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Some Remarks on the Caucasian Albanian Palimpsests*

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Abstract

The so-called Caucasian Albanian Palimpsest kept in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai for the first time allows to draw a comprehensive picture of one of the languages (probably the state language) of the third medieval Christian kingdom in Transcaucasia, namely (Caucasian) Albania. The relevant parts of the two palimpsest manuscripts (Sin. N 13 and N 55) covering roughly 120 pages (that is two thirds of the two manuscripts) have been deciphered, interpreted, and translated in the course of an international project running since 2003.¹ The Caucasian Albanian texts comprise a) fragments of a Lectionary, and b) parts of the Gospel of John, written by a different hand in a different style. A number of both text-internal and text-external arguments suggest that the original manuscripts were produced in the 7th century A.D.

The analysis of the texts clearly argues in favour of the assumption that the translators relied upon corresponding Old Armenian sources. Nevertheless, it can be shown that the texts in parts deviate from those Old Armenian Bible texts that have survived to our days, so that Georgian, Greek, and Syriac sources must also be taken into account. The readable passages of the two texts furnish us with roughly 8,000 word tokens (some 1,000 lemmatised lexical entries). Hence, the Caucasian Albanian palimpsest gives a considerable insight into the lexicon, grammar, and phonology of its language, which can now safely be identified as an early variant of Udi (East Caucasian, Lezgian). Caucasian Albanian (or Old Udi) differs from present-day Udi in a number of features, including an additional set of palatalised consonants, a more

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¹ The project has been financed by the Volkswagen Foundation since 2003; the project members are Zaza Aleksidze, Jost Gippert, Jean-Pierre Mahé, Wolfgang Schulze, and Manana Tandashvili. The project results here reported are the common property of the project members.

conservative system of local case markers, gender distinction within the set of anaphoric pronouns, and a stronger tendency to construe larger clitic chains. The lexicon is marked for three aspects: a) the preservation of Lezgian terms lost in present-day Udi; b) a set of loans from Armenian and (less prominent) from Georgian; c) loan translations especially from Armenian. The syntax of the texts comes close to that of its sources; however, the texts also exhibit a number of syntactic features alien to both Armenian and Georgian. This suggests that the translators tried to find a balance between the preservation of the original wording of the sources and the necessity to meet the needs of the Caucasian Albanian speaking audience.

Keywords

Caucasian Albanian, Udi, Armenian, Bible, Gospels, Lectionary, Palimpsest

The discovery of the first manuscript remains of the Caucasian “Albanians” in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai has provided a solid basis for the decipherment of the “Albanian” script and language. In an international cooperation project devoted to this task, the two Georgian palimpsest manuscripts in question (Sin. N 13 and N 55)² have been thoroughly studied and analysed, and a full account of their content will be published in the near future.³ In the present paper, we intend to make a few preliminary remarks concerning the “Albanian” manuscript remains as contained in the palimpsests.

The edition project has proven beyond doubt that the two Sinai manuscripts in question (N 13 and N 55) comprise, as palimpsests, ca. 185 leaves pertaining to at least six different original manuscripts, two of them Armenian, one Georgian, one Syriac, and two written in the “Albanian” script and language. Of the latter two originals, one is a lectionary manuscript containing lectures from three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), as well as Acts and Epistles (St. Paul's and Catholic), plus a few verses from the Psalms and a short lecture from Isaiah. The 64 pages of the lectionary manuscript have been preserved well enough to provide the basis for the decipherment of the script and the language, and more than 95 % of its contents have been re-established with certainty by the two authors of this paper. The second original manuscript written in the “Albanian” script has been much more difficult to account for, given that it was erased much more rigidly than the lectionary manuscript for being re-used as a palimpsest. However, it has be-

² Cf. Aleksizé 1997; 2001; 2003, and Aleksizé/Mahé 2001 for details.

³ The edition will comprise several volumes of *Monumenta Palaeographica Medii Aevi, Series Ibero-Caucasica* (Brepols, Turnhout).

come clear now from research carried out by the present authors that it was part of a Gospel manuscript, the 56 pages extant representing fragments of the Gospel of John. The following passages have been identified with certainty: Jo. 1,45-3,9; 3,27-4,10; 4,35-4,47; 5,17-7,17; 8,14-10,6; 11,7-11,29; 11,52-13,11; 15,13-16,22; 18,32-20,29.⁴

It must be stated right from the beginning, however, that within these passages, it is hardly ever more than 50% of the contents of a given page that can be read. In a few cases, it is not the text proper but only the remains of the Eusebian apparatus (in the bottom margin), which provides the basis for the identification of a given text passage.

The bad state of the Gospel manuscript remains notwithstanding, the textual remains do admit of attempting to investigate the relationship of the given Gospel version with those that might be assumed to have been used as its models, viz. the Greek, Armenian, Georgian, and Syriac Gospels. A very important indication in this respect is the name of lake Siloam mentioned in Jo. 9,7 and 9,11, which appears as <šiloham-> and <šilohan-> in the “Albanian” text. It is clear that with its initial <š-> the “Albanian” form cannot represent the Greek form Σιλοάμ directly as there is no reason to assume a substitution of a Greek <s-> by an “Albanian” <š->. The same holds true for the Georgian equivalent, which is <siloam-> in all ancient redactions (Adishi, Protovulgate, Athonite Vulgate), as well as the form occurring in the Armenian tradition, i.e., <silovam->. As a matter of fact, it is the Syriac form <šylwḥ>, i.e. /šilōhā/, which comes closest to the “Albanian” <šiloham->. Nevertheless, we can exclude the assumption that the “Albanian” text might reflect a Syriac model directly, given that it agrees with the Greek, Armenian, and Georgian versions in adding the explanatory note *which is translated ‘the sent one’* after the first occurrence of the name (in Jo. 9,7)—a note, which is missing just in the Syriac text. Instead we may assume that the “Albanian” text reflects an older stratum of the Armenian Bible translation, which was not adapted as much to the Greek tradition as the NT text of the Armenian Vulgate was.

As a matter of fact, the assumption that the extant “Albanian” NT translation was modelled upon an ancient Armenian version is corroborated not only by a few common words (note, e.g., <vardapet> “teacher” in Jo. 11,28)⁵, but also by the text of the lectionary, where the differ-

⁴ Possibly the first and the final leaves of St. John’s Gospel (containing Jo. 1,1-1,25 and 21,18 sqq. plus a colophon) have also been preserved in this set; the identification is not certain, however.

⁵ For a preliminary account of such “common” words (mostly of Iranian origin), cf. Gippert 2005.

ences between the Armenian text on the one hand and the Greek and the Georgian texts on the other hand are striking, esp. within the lectures from St. Paul's Epistles. Here, the "Albanian" text follows the extant Armenian version both in the wording and in the syntax as far as it can (see further below for examples). Nevertheless, the text of St. John's Gospel exhibits some remarkable divergences between the two versions that need further investigation. One such divergence is found in Jo. 5,28 where the "Albanian" text starts with the prohibitive formula **do not marvel** (*at this, for the time will be coming*), thus agreeing with the Greek, the Syriac, and the two versions of the Georgian "Vulgate" while the Armenian text (and the Georgian "Adishi" redaction matching it) have an interrogative formula **why (lit. what) do you marvel** (*at this, for the time is coming*) here.

On the other hand, there are some clear coincidences with the Armenian version within St. John's Gospel, too. One indication of this type is met with in Jo. 6,42 where the two texts agree in omitting the name of Jesus in the phrase *isn't that Jesus, the son of Joseph*, thus opposing themselves to the Greek, Syriac, and Georgian versions. Furthermore, the "Albanian" text matches the Armenian (and the Georgian of the Protovulgate [!]) in not mentioning the Saviour's mother when it continues with *of whom we know the father* alone. It is interesting that at the given place there is a marginal gloss that can be read as <y~s>, i.e. the (regular) abbreviation of the name of Jesus; if this is true, we have an indication here that the text was re-adapted to another (Greek?) model in quite the same way as the famous Armenian Gospel manuscript of Eĵmiciacın was "corrected" by adding (the abbreviated genitive of) "God", <a~y>, in a marginal gloss in Jo. 5,44. It is true, of course, that such coincidences cannot be taken to prove the dependence of the "Albanian" text from the Armenian, given that there are some Greek manuscripts, too, which mention neither Jesus nor his mother in the given context,⁶ so that this might as well be due to a common (Greek) source.

A similar case is Jo. 8,40 where the "Albanian" text agrees with the Armenian (plus the Georgian "Adishi" redaction) in saying *which I have heard from my father*, thus opposing itself to the Greek, Syriac, and Georgian Vulgate versions, which have **from God** instead. Here, too, we do find some Greek manuscripts,⁷ which support the "Armeno-Albanian" tradition in having τοῦ πατρὸς (μου) instead of τοῦ θεοῦ.

⁶ The register of variant readings by Swanson (1995) lists, e.g., mss. M 1424, N 700, and 1071 for the former and ms. W for the latter case.

⁷ Swanson (1995) lists ms. 1071 (among others) again for this.

A peculiar problem is the rendering of the coin mentioned in Jo. 6,7, which is a *Denar* (δηνάριον, *dynr-*) in the Greek and Syriac texts, and a *Dareian* (*dahekan* / *drahkan-*) in the Armenian and Georgian versions. Here, the Albanian text has a *hapax legomenon*, which can but partly be restored as <***zaizowzńa>, with <-ńa> representing a common derivative suffix. It is Wolfgang Schulze's proposal to regard this as a derivate of the (Latinised) name of the Byzantine Emperor Mezezius (> *mezaizowz-) who reigned at about 669 A.D. and who was an Armenian by his provenance (*Mžež Gnuni*).⁸ If this assumption is right, we arrive at a remarkable *terminus ad quem* for the emergence of the Albanian text.

The fragments of the lectionary include some fifty pericopes (both evangelistic and epistolary). The following passages have been identified with certainty:

Evangelistic:

Matthew	2,16-18; 5,13-24; 5,17-20; 10,16-32; 10,41-42; 14,2-3; 14,6-7; 14,10-12; 14,15-16; 16,15-19; 17,1-5; 19,27-30; 20,1-6; 20,10-16; 22,23-33; 23,34-37; 24,29-35
Mark	15,39-41
Luke	1,57-65; 1,75-80; 2,1-7; 4,14-36; Lk 7,1-10
John	—

Epistolary:

Acts	1,13-15; 12,1-10; 13,17-42.
Romans	8,9-39; 2,1-16
1 Corinthians	12,26-31; 13,1-13; 14,1-2; 15,51-58
2 Corinthians	4,7-18; 5,1-10; 9,4-15; 11,23-30
Galatians	1,11-19
Ephesians	2,4-5; 3,6-8; 5,25-29
Philippians	—
Colossians	—
1 Thessalonians	2,5-12; 4,12-16
2 Thessalonians	2,12-16; 3,1-3
1 Timothy	2,1-7; 3,14-16
2 Timothy	4,1-8
Titus	2,11-15
Philemon	—

⁸ Alternatively we might think of another Mžež Gnuni who is mentioned as a West Armenian king for the period of about 627-635 A.D.

Hebrews	3,1-6; 9,1-7; 11,17-27; 11,32-40; 12,1-19; 13,10-16
1 Peter	—
2 Peter	1,12-19
1 John	1,1-6; 1,9
2 John	—
3 John	—
James	1,1-11

Old Testament

Isaiah	35,3-8;
Psalms verses	6,3; 18 [19],5; 22 [23],1; 25 [26],8; 31 [32],1; 35 [36],10b

It is a deplorable fact that the pericopes of the lectionary do not contain any sections of the Gospel of John. Hence we cannot directly compare passages from the lectionary to those of the Gospel. Within the lectionary, there is but one passage that occurs twice (Mt 5,17-20). In this case, however, the two passages do not differ from each other and hence do not admit of further linguistically based hypotheses.

Many (but far from all) pericopes are marked with shorter or longer glosses written in rather small letters that are in parts difficult to decipher. A typical glossing would be: *Praising of the fathers, the old ones...* (Heb 11,17). The glosses usually indicate the occasion or motivation of reading the individual pericope. The text of the readings is normally preceded by a section (again in smaller letters) that mentions the source of the pericope, such as: *Praising/reading from the first letter to the Thessalonians by Paul the Apostle* (1 Cor 15,51). The individual pericopes are written in letters that are slightly larger than those used in the Gospel of John. Normally, one line in each of the two columns of a page contains roughly 15 to 16 letters (as opposed to roughly 20 letters in the Gospel text). In addition, the two columns of a page contain 22 to 23 lines as opposed to usually 21 lines in the Gospel text. The larger shape of the lectionary letters is probably motivated by the fact that the priests had to lecture the texts in a badly illuminated environment.

The text of the lectionary differs from that of the Gospel of John also with respect to the use of some abbreviations. For instance, in the lectionary *Jesus* is always abbreviated as *ȳs*. If the name is case marked, the case marker follows the abbreviated form, e.g. *ȳsen* (Ergative) or *ȳsi* (Genitive). In the Gospel of John, however, the abbreviation incorporates much of the ending into what is abbreviated, e.g. in the ergative *ȳn*. In both texts, the technique of abbreviating words is not confined

to the *nomina sacra* *Jesus, Christ, God, or Lord*, but may also concern common words like *head, you, or eternal/eternity*. Even morphological segments appear in abbreviated form (e.g. the genitive ending). In one case, namely in the third person plural pronoun (for human beings), the abbreviation is used throughout, which thus does not allow us to reconstruct its full form for the Caucasian “Albanian” language.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in details the internal organisation of the lectionary as it has been reconstructed in the course of the past three years by Jost Gippert. Likewise, we cannot dwell upon the question, which lectionary served as a model for the “Albanian” lectionary. It may suffice here to note that all the texts conform in large parts to the syntax of Old Armenian. This fact suggests that an Old Armenian source has at least influenced the emergence of the Caucasian “Albanian” lectionary. The number of loans from Armenian corresponds roughly to that of the Gospel text. Incidentally, we also find loan translations that were induced by Armenian. One example is the term for ‘sun’ that copies the Armenian compound *aregagn*, lit. ‘eye of the sun’.

The script used to write these words belongs to the world of ancient Transcaucasian alphabets. The letters used match 50 of the 52 signs of the Caucasian “Albanian” alphabet lists provided in Armenian manuscripts.⁹ The phonetic value of these signs have been safely established except for two letters the pronunciation of which still raises questions. The sound system of “Albanian” corresponds roughly to that of Modern Udi (except for /ö/, which must have been innovated in later Udi times). In addition, we have to assume a set of palatalised stops and sonants no longer present in Modern Udi.

In sum, the lectionary covers some 5,400 word tokens. For the Gospels, we can start from some 2,000 safely or partly readable words. This gives us a corpus of about 8,000 words (roughly 1,000 lexical types). From the lexical point of view, it seems helpful to refer to the well-known Swadesh list¹⁰ in order to arrive at a preliminary characterisation of Caucasian “Albanian”. As a matter of fact, the Albanian palimpsests covers 67 of the 100 concepts of this list. Of them, 70% (47) have etymologically related parallels in Modern Udi. In comparison with the latter language, the number of loans in the basic vocabulary of Caucasian “Albanian” is rather low (7,46% as opposed to 17 % in Modern Udi). However, the number of loans slightly increases if we take into consid-

⁹ See among others Gippert 2003 for details.

¹⁰ Starting with Swadesh 1952. Here, we refer to a simplified 100-words list as discussed by Bielmeier 1977.

eration more technical and religious terms (such as *people, synagogue, temple, teacher*, etc.), most of them taken from or modelled upon Old Armenian. Some “Albanian” words still continue proto-Lezgian terms whereas the corresponding items have been replaced by loans in Modern Udi (such as the word for *dove*). Unfortunately, keywords like Udi *fi* ‘wine’ or *e’k* ‘horse’ either do not occur in the texts or appear in unreadable passages. Nevertheless, it can be stated safely that from both a phonological and a lexical perspective the Caucasian “Albanian” language (which may well be styled “Old Udi” from now on) has preserved the original Lezgian character of the language (more precisely: Eastern Samur¹¹) much better than contemporary Udi has.

On the other hand, the grammar of Caucasian “Albanian” seems to have undergone substantial changes in comparison with its presumed (Lezgian) ancestor. Many of these changes may be due to the translation process: In fact, we cannot tell for sure to which degree the language of the “Albanian” palimpsests matched the every-day spoken “Albanian” language of the Middle Ages. Some features typical of East Caucasian have been preserved even in syntax, however, as, e.g., the use of postpositions instead of Armenian prepositions. On the other hand, the syntax of Caucasian Albanian exhibits a massive impact from unrelated languages, most likely Old Armenian, Old Georgian, Middle Iranian, and, perhaps, Ancient Greek. Here, it may suffice to mention the emergence of highly complex relative clauses and the gradual spreading of person marking.¹² A unique feature first discovered by Jost Gippert is the gender distinction occurring within the paradigm of anaphora (masculine, feminine, neuter), whereas Caucasian “Albanian” lost the ancient East Caucasian class marking technique (probably together with Early Lezgi and Early Aghul). Anaphoric use is also the source for the development of articles that in parts translate the Old Armenian articles. However, the language of the palimpsest differs from the Old Armenian Bible texts with respect to one important feature: while in Old Armenian, the Hebrew conjunction-like particle *wa-* was conventionally copied in terms of the conjunction *ew*, the Caucasian “Albanian” version normally ignores this segment if it is not used to focus on a specific segment but used in additive function. For instance, in Jo 8,33 we read in Armenian: *Pataxani etown nma ew asen* “they answered him and said” (Ms M 6200, ed. Kuenzle), while the palimpsest has: *reply*¹³=*did=they=him said=they*. The Old Udi conjunction *own* (itself a descendent from proto-Lezgian) is

¹¹ See Schulze 2005a.

¹² See Schulze 2004 for further details.

¹³ Lit. “word-back”.

but rarely used in this context, whereas the focusing function of *ew* is usually translated by a focus clitic also present in Modern Udi (-*al*).

Hence, it is evident that the translators of the Gospels and of the lectionary pericopes applied at least two strategies: On the one hand they wanted to conform to the syntax of their source text(s) as much as possible. On the other hand, however, they tried to accommodate the texts to the grammar of Old Udi whenever this was possible, without violating the general text syntax as it occurred in their sources. These efforts also become apparent from the fact that the translators frequently refer to loan translations instead of borrowing a term directly from the sources. Yet it is not clear whether the relatively strong tendency to rely upon the Old Udi lexicon in order to render technical terms reflects the existence of such terms in the common speech of the Caucasian “Albanians” or whether they were innovations established for the purpose of translating Biblical texts.

Summing up, we may hypothesise that both the Lectionary and the Gospel of John were translated into Old Udi at a time when the Old Armenian Christian tradition was already present in the regions of Caucasian Albania. The existence of the Lectionary does not necessarily presuppose the existence of a full-fledged “Albanian” version of the Bible. Rather we may assume that the pericopes were translated as such from different sources, at least one of them being an Old Armenian Lectionary. The fact that we have in hands the Gospel of John does not admit of claiming with certainty that this Gospel was part of a full translation of the Gospels. Instead it may well have been that the Gospel of John was, by about 670 A.D., the first Gospel text to be translated as such into Old Udi. The other parts of the Gospels may have been translated, too, but they were lost—otherwise the translation process may simply have stopped soon after 670 A.D., at a time when the Kingdom of Caucasian Albania already faced the threat of the Arabic Caliphate. We may even go a step further and assume that it was the local ruler Javanshir, assassinated in the year 669 A.D., who initiated the translation of the Gospel text as we find it in the palimpsests. This date perfectly matches the *terminus ad quem* (669 A.D.) mentioned above. Accordingly, the death of Javanshir might have deprived the translators from their official ‘sponsor’ (and thus from continuing their work). Further studies will show whether this hypothesis can be corroborated by additional findings. These studies will also have to take into account the question whether and to what extent the language of the Lectionary differs from that of the Gospel text. The more conservative handling of abbreviations mentioned above already suggests that the translation of Lectionary text

(not necessarily the manuscript itself) is somewhat older than that of the Gospel text.

The language of the palimpsests is clearly related to Modern Udi, more precisely to the Nizh dialect of Udi. Among the striking isoglosses we may name the feature of nominal stem augmentation, which is nearly inexistent both in Old Udi and in Nizh Udi, as opposed to the contemporary Vartashen (Oghuz) dialect.¹⁴ We may further assume that the language of the palimpsests reflects the most prominent local language of Caucasian Albania. If we take into account the content of the Mingechar inscription,¹⁵ we may even hypothesise that Old Udi was (one of) the state language(s) of Caucasian Albania. Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that Old Udi was the language of the Caucasian “Albanians” in terms of an ethnic group. Rather, we have to assume that Old Udi corresponds to the language of the ancient Gargars (cf. Movsēs Kaňankatuac‘i who tells us that Mesrob Maštoc‘ (362-440) *created with the help [of the bishop Anania and the translator Benjamin] an alphabet for the guttural, harsh, barbarous, and rough language of the Gargarac‘ik‘*).¹⁶ The *Gargarac‘ik‘* represented one of the peoples of the kingdom of Albania; their name is already attested in Strabo XI,5,1 and can be associated to the Armenian toponym *daštn Gargarac‘owc‘*, a region southeast of the central part of the Kura river (compare the contemporary river name *Gargar*, a tributary to the Araxes). Most likely, the *Gargarac‘ik‘* whose habitat was located to the east of the Aľuan province *Utik‘* played a crucial role in the state’s administration. In this sense, the Gargar (perhaps a reduplicated form of Old Udi *qar* ‘tribe’) would have constituted a south-eastern branch of the ancient Udis most of whom later either migrated to regions north of the river Alazani or became assimilated especially to the Turkic-speaking groups in the present-day Azerbaijan Republic. An alternative term for Old Udi would thus be *Gargar*, whereas the term “Albanian” remains slightly misleading.

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¹⁴ See Schulze 2005b for the emergence of stem augmentation in Udi.

¹⁵ See Gippert 2003 for the first approach to interpret this inscription in the light of the data provided by the palimpsests.

¹⁶ Pat. Aľ. Book II, 3, compare Dowsett 1961: 69.

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