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Hellenic Studies

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Mount Menoikeion Diary

Day 1-7/2

The seminar began with a day in Thessaloniki. The group assembled in the hotel lobby at 8 a.m. to visit several churches in the upper (old) city with Professor Lujendijk. It was incredibly hot and humid on the walk from the Bit Bazaar neighborhood of the hotel to Ossios David, the first church we visited. Ossios David is located just inside of the northern walls of the city, high above the downtown and the limani (port). The church doesn't open until 8:45, so we killed some time by walking the walls and visiting the monastery church where Vicky and Niko got married last summer, which has great views of the city and a large collection of peacocks.

Returned to Ossios David, where Ann-Marie gave a talk about the unique mosaic in the altar apse. Question time devolved into grad students trying to explain the value of icons in Orthodoxy and feuding with the church's caretaker, a young guy who knew his stuff. Returned to the hotel for a few hours of free time before boarding the bus to the monastery. I enjoyed a distinctly un-monastic lunch of pork gyros and a beer while wandering around Plateia Aristotelou. The minibus to the monastery left at 3 pm. I slept for most of the journey, but I woke up just outside of Serres and got to take in the ascent into the mountains around the monastery. Even with cloudy weather, the drive was quite scenic.

When we arrived at the monastery, a baptism was in progress, so we had to lay low, wandering around the edge of the monastery and seeing the vegetable gardens, the cemetery, and a river with a few waterfalls. I'm very excited to visit the monastery's ossuary, a room where all bones of the deceased are stored five years after their burial. Enjoyed Greek coffee, koulourakia, and loukoumia (all homemade). Once the baptism ended, I helped to empty the font (they have a designated holy water drain) and move chairs out of the church. Visited the gift shop and part of the on-site museum before dinner. We ate outside, behind the kitchen. Absolutely delicious vegetarian fare—two types of eggplant and Greek salad. Afterward, I helped with the dishes and talked to several nuns in broken Greeklish. One, Sister Pachomia, noticed my black eye (I had surgery about six weeks before coming to the monastery) and gave me a small container of a St. John's Wort salve to treat it. Showered and went to bed promptly for 7:15 Divine Liturgy.

The Monastery

Situated in a valley in the Menoikeion range, the monastery of Agios Ioannis Prodromos (St. John the Forerunner) has been used on and off since the 1400s. The current group of nuns are relative newcomers, having reopened the monastery in the 1970s after a 20 year period of neglect. Mixture of beautiful old buildings and nicely done newer ones. The grounds are quite substantial, and the church in the middle of the monastery is very popular with the local people. The nuns hail from all over the world (I think every continent except for South America and Antarctica is represented). They all speak Greek fluently, and many speak English as well.

Day 2-7/3

This was an incredible day—I doubt I'll be able to do it justice here. Woke up early for church (6:30). The service was long but very beautiful. The nuns do a lot more chanting than we do in non-monastic churches—the priest played a fairly minor role in the proceedings. Tons of Serrans came up, so I felt a bit out of place (Orthodox students were encouraged to be in the chapel while the non-Orthodox group stayed in the narthex at the back of the church). I wish I hadn't been as tired as I was—very drowsy during liturgy. Napped for an hour after breakfast, which helped. Food continues to be excellent, especially peppers and tuna moussaka at lunch.

First seminar session after lunch. Two talks—Lillianne about wax figures and votives, Justin about meadows as a metaphor for church interiors. Both very interesting. I was in over my head a bit, but I asked some questions and developed some short story ideas. Coffee and cherry juice after the seminar, which was a nice pick-me-up. We were joined by Nikos, his wife Rachel, and son Haris. Niko is the founder of the Mount Menoikeion Seminar and is the go-to expert on the monastery's history. He gave us a great tour of the church, including several hidden shrines that I didn't see during liturgy. The church is a convoluted structure with amazing iconography. Tour wound down just in time for dinner—spaghetti with mushroom sauce. Showered and went to bed early in order to wake up and help Sister Paisia in the garden at 7 a.m. Great day, and I'm very excited for tomorrow.

The Monastery

More details about the monastery's past and present came to light today. Agios Ioannis Prodromou has a long history. It was founded by a monk named Ioannis on the site of an abandoned, roofless church. He was succeeded by his nephew Ioannikos, who was a member of

the local aristocracy and helped the monastery navigate the turbulent politics of the Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman periods. Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs all fought over the town of Serres. The monastery was a favorite of the Serbian royalty—the remains of one of their great kings, Stefan Dusan, are interred in the chapel, which the modern-day President of Serbia visited a month before we arrived. At one point, 75% of the monks at Ioannis Prodromou were Bulgarian, a testament to the shifting ethnic and political identity of the region. In addition to being politically influential, the monastery was also a major economic player, running businesses in Serres and providing a wide range of services to the nearby communities. In World War II, the monks were kidnapped by Bulgaria and a major icon of St. John was stolen, although both the monks and the icon were returned after the war. The monastery's population and importance tailed off in the 1970s, and was reopened by the nuns a few years later.

Day 3-7/4

Woke up early as planned and went to work with Sister Paisia in the garden. Adam and I were the only students who took Paisia up on the opportunity to help in the garden. Paisia had us weed a row of tomato plants, which took up most of the time we were there. We were introduced to a pair of lay helpers, Dimitri and Elias. After an hour in the garden, we returned to the monastery for breakfast, which included coffee, tea, hard-boiled eggs, pastries, and preserves (there's nothing like a homemade koulouri covered in apricot preserves).

After breakfast, the group set out on a hike to the abandoned village north of the monastery. We visited a few small chapels, including one dedicated to Saint Paraskevi with a built-in holy spring, and walked through the remnants of a village. We had a particularly good time splashing around in the river which runs down from the mountains to the plain that Serres is on. Heads were dunked, shoes were taken off, and everyone was in good spirits. Returned to the monastery for vegan lunch (no fish today—the nuns follow a strict fasting calendar). In the afternoon, Niko took us on a mini tour of the various chapels on the monastery grounds—there are by my count four different ones.

The late afternoon was taken up by three more seminar presentations. Adam discussed monastic aesthetics and architecture, Denise talked about an abstract expressionist artist named Cytllondy (I think that's how it's spelled), and Antonio read from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House." All interesting presentations, and Adam's seemed particularly timely. Another delicious dinner—wish I had taken notes on what we ate. After struggling my way through Lent for years, I'm utterly amazed at what the nuns are capable of doing with the food despite the fasting restrictions. After dinner, Richard and I got tapped by Paisia to help move a dozen pallets of glass jars from a storage below the monastery to the commercial kitchen at the top of the

monastery. Richard and I got to ride in the bed of the monastery's pickup truck while Paisia drove, an exciting change of pace for me and an utter thrill for Richard.

While we were loading the pallets into the truck, Paisia told us about her life before becoming a nun. She grew up in South Africa and worked for the Johannesburg stock exchange. A life-changing moment occurred when she was driving home from work and was held up at gunpoint. Rather than surrender, she ducked and floored her accelerator. After this episode, she became disenchanted with South Africa and decided to travel around. She visited the monastery and immediately felt a spiritual pull toward it, despite speaking no Greek (her mother is Ukrainian Orthodox). She made it through the monastery's trial period and has quickly moved up the ranks, becoming one of the most important sisters within five years of arriving.

Day 4-7/5

Today was quite different than the past few days, as we ventured outside of the mountains for the first time since arriving here. The plan was to go into Serres in the morning, have lunch down there, and come back for a few presentations and dinner. I again reported for duty in the garden, and was paired with Kyrios Elias, who is a friendly, bearded retiree who speaks almost no English. He was very excited when I told him that I speak Greek, although he quickly found the limits of my speaking ability. We mostly talked about the vegetables we were harvesting (cucumbers and peppers), the weather, and the Euro Cup soccer finals.

The leaders decided to forego breakfast at the monastery for bougatsa in Serres' main plateia, so I came back from gardening and immediately hopped into a cab. The bougatsa was good, although a little heavy on the powdered sugar for my taste, and I got to talk to Robia, Lillianne, and Chloe, none of whom I knew well prior to breakfast. Afterward, Niko took us on a tour of the city, stopping at the antiquity museum (inside an old bazaar), a mosque-turned-gallery, and one of the big churches, which had the relics of a pair of martyrs. Later, we went to a Museum of Byzantine Art run by the Archdiocese of Serres. Really interesting icons, including one of St. Christoforos with a dog's face. We also got to see the archdiocese's radio station. Lunch at Alex's favorite restaurant, which included meat and beer. Not as good as the nuns' cooking, but a welcome change of pace.

Returned to the monastery in the late afternoon. Two presentations, the first in a small room next to where we have afternoon coffee, the second outside next to the cemetery (the library room we had been using is not air conditioned and gets quite hot). Richard's presentation was on fasting, competitive ascetism, and the rules of Orthodox fasting—really interesting for me as an Orthodox person who has heard dozens of variations on fasting rules. Ariana was the

first undergraduate to present, and she talked about spirituality in a medical context, with a particular emphasis on the case of a Hmong girl who had seizures and the series of misunderstandings between her parents and her American doctors. Finished up just before yet another amazing dinner, which featured some sea food—grilled octopus and squid in a salad form. The elder (geronda) of the monastery was the head cook at her previous monastery, and she has cultivated quite a group of chefs. The kitchen seems to be the epicenter of activity in the monastery, though this may be because of our presence. I'm surprised at how little time the nuns physically spend in church, although Sister Makrina has explained to us how the sisters are constantly, unconsciously doing the Jesus Prayer.

Although many of the people in the group are uncomfortable around her, I've learned a lot from Makrina, specifically about two well-known monastic elders—St. Paisios, who was canonized last year, and Elder Ephraim, the spiritual father of Ioannis Prodromou and dozens of other monasteries in Greece and the U.S. Ephraim is based out of St. Anthony of the Desert, a huge, well-known monastery in Florence, Arizona. The sisters were all excited to learn that I live a mere seven hours away from their elder, and implored me to visit the monastery and seek out the Elder's blessing on my return home. Many of the sisters have flown to the monastery in the desert, and they told me that it's very beautiful. After this incredible experience at their monastery, I may have to follow their advice and go to Arizona once I get home! We also got a preview of what the sisters will present at the synaxis tomorrow night. Somehow, someone had asked one of the sisters to sing, and before we knew it, the whole choir had assembled and performed a bunch of different chants for us, including a great version of Agni Parthene.

Day 5-7/6

Today is our last full day at the monastery, and we really made the most of it. I started my morning with gardening. Today Kyrios Elias and I talked about the FIBA Olympic Qualifiers, which Greece has played well in—they will be going against Croatia in a few days for a spot in the Olympics. Finally getting a taste for the intense instant coffee that Dimitri gives me every morning. Back to the basics for breakfast this morning—but when the basics are as good as they are here, that's not saying much. Tried sheep's milk yogurt for the first time in my life at breakfast. Despite Alex hyping it up, I was not a huge fan, especially the weirdly tough skin on the top.

After breakfast, we began our final day of touring the monastery with Niko (unfortunately, he and the family have an early morning flight to Cyprus tomorrow, so we won't get to see them off). We visited the peculiar tower at the top of the monastery, which has an awesome library at the top. Climbed back down and went to the front gate, where Robia presented on the world's first fully integrated interfaith building in Berlin (evidently, it's a mosque, synagogue, and church all in one structure). Another day, another awe-inspiring lunch. As I was buying gifts for my family, I decided to give myself the present of the monastery's cookbook, which is entirely Lenten and entirely in Greek.

In the afternoon, we visited the recently-completed New Wing of the monastery, which houses two state-of-the-art commercial kitchens, major dry storage space, and a new set of dormitories for the nuns. If the monastery can make investments on this scale in such a terrible economy, I don't think they have to worry about falling into the same problems that the monks who used to live here did. We also visited Sister Pachomia's herb facility, which was really neat. Pachomia is really smart and motivated—she has been researching old books in the monastery

library, looking for lost natural cures for various ailments, whether it's something as minor as my swollen eye or something as major as Crohn's Disease. Really interesting stuff, and getting to see all the herbs in action was cool too. Wish I'd had more chances to talk to Pachomia about her work. We also visited the current sweets kitchen, where we saw Sister Parthenia (who is from Texas and knows many of the same priests that I do) preparing the monastery's loukoumia, which is the best that I've had anywhere. Even though my family aren't big on sweets, I decided to buy them a box of it based on how great the samples were.

We then ventured from the realm of the living to the house of the dead—the ossuary that I've been looking forward to visiting since we arrived here. This past semester, I took a skeletal anatomy class, and I've been drawn to rooms full of bones ever since. The ossuary houses hundreds of skulls and thousands of other bones, all nicely arranged by the nuns, who found it disrepair and saw pentagrams and other evidence of witchcraft when they reopened the monastery. Now, the bones are carefully organized and shelved by type, though identifying individuals is difficult (only a few are labelled). The ossuary is part of an interesting monastic tradition in which individuals are buried for five years and then exhumed. If the body or parts of the body remain undecomposed, this is a sign of the individual's saintliness. For those who do not maintain an uncorrupted state, the bones are washed, cleaned, and then stored in the ossuary.

After all this, we still had time for another presentation. Alex talked about Jacques Derrida's book *Still Remains*, which is a combination of photos of Athens in the 1980s paired with seemingly unrelated text. One quote that stuck with me was that "Athens is dead but still alive, living yet dying," which seemed particularly prescient after the events of the past few years and after spending the past half hour in a bone house. We had our final dinner at the

monastery, and then began preparing for the synexis—the exchange of performances, gifts, and laughter that is always done at the end of the seminar.

Unfortunately, the weather didn't collaborate with us. As we were setting up outside, we heard thunder, and the heavens opened. This was some of the most torrential rain I've seen in my life—a wall of water coming out of the sky. I got soaked to the bone moving tables and chairs inside, and the synexis got delayed by about an hour as we reset in one of the rooms of the museum. The nuns got a kick out of the video Robia made showing them Princeton, and they enjoyed Vicky and Adam's dance routine (I was one of several backup dancers). Ann-Marie and Justin also sang an old English spiritual song, which was interesting for everyone after hearing Byzantine chant all week. Geronda, who has been laying low while we've been at the monastery, gave a speech thanking us and encouraging us to remain spiritual in the lay world. We all got up and gave individual thank yous, mostly translated by Alex. I gave mine in Greek and stumbled a bit, but it was heartfelt and the nuns recognized it. It's hard to summarize such an incredible experience into a little blurb, but I tried my best. Many farewells were said that night, as Ann-Marie, Niko, Rachel, Haris, and Phonda were all leaving in the morning.

Day 6-7/7

Our final partial day at the monastery started the same way that most of them have for me—with an early wakeup and a trip down to the garden. Kyrios Elias and I talked more basketball and he helped me clear up some confusion about names of different nuns. I was sad to leave the garden just as the eggplants were coming into season and with potatoes to harvest (probably the most fun crop to collect because you get to whack at them with a hoe). I'm glad that I was able to be helpful and not too much of a hassle for Mr. Elias, and I learned about gardening and Greek sports from him.

The leaders didn't have much planned for today, so everyone who hadn't presented was asked to do so. I had originally been scheduled to go on the third day, so it was something of a relief to finally get to present—I was the very last presenter. I was preceded by Chloe, who analyzed Antonin Artaud's "The Theatre and the Plague," and Robert, who talked about the Jesus Prayer—both interesting presentations, and especially the Jesus Prayer after my conversation with Sister Makrina a few nights previously. My presentation was about the role of incense in Orthodoxy, and the sisters were kind enough to give me a small brazier and some demo incense to burn during my presentation. It went well, although my focus on just presenting facts was quite different from the opinion and discussion-based presentations that had come before mine.

We had our final lunch and then got on the minibus back to Thessaloniki after many goodbyes and well wishes. I'm already thinking about what I want to include in a letter to the nuns. The bus ride was very quiet. Some people slept, some people looked at the scenery, and some of us just reflected the past week. I was in the latter category.

Postscript

My week at Mount Menoikeion has had a distinct influence on my spiritual life afterward. Getting to see what Orthodox monastic life is like has informed how I understand my church, my priest, and the monastics who occasionally visit our parish. As I mentioned in my last diary entry, I did write the nuns a letter at the beginning of September. I haven't heard back from them, but I hope I will in the next few weeks. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to visit the monastery of St. Anthony and seek out Elder Ephraim's blessing during the summer—I'm tentatively planning to do so during intersession. Meeting the nuns made me realize how important it is to go and get to know Orthodox people who are fully invested in the life of the church, and how important it is to make connections between the different Orthodox churches (Greek, Russian, OCA, etc.). I became the president of Princeton's Orthodox Christian Fellowship this fall, and I hope that our group will be able to do something to help or collaborate with the monastery of Agios Ioannis Prodromou as well as some of their brother and sister nuns who live in the U.S.