

Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform / Vanguard of Our Cultural Heritage / Chapter 23

"Sümela Monastery" with Katerina Prokos Türker

TOPICS: The location and history of Sümela Monastery, Status of the monastery during the Byzantine and Ottoman periods, The 1923 population exchange and its aftermath, Access to the monastery and the experiences awaiting visitors, Important structures and frescoes within the monastery, The restoration process and the work carried out, The protection of the frescoes and other restoration details, Plans for the completion of the restoration, Points to be considered by visitors.

Nükhet Everi In this part of our interviews with those who shoulder our cultural heritage for the Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform, I am taking you to Sümela Monastery. Today we have with us a very valuable colleague, professional tourist guide Katerina Prokos Türker. Katerina, welcome. Please introduce yourself briefly.

Katerina Prokos Türker: I was born on Heybeliada, Istanbul. I am a Rum (Byzantine Orthodox) of Istanbul and I live on Heybeliada as the fourth generation of my family. I received my primary school education here, in a Greek primary school. After completing my secondary and high school education at Fener Yoakimyon High School, I studied Chemical Engineering at Yıldız University. However, everyone knows me as a tour guide. I became a tour guide after completing a tour guide course at the Ministry of Tourism and I have been doing this job for about 40 years. Thanks to guiding, my research curiosity increased and I researched about many things about places such as Sümela Monastery. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this.

Nükhet Everi: Sümela Monastery is a cultural heritage monument that attracts a lot of attention. It is also on the agenda with its restoration works. Can you tell us about this beautiful monastery? What is Sümela Monastery, where is it located and why was it built there?

Katerina Prokos Türker: Sümela Monastery is one of the most important places to visit in Türkiye. It is located at an altitude of 1,150 metres in the Black Sea Mountains, about fifty kilometres south of Trabzon. It is close to Maçka. After travelling from Trabzon to Maçka, you can reach the monastery by following the Virgin Mary Stream. The history of the monastery dates back to the 4th century. According to the legend, two Athenian priests, Barnabas and Sofronios, dreamt that the lost icon of the Virgin Mary was in a cave in the Black Sea Mountains and this icon was one of the four icons painted by the Gospel writer Luke. The monks came to Trabzon, found the icon of the Virgin Mary and started the monastic tradition. The name of the monastery comes from the Virgin Mary on Mount Melas and in time it became known as "Sümela".

The monastery gained an organised structure in the 10th century and experienced its heyday in the 13th century during the Trabzon Komnenos Empire. Especially during this period, the monastery became a great religious centre with donations and support given to the monastery. It also maintained its importance during the Ottoman period. During the governorship of Sultan Beyazıt II in Trabzon, various privileges were granted to the monastery, which increased its importance in the region. The interest of the Ottoman sultans in the monastery continued when Gülbahar Hatun, the mother of Yavuz Sultan Selim II, made gifts and donations to the monastery. In the 17th century, Evliya Çelebi also spoke highly of Sümela Monastery in his Travelogue.

With the population exchange in 1923, the last monks left the monastery and the valuable icons were taken to Greece. Today, the monastery is an important tourist and religious centre, attracting many visitors from both Türkiye and abroad. The historical and architectural features of the monastery have transformed it from a religious centre into a cultural treasure.

Nükhet Everi: Today it is a very valuable museum. What awaits us when we visit Sümela Monastery? Can you also give us information about the restoration works?

Katerina Prokos Türker: When you go to Sümela Monastery, a pleasant walk in magnificent nature awaits you. Until recently, it was possible to go by minibuses, but now it is necessary to walk after a certain point. The breathtaking view of the monastery fascinates people when seen from the opposite side. To reach the monastery, you have to climb a 64-step staircase. These steps were built for security purposes. After entering the monastery, you can see the church in the cave, the Church of the Virgin Mary and other small churches. There are many sections decorated with frescoes inside the Monastery. These frescoes present the most beautiful examples of Byzantine art and depict various religious scenes.

Restoration work is being carried out to preserve the monastery's historical texture. The frescoes are one of the most striking features of the monastery and in order to preserve them, no flash photography, no graffiti, and no souvenirs should be taken. During the restoration process, both structural and aesthetic repairs are made to increase the durability of the monastery and the frescoes are restored in accordance with the original. In addition, various security measures are taken at the Monastery to ensure that visitors can visit the Monastery comfortably.

There is also a library and a guest house at the Monastery. The rooms where the monks used to live reveal clues about the daily life of the Monastery. Areas such as the kitchen and dining hall also attract the attention of visitors. While discovering the history and architectural features of the Monastery, visitors are also immersed in the magnificent nature of the Black Sea. The region where the Monastery is located also offers an ideal area for nature walks and photography.

Nükhet Everi: You have explained the history and importance of Sümela Monastery very well. How long will the restoration process of Sümela Monastery continue and what changes will take place once this process is completed?

Katerina Prokos Türker: The restoration process is quite time-consuming due to the extensive and detailed nature of the monastery. According to current plans, the restoration is expected to take several more years. When it is completed, more sections of the Monastery will be opened to visitors and new arrangements will be made for visitors to visit more comfortably without damaging the historical texture. In particular, special exhibition areas will be created to protect the frescos and to enable visitors to see these unique works of art more closely. Furthermore, the natural beauty around the Monastery will be preserved and visitors will be better served.

Nükhet Everi: Dear Katerina, thank you very much for your interview. You have shared very valuable information for all those who will visit Sümela Monastery. I hope everyone will pay more attention to this historical and cultural heritage.