

GEORGIA

Jvari (Holy Cross) Monastery in Mtskheta

A mountain rising over the confluence of the rivers Mtkvari and Aragvi near Mtskheta, ancient capital of Georgia, has attracted attention since ancient times. A pagan sanctuary was located on this mountain before the spread of Christianity in Georgia. In the third decade of the 4th century A.D., when Christianity became a state religion, a wooden cross was erected on top of the mountain where it stood for almost two centuries.

From 545 to 586 a church was built north of the cross (minor church of the Holy Cross) and from 586 to 605 a big church (main church of the Holy Cross) was built at the site of the cross. The base of the wooden cross can still be seen in the interior of the church. The buildings of Jvari Monastery are in harmony with the environment and represent a masterpiece created both by man and nature.

The builders of the churches were two generations of rulers (the ruler of Kartli, Guaram, and his son, Stephanos). The territory of the monastery was surrounded by a masonry wall and gate in the late Middle Ages (partially surviving at present).

The site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Ancient Monuments of Mtskheta) in 1994.

Significance

Jvari Monastery is a vivid example of the absorption of Eastern and Western cultural values and of re-adapting them to the local artistic environment. General characteristics of the minor church's ornamental decoration indicate the influence of Sasanian art. The architectural typology of the main church – a tetraconch – did not originate from Georgia, but underwent an original development, different from that in other countries. The outer volumes of the church are in full harmony with the interior space and are artistically ambitious. This feature makes Jvari different from Byzantine churches, in which the organization of the interior space is given higher priority.

The facades of the main church bear figure reliefs accompanied by explanatory inscriptions in old Georgian uncial script. The reliefs show the builders of the church and their family members. Fine proportions and high quality of execution distinguish these reliefs. An influence of Hellenistic traditions is also noticeable.

The building technique and the high standard of engineering for solutions of construction at Jvari Monastery, based on thorough calculations, are still impressive and a vivid testimony to the centuries-old building traditions in Georgia.

Threats

The minor church of Jvari has only partially survived, while the main church is preserved without any major changes, but has deteriorated over the centuries due to earthquakes and invasions. During the last 30 years new threats and dangers to the building have appeared: accelerated erosion of the building stone due to the acidity of the rain water and strong winds; erosion has significantly damaged the reliefs of the church; the minor church of Jvari is left uncovered; an incorrect planning of the conservation works has endangered the authenticity of the minor church of Jvari.

In 2004 Jvari monastery was inscribed on the 100 Most Endangered Sites list of the World Monuments Fund. In 2006, the site received financial support from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation through the WORLD MONUMENTS FUND, Kress Foundation European Preservation Program. Currently works to document and analyze the present condition and to draw up conservation guidelines are underway.

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