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“A place where no woman has ever entered...” The unique spiritual heritage of the Athos peninsula in the context of history and present time

From the viewpoint of the history of Christian spirituality, the Athos peninsula takes a very interesting and precious position. For centuries, Athos was the centre of eastern monastic life, art, and science. It played a huge spiritual role in the history of spirituality. Even in the times before Christ, there were small inhabited cities on Athos, for example Sani, Dion, etc. Athos is mentioned in the works of Thucydides, Homer, Plutarch, and many other Greek authors. During the Turkish occupation, Athos was the centre of national renewal and refuge of Greek education, art, and science.²

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The peninsula together with the entire range of the Athos mountains – Ἅγιον Ὄρος is one of the three “fingers” of the Greek peninsula Khalkidhiki – Cassandra, Sithonia and Athos which juts into the Aegean Sea from Khalkidhiki. Athos is the most eastern of them. It is 50 kilometres long and 8–12 kilometres wide. In the southern part of the peninsula, there is Mount Athos (2033 metres above sea level). “Athos” is the name of a fairytale giant. Politically, the peninsula (except for its most northern part) is the so called Autonomous monastic republic within Greece and its official name is *Αυτόνομη Μοναστική Πολιτεία Ἅγιον Ὄρος* – Autonomous monastic republic of the Holy Mount.³ Athos belongs to Greece and from the viewpoint of religious jurisdiction, it belongs to the patriarch of Constantinople.⁴ Athos parliament and administration council are seated in the capital, Karyes. The area of this republic is 336 km².

1. Historical context

The emperor Theodosius the Great (347–395) built the Church of Theotokos on Athos. It was situated in the area of today’s big monastery, Vatopedi, as a thanksgiving for the saving of his son Arcadius, who allegedly drowned after the fall from a ship, but later he was found living. He was lying at the board of Athos. The first hermitages on Athos as foundations which were of later monasteries were constructed in the 5th century. Among the first inhabitants we know about was the hermit Peter who came to Athos in 683 and lived in one of the caves on the southern hillside. He spent 53 years there.⁵ In 885 Athos was proclaimed a seat

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³ N. Sinicyna, *Odysea Maxima Řeka: renesanční Itálie – Athos – Moskevská Rus*, Červený Kostelec 2013, p. 8.

⁴ M. Capuani, M. Pappozzi, *Athos: die klostergründungen ein Jahrtausend Spiritualität und orthodoxe Kunst*, ed. W. Fink, München 1999, p. 248.

⁵ Cf. A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, München 2005, p. 11.

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of monks and hermits by the Byzantine emperor Basil I. (812–885). Their way of life began to change in 963 when Athanasius of Athos⁶ founded the first monastery Megistis Lavras (Big Lavra) with the support of his friend – emperor Nicefor. In 972 the Byzantine emperor John I. Tzimiskes (924–976) subscribed the constitution of the Holy Mount on a piece of goat skin. It guaranteed the preservation of various forms of ascetic life. In the 11th century most of the 12 big monasteries of Athos had already been built and there were many celias and hermitages. Monomas issued a special constitution for Athos and he prohibited the entry for persons and even animals of female sex! The attack of Crusaders in 1204 during the fourth crusade represents the dark chapter of the history of Mount Athos. Pope Innocent III. (1161–1216) annexed the whole Athos peninsula to the papal territories. He sent his legate, and all the inhabitants had to accept the Latin rite. Subsequently there was a cruel terror on Athos. The Holy Mount was liberated by the Bulgarian tsar John Asen II. (1218–1241). In October 1267 Roman Catholics and Uniats (i.e. the Orthodox connected to the Pope) appeared on Athos and a new persecution began. Monasteries – Zografos, Iviron and Vatopedi – were faithful to orthodoxy. The monks of Zografos were burned, the monks of Vatopedi were hanged, and the monks of the monastery Iviron were thrown into the sea. Russian and Serbian monasteries were burnt down. Four hundred chariots with holy objects and precious literary documents were deported to the West. In 1313 Athos was liberated.

2. Influence and support of Byzantium

Even though the Latin liturgical rite was preserved until the Middle Ages on Athos, the Byzantine emperors substantially supported the monasteries of Athos. Since the 14th century Athos became an important cultural and religious centre of the East. The last of the 20 big monasteries was built in that time. Since the second half of the 14th century Athos was attacked by Turkish pirates and many monasteries at the

⁶ A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, op. cit., p. 23–24.

seaside have the form of unconquered fortresses. After the fall of the Byzantine empire the situation worsened. Monasteries could survive by the support of Christian rulers from Danubian lands. A bad financial situation led to the introduction of idiorhythmic life in most monasteries: each monk could own a property, he earned his living, and he lived alone. Such monasteries did not have their igumen (superior). In 1783, a new constitution was made for Athos and in 1794 an Athos school was founded. It was a centre of education of that time. Monasteries were expanded, new monks came, and Athos enjoyed its golden age which was ended by the anti-Turkish uprising in Khalkidhiki during a Greek revolution. Monks and lay persons were massacred; monasteries had to pay higher taxes. Monks who remained were harassed and they had to serve the plundering soldiers. The situation changed in 1826 when monks returned to Athos. They were fleeing from the Turks. At the end of the 19th century a huge amount of Russian monks came to Athos. Russian tsars generously supported the monks on the Holy Mount of Athos until the Bolshevik revolution (1917). On November 5th 1912 the Greek flag was hoisted in the port of Dafni and in 1924 Greece acknowledged the legal sovereignty of the territory of Athos. In 1926 Athos was connected to the Greek state when Greek inhabitants were massacred in Turkey. In the 20th century there were radical changes on this peninsula. The number of monks decreased initially, but since 1972 the number of monks in monasteries increased. Most new monks on Athos are young, educated people – with university diplomas from the entire world. Today Athos is protected by Greece as an autonomous republic.

3. The population of Athos

The population of Athos underwent changes since the 10th century. In the 16th century there were 15–20 thousand monks and hermits living on the Holy Mount. It was the period of the biggest economic flourishing of the monastic republic, even though Turks charged taxes in exchange for the peace. During the Greek revolution, the number of monks rapidly


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decreased. Many monks entered the uprising army and monasteries were half-empty. In the 19th century, a huge amount of Russian monks came to Athos. The increase was helped by the Russian tsar who reconstructed the empty Greek monastery (Saint Panteleimon) into a strong community of 1,500 Russian coenobites. Rusicon, as this community is called, became the nightmare of the remaining part of Athos. Greeks did not want the numerous and prosperous Russian skits, for example a skit of Saint Andrew, to become independent monasteries and acquire seats in the synod. They supposed that half of the monks in Rusicon were tsar soldiers in disguise and they feared the Russian power over the peninsula. In 1912 there were some 7,000 monks on Athos, half of them were Russians. In 1930's this number was decreased by half and, of course, mostly Russian monks left. After the Bolshevik revolution, they could not live as monks any more. Dependant cells were closed and kalybas and aging Russian monks were located into bigger monasteries. Despite this fact the monasteries were almost empty. The same situation was with the monks from Eastern Europe. Serbian idiorhythmic Chilandari had 80 monks in 1930 and 43 monks in 1950. The same decrease occurred in Bulgarian Zografos and in Rumanian skit Prodromos. The situation in the Greek monasteries was not better. In 1930 there were 4,600 monks on Athos. Today there is just a half of them living there. Megistis Lavra, one of the most prosperous Greek idiorhythmic monasteries, had 600 monks in 1930 and 200 monks in 1953 which is a drastic decrease within 23 years.


4. Today: conditions for entry and regulations for the visitors of the monastic republic

Today the daily number of visitors of the monastic republic is strictly limited to 100 Greeks⁷ and 10 foreigners of male sex older than 18 years

⁷ Some mention 120 Greeks daily. Cf. H. Starrach, *Der Ruf des Athos; Erfahrungen und Begegnungen auf dem Heiligen Berg*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2002, p. 16.


**ΙΕΡΑ ΕΠΙΣΤΑΣΙΑ
ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΡΟΥΣ
ΛΘΦ**

Α/Α Γ Ν^ο 2252


ΚΑΡΥΑΙ, ΤΗ 14/06/2007
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ΔΙΑΜΟΝΗΤΗΡΙΟΝ
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ΛΘΦ

Ὁ κομιστὴς τοῦ παρόντος ἱεροκοινοσφραγίστου καὶ ἐνυπογράφου γράμματος ἡμῶν
κύριος **CABAN PETER**
τοῦ θρησκείμα: **ΚΑΘΟΛΙΚΟΣ**
ἰδιότης:
ἀρ. Δ.Α.Τ.: ἀρ. Διαβ.: 4556034
πόλις ἢ χώρα: **ΣΛΟΒΑΚΙΑ** με ἄδειαν παραμονῆς **ΤΕΣΣΑΡΟΝ (4) ΗΜΕΡΩΝ**
ἀφίκετο πρὸς ἐπίσκεψιν τῶν ἱερῶν σπηνωμάτων καὶ προσκύνησιν τῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀποκειμένων
ἱερῶν καὶ ὁσίων τῆς Πίστεως ἡμῶν.

Παρακαλεῖσθε ὅθεν, ὅπως παράσχητε αὐτῷ, πρὸς τῆ φιλόφρονι ὑποδοχῇ καὶ πᾶσαν
ἄμεινον φιλοξενίαν καὶ περιποίησιν πρὸς ἐκπλήρωσιν τοῦ δι' ἐν ἔρχεται αὐτόσε σκοποῦ.
'Ερ' ὃ διατελοῦμεν λίαν φιλαδέλφως ἐν Χριστῷ ἀδελφοί

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| Ο ΚΟΥΤΛΟΥΜΟΥΣΙΟΥ | ΕΠΙΣΤΑΤΗΣ | <i>Γ. Γρηγόριος Ἱεροσ.</i> |
| Ο ΚΑΡΑΚΑΛΛΟΥ | " | <i>Γ. Ἰωσήφ Ἱεροσ.</i> |
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Incense production – a specialty of Athos

of age.⁸ Before the entry to Athos, foreigners must ask for a special permission – *Diamonitirion* – from the embassy of Athos in Thessaloniki

⁸ Entry to the Athos peninsula is permitted under very strict conditions for males only. Catholic priests and professors at theological faculties must have a letter from the patriarch of Constantinople. The entry city of Athos is Ουρανούπολη (Heavenly city). After customs and passport checking once a day (usually at 10:00 AM) a ship called Hagia Anna is starting from this city to Athos.

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at the ancient Roman road Via Egnatia.⁹ Name, surname and passport number must be indicated in the application for the permission.¹⁰

The Athos peninsula is the world's biggest producer of incense. The aromatic substance *incense* is a dehydrated fluid acquired from some trees of the *boswellia* species. There are some 25 kinds of *boswellia* trees. They grow in a geographical area with certain temperature and certain amount of precipitation. Except for Athos, Somalia, and India, we can find them in southern Arabia or in the coast regions of Yemen and Oman. The ground is usually dry here. Trees grow in big distances from each other, in some cases hundreds of metres. Due to precious rain water, they have deep roots (30 metres). Incense trees in Athos grow more densely compared to Somalia. What we call incense is in fact resin from the trees *boswellia sacra* or *boswellia carteri*. These trees, belonging to the *bursacea*, can be 2–6 metres high.¹¹ The branches grow from the huge trunk above the ground so the trees look like bushes. The crust is peeled in big pieces until finally it falls down and is replaced by a new crust. The leaves are 15–25 cm long. They grow late in autumn. They grow on branches or as clusters at the end of the branches. Early in spring, white flowers appear which become berry drupes in summer. During the heat, usually in May, the crust is peeled from the trunk and branches. Due to the parallel arrangement of the capillaries, it is sufficient to peel the surface and it is

⁹ The application must be submitted at least two months before the planned entry to Athos but it is recommended to ask half a year in advance. The confirmation must be collected on the other day in Ouranopoli. After this approval males can spend three nights on Athos. Each night must be spent in a different monastery. Regulations valid for centuries must be observed. Males must have suitable clothing, long trousers and shirt. Short trousers and T-shirts can cause disapproval of entry. Visitors do not pay for accommodation and catering, they are guests of a monastery but they must adjust to the daily order of monks including early morning prayers and fasting. It is recommended to arrange the stay in some monasteries some months in advance and to arrange the transport by ship to Dafni because the capacity of the ship Hagia Anna is limited.

¹⁰ The remaining part of the peninsula is quite inhospitable; it has a lot of rocks and forests. The roads are mostly dusty. The flora of the peninsula is very pure. Only one monastery has electrical lighting. Some monasteries live from the wood sale, others produce wine, honey, jams, olive oil and incense.

¹¹ H. Kaindl, *Weihrauch*, in: *Weihrauch: Mysterium, Reinigende Kraft, Duft des Göttlichen*, ed. H. Kaindl, Graz 2004, p. 6–15.

not necessary to cut into the crust. From these wounds, sticky milky fluid is flowing. In the air it coagulates.¹² This resin flows in small amounts, it has lower quality and subsequently it is peeled after one month, but it is not collected. During the next two weeks, more fluid is flowing from the wounds in the tree but even this fluid is not used for incense. The harvest begins after the third peeling. In the hot summer months, the incense is collected once a week. A medium-sized tree produces 500 grams of resin. In October, after the hot period, the resin stops flowing and the harvest of incense is ended. The resin acquired from the so called incense trees is cut to small parts and it is covered by a natural powder from plants, aromatic flowers, and trees growing on Athos, such as magnolia, white cypress, cedar wood, acacia wood, roses, lavender, etc. Athos produces more than 40 kinds of incense (thyme) for the whole world.

5. Groups of monks on Athos

There are two main groups of monks on Athos: coenobites and idiorhythmists. In monasteries *idiorhythma* – special monasteries (each monk eats alone) – a monk is accommodated in several rooms, a kind of flat; in coenobite monasteries *koinonia* – common monastery (all the activities of the monks – prayers, eating, etc. – are done with the community) – each monk has his own cell. *I d i o r h y t h m i c m o n k s* can own property and income, they work and live alone in the monastery or outside the monastery, and they cook for themselves. Monastic shops in Karyes are managed by idiorhythmists. Monasteries can decide whether they will be coenobitic or idiorhythmic. Throughout the centuries they changed one form to the another. Today all the monks in Athos acknowledge the eastern orthodoxy and they come from various parts of the world. *C o e n o b i t e s* live in communities. They must observe typicon, i.e. monastic customs of particular monasteries, and they earn their living.

¹² P. Caban, *Historicko-vedecký pohľad na tematiku vôní v Biblii a v liturgii*, Český Těšín 2015, p. 14–15.

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General poverty of the coenobite monasteries is visible even today since the once prosperous communities became poor.

Monastic institutions in Athos can be classified into six categories:

- *mones* – monasteries;
- *skytes* – hermitages;¹³
- *celia* – cells in the nature;
- *calyves* – cottages;
- *kathismata* – small cottages;
- *isichastiria* – small shelters for one hermit in caves or inaccessible places in the rocks.

Each monastery of Athos is an independent legal person belonging to the patriarchate. On the other hand, we must not have a romantic view of the monks in Athos. They lead a life which could be perceived as miserable from the western point of view. But this life is satisfactory for them. The Athos monks are very spiritual people, they are physically prepared to endure life in heat, frost, with insects, and hunger.¹⁴

6. Spiritual life of the monks in Athos

The spiritual life of the monks in Athos can be characterised by three features. First, there is the emphasis on ascetics which means that they grow in virtues and exercise their will. The important feature of ascetics is fasting. In Athos three-day fasting is usual but monks can fast for 6 weeks as well. During the fasting period they eat just once a day. They can choose fruits or vegetables. The second feature of the Athos spirituality is a profound spiritual life, contemplation, and silence. The third feature is the tradition and observing of the tradition concerning customs and liturgical celebrations. Therefore they use the Julian calendar

¹³ A skyte is formed by monastic shelters built around a church. It is not a classic monastery. Slavic skytes of coenobites are different from the Greek skytes of idiorhythmists. This is due to the history of Athos an Eastern Church. First skytes were in Egypt and Palestine.

¹⁴ T. Merton, *Mont Athos*, <https://trapist.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/thomas-merton-mont-athos> (7.06.2016).

(13 days behind the Gregorian calendar) and except for the monastery Vatopedi, they live in the Byzantine time (two 12-hour periods – their alternation is determined by sunrise and sunset). A monk in Athos does not shave himself and does not cut his hair. He has a black tunic with a leather belt, a round black cap, and shoes.

7. Hesychastic movement

Since the Middle Ages Athos was a centre of the influential mystic renewal – so called *hesychastic movement*. Hesychasts were contemplating, solitary monks observing the spiritual tradition which was formed on Mount Sinai and later it was spread throughout Russia. The notion of hesychasm was misunderstood and unaccepted in the West. St. Gregory Palamas, the Athos monk and later a bishop of Thessaloniki, was the main defender of hesychasm in the 14th century. He defended hesychasm against a Greek from Italy called Barlam of Calabria. Barlam is presented as a westernised pseudotomist.¹⁵ In fact he was a humanist and in the name of classic ideals he used his sceptic nominalism against the mystical theology of Palamas. Barlam considered all the mystical experiences as illusory. At its best it can be a consequence of profound aesthetic experience motivated by symbolism. St. Gregory Palamas defended the thesis that “God’s light” – the same light seen by the three apostles on the mount of Tabor when the Lord was transfigured – can be perceived in this life as well. Even though hesychasm has some common features with hatha yoga, it is authentically Christian and a simple form of prayer. In fact the Hesychastic way of meditation is a simple method of remembering. It consists of slow, rhythmic breathing and silent repeating of the so called Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me.”

¹⁵ Cf. A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, op. cit., p. 52–55.

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8. Forbidden for women!

Athos is the only peninsula in Greece with no entry for women. This tradition has been observed for more than 1,000 years. This prohibition confirmed by the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1000–1055) in 1045 is strictly observed in this specific state. There is a legend from the 5th century about the visit of the empress Placida, a daughter of the emperor Theodosius the Great (347–395). She wanted to enter the church Vatopedi on Athos but she heard a warning voice: “Stop, do not go further, this is no place for two empresses.” The second queen was the Mother of God – Virgin Mary. At the church gate where it happened, there is a picture of Theotokos. This legend became the basis of the law forbidding the entry of women to Athos.¹⁶

9. Monasteries in the Athos and their hierarchic arrangement

The Athos peninsula consists of twenty monasteries. They look like small fortified cities. Their number is unchanged. There are 17 Greek monasteries, 1 Russian, 1 Serbian, and 1 Bulgarian monastery. There are some 1,900 monks plus the male staff of the monasteries. All the monks obtain Greek nationality when they are accepted as monks or novices. The monasteries in Athos have the following strict hierarchic arrangement:¹⁷

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|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Monastery Megisti Lavra | 2. Monastery Vatopedion |
| 3. Monastery Iviron | 4. Monastery Hilandarion |
| 5. Monastery Dionysos | 6. Monastery Koutloumousion |

¹⁶ This tradition was violated by four young women from Moldavia who were left in the Athos peninsula. Transferees had to transport them in boats to Greece via Turkey. Punishment for the violation of the ancient prohibition is two years of imprisonment but due to the situation and apologizing of the refuges the punishment was forgiven.

¹⁷ Cf. A. E. Müller, A. Müller, *Hora Athos: Dějiny mnišské republiky*, Červený Kostelec 2013, p. 10–21.

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 7. Monastery Pantokrator | 8. Monastery Xiropotamos |
| 9. Monastery Zografos | 10. Monastery Dochiarios |
| 11. Monastery Karakalos | 12. Monastery Filotheos |
| 13. Monastery Simon Petras | 14. Monastery Agios Pavlos |
| 15. Monastery Stayronikitas | 16. Monastery Xenophon |
| 17. Monastery Gregorios | 18. Monastery Esfigmenos |
| 19. Monastery Panteleimon | 20. Monastery Kostamonitis |

The buildings on Athos are quadrangle constructions with the cells for monks on the sides. A typical Athos monastery is a fortified complex of several buildings with terraces. They are grouped around the main church called *katholikon*. There are other churches and chapels – for example 17 churches in the monastery Vatopedi. In these churches and chapels, there are many icons. Some of them reflect the highest quality of the Byzantine art and many of them are related to legends.

In the hierarchy of Athos monasteries the most important position is taken by the monastery *Great Lavra* (*Megisti lavra*), situated in the southern peninsula of Athos, some 20 minutes from the seaside.¹⁸ The Great Lavra was founded by St. Athanasius of Athos in 963. He came to Athos in 958 and he founded the monastic rules. In the past, there were 15 defending towers in the walls. Today there are just nine towers. In the middle of the monastery, there is a monastery church called *katholikon*. There are precious objects, richly ornamented priestly vestments, liturgical objects, and important icons in the monastery. The library includes almost 2,500 manuscripts. A *skyte* of St. Anne belongs to the monastery. This *skyte* is formed by monastic shelters built around the church.

The monastery *Vatopedi* (*Vatopedion*) is one of the biggest and most evolved Athos monasteries. It is situated in a small bay in the middle of the Holy Mount. Its name is related to the aforementioned legend, which says that the monastery was founded at the end of the 4th century

¹⁸ A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, op. cit., p. 75–77.

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by the emperor Theodosius the Great because his son Arcadius was saved. After a shipwreck he did not drown, but was miraculously transported to the mainland. He was found at a blackberry bush which gave the name for the monastery. Vatos in Greek means blackberry bush and paidion means child, so Vatopedi means “child of a blackberry bush”.¹⁹ It is the only community in Athos which uses the Gregorian calendar so all the feasts of the liturgical calendar are celebrated together with the western Church and 13 days in advance of the other monasteries on Athos. The monastery is rich in precious objects. The treasury preserves the relics of the Holy Cross, a piece of reed with the vinegar sponge for the crucified Jesus, the skull of St. John Chrysostom and many other precious objects. The library includes some 2,000 manuscripts. A skyte of St. Andrew belongs to the monastery.

Iviron is situated on the eastern coast of the peninsula. It is possible to reach this place from Karyes on foot within 90 minutes. This third important Athos monastery was founded in 980 by three knights from Georgia. It is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (*Koimesis*), like the monastery Megistis Lavra.²⁰ The community was formed by Georgians celebrating the liturgy in their own language, but today Iviron is under Greek administration. Iviron has a big treasury and library which includes more than 2,000 manuscripts. One hundred of them are in Georgian language. The treasury includes the right hand of the Church Father St. Basil the Great and the head of St. Gregory of Nyssa. There are precious embroidered altar vestments, liturgical objects, crosses, chalices, patens, and other precious objects.²¹ A skyte of St. John the Baptist belongs to the monastery.

The Serbian idiorhythmic monastery Chilandari is the most northern Athos monastery. It is situated in a silent forest valley. It was founded at the break of the 10th and 11th centuries by two noble men – monks.

¹⁹ Today Vatopedi is the only Athos monastery with electrical lighting and several WC which function sometimes.

²⁰ H. Starrach, *Der Ruf des Athos; Erfahrungen und Begegnungen auf dem Heiligen Berg*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2002, p. 26.

²¹ N. Oikonomidés et al., *Actes d'Iviron. IV, De 1328 au début du XVIe siècle*, Paris 1995, p. 11–38.

The monastery has been burnt many times. In 2004 half of the monastery was destroyed by fire. The monastery church – *katholikon* – was spared. People from the entire world contributed to its reconstruction. In the monastery Chilandari, there is a world famous collection of icons which was saved from the fire. There are parts of Christ's cross and a part of the thorn crown. There is even one shroud. Alleged Jesus' body was enshrouded in this shroud when it was taken from the cross. It is quite an unknown shroud which "competes" with the shroud of Turin.

The monastery *Dionysiu* is named after a monk who founded it in 1366 on a small rocky mountain. Even this monastery was not saved from the fire. A precious icon of Theotokos survived. According to the legend this icon was painted by the evangelist Luke but it is not probable. The monastery *Kutlumusiu* is situated near *Karyes* 340 metres above sea level. It was mentioned for the first time in 1169. This monastery was burned by fire many times. The library and church were not spared. A skyte of *St. Panteimon* belongs to the monastery. In the middle of the eastern coast, there is the monastery *Pantokratoros*, founded in 1358. A special jewel of the monastery library is *Codex Pantokratoros* from 234 and an ornamented parchment manuscript from the 13th century. A skyte of the prophet *Elijah* belongs to the monastery. At the 8th place there is the monastery *Xeropotamu* situated on the western coast. It is even older than the monastery *Great Lavra*. Documents mention this monastery in 956. Due to fire the main building was not preserved. The oldest monuments come from the 18th century. The monastery *Zografu* is in the north-western part of the peninsula. It was the monastery of Bulgarians. It had a big importance for Bulgarian culture and literature in the 13th and 14th centuries. The ancient building was not preserved. Today's structure of the monastery comes from the 19th century.

The monastery *Dochiaru* is situated on the western coast of Athos. It was probably founded in 1013. The monastery complex is one of the most beautiful and architectonically interesting buildings in Athos. *Karakalu* is the 11th monastery situated on the eastern coast and one hour on foot from the monastery *Iviron*.²² Origins of the monastery are

²² A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, op. cit., p. 97.

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rooted deeply in the past, but it is not as old as the legends say. The 12th monastery is *Filotheu*, situated 315 metres above the sea level. It was mentioned for the first time in 1015. The most precious object of the monastery is the ancient icon of the amiable Theotokos. The icon is one of the oldest icons on Athos. The monastery *Simonos Petras* is situated on the south-western coast of Athos and it is the most courageous building in the Holy Mount. It is mentioned for the first time in 1345. This monastery was burnt several times and big damages were caused. Monks could save some relics when they fled from the monastery. The most southern monastery on the western coast of Athos is *Agia Paulu*. It was founded in the 10th century and burnt several times. A New Skyte and a skyte of St. Demetrius belong to the monastery. The 15th monastery is the smallest monastery, *Stavronikita* situated on the north-eastern coast between the monasteries *Iviron* and *Pantokratoros*. It was founded in the 11th century. Several fires destroyed almost everything except for the church. The monastery *Xenofontos* is situated on the western coast of the Athos peninsula. It was founded by the monk Xenofont at the end of the 10th century. A skyte of Mother of God belongs to the monastery. The monastery *Grigoriu* is also one of the smaller monasteries in Athos. It is not known when it was founded but it came into existence in the later period. The visitors concentrate on its *katholikon* with two precious icons. *Esfigmenu* is the monastery in the northern part of the eastern peninsula founded on the coast. It looks like a medieval castle. It was founded at the end of the 10th century. It flourished in the 18th century. The monastery of *St. Pantelimon* is situated at the western coast of the Athos peninsula. A person who sees it for the first time is overwhelmed by its size. At the end of the 10th century it was founded by the monk Leontios. We must say that the monastery is not situated in the same place where it was originally. A skyte of Theotokos belongs to the monastery. The last 20th monastery is *Konstantinu*, situated in the north-western part of the peninsula. The monastery is mentioned for the first time in 1051.²³

²³ A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchsrepublik*, op. cit., p. 100–112.

In the capital of Athos – in Karyes – there is a constant liturgy in the cathedral – 24 hours a day. There is a Theological academy for novices. Monks are very tranquil. It is a place where “time stops”.²⁴

10. Differences between western and Athos monks

The monks of Athos are different from the western monks: they accepted the teaching of hesychasm which says that by prayers and strict ascetics, a monk can see God as the apostles saw Him during the Transfiguration of the Lord on mount Tabor. This teaching contradicts the scholastic teaching about the natural knowledge of God which is proper for the western Christianity. They did not emphasise education – a teaching which emphasises *ratio* endangers the Orthodox faith according to their opinion. Another peculiarity is the Holy Communion on Sundays only. It is interesting that the monastic name must begin by the same initial as the baptismal name.

11. Number of monks in the particular monasteries of Athos²⁵

| MONASTERY (ACCORDING TO THE HIERARCHY) | 1903 | 1959 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1992 | 2000 |
|-------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Megisti Lavra (Μονή Μεγίστης Λαύρας) | 1187 | 459 | 406 | 348 | 309 | 345 | 362 |
| Vatopedi (Μονή Βατοπεδίου) | 966 | 129 | 83 | 60 | 55 | 75 | 142 |
| Iviron (Μονή Ιβήρων) | 456 | 101 | 68 | 52 | 53 | 61 | 78 |
| Chilandar (Μονή Χιλανδαρίου) | 385 | 63 | 55 | 69 | 45 | 50 | 75 |
| Agiou Dionysiou (Μονή Αγίου Διονυσίου) | 131 | 53 | 40 | 35 | 59 | 60 | 58 |
| Koutloumousiou (Μονή Κουτλουμουσίου) | 214 | 107 | 68 | 66 | 73 | 77 | 95 |
| Pantokratoros (Μονή Παντοκράτορος) | 548 | 118 | 84 | 63 | 57 | 50 | 70 |
| Xiropotamou (Μονή Ξηροποτάμου) | 106 | 43 | 36 | 22 | 38 | 34 | 40 |

²⁴ A. Silván, *Moudrost Silvána z Athosu*, Kostelní Vydří 2010, p. 50.

²⁵ A. E. Müller, *Berg Athos, Geschichte einer Mönchrepublik*, op. cit., p. 113.

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| MONASTERY (ACCORDING TO THE HIERARCHY) | 1903 | 1959 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1992 | 2000 |
|---------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Zografou (Μονή Ζωγράφου) | 155 | 21 | 15 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 20 |
| Dochiariou (Μονή Δοχειαρίου) | 60 | 29 | 16 | 11 | 31 | 32 | 27 |
| Karakallou (Μονή Καρακάλλου) | 130 | 42 | 30 | 13 | 16 | 26 | 37 |
| Filotheou (Μονή Φιλοθέου) | 133 | 44 | 36 | 81 | 82 | 74 | 70 |
| Símonos Petras (Μονή Σίμωνος Πέτρας) | 108 | 27 | 18 | 61 | 78 | 78 | 73 |
| Agíou Pavlou (Μονή Αγίου Παύλου) | 250 | 115 | 111 | 87 | 85 | 85 | 104 |
| Stavronikita (Μονή Σταυρονικήτα) | 219 | 35 | 26 | 43 | 40 | 33 | 45 |
| Xenofontos (Μονή Ξενοφόντος) | 195 | 66 | 43 | 39 | 50 | 46 | 48 |
| Osiou Grigoriou (Μονή Οσίου Γρηγορίου) | 105 | 53 | 34 | 57 | 72 | 77 | 86 |
| Esfigmenou (Μονή Εσφιγμένου) | 91 | 46 | 25 | 41 | 40 | 56 | 101 |
| Agíou Panteleimonos (Μονή Αγίου Παντελεήμονος) | 1928 | 61 | 27 | 30 | 32 | 40 | 53 |
| Konstamonitou (Μονή Κωνσταμονίτου) | 65 | 29 | 17 | 16 | 26 | 27 | 26 |
| TOTAL | 7432 | 1641 | 1238 | 1217 | 1255 | 1337 | 1610 |

12. Monastic cottages and skytes

| COTTAGES AND SKYTES | 2001 (OFFICIALLY) | 2001 (REALLY) | 1991 (OFFICIALLY) | 1991 (REALLY) |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Karyés (Καρνές, Karies) | 242 | 233 | 223 | 216 |
| Víglá - Agíou Nílos (Βίγλα - Αγίου Νείλος) | 12 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Vouleftíria (Βουλευτήρια) | 11 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| Dafni (Δάφνη) | 33 | 38 | 11 | 16 |
| Karóúlia (Καρούλια) | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Katounákia (Κατουνάκια) | 36 | 36 | 0 | 0 |
| Karsála (Καψάλα) | 19 | 19 | 0 | 0 |
| Kerasiá - Agíou Vasílios (Άγιος Βασίλειος) | 27 | 27 | 0 | 0 |

| COTTAGES AND SKYTES | 2001 (OFFICIALLY) | 2001 (REALLY) | 1991 (OFFICIALLY) | 1991 (REALLY) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Metóchion Chourmítsa</i> (Μετόχιον Χουρμίτσης) | 10 | 12 | 9 | 11 |
| <i>Néa Skíti (Skíti Theotókou)</i> (Νέα Σκήτη) | 44 | 48 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Prováta-Morfonouí</i> (Προβάτα-Μορφονού) | 29 | 29 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Skíti Agías Annis</i> (Σκήτη Αγίας Άννης) | 87 | 94 | 126 | 126 |
| <i>Skíti Agías Triádos</i> (Σκήτη Αγίας Τριάδος) | 40 | 40 | 29 | 29 |
| <i>Skíti Agíou Andréou Vato- pedíou</i> (Σκήτη Αγίου Ανδρέου Βατοπεδίου) | 87 | 89 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Skíti Agíou Dimitríou Vato- pedíou</i> (Σκήτη Αγίου Δημητρίου Βατοπεδίου) | 16 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Skíti Agíou Dimitríou</i> (Σκήτη Αγίου Δημητρίου) | 9 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Skíti Agíou Panteleímonos</i> (Σκήτη Αγίου Παντελεήμονος) | 12 | 16 | 23 | 24 |
| <i>Skíti Evangelismós tis Theo- tókou</i> (Σκήτη Ευαγγελισμός της Θεοτόκου) | 9 | 10 | 14 | 26 |
| <i>Skíti Theotókou</i> (Σκήτη Θεοτόκου) | 1 | 1 | 35 | 35 |
| <i>Skíti Profitou Iliou</i> (Σκήτη Προφήτου Ηλίου) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Skíti Timíou Prodrómou Ivíron</i> (Σκήτη Τιμίου Προδρόμου Ιβήρων) | 7 | 7 | 6 | 6 |

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| COTTAGES AND SKYTES | 2001 (OFFICIALLY) | 2001 (REALLY) | 1991 (OFFICIALLY) | 1991 (REALLY) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Skiti Timíou Prodróμου Megístis Lávras</i> (Σκήτη Τιμίου Προδρόμου Μεγίστης Λαύρας) | 15 | 15 | 13 | 13 |

Source: ΕΣΥΕ the Statistical Office of Greece on April 18th, 2009, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athos> (02.12.2015)

Conclusion

For more than 1,000 years the Athos peninsula was one of the biggest monastery centres of the Christian world. In fact this 35 miles long peninsula, situated some 120 km from Thessaloniki in the north of Greece, is a state of monks and monasteries. The capital of this small country, which is politically independent, is the city of Karyes in the central part of the peninsula; it is the seat of *synaxis* – representative organ consisting of monks who are chosen from various monasteries at the beginning of a year. Karyes is a monastic city with monastic school, small hotel and several shops managed by monks and lay persons and with some Greek policemen who must be celibate during the service on Athos. The whole peninsula is totally inaccessible for women. For centuries Athos was a “desert” closed for the world and it is a fortress of ascetics and contemplation. Athos is the last important monastic community of the old Christian tradition from the 4th and 5th centuries, when monastic life was founded and flourished. In those times people did not enter a religious order but went to a desert or mountains and they lived in small groups ranging in number from two or three up to ten, twenty or fifty people. Some of them lived as hermits. Monastic life did not have strict regulations but it had customs which could be adjusted for the spiritual journey of each human being. It is the same on Athos even today. In this article we wanted to explore the spiritual heritage of the Athos peninsula

in the context of history and today's situation. It is a place which a normal human being cannot visit; therefore the view of Athos is very precious. Even though in the early times of Athos, before the big schism in 1054, there was a monastery of Benedictines on Athos, the western Church was not popular here due to crusades. Some groups of crusaders and other knights from the West attacked and robbed the monasteries on Athos.

For the Orthodox Christians, Athos has a unique place as one of the most important spiritual centres of Orthodoxy. Orthodox spiritual traditions were preserved on the Holy Mount. Athos is connected with the so called *hesychasm*. A special form of the Orthodox eastern liturgical practice (so called Holy Mount Typicon from 1783) is preserved here. The Mount and Athos peninsula is the place where male pilgrims can enjoy profound spirituality. There are many precious relics from the whole world. For the non-Orthodox visitors, Athos is a place of peculiar ancient Byzantine architecture with many archaeological monuments from the time of ancient Byzantium. There are art works – icons, chalices, etc. In the Athos libraries we can find precious manuscripts concentrated in a small location. The Mount of Athos is the spiritual and cultural jewel of the world because there are monuments of high value. There are works of icon writers, sculptors, calligraphists and other artists. Visitors can touch Byzantium – its spiritual and artistic spheres.

Athos is one of the most authentic and complete examples of Christian monasticism. For centuries, it has been close to the original monastic life which prevailed in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. The Athos monks were never active in the apostolate and they never thought that it was necessary. Their own apostolate of prayer and example is quite eloquent. It would be praiseworthy to continue in the research of the history of spirituality and Christian liturgy in this precious and beautiful place full of spiritual strength and religiosity.

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Summary

“A place where no woman has ever entered...”
The unique spiritual heritage of the Athos peninsula
in the context of history and present time

Christian spirituality was perceived differently in the whole history of Church. When we look at the spiritual heritage of Christianity, a special position is given to a unique spiritual and geographic locality – the state of monks – Athos peninsula. It is a beautiful place where no woman has ever entered. This contribution aims to describe and interpret the religious heritage of this spiritually unique place. It is perceived as a protected area and the centre of eastern spirituality. It will be described on the basis of Church history as well as on the basis of personal experience of the author who visited Mount Athos and scientifically explored the sources.

Keywords: Christian liturgy and spirituality, holy Mount of Athos, spiritual heritage of Athos, way to Athos, religious context of Athos, monastic heritage

„Miejsce, do którego żadna kobieta nigdy nie weszła...” Unikatowe duchowe dziedzictwo Półwyspu Athos w kontekście historii i współczesności

Duchowość chrześcijańska postrzegana była odmiennie w całej historii Kościoła. Szczególną pozycję w duchowym dziedzictwie chrześcijaństwa zajmuje stan mnichów z półwyspu Athos. To piękne miejsce, do którego żadna kobieta nigdy nie weszła. Artykuł ma na celu opisanie i interpretację dziedzictwa religijnego tego wyjątkowego centrum duchowości. Jest ono postrzegane jako centrum wschodniej duchowości i obszar chroniony. Opracowanie powstało na podstawie źródeł z historii Kościoła oraz osobistego doświadczenia autora, który odwiedził górę Athos i zbadał naukowo źródła omawianego zagadnienia.

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