

Archaeological Research upon the Earliest Christian Settlement in Nekresi

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(Presented by Academy Member David Lordkipanidze)

ABSTRACT. The present paper deals with the cathedral complex dating to the 4th-6th centuries discovered in the ancient and early medieval settlement of Nekresi and the practice of burials of high-ranking clergymen inside churches. The main building is a three-nave basilica. The overall area of the basilica is 44 x 28 m. During archaeological research, two burials (No. 58 and No. 97) were discovered in the basilica under the floor of the central hall, which, according to stratigraphic analysis and radiocarbon studies were arranged in the period between the first half of the 5th century and the fifties of the 6th century. Along with the distinguished arrangement of these graves, the anatomical postures and attributes of the deceased indicate their belonging to high-ranking clergymen. Extremely noteworthy, hitherto unknown practice of Christian burial tradition reflecting the symbolism associated with Christian teaching has been attested on the territory of Georgia.
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Key words: Nekresi, Dolochopi, basilica, Christian period, burial graves, anatomical posture

In historical Hereti (nowadays Kakheti), near the town of Kvareli, on the right bank of the river Duruji, in the easternmost area of the ancient and early medieval former settlement of Nekresi, a unique church complex with numerous aspects of the initial stages of the Early Middle Ages by GPS data: N 41058'25.4; E 04504836.53 was discovered as a result of archaeological excavations conducted in 2012-2018 (Fig. 1).

The main structure of the complex is a three-nave basilica with a central hall 36 m long and 18 m wide which could be entered through three doors (western, northern and southern). The hall is divided into three naves by 5 pairs of cruciform

columns. The central nave terminated in a horseshoe-shaped sanctuary apse on the east and the side naves end with rectangular chambers called pastophorias. There is a multi-step synthronon around the apse. The ambo of the sanctuary is slightly elevated like proscenium to the naos till the nearest pair of pillars. The galleries 3-4 m wide follow the central hall from the north and east. There were two eukterions with apses to the east end of galleries. A narthex 4 m in width was also added. Initially, the full length and width of the large basilica turned out to be 44 m x 28 m (Fig. 2).

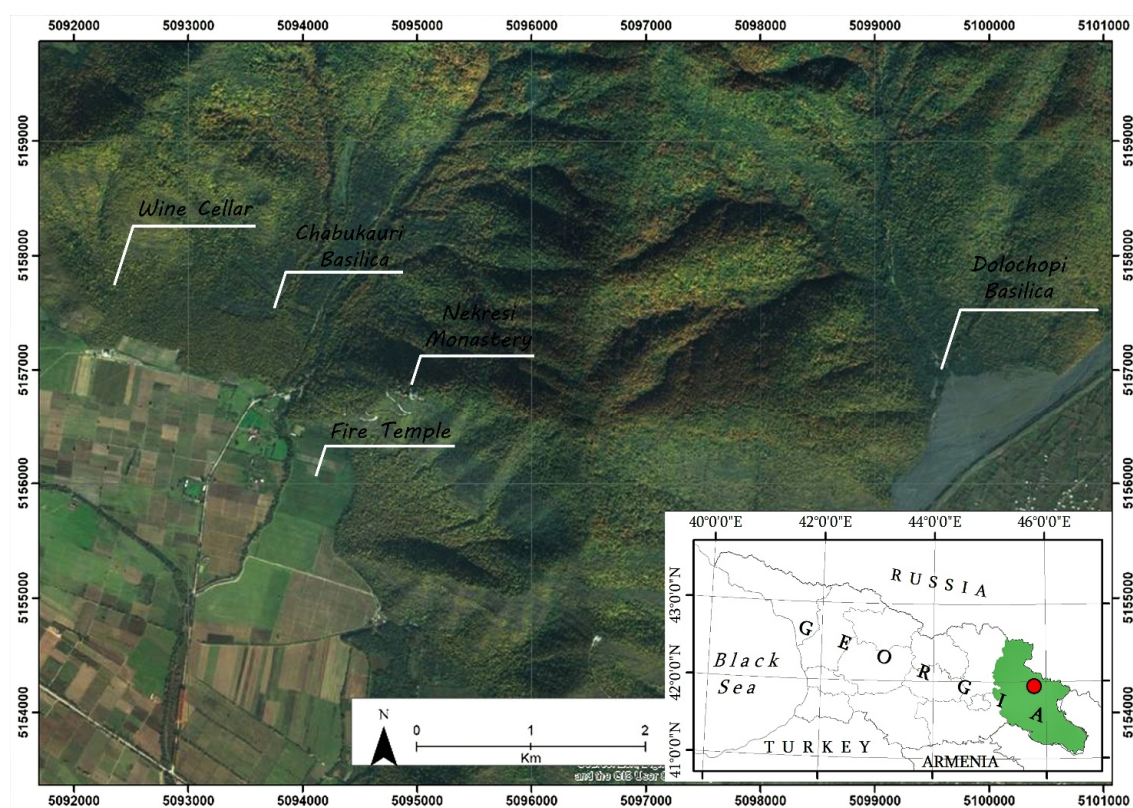


Fig. 1. Plan of Former City of Nekresi.

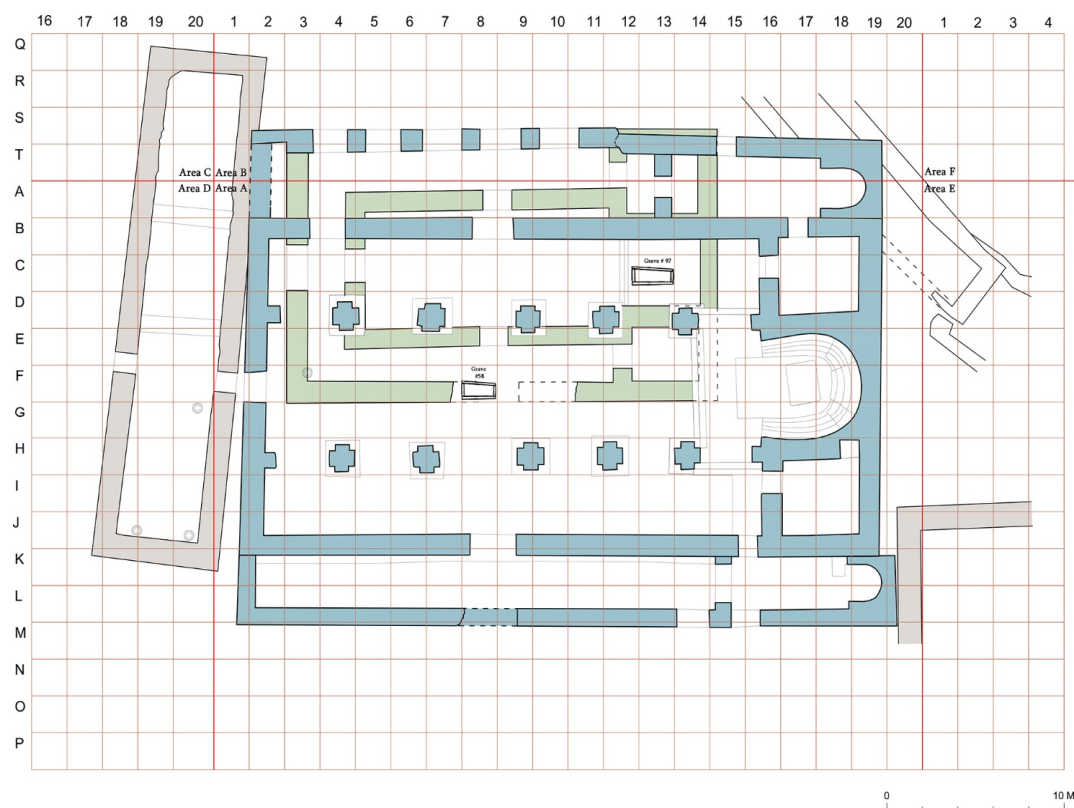


Fig. 2. Plan of Dolochopi Basilica.

An archaeological study of the fragments of building structures of the destroyed temple scattered on the floor convinced us that the naves of basilica were covered with tiled roofs rather than stone arches. Such way of roofing was no longer used in Georgian architecture after the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries. According to the features of this and a number of other features of planning, this temple is integrally linked to the stylistic circle of the earliest basilicas of the Roman and Byzantine worlds [1]. This circumstance, together with the results of a stylistic analysis of excavated artifacts, suggests that the temple must have been built at the turn of the 4th-5th centuries [2].

The presumable date of the destruction of this large Dolochopi basilica is found in tangible materials scattered on the floor in the interior of the church which appears to have declined after an earthquake. The discovered artifacts date back to the sixth century. As a result of studying the underground area of the large Dolochopi basilica, it turned out that this grandiose temple was built over an earlier church, 25 m in length and about 15 meters in width. During the excavation of this first temple, there were found the tangible materials characteristic of the 4th century and with high level of probability it must have been built just at that time.

According to the artistic and stylistic signs of these excavated monuments constituting Dolochopi complex, in parallel with dating by the method of comparative analysis, there were carried out laboratory, radiocarbon studies of organic residues attested in them. The results are as follows: the study of coal samples taken from the first ruined layer of the so-called three-church basilica of Dolochopi showed that the church was most likely destroyed no later than eighties of the 4th century. The result of laboratory research taken from the samples of the demolished layer of a large three-nave basilica coincided with dating of artifacts discovered inside the church – also with the same big probability the destruction must have occurred in the fifties of the 6th century [3].

Such chronological stratigraphy makes particular noteworthy rather unusual elements of Christian burial tradition, recorded in two burial graves, discovered under the floor of the central hall in a large basilica during archaeological research carried out by us. Let us consider what makes them noteworthy.

A description of the discovered tombs and their peculiarity. In terms of construction, both of these graves belong to the most common type of stone graves in Georgia of the Early and High Middle Ages [4]. Unfortunately, both graves lacked an inventory. However, the anatomical posture of the skeletal remains in the graves is rather noteworthy. Depending on the layout and the stratigraphic relation to the church buildings, both graves are undoubtedly arranged during the functioning of a large church, i.e., according to stratigraphic analysis and radiocarbon studies, from the first half of the 5th century till fifties of the 6th century.

Tomb No. 58 (Sq. F - 5). All four walls of the stone box were of one piece made of slate stone tiles (length – 207 cm; width (at the head) – 70 cm; width (at the legs) – 50 cm; depth – 48 cm; oriented towards east-west axis). The grave was roofed with similarly obtained and processed 4 tiles. The bottom of the grave was paved with flat tiles, precisely the type found in a scattered state during the excavations of the grandiose Dolochopi basilica. The remains of a 2-meter-tall individual were interred face-up, in a stretched pose; his left hand was folded on his chest while right arm was raised parallel to the spine in the blessed pose. An anthropological study confirmed that the remains belonged to a 45-50-year-old male who seems to have experienced deliberate mutilation during his lifetime - his right leg had the evident traces of wound that had healed. The skull of the remains was placed on a specially laid cobblestone measuring 15 x 19 cm. The damage was caused by land mass penetrated from the cracks left on the grave roof consisting of 4 plates due to the impact of meteorological dampness over the centuries (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Grave No. 58.

Grave No 97. Sq. C – 12, 13. The grave is roofed with one massive tile. The size of tiles: length from the south – 261 cm; length from the north – 231 cm, length from the west (at the head) – 83 cm, length from the east (at the feet) – 86 cm. Tile thickness is variable and fluctuates from 3 to 5 cm. The sizes for stone-box grave made up by 4 massive tiles are: from the east (at the head) 57 cm; thickness 3- 4 cm; from the west (at feet) – 60 cm, thickness 5-6 cm; from the north – 230 cm; thickness 6-11 cm; from the south – 240 cm; thickness 6-9 cm. The depth of the grave is 55 cm. The deceased individual was interred face-up, with the head to the west, in a stretched posture; the left hand rests on the pelvis and the right hand is bent and raised parallel to spine. Under the skull of the deceased person a specially laid cobblestone measuring 8 x 12 cm was found. According to the state of the skull it is obvious that the deceased person's head was laid on a special stone headboard and after being released from the soft tissue, the skull appeared not in a position characteristic of the posterior posture, face-up but almost vertically, in the posture looking to the east. After the burial of the deceased, the grave was not filled with earth, but for centuries the grave was filled with well-watered, 25-cm-long, ground-level boulders that were horizontally leveled on one level (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Grave No. 97.

It is especially noteworthy that both of these graves, at least throughout Georgia, are completely unique because of the additional elements of the arrangement and the postures of the remains of the deceased persons interred in them, we mean raised arms and stones under their heads.

The meaning of such a burial of Christians. It should be taken into consideration that both of these graves from the ideological and liturgical viewpoints are arranged in the most honorable place of the temple. Grave No. 58 is situated exactly in the centre of the middle nave of the large basilica, along the connecting axis of the north and south entrances; in such a way that it seemed the deceased buried there, looked directly at the sacred space of the altar, which personified the kingdom of heaven. Grave No. 97 is located in the center of the rectangular sanctuary within the initial mid-fourth century church and, at a glance, creates the impression of a saint's grave arranged under the sanctuary during its functioning (or at the time of its construction). Thus, if we also take into account the special ceramic floors of both of these graves, it can be supposed that high-ranking clergymen, possibly, builder-bishops of these temples or the remains of especially famous holy figures could

have been buried there. Such an assumption is fully consistent with the right arm left in a blessing posture for both of these remains. It is true that the burial of those who died so far has not found a direct analogue in Georgia and other countries of the Christian world (perhaps due to a lack of proper knowledge of the graves of the Late Antique and Early Medieval first phases), but logically, who, if not clergymen, should have been buried in the blessing posture? On the other hand, another ritual recorded in both of these graves – stone headboard laid under the head of a deceased convincingly indicates the Christian teaching and the connection of these deceased with the clergy. We have lots of documents attesting that such kind of burring tradition existed at the various stages of medieval centuries in Georgia and also in other Christian countries [5, 6]. Naturally, it is interesting to find out what kind of symbolic meaning this rule has. Part of scholars think that it is associated with the scene of Jacob's dream in the Old Testament (Gen. 28, 12-15), when he took the stone and placed under

his head as a pillow. When Jacob awoke he took the stone and set it up as a sacred pillar pouring oil over it and named that the place "Bethel" that means the house of God (according to Christian teaching the house of God is always referred as church). Some theologians hold that a stone, laid under the head of a deceased clergyman, in the grave of Christ, according to Jewish tradition, is a symbol of that stone, which, according to medieval travelers, was kept for a long time as a relic in Jerusalem [Source of Pilgrimage Stories].

In any case, the anatomical postures and attributes of the mentioned deceased buried in the Dolochoopi complex, along with arranging burials in sanctuaries indicate their belonging to the special social and ecclesiastical hierarchical positions.

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არქეოლოგია

ადრეული ქრისტიანობის არქეოლოგიური კვლევა
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წინამდებარე ნაშრომი ეხება ანტიკური და ადრეულ შუა საუკუნეების ნაქალაქარ ნეკრესში აღმოჩენილ IV-V საუკუნეების სატაძრო კომპლექსს და მაღალი იერარქიის სასულიერო პირების დაკრძალვის წესს. მთავარი ნაგებობა სამნავიანი ბაზილიკაა. ბაზილიკის სრული სიგრძე-სიგანე 44 x 28 მ-ია. არქეოლოგიური კვლევის დროს ბაზილიკაში, ცენტრალური დარბაზის იატაკის ქვეშ გამოვლინდა 2 სამარხი (№58 და №97), რომლებიც სტრატეგრაფიული ანალიზისა და რადიოკარბონული კვლევების მიხედვით, V საუკუნის პირველი ნახევრიდან VI საუკუნის დაახ. 50-იან წლებამდე არის მოწყობილი. მიცვალებულების ანატომიური პოზიები და ატრიბუცია, ამ სამარხთა გამორჩეულად მოწყობასთან ერთად, მაღალ სასულიერო იერარქიისადმი კუთვნილებაზე მიგვანიშნებს. საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე დადასტურდა ქრისტიანული დაკრძალვის მეტად საყურადღებო, დღემდე უცნობი დაკრძალვის წესი, რომელიც ქრისტიანულ მოძღვრებასთან დაკავშირებულ სიმბოლიკას ასახავს.

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