

THE ANCIENT CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS OF THE
BLACK SEA EASTERN LITTORAL – PITIUNT (BICHVINTA)

(*Supplementum Ponticum 5*)

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In this article the early Christian Monuments at Bichvinta (Georgia) are presented. The monuments are compared to other early Christian architecture in the region and set against contemporary sources, providing an overview of the development of Christian architecture on the east-shores of the Black Sea, as well as offering an insight in the spread of Christianity in the region.

Introduction

Ancient churches in the Black Sea eastern littoral firstly appeared at several fortified centres on the coast, especially at Roman – Byzantine administrative centres in the region. One of these centres was a Greek – Roman town known as Pitiunt (present-day Bichvinta) (Fig. 1). The town was incorporated in the Roman Empire in 63 AD and, after the Roman conquest of the former vassal Kingdom of Polemonian Pontus, became part of the province Cappadocia. It shared this fate with many other fortified town in the Colchis littoral, such as Apsarunt (present-day Gonio, near the town of Batumi), Phasis (present-day Poti) and Sebastopolis (present-day Sokhumi).

Centres like Pitiunt served as advanced posts for the Romans in the region and as such, they played a major role in the spread of Christianity throughout the region. As the region was under continuous threat of invasion by barbarian tribes from the north (where the local Georgian Kingdoms Lazika – in western Georgia – and Iberia – in the east – controlled the passages through the Caucasus), there was a constant need for military presence. It is known that the troops garrisoned at Pitiunt and Sebastopolis were drawn from Asia Minor – a region where Christianity took root already at a very early stage. Many of the soldiers at Pitiunt can thus be expected to have shared the Christian faith and so provided a major impulse for its spread in these remote parts of the Empire. Earlier, the Black Sea eastern littoral was already known as an area of banishment for Christians



Fig.1. Map of Georgia.

expulsed by the Imperial administration, which proved another impulse for the formation of early Christian communities¹.

In the 4th century AD Pitiunt already had a Christian community, headed by a certain Stratophilus, who is recorded as ‘bishop of Pitiunt’ in a list of participants of the first council of Nicaea, in AD 325. Apparently, he was not the only one from the region, as representatives of the eparchy of Polemonian Pontus are listed as well. Consequently, we can be sure that at least from the 4th AD century onwards, Pitiunt was a bishop’s residence, indicating its urban status.

The Christian monuments

Bichvinta represents a complex of very complicated and interesting monuments. Many of these monuments were situated well outside the town’s wall, suggesting that a significant part of the populace lived outside the town, in the economically important hinterland. In this article, several of these ancient monuments will be discussed.

¹ For example, it is a known fact that St. John Chrysostom was exiled to Bichvinta, where he died in AD 407. Also, the “Martyrdom of Origen”, describing events around the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century AD, mentions that Ciriak – one of the men of Origen – was buried in Zygameos (present-day Gudava, which lays approximately 55 km south-east of Sokhumi) in the reign of Emperor Diocletian (a period of heavy prosecution of the Christians). According to the ecclesiastical tradition, Andrew, the first-called Apostle, Simon the Canaanite (according to legend buried at Anakopia), and Matthew (according to legend buried at Gonio) carried out missionary activities here. Although these legends are known only from Medieval sources, there is at least the suggestion that Christianity took root in western Georgia already at a very early stage (Japaridze 1996, 34-43).

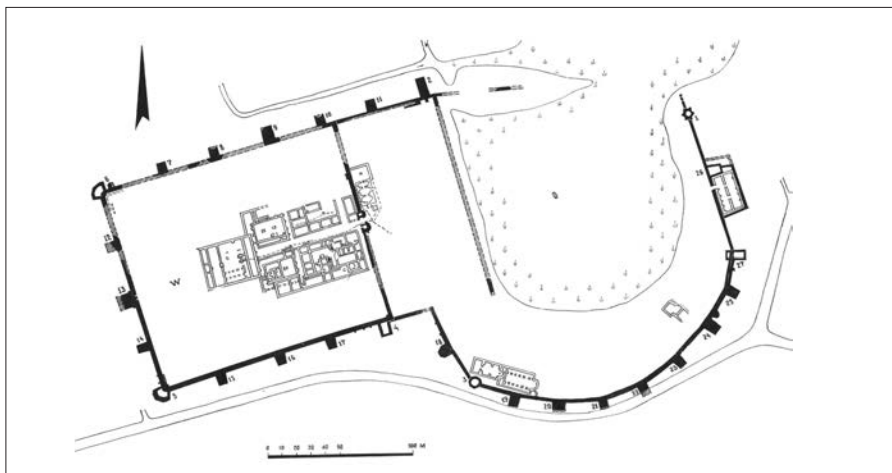


Fig. 2. Plan of citadel of the Pitiunt town remains.

Over the years, archaeological investigations have revealed a number of churches, including the remains of four different churches constructed on top of another within the city wall's enclosure. These remains lay in the so-called site III, located in the south-eastern part of the citadel of ancient Bichvinta (Fig. 2). These churches date to the 4th to 6th century AD. The stratigraphic picture of the site was – to some extent – clarified during field work in 1970 to 1973. During these seasons, five interchanging construction levels were identified (Apakidze 1977, 39-63). The oldest church uncovered at Bichvinta represents a single-nave structure of 25 by 10 meters, with a semicircular apse spanning the entire width of the building (Fig. 3.2). Various fragments of glass vessels, decorated with early Christian symbols were found in the apse of the church and were, after intensive study by N. Ugrelidze (1983, 105-6), dated to the first half of the 4th century AD. The excavator of the basilica, I. Tsisishvili (1977, 100), dated the monument to the beginning of the 4th century AD². Ramishvili, however, based on stratigraphical considerations and archaeological data, proposed that the church at Bichvinta may be dated to the 70's to 80's of the 3rd century AD (Ramishvili 1999, 4). If this were true, the church at Bichvinta – together with a single-nave church in Nastakisi (eastern Georgia) – would be the oldest Christian monument in Georgia known so far.

The 4th century AD was a period of great prosperity in Bichvinta, and the town appears to have had far-flung contacts with several major centres within the

² The best analogy for the monument offers the church excavated in Nokalakevi, in western Georgia. This church too is of a single-nave structure with a semicircular apse, and is also dated to the 4th century AD (Zakariaia/Kapanadze 1991, 166-7, 261).

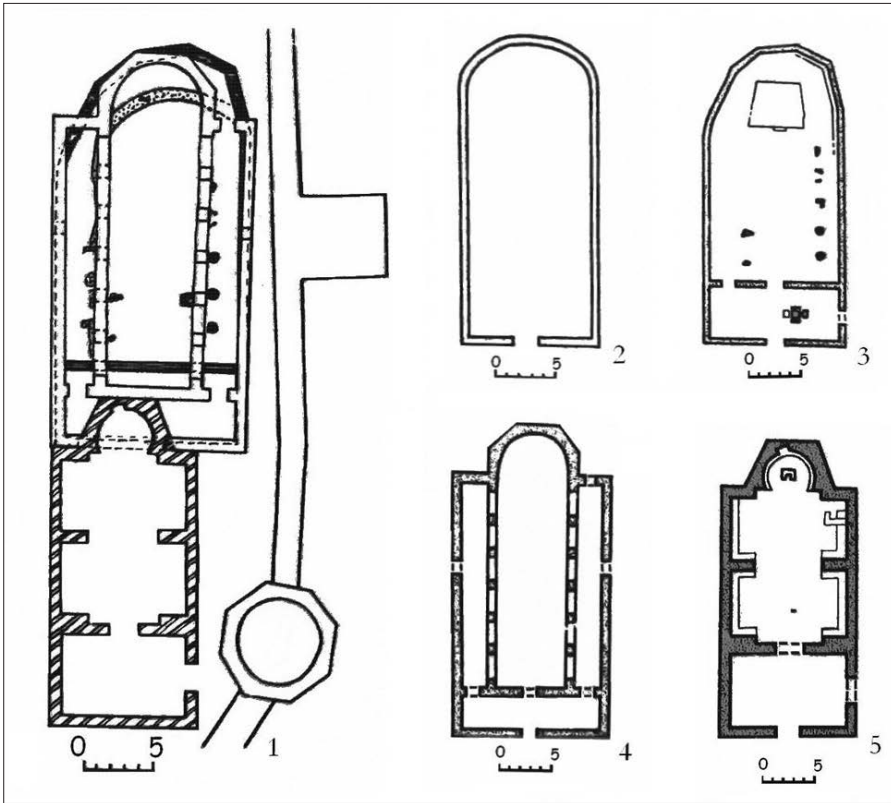


Fig. 3. Plan of the oldest church is in the citadel of Pitunt.

Empire. It is known that at the beginning of the 4th century AD, Antioch was one of the major Christian centres in the east, its spiritual influence spreading far beyond Asia Minor, even reaching Pontus and the north-eastern part of Asia (including Persia, Armenia, and Georgia). Coins from the mint at Antioch found during the excavations of Bichvinta indicate that Antioch and Bichvinta had close economic relations with each other³. Apart from coins from Antioch, mintage from Nicomedia, Cyzicus, and Constantinople has also been found at Bichvinta, which further attests to the significant role the cities of Asia Minor played with regard to the intercommunications of Pitunt. In contrast to that stands the total absence of any mintage coming from Rome (Dundua 1975, 375-413). The prosperity Bichvinta enjoyed during this period is also expressed in architec-

³ In total over 500 coins of the 4th century AD have been found at Bichvinta, 310 of these found in a hoard. A total of 103 coins from the mint at Antioch is known thus far.



Fig. 4. Mosaic in the apse. Bichvinta.



Fig. 5. Mosaic in the narthex. Bichvinta.

ture. Built over the remains of the earlier church, a new basilica (Fig. 3.3: dimensions 28.03 by 13.20 m) was erected, which included extensive mosaic decorations (Figs. 4 and 5). It was a three-nave structure with a pentahedral and – to a certain extent asymmetric – apse and a narthex which included a baptistery. The marble columns and affluent decoration, as well as a well preserved mosaic floor testify to the wealth of 4th century AD Bichvinta. The mosaic is done in *opus tessellatum* and shows geometric ornaments as well as thematic compositions (a chrisms; the fountain of life-giving water with birds and drinking deer) in the apse of the baptistery adds to that. The basilica has been assigned to different periods (varying from the 4th to the 6th centuries AD) in various publications, but this author is inclined to follow L. Matsulevich' suggestion – following an intensive study of the mosaics and two preserved Greek inscriptions in the altar of the basilica – that the monument was constructed at the beginning of the 4th century AD⁴. Notwithstanding its prosperity, Bichvinta underwent a massive destruction in the mid-4th century AD. The basilica with the mosaic floor was completely destroyed. However, the destruction was followed by a degree of recovery and the church was reconstructed (Fig. 3.4: dimensions 28.40 by 14.60 m). The basilica at Petra-Tsikhisdziri offers the closest analogy to this building phase (Inaishvili 1974, 136-7). The shape was altered and now included a protruded pentahedral apse, while the narthex of the church was reduced in size. Abutments with brick layers

⁴ Cf. Qaukhchisvili 1978, 218-41; Shervashidze 1978, 169-93; Lekvinadze 1970, 174-92; Matsulevich 1978, 100-68; Odišeli 1995; Matsulevich 1956, 153; Matsulevich 1962, 317.

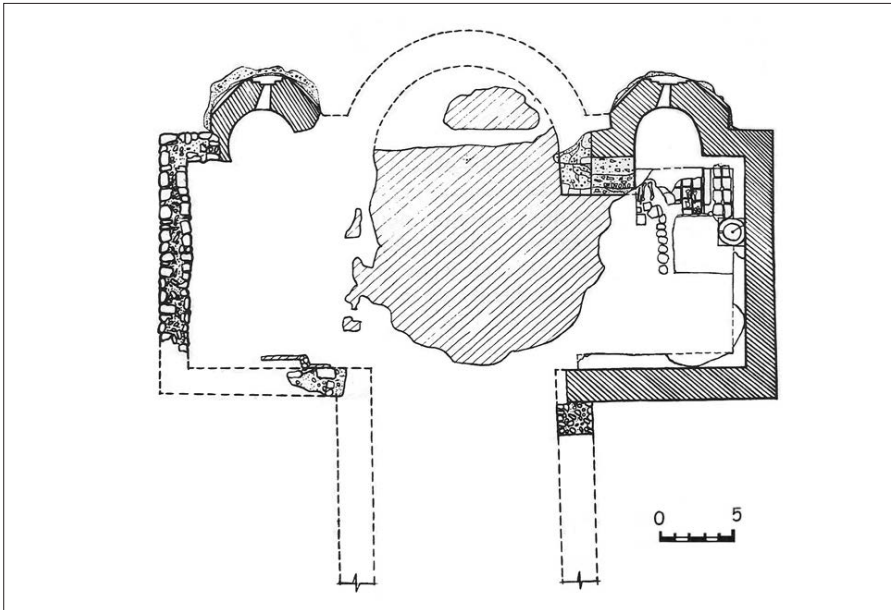


Fig. 6. Three-apsed basilica. Bichvinta.

replaced the marble columns, while the walls – preserved up to a height of 2 meters – were composed of roughly hewn blocks of sea conglomerate and lime mortar. On the inside, the walls seem to have been plastered and painted with murals. Small fragments of murals with traces of brown and red colours were identified on the altar and in the north nave. The surviving portions of the mosaic floor were still in use, while the damaged parts were covered with ceramic slabs. During the same period, the church was surrounded by an enclosure wall, which – at the same time – also surrounds an adjacent bath-house as well as several other buildings (Tsitsishvili 1977, 83-7).

In the last quarter of the 4th century AD, Bichvinta again met with destruction; this time so violent that a layer of cinder directly on top of the above-mentioned church was clearly visible during the excavations. This violent destruction is attributed to a horde of Huns, who had found their way through the passes of the Caucasus.

Life at Bichvinta only revived several decades later, in the first quarter of the 6th century AD. During those years, a church was built over the remains of the earlier church. This church, belonging to the last building phase of site III, would last only short time and was – together with the town's enclosure wall – destroyed somewhere in the 40-ies of the same century, during the Byzantine-Persian wars (see below). The church (Fig. 3.5; dimensions 17.45 by 11.60 m) was a single-nave structure with a trihedral protruded apse and narthex. The walls survive to

this day, with a preserved height of *ca.* 1 meter. The interior of the church was divided in two parts with tangs (1.92 by 1.96 m). The interior was covered by a semicircular arch, of which parts – if fallen down – are preserved. Tiles were used for roofing. The walls were built with blocks of conglomerate, held together with thick lime mortar and cobblestones. The appearance of the masonry is regular, with horizontal lines of stones (Tsitsishvili 1977, 92).

In 1980 and 1981, near the 10th century AD cathedral of Bichvinta, a complex of early Christian churches was excavated. Two construction phases could be discerned. The first dates to the 5th-6th century, while the second dates to the 6th-7th century AD. During the latter phase, a three-apse basilica had been built (Fig. 6: dimensions 17.50 by 7.60 m), with walls of mixed masonry. The north wall was built in *opus mixtum* with the use of rows four bricks wide. Traces of restoration and modification testify to the building's long-lasting service until well into the late Middle Ages (Lordkipanidze/Agrba 1982, 28).

Beneath the south apse of the church lay the ruins of the older church. This appears to have been a single-nave structure with a semicircular protruded apse (Lordkipanidze 1991, 30-1). Several empty graves from the early Christian period were identified both to the east of this church and within the church itself. Basically, the graves were constructed using flat tiles, bricks, and sandstone slabs. Nearby, in the west of the north apse, an anthropomorphic sarcophagus of stone was uncovered (Fig. 10: dimensions 2.0 by 0.4 by 0.3 m). It was hewn out of a single block of stone, and resembles a sarcophagus known from Sokhumi (Voronov 1969, 51; Khrushkova 1984, 207). Similar examples are known from Constantinople, Caričin Grad (Justiniana Prima), Provence, Čalma, Tipasa, and Thelepte (cf. Koch 2000, 414-5; Nikolajević 1980, 306; Khrushkova 1984, 209). The use of stone sarcophagi in Christian burial practice derives from the Classical period. The same could be said for the use of anthropomorphic sarcophagi⁵, although the similarity in shape of these so-called 'anthropomorphic' sarcophagi and ecclesiastical architecture might be a more plausible reason for the use of such objects. Consider, for example, the similarity between the head of the sarcophagus and the apse of a given church. Of interest in this regard is the use of small-sized stone-cut churches as grave-stones in modern Georgia (*e.g.* in Tchobiskhevi, Larebi, Vale, Tsagveri *e.a.* (cf. photo archive of A. Arabuli).

Some 400 to 500 meters to the south of Bichvinta's town limits, a church dating to the 6th century AD was excavated in 1963. The church had two apses and was rectangular in plan (Fig. 7). At the east side, the church was equipped with protruded pentahedral apses which were absolutely equal in size (dimensions of the building: 28.50 by 14 m). The walls were preserved to the height of 1 m. The

⁵ There is the suggestion that this practice derives from Egyptian customs (cf. Buhl 1964, 62). The earliest examples of an anthropomorphic sarcophagus in a Christian setting come from North Africa.

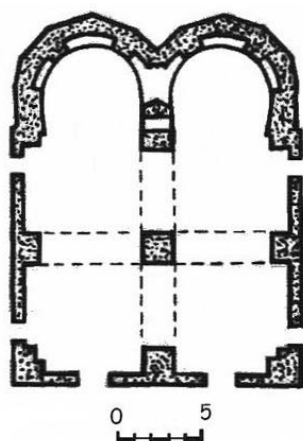


Fig. 7. Two-apses church. Bichvinta.

church was built with smoothly hewn quadrate stones and, at some places, bricks. White marble was used for inner trimming of the church. Several ornamented columns, with cylinder-shaped bodies and quadrate bases, were identified in this church (Mikeladze 1963, 125-7).

In the village of Lidzava, close to Bichvinta, excavations uncovered an early Christian church, which is tentatively dated to the 4th to 5th century AD. Although some of the walls survive up to a height of 3 meter, the plan is unclear. Several graves were excavated inside the church, yielding an iron and a bronze carrying cross. Nearby, architectural elements including a slab with an incision of a cross were found (Bartsits 2003, 223-7).

The last architectural complex that deserves mentioning here is situated farther afield, well outside the town limits, though still on the Bichvinta cape. It lies in the village of Alahadze and comprises a sequence of three churches. The first of these is a large, three-nave basilica with a heptahedral central apse and semicircular side apses (Fig. 8: dimensions 50 by 28 m). Five pairs of massive pillars had a supporting function. The church was built using the *opus mixtum* technique, combined with a very distinct element: ceramic boxes. It also has Hellenistic traits: rafter roofing, the existence of the narthex, and the elevation of the middle nave with regard to the naves beside it. The Alahadze basilica differs from the Mediterranean Hellenistic basilicas in having massive pillars supporting the arch of the roof, rather than columns supporting an architrave. The use of pillars instead of columns in basilicas is, incidentally, rather common in western Georgia (Lekvinadze 1970,168; Zakaraia 1983, 8). As far as the use of *opus mixtum* is concerned, parallels are found elsewhere in western Georgia, with buildings from the same peri-

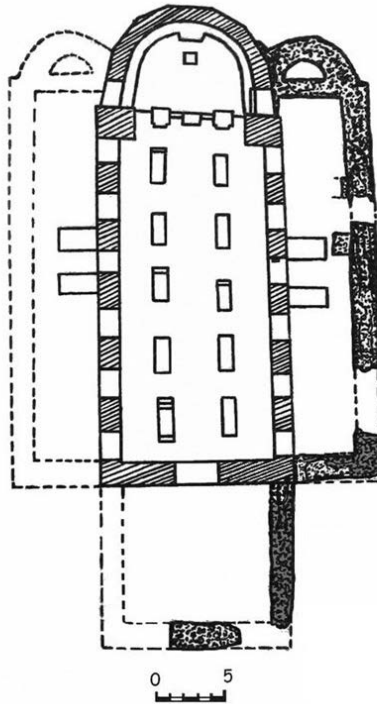


Fig. 8. Alahadze basilica.

od at Pitiunt, Anakophia, Gienos, Archaeopolis, Petra, and Vashnari. This type of masonry is characteristic for basilicas from the Hellenistic period in the Black Sea littoral (Lekvinadze 1973, 177). The mixed masonry of bricks and quadrate stones and the use of only bricks in the arch of the Alahadze basilica compares to the architectural traditions of Asia Minor in Late Antiquity. Despite that, the massive pillars, the strong walls (with a width of 1.8 m), the shape of the narthex, the use of ceramic boxes in the masonry of the wall stresses the local character of the building. It is dated to the first half of the 6th century AD.

The second church at the site in effect was a reconstruction of the previous one and covered only the central nave of the first church. It was a three-nave arched basilica with an apse and is dated to the 8th to 9th century AD. The third church at the site was build while the second was still functioning. It is a cross-domed structure, and as such stands for what eventually became the predominant type of churches in the region. Thus, the complex at Alahadze presents a whole evolution of local architecture: beginning with a Hellenistic type of basilica, eventually giving way to the cross-domed type.

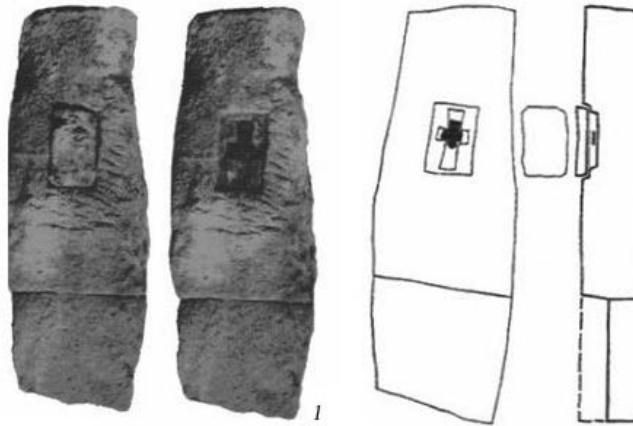


Fig. 9. Stele with a concealed cross. Bichvinta.

Archaeological data

The pages above have been devoted to the early Christian churches known so far in, and in the immediate vicinity, of Bichvinta. This article would not be complete, however, without brief mentioning of several noteworthy smaller finds shedding light on the early Christian communities in the area.

One such find is a stele from the Bichvinta cemetery (Fig. 9), bearing a concealed cross. The stele, with a preserved height of 73-27 cm and a width of 30 cm, represents one of the earliest Christian objects found in the region and should be dated before the reign of Diocletian (AD 313; before the Milan edict). The reign of Decius (AD 249-251) or Valerian (AD 253-260) would be plausible. Carved out of a single piece of stone, the stele once was fitted with an iron cross, fitted in a deep cross-shaped cutting of 13.4 by 7 by 2.5 cm. The iron cross is partially preserved. It was covered with a special lid of 13 by 7 cm, made of a 0.7 cm thick tile and subsequently plastered – and effectively concealed – with mortar. It is thought that the stele marked the grave of a ‘clandestine’ Christian. Later, it was used as construction material for a circular wall of indeterminate function. The stele suggests that in the 3rd century AD, there was a secret Christian community at Bichvinta. One would think of both legionaries and the local people as members of this community. Two graves without grave finds found at the Bichvinta cemetery may have belonged to members of this community too, as they were buried in stretched position, laying on their back, with the head facing west (Lordkipanidze 1991, 155; Mshvildadze 2003, 264-5).

In the hinterland of Bichvinta, the early spread of Christianity is indicated by the multitude of carrying crosses, cross-shaped pins, as well as local and imported ceramic wares (pottery, tiles, and bricks) decorated with Christian symbols (such as crosses, chrisms). The imported pottery mainly consists of red-varnished bowls



Fig. 10. Anthropomorphic stone sarcophagus. Bichvinta.

with impressed crosses on the bottom (cf. Lordikpanidze 1961; Berdzenishvili 1963; Asatiani 1977; see Fig. 11.1-3). Numerous parallels are known from Sebastopolis (Fig. 11.4) and other sites of the northern Black Sea littoral (Hersones, Tiritaka), the Aegean (Athens, Corinth, Kos), Asia Minor, and the Near East (Antioch, Pergamon, Jericho, etc.) (cf. Golofast 2001, 109, 110, 112-3; Hayes 1972, 323, 348-9).

Not only ceramics were at an early stage used as symbols of Christian faith. Three glass vessels for Communion purposes are known from Bichvinta. They are decorated with early Christian symbols and date to the 4th to 6th century AD. One of these is a shallow drinking vessel with an extended rim of green-blue glass. Three letters of the Greek inscription – ΠΙΕ and a depiction of a peacock – are preserved (Fig. 12.3). The inscription was restored as ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΗC – “drink and live” which clarifies the purpose of the drinking vessel – it was designated for Communion ceremony. The closest analogy for this drinking vessel is provided

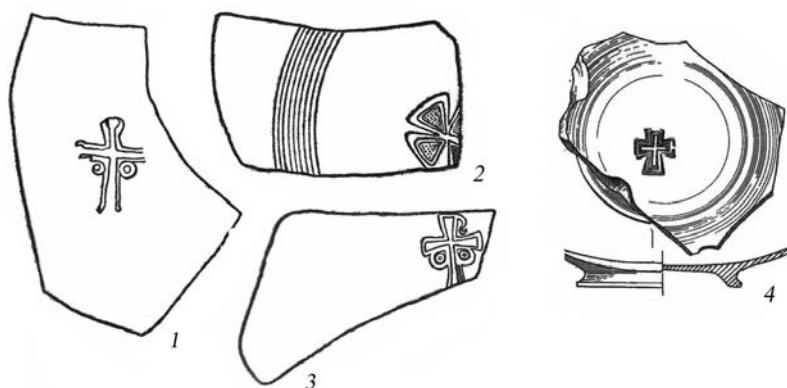


Fig. 11. Red- varnished ceramic. 1-3 Bitchvinta; 4 Sokhumi.

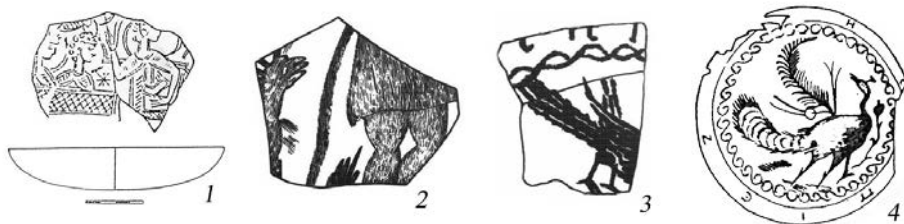


Fig. 12. Glass vessels. 1-3 Bitchvinta; 4 Mtskheta.

by a vessel found in the Mtskheta-Samtavro cemetery. This artefact was also decorated with a depiction of a peacock and the Tree of Life, as well as an inscription – ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΗC (Fig. 12.4). Both drinking vessels were imported from Syria and date to the 4th to 5th century AD.

The second vessel is a large drinking vessel with a flat bottom, made of blue-greenish glass. A shepherd and a lamb, in rubbing technique, are depicted on the sole surviving fragment (Fig. 12.2). This fragment was found in the apse of the ancient church of Bichvinta and is dated to the 4th century AD. Judging the processing technique, it is likely a product of the Cologne workshop.

The third vessel is a hemispherical body without a true base. It is made of greenish-yellowish and somewhat coarse glass (Fig. 12.1). Seven fragments are preserved, bearing an image of fellows in cloaks; supposedly Gemini – a symbol from the zodiac. According to the zodiacal symbols Gemini denotes May, just as a peacock symbolizes May and Easter in early Christian times. The drinking vessel is dated to the 5th to 6th century AD and is thought to be a product of the Aquileia workshop in Southern Italy (*cf.* Ugrelidze 1981, 103-8; Ugrelidze 1983, 2).

Final remarks

From the above, it is clear that Bichvinta has been a significant ecclesiastical centre from the beginning of the 4th century AD onwards. Over the course of the 4th to 6th century AD, nine churches were built in Bichvinta and its hinterland. Despite that, Bichvinta as a town lost its prominence from the 6th century AD onwards. It was in that century, in AD 542, with the Persians fighting in Lazika on behalf of the King of Lazika, that the Romans burnt Bichvinta for fear of losing the strategically important town to their enemy. A similar fate befell Sebastopolis, but unlike Sebastopolis, Bichvinta was never rebuilt during Justinian's restorations. Still, Bichvinta never lost its place as significant centre of Christian faith: in the 10th century AD a cathedral was built that enjoyed great popularity until the second half of the 16th century AD.

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