

## New Findings in Urban Heritage of Tbilisi

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(Presented by Academy Member Liana Melikishvili)

**In this paper two old dwellings, situated at L. Gudiashvili Square and the adjacent streets are discussed: 6 L. Gudiashvili Square / 1, I Beglar Akhospireli DE, and 21 Gia Abesadze Str. These buildings, listed since 2007, have so far escaped close scholarly attention. Modern-day L. Gudiashvili Square and its surroundings in Kala, one of the earliest districts in Tbilisi, served as a residential and trade quarter in the medieval city. In the recently revealed archival documents, the area is referred to as a market square. The area also functioned as a neighborhood of noble families residing in Tbilisi. During the 2018-19 rehabilitation works, it was discovered that the structure of the houses contain layers from the 17th, 18th, mid-19th, and late 19th centuries, that in addition to the archival research revealed hitherto unknown interesting materials that shed light on the medieval and 19th-century history of Tbilisi. In addition to recent findings at L.Gudiashvili square and its surroundings, the study of these two buildings allowed us to correct the opinion prevailing since the previous century stating that despite the fifteen century-long continuous urban life in Tbilisi, no medieval dwellings survived. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.**

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Modern-day L. Gudiashvili Square and its surroundings in Kala, one of the earliest districts in Tbilisi, served as a residential and trade quarter in the medieval city. In recently revealed archival documents the area is referred to as a market square. According to a document dated 1857, the Square had fulfilled its function for centuries. In the 19th century, the place was a neighborhood of noble families residing in Tbilisi, wealthy merchants, and civil servants representing the Tsarist bureaucracy in Georgia. The community also included the dwellers of two houses whose current address is 6 L. Gudiashvili Square / 1, I Beglar Akhospireli DE.

According to 19th-century archival documents, the two buildings were owned by the same person, which explains why the same street number was assigned to both buildings – a feature that has been preserved to date. Listed since 2007, the buildings have so far escaped close scholarly attention.

Containing construction layers from different centuries, the houses in question are a defining feature of the layout of the Square and the cul-de-sac, which is an integral part of the Square. One of the buildings overlooks the square with its main façade, while the other is situated in the cul-de-sac. Both have open courtyards. The buildings were

designed as enfilades, a design commonly used since the Middle Ages. The building facing the square is a traditional “Tbilisian” house with a plastered and painted façade decorated with classical and baroque elements in the front and balconies overlooking a courtyard. The masonry is made of old and new brick layers and a small amount of cobblestone.

During the 2018-19 rehabilitation works, the buildings were opened up and small-scale archeological surveys were carried out. It was found out that the houses have layers of construction from the 17th, 18th, mid-19th and late 19th centuries (Fig. 1). The archival research revealed hitherto unknown interesting materials that shed light on the history of this westernmost medieval and 19th century quarter of Tbilisi.



**Fig. 1.** Two-level cellar’s upper facility, 18th century. 6 L. Gudiashvili Square / 1, I B. Akhospireli DE.

The archival research findings and the information obtained during the rehabilitation works show that in the first decades of the 19th century, the site in question was occupied by a one-level flat-roofed structure facing the Square, with a portico supported by round columns. Its balanced façade covered up the asymmetrical inner structure of the masonry consisting of different chronological layers.

This practice was consistent with the standards imposed by the Tsarist authorities in the 1st half of the 19th century, which required that all restored

residential buildings feature an officially approved, “model” façade [1: 39]. The ongoing research revealed the following stages in the history of the building facing the Gudiashvili Square: it has an 18th-century basement; in 1812, the basement was part of a new residence that housed a hauptwaht in the mid-19th century; in 1897, a two-level dwelling was built over it, which survives to present with some alterations. Its façade overlooking the Square is shorter in length than the former building on the same site. The difference can be seen by comparing the 1855 and 1897 measured drawings.

As regards the architecture of the former dwelling surviving in fragments, it can be presumed that the building facing the Square preserves part of a Darbazi (hall-type) dwelling, which is suggested by the medieval masonry of the enclosed dwelling, and storage space, the arrangement and rhythm of the vaults, as well as the clay oven and construction layers from an earlier period, discovered during the rehabilitation works. At the end of the 19th century, a second storey was added over the building situated in the cul-de-sac, which formerly had been a one-storey flat-roofed structure with one of the oldest basements in the district [2: 150-167]. The basement obviously predates the presently surviving superstructure.

The identification, study and analysis of different construction layers of the buildings at 6 L. Gudiashvili Square / 1, I Beglar Akhospireli DE demonstrate that the construction of Tbilisian houses in the late medieval period was on an advanced level. Dating from the first half of the 19th century, the houses in question preserve fragments of earlier structures, as well as display medieval Georgian construction traditions [3: 91, 108]. Along with other multilayer historic sites surviving in Tbilisi, these houses are a representative example of the city’s urban history. Characterized by a complex structure with layers from different periods, the buildings shaping the urban pattern of L.Gudiashvili Square can be grouped according to a number of features. The houses at 6 L.Gudiashvili

Square/1, I Beglar Akhospireli DE, and the sizeable residence at 21 G. Abesadze Str. can be assigned to the same typological group based on the characteristics they have in common.

The residence with an integrated design comprising three two-storey enfiladed structures built since the mid-19th century at 10-year intervals formed a remarkable complex urban plot on an elongated site extending from G. Abesadze street into the depth of the yard. The arrangement of structures of different designs discovered beneath the house during the R&D stage of the rehabilitation works in 2016 and 2017 suggested that its specific overall design was defined by an earlier structure. This hypothesis was confirmed by an 1857 document found in the Central Historical Archive, which reveals that Praporschik Davit Areshov was applying to the Tbilisi Building Committee for a permit to build a new house on his own plot in Anchiskhati street (now G. Abesadze street), in the place of an old Darbazi he had inherited from his parents.

The stylistic analysis undertaken suggested that the earliest of the three buildings at 21 G. Abesadze Str. must be the double-enfiladed cube-shaped structure alongside the street, which is a representative example of mid-19th century architecture combining a classicistic façade with a “Tbilisian” balcony. The finesse of its façade and interior design is manifested in round balcony pillars, balustrades, and horizontally bracketed archivolt above symmetrically arranged pedimented openings, these being complemented by side panels of lozenge violet-and-green stained glass on both sides of the courtyard balcony. Of special note are seismic horizontal bands in the sidewall, which are also mentioned in Vakhtang Beridze’s book [1: 105], though the house in question is beyond the book’s primary focus.

The recently revealed 1857 archival document not only specifies the date of the building but also confirms that at first Areshov only built the structure situated along the street. As mentioned,

there were two more enfiladed structures in the yard: the main residential building at the end and an annexe in the middle, which enclosed the plot from the south and was initially used for ancillary purposes. The façade designs are not uniform in terms of their date of construction and level of mastery. At the beginning of the rehabilitation works, the structures were deconstructed on the builder’s and engineer’s instructions, due to their poor physical condition.

Of 21 Abesadze str. cellars built at different times, a two-room brick cellar with pointed barrel vaults and niches dating from no later than the 17th century stands out by its age and historically identifiable artistic taste (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** A spacious cellar's wall with niches, 17th century. 21 G. Abesadze Str.

There is a pool – or a cooler – in the middle of its smaller, deeply cut storage, whose domical vault culminates in an oval skylight – an architectural element designed to provide light and ventilation in an urban dwelling. The skylight in question is the oldest well-preserved specimen of this type and, therefore, is of particular value. Yet another detail that attracts attention is the passageway connecting the house on G. Abesadze Str. and the neighbouring house No 19 which preserves the traces of the medieval street pattern. The historical cul-de-sac once existing in this place and found on the earliest surviving maps of Tbilisi was referred to as the Akim Dead End in the mid-19th century. This location of the cul-de-sac is also suggested by the

chamfered corners of both houses – a historical urban development practice aimed to ease the passage of traffic (carts, carriages) through narrow streets.

There is one more point to be considered in connection with the Akim Dead End: private ownership and use of dead ends. As is known, apart from public streets, there were private streets as well [4: 71]. As both the old Darbazi standing on the plot in question until the mid-19th century and the later house were evidently owned by the noble family of the Areshovs, the cul-de-sac too should have been their private property. Z. Chichinadze mentions the Areshovs, or the Areshidze, among

Georgian Gregorian households [5: 111]. The system of cellars at 21 Abesadze Str. preserving fragments of residential structures from different periods and its connection with the residential structures developed in the 19th century allows us to track the development of certain elements of urban dwelling from late medieval Darbazi to modern Tbilisi-type houses. Thus, the study sheds light on the historical dimension of the remarkable architecture and the urban value of the heritage site.

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## ხელოვნების ისტორია

# ახალი მიკვლევები თბილისის ურბანულ მემკვიდრეობაში

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ნაშრომში განხილულია თბილისის ერთ-ერთ უძველეს უბან ქვემო კალაში, ახლანდელ ლ. გუდიაშვილის მოედანზე და მის მიმდებარე ტერიტორიაზე მდებარე ორი საცხოვრებელი სახლი: ლ. გუდიაშვილის მოედანი №6/ ბ. ახოსპირელის I ჩიხი №1 და გ. აბესაძის ქ. №21. 2007 წლიდან ძეგლად აღრიცხული ეს შენობები სპეციალური კვლევის საგანი აქამდე არ ყოფილა. ლ. გუდიაშვილის მოედანი და მისი მიმდებარე ტერიტორია შუა საუკუნეების ქალაქის ერთ-ერთ საცხოვრებელ და სავაჭრო ფუნქციის მქონე მიკროუბანს წარმოადგენდა. ახლად გამოვლენილი საარქივო დოკუმენტის მიხედვით, ის ბაზრის მოედნის სახელითაცაა მოხსენი-

ბული. აქ სახლობდნენ შეძლებული და წარჩინებული წარმომავლობის ოჯახები. 2018-2019 წლებში მიმდინარე რეაბილიტაციის დროს გაირკვა, რომ ზემოხსენებული საცხოვრებელი სახლები შეიცავს XVII, XVIII, XIX სს-ის შუა ხანების და XIX-ს-ის დასასრულის სამშენებლო ფენებს. საინტერესო და აქამდე უცნობი მასალები გამოვლინდა მათ შესახებ საარქივო კვლევის შედეგად, რაც მრავლისმთქმელია შუა საუკუნეების და XIX საუკუნის თბილისის ისტორიის უკეთ წარმოსაჩენად. სხვა უახლეს აღმოჩენებთან ერთად, ლ. გუდიაშვილის მოედანზე და მის მიმდებარე ტერიტორიაზე მდებარე ორი საცხოვრებელი სახლის შესწავლამ შესწორება შეიტანა გასული საუკუნის სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურაში დამკვიდრებულ მოსაზრებაში, რომლის მიხედვით, თხუთმეტ საუკუნეზე მეტი ხნის უწყვეტი საქალაქო ცხოვრების მიუხედავად, თბილისში არ შემონახულა ძველი საცხოვრებელი სახლები.

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