

The Northernmost Zoroastrian Fire-Temple in the World

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The Caucasus is a land of diverse population and beliefs. Today, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Yazidis live in cities and villages in the valleys and gorges of the region. One religion that had a strong impact on ancient Armenia, Georgia, and the Republic of Azerbaijan was Zoroastrianism. While the sources and views of Zoroastrianism are mainly from its homeland, Iran, Zoroastrianism also flourished in the Caucasus in conjunction with the local, native religions of the region. Kartveli or Georgia was converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE. The traditional date given for this momentous event in the history of Georgia is 337 CE. According to Christian sources, King Mirian (Mihran) converted from “paganism,” but a closer look at the sources suggests that the king and the people of ancient Georgia were worshippers of Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda). Legend has it that at night the shepherds in the region used to call on Armazi (Ahura Mazda) for help, and that people used to offer sacrifices to their god Armazi at a location near the “Bridge of the Magi.”



Façade of the ātašgāh

At about the same time, the capital of Georgia was moved from Mtskheta to some 10 km further south to Tbilisi by the national hero Vakhtang Gorgasali, who fought against the Sasanians. Vakhtang's statue is situated in front of the Metekhi Church near the Mtkvari River in Tbilisi. Subsequently, the Sasanians were able to retake the region and Vakhtang was murdered in 502 CE.² The remains of the northernmost Zoroastrian fire-temple are located in Tbilisi. In July 2008, the Sasanika team of K. Abdi, H. Emrani and T. Daryaei along with A. Gramian, L. Kian and S. Jilanchi visited Georgia to photograph and study the northernmost Zoroastrian fire-temple which is known as the ātašgāh "fire-place" or "fire-temple." The location of the ātašgāh was somewhat difficult to find and the locals in Tbilisi did not have any knowledge about the building. The ātašgāh was finally located below Kartlis Deda or "Mother Georgia" close to Kldisubnis which may have been established in place of the fire-temple. That is, the fire-temple was not destroyed but rather a church was built next to it at a time when both Zoroastrianism and Christianity existed side by side. The ātašgāh is walled off and can only be accessed through a home. The Sasanika team was given permission to enter the house and from there to see the remains of the ātašgāh.



Ātašgāh below Kartlis Deda



Floor of the ātašgāh



Later walls constructed over the ātašgāh



K. Abdi & T. Daryaei at the ātašgāh