

EASTERN TURKEY



In the last issue of *Compass*, author Jeremy Seal took us on an evocative journey through the remote region of Eastern Turkey. Now Konstantinos D. Politis – Cox & Kings' Royal Academy Art Tours lecturer and British Museum special assistant – leads us through the area's rich history and culture, which has shaped this fascinating and under-explored region.

The north-eastern Anatolian Plain is one of the least-known, less-visited regions of modern Turkey. And yet it is the stage upon which some of the most fascinating history of the last 4,000 years played out. A place where Asian, eastern cultures met - and often clashed - with powerful European influences from the west; a place where the unique, indigenous peoples fought to survive.

The Eastern Turkish odyssey begins at the great port city of Trabzon, ancient Trapezus, on the southern shore of the Black Sea. It was originally founded in the 8th century B.C. by ancient Greek colonists from Sinope, the naval harbour of Pontus. This was the hometown of the ancient geographer Strabo, and the sacred ground upon which Xenophon and the Ten Thousand marched. Trabzon's strategic location made it an important commercial centre in the following Roman and Byzantine periods: it even became

the empire's capital. Though this was ended by no one less than the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, who conquered the city in 1461 - eight years after his capture of Constantinople. Trabzon went on to flourish under Turkish rule in the 16th century, being the courtly residence of Selim the Grim and his son Suleiman the Magnificent. WWI hostilities were to drastically change its urban character, though it has recently recovered its position as a major Black Sea city.

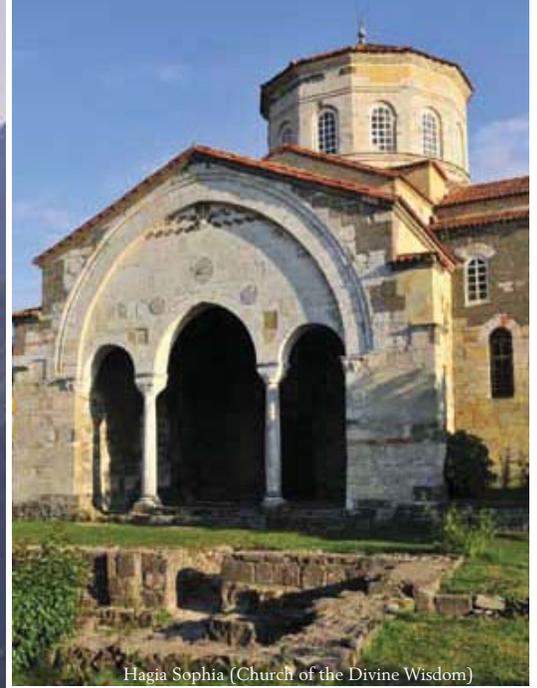
There are many important Byzantine churches with beautiful wall frescos in the region, but none more so than the magnificent Sumela monastery, dramatically positioned at the foot of steep cliffs overlooking the picturesque Altundere National Park. It was founded in A.D. 385, when legend has it that an icon painted by St Luke of the Holy Virgin miraculously appeared in a cave. The Emperor Justinian is said to have established a huge monastery

there in the 6th century, but what remains today is mostly from later periods. The monastery gained such significance by the 14th century, that the Emperor Alexius III Comnenus chose it for his coronation in 1349. Its fame persevered until 1923 when it was forcibly abandoned, but not forgotten. In August 2010 Sumela was chosen for the first modern ecumenical service outside of Istanbul conducted by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch.

The road to Erzurum lies on the ancient caravan route to Persia, passing through the lush, rolling Zigana Pass and sub-terrain stone-built houses, just as Xenophon described in the 5th Century B.C. Here local people dress in traditional outfits – brightly coloured, floral dresses for the women; baggy trousers and twirled headscarves for the men – and live quite differently to those in westernised western Turkey. Erzurum – the land of the Byzantine-Rums, as named by the Seljuk



Sumela Monastery, Trabzon



Hagia Sophia (Church of the Divine Wisdom)



Icona from Sumela Monaster

Turks who conquered it in 1103, and The Rock more recently by NATO - was a provincial capital. Over the centuries Armenians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Turks, Mongols and Russians have all fought to control this most strategic position in eastern Anatolia. Although they all left their mark, it is the Seljuk and Ottoman monuments that survive to embellish the city today. The grand mosques of Ulu Cami and Lala Mustafa Pasha Camii, and Koranic school of Cifte Minare Medrese are the most remarkable.

The ancient ruins of Ani are one of the great sights and sites of Eastern Turkey: nowhere else so readily recreates the impression of a vast capital city. Known as the City of 1001 Churches, it is not surprising Ani was compared to Constantinople Cairo. Founded as the centre of the Bagtarid Dynasty in 961 A.D, it boasted a population of 100,000. Although consecutive years involved

complex power-struggles between Byzantine Greeks, Georgians, Seljuk Turks and Mongols, it was the devastating earthquake of 1319 which saw the final demise of Ani. But its splendour can still be witnessed today, by the survival of dozens of beautifully adorned churches and massive defensive walls.

If one is to choose a single building complex to represent Eastern Turkey, then it must be the awe-inspiring, 18th century Ishak Pasha Palace. This truly magnificent structure is only matched by its stunning location, on a sweeping valley slope across from Mount Ararat. Built along the caravan route controlling trade with the east, it is a symbol and testament to the vast wealth generated by the Silk Road.

The region south of Mount Ararat was the homeland of the ancient Urtu civilisation, known to us from inscriptions and other archaeological remains from

around the 9th century BC. The name Ararat comes from the Old Testament and is a corruption of Urtu (the Latin translation is, Armenia). Near Lake Van (Turkey's largest lake) lies the city of Van, ancient Tuspha, which is the focal point of this most-ancient culture. Along with other nearby ancient sites of Cavustepe and Van Evi, this was a flourishing region and associated with the legendary Garden of Eden.

At the centre of Lake Van is the island of Akdamar, where the spectacularly decorated Armenian Church of the Holy Cross was built from 915 to 921. Amazing depictions of animals, birds, people and biblical scenes, intertwined with intricate floral motifs, are all sculpted onto the pink sandstone walls of the church. This magnificent building in its dramatic lacustrine setting was the venue of the first Eucharist service in a hundred years, given by the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop in September 2010.

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