

Caucasian Albania

An International Handbook

Ed. Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut

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Reviewed by Lâtime Summerer*

In 2023, *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook*, edited by Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut, is the first comprehensive international reference work devoted exclusively to the study of ancient Caucasian Albania. Issued by De Gruyter as part of its De Gruyter Reference series, the volume spans more than 700 pages and assembles specialists in history, linguistics, archaeology, art history, and religious studies. Appearing amid renewed scholarly and public attention to the Caucasus following recent regional conflicts, the handbook serves not only as an academic resource but also as an intervention in ongoing historiographical debates.

Rather than advancing new datasets or methodological innovations, the volume's primary aim is synthetic: it consolidates and systematizes existing scholarship. The structure is thematic, with sections devoted to classical and medieval written sources, language and script traditions, archaeology and material culture, religious institutions, ethnic identity, and relations with neighboring societies. Individual chapters exemplify this integrative approach. One surveys fragmentary Greek and Latin textual evidence; another offers a detailed linguistic analysis of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexical borrowing patterns. Throughout, the emphasis lies on critical synthesis rather than reinterpretation.

The archaeology and architecture section is comparatively brief, comprising only three chapters, including the sole archaeological

* Lâtime Summerer, Prof. ARUCAD - Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design, North Cyprus. ORCID: 0000-0002-1351-6394. E-mail: latife.summerer@arucad.edu.tr

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contribution by Hamlet Petrosyan. His chapter, “Tigranakert in Artsakh,” presents a thorough description of architectural remains, fortifications, civic spaces, and religious structures uncovered at the site. Petrosyan attempts to correlate archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic data to support identifying Artsakh, also called Şahbulaq, with Tigranakert. However, because direct archaeological or historical confirmation remains lacking, the proposed identification must be regarded as highly hypothetical. Treating this hypothesis as firmly established risks conflating a specific archaeological site with a broader geographical region, potentially shaping historical interpretation in problematic ways.

Furthermore, Petrosyan’s discussion does not address the political circumstances under which the excavations were conducted—namely, during the period when Nagorno-Karabakh was under Armenian control despite international recognition of the territory as part of Azerbaijan. The absence of such contextual clarification raises questions about excavation conditions, documentation standards, and interpretive framing. Comparable cases elsewhere, such as archaeological projects undertaken in Crimea following its annexation by Russia, have often been deemed illegitimate by international academic institutions and avoided by major publishers.

A further comparative example highlights the broader structural issue. In the case of Northern Cyprus, archaeological research conducted in territory lacking international recognition has regularly encountered significant barriers to publication in major Western academic presses and journals. In some instances, even preliminary reports or citations on findings have faced restrictions because of concerns related to legal status, heritage ownership, and compliance with international conventions. This has contributed to a *de facto* exclusion of certain categories of research from mainstream scholarly dissemination.

When considered alongside the inclusion of research conducted in Nagorno-Karabakh under contested circumstances, such contrasts may give rise to perceptions of inconsistent editorial standards within the international academic community. While legal contexts differ from case to case, the uneven application of publication norms—strict in some regions, more flexible in others—

can appear to reflect double standards. Whether these discrepancies stem from geopolitical considerations, institutional caution, or differing interpretations of international law, the lack of transparent criteria risks undermining confidence in claims of neutrality. A more explicit articulation of editorial principles governing research from disputed territories would strengthen both scholarly credibility and ethical consistency.

Another contribution, by Aleksan Hakobyan, examines “The Ethnic Situation in Antique and Medieval Caucasian Albania.” Hakobyan argues that while the kingdom functioned as a unified political entity, it was ethnically heterogeneous, encompassing multiple tribes such as the Maskut, Balasakan, and Lupenians. Ancient authors employed the collective designation “Albanians,” whereas later sources differentiated among individual groups. Compared with his earlier publications, Hakobyan’s current position appears more clearly articulated; previously, he had shown a tendency to situate Albania within a broader Armenian cultural sphere beginning in Late Antiquity.

The handbook’s principal strength lies in its international composition and panoramic scope. By bringing together scholars from diverse academic traditions, it offers a comprehensive synthesis of the region’s history, languages, literature, and material culture—an achievement in a field often fragmented along national and linguistic lines. Although predominantly synthetic, the volume incorporates recent developments in philology, manuscript research, and historical linguistics, ensuring that it reflects the current state of scholarship rather than relying on outdated paradigms.

The editors explicitly acknowledge modern controversies, including competing national narratives and accusations of historical revisionism. This reflexive awareness adds analytical depth and situates the study of ancient Caucasian Albania within contemporary intellectual and political contexts. Detailed bibliographies, extensive references, and systematic organization further enhance the handbook’s utility as a research tool.

One limitation, however, is an apparent imbalance in historiographical representation. Armenian scholarly traditions receive substantial attention, while Azerbaijani perspectives are

absent. This imbalance may create the impression that Armenian sources function as the primary custodians of Caucasian Albania's heritage, potentially minimizing other academic contributions. The lack of participation by specialists from Azerbaijan—whose work often relies on local archives, field research, and Azerbaijani-language materials—is neither explained nor contextualized. Whether deliberate or inadvertent, this omission narrows interpretive diversity and may incline the volume toward particular academic traditions.

Overall, *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook* functions as a foundational reference work rather than a monograph advancing a singular thesis. Its most significant achievement lies in consolidating dispersed research into a coherent and accessible framework. Although it does not radically reinterpret the historical record, it establishes a dependable scholarly baseline and is likely to remain a standard reference in Caucasus studies. By integrating Soviet, Western, and regional scholarship, it marks a notable milestone in the field. Nonetheless, despite the editors' stated commitment to neutrality, the combination of limited perspective diversity, politically sensitive archaeological material, and the perception of uneven international publication standards may lead some readers to question whether the volume achieves a fully balanced international approach.