

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Upper Svaneti
<i>Location</i>	Mestia District
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Georgia
<i>Date</i>	28 October 1993

Justification by State Party

The excellent natural conditions and the unity of architecture and landscape give this region an original quality of its own. The wealth of monumental and minor art (jewellery, metal work, manuscript illustrations, textiles and embroidery, wood-carving, icon painting, ancient forms of musical and oral folklore, vernacular architecture) are of paramount importance for the study of this region and for the history of Georgia and the Caucasus.

The monumental mural painting of Svaneti is of great importance in the study of the origins and development of Georgian and eastern Christian art. Much of the work of the Svaneti craftsmen rightfully belongs in the treasury of world art.

Note The State Party does not make any proposals concerning the criteria under which the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List in the nomination dossier.

Category of Property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Upper Svaneti is a *group of buildings*. It should also be considered to be a *cultural landscape* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description*History*

The earliest references to Svaneti occur in the works of Strabo (66 BC-AD 24), when it had already been settled for many generations and had achieved a high level of culture. From the 4th century AD it was a vassal-state of the kingdom of Lazika. When Lazika adopted Christianity in 523 the Svans followed suit, although pagan beliefs and rites persisted.

In the 8th century the Abkhaz Kingdom was established in western Georgia, with its capital at Kutaisi, to be in its turn absorbed into the united kingdom of Georgia that was finally consolidated by David II the Builder (1089-1125). A strong movement for Svan independence developed, and its feudal lords often chose the side of forces opposed to the Georgian state. This did not hinder the political and economic growth of Georgia, which spread to cover much of the region between the Black and Caspian Seas under George II and his daughter Tamar in the succeeding centuries. This was accompanied by a cultural flowering, of which Svaneti was one of the main centres, famous for its schools of metalwork, painting, wood carving, and architecture. These skills were employed by the Church, which was also rich and powerful in this period; most of the churches in Upper Svaneti date from this period.

Although Svaneti was not affected by the catastrophic Mongol invasion, it found itself increasingly isolated, and as a result its economy and culture declined in the 15th to 18th centuries. Part of Svaneti was eventually overrun by Princess Dadeshkeliani in the 15th century, but further inland, on the upper reaches of the Inguri river, the people of Upper Svaneti preserved their independence, with Mestia as their capital, until the coming of the Russians in the 19th century.

Description

The mountainous region of Upper Svaneti occupies the upper reaches of the Inguri river basin, between the Caucasus and Svaneti ranges. The only road through it runs along the river gorge. It consists of several communities, each in turn composed of several villages. It is a region of rich natural resources, such as minerals, metals, timber, wild fruits, abundant game, etc.

The characteristic landscape of Upper Svaneti is formed by small villages, dominated by their church towers 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 the abundance of towers, especially in Mestia and the frontier villages, such as Ushguli and Latali.

These towers usually have from three to five storeys and the thickness of the walls decreases, giving the towers a slender, tapering profile. Their upper floors are exclusively defensive in function, serving as platforms for observation and for storing and throwing projectiles; they have machicolated parapets crowned with arches. The houses themselves are usually two-storeyed and between 80 and 130 m² in ground area. The ground floor (*machub*) is a single hall with an open hearth and accommodation for both people and domestic animals, the latter being separated by a wooden partition, which is often lavishly decorated. A corridor annex helped the thermal insulation of the building. The upper floor (*darbazi*) was used by the human occupants in the summer, and also served as a store for fodder and tools. A door at this level provided access to the tower, which was also connected with the corridor (*gubandi*) that protected the entrance.

Continuing research on the origins of the Svaneti tower house now suggests that these go back to prehistory. Its features correspond with the economic imperatives of the communities to which they belong: intensive mountain agriculture and stock-rearing. They also throw valuable light on social organization (family size, distribution of functions, etc).

Many of the tower-houses have disappeared or are collapsing into ruins. The village of Chazhashi in Ushguli Commune has, however, been preserved as a Museum-Reserve. Here more than two hundred towers and four hundred houses have survived. The village is situated at the confluence of the Black and Inguri rivers, an easily defensible location. It is protected by two castles above and below the village; the lower castle has a small hall church known as Lashkdash; another church known as Matskhvar in which medieval wall paintings are preserved stands on a nearby hill.

The severe outlines of the Svaneti house (*machubi*) consisting of strong vertical and horizontal elements are softened by the addition of a purely decorative "cap" to the tower. The houses are built of irregularly sized stone blocks and sometimes local slate set in lime mortar.

The churches of Upper Svaneti are generally very small, rarely exceeding 20 m² and sometimes as small as 5-6 m², and not ornamented with carved external decoration. Internally, however, they are noteworthy for their wealth of wall paintings, carved doors, processional and altar crosses, and illuminated manuscripts. They range in date of construction from the early 9th to the 17th centuries, with a creative peak in the 10th-12th centuries. The wall paintings in particular are of high historical and artistic importance. A special feature of the Svaneti churches is the painted decoration on their facades, which depict Biblical and hagiological subjects.

The village of Zhibiani is one of the highest in Svaneti, some 2100 m above sea level. To the north of and dominating the village lies the Lamaria religious complex. The wall paintings on the church here are an outstanding example of Renaissance painting in Georgia. A tiny hall church known as Jrag is modelled on the Lamaria church. The village is laid out regularly on a north-south axis.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Legal protection is based on the Law for the Protection of the Monuments of the Georgian SSR. All the property is in State ownership.

Management

In 1970 the old part of Mestia was designated as a Reserve, followed by the Ushguli-Chazhashi area in 1971. The monuments of the entire region were recorded and registered in 1983-5.

Main responsibility for the management of the monuments in the region is vested in the G. Chitaia Museum of Folk Ways of Life and Architecture of the Republic of Georgia, working through its subordinate organizations, the Mestia Historical-Ethnographic Museum and the Ushguli-Chazhashi Museum-Reserve.

In 1991 the whole Svaneti region was designated as a Reserve at the request of the general public. Within this area the policy will be to preserve not only individual monuments but also the villages and the landscape as a whole. Modern building activities will be regulated and public services and amenities will be organized. A special commission is being set up to coordinate this project.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Interest in the monuments of Upper Svaneti began in the 19th century, and systematic scientific research began in the second decade of the 20th century. A Museum of Regional Studies was founded in 1936, based on the monuments of the Church of St George at Seti; since 1973 it has been a Historical-Ethnographic Museum and a branch of the S. Janashia State Museum of Georgia.

The survey of 1983-85 covered 960 monuments - 196 churches, 208 towers, 342 dwelling complexes, and three fortresses.

Monument protection bodies of the Republic of Georgia have to date carried out restoration and conservation work at 45 churches, 70 towers, and twelve dwelling complexes. A special concrete construction overlaid with traditional slate has been developed for roofing the towers; copper is used for church roofs.

The Ushguli-Chazhashi Museum-Reserve was created to preserve one village in its original form without any modern intrusions. A detailed plan has been worked out, as a result of which some of the inhabitants have elected to stay in the old buildings, which have been provided with the necessities of modern life, whilst the remainder have been resettled in neighbouring villages. Some of the unoccupied houses are being restored and furnished, whilst others will be used to house visiting scholars. A special restoration workshop is being established.

Authenticity

There are varying degrees of authenticity in the components of this nomination. The interaction between man and nature in the landscape is wholly authentic and of high importance. The restored buildings preserve a considerable degree of authenticity in materials and techniques, as well as setting. Much of the authenticity has, however, disappeared from others, as a result of the use of inappropriate modern materials. The same is true of some of the villages, where recent structures far outnumber the ancient ones.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

The ICOMOS evaluation mission that visited Georgia in May 1994 was unable to go to Upper Svaneti because of the disturbed situation there. With the restoration of more settled circumstances, the delayed mission was able to visit the region in May 1996.

Qualities

By virtue of its isolation for so many centuries, the Upper Svaneti region has preserved to a remarkable degree a mountain landscape that is essentially medieval in origin. It is also noteworthy for the remarkable tower-houses, developed to meet the needs of a population continually under threat from across its borders.

Comparative analysis

The isolation of Upper Svaneti makes it unique in this region. The only direct comparisons that might be made would be with isolated communities in the Himalayan massif, but these stem from a completely different cultural tradition.

ICOMOS comments

The nomination dossier lacks any definition of the precise area being proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. The "Description" section is wide-ranging, referring to important monuments all over the region. However, the only detailed documentation provided relates to the Ushguli-Chazhashi Museum-Reserve, for which a map showing "strict protective" and "protective" zones is supplied, and Zhibiani village, in the form of a "passport" (an official survey record).

It is not clear whether it is intended that the entire Reserve designated in 1991 is intended for inscription or one or both of the two areas singled out for special documentary support.

In the opinion of ICOMOS it would be premature for the entire Reserve to be inscribed, since it is a new creation and its policies are still being formulated. The technical condition of Zhibiani village is, according to the "passport", "in a grave condition", which would seem to disqualify it for inscription until action has been taken to remedy that situation. The Ushguli-Chazhashi Museum-Reserve, on the other hand, is clearly defined and has been in operation for several years. The best course might be for this area alone to be nominated at the present time, with the State Party retaining the option of extending the inscribed monument at some time in the future.

Recommendation

The ICOMOS recommendation that this nomination should be referred back to enable the State Party to delineate a representative and effectively managed and conserved area for inscription was approved by the Bureau at its meeting in June 1996. No response had been received when this document was prepared (September 1996) ; however, in the event of this being supplied and proving acceptable, ICOMOS recommends that this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iv and v*:

The Upper Svaneti region is an exceptional landscape that has preserved to a remarkable degree its original medieval appearance, notable for the distribution, form, and architecture of its human settlements.

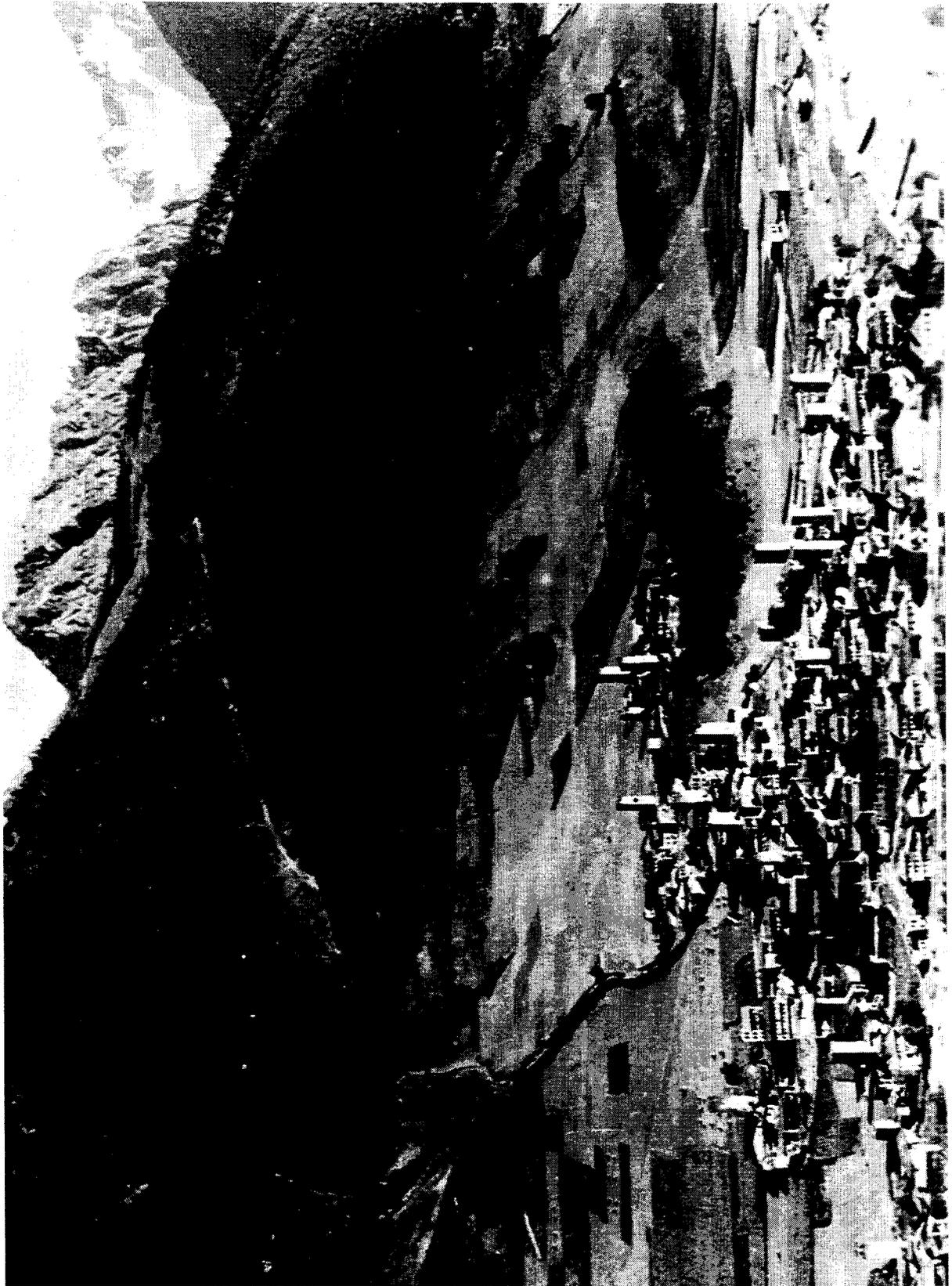
ICOMOS, October 1996



უკმა ხუანეთის (უკმა ხუანეთის რეზერვატის)
 ისტორიკო-არქიტექტურული კომპლექსის
 მ. 1:4000
 (სურათის ნაწილი, მ. 1:4000-ის ნაწილი)

Upper Svaneti (Mestia Region)
 The Reserve Zone of Ushguli Historical-Architectural Complex
 (Villages: Chulashi, Murkmeli, Chulblani, Jibiani)
 M. 1:4000

Haut Svaneti : carte de la Réserve
 Upper Svaneti : map of the Reserve



Haut Svaneti : vue d'ensemble

Upper Svaneti : general view