

## TISELI SETTLEMENT

Tiseli settlement is situated in historical Samtskhe, Akhaltsikhe district, about 1 km north-east of the village of Tiseli, at an altitude of 1200 m. On account of the proximity of the village it was called "Tiseli settlement". The site, however, used to be a separate, independent, village that cannot now be identified with the known names of settlements in the region. The centre of the settlement was presumably situated in the north-east, as is suggested by a basilica-type church hardly preserved above its foundations 300 m from the area we studied.

The settlement is bounded by hills to the south and east, while an open valley adjoins it to north and south. The small river Tiseli, a tributary of the river Mtkvari, flows 1.5 km to the west of the site.

The remains of the excavated settlement consist of closely spaced residential and domestic buildings situated on a slope inclined east to west (pl. I). Four main constructions were excavated and investigated by the archaeological expedition.

Building No. 1 was situated in the eastern part of the excavated area, and was an irregular rectangle in plan (6.8 x 8.1 m). The walls consisted of rough stones, using a dry-stone technique. Large stones were used for the framework, and the space between them is filled with smaller stones. The walls were preserved to a height of 0.7-1 m, and were between 0.7 and 0.9 m thick. The outer surfaces of the walls were rough, and it is clear that there was earth up against the external walls to a height of at least one metre, which means that the structure was partially inserted into the ground. We were unable to tell on which side the entrance lay, but it was probably in the western part of the NE wall (pl. II).

In the NE part of the structure, a gutter made with flat coarse stone was preserved. It measured 4.3m x 15.25cm x 5-10cm. A channel 10cm x 8cm was cut beneath the flat stones on the floor (pl. II). The structure used to be a cattle stall, the evidence for which, apart from the gutter, is the unusual irregular plan of the structure and the fact that no bread oven or hearth (heating is a necessary element of a residential structure) was found. Only a few artefacts, potsherds, were found inside the structure.

Building No. 2 with a paved floor abutted onto the SE corner of Building No. 1. Only part of the structure, a corner, was preserved in the trench; most remains unexcavated. The structure was aligned NE-SW. Its NW wall was laid with only one course. It was 2.9m long, 30-35cm wide, and its preserved height 55cm. Only two stones of the NE wall of the structure were found. The foundation was of dry-stone construction.

Rough stones were used for building, and the floor was paved with stone slabs. Typical slab sizes are: 0.65 x 0.40 m, 0.45 x 0.35 m, 0.50 x 0.30 m (pl. II). In the Georgian ethnographic tradition, domestic structures with paved stone floors were mainly used as cattle stalls (Chikovani, 1976, p. 66). It is quite possible that this structure functioned as a manger.

At 0.3 m north-west of the paved Building No. 2 a household pit (corn bin) built with unfinished medium size sandstone was recovered. Its upper part is narrow gradually broadening towards the bottom (depth: 1.85 m, diameter at mouth: 0.75 m, diameter at bottom: 1.6 m, thickness of the walls: 0.3-0.6 m) (pl. III, IV). Corn bins are an important element of residential buildings in Medieval East and South Georgia. They were used to keep most of the crops harvested by a family. Corn bins were preserved in South Georgia until the 1930s-40s (Chikovani 1976, 54).

Building No. 3 is situated 3 m west of Building No. 1. Like other buildings, it was only partially revealed in the trench. The plan of the building is irregular, oriented north-west to south-east (pl. III). In the trench it was revealed over an area of 6.6 x 2.9 m. The north-west wall of the building lies beyond the trench. Walls are built of unfinished sandstone with dry masonry. The north-east wall has survived to a height of 1.15 m. At other places the surviving height is 0.3-0.5 m, and the walls are 0.55-0.8 m thick. Like Building No. 1, the exterior of the walls is unevenly finished, i.e. this part was covered with earth to a certain height. The floor is of hard-packed earth. The building must have had the entrance in the north-west corner where fragments of three timbers have been recovered. One of these is 1 m long and 0.15-0.2 m in diameter. The width of the door was probably 1 m (pl. III).

At 0.9 m from the entrance of the building a circular stone hearth 0.55m in diameter was recorded. Its edges were plastered with clay (pl. III). The remains of a hearth strongly implies that the building was residential.

Building No. 4 is situated 2.1 m west of Building No. 3. Like the other buildings, it is an irregular rectangle in plan. The north-west part of the building remained outside the trench. It is oriented east to west and built with large sandstone blocks. The space between the exterior and interior facings of the wall is filled with small stones. The area of the building within the trench is 9 x 5 m. Walls 1-1.2 m thick have survived to a height of 1.2 m. The building has an earthen floor and must have had an entrance in the north-west part, which is outside the trench (pl. III).

Two bread ovens were found along the north-east wall of the building. The first had walls 0.06 m thick surviving to a height of 0.22m, and was 0.6-0.65 m in diameter (pl. III). It contained a fragment of a green glazed salt container (pl. XVII, 14). The second was larger, with walls 0.04 m thick surviving to a height of 0.4 m, and it was 0.7-0.85 m in diameter (pl. III). It contained a fragment of a thin-walled drinking vessel (pl. XIII, 6). Both ovens are of the so called "Georgian oven" type, partly beneath, and partly above floor level.

A deep pentagonal hearth consisting of vertically set pieces of sandstone was recovered between the bread ovens. Some 0.6 m south of the second oven a mortared *pithos* (1 m high, 0.6 m in diameter) decorated with a rope-like ornament was fitted into the floor and covered with a flat stone (pl. III).

In the south-east part of the building there was a T-shaped drain consisting of small sandstone slabs fitted vertically, covered with flat oblong sandstone slabs (pl. III), most of which had perished. One branch of the drain, which survived to a length of 2.1 m, and was 0.25 m wide and 0.1-0.15 m high, was oriented north to south. It lay perpendicular to the other branch which was 2.8 m long, 0.25 m wide, and 0.1-0.15 m high. The presence of drainage in a residential building must point to a high water table in this area. There is no doubt that the drainage ran out of the building, but it was unfortunately incomplete. The building produced fragments of glazed and plain pottery.

There was a platform 4 x 2 m west of Building No. 4 (pl. V), which was attached to Building No. 5 (6 x 7.5 m). Built like other constructions, its 1 m thick walls survive to a height of 0.4-0.5 m. The entrance must have been in the south-eastern part. It was a semi-dugout building (pl. V), as is suggested by the irregular masonry of the face of the walls. The building had been subject to intense burning: the remains of a charred timber survived on the earthen floor, and traces of fire were also visible on the walls. There were no finds.

Most of the finds from Tiseli settlement consisted of pottery (275 items). There were also six metal items, four of stone, and one of glass.

The recovered pottery can be divided into household items, kitchenware and tableware.

**Household pottery.** The *pithoi* have survived as fragments of rim, walls and bases. They are fired red, are of a coarse fabric, and have an ornament running along the rim and the sides. There are also plain vessels with flat bases (pl. VI, 1-7).

*Pithoi* with this shape and ornament are highly diagnostic of Late Medieval Georgian material culture. Analogous vessels have been found in Tbilisi, at Erekle II Square (Gdzelishvili, Tqeshelashvili 1961, pl. 27, fig. 162), Uplistsikhe (Mindorashvili 1990, pl. XIV, 2). Kvemo Kartli (the Loki valley) (Bokhochadze 1973, 75, in the

area of Kutaisi prison (Isakadze 2006, 21), and elsewhere.

Large pots survived as rim, wall and handle fragments. They are fired red and made from coarse-grained clay. Some are plain with flat rims and low necks (pl. VII, 1). The handles are solid and flat in section (pl. VII, 3). In addition to plain examples there are handles decorated with projected or engraved ornament (pl. VII, 2, 4). Some large pots had been painted red (Nos 49, 196).

**Kitchenware.** Only fragments of pans have survived. They are hand-made, fired red and made from coarse-grained clay. The pans come in different sizes. Some are decorated with a hatched cross (pl. VII, 5). There are pans with handles that are oval in section and decorated with a deep groove (pl. VII, 6).

Pans are to be found in abundance on Medieval sites in eastern Georgia: Tbilisi (Lomtadze 1955, 153), Javakheti Akhalkalaki (Jandieri 1969, 65), the Pshavi Aragvi valley (Rcheulishvili 1990, 73), Ertso-Tianet (Jorbenadze 1982, 94), Ujarma (Lomtadze 1989, 207), Telavi (Chikoidze 1979, 49), etc. This group of kitchenware pottery retains its shape over a long time. It is remarkable that the Medieval pans do not differ in shape from those that are known in the ethnographical record (Japaridze 1979, 108, fig. 38).

Pots are the most numerous category of ceramic but most have only survived in fragments. They are fired red and the clay is coarse-grained. They have offset rims (pl. VIII, 1), and are decorated with engraved, straight, wavy ornament or concentric lines and relief bands (pl. X, 1-6; pl. XI, 3, 5). Some have a knob modelled on the handle (pl. VIII, 2) or are decorated with engraved circular or oblong hatching (pl. IX, 2-3). The necks of some pots are decorated with relief ornament (pl. IX, 1).

Several pots were restored. One has an offset rim, a low neck and slightly convex shoulders. It has a hatched oval at the point where the handle joins the shoulder. The rim is decorated with an applied relief. An engraved wavy band runs around the shoulder, where there is also an incised cross (pl. IX, 5).

Another pot is almost twice as small as the first one. It has an offset rim, a low neck, and a spherical body. It is decorated with a hatched oval notch at the junction of handle and shoulder. The vessel is burnished with vertical lines applied under pressure (pl. IX, 6). A pot with a broken handle must have had the same shape (pl. X, 4).

Lids are fired red, the clay is coarse-grained, and all have traces of burning. They are disc-shaped with cylindrical (pl. VI, 9) or conical handles. One has a vent-hole (pl. VI, 8).

Jars differ from the pots by virtue of their narrow and tall necks. They have straight or slightly out-turned rims (pl. XII, 6-9). Fragments are plain, with a rough exterior. There might be an engraved or relief band around the rim (pl. XII, 3-5), and some have a knob applied to the rim (pl. XII, 1, 2). Once again, these vessels are fired red, and the clay is coarse-grained.

**Tableware.** Jugs have survived in the form of handle- and neck-fragments. The handles are round and flat in section (pl. XIII, 1-8), and one is of particular interest (pl. IX, 7). One neck-fragment is painted with two lines of red paint (pl. IX, 8).

Bowls are fired red, and the clay is coarse-grained. There are large, medium and small bowls. Going by the shape of the rim, there are:

Bowls with incurved rims (pl. XIV, 11; pl. XV, 4, 9)

Bowls with straight rims (pl. XIV, 3; XV, 3-7). Some have engraved rims (pl. XIV, 13) or have a raised edge (pl. XIV, 4; pl. XV, 2, 6)

Bowls with offset rims and low ribbed shoulders (pl. XIV, 15; pl. XV, 1, 5, 8)

Bowls with a flat top and projecting rim. There might be an engraved band or relief ornament running around the shoulder (pl. XIV, 1-2, 5-10, 12, 14, 17).

The bowls have three kinds of bases: 1. A wheel-like bottom (pl. XVI, 1-6), 2. A flat bottom (pl. XVI, 7-10) and 3. A recessed bottom (pl. XVI, 11-13).

A red baked fragment with incurved rim and a high wall and an external rib is distinctive. Unlike bowls of the developed Middle Ages, it has a low narrow foot and a slightly recessed bottom (pl. IX, 1).

Drinking vessels are one of the most interesting groups among the tableware. They are fired yellow, the

clay is well precipitated, and the fabric is 2-3 mm thick. The vessels have slightly out-turned rims. There are handles flat in section, sometimes incised, attached to the rim or the shoulder of the vessel. The surface is burnished. Some vessels are decorated with knobs rising from the inside or with engraved wavy ornament applied on the shoulder (pl. IX, 9-10).

This kind of drinking vessel is typical of Georgian pottery. They are widespread throughout east Georgia. Thin-walled vessels have been excavated in Tbilisi (Gdzelishvili, Tqeshelashvili 1961, pl. XXX, 219), Rustavi (Chkhatarashvili 1964, 172, 173, pl. IV, 8), Ujarma (Lomtadze 1989, pl. XXX, 203, 320, 498), Iqalto (Ramishvili, Cheishvili 1967, 85-89), Iori Sioni cemetery (Ramishvili 1970, pl. XXVIII, 1) Zhinvali cemetery (Jorbenadze 1983, 93), Uplistsikhe (Mindorashvili 1990, 87), at rock sites in Kvemo Kartli (Bakhtadze 1991, pl. XIII, 14, 17), etc. These parallels are mainly dated to the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries but production seems to have continued into later periods, in particular the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Glazed bowls** are sparsely represented, for there were only 14 items. They are fired red, and the clay is fine-grained. Going by the glazing methods, we can classify them as follows:

Bowl with plain fabric painted with slip and green glaze (pl. XVII, 1)

Bowl with plain fabric painted with slip and blue glaze (pl. XVII, 2)

Bowl with incised lines on slipped surface and glazed green (pl. XVII, 3)

Bowls with incised lines on a slipped surface and polychrome glazing (pl. XVII, 4-7). Among these is a specimen decorated with an animal and a floral ornament (see the animal's yellow painted ears on the side of the bowl) (pl. XVII, 8)

Green glazed bowls (pl. XVII, 8)

Blue glazed bowl (pl. XVII, 11)

The white slipped interior of the bowl is ornamented with purple and green lines; a colourless glaze covers the whole bowl

Bowl covered with a pink slip ornamented with purple and blue lines. A colourless glaze covers the whole bowl; a fragment of this ware was made into a disc (pl. XVII, 13)

Another disc was produced from the base of a glazed salt-container (pl. XVII, 14)

**Metal objects.** There are two hemispherical bronze plates with two holes at the edges (pl. XVII, 15), presumably jewellery fragments.

Of four iron objects, one is a 7.5 cm long spike (pl. XVII, 16), another is a fragment of a sheath (pl. XVII<sub>17</sub>), another is a fragment of a one-sided knife with a straight body (pl. XVII, 18), and the fourth, an iron fragment with two perforations, must be an ox shoe (pl. XVII, 19).

**Stone objects.** There are 4 stone objects: 1. An obsidian flake (pl. XVII, 20); 2. A flint insertion for a sickle with a retouched working edge, 4cm long (pl. XVII, 21). Both objects were stray finds in a Late Medieval cultural layer; 3. A sling stone 6 cm in diameter (pl. XVII, 22), of a kind that often occurs on sites in both western and eastern Georgia (Tbilisi, Uplistsikhe, Gonio, etc.); 4. A perforated stone disc, 4 cm in diameter (pl. XVII, 23) that must have had ritual function, and of a kind common on sites of various periods from the Late Bronze Age to the Medieval period.

**Glass object.** A bracelet was the only glass object excavated at the site. Made of black glass, it is round in section (pl. XVII, 24).

Few Medieval sites in Georgia are without glass bracelets of a variety of shapes and colours (Dolaberidze 1969, 98; Ugrelidze 1963, 65). In view of the typology worked out for Georgian glass bracelets, (Dolaberidze 1969, pl. I, II), this bracelet must be considered to be one of the earliest objects among the artefacts excavated at the Tiseli settlement and should be dated to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The shapes and decoration of the *pithoi*, the shapes of the pots, bowls and drinking vessels, the shapes and decoration of the glazed pottery suggest on the one hand diagnostic elements of the developed Middle Ages (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), but on the other the artefacts have a late Medieval look about them. This is especially the case with the shapes of *pithoi*, pots and bowls.

The lower date of the site cannot be later than the 16<sup>th</sup> century, since it has not produced objects reflecting Ottoman rule. Turkish products such as pipes, faience, etc., common on almost all the sites of lands conquered by the Ottomans including western and southern Georgia, are absent from the Tiseli settlement. But if we take the traces of intense fire into consideration, we may perhaps conclude that the village succumbed to Ottoman raids. In our view, the Tiseli settlement should be dated to the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The excavated buildings that we found are part of a larger settlement. Since excavations could not be conducted over a larger area, it is difficult to be sure whether the buildings were a residential complex of one family with industrial facilities or whether they belonged to two (or even more) families.

The settlement has a single stratum. Residential and industrial buildings are situated side by side, very close to each other. Both residential and industrial rooms are built using the same technique. Uncut stones are used in building, and a mixture of clay and earth was the bonding material. The buildings are semi-dug-outs, with walls covered with earth up to a certain height. The floors of both the residential and industrial structures were of hard-packed earth. Some buildings also had floors paved with stone which, judging by ethnographical parallels (Chikovani 1976, 66), may have been cattle-sheds. Residential buildings are always accompanied by a hearth and an oven. A *pithos* had also been arranged inside the residential building, which is not common in Medieval Georgian residential complexes, for it was more usual for a special building, a *marani* (wine-cellar), to be assigned for *pithoi*. The excavations did not reveal any roof tiles (apart from one fragment, pl. VI, 10), which suggests that the buildings had earthen roofs.

The excavated material (buildings, small finds) create a certain impression regarding the social status of the community and their industrial activities. The settlement was clearly inhabited by a productive peasant community.

The rich content of the humus and favourable climatic conditions promoted the development of intensive farming in this region from ancient times. From the Classical into the Medieval period Samtskhe enjoyed the production of a range of cereals including Persian wheat (*Triticum carthlicum*), barley, rye, emmer wheat, hard wheat, and winter wheat (Chikovani 1979, 78). Samtskhe was always famous for its cereal production, and this was borne witness to by the material revealed during the excavations.

The ovens and pans excavated at the settlement suggest that one of the most important branches of agriculture was growing cereals, and a high level of cereal cultivation is indicated by the discovery of a large pit for storing grain (pl. III-IV).

In the areas where cereal production was an important part of agricultural activity over millennia, there were specialized storage facilities of different shapes and capacity. One of the oldest of these stores was the grain bin (Chikovani 2004, 155). Apart from storing crops these bins might be used to hide in during invasions. They were mainly built outdoors and only occasionally indoors. Only family members knew where it was located (Chikovani 1976, 70). In terms of construction there is no difference between the excavated grain bins and those in use until the 1930s-40s. A high level of cereal cultivation in this region is indicated in written sources of the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, in particular postscripts to the Tiseli monastery manuscripts. Typical examples are: "I, Shveladze Imarindo, formerly Ioseb, donated a field to the Virgin of Tiseli and your monastery"; "I, Khutsiadze Anton donated a field to the monastery of Tiseli Virgin"; "To the monastery of the Tiseli Virgin I, Kurtsik, donated a field"; "To the monastery of the Tiseli Virgin I, Tilisdze Giorgi, donated my estate at Lobani, a field below Vardanauli"; "I, Sepedavlashvili Nona, donated a field to the Tiseli Virgin and your monastery"; "I, Kurtsikisdze Makharebeli donated a field to the Tiseli Virgin and your monastery" (Kldiashvili 1986, 16, 25, 28, 29, 31-34).

A complete *pithos*, as well as fragments, were discovered at the Tiseli settlement, which suggests that one of the branches of farming was viticulture and wine-making. Viticulture is one of the oldest branches of agriculture in Meskheta. Procopius of Caesarea states that "the Meskhethians are good farmers and there are vineyards there too" (Qaukhchishvili 1965, 127; Chikovani 1979, 88). The progress of viticulture in this region is indicated by the postscripts to the same manuscripts of the Tiseli monastery of the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, where



the wine cellars of the village of Tqemlana are mentioned. Written sources record gifts of vineyards and wine made to the monastery: "I, Ghamlagashvili David donated the Tqemluani fields behind the wine cellar to the Tiseli Virgin and and your monastery"; "I...donated the Tqemluana vineyard to the Tiseli Virgin and your monastery"; "I, Basilashvili Nona, donated forty silver tetras for agape to the Tiseli Virgin and your monastery"; "I, Siaosha, bought...a place, a former vineyard and gave half of it to Laklakidze for development; and .... donated to the Tiseli monastery" (Kldiashvili 1986, 17-19, 30, 33).

Written sources and archaeological material thus show clearly that the principal branches of farming of the Tiseli settlement community were the production of cereals, viticulture and wine-making.

Another important branch of agriculture was livestock breeding. Two of the excavated structures, in particular, Buildings No. 1 and No. 2 must have been a cow sheds.

Traditionally, every village in Meskheta had their own summer pastures. Mount Tiseli performed this role for this region and it was used by the people of Tiseli, Atsquri, Tqemlani, and Saquneti (Chikovani 1979, 94). It was presumably also intensively used by the inhabitants of the settlement we excavated.

The settlement, it seems, was very conveniently situated, being not only surrounded by rich and fertile fields and pastures, but also because it was linked to neighbouring places by passes and roads. Beyond the north-east slope, the settlement is connected to the village of Tadzrisi, from where the road led to Borjomi. The river Tiseli connected the settlement to the Tiseli monastery situated in the depth of the narrow gorge. The monastery was by then a powerful and important centre. The same gorge offered the shortest route to the oldest political and religious regional centre, namely Atsquri.

Thanks to the excavations we were able to form certain impressions about the planning of the settlements, and the nature of residential and industrial buildings in the foothills of South Georgia in the Late Medieval period. The investigation of the settlement produced material that enabled us to identify industrial activities, and to assess social life and the demographic situation of the population that lived in southern Georgia in those times.

The Ottomans conquered the territory of Samtskhe-Saatabago in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and this also involved the environs of the Tiseli settlement. As noted, the village may well have succumbed to the Ottoman invasions and their attempt to occupy the region.

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#### Illustrations:

Pl. I – Settlement, plan

Pl. II – Buildings Nos 1, 2, plan

Pl. III – Buildings Nos 2, 3, 4, plan

Pl. IV – Household pit: grain bin, section

Pl. V – Platform between Buildings Nos 4 and 5 and Building No, 5, plan and section

Pl. VI – 1-7. Household pottery excavated at the settlement, 8,9. Lids; 10. Fragment of a flat tile

Pl. VII – 1-4. Fragments of largepots; 5,6. Pans

Pl. VIII – Fragments of rims and handles of pots

Pl. IX – 1. Bowl, 2-6. Pots. 7. Fragment of the jug with a tubular handle; 8. Fragment of a jug painted with red lines; 9,10. Miniature drinking vessels with thin walls

Pl. X – Fragments of rims and walls of pots

Pl. XI – Fragments of pots

Pl. XII – Fragments of jar rims

Pl. XIII – Fragments of jug handles

Pl. XIV –Fragments of rims and walls of bowls

Pl. XV – Fragments of rims and walls of bowls

Pl. XVI – Fragments of bases of bowls

Pl. XVII – 1-14. Fragments of glazed pottery; 15-19. Metal beads; 20. Obsidian flake; 21. Flint sickle lamella; 22. Stone nucleus; 23. Perforated stone disc; 24. Fragment of a glass bracelet; 25. Perforated clay disc









































