

## THE "HOLY MOUNTAIN"

*By William Miller*

**M**OUNT ATHOS, the easternmost of the three prongs of the peninsula of Chalkidiké, has been for centuries the "Holy Mountain" of the Orthodox Church. Pious, or at least penitent, Byzantine, Trapezuntine, Serbian and Russian Emperors and dignitaries founded twenty monasteries there in the dark centuries; more than one monarch sought refuge there from the intrigues of courts, and, to make the solitude safer, it has always been a rule that no female — except the inevitable female flea, which invades most Eastern monasteries — should set foot upon Mount Athos. One woman alone is known to have visited the "Holy Mountain" — the wife of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, the "Great Elchi," at the time when that famous British diplomatist was omnipotent at Constantinople. When the Turks conquered the Balkan peninsula they allowed the monks of Mount Athos, which Xerxes had tried to sever by a canal from the mainland, to enjoy practical autonomy under the nominal sway of a *Kaimakam*, or Governor. The monasteries were represented in a federal council, which met at Karges, the monastic capital, and managed the common affairs of their community. Such was Mount Athos when scholarly travellers like Robert Curzon, Bowen, Tozer, Riley, Lampros and Hasluck visited it to study its institutions or catalogue its libraries.

The Balkan and European wars, by eliminating Turkey from Macedonia, surrounded Mount Athos with Greek territory. But the treaty of Bucharest in 1913 passed over its juridical position in prudent silence. An annex to the treaty of Sèvres of 1920 constituted the twenty monasteries of Mount Athos into a theocratic republic under the suzerainty of Greece, which undertook to respect the rights of all those ancient foundations, including the Serbian monastery of Chilindar, founded at the end of the twelfth century by the authors of the Nemanja dynasty, and the Bulgarian and Russian establishments. During the European conflict the monks of these monasteries, which were in convenient strategic positions, had been suspected of turning their refectories into arsenals for the benefit of this or that belligerent, and a new form of research work was undertaken there by emissaries of the Allies. Greek monks are naturally

politicians; the writer, who has visited many Greek monasteries, has always found the Abbot more interested in the latest political crisis in Athens or the imaginary schemes of the Great Powers in the Levant than in questions of theology or the history of his own religious house.

Accordingly, the task assumed by the Greek Government seven years ago was not easy; for all Greek monks do not hold the same views upon Greek internal politics, while the Greek and Bulgarian "fathers" could scarcely be expected to agree about external policy, and the Serbian inmates of Chilindar naturally looked to Belgrade rather than Athens for inspiration in the things of this world, which will creep into the most secluded cells. Nevertheless, the task has been satisfactorily performed; a holy calm has reigned over the "Holy Mountain." Greece wisely showed conciliation towards Jugoslavia, when it was asked that the monastery of Chilindar's *metóchia*, or farm-lands, situated in Chalkidiké outside the boundaries of Mount Athos, should not be liable to expropriation for the benefit of the refugees from Asia Minor. Russia, which had striven to assert claims over the Russian monks at San Stefano in 1878, in London in 1913 and in a memorandum to the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs in May, 1914, ceased to take interest in them when the Bolsheviks came into power. The proposals of the Tsar's Minister that the Russian monks should keep their nationality, hoist the Russian flag over their buildings, and enjoy the protection of Russia through a Russian official, have been quietly dropped. The spectacle of the Bolsheviks protecting the Orthodox religion would, indeed, have furnished a modern Juvenal with a parallel to the classical example of "the Gracchi complaining of sedition." Warned by the lessons of the Crimean War, the Greek Government could not have accepted propositions which would have given the Tsars an excuse for interference in the affairs of Mount Athos, just as they used to claim the right to intervene on behalf of the Orthodox Christians of Turkey. The Christian states of the Near East have learned by bitter experience the dangers of even well-intentioned intervention by the Great Powers.

The unsettled conditions of Greek politics postponed for six years the elaboration of a charter for Mount Athos, just as they have adjourned the definite allocation of the ecclesiastical sees in "New" Greece to either the Œcumenical Patriarch or the Archbishop of Athens. But on September 10, 1926, a decree on

the legal position of the “Holy Mountain” was issued, and followed last June by two further decrees regulating the relations between the Greek and the Monastic Republics. While, politically, Mount Athos was declared to form a part of the Hellenic State, its administrative autonomy was recognized, and, spiritually, it was made a direct appendage, *stavropégion* (as the ecclesiastical lawyers say), of the Œcumenical Patriarchate. Thus, on the “Holy Mountain” the Œcumenical Patriarch has obtained jurisdiction — which he had lost since the creation of independent Bulgarian, Serbian, Rumanian and Albanian Orthodox Churches — over Orthodox monks of non-Greek birth. But this new charter expressly lays down the principle that all monks who seek refuge from the world on Mount Athos *ipso facto* become Greek nationals, and that on the “Holy Mountain,” as in heaven, there are no race distinctions: all are, at least juridically, one family.

It has, indeed, been further suggested by some — although the suggestion has not found much support in Greece — that Mount Athos might advantageously become the seat of the Œcumenical Patriarch instead of the Phanar at Constantinople. The destruction of the Greek dioceses in Asia Minor as the result of the exchange of populations, the reduction of the Greek element in Constantinople itself, and the very restricted area, even if the sees of Western Thrace and Macedonia be definitely retained by the Patriarchate, of its jurisdiction in Europe, have greatly diminished the importance of the Patriarch, who, even in Greek lands, is now only “Œcumenical” in name — *magni nominis umbra*. Moreover, the summary expulsion of the Patriarch Constantine VI by the Turks four years ago, and their idea of forming a new Orthodox Church for Turkey alone under Papa Ephthym, made a considerable impression upon the Greeks. They saw clearly that the Patriarchate was at the mercy of the Turks, as Mohammed II had always intended it should be and had therefore allowed it to remain in Constantinople. History, prestige and faint hopes of the future alone militate in favor of the Phanar as the Patriarch’s residence. The statesmen who in 1833 created the autocephalous church of Greece saw the danger of a Patriarchate situated in an enemy’s country.

The new administrative system contains some interesting features. The Greek *Harmostes*, as he is styled by the classical title, bestowed in modern times on the British Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands and Governor of Cyprus, is a lay

official, subordinate to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, not to the Minister of the Interior like the other prefects, whom he resembles in rank and salary. He has under him a force of gendarmes, in case the holy fathers — *tantaene animis caelestribus irae* — come to fisticuffs, as has happened in Jerusalem and other "Holy Places." But he can make no change in the number or relations of the twenty monasteries, into which no schismatic may creep. Their property is declared inalienable, and all property on Mount Athos is exempted from taxation, including the earnings of artisans, but excluding the profits of those traders who supply the ascetic monks with their very few necessities of existence. This is a very liberal measure, when it is remembered that the trend of opinion in Greece is against the preservation of monasteries and in favor of devoting monastic property to a fund for increasing the meagre stipends of the parish priests. For, with the exception of Mount Athos and a few show monasteries of great historic interest, such as Megaspelaion, Meteora, Hagia Lavoia and Néa Moné in Chios, public opinion regards such institutions as an anachronism and an excuse for idleness rather than opportunities for pious contemplation or learned research. Under the new dispensation the monasteries retain their *Synaxis*, or Federal Assembly with its executive government of four, each of whom keeps one-quarter of the corporate seal. The entire charter must have the ratification of both the Patriarch and the Greek Parliament. Thus the monks of Mount Athos, like the inhabitants of Monaco, enjoy that rarest of all privileges of modern communities — exemption from taxation.

The above-mentioned arrangements should last as long as the political situation in Macedonia remains unchanged. Greek Macedonia, since the exchange of populations, is inhabited by an overwhelmingly Greek population — 88.8 percent of the whole, including the Jews of Saloniki. As long as Greece retains Saloniki and Dedeagatch, with the coast-line between them, the charter of Mount Athos should stand the test of practical application. In these days a theocratic republic is a rarity, which possesses unique interest for the student of constitutions. We may compare it with the treatment of the Vatican by Italy in the Law of Guarantees in 1871, which the late Luigi Luzzatti considered to be a masterpiece of Italian statesmanship. History may similarly point to the new charter of Mount Athos as a wise act of the young Greek Republic.