

Identification

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| <i>Nomination</i> | The historical church ensemble of Mtskheta |
| <i>Location</i> | Mtskheta District |
| <i>State Party</i> | Republic of Georgia |
| <i>Date</i> | 28 October 1993 |

Justification by State Party

Mtskheta is a multi-layered monument, its surviving architectural monuments and the excavated archaeological material testifying to the wide range of building activity and the high level of culture of the country from the 2nd millennium BC to the present era.

The architectural monuments are significant in the development of the architecture of Georgia and at the same time for the development of medieval architecture over the whole Christian area. They are also striking examples of the unity of architecture with its surrounding landscape.

Of special interest from an artistic and historical point of view are the early mosaics and metalwork discovered by excavation, along with the Armazi inscriptions, which provide a large database for the study of the origins of the Georgian language.

History and Description*History*

The strategic location of Mtskheta at the crossing of ancient trade routes and the confluence of the Aragvi and Mtkvari rivers, its mild climate, and its fertile soil contributed to early human settlement in the area. Archaeological excavations have shown that it was flourishing in the Bronze Age (3000-2000 BC). A rich hierarchical society developed, based on agriculture, crafts, and trade. The 4th century BC saw the emergence of powerful Georgian tribes. With the collapse of the empire of Alexander the Great the east Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Iberia came into being with its capital at Mtskheta.

At this time Mtskheta straddled both banks of the river and was divided into several distinct quarters: the Armaz-tsikhe (citadel and royal residence) was at the heart of the city and fortified quarters allocated to specialized trades clustered around it, making up "Great Mtskheta". The city was destroyed by Pompey the Great after his defeat of Mithridates the Great of Pontus in 65 BC. However, the city rose again after his withdrawal, and in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD Iberia became a powerful state which played an important role in the politics of the region.

Christianity was brought to Mtskheta in the 4th century by St Nino, and became the official state religion in 334. The first wooden church was built in the palace garden, where the Svetitskhoveli church now stands.

Political developments in the 4th and 5th centuries resulted in the capital of Kartli being transferred to Tbilisi by Prince Dachi in the 6th century. However, Mtskheta retained a prominent role as the religious centre of the country and the seat of the *katolicos* (later elevated to patriarch). It suffered grievously in the invasion by Murvan-Kru (736-8) and was reduced in size to a small area between the rivers Mtkvari and

Aragvi. It was ravaged again by Tamurlaine the Great in the 15th century. Nevertheless, a number of monuments from the earlier periods have survived.

When Georgia became part of Russia in 1801 Mtskheta was no more than a village in the Dusheti district. However, its economic situation was improved when the Poti-Tbilisi railway was built in 1872.

Description

The citadel (Armaz-tsikhe) of Great Mtskheta is located on the side of Bagineti mountain on the right bank of the river Mtkvari. It was surrounded by a number of distinct quarters, such as Tsitsamuri-Sevsamora (mentioned by Strabo), occupied by farmers, and the Sarkine quarter of metal-workers, each with its own defensive walls, baths, water supply, etc.

The walls of the Armaz-tsikhe fortress, built in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, enclose an area of nearly 30 ha. There are large rectangular towers spaced at 50 m intervals along the massive walls, built in alternate layers of dressed stone and mud-brick; the lower courses, which are set into the rock itself, are entirely of stone, and there are retaining buttresses on the steeper slopes. The so-called Hall of Columns is located on the lower internal terrace; it is rectangular (20.8 m x 8.9 m) and contains an axial row of six columns. Other remains from this period include the ruins of a temple on the top of Bagineti mountain and an impressive barrel-vaulted tomb.

Excavations in the Armaziskhevi valley have revealed many burials and structures from as early as the Neolithic period. These include a well preserved 2nd/3rd AD century bath-house and fragmentary remains of what must have been a sumptuous palace in proto-Hellenistic style. Of especial interest are the above-ground mortuary houses of the 1st century AD onwards; many have yielded grave-goods of high artistic value and historical importance. The excavated remains testify to the high cultural level of Great Mtskheta.

The coming of Christianity in the early 4th century resulted in intensive building activity to meet the requirements of the new religion, and many of these monuments have survived to the present day.

The Svetitskhoveli complex in the centre of the town includes the 11th century Cathedral, the palace and gates of the *katolikos* Melchisedek from the same period, and the 18th century gates of Irkali II. The Cathedral is domed and cruciform in plan. The interior was originally covered with wall paintings, but these were whitewashed over and only recently have fragments of them been revealed again. The monumental Pantocrator in the main apse is characteristic of the 11th century, but was repainted in the 19th century. The facades are ornamented with decorative arcading which unites the separate components of the structure. It was severely damaged by Tamurlaine, who commanded the supporting piers to be demolished, but it was rebuilt in the 15th century. Remodelling of the upper part of the drum took place in the 17th century, but more serious alterations took place in the 1830s on the occasion of a visit to the Caucasus by Tsar Nicholas II, when richly ornamented galleries and subsidiary chapels were ruthlessly swept away.

Opposite Svetitskhoveli on the top of the hill on the left bank of the Aragvi river is the Mtskhetis Jvari (Church of the Holy Rood), the most sacred place in Georgia, where a cross was erected by St Nino to replace heathen idols. The Jvari complex contains several buildings from different periods.

The first church, located next to the site of the cross, was built in the mid 6th century. It is a small cruciform building (8.3 m x 5.5 m) with porticos to north and south and built in dressed greenish limestone on a raised plinth. By the end of the century it was adjudged to be too small and so a new church was built on the site of the cross itself. This is also cruciform, but much larger (20.2 m x 16.25 m); the four arms terminate in semi-circular apses. It is surmounted by a small dome, giving a quality of grandeur to the interior. The exterior (of dressed yellow sandstone) is relatively plain, apart from the eastern face, which has five tall windows, each crowned by a relief carving.

The third important monument of Mtskheta is Samtavro (the Place of the Ruler) in the northern part of the town, where legend has it that St Nino lived. A small domed church (6.2 m x 3.9 m) was built in the 4th century and survives in a much restored condition. The main church of Samtavro, built in the early 11th century, is cruciform and domed and measures 27 m x 32 m. The graves of Mirian, the Georgian king who adopted Christianity, and his wife are in the north-west corner of the church. The facades are treated

differently. Those on the east and west are plain, contrasting with the elaborate ornamentation of those on the north and south. In addition to these two churches, there is also a 16th century two-storeyed bell-tower and a number of monastic structures at Samtavro.

Other important monuments in and around the town are the so-called Antioch Church (7th century), the 11th century Akhalkalakuri Monastery, the late medieval Armazi Monastery, and the 12th century Church of Kalaubani St George.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Protection of the ensemble of monuments in Mtskheta is based on the 1974 Law of Protection of the Monuments of the Georgian SSR. The town was declared a City-Museum in 1968. It is in State ownership.

Management

The Armazi area was declared a Reserve in 1940 and in 1955 a Museum of Regional Studies was set up in Mtskheta. A Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Georgian SSR in 1977 designated an area between the Aragvi and Mtkvari rivers up to the Bebristi-sikhe fortress as an Archaeological Reserve.

A plan for the development of the City-Museum was approved in 1973. This provides for the preservation of the scale and townscape of the historic part of the town, confining new development to an area to the north of the fortress. A project for the architectural and functional organization of the historical zone was completed in 1984.

Since 1974 there has been a permanent team from the I. Javakhishvili Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Georgian Academy of Sciences stationed in the town.

The Mtskheta Museum Reserve has its own management staff, headed by its Director. Policies are determined within the guidelines laid down by the Main Scientific-Production Board on the protection and Use of the Monuments of History, Culture, and Nature. Senior officials are responsible for the research, protection, and visitor aspects of the Reserve.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Owing to its turbulent history Mtskheta has seen a number of reconstructions and restorations of its principal monuments over the past millennium. The present state of the architectural and archaeological monuments is the result of systematic programmes over the past two decades.

Authenticity

The archaeological sites are entirely authentic. So far as the architectural monuments are concerned, restoration and reconstruction work carried out in the 19th century was typical of its time, though it does not conform with modern conservation standards. In terms of materials and techniques, the ensemble retains a relatively high level of authenticity, whilst the authenticity of setting is total.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

The ICOMOS evaluation mission which visited Mtskheta in May 1994 was impressed by the quality of the conservation work carried out there and by the commitment of those concerned to the management and presentation of the monuments (including the removal of inappropriate modern buildings from their environs). The mission was also given the opportunity to study and discuss protection and management plans for the monuments, which it found acceptable.

Qualities

The archaeological remains and buildings in the ancient capital of Georgia are of high quality in terms of the light that they throw upon the social, political, and economic evolution of this mountain kingdom over more than four millennia. Whilst their individual value may not be high, their group value make this a site of outstanding value.

Comparative analysis

The independent evolution of the Caucasian mountain state of Georgia over more than two thousand years is in many ways unique. It is therefore difficult, and probably irrelevant, to compare its monuments with those of neighbouring countries, where the cultural trajectory was different for a variety of reasons (geographical, climatic, religious, political).

ICOMOS comments

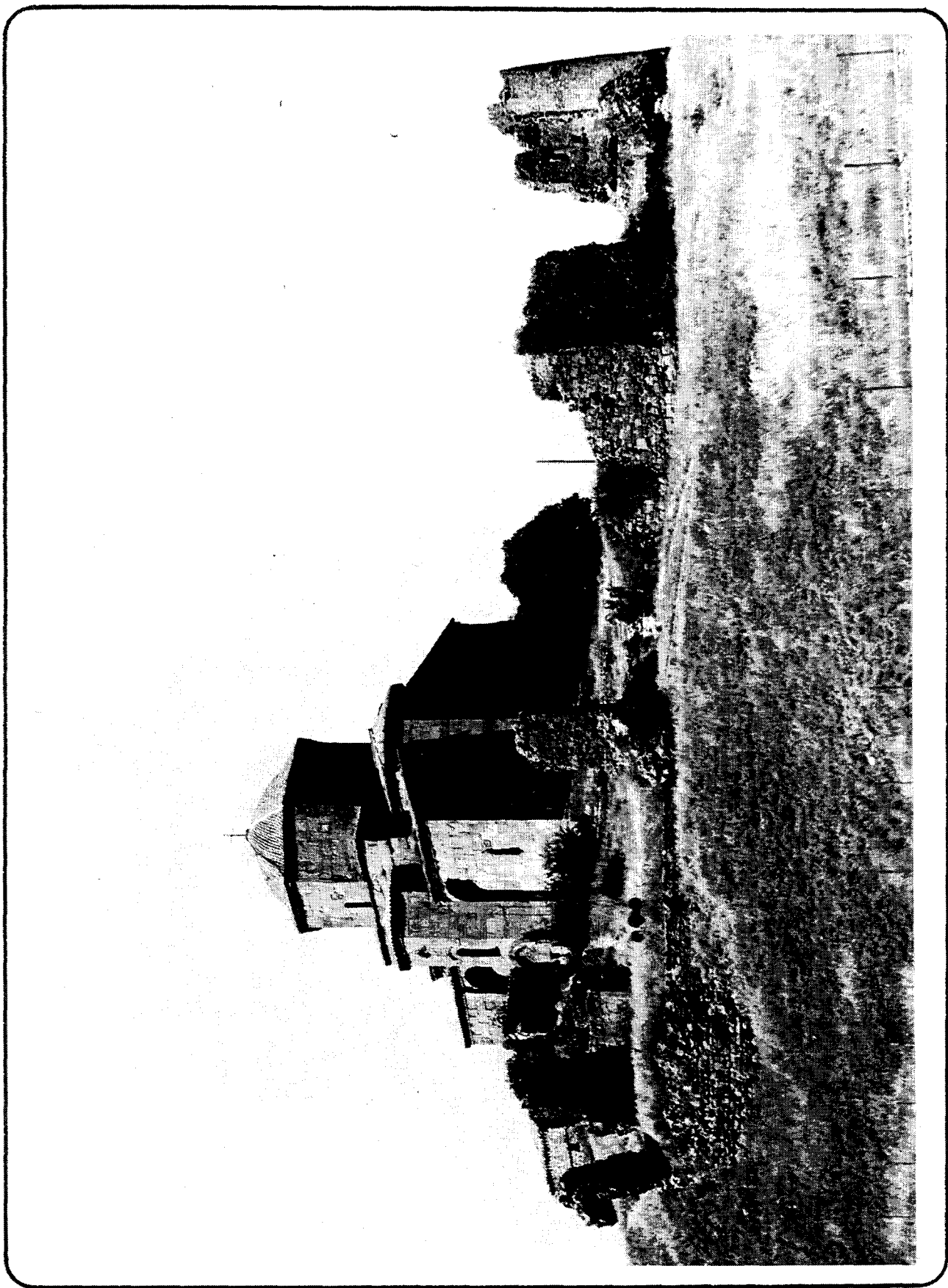
The nomination dossier submitted by the Republic of Georgia was accompanied by a number of books and other documents. Most of these are written in Russian or Georgian, neither of which is a working language of the World Heritage Convention. The most useful book, *Georgien: Wehrbauten und Kirchen*, is in German, another non-working language. More importantly, the only map provided showing the "Protective Zones of Mtskheta", was a very small-scale photographic print of a much larger map; the barely decipherable legends were, in any case, all in Georgian. However, new maps showing the areas proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List, together with buffer zones, were supplied to the mission, together with a summary of the Georgian protection legislation, as required by the *Operational Guidelines*.

Recommendation

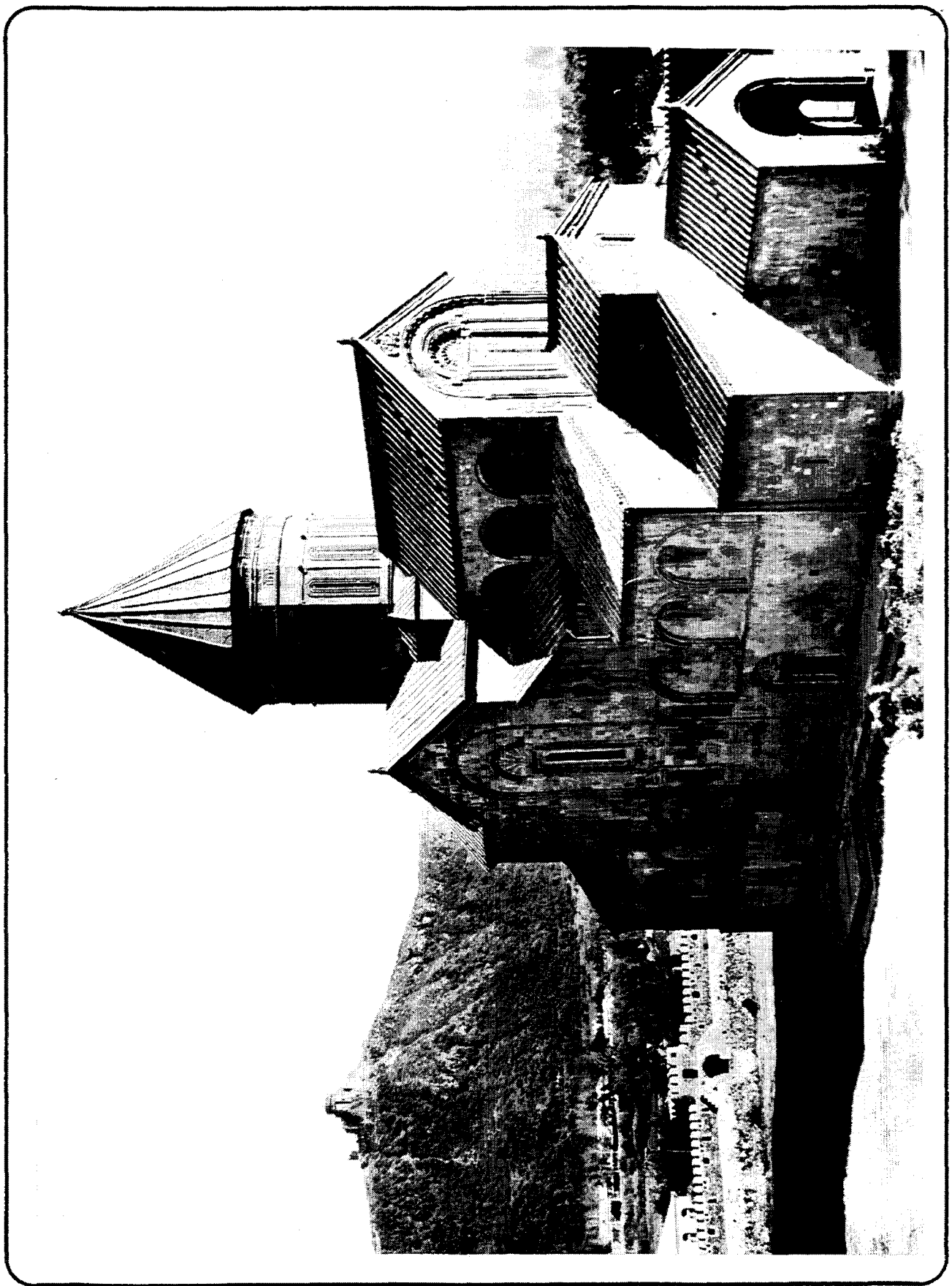
That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria iii and iv:

- **Criterion iii** The group of churches at Mtskheta bear testimony to the high level and art and culture of the vanished Kingdom of Georgia, which played an outstanding role in the medieval history of its region.
- **Criterion iv** The historic churches of Mtskheta are outstanding examples of medieval ecclesiastical architecture in the Caucasus region.

ICOMOS, October 1994



Mtskheta : Jvari, église vue du sud-est /
Jvari, Church seen from the south-east



Mtskheta : Svetitskhoveli, cathédrale /
Svetitskhoveli, Cathedral