

As Christianity became established, followers of the new religion sought a life completely devoted to the worship of the incarnate God by renouncing the world while continuing to live in it. At about the end of the 3rd century, ascetics of this kind began to withdraw into the desert, dedicating themselves to a strict, ascetic life of prayer, fasting, and vigilance for the love of Christ. Thus the arid deserts were transformed into lush pastures where countless hermits, both known and unknown to history, became models of ascetic practice and spiritual virtue.

Later, during the 6th and 7th centuries, pressed by Persian and Arab invaders, such ascetics sought safer abodes on Mt. Olympus in Bithynia and Mt. Athos in Halkidiki, where they took refuge, taking with them the tradition of the Desert Fathers.

Today, in the monasteries of the Holy Mountain of Athos, alongside the well-established cenobitic system of monasticism, it is possible to recognise this model of desert eremitism flourishing in the most inaccessible parts of the peninsula.

Idiorrhythmic sketes with their kalyves and secluded, makeshift hermitages sprout up and blossom like outward extensions of caves on the steep slopes of Athos' massive bulk.

Little St. Anne's Skete, a place where some of Athos's greatest hermits have devoted themselves to the ascetic life, is the focus of the journey that Nikos Koukis carried out in 1994 on the occasion of the feast-day of the Kalyve of Timios Prodromos. With the unerring gaze of a traveller hungry for the desert experience, the photographer, who is also a servant of the musical art, captured on film fleeting moments from the daily life and worship of the monks, the preparations for Athonite festivals and the journeying of pilgrims to their destinations. Expressive faces and the sounds of angelic chanting accompany us in this unique haven of peace and spiritual beauty.

UNIT 1: The journey – getting there

Once you have left the port of Ouranoupolis behind you and start sailing along the western coast of Athos, the wooded hilly contours of the peninsula unfold before you, with the peaks growing constantly higher as you travel south. Domesticated castles in hospitable folds of the coast, the first waterside monasteries – Docheiariou, Xenophontos – then the veritable township of St. Panteleimon with its massive multi-storeyed edifices and its harbour installations that once welcomed steamships from Odessa.

Later, to the south of the port of Daphne, as the coast becomes steeper and steeper, those rock-borne stone wonders come into view – the eyrie of Simonopetra, Gregoriou, Dionysiou... Last of all, the Monastery of St. Paul, nestling in the bosom of Athos itself. And then the desert, your destination – the kalyves of Little St. Anne's soaring above you, as if pinned to the cliffs. You leave the boat but, even so, either on muleback or on foot, you still have a long way to go before that refreshing traditional treat of coffee, raki and Turkish delight.

‘Diakonimata’ on Mount Athos

Diakonimata (singular: *diakonima*) are services provided by the monks that contribute to the smooth running of their monastery. These services are provided in accordance with the internal regulations of each monastery (as is set out in Article 91 of Athos's Constitutional

Charter) and each is of one year's duration. There is a specific procedure for the assumption of these duties, which takes place during the first two monastic assemblies in the first fortnight of the new year, after new candidates have been elected for the *diakonimata*. Each newly elected candidate presents himself at the assembly and, once he has prostrated himself before the monastery's guardian icon, receives the keys of his *diakonima* (or *diakonimata*, for he might be allocated more than one) from the abbot, or from the elder of the brotherhood in the case of other kinds of monastic foundation, such as *sketes* and *kellia*.

The *diakonimata* concerning administrative duties (e.g. monastic representative, *epitropos* [supervisor], *oikonomos* [steward], librarian, archivist and sacristan) are entrusted to older and more experienced monks. The manual forms of *diakonima* are assumed by younger monks and novices (e.g. *vordonaris*, guide/muleteer; *vagenaris*, keeper of the wine cellar; *docheiaris*, storekeeper; *mangipas*, baker; *portaris*, doorkeeper, etc.).

Patronal festivals on Mount Athos

All of the monasteries and sketes on Mount Athos, as well as all the other foundations that possess a church, organise a communal celebration on the feast-day of their patron saint. The festival begins on the previous day with Little Vespers and continues with a vigil, an all-night service in church and the Divine Liturgy. This is followed by the *trapeza*, a meal in the refectory which is attended by all the pilgrims.

Invitations to participate in the festival (*panigyri*) are sent to the members of the Holy Community and ecclesiastical, political and police authorities. All pilgrims are welcome, including old and new friends of the brotherhood, who make their way to the festival by various means and often greatly exceed the usual number of visitors. The proper organisation of a festival requires extra work, which takes the form of *panginiés*, time-consuming tasks relating, amongst other things, to the decoration of the church, the cleaning of the monastery and the preparation of the *trapeza*. The *panginiés* are performed by all the members of the brotherhood, with the aid of numerous pilgrims, members of other brotherhoods and laymen.

Tonsuring procedures

Through the performance of the sacrament of tonsure, which is essentially a repetition of the sacrament of baptism, a novice who is considered to be mature enough in terms of age, knowledge and piety, is elevated to the rank of a monk of the Great Schema (*megaloschimos*), having elected of his own free will to live a life of chastity, an angelic life dedicated to God. The tonsuring of a novice as a monk of the Great and Angelic Schema marks the beginning of his path to perfection.

The elevation of a novice to the rank of a monk of the Great Schema follows upon a recommendation by the abbot to the council of elders. It is the council of elders – that is to say, an assembly of all the elders of the community – that takes the decision and records it in the register of proceedings. The garments and accessories that characterise a monk of the Great Schema include the *anterí* (an inner cassock), the Great Schema (also known as *análavos* or *polystávri*), a leather belt, sandals, the *pallíon* (outer cassock), the *kalymauki* (stovepipe hat), cowl and cloak.

The hymnographer Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis

Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis (1905-1991) was a great figure in the field of hymnography and from an early date his work was incorporated in the services of the Greek Orthodox Church. During his lifetime he received great honours from the Church and the Greek State, while today he is considered to be the greatest hymnographer of the post-Byzantine era.

A native of Delvino in northern Epirus, Gerasimos grew up in Piraeus and Athens. At a young age, he withdrew to Mount Athos, where he became a novice at the Kalyve of Timios Prodromos at Little St. Anne's Skete, and his name was entered in the monastic register of the Great Lavra Monastery on the Feast of the Dormition in 1923. During the vigil on the feast-day of St. Gerasimos the following year, he was tonsured as a monk and took the saint's name.

Below the kalyves of Timios Prodromos and the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, whose brotherhoods amalgamated in 1966, in the cave where St. Dionysios the Rhetorician and Metrophanes once lived (16th century), Gerasimos built a chapel (1956), where every July (9th/22nd) a festival is held in honour of these two great figures of the Athonite desert.

The Thomades and Danilaioi brotherhoods

Another landmark at Little St. Anne's Skete is the Kalyve of the Apostle Thomas, home of the Thomades brotherhood, who are worthy practitioners of the art of gold and silver working, while their reputation as fine cantors extends well beyond the confines of Mount Athos.

In the same area survives the cave in which the elder Joseph the Hesychast and Cavedweller lived (1898-1959). Joseph was one of the most outstanding figures in the recent history of Athonite monasticism and his imminent consecration as a saint was announced by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew during his recent visit to Mount Athos.

Opposite Little St. Anne's Skete stands the northernmost part of Katounakia, a sparse collection of kellia scattered over the steep surrounding slopes. Amongst the kellia stands out the hermitage of the Danilaioi, a brotherhood that serves the arts of icon-painting and ecclesiastical chant, continuing a tradition that began with the foundation of the hermitage in 1881 by the elder Daniel Katounakiotis and his successor, the hieromonk Daniel, a melodist 'of angelic voice'.

The monk and icon-painter Merkourios

At Katounakia, on the border with Exo Karouli, in a humble makeshift hermitage, lived the hermit Merkourios Katounakiotis until his passing on 7 January 2016. Merkourios is remembered as one of the best icon-painters of his generation in the Lavra desert. The elder Merkourios used to paint portable icons by combining the traditional Byzantine style with the so-called Russian 'tsoukániko' technique, which involves the use of burnished hammered gold leaf. Also, he was particularly skilful in preparing intricate representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Athanasius the Athonite with boiled wheat, which he made with his assistants during the great feasts of the Great Lavra Monastery.