

FROM THE KATHOLICON TO THE KATHISMATON: The Mysteries of the Orthodox Monastery¹

La péninsule du Mont Athos en Grèce est, depuis un millénaire, l'un des foyers mondiaux de l'orthodoxie chrétienne. Une vingtaine de grands monastères y abritent une vie intense rythmée par la prière et le travail. Les divers espaces de ces monastères, ainsi que leur usage rituel, témoignent d'un riche équilibre entre le recueillement individuel et la vie collective.

The Athos peninsula is the setting for twenty major Orthodox monasteries, which house monks from around the world.² A theocratic republic within Greece, Mount Athos is administered by a council of monks. The austere rules of monastic life prescribe a vegetarian diet and a daily cycle of prayer and work. The monasteries and hermitages on Mount Athos are a unique record of the inhabitation of the Greek peninsula by Orthodox Christian monks over the last millennium. First settled by monks in the seventh century, the region's first monastery was founded in 709 by Athanasios the Athonite. In 1061, the peninsula was granted autonomy by imperial charter. The special status attracted monks of various nationalities to Mount Athos, giving the peninsula its international character. The monasteries were founded by monks from various countries of Eastern Europe, and were often endowed by the landed aristocracy of these countries, which allowed the monasteries to survive the Turkish occupation of the Balkans between the fifteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries.

Orthodox monasteries have generally fallen into two types — urban monasteries, endowed by members of the aristocracy, and wilderness monasteries, founded by monks and hermits. The setting of a wilderness monastery was often described as 'a spiritual desert' — a remote, barren, thinly populated place, which provided an ideal training ground for the struggles of monasticism.

A striking particularity common to most monasteries in Greece is the feeling that entering one of them, one has entered an urban space, such as a street or a plaza. An equally surprising particularity becomes evident when one consults the plan of such a monastery: invariably, a church has been dropped into the monastery courtyard with no attempt at a formal connection: the centralized domed plan of the church bears no resemblance to that of the linear buildings which surround it. The church is often quite close to the other buildings, so that there is no chance of it being perceived as an independent object. The church and its surrounding buildings, one would think, are fated to clash utterly.

In fact, there is no such clash. The space between the church and its surrounding buildings acquires an urbanity which is astonishingly similar to that of a small Greek town. The church, with its architecture of volume, is always read against the background of broad flat facades. The contrast between the two building takes the composition beyond architecture into urban design.

Since the founding of the Grand Lavra by Athanasios the Athonite, three forms of monastic life have existed on Mount Athos. The individual monk is expected to live a life of constant prayer and spiritual struggle, according to the way of life which best suits his abilities and spiritual needs. The *eremite* lives a solitary life, with little contact with others. The *irrhidite* lives in a loose community structured around an elder monk, in which each monk is free to set his own schedule of monks prayer, work, and meals. Finally, the *cenobite* lives in an organised monastery with collective prayers and meals. On the advice of his spiritual director, a monk may travel or even leave the monastery to embark on a new stage of his spiritual life.

¹ The *Katholicon* is the main church of an Orthodox monastery, used by all the monks for regular services. A *kathismaton* is a retreat for the use of an individual monk. The *Katholicon* and the *kathismaton* are the polar extremes of a rich balance between individual and collective space characteristic of Greek monasteries. The nature of this balance, as expressed in architecture and ritual, is the subject of this article.

² The Western Churches consist of the Roman Catholic and the Protestant denominations. The Eastern Churches consist of the Greek, Slavic, and Syrian Orthodox Churches, the Maronite and the Coptic Churches. Both the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches trace their roots to the earliest days of Christianity.

CHILANDARIOU MONASTERY COURTYARD

Source: G Trumler, *Athos to Agion Oros*, (Adam Editions: Athens, 1993).



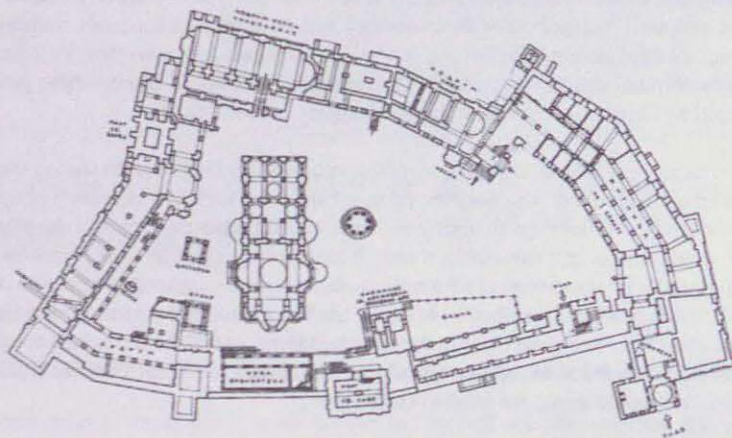
Deep within the walls, the lath grips plaster which places its own smooth white face to the world. The rough wood splinters the absolutely still air, thick with the brown dust of the ages. The outside wall carries the vibration of nature's cold air. Antique newspaper coats the wood that clads the house. Words never meant to be read again, framing pictures never meant to be seen again, they are a record of the time in which the house was assembled from the resources of the New England countryside. Between the rough wooden beams that support the years and voices of life, the thick black air descends to a gray earth below.

A distant sister of the room of memory atop the house, the dark stone room beneath holds the same silent air, but within haunted darkness. At the bottom of creaking, even further worn stairs which pass through a space of rotting wall plaster, gray and crumbling, a dusty packed earth floor underlies the low space. Like an engorged beast, a dark and rusted oil tank lives in a corner, creaking with its thick fluid. Humming in the centre of the room, with arms outstretched across the ceiling beams like a huge spider holding its web, a steely gray furnace throws heat into the still air. In the darkness, unrelieved by several small windows let into the thick foundation stone, the sounds of the beating heart of the house haunt the itinerant in the room. From behind a wall of thin oaken paneling, a void of absolute black leaks beneath the stairs. Layers of dust lie undisturbed upon items stored within, untouched by the hands chased away by fear of the inky black air. Lightly humming with the life of the naked wind outside, the last door is rickety with use and neglect. Another

The spiritual desert is the paradigmatic setting of the Orthodox monastery. The desert does more than ensure a frugal existence. It is the place where individuals confront the weakness of their own inner person. The Bible identifies the desert as the setting for several key events in Christian history — including the retreat of St. John the Baptist and the three temptations of Christ. In the early centuries of Christianity, the deserts of Egypt, Greece, and Asia Minor became the testing grounds in which the first monastic communities arose. The desert fathers, as these early monks were called, developed many central points of Christian doctrine.

The solitary hermit, living in a wilderness surrounded by demons and wild animals, and transforming it into a paradise through physical and spiritual labours, is a recurring figure in Christian literature. The desert is thus identified with solitude as well as physical and spiritual transformation.

The various buildings in the monasteries on Athos are generally arranged in strict order of importance. The central part of the complex is always devoted to the Church (Katholikon), which stands in direct relation to the Refectory (Trapeza) and the Font of Holy Water (Phiale). Arranged around the courtyard and the katholikon are the wings of cells, the administration building (Syndikon) and ancillary and storage areas (tailors and chandler's workshops, granary, wine cellar, beverages store, kitchen, bakery, etc.); these are enclosed within a frequently fortified wall which, at a suitable point, contains an opening for the entrance. Facing onto the inner courtyard stand partly enclosed porticoes and arcades, which are arranged according to the amount of space available.



CHILANDARIOU MONASTERY, MOUNT ATHOS. Source: S. Nenadovic.

Outside the nucleus of the monastery lie the following structures: the kiosk, stables, wash-house, workers' houses, workshop (oil-press, copper-smithy, cobbler's), landing-stage, kathismata (small retreats) and chapels. The rank and value of each structure are undisputed and clearly expressed both by its position and the degree of care given to its appearance.³

FORM AND PERCEPTION

At Skete Bouraseri, four buildings and a shed create a world of consummate beauty. Built in the 1920s by Russian monks from the Chilandariou monastery of Mount Athos, the skete was renovated by the present monastic community between 1981 and 1986. The result is a monastic environment of great freshness and charm, with generous proportions and constantly changing views. The spaces between the buildings are meticulously maintained and play an important role in the perception of the whole ensemble.⁴

Skete Bouraseri is laid out in such a way that one seldom sees fewer than two of the buildings at the same time. This principle holds true as one walks through the grounds of the monastery, and the resulting network of comparisons offer con-

³ Stergiou Stefanou, "The Courtyards of the Monasteries of Mount Athos," *Calendar Series* (Mount Athos Heritage Preservation Center, 1994).

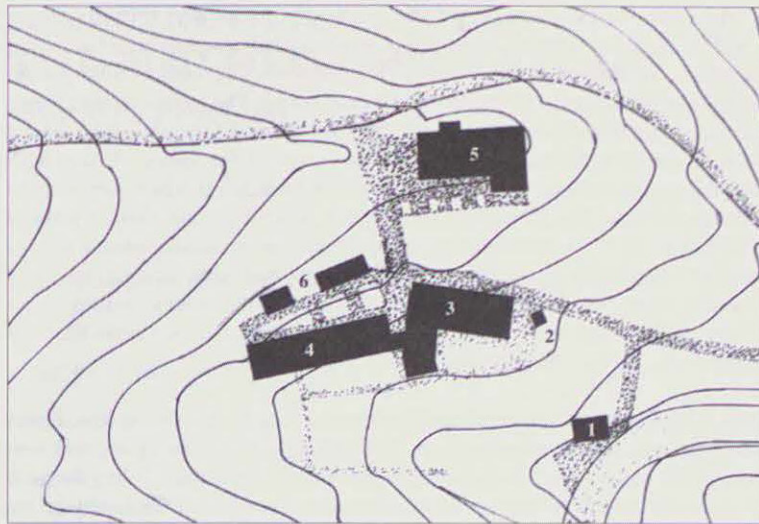
⁴ I am grateful to monks of Mount Athos for their hospitality and friendly help. Pater Arsenias, igoumen of the Skete Bouraseri, guided me through the icons of his monastery, and gave me permission to measure and photograph as much of the monastery as I pleased. I am also thankful to Pater Nectarius and Pater Gabriel, who acted as translators, and to Pater Theophilactos, who showed me how gold leaf is applied to icons.

SKETE BOURASERI: Roofs of Church and Refectory



SKETE BOURASERI

1 Gatehouse, 2 Ossuary, 3 Church / cells,
4 Refectory, 5 Guest house, 6 Garden sheds



trasts of near and far, short and tall, flat and sharp, big and small which influence the way in which the monastery is seen and experienced.

The monastery is approached along a zig-zag path. From the gate, the path sweeps right past the gate house. Leading uphill, the path then sweeps left, and views of fig and olive trees are exchanged for parallel walls. The effect of forced perspective is fantastic since the walls rise to a horizontal from a sloping base. On the left, a tall church settles into the slope, with a tiny chapel in front of it. On the right, a simple whitewashed retaining wall guides the eye uphill. Arriving level with a plaza, the visitor's eye is drawn first to a fountain in a whitewashed wall; then, to the left, the plaza opens up, enclosed by a large building as well as by the facade of the church. A glance uphill reveals the guest house, some distance away, surrounded by fruit trees. The buildings are surrounded by gardens and orchards, terraced into the slope. The final stop, for the eye as well as the body, is the stone bench and table, near the entrance to the refectory, where the igoumen of the monastery receives his guests.

The monastic environment of Skete Bouraseri is a delicate balance of openness and introspection. The monks are participants in a public life to the extent that they are members of a community under the direction of the elder. However, they also live a contemplative life as they practice voluntary seclusion within the bounds of the skete or the individual cell.

RITUAL SPACES

Although it often evolves within an architectural setting, ritual is to some degree independent of architecture, since it creates its own space. In Orthodox Christianity this fact is most poignantly expressed in the liturgical processions in which the congregation files out of the church, and circles around it. Ritual creates its own spatial relationships, contrasting openness and closure, stability and movement, darkness and light. Its essence is participation. Thus the following description of the spaces of Skete Bouraseri are choreographic and perceptual, based on my participation in the rituals described.

SKETE BOURASERI: Courtyard between Church and Refectory



The refectory of Skete Bouraseri was the first of the spaces which I visited, thanks to *philoxenia*, the hospitality which is extended to strangers throughout all of Greece. Having satisfied himself of my reasons for being there, the *igoumen*, Pater Arsenias, showed me to the sunny room in which a meal was ready. I ate slowly, taking in the icons which were arranged around the room — saints on panels on the lateral walls, and scenes from the Wedding of Cana on the wall behind me. Some minutes later, Pater Arsenias returned. The surprise which registered in his expression alerted me of the possibility that the monks did not draw out their meals. His eyes, however, soon creased in a smile. "*Phage glucosi.*" (Eat your dessert) he said, and walked away.

exterior door is loosely latched to the outside of the house, providing the minimum of closure to the fragile interior. With many layers of paint covering the cracked age, it is stiff and silent. Tight corners house spiders waiting seemingly in vain for their next meal to fall from above.

An envelope of heavily aged clap-boarding, lacking the neat horizontality of its origins, wraps around and around the house like a rope binding elements of a package. Painted over and over, with the aesthetic ideals of its successive occupants, the lack of constant care has resulted in the wrinkled texture of ancient skin. The cracked stone of the foundation gives rise to the wooden walls reaching upward, a flat blue colour over the ancient brown, to the sloping roof, covered with gravelly layers of brown lying atop a fabric soaked with black oily tar, protecting the dry memories beneath. Under the stony New England sky, the house appears to have grown like a mushroom from the frost-hardened earth. Yet, the thin of the walls is apparent to the chilled eye. The fragile warmth within leaks from the seams on the squared corners of blue wood. In its decay, it still warms and protects against the harsh changes nature brings. Holding in the voices of generations, the hum is audible when walking too closely by. The house gave birth, and served as crypt. Its journey remains unfinished in the lives of its inhabitants. Perhaps unfinished in its age, not easily sacrificed to the whims of its caretakers, the house lives a life of generations and of evolving themes; a crumbled symphony of voice and movement lost in a chorus of wooden members like itself, arrayed across the landscape.

Later on that day, I saw how the refectory is used by the monks. At the ringing of a bell the monks assembled in the room, arms crossed, standing well back from the tables, which were already set with plates of food. The monks waited for the arrival of the igoumen, who pronounced a short prayer. The monks crossed themselves, and sat down to eat. One monk, who had remained standing, read from a book on a lectern. He was reading from the 'Lives of the Saints.' A hand bell, rung during the reading, reminded the monks of passages at which they were to cross themselves. The monks ate quickly, and when I did the same, I realised what happened — the full-bodied taste of simple Greek cooking greatly diminished as I tried to rush through my food. Before I had quite finished, the Pater Arsenias rapped on the table with his knife handle, the monks crossed themselves, and the meal was over. A short prayer was read, and the monks filed out of the room. No more than twenty minutes had elapsed.

'Ella, Ieremias, ella!' Smiling, Pater Arsenias motioned me to follow him. It was time for vespers, the evening service. Pater Arsenias called me by a Greek version of my name, which is a common one among the monks. When they are tonsured, the monks receive a new name as a confirmation of their spiritual rebirth. 'Ieremias,' the Greek form of Jeremiah, an Old Testament prophet, is a common name on Mount Athos.

The service began as we entered the church, Pater Arsenias motioning me to the seat beside him. He intoned the first words of the liturgy, reaching for the *epitrachil*, a band of cloth embroidered with silver threads which hung at the threshold of the nave. He slipped it over his neck, Monks moved through the church, approaching each icon in turn, kissing it, and making the sign of the cross. Pater Arsenias, having accepted a censer from a nearby monk, censed each icon in turn, and the sound of jingling chimes accompanied the clouds of incense. He then censed each person present in the church. When my turn came, I bowed, as I was taught to do.

Pater Arsenias gave the censer to a waiting monk, and returned to his place, next to mine. One after the other, the monks came up to him, making the sign of the cross, touching their shoe in a low bow, kissing Pater Arsenias' hand, and making another bow. Although their movements were in rhythm with the same tempo, the monks moved as individuals —

*The monk, who has given up the vanities and the values of the world, represents man's reaching up to God. The icon represents God's reaching down to man. So a monk, venerating an icon, exemplifies the closest degree of union between God and man, save for the Eucharist and the Incarnation itself.*⁵



SKETE BOURASERI: View from guest house



SKETE BOURASERI: Ossuary chapel near main Church

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