

A Georgian Holy Place

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RCL has already drawn attention to some difficulties in the life of the Georgian Orthodox Church. We are glad to have this opportunity of publishing an article that describes the positive side of Georgian church life. Professor von Lilienfeld was with a group of German Lutherans who visited the Caucasus towards the end of 1975. Ed.

The high point of the whole Georgian trip was our visit to the shrine of Mucameta. We reached the church after a marvellous journey, lasting three-quarters of an hour, which took us through a deep gorge with a crystal-clear river bubbling at the bottom. The roadway was well kept up; it went for about 3½ kilometres from the main Gelati-Kutais highway, where we had left our bus. After about two kilometres it met a railway line, at a station named "Mucameta". This station nestled in isolation among the mountains, evidently serving nothing else besides the church.

It would have been just possible to get that far in a private car. (When we got back, there were several cars there. We saw the passengers at the shrine, including a bridal party, with the bride dressed in white.) The last part of the journey had to be done on foot. There were a good number of people going to and from the church. Those who were on their way there carried fruit, flowers and bread; one young man was leading a little lamb on a rope, and some women carried chickens in baskets. Most of the people were in family groups.

People stopped, as so often, to speak to the priests who were accompanying us, so that they were slowed down. For that reason, a number of our party arrived before them. This was partly bad for us, and partly good, because we discovered how "tourists" are treated in such places. The service seemed to be just finishing in the church. But the old woman who – as in every Georgian church – was selling candles, went for the women in our party who had no headcovering, and the unsuspecting Protestants among us who did not know that it was impious to clasp the hands behind the back in church. The Georgian women had laid their fruit out in front of icons, where the priest blessed them and received a

portion. When we arrived they began to pack them away. The hymns, which were being sung by the congregation instead of by a choir, died away. We had evidently been taken for secular intruders (all these people with cameras!) and it was strongly intimated to us that this was a place for prayer, and nothing else. Photography was strictly forbidden. The best thing, in fact, would be for us to leave this holy place again as soon as possible. Fortunately our clergy companions arrived at this point. As soon as they appeared, the whole atmosphere changed. Evidently they were the guarantee that we were at least well-disposed strangers. We were given a brief tour of the church and a few selected persons from our group were also shown their greatest treasure: the relics of the two warrior-martyrs David and Constantine, which were "undecayed" (mummified by a natural process). Unlike the custom in a Russian Orthodox church, only the priests and clergy in our group were permitted to venerate the relics, by kissing the glass top of the sarcophagus. The ladies (two) were allowed to glimpse it from a distance, and make the sign of the cross. It was apparent that the believers only tolerated this because Fr. Gabriel himself was with us.

Behind the church there was a path leading to some other buildings. It turned out that these formed a convent. The nuns, all elderly women, were sitting in the courtyard cleaning the sacred vessels from the church. Photography was strictly forbidden. There was obviously a number of priests there too, recognizable as monks by the tonsure. The Georgians who arrived at the shrine were welcomed, whereupon they disappeared into the adjoining buildings, obviously on some kind of business, and then went into the church to pray for five or ten minutes.

Unfortunately we could not stay any longer, since we had not yet had our midday meal, and we had to return over the Surami pass to Gori the same day. So regretfully we could not stay to witness the wedding.

In the archway leading to the convent – which resembled a gateway in an old German castle – there was a beautiful new marble tablet with an inscription in gold lettering. Before our departure I managed to have it translated. It was so interesting that I wrote it down:

Church of the Apostles (i.e. Mucameta), resting place of Saints David and Constantine. Their relics were in the Kutais state museum from 1922 until 1954, when they were brought here. The church was renovated in 1957. In 1963 the path to the church was made negotiable. Electricity was laid on in 1965. Ephrem, later Patriarch Ephrem II, was consecrated bishop here. There is a convent in the church grounds.

Signed: Bishop Naomi of Kutais and Gelati.

Here in Mucameta we could feel something of the heartbeat of the Georgian Church.