



The archaeology of the medieval towers in Mount Athos. An attempt of archaeological research

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The archaeology of the medieval towers in Mount Athos. An attempt of archaeological research.

The present study is focused on the archaeology of the medieval deserted towers in Mount Athos. Besides the towers included in the monastery precinct that protect the arsanas (little harbor) or the towers of the distinct fortification, the deserted towers controlled the inner paths and the sea, preventing the attacks of the pirates. Only three monasteries had a compound defense system: the precinct of the monastery, a fortification on the shore, a fortified harbor and an upper side tower, unprotected by a precinct.

Keywords: Mount Athos, tower, fortification, archaeology, medieval, culture.



After my first pilgrimage in Holy Mount Athos I realized that „a monastery comprises a sacred place with a holy fountain surrounded by groups of cells, utilitarian spaces (a refectory for dining, a dormitory for the pilgrims, stables, sheds and storehouses, cellars, a hospital for the sick and the elders), an aquaduct and the dwelling-tower - the last shelter of the monks - that dominates the architectural assembly through its height.”¹ There are some few exceptions: „The Holy Monastery Simons Petra did not need a tower for the dwellings”² My interest was not only in the study of fortifications that protect the catholikon or the tower that would protect the arsanas (the harbor), but mainly in the towers guarding the shores of the peninsula preventing, or at least delaying the attacks of the pirates.³

After having visited Holy Athos several times my

opinion about the chance of archaeology is the same: the research field is generous, but the access inside the Athonite community, a promised land, is restricted. This is understandable from the perspective of the necessity to preserve the traditional values and the way of life.⁴

The bibliography of the subject is deficient. A short study describes the traces of ruined towers in Mount Athos⁵. The two shallow buttressed towers, also ruined, were published by a Greek archaeologist⁶ and two are unpublished. It was a great effort to see them all.

Two topoi named paleopyrgos are to be found in two maps⁷, in two places: the Megistes Lavra Monastery land and the nearing Zograf Monastery.

The southern region of Athos is empty and deserted, located between the mountain and the sea. The landscape is rough, dry, and stony. It is dominated

by the peak of Mount Athos, but there are some single-cell hermitages in the shadow of the mountain⁸.

On the west side, there is a starting point from a large monastery, Agios Pavlos (Saint Paul's). There is no other monastery until one reaches the Megiste (Great) Lavra. The seashore is rocky, the current and the winds are strong. The vegetation is poor and the sun shines like in the desert. Although hostile, the region was never empty.



Paliopyrgos from Megistis Lavra, the deserted tower (structure of the wall).

On the path from the two best-known shelters for pilgrims, Prodrom Skete to Agia Anna Skete, one comes across a place like a promised land with springs full of water and a dark forest.

The description of the path toward the ruins of the tower in the southern side of the Athos peninsula is important because the watch towers are hidden in the forest. I have tried to find two medieval towers in the center of region. The pooriness of topographical information made achieving my goal difficult.

I had information from two monks: one from KavsoKalivia, who gave me a correct location, and from a monk in Prodrom Skete, a plan with detailed description. But the starting point in my attempt to find the ruins of the watch towers was a map. It was the only one in which I found the word *paliopyrgos* (old tower) marking a site⁹. No traveler, pilgrim, guide, or scientific study mentioned a tower in the region bordered by Megistes Lavra Monastery and Agia Anna Skete. Only the ruins of ancient altars were mentioned.

I started from Prodrom Skete with the first goal of finding the path which comes from Megistes Lavra. The path toward south is well preserved and easy to walk along. The main place to be noticed is the spring called Krya Nera (The Dark Spring), which flows from the mountain. The route in the forest is well preserved and an easy walk before climbing up to the peak of Mount Athos. Just before the ascent up the peak there is a paleopyrgos. Two big stones mark where to leave the main path and turn to the left. Before the stones with Orthodox icons, on the left side, you will see a

barbed-wire fence.

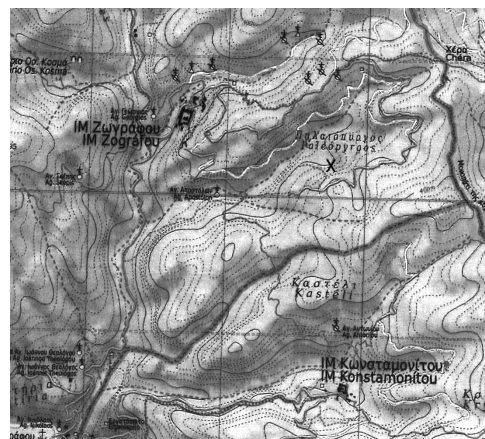
The ruins of tower are on the top of the rock outcrop and almost as wide as the platform. Leaving the main path on the left there are no ancient walls, but only the ruins of the hermitage of a monk, and under the bushes, traces of underground water channel. After a short climb through bushes, you can see a section of a stone wall.

The stone wall is higher on the north side (3 m). The exterior face of wall can be seen reaching a height of 1.20 m. The wall is 1 m wide. On the side, nearest the mountain, the wall is badly preserved. A big well-carved stone (60 x 27 x 17 cm) is preserved on the northern corner. For the next 3.70 m to the west, the stone foundation is better preserved. The gap in the foundations in the next stretch of wall suggests there was an entrance. The southern wall is preserved for a length of 9.50 m, at a height of 1.50 m.

More interesting is the east side of the tower facing the seashore. I could easily see an entrance on the south side. A large carved stone survives from the entrance frame. I presume that this entrance belonged to a balcony, whose purpose was to observe the sea. More detailed observation could lead to another conclusion. On this side an embrasure (splayed opening) can be observed easily, 0.50 m wide on the exterior, widening to 1 m on the interior.

In the northern wall, some round (6 cm diameter) and rectangular holes (10 x 15 cm) could be observed, which were covered by the face of the wall.

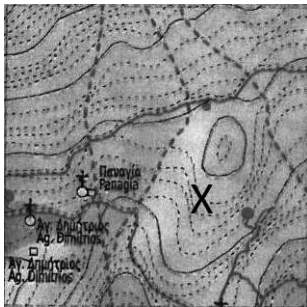
Concluding with the plan of the ruined tower, which was in a bad state of preservation, I presume that it had a rectangular shape (10.50 x 7.50 m), with a buttress(?) on the south-west. We could not conclude more, but because it is the simplest watch tower in Athos, it is probably an early one.¹⁰



Paleopyrgos(X) near Zographou monastery.

I preserved my opinion that the organization of the defending system reflects the organization of the Athonite society based on the autonomy of

the monasteries led by a central legislative structure comprising the abbots of the twenty monasteries and an executive one. The historic facts have to be taken into account in the organization and evolution of the system: the Byzantine, then the Ottoman domination, the role played by the Genovese in the sea trade, the domination of the Crusaders and, most of all, the danger represented by the outlaw pirates. The Athonite community would not have survived for a thousand years without this system that allowed the practice of the communitarian solidarity and without flexible politics.



Paliopyrgos(X) on the Land of Megistis Lavra Monastery.

The entire guarding and defending system was pointed towards the enemy coming from the sea. He came up against the fortification of the shore (fortified harbors and towers), then against the fortifications of the monasteries that could hold out until the outside help arrived. During the Ottoman domination there was an army body to protect the monasteries.



Note:

1. Petre Beșliu Munteanu, *Holy Mount Athos and Archaeology*. In: <http://christianforums.net/Fellowship/index.php.threads>, accessed in: 28.01.2011. passim; Arheolog Petre Beșliu Munteanu: „În Grecia cultul monumentelor istorice este așa de mare încât cercetarea de teren nu prea e afectată de criză și de presiunile dezvoltatorilor” I. Interviu. In: *Tribuna* din 19.11.2010.
2. Ibidem.
3. Ibidem.
4. Ibidem.
5. *Plutarchos Theocharidis, Ioakim Papagellos, Katalogos ton pyrgon toy Agioly Oros*, in *Oi Pyrgoi tou Agiou Oros*, Thessaloniki, 2002, p. 18-21.
6. Pascal Androudis, *Three early shallow-butressed towers on the monastery of Chilandarou, on Mount Athos*. In: www.academia.edu/2123144, p. 291-303; Ανδρούδης

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7. Roland Baetens, Dimitris Bakalis, and Peter Howorth, *Mount Athos. The Holy Mountain. Pilgrim Path. Monasteries and Sketes. Profiles of Key Paths. Skete Maps. Gazetteer*. Filathonites.org: 2016, 1:25.000; Reinhold Zwerger, *Athos (Agion Oros), Kartenskizze 1:50.000* (paliopyrgos, Megistis Lavra).

8. A first article about the 2017 archaeological experience in Mont Athos in: Petre Beșliu Munteanu, *Un arheolog sibian la Muntele Athos: Un loc plin de istorie, Sfântul Munte Athos și un toponim misterios, "paliopyrgos"*. In: *Tribuna Sibiului*, 19.01.2017.

9. Zwerger, op.cit., map.

10. Later, the Holy Council of the Elders from Megistis Lavra refused me more researches in any places administrated.

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