8th century. Thus, the Catholicos of Albania Nerses Bakur (689–706) “signed and sealed with his seal” the decree of non-recognition of the decisions of the Chalkedonian Council [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 3; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 3]. Later, he nevertheless accepted Chalcedonian Christology, for which he was anathematized at the Council of Partaw (704 AD), at which “the bishops and the entire assembly of the Church cursed him in a sealed statement with the mediation of God and agreement” [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 9; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 9]. Of particular interest is the information of an Albanian historian about a letter sent at the same time by the clergy and secular nobility of Albania to the Catholicos of Armenia Elia (703–717), concerning church strife. Movses Daskhurantsi/Kalankatuatsi provides the full text of this letter, which has the following closing lines: “This document was written by mutual agreement... and was sealed in accordance with the wishes of those whose names are written above” [Dasxuranci, 1961, III, 8; Kalankatuatsi, 1984, III, 8]. Among those who signed this epistle and put their seals, 11 representatives of the Albanian church are listed, then the prince-*ishkhan* of Albania Sheroy and 11 representatives of the highest aristocracy. Among the first we can see the Catholicos of Albania Simeon, bishops, abbots of monasteries, three monks; among the latter – *sparapet* of Albania Juankoy and representatives of various noble families (*azatk*).

From the examples given, it can be seen that not only representatives of the highest secular (king, crown prince, vizier, steward, chancellor, commander-in-chief) and religious (catholicos, archbishop, bishops, chorbishops, abbots) aristocracy had personal seals, but also the nobility of lower ranks of the hierarchy (heads of noble clans and families), as well as some ordinary church ministers – priests, monks. It can be assumed that in Caucasian Albania, as in Sasanian Iran, the possession of the personal seals was also the prerogative of the secular aristocracy and clergy.

Written sources contain indications of official correspondence, various normative acts of the Albanian kings (decrees, decisions, appointments), which had the force of law and operated on the territory of Albania. One can think that these decrees were also sealed by the royal seal. Thus, for example, at the turn of the 4–5th centuries, due to the development of writing and the adoption of the Albanian alphabet, King Aswahan and the Bishop of Albania Jeremiah “wrote a decree” on the organization of schools and the teaching of new writing. The decree might have had the seal of Aswahan, which survived and was attributed 1600 years later.

One can hope that in the future, a comparison of the names known from the Middle Persian inscriptions on intaglios from various collections of the world with the names of real historical figures recorded in narrative sources will reveal the seals of the representatives of the secular aristocracy and the clergy of Caucasian Albania. Currently we already have the data and materials that make it possible to a certain extent to judge the Albanian sphragistics, and the considered gem-seals demonstrate the important role of Middle Persian language and writing, comparable to the significance of Arabic language and writing in the subsequent period of the history of the Eastern Caucasus.

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