

Title: The Chabukauri Basilica
Date: Late 4th century – 427 AD
Geography: Kakheti (Georgia)
Culture: South Caucasus
Medium: Architecture



Fig. 1. Map of Nekresi town's territory and its relevant sites. © Nadar Bakhtadze, "The Early Christian Basilicas: Archaeological Research in Nekresi Former City (Georgia)," https://www.academia.edu/105722252/THE_EARLY_CHRISTIAN_BASILICAS_ARCHAEOLOGICAL_RESEARCH_IN_NEKRESI_FORMER_CITY_GEORGIA [last accessed 30th April 2025]

“alt= sites around Chabukauri basilica: Nekresi monastery about 1.5km to the southeast, the Fire Temple about 1.5km to the south southeast, and Dolochopi basilica 5.5km to the east southeast”

Keywords: Nekresi, Chabukauri, basilica, King Trdat, Christianisation

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The 4th or 5th-century basilica found in Chabukauri, in northeastern Kakheti, is one of the largest early Christian churches in Georgia. The impressive scale and style of the structure has prompted a reassessment of the spread of Christianity in the region as well as of the role in that spread of towns such as Nekresi.

The basilica lies in the centre of the historic town, which was founded by King Parnajom of Kartli (r. 109-90 BC) and which covered an area of around 200 hectares before its decline in the 8th century AD. The place is today to a large extent densely forested, rendering its archaeological investigation logistically challenging. Nonetheless, several important structures have already been excavated. For example, two notable sites in the area that appear to have been constructed during Late Antiquity are a potential Zoroastrian fire temple that may have functioned from the 2nd to 4th centuries, and a hilltop monastery (known as Nekresi monastery) founded in the 6th century by Abibos, one of the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers. According to the *Georgian Chronicles*, several monarchs carried out fortification projects on the town between its foundation and the 4th century. The *Chronicle* also claims that Christian influence was present in the region before the construction by Abibos of the monastery, recounting the story of the building of a church by King Trdat (r. 394-406). The archaeological site of Chabukauri basilica has been tentatively linked to this account.

Excavated during 1998-2005, the complex consists of the foundations of a pagan temple upon which a large basilica church was built in the 4th-5th centuries together with a chapel of the same date that may have functioned as a baptistery. Adjoining the basilica are the remains of another, smaller church, dated to the 6th or 7th centuries. The three-aisled basilica is 35 meters long and 15 meters wide and was constructed from sizeable rectangular blocks. While the church had at some point collapsed, all its pillars falling northwards in what appears to have been a single event, much of the rubble that was created by this disaster was never removed from where it fell, with the result that both architectural fragments and other artefacts have remained well preserved. Because of the uniform collapse of the basilica's pillars, the building's destruction may be attributed to a magnitude 9 earthquake dated to 427 CE with modern Ganja, Azerbaijan, as its epicenter.

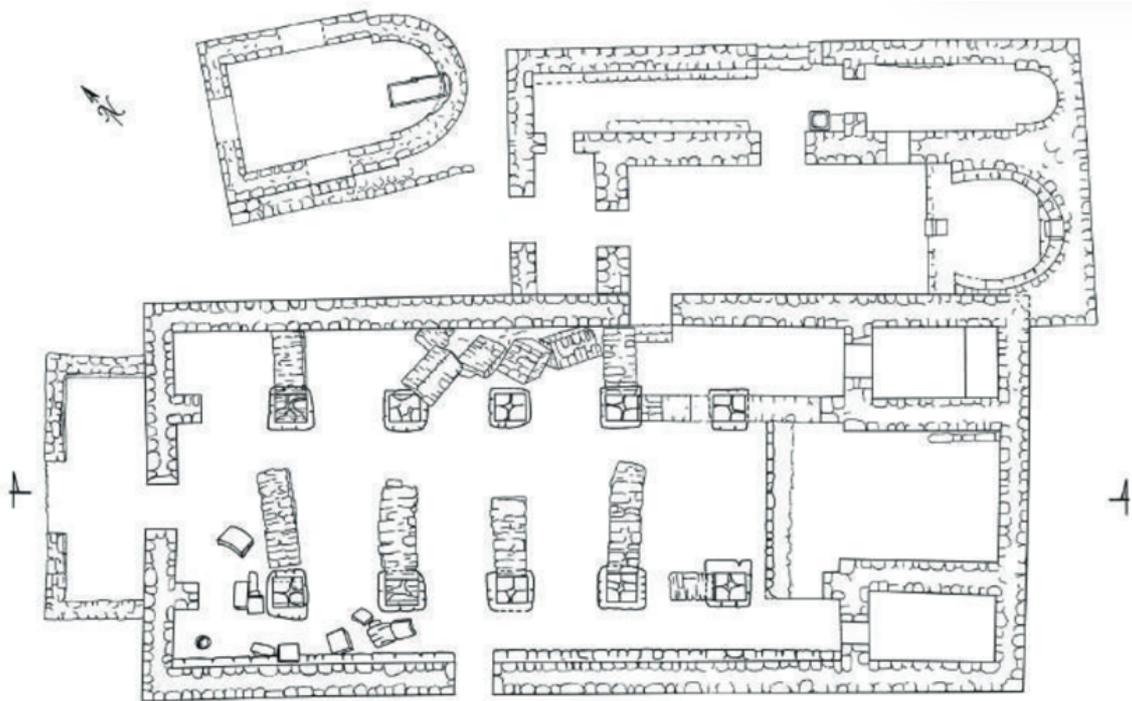


Fig. 2. *Plan of Chabukauri basilica, chapel, and adjoining church.* © N. Bakhtadze, V. Mamiashvili, B. Gabekhadze, J. Chkhvimiani, *The Early Christian Churches of the Ancient city of Nekresi* (Tbilisi: n.p., 2020). Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

“alt= Plan of Chabukauri basilica, with the main entrance facing northwest. To the northeast of this entrance, there is a small chapel. A later and smaller church adjoins the eastern corner of the main basilica.”

While several of the building’s architectural features do not have contemporary parallels in Georgia, they are comparable to those attested in the other parts of Eastern Christendom. For instance, the central nave ends in an elevated rectangular sanctuary similar to that found in Northern Syrian and Egyptian churches from the 4th to 6th centuries. Similarly, the roof, unlike those of the Georgian basilicas built after the 5th century, which are stone vaulted, consisted of both smooth and grooved ceramic roof tiles and antefixes laid on wooden beams. The toothed antefixes, for example, have parallels with the 5th century Nagzauri church in Lower Kartli. The roof tiles can also be compared to examples from 4th-5th century Georgia, as can the pitchers, wine jars, and bowls of which numerous examples were found. Finds preserved within the collapsed basilica also have compelling Near Eastern and Byzantine parallels that help identify the period during which the building was furnished and used. The four-legged alabaster table placed in the middle of the central nave has parallels with similar objects in 4th and 5th-century Byzantine churches, as also do the bronze oil lamps with multiple ducts that were excavated.



Fig. 3. *View of Chabukauri basilica from the northwestern entrance.* © N. Bakhtadze, V. Mamiashvili, B. Gabekhadze, J. Chkhvimiani, *The Early Christian Churches of the Ancient city of Nekresi* (Tbilisi: n.p., 2020). Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

“alt= northwest entrance to the basilica with a rectangular vestibule. The walls remain up to 2 metres high and two rows of five pillars separate the interior into three aisles.”

Excavations undertaken further east from 2012 to 2019 have revealed the even larger Dolochopi basilica, a 4th-5th-century church with material parallels to Chabukauri. The construction of these basilicas of large size so far east of the royal capital in Mtskheta, and within 100 years of Kartli's Christianisation, is important for several reasons. First, the existence of these buildings challenges the notion advanced by the art historian Giorgi Chubinashvili (1885-1973) and long accepted by scholarship that the earliest churches in Georgia took the form exclusively of small chapels. Several pieces of evidence previously used to support the notion that small rather than large-scale buildings characterized the architecture of places of Christian worship in Georgia during the early centuries have been questioned. For example, a stone structure underneath the 6th-century monastery founded by Abibos that had been thought to be an example of an early chapel has recently been re-identified as a crypt contemporaneous with the monastery itself.

The parallels between the architecture and artefacts of Chaburaki Basilica with those associated with Byzantine and Near Eastern churches indicate a significant foreign influence – and perhaps even direct material exchange. This suggests that the 4th century Christianization of Iberia was part of the pivoting of the region away from Iran towards Byzantium's sphere of influence.

When taken together with other buildings at Nekresi, the Chaburaki Basilica helps to shed light on the complex religious history of Georgia during the 4th and 5th centuries. The close – possibly overlapping – dates of the pagan temple and fire temple point to a region subject to multiple religious influences whose populations were ultimately encouraged to unite under a Christian state project. It is to be hoped that the continued investigation of Nekresi will give us a more detailed understanding not only of the political and religious role of the specific town, but also of the process of Georgia's Christianisation.

Biography

Luka Shanidze is an undergraduate studying Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Oxford

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