

The Upper Svaneti: Exploring Georgia's Ancient Towers and Traditions

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By Dr Michael Main

Writing around the time of Christ, the Greek geographer Strabo described a large population called Soánes who lived in the mountains behind the city of Dioskuria (now Sukhumi in Abkhazia). The Soánes were considered to be very powerful, with a ruling council of 300 men, headed by a basileus, and able to raise an army of 200,000 soldiers. Strabo is widely believed to have been writing about the Svan people who today inhabit the region known as Svaneti, located in the sub-alpine zone of the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains. The Svan people were also mentioned by the 6th century historian Menander, who described them as one of the tribes living at the top of the Caucasus. The origin of the Svans long predates written sources, and archaeological evidence connects them to bronze-age copper mining and the production of bronze axe heads and other items. Several place names in the Racha-Svaneti metallogenic region where Bronze age copper mining and smelting took place are of Svan origin. For example, the Svan word for hammer *kver* is preserved in place names such as *Kveregverdi* and *Kvereshula*. Today the Svan population is divided into lower Svaneti (Tkhenistskali Gorge), and Upper Svaneti (Enguri Gorge). The more isolated Upper Svaneti, and specifically the village of Chazhashi, has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List on the basis of the outstanding preservation of its medieval character.

Geography

Svaneti is the highest inhabited area of the Caucasus mountains, and the Upper Svaneti region of Ushguli is one of the highest continually inhabited areas of all Europe. Its administrative centre is Mestia, situated 1,400 metres above sea level on the upper Inguri River. Ushguli is situated at the junction of the Patara Inguri River and the Shavtskhalal Kvishara River at an elevation of 2,100 metres. The deep inhabited gorges are surrounded by mountain peaks of around 5,000 metres, the highest being Mount Shkhara at 5,201 metres. The alpine grasslands merge with permanent snow-covered mountains and glaciers. The climate is humid due to the proximity of the Black Sea and its fertile lands support a wide variety of plants. Beans, potatoes, apple, blueberry, pear, and plum are all grown in Upper Svaneti, and bear, lynx, wild boar and wolves roam the forests. The forests also support a wide variety of medicinal plants that are still harvested for traditional recipes including chamomile, St John's Wart, and Strawflower, among others.





A History Shaped by Climate Change

Whether Strabo was able to provide an accurate estimation of the size and strength of the Roman-age Svan population seems doubtful. However, it is the case that Strabo was writing during the time of the Roman warm period, when the climate was far more amenable to supporting larger populations. The marginal location of Upper Svaneti has meant that changes in climate conditions over the centuries has profoundly shaped the history of this community. In ancient times Upper Svaneti was located along a trading route between Persia and the Black Sea coast, and the local economy thrived on selling its agricultural produce and providing services to travellers, including military services. The onset of the Little Ice Age in the 5th century isolated Upper Svaneti and cut off the former trade route because the high

mountain passes became permanently covered in snow. The trading route moved south, passing through Adjara, and this route remained in use until the 19th century when the Ottoman Empire took control of the Black Sea. Between the 5th and 11th centuries Upper Svaneti remained isolated and largely forgotten, before the onset of the Medieval Warm Period (c. 950-1250 CE) made the region more accessible, and Upper Svaneti became a northern base for the Kingdom of Georgia during its expansion into the Caucasus. The region was an important site of power for the Georgian kingdom and remained so until the climate cooled again around the 16th century, resulting in the region becoming an isolated outpost once more. It was during this period between the 11th and 15th centuries that Upper Svaneti's famous towers were constructed.

Towers of the Medieval Golden Age

Around 200 towers are in evidence in the Svaneti region, and it is estimated that just as many have been destroyed. The towers were built mainly for defence, and there is a history of different Svan communities being in conflict with each other, but they also have the dual function of protection against avalanche. Towers belonged to extended family units, but they were constructed with the collective work of the entire village. The region of Ushguli, located at the head of the Enguri Gorge, around 2,000 metres above sea level, retains the best examples of Svan tower houses. The Ushguli area consists of five separate villages, or hamlets, located in close proximity to each other. There are two types of towers in Ushguli; the unique Svan type, and another type that is also found in the mountains of eastern Georgia. The second type is thought to have been constructed by the Georgian monarchy for stationing troops at the northern border of the expanding Georgian state. Svan living towers (machubi) were designed to keep domestic animals on the ground floor, as a living area on the second floor, and for defensive activities from the attached tower.





During winter the family live on the ground floor (machub) with cattle and goats kept behind a wooden partition, and hay stored on the first floor (darbazi). During summer the family lives in the open plan darbazi, which also has access to the defensive tower. Georgian competition with the North Caucasus resulted in Upper Svaneti becoming a showcase for high Georgian culture and the technological achievements of the state, and during this time most of the Svan churches were built.

Orthodox Churches and Pagan Rituals

There are around 100 Svan churches, most of them built between the 10th and 15th centuries, although some date back to the 8th century. Svan churches are unique, and many feature frescos painted on the external walls. This period coincided with a "golden age" for Georgian secular literature and culture that was encouraged by the Georgian monarchs, and not all of the church frescoes depict Christian themes. Two Svan churches depict scenes from a 10th century epic tale of feuding knights known as Amiran-Daredjaniani. Upper Svaneti's remote yet simultaneously important commercial and geostrategic location, profoundly impacted over the centuries by changing climate conditions, has resulted in the preservation of an extraordinary combination of traditions. Many Pagan beliefs and rituals that combined with the early introduction of Christianity have survived even to this day. Bronze age Svan religion was centered around the belief that female menstrual pollution and impurity threatened the purity of the male domain. The blood of sacrificed animals, especially bulls, was considered to be especially pure and was used in



There was also a system of spatial division between men and women to prevent the polluting effects of women, which could impact anything from stores of grain becoming polluted or ceremonies forced to be cancelled. The introduction of Christianity disrupted the spatial division of the village so that gender segregation was established in the privacy of the home, and also outside the village boundary. Women made secret offerings to domestic spirits in the hearth, while only men were allowed to enter churches and a separate building, called the Lamaria (St Mary), was attached for women to prepare bread for liturgical offerings. Men attended public rituals within the village, in hunting grounds, and mountain passes. Bronze age male/female dualism was preserved in the gender differentiated roles of Christian saints. Women worship St Mary and St Barbara as the saints for women's health and dairy production, while men worship St George and the Archangel. Bronze Age Svan worshiped a masculine moon and a feminine sun, and an earthly deity called Kviria.

purification rituals.



Free Svaneti

Along with its remote yet geostrategic location, varyingly isolated and cosmopolitan depending on the prevailing climate, experiencing periods of wealth and influence as well as hardship and poverty, Upper Svaneti remained untouched by Mongol invasion, and only partially influenced by European feudalism. Although feudalism made its mark in the establishment of Georgian orthodox churches, Svan Christianity did not adopt the hierarchy that the feudal system imposed. Svan priests were trained through an apprenticeship just as would a blacksmith. Worshippers were not vassals but "men of the sanctuary". Upper Svaneti is also known as "free Svaneti" because it remained outside the control of the lowland political system, governing themselves according to traditional law. The region is divided into territorial units called khevi, and the United Khevi of Svaneti (ertobili svanetis khevti), with its own flag and standard bearer, was formed for the collective defense of the region as well as social governance according to traditional law.

Traditional Law and Contemporary Svan Identity

Svan is an oral culture, and its unwritten language is not mutually intelligible with the Georgian language. This oral tradition was maintained throughout the Soviet period to the extent that, after the Soviet Union collapsed, Svan clans unproblematically returned to their lands according to their memory of traditional ownership. Much of Svan traditional law is based on oaths, and these have also been merged with Christian culture. One of the most important is the oath of unity, made to ensure collective action between the villages in the face of external threat. An icon is carried on a stick held by two men who must ensure that the icon does not fall to the ground while representatives from different villages pass under the stick. This ritual is still practiced today and is symbolic of Svan identity and a promise to live together in harmony. In 2013 Svan communities performed the oath of unity in protest at the construction of the Khudoni hydroelectric project that threatened some of the villages, resulting in the project being stopped. This protest was supported by communities from all over Georgia, transforming Svan traditional law into a powerful political tool. Today the Svan people are proud of their unique identity and traditions, and of their important historical role in the formation of the modern [Georgian](#) state.

Explore the intricate history and richly varied culture of the Caucasus with Georgian archaeologist, [Davit Naskidashvili](#), and [Ali Oveissi](#), on our tour [Crossroads of the Caucasus: Azerbaijan, Georgia & Armenia](#).

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