

«Mount Athos: the other place of
tradition and art»

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icons commissioned were to be in the style of late Gothic painting, and the remaining two hundred in the Byzantine tradition, apparently following the demands of a public with differing aesthetic preferences. Cretan painters, who experienced particular historical and social circumstances, became quite versatile.

Their relationship with the art of the dominating political power, Venice, and with other Western influences, combined with the taste of their mixed public (which included both Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic, with a broad social and cultural range), obviously led them to eclecticism: as a result, they were capable of producing icons in different traditions.

Painters and their assistants and other craftsmen, such as wood-carvers and carpenters, were also connected with the art trade. Paintings produced under these conditions may have been lacking in originality, but this was offset by their technical perfection, which guaranteed the fine quality of the work and thus secured the good reputation of the Cretan painters. In fact, some of the best known 15th century Cretan masters often added the name of their native town to their signature on paintings destined for exportation: for example, Andreas Rico de Candia pinxit; Andreas Pavius pindix de Candia.

In the 16th century the predominant artistic fashions were those of Renaissance and Mannerism, and these overshadowed the earlier enthusiasm for painting in the Byzantine or Late Gothic traditions, although *madonne candiotte* and *quadri dorati de nostra donna greca* continued to figure among the valuable possessions of late 16th century wealthy Venetian households.

Not only can this new turn in artistic taste be detected in the attitude of the Italian and the Cretan public; it also demonstrated the enrichment of the existing traditions of iconography which was attempted — within the limits of religious painting — by a number of Cretan artists. It suffices only to mention here the names of the 16th century masters: the young Domenikos Theotokopoulos (later the famous El Greco), Michael Damaskinos and Angelos, who all adopted a fresh approach to the treatment of traditional subjects, involving the use of Western elements, and often signed their works in new and original ways. Their iconographic innovations were undoubtedly held in high esteem by certain social circles, such as the members of the literary society of the *Accademia degli stravaganti* of Candia.

MOUNT ATHOS: THE OTHER PLACE OF TRADITION AND ART

George LAVAS

Mount Athos or 'Holy Mountain' means first of all monasticism, especially Athonite monasticism. However, what does it mean to be an Athonite monk? I shall not try, here, to describe him myself, but will let one of the distinguished members of Mount Athos do it in his own particular manner

'A monk is a holy monster. Don't be scandalized: Isn't something unreasonable or unnatural a monster? The monk also doesn't live according to nature, since he exercises 'unnatural functions'. Nature demands coupling. The monk surpasses this demand. Nature demands food, the monk says no: Nature demands freedom, he likes to be enslaved. He lives here, but he thinks of the Upstairs. On this earth he walks, but he sees the Heavens, the heavenly he imagines, towards the heavenly he directs himself, these (heavenly) things he desires, he scorns the earthly, he likes the other world. The monk combines the earthly, he likes the other world. The monk combines natural and unnatural, he is a mixture of present and future, transient and eternal earth and spirit, best and angel, human and divine (being)..'

These are the words of Father Theoklitos of the Dionysiou Monastery, one of today's spiritual exponents of the Holy Mountain. Such must be the people who have through the centuries lived here, only men, since the presence of women is strictly forbidden. The *avaton*, that is to say, the rule forbidding the entry of females (women and others), is still strictly enforced on Mount Athos today.

This strange way of life, that makes it a unique place in the Christian world and culture, together with the complexity of its environmental preservation, including problems of all kinds concerning the safeguarding of its historical, cultural and natural environment, are good reasons, to engage our attention here, today.

This monastic republic is situated, as you know, in the easternmost of the three peninsulas of Chalkidiki, a prefecture in Northern Greece. The peninsula itself is about 40km. long, its width varying from 8 to 18 km. The highest peak of its mountain range, known as the Megalos Zygos (great range) is Mount Athos (2,003 m.) from which the sacred peninsula takes its name. At the beginning of the peninsula is the point where Xerxes, the Persian King, ordered the digging of a canal in the year 481 B.C. in order to facilitate the passage of his navy to avoid the turbulent waters around the cape, during the Greek-Persian wars of Classical times. This peninsula is, in terms of its geography, a difficult place to organize settlements and

provide for communication between them. A large part of it is steep and hard to traverse, while the coastline is generally without harbours and exposed to the open sea of the North Aegean.

There is evidence that there were five towns there in antiquity (Dion, Olophyxos, Akrothoon, Thyssos, Kleonai) but later, after the destruction and the ravages of the early Middle Ages it appears that the site attracted the interest of anchorites and monks. The beginning of monasticism on Athos is lost in legend and it is not until the 9th century that we find information in historical sources.

Shortly after the middle of the 11th century, the first large monastic community, the Great Lavra Monastery, was founded by Athanasios. After a good deal of fluctuation during Byzantine times (there were nearly 300 'monasteries' there by the middle of the 11th century) the number and the kinds of monastic foundations became settled during the Turkish occupation in more or less their present state. Since the first half of the 17th century the epicentre of organised monastic life has been the twenty monasteries, which present the form of a compact vernacular dwelling-structure of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine periods. The architectural works, as well as the existing form of life of these monasteries and all other kind of buildings on Athos, are more or less authentic creations of the pre-industrial epoch. This makes their preservation through conservation, restoration and revitalisation much more important and valuable, because here we have not only traditional structures to protect, but also an original traditional form of life within this architectural framework.

Let me show you, now, some aerial views of the twenty monasteries, taken some years ago, to get a better idea of the size and the variety of these Athonite structures.

Each monastery consists of a compact building mass surrounding the *Katholikon* (the main church), which is normally also the oldest building, the *Trapeza* (the refectory) for the common meals, the *phiali* (the pavilion) housing the holy-water spout, the *Pyrgos* (the tower) and other isolated buildings and spaces.

Dependent on the twenty monasteries are 12 *sketes* (more or less agrarian communities of monastic farmhouses and churches, where small groups of monks live). Sometimes they are as large as a monastery, as for example the skete of St Andrew in Karyes.

In addition there are more than one thousand seven hundred (1,700) other *metochia*, most of them isolated on the peninsula and divided into various categories. So we have:

a. about 200 cells (*kellia*) = an establishment of three strictly faithful monks living in a cottage, which has its own chapel, because they believe that monasteries are already secular.

b. huts = a house for a monk. Many huts together seems to be a

small settlement but here there is no common organisation or relationship to each other. The best known of the huts are Kapsala near Karyes, the capital of Mount Athos, Mikri Ayianna, Katounakia and Agion Vassilios.

c. the seats = resting places and hermitages. In these last dwellings monks live isolated in inaccessible and almost hidden places and try through meditation to reach God.

Besides their architectural significance, these monasteries and their dependent-buildings are more or less full, as is well known, of excellent examples of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine works of art. Their wealth and their artistic and religious magnificence is unique. It is estimated that in the 'Garden of the Virgin Mary', as Mount Athos is also called, there are about one hundred thousand (100,000) square metres of frescoes, twenty thousand (20,000) icons, twelve thousand (12,000) manuscripts, thousands of heirlooms and other items of religious or ethnological significance.

The decoration can begin on the exterior of the building, mainly in the churches, where the walls are faced either with brick or stucco, while on the interior, they are decorated by marble or murals in successive zones as high as the picture of Christ Pantokrator.

This intricate interior arrangement of the churches of Mount Athos symbolizes the unexplorable maze of the human soul: thus God welcomes the visitor to enter and explore his habitation just as he invites him to take care of his own mind and search the depths of his soul. This arrangement also illustrates the gradual progress of the monk in his spiritual life, starting in the narthex, proceeding to an inner narthex and from there on to the nave and thus to the altar, or from chapel to chapel, from one zone of murals, to the higher one and finally to that of Christ Pantokrator on high.

The oldest items of painting on Mount Athos are portable icons painted on wood, which were related, according to tradition, to the founding and the existence of certain monasteries. They are believed to have floated to the mountain or to have been found in a miraculous way. It was not long though before art started flourishing on Mount Athos itself and it soon became a famous icon, fresco, and mosaic center. Two famous schools of painting are well-known here: the Macedonian with Panselinos in the 14th century and the Cretan with Theophanis in the 16th century.

The painters of the Macedonian School introduced the principle of the third dimension, thus rendering their paintings more natural, dramatic, luminous and mobile, without in the least departing from the metaphysical sphere.

In the 16th century, Cretan artists came to work on Mount Athos. This style drew carefully the outlines lending unruffled motion, serenity, introspection mingled with a Doric simplicity and no-



Map of Mt. Athos



Great Lavra (aerial view)



Simonoopetra Monastery

*Great Lavra, Vatopedi, Iviron, Chilandar, Diomysiou, Koutloumousiou, Pantokratoros, Xeropotamou, Zographou, Docheiariou, Karakalou, Philotheou, Simonoopetra, Agiou Pavlou, Stavronikita, Xenophontos, Gregorios, Efighmenou, Agiou Pantelimonos and Komtatonisou monasteries.

others, while the monk gives all of his belongings voluntarily. Contradictions and discussions of such a type are very often found on Mount Athos or outside it. Many publications and other similar manifestations activate Greek intellectuals and writers in this matter.

I now turn to the the administration of Mount Athos: authority is exercised by the 20 member Holy Community consisting of reverend fathers and superiors, one from each monastery. Each of them is elected early in January for a year's term office. This council is presided over by one member, called the Protos (*the First*), and it supervises the monasteries rather than governs them. The executive authority is exercised by a four-member 'Holy Epistasia' to form which the monasteries are divided into five groups of four monasteries. Each group of four takes over the Epistasia for a year and the representative of the first monastery in each group is called the 'Protopistates' or *Protos* (The First), that is First among equals.

MOUNT ATHOS TODAY AND ITS PROBLEMS

Mount Athos is today an integral part of the Greek State. It is a self-governed (but not autonomous) part of Greece. A Greek administrator (*Dioikitis*) has governed it according to the 'Charter of Mount Athos' since 1926. It is interesting to note here, that the countries which signed the agreement for Greece's entry into the European Community in Athens on May 28th, 1979, also signed a Common Declaration recognizing that the special established order on Athos, as described in article 105 of the Greek Constitution, is guaranteed exclusively for spiritual and religious reasons. Furthermore, the European Community will ensure that these reasons are taken into account during the application and further elaboration of the provisions of the Community Law, in particular with regard to customs and tax exemptions and rights of residency.

In closing, we have to say that Mount Athos is a unique religious, ekistic, historical, ethnological and cultural entirety. The sum of all these elements creates its great complexity and originality. What is more, Athos is above all a living monument to a great past and to a greater future. Both nature and man's creations on Athos have so far remained uncontaminated; 'monolithic, entire, the Byzantine ambience on Athos remains unchanging through the ages. The very universality of time is suspended there, the Mount continues its life according to its own rules, measuring earthly life on its own timescale'. Such a form of life is really exceptional in the whole world and such an environment of landscape and architecture undoubtedly needs preservation as well as conservation and restoration.

The main dangers which exist today and must be faced over the long term are:

a. The mechanization which slowly but systematically takes command on Athos. Streets and cars have become a daily increasing reality.

b. The old and precious religious foundations, as well as the thousands of other buildings-structures for various functions, have been endangered by subsidence, cracks, dampness, by time itself, natural decay and desolation. The risk of fire becomes greater as the number of monks and the visitors increases day by day. Another well-known danger in this area are earthquakes, which a few years ago caused some new losses of historical buildings.

c. The protection of the landscape and the ecological environment in general is indeed a difficult and serious problem. The rare plants and trees and the animals, the picturesque beaches, the old aqueducts and the little harbours must be protected, just like buildings, the frescoes, the icons, the heirlooms.

Last but not least: the living, spiritual atmosphere, the serenity and the peace of this still surviving monastic *civitas* has to be preserved as well as its historical and natural framework.

The Greek State has realized the critical situation concerning the entire preservation of Mount Athos, albeit rather late in the day. About 15 years ago a new public service (KEDAK= Centre for the Preservation of the Athonite Heritage, was established. It is under the administration of the Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace, and is situated in Thessaloniki and not in the Greek capital for the purpose of increased flexibility and closer proximity to the Athos peninsula. A committee of specialists — theologians, archaeologists-byzantinists, architects, restorers, civil engineers, administrators and of course, monks — are in charge of planning, organizing and supervising every work and program related to the Athonite republic. This committee, to which I have had the honour of belonging, began to work as soon as it was founded. The problems it has to face are many, complex and of a great variety. In reference to the organization we may staff this new public service with architects, specialists in the conservation of monuments, civil engineers, topographers, mechanical engineers and administrators. This staff has to carry out, under the guidelines of the above mentioned committee, the programme of the works related to the following main points:

1. Road networks between the monasteries, as well as the other places.
2. Harbours and boat yards.
3. Fire safety.
4. Water-supply and drainage.
5. Restoration of buildings and their artistic riches, such as pavements, frescoes, etc.

The application of all these programmes in general and in detail, includes many problems and hardships. One of the most challenging aspects is that everything, such as special equipment, tools, machin-



A contemporary athonite monk.



Engraving of the 19th century (1808) with the depiction of Ag. Panteleimonos-Monastery.



Sarantoukita Monastery: example of embroidery.

ery and materials has to be brought in from outside Mount Athos. Sometimes this is from difficult to impossible.

Last but not least: besides or apart from these problems, there is in many cases a difference of opinion between the monks and the restorers. The monks, following the logical practice of the centuries, very often want to replace damaged or destroyed parts of a building by demolishing and constructing a new one, using modern materials and up-to-date technical methods. We, on the other hand, are sent there to restore, conserve and preserve old, historical substance and material, trying to save any brick, stone or wooden construction of the past. Thus, an ideological antinomy is obvious and sometimes unpleasant, there. Some years ago, the monks of the Saint Dionysiou Monastery demolished a damaged part of the northwest facade, three hundred years old, to replace it with a new iron-beam construction. We, the KEDAK-committee, stopped this enterprise and we reconstructed the old structure. Who is right, who is wrong?

To tell the truth, I honestly don't know that international principles of restoration and declarations like those of Venice (1964) or Amsterdam (1975) can truly help very much in a vivid and dynamic place like Mount Athos.

I've tried to give you here a very short and, of course, fragmentary picture of Mount Athos. Its extraordinary importance lies in the fact that a practically unbroken record of human activity has been preserved for us, from the 10th century on, sometimes in written sources (archives of documents and the like), other times in buildings or ruins and works of art, as well as in material of broader technological interest (workshops, tools, systems for collecting water, etc.). This rich, pre-industrial tradition is today, directly and totally threatened by the intense activity which has emerged in our time. Just this old monastic centre of the Orthodox Christianity represents, today, a unique monumental entity consisting of a multilateral problem. In spite of all the negative factors, due to the rapid 'developmental' rhythm, the recent resurgence of monastic life on the peninsula, and the way in which interventions in the repair of the building are occasionally handled, many people who are working there are doing their best to safeguard the historical values as well as to safeguard the present evolution of the Athonite monastic structures and their environment.



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bility to their subject. These characteristics, as well as their choice of sombre colours and dark outlines broken only by a few bright lines highlighting important points, are testimony that this is an artistic style expressing hesychastic trends, that is the theological movement against the realism of Western thought and Art.

The works of sculpture, miniatures, illumination, pottery and weaving to be found on Mount Athos are also artistic creations of great interest.

Let me now spend some time on the internal life and organization of this Community, which created this architecture and art within this natural environment. As we know, monastic life had begun here as well as in Palestine very early, already in 4th century AD. This was a reaction of a new ideal in this period, to go away from the cities and to establish a new form of life. Monk (*monachos*) means in Greek two things: it can mean 'alone', as when man lives alone but it can also mean 'unique' or 'singular', a perfect, isolated human being. Both meanings are valid here: a perfect life is only possible in the isolation of the desert or nature. But we have to understand it in its correct meaning: the monks do not reject our world or our society. They only believe in another form of life because this chosen form can give them the ontological truth which they need.

The main characteristic of this form of life can be seen as a 'secret' social or divine relation. Through this inner conjunction with God the monk tries to reach a new level, which is stronger than death and creates another model of life, obviously different but not contradictory to our own way of life.

As is well known, life here is organised on the basis of two functional systems:

a) the cenobitic system (*koinobiakon systima*) or rule, which consists of absolute spiritual obedience to a *hegoumen* (abbot), democratically elected for life at a meeting of all monks of six years' standing in the monastery. In spiritual matters he has absolute power but in administrative matters he has the help of two or three trustees (*epitropoi*) chosen by all, or by the 'Assembly of Elders' consisting of eight or ten senior monks. The monastery dispenses property, clothing and food. Meals are also eaten in common.

b) the idiorrhythmic system (*idiorrythmon systima*) or rule: Monasteries under this system of organization are directed by two trustees who are changed annually and are assisted by an assembly of ten or fifteen superior monks (*proistammenoi*). Individuals retain personal property, eat their meals in their cells and are left to their own judgement concerning personal austerity.

Both forms existed on Mount Athos recently, but it must be said, that the cenobitic system is the original and most common one. No alteration is permitted in the status quo of the sovereign monaster-

ies. It is only permitted that an idiorrhythmic monastery become cenobitic, but not the opposite.

The everyday life of the monks expresses the purest Orthodox monastic discipline and still follows all the genuine Byzantine traditions of worship, liturgy, music, prayer and hospitality. A period of one day is measured on Mount Athos according to the old Byzantine timescale which changes with the seasons so that each day normally begins at sunset, or at sunrise in the case of the Iviron monastery.

Today, about 1500 monks live on Mount Athos. At the beginning of this century the population was about 6000, but in 1970 only 1000 old monks remained on the peninsula. So I have to stress that since 1970 there has been a radical growth in population. Every year about 50 new monks or a 5% increase in the number of monks, go to Mount Athos. This is remarkable, if we take into consideration that the population increase in Greece is only 1.6%. Further, it is very interesting to underline that not only people from the Orthodox countries (such as Greece, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia or Georgia) come to Mount Athos but also from other, non-Orthodox, countries (such as Peru, Canada etc.). According to the Greek Constitution, foreign monks receive Greek nationality with their tonsure, which symbolises their breaking away from their former worldly ties and also facilitates the organization of their life on Greek soil.

Even more interesting is the fact that the newly entered monks are young people (under 40 years old and they are highly educated. Theologians, physicians, engineers, doctors of medicine comprise some of the academically educated people there. This means that the average level of education on Mount Athos is higher than that of the male population of Greece.

All of these new events, which have happened in the last two decades on Mount Athos, create a new aura for the centuries-old monastic life. The main characteristics of this form of life, such as the communal element (eating, clothing, praying etc), the genuinely democratic organization, and above all their continuous care to avoid uniformity and individuality through stressing the meaning of the human personality, provided the opportunity for intensive discussions among Greek intellectuals in the last decade. Well-known leftist or Marxist writers, as well as atheists, visit Mount Athos for days, weeks or months to discuss various social or ideological problems with leading monks, who seem to have realised a successful communist-like model of life through the centuries, without using oppression or similar methods. The monks on Mount Athos seem to be willing to discuss problems of this kind because they believe themselves to be superior because of this contradiction. As they say, the main difference between a real communist and a monk lies in the fact that the former tries to take goods and rights to give them to



Stavronikita Monastery.



Interior of a Katholikon.



Dionysiou-Monastery: scenes from
the Apocalypse (16-17th century) in
the Katholikon.