

## **AKELDAMA - MANIFESTATION OF SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE BIBLICAL TERM**

### **Abstract**

The article discusses the word აკელდამა/აკლდამა [Akeldama/Akldama], which likely entered Georgian via Greek (Ἀκελδαμά or variant Ἀκελδαμάχ), and its semantic evolution. The term itself originates from the Aramaic phrase *חַמַּת דְּמָא* (*Haqel D'ma*), translated as "Field of Blood", as attested in the Gospel of Matthew and the Acts of the Apostles (Gr. *χωρίον αἵματος, ἀγρός αἵματος*; Lat. *ager sanguinis*). However, this word did not gain wider usage in Greek and remained limited to its specific biblical context. In contrast, in Georgian აკლდამა [Akldama] became a designation of an honorable burial site, despite its association with Judas Iscariot's sin, as it refers to the land purchased with the thirty pieces of silver. The article explains this transformation in the semantic meaning of აკელდამა [Akeldama] by referencing the burial tradition for pilgrims at the site known by this name in Jerusalem. This tradition would have been well-known to Georgians of the time through their compatriots in Jerusalem's spiritual centers. In the 12th century, members of the Hospitaller Order, the Knights of St. John, built a large underground vaulted structure, which they called *Chaudemar* - a distorted form of the French words *Champ de Mar* (Field of Blood), as *Akeldama* is referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. This event further influenced the semantic evolution of the word აკელდამა/აკლდამა (*Akeldama/Akldama*) in Georgian, leading to its complete inversion of meaning—from symbolizing the sin of Judas to representing a prestigious burial structure.

**Keywords:** *Tomb, Etymology, Semantic meaning, Field of blood, Burial building*

The article discusses the etymology, semantic evolution, and historical context of the term აკელდამა/აკლდამა [Akeldama/Akldama], tracing its origins from its biblical usage to its role during the Crusader period. The word აკელდამა comes from the Greek Ἀκελδαμά (v.l. Ἀκελδαμάχ), which is derived from the Aramaic *חַמַּת דְּמָא* (*haqel d'ma*), meaning "field of blood." In the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Gospel of Matthew* this term is associated with Judas Iscariot and a field purchased with the thirty pieces of silver. This field was subsequently known as *Akeldama*, or "field of blood," reflecting its association with death and betrayal. In the Greek context, the word Ἀκελδαμά never fully took root in the language, and its usage is restricted to this specific biblical context. However, in Georgian, the word აკლდამა [Akldama] evolved to refer to an "honorable burial monument," despite its connection with Judas' betrayal.

Archaeologically, the site known as *Akeldama* was located south of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), a place with strong associations with ancient sacrificial rituals,

where children were sacrificed to the god Moloch. Over time, it became a burial ground for foreigners, non-Jews and later, in Christian tradition, a site for the burial of pilgrims. According to tradition, in the 4th century, Saint Onuphrius the Great lived here. There was also a tradition of taking soil from Akeldama to be placed in European cemeteries, as this soil was believed to have special properties. Queen Helena is credited with establishing this tradition. However, Jewish tombs had existed here since ancient times, mainly from the period of the Second Temple, remain preserved. There are also many tombs from the Herodian period (37 B.C. – 70 A.D.), some of which are still in excellent condition today.

The tradition of this place remained unchanged for centuries. In fact, the pilgrim Antoninus from Piacenza, who visited the site in the year 570, emphasizes the tombs of pilgrims at this location. Bishop Arculf of Gaul, who traveled to Jerusalem around 670, also writes about the burial of pilgrims in this area. This tradition was continued by the Crusaders. In the 12th century, members of the Hospitaller Order, the Knights of St. John, built a large underground vaulted structure here, which they called *Chaudemar* - a distorted form of the French words *Champ de Mar* (Field of Blood), as *Akeldama* is referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. This structure housed the bones of knights and pilgrims who died in the Hospital, and the Hospitallers buried up to 50 deceased pilgrims each day. Archaeologically, it has been established that the layer of bones here reaches a depth of 4-5 meters. This partially ruined vaulted structure still exists near the Monastery of St. Onuphrius, which the Greeks built on the foundation of an ancient church in 1892. The burial tradition at this *Akeldama* site continued almost until the 19th century.

The article also delves into the linguistic and literary history of the term აკელდამა [Akeldama] in the Georgian language. It notes that the Georgian term is linked not just to the biblical meaning of the "field of blood" but also to its role as a place of Christian burial, where both martyrs and pilgrims were laid to rest. The term აკელდამა [Akeldama] in the Georgian language reflects this dual tradition, blending the biblical association with Judas' betrayal with the more positive, redemptive connotation that emerged during the later period. Such a transformation of the semantic meaning of the word აკელდამა [Akeldama] is explained in the article by the tradition of burying pilgrims in a place known by this name in Jerusalem, which must have been well known to Georgians at that time through their religious centers in Jerusalem.

Georgian lexicographers are generally familiar with both meanings of the word. აკლდამა [Akldama] is defined by Sulkhan-Saba as "a burial tomb," while აკელდამა [Akeldama] is explained as "a field of blood," based on the reference in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Niko Chubinashvili writes: *Akeldama*—Hebrew for 'a field of blood'; from this comes the term *Akldama*, which refers to an underground vault for the burial of the dead.

Similar to Sulkhan-Saba, who he draws upon, Ioane Bagrationi distinguishes between აკელდამა [Akeldama] and აკლდამა [Akldama]. He explains that აკელდამა [Akeldama] is Hebrew and "refers to a place in Jerusalem," "a field of blood" (citing the *Acts of the Apostles*). On the other hand, აკლდამა [Akldama] is a cemetery with an arched structure built beneath a church, where the dead are laid without a proper burial in a coffin. აკლდამა [Akldama] also refers to a burial vault, where the bones of the deceased are gathered and stored, and similarly, in the monastery of the saints, the bones of martyrs are collected together in an organized manner.

In Georgian written sources, the forms აკალდამა [Akaldama], and აკელდამა [Akeldama] are used interchangeably to refer to burial structures and are not associated with the betrayal of Judas. აკალდამა [Akaldama] is mentioned in the Georgian translation of the work *The Capture of Jerusalem*. The form აკელდამა [Akeldama] appears in *The Life of St. Gregory of Khandzta* and it is noteworthy that in this passage, Giorgi Merchule, the author, refers to a divine miracle. This aligns perfectly with the explanation of Ioane Bagrationi, who states that აკლდამა [Akldama] is the place where the bones of saints and martyrs are kept.

To summarize, აკელდამა/აკლდამა [Akeldama/Akldama] evolved from a symbol of betrayal to a sacred Christian burial site, with deep spiritual significance for medieval pilgrims. The transformation of the term's meaning reflects the broader Christian reinterpretation of sacred places and their role in the journey toward spiritual redemption. The evolution of the term აკელდამა/აკლდამა [Akeldama/Akldama] in Georgian display a shift in its semantic meaning, from a site of betrayal and sin to an honorable burial vault, influenced by the Christian tradition and the historical use of burial sites in Jerusalem. Earlier and especially during the Crusader period, *Akeldama* transformed from a biblical place of disgrace into a Christian burial ground for pilgrims who died in Jerusalem, corresponding words from the Gospel of Matthew, that the chief priests bought this field to bury strangers. The practice of constructing tombs for pilgrims and taking soil from the site to be placed in European cemeteries indicates the deep spiritual significance that *Akeldama* held for medieval Christians. This significance was well known to the Georgians of the time, through their religious centers in Jerusalem. This context, in turn, influenced the semantic evolution of the term აკელდამა/აკლდამა [Akeldama/Akldama], leading to a complete inversion of its original meaning - from Judas's betrayal to an honorable burial structure.