Turkey's forgotten Georgian churches

By Chris Hollier

Georgia was one of the first Christian states and, through its long and troubled history, it produced churches of great distinction and originality which were, like those of Armenia, inspirational in the evolution of Gothic. Georgia's boundaries have moved many times over the centuries, with the result that major churches are to be found in neighbouring countries. Those in the eastern provinces of Turkey are particularly fine but are now under threat from neglect and lack of understanding.

While civil strife in Georgia has recently pushed the former Soviet republic into the newspaper headlines, part of medieval Georgia's architectural heritage lies abandoned and forgotten, scattered among the wild and beautiful side valleys of the Kura, Otta and Turtm rivers in north-east Turkey. Remote and isolated, they receive few visitors today and have the dubious distinction of being one of the world's most neglected groups of ecclesiastical buildings. Yet they play a significant role in architectural history. As Orthodox Christians, the medieval Georgians had greater contacts with Byzantium than their better-known neighbours, and sometime foes, the Armenians. Their churches influenced mid-Byzantine architecture and were a factor in the evolution of the Romanesque style in Europe.

In theory, the remaining churches are protected buildings under Turkey's laws on ancient monuments but there is no conservation programme to ensure their continued survival. Ironically, it is only the promotion of tourism, for all its mixed blessings, that could help to save some of these fine buildings.

During the Middle Ages, the north-east corner of Turkey, then part of the kingdom of Georgia, was a land of shifting frontiers, an embattled border area over which many peoples fought. The Russians came from the north; Arabs and Sasanids of Persia from the south; Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans from the west; Seljuks and Mongols from the east. Yet despite these almost ceaseless struggles for control of the region, Georgia survived as a recognisable kingdom for more than a thousand years. At its height, it stretched 400 miles from the Black Sea to the Caspian. It was bounded to the south by the Arag River and to the north by the great Caucasian chain. The last king of Georgia died in 1788.

Georgia became Christian in the fourth century; 50 years after the neighbouring kingdom of Armenia, and subsequently recognised the Patriarch of Jerusalem.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, the original Georgia, with its capital at Tiflis, was devastated by successive Arab invasions from the south and east. Tiflis was abandoned and a new Georgia, with its capital at present-day Ashavan in Turkey, was established, based on the provinces of Tao, Klaiceti and Shavsheti. Under the Bagratid dynasty, which now took firm control of the upper Kura valley, Georgian power revived during the ninth century and the new kings embarked on a notable period of church building, each prince intent on raising memorials to his reign.

By the eleventh century Georgia was weakened again. First, by Byzantium which now feared the Bagratid growing power and, second, by the advance of the Seljuk Turks. But defeat did not last long and under David II, "the Builder", Georgian armies recaptured Tiflis in 1122, heralding a second political and cultural renaissance. Georgia lived in relative peace for another hundred years and reached its south under Queen Tamar (1184-1212) before being ravaged again by the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

By this time the Georgians' internal cohesion was also weakening. When Marco Polo visited the area in