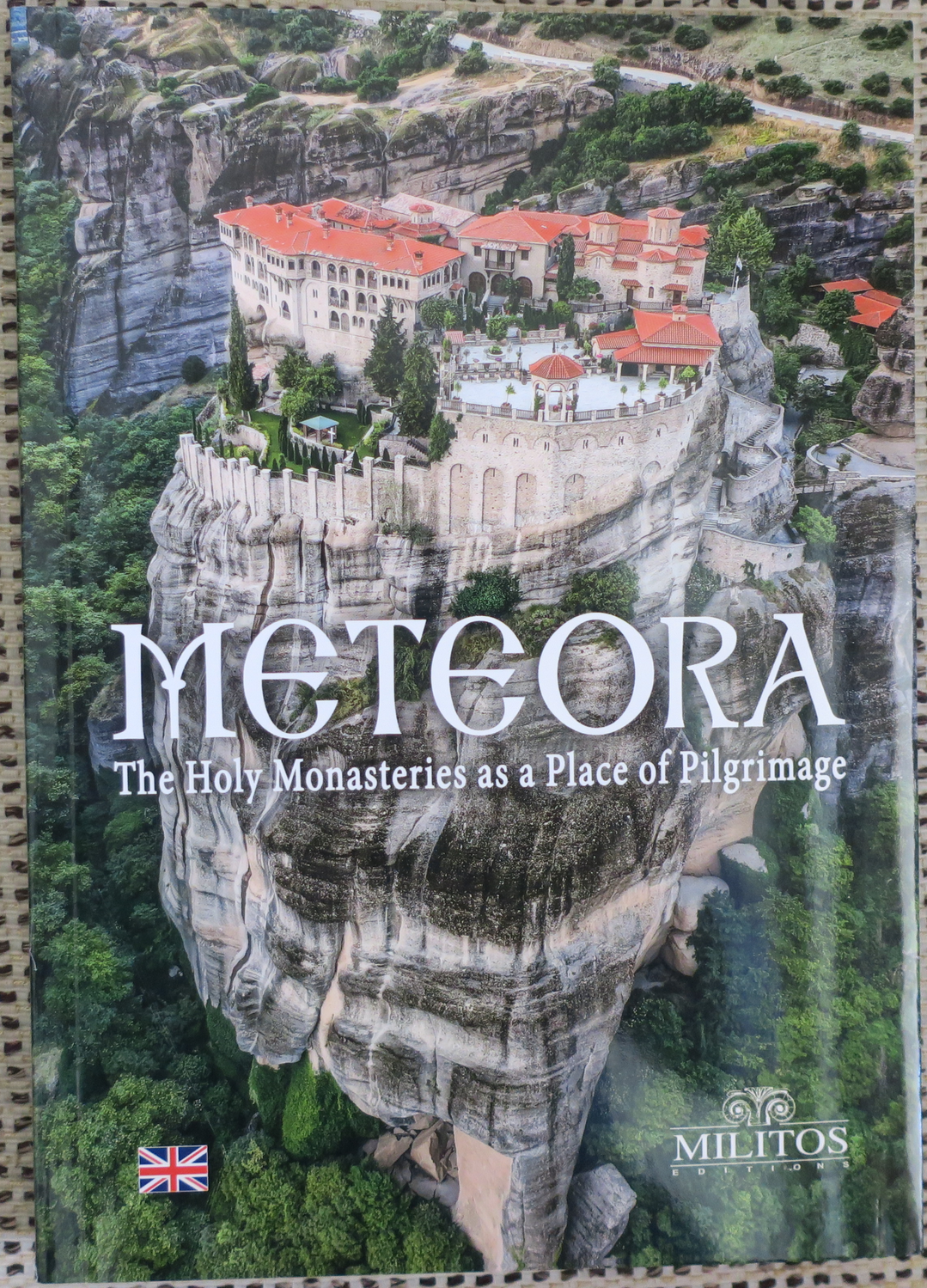
METEORA
The Holy Monasteries as a Place of Pilgrimage
MILITOS
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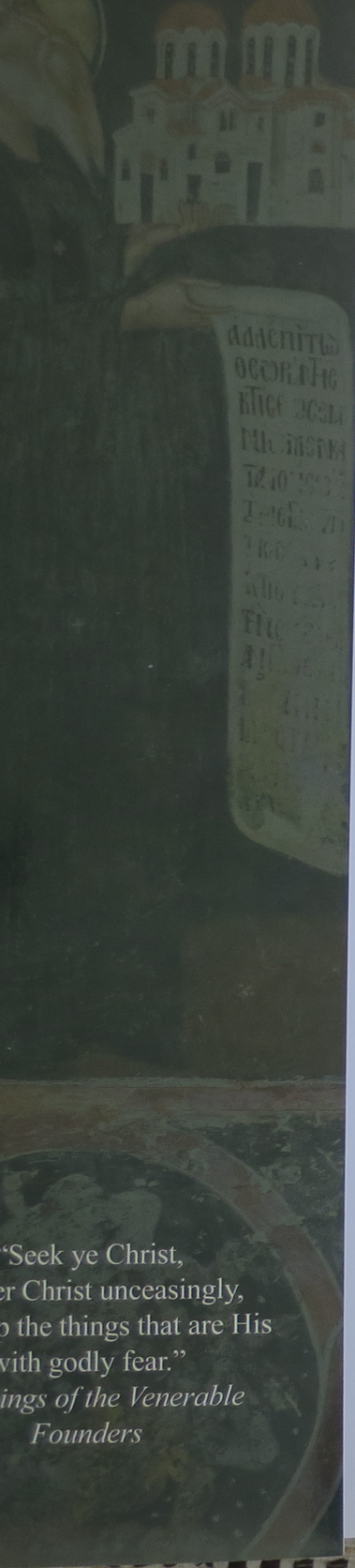


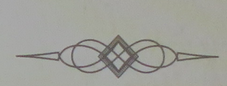
METEORA

The Holy Monasteries as a Place of Pilgrimage

THE HOLY MONASTERY
OF ALL SAINTS (VARLAAM)
2025



With reverence and deepest respect,
the present "Meteora. The Holy Monasteries
as a Place of Pilgrimage"
is gratefully and lovingly dedicated and offered
to the immortal memory of our most honorable
and spiritual father, the Former Kathegumen
of this Holy Monastery,
Elder Isidoros.





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Preface of the Kathegumen

The towering rocks of the Holy Meteora constitute a remarkable geological wonder, but also a living cultural and religious treasure, with monasteries suspended between earth and sky, built with faith, patience, and perseverance on their inaccessible peaks. Each rock tells a story; every church and hermitage whispers centuries-old memories and exhales spiritual incense.

For more than seven centuries, this stone city has served as a dwelling and place of asceticism for numerous monks, who lived either in solitude "in caves and crevices of the earth" or in organized monastic communities, striving in the silence of the rocks to fight "the good fight of faith". It became a place of prayer and contemplation for a host of saints, ascetics, and martyrs of faith, as well as a center of artistic creation. Perched upon the sky-reaching stones, the monasteries and hermitages of Meteora are a living testimony to deep faith and wholehearted devotion to God, as well as a persistent effort to preserve our ecclesiastical tradition and national heritage.

Today, the monastic community of the Holy Meteora remains one of the most important monastic centers in the Orthodox world—a living place, which, despite the erosive effect of time and the difficulties of the present age, continues to operate, offering prayers and supplications to the Creator, welcoming pilgrims, and providing words of consolation and hope. It is, in a way, a spiritual beehive from which the faithful everywhere may gather the honey of life in Christ.

At the same time, Meteora is a place that breathes history, radiates Orthodox spirituality, and generously offers visitors an irresistible natural beauty that, by itself, can save the world. It is no wonder, then, that the Holy Meteora has been recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, enjoying universal recognition and admiration.

The Holy Monasteries as a Place of Pilgrimage is not merely a repository of historical information, but an invitation to a deeper understanding of a sacred place. It addresses all kinds of visitors

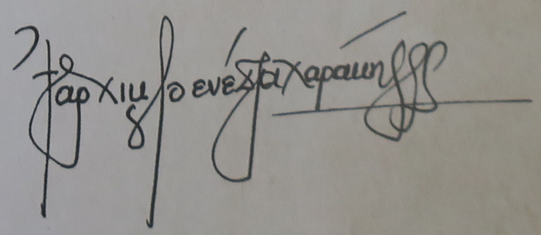
to the stone forest of Meteora—reverent pilgrims, lovers of natural landscapes, enthusiasts of Christian art, or even simple travelers from every corner of the earth; all who walk through the Meteoritic Thebaid, whether to discover its history and religious character, or to receive spiritual experiences and come into contact with a landscape of unparalleled beauty. "*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest*". (Matthew 11:28)

This second edition of the Pilgrimage Guide is lovingly and respectfully dedicated to our Elder, the former abbot of the Holy Monastery of Varlaam, the Very Reverend Archimandrite Isidoros Tsiatas, for his many years of service and spiritual contribution to the rock of Varlaam, where God appointed him to dwell.

We warmly thank all those who worked with dedication and zeal for the completion of this book. To the visitors and pilgrims of the Holy Meteora, and to the readers of this Guide, we extend our most heartfelt paternal wishes, that their visit to this sanctified place may become an opportunity for spiritual uplift and inner renewal.

A humble intercessor before the Lord,

The Kathegumen,
Archimandrite Benediktos Zacharakis





Introduction

HISTORY OF METEORA

AT THE NORTHWESTERN EDGE OF THE THESSALY region, on the outskirts of Chasia and in front of mountain Koziakas, stand the giant volumes of the rocky forest of Meteora facing the city of Kalabaka and the Pineios River that flows slowly along the plain of Thessaly.

The geological development of the Meteora rocks, in all their diversity and their majestic uniqueness, is attributed to the conglomerate deposits of a deltaic system which took its present shape thanks to the enduring impact over many centuries of strong tectonic forces and thanks to the weathering effect of nature, water and wind.

Leaving aside the scientific debate about the geology and the geomorphology of the area, both the mind and the soul of the intellectually curious visitor and pious pilgrim of Meteora are overwhelmed with the feelings of wonder, intoxication, and exaltation elicited by the unique character of the immense rocks and by the sanctifying presence of the monasteries perched like eagles' nests atop the rocky giants of the "Holy Stone City". At the foot of the rocks and in the surrounding area, the rich flora in its great variety of hues stands in sharp contrast to the nakedness and roughness of the tall rocks.

The uniqueness and beauty of the natural environment, as well as the long ascetic and monastic tradition spanning many centuries, explain why the Holy Meteora were included in UNESCO's World Cultural and Natural Heritage List in 1998 and in Natura 2000, the European network of protected areas.

The origins of the ascetic community of Meteora are lost in time. It seems, however, that the first hermits and monks climbed on



these rocks already in the 11th century seeking refuge and peace in their cavities. This small ascetic community was then reconstituted in the 12th century into the so-called Skete of Doupiani or Stagoi. Its center of worship (the "Kyriako") became the Panagia chapel on the Doupiani rock where hermits flocked from their prayer cells every Sunday to attend the Eucharist.

In the 14th century, the head of the Skete of Stagoi bore the title of the protos and kathegumen of the Skete based on the athonite model. According to the so-called *Historical Treatise* or *Chronicle of Meteora*, "no-one else was called hegumen in all the monasteries of Meteora; ...the *protos* of the skete also bore the title of hegumen". The leading figure of the Skete of Stagoi was the protos Nilos, the hegumen of the monastery of Panagia Doupiani and one of the *ktitors* of the Monastery of the Ascension (Hypapante) in the year 1366/67.

In the first half of the 14th century the arrival of Athonite monks, who flocked there to escape Turkish raids in Mount Athos, played a



seminal role in the development of monasticism in Meteora. Among those who sought refuge in the "Thebais" of Stagoi were the elder Gregorios and his spiritual servant, St Athanasius. By founding the monastery of Great Meteoron, Athanasius introduced in the Skete of Stagoi the spirit of cenobitic monasticism which eventually prevailed over idiorrhythmic and solitary monasticism.

During the early period of Turkish rule, and despite the difficult circumstances, more than twenty monasteries were erected or renovated in the rocky forest of Meteora. This is why Meteora is rightly considered to be the biggest and the most important monastic center after Mount Athos. The "monk city" of Ioannina played significant role since it was the city of origin for the *ktitors* of the Monasteries of Varlaam and Roussanou as well as for many monks. However, most of the monasteries in Meteora were either deserted or ruined due to various vicissitudes of fortune and due to the corrosive effect of time.

Kastraki.



Top: View of the modern city of Kalabaka and Lithopolis of Stagoi.

Today, six monasteries remain in operation: Great Meteoron (Transfiguration), Varlaam, Roussanou, St. Nicholas Anapafsas, Holy Trinity and St. Stephen. They continue their tradition of orthodox witness spanning many centuries and their contribution to the nation and society. Moreover, the chapels of Doupiani and of the Nativity of Mary at Kofinia, the monastery of Hypapante, and the Hermitages of St. Nicholas Badova and St. Anthony have also been conserved and restored.



Bottom: View of Kalabaka and the towering rocks of Meteora.



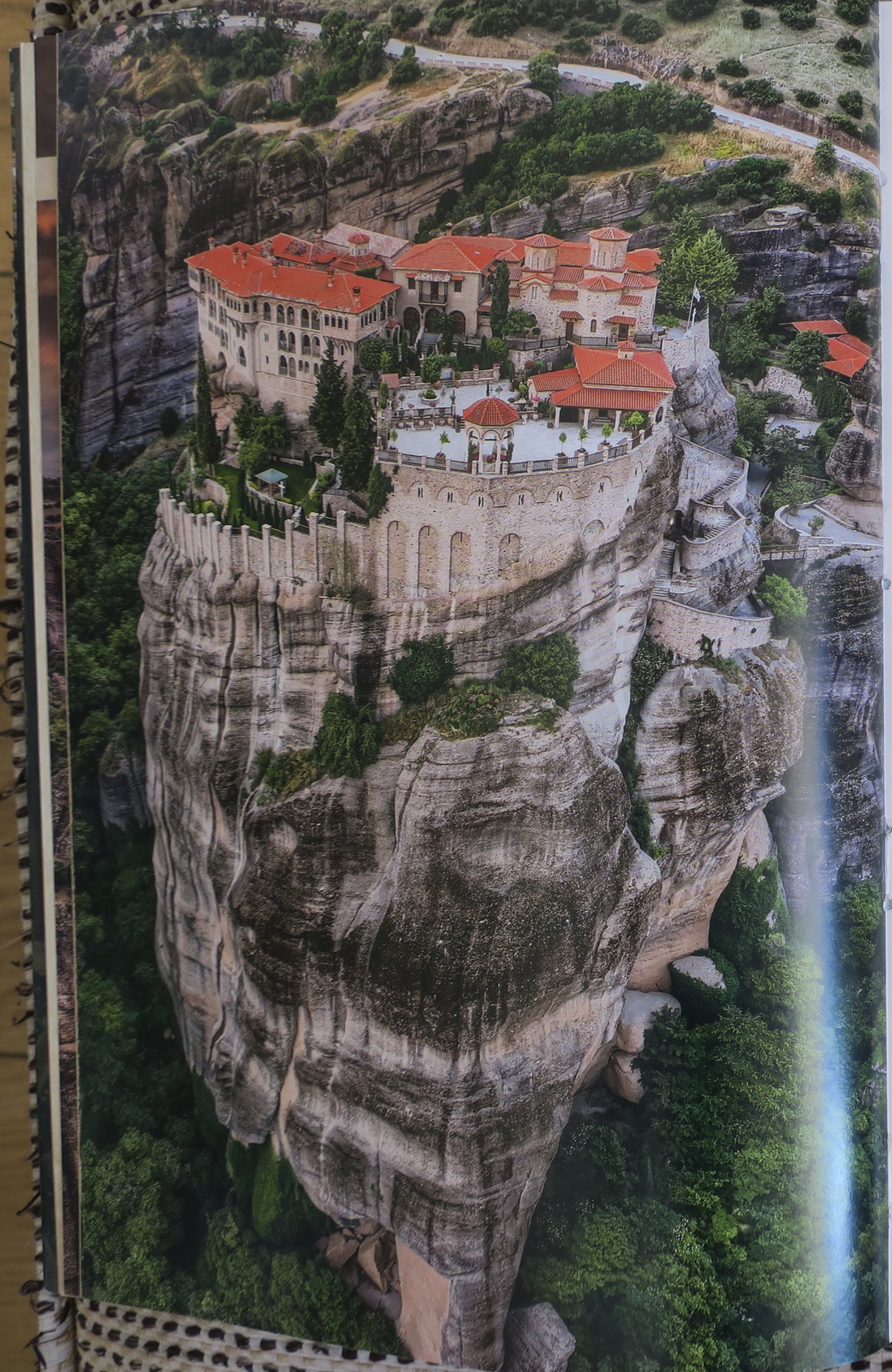
Holy Monastery of Varlaam and Meteora rocks.

Rocks of Meteora: "wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:38).



Left: The small monastery of Saint Anthony.
Bottom: The hermitage of Saint Gregory the Righteous.

Kastraki, hermitage of Saint George "Mantilas".



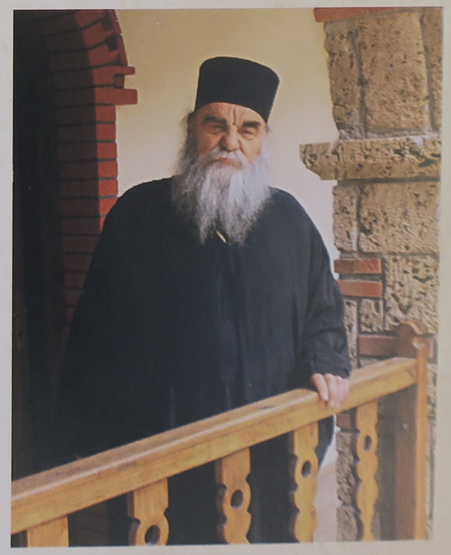
THE HOLY MONASTERY OF ALL SAINTS (VARLAAM)

A. HISTORY

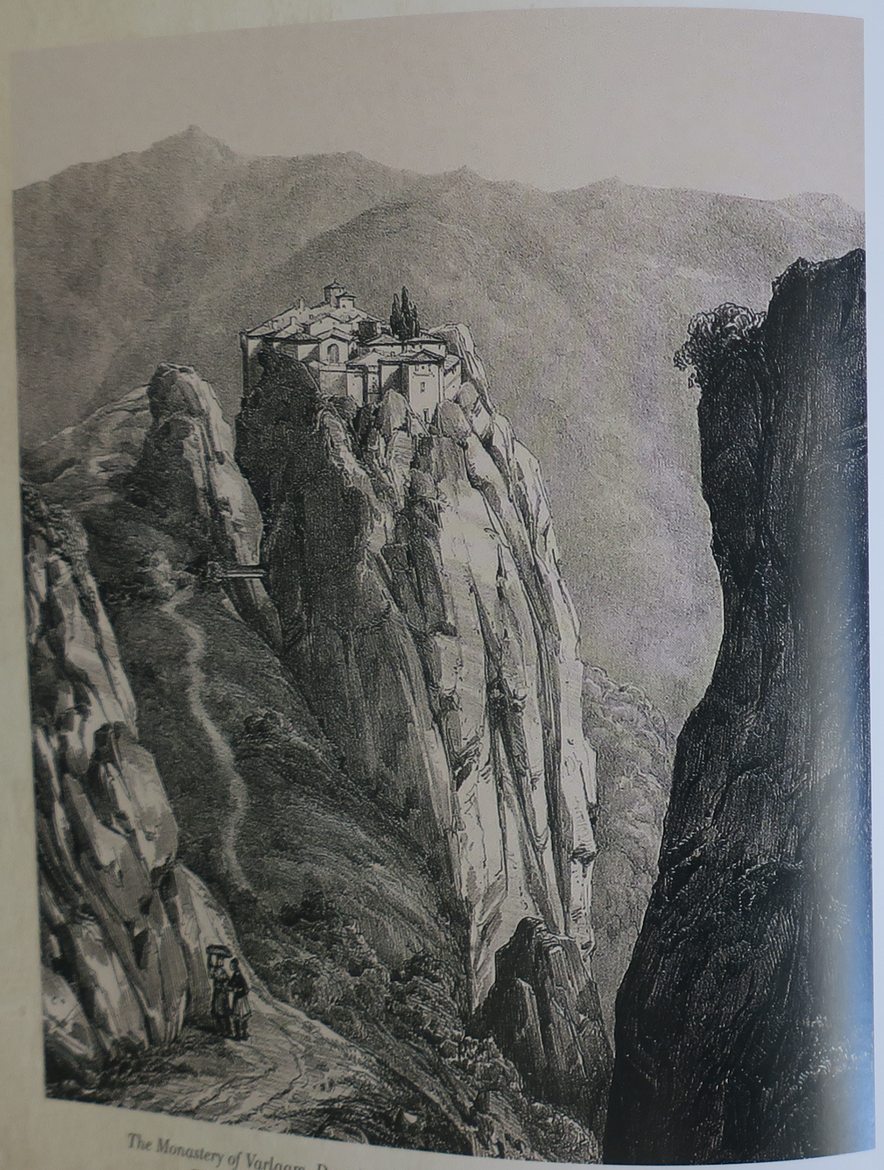
Location

The Monastery of All Saints, commonly known as Monastery of Varlaam, is built on top of an imposing rock towering above Skafidakia and Drakospilia at the northwestern edge of the rocky city of Meteora and not far from the Great Meteoron and the Roussanou Monastery.

The monastery is perched on a unique spot and the view from the rock is awe-inspiring. In his lyrical description of the landscape, Dr. Nikolaos Georgiadis mentions that "the view from Meteoron and Varlaam is just wonderful, compensating the bold traveler who entrusted his life to the rope net; he sees black rocks in front of him, each one stranger than the other, he sees the rich vegetation around him and Kastraki in the middle, springing like a colorful flower he sees the verdant hills of Chasia and the Pindus mountain range on the background and in the midst of it all the narrow stream of the Pineios river expanding slowly as it flows across the plain of Thessaly".



The late former Abbot of the Monastery of Varlaam, Elder Isidoros.



The Monastery of Varlaam. Drawing by Charles Robert Cockerell, from the book by Thomas Smart Hughes "Travels in Sicily, Greece and Albania".

Name-foundation - historical development

According to tradition, the imposing rock of Varlaam was settled for the first time during the first half of the 14th century by a contemporary of Saint Athanasius the Meteorite, the hermit Varlaam, who gave his name to the rock. In the Biography of Saint Athanasius, it is mentioned that Varlaam drove out with his slingshot a group of bandits who tried to rob the Saint.

The first ktitors of the monastery, however, were the brothers and priest-monks Nektarios and Theophanes, the offspring of the wealthy and illustrious byzantine family of Apsaras from Ioannina. We can learn about their lives from the ktitors themselves in their autobiographical writings (the autobiography and the testamentary letter of the year 1541/42, the contemporary *enthymiseis* (memoirs) in codice 127 of the Monastery of Varlaam) but also from other documents praising them about their character that appear in codices 257 and 180 of the Monastery of Varlaam and in codice 172 of the athonite Monastery of Panteleimon.

According to their autobiography, brothers Nektarios and Theophanes came to the Ioannina Island at a young age (around 1495) and were received as monks by the elder Savas (honored on February 3rd), with whom they stayed for a decade. After his death, the two brothers went to the Dionysiou Monastery in Athos and stayed with the former Ecumenical Patriarch Nephon II († 12 Aug. 1508), seeking new spiritual sources for their monastic life.

After staying for a few years in Mount Athos and after asking and receiving from their enlightened spiritual mentor, patriarch Nephon, "a charter (canon) of rules for founding a monastery", they returned to their cell in the island of Ioannina. There they built at their personal expense the hermitages of Timios Prodromos (1506/7) and of Saint Nicholas in Lepeno, where their parents settled and were also received as monks taking the names Katafigi († 7 Nov. 1506) and Job (†1523/24). Their three sisters became monks and took monastic names too: Athanasia (†11 Nov. 1512), Eugenia († 1513/14) and (possibly) Magdalene. The small monastery of Saint Nicholas in Lepeno was later granted (1549) through a testamentary letter of Nektarios Apsaras to the Monastery of Varlaam.

Nevertheless, the frequent interventions of the local ecclesiastical and political authorities forced the two brothers to abandon the island in 1510/11. Bearing in mind the words of their spiritual mentor,



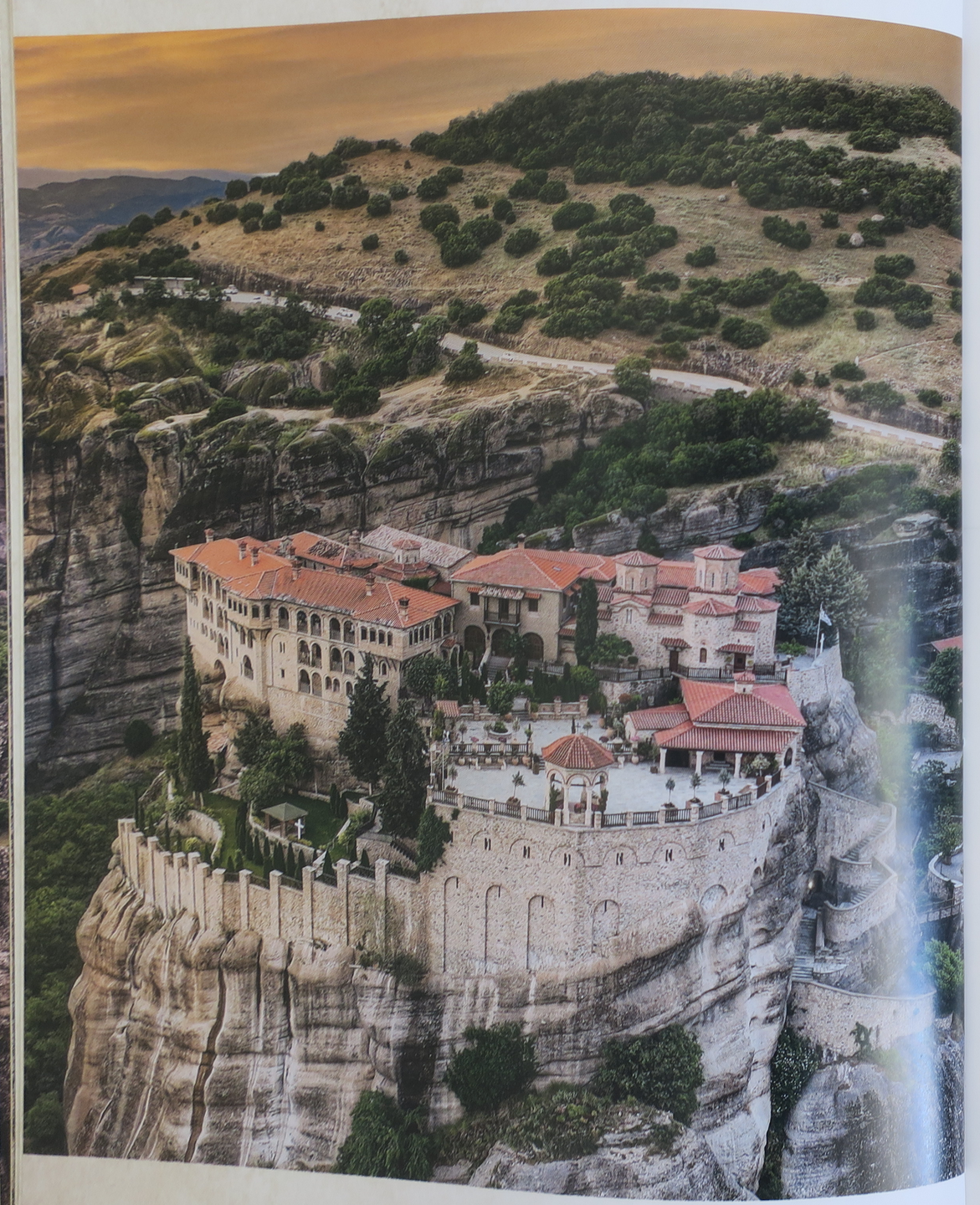


St. Nephon, who had presciently advised them that "when temptation comes, don't fight it but go to a monastery and seek peace there", they moved to the rocky city of Meteora. Seeking a new home for their ascetic fulfillment, they first settled in the Pillar (Stylos) of Prodromos and stayed there for seven years (until the autumn of 1517).

Due to limited space and because the "winds circulating there" were "harmful and unhealthy", Saints Nektarios and Theophanis chose another rock that was "broad, well aired, and serene... spacious and fit for habitation, a rock called Varlaam, because it had taken its name from a certain monk".

The two ktitors and their spiritual servants, Benedictus and Pachomius, found the sharp rock of Varlaam "abandoned for many years... and deserted". They immediately began construction activities, and they thoroughly renovated the church of the Three Holy Hierarchs, "worn down after many years, abandoned from people and ruined", and this became the first Katholikon of the monastery. The building of the church was not a smooth affair due to obstacles presented by the Ottoman authorities. After the church, the ktitors also built the appropriate shelters, the cells, the tower and the staircase.

The monastic brotherhood of Varlaam soon grew considerably reaching thirty members, and the need arose for a new, spacious





Katholikon that was built east of the Three Holy Hierarchs and was dedicated to All Saints.

For the proper operation of the *cenobium* and the smooth organization of the spiritual life of its large brotherhood, the holy ktitors Nektarios and Theophanis set out rules (a liturgical Typiko) first in their autobiography and later in their testamentary letter written in the year 1541/42. The testamentary letter was ratified in 1544/45 by a *sigillum* of the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah I after a request from St. Theophanes, who seems to have travelled to Constantinople for that purpose. The patriarchal sigillum ensured the immutability, the inalterability, and the indivisibility of the rules set out by the holy ktitors for the internal organization of the monastery and its assets and asked the bishop of Stagoi and the hegumen of Great Meteoron to respect the testament. On its part, the brotherhood of the Monastery of Varlaam had to respect and defer to the bishop of Stagoi and to honor his name.

After a strict period of askesis spanning many years, an unflagging spiritual struggle and a ten-month exhaustion due to illness, St. Theophanes passed away on 17 May 1544, on a Saturday, at the dawn of the Sunday of the Blind Man, after having inspected the finished





Katholikon of the monastery and blessed all the attendants. According to the account of the prohegumen of the Simonos Petras Monastery, the priest-monk Kassianos, the death of St. Theophanes was accompanied with the miraculous presence of a "bright and luminous star throwing its full light over the building". Six years later, St. Nektarios passed away on 7 April 1550, on the Monday of Renewal.

Concerning the foundation of the monastery, the holy brothers mention in their testamentary letter that "we built cells in which the ascetic monks and other visitors could rest, and we also rebuilt and improved other buildings in the monastery. We also equipped the monastery with vessels and books and vestments for the priests and deacons in the glory of God". Most of all, they left behind them a strict *cenobium*, "pure and sincere", which was organized in an exemplary way with a large enough immovable property and with a monastic brotherhood built on a stable spiritual foundation.

Already since the time of the ktitors, the monastery maintained spiritual bonds with the Dousikou Monastery and with its ktitor, St. Bessarion († 13 Sept. 1540), metropolitan of Larissa, whose testa-



ment was the model on which the ktitors based their own testamentary letter. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the period 1521–Aug. 1529, in the early years after the two brothers from Ioannina settled on the rock of Varlaam, St. Bessarion was the exarch and later the supervisor of the bishopric of Stagoi. That's perhaps the reason why priest-monk Arsenios from the Dousikou Monastery, the archbishop of Domenikon and Elassona and later of Suzdal in Russia, showed his respect and made numerous offerings to the Monastery of Varlaam.

The ktitors of the Monastery of Varlaam had probably also a close spiritual relationship with their contemporary St. Nikanor, ktitor of the Monastery of Zavorda († 1549). The latter stipulated in his testament (1532) that the hegumen should be selected from among the brotherhood of the monastery and if that's not possible, then from Meteoron or "from the monastery of Varlaam". During his installation, the new hegumen should receive his crosier and the text of St. Nikanor's testament from the hands of one of the attendant hegumens, either from Meteoron or from the Monastery



of Varlaam. Furthermore, relations with Epirus and Ioannina, the birthplace of the ktitors, were always very close since many of the monastery's monks, priest-monks and hegumens came from there.

After the death of Saints Theophanes and Nektarios, the Monastery of Varlaam, under the spiritual leadership and wise management of their immediate successors, maintained its economic prosperity and carried on its construction activities and its spiritual growth until the beginning of the 17th century. In 1565, the lite (esonarthex) of the Katholikon was painted at the expense of the bishop of Vella, Antonios Apsaras, who was probably a relative of the ktitors. The monastery also maintained for a long period of time a well-organized bibliographical workshop as well as a gold embroidery workshop which enjoyed a good reputation in the broader region of Thessaly, Macedonia and Agrafa.

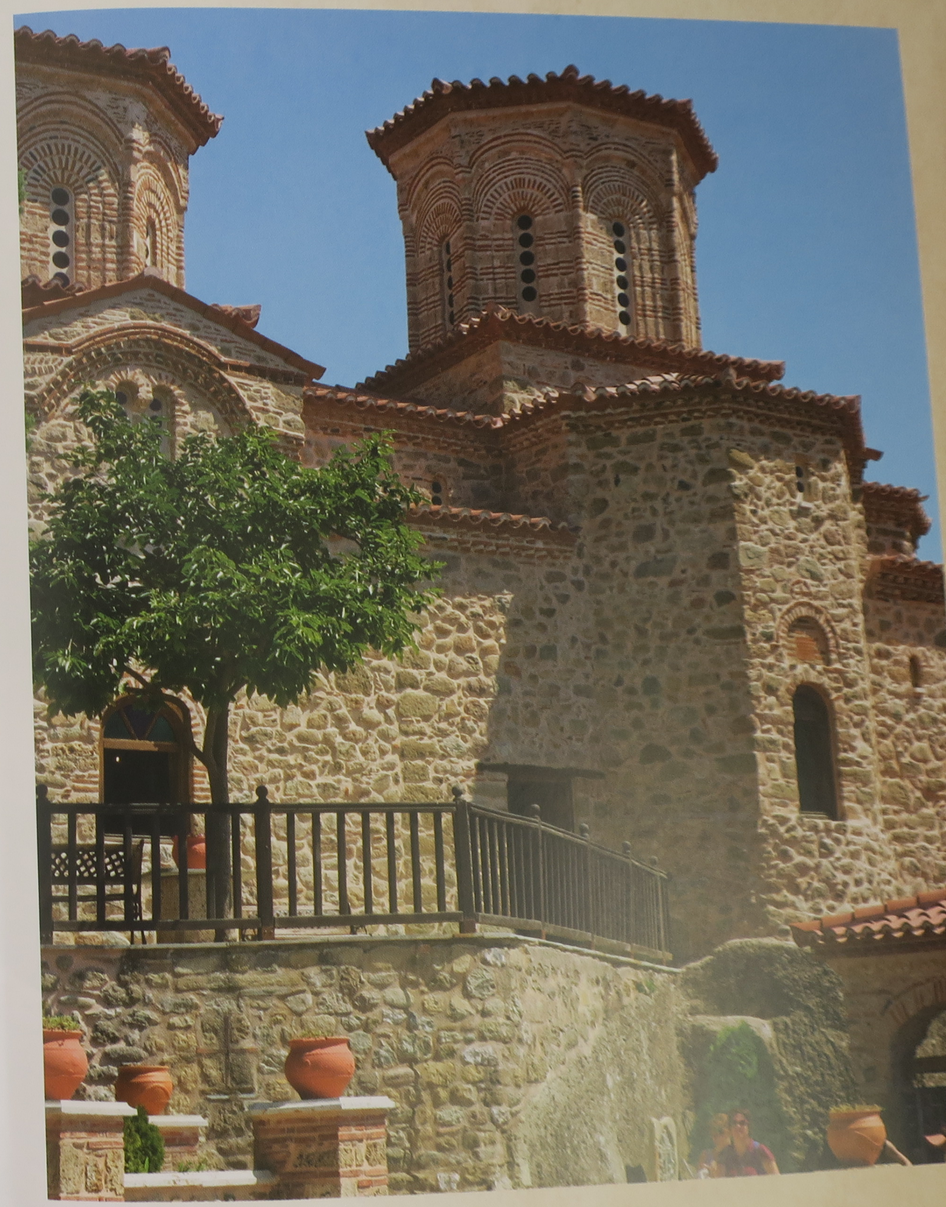
Thanks to the concern of the ktitors, until the death of St. Nektarios († 1550), the monastery acquired a large amount of immovable property in Thessaly and Osdina (Thesprotia), their original assets, as well as several buildings in Trikala and Ioannina (the small monastery of St. Nicholas in Lepeno) for the accommodation needs of the monks.

A few years later, under Sultan Selim II (1568), the property of the monastery was seized along with that of other monasteries, and the



varlaamite fathers were forced to buy it back by paying 200 thousand aspra (silver coins). In 1528 the monastery was again forced to pay the Ottoman authorities a big sum to buy back its own lands in Osdina. All the above explain why the monastery was forced to take out big loans until the 17th century.

The sponsor of the monastery during the last quarter of the 16th century was the royal house of Wallachia. At that time, the monastery of St. Nicholas in Bucotăţ of Craiova was gran ted to the monastery of Varlaam as a metochion (dependency) (post 3 Oct. 1572, perhaps in the year 1588). The grant was ratified in January 1593 with a decree by the ban of Craiova, Michael the Brave. According to the relevant note (f. 244n), the varlaamite codice 15 was written in 1607 in that metochion, which is mentioned in the codices of the monastery as "Buku vedzhi", by the famous calligrapher and illuminator Matthew from Myrea "upon the request of priest-monk M(it)rophanis and the kathegumen of the venerable monastery of Varlaam, near Meteoron... In the metochion of the monastery in Craiova". The close relationship between the monastery and Wallachia through the metochion also explains why Preda, the ban of Craiova, and his wife Katalina donated an epitrachil to the monastery. Today the former



Left: Belfry of the monastery.
Top: The Katholikon of All Saints (southern side).

varlaamite metochion in Bucotăţ operates as an ecclesiastical school of the Patriarchate of Romania.

The struggle for the survival and preservation of the monastery's property in the face of the excessive and often illegitimate demands of the Ottoman authorities persisted in the 17th century. The demands of the authorities for monetary payments were met by taking out new loans, by organizing zities (fund raising) and by resorting again to the support of the Danubian Principalities. This is the reason why, around the mid-17th century, Cyril, the hegumen of the Monastery of Varlaam, along with the hegumens of the other monasteries in Meteora and of the Dousikou Monastery, sent a letter to the Albanian prince of Moldova Vasile Lupu (1634-1653) from Epirus describing their predicament in dramatic terms and asking for his mercy and financial support.

Despite the hardships, the 17th century and especially its first half was a period of reconstruction of the monastery which managed to secure the necessary funds for the erection of the old hospital–nursing home (around the end of the 16th century), the renovation of the chapel of the Three Holy Hierarchs (1626/27) and the execution of its wall paintings ten years later (1637), as well as the construction of the trapeza (refectory) and the hestia-kitchen (most probably at the beginning of the 17th century).

The subsequent period, especially after the second half of the 18th century and until the Greek Revolution (1821), is considered to have been especially hard due to the general crisis and decline of the Ottoman Empire, but also due to the disturbing presence and activity of irregular groups of armed Albanians after the Orlov Revolt (1770). An indicative description is provided in 1788 in the pandektis of Anatolios, the hegumen of the Monastery of Varlaam, who mentions that "the holy monasteries went through a great amount



Epitrachelion, donation of the Ban of Craiova, Preda Buzescu, and his wife Katalina (c. 1602 – May 1608).



of hardship and had to pay heavy levies, which is also why they contracted big debts".

Ten years earlier (25 April 1779), the hegumen Anatolios welcomed the Swedish Orientalist Jakob Jonas Björnståhl who left an interesting description of the monastery: "There are two churches here. The number of monks is not higher than 9 or 10 and all who live on this rock do not exceed 24 persons, including the servants. After the foundation of the monastery, no woman has ever walked up here or in Meteoron. The hegumen accompanied me to one of the churches, which is not as big as that of the Meteoron but it is far more beautiful. It has two small, beautiful domes and it is rather sunny. There are wall paintings everywhere in the local style without perspective and chiaroscuro. [...] In this small, narrow rock there is more greenery than in the big, spacious rock of the Great Meteoron. Here, craftsmanship (sic) was more present, and this small piece of land was better exploited than in other monasteries. They have planted garden vegetables for their kitchen. There are also some trees, such as laurels... You can also see a nice blossoming quince tree... and a mulberry tree". After approximately half a century, when the British traveler Robert Curzon visited the monastery (9 Nov. 1834),

he gave us a picture of decline: "The place seems poor and abandoned; the best days are over; here, as elsewhere, the spirit of ascetic monasticism has begun to decline".

An interesting aspect of the monastery's history in the 18th century and until the mid-19th century is that laymen and clerics were exiled (interned) here on the initiative of the Patriarchate or of the local metropolitans and with the assent of the High Porte.

The Monastery of Varlaam also became a subject of popular music, and it is mentioned as the "cell of Varlaam" in the folk song of "Papagiorgis" or "Deli-papas", most probably a "klepht" who lived in pre-revolutionary times.

It should be noted that, despite the hardships of the times, the brotherhood of the monastery did not cease to demonstrate actively its interest on the education of the enslaved Greek nation. The monastery's codice no. 69 contains a letter from the year 1752 of the varlaamite priest-monk Amphilochios, who taught for a certain period in the School of Tyrnavos. In that letter, Amphilochios asks the Varlaamite elder Agapios Chatzis to promote the establishment of a school with the assent of "Stainoi" (i.e. the residents of Kalabaka) and the residents of Kastraki. Moreover, codice no. 287, f. 71r







includes a copy of a promissory letter from 1845 (Feb. 15) of the hegumens Agathagelos of Great Meteoron, Jacob of St. Stephen and Gregorios of Varlaam, in which they accept the obligation to contribute 500 piastres each to the schools of Trikala to pay the salaries of the teachers.

Throughout the 19th century, the monastery managed through taxes and other levies to meet its obligations and to preserve its immovable property before losing it forever at the beginning of the 20th century. In the middle of the same century, the monastery, in decline and having suffered from the wounds left by the armed conflicts of the 1940s, started again to recover.

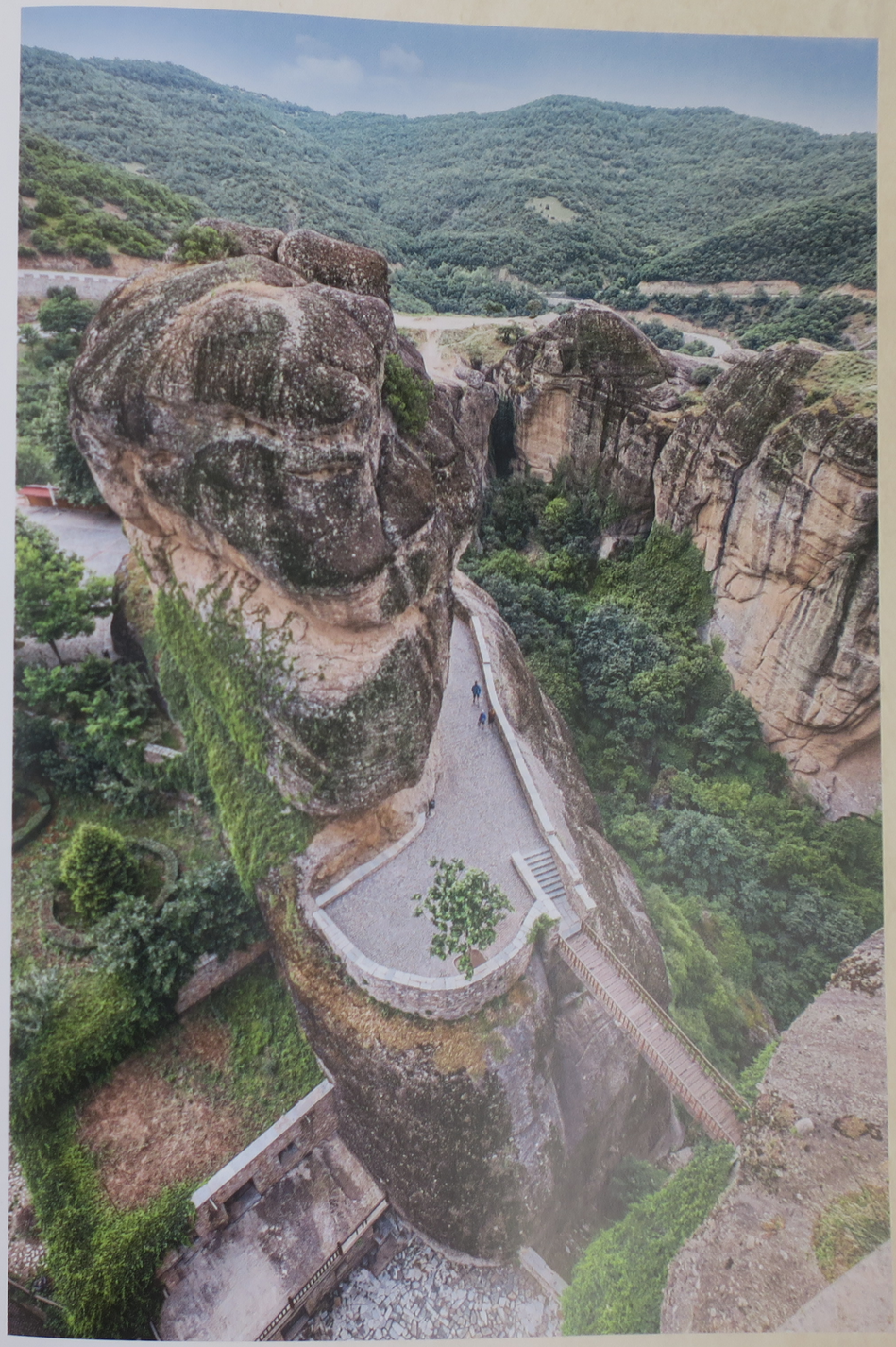
In 1961, the brotherhood of the monastery was composed of the hegumen, priest-monk Sophronios, and the fathers Chrysostomos Tetsios and Aimilianos Vafeidis. On April 2 of the same year, father Kallinikos Karousos, the future metropolitan of Piraeus, became the hegumen of the monastery with the support of the bishop of Trikki and Stagoi, Dionysios (Charalambous). His entourage of men were also received as monks: Amvrosios (Athanasios) Lenis, the future

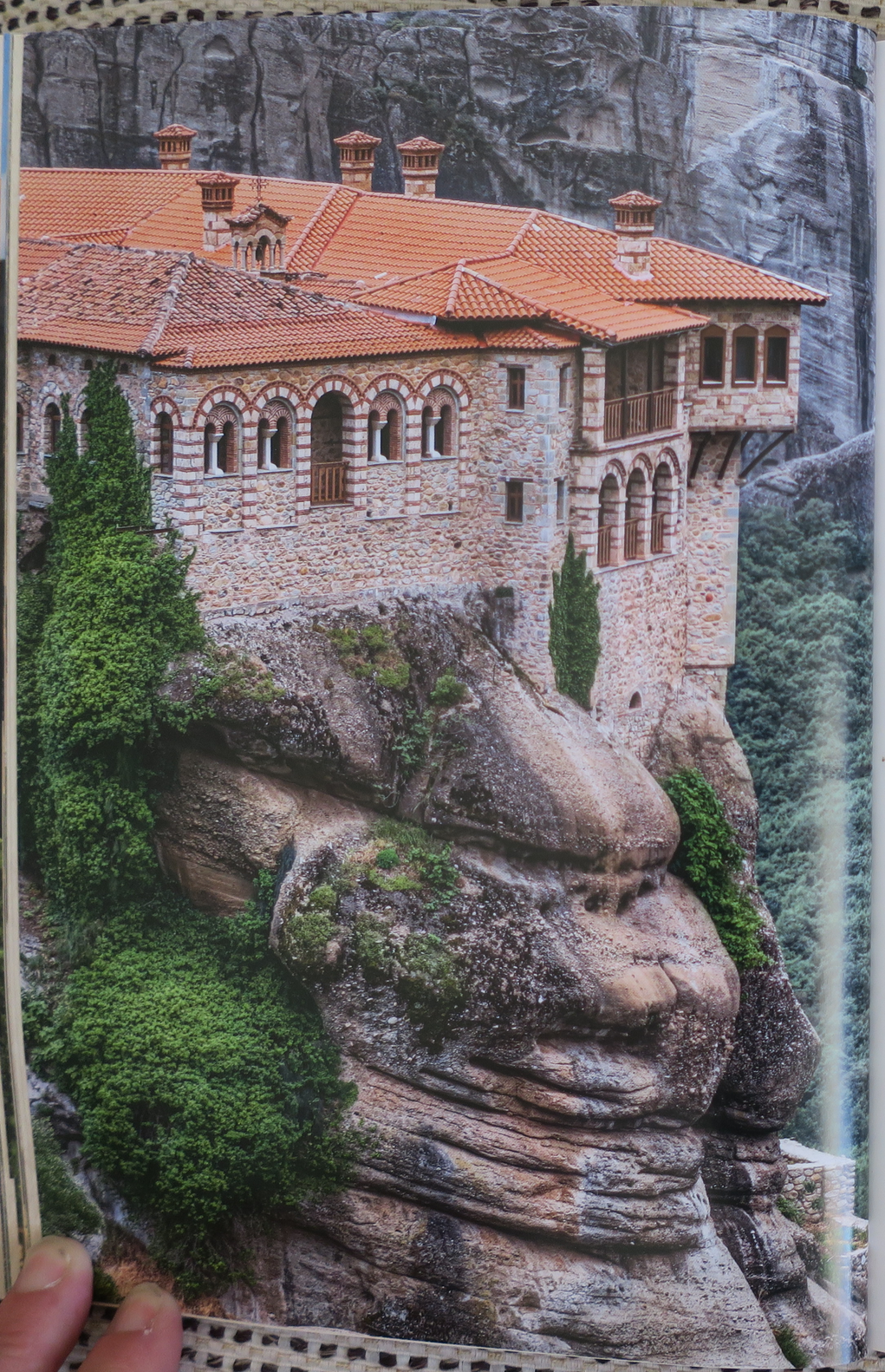
metropolitan of Kalavryta and Aigialeia, Christodoulos (Christos) Paraskevaidis, the future metropolitan of Dimitrias and archbishop of Athens, Agathonikos (Georgios) Fatouros, the future metropolitan of Kitros, Nektarios (Ioannis) Milionis, the officiating priest in the hospital "Agios Savas" of Athens, Isidoros (Ioannis) Tsiatas, the current hegumen of the monastery, and the fathers Chariton Sarris, formerly hegumen of the Monastery of Varlaam and later of Great Meteoron, and Arsenios Tselitas (Gregoriatis).

Since then, thanks to the unflagging efforts and the divine zeal of the brotherhood of the monastery, the buildings of the monastery have been extensively repaired. Moreover, the wealth of its relics has also been kept and preserved, and the monastery took important philanthropic initiatives and became a center of spiritual growth for the broader region of Trikala. In 1995 the rock of Agia Moni and of Timios Prodromos were granted to the monastery as a *metochion*.



The wooden semantron of Varlaam Monastery.





B. EXTERNAL DESCRIPTION

General overview

East of the rock tower of Meteoron, at 589 m. above sea level, stands the rock of Varlaam. Its height from the accessible northern side is estimated at 125 meters, whereas it is three times as high as the southern side (approximately 373 m.). Until the 20th century, access was possible through a net and a rope ladder, and it was only in 1921 that the currently existing staircase was carved on the rock.

As Nikolaos Georgiadis notes, on top of the rock, in an area of around 7 acres (7,000 square meters), stands "the monastery of Varlaam. Inside the monastery, the church and the building of the monastery occupy the entire plateau with only a small yard in the middle in which they have planted a big cypress tree. The church is small and sunny... there is also a big restaurant and a well-maintained library".



The Katholikon

The *Katholikon* of the monastery is based on the Athonite type with a dome and a spacious narthex. According to the autobiography and the testamentary letter of the ktitors, the church is "a beautiful and richly decorated cross-in-square with two domes", erected in the name of All Saints, "and finished in just twenty days during the year ¸ζν΄ (=1541/42)". The speed of the construction may explain the careless masonry made of tufa and uncarved stones. Inside the church there are stone inscriptions on the upper part of the apse bearing the date ¸ζν΄ (=1541/ 42), which indicates either the year of the completion of the church or the progress of the construction at that phase. According to the prohegumen of the Monastery of Simonos Petra, Kassianos, the church of All Saints together with its narthex was finished on 17 May 1544, on a Saturday, and it was inspected by the monastery's ktitor Nektarios Apsaras shortly before his death.

On 24 April 1544, a strong earthquake hit Thessaly causing significant damage to the monasteries of Dousikou and Olympiotissa. In the case of the Monastery of Varlaam, the Biography and the testamentary letter of the ktitors do not mention any damages to the churches due to the earthquake. However, in the archive of the monastery are kept two Ottoman documents from the years 1546 and 1547 which give the monks the license to freely restore the monastery's church (without mentioning which church) and to repair damages according to the original plan.

The phrase "built from the foundations up and painted" in the dedicatory inscription of the main church from the year 1548 may refer to this recent renovation of the Katholikon. It is safer to trust a note in codice no. 163 (f. 2n) which mentions that on Thursday, 21 August 1735, a strong earthquake followed by several aftershocks in the subsequent days caused cracks in the Katholikon, the trapeza and the kitchen.

The Katholikon is composed of a tetrastyle main church of the cross-in-square type with a dome and lateral choirs and a spacious tetrastyle cross-in-square lite with a dome. The architectural ensemble combines contemporary trends from the 16th century with older morphological models from the previous byzantine period. In 1782, an exonarthex was added at the expense of Parthenios, bishop of Stagoi, which was rebuilt in 1857 based on the older plan and replaced in 1930

Left: Depiction of the Last Judgment (Second Coming), on the eastern wall of the Katholikon's narthex.

Christ in Glory,
fresco of the Ascension,
in the sanctuary
of the Katholikon.



The monastery's holy founders, Theophanes and Nektarios.
Fresco on the southern wall of the narthex.



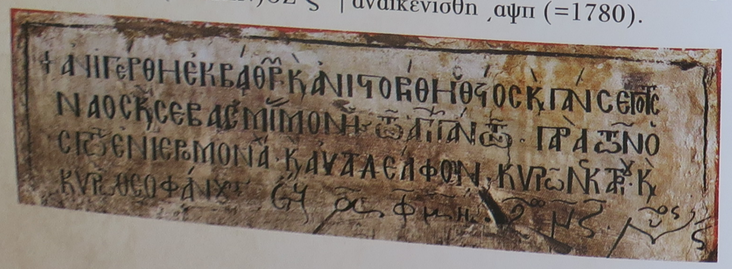
The Crucifixion of Christ. Western wall of the
Katholikon's main church.



The Dormition of Theotokos. Fresco by Frangos Katelanos in the main church.

by the current exonarthex with the guest house on the upper floor.

The wall paintings of the main church were completed in 1548 as testified by the dedicatory inscription on the south wall above the door: † ΑΝΕΓΕΡΘΗ ΕΚ ΒΑΘΡ(ΩΝ) Κ(ΑΙ) ΑΝΙϚΟΡΗΘΗ Ο ΘΕΙΟϹ Κ(ΑΙ) ΠΑΝϹΕΠΤΟϹ | ΝΑΟϹ Κ(ΑΙ) ϹΕΒΑϹΜΙ(ΑϹ) ΜΟΝΗϹ ΤΩΝ ΑΓΙ(ΩΝ) ΠΑΝΤΩΝ · ΠΑΡΑ ΤΩΝ Ο|ϹΙΩΤ(Α)Τ(ΩΝ) ΕΝ ΙΕΡΟΜΟΝΑΧ(ΟΙϹ), Κ(ΑΙ) ΑΥΤΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ · ΚΥΡΩ ΝΕΚΤΑΡΙΟΥ · Κ(ΑΙ) | ΚΥΡΩ ΘΕΟΦΑΝΟΥϹ · ΕΤ(ΕΙ) ,αφμη (=1548) · ,Ζ^{ω}ΝϚ (=1547/8) ΙΝΔ(ΙΚΤΙΩΝ)ΟϹ Ϛ′ | ανακενίσθη ,αψπ (=1780).



(The venerable monastery of All Saints was built from the foundation up and painted by the holy priest-monks and brothers Nektarios and Theophanes in the years 1547/8, in the sixth Indiction, and it was renovated in 1780).

The last verse was added to the inscription in 1780 after the renovation of the Katholikon by the bishop of Stagoi Parthenios. Although the dedicatory inscription does not mention the name of the artist who painted the main church, the study of its iconography and style led scholars to conclude that he is the eminent post-byzantine painter Fragos Katelanos from Thebes.

The brush of Katelanos is also responsible for the decoration of the chapel of St. Nicholas in the Katholikon of Great Lavra (1560). Also, a series of monuments in Aetolia-Acarnania (Myrtia Monastery, 1539), in Epirus (Monastery of Philanthropinon, 1542), and in Western Macedonia (the Katholikon of St. Nikanor in Zavorda, c. 1534-42 or post 1542, and the Panagia Rasiotissa in Kastoria, 1553) are attributed to him. Among the above, the iconography, the style and the layout of figures and scenes in the decoration of the Katholikon of Zavorda presents a great affinity with the Monastery of Varlaam, which is thus classified as a work of Katelanos. Moreover, the Monastery of Philanthropinon in the island of Ioannina, as well as the Monastery of St. Nikanor, had close spiritual bonds with the ktitors of the Monastery of Varlaam. Therefore, it is conceivable that the two



Choir of Saints. Detail from the fresco of the Second Coming in the Narthex.

Platytera ton Ouranon (The All-Holy), fresco in the apse of the sanctuary of the Katholikon.

brothers from Ioannina were familiar with the quality and the value of Katelanos' art in that city and even recommended him to the Monastery of Zavorda for painting the walls of its Katholikon.

The rich iconographic program me of the main church is laid out on all its surfaces. The Pantocrator is pictured in the dome, and he is followed by Mary, the Baptist, angels and prophets in the drum, while the spherical triangles feature the Four Evangelists. In between the spherical triangles, and especially on the eastern side, the figure of Christ dressed in a pure white chiton is depicted in a polygonal aureole, while the western side features the Preparation of the Throne. Respectively, a personified New Testament is painted

on the northern side and the Agion Mandylion on the southern side.

The iconographic program of Holy Bema (chancel) contains the standard liturgical content. On the apse of the sanctuary the Theotokos Platytera impresses the viewer with the sweetness of her face and the lustre of her golden maphorion. She is followed by the Heavenly Liturgy, the Communion of the Apostles and the officiating bishops, who are shown on the southern section of the east wall and on the piers of the sanctuary.

The barrel-vaults and the upper zones of the walls of the main church feature scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts, while scenes from the Cycle of the Life of Christ (childhood, miracles and the passion of Jesus) are depicted on the lower part of the walls and on the upper zone of the two choirs.



Theotokos the Mediator. Fresco on the iconostasis of the Katholikon.

A representation of Christ as the "Messenger of the Great Counsel" is painted on the half-dome of the northern choir, and Christ Emmanuel on the south wall. The drum of the two choirs contains figures of military saints.

On the west wall, above the entrance, the visitor can see the crowded compositions of the Crucifixion and the Dormition of the Virgin. In this case Katelanos uses older models such as the representation of the soul of Mary as a winged, swaddled infant, an iconographical detail which is present in Palaiologan compositions of painters from Salonica at the end of the 13th century, whereas in Meteora it is found only in the Katholikon of the Monastery of Hypapante.

The scene of the Assurance of Thomas painted on the hemispheric drum, above the south entrance to the main church, is also interesting for its special iconography. Katelanos includes among the apostles a feminine figure who is the queen Maria Aggelina Doukaina Palaiologina († 28 Dec. 1394), the wife of the despot of Ioannina, Thomas Preljubović. The same representation is also found in the Katholikon of the monastery of Philanthropinon, on the Ioannina Island, as well as in Zavorda.

Also, on the west side of the eastern piers, at the level of the *iconostasis*, the visitor is impressed by the full-length figures of Christ - "Savior of the world" (right) and of Mary - "Mother of God, the Intercessor" (left). Christ stands in frontal position giving his blessing and holding a gospel. In contrast, Mary is turned toward her Son and is holding with her right hand an open liturgical roll which features the following characteristic dialogue between herself and her Son on the subject of the salvation of mortals:

«Δέξαι δέησιν |
τῆς [σ]ῆς μ(ητ)ρ(ὸ)ς οἰκτίρμο[ν].
Τί μ(ῆτ)ερ αἰτεῖς • |
Τὴν βροτῶν σ(ωτη)ρίαν • |
Παρόργισάν με |
Συμπάθησο[ν] υἱέ μου |
Ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐπιστρέφουσι |
Κ(αὶ) σῶσον χάριν • |
Ἔξουσι λύτρον • |
Εὐχαριστῶ | σοι Λόγε • ※»

(-Listen to the prayer of your mother, oh Merciful One.
-What is your wish mother?
-The salvation of mortals.
-They have caused me distress.
-Have mercy on them.
-They can't correct their ways.
-Give them your grace.
-They shall be saved.
-Thank you, Word.)

On the north and south wall of the western piers, the gaze of the pilgrim and visitor is attracted by the calm and ascetic figures of the two ktitors, Theophanes and Nektarios. The two saints both hold a miniature model of the Katholikon and they look up towards the icon of Mary holding the infant and the icon of Christ, receiving their blessing. These are real portraits (St. Nektarios was, after all, still alive when they were executed), their main lines are soft and the lateral chromatic strokes are dominant.

On the west side of the piers, where the holy ktitors were painted, we see the figures of the Ecumenical Patriarch Nephon (perhaps one of his earliest depictions) and St. Nicholas, respectively. Their depiction in the main church near the ktitors and not in the chancel with the rest of the bishops illustrates both the spiritual relationship of the two ktitors with St. Nephon



Jesus Christ "Savior of the World". Fresco on the iconostasis of the Katholikon.



The founders of the monastery, Nektarios and Theophanes.

but also their respect towards St. Nicholas, to whom they dedicated the hermitage of Lepeno in Ioannina.

On the north side of the northwestern pier, near St. Nephon, the first representation of the neomartyr Ioannis from Ioannina, only twenty-two years after his martyrdom in Constantinople († 18 Apr. 1526), is also interesting. The neomartyr Ioannis is depicted in frontal position holding the cross of martyrdom with his right hand while holding with his left hand



Saint New Martyr John of Ioannina, on the north side of the northwestern pillar of the main church. His sacred skull is kept in the Chapel of the Three Hierarchs of the monastery.

an open liturgical roll with the well-known hymn "Christ is risen", which he sang during his martyrdom. His depiction on a pier that supports the dome is certainly a conscious choice on the part of the ktitor Nektarios, also from Ioannina, honoring the new "pillar of the Church" and offering him "as a model for imitation and a wake-up call for resistance" at a time when the Christian faith was being tested and put on trial by Ottoman tyranny and Islamization. Furthermore, the iconographic rendition of





The Katholikon of the monastery. View of the carved wooden iconostasis.



the figure of the neomartyr (facial characteristics and dress) is unique in the case of the Monastery of Varlaam. Lastly, the west wall of the church, on each side of the entrance, features the expressive figures of the hymnographers St. John of Damascus and St. Cosmas the Melodist.

The rich iconographic decoration of the main church indicates the experience and the skill of Fragos Katelanos in creatively assimilating older models from the Palaiologan period and in integrating them into the iconography of the "Cretan School" along with western influences in color and drawing. The scenes are rich, and they have strong narrative content. The figures are expressive and dynamic, full of grace and sweetness, and their faces are luminous; they are characterized by clarity in drawing, plasticity, and maturity in the use of colors. Katelanos prefers bright colors (blue, white, deep red and purple) and he likes to paint his figures in rich gilded ornaments in relief.

The lite of the Katholikon was painted in 1565 by the Kontaridis brothers, also from Thebes, by the priest and sacellarius Georgios, and by Fragos. Apart from the Monastery of Varlaam, they also worked in the broader region of Ioannina. The wall paintings of the northern exonarthex in the Monastery of Philanthropinon are attributed to them, and they also signed the decoration of the church of St. Nicholas in Krapsi of Ioannina (1563) just a few years before painting the lite in the Monastery of Varlaam. An inscription on the north wall of the lite mentions that:

Η ΜΕΝ ΑΡΧΗ ΤΗΣ ΙϚΟΡΙ(ΑΣ) ΤΗΣΔΕ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΝΑΡΘΙΞ • ΗΝ ΙΟΥΝΙΟ • ΚΓ • | ΕΤΕΛΙΩΘ<Η> ΔΕ, ΟΚΤΩΒΡΙΟ • ΙΖ • ΗΜΕΡΑ • Δ • ΄ΑΦΞϚ • ΄ΖΟ̃Δ | ΙϚΟΡΙΘ<Η> ΔΙΑ ΧΕΙΡΟϹ ΓΕΩΡΓ<Ι>ΟΥ ΙΕΡΕΩϹ • Κ(ΑΙ) ϹΑΚ(ΑΙ)<ΛΛ>ΑΡΙΟΥ ΘΗΒ(ΩΝ) • ΟΜΟΥ ΜΕΤΑ ΤΟΥ ※ ΙΝ(ΔΙΚΤΙΩ)ΝΟΣ Θ | ΑΥΤΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ ΗΜ(ΩΝ) ΦΡΑΓΓΟΥ.

(The painting of the walls of this holy narthex began in June 23 and finished in October 17, on Wednesday, in 1566, in the 9th Indiction, by the priest and sacellarius of Thebes Georgios along with our brother Fragos).

Another inscription above the figure of Mary, on the west side of the northeastern pier, informs us that the expenses for painting the lite were paid by Antonios Apsaras, the bishop of Vella, who was probably a relative of the ktitors. It should also be noted that the decoration of the Katholikon was restored under Parthenios of Stagoi in the years 1780-1782.



Saint Sisoes in front of the tomb of Alexander the Great.
Fresco on the western wall of the narthex of the Katholikon.

† ΑΝΙϚΟΡΗΘΗ Ο ΝΑΡΘΗΞ ΟΥΤΟϹ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΙΟΥ ΝΑΟΥ Τ(ΩΝ) ΑΓΙ(ΩΝ) ΠΑΝΤ(ΩΝ) ΔΙΑ ϹΥΝ|ΔΡΟΜΗϹ Κ(ΑΙ) ΕΞΟΔΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΦΙΛΕϚΑΤΟΥ ΕΠΙϹΚΟΠΟΥ ΒΕΛ(ΑϹ), ΚΥΡΙΟΥ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΟΥ | ΑΨΑΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΕΞ ΙΩΑΝΝΙΝ(ΩΝ) ΕΝ ΕΤΕΙ ΑΠΟ ΑΔΑΜ ΖΟΔ΄·, ΑΠΟ Χ(ΡΙϹΤΟ)Υ ΔΕ ͵ΑΦΞϚ΄. | ΕΝ ΕΤΕΙ ΔΕ ΑΠΟ ΧΡΙϚΟΥ ͵ΑΨΠ΄, Κ(ΑΙ) ͵ΑΨΠΒ΄, ΑΝΕΚ(ΑΙ)ΝΙϹΘΗ ΑΠΑϹΑ | Η ΙϚΟΡΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΤΕ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΒΗΜΑΤΟϹ, ΤΟΥ ΚΑΘΟΛΙΚΟΥ, Κ(ΑΙ) ΤΟΥ ΝΑΡΘΗΚΟϹ ΤΟΥΤΟΥ | ΔΙΑ ϹΠΟΥΔΗϹ Κ(ΑΙ) ΔΑΠΑΝΗϹ ΤΟΥ ΤΑΠΕΙΝΟΥ ΕΠΙϹΚΟΠΟΥ ϚΑΓΩΝ | ΠΑΡΘΕΝΙΟΥ ΕΙϹ ΜΝΗΜΟϹΥΝΟΝ Κ(ΑΙ) ΨΥΧΙΚ(ΗΝ) ΑΥΤΟΥ ϹΩΤΗΡΙΑΝ.

(The narthex of the holy church of All Saints was painted at the expense of His Eminence bishop of Vella Antonios Apsaras from Ioannina in the year 1566. In the years 1780 and 1782 all the wall paintings of the Bema, the Katholikon and the narthex were restored at the expense of the humble bishop of Stagoi Parthenios for his memory and spiritual salvation.)

Due to limited space, the iconographic program of the lite is not characterized by large compositions and it is laid out around the dome, which



The Abyssal Dragon. Detail from the fresco of the Second Coming
(eastern wall of the Katholikon's lite).

is dominated by the representation of Christ in Aureole and the Praises (ainoi). A large-scale composition of the Second Coming is present on the east wall. On the southeast corner lies the grave of the ktitors who are depicted holding a miniature model of the Katholikon inside an apse on the south wall. Above the figures of the ktitors stands the archangel Gabriel and, next to him, on the east wall, there is a representation of the Baptism of Christ. A section on the southwestern corner contains scenes from the life of the Baptist as well as the ascetic figure of St. Mary of Egypt who communes the Body and Blood of Christ from the hands of St. Zosimas, while the respective northwestern section features St. Pachomius received as a monk by the Angel. The vaults and the walls above the arches are dominated by scenes of martyrdom. The lower parts of the walls and the piers contain full-length figures of saints, monks and ascetics.

Above the entrance to the west wall is an impressive representation of the abbot Sisoes, who is shown in front of an open grave with the dead body of Alexander the Great, lamenting and reflecting on the futility of earthly life and the inescapability of death. "When the great ascetic Sisoes saw the unburied dead body of the once glorious Alexander, king of the Greeks, he was struck by the futility of the temporal world and its glory, and he began lamenting: "Oh Death, no-one can escape from you".

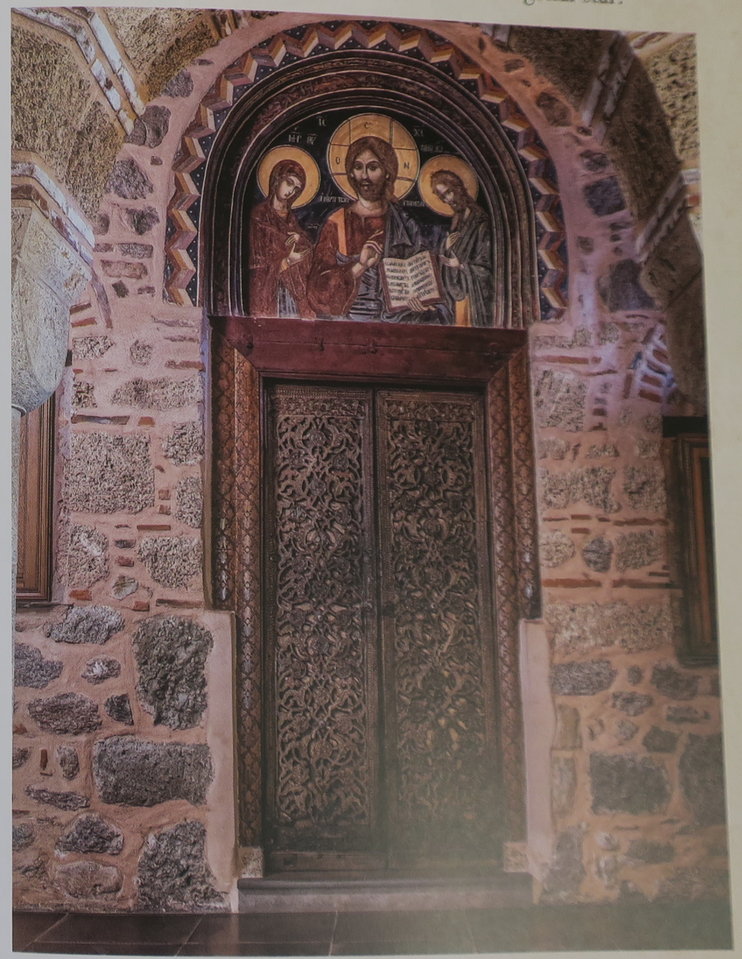
Lastly, the north wall of the lite, below the biphora window, features the rare composition of the Madonna of the Passion with the infant raising Adam (left), whereas Symeon carries the instruments of the Passion (right). The figure of Christ anapeson (lying down) is depicted in the respective position of the south wall.

The art of the Kontaridis brothers manifests the influence of the "Cretan" school, as well as that of their fellow countryman Katelanos. However, their figures are more simplified and rigid, their colors are brighter, and there are also visible loans from western (Italian) models in some of their compositions.

The wood carved gilded *iconostasis* of the main church is interesting for its subtle and intricate construction. It was executed during the same period as the wall paintings of the main church, perhaps around 1548-1550. Due to limited space, its main section is exclusively devoted to the despotic icons of Christ and the Virgin. These are painted in the katelanian style, but they may as well imitate the icons that decorated the *iconostasis* of the hermitage of Prodromos in the Ioannina Island. The epistyle of the *iconostasis* is decorated with the representations of the Great Deesis, the archangels Michael and Gabriel, and the apostles in symmetrical semichoirs. Their style refers to the artistic current of the "School of Northwestern Greece", but we

can't exclude the participation of the workshop of Fragos Katelanos.

Finally, the elaborately carved outer door of the Katholikon–perhaps the original 16th century door– is a masterpiece of woodcarving. Its exquisite decoration invokes an arabesque; there are offshoots symmetrically winding upwards and medallions containing birds or a double-headed eagle, *fleurs-de-lis*, a hexagonal star, as well as a cross-shaped braid (*key of Solomon*) inside an octagonal star.



Entrance to the Katholikon with the old wooden-carved door (16th century).



CHAPELS

A. THE THREE HOLY HIERARCHS

The single-nave chapel of the Three Holy Hierarchs was the original Katholikon of the monastery. It was erected by the holy ktitors after the autumn of 1517 on top of the ruins of the old, smaller church which had been built there around the mid-14th century by the rock's first settler, the hermit Varlaam. In the ensuing years it seems that it suffered damage, and it was restored in 1626/27. A plinth (brick) built into the arch of the sanctuary bears the inscription "+ Ετους ,ζρλε΄ (= 1626/27)" which confirms that the restoration was completed in that year. Ten years later (1636/37), the walls of the chapel were painted by the priest Ioannis "from the land of Stagoi" and his sons, as noted in the dedicatory inscription:

+ ΤΟ ΠΑΛΑΙΟΝ ΠΑΡΕΚΚΛΗCΙΟΝ • ΤΩΝ ΤΡΙΩΝ ΙΕΡΑΡΧΩΝ, ΒΑCΙΛΕΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ • ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΟΥ • Κ(ΑΙ) ΙΩ(ΑΝΝ)ΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΧΡΥCΟCΤΟΜΟΥ • ΑΝΗΓΕΡΘΗ ΕΚ ΒΑΘΡΩΝ | Κ(ΑΙ) ΑΝΙCΤΟΡΙΘΗ, ΠΑΡΑ ΤΩΝ ΟCΙΩΤΑΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΟΜΟΝΑΧΩΝ, Κ(ΑΙ) (ΜΟΝ)ΑΧ(ΩΝ) • ΤΗC ΘΕΙ(ΑΣ) Κ(ΑΙ) CΕΒΑCΜΙ(ΑΣ) ΜΟΝΗC ΤΩΝ ΑΓΙΩΝ ΠΑΝΤΩΝ ΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΕΥΟΝΤΟS ΚΥΡΩ ΚΥΡΙΛΛΟΥ • Κ(ΑΙ) CΕΡΓΙ(ΟΥ) ΤΩΝ | ΙΕΡΟ(ΜΟΝ)ΑΧ(ΩΝ), Κ(ΑΙ) ΑΥΤΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ • ΕΤΕΙ • ,Ζ^{ω}•Ρ^{ω}•Λ•Ε :- ΙCΤΟΡΙΘΗ ΔΕ Κ(ΑΙ) ΔΙΑ ΧΕΙΡΟC ΚΑΜΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΑΜΑΡΤΟΛΟΥ • ΙΩ(ΑΝΝ)ΟΥ ΙΕΡΕ(ΟΣ), ΜΕΤΑ ΤΩΝ ΤΕΚΝΩΝ ΑΥΤΟΥ • ΕΝ ΕΤΕΙ • ,Ζ•Ρ^{ω}•Μ•Ε• ΙΝ(ΔΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ) Ε΄ | ΕΚ ΧΩΡΑC CΤΑΓΩΝ :-

(+ The old chapel of the Three Holy Hierarchs, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, was built from the foundation up by the monks and priest-monks of the venerable Monastery of All Saints under hegumen Kyrillos and his brother Sergios in the year 1626. It was painted by me, priest Ioannis from the land of Stagoi, along with my children in 1636, in the 5th Indiction.)

The Dormition of Saint John Chrysostom. Wall painting (year 1637)
in the Chapel of the Three Hierarchs (on the west wall).



The sacred skull of Saint Nicholas of Metsovo, kept in the Chapel of the Three Hierarchs.

The iconographic program of the Bema contains the standard Eucharistic cycle. The figure of the enthroned Platytera with Christ–Emmanuel in her bosom painted on the half-dome of the apse is noteworthy. Mary holds a kerchief –a symbol of her virginity– and she is surrounded by four Archangels, two of whom carry open liturgical rolls. All the above give a special quality to the composition and distinguish it from others with a similar theme.

The main church is replete with scenes from the Eucharistic and the Christological cycle, as well as from the Akathist. On the west wall the crowded compositions of the Synaxis of St. Ephraim the Syrian and the Dormition of St. John Chrysostom are noteworthy. Several figures of full-length saints and of frontal ancestors of Christ, from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed, occupy the lower zones of the north and the south wall, as well as the upper zones of the north, the south and the west wall respectively. The ktitors of the monastery, Saints Nektarios and Theophanes are also painted on the north wall. Next to them, in a place of honor, stands the neomartyr Nikolaos the Young from Metsovo who was burned alive by the Ottomans in the center of Trikala in 1617, only twenty years before the walls of the church were painted. The martyr is mentioned in the Varlaamite codice no. 109, f. 154n.

(When neomartyr Nicolaos from Metsovo was ensnared by the Turks, he remained for a long time under the spell of their deception due to the fear of the judges; when he lost his fear and appeared before the court, neither praise nor threat, neither flagellation nor imprisonment, neither hunger nor thirst were able to intimidate him. Finally, the infidels lit a pyre in the central marketplace and burned him at the stake in 1617. [K. H. Doukakis, *Neon Martylogion*, Athens 1897, p. 32]).

Several original iconographic themes are also noteworthy, such as the vision of the bishop of Arabissos Adelphios about St. John Chrysostom and the vision of a man hunted by a wild unicorn.

The frequent presence of the figure of St. John Chrysostom (five times in total) in the walls but also in the iconostasis of the church is indicative of the respect of the monastery's fathers for his person and of the fact that the monastery preserves the left hand of the saint as a sacred and invaluable relic.

The decoration of the chapel of the Three Holy Hierarchs is a skillfully organized cycle of wall paintings which is faithful to the tradition of Cretan painting. The priest Ioannis borrows patterns and iconographic details from other monuments of the area, such as the Dormition of the Virgin in Kalambaka (1573) and the Katholikon of the Dousikou Monastery (1557), and he is also manifestly influenced from the wall painting cycles of the neighboring monasteries of Great Meteoron, Roussanou and St. Nicholas Anapausas.

The style is characteristic of the 17th century and could be described as "empirical" but not naive. The workshop of the priest Ioannis is different from other contemporary workshops, such as that from Linotopi, and it stands out for its excellent technical training and education and for its aesthetic pursuits.

The church has an old wood-carved gilded iconostasis with a bas-relief which was executed after the wall paintings of the chapel, probably around the mid-17th century.

West of the chapel of the Three Holy Hierarchs is a spacious lite beautifully painted by Lazaros Pechlivanidis in 2005. More specifically, the south and the west wall feature the Future Judgment, the dormition of the ktitor of the monastery St. Theophanes, the martyrdom of the neomartyr St. Nicholas from Metsovo and the discovery and delivery of his holy head in the Monastery of Varlaam. The east wall features a large-scale representation of the "In You Rejoices" (Epi Soi Chairei) and the martyrdom of the neomartyr St. Ioannis from Ioannina above the entrance door of the chapel. Lastly, the holy relics of the monastery are kept and exhibited in a small chapel north of the lite.

B. AGIOI ANARGYROI

The small, single-nave and barrel-vaulted chapel of Agioi Anargyroi is attached to the northern side of the hospital – nursing home from which it seems to have taken its name at a later age. The time of its construction is unknown. A study with geodetic and astronomical methods concluded that July 23 (day of the prophet Ezekiel and the martyrs Fokas and Apollonios) was the date of the founding of the church, which took place around the year 1546. However, according to another calculation, the chapel was built probably around the mid-17th century. The wall paintings were completed in 2005 by the painter Euthymios Berdebes.

The trapeza

The "very wide and flat" trapeza of the monastery, as Gerasimos, the metropolitan of Raska (1776), mentions in a verse, is located northwest facing the Katholikon. It is a single-nave, oblong, rectangular and barrel-vaulted building with an outer trigonal apse on the western side.

The building was probably built at the beginning of the 17th century (perhaps around 1620), but it suffered serious damages a century later from the strong earthquake of 1735, when according to a note in the codice Varlaam no. 163, f. 2n: "our church was damaged including the trapeza and the refectory". The British traveler Robert Curzon, who visited the monastery (1834), notes that the walls of the trapeza were painted, but this decoration is not preserved today. The area of the trapeza, which was converted after 1961 into a sacristy – museum, was renovated and its walls were beautifully painted by Lazaros Pechlivanidis in 2010, thus resuming its original function as the dining hall for the fathers of the monastery.

Left: Refectory (Trapeza), interior view.



Monks of the monastery using the traditional net and winch system.



Other buildings

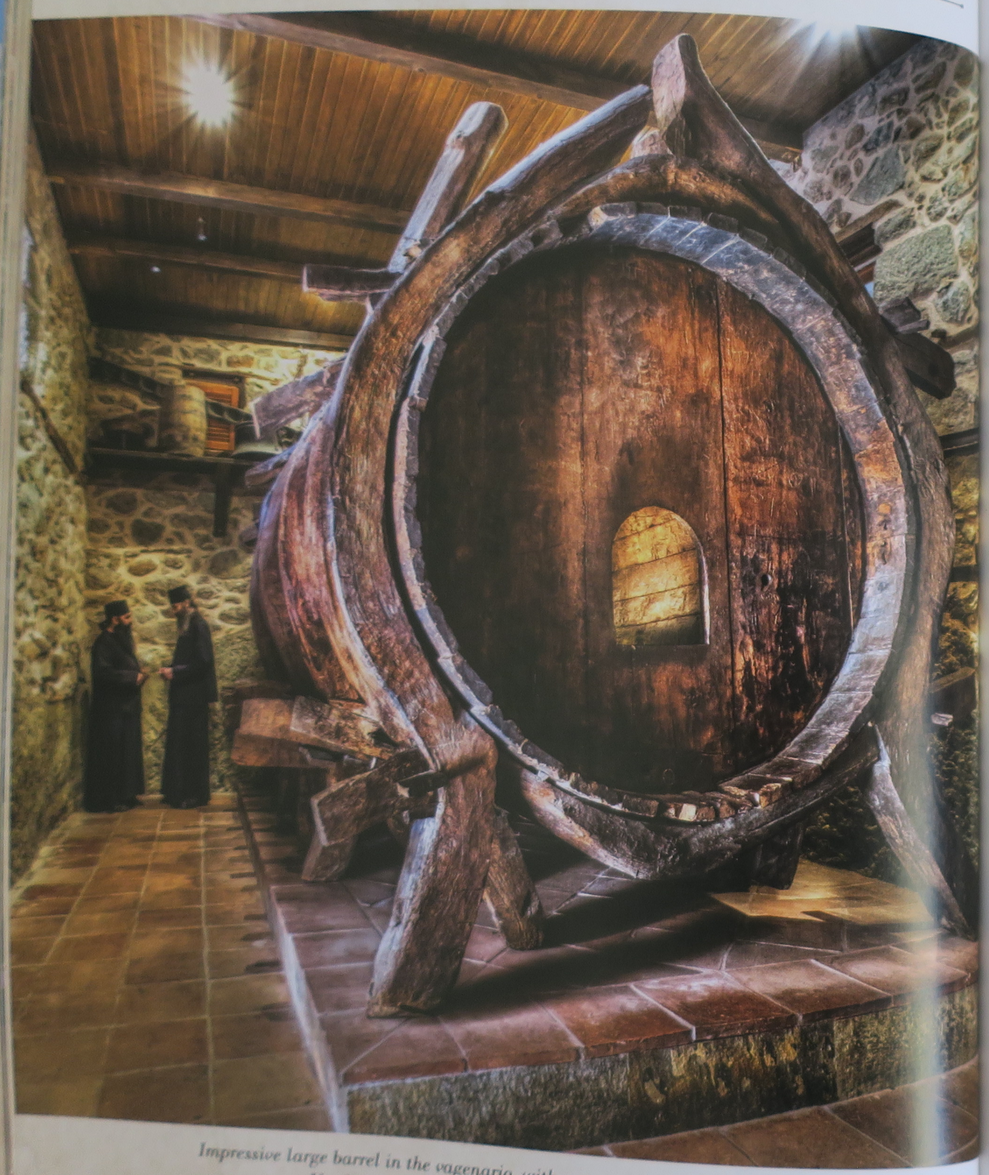
The monastery's **hospital–nursing home** is a separate ground-level building situated southeast of the Katholikon, a location that ensures tranquility, isolation, but also unhindered exposure to the sun. The building has a quadrilateral ground plan, and the roof is supported by four columns connected to each other with arches. The area is thus internally divided into nine apartments, of which eight are covered with groin vaults and the ninth is covered with a vault leading to a quadrilateral mini-dome–chimney. The clay air ducts in the vault contributed to the introduction of fresh air. A fireplace (aroula) at the center of the floor offered heat to the patients.

The similarity of the hospital of the Monastery of Varlaam with that of Great Meteoron in terms of their architectural type leads scholars to date its construction probably to the last quarter of the 16th century.

The **bakery** (magipeio) is located at the north section of the monastery near the trapeza. It has been operating in the same location from the days of the ktitors until the 20th century. In 1986 the interior was appropriately readjusted, and it now houses the monastery's Library.



Left: Monks ascending with the traditional net.



Impressive large barrel in the vagenario, with a capacity of 12,000 liters. Used for collecting rainwater or storing wine.

The **hestia**–kitchen is located next to the trapeza and its north-eastern section is attached to it. It is a small building with an almost square ground plan leading to an octagonal dome-chimney. It was probably built at the same time as the trapeza in the second or third decade of the 17th century. The interior was converted in 1926 into a sacristy, later into a Library, and after 1961 into a reception area, whereas today it has resumed its original function.

The **lift tower** is located at the northeastern section of the monastery complex. It is one of the monastery's oldest buildings due to its significance as an alternative method of access to the monastery but also because it was used for transferring the necessary provisions and building materials. The tower is mentioned in the testamentary letter of the ktitors and it was finished in its present form in the year 1535/36, as indicated in the plinth inscription built into the east wall of the tower's balcony:

+ ΝΕΚΤΑΡΙΟC Κ(ΑΙ) ΘΕ|ΟΦΑΝΗΣ.
ΟΙ Κ(ΑΙ) ΚΤΗ|ΤΟΡΕC | ΕΤΟΥΣ ,ΖΜΔ΄
(= 1535/36).

At the center of the balcony the visitor can still see the wooden mechanism of the manual lift (vrizoni or ergatis) which was adjusted to the net through which the monks used to lift people or materials up to the monastery. A stone ladder leads from the tower balcony down to a chapel on the first floor which is dedicated to the Taxiarchs (or to the Synaxis of the Archangels) and which functions as the church of the reliquary. Its walls were painted in 2004 by Euthymios Berdebes. The second floor, located below the chapel of the Taxiarchs, is used as a reliquary.

The monastery's wine cellar (vagenario), an oblong ground-level building located north of the Katholikon, was used for storing wine in large wooden barrels (vaenia). Today the visitor can see inside the building one such huge oak vaeni of the 16th century, the so-called "grandfather" (pappous), 2.5m. in diameter, 6m. in length and 12 kl. in storage. In the wine cellar some exquisite samples of ecclesiastical wood-carving are also exhibited in a special case.



C. MUSEUM

The Museum of the Holy Monastery of Varlaam is housed in a space that harmoniously integrates with the architectural environment of Meteora, respectfully preserving its character while incorporating technology in the preventive conservation and presentation of its exhibits. It includes a rich collection of relics, sacred vessels, manuscripts, portable icons, silverwork, embroidered vestments, and more. The museum utilizes state-of-the-art technology in display cases, lighting systems, and microclimate control (temperature and humidity), among other features.

Portable Icons

The portable icons preserved in the sacristy historically belong to different periods ranging from the second half of the 14th to the 18th century, and they are especially interesting for studying the development of the byzantine and post-byzantine art of portable icons.

Among the portable icons, the one of Saint Demetrios stands out. The saint is depicted enthroned, wearing military attire, and trampling an evil dragon beneath his feet. The icon was most likely painted during the fifth decade of the 16th century by an artist of the "School of Northwestern Greece".

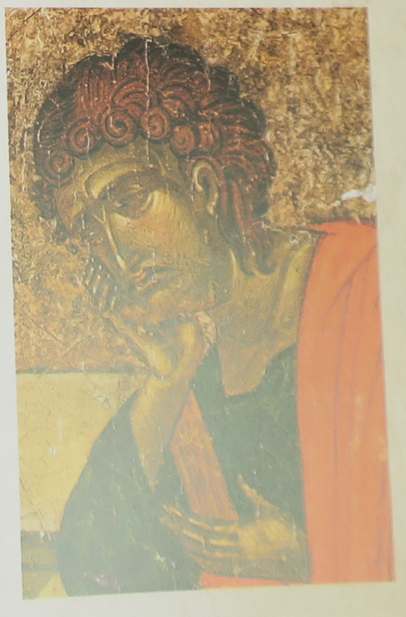
The once double-sided icon with the representations of the Crucifixion and the Dormition of the Virgin is of special significance. The icon was stolen from the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Kalabaka, where it had been kept until 1979, and it was broken in two by the smugglers. After being rediscovered abroad in 1986 it was repatriated, and it is preserved today in the Monastery of Varlaam. The representation of the Crucifixion is older, and it is attributed to a northern Greek workshop from the second half of the 14th or the beginning of the 15th century. A red inscription on the lower section of the icon mentions that it is a gift from Ioannis Kantakouzenos and his wife Theodora. The illustration of the Dormition of the Virgin dates from the 16th century and it has been attributed to the great Cretan master Theophanes Strelitzas Bathas (1527).



Icon of the Crucifixion (15th century).
Donation of Ioannis Kantakouzenos and his wife Theodora.









Views of the southwestern side of the new sacristy.

Another interesting portable icon, painted probably in the 16th century, features the fine and elegant figures of Saints Georgios and Dimitrios, "the Grand Duke". In this case, the saints are not rendered as military men but as martyrs with courtly dresses from the late byzantine period.

The icon of the Virgin, signed by the famous Cretan painter and priest Emmanuel Tzanes in the year ,αχξη΄ (=1668), is an important example of Cretan art from the 17th century. An enthroned Virgin holding the infant is depicted at the center flanked by two angels, and the frame is surrounded by apostles and bishops of the Church in bust.

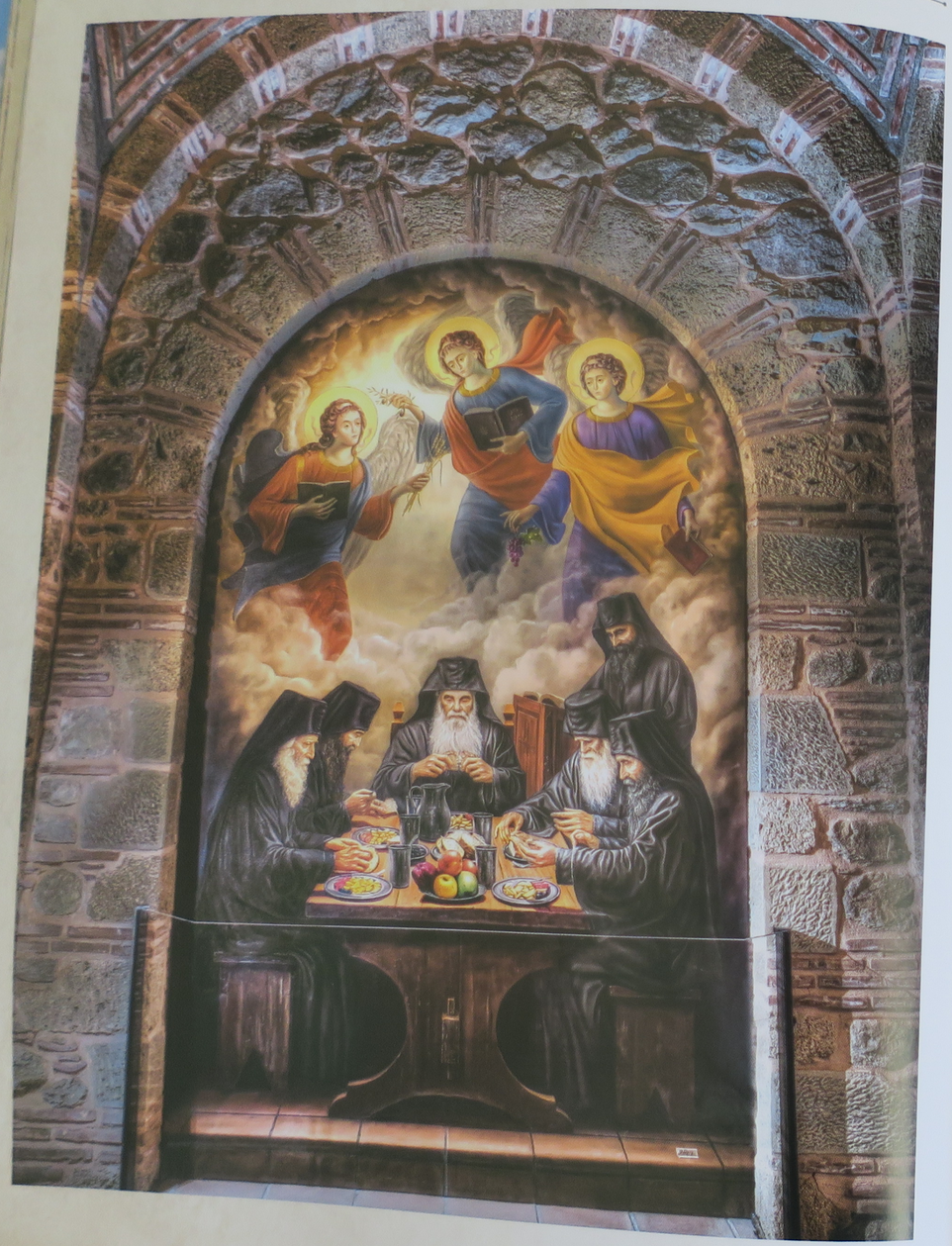
The priest-monk Arsenios from the Dousikou Monastery (b. 1550 † 1626) was an offspring of a Levite family and the brother of Ioasaf, bishop of Stagoi, while his mother was the niece of St. Bessarion, archbishop of Larissa. In 1584 he was ordained archbishop of Domenikon and Elassona; later he travelled to Moscow where he was ordained archbishop of the cathedral of the Archangels in 1599. In 1613 he was ordained the archbishop of Tver and Kasin, and in 1615 the archbishop of Suzdal and Tarusa. In 2005, his relics were

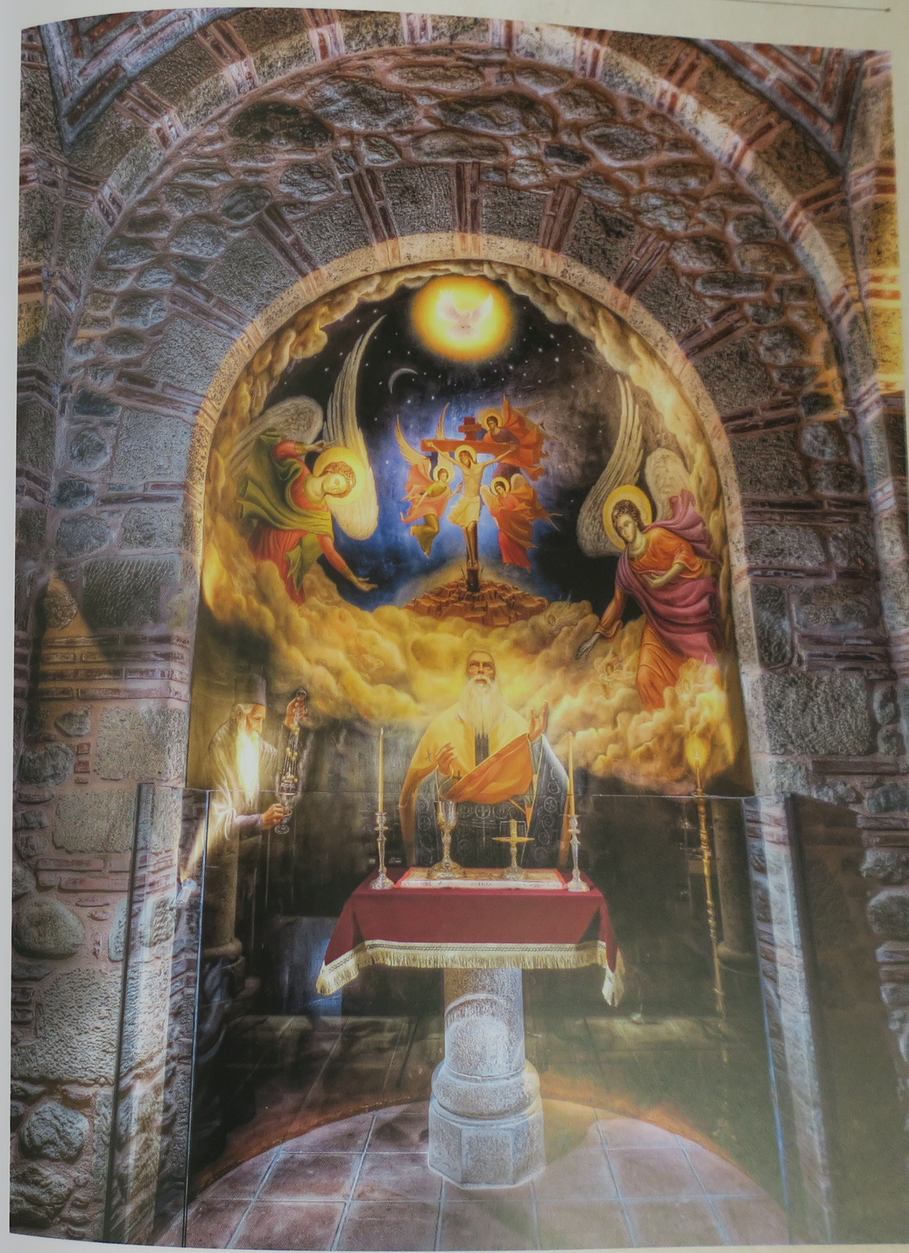


Theotokos "Epi Soi Chairi". Russian triptych (late 16th – early 17th century).



The Theotokos holding the Child.
"Cretan icon by the priest Emmanuel Tzanes (1668)."







Top and right: Details from a Russian triptych (late 16th – early 17th century).

transferred to the church of the Nativity of Mary in Suzdal, and he was canonized as a saint of the Orthodox Church.

When he was archbishop of the Archangels, Arsenios sent about ten icons to the Monastery of Varlaam. Most of them featured the Virgin holding the infant and one of them Christ Emmanuel. Most of them bear a note-dedication hand-signed by Arsenios himself which mentions in some cases the year of dispatch (1589 and 1592).

The donation of the above icons to the Monastery of Varlaam took place probably during the visit of the varlaamite fathers Damaskinos (the hegumen of the monastery) and Kyprianos to Moscow in 1590. Along with other fathers from the monasteries of Great Meteoron, Dousikou and Zavorda, they took part in the mission to deliver the sigillum of the establishment of the Patriarchate of Mos cow by the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah II.

Another Russian icon featuring the Dormition of the Virgin was dedicated to the Monastery of Varlaam by the varlaamite priest-monk Sergius in the year ,ζρλθ′ (=1630/31).

The two triptychs from the same period (end of the 16th–first half of the 17th c.) are of great artistic value. The first one, which contains visible Cretan influences, features the Second Coming at its center including scenes from the Deesis, the Preparation of the Throne, the Righteous and the Paradise. The decoration is complemented by red and green engraved floral ornaments set on a golden background.

The second triptych comes from Russia. It contains representations which are all related to the Virgin and are variations on the "In You Rejoices" (Epi soi Chairei).





Saint Demetrios "the Grand Duke, the Apokaukos" and Saint Nestor.
Portable icon from the 16th century.



Christ Emmanuel. Russian icon (late 16th – early 17th century),
donation of Arsenios of Elassona.





Woodcarving

The numerous wood-carved crosses for use in litanies, benedictions and blessings that are exhibited in a special case in the monastery's sacristy are excellent samples of miniature work and skill.

They have two sides with finely carved representations of the Twelve Great Feasts (especially the Baptism), bishops, apostles and evangelists, and most of them are coated with intricately decorated metal, silver or bronze coverings.

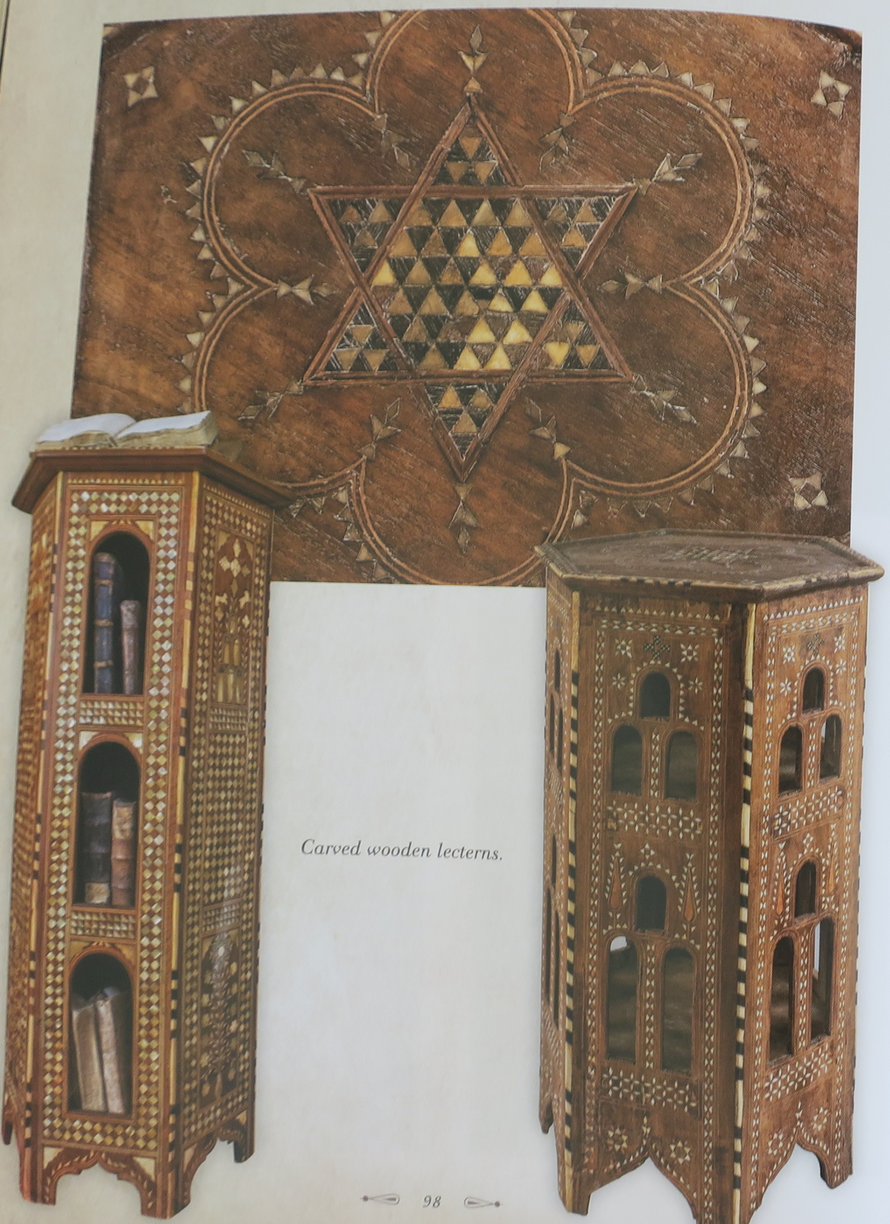
Another excellent example of ecclesiastical woodcarving is the hegumen's throne which was once placed in the Katholikon and bears an inlaid ivory decoration: stars, flowers and floral ornaments (vine shoots). The visitor can also admire more samples of ecclesiastical wood-carving (shrines, lecterns, a hegumen's chair, a chest and a diskeli) with intricate ivory decoration placed in a special case in the monastery's wine cellar.



Top and bottom: Intricate details from a carved blessing cross.







Carved wooden lecterns.



Detail from the original carved wooden door of the katholikon of the monastery (16th c.).



Gold Embroidery

An important gold embroidery workshop operated in the Monastery of Varlaam for almost half a century (from the 16th to the beginning of the 17th century), and excellent samples of its production are exhibited in the Sacristy. The origins of that workshop should be sought probably in Ioannina, the birthplace of the *ktitors*.

The most eminent representative of the workshop was the monk Arsenios who worked during the period 1577/78 - 1589/90, as we can estimate based on the works that are attributed to him with certainty. The Sacristy keeps several cross-shaped *epithemata* for omophorions signed by Arsenios that reveal his ability and skill in the use of materials and in the variety of stitches.

A large-scale Threnos (1.87 x 1.37 m.) created by Romanos in the year ,ζριζ΄ (= 1608/09) is also exhibited in the Sacristy. The crowded composition is represented in skillful stitches, colorful silk threads and silver and golden wires on a purple and damson silk cloth.

The Sacristy also keeps two epitrachils (end of the 16th – beginning of the 17th c.), a pair of *epimanika* (cuffs) with a depiction of the Annunciation (first half of the 18th c.) and a bishop's mitre (second half of the 18th c.) donated by Dionysios, metropolitan of Trikki and Stagoi (1959-1970).

Finally, the modern bishop's vestments were donated by the archbishop of Athens Christodoulos (1998-†2008) who came from the monastery's brotherhood, and they are kept in a special case of the Sacristy.

Cuffs (epimanikia) with a depiction of the Annunciation (first half of the 18th century).



Top: Gold-embroidered epitaphios of Romanos (1609).



Right: Hierarchal vestment, donated by Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens (1998 – †2008).



Liturgical vestment (hierarchal sakkos and cuffs).



Omophorion patches depicting the Resurrection and the Dormition of the Theotokos (1577/78).



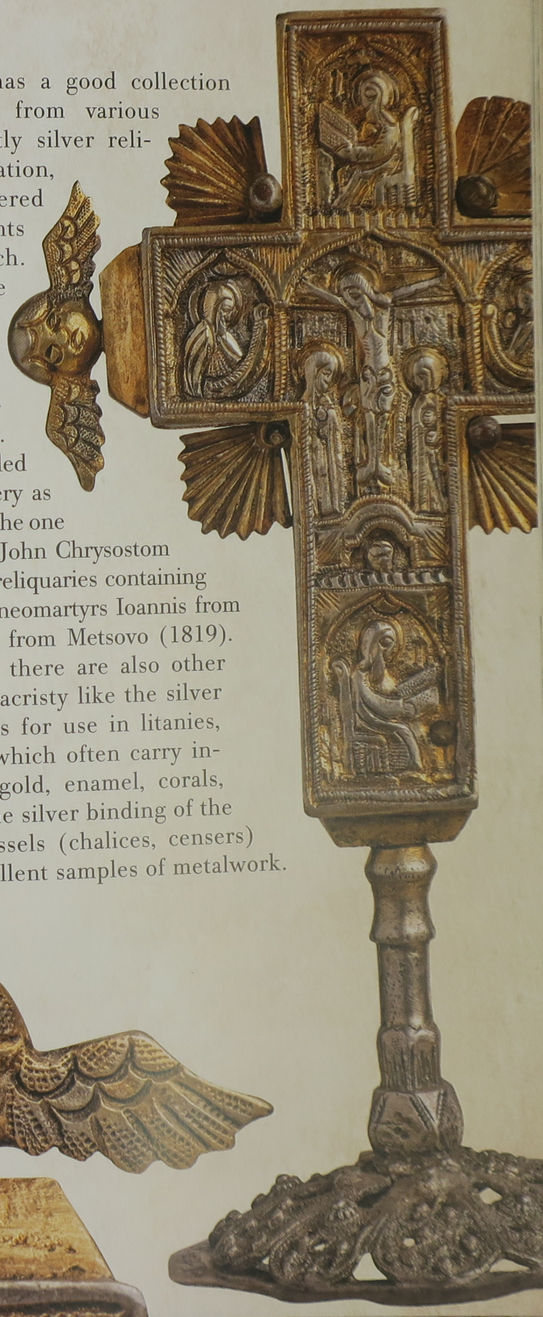
Silverwork

The Monastery of Varlaam has a good collection of ecclesiastical silverworks from various periods (16th–19th c.), mostly silver reliquaries with intricate decoration, since the monastery has gathered numerous holy relics of saints and martyrs of the Church.

The silver reliquaries of the holy ktitors Theophanes and Nektarios and of their attendant Benedictus, which are exhibited in the lite of the Katholikon, are particularly important.

Among the other silver or gilded reliquaries kept by the Monastery as holy *sebasmata*, we should note the one containing the left hand of St. John Chrysostom as well as the richly decorated reliquaries containing the graceful holy heads of the neomartyrs Ioannis from Ioannina (1774) and Nikolaos from Metsovo (1819).

Apart from the reliquaries, there are also other exhibits in the monastery's Sacristy like the silver or bronze coatings of crosses for use in litanies, benedictions and blessings, which often carry intricate ornaments made of gold, enamel, corals, pearls and precious stones, the silver binding of the sacred gospels, liturgical vessels (chalices, censers) and the buckles that are excellent samples of metalwork.







Wooden cross with metal overlay (detail).



Holy grails.



Silver tray, gift to the monastery by Arsenios of Elassona.







Censer with a depiction of the supplicating Theotokos (1663).



Elaborate metal buckles.



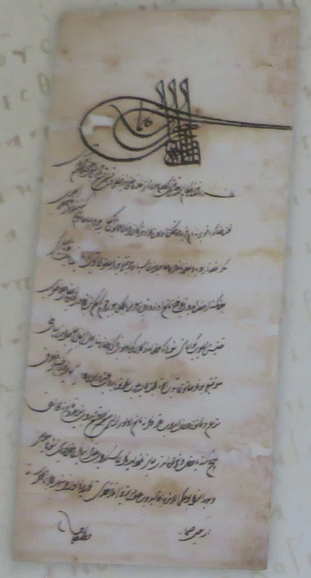
Documents, manuscripts, prints

The Monastery of Varlaam has a rich and notable collection of manuscripts and incunabula, since the holy ktitors and their successors managed to equip it with a rich library to satisfy the monks' liturgical needs. The library keeps today 305 manuscript codices, of which 32 dates from the period stretching from the 11th century to the 15th century, 100 belong to the 16th c., and 70 codices date from the 17th c.
The large number of manuscripts of the 16th and the 17th century is mostly since the monastery operated during that time (until approximately 1630) as an organized bibliographical workshop with specialized calligraphers and copyists who produced mainly liturgical books. The monastery's collection of manuscripts includes codices that were written and decorated by Lucas from Cyprus, bishop of Buzău and later metropolitan of Hungaro-Wallachia, and Matthew, metropolitan of Myrea, from Pogoniani of Epirus.

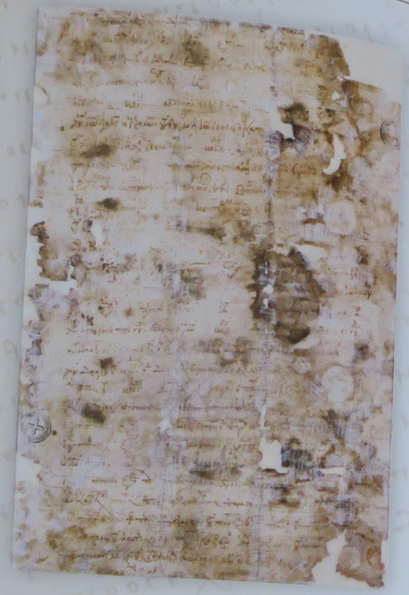
The library also keeps many incunabula, around 496 volumes (15th–19th c.). Most of these came from the personal library of the bishop of Stagoi Parthenios (March 1751–† 26 March 1784). Parthenios, who was a member of the monastery's brotherhood, donated his Library and his valuable archive. His rich collection includes liturgical works and works of the great fathers of the Church, such as Athanasios of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Dionysius the Aeropagite, etc.

It also includes some incunabula and editions of classical texts of Greek writers by the famous humanist Aldus Manutius: Hesiod (1495), the Suda Dictionary (1499), Aristophanes (1502), Aristotle (1545), the Complete Works of Plato (1513), the Complete Works of Xenophon (1525).

Finally, the monumental edition of the works of John Chrysostom in eight volumes by Sir Henry Savile is also noteworthy (Eton, 1612).



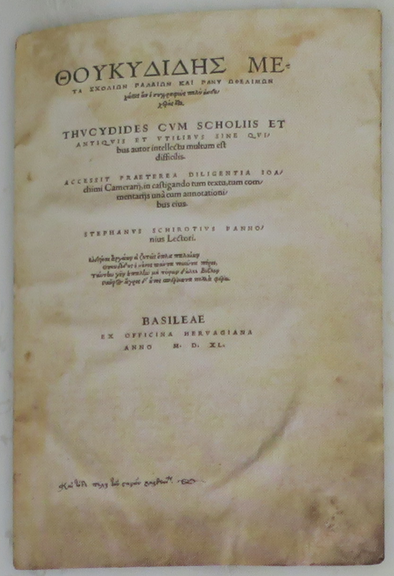
Document (firman) of Suleyman II the Magnificent (1534), prohibiting the interference with property interests of the monastery.



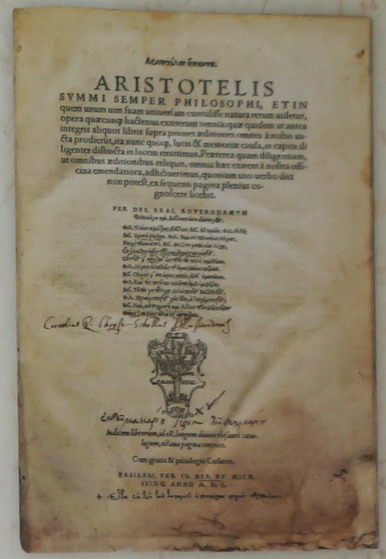
Acts (diagnosis), 1163 (April) Confirmation of the rights of the bishopric of Stagoi.



Cod. 289, Divine Liturgies and prayers, 18th century.



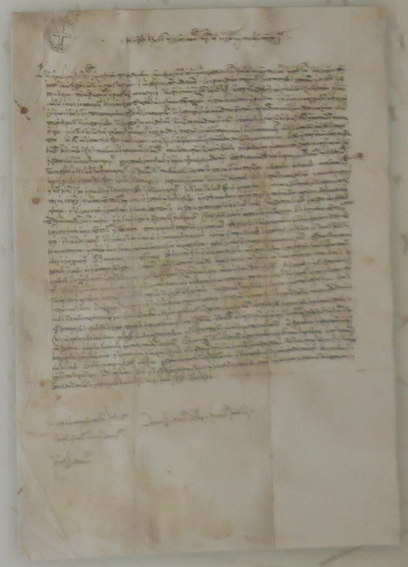
Thucydides, Basel (1540).



Works of Aristotle, Basel (1550).



Chrysobull of the ruler of Wallachia, Serbanus Kantakouzenos (1678–1688), concerning the monastery's metochi in Bukovets, Wallachia.



Patriarchal sigillion (copy) by Patriarch Theoleptos II (1586).



Top: Codex 82 (1609/10), f. 26r, with ornate multicolored decoration (title and initial).





Miniature of Evangelist Luke, Codex 7 (1618/19), folio 1v, scribe Ioannikios.



PANAGIA DOUPIANI

AT THE FOOT OF THE PILLAR (STYLOS) OF DOUPIANI, on the outskirts of Kastraki and just prior to the rock of St. Nicholas Anapafsas stands the small, humble, and unassuming chapel of Panagia Doupiani. It is the oldest monument in Meteora, and it was used for several centuries by the first anchorites and ascetics as their center of worship (Kyriakon).

Panagia Doupiani is first mentioned as a chapel in the praktikon (assets registry) of the praktor and anagrafeus (registrar) Manasis at the end of the 12th or at the beginning of the 13th century. According to the sources it belonged to the bishopric of Stagoi until the 1340s, and thereafter it is always mentioned in connection with the Skete of Stagoi but under the spiritual jurisdiction of the local bishop.

It is a single-nave chapel with a wooden gabled roof. The masonry is simple, made of freestones and re-used building materials (spolia). The wall paintings are mostly restricted to the area of the Bema (chancel): an upright Mary, a Christ-lamb in a paten surrounded by angels and officiating bishops (Cyril of Alexandria, Vlasios, Polycarpos and Fokas), the full-length figures of certain Apostles, the deacons Romanos (full-length) and Stephen the Protomartyr (in medallion), as well as the remnants of scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts, such as the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Ascension. In the main church, on each side of the wooden iconostasis, we encounter the full-length figures of Christ (left) and of Mary holding the infant Jesus (right). The wall paintings date from the beginning of the 13th century and they are stylistically like those of the diaconicon in the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Kalabaka.

The chapel of Panagia Doupiani has been repaired several times; first in 1861, then a century later (1970-71), and finally during the years 2007-2010. Today it operates under the jurisdiction of the Monastery of the Great Meteoron as a metochion.

THE HOLY MONASTERY OF THE HYPAPANTE

BUILT ON THE CAVITY OF A SHARP ROCK at the northern part of the Meteora monk city, the small monastery of Hypapante is, along with Panagia Doupiani, one of the oldest monuments in Meteora.

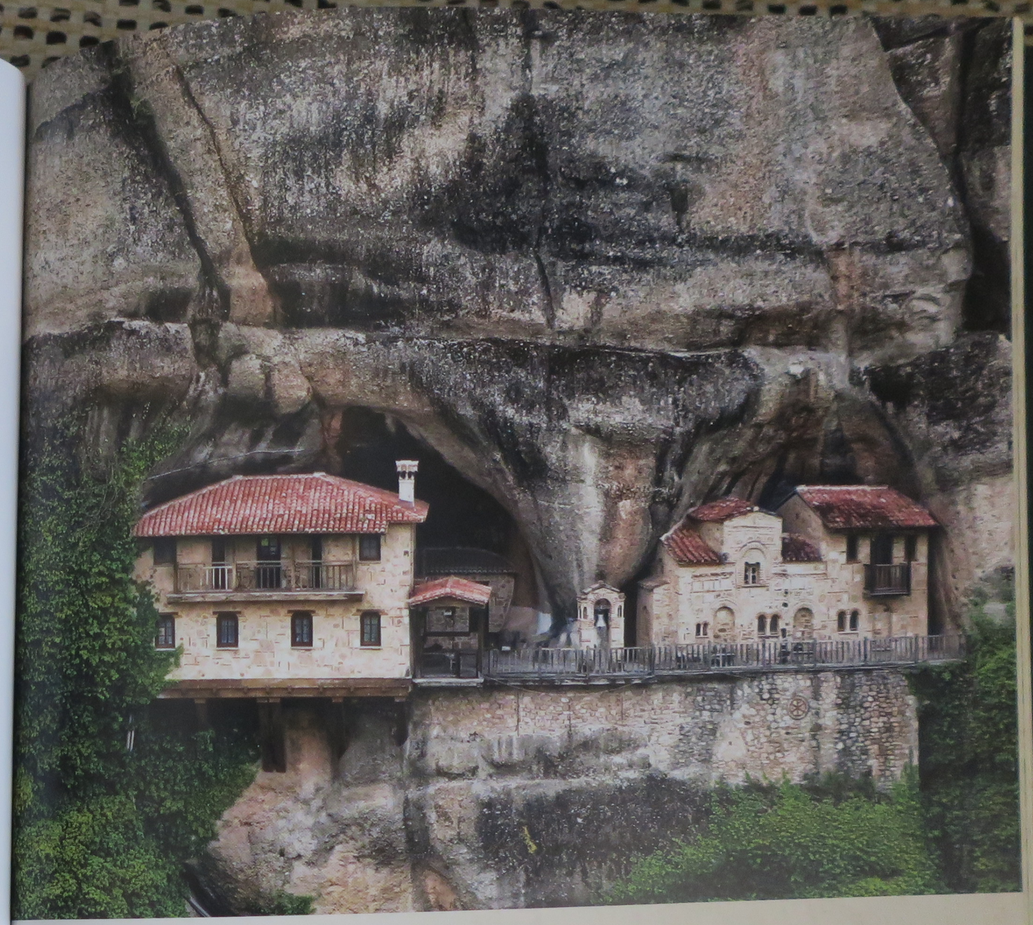
The monastery was initially dedicated to the Ascension of the Lord, as shown by the depiction of the Christ Savior "Analipsimiotis" (sic) on the southern wall of the church as well as by the geodetic and astronomical measurements with the method of astronomical orientation, which demonstrated that the Katholikon was constructed in the year 1357 and that it was dedicated to the feast of the Ascension.

All the above is also confirmed by the Katholikon's dedicatory inscription on the lintel of the west side of the main church. The inscription states that the church of the Ascension was erected and painted thanks to the contribution in both effort and expense of the protos of the Skete of Stagoi, the priest-monk Nilos, in the year 1366/67, under the governorship of the Greek Serbian despot Symeon UroŠ Palaiologos (1359-1370). According to a second inscription on the north wall of the main church, the local nobleman Constantinos, who later became monk Cyprian, also contributed to the cost of painting the Katholikon.

The monastery was renamed and dedicated to the Hypapante probably before 1529.

The small Katholikon of the monastery is a cross-roofed type of church. Due to lack of space, the iconographic program includes only a few scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts and depictions of saints, either full length or in medallions. Of special interest are the depictions of the local bishops, such as Saints Achillios and Oikoumenios, of the monastery's ktitor Nilos, as well as the painting of the Dormition of the Virgin on the west wall in which the Theotokos' soul is represented as a winged swaddled infant; an iconographic detail from the Palaiologan times which is also encountered later in the Katholikon of the Monastery of Varlaam.

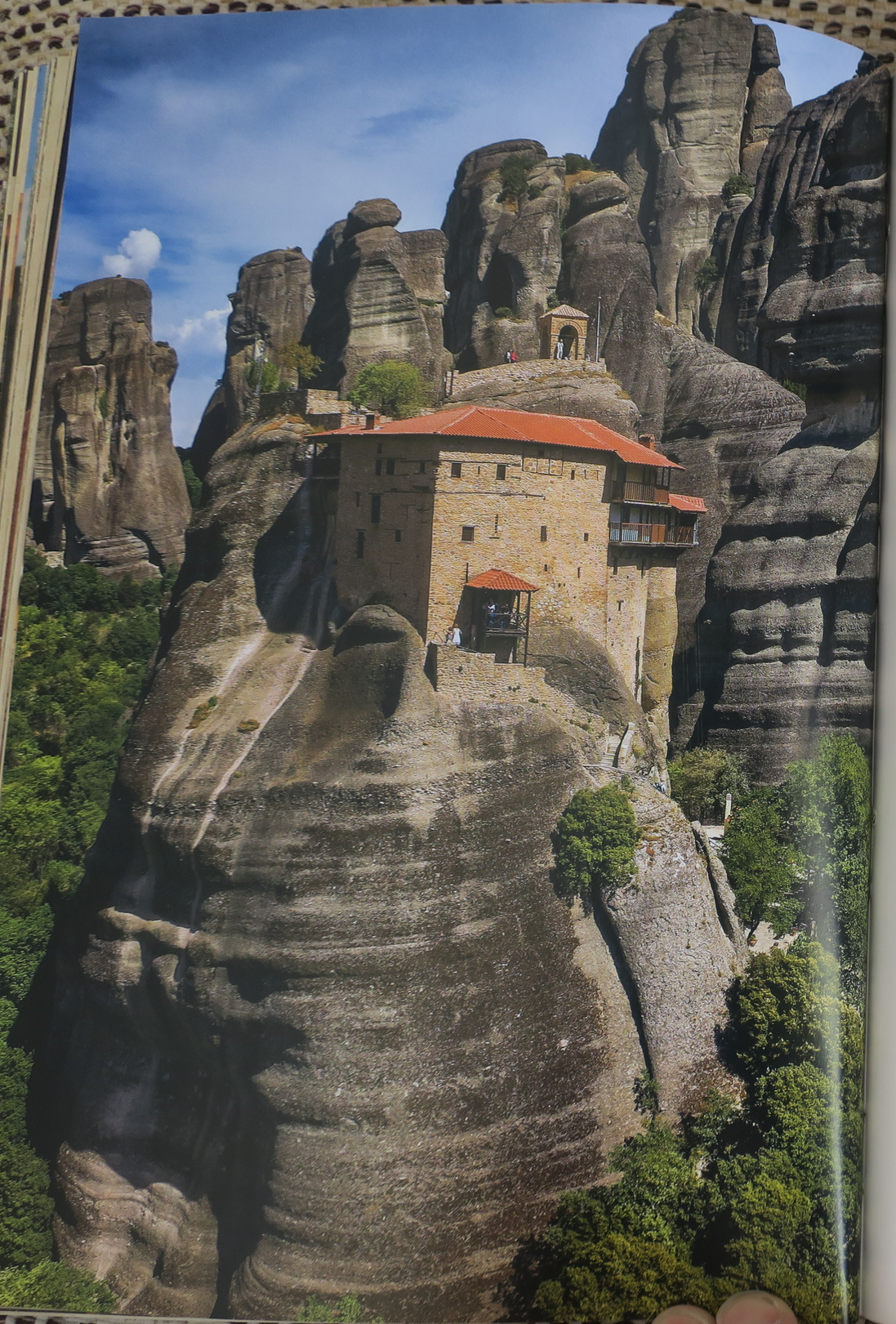
The painter of the main church is anonymous, but he demonstrates a thorough mastery of the Late Byzantine tradition of painting in Western Macedonia. The most distinguishing features of his art are the use of sharp lines the broad luminous rendering of the



surfaces with bright colors, the tranquility of the figures, and the inclusion of charming details from everyday life.

The monastery was renovated in 1765 by Athanasios Vlahavas, the father of the well-known priest and independence fighter Thymios Vlahavas. Two decades later (1784), the narthex was decorated with folk-style wall paintings of saints by the painter Dimitrios Zoukis from Kalarites and his disciple Georgios from Ioannina at a time when Paisios Klinovitis was bishop of Stagoi (1818-1821/22), and the priest-monk Symeon was hegumen of the monastery.

After the failure of the independence movement of Thymios Vlahavas (1809), the monastery suffered damage from the cannons of Ali Pasha of Ioannina, ceased to function and was gradually abandoned. In 1994, it came under the jurisdiction of the Monastery of the Great Meteoron as a metochion and it was renovated and restored (1995-2000).



HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT NICHOLAS ANAPAFSAS

THE MONASTERY OF SAINT NICHOLAS ANAPAFSAS is the first monastery one encounters when ascending from the village of Kastraki towards Meteora. The origin of the name "Anapafsas" has not been definitively determined.

The limited area of the rock has influenced the architecture of the monastery, which was built on floors, one on top of the other, but without achieving the desired spaciousness. In the past access was possible through a rope ladder or net, but today it is facilitated through an inbuilt staircase.

One theory suggests that it derives from an old founder of the monastery or is etymologically related to the Greek verb "anapavomai" (to rest), implying that "Anapafsas" refers to a place where monks sought spiritual rest.

The first organized monastic presence on the rock of Anapafsas is placed in the 14th century, as this is when certain fragments of wall paintings in the small chapel of Saint Anthony are dated. Around the same time (c. 1350), the orientation of the chapel has been dated using geodetic and astronomical methods for investigating the alignment of ecclesiastical monuments.

The first mention of the monastery "of the great Nicholas Anapafsas" appears in the Historical Treatise or Chronicle of Meteora (post August 1529). In contrast, the exhortation of Saint Athanasios the Meteorite († 1381) to his fellow ascetics to elect the spiritual father of Meteora "with the opinion of the abbot of Saint Nicholas" does not refer to the monastic community of Anapafsas. The identification of this figure with the monydrion (small monastery) of Saint Nicholas mentioned in a letter from the mid-14th century (post 1340–1360) is also uncertain.

The monastery underwent radical renovation between the last decade of the 15th century and the first decade of the 16th century, during which the present small and elegant Katholikon (main church) was constructed. According to the founding inscription on the east wall of the narthex, above the entrance to the main church, the renovation was

Top: The Dormition of Saint Ephraim the Syrian.
Bottom: Adam naming the animals.

undertaken by the Metropolitan of Larisa, Saint Dionysios the Merciful, who lived there as a monk during the last years of his life († March 28, 1510), and the Exarch of Stagoi, Hieromonk Nikanoras († 1521/22). The wall painting was completed on October 12, 1527, by the famous Cretan painter Theophanes Strelitzas Bathas.

Theophanes came from a family of artists that had fled to Venetian-ruled Crete from the Peloponnese during the second half of the 15th century. He himself was born in Candia (modern Heraklion) around the end of the 15th century, married, and had two sons, Symeon and Neophytos, who followed in his footsteps. Among his works are the Katholikon of Saint Nicholas Anapafsas (his earliest signed work), the Katholikon of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos (1535), the Katholikon, refectory, and the chapel of Saint John the Forerunner in the Monastery of Stavronikita (1545/46), as well as a series of portable icons for the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Kalabaka. After his death († 1559), his son Neophytos, who painted the cathedral of Kalabaka in 1573 with priest Kyriazis, proudly noted in the dedicatory inscription that he was the son of "Lord Theophanes the monk, the excellent icon painter".

The fully frescoed Katholikon of the Monastery of Saint Nicholas Anapafsas consists of a small single-nave church with a dome and a relatively spacious narthex. In the main church, the image of Christ Pantocrator dominates the dome, followed by scenes of the Liturgy of the Angels, the four Evangelists in the pendentives, feasts of the Dodekaorton in the upper wall zones, and full-length or half-length saints.

In the narthex, impressive scenes include the miracles of Jesus, the imposing and densely populated compositions of the Last Judgment, the Dormition of Saint Ephraim the Syrian and of Saint Nicholas, as well as the depiction of Adam in Paradise naming various animals and birds (Genesis 2:20). Theophanes also painted Saint Athanasios the Meteorite and the monastery's founders, Saint Dionysios the Merciful and Hieromonk Nikanoras.

The wall paintings of Saint Nicholas Anapafsas represent a significant example of 16th-century Cretan painting. In both iconography and style, Theophanes follows forms and types that had already been established in the 15th-century Cretan iconographic tradition, as well as Palaiologan models, while subtle influences from Italian art are present, though introduced in a way that does not alter the byzantine stylistic character.

Among the monastery's other areas, noteworthy are the refectory, located on the upper floor above the Katholikon, with folk-style wall paintings on the eastern wall; the chapel of Saint John the Forerunner

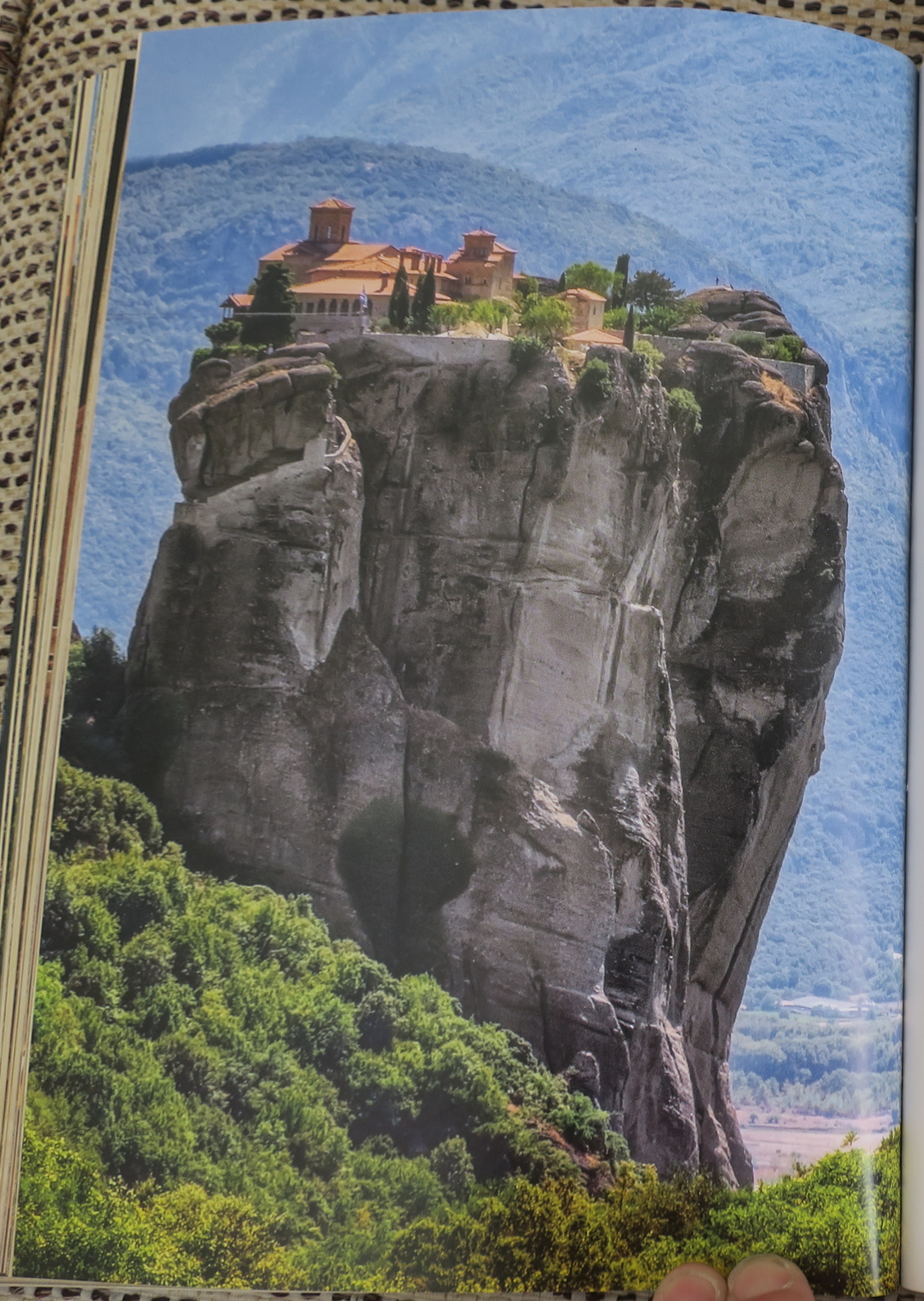


Theotokos (detail) from the depiction "Above, the Prophets", in the narthex of the Katholikon.

opposite the refectory; the small chapel of Saint Anthony mentioned earlier; and the chapel of Saint Silouan.

After centuries of monastic life, the Monastery of Anapafsas began to decline in the early 20th century and was already closed when Nikos Veis visited it in 1909. Further serious damage occurred during the events of World War II· however, during the 1960s, the monastery was restored, and its frescoes were conserved.

Today, the monastery possesses precious treasures- 35 handwritten codices, mostly from the 14th–16th centuries, out of the 43 recorded by Veis in 1909.



HOLY MONASTERY OF THE HOLY TRINITY

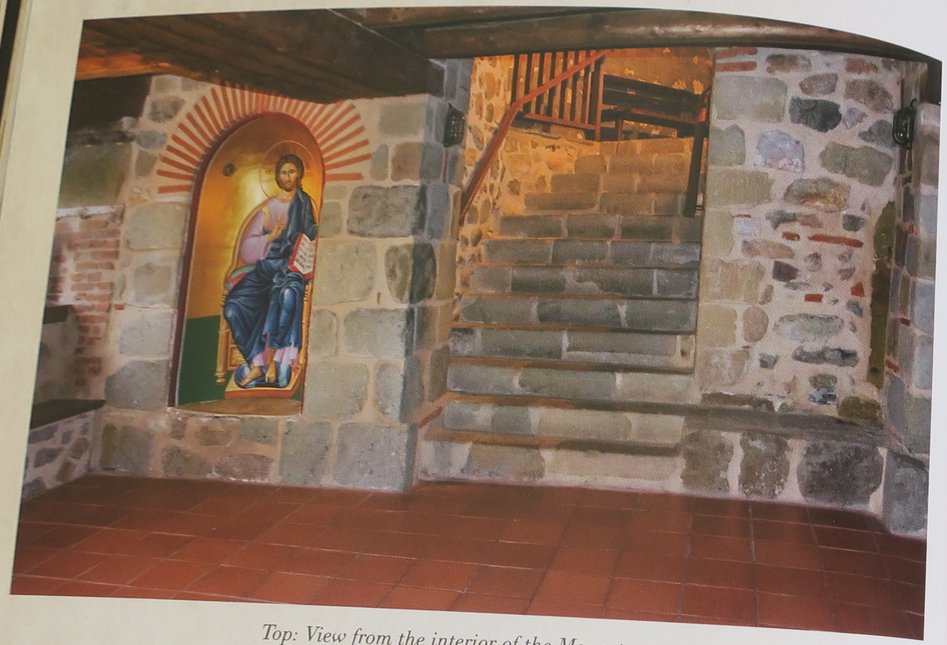
BUILT ON TOP OF A TALL AND IMPOSING ROCK, the Monastery of the Holy Trinity is the most famous monastic complex in Meteora. Western travelers used to describe vividly and sometimes even with fear how they climbed on the rock using inbuilt wooden staircases and the traditional net. Today access to the monastery has improved and, after reaching the top, the pilgrim–visitor is rewarded with an enthralling view of the rocky forest, the Pindus Mountain range in the background, and the neighboring monastery of St. Stephen.

The monastery was founded by a certain monk Dometios around 1438 according to an oral tradition which is not confirmed by the available written documents. However, as the most authoritative researcher of Meteorite monasticism Dimitros Sofianos remarks, we can't exclude the possibility that the first hermits may have settled here at the beginning of the 14th century, as they did in other rocks in Meteora.

The first mention of the monastery is found in a prostagma (ruling) of Symeon UroŠ Palaiologos (1362) which refers to the Meteoron and "the Holy Trinity."

The main church of the Katholikon is the oldest building of the Monastery and it was erected in the year ,ςϡπδ′ (= 1475/76) according to the inscription on a plinth built on the south outer wall of the church. A later study however estimates that the church was built twenty years later, around 1458.

The small Katholikon of the monastery is composed of the main church, the narthex and the sacristy, each of which corresponds to a separate construction phase. The main church is a distyle cross-in-square with an octagonal dome whose ground plan resembles that of the equally small old Katholikon of Great Meteoron. The masonry is simple on the lateral sides. It is more complex on the eastern side due to the use of cloisonné masonry and rich ceramic ornamentation on its upper section. The apse of the sanctuary is triangular with a biphora window on the main side and blind arcades on the lateral sides. These morphological features and the building method einforce the view that the monument dates from the 15th century.

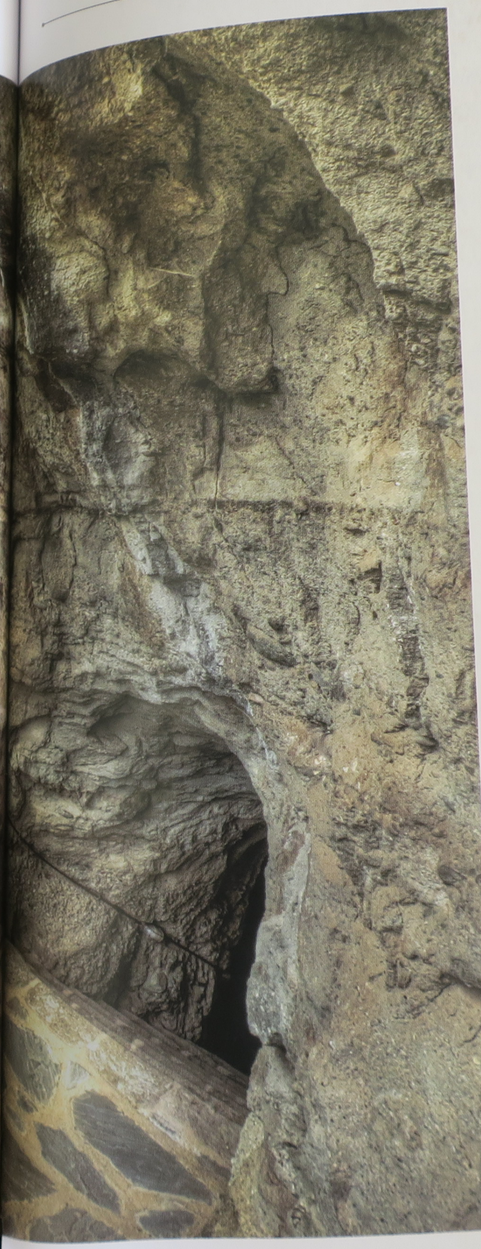




Top: View from the interior of the Monastery.
Bottom: Area with the winch system.









The present-day decoration of the main church was completed on 6 October 1741 by the brothers Antonios, the priest, and Nikolaos, when Theophanis was bishop of Stagoi and Parthenios was hegumen of the monastery. The wall paintings include the standard content. At the apse of the sanctuary our gaze is attracted by the figure of Platytera and, below that, the Angelic Liturgy and the officiating bishops. The dome features the Pantocrator surrounded by angels, Mary, the Baptist and a few prophets laid out in two zones. The rest of the wall surfaces are covered with scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts and the Cycle of the Life of Christ as well as certain figures of saints, either full length or in medallion. Researchers have also recently discovered an older layer of wall paintings.

A small square sacristy was added in 1648 on the south side of the Sanctuary as documented by the inscription carved on a plinth on the outer side of the west wall: "† ETOC ͵ZPϟB´ EΠEI [MH]NH MAYO." Some years later, in 1689, a spacious lite covered by a vault was built west of the main church. According to the dedicatory inscription, it was painted in 1692 by Ioannis Rizos and Athanasios, when Arsenios was metropolitan of Stagoi and Ionas was hegumen of the monastery.



The Katholikon of the monastery.

The iconographic program of the lite includes the figure of Pantocrator in the dome flanked by two successive zones of angels and prophets. The figures of the Four Evangelists are painted on the spherical triangles and, below them, we can see scenes from the Cycle of the Life of Christ and some figures of saints, either full length or in medallion.

The old wood-carved iconostasis of the main church was stolen in 1979 and was replaced by a new one. The same sacrilegious hands also took away the old, remarkable icons of iconostasis. Among them stood out an icon of Christ from 1662 and an icon of Mary painted in 1718 "by the humble hand of Rizos from the region of Agrafa." The small cemetery chapel of Timios Prodromos located past the entrance of the monastery on the left is also noteworthy. The church is cyclical and covered by a vault. It is mostly carved into the rock, and it is filled with beautiful wall paintings from the end of the 17th century. According to the dedicatory inscription, it was built and painted in 1682 at the expense of the priest-monks Damaskinos, Ionas and Parthenios. On the south outer wall of the Katholikon there is today an inscription built into the wall: "ΔIA XEIP|OC NIKOΔI|MOY MONA|XOY KAI ΠTO|XOY PAKEN|ΔITOY" (by the humble and poor monk Nikodimos). The French traveler and archaeologist Léon Heuzey mentions that he had seen this inscription somewhere in the chapel of Timios Prodromos during his visit there in the summer of 1858. We don't know when and why the inscription was removed from its location and transferred to the Katholikon. Nikodimos was probably the craftsman who built the chapel. The richly decorated gilded wood-carved iconostasis dates from the same period as the wall paintings.

The building complex of the monastery also includes the old trapeza, which has been converted today into the church of the Dormition of the Virgin and preserves some folk-style wall paintings, the cha pel of the Taxiarchs which contains the ossuary of the monastery, the cells, the reception areas, the lift tower and the tanks, all of which have been renovated.

The Holy Trinity owns today a remarkable collection of 31 manuscripts. The once-rich library and the archive of the monastery, a gift by the bishop of Stagoi Paisios Klinovitis (12 May 1784–1808) were both lost along with many manuscripts, icons and other relics during the Italo-German Occupation. In 1994 the monastery obtained the hermitages of St. Anthony, St. Nicholas Kofinas or Bantova and the small church of the Nativity of Mary, which were thoroughly restored and repaired.



HOLY MONASTERY OF GREAT METEORON (TRANSFIGURATION)

BUILT ON THE BROAD UPLAND AREA OF THE TOWERING pinnacle of Meteoron at the western end of the rocky forest, the Monastery of the Transfiguration or Great Meteoron is the largest and one of the oldest monasteries in Meteora. Shortly before the middle of the 14th century, its ktitor was St. Athanasios the Meteorite, an ascetic figure and a leading representative of monasticism in Meteora.

Athanasios (christened Andronicos) was born around 1303 in Neai Patrai (Ypati) to eminent parents. After the untimely death of his parents and the occupation of Neai Patrai by the Catalans (c. 1318/19), he first sought refuge in Salonica and then travelled to Athos and Constantinople. There he made the acquaintance of some eminent figures of the hesychast tradition, such as Gregorios Sinaitis, Daniel the Hesychast, the future Ecumenical Patriarch Isidoros etc. Later he travelled to Crete, but he came back to Athos (c. 1332) where he was received as a monk taking first the name Antonios and later, when he received the Great Schema, the name Athanasios. Due to the Turkish raids, Athanasios, along with his spiritual father Gregorios, fled from Mount Athos and, having passed through Salonica and Veroia, he finally settled down in the lofty and hesychastic rocks of Meteora. In his quest for more isolation and hesychia, Athanasios took permission from his spiritual father and climbed around 1340 on "the steep rock... the great rock of... Stagoi which is called Meteoron (suspended in the air) for good reason," as noted in the sigillum of Patriarch Metrophanes III (1580, Apr.).

Athanasios built on that rock his humble hermitage which can be still seen today just before the entrance to the monastery in a cavity on the left, and he organized there the first monastic community based on cenobitic principles. Initially the monastery was dedicated to the Virgin and later to Christ Savior in whose honor he built the new church (c. 1360). After a brief illness Athanasius passed away at the age of 78 in the year 1381 (Sept. – Nov.). Athanasios' successor in the

arche of Meteoron and the second ktitor of the monastery was Ioannis Uroš Palaiologos (born c. 1349/50) who, "infused with divine love", rejected temporal power and put on the monk's garb at the age of 22 taking the name Ioasaph.

After the death of Athanasios, during the 1380s, and especially in the year ,ςωϞς΄ (6896 = 1387/88), Ioasaph rebuilt and expanded the original church of Christ Savior erected by Athanasios. This is the present-day church-shaped sanctuary of the Katholikon of the monastery based on the type of the tetrastyle cross-in-square with dome, which was painted one century later in 1483. He also contributed to the foundation and development of the Monastery of Hypsilotera or "of the Calligraphers" in 1389/90, which was built on a rock tower facing Meteoron.

After the conquest of the area by the Ottomans (most probably at the beginning of the 15th century) and until the beginning of the 16th century, the monastic community of Meteoron prevailed over the Skete of Stagoi and the spiritual father of the monastery took the title of hegumen and became the head of the Skete.

Despite the hardships of the Ottoman conquest, the 16th century was a period of prosperity and growth for the monasteries of Meteora and the broader region of Trikala. The princes of Wallachia made a significant contribution, especially Neagoe Basarab (1512-1521) who sponsored the construction of the tower and part of the staircase and "did many good things for the monastery and donated relics," according to Dionysios, the hegumen of the monastery of Meteoron.

The imposing main church and the lite of the Katholikon of the monastery were finished during the same period (1544/45). The church is based on the Athonite model of the tetrastyle cross-in-square with dome and choirs, it has a tetrastyle two-storeyed lite and resembles morphologically the Katholikon of the Dousikou Monastery. The masonry is made of alternating layers of stones and plinths and seems to have been constructed very carefully. The wall paintings of the main church were completed in 1552 under hegumen Symeon from Epirus.

The decoration of the Katholikon comprises three phases which are chronologically distinct from each other and show the evolution of the late-byzantine and post-byzantine painting from the end of the 14th century until the middle of the 16th century.

The representation of the Second Coming on the outer side of the north wall of the old Katholikon (post 1388) belongs to the first phase. The second phase includes the wall paintings of the old Katholikon, i.e. of the present-day sanctuary, which were finished in 1438 and contain

the standard iconographic program. Especially noteworthy is the absence of feminine figures, apart from St. Helen, the depiction of important representatives of orthodox monasticism and the representation of Saints Georgios ("the Capadocian"), Dimitrios ("the Grand Duke") and Nestor in the dress of Byzantine princes. The decoration of the old Katholikon is attributed to an artist workshop whose works, apart from Thessaly, can also be found in Salonica, in Western Macedonia (mostly in Kastoria), and even in Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova. They are remarkable and well-trained artists who follow Palaiologan models and are characterized by chromatic plasticity and the relaxed posture of their figures.

The third phase includes the wall decoration of the main church and of the lite, which was completed in 1552. The main church is replete with scenes from the standard iconographic program: on the dome we see the imposing figure of Pantocrator, the Angelic Liturgy and the four Evangelists in spherical triangles. The choir apses, the drums of the four cross-arms, and the upper parts of the walls of the church are covered with scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts and from the Cycle of the Life of Christ. The figures of the holy ktitors of the monastery, Athanasios and Ioasaf, are depicted in the south and the north pier respectively.

The lite is decorated with martyrdom scenes, and on the eastern wall our gaze is attracted by the Trimorphon (Christ, Mary, and the Baptist) above the entrance to the main church and by the representations of the First and the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Lastly, the grave of the ktitors is in the northwestern corner.

Although his name is not mentioned, the artist of the main church and of the lite has been identified based on iconographic and stylistic features as Giorgis, an eminent representative of Cretan painting during the 16th century. These features include the balance of the compositions, an austere style, linearity, the individual details on the figures' faces, and the presence of Western loans.

The active hegumen Symeon was also responsible for the reconstruction of the trapeza (1557), whose architecture is impressive. It is an oblong 35m building with an apse on its eastern side that is polygonal on the outside. On the inside, 5 pillars divide the area into two aisles. The room is covered with arcs, groin vaults and vaults.

The spacious hestia (kitchen) of the monastery is built nearby, north of the trapeza, and many cooking utensils are exhibited there which were once used by the monks. On the outer side of the south wall of the trapeza Vlasios Totsonis (2008) painted the large-scale representation



Katholikon of the Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron.

"The King of Glory", which features Jesus among the Prophets and the Righteous of the Old Testament in the upper zone, and the Ancient Greek Sages (poets, historians and philosophers), who approached the true God through their seminal word, in the lower zone.

The building complex of the monastery is complemented by the hospital-nursing home which was finished in July 1572 and by the chapels of Timios Prodromos (c. 1360 with a subsequent building phase in the 18th century), of Saints Constantine and Helen (1789), St. Nectarios, St. John Climacus and St. Olga the isapostolos (equal-to-the-apostles).

Despite the vicissitudes of fortune suffered by the monastery in its long history during the last six centuries, it has managed to preserve many of its relics.

Apart from the extensive wall painting cycles, the Monastery of Great Meteoron has a rich collection of portable icons covering a long period from the 14th to the 19th century. The most distinctive in terms of art and age are the Palaiologan icons of Mary holding the infant and of St. Nicholas in the shrines of the main church, as well as the impressive icon of Panagia "the Unfading Rose" from the year 1790 on the iconostasis of the Katholikon.



Christ Dragged to the Cross.
Fresco of the Katholikon.



Original iconography of the Virgin Mary "Rodon to Amaranton".

In the monastery's sacristy–museum, the pilgrim can also see an icon reliquary with a full-length Mary holding the infant at the center surrounded by fourteen busts of saints, each of which contained a piece of relic underneath. The icon was donated to the monastery by the sister of St. Ioasaf, Maria Angelina Doukaina Palaiologina (post 1372 – ante Dec. 1384), who is shown kneeling at the feet of Mary. She also donated the icon of the Assurance of Thomas, in which she is shown in royal dress amidst the Apostles along with her husband Thomas Preljubović († 23 Dec. 1384). Lastly, equally interesting is a diptych with a lamenting Mary and a Jesus as the "Man of Sorrows" as well as an icon of the Archangel Michael, all dating from the Palaiologan times, while there is also a notable collection of icons from the 16th century.

The monastery still keeps important samples of wood-carving, such as the gilded iconostasis of the Katholikon which preserves in its present form an older section from the year 1634/35 along with a newer addition of 1791; intricate ivory-decorated lecterns and shrines, the hegumen's throne (year 1616/17), as well as wooden crosses with metal coating decorated with enamel, precious stones and corals, which are exhibited in a special case in the monastery's sacristy-museum.

In the museum the pilgrim can also admire a remarkable collection of ecclesiastical cloths embroidered with gold, such as the podea (the cover of the holy altar), which was donated by Maria Palaiologina (end of 14th century) according to the tradition, epimanikia (cuffs), epitrachils (stoles), belts, the mitre of the hegumen Symeon (mid-16th



Theotokos and Christ as Extreme Humility.
Palaiologan diptych (14th c.), monastery museum.

century), and two epitaphions. The first dates from the Palaiologan times (14th century), it was created most probably by a workshop of Ioannina, and it may have been a gift of Maria Palaiologina to her brother Ioasaf, while the second dates from the year 1620/21. Lastly, there is a collection of silverworks comprising mostly reliquaries from the 16th – 19th century.

The monastery has one of the richest monastic libraries after Athos with 666 parchment and paper manuscripts spanning ten centuries of intellectual production (9th – 19th cent.) that the monks carefully managed to preserve despite the occasional adversities. Most of the codices have theological and ecclesiastical (liturgical) content, but there are also texts from secular literature, i.e. of ancient writers, or even demotic texts in prose or in verse. There is also a significant number of incunabula -around 450- from the 15th to the 19th century. They include publications of classical Greek writers by Aldus Manutius (aldinae) edited by eminent Greek scholars of the time, such as Markos Mousouros, Dimitrios Chalkokondylis, Zacharias Kallergis etc. The archive of the monastery is also rich in Byzantine and post-Byzantine documents, imperial chrysobulls, patriarchal sigilla etc. The chrysobulls of the emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos (year 1336) and of the Serbian king Stefan Dušan (year 1348) for the Monastery of St. George of Zavlantia, the chrysobulls of the Greek Serbian prince of Thessaly Symeon Uroš Palaiologos, the prostagmata (commandments) of the son of Ioannis –the future monk Ioasaph– and a letter of Maria Palaiologina (year 1386) are all especially noteworthy.

After the liberation of Thessaly from Turkish rule (1881) the monastery went through a long period of decline, lack of men, and abandonment. After the Second World War, it was even converted into a guest house until Dionysios, the metropolitan of Trikki and Stagoi and a fervent proponent of monasticism, brought there a new brotherhood headed by the archimandrite Aimilianos Vafeidis (1963). Since then, the Monastery of the Transfiguration, along with the neighboring Monastery of Varlaam, became the seedbed for a renaissance of monasticism in Meteora and beyond. In 1990 the monastery celebrated its 600-year anniversary with the presence and the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I.

Today the monastery continues its spiritual and philanthropic work. It has renovated its building complex, and it has kept and preserved its invaluable relics in modern sacristy. It is also constantly promoting the national heritage, history and tradition with the establishment of a series of thematic museum areas.



THE HOLY MONASTERY OF ROUSSANOU

WALKING PAST ST. NICHOLAS OF ANAPAFSAS, in the verdant valley of the rocky forest of Meteora, we meet the small and elegant monastery of Roussanou perched on a tall and narrow rock.

The name Roussanou, whose origin has been the subject of speculation, is encountered for the first time in the Historical Treatise or "Chronicle of Meteora" (probably shortly after 1529), which mentions the "monastery of Roussanou". This means that monastics had settled on the rock which was known by that name already since that time.

According to the hegumen of Great Meteoron Polykarpos Rammides, the priest-monk Nikodemus and his spiritual servant Benedict settled on the rock of Roussanou in the year 1388 and built the church of the Transfiguration there. This information is not confirmed by other sources, but it is consistent with the estimated age of the small old chapel of St. Barbara in the Monastery of Roussanou which dates from the year 1388. Therefore, the first settler-hermit who climbed there at that time may have given his name to the rock.

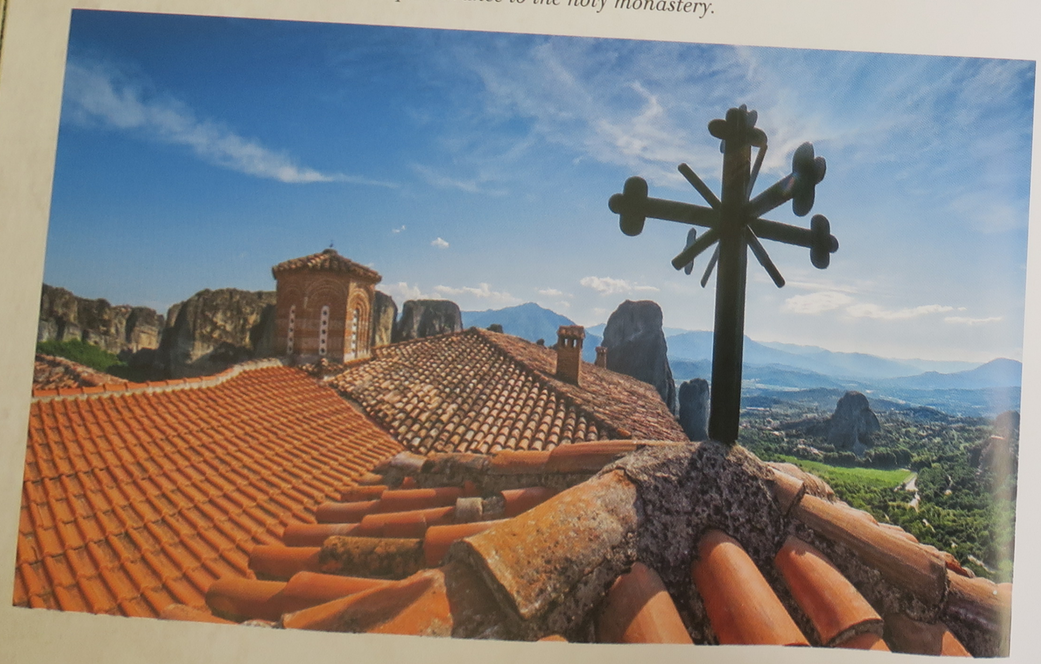
In the 16th century, when brothers Ioasaph and Maximos from Ioannina decided to rebuild the monastery and to organize the cenobium (March 1527 – ante Aug. 1529), they came up against a scene of ruin and abandonment. In their Testament, written in 1545, they note that the old church of Christ Savior "had been ruined after many years of abandonment and only a trace of it remained".

The ktitors of Roussanou modeled their own Testament after those of St. Bessarion, the metropolitan of Larissa and the ktitor of the Dousikou Monastery (1434/5), and of their fellow countrymen, Nektarios and Theophanis Apsaras, the ktitors of the neighboring monastery of Varlaam. According to their document, they asked and received from the substitute for the bishop of Stagoi, metropolitan Bessarion II of Larissa, and from the hegumen of the Great Meteoron "the rock of Roussanou... and jurisdiction over it was granted to us". Then they built the church from the foundation up and "we built

Holy Monastery of Roussanou.



Top: Entrance to the holy monastery.





cells around it in which the ascetic monks and other visitors could rest, and we also built and improved other buildings in the monastery. We also equipped the monastery with vessels, books, sacred items and vestments for the priests and deacons in the glory of God". Moreover, they equipped the Monastery with immovable property, and they organized a strict cenobium.

The present-day monastery consists of a three-floor complex. The small and elegant Katholikon of the Transfiguration of the Savior is located on the second floor. It was probably built around 1528 based on the Athonite model of the cross-in-square distyle church with dome and choirs on the left and right side and with a narthex covered by a vault. Due to the limited space and the shape of the rock, the sanctuary had to be oriented northwards.

The Katholikon is replete with excellent and well-preserved wall paintings from the 16th century. According to the dedicatory inscription located on the lintel above the entrance on the south wall of the church, the wall paintings were completed at the expense of the hegumen of the monastery, the priest-monk Arsenius, in November 1560, but the name of the painter is not mentioned.



Top and right: Detail from the depiction of the Praises (Ainoi) in the narthex of the Katholikon.

The iconographic program of the dome and the Bema includes dogmatic and eucharistic themes. The main church is painted mostly with scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts, the crowded representation of the Dormition of the Virgin being the most impressing, and with scenes from the Cycle of the Life of Christ and with figures of saints. Only the Bema Doors and the zone of the Apostles with the Mourning Figures and the Crucified remain from the remarkable wooden iconostasis of the main church, which was stolen.

The lite is decorated with the Pantocrator and the Praises (Ainoi) in the vault, martyrdom scenes and an impressive illustration of the Second Coming on the eastern wall.

The decoration of the Katholikon belongs to the tradition of the Cretan school, although the iconography of the scenes seems to follow certain Palaiologan standards of the 14th and the 15th centuries. The compositions are harmoniously organized, their layout is balanced and symmetrical and their style is measured, while there are noticeable similarities with the wall paintings in the Katholikons of the monasteries of Great Meteoron and Dousikou. All the above seem to confirm the view that attributes the decoration to the eminent painter Tzortzis.



A bibliographic workshop operated in the monastery until the middle of the 16th century and its main representative was the scribe Parthenios (c. 1565). From the 52 hand-written codices recorded by the untiring student of Meteora Nikos Veis in 1909, 40 codices remain today. This loss of manuscripts, as well as of other relics, has been since the monastery was abandoned for a long period of time during the 1940s. After the war, the nun Eusebia from Kastraki lived there († 1971). Having been thoroughly renovated and restored, the monastery operates today as a convent.

Although the monastery is dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior, the memory of St Barbara is piously celebrated today (4 Dec.).



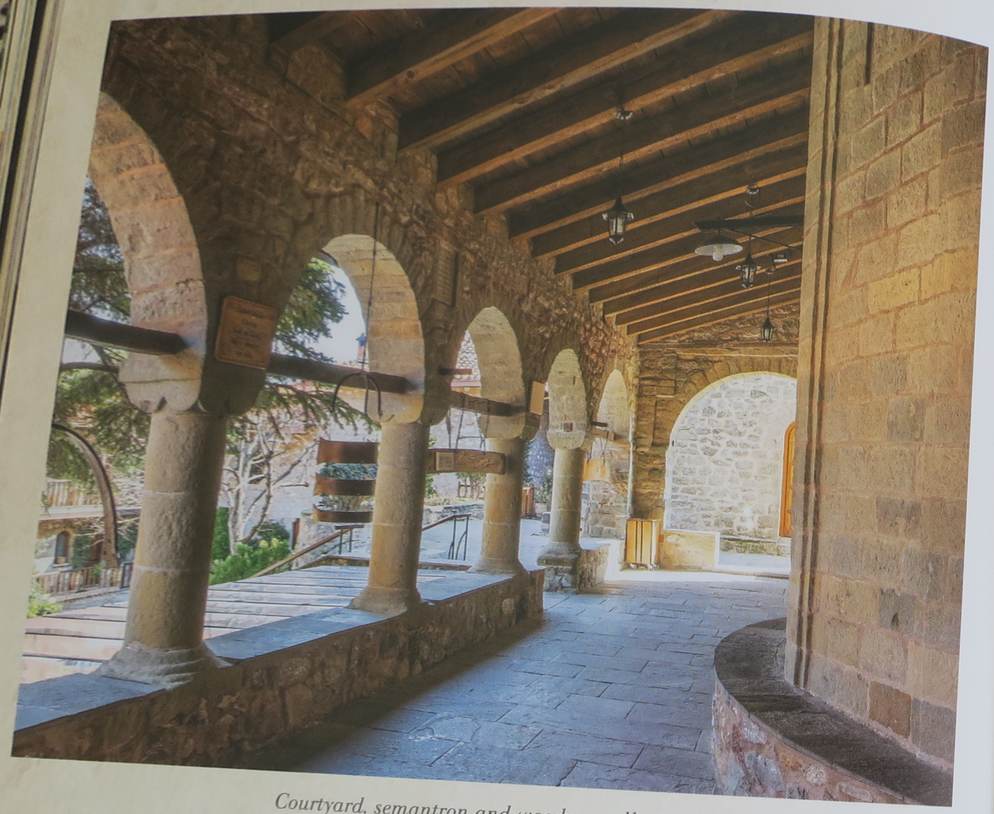
HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT STEPHEN
(AGIOS STEFANOS)

THE MONASTERY OF ST. STEPHEN is located at the southeastern corner of the rocky city of Meteora on the peak of a giant rock towering Kalabaka and giving an unobstructed view of the plain of Thessaly and mountain Koziakas.

Compared to other monasteries in Meteora, access to the monastery is easy through a small stone bridge which replaces an older wooden drawbridge. The new bridge helped hermits and ascetics to inhabit the rock of St. Stephen early on.

As noted by Dimitrios Sofianos, the origins of the historical life of the monastery "are lost in time, covered by the mist of legends and traditions". According to both Greek and international travelers and visitors, from the Swede Jakob Jonas Björnståhl (1779) to the Greek Ioannis Papasotiriou, who taught in the Gymnasium of Trikala (1927), the inscription "΄ϚΨ΄ ΙΕΡΕΜΙΑϹ" (= 1191/92) was carved on a rock near the entrance to the monastery. Both the origin and the purpose of the inscription, whose traces were erased after 1927, are unknown. It has been suggested that the name "Jeremiah" may have referred to the first hermit who settled on the rock of St. Stephen. Saints Antonios and Philotheos are known to be the ktitors of the monastery. According to a later tradition, the former is related to the byzantine family of Kantakouzenos, and it has been confirmed that the latter lived during the first half of the 16th century and came from the village of Sklataina (Rizoma) in Trikala.

A sigillum of the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah I (Feb. 1545) affirms the independence and autonomy of the monastery and refers to the construction of the church and to the other activities of Philotheos, who "rebuilt this venerable church in the honor of the archdeacon St. Stephen on top of the rock... It can be said that he erected the venerable church from its foundations up and decorated it, and he also built cells for the monks and the visitors of the monastery. He improved the rest of the buildings and donated many ecclesiastical vessels and



Courtyard, semantron and wooden mallet.

manuscripts and sacred vestments and everything appropriate for the monastery... And promising to live a cenobitic life, they have asked me to confirm and guarantee with this letter the rights and privileges of this monastery, so that it will be independent from His Eminence the bishop of Stagoi and the Saintliest Abbot of the holy royal monastery of Great Meteoron".

The old Katholikon of the monastery that was built by Philotheos is a small single-nave basilica with a wooden roof and a narthex separated from the main church with a three-arched opening (trivilon). The main church and the narthex are replete with paintings. The iconographic cycle includes the standard content: the Platytera, the Eucharist, and the officiating bishops in the sanctuary; scenes from the Twelve Great Feasts and the miracles of Christ, the Oikoi (Stanzas) of the Akathist, and some full-length figures of saints in the main church. Lastly, in the narthex, on both sides of the entrance, the two ktitors of the monastery, Saints Antonios and Philotheos, are painted in monastic frocks.



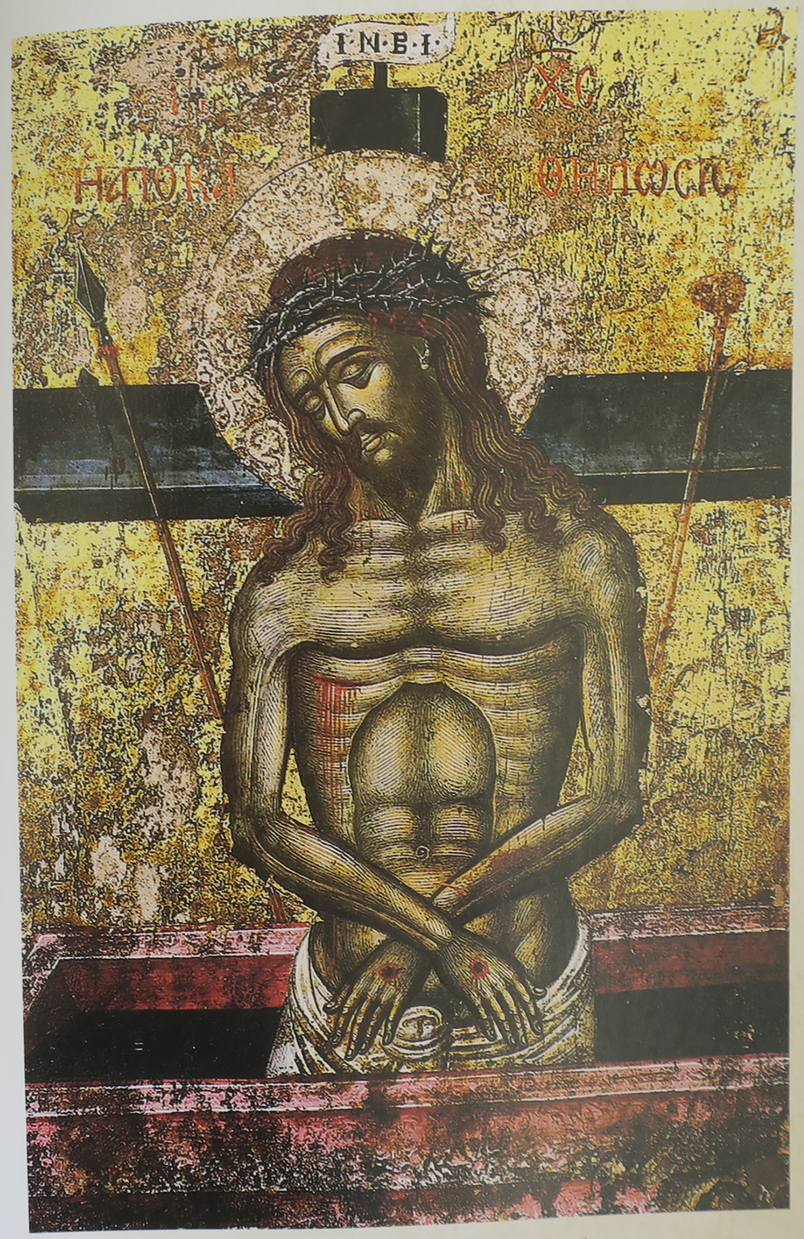
Holy Monastery of Saint Stephen, exterior view of the Katholikon.

The dedicatory inscription on the west wall of the main church mentions that the wall paintings were executed under hegumen Mitrophanes and that the representation of the Dormition of the Virgin was later restored by the kastre(n)sios priest Nikolaos from Stagoi, a well-known painter of portable icons. The date of the execution and of the partial restoration of the paintings is unknown because the year has been effaced from the inscription.

The anonymous painter of St. Stephen is considered as a representative of the "empirical" painting style of the 17th century which is marked by austerity, simplification and linearity in the composition of the figures and by the limited use of the ornament. Subsequent studies have highlighted the similarities between the decoration of St. Stephen and that of the narthex in the church of St. John the Theologian in Vragiana of Agrafa (1649) and have even suggested that the painter of St. Stephen may have studied as an apprentice under senior painters from Linotopi of Epirus, or



The Dormition of Saint Theophanes. Church of Saint Charalambos, work of Vlasis Tsotsonis.



The Deposition from the Cross, work of Emmanuel Tzanes (1670).

that he may have originated himself from that village. Therefore, the decoration of St. Stephen is dated to sometime between the second and the fourth decade of the 17th century.

The gilded wooden iconostasis of the church is also noteworthy. It is a work of the woodcarver "Nikolos the Peloponnesian" dating from the mid- 17th century (1659) and it is a fine example of ecclesiastical woodcarving from that period.

The more recent large Katholikon of St. Charalampus was built in 1798 under hegumen Ambrosius. It is based on the Athonite architectural type, i.e. tetrastyle cross-in-square with side choirs and a spacious narthex. The main church is crowned by three fine, elegant domes located in the church center, in the prothesis and in the diaconikon. At the beginning of the 19th century, under hegumen Mitrophanes, an arcade was added at the north outer side. After its reconstruction, the Katholikon did not feature any wall paintings except in the central dome, and its decoration by the recognized painter Vlasis Tsotsonis began only in 1992. In this recent decoration the visitor is impressed by the depictions of the Second Coming and of the Dormition of St. Theophanis, the ktitor of the Monastery of Varlaam, on the west wall of the narthex. The church has an exquisite wooden iconostasis created Theopanis by wood-carvers from Metsovo at the expense of Gabriel, bishop of Stagoi. The ciborium above the Holy Altar, the despotic throne and the shrines of the main church (1836) are also noteworthy examples of ecclesiastical wood-carving.

The church keeps today the relics of the protomartyr St. Stephen and the skull of the hieromartyr St. Charalampus, a priceless gift from Vladislav, prince of Wallachia and the relative of the great vornic Dragomir, although researchers still disagree about the dating (probably the last quarter of the 15th century or the first quarter of the 16th century). In fact, the princes of Wallachia had been donating gifts to the monastery since the 16th century, and the monastery even acquired a metochion (dependency) by the name of Transfiguration in Butoiu, near Tirgo visto, which it kept until the middle of the 19th century.

The building complex of the monastery is complemented by the trapeza, the kitchen, the chapel of St. Skepi east of the Katholikon, and the cross-roofed cemetery church of the Archangels and of the martyr St. Claudia at the eastern corner of the rock, which was beautifully painted by Vlasios Tsotsonis.

The trapeza of the monastery was built in 1857 by hegumen Constantius. It is a small building covered with two low domes. After its restoration, it has been converted into a sacristy-museum which exhibits some remarkable samples from the treasures of the monastery, such as documents, manuscripts and rare incunabula, portable icons, wood-carved and silver-plated crosses, intricate silverware, vestments embroidered with gold as well as other fabrics. An icon of the Deposition of Christ (1670) by the eminent 17th-century Cretan priest and painter Emmanouel Tzanes (Bounialis) and an impressive epitaphion from 1857 embroidered with gold stand out among the exhibits.

The monastery keeps today 155 manuscripts, a special group of which came from the pen and brush of calligraphers-illuminators belonging to the cycle of artists gathered around Lucas from Hungaro-Wallachia (mid-17th century) and Matthew from Myrea, such as the priest-monk Anthimos from Ioannina, the priest-monk Isaiah and Jacob, the bishop of Side and later of Ganos and Chora. These manuscripts are distinguished for their colorful, ornamental miniatures, elaborate headpieces and decorative initials. The codices 18 (calligrapher Isaiah, 1643/44) and 103 (calligrapher Jacob, 1632) are characteristic examples which are exhibited in the museum of the monastery. Lastly, four folios in vellum (6th century or, according to another estimation, 7th-9th century) containing fragments from the Gospel of Matthew in majuscule script are particularly important for their paleographic value.

The Monastery of St. Stephen has always contributed to the Education of the Nation. The well-known cleric and scholar Dorotheos Scholarios sought refuge there to satisfy his love of learning, whereas the active hegumen Constantius (mid-19th century) built the Constantian School in Kalabaka and offered a considerable endowment for the reconstruction of the Gymnasium of Trikala. Lastly, the monastery operated an orphanage school for girls in the 1970s with the nuns serving as teachers.

The monastery, which is referred to by an older tradition as an hesychasterion (hermitage), was reserved for men until the Second World War, when it suffered serious damages. In 1961 it was converted through royal decree to a nunnery with a large and active sisterhood distinguished for its intellectual cultivation and its rich philanthropic work.

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