

The Late Antique Church at Napurvala Hill (Pichvnari, Western Georgia) and Its Associated Cemetery. A Reappraisal Based on Surviving Evidence at the Batumi Archaeological Museum

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**THE LATE ANTIQUE CHURCH AT NAPURVALA HILL  
(PICHVNARI, WESTERN GEORGIA) AND ITS  
ASSOCIATED CEMETERY. A REAPPRAISAL BASED  
ON SURVIVING EVIDENCE AT THE BATUMI  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM\***

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*Abstract.* This article presents the artefacts found during the excavation of a building at Napurvala Hill, Pichvnari, in the 1960s and 1970s and now at the Batumi Archaeological Museum (BAM). Besides discussing the bulk finds, some of which were already published in 1980 by Chkhaidze, this contribution provides, for the first time, a study of a small white marble

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cross found during the excavation and now on display at the BAM. It will conclude that, although the interpretation of the building as a church remains sound, the chronology of the artefacts is problematic as their dating ranges from the Hellenistic to the Medieval periods.

In 1966 and 1967, during the excavation of a 5<sup>th</sup>-century-B.C. cemetery at Pichvnari, loc. Napurvala Hill, excavators brought to light an unexpected collection of Late Antique artefacts, including pottery, fragmented glass windows, roof tiles and brick fragments.<sup>1</sup> After a stoppage of eight years, excavation at this spot resumed in 1975 and continued to 1978, when burials, the foundations of a rectangular building and associated material broadly dated to Late Antiquity were found. This report aims to re-examine the material of this assemblage and the nature of the building based on unpublished archival data now at the Batumi Archaeological Museum (henceforth, BAM). The study of this assemblage, which was brought to light not using modern stratigraphic techniques, is, admittedly, problematic. Nevertheless, its material is important as it provides clues about the renewed significance of Pichvnari and the level of permeability of the Colchian coast to foreign goods in the Late Antique period.

#### THE SITE AND ITS ENVIRONS

Pichvnari is situated 10 km to the north of Kobuleti in western Georgia, at the confluence of the Choloki and Ochkhamuri rivers.<sup>2</sup> The site has attracted archaeological interest since the 1960s and, between 1998 and 2008, underwent systematic investigations by a joint Georgian-British archaeological team (Batumi Archaeological Museum, Niko Berdzenishvili Batumi Research Institute and Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford) directed by Amiran Kakhidze and Michael Vickers. In the past decade, excavations have continued under the direction of Amiran

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<sup>1</sup> All dates are A.D. if not otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> Literature on this site is vast. See especially Vickers and Kakhidze 2004; Kakhidze 2007; Kakhidze and Vashakidze 2010; Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009; Kakhidze and Kakhidze 2014; Kakhidze and Vickers 2014; Kakhidze 2016; a summary description of the results of the excavation is in Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016, 144-151, 175-177.

Kakhidze. Although Pichvnari has a long history dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C., the attention that this site has generated is linked to the existence of two burial sites; one a 5<sup>th</sup>-century-B.C. Colchian cemetery, and the other a contemporary necropolis of Greek settlers. The co-existence of Colchian and Greek cemeteries, alongside the presence of rich imported goods from Greece, suggests peaceful interactions between the two cultures and the multitude of connections between the eastern coast of the Black Sea and the West.<sup>3</sup> Imports from the West seem to have continued well into the Hellenistic period, as proved by the goods found in the graves of a third necropolis dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.

Less documented at Pichvnari is a limited phase of reuse of the old Colchian and Greek necropoleis in Late Antiquity. The Georgian-British archaeological team brought this phase to light in 1998-1999 and 2005-2007 when it discovered a total of ten burials dated to this period.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the existence of these burials suggests the presence of a Late Antique settlement in the area, this has yet to be confirmed. All the Late Antique inhumation burials are in east-west oriented graves, suggesting that the community at Pichvnari may have already adopted Christianity – although as in other archaeological contexts, east-west orientation alone cannot prove that a grave belonged to a Christian.<sup>5</sup> The graves are rectangular with rounded corners and are found some 1 m below modern ground.<sup>6</sup> Within these graves, pottery, glass vessels, weapons (iron axes, knives and spears), coins, bronze buckles, iron fibulae and pieces of jewelry, such as beads, silver and gold rings, and earrings, were found.

Before the Georgian-British archaeologists would bring to light the Late Antique cemetery, a concentration of Late Antique graves associated with a building had already been discovered in the 1960s in Napurvala Hill. This was fully excavated in the 1970s (Fig. 1). As opposed to other Late Antique finds at Pichvnari, the collection of artefacts brought

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<sup>3</sup> Kakhidze, Tavamaishili and Vickers 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Vickers and Kakhidze 2004, 209-214; Kakhidze and Vickers 2014, 239.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the case of the burials in Sopiana: Gábor and Győr 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Vickers and Kakhidze 2004, 210.

to light in that occasion has yet to receive the attention it deserves. Most of the material from the Late Antique building at Pichvnari, with the exclusion of grave goods, some potsherds, glass fragments, and a small marble crucifix (discussed below), have been published, in Georgian, by Lili Chkhaidze.<sup>7</sup> Short reports of the 1966-1967, 1975-1976 and 1978 excavations of the Late Antique building at Napurvala Hill, which are based on the conclusions reached by Chkhaidze, are also available.<sup>8</sup> Most part of this Late Antique assemblage is now housed at the BAM, with the exception of at least one piece that resides at the Khariton Akhvlediani Adjara State Museum in Batumi. However, many artefacts that make up this small Late Antique collection appear to be lost.

The Late Antique material from Pichvnari is one of the many testimonies to the renewed importance of the Colchian coast in the Late Antique period, a time in which Rome was struggling to control the eastern and southeastern coast of the Black Sea against the Persian threat.<sup>9</sup> The renewed Roman control in the region is exemplified by the remains of the fortifications at Tsikhisdziri, which are situated some 14 km to the south of Pichvnari as the crow flies. The site has often been identified with the city of Petra Pia Iustiniana, which was reported by Procopius to have been founded by order of emperor Justinian and to have been the object of major fights between the Roman and Persian armies during the Lazic war.<sup>10</sup> Although Procopius claims that the site was destroyed during the war, the remains at Tsikhisdziri show significant later evidence of occupation, including restorations of the fortification walls<sup>11</sup> and lead seals of Byzantine officials dated 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup> According to the conciliar records, the city remained the seat of a bishop well into the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Besides probably hosting a harbour, and,

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<sup>7</sup> Chkhaidze 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016, 175-176; Kakhidze 2016, 41-43.

<sup>9</sup> On the events in Lazica, see Braund 1994, 238-314; on Tzanica, Intagliata 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Braund 1994, 238-314.

<sup>11</sup> Intagliata, Naskidashvili and Snyder, forthcoming. On the remains at Tsikhisdziri, see mostly Inaishvili 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Iashvili and Seibt 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Darrouzés 1981, 212, 227, 241, 259; Fedalto 1988, 403.

thus, being a gateway for goods shipped into Lazica, Tsikhisdziri would have controlled the land traffic along the coastal route, where the remains at Pichvnari may have been situated.

#### THE BUILDING AT NAPURVALA HILL AND ITS ASSOCIATED BURIALS: AN OVERVIEW

Only one plan of the building at Napurvala Hill and its associated cemetery is known (Fig. 1 – scanned from the BAM's archive). This has been reproduced in a number of publications<sup>14</sup> and shows the wall boundaries of the building and a scatter of burials, some of which probably belonging to an earlier, 5<sup>th</sup>-century-B.C. cemetery. It does not clarify the location of the Late Antique burials in relation to the building.

In plan, the building is oriented south-west to north-east and consists of two sections, namely a rectangular entrance porch (2 m long and 1,75 m wide) and a rectangular room (12 m wide; full length not preserved; maximum length is ca. 12 m). The eastern wall is not preserved and, therefore, it cannot be determined whether an apse in this building existed. Only the foundations of the walls (ca. 70 cm wide) were still in place when the building was excavated. The foundations were made of two faces of rough, uncut stones and lime mortar. According to the excavators, the floor of this building could have consisted of gravel and a wooden roof system with clay tiles may have covered the interior. No support system for the roof has been found, suggesting that the room was a simple single hall. The excavation of this building in the 1970s was conducted to the highest archaeological standards of the time but did not follow a stratigraphic methodology. As a consequence, the exact find-spot of much of the material discovered is now unknown, including a white marble crucifix discussed in this essay. However, it is certain that the building was constructed immediately on top of an earlier 5<sup>th</sup>-century-B.C. Colchian cemetery, suggesting a lack of activity within this area lasting about one millennium.

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<sup>14</sup> E.g., Chkhaidze 1980, fig. 1; Kakhidze 2016, folded plan. The latter provides a north arrow and the location of Burial 54.

The building has been interpreted by its excavators as a church due to its orientation, the existence of an associated cemetery, the glass window fragments and the discovery of a small, white marble crucifix.<sup>15</sup> To this evidence, one could also add the presence of an entrance porch, which has relevant parallels to other Late Antique churches in the region, as will be discussed below.

Much uncertainty shrouds the associated cemetery. A total of twelve Late Antique burials were brought to light within, and in close proximity of the church. One was found within the building (Burial 54), while the others outside the church, close to its northern corner. With the exception of Burial 54, the exact position of the other burials in the surviving plan remains unclear, as these have never been discussed in literature. No photographs exist to show the way the bodies were interred, but it is likely that they were placed in simple pits rather than stone cists, as plans of the cemetery do not show any details on this regard.<sup>16</sup> The use of wooden coffins at the time is also doubtful; existence of iron nails with square heads has been reported,<sup>17</sup> but these might have originated from the fill of the church.

The high acidity of the sandy soil at Pichvnari meant the majority of the human bones had almost entirely decomposed by the time they were excavated by archaeologists. The most that was found was a number of skull fragments, which, upon further examination, have not been enough to figure out the sex and age of the body. Chkhaidze provides a short list of the material found in these burials; namely pottery, glass vessels, beads, fibulae, belt fragments, and iron and silver rings.<sup>18</sup>

Burial 54 is the only grave that has a known location within the church.<sup>19</sup> One unpublished photograph shows the cover of the burial after its discovery (Fig. 2). Unlike the other simple pits found in close

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<sup>15</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 40. The presence of the cross is not, however, indicative of the nature of the building in Late Antiquity. In fact, the object might be later than originally thought by the excavators. See discussion below.

<sup>16</sup> Kakhidze 2016, folded plan; fig. X.

<sup>17</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Kakhidze 2016, folded plan.

proximity to the church, this grave was covered by 16 horizontally-placed bricks. Of these 16, only six are now on display at the BAM, with the current location of the remaining 10 unknown. According to a final report, the interior, walls and floor of the burial were covered in clay.<sup>20</sup> The use of bricks to cover Burial 54 could reflect the desire of its builders to separate this grave from the others. However, this still is not unique to the graves of the times. In the Late Antique Caucasus, whilst Christians were normally interred in stone cists made of large slates, wooden coffins or simple pits,<sup>21</sup> burials in bricks were also frequent.<sup>22</sup> When excavating the grave, archaeologists uncovered human remains in a secondary deposition. This suggests that the individual buried, who was presumably of a high religious or social status, died elsewhere and the remains were later transferred to Pichvnari. In terms of grave goods from this burial, only one glass vessel remains (Fig. 5).<sup>23</sup>

#### THE ASSEMBLAGE

Chkhaidze has discussed the pottery and glass fragments from the church at Pichvnari to some extent, and approximated a rough 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century chronology for them based on regional comparanda.<sup>24</sup> The necessity to re-present this assemblage is given by the fact that some of the material have never been published or discussed in the secondary literature. As most of the artefacts published by Chkhaidze have been since lost, and because the authors have not had the opportunity to examine them, this brief report will mostly limit the discussion to the articles still preserved at the BAM. The reader is invited to consult the Chkhaidze's work for more information on the remaining pieces.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kakhidze 2016, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Mgaloblishvili and Gagoshidze 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Khroushkova 2006, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Chkhaidze 1980.

<sup>25</sup> The inventory numbers of the pieces reported in the illustrations are those given by the excavators on 1975; for unknown reasons, some numbers are repeated (e.g., cf. glass vessels and glass windows).



*Pottery*

The usefulness of the ceramic material recovered from the building at Napurvala Hill and stored at the BAM is limited by the lack of documentation regarding their context of provenance and the absence of typological ceramic studies for this region. Nonetheless, the pottery will briefly be presented here, with some general remarks on its chronology and provenance.

Among the local table and kitchen wares, only three potsherds from Napurvala Hill – two handles and one fragmentary neck of a jug – appear to share the same fabric. This is characterized by a light reddish yellow colour throughout (7.5YR 7/8), small voids and small white and black inclusions. The neck of the jug, which was found in the topsoil (fig. 3.75/191),<sup>26</sup> is the most diagnostic of the three. The rim, which must have been upturned and rounded, does not survive in its entirety, as its upper edge is chipped away. Chkhaidze identifies it as a piece of local cooking ware, and believes that it has similarities with material from Vardistsikhe (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries).<sup>27</sup> Five other fragments have all different fabrics and have not been published. These include the flat base of a cooking pot (fig. 3.75/241), characterized by a distinctive dark brownish grey fabric (2.5YR 2/3) with numerous white inclusions, the base of a large bowl (fig. 3.75/246 – outside and inside: 7.5YR 4/3; core: 5YR 6/8) two rims of bowls (fig. 3.75/175 – 7.5YR 7/6; fig. 3.75/238 – 5YR 5/6) and the body sherd of a storage container.

As for imported table ware, out of the two red-slipped fragments of rims published by Chkhaidze, only one survives at the BAM. This is part of a bowl with a rim having two concentric grooves on its upper part (fig. 3.75/184). Three incised lines run roughly parallel on the outer surface of the vessel just below the rim for about 10 cm. The fabric is reddish yellow throughout (5YR 7/8), includes sporadic fine white inclusions and is covered by a worn light red slip (10R 6/10). Again,

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<sup>26</sup> BAM records 75/184. This fragment was published by Chkhaidze (1980, fig. 3.4).

<sup>27</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 48 n. 25.

Chkhaidze's dating for this piece is generically Late Antique; the sherd finds comparanda in the Caucasus and the northern Black Sea.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, two fragments of transport containers are still stored at the BAM. One of these fragments, a body sherd, is currently unpublished. This is not a diagnostic piece, but the fragment's light pinkish red fabric (5YR 7/6), with small black inclusions point to a production area around the southern Black Sea – indeed, it is reported as “Sinopean” in the BAM's records.<sup>29</sup> Sinopean amphorae “à paté rosée” are common throughout the Hellenistic period around the Black Sea up until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. A later, Late Antique production of Sinopean amphora “à paté rouge,” with numerous types and variants, existed between the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>30</sup> Our specimen, which might be residual, most likely belongs to the former “paté.” Unfortunately, the date cannot be pinpointed with certainty due to the absence of diagnostic features. The second fragment, already published,<sup>31</sup> is a body sherd bearing wide grooves (5 mm wide on average) on its outer surface (fig. 3.75/233). The presence of a corrugated surface has been used by Chkhaidze to give the object a generic Late Antique dating.<sup>32</sup> However, a later chronology cannot be excluded.

### *Glass*

Thirteen fragments of glass vessels from the church at Pichvnari, are still held at the BAM, six of which have already been published by Chkhaidze (two – figs. 5.5 and 5.6 – may be Hellenistic – fig. 4.75/212; fig. 4.75/220;<sup>33</sup> the fragment shown in fig. 5.3 in Chkhaidze's article is now lost).<sup>34</sup> The remaining unpublished pieces include a small rim

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<sup>28</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 45, fig. 3.2.

<sup>29</sup> BAM records 75/179.

<sup>30</sup> Kassab Tezgör 2010, 120-141; on the eastern Black Sea coast, see especially Inaishvili and Vashakidze 2010, 152; Kassab Tezgör, Kebuladze, Lomitashvili and Zamtaradze 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 45, fig. 3.4.

<sup>32</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 45.

<sup>33</sup> We are grateful to Tamar Partenadze for her help in identifying the pieces.

<sup>34</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 51, fig. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4-5.7, 5.8.

sherd of a bowl (fig. 4.75/224), the base of the stem of a caliche (fig. 4.75/226), and five body sherds. Most of the fragments are transparent light blue in colour, but there are exceptions. One body sherd, which bears the remains of a decoration in relief (fig. 4.75/213) has a characteristic transparent brownish green colour, which resembles that of other glass vessels dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>35</sup> while fig. 4.75/226 and fig. 4.75/223 are opaque, not completely transparent. Reaching a chronology for these pieces is difficult, given the lack of systematic studies for the region. However, one should note that one of them (fig. 4.75/218) has comparanda dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>36</sup> and that two fragments (fig. 4.75/207 and 75/223) certainly belong to 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century glass lamps – frequently found in churches in western Caucasus.<sup>37</sup>

The most significant specimen of the assemblage is now held at the Khariton Akhvlediani Adjara State Museum – not at BAM – and has been published several times.<sup>38</sup> This is a glass bottle with a concave base, a globular body, and a cylindrical neck slightly tapering towards the rim (Fig. 5 – height: 13 cm; max. width: 10.5 cm). Its colour is a transparent light blue, despite being described as a “light greenish/yellowish” by the excavators.<sup>39</sup> The importance of this piece is associated with its context; it is the only piece that we can confidently associate with the sealed Late Antique grave Burial 54. The vessel has been dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup> One should note, however, that this type of vessel seems to have been mass produced throughout Late Antiquity and beyond. Glass vessels of this kind appear to be frequent in Christian burial assemblages and were used to hold aromatic substances. A similar piece, but with a bulge at the joint of the neck and a hemispherical body has been found at Lesnoe, near Sochi, and dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> cen-

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<sup>35</sup> Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 58, 78; pl. XIX.60; XIX.89.

<sup>36</sup> Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 82

<sup>37</sup> Khrushkova 2006, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 53, 51, fig. 5; Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 78-79, pl. XX.90. The authors did not have the opportunity to analyse it.

<sup>39</sup> Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2009, 78 with further bibliography.

tury.<sup>41</sup> Similar pieces found at Panticapaeum have been dated to the Late Antique period until the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the material discussed above, a small collection of two distinctive groups of glass window fragments was discovered in the southeastern and northeastern corners of the building during surface cleaning in 1975 (Fig. 3). The majority of the fragments are opaque, light brownish-grey in colour and 0.3 cm thick. One small fragment (75/222) shows on one side an iridescent patina. The remaining fragments have the same colour, but are transparent and much thinner – generally between 0.1 and 0.2 cm in thickness. The chronology is uncertain, but their direct association with the building in discussion remains likely.

#### *Building Material*

Among the bricks recovered from the excavation of the church are three fragmentary pieces, the fabric of which are light brownish red in colour, with numerous small white inclusions and infrequent large dark red inclusions. Two of these fragments exhibit finger impressions on one surface. A fourth brick fragment is made of a different fabric, far paler with a light yellow colour and is one that also contains a wider variety of inclusions, including large pebbles. Their thickness is comprised between 4.1 cm and 5.5 cm. The museum still keeps a record of the dimension of a fifth brick “in pinkish colour,” which is now lost, with measurements of: 25 cm x 34-35 cm x 3.5 cm.<sup>43</sup> The origin of these bricks is unknown. If coming from this building, it can be presumed that they were adopted as brick bonding for either its walls or *synthronon* – if there was one. Brick bonding was a widespread building technique in western Caucasus.<sup>44</sup> The bricks, as well as the stones used for the construction of the walls, may have been removed at a later time.

The bricks used to cover Burial 54, six of which are displayed at the BAM, come in three different sizes: 1. 33.5 cm x 13.7 cm x 5 cm (fig. 7.75/552); 2. 30.5 cm x 26.5 cm x 5 cm (roughly double the size of no. 1 –

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<sup>41</sup> Khrushkova and Vasilinenko 2012, 147, fig. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Zasetkaya 2003.

<sup>43</sup> BAM record, 76/556.

<sup>44</sup> For church architecture, see Khrushkova 1989, 119-120.

fig. 775/551); 3). 35.5 cm x 25.5 cm x 6 cm (fig. 7.75/550). Their fabric consists of a light reddish colour throughout with very fine inclusions and voids, and sporadic large red inclusions. The surface is gritty and has a multitude of long cracks, suggesting that the bricks were not left to sundry for sufficient time before being placed into the kiln. Types 1 and 3 have finger impressions running through one or two surfaces. One type of brick in both the *synthronon* and the walls of the church at Vashnari has similar dimensions and the same fabric to the Type 1 described above (30 cm x 25 cm x 5 cm). Widespread in the region, the 28 cm x 28 cm x 3 cm Early Byzantine brick type is absent from Pichvnari, but the adoption of finger impressions on brick surfaces point towards a Late Antique chronological horizon for these specimens.

Two roof tiles remain. The most complete one is a flanged *tegula*. The fabric is the same as the brick found during surface cleaning but has a small number of larger voids in the fracture, some reaching 5 mm (fig. 7.75/194). One should also note that Chkhaidze reports the existence of one imbrex from the site, which is now lost.<sup>45</sup> Whether the roof of the church was tiled is difficult to postulate with the data at hand, but nevertheless remains likely.

#### *The Marble Cross*

In 1976, during the opening of the second season of excavation of the church complex at Napurvala Hill, archaeologists discovered white marble cross (or more precisely, crucifix) approximately 30 cm below the ground.<sup>46</sup> The small dimensions of the object (3 cm in height, 0.4 cm thick) indicate that it could have been used as an item for personal devotion, although the nature of the damage it has sustained (with chips to the edges, the left arm now almost completely missing, and blackening on the flat reverse side) suggests that, either originally or at a later point in its history, the object was attached to a support such that it might have provided a decorative element of a larger object. The corpus of Jesus, carved in low relief, is represented draped in a loin-cloth, at-

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<sup>45</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 48, fig. 4.4.

<sup>46</sup> The BAM records (75/206) report that the crucifix was found after just one blow of mattock.

tached to the front side of the Latin-shaped cross. Although photographs of this side of the crucifix have been published,<sup>47</sup> the iconography has not been discussed (Fig. 8). The back is published here for the first time (Fig. 8b).

In the absence of excavation diaries, and with no detailed information recorded or published about the excavation of the object, it is impossible to reach any conclusions about its date from the archaeological context. We are thus reliant on an analysis of iconography and other features to furnish information about when it might have been produced.

The iconography recalls that of the *Christus triumphans* developed in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries across the Mediterranean basin and used in different pictorial contexts for the representation of Jesus alive on his cross – although from the carving it is not clear whether the eyes are open or closed. From the surviving evidence, the *triumphans* iconography is first attested in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the miniature arts on engraved gemstones produced in the Eastern Mediterranean. Two examples are known to survive, and in each case Jesus is shown nude in strict frontality standing, with legs side by side and arms outstretched at right angles, against the cross flanked by the twelve apostles.<sup>48</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a further development of the iconography is preserved in relief sculpture, both monumental and portable. The crucified Jesus is alive (his head facing the viewer, his eyes open), showing no signs of physical suffering, and now wearing a narrow loin cloth. He is flanked either by the two thieves (as on a panel of the carved wooden doors of the Roman church of Santa Sabina, ca. 432, still in situ),<sup>49</sup> or by figures mentioned in the Johannine gospel narrative as being present at the crucifixion (namely Mary and John, as on an ivory relief in the British Museum, possibly produced in Rome or Northern

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<sup>47</sup> Most recently in Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016, pl. 139.

<sup>48</sup> One example, a carnelian intaglio (13.5 mm x 10.5 mm) reportedly found in Constanza, Romania, and possibly made in Syria, is now in the collection of the British Museum, London (reg. nr. 1895,1113,1). A second carnelian, almost identical in size (19 mm x 14 mm), shape and design, formerly in a private collection, is now lost: Harley-McGowan 2011, pls. 1 and 2.

<sup>49</sup> For the doors, see Foletti and Gianandrea, 2016, with discussion of the crucifixion panel 153-157 (with the bibliography), tav. VI.

Italy ca. 420-430).<sup>50</sup> While the body of Jesus as carved on the Pichvnari cross compares very well with this iconography (in that it is upright, legs side by side, clad only in a loin cloth, the head erect and facing the viewer, arms rigidly placed at right angles to the body – which exhibits no signs of suffering), there are fundamental differences.

Stylistically and iconographically, the handling of the body does not accord with what we know from extant evidence about the representation of the crucified body of Jesus in Late Antiquity. The style and length of the loin cloth (sitting low on the hips, being rolled at the top and the hem extending down to the knees) and the concurrent treatment of the chest (an elongated torso, in stark contrast to the stockier body of Jesus as extant in 5<sup>th</sup> century art, and one that is carefully modelled with clearly delineated musculature) is distinctive and betrays knowledge of artistic trends that emerged later, by the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, this treatment of the torso and loin cloth is well attested in the Carolingian period between the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century, a time when heated theological discussions were in progress about the death of Jesus. These debates, as in other periods in the history of art, are integral to and so lie behind the iconographic developments we witness in the visual arts.<sup>51</sup> Comparanda for the body of Jesus on a Latin-shaped cross can be found among a variety of media in this period, including the miniature arts (ivory reliefs, engraved crystals – similar in style to some German monumental crucifixes of the 10<sup>th</sup> century for instance – manuscript illumination and metal work), as well as monumental art (notably wall painting).<sup>52</sup> As on our object, in these examples the cruci-

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<sup>50</sup> The “Maskell” Crucifixion ivory (77 mm x 102 mm), British Museum, London, inv. nr. 1856,0623.5. For this ivory and the Santa Sabina panel, see further Harley-McGowan 2018, 301-304, figs. 18.9 and 18.10, with bibliography.

<sup>51</sup> The fundamental study remains that by Chazelle 2001. For the impact of theological debate on iconographic change in the representation of the crucifixion at different periods, see Kartsonis 1986, 33-39; Harley-McGowan 2019.

<sup>52</sup> One of the best surveys of this evidence, and so helpful sources to compare the iconography, is Schiller 1972, with examples illustrated across figs. 345-348, 354-380, and discussion about iconographic development in the West from the 7<sup>th</sup> through to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, 99-117.

fied Jesus is represented as though attached to a Latin-shaped cross with legs side by side, arms extended horizontally and the loin cloth low and long. The same iconography appears in Byzantine art, attesting to the stability and circulation of the type geographically and over several centuries.<sup>53</sup> In its careful attention to the positioning, clothing and modelling of the body, the Pichvnari cross thus betrays knowledge of an iconographic type that emerged by the 9<sup>th</sup> century and continued to exert an influence in a variety of cultures and historical contexts.

In terms of securing an approximate date for its production, an additional factor to consider is the fact that there is no surviving material or literary evidence to indicate that the crucifix (that is a cross bearing the fully modelled body of Jesus that could function as a portable and independent instrument of devotion) existed as a class of object before the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Literary evidence suggests that plain crosses were worn as personal jewelry, suspended as pendants on necklaces, by the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century although the earliest datable examples come from the late 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> Yet as material objects, crucifixes are unknown in Late Antiquity and rare in Byzantine art, emerging from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries at a time when the relation between viewer and religious object began to become more direct and intimate.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the earliest pendant or

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<sup>53</sup> One example will serve to illustrate this: a pyramid shaped intaglio seal in New York, likely manufactured between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century to be hung from a chain and worn around the neck (to thus function both as a seal and an amuletic device). It carries a representation of Jesus crucified between the Virgin and St. John: Rock crystal, 20 x 18 x 24 mm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. nr. 86.11.38. Kornbluth 1995, 11-13, figs. 33.1, 33.2. In Carolingian art the head of Jesus is normally encircled by a nimbus and is often inclined, however in this example the head is without nimbus and is erect, although turned in profile to look towards the Virgin.

<sup>54</sup> A key piece of evidence is the report of Gregory of Nyssa that on her death, his sister Macrina (ca. 330-379) was found to be wearing an iron cross around her neck (Greg. Nyss. *V. Macr.* 30.238-242, ed. and trans. P. Maraval, Paris 1971). Dölger 1932, is important, analysing the text in relation to material evidence.

<sup>55</sup> On this change, developing from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century through to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, see Kitzinger 1979, 148. On the emergence of the crucifix as a new



reliquary crosses that depict the corpus of Jesus are Byzantine and consistently show Jesus robed in the full-length *colobium*, not the loin-cloth.<sup>56</sup> Later Byzantine processional crosses are also known and well documented; yet none that appear to have been decorated with the addition of small crucifixes such as the one in marble found at Pichvnari, or in other media, are known.<sup>57</sup> Therefore the very form of the object speaks against the likelihood that it can be assigned a Late Antique date.

In addition to the iconography, style, and the distinctive form, the medium is also highly unusual in Late Antiquity, and we have been unable to find comparanda. Further study of the marble may offer new and interesting lines of enquiry regarding a likely place and time of production, as well as trade routes, given evidence for the later occupation of the site noted at the beginning of our essay. However, from a preliminary assessment of the form, style, iconography, size and medium we must conclude that the crucifix, which consciously emulates an early Christian style for the body of Jesus, cannot date from before the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and so is considerably later than that of the majority of the material discussed so far.

#### REMARKS ON THE CHRONOLOGY AND NATURE OF THE BUILDING

Chkhaidze has suggested a 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century chronology for the construction of the building and its frequentation. Based on the study of the artefacts, she also has pointed out the high level of connectivity of the Colchidian western coast with several trading and production centres of the Black Sea and beyond, and found comparanda with material from a number of regional coastal and inland settlements including Vardistsikhe, Bichvinta, Poti, Sokhumi, Bobokvati, Ochamchire, Tsikhisdziri and Apsaros.

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class of object, see Peers 2004, 13-14. Still relevant is the distinction Orazio Marucchi made between two phases in the development of the crucifix: 6<sup>th</sup>-12/13<sup>th</sup> century, when the figure was mostly triumphant or alive; and 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when an interest in realism in the depiction of Christ's suffering emerges: see Marucchi 1908, 529.

<sup>56</sup> See the comprehensive catalogue and discussion of these by Pitarakis 2006.

<sup>57</sup> A good overview of the development of figural processional crosses remains Cotsonis 1995.

We are inclined to agree on Chkhaidze's general conclusions and her arguments do not need to be repeated here. However, given the state of the evidence, it is difficult to pinpoint a more accurate chronology. Most of the objects are, as documented by the BAM records, from the topsoil. As also attested from the mixed nature of the finds that include Hellenistic, Roman and later Medieval material (glass, the Sinopean amphora fragment and the white marble cross), the context of discovery is disturbed, and therefore not useful when determining an exact dating for the construction of the building.

The only diagnostic artefact coming from a known sealed deposit is the globular glass bottle from Burial 54, dated in modern literature to the 4<sup>th</sup> century – although, as seen above, a wider chronology cannot be excluded. A 4<sup>th</sup>-century chronology would be in line with the Late Antique burials discovered at Pichvnari by the Georgian-British archaeological team in 1998-1999 and 2005-2007, which have consistently been dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>58</sup> One glass fragment (fig. 4.75/218) can also be dated to the same chronological horizon. If the building was constructed together with Burial 54, then, a Late Antique chronology for it would be in order.

Evidence suggests the function of the building was that of a small chapel or church.<sup>59</sup> This theory is confirmed by its overall plan and, more specifically, the presence of an entrance porch to which important comparisons within the region can be made. A similar space is found in the church at Vashnari, which is dated to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. At Vashnari, the space protrudes like an appendix from the back wall of the naos and is in line with the apse of the church.<sup>60</sup> Another parallel is found at the entrance of the three-aisled basilica church at Tsandripshi (Gantiadi). The original construction date for this building lie between 527 and 542, and subsequent construction includes two major restorations until the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>61</sup> In plan, the church at Pichvnari falls generally within a

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<sup>58</sup> Vickers and Kakhidze 2004, 209-214; Kakhidze and Vickers 2014, 239.

<sup>59</sup> Chkhaidze 1980, 39-41; Kakhidze 2007, 42.

<sup>60</sup> Khroushkova 1989, 106 and fig. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Khroushkova 1989, 89-90 and figs. 1, 2.

large architectural group known as “à nef unique.” The churches of this group are characterized by the presence of simple rectangular naos ending with semi-circular, U-shaped or polygonal apses to the east. In some cases, the churches may have lateral annexed buildings and a narthex. Relevant examples of churches within this group include the buildings at Pitunt (N1, N6), Mramba, Archaeopolis (“Misaroni”) and Guenos.<sup>62</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This article presented and reassessed the material and documentation of a Late Antique building and its associated cemetery at Napurvala Hill, Pichvnari. The material from the fill of this complex is varied. At the BAM, a limited selection of these artefacts still survive. Although determining an accurate chronology is prevented due to gaps in research and excavation data, the majority of the material from the church fill, as originally postulated by Chkhaidze, can mostly be dated to Late Antiquity. Yet, the context is chronologically mixed and include also Hellenistic, Roman and Medieval material. A preliminary assessment of the iconography of the white marble cross points to a later period. Although lacking the eastern wall, and, thus, the apse, it is reasonable to conclude that the building was a small church or chapel, as first suggested by the excavators. The church falls in the group of buildings known within Khroushkova’s typology as “à nef unique.” These buildings have a longstanding tradition in the Caucasus area, from Late Antiquity up to and throughout the Medieval period.

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<sup>62</sup> Khroushkova 1989, 110-111.

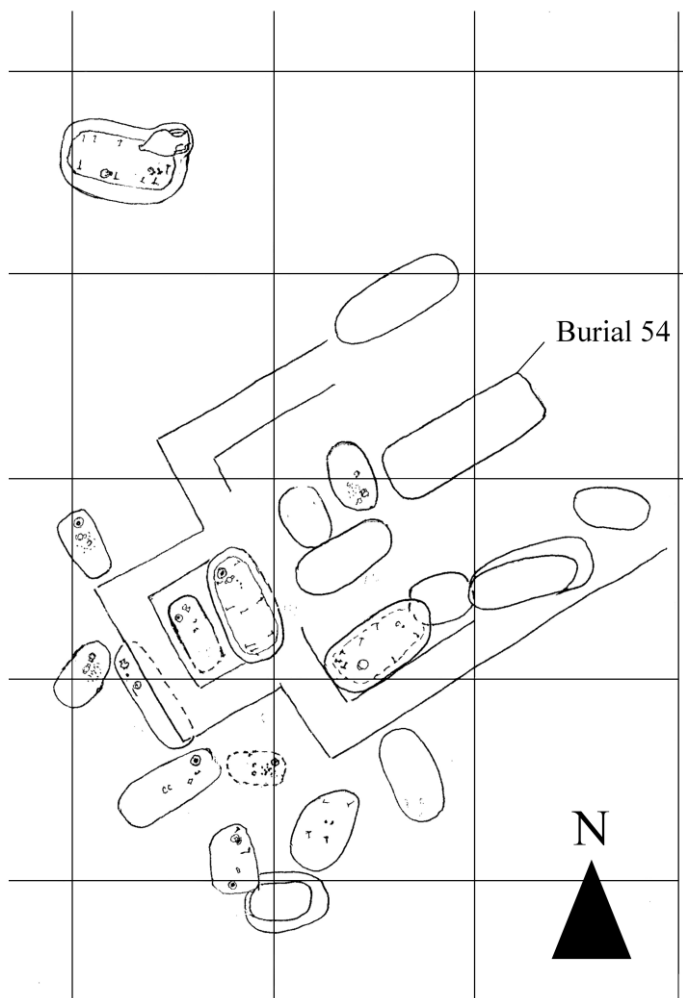


Figure 1. Plan of the church at Napurvala hill and associated cemetery (BAM archive).

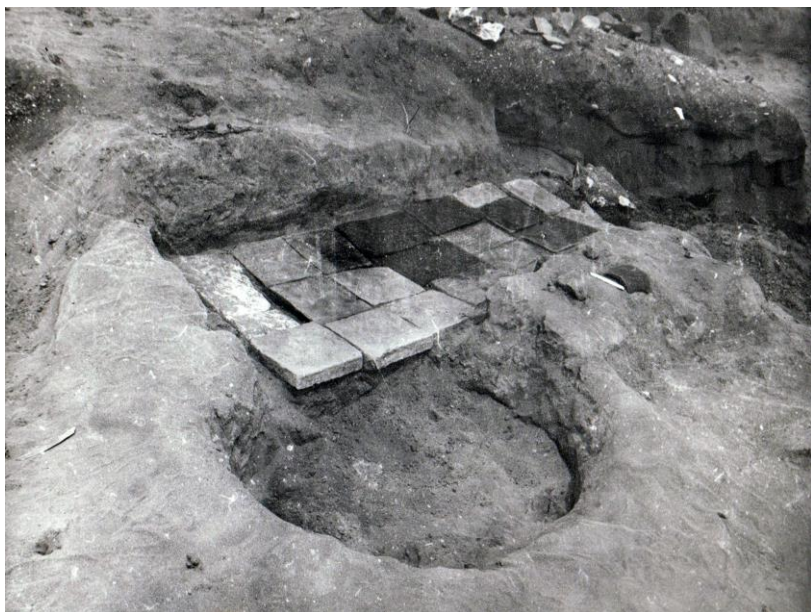


Figure 2. Burial 54 at the time of excavation (BAM archive).

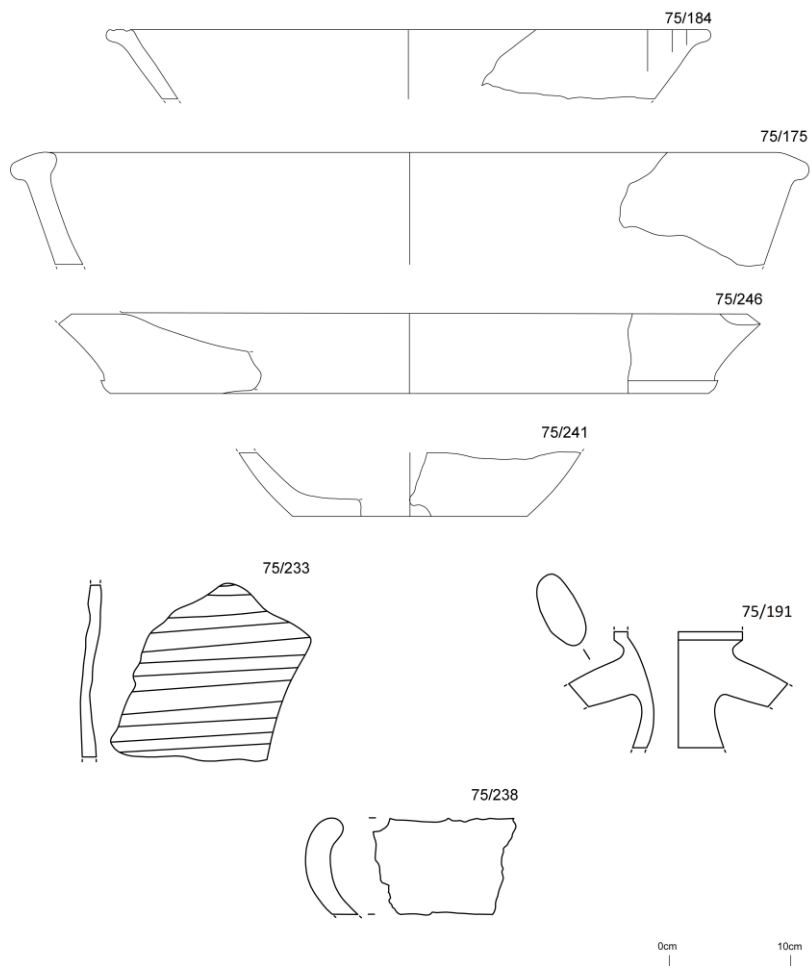


Figure 3. Pottery (drawn by E. E. Intagliata and M. C. Ravizza).

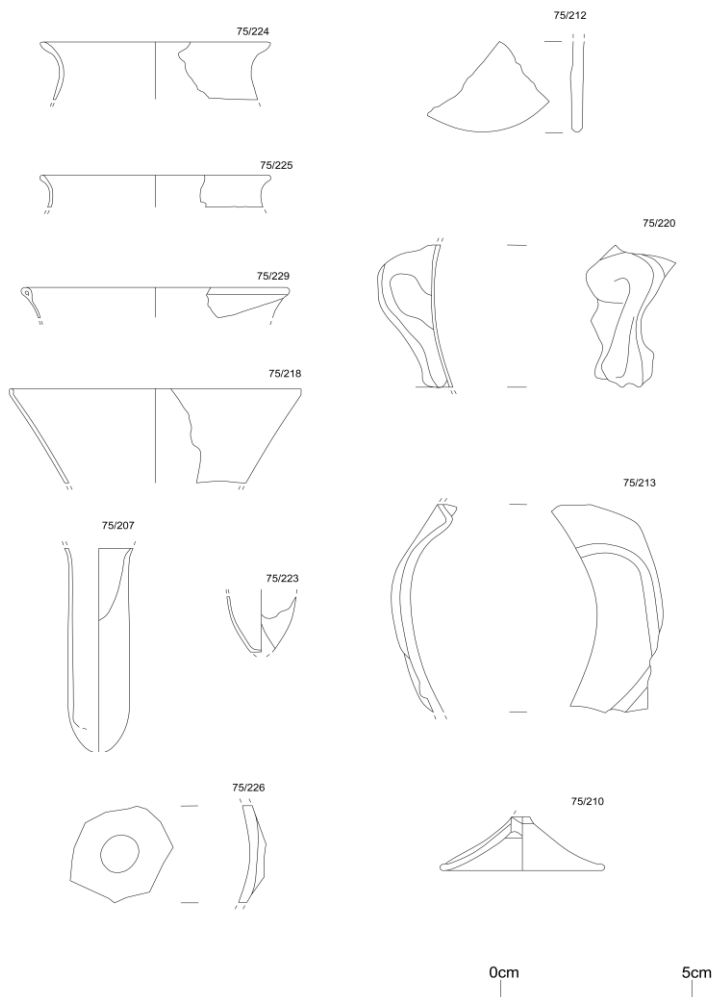


Figure 4. Glass (drawn by E. E. Intagliata and M. C. Ravizza).

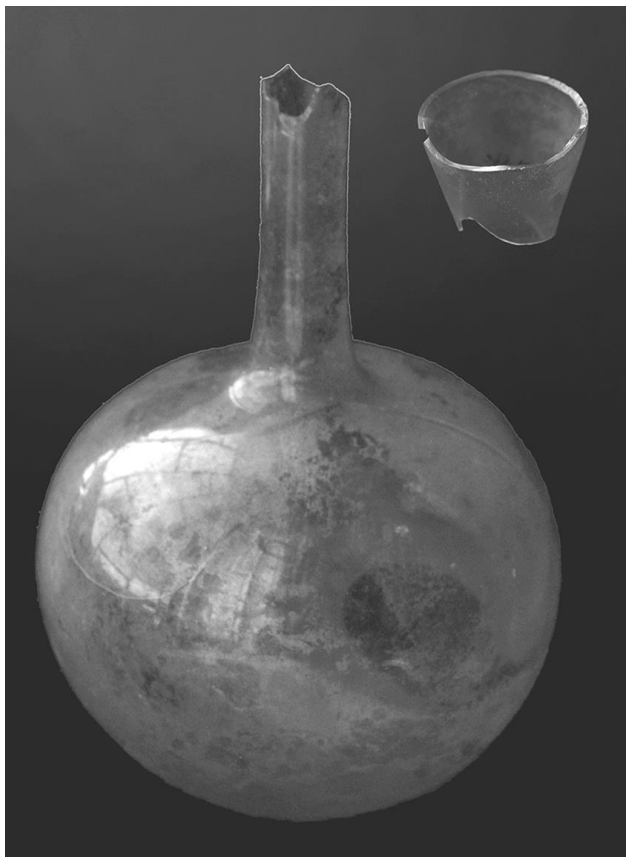


Figure 5. Glass vessel from Burial 54  
(from Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2011, pl. XXIV.97).



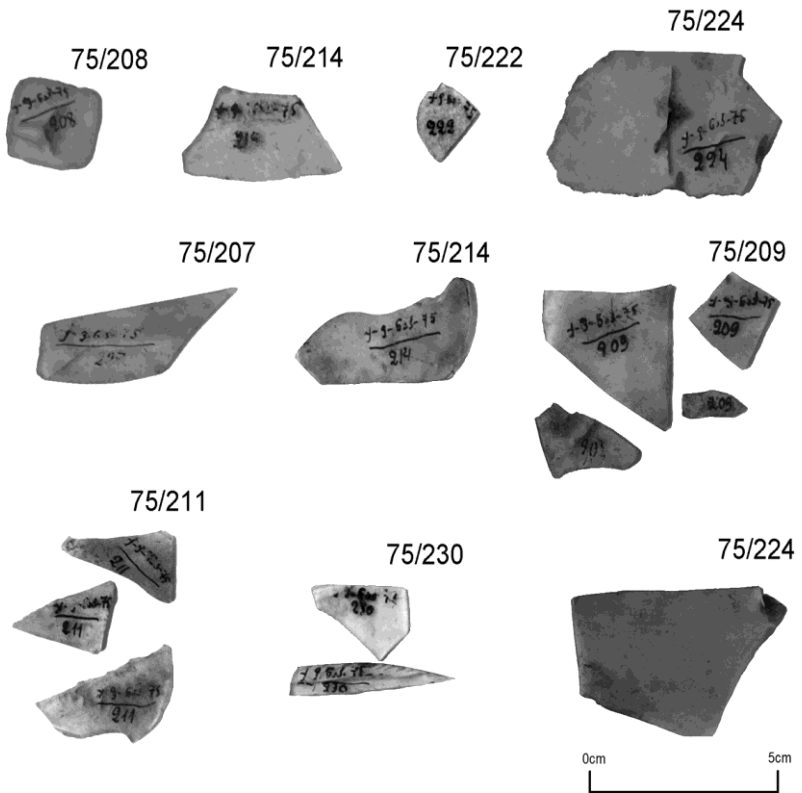


Figure 6. Fragmentary glass windows (photo by E. E. Intagliata).

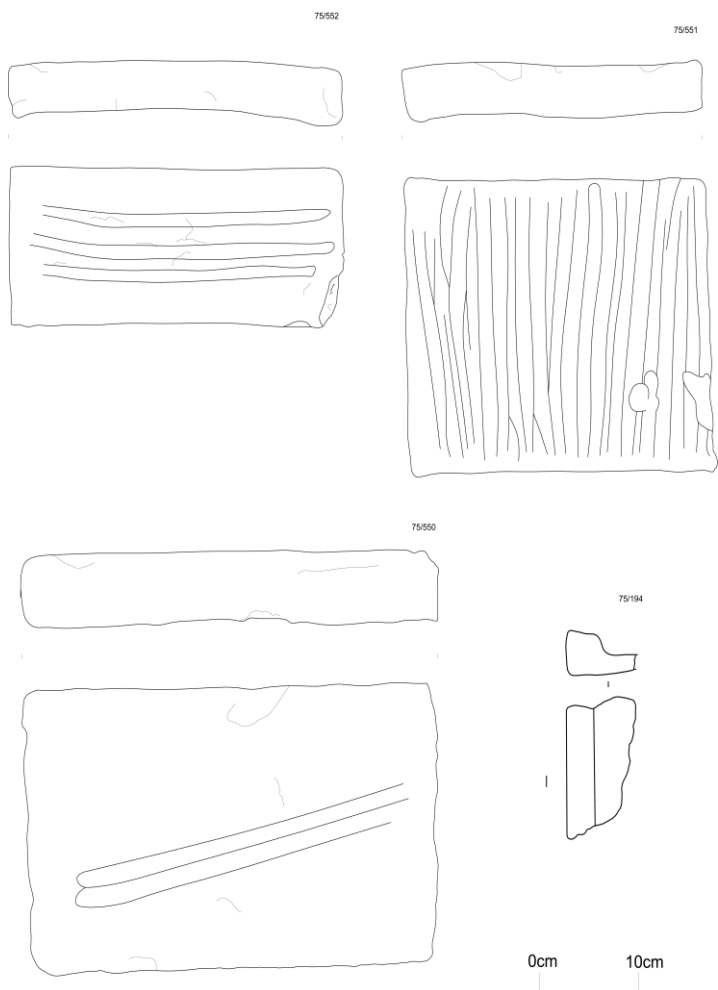


Figure 7. Building material (drawn by E. E. Intagliata and M. C. Ravizza).

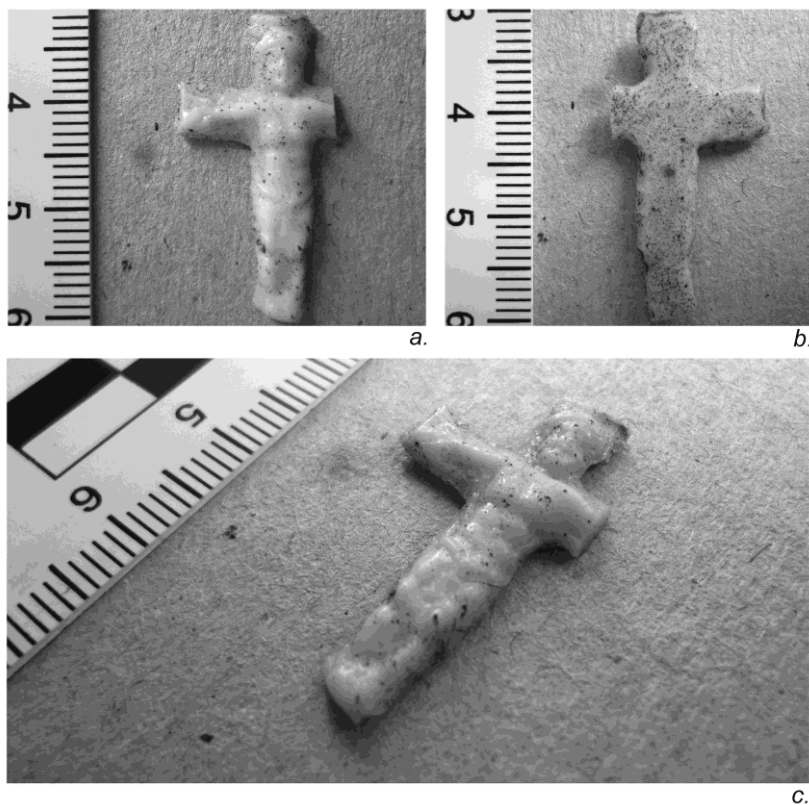


Figure 8. The white marble cross. Frontal (a.) back (b.) and lateral view (c.) (photos by E. E. Intagliata).

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