



„Open Pits in Samshvilde”

Hands on Experience in Archaeology and Bioarchaeology
Samshvilde Archaeological Complex, South Georgia

Information for Applicants



Program Introduction

Welcome to Samshvilde Archaeological Expedition's program „Open Pits in Samshvide”

Samshvilde is an outstanding archaeological complex located in the Southern part of Georgia (Tetritskaro Municipality). Its significance is known from historical texts, notably for having been conquered and returned to the Georgians by famous king David the Builder in 1110. Samshvilde's historical longevity and wealth as a thriving medieval capital can only be surpassed by the richness of archaeological finds that have been made there.

The site contains architectural elements, coins, ceramics, and even artifacts yielding from older prehistoric times. With every excavation season our research questions multiply and become more complex. Only small-scale fieldwork had been carried out during the Soviet and post-Soviet period, but these efforts did not provide details on the site's stratigraphy and chronology or the distribution of cultural features and monuments.

To rectify this, Professor David Berikashvili, in collaboration with the University of Georgia in Tbilisi, launched the first full-scale multidisciplinary archaeological investigation at Samshvilde in 2012. With the help of scientific collaborators and local students, David has been devoted to the study of this exceptional site which mirrors the entire region by its multi-ethnic history and deep-rooted presence.

Year by year the project is gaining bigger scale and personalities of different field and experience joining it. For nonprofessionals and for those, who have no experience in field archaeology this is unique opportunity to participate in a real dig and under qualified staff make real discoveries.

The team at Samshvilde Archaeological Expedition are dedicated to teaching newcomers about archaeology of Samshvilde and Georgia in General, as well as building new collaborations. We wish to offer you a uniquely enriching academic and cultural experience here.

Brief History of Samshvilde

Samshvilde is a historic city situated in Kvemo Kartli province, in the southern part of Georgia (Fig. 1). Georgian historic tradition associates the foundation of Samshvilde with the pre-Christian period. Our project has now detected proof of occupation dating back to the Neolithic period (Fig. 2), but nowadays, it is recognized that Samshvilde was founded as an urban political-economic center only in the early medieval period, in particular during the 5th century.



Fig. 1 Samshvilde citadel and the eastern tip of the promontory



Fig. 2 obsidian arrow heads, prehistoric period

As the Arabs appeared in Transcaucasia during the mid-8th century, a substantial part of eastern Georgia, including Samshvilde, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Arab Emir. This arrangement continued until the mid-9th century when the region fell under influence of the Armenian royal Bagratuni dynasty of Shirak. In the 10th century, Samshvilde was the capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Tashir-Dzoraget which was a vassal of the Kingdom of Ani. The Georgian King Bagrat IV restored it within the borders of Georgia in 1064. During the second half of the 11th century Samshvilde was under the influence of Seljuk Turks, and this continued until 1110 when it was liberated by King David IV (the Builder) and placed under the jurisdiction of the Georgian State. Excavations have revealed a wealth of artifacts from this period, most notably polychrome glazed ceramic vessels, bronze coins, and semiprecious gems (Fig. 3-4).



Fig. 3 Glazed polychrome ceramic bowl, medieval period



Fig. 4 Bronze coin of Queen Tamar with Arabic inscriptions

Various Georgian feudal families controlled Samshvilde in the late medieval and post-medieval period. First the influence of the Orbeli was dominant and later the Baratashvili-Kaplanishvili, whose tenure continued up to the 17th-18th centuries. In the second half of the 18th century the ethnic situation in Samshvilde and Kvemo Kartli in general changed significantly. From the end of the same century, these areas were occupied by newly arrived groups of Armenians who settled in Samshvilde and nearby areas. From the beginning of the 19th century, Turkish-speaking populations, Germans (1818) and Greeks (1829) were settled in this region by the Russian Imperial government. Even today, the population in this part of Georgia continues to have a diversity of ethnic elements.

Archaeology of Samshvilde

Samshvilde occupies a long basalt promontory that rises above the confluence of two important rivers, the Khrami and Chivchava. The medieval city covered the entire length of the promontory and its layout was arranged according to the occupations and status of the population: the western part of the city, which may have been the residential area of the lower classes, was separated from the central part where nobles resided by a 4m-high and 2.5m-wide stone wall. The central district was separated from the easternmost part of the city, where high-status structures were located, by a 12m-high and 7m-wide fortification wall, forming a citadel (Fig. 1). Such a heavily fortified defensive system has not been preserved at any other medieval site, not only in Georgia but also throughout the Southern Caucasus.

The Water Supply System. Despite the separation of the city's three districts, its hydrological network was integrated so that water was supplied to residential, trade and artisanal areas as well as to the noble and royal districts. A well organised and serviceable water supply system was essential for cities of the medieval period. In designing this system, the builders of Samshvilde skilfully took advantage of the natural inclination of the promontory which is equal to 2cm per metre. The total difference between the highest and the lowest points of the city is 70m, which is sufficient to ensure the natural flow of water through the entire city.

Our project dedicated a considerable amount of time to studying Samshvilde's water supply system. Two reservoirs or cisterns (diameter 20–25m, depth 2.5m) are cut into the basalt bedrock in the eastern part of the city. These were connected to the network and considerable reserves of water were stored in them, ensuring a ready supply as well as access to water during times of drought or prolonged siege. The 'Royal Bath', one of Samshvilde's noteworthy standing structures, is also connected to the water supply system.



Fig. 5 Royal Bath (before restoration)



Fig. 6 high medieval water pipe

The 'Royal Bath'. A bathhouse of the later medieval period is located in the eastern part of the city, in what is regarded as the 'Royal District', leading us to call this structure the 'Royal Bath' (Fig. 5). This unique structure has never been studied previously. Preliminary studies by test trenches has established that much of the building is buried beneath soil and rubble. However, it may be said on the basis of its architectural details and by comparison with similar structures preserved in Georgia that the building dates to the 16th–17th centuries and may be regarded as a hamam of the Ottoman Turkish type. Its water supply and the furnace unit located underground require fuller study as does the purpose of walls that are directly connected to the main building. We intend to expose it and do a virtual reconstruction by photogrammetry in 2019.

Palaces and Residential Buildings. Residential structures at Samshvilde differed according to the social classes for which they were intended. For example, houses preserved in the district thought to have been inhabited by tradespeople and artisans were built from unprocessed stone and timber which contrasts with the mortared stone palaces in the supposed noble or royal districts. Although none of the palace buildings have yet been studied in detail, an impression of their construction and materials can be gained from walls preserved above ground. There are five ruined palaces preserved at Samshvilde. Three are located in the central part of the city and two are in the royal district. One of the royal district palaces was a two-storey building, judging from the preserved walls. It is assumed that this palace was intended for the king and his family. This structure has been identified as a target to excavate test trenches in future seasons.

Churches. There are seven recorded churches at Samshvilde that belong to different phases of the medieval period. According to the Georgian Chronicles, the earliest church was built here by Queen Sagdukht in the 5th century, but the whereabouts of this building is currently unknown.

Of the churches preserved above ground, Samshvilde Sioni is the most outstanding (Fig. 7). Indeed, it ranks among the most significant monuments of medieval Georgian church architecture. An inscriptions mentioning the Byzantine emperors Constantine V Kopronymos and Leo V the Khazar is preserved on the façade in Old Georgian script (Fig. 8). According to the inscription, the church's construction dates precisely to 756-777 AD. The art historian Niko Chubinashvili made small test trenches in the interior of Sioni Church in 1968, but otherwise the building has not been studied.

Samshvilde Basilica (10th century), located 150m to the west of Sioni Church, is a Monophysite church. The basilica was built and functioned when Sioni Church was already in ruins as a result of an earthquake and at the time that Samshvilde was the capital of the Kingdom of Tashir Dzoraget. Restoration works at the basilica were carried out in the 1990s and today it is one of the active churches of the city. The so-called Palati Church, which belonged to the Kaplanishvili, the local feudal dynasty, is located near the basilica. Our surveys of Palati Church in 2014 established that members of the Kaplanishvili family were buried in the interior of this church. Ruins of the two-storey palace belonging to the same family are located nearby. Four other churches are known at Samshvilde: St George's Church (10th–11th centuries), the Dormition Orthodox Church (10th–12th centuries), St Theodore's Church (12th century) and the so-called Theogonida. These structures all require further investigation.



Fig. 7 Sioni Church ruins, aerial view facing east



Fig. 8 Sioni Church ruins, exterior wall with inscriptions

Cemetery. One of the main questions arising from our surveys at Samshvilde is the location of the city's cemetery. A geophysical survey allowed us to locate some graves dating to the 15th century north of Sioni Church. However, the limits of the cemetery have not been defined. It may only be assumed that the main cemetery of the city was located far from the residential areas. The graves are diverse in their arrangement and deposition methods, including atypical burials. Due to its unconventional characteristics and potentially significant historical value (signs of violence and social deviance are observed), the Sioni cemetery will be subjected to intensive research in upcoming years by the project's bioarchaeologist.

Megaliths. Megalithic features at Samshvilde are in the form of two menhirs and a 'tetralith', a monument consisting of three balanced boulders. One of the menhirs, a 2.45m-high stone column, is located in the interior of the Dormition Church. It seems that it was erected in the pre-Christian era, possibly during the Bronze Age, and the church builders intentionally built the medieval building around it. The 'tetralith', which consists of three massive basalt boulders balanced on top of each other, is a unique feature with no known parallels in southern Georgia. At present it cannot be precisely dated because no archaeological excavations have yet been carried out at this location, but it may be presumed that this and the other megalithic monuments date from the Bronze Age.

Archaeological Research in Samshvilde

Excavations. Since 2012 excavations have been conducted at two locations. The first is next to the main fortification wall of the city, within what is regarded as the **citadel**; the other is the **burial space** near the 8th century Sioni Church.

Excavations at the citadel have so far unearthed archaeological deposits of 1.3 m depth belonging to the high-late medieval centuries (11th-13th centuries). In 2018 a Late Bronze Age pit burial (possibly 13-12th centuries BCE), underlying medieval contexts was discovered inside the citadel walls. Results of archaeobotanical, carbon-14 dating and osteological analyses are expected shortly to help us better understand this important find. Artefacts from the citadel trenches are diverse and includes ceramics, metal, stone, glass and bone items that have long chronological diapason.

The focus in the Sioni section, where four trenches have been opened, is the excavation of human remains. An initial interpretation of the graves discovered here is that they belong to citizens killed during the invasion of the Turkmen leader, King of Tabriz – Jahan Shah in the 15th century. Further excavations are required to confirm this.

Aerial Mapping and Cave Exploration. Aerial mapping of the Samshvilde promontory and adjacent areas has given us an approximate idea of the urban layout of the city-site, its main districts, the hydrological system and the location of architectural remains. In addition, aerial and video mapping are being conducted in the canyons of Chivchava and Khrami rivers where there are multi-tiered cave complexes which are very difficult to reach. Using this method to define the exact location, the number and size of these cave complexes is very effective. For example, as a result of aerial mapping of caves in the Chivchava canyon, carried out in 2015, access routes were defined, allowing our team to reach the caves and undertake test excavations there. Large amount of ceramics and bone material were discovered in the test trenches as well as on the surface; obsidian artefacts were also discovered. We hope to follow

up aerial surveys with a LiDar scan project in order to better understand the urban layout west of the fortification walls. The foundations of these structures are visible above-ground but are largely encumbered by vegetal tree cover and have not yet been excavated.

Other Analyses. Palynological, archaeobotanical, bioarchaeological, and petrographic analyses is being undertaken as part of the excavations at Samshvilde. Palynological results obtained from the medieval layers of the citadel provide information on the environmental conditions of Samshvilde during the 12th-13th centuries and the nature of household activities at this time. Experimental archaeology projects are also under way to better understand the prehistoric lithic industry and lithic material sourcing routes.

Research objectives for 2023

- Continuing excavations in the citadel by:

- Clearing vegetation around the 16-17th century 'Royal Bath' to identify the whole plan of the building and prepare it for 3D virtual conservation by photogrammetry. This aims to encourage tourism and awareness about Samshvilde for the general public;
- Archaeological excavations of Medieval Palace of the 18th century inside the Citadel walls. Excavations of the Archaeological Trenches of inside and outside the Samshvilde Fortification Walls
- Archaeological Excavations and Bioarchaeological studies of the medieval cemetery near 8th century Sioni Cathedral Ruins.

Program details

The following program is aimed on those, who have no or limited professional skills in the field archaeology, but are interested and want to make their hands muddy. This includes the high class student of International Schools in Tbilisi with understanding of human origin, historical past and basic archaeology.

- Program will take place in archaeological complex Samshvilde, Tetriscqaro Municipality, South Georgia.
- Program duration 7 days.
- The number of participants 7-8 students.

Program description:

1st day. Monday.

10:00 Departure from Tbilisi by minibus (meeting point at the University of Georgia)

11:15 Arrival to camp house in the village Samshvilde. Accommodation.
13:00 Dinner
14:00 Visiting site: excavation area and main sightseeing.
17:00 Returning to camp House
18:00 Supper
20:00 Introduction into Samshvilde Archaeology at the meeting room of camp house (by Prof. David Berikashvili)
21:00 Light supper (tea/coffee)

2nd Day. Tuesday

7:00 Wake up.
7:45 Breakfast.
8:30 Hiking to the site
9:15-13:00 Excavation
13:00-14:00 lunch on the site
14:00-16:00 Excavation
16:30 walking back to camp house.
17:00 showers/rest
18:00 supper
19:00-20:00 pottery washing
20:30 light supper
21:00 camp fire.

3rd Day. Wednesday

7:00 Wake up.
7:45 Breakfast.
8:30 Hiking to the site
9:15-13:00 Excavation
13:00-14:00 lunch on the site
14:00-16:00 Excavation
16:30 walking back to camp house.
17:00 showers/rest
18:00 supper
19:00-20:00 pottery washing
20:30 light supper
21:00 camp fire, story telling

4th Day. Thursday

7:00 Wake up.
7:45 Breakfast.

8:30 Hiking to the site
9:15-13:00 Excavation
13:00-14:00 lunch on the site
14:00-16:00 Excavation
16:30 walking back to camp house.
17:00 showers/rest
18:00 supper
19:00-20:00 pottery washing
20:30 light supper
21:00 camp fire, barbeque

5th Day. Friday

7:00 Wake up.
7:45 Breakfast.
8:30 Hiking to the site
9:15-13:00 Excavation
13:30 Trip on Riv. Khrami (by minibus)
14:00 – 18:00 Lunch/camping at the river
18:45 – arrival at camp house/showers, rest
20:00 – supper
21:00 – camp fire

6th Day. Saturday

7:00 Wake up.
7:45 Breakfast.
8:30 Hiking to the site
9:15-13:00 Excavation
13:00-14:00 lunch on the site
14:00-16:00 Excavation
16:30 walking back to camp house.
17:00 showers/rest
17:00 Big supper (local food, barbeque, etc..)

7th Day. Sunday

9:00 Wake up.
10:00 Breakfast.
11:00-13:00 Pot-wash and small finds analyzing
13:00 Dinner
14:00 Packing
15:00 Departure to Tbilisi
16:45 Arrival to Tbilisi (at the University of Georgia)

General Information

Program Dates. July 3th to July 9th, 2023.

Application Deadline. We are accepting applications until all spaces are filled (7-8 participants), **until a maximum of June 10TH , 2023.**

Eligibility. We are looking for high class students with an interest for archaeological fieldwork from all countries. Applicants with little to no experience are especially welcome as the objective of this program to learn basic archaeological methodology and gain fieldwork experience, to get better known with Georgian Cultural Heritage.

Prerequisites. No academic status or performance prerequisites are necessary for this program. Applicants must be fit for light physical work and have a positive attitude and a willingness to work as archaeologist. Fieldwork is an extremely enriching experience but it can also be demanding physically and psychologically at times, so a positive mindset can go a long way in making your experience memorable.

Program fee. Every applicants are asked to contribute a fee of **490 USD for the whole program.** The fee includes transfer from Tbilisi to Samshvilde and from Samshvilde to Tbilisi. Rooms in Expedition house, meals (Breakfast, Dinner, Supper), excavation materials, WiFi, access to archaeological and bioarchaeological materials and one day trip to nearby historical place. The program fee **DOES NOT** include: personal expenses, Health insurance (REQUIRED) and expedition T-Shirts with Samshvilde Expedition Logo (T-shirt price is extra 15 USD. The size for T-Shirt must be informed)

Location and Accommodation

Samshvilde village (41°30'58"N 44°29'27"E) is located in Tetrtsqaro Municipality, in the province of Kvemo Kartli in south Georgia. It is located 4 km south of the town of Tetrtsqaro, 66 km away from Tbilisi (ca. 1h30 drive) and 2 km north of the ruins of the medieval town of Samshvilde where we work. The village was founded in the early 19th century and named after the nearby historical locale. As of the 2014 national census, Samshvilde had the population of 443, mostly (98%) ethnic Armenians.



Staff and program participants will reside in a dig house in the village of Samshvilde, which is only a 25 minute walk from the site. It is newly renovated and has all necessary commodities. The following will be provided: food, electricity, WiFi, hot water, showers, toilets, beds with mattresses, washing machine for clothing, a kitchen and workspace. The following will NOT be provided: bedding. There is a small shop in the village where you can buy additional treats. Dinners are prepared by our housekeeper. You may bring additional food of your own. Please communicate with the organizers if you have dietary restrictions or allergies.

Tetri Tsqaro is the nearest town from Samshvilde, about a 20 minute drive away. We will be commuting regularly to purchase food and other necessities. There are a variety of small shops, groceries and a pharmacy, but there is little variety. You will have the opportunity to accompany staff members if you wish to purchase treats or personal items of your own, but we suggest that you bring your favorite products with you.

What to Bring

Here is an indication of what program participants should bring to Samshvilde. This is not an exhaustive list. If you have any questions about what to bring or have specific needs/preferences please contact us. Be aware that days are quite hot and sunny in south Georgia (up to 40°C) but nights are cooler (15-20°C).

Archaeological equipment (trowels, brushes, shovels...) and work accessories (gloves, hard hat) will be provided. Trainees are welcome to bring their own, but are responsible for them if they do.

Documents

- Cash: trainees are advised to carry money for personal expenses (treats, souvenirs, snacks, calling card, etc.)

Clothing

- For work: Cargo pants or shorts, sun hat, work boots (such as steel-toe boots or hiking boots), sunglasses, rain coat
- For leisure: lightweight clothing for the daytime, warm long-sleeved jumper for cool nights, swimsuit (you may want to swim in the river)
- Bedding (sleeping bag or sheets, pillow) and towel
- Medical kits
- A medical kit will be provided, although participants are welcome to bring their own portable kits
- Trainees may be susceptible to blisters, mosquito bites, or an upset stomach
- Any medical issues can be discussed privately with either David or Andrew.
- Toiletries: Soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, clean wipes etc.

Miscellaneous

- Sunscreen, mosquito repellent, water bottle, pocket knife, money belt, flash light,

plug adapter for European wall outlets (), a book to read etc.

Additional Information

Risks.

- **Fieldwork** entails a certain risk of injury, such as: minor cuts, sprains, bruises, blisters, heat stroke, sunburn, etc. Some trenches at Samshilde are very deep (over 2m), so staff members and trainees are required to exert caution at all times while on site. A safety training will be given before the beginning of excavation.
- **Vipers** are endemic to south Georgia and Samshilde is known for being a hot spot to find them. Nevertheless, it is extremely unlikely that you will get bitten by a snake if you simply stay alert. So, do not worry. Caucasus-trekking.com recommends:

How to prevent a snake bite? Usually, no effort is needed, snakes are shy and prefer to “run” away. They attack only if they feel directly threatened. Still, you can reduce this risk by few simple measures. The most effective of them are those most simple ones - watch your step and don’t stick your hands into narrow, dark crevices unless necessary.

Also, consider wearing sturdy hiking boots and long pants. [...] Very useful are also trekking sticks. They generate strong vibrations (which alert snakes to your presence and gives them more time to hide) and at the same time “scan” the area in front of you (so a snake could attack a pole instead of you)
