

## Sacred pagan temples in the Caucasus region: characteristic features

Aleksandr Cherkasov – Larisa Koroleva – Sergei Bratanovskii – Michal Smigel

Dr. Aleksandr Cherkasov  
International Network Center for Fundamental and Applied Research, Washington, USA  
1150 Connecticut Ave. NW, STE 900 Washington  
District of Columbia, USA 20036  
Volgograd State University  
University prospect 100  
400062 Volgograd  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: sochi003@rambler.ru

Dr. Larisa Koroleva  
Penza State University of Architecture and Construction, Penza  
Germana Titovs str. 28  
440000 Penza  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: la-koro@yandex.ru

Dr. Sergei Bratanovskii  
Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow,  
Stremyanny lane 36  
117997 Moscow  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: bratfoot@mail.ru

Dr. Michal Smigel  
Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica  
Národná str. 12  
974 01 Banská Bystrica  
Slovakia  
e-mail: michal.smigel@umb.sk

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### *Sacred pagan temples in the Caucasus region: characteristic features*

The article deals with Christian-pagan sacred places and Caucasus traditions in the 19th century. The authors pay attention to the structure of the pagan temples and their characteristic regional features, and they study the traditions and the role of the local clergy in the life of society.

Materials of personal origin (memoirs and diary entries) of emissaries, scouts and travellers in the 19th century were used as sources in the research. These materials allow us to get an idea about the structure of the temples and ceremonies that were held around them. In addition, materials of archaeological research, as well as modern scientific publications, were used for this study.

In solving research problems, both general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, concretization, generalization) as well as traditional methods of historical analysis were applied. The work uses the historical-situational method, which involves the study of historical facts in the context of the studied era in conjunction with “neighbouring” events and facts. The application of this method allowed the authors to understand the role of the pagan temples and their priests in preparation of the highlanders to assault their neighbours.

In conclusion, the authors note that pagan temples were built in many parts of the Caucasus region: in Circassia, Abkhazia, Georgia, and Ossetia. However, until the end of the 19th century, they remained only in the most remote and impassable parts of the mountainous regions. The reasons for this were the

enormous social upheaval in the Caucasus, the civil war in Circassia and the religious persecution of the old Christian-pagan clergy.

Key words: traditions, religion, pagan temples, Georgians, Khevsurians, Circassians, Tushetians, Abkhazians, Ossetians.

## Introduction

The Caucasus of the XIX century was a territory rich in historical and cultural traditions, populated with numerous tribes that spoke different languages. Today, this diversity of languages and traditions disappeared, but it existed 150-200 years ago. The religious map of the Caucasus can be represented as a layer cake, with Christianity (Central Georgia) as one layer, Christianity, mixed with paganism (Ossetia, mountainous Georgia, Circassia, Abkhazia) as the second one, and Islam (Dagestan) as the third layer. In this research we will consider Christian-pagan places of worship – sanctuaries, or temples, which have different names for different peoples, and we will analyze their role in the life of the local population.

## Materials and methods

Materials of personal origin (memoirs and diary entries) of emissaries, scouts and travelers in the 19th century were used as sources in the research. These materials allow us to get an idea about the structure of the temples and ceremonies that were held around them. In addition, materials of archaeological research, as well as modern scientific publications, were used for this study.

In solving research problems, both general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, concretization, generalization) as well as traditional methods of historical analysis were applied. The work uses the historical-situational method, which involves the study of historical facts in the context of the studied era in conjunction with “neighboring” events and facts. The application of the historical-situational method allowed the authors to understand the role of the pagan temples and their priests in preparation of the highlanders to assault their neighbors.

## Discussion

The first attempts to collect data on the Caucasus region religious traditions were made in the late Middle Ages, when missionary societies sent their representatives there. Giorgio Interiano, Emiddio Dortelli, D. Ascoli were among the authors who were engaged in describing the traditions in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The scouts and emissaries of the Caucasian War also made detailed descriptions of the religious cults of the Caucasian tribes in the XIX century,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> INTERIANO, G. *The daily life and country of the Zikhs, called Circassians*. Nalchik, 1974; CAUCASUS: Karpov, Y. *The Dz'bigits. Botyakon*, Y.M. The Abreks. Nalchik, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> TORNAU, F.F. *Zapiski kavkazskogo ofitsera*. [Reminiscences of a Caucasian Officer]. Maikop, 2008; LAPINSKII, T. *Gortsy Kavkaza i ikh osvoboditel'naya bor'ba protiv russkikh*. [The highlanders of the Caucasus and their liberation struggle against the Russians]. Nal'chik, 1995; BELL Dzh. *Dnevnik prebyvaniya v Cherkessii v techenie 1837–1839 godov*. [Journal of a residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838 and 1839]. Tom 2. Nal'chik, 2007; LONGVORT, Dzh.A. *God sredi cherkesov* [A year among the Circassians]. Nal'chik, 2002.

as well as the travellers did.<sup>3</sup> This subject was studied during the Soviet period, as well as in the contemporary Russia. Y.N. Voronov, A.A. Cherkasov, R.M. Chichibekova, N.A. Diasperova and others should be mentioned among the authors who describe the religious traditions of the Caucasus region.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

In the middle of the XIX century religious Christian-pagan temples were located on the territory of Circassia, Abkhazia, mountainous Georgia and Ossetia.

V. A. Gurko-Kryazhin, the researcher from the 1920's, in his description of the life of the mountain regions of Georgia (Khevsurians), noted: Sometimes we find here the oldest social institutions related to social paleontology, which are found in the less developed areas of the world. We've found for example, the "male houses", which are common for the islands of Micronesia and others. The Khevsurians preserved them in the form of men's clubs; in Shatili, we observed a similar club, bearing the characteristic name *salakbo* (or *pehoni*), that is, roughly translated as a "talking parlor". All the male population of Shatili converges here daily, including the boys who reached the age of 12 and are already considered equal to the adults. They spend time doing crafts, but mainly in endless conversations, disputes, etc. Here children learn all sorts of legends, and here their thinking is formed under the guidance of honorable old people who have their own special places in the club. Women are not allowed to enter the *salakbo*.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that similar evidence was given by the other authors.<sup>6</sup>

It should be interesting to learn more about the atmosphere of the *pehoni*. A. Chzhimbe noted that "*Concentrated and calm highlanders squatted along the walls. Most of them were sharpening the wooden sticks with knives, lost in deep thought. This was a pleasant and easy work, worthy of warriors, as it didn't distract from the conversation and took their energy excess. A warrior should not give his strength and pay attention to housework, this is a woman's business ... A warrior should be free. Then at any hour of the day and night he will go on a raid, he will participate in a bloody battle, and nothing will stop his free heart and head to show his valor.*"<sup>7</sup> A similar tradition existed among the Circassians who also sharpened the sticks for arrows in their spare time.

Researchers of the XIX century, familiar with the life of Khevsurians, also mentioned this public institution. For example, R. D. Eristov noted that "*they hold meetings in pehoni, where they*

<sup>3</sup> ERISTOV, R.D. On Tushetian-Pshav-Khevsurt region. In: ZKOIRGO. B. 3, 1855; SPENSER, E. *Opisanie poezdok po Zapadnomu Kavkazu, vkhlyuchaya puteshestvie cherez Imeretiyu, Mingreliyu, Turtsiyu, Moldaviyu, Galitsiyu, Sileziyu i Moraviyu v 1836 g.* [Travels in the Western Caucasus; Including a Tour Through Imeritia, Mingrelia, Turkey, Moldavia, Galicia, Silesia, and Moravia, in 1836]. Na'chik, 2008; ZISSERMAN, A.L. *25 years in the Caucasus*. Saint-Petersburg, 1879; PFAF, V.B. Materialy dlya istorii osetin [The materials on the history of Ossetians]. In: *Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh*. Tiflis. Vyp. 5., 1874; MARIGNY, de T. (ed.) Klaproth, I, 307, dans le Voyage de Jean Potocki, 1836.

<sup>4</sup> VORONOV, Yu.N. Drevnosti Sochi i ego okrestnostei [Antiquities of Sochi and its environs]. Krasnodar, 1979; CHERKASOV, A.A. – IVANTSOV, V.G. – SMIGEL, M. – MOLCHANOVA, V.S. The Daily Life and Morals of Circassian Society: A Historical-Comparative Investigation based on sources from the period between the Mid-16th and the First Half of the 19th centuries. In: *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*, X., 2015, 1, pp. 73-88; GICHIBEKOVA, R.M. Russian Policy towards Islam in the Caucasus (XVI–XIX Centuries). In: *History and Historians in the Context of the Time*, Vol. (15), 2015, Is. 2, pp. 87-92; DIASPEROVA, N.A. – ZULFUGARZADE, T.E. – KUCHERKOV, I.A. The Features of Raiding Tactics of Circassians in the period of the Caucasian War (1801–1864). In: *Bylye Gody*. 44(2), 2017, pp. 438-444.

<sup>5</sup> GURKO-KRYAZHIN, V. *Khevsurians*. Moscow, 1928, pp. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> DEMIDOV, G. *In the mountains of Caucasus: mountain regions of Georgia*. Moscow, 1931, p. 59; KAMARAULI, A.Y. *Khevsuria*. Tiflis, 1929, pp. 133-134.

<sup>7</sup> CHZHIMBE, A. *Canyon people: A novel from the life of the Khevsurians*. Moscow, 1928, p. 159.

*grind gunpowder and talk about the country, the war, and hunting.*<sup>78</sup> In his work N. A. Khudadov notes that *“the Khevsurians like gatherings; they spend all their free time together, especially in winter, smoking tobacco and spitting; sharing the information that only the highlanders can be interested in: about the past, the present, about the past raids on the Kist and Pshavy people, about the heroes, the war against Eristavi and etc. The young generation is also present and for them these gatherings are the only school.”*<sup>79</sup>



**Fig. 1:** Sapekhno of Shatili <sup>10</sup>

Shatili sapekhno was a building-canopy, fenced on three sides by stone walls (Fig. 1). It served as a place for periodic and daily rural gatherings of the men, who met in their leisure time. For this the stone slabs-seats, were located inside the sapekhno, including special benches for the elders, and on the small area in front of the entrance there was a place for the keeper of the sanctuary. Shatili stood out among the other Khevsurian villages for having a special place to hold the gatherings and daily meetings. Chachashvili noted that such building was the only one in Khevsureti.<sup>11</sup> At the same time G.D. Chikovani wrote that sanctuaries like this were found in the village of Guro and Ortskhala Pirikit Khevsureti as well as in Arkhoti.<sup>12</sup> In most of the Khevsurian villages such events were held in the open air and daily gatherings often took place on flat roofs of houses. In some villages (in Batsaligo, Biso-Khakhmati, Chormesha, Khakhabo and Ardoti) the sapekhno didn't have walls and a canopy, but was equipped with stone seats.

Comparing different temples of the Caucasus region, we would like to mention a similar place on the territory of the North-Western Caucasus – the Kudepsta sacrificial stone, which is located near the city of Sochi on the Black Sea coast (Fig. 2).

The archaeologist Y. N. Voronov believes that this place undoubtedly served as a sanctuary.<sup>13</sup> It can be assumed that the most honorable sitting places belonged to the priest and the elder of the society. In addition, archaeologists discovered the remains of the building foundation

<sup>8</sup> ERISTOV, R.D., ref. 3, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> KHUDADOV, N. Khevsuria notes. In: *ZKOIRGO*. B. 14, 1890, Is. 1, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Caucasus: Karpon, Y. The Džbigits. Botyakov, Y.M. The Abreks. Nalchik, 2014. p. 45.*

<sup>11</sup> CHACHASHVILI, G. *The “sapekhno” of Shatili*. In: Autoref. diss. ... Candidate of Historical Sciences. Tbilisi, 1949.

<sup>12</sup> CHIKOVANI, G.D. From the history of the social life of the Vainakhs. In: *KES*. Tbilisi. T. 6, 1986, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> VORONOV, Yu.N. *Drevnosti Sochi i ego okrestnostei* [Antiquities of Sochi and its environs]. Krasnodar, 1979, p. 50.

behind the sacrificial stone.



**Fig. 2:** The sacrificial stone in Kudepsta<sup>14</sup>

Let us give one more example of a sanctuary. This time it is in the territory of Ossetia (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3:** Khuytsauy dzuar sanctuary (Ossetia)<sup>15</sup>

The buildings were a characteristic feature of the temples in Ossetia, Circassia and Georgia. In Circassia these buildings are in ruins, but in the mountains of Ossetia and Georgia they are preserved. At the same time, most of the temples in Circassia were in sacred groves. The reason

<sup>14</sup> BULGAROVA, B.A. – VAZEROVA, A.G. – OCHIROV, O.R. Religious Culture in the Caucasus: Pagan Temples and Traditions. In: *Bylye Gody*. 44(2), 2017, p. 421.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 423.

for this was the specific landscape with a few mountains, especially on the coastal area and in the plains. As well as in Khevsureti, the people worshipped crosses, which were often placed under a sacred tree (Fig. 4) or on it<sup>1617</sup> (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Circassia: cross worshipping



Fig. 5: Sacred tree with a cross

Let's come back to Khevsureti. During the gatherings that were also held in sapekhnos, the villagers discussed various economic and social matters. They made the draw to establish the order of grazing the herds on the fields, discussed issues related to the operation and protection of community pastures and hayfields. At the gatherings, the villagers defined a policy for close neighbors and distant neighbors, made decisions to ensure the defense of the village. Legal and property disputes between the community members were also discussed.

The men who represented the households of the original families from the village, and the new settlers who were accepted into the community after special ceremonies, had a right to attend the meetings<sup>18</sup>. For the first time a young man became a member of the gathering when he came of an age. The elder was leading the gathering. He was a wise and experienced man, and at the same time an eloquent, witty person, a firm adherent of traditions. The local sanctuary priests had a special position. The other participants nominally had equal rights. The decisions taken there were subject to rigorous execution by the all members of the community. Those who disobey could be sentenced to various punishments - from a curse to the expulsion from the village.

Georgian mountain tribes of the Khevsurians, Tushetians and Phsavians cannot be considered pagans for they believed in the true God and his saints, and they cannot be considered Christians for they were too far from following the Christian faith dogmas. They called themselves Christians and all the foreigners – “basurmans”<sup>19</sup>.

The community belongings were also stored in the sanctuary. It is mentioned that when the troops of Shamil came close to Shatili, the local population concentrated all the firearms in sapekhnos and supplied the defenders in the towers<sup>20</sup>. The hunters made marks to account their prey on the pillar of the Shatili sapekhnos, i.e. this public center served as a place for recording

<sup>16</sup> CHERKASOV, A.A. – ŠMIGEL, M. – IVANTSOV, V.G. – RYABTSEV, A.A. – MOLCHANOVA, V.S. Hillmen of the Black Sea Province (early XIX century): Geography, demography, anthropology. In: *Bylye Gody*. (2), 32, 2014, p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> CHERKASOV, A.A. – SMIGEL, M. – BRATANOVSKII, S. – VALLEAU, A. The Circassian aristocracy in the late XVIII – The first half of XIX centuries: The social structure of society. In: *Bylye Gody*. 47(1), 2018, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> KANDELAKI, M.B. *From the public life of the Georgia highlanders - the institution of amanatism*. Tbilisi, 1987, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Peoples of Russia. Issue 4. Saint-Petersburg, 1879. p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> Caucasus..., ref. 10, p. 47.

the trophies, for marking valor and skill of a male hunter and warrior. Thus this place formed public opinion about the warrior and strengthened his authority.

Khevsureti sapekhnno was close to a communal sanctuary (temple, khati, dzhvari). By this we mean the order of initiation and inclusion in the sanctuary of exclusively male members, the active participation of the sanctuary in regulating the life of the community through the formation of special authorities and activities aimed at implementing a socially defined model for the younger generation, etc.

On the day of the Epiphany (gamtskhabeda dge) young boys of 8-15 years old gathered in Shatili sapekhnno. Each of them brought wood, vodka and bread. They started a fire, set the table and sanctified it. At the sunrise, women came into the sanctuary. One of them approached the open side of the building and prayed for the dead villagers. After that, women went home. During the feast the youth prayed for the souls of the deceased relatives, and especially their peers. Adult (married) men were not allowed to sapekhnno on this day, its territory was completely at the disposal of young men. During the day, the youth held competitions in wrestling, fencing, archery and jumping over the fire near the sapekhnno<sup>21</sup>. It is important to mention that the Abkhazians held a horse race in honor of the deceased on the third day of the funeral. They were attended by young men from 12 to 14 years old who had to cover the distance from 30 to 50 km. Such horse races were arranged for the prize from the family of the deceased<sup>22</sup>.

The monotony of everyday gatherings in the “talking parlor” was periodically interrupted by the festive feasts of the “rural army”, i.e. the male community. At the table, the “army” was seated in accordance with the age: the elders took places at the head of the table, and the youth were seated at the end of the table and served the elders. During the feast, the elders were called the “cupholders”, and the younger ones were “standing up servants”. Two or three young people appointed by the “army” went to the sanctuary for the sacred beer prepared by the servants of the khati. The obligatory element of the feast was the common prayer of the “army” for the dead, singing heroic songs and the ritual drinking of sacred beer.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, this rite was preserved in the aristocratic societies of Circassia and was called the “bratina”. The warriors standing in a circle sipped their beer from the bowl, which was passed in a circle until all the beer was finished<sup>23</sup>. It should be mentioned that a significant part of Circassian aristocracy throughout the entire Caucasian war remained faithful to the Christian-pagan religion, to the religion of their ancestors. For example, the prince of the coastal Ubykhs Ali Ahmet Oblag, according to the English emissary J. Bell, was suspected to be a believer of the old religion<sup>24</sup>. It should be clarified that Islam was already widely spread in the region that at that time, and the Muslim clergy made efforts to persecute the Christian-pagan clergy<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> CHACHASHVILI, G. *The “sapekhnno” of Shatili*. In: Autoref. diss. ... Candidate of Historical Sciences. Tbilisi, 1949, pp. 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> Peoples..., ref. 19, p. 373.

<sup>23</sup> CHERKASOV, A.A. – IVANTSOV, V.G. – SMIGEL, M. – MOLCHANOVA, V.S., ref. 4, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> BELL, Dzh. *Dnevnik prebyvaniya v Cherkessii v techenie 1837–1839 godov* [Journal of a residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838 and 1839]. Tom 2. Nal'chik, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> CHERKASOV, A.A. – IVANTSOV, V.G. – METREVELI, R.V. – MOLCHANOVA, V.S. The Destruction of the Christian Historical-Cultural Heritage of the Black Sea Area: Trends and Characteristics (the Late 18th and First Half of the 19th centuries). In: *ANNALES Ser. hist. sociol.* 26 (1), 2016, p. 8.

Festive feasts, as well as ordinary meetings of men in sapekho were brightened by fencing duels, which was a form of friendly, bloodless battle. The blows were dealt with the butt or flat side of a sword, which required a considerable skill from the contest participants. The tournament was attended by men and boys who have reached adulthood and have sufficiently mastered the technical and tactical methods of fighting<sup>26</sup>. Fights like these were important for the training of warriors, and for those around them it was a spectacular show. It had a great emotional impact on young people, who were participants or spectators of the fights. Thus, the warrior character was formed. Holidays and gatherings, among other things, were the time of military-physical training of the male population, a show of the military forces of the community on the eve of the military campaign<sup>27</sup>. Similar holidays were held in the Circassian societies by the Christian-pagan clergy<sup>28</sup>.



**Fig. 6:** Khevsurian warriors



**Fig. 7:** Circassian warriors



**Fig. 8:** The village of Shatili

Chainmail armor was typical for Khevsurian and Circassian warriors (Fig. 6 and 7). Along with the chainmail armor, the Khevsurians used small shields, which were not popular among the Circassians. One more difference was that the Khevsurians lived in defensive towers. For example, the Khevsurian village of Shatili was an unapproachable citadel (Fig. 8). The Circassians didn't have such defensive structures at all, which was explained by the fact that the Circassians could always withdraw in the event of invasion, but the Khevsurians didn't have such an opportunity due to the mountainous area of living.

<sup>26</sup> ELASHVILI, V.I. Fencing in the system of physical education in Georgia. In: *KSIE*. 1949, Is. 8. p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> BELL Dzh, ref. 24, pp. 80-81.



In summer time, the Khevsurians often raided the neighboring Kist mountain villages, always led by priests with the banner of the sanctuary.<sup>29</sup>

R. Eristov mentioned that they raided the neighboring Kist village every year. *«In this occasion the priest brings out the droshi (banner – Auth.), and woe on those who do not come under the banner of the sanctuary.»*<sup>30</sup> The disobedient imposed a large penalty ban of the priests, they were subjected to general contempt and “the anger of the temple”. This army was sent in the name of some saint to non-peaceful Kist village, engaged in a shootout and, after capturing all livestock, returned back. The cattle taken from the enemy was divided into three parts: one part was sacrificed to the temple, the other was given to the local bailiff, and the third was given to raid members. The raiding traditions of the Circassians were similar in nature, but had their regional specifics. The highlanders from different mountain villages gathered in the village of the leader, and there, in the presence of the mullahs, swore on the Quran to obey him unconditionally from the minute of his speech until the dismiss; not to attempt a betrayal and to be content with equal loot sharing. The party was housed in the mountain village, and the honorary riders were personal guests of the leader. After a luxurious feast the leader made a fortune telling: he took a sheep’s bone and threw it on the floor near the fireplace. If the bone landed facing smooth surface upwards, it heralded the unfavorable outcome of the campaign. The raid was postponed, which significantly reduced the number of warriors. When the bone landed with smooth surface downwards, it inspired confidence in the entire party, and the leader announced immediate attack.<sup>31</sup>

The success of the raid and the size of the loot depended on the courage of the warriors. Courage was valued very highly, poems were devoted to a celebrated warrior. On the contrary, a man who has never been injured, couldn’t be named “a man.”<sup>32</sup>

Similar strict rules were imposed on the observance of the duty of comradeship: it was considered shameful to leave one comrade behind during a battle, on a hunt or in another difficult situation. To prove courage and fellowship in decisive moments of battle, the soldiers tied themselves with one another with the clothes, belts, or were holding hands and threw themselves at the enemy.<sup>33</sup>

The other mountain regions of the Caucasus had similar to the Khevsurian features of social life, defined by the common way of life and the military-democratic system. D.Z. Bakradze wrote about the Svans in the middle of the XIX century, noting that the highlanders spend most of their time in shooting and feasting. Shooting always occurred in front of the crowd. Feasts were held day and night by different members of the army. The leader’s house was often full of people for different occasions; people were placed on the floor or on benches. Traditionally, women did not take part in the feast, nevertheless attended it<sup>34</sup>.

Tushetian sapekhno was similar to the Khevsurian one. It was a place of gatherings and meetings of men. Public affairs were discussed there, decisions were made on organizing marches, and military squads were gathered. The village guest came to this sacred place and there he was cheerfully greeted by the village men. The territory of the Tushetian temple was

<sup>29</sup> ZISSERMAN, A.L., ref. 3, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup> ERISTOV, R.D., ref. 3, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> DIESPEROVA, N.A. – ZULFUGARZADE, T.E. – KUCHERKOV, I.A., ref. 4, pp. 439-440.

<sup>32</sup> MAKALATIA, S.I. Khevsureti. Tbilisi, 1940, pp. 69-70.

<sup>33</sup> ZISSERMAN, A.L., ref. 3, p. 251.

<sup>34</sup> BAKRADZE, D.Z. Svanetia. In: *ZKOIRGO*. B. 6, 1864, pp. 43-44.

forbidden for women, as well as the Khevsurian one. In the past, the temple was a constructed building<sup>35</sup>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to note that pagan temples were built in many parts of the Caucasus region: in Circassia, Abkhazia, Georgia, and Ossetia. However, until the end of the XIX century, they remained only in the most remote and impassable parts of the mountainous regions. The reason for this was the enormous social upheaval in the Caucasus, the civil war in Circassia and the religious persecution of the old Christian-pagan clergy.

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