

New considerations on the Uplistsikhe rock-cut ensemble (Georgia)

Nodar Bakhtadze^{1,2}

Abstract

In Georgia, in the river Mtkvari valley, artificial cavities complexes, dated back to the 11th century BC up to the 4th century AD, are found. The crowning touch of this kind of building is the great cave ensemble of Uplistsikhe. However, despite its almost 150-year study, the artistic and planning solution of this site and questions of its functional differentiation were challenged by Georgian scholars of different generations. Researchers expressed different, frequently diametrically opposed views on the purpose of the entire complex as well as individual cave facilities. This trend continues until now. Most researchers consider this site as a fortified city, and the caves forming it as part of the fortification or palace halls, household areas, theatre, and so on in use over the centuries. We think, that in some areas of Eastern Georgia, similarly to many regions of the Near East and the Mediterranean basin a tendency of the gradual assignment as burial and sacred functions to the complexes of the man-made cave settlements by the population is already attested in the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages. This tradition must have played a decisive role in the emergence of cave templar centers of the cult of the ancestors and other religions merging with it on the basis of rock settlements. The origin of the Uplistsikhe temple ensemble should be related to the same event. Throughout the Hellenistic period, large and small temples in Georgia were often carved into the rock. This tradition lasted until the Late Antiquity and was finally reflected in a large part of Christian monasteries.

Keywords: Georgia, rock-cut, Uplistsikhe, ensemble, temple.

Introduction

Uplistsikhe is an well-known, great rock-hewn ensemble in eastern Georgia, some 90 kilometers west of the city Tbilisi (Figs. 1, 2). The complex was cut in a flat,

straight, but slightly inclining mountain. The river Mtkvari itself closed access to the town from the south, but it was possible to get into the complex through a 3 m tunnel that functioned as a water supply. The tunnel was closed by a metal gate in case of invasion. Two



Fig. 1 – Uplistsikhe ensemble (photo N. Bakhtadze).

¹ Ilia State University, 3/5 K. Cholokashvili Ave, Tbilisi 0162, Georgia

² Georgian National Museum, 3 Rustaveli Ave, Tbilisi 0105, Georgia

Nodar Bakhtadze: phone + 995 32 2321582 - nodar.bakhtadze@iliauni.edu.ge

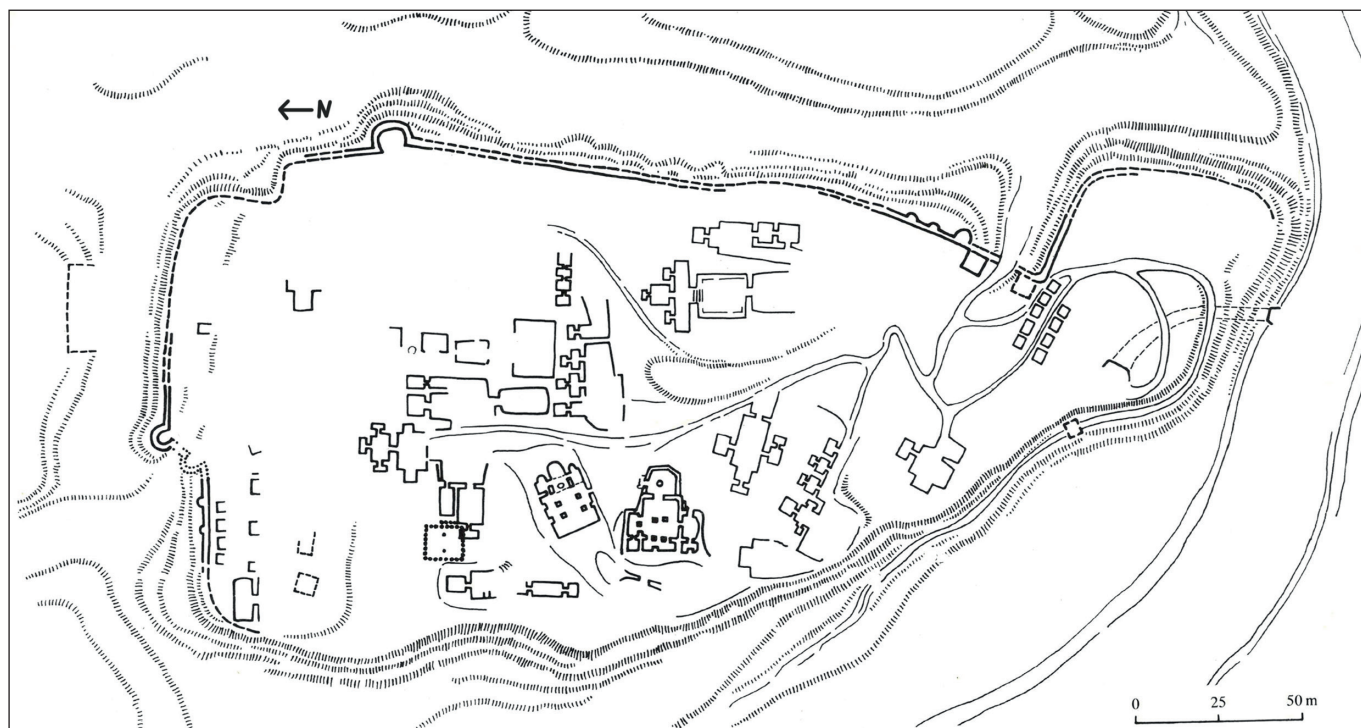


Fig. 2 – Plan of the Uplistsikhe ensemble (photo N. Bakhtadze).

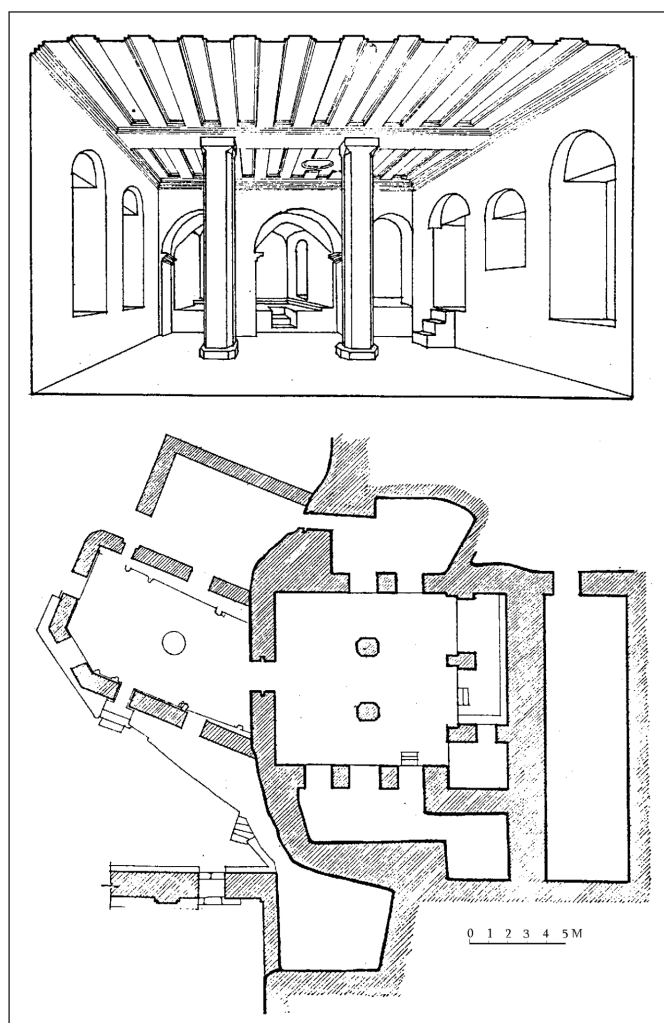


Fig. 3 – The Plan and interior of the rock-cut hall of Uplistsikhe (drawing B. Gabekhadze).

out of the three roads approaching the ensemble were not protected, but the third, coming from the north, was cut in the rock, with up to 10 m high walls.

The Uplistsikhe complex can tentatively be divided into three parts: south (lower), middle (central) and north (upper) covering an area of approximately 8 hectares. The middle part is the largest, it contains a bulk of the Uplistsikhe rock-cut structures. Among them, a ceremonial hall is the most notable. A pillared hall with two adjacent rooms is one of the most important structures in the ensemble (Fig. 3). Its ceiling was supported by two pillars. A stone bench, probably, served as a ruler's seat.

Most of the caves lack any decorations, although some larger structures have coffered tunnel-vaulted ceilings, with the stone carved in imitation of logs (Fig. 4). Some of the larger structures also have niches in the back or sides, which may have been used for ceremonial purposes. The decoration of the halls reflects both quite rich wooden interiors and Roman lacunas. The facade of the large ceremonial hall of the southern part is decorated by a Roman-type arch with pediment.

Approximately two decades ago, the view prevailed in Georgian and foreign scholarly circles according to which the origin of the Uplistsikhe ensemble was believed to be the earliest and the only pre-Christian rock-cut monument in Georgia. Despite its almost 150-year study, the artistic and planning solution of this site and questions of its functional differentiation were challenged by Georgian scholars of different generations. Researchers expressed different, frequently diametrically opposed views on the purpose of the entire complex as well as individual cave facilities. A part of the researchers considers this site as a fortress-stronghold

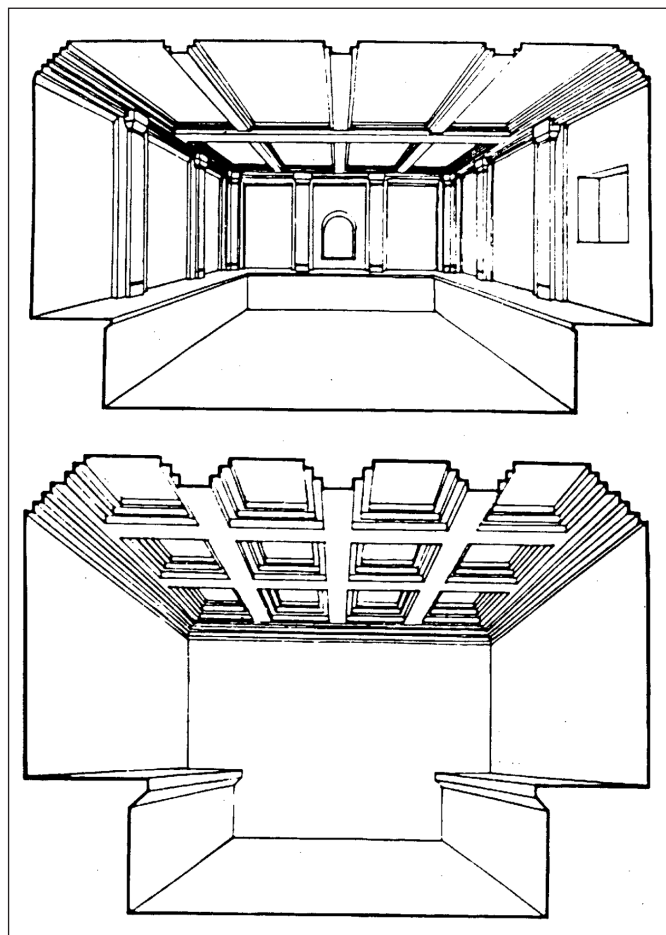


Fig. 4 – The interiors of the rock-cut halls of Uplistsikhe (drawing B. Gabekhadze).

or fortified city, and the caves forming it, respectively, as the fortification or secular purpose components (palace halls, household areas, theatre, and so on) (Beridze, 1974: 15; Amiranashvili, 1963: 81-85; Mepisashvili, Zinzadse, 1986: 41-42). Some scientists think Uplistsikhe is a complex of cave temples (Sanikidze, 2002). Several years ago, an absolutely original view was advanced, according to which the cave facilities of Uplistsikhe form a unity of rock-cut burials (Kipiani, 2002). The phenomenon of “sudden” creation of a plot rock-cut complex of Uplistsikhe on the Georgia territory, was explained by a famous German orientalist of the 19th-20th centuries C. Lehmann-Haupt as follows (Lehmann-Haupt, 1938: 245-246). He supported the hypothesis of the Georgian tribes’ migration to the South Caucasus from the territory of Corduene (North Mesopotamia, south of Lake Van) in the 1st millennium BC and believed that the tradition of carving caves was “imported” by this population from there. During the 20th century, this version of Uplistsikh’s origin was shared by many well-known Georgian scientists (Amiranashvili, 1963; Khakhutaishvili, 1964 and others).

We decided to verify this issue due to the following circumstances. The architectural masterpieces of all civilizations of the world, including the artistically planned cave complexes, are mostly the result of

long-term development of one or another style in a place. Of course, certain ethnic group, when migrating to other areas, could introduce a completely new style of buildings, but it was unlikely that migrants would create such a high-class architectural ensemble on the first attempt, and that too the only one. This critical view was reinforced by the landscape archaeological works conducted by us in a number of provinces of Eastern Georgia, during which we identified a number of cave complexes with quite archaic plans, completely undiscovered and unexplored before (Bakhtadze 2007: 62-79).

It turned out that directly in the province of Shida Kartli, adjacent areas of Uplistsikhe, distant from each other to some extent, several cave monuments were created in the Late Bronze - Early Iron periods. The age of their origin slightly predates the early stages of the Uplistsikhe construction. These ordinary rock sites, following definite reconstruction work, functioned actively in the Hellenistic period too.

The results of the archaeological research of the Shiomgvime Cave complex

The caves of Shiomgvime are located in the closest neighborhood of a large, famous Christian monastery. Hiding places and necropolises carved into the rock of pre-Christian times in many regions of the Eastern Byzantine world (Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, etc.) were very intensively used for monastery needs (Hirschfeld, 1992: 54-55; Gilli, 2017: 450 and others) So, the exclusion of similar phenomenon would not be legitimate in Shiomgvime either.

It could also taken into account that the layout of these caves does not at all correspond to the principles of rock monastery architecture of the Middle Ages: there are no churches, prayer niches, refectories so characteristic of Christian cave monasteries. On the other hand, a significant part of the caves, due to their rather complex spatial and planning solution, cannot be considered monk’s living cells or shelters. To carry out archaeological work from cave monuments in the vicinity of Shiomgvime, we chose a group of caves where the probability of finding tangible material from the most ancient phases of life was high (Fig. 5 A).

Our expectation was justified: in several of these caves, under very poor cultural layers of the developed and late Middle Ages, in the recesses of rocky floor, we found a certain amount of tangible material, fragments of pottery from various periods of pre-Christian times (Bakhtadze, Kipiani, 2000). For example, fragments of red-polished yellowish dishes are similar to pottery of the Ellenistic Hera found within the territory of Shida Kartli (Gagoshidze, 1981: 45-48) (Fig. 5 B). The material of this series certainly indicates that this complex of caves should have been created no later than the turn of the 2nd-1st millennium BC, and its earlier intensive reconstruction, expansion and use for various purposes took place in the early ancient, Hellenistic and subsequent periods. The hard-to-reach premises included in this complex are

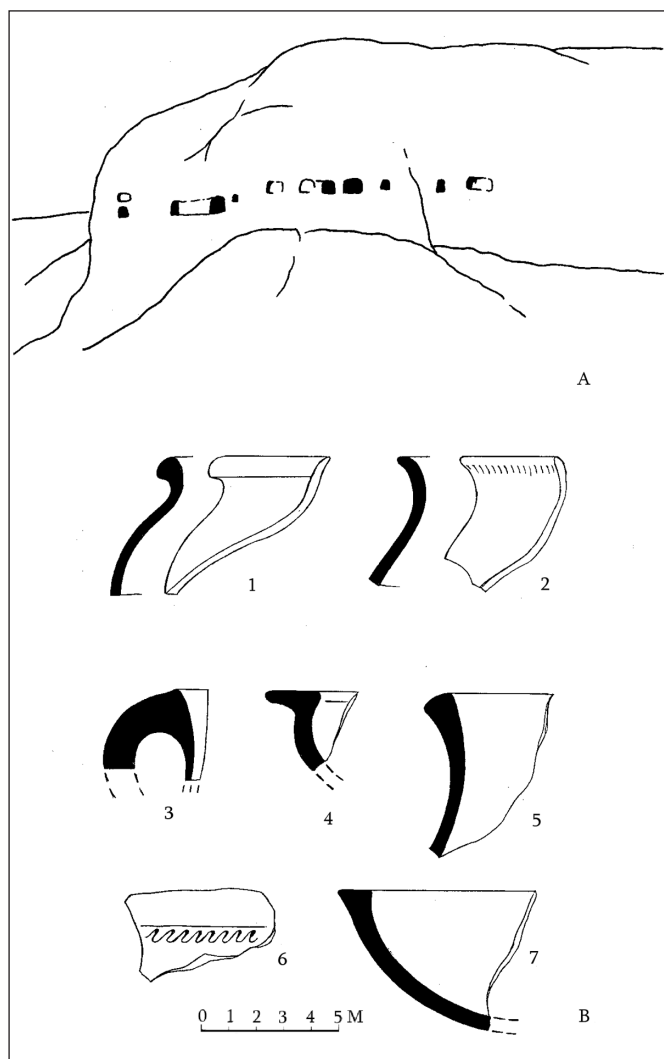


Fig. 5 – A) a group of Shiomgvine cave complex; B) pottery from this caves.

their creation for residential purposes is less likely. It is quite obvious that in their person we are dealing with a set of rock-cut tombs of a simple type, and the material found here is the remains of grave goods.

The results of the archaeological research of the Grakali cave complex

Grakali caves are carved in 4 tiers on the left slope of the Kura River gorge (Bakhtadze, 2002: 24-26). Up to 30 caves have been preserved, the vast majority of which are inaccessible today and we explored them using climbing equipment (Fig. 6). The caves are carved in easily processed calcareous rocks, so it was not difficult for their creators to obtain shapes that were close to geometric, and the rooms practically have a rectangular layout. In most premises, a trace of carving with a tetrahedral chisel has been preserved. Most of the premises included in the complex turned out to be very small in size - their length and width do not exceed 2-2.5 m, and their height varies between 1.4-1.7 m. The ceilings are all flat. Most of the premises are

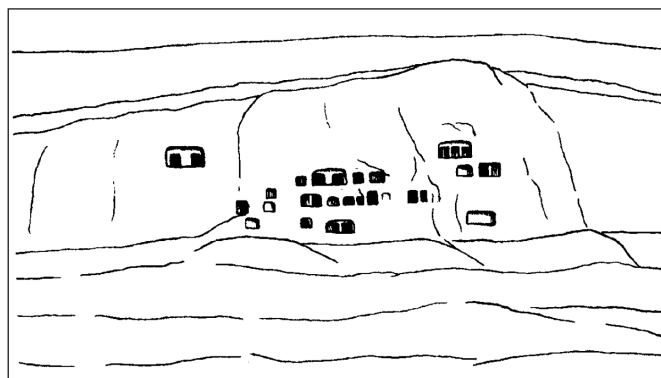


Fig. 6 – Grakali cave complex (drawing B. Gabekhadze).

isolated from each other and have very narrow and low (approximately 1.2-1.5 m high) openings and a high threshold protruded to the surface of the earth. Even though burial shelves and niches in the caves are not confirmed, based on the miniature volumes, low height and shapes of the entrances of these rooms, we think we are dealing with a system of rock-cut tombs of a simple type. The burial chambers have more or less close parallels both from the Uplistsikhe ensemble and the rock tombs of the ancient period in the countries of the Middle East. With repeated use of these cave complexes, the original cultural layers were destroyed. In return, the archaeological study of the directly front gentle slopes of the caves brought greater clarity to the establishment of the chronological framework in the origin and functioning of the complexes. In the material found here with the help of exploration tools, fragments of ceramic products of a well-known type from the archaeological sites of Shida Kartli in the first half of the 1st millennium BC were revealed (Lordkipanidze, 1989: 129-144). It is noteworthy that two shapeless pottery shards of this type of pottery were also found on the floor of one inaccessible small cave in the upper register of the Grakali caves.

The results of the archaeological research of the Kaspi rock-cut necropolis

In the nearby areas of Uplistsikhe, we also found a number of rock-cut monuments of the late Antique Period. The political and economic decline of the country and the consequences of the orientation of Iberian ruling strata towards Iran Parthian and Sassanian states (2nd-3rd cc AD) must be reflected in the architecture of the Kaspi rock-cut necropolis (Fig. 7), where, on the one hand, decline of the tradition of monumental rock architecture, as well as the Zoroastrian custom of burying nobles is in evidence.

In Georgian written sources, Kaspi is mentioned among the most ancient cities of Iberia (Bagrationi, 1959: 364, 366). The construction of Kaspi, like Uplistsikhe attributed to the legendary Ethnarch - *Uplis*. This is what led us to the idea to look for monuments of the ancient period carved into the rock and in the vicinity of the supposed localization of Kaspi settle-



Fig. 7 – Kaspi rock-cut necropolis (photo N. Bakhtadze).

ment. The study yielded an important result: in the area of the alleged localization of Kaspi settlement, we discovered a very interesting complex carved into the rock (Bakhtadze 2007: 66-73). The cave complex is carved into a cape-shaped massif of a hillock. They are badly damaged, the front parts of all of them collapsed, of the majority only minor fragments remain. Today, 4 of them have been preserved in somewhat complete form, and the remains of up to 10 caves make it possible to approximately reconstruct them. An architectural analysis of these monuments has led

us to the conclusion that before damage and later alteration, each of these structures was based on a similar planning principle, which we can learn from the example of relatively well-preserved caves. The first three caves in one cape are carved side by side, often with a four-sided metal tool (Fig. 8). There is no visible trace of wall wear. The plan of the caves approaches a round-angled square, and the ceilings are vaulted-lancet (dimensions No. 1 - 2.5x2.3m, maximum height 1.96m, No. 2: 2.4x2.3m, maximum height 1.6m). In the western and northern walls of both rooms, one round-angled shelf-bed (length 1.6-1.75m, width about 55-0.6m, height 0.65-0.7m) is carved, from the floor the shelf rises by 0.2- 0.5m. There were open vestibules in front of the caves, from where through low and narrow doors (height 0.65-0.9 m, width 0.5 m) one could get into the main rooms. The entrances are decorated with simply carved decorative frames. Cave No. 4 unlike the first three, does not have a vestibule, and the ceiling is 1.8 m high here. Opposite the entrance and in the right walls niche-shelves (1.75-1.8 x 0.6-0.9 m, height 0.6-0.8 m) are carved, out of which the sides and bottom of one of them are separated from the space of the room by thin partitions 15cm long. It is obvious that the attributes of the described caves, and especially the shelf-niches, were typical of the badly damaged caves preserved around them. Here we note that in the sheer rocks adjacent to the caves, such shelves are carved openly, without rooms. The shape and dimensions of the shelves are suitable only for the dead to rest there in an extended position. Low entrances suitable for one-time use and miniature dimensions of the rooms are also quite suitable for this

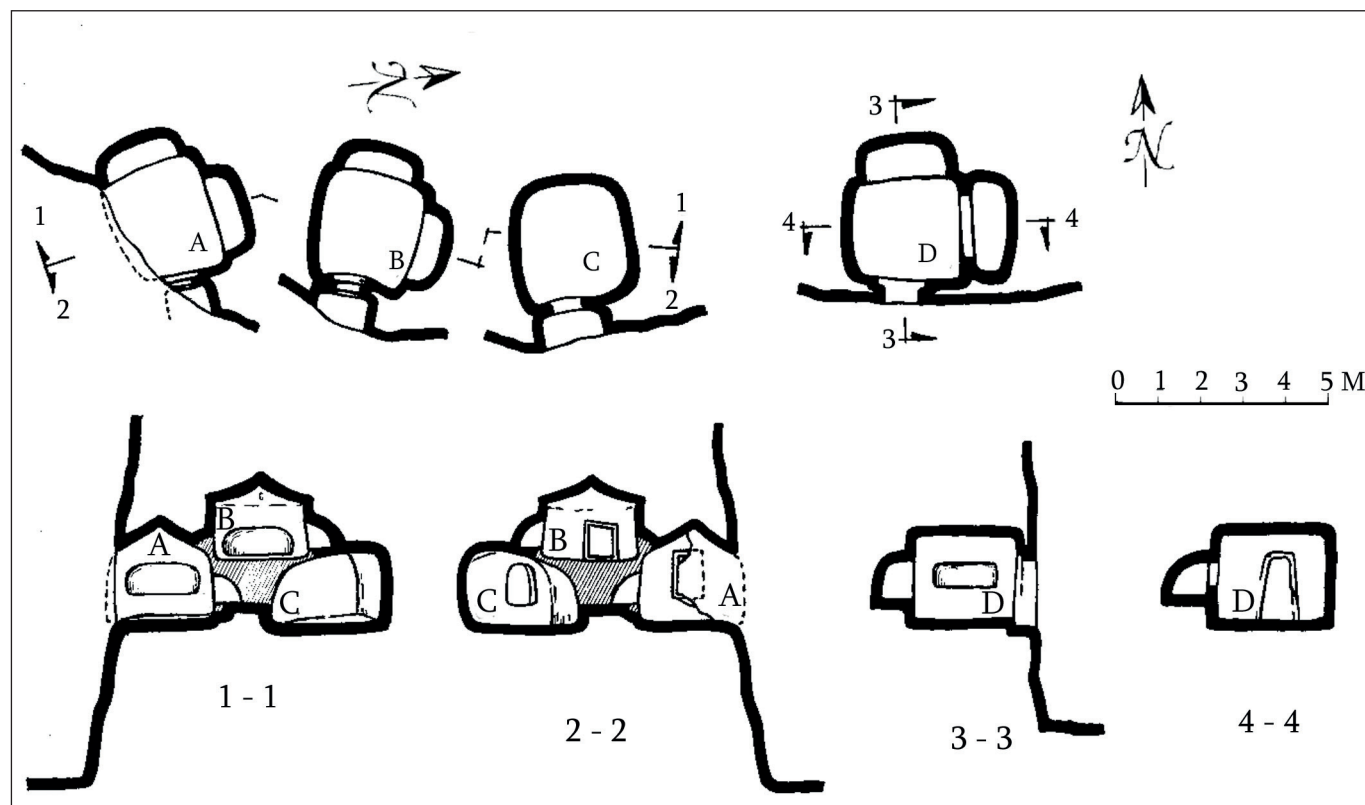


Fig. 8 – Plans and sections of Kaspi necropolis tombs (drawing N. Bakhtadze).

function. Thus, it can be convincingly said that this complex of caves cannot be anything other than a collection of tombs-mausoleums of a very mature type, a necropolis carved into the rock.

In these tombs, the bodies rested emphatically on different sides, perpendicular to each other, while in the walls opposite the chambers, shelves could be freely carved along the east-west axis. Thus, here there is a clearly non-Christian order of burials of the dead.

In a number of details, this monument is related to the samples created in the bowels of the Zoroastrian religions of the ancient Iranian world. Fire worship forbade the burial of the dead in the ground (the doctrine of Zoroastrianism, along with fire, recognized the holiness of the earth), therefore, even the kings and nobles of Media, creating rock tombs, did not insult the earth with corpses, since the rock was not considered earth (Boyce, 2001). The Kaspian necrop-

olis, given its size, almost indisputably points to the widespread in the territory of Shida Kartli during a not so short period of fire worship or some kindred religion based on this doctrine. Features of the architectural details of the Kaspian tombs should indicate the origin of this monument in the late Antic era. The functioning of the necropolis in this era is also confirmed by small red-colored pottery shards from late antique times, which we found in the recesses of the floor in the tomb No. 3, which may be accidentally preserved remains of the grave goods. We also think that such dating of the Kaspian tombs should indicate that, like some regions of the Middle East, in Shida Kartli, the ensemble of mausoleums-temples of Uplistsikhe, highly artistically carved in the early antique and Hellenistic style, was replaced by cave tombs created in the late Antique era by relatively modest architectural methods.

Conclusion

Finally, we can conclude that in some areas of Eastern Georgia, similarly to many regions of the Near East and the Mediterranean basin a tendency of the gradual assignment as burial and sacred functions to the complexes of the man-made cave settlements by the population is already attested in the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages. This tradition must have played a decisive role in the emergence of cave templar centers of the cult of the ancestors and other religions merging with it based on rock settlements. We think that the origin of the Uplistsikhe temple ensemble should be related to the same event.

In the process of the establishment and development of an ancient state in Eastern Georgia, in the wake of the political, economic and cultural developments in the Iberian kingdom, and in conformity with concrete cultic procedures, the scale of buildings of this type and architectural structures as well as the aesthetic aspect of their execution altered. Brilliantly designed and executed on the Classical-Hellenistic traditions Uplistsikhe constructions – accord well with the period of the ascendancy of the Iberian kingdom. It seems that throughout the Hellenistic period, large and small temples in east Georgia were often carved into the rock. This tradition lasted until the Late Antiquity and was finally reflected in a large part of Christian monasteries.

Bibliography

- Amiranashvili S., 1963, *History of the Georgian art*, Moscow, Isskustvo, pp. 81-85, [in Russian].
- Bagrationi V., 1959, *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia*. Kartlis Tskhovreba, Vol. IV, Sabchota Saqartvelo, pp. 364-366 [in Georgian].
- Bakhtadze N., 2000, *Genesis of rock-cut architecture and first stages of its development in Georgia*. Caucasian Messenger, 6, Tbilisi. pp. 22-30 [in Georgian].
- Bakhtadze N., 2007, *The genesis and paths of development of rock-cut architecture in Georgia*. Tbilisi, georgian national museum, pp. 62-79 [in Georgian].
- Bakhtadze N., Kipiani G., 2000, *The results of the archaeological exploration of the caves in the vicinity of Shio-Mgvime monastery*. Tbilisi, Proceedings of IV session of the Mtskheta institute of the Georgian Academy of sciences, Tbilisi, pp. 11-15 [in Georgian].
- Beridze V., 1974, *Old Georgian architecture*, Tbilisi, Khelovneba, p. 15, [in Georgian].
- Boyce, M., 2001, *Zoroastrians: their religious beliefs and practices*. London, Routledge, 252 pages.
- Gagoshidze I., 1981, *Samadlo*, 2. Tbilisi, Mecniereba, pp. 45-48 [in Russian].
- Gilli E., 2017, *From columbaria to dovecotes: two thousand years of use of cave dwellings in Ağırnas (Kayseri, Turkey)*. Proceedings of II International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities, HYPOGEA 2017, Cappadocia, pp. 446-453.
- Hirschfeld Y., 1992, *The Judean desert monasteries in the Byzantine period*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 54, 55.
- Khakhutaishvili D., 1964, *Uplistsikhe, I. The results of the archaeological research of 1957-1963*, Tbilisi, Mecniereba, 236 pages [in Georgian].
- Kipiani G., 2002, *Uplistsikhe*. Tbilisi, Logosi, 172 pages.
- Lehmann-Haupt C., 1938, *Introductory lecture on the histori and culture of the Khalds*. Proceedings of Tbilisi State University, VI. Tbilisi, 1938, pp. 245-267 [in Russian].
- Lordkipanidze O., 1989, *Heritage of ancient Georgia*. Tbilisi, Mecniereba, pp. 129-144 [in Russian].
- Mepisashvili R., Zinzadse W., 1986, *Georgien. Wehrbauten und Kirchen*. Leipzig, VEB E.A. Seemann Verlag, pp. 41-42.
- Sanikidze T., 2002, *Uplistsikhe. An essay on the history of Georgian architecture*. Tbilisi, Khelovneba, 196 pages [in Georgian].