

Making Acquaintance With Georgia*

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Georgia was one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as its official religion, in the year 337.

In the Northwestern part of the country, the Svans remain the guardians of the Orthodox Faith and of its treasures: Icons, thousand-year-old masterpieces.

Svanetia is located there, surrounded by the highest peaks of the Caucasus, such as Mt. Elbrus (5,644 meters). In one of its villages, Ushguli, there stand imposing fortified towers, which were registered in the World Heritage of Mankind by UNESCO in 1996. They were built between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries to serve as watch towers, storehouses for food, and assuredly as hiding-places for Icons, those priceless treasures of Orthodoxy.



A small stone Church in Adishi, a mountain village. It conceals a veritable masterpiece of religious art: a triptych from the tenth century, for which an elderly guardian, German Kaldani is responsible.

We do not know the exact contents of this wealth, because very often specialists in art history have been expelled and have left empty-handed.

The brave Svans, who live on hard and barren land with interminable winters, maintain a mistrustfulness inherited from the past. In the 1960s, government representatives took a hand-made Bible adorned with precious stones, allegedly to preserve it, and never returned it. Furthermore, four foreigners were buried alive in a country chapel in 1937. They had attempted to take illegal possession of the Icon of St. Kvirike, who was martyred by the Turks, and whom the Svans consider to be their Patron Saint.

The region's deep valleys were used as a sacred hideout. Inhabitants from all the various regions of Georgia would come, loaded with treasures from their Churches, in order to protect them from the Turkish and Mongol invaders. When peace returned, the Icons were conveyed to their houses. It is always one and the same family in every village that has responsibility for them, and the secret of the designated hiding-places in the mountains is passed on only from father to son.

Unfortunately, the fear of urbanism and of the religious skepticism of the youth causes the elders anxiety. Who will protect those sacred treasures of Orthodoxy?

In order to answer this, we have to understand the bravery of these people, for whom the meaning of life is justified only by the preservation of this Orthodox heritage.

The Hidden Icons of the Caucasus

Beginning in the eleventh century, the “*machubis*”—stone towers made with straw and mud—were erected in just about all of the Christian villages in Georgia. One consequence of this form of architecture was that Upper Svanetia was registered in the World Heritage of Mankind.

Georgia was one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as its official religion. That was in the year 337. Since then, the Georgian Church has withstood Persian, Arab, and Ottoman invasions. In the Northwestern region of the country, the Svans are the guardians

of the Orthodox Faith and of its treasures: Icons, thousand-year-old masterpieces.

In the country chapel of Lagurka, there is an Icon depicting St. Kvirike, who was martyred by the Turks. He has been protecting the inhabitants of the valley for more than a thousand years.

The Svans are the guardians of the Orthodox Tradition, and the Icons are handed down from father to son.

The “*machubis*,” which are fifteen meters high, served others as shelters during the period of Moslem raids. Today, these towers are no longer being maintained and are in danger of disappearing.

Icons do not merely symbolize faith: they express the presence of God. By safeguarding them, the people are themselves protected.

“I would give my life to protect our village’s treasure. It so happened that in the past we threw from high off the towers the foreigners who wanted to appropriate it,” proudly says German Kaldani, tribal chief and guardian of Icons in a small village in Svanetia, built at a height of 2,200 meters in the mountains of Georgia. Before him, it was his father and his grandfather who guarded this treasure: many dozens of silver or golden Icons, certain of which, tradition asserts, date from the ninth century....

Wedged into the Northwest of Georgia, near the Russian border and surrounded by the highest peaks of the Caucasus, such as Mt. Elbrus (5,644 meters), Svanetia is a region shrouded in mystery. It is the living heart of a legendary Georgia: that of Jason and the Argonauts, who found the Golden Fleece in its river beds, as well as that of the savage, warlike tribes that very early came to Christianity, while always jealously guarding their secrets.

Over three days are needed to traverse the 250 kilometers that separate these low valleys from the capital city of Tbilisi. The road is terrible. While at first it follows a peaceful valley, later it becomes winding, after which one goes up along passes from which there extend landscapes of incredible ruggedness.

The numerous landslides, displacements of the soil, and avalanches can close off the road for many weeks at a time, throughout the year. Perhaps we can see in this isolation why the Svans are called “guardians of the Faith.”

Treasures As Yet Unknown to Us

Despite Georgia's independence since 1991, it is still the Russian Army that controls access to the region. It is prohibited to go about at night, because you run the risk of being robbed by bandits.

“A land that suffers from hunger, inhabited by a wild people...,” wrote a Victorian traveler about the people who live in those areas. According to him, it was not uncommon to come across warriors wearing chain-mail armor that belonged to the Crusaders!

The village of Ushguli, seventy kilometers from Mestia, is one of the most imposing in Svanetia. It greets us from above with its fortified towers, which proudly stand as the last shadows of a turbulent history. These are the “*machubis*,” which in 1996 were registered by UNESCO in the World Heritage of Mankind.

Reaching a height of nearly fifteen meters, they are constructed with stone, straw, and mud. They were built between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries to be used as storehouses for food or as watch towers. The families of the village found refuge there in the event of foreign invasions or attacks by neighboring villages for the settling of scores. And, certainly, they hid their precious Icons in these towers: the treasure of Christianity.

Only in exceptional cases can the few foreigners who venture into this region get into the country chapels, which are closed with heavy padlocks.

Very often, specialists in art history have been expelled and have left empty-handed. For that reason, we are not very familiar with the exact content of this wealth.

To this day, indeed, there do not exist any inventories or serious studies of these Icons.

The Svans maintain a tremendous mistrustfulness inherited from their ancient past, but also from more recent times.

The man who is hosting us, German Kaldani, aged 63, recounts how, in the 1960s, government representatives took a handwritten

Bible from the ninth century, in miniscule script and adorned with precious stones.

“They told us that they were taking it in order to preserve it. They never gave it back,” he tells us, regretfully.

Inside the chapel, its guardian also relates how, in 1937, four foreigners were buried alive there. They had attempted to take illegal possession of the Icon of St. Kvirike (Kerykos), who was martyred by the Turks and who began to be honored in the eleventh century as the Patron Saint of the Juguri Valley, the vital artery of the Svan region.

With their valor, the Svans have symbolized the great strength of Georgia for centuries. There are so many precious metals in such barren land that they astonish you. Impregnable bulwarks, their deep, hidden valleys were regarded for many years as a place of refuge, almost a holy spot, to which people from all of the regions of Georgia would come, loaded with treasures from their Churches, so as to protect them from the Turkish and Mongol invaders. When peace returned, the Icons remained in their homes. Having patiently acquired their trust, the Svans whom we met proudly revealed certain of them to us.

Life in the Caucasus mountains is harsh. The land is cultivated with difficulty, the winters drag on interminably, and yet they somehow have to feed their flocks all year long. The electricity rarely works, the radio waves only reach them when the weather is good. The rules of social life preserve their tribal way of life.

It is always one and the same family in every village that has responsibility for the Icons, and the secret of the designated hiding-places in the mountains is passed on only from father to son. Unfortunately, the majority of the young dream of nothing else but leaving Svanetia, seduced by the promise of a less archaic way of life in Tbilisi. The villages are gradually being deserted.

The old people wonder who will guard the Icons in the future, those sensible presences of a forgotten Golden Age.... Some think the families should distribute them among themselves, before they migrate to the city.

What exactly is the link that binds them to these relics of the past? How can we avoid the dispersion of this incredible inheritance and its sale by mafia organizations? To give an answer to this anxiety, it is necessary to have a sense of the deep bravery of this people, for whom the meaning of life is not justified by anything except for the preservation of this heritage.

Land of Christianity

The Georgians, who accepted Christianity as their official religion from the first half of the fourth century, as also did the Armenians, never ceased from doing battle against foreign invaders, such as the Persians, Turks, and Mongols, whose domination they had frequently to endure.

They knew their most fortunate era—their Golden Age—from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, under rulers such as David the Builder (1089-1125), who conquered the Seljuk Turks, and Queen Tamar (1184-1213), who extended Georgian territory from the Black Sea to the Caspian.

At the same time, they secured the independence of their nation and the rebirth of the arts and education. Churches, castles, frescos, Icons, and enamel objects testify today to the grandeur of the past.

Icons, Divine Symbols

Icons are not merely works of art. For Orthodox Christians, they express the presence of God and of His mystery. The Church has appointed the Icon as a temple, a space in which the person depicted is simultaneously mysteriously present.

The first Icons, which depict Christ, the *Panagia*, or the Saints, were simply painted on wood. The oldest that are known to this day are preserved at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai.

In Byzantium, engraving, or metalwork, which was done with a mallet, made its appearance in the thirteenth century. Little by little, this art spread throughout the entire Christian Empire. For the

Georgians, who are very influenced by the art of Constantinople, carving reached its acme in the first half of the eleventh century.

The golden age of Georgian Iconography would continue until the thirteenth century. □

Translated from the Greek.

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