

REVIEWS AND COMMENTAIRES

REPORT OF THE 2020 EXCAVATIONS
AT MACHKHOMERI
(KHOBİ MUNICIPALITY)

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Introduction

Machkhomeri is a hilltop site situated 100 metres above sea level and 3.5km to the northwest of Khobi, western Georgia (Fig. 1). Before the current excavations, the site had been surveyed by Nikoloz Murghulia, who provided a useful preliminary plan of the site and advanced a late antique chronology in 2010.¹ Excavations at the site commenced in 2018 with several trenches to test the potential of the site for future work and identify its main structural components.² It was clear by then that the site consisted of a fortified wall surrounding a large building, the function of which remained unknown until 2019. That year, more extensive excavations targeted the remains of this building, which revealed a church. The

2019 excavations uncovered the remains of a funerary chamber situated at the northeast side of the building.

Further excavations were conducted to the south, revealing the remains of an annex, which was interpreted as a *narthex*. By this time, the excavations had uncovered a wide array of artefacts, including several Greek inscriptions and limestone slabs displaying mediocre quality carvings of crosses and animals. Several of these inscriptions have already been presented to the scholarly community; although fragmentary, they provide invaluable information for this site, the ancient name of which remain unknown.³

In 2020, excavations resumed.⁴ Travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic prevented several team members from travelling to Georgia and joining the excavation. Therefore, this year's excavation was limited in staffing, expertise, and scope. The excavation was conducted in August and September 2020 and was designed to clarify the plan of the church – particularly its central component – as well as to uncover two structures associated with the fortified wall on the western sector of the hill.

The Church

The 2020 team experienced the usual hindrances associated with the excavation of a highly forested hilltop settlement in this part of Georgia. The main problem concerning archaeological investigations at Machkhomeri is the extensive vegetation cover and the impossibility of grasping the total extent of the site to the east of the church. In addition, the frequent interspersed trees and bushes appears to have hugely affected the stratigraphy of this site. The fill of the *naos* of the church, which is a 50–70cm deposit, and that of the northwest tower, appear to have no distinct stratigraphy because of the disturbance caused by the numerous roots.

¹ N. Murghulia, "The fortification system of Lazika (Egrisi) kingdom in the 4th–6th centuries (research into west Georgian castle)". FaRiG final report 2010 [available at: farig.org/images/pdfs/research-nikoloz-murghulia.pdf; accessed 15/11/2019], 33–34, 91.

² The first report of the excavations was published in 2020. R. Papuashvili, E.E. Intagliata, D. Naskidashvili 2020. "Excavations at Machkhomeri – Khobi Municipality. Preliminary report of the 2019 season." *Pro Georgia, Journal of Kartvelological Studies* 30, 121–134.

³ G. Chitai, R. Papuashvili, and A. Vinogradov 2020. "A new complex of Greek inscriptions from Machkhomeri fortress in Lazica." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 214, 169–178.

⁴ The excavations were conducted under permit N 6-17:60 granted by the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia. This year's excavation was sponsored by Khobi Municipality and the Danish National Research Foundation under the grant DNRFF119 – Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet). The authors are grateful to these institutions for their unwavering support. The materials collected during this season are housed at Kheta Local Museum.

The excavations in the church completely exposed the remains of the *narthex* and the *naos* of the building (Fig. 2). It has also clarified the relative chronology of the structure, which appears more complex than previously thought. The first phase of the *naos* identified this year consisted of a central nave and two lateral aisles divided by two rows of four square pillars. The nave was divided into two uneven spaces (Rooms E and F in Fig. 2) by a low, 16–17cm-high platform.

Only the remains of the pillars dividing the northern aisle from the nave survive, while those in the southern aisle were removed at a later date. The pillars, which stand on a slightly raised platform, were built with an *opus emplectum* technique, with a core of mortared rubble and faces of stone slabs. The length of their sides varies but generally fall between 70 and 75cm. They are placed at irregular intervals of 1.3m to 1.6m.

At a later stage, the pillars were abutted towards the interior of the church by rectangular pilasters, which survive in a poor state of preservation. Remains of these pilasters are still visible along the north and south side of the nave. The central nave (Rooms E and F) was paved with slabs of local white limestone on top of a 4–6cm-thick pinkish mortar bedding. The flooring extended onto the lower part of the walls, thus creating a low baseboard. The floor tiles are in a highly fragmentary state, and they are generally irregular in shape, although some are rectangular, squared, trapezoidal, triangular, or octagonal. In the southern sector of Room E, the floor exhibits a round motif with a central octagonal tile from which large triangular tiles with curved outer ends irradiate. Of the latter, only two tiles survive – one white and one light red in colour. Additional flooring was identified in the southern aisle, consisting of a hard floor made of mortar with a red-coloured surface. It is currently too early to know whether the nave floor and that of the southern aisle were installed simultaneously.

A third rearrangement of the church entailed blocking off the space between the pillars by walls. These walls are visible only on the northern side of the nave, where they were built on top of the white tile flooring. A blocking wall appears to have been constructed also on the slightly raised platform between Rooms E and F. Of this feature, however, little survives. The southern side of the nave was also rearranged: the pillars were removed, and a wall might have been constructed in their place. The blocking walls were constructed with an *opus emplectum* technique and made use of reused bricks and tiles. These materials could either have

been sourced from the original church when the building was in a partial state of disrepair or from other unknown structures at the site. The installation of these blocking walls effectively reduced the dimensions of the complex, which became a single-hall building.

Among the artefacts brought to light within the church during this season are three inscriptions. One, of which three fragments are preserved, reads 'And by the most holy bishop... with the *synodia*, and by... with the *synodia*, and by A... with the *synodia*, and by...'⁵ a continuation of the '*synodia*' inscription found in 2019. Another inscription is also fragmentary; on the two preserved fragments, it reads: '... from their own expenses all the craftsmen... took... presbyter... and a half...'⁶ suggesting that the construction of the church may have been a collective achievement sponsored by local inhabitants. The third inscription is a graffito on the back of what may be an altar screen: 'Theonas praying God; ...a enjoys her health'.⁷ Theonas is already known from one of the 2019 inscriptions. All these inscriptions can be dated paleographically to the 6th century CE.

Awaiting a complete study of the material brought to light during the 2018–2019 seasons, it can preliminarily be concluded that the church was constructed in the 6th century CE and underwent major transformations later on, including the addition of a *narthex* and a later rearrangement of the liturgical space. The latter, which is difficult to date at present, saw the *naos* shrinking within the limits of the nave of the original church. Other later additions, also difficult to date, include the construction of partition walls in the southern and northern aisles of the first phase of the church

⁵ + και παρὰ τοῦ ἀγιοτά[τ]του ἐπισκ[ό]που
μετὰ τῆς συνοδίας κ[α]ί τοῦ μετὰ
τῆς συνοδίας καὶ τοῦ Α[.....]
μετὰ τῆς συνοδίας καὶ τοῦ

⁶ [ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων ἀνα-]
λομάτων πάντες οἱ
τέκτονες καὶ[... οὐ-]
τως ἐλάβανον[ν ...
...]Β[...]

...]
...]ΟΥ
...] πρεσ-
β[...] καὶ ἡμις-
υ ...]τος.

⁷ [Θεῶ]νας ἐνγόμενος τῷ [θ(ε)ῶ],
...]α νημένουςα ἀπολαύ[ει].

and the foundation of a pseudo-circular structure in the northern part of the *narthex*.

Though an estimated two-thirds of the church has already been revealed, several questions remain unresolved. A relative and absolute chronology of the funerary chapel, Room D, has yet to be fully understood, although it is plausible that this was a later addition to the first phase of the church. It is also to be ascertained whether the first phase of the church identified this year was built on virgin soil or was installed on top of an earlier building. It is hoped that next year's excavations in the apse and the northern sector of the southern aisle will help answer these questions and clarify the chronology of the final phases of occupation of the building.

Fortifications – northwest tower and southwest building

The high vegetation cover on the hill has prevented us from fully understanding the extent of Machkhomeri's defences. However, it is now evident that the monument must have encompassed most of the hill ridge; the site was defended by towers, several of which were identified in 2019. At least on the northern and eastern sectors of the hill, the wall is approximately 0.8–1.0m thick, which is certainly not adequate to stop a medium-to-large-sized army from conquering the site. It is more likely that the wall was constructed as a deterrent against small-scale raids. Given the location of the site on a low hill ridge, the walls must have been visible from the valley; therefore, they might have also signified power and prestige in the historical landscape.

This year's excavation targeted the remains of the fortifications to the west of the church, particularly one tower to the northwest and a second structure to the southwest – either a second tower or a gate (see discussion below). Both features were clearly built contemporaneously with the curtain wall.

The tower is situated 21.5m to the northwest of the church (Fig. 3). The excavation aimed to clear the high vegetation cover from the structure, unearth its walls, and excavate its fill. The building is a 6 × 6m square; its walls are 0.8 to 1.0m thick and extend for up to 3 metres. No evidence of an entrance has been found. The building must have been frequented in modern times, perhaps for use as a temporary shelter, as suggested by modern artefacts recovered during the excavation of its fill. The modern frequentation and vegetation cover resulted in disturbances of the strati-

graphy inside the building. During the excavation of the fill, no significant diagnostic artefacts have been identified.

The second structure associated with the fortifications at Machkhomeri is located 23m southwest of the first (Fig. 4). Although this structure has preliminarily been identified as a tower, its function is not yet fully understood given the incomplete state of the excavation in this sector of the site. The feature is situated on a steep slope and, at the time of the excavation, it was scarcely visible, entirely covered by soil, bushes, and trees. Because of this obstruction and due to time constraints, this year's excavation aimed to clarify the size of the feature. This result was achieved by excavating a 0.5m-deep trench alongside the course of the walls. The vegetation cover inside the structure was also cleared, but its fill was not excavated. The structure is 9.1m × 5m, and its walls are approximately 0.8m thick. The walls extend for up to 2m in the northern part of the structure, while the walls are at a lower height in the rest of the building.

The excavation revealed a large, 1.6m-long block placed horizontally and flanked by vertically-placed stone blocks. The block may be a threshold. Given that the threshold opens westward, thence outside the area delimited by the fortifications, it is reasonable to conclude that this structure allowed access to the site. The excavation of the fill of the structure, which is planned for 2021, will clarify the function of the building and, hopefully, its chronology.

Conclusion

The 2020 excavations at Machkhomeri clarified the plan of the church, which in 2019 was thought to be a single hall constructed in one phase. The earliest construction identified during the 2020 excavation revealed a basilica-type church. Later, the church was converted into a single-hall church. The date of construction of the fortification remains to be clarified. The excavation of the northwest tower shed light on the plan of this structure but not its dating, while the function of the southwest building, either a gate or a second tower, has not been fully brought to light.

Summary

This article briefly presents the results of the 2020 excavations at Machkhomeri – Khobi municipality, western Georgia, which targeted the *naos* of the church and clarified its plan – a basilica-type building rather

than a single-hall structure, as postulated in our first report. In addition, two structures associated with the fortification wall to the west of the church were excavated, namely a tower to the northwest of the site and a building with a function that remains to be clarified. It is hoped that the 2021 excavations will help shed more light on the chronology of the final phases of occupation of the site and date the fortifications.

Report of the 2020 excavations at Machkhomeri
(Khobi Municipality)

This contribution presents the results of the excavations conducted at Machkhomeri in the summer of 2020, when the excavation team targeted the central sector of the church and, therefore, clarified the plan of the building and its relative chronology. Excavations of the fortification wall to the west of the church facilitated the investigation of two structures associated with the defence of the site, namely a tower and a building with a function that remains to be clarified.

Key words: Machkhomeri, Lazica, Late Antiquity, church, hilltop settlement.



Fig. 1. Drone photograph of the site seen from the north (D. Naskidashvili)

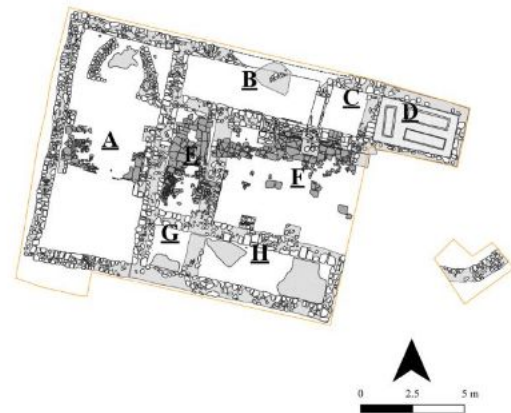


Fig. 2. Plan of the church (D. Naskidashvili, E.E. Intagliata)



Fig. 3. The northwest tower seen from the northwest (D. Naskidashvili)



Fig. 4. The southwest building seen from the south (D. Naskidashvili)