

# PILGRIMAGE. THE NATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF MOUNT ATHOS\*

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Greece was the birthplace of two civilisations. While the classical, through its teachings in philosophy, art and science, formed the secular basis for modern Western culture, it was in Byzantium later that Christianity was merged with the classical spirit and sharpened by Eastern belief. Thus the young Christian religion gained its philosophical substance. Through the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, Constantine the Great proclaimed Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In 330 AD the capital was moved to the Hellenic city of Byzantium. The process of change from the Roman—pagan identity to that of Christianity had been set into motion. By the end of the same century the Empire was the Holy Empire and the Emperor the Holy Emperor, revered as the Viceroy of God. The links between Church and State were thus strengthened and Byzantine culture adopted its Theocentric character.

The Holy Empire of God on Earth has been explained as «the pale reflection of the Kingdom of God in Heaven, earthbound because of its sins, but always with an Ideal that it should try to imitate»<sup>1</sup>. Art and architecture could be made to serve that Ideal and in the reign of Justinian (527-65 AD) the building of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople provided the Christian expression independent of pagan models of the past. It is within Hagia Sofia, constructionally influenced by East and West, that the principles which were to govern Byzantine art and architecture – centrality, inwardness, immateriality

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1. Runciman, S. *Byzantine Style and Civilisation*, 1975, p. 9.



View of Mount Athos and its monasteries. Engraving by Pierre Belon du Mans, 1553. National Library of Paris. In: Mylonas, P. [Mount Athos and its Monastic Institutions through Old Engravings and Works of Art.] 1963, p. 26.

Map of Greece and neighbouring countries. Krautheimer, R. *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*. 1975, p. 19.



and spiritual dimension — were all stated with a perfect formal clarity.

If Constantinople and Hagia Sofia represented the external power, the pride and glory of the Byzantine Empire, it should not be forgotten that alongside this Byzantium there existed another of relative introspection: a Byzantium full of mysticism which shunned the expansive world of State and sought salvation in constant prayer and the mortification of the flesh. Due to its non-authoritarian stance, it was natural that the visual expression of this Orthodoxy, as its architecture developed over what is now Turkey, Greece, the Slavonic States and, later, Russia, should be subject to regional inflexion. Although the crescent has long since supplanted the cross on the churches of the City of the Golden Horn, this other Byzantium remains still alive today on the rocks and shores of Mount Athos, its artistic expression there being in the indigenous Athonite monastic architecture.

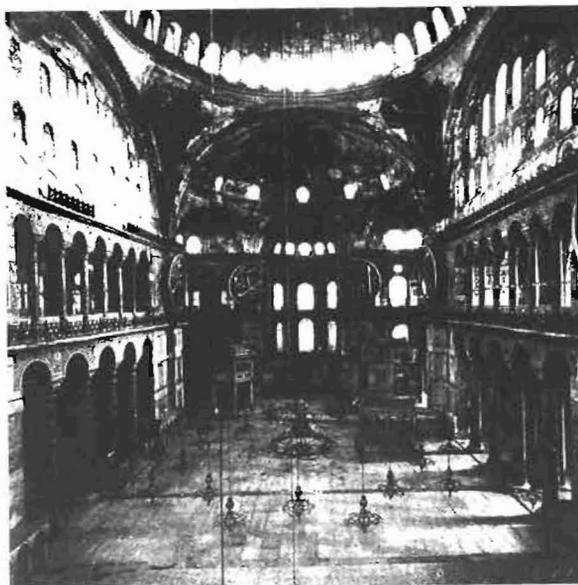
As a whole the architecture of Mount Athos is polyglot. Throughout its history the Holy Mountain has come under different external authorities and had undergone many changes before Greek sovereignty was finally affirmed in 1923. While since then there have been only three monasteries representing non-Greek nationalities, earlier on there were many and with these came all the influences of the architectures of their separate homelands. In many cases these influences were foreign to the character of the place and harmful to the development of Athonite architecture. Indeed, Phillip Sherrard wrote: «Existing buildings in these establishments were replaced by new buildings disfiguring the Mountain with garish semi-oriental domes and introducing on a large scale, a vacuous and cheaply sentimental iconographic style, whose influence has not yet, unfortunately, been eradicated. In this way what had been minor monastic dependencies often grew to two or three times the size of the parent monastery»<sup>2</sup>.

It is not in such buildings that my own interests lie. These are rather with the native monasteries and dependent buildings which are essentially Greek. It is here that over the centuries an architecture has been developed which directly reflects the lives of the monks belonging to these monasteries essentially without outside influences, save originally for the Byzantine base on which the first of them were

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2. *Athos. The Mountain of Silence*, 1960, p. 20.

Hagia Sofia,  
Constantinople.  
Interior of nave.  
Mango, C.  
*Byzantine  
Architecture.*  
1978, fig. 89.



Russian  
monastery  
of Panteleimonos,  
Mount Athos.



modelled. At every stage from work to worship this architecture is a combination between the practical and the spiritual elements present in the lives of the monks.

My intention is to demonstrate this through the investigation of three separate buildings: a boathouse, a monastery and a church. These examples draw an accurate picture of the daily life of the monks and examined in that particular order, represent a journey, a pilgrimage through Mount Athos and its monastic architecture. The particular examples selected do not belong to the same monastic institution, but individually represent buildings which, unlike many others, have maintained their purity and clearly demonstrate the intentions and principles of their architects and builders. First though it is necessary to understand the basis of that Theocentric life and how the indigenous architecture of Mount Athos has arisen through history.

#### MOUNT ATHOS. PLACE - HISTORY - LIFE

In the north of Greece from the shores of the plain of Chalkidike three arms reach out into the Aegean Sea. The easternmost of these, the peninsula of Athos, beginning with a series of heavily wooded hills covered with pines, olives and chestnut trees, runs for some thirty miles south-east, at places only two miles wide, terminating in the almost perfect, marble pyramid rising sheer out of the waters to its single peak, the two thousand metre high summit of Mount Athos.

«To the east», wrote Robert Byron from the summit, «whence we had climbed, tiny contours uttered Lemnos and the Asia Minor coast: the plains of Troy, whence Tozer saw this platform of ours 'towering up from the horizon, like a vast spirit of the waters, when the rest of the peninsula is concealed below.' In the north, all the coastline of Thrace, Cavalla, and Dedeagatch wound away to the junction of the Dardanelles, with Turkey's remnant hovering in soft uncertainty. In the west, battling for definition athwart the cadent sun, the other two fingers of Chalkidike, Longos and Cassandra lay one above the other in the sea; and over them Olympus and the line of Greece. While, farther south, another transient shape proclaimed Euboea and the satellite Sciathos, which means in Greek, 'Shadow of Athos.' Thither, in the morning, the shadow stretches. Had it been the dawn we witnessed, instead of hazy sunset, we should also have seen, as all the Orthodox world knows, Constantinople, the great capital. We looked; but the flat dome of St. Sofia rose only in the mind. Christ saw the town,



Mount Athos.



Valleys of Athos.

no doubt, the old Byzantium. For the Orthodox world knows, too, that it was here the devil led him»<sup>3</sup>.

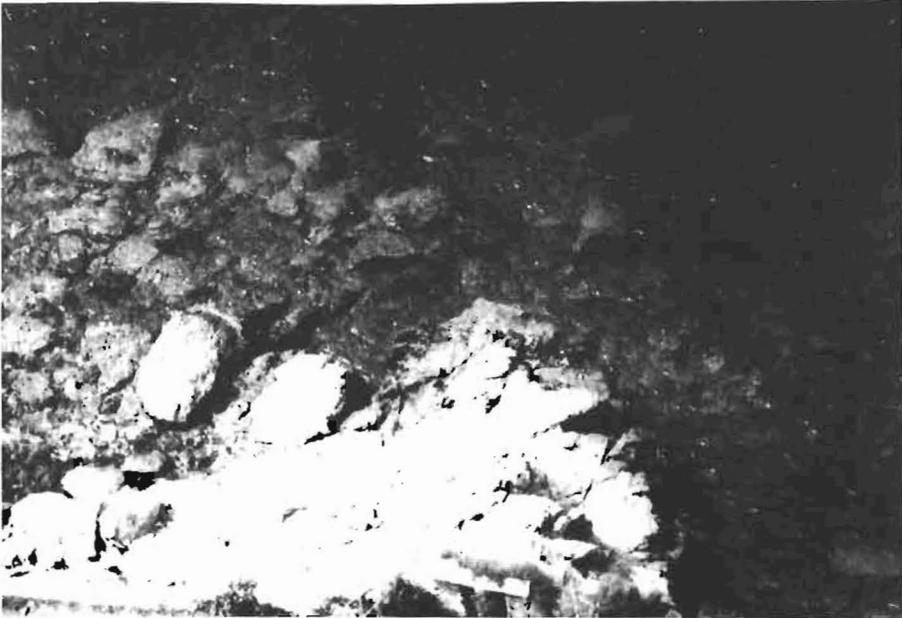
Below this peak the scenery is no less impressive. As another traveller recalled: «The dark blue sea was on my right at about two miles distance; the rocky path over which I passed was of white alabaster with brown and yellow veins; odoriferous evergreen shrubs were all around me; and on my left were the lofty hills covered with a dense forest of gigantic trees which extended to the base of the great white marble peak of the Mountain»<sup>4</sup>. Numerous hills spread from the main ridge creating green valleys covered with olives and vines, ilex and arbutus or deep inaccessible gorges, their depths lost under the thick vegetation. They meet the sea creating small natural ports, their waters deep and clear, calm or brooding, each one possessing its own special beauty.

The dynamism of the mountain, however, lies not only in its

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3. Byron, R. *The Station: Athos. Treasures and Men*, 1949, p. 102.

4. Curzon, R. *Visits to Monasteries in the Levant*, 1849.



Turquoise blue.

natural beauty. History and legend are very much alive in this place which for over a thousand years has been the home of the Orthodox monastic community, the place where the traditions of that other Byzantium have been most stubbornly preserved.

Even in ancient times Athos was considered a holy place. Its name originated, according to legend, from the Titan of Thrace who eternally lies buried beneath it, justly punished by Poseidon for his misconduct towards the Olympian gods. In classical times the Persian king Xerxes left a permanent scar on the Mountain. Leading his fleet against Greece he did not risk sailing by the south promontory of Athos where a few years earlier his predecessor had seen a large number of his ships wrecked. He hacked a canal through the peninsula, towards its northern end, cutting it off from the mainland before proceeding in vain, to conquer Greece. The Christian history of Athos began with the arrival of the Virgin Mary, the heavenly patron and protectress of the Mountain. In the course of her journey to Cyprus She arrived at Mount Athos and was moved by its natural beauty. She declared it to be Hers, given by her Son, and promised to protect it for the future. Much later Mount Athos will be called by one of its own poets: «the Park and Garden of our Lady»<sup>5</sup>. History was uneventful until the beginnings of the monastic settlement.

Monasticism itself had first developed towards the East. Seen as «a spontaneous reaction to the worldliness of the late Graeco-Roman world»<sup>6</sup>, it had originated in the third century in the deserts of Egypt under the teachings of St. Anthony on *eremitical* and *semi-eremitical* life.<sup>7</sup> St. Pachomius later developed the common or *coenobitic* model.<sup>8</sup> He «decided to place all those who came to him for guidance under his direct authority and to make them live, as far as possible, under one roof and observe one and the same rule»<sup>9</sup>. This system rapidly spread to other parts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor, where St. Basil stressed its superiority and established it as the model for the Orthodox monastic system. Following the acquisition of Egypt by the

5. Daponte, K. [Special Issue on Mount Athos], *Nea Estia*, 1963 (12), p. 35.

6. Desmond, J. «Ancient monasteries as cells of planned growth», *AIA Journal*, 1976 (7), p. 58.

7. *Eremitical life*: monastic life in absolute isolation. *Semi-eremitical life*: loosely organised eremitical life.

8. Coenobitic system: life led in community.

9. Sherrard, P. *op. cit.*, 1960, p. 33.

Arabs in the seventh century, a large number of hermits found their way to Athos since the deserts of Egypt and Palestine were no longer safe for monastic life. Impressed by its natural beauty and its mythical peak, they decided to establish their hermitages there. Gradually, the first monastic settlements, known as *lavras*, began to appear. At the time, Athos was thought ideal for monastic habitation. Its detachment from the mainland ensured the tranquillity and isolation of the community, while its proximity to the sea gave it a valuable ease of access. Positioned close to Constantinople, in the middle of the Empire, it was a safe place and would continue to be so as long as it was surrounded by Christian nations who respected the monastic population.

The establishment of the coenobiac groups in the tenth century is associated with the arrival on Athos of St. Athanasius, a close friend and confessor of the emperor Nicephorus Phocas, who set up the first monastery on the Mountain, the Great Lavra, in 963. Having completed his task, not without resistance from the local hermits, he informed his protector and received a *chrysobul* (imperial document) in return, securing his monastery's position and independence. The dominant form of monasticism was now established on the Mountain. In the years that followed, monks from all parts of the empire as well as Rome, Georgia, Calabria and Armenia arrived at Athos setting up similar establishments modelled on the Great Lavra. By the end of the twelfth century all Slav races were represented, giving the Mountain its unique pan-Orthodox character. Different forms of monasticism were controlled by a charter setting out the internal organisation of the monastic community, including the proscription of women and all animals of the female sex from Athos.

The population continued to multiply to reach a climax of over twenty thousand monks and two hundred 'monasteries'<sup>10</sup>. This prosperity, however, did not last for long. The Fourth Crusade originally bound for the Holy Land was diverted and set against Constantinople. In 1204 the city was captured. In the division of the Empire which followed, Mount Athos suffered disastrous consequences. Monasteries were completely destroyed and monks were tortured and killed. It was not until 1261 that the Byzantines recaptured the capital and order was temporarily restored. For Byzantium it was the beginning of the end, but for Athos the worse was still to come. Andronicos II, in his at-

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10. This figure refers to total number of monastic establishments present.

tempt to protect the threatened territories of his crumbling empire, imported an army of Catalan mercenaries from Spain in 1307, but they soon began to tyrannise the people they had been sent to protect. For more than two years Athos was subjected to numerous attacks by these 'merciless professionals'. Of more than two hundred monasteries existing in the thirteenth century only twenty five survived in the fourteenth.

In the following century a new status change took place, luckily with the least of interference. Feared of new devastation by the advancing Turkish army the Athonite monks managed to secure recognition and autonomy of their community by the Sultan Murad II in 1430. With this event Mount Athos entered a period of quiet and relatively undisturbed life. Although interference by the Turks was kept to a minimum, heavy taxation brought financial plight to the monasteries. As a result the coenobitic life suffered and was replaced by an *idiorrhythmic* system in which every monk was financially independent and responsible for himself. During the same period extensive building work took place through the support of Moldo-Wallachian princes who assumed the role of the imperial patrons of Byzantium. At this time the number of monasteries was fixed at twenty. Today the same twenty houses exist on Athos, seventeen of which belong to the Greek element, while one each belongs to Serbians, Russians and Bulgarians. Following a period of decline during our century, Athos is today enjoying a period of rejuvenation and development. Partly responsible for this is the return to the coenobiac rule accomplished by all the monasteries, which has encouraged young, fresh blood to enter the Mountain. Today, the monastic population of Athos is approximately two thousand.

The one aspect which has remained little affected by the turbulence of historic events is life on Mount Athos. This is still carried out according to early monastic principles and Byzantine traditions, and it is this factor which has largely sustained the contrivance of tradition in the parallel art and architecture, despite the introduction of 'foreign' interpretations in certain monasteries. With their traditional black, rough-sewn habits, whether working in the fields or praying in church or their cells, the daily activities performed by the Athonite monks are part of a wider theory based on the principles of Orthodox monasticism.

As soon as the monk enters monastic life he is free to devote himself to the pursuit of purification and the attainment of his pri-



Map of Mount Athos. Sherrard, P. *Athos. The Mountain of Silence*. 1960, p. 4.

mary aim, the spiritual life. The key stones of this life are contained in the three fundamental virtues which he is asked to cultivate: poverty, chastity and obedience<sup>11</sup>. The daily life of the monk, being the means to purification, is divided into three parts: prayer, manual work and sleep<sup>12</sup>. Shortly after midnight the monks will gather in church for communal prayer and the execution of the daily Liturgy. Soon after dawn, they will walk in procession to the refectory where, following a brief benediction by the abbot, the first meal of the day will be served. The second, on days of non-fast only, will be served in the afternoon.

The theoretical importance placed on work is central to Athonite practice. Each monk executes a daily predetermined task, manual or spiritual, for the benefit of the community—cultivating fields, studying in the library, taking care of the church, refectory and guest-rooms: «Here, in lush valleys, teem bees, figs and olives. The inmates of the monasteries weave cloth, stich shoes, and make nets. One turns the spindle of a hand-loom through the wool; another twists a basket of twigs. From time to time, at stated hours, all essay to praise God. And peace reigns among them, always and forever»<sup>13</sup>. When work is over and the last offices in the afternoon have been completed, when sunset falls and the monastery gates are locked according to ancient tradition, the monk will resign to his cell to carry out his individual prayer. Sleep is restricted to as little as possible, in short stretches of about two hours between prayer, depending on the endurance and the spiritual strength of the individual. The circle will be completed when the wooden gong sounds in the darkness and the monk is summoned again for the Liturgy.

This ritual pattern of life, charged at every level with symbolic meaning, is the course the monk follows towards purification. Through the exact execution of this pattern he will find that it no longer oppresses, but liberates and leads him to spiritual life. These are the factors which have influenced the indigenous architecture of Mount Athos, itself similarly liberating and spiritual.

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11. St. Basil states the importance of the virtues. A monk must possess no property being the soldier of Christ. He must not seek to leave any children on earth but to lead them up to heaven. As long as commands are lawful he must obey like servants obey their masters.

12. St. Basil prescribes that the monk's whole life must be a season of prayer both communal and private.

13. Buondelmonte, C. In: Sherrard, P. *ibid.*, p. 75.

## THE NATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF MOUNT ATHOS

Hermits first established themselves on Mount Athos towards the northern part of the peninsula, close to the isthmus and the mainland beyond. They lived primitive lives in caves and grass huts, individually or forming small groups known as *lavras*<sup>14</sup>. They were not strictly organised and their needs were easily met, being situated so close to the mainland. Very few permanent buildings were built at the time and only one survives today, the church of Protaton in Karyes. Dating from c.950, this church is believed to have formed the assembly place of the early community. It is famous for bearing the wall paintings of Manuel Panselinos, the most notable master of the Macedonian School<sup>15</sup> of the fourteenth century. It is an unusual combination of a cruciform plan and a basilica roof whose form has been extensively altered and today no longer resembles any model of Byzantine church<sup>16</sup>.

These eremitical and semi-eremitical types of life later found their architectural expressions in the *kellia* and *sketae*, the embryonic types of monastic settlement on Athos. The *kellia*, or cells, hundreds of which are scattered around the cliffs and valleys of the Mountain, represent the smallest monastic establishments<sup>17</sup>. They are generally single cottages with a stretch of land attached to them and occupied by a family of monks. Their size may vary, but they generally contain a chapel, refectory and library. The *sketae* are usually larger complexes, attached to one of the ruling houses, representing a development of the original *lavra*. They resemble a village, consisting of a loose formation of cottages arranged around a central church or *Kyriakon*. Daily offices are performed in the individual chapels contained in the cottages, while on Sundays the monks gather at the *Kyriakon*<sup>18</sup> for the execution of the Liturgy. In the larger *sketae*, uses like refec-

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14. This description is by St. Athanasius. Kournoutos, G.P. [The Holy Mountain. History and Legends], *Nea Estia*, 1963 (12), p. 6.

15. The Macedonian School flourished in northern Greece and Serbia. It is characterized by a light palette, a fondness for large open forms and an intensity similar to expressionism.

16. Mylonas, P. *op. cit.*, p. 191.

17. They are the smallest establishments for architectural purposes. Hermitages are also established in caves and huts.

18. Sunday: *Kyriake* (Greek). The church is only used on Sundays and is therefore called *Kyriakon*.

tory, library and guesthouse are present, effectively making these a scaled-down version of a monastery.

The ground for the establishment of the monastery on Athos was provided by the existence of the first *Iavras*. In fact it is possible that monasteries may have evolved even without the introduction of the architectural models of Constantinople and the East, by St. Athanasius in the tenth century. Monasteries representing 'worlds outside the world' were invariably located in isolated, uninhabited and often hostile areas. Their siting was based, largely, on practical considerations, like the provision of water and defence, aiming to ensure the community's autonomy and safety. These factors have been closely observed on Athos. Other specific considerations like access led to some monasteries being positioned by the sea, while climatic factors persuaded a few to shelter in inland valleys, whilst others chose more open sites.

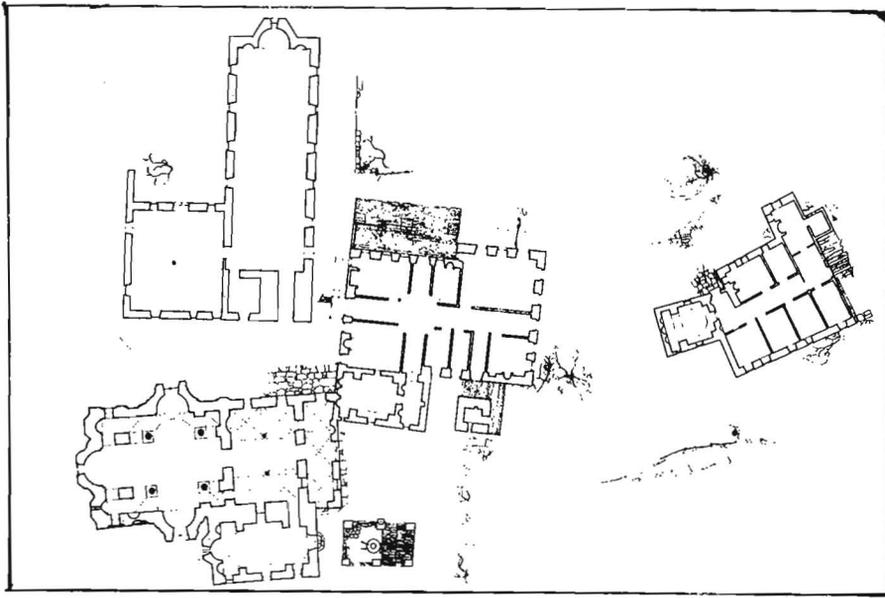
Spiritual considerations, however, often proved more important, as the site of the monastery had to be suitable for contemplative and spiritual life: «The landscape has always formed for the Greeks the necessary scenery for the building of sanctuaries and the evocation of a spiritual elevation, a mystical atmosphere»<sup>19</sup>. The monk, being a strongly religious man, believes in the 'sacredness' of space, a characteristic which he tries to capture. This sacredness is often related with the history of the place. We thus find monasteries associated with the hermitages of holy men or placed at the location of an ancient sanctuary. In some cases a hierophany dictates the site of the monastery. According to Mircea Eliade, this manifestation of the divine, in the form of a vision or dream, «consecrates the space and reveals the central axis for all future orientation»<sup>20</sup>. It represents the ultimate sign for the siting of a monastery and is followed even in adverse circumstances, as we shall see later. Aspects of a similar nature govern the internal organisation of the building.

Organisation of the Athonite monastery is based on the model of the ancient fortified town, as developed in the East many centuries before its introduction to Athos. It consists of a rectangular fortified enclosure surrounding a central court in which the main church, the *Katholikon*, forms the centre of the composition. Around it, inside the

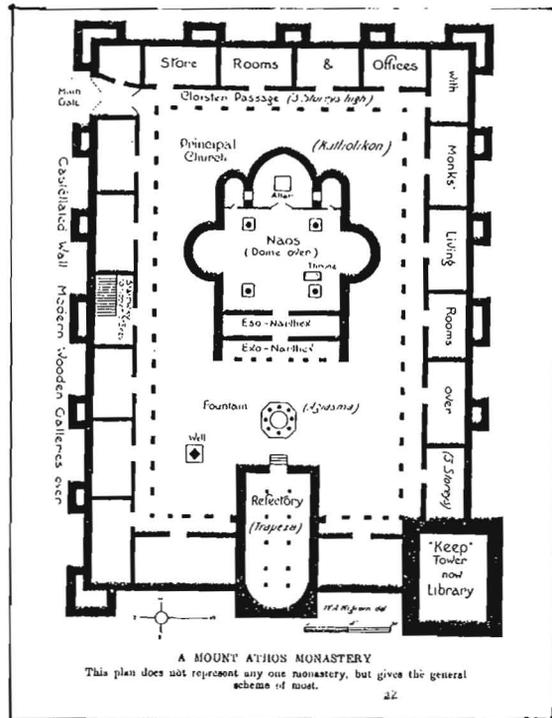
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19. Mylonas, P. [Architecture of Mount Athos], *Nea Estia*, 1963 (12), p. 191.

20. Eliade, M. *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, 1987, p. 21.



Skete of St. Demetrius.  
Plan. Source: Axiotis, G. et al. [*Mount Athos.*] 1960.



Typical monastery plan.  
After Hasluck, F. W. *Athos and its Monasteries.* 1924.

court, are scattered various chapels and other buildings, where space allows. Opposite the *Katholikon* is placed the refectory, the entrances of the two buildings closely related, stressing the processional link. The perimeter houses communal facilities like stores, offices, working areas and the monks' accommodation as well as the guesthouse and hospital. Defence is provided by making the inside of the court the main facade, avoiding outside windows on lower levels and piercing the enclosure with a single, strongly defended gate and passage. A tower, normally positioned at the highest or weakest point of the perimeter, serves as part of the defences and in the last resort as a keep.

This formal model is followed to the extent topography allows. In gentle, comparatively open sites the plan is applied in a conventional manner. When the site is restricted it is the *Katholikon* which is respected, the court being reduced in size, becoming a mere passage around it. When additional space is required the court is expanded with the removal of one of the sides and the extension of the perimeter wall. Where horizontal expansion is problematic the monastery expands in height with the addition of floors, often gaining a strong visual appearance.

Close to the monastery a range of more humble buildings housing the secondary functions of the community lie scattered in the landscape. These include the cemetery with its chapel, dwellings for servants, as well as mills and stables. Dominant among these buildings is quite often the boathouse, situated at the monastery port, forming the point of arrival to the monastery and the first sign of its existence.

The establishment of the first monasteries in the tenth century provided the starting point for the development of the architecture of Mount Athos. The imperial patronage and support which the monasteries enjoyed during that time, provided a sound basis for the flourishing community and its architecture.

As this architecture developed it assumed the course of a complex, evolutionary process affected by a variety of parameters. Although the principle of the fortified enclosure was always followed, given the continuous need for defence and the unchanging spiritual requirements of the monks, individual buildings within the monastery evolved. Through repeated building phases, extensions and repairs the monasteries assumed a course of an organic organisation «where every member of the architectural body springs up when and where needed



*Harmonia.*

like the branches of a tree»<sup>21</sup>. Notable departures from the formality of the model are thus present as this is periodically re-interpreted by the individual builders, giving each monastery its strong, distinctive flavour. In this long process the element of the accidental is to be anticipated, if not forgiven, taking its place in the architectural development of the monasteries.

This evolutionary process, although accepting external influences and local attitudes from the neighbouring mainland, maintained its strict traditions and always aimed to achieve its own objectives. In this way Athonite architecture never lost its appeal towards the monks and remained directed towards their way of life. It aimed to fulfil the practical and spiritual aspects, namely the dogmatic content of the faith and Byzantine traditions, present in the life of the monks.

Through the detailed description of three discreet buildings — the boathouse of Iveron, the monastery of Simonos Petra and the *Katholikon* of Koutloumoussi — I will attempt to demonstrate the presence of the spiritual and practical elements of the life of the monk in the indigenous monastic architecture of Athos.

#### THE BOATHOUSE OF IVERON

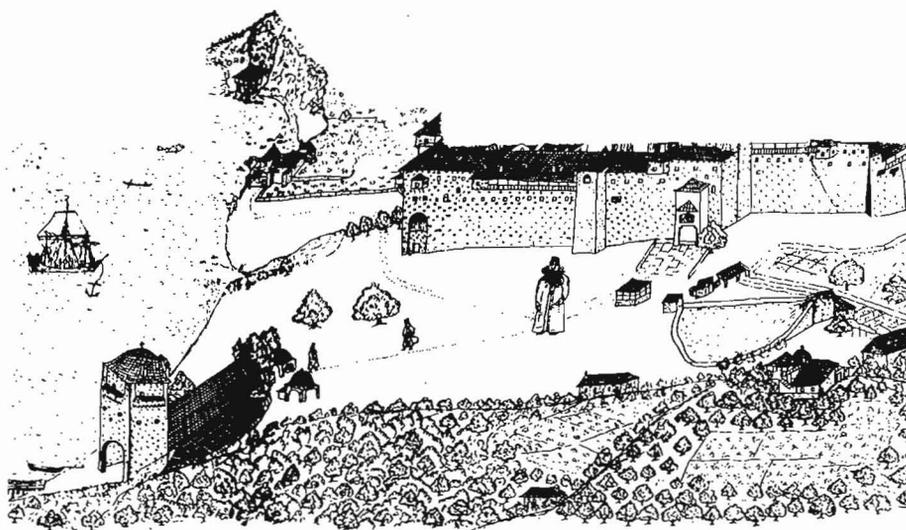
The first impressions of Athonite life and architecture are the boathouses one sees along the coasts of Athos. They are the early signs of the existence of a monastery, the thresholds of entry to the monastic territory of the Holy Mountain.

From the early days of monasticism on Mount Athos the sea formed the primary means of communication both with the outside world as well as within the community, the mountainous interior of the peninsula and the absence of infrastructure discouraging land travel. Each monastery possessed then, as it still does today, its own boat which was used for transport and trade purposes. The importance placed on sea travel, as well as the need for protection against pirate raids, materialised in the building of boathouses.

Boathouses on Athos soon assumed a particular character, incorporating apart from the boatstore, areas used for other storage as well as accommodation for the resident monk, whose task was the care and maintenance of the building. Their particular layout and size varies considerably, the determining factor being the distance of the

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21. Mylonas, P. *ibid.*, p. 191.



The Monastery of Iveron. Engraving by Vassily Barsky, 1744. In: Mylonas, P. *ibid.* p. 28.



Boathouse of Zographou.

parent monastery from its boathouse and port<sup>22</sup>. At monasteries positioned close to the coast the building is often a simple store. In cases where the monastery is situated inland, a fair distance away from the coast, the boathouse, the term no longer being applied to a single building, often expands to house functions like defense tower, church, working areas as well as long-term accommodation and storage. Pilgrims and monks arriving at inconvenient hours, would spend the night there and proceed to their destination in the morning.

The characteristic type of boathouse found on Athos, however, is the defended boathouse which combines the boatstore and storage area with a defence tower housing the caretaker's accommodation. Towers of this sort once provided the first line of defence against pirate raids and are scattered on the coasts of Athos, landmarks of a monastery's existence. The boathouse of Iveron, built in 1625, is perhaps the finest example of this kind on the Mountain.

The east coast of Athos is characterized by its peaceful, gentle topography as opposed to the rough, rocky terrain of the west coast. Low, wooded hills and sandy beaches provide a landscape ideal for human habitation. The open sea, exposed to north-easterly winds throughout the year, however, is rough, making navigation difficult. Along this coast the first monasteries were built towards the end of the tenth century: Great Lavra, Vatopedi, Iveron, their founders closely associated. It was St. Athanasius himself who aided John the Iberian from Georgia to establish himself on Athos, and found the monastery of Iveron in 976. Incorporating other smaller establishments already present in the area it grew so rapidly that it became one of the largest houses on Athos causing the admiration if not the envy of the Greeks.

Situated half-way down the peninsula, in the same sandy beach that the Virgin Mary set foot on when she arrived to Athos, it sits on the flats a short distance away from the shore. Around its large, bright volume, dense forests of pines and chestnut trees cover the low ridges, on the other side of which lies the capital of Karyes. Scattered below the monastery by the shore lie a range of other buildings, the most important of which is the boathouse with its tall, medieval tower, one of the largest on Athos. Sailing down the coast, as you approach the monastery, this tower dominates the view, its pure, stone volume con-

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22. Orlandos, A.K. [*Monastic Architecture*], 1958, p. 145.



Boathouse of Iveron. Approach.



Boathouse. Front View.

trasting with the numerous walls and balconies of the monastery, silhouetted in the background.

The boathouse consists of two elements: the tall defence tower with its big arched opening at ground level and the rectangular boatstore behind. It is positioned with its narrow side facing the sea by the intersection of the road to Karyes, running along the coast, and the gently ascending path which will take you to the monastery gate and the hills beyond. The tower, its verticality contrasting with the horizontality of the landscape, marks the beginning of the route to the monastery.

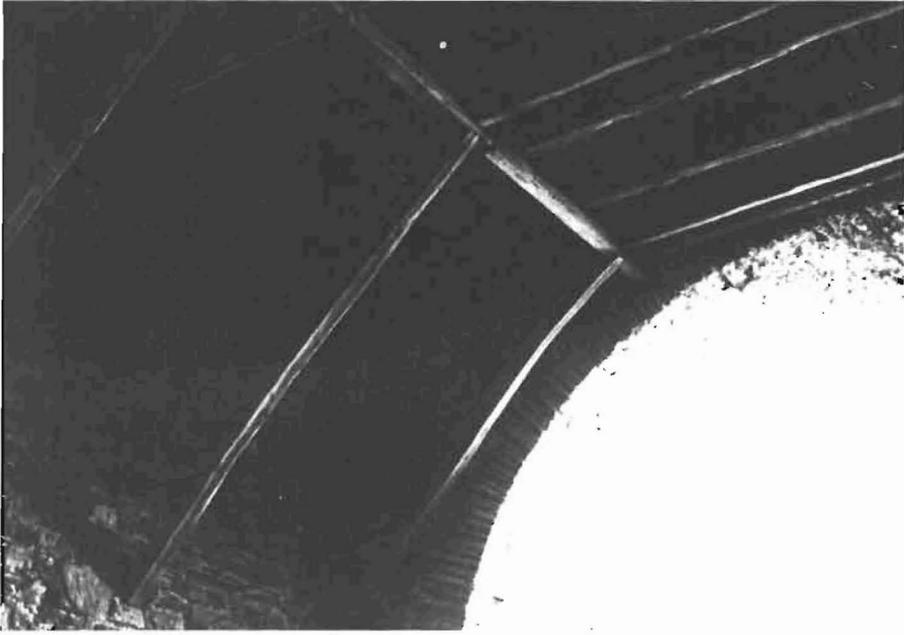
Externally the building is very plain. Built out of local stone, its elevations are essentially featureless given its defensive character. The only notable feature are the continuous projecting machicolations at the highest level of the tower, visually balanced by the rounded, slated roof. The absence of openings reinforces the dramatic, dark gate to the boathouse underneath.

This gate has been built considerably high to allow the easy movement of large boats. Behind it the environment is pleasingly cool. Above is a stone crossvault which carries the higher levels of the tower. Its surfaces are plain and unarticulated, its geometry simple like that of a Platonic solid. No ribs are employed, the only 'ornament' being the rough texture of the stonework. The form relies on the Aegean light to gain its presence.

Ahead, on the other side of a similar arch, lies the boatstore, a deep and dark, rectangular room used for repairs and unloading of boats. Above it, conveniently placed is the storage area, where supplies would be hoisted through a void and kept there temporarily until safely carried to the monastery. Its floor consists of an elegant timber structure comprising transversely spanning beams carried by purlins and diagonal struts built into the side walls. This combination of horizontal and diagonal members approximates the form of the arched gates, giving a feel of consistency to the overall space.

On your left, well hidden in the thickness of the wall, lies a stair leading to the higher levels of the tower. Judging from its tight proportions, it was built with defence purposes in mind rather than comfort. It leads to a square room covered by a stone, domed ceiling.

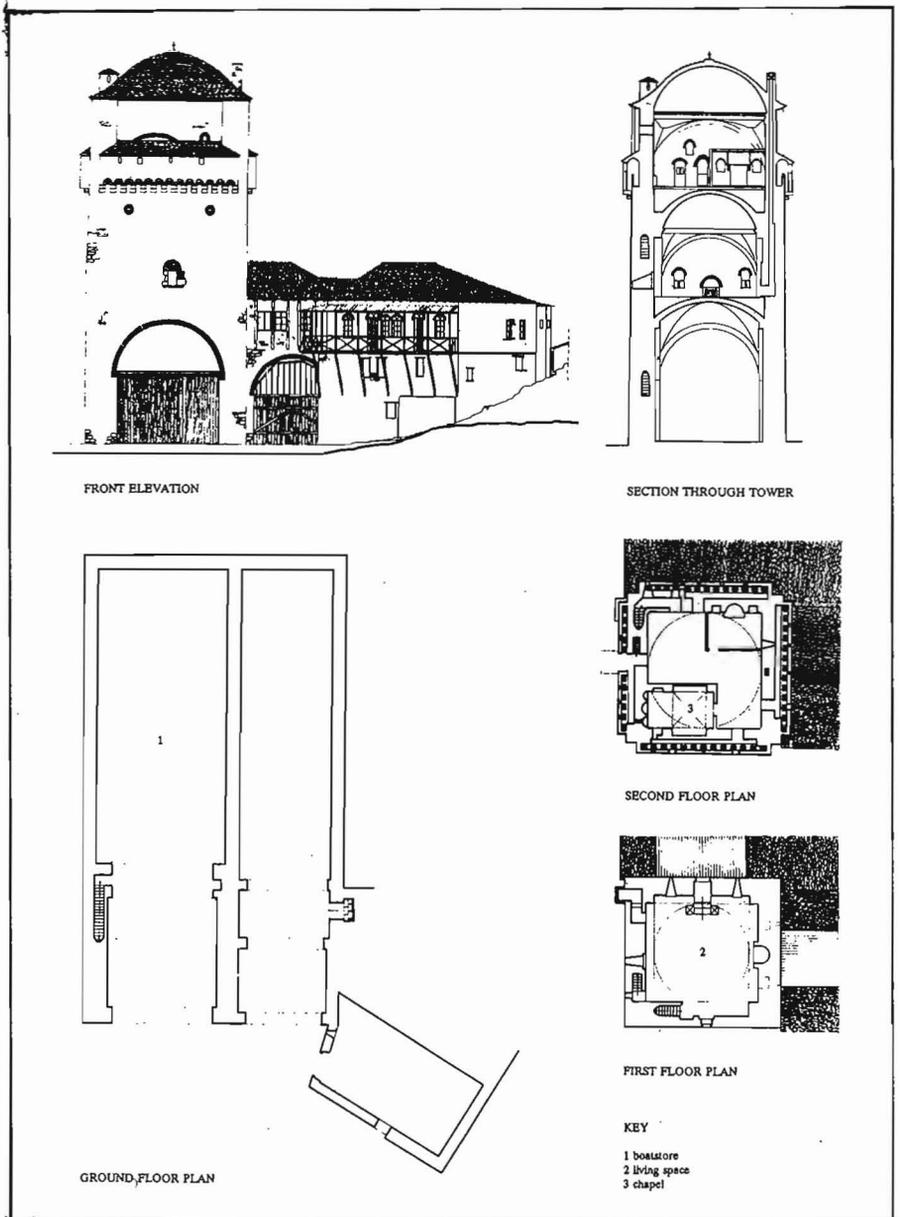
This is the main living space of the boathouse, occupying the entire area of the tower. The caretaker would live here in comfort, but the room is large enough to accommodate a group of people in the case of an emergency. The interior is very plain, like a monk's



Boathouse. Interior of Boatstore.



Boathouse. Living Space. Theocharidis, P. et al. [*Greek Traditional Architecture. Vol. 8: Macedonia B'-Thrace.*] 1991, p. 273, fig. 4.



Boathouse of Iveron. Plans, section, front elevation. Source: Axiotis, G. et. al. *ibid.*

cell, in tune with the monastic spirit. On the south wall lies a door giving access to the store over the boathouse while on the wall opposite lies the only window in the room offering views towards the sea and the entrance of the boathouse below. A great stone fireplace is positioned axially on the west front with a small alcove on each side. A separate stair, tighter than the previous one, leads to the top level of the tower.

This is the floor from which a defensive battle would be fought. The space is identical to the one below with the exception of two small rooms, a sitting room and a chapel, positioned at opposite corners of the square. This reduces the remaining area to a mere passage for accessing the machicolations on the outside faces of the tower. From these, molten lead or burning oil would discourage potential intruders.

The presence of the chapel on the top floor despite the lack of space and the practical nature of the building, is of interest. At closer scrutiny the chapel appears to be a miniature of a larger church. On plan, the divisions of nave and chancel have been closely observed as have the three apses of the chancel, correctly orientated and incorporated within the thickness of the east wall. In section, it carries a separate domed ceiling, an element invariably found in Byzantine churches.

Even in this practical and functional building the spiritual element is expressed and given its appropriate place. Positioned at the top level, the chapel gives the monks a feeling of security, offers them the divine protection when defending their monastery. Through continuous prayer they find the courage to fight and protect the house of God.

This spiritual aspect is important to the monks, as their opinion on the boathouse, in 1701, indicates: «And the boathouse offers great satisfaction and joy to the holy fathers, with its position and its construction as well as its function. For it offers a narrow face which does not spoil the view from the monastery, is faultlessly built and defended by a tall tower ... and at the top floor contains a chapel and enough cells and potent machicolations ....»<sup>23</sup>.

Leaving the boathouse behind you follow the path to the monastery.

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23. Komninos, I. «Pilgrimage.» In: Orlandos, A. K. *ibid.*, p. 146.

## THE MONASTERY OF SIMONOS PETRA

The west coast of Athos is well protected from the winds and the sea assumes a still quality normally associated with lakes, only to be interrupted by the ripples of passing boats. The topography of the land, however, is in direct contrast to this: rocky cliffs emerging sharply out of the water, rising high to meet the main ridge of the Mountain, creating inaccessible gorges and well protected ports.

In these gorges, benefiting from the natural defence the landscape offers, monasteries were built from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, mostly sited on top of isolated rocks. Simonos Petra, Gregoriou, Dionysiou and St. Paul's, although all based on the principle of the fortified town, have expanded vertically, during their early stages, due to the restricted nature of the sites they occupy. New wings were gradually buttressed on the sides of the rock giving these buildings their distinctive, tower-like appearance characteristic of the monasteries of the west coast. Later, however, the monasteries of Dionysiou, Gregoriou and St. Paul's, positioned in more favourable locations, expanded horizontally losing their original character, approximating the general form of the Athonite monastery.

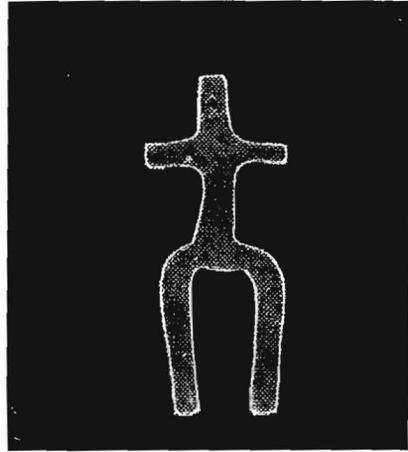
The monastery of Simonos Petra remains the sole example which has retained this character through its six hundred years of evolution. Its basic organisation of spaces and functions is based on a vertical principle of ordering which gives it today its unique feel among the monasteries of Athos.

The early architectural history of Simonos Petra is, like most Athonite monasteries, difficult to trace. Founded in the thirteenth century by St. Simon, a hermit whose cave is located close to the monastery, the early building consisted merely of a church. It was expanded by John Uglitch, a Serbian prince considered its second founder in 1365, forming the nucleus of the current building. Few elements date back from these early building phases, however, as twice the building was consumed in fire in 1580 and 1622 and had to be almost entirely rebuilt. Today, it is notably characterised by the buildings of the period 1862-1902, following the devastating fire of 1891<sup>24</sup>. During this fire the top levels were totally destroyed and were rebuilt along with the central church, the *Katholikon*. The operation was ended with the construction of the east wing towards the cliff, which completes the

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24. Theocharidis, P. [*Simonopetra. Holy Mountain*], 1991, p. 77.

*Stylites.* [Simonos Petra. Holy Mountain.] 1991, front cover.



Monastery of Dionysiou.



form of the monastery as we see it today. It is worth noting that during these late building phases the same language and construction has been followed in the attempt to reconstruct the original form, enhancing the homogeneity of the entire complex<sup>25</sup>. Very few changes and deviations from the original are thus present effectively bringing the traditions of Byzantine architecture to the dawn of the twentieth century.

Sailing south from the port of Daphni, towards the pyramid of Athos, hidden behind the first cape lies the monastery of Simonos Petra. It first appears as a white spot, halfway up inside its gorge, brilliant among the grey rocks. Perched high some two hundred meters above the sea on a rock strangely detached from the rest of the cliff behind, it strikes you so unlike the other monasteries with their numerous walls and roofs. This one by contrast consists of three whitewashed stone blocks towering back towards the sky. In the abyss below, among rocks and evergreen shrubs, winds intricately the path which leads up to Simonos Petra from its small boathouse and port.

The climb is tiring under the midday sun but the view of the monastery more than makes up for it, its continuously changing aspects inappreciable to the stationary observer. The ascent is quite steep, the building disappearing from view only to reappear at each turn fresh, different, enlarged. New angles and planes are composed, new details become apparent as the building appears to rotate on its rocky pinnacle. This occurs because the three blocks are not set square to each other but positioned as the rock demands. The suspended timber balconies embracing the seawards side of the building, enhance the sense of mass, giving a sense of scale to the otherwise bare elevation. What appeared tiny is now colossal.

At the base of the building the foundations widen to give the three blocks a more stable foot. Man-made meets natural trying to complement, the seam visible yet unobtrusive. The building appears to grow out of the rock. It becomes the Rock, Simonos Petra (Simon's Rock). By the base lie the stepped gardens, their curved, stone re-

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25. This occurs because of the different time scale perceived within a monastery. This is characterized by the perception of seasons and years rather than days or weeks, which creates the effect of stillness of time to the visitor. The monks may be seen to live still in Byzantine times and using the same techniques are able to produce a building which is as truly Byzantine as its earlier homologues.

Simonos Petra. View from  
its boathouse and port.



Monastery. Ascent.



taining walls harmoniously incorporated into the natural slope, the last echo of the building.

At the top of the one-hour ascent lies a small terrace by the side of the east wing. Ahead the tall, sophisticated, aqueduct bridges the gap from the rock to the cliff behind, visually integrating the building with the land. Its stone body is pierced by a series of arched openings reducing its visual mass and the wind pressure acting on its face. An arched opening at its base leads to the rear of the monastery and its small entrance court.

The entrance sequence of Simonos Petra is one of the most memorable on the Mountain. An enclosed passageway abutting the aqueduct cuts itself off from the bulk of the building and descends to meet the ground. An irregular, paved ramp flows out of the tunnel, its last few cobbles blending with the ground like a cascade falling in a pool of water. The welcome gesture is made.

Inside the dimly lit passage the ascent continues on a formal, linear route. At the end of the climb you arrive inside a long vaulted chamber, the undercroft of the building. Various smaller passages and doors present themselves but the light guides you into a steep, spiral, further ascent. Above, the ceiling changes into a series of irregular whitewashed vaults subtly diffusing the light. As your spiralling path reaches its end, you emerge on top of the rock, in the brightly-lit, tiny monastery court, facing the south wall of the *Katholikon*.

It was at this spot that the first *Katholikon* was built by St. Simon in the thirteenth century. On one Christmas Eve the Saint saw a star suspended above the rock outside his cave and heard a voice urging him to build a monastery at that position. Considering this a divine sign he went on to found his «New Bethlehem», as the monastery is known, and dedicated the church to the Nativity of Christ. Future generations of builders have respected the sacredness of this space, a fact which has dictated the form of the monastery.

The *Katholikon* of 1891 is the only building built directly on the rock, occupying almost its entire area. The court has been limited to a passage, due to lack of space, around the two sides of the church, while the other two are in contact with the perimeter. This sacred place, manifested by the hierophany, is reserved for the siting of the sanctuary while the bulk of the monastery grows around and below it. Only two storeys are built above this level while the rest of a total of seven are simply and quite dramatically buttressed externally by the face of the rock. When additional space is required new vertical el-



Monastery. Entrance.



Monastery. Balconies.

ements are buttressed on earlier ones as is the case with the 1864 south extension. The organisation of functions is divided accordingly. The lower levels house the monks' cells while the top two levels contain the communal and public functions. At court level are housed the refectory, kitchen and bakery while the entire top level is occupied by the guesthouse. Access to these areas is gained through a tiny atrium between the south side of the *Katholikon* and the refectory. Through there you are first led to the guesthouse when you arrive as a visitor to the monastery.

At the top level you first experience the view from the balconies of Simonos Petra. The balconies feel solid and secure with their ample-sized timbers traditionally anchored to the wall behind. They are fairly wide, not simply passages on the sea-wards side of the building, but separate spaces. They do not feel totally external, as each one forms the roof to the one below. You approach the edge and rest on the balustrade. From this dizzying height the boathouse and its tower appear tiny. Beyond, the dark blue sea stretches to meet the horizon, but «the blurring of heat interposes and merges the sea and the sky, and only rippling waves reveal to the watchful eye the tangible presence of a body of water»<sup>26</sup>. To your left, completing the picture, the marble pyramid of Athos with its peak crowned by a small cloud, rises in full view.

The balconies of Simonos Petra are not a decorative feature. They are a vital part of the organisation of the building providing access to several parts of the monastery. By shifting the circulation externally the builders have managed to use the main core of the building more efficiently. But to the individual monk the balconies are more importantly «his home and his castle»<sup>27</sup>. When work is over he will sit here and view the sunset and converse with his brothers on matters of the monastery. He will admire the landscape, the creation of God, contemplate and pray. This extroverted feature of the monastery does not remove from the inwardness of life. Although external the space still feels isolated and detached from the world, owing to the siting of the monastery. The introversion of monastic life is preserved. To understand this introversion better one needs to descend to the other extreme of the monastery, the one built below the rock, where the monks' cells are situated.

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26. Jeanneret, C. E. *Journey to the East*, 1989, p. 184.

27. Byron, R. *The Station. Athos: Treasures and Men*, London, 1949, p. 120.

Monastery. Stairwell of southern wing.



Monastery.  
View from cliff.



Through the main atrium a few steps lead down to the accommodation of the southern wings, the oldest part of the monastery complex. Crossing the low arched passage you enter a narrow, dark corridor of non-linear order. It leads to a vaulted rectangular room connected with simple timber stairs to the floor below. This is effectively the stairwell of the building, repeated at every level, each time reduced in size because of the increasing thickness of the stone walls. Various passages link these chambers to other pockets of space where the hanging icons by each door denote the presence of the monks' cells. At places, an opening gives access to the balconies outside allowing light to penetrate this otherwise introverted labyrinth. The thick stone walls give a remarkable presence to these spaces causing them look bigger than they actually are, creating the impression that the building has been carved out of the rock, a man-made cave. It was in caves after all that the first hermits had dwelt in total isolation. These spaces form a preparatory stage before entering the personal space of the monk, the cell.

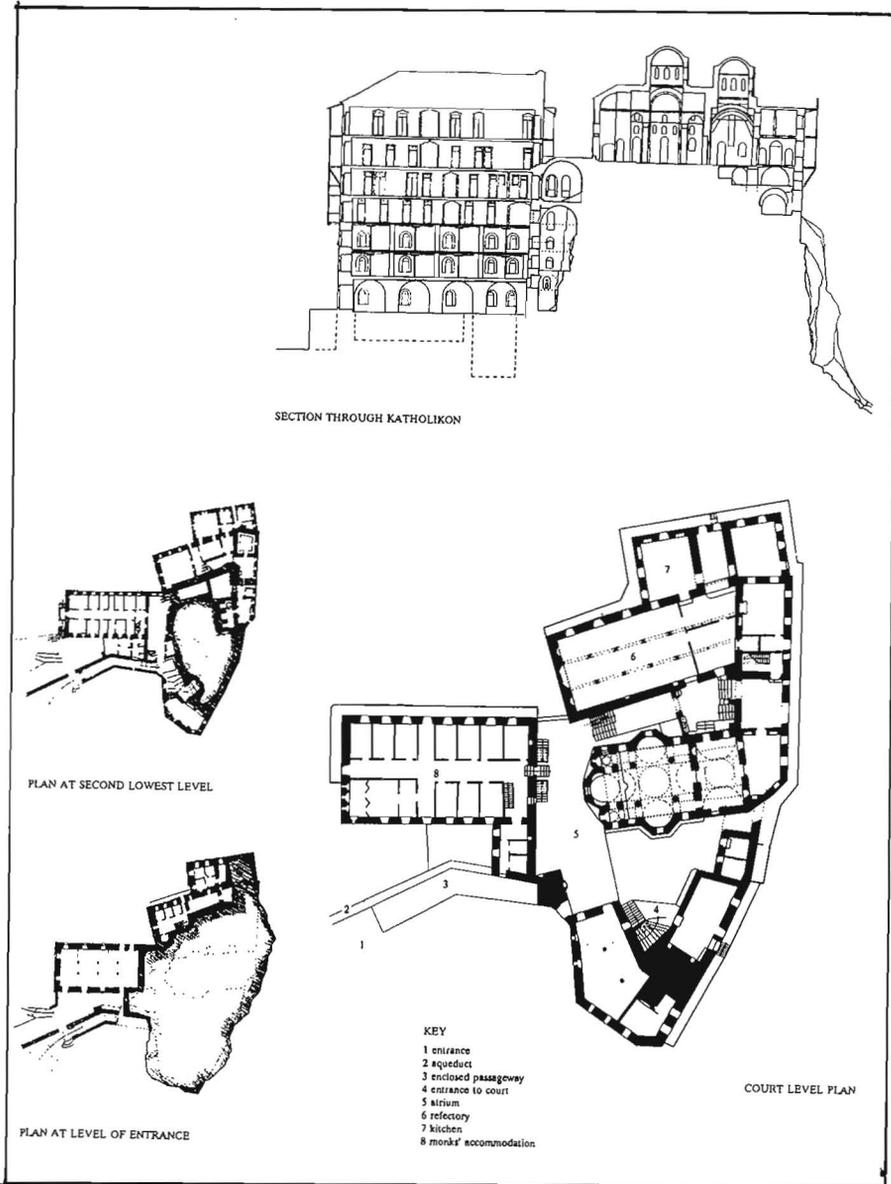
To enter a cell you go through a low, narrow door. You almost have to lower your head, a sign of humility, as you enter this most sacred of spaces. Inside, the room is quite tiny, slightly larger than the reed mattress lying directly on the paved floor. Other furnishings and personal belongings are kept to a minimum, a low desk and a stool. Light and ventilation is provided through a slit window forming an alcove in the thick external wall. Its size is small maintaining the hermetic enclosure of this space.

Inside these thick walls, in absolute silence and tranquillity the monk will pray for several hours. This other extreme from the church on the rock has found not only its proper place but its suitable expression. It has become a cave, a tomb, compatible with the monastic ideal<sup>28</sup>. In this space the monk will execute his personal prayer or his spiritual task.

In the early hours of the morning when the wooden gong echoes in the labyrinthine passages, the monk will leave his cell and walk to the *Katholikon*.

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28. The stay of the monk in his cell should ideally be a simulation of the experience of the state of death. Only when the monk has the objective image of himself as dead, can genuine repentance be experienced.



27. Monastery of Simonos Petra. Plans, section. Ground floor plan, section after Papadopoulos, S. [*Simonopetra. Holy Mountain.*] 1991, p. 108-9. Other plans after Quinn, P.J. «Drawing on Mount Athos: The Thousand Year Lesson». *Places*, 1985, 2 (4), p. 45.

THE *KATHOLIKON* OF KOUTLOUMOUSI

By the time the monk carrying the wooden gong completes his third tour of the cells, all the monks are gathered in the main church of the monastery, the *Katholikon*. This is the place of communal prayer, the centre of monastic life. It is the dominant building in the composition, positioned to be seen from anywhere within the monastery<sup>29</sup>.

For Orthodox worship at simplest two divisions of the church are necessary, the chancel (*bema*) and the nave which are separated by a closed screen. The chancel has normally an apsidal end and is flanked north and south by two smaller apses called the *Prothesis* and *Diakonikon* respectively. The former is used for the preparation of the elements while the latter serves as a vestry. The central apse contains the altar.

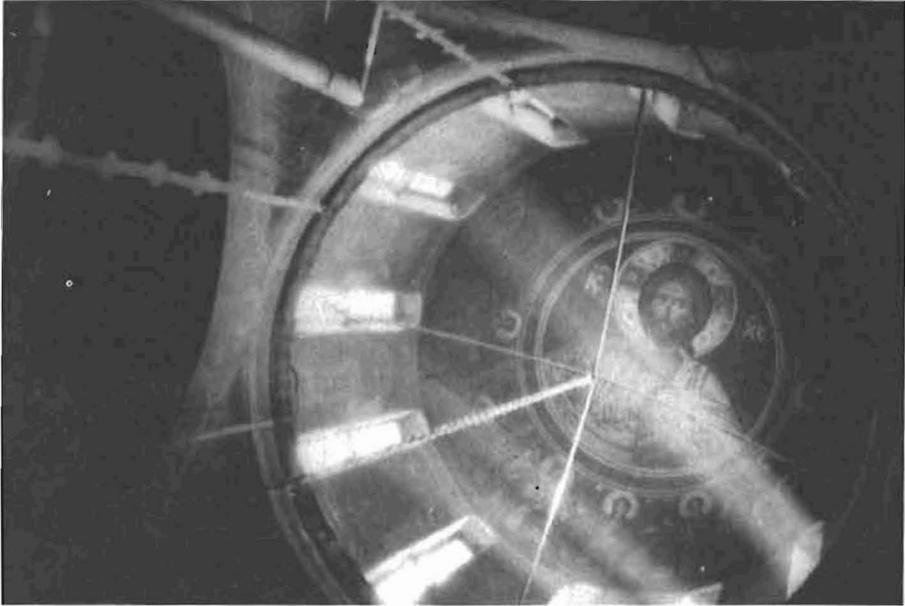
The base for a full church plan is a Greek cross inscribed in a square forming a nave, choir and transepts, their intersection being marked by a dome. One or more antechambers or narthexes are added westwards. This type of plan, known as the cross-in-square plan, was originally employed in Athos by St. Athanasius in the building of the *Katholikon* of the Great Lavra in 963. Slightly modified, it provided the model for all future churches on the Mountain.

The changes which were carried out arose from practical considerations and aimed at making the church more suitable for monastic use. Two apses were added at the ends of the transepts to accommodate two groups of readers and singers chanting the Liturgy. The narthex, which in a Byzantine church is a rather small element, on Athos took the form of the *lite*, a double-height space divided in six vaulted or domed bays which are supported by two columns. Certain services are performed in this space like the celebration of minor canonical hours and funerary ceremonies. Chapels often flank this element and are usually entered from both the *lite* and the exonarthex, which takes the form of an enclosed gallery running round the west end of the church.

These changes characterise a new type of church known as the Athos plan which consists the typical monastery church employed both inside and outside Mount Athos. The *Katholikon* of Koutloumoussi,

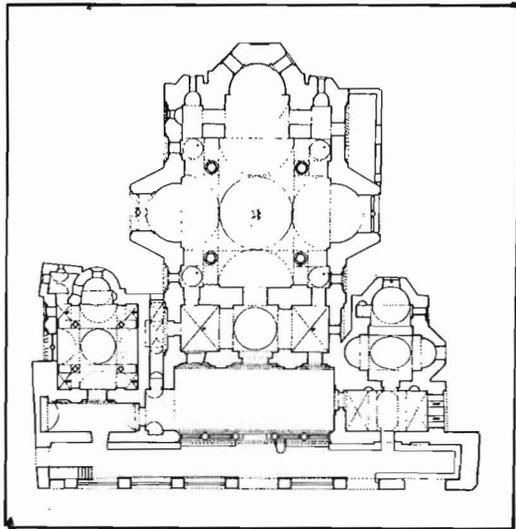
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29. Orlandos, A. K. «*Monastic Architecture*», 1958, p. 28.



Light.

Typical Athonite church  
plan (*Katholikon*  
of Iveron). After  
Mylonas, P.  
«Architecture  
of Mount Athos.»  
*Nea Estia*,  
1963, (12), fig. 2.



built in 1540 and dedicated to the Transfiguration of Christ, represents a typical yet particularly elegant example of this type.

The monastery of Koutloumoussi is situated in the mainland within walking distance from the capital of Karyes. If you follow the path from the village leading south in the valley below, you find yourself among fields and orchards cultivated by the monks. It is a different landscape so still and quiet compared to the rocky topography of the coast. Here is no sound of waves, but the singing of birds. Among these fields, sitting on a gentle slope lies the monastery of Koutloumoussi, refuge to the absent-minded visitor whom sunset will find in Karyes.

The path takes you along the high north wall to the main gate and its stone fountain opposite. After a brief, refreshing stop you proceed to the entrance. You enter through a long, vaulted tunnel, used in the past as a defence precaution, with a set of metal-cladded doors at each end. At the other side you emerge inside the court, facing the tower, one of the oldest on Athos. On your right lies the refectory, a single-storey rectangular hall with its white stuccoed walls, next to the all-marble *phiale*<sup>30</sup> shining under the afternoon sun. As your eyes sweep the court they stand still at the bright red *Katholikon*, standing opposite the refectory, free in the middle of the court.

This terra-cotta red colour is said to symbolise the blood of the martyrs. It captures the eye and makes the building stand out from its surroundings, stressing its importance. It also has a practical function: the thick render protects the stonework from the fierce winters of Athos. Where it has been removed, one can admire the beautifully preserved stonework underneath.

Externally the characteristic features are the multiple domes, their slender, rounded forms rising effortlessly towards the sky. Their windows, narrow vertical slits, with their whitewashed borders, emphasize their proportions. They terminate with their leaded roofs providing a suitable dark finish to the blood-red body of the church. The lead closely follows and enhances their contours, the seams radiating from the centre where an iron cross sits. Lower down shallow niches articulate the otherwise bare vertical surfaces of the church. In typical By-

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30. *Phiale*: round or polygonal covered structure used for ceremonies like the blessing of the waters etc.



*Katholikon. Exterior.*



*Katholikon. Detail  
of exterior.*

zantine practice, small and large decorative motifs are set into the walls.

The exterior of a Byzantine church, with its irregular and often accidental construction appears bizarre to contemporary people. «From the point of view of our very strict demands, a Byzantine plan is always an error. But an acceptable error which works»<sup>31</sup>. Like all Byzantine churches it guards its secrets well. It is inside that the story unfolds, that all questions are answered. As J. Strzygowski has noted, the Byzantine church has made the interior the carrier of the idea so that upon it depends the external envelope of the building<sup>32</sup>.

Entrance is through a door on the west front which admits you into the narthex. Immediately the external irregularity gives its place to something much purer and structured, a space which welcomes exploration. The narthex is a well-lit passage wrapping around the west and north faces of the main body of the building, providing a threshold with the outside. Although it appears as a later extension, there is evidence to suggest that it was built at the same time as the church itself. It consists of repeated square bays, each covered with a shallow dome.

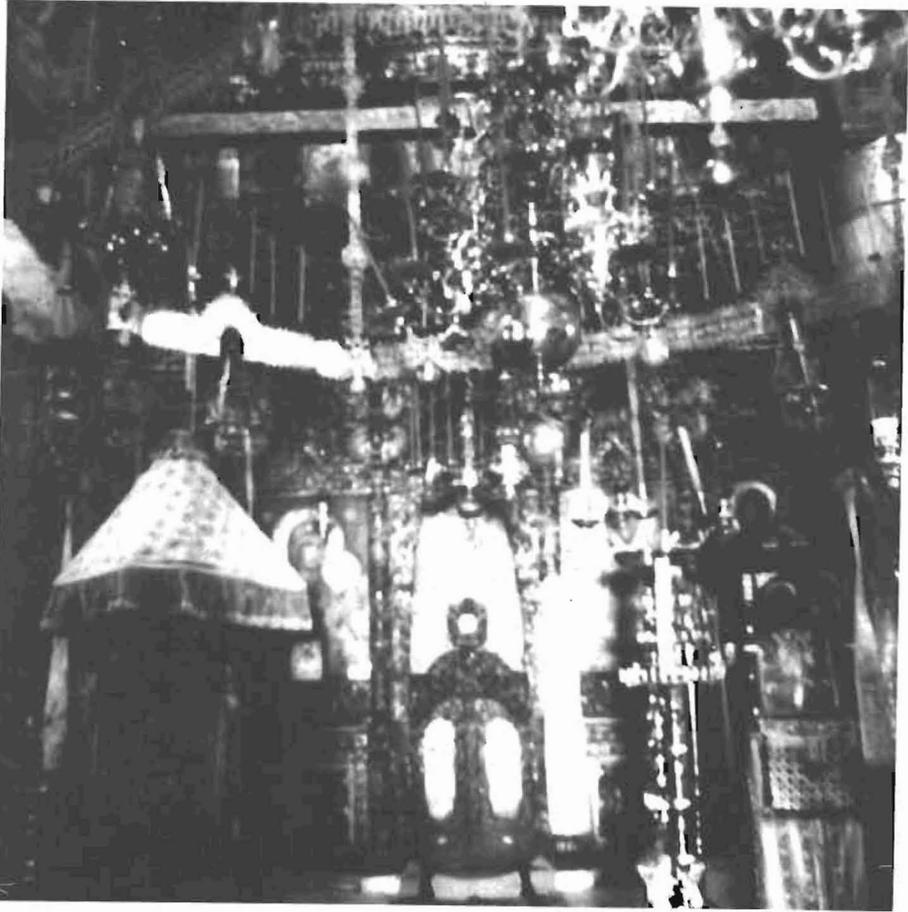
Through the axially placed, beautifully crafted, inlaid ivory doors you enter the *lite* and surfaces begin to reveal themselves. Its typical layout consists of six, almost square bays supported by the two stone shafts framing the passage to the nave. They are all roofed by crossvaults apart from the two flanking the entrance which are domed. The space is very dark and imposing, light being admitted only through the slit windows of the domes. In this low light the walls and vaults assume the appearance of a continuous skin, while the strong geometry applied gives the space a sense of classical purity. The light entering through the axially-placed passage compels you to enter the nave.

A sudden change of scale is perceived. Although by no means big, the nave with its centralised space is more spacious than both the exonarthex and the *lite*. The monks have expended their chief attention on this rich interior where all the Byzantine arts have found their appropriate place. From the patterned, marble paving and the conti-

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31. Bayer, «Esthetique de la Grace», In: Michelis, P. [*Analysis of the Aesthetics of Byzantine Art*], 1946, p. 46.

32. Strzygowski, J. «Ursprung der Kristlichen Kirchenkunst», In: Michelis, P. *ibid.*, p. 27.



*Katholikon. View of interior.*

nuous painted surfaces to the elaborately carved, wood *iconostasis* and the suspended brass coronas, this interior appears to some as muddled and overworked. But a careful examination will soon lay bare its merits.

This is the criticism of the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret: «The edifice is clearly articulated, in plan as well as in cross section, its mass both supporting and supported, its walls taut like muscles, and bulbs celebrating the curve. The powerful unity of its language is so sober that it confers to this impression the purity of a diamond.

Hard and solid, it is the crystallization of a Hellenic clarity, mysteriously combined with undefinable Asiatic evocations»<sup>33</sup>.

The dominant element in the space is the central dome, resting on pendentives which are in turn supported by the four simple, monolithic, round shafts. It is tiny, only about four metres in diameter, yet after crossing the narthex and the *lite* it appears big and strong, expanding the space considerably. Its slender proportions draw the eye into an upwards spiralling movement, from walls and vaults to pendentives and the curved underside of the dome with the painted figure of the *Pantokrator*<sup>34</sup>.

On the north and south sides of the dome, the apses of the choirs rise up to meet it, enlarging the space considerably. A rounded pyramid of space is formed, crowned by the dome, making the transition from base to top more natural and complete. Along the periphery of these apses lie the stalls which the readers and singers occupy. From these, they will chant the Liturgy, being led by a single monk who places his graduale alternately on stands positioned on the radial points of each apse. The addition of the two side apses by the Athonite builders has not only solved the problem of space but also produced an excellent aesthetic result, complementing and improving the cross-in-square plan.

Apart from the practical aspect of this plan, the architectural form carries a profound symbolism, expressing the cosmological interpretation of the Byzantines. The church becomes an allegory of the infinite, rather than attempting to encompass it as was the case with pagan temples<sup>35</sup>. The church becomes an image of the universe, expressing the presence of the single God. For inspiration the Byzantines drew from the sky, whose symbol became the dome. The other form present, the cross, takes the symbolic meaning of the pagan order which Christ defeated on earth. The two elements of earth and sky, the dome and the cross, thus become a symbol of the universe. The rounded forms express the idea of the infinite by maintaining the boundaries of space undefined.

The space underneath the dome is maintained free in Athonite churches. Here, usually on the decorative navel marked on the marble

33. Jeanneret, C.E. *Journey to the East*, 1987, p. 197.

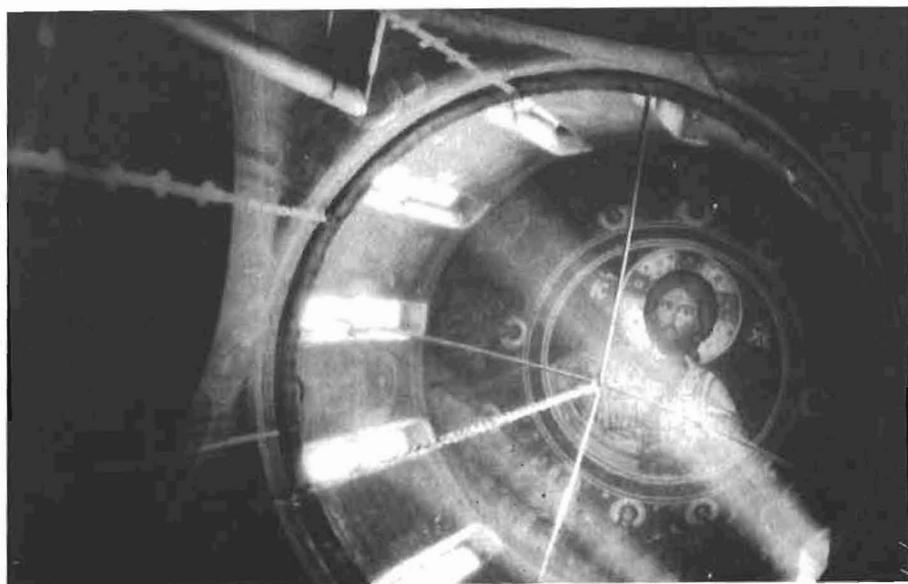
34. Christ *Pantokrator*: the figure of Christ as ruler of the world.

35. Prokopiou, G. A. [*The Cosmological Symbolism in the Architecture of the Byzantine Church*], 1981.

*Katholikon. Iconostasis.*



*Katholikon. The Pantokrator.*



floor, during the course of the Liturgy, the monks will kneel and beg the Lord's and their brothers' forgiveness. The need to maintain this space free has resulted in an eastwards shift of the *iconostasis*, the division between chancel and nave.

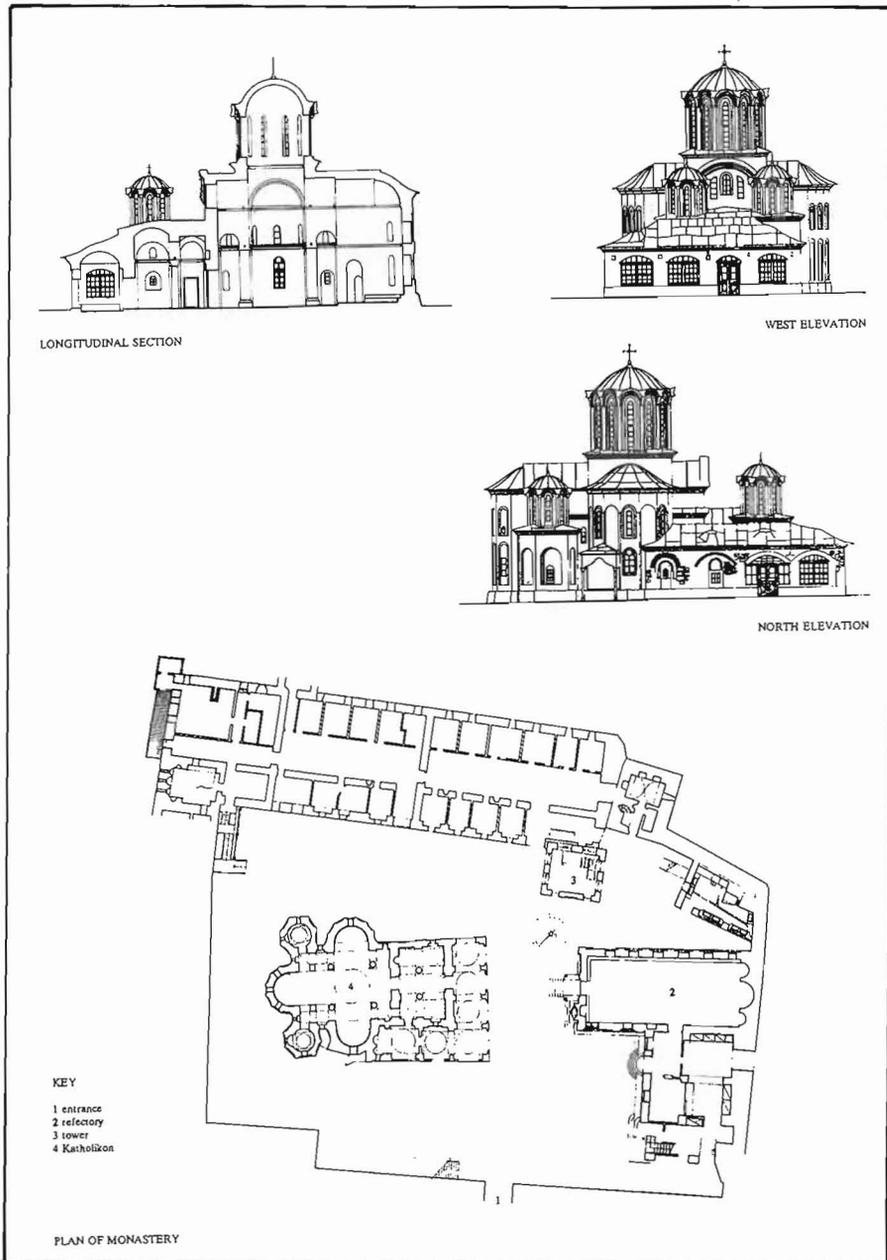
This elaborately carved screen stands imposingly ahead. It is made of walnut which is gilded all over, providing a frame for the icons which adorn it. The woodwork descends from late Renaissance models and is common all over the Aegean. It generally dates from the eighteenth century and although not academically correct, it creates an extraordinarily rich effect, its flowing surfaces reflecting the light emanating from the dome.

Three openings through the iconostasis lead to the chancel beyond. The central one, positioned on the longitudinal axis of the nave, constitutes the formal entrance to the chancel. Directly behind it, in the central apse, lies the altar, normally a marble table adorned with numerous items of Byzantine miniature art. Through this passage the priest will appear to bless the congregation and offer the Holy Communion, through here he will emerge and extend his arms and raise his spirit towards Heaven and the light entering through the dome.

Light in a Byzantine church assumes a dominant role, both symbolic and practical. To the Byzantines light symbolises the Truth, it symbolises Christ: «I am the Light of the World»<sup>36</sup>. It is also used to reinforce the architectural character of the spaces. The procession from the outside to the nave is characterised by the careful manipulation of light within these spaces. From the well-lit narthex you cross the dark *lite* to arrive into the nave underneath its light-flooded dome. Light inside the main space is employed with a similar hierarchy, reinforcing the architectural form and through it the symbolic ideas embodied in Byzantine churches. The overall quality of light is thus diffused rather than direct, to create the impression of a space different and removed from the outside. The strong, direct light of the Mediterranean is contrasted and is only used to highlight the primary features of the space, the dome and the figure of the *Pantokrator*. The diffused light gives the space an ethereal quality, so suited to the gentle and definite curves, emphasising their skin-like quality and the introversion of the enclosure. This skin quality is assisted by the pres-

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36. *The Gospel according to St. John, 8-12.*



*Katholikon* of Koutloumoussi. Plans, sections elevations. Source: Axiotis, G. et. al. [*Mount Athos.*] 1960.

ence of the continuous wall paintings which add colour and enrich the mystical atmosphere of the interior.

Byzantine painting has a twofold purpose. It aims to educate, communicating the dogmatic content of the faith through images, as well as decorate and enhance the architectural qualities of the space. Since the days of Hagia Sofia Byzantine painting has been characterised by its non-representational style. Portraiture from the living model, whether human, animal, or flower was not what the artist sought. As in every Byzantine art the spiritual character is the dominant theme. Inside the church, the paintings are arranged on a definite scheme, each sacred scene and every saint having an appropriate place, in accordance with the architectural significance of the surface. The main apse is occupied by the figure of the Virgin, while the central dome by that of Christ as *Pantokrator*, surrounded by angels and archangels. The four Evangelists, having spread the Word, are portrayed on the pendentives which support the dome. The entire system of shafts, pendentives and dome becomes, in painting terms, a symbol of the Church (*Ecclesia*) which Christ founded on earth. The use of colour in Byzantine painting aims to affect the quality of the light in the space. The prominent hues of blue, ochre and gold aim to create the impression of a warmly lit space, not a space lit by natural light. The light of the fire and candles is to Byzantine eyes more beautiful than the light of the sun.

The final touches of this interior are added by the brass coronas, a distinctive feature of Athonite churches, suspended from the periphery of the dome. Under the burning candles of these coronas, before the first light of day, the monks will be transformed into Byzantine princes to worship God. The Liturgy will take place. The architecture combined with the chanting of monks and the burning of incense will create an experience for all the senses. The reality of this experience, however, does not aim to excite the senses, but through them penetrate deeper into the human spirit. The Athonite church is the culmination of the Orthodox monastic spirit.

### THIS OTHER BYZANTIUM

The three buildings studied demonstrate the presence of the spiritual element and its combination with the practical needs of the daily life of the monks. On the journey from periphery to centre, from the boathouse to the *Katholikon*, the experience and the architectural expression of the two elements changes both in intensity and in the

way through which it is achieved. The principles which characterize Byzantine architecture — centrality, inwardness, immateriality — are embodied in the indigenous architecture of Mount Athos as interpreted by the local builders.

The boathouse although a practical and functional building contains a chapel at the top level of its tower to fulfil the monks' need for worship and prayer. It is a building whose appearance and construction includes references to church architecture in terms of its employment of sacred forms as well as its construction which stresses its immaterial characteristics rather than its tectonic qualities. The living spaces within the tower with their domed ceilings do not only represent a logical structural solution, but also create a centralised space, perhaps the memory of the interior of a church. In this way the monk is always in the presence of 'sacred' forms, as reminders of his true task and aim, even in his place of work.

In the monastery the practical and the spiritual elements are combined to achieve a single, unified and highly authentic expression. The form of the monastery is dictated by the central position of the *Katholikon* on top of its 'sacred' pinnacle, as this has been manifested by the hierophany. This comprises almost the only reference to the original monastery model, the rest of the building having grown irregularly by the faces of the rock. The inwardness of monastic life, assisted by the setting of the monastery, is enclosed within the thick stone walls whose inevitable and practical form has been used to enhance the expression of the monks' cells, giving them the feeling of the cave and tomb, according to the monastic ideal. The external timber balconies, the only extrovert feature of the monastery, enhance its introversion in terms of both life and architecture. They do not only represent functional passages, but spiritual spaces used for prayer and contemplation.

The *Katholikon*, forming the end of the route, represents the crystallisation of centrality, inwardness and immateriality in the space of worship. In this tiny church the ascetic character of Hagia Sofia has been expressed at a much more humble scale. The architectural form, symbolic and practical, enhanced by the quality of light within the space and the painting of the continuous surfaces create the experience of a space removed from the physical world and make the turn into the inner self. Here matter becomes subordinate to the spirit.

The architectural expression of this 'other' Byzantium embodies the same principles as the formal, sacred art and architecture of Con-

stantinople. The interpretation, however, is different, characterized by the primary feature of this mystical Byzantium: the presence of prayer in the life of the Athonite monk. The importance of this constant prayer, whether communal or private, has been underlined by St. Paul and is expressed architecturally in all stages of life from work to worship<sup>37</sup>. It is the presence of this constant prayer which manifests the spiritual character of Athonite architecture.

This spirituality is the factor which has maintained Mount Athos and its architecture alive for over a thousand years. It can be argued that it was this spirit and the preservation of traditions that sustained the uninterrupted organic evolution. Architectural models were not interpreted as strict forms, but freely as a set of ideas able to adjust to local conditions and problems. These sets of ideas, although differently interpreted through time, gain their homogeneity through the application of the same indigenous materials, primarily stone and timber, and the same traditional techniques of construction. The use of local materials creates apart from a similar language for the individual buildings, an intimate relationship with nature, giving Athonite architecture its definite sense of place. This approach although appearing 'irrational' to contemporary assumption has its own beauty and validity. Harmony is not achieved through a rational thinking process, but rather through a deeper understanding of the nature of man.

In our secular society, in a fast moving world, it is the spirit, the inner sides of human existence which, in many cases forgotten, need to be recaptured. This is the greatest lesson Byzantine and Athonite architecture demonstrate. This architecture, a natural one largely, represents an example of how the simple, everyday needs of man and the deeper spiritual needs can be combined in a unified whole, achieving a timeless expression. This lack of understanding of the inner self, has pushed, to a certain extent, contemporary architecture in a course of endless search for novel forms and innovation. Yet this architecture does not appear to have any life in it, since it does not acknowledge man's spiritual side.

In our search for a timeless architecture perhaps we should aim to understand better this spiritual side of man, so beautifully displayed in the native architecture of Mount Athos.

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37. St. Paul, in his First Epistle to the people of Thessalonike (5-17,18), stresses the importance of the 'constant prayer' in the life of the monk. This concept relies on the continuous repetition of the «*Kyrie Eleison*».



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