



Managing the heritage of Mt Athos

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Introduction

The spiritual, cultural and natural heritage of Mt Athos dates back to the end of the first millennium AD, through ten centuries of uninterrupted monastic life, and is still vibrant in the beginning of the third millennium. The twenty Christian Orthodox sacred monasteries that share the Athonite peninsula – in Halkidiki to the East of Thessaloniki – are quite diverse. Established during the Byzantine times, and inspired by the monastic traditions of Eastern Christianity, they have developed through the ages in parallel paths and even have different ethnic backgrounds with Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian and

Cypriot monastic communities (Tachiaios, 2006). Yet all the monks on Mt Athos are recognised as citizens of Greece residing in a self-governed part of the country (Kadas, 2002).

Already in 885 Emperor Basil I declared Mt Athos as ‘...a place of monks, where no laymen nor farmers nor cattle-breeders were allowed to settle’. During the Byzantine Period a number of great monasteries were established in the area. The time of prosperity for the monasteries continued even in the early Ottoman Empire period. However, the heavy taxation gradually inflicted on them led to an economic crisis dur-

< The approach to the Stavronikita Monastery.

¹ The views included in this paper are of its author and do not represent necessarily those of the Holy Community of Mt Athos.



younger and well-educated monks (Sideropoulos, 2000) whose number has been doubled during the past forty years. It is up to them to continue the spiritual traditions of the area during the third millennium.

The heritage of Mt Athos

It is important to note that the heritage of Mt Athos is multiple and integrated, and that it is incorporated in a living millennial tradition (Smyrnakis, 1903). In parallel, this tradition is maintained while the monastic communities of Athos adapt contemporary techniques to their needs. Thus, state-of-the-art methods are being used in restoring and protecting priceless icons and ancient manuscripts, while the monks use mobile telephony and the internet to communicate, although their use is in principle restricted.

The spiritual heritage of the area originates from the Byzantine Orthodox tradition with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople still maintaining the spiritual leadership of Athos (Papachrysanthou, 1992). The strong religious faith of the monks and their devotion to ascetic life dedicated to prayer is an inspiration for the Christian Orthodox faithful, which is estimated now to 200-250 million people distributed in many countries (McGuckin, 2011).

Part of this spiritual tradition is the *avaton*, which forbids the entrance of women and children, as well as female animals to Mt Athos. Since its official establishment in 969 AD by Ioannis Tsi-

ing the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and made them abandon the coenobitic and embrace the idiorhythmic system (where monks come together but are able to own things individually and not being obliged to work for the common good). Despite their impoverished situation during the eighteenth century, Mt Athos took a leading role in the Greek enlightenment, founding the Athonite Academy near Vatopedi Monastery (Theodorou and Dana, 2003). During the Greek War of Independence in the early nineteenth century, the Holy Mountain became a shelter for the suffering Greek population, and was plundered by the Ottomans. After the end of the war, many Slavonic countries in an attempt to increase their influence in the area donated large sums of money to rebuild old monasteries and the numbers of the monks increased. The world wars and the civil war that followed diminished their numbers considerably.

Near the end of the twentieth century, Mt Athos monasticism experienced a re-vitalisation through an increase of

miskis, the area has been dedicated to the Virgin Mary and has been known as Her 'little garden'. Thus, no other woman has ever been allowed to enter.

The cultural heritage consists of a unique architecture, which melds many different styles from various epochs and countries, perfectly in harmony with each other and very well integrated in the rich natural environment of the Athonite Peninsula. It is complemented by invaluable collections of artefacts, frescoes and icons, manuscripts and old editions, objects of religious art and other precious gifts from devout leaders and pilgrims. Most of these are now properly maintained, although fires and insensitive restorations have caused occasionally serious damage (Papayannis, 2007).

The natural heritage is also unique due to a rapid succession of diverse climatic conditions and ecosystems from Mediterranean along the coasts to alpine at the tip of Mt Athos, which exceeds 2000 m (Ganiatsas, 2003). The variety of cli-

mate types provides a habitat for a large number of plant and animal species, including quite a few endemic to the region (Kakouros, 2006). The absence of grazing in the entire peninsula has allowed the existence of a dense forest, of deciduous and coniferous and maquis vegetation (Dafis et al., 1996).

That is why Mt Athos has been recognised by UNESCO as a Mixed World Heritage property for both nature and culture in September 1988. The entire area has been included in the Natura 2000 European Union network of protected areas, both for its habitats and birds. Both of these designations have been proposed unilaterally by the Greek State, without the participation and the agreement of the monastic communities and have been approved by the World Heritage Committee and the European Commission. The Holy Community of Mt Athos has accepted these designations *ipso facto*, but only within the historic and legal framework of the Athonite Peninsula.

The inner courtyard of the Vatopedi Monastery.



Management responsibilities

The requirements of the two protection regimes under UNESCO and the European Union have created occasional friction between government services and the Mt Athos authorities, who feel strongly that they have the full responsibilities for the management of the Athonite Peninsula. This is based on the long tradition of the area, and has been recognised by the Decree 10/16.09.1926 on the ratification of 'the Constitutional Charter of Mt Athos', as well as by article 105, paragraphs 1–3, of the Greek Constitution. It is also recognised by the 1981 Treaty of admission of Greece in the European Union, which recognises Mt Athos as part of a European Union member state, but with certain special considerations.

In accordance with the existing legal framework, Mt Athos is governed by the Holy Community, which consists of representatives of the 20 monasteries in the area. Each monastery has jurisdiction for the management of their property, certain general matters, however, are decided at the level of the Holy Community, such as opening of roads, or entry of automobiles for the transport of goods and people. For major matters, the Holy Community meets with 20 Abbots also participating (Elissaios, 2007).

The State is represented by a Governor – appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – who is responsible for security matters and the implementation of Greek laws.

In this context, the diachronic views of the Holy Community of Mt Athos are

clearly presented in the following excerpt from a letter sent to UNESCO in October 2010:

'Naturally, the monks of Mount Athos are themselves the unremunerated custodians, protectors, and preservers of the peninsula's natural and cultural treasures. They are, in addition, the bearers and practitioners of a spirituality that is both traditional and contemporary; they are the ones who live in and shape the institutions and established orders. The Athonite administrative authorities (the Holy Community and the Twenty Holy Monasteries), manage their own affairs and struggle to maintain their institutions and traditions. From their own funds, but occasionally with state and private grants, they care for the various monuments, and, either through services that they organize, or that they entrust to outside collaborators, they oversee various studies and restoration projects, plans for the management of the environment, and, with the cooperation and approval of the appropriate government services, they see that these projects are carried out.'

The relations of Greece with UNESCO for all World Heritage Convention matters have been ensured through the Ministry of Culture and the Permanent Delegation of Greece to UNESCO. Often the Holy Community has been ignored, while the Ministry of the Environment (responsible for nature protection) has shown little involvement. This has been strongly protested by

the Athos authorities who have attempted to communicate directly with the World Heritage Committee with mixed results. It should be noted that in spite of recommendations from the World Heritage Committee, the Ministry of Culture and the Holy Community have been submitting separate reports on the conditions of the Mt Athos site (Holy Community, 2008). However, recently there has been progress towards a better understanding and collaboration on all sides.

Thus, in November 2010, at the invitation of UNESCO and the Government of Ukraine, the Holy Community participated formally in a workshop on the role of religious communities in the management of World Heritage Sites with religious meaning. In January 2011, the Ministry of Culture of Greece invited the Coordinator of the Athos Study to participate in a workshop on the management of the Greek World Heritage properties. Finally, on 2–5 June 2011, Francesco Bandarín, Assistant Director-General of UNESCO was the first World Heritage official to visit Mt Athos at the invitation of the Holy Community.

The integrated management study

Objectives

It should be clear that the integrated management study for the Mt Athos spiritual, cultural and natural heritage has been requested by the World Heritage Committee, after a fact-finding mission in 2006 (UNESCO, 2006).

Thus, decision WHC-06/30.COM/7B of the Committee meeting in Paris includes the following:

'The highest priority for improvement of conservation of the World Heritage property is the preparation, approval and implementation of an integrated and multi-disciplinary management plan for the entire area of Mt. Athos, which should cover the following issues:

- *Evaluation of the current situation, taking into account the co-existence of nature and spirituality/culture in Mt. Athos since the end of the first millennium, and the legitimate needs of the Monastic Brotherhoods;*
- *Circulation and transportation network of Mt. Athos;*
- *Integrated management of the natural environment;*
- *Sustainable management of the forests;*
- *Protection of the property within a cultural landscape perspective;*
- *Resolution of the problem of solid and liquid wastes;*
- *Improving management of risks, especially of fires and earthquakes, as well as eventual impacts from climate change;*
- *The importance of developing a consistent approach to conservation decision-making from monastery to monastery.'*

However, the monastic authorities of Mt Athos have accepted willingly this recommendation as they believed it would contribute to the effective conservation

of the Athonite heritage and would also strengthen their claims for responsible management, with full respect to the national legislation and the *acquis communautaire*. They also recognise that the spiritual, cultural and natural heritage of the area is inextricably interrelated and this necessitates its integrated and systematic management.

Structure

The Mt Athos study will, therefore, address a variety of issues, among which are the following.

It would start with an honest and objective assessment of contemporary conditions in the Athonite Peninsula on all heritage aspects. These would include not only positive development, but also threats to heritage and problems to be faced. It would also identify the human and financial resources available for the eventual needs of effective management.

A key issue would be the study of existing land use for worship, habitation,

and productive activities, especially for the cultivations and forestry, energy production and infrastructure networks. Future needs will be analysed and proposals for the future distribution of land use will be developed.

Transport and communication for access to Mt Athos and within its boundaries will have to be reconsidered, so that it serves efficiently the daily needs of the monastic communities and the visitors. It should also be economical in energy and reduces pollution and noise, while maintaining a peaceful milieu, which is an imperative requirement for worship and ascetic life.

A major productive activity, forestry in Mt Athos has been practiced in traditional ways. However, in recent times social and financial developments in Greece have rendered some of these practices obsolete and have encouraged more aggressive exploitation techniques. It is necessary, therefore, to re-evaluate forestry practices within the framework of sustainability (Dafis,

Restored wing of the Hilandar Monastery.



1992), and to promote the certification of wood products from the forests of Mt Athos. As an example, Kakouros (2009) reports that the implementation of selective inversion thinning reduces the risk of wildfires and promotes species diversity. Furthermore, a monitoring system allows a more sufficient ecological and economical assessment of this method.

The high biodiversity of Mt Athos (its flora includes 1453 taxa and its fauna 131 bird species, 37 mammals, 14 reptiles and 8 species of amphibians) (Dafis, 1992), is characterised also by an important degree of endemism (22 taxa endemic to Greece, 14 local endemics and six to the Balkan Peninsula). The rich biodiversity must be identified, inventoried and conserved through appropriate science-based methods and measures, also in accordance with European Union requirements and especially the Birds and Habitats Directives. A system of monitoring key biodiversity indicators on a periodic basis must also be established and managed by the Holy Community.

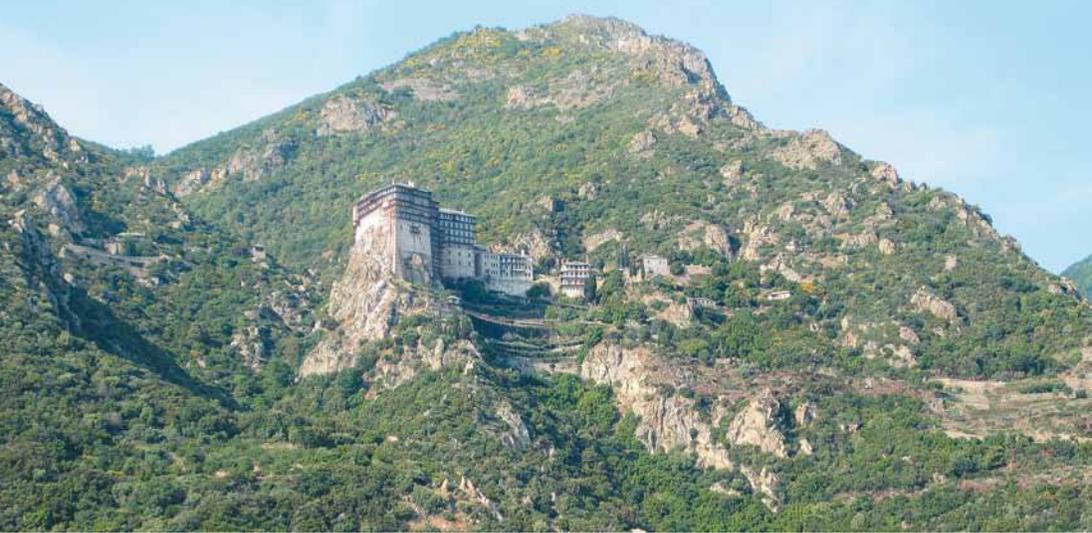
At the interface between nature and culture are the majestic landscapes of Mt Athos, formed through the ages by natural processes and human endeavours in total harmony. In recent times, however, some of these cultural landscapes have been blighted by insensitive infrastructure works, especially road construction. Although vehicle traffic is very limited, the roads themselves have had negative impacts not only on the sensitive landscapes of Mt Athos, but also on the historic network of pedestrian trails that have served

both monks and pilgrims through centuries. Remedial measures need to be carefully designed to restore the landscapes affected (Papayannis, 2008).

Extensive work has already been done on the restoration of historic buildings and facilities and their immediate environment in nearly all of the 20 monasteries (Pennington, 1978). Most of it has been based on sound restoration practices, with few exceptions. A more systematic approach is now necessary, so that further restoration work will be based on scientific research and documentation and is carried out at the highest international levels of quality; an approach that should take seriously into consideration the living conditions in buildings permanently inhabited by the monastic communities. This is merited by the uniqueness of the Mt Athos architectural heritage.

A considerable part of the cultural heritage of the area resides in the artefacts, icons and other objects of religious arts, written or printed documents, and the utilitarian objects from past epochs. Their careful maintenance and enhancement is well advanced in Mt Athos and in quite a few monasteries state-of-the-art facilities for protecting and exhibiting them have been constructed. However, a systematic inventory and programme of conservation is needed.

The management of liquid and solid wastes in Mt Athos does not present major problems. It must be resolved, however, in a decisive manner using a combination of traditional knowledge



Integration of Simonopetra Monastery in the surrounding landscape.

and modern technology. Preventive measures to decrease packaging of imported products and the extensive use of recycling should be strongly encouraged.

As to energy, Mt Athos is not linked to the power networks of the country, but relies on its own production. Part of it is renewable (hydroelectric and solar energy), but most of it is produced through thermal generators. For the future, ecological practices should be promoted, primarily through systematic energy economy, including the introduction of passive measures in buildings. Production should be redirected to renewable sources, taking into account, however, the need to protect cultural landscapes.

Being a depository of great heritage wealth, Mt Athos must seriously face the need to manage risks. As proven by its history, forest and building fires are the main threats and they require preventive measures, equipment, or-

ganisation and training. For instance, in August 1990 a large wild fire destroyed some of the forested areas of Mt Athos and menaced the Simonopetra Monastery. Also, the Hilandar Monastery was partly burned by a building fire in 2004 and is undergoing restoration. As Mt Athos is in a dangerous seismic zone, the threats from earthquakes must also be considered. In addition, climate change impacts will be felt on the availability of water, on changes in ecosystems and flora and fauna species and through sea level rise. They should be carefully monitored and adaptive measures taken when proven necessary.

Finally, the Athos Management Study will address the related administrative issues, which concern mainly the appropriate organisation of the Holy Community and its Committees in managing effectively the Athos Peninsula. The process of approvals and implementation of the Management Study will also be included, as well as

the necessary arrangements for monitoring developments and for corrective measures whenever needed.

Key aspects

The approach considered by the Holy Community has certain key aspects, which may be considered as highly innovative in view of the specific conditions of a highly sensitive area managed by monastic fraternities.

The fully integrated approach to spiritual, cultural and natural heritage is a key constituent, quite uncommon in Greece, where often the Ministries of Culture and Environment barely collaborate. It requires the establishment of a multi-disciplinary study team, which will appreciate not only the technical and scientific parameters but also the spiritual dimensions that govern them in Mt Athos. An increased understanding will also be required from the responsible monastic authorities, so that they can comprehend the study proposals and be able to implement them effectively.

In this important matter, the perception of the study, as an open learning and educating process for both sides, might facilitate the work and ensure its success. Thus, consultation is planned on three levels. Firstly, and most critical one, with the 20 monastic fraternities and the Holy Community. Secondly, with national public services and authorities involved in Mt Athos, including the Governor, the Ministries of Culture and Environment and the Centre for the Protection of the Athonite Heritage. Thirdly, with UNESCO and its World Heritage Convention and Cen-

tre, including its technical advisors (IUCN, ICCROM and ICOMOS), as well as the European Commission, in relation to the Natura 2000 Network.

The advice of these international bodies would be highly valuable for the preparation and implementation of the Athos Management Study. In turn, the experience gained through it – properly disseminated – may be valuable for similar sacred sites in other parts of the world.

Basic management principles

To allow the monastic community of Mt Athos to appreciate the challenges posed and to reach a consensus, a number of basic management principles were proposed in the first phase of the Management Study. Once approved, they will govern decisively the preparation of the Management Study; against them, the Study proposals and recommendations will be judged before final approval.

The primary principle and objective for the Study is to contribute to a modest extent to the maintenance and strengthening of the millennial Christian Orthodox monastic traditions of Mt Athos, and to encourage their evolution in a world in which the simplicity and sobriety of the ascetic approach to life gains new pertinence.

In turn, the architectural heritage of Mt Athos being unique in its historic development, diversity and wealth, and its integration into the natural environment, must be respectfully restored and sensitively adapted to the needs

of the monastic fraternities that inhabit it. This is complemented by a dense system of footpaths and trails, whose continuity has been partially blocked and needs to be re-established.

This should be complemented by the maintenance and safekeeping of all the elements of cultural heritage in the Athonite Peninsula, including incorporated art work, imported gifts of a religious and secular character, and objects that testify to a millennium of monastic life, as well as the living intangible heritage of oral traditions, liturgical Byzantine music and psalms and related practices, all imbued by a strong religious dimension. In this context, the conclusions of the 2003 ICCROM Forum on Conserving the Living Religious Heritage can be useful and especially their focus on integrity and authenticity (Stovel et al, eds., 2005).

The protection of the natural environment is also an imperative consideration, as it is part of the early Byzantine tradition (Sinacos, 2003). This should include the ecosystems (such as forest, coastal and marine, alpine), landscapes and efforts to increase biodiversity and avoid the loss of species, which is already happening. Many species of the flora and fauna species of the area are included the European Red Data List (endangered, vulnerable and rare) (Philippou and Kontos, 2009).

A control of the terrestrial, marine and aerial boundaries of Mt Athos must be maintained, in order to protect the monastic character of the area and its focus on worship.

The afore-mentioned principle is related to the careful management of pilgrims and visitors, and it aims at reaching a balance between the tradition of hospitality that governs Athos and the need of maintaining peace and quiet. Measures to control the flow of visitors have already been instituted and can be further improved.

In the same spirit, the technical infrastructure must be planned in a highly effective and ecological manner, according to contemporary standards of performance, but also respecting monastic considerations.

There are a few productive activities in the Athonite Peninsula, with various cultivations for self-consumption – mostly using organic agricultural practices – and a limited export of timber and wine, while fishing by the monks plays a marginal role. These, and any additional activities in the future, must be carried out in a framework of sustainability, so that they do not degrade the natural environment and will remain feasible for future generations.

Similar sustainability principles must be applied to all natural resources, and especially space, water and energy, as well as the treatment of waste. The environmental responsibility and the long-term care for the Athonite environment and the generations that will inhabit it in the next centuries should be in harmony with the mentality of the Athonite monastic fraternities (Papayannis and Elissaios, 1994).

A final key consideration is the intention to encourage and ensure the ac-

tive – and decisive – involvement of the monastic community and other permanent inhabitants in every step of the management process, through a system of consultation and collaboration with the Study Team and a voice in the evaluation of options and approvals.

Implementation

Through active participation, it is expected that the Management Study will have good chances of being implemented, once approved. Some other choices will also contribute to the implementation. The Study Team will cultivate close collaboration with the scientific institutions, so that its proposals are the result of a broad consultation. Similarly, it intends to initiate contacts with the appropriate public services and take seriously into account their views. The Study will include a detailed action plan of necessary measures, regulations and interventions, providing a brief description, responsi-

ble driver, time schedule and indicative cost for each. The major issue that needs to be considered here is the financing of all these actions, especially in view of the dire state of the Greek national economy. This should be considered carefully by the Holy Community, which has the overall responsibility for management implementation, and discussions on funding options should be held with the state authorities and the European Union.

It is clear that the integrated and systemic Management Study of the Athos spiritual, cultural and natural heritage is a critical step in the long history of the area. The difficulty in preparing reasonable and balanced proposals and obtaining agreement on them should not be underestimated. On the other hand, if all goes well through the wise guidance of the Holy Community, the Study can play a significant role in the maintenance and strengthening of the traditions of this unique sacred place.

Vegetable garden and outhouses of Simonopetra.



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