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CULTURAL HERITAGE IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES: MEMORY, APPROPRIATION AND CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS IN KARABAKH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how cultural heritage is negotiated, interpreted, and institutionally governed in post-conflict settings, taking **Karabakh** as a central case study. It focuses on the transformation of memory, communities, and heritage governance following armed conflict. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in heritage and memory studies, cultural heritage is conceptualised not as a neutral legacy of the past but as a socially constructed process shaped by power relations, historical transformations, and state-building. Particular attention is given to the concept of "heritage without heirs," referring both to the interruption of earlier custodial and ritual frameworks and to contemporary governance contexts that differ institutionally and religiously from the historical environment in which the monuments emerged. Empirically, the article analyses the post-conflict reinterpretation of medieval Christian monuments in Karabakh and shows how the historical narrative of Caucasian Albania is used to classify and integrate these sites into contemporary heritage regimes while preserving them materially. It argues that post-conflict heritage preservation does not automatically lead to reconciliation. When heritage governance is shaped by competing or unilateral interpretive frameworks, it may reinforce existing hierarchies of historical interpretation and symbolic authority in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: cultural heritage, post-conflict societies, memory politics, heritage without heirs, Caucasian Albania, Karabakh, Christian monuments, Caucasus studies, Turkic world

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Introduction

Armed conflicts generate not only human and material losses but also profound transformations in cultural landscapes and collective memory. Cultural heritage—monuments, religious sites, historic landscapes, and collective traditions—frequently becomes a target of symbolic violence or an instrument of political instrumentalization. In post-conflict societies, heritage therefore emerges not merely as an object of preservation but as a contested arena in which collective identities, historical narratives, and power relations are renegotiated. Post-conflict societies are social and political formations that emerge after the formal cessation of armed conflict, characterised by unresolved tensions, disrupted social relations, and ongoing processes of political, institutional, and symbolic reconstruction. Although large-scale violence has ended, such societies remain shaped by legacies of displacement, collective trauma, contested memories, and struggles over authority, identity, and territorial legitimacy. The South Caucasus offers a particularly revealing context for analysing these dynamics, as cultural heritage in the region is deeply intertwined with ethnic, religious, and territorial claims. The case of Karabakh illustrates how heritage becomes central to post-conflict politics. Decades of Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict resulted not only in large-scale displacement and changes in political control but also in the transformation of religious and cultural sites into objects of historical contestation and narrative reconfiguration. Within the broader framework of Caucasus and Turkic world studies, the Karabakh case illustrates how post-conflict heritage governance intersects with regional histories of empire, religion, and cultural plurality.

Recent Azerbaijani scholarship has increasingly examined post-conflict cultural heritage in Karabakh through long-term field research, digital documentation, and memory studies. These works emphasise that heritage destruction and preservation cannot be separated from forced displacement, collective trauma, and the symbolic loss of place experienced by internally displaced persons (Ahanchi, 2022a; Ahanchi, 2022b). Azerbaijani scholarship on cultural heritage and memory in conflict and post-conflict contexts has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Researchers have examined the destruction and reinterpretation of historical monuments, the politicisation of heritage narratives, and the long-term cultural consequences of occupation and displacement (Tokarz, 2017). Recent institutional research programs within Azerbaijan’s archaeological

community also emphasise expanding and systematising scholarship on Caucasian Albania, including publication strategies and international dissemination.

In 2024, the author conducted a field visit to Karabakh in the framework of an international academic conference. During this visit, Christian monuments located in the Tugh and Hadrut regions were interpreted by internationally recognised specialists in the history, epigraphy, and architecture of Caucasian Albania as Albanian Christian heritage. These on-site interpretations provide a valuable empirical entry point for analysing how expert knowledge operates within post-conflict heritage governance and how scholarly authority can contribute to processes of heritage reclassification.

This article addresses three interrelated research questions. First, how does cultural heritage function as a political and mnemonic process in post-conflict societies? Second, how are medieval Christian monuments in Karabakh reinterpreted through competing historiographical frameworks? Third, how can the concept of "heritage without heirs" help to explain heritage governance in contexts marked by both displacement and religious discontinuity? Situated at the intersection of heritage studies, memory studies, and Caucasus regional studies, the study combines critical literature analysis with contextual interpretation and qualitative field observation.

Cultural Heritage, Memory, and the Concept of "Heritage Without Heirs"

Contemporary heritage studies increasingly conceptualise cultural heritage not as a neutral inheritance from the past, but as a socially constructed and politically embedded process. Rather than simply preserving material remains, heritage practices actively select, interpret, and institutionalise particular versions of the past in response to present political, social, and cultural needs (Lowenthal, 1998; Smith, 2006). In post-conflict societies, these processes become especially visible, as heritage is mobilised to legitimise authority, assert historical continuity, and negotiate competing claims to territory and identity. Lowenthal's observation that heritage is less about historical accuracy than about present-day meaning underscores its inherently selective character. Heritage emphasises continuity and belonging, often at the expense of complexity and plurality. Smith further develops this insight through the concept of the "Authorized Heritage Discourse," which highlights how expert knowledge, state institutions, and professional practices privilege certain interpretations while marginalising others (Smith, 2006). In post-conflict contexts, this

authorised discourse frequently consolidates dominant narratives rather than facilitating inclusive engagement with the past. Theories of collective and cultural memory provide an additional analytical layer for understanding these dynamics. Collective memory, as articulated by Halbwachs (1992), is socially framed and continuously reconstructed through interaction within specific groups. Cultural memory, by contrast, refers to the institutionalised and material forms through which societies stabilise and transmit selected interpretations of the past across generations (Assmann, 2008; Sierp, 2025). Monuments, religious buildings, and commemorative landscapes function as key sites where cultural memory is anchored and made visible. In post-conflict societies, however, these sites often become focal points of contestation rather than shared reference points.

Empirical research conducted among Azerbaijani internally displaced persons from Karabakh further demonstrates that "heritage without heirs" does not imply the disappearance of heritage from social life. Instead, monuments, cemeteries, and destroyed villages continue to exist as mnemonic landscapes preserved through oral narratives, family memory, and symbolic practices of remembrance. Field-based studies show that displaced communities maintain emotional and moral claims to cultural heritage even in prolonged conditions of physical absence (Ahanchi, 2022a). Research on memory and displacement in the Azerbaijani context further demonstrates that forced migration produces durable forms of cultural loss extending beyond material destruction. Narratives of lost homes, cemeteries, and sacred places become central to identity formation among internally displaced persons, shaping intergenerational memory and moral claims to return (Ahanchi, 2022c; Ismayilov, 2019).`1

Within this theoretical framework, the concept of **"heritage without heirs"** offers a particularly useful lens for analysing post-conflict heritage governance. Although the term "heritage without heirs" is not always used explicitly in the literature, the phenomenon has been extensively analysed in heritage and memory studies in relation to dissonant heritage, post-conflict reconstruction, and heritage governance in the absence of living bearer communities (Lowenthal, 1998; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996; Smith, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Viejo-Rose, 2011). Ashworth and Tunbridge (1996) demonstrate that heritage is inherently dissonant, as it involves multiple, often conflicting, claims to the same past. When one of the claimant communities is displaced or eliminated, dissonance does not

disappear. Instead, it is reconfigured in ways that favour those who remain and are able to assert institutional control.

Subsequent scholarship has shown that heritage may survive materially while losing its living social and ritual context. Viejo-Rose's (2011) analysis of post-war reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates how destroyed religious monuments were rebuilt as symbols of recovery and reconciliation, yet often without the return of the communities that had historically animated them. In such cases, rebuilt heritage sites function more as political and commemorative markers than as spaces of lived religious practice. Similar dynamics are observed in Cyprus, where churches and mosques located on the "other side" of the divide persist as heritage sites despite the long-term absence of their original congregations (Papadakis, 2005; Constantinou & Hatay, 2010). Comparable processes can be observed in post-Holocaust Europe, particularly in the reconstruction and preservation of Jewish heritage. Synagogues, cemeteries, and former Jewish quarters have been restored across Central and Eastern Europe, often in contexts where Jewish communities were annihilated or never re-established after the Holocaust. As scholars note, this revival of Jewish heritage is frequently driven by state institutions, international organisations, or cultural tourism agendas rather than by living religious communities (Gruber, 2002; Young, 1993; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). In these settings, Jewish heritage functions as a form of "memory without community," serving educational, commemorative, or symbolic purposes while remaining largely disconnected from previous everyday religious or social practice.

These examples highlight a key characteristic of heritage without heirs: the transformation of heritage from a lived social practice into an administratively managed object. When communities that once maintained ritual use, transmitted memory, and ensured continuity are no longer present, heritage becomes increasingly dependent on state institutions, expert discourses, and international frameworks. As Smith (2006) argues, such conditions expand the interpretive power of authorised actors, while narrowing the range of voices that can meaningfully participate in heritage-making. Meskell (2018) further emphasises the ethical implications of heritage governance under these conditions. She cautions that preservation without community participation risks turning heritage into a technocratic project that obscures questions of ownership, responsibility, and historical

justice. In post-conflict contexts, this risk is heightened, as heritage interventions may stabilise unequal power relations rather than challenge them.

Importantly, this article conceptualises "heritage without heirs" as a dual condition in the case of Karabakh. On the one hand, the concept refers to the historical interruption of ritual practices, mnemonic traditions, and custodial arrangements once associated with Christian monuments in the region. Such interruptions may emerge through broader processes of social transformation, institutional change, or shifts in patterns of use, producing a break in ritual continuity and collective memory that can leave heritage sites socially detached despite their material survival. On the other hand, "heritage without heirs" also applies—albeit in a different register—to the predominantly Muslim Azerbaijani society that now governs these Christian monuments. Although the Azerbaijani state is responsible for the preservation and administration of these monuments, it does not share a direct institutional or confessional continuity with the medieval Christian religious–architectural tradition to which they belong. This religious discontinuity does not imply indifference or hostility to preservation; rather, it shapes the modes through which heritage is documented, classified, and integrated into national narratives. Heritage governance thus unfolds under conditions of *double discontinuity*: the demographic absence of the historical bearer community and the religious non-continuity of the governing society. This dual configuration renders heritage appropriation structurally likely rather than exceptional. Heritage cannot be inherited through uninterrupted tradition; it must be reinterpreted, mediated, and reclassified in order to be rendered meaningful within a new social and political framework. The concept of "heritage without heirs" therefore provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding why post-conflict heritage governance in Karabakh relies so heavily on expert authority, historical narratives of deep antiquity, and discursive strategies of reclassification.

This condition of „double discontinuity" raises a central question: by what historical and discursive means can cultural heritage be rendered intelligible, legitimate, and governable in the absence of an unbroken community of transmission? In the case of Karabakh, this question is addressed not through the restoration of social continuity, but through the mobilisation of historiography. Specifically, narratives of deep antiquity and early Christian presence provide a framework through which Christian monuments can be reinterpreted, classified, and integrated into contemporary heritage regimes. It is within this

context that the historical concept of Caucasian Albania acquires renewed significance, functioning as a mediating narrative between material preservation and symbolic reclassification.

Caucasian Albania in Historiography and Heritage Discourse

The existence of Caucasian Albania as an early Christian polity in the eastern South Caucasus is well documented in medieval sources and modern historical scholarship. Classical Armenian sources, most notably *The History of the Country of Albania* attributed to Movses Kaghankatvatsi, describe Albania as a Christian kingdom whose ecclesiastical structures developed in close interaction with neighbouring Armenian and Georgian traditions (Kaghankatvatsi, trans. Dowsett, 1961). Modern Western historiography generally treats Caucasian Albania as a historically fluid, multi-ethnic formation whose political and religious institutions changed over time and lacked a single, uninterrupted line of institutional continuity (Hewsen, 2001; Thomson, 1997). From this perspective, Caucasian Albania is not understood as a stable national precursor of any modern state, but rather as a regional polity embedded in a complex network of cultural, linguistic, and religious exchanges. Its Christian heritage is thus approached as part of a broader Caucasian Christian landscape, characterised by overlapping jurisdictions, shared architectural forms, and shifting ecclesiastical allegiances.

Azerbaijani archaeological scholarship has produced a substantial body of material evidence on Caucasian Albania, particularly through long-term excavations of key urban centres such as Gabala (ancient Kabala). This research foregrounds settlement history, urban development, and regional connectivity as empirical foundations for interpreting Albanian-period cultural landscapes (Babayev, 1990).

Caucasian Albania has acquired renewed significance in post-Soviet historiography, where it has increasingly been mobilised as a source of historical legitimacy. As Shnirelman (2001) demonstrates, the concept of Caucasian Albania has been transformed into a powerful narrative resource in the construction of national histories across the South Caucasus. Rather than serving as an object of critical historical inquiry, Caucasian Albania is frequently invoked as a symbolic ancestor, capable of anchoring modern territorial and cultural claims in deep antiquity. In contemporary Azerbaijani historiography, this process has taken a particularly pronounced form. A growing body of scholarship (Aliyev, 1982;

Aliyev, 1989; Mammadova, 2021; Tokarz, 2017) reframes medieval Christian monuments located within the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, including Karabakh, as products of **Caucasian Albanian civilisation** that were later appropriated or reinterpreted in Armenian ecclesiastical narratives and historiography. Within this framework, Armenian inscriptions, architectural modifications, and ecclesiastical affiliations are often described as secondary layers imposed upon an originally Albanian substrate. This narrative does not deny the Christian character of the monuments; instead, it reassigns their genealogical affiliation and symbolic ownership.

Contemporary institutional scholarship has further strengthened research on Caucasian Albania through coordinated, interdisciplinary publication efforts. In particular, the multi-volume collection *Ethnocultural Heritage of Caucasian Albania* brings together archaeological, architectural, historical, and ethnographic studies that systematise evidence on early Christian monuments, settlement patterns, and cultural continuity across the region (Abdullayev et al., 2022). This body of work situates Albanian heritage within broader debates on post-conflict preservation, interpretation, and the role of scholarly frameworks in shaping heritage governance in contested historical landscapes.

Armenian historiography offers a markedly different interpretation. Armenian scholars situate the Christian monuments of Karabakh within the Armenian Apostolic tradition, drawing on epigraphic evidence, architectural typology, and documented links between the region and medieval Armenian ecclesiastical centres (Hewsen, 2001; Maranci, 2015). From this perspective, the region's monasteries and churches are understood not as isolated survivals of an extinct polity, but as integral components of a living and historically continuous Armenian Christian landscape that extended across eastern Armenia and Artsakh. The divergence between these historiographical traditions does not primarily concern the factual existence of Caucasian Albania, which is acknowledged by all sides. Rather, it revolves around questions of continuity, succession, and legitimacy. The core issue is not whether Caucasian Albania existed, but whether modern actors can claim direct inheritance from its religious and cultural institutions. As Shnirelman (2001) notes, such claims are rarely resolved through additional historical evidence. Instead, they reflect contemporary struggles over identity, territory, and symbolic authority.

In the post-conflict context of Karabakh, this historiographical debate acquires immediate political and material significance. Heritage interpretation is no longer confined

to academic publications; it is enacted through restoration projects, museum exhibitions, official statements, and on-site expert explanations. The invocation of Caucasian Albania thus functions not merely as a scholarly position, but as a governing framework that shapes how Christian monuments are classified, presented, and integrated into national heritage regimes. Crucially, the mobilisation of Caucasian Albania in post-conflict heritage discourse does not operate through outright denial or destruction. Instead, it relies on processes of selective emphasis and narrative layering. Early Christian chronology is foregrounded, while later medieval and early modern Armenian ecclesiastical history is marginalised or reframed as derivative. This strategy allows for the material preservation of monuments while simultaneously detaching them from Armenian collective memory. From the perspective of heritage studies, such practices exemplify discursive appropriation rather than physical erasure. Monuments remain standing, and their Christian identity is formally acknowledged, yet their meaning is reassigned through expert discourse and institutional authority. This process aligns closely with what Smith (2006) describes as the operation of „authorised heritage discourse“, in which expert knowledge legitimises particular interpretations while rendering alternative narratives invisible or illegitimate.

Christian Monuments, Field Observations, and Post-Conflict Appropriation

The historiographical tensions surrounding Caucasian Albania acquire concrete form in the interpretation of specific Christian monuments in post-conflict Karabakh. Alongside expert interpretation and on-site historiographical framing, systematic digital documentation has emerged as an important tool in post-conflict heritage analysis. The creation of structured databases of Karabakh’s historical-cultural monuments allows for comparative assessment of destruction, preservation, and post-war reinterpretation, while also serving as a form of cultural witnessing that records loss as well as restoration (Ahanchi & Mammadov, 2024). Local studies of Karabakh emphasise that heritage destruction functioned not only as collateral damage but as a systematic strategy affecting cultural continuity and collective identity. Post-conflict recovery therefore requires addressing both physical reconstruction and the restoration of symbolic and cultural meaning for displaced populations (Ahanchi, 2022c).

During the author‘s 2024 field visit to Tugh and Hadrut, Christian churches and cemeteries remains were interpreted by internationally recognised specialists in Caucasian Albanian history, epigraphy, and architecture as monuments of Albanian Christian heritage.

These interpretations were presented as academically grounded and consistent with current scholarly research. Importantly, they were articulated not as one possible reading among others, but as authoritative explanations delivered *in situ*, in close proximity to the monuments themselves. This mode of presentation endowed the narrative with a particular epistemic weight, reinforcing its legitimacy in the eyes of visitors.

The interpretation of specific monuments illustrates how this process operates in practice. The monastery of Dadivank, traditionally associated in Armenian historiography with early medieval Armenian monastic networks, was framed primarily through its antiquity and early Christian origins (Hewsen, 2001; Maranci, 2015). Emphasis was placed on its presumed foundation period and architectural features understood as pre-Armenian, while Armenian inscriptions and later ecclesiastical affiliations were either briefly mentioned or presented as secondary interventions. Through this selective emphasis, the monument was positioned within an Caucasian Albanian Christian framework without denying its Christian character, a strategy consistent with broader patterns of post-conflict heritage reclassification (Shnirelman, 2001; Tokarz, 2017). A similar strategy was evident in discussions of Gandzasar Monastery. As a thirteenth-century complex closely linked to Armenian princely patronage and ecclesiastical authority, Gandzasar occupies a central place in Armenian historical narratives (Hewsen, 2001; Maranci, 2015). In post-conflict heritage discourse, however, its interpretation increasingly foregrounds early Christian continuity and regional architectural traditions, while later Armenian political and religious contexts are downplayed. The result is a narrative that preserves the monument materially and recognises its religious significance, yet detaches it from Armenian collective memory by reassigning its genealogical lineage (Smith, 2006; Tokarz, 2017).

Amaras Monastery provides another illustrative example. Traditionally associated with the early spread of Christianity and Armenian literacy, Amaras is frequently invoked in Armenian historiography as a foundational site of Armenian Christian culture (Hewsen, 2001). In contemporary Azerbaijani heritage narratives, however, Amaras is incorporated into a broader Albanian Christian tradition, framed as evidence of an indigenous Christian presence predating Armenian ecclesiastical dominance. As with other sites, this interpretation relies on chronological prioritisation and selective historical framing rather than outright denial, exemplifying what heritage scholars describe as discursive appropriation through authorised interpretive regimes (Smith, 2006; Shnirelman, 2001).

These cases demonstrate that post-conflict heritage appropriation in Nagorno-Karabakh does not primarily operate through physical destruction or overt denial. Instead, it functions through processes of reclassification and narrative succession. Monuments are preserved, restored, and publicly displayed, yet their meaning is transformed through expert discourse that redefines their historical affiliation. This approach allows for the material survival of Christian heritage while simultaneously reconfiguring its symbolic ownership. The effectiveness of this strategy is closely linked to the condition of "heritage without heirs." As earlier custodial, ritual, and mnemonic frameworks associated with these monuments have been interrupted, the communities that historically sustained them through ritual practice, custodianship, and collective memory are no longer actively present in their former role. As a result, there is limited capacity for local contestation of newly imposed interpretations. At the same time, the predominantly Muslim context of contemporary Azerbaijani society introduces an additional layer of complexity. While the state assumes responsibility for preserving Christian monuments, the absence of shared religious tradition shapes the way these sites are framed and managed. Christian churches function primarily as historical and cultural objects rather than as living sacred spaces. This condition reinforces the reliance on expert knowledge and archaeological discourse, which provide culturally neutralised frameworks through which Christian heritage can be integrated into national narratives.

From a heritage studies perspective, these dynamics exemplify how authorised heritage discourse operates in post-conflict settings. Expert authority does not merely interpret heritage; it actively constitutes it by determining which historical layers are foregrounded and which are marginalised. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the invocation of Caucasian Albania enables a form of heritage governance that preserves monuments materially while reassigning their mnemonic and genealogical significance. This process aligns with broader patterns observed in other post-conflict societies, yet it is distinguished by the central role of early medieval history and religious succession in legitimising contemporary claims.

Religion and Mediated Heritage Governance

Religious difference constitutes a crucial, yet often under-analysed, dimension of post-conflict heritage governance in Karabakh. While Christian monuments are materially preserved and increasingly incorporated into official heritage frameworks, they are

managed within a predominantly Muslim socio-cultural environment. This context shapes not only institutional practices of preservation, but also the symbolic status of Christian sacred sites. Churches and monasteries tend to be framed primarily as historical and architectural monuments rather than as living religious spaces embedded in ongoing ritual traditions. This transformation reflects a broader process of desacralisation observed in many post-conflict settings, where religious heritage survives as cultural property but loses its liturgical and communal functions (Meyer & de Witte, 2013). In Azerbaijan, this process is not necessarily driven by hostility toward Christian heritage, but rather by the absence of shared religious continuity. As a result, Christian monuments are integrated into national heritage discourse through culturally neutralised categories such as archaeology, early history, and civilisational legacy.

Within this framework, the role of Azerbaijan's indigenous Christian minority—the Udi community—acquires particular significance. Often presented as descendants of Caucasian Albania, the Udis provide a mediating link between Christian heritage and contemporary Azerbaijani national identity. Their presence allows for a limited form of religious continuity that is compatible with the dominant historiographical narrative, while also offering a practical mechanism for managing Christian sacred sites within an Islamic social environment. Udi involvement in the restoration and contemporary use of churches damaged during the Soviet period is most clearly documented in the village of Nij, Gabala district, where the Church of St. Eliseus and a second (lower) Albanian church were restored and reactivated for Christian worship (Grant, 2014; Cornell, 2015). By contrast, other sites such as the Church of Kish have been restored primarily as heritage monuments rather than as active religious spaces, highlighting different modes of post-Soviet Christian heritage governance in contemporary Azerbaijan. At the same time, this mediation should not be idealised. Despite expressed intentions to revitalise churches in Karabakh and restore liturgical practice, The Udi community remains small, geographically limited, and institutionally constrained. Its role does not fully replace the earlier custodial and ritual frameworks historically associated with many Christian monuments in Karabakh. Rather, it illustrates how post-conflict heritage governance develops pragmatic preservation strategies within evolving historical and institutional contexts.

Situating the Karabakh case within a broader comparative perspective helps to clarify its significance beyond the South Caucasus. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reconstruction

of mosques and churches after the 1990s war was widely presented as a symbol of reconciliation. Yet scholars have shown that many reconstructed sites function without the return of their original communities, becoming markers of territorial control or international intervention rather than spaces of renewed coexistence (Viejo-Rose, 2011). Similarly, in Cyprus, religious monuments located on the "other side" of the divide are preserved and managed through bi-communal and international mechanisms, but remain largely detached from the lived religious practices of displaced populations (Papadakis, 2005; Constantinou & Hatay, 2010). Compared to these cases, Karabakh is distinctive not because heritage appropriation occurs—this is a common post-conflict phenomenon—but because of the central role assigned to early medieval history and religious succession in legitimising contemporary heritage claims. The mobilisation of Caucasian Albania as a historical framework enables material preservation while simultaneously reassigning symbolic ownership. This strategy allows heritage governance to proceed without direct confrontation with Armenian collective memory, yet it also limits the potential for inclusive or dialogical engagement with the past.

Studies of displaced Azerbaijani communities highlight that religious heritage sites—particularly cemeteries and sacred landscapes—play a central role in sustaining collective memory under conditions of exile. Even when ritual access is interrupted, these sites continue to function as symbolic anchors of identity and belonging, reinforcing the idea that heritage loss is experienced not only as material destruction but as a rupture in moral and intergenerational continuity (Ahanchi, 2022b; Ahanchi, 2022c).

Conclusions

This article has examined the role of cultural heritage in post-conflict societies through the case of Karabakh, with particular attention to the reinterpretation of medieval Christian monuments. Incorporating local field-based research and digital heritage documentation into post-conflict heritage studies allows displaced communities to be recognised not merely as subjects of heritage governance, but as active bearers of memory and historical knowledge.

Situating the Karabakh case within broader Caucasus and Turkic world scholarship underscores the importance of integrating local academic perspectives into global heritage debates. Azerbaijani researchers increasingly contribute empirical data, archival materials,

and methodological innovations that challenge externally imposed or purely discursive interpretations of post-conflict heritage (Ahanchi, 2025).

By combining insights from heritage and memory studies with empirical observations from a 2024 field visit, the analysis has demonstrated that cultural heritage in post-conflict contexts functions less as a neutral legacy of the past and more as a dynamic field of memory politics and power negotiation.

The concept of "heritage without heirs" has proven especially useful for understanding these processes. In Karabakh, heritage without heirs operates as a dual condition: historical interruptions in custodial, social, and ritual frameworks have weakened the continuity traditionally associated with many Christian monuments, while contemporary heritage governance operates within an institutional and religious context different from that in which these sites originally emerged. This double discontinuity creates conditions in which heritage appropriation through expert discourse and historiographical reclassification becomes structurally likely. The parallel with post-Holocaust Jewish heritage, as well as post-conflict heritage in the Balkans and northern Cyprus, underscores a broader pattern in which heritage survives not through continuity of community but through institutional management. A dynamic that is equally visible in the post-conflict governance of Christian monuments in Karabakh.

The mobilisation of the Caucasian Albania narrative illustrates how post-conflict heritage governance can preserve monuments materially while transforming their meaning and mnemonic affiliation. Such strategies do not necessarily aim at destruction or denial; instead, they rely on selective emphasis, expert authority, and institutional control to reassign symbolic ownership. While this approach enables preservation and administrative stability, it also risks reproducing exclusionary memory regimes and reinforcing post-conflict asymmetries of power. More broadly, the findings suggest that heritage preservation alone does not guarantee reconciliation. When heritage is embedded in

Picture 1. Caucasian Albanian church (Ak Khach), Hadrut, Karabakh. An early medieval stone church, dated to the 5th–7th centuries, associated with the Christian architectural heritage of Caucasian Albania. The building preserves a simple basilical form with an open bell-cote and minimal later architectural interventions.

exclusive or unilateral narratives, it may serve to stabilise post-conflict domination rather than to foster dialogue. Recognising the structural conditions of "heritage without heirs"—including both demographic absence and religious discontinuity—is therefore essential for developing more reflexive and ethically informed approaches to heritage governance in post-conflict societies.

Picture 2**. Church of St. Stephen (Surp Stepanos), Tugh, Karabakh.** An early medieval Caucasian Albanian basilica (6th–7th centuries), later adapted, rebuilt, and re-roofed during the 19th–20th centuries, when the monument came under the ecclesiastical use of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The structure combines an early Christian architectural plan with visible traces of modern-period interventions.

Picture 3. **Joniškis Synagogue Complex, Lithuania.** The White and Red Synagogues form a rare ensemble of two 19th-century brick synagogues, restored and adaptively reused for cultural and educational purposes while preserving the architectural and historical legacy of the town's Jewish community.

Picture 4. Interior of the Selimiye Mosque (former Cathedral of Saint Sophia), Nicosia, Cyprus. Built as a Latin Catholic cathedral in the 13th–14th centuries (ca. 1209–1326) in the French High Gothic style, it was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest in 1571, while retaining much of its Gothic architectural fabric. The ribbed vaults and pointed arches remain largely intact, complemented by later Islamic elements such as the mihrab and mahfil. Conservation and restoration works in the Selimiye quarter, including the monument, have been supported by the European Union as part of broader cultural heritage preservation programmes in Nicosia.

Photo credits: All photographs by **Rasa Čepaitienė**.

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