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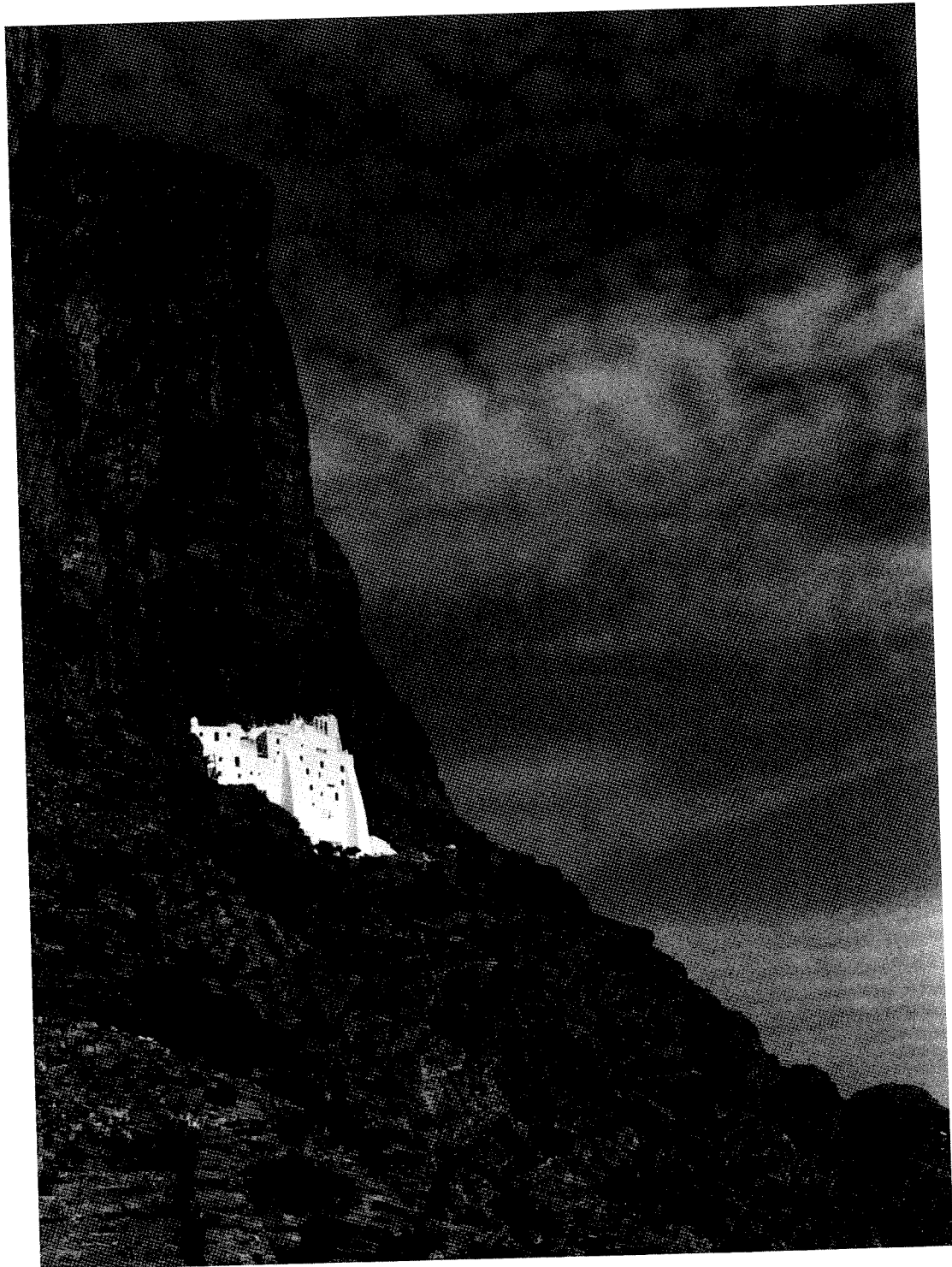
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The Greek Byzantine Church and its Setting Jonas Lehrman

Moni Panayia Khoziviótissa (1088), near Amorgós, Cyclades. The whitewashed walls of the monastery and the steep rock face of Oros Profitis Ilias offer a stark contrast. Many alterations and renovations to the building have occurred over time, and the buttresses are of recent date. Some floors are built out of stone, others are hewn from the rock.

Photos by Jonas Lehrman.



The relationship between a building and its site is a fundamental one. The link is intriguing, as it reflects relationship between humankind and the natural order. The presence of a building intensifies any landscape, but the symbiosis is a success only when the attributes of the site are fully recognized. The early inhabitants of the Greek landscape seem to have possessed a highly developed respect for the particular attributes of a site in their selection of locations of great beauty for their temples and, later, for their churches.

This is well illustrated by Byzantine churches, especially those built from the eleventh century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. For the most part, these churches reflect a continuity of structure and style, which enables a clear comparison between their typical form and shape with Greece's remarkably varied landscape — mountain barriers, shoreline, fertile valleys, barren hillsides, dense vegetation and dry plateaux.

Byzantine churches in Greece are always on a human scale and usually quite small. They can be found standing alone in open fields or valleys, perched on hillsides that overlook small communities, or on promontories that look out to sea. Churches in the countryside may be half concealed by a cluster of cypress; churches on the side streets of towns and villages may be partly hidden by adjacent buildings. Because of their modest size, quiet strength and restraint, these churches succeed in retaining a certain dignity that has more to do with the effect of size than with size itself. The result is that often, when a church is seen in the landscape, it seems to be in a space that is too large for it.

Byzantine churches are generally intended to be freestanding and their typical modeling — dome, drum, pitched roofs and curved apse — encourages views from various directions. This is additionally fortunate; because of the nature of the topography in Greece, one is just as likely to

see a Byzantine church from a higher or lower angle as on the level.

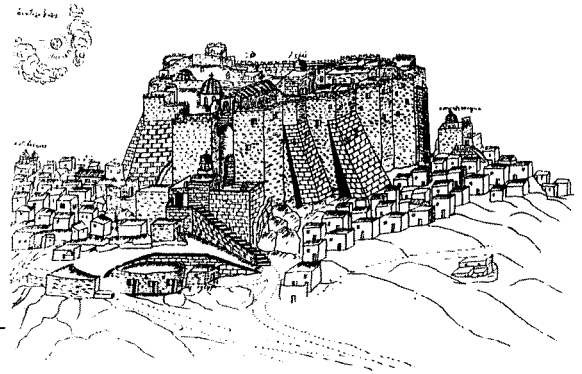
Many of the settings into which Greek Byzantine churches have been placed were believed to possess a mystical appeal. This may have been due to a pagan shrine or temple that once stood on the site, or to the beauty, grandeur or inherent natural drama of the landscape.

There are many distinct landscapes in Greece, each with its own character, and they often follow in close succession. Clearly defined landscape elements, such as hillsides, particular vegetation or a lake, easily become part of one's environmental image, especially when the elements are exceptionally striking, and the landscape of Greece has many such instances. They may relate to one's deepest feelings and yield a sense of association, of belonging.

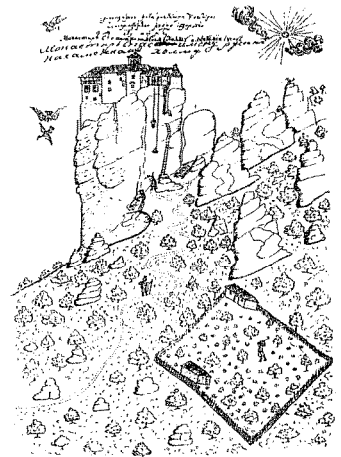
It is such an awareness of the character or nature of a particular site that in early times resulted in the attribution to it of mystical or sacred qualities. Where these particular characteristics resulted in a believed presence of divinity, a temple and, later, a church was often located. Sometimes a particular quality or element of a site, such as the presence of a spring, grove or cave, would be sufficient attraction.

Security. The Byzantine period was on occasion a time of great danger, of piracy, pillage and attack that could come from many directions. Numerous churches were located for protection on top of hills or mountains, within a *kastro*, or fortification. A view of the sea was important to give advance warning of the approach of pirates, but often it was just as necessary for a community itself and its church not to be seen from the sea.

Water. In Greece, water has always held a special significance and its quality is highly



Moní Ay. Ioánnou tou Theólogou (1088). Patmos, Dodecanese. This fortified monastery has a view of the sea from all directions. Immediately surrounding the walls are closely grouped sixteenth- and seventeenth-century houses that encircle the island's summit.



Moní Rousánou (c. twelfth-sixteenth century). Metéora, Trikkala. Compare with photograph, page eight.

Sketches by B. Barskij (1745).



Episkopí (c. twelfth century). Stavri, Laconia. The approach to this church in the Mani, seemingly perched in the hollow of a hill, presents a view of the restored cupola, apse and north side of the transept. Beyond is the Bay of Mésapos and the peninsula of Tigáni.

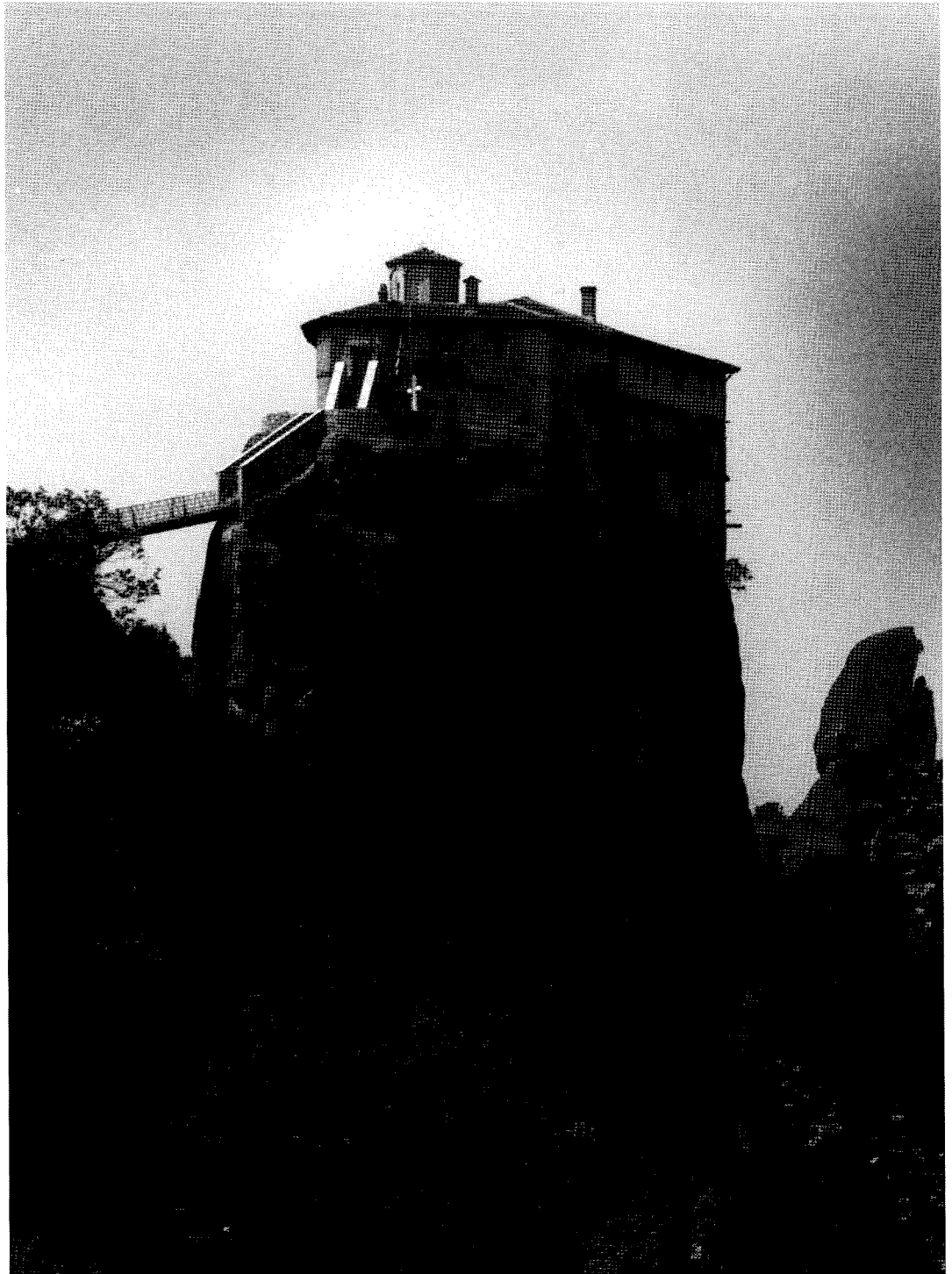
prized. The existence of a fresh water spring frequently determined not only the founding of a village or town but also the location of a temple and, later, a church in the vicinity. Some Byzantine churches are also located next to large bodies of water, possibly because a seacoast or lakeshore location could be interpreted as a symbolic reflection of intercession between God and man, or because of the regard for water as a symbol of life itself.

Hills and mountains. It may be assumed that the New Testament verse, “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18), with its implied certainty and dependability, was a major determinant in the location of many Byzantine



Ay. Sophia (c. thirteenth century). Monemvasia, Laconia. Situated at the edge of a steep cliff at the end of a precipitous rocky promontory, this church overlooks a wide sweep of water. It is also adjacent to the summit ruins of a Byzantine town with an extensive history of attack and occupation.

Moní Rousánou (c. twelfth-sixteenth century). Metéora, Trikkala. The dramatic setting of this small monastery, on the pinnacle of an almost rock-hard combination of sand, pebbles and gravel, is more memorable than its architecture. Before the bridge was built in 1868, visitors and goods were hauled up in baskets. The remarkable location of this monastery is typical of others in the immediate area.





churches on mountainsides. A further possible reason for a high location may well have been a sense of being closer to heaven at the *axis mundi*, where heaven and earth meet, or a symbolic recognition of the Assumption.

Whereas a functional or religious cause can often be found for a church's particular location, in most cases there nonetheless exists a profoundly harmonious relationship between the church and its setting. It is suggested here that this harmonious relationship is due to the modest scale of the church building, the comprehensible scale of the landscape and to the respect felt by the Byzantine Greeks for the particular attributes of a site.

Moni Ay. Yeóryios (c. fifteenth century). Rhodes (old city), Rhodes, Dodecanese. This small, partially restored monastery, located on the west side of the medieval town, is surrounded by dwellings and narrow streets with St. George Bastion and the fortification wall behind. It is very near a main pedestrian thoroughfare in the old city.