

THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE EASTERN BLACK SEA LITTORAL (WRITTEN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES)*

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Abstract

This article presents a brief summary of the literary and archaeological evidence for the spread and consolidation of Christianity in the eastern Black Sea littoral during the early Christian era (4th-7th centuries AD). Colchis is one of the regions of the late antique world for which the archaeological evidence of Christianisation is greater and more varied than the literary. Developments during the past decade in the field of early Christian archaeology now enable this process to be described in considerably greater detail

The eastern Black Sea littoral—ancient Colchis—comprises (from north to south) part of the Sochi district of the Krasnodar region of the Russian Federation as far as the River Psou, then Abkhazia as far as the River Ingur (Engur), and, further south, the western provinces of Georgia: Megrelia (Samegrelo), Guria, Imereti and Adzhara (Fig. 1).

This article provides a summary of the literary and archaeological evidence for the spread and consolidation of Christianity in the region during the early Christian era (4th-7th centuries AD).¹ Colchis is one of the regions of late antiquity for which the archaeological evidence of Christianisation is greater and more varied than the literary. Progress during the past decade in the field of early Christian archaeology now enables this process to be described in considerably greater detail.²

The many early Christian monuments of Colchis are found in ancient cities and fortresses that are familiar through the written sources.³ These include Pityus (modern Pitsunda, Abkhazian Mzakhara, Georgian Bichvinta); Nitike (modern Gagra); Trakheia, which is surely Anakopiya (modern Novyi Afon, Abkhazian Psyrtskha); Dioscuria/

* Translated from Russian by Brent Davis.

¹ For more detailed information, see Khrushkova 2002a; forthcoming.

² Khrushkova 1993.

³ In addition to the familiar summary of literary sources presented in *RE*, information on the historical geography of the eastern Black Sea littoral and on excavations can be found in Kacharava and Kvirkveliya 1991: 30-32 (Apsarus); 41-43 (Bata); 76-78 (Gyenos); 86-89, 234 (Dioscuria-Sebastopolis); 162-63 (Mokhore); 178 (Nikopsis); 181, 244 (Nitike/Stennetika); 221-23 (Pityus); 235 (Ziganis); 289-93 (Phasis). See also O. Lordkipanidze 1996; Braund 1994; Tsetskhladze 1994; etc.

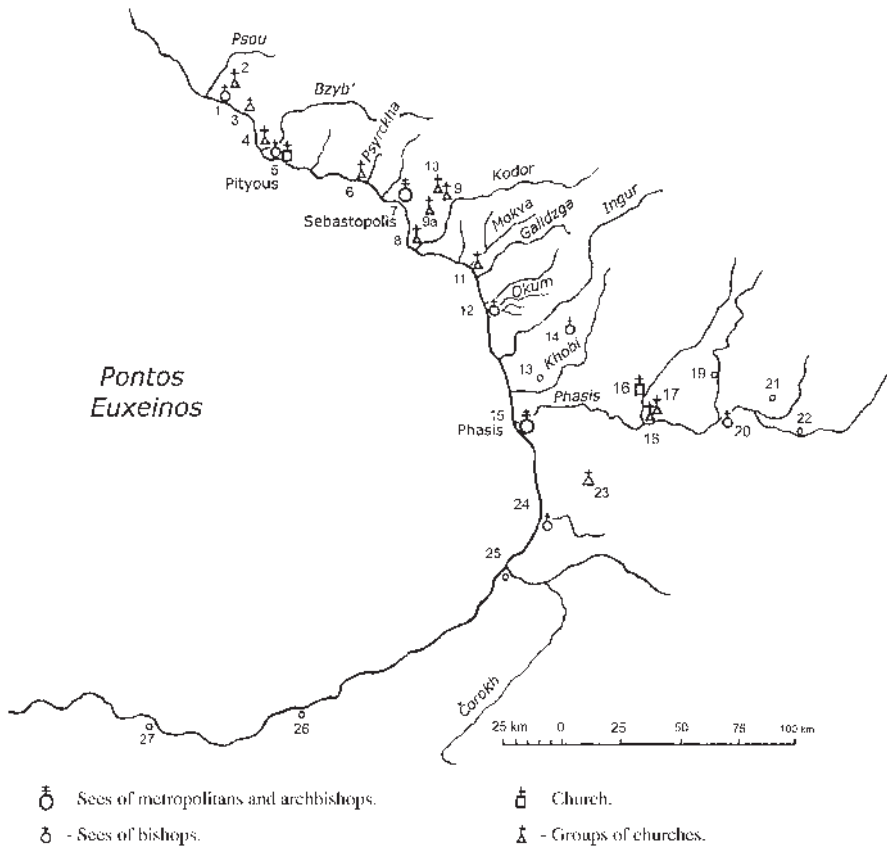


Fig. 1: Map of the eastern Black Sea in late antiquity.

1. – Tsandripsh; 2. – Khashupse; 3. – Nitike; 4. – Alakhadzy; 5. – Pityus; 6. – Anakopiya; 7. – Sebastopolis; 8. – Dranda; 9. – Tsibila; 10. – Shapky; 11. – Gyenos; 12. – Siganeon, Sicanabis; 13. – Khobi; 14. – Saisine; 15. – Phasis; 16. – Archaeopolis; 17. – Onoguris; 18. – Nodzhikhevi; 19. – Kotais; 20. – Rhodopolis; 21. – Skandéis; 22. – Sarapanis; 23. – Vashnari; 24. – Petra; 25. – Apsarus; 26. – Rhize; 27. – Trapezus.

Sebastopolis (modern Sukhum/Sukhumi, Abkhazian Aqwa, and the Tskhumi of mediaeval Georgian sources); Gyenos (near the modern city of Ochamchira); Ziganne, also Ziganis, Ziganeos (Gudava); Tsibilia, also Tsibilon (near the modern village of Tsebelda, in the valley of the same name); Archaeopolis (Tsikhegodzhi, modern Nokalakevi); Petra (modern Tsikhisdziri, in the opinion of most); and Onoguris (presumably modern Sepieti). Some of these are well known, having been

established as Greek colonies: Pityus, Dioscuria, Gyenos and Phasis.⁴ There appears to be no consensus about the locations of the others: Nitike, Trakheia, Ziganis and Petra. A number of monuments are situated in inhabited places, the historical names of which are unknown: Alakhadzy, Tsandripsh (Gantiadi), Khashupse, Aba-Anta, Dranda, Vashnari, Nodzhikhevi and others. For this study I have examined museum material and various elements of church decoration found in secondary use, in addition to the religious buildings themselves.

History of the Study of the Early Christian Monuments of the Region

This history of the study of these monuments could be said to begin with the works of the 17th-century Catholic missionary Don Cristoforo de Castelli, whose long labours in Megrelia resulted in an album of drawings and records.⁵ At about the same time, Megrelia was visited by Russian emissaries who attracted special attention to the state of Christianity in the region.⁶ Academic research in the eastern Black Sea littoral began later than in the neighbouring Crimea or in Asia Minor thanks to continued disturbances in the region in the first decades of the 19th century (especially in Abkhazia), Russo-Turkish rivalry, and Caucasian war. The first serious explorer, in a journey conducted in 1833 from Pitsunda to the mouth of the Ingur, was the Swiss scholar F. Dubois de Monpéroux (1798-1849); his work is particularly valued for its illustrations.⁷ It is possible to find some information on ecclesiastical buildings in the works of M. Brosset⁸ and D.Z. Bakradze,⁹ who were historians working in the middle and second half of the 19th century. In the second half and at the end of the 19th century, systematic expeditions were carried out by the well-known Russian scholars N.P. Kondakov,¹⁰ P.S. Uvarova¹¹ and A. Pavlinov.¹² The resulting 14-volume 'Materials on the Archaeology of the Caucasus', published by the Moscow Archaeological Society, still retains its significance. Architectural monuments were the priority, and brief archaeological projects rather bore the character of surveys, such as the excavations of V.I. Sizov at Sukhumi.¹³ Russian ecclesiastical historians also became interested in Abkhazia as the country of ancient Christianity.¹⁴

⁴ On the Greek colonisation of the eastern Black Sea littoral, see Tsetskhladze 1998.

⁵ Translation of this source into Georgian: Giorgadze 1976.

⁶ Likhachev 1954

⁷ Dubois de Monpéroux 1839 (and Atlas 1843).

⁸ Brosset 1851.

⁹ Bakradze 1875.

¹⁰ Kondakov 1876; Tolstoi and Kondakov 1891, 36-111.

¹¹ Uvarova 1894; 1891.

¹² Pavlinov 1893.

¹³ Sizov 1889. On the study of the monuments of antiquity, see Chernyavskii 1879.

¹⁴ A.L. 1885.

Thus, by the start of the 20th century, no broad archaeological exploration had yet been conducted in the eastern Black Sea littoral. The Abkhazian Scientific Society was created in the 1920s; its member, archaeologist A.S. Bashkirov, investigated the monuments at Sukhumi and Pitsunda.¹⁵ Then, in the 1930s, a student of local lore, I.E. Adzinba, gathered information on the mediaeval architectural monuments of Abkhazia.¹⁶ At that same time, the well-known archaeologist and Byzantinist A.M. Schneider was invited to investigate Archaeopolis-Nokalakevi;¹⁷ and the architectural historian G.N. Chubinashvili began studying the still-unexcavated Church of the Forty Martyrs in Nokalakevi.¹⁸

In the 1950s, and then more intensively in the 1970s and 1980s, a great deal of archaeological research was conducted on the late antique, early Christian and mediaeval monuments of the eastern Black Sea littoral. The principal centres that undertook this work were the Dzhavakhishvili Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography, Georgian Academy of Sciences; the Guliya Abkhazian Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Georgian Academy of Sciences (now the Humanities Research Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Abkhazia), in Abkhazian territory; and the Berdzenishvili Batumi Research Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, in Adzhara. The important excavation of Pityus was carried out under the direction of A.M. Apakidze, and later under G.A. Lordkipanidze.¹⁹ I.I. Tsitsishvili studied the early Christian complex within the walls of the town.²⁰ V.A. Lekvinadze proposed his own interpretation of the monuments discovered in Pityus.²¹ Outside the town walls, T.M. Mikeladze excavated the ruins of a double-apse church.²² Lordkipanidze and Z.V. Agrba investigated the remains of a religious complex situated near a large mediaeval church at Pitsunda.²³ Later, this complex was re-examined in order to establish the plans of its original construction and subsequent rebuilding.²⁴ Lordkipanidze excavated part of the Late Roman necropolis at Pityus.²⁵ It is worth noting that the habitation levels of the Classical period at Pityus have not been uncovered, and that due to the presence of groundwater at the site, archaeologists have nowhere reached virgin soil.

¹⁵ Bashkirov 1926.

¹⁶ Adzinba 1958.

¹⁷ Schneider 1931.

¹⁸ Chubinashvili 1970.

¹⁹ A. Apakidze 1975; 1977; 1978.

²⁰ Tsitsishvili 1977.

²¹ Lekvinadze 1968a; 1970b; Khrushkova 2002a, 67-91.

²² Mikeladze 1963; Khrushkova 2002a, 91-96.

²³ G. Lordkipanidze and Agrba 1982; Agrba 1985.

²⁴ Khrushkova 1985, 64-66; 2002a, 97-110.

²⁵ G. Lordkipanidze 1991.

Near Pityus, in the village of Alakhadzy, Apakidze and Agrba uncovered a large basilica.²⁶ Our own excavations completed the study of this complex: the plan of the early basilica and the character of its reconstruction were clarified, and the mediaeval church was entirely excavated.²⁷ The principal religious centre of Abazgia was Tsandriph, where I conducted the excavation of a large basilica in 1980.²⁸ Previously, this monument had been studied by Lekvinadze.²⁹ In the Khashupse gorge, on the summit of a mountain 7 km from the shore, stands a large fortress, as yet unstudied; within its walls lies a small church which the architect T.V. Zantariya and I measured in 1980.³⁰

In Gagra, 17 km south-east of Tsandriph, a single-nave church is situated; it had been heavily rebuilt in the second half of the 19th century, and was not excavated.³¹ Still another single-nave church with annexes was found in the fortress of Aba-Anta, on the outskirts of the large village Lykhni, in the Gudauta district. It was excavated by L.A. Shervashidze and dated to the 7th-8th centuries.³² In 1986, L.A. Bolshakov and I carried out a new measurement of this church;³³ and having freshly examined it in the summer of 2003, I am now of the opinion that it is a mediaeval construction, probably of the 10th century.

Let me move on now to the monuments of Apsilia. Archaeological exploration of Sebastopolis was made difficult by the fact that it sits beneath the modern town of Sukhumi. In the 1950s and 1960s, work was conducted in a narrow zone along the shore by Apakidze, O.D. Lordkipanidze, M.M. Trapsh, L.N. Solovyev, Shervashidze and Lekvinadze.³⁴ Later, together with M.M. Gunba, and with the participation of B.S. Kobakhiya and M.K. Khotelashvili, I resumed excavations in a broader area.³⁵ It was at this time that the first early Christian church at Sebastopolis was discovered.³⁶ S.M. Shamba, studying the ancient Gyenos, uncovered a single-nave church in a Late Roman level, with the assistance of Kobakhiya and myself.³⁷ In Ziganis, P.P. Zakaraya and Lekvinadze discovered a baptistery, part of a religious complex that had been destroyed by the mouth of the River

²⁶ Agrba 1972.

²⁷ Khrushkova 1985, 66-68; 2002a, 119-36

²⁸ Khrushkova 1985, 15-16; 2002a, 137-84.

²⁹ Lekvinadze 1970a.

³⁰ Khrushkova 2002a, 185-86.

³¹ Didebulidze 1977; Khrushkova 2002a, 186-89.

³² Shervashidze 1979.

³³ Khrushkova 2002a, 189-91.

³⁴ Lekvinadze 1966; Trapsh 1969, 285-362.

³⁵ Gunba and Khrushkova 1989; 1990a; 1990b.

³⁶ Khrushkova 1995a; 1995b; 2002a, 195-259.

³⁷ Kobakhiya *et al.* 1987; S. Shamba 1988, 50-61; Khrushkova 1985, 70-71; 2002a, 273-90.

Okum.³⁸ The large domed church in the village of Dranda was not excavated, though architects and restorers found amphorae lying in a ceiling-vault.³⁹ All of these monuments are situated in the coastal area.

As for the mountainous part of Apsilia, particularly the valleys of Tsebelda: a late antique necropolis was actively explored by Trapsh, G.K. Shamba, Gunba, Y.N. Voronov, O.K. Bgazhba and others.⁴⁰ The fortress of Tsibilia was studied under the direction of Voronov.⁴¹ In 1977-79 I investigated the religious complex on the summit of the cliff ('Church Hill'), consisting of two early Christian churches and a mediaeval one.⁴² The chronology of the Apsilian tombs remains in dispute;⁴³ also variously dated are the Christian objects (not large in number) found in the burials.⁴⁴ In this same region of Tsebelda, single-nave churches of the 6th century were uncovered in the fortress of Shapky⁴⁵ and in the village of Mramba,⁴⁶ where slabs engraved with early Christian symbols had earlier been found.⁴⁷

Archaeopolis, the main city of the Lazica, was studied by an expedition directed by Zakaraya, and with the participation of N.Y. Lomouri, T.V. Kapanadze, Lekvinadze and others. Here were uncovered complexes of defensive, public, domestic and ritual buildings. The most comprehensive work on the ecclesiastical architecture of Archaeopolis and its environs is that of Kapanadze;⁴⁸ while articles by Lekvinadze contain the principal observations and conclusions regarding the basilicas of Lazica: Archaeopolis,⁴⁹ Vashnari,⁵⁰ Sepieti and Petra.⁵¹

After an interruption caused by political instability, excavations resumed at the Sukhumi (now Sukhum) fortress. A.N. Gabeliya is successfully studying one of the urban quarters of Sebastopolis. At a neighbouring site in 2001-03, Y.V. Gorlov,

³⁸ Zakaraya and Lekvinadze 1974; Zamtaradze 1979; Khrushkova 2002a 331-32.

³⁹ Tsintsadze 1979; Khrushkova 2002a, 259-71.

⁴⁰ Voronov 2003.

⁴¹ For a summary of the work in Tsebelda, see Voronov 1998.

⁴² Khrushkova 1982; 2002a, 291-322. On some details uncovered later when the church was re-examined, see Voronov *et al.* 1986.

⁴³ Besides Voronov 1998, on the dates of the Tsebelda necropoleis see Gei and Bazhan 1997, 9-30, 54-62. Voronov follows the chronological scheme of A.K. Ambroz, which is disputed by other archaeologists, see Kazanski and Soupault 2000, 262-68.

⁴⁴ Khrushkova 2002a, 327-30, Voronov 2003, figs. 27.7, 74.23, 114.10, 125.6, 125.22, 191.2, 207.5.

⁴⁵ O. Bgazhba 1985; Khrushkova 2002a, 322-23.

⁴⁶ Voronov *et al.* 1985; Khrushkova 2002a, 323-27.

⁴⁷ Khrushkova 1980, 32-33.

⁴⁸ Kapanadze 1991.

⁴⁹ Lekvinadze 1974.

⁵⁰ Lekvinadze 1972.

⁵¹ Lekvinadze 1973.

D.S. Bzhaniya and M.G. Abramzon uncovered a small basilica adjoining an octagonal church that I excavated in 1990-92.⁵²

At the end of the 1980s, due to the political changes taking place in Eastern Europe, Western European historians and archaeologists became more interested in the history of Colchis in late antiquity and the early Christian period. In the encyclopaedia *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, O.D. Lordkipanidze and H. Brakmann published the article 'Iberia', which contained much information not only on the Iberia of the ancient authors, but on Colchis as well.⁵³ In D.C. Braund's book *Georgia in Antiquity*, the history of Lazica in the time of Justinian is examined in detail.⁵⁴ An article by W. Seibt is devoted to the history of Lazica.⁵⁵ One of the long-established meetings of historians and mediaevalists at Spoleto was devoted to the Caucasus; issues raised in this present article were discussed in several of the papers.⁵⁶ The frequently disputed problems of historical geography have always attracted interest.⁵⁷ A number of maps in the *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* depict the Caucasus in late antiquity and in the early Christian period.⁵⁸ The overall problems of historical geography are discussed by R.H. Hewsen in his monograph on the *Geography of Anania of Shirak*.⁵⁹

Scholars have lately turned their attention back to well-known written sources: Strabo's data on Georgia was re-examined by O.D. Lordkipanidze.⁶⁰ A new edition of the corpus of documents associated with St Maximus the Confessor has appeared.⁶¹ In the pages of *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*⁶² we encounter many individuals active in Lazica and Abazgia in the 5th-6th centuries. B.G. Hewitt examined some linguistic aspects of the ethnic history of the Abazgians,⁶³

⁵² In August 2003 I was shown the basilica by colleagues who had excavated it. They considered it to date to the time of Justinian (Abramzon *et al.* 2003, 99-104). In my opinion, the newly excavated basilica and the octagonal church were parts of a single architectural complex from the beginning of the 5th century. I took part in the excavation and measurement of the basilica in order to assess this supposition. By the time the western part of the basilica had been excavated, the supposition had been verified.

⁵³ O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994. For brief notes about the Abazgians and Apsilians, following up *RE*, see *Neue Pauly. Encyclopädie der Antike* 1, 7-8 (D. Sigel), 916 (A. Plontke-Lüning).

⁵⁴ Braund 1994. For a critical discussion of this book, see Wheeler 1994-96; Khrushkova 1996; Tsatskhladze 1996.

⁵⁵ Seibt 1992.

⁵⁶ Outtier 1996; Carile 1996b; Van Esbroeck 1996; Giardina 1996; Seibt 1996.

⁵⁷ Bryer 1966; 1967; Bryer and Winfield 1985, 325-26, 346-47; Zuckerman 1991, 527-40.

⁵⁸ *TAVO B VI* 11 (S. Pirker, S. Timm and T. Mallmann); *TAVO B VI* 14 (R.H. Hewsen).

⁵⁹ Hewsen 1992, 112, 125-27, 328.

⁶⁰ O. Lordkipanidze 1996.

⁶¹ Allen and Neil 1999; 2002.

⁶² Martindale 1989; 1992.

⁶³ Hewitt 1990-91b – in debate with Gamkrelidze 1990-91.

and is also responsible for a note on the etymologies of the toponyms Bichvinta/Pitsunda.⁶⁴

The number of archaeological publications is increasing. Some of them contain historiographical information,⁶⁵ while others address specific types of monuments, sites and objects, such as an inventory of late antique Apsilian burials,⁶⁶ or the detailing of Byzantine marble decoration.⁶⁷ Information is emerging about new excavations in the territory of Adzhara.⁶⁸ A characteristic feature of recent years is a multiplication of the number of works of Georgian and Russian authors published in Eastern European languages. They are dedicated to such topics as the excavations of Archaeopolis and the problems of the history of Lazica (Egrisi),⁶⁹ architectural constructions,⁷⁰ mosaic pavements,⁷¹ the burials of Apsilian elites,⁷² and a defensive complex known as the 'Abkhaz/Kelasurskaya Wall'.⁷³

Written Sources on the Spread of Christianity

Christianity permeated Colchis through Roman coastal towns and fortresses. The system of Roman defences in the eastern Black Sea littoral, which Lekvinadze called the Pontic *limes*,⁷⁴ includes a series of forts along the shore. Arrian, in his *Periplus Ponti Euxini* (AD 130 or 131),⁷⁵ mentions Apsarus (modern Gonio) at the mouth of the River Chorokhi, Phasis (modern Poti) at the mouth of the River Phasis, and Sebastopolis, which at this time marked the limit of Rome's possessions.⁷⁶ A similar picture is provided in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*:⁷⁷ Apsaro (Apsarus), Phasin (Phasis), Sicanabis (Ziganis),⁷⁸

⁶⁴ Hewitt 1990-91a.

⁶⁵ Bortoli-Kazanski and Kazanski 1987.

⁶⁶ Kazanski 1991, 488-93; Soupault 1995.

⁶⁷ Djobadze 1984; Barsanti 1989.

⁶⁸ Kakhidze and Plontke-Lüning 1992; Geyer and Mamuladze 2002; Geyer 2003. See also Tsetskhladze 1999.

⁶⁹ Lomouri 1969; 1985; Zakaraya *et al.* 1979.

⁷⁰ Zakaraya 1987; Khrushkova 1981; 1989a; 1989b; 1990; 1995b; 1998; 1999; 2002b.

⁷¹ Odišeli 1995.

⁷² Voronov 1995.

⁷³ Aleksidze 2000, 673-81.

⁷⁴ Lekvinadze 1969. N.Y. Lomouri denies the existence of a Roman *limes* in the eastern Black Sea littoral: Lomouri 1981, 279; 1986.

⁷⁵ On a now-lost stone with a Latin inscription found at Sukhumi in the 19th century can be read the remains of the names of Hadrian and Arrian (Elnitskii 1964; Braund 1994, 195).

⁷⁶ *RE* II.3, 955-56.

⁷⁷ Facsimile edition, with commentary: E. Weber (Graz 1976). Podossinov 2002, 297-378.

⁷⁸ The point under the name 'Zigana' is situated 55 km from Trapezus (Zuckerman 1991, 534). Hewsens places Ziganis at the modern village of Igana, between Phasis and Rodopolis (Hewsens 1992, 127 n. 12; *TAVO* B VI 14 [Hewsens]).

Cyanes (Gyenos)⁷⁹ and Sebastopolis. Of the cities named, early Christian buildings have been uncovered at Sebastopolis, Gyenos and Ziganis.

Judging by the *Notitia Dignitatum* assembled around the beginning of the 5th century,⁸⁰ Roman troops were stationed in Valentia, Ziganis, Sebastopolis, Mochore and Pithiae (Pityus) during the reign of Theodosius II.⁸¹ The location of some of these places continues to be disputed. Lekvinadze placed Valentia in Apsarus,⁸² and Mochore in Mamai-kala near Sochi. In the opinion of Lomouri, and later of C. Zuckerman, the series of places in the *Notitia* are situated not in Colchis, but in Turkish territory. Zuckerman supposes that Colchian Sebastopolis was renamed Valentia, and he places Mochore in Asia Minor.⁸³ Curiously, the written sources and archaeological evidence are not always in agreement. A brick with the stamp VEXFA was found in Tsikhisdziri (Petra) near Batumi;⁸⁴ Lekvinadze dates it to the 2nd-3rd centuries and supposes that the mark was the stamp of two legions, Fulminata and Apollinaris.⁸⁵ M.P. Speidel, and after him Braund, dated this brick to the beginning of the 4th century, and believed that it came from a 'Phasian' or 'Phasiac' vexillation.⁸⁶ Such a vexillation is unknown; while the legion XV Apollinaris is attested in this region in a single piece of evidence—tiles with the legion's insignia have been discovered at Pityus in 2nd-3rd-century levels,⁸⁷ and also at Sebastopolis in levels from the end of the 4th century.⁸⁸

Thus, under Theodosius II, Pityus (the Πιτυοῦς ὁ μέγας of Strabo 11. 2.14)⁸⁹ found itself within imperial borders. The presence there of a church organisation in Constantine's time, as well as the custom of banishing Christian soldiers there during the period of the Diocletian persecutions, could point to the presence of Roman

⁷⁹ G. Guliyā supposed that the Greek 'Gyenos' originated from the Abkhazian toponym *Dyuan* 'dry meadow' (S. Shamba 1998, 9-12).

⁸⁰ Edition of the text by O. Seeck (Berlin 1876; repr. Frankfurt 1962), 83-85. On specifying the date of the *Notitia*, see Zuckerman 1998.

⁸¹ P. Peeters considered the unusual form 'Pithiae' to be a copyist's error (Peeters 1932, 13 n. 2). However, it also appears later in Byzantine sources.

⁸² Lekvinadze 1969, 82. D.C. Braund is of the same opinion (1994, 265).

⁸³ Zuckerman 1991, 530-32. So far there is no evidence to support this hypothesis.

⁸⁴ On the identification of Petra with modern Khopa in Turkey, and of Mochore with Tsikhisdziri, see Inaishvili 1991, 10-12. However, the majority of scholars identify Petra with Tsikhisdziri (Seibt 1992, 142-43 n. 29; Braund 1994, 294 n. 112; Bryer and Winfield 1985, 1, 326, 349 n. 26).

⁸⁵ Lekvinadze 1967.

⁸⁶ Braund 1994, 189. For the same opinion, see O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994, 77.

⁸⁷ Kiguradze *et al.* 1987.

⁸⁸ Khrushkova 2002a, 224-25.

⁸⁹ The Pisinum named in the 'Ashkharatsuits' (AŠXARHAC'OYC) is Pityus, according to Hewsén (1992, 111 n. 27, 203-11). V.F. [R.] Butba considers Pisinum to be the earliest instance of the Abkhazian word *Apsny* 'Abkhazia' (Butba 2001, 73-79).

forces in Pityus as early as the 4th century.⁹⁰ Church buildings existed there during the course of the 4th-6th centuries. The Justinianic era in the eastern Black Sea littoral is well known to historians, in large part thanks to Procopius of Caesarea.⁹¹ The city of Petra played a key role in the military events of this time; and a complex consisting of a basilica and baths was uncovered there. Within the system of imperial defences, the Laz towns and fortresses situated in the hinterland acquired a special significance: Archaeopolis, Kotais (Kotiaion, Kytaia, Kotatission, modern Kutaisi), Rhodopolis (modern Vardtsikhe; both the Greek and the Georgian mean 'Rose City'), Sarapanis (modern Shorapani), Skandeis (modern Skanda) and Ukhimereos or Utimereos.⁹² Of the places named in Lazica, early Christian churches have been uncovered at Archaeopolis and in its environs.

Under Justinian I (527-565), a line of Byzantine defences advanced alongside the mountains for the protection of the passes leading into the North Caucasus. Churches have been discovered in the Apsilian fortresses at Tsibilia and Shapky, and in the anonymous Abazgian fortress at Khashupse. The Misiminian fortress Siderun (the 'Iron Fortress'), which is identified with Tsakhar, has not been archaeologically studied. The most important fortress of the Abazgians is called Trakheia by Procopius; the majority of scholars identify it with the Anakopiya of mediaeval sources (modern Novyi Afon, Abkhazian Psyrtskha),⁹³ though some authors identify it with Gagra.⁹⁴ It is possible that the word *Τραχέϊα* in Procopius simply designates a harsh, stony, inaccessible place; and as for the Abkhazian toponym 'Anakopiya', linguists see it as being semantically equivalent to the Greek.⁹⁵ The details of the architectural decor preserved on the mountaintop where the fortress was constructed indicates the existence of an early Christian church (or churches) here or nearby.

⁹⁰ Braund (1994, 265) cites the evidence of Zosimus (2. 33. 1) on the presence of a garrison in Phasis in the time of Constantine. C. Zuckerman considers this passage of Zosimus 'problematical' (Zuckerman 1991, 538 n. 44). For a similar opinion on the absence of Roman forces in Pityus under Constantine, see Wheeler 1994-96, 74 n. 39.

⁹¹ For a detailed analysis of the information on Lazica in Procopius, see Braund 1994, 268-311; O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994, 81-84. The construction of the Kelasurian ('Great Abkhazian') wall is attributed by D. Aleksidze to the Persians between 553 and 568 (Aleksidze 2000).

⁹² Not located. According to Hewsen, this is Kotais (Hewsen 1992, 127 n. 13).

⁹³ Dubois de Monpéroux 1839, 273-74 (Russian transl. 1937, 129-30); A.L. 1885, 200-01; Ancharbadze 1959, 9-11; Inal-Ipa 1976, 281-82; Amichba 1988, 17-21; Kollautz 1969, 48; Martin-Hisard 1981, 152; Braund 1994, 301 n. 149.

⁹⁴ Lekvinadze 1970, 173. In an earlier work, Lekvinadze equated Trakheia with Anakopiya (Lekvinadze 1968b, 94); *TAVO* B VI 14 (Hewsen). A similar opinion is expressed by Butba (2001, 16), who, like Hewsen, relies on the 'Ashkharatsuits': he identifies Trakheia with the Nitika of Arrian; though he places Nitika not at Gagra, as is customary, but in the vicinity of Tsandriph (Gantiadi).

⁹⁵ K. Bgazhba 1974, 168.

The geography of Romano-Byzantine cities in the region (on the one hand) and the arrangement of early Christian churches (on the other) often coincide, especially along the coast. According to a peace treaty struck in 561/2 in Dara, Lazica remained Byzantine, whereas Iberia fell under Persian control; and Pityus and Sebastopolis were named as fortresses within the province of Pontus Polemoniacus, not Lazica. The new political reality was reflective of the region's administrative-ecclesiastical organisation, which has been outlined in the first *notitia* of the Constantinopolitan patriarchate.

Church tradition speaks of the conversion of the provinces of the Black Sea littoral, of Scythia (Crimea) and of Colchis by the apostles Andrew and Simon the Canaanite. The Byzantine tradition regarding the work of the apostle Andrew emerged at the end of the 8th or in the 9th century;⁹⁶ and in the opinion of I. Dzhavakhshvili [Dzhavakhov], this tradition regarding Andrew 'was brought to Greece from Byzantium by Greek monks' at that time.⁹⁷ The early versions of the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew* were probably created in the second half of the 2nd century; their canonical variant mentions only Scythia. The information in it influenced the work of Origen (*ca.* 185-*ca.* 254), Tertullian (*ca.* 160-*ca.* 225) and Arnobius (3rd-4th century), and Eusebius of Caesarea repeats it in his *Ecclesiastical History*.⁹⁸ Various versions of Andrew's route from Scythia to Asia Minor have been proposed, either by sea to Sebastopolis, or by land from Alania through the Misiminian city of Phusta to Apsilia and then along the River Kodor to Sebastopolis.

The *Acts of Andrew* speaks of the death by torture of Simon the Canaanite in AD 55, in Nikopsis on the Apsarus in the country of the Zikhians. Here we already meet with the muddle of toponyms that would persist for centuries, even into modern works: the author of the *Acts of Andrew* confuses Nikopsis in the country of the Zikhians (modern Nechepsukho or Novo-Mikhailovka in the Sochi district) with Anakopiya (or Anakopsi in some Georgian sources) in Abazgia, surely Psyrtskha, located on the banks of the river with the same name (modern Novyi Afon).⁹⁹ M. Van Esbroeck equivocates about the historical reality of the apostle Andrew's public sermon in Colchis;¹⁰⁰ but one way or another, the tradition of Andrew's conver-

⁹⁶ Dvornik 1958, 173-80, 208-09 n. 79; Chichurov 1990, 7-10; Vinogradov 1999.

⁹⁷ Dzhavakhov 1901, 103-06.

⁹⁸ von Harnack 1924, 539-41.

⁹⁹ I cite one characteristic example: Peeters identifies Nikopsis with Anakopiya and places it at the mouth of the River Chorokhi, where Apsarus is situated, on the border between Zikhia and Abazgia (Peeters 1932, 1-15). It is evident that two places have been conflated that are in fact some hundreds of kilometres apart: the River Chorokhi on the one hand, and the border between Abazgia and Zikhia (Nikopsis/Nechepushko) on the other, which are situated at opposite ends of the eastern shore of the Black Sea. A. Kollautz includes two places called Nikopsis on his map: one at Nechepsukho, and the other at Anakopiya (Kollautz 1969, 24, 29-31, 46, 48, fig. 1).

¹⁰⁰ Van Esbroeck 1996, 216 n. 69. New evidence may come to light in the future.

sion of the country took special hold in Megrelia and Abkhazia, judging by the testimony of Russian emissaries (1640)¹⁰¹ and of the missionary Castelli (before 1650).¹⁰²

As is the case nearly everywhere else, nothing is known about the lives of local Christian communities between the time of the apostles and that of Diocletian. At the start of the 4th century, the northern Black Sea littoral served as a place of exile for Christians. From the time of Strabo down to recent times, this region had been considered particularly savage.

Around 300, seven soldier-brothers led by Orentius were exiled to Pityus; of them, only Longinus reached his destination. The *Life of St Orentius* appeared in the 6th century;¹⁰³ some of the numerous toponyms in the *Life* are also found in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, such as Apsarus, Ziganis and Pityus.¹⁰⁴ At that same time, the soldier-Christians Eugenius, Valerianus/Valerius, Candidus/Kanidios and Aquila/Akylos were exiled to Pityus, and were immolated at Trapezus/Trebizond.¹⁰⁵

It is not by chance that a Christian community arose in Pityus during the Constantinian period: its bishop, Stratophilus, took part in the First Council of Nicaea in 325. Pityus became part of the ecclesiastical organisation of the province of Pontus Polemoniicus.¹⁰⁶ Its bishopric then disappears from the sources; but the role of the city in the history of early Christianity in the Caucasus is thoroughly verified by archaeological and architectural data. More than a thousand years later, at the end of the 14th century, the see of the Abkhazian Katholikos (patriarch), who ruled over the bishops of the entire province of Western Georgia, was transferred from Gelati to Bichvinta/Pitsunda.¹⁰⁷ As to the character of the Christianisation of the population, the material from the burial ground at Pityus is less informative than the monumental buildings. Excavation of 300 burials from the 2nd to 4th centuries (perhaps dated too early by G.A. Lordkipanidze) yielded but a single 'stele': a small column with which was deposited a cross, most probably of secondary origin.¹⁰⁸ In the 5th century, Pityus remained a place of exile. According to the writings of Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus (5. 34. 8), John Chrysostom (who died in September 407 at Koman in what is now Turkey) was sent in 406 to Pityus, on the frontier with 'the

¹⁰¹ Likhachev 1954, 218.

¹⁰² Giorgadze 1976, 177-78, 395-96, fig. 466.

¹⁰³ Peeters 1938. Sinaksari's Georgian translation differs from the Greek version in a number of details (Tamarati 1910, 150; Kollautz 1961, 81).

¹⁰⁴ Bryer and Winfield 1985, 325-27; Lekvinadze 1969, 81.

¹⁰⁵ Martin-Hisard 1981b.

¹⁰⁶ Honigmann 1939, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Koridze and Abashidze 2000.

¹⁰⁸ G. Lordkipanidze 1991, 2, 4, 155-56, pls. LXXXVI-LXXXVII.

most savage barbarians'. Peter the Fuller, Bishop of Antioch, was exiled to Pityus in 488, but managed to flee.¹⁰⁹

The spread of Christianity amongst the local population was the result of active Byzantine policy, especially during the period of war with Persia. Information about the period before Justinian I is piecemeal and indefinite. In his *History of the Armenians*, Agathangelos (after 506) speaks of the simultaneous conversion of the Lazi, Iverians, Albanians and Armenians as having already occurred by the time of Constantine, though this information is contained only in the short Greek and Arab versions of the sources and not in the Armenian text.¹¹⁰ In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Gelasius of Cyzicus (fl. 475) writes that the Iverians and the Lazi were converted during the time of Constantine—although his source, the earlier *Ecclesiastical History* of Gelasius of Caesarea (d. pre-400), says nothing at all about this.¹¹¹ At the beginning of the 5th century, the Asterius of Amaseia mentions that St Phoca was greatly esteemed by the 'Scythians of the Maeotian Sea, of Tanais and of Phasis', and that they revered his grave in Amaseia.¹¹²

Because of the variable political circumstances, the Laz rulers vacillated between Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Priscus of Panium (472) speaks of St Daniel the Stylite's visit to the Laz king, Gobazes I, at Constantinople in 465/6.¹¹³ Many historians date the official conversion of the Lazi to the baptism of king Ztathius in 522/3 during the reign of Justin I. John Malalas, the *Chronicon Paschale* and (later) Theophanes and other sources report that Ztathius was baptised at Constantinople, receiving a crown, a white cloak and a silken *chiton* from the emperor.¹¹⁴ Archaeologists have dated the earliest church at Archaeopolis to the 4th century. On this basis Lomouri concluded that the baptism of the Laz king must have been 'secondary', and that the conversion of the Lazi ought to be placed in the 4th or 5th century at the latest.¹¹⁵ However, the sources offer no information on a 'primary' conversion of the Lazi. Procopius has very little to say about Christianity in Lazica, speaking

¹⁰⁹ Martin-Hisard 1998, 1172 n. 26; Van Esbroeck 1996, 203-04.

¹¹⁰ Translation and commentary by R.W. Thomson (Albany 1976); Garitte 1946, 97-99, 320-21.

¹¹¹ O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994, 41-43, 90-91.

¹¹² Martin-Hisard 1985, 144.

¹¹³ On Gobazes I, see Martindale 1992, 559-60. For a new edition of the *Life of St Daniel*, see Festugière 1961 (conversion of Gobazes, p.126); Martin-Hisard 1998, 1172; Carile 1996b, 20.

¹¹⁴ On Ztathius, see Martindale 1989, 1209; O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994, 92; Braund 1994, 286; Chekalova 1993, 468 n. 60, 493 n. 99; Carile 1996b, 62-63 n. 131. A.A.M. Bryer considers the white garments to be allusions to the fact that the fortresses in the Lazican littoral exported fine white cloth (Bryer 1966, 177 n. 12). In his *Ecclesiastical History* (ed. R. Keydell [Berlin 1967]), Agathias (3. 15) says that the Laz kings did not think it proper to wear a purple *chlamys*, permitting only white clothing embroidered with gold.

¹¹⁵ Lomouri 1981, 279-91.

of the Lazi as zealous Christians (*De Bello Persico* 2. 28. 26) and mentioning their bishops (*De Bello Gothico* 8. 2. 18), but saying nothing at all about the diocesan sees; Justinian repaired a church in Lazica, though it is unclear where (*De Aedificiis Peri Ktismatôn* 3. 7. 6). Information on the ecclesiastical buildings of Lazica in the 6th century is just as rare in other sources. Agathias mentions a church near Phasis, as well as a church dedicated to St Stephen at Onoguris (3. 5. 7). As a result, Lekvinadze identified Onoguris with modern Sepieti, where there is a basilica containing a Greek stone inscription addressed to St Stephen.¹¹⁶

As for the Abazgians, Procopius states that at that time they were still worshipping trees, and that Justinian I built the Church of the Blessed Virgin for them, and sent priests. The emperor sent the Abazgian-born eunuch, Euphratas, to Abazgia with instructions to ban the custom of castrating boys and selling them as slaves (*De Bello Gothico* 8. 3. 14-21);¹¹⁷ this information is confirmed by Evagrius Scholasticus in his *Ecclesiastical History* (4. 22).¹¹⁸ A convenient time for all this activity would have been the period before 540, when the Persian army invaded Lazica, and the Byzantines (in 542) found it necessary to abandon the coastal cities (*De Bello Gothico* 8. 4. 6; *De Aedificiis Peri Ktismatôn* 3. 7. 8). Most probably, the Justinianic 'church for the Abazgians' was the Tsandriphsh (Gantiadi) basilica situated 16 km to the northwest of Gagra.¹¹⁹ Van Esbroeck expresses the supposition that the construction or repair of the churches of the Lazi and the Abazgians in the time of Justinian arose out of the necessity to replace Monophysite churches with Orthodox ones,¹²⁰ though it is difficult to support this idea with the sources.

Procopius states that the Apsilians 'became Christians in antiquity' (*De Bello Gothico* 8. 4. 33). In graves at Tsebelda were found some Christian objects, including a golden cross and a medallion with the image of the Gorgoneion, both of which have often been cited. Trapsh, who discovered them, dated the finds to the 4th century, an opinion that was later repeated many times.¹²¹ Voronov, a supporter of the late dating of the Tsebelda necropolis, concluded that the Apsilians remained pagan as late as the second half of the 7th century;¹²² but study of the golden cross and the Medusa medallion enables them to be dated to the first half of the 6th century.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Lekvinadze 1970a, 166-68.

¹¹⁷ Kollautz 1969, 27-31; Adzhindzhal 1987; Letodiani 1989. On Euphratas, see Martindale 1992, 465.

¹¹⁸ Allen 1981, 68, 186 n. 83.

¹¹⁹ Lekvinadze 1970a, 173-74; Khrushkova 1985, 15-60; 2002, 174-77.

¹²⁰ Van Esbroek 1995, 213.

¹²¹ Trapsh 1971, 118-22, 205-07; 1975, 9-15, 62-69; Anchabadze 1964, 221-29; Inal-Ipa 1976, 239; G. Shamba 1970, 13-23, 27, 62-65, 78; Gunba 1989, 78, 85.

¹²² Voronov 1975, 17, 112-13, 133, 145.

¹²³ Khrushkova 2002a, 327-30.

Also, it is well known that burial rites are a conservative part of culture; and so the small number of Christian objects in the graves does not necessarily equate to a small number of Christians amongst the Apsilians. The discovery of early Christian churches in the fortress of Tsibilia confirms the spread of Christianity amongst the Apsilians in the first half of the 6th century.

The ecclesiastical organisation in Lazica and Abazgia was under the control of the Constantinopolitan patriarchate; and as evidence of this, we have not only the well-known bishopric at Pityus, but also the twenty-eighth canon of the Council of Chalcedon of 451¹²⁴ and the construction of the Abazgian church by Justinian. The developed system of dioceses in the region was created after the conclusion of the Byzantine-Persian wars, at the end of the reign of Justinian I or soon thereafter. The Bishop of Phasis is mentioned by Theophilactus Simocatta in 589/90 (3. 6. 17).¹²⁵ The first episcopal *notitia* (before 641) formalised the state of affairs that had developed earlier. The Abazgian archbishopric based at Sebastopolis in fact played the role of metropolis.¹²⁶ The metropolis based at Phasis had four suffragans whose sees were situated at Petra, Rhodopolis, Saisine and Ziganis.¹²⁷

What do archaeologists know about these episcopal sees? The basilica of the time of Justinian I at Petra may have been episcopal; and marble columns and capitals of the 6th century are currently being found at the mediaeval church at Tsaishi (Saisine).¹²⁸ It is possible that they were procured from the Proconnesian workshops at the episcopal church of Saisine, which existed at that same place. A 4th- or 5th-century baptistery has been uncovered at Ziganis, and so it was not by chance that a diocesan see was later founded here. No churches have yet been uncovered at Phasis or Rhodopolis. The cathedral of the Abazgians may have been the large domed church at Dranda (23 km south of Sukhumi).

After Stratophilus, the names of the local hierarchs are known only from the 7th century, beginning with Cyril, Bishop of Phasis, whom the emperor Heraclius appointed as Patriarch of Alexandria in 631.¹²⁹ Theodore, Metropolitan of Phasis, was a participant in the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680/1;¹³⁰ it is possible that a 7th-8th-century seal found at Pitsunda belonged to this same Bishop Theodore.¹³¹

¹²⁴ O. Lordkipanidze and Brakmann 1994, 94.

¹²⁵ Martin-Hisard 1998, 1173.

¹²⁶ *Historiae* (ed. C. de Boor and P. Wirth [Stuttgart 1972]); On the status and role of the archbishopric, see Feissel 1989, 810.

¹²⁷ Darrouzès 1981, 7-8, 205-12; 1989, 209.

¹²⁸ Khrushkova 1980, 22-24.

¹²⁹ Darrouzès 1984, 178 (Greek text), 199 (French translation).

¹³⁰ Le Quien 1740, 1443.

¹³¹ Dundua 1978, 341-42.

A decade later, in 692, metropolitans Theodore of Phasis, Faustinus of Ziganis and John of Petra took part in the Fifth-Sixth (Fourth Constantinopolitan) Council in Trullo.¹³² Lazica and Abazgia are mentioned together for the first time in the second episcopal *notitia* at the beginning of the 8th century.¹³³ The records show Metropolitan Christopher of Phasis and Archbishop Constantine of Sebastopolis at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 786/7 in Nicaea.¹³⁴

The Abazgian archbishopric is mentioned in a series of *notitiae*—namely, in the second, third, fourth, fifth, seventh (beginning of the 10th century), eighth, eleventh (end of the 11th century) and twelfth (12th century); and finally, it is named as a metropolis in one copy of the fifteenth (between the end of the 12th and the end of the 13th century).¹³⁵ The Byzantines strove to retain their position in the western part of the eastern Black Sea littoral, relying on Anakopiya, which they held until the 1080s. Other conditions applied in Phasis: after the seventh *notitia* it disappears from the registers of the Constantinopolitan patriarchate. The name Lazica is formally retained, but only to designate the ecclesiastical territory of the metropolis of Trebizond.¹³⁶ In the first quarter of the 10th century, local bishoprics begin to appear.¹³⁷

Meanwhile, after the consolidation of Christianity, Abazgia remained a place of exile; but now the exiles were sent to desolate mountainous locations. In July 662, St Maximus the Confessor arrived in Lazica, together with Anastasius the Monk and Anastasius the Apokrisiarius. In a letter sent to Theodorus of Gangra in Jerusalem, this last Anastasius describes the misfortune of the exiles in the mountain fortresses of Apsilia, Misiminia, Svaneti, Lazica and Alania.¹³⁸ Judging by this document, the mountain fortresses were controlled by the Byzantines, who were sending exiles there as well. It is at this time that the Abazgian ruler Gregory openly extended protection to the exiles; Anastasius calls him ‘Christ’s friend’, and the Abazgians and Lazi repeatedly refer to him as ‘beloved of Christ’ (*philochristi*).

¹³² Ohme 1990, 148, 169, 182, 220, 304-05.

¹³³ Darrouzès 1981, 217-18, 231, 233.

¹³⁴ Darrouzès 1975, 5-21, 62-68.

¹³⁵ Darrouzès 1981, 82, 84 n. 3, 218, 233, 251, 266, 274, 294, 346, 352 n. 2.

¹³⁶ Darrouzès 1986, 7-8, 25, 39-40; 1989, 210-13. The opinion has been spreading that both the metropolis of Lazica and the archbishopric of Abazgia ceased to exist by the end of the 9th century (Koridze and Abashidze 2000, 68). In the opinion of B. Martin-Hisard, the ecclesiastical provinces of Lazica and Abazgia ‘disappeared in the 10th century’ (Martin-Hisard 1993, 562). In reality, though, this applies only to Phasis, not to Sebastopolis.

¹³⁷ Anchabadze 1959, 144-54, 171-77; Gunba 1989, 213-34; Martin-Hisard 1981b, 146-56; 2000; Khrushkova 2006.

¹³⁸ Allen and Neil 1999; 2002. On the Georgian sources associated with St Maxim, see Kekelidze 1912. On the destination of Anastasius’ letter to Theodorus of Gangra, see Noret 2000. A. Brilliantov (1917) writes that Anastasius’ addressee was located in Jerusalem, not Constantinople. His article contains much information on historical geography; on some of the toponyms, see Zuckerman 2000, 553-54.

The region of Tsebelda is connected with the story of still another martyr as early as the Arab invasion; and for the first time, it was not an exile, but a local Apsilian-born martyr to the faith. In 738 the Arabs, having captured Sebastopolis, entered Apsilia and Misiminia. They seized the Iron Fortress and took into captivity Eustaphius, son of the Apsilian ruler, the patrician Marianos. The young man refused to take up Islam, and was killed at Harran.¹³⁹ There is no doubt that at this time, Christianity had taken firm hold throughout the mountainous regions of Abazgia. John Sabanisdze, author of *The Martyrdom of Abo of Tbilisi*, describing events to the 780s, speaks of Abkhazia as a country 'filled with faith in Christ'.¹⁴⁰

Epigraphic evidence also serves as a source for characterising religious life in the region in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. From the 4th to the 10th century, nearly all of these inscriptions are in Greek, with a few isolated ones in Latin; Georgian inscriptions first appear at the very end of the 10th century, with the majority from the 11th-12th centuries.¹⁴¹

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence draws a very broad picture of the spread of Christianity in the region, and outlines the history of the development of the main religious centres. We can distinguish two phases in Christian building activity in the region. The first phase consists of isolated buildings in the 4th century, and then the appearance of churches in the urban centres in the 5th century, predominantly along the coast. In the second phase, the old religious centres expand and extend their influence over the adjoining territories during the 6th century, particularly in the time of Justinian; new churches appear in the hinterland and in the foothills of the mountains. In the second half of the 6th and during the 7th century, churches of considerable dimensions and of more complex architectural types are constructed.

The Beginnings of Christian Building-Works: 4th and 5th Centuries

The oldest Christian centre was Pityus. The city of late antiquity consisted of two parts: the *castellum*, and a *canaba* added later. The earliest church, the centre of the bishopric, was built before the First Council of Nicaea (in 325). The remains of the foundations of its southern part have been preserved. It is a single-nave construction, with a broad apse. Despite its simplicity, its dimensions are quite considerable—more than 26 m in length.¹⁴² The choice of site for the church – outside the

¹³⁹ Mango and Scott 1997, 544. On Marianos, see Lilie *et al.* 200, 168; Anchabadze 1959, 92-94.

¹⁴⁰ BS I, 85-87; Amichba 1986, 8; Gunba 1989, 94-95; Shurgaia 1999.

¹⁴¹ Gamakhariya and Gogiya 1997, 807-15.

¹⁴² Lekvinadze 1968a; 1970b, 174-78; Tsitsishvili 1977, 113-18; Khrushkova 1989.

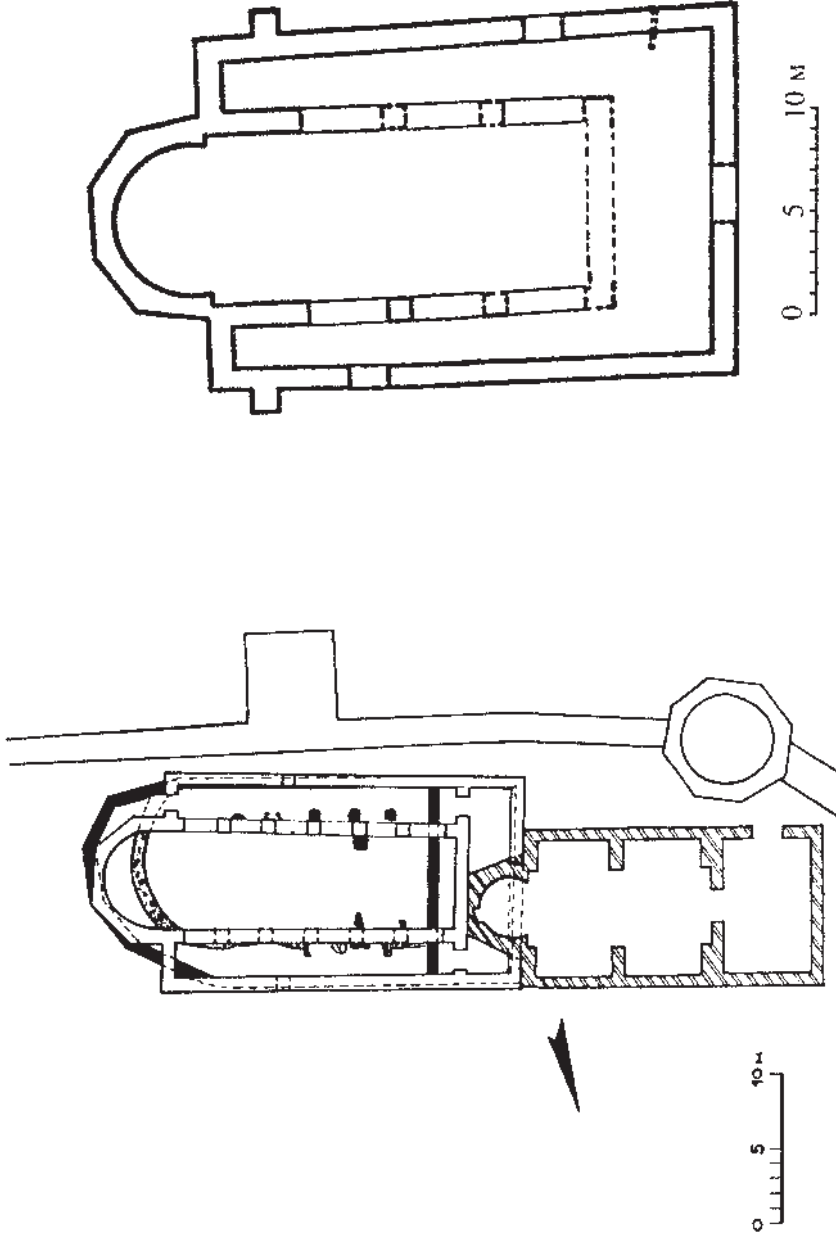


Fig. 2: Pityus: plan of religious complex within the city walls (I.I. Tsitsishvili).

Fig. 3: Archaeopolis: basilica (church no. 2) (T.V. Kapanadze).

walls of the *castellum*—could indicate a memorial function, although no burials have been discovered in the apse of the church (Fig. 2).

In the middle of the 4th century, the first church was destroyed by fire. In its place was built a much more extensive basilica with a narthex (church no. 2) and perhaps an atrium. Its plan includes an unusual feature: a broad, asymmetrical apse, pentagonal both inside and out, which causes the aisles to be of unequal width. This feature appears to have resulted from the accommodation of an asymmetrical, trapezoidal ‘platform’ within the apse:¹⁴³ perhaps this ‘platform’ was the place of a memorial (or funerary) cult around which the first church was built. After the destruction of the first church, the structure was also included within the apse of the subsequent basilica as if it were a sacred place; and so this seems to be an example of the ‘monumentalisation’ of a small funerary or commemorative construction, a typical early Christian custom. A baptistery is also accommodated within the narthex.

The floor of the church is decorated with mosaics; about 30% of the surface area is preserved. The motives are customary ones within the early Christian repertoire: a Christ-monogram in a wreath with apocalyptic letters, A and Ω; two deer beside a fountain; birds beside a chalice; palms; fish; and so on. The most probable date for the mosaic, and indeed for the whole basilica, would be the end of the 4th century or the first half of the 5th.¹⁴⁴ An inscription in the sanctuary contains a standard dedicatory formula: ὙΠΕΡ Ε[ΥΧ]ΗΣ ΩΡΕΛΙΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΠΑ[Ν]ΤΩ[Ν] ΤΩ[Ν] Ο[Υ]ΚΟ[Υ]—ὑπὲρ εὐχῆς Ὁρελιού καὶ παντὸν τοῦ οἴκου (αὐτοῦ) ‘Ex-voto for Orelios and all his house’. T. Kauhchishvili sees here the name ‘Orel’; for. Lekvinadze, it is ‘Orentios’; and for G. Traina, the name is ‘Oriël/Uriel’. In my opinion, it is Aurelios/Ὁρέλιος (Αὐρήλιος) in the genitive, with Ω in place of Αὐ at the start of the word, and with ε in place of the more usual η; the genitive ending of Αὐρηλιού is rendered as a contraction, and the conjunction καὶ is replaced by an abbreviation mark.¹⁴⁵ The basilica was decorated in marble from Proconnesus. Interestingly, this second church is still located outside the protection of the city walls. It too was destroyed by fire; and in the second half of the 5th century, a standard basilica with aisles more than 28 m long, with a pentagonal apse and a narthex, was built on its remains. By now, the basilica is *within* the city walls.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ The participants in the excavation write of the presence of a martyrion here, they do not cite any data on burials (Matsulevich 1978, 104-05; Tsitsishvili 1977, 118).

¹⁴⁴ Odišeli 1995, 31-60, tabs. 13-24; Shervashidze 1980, 8-41.

¹⁴⁵ On the discussion concerning the reading of the inscription, see Khrushkova 2002a, 79-83.

¹⁴⁶ Khrushkova 2002a, 87-89. Some late burials were discovered in the church, but they are not marked on the published plans: Tsitsishvili 1977, 104 n. 2, 118, figs. 11-12.

As is the case everywhere, the inhabitants of Pityus venerated the relics of martyrs and saints beyond the city walls. A funerary complex was located to the south-east of the city; it consisted of two small buildings: a chapel, and a rectangular martyrrium in which two tombs and an anthropoid sarcophagus were discovered. On the site, adjacent to these buildings on the east, were excavated two stone tombs closed over with slabs. This complex can be dated to the second half of the 5th century; it survived until 542. In the second half of the 6th century, a large cruciform church was built on this site (Fig. 9).

A few Christian religious objects originate from Pityus. Amongst them is the 'stele' discovered in one of the ground burials of the late antique necropolis. This 73 cm stone column, in which was deposited an iron cross, was covered over with a fragment of tile; archaeologists date it to the Diocletian period.¹⁴⁷ In my opinion, the column's deposition in the grave was secondary; its primary use was as part of the chancel screen, and so it most probably dates to the second half of the 5th century. The custom of placing votive crosses into detailing within a church was widespread:¹⁴⁸ in the Pityus museum, for example, is preserved a marble column supplied with a cavity for a cross. Another example is the marble column from the church in Tsaishi (Saisine): on it, next to a cavity for a cross, is carved the inscription ΚΟΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΒΑΧΑΗΚ-Κύριε, σῶσον τοῦ Βασίλλης ('Lord, redeem Basilis'),¹⁴⁹ which clearly testifies to the votive nature of the cross.

One of the graves was associated with a fragment of a brick found in the city, not in the necropolis;¹⁵⁰ on it, an epitaph is preceded by a cross: εν[θάδε] κατ[ακεί-ται] Οσ... 'Here lies Os...'. Still another stone inscription from Pityus can be dated to the 4th century; it contains the clearly preserved letters [Γ]ΠΕΡΝΙΚ[ΗΣ]-υπερ νίκης 'for victory'. Speidel and T.T. Todua reconstruct the inscription as υπέρ νίκης και σωτηρίας τοῦ κυριοῦ.¹⁵¹ Perhaps we have here a formula that appears in the liturgy of St Jacob, in which the words υπέρ νίκης are followed by the name of the emperor and then a list of those being prayed for.¹⁵²

In the Pitsunda museum there is a fragment of a round marble liturgical table, about a metre in diameter; it is decorated with a Christ-monogram.¹⁵³ It can be dated

¹⁴⁷ G. Lordkipanidze *et al.* 1990; G. Lordkipanidze 1991, 155-56.

¹⁴⁸ Teteriatnikov 1998, fig. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Khrushkova 1980, 23; 2002a, 111-12.

¹⁵⁰ The brick is published, but without a reading of the inscription (G. Apakidze 1977, 231, fig. 66, no. 568).

¹⁵¹ A. Apakidze 1977, no. 575 (without a reading). On the reading of the inscription, see Speidel and Todua 1988, 58.

¹⁵² Lassus 1947, 252.

¹⁵³ Khrushkova 2002a, 113-14.

to the 5th century.¹⁵⁴ When the city-site was excavated, imported glass vessels of the 4th-5th centuries with Christian symbols on them were discovered. On one is an image of the Good Shepherd; on another is a peacock, with the inscription ΠΙΕ ΖΗΣΗΣ 'Drink (and) live'.¹⁵⁵ Three cast-bronze crosses of the 5th-6th centuries originated from the city-site as well.¹⁵⁶

What else was built in the eastern Black Sea littoral at this early time? Archaeologists can date to the 4th century the earliest church at Archaeopolis, the only part of which to be preserved is the remains of the broad apse; the church was more than 26 m long. In the middle of the 5th century, this church was destroyed; and in its place was built a basilica, with a baptismal font in the south-western corner. The basilica (Fig. 3) burnt down at the beginning of the 6th century.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the history of the religious complex at Archaeopolis and the basic elements of the plan of its early church are very reminiscent of the first church at Pityus, which influenced the entire surrounding region. It is worth noting that at Archaeopolis, the dates of the churches are assumed: they come from the architectural constructions, of which almost nothing remains.

To the first phase of Christian building-work can be dated the constructions at three coastal cities: Sebastopolis, Gyenos and Ziganis. Of these, the most prominent and complicated is the complex at Sebastopolis, which is located within the urban district. Its plan is octagonal, without an apse; eight pillars support the dome, and the central core was surrounded by a vaulted deambulatory. Four additional rooms are positioned in the form of a cross; and the southern room is joined on the east to still another room that served as a martyrium. In it were discovered four tombs of stone and brick; three of them are elevated above floor-level and served as objects of veneration (Figs. 4-5).

An original element situated in the centre of the octagon is the exedra, which served as a bench for the clergy; it can be compared to the well-known 'Syrian ambo' (*bema*), which was oriented to the west – not to the east, as is our custom today.¹⁵⁸ The Sebastopolis exedra also resembles the 'freestanding bench' found in church apses in the regions of Istria and Noricum.¹⁵⁹ The church at Sebastopolis was destroyed by fire in the time of Justinian, as proven by numismatic finds and the well-confirmed testimony of Procopius regarding the destruction of the city by the Byzantines in AD 542 (*De Aedificiis Peri Ktismatôn* 3. 7. 8-9). As far as we can determine, the church was built at the beginning of the 5th century.

¹⁵⁴ Chalkia 1991, 47-53, 225, figs. 58 and 62, dis. 1-3, 4-5, 10, 11; Duval 1984, fig. 7.

¹⁵⁵ Ugrelidze 1987, pls. XIII-XVII.

¹⁵⁶ Khrushkova 2002a, 115.

¹⁵⁷ Kapanadze 1991, 167-78.

¹⁵⁸ Renhart 1995.

¹⁵⁹ Glaser 1991, 97-100, 182-201.



Fig. 4: Sebastopolis: view of octagonal church from the north.

A shaft in the centre of the church revealed that the early materials from the virgin soil date to the 1st century. Also discovered in the strata which predate the church were traces of a destroyed stone building covered in massive tiles. On 20 of the fragments were found the stamp of the legion XV Apollinaris.¹⁶⁰

A grave stele was found in the eastern part of the deambulatory. The inscription is almost entirely preserved: ΟΠΟΛΛΑ / ΜΟΝΕΝΘΑ / ΛΕΚΑΤΑΚΙ / ΤΕΟΡΕΣΤΗ

¹⁶⁰ Khrushkova 2002a, 195-259.

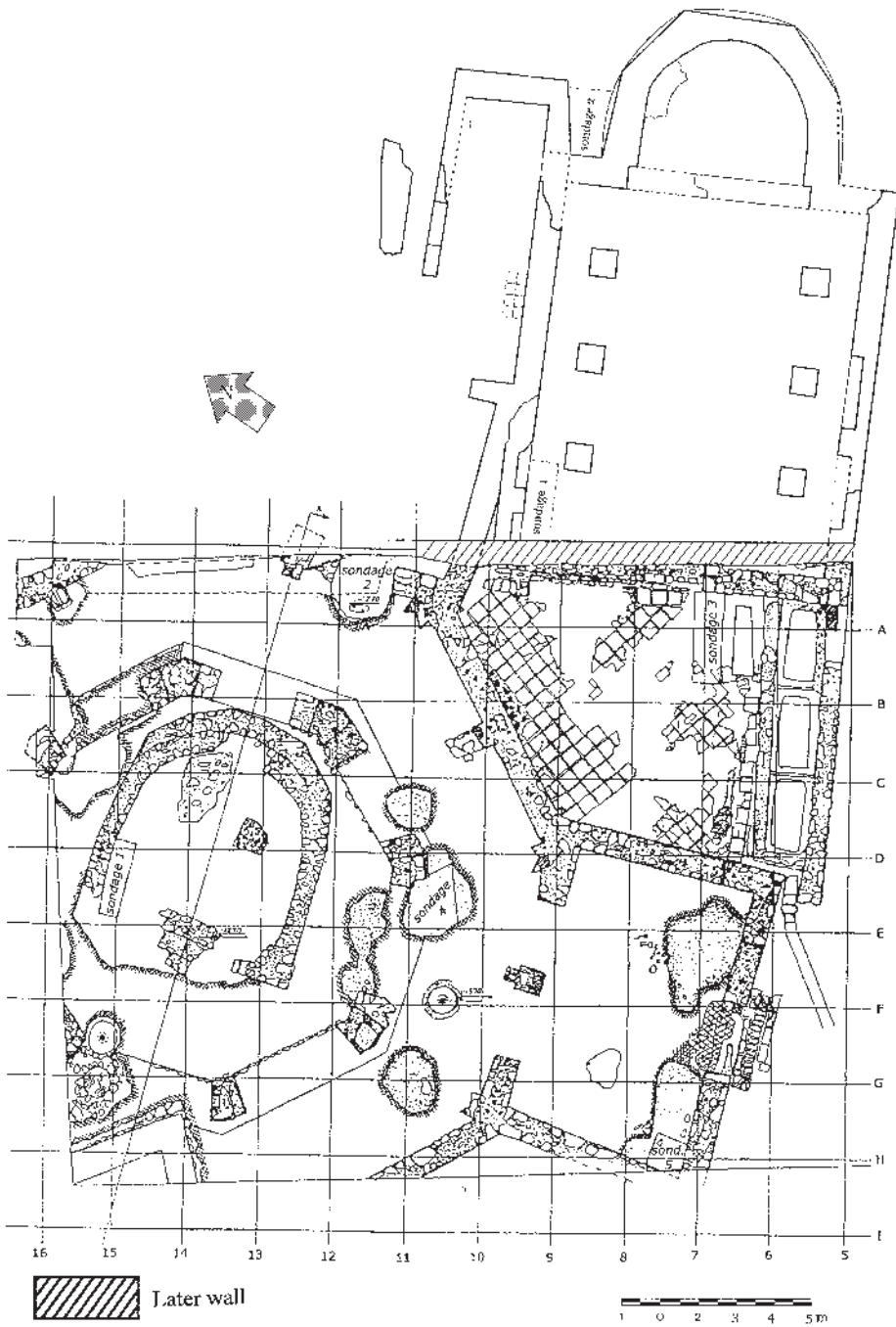


Fig. 5: Sebastopolis: plan of architectural complex (1992, 2005).

/ ΣΤΡΑΤΙΩΤ / ΛΕΓΕΩΝ / ΠΙΣΧΑΡΙΝ / ΜΗΣΑΝΕΓ / ΜΕΝΟΙΚΟ – or, with corrections, ὁ πολλὰ [τλή]μον ἐνθάδε κατακεῖται Ὀρέστη[ς] στρατιώτ[η]ς λεγεων[ά]ρι[ο]ς χάριν [μνή]μης ἀνεγ[είρα]μεν οἶκος[ν]: ‘Here is buried Orestes, soldier-legionary, having endured much suffering; for the sake of his memory, we have built an οἶκος’. This last word could mean either a funerary structure or a church building, although the inscription contains no obvious Christian features. Does the stele contain a pagan epitaph, or is it associated with one of the tombs in the martyrium? The latter seems more probable.

On a neighbouring site next to the eastern side of the octagonal church, Abramzon, Bzhaniya and Gorlov discovered a small basilica about 17 m long, adjacent to the martyrium, and forming part of the church complex. This basilica is a construction with a pentagonal apse and three pairs of pillars, and is joined to a small rectangular room at the north. The pavement of the basilica was executed in the *opus sectile* technique, using figured bricks and small slabs of Proconnesian marble in various shapes; this is the first such example in Abkhazia (Fig. 6). The basilica, like the octagonal church, underwent reconstruction. The level showing fire and destruction (542) is filled with a great number of tiles lying on the floor of the basilica. The first church at Sebastopolis, then, was the most extensive and complex construction in the region; and its original plan, combining an octagon, a cross and a basilica, has no analogies in the Caucasus or in the Pontic region.

Also worth mentioning are some isolated finds from Sebastopolis (Sukhumi) and its environs: architectural fragments with early Christian motifs,¹⁶¹ an anthropoid sarcophagus,¹⁶² and a bronze cross with an image of the Crucifixion.¹⁶³

The remains of the church at Gyenos are deposited within the upper portions of a huge cultural level, the lower parts of which contain material from the first half of the 6th century BC. A single-nave building with a broad semicircular apse and narthex is symmetrically connected to two annexes, creating a cruciform plan (Fig. 7). Graves were found in every part of the building except the apse—tombs of brick and stone, and also simple pit burials. In the southern room, a tomb with a female burial contained golden objects: earrings, two rings, and 60 brooches that had adorned the shroud. Yet another pair of golden earrings was found in a destroyed brick grave in the north-east corner of the nave. A gold-plated cross is associated with the destruction layer. The remains of a sandstone chancel screen were preserved, the decoration of which imitates Proconnesian marble work. The church dates to the end of the 5th century; it existed until the 7th century.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Khrushkova 1980, 31-34.

¹⁶² Khrushkova 1984.

¹⁶³ Khrushkova 1979.

¹⁶⁴ Kobakhiya, Khrushkova and Shamba 1987.



Fig. 6: Sebastopolis: basilica, pavement in *opus sectile* (2003).



Fig. 7: Gyenos: view of church from the west.



Fig. 8: Khobi: capital.

In Ziganis the remains of a Late Roman fortress are preserved. Within it is situated a small rectangular building with a semicircular apse, which served most probably as a baptistery. In the cultural level were found 16 copper coins of Constantine I (306-307) and Licinius (307-328), as well as marble slabs without ornamentation. The coins enable the baptistery to be dated to the 4th-5th centuries. The church associated with the baptistery has not yet been discovered, but judging by the archaeological material, it existed until the 10th century.¹⁶⁵

Architectural details of Byzantine marble gives some indication as to the decor of churches that have not survived. Some of the pieces were discovered during the excavation of the complex inside the walls of Pityus, whereas others are old finds; three columns stand not far from the mediaeval church. In the 1390s, Prince Vamek Dadiani, ruler of Megrelia, removed a large collection of columns, capitals and fragments of the ambo (6th century) to the village of Khobi, where they decorate the walls of the chapel he constructed there; amongst these marbles are some composite capitals from the 5th century (Fig. 8). A Georgian inscription on the facade speaks of the campaign of Vamek in Dzhigeti (the Zikhia of the Byzantine sources), in which he conquered the fortresses of Gagari (modern Gagra) and Ugagi (Anakopiya?).¹⁶⁶

North-eastern Abazgia and neighbouring Zikhia (the Pitsunda-Gagra-Tsandripsh-Adler region) were the chief zones from which Byzantine marble architectural details were exported in the 5th-6th centuries. In the 5th century, there apparently existed in the vicinity of Pityus a significant church decorated with Proconnesian marble. I would also like to mention another Ionic marble capital of the 5th century from the village of Ankhua, near Anakopiya.¹⁶⁷

Thus, in the 4th and 5th centuries, almost all Christian constructions were concentrated in coastal cities; Archaeopolis constitutes an exception.

Religious Buildings of the 6th Century

A large number of surviving church buildings and architectural fragments of marble or local stone date to the 6th century. Let us return to Pityus. The Byzantines abandoned the city in 542, but not for long. In the second half of the 6th century, the city lost its former military importance and was relinquished as the great religious centre. Life resumed in the religious complex within the city walls. The fourth and last church was a single-nave vaulted construction; its modest dimensions characterise the fading of the ancient city. The religious life of the mediaeval city developed outside the walls of the ancient city-site. In the second half of the 6th century, two churches appear.

¹⁶⁵ Zamtaradze 1979; Khrushkova 2002a, 331-32.

¹⁶⁶ Khrushkova 1980, pls. IX-XI.a

¹⁶⁷ Khrushkova 2002a, 362-63, pls. LXXIV.2-3, LXXV.2.

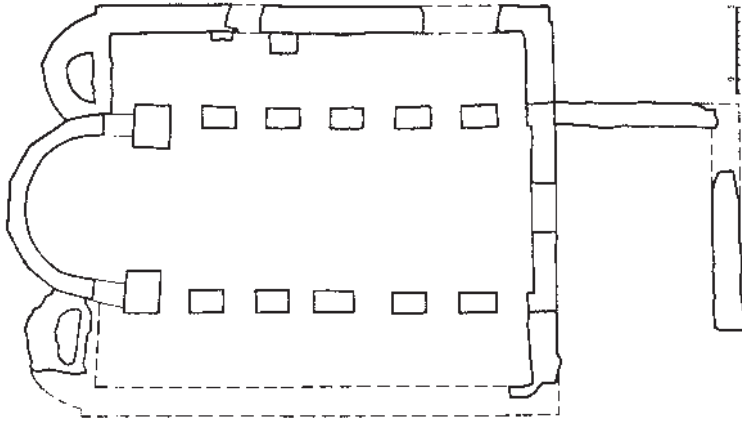


Fig. 10: Alakhadzy: plan of first basilica (church no. 1).

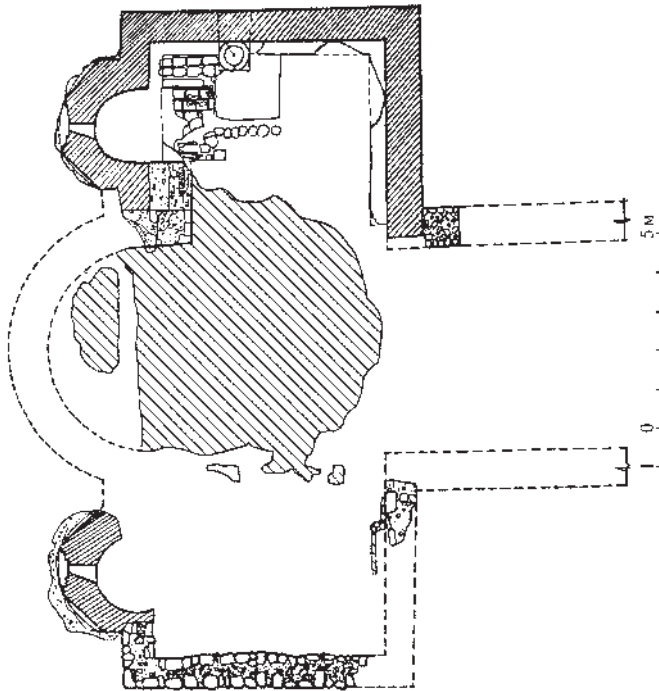


Fig. 9: Pityus: plan of church no. 7 outside the city walls.

In place of the small complex consisting of a martyrium and a chapel, a large cruciform church with three apses was built; it may have been covered with a dome (Fig. 9). It retained its memorial function: the former martyrium became the northern annexe, and three tombs were situated under the floor of the southern annexe. The next important stage in the development of Christian Pityus was the 10th-century construction of a grandiose domed church beside the cross-shaped one. This became the seat of the Abkhazian Katholikos (patriarch), which existed until the second half of the 16th (or, according to other data, the 17th) century.¹⁶⁸

In the second half of the 6th century, a double-apse church was built in the ancient coastal cemetery at Pitsunda; its external dimensions were 28.5 m × 14.5 m. The church belongs to the extensive family of 'double-churches' in which both parts are identical. The vault was supported by a massive pillar in the centre, and by pilasters in the corners and along the side walls. Various parts of the church may have had various functions.¹⁶⁹ It existed until the 10th century.

At Pityus, the archaeological levels from the 7th-8th centuries are still unexplored, but two individual finds are evidence of the importance of the city in the period after late antiquity—namely, two lead seals, one of which belonged to Constantine, an Abazgian prince(?) of the late 7th and early 8th century;¹⁷⁰ the other belonged to Theodorus, a 7th-century bishop.¹⁷¹

Pityus served as a centre for the spread of Christianity into the adjacent district. A prominent architectural complex was found 3 km from Pityus, at the village of Alakhadzy. The initial construction was a triple-apse basilica with a narthex; the building was nearly 50 m long, and is dated to the first half of the 6th century (Fig. 10). The basilica was constructed using the *opus mixtum* technique, which had spread to Pityus. In the 8th or the 9th century, after a fire, the basilica was rebuilt without its aisles and narthex, and with two lines of new pillars supporting the vault. The second basilica was still in existence when, in the 10th century, a domed church of middle-Byzantine type ('quincunx') was built to the north of it.¹⁷² The settlement surrounding the complex has not been explored.

The most important church in Abazgia, built under Justinian I, was the basilica at the village of Tsandripsh on the coast; it is much better preserved than the other monuments of this period (Figs. 11-12). In the first stage, the basilica had three apses, a narthex, and a small portico in front. The plan of the basilica has an unusual feature: its aisles are enlarged in their eastern parts. This peculiarity resulted from

¹⁶⁸ Khrushkova 2002a, 104-10.

¹⁶⁹ Mikeladze 1963. For a discussion of the issue of 'double churches', see Caillet and Duval 1996.

¹⁷⁰ Lekvinadze 1955.

¹⁷¹ Dundua 1977.

¹⁷² Khrushkova 2002a, 119-36.



Fig. 11: Tsandripsh: view of basilica from the north-west.

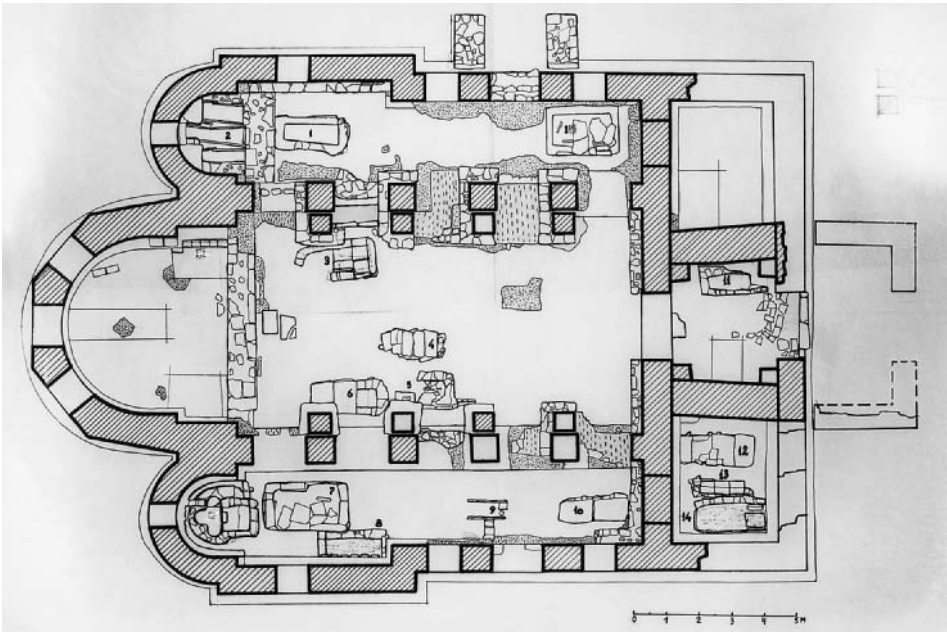


Fig. 12: Tsandripsh: plan of basilica (with rebuildings). 1-15-tombs.

the liturgical uses to which these areas were dedicated. The eastern part of the northern nave served as a baptistery; a baptismal font was located in the apse. The eastern end of the southern nave, on the other hand, contained a chapel; two venerated tombs were elevated above floor-level, and benches ran along the walls of the apse to either side of the altar.

Another 13 tombs were discovered under the floor in all parts of the basilica except the central apse; almost all were made of mortared stone, brick or tile. In tombs 3, 10 and 11 *in situ* glass vessels of the same type were found; fragments of this type of vessel also lay around tomb 6. Almost all the tombs are of the same period, and contemporary with the basilica. Tomb 9 in the northern nave constitutes an apparent exception; its walls consist of marble slabs of secondary use. Some tombs remained intact; others were used repeatedly.

More than 70 marble fragments represent parts of the decoration and liturgical furnishing: columns, slabs, door-side alms-boxes, the ambo, the chancel screen, and so on. On a fragment of an epitaph can be read the word [AB]ΑΣΓΙΑΣ, 'from Abazgia'. The style of the marble detailing is typical of the era of Justinian I, and is in accord with the particulars of the architecture. Lekvinadze's idea that the Tsandripsh basilica is the temple that Justinian built for the Abazgians (according to Procopius) is confirmed by material from the excavation. In the 8th-9th centuries the basilica was rebuilt without its narthex and with vaults; and in the 10th century porticoes were added to both the west and south sides.¹⁷³

The coastal area where the 'church of the Abazgians' was built was protected by a fortress situated on a mountain-top above the gorge of the River Khashupse, 7 km from the coast. The similarity in building techniques between this fortress and the one at Tsibilia in Apsilia suggests that the Khashupse fortress was built by the Byzantines in the first half of the 6th century to protect the road to the mountain pass. On the summit of the mountain were found the ruins of a small single-nave church with a horseshoe-shaped apse and a narthex; the site has not been excavated. Still another single-nave church of the 6th (or 5th) century is situated in the city of Gagra, in the area of the coastal fortress. This construction is rectangular in plan, with asymmetrical annexes; it acquired its current appearance during restorations in the second half of the 19th century.

At Anakopiya, on the summit of a mountain, was found the most important fortress of the Abazgians, which Procopius calls Trakheia; it was explored by Trapsh.¹⁷⁴ In its central part, a church with a rectangular exterior plan was built in the Middle Ages (11th century?). It is possible that its foundations include the remains of

¹⁷³ Lekvinadze 1970a; Khrushkova 2002a, 137-84; 2005.

¹⁷⁴ Trapsh 1969, 121-57; 1975.

an early Christian building, as several pieces of architectural detailing with early Christian symbols were found here.¹⁷⁵ One accidental find on the slope of the mountain was a 7th-century lead seal with cruciform monograms on both sides; on one side is the customary formula 'Blessed Virgin, help', and on the other is the name of the Eparch Peter(?).¹⁷⁶

Thus, in 6th-century Abazgia, Christianity spread to a considerable portion of the local population. The main Abazgian religious centre was at Tsandripsh, though Christian buildings were also found in fortresses.

The most important Apsilian fortress was Tsibilia/Tsibilon; it sits on two cliffs more than 400 m high, overlooking the Kodor gorge. A religious complex was situated on the summit of one of the cliffs (Figs. 13-14). A small late church (no. 1) with a rectangular plan is surrounded by a cemetery containing several dozen burials from the 13th-17th centuries. The church occupies part of the site of an older and larger church (no. 2), a single-nave construction with a broad horseshoe-shaped apse, dating from the first half of the 6th century.

Church no. 3, the oldest and largest, consisted of a single nave, a narthex and annexes on the southern side. Its apse and northern wall, which were built on the slope, are entirely destroyed; but judging by the preserved portion of the apse, its form was semicircular. A small fragment of the altar table constitutes a rare find of Proconnesian marble in the mountainous zone. To the south is situated a baptistery consisting of three small rooms; and in a tiny room on the south side of the baptistery, reliquaries containing bones were found. Church no. 3 can be dated to the first half of the 6th century, and was most probably built before the nearby Church no. 2.¹⁷⁷ The baptism of the Apsilians occurred in the church with the baptistery. In other buildings within the fortress were discovered some tiles and bricks with the stamp of a Bishop Constantine, although this individual is not mentioned in a single written source.¹⁷⁸

The fortress that the Abkhazians called Shapky is located 7 km from Tsibilia; a single-nave church was discovered here. The plan of the church can be reconstructed as a rectangle; its eastern wall, which stood on the slope, has collapsed. A tomb is located in the northern portion of the chancel area. The church dates from the time of Justinian I; its excavation has not been completed. In the region of the Tsebelda valley, in the village of Mramba, yet another single-nave church of the 6th century

¹⁷⁵ Khrushkova 1980, 26-31; 2002a, 192-94.

¹⁷⁶ Khrushkova 1977.

¹⁷⁷ Khrushkova 2002a, 291-322. In the opinion of Y. Voronov and O. Bgazhba (1987), Church no. 2 was built first.

¹⁷⁸ Voronov and O. Bgazhba 1987.

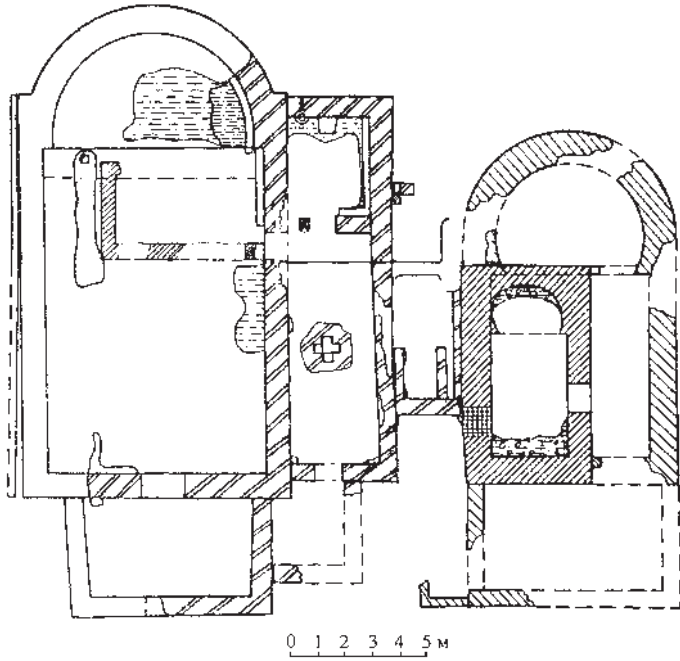


Fig. 13: Tsibilia: plan of religious complex.



Fig. 14: Tsibilia: view of baptistry of church no. 3 from the west.

is known. It was decorated with limestone slabs containing images consistent with the early Christian repertoire: birds, grapevines, crosses and fish.¹⁷⁹

So far, no churches of Justinian's time have been discovered in the considerable territory between the rivers Kodor and Ingur. In Archaeopolis, religious building continued into the 6th century. The 5th-century church with a narthex was destroyed at the beginning of the 6th century; it was not rebuilt, but beside it was constructed a basilica with two asymmetrical pastophoria, the only such case in the region. In the Middle Ages the basilica was rebuilt as the domed Church of the Forty Martyrs, which still stands today.¹⁸⁰

Several small single-nave churches have been discovered both in Archaeopolis and in its environs; presumably, they date to the 5th or 6th century. One of them is located not far from the Church of the Forty Martyrs; it has a broad semicircular apse and a narthex. A ceramic drainpipe that passes through its southern wall may have been associated with baptism. In the *acropolis* of Archaeopolis is a rectangular single-nave church called 'Misaroni', the walls of which are almost entirely preserved. Still another small building with a pentagonal apse was included in the first line of defensive walls at Archaeopolis; Kapanadze has determined that it was a church. A few rectangular single-nave churches, with or without a small narthex, are located at fortresses in the region of Archaeopolis: Abedati, Kotianeti and Shpeti. The only example of a domed church is a tiny tetraconch at Nodzhikhevi; it was built in the 5th-6th centuries.¹⁸¹

At the village of Sepeti (ancient Onoguris), 4 km from Archaeopolis, there is a vaulted basilica without a narthex, considerably reconstructed in its upper parts. A Greek stone inscription contains an invocation to St Stephen in the name of someone called *φιλοκτίστης* ('he who loves to build'); perhaps this is the anonymous founder of the church. Beside the inscription is an image of a male figure in a long garment; the figure has a halo. The basilica is dated to the turn of the 5th/6th centuries, or to the 6th.¹⁸²

Vashnari was an important religious centre in this part of Lazica. The architectural complex was situated within the fortress walls, and consisted of a basilica and a martyrion (Fig. 15). The basilica had a pentagonal apse, and an annexe the southern side served as a baptistery; baptism is mentioned in a poorly preserved Greek stone inscription. The basilica was surrounded by an ambulatory on all sides but

¹⁷⁹ Voronov *et al.* 1986; Khrushkova 1980, 32-33; 2002a, 322-27.

¹⁸⁰ Kapanadze 1991, 335-39.

¹⁸¹ Kapanadze 1991, 339-40, 343-44.

¹⁸² Lekvinadze 1970a, 166-68; Kapanadze 1991, 198-215. On the inscription, see Kaukhchishvili 1951, 89-91.

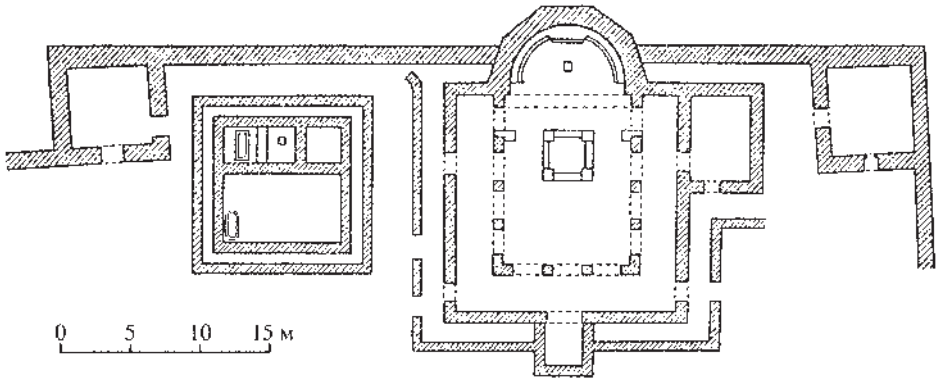


Fig. 15: Vashnari: plan of religious complex (V.A. Lekvinadze).

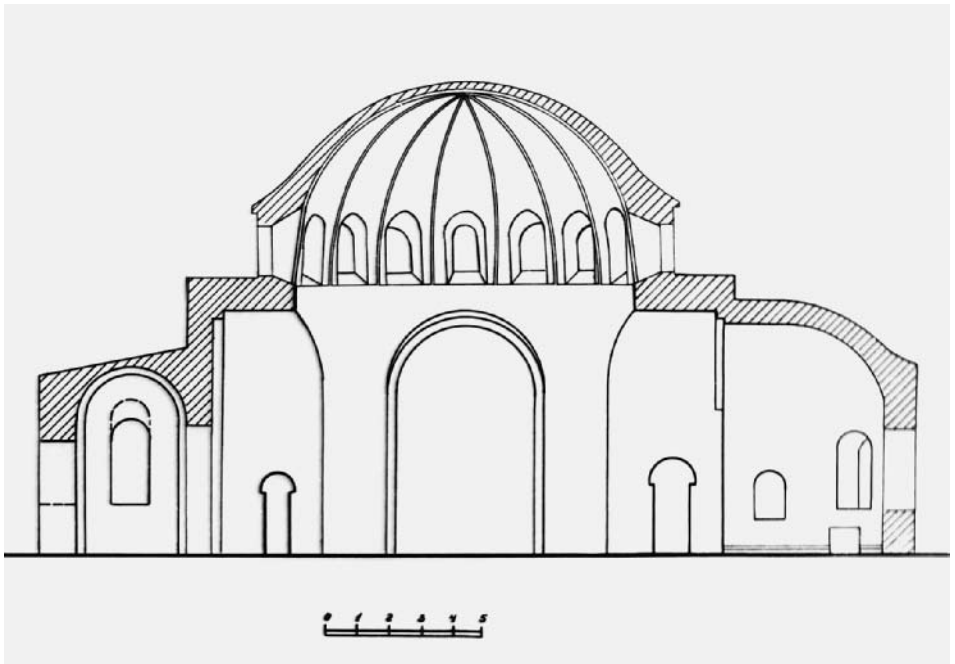


Fig. 16: Dranda: section of church (V. Khashba).

the east. Two metres north of the church is situated a square martyrium in which burials were discovered. The upper storey of the martyrium was decorated along the main facade of the colonnade, of which six capitals of local stone are preserved; these Corinthian capitals, with their schematised volutes, are adorned with four simply carved leaves. The complex dates to the second half of the 6th century.¹⁸³

At Tsikhisdziri (Adzhara), a basilica with a pentagonal apse and a narthex was discovered; it is the only such complex with a bath. At the southern entrance to the basilica there is a portico whose asymmetrical plan conforms to the colonnade of the baths. The basilica dates to the time of Justinian; it is possible that it became the episcopal centre of Petra.¹⁸⁴

After the Justinianic period, a great brick church was built at the village of Dranda, in the Apsilian coastal region (Fig. 16). One could say that this monumental domed structure completes the evolution of early Christian construction in the region, which began with the simplest of single-nave churches, the modest cathedral of Bishop Stratophilus at Pityus. The plan of the Dranda church contains its own combination of rotunda and cross, while the sanctuary includes a prothesis and a diaconicon. The interior is dominated by the broad dome, which rests on the vaults over the arms of the cross, and on parts of the walls. The brickwork is noted for the marked care with which it was constructed, particularly in the interior, in the brickwork of the vaults and the dome. During restoration, amphorae of various types were discovered in the vault over the narthex; in my view, they date to the end of the 6th or the first half of the 7th century.¹⁸⁵ On the basis of the amphorae, archaeologists A.L. Yakobson, Khotelashvili and Lekvinadze date the church to the 6th century,¹⁸⁶ while historians of architecture Chubinashvili and R.S. Mepisashvili date it to the 8th century.¹⁸⁷ It is possible that the church at Dranda was the see of the archbishopric of Abazgia: its dimensions and its architectural excellence closely connect it to the Byzantine architectural tradition, and all the sources affirm that this building was not an ordinary one.

Conclusion

The evolution of Christian constructions in the eastern Black Sea littoral can be summarised as follows. Christian buildings appeared in the 4th century, first at Pityus in the time of Constantine, and perhaps then at Ziganis and Archaeopolis.

¹⁸³ Lekvinadze 1972.

¹⁸⁴ Lekvinadze 1973. For a survey of the early Christian monuments of Lazica, see Khrushkova 2002a, 331-53.

¹⁸⁵ Khrushkova 2002a, 259-73.

¹⁸⁶ Lekvinadze 1982; Khotelashvili and Yakobson 1984.

¹⁸⁷ Chubinashvili 1948, 62, 67, 99; Mepisashvili 1983.

A prominent religious complex was erected at Sebastopolis at the beginning of the 5th century. In the 5th century, the old churches at Pityus and Archaeopolis were reconstructed. Religious buildings appeared outside the walls of Pityus. At the end of the 5th century, the church at Gyenos was built; and at the beginning of the 6th century, the Church of the Forty Martyrs at Archaeopolis and the tetraconch at Nodzhikhevi were constructed. A large basilica arose at Alakhadzy, near Pityus, in the first half of the 6th century, and, under Justinian I, the church for the Abazgians was constructed at Tsandripsh. A number of single-nave churches began to appear at fortresses: at Tsibilia, Shapky and Khashupse, at Gagra, possibly at Anakopiya, and in the vicinity of Archaeopolis.

All the familiar types of early Christian architecture are encountered in the eastern Black Sea littoral: the basilica, the single-nave church and the domed building (though there are few examples of this last type). Single-nave churches are varied, and often include annexes. Sculptural decoration employs slabs with locally made reliefs adorned with symbolic motives, as well as imported marble works from Proconnesus. In the 6th century, architectural types become more complex and advanced, and there is an increase in the import of marble, which is used to decorate prominent churches, especially in the northern part of the region (in Abazgia, and in neighbouring Zikhia to the north-west). Some liturgical furnishings (such as ambos and chancel screens) are of Constantinopolitan type; these, like the marble, were frequently imported. In other cases, the form of the liturgical furnishings bears a similarity to Syrian and Palestinian examples. In the second half of the 6th century, new significant domed buildings appear at Pityus: a double-apse church and a cruciform church, both outwith the walls of the ancient city. A martyrion-complex arises at Vashnari. At the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th, the church at the village of Dranda characterises the passage from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.¹⁸⁸

The entire eastern Black Sea littoral served as a zone of multicultural contact. Thus, its early Christian architecture is characterised in particular by a combination of features: Roman (especially in the first phase), Constantinopolitan and Syro-Palestinian, as well as from Asia Minor.

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Abbreviations

BK *Bedi Kartlisa.*

BS *Biblioteca Sanctorum* (Rome 1961-).

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¹⁸⁸ Khrushkova 1991; 2002a, 418-31; 2002b.

- REGC *Revue des Études Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes.*
- TAVO *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* (Wiesbaden 1977-93).
- VV *Vizantiiskii Vremennik.*
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