

World Heritage Sites

Protected Areas and World Heritage



MOUNT ATHOS GREECE

Mount Athos has been a principal spiritual centre of the Eastern Orthodox church and maintained an autonomous status since Byzantine times. The mountain republic of 20 monasteries and some 1,400 monks preserves, along with exclusion of women, the agricultural and craft traditions of a medieval Mediterranean agrarian culture and a treasury of vernacular architecture, art and manuscripts. Its spiritual authority and its art especially, have been influential for a thousand years throughout the Orthodox Christian world, including Russia.

COUNTRY

Greece

NAME

Mount Athos

MIXED CULTURAL AND NATURAL WORLD HERITAGE SERIAL SITE

1988: Inscribed on the World Heritage List under Cultural Criteria i, ii, iv, v & vi + Natural Criterion vii.

STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE [pending]

IUCN MANAGEMENT CATEGORY

Unassigned

BIOGEOGRAPHICAL PROVINCE

Mediterranean Sclerophyll (2.17.7)

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

The site is on Akti, the easternmost of the three peninsulas of Khalkidike in the Macedonian Region, about 150 km southeast of Thessaloniki: 40° 15'N by 24° 10'E.

DATES AND HISTORY OF ESTABLISHMENT

10th-11th centuries: Twelve of the existing monasteries were founded; seven others were founded by the end of the 14th century;

1046: The Emperor Constantine IX banned women and female animals from the mountain;

1926: The Greek government guaranteed Mount Athos as a semi-autonomous region, based on the *typikon* of 971;

1963: The Grand Lavra, the largest and earliest still existing monastery, founded by St. Athanasios;

1972: The Byzantine Emperor John Tsimices granted the Holy Mountain by a *typikon* its exceptional status as a monastic republic answerable only to the emperor;

1977: The signatory states of the Common Market recognized this special status.

LAND TENURE

The land is separately held by the 20 monastic brotherhoods which comprise the self-governing and semi-autonomous republic of the Holy Mountain under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The civil administrator is the Governor of Mount Athos under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

AREA

33,042 ha (UNESCO WHC, 2007).

ALTITUDE

Sea level to 2,033m (Mt. Athos)

PHYSICAL FEATURES

Akti is a 7-18 km-wide forested limestone mountain peninsula of great natural beauty which extends from a low narrow isthmus connected to the mainland, 56 km into the Aegean Sea, culminating at its southern end in Mount Athos, 2,033m high. The landscape is rugged and wild, scored by deep gorges and small valleys. Two-thirds is forest and woodland, one third scrubby garrigue and rocks. The coastline is rocky and steep.

CLIMATE

The climate is temperate Mediterranean, with cold wet winters from November to March, when Mount Athos itself is usually snow-capped and the east coast is lashed by north winds, and hot dry summers modified by the sea. The average temperatures at nearby Thessaloniki are 5°C in winter and 26.5°C in summer. Rainfall there is low, ranging between 500-700mm. The west coast is sheltered and warmer.

VEGETATION

The vegetation is not unusual except that, having been well protected for centuries, it preserves species now becoming rare. Two-thirds of the vegetation cover is a mixed broadleaved deciduous, broadleaved evergreen and, at higher elevations, conifer forest, one third is sclerophyllous scrub and rock. Sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa*, often planted for timber, is co-dominant, with holm and Hungarian oaks *Quercus ilex* and *Q. trainetto*; with oriental plane *Platanus orientalis*. Main scrub species are arbutus *Arbutus unedo*, cypress *Cupressus sempervirens*, laurel *Laurus nobilis*, lentisk *Pistachio lentiscus*, phillyrea *Phillyrea latifolia*, wild olive *Olea europea* and heather *Erica* spp. Higher level forests are generally of black pine *Pinus nigra*, oak and cedar *Calocedrus decurrens*, with sub-alpine vegetation above (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a). Traditional conservation has left some of the forest unusually intact but some is being logged (Heath & Evans, 2000).

FAUNA

Little precise information is available about mammals, though grey wolf *Canis lupus*, wild boar *Sus scrofa* and many snakes are reported by recent visitors. It is probable that there are red fox *Vulpes vulpes*, jackal *Canis aureus*, European badger *Meles meles*, beech marten *Martes foina*, stoat *Mustela erminea*, weasel *Mustela nivalis vulgaris*, European hedgehog *Erinaceus concolor*, shrews *Crocidura* spp and various mice. The presence of the persecuted Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* (CR) was reported in 2006 (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a) possibly from lairs on Piperi in the Northern Sporades Marine Park. Among the birds noted in Grimmett & Jones (1989) and Heath & Evans (2000) are black stork *Ciconia nigra*, short-toed snake-eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni* (VU), capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus*, eagle owl *Bubo bubo*, the near threatened Yelkouan shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* and Audouin's gull *Larus audouinii*. They note several raptors for the nearby peninsula of Sithonia and that Athos is a nationally important area for raptor breeding and passage. The numerous wetlands of the north Aegean coast attract wading birds which may pass through.

CONSERVATION VALUE

Mount Athos with its twenty monasteries has been a principal spiritual centre of the Eastern Orthodox church since Byzantine times, is still autonomous, and preserves along with the agricultural and craft traditions of a medieval Mediterranean agrarian culture, a treasury of striking vernacular architecture, art and manuscripts, which has been influential for a thousand years throughout the Orthodox Christian world and is still revered. The peninsula lies within a Conservation International-designated Conservation Hotspot and in a WWF Global 200 Marine Eco-region.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The peninsula was populated in pre-Christian times. From the 4th century hermits took refuge there and monks from Athos attended the Council of 843, but the early monasteries were often subject to pirate raids. In 883, Emperor Basil II issued the first imperial charter for their protection. The first still existing foundation was of the premier monastery, the Great Lavra, on the tip of the peninsula, founded by St Athanassios and financed by his friend Emperor Nicephoros Phocas and the next emperor, John Tzimiskes who retired there. Thereafter, Athos became the principal spiritual center of the Orthodox church. This influence persisted especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and despite the establishment of the Patriarchate of Moscow in 1589. Its fortunes have fluctuated between prosperous periods such as the 10th and 15th centuries when the numbers of monks and monasteries were far larger than now, and desertion after depredation by pirates, western Christians and Ottoman Turks. The latter taxed so heavily as to oblige the monkish communities to split up and become idiorrhythmic. But time and again, imperial Byzantine and royal Russian or Serbian benefactions have restored prosperity. Mount Athos remains the strict guardian of Orthodox traditional worship.

The millennium-long preservation of the Mountain as a sacred place has made it a unique artistic site which combines its natural beauty with ancient architectural forms which grouped together look like small castellated hill villages. The monasteries preserve the typical layout of Orthodox monastic establishments strictly organized according to principles dating from the 10th century: a square, rectangular or trapezoidal wall flanked by towers; under this the cells surround the community's church (*catholicon*), which stands alone in the center. The forms of the refectory, hospital, library, chapels, fountains, defensive arsenal and watchtower and the farms worked by the monks are all characteristic of the medieval Byzantine period. The monastic ideal has thus preserved a conservatory of vernacular architecture and agricultural and craft traditions representative of a medieval Mediterranean agrarian culture attenuated elsewhere.

The monasteries are filled with masterpieces of Eastern Orthodox art: 14th century murals by Manuel Panselinos in the Protaton church in Karyes village, and 16th century murals by Frangos Castellanos and Theophanis the Cretan at the Great Lavra. Frescos and mosaics (totalling some 100,000 square metres), portable icons, miniatures, gold artifacts, embroidered vestments, edicts and a wealth of illuminated parchment manuscripts are preserved in each monastery. The library of 13,000 manuscripts in the Vatopedi monastery is the richest in the Greek Orthodox world. Conservation of varying quality is done by individual monasteries, but a consistent approach does not exist (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a). Culturally, the Mountain has exerted lasting influence on the development of the religious architecture and monumental painting of the Orthodox world. The typical layout of Athonite monasteries was used as far away as Russia. Iconographic themes, codified by the Mount Athos school of painting were used and elaborated from Crete to the Balkans from the 16th century onwards. In the 18th century the rules were laid down in minute detail in the *Painters' Manual*. The presence of the Orthodox church in more than 20 nations today continues to endow the Mountain with an exceptional universal significance.

LOCAL HUMAN POPULATION

In 1046 the Emperor Constantine IX banned women and female animals (except cats) from the mountain, which is still inhabited only by men, most of them monks living in cenobitic (communal) or in idiorrhythmic (eremitic) establishments. In 1903 the monks numbered 7,000; by 1965, after the exodus from Turkey and the wars, there were only 1,490, but younger men have now begun to return and the revival affects all aspects of the mountain's activities (Lyttle, 2004). By 2001 the population of Athos was

about 2,260 including 1,536 monks (Kostantinos, 2001). The monks live in 20 monasteries and their dependencies: 12 *skites* (minor monasteries), and many *kellia* (farmhouses), *kathismata* (individual cells) and hermitages. They come from Greece, Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Rumania and share a common liturgy and routine of prayer and manual work, following the 4th century rule of St. Basil. Several anchorites also live in the 'desert' of Karoulia at the extreme end of the mountain where cells cling to the cliff face rising steeply above the sea. The only port is Daphni on the west coast near the central administrative settlement of Karyes. There is a little agriculture.

VISITORS AND VISITOR FACILITIES

Pilgrims and students are welcomed but casual sightseers are not encouraged. Before entering the area however, visitors, who are limited to 120 a day if Orthodox Christian, or in groups of 10 per day if not, may stay four days only. They must register in Thessaloniki and submit permits from the Mount Athos office in Ouranoupolis, and if foreign, also passports and permits from the government. Visitors' cars are not permitted. The usual access is by boat from Lerissos to the east coast monasteries and from Ouranoupolis to the west coast monasteries. From Daphni there is a bus up to Karyes and a boat to the monasteries in the southwest. Any monastery may be visited, by mule or on foot, and hospitality is offered to guests. There are detailed annotated guides to the many walks, and there are hotels in the towns of Ouranoupolis and in Lerissos north of the isthmus.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND FACILITIES

Many antiquarians and religious historians and scholars visit to study the great number of manuscripts, paintings and artifacts. Among the studies supported by the Ministry of Culture used for management of the site are risk assessment, archaeological surveys and constant monitoring (UNESCO/WHC, 2006b).

MANAGEMENT

The republic is self-governing according to long tradition, and was declared semi-autonomous in 1926. It is governed, under the ecumenical Patriarchate of Istanbul, by the Holy Assembly, the legislature which meets twice a year, by the Holy Community (administration), and by the executive Holy Supervision, four monks annually chosen from each of five monastic groups, drawing on each of the twenty monasteries in turn. Each monastery regulates its own territory. The Governor of Mount Athos, based in the central town of Karyes, is the civil administrator under the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Major government restoration work is aided by the office of the 10th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture. Monks welcome pilgrims but do not encourage tourists, which helps to preserve the integrity of the area. The muletracks and footpaths between monasteries are maintained with the help of the Friends of Mount Athos and similar organizations. Its ecology and traditional organic farming methods will continue to be protected by the monks' conservatism. A ban on grazing has allowed the forest to regenerate in places. Fishing within 500m from the shore is limited to the monks, and there is little illegal fishing but coastal facilities are put up without consideration of their effect.

Due in part to the idiorhythmic tradition of the twelve monasteries, there has been a lack of overall management of the peninsula. In 2006 an IUCN/ICOMOS mission visited the property to gauge its state of conservation and the effectiveness of management to protect the site's world heritage values against threats. It produced a detailed report which emphasised the need for a risk-preparedness study, especially for fire, and for a multi-disciplinary management plan for the whole peninsula to achieve some consistency among the many independent conservation activities (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a). In response the State Party submitted two reports in 2010: one by the government on the state of conservation and restoration of seven monasteries and the creation of an exposition of treasures shown abroad. The second, from the Holy Community, was a comprehensive account of improvements during 2008-9. This was the development of electronic documentation of the mountain's cultural resources, building projects, infrastructure, safety, and measures for the management of the environment: forest fires, floodwaters, erosion, disasters, forest coppicing and waste disposal. In addition it provided a framework for comprehensive management of the cultural and natural values of the property (UNESCO, 2010).

MANAGEMENT CONSTRAINTS

There are two main threats to the site. Fire is the greatest threat to the old forests and monasteries. There was a notable forest fire in 1990 and in 2004 fire destroyed half the ancient Serbian monastery of Halandari (Chilandar), now being restored. Roads financed by the EU and the government have been intrusively cut through the chestnut forests to improve emergency fire access and make the forests more accessible for timber extraction, which is threatening their integrity. Erosion, earth dumps and car-dumping have followed (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a). Many chestnuts *Castanea sativa* are also dying from disease (Heath & Evans, 2000). The traditional independence of each monastery makes agreement on heritage protection more difficult. An unusual challenge has been the recent rift between the monks, of Esphigmenou monastery in particular, who wish to preserve the independence of the traditional orthodox rite and the majority (supported by the government) who have followed the Patriarch of Constantinople into a measure of ecumenical agreement with the Roman Catholic church.

STAFF

The Republic is run by the monks themselves, following a roster. They are aided by the civil authority. The head of each monastery is the director of his community and its territory. Each monk has his assigned duty in the monastic routine, but decreasing numbers have led to the employment of laymen for much of the menial work. The Ministry of Culture employs a monitoring and rehabilitation staff of 164 (UNESCO/WHC, 2006b).

BUDGET

E2million was granted by the Greek Biotope-Wetland Centre (EKBY) between 2003-2006 for rehabilitation of the forests and training in management, using EU funds from the LIFE-Nature Programme (UNESCO/WHC, 2006a). Revenues come from entrance fees, from endowments and from the government compensation for lands expropriated by the state. Funds are needed to finance the restoration of Halandari.

LOCAL ADDRESSES

Mount Athos Pilgrim Bureau, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate of Churches, 2, Zalokosta St., Athens, Greece.

Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace, Directorate of Political Affairs, Plateia, Diikitiriou, Thessaloniki.

Hellenic Ministry of Culture - 10th Ephorate of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Antiquities, 63100 Polygyros, Chalkidiki, Greece.

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DATE

1988, Updated 9-2008, 9-2010, May 2011.