

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Early Christian Liturgical Artifact from the Avey Albanian Temple: Archaeological Evidence and Religious Symbolism in Caucasian Albania

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Abstract

The archaeological investigation of Early Christian religious monuments is essential for reconstructing the religious, cultural, and socio-political history of Caucasian Albania. Ecclesiastical architecture and associated liturgical artifacts provide valuable evidence for understanding the spread of Christianity, the organization of worship, and the evolution of religious traditions in the South Caucasus during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. This study examines a rare Christian liturgical artifact discovered during the 2023 archaeological excavations at the Avey Albanian Temple, located on the summit of Mount Avey in the Gazakh District of western Azerbaijan. Archaeological investigations conducted within the church interior and its surrounding courtyards yielded significant information regarding the architectural development of the monument, burial practices, and material culture associated with the religious complex. Among the recovered finds, a unique metal object bearing Christian iconographic features represents one of the most remarkable discoveries. Based on archaeological context, typological characteristics, morphological analysis, and comparative evaluation with similar liturgical objects from the Christian East, the artifact is identified as a rhipidion (liturgical fan), an important ceremonial implement used during Christian worship. The discovery constitutes one of the rare examples of such liturgical objects documented in Caucasian Albania and provides new evidence concerning the religious practices, ecclesiastical traditions, and symbolic culture of the Albanian Church. The findings significantly contribute to the understanding of Early Christian material culture in the South Caucasus and offer new perspectives on the liturgical heritage of Caucasian Albania.

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1. Introduction

Caucasian Albania occupied a prominent position among the early Christian kingdoms of the South Caucasus, playing a significant role in the political, religious, and cultural development of the region. Following the official adoption of Christianity during the fourth century CE, numerous churches, basilicas, monasteries, and religious complexes were constructed throughout the kingdom. These monuments functioned not only as places of worship but also as centers of ecclesiastical authority, political legitimacy, and cultural integration. Although extensive research has been devoted to the architectural characteristics of Albanian churches, considerably less attention has been paid to the liturgical objects and material culture associated with religious practice. Consequently, archaeological discoveries of ecclesiastical artifacts remain particularly valuable for reconstructing the ritual life of the Albanian Church.

Recent archaeological investigations in western Azerbaijan have considerably expanded current knowledge of Early Medieval Christian monuments. One of the most important sites is the Avey Albanian Temple, situated at an elevation of approximately 922 meters above sea level on Mount Avey, within the territory of the Avey State Historical and Cultural Reserve near Dash Salahli village in the Gazakh District. On architectural grounds, the monument is generally dated to the fifth–seventh centuries CE and represents one of the best-preserved examples of Early Christian religious architecture in the region.

In 2023, the Avey Temple became one of the principal research sites of the Gazakh Archaeological Expedition. Systematic excavations were undertaken inside the church as well as within its northern, southern, and eastern courtyards. The primary objectives of the project were to clarify the architectural layout of the monument, determine its construction phases and chronology, investigate the existence of burials within and around the church, and analyze the archaeological assemblage recovered from different stratigraphic contexts. Particular attention was given to evaluating the relationship between the construction period of the monument and the associated funerary evidence, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive reconstruction of the site's historical development (Najafov, 2024).

The archaeological investigations produced substantial new evidence concerning the architectural evolution, functional organization, and historical use of the temple complex. While several observations corroborated the results of archaeological studies conducted during the 1960s and 1970s, the 2023 excavations also revealed previously undocumented structural features and archaeological contexts that significantly refine existing interpretations of the monument (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2024).

Excavations conducted within the central chamber of the church covered an area measuring 2×2 m. Since burials of bishops, clergy, or other revered religious figures are frequently encountered within Early Christian churches, one of the principal aims was to determine whether similar funerary practices had occurred at Avey. Although no burials were identified within the excavated area, the investigations yielded important information regarding the construction techniques, floor sequence, and occupational history of the monument (Najafov, 2024).

Among the recovered archaeological materials, the most significant discovery was a rare metal artifact displaying distinctive Christian iconographic features. Its morphological characteristics, construction, and decorative elements strongly indicate that it represents a *rhypidion*, a ceremonial liturgical fan traditionally employed during Christian Eucharistic services. Beyond its practical function, the *rhypidion* possesses profound theological and symbolic significance, representing the presence of angels and the sanctity of the liturgy within Eastern Christian tradition. Comparable artifacts are exceptionally rare in the archaeological record of Caucasian Albania, making this discovery particularly important for understanding the liturgical practices and ecclesiastical culture of the Albanian Church.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive archaeological, typological, and symbolic analysis of the newly discovered artifact from the Avey Albanian Temple. Through contextual evaluation and comparative analysis with analogous finds from the wider Christian world, the study seeks to determine its function, chronology, and religious significance while contributing new evidence to the study of Early Christian material culture in Caucasian Albania. The discovery not only enriches the archaeological record of the Avey Temple but also offers valuable insights into the development of Christian liturgical traditions in the South Caucasus during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

2. Literature Review

Research on the Christian heritage of Caucasian Albania has expanded considerably over the past several decades, with particular emphasis on ecclesiastical architecture, archaeological monuments, and the historical development of Christianity in the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to liturgical artifacts recovered from archaeological contexts, especially objects associated with ecclesiastical ceremonies and ritual practice. Consequently, discoveries of movable religious objects provide an important opportunity to reconstruct aspects of Christian worship that cannot be inferred solely from architectural remains.

Early studies primarily focused on documenting the architectural characteristics of Albanian churches and monasteries. Akhundov (1986) produced one of the earliest comprehensive studies of ancient and early medieval Azerbaijani architecture, identifying the principal construction techniques and stylistic features of ecclesiastical monuments. Later, Mammadova (2004) further examined the

architectural evolution of Caucasian Albanian religious buildings, emphasizing their regional diversity and their relationship with neighboring Byzantine and Georgian architectural traditions. These studies established the architectural framework within which archaeological discoveries from Albanian churches can be interpreted.

Recent archaeological investigations have significantly enriched understanding of religious monuments in western Azerbaijan. Museyibli et al. (2019) presented archaeological, anthropological, and historical investigations conducted at Keshikchidagh, demonstrating the importance of integrated archaeological research for reconstructing settlement organization and religious landscapes. More recently, Najafov et al. (2024) documented the results of archaeological excavations conducted in and around the Avey Albanian Temple during the 2023 field season, providing the first systematic description of the monument's stratigraphy, architectural features, and archaeological assemblage. Additional evidence concerning the site's historical significance has been presented through the analysis of numismatic finds recovered from the temple complex, revealing important information regarding economic interaction, monetary circulation, and the broader socio-political environment of Caucasian Albania during Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Najafov et al., 2026).

Beyond regional archaeological studies, international scholarship has contributed substantially to understanding Christian liturgy and the symbolic function of ecclesiastical objects. Christian iconography has been comprehensively documented by Koch (1996), whose classification of Christian symbols remains one of the principal reference works for interpreting religious imagery. Likewise, Armstrong (2016) explored the historical evolution of monotheistic religious traditions, providing broader theological context for understanding the development of Christian symbolism.

The symbolic significance of liturgical practice is further illuminated by the theological writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite (2010), whose interpretations of celestial hierarchy and sacred ritual profoundly influenced Eastern Christian worship. These theological concepts explain the symbolic role of ceremonial objects employed during the Divine Liturgy and continue to inform modern interpretations of Byzantine ecclesiastical traditions.

The liturgical implement examined in the present study is identified as a *rhypidion* (flabellum), one of the most recognizable ceremonial objects used in Eastern Christian worship. Burovik (1996) provides a concise historical overview of the object and its liturgical function, while Gür and Karakök (2021) offer one of the most comprehensive modern analyses of *rhypidia* in Byzantine art, examining their iconography, ceremonial use, and representation in Late Byzantine wall paintings. Their study demonstrates that the *rhypidion* functioned not merely as a practical instrument but also as a powerful symbol representing the heavenly hosts participating in the Eucharistic liturgy.

The architectural context in which such objects were employed has also been investigated internationally. Nesbitt (2012) emphasizes the relationship between church architecture, sacred space, and the sensory experience of worship in Byzantine churches, illustrating how liturgical objects contributed to the creation of a sacred environment. Similarly, Woolfenden (2000) argues that ritual performance itself constituted a central mechanism through which holiness was expressed within Byzantine Christianity, highlighting the theological importance of ceremonial objects beyond their practical use.

Despite these important contributions, a significant research gap remains concerning the archaeological evidence for liturgical implements within the churches of Caucasian Albania. Existing scholarship has concentrated primarily on architecture, inscriptions, and burial practices, whereas movable ecclesiastical artifacts have received comparatively little systematic investigation. The recently discovered metal object from the Avey Albanian Temple therefore represents an important addition to the archaeological record. Through archaeological contextualization, typological comparison, and symbolic interpretation, the present study seeks to address this gap by providing the first comprehensive analysis of a probable *rhypidion* recovered from an Albanian ecclesiastical context.

3. Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary archaeological research design integrating field archaeology, artifact analysis, historical interpretation, and comparative religious studies to investigate the liturgical artifact recovered from the Avey Albanian Temple.

The primary source of evidence consists of archaeological materials obtained during systematic excavations conducted at the Avey Albanian Temple in 2023. Excavation activities were undertaken within the interior of the church as well as its northern, southern, and eastern courtyards using standard archaeological excavation techniques based on stratigraphic principles. All archaeological contexts were documented through detailed field recording, photography, scaled drawings, and spatial mapping, allowing the precise provenance of each artifact to be established.

Following excavation, the recovered artifact was subjected to a detailed morphological and typological examination. Particular attention was given to its dimensions, manufacturing technique, decorative motifs, preservation state, suspension mechanism, and iconographic elements. These physical characteristics were compared with published examples of Byzantine and Early Christian liturgical objects in order to determine the functional identity and chronological attribution of the artifact.

A comparative historical approach was employed to evaluate similarities and differences between the Avey discovery and analogous liturgical objects documented in Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian, and broader Eastern Christian archaeological contexts. Published archaeological reports, museum collections, and scholarly literature served as comparative datasets for identifying diagnostic typological characteristics associated with rhipidia and related ecclesiastical implements.

The symbolic interpretation of the artifact was informed by theological and liturgical literature concerning Early Christian ritual traditions. Classical Christian writings together with modern studies of Byzantine liturgy and Christian symbolism were consulted to explain the religious significance and ceremonial function of the object within ecclesiastical practice.

Finally, all archaeological observations, historical sources, and comparative evidence were synthesized through qualitative interpretative analysis. Rather than relying solely on descriptive classification, the study evaluates the artifact within its broader archaeological, historical, and religious context to reconstruct its probable function and assess its significance for understanding Christian worship and material culture in Caucasian Albania.

This integrated methodological framework enhances the reliability of artifact identification while providing a comprehensive interpretation that combines archaeological evidence with historical and liturgical scholarship.

4. Archaeological Overview of the Avey Albanian Temple

The Avey Albanian Temple, registered as Cultural Heritage Monument No. 283, is situated within the Avey State Historical and Cultural Reserve in the Gazakh District of western Azerbaijan. The monument occupies the summit of Mount Avey at an elevation of approximately 922 m above sea level and is generally dated to the fifth–seventh centuries CE based on its architectural characteristics and archaeological evidence (Figure 1). Owing to its strategic location and exceptional state of preservation, the temple constituted one of the principal research sites of the Gazakh Archaeological Expedition during the 2023 field season.

Systematic archaeological excavations were conducted within the church interior and across the northern, southern, and eastern courtyards of the temple complex. The primary objectives of the excavation were to determine whether burials existed within or immediately surrounding the church, clarify the architectural layout and construction chronology of the monument, examine the relationship between funerary practices and the development of the sacred complex, and analyze the recovered archaeological materials to establish their cultural and chronological significance (Najafov, 2024).

The investigations produced substantial archaeological, architectural, and historical evidence concerning the development and use of the temple complex. While some of the observations confirmed conclusions reached during archaeological investigations carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, the 2023 excavations also revealed previously undocumented structural features and archaeological contexts that substantially refine current interpretations of the monument and its historical development (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2024).

Excavation units were established both inside the church and within its surrounding courtyards. Inside the sanctuary, archaeological investigations focused on a 2 × 2 m trench located within the central chamber. Since burials of bishops, clergy, and other revered religious figures are frequently encountered beneath the floors of Early Christian churches throughout the Eastern Christian world, one of the principal aims of the excavation was to determine whether similar funerary practices had occurred at the Avey Temple. Although no burials were identified within the excavated area, the investigations yielded important information regarding the construction sequence, floor stratigraphy, and occupational history of the monument (Najafov, 2024).

Outside the church, archaeological investigations identified thirty-four burial locations marked by stone grave covers, concentrated primarily near the western side of the monument and around its principal entrance (Figure 1). Several graves—approximately six—were superimposed, suggesting repeated use of the cemetery over an extended period. The stratigraphic relationship between these burials indicates successive phases of interment rather than simultaneous burial activity.

Evidence obtained during the excavations, together with information provided by local residents concerning graves uncovered during earlier earthworks, suggests that Christian burials extend throughout the entire area surrounding the temple. Most graves begin only 10–15 cm below the present ground surface, indicating relatively shallow burial practices (Najafov, 2024). Burial density is noticeably greater in areas immediately adjacent to the church, a pattern that may reflect the widespread Christian belief that burial in close proximity to a sacred place conferred spiritual prestige and enhanced the hope of salvation. The southern courtyard contains the highest concentration of graves. The surviving stone grave markers measure approximately 1.5–2.5 m in length and 40–60 cm in width. Decorative motifs and symbolic elements engraved on their surfaces were executed predominantly using incised carving techniques, indicating a relatively uniform funerary tradition within the cemetery.



Figure 1. The Avey Albanian Temple.

Source: Authors' archive, Gazakh Archaeological Expedition, 2023.

Architecturally, the monument represents one of the most significant surviving examples of ecclesiastical architecture attributed to Caucasian Albania. The church, traditionally identified as the Avey Temple (sometimes referred to in earlier literature as the "Moon Temple"), occupies the southern summit of Mount Avey. Constructed from locally quarried Avey stone, the building consists of a two-aisled plan with chambers measuring approximately 4.5×3.5 m and 3.5×2.5 m, respectively (Mammadova, 2004). The northern chamber is roofed with a barrel vault, whereas the southern chamber is crowned by a conical dome, illustrating the combination of architectural solutions characteristic of regional ecclesiastical construction.

The temple forms the central component of a much larger religious complex. In addition to the principal church, the complex includes a second ecclesiastical structure, an auxiliary building locally known as a *souma*, partially preserved enclosure walls surrounding the sacred precinct, and several ancillary constructions (Akhundov, 1986; Mammadova, 2004). Archaeological observations undertaken during the present investigation further suggest that a series of caves extending along the steep southern slopes of Mount Avey also formed an integral part of the religious complex. Their spatial relationship with the temple indicates that these caves may have served monastic, hermitic, or auxiliary ritual functions associated with the operation of the sanctuary.

Both archaeological evidence and historical sources support the interpretation that the monument was constructed during the period of the Caucasian Albanian Kingdom, most probably between the fifth and seventh centuries CE (Najafov et al., 2024). Nevertheless, several architectural characteristics appear to preserve elements inherited from pre-Christian Albanian building traditions. Previous architectural studies have also emphasized stylistic similarities with Roman and Classical Greek construction techniques, suggesting that the monument reflects a synthesis of indigenous architectural traditions and broader Mediterranean influences (Akhundov, 1986).

Certain narratives advanced in Armenian historiography have attributed the foundation of the monument to Mesrop Mashtots and identified it as the Monastery of Saint Sarkis. However, these assertions are not supported by archaeological evidence, historical documentation, or architectural analysis. Current archaeological data do not substantiate such interpretations, and the available evidence instead supports the identification of the monument as an authentic ecclesiastical structure of Caucasian Albania (Najafov et al., 2024).

The geographical position of the temple is equally significant for understanding its historical function. Constructed atop an isolated and steep mountain summit, the sanctuary would have been difficult to access for the general population. This topographical setting suggests that the monument may not have functioned as an ordinary parish church but rather as a restricted religious center used by clergy, monks, or selected members of the ecclesiastical community for the performance of specialized liturgical ceremonies. This interpretation distinguishes the Avey Temple from other Albanian churches in the Gazakh region, particularly the church located near Aşağı Əskipara village along the left bank of the Coğaz River, which occupies an open settlement context and exhibits architectural features more consistent with a publicly accessible place of worship (Akhundov, 1986).

Taken together, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Avey Albanian Temple was considerably more than an isolated mountain church. It functioned as the nucleus of a complex religious landscape incorporating ecclesiastical buildings, funerary spaces, auxiliary structures, and associated cave complexes. The exceptional preservation of the site, combined with the archaeological materials recovered during the 2023 excavations, provides an important foundation for reconstructing the religious life, funerary traditions, and liturgical practices of Caucasian Albania during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

5. Archaeological Context of the Discovery

Previous archaeological investigations conducted around the Avey Temple during the 1960s and 1970s documented a substantial Christian cemetery associated with the ecclesiastical complex. The surviving grave monuments display decorative traditions characteristic of Caucasian Albanian funerary art. One of the best-preserved gravestones bears a stylized lotus motif—a symbol frequently associated with the local artistic tradition—while an eight-petalled rosette interpreted as a solar symbol occupies the upper corners of the composition (Akhundov, 1986). Similar funerary monuments have been documented at the foot of Mount Avey, particularly in the Qızılqaya and Şişqaya areas, where numerous gravestones are decorated with carved Albanian crosses. Comparable iconographic elements have also been identified on gravestones discovered near Mount Göyəzən, where lotus motifs and solar symbols appear in association with Christian funerary symbolism, suggesting the existence of a shared regional artistic tradition during the Albanian period.

Architectural decoration within the church further reinforces its Christian identity. A carved Albanian cross enclosed within an ornamental floral composition is preserved above one of the interior niches adjacent to the eastern window. Executed in relief directly into the stone masonry, this composition represents one of the most distinctive decorative elements of the monument. A second cross of almost identical design survives on the exterior western façade. Both carvings exhibit extensive intentional damage, including abrasion and partial destruction caused by blunt mechanical instruments, indicating deliberate defacement during a later period (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2024).

The Avey Temple should not be interpreted as an isolated religious monument but rather as the principal component of a broader monastic landscape extending across Mount Avey. Together with the Keshikchidagh cave-monastery complex situated on the opposite side of the Kura River valley, the Avey complex forms part of a wider network of Early Christian religious centers occupying strategically elevated locations within western Azerbaijan. Archaeological surveys conducted around Qızılqaya, Göyəzən, and other neighboring sites have identified numerous rock-cut cells exhibiting remarkable architectural similarities to those documented at Keshikchidagh. The consistency in construction techniques, spatial organization, and topographical setting strongly suggests that these monuments belonged to a common ecclesiastical tradition and developed within the same cultural and religious environment.

Field observations conducted during the present investigation indicate that numerous natural caves situated immediately below the southern and western slopes of the temple summit were intentionally modified through artificial excavation to create monastic cells. Similar interventions are well documented within the Keshikchidagh cave monastery, supporting the interpretation that both sites functioned according to comparable monastic traditions. Additional cave cells identified along the lower mountain slopes further strengthen the hypothesis that the Avey complex served as an important Albanian cave monastery from the Early Medieval period onward. The architectural organization of these cave cells demonstrates careful adaptation to monastic life. Several chambers are interconnected by internal passages, while others consist of two separate compartments. Many preserve carved niches intended for oil lamps, recessed storage spaces for provisions and personal belongings, and rock-cut sleeping platforms designed for single occupants. The absence of window openings reflects the ascetic character of these hermitages, whereas the presence of carefully shaped doorframes suggests that wooden doors originally enclosed the entrances. Access to many of the caves remains difficult due to the steep surrounding cliffs, emphasizing their suitability for secluded religious life. The entrances generally measure between 1.0 and 1.5 m in height and approximately 0.6–0.8 m in width, while the rock walls surrounding the entrances reach thicknesses of approximately 1–2 m (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2024). The construction of artificial cave sanctuaries and monastic cells has deep historical roots throughout the Near East and the South Caucasus, spanning both pre-Christian and Christian periods. Comparable cave monasteries have been documented not only at Avey and Keshikchidagh but also in Karabakh, Nakhchivan, and the Sheki–Zagatala region, indicating that this architectural tradition formed an integral component of the religious landscape of Caucasian Albania (Museyibli et al., 2019).

6. Description of the Liturgical Artifact

Archaeological excavations conducted within the Avey Temple and its surrounding cemetery produced a diverse assemblage of material culture dating from Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The recovered artifacts include ceramic vessels, glass fragments, carved architectural stones bearing Albanian crosses, decorated bricks with geometric lattice patterns, metal objects, copper coins, and other archaeological materials reflecting the long-term occupation of the religious complex. Among these discoveries, one metal object recovered from Burial No. 1 represents the most remarkable and archaeologically significant find of the 2023 excavation season (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Liturgical pendant recovered from the Avey Albanian Temple.

Source: Authors' photographs and interpretative drawing prepared from the original artifact recovered during the 2023 archaeological excavations.

The artifact was discovered within a grave situated immediately adjacent to the principal entrance of the church. Burial No. 1 had been selected for excavation in order to investigate funerary practices associated with the temple cemetery. The skeleton was encountered at a depth of approximately 10 cm below the modern ground surface, suggesting that the burial belongs to one of the latest phases of cemetery use. Stratigraphic observations indicate that the deceased had been interred above an earlier grave marked by an existing gravestone, reflecting the repeated reuse of burial space over time (Najafov, 2024).

The individual had been buried in a supine position with the body oriented along the west–east axis, following established Christian funerary customs. The right arm was extended alongside the body, whereas the left arm was flexed across the pelvic region. Osteological examination indicates that the remains belonged to an adult male of relatively large stature. The burial therefore conforms generally to Christian mortuary traditions observed elsewhere in Caucasian Albania.

One of the most unusual characteristics of the burial concerns the treatment of the skull. Rather than resting directly on the grave floor, the head had been placed inside a ceramic brazier filled with ash and charcoal before interment (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2024). This funerary practice is exceptionally rare within the archaeological record of Caucasian Albania and may reflect a ritual action possessing symbolic or liturgical significance rather than a purely practical burial procedure. The presence of ash and charcoal suggests that the brazier had previously been used, raising the possibility that it formed part of a ceremonial practice associated with purification, memorial rites, or other religious traditions performed during burial. At present, however, the precise meaning of this custom remains uncertain and requires further archaeological and comparative investigation.

The metal artifact discussed in this study was recovered directly from this archaeological context. Its association with a Christian burial adjacent to one of the most important ecclesiastical monuments of Caucasian Albania substantially enhances its archaeological significance and provides an exceptionally reliable contextual framework for interpreting its chronology, function, and symbolic meaning.

7. Archaeological Description and Interpretation of the Liturgical Artifact

A copper coin was recovered from the mandibular region of the buried individual during excavation of Burial No. 1 (Najafov et al., 2026). The coin was remarkably well preserved despite minor corrosion, allowing its inscriptions to be identified. Numismatic analysis demonstrated that it is a copper dirham struck during the reign of the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqa Khan (r. 1265–1282). The specimen belongs to the *qa'an al-'adil* type and was minted in Tabriz in AH 663 (AD 1265) (Najafov et al., 2026). Its position immediately adjacent to the lower jaw strongly suggests that it had originally been placed inside the deceased's mouth as part of the burial ritual.

Although this practice is more widely documented in other cultural traditions, archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the placement of coins within Christian burials also occurred in certain medieval contexts (Najafov, 2024; Najafov et al., 2026). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that several copper issues of Abaqa Khan incorporate overt Christian symbolism, including a cross accompanied by the Arabic inscription: *"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the One God."* Such numismatic evidence reflects the complex religious environment of the Ilkhanid period and illustrates the continued visibility of Christian communities within the Mongol Empire (Najafov et al., 2026).

The most significant discovery associated with Burial No. 1, however, was a cast copper liturgical object recovered directly from the chest of the deceased. Its archaeological context strongly indicates that it formed part of the individual's personal religious equipment and had been intentionally deposited during burial.

The artifact was manufactured from cast copper using a mould-casting technique followed by relief decoration. It measures approximately 8 cm in length, 5 cm in width, and 1 cm in thickness (Figure 2). The obverse bears a carefully executed relief representation of a standing sacred figure holding a long ceremonial staff identified as a rhipidion (liturgical fan or ceremonial staff). Although the precise identity of the figure cannot be established with certainty, the iconography suggests either a Christian cleric participating in the Divine Liturgy or, more plausibly, an angelic figure represented according to the conventions of Byzantine Christian art.

The figure is depicted wearing a long liturgical garment closely resembling the vestments traditionally associated with Byzantine clergy. The right hand holds the ceremonial implement, while the left arm is bent across the chest in a gesture commonly interpreted as reverence, blessing, or liturgical devotion. The head is enclosed within a circular halo, a fundamental element of Christian iconography symbolizing holiness, divine illumination, and participation in the heavenly realm. In Eastern Christian theology, halos signify sanctity and the radiance of divine light surrounding saints and celestial beings.

Particularly noteworthy are the two wings extending from the figure's shoulders. Within Christian iconography, wings symbolize the heavenly nature of angels, spiritual ascent, divine protection, and communication between the earthly and celestial worlds. Their presence strongly supports the interpretation that the represented figure belongs to the angelic hierarchy rather than depicting an ordinary member of the clergy.

The ceremonial object held by the figure possesses a gently curved shaft terminating in a square element interpreted as the representation of a seraph. Five circular motifs are incorporated into the composition, almost certainly reflecting symbolic rather than purely decorative intentions. Although their precise theological meaning cannot presently be determined, circular forms frequently represent eternity, divine perfection, or celestial order within Christian artistic traditions.



Figure 3. Byzantine representations of angels holding a rhipidion (liturgical fan), illustrating iconographic parallels with the Avey artifact.

Source: Adapted from Koch (1996, *Christian Symbols*).

A perforation located at the upper edge of the object indicates that it was intended for suspension. Given its relatively substantial dimensions and weight, it was most probably designed to hang within a sacred architectural space rather than to function as a personal pendant worn continuously around the neck. The reverse surface is plain and undecorated, whereas the perimeter of the object is framed by an approximately 1 cm-wide raised border decorated with twisted vegetal or wheat-ear motifs that enhance its ornamental appearance while emphasizing the central sacred image.

7.1. The Rhipidion in Early Christian Liturgy

The iconographic and morphological characteristics of the artifact strongly suggest its identification as a rhipidion (Greek: *ῥιπίδιον*), also known as a flabellum, one of the principal ceremonial objects employed in Eastern Christian liturgy. Within the Byzantine and Orthodox traditions, rhipidia generally consist of circular, square, rhomboid, or star-shaped metal or wooden fans mounted on long handles and decorated with representations of the six-winged seraphim (Burovik, 1996). Although six-winged angels constitute the canonical form in Byzantine liturgical art, two-winged representations also occur in medieval Christian iconography. The Avey artifact belongs to this latter tradition, depicting a two-winged celestial figure.

The iconography corresponds closely to established Byzantine artistic conventions and reflects the theological symbolism associated with the Eucharistic liturgy. Rather than functioning merely as ceremonial fans, rhipidia symbolically represent the invisible presence of the heavenly hosts participating in the Divine Liturgy. Their use expresses the belief that angels continuously accompany and protect the sacred mysteries celebrated during Christian worship.

Monasticism provides the broader spiritual context within which such liturgical objects acquired their significance. From the fourth century onward, Christian monks devoted themselves to lives of asceticism, prayer, contemplation, and communal worship, withdrawing from secular society in pursuit of spiritual perfection. This monastic tradition originated in Egypt through pioneers such as Saint Anthony the Great (AD 251–356) and was further developed by influential ascetics including Macarius of Egypt, whose teachings on contemplative prayer profoundly shaped Eastern Christian spirituality (Christian Symbols, 1996; Armstrong, 2016). Consequently, liturgical objects depicting monks or angels should be interpreted not merely as artistic representations but as visual expressions of the theological ideals embodied by monastic worship.

Within Christian theology, the Divine Liturgy represents the highest form of communal worship through which believers participate collectively in praise, thanksgiving, remembrance, repentance, and communion with God. The liturgy is understood as both an earthly

ritual and a participation in the eternal heavenly worship described in biblical and patristic literature. Accordingly, liturgical implements such as the rhipidion possess profound symbolic significance extending beyond their practical ceremonial functions.

According to Byzantine liturgical tradition, rhipidia are carried by deacons or attendants during the Eucharistic celebration and are positioned beside the Holy Table to symbolize the perpetual presence of the seraphim surrounding the divine throne. They are used during the consecration of the Eucharistic gifts, episcopal processions, solemn church ceremonies, and the blessing of the paten and chalice. Rhipidia also accompany bishops during important liturgical processions and may be employed during funeral rites, particularly those associated with deceased bishops, emphasizing the continuity between earthly worship and the heavenly liturgy (Burovik, 1996; Armstrong, 2016).

The discovery of a probable rhipidion within the archaeological context of the Avey Albanian Temple therefore represents an exceptional contribution to the study of Early Christian material culture in Caucasian Albania. The object not only confirms the presence of sophisticated liturgical traditions within the Albanian Church but also demonstrates the close integration of local ecclesiastical practice with the broader religious and artistic traditions of the Byzantine Christian world. Its archaeological context, iconography, and symbolic content collectively provide compelling evidence for the advanced development of Christian ceremonial life in western Azerbaijan during the Early Medieval period.

8. Christian Symbolism and the Liturgical Significance of the Rhipidion

Christian symbolism represents one of the most sophisticated visual languages in religious history, serving as a medium through which theological concepts, spiritual realities, and sacred narratives are communicated beyond the limitations of written texts. Although many Christian symbols became closely associated with the development of Christianity, numerous motifs originated in pre-Christian cultures and were subsequently reinterpreted within a Christian theological framework. The cross, for example, universally recognized today as the central symbol of Christianity and the instrument of Christ's crucifixion, had already functioned as a symbol of life and regeneration in ancient Egyptian civilization before acquiring its Christian significance (Christian Symbols, 1996; Dionysius the Areopagite, 2010).



Figure 4. Angelic representations holding rhipidia in Christian iconography.

Source: Christian Symbols (drawn by Rudolf Koch with the collaboration of Fritz Kredel). San Francisco: Arion Press, 1996.

From the earliest centuries of Christianity, symbolic imagery became an essential component of religious expression. Before the establishment of formal ecclesiastical art, Christian communities employed symbolic representations to communicate theological concepts, identify places of worship, and express beliefs that could not easily be articulated through language alone. According to the theological writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, symbols function as visible manifestations of invisible divine realities, allowing human beings to perceive spiritual truths through material forms (Dionysius the Areopagite, 2010). Consequently, Christian iconography should not be interpreted merely as artistic decoration but rather as a visual theological system through which sacred knowledge is transmitted.

Among the most important liturgical symbols of Eastern Christianity is the rhipidion (flabellum), traditionally associated with the angelic hierarchy surrounding the heavenly throne. Artistic representations of angels carrying rhipidia have been documented throughout the history of Byzantine and Orthodox Christianity and occur in manuscripts, monumental wall paintings, portable icons, liturgical vessels,

and ecclesiastical metalwork. Such imagery reflects the theological belief that angels participate invisibly in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy alongside the earthly congregation.

Within the hierarchical structure of Christian angelology, celestial beings occupy different ranks and perform distinct theological functions. The highest order comprises the Seraphim, symbolizing divine fire and eternal worship; the Cherubim, representing wisdom and guardianship; followed by Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels (Figure 4). These classifications, derived primarily from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and later Byzantine theological tradition, profoundly influenced the visual language of Christian liturgical art.

The rhipidion itself has remained an integral element of Eucharistic worship since the earliest centuries of Christianity. Liturgical regulations prescribe that two deacons traditionally hold rhipidia on either side of the altar during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. During episcopal processions, ceremonial entrances, and processions carrying the Holy Cross, rhipidia accompany bishops and clergy as visible representations of the heavenly hosts surrounding the sacred mysteries. They are also employed during the blessing of the Gospel Book, sacred icons, relics, the paten, and the Eucharistic chalice (Burovik, 1996).

Originally, liturgical fans were manufactured from practical materials such as feathers, leather, linen, or woven fabrics to protect the Eucharistic gifts from insects during worship. As Christian liturgy became increasingly ceremonial, these utilitarian objects gradually evolved into elaborately decorated liturgical implements crafted from precious metals, frequently incorporating images of seraphim and other angelic beings mounted on long handles (Christian Symbols, 1996). Their transformation from functional fans into highly symbolic ceremonial objects illustrates the growing theological sophistication of Byzantine liturgical tradition.

The iconographic characteristics of the Avey artifact closely correspond to this established Eastern Christian tradition. The halo surrounding the figure, the liturgical vestments, the winged representation, and the ceremonial implement held in the right hand collectively indicate that the object belongs to the visual language of Byzantine ecclesiastical symbolism. Whether interpreted as an angel or as a liturgical minister representing the heavenly liturgy, the imagery reflects concepts deeply rooted in Eastern Christian theology and demonstrates the close relationship between the Albanian Church and the wider Byzantine liturgical tradition.

The discovery therefore provides valuable archaeological evidence not only for the existence of Christian worship at the Avey Temple but also for the transmission of Byzantine liturgical iconography into Caucasian Albania. It constitutes one of the rare archaeological examples illustrating how theological concepts were materialized through liturgical objects within the Albanian ecclesiastical environment.

9. Conclusion

Historical sources and archaeological evidence collectively indicate that Christianity had become firmly established in the central regions of the South Caucasus before the arrival of the well-known Syrian missionary monks traditionally associated with the expansion of monasticism in eastern Georgia and neighboring territories. Georgian ecclesiastical tradition records that the missionary David Garejeli, accompanied by twelve fellow ascetics, arrived in the Caucasus during the reign of the Iberian king Parsman (AD 542–557) to promote Christian monastic life. Although members of this missionary group later dispersed across different regions of the South Caucasus—including the neighboring Albanian provinces of Cambisene and Hereti—there is currently no direct archaeological or documentary evidence linking specific individuals with the Avey Temple or its associated cave-monastery complex (Bagrationi, 1971).

At the same time, archaeological investigations demonstrate that Christianity had already achieved a significant level of institutional and architectural development within Caucasian Albania prior to, or independently of, these later missionary traditions. The Avey Temple represents one of the most important examples of this indigenous ecclesiastical heritage. Its architectural characteristics, extensive cemetery, associated cave-monastery complex, and rich assemblage of liturgical artifacts collectively demonstrate that the site functioned as a major religious center within western Caucasian Albania during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

Among the archaeological discoveries recovered during the 2023 excavations, the cast copper liturgical object depicting a winged sacred figure holding a rhipidion constitutes the most significant contribution to the study of Albanian Christian material culture. The artifact represents one of the rare archaeological examples of Byzantine liturgical symbolism recovered from an Albanian ecclesiastical context and provides new evidence concerning ceremonial practice, religious iconography, and theological traditions within the Albanian Church. Its archaeological context, typological characteristics, and iconographic features strongly support its interpretation as a liturgical object closely associated with the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

The broader archaeological evidence recovered from the temple complex—including Christian burials, carved crosses, architectural decoration, associated cave-monastery cells, and liturgical material culture—collectively confirms that the Avey complex was considerably more than an isolated mountain sanctuary. Rather, it functioned as an integrated religious landscape incorporating ecclesiastical, monastic, and funerary activities that played a significant role in the development of Christianity in Caucasian Albania.

The present study therefore contributes new archaeological evidence to the growing body of scholarship concerning the Christian heritage of the South Caucasus. The discovery of the probable rhipidion expands current understanding of Albanian liturgical practice, demonstrates the transmission of Byzantine ecclesiastical traditions into western Azerbaijan, and highlights the importance of the Avey Temple as a major center of Early Christian religious life.

Future archaeological investigations should adopt a comprehensive landscape-based approach encompassing the temple itself, the surrounding cemetery, the associated cave-monastery complex, and the nearby ancient settlement. Integrating archaeological excavation with architectural analysis, material culture studies, geophysical survey, radiometric dating, and comparative historical research will provide a more complete reconstruction of the religious, social, and cultural development of the Avey complex. Such multidisciplinary investigations will substantially advance our understanding of the evolution of Christianity in Caucasian Albania and its place within the wider Christian world.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Shamil Najafov

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Not applicable. The study is based on archaeological investigations of historical and cultural heritage and did not involve living human participants or animal subjects.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Additional archaeological documentation and excavation records are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the regulations governing archaeological heritage documentation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

The archaeological investigations reported in this article were conducted in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan governing archaeological excavations and the protection of cultural heritage. All archaeological fieldwork was carried out with the appropriate institutional permissions.

AI Use Disclosure

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to generate archaeological data, interpret research findings, or produce scientific conclusions. AI-assisted language editing was used solely to improve the clarity, grammar, and readability of the manuscript. All scientific interpretations, analyses, and final content remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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