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*This presentation was supported by Shota
Rustaveli National Science Foundation of
Georgia (SRNSFG) [grant number FR-22-117]*

The Kingdom of Egrisi (Lazica), 1st-8th c. AD: an historical and archaeological overview

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Tbilisi-Cambridge
17.02.2026

Physical Map of Georgia



Georgia is a country in **Eurasia** to the east of the **Black Sea**, most of which is located in the **South Caucasus**. To the north, it is bounded by the **Caucasus** ridge, to the south by the **Lesser Caucasus** Mountains, and to the west by the eastern **Black Sea** coast.

Mountains are the dominant geographic feature of **Georgia**. The **Likhi Range** divides the country into eastern and western halves. At present the area of **Georgia** totals **69,7 sq. km.**; According to ancient oriental and later antique annals, the territory was always settled by the tribes of **Georgian** origins.

One of the most important geographic regions of **Georgia** is swampy **Colchis Plain**, of triangular shape in close to the **Black Sea** littoral.

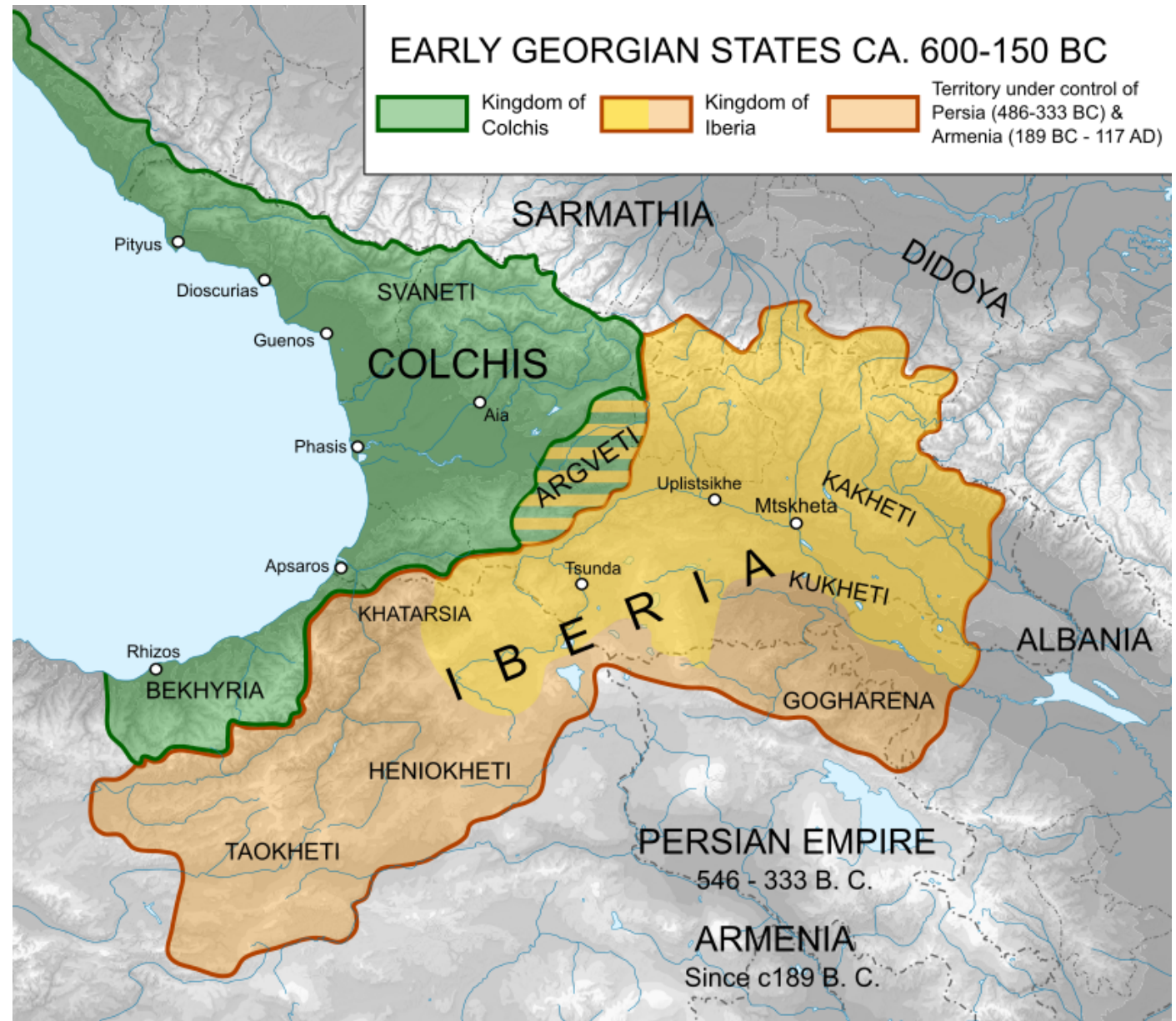
The Kingdom of Colchis (6th-4th cc BC)

Greek colonisation of the Black Sea began early in the first millennium BC, with colonies founded initially in towns on the northern coast of Asia Minor. The earliest extant Greek texts show that in the 8th century Colchis and the Caucasus had already been integrated into the world of Greek myth and imagination.

Greek colonies on the Colchian shore were only founded from the 6th century BC. Historical sources and archaeological excavation identify five colonies—Pityus, Dioscurias, Gyenos, Phasis and Pichvnari.

Greek pottery, fine wares and storage containers from this period are to be found in coastal settlements, in towns along the Rioni, and further inland.

The effects of these settlements can, however, be observed in the archaeological record—most directly on the coast, or inland at river ports. This period is a very rich for west Georgian archaeology. Sites like Vani, Pityus, Sebastopolis-Dioscorias and Pichvnari show plentiful material remains, including the stunningly wealthy burials of Vani.



Grave goods from Vani

5th – 4th cc BC



Colchian coins – 6th – 3rd cc BC



The fall of Colchis Kingdom



The kingdom of Colchis collapsed in the 1st century BC as a result of the Mithridatic wars and the campaign of Pompey the Great (106-48 BC) in the Caucasus. The former territory of Colchis was added to the province of Pontus and later (63 AD) united into the province of Galatia.

Several small kingdoms emerged in West Georgia during the 1st - 2nd centuries. Arrian of Nicomedia (The counsel of emperor Hadrian (117-138) in Cappadocia), during his trip around the east coast of the Black Sea, mentioned several tribes in the territory between Trapezunt and Sebastopolis: Colchians, Sans, Makrones, Heniochs, Dzidrits, Lazs, Apsilians, Abasgians, and Saniges. Those tribes were ruled by kings, though they were vassals to the Roman Emperor.

In the end of 3rd century Laz became the most powerful kingdom of West Georgia.

The foundation of Egrisi (Lazica) Kingdom

At the end of 3rd - beginning of 4th century, the Roman empire was weakened by the growth of foreign powers (Goth and Hun attacks on Roman territory; and the strengthening of Persia and its occupation of Iberia, Armenia and Albania) and lost control of its eastern provinces, including the West Georgian kingdoms. There were no Roman troops on the east Black Sea coast from the beginning of the 4th century, and the vassal relationship between Rome and Egrisi became very formal in character. In this period the Laz appear to have annexed the neighbouring tribes - Apsilians, Abasgians and Saniges. The Laz also annexed Svania and Racha-Lechkhumi at the end of 4th century. So, from the 3rd century, the Laz annexed all neighbouring tribes one at a time; uniting West Georgia and creating the new Kingdom of Lazica (Egrisi).

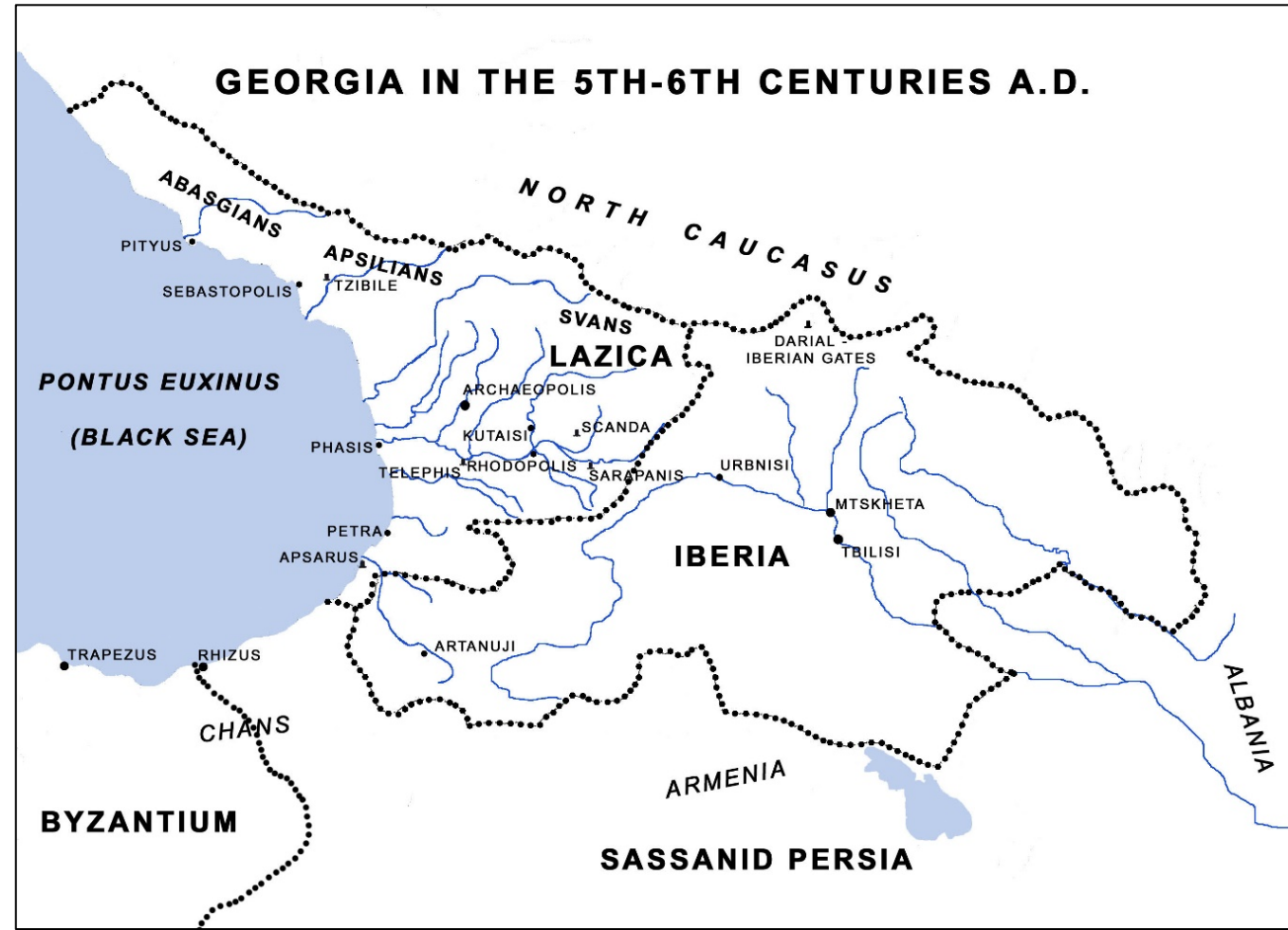


Agathias of Myrina (6th c. Greek historian) about Lazs:

*The inhabitants of **Lazica** were called **Colchians** in ancient times, so that the **Lazi** and the **Colchians** are the same people. That this is the case can easily be inferred from such landmarks as the river **Phasis** and the **Caucasus** and the fact that they have inhabited these regions for a very long time.*

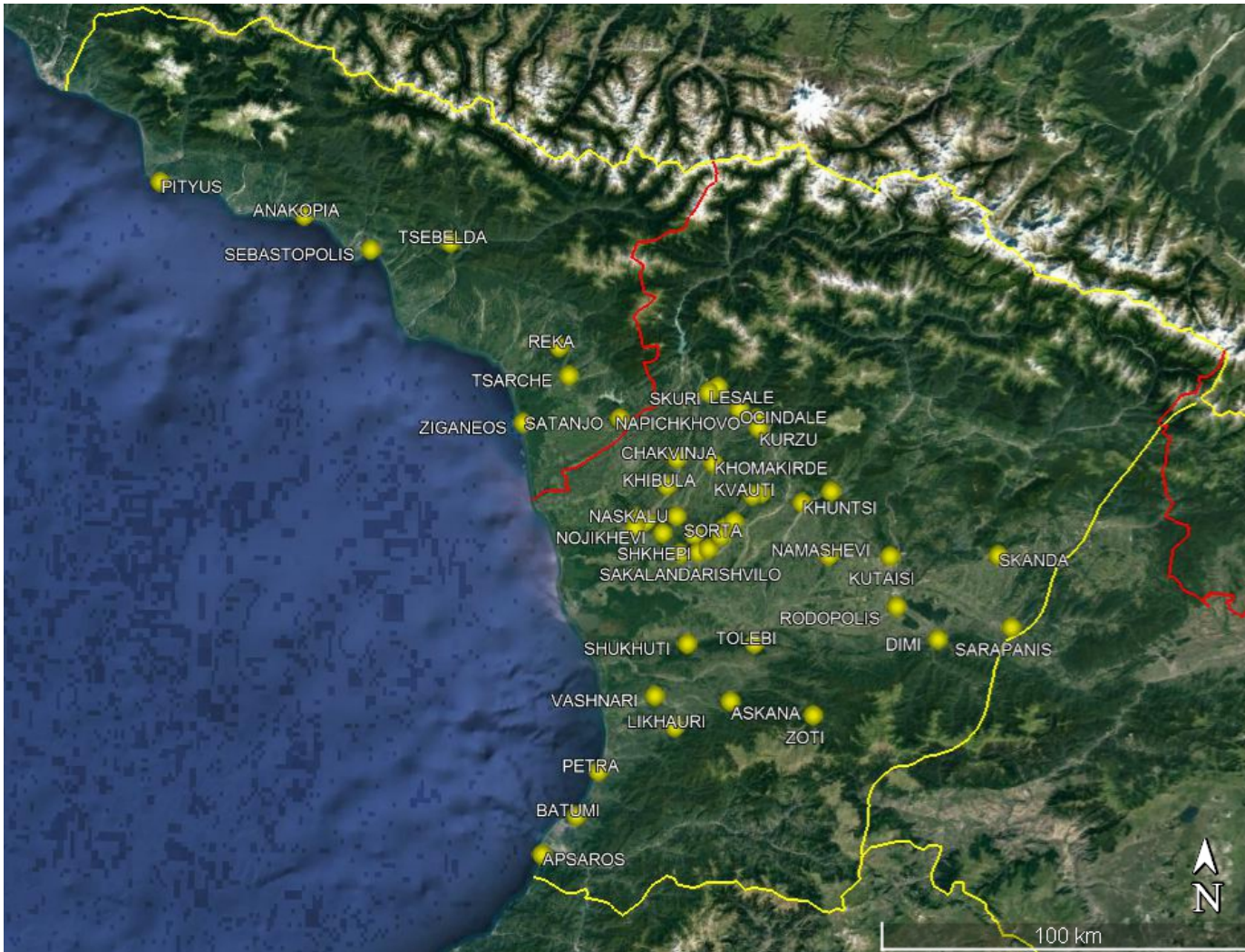
*The **Lazi** are a great and a proud people and they rule over other very considerable peoples. They pride themselves on their connection with the ancient name of the **Colchians** and have an exaggeratedly, though perhaps understandably, high opinion of themselves. I certainly know of no other subject race with such ample resources of manpower at its command or which is blessed with such a superfluity of wealth, with such an ideal geographical position, ... and with such a high standard of **civilization** and **refinement**. The ancient inhabitants of the place were indeed completely unaware of the benefits of navigation and had not even heard of ships until the arrival of the famous **Argo**. Nowadays they put out to sea whenever practicable and carry on a thriving commerce.*

*Nor are they **barbarians** in any other respect, long association with the **Romans** having led them to adopt a **civilized** and **lawabiding** style of life.*



The rulers of the newly founded kingdom took responsibility for the defence of their borders. Its geopolitical location meant that Lazica faced a number of threats – from the Roman (later Byzantine) Empire in the west; Sassanid Persia from the east; and nomadic warrior tribes from the north – and consequently the rulers of the kingdom organised strong lines of fortification along their borders.

A significant number (About 60) of early medieval castles (4th-6th centuries) were discovered and studied by archaeological survey and excavation in West Georgia in the 20th-21st centuries.



Procopius of Caesarea (6th c. Greek historian) about Lazs:

*The **Lazi** at first dwelt in the land of **Colchis** as subjects of the **Romans**, but not to the extent of paying them tribute or obeying their commands in any respect, except that, whenever their **king** died, the **Roman emperor** would send emblems of the office to him who was about to succeed to the throne.*

*And he, together with his subjects, guarded strictly the boundaries of the land in order that hostile **Huns** might not proceed from the **Caucasus mountains**, which adjoin their territory, through **Lazica** and invade the land of the **Romans**.*

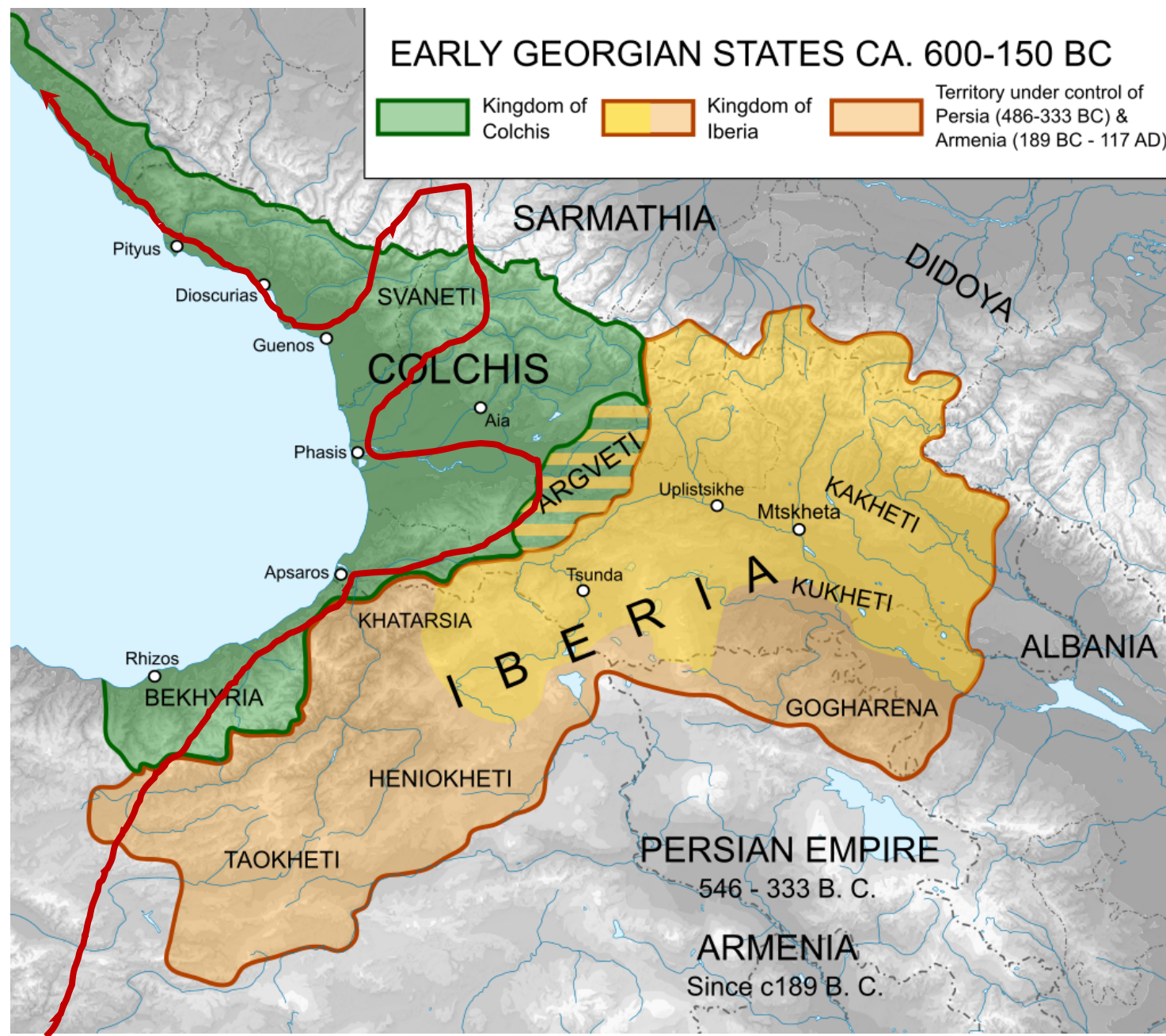
*And they kept guard without receiving money or troops from the **Romans** and without ever joining the **Roman** armies...*

*...As regards the **barbarians** dwelling in the **Caucasus**, **Lazica** was nothing else than a **bulwark** against them.*

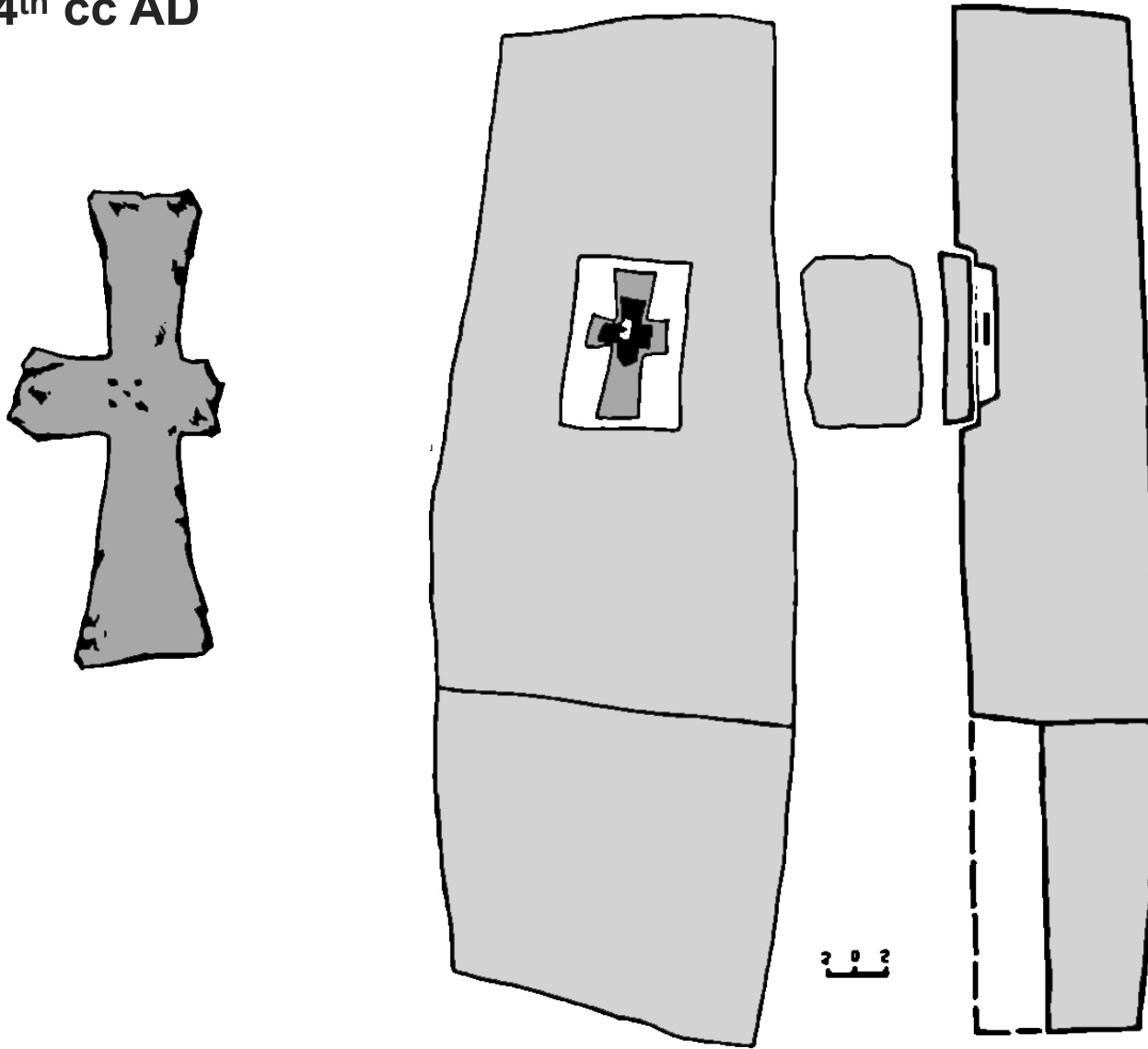
Saint Andrew the first-called Missionary journey to West Georgia

According to the **Georgian Church** tradition, **Christianity** was introduced to **West Georgia** by apostles - **Andrew the first-called, Simon the Zealot and Saint Matthias**. This tradition is based on **Byzantine written sources** – Sophronius (4th-5th cc AD), Dorotheos (6th c AD) and Pseudo Epiphanius (6th-7th cc AD).

Those authors describe the places to which **Saint Andrew the first called** travelled, and among them they mention **Sebastopolis, Apsaros**, unnamed communities along the banks of the river **Phasis**, **Colchis** and **Iberia**. According to one version **Saint Andrew travelled in Georgia** on three occasions and **Simon the Zealot** and **Saint Matthias** accompanied him on the third trip.



Iron cross, hid in Stone stele from Pityus, dated 3rd-4th cc AD

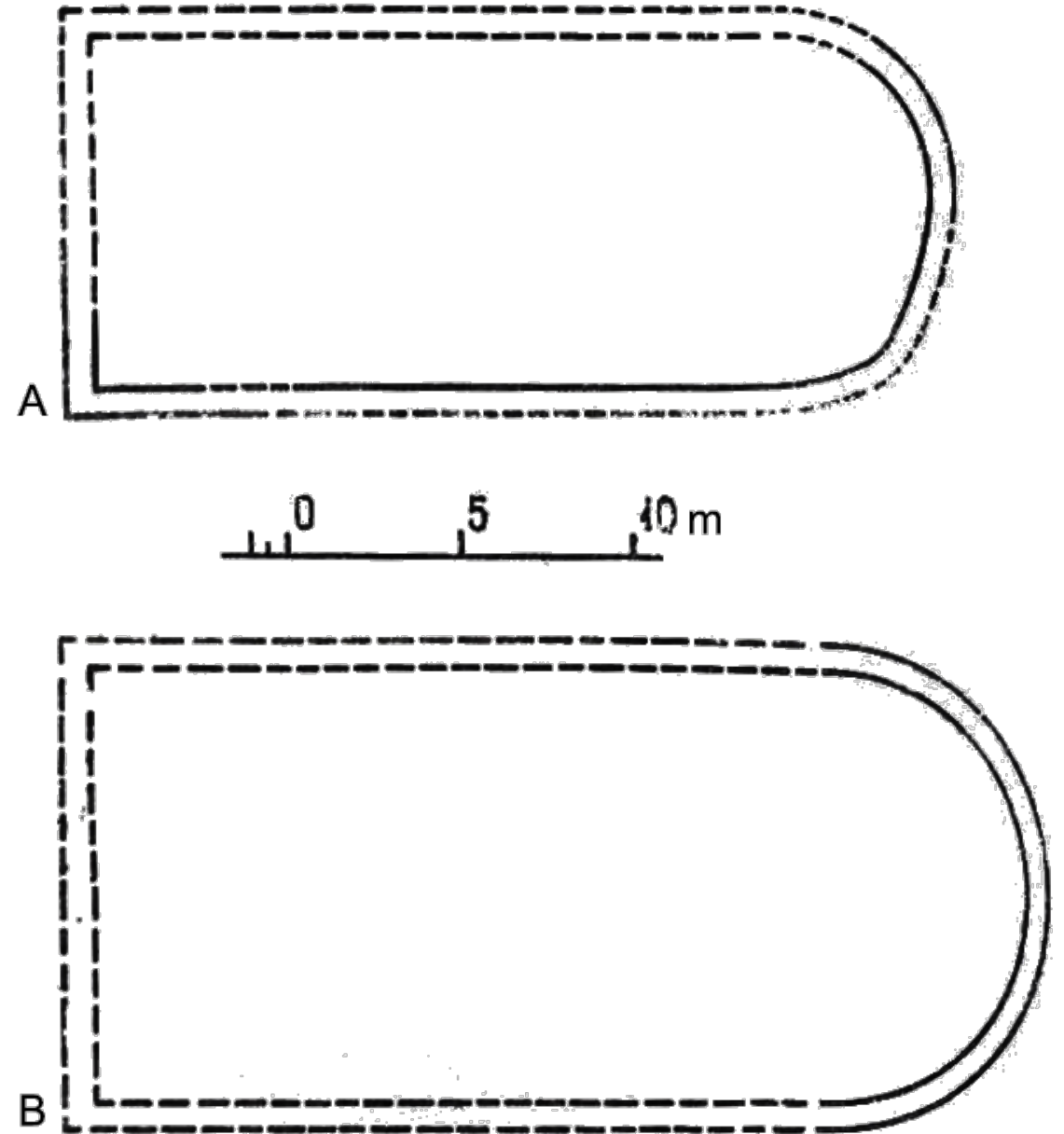


Unfortunately we don't have direct **archaeological** signs to prove **Apostles** journey to **Georgia**, but It is interesting to note that we have **archaeological** evidence that shows early **Christian communities** living in **West Georgia** before the official conversion, in the **2nd-3rd centuries**. Various **artifacts** have been discovered during archaeological excavations in historic **Pityus**, (Modern Bichvinta, Pitsunda – west Georgia, in the region of **Aphkazia**, occupied by the **Russian Federation**). Those artefacts include an **iron cross**, hidden in a **Stone stele**, dated **3rd c AD**. In addition, some **artifacts** with **Christian symbols** (fish, peacock etc.) have been discovered during excavation at **Gonio-Aphsaros** and **Petra-Tsikhisdziri**.

Earliest (beginning of 4th century) hall churches from Bichvinta-Pityus (A) and Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis (B)

Christianity was declared the official religion in **Lazica** in the first half of the **4th century**. According to the 4th century bishop **Gelasius of Caesarea** in the period of the reign of **Constantine the Great (306-337)**, the **Lazs** and **Iberians** were converted to **Christianity**. Other authors also state that **Georgian tribes** and states were converted in the same period. Also, it is worth mentioning that **Stratophilus, bishop of Pityus**, attended The **First ecumenical Council of Nicaea** in 325.

Ruins of the hall churches discovered in the main cities of **Lazica** like **Pityus** and **Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis** (The capital city of the state) are dated to the **end of the 3rd - beginning of the 4th century**. It is interesting that in **Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis** the church was built in the **Royal quarter** of the lower town, which means that **Christianity** had already been recognized as the **state religion** in the country.



Aerial view of the lower town of Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis – 4th, 5th and 6th centuries churches in the royal quarter of the city



While **Christianity** was first declared the official religion in **West Georgian** in the **first half of the 4th century**, the **Kings of Lazika** continued to seek balance in their **relationship** with **Byzantium** and **Sassanid Persia**. They used **religion** as a **political tool** in their engagement with the two great empires – **Rome/ Byzantium (Christianity)** and **Sassanid Persia (Zoroastrianism)**.

In the beginning of the 5th century a new, three-nave basilica was built on top of the original hall church. That basilica did not survive very long either, and was destroyed by the end of the same century, and in the beginning of the 6th century the stone steps of a royal palace were built on top of the south wall of basilica.

We think this might represent a statement by the rulers, that the ruins of the church weren't sacred to them, or something to be respected, they could just build stairs on top of it.

Forty Martyrs' church. 6th century. View from south

According to written sources there are at least two instances of **Laz kings** choosing a **Persian orientation** and **renouncing Christianity**. Eventually, **Christianity** was declared the **official religion** in **523**, when **King Tsathe** was **baptised**.

The situation seems to change radically in the **6th century AD**, after **King Tzathe** was baptised in **523**. From this date the 6th century witnessed the construction of, many churches all over the kingdom. This period of construction includes four new churches in **Nokalakevi**: two in the Royal Quarter, one in the Middle Town and one within the **Citadel**. The main church at Nokalakevi is the **Forty Martyrs** domed basilica



The Jege-Misaroni church from North-West



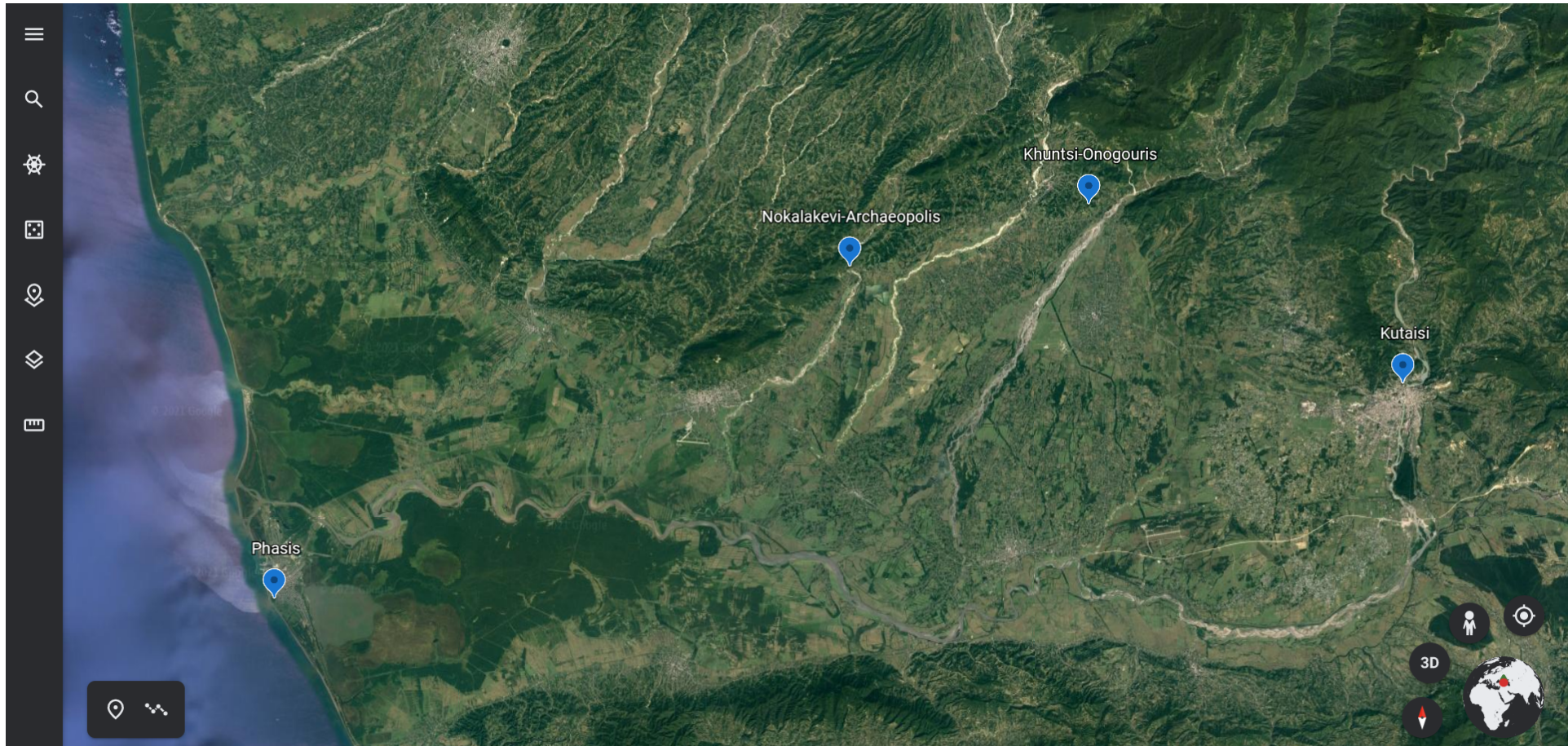
It is also worth mentioning the hall-church dedicated to **Saint George** within the citadel of **Nokalakevi**. It is hall-shaped church. Its local name is **Jege-Misaron**, which itself provides an interesting insight into the local response to **Christianity**. It is well known that **Mithraism** was one of the most popular religions in the Late Roman empire. **Mithras** was a warrior god, a protector of pure people, and in Christianity many attributes of **Mithras** were later assigned to **Saint George**. 'Jege' in Mengrelian means **George** and **Misaron (Misra)** might be connected to **Mithras**.

Saint Andrew cross on the architrave of the main gate of Jege-Misaroni church



Location of Khuntsi Fortress – Onogouris (?)

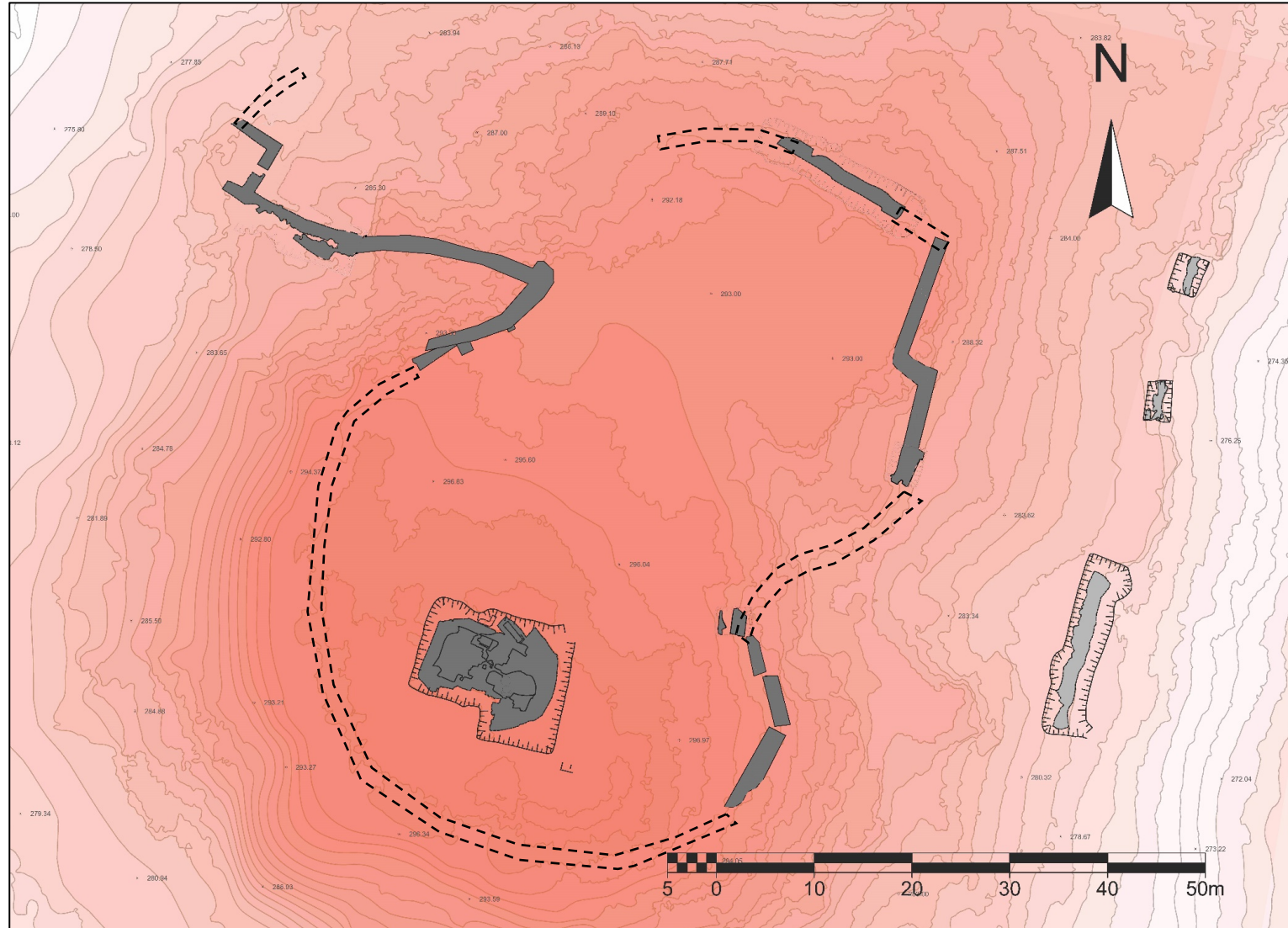
when we speak about relations between Christianity and other religions, and the conflicts and assimilation that took place in West Georgia, it is necessary to include some new discoveries of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi.



In 2014 we received information regarding the ruins of a fortress 25 km east of Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis. We visited the site and found a very interesting monument, situated perfectly to control routes and the plain between two important Laz cities, Kutaisi-Mokhiris and Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis.

Plan of Khuntsi fortress

After archaeological investigation over ten years, we can suggest that this fortress could be ancient Onogouris, mentioned by Agathias of Myrina, who is among those who described military engagements in west Georgia in AD 541 between Byzantium and its Laz allies on the one side, and the Sassanid Persian Empire on the other. It was part of a confrontation that lasted for more than 20 years, and historical accounts describe it as the **‘Great War of Egrisi’**.



Aerial view of Khuntsi fortress



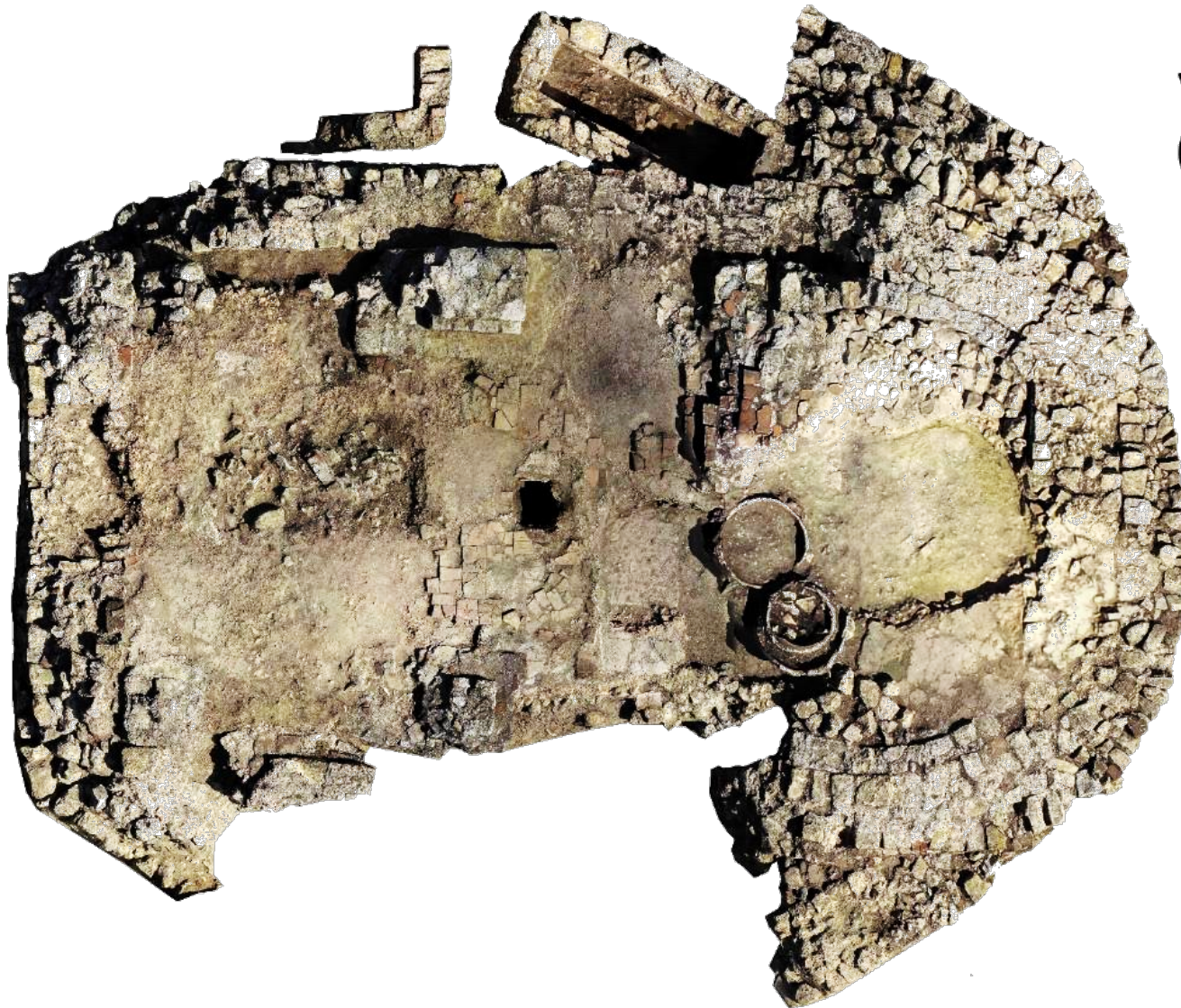
Agathias refers several times to the fortress of Onoguris, which was strategically important to both the Byzantines and the Iranians. **Agathias, Histories, II.22.3:3** *“Then, after he had reinforced the **Persian** garrison at **Onoguris** (which he had established in the district of **Archaeopolis** as a hostile base against the **Romans**) putting new heart into the men and making the place as secure as possible, he returned to **Cotai̇s** and **Mucheiresis**.”*

Aerial view of Khuntsi fortress

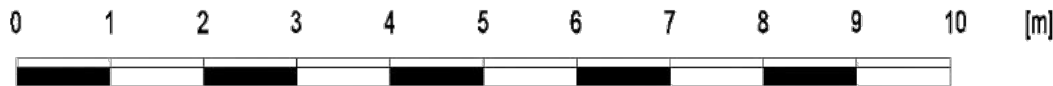


The expedition has excavated up to 150 meters of the substantial fortification walls, two towers, and a fragment of gate.

Orthophoto of Khuntsi fortress temple (5th-6th cc AD)



Excavation has also revealed the remains of a temple, with interesting architectural details: including **angled corners**, rather than square; **four column bases** in the interior built separately, but just right to the walls; and **additional structures**, perhaps to support an apse. All of these elements are very unusual for early Christian temples and there is no comparable site in Georgia, the Caucasus or any other Christian region.

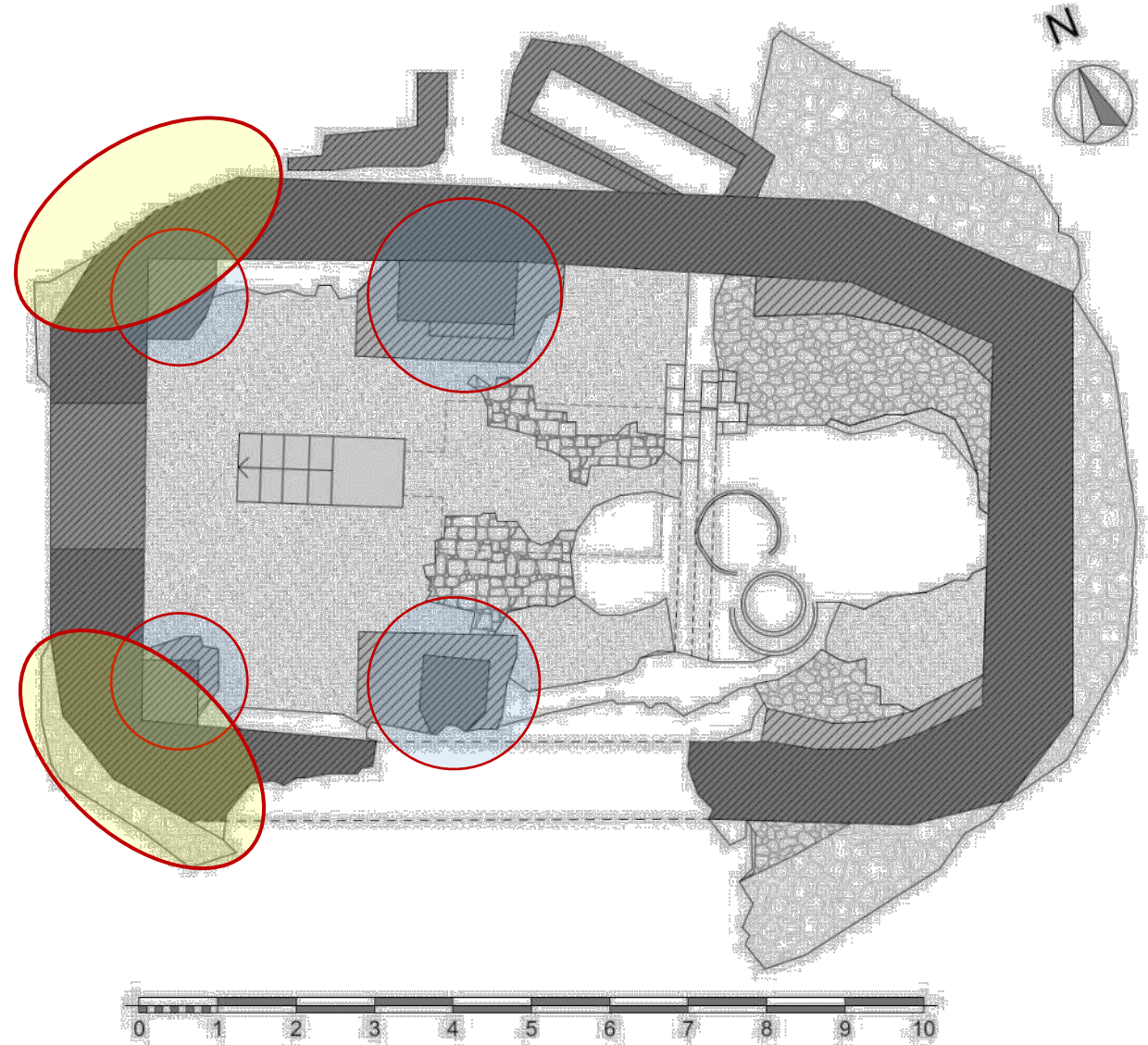


Cross fragment, found on the floor of the temple (5th-6th cc AD)

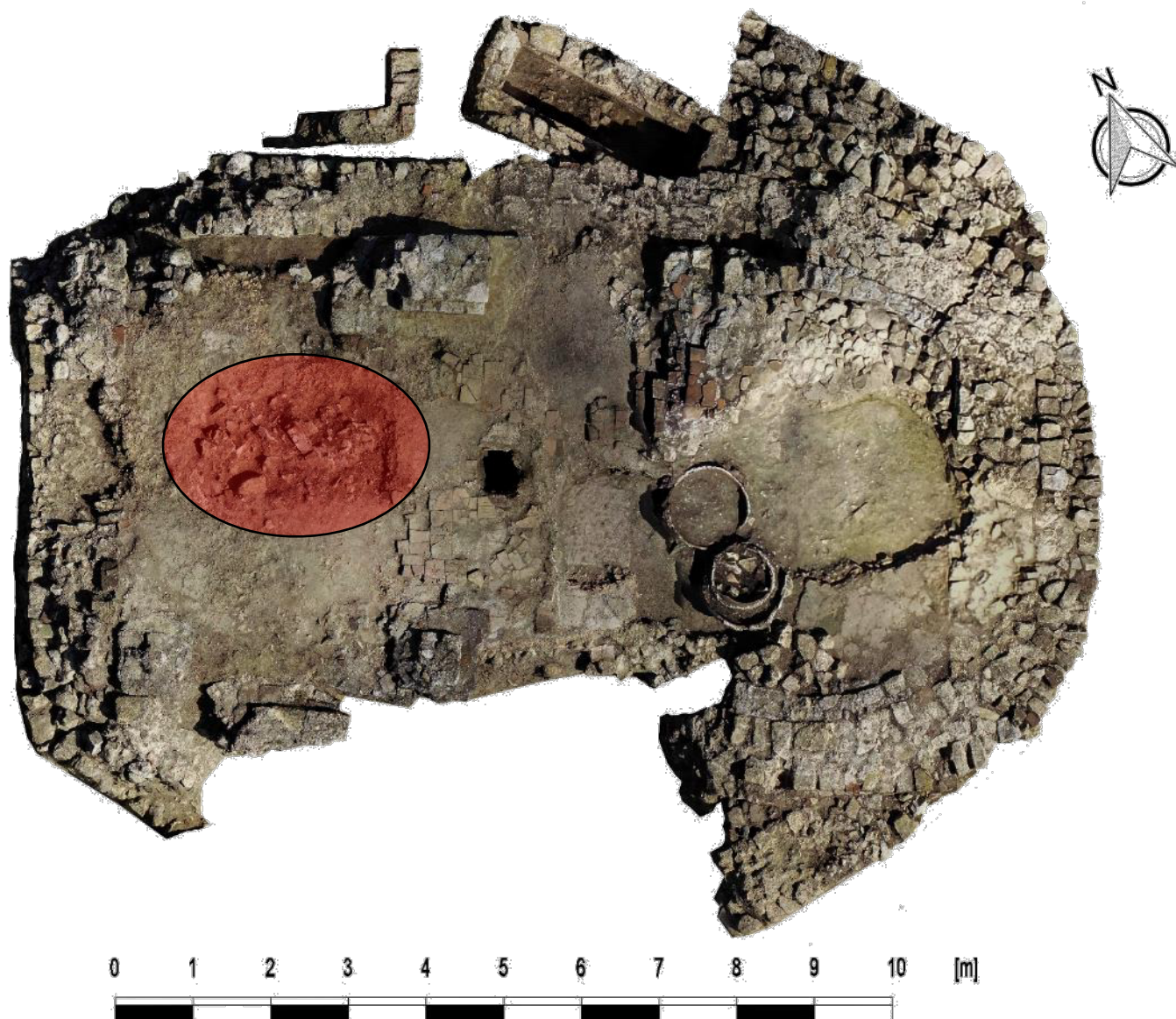


Plan of Khuntsi fortress temple (5th-6th cc AD)

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Orthophoto of Khuntsi fortress temple (5th-6th cc AD)



Entrance (Dromos) of the Crypt before and after cleaning. View from East



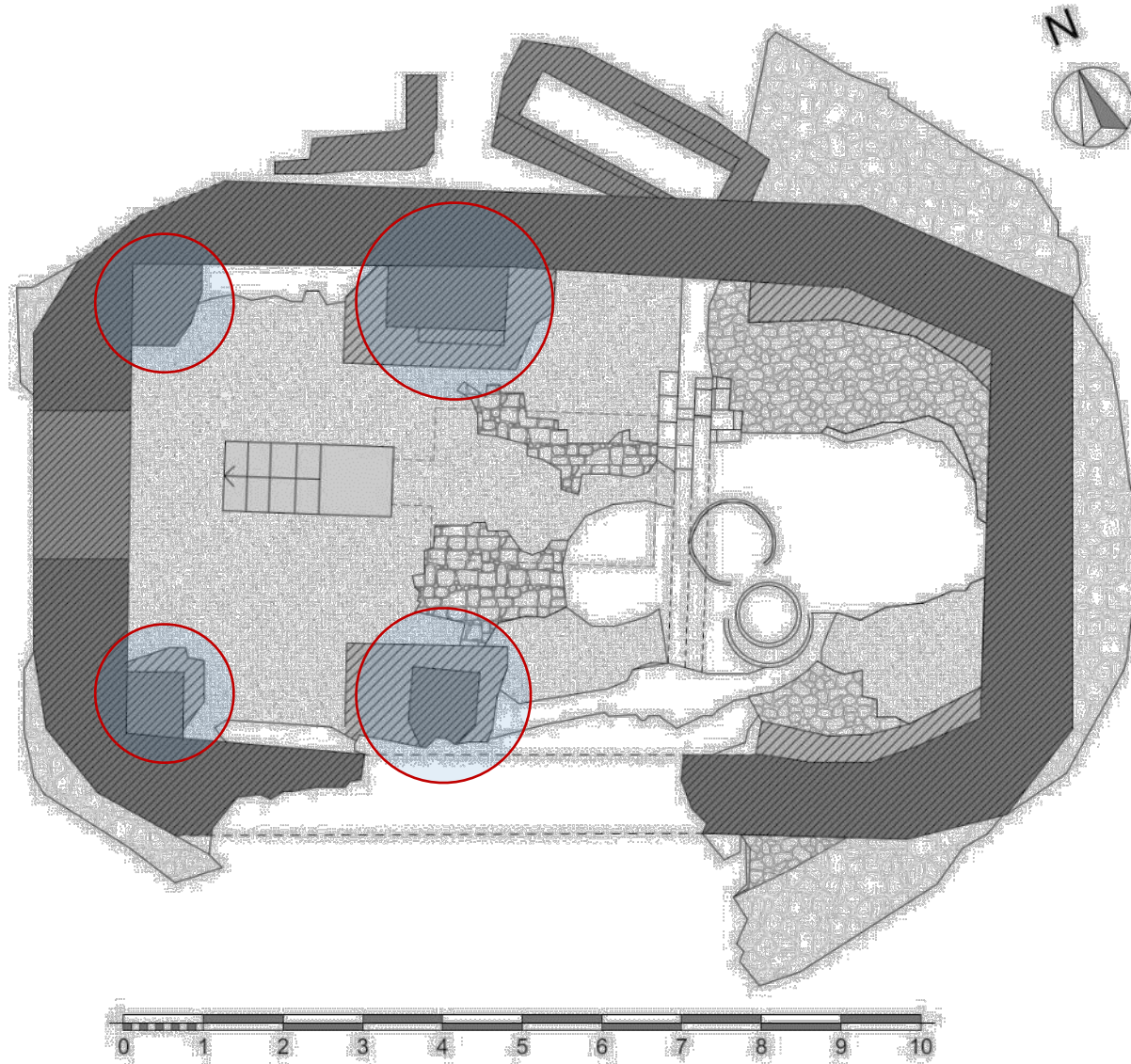
Five step Entrance (Dromos) of the Crypt



Interior of the Crypt before and after cleaning



Plan of Khuntsi fortress temple (5th-6th cc AD)

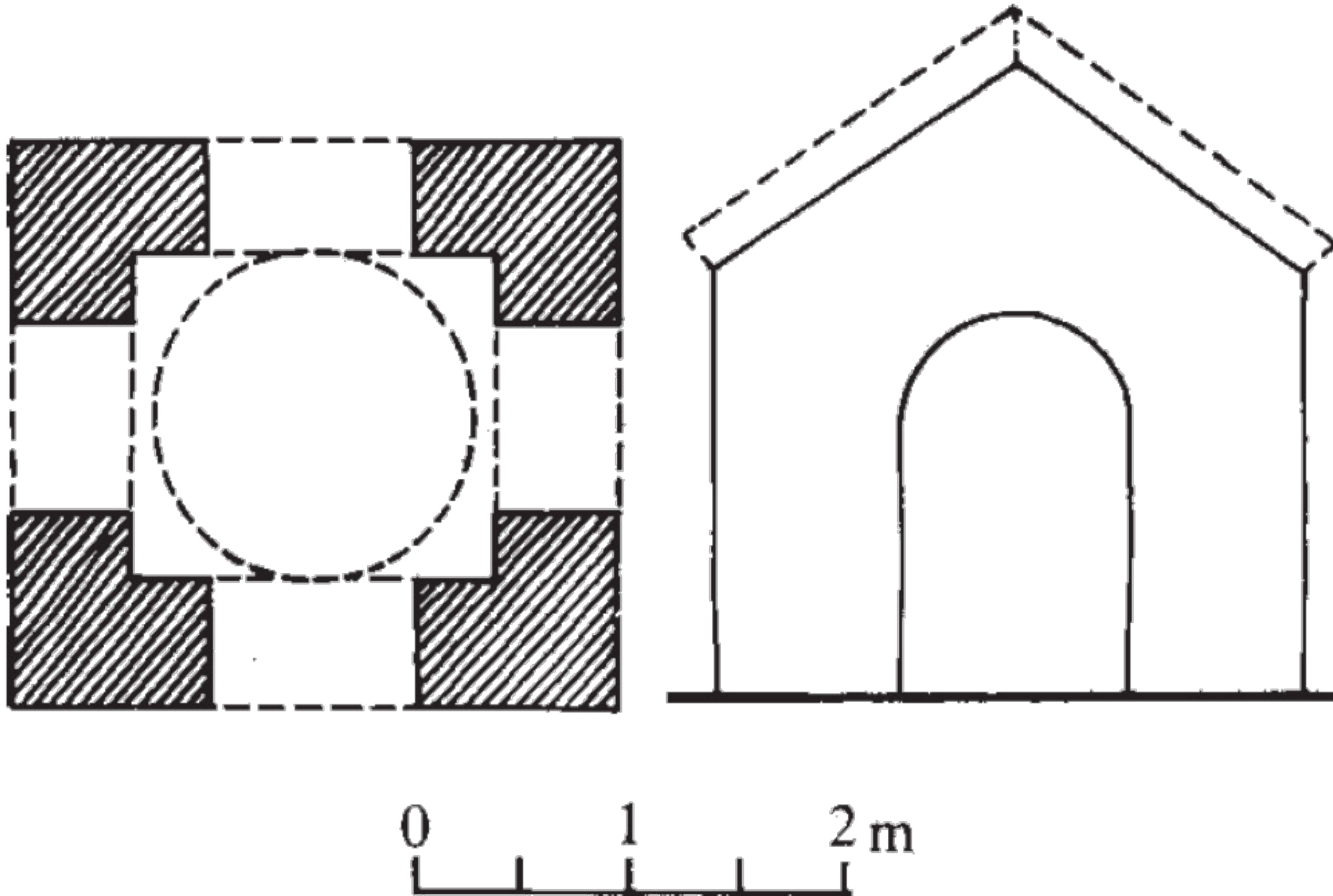


Therefore, based on the dating evidence and the fact that Onogouris was occupied by a Sassanid Persian army for several years, we believe that this temple, supported by **four columns**, was dedicated to another religion (for example Zoroastrianism). Later it was adapted or reconstructed as a Christian church, and this perfectly demonstrates the complex nature of the spread and development of Christianity in West Georgia in the late Roman-early medieval period.

Cheremi temple, East Georgia (4th-5th cc AD)



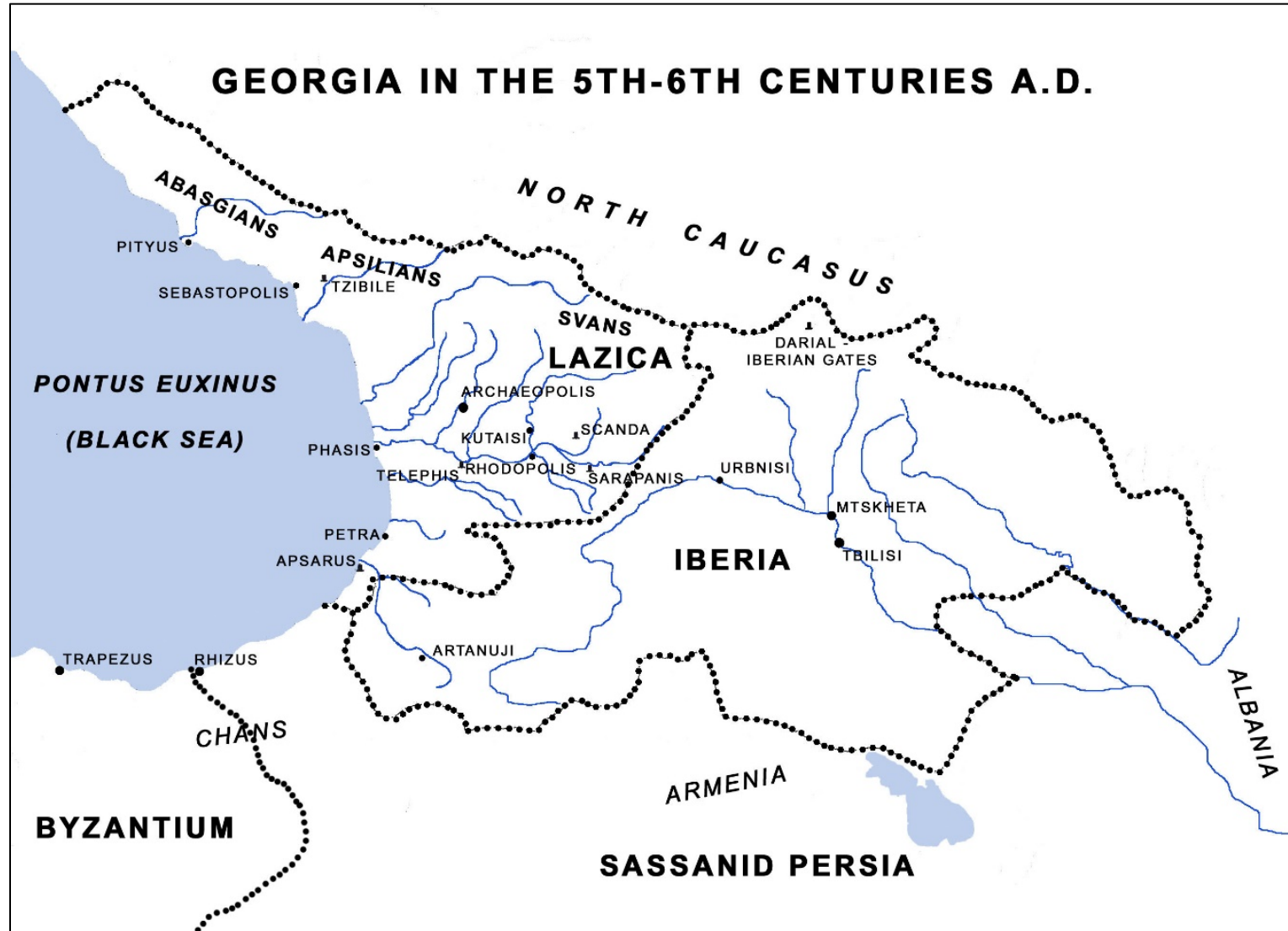
Cheremi temple, East Georgia (4th-5th cc AD)



The Great War of Egrisi – Lazica war (541-562)

The **Great War of Egrisi**, was fought between the **Byzantine** Empire and the **Sasanian** Empire for control of Lazica. The Lazic War lasted for twenty years, from **541** to **562**, and ended with the **Fifty-Year Peace Treaty**, which obligated the **Byzantine** Empire to pay tribute to **Persia** each year for the recognition of **Lazica** as a **Byzantine** vassal state by **Persians**.

Lazica, situated on the eastern shore of the **Black Sea**, and controlling important mountain passes across the **Caucasus** and to the **Caspian Sea**, had a key strategic importance for both empires. For **Byzantines**, it was a barrier against a **Persian** advance through **Iberia** to the coasts of the Black Sea. **Persians** on the other side hoped to gain access to the sea, and control a territory from **Iberia**, which was by now under their firm domination, could be threatened.



The Great War of Egrisi – Lazica war (541-562)

Lazica featured a difficult terrain and was surrounded by naturally impregnable borders. Besides, it was protected by strong fortresses, including Archaeopolis, Petra, Sarapanis, Skande, Phasis, Rhodopolis, Uchimerion, Kutaisi, Onoguris, Sebastopolis and Pitius.

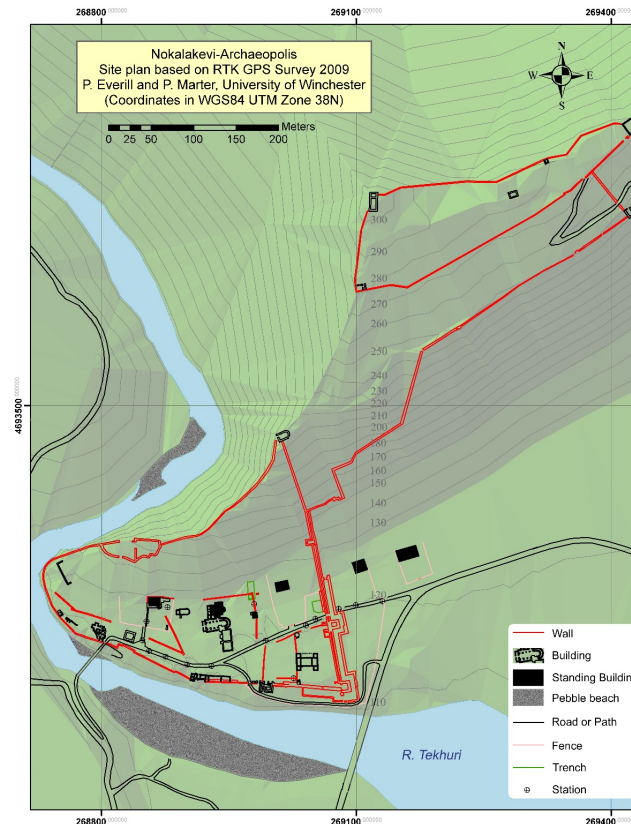
During the war several principle battles were fought between Laz/Roman and Sassanid troops to take control over the capital city of the kingdom **Archaeopolis** and main Black Sea coastal cities – Phasis and **Petra**.



Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis

Petra-Tsikhisdziri

The Siege of Archaeopolis (551)



Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis consists of a lower town and a citadel, set in a loop of the river Tekhuri where it emerges from a gorge in the mountains onto the Colchian plain.

The lower town borders the river to the south and west and a steep slope to the north. Perched on the crest of this ridge sits the citadel with fine views across the plain to the south and east.

Walls connect the two parts of the city. On the east side of the lower town, unprotected by nature, successive rulers built three parallel defensive walls with towers and a strongly fortified gate.

Persians and **Sabiri** attacked the city walls with warrior elephants, while **Archaeopolis** was guarded by **3 000 Roman** and **Lazi** garrison.

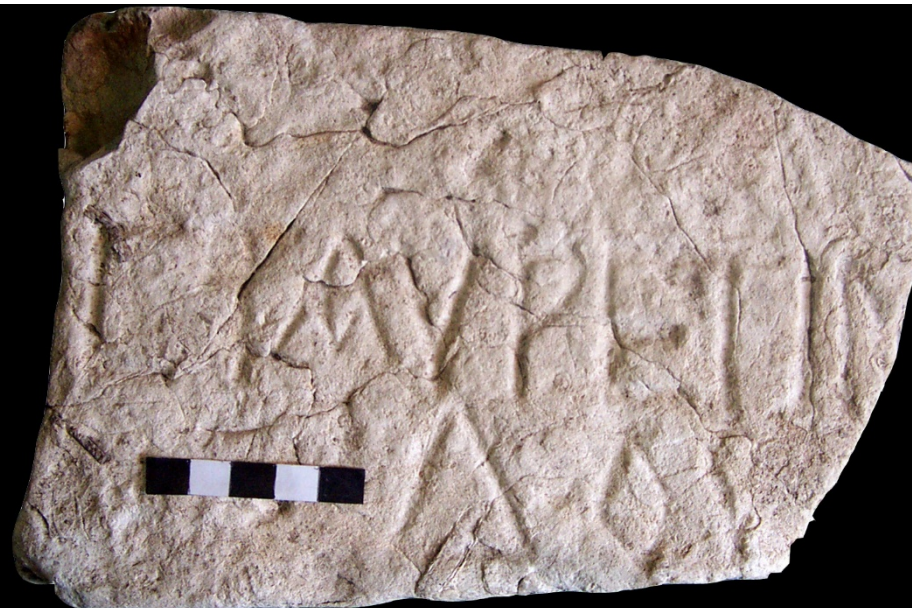
As a result **Sassanid** failure to take control over Archaeopolis.



Watercolour by Phil Marter illustrating a key moment in the Persian attack on Nokalakevi in AD 551



**BYZANTINE EMPEROR MAURICE
TIBERIUS (582-602) GOLDEN COINS**



**FRAGMENT OF THE 4TH-6TH cc AD
STONE-CROSS WITH GREEK INSCRIPTION**



AMPHORAE FROM CITADEL. 6TH c. AD



The siege of Petra

The **siege of Petra** was fought in **550 AD**, between the **Byzantines** (East Romans) under the general **Bessas**, and the **Sasanian Persian** garrison of **Petra** in the buffer state of **Lazica**.

After a failed attempt to recapture Petra in **549**, the Byzantine emperor **Justinian I** sent an army under **Bessas** to retake the fortress. The **Byzantine** historian **Procopius** described the resulting siege in vivid detail.

500 Sasanian forces who had shut themselves in the **acropolis** refused to surrender, in spite of an offer of capitulation, preferring instead a heroic death.

6th century Persian coins, chain-armour, helmet and other military weapons discovered in the acropolis of the Petra-Tsikhisdziri in 2017

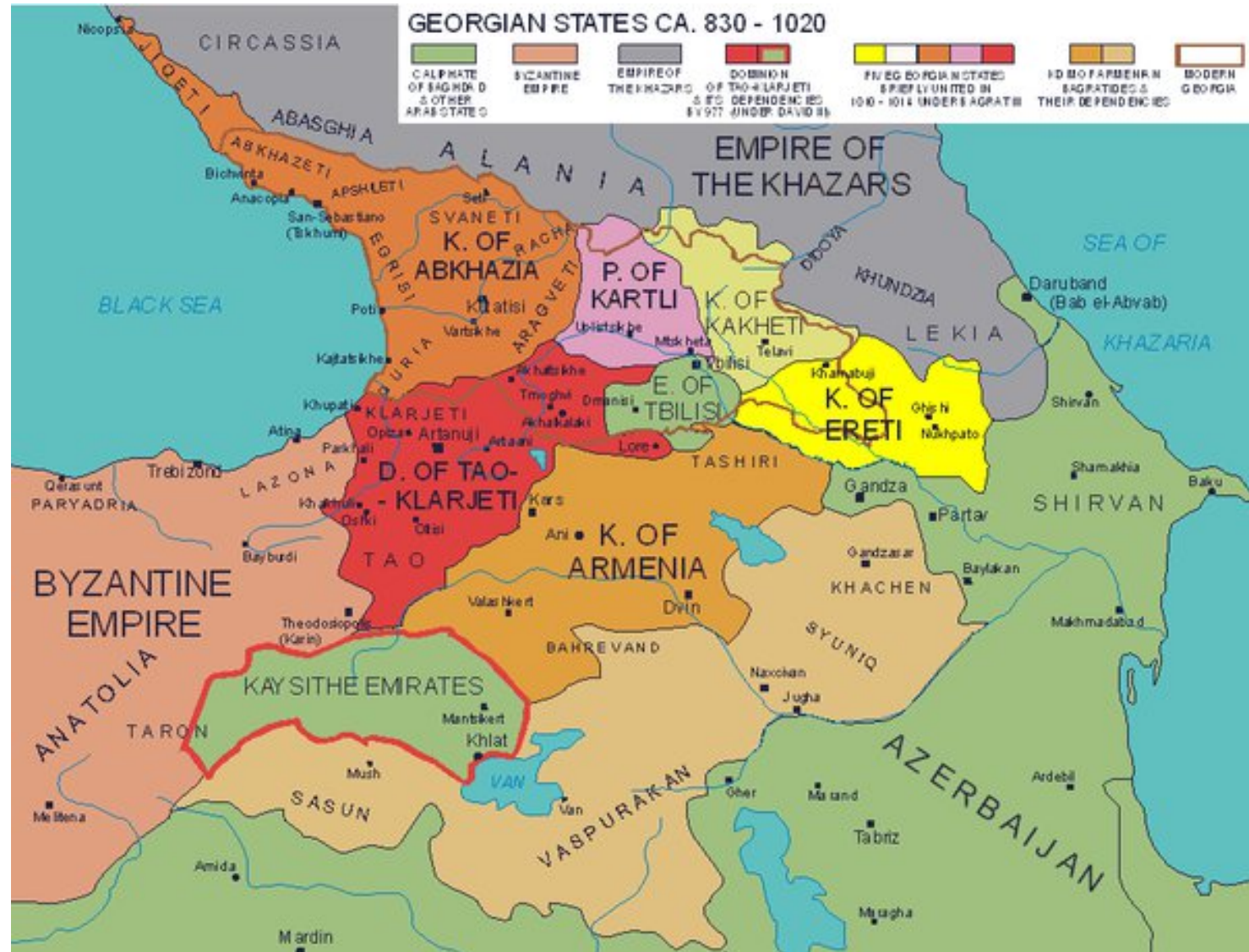


The fall of Lazica Kingdom

At the end of the **6th century**, after the great war in **Lazica**, the **Byzantines** abolished the monarchy in **Egrisi**. The country was ruled by an appointed official, **Patrician**, who had to be a noble from **Egrisi**. This situation lasted until the end of the **7th century**.

At the end of the **7th century**, **Patrician Sergius of Egrisi**, who was upset with the **Byzantines**, handed over the country to the **Arabs**. However, the **Egrisi people** soon **rebelled** against the **Arabs**. To suppress the rebellion, in **735-737**, the Arab general **Marwan ibn Muhammad**, also known as **Marwan the Deaf**, led a campaign to **Georgia**. **Marwan the Deaf** captured and destroyed the capital of **Egrisi**, **Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis**.

Essentially, from this time, **Egrisi** ceased to exist as a state, and by the end of the **8th century**, a new **Georgian** state — the **Kingdom of Abkhazia** — was formed in western **Georgia**.





THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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