

# The Architecture of Uphlistsikhe, Georgia

by

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*Uphlistsikhe is one of the most important architectural and archaeological sites in Georgia, which is situated on the isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In the north it is bounded by the main Caucasian Range, forming the frontier with Russia, Azerbaijan to the east and in the south by Armenia and Turkey. Geographically Georgia is the meeting place of the European and Asian continents and is located at the crossroads of western and eastern cultures (Fig. 1). In classical sources eastern Georgia is called Iberia or Caucasian Iberia, while western Georgia was known to Greeks and Romans as Colchis.*

*Since 1956 an archaeological team from the Georgian State Art Museum has been excavating the site of Uphlistsikhe, not only the rock-hewn town but also its surrounding area. During archaeological excavations great numbers of artefacts have been discovered from different periods of occupation. All finds are kept at the Georgian State Art Museum in Tbilisi or at the local site museum and expedition base in Uphlistsikhe.*

Uphlistsikhe is a rock-hewn town with levels from the early Iron Age, tenth-ninth centuries BC, up to the late medieval period. Consequently it must be considered as a multilayer archaeological-architectural site. But the town acquired its very specific profile mainly in the Late Hellenistic period (end of the first and second centuries AD) when large-scale building works took place. At this time it acquired everything usually regarded as the necessary attributes of cities of the Hellenistic period: a moat, defensive walls and towers, a road network, a tunnel leading to the river, water supply and drainage and many structures of varying character both inside and outside the city walls. Its location and prosperity gave it great political significance and because of this Uphlistsikhe is frequently mentioned in Georgian historical sources. It is noticed amongst the earliest established Georgian towns and castles.<sup>1</sup> Its foundation, according to historical sources, is connected with the mythical Uphlos, son of Mtskhethos.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological evidence confirms that this medieval source can be trusted, hence Uphlistsikhe really is one of the earliest Georgian cities. It was eminent in antiquity but, with the Christianisation of Georgia, it lost its importance. However, in the eighth and ninth centuries when Tbilisi, the

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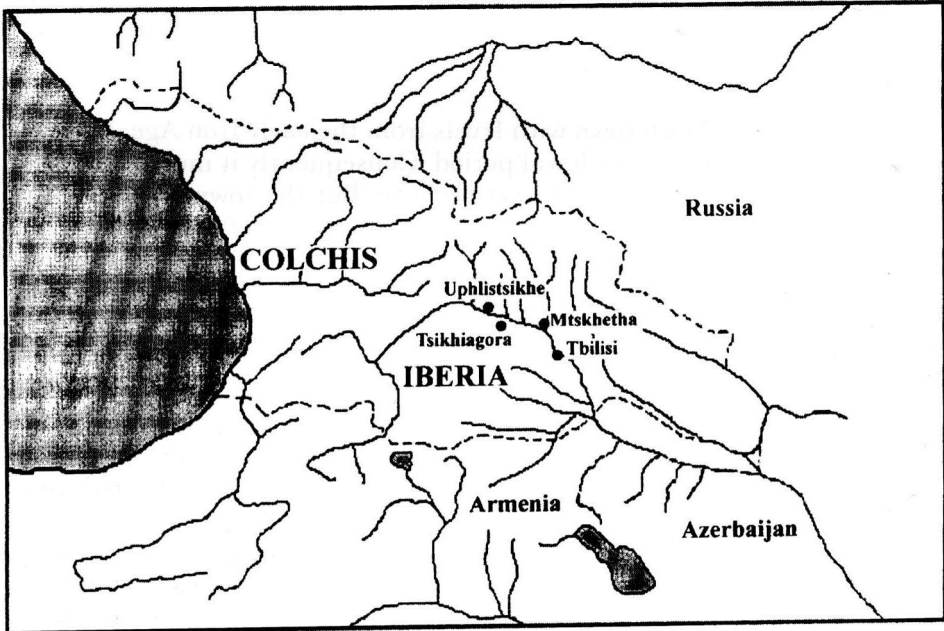
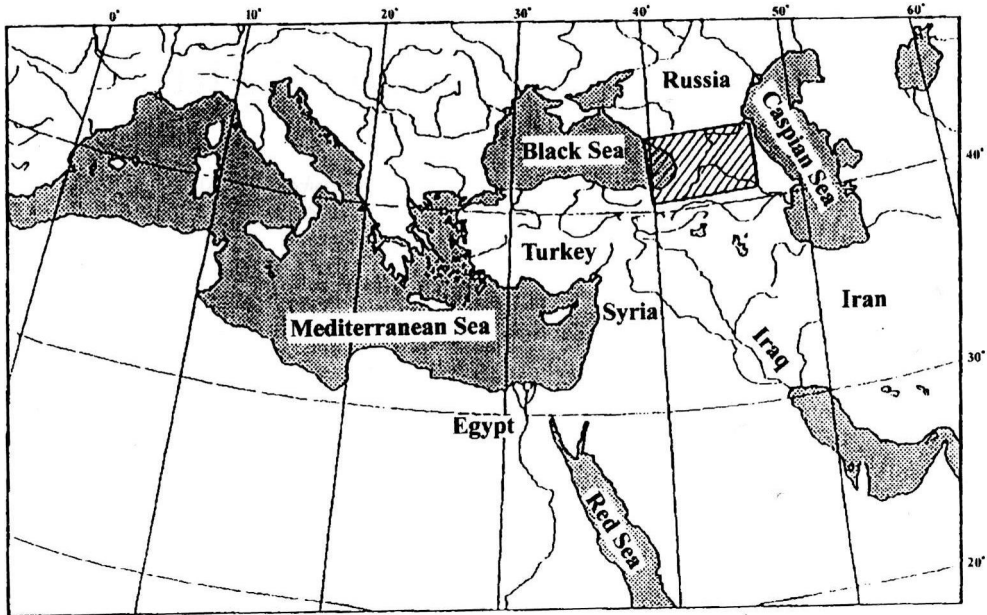


Fig. 1  
a. Map of the Mediterranean and the Near East  
b. Map of Georgia

capital of Georgia, was under Arab control, Uphlistsikhe once more became virtually the centre of the country and a stronghold of resistance against the foreign conquerors. Uphlistsikhe was finally abandoned as a city during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a result of Mongolian raids. After this the local population came to the city only occasionally, usually in times of danger.

Uphlistsikhe is situated seventy kilometres west of Tbilisi, on the left bank of the River Mtkvari (Fig. 2). The soft light-grey-coloured sandstone from which the town is cut is part of the Kvernaki range. The rock massif descends from the north (top of the Kvernaki range) to the south (bank of the River Mtkvari). At the same time the rock slopes from west to east, so the town's relief has a dual inclination: from north to south and, to a lesser extent, from west to east. From the west and south the town is bounded by high cliffs which form a natural defence from those sides. Hence there was no requirement for defensive structures on these boundaries. From the east and north the town territory is determined by fortified walls, while in the central part of the city a narrow and deep ravine begins, first proceeding to the south, then turning to the east and eventually disappearing beneath the curtain wall and a tower. These natural topographical features help to define the town plan. The structures mainly face south, though a few are orientated to the east and in one case the west.

The town (Fig. 3) can be tentatively divided into three parts: south (lower), middle (central) and north (upper). The middle part is the biggest and the most



Fig. 2  
Uphlistsikhe, general view

Fig. 3  
Uphlistsikhe, contour map

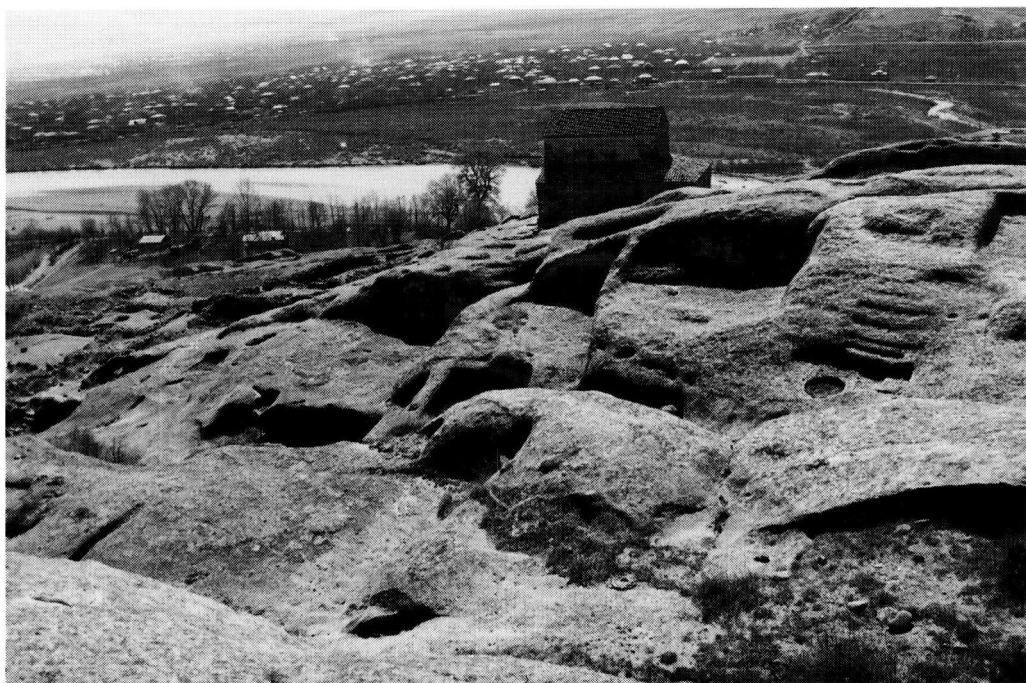


Fig. 4  
Uphlistsikhe, northern part of the city

important since it contains all the main structures of the city. In the south and north, smaller structures have been discovered, built mainly from traditional building materials (stone, timber, mud brick) on the levelled rock-cut terraces (Fig. 4). The southern part of the town can be reached by a narrow rock cut path – *Mtsire Kldekari* (Fig. 5) – or by a tunnel (Fig. 6). Both begin at the river level and finish at the first (largest) terrace of the lower part (15m above the river). From this terrace the central street of the city begins, running from the west upper edge of the ravine. Narrow alleys and sometimes stairs lead from the central street to the different structures and the main street ends in front of the last big cave structure of the central part of the city. In the north part, practically speaking, there are no rock-hewn structures, just levelled rock-cut terraces on which the evidence suggests structures made from ordinary building materials once stood.

The city's principal gate was constructed in the south-east corner of the middle part of the city, from which a rock-hewn road (for wheeled transport) went down to the bottom part of the rock massif. The surface of the road was badly damaged in the medieval period, but in the lower part, where it turns to the east and becomes level, it remains perfectly preserved. In this part the road has a width of 3m and runs approximately 80m to the east.

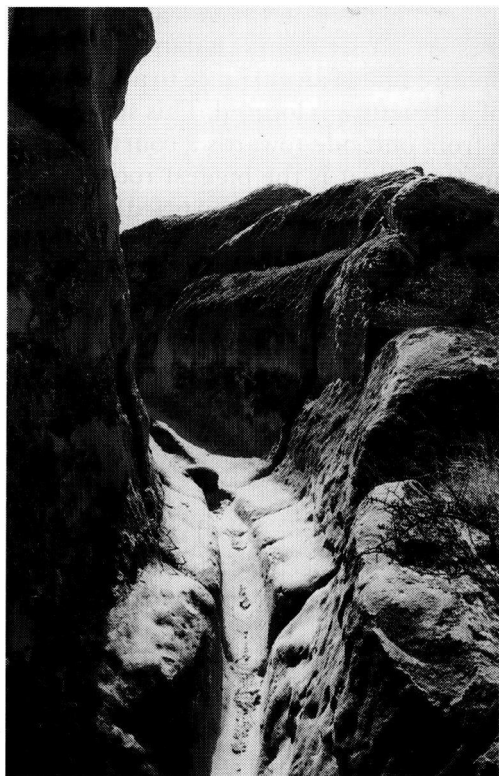


Fig. 5

Uphlistsikhe, *Mtsire Kldekari*



Fig. 6

Uphlistsikhe, the tunnel

The town was supplied with water from the spring which is situated on Kvernaki plateau 4km to the north. Its level is higher than the town so water was delivered in ceramic pipes by force of gravity. The whole of the town was covered by a network of channels, mostly rock-hewn in the centre of the streets (Fig. 5) containing ceramic pipes and covered by stone slabs to achieve a flat street surface. Similar channels were used as sewers and drainage systems. In many places in the town there are also rock-hewn cisterns constructed for water storage.

A very important feature of Uphlistsikhe town planning is that it is designed as an ordinary, mountain-slope extended town. Structures both rock-hewn and of ordinary building materials, are fashioned or constructed in specially levelled terraces. Normally rock-hewn structures are characterised by the existence of tiers of caves in vertical rock massifs, where it is usual to see only openings, and it is impossible to imagine the full dimensions of structures within. Precise analogues for Uphlistsikhe among the rock-hewn sites are quite rare. Only Nabatean Petra in Jordan could confidently be mentioned here, and perhaps also some tombs in Asia Minor (for example in Paphlagonia,<sup>3</sup> Turkey).

The city has a system of fortified structures. Some parts of the Hellenistic period fortifications have survived, such as the remains of the town entrances (*Mtsire Kldekari* and the principal gate tower), the tunnel, the moat and fragments of curtain walls. Most of the city's rock-hewn structures are structurally similar, comprising rock-hewn courtyards and spaces. On the opposite side of an entrance to a courtyard (if the depth allows it) the principal space of a structure is located. This space does not have a façade wall, being entirely open from one side towards a courtyard. Its importance is emphasised by its dimensions (usually it is the biggest room of the structure, and its floor level a little higher than the level of the courtyard) and also by the fact that, in many cases, it is crowned by a vault. At the back, and sometimes on the sides, of the principal room, smaller spaces are made, always with flat ceilings. Ceilings of back spaces are mostly decorated by rock-hewn imitations of timber roofing (Fig. 7, a & b) or coffers. Rock-hewn benches follow the perimeter of the courtyard. All the surfaces of the structures are worked in the same manner: smoothed so that it is practically impossible to distinguish tool marks (later alterations are easily recognizable by the existence of tool marks).

This is the primary scheme of the structures, but there is a diversity of plan. For example, *Tsiteli otakhi* and *Sada otakhi* share a courtyard (the courtyard was divided into two parts in the medieval period by a rubble wall) (Fig. 8); *Kesonur-kamarovani kompleksi* has a circular segmental courtyard because of the relief (Fig. 9); and in *Makvliani* the court level is about 2.2m below that of the cave (Figs. 10 & 11).

Because archaeological evidence from these structures is exclusively from the medieval period, the only way to date and understand them is to analyse the structures themselves of which there are certain important features. The first, is the interrelation of an entry to a courtyard and the principal (open) space. This interrelation emphasizes the axial symmetry of the structures and leads to clearly marked frontality. The structures are designed on the supposition of a visitor's



Fig. 7

- a. (above) Uphlistsikhe, *Kokhta Sakhli*, ceiling decoration
- b. (below) Uphlistsikhe, *Shetskvilebulkochebiani Sakhli*, ceiling decoration





Fig. 8

Uphlistsikhe, *Tsiteli Otakhi* and *Sada Otakhi*

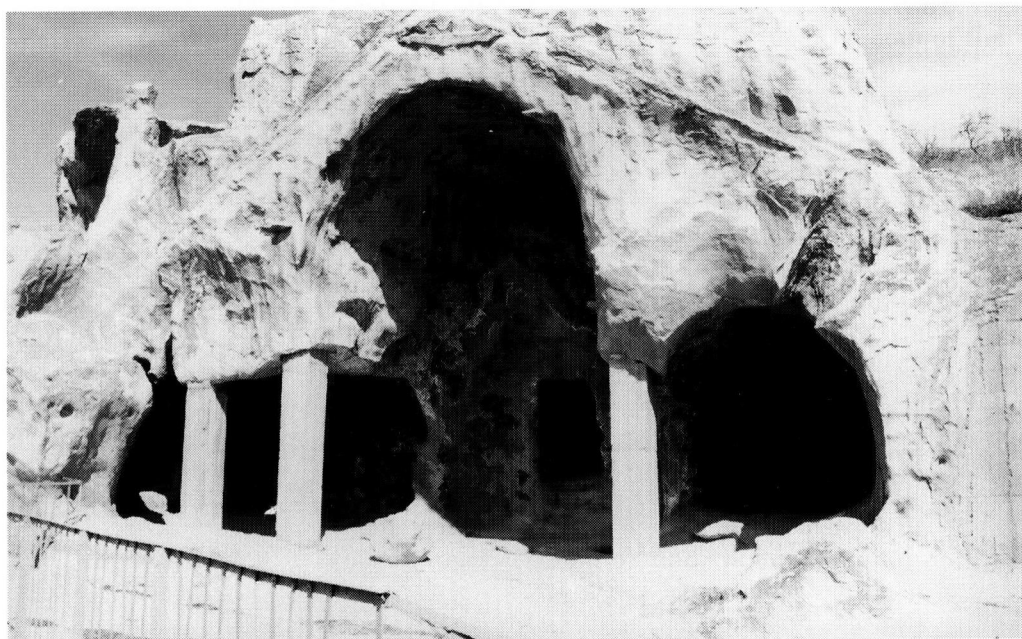


Fig. 9

Uphlistsikhe, *Kesonur-kamarovani kompleksi*



Fig. 10 (left)  
Uphlistsikhe, *Makviani*, plan

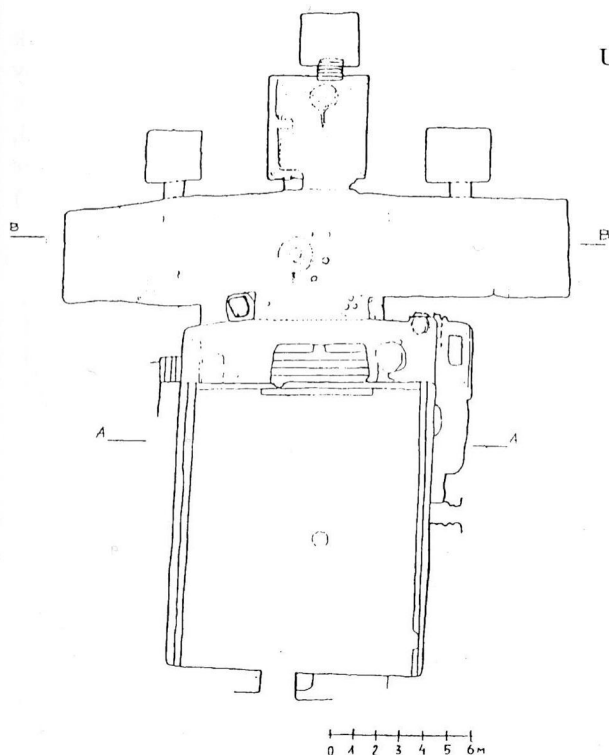


Fig. 11 (below)  
Uphlistsikhe, *Makviani*



fixed point of view, and do not suggest a dynamic perception (as in Greek architecture, for example at the Acropolis of Athens). They are characterised by the existence of symmetrical axes which are the cause of the frontality and static effect. The second feature is that a significant focus of the structures is the principal, open and vaulted, space. The height and dimensions of this space (higher and bigger than the other spaces, and occupying about 25-55% of the entire space of a structure) stresses its dominant role. Also because the arch form is not static but active, and normally dominates the view, it highlights the contour line of a curved vault. Thus it attracts the visitor's attention, concentrating it on the principal space and this effect is increased by the contrasting lightness of the bed rock and the shadowed principal space, which is usually overshadowed by a vault.

The rock-hewn structures of this type are in certain terms atectonic. It is difficult to imagine how they would be roofed if they were to be built in an ordinary way. This problem is clearly seen in an axonometric reconstruction published by G. Lezhava (Fig. 12).<sup>4</sup> Because of the complex spatial relationships between the principal and other spaces (the principal space is higher and vaulted, while other spaces are lower and have flat ceilings), it would be extremely difficult to cover them by means of a conventionally jointed structure. This atectonic feature, therefore, suggests the existence of a rule according to which the principal space of a structure should be higher and crowned by a vault.

All these points illustrate the great importance of the principal space, through which the vertical axis passes. It is the centre of the structure's composition. We would argue that from the description of the structures, it can be concluded that they are typologically identical to the structures which in the history of architecture are known as *iwan* or *livan* structures.<sup>5</sup> These are characterized by the existence of *iwans*, the main spaces within them. *Iwans* are always open on one

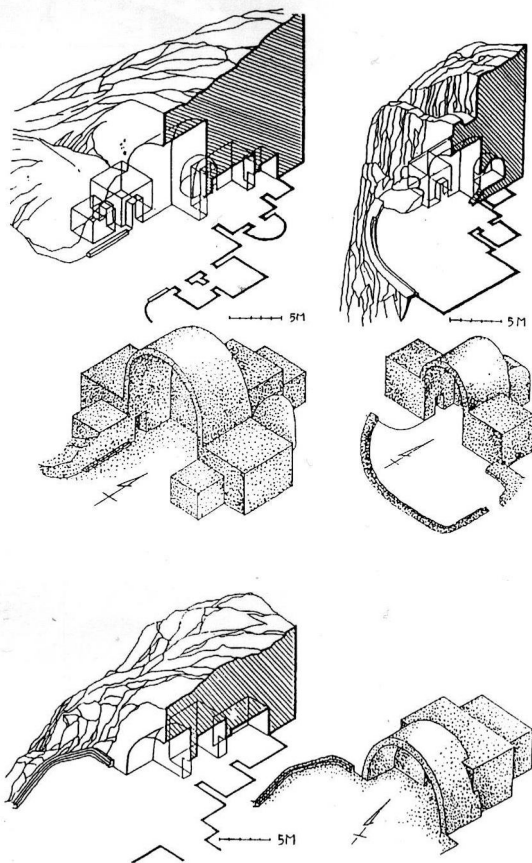


Fig. 12  
Reconstructions of Uphlistsikhe *iwan*-type structures. Reproduced from Lezhava, G., *Antikuri khanis saqarthvelos arqiteqturuli dzeglebi*, (Tbilisi, 1979)

side, without a façade wall. They are higher in comparison with the other spaces of the structures, and are usually vaulted. For a correct understanding of the sense of an *iwān*, we would like, following B. C. Reuther and F. Oelmann, to emphasize that an *iwān* is not a portico, rather a preface to the main space of a structure, as are open spaces in *bit-hilani*<sup>6</sup> or *prostas* of Greek houses;<sup>7</sup> it is itself the central space of a structure, its compositional and semantic dominant.

*Iwān* structures are regarded by scholars as a Parthian innovation.<sup>8</sup> It is thought that *iwāns* first appeared in the late second or beginning of the first centuries BC in the northern parts of the Parthian empire. There the homeland of the Pahn tribe, which created a core of the Parthian nobility, is located. Structures with *iwāns* finally took shape and spread widely in the second half of the first century AD in the Parthian empire.<sup>9</sup> It became a popular architectural theme and later this kind of structure was permanently used in the Sassanid empire<sup>10</sup> and in Muslim architecture in general.<sup>11</sup> For example *iwāns* can be found today in dwellings in Syria, Iraq and Iran.<sup>12</sup> Thus the middle of the first century AD is a *terminus ante quem non* for Uphlistsikhe *iwān* structures. Taking into consideration that the Iberian kingdom was on the periphery of the cultural centres of the Parthian empire, and that architectural themes and types extend more slowly than influence in ceramic or metalwork,<sup>13</sup> we think that the creation of Uphlistsikhe *iwān* structures can be dated towards the end of the first century AD. Roman influence on the Iberian kingdom became stronger from the thirtieth to the fiftieth years of the second century. This is reflected in historical<sup>14</sup> and archaeological<sup>15</sup> sources, and in architecture.<sup>16</sup> Therefore we would argue that the latest limit for the creation of the Uphlistsikhe *iwān* structures is the second half of the second century AD. In other words, it was a period when Roman influence on the Iberian kingdom was becoming greater and, at the same time, the Parthian empire was tearing itself apart through civil strife and moving towards its end.<sup>17</sup>

Associated with the Roman impact is the creation of octagonal coffers and a pediment in one of the Uphlistsikhe *iwān* structures, the *Kesonur-kamarovani kompleksī* (Fig. 9). This type of coffer is absolutely atypical for Uphlistsikhe structures, although there is a wide range of rock-hewn ceiling decorations. Secondly, none of the Uphlistsikhe *iwān* vault soffits is coffered. Thirdly, we think that the rock-hewn pediment was added to this structure at the same time, because the flat roof, but not the gable, is the characteristic of *iwān* structures. This is confirmed by archaeological material<sup>18</sup> and also by later and contemporary examples of *iwān* structures. So we suppose that shortly after finishing the structure, the coffers and the pediment were added to it according to new fashions and demands, using the same rock-cut technique.

Stratigraphical evidence supports the view of the second half of the first century to the first half of the second century as the date of the creation of the Uphlistsikhe *iwān* structures. Stratigraphical sections show that pre-Christian layers consist of two levels: lower, the fourth to the second centuries BC, and upper, the first to the third centuries AD. The lower level was created as a result of the destruction of the mud bricks, while the upper level includes large amounts of sand, which is a product

of bed rock erosion.<sup>19</sup> This provides a basis for suggesting that in the Hellenistic period structures were built basically from mud brick, the destruction of which created lower levels with characteristic soil structures. Later, the significant building activity of the first to second centuries AD dramatically changed the character of deposited soil. The quantity of sand which is 'a product of rock bed deterioration' was increased.<sup>20</sup>

For functional interpretation of Uphlistsikhe *iwan* structures I refer only to Parthian period *iwan* structures, for chronological reasons. The architectural theme of *iwan* in Parthia was used both in secular and sacred architecture. Comparing Parthian secular and sacred structures it is clear that they have different spatial solutions. All Parthian residential structures where the *iwan* architectural theme was used (ordinary dwellings and palaces as well) had a similar character. The structures were organised around courtyards. An *iwan* or *iwans*, if there were two or four, opened into the courtyard. If there was only one *iwan* it faced north (thus, it was built in the south façade of the courtyard), and if there were more the main *iwan* always faced north. The importance of the main *iwan* was highlighted by its size and height.<sup>21</sup> None of the *iwans* opened directly onto the street façade. Moreover, the courtyard was not connected directly with a street either. There was always a special space in a corner of the courtyard which connected a street with the structure. In all residential structures having *iwans* there are areas with ovens or hearths or other devices for domestic activity.<sup>22</sup>

Temples with *iwans* were separate buildings in sacred precincts (Hatra<sup>23</sup>); or on sacred platforms (Masjid-i Solaiman and Bard-e Nishandeh<sup>24</sup>); or were joined to sacred precincts (*temenos*) from one side only, opposite the entry (Mansur-depe<sup>25</sup> and Dilberjin<sup>26</sup>). *Iwans* of temples rarely opened towards the north, unlike residential *iwans*, but were generally oriented south and east.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, temples were not as much isolated from the outside world as were residential structures. Even if there were precincts, the dimensions of them are so huge that it is difficult to say that the structure is isolated. Comparing Uphlistsikhe *iwan* structures with Parthian structures it seems that they have more in common with temples than with residential structures. First, because the Uphlistsikhe *iwan* structures are not organised around courtyards, but spaces (*iwan* and other spaces of structures) join the courtyard from one side, opposite to the entrance (if the depth allows). Secondly, rock-hewn fences are not high, and all courtyards are directly connected with streets, without any special spaces, so that space is not isolated from the outside world. Thirdly, Uphlistsikhe *iwans* are generally oriented to the south, or in other words orientation is the same as in Parthian temples, though this might be coincidental because bed-rock declination in Uphlistsikhe is from north to south. Fourthly, in Uphlistsikhe *iwan* structures there have been no discoveries of domestic implements from the Hellenistic period. Fifthly, in many Uphlistsikhe structures there are small spaces which are inconvenient for use as dwellings, but might be used as treasuries or stores. All of which may indicate that the character of Uphlistsikhe *iwan* structures is closer to religious structures than to secular structures. But at the present stage of our knowledge it is impossible to argue this categorically.

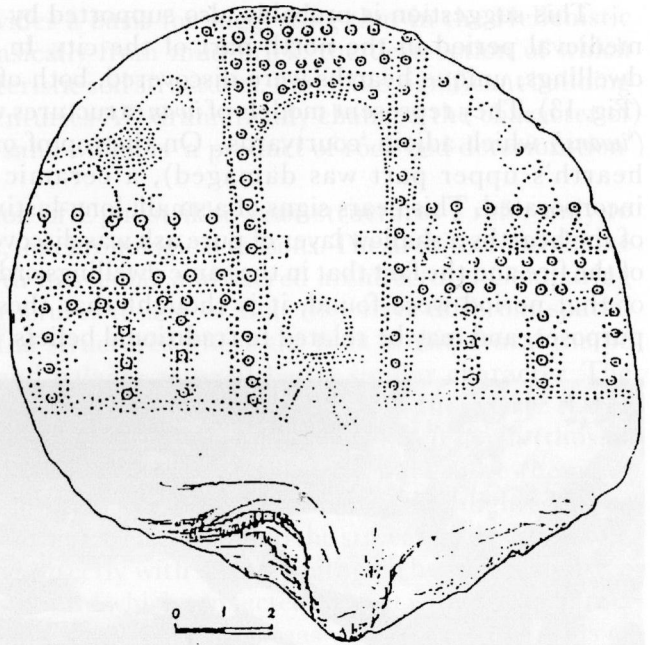
This suggestion is probably also supported by an important discovery of the medieval period in the north part of the city. In two eleventh-twelfth century dwellings, unique hearths were discovered, both of which are oriented east-west (Fig. 13). They represent models of *iwan* structures with small vaulted open spaces (*'iwans'*) which adjoin 'courtyards'. On the top of one of the hearths (the second hearth's upper part was damaged), a ceramic vessel with tiny horns was incorporated. This bears signs of a small, long-lasting fire. In 'courtyards' in front of the hearths a shallow layer of pure ash was discovered. Because of the small size of the fire and the fact that in the same dwellings ordinary fireplaces, characteristic of that period were found, it is thought that these hearths were used for cult purposes, and may be related to traditional beliefs.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 13  
Uphlistsikhe, medieval hearth

Parallels in other rock-hewn structures for the Uphlistsikhe structures have been found only in Paphlagonia, Asia Minor. These structures are analogues of Uphlistsikhe simple *iwan* structures, which consist of an *iwan* beyond which is a smaller space (room). R. Leonhard, who published these structures, thought that they might be tombs of the Roman period.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately we could not find any recent studies of these structures, while Leonhard's statements give rise to many doubts. As for parallels from Georgia, we think that remains of *Orsenakiani*,

Fig. 14  
A sea shell with an engraved image  
of *iwan*-type structure found in  
Mtskheta



*Ertsenakiani*, *Zghurbliani* and a bath building in Armaziskhevi represent a four-*iwan* type palace of the first and the first half of the second centuries AD.<sup>30</sup> Here the finding of a sea shell with an engraving of *iwan* structures should be mentioned (Fig. 14). The shell was found in the grave in Mtskheta which can be dated to the third and beginning of fourth centuries AD.<sup>31</sup>

To summarise, we can state that *iwan* structures in Uphlistsikhe were created in the second half of the first and the beginning of the second centuries AD and that probably they have a religious character.

One of the main rock-hewn structures – *Orsvetiani Darbazi* (Figs. 15 & 16) – is completely cut out of the rock as are the majority of other Uphlistsikhe complexes. It is oriented exactly to the east (here the orientation of a temple is specified with reference to the position of the main entry to the *cella*). It consists of an almost square *cella* (9.1 x 9.5m), flanked by two narrow spaces with a courtyard in front of the *cella* which is at the east. The courtyard has a rock-hewn socle with the remains of four pairs of pilasters, also rock-hewn. The entrance is in the north side wall of the courtyard, in the centre of which there is a rock cut round pit (diameter 1.42m, depth 11cm). The shallow depth of the pit and its position suggests that it was made for religious purposes. The east façade of the *cella* has been destroyed, but surviving parts make it possible to imagine the façade. The entrance was in the centre, on both sides of which windows were cut in the medieval period. There were two octagonal rock-hewn pillars in the *cella* (hence the name of the complex *Orsvetiani Darbazi*: two-pillar hall). Nowadays only small fragments of them survive on the floor and traces of the abaci of capitals on the ceiling.

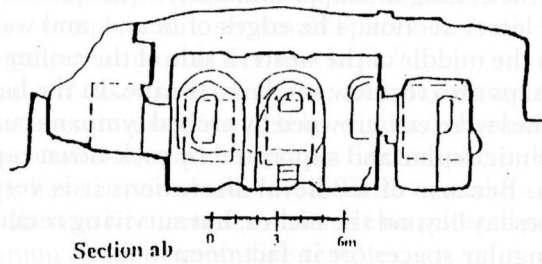
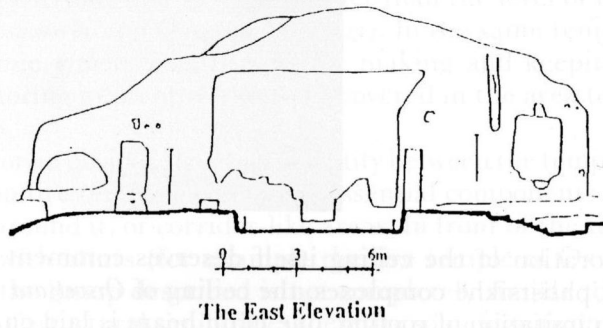
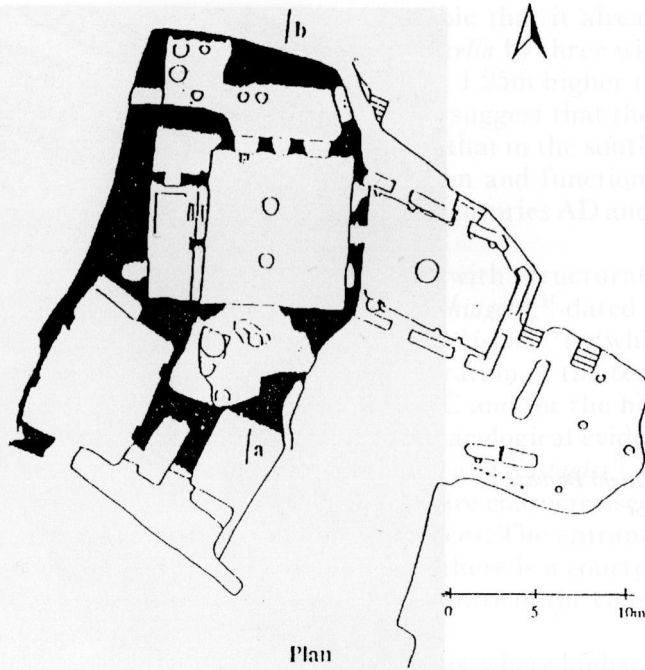
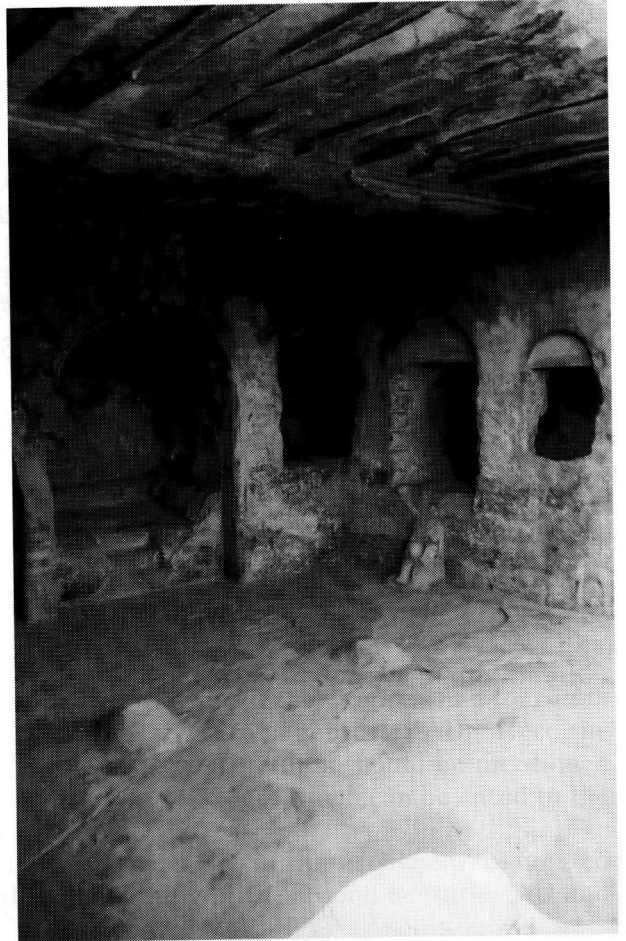


Fig. 15  
Uphlistsikhe, Orsvetiani Darbazi, plan, east elevation and section

Fig. 16  
Uphlistsikhe, *Orsvetiani Darbazi*,  
interior



The decoration of the ceiling itself deserves comment (Fig. 16). As in the majority of Uphlistsikhe complexes, the ceiling of *Orsvetiani Darbazi* is decorated by rock-hewn imitation of roofing: one main beam is laid on the south and north walls and divides the ceiling into approximately equal parts. Across the main beam are cut beams of lesser section. The edges of beams and wall-plates have fascias. Approximately in the middle of the western side of the ceiling a hole is cut, probably for light and perhaps also to allow smoke to escape. In the back wall on the west of the *cella* three niches were cut, crowned by arched tympana cut into the wall surface. The arches are semicircular and supported by rock-hewn capitals which comprise fascias and abaci. Because of medieval alterations it is very difficult to imagine what kind of spaces lay beyond the niches, but surviving remains suggest that there were small rectangular spaces (or in fact deep niches).

The two corridor-like spaces on the sides were altered in the medieval period. In the north area a *marani* (a special structure where, in Georgia, wine was produced



and stored) was then made, though it is possible that it already existed in the Antique period. This area was connected to the *cella* by three windows. The south area opened into the *cella* via two windows and is 1.25m higher than the *cella* floor level. The characteristic tool-marks on the walls suggest that the floor level of the north space in the Antique period was similar to that in the south space. Specialist opinion is divided about the date of the creation and function of the *Orsvetiani Darbazi*.<sup>32</sup> We favour a date in the first or second centuries AD and argue that it was a temple.<sup>33</sup>

There are four more temples in Georgia with structural units similar to *Orsvetiani Darbazi*. These are the temples of *Tsikhiagora*,<sup>34</sup> dated to the end of the fourth – beginning of the third centuries BC; *Gharthiskari*,<sup>35</sup> for which archaeological evidence suggests that the date for the lower stratum of the temple is the end of the third – beginning of the second centuries BC and for the high stratum is the second century BC; *Samadlosmitsebi*,<sup>36</sup> where archaeological evidence suggests that the date of the temple is the second century BC; and *Nastagisi*,<sup>37</sup> dated to the third and second centuries BC. Temples of this group are characterised by the existence of a square *cella*, flanked by two corridor-like spaces. The entrance to the *cella* is in the centre of the façade. In front of the temple there is a courtyard enclosed by a high fence with entries in the side walls. In the centre of the court is an altar place or an altar (*Tsikhiagora*, *Orsvetiani Darbazi*).

In the *Tsikhiagora* and *Orsvetiani Darbazi* temples, where high walls have survived, the *cella* is connected to the corridor-like spaces by windows. In three cases the floor level of the side corridor-like spaces is higher than the level of the *cella* floor (*Gharthiskari*, *Samadlosmitsebi* and *Orsvetiani Darbazi*). In the same temples remains of *kvevri* (a big ceramic *pitcher*, usually used for making and keeping wine, and sometimes also for storing grain or oil) were discovered in the area to the right of the *cella* façade.

We would argue for an obvious structural identity between the temples described above and the Iranian fire temples, where the essential components are a square *cella* with a corridor around it, or corridor-like areas. In front of the temples there are enclosed courts with altars (for example the fire temple of Oxus in Takhti-Sangin<sup>38</sup>). However, the group described is not completely similar to the Iranian fire temples. In spite of structural similarities there are some significant differences:

1. This group of Iberian fire temples does not display the crucial structural element of Iranian fire temples, namely small spaces on both sides of the *cella* (*Atheshgah*), where the sacred immortal fire was kept.<sup>39</sup>

2. There are no known cases in Iranian fire temples where the *cella* and side spaces (corridors) have been inter-connected by windows. Probably this is a result of the bad state of preservation because in Iranian fire temples only the foundations and lower parts of walls have survived and it is difficult to make a clear judgement.

3. In this group of Iberian fire temples there are no pillared porticos in front of the *cella*, which is common in the Iranian fire temples.

4. Finally, in the Iberian fire temples, except for *Gharthiskari* temple, the roofs are not carried by four free-standing pillars, which is canonical for the Iranian fire

temples,<sup>40</sup> but by one (*Tsikhiagora*), two (*Orsvetiani Darbazi*) or probably none at all (*Samadlosmitsebi*).

Naturally, there still remains the problem of the dedication of these temples. Unfortunately, the present state of our knowledge does not allow us to answer this question. However, as a hypothesis, we might suggest that the *Gharthiskari* and *Orsvetiani Darbazi* temples were devoted to a solar deity. This may be deduced from their orientation (both temple entrances face towards the east) and by the fact that the floor level of the corridor-like spaces on the sides is higher than the floor level of the *cella* (*Orsvetiani Darbazi* – 1.25m; in the *Gharthiskari* higher stratum temple the floor level of corridor-like spaces was specially raised by 0.3m). These facts suggest a possible analogy with Mithraea where an entrance orientation to the east is an essential feature<sup>41</sup> and where side spaces (aisles) are always higher than the central part.<sup>42</sup> An important element in this hypothesis is the fact that the *Orsvetiani Darbazi* is completely cut out of the rock. This point perhaps hints at the traditional belief that ‘Mithras had to be worshipped in a natural cave’ or in a sanctuary, artificially created, which ‘was carefully given the appearance of a cave’ because of the belief that Mithras was born from the rock.<sup>43</sup> As a summary, it can be stated that there is a regional type of Iberian fire temple comprising the temples of *Tsikhiagora*, *Samadlosmitsebi*, *Nastagisi*, *Gharthiskari* and *Orsvetiani Darbazi* of Uphlistsikhe. Of these, the last two may be dedicated to a solar deity. With the conversion of Georgia to Christianity in 337 AD, Uphlistsikhe lost its importance as a religious centre, but it remained a significant political centre for the country and especially for the Kartli region in the central part of Georgia.

As a result of archaeological excavations in Uphlistsikhe, many artefacts of the medieval period have been unearthed.<sup>44</sup> There are levels of early (fourth-eighth centuries), developed (ninth-thirteenth centuries) and late (fourteenth-sixteenth centuries) medieval periods. In the medieval period, the inhabitants of Uphlistsikhe used structures of previous periods intensively, adding new spaces and domestic items and structures. These additions are easily distinguished by the characteristic patterns of the rock cutting. While Hellenistic period builders always smoothed and polished as the final stage of their work, medieval craftsman did not pay any attention to the character of the rock surface. They simply left tool marks without any attempt to smooth it.

It is interesting to trace how medieval inhabitants altered *iwans*. They divided them into two storeys and built a wall in front. This did not follow the façade line of the Hellenistic period, but to increase space it was built at a distance of approximately one metre in front of the Hellenistic façade. Thus all idea of an *ivan* as the principal open space of a structure was lost.

Apart from alterations of the Hellenistic structures, many new structures were built in the medieval period, some from ordinary materials such as stone, clay, mud brick, timber, brick and mortar, although others were rock-hewn. It is not only tool marks that distinguish medieval structures from those of previous periods, but architecture as well. The structures do not have pure geometrical forms, the characteristic of the Hellenistic period (Fig. 17). They are very close to architecture



Fig. 17  
Uphlistsikhe, *Ertsvetiani Darbazi*, interior

of the twelfth-century fortified and rock-hewn monastery at Vardzia in the south of Georgia.

Near *Orsvetiani Darbazi* was the Christian basilica, partially built, and partially cut in rock (Fig. 18). N. Chubinashvili who investigated came to the conclusion that it was built in the second half of the sixth century.<sup>45</sup> But there is some evidence that a pagan temple was on this site before the Christian basilica.<sup>46</sup> On the site of the Hellenistic period structure another basilica was built in the ninth century. This is dedicated to *Uphlistsuli*, which in Georgian means 'son of the Lord'. Of course the local population understands 'son of the lord' to be Jesus Christ, but this name is extremely unusual because normally Georgian churches dedicated to Jesus Christ are called '*matskhouris*' ('saviour'). This is a single nave basilica with ambulatories on three sides, built of small fragments of stone, and brick. In common with many Uphlistsikhe structures it also was altered many times and bears layers of the eleventh, thirteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup>

There are three small rock-hewn chapels of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Uphlistsikhe. Their architecture relates to that of ordinary chapels from that period and to rock-hewn chapels from Vardzia.

In the medieval period, in contrast to the Hellenistic period, many domestic structures and devices such as stables, *marani* and kilns for making ceramics were



Fig. 18  
Uphlistsikhe, early medieval basilica

made in the city. There are layers of various medieval periods in the fortification walls of the city, all of which were added to the remains of earlier periods so that they cover pre-Christian, early and developed medieval masonry. The different layers are easily distinguishable because builders used different materials (mud brick, brick and different kinds of stones for ashlar) in each period.

#### HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS

From archaeological finds we can confirm the presence of people in Uphlistsikhe from the end of the second millennium BC (the final stage of the Late Bronze Period), but we do not know what kind of settlement existed.

Large scale building activity can be traced in Uphlistsikhe in the Hellenistic period, but the structures mainly were built from ordinary materials. Unfortunately there are only a few remains of structures of this period and it is mainly movable artefacts that survive. The next, intensive building activity took place in the late Hellenistic and late Antique periods, namely the second half of the first and beginning of the second centuries, when the city acquired its distinctive appearance. In this period many Uphlistsikhe rock-hewn structures were made. It is likely that there were some natural or artificial caves utilised before then, but now it seems impossible to distinguish them. Naturally we face the question of who rebuilt

Uphlistsikhe and why in the late Antique period. Taking into account the huge scope of the work done in the late first and early second centuries AD, it is clear that these works were undertaken by order of the state. At the end of the first century or beginning of the second century AD, the huge *temenos* of Dedoplis Mindori (about four hectares) was destroyed.<sup>48</sup> Unusually there is no trace of reconstruction, suggesting that somebody permanently controlled the situation.

We would argue that these two synchronous events, the destruction of the *temenos* at Dedoplis Mindori, where the deity was probably the moon, and the rebuilding of Uphlistsikhe as a religious centre, are related and reflect the internal political struggle of the Iberian kingdom. We know from historical sources that at that time there were no large and long term invasions. Georgian historical tradition attributes the liquidation of the joint sovereignty, when two members of different branches of the royal family were kings simultaneously to this same time. One was king of Armazi and the other king of Mtskheta.<sup>49</sup> That the patron deities of different royal branches were different is suggested by a passage of the *Kartlis tskhovreba*, where it is said that there 'was in Odzkhe a noble of the king of Armazi who truly followed belief (religion) of the king of Armazi'.<sup>50</sup> It seems that the king who won this struggle destroyed the family religious centre of the enemy and built his own. So Uphlistsikhe became the state's main religious centre, as maybe Persepolis was in Achaemenid Iran.<sup>51</sup>

That Uphlistsikhe was a religious centre<sup>52</sup> in the late Antique period, and probably even earlier, is suggested by the extant available evidence: historical, ethnographical, art historical and archaeological. The seventeenth-century Georgian historian and geographer, Vakhushti Bagrationi, in his fundamental work *Description of the Georgian Kingdom*, describes Uphlistsikhe as 'a place of an oracle'.<sup>53</sup> In a Georgian translation of the Decree of the Church Council of Antioch, there is a passage where a curse is placed on the people who serve the Uphlistsikheans and equally on people who worship idols, rocks and trees.<sup>54</sup> Both of these documents have already attracted the attention of scholars.<sup>55</sup> It is significant that the nineteenth-century archaeologist, D. Meghvinetkhutsesi, who excavated Uphlistsikhe, wrote: 'It is said that Uphlistsikhe was held by hermit-fireworshippers like those in Baku'.<sup>56</sup>

All the main rock-hewn structures of the late Antique period probably were religious buildings. Later on with the conversion of Georgia to Christianity, Uphlistsikhe lost its importance as a primary religious centre and became a significant, but ordinary, city. This shift of the city's meaning is adequately reflected in the archaeological material. In contrast with the pre-Christian period, a greater number of domestic items and structures like ovens, kilns, *marani*, and barns from the early medieval period were found. In the medieval period most rock-hewn structures of the Hellenistic and late Antique periods were used as dwellings and, at the same time, several Christian churches were built in Uphlistsikhe. But the strong pagan influence was preserved in historical sources and in the memory of the local population, so in the developed medieval period, they used cult hearths for pagan rituals.

Uphlistsikhe as a city finally was abandoned as a result of the Mongolian invasions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. After this, the territory of the city was used only sporadically by settlers of nearby villages in times of danger. But the ninth-century basilica remained functional and continues in use today. On certain days during the year there are special services.

New life for Uphlistsikhe started in the 1950s, when it became a popular tourist site. Since then, the archaeological expedition of the Georgian State Art Museum has undertaken permanent excavations.

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