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978-1-108-42586-5 — A History of the Athonite Commonwealth
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Excerpt
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PART I

The road to the monastery was long, steep, and stony. Stones marked the boundaries of the fields in which contented sheep munched and meditated and enjoyed the far-reaching prospect. No dwelling was to be seen except a distant stone byre, nor was there any shelter other than the occasional wind-swept tree, but beyond the crest of a hill there was nothing but mountain succeeding to mountain succeeding to mountain for as far as the eye could see.

Eventually the track came to a fork and the right-hand turning led down to a small hollow in which nestled a stone-built cottage – or was it a pair of cottages? – with some disused sheds and pigsties attached to the back wall. The sight was welcome after the long, hot walk. Even more welcoming and even more unexpected was the sound of the talanto, the wooden plank that is used by Orthodox monasteries and struck with a mallet to summon the faithful to prayer. Emerging from behind the house was a monk walking purposefully round the small enclosure, beating his talanto to an unmistakable haunting rhythm, summoning his community to vespers in the chapel that he had created from a former stable. We followed him inside. The interior was dark, illuminated only by candles and an oil lamp or two. It took a while to adjust to the dim light, but gradually a host of colourful figures came into view: the entire walls were frescoed with scenes from the lives of the saints and with standing figures; a carved wooden iconostasis screened the tiny sanctuary from the rest of the chapel; and on it shining icons of Our Lord, of the Mother of God, and of other saints bade us welcome and prepared us for the chanting that was to follow. The same monk who had been sounding the talanto now appeared from behind the screen, censed the holy icons and then the assembled congregation, and began to intone a psalm.

Apart from the sheep and the architectural style of the buildings, this could easily have been a remote hermitage near the southern point of Mount Athos, the so-called desert of Athos, where hermits scratch a meagre living from the stony soil while devoting their lives to prayer for a fallen world. But in fact we were in Shropshire, the heart of England (though some of the furthest glimpsed mountains may have been over the border into Wales), and the cottage was none other than the monastery of Sts Antony and Cuthbert! The icons, of English saints, confirmed this, though they were mixed in with other saints whom one might have expected to meet on Athos (Plate 1): there beside St Aidan and St Cuthbert were St Isaac the Syrian and St Athanasios the Athonite, with scenes from the life of St Cuthbert above. And on the opposite wall St George stood next to St Antony of Egypt and St Seraphim of Sarov, below scenes from the life of St Antony. After vespers we were taken on a tour of the estate. A pigsty was in process of being converted to provide accommodation for more monks; attractive wooden huts had already been constructed in the woods to house

pilgrims at some distance from the monastery; and hundreds of new trees had recently been planted to ensure long-term supplies of timber, not for fuel, but for icons and for woodcarving.

For this monk, so recently returned from Athos, was already known to be a talented iconographer and was destined to make his name as one of the most skilful writers of icons in the Athonite tradition working in the West. Though he has subsequently left the monastery (where his place has been taken by another hermit-monk who continues the same tradition), his monastic career is typical of what this book is concerned with. From his home in New Zealand and following a period of study in London, he was drawn to Athos where he joined the cenobitic monastery of Iviron under the charismatic leadership of Fr Vasileios, one of the principal architects of the twentieth-century revival of Athonite monasticism. During the years he spent on Athos, in obedience to an encouraging spiritual father, he was enabled to embark on the spiritual path of a monk as well as the spiritual path of an iconographer. Having learnt the rudiments of both, he chose to return to the world and to the West, to establish a hermitage in England where he could pray and work, and where he could operate as an ambassador for Orthodoxy and for the sacred traditions of the Holy Mountain.

As we shall see, this is the way that Athos has operated for centuries, since the first monks were attracted to its secluded, harsh, and numinous terrain. Many stay for life, but a significant proportion return to the world, armed with the fruits of the garden of the Mother of God. Their impact on the world, perhaps not widely recognized, has been immense, wide-ranging, and of huge significance. And this is not a phenomenon restricted to a remote Byzantine period or East European context. It is still happening today, even in the West. Theirs is the story that this book sets out to tell.

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Map 1. The Byzantine Commonwealth.

CHAPTER I

*Introduction***The Byzantine Commonwealth**

It is no accident that the title of this book is reminiscent of the titles of two other books written by distinguished scholars, to both of which I must acknowledge a debt. The first is the seminal work by the Oxford historian Dimitri Obolensky entitled *The Byzantine Commonwealth*.¹ This book, when it first appeared in 1971, was not without its critics, no doubt because the ideas that it contained were so revolutionary; but perhaps the clearest demonstration of the fact that those ideas have now attained the status of orthodoxy is provided by the historian Jonathan Shepard who entitles his introductory chapter to the recently published volume on Eastern Christianity in the *Cambridge History of Christianity* ‘The Byzantine Commonwealth 1000–1550’ (and the extension of the closing date from 1453 to 1550 is significant).² Rather than paraphrase those ideas here, I prefer to quote Obolensky himself (partly I must confess because he was such a master of English prose) who summarized them quite concisely in the introduction to a subsequent book:

Some years ago, in a book entitled *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, I ventured the opinion that in the Middle Ages, despite notable differences in social and political life, those East European countries which owed their religion and much of their culture to Byzantium formed a single international community; its nature, I argued, is revealed in a common cultural tradition shared and contributed to by their ruling and educated classes. They were bound by the same profession of Eastern Christianity; they acknowledged the primacy of the Constantinopolitan Church; they recognized that the Byzantine emperor was endowed with a measure of authority over the whole of Orthodox Christendom; they accepted the principles of Romano-

¹ D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

² J. Shepard, ‘The Byzantine Commonwealth 1000–1550’, in M. Angold (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 5: *Eastern Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3–52.

Byzantine law; and they held that the literary standards and artistic techniques of the Empire's schools, monasteries, and scriptoria were universally valid models. This international community I rather intrepidly called the Byzantine Commonwealth.³

Some scholars have questioned the validity of the term 'commonwealth' when applied to Byzantium;⁴ and it is true, as Obolensky himself admitted in the passage just quoted, that there were often major differences in social and political terms between its members. So there are between members of the British Commonwealth today, but they do not get in the way of it operating very effectively as an economic and cultural umbrella sheltering a motley collection of states that share a common history, culture, and language. But just as with its modern-day British counterpart, membership of the Byzantine Commonwealth was always entirely voluntary; and, as Shepard writes, 'Acceptance of the Constantinopolitan patriarch's profession of faith and the Byzantine-authorized forms of worship – virtually the only stable denominators of adherence to the Byzantine order – did not rule out a variety of other cultural identities or political allegiances.'⁵ The Oxford historian Averil Cameron has also pointed to some problems with the 'commonwealth' idea, at least as a general historical model for Byzantium: 'We need now to look less to the religious agendas emphasized in previous scholarship than to "connective history" – networks, connections, and interacting systems, including trade, diplomacy, and indeed these aspects of religion.'⁶ Indeed, it is 'connective history' and the networks of Orthodoxy that this book is about and for our purposes the 'commonwealth' idea seems all the more appropriate. 'The term "commonwealth"', Cameron goes on, 'is inherently favorable, bypassing considerations of power and social macrostructures in favor of a kind of generalized cultural beneficence.' She seems willing to accept the term in a less 'top-down' sense, and in a cultural and religious context where a measure of 'generalized beneficence' is surely not out of place; and she writes, 'when applied to the post-Byzantine period the idea is even more closely associated with the influence of Orthodoxy, and especially that of

³ D. Obolensky, *Six Byzantine Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁴ See, for example, the books by the American Byzantinist Anthony Kaldellis: *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), and the provocatively titled *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁵ Shepard, 'The Byzantine Commonwealth 1000–1550', p. 45.

⁶ Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 39–40.

the monastic milieu on Mount Athos during the Ottoman period.’ There could scarcely be a more ringing endorsement for the writing of the present book.

The second book to which I am indebted is the collection of studies more recently put together by the Greek scholar Paschalis Kitromilides and entitled *An Orthodox Commonwealth*.⁷ While acknowledging his debt to Obolensky’s *magnum opus*, Kitromilides narrows the geographical focus from Eastern Europe as a whole to the Ottoman Balkans and the succeeding national states of south-eastern Europe, and he changes the chronological focus from Byzantium to the early modern period. His concern is not to establish the survival of the ‘bonds of Commonwealth’ in the post-Byzantine era but rather to question whether it really was a ‘commonwealth’ and, if so, how long it lasted, how it changed over time, and what forms of transition it experienced.

Kitromilides identifies the most significant historical event in the formation of the Orthodox Commonwealth as the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988 and the subsequent adoption of Orthodox Christianity by his subjects. After the symbolic dissolution of the Christian empire on 29 May 1453, the patriarchate of Constantinople assumed a truly ecumenical role and its subsidiary institutions (notably the monasteries) a collective responsibility to provide guidance for the faithful.

As a historical phenomenon, the ‘Orthodox Commonwealth’, the cultural creation of Byzantium, remained a hallmark of the post-Byzantine period, and the provision of its spiritual leadership was understood as an essential element in the historical mission of the Church in the years following the Fall of Constantinople. In the post-Byzantine period, Orthodox religious institutions (patriarchates, monastic foundations, places of pilgrimage) in the broad geographical area from the Baltic to the Red Sea functioned as substitutes for the Christian Empire, and became the focal points in the collective life of the Orthodox communities . . . In this sense Byzantium survived after 1453 and, as a cultural heritage, retained its organic unity until the nineteenth century.⁸

As to how long this Orthodox Commonwealth lasted, Kitromilides suggests that it died with Joachim III, patriarch of Constantinople, in 1912, the year which saw the outbreak of the Balkan Wars.

⁷ P. M. Kitromilides, *An Orthodox Commonwealth: Symbolic Legacies and Cultural Encounters in Southeastern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 6, pp. 6–7.

His death had the same symbolic significance as his belief in the Orthodox Commonwealth, which led him to welcome to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, with equal warmth, the Grand Dukes of Russia, the King of Serbia and the princes of Greece. These scions of ancient dynasties and the world they symbolised in the eyes of the Patriarch were, on the threshold of the twentieth century, no more than the last embers of a lost world. The new century was dawning as imperialism was reaching its zenith, bringing the deadly conflicts of rival nationalisms to their climax. The millennium-long shared past of the peoples of East and South-Eastern Europe seemed to have fallen into oblivion.⁹

The Athonite Commonwealth

In writing about what I term the 'Athonite Commonwealth', I am particularly conscious of taking up a statement made by Obolensky which, as far as I am aware, he never attempted to develop but which seems to me to invite amplification and illustration over a dauntingly broad canvas. In the context of the persistent southward migration of the peoples of the Balkans and Central Europe into Byzantine territory he writes:

These migrations of peoples were, we have seen, followed by a reverse movement from south to north, instigated by the statesmen in Constantinople with the aim of taming and civilizing them. The alternate movements of commodities, men and ideas to and from the Mediterranean world, which have been compared [by Braudel] to the rhythmic pulsations of the living heart, brought the periphery of this world into close contact with its centre on the Bosphorus, and carried the civilization of Byzantium up rivers, across plains and over seas to the farthest borderlands of Eastern Europe.¹⁰

Later in the same book Obolensky refers specifically to the part played by the Holy Mountain in this two-way process:

The analogy, suggested earlier, between the alternating current of men and ideas flowing to and from the Mediterranean and the pulsations of a living heart, finds a further illustration in the role of Mount Athos, drawing to itself men from all over Eastern Europe who sought training in the monastic life, and then sending back, through these Slav monasteries founded on its soil, the results of their labours and learning to their native lands.¹¹

It is self-evident that Obolensky has here identified a role of immense importance that was played by the Holy Mountain throughout the latter

⁹ Ibid., p. 18. ¹⁰ Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, p. 360. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 383.

part of the Byzantine period. It is my contention that it has continued to play this role down to the present day and that, as long as Athos survives as the spiritual heart of the pan-Orthodox world, that will always be a defining part of its identity.

In my earlier book, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*,¹² I attempted to sketch a history of Mount Athos from its beginnings as a centre of monastic activity in the ninth century, through its many vicissitudes, periods of growth and periods of decline, down to the end of the twentieth century when it was clearly enjoying a strong revival after a long period of uncertainty. This was very much an internal history, focused on the Mountain itself and its indigenous institutions. My purpose in this new book is to attempt an external history of Athos. I shall be examining the relationships that the monasteries developed with the outside world, 'the networks, connections, and interacting systems' as Cameron would define them, the impact that they had on the development of monasticism, the gifts that they showered on a world that was hungry to receive them. As before, I shall aim to avoid the tedium of a chronicle by focusing on the individuals concerned in these spiritual movements, the relationships that they enjoyed with the Holy Mountain, and the ways in which they shared them with the outside world.

Athos has often been described as the spiritual heart of Orthodoxy. It is worth pausing to consider exactly what that phrase means in practice. It means, as Obolensky adumbrated in his classic study, that throughout its history the Holy Mountain has drawn men from far and wide to come and experience for themselves its seclusion, its sanctity, and the teaching of its holy fathers. Some have come to stay, but many have returned to the outside world, charged by the strength of the spiritual gifts that they have received there and inspired to make use of those gifts in whatever way they can. In many instances they have gone on to found (or revive) monasteries in other parts of the world which have in turn become centres of spirituality. Sometimes gradually, sometimes remarkably rapidly, a network of such centres can be seen to have spread all over the heartlands of the Orthodox world and even beyond, as spiritual fathers have attracted and inspired groups of disciples who have in turn become spiritual fathers to new groups of disciples, who have carried the torch of Athonite monasticism to parts of the world which it had never previously illuminated. This monastic diaspora is what I have, 'rather intrepidly', chosen to term the Athonite Commonwealth.

¹² G. Speake, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, 2nd edn (Limni: Denise Harvey, 2014).

The geographical focus of this ‘commonwealth’ throughout most of its history has been the Orthodox heartlands of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. During the so-called middle Byzantine period, when the empire was at its height and stood in a position of influence over most of its neighbours, the monastic thrust followed the political one into Georgia, Kievan Rus’, Serbia, and Bulgaria. After the Mongol invasions and the Latin empire, when there was a realignment of political forces, there sprang up a new spiritual movement known as hesychasm which turned the Holy Mountain into a hotbed, first of controversy, and subsequently of missionary zeal. As a result, Athonite monasticism was championed by a panoply of charismatic elders from all over Eastern Europe who swiftly transmitted it back to their own lands where it spread like wildfire and became the backbone of an entirely new literary as well as spiritual culture. The fire was dampened, but never quite extinguished, by the Ottoman conquest of the greater part of this area, when the focus shifted to those areas that remained free (or less strictly controlled), namely Russia and Romania. In the second half of the eighteenth century, partly in response to the encroachment of secularizing ideas from the West, another creative burst of Athonite spirituality brought about a spectacular renewal of traditional Orthodoxy and a revival of the monastic network, initially in the neighbouring territories of Romania and Ukraine, but spreading swiftly north to Muscovy and then east over the Urals and the wastes of Siberia to the borders with Central Asia and the Far East whence it took ship across the Bering Strait and found new footholds in the Aleutian Islands and Alaska.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century the Athonite Commonwealth seemed to have reached its natural extent and to have covered the entire Orthodox world. Meanwhile, waves of nationalism swept over what under the Ottomans had been a subject territory with no frontiers. Suddenly there were boundaries where none had been before and demands for autocephaly of the various national Churches. At the same time there were moves to restrict the wealth and power of the monasteries: estates were confiscated, monasteries were closed, and many links with Athos were broken. As the Ottoman Empire started to break up, new tensions arose, the countries of the Balkans found themselves at war with one another, and finally ‘holy Russia’ itself was engulfed by revolution. A pall of communism spread over almost the whole of the Orthodox world and monasticism was forced into a steep downward path.

Meanwhile, Athonite spirituality, though superficially in sympathetic decline, sought new outlets for its unquenchable springs. While

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traditional routes to the north and east were now blocked, it took a new direction – to the west. New centres sprang up in Western Europe and North America, and suddenly the Mountain's web became a global phenomenon. With the fall of communism and the reopening of borders in Eastern Europe, freedom has returned to the Orthodox heartlands, monasteries have begun once more to flourish and to fill with men and women thirsting for spiritual waters, and Athos has the opportunity to assume a new role for itself as the seminary of a new monastic revival. Whether it will rise to this challenge is beyond the scope of this book to foretell, but the widely publicized mission in 2011 of an Athonite abbot taking one of the Mountain's holiest relics, the Virgin's Girdle, on an extended tour of Russia to be venerated by millions, reciprocated by an equally high-profile pilgrimage to Athos in 2013 by the patriarch of Moscow, and the celebrations held to mark the millennium of the Russian presence on Athos in 2016 suggest that the possibilities are limitless.

It was the third week of May and the streets of Kiev were decked out in countless sprays of pink and white as the celebrated chestnut trees were in full bloom. The sun shone hot from a cloudless sky, and the city went about its business with the usual noise and bustle of trams and taxis and street cries. But Kiev is a city that takes great pride in its monastic tradition and does not allow the visitor to ignore it. Even in the city centre I found oases of calm: the magnificent cathedral of St Sophia (sadly now a museum; Plate 22) with its glorious eleventh-century Byzantine mosaics is set in a walled enclosure amid lawns and trees where anyone can stroll or sit at leisure; and the nearby monastery of St Michael, newly restored, resplendent in blue and gold and housing the holy relics of St Barbara, offers a functioning church where passers-by, hurrying between appointments, may enter just to light a candle and venerate an icon.

Only two or three kilometres south of the centre is the spiritual symbol of the city, the incomparable Pecherskaya Lavra or monastery of the Caves, founded in 1051 on the west bank of the river Dnieper. Inside its gates all was calm and peaceful. The trees were as festive as those in the streets outside and the flowerbeds responded with sheets of white and yellow irises. A paved path leads straight from the main entrance to the great golden-domed cathedral of the Dormition, some 250 metres away, and from various directions the faithful were making their way towards its open north door, outside which a man with no legs begged for alms. As I drew near, the ground began to vibrate under my feet and the massive bells in the nearby tower gradually stirred themselves into seismic action. I entered through a side chapel where six or seven queues of penitents waited patiently for confession. Inside, the lofty nave was already densely packed with pious Kievans, for this is a monastery wholly integrated with the local community; a deacon, colourfully vested, was slowly rotating on his heels and censuring the congregation; a male-voice choir was chanting loudly but mellifluously from a hidden gallery; the Divine Liturgy for the feast of the Ascension was about to begin. The royal doors were opened and at last the celebrant appeared, supported by six other priests and numerous acolytes. As he turned to face the congregation, we were able to identify him as none other than Archimandrite Methodios, abbot of the holy monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos.

What was a Serbian archimandrite doing serving the Liturgy for the Ascension in this great cathedral inside the monastery of the Caves in Kiev, some 1,500 kilometres away from his home on Mount Athos? Why were there several other Athonite clergy (but no bishops) among those concelebrating with him? And why did the congregation include so many laymen

and women, drawn from all over the Orthodox world and beyond, wearing official badges of identification?

The occasion was an international conference held from 21 to 23 May 2015 and devoted to the theme of 'Athos and the Slav World'. At the end of the service more than a hundred hierarchs, monastics, academics, and other worthies made their way to the nearby monastery refectory where they would spend the next three days listening to learned papers on all manner of topics connected with this all-embracing topic.

After the conference was over, I spent a day exploring the monastery, its buildings, and its grounds which cover an area of more than 20 hectares. Either side of the approach to the main gate the high walls are painted with frescos that date from the early twentieth century and give a foretaste of what is to be found inside: on the left the so-called Synaxis of the Saints of the Near Caves shows St Antony holding an icon of the Dormition among a crowd of saints whose bones are to this day preserved in the Near Caves; and on the right the Synaxis of the Saints of the Far Caves has St Theodosius holding a cross also among a crowd of saints whose relics lie buried in the Far Caves. Above the gate itself is the imposing church of the Holy Trinity which dates from the early twelfth century, though most of what you see dates from an eighteenth-century restoration. Still it is one of the oldest buildings in the monastery and the ensemble makes an awesome aperitif to the spiritual and architectural feast that is within (Plate 11).

The present cathedral of the Dormition, the principal church of the monastery, dates only from the late twentieth century, its predecessor having been blown to smithereens by a bomb in World War II. The first church, said to have been built in 1075–7, was destroyed by the Mongols in 1240 and it was 200 years before it was replaced. That fifteenth-century church was in turn reduced to ashes in 1718 but was soon rebuilt on a much more lavish scale and survived for another two centuries. Thus the history of this church broadly mirrors the history of Russian monasticism: a humble but confident start in the eleventh century; two centuries of decline under the Mongols; renewed growth in the fifteenth century, halted by a sharp temporary setback in the eighteenth; a swift return to renewed splendour, lasting until the twentieth century when suddenly everything was destroyed, only to be brought back to life in the years before the start of the third millennium. Appropriately enough, the present structure was reconsecrated on the feast of the Dormition, 28 August 2000 (Plate 12).

The most 'authentic' part of the monastery is of course the eponymous caves. St Antony had lived in a cave on Mount Athos and when he returned to Kiev in 1051 he naturally looked for a cave. This underground labyrinth in due course became the kernel of the monastery. The subsequent history of the caves is

described on pp. 69–75. They may still be visited, and they give an idea of what monastic life must have been like in those early days when there were no buildings above ground. In fact, there are two sets of caves, the so-called Near Caves, which are nearly 400 metres long, and the Far Caves, which are somewhat shorter, though deeper. Both sets of caves lie some 10 to 15 metres below ground and comprise a system of passages, lined with tombs and occasionally punctuated by chapels. The tombs, mostly set back in niches, are those of former abbots, saints, and monks of the monastery; the chapels, dimly lit by candles and oil lamps, are still used for worship; and the entire complex serves as a major focus of pilgrimage. The passages seem endless and are quite dark in places, so I was glad of the lighted candle that one is encouraged to carry. They are just high enough to enable someone of average height to stand up, but they feel quite claustrophobic all the same, and I was happy when I finally emerged into the sunlight.

I felt hugely privileged to be able to spend six consecutive nights in this ancient and numinous place. It was the antithesis of the monastery of Sts Antony and Cuthbert on top of the Stiperstone Hills in Shropshire; and yet they were both living reminders of the strength and breadth of the spiritual diaspora of Mount Athos. And why was our conference being held in this most glorious and most hospitable of all possible monastic venues?

In fact, nowhere could be more appropriate to the theme, for Kiev was one of the earliest and one of the most important outposts of the Athonite Commonwealth. For almost a thousand years the monastery of the Caves has flourished as a major representative of Athonite spirituality, disseminating its fruits to all Russia and beyond. Some of the papers delivered at the conference were more apposite to this theme than others, but the fact that the conference was taking place in this auspicious location and evoking so many associations and links with the entire Orthodox world, was a clear indication that both the Holy Mountain of Athos and its far-reaching Commonwealth are alive and well and reaching out to all those who care to listen to their message. In the pages that follow we shall attempt to identify these associations and these links and draw together the diverse strands that combine to create what is surely the most important spiritual and cultural movement that the Orthodox Christian world has ever seen. But first we need to go right back to the beginning . . .