

THE CASE OF MOUNT ATHOS

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Abstract. Mount Athos or the “Holy Mountain”, is situated at the north-eastern part of Greece, 2.033 m (6.670 ft) high¹. Mount Athos, the state of the monks, unique all over the world for its peculiarity relating to its visitors – pilgrims (only males are accepted) offers multiple interest not only for Greece and Orthodoxy world but also for the Balkan and the world-wide culture². It is an immaculate natural environment at a distance of 130 km far from Thessaloniki. Its residents, monks only, tend the so-called “garden of Virgin Maria”, with diligence and prudence avoiding any distortion of the natural environment. The nature of Athos has been kept unhurt for over a thousand years, with just the slightest exceptions such as opening up mountainous roads for fire protection and wood transportation purposes. The visitor-pilgrim, walking about in the picturesque trails near the deep blue sea or higher inside the woods or climbing to the crest, is amazed by a landscape of particular natural beauty surrounding the monasteries, cloisters and cells. The local flora is a combination of chestnut woods (the largest one in Europe), walnut, fir, beech, pine, holly woods and many kinds of plants, rare or even totally unknown in other regions of Greece. Another interesting aspect of Mount Athos is its fauna, which includes jackals, boars, wolves, foxes, squirrels, hares, weasels, birds such as eagles, hawks, hoopoes, owls, partridges, woodpeckers, cuckoos, wood-pigeons, and also reptiles like snakes, turtles, lizards, insects and many more.

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AIMS AND BACKGROUND

It is an undoubted fact that the environment around us and consequently the nature are nowadays being continuously damaged. It is also a fact that in the Balkan region, our region, the physical environment has suffered major disasters in recent years. The nuclear accident at Chernobyl, the war in Serbia and the increasing, expanding and uncontrollable yearly forest fires are the most important disasters. And the urgent question, which constantly requests an answer, is “Are there regions in the Balkans, where man can seek and find an undisturbed natural environment ?” The answer to this question is yes! And one of these regions is the Greek Mount Athos, otherwise called “Holy Mountain” or “Garden of Virgin Mary”, and in Greek called Agion Oros³.

GEOGRAPHY

Athos is the easternmost of the three feet that reaches out to the south from the Peninsula of Chalkidiki. To the west it faces the Singitikos Gulf and to the east the Aegean sea. The small Peninsula of mount Athos has a length of 40 km, a maximum width of 8 km and an overall area of 400 km². The Mt. Athos range (2.033 m in height) runs down along the whole Peninsula and has given the Peninsula its name. Its precipitous cliffs have formed many small capes, such as those of Pinnes, Fonias, Arapis, etc., with corresponding coves as Dafne, Lavra, Vatopedi, which are accessible by boat.

HISTORY

According to the Greek Mythology Athos was a giant coming from the nearby geographical region of Thrace who for many years fought against the god of the sea, Poseidon. During one of those fierce battles, when Athos was hurling boulders against the god, Poseidon slew him and buried him under the mountain, which took the giant's name.

According to the ancient Greek history the first people to inhabit Mt. Athos came from the tribes of Thracians and Pelasgi from the island of Lemnos. Later came to Mount Athos settlers from the city of Chalcis, near Athens. Remaining ruins bear witness to the cities founded around the Peninsula. The most famous city was Sani, a colony built by the people of Andros, an island at the south of Greece. The city was destroyed by Philip, the king of Macedonia. A few years later his son Alexander the Great built up a new city on the same site which was named Ouranoupolis. The city has the same name until now and is well known as the entrance to the Holy Mountain of Athos. In the Roman period the city of Ouranoupolis loses its importance and we do not have much information on it.

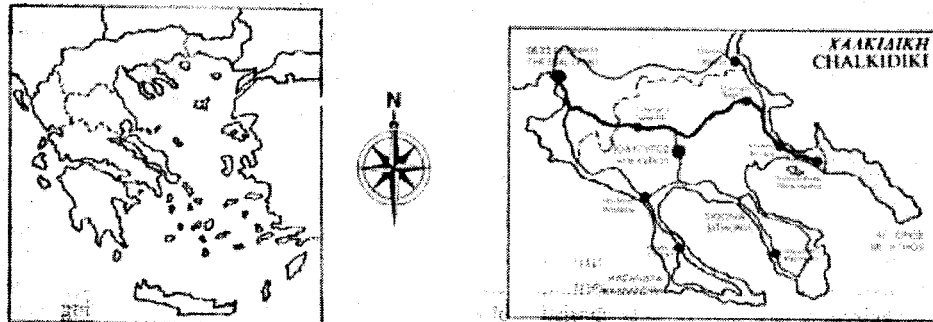


Fig. 1. The map of Mount Athos

HISTORY OF THE MONASTIC STATE

Although it is not established when monastic life developed on Athos, it is certain that the first hermits arrived in the 7th century from the middle East and Egypt, fleeing from the Arabs.

Athos was officially named a place for monasticism by the Byzantine emperor Basil the First in 885. St Athanasios, a hermit from the city of Trebizon in Northern Turkey, well known as Eyxinos Pontos in the past, is considered to be the founder of convent (or otherwise coenobite) monasticism on Athos. St Athanasios, with the support of emperor Nikephoros Phokas founded in 963 the first monastery on the Holy Mountain, called Megisti Lavra (that is Great Ardour). A few years later in 972 the organisation and administration of Athos was established with the signing of its first charter (called *typikon*) by the Byzantine emperor Ioannis Tsimiskes. This charter was known as *tragos* ("ram", as it was written on the skin of a ram). The *typikon* declared Athos an independent monastic state, containing Monasteries, Kellia, Kathismata, Kalyves, Sketes, and Hesychasteria*.

Romanians, Serbs, Bulgarians and Russians helped to establish Mt. Athos as the ecumenical centre of Orthodoxy.

The 1924 constitutional charter for the Holy Mountain and the successive Greek Constitutions confirm that Mt. Athos is a self-governing part of the Greek state, comes under the religious jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch and is administered by twenty ruling monasteries under the supervision of State authority. Athos is exempt of all duties and taxes. Women are excluded from the monastic community in accordance with an old tradition.

DAILY LIFE ON THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Every morning before dawn, the monks are called to pray at the church of the monastery by the sounding of a bell or a "semandron" (a wooden beam and mallet). After the Orthros (Matins) and Holy Liturgy the monks gather for a simple meal of boiled potatoes, salad, walnuts, olives and brown bread. They never eat meat, but they eat fishes at celebrations. Their day continues with work in the gardens, vineyards, clearing and maintenance of the buildings, icon-painting, and theological studies. After the sunset the great wooden gates of the monasteries are shut and the monks retire.

* The kelli is a monastic institution of the single building containing a small chapel with a small area of land attached, and held under a deed of trust from a ruling monastery by three or more monks. The kathisma is a hut occupied by a single monk who buys his supplies at a nominal price from his monastery. The monks dwelling in the kathismata have reached a high degree of sanctity. The kalyva is a smaller than a kelli containing a chapel but without any land attached. The skete is an organized monastic community consisting of a number of kalyves. The monks inhabiting them occupy themselves in various handicrafts. The hesyhasterion is not be found in the most remote areas of the mountain, such as the south-west extremity of the peninsula, and is a retreat for those wishing to follow an unobstructed monastic life of the highest order.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mount Athos, the only entrenched and unique monastic province in the world, exhibits multifold interests, not only for Greece and the Orthodox Church, but also to the universal civilisation. It is a virgin, undisturbed environment, despite the existence of roads that allow transportation between the convents (or monasteries) and many safety measures taken against fire. A landscape of immense natural beauty surrounds the monasteries, the sketes, the kellia (cells) and the capital village, Karies. The picturesque natural environment manifests itself to every visitor or pilgrim as he wanders along paths made of stone. Fountains appear along the paths, at which the visitor can have a rest and drink cool water, using a metal cup permanently hung at the edge of the fountain.

Despite some unavoidable damages, the nature of Mount Athos is very well preserved. Forests of chestnut trees, walnut trees, hazel trees, fir trees, beech trees, pine trees, bushes and various chloral that is rare and even endemic in the region, constitute the environment of the Holy Mountain, Mount Athos.

In the southern part of the Peninsula the environment changes into an impressive, unworldly beauty. The vivid green and the woods give way to alienating, rocky, difficult-to-reach mountain slopes. All the monasteries are built in selected regions, and have unlimited view towards the mountain and the sea.

The monks cultivate various fruit-bearing trees, vines and garden plants in the traditional manner, without additives and chemicals. A glass of local Athonian wine is indeed worth to try.

The fauna of Mount Athos offers much interest to an expert, since it includes animals as wolves, wild pigs, foxes, squirrels, rabbits and weasels, birds as eagles, hawks, owls, partridges, woodpeckers and cuckoos and reptiles, tortoises, lizards, etc.

Apiculture, that is the preservation of bees that produce honey and wax, is also grown in Mount Athos. Honey is used for nutrition and wax for the making of traditional candles. In many cells chickens are brought up, for the use of the produced eggs in the painting of holy pictures, otherwise called icons.

The transportation of goods between the monasteries is accomplished by sea with the use of small boats and by land with the use of small trucks. In the southern part of the province there exist no roads through the forests and therefore the transport is accomplished with the help of mules.

The protection of the environment is a result of the use of soft energy sources. No electricity cables run across the Peninsula. Electric energy is used basically in night hours and produced in hydroelectric works that are constructed near the monasteries. The electric energy required for the cells and houses is produced by the sun using photovoltaic cells, by the wind using wind generators and in the worst case by diesel engines.

Timber from the forests is the major source of wealth for the monasteries. Timber is used even for heating and food preparation.

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