



International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

Volume 7

Issue 4 *Special Issue : Volume 2 of Papers Presented at 10th International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference 2018, Santiago de Compostela*

Article 12

2019

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Recommended Citation

Mylonopoulos, Dimitrios; Moira, Polyxeni; and Parthenis, Spyridon (2019) "Pilgrimages Through Time and Space. The case of Marian Pilgrimages in Greece," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 12.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/fwt6-6v41>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol7/iss4/12>

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Pilgrimages Through Time and Space. The case of Marian Pilgrimages in Greece

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Since ancient times and throughout history, religious sentiment has been one of the motives for people undertaking pilgrimages, seeking to communicate with the divine in sacred places. Travelling for religious reasons fulfilled a spiritual need and their undertaking was considered to be a redeeming action.

It is indeed difficult to identify any other human activity so widespread in space and so resilient in time as undertaking a pilgrimage to shrines. Since antiquity there has been a firm belief that praying or fulfilling one's religious tasks is more efficient when it takes place in specific sites: in places where gods or saints were born, spent a part of their lives, died or performed miracles, in areas with statues, cathedrals, churches, relics of saints and miracle icons or in sites where the most important events of the history of each religion took place.

Many of the Christian pilgrimages are associated with the Holy Mother of God (Theotokos). In Greece, shrines monasteries and churches have been established in areas related with the miracles performed by the Virgin Mary (Panagia or the All Holy One in Greek). Apart from the basic Marian feast days, the life of the church and folk piety have added many more, which are associated with the Virgin Mary, the Miracle-Worker, or the foundation of churches dedicated to the Mother of God, or the finding of miracle-working icons portraying the Virgin Mary. Almost everywhere in Greece one can find a miraculous icon representing the Mother of God, each one with its own history and legends, which creates a mystical experience. Moreover, many of these pilgrimages are significant cultural monuments and attract tourists' interest.

This paper describes some of the main Marian pilgrimages in Greece as well as their management agencies and techniques in order to enhance travellers' experience.

Key Words : pilgrimage, Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Greece, Mount Athos, Tinos island, Sumela Monastery

Religious sentiment and pilgrimage

Since ancient times and throughout history, religious sentiment has been one of the motives that encouraged people to undertake pilgrimages seeking to communicate with the divine in sacred places. Almost all great religions encouraged their congregants to visit a shrine so that they can be relieved from all hardships, spiritual or not. Visiting a sacred place in the sense of catharsis, forgiveness of sins, fulfilment of an oath, cure or fulfilment of a request was called pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage, a substantial way of people communicating with the divine, has always been and continues to be a voyage into the unknown. The initial act of pilgrimage

consists of the people putting their fate into the hands of the divinity. Through this expression of faith, the pilgrims seek the divine, beyond everyday life. Motivated by the prevailing spiritual element, the love for the divine and the distancing from material needs, the pilgrims seek to save their souls by undertaking this 'physical trip' (Barber, 1993:1; Μοίρα, 2003:88; Sorabella, 2011; Harpur, 2016).

Pilgrimage means travelling to a shrine. Traditionally, pilgrimage is described as a trip undertaken to a sacred place for a religious motive, because of the special act of God or other divinity in this locale (Jackowski & Smith, 1992: 93). There, the pilgrims engage in acts of devotion and piety. It is a journey with a dual

destination: external - real to the place itself, and internal - symbolic, aspiring to spiritual elevation (Dubisch, 1995: 49).

Marian pilgrimages in Greece

The gratitude, the trust and the love of the people for the Virgin Mary are reflected in hymnography, folklore, art and worship. Countless monasteries and churches throughout Greece are dedicated to the Holy Mother of God as well as numerous icons depicting Her. Such icons have been unearthed in many parts of Greece, often in a miraculous way, and their finding resulted in the building of holy churches and monasteries, which subsequently served as pilgrimages. Thousands of believers flock to Marian shrines every year in order to worship the icon of the Virgin and turn to Her Grace for healing. The most important feast days are the Conception of the Virgin Mary (9 December), the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8 September), the Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple (21 November), the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God (26 December), the Annunciation (25 March) and the Dormition (15 August). Moreover, the Feasts of the Placement of the Belt of the Virgin Mary (31 August) and the Protection of the Most Holy Theotokos (28 October) are celebrated.

The Virgin Mary has a large number of titles and names attributed to Her Grace. The titles derive from

- a) the depiction of the Virgin Mary in icons (e.g. Vrefokratoussa [Virgin Mary with Child], Glykofiloussa [Virgin Mary of the Sweet Kiss], Hodegetria [the One who Shows the Way], Esfagmeni [Damaged by the knife]),
- b) the theological capacity (e.g. Eleoussa [Showing mercy]),
- c) the age of the icon (e.g. Gerontissa [the Elder]),
- d) the way the icon was found (e.g. Faneromeni [the Revealed]),
- e) the origin of the icon (e.g. Athinotissa [from Athens]),
- f) the style or the typology of the church dedicated to Her [e.g. Tholoskepasti [Domed], Pelekiti, [Hewn in rock]),
- g) the name of the donor of the church or the monastery (e.g. Kapnikarea [from the Greek surname 'Kapnikaris']),
- h) the season of the year when different agricultural activities take place during the various Virgin Mary feasts (e.g. Flevariani [of February]),
- i) her miracles (e.g. Giatrissa [the Healer]).

Most of these titles are eulogistic, given to the Virgin Mary because of the love of the devotees. In Greek the noun 'chryssos', meaning 'gold', is often the prefix in titles of the Mother of God. (e.g. Chryssospilotissa (Our Lady of the Golden Cave), Chryssopighi (Our Lady of the Golden Spring)). Moreover, there are other names created by the hymnographers of the Church which mainly come from the Akathist Hymn (e.g. Virgin pure, Higher than the heavens, King's throne, Heavenly ladder, Intercession, Invincible Champion, the Sheltering, Full of Grace and others (Παπαθανασόπουλος, 2014)).

The major Marian pilgrimages in Greece

During the Marian feast days, big pilgrimages take place and customs and old traditions are revived.

Mount Athos or 'The Garden of Virgin Mary'.

The Holy Mount area was inhabited by monks in the 9th century AD, and in the 10th century AD the first monasteries were established. It was local people who renamed the Athos peninsula as the Holy Mount and this new name was formalised by virtue of a special imperial decree of the Emperor Constantine IX the Monomachos in the middle of the 11th century. In 1453 it was conquered by the Turks. Up to the 18th century it was a spiritual centre. Today Mount Athos is home to twenty sovereign monasteries and about 1,800 monks. The monasteries are legal entities of public law. Seventeen of them are Greek, one is Russian, one is Bulgarian, one is Serbian and one is Georgian. Mount Athos is an autonomous polity within the Hellenic Republic under the official name 'Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain'. It is under the direct spiritual jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Only adult men and young males accompanied by their fathers are permitted to visit the territory. Women are prohibited from entering the Athos peninsula (Mylonopoulos, *et al.*, 2009:535). This rule is known as 'Avaton' (inaccessibility). Legislation Decree 2623/1953 stipulates that violation of the Avaton incurs a penalty of imprisonment for a period varying from two months to one year.

The monasteries feature a rich collection of well-preserved artefacts, icons, rare books and ancient documents (Μοίρα, 2005). It was inscribed by UNESCO in 1988 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for meeting both 'natural' and 'cultural' criteria. Twenty-two of the miracle-working icons of Theotokos kept in the monasteries are very well-

Figure 1. Mount Athos. Simonopetra monastery

Source: Greek National Tourism Organization. Cacarouhas

known. Each of these icons depicting the Virgin Mary has its own miracle-working history and the name of each individual icon derives from a specific miracle of the Mother of God depicted in them.

Since 972 AD when the First Typikon of Mount Athos was written by the Byzantine emperor Ioannis Tsimiskis, the community has been governed by a particular political and ecclesiastical regime, deriving from imperial chrysobulls (edicts), the different 'Typika', the Patriarchal sigilla (documents), the Sultan's firmans and the General Regulations of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 recognised Greek sovereignty over Mount Athos. The community's present charter map dates from 1924 and is guaranteed by the Greek constitution of 1975 as this was subsequently revised in 1986, 2001 and 2008 (Μυλωνόπουλος, 2001: 96).

The shrine of the Holy Church of Panagia Evangelistria of Tinos (Our Lady of Tinos).

The Holy Church of Panagia Evangelistria (literally meaning 'The All-Holy Bringer of Good News') is the major Marian shrine in Greece. It is located in the town of Tinos on the island of Megalochari (literally meaning 'She of Great Grace'). In terms of area, it is the fourth biggest island in the island complex of Cyclades. Tinos is the island of art and culture and marble craftsmen. Its inhabitants, Orthodox and Catholics, declared Panagia of Tinos to be the national patron saint of Greece and its holy aretefacts have become the most venerated religious icon in Greece.

The most important church and pilgrimage in Greece is that of Evangelistria of Tinos. The church was built on the spot where on 30 January 1823 the holy icon of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin was unearthed after several mystical visions of Sister Pelagia, a local nun from the Monastery of Kechrovouniou. The icon is thought to be the handwork of St. Luke the Evangelist, one of the first three icons that he painted (Σιώτος, 1973).

Tinos was declared as a 'holy island' by virtue of Legislative Decree 948/1971 (Gov. Gaz. 145 A). The shrine of the pilgrimage of the 'Panagia of Tinos' operates as a legal entity under public law, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, and it is a financially independent charitable foundation, operating under the name 'Pan-Hellenic Holy Foundation of Evangelistria of Tinos' by virtue of the Law 349/1976 (Gov. Gaz. 149 A). It was established in 1825 and has been designated by the Greek State as a 'Pilgrimage for the Orthodox Christians from all around the world' (Royal Decree No 11 of 1851). It is governed by a 10-member

Figure 2. The Holy Church of Panagia Evangelistria of Tinos

Source: P. Moira, personal archive

Figure 3. The Church of Panagia Ekatonapyliani

Source: Greek National Tourism Organisation. F. Lehmann

committee, which consists of nine elected members, chaired by the Venerable Metropolitan Bishop of Syros-Tinos. All its assets originate exclusively from donations, bequests and alms, given by pilgrims.

The Church of Panagia Ekatonapyliani, Paros island.

The Church of Panagia Ekatonapyliani (Our Lady of a Hundred Gates) is located in Parikia town of Paros island in the Aegean Sea. The church preserved today is a three-aisled basilica of cross shape with a vault of the Paleo-Christian era.

Believers from all over Greece gather here on 15 August to venerate the image of Panagia Ekatonapyliani and take part in the festivities. After the procession of the Holy Icon, a festival begins on 16 August with traditional music (Πατρικής, 2005). In 1992 the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece declared Ekatonapyliani as a Panhellenic place of pilgrimage, for its archaeological, historic and religious value.

The Holy Church of Panagia Ekatonapyliani was designated by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece as a Pan-hellenic Pilgrimage (Regulation 60/1992, Gov. Gaz. 116 A). It operates as a legal entity under private law, under the name 'Holy Metropolis of Paronaxia - Holy Pilgrimage of Panagia Ekatonapyliani of Paros'. It is governed by a seven-member Steering Committee, chaired by the Metropolitan Bishop of Paronaxia.

Figure 4. The Monastery of Panagia Prousiotissa

Source: G. Pazios, Copyright free. Available at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/41/Prousos_Monastery_01.jpg

The Monastery of Panagia Prousiotissa, Evrytania.

The Holy Monastery of Prousos is built on a steep rocky area among mountains in Evrytania, Central Greece, 31 km from Karpenissi. A carved cave house, the first old church of the Monastery contains the Holy Icon of Panagia Prousiotissa, painted by St. Luke the Evangelist. The icon was taken away from Prousa (Bursa) in Asia Minor in 829 AD, during the Second Iconoclast period.^[1] The icon was taken to Greece by a young man of noble origin, called Dionysios, but for an unknown reason the icon was lost when Dionysios arrived in Thrace (Πιπερίγκου-Κυριαζή, 2001). The icon appeared suddenly at Evrytania on 23 August under the form of a column of light, a torch. This is now the Feast day of the Monastery in commemoration of this event, as it was Panagia herself who chose where to be sheltered. It is also known as 'the House of Panagia'. Visitors can also see the 'steps' of Virgin Mary in 'Typoma', geologic formations that look like footprints. According to tradition, these are the footprints which the Virgin Mary left on her way to Prousos. The monastery played an important role in the Greek War of Independence as it served as a shelter for civilians. Visitors can see the lookout towers ('karaoulia') of the commander-in-chief Georgios Karaiskakis, the monastery clock that is perched on a hillock and the chapel of Agion Panton, opposite the monastery, built in 1754.

1. 814-842 AD. Iconoclasm, Greek for 'breaker of icons', is the deliberate destruction within a culture of the culture's own religious icons and other symbols or monuments, usually for religious or political motives. (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011: 5, 7-9).

The Sumela Monastery, Imathia.

The historic Monastery of Panagia Sumela or Soumeliotissa was built at the end of the 4th century (380-386 AD) by the Athenian monks Varnavas and Sofronios on the rocks of the mountain Mela, at a height of 1063m. After a dream, the two monks Varnavas and Sofronios began a long journey from Athens to find the icon at Mela mountain, south of Trabzon in the Black Sea. There, they discovered miraculously the icon in a cave. The name of the monastery means 'At Mela's' (Is tou Mela - Su Mela). After the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923 the monastery was abandoned. The icon, together with a Gospel and a large precious cross, was brought to Greece in October 1931 by the monk Amvrosios Soumeliotis. The miraculous icon was enthroned at Kastania on 15 August 1952. Thousands of believers from Greece and all around the world flock each year to venerate the Holy Icon of Panagia Soumela and attend the Feasts. On the feast of the Assumption, the procession of the Holy Icon is followed by many believers. A folk festival follows, with traditional Pontian bands from Macedonia (Παναγία Σουμελά, 2014: 15, 50).

The Holy Church of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary at the Pilgrimage of Panagia Soumela has been designated as a Pan-hellenic Holy Pilgrimage (Regulation 215/2010 Gov. Gaz. 191 A). It operates as a legal entity under public law, under the supervision of the Church of Greece and it is chaired by the Venerable Metropolitan Bishop of Veria and Naoussa.

The Virgin Mary of Agiassos, Lesbos island.

The church of Panagia of Agiassos on Lesbos island in the Aegean, 26 km from the town of Mytilene, is one of the most important Marian pilgrimages in Greece. The Holy Icon of Panagia Vrefokratoussa (i.e. holding baby Jesus) is said to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist. It is made of mastic and wax and bore the inscription 'Mitir Theou, Agia Sion', that is, 'Mother of God, Holy Sion'. In those times Jerusalem was called Agia Sion. The monk Agathon the Ephesian carried the icon from Jerusalem, where he was self-exiled, to Agiassos in 803 AD. Agathon wished to meet Empress Irene the Athenian who lived in exile on Lesbos island. The current church was built in 1815, after the destruction of the two previous ones in 1806 and 1812, on Mount Olympus. It is a three-aisled basilica with three bema recesses, three altars and a big matroneum. In the courtyard there is a chapel of the Holy Apostles, a Synodic (i.e. building for the

reception of guests and pilgrims), a folklore and an ecclesiastical museum and guesthouses for pilgrims (Φραντζής, 1992). The feast day of Panagia takes place on Assumption Day on 15 August. Panagia of Agiassos was designated as a Holy Pilgrimage in 1971.

The Holy Monastery of Panagia of the Great Cave of Kalavryta, Achaia.

The Monastery of the Virgin Mary Megalospileotissa (i.e. of the Great Cave) is located in Kalavryta, Achaia, in northern Peloponnese. It is built onto a rugged vertical face on Mount Chelmos at a height of 924 metres. According to tradition, the monastery was founded in 362 AD by the monks Symeon and Theodore from Thessaloniki. After a vision they had, the two monks sought out the icon of the Virgin Mary which had appeared in their vision painted in relief. Having wandering about the land for a long time, they finally reached the village of Zachlorou. There, they were led by the shepherdess Euphrosini to a cave where she had just discovered the sacred icon the two monks had been looking for. The Holy Icon of Vrefokratoussa Theotokos (i.e. holding baby Jesus) is embossed, made of wax, fragrant substances and mastic and is said to be one of the four icons painted by Luke the Evangelist. The monastery and the church were built on the spot where the icon was found (Λέκκος, 1995: 276-277). The feast days of the Monastery are on 15 August (Assumption), 14 September (Raising Aloft of the Honoured and Life-Giving Cross) and 18 October (Feast of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Luke).

Figure 5. The Holy Monastery of Panagia of the Great Cave of Kalavryta



Source: Vier, N. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MegaSpileo.jpg>

Figure 6. Panagia Chozoviotissa

Source: Greek National Tourism Organisation. F. Kontos

The Holy Monastery of Panagia Chozoviotissa, Amorgos island.

The byzantine monastery of Panagia Chozoviotissa, dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin Mary, is situated on the steep slopes of mount Profitis Ilias, on Amorgos island in the Aegean. It was built in 1088 AD, during the reign of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, in order to protect a religious icon, dating from the year 812, from intruders.

The monastery of Panagia Chozoviotissa is an unsophisticated building with eight floors, with a length of 40m and width of 5m, built over a vertical cliff of 300 meters over the sea. The monastery feast is on 21 November and a folk festival is organised every year with local food and sweets offered to all visitors.

The management of sacred places

The term ‘Cultural Heritage Management’ (CHM) refers to the systematic care for the preservation of significant cultural sites and physical heritage assets as a duty to future generations. For this reason, special Codes and Charters have been drafted by international organisations and agencies, such as the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of

Monuments and Sites - Venice Charter (1964) and the UNESCO Convention on Protection of Cultural Property (1970). These principles have been transposed into Greek law (Μοίρα, 2009:105). The main goal of management is not only the tourism promotion of religious-cultural assets and their economic output, but also their preservation for future generations. Regarding cultural goods presenting a religious interest, this need is more imperative because they combine nation-specific tangible and intangible elements.

Intangible assets include cultural landscapes and the religious significance and traditions associated with these landscapes (legends, stories, worship customs, festivals and other forms of religious folk tradition). So, a professional visitor management plan is essential. Visitors can be either pilgrims or religious-cultural tourists. Cooperation and understanding among the competent stakeholders (State, Church and individuals) would help in preserving the physical integrity of these sites, and at the same time allow the coexistence of commercial activity and religiousness sought by visitors (Μοίρα, 2009:105-106). Different stakeholders from the public and the private sector are involved, directly and indirectly, in the management of religious sites and shrines. However, pilgrimage sites are often monasteries. A ‘monastery’ is a building in which monks live and worship while a ‘monk’^[2] is a man who is a member of a group of religious men who live a simple life apart from general society, usually in a monastery (Μπαμπινιώτης, 2005:1115; Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).

The management techniques of pilgrims and visitors in religious sites are normative, physical, economic and educational.

The **normative management techniques**, consisting of rules and regulations, are the most commonly used techniques aiming at restricting the daily number of visitors with respect to the carrying capacity of a specific site or the host community (Μοίρα, 2009:105-106). For instance, the Holy Executive of the Holy Mount Athos Pilgrims’ Bureau, issues only ten permits a day for non-orthodox visitors (foreigners) and 100 for Greeks and Orthodox visitors, so that the serenity of the monks is not disturbed (Mount Athos Center, 2009). There are also other restrictions used at sites,

2. The etymology of the word ‘monk’ is this: Middle English, from Old English *mumuc*, from Late Latin *monachus*, from Late Greek *monachos*, from Greek, adjective, single, from *monos* single, alone (Merriam Webster, 2019).

such as those concerning the use of private cars and motor vehicles to access a sacred site, the opening hours or the zoning of an area which allows specific activities. In order to better achieve the goals set, these techniques vary from a notice to imposing a fine.

The *physical management techniques* include measuring the carrying capacity of a monument or site, which may include natural and cultural assets. This is the case on the Holy Mount Athos. Constraints on infrastructure, which may lead to a demand for new services or to the extension of old ones, may cause constraints for other components of the carrying capacity (e.g. social, environmental).

With regard to religious tourism and pilgrimage, the *social-psychological component* is a vital dimension of the carrying capacity which has not been taken into account, thus, ignoring the psychological needs of the pilgrims as well as the people working in these sites. The psychological parameter has a dual dimension when it comes to an active religious site. This is because on the one hand, the presence of religious tourists may exert pressure and disturb the priests and the monks by distracting their attention from the performance of their duties, and on the other hand, pilgrims are hindered to pray with devout concentration, which results in the downgrading of their spiritual experience. This happens because the quality of the religious experience cannot be achieved when huge numbers of people (pilgrims or religious tourists) are gathered in a specific site or monument, which affects the carrying capacity of the monument or the site and that of the people associated with it (Μοίρα, 2009:111-112). In many religious monuments, for example in the Meteora Monasteries, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, there are concerns about the increase in the number of visitors, as this contradicts the wishes of monks and nuns to isolate themselves, meditate and pray. The constant presence of visitors (pilgrims and religious tourists) distracts monks and nuns from their religious tasks and turns them into 'tourist guides' (Μοίρα, 2009). For this reason, there is a winter and a summer timetable with the visiting hours and days for the six functioning Meteora monasteries.^[3] This allows monks and nuns to perform their religious tasks undisturbed.

The *economic management techniques* primarily use the fee for the service, or the product provided as an incentive or counterincentive in order to regulate tourists' behaviour. These techniques aim at:

- a) keeping under control the number of pilgrims and religious tourists in a sacred site or monument through the adjustment of the admission fee and differential pricing depending on the season;
- b) encouraging an environmentally-friendly conduct (e.g. visitors are asked to pay a deposit for guarantee before entering a monument or site and this deposit is returned to them on exiting after a careful inspection of the site or monument for possible damages has been carried out);
- c) rewarding correct environmentally-friendly conduct (e.g. through economic bonuses or prizes).

So, a higher fee is set in an area during the high season so that tourist flows are spread more evenly throughout the year. Sometimes a section of a site or a secondary attraction can only be accessed after an extra fee has been charged, known as 'pay perimeter' (Shackley, 2001:61). In the Greek functioning monasteries, there is no entrance fee. Nevertheless, there is an entrance fee in non-functioning religious monuments (Μοίρα, 2009:51; Μοίρα, 2018). For example, currently there is a full entrance fee of twelve euros in the Archeological Site of Mystras, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where there are many Byzantine churches. There is also a reduced admission ticket of six euros for special categories [e.g. senior Greek and EU citizens over the age of 65, tourist guides] (Οδυσσέας, 2019). In this case the protection and management are carried out by the Ministry of Culture and Sports through the responsible regional service.

Moreover, in some places, in order to control the number of travel agents engaging in the promotion of a specific site or monument and ensure that funds flow in for the management of the area, a method of auctioning tourism business licenses is applied.

The *educational management techniques* aim at restricting the improper or indecent conduct of religious tourists and improve the quality of the experience. Tourists should know how to respect the sacred sites as well as the religious-cultural systems of the host populations. To this end, in these sites, leaflets and brochures with instructions for proper conduct during the visit are often distributed to visitors; there is proper signage for prohibited areas and special tour guides; the staff working there is specially trained and; the host population is informed in specially organised workshops about the necessity of protecting religious sites and monuments as cultural resources.

3. The Meteora monasteries come under the jurisdiction of the Holy Metropolis of Stagoi and Meteora.

A typical example of the use of this technique is the religious excursions to monuments or pilgrimages throughout Greece, organised by the Greek Holy Metropolises. For instance, an educational youth pilgrimage excursion ‘In the Footsteps of Paul the Apostle’ was organized by the Holy Metropolis of Kitros, Katerini, and Platamon (Ποιμήν, 2018).^[4] The programme of this excursion went beyond visits to cultural sites and monuments as it included various activities such as pilgrimage, guided tours, watching documentaries on St. Paul, having lunch and dinner in accordance with the Greek orthodox tradition, and attending Mass. The route is not just a geographical itinerary, but a mental procedure based on existing and modern elements. The goal of these organised pilgrimage tours is for the visitors / pilgrims to become integrated into the natural environment, comprehend the local culture and learn to respect the religious monuments, the premises and the local people.

These measures are not always effective because it depends on the age, the religious beliefs and the educational background of the visitors, while special knowledge about the religious sites is necessary in order to raise awareness among travellers.

The role of the competent national authorities with regard to the protection of religious-cultural heritage is crucial. In 2013 a Memorandum of Understanding on Pilgrimage Tourism was signed between the Church of Greece and the Greek Ministry of Tourism. This MoU provides for the encouragement of the organisation of tailor-made training programmes addressed to the staff of tourism businesses, tourist guides and other personnel engaged in pilgrimage tourism activities (MoU, 2013).

Many of these sites attract crowds of tourists which creates a lot of problems requiring the protection and the management of the shrines. In Greece the State and the Church are closely connected institutionally, so there is a special legal framework for the protection of

religious sites, monuments, ecclesiastical heirlooms and treasures in continental and insular regions. By virtue of Article 59 of Law no. 590/1977 ‘On the Statutory Charter of the Church of Greece’, the administration and the management of Holy Shrines, regardless of their legal form and status, as far as they are available for public worship, is the sole competence of the Church of Greece. The relevant Metropolitan Bishops are appointed *ipso jure* as Chairmen of the local ecclesiastical foundations. Due to the special importance of a religious site or shrine for the Orthodoxy, the Greek State intervenes legislatively and acknowledges a regime of enhanced protection for a specific site or monument.

Conclusions

By establishing a special legal framework for the designation of the Sacred Sites, conflicts can often arise between the religious aspect of the shrine and the cultural aspect driving religious-cultural tourism. In other words, is cultural tourism compatible with pilgrimage in a shrine with an active religious activity? Moreover, one wonders whether the implementation of bans and restrictions, aiming at reducing the tourists’ impact on sacred sites, is practically feasible.

On the one hand, it is thought that sacred sites are destined exclusively for worship and asceticism and thus should not be utilised as cultural resources. On the other hand, it is believed that the cultural aspect of these sites is more significant and while they are designated as sacred, they should be accessible to anyone with a cultural interest.

The answers to the above questions vary depending on someone’s perspective and point of view. By designating sacred sites, lawmakers aim at combining the two components, the religious and the cultural. The question as to whether this goal is achieved only depends on the enforceability of the legislation.

4. The excursion took place on 18 February 2018 under the escort of the Very Reverend the Metropolitan of Citrus, Katerini and Platamon, Georgios.

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