

## **A Lesser Known Important Cultural Heritage Source and Religious Tourism Value in Turkey: Vazelon (Zavulon) Monastery\***

**Ahmet Çavuş, PhD**

Atatürk University  
Faculty of Tourism  
Department of Tourism Guidance  
Erzurum, Turkey.

### **Abstract**

*Vazelon which is also known as Zavulon Monastery is located within the borders of Macka district Kiremitli village in North eastern Trabzon. It is 45 km away from Trabzon, 15 km away from Macka and its height is 1210 m. The name of the monastery is assumed to be originated from Mount Zavulon and this religious structure was built at the foot of the mountain cliff. Monastery was originally built as a chapel in 270 A.C. at the intersection point of Yahya stream and Degirmen stream. However it was demolished as a result of Persian attack in 6<sup>th</sup> century and many priests were killed. After this event, it was built in current location at three different stages. The monastery devoted to John the Baptist was a 4 storey building. At that time, it was an institution having school, court, and notary and guest house functions as well as providing service as a place of worship and for raising monks. The priests in the monastery were noting and saving the political, economical and social subjects since 13<sup>th</sup> century. After the population exchange agreement between Turkey and Greece in 1923, Vazelon monastery was emptied. This place which was left alone, was later destroyed by treasure hunters and although the main frame of the building remained standing, trees grew inside and it took a ruined view. By taking Vazelon monastery and its surrounding under protection, restoring it, meliorating its roads and advertising it, an important cultural heritage will be protected and be redounded to tourism.*

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, Religious tourism, Trabzon, Vazelon Monastery, Turkey, Cultural tourism

### **1. Introduction**

Culture is a phenomenon formed by the people such as information, production, art, traditions, customs, religion, belief, habits, value judgement, apparel belonging to different regions within a country and a nation and that is learnt and transferred to new generations and have integrative properties (Doğaner, 2014). The cultures are the features that distinguish the countries from the other countries. Cultural heritage is a set of values belonging to the societies coming from the past and desired to be continued in the future. Cultural heritage are the areas having historical, aesthetic, archeological, scientific, ethnological and anthropological values, structure groups and archeological sites (Online 1).

Since these works and values transmitted from generation to generation are seen as the wealth of a country and it is believed that they must be adopted for next generations, all these values are called as “Cultural Heritage”. The scope of the cultural inheritance is wide and intangible cultural inheritance is dealt in two separate categories. Intangible cultural inheritance is the value that cannot be held or seen but that brings into being the society. These are the elements such as traditions, language, beliefs, music, songs, dances, show, rhymes, stories and poems. The protection of intangible cultural inheritance is important for the societies, and the protection of them is more difficult than tangible cultural heritage artifacts (Can, 2009).

Tangible cultural heritage is the artifact consisting of the structures, historical places and monuments and that must be protected on being transmitted to the next generations. Archeological, architectural, scientific-

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technological works, crafts are thought to be tangible cultural inheritance. In order to be transmitted of these artifacts to the next generations, they must be protected (Can, 2009:1). Today, with the transmission of cultural heritage artifacts to the next generations, the survival of their own values and so their own identity that is becoming increasingly important in the world is ensured. The survival of these values is important in terms of understanding the past and adopting these values. With this purpose, in 17<sup>th</sup> General Conference of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Paris, the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection Agreement was agreed in 1972. Since 2015, There are 1031 heritages formed according to the World Natural and Cultural Heritage Protection Agreement and declared as World Heritage Site (DMA). 802 of them are cultural, 197 of them are natural and 32 of them are mixed (natural and cultural) heritages. After adopted this agreement in 1982, Turkey become a side. As of 2015, Turkey has 15 heritages in this list, 13 of which is cultural and 2 of which is mixed (Table 1). Beside this, our country has 60 cultural inheritance totally, 57 of which is cultural and 2 of which is mixed and 1 of which is natural that are recommended for World Cultural Heritage and found in temporal list (Online 2).

**Table 1:** The places located in Turkey in the List of World Heritage, the years and features

	<b>World Heritage List</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Feature</b>
1	Divriği Ulu Mosque and Darüşşifası	1985	Sivas	Cultural
2	Historical Areas of İstanbul	1985	İstanbul	Cultural
3	Göreme National Park and Cappadocia	1985	Nevşehir	Natural-Cultural
4	Hattuşa – Hitit Capital	1986	Çorum	Cultural
5	Nemrut Mount	1987	Adıyaman	Cultural
6	Hieropolis - Pamukkale	1987	Denizli	Natural-Cultural
7	Xanthos - Letoon	1988	Muğla - Antalya	Cultural
8	Safranbolu City	1994	Karabük	Cultural
9	The ancient city of Troy	1998	Çanakkale	Cultural
10	Edirne Selimiye Mosque and Complex	2011	Edirne	Cultural
11	Çatalhöyük Neolithic City	2012	Konya	Cultural
12	Bursa and Cumalıkızık: The birth of Ottoman Empire	2014	Bursa	Cultural
13	Bergama Multilayer Cultural Landscape Area	2014	İzmir	Cultural
14	Diyarbakır Fortress and Hevsel Gardens	2015	Diyarbakır	Cultural
15	Ephesus Cultural Landscape	2015	İzmir	Cultural

**Source:** Online 3

Cultural inheritance values are generally seen and evaluated as the center of attractions for tourism sector. They are the places existed for long years and of course provided that the people learn cultural values with natural beauty and be alone with the nature. The landscape having cultural quality is the conclusion of common study of nature and human labor. These are the areas that carry the development and locations of the societies beyond the time and that depict the natural environment of that society that survived physically and social, economic and cultural aspects and that give information about that society (Can, 2009). The places that are important in terms of the belief may be among cultural inheritance values and these values are the potential sources in terms of tourism. In Turkey, Divriği Ulu Mosque Edirne Selimiye Mosque, Sultan Ahmet Mosque, Mevlana Mosque and Tomb, Mor Gabriel Monastery, Saint Pierre Church and Sümela Monastery are some of them.

In this field, there are several artifacts known and preserved in our country as well as there are some values that have not been known or protected yet. One of these values is Vazelon Monastery found in the borders of Kiremitli Village of Maçka town of Trabzon province and that is our study subject. The history of the place goes back to A.D. 270, and it is one of the oldest monestaries of Anatolia. There are some features that make Vazelon different. Some of them are codexes and documents that reached to these days and in which priests living in the monastery wrote social, economical and political events occurred around Trabzon between 8<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. This temple has different functions such as educational institution, notary, court, a loan of money exchange.

Beside this, like Sümela Monastery under the protection in Trabzon and located in World Cultural Heritage temporal list, that it is located at the foot of a steep cliff, and in a hilly topography, being covered with forests and that there is no settlement around it makes this place attractive.

## **2. Aims and Methods**

This research is a field study and potential detection was tried to be made like in most of the geographical studies and as a result, some suggestions were submitted. As it is known, that geographical studies constitute sources for investment and planning processes and mostly directed them are important with their reasons. In this study, they were brought to the available status by using *qualitative research methods*. Accordingly, the study is a typical *field research* based on a definite field and a definite subject. As it is known, field researches are among the methods frequently applied for obtaining data collection and research findings. In this research, it was applied to the data, viewpoints and information obtained from especially observation and interviews while describing the field. In the study, some qualitative data was obtained from the local institutions and used.

One of the important processes in the preparation of the study is reviewing the relevant literature. The subject of research was examined through historical development, functions and the relevant sources related to the surroundings of Trabzon and the monastery. As a result, it was aimed to reveal the importance of Vazelon Monastery that is one of the first monasteries and face to the danger of extinction today in terms of both cultural inheritance source and faith tourism. Besides this, some suggestions were made about what it should be made for the protection of this inheritance value and giving it to the tourism.

## **3. The Location of Research Field and Natural Environment Features**

Vazelon Monastery is within the borders of Kiremitli Village of Maçka District in Trabzon province and it is located in 14 km away from Maçka and 44 km away from Trabzon (Map 1). After it is went as far as 8 km towards the road of Gümüşhane-Erzurum to the south of Maçka district, it is turned to the west and it is reached to the closest location to Vazelon Monastery after approximately 5.5 km tracing Yahya River from the road divided into Köprüyanı Village. From here, it is reached to the Monastery by walking from the path as much as 250 m in the forest. The monastery located in the elevation of approximately 1210m, is located in a rocky area and a steep field at the foot hills of Zavulan Mount in the north of the Zigana Mountains facing to the east. In the selection of the monastery place, the advantageous location owned in terms of security has become important. This field is the place where high mountainous areas and the deep valleys are located together, and accordingly it is a situation in which terrain conditions are rough and the transportation is hard.

Zavulan Mount is located in the north slope of the Zigana Mountains that is an extension of the Eastern Black Sea Mountain Ranges where the monastery is located. The field located in the arc of Zigana (Kalkanlı) Mountains that are in the middle part of the Eastern Black Sea Mountains extends in parallel with the the coast in the direction of east-west in anticline way and its altitude has a structure continuously increasing toward the internal parts. As from the eastern part, the ranges beginning with the Horos Mountains (Taşoluk Hill 2420 m, Ayser Hill 2423 m) continues with the Kalkanlı Mountains (2193 m), Nişan Mount (3082 m), Fırın Mount (2706 m) and Karakaban (2550 m) with mountainous mass. This range is fully called as the Kalkanlı (Zigana) Mountains (Zaman, 2005:4). Here, the extension of land forms, climate and vegetation characteristics are affected.

In the field where the Black Sea climate prevails, some differences are seen in terms of temperature and precipitation values due to the extension of the mountains and the altitude difference between the coast and monastery land. In Trabzon (33 m) that is a coast station, annual average temperature is 14.7°C and the precipitation is 798.8 mm (Online 4), the temperature in Maçka that is in the elevation of 250 m is 12.2°C and the precipitation is 731.7 mm, the temperature in Sümela Monastery Station that is in the closest location to the research area that is in the elevation of 1100 m is 9.4°C and the precipitation is 906 mm. In the research field, the snowfall beginning in October continues until April and the number of snow days is 30,6, the number of the days covered with snow is 79.6 days ( Zaman, 2005:7). The rain in winter mostly falls as snow and it creates a beautiful landscape around the monastery (Photograph 1).

Based on the temperature, precipitation, and the distribution values of the precipitation according to the seasons, there is dense forest cover in the field. Main tree species consisted of both broad-leaved trees and coniferous trees in these forests are spruce tree (*Picea orientalis*), *Carpinus betulus*, Chestnut tree (*Cestanea sativa*), fagus (*Fagus orientalis*), *Alnusvurgalis* (*Alnusbarbata*), *Ulmusglabra*, lime tree (*Tiliarubra*), walnut tree (*Juglansregia*),

*Corylusavellana* and *Rhododendron luteum* with yellow and purple forest roses as forest flora (*Rhododendron luteum*). That the research area is so rich in terms of forest cover forms a worthwhile landscape beauty like in Sümela Monastery (Doğanay, 2003) (Photograph 2). Considering the temperature and vegetation features, the most appropriate time during the year for visiting these surroundings is between May and November.



**Map 1:** The location of Research Field



**Photograph 1:** The image of Vazelon monastery and surroundings covered with snow (Online 5)



**Photograph 2:** The forests formed by broad-leaved and coniferous trees around Vazelon monastery (Online 6)

#### ***4- The Foundation and Historical Development of Vazelon Monastery***

The monastery was built as chapel at the junction point of Yahya River and Değirmendere in AD 270. However in 6<sup>th</sup> century, temple was destroyed with the attacks of Persians and several priests were killed there. On this event, monastery was built on the foot hills of the steep cliffs of Zavulon Mount in its today's location. A chapel was first built in the cave under the cliffs. A monastery was built next to the chapel as a part of it is remained under the rock. However, on the event that this structure could not meet the need in time, it was enlarged by making additions to the front part (to the eastern part) in time and it gave its present shape (Durmuş, 2012). The walls of monastery are made of cut stone; and these stones were removed from the quarry in Bağışlı Village in the south and carried to here and it was made with lime mortar. While the exterior walls were thick, interior walls were built thinner. These are mostly volcanic andesitic stones. The floor and ceiling are made of wood structures. The entrance of four-storey monastery is at the front side and it is approximately in the elevation of 4 m from the floor for the purpose of security. While it was being ascended here from the wooden stairs that can be lifted and lowered, this stairs was made from stones afterwards. Today (2015), it is entered from a small hole opened to the wall in the north of the monastery (at the side of cave chapel) by bending in difficulty due to the fact that the stairs were demolished that provided the entrance.

Main parts of Vazelon Monastery are; pastor rooms, guest house, student rooms, library, dining room, kitchen, pantry, bakery, winery, warehouses, sewing rooms, patient care rooms and training rooms. Inside the monastery, there are some frescoes depicting that Jesus is swung in a cradle on the ceiling and the the Day of Judgment on the walls. An important part of this three-naves chapel built inside the rock was ruined except for a few walls. There is a cave entered from inside the monastery and here was used as a hermitage (Photograph 3). There were two corridors showing that the monastery is enlarged in two phases and connecting the rooms each other. These corridors stretch to the north and south and connect the rooms in the direction of the east and west. The roof of the monastery was made of wood leaning towards single side and tile was laid on as cover materials.

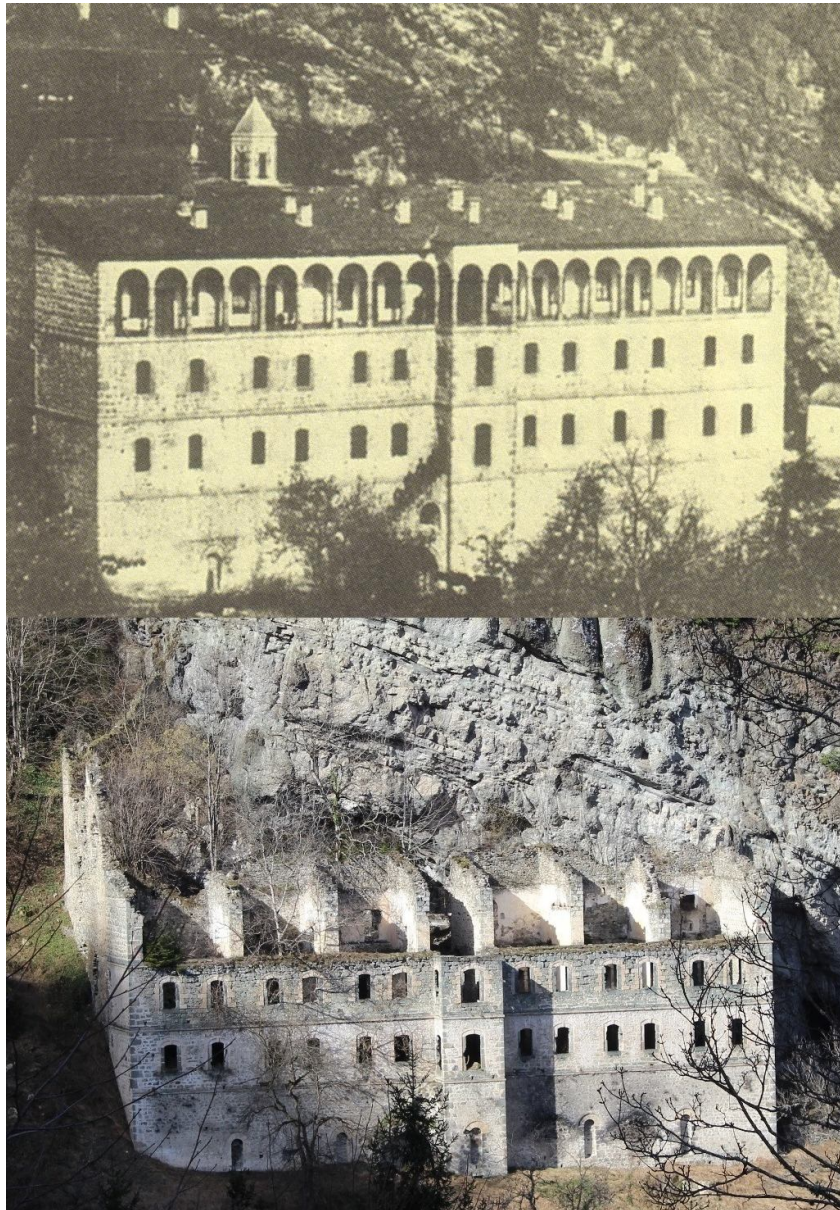


**Photograph 3:** a-1 and a- 2 show three-nave chapel in the Vazelon Monastery, b-1 shows cave behind this chapel, b- 2 shows ayazma water flowing from the cave ceiling

After Vazelon Monastery is founded, some repairmen's were made. One of the most important ones of themes the repairmen made by Justinian, Eastern Roman Emperor in A.D. 565. However the main development of the monastery is with the help of Komnen Kings in 13<sup>th</sup> century. Especially in the last quarter of 14<sup>th</sup> century, III Aleksius visited the monastery, and he donated the income of nine villages when he saw the bad conditions of there. The incomes of the monastery were exempted from the tax and Komnen Kings donated many slaves to the monastery and provided them to be used in agricultural works (Durmuş, 2012).

After the conquest of Trabzon by the Ottoman Empire in 1461, it wasn't given any harm to the monastery and the priests continued to live here as before and to continue the functions of the monastery. Vazelon Monastery was evacuated in 1923 in accordance with the made between Turkey and Greece. Afterwards, it was destroyed by treasure seekers and historical smugglers; its roof was demolished and the front part of the fourth storey at the side of the cave was collapsed and the wooden parts holding the storeys were decayed and collapsed. The trees were grown in it and it turned into ruins. The monastery is protected today. Beside this, it is closed to the visitors (Photograph 4).

There is a small chapel (in the north) next to the monastery, and there are some frescos depicting the birth of Jesus and baptism of Prophet Yahya on the walls of this chapel. As in whole of the monastery, here was destroyed by the treasure hunters and historical artifact smugglers; some holes were opened in the ceiling; some frescos were removed from its walls and they were ruined (Photograph 5). Besides, there were nine chapels within this framework attached to the monastery.



**Photograph 4:** The images from prior to 1923 (Online 7) and 2015 version of Vazelon Monastery

### ***5- The Functions and Importance of Vazelon Monastery***

Vazelon Monastery or Zavulon Monastery with the other name, was built in the name of Prophet Yahya who is the son of Mary's aunt and believed to baptize Jesus in the river of Şeria; for this reason it is known as Yahya Monastery. Vazelon was built in A.D. 270 and it is one of the ancient monasteries in Anatolia. As well as being an important place of worship and hermitage in Trabzon, it has come to the fore with its other features. Notary has the functions such as courts, guesthouses, paying debt to the public and education agency. Since the monastery is a good educational institution, many Christian families sent their children from other places. Therefore, there were some people coming from even Russia to there for education. This religious institution has a big library where there were many handwriting books. The priests living in the monastery lent some money to the people in need. In contrast, although money is taken mostly, sometimes crops were taken from the products (Durmuş, 2012:45). The number of the monks living in the monastery is different in the sources, and it is known to be between 40 and 400. They undertook an active role in the arrangement of social and economic life in meeting the needs of the people living in Maçka and surroundings. One of the most important features of here is that some kings were crowned here in the period of Kommens and many documents in this period were kept here (Durmuş, 2012).



**Photograph 5:** Chapel located (in the north) next to Vazelon monastery and built here first (2015)

### **6- Codex of the Monastery**

The priests in the Vazelon Monastery wrote the events developed in their periods, the contracts and agreements made between the monastery and public or among the public, donations, sales, pledges, approvals, decisions, memorials cadastral inventory, wills and changes and they kept them. This application started in 8<sup>th</sup> century (772) and continued until 19<sup>th</sup> century. The agreements between Kommens (Trabzon Empire) and the other countries, the presents given, and the documents such as decrees, are recorded on this codex and kept. In this codex, there is some historical, geographical, economic and social information in Trabzon and surroundings (Durmuş, 2012).

Handwriting books are also called as codex. In the monastery, while there were five known handwriting books between 8<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century, two of them fully reached today and 20 pages of one of them reached today. These are called as A, B, C, D and E. Whole of B and E codex of them reached today but the fate of the others is unknown. B codex of them or Ankara codex with the other name includes 118 contracts between the years of 1257 and 1818. In Turkey, it is kept in Turkish Historical Study and their contents have not been printed yet. E codex was investigated by Russian Archeologist Uspenski who stayed in Trabzon between the years of 1916 and 1917 and this codex was printed in Russia together with in 1927. E codex includes 190 contracts between the years of 1245 and 1704. Its original version is in the dimensions of 133\*104 mm and it includes 120 pages and it is in St Petersburg Russian Public Library (Artun, 2006).

### **7-Conclusions and Recommendations**

Turkey has a rich potential in terms of cultural inheritance sources. Many civilizations lived in these lands and the artifacts remained from these civilizations facilitate being understood of the past. The protection of these artifacts, their maintenance and being transmitted to the next generations are required. Trabzon is one of the important cities of Turkey in terms of the presence of cultural inheritance sources. There are many cultural inheritance values in this city and the most known of them is Sumela Monastery. Besides this, there are some cultural inheritance sources that are not known enough and one of them is Vazelon Monastery. This religious building takes attention as being one of the most ancient monasteries in Anatolia (AD 270), being located in a field covered fully with forest at the foot of a steep cliff and the handwriting books in which social, economic and political events and agreements in Trabzon and surroundings by the priests living here in 8<sup>th</sup> century and 9<sup>th</sup> century as being different from many other monasteries.



Being protected of this building that is in a bad condition today and cultural inheritance of our country and the development are important in order to be developed of the cultural tourism in the province. There are some measures to be taken for this.

- Vazelon Monastery was emptied with the exchange made between Turkey and Greece in 1923. Then, it was destroyed by treasure seekers and historical artifact smugglers and some parts of them collapsed due to the neglect and the trees grew in it and it has become a bad situation. If it is not restored, it is confronted with the danger of disappearance in a short time. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey has been making successful about the reparation of many historical artifacts and transmitted to the next generations in the country in the last period. An expert team was charged in order to restore this artifact; how it is going to be restored must be planned suitable for its original and its restoration is performed according to this plan.
- With cultural and historical importance of Vazelon Monastery and since the surroundings of it have a rich species variety in terms of natural vegetation, it must be taken under protection like Sumela Monastery and the entrances and exits here must be performed in a controlled way. Besides, it is required to be prepared of a detailed development plan for Altındere National Park (Sumela Monastery and surroundings) as it is suggested by Serkan Doğanay. It is required to prepare the inventory of the types and varieties of vegetation and animal presence in this plan. Besides this, being bounded of utilizing the protection areas to certain principles has a great importance. In order to reach the mentioned purposes, master plan of the protection area must be prepared. With this plan, this area is divided into 3 regions. The first one is the absolute protection zone that is close to the human usage and where the source values will be taken under protection. The second one is transition (buffer) zone and the third one is that the usage zone that is open to the daily benefits, accommodations, food and beverage facilities, in other words to touristic activities. Performing this application may remove some problems that may be encountered in the future (Doğanay, 2003).
- The transportation to Vazelon Monastery is provided by two points. Of them, from Trabzon-Gümüşhane highway, it is reached to the closest place to the Monastery from Köprüyanı Village in 5,5km, and from Kiremitli Village, it is reached in 7 km. Both the ways are responsible for the transportation. In many places where only one vehicle is hard to go, in this way where the branches are rubbed to the vehicles and there are some holes it is extremely difficult to go except for the land vehicles. First of all, it is required to improve and enlarge this road. Improving the road primarily from Köprüyanı Village will be more suitable for distance, land conditions, slope values and giving less harm to the environment.
- Vazelon Monastery is one of the important values in the province in terms of cultural tourism. However here is not known enough. In order to be advertised here, it must be mentioned more in the brochures printed in Turkish and in the other languages by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate and the internet site and its photographs taken in different seasons must be shared and it must be added to the descriptions about here that it is one of the first monasteries built in Anatolia and the natural beauties around it must be mentioned. It must be emphasized that here is an important inheritance value not only for Trabzon but for our country internationally.

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