



MOUNT ATHOS

Microcosm of the Christian East

Edited by

GRAHAM SPEAKE

and

METROPOLITAN KALLISTOS WARE

Peter Lang

Mount Athos is the spiritual heart of the Orthodox world. From its beginnings in the ninth century it attracted monks from all corners of the Byzantine empire and beyond to experience its seclusion, its sanctity, and its great natural beauty. The first monastery, founded in 963, was an international institution from the start; by the end of the twelfth century separate monasteries had been founded not only for Greeks but also for Georgians, Amalfitans, Russians, Serbs, and Bulgarians. Nationality, however, has rarely counted for much on Athos, and though the Romanians have never secured a monastery for themselves, today they form, after the Greeks, the largest ethnic group. This book tells the story of how these many traditions came to be represented on the Mountain and how their communities have fared over the centuries. Most of the papers were originally delivered at a conference convened by the Friends of Mount Athos at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, in 2009. As far as possible, the authors were chosen to write about the traditions that they themselves represent.

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seen from the north in winter. Photo: Gerald Palmer.

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IN MEMORIAM JEREMY BLACK

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Introduction

Most of the papers collected in this volume were first delivered at a conference entitled 'Mount Athos: Microcosm of the Christian East' which was held by the Friends of Mount Athos at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, in February 2009. Both the speakers and the delegates were drawn from all corners of the Orthodox world and, as far as was possible, the presenters were chosen to speak about the traditions which they themselves represented. All the same, there were gaps in the coverage and, in an attempt to fill them, we have commissioned a number of additional papers which are now included in the volume. We are conscious that the collection here presented is still not entirely comprehensive, but we hope that it does at least convey something of the remarkable diversity of traditions that has characterized Mount Athos throughout the 1,200 years or so of its existence as a holy mountain.

Holy mountains were a not uncommon phenomenon in the Byzantine world. There were notable examples in various parts of Asia Minor such as Mount Olympos in Bithynia, Mount Latros near ancient Miletus, Mount Auxentios near Chalcedon, and Mount Galesion near Ephesus. But as the Byzantine empire contracted before the advance of the Seljuq Turks, all these monastic centres went into irreversible decline and, after the disastrous Byzantine defeat at Mantzikert in 1071, most of them were overrun and their monks either enslaved or expelled. All this meant that Athos acquired an ever-increasing prominence, since it emerged from the period of the Latin empire (1204–61) as almost the sole survivor. Since that time it has been known throughout the Orthodox world as *the* Holy Mountain, and so it will be referred to in this book.

The significance of monasteries in the Byzantine world-view should not be underestimated. Jonathan Shepard has recently described the restoration of the capital in 1261 as signalling ‘the rehabilitation of Constantinople as a locus of God-blessed authority on earth.’ He continues:

If the imperial capital provided one conduit to God’s kingdom, Byzantine monasteries offered another. The veneration and awe they generated as microcosms of the celestial order had come increasingly since the mid-tenth century to focus on the Holy Mountain of Athos.¹

From the start, the monasteries enjoyed imperial patronage. Indeed monasteries on such a scale could scarcely have been founded without it; and for the patrons, to be commemorated in perpetuity as ‘founders’ of a monastery on Athos was a sure route to immortality. But, as Shepard points out, imperial patronage also ensured privileged status for the monks, which may have accounted in part for the speed with which Athonite monasticism developed in the tenth century.

From the start, monks were drawn to Athos from all over the Byzantine empire and even beyond, though many had already made their monastic profession elsewhere. Among the earliest ninth-century hermits, for example, St Peter the Athonite and St Blasios of Amorion had both become monks in Rome, St Euthymios the Younger on Bithynian Mount Olympos, and Joseph the Armenian, the friend of Euthymios, had also clearly travelled a long way from home. After the foundation of the Lavra in 963 there seems to have been what Rosemary Morris calls a ‘quantum leap’ in Athonite recruitment,² not just in numbers but also in the geographical spread of their origins. Within fifteen years of its foundation, for example, the Lavra is said to have housed as many as 500 (though this figure probably included lay workers as well as monks); and by 985 monasteries had been founded for both Georgians (Ivion) and Amalfitans. ‘At first glance’, writes Morris,

- 1 J. Shepard, ‘The Byzantine Commonwealth 1000–1550’, in M. Angold (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 5: *Eastern Christianity* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 14.
- 2 R. Morris, ‘Where Did the Early Athonite Monks Come From?’, in R. Gothóni and G. Speake (eds), *The Monastic Magnet: Roads to and from Mount Athos* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 21–40 (p. 32).

it might appear that the arrival of Georgians and Italians on Athos (evident by the end of the tenth century) marked a major expansion of the geographical extent of the spiritual magnetism of the Mountain. In fact, however, many of the newcomers passed through regions where Athonite monasticism was already well known. Mount Olympos, where Georgian monasticism had long been established, was the most important ... Another such was Constantinople ... It may, in fact, have been via the capital that the first Amalfitan monks came to Athos.³

But even if some of the first Athonites came via the traditional monastic 'stopping-off' points, there is no doubting the fact that in one way or another they travelled great distances in order to avail themselves of the seclusion and tranquillity that Athos was known to offer. Just as monasteries were regarded as 'microcosms of the celestial order', so the Mountain itself quickly became a microcosm of the Christian East. The story, or rather the many different stories, of that development are told in the papers that follow.

Averil Cameron's opening chapter on 'Mount Athos and the Byzantine World' sets the scene by positioning the monasteries of Mount Athos and their influence in the context of the Byzantine empire. She demonstrates that, as the fortunes of the empire waxed and waned, and its borders expanded and contracted, so Athos came to symbolize stability and to embody not just the cause of Orthodoxy but also the essence of Byzantium. Indeed, as the political and economic situation of the empire grew increasingly insecure during the Palaiologan period, so the monasteries of Athos flourished as the beneficiaries of donations of land and other favours not only from Byzantine emperors and aristocrats but also from rulers of other states. The two key elements that support the subsequent emergence of Byzantium as a 'commonwealth' are seen to be, first, the authority and enhanced worldwide religious role of the Patriarchate and, second, the authority and increasing autonomy of the Holy Mountain. When finally the empire fell and there was no longer in Constantinople an anointed defender of all Orthodox Christians, the transnational community of Athos was well positioned to become an alternative source and symbol of divinely ordained religious authority that would itself pave the way for the future role of Orthodoxy worldwide.

3 Ibid., pp. 33–5.

Georgian monks first became active on Athos in the decade of the 970s, as Tamara Grdzeldze describes in her chapter. Through his close friendship with St Athanasios the Athonite John the Iberian first obtained a number of cells for Georgian monks near the Lavra and subsequently was given permission to build the monastery of Iviron. Iviron provided a link between the royal house of Georgia and the imperial court in Constantinople which the former was able to exploit for political ends. The monastery became a centre of learning and translated Christian texts into Georgian which were then shipped back to Georgia to provide spiritual nourishment for the Georgian people. But Georgian prosperity on Athos was short-lived: gradually their monastery was infiltrated by Greek monks, by the twelfth century it contained two distinct communities, and in 1357 the Georgians finally lost control of it. Today there are no more than a handful of Georgian monks on the Mountain, none of them at Iviron, but the memory of the monastery as a national spiritual symbol lingers on.

In his chapter on the Bulgarians Kyrill Pavlikianov concentrates on the period from 980 (when at least one Bulgarian-speaking monk is known to have been on the Mountain) to 1550. A minor Slav-speaking monastery known as Zelianos is referred to in several documents of the eleventh century and may have been connected with the Bulgarian population of Halkidiki. The monastery of Zographou was in existence by 980 but seems not to have become Bulgarian before the second half of the twelfth century and not to be commonly known as 'the monastery of the Bulgarians' before the late thirteenth century. The only Bulgarian saint of the Byzantine period known to have been a monk of Zographou is St Kosmas the Zographite who is said to have died in 1422, though another saint of Bulgarian origin, St Romylos of Vidin, lived as a hermit near St Paul's monastery for about twenty years from the mid-fourteenth century, and several other Bulgarian monks were active as copyists at Megiste Lavra at this time. A group of Bulgarian monks is known to have occupied and restored the deserted monastery of Koutloumousiou in the first half of the sixteenth century, but by 1541 they had been replaced by Greeks. The Bulgarian Athonites have produced no major spiritual figures, attracted no spectacular royal donations, and aroused no particular interest on the part of the medieval Bulgarian Church. They have been content to maintain a low profile throughout, but they remain in control of Zographou which has shown modest signs of renewal in recent years.

The Serbian tradition on Mount Athos begins in the year 1191 with the arrival of Prince Rastko Nemanjić (later St Sava), as Vladeta Janković recounts in his chapter, and is formally established in 1198 with the completion and consecration of the katholikon of Hilandar monastery. In that year the founders appealed to the Emperor Alexios to grant Hilandar the status of an independent monastery on the lines of the already existing Georgian and Amalfitan monasteries. The request was granted and a chrysobull was issued stating that the monastery was to be 'a gift to the Serbs in perpetuity'. Hilandar rapidly grew into one of the wealthiest and most influential monasteries on Athos as well as representing the spiritual heart of medieval Serbia. Serbian influence on the Mountain was at its height during the second half of the fourteenth century when at one point the Serbian state stretched from the Danube to the Peloponnese. At that time several other monasteries, such as St Paul's, became largely Serbian, and Serbia used its own resources to revitalize a large number of other monasteries such as St Panteleimon, Simonopetra, Xeropotamou, Karakalou, Esphigmenou, Konstamonitou, and Philotheou. Hilandar may be described as Serbia's best diplomatic 'envoy' to Byzantium, it has always enjoyed (and continues to enjoy) a 'special relationship' with its neighbour Vatopedi, and the Serbian tradition remains deeply rooted in Mount Athos today.

The inclusion of a chapter entitled 'Latin Monasticism on Mount Athos' may come as something of a surprise, but Marcus Plested writes about the flourishing existence of a Benedictine monastery of the Amalfitans on Athos for some 300 years from about 980 to the late thirteenth century. This was a major house with a large community that celebrated the Latin rite and followed the Benedictine rule. The reasons for its eventual decline are unknown but there is no suggestion that there was any objection to its liturgy or theology. Other contacts between Athos and the West have been less glorious. After the Fourth Crusade the Mountain was systematically pillaged by its Latin masters. In the late Byzantine period there were various attempts at reunion with Rome which were not necessarily always opposed by the monks, even though nothing came of them. Again in the seventeenth century the Jesuits were asked to revive the idea of reunion between the Mountain and Rome, and again nothing came of it, but a Jesuit school was founded at the Protaton. Such contacts have little chance of being revived in today's climate, but the Latins have played a significant part in the history of Athos over the years.

Unlike the Latins, the Romanians have never had a monastery they could call their own on the Holy Mountain, as Fr Constantin Comanilaments in his chapter entitled 'Moldavians, Wallachians, and Romanians on Mount Athos'. Romanian monks are first recorded as present on the Mountain in the fourteenth century when a significant number of them settled in the monastery of Koutloumousiou but, although the Voyevod Vladislav I was given the title 'owner and founder' of the monastery in recognition of the support he had provided, the monastery remained under Greek jurisdiction. The Romanians also missed an opportunity at Esphigmenou in 1805 when it was suggested to the Metropolitan of Moldavia that the monastery could become a 'settlement of that nation', but for reasons that are obscure the offer was rejected. Between these dates and indeed until the formation of the modern state of Romania in 1859 the Romanian principalities were unstinting in their support of the Athonite monasteries and there is scarcely a house that did not receive some form of assistance from them, often in the form of monasteries in Romania that were dedicated to Athos. And yet the status of the Romanian monks on Athos has remained humble and they have had to be content with the two sketes of Lakkou and Prodrömu. These are once again flourishing centres of spirituality, and there are a good many Romanians scattered among the ruling monasteries. All together there are now about 200 Romanian monks on the Mountain and, though they have no monastery of their own, they do in fact form the largest ethnic minority on Athos today.

In a paper entitled "The Ark of Hellenism": Mount Athos and the Greeks under Turkish Rule' Graham Speake picks up and develops Averil Cameron's suggestion that after 1453 the Holy Mountain was able to represent a symbol of the continuity of Orthodox culture and of divinely ordained religious authority. Rather than attempt a general survey, he takes two snapshots of Athos, in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century, and focuses on two pairs of parallel lives. Perhaps the clearest indicator of the continuing prosperity of the Mountain in the sixteenth century is the foundation in 1541 of the monastery of Stavronikita, accomplished with the assistance of Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias I. Needing an artist to embellish the newly built katholikon and refectory, the Patriarch turned to Crete to commission the most celebrated iconographer of the day, Theophanes. Athos was still the place where artists' reputations were

made and as a result of his work not only at Stavronikita but also at the Lavra Theophanes found himself setting a style that became the model for Orthodox church art for the next two centuries. Scholars too were attracted to Mount Athos at this time and it was no doubt with a view to accessing the contents of its library that the learned Michael Trivolis in 1506 became a monk of Vatopedi with the name Maximos. Ten years later Maximos was invited to Moscow to translate patristic texts into Slavonic. Drawn into the controversies that divided Muscovite society and refused permission to return to Athos, Maximos fell foul of the authorities and was charged with heresy, sorcery, and treason. After spending more than twenty years in prison he was finally released in 1548 and allowed to reside in a monastery near Moscow for his remaining years. Venerated as a holy martyr and 'Enlightener of the Russians', he was finally canonized in 1988. Further examples of Athonite outreach may be identified in the eighteenth century when the Holy Mountain was at the centre of an intellectual and spiritual revival. At the suggestion of the monks an academy of higher learning was established on a hillside overlooking Vatopedi with the brief to train leaders both for the Church and for the Orthodox world as a whole. As its director the Patriarchate appointed a scholar of international reputation, Evgenios Voulgaris, but after only six years in the post this star of the Enlightenment found that his supporters had turned against him and in 1759 he resigned. Some years later he was invited to join the court of Catherine the Great in St Petersburg where he developed a political philosophy that envisioned an enlightened Christian monarchy being re-established over the Orthodox peoples of south-eastern Europe. St Kosmas the Aetolian had studied at the academy on Athos before becoming a monk of Philotheou. Later, with the blessing of the Patriarch, he embarked on a series of missionary journeys, preaching, teaching, and founding schools the length and breadth of Greece. Dubbed the 'equal to the Apostles', he was suspected of harbouring political ambitions against the Ottoman authorities and in 1779 he was hanged. It is a tribute to the vitality of Athos that two men so completely different from each other as Voulgaris, doyen of the Enlightenment, and the arch-traditionalist Kosmas could be accommodated on the Mountain at more or less the same time. The lives of all four show that Athos has never lost its ability to attract men of outstanding ability and send them out into the world as ambassadors of its traditions.

In his chapter entitled 'The Russians on Mount Athos' Nicholas Fennell demonstrates that the Russian presence on the Holy Mountain, which has lasted for well over a thousand years, has experienced many vicissitudes, at times manifesting conflict, envy, and rivalry, at other times inspiration, mutual support, and spiritual revival. For most of that millennium their numbers rarely rose above 200 and for most of it relations with the Greek majority were harmonious. The most influential Russian Athonites have been models of piety, humility, and asceticism, notably St Antony in the eleventh century who is regarded as the father of Russian monasticism and went on to found the great monastery of the Caves in Kiev, St Paisy in the eighteenth century who was at the heart of spiritual revival both on Athos and subsequently in Moldavia and Russia, and indeed Fr Sophrony in the late twentieth century who founded the monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex. Relations became more complicated in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Russians regained control of the St Panteleimon monastery and expanded its brotherhood to almost 2,000. There is no doubt that among the Russian spiritual fathers there were holy men, who acted as a magnet for the thousands of Russians who flocked to Athos. For a time the Russians even outnumbered the Greeks on the Mountain. Moreover the Russian houses attracted great wealth from their many supporters and pilgrims. All this inevitably aroused envy and suspicion, and previously good relations with the Greeks deteriorated into competition and conflict. The situation resolved itself with the Revolution of 1917 and the consequent severing of ties between Russia and Athos. Since then numbers of Russians on the Mountain have dwindled to earlier levels and relations have improved, but memories are long and there is plenty of evidence to show that the Greek authorities have taken every opportunity to reduce the flow of Russian monks to the St Panteleimon monastery to a trickle.

In a concluding chapter, 'The Holy Mountain: Universality and Uniqueness', Kallistos Ware attempts to answer the question what makes Athos, if not unique, then certainly exceptional and distinctive. He makes no claim to be exhaustive in offering a fourfold answer. First he discusses the physical reality of the Mountain itself and its intrinsic sacredness. Many have commented on the astonishing natural beauty of Athos, and since beauty transforms the world into a sacrament of the divine presence, the

natural beauty of Athos possesses more than a purely aesthetic importance. But there are many such places of natural beauty in the world: what gives Athos its special sanctity? A second distinctive feature is its universality. From its very beginnings as a monastic settlement until the present day Athos has always been a spiritual centre for all Orthodox. It is not unique in this respect either, since there has been an international element in Christian monasticism from its beginnings in fourth-century Egypt; but the pan-Orthodoxy of the Mountain, assisted by its membership of a supranational Orthodox commonwealth persisting long after the fall of the Byzantine empire, has been proudly proclaimed throughout its history. Furthermore, in the third place, Athos can claim to be a microcosm of the Christian East, not just because of its pan-Orthodoxy, but also because it embraces, as it has always embraced, all three forms of monastic life that are found there, namely the cenobitic, the eremitic, and the 'middle way' or semi-eremitic. Thus there are monks that choose to live a common life in the so-called 'ruling' monasteries, all of which are now coenobia; there are monks that live as solitaries, mostly in the desert at the southern tip of the peninsula; and there are monks that live in small cells housing between two and six men either in independent locations or grouped in the idiorhythmic sketes. Each serves the world in the best way known to him, but above all by prayer. Finally Athos enjoys a uniquely privileged position in being under the special protection of the Mother of God. It is her garden and she is the patron of its creative silence, its stillness, its *hesychia*. Mary is the model for all hesychasts and her creative stillness is one of the most precious qualities of the Mountain. In conclusion Metropolitan Kallistos considers the extent to which these distinctive features of Athos are secure and he is dismayed to find all but the third under some sort of threat. Those of us who value the Holy Mountain must be vigilant in its defence, though we do well to avoid unsolicited interference and to bear in mind the Mountain is not without its own powers of endurance.

* * * * *

The following table presents the predominant nationalities (and significant minorities) of the ruling monasteries (including sketes and other dependencies) at different points in time.

		1489*	1725/44*	1903†	2010
1	Great Lavra	Greek	Greek	Greek	Greek
2	Vatopedi	Greek	Greek	Russ/Greek	Greek
3	Iviron	Georgian	Greek	Greek	Greek
4	Hilandar	Serbian	Serbian	Russ/Bulg	Serbian
5	Dionysiou	Serbian	Greek	Greek	Greek
6	Koutloumousiou	Moldavian	Greek	Greek	Greek
7	Pantokrator	Greek	Greek	Russ/Greek	Greek
8	Xeropotamou	Greek	Greek	Greek	Greek
9	Zographou	Wallachian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian
10	Docheiariou	Serbian	Greek	Greek	Greek
11	Karakalou	Greek	Greek	Greek	Greek
12	Philotheou	Albanian	Greek	Greek/Russ	Greek
13	Simonopetra	Bulgarian	Greek	Greek	Greek
14	St Paul's	Serbian	Serbian	Greek/Rom	Greek
15	Stavronikita	[Greek]	Greek	Russian	Greek
16	Xenophontos	Greek	Serb/Greek	Greek	Greek
17	Grigoriou	Serbian	Bulg/Greek	Greek	Greek
18	Esphigmenou	Greek	Greek	Greek	Greek
19	St Panteleimon	Russian	Russian	Russian	Russian
20	Konstamonitou	Greek	Russian	Greek	Greek
* according to the Russian monk Isaiah					
** according to the Russian pilgrim Vasily Barsky					
† according to the Greek historian Gerasimos Smyrnakis					

Mount Athos and the Byzantine World

If we try to position the monasteries of Mount Athos and their influence in the context of the Byzantine world, our first problem is to define what that world actually consisted of. It is notoriously difficult to grasp the geographical limits of Byzantium at any one period – Byzantium was an empire, or perhaps we should rather say a state (for at some periods in its existence it did not in the strict sense exercise imperial rule over foreign populations), which itself increased and decreased dramatically in extent over time. This was so even if we leave out of account the powerful influence it exerted on neighbouring states (which of course themselves also expanded and contracted). Thus anyone who looks at a handbook or atlas of Byzantium will find a whole series of maps representing the extent of Byzantine rule at various periods with lines of various sorts – heavy, dotted, with shading, etc. – to mark changing boundaries and borders.¹

In fact of course ancient and medieval states generally did not have clear borders or ethnicities, any more than their citizens had passports. As one of my colleagues used to say, over its long history the Byzantine empire was like a concertina – it frequently changed its shape as a result of warfare, conquest, and the rise of new states around it, and its borders went in and out almost on a regular basis.² Byzantium in the tenth century, when the first of the great Athos foundations took shape and the empire

1 See the very useful maps for different historical periods in John F. Haldon, *The Palgrave Atlas of Byzantine History* (Basingstoke, 2005).

2 For Byzantium's changing size and the validity of its claims to be an empire see John F. Haldon, 'The Byzantine Empire', in Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel (eds), *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires. State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 205–54.