

The church of Protaton, Karyes, Mount Athos



Karyes has been the seat of the self-governing body of Mount Athos and the seat of the 'protos' since the 10th century. At that time the settlement comprised some small older monasteries and the residences of representatives of distant ones.

Assemblies of the monks were usually held on 15th August, the Virgin's feast-day, in the Protaton church, the very heart of monasticism on Mount Athos; disputes between monasteries, mainly about land holdings, were settled there.

Dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, the Protaton is a large triple-aisled basilica with narthex. Built in the 9th century by the emperor Michael III it was extended by Nikephoros II Phokas in 10th century and repaired in the reign of Andronikos II Palaeologos (1282-1328). The wall-paintings (circa 1300) have been attributed to Manuel Panselinos; the artist created a work that has gained world-wide acclaim in our time.

The extraordinary abundance of painted frescoes, free of all abstraction and featuring exquisite figures that come close to defining the quintessence of man, give superb material expression to the vision of Palaeologan art.

Near the Protaton, in the northeast, is the bell tower (dating from 1781), supported on two trapezoidal legs that form a gallery. There are several bells here, the largest of which weighs 1200 kg.

The iconostasis is made of marble and belongs to the tenth century. On the throne of the Holy Altar is the most famous icon in the Holy Mountain, the Mother of the Lord “Karyotissa”, known especially as “Axion Estin”.

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