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Drawing on Mount Athos: The Thousand-Year Lesson

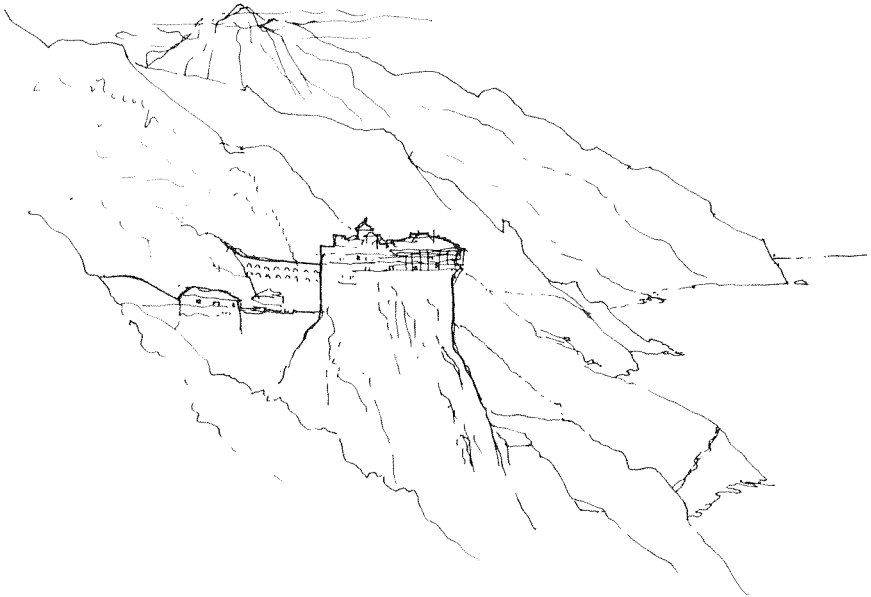
Patrick J. Quinn
Drawings by the author

Preface

The monastic settlement of Mount Athos is a curious anomaly, being neither truly Western nor truly Eastern in its spirituality. It is isolated, ascetic, contemplative, and includes both coenobitic (communal) and idiorrhythmic (individual, hermitlike) life-styles.

Its architectural complexes evoke images of both Tibetan (Lhasa) and European medieval settlements. Yet its details range from Byzantine to Moldo-Wallachian to Moorish to neoclassical. While it sits on a peninsula in northern Greece its origins and attitudes are the antithesis of classical Greek thought. Faith takes precedence over rationality as the keystone of its life structure. Its mystics seem much closer to Buddhists than to Benedictines. Its communal prayer is closer to the Copts of ancient Egypt than to the Gregorians of the West. In fact, its way of life is more faithful to the ideas of Pachomius, the fourth-century founder of Western monasticism in the deserts of Egypt, than to later ideals.

Abbot Suger who, in building the church of Saint-Denis covered the altar with gold and precious stones, would probably have loved the interiors of Athonite churches. Bernard, who took Suger so much to task for his materialism, might have been delighted with the dwellings and other buildings of Athos, in their bare-boned, ascetic strength. One of the purposes of this paper is to reveal the rich architectural potential of the Athos plan.



Historical Note

Contemplative monks had already begun to frequent Mount Athos by the seventh century A.D. Athos became a refuge from the hostility of both Byzantine emperors and the people of Constantinople toward monasticism in general. The Holy Mountain was not referred to as a monastic “center” until the ninth century when monks from Mount Athos took part in the Council of 843 convened by the Empress. Two key personalities emerged about this time: one devoted to the eremitical (individual, ascetic) life, Peter the Athonite, and the other, Euthymios, of Salonica who favored a semi-eremitical life that included some communal structure.

The breakup of village communities and the Arab conquest also acted as factors in inducing holy men to seek the slopes of Mount Athos. Pirate raids and repetitive pillage forced them steadily toward the least accessible areas at the peninsula’s southern end, where by the ninth century many hermits were grouped into loosely organized communities, Lavras, modeled after those of Palestine. Their elders formed an assembly, the Synaxis, on the heights of Zygos.

The coenobitic, or communal life was introduced by Athanasios, who established what I call the Athos **plan** in the design of the first major monastery, Grand Lavra in 963 A.D. Despite resistance from those who favored the eremitical life, the “rules and disciplines” of Athanasios were embodied in the first **typikon** or Charter in 971;

these continue to govern life on Mount Athos today.

In 1453 Mount Athos fell under Turkish rule. Imposition of taxes and tariffs threatened the economic survival of the monastic communities. Part of their response was to adopt the idiorrhythmic way of life. In this mode individuals live virtually as hermits yet are affiliated with a monastery whose liturgical functions they attend as infrequently as three times a year. Although in the twentieth century almost all of the Athonite monks live under coenobitic rule in communally owned structures, two monasteries remain idiorrhythmic.

Despite its origins as a refuge for hermits and ascetics, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Mount Athos became the intellectual center of Greece. The Athonite Academy was founded to prepare the rebirth of Hellenism. The Greek War of Independence in 1821 marked a rapid decline of such Athos-based scholarship, when many of the monks took up arms against the Turks. In the late nineteenth century, however, the population of the Holy Mountain reached a peak of some 7,000 monks, with members from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, etc., and great material support from royal patronage in those countries, a patronage which, for obvious reasons, has almost disappeared in the twentieth century. Mount Athos once again is an isolated retreat from the world; its population is just over 1,500.

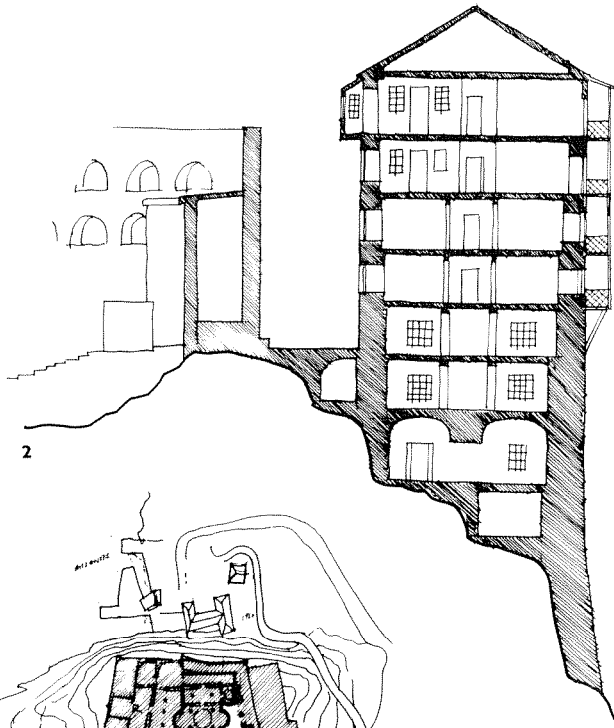
Introduction

Few American architects have ventured to visit this extraordinary repository of architecture. Paul Mylonas of Athens is the only European architect in the field who has studied it with any degree of seriousness. Perhaps the cause is difficulty of access, the monastic diet, or the lack of modern conveniences. Architects like to eat and sleep well when they travel and hate to be far from a telephone or post office. Yet, in a time of studious concern with historic precedent, despite the fact that an historian such as Joseph Connors considers it “more relevant for architects than ever,” Athos is neglected.

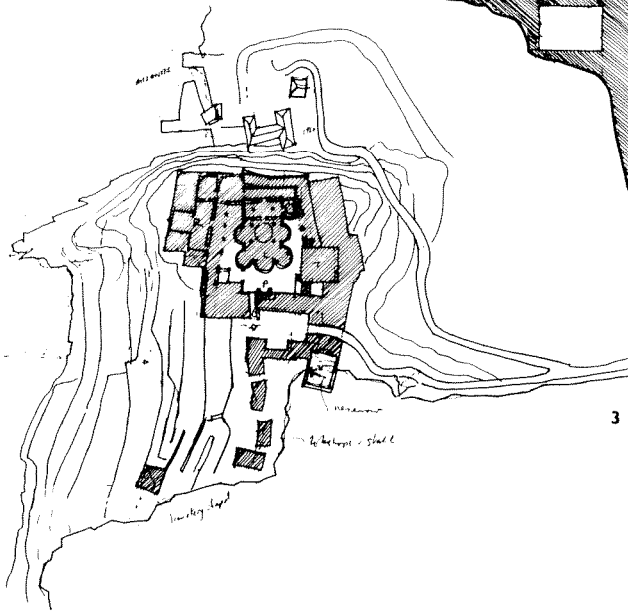
Athos is the easternmost of the three promontories of the Chalkidiki, a Greek peninsula some 60 kilometers long that stretches into the Aegean Sea from a low, gentle landscape at the isthmus to a 2,000-meter-high peak of white marble rising sheer from the rocks at the stormy tip.

The peninsula is reached by boat, and from its tiny harbors narrow trails lead up through forests, meadows, along cliffs, and streambeds to the monasteries. Time is measured by sunrise and sunset. The monks fish, raise bees, grow vegetables, olives, vines, and harvest chestnut forests. They also make icons and other devotional objects. The Holy Mountain is dedicated to the Virgin.

There are 20 monasteries today, most coenobitic, a few idiorrhythmic, and many small sketae, kellia, and



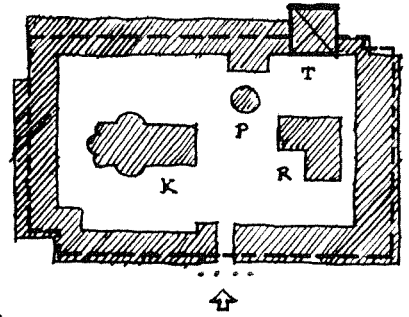
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- 2 **Simonopetra**, section through nineteenth-century building.
- 3 **Dionysion**, site plan.
- 4 **Philotheou**, from the south.
- 5 **The Plan**.

- 6 **Iveron**, from the southeast.
- 7 **Philotheou**, site plan.
- 8 **The Katholikon**, sketch plan (Dionysiou).
- 9 **The Tramezza** (Refectory), Xenophontos.

even inhabited caves. After two study trips to the Holy Mountain I am convinced that it offers enlightening examples of:

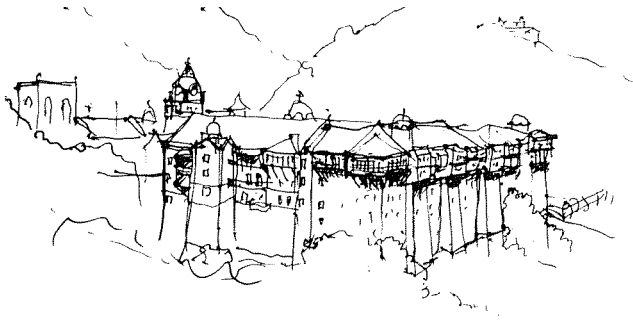
the adaptability of a formal model, the **plan** to a variety of site-types, settings and scales; the integration of architecture and the land; and the integration of formal and informal orders of architecture.

The Plan

In 963, despite protests from those who favored the traditional ascetic, eremitical life, Athanasios founded the first formal monastery as a communal model, Grand Lavra. The **plan** was clear and has been used as an architectural model ever since.

A rectangular area was enclosed by a protective stone wall, with a single, formal entrance and a defensive tower, usually at the highest point. Within the enclosure were placed the three major communal buildings in a clear relationship to one another: the Katholikon, or main church, the Tramezza, or refectory, and the Phiale, or holy well.

The monks' cells were arrayed along the inner face of the wall, often in random groupings. In many cases, as the monastery grew, the cells rose above, poked through, and even clung to the outer face of the wall. The contrast between these and the formal character of the communal structures often results in what Charles Moore calls the Doctrine of the Immaculate



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Collision, a most lively and aesthetically exciting complexity.

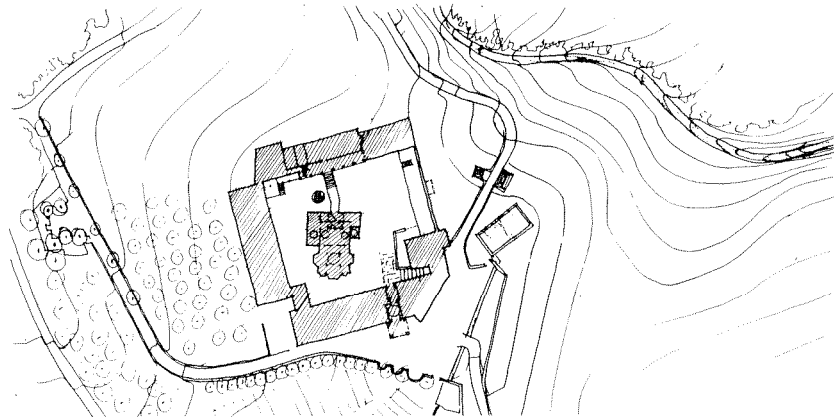
Other areas such as the library, workshops, small chapels, etc., are found in various places within the “thickened” wall. The laundry, bakery, infirmary, wine presses, icon painting studios, and storage vary in placement inside and outside the walled complex.

These monasteries, pillaged and often burned by pirates, crusaders, Saracens, and others, have been built and rebuilt, transformed in size and shape, and adapted to changing occupancy and changing technology over the past 1,000 years; yet the **plan** remains, sometimes clearly evident, sometimes hidden in complexity as the architectural genesis of Athonite monasteries today.

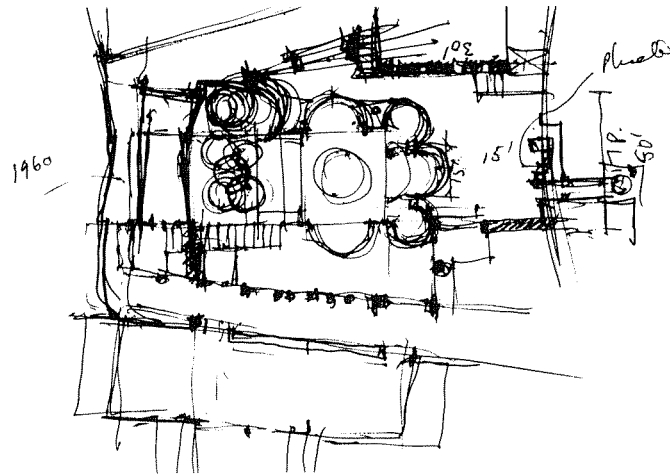
The formal **Katholikon** has a triple-apsed plan, one apse for the Holy Table (usually with two subapses for the treasury and the Diakonium), and two lateral ones for singers and dignitaries. There is usually, in addition to the Naos, a sequence of spaces making a narthex and an exo-narthex, thus, ritualizing in the architecture both the structure of the liturgy and the degrees of entrance and inwardness.

The symmetrical multidomed structure is reminiscent of Armenian churches, and it is no surprise to find that Athanasios came from ancient Trebizond.

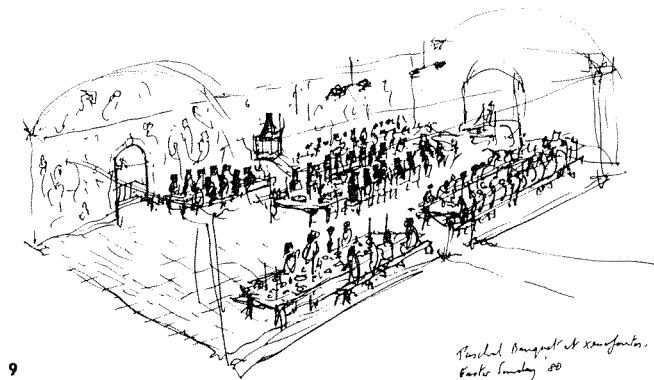
The **Refectory** is generally a rectangular space with an apse at



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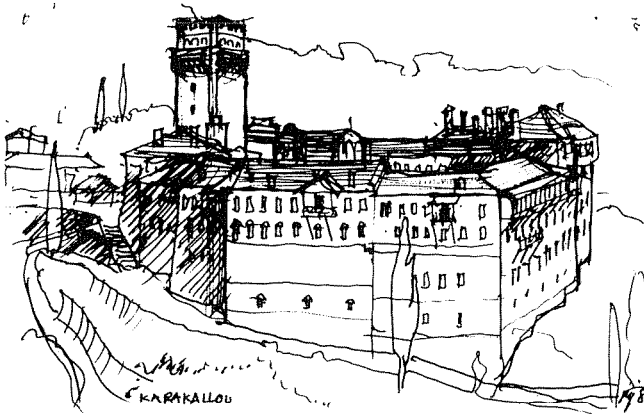


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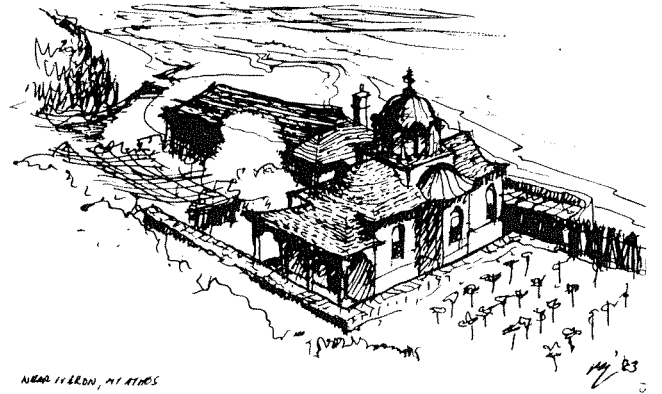


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Placed amongst 400 monks.
Early Monday '00



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one end in front of which sits the abbot on a raised dais. Monks sit at two long rows of tables lining the walls; a raised lectern on one side provides for readings during meals. The space may be L-shaped, as at Koutlemoutsiou, or T-shaped as at Dionysiou. Sometimes a shortage of enclosed court space forces the Refectory to be built into the wall or up close to it, as at Chilandari or at Docheiariou.

Both the Katholikon and the Refectory are customarily decorated with rich frescoes covering interior walls and domes.

The **Phiale**, the third of the communal ritual structures, serves for the monthly Blessing of the Waters and on the feast of the Baptism of Christ. It may be circular or polygonal, ringed by eight columns within low parapet slabs and covered by a hemispherical dome, with a richly frescoed interior.

Architectural character is quite varied within this scheme, ranging from the thirteenth-century Byzantine Katholikon at Chilandari to that at Docheiariou, which is Moldo-Wallachian. Neoclassical

forms appear at the entrance to Iverson and in at least one of the chapel façades at the Russian monastery of Panteleimon. Vernacular elements surround and interweave with these, creating a very rich complexity.

Some windows and doors, for example, at Ispighmenou and Docheiareiou remind one of postmodern details from the current pages of *Progressive Architecture*.

The same might be said of the bedroom stoves at Vatopedia and the stove in the Governor's office at Karyes.

Adaptability of the Plan

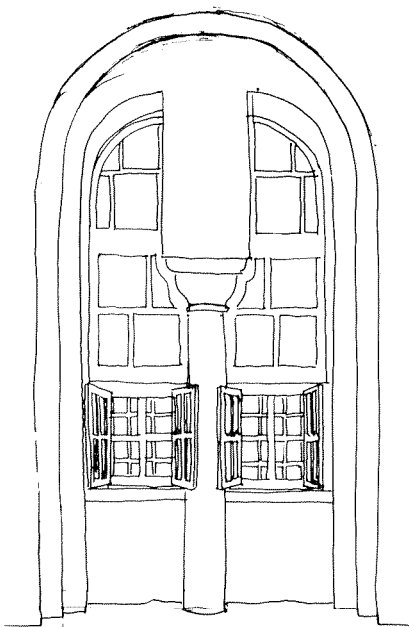
The monastic enclosure varies in size from about one-half an acre at Dionysiou to over three acres at Vatopedia. Adaptation of the **plan** varies ingeniously, from site to site, with topography, orientation, and size. Chilandari, for example, rests expansively in a sheltered valley. Simonopetra clings tightly to a rocky, often stormy, pinnacle.

The **plan's** shape shifts from the pure rectangle, as at Lavra,

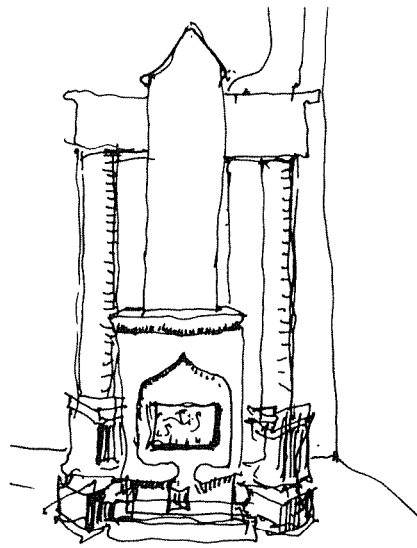
10 **Phiale**, Iveron.

11 **Karakallou**, from the southeast.

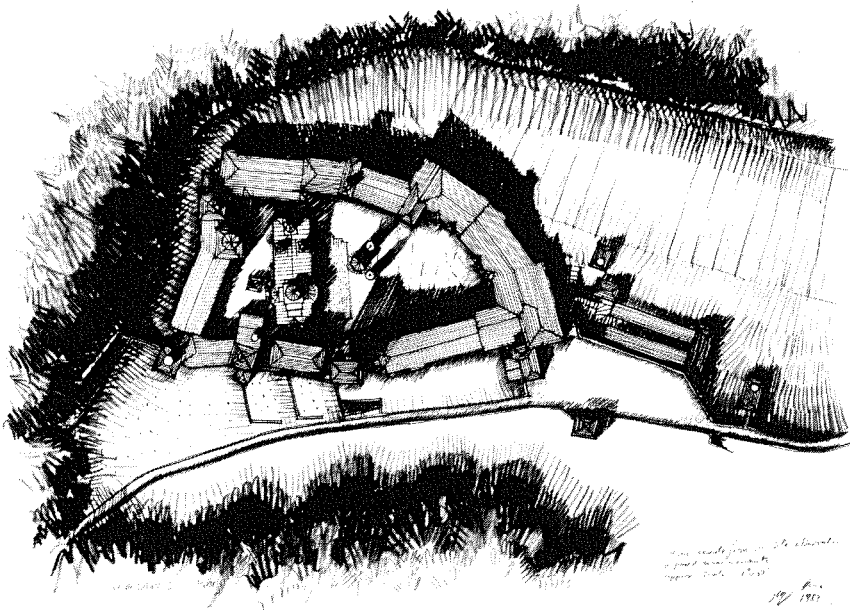
12 **Kellion**, near Iveron.



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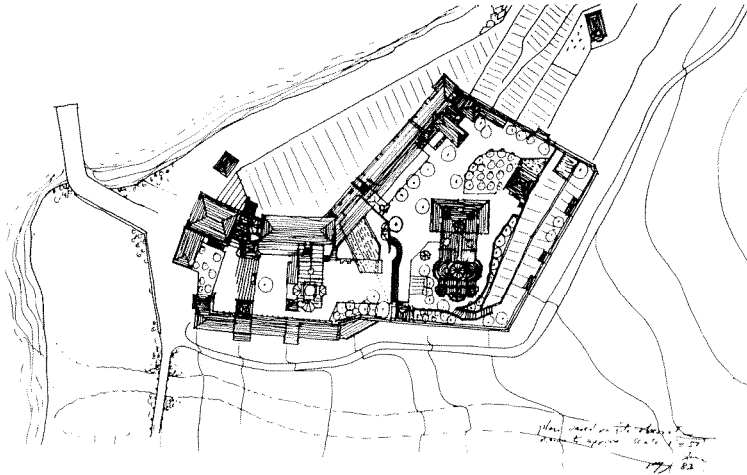


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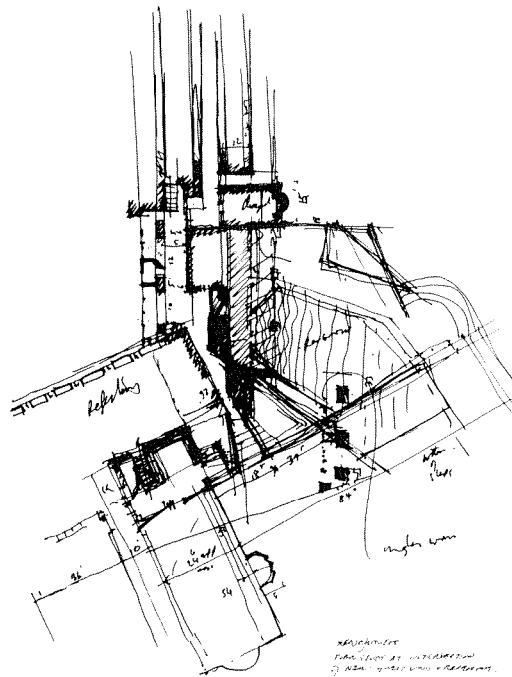
13 Katholikon window, Dockeiriou.

14 The Governor's stove, Karyes.

15 Chilandari, site plan.



16



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16 Xenophontos, site plan.

17 Detail of the plan, Xenophontos.

Koutlemoutsiou or Philotheiou, to bent, cramped or distorted versions at Iveron, Docheiariou, and Xenophontos. At Xenophontos a large nineteenth-century addition extends and embraces the old, creating a new whole where we find the **plan** within the **plan**. The meeting of these walls is so complex as to defy understanding without close study.

The monastery of Dionysiou is so cramped on its rocky site that it reduces the courtyard to a mere passage on three sides of the Katholikon. The most extreme example of adaptability is found at Simonopetra, which I will describe in more detail later.

Integration of Architecture and Land

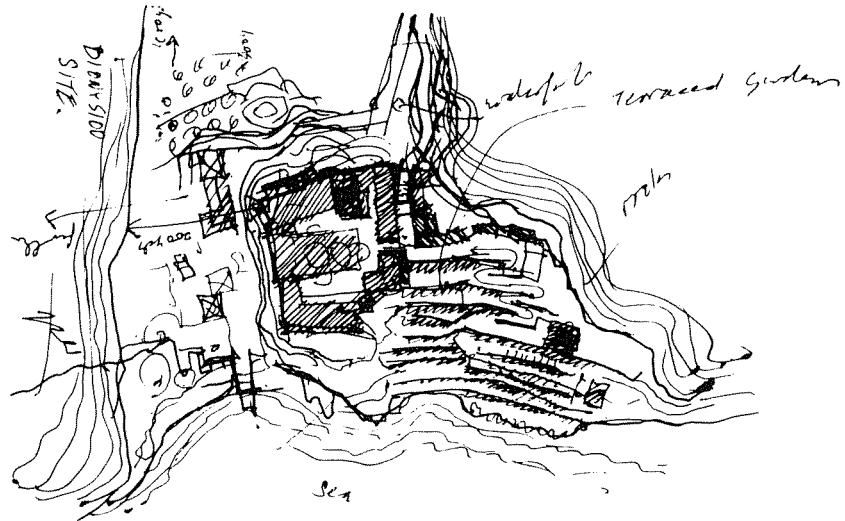
No less important than the adaptation of the **plan** to various site types is the careful manner in which each building complex is related to topography, land-planning, and cultivation. It is hard to tell, in some cases, whether the building was shaped to the land or the landscape tailored to the architectural form. Each site utilizes a precious stream for water supply, water power, and irrigation. Reservoirs are placed within the walls and near the gardens. Aqueducts are sometimes needed to conduct the flow. Orientation to the sun and shelter from the wind help to determine the best location for vines, vegetables, etc., and for their closeness to the buildings. These are important factors in the layout of each complex.

The flatter, more fertile land of the North allows for less confined buildings and gardens yet, even there, clear economy is evident in the planning. The larger fields, groves, tree rows, and waterways are no less carefully organized. Tree rows soften wind effects. Slopes both expose and protect planting as nature demands. Water is distributed without waste. Trails are laid out to minimize erosion.

The rocky southern garden slopes are carefully terraced with stone walls, often up to 30 feet high. Every enclosed meter is closely planted with life-supporting supplies. These make beautiful, mosaic-like patterns on the land. Olive groves, needing less precise ordering, serve as soft buffers between the small-scale gardens and the wilderness.

The retaining walls sometimes appear as a continuation of the monastery architecture as at Simonopetra or Dionysiou. The building acts in counterpoint to the landscape, thus making a fine integration, both ecological and visual, therefore aesthetic, of architecture and site.

At Dionysiou, even the elements protruding from the upper building walls seem to be of the same order as the stepped garden walls of the slope below. At Xenophontos, when the monastery was expanded in the last century, the extension embraced some of the terraces which now appear within the enclosure, giving ease of access to produce and utilizing the new court area to the maximum.



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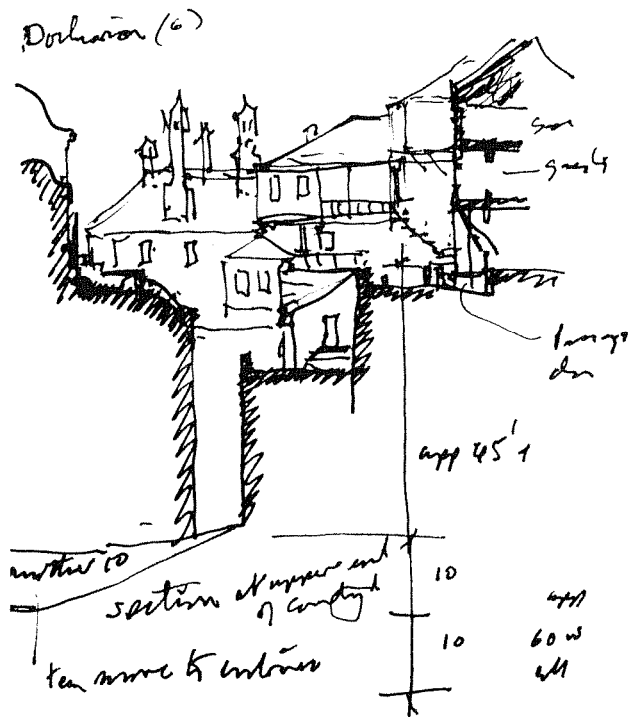


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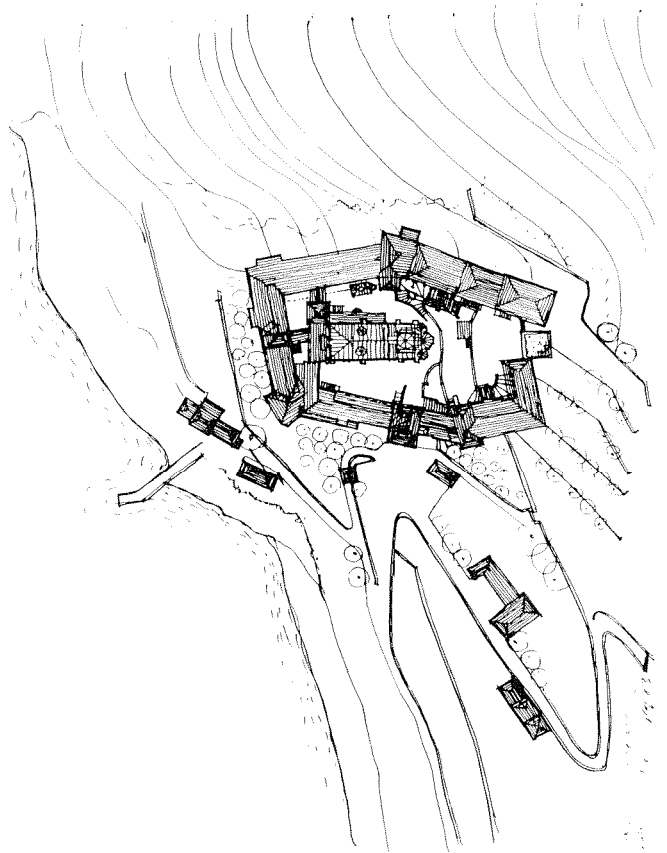
18 Dionysiou, site plan.

19 Dionysiou, from the south.

20 Dionysiou, view of the entrance from within.



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Docheiariou's tightly packed structure on a steep slope reduces the courtyard almost to a narrow, stepped street.

Integration of Formal and Informal Architecture

This phenomenon of Athos can be illustrated by two general examples; *first*, the cells, their distribution, design, and relationship to the wall and other nonritual spaces; *second*, the entrance and its ritualistic sequence of spatial experience in penetrating the complex.

The monks' cells illustrate the possibility of personalization of one's own space/world within the larger world of an impersonal, communal life-style. Its many Athonite variations show the range and degrees of asceticism reflected

in the architecture. Each monk's cell is his own world and the diversity of these is difficult to anticipate. Some are merely boxes protruding from the face of the wall or crowning it like crenelations. Others are anonymous units in three-story ranges. Some occur within the form of the wall, identified only by windows. Some are sparsely furnished. At the opposite extreme a monk in the idiorhythmic monastery of Vatopedia has an apartment complete with a stereo set and comfortable furnishings. His habit hangs, infrequently used, on a hook in the corner. His dress while "at home" is casual, worldly.

As a result of all this, the cells and their balconies, shared and singular, vary the wall, inside and out like the interweavings of a rich tapestry.

21 Docheiariou, section.

22 Docheiariou, site plan.



DOCHEIARIOU, COURTYARD

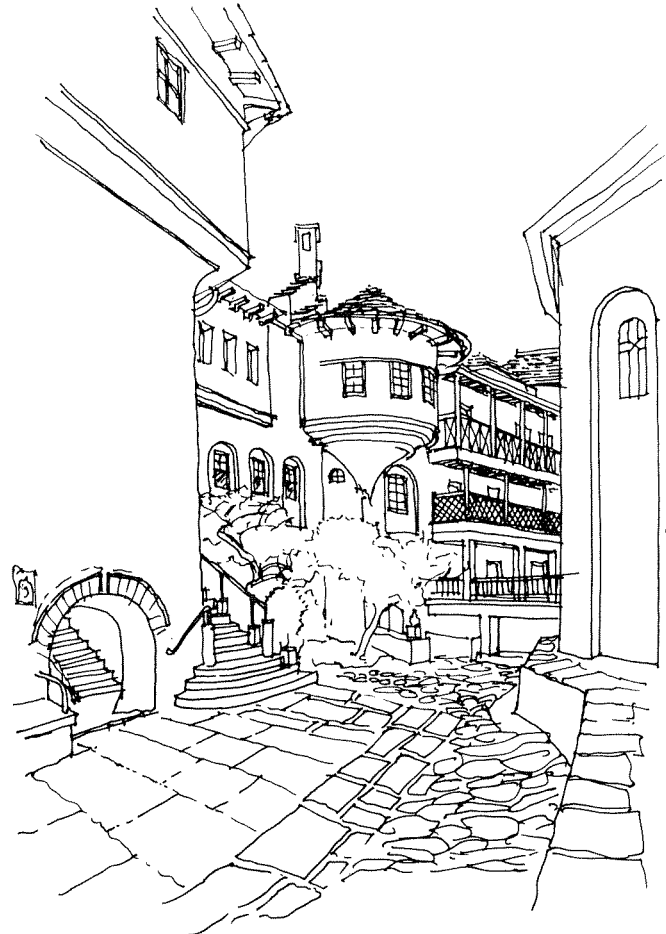
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The many shifts in detail, form, and scale are seen in the unity of this larger tapestry despite their almost anarchistic diversity.

The small chapels, the guest rooms, stores, etc., serve only to further enrich this diversity within the overall, formal order.

Two entrance sequences can serve as our second set of examples.

At Isphigmenou the trail emerges from the mountainside, crosses a bridge, and passes under two sentinel trees into a forecourt, which welcomes the coastal trail and is flanked by the reservoir. The formal opening in the wall is arched, symmetrical, and flanked by two strong, blue columns. The color scheme of the entrance, terracotta red, cerulean blue, and white



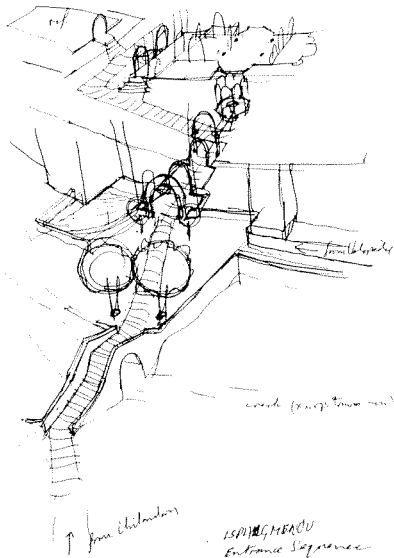
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is common among the monasteries and serves to emphasize the opening in the grey mass of the structure.

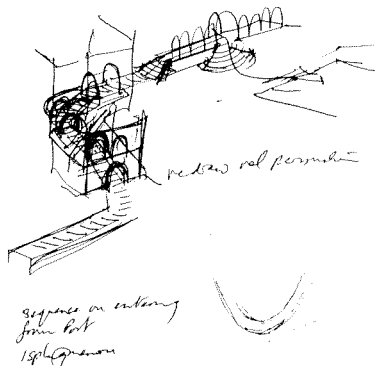
The great, iron-studded oak doors, which open at sunrise and close at sunset, give way to a series of four vaulted and frescoed spaces within the thickness of the wall. A second pair of doors on the inner face opens into the court where the imposing Phiale confronts the pilgrim. Its richness of detail and strength of form increases the anticipation of the Holy Place, presaged by the frescoes of the passage. The dramatic light changes from the glare of the forecourt to the darkness of the passage to the brilliance of the Phiale's light marble set against the dark red of the Katholikon wall is clearly intended.

23 Docheiariou, courtyard.

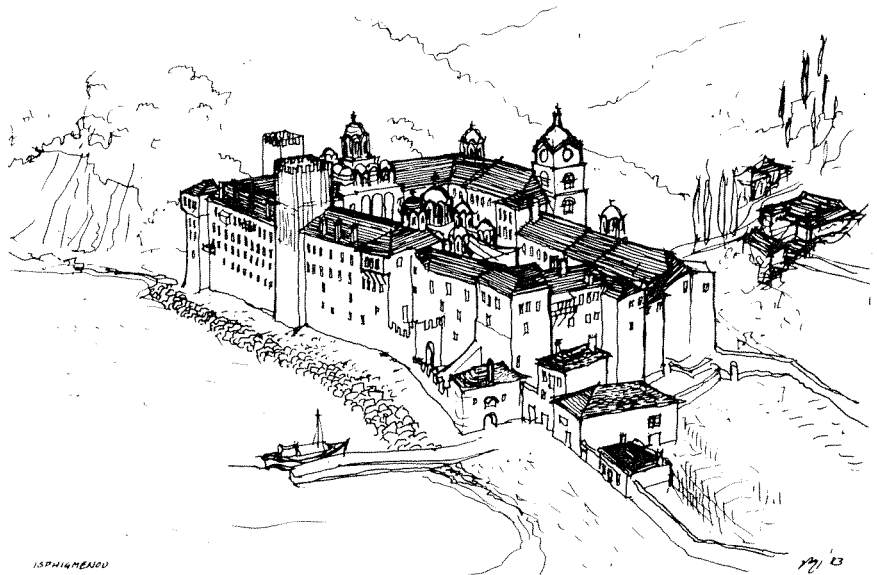
24 Karakallou, courtyard.



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The Phiale serves also to turn one's route gently and firmly towards the colonnaded entrance of the Katholikon and the space between it and the Refectory. The sequence becomes utterly formal as one proceeds from the esonarthex to the ikonostasis where the great dome and the image of the Pantokrator on its inner surface terminate this journey into the Holy.

The monastery has a second entrance from the sea (now used more frequently) that penetrates the complex in the same winding, articulated, increasingly formal order.

Chilandari has a shorter but even more dramatic sequence. Here the vaults of the passage through the wall are interrupted by a great light well in the middle. Thus, one goes from light-vast to dark-small, to light-high, to dark-small, finally turning at right angles to the breathtaking beauty of the court. The Katholikon is away on the far side, yet seems close and intimate, fronted by its most elegant Phiale, which in turn is flanked by two regal, ancient cypresses.

These entrance sequences, bending and adapting to the site's peculiarities, provide both informal and formal order in easy coexistence. They are like spatial rosaries whose beads vary in beauty, shape, and importance yet whose stringing gives order and clarity to their disparity.

Simonopetra: The Ultimate Example

More than any other monastery Simonopetra illustrates the ideas outlined in the preceding sections. So well does it succeed in subsuming both the plan and its modes of variation that they are virtually unrecognizable as separate considerations. Perhaps that is why the first sight of its singular form moves one so deeply.

I have therefore made a more precise set of drawings of Simonopetra's plans and sections, for it is worth careful study and its complexity defies easy analysis. The drawings show how wonderfully clever the builders were in encircling the pinnacle, distributing space according to both hierarchy of function and symbolic importance.

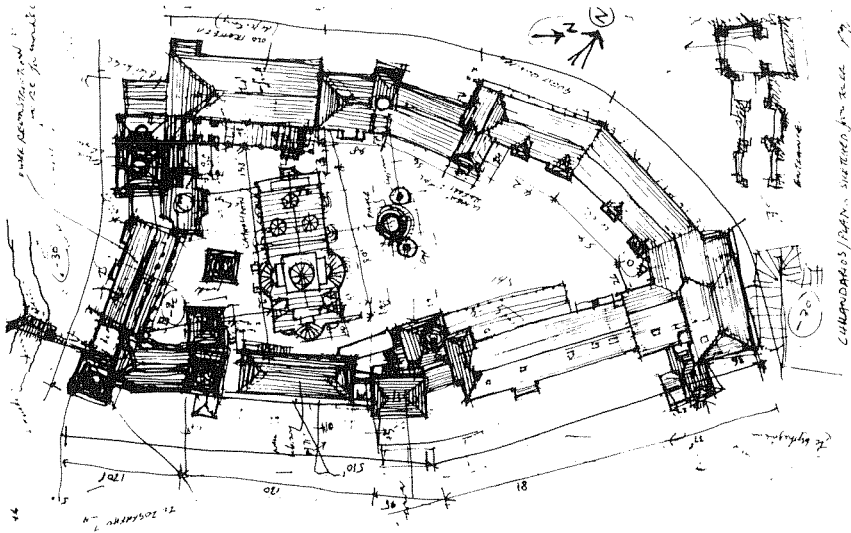
25 **Ispigmenou**, entrance sequence from the west.

26 **Ispigmenou**, entrance sequence from the east.

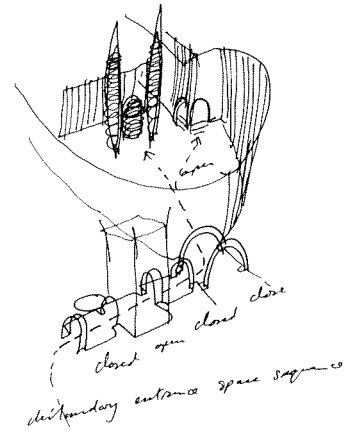
27 **Ispigmenou**, from the northeast.



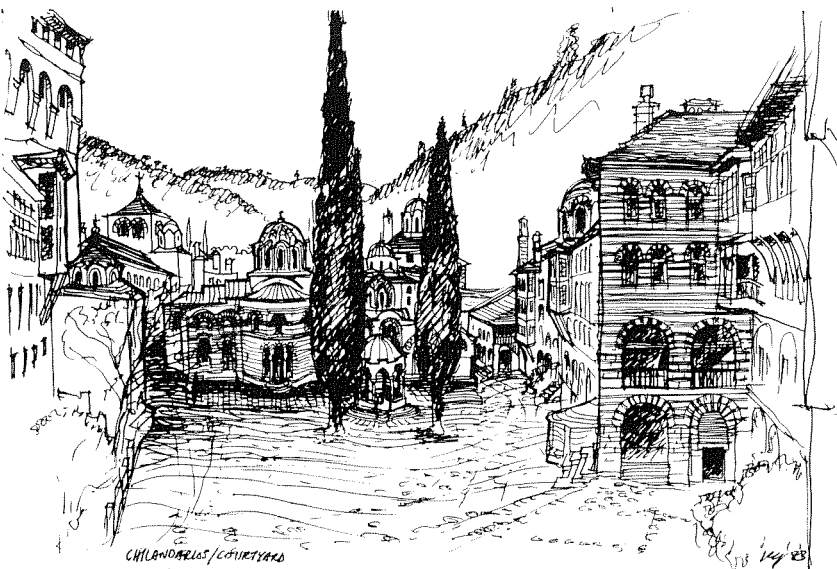
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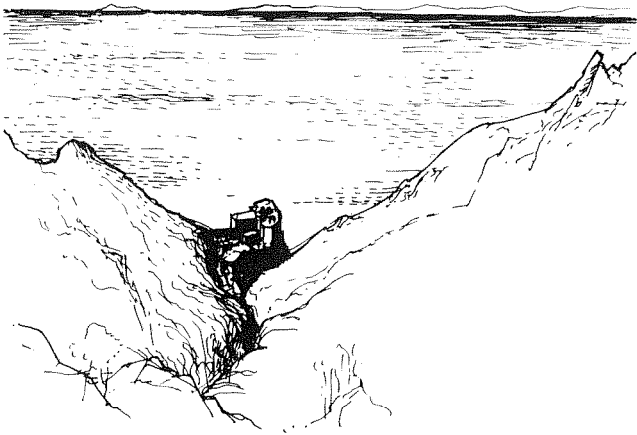
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28 Chilandari, from the east.

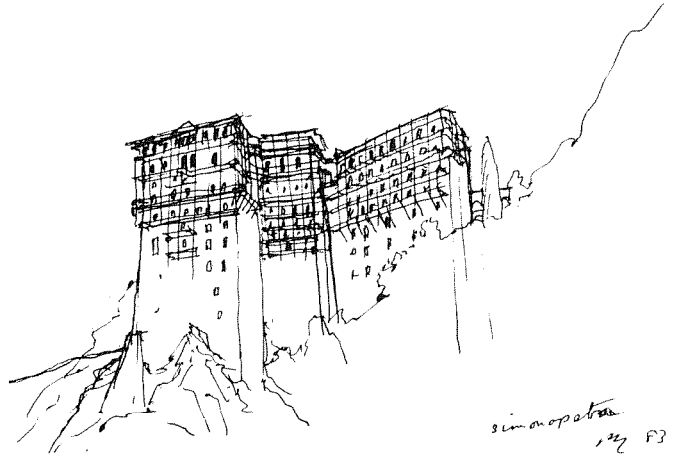
29 Chilandari, plan.

30 Chilandari, entrance sequence.

31 Chilandari, courtyard.

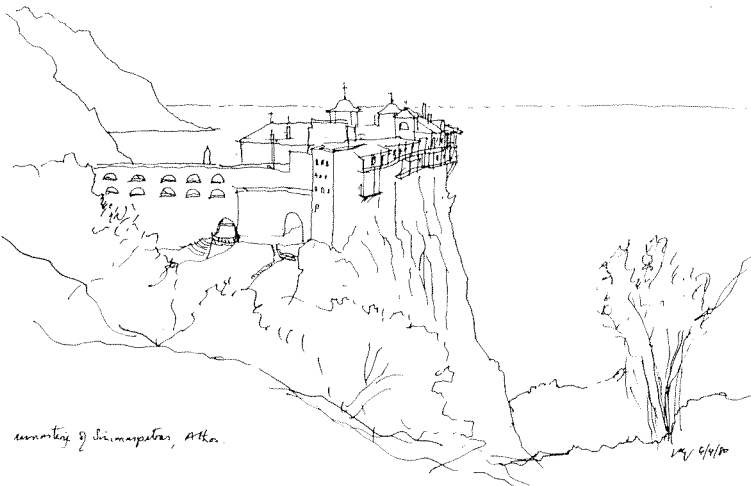


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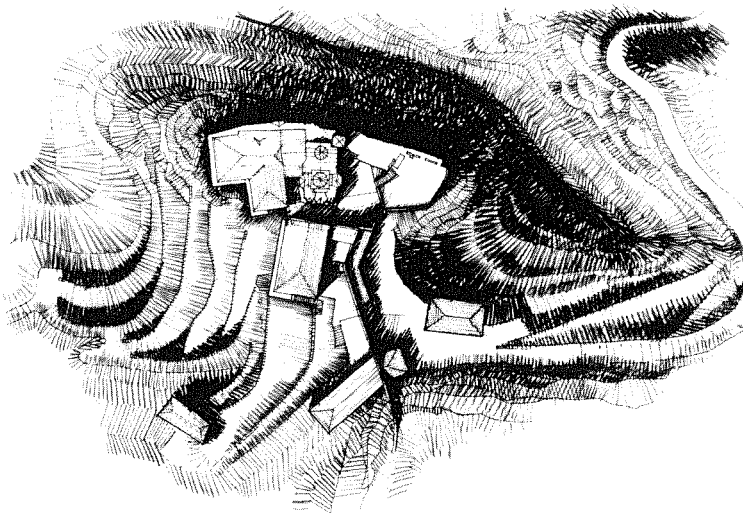
The building seems to grow out of the rock. It becomes the Rock. It becomes Simon Peter ("Thou art Petrus and upon this Rock I will build my church . . ."). It transcends even its own elegant efficiency and becomes built poetics. It thus becomes architecture.



remains of the monastery, Athos.

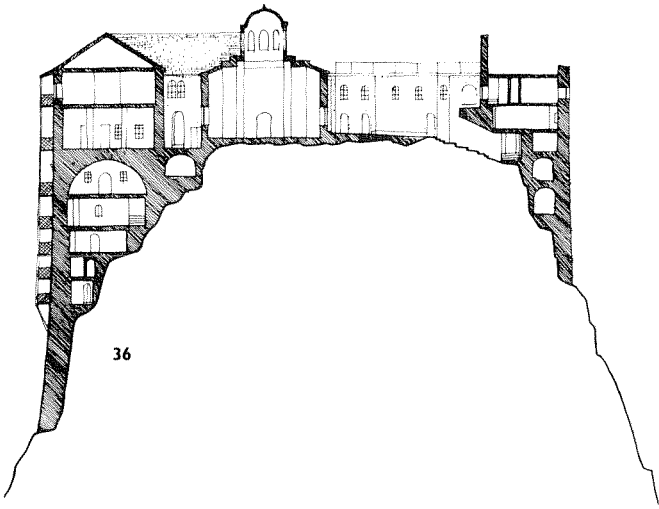
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It has no tower because it is a tower. The aqueduct is no mere conduit. It is integrated with building and land. The stepped terraces are an extension of the building, an outcropping of the rock. The outbuildings articulate both the trail and the terraces, sometimes even bridging the path which winds on the seaward side along the successive steps of the gardens.

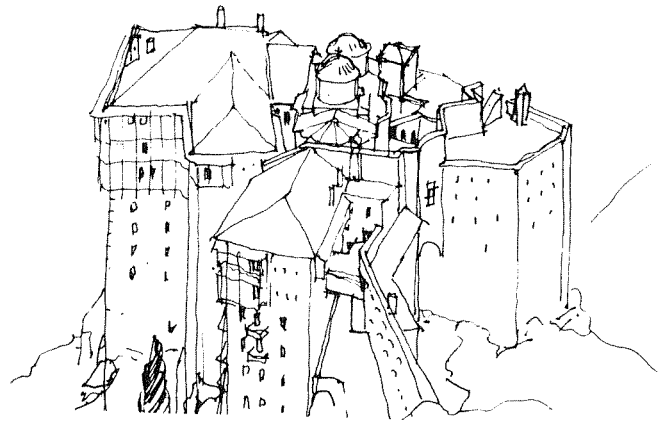


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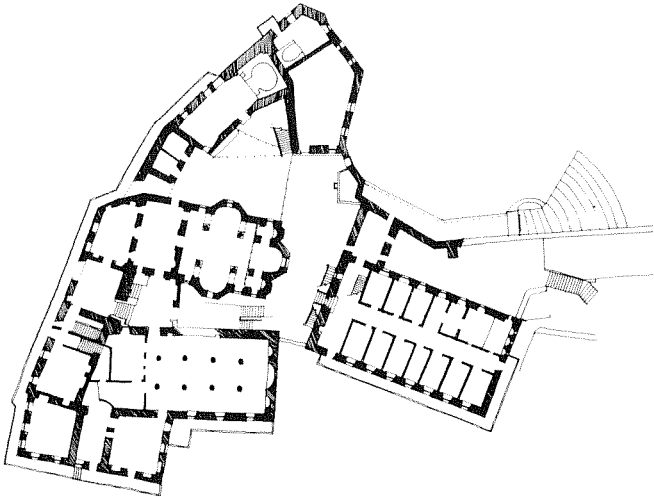
The ritual entrance, whose steps flow like the baroque stairs of Noto, is a tunnel winding mysteriously through dark complexities of formal and informal space, up and up until it slowly climbs into the bright light of the tiny court. Flanking the cool wall of the built-in Katholikon, the path again penetrates the wall onto the flimsy necklace of balconies, and stops the pilgrim with the shock of the enormous vista of sea and



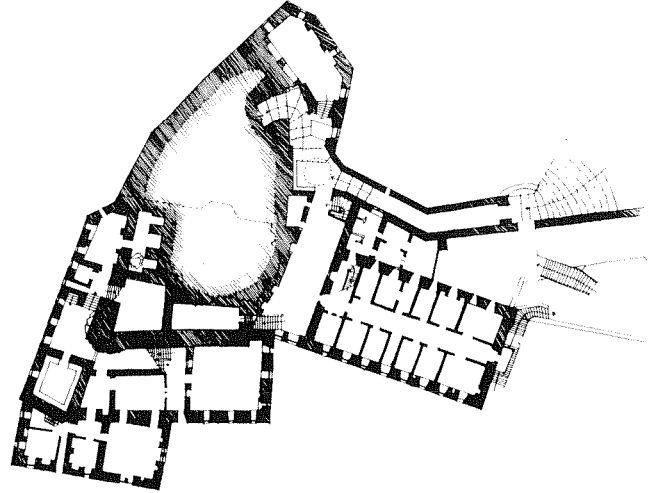
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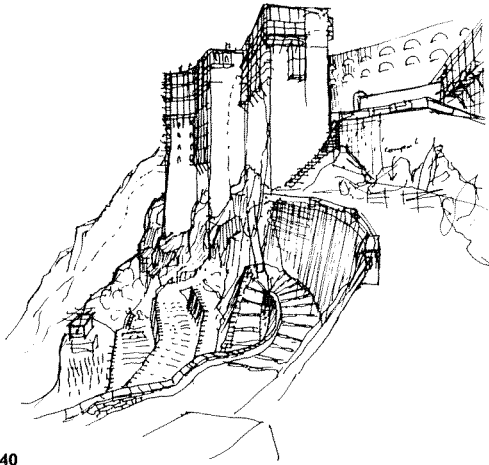
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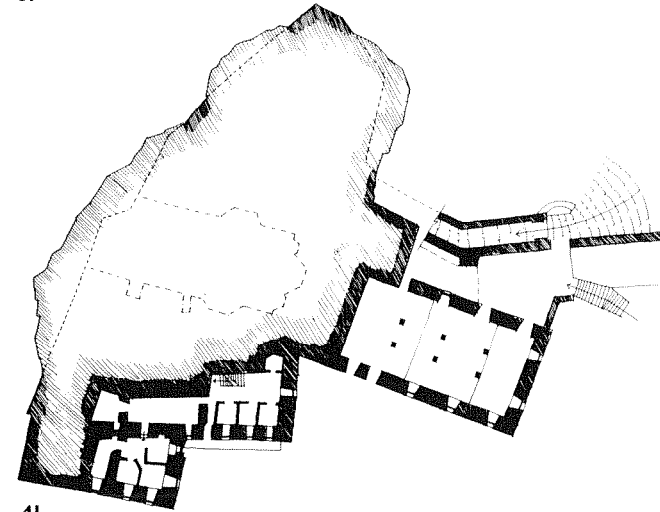
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32 Simonopetra, from the north.

33 Simonopetra, from the south.

34 Simonopetra, from the northwest.

35 Simonopetra, site plan.

36 Simonopetra, N-S section through Katholikon.

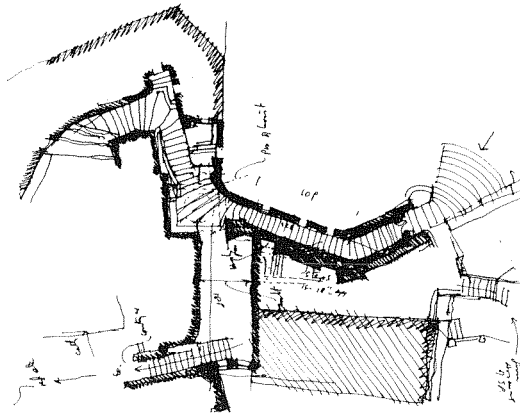
37 Simonopetra, from the east.

38 Simonopetra, plan at courtyard level.

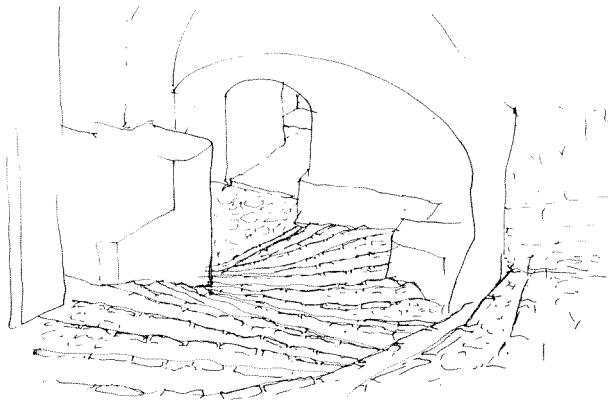
39 Simonopetra, plan at level of entrance.

40 Simonopetra, from the southeast.

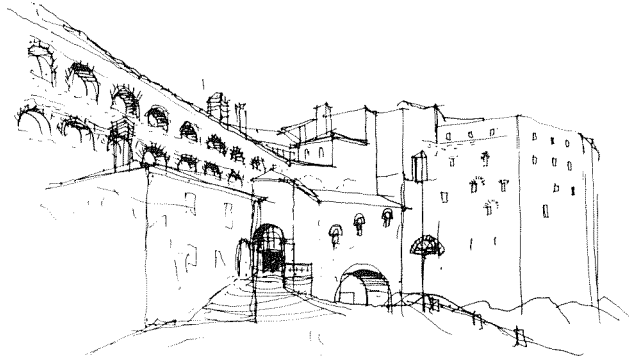
41 Simonopetra, plan at second lowest level.



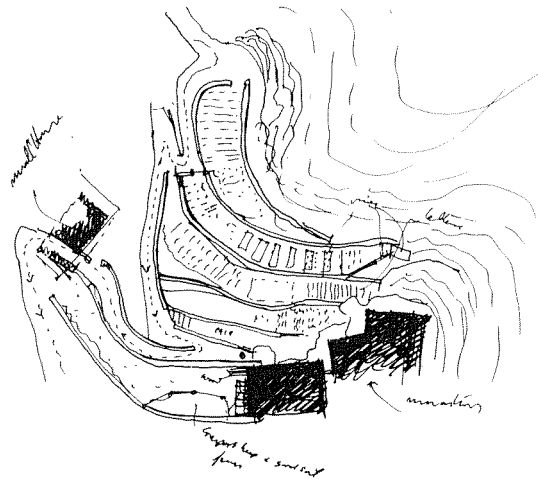
42



43



44



45

- 42 Simonopetra, the tunnel.
- 43 Simonopetra, tunnel exit.
- 44 Simonopetra, entrance.
- 45 Simonopetra, garden plan.
- 46 Simonopetra, former reception area halfway up tunnel.
- 47 Simonopetra, interior atrium.
- 48 Vatopedi, the harbor.



46

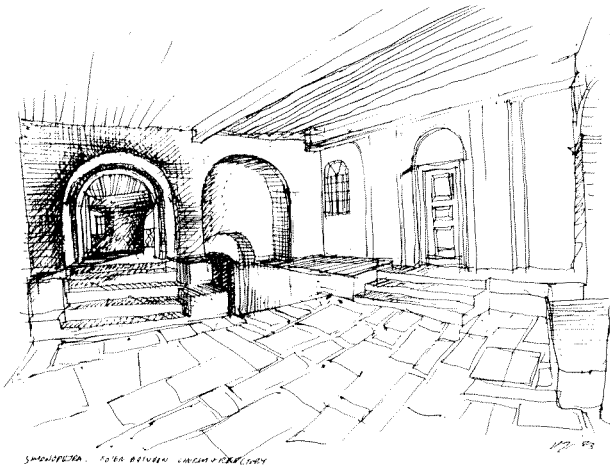
mountain and the dizzying drop to the water below. Again one penetrates the wall into the tiny vaulted atrium between the Katholikon and the Refectory.

As they descend, seemingly through the rock, the inner corridors of the complex form a whole inner world of mystery and delight. They seem never to end and give a sense of infinite dimension to this tiny enclosure. Only in the nineteenth-century wing which flanks the aqueduct does the order become clearly rectilinear. Fire has several times destroyed Simonopetra, consuming its manuscripts, its treasures, and, sometimes, the monks who tried to lower themselves down the cliff-like face. In the rebuilding, the form of the plan and of the building remains as a timeless bulwark against change.

Yet it accepts change and modernization.

Modernization of Mount Athos

The critics of Athanasios, when he gave order to the inhabitants of the Holy Mountain, were no less vocal than the monks who today criticize new changes.



Simonopetra. Courtyard between Katholikon and Refectory

47

The new abbot of Simonopetra, Remilianos, provides the new vision and the example. Coming from Meteora a decade ago, he found Simonopetra a neglected, decaying complex occupied by a few elderly monks, who had invited him to come and rescue the monastery from decline by new leadership.

Today the monastery is filled with young, healthy, and vigorous monks whose vitality and holiness is impressive. The old watercourse now drives a hydroelectric plant. Silent, modern switches and electric fixtures have replaced gas lamps and candles (except in the Katholikon's corona). Fire extinguishers are everywhere. The once-decayed gardens are bright and full with a variety of nutritious plants. The diet, while still ascetic, is excellent and the abbot's policy recognizes the greater needs of those assigned to heavy physical work.

A similar resurgence is evident in other monasteries such as Karakallou, Chilandari, and Philotheou, where three young American novices live and where remodeling, reconstruction, and repainting goes steadily ahead.



The Monks' Quarter, Simonopetra

48

The monks' life is no less rigorous than before; yet novices appear from as far away as Alaska and Australia. Participation in the communal prayer gives one a sense that the whole spirit of Mount Athos has been reborn, auguring perhaps another 1,000 years of unbroken continuity.

Athos survives, not only as a physical example of superb design, but as a living community dedicated to the most spiritual of life-styles.

Athanasius' great plan continues to act as a framework within which change is not only possible but real, without diminishing the holy commitment of its community.