Shota Mamuladze
Gonio-Apsarus Archaeological and Architectural Site
shota.mamuladze@bsu.edu.ge

Kakhaber Kamadadze
Gonio-Apsarus Archaeological and Architectural Site
kaxaberqamadadze@yahoo.com

Emzar Kakhidze
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University
emzar.kakhidze@bsu.edu.ge

Avgia Church (Batumi, Georgia)

Abstract:

The church discussed in the paper is situated in Avgia, on the outskirts of Batumi. It is an early Christian period hall-type church with northern and southern wings. The ground plan of the whole structure resembles the well-known layout of the *croix libre*. The whole building is 23.85 m long and 19.0 m wide – including the arms. It has a projecting semi-circular apse whose radius is 6.05 m. The main space of the church is divided into three parts. It consists of a transverse hall, which may have operated as a narthex, a hall, and an altar apse. The floor of the structure was covered with pinkish lime mortar, a mixture of small pebbles and ceramic powder. The only central entrance to the church was located on the west side. The northern annex had an entrance in the north-western corner, and the southern one – in the south-eastern corner. The church seems to have been built of rubble stone. The construction style, layout, and archaeological evidence from the site narrow down its chronology to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.[1]

Keywords: Byzantine, western Georgia, Avgia, early Christian church

The research work of an archaeological expedition financed by the Ajara Cultural Heritage Preservation Agency began in June 2015 at Akhalsopeli, located on the suburbs of Batumi. The investigation of an early medieval church was the main purpose of the fieldwork undertaken during the expedition. According to the modern administrative division, Akhalsopeli is divided into two parts. One belongs to the Khelvachauri Municipality and the other to Batumi. The explored monument is located in the Avgia[2] precinct (50 Avgia Street), in the home garden of a local resident – Tamaz Sharadze.

An accidental discovery of Byzantine tiles and brick sherds followed by subsequent visual surveying of the site revealed traces of stone masonry. According to local inhabitants, the remains of a fairly well-preserved building were visible at the spot until the second half of the 20th century. Later, the building was demolished and its stones were used for other construction activities. The expedition carried out small-scale fieldwork in order to determine the full extent of the monument.[3]

The two-week observational archaeology excavation uncovered quite a large basilica. It appears that the

[1] A professor from the Ilia State University, Guram Kipini, set the chronology of the whole construction to the 5th century AD. Other scholars consider the traces of some reconstructions as belonging to the later phase of the 6th century AD.

[2] It is quite possible that the toponym of Avgia derives from the Greek word ἅγιος, i.e. 'saint'.

[3] The study area included the following squares: NO: 1–3, 11–13, 21–23, 31–33; SO: 1–3, 11–13, 21–23, 31–33 SW: 1–3, 11–13, 21–23, 31–33; NW: 1–3, 11–31; the dimensions of the squares were 4 by 4 m.

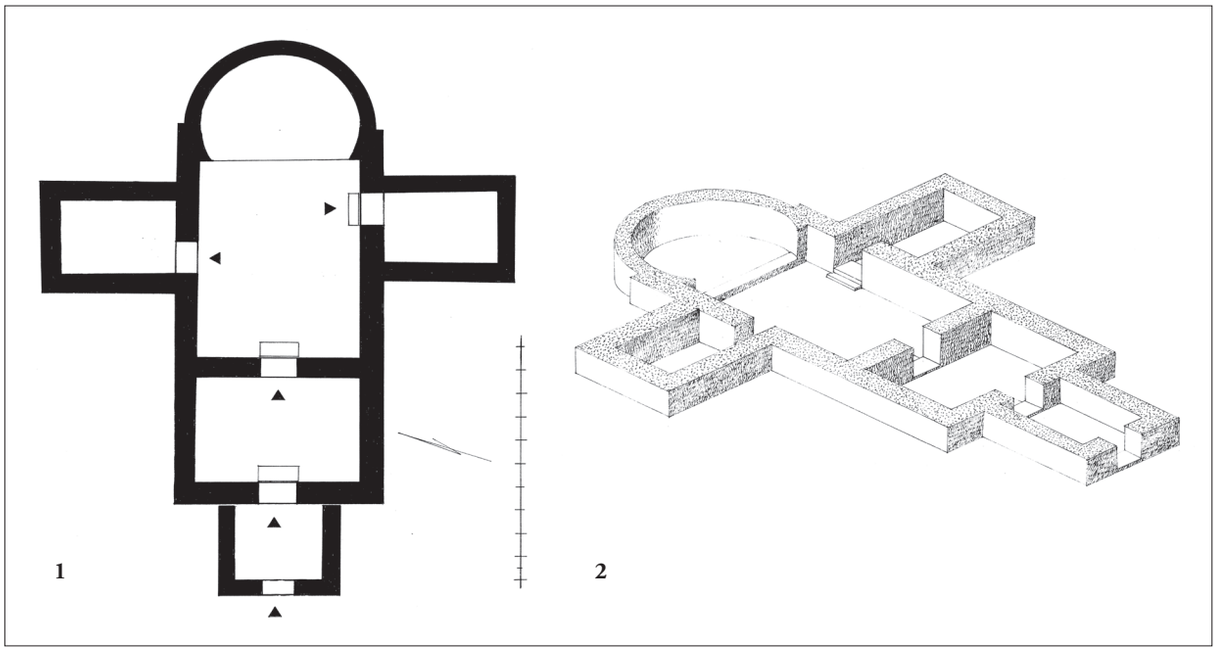


Fig. 1. Avgia church plans (compiled by Guram Kipiani).

building in question resembled temples from the early Byzantine period in terms of the technique, layout, and archaeological material. The excavations revealed a transept hall (Figs 2–3) of an initial geometric cruciform shape, the so-called *crux immissa*, also known as the 'crucifix' and 'long cross' (*crux immissa oblonga*). Such transept halls were common in the early medieval period and can be found in almost every periphery of the Byzantine Empire. There were two basic types of transepts: the domed and the undomed.[4] Domed basilicas in the Byzantine Empire emerged quite early:[5] the evolution from a flat-roofed system to arched roofs created the need for more sophisticated solutions, hence the domes.[6] It is considered that this type of design was based on the schemes of martyries and rock-carved tombs.[7]

The Avgia church can be classified as an undomed basilica. None of the stones found in the ruins can serve as evidence for the existence of vaults. The walls of the temple and the intersections of the hall and the transepts would hardly be strong enough to bear the weight of a dome. The building shows no evidence of pilasters. It must have had a simple, coarse, flat ceiling, typical for an early western basilica structure. The structure of the building – which is also similar to the one from Abkhazia – generally dates back to the early medieval period.[8] A largely similar church from the northern Black Sea coast belongs to the same era.[9]

The Avgia church site differs from other cultic buildings in only one feature: the narthex. It was not added later so it must have been built together with the church (Figs 1–2). The narthex is separated from the hall with a 70-cm-wide septum. The dimensions of the narthex door aperture equal those of the main entrance of the hall. The western part of the narthex has a square extension which could have been added later. However, the chronological discrepancy between the main structure and the extension must have been minimal. The extension walls are less than 60 cm wide and a bit lower than the main nave. Only the lowest structure is preserved. There are no traces of a door aperture. This seems to be a 'replica' of the gate-exonarthex which may have been destroyed before the construction was completed. The domed structure in Najakhavo (Martvili municipality) shows a similar extension.[10]

Some of the walls have survived up to 2 metres in height. They are made of rubble, unworked stones and lime mortar (a mix of ceramic powder, pebbles and crushed rocks). The rows are regular. The key areas are well-bound and strengthened with sandstone quadras.[11]

[4] Restle 1979, 68–73, figs 42–44.
[5] Stanzl 1979, 79–92.
[6] Vul'f 1900, 315.
[7] Bandmann 1956, 187.
[8] Shamba, Shamba 1985, 19–22.
[9] Romančuk 2005, 26.
[10] Zakaraia, Kapanadze 1991, 54–56, fig. 91.
[11] The so-called 'opus incertum'.



1



2

Fig. 2. Views on the Avgia church from the east (1) and west (2) (photo by Giorgi Dumbadze).

The apse walls are a somewhat different case: they were constructed using carefully selected and comparatively small square stones of equal sizes.[12] The door embrasures are of the same width – 1.5 metres. Interestingly, the door embrasures of the northern and southern extensions are intentionally positioned outside of their common axis of symmetry and misaligned: the southern one is cut out in the eastern part, and the western one – in the northern part. The floors were laid at different levels. The difference between the floor levels is about 20 centimetres and the same quality low step stone tiles are laid in front of the embrasures (Figs 1–2). The floors of the main and intersected naves are made of a mix of lime mortar and ceramic powder.[13] The data obtained at one spot confirmed that the interior walls must have been plastered with the same material, which is quite natural. The apse of the church is explicitly horseshoe-shaped and is similar to the early Christian Cappadocian apses built according to the same scheme.[14] The architecture of the building is entirely based on the Roman foot.[15] As a result, the total length of the church measured along the E-W axis is 23.7 metres (79 Roman feet), and the total width

[12] The so-called 'opus quadratum'.
[13] The so-called 'opus signinum'.
[14] Restle 1979, figs 32, 34, 39.
[15] The Roman foot is the same as the Attic foot but subjected to a minor change. In consequence, its practical length is 0.3 m.

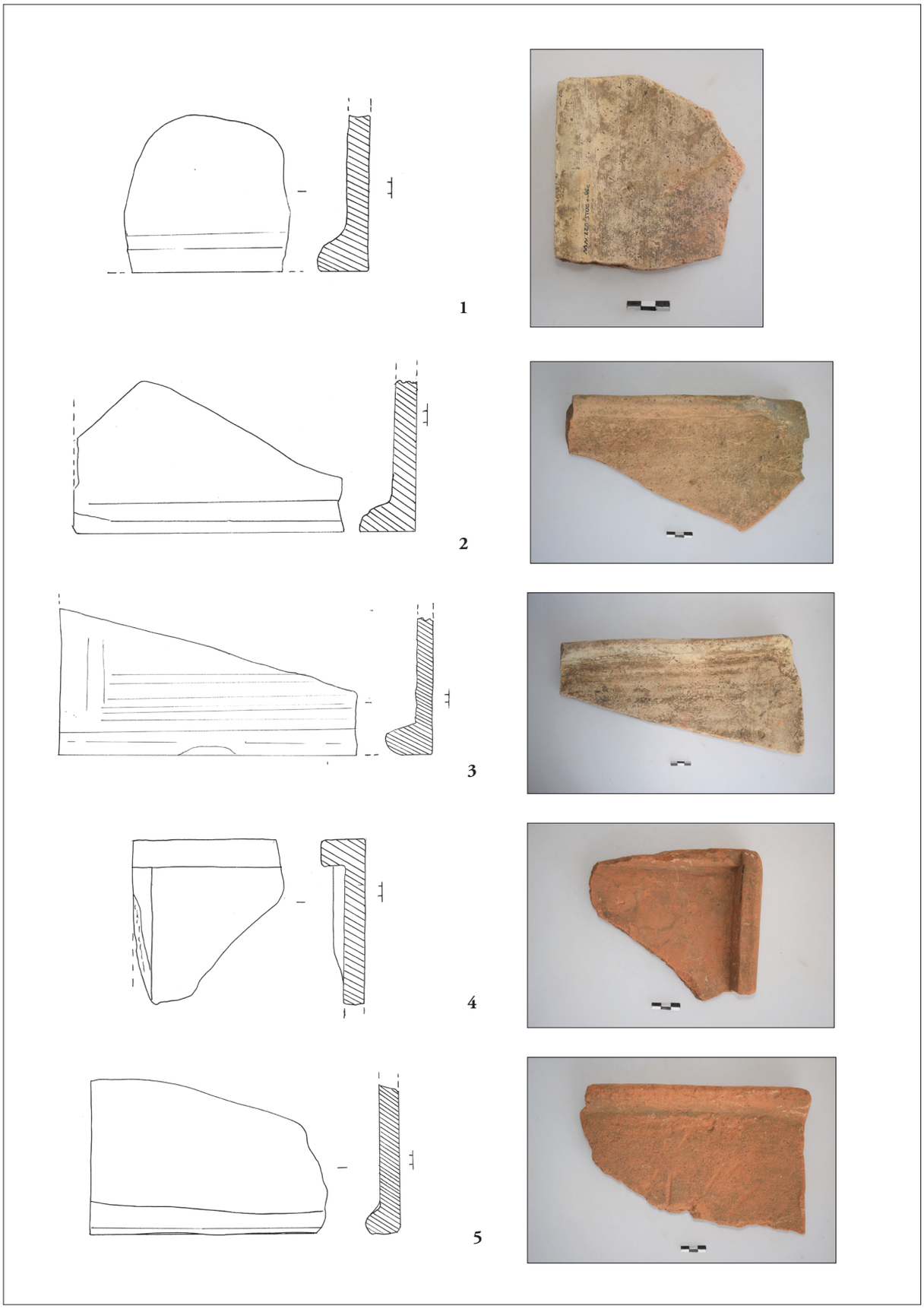


Fig. 3. Building ceramics discovered during the excavations of the Avgia church (compiled by Guram Kipiani).

(i.e. the N-S length of the transept arm) is 19.2 metres (64 feet).

Similarly, the western extension of the temple is 3.9 metres long (13 feet) while the wall is 90 centimetres (3 feet) wide. Such rules can be observed almost everywhere at the site. In short, all of the details in the temple were designed according to Roman measurements. It is a common feature because the early Christian civilisation absorbed Roman ideas in all areas. The same can be said in regard to almost any monument from that period.[16]

The building had been covered with wooden structures bearing the burden of flat and striated or grooved tiles. It must be noted that in Georgia this method of roofing is rarely found. The roofing method from the Avgia church is similar to that of the three-nave basilicas found on the territory of the Nekresi settlement, the Chabakauri and Dolochopi precincts.[17]

As is known, Georgian basilicas or hall temples built after the 5th and 6th centuries AD are roofed with stone vaults. This roofing method must have been inspired by the Roman-Byzantine world of the 4th and 5th centuries: the roofs of ancient basilicas in the central and eastern Christian provinces of the Roman Empire were based on wooden constructions.[18]

Archaeological Evidence

The finds unearthed at the site of the Avgia church include construction materials: tiles, bricks and floor tiles. Several potsherds, jugs, amphora necks and bases, as well as fragments of glass, bronze, and metal works have been found on the site. In the altar, i.e. in the middle of the apse, three iron crosses have been uncovered. Judging from their analogies, all of the items can be dated to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Tiles of the Solen type represent the majority of materials in regard to construction ceramics (Fig. 3. 1–5). The majority of these are made of lilac (Avgia. 2015/5, 23–29, 32, 65, 69, 83, 85, 92–94, 97–98, 100, 103, 105–108), orange (Avgia. 2015/2–3, 19–22, 30–31, 33–34, 64, 91, 101) or brown (Avgia. 2015/4, 6, 18, 77, 89–90, 95–96, 99, 102, 104) clay with a low, turned up side. Sherds of striated tiles were not very common (Fig. 4. 1). Most of them were made in an important trade and transit centre of the southern Black Sea coast, Sinope. Ancient Colchis had close trade and economic ties with that particular town since the Classical period. As shown by archaeological discoveries, these relations continued until the early medieval period. Medieval tiles are similar to those from the Classical period. However, certain distinctive features can be observed. Namely, the early medieval tile is smaller and thinner when compared to the classical one. Moreover, it is of poorer quality. According to current knowledge, during the early medieval period tiles were used to roof buildings which received much care and attention. Cultic buildings also had tiled roofs.[19]

The group of construction ceramics is followed by a set of floor tiles (Fig. 4. 2–5). All are brown and have a rectangular shape (Avgia. 2015/16–17, 66–67, 71, 80, 109–110). An animal foot mark is preserved on one of the tiles (Fig. 4. 3); in the case of two other tiles, a right-angled triangle is cut out on one of the sides (Fig. 4. 5).

Household ceramics are represented by various fragments of *kvevris* (large earthenware vessels) which are made of brown clay (Avgia. 2015/7, 54, 84). Their surface is decorated with relief mountain ranges.

Some fragments of *dergis* (large pots) have also been uncovered at the site (Fig. 5. 1–2). They have turned-out triangular or rectangular rims, short necks and straight bodies (Avgia. 2015/1, 81, 87). One of them has three grooved crosses (Fig. 5. 1).

A comparatively large number of pots (Fig. 5. 3–6) are represented by pieces of rims, walls and handles. They have typical flat and slightly outspread rims, low necks, as well as rounded and wide flat ears (Avgia. 2015/35–36, 38– 39, 42–44, 50, 53, 82). A small number of jugs (Avgia, 2015/41, 51, 57, 61, 68, 711, 18, 85) have been obtained as well. They have flat bases (Fig. 6. 1) and the clay comes in two colours: a) pinkish-orange and b) brown. A pan-like sherd of one vessel's rim wall is made of brown clay and has a disproportionate mouth and a rounded body (Fig. 6. 2).

Another group comprises household movable amphorae**.** The local Colchian concave amphorae are represented as sherds of rim necks, and ears (Fig. 6. 3). They are similar to the finds uncovered in the fort of Gonio-Apsarus and date back to the 5th and 7th centuries AD.[20] Some rim neck and ear sherds of grooved orange clay amphorae have also been uncovered at the site (Fig. 6. 4–5). They bear quite a lot of similarities to the Gonio-Apsarus finds, as well as the Byzantine examples dated to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.[21]

Among other finds, handles of various bronze items have also been uncovered. All of them are round-edged (Avgia. 2015/12, 14). According to the context of the

[16] Gartkiewicz 1990, 71–75; Krautheimer 1984, 102–104; Kipiani 2009, 751–752.

[17] Bakhtadze et al. 2015, 66–67; Bakhtadze 2018, 109–110.

[18] Bakhtadze 2018, 109–110.

[19] Jgamaia 1980, 18–21.

[20] Khalvashi 2002, 20; Mamuladze et al. 2012, 237–243.

[21] Khalvashi 2002, 42–58, fig. 3; Mamuladze et al. 2012, 237–243.

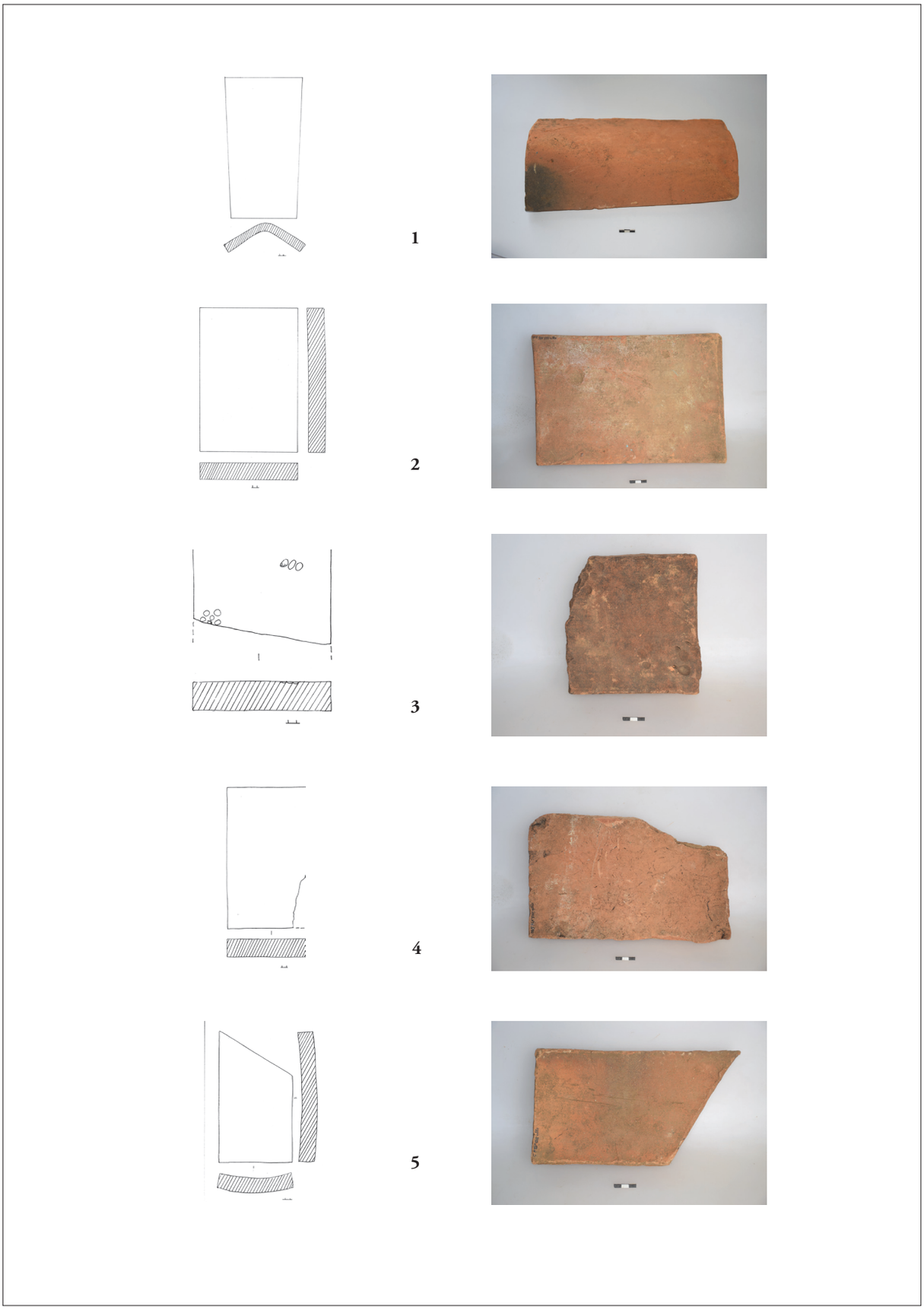


Fig. 4. Building ceramics discovered during the excavations of the Avgia church (compiled by Guram Kipiani).

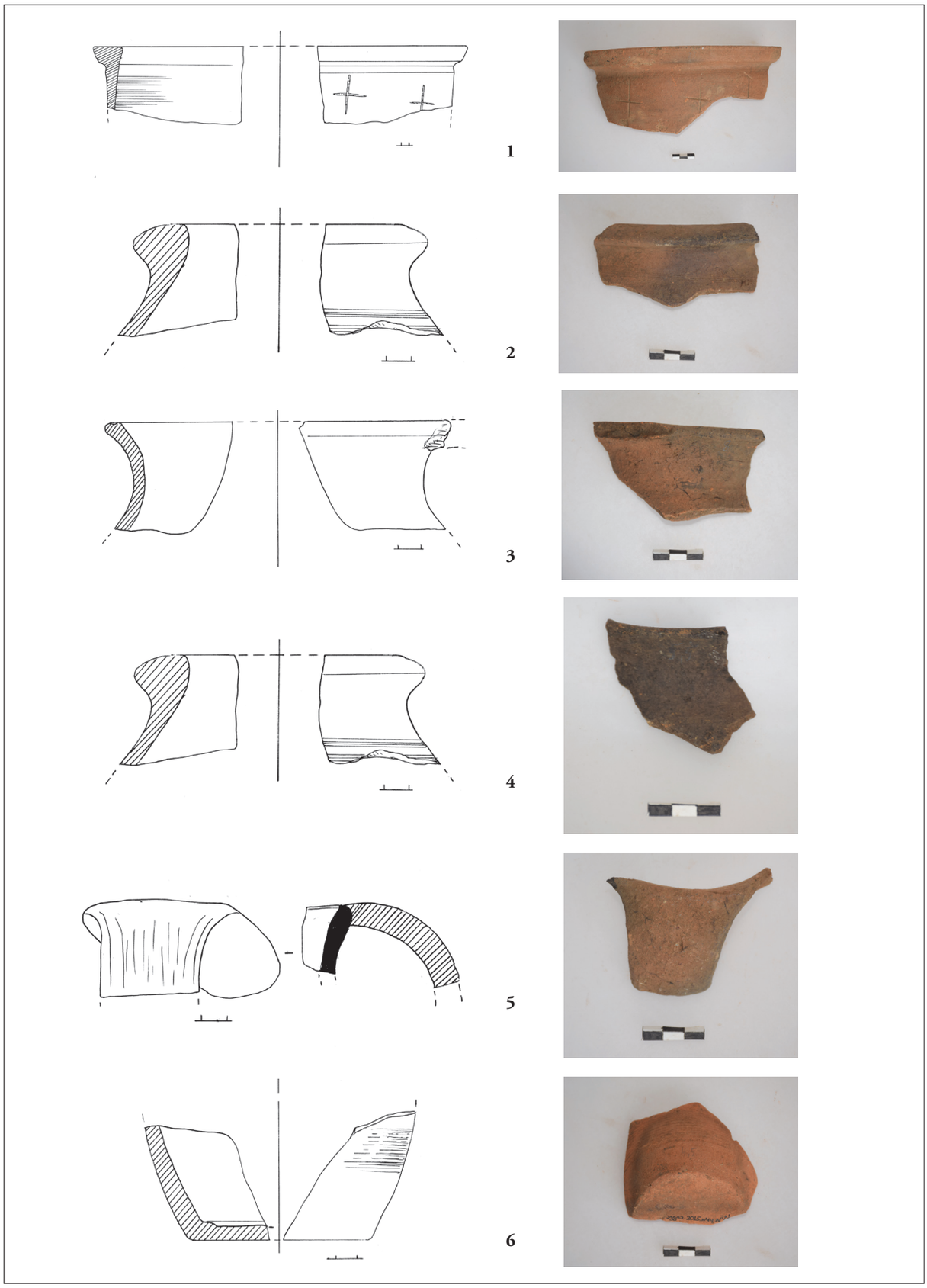
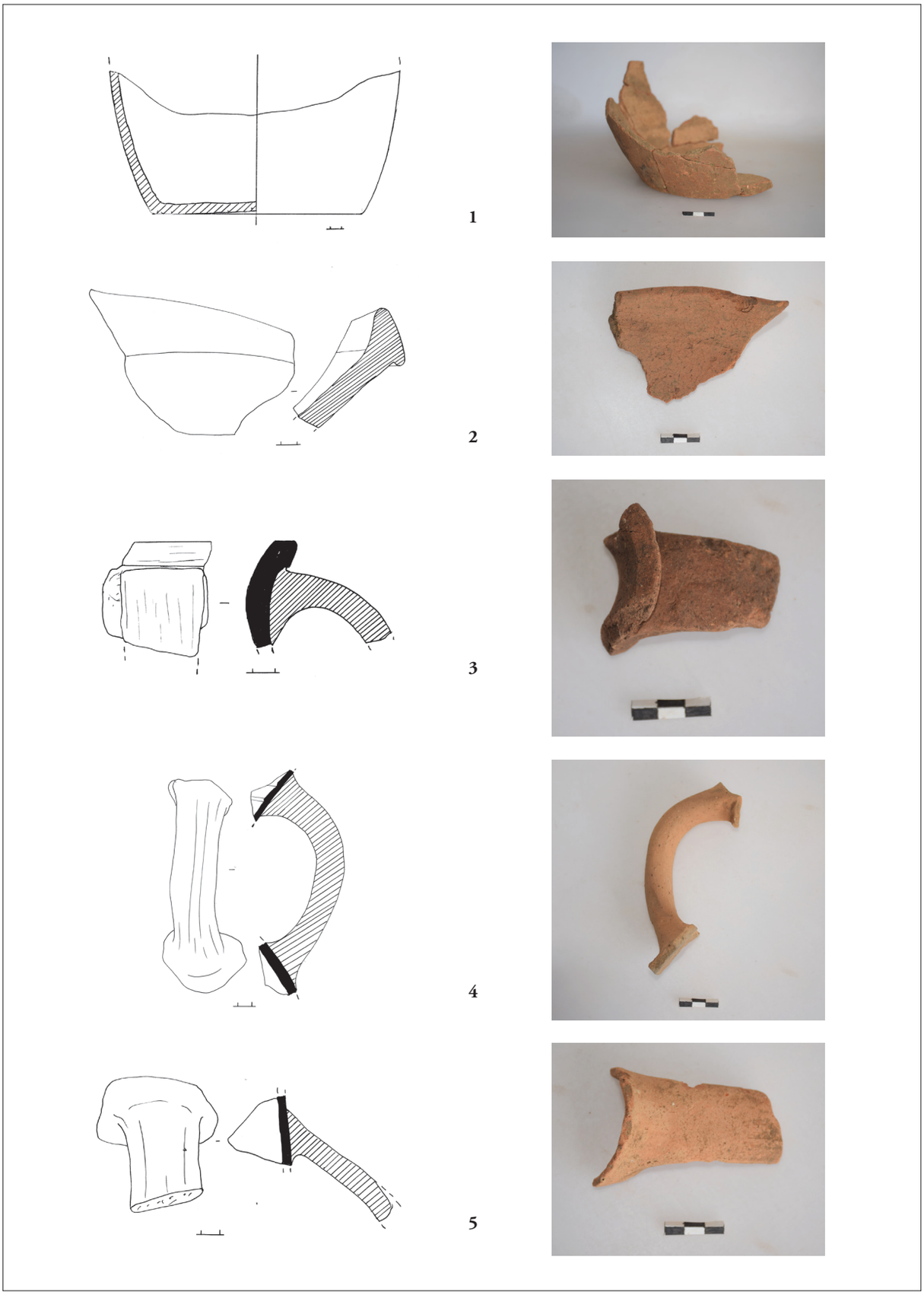


Fig. 5. Household ceramics discovered during the excavations of the Avgia church (1–2: dergis (large pots), 3–6: pots) (compiled by Guram Kipiani).



Figs 6. Household ceramics discovered during the excavations of the Avgia church (1: jug, 2: pan-like dish, 3–5: amphorae) (compiled by Guram Kipiani).

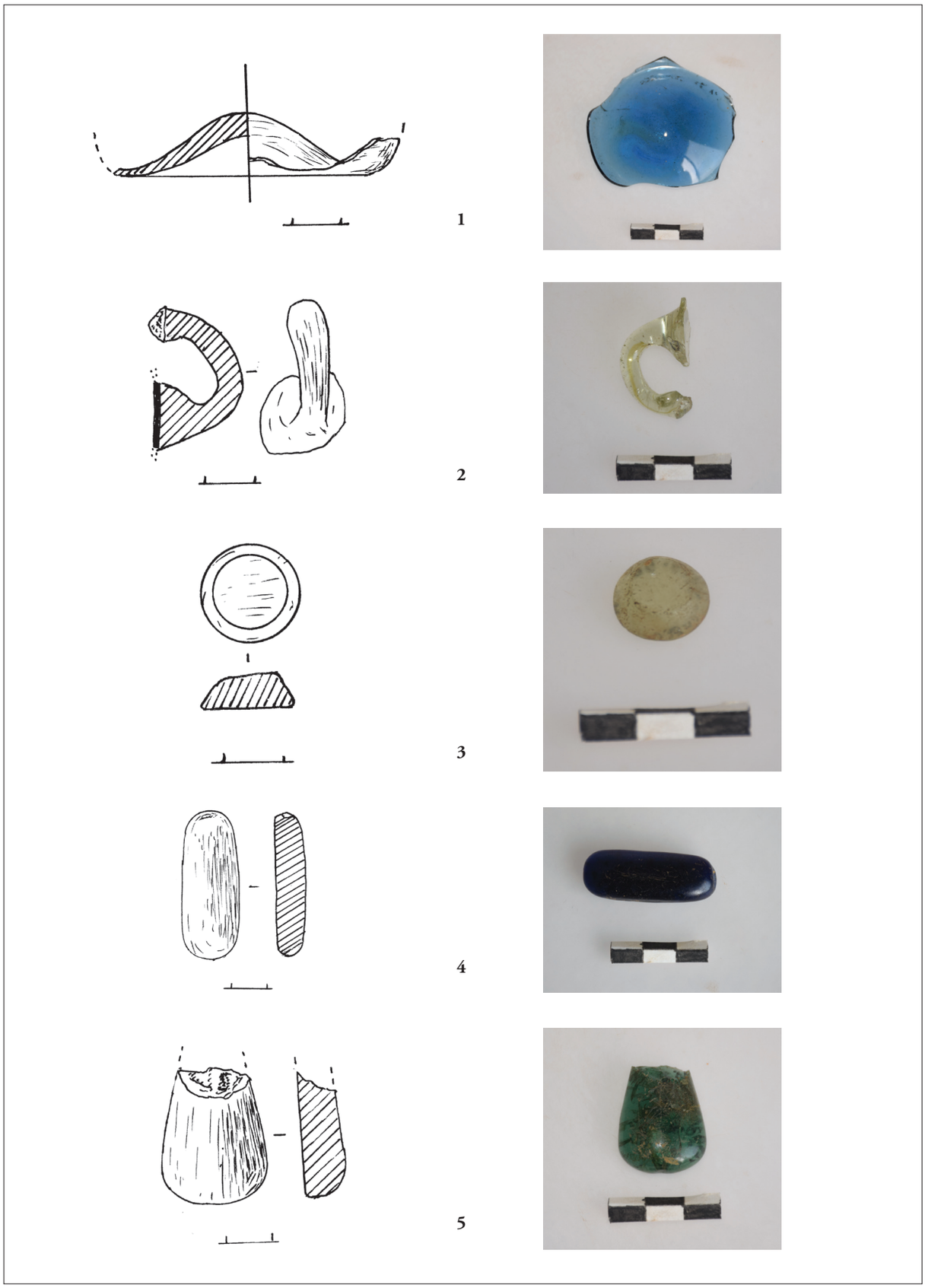


Fig. 7. Archaeological items discovered during the excavations of the Avgia church (1: cup base, 2: glass lamp base, 3: glass gem, 6–8: crosses) (compiled by Guram Kipiani).

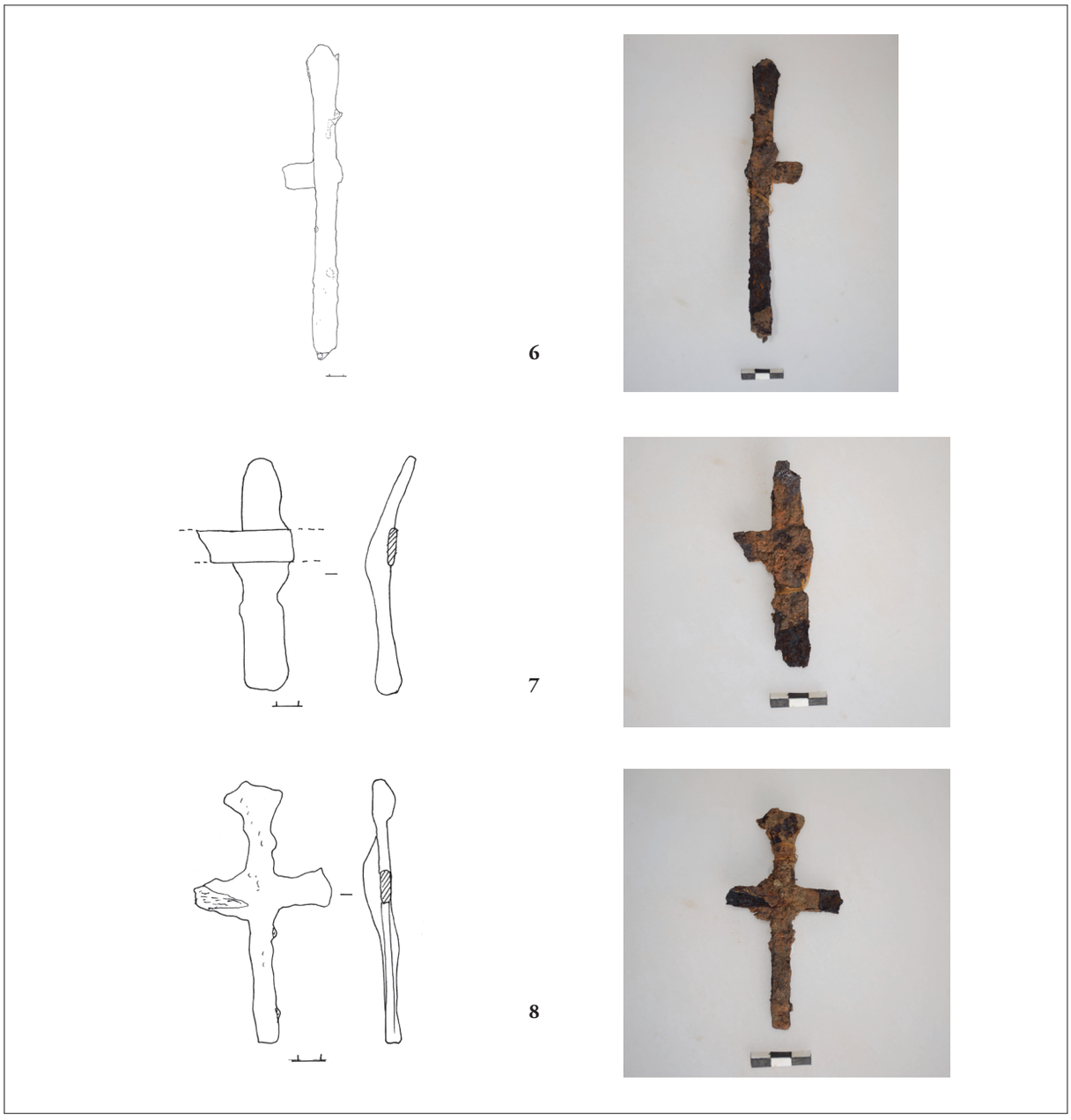


Fig. 7. Cont.

discovery, these items should be dated to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Considerably fewer glass objects (Avgia. 2015/4, 40–41, 45, 59) have been found. The base of one glass vessel is fully preserved. It is characterised by a thin blue wall and a conically incurved base (Fig. 7. 1). As is known, this type of glassware had a dual purpose: it was used for drinking or as a lamp. The use of such a cup lamp is evidenced by the floor mosaic of the Hammat Tiberias' Synagogue, Israel.[22] The mosaic is dated to the 4th century AD and displays a seven-branched menorah.[23] The use of this item as a lamp can be evidenced by the monuments from Karanis (Egypt) and northern France.[24] Their use as drinking vessels can be proved by the finds of Vojvodina,

[22] Crowfoot, Harden 1931, 197–200; Antonaras 2008, 24.
[23] Ancient Glass 1998, 24; Antonaras 2008, 24.
[24] Antonaras 2008, 24.

Serbia,[25] Thessaloniki, Greece[26] and Osenovo, Bulgaria.[27] These types of drinking vessels can be dated to the 4th and 5th centuries AD.[28] The Avgia vessel is dated to the 5th century AD.

A single piece of a dish handle (Fig. 7. 2) must have once been a part of a lamp. Glass lamps were quite popular in the early Christian era. The difference between a lamp and a drinking vessel was just a tiny handle attached near the rim which allowed to hold a hook that was attached afterward and served to hang it on the wall.[29] Based on an analogous item held by the Thessaloniki Museum, the handle of the Avgia lamp can be dated to the 5th century AD.[30] In the 5th and 7th centuries, glass lamps were quite common along the eastern Black Sea coast.[31]

Uncovered glassware includes a round, flat-surfaced greenish-yellow gem imitation (Fig. 7. 3) and two gems with different crosses. One of these is rectangular in shape, round-edged and made with emerald (Fig. 7. 4), while the other is green with wide endings (Fig. 7. 5).

In the inner space of the church, three iron crosses were uncovered (Fig. 7. 6–8). All three are damaged (Avgia. 2015/46–47, 60), but one is relatively well-preserved (Avgia. 2015/60). All three arms of the cross are equally distant from the centre, while the fourth – the lower one – is elongated, and thus the arm ends are difficult to recognise (Fig. 7. 8).

As far as other artefacts are concerned, a fragment of a nail (Avgia. 2015/56) and a medium-sized grey stone core (Avgia. 2015/76) have been unearthed. On the basis of their analogies, all of the objects can be dated to the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Thus, in terms of architecture, construction technique and archaeological material, the Avgia church can be dated to the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

Bibliography:

Ancient Glass 1998 Ancient Glass from the Holy Land, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and Israel Antiquities Authority, San Francisco.

Antonaras A.C. 2008 Glass lamps of the Roman and Early Christian periods. Evidence from the Thessaloniki area, (in:) C.-A. Roman, N. Gudea (eds), Trade and Local Production of Lamps from the Prehistory until the Middle Age. Acts of 2nd International Congress on Ancient and Middle Age Lighting Devices, Lychnologícal Acts 2, Cluj-Napolca, 23–30.

Antonaras A.C. 2010 Early Byzantine glass vessels: forms and uses, (in:) F. Daim, J. Drauschke (eds), Byzanz – das Römerreich im Mittelalter 1, Mainz, 383–430.

Bakhtadze N. 2018 Udzvelesi bazilikebis arkeologiuri kvleva nakalakar nekresshi da mosazrebani pirveli kartuli kristianuli tazrebis khurotmodzgvruli agnagobis shesakheb [Archaeological study of the oldest Basilicas in Nekresi settlement and some thought on architectural structure of the Georgian Christian temples], Bulletin of the Georgian Academy of Sciences 1, 106–129 [in Georgian with English and Russian summaries].

Bakhtadze N., Mamiashvili V., Gabekhadze B. 2015 The Dolochopi Basilica archaeological research in the Nekresi former city, Online Archaeology 8, 66–67 (https://www.heritagesites.ge/uploads/files/59f350ca0f3b6.pdf).

Bandmann G. 1956 Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungstäger, Berlin.

Crowfoot G.M., Harden D.B. 1931 Early Byzantine and later glass lamps, Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 17, 196–208.

Gartkiewicz P.M. 1990, The cathedral in old Dongola and its antecedents, Nubia 1, Dongola 2, Warsaw.

Jgamaia J. 1980 Samsheneblo keramika peodaluri khanis sakartveloshi [Building ceramic in Medieval Georgia], Tbilisi [in Georgian with Russian summary].

Khalvashi M. 2002 Keramikuli tara Gonio-Apsarosidan [Amphoras from Gonio-Apsarus], Gonio-Apsarus 2, Batumi [in Georgian with German summary].

Kipiani G. 2009 Mepe mirianis bazilika [King Miriani basilica], (in:) N. Makharadze, M. Giorgadze (eds), Byzantiology in Georgia 2, 733–789 [in Georgian with English summary].

Kissas S. 1988 He anaskaphe sten Kolchida Kilkis, Archaeologico ergo ste Makedonia kai Thrake 2, 207–217.

[25] Šaranović Svetek 1986, 61, no. 52, pl. IV.1.
[26] Papanikola-Bakirtzi 2002, 532–533.
[27] Minćev, Georgiev 1981, 11–12, pl. VIII.1.
[28] Antonaras 2008, 23–24, figs 3.1, 4.1; 2010: 387, fig. 4.
[29] Antonaras 2010, 388.
[30] Antonaras 2008, 24, figs 3.2ii, 4.2ii; 2010, 388, fig. 6.
[31] Antonaras 2008, 24; Papanicola-Bakirtzi 2002, 285, no. 299; Kissas 1988, 209, fig. 4; Uboldi 1995, 124–125, form V.

Krautheimer R. 1984 Early Christian and Byzantine architecture (4th revised ed.), Yale.

Mamuladze S., Kakhidze E., Khalvashi M. 2012 Gonio-apsarosi adrebizantiur khanashi [Gonio-Apsarus in the early Byzantine Age], (in:) G. Kipiani (ed.), Historian and Archaeological Issues of Georgia and Caucasus, Tbilisi, 237–242 [in Georgian wit English summary].

Minćev A., Georgiev P. 1981 Rannohristiianska grobnica s' stenopisi krai s. osenovo, Varnensko, Izvestija na Narodnija Muzej 17, 9–16.

Papanicola-Bakirtzi D. 2002 Everyday life in Byzantium (exhibition catalogue), Thessaloniki.

Restle M. 1979 Studien zur früh byzantinistchen Architektur Kappadokiens, Wien.

Romančuk A.I. 2005 Studien zur Geschichte und Archäologie des byzantinischen Cherson, Colloquia Pontica 11, Leiden–Boston.

Shamba S.M., Shamba G.K. 1985 Raskopki drevnego Gyuenosa [Excavations in ancient Gyenos], Archaeological Discoveries in Abkhazia, Tbilisi, 19–22.

Stanzl G. 1979 Längsbau und Zentralbau als Grundthema der frühchristlichen Architektur, Wien.

Šaranović Svetek V. 1986 Antićko staklo u jugoslovenskom delu provincije Donje Panonije, Novi Sad.

Uboldi M. 1995 Diffusione delle lampade vitree in etá tardoantica ed altomedievale e spunti per una typologia, Archaeologia Medievale 22, 93–145.

Vul'f O.F. 1900 Arhitektura i mozaiki hrama Uspeniâ Bogorodici v Nikee [Architecture and mosaic of the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin in Nicaea], Vizantijskij vremennik 7.2–3, 315–425.

Zakaraia P., Kapanadze T. 1991 Tsikhegoji-arkeopolisi-nokalakevi (khurotmodzgvreba) [Tsikhegoji-Archaeopolis-Nokalakevi (Architecture)], Tbilisi [in Georgian].