

GEORGIA

The Sioni Church near Ateni

The Sioni Church is an outstanding example of early and high medieval art in Georgia with excellent remains of the original building structure, large-scale medieval paintings from the 12th century and several historic inscriptions on the exterior. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the structural design and the painted surfaces, i.e. the painting ground, the inscriptions and the structure of the walls, are closely connected. Therefore, any disturbance of the sensitive masonry will immediately affect the paintings inside. The church's stonework was constructed in a very precise way, probably based on a local construction technique that was only applied at a certain time. It is the use of a three-shelled wall structure with solid core and thin, upright stone slabs whose joints fit exactly, but which are not firmly attached to the core.

Unfortunately, due to the peculiarity of this structure the stonework also reacts very sensitively to interferences. External impacts, such as earthquakes, damages to the substructure and the plinth masonry have time and again resulted in constructional defects and afterwards in several consolidation and repair campaigns.

The present damages at the southern conch are part of these general structural problems: After a successful consolidation of the main cupola in the second half of the 20th century, structural ele-

ments in the south began to tilt – a development that has not stopped to the present day. The consequences have been cracks and a local overstress of the masonry, which in turn have led to serious damages to the shells of the wall structure and therefore to an acute endangerment of the medieval wall paintings in the areas concerned. Furthermore, the present condition of the abutment piers could result in static instability. A consolidation is therefore urgently needed.

(For a more detailed account of the damages to this church and its wall paintings see R. Barthel/H. Maus/C. Kayser, "Die Sioni-Kirche von Ateni", in: *Toccare – Non Toccare*, ICOMOS Journals of the German National Committee XLVII, Munich 2009, pp. 89–105.)

Upper Svaneti

Preserved by its long isolation, the Upper Svaneti region of the Caucasus is an exceptional example of a cultural landscape. Situated on the upper reaches of the Inguri river basin between the Caucasus and Svaneti ranges on an altitude of 1 500–2 100 m, it is formed by small medieval-type fortified villages from the 9th to the 16th centuries and situated on the mountain slopes with a natural environment of gorges and alpine valleys and a backdrop of snow-covered mountains. The most notable feature of the settlements is

Sioni Church, painted interior of the south conch (photo: Barthel & Maus)



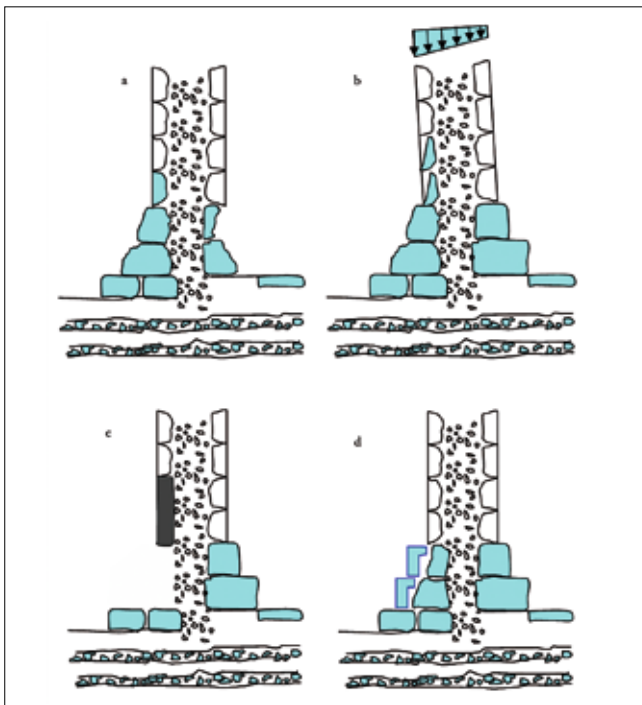


Sioni Church, cap stone in the vault of the south conch: the stone has sunk 30 mm (photo: Barthel & Maus)



Sioni Church, vault of the south conch with fallen-off cap stone: the mortar shows an imprint of the lost stone trapezoidal in its cross section (photo: Barthel & Maus)

Damages at the base. a: stones weathered on the inner side; b: outside detachments of up to 12 cm; c: concrete seal from the last renovation campaign and missing stones at the base; d: damages hidden by stones placed in front during the last renovation campaign (drawings: Barthel & Maus)



the abundance of tower houses, especially in Mestia and the frontier villages, such as Ushguli and Latali. These tower houses were used both as dwellings and defence posts against invaders who plagued the region for centuries. Between four and twenty metres high, the towers stand in the middle of the village, each of them between four family houses. They have three to five storeys and the thickness of the walls decreases. The upper floors were exclusively for defensive purposes, serving as observation platforms and for storing and throwing projectiles; they have machicolated parapets crowned with arches.

Many of the tower houses have disappeared or are falling into ruins. However, in the village of Chazhashi in Ushguli Commune more than 200 towers and 400 houses have survived, but Chazhashi and the old part of Mestia were designated as museum-reserves as early as in 1970–1971, and in 1991 the Republic of Georgia declared the whole Svaneti region a reserve. Included on the World Heritage List since 1996, the villages have become tourist destinations, and economic benefits as well as conservation challenges have resulted.

Following the *Getty Newsletter* of summer 2000 the Getty Grant Programm started working in the Upper Svaneti region with a team of specialists to document the villages of Murkmeli, Chazhashi, Chvibiani and Zhibiani. Consequently, the Georgia National Committee of ICOMOS and the municipalities themselves started to develop a long-range plan for preservation and site management that will accommodate the growing tourism while protecting these rare places. “To approach the complex issues on the Georgian site, ICOMOS Georgia has assembled an interdisciplinary team of Georgian professionals and international specialists with expertise in art history, architectural conservation, materials conservation, engineering, archaeology, and heritage tourism. In close collaboration with local officials and based on the research and documentation gathered during the process, the team will create a long-term strategy to preserve the area and to manage tourism. To ensure that the community has the skills and resources to address current as well as future preservation efforts, the project team developed a series of on-site training components, ranging from student involvement in daily fieldwork to interactive seminars with the local community on the challenges of daily maintenance, repair, and preventive measures” (*Getty Newsletter*, 2000).

Nevertheless, the decay of the towers continues to this day, many of them being on the brink of collapse, as stated in a report published in *Georgia Today* about a meeting in Mestia on February 18, 2010 between the CENN network of non-governmental organisations and local residents to discuss the towers (story by Tea Topuria in Svaneti, IWPR, April 9, 2010). According to this report local residents are not allowed to repair the towers themselves, since they are state monuments, and therefore the locals have even stopped to restore the roofs. As derelict towers also pose a threat to the local population, because falling stones could easily hit people below, and as even in the reserve village of Chazhashi the authorities have only undertaken cosmetic repairs on the towers, the tower owners have been debating about the creation of an association to represent their interests. On enquiry the National Agency for the Protection of Cultural Heritage declared that in 2009 eleven towers were re-roofed, for 2010 another 15 are planned, but the repair of all the towers cannot happen in two or three years – it “will happen gradually”. The Agency also declared that local people were free to repair their towers, but the Agency would have to approve the plans first. As a consequence special training courses would have to be set up to train local people. In addition, initiatives in 2010 from different international foundations like the “Tourist Centre of Svaneti”



Tower house in Revaz Khojelani, Upper Svaneti

Tower house in Nodar Gvarliani, Upper Svaneti



(founded in 1996 as an NGO) to implement a project to repair four towers in the village of Laghami/Mestia Commune with financial assistance from the German Government are very important and necessary contributions to the safeguarding of this unique heritage.

Christoph Machat

Bagrati Cathedral, Kutaisi

Bagrati Cathedral (11th century) is an outstanding example of medieval ecclesiastical architecture. Apart from its high artistic value, it is a symbol of Georgia's national identity. In June 2009, the Georgian Ministry of Culture, Monument Protection and Sports approved the Bagrati Cathedral Rehabilitation Plan. Together with Gelati Monastery Bagrati Cathedral has been on the World Heritage List since 1994. The agreed plan envisages a reinforcement of the existing structures with the aim of a complete reconstruction of the cathedral.

Works already carried out at the site are a very crude intervention into the authentic fabric, due to an excessive use of reinforced cement and an inadequate methodology: the reinforcement of the entire foundation by using massive reinforced cement has led to the destruction of archaeological layers; all columns and the arch in the interior were dismantled; the authentic bases of columns were perforated for the arrangement of concrete piles; the apse masonry was bored for cement injections, etc. The applied methodology is destroying the authenticity of the site and may lead to a loss of the site's outstanding universal value.

On 14 September 2009 a group of Georgian experts initiated a public appeal to the Government officials to halt the ongoing works and ensure international expertise, because the project had not been agreed with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. Later, the Group of Bagrati Appeal distributed among the international conservation community an appeal with the request to support the "Save Bagrati Cathedral" movement in convincing the Georgian Government to ensure a wide international involvement in the eval-

Bagrati Cathedral before the intervention





Bagrati Cathedral, the interior before intervention

Bagrati Cathedral, the interior during reconstruction works in 2009



Authentic column bases perforated for the arrangement of concrete piles





Restoration of the wall facing by means of a metal net and cement mortar

uation of the existing situation, in order to avoid any further loss of the cultural significance of Bagrati Cathedral. Regretfully, these efforts were not successful.

On 29 July 2010 the World Heritage Committee at its 43rd session placed Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery (Georgia) on the List of World Heritage in Danger. *“The Committee expressed its serious concern about irreversible interventions carried out on the site as part of a major reconstruction project. The Committee believes this project will undermine the integrity and authenticity of the site and should be immediately halted.”*

Nato Tsintsabidze
Secretary General, ICOMOS Georgia

Shchusev’s IMEL in Tbilisi is Endangered

The main artery of 19th-century Tbilisi, Shota Rustaveli Avenue, consists of chronologically and stylistically distinguished buildings. These differ in terms of architectural value, but each building is also important from the urbanistic point of view. The great majority of buildings on this avenue are listed.

Among the early Soviet buildings erected on Rustaveli Avenue, the building which formerly housed the Georgian branch of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (IMEL) is noteworthy. It was designed in 1938 by the well-known Russian architect Alexei Shchusev (1873–1949), who also designed Lenin’s Mausoleum in Moscow.

Noteworthy is the main facade of the building facing the avenue, for which traditional Georgian yellow stone material was used and which was adorned with giant pillars of dark grey granite, thus using inspirations from the decoration of medieval Georgian architecture. The side elevation with a Georgian portico also follows the traditional artistic composition and stands in contrast to the plain facade overlooking the narrow street.

But what makes Shchusev’s Tbilisian creation unique is its back facade built in the constructivist style. The architectural values can

mostly be found in the round central part of the back facade located between side wings, and in its artistic plainness and simplicity with free articulation of the components of classical adornments.

The IMEL building used to have a rich interior decoration which made this early Soviet masterpiece almost the only example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Tbilisi. In 2006 the building was delisted by the authorities. Afterwards it was sold to a company, which declared that the building would be converted into the Kempinski Hotel.

Despite strong protest from the heritage conservation community, which believes that the structure should be preserved in its authentic state, in September 2009 the demolition of the rear side wings started and has continued until today. The whole interior decoration has been lost. Therefore, an important example of 20th-century architecture is endangered.

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IMEL building (photo: M. Mania)

IMEL building, back façade (photo: M. Mania)

