



## **Pichvnari, Ajarian AR, Georgia 1998**

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Pichvnari is situated on the Black Sea coast, in the southwestern part of Georgia, within the autonomous republic of Ajaria. It lies at the junction of the Choloki and Ochkhamuri rivers, 10km north of Kobuleti, and a kilometre or so inland. Pichvnari was a major settlement from the late Bronze Age, but became more obviously wealthy during the period of Greek colonization, when trading and cultural links were established between the eastern coast of the Black Sea and the Hellenic world. The urban area appears to have extended over an area of ca. 100 hectares, and there are three cemeteries of the classical period spreading over 20 hectares nearby to the west. These are: the “Colchian” cemetery of the 5th century BC, the cemetery of the Hellenistic period, and the third, the “Greek” cemetery of the 5th-4th centuries BC.

Results of earlier excavations in the “Greek” cemetery are summarized in A. Kakhidze, *Vostochnoye Prichernomoriye v antichnuju epokhu (The Eastern Black Sea Coast in Antiquity)* (Batumi, 1981). It is the only burial ground so far known in Transcaucasia that has a strong claim to be ethnically Greek. Graffiti scratched on pottery vessels (G.R. Tsetskhladze, “The interpretation of Pichvnari”, *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne* 20 [1994] 127-45), the frequent existence of coins used as “Charon's obols” (to pay the ferryman for the journey to the next world), and the orientation of the burials tend to this conclusion.

The work of the Pichvnari Expedition, organised from the Batumi Archaeological Museum and the Batumi Research Institute, ceased at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, but it was possible to start again in 1998 with the collaboration of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The season lasted for the months of July and August. The Co-directors were Dr Amiran Kakhidze, Director of the Batumi Archaeological Museum, and Michael Vickers, Reader in Archaeology in the University of Oxford, and Curator of Greek and Roman antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum; Dr Gia Tavamaishvili was Deputy Director, Dr Tamar Sikharalidze was in charge of the storeroom and served as “collections manager”; other Georgian participants included Dr Irakli Iashvili; (numismatist), Dr Nineli Vashakidze, Dr Manana Odisheli, Ms Maia Jjavadze, Ms Nino Dzneladze (archaeologists), Anzor Javelidze (architect and surveyor), and Merab Khinkiladze (draughtsman). There were two postgraduate students from Batumi University, Taniel Ebralidze and Merab Khalvashi, and two Oxford undergraduates, Tom Welsford of St Johns and Victoria Kwee of Jesus. This, the first ever joint British-Georgian excavation, was supported by the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust, the Oxford Craven Committee, a Jesus College, Oxford Research Grant, St John's College, Oxford, the Department of Antiquities at the Ashmolean, and donations from Gerald and Suzanne Labiner of Los Angeles and Ted and Andrée Gorton of Paris, as well as a subvention from the Batumi Archaeological Museum.

The excavation headquarters, situated in a former collective farm, had become dilapidated over the past few years. Work was put in hand in April 1998 to repair the building, to install an electricity and water supply, and to replant the surrounding garden. The kitchen was put back into good condition, and a cooker, refrigerators and a washing machine acquired. The accommodation was simple, but far from Spartan. The legendary Georgian hospitality was much in evidence, aided by the presence of Guliko Tsiskaradze, our excellent cook, and wine from local vineyards including the one in the garden of the Batumi Archaeological Museum tended by Guram Svanidze (who was also our driver and mechanic). We were frequently filmed by local television stations, and Ilya II, the Patriarch of Georgia paid us a formal visit.

The areas of the Greek and Colchian cemeteries dug in the seventies and eighties were extended: 20 graves were investigated in the 5th century Greek cemetery, 36 in the 4th century Greek cemetery, and 30 in the Colchian cemetery. The excavated areas lay for the most part below a tea plantation, and several days were spent clearing away tea bushes (the Georgian tea industry is today virtually non-existent). The graves lay in sandy soil a metre or so below the surface. The soil was removed by means of specially designed wood and wire “scrapers” pulled across the soil until the outlines of the graves showed up on the surface. Each grave was then carefully prepared for study, photography and drawing. Most graves in the Greek cemetery had contained wooden coffins, but the wood (as well as human organic remains) had not survived; only iron (and one or two bronze) nails showed where the coffins lay. A typical Greek grave might contain an imported wine amphora (from Rhodes, Sinope or Heracleia), some Athenian black gloss pottery, a locally made Colchian jug or two, a silver coin (usually a Colchian “tetri” or tri-obol), and sometimes a core-made glass perfume vessel and bronze (and in one case, silver) jewellery. The Greek graves were all aligned with the head at the east; the Colchian graves were less carefully aligned. The latter contained much the same kind of grave goods, but with a greater preponderance of Colchian material.

An unexpected discovery was that part of the 5th century Greek cemetery had been reused in the Roman period. What was supposed to be a one-period site began to produce graves containing blown glass vessels—unheard of before the 1st century BC. After a day or two, the picture became clearer. What emerged were Roman graves of the 3rd or 4th century AD, typically containing a glass beaker, a pottery jug, iron weapons (a spear and an axe), and a whetstone, overlying a 5th century BC Greek grave whose outline can be seen from the iron coffin nails.

In addition to graves in the Greek cemetery, there were small deposits of hard-packed, burnt earth which contained potsherds—of amphoras, imported and local pottery—the remains of ritual feasts at the graveside. One vessel, an Attic black-gloss bowl, bore a Greek graffito reading Διονυσος Λαοδαμαντος: Dionysios son of Laodamas. Mrs Elaine Matthews of the Oxford-based *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* kindly notes that “The distribution of the name *Leodamas* is interesting. A sprinkling through the islands (LGPN I), but 10 at Thasos; 7 in Athens; none in IIIA and 1 in IIIB (Thessaly) i.e. basically none on the mainland or the west; 1 Thracian, but a group of 7 in Olbia; 5 in Miletos, 4 others scattered in Kyzikos, Kolophon.”

The threat presented by agricultural and building works in the area is ever more present. The local authority is, however, very cooperative and good relations exist between archaeologists and administrators to the extent that a nearby building has been set aside for a Pichvnari Museum. It is hoped to continue the joint excavation next summer, but in the area of the settlement proper, rather than the cemeteries.