

# Preliminary Report on Archaeological Survey in Upper Svaneti

(Sep-Oct 2018)

## 1. Introduction

Located in western part of the Caucasus Mountains, Upper Svaneti's unique cultural landscape, language and rich ancient customs are relatively well known outside Georgia, and its medieval villages are inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. However, the archaeology of this region is very poorly understood for a variety of reasons. Most of the archaeological sites have not been mapped properly, with only approximate locations provided in the limited publications – the absolute majority of which are old and available only in Russian and Georgian. Therefore, mapping and creating a database of the archaeological sites was the main goal of this project – pivotal for future archaeological research in this region and for establishing a better understanding of its archaeological landscapes. While re-discovering and mapping previously identified sites was a preeminent goal, new sites were also identified and recorded. Unfortunately, not all the sites mentioned in the previous literature were able to be identified (especially mines) due to their remoteness and the absence of people who would know their location.

## 2. Archaeological Sites in Upper Svaneti

Sites were recorded in 10 communities of Upper Svaneti: Tchuber, Phaer, Etser, Becho, Latli, Lenjar, Mestia, Iphar, Kaal and Ushgul; 24 sites in total, five of which were previously unknown (fig. 1).

### *Ushgul*

One site was mapped near the community of Ushgul (fig. 2). It is a settlement dated to the classical period (Chartolani 1996, 147-9), located east of Ushgul, on the road to Lower Svaneti via the Zagar Pass (fig. 3). It was excavated in the late 1990's but the results have not been published.

Location: 339811.00 m E

4752702.00 m N

2295 masl

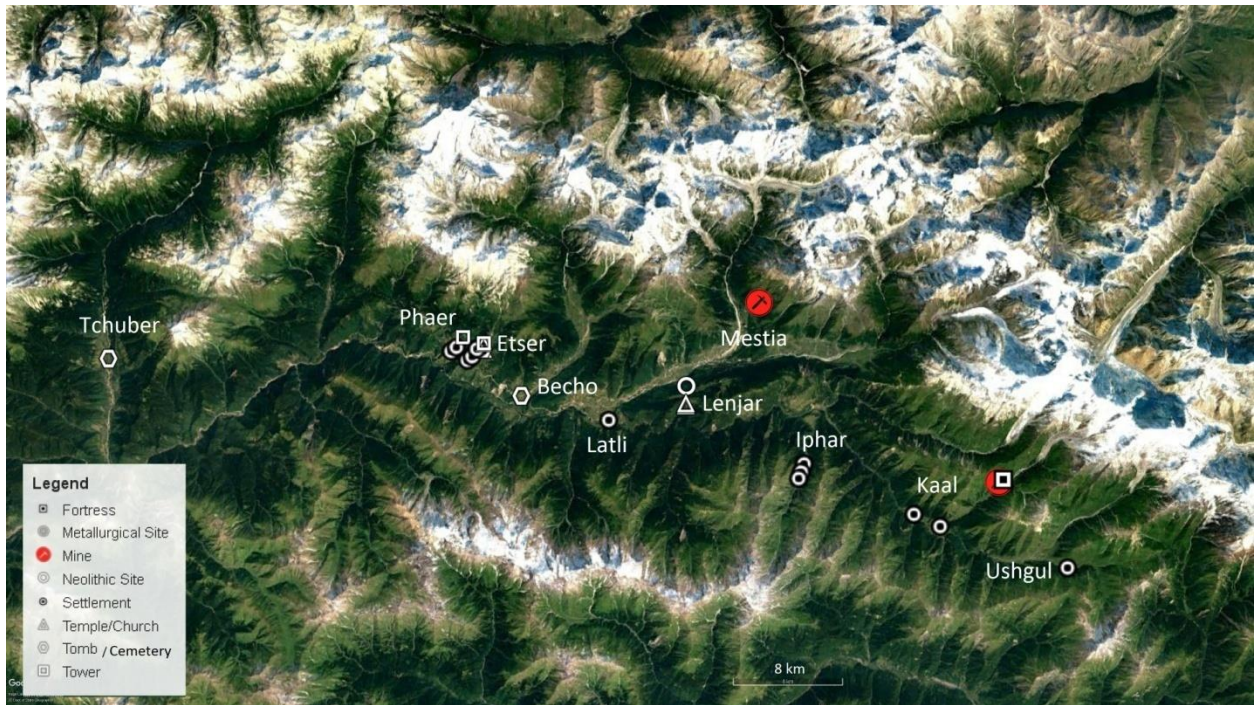


Fig. 1. Location of the sites in Upper Svaneti.

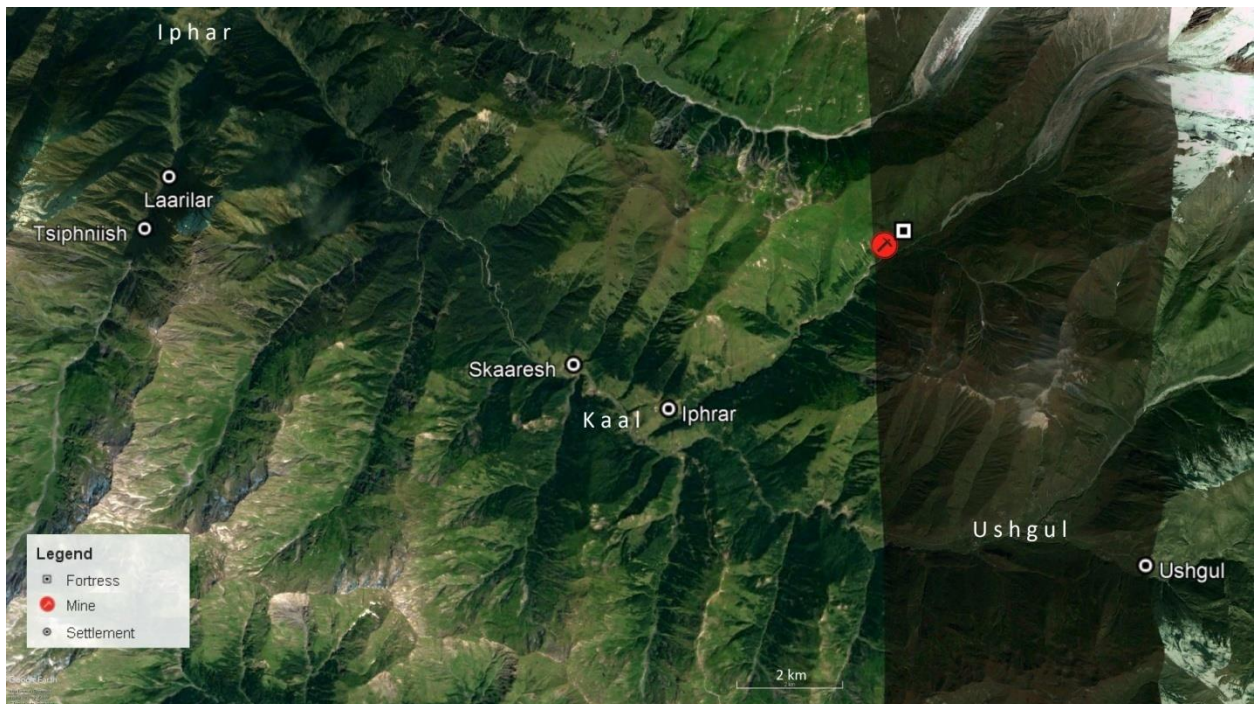


Fig. 2. Location of sites in the Communities of Iphar, Kaal and Ushgul.



Fig. 3. Ushgul. View from east

### *Kaal*

Four sites were mapped within the community of Kaal – two settlements (Skaresh and Iphrar), one mine and one fortress (fig. 2). Skaresh is located on a hill north-east of the village of Vichnash (fig. 4). It is dated to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age, and is thought to have evidence of metal production through the identification of large amounts of metal slag, and 14 copper ingots that were uncovered along with a number of LBA copper alloy artifacts in caves around the site (Čartolani and Kaldani 1978, 30-1; Chartolani 1996, 118-21, 127-8).

Location: 329063.00 m E

4756752.00 m N

1812 masl



Fig. 4. Skaresh.

The remains of another Late Bronze – Early Iron Age settlement was located on mounds north-east of the village of Iphral, at the place called Lnasq'e, overlooking the village. Four copper ingots were found there in earlier investigations (Chartolani 1996, 128), (fig. 5).

Location: 330880.00 m E  
4755858.00 m N  
1996 masl

A probable adit and a nearby open-pit mining site were identified near the village of Khalde, in the Khalde river valley (fig. 6, 7). High mineralization is clearly visible and rocks containing iron are identifiable through their reddish colour. Iron rich, red-stained streams are abundant in the whole valley of the river Khalde. Its identification as mining site is difficult at present to say without more detailed examination.

Location: 335031.00 m E  
4758827.00 m N  
2248 masl



Fig. 5. Lnasq'e, Iphral.

Remains of a fort were recorded in the Khalde river valley, on eastern slopes of a range separating the Hadish and Khalde valleys. Located on a hilltop, the fort overlooks the Khalde valley and controls the path connecting to the Hadish river valley via the Chkhutnier Pass (fig. 8). Some stones (probably of a foundation) were still visible, despite tall grass; however, it is unclear whether mortar was used. The date is also unknown. The fort consists of two parts at two slightly different levels respectively: the easternmost, lower part is almost certainly a watchtower, judging by its square shape and smaller size relative to the other part, which is larger and of a rectangular shape. The size of the fort is roughly 20 x 10 meters. Chartolani (Chartolani and Kaldani 1978, 32) also mentions a fort or fortress on the ridge between the Khalde and Hadish Valleys. It is possible that fort surveyed by the present project is the same as the above-mentioned site, but some of the details do not align with one another. The earlier report gives an elevation of 2600 masl, while the site I surveyed is at 2289 masl, an area of 400 m<sup>2</sup> (as opposed to ~200 m<sup>2</sup>), and notes the presence of lime mortar, which I did not identify.

Location: 335412.00 m E

4759117.00 m N

2289 masl



Fig. 6. Potential mining site. General view and lower part of the site.



Fig. 7. The upper part of the potential mining site.



Fig. 8. The remains of a fort.



## *Iphar*

Two sites were mapped in the community of Iphar. Both are located south of the modern village of Zegan, in the narrow river valley of Lasil, on the Svaneti Range which separates the Upper and Lower Svaneti (fig. 2).



Fig. 9. Larilar.



Fig. 10. Tsipnish.

The site of Larilar is the closest to the village of Zegan and the site of Tsipnish is located further up the stream. Copper ingots and EBA and MBA copper alloy tools were found at both sites. According to Chartolani, Larilar (fig. 9) is dated to the Middle Bronze Age and Tsipnish – the Early Bronze Age (fig. 10). Both settlements produce evidence of metal production (Čartolani 1974, 48; Chartolani 1996, 127-8). There is an area between the two sites identified by locals as “Nagmalvaer”, which in the Svan language means “a place that used to be settled”, or “an ancient settlement”.

Location of Larilar: 321270.00 m E  
4760588.00 m N  
1749 masl

Location of Tsipnish: 320818.00 m E  
4759578.00 m N  
1837 masl

## *Mestia*

One site was mapped within the community of Mestia: the Mine of Zaargash. It is located north-east of Mestia in one of the gorges (fig. 11). Zaargash preserves two adits, and four main tunnels. It was excavated in the 1980's by Shota Chartolani and is dated to between the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium to the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Chartolani 1996, 129-35; Tschartolani 2001, 120-9), (fig. 12).

Location: 318145.00 m E

4772002.00 m N

1827 masl

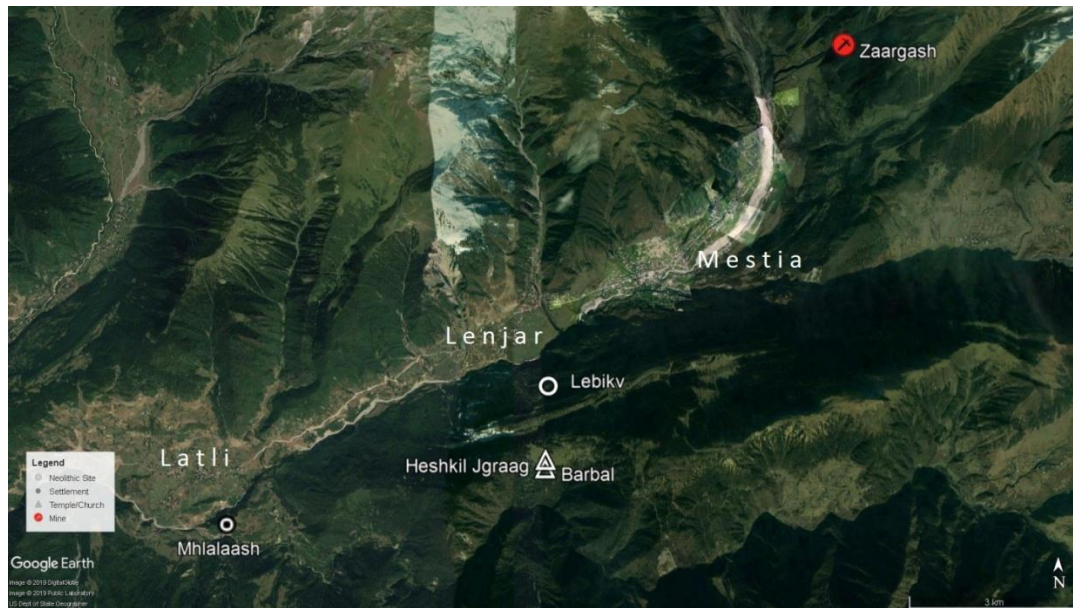


Fig. 11. Location of sites in the communities of Latli, Lenjar and Mestia.

## *Lenjar*

Three sites were recorded within the community of Lenjar: the Neolithic site of Lebikv, the medieval temple-church\* of Jgraag/St. George and the temple-church of Barbal/St. Barbara.

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\* Many medieval churches in Svaneti are built on or near pre-Christian sacred places. Svan religious rituals, both past and present, are a heavily syncretic mix of (predominantly) Pagan and (to some extent) Christian practices. Although built as churches, they functioned, and continue to function, as pagan temples, except when the Divine Liturgy is performed there by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Indeed, most of them retain a dual dedicatory name reflective of both the Christian saint and the analogous Pagan deity. For these reasons, I refer to these religious buildings as temples-churches to reflect their dual Christian and Pagan nature.

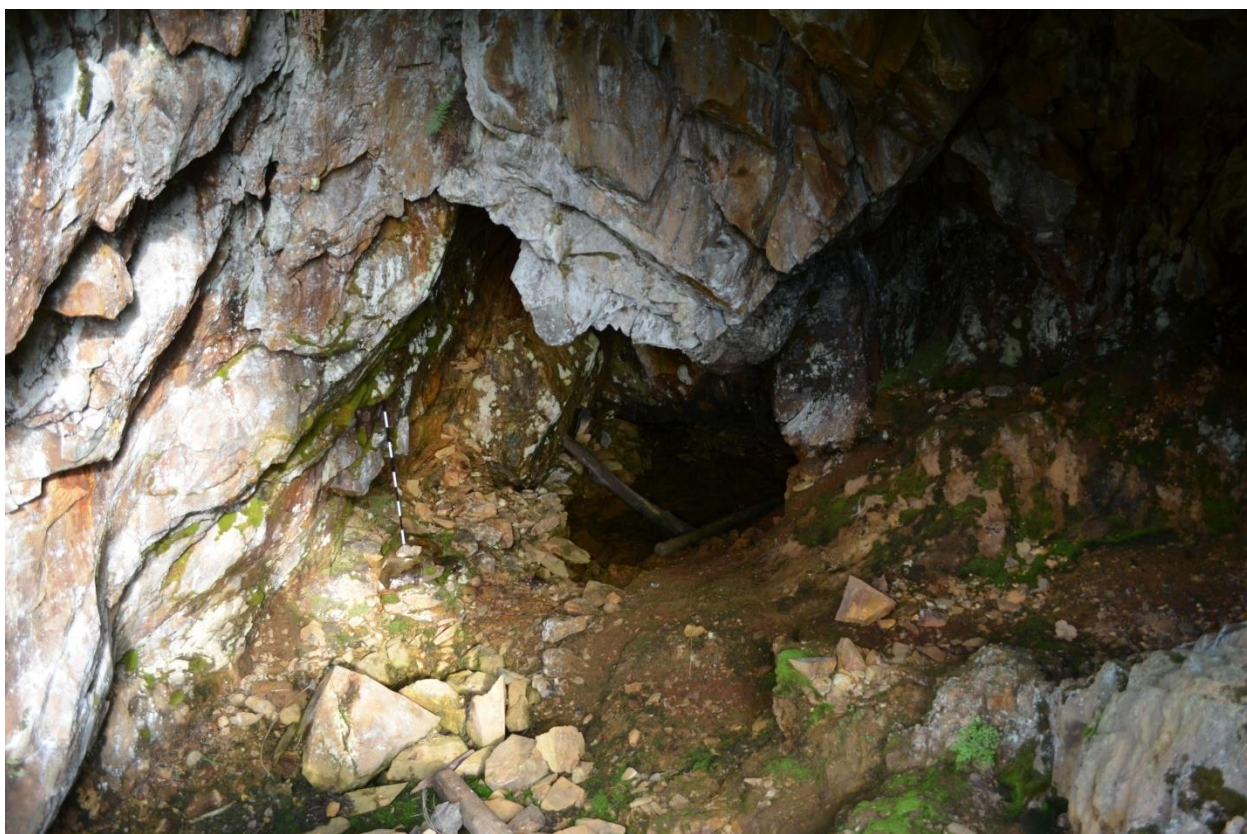


Fig. 12. Lower and upper adits of Zaargash.

The site of Lebikv is located south-east of Lenjar, on northern slopes of a mountain ridge in between the Mulkhura and Enguri valleys (fig. 11). Lebikv (fig. 13) has been known since the early 1960's when flint tools were discovered there by locals, followed by Berdzenishvili's excavations of the site in 1964 (Chartolani 1970, 344).

Location: 312894.00 m E  
4766298.00 m N  
1637 masl



Fig. 13. Lebikv.

The temple-church of Jgraag/St. George of Heshkil is located on southern slopes of the ridge separating the Mulkhura and Enguri river valleys (fig. 12). It was excavated in 1997-8 (Chartolani *et al.* 2000). There are ruins of a medieval village around the Jgraag temple/church, which once belonged to the Heshkil community, but are now part of Lenjar (fig. 14).

Location: 312818.00 m E  
4765079.00 m N  
1782 masl

The remains of temple-church of Barbal/St. Barbara and the ruins of some other nearby structures were identified and mapped not far from the Heshkil Jgraag temple (fig 15).

Location: 312805.00 m E  
4764931.00 m N  
1743 masl



Fig. 14. Heshkil Jgraag and a nearby ruined tower.



Fig. 15. The temple-church of Barbal/St. Barbara

## *Latli*

One settlement, called Mhlalaash, was surveyed in the community of Latli. The site is located south-west of the village of Lakhushd, at the confluence of Mulkhura and Enguri rivers (fig. 11). No prior survey publications report its existence. The remains of large structures and at least of one tower are clearly visible, covering an area of 5-6 ha (figs. 16, 17). All observed standing architecture was built with dry masonry. The site may be provisionally dated to the Medieval or perhaps even pre-Medieval period, as the absence of mortar is at least consistent with a pre-Medieval date.

Location: 307292.00 m E  
4764082.00 m N  
1307 masl



Fig. 16. Mhlalaash.





Fig. 17. Mhlalaash.

## *Becho*

One site was recorded in the community of Becho (fig. 18). It is a Late Bronze Age cemetery located in the village of Kartvan at a place called “Laltskhat” (“sacred place”) and was discovered by a local (K. Gabuldani) in 1983 when he was building a house nearby. Chance finds (copper alloy objects) were given to the Svaneti Museum and the site was subsequently studied by the Svaneti Archaeological Expedition led by Shota Chartolani (Chartolani 1996, 135-8).

Location: 300961.00 m E  
4765934.00 m N  
1423 masl



Fig. 18. Location of Kartvan cemetery

## *Etser*

Seven sites were recorded in the community of Etser: three settlements, two temple-churches, a tomb and one watch-tower (fig. 19).

Svik I is a Late Bronze – Early Iron Age fortified settlement located on a hill west of the village Phkhotrer (figs. 20, 21, 22, 23). It was excavated in 1970's by the Svaneti Archaeological Expedition (Čartolani and Kaldani 1978, 31-3; Čartolani and Iremašvili 1979, 82-5; Čartolani 1981, 124-9; Čartolani 1984, 38; Chartolani 1996, 146-7).

Location: 297180.00 m E  
4768690.00 m N  
1554 masl

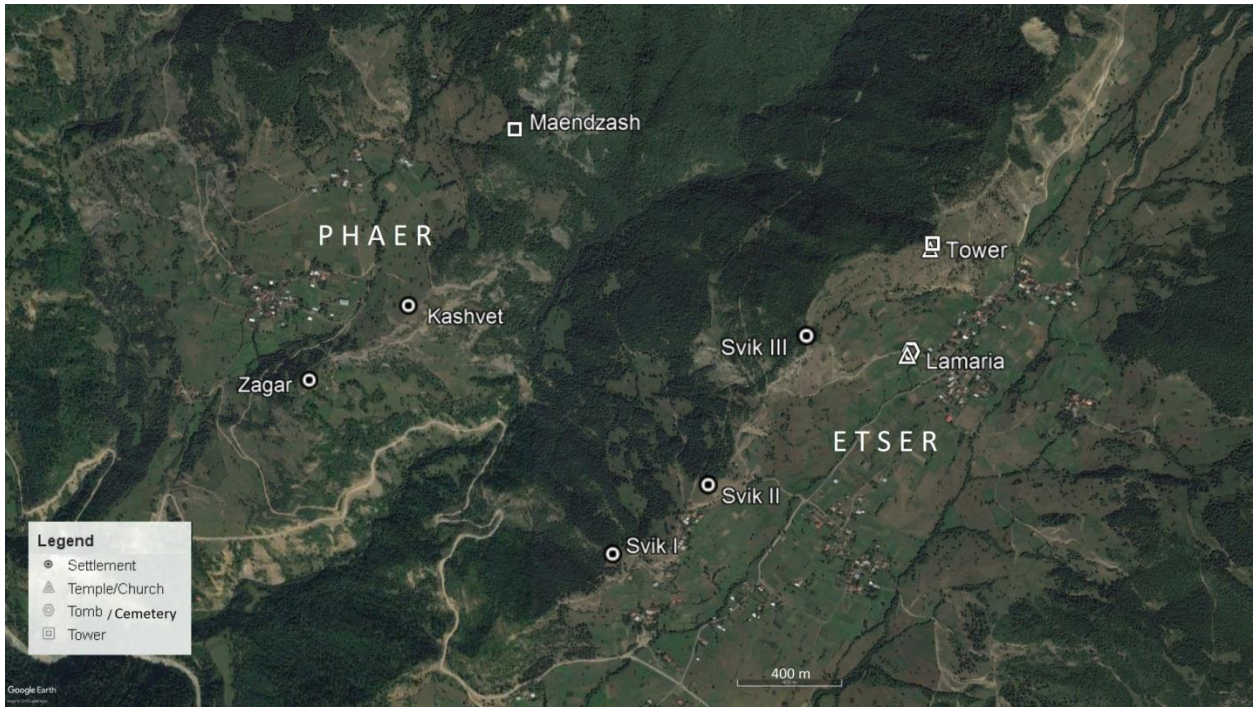


Fig. 19. Location of sites in the communities of Phaer and Etsar



Fig. 20. Svik I, view from the village.



Fig. 21. View from Svik I over the village and Enguri Valley.

Svik II is another hill top settlement located north-east from the site of Svik I, overlooking modern villages of the community of Etser. Like Svik I and Svik III, Svik II is also considered a sacred place by locals who gather there at a certain time of a year and perform various religious rituals (mostly pagan – animal sacrifices etc). Svik II has never been excavated (Fig. 24). It is estimated to date to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age.

Location: 297547.00 m E  
4768943.00 m N  
1589 masl

Svik III is located further north-east of the sites of Svik I and II, and is highest elevation of the three. It also appears to date to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age period.

Location: 297911.00 m E  
4769486.00 m N  
1709 masl



Fig. 22. Structures at Svik I.



Fig. 23. Structures at Svik I.



Fig. 24. Svik II.

The ruins of a temple-church of Lamaria/Virgin Mary was recorded west of the village of Barsh (fig. 25). According to a local elder (Shota Gurchian) the site was excavated in the early 1960's (perhaps by Berdzenishvili?).

Location: 298291.00 m E  
4769401.00 m N  
1616 masl

The remains of a tomb was identified a few meters away from Lamaria (fig. 26), also apparently excavated in the early 1960's (according to Shota Gurchian).

Location: 298306.00 m E  
4769414.00 m N  
1617 masl



Fig. 25. Lamaria of Barsh





Fig. 26. The tomb near Barsh.

A ruined watch-tower was mapped north-west of the village of Barsh (fig. 27).

Location: 298357.00 m E  
4769795.00 m N  
1771 masl

A few meters south of the aforementioned watch-tower, a number of ruined stone structures (fig. 28) are visible. These are reported to be the remains of a church, which was excavated by Maksime Kaldan and another unknown individual (as per Shota Gurchian).

Location: 298349.00 m E  
4769776.00 m N  
1769 masl



Fig. 27. The watch-tower above the village of Barsh, community of Etser.



Fig. 28. The ruins nearby the watch-tower above the village of Barsh.

### *Phaer*

Three sites were recorded in the community of Phaer: a ruined tower, and two settlements (fig. 19). All of these sites were previously unknown.

A ruined tower was recorded north-east of Phaer, in a forest, at a place identified as Maendzash (fig. 29). It overlooks a deep gorge between the communities of Phaer and Etsar.

Location: 296860.00 m E

4770276.00 m N

1642 masl



Fig. 29. Maendzash.

The remains of a settlement (most likely pre-medieval) was identified east of the modern village of Phaer, on an elevated ridge/plateau, at the place identified by locals as Kashvet (fig. 30).

Location: 296418.00 m E  
4769651.00 m N  
1471 masl

Another settlement site identified as Zagar was located on a terraced hill south-west of Kashvet (fig. 31).

Location: 296015.00 m E  
4769376.00 m N  
1428 masl



Fig. 30. Kashvet.



Fig. 31. View over Zagar from Kashvet (above) and view of Kashvet from Zagar (below).

### *Tchuber*

One site was mapped in the community of Tchuber (fig. 32). It's a cemetery consisting of two main cremation areas called Larilar. It was excavated in 1980-1982 by Shota Chartolani and is dated to between the 6<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC (Čartolani 1984, 41-4; Chartolani 1996, 143-5).

Locatoin: 270874.00 m E  
4769464.00 m N  
910 masl

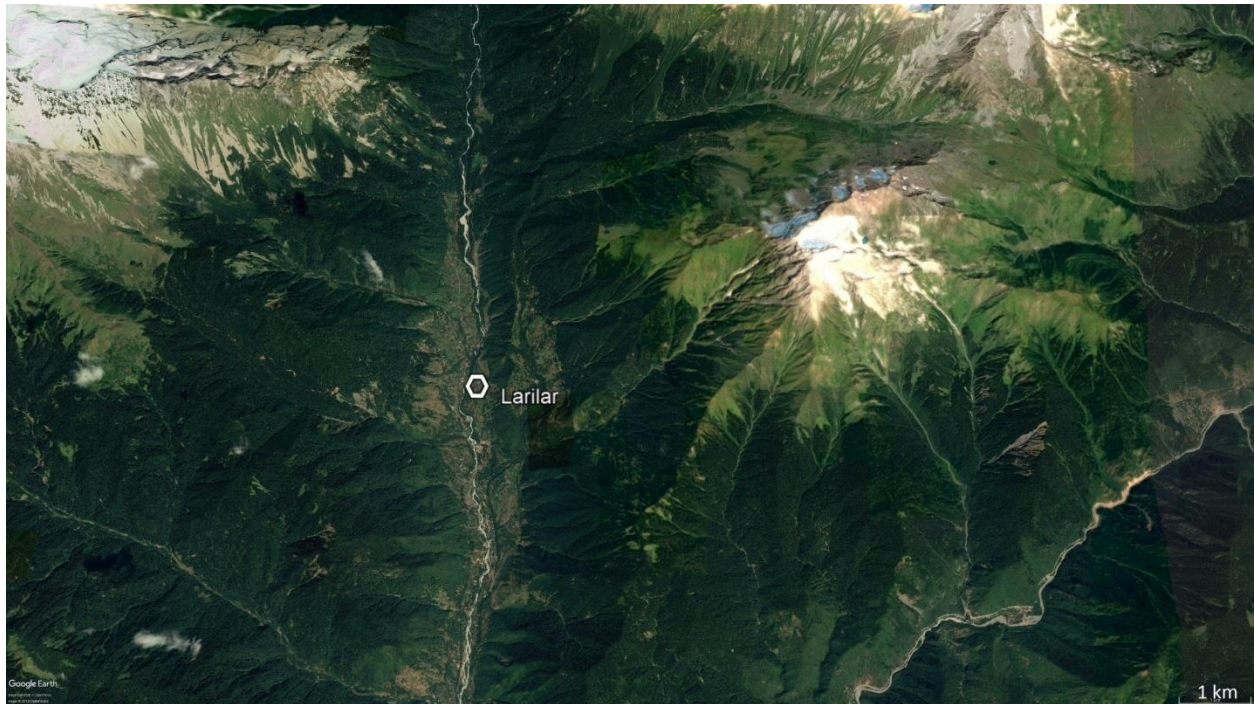


Fig. 32. Location of the Larilar cemetery.

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