Mount Athos – more than just a man’s world

Thymio Papayannis
Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (Med-INA)

The “Holy mountain”, a spiritual centre since 1054 and a sanctuary forbidden to women, Athos has enjoyed an autonomous statute since Byzantine times.

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t is four in the morning. Outside, the star-filled sky cannot pierce the utter darkness. Inside the monastery church the first monks are gathering. One by one, the black-robed men bend before the icons, and then take their places at standing prayer pews. The first psalms rise up. The dark church is barely illuminated by a candle. As the service proceeds, the chanting swells. The illumination intensifies with further candles and lamps, while the monks move in the patterns of an ancient Byzantine tradition.

We are in the monastic State of Athos, and it really is a state apart. While life here is simple and human in dimension, it looks towards heaven and the divine. The people and the place have combined to create a community inexplicable by society’s criteria; it lives in the world, yet is not of the world. Its very existence is intended to bear witness to the fact that there are matters beyond our understanding: one of its names is the Garden of the Holy Virgin, a reference to the Garden of Eden. It symbolizes the mystery of the eternal future, a mystical journey between heaven and earth: the perfection to which the monastic life aspires is that of the angels surrounding God’s throne.

The Holy Mountain has survived, advanced and functioned now for centuries on its own principles, laws and rules, within its own tradition. In essence, here the people take the lead, and any practical issues only follow.

**Origins of Mount Athos**

The easternmost of the three peninsulas of Chalcidice in northern Greece is known worldwide as Aghion Oros (Holy Mountain), guiding light of Orthodox Christianity. Since the end of the first millennium it has hosted a large, entirely male, monastic community, organized under the principles of early monasticism.

From the 9th century ascetics had gathered there, and it was acknowledged after 1054 as a vital spiritual centre within the Byzantine Empire after the disappearance of other monastic centres (in Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor). It has been protected continuously since then, as demonstrated by official documents and decisions of emperors, rulers and patriarchs, retaining its pivotal role even after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Since then, the Holy Mountain became – and remains today – the largest community and spiritual home of Greek Orthodoxy, embracing monks within its shores from every Orthodox nation. ‘We can describe the Athos Polity as the largest isolated living monastic community, serving the world by offering the strength of life, grace, spiritual wealth and active prayer, reaching heavenwards in every way for the redemption of all mankind.’

**Special circumstances and international significance**

Mount Athos has been granted a special status with regard to its operation and management. This was recognized internationally for the first time in the Berlin Treaty of 1878, before the liberation of Thessaloniki and the incorporation of Chalcidice – including Mount Athos – into the Greek State in 1912. Since then, Mount Athos has maintained a clear self-governing status, which was formally recognized in the Greek constitution of 1927 and the treaty by which Greece joined the European Union.

Towards the end of the 1980s, in recognition of the areas’ uniqueness,
the Greek Ministry of Culture, through the country’s permanent delegation at UNESCO, decided to propose that Mount Athos be inscribed on the World Heritage List, both for its natural beauty and its cultural importance.²

According to the 1988 decision to include the site on the List, its Outstanding Universal Value stems principally from the creation of a sacred site, the distinctive and timeless architecture of its buildings, harmoniously incorporated within an exceptional natural environment in a region of outstanding beauty.

The unique heritage of this holy place is supplemented by a great wealth of manuscripts and documents, books, icons and other religious objects.

Past and present management

All of the above is well known to those who have any interest in the Holy Mountain. The decisive role of the region’s religious traditions may be less familiar and is perhaps worthy of further consideration. The spiritual path followed here, laid out in centuries of profound philosophical thought, is characterized by restraint and the respectful use of natural resources; this leads directly to practices, methods and an overall approach to the management of agriculture, forestry and wild areas on the Athos peninsula which can be considered sustainable, according to modern science. The exceptional condition of the Mediterranean forests on the peninsula is a notable example of sustainable management, stemming naturally from the harmonious relationship between the ascetic life and agricultural and felling practices, as well as the supporting infrastructure.

The unique nature of Mount Athos can thus be seen as an example of wise management of an exceptionally sensitive region, with great natural wealth and cultural heritage, by a purely male monastic community which has maintained its principles and traditions for over a thousand years.

After a millennium of existence, a monastic community like this one, especially one located in the European Union and on the fast-developing shores of the Mediterranean, might expect to weaken. The reverse is true: the number of monks is increasing, while the spiritual influence of the Holy Mountain can be felt across and even beyond the borders of the twenty or so countries where Orthodox communities can be found.

This should not be understood to mean that this is an area without difficulties and threats. The Athos peninsula is part of the Greek State and is unavoidably affected by the catastrophic financial and social developments in the rest of the country. In parallel, the region’s environmental problems (such as pollution from liquid and solid waste, inadequately planned road building, the construction of buildings and infrastructure, forest fires, increased energy consumption and the effects of climate change) have intensified over recent decades and require an immediate response.

Since 2006, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has maintained that the appropriate response to the site’s major problems requires a comprehensive management programme for its cultural and natural heritage, and indeed necessitates the active participation of the monastic community, acting through its governing bodies. In the decade which followed this proposal, some positive steps were taken in this respect, but very slowly.
The delay may stem from disagreement within the community, as well as from a predictable concern that the introduction of new and ‘foreign’ concepts might threaten the preservation of its traditions. In this context, it should be noted that the whole peninsula is historically divided between twenty monasteries, each of which supervises the shelters (sketae), smaller houses and cells within its grounds. Each monastery is therefore autonomous within its area and only wider issues that concern the overall administration of Mount Athos (such as road building, vehicular access, management of pilgrims and visitors) come within the purview of the Holy Community.

According to one view, the broad management programme proposed by UNESCO could lead to restrictions that could threaten not only the self-governing status of Mount Athos but also the monasteries’ overarching rights to manage their own sites. The opposite opinion, however, is that if the Holy Community took charge of the management of the Athos heritage site, it would reconfirm its historic role, especially within the scope of an international treaty. In this manner it could more effectively secure the monastic traditions of Athos, while adapting them where needed to changing circumstances. This latter view is supported by the fact that the Holy Community’s coordination role has been strengthened over the last few years, and it has become more widely accepted that cooperation and joint action is more effective in responding to common problems, without necessarily diminishing each monastery’s autonomy.

In any case, interaction and discussions over the last decade have brought all the institutions involved to a better understanding and acceptance of the principles guiding the management of a World Heritage site by a male Orthodox monastic community. These principles coincide with those of communal Orthodox monasticism itself, and include the unceasing devotion to practice and prayer, frugality in all aspects of daily life, and freedom from worldly shackles and diversions (familial, financial and political), as well as from personal possessions in a spirit of brotherhood and collegiality. It is certain that, through these discussions and the search for consensus, positive decisions can be taken which will advance the integrated management of the Athos peninsula by the Holy Community. Little significance should be given to any delay, either in reaching those decisions or in the implementation of the programme, as the monks of Mount Athos live with the past, which for them forms a continuous part of their present and future, expanding time while engaging actively in ‘the great mystery surpassing all things’.

The avaton of Mount Athos

One of the strongest traditions in Mount Athos is the hospitality shown to pilgrims and visitors. This requires both management and spiritual consideration, as the Athos Peninsula cannot be treated as a tourist destination. It is a self-governing area of isolation and prayer, and for this reason the Holy Community has limited the number of visitors, attempting to distribute them appropriately between the monasteries.

A thornier question, which has given rise to both disputes and demands over the years, is the concept of avaton, which means literally ‘not to be walked on’ or ‘inviolability’. It is not only an ancient practice, but also a fundamental approach to the order of monastic life, applicable in particular to the rule which forbids women from entering or staying on Mount Athos. The rule stems formally from a decree issued by Emperor Constantine the Gladiator in 1046 and has been respected in practice ever since.

The concept of avaton, however, has a wider meaning, constituting a principle expressing the nature of the Holy Mountain; it can be more precisely defined as the rules that keep the ascetic use of cultural means and the wise preservation of a distinctive and fragile place. The concept of avaton is not an ideology and should not be seen as discriminatory, but relates to the options by which a place is chosen for monastic life and the worship of God.

In its communication of 16 January 2003, the Holy Community emphasized that ‘the concept of avaton should not be seen as an isolated practice, but as one of the many facets which together constitute the special nature of Mount Athos. These facets cannot be addressed separately, but only as a unified whole which has shaped the unique character and spiritual life which is now the object of universal admiration’. In a similar declaration of 30 September 2003, the Holy Community notes that ‘one
Chilandar Monastery Church is one of the twenty Orthodox monasteries on Mount Athos.
of the impressive aspects of Mount Athos is that the rule of avaton is applied uniformly by twenty monasteries under a common administrative body on a peninsula clearly distinguishable on the map, and extending right across the entire peninsula, given that it is all subject to a special self-governing regime. Another aspect is the fact that the common enforcement of avaton has been acknowledged by the Greek State with a particular status, for historical, religious and cultural reasons.

The practical effect of this monastic rule is that within the Athonite community there are none of the traditional divisions between gender roles. Male monks treat all tasks with equal value and undertake them all in rotation, including ‘housework’, without female support. This allows them greater appreciation of their own frugal needs, as well as the chain of production and consumption, resulting in a more Spartan approach to the area and its natural environment. It is thus easier for the monks to rid themselves of concern for unnecessary things, leaving them with more time for their spiritual duties. I recall the words of a monk on Athos, gazing at the sea below:

‘Avaton’ is therefore a monastic concept, not a cultural one. For only men or women to live somewhere would be bound to affect the environment, but this does not relate only to World Heritage sites.

The monastic life is the pattern for our future life in the Kingdom of God, where gender will be erased. This is the only way to understand the spiritual significance of ‘avaton’.

In this sense, the inviolability rule of avaton constitutes an inalienable part of the living spiritual tradition of Mount Athos that deserves to be respected and protected. On the Holy Mountain, the management of the natural and cultural heritage is in harmony with the spiritual traditions guiding the monastic community through the ages. For this harmony, which is difficult to achieve and to maintain, the monks endlessly strive and toil.

Notes
1 Archimandrite Emilianos, Monastic Life, the House of God and the Gates of Heaven, Catechisms and Sermons 1, Stamp of Authenticity, p. 138.
2 Inexplicably, during the lengthy procedure that preceded it, the participation and final acceptance of the institutions of Mount Athos – the Holy Community and the Double Session – were not requested, negating its self-governing status that had been valid since the Byzantine era. This lapse often resulted in tensions between the monastic community and the Ministry of Culture.
3 It should be noted that all twenty monasteries on Mount Athos currently observe the cenobitic system based on ‘life in common’.
4 Stelios Ramflos, 2015, Victory as Solace, Athens, Mousses, p. 77.