

Georgian Churches in the Eastern Provinces of Turkey

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Abstract : Georgia became Christian in the 4th century. During the 7th and 8th centuries, Georgia, with its capital at Tiflis, was devastated by Arab invasions from the south and east. Tiflis was abandoned and a new Georgia, with its capital at present-day Ardahan; in Turkey, was established, based on the provinces of Tao, Klarjeti and Shavsheti. Georgian power revived during the 9th century and the new kings embarked on a notable period of church building, each prince intent on raising memorials to his reign. Georgia was weakened again in the 11th century. First, by Byzantium which now feared the Georgians' growing power and, second, by the advance of the Seljuk Turks. But defeat did not last long and under David II, 'the Builder', Georgian armies recaptured Tiflis in 1122, heralding a second political and cultural renaissance. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of monuments in 9th-11th centuries. Kingdom of Georgia's boundaries have changed lots of times over the centuries, and consequently a considerable number of churches are to be found in other countries, especially in north-eastern provinces of Turkey. Georgian monuments spread to valleys of the Çoruh, Oltu and Tortum rivers in north-east Turkey. These churches have significant role in architectural history. The medieval Georgians and the Armenians had known contacts with Byzantium. Their churches influenced mid-Byzantine architecture and were a factor in the evolution of the Romanesque style in Europe. In the centuries following the inclusion of Tao and Klarjeti within the expanding Ottoman Empire, the monasteries and churches were gradually abandoned with migration of Christian population. Although some of those monuments are in good condition through the conversion of churches to use as mosques, the rest of those monuments are under threat from neglect and lack of maintenance. Many fell into ruin or were plundered for their stone; others were damaged by earthquakes, by treasure hunters. The only hope for the Georgian churches is for them to be recognised as a touristic value in a beautiful region of deep valleys and magnificent mountain scenery. As coeval churches in modern Georgian boundaries, these churches in north-eastern provinces of Turkey have to be evaluated by UNESCO. This study aims to create awareness about the conservation of Georgian churches in north-eastern provinces of Turkey as world heritage taking advantages of tourism. Georgian churches as a heritage should be evaluated not only a monument but also cultural landscape. The cultural route is created visiting both churches and the other medieval structures in these regions.

Keywords : Georgian churches, medieval monuments, Tao-Klarjeti, Turkey

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