

Mount Menoikeion Seminar 2015

Journal

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The view upon entering the monastery...





Above, a nicely-lit view of the mountains surrounding the monastery. The structure on the right is the church; on the left and at the end of the pathway are the nuns' living quarters. Just off-screen (behind the camera, to the left) are doors leading to the library and dining spaces. The monastery is not very large at all; the experience of living for almost a week within its enclosure gave us a good sense of how the space strengthens the spiritual community. The nuns live, work, and pray in close proximity to one another. They care for each other and collaborate to keep the monastery clean: we were amazed, for example, by the carefully-picked and well-manicured flower arrangements, or by the thoroughness with which the nuns swept the stone walkways and floors. Attention to detail in the maintenance of the monastery (as well as in cooking, gardening, and other duties) is an important component of the community's devotional practices, not just their quality of life.

What this picture fails to capture (due to some sort of lens distortion) is the steepness of the mountains, how dramatically they seem to press up around the monastery. It was like living in a bowl that opens onto the sky.



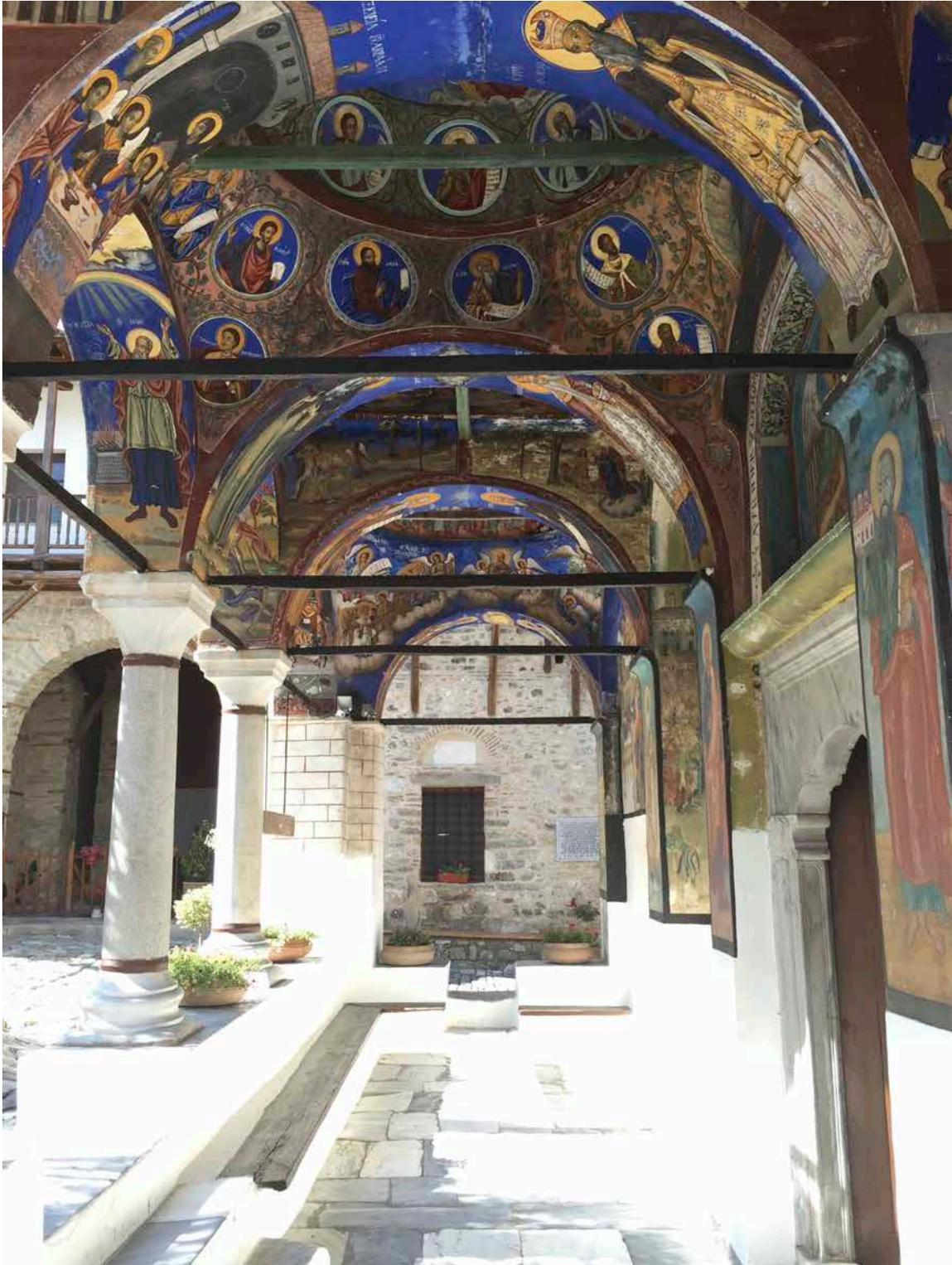
Some additional views of the monastery. Top right is a photo of our visit to the nuns' private porch: the doors on the left open into their living chambers. It was an honor to be allowed entry to this part of the monastery: one of the few recent guests granted access was the Patriarch of Constantinople, who had tea on the balcony towards the conclusion of his visit. In addition to opening this normally off-limits area to us, the nuns gave us permission to attend the liturgy (another great privilege). They lifted several standard restrictions in order to ensure that we left Mt. Menoikeion with a more thorough understanding of their way of life.

The top left photograph was taken during one of our hikes through the mountains. The bottom photograph shows the opposite side of the monastery (the private porch may be seen at right). Both pictures include the defensive tower, which we managed to climb (I gave my presentation inside it). The lower photo gives a nice perspective on the way the monastery is situated within the hills; it also shows the nuns' garden, where they produced most of the vegetables that ended up on our plates. The garden is remarkably well-kept, and almost all of the work is handled by a single nun.

Much of the pleasure of our visit to Mt. Menoikeion came from wandering around the monastery grounds, taking in the view, and hearing from the nuns about their appreciation of the landscape.



These were our sleeping quarters. The room ordinarily functions as a workshop, but the nuns were kind enough to reconfigure it for the duration of our stay. This photo was taken right before our departure, so the room is clear of our suitcases and the stacks of clothes we arranged upon the tables. There is an incredible view of the mountain (perhaps you can see some of the greenery through the glass) and—when the windows are opened—a very refreshing breeze. For those of us accustomed to the hubbub of the city—or even the Princeton campus—the evenings were unusually quiet.





Both this picture and the photo on the previous page give a taste of the paintings throughout the monastery: the frescoes in the previous picture are easily accessible to visitors (the wall on the right side of the photo is the front of the church), whereas the wall-paintings which Foteini is illuminating here are almost entirely private (they decorate the small chapel within the nuns' living quarters). That we were allowed entry into this room was another amazing show of courtesy from the nuns. Lined up on the lower register are various saints, most of them named by Greek inscriptions. As we looked around this chapel, we tried to identify the saints by spotting their attributes, or the symbols with which they are typically associated. For example, Helena, the mother of emperor Constantine, is pictured holding the 'true cross'—the cross on which Christ was crucified—which she is said to have recovered.

We were very lucky to have several art historians among us. While in the monastery, much of our attention was devoted to looking at paintings and familiarizing ourselves with the iconography. The pictures on the walls tell the history of the monastery—paintings were removed, edited, and added over time.



One of the most unforgettable experiences at the monastery was our visit to the ossuary (the building which fills the bottom photo). The ossuary houses bones (including skulls) of previous monastics from Mt. Menoikeion, some of whom must have lived centuries ago. Some of the bones (I think) also belonged to non-monastic residents of the region around Serres. The nuns had organized all of the bones (particularly the skulls) into neat rows for display. When we entered, we were confronted with a long chamber crowded with lines and lines of skulls, all carefully stacked on shelves, all seeming to stare out at us as we walked through. Just as we entered the ossuary ominous skies and rain arrived; I took the top picture just before heading inside. The weather provided an appropriate atmosphere for our encounter with the skulls.

The ossuary stands next to a small cemetery where one of the nuns had recently been buried. She died right before the visit of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the Patriarch helped the nuns pay tribute to her.

When I ran into one of the nuns around the refectory later that day, she asked me how I had ‘enjoyed’ the ossuary. I was somewhat alarmed by her choice of the word ‘enjoy’: her English was quite good, so she had certainly meant it. As we talked, it became clear that the nuns not only took great pride in the achievement of ordering all of the bones, but found the display of remains deeply assuring: the great volume of bones in the ossuary reminded them that they were part of a spiritual community with a long and respectable history.



This photograph does not do justice to the meals served by the nuns at Mt. Menoikeion: almost all of the food—a whole mountain of it—is off-screen. Also off-screen are the two sisters whose job it was (throughout our stay at the monastery) to ensure that we were well-nourished. The very moment any one of us had cleared off our plate—without delay!—one of the nuns hurried over with more food. If the sisters sensed that someone was having trouble with a fish bone, they'd whisk the fish away, meticulously clear it out, and redeliver it. Though it was a big job to feed us so lavishly, the nuns clearly took great pleasure from it.

At the center of the above picture is an elaborate display of fruit with an edible bird perched atop it. The bird has an eye detail, very well-carved wings, and a toothpick for a beak. Next to the bird you can make out a card with the words, 'Happy Birthday Tina': the nuns designed this plate specially for the occasion. This was not the only time the sisters produced such artistic food: I saw them transform a zucchini into a pop-eyed monster.

We were able to pay back a small portion of the nuns' generosity by working diligently on the dishes after we'd eaten.

