

tradition which attributes the origins of Vatopedi to Theodosius the Great.¹⁴

Excavations carried out in 2000 by the Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities uncovered the foundations of a large Early Christian basilica to the north of the katholikon, and similar investigations in the narthex of the chapel of St Nicholas in 2003 brought to light architectural fragments from the same basilica and a brick-built Early Christian tomb. Such discoveries appear to confirm the tradition that the monastery is built on the site of a Christian settlement dating from Late Antiquity but there is still nothing to indicate that that settlement was monastic.

Perhaps it is wise to conclude with the monks themselves: 'Tradition and history are interlaced, giving us the beauty of today's reality, which has been handed down by the elders to the younger members continuously for more than a thousand years.'¹⁵

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE GARDEN

Because of its history and the unusual circumstances of its dedication to the Mother of God for more than a thousand years, Athos embodies a unique cultural landscape. This landscape cannot be described as entirely natural, since even monks make some impact on their environment, but it is probably closer to being a natural landscape than any other area of comparable size in the eastern Mediterranean. As such, it is of inestimable value to the ecologist, before the results of any human activity are taken into account. A number of factors have combined to create it.¹⁶

The Mountain enjoys wide variety in both its relief and its geology. From sea level south of the isthmus Megali Vigla rises sharply to a peak of 510 metres within 1.5 kilometres of the frontier, creating a natural barrier against the outside world. This is followed by undulating hills that run down the spine of the peninsula, gradually increasing in altitude until they become a mountain range with heights of between 450 and 900 metres. At the southern tip the range shoots up to a rocky eminence of 2,033 metres before plunging headlong into the sea. The relief is so dramatic that it is perhaps a matter for some surprise that only 20 per cent of the area of the peninsula is above 500 metres.

¹⁴ Ploutarchos L. Theocharides, 'Recent Research into Athonite Monastic Architecture, Tenth–Sixteenth Centuries', in Bryer and Cunningham (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁵ *The Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi* (Mount Athos, 1994), p. 21.

¹⁶ I am much indebted to my friends Philip Oswald and Oliver Rackham for help with this section. See also P. Oswald, 'The Flora and Fauna of Mount Athos', *Annual Report of the Friends of Mount Athos* (1995), pp. 35–9; the essays in S. Dafis *et al.*, *Nature and Natural Environment in Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki, 1997); and O. Rackham, 'The Holy Mountain', *Plant Talk*, 27 (2002), 19–23, and *id.*, 'Our Lady's Garden: The Historical Ecology of the Holy Mountain', *Annual Report of the Friends of Mount Athos* (2004), pp. 48–57.



6. The east coast of Athos from Stavronikita. The last rays of the setting sun illuminate the peak which for once is free of its customary cap of cloud.

Geologically Athos, unlike its peninsular neighbours, is a continuation of the Rhodope Mountains of western Bulgaria and contains both igneous and metamorphic rocks. Much of the peninsula consists of granite, and there are also bands of schist and gneiss in the central area, but the peak itself is made of pale marble, a formation which is strikingly visible from the sea. These are all highly durable rocks which are resistant to erosion and weathering and provide an environment hospitable to dense vegetation. Despite the durability of the rocks, however, the land has risen very rapidly (by some 14 metres in the last 2,500 years). This means that caves that were once hollowed out by marine action now stand well clear of the water line and are available for human occupation. It also means that the whole peninsula is an area of maximum earthquake intensity.¹⁷

Athos also develops its own microclimates which give considerable variation according to the altitude. In the lower regions the climate is mild and typically Mediterranean. As the height increases, so does the rainfall and even the snow, which on the peak lies for some months into the summer. The whole peninsula is subject to strong winds from the north or north-east which frequently result in stormy seas, and the climate on the higher slopes is distinctly harsh.

This combination of relief, geology, and climate, together with the general

¹⁷ See M. and R. Higgins, *A Geological Companion to Greece and the Aegean* (London, 1996), pp. 112–13, 212.



7. Mixed woodland on the slopes of the mountain itself near the skete of Lakkou.

inaccessibility of the region and the absence of destructive flocks of sheep and goats, is conducive to the development of forest, clothing the Mountain with a dense and varied vegetation. As a result, the forest cover, which includes maquis, extends to more than 90 per cent of the peninsula, and the landscape is astonishingly varied. Bare hillsides, which characterize so much of the Greek landscape elsewhere, are not a feature of the Holy Mountain.

As the land rises, so the vegetation changes and passes through a number of zones. Above the coastal strip, there is first a zone of broadleaved maquis consisting mainly of evergreen shrubs and small trees. These include two species of strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo* and *Arbutus andrachne*), the former hung in autumn with great clusters of cream-coloured flowers; the laurel or bay, which flourishes particularly beside streams, where also oriental plane, alder, and white willow are found; the kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*) and holm oak (*Quercus ilex*); and the wild olive. The cultivated olive and vine are common in the immediate vicinity of monasteries; elsewhere their appearance on crumbling terraces often indicates an abandoned grove or orchard, dating from a time when there were more mouths to feed, now gently reverting to the wild. Conspicuous flowering trees at this level include the Judas tree with its unmistakable splash of pinkish purple in spring and the flowering or manna ash, which produces sprays of creamy-white flowers in May.

The Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*) accounts for more than a quarter of the total forest cover. It is especially widespread in the north of the peninsula, perhaps because that area has suffered more from forest fires, and there it more or less takes the place of the broadleaved maquis found further south. Above the broadleaved maquis is a zone of deciduous broadleaved forest in which the sweet chestnut is now dominant. Mixed forests, with deciduous oaks and other broadleaved species and an endemic fir, perhaps of hybrid origin, are less common than they used to be as a result of long-term selective coppicing and encouragement of chestnut; but in some parts these species survive, as does beech on some north-west-facing slopes. Other trees found at this level include limes, aspen, hop hornbeam, and several maples. Higher up, there are stands of black pine and stinking juniper. The export of timber has long provided the monks with an important source of income; but while disciplined forestry is beneficial for the environment, overexploitation of the reserves is not. 'Do not pick the flowers,' warns a notice to pilgrims; 'this is the Virgin's garden.' But the trees are just as much a part of the garden as the flowers. Bishop Kallistos is fond of quoting the words of the late Fr Amphilochios of Patmos (d.1970): 'whoever does not love the trees, does not love Christ.'

Finally, above 1,500 metres, is the alpine zone of the peak itself. Here, above the tree-line, there are a number of endemic species. According to K. Ganiatsas, who has studied the vegetation and flora of the Mountain,¹⁸ there are 35 plants that are endemic to Athos, most of them found on the peak. This compares with only 82 for the whole of the north Aegean (which of course includes Athos) and 206 for Crete. The botanical names for the species peculiar to Athos are often quite charming: *Isatis tinctoria* subsp. *athoa* (a subspecies of woad) and *Viola athois* are named after the Mountain itself; others recall the names of monasteries or sketes such as *Campanula lavrensis* and a knapweed called *Centaurea sanctae-annae*; *Astragalus monachorum* is called after the monks; and *Campanula albanica* subsp. *sancta*, a harebell, and *Armeria sancta*, a coastal thrift, are reminders of the sanctity of the garden.

Wildflowers are one of the most arresting and memorable features of the Athonite landscape at every level and in every season. Botanists tell us that the flora is not as rich as in other parts of Greece, and in terms of the sheer number of species this is no doubt true, though elsewhere the depredations of flocks and herbicides, not to mention human intervention, often create a contrary impression. On Athos, especially in springtime, the profusion and richness of the flowers can only support the belief that the natural environment there is in good hands. Plants with bulbs, corms, and tubers are among the most attractive, notably species of crocus, anemone, cyclamen, and fritillary, and as many as 30 different wild orchids have been identified. Monks also seem to cultivate

¹⁸ K. Ganiatsas, *I vlastesis kai i chloris tis chersonesou tou Agiou Orou* (Mount Athos, 2003).





8. Previous page: Vegetable gardens and cypress trees near the monastery of Zographou in the northern part of the peninsula where gradients are less steep.

9. Above: Bees and olive trees both make important contributions to the monks' economy.

flowers and flowering shrubs with a greater enthusiasm than most people in Greece, either because they are more in tune with nature or because they simply have more leisure.

One might expect that so secluded an environment would provide the ideal habitat for a wide variety of wild animals, but it seems that the fauna of the Mountain is less interesting than the flora. It is unclear whether there are still wolves. Certainly there were until recently; then came reports that they were extinct, perhaps exterminated, then that they had returned. The same goes for red deer. Hunting is officially prohibited on Athos, but that does not mean that it does not take place, and both species would represent an attractive bag. Other mammals roaming the Mountain include jackal, fox, badger, wild cat, wild boar, roe deer, hare, red squirrel, and hedgehog. Lizards are ubiquitous; snakes are said to abound, but are less often seen; most commonly heard is the marsh frog which frequents the environs of many a monastery. The monk seal, however, is an endangered species and is rarely seen. The bird population includes eagles, other birds of prey, and hoopoes. Swifts, swallows, and martins arrive with the spring, when the monastic vicinity is also well nightingaled. The butterflies are out of this world.

ANOTHER WORLD

Despite a climate that is at times harsh, vegetation that is often impenetrable, and rock formations that challenge the most experienced of climbers, Athos presents a landscape that is unmatched in Europe and, to most observers, incomparably beautiful. Perhaps the two most striking attributes are its seclusion and its variety. This variety is well described by Professor Dimitrios Kotoulas of the University of Thessaloniki in an evocative description of the Holy Mountain's natural environment:

The steep slopes, the deep gorges, the tall cliffs and the outcrops of rock, the shades of green of the vegetation, changing in autumn to variations of yellow and russet, the bare boughs of the trees in winter, the deep or light azure of the sea—these all ease the eye; the roaring of the gales, the lapping of the waves, and the cries of birds delight the ear, and the sweetness of the natural aromas and the fresh air make glad the visitor's sense of smell. All together, these features make up the incomparable natural harmony of Mt Athos, to which the lissom cypresses around the monasteries and along the stream beds add a note of austere gravity, sanctity and peaceful melancholy. The grandeur of the physical environment is the natural background in which the monks of Mt Athos, guardians of the ancient institutions of Orthodoxy and the Greek race, root their mystic life and spiritual presence.¹⁹

¹⁹ S. Papadopoulos (ed.), *Simonopetra: Mount Athos* (Athens, 1991), p. 57.

As for the seclusion, the quality of the silence that is to be found on Athos, there is no more moving account than that of Gerald Palmer, an Englishman who visited the Mountain nearly every year from 1948 until his death in 1984:

This stillness, this silence, is everywhere, pervades all, is the very essence of the Holy Mountain. The distant sound of a motorboat serves only to punctuate the intensity of the quiet; the lizard's sudden rustling among the dry leaves, a frog plopping into a fountain, are loud and startling sounds, but merely emphasize the immense stillness. Often as one walks over the great stretches of wild country which form much of this sacred ground, following paths where every stone breathes prayers, it is impossible to hear a sound of any kind. Even in the monastery churches, where the silence is, as it were, made more profound by the darkness, by the beauty and by the sacred quality of the place, it seems that the reading and chanting of priests and monks in the endless rhythm of their daily and nightly ritual is no more than a thin fringe of a limitless ocean of silence.

But this stillness, this silence, is far more than a mere absence of sound. It has a positive quality, a quality of fullness, of plenitude, of the eternal Peace which is there reflected in the Veil of the Mother of God, enshrouding and protecting her Holy Mountain, offering inner silence, peace of heart, to those who dwell there and to those who come with openness of heart to seek this blessing.²⁰

The creative response that the Mountain inspires in its visitors and residents has taken many forms. Poetry, painting, music of one form or another can all be cited. But probably the commonest response, and certainly the one that unites all its inhabitants, is prayer. The monks do not regard themselves as living in the same world as the rest of mankind. They often refer to themselves as the living dead. In order to be a monk on Mount Athos, it is said, a man has to die and be born again. He must cast himself off from this world, and through a process of purification he must achieve union with the divine and must himself become God-like, a process known as *theosis* (deification). Each day the monk undergoes a new martyrdom; each day he grows closer to Christ; Christ is his bridegroom, his cell his bridal chamber. Thus it is that the Garden of the Mother of God is also known as the gate of heaven. It is a foretaste of Paradise, truly another world. It is time to examine how and when the first monks arrived there.

²⁰ G. E. H. Palmer, 'Silence over Athos', first published in the periodical *Orthodox Life* (Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Monastery, Jordanville, NY), Nov.-Dec. 1968, p. 33.