



No. 3

ATHOS NEWS

March 2021

It seems to have been a long winter in the UK, and it has been a hard one on the Holy Mountain, as you can see in this recent photograph (below). But there are at last a few signs of spring – birds have begun their early-morning liturgical chanting and crocuses and aconites bring colour to expectant gardens – and the rollout of vaccinations brings hope of better times to come. For the moment, however, international travel remains difficult and the border of the Holy Mountain is still closed to visitors. While there is little to report from Karyes, it seemed a good moment to share a couple of accounts by pilgrims who did manage to reach the Mountain in 2020. The first is by Rory Fraser, an observant and articulate writer, watercolourist, and graduate student at Cambridge, who records the impressions that visiting Athos for the first time in the middle of the pandemic made on him. The second, by contrast, is by Spiridion Azzopardi, an antiquarian horologist and a regular visitor to Athos. He is the author of many articles published over the years in the Annual Report detailing his work on restoring the clocks at various monasteries. Here he provides an update on his work at Iviron in collaboration with Fr Jeremiah.

As you may know, we were privileged to have a talk from Abbot Ephraim of Vatopedi, relayed to us by Zoom in February. In case you missed it, you can still catch it on our website or by clicking this link: [LINK TO THE VIDEO](#). The live video on Facebook was received by an audience that numbered as many as 115,000!

Graham Speake



Reflections on Athos in 2020

by Rory Fraser

Crouched in the corner of an Oxford pub the night after my finals, I made a new friend. His name was John-Francis Martin, an effusive Byzantinist instantly recognizable from his mop of golden hair and sparkling blue eyes, which made him look like a cross between a Raphael and a poacher – accompanied by a distinctly Irish lilt. I already knew him by sight, as he'd narrowly avoided running me down on his bike several weeks before, but it wasn't until that night that we met properly. The subject over which we instantly clicked, and to which our conversation was dedicated for the rest of the night, was the same: Mount Athos – a magnetizing name of almost mythical significance, whispering of great churches, libraries, and the relics of Byzantium.

Almost exactly twenty-four months later, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, I received an unexpected phone call from John-Francis. Rather than the usual 'pandemic small talk', he posed a different question: would I like to go to Mount Athos in July? After months cooped up in rural Rutland, where every family meal was an exercise in trench warfare, the answer was an unflinching yes.

A few weeks later, I found myself tumbling out of an airport taxi into a dusty port in rural Greece, before boarding the ferry to the island of Ammouliani, my final destination. On landing, I was met by John-Francis who, simmering with excitement, whisked me off to a local taverna to meet the rest of the party. They constituted one of the most diverse groups of people I have ever encountered, ranging from a Parisian consultant, with a thin copy of Balzac protruding from his crisp linen jacket, to a dreadlocked Irish goatherd playing a pipe, not to mention an academic, architect, lawyer, two soldiers, civil servant, and a banker, all under the age of thirty. What followed can only be described as a forty-eight-hour bonding session, fuelled by Irish gusto and executed with Mediterranean flair. Within a few hours, suitcase still in hand, we were in the midst of a fiesta. John-Francis had joined several of the locals in a sort of Hellenic-Irish jig, while everyone clapped to the sound of quavering *bouzoukia*. The following day, the party continued on water as we cavorted across the

bay on hired boats, pausing only to swim to a local island for lunch. With hangovers burning off faster than the salt on our backs, Covid seemed very far away indeed.

Or was it? That evening an e-mail arrived saying that we all needed negative Covid tests to enter Athos. Our adventure seemed thwarted. Our solution, as is often the way in Greece, lay in the fish market. Here John-Francis bumped into our Airbnb host who, it transpired, was also one of the chief medical officers for northern Greece and offered to test us. As a token of our thanks, that night we held a feast in his honour where each member of the group sang a song from their home country. In return, through a haze of cigarettes and ouzo, our host regaled us with stories of the Holy Mountain.

The following morning, we rose at dawn in order to catch a boat from Ammouliani to Ouranoupolis. The views were spectacular: water merging from aquamarine to turquoise to a rich cobalt blue from which soared the mountain itself, like a holy Vesuvius. In Ouranoupolis we had our papers checked by some exceedingly humourless officials before an emergency trouser shop, as shorts are banned on the peninsula – alongside women, speaking at meals, and swimming. Finally we boarded the ferry to Daphni, the main port on Athos, thus crossing its zealously guarded border. This second journey was even more amazing than the first. Swathes of virgin bush rose out of the water interrupted only by the odd hermitage which, with their whitewashed walls, resembled cubes of cottage cheese nestled in the landscape. Suddenly someone shouted ‘monastery’ and we all leapt for the railings where we saw a cluster of high machicolated walls, towers, and domes, like a castle, alluding to the pirates that once combed the shores. It was as though we were sailing back in time.

On arrival in Daphni, we were met by Dimitri, our wonderful organizer and guide, who welcomed us to Athos, ‘the Garden of the Mother of God’, before scooping us into a minibus and rocketing into the hills. While many aspects of life on Athos are relatively modern, the roads, and the regulations that govern their use, are not one of them. After a journey that makes a ride on the Blackpool Big Dipper look pedestrian, we arrived in Karyes. From here we walked to the skete of St Andrew – a sort of mini-monastery – where half of us were to stay.

In reality, there was nothing ‘mini’ about St Andrew’s. An avenue of cypress trees led to a pointed gateway, behind which soared a medley of sugary pediments, onion domes, and spires. It was as though a corner of the Kremlin had been picked up and dumped next to the Aegean, speaking of Tchaikovsky, balalaikas, and the Romanovs. Stepping into the main courtyard, with its derelict buildings and overgrown gardens, it became clear that St Andrew’s had seen better days. As Dimitri explained, owing to a theological spat, the skete had been sacked by the Tsar in 1913 and never quite recovered. Given the heat, nor had we. The cooler island climate of Ammouliani had given way to a furnace on land and we were all utterly exhausted. After being welcomed by the Abbot – a tall, rather aloof man who evidently enjoyed swishing about in his *kalimavkion* – we collapsed into our dormitory for a siesta.

This was wishful thinking. No sooner had we done so than there was a light tap on the door and a request for us to move several tonnes of potatoes. Half an hour later, caked in dirt, morale low, we were about to trudge back to our dorm when one of the monks produced some *loukoumi* and a bottle of vodka from beneath his flowing black robes. ‘Payment’, he whispered, with an enormous grin. It seemed we had passed the test. Famished and dehydrated, the goods went straight to our heads, resulting in a raucous, albeit rather giddy, conversation. The monk’s name was Fr Nikodemos who, with his booming voice, jovial temperament, and hedgerow of a beard, looked a little like Father Christmas crossed with Rasputin. He was delighted to discover that some of our group were Irish and went on to talk of his desire to retire to a monastery on the west coast of Scotland. After slightly puzzled probing, it transpired that this was because of (a) the more bearable climate, and (b) its proximity to a convent. Finally, he announced, ‘I must show you the skull of St Andrew tomorrow, and the Romanov throne!’ (the skete’s prized relics), before marching off to vespers. As he did so, we asked why he was being so kind to us. To this, he laughed and then shouted over his shoulder, ‘I used to work for Guinness!’

Later that evening, I decided to explore the skete’s olive groves. The last strains of compline could be heard from the upper windows over the sound of swallows swooping between the belfries above and boar in the forest below. I was struck not only by the beauty of the scene, but by how it offered a glimpse of a lost world. While the rest of Russia had marched its bloody course, St Andrew’s had been left behind: a living relic not dissimilar to the jewelled caskets in its crypts.

The following few days passed in a frenzy of activity. In the mornings we helped in the gardens, while the afternoons were spent scrabbling about the hidden

paths to other monasteries, interspersed with powerful cups of Greek coffee with Fr Nikodemos in the monastery shop. Soon enough we were invited to stay at a different monastery. This was Vatopedi, St Andrew's parent monastery, and one of the richest, having recently been endowed by a Russian oligarch who was cured of cancer by one of its icons.

Another harrowing taxi journey took us to the other side of the peninsula where, suddenly, the dusty track gave way to a wide cobble road, flanked by ancient olive groves, that snaked its way down to the sea. Collapsing out of the taxi, we leapt for a marble drinking fountain where, to our delight, the water was deliciously cool. As the liquid percolated through our bodies, we began to register our surroundings. On our left was a deep pool filled with flaming coy carp, while to our right, a view of terraced vineyards, orchards, and lush green hills over which the afternoon sun cast a golden haze. Porters arrived to help carry our bags before leading us under the domed entrance, painted a deep royal blue, and up a winding alley that emerged into the central courtyard. What greeted us was less a monastery than a small town. At the centre was a tower, not unlike a campanile, from which the cobbled ground rose sharply into a series of pavilions. Surrounding this was a jumble of facades: some classical, with French windows and pediments, others cloistered, around which older monks strode, deep in conversation, rising to an assortment of towers, crenellations, and domes.

Finally, we arrived in the guest lodgings, a gleaming panelled room at the end of which was a table laid with *loukoumi*, water, and raki. Waiting at the table was a very tall monk with a jet-black beard, kind brown eyes, and a soft, soothing voice who can't have been more than thirty. The monk's name was Fr Ephstathios. An immaculate host, he offered refreshment before welcoming us each in turn, learning our names, where we came from, and what we did. When I told him I studied English, his eyes lit up and he said, 'I love *Hamlet!*' and proceeded to recite one of the soliloquies, before explaining how before coming to Mount Athos he had been an English teacher and singer-songwriter in Australia. Though only a few years ago, he spoke about his past, and indeed the outside world, as a dreamy, otherworldly place that belonged to an entirely different person. 'When you become a monk,' he explained, 'you kill your former self and become a kind of ghost, a vassal for the

Holy Spirit.’ This change occurred when, at about the same age as us, Fr Ephstathios had visited the Holy Mountain as a mere pilgrim, heard the Virgin’s call, and never left: now Mount Athos was his reality.

Suddenly the bell sounded and it was time for dinner. Nothing could have prepared me for this. As we processed from the church under the refectory’s warped latticed ceiling, ancient murals of saints gazed sternly down from the walls on to marble tables – salvaged from before the fall of Constantinople – on which lay a mighty feast of fish, watermelon, and wine, accompanied by a suspicious number of condiments. The *maître d’* monk then led us to a table which, to our dismay, was somewhat barer. Seeing our disappointment, he explained how, due to Athos’s adherence to Byzantine time, the rest of the monastery was enjoying a feast day, while we, still on Gregorian time, were two weeks behind and thus still fasting. Nodding meekly, we sat down – it was clear that he was almost as confused by Byzantine time as we were. No sooner had we done so than another monk appeared by our table and began to translate the reading from the pulpit. Unfortunately, the reading being a rather complex parable, and the monk’s English somewhat limited, this did not make a lot of sense, and was accompanied by increasingly frantic gesticulation.

As the monks processed out of the refectory before us, it was our first opportunity to see the brotherhood as a whole. I was amazed not only by how young many of them were, but also the variety of faces, showing the range of Orthodox countries: some smooth and pale, with high foreheads and patrician noses, others wizened and dark, with Amazonian eyebrows under which wild eyes furtively returned our stares. After passing the Abbot, one hand clasping a great staff, the other poised in benediction, surrounded by a gaggle of bowed underlings, we emerged into the courtyard. Gone were the grave expressions that had just marched past us and instead we found what resembled an Italian piazza: the older monks nattering under the arcades, or catching up with returning pilgrims, while the younger ones buzzed excitedly between them. Exhausted by the events of the day, we went out on to the balcony to play baccarat. Beneath us, the monastery’s ancient walls swept down to a fishing village that perched on the edge of an enormous bay. Staring out across the Aegean, I said to John-Francis, ‘You know this is all strangely familiar – I wonder if medieval Oxford was like this.’ At this he turned to me and replied, ‘either way, I could get used to it.’ He wasn’t the only one.

Given the highly structured nature of monastic life, the following days blurred into one. We would be woken first by the call for matins – an odd tapping noise that echoed through the building, as though it were a disorientated woodpecker. This was usually followed by a light tap on the door from whichever monk was on duty who, in the half-light, looked more ghost-like than ever. In the morning, after a breakfast of freshly baked bread, honey, and peaches, washed down with wine, all from the monastery, we would help in the kitchens, cutting fruit or scrubbing the tables and floors. Meanwhile the afternoons were given to exploring the hills with Fr Ephstathios, who was so busy batting off John-Francis’s theological googlies that we usually got lost, resulting in some fairly intrepid detours.

By far the highlight of our stay, however, was the all-night vigil. In the morning a bishop arrived from Athens, looking strangely young and nervous compared to the senior monks around him, while in the afternoon everyone was sent for a compulsory nap. After a light supper the service began, marked by the sound of a light humming coming from inside the church. As the light began to die, the humming grew louder, reverberating around the cloisters like a swarm of ghostly bees. This was interrupted only by the murmur of conversation from the monks who flitted in and out of the service, their long black veils floating behind them like burqas. While many members of the group went to observe earlier in the evening, I decided to go last.

It was around midnight when I passed under the great curtain that shades the church during the day. I stood alone in the painted arcade, while the Roman tunics on an army of saints glittered in the moonlight, as though urging me inside. Pulling open the door, I was hit by a blast of incense. The narthex, usually reserved for non-Orthodox worshippers, was relatively quiet. Moonlight filtered through the smoke, rippling across the elaborately carved chairs that lined the walls and falling in spangled pools on the marble floor. Holding my breath, I passed through a pair of double doors into the next chamber – for Orthodox worshippers only. The air was still heavier with incense, through which I could make out the figures of monks crouched in the stalls around the walls. Some venerated icons, others were nodding off, only semi-distinguishable from the blackened murals which surrounded them.

At last I passed through the final set of doors and into the heart of the church. The music was deafening: a deep wail that sounded half-Benedictine, half-muezzin,

ricocheting off the soot-caked walls that swirled with saints, congregations, and councils. These were lit by a vast chandelier, as though a cobweb dipped in gold, which seemingly hovered in the air alongside gilded ostrich eggs and orbs of coloured glass. Behind this rose the iconostasis: a gilded confection of velvet and gold, mirrored in the marble floor below, which, polished from centuries of use, resembled a sheet of water on which floated the stern of a Venetian barge. Though I had no idea what was being said, it was as though layer upon layer of theology, history, and art was being peeled back to reveal the white-hot core of a living faith. Suspended in that moment, everything that Fr Ephstathios had told us – stories of pirates, martyrs, miracles, and saints; of the monastery’s foundation by a Roman emperor whose son was saved from drowning by the Virgin Mary on the very beach below us – seemed tangibly close. Finally, the monastery’s most sacred relic, the Belt of the Virgin Mary, was held aloft. Overwhelmed, I fell to my knees in prayer.

As dawn began to creep up the nave, the monks filed out of the church and into the courtyard. In the rosy morning light we processed out of the monastery gates behind a great icon carried under a tasselled parasol. While the sun rose over the sea, so did our numbers, as pilgrims and monks came to join us from the surrounding cells, each taking a turn to bear the icon around the monastery walls. Suddenly I was ushered to the front and handed the wooden brace that supported it. Treading my way down the cobbled path, I felt less like I was carrying a thing than a person. Before I could think about it, someone took my place and I sank to the back of the group.

A few days later, the rest of the group decided to climb Mount Athos itself. Keen to experience more of monastic life, as well as to write a little, I decided not to, and waved them off from the entrance. Being alone in the monastery was a very different experience, as one got to know the monks on a personal level. This was mainly through helping in the kitchens where, despite the language barrier, I came to understand their foibles and they mine, often accompanied by a mischievous wink and a slice of watermelon. There was something immensely satisfying about being given a single task and trying to do it well; of being a single cog in a well-oiled clock whose daily chimes reverberate back over a millennium – a contrast made all the more apparent by the kitchen’s state-of-the-art machinery. After meals I also enjoyed talking to the monks in the courtyard. Conversations ranged from the other pilgrims –

one day a general, another a supermodel – or past royal visits from Prince Charles and Prince Philip (about whom they spoke in a loving, fraternal way, but completely without deference), to their lives before Vatopedi. I was fascinated to discover that one had been a renowned surgeon, while another had worked as a chef in a famous Paris restaurant. We spent a merry evening swapping watering holes as he twirled his prayer rope between his scar-pocked fingers.

Perhaps most significant, however, was a discussion I had with Fr Ephstathios the day before we left. After nearly two weeks on Athos I was teeming with questions. Cornering him after breakfast, I asked if we could have a ‘serious chat’. He was more than happy to oblige. That evening, seated under an olive tree in the garden, I let the floodgates open: what underpins Orthodoxy? How does it differ from the Catholic Church? What are its practical implications for daily life? And crucially, how does he, a monk barely older than ourselves, reconcile himself to it? After listening carefully to my muddled rant, he answered with great compassion, clarity, and care. It became apparent that behind his gentle demeanour was not a series of scriptures, but the same powerful flame that I had felt a few nights before. What started as a conversation became more of a confession, and I rushed back before the curfew, feeling lighter than I had in weeks.

As I write this now, in the depths of another lockdown, our trip to Athos seems something of a dream. A few weeks after we returned, the travel corridor to Greece was revoked. To have spent that brief window away from the pandemic among such kind and convivial company, in such a beautiful place, was a blessing that none of us will forget. Nobody stayed on like Fr Ephstathios, but we each left with a kernel of the Virgin’s Garden that will continue to grow: it is not a question of if we return, but when.

An Update on the Clocks of Iviron Monastery

by Spiridion Azzopardi

My first visit to the monastery of Iviron was in the days when visiting pilgrims were issued with an oil lamp and a box of matches. This was when I first met Fr Jeremiah, a monk at the monastery to whom I expressed my interest in horology, which resulted in a tour of the clock tower situated above the main church. Although there was no evidence of a clock on the tower wall, I discovered a very large verge and foliot clock with three gear trains which included a quarter strike (Fig. 1). It bore many scars of ageing and prolonged service that was evident in the early repairs which had been crudely applied using the technology of the past. Fifteen years later I found myself engaged in the restoration of this same clock.¹

The clock and dial had been photographed and commented upon by passing travellers who visited Iviron monastery, in particular Athelstan Riley, who travelled to Mount Athos in 1883 and in his subsequent book comments (unfavourably) on the condition and accuracy of the clock.² This confirms that this verge and foliot timepiece was still in daily use towards the end of the nineteenth century.

I spent five months restoring this great clock while living and working within the confines of the monastery. My work inspired Fr Jeremiah who took an interest in the project and was a frequent visitor to view the clock's progress. During my stay I discovered a hoard of clocks in the underground vaults of the monastery: these included brass dial, lantern, longcase, bracket, carriage, etc. Many of these and other artifacts were collected by Fr Prodromos, who has a love and appreciation for the monastery's folk history and took steps to preserve as much of it as he could. The conditions in the vaults where the clocks were stored were far from ideal because of the damp and salt-laden air that was present due to the close proximity of the sea.

Fr Jeremiah later took up the baton to rescue these somewhat valuable clocks and housed them in a more congenial environment, but before he did so, each clock had to be cleaned and years of corrosion removed. Fr Jeremiah had no formal training in clock restoration or repair and soon became immersed in learning, under my guidance, in between his monastic duties. Like many amateur horologists, he caught

¹ A fuller description of the clock and of my work on it was published in the Annual Report of the Friends of Mount Athos (2015), pp. 61-7.

² Athelstan Riley, *Athos or the Mountain of the Monks* (London, 1887), p. 143.

the bug and there was no stopping him. His ability progressed from the art of cleaning and preserving to carrying out simple repairs and between us we managed to get many of the clocks back into working order (Fig. 2). Many of them are now on display in one of the monastery's libraries. An important aspect of this work is that Fr Jeremiah started to document these clocks and has produced an invaluable detailed catalogue of all the monastery's clocks which are now suitably stored. Fr Jeremiah is one of the few, if not the only monk, on Mount Athos who restores clocks.



Fig. 1. Explanation of the workings of the Iviron verge and foliot tower clock by the author. Clockwise: Fr Prodromos, Fr Christophoros, the author, Fr Athanasios.



Fig. 2. Fr Jeremiah and the author at work on the restoration of a large brass verge short pendulum clock.



Fig. 3. Fr Prodromos giving a guided tour of the folk museum.