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Research paper

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ON THE DATING OF THE DATUNA TEMPLE

Abstract. This study addresses several interconnected issues. Primarily, it delves into the challenging task of establishing the construction date of the sole surviving medieval Christian temple within the modern boundaries of Dagestan. Concurrently, it investigates the social dynamics of the settlement that existed alongside the temple during the medieval era. These issues are contextualized within the broader political landscape of the South Caucasus and the strategic maneuvers of the Byzantine Empire in its endeavor, during the mid-10th century, to assert dominance over all Christian churches in the Caucasus. This multifaceted approach enables the reconstruction of a comprehensive historical narrative and offers insights into questions that naturally arise when attempting to address any one aspect of this complex puzzle. In determining the Datuna Temple's construction timeframe, the study builds upon the dating framework proposed by R. Shmerling, a recognized expert in Georgian church architecture. Additionally, it incorporates newly uncovered or reinterpreted written sources, which, in the author's view, yields a more precise dating. Through an examination of medieval Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, and local sources, the study arrives at the conclusion that the Datuna Temple's construction was commissioned by King Sarir (Nutsal of Avaria) Bayar III (Bakhtishor-huasro) in the year 1008. Furthermore, considering subsequent historical developments and sources, the study posits that the Datuna settlement likely served as the winter residence of that ruler, housing individuals from a dependent social class. Consequently, the study provides a comprehensive exploration of political and confessional history, as well as shedding light on the cultural aspects of medieval Dagestan's settled communities.

Keywords: Dagestan; Sarir; Avar Nutsaldom; Georgia; settlement culture; Orthodox Christianity; church.

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Исследовательская статья

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К ВОПРОСУ О ДАТИРОВКЕ ДАТУНСКОГО ХРАМА

Аннотация. Исследование ставит перед собой несколько смежных задач. Прежде всего оно посвящено вопросу определения даты строительства единственного сохранившегося средневекового христианского храма на территории современного Дагестана. Вместе с тем рассматривается социальный характер поселения, функционировавшего рядом с храмом в средневековый период. Эти вопросы рассмотрены в рамках политической ситуации на Южном Кавказе и стратегии Византийской империи, предпринявшей в середине X в. попытку подчинить себе все христианские церкви на Кавказе. Такая постановка вопроса позволяет воссоздать целостную картину и ответить на вопросы, неизбежно возникающие при решении лишь одной из задач. При определении времени строительства Датунского храма исследователь отталкивается от датировки, предложенной специалистом по грузинской церковной архитектуре Р. Шмерлинг. Вместе с тем привлекаются вновь выявленные или по-новому интерпретированные письменные источники, которые, на взгляд автора, позволяют предложить более точную датировку. На основе средневековых армянских, грузинских, арабских и некоторых местных источников сделан вывод о том, что строительство Датунского храма было осуществлено по заказу царя Сарира (нуцала Аварии) Байара III (Бахтишор-хуасро) в 1008 г. Также, исходя из более поздних реалий и источников, предполагается, что Датунское поселение было зимней резиденцией данного правителя, жители которого были представителями зависимого сословия. Таким образом, данное исследование посвящено ряду смежных вопросов и носит комплексный характер, раскрывая вопросы политической и конфессиональной истории и проблемы поселенческой культуры средневекового Дагестана.

Ключевые слова: Дагестан; Сарир, Аварское нуцальство, Грузия; Армения; поселенческая культура; православие; церковь

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In the medieval period, one of the prominent states in the Caucasus, as documented in the Dagestan chronicles, was the Avar Nutsaldom, identified in Arab and Persian historical records as the Kingdom of Sarir. Written sources spanning from the 7th to the 14th centuries attest to the prevalence of Christianity within this realm during the 10th to the 13th centuries, where it held the status of the state religion. The formalization of this status likely occurred in the mid-10th century, coinciding with the Byzantine Empire's heightened foreign policy activity in the Eastern Caucasus, channeled through the Georgian Church. This transformation transpired concurrently with the decline of the Armenian Church and the ascendancy of Orthodoxy (Dyophysitism). The evolution of religious dynamics can be discerned by examining the Second Albanian Kingdom (*Arm.* the Kingdom of Alvank, *Georg.* The Kingdom of Hereti, *Arab.* the Kingdom of Shaki), situated within the Alazani Valley and the contiguous southern slopes of the Caucasus. According to accounts from Draskhanakertsi (c. 850–929), dating back to the early 10th century, the population of this kingdom was described as “originating from our people and our pastures” [1, p. 161]. This indicates that the inhabitants of the Albanian kingdom, including those in the surrounding mountainous regions, adhered to Armenian Christianity (specifically, Monophysitism) at that time. However, in the mid-10th century, King Ishkhanik (943–959), the son of Queen Dinar and the grandson of Adarnase Bagrationi from Tao-Klarjeti, under the influence of his mother, embraced Orthodoxy and introduced the Dyophysite faith into the kingdom [2, p. 38–40].

Drawing upon an analysis of Armenian historical sources, it becomes evident that a comparable transformation unfolded in the kingdom of Sarir in the mid-10th century. Notably, the account of Stepanos Taronetsi, hailing from the turn of the 10th to the 11th centuries, merits attention. Taronetsi's chronicle identifies Prince Ber as the Nutsal of Avaria (Sarir) Bayar II (Bukht-Isho II), ruling in the mid-10th century [3, p. 67]. According to the chronicle, he attempted a military campaign against Armenia. Crossing the Kura River, Ber's army engaged the Armenians, resulting in Ber's capture and his subsequent confinement in the city of Kars, where he was eventually ransomed “at the price of gold,” leading to the conclusion of a peace treaty [4, p. 117–118]. This campaign likely transpired in 932, during the reign of King Abas I Bagratuni of Armenia (929–953) [5, p. 72]. Armenian sources link Ber/Bayar's campaign against Armenia to the demand for the consecration of the newly constructed Church of the Holy Apostles in Kar according to the Chalcedonian rite. Notably, this demand coincided with a period in the 930s when the alliance between the Byzantine Empire and Armenia fractured, and the persecution of Armenian Monophysite monks commenced in Byzantium, prompting their mass exodus to the Armenian (Bagratid) kingdom. This event is integral in understanding the underlying conflicts and developments within the Christian landscape of the Caucasus during that era. Since the Church in Ani was consecrated in 931–932, it is reasonable to infer that the campaign unfolded in the same period and was seemingly inspired by Byzantine interests, which sought to curtail the autonomy of the Armenian Church [5, p. 70–72]. Consequently, the transition from Monophysitism to Dyophysitism in the Albanian kingdom in the 930s, coupled with a parallel shift in Sarir,

emerges as a direct consequence of Byzantine policy. Hence, there is ample justification to contend that from the mid-10th to the early 13th century, Constantinople exerted a certain degree of influence in the Eastern Caucasus through Sarir, serving as a bastion of Orthodox Christianity in the region.

The profound influence of Christian culture and Orthodoxy on the local populace, along with the extent of their social and cultural integration, is vividly illustrated by the abundant presence of Christian temples in Avaria [6, p. 2, 6]. As noted by G. Gambashidze, religious structures of this nature, including hall-type churches, while not characterized by intricate architectural or decorative elements, hold immense historical and sociological significance. Erected by villagers for religious observance, these temples serve as tangible evidence of the profound reach of the Christian faith within the local community [6, p. 7].

The sole surviving Datuna temple in Dagestan, nearly unaltered from its original state, is situated within the mountainous region known as the *GyatIan-kIkIal* gorge, meaning “church gorge” in Avar (*Avar gatIan* – “church”). This architectural monument is located near the village of Datuna, sharing its namesake, within the Shamilsky district of the Republic of Dagestan (Fig. 1, 3, 4). The existence of this Christian architectural gem has been well-documented in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. Notable mentions of it can be found in the works of D.N. Anuchin, A.P. Berger, E.I. Kozubsky, N.B. Baklanov, A.P. Kruglov, and it has undergone comprehensive architectural analysis by R.O. Shmerling [8] and V.I. Markovin [7]. We should clarify that our objective here is not to provide a detailed description of the temple itself but rather to ascertain a more precise date of its construction, drawing insights from written historical sources.

The Datuna Temple has long been recognized by scholars as a classic specimen of Georgian church architecture. By scrutinizing its architectural characteristics, R.O. Shmerling discerned its intrinsic link to the heritage of Georgian medieval architecture. Shmerling’s meticulous analysis led to a decisive dating of this monument to a “relatively short period of time,” specifically, either the late 10th century or the early 11th century [8, p. 217].

This dating, it appears, finds corroborating evidence and potential clarification through inscriptions on silver plates – specimens of jewelry confiscated in the 16th century from the Zarzma monastery located in southwestern Georgia, a region then under Ottoman occupation. One of these plates features an inscription in the Georgian *Asomtavruli* script: “Christ, exalt the *Bakhtishor-Khuasro*¹ king!” Additionally, a smaller note accompanies this inscription, reading: “Christ, have mercy on the treasurer of the house.” The paired plate provides a further key clue, indicating a date: “Koronicon 228,” which corresponds to the year 1008 [9, p. 98–107; 10, photo 107].

According to the 11th-century chronicle “*Tarikh al-Bab*” (“History of Shirvan and Derbend”), in 1025, Amir Mansur “married Sariya, the daughter of Bukht-Yisho, the ruler of Sarir” [11, p. 70, 136]. D.L. Muskhelishvili established [12, p. 149] that this Bukht-Yisho is the same individual referenced in the aforementioned inscription. Further research into Dagestan sources unveils that the Syriac (Aramaic) theophoric name² Bukht-Yisho (derived

1. *Khuasro* is a title denoting a ruler and originates from the personal name of Shahan Shah Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–579).

2. A theophoric name (Greek θεός “god” + φορέας “bearer”) is a personal name that includes the name of a god(s) or a divine epithet.

from Ἰησοῦς, meaning “Jesus”) was the ecclesiastical name³ of the ruler of Avaria, Bayar III, who reigned in the period of the late 10th to early 11th centuries [3, p. 68–69].

To the east of the Datuna Temple, situated on the left bank of an unnamed river, lies an unexplored medieval settlement (Fig. 2). This location has yielded fragments of medieval ceramics and an associated burial site. As early as the 19th century, S.A. Berger remarked: “In close proximity to the church, one encounters the remains of structures, as well as abandoned vineyards and fields, which strongly suggest the presence of a former settlement. According to local legend, during the summer, when intense heat prevailed, this settlement overlooked the surrounding heights known as Tliani, where traces of additional ruins are also visible. The ruggedness of the gorge sheltering the church and the relatively barren natural surroundings lead us to conclusion that *the church did not maintain an exclusive congregation* (here and below, author’s cursive), but rather people congregated here on pilgrimages from other locales” [13, p. 59]. In terms of spatial extent, this settlement appears to have encompassed several dozen residential structures and likely served as a seasonal dwelling for the Nutsals of Avaria, considering the harsh climate of the kingdom’s capital on the Khunzakh plateau. This assumption is supported by a tradition preserved among the Nutsals during the Late Middle Ages, as well as insights from M. Alikhanov-Avarsky. Based on oral traditions documented in the 19th century from elderly local residents, Alikhanov-Avarsky wrote: “...in earlier times, Datuna, it is said, was the personal property of the Avar khans.”⁴

Unfortunately, the settlement adjacent to the Datuna Temple remains unexplored by archaeologists, making it challenging to provide a definitive characterization. However, it is plausible to speculate that this settlement may have been inhabited by a dependent class of individuals who served at the winter residence of the Nutsal of Avaria. A similar settlement, situated approximately 30 kilometers downstream along the Avar Koisu (Avar-or) river in the Ortakolo tract, has undergone comprehensive archaeological investigation. The findings from the study of this settlement and its associated burial ground have led archaeologists to draw the following conclusions. The Ortakolo tract is not well-suited for agricultural cultivation, and the cultivated terraces themselves are relatively small in size. The presence of numerous graves on steep slopes, as well as the reuse of stone tombs with earlier burials placed upon existing floors, suggests limitations in available land resources. The scarcity of burial artifacts and the near absence of weaponry within the graves, coupled with recorded injuries on the buried remains, classified as either “domestic” or “defensive” in nature, potentially imply that the population was more likely subjected to raids rather than actively participating in them. Furthermore, craniological analyses of the remains from the necropolis in this settlement have revealed a unique and highly diverse composition of its population, indicating diverse origins. Based on these findings, the researchers have postulated that “the population that left the complex of monuments in the Ortakolo tract represents the so-called lags⁵ – prisoners, who are a group of the population with limited rights.” This population ap-

3. A name that is usually given at baptism or during monastic tonsure and which is not identical to a personal name.

4. Alikhanov-Avarsky M. In the mountains of Dagestan. XXI // Newspaper “Kavkaz”, September 25, 1896.

5. Lag (Avar – лагъ) is a dependent class, usually represented by prisoners or their descendants. They usually did not own real estate and performed various duties or paid food rent in favor of land owners.

pears to have been comprised of individuals from various regions across the Caucasus [14, p. 209–210].

It seems that the same dependent settlement might have lived in Datuna, which situated, like Ortakolo settlement, in close proximity to the temple and shared a similar scarcity of available land resources. However, a definitive answer to this question can only be provided through comprehensive investigations of this settlement and its associated burial grounds.

Given the modest size of such a settlement, it is improbable that it initiated the construction of an elaborate and costly edifice like the Datuna Temple. These circumstances raise the possibility that the temple was commissioned by the ruler of Avaria, with construction overseen by a skilled architect from Georgia. Furthermore, it appears that a professional Georgian jeweler was commissioned by the ruler of Avaria in 1008 to craft silver plates depicting biblical scenes specifically for the church. When juxtaposing these facts and considering the architectural attributes, alongside the dating of other churches in Avaria, a hypothesis emerges suggesting that the Datuna Temple might have been erected in 1008, the same year indicated on the plates. This construction could have been ordered by King Sarir Bayar III, who is referenced in written sources under the church name Bukht-Isho or Bakhtishor. Concurrently, church artifacts, including the aforementioned silver plates, would have been created. It is plausible to speculate that, following the local population's adoption of Islam, the clergy associated with the Datuna Temple may have relocated to Georgia, bringing church artifacts with them.

Small settlement sizes were a common feature within the kingdom of Sarir, as evidenced by historical records. The Arab historian al-Masudi, in his work "Muruj az-zahab" (completed in 956), recounts that the ruler of Sarir "*had 12 thousand villages, from which he recruited as many servants as he wanted. His country is harsh, and for this reason inaccessible, being located on one of the spurs of Kabkh*" [11, p. 204]. Additionally, al-Yakubi (d. 897/98), in his work "Kitab al-buldan," adds valuable insights about Sarir by referencing officials who operated in the Caucasus. According to his accounts, there were a total of 18 thousand settlements in this region, and in this value, Sarir surpassed all other regions in the Caucasus [15, p. 207].

Turning to archaeological materials and the research conducted by Dagestan ethnographers enables us to characterize the majority of these settlements as small, often referred to as "tukhum" settlements, each comprising no more than 2-3 dozen farms. The process of synoecism, wherein larger rural communities were formed by uniting several small tukhum settlements, gained momentum, dating to the 13th–14th centuries, following the collapse of the centralized state of Sarir. This process of synoecism was primarily instigated by internal crises and the erosion of centralized power within the Avar Nutsaldom during the late 13th–14th centuries, possibly exacerbated by external aggressions. Consequently, many small settlements found themselves compelled to ensure their security by amalgamating into larger territorial rural communities. These communities often occupied strategically defensible locations or incorporated existing settlements through the consolidation of neighboring tukhums. Throughout these processes, the more economically efficient system of farm settlements underwent significant transformation. Notably, in the second half of the 14th century, this led to the formation of larger settlements such as Andalal. For instance,

one of the prominent communities, Rugudzha, emerged in 1365 through the amalgamation of approximately a dozen tukhum settlements [16].

Evidently, the Datuna Temple functioned until the beginning of the last quarter of the 15th century when Islam established itself in the region. The rural community of Batlukh, situated near the Datuna Temple, along with the union of communities (Avar – *bo*) called Gidatl, converted to Islam in 1475/76 [17]. According to a legend documented in 1946 by G.Ya. Movchan in the village of Tlyah within the Gidatl society, “when the true faith was established, the Gidatlin people launched a campaign against the Christians and destroyed the Datuna Temple. Three doors were taken from there. One was kept in Urada, the other in Ghenta, the third – this one – here in Tlyakh.” This account pertains to a wooden three-door partition measuring 2.5 meters in length and approximately 1.6 meters in height, adorned with a beautifully and skillfully carved pattern. According to the researcher, it served as an altar barrier [18, p. 161–162]. Despite repeated attempts by the author to locate it in Tlyakh, regrettably, the subsequent fate of this artifact remains unclear.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that the relatively late adoption of Islam by the population in this mountainous region of Dagestan allowed Christianity, and consequently a written tradition based on the Georgian alphabet, to persist for a longer period. Likewise, a manuscript containing the texts of the Gospels of Mark and Luke, recently discovered in the Fund of Oriental Manuscripts of the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography of the Far Eastern Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, sheds light on this cultural continuity. It was revealed that the previously known manuscript is a palimpsest, with Arabic text written over the Georgian text. This manuscript comprises 168 sheets of parchment (with an average sheet size of 16.5×10 cm), a rarity in medieval Dagestan, signaling the influence of Georgian culture in Avaria through the dissemination of Georgian manuscripts. Analysis of the Arabic text revealed that it is a Sufi work dating from the turn of the 10th–11th centuries, initially written in eastern Iran and later copied in the 16th century in Mountain Dagestan. On the other hand, the non-canonical text of the Gospels, written in the *Asomtavruli* script, dates back to the second half of the 7th–8th centuries. It is evident that this manuscript, with its beautiful and precise handwriting using golden ink, was not originally compiled in Dagestan. Instead, it was likely created in Georgia itself or in a Georgian monastery outside the country before making its way to Georgia [19]. Subsequently, it could have been acquired by the king of Sarir for the Datuna Temple or found its way into the territory of Dagestan. One plausible explanation is that the manuscript may have been stored in one of the local medieval temples of Avaria (Sarir) and later came into the possession of an Arabic manuscript copyist, or Katib. This scenario appears logical, as raids by mountaineers on Georgia were exceedingly rare before the 17th century, making it highly unlikely that the manuscript was a captured trophy during a campaign.

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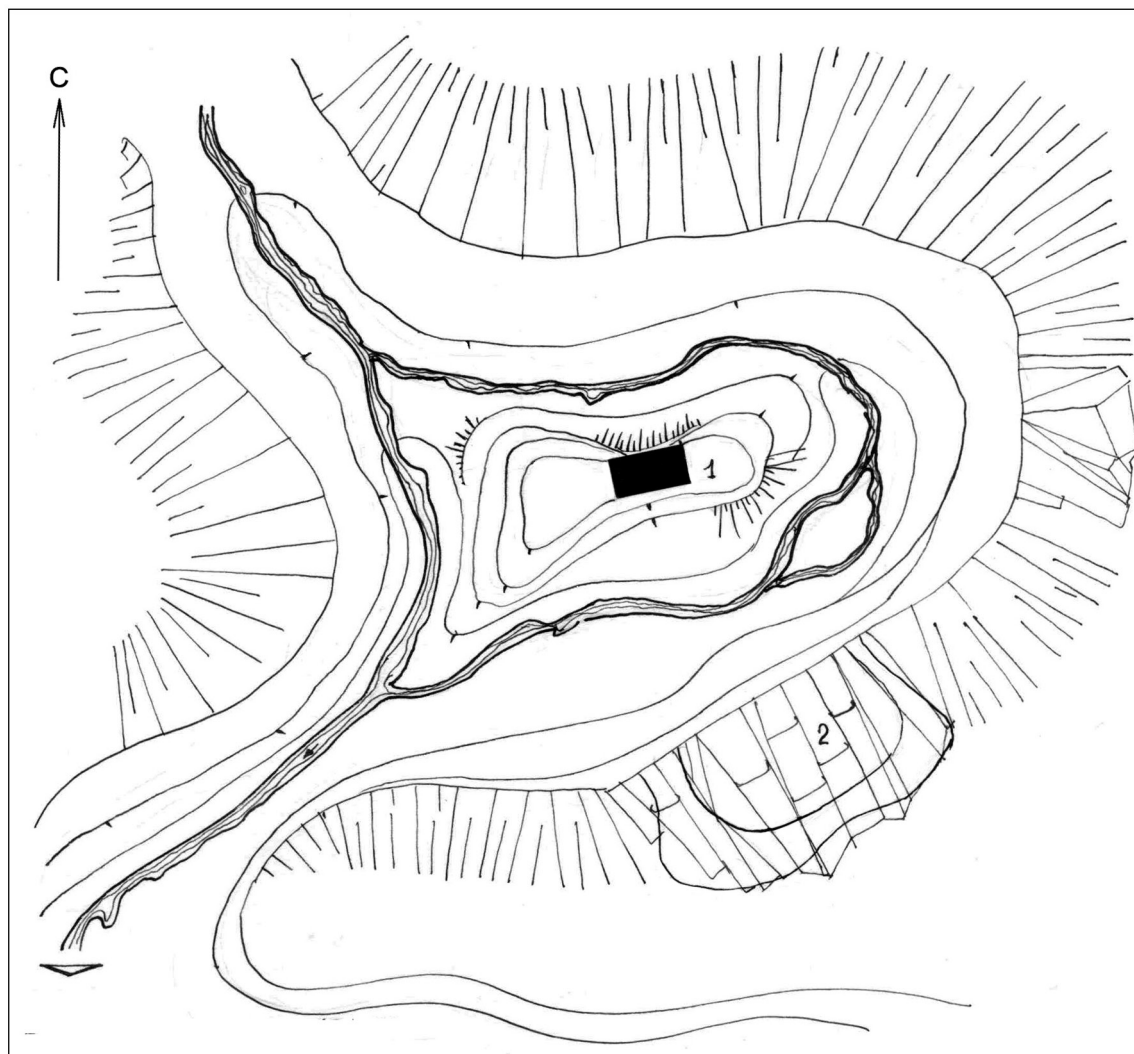
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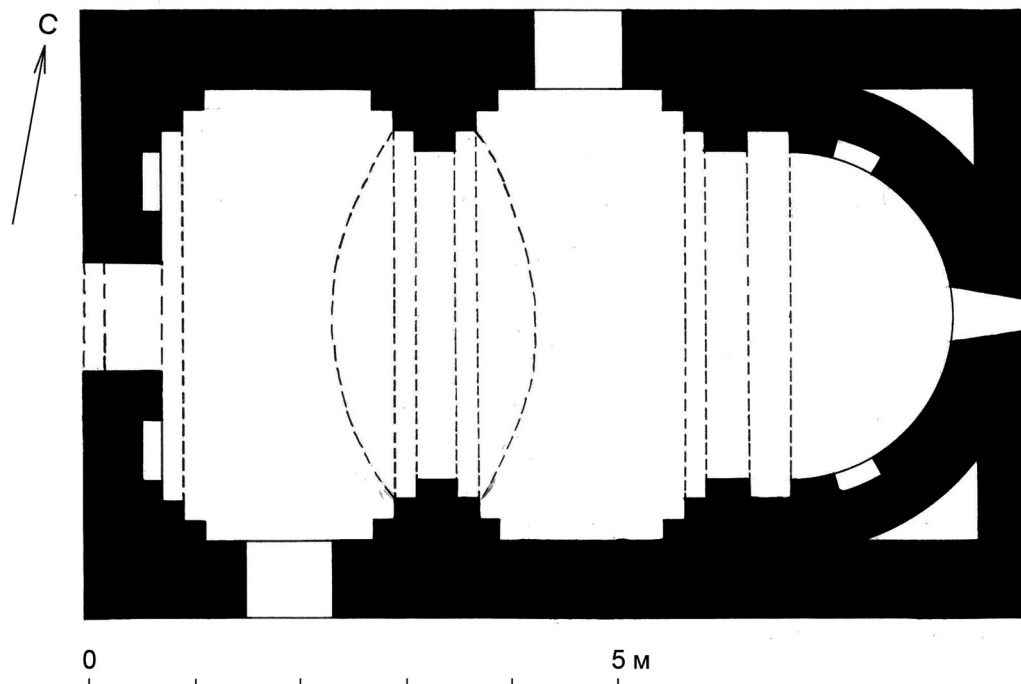
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Fig. 1. Datun church: a – general view from the SW; b – central (western) facade, view from the west.
Photo by M.S. Gadzhiev, 2018.

Рис. 1. Датунская церковь: а – общий вид с ЮЗ; б – центральный (западный) фасад, вид с запада.
Фото М.С. Гаджиева, 2018 г.



a



б

Fig. 2. Datun church: a – general plan of Datun church and medieval settlement; b – Plan of Datun church. Executed by G.M. Guzova in 1976. Archive of the Agency for Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Dagestan

Рис. 2. Датунская церковь: а – генеральный план Датунской церкви и средневекового поселения; б – План Датунской церкви. Выполнены Г.М. Гузовой в 1976 г. Архив Агентства по охране культурного наследия РД



а



б

Fig. 3. Datun church: a – central entrance, view from the west; b – eastern facade, view from the SE.
Photo by M.S. Gadzhiev, 2018.

Рис. 3. Датунская церковь: а – центральный вход, вид с запада; б – восточный фасад, вид с ЮВВ.
Фото М.С. Гаджиева, 2018 г.



a



б

Fig. 4. Datun church: a – semicircular apse; b – interior, central entrance, view from the east.
Photo by M.S. Gadzhiev, 2018.

Рис. 4. Датунская церковь: а – полукруглая апсида; б – интерьер, центральный вход, вид с востока.
Фото М.С. Гаджиева, 2018 г.

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