

Mount Athos  
The Garden of the Virgin  
A Pilgrimage to Medieval Greece  
With Drawings and Lino-prints by the Author  
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**Book-cover:** Meghisti Lavra, the Font of Life, symbolizing the Virgin, and the Trapeza, the communal refectory used only on high Feast Days.

My photographs from this pilgrimage are found at:

<http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/Greece-Web/Athos/1979Athos.htm>

For historical and practical information go to the [Wikipedia Article](#)

## Short History of Mount Athos

### An Introduction

The Mount Athos peninsula is the eastern-most spine of the Halkidiki in Northern Greece, extending 60 km into the Aegean Sea. It is home to an autonomous republic of 20 monasteries and 12 skite with a population of 1600 Eastern Orthodox monks. Athos is governed by a democratic constitution granted to the monks in 972 AD by the Byzantine Emperor Ioannis Tsitsimitzes. To this day four men are elected from among the abbots of the monasteries, who act as the republic's government. A civilian governor represents the interests of Athens. Each Orthodox nationality has its own monastery, their largest number is naturally Greek.

After several setbacks in the 10th century caused by Byzantine affairs in Constantinople, Athos had its up and downs. Its first trial came between 1204 and 1262, when after the Fourth Crusade Byzantium came under Latin rule. Many monasteries were destroyed, their monks killed. A period still constituting a vivid memory in the minds of the monks. By contrast the Turkish Ottomans respected and reaffirmed the Athonite constitution after 1453 and left the monks alone. Several monasteries were built or restored by the Christian wives of the Ottoman Sultans. At the beginning of the 20th century imperial Russia tried to usurp the Athonite Republic and to establish a Mediterranean naval base at Panteleimon. This came to naught, when in 1913 the 2000 monks of Panteleimon were ideologically split by a charismatic starets. A Russian warship bombarded the monastery and deported the unruly half of its population to Siberia. After World War I the population of Athos diminished drastically. In 1972 it reached its lowest level of 1100 mostly elderly monks. American interests - the monks indict Walt Disney - proposed to buy the monasteries, restore them and covert them into museums, their monks as colorful care takers. The Greek government had no money, and the monks resented the interference. Finally UNESCO put the entire Mountain under their protection. Since the 1980s the Mountain has been revived by an influx of well-educated young men. It is in full flower again.

There exist no religious orders in Eastern Orthodoxy and no monastic rules like in Roman Catholicism. The communal life in the majority of monasteries emulates the exemplary lives

of the early hermits, like St Anthony of Egypt and Basil of Caesarea. By western standards, they are loosely knit communities under an Elder. These monasteries are called cenovitic (koinovitic), from the Greek word koine, the common language of the New Testament. In the 15th century a movement swept Athos, which allowed individuals to establish private apartments in a monastery, where they could retire in exchange for donating their wealth to the monastery. They are called idiorrhythmic. A limited number of these still exists on Athos today.

The Holy Mountain's greatest treasure are the rare medieval manuscripts in its libraries - which are only shown with special permission. The monasteries house a plethora of precious icons, revered by the faithful. Its medieval architecture has to be considered secondary to its 1100-year-old spiritual traditions - and those were the reason for my pilgrimage to the Mountain in 1979. The text was written in 1980, and the lino prints as well. The monks are adverse to being photographed, and I respected that. For this edition I added a number of pen-drawings, to show the luminous Greek landscape, the "Garden of the Virgin Mother of God," which contrasts so strongly with the black cloth of the monks and their nightly vigils.

## A Zen Koan

Hitch-hiking to Istanbul along the coast of Northern Greece one early morning, I had seen Mount Athos for the first time. It was one of those transparent, luminous days that fall upon the Aegean Sea as the first sign of autumn. You seem to see to the very edge of the world, islands behind islands and a horizon drawn with a blue straight edge. Floating on the sea there was the mysterious peninsula. Wave upon wave of an ever steeper spine, rising higher and higher towards the south, which from the white crested peak of the Mountain abruptly fell into the sea. It was so clear that you could make out the monasteries clinging to the eastern shore, Vatopedi, Stavronikitas, Iviron, the Lavra.

But in those early days of my wandering around the Aegean Sea my intoxication with the clarity of Classical Greece had left no room for an exploration of the "dark middle ages." The way back to Mount Athos took twenty-five years and passed through many other peregrinations in Greece, four intense visits to Russia and Georgia, and the discovery that behind the Greek clarity exists a spirituality, which is female and lies deeper than Christianity and is quite possibly older than God.

It was the need for an understanding of this koan-like puzzle that led me back.

The idea of going to Mount Athos in the summer of 1979 had been Barbara's. She was unable to travel to Europe that year, and because as a woman she would not be able to accompany me to Athos anyway, she suggested that I go to Greece by myself and finally face my test. It appeared very natural for me to live with the monks for a few weeks, but my friends were bewildered. Few had ever heard of Athos and my explanations, a monks' republic under the oldest, still living, democratic constitution in the world, no women, no plumbing, did not help much. They would have found it easier to understand, had I proposed to go to Tibet, but a whole mountain of Christian monks - they are Christians aren't they? - was too much.

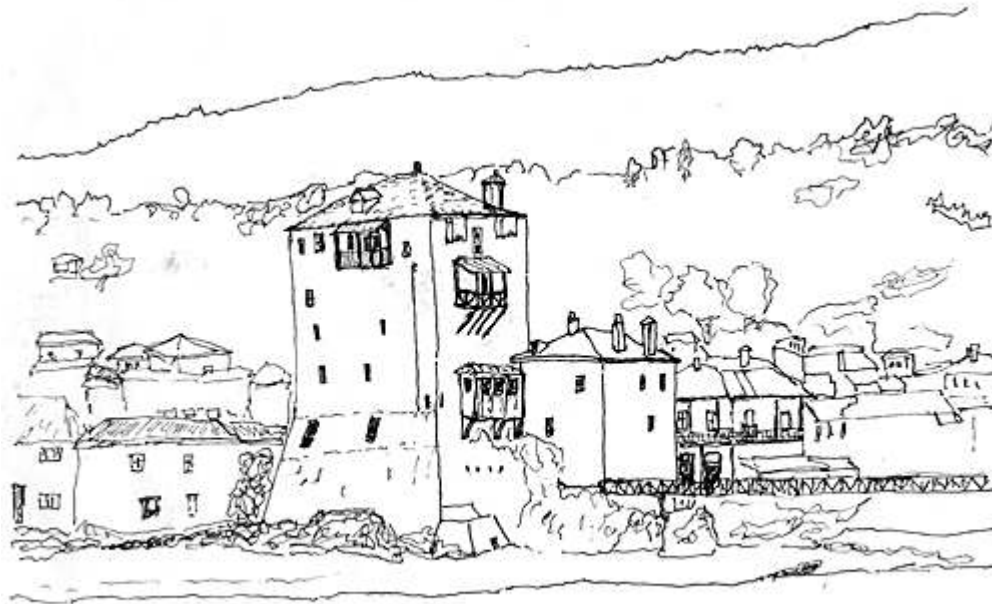
The more thoughtful asked more penetrating questions. My own mother gave me a hug and with a quizzical look demanded, "What do you want from these monks? At best they are ignorant and bigots at worst." Most discouraging was an old Georgian friend who loves Athos and had spent many months in its monasteries doing research. He summed it all up with the caveat. "You are crazy, three weeks, you could not survive there that long, - the food is horrid."

I did go and spent ten days there, for various reasons less than I had hoped to, and one was indeed the difficulty of finding something to eat. One vegetarian meal a day was the rule and wild berries for lunch.

And what did I learn from the monks? What was the answer to my koan? Are there spiritual insights that are deeper and older than the Christian God? Zen offers an answer, and as so often in Zen the answer is another koan: *Mu*. *Mu* means as much as "No-Thing", and strangely but not unexpectedly the hermits on the Mountain also knew this answer: *Mu* is *not-words*, *not-theology*, and *not-holiness*, *Mu* is *not-God*, *not-Christ*, and *not-Virtue*, but includes all of these. Lao Tse says it more succinctly, "The Tao that can be told is not the Tao." The Tao is the Way, the Path, and Athos is just that. So I propose to simply take you on my way around the Mountain, because I found that this was the one thing that was required of me in order to understand. And there is no map of this territory, and time stands still, and ten days are like an eternity.

## Ouranoupolis

Ouranoupolis is a small village outside the northern border of the Athonite territory. For centuries there was only a Venetian tower there, half in ruins. Sometime after WW II an Australian woman moved into this tower to live there, to be close to her son who had become a monk. A medieval story in our times. On my last day on the mountain I met this monk entirely by chance.



Later Greek refugees from Asia Minor started to build a new village around the tower. It is now a bustling place crowded by tourists from all parts of Europe. Here I spent three days waiting for the day on which my special visa would let me take the small boat to Daphni and the Mountain. I had rented a bare room from a woman from the Pontus. Her son operated two of the local discos, a nervous, embittered young man. He spoke excellent English, and knew the Mountain well. He insisted that the only way to see the Mountain was on foot, and he was the first person who assured me that I could cross the southern escarpment of the Mountain.

Ouranoupolis is the last station before entering the Athonite Republic, and the first the monks reach when they venture into the outside world. Every morning and afternoon the boat arrived carrying monks and men. Often hilarious situations ensued, a scrawny, bearded, black-clad monk with his high top-hat and a bag around his shoulder was trying to sell boxes of incense to a group of barely bikini-clad young girls. Black cloth peering at the forbidden bare flesh.



In one of the tourist shops I discovered a postcard of an icon of John the Baptist with fantastic wings and a stark late-Byzantine face, half fallen angel, half prophet in the desert. I have always had a special affection for this saint, so prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy. He is "*O Prodromos*" in Greek, the "First on the Path". I carried him along on my way as an inspiration, interpreter, guide, and guard.

## "A Gift of Joy"

It is a strange feeling to arrive for the first time in a place one has dreamed about for twenty years. The boat ride along the mysterious coast, the arrival in Daphni, the bus ride to Karyes. The offices of the Synod were crowded with people. One monk, issuing the pilgrim's pass with averted eyes, swept my money into a bag, and another clipped the long hair of a high-school student, no time to be alone, no place to reflect.

Then I stood at the edge of Karyes - this chaotic monastic Capital village without women trying to savor the moment, to fit the visions of my mind into the landscape that lay before me.

Nothing had prepared me for what I saw, not the pictures of monasteries I had seen, not years of wandering through Greece, nor my imagination: This was a lovely, sensuous country, female shapes, slowly undulating hills and valleys covered with lush vegetation, low

trees and bushes, green down to the blue sea. How un-heroic, how unsuited for ascetics, no sun-drenched marble cliffs, no bare rocks, no earth parched to the ochre-brown of fired bricks - green, pastoral, the most idyllic Greece yet.

A monk passed, erect on a horse, his long braided hair and black cloth billowing behind. He covered his face ignoring me and my greeting.

After a quarter-hour I reached the first monastery, Koutlomousiou. An army of monks with brooms futilely kicked up clouds of dust in the neglected courtyard. I wandered on. A threatening, overcast sky, the air oppressively hot and humid. A little further down I got lost on a path between man-high shrubs which lead nowhere. Finally the clouds broke, and I hid beneath a bush to wait out the brief shower. It did not relieve the heat. Not a soul in sight, every human being seemed to be hiding from the afternoon.

I was still trying to figure out where I was going, where to my path was leading, when I was startled by a high, excited voice: "*Perimenite, pou pate?*" - "Wait, where are you going? Here eat a few of these figs." An old monk in work habit ran after me from a low gate in a side path. He pushed a tin plate loaded with fresh fruit at me: "Take one - take them all." I don't particularly care for figs, but these were fresh from the tree.

I sat down on a rock with to him eating of the figs.

He must have been over eighty. He told me that he had been an hermit on the Mountain for over fifty years and a lumberjack before that. "I am from Kavalla, you know Kavalla?" Then came the war, it was very bad. "In Turkey, very bad, you know Turkey? Very bad time in Turkey." I realized he was talking about the First World War. After the war he remained on the mountain as an hermit. Yes, and since then he had lived down the hill, in this house behind the bushes. "You understand, hermit...? All night I pray. I never sleep." His thin lips moved rapidly, an incessant flow of murmured words, his hands counting an imaginary rosary. "Yes, *Kyrios*, these fifty years have been the most happy days of my life, *I evtikhismenes khronia, to kharisma tis kharas*, "Fifty years, a gift of joy."

I asked him what prayers he was saying during the night. "Very simple, *Kyrios*, very simple: *Kyrie Iesous Christe, ge tou Theou, Eleison me.*" "Lord Jesus Christ, born of God, have Mercy upon me." So, on the first day I had met a man who knew the secret of the "Little Jesus Prayer", the last true Christian mantra still in use. Spoken by some under their breath during all hours. I considered for a moment to stay, but was too restless. I wandered on. - *To kharisma tis kharas* - The Gift of Joy.

## Karakallou

I walked from Karyes to Iviron on that first afternoon and slept at this Georgian Monastery. Next morning I found that the boat, which navigates the east coast of the peninsula, would arrive only in the late afternoon. I resolved to walk along the coast.



It was a brilliant, windy morning. I passed the chapel of a skiti, all painted blue, right by the sea. The arkanas of Ivion receded behind me. Stavronikitas could be seen to the north.

I reached Karakallou, high up in the hills around noon. The small, poor, but pretty koinovion lay deserted in the beating sun, everyone asleep, flies everywhere. I walked back down to the sea hoping to catch the boat to Meghisti Lavra. The boat never arrived, because the wind had whipped up high seas by that time... Greece. This finally decided my fate, obviously I was being called upon to walk to the Great Lavra, to walk around the Mountain, to circumambulate Aghion Oron in Buddhist fashion, with the Mountain to my right. I once more climbed the one hour track up to Karakallou in the hope of finding a bed for the night.





Karakallou is a *koinovion*, a communal monastery and though poor much cleaner than the rich, *idiorrhhythmic* Iviron, where the monks live in individual apartments by their own rhythms. Together with three Greek pilgrims I was invited to participate in the vesper service. This was the first of numerous vesper services that I attended during the next ten days. The service, like all services on Athos, is sung in its entirety: the soul demands singing not words. There are no instruments, only human voices. In fact, musical instruments are banned on the Mountain, and the pilgrims are searched in Daphni for mouth organs, radios, and film cameras. With few exceptions in the younger monasteries the attitude of the monks during service is disturbingly unconcerned. Three or four perform the antiphon, the "Wechselgesang," the others hang or stand in their pews, some seem to to sleep, some watch the proceedings. At times one of them will arrive late or leave early. The service is not celebrated for the community, it solely venerates the Holy Images.

Afterward we were invited to have supper with the monks in the refectory. Compared to the bowl of bean soup and the glass of water we had been offered in Iviron the night before, we were served a feast of vegetables fried in oil - cold like most food in the Athonite monasteries, a bowl of black olives, bread, a small earthenware jug of wine, and watermelon slices for desert. It turned out to be the best meal of the entire pilgrimage. To work-off the sudden onrush of food after a whole day of fasting I later helped stack a pile of fire logs for winter use.

I was given a charming cell by myself carefully separated from my orthodox co-pilgrims. It overlooked the ocean and the olive trees of the monastery. A cleanly laundered sheet and cover, a pillow case, a simple blanket. There was even a pair of house slippers, which I

disdained for esthetic reasons.

In no place do you lose every concept of time, the guarded measure of our reality, so fast as on Athos. The monks still live by the old Julian calendar, the hours are counted in Athonite time, which is measured from sunset to sunset. And three in the morning by our clock becomes the middle of their day.



It was the first night, during which I was awakened by the *semantra*, the hour-wood, a long, narrow plank pounded with a small hammer to call the monks to service. Some *semantras* are stationary, suspended on long wires near the church, others, smaller ones can be carried by a monk, who walks along the galleries to every cell. Their hard rhythmic sound was to punctuate all the coming nights, measure my dreams, and sink into the most pervasive memory of Athos.

## The Night

In this land of light, Greece, so much on the Mountain is shrouded in darkness, and not only the squalor, the dirt, and the darker sides of life among men, but also the Holy of the Holiest, the great liturgy hides under the cover of the Night. In the darkest of the small

hours the monk with his xylophone calls his brethren to the main service. Every night, up and down the galleries, coming and receding, wanders the echo of the hard ripples of his instrument. Slowly a light appears here and there, figures, darker than the night in their black shrouds, emerge from their cells, a nightly resurrection from the tomb. Following the dim lights of their lanterns, casting huge shadows across the cobble stones of the courtyard, the Gestalten wander towards the church. A few candles reflect a thousand times in the gold surfaces of the icons, and then the great singing begins. Four hours until the dim light of the coming day celebrates a new victory over darkness.

Why these nights? Why these celebrations of Christ - or the Virgin - in such darkness? Why these burrowings of His disciples in this land of light? The churches of brown earth, lowly sprawling caves, like mole hills. Where are the soaring flights of the Northern Gothic, the exuberance of the Bavarian Baroque, why are they missing from the land of the Greeks? - Or do we misunderstand the meaning of the Christian faith? Have we lost one of its vital ingredients? What do the Athonite monks know that we do not ?

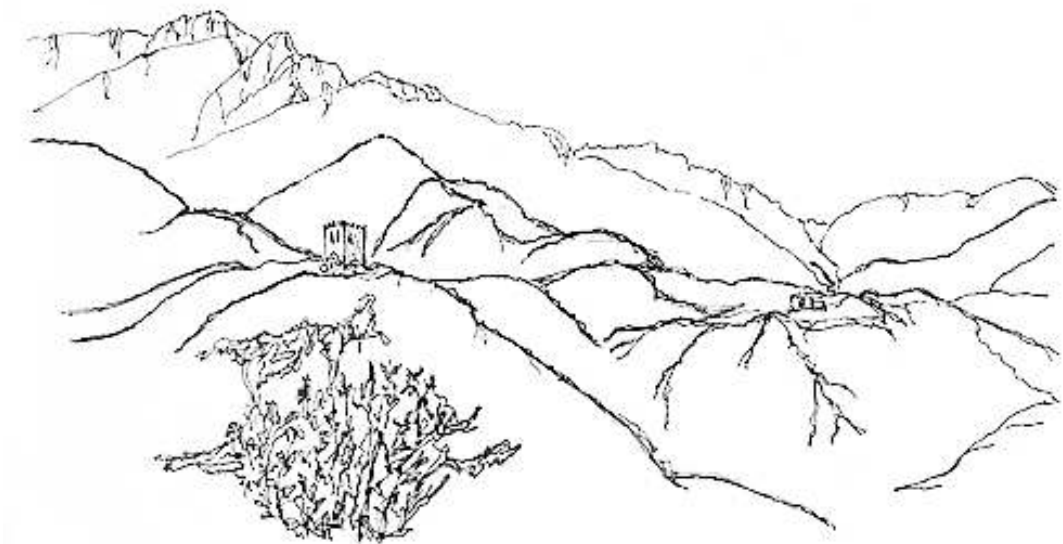
Strangely, once again the Tao-Te-Ching offers an insight. Lao Tse says:

*Ever desire-less, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
These two spring from the same source  
but differ in name: this appears as darkness.  
Darkness within darkness. The gate to all mystery.*

When I brushed my teeth in the cold, gray light of the next morning, the monks were still singing in church. I left before sunrise on the long hike to the Great Lavra.

## Meghisti Lavra and the Erimos

For eight hours I wandered through an ever more beautiful countryside. The age-old path, paved with stones worn by time and donkey hooves into a gouged pattern most painful to walk on, first led through a dense growth of yellow-blooming broom. Imagine the intoxicating smells and colors. Later the path climbed over a low ridge, then down again to the edge of the sea. Somewhere I lost the footpath, following a new road higher and higher into the northern flank of the Mountain whose bare rocky peaks were always in view high above. The macchia gave way to woods of oaks and chestnut trees. There was plenty of water, trickling springs and fast running brooks in every valley. The hot noon hours I spent near a spring under a blackberry bush providing both shade and food. And during the entire day's walk I was completely alone, not a man in sight. Despite the streams of sweat running into my eyes, I felt one of the happiest people on earth.



When I reached the Lavra around three in the afternoon, I was dead tired. The huge, rambling compound of the monastery lay deserted by all life except for a pair of scrawny cats in the afternoon heat. I took my sleeping bag and went to sleep on a bench in a small kiosk outside the main gate, where the monks sit in the evening. Soon a charming, talkative monk woke me up, it was not proper to sleep in such unorthodox fashion in front of the holy images over the gate! He sent me inside to the xenodokhion, the guest house, which was still closed. Hungry and tired I walked around the courtyard in search of a cool, and quiet spot to hide. The many flies kept me awake, however.

It was then that two old, bent over monks appeared on crutches. They made their way to a small peach tree that I had eyed with envy. One took his walking stick and beat the tree, the other collected the fallen peaches in his hitched up soutane. Babbling and gesticulating they shuffled back, rolling me a couple of fruit. Alas they were green and hard as stone. Disappointed I searched the ground around the tree for some riper ones. Just when I had decided to knock some down myself, another monk appeared in the deserted yard and shaking his fist cried in German: "Stehlen Sie nicht, mein Lieber," don't steal my dear, and repeating "Ja, mein Lieber, mein Lieber;" vanished in a nearby doorway. My courage left me, and I remained hungry.



It was past eleven at night before we were fed that day. A crowd of people from all parts of the world had arrived with the last boat down the western, leeward coast. They soon converted the quiet monastery into a noisy youth hostel. The monks watched this scene with disdain and simply decided to disregard their guests. Only the vociferous protest of the Greeks among us finally opened the doors to the refectory. We fell on the skimpy food. A sorry sight, the feeding of wild animals.

I had repeatedly inquired after the path across the steep southern escarpment of the mountain, but nobody I met had ever walked this way. I was strongly warned, just last year an Austrian had fallen to his death attempting the traverse. The path was dangerously exposed - besides the area was inhabited by wild monks, who would roll stones into my way and try to rob me. When I heard this tale, I firmly made up my mind to dare it; too obviously these were horror stories. Yet still next morning a Greek from a surveying party seriously tried to talk me out of my plan. "Alone, all by yourself, you are crazy!"

It turned out to be a most beautiful hike. It was strenuous, from sea level the path went to above a thousand meters and then down again, but it was nowhere dangerous. Before the sun was high I had passed through the lower macchia in the foot-hills and had reached woods of oaks. Later, at higher elevations, firs surrounded meadows, streams, and wild canyons strewn with gray marble boulders. I was surrounded by a profusion of butterflies of all kinds. One small, blue soul flew ahead of me for half an hour, occasionally resting a little until I caught up with her and then leading me on again;

And then I happened on the robber monks. They were driving a donkey piled high with firewood down a steep ravine, beating the miserable beast mercilessly. The animal had got wind of me long before its masters had noticed and was balking. Everybody was surprised by the other's presence. They really did look wild, more like Californian gold miners than

monks. I hurried on pursued by a cloud of biting black flies.



*O Erimos* means the Desert in Greek, and an *Eremitos* is a man who lives in the desert, a Hermit. The area is full of lonely huts in the most inaccessible places inhabited by hermits, who live out their lives there. In some places they form small villages, Aghias Annis, Kavsokalivia, Kerasia, Katounakia, Karoulia. - They all were lower than my trail. They must be beautiful, and the people living there *are* the true inhabitants of Athos, who in their solitude live the path to insight. Alas, I was too uncertain of my way, too driven to go down and stay.

At the height of the day I came upon a small meadow, a fast flowing brook, a spring under an old oak tree, a stand of blooming thistles. I took a "bath" in the cold water and watched the iridescent butterflies in the heat of noon. Pan playing his flute among the trees. I had come home to Greece.

## Woman

Why has Woman become excluded from this realm? How can a man conceive of being in Greece without a woman? In this most sensuous land? Where did all the nymphs go that inhabited these springs and streams? Pan without a consort? Lying in the heat of this Greek noon, out of sight of the black monkish cloth, the absence of woman assumed desperate proportions.

Why has Christianity robbed Man of one of his great consolations, of one of his few insights into life? - Deep meditation is the way to salvation! He will be distracted by the presence of

her! Woman had to go - and on Athos also chicken and sheep! This pronouncement, which must originate in Christian monasticism of the ascetic, pessimistic persuasion of the Egyptian Gnosis, has always puzzled me.

At a New Year's party later that year a young woman questioned me about my Athos experiences. I voiced my puzzlement. She looked at me sadly and said "You want to know, why I have had four children in such close succession, because giving birth has every time been the most exhilarating high that I have been able to experience; never did I feel so close to death." And smiling she added. "I sometimes pity men for their inability to experience this unity of death and birth and giving life. Men are forced to invent ever more daring constructs to still their fear of death and life. How can you love unless you comprehend the unity of birth and life and death?"

It then occurred to me that Christ's teaching is one of the most audacious attempts to spin man off the wheel of life, like a spark from a grindstone, tangentially in a straight line towards a teleological infinity - outside of himself. To break the magic circle of birth and death, men try to deny the existence of Woman by simply excluding her from his life - and be free....

But the psyche of even the most seasoned desert-father is wiser and wiler and miraculously readmits the Unknown Woman back into his subconscious. Sybele-Selene-Sophia dressed in medieval garb reenters as the Panaghia, appropriately the Mother of God; Her presence on the mountain is all-powerful, all-pervasive. In the shapes of the roofs of the chapels, in invocations, icons, in symbols, and in the sub-lunar aspects of the night, *Woman Incarnate* reigns supreme and is revered with possibly even greater fervor than her son. *Mount Athos the Garden of the Virgin....*

Did I hear Pan laugh in the meadow? Two butterflies were making love on a thistle -- *O Eros....*

*Das Unbeschreibliche, hier ist's getan.  
Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.  
Goethe's Faust*

Hours later I arrived high above the skiti of Aghias Annis, which lies dispersed throughout the boulders of a steep ravine. I decided that this was the end of this day and soon sat on the small square in front of the Kyriakon, the Church of Our Lady, in the pulsating light above the sea.

## The Skiti of Aghias Annis

The houses of Aghias Annis, each a monastic "farm" inhabited by two or three monks gathered around a Gerontias, an older monk, their "guru", are widely dispersed in the steep, sun-beaten ravine. The highest houses five-hundred meter above the edge of the sea, facing due south. The sun's arrows hit from every angle, from above and from the glistening mirror of the sea below, a merciless shadowless, exhilarating bombardment of light, blinding even

through closed eye lids. A few olive trees, carefully tended by small water runnels, spend shade here and there. Each farm has a square, windowless chapel covered with a bosom-like roof of loosely stacked, flat slate slabs.

The Kyriakon seems suspended in the glaring light on its small platform, the central square of the community. There is a table with rickety, high-backed chairs under an olive tree, a water faucet in the opposite corner. Here I sat for three hours together with a silent, evasive Greek, who chain-smoked cigarettes, staring at the infinite sea.

Later a young monk appeared from nowhere and took me to the dormitory. I fell asleep immediately.



When I woke it was already dark. I found a kerosene lamp and a box of matches. My watch showed eight o'clock. I must have slept for three hours, supper-time had long passed. I carefully felt my way down the steep stairs to the common terrace. They had been waiting for me. I was led two levels further down, deeper into the dark mountain, where my supper had been laid out on a long refectory table in a cavernous room illuminated by a single kerosene lamp with an enormous circular shade. I then realized that I shared the light and the table with a feeble, old man. His shaky hands could hardly hold his soup spoon. At first I broke the bread for him, then cut his melon, and in the end I fed him spoon by spoon.

Aghias Dionysiou



The night at Aghias Annis had been a bad one. It was oppressively hot, a thunderstorm which never broke was brewing to the south over the sea. The flies were biting, and for the first time I felt my sleeping bag invaded by flees or bedbugs. For a long time I squatted on the bare cement floor of the small balcony watching the fizzling lightening on the horizon.

As usual there was no breakfast. So the walk into the early, cool morning, across yet another mountain ridge to Nea Skiti was a relieve. Behind the next monastery, Aghios Pavlou, I lost my path. It had become hot again. Finally I decided to have a swim in the sea, although the prospect of cooling off was tempered by the knowledge that for the rest of the day I would have to live with the itching salt incrustation the sea would leave behind. Wading around a rocky promontory to get out of sight of the monks - one does not take off one's cloths on the Mountain, not even for swimming - I discovered the continuation of my path, climbing directly out of the water precipitously up a mountain side, I put some of my clothes back on again and continued my pilgrimage.

For the first time this stretch turned out to be dangerously exposed, fifty vertical meters above the sea, a narrow ledge with nothing to hold on to except dry grass and an occasional bush. The heat of noon, and the exertion of the steep climb made me dizzy. Several times I considered to return, but retracing my steps was, of course, even more dangerous. After an hour I reached Aghias Dionysiou, completely exhausted.



Dionysiou hangs like a bee hive, suspended on beams from the side of a mountain ledge, high above the sea. In this restricted site its interior is an architectural jumble of stairs, narrow corridors, arcades, corners, doors, chapels, rooms. and surprises, all painted in dark red or black and white.

Deep inside the old walls I came upon the great "trapeza", the refectory. Since the monastery converted from a koinovion to an idiorrhithmicon in the seventeenth century, the refectory is used only on high holidays. Peeling murals covered the walls, apocalyptic scenes, the last judgment, a long row of church fathers looking down on a table stacked

with bright, red tomatoes. In a dark niche a single oil lamp cast its sparse light equally on a Deesis and a pile of watermelons. A narrow window opened into a wood workroom of Japanese austerity.



Later in the afternoon the boat from Daphni arrived. It delivered two Greek students from the University of Paris and a strange pair, a well-dressed, graying, middle-class father with his twenty-year-old son. The two immediately created an atmosphere of tension. The young man, apparently badly spastically disturbed, ran aimlessly around rowing his long arms and talking incoherently to himself. His thin pants barely hiding an enormous, faunish erection. During vesper service the two, not daring to enter the inner sanctum, stood demurely in the pews of the proscenium. Once or twice the high voice of the possessed pierced the service.

After a silent supper interrupted only by the occasional screeches of the young man, I joined the two students from Paris and a monk on the balcony of the guest dormitory. Watching the sun set into another thunderstorm over the sea, I listened to the agitated talk of the monk. I understood little, but the dramatic gestures of the old man conveyed his excitement. Every now and then one of the students translated a few sentences for me. Piece by piece an astounding story emerged. The strange pair had come seeking admission of the young man to the monastery, partly in the hope of finding a cure for his possession, partly to give his "kharisma", his divine gift an appropriate setting. For hundreds of years Dionysiou and Simonas Petras supported asylums for the insane, where the monks practiced various methods of healing. But any comparison with modern medical institutions for mentally disturbed is highly superficial. The monks were primarily seeing themselves as the retainers of people with the gift of "divine madness." Apparently the young man had come

with a recommendation from his parish priest attesting to this gift. The problem turned out to be the Greek government, which recently had put an end to this age-old practice as incompatible with enlightened modern medical treatment of the mentally ill.

The New Testament's many stories of Christ's encounters with the insane and their strange ambiguity came to mind: "And He went into Capernaum on the Sabbath. He straightway went into the synagogue and taught. And there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue, who cried out: 'Leave us alone! What have we to do with thee, Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know who thou art, the Holy One, the Son of God.' And Christ drove out the 'Legion' of this man's unclean spirits." But have you ever noticed that it is only the possessed who address Christ with his full titles, only they recognize his divine origin in the New Testament? Others have faith in Him, but they do not "know" Him.

I realized that this is one, maybe the most important secret of the Greek spirit. At Dionysiou I understood that probably no other culture nourished such an ambivalence towards the demonic, in their tragedies, Dionysos, Eleusis, Delphi. Elsewhere madness instills fear. Only the Greeks dared to explore man's limits beyond the edge of sanity and to raise insanity to the level of a divine creative principle....

## Simonas Petras

Next morning, afraid of another precipitous path, I took the boat around the corner to the landing of Simonas Petras, a ride of fifteen minutes. Together with me three tourists jumped off the boat, a German theology student, who told me at once about the girl-friend he had to leave behind on the mainland; a young Englishman from Athens, whose sole concern was to get back to civilization to have a good drink, and an Italian in a green T-shirt, who had three cameras and a plastic shopping bag slung around his neck. With this incongruous trio I climbed the path to the monastery, three-hundred meters up a steep mountain valley. When we arrived, we found the monks loading a small pick-up truck, ready to drive to Daphni. A great temptation. The trio of foreigners eagerly boarded the truck and were soon carried away, leaving me once again to blessed solitude.



Simonas Petras is a "Tibetan" arrangement of balconies, six levels high, overhanging the blue Mediterranean. The highest balcony, some four-hundred meters above the abyss belongs to the guest dormitory. There I spent a most blissful afternoon reading. A monk had welcomed me and brought me a cup of coffee, water, and an ouzo. Later a second cup arrived.

Walking along the gallery-like balcony I suddenly realized that it was only a flimsiest construction of rusting nails and rotten boards that separated me from the sea below. Suspended on and held together by pure faith. Walking on water, nay, on thin air.

Later the monk with the *semantra* appeared, first several levels under me then climbing higher and higher, calling for vesper service. Another young monk invited me in English to join their service. He had a most confusing resemblance to a long-lost love, Anita.

Simonas Petras is known as the strictest and most fundamentalist monastery of the mountain. Needless to say, it is a *koinovion* populated by young people - hardly a monk over thirty. They were all there at the service participating in a moving antiphon. The day before had been the Day of the Transfiguration of Christ, which we know as Mount Tabor, and the word *Metamorphosis* in ever changing musical colors wound itself through the liturgy. The magic of a word, Christ as the *chrysalis* - the soul as *butterfly*.



A kind of "*Johannitische Freude*", a mystical ecstasy overcame the community after the service, people hugged and kissed each other. Three monks distributed a sweet cereal. Two, completely oblivious to their surroundings, stood embraced, hovering at the edge between darkness and light. *Agape*. . . .

## Panteleimonos

The following morning was gray. The nightly thunderstorm still hung around the Mountain when I got on my way. I left when the monks were still singing in church. This time it was easy walking on the new road to Daphni. It lead across a long open ridge to finally sink down to the harbor.

Halfway to Daphni the thunderstorm returned, not a tree or other shelter in sight. I took my anorak out and partly hid under a low bush. The rain became stronger, lightning all around. Soon my jacket was soaked through. To save my shoes I took them off and buried them under the backpack. Then my only pair of pants came off and my shirt too. It was not really cold. The rain went on, the lightning became most frightening. I stood naked with chattering teeth in the downpour, in the strange hope that the Panaghia, the Mother of God would take pity on me. The rain and lightening became worse before it finally stopped after an hour. I found a last dry sweater at the bottom, of my backpack, and wandered on in swimming trunks and the sweater for another hour, before I reached Daphni. A plate of reheated beans I ordered in the dirty restaurant there restored some life. A ray of sun lured me back onto my way in the afternoon.

The first sign of life I met behind the great burnt-out ruin at Panteleimon, the Russian

monastery, was a brand new Soviet army truck. So, the rumor that the Soviet government occasionally supports the monastery was after all true. Later I learned from one of two Greek monks there that during the past ten years twenty-two young monks had arrived from Moscow, the largest Russian population at Panteleimon since the thirties. During the early part of the 20th-century some two-thousand Russian monks lived there. Today only the shells of the huge nineteenth century four-story barracks remain, a gloomy sight under the gray sky of this day.

Wandering around among the ruins, bushes and a palm tree growing in the burnt out shells, blue grapes hanging from an old arbor, I met the first Russian soul. A handkerchief with knots in its four corners covered his shaggy head. He wore the traditional long hair-shirt of the Russian penitent a tattered quilt-jacket over it. On his bare feet - I could not believe my eyes - a pair of worn, Muscovite house slippers. He was very young with only a short blond beard. Assuming from experience that nobody could understand him, he smiled at me and wordlessly walked over to a pear tree, picked five pears, ate one and still chewing, offered me the other four.



I slept in a high, narrow cell with a small window over the door, a shaft-like window to the outside world and two spartan beds. A new series of thunderstorms was howling outside lightening the pitch black sky. Every quarter-hour the Glockenspiel of the church was reciting the tune of the Spasski Gate of the Moscow Kremlin. . . . As the night wore on, I receded deeper and deeper into the world of Tolstoy's novel *Vozhkreschenie*, the Resurrection. I was woken by the strokes of the big bell and sat up in bed counting the twelve-plus-four strokes. And then a thin, high voice began to sing in the corridor outside... the ghosts!



With a shiver I peered from the door, and there a Greek peasant in his Sunday best was standing with folded hands singing and praying to the Panaghia. The soft light from a row of kerosene lamps cast semi-circular patterns down the hall.

I sat with my small lamp for two hours writing letters and listening to the driving rain and the beating surf.

Later in the small hours I woke with a start and the clear sensation that my old father had died.

## Xenophontes

The wind had blown the clouds away, the cobwebs of the night and the last gloomy memories of the Russian monastery were soon burnt by the sun. A long walk through silver gray olive groves, always in sight of the blue sea on my left, put me back into Greece.

Xenophontes is one of the poorer koinovions that had been in slow decay for a generation, only during the past few years has it come back to life with the arrival of a number of young monks. They are very young indeed, a flock of children barely out of school, running through the corridors, laughing and giggling and playing hide and seek after service. They are, however, carting the centuries old debris out of the buildings, mending the roofs, reinforcing the crumbling walls, and most importantly putting new whitewash on everything in reach. And so it was that I found a completely new bathroom, western water toilets, porcelain washbasins, and the luxury of luxuries a shower in the guest quarters. I decided on the spot to stay for the night, although it was not even noon time.

This turned out to be more difficult than expected. The intelligent, young monk responsible for the guests made it quite clear that he would like to see me go to the next monastery

where there were more monks to take care of tourists, here he was all by himself. I begged and pleaded with him, of course, without telling him that it was the shower that attracted me, and finally he conceded. Overjoyed I took a swim in the clear sea, and dried its salt on my skin in the sun on the rocky beach.

The monk had given me a couple of pieces of bread in replacement for my rain-soaked completely molded German bread, which I had to throw away in Panteleimon. This, a few grapes I found and the four plums I had received, were the my food for the day. The strange thing was that I did not feel hungry any longer. After noon it became so hot that I retreated onto a bench in the entrance gate of the monastery there to continue my reading.

Being absorbed in my book - a psychological study of Zen... I had not paid any attention to a group of men coming down from the monastery until a voice asked me in Greek, "*Are you German?*"

"Yes, I am," and the voice changed to fluent German: "Dann kann man ja Grüss Gott sagen." I looked up and found myself facing a most imposing monk, towering over me, very slender, in his sixties. His head framed by an electric halo of white hair. He was accompanied by another monk and a civilian with the gray suit and belly of a learned Greek bureaucrat, the speaker. They passed without another word. I was dumb-struck by this apparition.

The trio was waiting for the boat at the landing. Curious, I took my camera and slowly moved after them. They had to notice me, and the two monks immediately hid behind a wall. I felt like an intruder, too embarrassed to take a fast picture. On my retreat I suddenly found myself face to face with the mysterious monk. With his back to a whitewashed wall he eyed me with weariness and distaste.





This meeting pursued me for the next days. Only on return to Ouranoupolis did I learn that this man was the Archimandrite of Thessaloniki on an inspection tour of his monasteries. One of the high dignitaries of the Greek Church on foot with an entourage of two men and a couple of peasants carrying their briefcases, sleeping in the same little cells that I had slept in, nearly incognito. How better could the difference between the Greek and the Roman traditions be demonstrated as by comparing this man with the Latin Pope.

## Dokheiarion

I had finished my book. The day had brought the first clear, dry signs of autumn, a veil of melancholy hung in the low, silken light. I had made up my mind to leave next morning, driven in part by the foreboding vision of my father's death. I had sprained a ligament in my right foot, which made walking with the full load of my backpack painful. My time had come to an end.



There was one last thing to do, to walk the half-hour to Dokheiarion. I left my belongings behind and limped slowly along the path above the sea .- Dokheiarion turned out to be one of the marvels of the mountain. The buildings climb directly from the sea like a vineyard, up the flank of a modest hill. Not as daring as Dionysiou in location, but if possible more picturesque and filled with apocalyptic murals in excellent preservation, especially in the katholikon. Standing on the highest tier of its many levels one overlooks a landscape of mounting roofs crowned with a confusing jumble of chimneys, one for each of the many monkish apartments of this idioryhmikon, each different from the next, white before the blue foil of the shimmering sea. The monks are know for being liberated. I observed one spying on the women on a passing tour boat with binoculars!

Here I briefly met the son of the Australian lady in the tower of Ouranopolis. He invited me to stay. Alas, I had to decline and limped back to Xenophontes.



I was rewarded with a last unforgotten supper at Xenophontes among the monks in their cavernous refectory. Twenty-five black-clad figures along long tables eating in silent concentration. One monk with an expressive, melodious voice read a story from the lives of the saints. Every once in a while the prior, who presided at a separate table, rang a bell and everybody crossed himself. For the last time I ate the Mountain's fare, vegetables cooked in oil, a piece or two of dry white bread, a small bowl of shriveled black olives, a tin beaker of retsinated wine, water, and a huge slice of watermelon for desert. And the darkened murals, church-fathers, saints, Jacob's dream, the monster with the seven heads from the Apocalypse, *o tartaros*, and a deesis, the Virgin and the Baptist flanking Christ, looked down upon this age-old ritual of the *koine*. Silently I bade farewell to Mount Athos.

It took me a week to reach my parent's home by boat, bus, and train. My mother, tears in her eyes, fell around my neck. Father had had a blackout while shopping alone in town. Friendly people had taken him to the hospital. He was all right but had just come home.