

Landscape, Architecture, and Spirituality at the Remote Monastic Communities of Mount Athos

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Abstract

Mount Athos, located in modern-day Greece, was a major monastic site within the Byzantine Empire and remains a major center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. This paper introduces the Athonite monasteries and attempts to answer the question of why the monks selected Mount Athos as the site of their monastic communities. Orthodox monks frequently founded prominent monastic communities in urban centers as well, but one fascinating element of Orthodox monasticism is how they often established monasteries in exceptionally remote or rugged areas. This desire to re-create a built environment in such a demanding context, although not unique to the Athonite monks, is especially captivating on Mount Athos because the monasteries at Mount Athos maintained a large, continuous operation despite the location having no immediately apparent significance to Orthodox Christianity. A number of potential spiritual, psychological, and political motives could have led the monks to the isolated, jagged landscapes of Mount Athos. These reasons include the psychological effect of mountainous landscapes, changing political attitudes towards monasticism in the Byzantine Empire, and the need for a defensible position against pirates and invaders. Through the use of the historical precedent of Mount Athos, insight will hopefully be gained into the relationship between landscape, architecture, and spirituality that will promote the preservation of these spaces.

Keywords: Cultural Landscapes, Mount Athos, Monasticism

1. Introduction

Located on Chalkidiki peninsula in Greece, the monasteries of Mount Athos are among the most cherished and studied religious sites in the world (Fig. 1). Reaching back to the 10th century C.E., the Athonite coenobitic, or communal, monasteries are among the oldest uninterrupted centers of Orthodox worship. These monasteries contain an artistic and architectural richness that reflect that fact. Just as striking as the years of Eastern Orthodox history and tradition contained within these monasteries, however, is the remote and dramatic landscape that the monks chose to settle in. Traditions, spirituality, and more practical matters of politics and defense all played a role in the selection of Mt. Athos as a monastic site.



Fig. 1 Aerial View of Mount Athos, Greece
(Photo: <http://dxnews.com/sv2yl7a-mount-athos/>)

2. History of Mt. Athos

Accounts from Mount Athos itself claim that the first Orthodox monasteries existed as far back as Constantine's time.¹ There were also many small sketes, or dwellings of isolated eremitical monks, already well established on the peninsula by the time of the coenobitic monasteries. The Great Lavra monastery stands as the oldest surviving coenobitic monastery on the peninsula.² Established by Saint Athanasios in the year 963 with support of Emperor Nikephoros II, the monastery stands as the first known example of a communal monastery on Mount Athos.³

The Great Lavra features the key elements of Athonite monasteries. The major church in the monastery, known as the katholikon, is a domed, tri-conch structure, which sits at the center of the monastery (Fig. 2). It is situated in this way so it can be prominently viewed and easily accessible for the multiple services performed every day. The katholikon is aligned with the phiale, a ceremonial fountain, and the refectory, the dining hall of the monks. Surrounding these vital buildings is the monastery's "living wall" (Fig 3). This wall acts as both a fortification against raiders and a psychological construct that separates the monks from worldly desires. This wall is also integrated with the functional aspects of the monastery, with living cells and other buildings a part of its construction.



Fig 2 St. Athanasios and others, Katholikon at Great Lavra, Mount Athos, Greece, 10th century
(Photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Main-church,-Great-Lavra.jpg>)



Fig. 3 The “Living Wall” of Great Lavra, Mount Athos, Greece, 10th century

(Photo: <http://www.dilos.com/location/13459/GREECE-Macedonia-HALKIDIKI-Athos-Great-Lavra-Monastery>)

Over time, an increasing number of new communities modeled after the Great Lavra were established on Mount Athos. The first of these was Vatopedi, founded in the late 10th century.⁴ The layout and arrangement of the katholikon, phiale, and refectory all closely follow the same arrangement as in the Great Lavra, reestablishing and reinforcing the coenobitic principles established there. Eighteen more monasteries were built after Great Lavra and Vatopedi. Some introduced new architectural and construction techniques. The pointed arches, twin-domed narthex, and ceramic plumbing are found at Hilander monastery (Fig.4) and show a clear development from the construction of the earlier monasteries.⁵ Other monasteries, like the Dionysiou monastery, which is perched on a narrow outcrop of rock on the coast of the peninsula, pushed the functional and aesthetic integration of building and landscape to their limits (Fig. 5). However, despite the architectural improvements, the schematic core of the Athonite monasteries always remained similar to the one established by Athanasios for the Great Lavra monastery. These monasteries on Mt. Athos formed a monastic republic.⁶



Fig. 4 Hilandar Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece, 12th century and later

(Photo: <http://www.svetlanameritt.com/2012/11/15/hilandar-monastery/>)



Fig. 5 Dionysiu Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece, 14th century

(Photo: <http://www.dimosaristoteli.gr/en/culture/holly-mountain-dionysiou-monastery>)

Mount Athos was not the only setting for Byzantine monasteries to be established on difficult terrain in a geographically isolated area. This practice is in line with many other Eastern Orthodox holy sites that feature clear topographical or architectural boundaries that form a feeling of being a “spiritual island.”⁷ Saint Catherine’s monastery, located on the Sinai Peninsula, is among the oldest Eastern Orthodox monasteries that displays this principle. It is located at the base of Mt. Sinai, where it is believed that Moses received the Ten Commandments.⁸ The monastery itself was built around 550 by Emperor Justinian, and has served as a popular pilgrimage destination as well as an invaluable library of religious texts second only to the library of the Vatican. The linear, basilica-planned *katholikon* and later Islamic additions distinguish the monastery from the Middle-Byzantine style of the Athonite monasteries, and Saint Catherine’s also relies more on its fortification walls than the landscape to separate itself from the secular world.⁹ However, the monastery’s remote location certainly contributes to that feeling of disconnection from worldly temptation.

3. Spiritual Reasons for Settlement

There are many reasons to settle in such landscapes, but perhaps the most obvious motivation for the Athonite monks to have been driven to such locations is simply the desire to separate themselves from the secular temptations that would be found in densely populated medieval cities like Constantinople and Thessaloniki. The geographic distances from the major population centers reinforce the concept of the Athonite monasteries’ “living wall” separating them from worldly desires and distractions. In this way, the coenobitic monasteries maintain the sense of extreme separation established by the eremitical monks. However, it also allowed for them to establish the larger communities they desired.

Like in the case of better studied St. Catherine’s monastery on Mount Sinai in Egypt, religious myths and traditions may have also played an important role in the selection of the exotic location of the Athonite Monasteries. Athanasios, who is considered the founder of the Athonite monastic communities, situated the monastery he established, the Great Lavra monastery, where it was believed the ancient Pelasgian city of *Athrokoi* once stood.¹⁰ Mt. Athos itself has long been a fixture of Greek mythology; one tale states that a Thracian giant named Athos hurled the mountain into the sea during a battle with Poseidon.¹¹

Local stories also claim that the Virgin Mary herself visited the Mountain while travelling to Cyprus, and that she admired the peninsula’s unique plant and animal life.¹² Like many mountains, on Mt Athos elevation changes create a variety of habitats that would normally be stretched across numerous latitudes. The variety of flora and fauna would have fit well with the monk’s herbalist and self-sustaining life styles and reinforced the monk’s view of the peninsula as the “Virgin’s Garden.”¹³

In his article “Mountains and Mythology,” the ecological philosopher Arne Naess explores a number of reasons why Mt. Athos and other exceptional landscapes so often attain mythological status.¹⁴ These attributes include the upward movement of the eye, the ascension of someone moving up the mountain, the physical proximity of mountains to heaven, and the struggle it takes for one to climb the mountain. These experiences felt by someone engaging with the mountain reflect religious ideals found in many cultural contexts. Naess also describes how different cultures have different views of the ascension of holy mountains; Chinese traditionally view it as a heroic act, whereas Tibetans view it as a profane one.¹⁵

Moreover, Naess articulates his own political view that the world's remaining unclimbed mountains should remain unclimbed. He says that the "unreachableness" of these peaks is a valuable part of their symbolism and climbing them is an act of vain desecration. Interestingly, I would argue, Orthodox monks must have held a similar sentiment while they were constructing their monasteries. The Athonite monasteries themselves are situated on the slopes of the mountains, with no built structures on the peak of the mountain itself.¹⁶

There appears to be some evidence that the spiritual power of these mountains may be more than just a philosophical concept. A study performed by Piercarlo Valdesolo, a psychology professor at Claremont McKenna, and Jesse Graham, a psychology professor at the University of Southern California, which they published in 2014 sought to determine the role that "awe" plays in cognition.¹⁷ To accomplish their research, they played particularly evocative clips from BBC's "Planet Earth" to college students before having them fill out a questionnaire. A control group was played neutral news footage. The study found that the students in the "awe" group were more likely to attribute patterns to a supernatural or divine element.¹⁸ This study then seems to suggest that exposure to "awe-inspiring" objects or events may increase one's sense of spirituality, which would make the majestic Mount Athos a very literal spiritual resource for the monks.

It is also important to note that this sense of awe can be derived from both natural and man-made sources. According to legend, the Russian prince Vladimir I sent out emissaries while in order to help him decide on the religion his fledgling empire should adopt.¹⁹ His emissaries in Constantinople were so awestruck by the majesty of a service taking place in the Hagia Sophia (Fig. 7) that their accounts proved pivotal in Vladimir's decision to convert the Rus to Orthodox Christianity. It is clear from this account that Byzantine builders did not need to rely on natural wonders to provide the feeling of awe that Valdesolo and Graham studied. Perhaps the Athonite monks, seeking to replicate the awe of these structures, but lacking the resources to create their own, looked at the Earth as a source of heightened feelings of spirituality.



Fig. 7 Isidorus and Anthemius, Interior of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey, 537.
(Photo by Dirk Heitepriem taken from: <http://www.thousandwonders.net/Hagia+Sophia.>)

Indeed, nature itself can often have a strong psychological impact on people as well. This phenomenon has long been an intuitive feeling, but there has in fact been numerous research studies performed on the topic of nature and mental well-being.²⁰ Perhaps the combination of the awe-inspiring landscape and natural surroundings provided an irresistible psychological and spiritual context for the Athonite monks.

As discussed here, there are numerous reasons, both spiritual and psychological, that the monks of Mount Athos would be drawn to that location. The Athonite monasteries show a clear understanding of the psychological and spiritual power the built environment can provide for a monastic community. The placement of the *katholikon* makes it act as a spiritual panopticon²¹ and the prominent fortifications of the monastic enclosing walls provide a sense of separation from the secular world. It is logical to then assume that the Athonites would also have an understanding of the impact that the landscape had on their spiritual lives.

4. Political Reasons for Settlement

The monks also live in a time of ongoing political changes, theological shifts, and military actions. Political and practical matters, therefore, likely played a role in the selection of Mount Athos for their community. Already in 726, Byzantine Emperor Leo III (685-741) publicly declared the prohibition of the use of religious icons in the Byzantine Empire, starting the Iconoclasm period.²² Monasteries, with their large stores of valuable religious imagery, were naturally major targets of the Iconoclasts.²³ While the Great Lavra Monastery was not founded until over 100 years after the end of the last major Iconoclasm controversy, it is still possible that anti-monastic and anti-icon sentiments may have played a role in the monks' decision for distant settlement.²⁴

Perhaps the monasteries' relation with the wider Byzantine Empire was more beneficiary. Architecture is often used as a symbol of political power, as can be seen by many of the buildings in modern Istanbul, formerly the Byzantine capital city of Constantinople. Going even further back in history, widespread building, as performed by Rome in their conquered territories, would also be used to establish an empire's power over a broad geographic area. Given Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros II (912-969) direct support of the construction of the Great Lavra monastery, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that these monasteries may have served as "spiritual outposts," maintaining the empire's power and prestige in a subtler yet similar manner to military fortifications. Moreover, support of both urban and rural monasteries would gain the Empire alliances with the monastic communities, which were rapidly growing in wealth and power.²⁵

A role as potential political tools is not the only aspects monasteries shared with Byzantine fortifications. Due to the large amounts of priceless liturgical materials they stored, monasteries became prime targets for pirates.²⁶ Therefore, monasteries employed siting and architectural techniques similar to Byzantine fortifications of the time. The fortress of Gynaikokastro (Fig. 8), built in the vicinity of Mt. Athos by the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos III (1297-1341) and completed around 1328, provides an example of Byzantine military architecture of the time.²⁷ It is placed prominently on a large hill with towers that provide long views out over the landscape and thick masonry walls enclosing an oval shaped courtyard. This overall scheme closely resembles the walls, towers, and siting of the monasteries of Mount Athos. Additionally, Mount Athos also benefits from being located on a peninsula, as a narrow, 8-kilometer wide isthmus would have made Mount Athos easily defensible from a land-based attack.



Fig. 8 Andronikos III, Gynaikokastro Fortress, Macedonia, 1328.
(Photo taken from: <http://www.kastra.eu/castlegr.php?kastro=gynaikastro>)

Mount Athos had the special benefit of being located far away from the rapidly expanding Islamic empires in Africa and the Middle East (Fig. 9). With the holy sites such as Jerusalem and Mt. Sinai occupied by Arabs, and later the Seljuks, the Byzantine Empire would have begun looking for places closer to home for new monastic communities.²⁸ Major strategic losses such as those experienced after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 and the Fourth Crusade in 1204 ensured that the Byzantines would never again be a major political player in areas such as Africa, Jerusalem, and Anatolia. This would drive even greater numbers of Orthodox Monks west to sites such as Mt. Athos and Meteora.

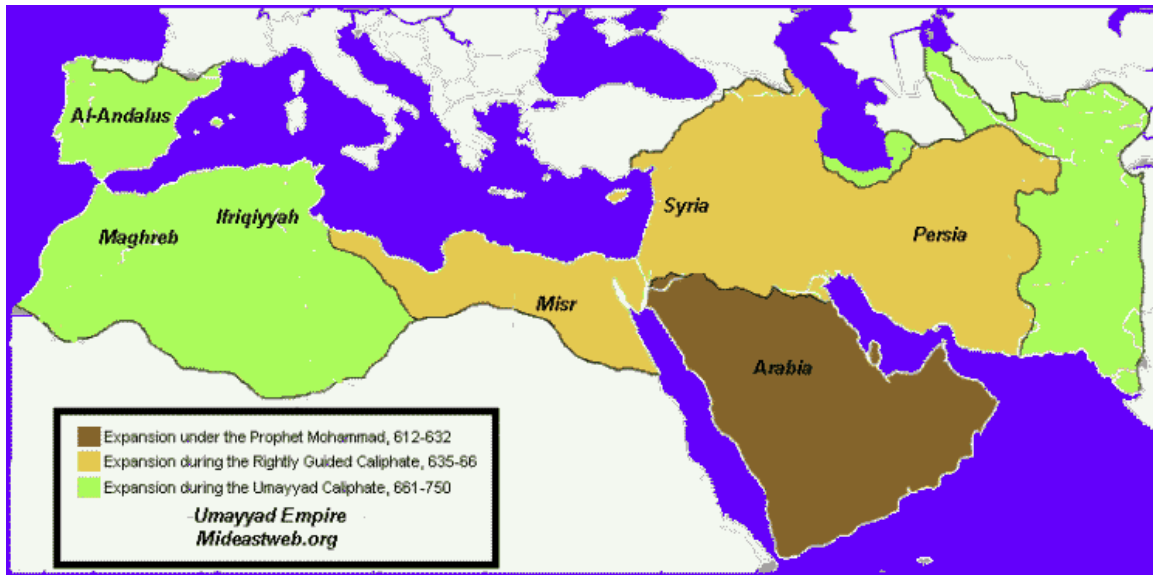


Fig. 9 Map showing the expansion of the Umayyad Empire from 612 to 750 C.E.
(Map taken from: <http://www.mideastweb.org/Middle-East-Encyclopedia/umayyad.htm>)

5. Acknowledgements

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6. Conclusion

When trying to determine whether spiritual or practical concerns would have been the primary reasons for the monks' settlement in remote territories as opposed to urban settings, one must consider that remaining in Constantinople, or any other Byzantine city, would have provided the monastery a great deal of security and protection. The spiritual and biological aspects of living in the "Virgin's Garden," however, would have been almost impossible to replicate. Additionally, the elements that make the Mt. Athos peninsula desirable in a practical sense, such as its remoteness and the mountainous terrain, also contribute to the serenity of the place. Perhaps the monks thought of their religious and worldly concerns as one, and saw their settlement on Mt. Athos as God providing them a place of both physical and spiritual refuge. Just as the monks would have seen the site and their faith connected together, the landscape remains inextricably linked with the spiritual and serene nature of the monasteries.

7. Endnotes

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<http://trumpeter.athabasca.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/294/434>
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 20. Ming Kuo, Naomi Sachs, and Jerry Smith, "Health Benefits of Nature." *American Society of Landscape Architects*. <https://www.asla.org/healthbenefitsofnature.aspx>
 21. The panopticon principle originated with Jeremy Bentham, who intended it for use in prisons. A centrally located guard tower overlooks a ring of cells, meaning the guard could be observing any prisoner at a given time. Despite its original use in penal architecture, today it is often used to describe any visually prominent and centrally located architectural element. See Richard Ingersoll and Spiro Kostof, *World Architecture, a Cross-Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 628-629.
 22. Two major Iconoclasms occurred within the Byzantine Empire, one from 726 to 787, and another one from 814 to 842. In both of these cases, Byzantine Emperors viewed recent crises as divine punishment for failing to follow the commandment "though shall not make any graven image."
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