

Saint George Greek Orthodox Cathedral



The Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, Greek Orthodox Church in Greenville, South Carolina

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The Incredible Story of the Miraculous Icon - Panagia Soumela

The Evangelist Luke painted several Icons of the Holy Mother of God. One of these is the Panagia Soumela. After Saint Luke was crucified at 84 years of age, he was buried in the town of Thebes (modern-day Thiva). His relics were transferred to Constantinople in the mid-fourth century to the Church of the Holy Apostles. After he died his companion Ananias became the caretaker of the icon he painted of the holy Mother.



In the late 3rd or early 4th century the icon was placed in a church in Athens dedicated to the Mother of God.

Barnabas and Sophronios

During the reign of Theodosios (379-395) a priest in Athens had a vision where the Mother of God told him that he and his nephew, a deacon, should become monks. After they were tonsured as Barnabas and Sophronios, they went to venerate the wonder-working icon that saint Luke had painted on the Mother of God in Athens. As they knelt in front of this icon the Mother of God again spoke to them and told them that they should follow her and go east to Mount Melas. At the same time, angels appeared, lifting the icon and carrying it off. It was never seen again in Athens.

These two monks wandered towards the east stopping at Mount Athos, Latmos, and Papikon and then to Ephesus where they took a ship to the Black Sea. This part of the world (Asia Minor - modern day Turkey) was the center of Christian spirituality. This was the age of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Theologian, and the Second Ecumenical Council. Christianity had just become a state religion. It was also when Saint John Chrysostom was delivering his sermons in Constantinople and Saint Marcarius was preparing young Augustine for his baptism in Africa.



Baranabas and Sophronios visited [Trebizond](#) and wandered the region in search of Mount Melas.

Finally, at one of their stops they met a farmer who advised them that they had encamped at the foot of Mount Melas. That next day they followed the river towards the top of the mountain and slept near the top.

In the morning they found a dry cave a bit closer to the summit. they entered to investigate and this miraculous icon appeared in front of them. It was sitting on a high ledge bathed in light.



Without any resources they established life on the side of the steep mountain. One day a donkey appeared laden with food and he also carried a letter from the nearby monastery of Vazelon. The abbot wrote that the Mother of God had appeared to him and asked them to send food.

Shortly, word of the monks and the miraculous icon spread and pilgrims began to come. Some stayed to become monks. By the time of the death of the founders in 412 the monastery was flourishing. It was favored by the Byzantine emperors and was the most prosperous monastery

in the Pontos region.



The monastery was sacked and destroyed in the 7th century by "Hagarenes" (probably non-Christian raiding parties from the south or Cretan Arabs who were pirating as far north as Trebizond on the Black Sea). The monastery was restored in 644 by an illiterate farmer named Christopher. The Mother of God appeared to him and instructed him to go to the local bishop to be ordained and then to go and rebuild her monastery. Miraculously when he arrived the chapel had been swept clean and when he picked up the Gospel he found he could read. Shortly, the monastery again prospered.

In 1461 the Turks occupied Trebizond and Pontos. The monastery was not affected until early in the 16th century when Sultan Selim I discovered the monastery and was angered by its wealth and prosperity. He ordered it to be destroyed. But as soon as he made the order he fell from his horse with convulsions. He recanted his order and was restored to health. When he returned to Constantinople he issued an

imperial *firman* granting the monastery all the privileges it had enjoyed under Byzantine rule during the Comnenus Dynasty. Other sultans followed suit and the monastery enjoyed prosperity in the 18th and 19th century under Turkish rule.

This all came to an end with the genocide and [exchange of populations](#) which took place in 1923 in which all the Orthodox of Asia Minor were exiled to Greece. This forced the abandonment of the monastery. The monastery's treasures, which included the cross, gospel, icon and relics, were buried to hide them. They were not touched until 1933 when the Turkish government gave permission for them to be unearthed and taken to Greece. The monk Ambrosios visited the ruined monastery of Soumela and retrieved the holy icon and the rest of the church's valuables and brought them to Athens.

The icon of the Panagia Soumela was kept in the Benaki Museum in Athens until 1952. Pontians who had been exiled to Greece from Pontos obtained the funds to build a church in a small village in Kastinia between Kozani and Veria.

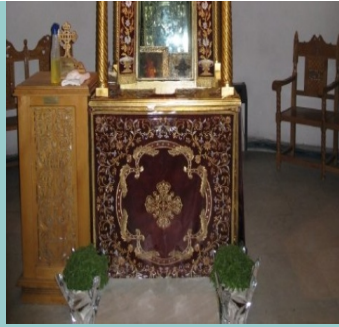
The icon is covered by a silver riza depicting the Prophets David, Moses, Isaiah and Aaron flanking the Mother and Child. Time has worn the icon until the faces are indistinguishable, although an outline of one of the Virgin's eyes is still faintly visible.



Today the icon is still revered and a copy now is kept at the monastery in South Carolina, [Paracletos Greek Orthodox Monastery](#).

The Turkish government is now restoring the





Monastery of Soumela, about 40 kilometers south of Trebizond, not as an Orthodox monastery, but as an historical tourist site, with more Turkish feeling than the original architecture.



The icon of Panagia

Soumela took its name from the Monastery of Soumela in Pontos of Asia Minor. The name "Soumela" comes from "Stou Mela", i.e. "at the mount Melas" and consequently signifies a particular locality in Pontos.

A short excerpt on the Monastery of Soumela in an interview with a Pontian Greek Orthodox Christian by Road to Emmaus Journal refereenced below

"RTE: In your account of the Black Sea crypto-Christians, you frequently mention the Monastery of Panagia Soumela, between Trabzon and Kromni. According to the Greek tradition of the founder-monks, Sts. Barnabas and Sophronius, Soumela is even older than St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai.

GEORGE: Yes, we had three of the oldest monasteries in the world near Trebizond. The Pontian tradition describes them as: "Vazelon, the most ancient," dedicated to St. John the Forerunner and built in this remote spot in 270, at the height of Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians; "Panagia Soumela, the most famous," founded in 383; and "St. George Peristereota, the most beautiful," established in the early sixth century. They were living monasteries throughout the Byzantine and Ottoman periods until they were evacuated in 1923 during the European-engineered Exchange of Populations, when the monks were forced to leave. The monasteries were left to be ruined by weather and vandals. Archbishop Chrysanthos Filippides of Athens and All-Greece, the Metropolitan of Trebizond who fed the Turkish women and children during the Russian occupation of 1916, later remarked, "Through the guilty complicity of the western Christian powers, a glorious Christian civilization in the East has been destroyed. The Church of Trebizond has been banished, and our inheritance has been transferred to strangers."

[Photos from the Monastery of Panagia Soumela in Pontos.](#)

Videos

- [Sumela Monastery, Turkey, October 2006](#)
- [panagia soumela](#)

See "Between Heaven and Earth: The Monastery of the Panagia Soumela", Road to Emmaus Journal, vol 32 by Mother Nectaria MeLees

Source of Image of Original Icon of Panagia Soumela



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