

The Holy Monastery of Stavronikita



The Monastery of Stavronikita (Greek: Σταυρονικήτα) is one of twenty monasteries on the Mount Athos peninsula and is located on the northeastern side of the peninsula at an elevation of about 50 meters (160 feet) above the sea. It is fifteenth in hierarchical rank among the monasteries. Stavronikita is the most recently built monastery on Mount Athos. It is also the smallest monastery among the twenty monasteries and is dedicated to St. Nicholas. Stavronikita has been a coenobitic (communal) monastery since 1968.

There are various conflicting traditions and stories regarding the monastery's name. According to one Athonite tradition, the name is a combination of the names of two monks, Stavros and Nikitas, that used to live in two cells at the site before the monastery was built. Another tradition recounts of a Byzantine army officer serving under the Byzantine Emperor John I Tzimiskes, named Niceforus Stavronikitas that built the monastery and named it after himself. Yet a third tradition attributes the foundation of the monastery to a patrician by the name

Nikitas. The patrician's name day according to the Eastern Orthodox calendar of saints is celebrated the day after the Feast of the Cross. Hence according to this tale the monastery got its name by combination of the patrician's name with the word "Stavros" (the Greek word for cross).

The many conflicting tales of the monastery's name hint to the obscurity of its historical origins. In a document by the Protos Nikiforos dating back to 1012 there is the signature of a monk who signs as "Nikiforos monk from Stravonikita" (Greek: "Νικηφόρος μοναχός ο του Στραβωνικήτα"), while in a 1016 document, the same monk signs as "from Stavronikita" (Greek: "του Σταυρονικήτα"). This alludes to the existence of a Stavronikita monastery as late as the first half of the 11th century.

This early part of the monastery's history ended approximately during the first half of the 13th century when the monastery was deserted due to constant pirate raids as well as due to the tremendous impact caused by the Fourth Crusade to the whole of the Byzantine Empire. The deserted monastery came initially under the jurisdiction of the Protos and later under the jurisdiction of Koutloumousiou monastery and later Philotheou monastery and functioned as a skete. In 1533, The monks of Philotheou sold Stavronikita to the abbot of a Thesprotian monastery, Gregorios Giromeriatīs (Greek: Γρηγόριος Γηρομεριάτης). In 1536, a patriarchal edict by Patriarch Jeremias I reinstated Stavronikita's status as one of the monasteries of Athos, bringing their total number to 20. Therefore, Stavronikita became the last officially consecrated monastery of Athos and is usually referred as the last monastery to be added to the athonite hierarchy.

The subsequent history of the monastery was marked by the fact that it always remained small in comparison to other athonite monasteries, both in property and in number of monks. Despite the repeated aid by the athonite community as well as by important benefactors, such as archon Servopoulos in 1612, the monk Markos in 1614, the people of Kea in 1628, Thomas Klados in 1630 and the Prince of Wallachia, Alexandru Ghica from 1727 to 1740, the monastery's evolution was constantly hampered partly by quarrellings with nearby sketes and monasteries, most notably with Koutloumousiou monastery, over matters of land property and more importantly by two great fires in 1607 and in 1741 that burnt Stavronikita to the ground. However, the monastery continued to grow. In 1628 the catholicon was renovated and in 1770 the monastery's well-known aqueduct was built along with some of its chapels.

Stavronikita is the smallest of all athonite monasteries. Important sights of the monastery are its characteristics, the tower at the entrance, its aqueduct, as well as its centuries old cypress outside the western corner of the complex.

The catholicon of the monastery is dedicated to Saint Nicholas and is the smallest catholicon among its other athonite counterparts. It was built during the 16th century above a church that existed before and was dedicated to Theotokos. The catholicon is decorated with frescoes and an iconostasis by the famous icon-painter



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