

TOMBS UNCOVERED IN THE SOUTHERN GALLERY OF DURUJI BASILICA

დურუჯისპირა ბაზილიკის სამხრეთ გალერეაში აღმოჩენილი სამარხები

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ABSTRACT. In the surroundings of the city of Kvareli, located in the Kakheti region and historic Hereti, on the right bank of the Durudji River at the far eastern part of the Nekresi site, archaeological research has revealed a unique temple complex dating back to the 4th-5th centuries. The main building of the complex is a three-nave basilica. The total length and width of the basilica, including its galleries and narthexes, is 44 m by 28 m.

According to stratigraphic analysis and radiocarbon studies, the tombs were constructed from the first half of the 5th century to around the 550s. The anatomical positions of the deceased, their attribution, and their interment in particularly honorable and distinctive manners suggest that these individuals belonged to a high secular hierarchy¹.

Key words: Nekresi, archaeology, Dolochopi, basilica, Christian period, burial.

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ვაჟა მამიაშვილი

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აბსტრაქტი

ისტორიულ ჰერეთში, დღევანდელ კახეთში, ქ. ყვარლის შემოგარენში, მდ. დურუჯის მარჯვენა ნაპირზე, ანტიკური და ადრეულ შუა საუკუნეების ნაქალაქარ ნეკრესში მდებარეობს IV-V საუკუნეების სატაძრო კომპლექსი. კომპლექსის მთავარი ნაგებობა სამნავიანი ბაზილიკაა. მისი სიგრძე-სიგანე გალერეებით და ნარტექსით 44 x 28 მ-ია. ნაშრომში სწორედ ამ ბაზილიკის სამხრეთ გალერეის სარდაფში, კატაკომბის მსგავს სივრცეში აღმოჩენილი ქვა-ყუთის ტიპის სამარხების ტიპოლოგიისა და ქრონოლოგიის საკითხებია განხილული. სტრატეგრაფიული ანალიზისა და რადიოკარბონული კვლევების მიხედვით, ეს სამარხები V საუკუნის პირველი ნახევრიდან VI საუკუნის დაახ. 50-იან წლებამდე მოუწყიათ. მათში მოთავსებული მიცვალებულების ანატომიური პოზები, ატრიბუცია და ხაზგასმულად საპატო ადგილებში, გამორჩეული კონსტრუქციის სამარხებში დაკრძალვა იმაზე მიგვანიშნებს, რომ ისინი მაღალ სოციალურ ფენის, ადგილობრივი არისტოკრატის წარმომადგენლები უნდა ყოფილიყვნენ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ნეკრესი, არქეოლოგია, დოლოჟოპი, ბაზილიკა, ქრისტიანული პერიოდი, სამარხი.

Introduction:

Archaeological excavations carried out between 2012 and 2022 in historical Hereti, in contemporary Kakheti, in the environs of the town of Kvareli on the right bank of the Duruji River, in the easternmost area of the late antique and early medieval city of Nekresi, uncovered a temple complex from the early Middle Ages

remarkable for its unique features in many respects² GPS coordinates: N 41058' 25.4; E 0450 48' 36.53 (Fig. 1) (Bakhtadze, ... 2020-1-20).

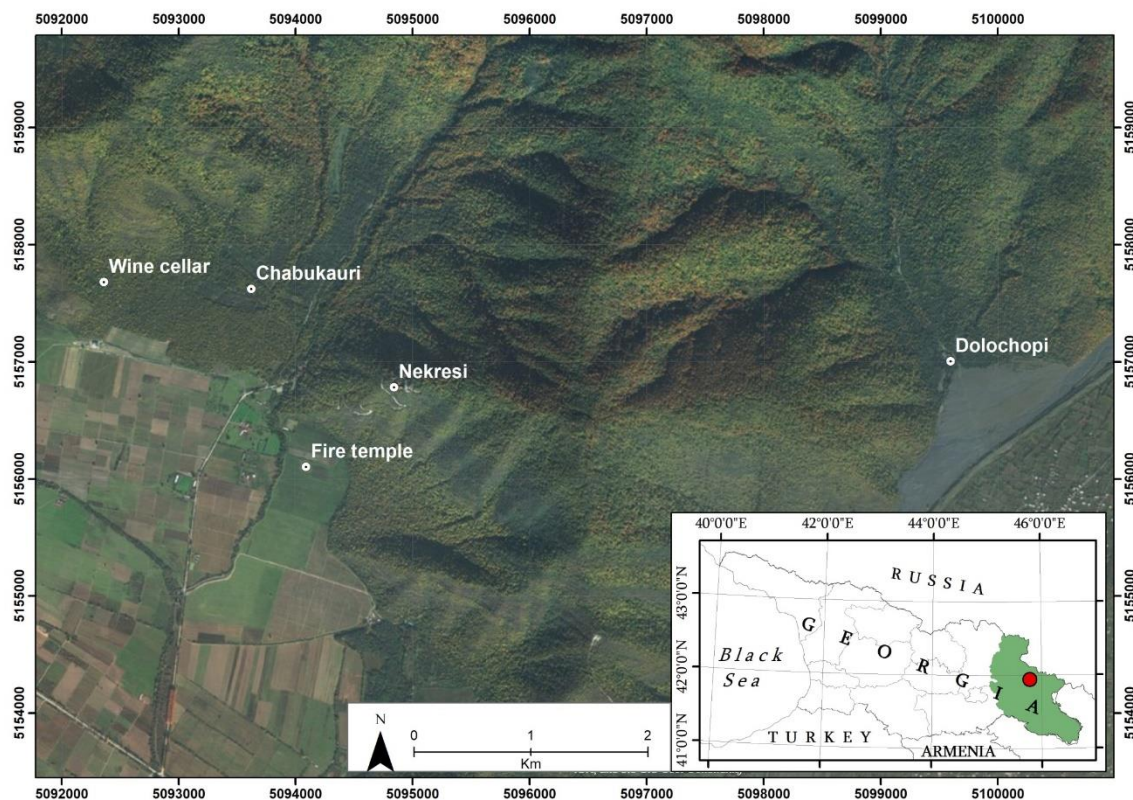


Fig. 1

The complex's main building is a three-nave basilica, with a central hall measuring 36 meters in length and 18 meters in width. Entrances are situated on three sides-west, north, and south. The hall has a cruciform plan, with five pairs of columns dividing it into three naves. The central nave terminates in the east with a horseshoe-shaped apse, while the side naves end in rectangular pastophoria. A multi-step synthronon surrounds the apse, while the sanctuary ambo rises like a proscenium toward the naos, extending to the nearest pair of pillars. The central hall was originally flanked to the north and south by galleries, each 3-4 meters wide, with eukterions terminating in apses at the eastern ends. To the west, the basilica also featured a narthex, approximately 4 meters wide. The original dimensions of the large basilica were 44 meters in length and 28 meters in width (Fig. 2).

² The excavations were conducted by the Archaeological Expedition of the Georgian National Museum for the Study of the Nekresi Settlement, under the leadership of Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor Nodar Bakhtadze.

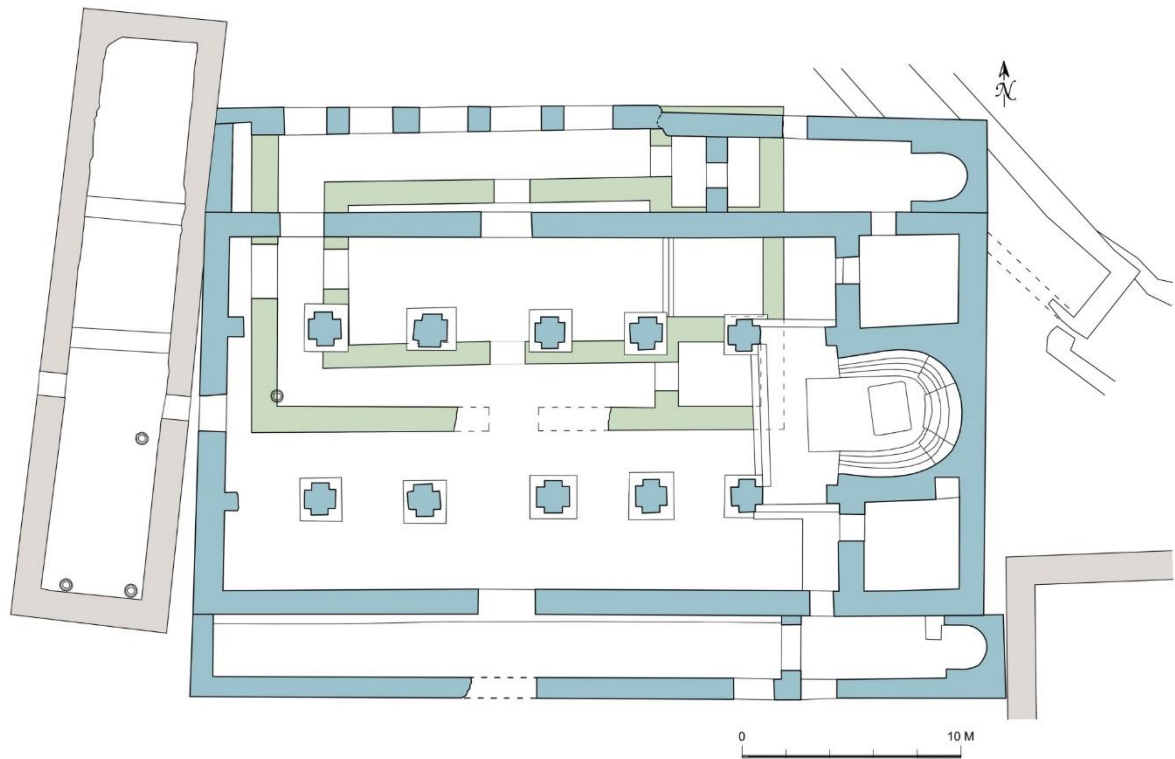


Fig. 2.

The archaeological analysis of construction remains scattered across the temple floor during its destruction revealed that the basilica naves were originally roofed with tiles supported by wooden structures, rather than stone vaults. This roofing technique was abandoned in Georgian temple architecture after the 5th–6th centuries. Based on this evidence and several other architectural features, the temple aligns stylistically with the earliest basilicas of the Roman-Byzantine tradition. Additionally, the stylistic analysis of artefacts uncovered during the excavation suggests that the temple was likely constructed at the turn of the 4th–5th centuries.

The approximate date of the destruction of the large basilica is inferred from the artifacts scattered across its floor during the earthquake that devastated its interior; These artifacts are dated to the 6th century. After this catastrophe, the three-nave basilica was transformed into a smaller church. Reconstruction extended from east to west, up to the fourth pair of columns, with only the central and northern naves rebuilt. The openings between the columns, except for the doorways, were sealed with blank walls. Archaeological evidence recovered within the temple interior, now converted into a two-nave hall, indicates that the building remained in this form for approximately a century and a half. After the complex ceased functioning in the 10th–13th centuries, the inhabitants of the settlement, which had by then transformed into a rural area, established a dense necropolis atop the ruins of the destroyed buildings.

The study of the space beneath the floor of the large basilica revealed that this grand temple was built atop the remains of an even earlier Christian temple, measuring approximately 25 meters in length and 15 meters in width. Excavations of this earlier temple uncovered artefacts characteristic of the 4th century, strongly suggesting that the structure was constructed during this period.

It should be noted that, alongside the dating of the excavated monuments of the Dolochopi complex through comparative analysis of artistic and stylistic features, laboratory radiocarbon analysis of the organic remains found within them was also conducted. The results are as follows: analysis of charcoal samples from the

destruction layer of the first, so-called three-nave basilica-type temple indicates that it was likely destroyed no later than the 380s. Similarly, laboratory tests of samples from the destruction layer of the larger basilica align with the dating of artefacts found within the temple, strongly suggesting that its destruction occurred in the 550s.

During the functioning, this large Basilica served as a burial site for significant hierarchs and secular individuals. A dedicated chamber—the southern gallery, or more specifically, a catacomb space beneath its floor—was designated for the burial of secular individuals, undoubtedly members of the aristocracy (Fig. 3). During the archaeological excavations conducted in 2018–2019, the stratigraphic layers formed by the catastrophic collapse of the temple structures above the slate-paved floor of this gallery were revealed as follows: on the floor slabs numerous tiles and antefixes shattered into large and small fragments during the collapse (it should be noted that the dimensions of this construction ceramics coincide with the dimensions of the tiled child tombs discovered in the city of Urbnisi, dated to the 4th-5th centuries (Jghamaia, 1980:16; Lomtadze, 1964:93)) were scattered (Fig. 4; 5; 6). In the same layer, the remains of wooden structures that had decayed into earth over the centuries, along with up to two dozen large nails, were identified (Fig. 6-2). It is noteworthy that no confirmed fragments of wood charred by fire were found in this layer, which practically excludes the possibility that the roof collapsed due to fire, and by extension, the destruction of the church by its enemies (In that era, the violent demolition of such a robust structure without setting fire to the tightly-knit, frame-like roof structures—one of the key factors determining the building's stability—would have made the task significantly more difficult).

Above this layer, along with mortar fragments, large stones and blocks from the basilica's walls had fallen. It was also established that parts of the northern wall (i.e., the southern wall of the main hall) primarily rested on the gallery floor. Later, it was also possible to determine that the south wall extended along the temple's outer perimeter, sometimes broken into only slightly fragmented blocks. Thus, the stratigraphic layers revealed above the floor of the southern gallery seem to reflect the result of destruction caused by a natural cataclysm, most likely an earthquake. We believe this was the second, largely destructive one that damaged the temple in the 6th century.



Fig. 3. Duruji Basilica, catacomb space beneath the floor of the southern gallery.



Fig. 4. Duruji Basilica, a layer of collapsed wall rubble and tiled roofing on the floor.



Fig. 5. Clay roofing tiles and antefixes on the floor of Duruji Basilica.



Fig. 6. Duruji Basilica. Iron nails and clay materials (painted antefix, tiles) used in the roof.

On this floor, following the recording and removal of intact traces of the collapsed structures of the large Basilica, beneath the thin clay mortar and clay compaction for the slate, a uniform layer approximately 1.5 meters thick was identified. This layer, specially deposited at a significant depth instead of compacted soil, extended along the entire length of the gallery. It contained secondary displaced cultural layers and a few artefact fragments, primarily construction ceramics. The discovery of a row of stone-box-type tomb roofs, raised 20–30 cm above the paved bottom of a wide and deep trench (Fig. 7), clarified that the floor, dissected on its upper horizon and strewn with rubble from the destruction of the basilica, had been arranged secondarily during reconstruction. This occurred after the original catacomb-type crypt, up to 30 meters long and 3 meters wide, located beneath the gallery floor of the temple's basement, was abolished and the entire space filled with earth. Initially, the ceiling of this crypt-basement consisted of a wooden floor supported by a wooden beam construction forming the gallery. The entrance to the elongated crypt, a door opening 1.2 meters wide, was situated at the eastern edge of the basement, above the horizontal level of its floor. Within this tunnel-like, unlit, and very low space of the crypt (approximately 1.5 meters high), eight carefully levelled stone-box-type tombs (No. 106; Nos. 110–116) were arranged beneath the floor and partially raised above it. These tombs likely held laypersons, presumably noble citizens of the city or province.

Two additional tombs, arranged in the basement of the chapel at the eastern end of this gallery, are typologically almost identical to the stone-box tombs discovered in the catacomb beneath the corridor. Unlike the gallery crypt-basement, this small crypt had no independent entrance from the lower horizon. It appears that, if necessary, access could be gained via a wooden staircase through a hatch-like opening on the floor of the western part of the attic.



Fig. 7. Duruji Basilica: 4th-century tombs beneath the southern gallery.

Considering that extensive catacomb burial grounds were first confirmed in the Duruj Basilica during excavations of Christian churches from the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods throughout Georgia, we aim to provide a detailed presentation of the burial customs of that time. This includes the construction of the tombs, the positions of the buried remains, and the grave inventory. The numbering of the tombs follows the order of their excavation, arranged sequentially from west to east.

Tomb No. 106 (Sq. K - 2, 3; L - 2, 3).

Length: 183 cm; Width at the west (head): 85 cm; Width at the east (feet): 75 cm; Height: 47 cm. The tomb is roofed with four slate stone tiles, with the remaining gaps between them filled with smaller tiles of the same type. On three sides—southwest, southeast, and northwest—one cobblestone is placed on each tomb slab, likely intended to strengthen the side slabs. The stone box is oriented along the east-west axis. The remains of one deceased woman were found in the tomb. The burial posture is pagan. The skeleton lies on its right side, with the skull positioned on the right. The right arm is bent and placed behind the back (as indicated by the finger phalanges fixed under the vertebrae and the ring on it). The forearm of the left hand is angled along the west-east axis, with the radius and wrist bones bent, parallel to the shoulder bone. The femurs are bent about 18° from the west-east axis to the north.

As for the large and small bones of the tibia, the right leg bones are aligned with the west-east axis, while both bones of the left tibia are bent about 60° to the southeast, located under the bones of the right tibia. The infallibility of the semi-pagan burial in the tomb is proved by the fact that the remains are positioned 29 cm from the west (head) and 17 cm from the east (feet), leaving empty spaces providing full opportunity for burying the deceased outstretched in the classical Christian pose. The tomb is cut at a depth of 85–95 cm from the floor level (Figs. 8, 9).

Artefacts found in the tomb:

1. Bronze Bracelets (Pair)

The bracelets are crafted from an arched shaft with a round cross-section, featuring thickened ends. They were found on both hands of the individual. On the right (south) hand, the bracelet was located beyond the end of the humerus, at the beginning of the ulna and radius. On the left hand, the bracelet was positioned over the ulna and radius, near the wrist bones. Diameter: 5.8 cm; 6.2 cm (Fig. 10, 1-2).

2. Silver Earrings (Pair)

A pair of silver earrings featuring an open rod of circular cross-section tapered at both ends and curved. The mouth of each earring is attached to its corresponding rod. On the thickened, biconical part of the stem, there is a pointed extension 0.8 cm thick. Along with the earrings, two beads were discovered, one of which bears a fragment of a gold plate, indicating that the bead was likely set into a gold plate (diameter: 0.3 cm). Based on the proximity of the beads and earrings to the skull, it is plausible to infer that the beads were mounted on the pointed end of the earrings. One of the earrings has a broken stem. Ring diameter: 1.9–2.2 cm (Tab. 82, 4).

3. Silver Fibula

A silver fibula with an iron pin. The pin rest is shaped like a raised toe, and the clasp terminates in a single curved element with two balls soldered to its sides. The iron pin is not preserved, but fragments on the fibula suggest the presence of three iron balls, possibly arranged to resemble a cross. The fibula measures 3.7 cm in length, and the stem thickness ranges from 0.2 to 0.4 cm. The fibula was discovered on the left side of the skeleton (Fig. 10, 3).

4. Silver Ring with Rectangular Setting

A silver ring with a hollow, round cross-section (damaged and incomplete). It features a rectangular setting holding a light blue stone of matching shape. The shoulders of the ring diverge toward the setting. Diameter: 2.2 cm (Fig. 10, 5).

5. Mother-of-Pearl Plate

An octagonal, partially transparent mother-of-pearl plate with a thickness of 0.1 mm. Dimensions: 2.2-2.4 cm. The artefact was found in the chest area of the remains (Fig. 10, 6).

6. Bone Amulet

A conical bone amulet with one thick end (0.8 cm) and one thin end (0.4 cm). A round hole is located at the thin end. The artefact was discovered in the chest area of the remains (Fig. 10, 7).

7. Bead

A cylindrical bead with a rectangular hole in the middle, featuring black-and-white inlay. Diameter: 0.6 cm. The artefact was found in the chest area of the remains (Fig. 10, 8).

8. Cylindrical Bead

A cylindrical bead with a round hole in the middle. The bead is opaque. Diameter: 0.4 cm. The artefact was found in the chest area of the remains (Fig. 10, 9).

Based on a comparative analysis of the jewellery found in the tomb and similar items from other sites, the tomb is dated to the 5th–6th centuries. For example, analogues of the earrings discovered in Alevi are dated to the 5th century. Similarly, tombs excavated in Mtskheta, the Pshavi's Aragvi Gorge and Armaziskhevi, dated to the 5th–6th centuries, have yielded exact analogues of the fibula. The bracelets can be confidently dated to the 5th century through comparative analysis with a bracelet found in Tomb No. 10 in the Alazani Valley, near the village of Koghoto (in the environs of Kiziqhi) (Sinauridze, 1967:116, 130, Tab. III-3; Rcheulishvili, 1990:30–31, Tab. III-23; Sinauridze, 1966: Tab. I).



Fig. 8. Duruji Basilica: Tomb No. 106 in the Southern Gallery.

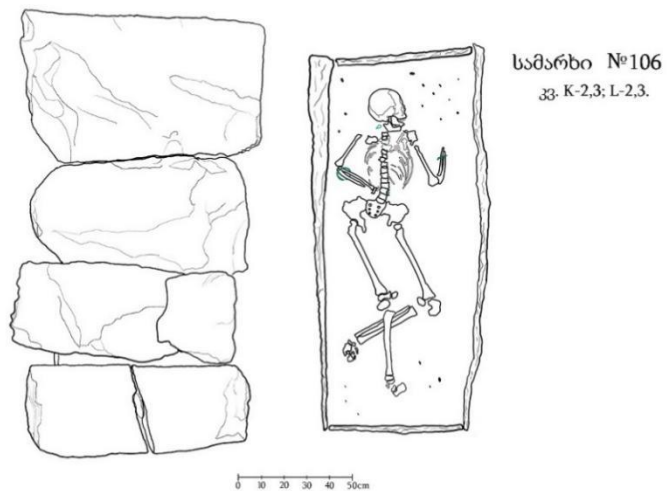
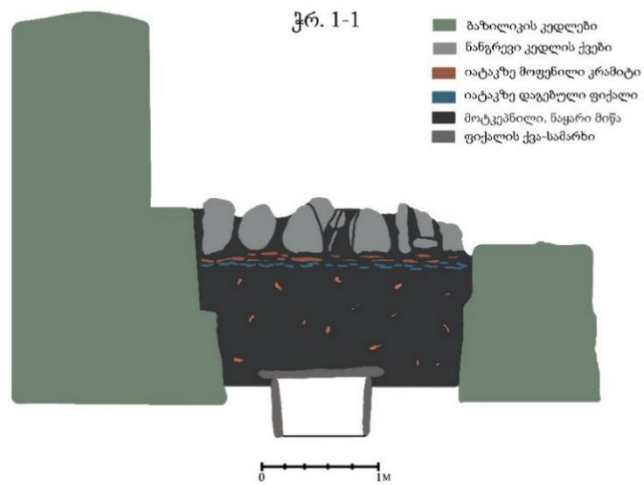
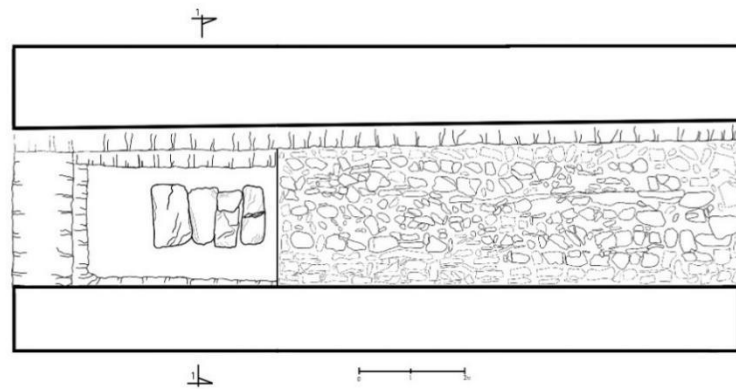


Fig. 9. Duruji Basilica: Tomb No. 106. Cutout section and drawing by V. Mamiashvili.



Fig. 10. Duruji Basilica: Jewellery accompanying the remains in Tomb No. 106, discovered in the Southern Gallery.

Tomb # 110. (Area A, sq. K-4, 5; L-4, 5). Length - 203 cm; width in the west - 92 cm; width in the east - 95 cm; height - 50 cm. It is oriented along the east-west axis. The sides of the tomb are constructed from four slate

stone slabs, while the covering comprises three roughly hewn flat stone slabs. The central slab was fractured due to the impact of several boulders that had fallen from the surrounding wall structure (This damage is likely attributable to an earthquake, after which the catacomb gallery was filled with earth and reinforced). The northern and southern longitudinal slabs are externally supported at their ends by two vertically leaning cobblestones, designed to prevent the vertical slabs from sliding outward. These cobblestones also served as supports for the flat roofing slabs. The tomb contained a minimal amount of earth. Two individuals were buried side by side. The burial sequence suggests that the individual on the northern side was interred later, as evidenced by the partial placement of their right arm bones over the skeleton of the southern individual. The burial posture reflects Christian traditions, with both individuals' hands positioned in the pelvic and chest areas. The tomb lacked inventory (Fig. 11).

The southwest corner of the stone box intersects with a pitcher in the utility room of the old basilica complex, which previously occupied the site of this gallery (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. South Gallery, Tomb No. 110. The roof of the sealed tomb in the open space beneath the floor, damaged by the collapsed wall mass. Large Duruji Basilica, South Gallery.

Tomb No. 111. (Area A, sq. K-6, 7; L-6, 7). The tomb measures 205 cm in length, with a width of 67 cm at the western end (head), 75 cm at the eastern end (feet), and a height of 36 cm. The stone box is oriented along the east-west axis. The tomb was roofed with three well-hewn and closely fitted slate slabs. Its sides are composed of four smooth, flat slate slabs. To prevent the vertical slabs from protruding outward, each is supported externally by a cobblestone positioned vertically at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners. A small amount of soil had entered the tomb due to water seepage. Two individuals were buried side by side within the tomb. The burial sequence indicates that the individual on the southern side was interred later, as this skeleton partially overlaps the remains of the individual on the northern side. The skull of the individual on the northern side could not be dissected. Both individuals' hands were placed in the pelvic area, consistent with Christian burial practices. The tomb contained no inventory.

Tomb No. 112. (Area A, sq. K-8, 9; L-8, 9). Length - 192 cm; width in the west - 76 cm; width in the east - 78 cm; depth - 41 cm. The tomb was roofed with two well-hewn slate slabs. The western slab, being larger, nearly completely covered the stone box, while the second slab sealed the remaining small opening at the eastern end. The sides of the tomb consist of four hewn slate slabs. To reinforce these sides, roughly hewn stones were placed externally at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners. A small amount of earth was present inside the tomb. Two individuals were buried side by side within it. Only the femur, tibia, and fibula were preserved for analysis. The tomb contained no inventory.

Tomb No. 113. (Area A, sq. K-9, 10; L-9, 10). Length - 207 cm; width west - 36 cm; width east - 49 cm; depth - 52 cm. It was roofed with two fairly well-hewn slate slabs. A single large slab covered most of the stone box, while a second slab sealed the remaining portion at the east. The sides of the tomb are constructed from four hewn slate slabs. To reinforce these sides, a cobblestone was placed externally at each corner—northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast. The tomb was free of ground mass. A single individual was interred within the tomb. The left (northern) arm was extended parallel to the body, while the right (southern) arm rested on the pelvis (Fig. 12).

Artefacts found in the tomb:

1. **Bronze Ring.** Round-section ring with a scratched cross-shaped ornament on a flat shield. The ornament is patinated and poorly legible. Diameter: 1.7 cm.
2. **Bronze Buckle (Part).** Height: 4.1 cm (see below).



Fig. 12. Tomb No. 113, located in the southern gallery of the large Duruji Basilica.

Tomb # 114. (Area A, sq. K-10, 11; L-10, 11). Length - 188 cm; width west (at the head) - 54 cm; width east (at the feet) - 52 cm; height - 39 cm. It is roofed with three well-hewn slate slabs. The sides of the tomb are constructed from four well-hewn slate slabs. To reinforce the structure, the northern and southern longitudinal

slabs are supported externally at their ends by two roughly worked flat stones placed vertically. The tomb contained two individuals buried nearly side by side. The burial sequence indicates that the individual on the northern side was interred first. During the burial of the subsequent individual, the remains of the primary burial were pushed aside, suggesting significant decomposition of the earlier skeleton at the time of the second interment. The tomb was free of soil mass introduced by water seepage and contained no inventory.

Tomb No. 115. (Area A, sq. K-11, 12; L-11, 12). Length - 204 cm; width in the west - 79 cm; width in the east - 84 cm; height - 35 cm. Originally, the tomb was covered with a single solid slate slab. However, under certain circumstances-possibly during an earthquake-this slab fractured into three parts. Subsequently, two smaller fragments from the western section were repositioned on the larger remaining eastern slab, creating a reconstructed roof. Additional small flat stones were placed beneath the corners of this shortened roof for support. The sides of the tomb are constructed from four hewn slate slabs. To prevent outward displacement, each slab is externally reinforced with cobblestone placed at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners. The tomb contained no soil mass. Two individuals were interred side by side. The first burial was on the northern side, while the second individual was placed on the southern side, partially covering the skeleton of the earlier interment. Both individuals had their hands positioned in the pelvic and abdominal areas. The tomb was without inventory (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Duruji Basilica, South Gallery. Two remains discovered in Tomb No. 115.

Tomb No. 116. (Area A, sq. K-13, 14; L-13, 14). Length - 198 cm; Width in the west - 77 cm; Width in the east - 81 cm; Depth - 37 cm. The tomb is roofed with two hewn slate slabs. The sides of the tomb are composed

of four hewn slate stone tiles. To reinforce the structure, a cobblestone was placed externally at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners of the tomb slabs. The tomb was free of soil mass. Two remains were found within the tomb. From each, the femur, tibia, and fibula bones were dissected for analysis (Figs. 14, 15).

The following artefact was discovered in the tomb: a bronze fragment of an iron buckle, measuring 4.5 cm in height (see below).



Fig. 14. Tomb No. 116, discovered in the southern gallery of the large Duruji Basilica.



Fig. 15. Tomb No. 116, discovered in the southern gallery of Duruji Basilica. The doorway and threshold in the south wall of the southern gallery, serving as the entrance to the underground space.

Graves in the chapel crypt:

Tomb No. 117. (Area A, sq. K-15, 16; L-15, 16). Length - 202 cm; width in the west - 54 cm; width in the east - 46 cm; height - 44 cm. The tomb is roofed with three fairly well-hewn slate slabs. The sides are constructed from four hewn slate slabs; however, the northern slab was later fractured into two parts due to external force. Each slab is reinforced externally by a cobblestone placed at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners to strengthen the structure. The tomb was free of soil mass. Inside the tomb, the remains of a single individual were found, with the hands positioned on the abdomen and pelvis. The tomb contained no inventory (Figs. 16–19).



Fig. 16. Tomb No. 117, discovered in the Chapel crypt of the southern gallery of Duruji Basilica.

Tomb No. 118.(Area A, sq. K-16, 17; L-16, 17). Length - 207 cm; width in the west - 61 cm; width in the east - 66 cm; height - 43 cm. The tomb, uncovered beneath the floor, is roofed with two well-hewn slate slabs. One slab nearly completely covered the tomb structure, while the second one sealed the small remaining space at the eastern end. The floor of the tomb was constructed from a single, well-polished cobblestone. The joints between the floor and the sides of the tomb, i.e. the ribs, were plastered with lime mortar. The sides of the tomb are composed of four solid slabs. The northern and southern longitudinal slabs were reinforced at both the top and bottom by well-hewn, vertically aligned flat stones (Figs. 17, 18). The tomb was almost entirely free of soil mass brought in by water. The skeleton of one individual was found in the tomb, which was severely damaged. Only fragments of the pelvis and skull could be recovered for analysis. The tomb contained no inventory (Fig. 20).

Each of the four “walls” of the stone boxes is constructed from at least one fairly well-hewn slab or a mass of rock broken off and subsequently shaped into a square plank. The longitudinal (northern and southern) stone slabs are slightly larger than the vertically inserted slabs that form the tomb's ends (top and bottom). Among these stone boxes, or sarcophagi constructed from stone slabs, only Tomb No. 118 features a solid stone floor. The floors of the other stone boxes are composed of either earth lined with clay or paving stones. Regarding the roofs, only two stone boxes are almost entirely covered with hewn stone slabs (with minor additions at the base), while the remaining tombs are roofed with three, four, or five slabs laid side by side, spanning the entire length of the tomb.



Fig. 17. Slate stone floor of Chapel crypt in the southern gallery. Photograph by V. Mamiashvili.



Fig. 18. Burials #117 and #118, discovered in the chapel crypt.



Fig. 19. Open stone boxes in the sacrificial chapel crypt of the southern gallery.



Fig. 20. Burial #118, discovered in the chapel crypt of the southern gallery.

Noteworthy is a distinctive feature of the construction of the stone boxes discovered within this crypt-corridor and chapel space, which sets them apart from other stone tombs studied in Georgia to date. Unlike other examples, the stone boxes here, entirely buried in the ground, did not require external supports to prevent the "side planks" from sliding outward or to distribute the weight of the roof slabs. Instead, once the stone box was installed, this structural function was provided by the earth, which was packed tightly under the mouth of the tomb and compacted into the voids left along the trench sides. To further stabilize the structure, transverse stone slabs were inserted between the longitudinal "planks" to prevent them from collapsing into the tomb's space. This technique is exemplified by all 109 tombs in the expansive crypt described above, located within the interior of Duruji Basilica itself, dating to the 9th–12th centuries, which serve as examples of such "ordinary stone boxes."

In the case of the stone boxes located beneath the southern gallery, where the vertical stone slabs of their sides were elevated above the ground even by 20–30 cm, it was customary to insert two stone blocks between the paved floor and the roof slabs at both the heads and ends of the "boxes," on the north and south sides. These "buttresses," partially anchored in the basement floor, not only helped distribute the weight of the roof slabs but also enhanced the structural stability of the tombs. This reinforcement effectively protected the longitudinal walls from collapsing outward into the surrounding space. Incidentally, this feature provides further evidence supporting the original catacomb design of this corridor.

Some tombs are individual, while the majority are paired. Anthropological observations suggest that these paired tombs contained the remains of a man and a woman buried side by side. The paired tombs were originally designed to be significantly wider—almost twice the width of those intended for single individuals. By all indications, these stone boxes were constructed as tombs for spouses. Similar open-space, vault-like crypt-galleries are a common architectural element in early Christian churches of the Roman and pre-Byzantine world. In Georgia, this architectural element was first identified in Duruji Basilica.

Of particular interest is Tomb No. 106, located in the extreme western part of this gallery, within the basement register. It was the first tomb to be opened, although, as we later discovered, it was chronologically the last burial in this catacomb. Like the other tombs, its stone box is carefully constructed using well-hewn, geometrically shaped tiles. The young woman interred in the tomb, surprisingly, was buried in a “semi-Christian” posture. As observed, the deceased appears to be lying on her back, but her legs are positioned almost sideways. The left leg is bent at the knee, with the shin crossed beneath the right leg. The right arm is bent and extended behind her back, where a silver ring was found on the phalanges of the fingers, fixed beneath the spine. The left arm is oriented toward the west.

Finally, the head of the deceased was turned toward the north, resting in profile. This burial posture appears to represent an intermediate form between the traditions of burying the deceased in a supine position and the pre-Christian custom of interring individuals on their side in a crouched, embryonic position, a practice widespread and almost universal in Georgia during the pre-Christian era. Adding to this observation are the intense traces of fire and remnants of coals lit within the tomb before the burial, likely as part of a ritual to “purify evil spirits.” This practice, characteristic of “folk” burial rites, was prevalent in late antiquity and occasionally persisted into the early Christian period. Taken together, these elements strongly suggest a semi-pagan character for this tomb, leaving little doubt about its transitional nature.

In the early Christian era, particularly during the 4th–6th centuries, instances of burying the deceased in pagan positions within the tombs of Christian communities were not uncommon in Georgia. However, such practices were predominantly observed in the mountainous and foothill settlements of Eastern Georgia. Similar burial practices have been documented by archaeologists in the tombs of Christian communities in the North Caucasus dating to the 8th–10th centuries, notably in Avaria (in territories presumed to correspond to Didoeti and Khundzakhi, located beyond the Caucasus within the Nekresi diocese) (Атаев, 1958:165, 179).

The custom of burying the deceased in such positions, even within explicitly Christian societies, is often attributed to the partial or complete retention of pagan traditions within the collective consciousness of the population. The extent to which Christian faith was deeply rooted in these groups remains uncertain: did they continue to worship pagan deities, or were they observing certain folk customs discreetly, away from the scrutiny of the clergy? It is noteworthy that such burial positions were predominantly associated with women (who were perhaps less familiar with the teachings of Christian sacred texts and, therefore, more likely to preserve ancestral traditions within the familial sphere) (Afkhazava, 1988:52, tab. 24, 26, 30).

This particular case stands out as unique thus far: in what was likely a prominent religious centre—a cathedral established during the advent of Christianity in Georgia—a noblewoman was interred in a semi-pagan manner (eventuality is excluded) in a repository adjacent to the naos, traditionally reserved for the eternal rest of the clergy of the highest rank, such as bishops. This suggests a significant compromise on the part of the clergy, either to the ancestral traditions preserved by this noble family or to the faith of this individual, possibly a mountaineer or a lady of North Caucasian origin. Such concessions, however, would have been inconsistent with the ideals of the full Christianization of the region.

Finally, the possibility cannot be excluded that the young woman buried in this tomb was a member of a Christian family but had not yet been baptized. After all, in Georgia, as in the Christian world more broadly, infant baptism had not yet become a widespread practice before the 5th century. Instead, the clergy often waited for young individuals to consciously express their desire to accept the Christian faith.

As previously noted, stratigraphic evidence confirmed in this part of the temple indicates that the tomb cannot postdate the destruction of the large Basilica, which occurred in the first half of the 6th century. One of the types of jewellery found in the tomb—a silver earring with a gilded pendant—has parallels in Georgian archaeological materials dating to the 5th century.

Additionally, the silver fibula-type artefacts discovered in the tomb have been attributed by various scholars to the 5th–6th centuries (Nioradze, 1926:21–22, Tab. II-28; Tkeshelashvili, 1959:322, Tab. II-Fig. 17; Tab. III-Fig. 13; Texov, 1987: Fig. 30-1; Kikvidze, 1961: Tab. 1:13; Mindorashvili, 2000:85, 92, Tab. II-28).

Furthermore, some researchers of Georgian and North Caucasian burials have also dated analogues of the remaining burial inventory, with varying degrees of accuracy, to between the 5th and the first half of the 6th century. (Chikhladze, 2005:207, Tab. II-182; Didi Mtskheta, 2016:100; Maisurashvili, 2018:165, Tab. LVII-9).

With an 80% probability, the calibrated date obtained from the radiocarbon analysis of a bone sample taken from the remains in Tomb No. 106 indicates a timeframe spanning the late 5th century to the first half of the 6th century. This evidence aligns fully with the observation that this burial is the last chronologically within the gallery-crypt (see below). Furthermore, the radiocarbon dating corresponds with the proposed classification of the burial inventory and the results of the architectural analysis concerning the period of functioning of the large Duruji Basilica.

Other tombs within this catacomb burial ground also date to the 6th century. Tomb No. 113 contained a fragment of an iron buckle, while the remains in Tomb No. 116 were accompanied by a fragment of a buckle and a copper ring (Fig. 21) (Aphkazava, 1979: Tab. XXXI-7; Воронов, 1982:157, Fig. 22-18; Афанасьев, 1979:49–50, Fig. 1-19).

Two burial stone boxes, located beneath the floor of the chapel to the east of the gallery and within the open-space crypt, must also date to the same period. Based on all stratigraphic evidence, these tombs (No.117 and No.118) were constructed during the operational period of the large Basilica.



Fig. 21. Duruj Basilica, inventory of Tombs No. 113 and No. 114, excavated beneath the floor of the southern gallery.

From a logical perspective, the arrangement of burials in the crypt beneath the described attic and basement of the gallery likely began in the east, originating in the crypt beneath the chapel.

In particular, Tomb No. 118, the first and most prominent burial site, distinguished by its meticulous construction (including a single-stone foundation and roof, and plastered sides for "hermetization"), was likely intended for a layman of very high rank. It is plausible that the design of the chapel and the crypt system was deliberately planned to accommodate the burial of this specific feudal lord and his wife. Following this reasoning, it is likely that his wife or direct heir was buried in Tomb No. 117, situated in the space immediately west of Tomb No. 118. Thereafter, the remaining tombs were arranged sequentially from east to west within the catacomb. This sequence reflects an effort to maintain minimal distance from the chapel altar and the grave of the most esteemed ancestor. For married couples, "two-place" wide stone boxes were pre-constructed,

anticipating the burial of the surviving spouse upon their passing. For unmarried young men, narrower, individual stone boxes were prepared.

Similar open-space vaulted crypts and catacomb-style galleries are characteristic architectural features of early Christian churches in the Roman and early Byzantine world. In Georgia, this design was first identified in Duruji Basilica.

It was established that, following an earthquake in the 5th century that partially damaged the temple, measures were undertaken to enhance the building's structural stability. The open spaces between the floors, originally covered with wooden structures, were filled with earth, and the wooden flooring was replaced with a compacted surface overlaid with poorly fitted slate stones. This intervention effectively created a more stable and seismically resistant foundation for the southern gallery and the southern wall of the basilica's central hall. However, the modification rendered the underground catacombs inaccessible, thereby preventing the performance of rituals such as anointing the bones with holy oil, burning incense, and other practices intended for the care of the deceased (Figs. 22–24).



Fig. 22. Duruji Basilica, zenithal view.



Fig. 23. Duruji Basilica, open stone boxes revealed in the southern gallery.

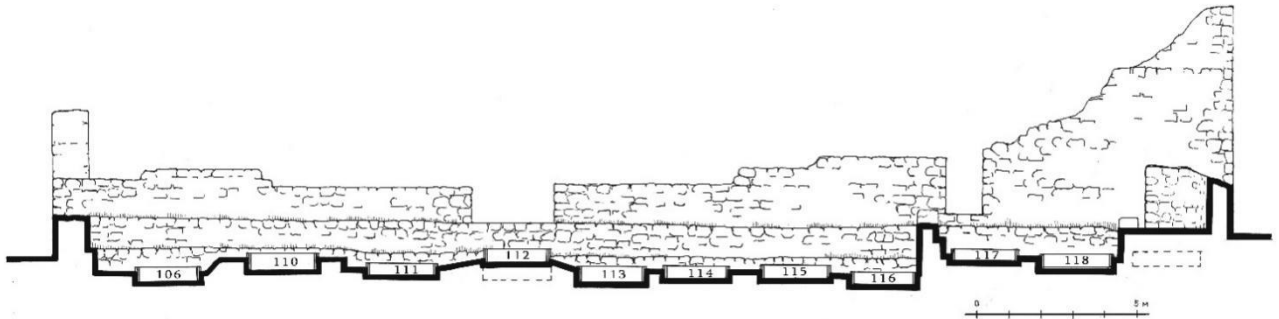


Fig. 24. Duruji Basilica, stone boxes revealed in the southern gallery.

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