

Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi



Information bulletin

Holy Mountain 2009

Information Bulletin concerning the Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi



Over recent months, an unprecedented commotion has developed concerning the utilization of the property of the Monastery and, in particular, the exchange of Lake Vistonida, as well as the disposal of the financial resources arising from this.

The Abbot and the whole Brotherhood of the Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi express our profound sadness and humbly ask forgiveness from the flock of Christ because, unwittingly and in a manner that could not have been foreseen, we have been a stumbling-block for them.

The text which follows presents a series of facts and evidence which will help clarify the issue.

BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW.

The Monastery of Vatopaidi was founded in the 4th century by Emperor Theodosios the Great and after it had been destroyed and abandoned at the beginning of the 10th century was renovated by the new founders Nikolaos, Athanasios and Antonios. Over the centuries, it has proved to be one of the greatest centres of Orthodoxy, living the practice of hesychasm, producing a host of saints and, at the same time, performing a wide variety of missionary work within the realm of Greece and outside.

*Contribution
to the Church.*

The Monastery has made an inestimable contribution to the life of the Greek people over its thousand-year and more history. In 1749, during the time of Turkish rule, the Monastery founded the Athonias Academy, which, as is well known, was the most important educational institution for the subjugated Greeks. It produced a number of outstanding personalities such as Saint Kosmas Aitolos, equal to the Apostles, Rigas Ferraios, and many teachers of the Greek people.

*Contribution
to the Greek
people.*

Generous economic aid was provided by the Monastery for the Revolution of 1821, and Grigorios, the Vatopaidan Metro-



Visit of the Prime Minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, to the Monastery in 1927.



The Pan-Orthodox Conference (Pre-Synod) during the reign of Patriarch Fotios II, held at the Monastery in 1930.

politian of Eirinoupolis, blessed Ypsilantis' banner of the revolution in the Transdanubian Principalities, also contributing half a million piastres to the cause. The Monastery also contributed to the re-foundation of the Great School of the Nation, the University of Athens and the Theological School in Halki, while also providing funds for the building of the School of Languages in Constantinople and most of the institutes of learning of the Greek state.

In 1912, it saved the inhabitants of Vrasna and Stavros in Halikidi from certain death by delivering to the Turks an extortionate amount of taxes which the villagers were unable to pay themselves. After the great fire in Thessaloniki, in 1917, it provided generous financial aid to those in need. After the Asia Minor catastrophe in 1923 and the exchange of populations, the Monastery initially gave away 6,200 hectares, soon followed by a further 3,800 hectares, for the refugees to settle on. These were located on Thasos and in Halkidiki (Ouranoupolis, Nea Triglia, Nea Roda, the whole of the island of Amouliani, Moudania, Vatopedi and Ayios Mamas).

EFFORTS TO RESTORE THE MONASTERY.

Because of the serious lack of vocations on the Holy Mountain after the 1950's, the Monastery entered a sharp decline, both materially and spiritually. In 1990, by a decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Holy Community of the Holy Mountain, the Monastery was converted from the idiorhythmic style and became a coenobium. It was settled by a group of 18 monks, under the spiritual direction of Elder Iosif from New Skete, and Hieromonk Efraim was enthroned as the first Abbot.

The new Brotherhood made its first concern the spiritual revitalization of the Monastery and also drew up a list of priorities for the material tasks that needed to be carried out. Today, the Monastery numbers 110 monks, from 12 countries.

The Monastery of Vatopaidi is an enormous building complex, with a covered area of 35,000 square metres, while the Sketes and Kellia which are subject to it have a covered area of more than 50,000 square metres. Since 1990, approximately one third of the Monastery has been renovated, at a cost of 45 million euros. It was also necessary to restore the Skete of Saint Andrew (Serai) in Karyes, the Skete of Saint Demetrios, the old Atho-

*Restoration
of the
Monastery,
Kellia and
Sketes*



The northern part of the East Wing, before and after renovation.



The Refectory of the Monastery before and after renovation.

Monks have no personal interests, nor do they serve those of others. A clear distinction must be made between the poverty of a monk and the property of his monastery.

nias School and many kellia which belong to the Monastery, a total of 50,000 square metres of covered area. It should be borne in mind that the annual grant from the State and from European funding, covers

only a very small portion of the costs, *so restoration work would be impossible without a substantial financial contribution from the Monastery itself.*

**Conservation
of the
treasures.**

3,500 icons are kept in the Monastery, 2,200 manuscripts, 350,000 documents, 40,000 incunabula, a multitude of works of art (gold-thread embroidery, silver and gold artifacts, heirlooms of inestimable cultural and historical value), which for years lay abandoned, at risk of decay and destruction. Two new Sacristies have been built to exhibit and preserve these treasures. Conservation of the wall-paintings by Manouil Panselinos (1312 A.D.) in the Katholiko (Main Church) has already been completed, as well as of hundreds of portable icons, manuscripts and many items used in worship.

THE CHARITABLE WORK OF THE MONASTERY.

Because of the way the facts have been traduced, the Monastery feels obliged to publish a representative selection of its charitable work.

Every year, 50% of its net income is spent on:

- bursaries for students,
- assistance to families without means of support,
- medical treatment for those without means of support,
- freeing prisoners without means of support and improvement of living conditions in corrective institutions,
- detoxification assistance for those using drugs and other addictive substances,
- financial support for monasteries, both within Greece and outside,
- financial support for Church organizations, camps and institutions in Greece, Cyprus, America, Russia, Rumania, Serbia, Africa and various regions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Financial support.



The condition of the old Sacristy when it was opened in 1989 and after its renovation in 2005.



Wall-paintings from the Katholoko (1312) before and after cleaning and after the removal of later additions.

Hospitality.

Every year, some 25,000 pilgrims visit the Monastery. The cost of providing free food and shelter for these visitors and the 150 workers in the Monastery is enormous. In terms of food alone, about 700 portions are provided each day.

Publishing effort.

The publications of the Monastery, on a variety of spiritual, academic and musical subjects, have been awarded prizes by the Academy of Athens and various European public bodies and present the spiritual and cultural values of the Holy Mountain and Orthodoxy to the world at large.

Plans and Aims .

It was the Monastery's intention to use a large part of the funds that would have accrued from the exchange of Lake Vistonida and the management of its property in general for charitable works. For this reason it established the "Gregorian Charitable Cultural Research Institute", by notarial deed no. 11816/22-5-2007, which was sent to the Public Bill Committee for tabling in Parliament. The purpose of the Institute was to put significant social programmes into effect. Long before the present turmoil, the Monastery had already announced the following works:

- Rehabilitation Centre for Invalids at Grammatiko, Attica (budget of 40,000,000 euros).
- Model Old People's Home in Limassol, Cyprus (budget of 5,000,000 euros).
- Drug Detoxification Centre in Mesoyeia.

LAKE VISTONIDA.

Lake Vistonida is the largest remaining property (3%) outside the Holy Mountain of those which the Monastery inherited from the emperors who founded it, from donors and benefactors, all of the rest having either been given to the Greek State at various times or simply expropriated.

The Monastery of Vatopaidi, with the Sketes and Kellia which belong to it constitutes an enormous building complex with a covered area of more than 85,000 square metres.



The condition of the icon repository before and after renovation.



The Monastery dependency of Saint Nicholas on Lake Vistonida.

In 1994, the Local Government Authority of the Prefecture of Xanthi questioned the rights of the Monastery over the islet Ada Bourou in Lake Vistonida. The case went to the legal office responsible, the Advisory Council for Public Land, and, in a unanimous verdict published in 1998, this body recognized the Monastery's rights. In recent months slanderous charges have been made against the Monastery for deceiving and misleading the Greek Public Authorities over the claim to rights of ownership over Lake Vistonida and its shoreline and the proposed exchange. It must be emphasized that the Monastery has played no part in any illegal transaction or other illicit practice. Through its representatives it attempted- as it still does- to safeguard its rights by legal means and transparent procedures before the legally-constituted organs of the Greek Public Authorities.

The Monastery's rights of ownership over the Lake.

The Monastery's rights of ownership over Lake Vistonida, its shoreline and islets are beyond question and fully attested legally. All the title deeds of the Monastery concerning Lake Vistonida

were ratified by chrysobulls of Byzantine emperors, firmans of Sultans, and synodal documents and sigillia of Patriarchs of Constantinople, all of which have been recognized as valid by Greek courts as deeds of ownership.

After the foundation of the modern Greek state, the Monastery's rights were re-confirmed through two legal opinions from the most eminent Professors of the Law School of the University of Athens in 1922 and 1923 (Messrs. K. Raktivan, G. Streit, K. Rallis, D. Papoulias, K. Polygenis, N. Saripolou and D. Dingas).

In 1924, the Greek Public Authorities, through a Legislative Decree agreed that the Monastery would give it 3,800 hectares in Halkidiki for the settlement of refugees from Asia Minor and that the whole of the Lake of Vistonida would remain with the Monastery. Everything above has once

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Start of restoration work at the ruins of the old Athonias Academy.

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more been supported and confirmed by the opinion published by Ioannis Konidaris, Professor of Ecclesiastical Law at the University of

Athens, on 28-10-2008. These deeds were recognized by the relevant Land Services of Xanthi and Rodopi and led the Advisory Council for Public Lands and Exchangeable Property, with different members and under different governments, to rule unanimously in favour of the Monastery's rights of ownership, with four (4) opinions at various points in time from 1998 to 2004.

The court case in Rodopi.

On 5-11-2003, the plenary Court of First Instance in Rodopi discussed the action brought by the Monastery for a final decision to secure its ownership rights over the lake. On 25-6-2004, the litigants submitted a joint declaration to the court requesting that no verdict be given, since in the meantime, on 20-5-2004, the Advisory Council for Public Land had once again found unanimously in favour of the Monastery. In accordance with established case law, when the litigants declare in common



Part of the South-West Wing, which has not been renovated.



In the new Common Room of the Monastery.

that they do not wish a verdict to be published, the President of the court refrains from doing so. The recent order to publish the verdict raises serious questions about the independence of the judicial authority in Greece.

The challenge to the title deeds of the Monastery deals a severe blow to property rights and brings the possibility that Church property outside the realm of Greece (the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria and Jerusalem, as well as Saint Katherine's Monastery on Sinai) may also be claimed by other parties. The search for culpability among those in the Public Sector who were responsible for the procedures which were followed has also badly shaken the confidence of the public and

The challenge to the title deeds of the Monastery.



Inter-Orthodox Conference on Elder Sofroniy in Athens.



Procession, Sunday of Orthodoxy.

is a blow to the interests of those who have dealings with the Greek Public Authorities.

THE EXCHANGE PROCEDURE.

The exchange of Lake Vistonida and its shoreline for other real estate was proposed by the Greek Public Authorities in order to meet the requirements of local agencies. The Monastery did not want to exchange Lake Vistonida, as is clear from the fact that the Monastery had commissioned companies to prepare studies on how best to develop the lake and the region around it.

The evaluation of the value of the estate and lake was entrusted by the Greek Public Authorities to the institution legally responsible, the Body of Chartered Assessors, which is independent and does not belong to the public sector. *The assessment was made on the basis of international and European assessment models, without any input, intervention or even opportunity for intervention by the Monastery.*

The properties in the exchange.

The choice of the real estate to be exchanged was made by the Greek Public Authorities, via the Ministry of Agrarian Development and the Public Land Company.

Part of the land which was exchanged was later auctioned off in accordance with the regulations of the Constitution of the Holy Mountain.

The Olympic plot of land which is in the “Thrakomakedones” area was given to the Monastery when it proved impossible to move the facilities of the Ministry of Employment there because of a number of problems to do with the Ministry.

The Olympic plot of land.

After studies were made, the Monastery preferred to realize the value of the land through the legal procedure of an auction. The first auction was considered disadvantageous. Thereafter, the land was sold to Noliden Ltd. for the sum of 41 million euros.

The same company offered the Monastery, on conditions, a donation of 9 million euros, in order to take part in the Gregorian Charitable Foundation, in particular in the financial administration of the Rehabilitation Centre for Invalids, which was going to be built in Grammatiko in Attica. On this Olympic land, the company planned to build a clinic for heart surgery, gynaecology and obstetrics, with an investment budget of 200 million euros, which would have provided 2,000 jobs. Unfortunately, after all the turmoil, it is not now possible for Noliden Ltd. to make this investment or to found the Rehabilitation Centre for Invalids. The Monastery has undertaken to return the 9 million euros.

The exchange of Lake Vistonida and its shoreline for other real estate was proposed by the Greek Public Authorities.



The chapel of Saint Evdokimos before and after restoration.

*The supposed
deception of
the Public
Authorities.*

Dozens of top state officials of high moral standing and education (ministers from both large parties, members of the Supreme Legal Council of the State, members of specialist advisory committees, expert University professors and Public Prosecutors) all signed legal opinions and the corresponding ministerial decisions in favour of the Monastery from 1998 to 2008. It was impossible for the Monastery to intrude in any way into these procedures and into the actions of the agencies involved in order to exert influence on them or deceive them.

FREEZING THE MONASTERY BANK ACCOUNTS.

It is astonishing that the agencies responsible have been keeping our accounts frozen and so depriving the Monastery of its income for almost four months now. Through having its accounts frozen, the Monastery has been deprived of all the significant income it had, whether from renting property or from its other investments. Do the agencies responsible really not know that 110 monks and 150 workers live in the Monastery and that the Monastery provides free hospitality to 25,000 visitors a year?



In the Main Church of the Monastery.



Monastic tasks: At the carpentry shop, icon studio, garden, apiary.

How are these running costs to be met? It is therefore inevitable that restoration and conservation work will be stopped and that hospitality will be limited.

DISPOSAL OF THE MONASTERY'S INCOME.

The Monastery is a Legal Entity in Public Law, in other words it is not private but is a Public Foundation, a possession and property of the Greek people. Every Monastery, through its moveable and fixed property, makes sure it can meet its costs for rations, hospitality, building restorations and conservation of treasures, and also carry out its missionary and charitable work. *The abbots of the Monasteries have the right and also the*



duty to manage the property of their Monasteries, and this is not forbidden by the Church canons, provided it is for the benefit of the Monastery and not for their own personal gain.

Dozens of top state officials of high moral standing signed legal opinions and the corresponding ministerial decisions in favour of the Monastery from 1998 to 2008. It was impossible for the Monastery to intrude in any way into these procedures.

Monks have no personal interest, nor do they serve those of others. A clear distinction must be made between the poverty of a monk and the property of his monastery. It is obvious, but should still be noted, that monks in a coenobium, as well as their

abbots, have no personal property, so any claims about the existence of personal bank accounts are unjustified and entirely baseless.

The Monastery of Vatopaidi employed financial advisors to find the best way of managing its property, as other Church organizations have done. All the Monastery's capital, much of



The East Wing before restoration.

it derived from loans, is deposited, as the law requires, in bank accounts in the name of the Monastery- not, of course, in any personal account, since these do not exist.

The Monastery's collaboration with companies is due to the fact that certain jobs were entrusted to financial advisors-laymen who are spiritual children of the Monastery- in order to free the monks from commercial and financial transactions. At regular intervals, the financial advisors of the Monastery presents a report to the Council of Elders, which is the Monastery's own responsible body.

THE MONASTERY'S PROPOSAL FOR AN ACCOMMODATION.

Because so much turmoil has been created, which has been an affront to the Monastery and the Church in general, in an effort to bring about peace the Monastery sent letters to

- a) the Minister of Agrarian Development (23-9-2008);
- b) the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Agrarian Development (17-10-2008) which was copied to the Prime Minister (20-10-2008); and



The East Wing after restoration.

c) the Minister of Finance (9-12-2008), proposing that all the real estate which came to the Monastery from the exchange through legitimate procedures be returned to the Greek Public Authorities. The Monastery would also not require the Greek Public Authorities to recognize its land rights over Lake Vistonida and its shoreline, since the ownership would be decided by the courts.

ULTERIOR MOTIVES.

Although many and varied interests are involved in the case, with their own financial and political agendas, it is hard to ignore the fact that the real purpose behind the turmoil is the defamation of institutions and the separation of Church and State administration. Some people have seized the opportunity to strike at the Church by fanning the flames in order to dam-



The Vatopaidi Skete of Saint Andrew (Serai) in Karyes.



age monasticism and to shake society's faith in Greek, Christian ideals.

THE MONK AND THE WORLD.

A monk's relations with other people are permeated by the Orthodox Patristic principles of selflessness and genuine love.

The Monastery of Vatopaidi is not a private but a Public Foundation, a possession and property of the Greek people. Through its moveable and fixed property, it makes sure it can meet its costs for rations, hospitality, restorations and conservation, and also carry out charitable work.

Pilgrims to the Holy Mountain have experience of this love. They take this spiritual leaven from the Monastery back to their families, their parishes and in this way the family, society and the world are blessed.

We ask that you, too, pray that Christ and His All-Pure Mother, to whom our Monastery is dedicated, will provide a blessed resolution to our present trial.

From the Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi





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The Abbot and the whole Brotherhood of the Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi express our profound sadness and humbly ask forgiveness from the flock of Christ because, unwittingly and in a manner that could not have been foreseen, we have been a reason for them to be scandalized.

The text presents a series of facts and evidence which will assist in the better understanding of the matter.