



MOUNT ATHOS

Microcosm of the Christian East

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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 (Iviron) 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.