AGHION OROS
AN ARTIST’S VIEW OF MOUNT ATHOS

The visit to the Aegean about which Mr. Etting writes was aboard the yacht Doudouna, chartered by Henry McIlhenny. Other guests were John Knowles, Roderick Cameron, Perry Rathbone, and Theodor Roubanis.

—EDITOR

It was June 16th, Sunday appropriately enough, that on emerging before breakfast from our cabins on the Doudouna we caught our first glimpse of the Holy Mountain rising dome-like from the pearly mists of the Aegean. As we drew nearer, the outline seemed to leaven into a towering blue pyramid, cleft at the summit and falling away gradually to the left toward Macedonia. We lined up our canvas chairs on the starboard deck and, gently swaying with the waves, watched this sacred land become a green reality. Originally named for the giant Oros who had the temerity to battle with Poseidon, Mount Athos rises some six thousand feet out of the sea at the tip of the most eastward of three peninsulas called the Chalcidice. From our front row seats we watched the peak soar clear and sharp now above a luminous mist at the water line which imbued it with a mystical majesty reminiscent of
a Japanese printmaker's beautification of Fujiyama.

Unlike the arid Greek islands, the nearer we got the more verdant this land looked, except on the rocky pinnacle which, we noted through binoculars, was streaked with drifts of stale snow. The quiet sea was devoid of ships or gulls, and the only sound of life was the thronging of the Doulanas's smelly engines.

Drawing closer we could distinguish the pale masses of several monasteries looming at intervals along the shore. We knew there were two kinds of monasteries, the cenobitic or communal, ruled by an abbot, where everything was shared, the monks ate together, had to attend all services, and ownned nothing individually; and the idiorrhythmic, ruled by four eptepres, where the monks ate in private quarters, attended services as they felt the urgency, and could own some property. Half of the monks, however, lived in clusters of houses outside the monasteries, called sketes, often forming quite independent colonies of their own. A fourth and very small group were the hermits, sequestered in dangerously inaccessible huts. The entire population was now estimated at about two thousand and was doubtless less, while at a maximum in the fourteenth century there had been forty thousand holy men, protected by Byzantine Emperors and the support of private patrons.

The Bull issued by Emperor Constantine Monomachus in 1066 decreed access to Mount Athos was forbidden to any "woman, female animal, child, craven, or person with beardmarked face." But later that day we were to see two young boys while we waited in the capital village of Karyes for our dionomantiaos, the permits required to visit the monasteries and we were informed that lens could now be raised, providing they be kept outside the walls of idiorrhythmic monasteries everywhere had not stood still all these years. Yet there was no milk, of course, and musical instruments were strictly taboo.

It was noon as we sighted Daphni, the only port on Mount Athos. It is here you must land to get to Karyes (walnut trees), the capital, a two or three hour climb. To our amazement we learned that the first road on a peninsula, from here to Karyes, had just been completed in honor of the king's visit, on the occasion of this year's thousand-anniversary ceremonies of the founding of Mount Athos. So we might be able to bum a ride on an army truck, one of which luckily was about to depart. We leapt aboard over bulging tires, settling glad of boots. The dirt road circled spirally up and over richly wooded hills. Higher and higher, we chugged in low gear, wafted in clouds of our own dust. Below, the sleek white hull of the Doulanas rode coolly upon ultramarine depths. Higher the first shoulder of the mountain ridge loomed the brown stone cluster of our first monastery, Xeropotamou, with the sun beating down on its cubist concentration of buildings. Up farther we rode under the waving branches of trees, among green hills with only telephone poles to indicate the presence of man. Now and then the old footpath would cross the road and disappear in a shrubbery. After an hour we began to descend and, in high, we bounded wildly down and around to Karyes. Here we inspected the tenth century church of Profitis, said to be the oldest on Mount Athos, a deep-set building with corridors of retooched frescoes outside, below street level. The building was surrounded by Romanesque buttarks added later to prop it together. We walked up a few alleys toward dwellings for the most part deserted. Flowers and vines were in profusion, and everywhere ran little streams of mountain water. After we had received our visitors' permits, we began the hike to Iviron, guided by a monk in weatherbeaten vestments. He had two mules and to their wooden saddles he tied his knapsacks and coats with intricate manipulations of cord.

It was hot, so we were glad to find the path led mostly down, through valleys of trees and shrubs—oak, chestnut, walnut, maple, laurel—bristling in the distance with clusters of cypress, all undisturbed for centuries. Flowers abounded on either side—poppies, daisies, thistles, lilies, morning glories, and indescribable herbs. At one point a long black snake twisted into the underbrush. We crossed streams, ascended gullies where stones had been set to facilitate one's footwork. Constantly turnsight Mount Athos, and even a footpath on the mountain was nowhere smooth enough to walk. Instead, it was always the same, we soon would learn, though entrances varied in decoration and elaborateness. A sort of observation pavilion usually stood outside where monks might chat, silently admire the view, or watch arrivals penetrate the whitewashed passage into the inner court of their autonomous haven.

A few old bearded monks in well-worn tunics cast noncommittal glances as we emerged into a large central quadrangle with grass rising between the flagstones. A church with machilicated domes stood on the left, and assorted buildings in various states of decrepitude lay scattered within the enclosing walls which were actually the cells or apartments of the monks, judging by the faces staring at us from open windows.

A couple of our permits were inspected by a monk guestmaster who then led us to a building in a rear corner, up wooden stairs into a rectangular room with banquettes covered with Turkish rugs and relentless cushions. There was a long, bare table in the center and a closed bookcase, apparently empty, at one end. Faded photographs of the king and queen of Greece bowed giddily forward from the walls. Two open windows gave out on the silent jungle tapering away in the golden light of evening to the Aegean.

We disposed ourselves about the room in friendly separateness, to cool off and set aside the bugs, cameras, and notebooks. Shortly, our monk reappeared smiling, followed by a much older one bearing a tray of tiny cups of Turkish Coffee, ponies of raki (ouzo), glasses of crystal water and a plate of koulouri, Turkish delights generously dipped in confectioner's sugar. Following this formality we were asked to sign in two guest books, already filled with names and addresses crowded one upon the other in ditinctly down the years, page after page.

The guestmaster meanwhile was graciously answering questions: there had been five hundred monks at Iviron in its heyday, now there were only 35. They slept about four or five hours, services lasted eight or nine hours at a stretch, sometimes more, and the rest of the time was devoted to house chores or gardening. We were free to wander about, and in the morning we would be shown the treasures. Nothing was said about bed, but we supposed some meal would be served soon. I decided about this strange world, bolted in for the night. The church and the chapel were locked, as was the refectory, a large deserted hall...
where no one apparently ate any more. There was a pavilion with a dome painted inside with lovely patterns of angels in faded aquamarine and rust, with our Lord and our Lady placed in gold leaf. Under this was the phial, or sacred well, and a round marble basin for holy water. Here a ladder had been left leaning against a crumbling wall; there some rags were soaking in a washtub; stones lay about, fallen from an inaccessible tower; a broken grape arbor dangled a vine with its flowers and clusters, and the flicker of a black robe in the distance, otherwise complete quiet.

We were married in a Medieval setting of transcendent disrepair, but the people had gone and there was only a bearded ghost or two fleetingly seen at a window to remind us that some sort of remote life existed here still.

I walked up the refectory tower to look at the great bells and peer down into the empty courtyard, wistfully. The Turks during their occupation of the peninsula had forbidden the Athenians to use bells as a means of summoning monks to service, because they feared their sound, covering great distances, might be used as a signal for mass uprising. Therefore the monks had devised a long wooden instrument of varying length, called the skyrkos, which, when beaten like a tattoo, had remained their means of announcing periods of prayer. We found one here at the entrance to the old dining hall, complete with wooden hammer, and nestled in the middle to be borne over the shoulder when in use.

Our little band reassembled on the steps of the fountain to whisper comments. As it was eight by then, we decided to return to the pilgrim's quarters and see if anything, literally, was cooking. Indeed, there were nine plates on the table now, crusts of bread at each plate, a knife and fork, a glass of water and one of red wine. Three men in shirt sleeves were already seated at one end and looked as though they should have napkins tucked under their chins, but of course there were none.

Our beperctadated monk-chef distributed soup plates filled with a most deliciously browned broth with olive oil. We munched away in silence for awhile, churned the bread and gulped the wine. After a considerable pause someone announced hopefully, "I guess there will be a second course, since we have knives and forks..." Faces cheered a bit over this until I said, "But haven't you noticed the plates of sardines? I mean, I'm not afraid of the flattery for "these." I had already had a at sardine and given it up reluctantly since it was only half-cooked, had been preserved in salt, and had a very resistant set of bones thoroughly infiltrated down the middle.

It was nine o'clock when our monk reappeared with a couple of kerosene lamps, one with an extra bend, and we ended up packing our knapsacks on the mattresses. The beads had boards under them, but there was one sheet over each, and two fold grey blankets at the foot, smelling strongly of perfume. In the dim light of an afternoon I had felt transported to the Middle Ages, I now seemed plunged into the intimate mysticism of Mont Sion.

All the churches here we found were built on the same cross pattern, with the center empty space hung with an all-embracing brass crown sprouting candles. The altar was closed off in the section facing the entrance, and in the middle of the two side sections stood lecterns lined with mother-of-pearl and covering with black lamps.

In the dim candle glow, black figures swished about the patterned barrel, emerging from the wings in opposing directions, floating un-expectedly to their knees to make the sign of the cross, or passing like a humming bird to plant the plumes under the column glimpsed in the shadow behind a canopy of votive lights. Sometimes in transit they swoved like dancers to avoid collision, eventually sweeping out of view like skining queens.

There was a constant monotonous outpouring of words, broken from time to time by the interosol of ten or twenty Kyrie eleisons (Lord have mercy) terminated by the last one heavily pronounced as though to make a special point, sealing off the procedure before starting off on another tack. Absently frozen in mosaic, Christ Pantocrator silhouetted in gold and surrounded by the halo of the saints stared upon us from the church's dome.

A shining cross was lowered from the air only to be hoisted by pulleys later, along with small colored lanterns, held in the sacred form of procession.

An aggressive little bell caused curtained doors to fly open like traps in a mechanical clock and a priest dressed in black, trailing a veil draped over his hat, on his way to deliver lessons from one of the lecterns. At other times a figure wear- ing lace and gold-embroidered vestments would stride out swinging a censor trailing zigzags of scented smoke.

Everybody was busy with some sacred office. But I was too busy seeking themselves there was no congregation. A monk or two might stand in one of the stalls for an hour or so, then leave. We were expectedly ignored, useless spectators in a pageant as old and inevitable as the tides. Others would stand where we stood, whence for centuries pilgrims before us had watched with various degrees of involvement. It was indeed a timeless affair, interrupted only by exigencies of life. Nothing had any meaning but the prayers them- selves and their stubborn repetition, an insistent denial of any significant existence.

Lulled by the monotony of the long unintelli- gible prayers and lessons, and slightly dazed by the lack of food and the headiness of the.incense, my mind began to wander; I took up my sausage hopefully toward the growing promise of day. Gold halos began to fade, and the polyphony of sound ti- pered off. Then this insidious pageant folded up, piece by piece; candles were blown out, the incense put away, nuns closed, doors shut, curtains pulled, and the church with all its gaudy trappings was engulfed in silence.

When we finally emerged into the courtyard glare, the bearded monks lowered about briefly. As they are not allowed hair trim, the look of our hatted priests varied considerably, and moustaches and beards aged from black and brown to grey, often with streaks of yellow in between. Some wore their hair in the back in little knots like matadors, others let it flow loosely over their casacks, while some tied it in a variety of braids. None looked young but they all seemed friendly, and there was frequently a glib

EMILY ETTING was born in Philadelphia, graduated from Harvard, then studied with Andre in Tokyo and later moved to India where she had one-man shows in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Munich, Paris, and taught for a year at the Philadel- phia College of Art. She is represented in the collections of the Whitney Museum in New York and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as well as in many private collections. The books for which she has been awarded the Pulitizer Prize, her drawings are deceptively simple. With a mini- mum of line he conveys his perceptive observa- tion of the people he encounters, whether they be the inhabitants of his native Paris, sailors on a stage coach carrying mail for the ballet, or these monks of Mount Athos. Miss ETTING is a member of the Alliance Francaise de Philadelphie, Chevalier de la Legion D'Honneur, and Honorary President of Artists Equity.
of gold when they smiled across the language barrier.

The weather was grey and overcast as we were led by four monks into the church to see the treasures kept in the partitioned section behind the altar. The mysteries of the night had vanished now as our guides talked in loud voices, pointed out icons, vestments, ornate crosses, scepters, bejeweled crowns and relics, attributing their vintage when they knew it, and attesting to their historical and religious significance. With particular satisfaction they showed the over-richly ornate binding of the Bible presented by Peter the Great of Russia.

Then we were led out into a long veranda glazed in on the outside, with rectangles of blue or red panes lining things up here and there. On the inner wall we admired a series of flaking eighteenth century frescoes painted in tones of brown, black, and gold, depicting scenes and parables from the New Testament. We were lost in the Apocalypse when a vigorously determined elder with a peppery beard impatiently waved away our kind guides and took over. We must follow him to the library in the back, said he, in French now, for a change. He unlocked the door and we entered a large, musty room with manuscripts crammed in bookstacks sectioning off most of the space from floor to ceiling. Two big tables and several horizontal vitrines were crowded with books. The elder, who we assumed was librarian, opened one or two tomes and, before we could look, snapped them shut in our faces.

The examination of illuminated manuscripts was thus conducted in a peremptory manner as we tried to admire gold-leaf letterheads and jewel-dotted illuminations under glass, none of course able to decipher a word or a caption.

We adjourned next to the nearby Chapel of the Miraculous Virgin, containing an icon "traculacously" thrown up by the sea. In the vestibule were more murals, this time with Greek philosophers—Plato, Sophocles, Aristotle—mingled alternately in the society of the saints. This chapel, our bristly guide informed us, had been erected over a pagan temple to Poseidon. With evident satisfaction he said that statues of Hera, Apollo, Poseidon, and other idols slept peacefully in the ground beneath us, and he rested his head on his hands pressed together. "Very good for them," he concluded deprecatingly.

It was beginning to drizzle when we waved goodbye to several old monks in faded cassocks watching from their windows as we passed the now empty viewing pavilion, and straggled down to the pier where the yacht was to pick us up. A crumbling tower stood on our left, and several half-ruined dwellings adorned the pebble beach with arches underneath for boats to be drawn up. But no sign of life, not even in the battlements of Iviron, aloof behind us. We huddled under a woodshed and waited. Sure enough, just a little before twelve a dark spot loomed in the horizon—less grey void to the south; and less than an hour later we heard the Doxousa's anchor chain running out. Once on board electric razors buzzed, ouzo was produced and a bottle of chilled white retsina. We lunched on deck so as not to miss in passing the picturesque monasteries of Strovoniki and Panteleikos.

It was three when the walls of Vatopedi came into focus, rising over the cliffs like a proud bastion city, and we were very expectant as we landed that afternoon, having read glowing accounts of the place—one author going so far as dubbing it "the Paris of monasteries." The name vaso bramble bush, paisi child, had been decreed because of a miracle. While sailing past Athos in a storm with his mother, the wife of Emperor Theodosius, the boy Arcadius had been washed overboard and given up for lost. Subsequently shepherds discovered him unscathed, asleep under a bramble bush. When later he became Emperor of Byzantium, he had the monastery built at that spot. It was idiosyncratic, of course, and was renowned for being more advanced than any of the other establishments; its monks were elegant in rain, it used the Julian calendar, Greenwich time, and, above all, it had electricity.

It was a brief hike up to the wide front of balconies and varicolored apartments of Vatopedi rising towards the clouds. Things seemed more lively here as we met some monks with mules carrying kindling wood, several others smiled and waved from the viewing pavilion. At the portico we were greeted by an elder who led us to a whitewashed halway to deposit our knapsacks on benches. This done he took us into a large compound with domed churches and buildings of various proportions strewn about. The pavings rose, following the mountain slope to the right, hemmed in by outer apartment buildings topped by the widest assortment of chimney pots and cisterns. By section, in a kind of miniature wall of china with crenelated parapets.

First we inspected the crowded library and gazed and illuminated manuscripts and Bibles open up like pairs of palms to the scrutiny of a fortune-teller. There was traffic of material here that a new cement building was nearing completion outside better to accommodate it.

The church was entered through the usual dark vestibule paneled in black woodcarvings, and flanked by chapels whose walls were jammed

with frescoes of saints, devils, hell's flames, dragons and angels. The central section was much larger than that of Iviron, and a wider brass kovor (crown) of candles hung down over a more elaborate marble floor. Verev lights twinkled everywhere, with glints reflected from shining crosses, icons, candelabra, twin-headed eagles, and crystal pendants.

In the sacristy several monks awaited us and together we examined some of their treasures. An ancient icon of the crucifixion, made from the tiniest bits of mosaic I had ever seen, was luckily not covered with silver, but held in a wide frame squared off in solid silver bas-reliefs of Biblical scenes. There was a belt with round buckles said to have belonged to the Virgin Mary, and an elaborate silver cross which contained in separate sections the fingers of John the Baptist, a piece of the true cross, and a fragment of the skull of St. Gregory the Theologian. There were trays of vestments woven with gold thread and stuffed with precious stones, and portable crosses with sunbursts, and brass standards with angelic faces circled by interwoven angels' wings.
An imposing looking abbot named Father Zacharias stepped in and begged us to accompany him. He was apparently irritated, we gathered, that our reception had not followed the proper note. We retraced our steps to the hall with our knapsacks and we ushered into an enormous salon extending across the width of the building, with tall draped windows giving out at one end to the sea. It was an airy room with grey walls and a pale blue ceiling with white plaster moldings, from the middle of which hung a crystal chandelier. Life-size photographs of Queen Frederika and King Paul in regal attire gazed down disinterestedly from skylit hangings. A custom carpet covered the floor, with a wide border of alternating designs in blue and white of the two-headed eagle and the Greek crown. Bentwood chairs lined the walls with dusty tepoys spaced in between. The central area was dominated by an oval table covered with an orange cloth over which soared a faded world globe, flanked by two elongated bentwood rocking chairs that looked as though they had never been sat upon.

Our group settled modestly in a corner and in a few moments the doors were flung open and one of the brothers passed around the usual tray of welcoming savories. First came tiny candied eggplants to be taken with a spoon held over a glass of water. Then the Turkish coffee in tiny cups made in Japan, followed by raki, which is stronger than ouzo and distilled, we now learned, from grape skins.

Father Zacharias became quite jolly now that things were in order once more and, after the guest book routine, proposed we adjourn to a less formal sitting room. This sported a small balcony with delicate railings which jutted out, command ing a perilous view of vegetable patches below falling away to the sea.

It was a dramatic evening, for a storm was blowing in from shrouded Mount Athos. Lightning flashed over the water, and thunder crashed and crumbled overhead as we sat there floating in suspension. Peacocks cried out from a garden below, surely an odd reminder here of worldly vanities. Then the rains came, lashed in whirls of wind, and we retreated to the darkening room, bolting the windows behind. An electrified chandelier hung down from the ceiling and I wondered when the light would be turned on. A monk came instead, carrying a lamp and Father Zacharias explained that for forty years Vatopedi had enjoyed the unique privileges of electric power, but three years ago the generator had broken down and the epistrophi at Kayress who all along had taken a dim view of this Athonite luxury had refused to allocate funds for repairs.

Father Zacharias expounded now on the rigors of monastic life, and its total subjugation to a ritual of prayer and fasting. He said, unlike our church, there was no preaching here. No man was led, each had to find his own way alone, guided by his own conscience and his own desire for salvation. It was only through complete denial of one's former life that a believer might triumph in his lonely struggle with himself. And the sole weapon of defense against himself and his mental demons was relentless prayer.

Mount Athos was open to any man who was ready to renounce the world. After a year's apprenticeship an applicant could become a monk. Provision had been made for falterers, however, and these were sent to the island of Amoulou—a concentration camp for naughty monks. Vatopedi which had once had an enrollment of a thousand was now down to 44, which was a fair average these days. It was run by three epistrophi, employed one hundred secular workmen,
and sold outside its own olive oil and lumber. A monk broke in suddenly with flapping ribs to borrow a ring of keys and swirled out again like some herald in a Shakespeare play. When he returned he whispered long enough with our host to give me time to sketch him. His unruly hair at the back was tied with black ribbon and formed a kind of teased puffball.

The topic of conversation switched now to the sumatron, our friend explaining that its origin could be traced back to Noah who had gathered his passengers by knocking on the ark. Those who had not responded had been drowned (lost). Therefore, the monks who did not respond to the second call of the sumatron were considered lost. Nevertheless, at certain times, a third summons was given, by beating a large metal horseshoe suspended from a rafter. So there were some concessions to human frailty after all!

At nine forty-five the door of the adjoining room was opened by the monk who had served the savories, and we sat down at a long table covered with a white cloth. First came a vegetable stew served along with zucchini and beans boiled in their pods. This was followed by a dish of peas and rice mixed with squid tentacles. There were slices of bread and carabos of water and red wine. Such lavishness on the part of Vatopedi was known to be the most luxurious of the monasteries looked upon by the others with a considerable measure of jealousy and disapproval.

We divided into two rooms for the night and were surprised to find in each a large framed mirror, allowing for the vanities of the more corrupted pilgrims.

Next morning at six we attended Mass. The church was usual with candle flames and their myriad reflections. The intoning of prayers never took a dip as in Roman Catholic services, but went on in straight monotonous lines with hypnotic effect, as the monks shuffled about weaving their ancient choreography.

This morning’s liturgy ended with the monks flocking to an abbot standing in the center ladeling out some sort of massa into their cupped hands. When we emerged into the daylight, the monks collected about the phiale munching the sacred crumbs they offered rather shyly and gleefully to share with us. These were actually some sort of cake flakes eaten, they explained, to expiate the sins of the dead . . .

A very small monk whose hat reached my chest offered to show us the refectory which was in disuse since they all ate in their own quarters. It was an enormous hall in the shape of a cross. Gold chandeliers with tall yellow candles hung from the center of kaleidoscopic patterns painted on the ceiling. The walls between arched windows were entirely covered with frescoes depicting the saints and incidents from the Holy Scriptures. To the left, a gaily painted pulpit clung to the wall like the nacelle of a balloon, with a ladder propped against it sideways. On special occasions when the dining room was used, a monk stood up there to read the lesson while the others ate in silence. The stone floor was lined at every side with rows of U-shaped table-tops and benches carved out of local marble. The tables were depressed in the center for drainage and like the benches were supported by cement blocks plastered blue. The scent of baking bread wafted in on a breeze put us in mind of breakfast, so we retrieved our bags, waved goodbye to a scattering of monks we had never seen before, and walked with accelerating steps toward the promise of Neskeaf . . .

The sun was shining and the Aegean was that ultra-marine that makes the passing islands look like loaves of floating gold. It was almost eleven when the towers and cupples of Great Lavra rose before us out of the forest greenery. Mount Athos loomed directly above, its summit sheltering a passion fruit island.

Great Lavra was founded in the tenth century by St. Athanasius with assistance from Emperor Nikephoros Phocas. It was often referred to reverently as the Very Great Lavra. From a thousand the inmates had dwindled to eighty, which kept it still the most thriving of the monasteries.

We followed the old trail to the monastery up over stone and earth hedged in with lavender and thyme, and rows of pink oleander. We pantied under the blazing sun, but a half hour later when we reached the pagoda a breeze refreshed us as we chatted with several distinguished elders awaiting us.

Cool shade greeted us as we passed the iron-plated portals into the narrow passage leading to the courtyard of Great Lavra. A dear old monk sat, hands crossed, smiling patiently while we tasted the customary coffee and raki and signed our names in the register of timeless pilgrimages.

Mauve passion flowers were entwined through balcony railings, and blue cupules glittered in the morning glare as we were led down to inspect two giant cypresses in front of a chapel. The thickest of these was said to have been planted by St. Athanasius himself, and looked healthy enough to thrive on for hundreds of years more.

The Byzantine church, entered through panelled bronze doors, was the largest we had seen and the reflection of shafts of sunlight inundating the marble floor set halos aglow, bubbling profusely in mosaic domes and arches. Persian tiles encrusted the side uveloes, and the bronze koros was most elaborate. Besides the usual embellishments in crystal and gold it dripped large blue Christmas balls—made of glass, however.

The treasures and relics at Great Lavra were expertly displayed in an airy gallery filled with table vetrines. Four other monks had made the tour with us and each interestingly corroborated bits of information about items that intrigued us. Mosaics, icons, gem-studded daggers, crosses, jeweled bindings attracted our fleeting scrutiny. There was a room with trays of vestments from floor to ceiling, only an infinitesimal fraction of which could be shown at a time.

The library contained many manuscripts from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, an eighth century Gospel according to St. John, and most prized of all, a fourth century copy of the Epistles of St. Paul which the monks claimed to be the oldest book on Mount Athos.

The phiale made of porphyry was about six feet in diameter and topped with a highly ornamented dome. Across from this the refectory was shaped like Vatopedi's but was more sombre, having few windows, and a conspicuous altar at the far end with a cross silhouetted against panes of glass. The U-shaped table tops were hewn of rough stone and the reader's pulpit was more severe, square and roofed, like a tragic Punch and Judy kiosk. The walls were, as usual, crowded with Biblical events, but at eye level lined with a forbidding succession of tall saints with halos, each brandishing some proclamation or admonition. On side sections were badly flaking scenes of the Resurrection, and an elaborate panel depicting the Tree of Jesse, from the "Who Begat Whom?" directory at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.
We lunched on board at anchor under the canvas awning, but on departure lined our deck chairs portside for watching the afternoon's spectacle. Much the courtier, the sun littered endless diamond particles over the shifting waves. Rounding the cape high cliffs shot up perpendicularly from the depths and we now began excitedly to spot through the field glasses our first hermits' huts. They were usually perched on the most inaccessible cliffs, sometimes wedged in under a protruding ledge of rock. Some were nothing but a few boards held together no one knew how, or occasionally boxed in with clay. Here and there on a grassy rise would stand a little house with a vegetable patch in front. But mostly these dwellings resembled hornets' nests, with a window here and there the only suggestion of human life. This precipitous section was called Karoulis which means pulley in Greek. It was so named because the hermits who dwelt there lowered baskets to the water for mail, or occasional donations from passing fisherman.

They were a sect all their own, living as removed as possible from any trace or reminder of our world, rarely even coming in contact with each other. Unless they built their own hovel, they moved in after an occupant was found dead. On a shelf in good view celibates would preserve the skull of a former tenant or two, with departure dates inked in on bleached brows.

Through our lenses we could readily scrutinize these lost outposts, grateful meantime for the good weather, since we were sailing treacherous waters where among other disasters a Persian fleet had filtered the depths, the icon of the Miraculous Virgin had been given up with its ship, and the child Arcadius had been washed overboard by a furious wave. Only a steady breeze blowing down from the mountain gave any indication of the wild lashing and cyclonic thursts that howled in winter through these desolate canyons and crevasses.

Nowhere among these diggings could we detect a trace of life except for a shred of laundry flapping forlornly once in a while over the void. Below, not a boat, not a gull, only the line of us glued to binoculars, handing them round as new nuts faced into view. Ascetics who had renounced the world for a life of devotion and contemplation clung doggedly on hazardous steps to eternity. Theirs was a lonely approach, but in its way a selfish one. Yet, in its austerity, devoid of any trappings, one could not help but admire the courage it took to face death so relentlessly that when it came, it could only be envisaged as an insignificant segment of the journey.

An hour or so later, it was heartening to come upon the scene of Kapsokalyvia. This was an artists' colony, perched in rambling fashion on a slope and, like some alpine village, dominated by a church steeple. We could now discern groups watching us from the terrace of several houses, and two men were actually waving a Greek flag from side to side in greeting. The figure of a black-hatted friar, enthusiastically bounding down the path to meet us, came indeed as a surprise after the more austere receptions at the monasteries.

Chugging in over the most limpid aquamarine shallows, all the more clear for the mackerel pebbles below, the tender swelled in to the little landing strip just as the welcoming monk reached it himself, perceptibly breathless. He led us nimbly up twisting trail to the cluster of houses. He used a walking stick, wore a black leather belt, and his breath was rampant with garlic. He spoke in broken English, told us he had studied in Rome, was now a resident of Bengali, Libya, and was here only to visit a brother. His friend's house was one of the first we came to. It had two floors, neatly kept, and the resident monk instantly offered coffee. We thanked him in unison, declining because first we must visit the church. So higher and higher we plodded perspiringly, to level off at the upper bend beside a spring with a glass rewardingly poised on a ledge over the spouting water.

Several smiling friars awaited us on a balustraded terrace which dominated the bay, the white hypen of the Doudouma gleaming in solitoy splendor on an outspread page of blue. The first thing that fixed our attention, however, was a whitewashed shed with an arched opening at one end like an oven. Behind a grill inside surged a seething jumble of bleached bones. In the back, rows of skulls could be seen inscribed with dates. The friars swayed about, amused at our astonishment and expounded the fact that since no one can be born in Athens, people just die there, without tears and without monuments. When death occurred there was no mourning, bodies were interred in an enclosure with an annotation over each grave like a seed marker. After two years the bones were dug up and added to the ossuary. It all seemed very jolly all of a sudden, and everybody laughed, including the venerable friars.

The church of St. George was a reduced and less ornate version of those in monasteries, with much carved woodwork, and the usual backing of crushy stalls. It had been built six hundred years ago, after the mountain springs had been discovered. The friars charmed us with their hospitable ways, and offered us raki and coffee on their suspended terrace. Forty monks now lived and worked in Kapsokalyvia, in thirty-two houses, leaving ten currently vacant.

One of the local artisans produced icons and metal markers he had whittled out of pine. When we asked about the painters our greater led us down to what looked like the sort of villa you might find in a European countryside. It was three stories high and had a terrace with an iron balustrade overlooking flower and vegetable gardens. There was a profusion of nasturtiums, poinsettias, roses, geraniums, and lemon and orange trees bearing fruit.

We rang the bell and presently two black hats and grey beards poked out of windows overhead. Recognizing the Libyan they immediately bustled down to open the door. There seemed to be lots of rooms on each floor, all immaculately kept, with beds neatly tucked in. The furniture, they pointed out, had been made of regional woods.

Each house had its own chapel with an icon or two, and bronze crosses and candlesticks. Here they even had a library, with gold patterns stencilled on the glass lenses protecting the books.

Our two artist friars, having studies on either side the staircase. These contained incomplete paintings of St. George, the Holy Virgin and Child, or the crucifixion, all scrupulously copied from standard models in books or color reproductions. Their little palettes had microscopic smears of oil paint on them and they worked with practically miniature brushes. There was never any change in the religious sub-

After service. Great Lawn

EXPLIDITION WINTER, 1965
ject matter, its order or its treatment, one of them explained. Everything was painted according to inflexible instructions. Their only complaint was that usually after an icon was finished it was handed over to a silversmith who, with embossed metal, covered over all but the faces and hands of the subjects, thus concealing forever the major part of their devotional labors.

Our last day we arose at six and set off for cenobitic Gregoriou. We first passed Simopetra, its domino towers protruding remotely from the hills. In the morning sun, wooded valleys formed solid shadows down the mountainside.

To the right of a ravine descending to the sea, Gregoriou towered from a cliff in a small cove. Its living quarters and balconies on top were painted in faded tones of blue, and cypresses thrust skyward from both sides. Farm hands with mules double barreled with hay indicated a path which looped back up valley and was paved with stones graded in wide tiers so donkeys could ascend. Occasional mulberry trees lent their shade, and on a high terrace at the entrance, poppies, gardenias, and carnations bloomed between the cypresses.

We were no longer surprised to come upon an ossuary with vintage skulls beside which we were greeted by monks who had watched us disembark from their viewing stand. Into a court partly shaded by a grapevines they walked us up to the reception salon, nestling under a corner of the outer eaves. It was a low-ceiled room with a porcelain stove and the usual hard barquettes. Drawn curtains over the east windows suffused us in a rosy twilight. A door to the sea opened onto a rickety wooden balcony extending around the front, like a chalet poised atop a skyscraper. It made one dizzy to peer down vertically hundreds of feet to the pale pebbles below. This being a cenobitic establishment we were particularly interested in seeing the communal refectory. We easily discovered this long white hall filled with wooden tables and benches. Collected at one end, sure enough, hatted monks arched over their bean soup, no doubt dripping down their beards, and not always silently listening to the one in the pulpit droning the lesson. If there were thirty-seven monks at Gregoriou not more than half were present here. One who...
archways, gleaming white in the early sun. The church was painted red, its reflection turning white walls pink, and shaded areas appearing blue by contrast. A tall monk passed, his cassock sewn at the seat with a large grey patch. Black cats were everywhere on the prowl. There were thirty-eight friars here, one more than Gregory, but it seemed busier because of more concentrated quarters.

An abbot with a walrus moustache tucking down into his grey beard sat with us as we tasted our morning’s second round of savories. And with the zak he proposed a timely toast in Greek to the effect of “A thousand years to you!” We then went on to admire cloister walls with frescoes crammed with events from the Apocalypse in brown, black, and gold. The silent refectory was likewise decorated with scenes and haloed saints. But the library here, though small, was the best arranged. Manuscripts were locked in steel cabinets, while those in the vitrines had easily read labels with the centuries of the items printed as well in Western numerals. The librarian monk seemed to know more about his treasures than any of the others and readily gave out information as we exclaimed over minute and effulgent illuminations.

At the church we were joined by a jolly little monk who spoke English and offered to pose for us standing in one of the stalls with a veil over his head and holding a candle as though to read the lesson. He said his name was Father Ilarion Monachos and he invited us all to his cell. The abbot tried in every way to divert us from this, insisting it was of no possible interest. But the little monk tucked at our sleeves and we followed him along the usual corridors with the shut doors till we came to a musty cubicle with a narrow bed covered with a red blanket, reminding me instantly of Van Gogh’s room at Arles, in a sombre version. The only light came from a square aperture with storm windows that gave out on one of those precarious balconies projecting over the rocky shore. He told us the others referred to his lair as Queen Mary’s cabin because of its position, but more precisely because he had never gotten over a return journey from Georgia, U.S.A., taken on board the Conquerer of that time. They kidded him about the balcony being the promenade deck... On board the Dodecans, the late afternoon slipped lazily by with sun-glimmering monasteries looming in the distance and melting away behind. As evening approached we turned into the Bay of Dupnoi for our final night. Behind us the sun was a fireball edging precariously into the cool horizon, and the sky radiated that magical glow

had finished eating offered to lead us to the church and chapels and, beyond the sacred well, to the treasury and the library.

When we crowded into the dingy hall a few of the monks lingered on the terrace, waving intermittently, one remaining until we finally moved out of sight. At nine o’clock we reached Dionysius, which resembled a Tibetan monastery because of the vertiginous height of its sustaining walls and the overhang of its upper structures with their rows of balconies propped up with sticks.

It was an easy winding climb from the shore and we paused only once, under a Judas tree with red bean-pods. The entrance to Dionysius was in the back and we were welcomed here by the most friendly brothers we had yet come upon. The inner court was crammed with buildings, giving the impression of a little town, with streets abruptly turning corners and leading through...
a Greek twilight affords, and we seemed suspended between miraculous dimensions.

Sailing back to Piraeus next morning I sat on deck appraising our visit to this remote Byzantine outpost. Researchers devoted months studying the life of these orthodox monks, their customs and self-denials. Much had been published on the subject by men who had trudged the hard way over unmarked trails in all seasons, and patiently conversed with those who had fled our world. After as brief a visit as ours one was hardly equipped to make pronouncements, but one was certainly moved by strong impressions. Though Athonite religious principles and motivations might seem alien or abstruse, none could avoid the pervading sense of antiquity and timelessness.

It was well known that down the centuries the monasteries had been pillaged by pirates and invaders, as well as ravaged by fire. It was also established that pilgrim imposters had pilfered pages from manuscripts and stolen unique documents, which explained the cautious manner in which treasures were sometimes exhibited. Doubtless, revelations and prehistoric discoveries of even pagan significance may some day be brought to light on the peninsula, but in the meantime these remain inviolate, shielded by guileless verdure.

My head swam with visions of silver and brass and glinting jewels, with black figures weaving through night vigils. I also recalled the hermits abstracted so far from the rest of humanity they seemed poised between life and death, facing distances that would one day swell like a tide, bearing them beyond the earth's last ledge and stone.

Hours later as I gazed behind, Mount Athos was but a thread rising to a crescendo, fragile like an ash floating momentarily over a bonfire before blowing away.