



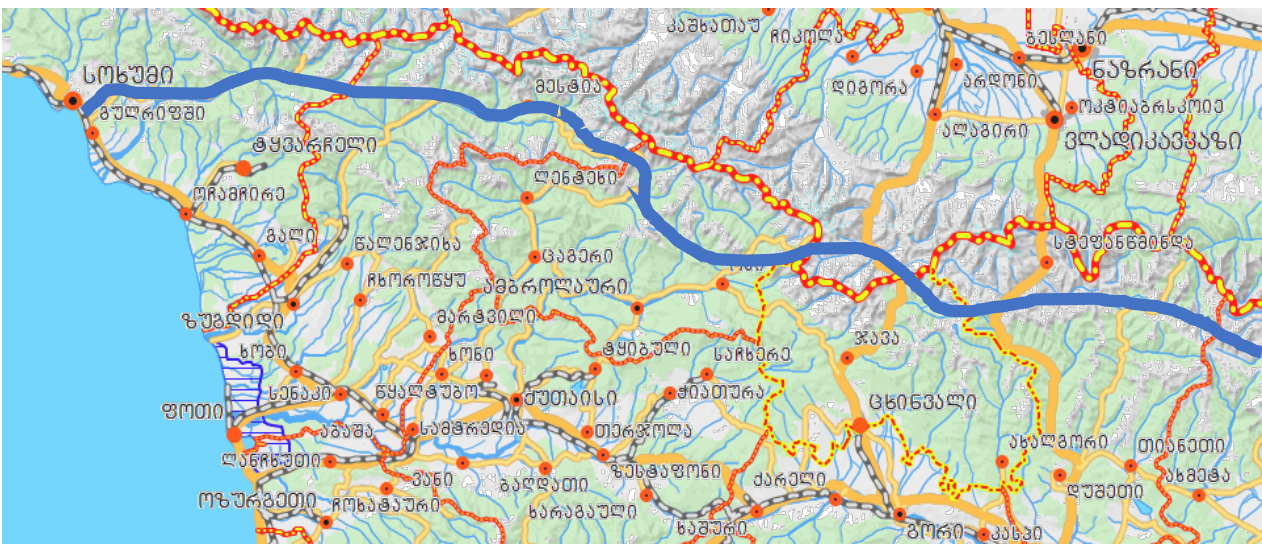
Project Svaneti

Svanetian Towers and Svanetian high art

History and hypothesis

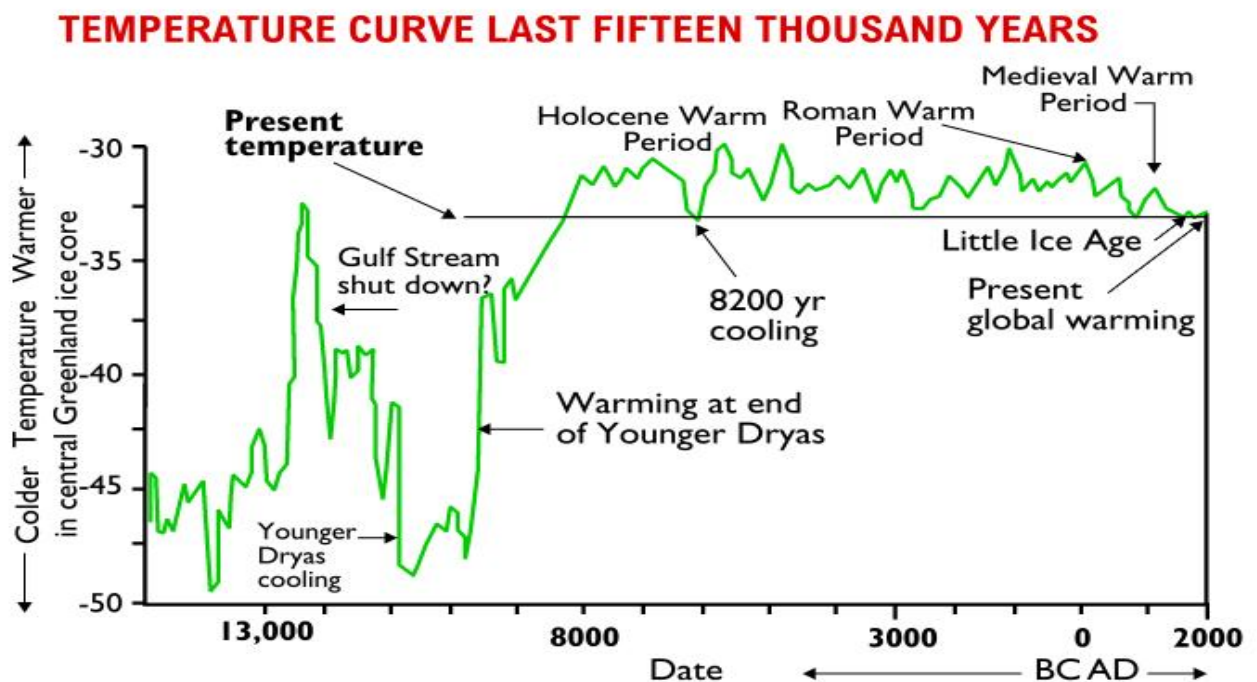
Tower complexes, a multitude of churches, remains of knowledge of advanced construction and craftsmanship technologies of medieval times, examples of high art preserved in Mestia Museum: all these are the result of a state project which was implemented over three centuries (11th - 13th) in Svaneti and had as its aim to turn Svaneti into a Caucasian military, religious, cultural and technological centre. To this end: 1. A barrier was built to defend against the expected danger from the north Caucasus (Svanetian Tower complexes); 2. A system was created which was to fulfil the function of Christian missionary centre in the north Caucasus (a large number of churches concentrated in one place); and 3. Cultural and technological development and display points were set up to become anchors to attract people living in the North Caucasus (survived traces of high art and advanced technologies).

In the classical period and in the early Middle Ages a trade route crossed Svan territory in the directions of the north Caucasus and the Black Sea. The Kodori valley gave the traveller easy access to the Black Sea littoral, where there were trade ports built by the Greeks. Sea routes from these trade ports were open towards central Europe (to the west), towards Byzantium (to the south), and also towards the peoples living on the northern shores of the Black Sea.



The trade and military potential of this route had great importance in the region: Up to the end of the sixth century there had been several battles between the Byzantine and Persian kingdoms to gain control over the road. The existence of this trade and military route brought wealth to the region. Historians tell us at that at this time the Svans could field an army of 200,000. Apparently, not only did Svans living along the road serve in this this army, but they were should also joined by inhabitants of the north Caucasus.

Owing to the regional cooling that had begun in the fifth century (at the end of what is known as the 'Roman climatic optimum'), the path heading to the Black Sea was impassable (its highest point at Kodori pass is 2,000 metres above sea level). In the same way, owing to a worsening in climatic conditions, links with the people of the north Caucasus became difficult. Until the tenth century, Svaneti lived as if in an impasse, where the approach road had crumbled, and the exit road went nowhere.



Warming recommenced in the tenth century (known as the 'Medieval Warm Period'). In this period the air temperature did not reach the level of the Roman climatic optimum, and so the path over the Kodori pass towards the Black Sea did not reopen. On the other hand, however, this warming freed the passes to the north Caucasus. Glaciers retreated and most of those paths were reopened that had linked the north Caucasus to Svaneti until the sixth century.

From the end of the tenth century Georgian monarchs implemented a project of Georgia as the undisputed regional leader. It is clear that links with the inhabitants of the north Caucasus were important

from both a security and an expanding perspective. It was at just this time that the idea arose of Svaneti as the main outpost in links with the north Caucasus and at the same time it is connected with the construction of Svan Tower complexes.



Svan tower complexes were built at the foot of the crossing points from the north Caucasus, and were based on the consideration that a group descending from a mountain pass would have to come through Tower complexes. If the aim of this group was to wage war, it had practically no chance of survival.

For the very reason that the passes could only be traversed in a snow-free period, Svan towers itself were built as “summer” buildings, without any heating systems. It may be assumed that they were used only during periods when there was no snow.

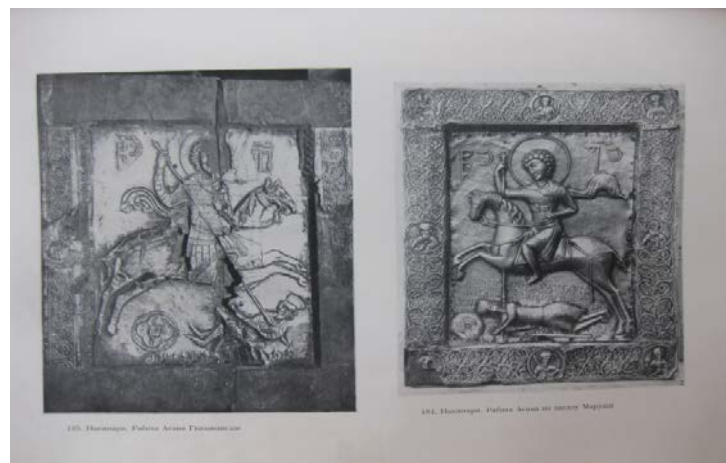
The hypothesis that between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries Svaneti was being developed as a defensive barrier against the north Caucasus, but at the same time it was an outpost of the expansion of the Georgian kingdom towards the north Caucasus are confirmed by the high quality of applied art and an upsurge of cultic buildings in the same period. Works of high art were created in the same period, when most of the churches were built.

As the proper evidence on the great importance of Svaneti for Georgian Kingdom in X-XIII centuries can be considered the fresco in one of the churches of Svaneti (Christ Church in village Latali, built in 11-12

centuries) picturing the transferring of the royal sword from the hands of top Nobile of Svaneti to King Demetre the I of Georgia (AC 1125-1156) while the coronation of the latter.



Beside this, another proof also can be several political poster-icons of St. George, created in 11th century, where the dragon figure is substituted by the figure of Emperor Diocletian (AC 245-311) – dedicated fighter against Christianity in whose reign St. George was martyred.



On this icon St. George and Diocletian are carrying the signs, indicating on King George the First of Georgia (AC 1014-1027) and on Emperor of Byzantine Basil the Second (AC 976-1025) respectively. Probably, this politically motivated poster-icons are the reaction on tough relations between two kingdoms in AC 1014-1023 and on the war (AC 1021-1023) ended with the victory of Byzantine (*Prof. Paata Bukhrashvili's theory*).



Eleven paths from North Caucasus to Svaneti area. In the foot of every route there is villages with towers.

It is possible that Georgian monarchs thus trying to create centres for attraction for the people of the North Caucasus, enchanting them with a high culture and advanced technologies and with the spread of Christianity. This idea is confirmed by the fact that Georgian churches in the north Caucasus were built in this particular period (between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries).



11th century church Datuna in Dagestan. From: <http://www.batsav.com/pages/georgian-churches-north-caucasus.html>

Svaneti between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries was developing as a national defensive centre against the north Caucasus and at the same time as a centre for the expansion of the country's borders towards the north. All Svan tower complexes were built in this period. Towers built during this period are exceptional not only because during 800-900 years not a single tower has been destroyed by earthquake or avalanche, but also because of their state-of-the-art building technology of that era (the upper parts of some towers are built from blocks weighing several tonnes).

The Medieval Warm Period that began in the tenth century came to an end at turn of the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries. Passes were again closed. This new cooling phase lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century. In due course this came to an end, and the project for the development of Svaneti was consigned to oblivion, but we can still see its outcome today in Svanetian towers and churches, in icons and frescos executed to the standards of high art and in the remains of advanced technologies of that times.

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2014.06-09.

