

The image shows a massive, vertical rock formation. On its face is a large, ancient fresco of a bearded man with a halo, wearing a red and gold robe. At the base of the rock, a small, multi-story stone building with a red-tiled roof is visible, featuring a wooden staircase leading up to it. The background shows a valley with green hills and a small town under a cloudy sky.

PAUL
PISSANOS

METEORA

THE ROCKS OF GOD



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Author of the book
PAUL PISSANOS

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ANGELICA TIMMS
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D. GEORGIADES
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Art Supervisor
CAROLINA PISSANO

Cover Picture
Meteora - Photo Composition

Creative Layout
DENNIS DANTES
dantes.dennis1@gmail.com

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40 Empedocleous Str. - Pangrati - Athens T.K. 11 636 Tel.: 210 7520681-2 Fax: 210 7520683
e-mail: pissanos@otenet.gr info@eptapolis.gr

PAUL PISSANOS



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Athens 2011

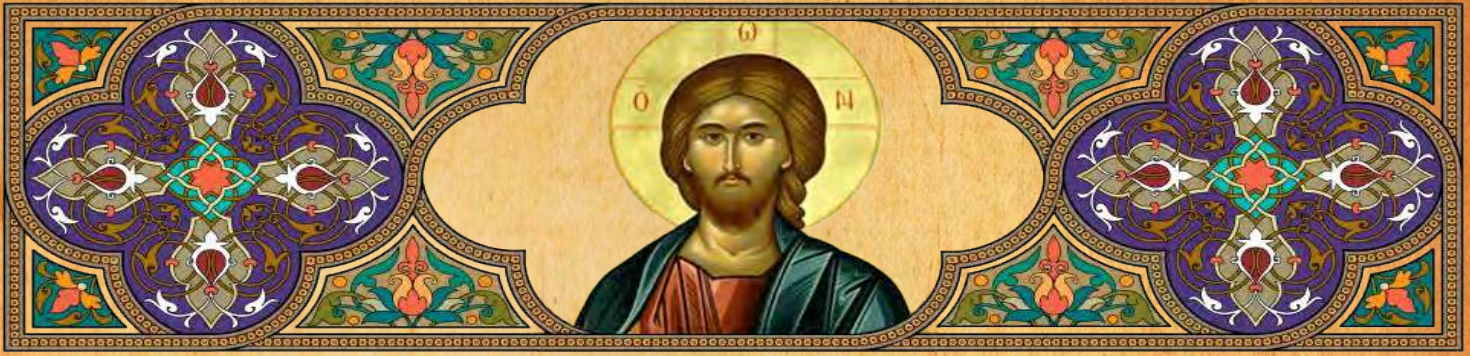


METEORA

THE ROCKS OF GOD

CHAPTER I'

PROLOGUE



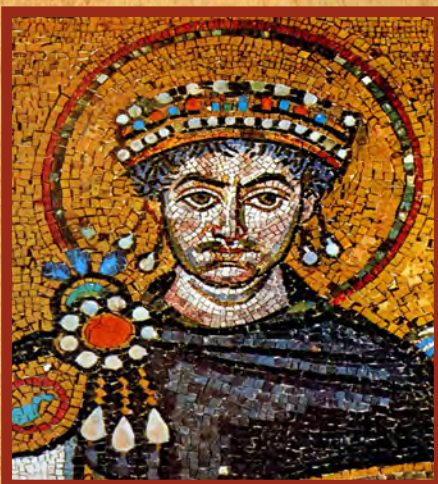
PROLOGUE

Travellers wishing to visit the Meteora pass through the town of Trikala, after crossing the plain of Thessaly.

This attractive town – with its own history – was inhabited 5,000 years ago, and up to the 11th century BC, was called Trikke. The name Trikke is first mentioned by Homer. In ancient times, it was a flourishing cultural and religious centre. There was a famous temple of Asclepios, here which helped to gain universal recognition of Trikke as the city of the ancient Greek god of medicine. Trikala, as it is known today, was particularly prosperous in early Christian times.

In the 6th century AD, the emperor Justinian restored the walls of the city. Norman invaders took the town in 1082, while in 1204, Trikala formed part of the kingdom of the Thessaloniki Franks. Conquering forces periodically captured Trikala until in 1593 it fell to the Turks, together with the whole of Thessaly. The development of the monastic state of the Meteora – particularly during the 14th century – had lent special splendor, not only to the

Justinian



The River of Trikala



PROLOGUE

town of Trikala, but to the entire region.

Among the monuments still preserved today, visitors can admire the Kastro and the churches of the post-Byzantine period. In the picturesque Christian quarter of the Turkish era, under the Byzantine fort, are churches with wooden roofs and beautiful frescoes, relief decoration and carved wooden templons.

Of special architectural interest is the Kursum Jami, the leaden Mosque, which belongs to the same era. It was built in the 16th century by Sinan, an architect of Greek origin. Leaving Trikala behind, just a few kilometres away we can see the attractive town of Kalambaka, surrounded by the Meteora – the rocks of God.

The closer you approach the Meteora, the more you feel that you are abandoning an earthly world to enter a new, divinely built, heavenly kingdom, constructed of sheer, mountainous rocks, which only God Himself could have arranged in such architectural, celestial magnificence.

Kalambaka is located at the foot of the Meteora. In antiquity this was the site of the town of Aiginion, while in medieval times it was known as Stagoi. During the latter part of the Turkish occupation it was called Kalambaka.

In the small, town of Kalambaka, a number of Byzantine churches survive with their ornate carved wooden templons and frescoes.

The Kastro of Trikala



Saint Ecoumenios, Bishop of Trikke



PROLOGUE

The resplendent Byzantine cathedral, dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, is the town's most important monumental building. The cathedral, belonging to the diocese of Stagoi, represents what is most precious in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art. It is believed that the Kalambaka basilica – as the church is known today – was built during the 16th and 19th centuries. Several fine 12th - century frescoes have been preserved in the sanctuary.

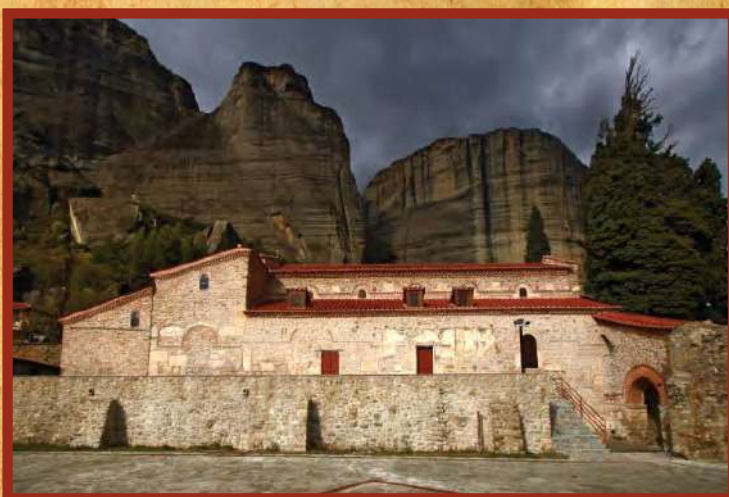
Most of the cathedral is decorated with superb frescoes, depicting full-length saints, and dating to 1573. The inscription tells us they are works by the priest Kyriazis and by Neofytos, son of the famous Cretan painter, Theofanis. The marble pulpit in the middle of the church was re-assembled from sections of the pulpit of the original early Christian basilica.

We can also admire around us marvellous portable icons of saints, as well as the surviving carved wooden templon. On the northern wall of the narthex, is the text of a chrysobull issued by the 14th - century emperor Andronikos III, which validates the borders of the diocese of Stagoi to which it grants rights and privileges.

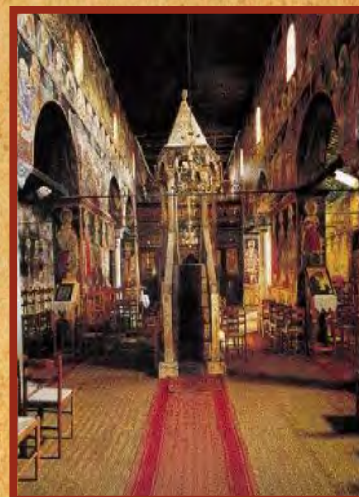
There is another document in the church issued for the same purpose in 1393 by the patriarch Arsenios.

Next to Kalambaka, nestled in the foothills of the Meteora, is

Temple of the Assumption of Virgin Mary - Kalambaka



The Temple Basilica



PROLOGUE

the village of Kastraki. A spectacle of inexpressible beauty unfolds before the visitor's eyes. Snow-white walls... heavy wooden beams and red roof-tiles... at the feet of a stone giant, as if planted there by God Himself. Visitors feel that this small village is the gateway to a stone forest, to a transcendental world... a world of devotion to God... a world of profound prayer... lifting the soul heavenwards.

The Meteora! The rocks of God! early in the last winter of the second Christian millennium.

Their imposing, magnificent presence, unique on the earth's surface seems to mark the soul's advance to Heaven. Flowing between the grey, fissured rocks like the rustle of a supernatural wind, are the prayers of saints... revealing the strength man possesses through his faith, enabling him to build churches linking earth with Heaven.

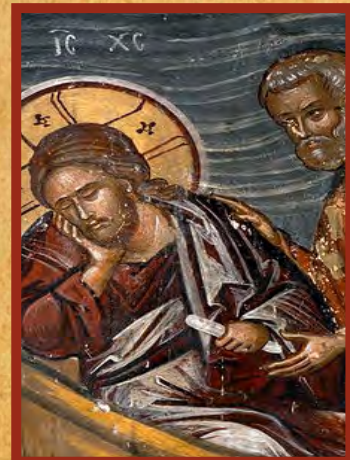
This geological phenomenon, of rocks whose almost vertical height sometimes reaches 400 meters, has not yet been scientifically explained. The awestruck visitor stands in ecstasy before these giant stones searching for answers to the great questions they pose. Some scientists attribute the rocks' structure to erosion, which acquired their final form about 60 million years ago.

Others consider them to be deltoid – in other words the product of a river delta. If this is so, then the region of the Meteora

One of Theofani's paintings



Detail of the painting



PROLOGUE

was once the delta of a river which – during the Pliocene era, when today's Thessalian plain was a vast lake – carried sand, mud, pebbles, shingle and other material to this area out to the sea.

Perhaps later, because of a rare natural occurrence, some of these materials welded together and formed a vast cone, which split into hills and rocks of various shapes when the water eventually subsided.

Yet other experts believe that the present shape of the Meteora rocks is due to the effects of erosion caused by wind.

However, whatever the explanation of the origins of the Meteora stone forest – a unique natural phenomenon – the monasteries that spring up from rocky peaks, like the centers of stone flowers, transform awe into religious devotion, and admiration into prayer.

According to monastic tradition, the first ascetic or hermit of the Meteora, in 985, was the anchorite Varnavas, who founded the small skete or hermitage of the Holy Spirit, nestled in the

Kastraki – Panoramic view of the Meteora rocks



PROLOGUE

hills above the village of Kastraki. During the 11th century other ascetics followed in the virtuous hermit's footsteps. Their concern about the after life and their intuitive sense that the sanctity of the site made it an ideal arena for the struggle to earn a place in Heaven, helped them to dedicate their lives here to the salvation of their souls.

For them, the path leading to the peaks of the precipitous rocks was divinely charted. With admirable patience, they carved out tiny cells in the rocks and small, rudimentary chapels – “prayer-nooks” – where they might kneel, day and night and pray to God. Thus began the organisation of the first community of anchorites, who lived in hermitages on the bare rocks – which only vultures and eagles could reach.

In his imagination, the traveller journeys back in time... seeking the chastened figures... living in the cells, keeping company with the birds... the sky and the wind. All day long, summer and winter, they gaze at the horizon... rejoicing and marvelling at the Almighty's works... praying for the redemption of souls. They survive on bread... wild honey... cheese and milk from the livestock grazing at the foot of the rocks.

On summer nights, they turn their gaze to the Heavens. They ponder the stars in the infinite world of the universe, trying to

Monks are praying for the Salvation of the souls...



PROLOGUE

conceive the essence of God's existence. In the chilly winters... after the day's tiring work... close to the fire... they speak of God... as they eat blessed bread and drink wine from the local vineyards; and then they pray.

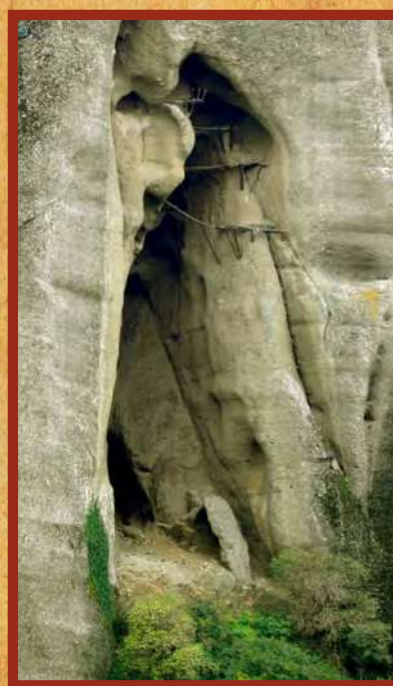
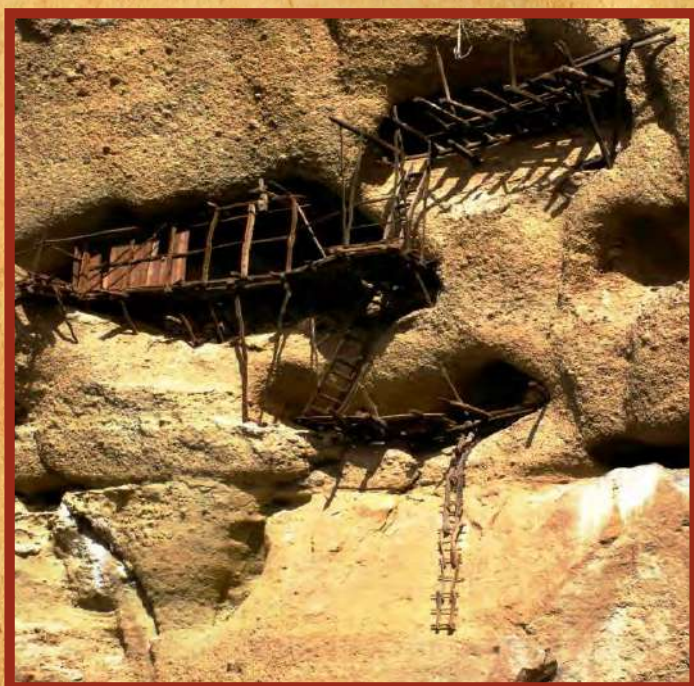
The establishment of the first monasteries and the organisation of the monks' community took place in the 14th century.

In the mid-12th century, the ascetics set up the Skete of Doupiani – also known as the Skete of Stagoi – and organised the first monastic community of Meteora.

It is said that here under the pillar of Doupiani, in the chapel of the most holy Virgin of Doupiani, every Sunday monks from the surrounding cells met to pray together, and so the first rudimentary organisation of the monastic community of the Meteora came into being.

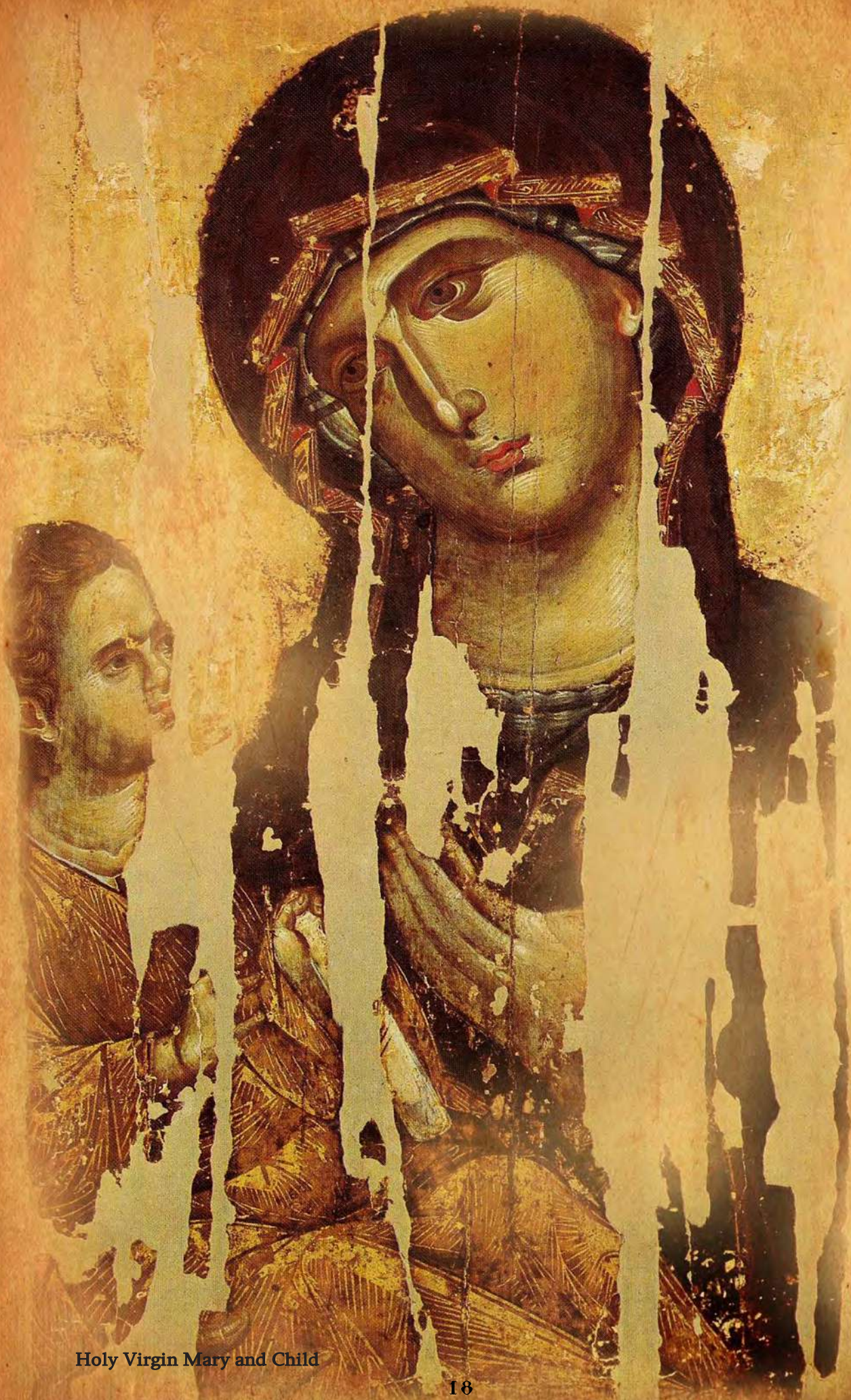
All the sketes were subject to the bishopric of Stagoi, of which the Superior, – the "Protos" – governed all the hermitages, of which the church of the Panayia Doupiani was the liturgical center. In

Hermitages inside the rocks of Meteora









Holy Virgin Mary and Child

PROLOGUE

the mid-14th century, the abbot of the Doupiani monastery was Neilos, a worthy representative of Meteora's community. Neilos' endeavors led to the skete receiving various privileges, while four new churches soon adorned the surrounding caves.

It was at this time that the skete broke away from the Stagoi bishopric, and the God-fearing Athanasios appeared at Meteora. He founded the Great Meteoron, and set to work zealously to organise the monastic community of the Meteora, which entered upon a period of rapid growth.

In the 15th century the monastic life of the Meteora fell into decline. But a period of revival began in the 16th century. The majority of monasteries were renovated, while new ones sprang up on various rocky pinnacles. It was a century in which the community flourished.

The Second World War of 1941-45, greatly affected the monastic communities of the Meteora. Of the many hermitages and the 24 monasteries, only seven survive today. Immersed in the memories of bygone times the remaining monasteries and the ruins of hermitages wait patiently on the peaks of the precipitous rocks to relive an era of religious splendour, in accordance with God's promise.



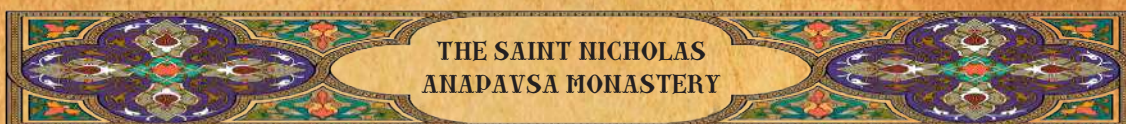


METEORA

THE ROCKS OF GOD

CHAPTER II'

THE SAINT NICHOLAS ANAPAVSA
MONASTERY



THE SAINT NICHOLAS ANAPAVSA MONASTERY

On this wintry day, when clouds envelop the stone pinnacles of the Meteora and the diamond drops of rain emphasize the lofty magnificence of this sacred place, we leave behind us the rock of Panagia Doupiani and the last few homes of the village of Kastraki, and arrive at the monastery of Saint Nicholas Anapavsa on our left, at the bottom of the slope.

Clinging like an oyster to the eastern face of the rock, it could be the birthplace of heavenly spirits in the hazy, damp atmosphere.

The katholikon, dedicated to Saint Nicholas, has been incorporated into the many-storeyed building.

The chapels of Saint Anthony and of Saint John the Prodromos, the cells, the refectory, a cistern, crypt and storerooms all lie within the same complex.

The tower on the north side houses the windlass with its quaint winch, which the humble monks turn to draw up and

The Assumption of Virgin Mary





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lower their fellow monks, or materials and provisions in a net. According to some sources, the monastery took the name Anapavsa from its founder. However, others inform us that it got its name from the Greek word ἀνάπαυσις because, for the monks, it was an ideal place of repose. It is believed that monastic life began here in the 14th century. The few remains of frescoes in the chapel of Saint Anthony confirm that monks built the small church in the 14th century. In the 15th the monastery was uninhabited, but renovation work began in the 16th century.

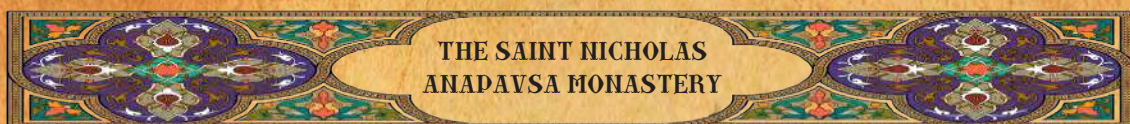
The monastery's fame throughout the world is due particularly to the wall paintings in its katholikon.

...the beginning of human creation, as described in the Old Testament. Adam names the animals and the birds of the sky. The fresco is by Theofanis. It adorns the katholikon of Saint Nicholas Anapavsa monastery. There too is another work by Theofanis: the temptation of Christ in the desert. Jesus – “of many forms” – refuses the temptations and exorcises the demons, who have promised him wealth and fame on earth.

Here, is part of Theofanis' fresco, depicting the Assumption of Saint Ephraim of Syros.

Adam naming the animals and birds of Heaven





And here, Saint Artemios on the left and Saint Efstathios on the right, who adorn the katholikon of the sacred monastery.

Saint Jacob the Persian. Yet another fresco from the pantheon of the monastery, painted by the inspired iconographer, Theofanis.

Saint Jacob the Persian



Saint Pachomios



The Dormition of Saint Ephraim the Syrian





Yet another of his venerated works portrays the departure of the demons, on Christ's orders, from those possessed, and their entry into the swine, which ran headlong into the waters of the sea.

Saint Evfrosinos...

Saint Pachomios, on the left of the painting and the Angel of the Lord on the right.

The Baptism of Jesus Christ



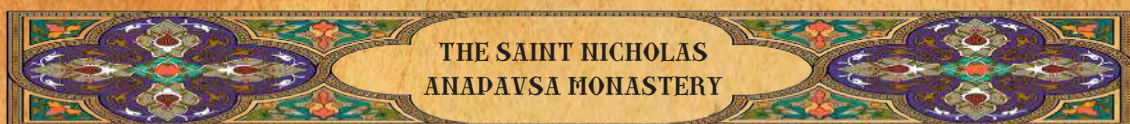
And, finally, Jesus Christ raised on the cross – probably one of Theofanis' most dramatic works in the katholikon of the

Saint Christopher



The Second Coming





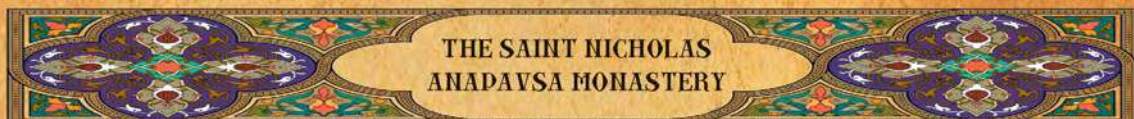
monastery of Saint Nicholas Anapavsa.

In this sketch drawn in 1745 by Vassily Barskij, we see the monastery and the hermitage of Timios Prodomos.

We leave the monastery of Saint Nicholas and continue our journey upwards which seems to be leading us to Heaven itself. All around us, the giant rocks of the Meteora turn our admiration to awe.

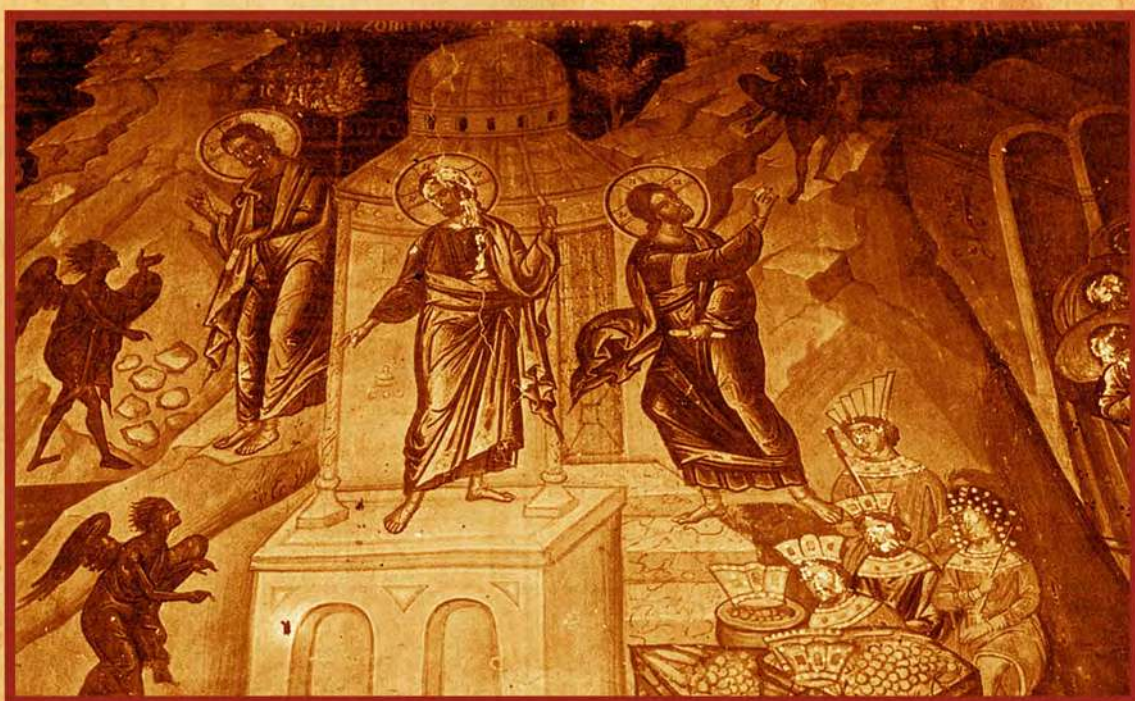
Jesus walks the distance carrying the Cross





The cries of birds, echoing from the stone faces of the rocky masses, in the vast silence... and among the heavy grey-black clouds that cross the canyons and precipices... seem to show the way for the monks' prayers to rise from the icon-stands to the Heavenly Dome.

The Temptations of Christ in the desert



Holy Monastery
Saint Nicholas
Anapavsa

Sketch
Vassily Barskij

