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BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: THE MONASTERY OF PANAGIA SOUMELA

by Mother Nectaria McLees

In a remote Alpine forest, on a towering cliff-face 1,500 feet above the valley floor, stand the ruins of one of the longest-lived Orthodox monasteries of Asia Minor, Panagia Soumela.¹ A grueling 850-foot (250-meter) climb opens out onto a broad shelf in the rock, supporting the majestic church and monastery that enshrined one of Christendom's oldest icons, the Soumela Mother of God. Venerated as an original work by St. Luke the Evangelist, the icon inspired the monastery's early foundation.

This dramatic setting, southwest of the city of Trabzon in northern Turkey, is the old Greek region of Pontus, the home to Christians from the Church's infancy. Evidence for Orthodox belief that the famous icon enshrined here was painted by St. Luke is no less dramatic, and bolstered by imperial Byzantine legislation mentioning the monastery's late fourth-century foundation.

Traditions confirm St. Luke's presence in Achaia, a Roman province in the northern Peloponnese, and his death and burial in nearby Boetia at the age of eighty-four. St. Luke was buried in the town of Thebes (modern-day Thiva)

¹ Panagia Soumela: Panagia meaning the "All-Holy Mother of God," and Soumela being a Pontic dialectic corruption of tou Mela "of Mela."

where his original marble sepulcher can still be seen. His relics remained there until the mid-fourth century, when they were moved to Constantinople to the Church of the Holy Apostles. After his death, his companion and disciple Ananias became caretaker of an icon painted by the evangelist that would later be known as the Panagia Soumela. Once Christianity was legalized, it was placed in a church dedicated to the Mother of God in Athens, where it remained until the reign of Emperor Theodosios I (379-395).

During Emperor Theodosios' rule, a thirty-year-old Athenian priest by the name of Basil had a vision in which the Mother of God told him that he and his nephew Sotirichos, a deacon, should become monks. The two obeyed, and after their tonsures as Monks Barnabas and Sophronios, they went to



Abandoned chapel near Soumela.

venerate St. Luke's wonder-working icon of the Mother of God, enshrined nearby. As they knelt before the icon, the Mother of God spoke to them again, telling them to follow her to the east, to Mount Mela. They saw the icon lifted from its shrine by two angels who disappeared with it towards the eastern horizon. The icon was never seen in Athens again.

After years of wandering through the great monastic centers of Mt. Athos, Latmos, and Papikon, the two monks came to Ephesus, and took ship up the coast to the Black Sea. Spiritually, Asia Minor was in full fruition.

Neighboring Cappadocia had just seen the repose of St. Basil the Great in 379. Basil's brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, lived until 395, and his friend St. Gregory Nazianzen until 389 – both were probably still living when Frs. Barnabas and Sophronios made their way east. Christianity had become the state religion in 380 and the Second Ecumenical Council was convened the following year in Constantinople. In Antioch, a young preacher named John was stirring public interest with his sermons, while in far-off Africa, St. Macarius the Great was preparing for his death, and a young man by the name of Augustine, for baptism.

After visiting Trebizond, the monks wandered through Pontus in search of their mountain. Finally stopping in a small village, they were taken in by a local farmer who told them that they had sheltered at the foot of Mount Mela itself. Filled with joy, they left at dawn and followed the river towards



Panagia Soumela, after the vandals.



Detail of fresco with St. John the Theologian.

the summit. By nightfall they had climbed high up the mountainside and lay down to sleep in the woods. In the morning when the monks awoke they saw a large flock of swallows flying in and out of a cleft closer to the summit. Climbing up to investigate, they found a large dry cave, and as they entered, the miraculous icon (which they had last seen in Athens) appeared in front of them on a high ledge, bathed in light.

Understanding that this was the place intended for them, Frs. Barnabas and Sophronios were nonetheless perplexed. There was no source of water nearby, and it was impossible to live there. They turned to the Mother of God, begging her help that they might continue in the place where her icon rested. Once again they heard her assuring them that she would give water not only for their bodily needs but also for spiritual healing. As she spoke, a rock above the cave split, and fresh, cool water sprang forth. This miraculous spring became one of the great treasures of the monastery, and continues to flow today, 1600 years later.

After living for seventeen days on the mountainside with only wild herbs and roots for food, the fathers awoke one morning to find a laden donkey standing quietly below the cave. They looked



Three Magi.

in vain for his owner, unable to believe that the donkey had wandered so far and high by itself. The animal was loaded with food, and amidst his bags was a parchment letter addressed to them by name from the abbot of the nearby monastery of Vazelon. The abbot wrote that the Mother of God had appeared to him, asking that the monks be sent food. Not knowing where they were, he loaded the donkey with the supplies and let him go free, trusting the Mother of God to lead him. The monks wrote back their thanks and sent the donkey home. A few months later the same abbot was instructed by St. John the Baptist to send more supplies as well as three monks to assist Frs. Barnabas and Sophronios. For many centuries after, the monks of Mt. Mela sent annual gifts to Vazelon in gratitude for the monastery's generosity during those first hard months.

As word spread of the two monk-ascetics and the miraculous icon that had appeared on the mountain, pilgrims began making the long climb up to the cave. Some stayed to become monks themselves, and by the time the founders

reposed on the same day in 412, the monastery was flourishing. It enjoyed the favor and imperial privileges of subsequent Byzantine emperors and was the most influential and prosperous monastery in the region of Pontus.

Some time during the sixth century, the monastery was attacked and destroyed by what hagiographical literature calls “Hagarenes” (probably non-Christian raiding parties from the south or Cretan Arabs who were pirating as far as Trebizond on the Black Sea). The monastery was restored in 644, again by the intercession of the Mother of God, who appeared to a pious, illiterate farmer named Christopher as he was plowing his fields in a village near Trebizond. She instructed him to appear before the local bishop



Interior of main church, 2007.

to request ordination and then rebuild her monastery. When he protested that he could not even read, she promised to help, and sent him off. She appeared that evening to the bishop as well, foretelling Christopher’s arrival. The ordination took place as she requested, and Christopher climbed to the deserted ruins. To his surprise he found the church swept and made ready. At his first attempt to serve, the Mother of God appeared once again, and when she handed him the Holy Gospel, he found that he could read. She told him to serve liturgy as often as he could and promised her own help and that of Sts.

Barnabas and Sophronios. Pilgrims again came to be monks, and by the time of his repose, St. Christopher was the spiritual father of a large brotherhood.

The monastery flourished, and over the centuries acquired many spiritual treasures, including the icon of the Panagia Soumela, the relics of Sts. Barnabas, Sophronios and Christopher, a parchment gospel copied by St. Christopher, and an intricately carved wooden cross, given to the monastery by Emperor Manuel I Comnenus, that contained substantial fragments of the True Cross. (The wooden cross and the gospel copied by St. Christopher are now in the Byzantine Museum in Athens.) In 1349, Alexis II Comnenus was crowned Emperor of Trebizond at Soumela; he subsequently donated land and villages to the monastery, restored the older structures, and built new cells.

After the Turkish occupation of Trebizond and Pontus in 1461, Soumela



Soumela's church, 2007.

continued to fare surprisingly well. According to one tradition, Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) came upon the monastery one day as he was hunting. Infuriated by its apparent prosperity, he ordered it destroyed, but as soon as the sultan uttered the command, he fell from his horse, convulsing and foaming at the mouth. His retainers begged him to recant his order, and as soon as he did, he became well. Returning to Constantinople, he issued an imperial *firman* granting the monastery all the privileges it had enjoyed under the rule of the Byzantine Comnenus Dynasty. A dozen other sultans followed suit, and Soumela enjoyed its greatest period of prosperity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under Turkish rule.

In periods of oppression, the monastery suffered with the Christian population. In 1997, 101 year-old Spiro Yakoustides recounted the tensions at Soumela before the 1923 Exchange of Populations, and of help from an unexpected quarter:

My uncle Christos was a builder who...took me around and taught me his trade. When I was a teenager he took me up to the monastery of Panagia Soumela.... Some of the Turks living near there were crypto-Christians, and they protected the monastery. With my own eyes, I saw about ten or fifteen of them taking Holy Communion. There were many crypto-Christians and they protected us; if it hasn't been for them we'd have been slaughtered. For example, there were a lot of crypto-Christians in the police. During Holy Week, they used to put a guard on our churches, and refuse to allow any Turks in, just in case anybody tried to desecrate our ceremonies. At Easter itself, there was a crypto-Christian who would watch our church to make sure nobody would bother us.²

The Exchange of Populations in 1923, in which all of the Orthodox of Asia Minor were exiled to Greece, forced the monastery's abandonment by the monks. Soumela fell victim to decades of idle desecration and the ravage of time. The monastery's treasures, the cross, gospel, icon, and relics which were buried or hidden at the time of the forced emigration, were left untouched until 1931 when the Turkish government gave permission for them to be unearthed and taken to Greece. The location of the relics of Sts. Barnabas,

Sophronios, and Christopher is still unknown. The area is today a national park and the ruins of the monastery are being rebuilt in a rather Turkish style as a world heritage site by the Turkish government in cooperation with UNESCO. The monastery is now almost completely accessible by road, and is visited each year by many Turkish Muslims as well as Christian pilgrims.

The icon of Panagia Soumela was safeguarded by the Benaki Museum in Athens until 1952, when Pontians who had settled in Greece gathered funds to build a church in Kastania, a small northern village between Kozani and Veria. The church was consecrated in honor of the Dormition of the Mother of God and the icon of Panagia Soumela was carried by foot in procession from Veria and enshrined in the church. Although the site is formally designated as a monastery, there are not yet any monastics in residence. The icon is covered by a silver *riza* depicting the Prophets David, Moses, Isaiah and Aaron flanking the Mother and Child. Time has worn the paint off the icon until the faces are indistinguishable, although a faint outline of one of the Virgin's eyes can still be seen.

The feast-day of the three founders is on August 18; that of the icon of Panagia Soumela, on August 15. ✚

² Bruce Clark, *Twice a Stranger: How Mass Expulsion Forged Modern Greece and Turkey*, Grana Books (London) and Harvard University Press (Boston), 2006, pg. 120. Also available on Amazon.com