

# Landscape Linking Religion and Nature in the Caucasus

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## Abstract

If we accept natural landscape the result of the first interaction of human and nature, cultural landscape is natural selecting for interaction during the time, which may have different causes in different periods. Ritual landscape as an important part of the cultural landscape is the community reaction to the spiritual needs. In ancient times, people lived in a directly deep link with nature. The biological landscape and the ritual landscape from ancient time was influenced by the natural landscape. This becomes important when we know natural elements of landscape in ancient time had spiritual concepts in addition to its function. So there has been direct and inseparable link between religion and nature. Due to dominant mountain landscapes in Georgian, the mountains always have had a fundamental role to the structure of public life as a landscape element, it has been three aspects of functional, meaning and the aesthetic. The importance of these three aspects from the ritual landscape view is different due to the time and place of ritual and cultural landscape formation. In this paper, by choosing three sets of ritual in Mestia, Uplistsikhe and Mtskheta in Georgia, first the ritual landscape of mountain formation is discussed in each of these three categories, due to the mountain association with the cultural community, the cultural landscape is formed differently. So that in Mestia the functional aspects was the dominant for creating meaning role and shaping the landscape of the mountain, In Uplistsikhe the aesthetic and meaning aspects of the mountain was overcome and in Mtskheta location of mountain is important as the strategically region. After comparing these three aspects of ritual landscape, the relation between natural and cultural landscape will be discussed.

## Keywords

Ritual Landscape, Natural Landscape, Cultural Landscape, Function, Aesthetics.

### Mountain, the sacred natural element

There are different contexts for sacred places' formation which affected by natural factors, geography, culture and beliefs. The deep bond between the natural elements and the sacred, forced human to create the link between religion and nature. The relation between these two elements has been long viewed around the world and has continued to nowadays.

Mountain is a natural element which has special place in traditional rituals of different religions. Different groups considered the mountain as a worship place of the Gods and these temples dedicated to the natural viewpoint. Prayer caves in the mountain have been created by humans or nature. Mountains are located in the center of the universe and they are the reaching point of earth and sky. Mountains are closer to the sky and their dual sanctity space is the stature and symbolism. This fact has been caused to provide a nice worship place for all the Gods, (Eliade, 1993: 106). In all religions, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, the sacred mountain, find meaning by located the sacred places in the heart of nature. As "Pire Sabz" in Yazd, "Elephanta cave" and "Ajanta cave" in India, Buddhist temples in Tibetan, "Virgin Mary Pantheon" at Lourdes in France and "Fatima Shrine" in Lisbon of Portugal, and the "holy shrine of Emamzadeh Davoud and Emamzadeh Hashem" in Iran are the evidence of this claim. Because of the significance of access to water in these places, this natural and sacred element can be seen as springs, well or river.

Also on the sacred of the mountain, it can be noted that mountains and caves were a place for solitude and austerity monks in different religions. Forty days of the Prophet's pray (PBUH) in the "Hira Cave" in the "Nour Mountain" represents the saint of mountain in Islam.

### Hypothesis

Mount is the most important natural element in formation of ritual landscape of Georgia and it has maintained this position with different forms in different periods.

### Definition of terms

Before getting into the discussion, to understand the concept of "ritual landscape" and its relation

with "nature", some words need to be defined:

- **Natural landscape:** Some of the experts say the natural landscape is nature without human. Ferdinands believes that natural landscape is a landscape where there is no trace of human activity on it (Ghazanfari, 2008: 20). Natural landscape is the pristine nature which it is defined by human and has a unique identity. In terms of physical intervention, human had not interfered on it such as pristine nature, but in terms of the mental connection, it is a part of the pristine nature that human mind gave meaning to it. The sun as seal, magic as a special time of prayer with God are examples of natural landscape.

- **Cultural Landscape:** Cultural Landscape is a natural landscape that has been formed by a group of human. Culture has operating role, nature plays an intermediary role, and the cultural landscape is the result (Sauer, 1925).

- **Ritual Landscape:** Ritual is a subset of culture and makes landscape which is also cultural, due to the importance of ritual symbols called ritual landscape (Mansouri, 2013). Ritual landscape is part of the cultural landscape that displays reflects of the customs, rituals, religion and religious ritual. Events such as "SizdahBedar", "Sadeh", "Panjahe", and etc. "SizdahBedar" are traditional rituals that are formed in the nature and rooted in respect for water and plants. "Sadeh" is an old ritual landscape that refers to the worship of fire. According to Fereydoon Joneidi's belief about epic poem in "shahnameh", advent and worship of fire related to Houshangshah times.

Obviously that Houshang started using stones and also it is clear that stones encounter to each other made the first flashes of fire (Joneidi, 2007: 72).

"Panjahe", tying things to trees and drinking water for consecration, rooted in recourse to the goddess of water. Also the "Rain's Pray" and recourse to "Fatemeh Zahra" (SA) and many other rain's rituals in Iran are the evolved remainders of the water prayer and recourse to Anahita (Javadi, 2013). Put the water jug on the "Haftseen" shows the significance of the symbol of Venus (Heidari, 2002).

Mountain's role in ritual landscape of Georgia In this paper three different cultural landscape of Mestia, Uplistsikhe and Metskhta will be studied which are different in both biological and ritual factors. In this context, role of the natural landscape will be discussed in the formation of a ritual land-

scape. By using observations and theoretical foundations, these questions are tried to be answered: Is there any relation between a natural landscape and the ritual landscape in Georgia? Is there a specific element of the natural landscape which has the main a repetitive role in shaping cultural landscape of this area?

### Review visited samples

#### • Mestia : Dependence of the material life to ritual landscape

Mestia, is a tourist village located in North West of Georgia. Primary residence of this area formed near the river and the mountain ranges. Subsistence in Mestia are based on agriculture and livestock activities and rain had a major impact on their lives. Defensive towers in this area were considered as a safe place from enemy attack. Since the attack they were as temporary residence. The ritual space of Mestia is a church at the top of the hill. However, the combination of ritual space and mountain rooted in ancient religions in the Middle East and Caucasia, therefore, the Church can probably was built on the remains of a more ancient place of worship. Even if this is not true, the combination of the

natural landscape and architecture to create a ritual landscape, from the ancient tribes believed the mountain as the nearest element to the sky, and the choice of making place for worshipping Gods and resort to get the blessings such as rain or stopping it. As "Shohreh Javadi" says, importance of prayer to the goddess of water is for her ability in fertility, blessings and abundance (Javadi, 2007). On this basis it could be argued selecting the location of the temple is combination with the natural element that people recourse on it for prayer, sacrifice and ask for rain and fertility. If we judge according to the current situation, we can say that the temple combined with the natural landscape and formed Mestia's ritual landscape, aesthetic pattern of ritual space is taken from the historical pattern. The history of civilization is older in Mestia, the probability of first alternative is more. During the time these sacred places have been converted to the Church and there were safe places and worshipping place for people (Pourjafar & Nezhadebrahimi, 2009). Temple of Mestia deformed according to the terms by this logic and today it dominates the village as church (Fig.1).

In addition to mountain, Mulkhrariver is another

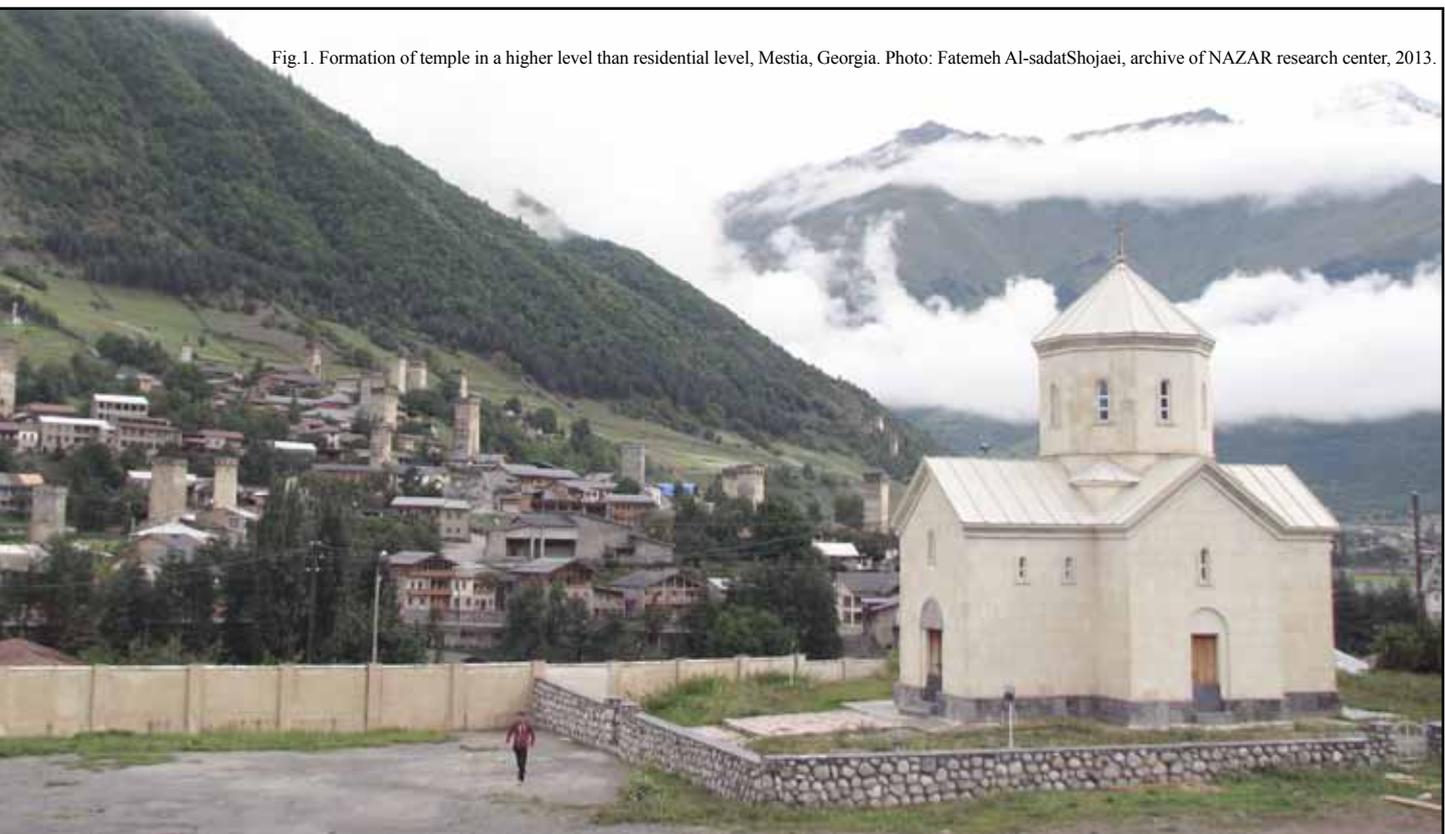


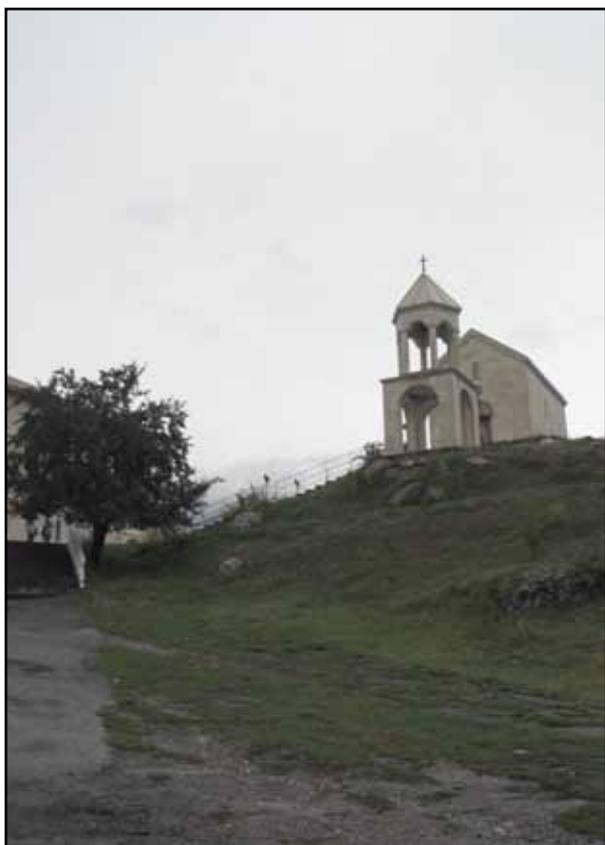
Fig.1. Formation of temple in a higher level than residential level, Mestia, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

natural element that has played a role in temple's location. Temple of Mestia is located on a mountain which the river flows around. The main element of natural landscape in ritual landscape is mountain and it is located higher than the residential level. River as the second element flows near mountain. Because the mountain was high and it is a source of atmospheric precipitation and lead residents to itself for worship and ask for rain. As the result of the beliefs contact with the supernatural on the mountain is possible. River as a natural element connected with the sacred mountain made a stronger linked between the natural landscape and ritual landscape. Mount selection is dependent on the beliefs and river. So there is one of them without another can't provide an appropriate place for creation of a ritual landscape (Fig.2).

• **Uplistsikhe: A ritual Landscape independent of settlements**

Uplistsikhe is a religious complex which is located on the mountains near Gori in Georgia. In some resources it is known as a residential complex. But it

Fig. 2. Location of temple on the mountain, Mestia, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



literally means "temple" or "Castle of the Gods". In addition, there are some shelves on the wall where the light was put and small rooms with big pools of water on the floorviolated believes that there was only a residential complex. The special role of water in this complex made theory of religious function stronger, since the waterways connected all pools throughout the series together (Fig.3). Water is the first element which everything was created from, therefore it was the ancient symbol of womb and fertility as well as purification and regeneracy (Hall, 2001: 195).

It seems these pools and waterways are related to the sacred water and also “padyab” in ritual spaces in ancient religions. Probability of absence of residential complexes near this area made this hypothesis stronger that religious place is independently and it is formed to praise the sacred mountain. Even if residential complexes will be observed, the claim that Uplistsikhe was a temple and place of worship is not violated. Then we can say the temple formed in connection with that.

The author believes that religious spaces developed by the growth of culture, as overtime in addition to meet the material needs another goals have been added. The local temple of Mestia becomes to a religious complex in Uplistsikhe, in addition of Worship, creating visual communication with the sacred elements of nature becomes important. Observation of the porch with a viewpoint to nature, demonstrate that purpose of forming is according to the sacred mountain that located in front (Fig.4). In other words locating was in such a way that in addition to eliminating spiritual need, aesthetic needs of a ritual space will be provided. That is why at this location some frames are embedded to see and consecrate a sacred natural element simultaneously.

It seems Uplistsikhe is the result of a development civilization where mountain is the main element of the ritual space as a part of the natural landscape. Here ritual space is not on top of the mountain, but it is formed in front of it as a viewpoint and perhaps is a shrine to the sacred mountain. Viewpoint's emphasize is on the mountain and secondarily on Mtkvari river (Fig.5). Flowing water has a special situation in traditional rituals also observed water near to Temple (Azad, 2005). This is due to the importance of water in the life of communities and it was related to the mountain as an origin of at-



mospheric precipitation and status of Gods. Based on the spatial structure of Uplistsikhe and because of kind of orientation and it's communicate with mountain and river it seems these natural-cultural elements are located in the center of the ritual space and other spaces formed according to them.

• **Mtskheta: The sacred Mountain, dominant to the Nature**

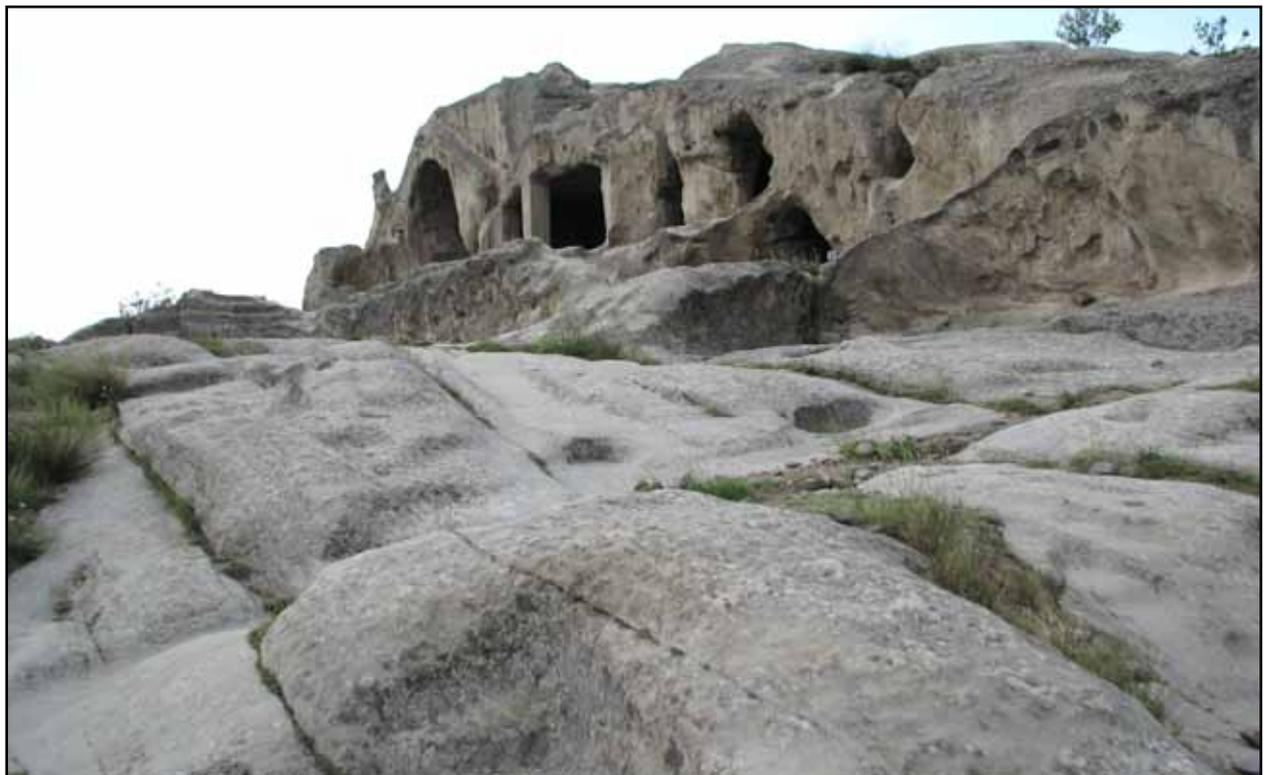
Mtskheta is a small town in center of Georgia that is located on the hillside. River flows near Mtskheta made it for life. There are two churches in the residential context and a monastery located outside. "Jvari Monastery" is an important temple that is located outside of the city and in ventricular of pristine nature. It is located on the mountain and higher than the surrounding residential areas. The mountain is located on the end of "Mtkvari Valley" and in context of the surrounding residential region. The "Mtkhvari River" confluence with mountain and "Aragvi River" in this area. That is important because of the strategic location and "Jvari Monastery" is located on it (Fig.6). Location of this mountain and also monastery located on it shows the sacred of mountain and its importance.



Fig. 3. The large pools in rooms of religious complex, Uplistsikhe, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Around the City several hills and mountains even same as the height of sacred mountain can be observed, but confluence of two rivers beside the mountain made it more important than the other hills. Also the church is built on the stone pad which seems it is because of more emphasis for the location of the sacred space and aggravation of the enormity of it.

Fig. 4. The porch, a viewpoint to the sacred mountain, Uplistsikhe, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



Similarity of "Jvari (cross) Monastery" with the other samples is because of a connection between ritual space with mountain and river as natural elements. Temple of Mestia has a connection with residential context and it was defined for a settlement and locally level, but monastery of Mtskheta was defined for several settlements and region level. In addition, there are not agricultural interventions in the surrounding nature of Mtskheta and pristine nature remains. However, the basic role of mountain in forming ritual space is evidence on both cases. It is important that in communities with different cultural levels and different spheres of influence, the mountain is main element of the natural landscape in the structure of ritual landscape. The river is a related element to the mountain. In addition to the Orthodox churches the monasteries and the Catholic churches in Europe usually located on the mountains and beside of the scared well or water. Such as "Virgin Mary Church" in Marseille of France and "Sainte Odile" in Strasbourg. The Whys of ritual landscape formation in Georgia Despite

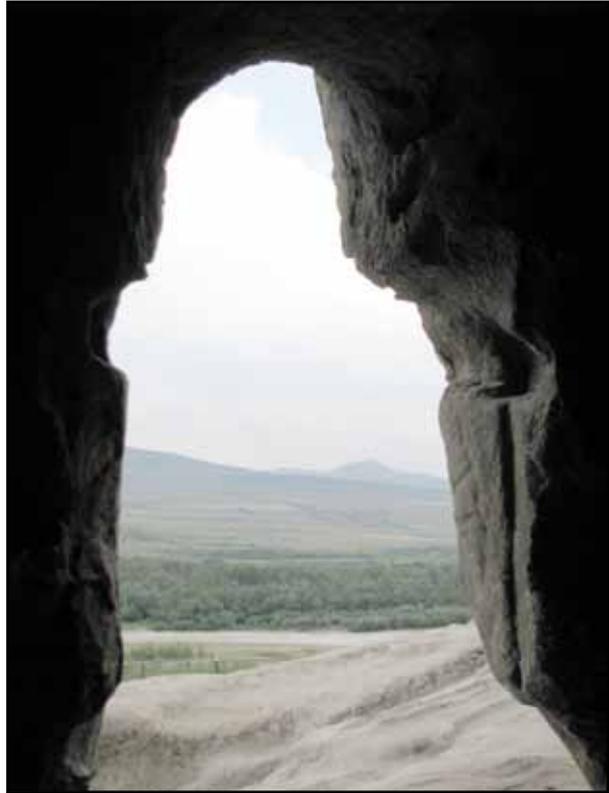


Fig.6. Location of Jvari monastery at the Confluence of two rivers and mountain, Mtskheta, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.5. Provide vision for emphasize the front sacred mountain, Uplistsikhe, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



the different natural landscape and cultural landscape, the most specific element of the nature which ritual landscape is realized in combination with it is common in Mestia, Uplistsikhe and Mtskheta. Mountain is the main element of nature and river as a natural element depends on it, is formed a ritual landscape in three cases:

- Mountain as a source of atmospheric precipitation and river that flows around it, considered as sacred elements in Mestia. They formed ritual landscape in combination with temple. Because of location the temple of Mestia seen from far distance and it is directly understandable. This sacred place respond to the spiritual needs of residents and its functional aspect is dominant in creating meaning role.

- Temple of Uplistsikhe is located in front of the sacred mountain and considered as its viewpoint. So that the most important natural element is the front mountain. This claim is proved by orientation of rooms and main porch and emphasis on the vision on the front mountain. Temple of Uplistsikhe provides aesthetic needs in addition to spiritual needs. Both ritual function and vision on sacred mountain created a new concept of a ritual landscape that aesthetic and function are effective on it. Understanding the identity landscape of the complex obtained indirectly.

- The sacred mountain and the importance of water have an important role in "Jvari Monastery"'s location. Since the monastery was built on confluence of mountains and river. This place like the church of Mestia can be seen from far landscape and it is directly understandable (Fig.7). Mtskheta have completed religious function in response to the spiritual needs of residents (Table 1).

### How ritual landscape is formed in Georgia?

- The temple of Mestia is a single ritual element that has been built near the settlement. Dependence of residents' life to agriculture caused the temple's lo-



Fig. 7. Visibility of Jvari monastery directly, Mtskheta, Georgia. Photo: Fatemeh Al-sadatShojaei, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

cation in relation to mountain. Mountain and river surrounding it, are two natural elements that show reflection of nature and culture.

- Uplistsikhe is an independent religious complex which is under domination of the front mountain and influences viewer in terms of aesthetic. In Uplistsikhe sacred mountain is located in front of a worship complex. The role of natural landscape in formation of ritual landscape with emphasis of the front mountain can be observed.

- "Jvari Monastery" of Mtskheta dominates surrounding settlements. This single religious element is located out of the settlements and on top of the

Table1. The whys of a ritual landscape formation in Georgia. Source: Author.

Landscape Factor	Mestia	Uplistsikhe	Mtskheta
Sacred nature and natural elements	Mountain & River	The front sacred Mountain	Mountain & River
The visual role of Temple	Can be seen from far landscape	Viewpoint of front mountain	Can be seen from far landscape
Respond to users' needs	Spiritual need	Spiritual need and Aesthetics	Spiritual need
Understanding Temple's identity	Directly	Indirectly	Directly

sacred mountain. What distinguishes the mountain from the other same surrounding height hills is confluence of two rivers nearby. The river shows the na-

ture footprint in connection of natural landscape to ritual landscape in addition to the mountain (Table 2).

Table2. The Hows formation of a ritual landscape in Georgia. Source: Author.

	Mestia	Uplistsikhe	Mtskheta
<b>Location Compared to the around complexes</b>	Near the settlements	A single ritual complex	Out of settlements
<b>Distinguish Temple</b>	A single elements	Relation to the pristine nature	A single elements
<b>Linking cultural landscape &amp; natural landscape</b>	Temple’s location on mountain with an emphasis on the river	Locate temple on sacred mountain with an emphasis on the river	Locate monastery on mountain and in Confluence of two rivers

**Conclusion**

Natural and ritual landscape of Georgia have close relation to each other. Ritual Landscape is part of the cultural landscape that has been used in different forms in the natural context. Although three complexes in Mestia, Uplistsikhe and Mtskheta were different in the climate, the period of construction and architecture, but these three cases are all located on sacred places on the mountain and their main purpose was spirituality and worship. Other functions such as residential context is formed near it. Sometimes functionality was dominant and sometimes with increasing residents' culture, aesthetics overtaken from functionality. By comparing the three ritual landscape in Mestia, Uplistsikhe and Mtskheta, despite different cultural Landscapes, it seems natural elements have always played an essential role in the formation of the ritual landscape in Georgia. Nature was context of formation of temples. At first sacred element of mountain known as a special point for temples' location. Then this element along with river made milestone that is the most suitable place for the formation of the Temple. Mountains were sacred throughout history and were locations for communicating with Gods. As in all religions and beliefs of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam and Pre Zoroastrianism the mountain and river were important. Georgians like lots of other people consider this nature as a significant element. They have built religious places on mountains. Over the different times and changes in religion and culture this belief has been always preserved. The differences mentioned in three cases resulted from the amount and type of intervention in nature which were at three different levels: “Material need”, “Material need with aesthetic” and “Material need with dominating on the surrounding area”. But in all three cases responding to the spiritual needs is accomplished by the relation between the natural landscape and cultural landscape with a focus on the cultural role of mountain. In fact, in Georgia the role of mountain has increased, passing through ritual, from a natural landscape to a cultural landscape.

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