

Archive Documents

Romanians in Mount Athos between Religion and Dictate

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Abstract

After a brief introduction on administrative and religious organization of Mount Athos and the foundation of the Romanian hermitages Prodromu and Lacu, the paper demonstrates, based on archive documents, the presence of the Romanian element here since the 9th century. The emphasis falls on the life of Romanian monks in Athos since the second half of the 19th century till present. Their difficult situation, always placed between the religious life initiated and supported by the Romanian Patriarchate and the Romanian government and the Greek position represented by the antiRomanian actions of Great Lavra that control and manage from 1924 to the present day the two Romanian hermitages is highlighted.

Statements in this paper are based on documents that are in the funds of the National Archives and the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Keywords: Romanians, Mount Athos, archive documents

According to tradition, the origin of the monastic life at Athos dates back to the times of emperors Constantin the Great (313-337 AD) and Theodosie (408-434 AD) when the first monks are thought to have settled in the sacred mountains. A few monks in Palestine and Egypt also sought refuge at Athos after Arabs occupied their countries (Palestine in 638 AD and Egypt in 640 AD) and Athos was the place where monks in the

Byzantine Empire found shelter during the iconoclast disputes in the 8th and 9th centuries.

The oldest monastery is the Great Lavra that Athanasie of Athos founded in 963 AD. Iviru Monastery followed in 972 AD and then Vatoped and Filoteu, also before 1000 AD. Then Esfigmenu, Dohiar, Xenofon, Xiropotam, Caracalu, Costamonitu and Zografu were built in the 11th century, Rusicon and Hilandar in the 12th century and monasteries Cutlumuş, Pantocrator, Saint Paul, Grigoriu, Simonpetra in the 14th century.

Along time, the number of monasteries varied with the evolution of historical events. Some of them disappeared, others were assimilated and changed their hierarchies. Twenty big monasteries rule the territory of Athos at present. Besides them, there are also 8 small convents, approximately 20 hermitages, a lot of huts and a few small reclusories. Convents, hermitages, huts and other monastic shelters built on the territory of a monastery are under control and administration. of that. They do not dispose freely of their goods and do not take part in the ruling of the Sacred Mountain.

While a Protos ruled the community at Athos until the 16th century, a board made of the 20 Fathers Superior of the great monasteries has gradually taken the lead. These Fathers Superior who were first named *proisthos* and then *epistates* are organized in 4 men groups (the *Episthasis*) that rule in turns, each group one year, beginning with the first of June and ending with the end of May the following year. The four *epistates* in each group elect one of them as a president who holds the crozier of the Primate and is appointed *Protepistat* or *Protos of the Sacred Mountain*.

The permanent administrative body superior to the *Epistasis* is the Extraordinary Assembly or the Saint *Sinaxis* including representatives of the 20 monasteries. The legislative and judicial body is the Biannual Double Assembly or the Extraordinary Double *Sinaxis* whose members meet twice a year in the small town Careia, the capital of Athos.

The community at Athos was granted territorial and administrative autonomy within the Byzantine Empire, since the 9th century until 1453, when the Empire was conquered by the Ottomans. The Ottoman sultans confirmed and reinforced the privileges of the monks and the 8 contracts (*typicons*) I (972), II (1046), III (1394), IV (1406), V (1574), VI (1783), VII (1810), VIII (1911) ensured the religious, political and administrative autonomy of the Sacred Mountain.

After Byzantium surrendered in 1453 Mount Athos was supported by the Romanian principalities until the middle of the 19th century. With all the autonomy Turks granted, the religious settlements in the Sacred

Mountain couldn't have lasted without the substantial Romanian material and moral aid.

Political events in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century raised the Sacred Mountain problem as an issue at European peace conferences. For example, by Berlin 1878 Peace Treaty the privileges of the Sacred Mountain were reinforced. The situation stayed the same until the Balkan wars (1912-1913). The Greek army occupied Athos in November 1912 and European powers claim the right to decide the fate of the Mountain in the London Peace Conference.

Mount Athos was declared autonomous, independent and neutral in November 1913. The First World War blocked the enforcement of the decisions taken at the London Conference. The Greek government appointed police officers to keep the order at Careia. The Careia Church Assembly in collaboration with a Greek public servant drew up a statute in 1918 that specified the autonomy, neutrality and independence of the community under 1913 London Treaty conditions. Greece recognized the autonomy of Mount Athos by the 1920 Sèvres Treaty and after the Russian-Turk war, the Lausanne Conference (July 1923) decided that Mount Athos would have the status of mandated territory under Greek administration. A commission of five Greek clergymen drew up Mount Athos Statute at the beginning of 1924 and the Statute was signed by the representatives of 19 monasteries in Athos on May the 10th, 1924. St. Pantelimon Russian Monastery refused to sign it. In 1925 the Constantinople Patriarchate accepted the Statute and the Greek government issued a law entitled „On the ratification of the regulations of Athos Sacred Mountain” on the 26th of September, 1926. The law declares that the convents, huts and hermitages are annexes of the 20 great monasteries, settles to 20 the number of monasteries and denies ownership rights to any settlements but the 20 monasteries. At the same time, all monks in Athos should have Greek citizenship irrespective of nationality, convents, huts and hermitages are declared inalienable property of the tutor monasteries. The law forbids transformation of convents into monasteries, of hermitages into convents and of huts into hermitages and also forbids the sale of hermitages and huts without prior approval of tutor monasteries that are declared first buyers. The number of monks that have the right to inherit a reclusory is reduced to three.

Although Greek Constitution has been amended several times after 1926, Mount Athos status has remained unchanged. According to provisions in the 1975 Greek Constitution, Mount Athos represents a self-governing region but it is a part of the Greek state. As religious institution, Mount

Athos is under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Monks in service at Athos obtain Greek citizenship. Greeks assure maintenance of public order and security in the Sacred Mountain. Therefore, the Greek state acts in fact as a leading organ of the Mount, as it has acquired all civil, political and ecclesiastical powers in the region.

Greek, Slavic and Romanian documents dating from the 14th to the 19th century prove that all the monasteries in the Sacred Mountain benefited of maintenance, restoration and endowment by contribution of Romanian rulers, boyars and believers. All Romanian kings from Vladislav I to the last princes in the 19th century dedicated estates, villages, monasteries, woods, vineyards, lakes, customs and mill fords benefits etc. to Athos monasteries. All these dedicated properties brought an annual income of about 7 million piastres in the 1850s keeping into account that the budget of the Romanian countries was then of 50 million piastres which meant that 1/7 of it went to Athos. Such substantial donations made Romanians (people, kings and church) the next most important supporters of the Sacred Mountain settlements after the Byzantine emperors.

Athos documents certify the presence of the Romanian element in Mount Athos as early as the 9th century when the South-of-Danube Wlachs resided there. The donations of Romanian rulers and the presence of Romanian monks in Athos are certified by documents dating back to the second half of the 14th century. In time, the number of Romanian monks in Athos increased and monachal life especially flourished at the turn of the 19th century. Romanian monks would live together with Greek, Russian, Bulgarian and Serbian monks or they would live in their own convents and huts. They built the Romanian Lacu hermitage on the estate of St. Paul's monastery in the 1750s and set foundation of the Romanian Prodromu hermitage on the estate of Lavra monastery in the 1850s. Moldavian monks Justin and Patapie bought Ianucopole convent from Lavra monastery in 1820 but the 1821 events prompted them to go back to their country and the convent property reverted back to the monastery. Moldavian monks Nifon and Nectarie supported by voievode Grigore Ghica and metropolitan bishop Sofronie bought back Ianucopole convent paying 7,000 gold lei and they signed a new contract with Lavra monastery by which the settlement was recognized as Moldavian hermitage. Grigorie Ghica granted an annual fund of 3000 gold lei to the hermitage in June 1853 and the Ecumenic Patriarch of Constantinople reinforced the contract between Lavra and fathers Nifon and Nectarie in June 1856. Nifon, superior of Prodromu hermitage, asked the Metropolitan Nifon of Ungro-Wlachia in march 1857 to give his

blessing for the construction of the new church of the hermitage and to agree with a charity raise register. Permission was granted. (1)

King Charles I certified the right of Romanian Prodromu hermitage to be protected by Romanian laws on the 19th of June 1871 and the seal of the hermitage had the inscription reading „Seal of Romanian congregation” instead of „Moldavian” as acknowledgement of the contribution of all Romanians and of the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia after 1859.

National conflicts started in Athos beginning with the third decade of the 19th century. In turns, Russians then Serbs and Bulgarians obtained representatives in the Careia Assembly (Russians – Rusicon monastery, Serbs – Hilandar monastery, Bulgarians – Zografu monastery). The Greek majority did not acknowledge the right of Romanian monks to distinct organization. They were totally subordinated, both ecclesiastically, canonically and economically to Greek monasteries. Greeks’ attitude towards Romanians was sharpened by the 1863 secularization of the monastic estates in Romania under the rule of Alexandru Ioan Cuza. Thus Greeks lost their most important resources in Romanian principalities.

Under such circumstances, Romanian monks coming from Romania, Transylvania or Bessarabia started to set up small convents and huts buying land or even buildings from Greek monasteries. By comparing three documents – one signed by plenipotentiary Minister of Romania in Constantinople Ghika Brigadier in march 1901, one signed by Prodromu hermitage superior Antipa Dinescu in september 1905 and the historical-statistical memorial on the situation of Athos monks in 1908 – we find out that there were 32 Romanian centers in Athos at the beginning of the 19th century, 628 monks living in the two Romanian hermitages (Lacu and Prodromu) and in the 24 small convents and 26 huts. I shall not present the situation of Romanian convents and huts in this paper.

After the 1863 secularization of Romanian monastic estates that had provided for Athos monasteries, the situation of Romanian monks living in the Sacred Mountain visibly deteriorated. Monk Ghedeon from Prodromu drew out a report (2) on the situation of Lacu hermitage on the 8th of June 1881. After describing the barren land on the estate of St. Paul’s monastery where the hermitage had been built, Ghedeon remarked that the Greeks had allowed Romanian monks to settle there because „the place is difficult to reside in especially for the Greeks”. Romanian monks had to pay an annual tax to St Paul’s monastery and Ghedeon wrote that „they sell this place every year to Romanians but the place is still Greek”. (3) The clergyman of Prodromu described in his report the situation of „serfs for Greeks” that

marked the Romanian monks at Lacu hermitage living in 50 houses built by themselves. Some monks were living alone and others were sharing their cells with one, two or three others. Each of the 50 houses was considered „property” and was subordinated to St Paul’s monastery which „is the only one entitled to decide for them as it pleases”. There were three clergymen of the hermitage acknowledged at the monastery level, one „representative” (*dichiu*) and two members appointed for one year. The hermitage representatives had to observe the agreement with the superior monastery „and not favour the nationality of the residing monks”. The Prodromu clergyman pointed out the servitude of the monks at Lacu hermitage as „in brief, there is no Romanian ruling there but a Greek one”. He demonstrates further that „this place is always on sale and never sold” (4).

The functioning of the network formed by the 20 independent monasteries in Mount Athos and the subordinated hermitages and convents is then explained. The monks residing at Lacu hermitage would buy their cells from St Paul’s monastery by paying an annual tax. If they had to sell their houses, a third of the price had to be paid to the monastery. If the inhabitant of a cell died and had no heirs (*diadoh*), the cell became property of the monastery and if there was a heir, he had to pay a third of the room’s price to the monastery. Furthermore, the fact was pointed out that „no one is allowed to have more than two apprentices” which contributed to the frequent sale and resale of cells and provided income for the superior monastery.

Moreover, it was specified that the monks at the hermitage „cannot develop relationships to any church or political authority in their own name or in the name of their country of origin but only in the name of the Greek monastery.” Such lack of autonomy implied that „the monastery could transform Lacu hermitage into a Greek hermitage any time because its name is Lacu hermitage of St Paul’s monastery and not of Romanians although we name it Romanian Lacu hermitage but that is just a name and it is not acknowledged by the superior monastery St Paul or by any other authority. (5)

As for the maintenance of the monks at the hermitage, the report said that some of them would come with money from Romania and lived by it while others would craft spoons and crosses „but all of them have to dig in the vineyards of the Greek monastery and to pick their hazels and olives.”

Working on the monastery estate made life difficult for the Romanian monks at the hermitage. Monk Ghedeon acknowledged that clergymen should be humble but he said that „humble be before God and

avoid temptation” and they shouldn’t be humiliated by banishing assertion of their nationality and „the righteous spiritual progress of their nation that should be considered equal to other nations and not humiliated”. In fact, the monk at the other Romanian hermitage Prodromu, who was involved in a long time fight against Lavra monastery to obtain acknowledgement of equitable relations between hermitages and monasteries, showed in his report the consequences of lack of equal rights for foreign monks at Athos and of the domination of Greek clergymen in the Sacred Mountain.

Ghedeon wrote that most monks at Lacu hermitage were poor and could not pay the annual tax. That is why the Romanian state helped them with the annual 1200 lei subvention. The report explained how the money was spent to pay the tax to St Paul’s monastery for all the monks, to repair „what they all needed, i.e. churches and mills”, to cover expenses for the celebration of the patron Saint Dimitrie’s day „and not to wander from one Greek church to another begging” and to give to the poorer ones if they could spare a small sum.

The abbot and sponsors would present a report at the end of each year, before the assembly of the hermitage, telling everybody how the subvention had been spent. Some monks were in favour of dividing the subvention between them after receiving it, which would have led to hardships for poorer monks because „those who had would take more and those who didn’t have would take little or nothing and they would be forced to find money to pay the tax and if they needed to repair a building or need money for common expenses they would have to beg from the Greeks”. Therefore, the report considered that the subvention was spent correctly.

One can infer from the same document that monk Ghedeon was not aware of the behaviour of the new superior of the hermitage but there were rumours about monks arguing on the spending of money. The superior had deposited the 1880 subvention at Prodromu hermitage with an annual interest rate of 5% because „there was disagreement between them or they didn’t need the money then”.

In the end of his report, the Prodromu monk suggested that the Romanian government „should command them to spend the money in the manner detailed above... Or if the government considers proper to share the money between them, then let them beg from foreigners when they have common needs if they consider such a behaviour honourable” (6).

Superior Iustin and the 67 monks at Lacu hermitage sent a memorial to the Romanian Consulate in Thessaloniki on the 24th of march 1883 complaining that they „had great financial difficulties being exploited by

the Saint Monastery” so that they had to cut their garden trees to use the wood for heating. Their annual tax had been raised from 12 to 25 Ottoman liras and „most of [them] are not able to earn their daily bread” so they had to ask for a few pieces of crumbled bread from the Russian monks residing in St Pantelimon’s monastery. Such poverty came as a reaction of Greek monks to the December 1863 secularization of Romanian monasteries previously devoted to the Sacred Mountain. Angry at that, Greek clergymen said to Romanian monks at Athos to go to their government who had taken their lands. More than that, the church at Lacu was in an advanced state of decay: „It leans against wooden beams, it is about to fall down and we are not allowed to restore it” (7). The monks asked the Consul: „Do not forget us, think as God will enlighten you and send reports wherever is appropriate to ease our needs” (8).

The subvention was granted for Lacu in the following years, sometimes delayed but the hermitage had a precarious situation compared to that of Prodromu hermitage. On the 12th of May 1905 Archimandrit Antipa Dinescu, superior of Prodromu hermitage, wrote a memorial for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction specifying that the Romanian monks at Lacu hermitage had asked the superior St Paul’s monastery officials to be allowed to rebuild their church dedicated to patron Saint Dimitrie on the same foundation as the old one that had gone to ruin. „They have obtained permission to rebuild on condition they give to the monastery the necessary sum and let the Greeks hire masons and carpenters who are to be paid by charity money collected by Romanian monks and who are then to work for the superior monastery too. They have charmed them by praise and promises and took much money from them, making them pay for a marble iconostasis and a lot of repairs inside the cathedral of the monastery and also to pay for particular gifts”. Antipa Dinescu explained that the new church of Lacu hermitage had been paid for twice only because „they would give the money to the Greeks who exploited it as they liked”. When the Romanians wanted to dedicate the new church, the Greeks asked them to pay an extra 500 Turkish liras „for the benefit of the monastery, in order to buy back their church once more. As they didn’t have the money, they were allowed to officiate only partially the religious service. We shall see what comes next” (9).

Lacu hermitage had no help from the country during the First World War. An address to prime Minister I. I. C. Brătianu sent on the 21st of July 1919 specified that there were 70 monks living in the hermitage „only the One God knows how”. The monks had pawned their rooms out of poverty.

They were asking for help „from our mother Patriarchate and from its counsellors to provide support as they will.” The address was signed by the superior, by clergyman (*ieromonah*) Nicolai and sponsors Sava Rădulescu and clergyman (*ieromonah*) Iosif. (10)

Superior Ioanichie and the hermitage sponsors authorized clergyman (*ieroschimona*) Damaschin (aka M. Beju, a Transylvanian Romanian, owner of Annunciation convent within Lacu hermitage) on the 10th of August 1920 to cash the 1915-1920 subvention granted by the Romanian government. Ioanichie asked the government to give the monks „wheat instead of money” and other useful goods for the hermitage dwellers „because life is expensive in the Greek country and Romanian currency is not accepted” (11). The report added to the authorization wrote that no subvention had been cashed for period 1915-1920; 1,400 lei had been provisioned for 1920 and the fund had been carried forward for years 1917-1919.

Monk Eftimie who was the superior of St. Nicholas convent within Lacu hermitage wrote to the bishop of Romanian Argeş district Visarion Puiu on the 15th of March 1922 that he had paid all his debts but the superior St. Paul’s monastery „does not allow me to live here anymore on various unsubstantial reasons. They have ordered me to sell my house which I haven’t done yet. Now they have warned me that they are going to throw me and my apprentices out.” Contemplating „trouble, insecurity and lack of any support in that foreign land”, the monk at Athos and his apprentices had decided to seek reclusion in a Bessarabian hermitage „where we won’t stand in anyone’s way and we won’t be slaves to foreigners anymore”. They asked Visarion Puiu to show his good will to them as in previous times „and we will be grateful all our lives to the man who will free us from foreign slavery in a country where judges are executioners alike and we cannot complain to anyone” (12).

Monk Eftimie Movilă, superior of another St. Nicholas convent within Lacu hermitage, wrote to the same bishop Visarion Puiu recommending him clergyman (*schimona*) Inochentie in Ascension convent lead by clergyman (*ieromonah*) Ioachim as „a monk leading a good life [who] with God’s help was seeking blessing and help to be able to visit the Argeş Diocese and other monasteries”. Monk Eftimie had the intention to visit Romania himself „if events get calmer... Everything is expensive and at shortage in Mount Athos and I don’t know how long this will last” (13).

Monachism in Athos Mountain went through a crisis after 1924 and Lacu hermitage knew both spiritual and material decay. The old monks were dying one after another. Greek authorities were seriously discouraging

young monks to come to the mountain. Convents were deserted and went to ruin. The process became more radical after 1945 when the Romanian communist regime ceased any relation to Mount Athos and the believers' aids could no longer reach the sacred place. There were only 4 old monks at Lacu hermitage in 1975 lead by clergyman Neofit Negară. Three young monks went there from Romania in 1976: Iulian Lazăr, Meletie Ifrim from Sihăstria monastery and Melchisedec Ghițun from Putna monastery (14).

There are only 10 convents and a few ruined ones left within Lacu hermitage at present and 40 Romanian monks are living there:

The most important convent is Annunciation convent with 9 monks lead by superior Ștefan Nițescu.

St. Artemie convent – 8 monks, superior father Pimen;

St. Prophet Elijah's convent – 2 monks, superior father Sofronie;

Meeting Lord convent – 4 monks, superior father Paisie;

St. Nicholas convent – 5 monks, superior father Rafael;

Mother of Lord Veil convent – 3 monks, superior father Isidor;

St. Anthony the Great convent – 4 monks, superior father Nichifor;

Assumption of the Virgin convent – superior monk Pimen Vlad.

The Romanian government should resume granting subventions to help maintaining Lacu hermitage following the procedure started in 2007 for Prodromu, the other Romanian hermitage in Athos. The isichast monks living in the convents within Lacu hermitage are leading a sanctified life of humbleness, restraint and prayer.

Prodromu hermitage has also gone through many troublesome periods partially because of the conflicts among monks and partially because the attitude of the Constantinople Patriarchate towards them.

At a certain moment, Romanian monks in Prodromu were not united as some of them took sides with Lavra monastery and others stayed loyal to the Romanian cause, trying to obtain the promotion of Prodromu hermitage to the statute of monastery.

Prodromu monks sent several addresses to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (15) and Public Instruction which were sent further to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (16).

The aspiration of Romanian monks toward the acknowledgement of their national community rights was grounded. They worked for a long time to obtain the promotion of the Romanian Prodromu hermitage to the status of monastery with all the resulting rights. Thus Prodromu would have joined the other 20 monasteries in Athos among which 17 Greek, one Russian, one Bulgarian and one Serbian. The monks also considered any other solution

that would have assured a national status to their ecclesiastic settlement. They just envisaged administrative and economic aspects and never debated theological matters or the issue of religious authority. Their Romanian aspiration was rightful also because of the constraints imposed by Greek clergymen. Romanian monks were subject to abuse when it came to contracts, taxes and tributes, land working, building new churches or houses, investing monks and accepting new-comers in the hermitage community. They had great difficulties with ordaining or promotions and with gaining access to wood and water sources. (17)

A group of Romanian monks from Prodromu wrote to the Minister of Religious Affairs on the 13th of June 1881: „limiting the number of monks empowers Lavra monastery to rule inside the hermitage. It would be highly humiliating for Romanians to be counted like cattle by Greek monks as only the Romanian hermitage is subject to such a restriction compared to all other local Greek, Russian, Bulgarian and Serbian hermitages of all categories and such a pretension doesn't observe the spirit of the foundation act of the hermitage. And we are not allowed to take the timber that we have paid for and we have still to pay 1,000 lei in old currency in the future in order to have the right to use it for our household needs” (18).

Another address of Prodromu monks on September 29, 1881 pointed out the biased position of the Constantinople Patriarchate that promised support to the Romanian representatives on one side and on the other side they denied and restrained the rights of the Romanian settlements. Romania's Consul in Constantinople Alexander Fara asked an audience to the Patriarchate to discuss the situation of Prodromu hermitage as a messenger of Romania's Metropolitan. The Patriarch answered to the diplomat: „the 1876 decision against the rights of our hermitage was not ill-intended and the Patriarch promised that if the hermitage engaged into peace negotiations with Lavra according the His Holiness decision on the 13th of august instant year and they didn't reach an agreement then His Holiness would enforce a better contract than the 1876 one. Such were the promises that the Constantinople Patriarch made to honourable Mr. Dimitrie Brătianu, honour. Mr. N. Bordeanu and Honour. Mr. Olănescu, first secretary of the Romanian Legation in Constantinople saying that by the 1876 contract he would not attempt upon the rights of our Romanian hermitage before enforcing the 13th of august instant decision. But these promises have proved false, as it results out of the above-mentioned decision. He is not going to fulfil either his new promises to Mr. Fara but he just wants to take advantage of an opportunity. That is why they enterprise

anything so as the issue of our hermitage wouldn't be treated as a political one and the hermitage status wouldn't be formally acknowledged by the Ottoman government. Their aim is to deprive the hermitage of all its rights the Great Church acknowledged by the 1876 contract and to block the right of the Romanian government to defend this sacred shrine, pushing it into the sphere of influence of His Holiness and the Lavra Greeks" (19).

Romanian monks begged Romanian authorities not to believe „the false promises coming from Phanar as the Greeks will have not fulfilled any of them and they never will but they just want to take advantage of the situation (and it is a shame that Greeks should play upon the Romanian nation as if it were a string puppet) ... If we miss the chance of progress offered by article 62 of Berlin Treaty we waste any hope of moral and material prosperity and a very good opportunity of development (20).

Article 62 of the Berlin Treaty that Romanian monks had referred to in their address provided international guarantees for the Sacred Mountain: „ecclesiastical people, pilgrims and monks of any nationality ... will have the same rights, advantages and privileges... Whatever their native country may be, monks in Mount Athos will keep their previous possessions and advantages and they will enjoy equal rights and treatment without any exception" (21).

Following the 1880-1890 conflict with Prodromu hermitage, Lavra monastery officials pursued their own interest. Teodosie Soroceanu, leader of the Romanian Brothers Community in Mount Athos and superior Antipa Dinescu of Prodromu wrote a series of letters to the government and to the Romanian Orthodox Church asking that the hermitage should be promoted to the status of monastery like the other twenty Athos settlements. „17 monasteries for the Greeks, one for the Russians, one for the Serbs and one for the Bulgarians are enough for the moment and we consider it as a homage to the Romanian countries to fight for a monastery of our own as it is humiliating for us as a nation not to have one" (22).

The Romanian state increased support for Romanian monks in Athos. During the Balkan wars the political situation of the region changed as in november 1912 the Greek state conquered the Chalkidic Peninsula and declared it in a state of siege. The Ottoman authority was annulled but the autonomy of the Sacred Mountain was still guaranteed. The situation of Athos monks was discussed at the London Conference and a few solutions were proposed: 1) Athos will remain a part of the Ottoman state, preserving its former status; 2) Athos will become an autonomous part of the Greek state; 3) Athos will become an independent organization under international

guarantee. The Romanian ambassador to London N. Mișu suggested that Romanian authorities should reach an agreement with Greece in order to obtain „at least a vote in Careia (Chinotita) Assembly by buying the autonomous rights of a deserted monastery or by giving our convents the statute of independence, which is going to be more difficult” (23).

Careia Assembly decided on the 3rd of October 1913 to preserve the former system, transferring the rights of the Ottoman Empire to the Greek kingdom and rejecting the idea of making Mount Athos international and neutral. Romanian monks in Athos missed a favourable opportunity to get a positive response to their demands in the summer of 1913.

Another conflict burst out at Prodromu in 1914 opposing a part of the monks to superior Antipa Dinescu who was accused of having violated the 1891 regulation. The superior was expelled by force out of function and hermitage. G.C. Ionescu who was then General Consul of Romania in Salonic was sent to settle the conflict. He concluded in a February 1915 address that the rebellion had been set up in Lavra monastery and that „disorder and lack of honesty are going to reign in Prodromu as they do in Greek monasteries” (24). The Prodromu conflict went on between 1914 and 1917 and burst out again in March 1919 because the expelled instigators were re-installed in the hermitage by help of Greek authorities.

Documents in the funds of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts and DANIC mention that Prodromu monks elected clergyman (*protosinghel*) Simeon Ciomandra as superior in April 1920 but he was not confirmed by Lavra as he was born in Macedonia and according to article 4 in the Synod’s 1883 decision a superior could only be a Romania – born Romanian. As a consequence, new elections were organized in 1921 and Hrisostom Apostolache became superior of the hermitage.

Romania’s Metropolitan Miron Cristea submitted to the Ministry of Religious Affairs an address in July 1922 requiring intervention to Greek authorities in order to obtain the hermitage independence and the appointment of a representative in Careia Assembly (*Chinotita*) (25).

Nevertheless, the frequent replacement of one superior by another and the conflicts among Prodromu monks went on bringing grave prejudice to the image of the hermitage and discrediting the actions of Romanian authorities.

The 1924 agrarian reform in Greece lead to the expropriation of Athos monasteries estates. Only the estates of the Serbian Hilandar monastery and the church of Prodromu hermitage on Thassos Island had not been expropriated yet. The Greek government decided in the autumn of

1927 to have the Thassos church expropriated and to confiscate its harvest, olive trees, tools and wine press without paying any damages and threatening thus the very existence of Prodromu hermitage.

The period that followed was extremely difficult for Romanian monks at Athos and especially at Prodromu. They were dependent on Lavra monastery, they didn't have a representative in the Careia Church Assembly to defend their rights, their estate on Thassos island had been expropriated, they were obliged to become Greek citizens to which added internal conflicts among monks which were fuelled by Lavra, debates on the adoption of the new calendar, bad administration of the hermitage estate in Romania and then the break of connections to Romania after the establishing of the communist regime. Under such grave circumstances, the most important Romanian hermitage in Mount Athos decayed economically and the monks decreased in number without being replaced by Romanian apprentices.

Romanian Patriarch Justinian took part in the celebrations dedicated to the millenium of church life in Mount Athos in June 1963 and he visited Prodromu hermitage. The hermitage had well-kept gardens and 18 monks were still living there lead by archimandrit Veniamin Popa who had replaced clergyman Arsenie Mandrea in 1946. The superior remarked the fact that Justinian was the first Romanian Patriarch visiting the hermitage and he appealed for help to repair the buildings and church and to send monks to Romania in order „to refresh the monachal staff” (26). But that was to happen only ten years afterwards. Archimandrit Veniamin Popa ruled the hermitage during 1946-1975 and was replaced by clergyman (*protosinghel*) Ilarion Lupașcu during 1975-1984. Four young monks from Sihăstria Monastery came to the hermitage in 1975 and 8 more monks settled there during 1978-1985. Petroniu Tănase, a remarkable Athos theologian and confessor, has been superior of the hermitage since 1984.

16 monks were living at the hermitage in 1986, six of them in their fifties and the rest young monks 27 to 35 years of age. The Romanian state donated a tractor with a trailer and a small lorry to the hermitage in the 1980s. As compared to the past when it had estates in Romania and on Thassos island, at present Prodromu hermitage is one of the poorest monastic settlements in Mount Athos.

By help of the Romanian state and other sponsors, part of the hermitage workshops have been restored after 1990, the main church, library, bakery, synodicon, the southern, northern and western wings of rooms, the guest house, the kitchen and canteen have also been restored and

the water supply system has been improved by installing metal waterpipes and building two water tanks. A driveway has been built to link Great Lavra to the hermitage.

27 Romanian monks are living now at Prodromu under the lead of venerable archimandrit Petroniu Tănase.

Law 497 enforced on April 23rd 2007 set up the legal frame for the financial support that the Romanian state provides for Prodromu hermitage. The Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs allots from the Ministry budget an annual sum equivalent to 250,000 euro to „cover restoration, repair and maintaining expenses of the buildings and four churches on the hermitage premises and also to cover expenses for editing promotional materials and supporting the activities of the hermitage monks” (27). The Romanian Parliament modified article 4 of the above mentioned law on april the 7th 2008, specifying that the allotted sum is destined to cover expenses for „restoration, repairment, maintainance and administration of the buildings and the four churches on the hermitage premises; to cover expenses for purchasing fixed goods on the basis of the legally approved investment list; maintainance and production activities inside the hermitage; payment for hand made work and services; support of the practical and spiritual needs of the monks; accomodation of pilgrims; editing of promotional materials for the hermitage” (28). Thus the tradition of supporting a center of high spirituality has been resumed after a half of century interruption.

As a conclusion, we would assert that:

Romanian monastic settlements in Mount Athos still represent Romanian orthodoxy and Romanian society shouldn't look indifferently at the decrease of the number of monks in Athos and the decay of their settlements. The fact that the Romanian government supported constantly Athos communities in the second half of the 19th century up to the First World War sets an example for the governments in our days who should take measures for maintaining at least the two hermitages and the few convents that are still surviving grace to the admirable effort of the monks who continue the Romanian tradition in the Sacred Mountain.

The 250,000 euro subvention granted to Prodromu hermitage by the Romanian government in 2007 is the first sign that Romanians haven't abandoned their conationals who have chosen to lead an isolated life in Mount Athos and pray for their people. Nevertheless, the same financial and material support should also be granted to Lacu hermitage and to the 140 year old convents who are maintaining Romanian monastic tradition.

Therefore the Government, the Patriarchate and the Romanian society should join hands to provide a decent life for the Athos monks as they should be able to represent the values of Romanian orthodoxy in Mount Athos. To put it in the words of superior Petroniu Tănase of Prodromu hermitage: „The documents we have kept are living proof of what these monks have thought and did far away from their country but acting at the call of their Romanian national conscience” (29).

References

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