

World Heritage Sites of Georgia

Georgia is one of the oldest countries in the Caucasus, which has preserved its rich and age-old cultural heritage, comprising monuments of diverse chronology beginning from the Pre-Christian epoch up to Middle Ages and Modern time.

Since its independence in 1991 Georgia has joined the World Heritage Convention and as a State Party of the Convention has prepared tentative list of the most significant sites of Georgia for inscription on the World Heritage List (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>). Up to day three sites: City-Museum Reserve of Mtskheta, Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery (Kutaisi), Ushguli Community, Upper Svaneti, are already listed as World Heritage Sites, while Tbilisi Historic District and Vardzia-Khertvisi Historic Aerial are nominated for the inscription on World Heritage List.

Properties inscribed

City-Museum Reserve of Mtskheta

City-Museum, architectural reserve Mtskheta is a multilayer site testifying to the large scale of building activity and universal culture of the country. Preserved architectural monuments and unearthed archaeological material bear witness to the high artistic value of building technique and minor arts in different epochs. Enormous is the historic significance of the site, as it had reflected most crucial stages of the Georgian history.

According to the archaeological excavations, the first settlement had emerged in the 2nd mil. B.C. and from 3rd mil. B.C. Mtskheta became the first capital of eastern Georgia - Iberia Kingdom. Ruins of large fortification structures, palaces, temples are preserved on its territory: Armazistsikhe (Armazi fortress), 4th-2nd cc. B.C. – early middle ages; residence of Kartli Eristavi (rulers) in Armaziskhevi 1st – 3rd cc. A.D., with its well-preserved bath-house; Necropolis, 2nd- mil. B.C.; Mausoleum, late 1st c. A.D., one of the interesting monuments of Antique culture in Georgia; city-site Dzalisi, in one of the bath houses of which a mosaic floor with the images connected with the cult of Dionysus (2nd – 3rd cc. A.D.) was discovered.

After the declaring of Christianity as an official religion (early 4th c.) new ecclesiastical buildings were erected in Mtskheta and though the capital was moved to Tbilisi (5th c A.D.), Mtskheta had still, even to our days, retained its significance of religious center of the country. A great number of grand churches of the highest artistic value form the ensemble of the city. In the center dominates Svetitskhoveli cathedral, built in 1010-1029 on the place of the original wooden (4th c.) and later basilica (5th C.) church.

This ensemble is well supported by the church crowning the hill by the junction of rivers Mtkvari and Aragvi, - the grand church of the Holly Cross “Jvari” (586-604), a classical sample of Georgia architecture, an amazing example of the unity of architecture and its surrounding landscape. In general the monuments of Mtskheta are of stage-marking significance in the development of Georgian architecture.



Jvari Monastery

Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery (Kutaisi)

A cathedral church, erected by the King Bagrat III in Kutaisi, is one of the most significant 11th c. samples of architecture, known as “Bagrati Church”. The construction of the church was finished in 1003. Turk invaders had exploded it in 1691 and up to now the church is preserved in grand monumental ruins.

The church is of the triconch plan. General aspect of the church is grand and monumental, varied and dynamic. The church amazes and fascinates the visitor by refined proportions, free and artistic rendering of the mouldings, ornamental decoration and arches as well as by the lightness of constructions.

Ornamental decoration of “Bagrati Church” makes it possible to trace the evolution of the Georgian architectural ornamentation during a spell, lesser than half a century, representing fine samples of the world architectural ornamentation.

Gelati Monastery is founded in 1106 by the King David the Builder. The ensemble comprises well-preserved monuments of high artistic and historical value. Gelati was also, the most significant old Georgian center of the scholarly activity and education, which is testified to by the academy, active in the monastery (12th. C.).

The main cathedral of the ensemble is a grand cruciform domed church of the Virgin, the chancel of which shelters contemporary, 12th.c mosaics, while the interior is completely adorned with frescoes (12th –17th cc.). A small domed church, dedicated to St. George (architecture 13th. c., murals 16th. c.) is erected to the east of the main church, while a two-storied church of St. Nicolas (13th. c.) is built to the west of the main church; an Academy (12th. c.) is situated next to the former, and a bell-tower (12th 13th cc) is erected above the spring, to the north-west of the main church.

Monastery architecture is limited to the 12th 13th cc. forming a compact, stylistically homogeneous ensemble. Its grand, monumental architecture is distinguished by a restrained, moderate decoration. The interior of the main church is solemn, full of light and spacious.

Gelati ensemble is especially noteworthy for specimens of architecture, mosaic, mural, metalwork and enamels. High artistic level of execution of Gelati mosaic composition places it among the monuments of worldwide significance. Mural painting, comprising vast chronological limits, from 12th c. up to 17th cc, is a peculiar, most significant museum of the medieval Georgia mural painting. Outstanding samples of Georgian metalwork, famous Khakhuli enamel icon (12th c) among them, and illuminated manuscripts were kept in Gelati.

Due to their “Outstanding Universal Value”, Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery are not monuments of merely national significance, being the best samples of the medieval Christian architecture and are justly inscribed on World Heritage List.

Upper Svaneti

Svaneti, one of the oldest historic-geographical provinces of Georgia (western Georgian highland), is located on south slopes of the Great Caucasus Ridge, at the sources of the rivers Enguri and Tskhenistskali. It is surrounded by hardly accessible natural boundaries: from the North – the Great Caucasus Ridge, from the East – Racha Ridge, from the Southwest – Egrisi and Apkhazeti Ridges.

Thanks to its geographical location and natural conditions, over the centuries Svaneti was physically isolated from the historical cataclysms taking place in its neighboring regions, although it always shared historical life of the Georgian state. In the times of hardship Svaneti was a kind of treasury for the whole country. This fact has preconditioned preservation of a great number of monuments of art of Georgian and foreign provenance on the territory of Svaneti. Besides, Svaneti was one of the significant cultural centres of the Medieval Georgia – local, original school of painting, metal workshops, etc. were active here. Especially rich is Svaneti in its peculiar ecclesiastical and secular architectural heritage.

Ushguli – historical community in the outlying east part of Upper Svaneti – is especially interesting, due to its historical and artistic significance. It comprises four villages – Murkmeli, Chazhashi, Chvibiani and Zhibiani. Ushguli is one of the highest inhabited settlements in the Europe (2,200 m. above the sea level).

Natural conditions and historical development processes of Svaneti in general and Upper Svaneti, in particular, had preconditioned establishment of emphatically original mode of life and cultural environment of this region, namely Ushguli settlement; on the other hand, the same factors had ensured preservation of authenticity of this cultural space, its architectural environment.

Ushguli settlement is a homogeneous, compact system of villages located along a single longitudinal axis. The settlement comprises all architectural types characteristic of Svaneti: a church, a tower/defense, machubi/historically residential and subsidiary, and fortified dwelling/residential-defense. It is noteworthy that tower plays a significant part in the artistic and architectural identity of the Svanish dwelling. It is the major determinant of the silhouette of Svanish architectural ensembles, being even perceived as a symbol of Svaneti.

Nature and authentic historic architecture is the major factor determining values of Ushguli as a cultural landscape.



Upper Svaneti, Typical village



Upper Svaneti, Svan Towers

Nominated Sites

Tbilisi Historic District

Tbilisi, one of the oldest Christian cities in the world, is a city-chronicler, an interesting and distinct illustration of its historic life beginning from the 5th c. AD up to present. Tbilisi Historic District represents 19th c. urban fabric with the samples of the monumental architecture of diverse typology (5th-19th cc.) scattered within it.

Relatively late date of the residential quarters is preconditioned by the fact that in 1795, during the invasion of Aga-Mahmad-Khan, Tbilisi quarters within the city fortified walls were damaged to a considerable extent. Rehabilitation and enlargement of the city in the 19th c. coincided with the annexation of Georgia to the Russian Empire. Russian Empire had chosen Tbilisi as an administrative and cultural centre of the Transcaucasus. Due to this, Russian authorities decided to build “Modern Tbilisi” on the areas outside the old – Medieval – city walls, based on the regular planning structure and “model” projects. At the same time revival of old – Medieval – city was begun by the local folk craftsmen. In response to the vital necessities this process developed very rapidly and by the mid 19th c. rebuilding of the “Old City” was mainly finished, while “Modern Tbilisi” quarters were finally

formed by the second half of the 19th c.-first decades of the 20th c. That is why, division of the Tbilisi Historic District – into “Old” and “Modern” parts is somewhat conventional, though not groundless.

Up to present “**Old Tbilisi**” coincides with the major core of the city established in the 5th c. During its revival in the 19th c. network of the narrow irregular streets and Medieval planning structure was preserved. Of special significance is the so called “Tbilisian” type dwelling – two-three storied brick buildings, with a system of wide, developed wooden balconies, galleries, passages and exterior staircases and a courtyard functioning as a kind of a vestibule. Here unique model of the spatial organisation is formed, in which the verge between exterior and interior is maximally diminished.

“**Modern Tbilisi**” manifests quite an interesting phenomenon. The city, which was to be built based on typical or individual projects in accordance to the European styles, had acquired a clear-cut individual identity thanks to the folk craftsmen, who were implementing these projects. Secluded spatial organisation of a dwelling was so alien to the local community that a compromise solution was found: European style was preserved on the facade, while planning, structure and especially spatial organisation of a courtyard were fully grounded on the national tradition. Ultimately, “Modern Tbilisi” had preserved clear-cut Tbilisian character, representing a somewhat new stage in the development of the urban vernacular architecture.

Two parts of Tbilisi Historic District – “Old” and “Modern” – differing in their planning structure are united by the common Tbilisian character, have outstanding universal value, being an original urban phenomenon corresponding to the present-day “open society”.



Old Tbilisi, Kala District



Typical Dwelling in Old Tbilisi

Vardzia Khertvisi Historic Areal

Vardzia Khertvisi Historic Areal is the oldest Georgian historical-geographical and administrative unit, which is traceable back to the Prehistoric epoch and had retained and heightened its significance in the course of the whole Middle Ages. According to present administrative division, Vardzia-Khertvisi area is located in Aspindza district. In the past it used to form part of Lower Javakheti.

The site, comprising a vast territory in the upper reaches of the river Mtkvari basin, and spread over 18 km. from Khertvisi (Medieval residence) to Vardzia (12th-13th cc. rock-cut monastery) is significant in many respects: unique natural conditions had created favorable conditions for the emergence of prehistoric life in the area and development of farming, which was practised here in its intense and highly developed form - terrace farming; historical context: Vardzia-Khertvisi gorge formed part of Javakheti saeristavo (administrative-territorial unit in Old Georgia). In High Middle Ages it was included into the royal domain; and finally, diversity of cultural heritage, which is distinguished by the abundance of monuments of rock-cut and built architecture, mural painting, epigraphic and archaeology.

This region is characterised by the rocks of volcanic origin, providing vast possibilities of their using. Rock-cut monuments preserved in Vardzia-Khertvisi gorge comprise quite vast chronological limits - from the 8th-9th cc. up to 15th-16th cc. Best samples among them are Vanis Kvabebbi and Vardzia Grand Monastery, which is stretched over 500 m. comprising more than 600 compartments, among them 15 churches. Caves in Vardzia are arranged in 5,7, in certain cases 13 tiers, which are connected with one another by means of holes cut in this ceiling and secret tunnels. Building activity in Vardzia - Royal monastery - mainly comprised second half of 12th c. up to the end of the 13th c. It was begun by the King George III (1156-1184) and continued by his daughter, King Tamar (1184-1213).

Eastern part of the Vardzia complex shelters main church of the monastery, a spring, “Tamar’s room”, “sadarbazo” (meeting hall), ‘salkhino” (reception hall), apotheca, majority of monastery vine cellars and a secret tunnel. Main church of the Dormition is an aisles vaulted church and entirely painted. The murals are dated to 1184-1185. Northern wall bears portraits of the royal family: King George III, and his daughter King Tamar. Due to its highly artistic merits, manner of execution and progressive tendencies Vardzia murals are justly recognised as one of the masterpieces of the medieval mural painting.

Fortification structures of the nominated site are erected in strategically important places. At the same time, aesthetic aspects are also taken into consideration, being reflected in the ingenuous merging with the setting.



Khertvisi Fortress



Khertvisi Fortress, Main Wall

14 km from the regional centre (Aspindza), by the junction of two rivers, on a top of a high rock, located is Khertvisi fortress. This is one of the well preserved fortification structures in Georgia, erected in the 10th c. and renovated several times in the course of its history.

Archaeological excavations provide evidence on dense habitation of this area beginning from the Eneolithic epoch. Burial-mounds unearthed here (17th-16th cc. BC) confirm existence of the local centre of Trialeti culture. They show that at that period the gorge was inhabited by separate families united in tribal organisations.

The historic area is rich in the epigraphical monuments - building and memorial inscriptions, executed in old Georgian uncial script "Asomtavruli", which represent an important historical source. Vast chronological range of these monuments show development of the letter outlines from the 9th c. up to 18th c. Of special interest are painted inscriptions and inscriptions written in ink in Vanis Kvabebi.

The site has preserved samples of rock-cut "darbazi" (Gamogma Chachkari, 10th-11th cc., Vanis Kvabebi, 8th-9th cc.), as well as timber "darbazi" (Cholta, Zeda Tmogvi, Gagma Chachkari, etc.).



Vanis Kvabebi

Among the monuments preserved in the Vardzia-Khertvisi, distinguished are tetrahedral stone stelae erected in the open air (Zeda Tmogvi, Pia, etc.). Tradition of erecting such stelae in Georgia goes back to the period of Christianisation of the country (4th c.). These monuments are decorated with ornamentation, symbolic and figure representations. Chronological range of these interesting samples of the Medieval Georgian art covers 6th-9th cc.

Vardzia-Khertvisi area has preserved both churches of high artistic value and ordinary modest chapels. These are mainly domeless structures. Special mention should be made of the two aisled churches type samples of which are also preserved here - Zeda Vardzia 11th c.

In case of both nominated sites: **Tbilisi Historic District** and **Vardzia-Khertvisi Historic Area**, World Heritage Centre Bureau has recognized the "Outstanding Universal Value" of the sites, as well as expressed its satisfaction with the authenticity of the nominated sites, but deferred both sites, subject to development of the proper management plans and guideline for rehabilitation. This fact indicates weakness of the institutional and administrative structure of the heritage preservation field in Georgia. Lack of risk preparedness planning, management network and absence of the everyday

maintenance resulting in the near loss of most distinguished properties of Georgian cultural heritage, places entire cultural heritage of Georgia at risk ([H@R](#)).

ICOMOS Georgia
icomosge@gol.ge