

In Mt. Athos, Byzantine Empire lingers

Brother Job of Skete Prophet Elias performs rites at the charnel room, which holds the skulls of deceased monks. (Dave G. Houser, Universal Press Syndicate) MOUNT ATHOS, Greece — Brother Job twists and jiggles the big brass key and eases open the charnel house door. My eyes struggle in the dimness, and I blink in disbelief, confirming what I think I'm seeing — row upon row of human skulls.

I've viewed specimens of mankind's top-piece at archaeological digs, museums and memorials worldwide. I have even slept beneath rafters laced with them in the longhouses of former headhunters in Borneo. But what makes these examples at Skete Prophet Elias, a small monastery in the Monastic Republic of Holy Mount Athos in Greece, so riveting is that they have inscriptions scrawled across their foreheads.

My first impression is that this is some sort of posthumous inventory system. Brother Job, a young monk at Prophet Elias, must be reading my mind as he hastens to explain.

"When a monk dies, his body is buried in the earth. After three years the grave is opened and the bones transferred to a common burial chamber," he says.

There is one exception.

"The skull alone," adds Job, "is placed on a shelf with those of earlier brothers — with just the name and dates of birth and death inscribed on the forehead."

This may be more than I need to know about life — and death — at Skete Prophet Elias. I am thrilled, however, to have found Brother Job, an American, but more important, an English-speaking monk. I have been wandering about the holy mountain for going on three days, and Job is the first soul I've encountered with whom I can converse beyond the basic utterances and hopeful hand signs that have at least managed to secure me food and shelter.

I had met Job just this morning in Karyes, a dusty little town that serves as the administrative center of Mount Athos. There is a "government" office that deals with matters of customs, immigration and health, and there are a few shops.

I'd been hiking into Karyes each day to meet passengers arriving on the ferry from Ouranoupolis, hoping one of them would be my friend, Aris Drivas, who was supposed to have met me here three days ago. Being phoneless is usually fine with me. But on this occasion it would have been good to know that Aris, an Athens yacht broker, had been delayed and would not make it to Mount Athos until today.

I'm hanging out when I spot Job wheeling a small farm tractor up to the health office. He's towing a cart holding another black-robed monk who is cradling his jaw as if in the throes of a toothache.

Certain that I've heard Job speaking English as he ushered his brethren into the building, I wait for him to come out. During the time it takes to extract an impacted molar, I learn more about Mount Athos from Job than I have in the past three days.

High-domed structures, arches and fine brickwork are the hallmarks of Byzantine architecture, abundantly evident in the Monastic Republic of Holy Mount Athos, located on a remote peninsula of northern Greece. (Dave G. Houser, Universal Press Syndicate) During an Aegean sailing trip the week before, Aris had invited me to accompany him to Mount Athos, where he sometimes employs monks at Pantokrator Monastery to hand-make pieces for his boats. He would arrange the necessary permits and meet me there. All I knew about Mount Athos was that it is an enclave of monasteries on an isolated peninsula in northeastern Greece.

Clearly it is much more than that. It is the Middle Ages — not re-created for touristic effect, but for real. Mount Athos is a place of such mysterious otherworldly power that visiting it is like stepping out of time.

Mount Athos is an Eastern Orthodox monastic republic. It is a long-surviving administrative unit of the Byzantine Empire, an autonomous mini-state.

Nearly 2,500 Eastern Orthodox monks of Mount Athos live a simple, ascetic life that has hardly changed since the enclave was established by a Byzantine emperor in the 10th century A.D. (Dave G. Houser, Universal Press Syndicate) within Greece that still operates under a charter granted by a Byzantine emperor at Constantinople in the 10th century A.D.

Like the Vatican, it has many characteristics of an



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independent state. Visitors (males only, and a maximum of 10 per day) must have passports and entry permits and must undergo customs inspections. Occasionally physical examinations are required. The exclusion of women is strictly enforced.

This male stronghold comprises 20 large monasteries and dozens of smaller ones (sketes) and individual hermitages. It is home to about 2,500 monks of the Eastern Orthodox Church: Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Romanian, plus a few other nationalities, including Americans.

Culturally and geographically speaking, Athos is a world apart. Its fortified Byzantine-style monasteries, most built between the 10th and 15th centuries, are scattered over a hilly, heavily forested peninsula a bit more than 7 miles wide and 34.8 miles long. Near its tip is Mount Athos, a barren spire soaring 6,670 feet above the Aegean Sea and accessible only by boat.

Ah, the boat! By bringing my friend Aris, it, too, has added to my blessings, which are finally catching up with me in a place where blessings are the stock in trade.

Brother Job invites Aris and me to stay at Prophet Elias and, obliging, we hike along behind Job on his tractor, towing a much-relieved monk up through scrubby hillsides covered with patches of gardens and vines. I spot tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, corn, peas, beans and artichokes. There are apricot and olive trees and grapes.

The high-domed monasteries of Mount Athos are, for the most part, true architectural gems. Fine brickwork was Byzantium's calling, and it is evident everywhere.

Built by Russians in the 18th century, Prophet Elias is relatively new to Mount Athos, but it is a splendid example of the traditional arch-and-dome Byzantine style. It was built to accommodate almost a hundred monks, but during Soviet times in Russia, so few monks came to Prophet Elias that it faced abandonment. Then a small group of monks from upstate New York came to Athos to rescue the skete.

"It is good that we could come and help preserve this wonderful space," says Job, the only resident of the skete now willing to talk to me "on the record," since word is out that I'm a journalist, "and, as you can see, it is like heaven on Earth here."

That's hardly an overstatement. With its bountiful orchards and gardens, its winery, olive mill and old stone bakery, Prophet Elias could pass for a rustic



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