

The Church of the Transfiguration at Sotera (Famagusta District) in Context: History – Architecture – Murals

Discussions of artistic developments in late 13th-century Cyprus have been dominated by two well-known monuments, both located in the valley of Marathassa on the Troodos Mountains, namely the church of the Panagia at Moutoullas (1280) and the katholikon of the Monastery of St. John Lampadistes at Kalopanagiotis (second half of the 13th c.). At the same time, art-historians lament the lack of comparable evidence from the urban centres of the island, which could have shed more light on the origins, character, and wider resonances of a new trend observed at the time bespeaking an artistic re-orientation of the island towards the Crusader Levant. However, there is one little-known unpublished Cypriot monument with clear stylistic affinities to Moutoullas and Kalopanagiotis, which can provide new and important evidence so far not considered in investigations of the art of Cyprus and the Levant during the 13th century. This is the church of the Transfiguration at the village of Sotera, which is located only 10 km south of Famagusta, Cyprus's major port at the time and its gateway to the Crusader East and beyond.

The project, which is undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus (archaeological officer in charge: Georgios Philotheou), aims to address this gap and to bring this very important monument to the attention of the international scientific community. More specifically, it entails (a) the full documentation of the structure and its decoration; (b) the architectural study of the monument and the clarification of its various building phases; (c) the iconographic and stylistic analysis of the painted decoration; (d) the technical examination of the murals (scientific analyses of the plaster and pigments); and, (e) the study of the historical, social, and artistic context of the monument both within the micro-region of Sotera and within the broader context of Cyprus and the Levant. The work is undertaken by an international scientific team, which includes, in addition to Maria G. Parani and Georgios Philotheou, Mat Immerzeel (Paul van Moorsel Centre for Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East / VU Universiteit Amsterdam), Ioanna Kakoulli (Materials Science and Engineering Department, UCLA), Tassos Papacostas (King's College London), Athanasios Papageorgiou (former Director of the Department of Antiquities), Maria Paschali (independent scholar), Philippe Trélat (Groupe de Recherche d'Histoire de l'Université de Rouen), and Andreas Zissimos (Geological Survey Department, Cyprus).

The end result will be the publication of a volume dedicated to the monument in which various aspects of its morphology, history and context are discussed. The expected outcomes of the proposed project will significantly advance our understanding of artistic creativity in late 13th-century Cyprus and will offer a basis for re-evaluating the role of the island in the artistic realities of the Eastern Mediterranean at the time. Not least, they will put Sotera more strongly on the cultural map of Cyprus for the benefit of the area and its people.