

The Lost Kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti*

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Abstract

The text describes an expedition to Tao-Klarjeti organized by British Museum Tours. The author, together with the group, visited historical Georgian territories located in eastern Turkey and explored significant cultural and architectural monuments, including the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon, the Sumela Monastery, Ishkhani, Bana, and etc.

Key words: *Tao-Klarjeti, expedition, Turkey*

In September last year, in company with Mrs. Valerie Slemeck – a perfect fellow traveller – I joined an expedition to the ancient kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti. This is now a part of Eastern Turkey. The journey was organised by British Museum Tours, with the title “Lost Kingdoms of the Christian Orient”. Our leader was Mrs. June Ward, and the lecturer Dr. Antony Eastmond, a Fellow of the British Academy, now at the Department of Art History in the University of Warwick. He was at the Georgian Summer School at Shav-Nabada in 1990, and is the only British

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scholar studying Georgian art and architecture. We had also an experienced Turkish guide, Tim Ucib Bilgör – altogether a highly competent team.

We started from Trebizond, last outpost of the Byzantine Empire, and travelled eastward along the Black Sea coast, to drive through the Pontic mountains into the region of Tao-Klarjeti, among the deep and winding valleys of the Chorokhi.

In Trebizond we visited the Citadel and other medieval buildings, some very well preserved, such as the 13th-century (where we saw the finest surviving frescoes of that period) church of Hagia Sophia. The carved ornamentation which adorns the facades, walls and window arches is of an artistry recalling that of many Georgian buildings of the period – such as Sveti-Tskhoveli in Mtskheta, the cathedral of Gelati, the bell tower at Vardzia and the church of Otskhi. Other examples can be found in *The Arts of Ancient Georgia*, by R. Mepisashvili and V. Tsintsadze, with the comment that some decorative techniques were used, as at Ateni, to help to concentrate the worshipper's attention on the altar area and the dome.

In the morning we climbed a steep winding path to the 6th-century Orthodox monastery of Sumela, high on an almost sheer cliff face. It was a stiff climb but one of great beauty, the precipitous side of the path falling deep through a luxuriant cloud of trees. The monastery is a large complex of buildings cut into caves in the rockface, as at Vardzia, not far distant across the frontier.

Leaving our hotel in Trebizond we travelled up into the Pontic mountains towards the Zigana Pass, to stay three nights at Artvin. This was our base for exploring the kingdom of Tao. Our bus followed zigzag roads up and down the mountainsides, from old capital of Artanuji to the churches of Doliskana and Ishkhani and the monastic complex of 10th-century Otkhta-eklesia (Dortkilisa). The 7th-century church of Ishkhani was more than once rebuilt, and little remains on the original structure but the finely decorated arcading of the eastern apse. The church of Bana,

also 7th century, was rebuilt in the 9th and damaged in the 19th c. However, ornamentation of interesting design can be seen in the ruins. Of all the architectural remains that we saw, I remember the great church of Otskhi as the most impressive.

Despite the colossal size of the building, the architect managed to keep the lines clean and the forms delicate. The interior with its vertical emphasis is filled with light, which streams in through the numerous windows and plays on the many different surfaces.

It was built in the 10th century, of the same period as the church at Alaverdi and the cathedral of Bagrat at Kutaisi, of which I was vividly reminded. The impression these majestic structures make may go beyond the purely aesthetic to touch a deeper, more widely ranging awareness.

All the way, mountains rose high as an eagle's flight on every side of us, descending forested slopes to river valleys below. The trees were of many varieties, and among them a house, half hidden, could occasionally be seen. Most of these scattered dwellings were built in the Georgian style. We had noticed that whereas in Trebizond all women wore the black chador, covering the head and whole body, with only a slit for the eyes, in Tao the women were dressed in bright colours, with a scarf over the head leaving the face exposed. I spoke to one or two of the people we met, asking them if they spoke Georgian: "kartulad laparakobth?" They seemed to understand that, but I could make nothing of their replies except the word laz. That part of the country may have been in Lazistan.

Drink was a problem until we arrived in Istanbul. Pre-dinner drinks were beer or Coca-Cola. When I rashly asked for a gin and tonic I was offered, at the first hotel, a large bottle of gin, nothing less. Next time a full glass arrived, of which I took a hopeful mouthful. My expression made the others laugh: it was neat gin.

We drove on to stay at Kars, formerly in Armenia but now part of Turkey, where the fortress has been taken over by the

army. From Kars there was a visit to Ani, great and famous seat of the Armenian kings and the site of many a fierce battle between Georgians, Persians and Turks. I did not myself go to Ani, but others who went described the well preserved churches, with the wall paintings of St. Gregory of Tigran Honenc and the miracle of St. Nino.

In Erzurum, where we stayed the following two nights, some of us were taken to see a small carpet factory. We watched the process of weaving, and were told about the origin of designs in different regions. Modern materials – silk and wool – are woven into traditional designs. Valerie and I each bought a carpet, of a quality which would be hard to find in England at a comparable price.

In the morning we visited the 13th-century Cifte Minaret Medrese, a mosque with twin minarets. There, as is the custom, we took off our shoes and the women covered their heads and shoulders. Tim, our Turkish guide, explained to us how the Quran has to be read in a certain rhythm. Then the Imam appeared and read out a passage, which Tim afterwards translated. This proved to be an injunction not to neglect one's parents – the sin which is not forgiven.

From Erzurum we flew to Istanbul for the last day of our journey. We had a drink at the famed Pera Palace hotel with its exuberant decor. The next morning was spent at the Kariye museum, the old Khora monastery. This ancient building is one of the best preserved examples of Byzantine architecture, with the finest surviving Byzantine mosaics and frescoes in the world. Although these had been whitewashed in accordance with the Quranic taboo on representation of the human form, they were found to be undamaged when the whitewash was removed in 1879. Both in structure and ornamentation, it was a place of incomparable beauty.

Tim had arranged a lunch of delicious fresh seafood at a restaurant overlooking the Bosphorus. After this there was a visit

to the great mosque of Hagia Sophia. On the following morning
we flew back to London – the end of a deeply rewarding journey.