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The Icon of Virgin Mary in Epirus through the Centuries

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Translated in English by:
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T.E.I. of EPIRUS



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PANAGHIA (VIRGIN MARY), A CENTRAL FIGURE IN CHRISTIAN FAITH

“Orthodox tradition takes the one and unique face of “Theotokos” (meaning the Mother of God), multiplies and transforms it, gives it names and qualities according to the history, the manners and the customs of each region, without, however, destroying, not even in the least, her uniqueness. And although one would expect this multi-fragmentation to lead to confusion, on the contrary, it reveals the unlimited love of believers, the unappeased and ceaseless lust of children to see and talk to their Mother, according to their personal needs, requirements and particularities.” [1]

Through the ages, people’s innate need to believe and reveal their pain, and to ask for help and support from a power beyond the limits of their own powers, indeed found its full expression in the face of Virgin Mary. One of the main qualities attributed to her since the beginning of Christian Faith is that of the “mediator” between people’s problems and God’s mercy¹. She is the one who makes the hopes and desires of believers real, the one who acts as a mediator, an “ambassador” for human prayers and requests; the one who hasn’t lost anything of her human nature and has become approachable to people, even though she is “the perfect woman”. The certainty of Virgin Mary’s mediation is considered a fact and can be seen in all manifestations of faith towards her face. It also becomes clearly apparent in the way she is depicted in the various alternative illustrations of her as the “Beseached” and in the believers’ direct appeals for mediation.

The presence of Virgin Mary has also been crucial to the domination and spread of Christianity. *“In the conscience of idolaters, Panaghia’s face came as a substitute of “the Great Goddess” of the Aegean Civilization. In all Ancient civilizations the female deity has supremacy over the male one. I would say that the adoption of the worship of Panaghia by the patriarchal circles of the Church was the result of public demand. During the first centuries the Church was trying to decide whether the birth was sinless or not. The honour to Panaghia is officially established by the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus in 431 A.D. and of Chalkidona in 451 A.D. Only then was the adjective “Theotokos” (meaning “the Mother of God”) attributed to Panaghia. During the same period, the peoples of Europe, bound up with their pagan doctrines, were reluctant towards Christian bishops. However, the presence of Panaghia was attractive... For them, the female meant the source of life and food, tenderness, compassion, solidarity.*

¹ *“The Mother of God Mary is honoured by both Churches, Catholic and Orthodox, as a figure which deserves the highest honour, and which comes right after the Holy Trinity in rank of importance. She is honoured not only as a simple Saint but as The Holy Virgin and as Panaghia” [2]* (a saint above all others), who acts as a mediator for us and carries our prayers for the realisation of our desires to her Son. For the Catholic Church this is the main quality of Virgin Mary, who is honoured solely as a “mediator”.

They found all these notions in the face of Panaghia..."². Thus, Virgin Mary became a figure familiar even to people of other religions while at the same time she became "Theotokos" (the Mother of God) for the Orthodox Church.

This is the main quality that was attributed to Virgin Mary by the Orthodox Church³. Since the 4th century, her figure had become the apple of discord between Cyril, who considered her to be Theotokos (the Mother of God), and his rivals for the patriarchal throne of Constantinople, who considered her as *Anthropotoko* (the mother of man) and *Christotoko* (the mother of Christ) [3]. The 3rd Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) declared Virgin Mary as "Theotoko" (the Mother of God) and gave an end to the conflict. She is officially the woman who gave flesh and blood to the Word of God and gave birth to His Son. Till today, the title "Mother of God" is inscribed right next to her depicted image.

In the conscience and the hearts of Christian people, she is not only the Mother of God, but also theirs. Especially for the Orthodox people and the people of the Mediterranean in general, the face of Virgin Mary is one and the same with that of their own mother. The social institution of the family is especially honoured and the Orthodox tradition, according to which God is identified with the father of the family, Christ with the brother and Virgin Mary with the mother, is accepted. "*The most important person in one's life is his mother... When people come to pray, "mother" is the word that you hear coming out of their mouth all the time.... And they mean Virgin Mary. They sense Virgin Mary as their own mother*"⁴ ... Thus, she is the mother of the Son of God and, at the same time, the mother of all people, a unique role that praises her female nature.

The emphasis on the female nature of Virgin Mary upgraded the role of the female, established the presence of the female element in Christian Faith and helped in the equality of the two sexes. As it was pointed out by Patriarch Proklos in one of his *Homilies* [4], Virgin Mary is the reason why *all women are blessed*. Indeed, as the descendant of Eve, the disobedience of whom is considered to have brought death in our world, the female was considered to be sinful, and in some cases cursed, and for many years bound up with prejudices that affected her social status. Mary's ministrations as a woman, as the archetype of the woman who took the place of the first woman, Eve, through which virginity was lost, commences with the Annunciation. She became the "key" figure of human history since the fact that a mortal woman carried in her perishable and mortal vagina the one who is "Achronos" (meaning that time can not harm Him) and "Achoretos" (meaning that He does not fit anywhere), and gave birth to "Theanthropos" [1] (meaning God and man at the same time), offered from the early years of the Christian Church an excuse for a special relationship with her and paved the way for the equal treatment of both sexes.

Moving further, after the reinstatement of the worship of the holy icons in 843 A.D. the program for the wall painting of churches was finalized and the place of Virgin Mary was clear from the beginning: placed, mainly as "Platitera ton ouranon" (meaning broader than the skies), at the conch of the sanctuary, that is the place where the earth is symbolically united with the sky, in a highly important and male dominated place of the church, she replaced the cross on the arches [5] and imposed the presence and participation of women in the process of the Holy Mass. Furthermore, the depiction of

² An approach of the journalist, historian and author Christos Chalazias, as it was published in the article entitled *Panaghia: The Mother of God*

³ Contrary to the Catholic Church, where, as it was mentioned earlier, the quality of the "mediator" is the one emphasized and solely honoured.

⁴ The personal account of prioress Charitini, Monastery of Kato Panaghia in Arta, 13-1-2008

Theotokos and scenes of her life in other important parts of the interior of churches confirms the close relationship between the woman and the divine, secures her right to participate in the process of the Holy Mass and compensates, in some way, for the absence of female priests in Christian religion and for banning women from the sanctuaries of churches.



All the above mentioned qualities which have been attributed to Virgin Mary are acknowledged and praised by the whole Christian world in many different ways, which will be analysed in another chapter of this paper. However, as it will become clear later on, the specific historical, cultural, social and economic conditions in the region of Epirus determined the intense nature of faith and its expression.

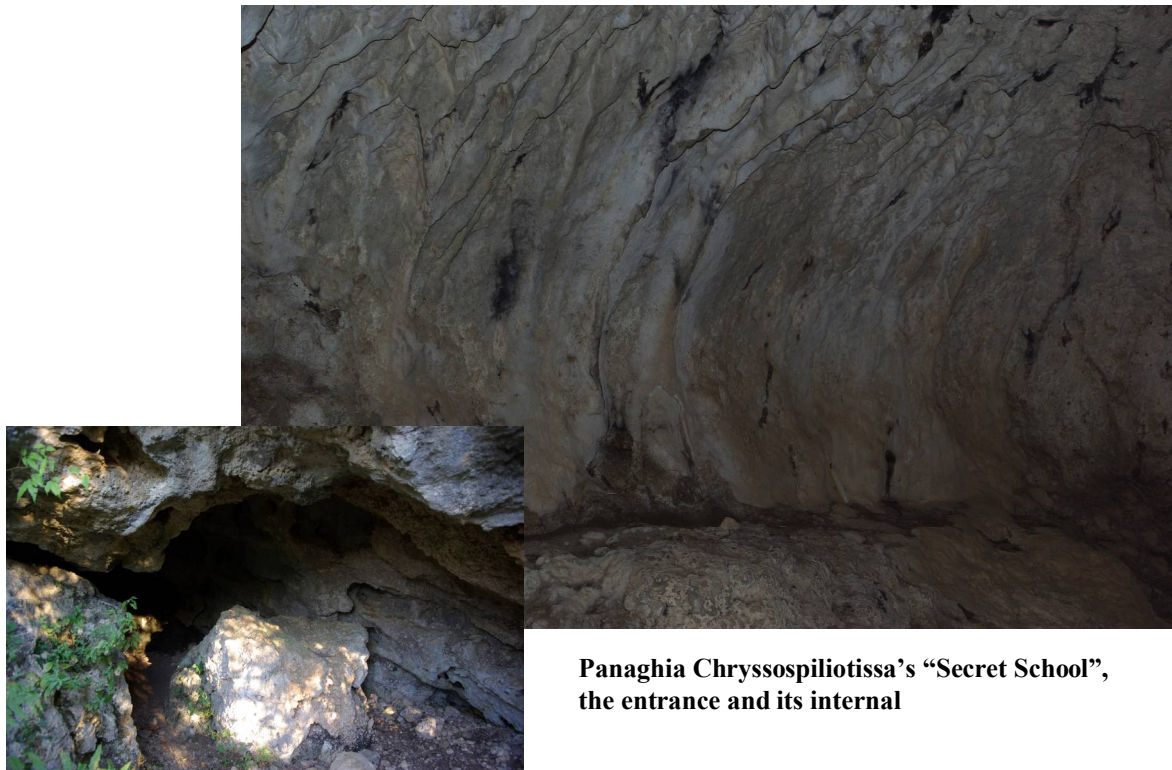
PANAGHIA IN EPIRUS: A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP PANAGHIA AS THE PROTECTOR AND HELPER OF THE PEOPLE OF EPIRUS

In Epirus, the figure of Virgin Mary was honoured and loved in the highest degree. The reason for this ceaseless love is not other than the extreme difficulties that this small region of Greece has faced for centuries – though in a smaller scale nowadays.

Epirus, a tortured region with a long history of oppression and slavery under Turkish rulers, used faith and intense religious feeling as the means to retain its identity. It is here that the Turkish conquerors fought Christian religion to the end. Yet, Christians managed to keep their faith alive under really difficult conditions. During that period and the difficult years that followed the figure of Virgin Mary constituted the moral grounds for all Christians. Within this hopeless situation of continuous battles, oppression, and lack of freedom, the only thing that kept national awareness, the Greek language, humanity and hope for a better future alive was religion. The figure of Theotokos or Panaghia, as people called her, also played its role. It was on Her that local people pinned their hopes – more than on any other saint. She was there for everybody; she was the mother of the poor, of those who fought at the front, of the women who were left behind, waiting for their husbands and sons to return from the battle, but also the mother of those carrying ammunition to the weakened and hungry fighters and soldiers.

Byzantine Epirus had already bequeathed to local people a lot of churches and monasteries dedicated to Virgin Mary. It was there that they sought to find shelter, to pray, even to learn how to read and write. In Epirus, many monasteries dedicated to Virgin Mary, especially those built in rough and inaccessible places, became the shelter of Christians, witnesses of battles and sacrifices, assisted financially in the preparation of onsets, and supplied food and weapons during the Ottoman domination and the Greek Revolution. In the prefecture of Thesprotia the monastery of Giromeri (a centre of onsets and shelter of the fighters), in the prefecture of Ioannina the monastery of Panaghia of Molyvdoskepastos (it was a base of operations and a centre of charity), the monastery of Tsouka (one of the most important shelters for rebels of the area) and the monastery of Kipina (with its 240-metre cave where the residents of nearby villages found shelter and safety during the difficult times of the Ottoman domination), in the prefecture of Arta Panaghia Chryssospilotissa (which was a base of operations), the monastery of Seltos (where the people from Souli found shelter and died heroically) and the monastery of Rovelistas (with its financial contribution) are some of the most striking examples of the relation and the connection between the image of Virgin Mary and people's belief that the cause of their struggle was right and that was the reason why their Mother would help them. The seminary that was housed inside the monastery of

Panaghia of Rovelista served also as a secret school. According to written accounts in books and the lines of a folk song, there was also a secret school in the monastery of Giromeri, the classroom of which is still intact, while a few metres away from Panaghia Chryssospilotissa there is a small cave especially shaped to function as a secret school.



**Panaghia Chryssospilotissa's "Secret School",
the entrance and its internal**

People of Epirus proved to be leaders during the preparation and progress of the Greek Revolution of 1821, always finding the highest encouragement in their faith in Virgin Mary. To set an example, those who were initiated to Filiki Heteria⁵ (Society of Friends) swore on a picture of Virgin Mary. According to the written accounts of General Makrygiannis [6], Virgin Mary offered him guidance in his struggle against the Turks as well as personal advice on how to improve his social behaviour.

Thus, the great faith in Virgin Mary on behalf of both the people of Epirus and all Greek Christians during the Ottoman domination and the Greek Revolution is obvious. For this reason, in Athens on the 25th of March in 1838, when the first official celebration of the Greek Revolution took place, by a decree of King Otto it was determined that the 25th of March would be celebrated as the day of National Regeneration, although the Revolution had started a few days earlier. In fact, the choice of this particular date shows the importance and the major role that Christianity played in the lives of Greek people, as the "time" that the Greek Revolution broke out was also considered the "time" for religious elation.

Panaghia and Freedom
Two sacred words
Two words with a meaning
That fills our hearts

⁵ The founding of Filiki Heteria in 1814 was the first decisive step for the preparation of the Greek Revolution in 1821. One of the three founders was Nikolaos Skoufas, who came from Epirus, and was taught how to read and write in the church of Panaghia Kassopitra in Arta.

With thrill and awe.
The Mother of all people
Universal Mother
And cherished Freedom
The dream of all people
With a heavenly glow, they shed light on
Two visions, two unfading ideas
...Come! Fighters
Don't ever stop,
They are both yours:
The MOTHER and FREEDOM
And the hearts of all of us are with you!⁶

Liberation from the Turks came later for Epirus compared to other regions of Greece. People from Epirus, however, never stopped believing in and honouring Virgin Mary by building monuments which, while not much impressive in shape, constitute evidence of art and spiritual activity in the area during the Ottoman domination. Such an example is the church of Panaghia Kassopitra in Arta [8], which was constructed in 1732, was later on destroyed and reconstructed with money raised by the believers in 1820⁷. The miracle working icon of Virgin Mary can still be found on the marble iconostasis (icon screen) of the church. The oppression that slavery entailed is utterly evident by the frescos and the small size of the churches of that period. The view of M. Hatzidakis is typical of this: “...they prove the vital need of a nation to retain its identity through the most difficult political, economic, and living conditions, the art not being left uncontrolled but evolving at a slow pace, influenced by the fate of Greeks and the changing intellectual horizons...” [10]

The role of faith in Virgin Mary in Epirus is also outstanding during the Second World War. Her role was catalytic not only because she constituted the basis of people's faith, but also because, with her miraculous interventions, she proved to have been the greatest ally of the Greek army on the snowy and rough mountains of Epirus.

Of course, miracles and apparitions were reported in many regions of Greece during the war, but at the front, at the Greek – Albanian borders and on Pindus, Virgin Mary was the protector and the leader of those who fought for their country under difficult circumstances. Their faith was so strong that they could see her encouraging them and “covering” them protectively, while they were fighting on the snowy mountains of Pindus and Albania.

The account given by Vassiliki Bouri⁸, niece of Spyridon Houliaras, who fought at the borders, is characteristic. According to it, Spyridon Houliaras used to narrate incidents of the war to his relatives before he died. The one that affected him the most, however, was a miracle of Virgin Mary. While the soldiers were fighting under really adverse conditions, Virgin Mary appeared in front of them and as a protector “covered” them with her mantle and led them towards their enemy, ready to confront them.

This miracle is also corroborated by the accounts of other soldiers of that time who fought on the mountains of Pindus. At the front, Greek soldiers saw the same vision everywhere: at nights, they could see a tall, slim woman figure walking with her

⁶ Poem by Popi Matsouka – Zachari from Arta entitled: The message of 25th March [7]

⁷ Seraphim Xenopoulos [9] refers to the existence of a cemetery for the fighters who lost their lives in the battle of Arta in 1821, but today there is no evidence to support its existence

⁸ An oral account given by Vasiliki Bouri, resident of Lepiana in Arta, to Heleni Mpalaska on 3/11/2007

kerchief resting on her shoulders. For the soldiers she was no other than Virgin Mary, the defender general of Greeks.

Tasos Rigopoulos, a soldier in 1940, reports from the front: *I'm writing from an eagle's nest 400 metres higher than the top of Parnitha. Everything around me is snow-white. The reason I'm writing [...] is to share with you what I've experienced, what I saw with my own eyes; something that I'm afraid you won't believe if you hear it from others. A few moments before dashing against the blockhouses of Morova we saw a tall woman dressed in black standing still some 13 metres away. The guard yelled: "Identify yourself". There was no answer. He yelled angrily once more. At that moment, as if struck by electricity, we all whispered: "Panaghia!". She hurled herself at the enemy as if she had eagle wings. We followed her. We could constantly sense the bravery she was transmitting to us. We fought hard for a whole week until we finally took the Ivan-Morova blockhouses. [...] She was always dashing forth. And when, victorious at last, we were advancing to defenseless Koritsa, our Defender turned into steam, smooth smoke, and vanished into thin air". [11]*

On the mountain ridge of Ronteni, the soldiers of the 51st independent battalion, under the commands of major Petrakis also witnessed a miracle. From the 22nd of January and on, every evening at half past nine the enemy's heavy artillery commenced fire against the battalion and the road that was used by transport vehicles. There was a lot of nervousness and heavy casualties. The daring scouts were unable to locate the enemy's artillery. Apparently, the enemy was changing its position every evening. The situation was really desperate. It was an evening in February when the enemy artillery was heard firing once again. "*Panaghia, help us, save us*", shouted the major spontaneously. Suddenly, a bright cloud came into sight from a distance, something like a halo was formed and the image of Virgin Mary appeared. She started bending towards the ground and stopped right over a ravine. Everybody in the battalion shivered as they witnessed the miracle. "*Miracle!*", they shouted and they prayed. Immediately, they sent a message to the Greek artillery, the Greek canons fired, and right after that there was a silence. The Greek bombs had achieved a perfect strike. [11]

"No matter how faith is expressed during war, it is certain that it offers assistance to the soldier who is tested. And the image of the protector makes him hopeful and optimistic. ...People from Arta, fighting at the front, were afraid neither of mortars nor of enemy bullets, as long as they had the image of Panaghia in front of them...". [12] Yiannis Tsarouchis, after having painted "The Virgin of Victory" on the cap of a box of herring, having in mind a badly painted picture of the Virgin that was going around the camp, he was on his way to the commander of the battalion in order to present his work. The painting had already acquired a fame of being miraculous and on his way to the commander some soldiers from Arta "*being in a state of religious excitement, demanded that the miraculous icon spend at least one night at their camp. All the soldiers were shouting: "The Virgin, the Virgin. Leave it here for one night". Suddenly, the alarm sounded. [...] we lied down, according to the orders we had. None of the soldiers from Arta did the same. "Hey! Comrade! How can you be scared when you hold the Virgin in your hands?"*", one said". [12]

It was also characteristic that on the military identification cards, right next to the personal details there was a picture of Virgin Mary. And just moments before they attacked, they would pray, shout "*Panaghia mou!*" (my Virgin) three times, and dash forth⁹.

⁹ An account of a fighter of the Resistance which was presented in a special programme of the TV channel SKAI on 28 October 2007

The importance of Virgin Mary's miraculous interventions was acknowledged right after the end of the Second World War. For this reason, the celebration of Agias Skepis, which in 626 A.D., when Her miraculous intervention saved Constantinople from the Avaroi (Turkish-Mongolian Nomads), was officially established to be celebrated on October 1st, was transferred in 1952 on the 28th of October to remind them of her miraculous intervention during the most difficult period for Greek people.

In Epirus, Virgin Mary plays an equally important role: that of the helper in the fight against disease.

Even today, according to the priest Dimitrios Athanasiou, a procession of the miraculous icon of Panaghia of Rovelista takes place in the parishes of Komboti, Limini and Megarchi in the prefecture of Arta, to remind us of Virgin Mary's miraculous intervention when she saved these villages from the plague epidemic. When the plague epidemic struck the town of Arta, 300 families of all religions found shelter in the monasteries of Kato Panaghia, Theotokio and Vlacherna, which offered their help to them and contributed in saving the poor, while the town was left uninhabited for 14 months. [9] [13]

The most recent incident¹⁰ is mentioned by the 70-year-old K. Tsintzas according to whom Panaghia helped him overcome his illness. When he was a child, some health problems caused him inexplicable fever and was unable to eat or walk. His problem could not be medically explained but he managed to overcome it, as he firmly believes, with the help of Panaghia Chryssospilotissa. According to his account, while he was in Ioannina for extensive medical tests, his mother had a vision in her dream in which Virgin Mary showed herself and told her not to worry about anything. After all the unsuccessful attempts of the doctors to diagnose the disease and find a remedy, he and his mother were found on the way to their village. After walking for many hours, with young Konstantinos on the back of his mother, they finally reached the place where the road that goes up to Chryssospilotissa meets the main road. There, having the vision in her mind, his mother looked up to the place where the monastery is and prayed. Virgin Mary worked her wonder and the next day, Konstantinos was able to eat and walk again.

“No matter how much the world has changed, people have faith within their hearts. Today, many young people come here, especially couples. They come here to find the peace that they can't find in the world outside” said¹¹ the prioress Charitini of the monastery Kato Panaghia contradicting the common belief according to which young people do not consider matters of faith to be important. *“Monasteries that are dedicated to Panaghia constitute landscapes of unique beauty, a kind of mental beauty, and they affect your soul in a way that you cannot explain”*, said a young couple that we met at the monastery of Molyvdoskepastos¹² (pic.4). In our days, people, especially the young, turn to Her because they feel a deeper, unfeigned and honest need to communicate with the Divine, without asking most of the times for something particular. That was pointed out by the nuns of the monastery in Theotokio¹³ in Arta. *“Although our monastery is not one of the most visited in the area like, for example, Kato Panaghia, people come here to pray. Many young people come... Young children*

¹⁰ Oral account by Konstantinos Tsintzas, given to Andr. Oikonomou on 15/8/2007, in the village Romano in Arta

¹¹ Monastery of Kato Panaghia 13/1/2008

¹² Monastery of Panaghia Molyvdoskepastos 17/8/2007

¹³ Monastery of Theotokio 13/1/2008

are more spontaneous and honest... The young are just looking for peace, they don't ask for something in exchange...”.

“Believers come to our Panaghia full of faith and pain, and miracles happen even in our days, as people who visit our monastery say” said prioress Charitini. In these miracles, Theotokos has a direct contact with people [11]. Sometimes, she appears in people's sleep, while some others can feel her presence only through her voice or some kind of scent. Her image does not cause the awe or fear that man feels before God, but intimacy.



Monastery of Panaghia of Molyvdoskepastos, peace of place, peace of mind

THE WORSHIP OF THE ICON OF VIRGIN MARY THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Virgin Mary has probably been the dearest figure in Christian religion. This becomes clearly apparent if we consider the numerous ways of worship, officially established by the Church, which have been enriched by the faithful themselves, who constantly seek ways to express their need to communicate with God. In Epirus in particular, Virgin Mary is honoured and worshiped in a variety of ways

Ways to worship Virgin Mary and their special character in Epirus

1. Religious Painting

This is of the most substantial and oldest ways to worship Virgin Mary. Icons, both portable and in-wall, depict her image, which has been depicted in a variety of ways through the centuries.

Brief history of icons in Greece with emphasis on worshipping icons and frescos depicting Virgin Mary.

According to Charles Delvoye [5], Byzantines used to call “icon” every religious depiction, portable or not, no matter what technique was used to create it. Today, we use this term only for portable paintings. As far back as the 4th century A.D., we find icons of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary and other characters of the Christian religion, with the help of which, the first distinct elements of Christian faith begin to appear. Soon, these icons became the object of true worship, not to mention the fact that wonder-working qualities were attributed to many of them.

The 3rd Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431 A.D. is *a worth mentioning milestone in the history of the honours to Theotokos*, as professor Kon. Charalambidis [14] mentions. “*After Nestorios condemnation and the dogmatic declaration of Virgin Mary as Theotokos and Mother of Christ, a new wave of worship and artistic expression in honour of the mother of the second member of the Holy Trinity started*”.

The worship of icons was spread even more during the second half of the 6th century and in the 7th century, as they were considered effective mediators, and Christians often turned to them, asking for the help of the figures depicted, in difficult times of both their public and private life. So, people filled their homes with icons of all sizes, the smaller of which people could easily carry with them.

The legend of icons not made by human hand but sent to people by God, which was invented during the second half of 6th century, brought forward the world of holy

miracles¹⁴. Believers, however, felt the need to believe that the icons depicted the external features of each person and, therefore, considered the first icons of Virgin Mary to have been painted by Evangelist Lukas [14].

Only a few icons of this period of the first Byzantine years have been saved. During iconoclasm (war on icons) (720-843 A.D.), icons were still drawn, secretly though, since both makers and possessors were punished even with death. So, Christians could only express their faith within their homes, where they had icon stands. Icons in these little stands functioned as private worship places during the difficult times of iconoclasm

The reinstatement of the holy icons and the end of iconoclasm in Byzantium in 843 was the beginning of a new period of creativity, during which icons were produced at an increasing rate. Virgin Mary is the prevalent figure among the depicted saints. Consequently, from the early till the later Byzantine times, the figure of Virgin Mary was the focal point of the interest of painters of holy icons. She not only the character depicted the most, but also the one that presents the greatest variety, due to local traditions and needs. *“There’s no other figure for which the Art of the Churches (meaning both Orthodox and Catholic) has created so many depictions and so many types as for Virgin Mary”* [2]. Indeed, from the 6th to the 15th century, there were numerous representations of Virgin Mary on frescos, illustrated manuscripts, ivory, marble and steative bas-reliefs, metalwork and fabric-work; however, portable icons were the most widespread.

After the fall of Constantinople, icons, among which those of Virgin Mary too, were still being created, though under new terms and conditions. Her figure has a prominent position both in painters’ and customers’ preferences, as icons, in general, acquire, from the 15th century on, commercial value – together with their religious value – and are subjected to market rules [15]. Under these new conditions, there was a variety of depictions of Virgin Mary, as a result of mass orders. Some of the most prevalent iconographic forms of Virgin Mary are the following: Vrefokratousa (i.e. holding her baby), Mesitria (i.e. mediator), Queen or Panaghia Enthroni (i.e. sitting on a throne), Panaghia tou Pathous (i.e. the Virgin of suffering) and the Route of Iesse, the Assumption and the Annunciation of Virgin Mary.



**Queen or Panaghia Enthroni (i.e. sitting on a throne),
Monastery of Panaghia of Vlacherna, Arta**

¹⁴ The original icon of Panaghia of Faneromeni in Lefkada, a replicate of which we can see today, is an example of this. The people of Lefkada commissioned hagiographer Kallistos. However, the icon appeared miraculously drawn on a piece of wood and the only thing that Kallistos did was to paint it in colour. That’s why it was called Faneromeni (meaning “the one that appeared”).

Parallel to portable icons is the history of frescos. The first Christians experimented a lot with regard to church iconography, which reflects their nostalgia for ancient Greek glory and at the same time their insecurity concerning the iconographic plan they had to implement. From the very beginning, Virgin Mary was one of the most popular figures.

During iconoclasm, religious icon art was condemned. Under these circumstances, even the icon of Virgin Mary, which used to decorate the corner of the apse of the sanctuary from the early years of Christianity, was replaced by a cross. Nevertheless, after iconolatry prevailed in 843 A.D., the formal iconographic plan of churches was established, and Virgin Mary held a prominent position as one of the dearest figures of Christian religion. Virgin Mary in the form of Platitera (Broader than the skies) replaced the cross on apses, a position held even in our days in the overwhelming majority of newly-built churches. Scenes of Virgin Mary's life are placed in key places, such as the narthex and above the western entrance, where quite often the Assumption of Theotokos is depicted. The scene of the Annunciation is enriched, becomes a standard depiction and constitutes an integral part of iconographic plans of churches, emphasizing in this way the role of Virgin Mary as Theotokos (the Mother of God)."



**The Assumption of Theotokos,
iconography above the western entrance in the Church of Hypapanti in Lepiana, Arta**

The evolution of religious painting in Epirus with emphasis on Virgin Mary's icons

In Epirus, a lot of icons are created from the earliest years of the Despotate. “*The existence of local icon workshop in Ioannina seems to have been certain; a similar workshop may have existed in Arta as well*” [16a]. From 1542 to 1600, the School of Ioannina, a very powerful local “school”, is founded and its influence comes down to the 18th century. From 1600 on, a large number of guilds can be found in rural rather than urban (Ioannina, Arta) areas. These gradually transform the pompous style of older works into a more realistic one, by turning to western art more and more.

The paths of the introduction of western elements were quite a few. The Venetian dominated Ionian Islands seem to have been the most important “bridge” through which western elements could pass into Ottoman-dominated Epirus. In the West, human figures superseded divine ones, thus creating secular painting that almost replaced religious painting. Baroque, which follows the Catholic Church in its attempt to command respect and strengthen its position, is the mainstream of western painting in the 17th century. In the 18th century, baroque art would totally conquer the Ionian Islands, which sever the link with Byzantine tradition and enter the sphere of western influence [17]. The westernisation of the Ionian Islands had already been prepared by the middle of 17th century, through the settlement of Cretan painters there, after the occupation of Crete by the Turks in 1669. These painters had already created some important icons of Virgin Mary by adding elements of Italian style in them since the 15th century. All these trends were assimilated by Ionian Islands’ painters, who attributed more realistic and real life characteristics to the figure of Virgin Mary, looking for the “specific” and the texture of things, and emphasising on her feminine nature. The establishment of the “Ionian School” by Panagiotis Doxaras in the early 18th century signified the beginning of a unified, *italianised style* [16b] and the turn of eastern art to the West.

Nevertheless, we should point out that despite the western influence on painting in Epirus during the late Byzantine years, this influence primarily has to do with the arrival and trading of icons rather than the clear adoption of iconographic elements and styles, and it is much more evident in coastal areas of Epirus. The strong presence of the Church in Ottoman-dominated Epirus, contributed to its resistance in the introduction of western artistic elements through its perseverance in conservative Byzantine tradition and style.

Portrayals and names of Virgin Mary

As already mentioned, Virgin Mary is the figure of Christian religion painted the most. Odigitria (i.e. leader), Dexiokratousa (i.e. holding baby Jesus in her right arm) or Aristerokratousa (i.e. holding baby Jesus in her left arm), Eleousa (i.e. merciful), Panaghia of Vladimir, Galaktotrofousa (i.e. feeding baby Jesus with milk), Vlachernitissa (i.e. of Vlacherna), Gerontissa (i.e. of an old age), Pantanassa, Platitera, Zoodohos Pigi (i.e. source of life), Panaghia tou Harou (i.e. Virgin of death), Agiosoritissa, Rodon to Amaranton (i.e. the rose that does not wilt), Panaghia of Vatos, Kardiotissa, Psychosostria (i.e. soul saviour), Amolyntos (i.e. pure) are only some of Her depictions found in Greece. Several of these are widely spread in Epirus, the area under discussion.



**Panaghia Galaktotrofousa (i.e. feeding baby Jesus with milk),
fresco in Panaghia Lambovitissa in Thesprotiko, Preveza**

Generally speaking, Epirus has a considerable number of icons of Virgin Mary, as well as a lot of remarkable icons that are of religious, historical and archaeological interest. Apart from the most common depictions, it is worth mentioning an icon of rare

topic; it is a fresco found in Panaghia of Brioni in Arta, named Panaghia the Aimatodakryoussa (i.e. crying with blood tears). Another unusual topic is found in the narthex of Panaghia of Vlacherna, depicting the procession and carrying of the icon of Odigitria taking place in Constantinople every Tuesday.



Depiction of the procession and carrying of the icon of Odigitria taking place in Constantinople every Tuesday. Fresco in the narthex of Panaghia of Vlacherna near Arta

It is also worth pointing out that some iconographic types foreign to indigenous traditions [16] emerged in Epirus. Such case is the icon of Portaitissa¹⁵ (i.e. Virgin Mary of the gate), which gave its name to the now collapsed monastery of Panaghia Portaitissain Kostakioi, Arta. One can only see the church of this monastery, which is a dependancy of the Iberian monastery on Athos (Agion Oros). Another icon is Lambovitissa, after which a monastery that existed in Thesprotikon, in the prefecture of Preveza, was named. Its church is still intact and many people go there to worship God.

The existence of so many names attributed to Virgin Mary reflects the special conditions and needs of the faithful of this district, which is exactly the case with other regions of Greece. Panaghia Vella, Panaghia Ntourachani, Panaghia of Abel in Ioannina, and Panaghia of Brionis in Arta are examples of churches or monasteries that were named after their owner. Rovelista, Chryssospilotissa, Spilaiotissa, Stomiotissa, Plakiotissa, Lambovitissa, Parigoritissa, Eleousa, Paramythia, Megalochari, Iketevousa,

¹⁵ During the reign of the iconoclast emperor Theophilus, an icon of the Virgin in the possession of a pious widow and her son from Nicaea in Bithynia was cast into the sea to save it from the destructive frenzy of its pursuers. Many years later it reappeared... After the Virgin herself gave a sign to the abbot, the icon was taken to the Catholicon of the monastery by a humble Georgian ascetic, Gabriel by name, who had walked across the waves to pick it up. Eventually, after another sign from Theotokos, the icon was placed in the chapel, which had been built for this purpose at the entrance of the monastery, to be its guardian and protector: hence it acquired the name "Portaitissa" [18]

Portaitissa, Vlacherna, Evangelistria, Faneromeni, Moschovitissa, are names associated with the recovery of the icon or some miracle, the place of its origin or the place it was found, as well as qualities that are attributed to it by local people.

What follows is a brief mention of the relation to neighbouring Italy. “*Icons belong to Orthodoxy and are only guests in the West. Catholicism, however, does not oppose to worshipping them, since their first days go back to the period when Church was still one thing, long before the Schism*” [19]. Thus, some of the names that were given to Virgin Mary by people of the Orthodox Church, were used by Catholics too, a fact that is indicative of the interaction between peoples as far as religion is concerned. This mutual influence extends to the adoption of common iconographic styles, even from the early Byzantine times. A typical example of this, is the depiction of the Mother of God with little Jesus in the form of Odigitria and other forms related to it, such as Eleousa, Glikofilousa, and Panaghia of Pathos. Panaghia Odigitria is undoubtedly one of the most popular forms of depiction of Theotokos both in the East and the West. Vrefokratousa Theotokos (i.e. holding her baby), shows the way to the faithful with her hand and leads them to the way of God, while at the same time she shows the course of her Son. Andreas, Archbishop of Crete, who lived in the 8th century A.D., verifies the fact that icons of Odigitria had already been sent to the West from as early as the 7th century A.D. The works of western painters take as a necessary prerequisite the type of Odigitria, which is either copied or modified [2].

2. Prayer and invocation

Prayer constitutes one of the most common ways of worship and an effort to communicate with God. Praying to Virgin Mary is something that the faithful in Epirus as well as all Christians do quite often. A prayer to Virgin Mary may consist of specific words or hymns that are consecrated in Christian religion, such as the Akathistos Ymnos¹⁶ (i.e. the standing hymn) or constitutes a spontaneous personal expression. The latter is common everyday practice of Epirus residents.

3. Feast days

Until the 4th century A.D. there were no feast days dedicated to Virgin Mary in the church calendar. At the beginning of the 5th century, some eastern and western churches started honouring Her with special feasts. The Assumption was formally established in the middle of 5th century, the Nativity at the beginning of the 7th, the Presentation during the 6th century, and the Annunciation in the middle of the 6th century. The Roman-Catholic Church, proclaimed the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary” in 1854.

From early years till today, fêtes taking place in church yards and the central squares of villages and towns constitute an integral part of the feast days of Virgin Mary in Epirus. The lines “*Maria is the Virgin’s name, Maria is your name too...*” from a popular folk song are heard in all fêtes in Epirus. This is yet another proof that the figure of Virgin Mary is totally interwoven with the different aspects of people’s social life in Epirus. In addition, the Holy Mass is quite often followed by a litany of the icon

¹⁶ It is called “Akathistos” (standing) because believers are standing when they sign it. It is also called “Hairetismoï” (salutations) because the word “haire” (hail) is prevalent in the hymn, as it is repeated 158 times.

in the courtyard, or even in the streets of villages and town so that Her blessing spreads on every part of them.

The most prominent feast days of Virgin Mary are:

a) The Assumption of Theotokos on August 15th. It is the most prominent feast of Virgin Mary and one of the most important of Christian religion. In Epirus in general, where a large number of churches is dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary, there are three-day feasts that people from all places of Greece attend almost everywhere. In many areas, the Holy Mass is followed by a procession of the icon of Virgin Mary, while in Theotokio (a monastery in Arta) the nuns decorate the epitaph and chant encomiums during the Evening Mass on the day before the feast. Another brilliant celebration takes place in the monastery of Panaghia of Molyvdoskepastos in the prefecture of Ioannina, not to mention every church or monastery dedicated to Her grace. Olympia Skarjiotis recollects the feast day of the Assumption of Panaghia Plakiotissa, which celebrated the Assumption of Theotokos even though it was dedicated to Her Nativity: “...each year, a supplication followed by a Mass would take place every day throughout the first 15 days of August. Pilgrims, bringing their blanket and food with them, came to the monastery [...] to spend at least one night close to Her grace, to attend the Mass and receive holy communion. It was considered huge blessing. I remember leaving the village early and walking for almost two hours [...]. The moment we got into the monastery, we would run to the church to find the best place, as close as possible to the miracle-working icon, because we thought that the closest we got to the icon, the more blessing we would receive from Her holy image”. [22]

b) The Nativity of Theotokos on September 8th. Most monasteries of Epirus are dedicated to this feast day, after the Assumption. The feast day of the Nativity of Virgin Mary is celebrated with pomp and circumstance in the monasteries of Kato Panaghia in Arta, Panaghia Rovelisti, Panaghia Lambovitissa in Thesprotiko in Preveza, and many other monasteries, churches and chapels around Epirus. Similar to the Assumption, this feast is followed by two-day or three-day fêtes and festivities, with crowds of people attending. In older times, a brilliant fête followed the feast day in the monasteries of Panaghia Chryssospiliotissa and Panaghia Plakiotissa. “In old times, Her feast day (The feast day of Plakiotissa) coincided with a two-day fête [...]. After the Mass, pilgrims would dance and have fun”. [22]

c) The Annunciation of Theotokos on March 25th. It coincides with one of the two main Greek national holidays, the declaration of the Greek Revolution in 1821. This day is celebrated with pomp and circumstance in the church of Parigoritria in Arta, where a lot of people are gathered to pay their respects to the old icon of Virgin Mary, which is decorated and placed in the centre of the main church. Crowds of people also gather at monastery of Evaggelistria in the village Ano Pedina in Ioannina.

d) The Presentation of Theotokos on November 21st. In some parts of Greece, especially the mountains Tzoumerka, there are festivities that follow the Holy Mass. It is also known as the feast of Panaghia Polisporitissa.

e) Zoodochos Pigi (i.e. the Source of Life) is celebrated on the first Friday after Easter Sunday (it is a movable feast). The icon of Zoodochos Pigi, which is kept in the monastery of Kato Panaghia, is taken to the church of Odigitria in Arta.

f) The Katathesi of Timia Esthita, on July 2nd. It's the feast of the church of Panaghia in the village of Vlacherna.

g) Novena of Virgin Mary on August 23rd. The monastery of Seltos celebrates on this day even though it is dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary. Also Panaghia

Prousiotissa in Graekiko in Arta, where a fête follows, is the place where crowds of people from the villages of Tzoumerka gather.

h) Agia Skepi on October 28th. On this day, Virgin Mary is honoured as the protector of the Greek nation.

4. Hymns, psalms, kontakia, encomiums

Many psalms, hymns, and encomiums have been composed for Virgin Mary. It is worth pointing out that in several monasteries in Epirus hymns are composed in order to honour Virgin Mary with the specific quality that is attributed to Her in each separate case. Typical examples of this are the encomiums chanted in devout atmosphere in Theotokio, in the prefecture of Arta and the enchanting canon for Panaghia Rovelista. On Her feast day, the nuns decorate Her miracle-working icon, crowds of people swarm to worship it, and the Holy Mass is enriched with the encomiums for Theotokos, called Rovelista, chanted by the mellifluous voices of the nuns and offering a unique experience to all those attending it:

“Hurry and help
In difficult times
Those who ceaselessly ask for your help
Miraculous, solemn Rovelista”

“Rivers of miracles
Your solemn icon
Gashes, Panaghia Rovelista,
For those faithful seeking your help” [28]

5. Vow, pilgrimage, fasting

For Christians, paying their respects by kneeling in front of holy icons is probably the most common way to beg for Virgin Mary’s mediation. On the day of the feast, the holy icon is decorated and placed in the centre of the church and lots of people come to kneel before it. Fasting before an important Christian feast is another common practice.

Vows and offerings is common practice for all Christians throughout Epirus, as well as for the rest of the Christian world. People praying for Her mediation usually promise to offer one of their favourite personal belongings or even a big or small candle. In many churches and monasteries of Arta Virgin Mary’s icons are almost covered with the offerings of the faithful.

A special manifestation of faith is also the “offering” of children to Virgin Mary. Most of the times, this is “incited” by a fear during a difficult pregnancy. In this case the salvation and safety of the newly born child is undertaken by Virgin Mary who, as a mother Herself, suffered unbearable pain when Her son died. According to priest Dimitrios Athanasiou, another such manifestation of faith in Virgin Mary in Epirus is walking to the monastery. In fact, sometimes this is done by women walking barefoot, after several days of fasting.



Panaghia Gerontissa (i.e. of an old age) adorned with the offerings of believers, Monastery of Kato Panaghia, Arta

Small offerings, evidence of the unlimited love and faith towards Panaghia, Monastery of Kato Panaghia Artas



6. Sainly toponyms (names of places)

Names of locations are another domain in which local people's love towards the face of Virgin Mary is apparent and clearly manifested. The most common toponym is "Panaghía" but others referring to some quality of Her are not rare. Eleousa, Vlacherna, Faneromeni, Pantanassa, Panaghía, Panaghiá and Megalochari are some toponyms in the prefecture of Arta; Zoodochos and Theotokos are found in the prefecture of Ioannina; Paramythia, Our Lady Panaghiá and Faneromeni in the prefecture of Thesprotia and Panaghía and Agia Faneromeni in the prefecture of Preveza.

7. Construction of churches and monasteries

One of the most important and most favourite ways of worship of Virgin Mary is the construction of churches and monasteries, as well as chapels found in every district of Epirus, dedicated to Her grace. Even in the most distant villages on the mountains of Epirus, one can find small churches and monasteries dedicated to Virgin Mary, some of which are of great historical and archaeological value.

According to our data, collected with the help of priest Dimitrios Athanasiou, the total number of monasteries (active or not) dedicated to Virgin Mary today is 108 out of an overall total of 274 monasteries in Epirus. In a region of 336.392 permanent residents, the total of monasteries and parish churches dedicated to some saint is 992. Of these, 297 (30%), thus 1 church for every 1132,6 residents, is dedicated to some of the feast days of Virgin Mary – the Assumption and the Nativity being the most common. Apart from monasteries which were constructed because of some kind of miracle, the construction of a greater number of churches and monasteries was the result of local people's faith and devotion.

The most important reasons to build a church or a monastery in Epirus are, as elsewhere, the miraculous way that some icon of Virgin Mary was found, the appearance of the Virgin herself or, most commonly, the need to "house" the faith of local people and express gratitude to Her.

THE ROAD OF MIRACLE

Monasteries and temples in Epirus the construction of which was the result of a miraculous apparition of Virgin Mary or a discovery of a wonder-working icon

Prefecture of Thesprotia

MONASTERY OF THE ASSUMPTION OF VIRGIN MARY IN GIROMERI

The construction of the monastery of the Assumption of Virgin Mary in Giromeri, which is built in a really picturesque landscape in the homonym village in Filiates, on the mountain Farmakovouni of Thesprotia, was due to a miracle. [20]

Osios Nile the Erichiotis, was the founder of the monastery. Because of the fame he had acquired, the residents of Thesprotia requested that he visit their area. Osios (Saint) Nile, who was then 80 years old, accepted their invitation and initially settled in an old place of asceticism, opposite to the current location of the monastery. After the arrival of other monks from the area, the first fraternity was quickly formed.

For days, the monks had been observing a light shining on the mountain opposite to theirs. Prompted by the light, they went there and found themselves in front of the icon of Panaghia Odigitria that the light sprang from. The monks interpreted this incidence as Virgin Mary's wish to build a monastery there, and that was exactly what they did. The icon of Virgin Mary was placed in the catholicon of the monastery on an icon-stand made of carved wood.

The fresco on the catholicon, depicting Evangelist Lukas creating the icon of Virgin Mary, is important for its originality but also for its age.

The contribution of the monastery of Giromeri both during the Greek Revolution and National Resistance was important. It constituted a sally centre as well as a refuge for Greek fighters. During the Ottoman domination the monastery housed a secret school the class of which still exists, while according to evidence Father Kosmas spoke there to a crowd of 11.000 people on April 16th, 1775.

The monastery of Giromeri is one of the few monasteries of Epirus which are still manned and active. Today, it has undergone an impressive renovation. It functions according to the rules of monasterial life and accepts pilgrims daily from dawn till dusk.

Prefecture of Ioannina.

THE MONASTERY OF PANAGHIA DOURACHANI

In Amphithea in Ioannina, on the shore of the lake Pamvotida, the monastery of Panaghia Dourachani is built. The construction of the monastery is due to a miracle that took place in 1434, four years after the final subjugation of Ioannina to the Turks in 1430. At this time, Dourachan Pasha, ruler of Roumeli, came to Epirus in order to suppress a rebellion. It was winter and snow had covered everything. Dourachan Pasha reached the eastern shore of the lake, which was frozen and covered with snow, and without realising it, he crossed it along with his troops and reached the opposite shore. When he was informed about the grave danger he and his army had been in, he attributed his salvation to some miracle of Virgin Mary, as there was an iconostasis of Virgin Mary exactly where he crossed the lake. Dourachan Pasha changed his faith and founded a monastery that was named after him, in order to show his gratitude to Virgin Mary. [21]

Today, the monastery attracts the interest of the locals for another reason too: the monastery houses an orphanage under the supervision of its priest. The social work taking place there is really remarkable.

THE MONASTERY OF TSOUKA

The monastery of Tsouka, found in the village Hellinikon in Ioannina, was built at the edge of a 760-metre high cliff, overlooking the gorge of the river Arachthos in 1190. The construction of the monastery was due to a miracle of Virgin Mary, the icon of which graces the interior of the church even today. According to tradition, the wonder-working icon of Virgin Mary was found on the rock of Tsouka. Wishing to protect the icon, local people built a small chapel in close distance and placed it in it. However, the following day, the icon was found again at the same place on the rock. That was interpreted as a miracle and the monastery was built right over the place where the icon was found. It was named after the top of the hill it was built, since the expression “Tsiouka Analta” means “a high mountain top” in the language of Vlachs (local Nomads).

Its contribution during the Greek Revolution was important since it functioned as a religious and national centre. Apart from that, it was one of the most important shelters for local Greek fighters in all national struggles.

Today, it is the most important place of pilgrimage in Ioannina and it celebrates the feast day of the Nativity of Virgin Mary on September 8th.

THE MONASTERY OF PANAGHIA PLAKIOTISSA

The historical monastery of Panaghia of Plaka or Panaghia Plakiotissa is located in the borders of the prefectures of Arta and Ioannina, between the mountains Tzoumerka and Kserovouni, at the edge of the small settlement Plaka. It used to house an icon of Virgin Mary, the miracles of which made the monastery a major attraction for faithful from the area of Tzoumerka.

The first verified miracle [22], due to which the monastery got its name, took place long ago, when the monastery, which was inhabited by many monks, was quite wealthy and used to possess huge herds of goats and sheep. The monastery's shepherds used to take the herds to the grazing fields of a slope of Kserovouni opposite to the monastery. However, the residents of that area, who wanted the forest there to be used as grazing place of their herds only, decided to drive the monastery's herds away from it. So, a group of them went to the forest and violently drove the shepherds and their herds away. The shepherds returned to the monastery and told everything that had happened to the abbot. Then, he went into the church, took the icon of Virgin Mary off the icon stand, went back outside, stood in front of an old tree with a huge cavity (hollow) on it, and looking at the slope he said: “*My Virgin, look what they have done to you*”. Then, he placed the holy icon within the cavity and after covering the entrance with a branch, he said: “*My Virgin, I won't let you out of there unless you work your miracle*”. It wasn't long before a small cloud appeared right over the forest where the herds of the monastery used to graze. It quickly grew bigger and started pouring down so heavily and for such a long time, that the forest could not absorb any more water and started sliding down the slope. When the rain was over and the sky was clear of clouds, the monks got out to see what had happened. A huge slab of white, shining rock had appeared right where the beautiful forest used to be. Virgin Mary had worked Her miracle and so, the abbot took the icon back on the icon stand. After that, both the place and the village were named Plaka (i.e. slab), and the monastery was named Panaghia Plakiotissa.

In recent times, sacrilegious people broke into the monastery and stole the icon and other curios. After some time, the icon was recovered but was not placed in the monastery for safety reasons.

In the past, Her feast day was followed by a two-day fête. Today, the monastery is not active and it has lost most of its prior glory.

Prefecture of Arta

THE MONASTERY OF PANAGHIA CHRYSOSPILIOTISSA

Close to the village Gourgiana in Tzoumerka, there is the monastery of Panaghia Chryssospiliotissa [26], situated in a difficult to reach, but otherwise impressive location, which has probably been sacred since ancient times. [24]

The monastery is of great interest since it is not only picturesque, but also important in terms of typology. Today, only the church remains from the initial cluster of buildings. It is dedicated to the Nativity of Virgin Mary and it was built in the 11th century [9]. However, it acquired its present form after the renovation which took place in 1663, according to an inscription placed in a conch on the south wall.

Close to the sanctuary, there is a cave where the icon of Virgin Mary was found. The recovery of the icon was interpreted as a miracle and led to the foundation of the monastery. *“In a case that the residents of Gourgiana were being persecuted, they hid the icon of Virgin Mary in the cave of Zografos, which was difficult to find, in order to save it. Many years later, when the icon was recovered, their descendants built a monastery there that they dedicated to Panaghia the Spiliotissa (Virgin Mary of the Cave). Today, the icon is kept in the “Mega Spilaio” (the Great Cavern in Kalavryta) for safety reasons, since it is considered to be one of the 5 icons created by Apostle Lukas, and it is called “Megalospiliotissa”. It was very difficult for raiders to find the entrance of the cave since it was a really small hole, covered with holm-oaks, and that was why it was used as a shelter by people leaving nearby...”* [25]. It was in this cave that the historical icon was found by a shepherd (according to some others, a group of shepherds) from the village Platanoussa, which lies exactly on the opposite mountain. According to tradition¹⁷, for a long time, shepherds from Platanoussa could see a strange light shining during the night exactly where the hidden icon was found, and their curiosity led to the recovery of the icon. A small church, which was later expanded and became the monastery, was built there.

The tradition relevant to the foundation of the church was depicted in a portable icon that used to embellish the wooden icon stand, which was a unique piece of fretwork. It was the icon of the Nativity of Virgin Mary, created in 1831, for which the academic P. Vokotopoulos [27] wrote that *it was of inferior artistic interest compared to the rest of the icons on the icon stand*, however, its worship was one of the most important reasons that led the faithful to this difficult to reach monastery. Nowadays, on this artistically unique, wooden icon stand one can see icons created in recent years.

Even today, people attribute numerous miracles to it, and they turn to it to pray in every difficult moment of their life, having faith in it with all the strength of their soul.

THE MONASTERY OF PANAGHIA ROVELISTA

The foundation of the monastery of Panaghia of Rovelista [28] situated 30 km away from the town of Arta, at the location Radovizia, is attributed to a miracle. The construction of the monastery is closely related to the miracle working icon, placed in the interior of the main church.

In 1906, close to the place where the magnificent monastery stands today, Georgios Kostoulas, from the village Velentziko, founded a small private church,

¹⁷ This tradition is widely spread in the area of Tzoumerka and many people referred to it during our visit to the monastery.

dedicated to the Presentation of Virgin Mary. Right next to the church, he had two small cells built for the priests that would officiate there at times.

During the same period, an Archimandrite, named Amvrosios, who happened to visit the area, spent some days as a guest at the church. He had an icon of Virgin Mary with him which was of medium size (0,27 x 0,32 m). It is said that the icon came from Moscow and it was constantly emitting an incredible scent. That's why it is still called "Panaghia Moskovitissa" (i.e. Virgin Mary from Moscow). During Amvrosios's stay, the icon was placed on a throne inside the church.

One morning, entering the church for his usual prayer, Amvrosios realised that the icon was missing. The following nights, shepherds that roamed the area could see a light coming from the place the monastery is situated today, but since the forest there was extremely dense, it was impossible for them to pinpoint the exact location. One night, one of the shepherds observed the light carefully and placed his crook on a tree in such a way that it was pointing exactly at the place that the light was coming from. The next morning, he headed to the direction that his crook was pointing and he found the icon among the brambles. He sent for father Amvrosios and so the icon was taken back to the church.

The next day, however, the icon was missing once again. Amvrosios, certain that the icon had in some miraculous way been moved to the place it was found the day before, headed towards the forest to collect it. Indeed, the icon was found there. On his way back to the church, holding the icon in his arms he came face to face with a villager who asked him: "*have you found the icon father?*" and he answered, "*Yes, it was down there.*" Then the villager asked him in the local dialect, "*Why does the icon rovolai (i.e. go) down there father?*". The verb "rovolai" was the reason that the icon was named "Rovelista". According to another version, it was named after "Rovel", the name of the shepherd that had pinpointed the location of the icon.

Where the icon was found, a small church, where the miracle working icon was placed, and some cells were built, while Amvrosios spent the rest of his life there.

The monastery became more and more famous and crowds flocked to worship the miracle working icon. As the monastery expanded, so did the property and its belongings. The monastery housed a Seminary which functioned also as a secret school during the Ottoman domination. Charity became one of the main occupations of monks. It was totally destroyed during a rebellion against the Turkish conquerors in 1854 but thanks to abbot Anthimos's prudence, the most important curios of the monastery were saved; among them, the icon of Virgin Mary which had been hidden in a nearby cave, named for this reason "Panaghia's Cave". The monastery was rebuilt from the beginning thanks to the interest of Anthimos and the support of the faithful.

In World War II, it helped the hungry and unfortunate population of the area, and it was there that Napoleon Zervas and Aris Velouchiotis announced their decision for common military action. In the years that followed, during the Civil War, the monastery was destroyed and completely deserted. However, it was restored for a second time by priest-monk Mitrofanis Mitsilis and his full sister Andriani, who became the prioress of the monastery. A royal decree in 1963 turned the monastery into a female on, as it is today.

Ever since, the invaluable miracle working icon is positioned on its throne in a prominent place within the church. The icon, which constantly emits its scent, depicts Virgin Mary as Deksiokratousa Glikofilousa (i.e. holding Christ in Her right arm and kissing Him), a Russian style in compliance with the icon of Vladimir. Virgin Mary rests Her cheek on Christ's face with a tenderness that is impossible to describe. It is plated with silver, leaving Virgin Mary's and Christ's faces uncovered. Its frame, in the

form of a triptych, depicts the figures of Apostles Peter and Paul. The frame is also plated with pure silver, rendering a masterpiece of silverwork.

The presence of the faithful is particularly impressive on September 8th, which is the feast day for the monastery (November 21st is the feast day for the chapel of “Kokkini Ekklesia” – the Red Church).

THE MONASTERY OF SELTSOS

It is a monastery dependency of Rovelista and it is located on a vertical cliff over the river Acheloos, near Piges, a village in the prefecture of Arta. The monastery of Seltos owes its reputation primarily to the battle that took place there in April 1804 between the troops of Ali Pasha and Souliotes (men from Souli). This battle turned Seltos into a new Zalogo because a crowd of women and children jumped over the 300-metre precipice, right into the river, as they didn't want to be captured by the enemy [30].

The church was built in 1697 according to the inscription on the lintel of the gate, leading from the main church to the narthex. There is also a full-body depiction of the founders of the monastery on it. The captains Nikos and Apostolis from Arta are among the founders of the church.

According to tradition, these two brothers, famous Klephts (i.e. troops that lived on the mountains and fought against the Turks) of the area, took shelter in the crags and raided the neighbouring Turkish occupied villages, thus gathering treasures. Every night, they took turns staying awake to protect themselves. One night, Nikolas saw a light at a distance that looked like a flickering oil-lamp. Not knowing what it was, he fired his gun thus waking up his brother, who also fired his gun, aiming at the light, but missed. As they realised it was not an enemy, they decided to go near it. Apostolis was 10 metres away from the light when he started praying and said, “*May your name be blessed, Mother of our Lord...*” and turning to his brother told him, “*Virgin Mary appeared before us who are so sinful. This is a great honour. We must honour her as much as we can*” [31]. So, they decided to build a monastery dedicated to Her at the exact place where they saw the light.

As far as the name “Seltos” is concerned, there have been two possible explanations. The first is recorded in the historiography of Nap. Economou: “*It was named like that because Ahmer Seltos did not receive any payment to cede the area and assisted the captains Nikos and Apostolis in acquiring a permit to build it from the Vizier of Ioannina.*” The second version was given by Professor Elias Mpakos, who claims that the name “Seltos” is of Slavian origin and is due to the passage and settling down of Slavs in the area during the Middle Ages [29].

There are many priceless despotic icons in the monastery, some of which were saved and are now kept in a safe place.

Its church is dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary, but always celebrated on August 23rd, the Novena of Virgin Mary, so as not to coincide with the feast of the nearby monastery of Spilia in Agrafa, on August 15th. The celebration takes place both in the courtyard of the church and the square of the village Piges, and lasts for 2 days.

THE ROAD OF FAITH

Churches and monasteries of Virgin Mary which constitute important religious centres of Epirus, whether they are related to some miracle or not.

Prefecture of Thesprotia

THE MONASTERY OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THEOTOKOS OF PAGANION

In the prefecture of Thesprotia, the once wealthy monastery of Paganion, which helped the most in the national fight of Greeks, stands out due to its historical and religious value. The most important feature in the interior is the depiction of the Assumption of Virgin Mary, which the monastery is dedicated to.

THE CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THEOTOKOS PARAMYTHIA

The church of Panaghia Paramythia is what's left of the homonymous monastery that was built in the 14th century. Nowadays, it is a parish church which is extremely important to the region of Thesprotia, due to Panaghia's quality of "Paramythía". It is an ancient equivalent to "Parigoritria" (the verb "paramytho" meant "to console"). Many people turn to it even today, to find consolidation and ask for courage and strength from Virgin Mary.

Prefecture of Ioannina

THE CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF VIRGIN MARY OF ARCHIMANDRIO IN IOANNINA

According to local tradition, a shepherdess saw the icon of Virgin Mary on the branches of a plane-tree north-east of the current church. In this place, according to legend, a small church was initially built and later on a monastery. It is an important place of pilgrimage in Epirus.

THE MONASTERY OF PANAGHIA OF MOLYVDOSKEPASTOS

On the foot of mountain Nemetzikas, where the rivers Aaos and Sarantaporos meet, and close to the Albanian borders, lies the monastery of Panaghia of Molyvdoskepastos. The founder of the monastery was probably the Byzantine Emperor Konstantinos IV Pogonatos in the 7th century, and it was renovated initially by the Great Duke Andronikos Komninos Paleologos, and later, in 1522, by the residents of Pogoni. The monastery got its name, "Molyvdoskepastos" (i.e. covered with lead), from its roof, made of leaden plates [20], which were taken by the Turks to be used in the manufacture of ammunition.

The greatest treasure of the monastery is its miracle working icon of Panaghia "Pogonianitissa". Numerous miracles have been attributed to it.

The contribution of the monastery was great throughout its history. The monks proved to be very charitable as they offered help to the poor, the diseased, and those who were chased by the Turks or the Albanians. During the national struggle for freedom, it became one of the centres of onsets and it also functioned as a school.

THE MONASTERY OF VELLA

The monastery of Vella is located in Kalpaki of Ioannina and was founded in the 11th century. It is quite close to where the ancient town "Paliiovella" – which was very prosperous during the Byzantine period – used to be. Until 1713, it functioned as the Bishop's residence. It is dedicated to the Nativity of Virgin Mary. It's worth mentioning that since the 13th century and for 400 years, the monastery had been an important intellectual centre and possessed a huge property. It was deserted in 1817, when the

monks, who refused to give their property to Ali Pasha of Ioannina, abandoned it and found shelter in Corfu. From 1911 to 1989, the monastery housed a Seminary.

THE MONASTERY OF AVEL

The monastery of Avel is situated in a beautiful landscape near the village Vissani. It is assumed that it was named after Avelis, a land owner who founded and renovated the monastery during the last period of Byzantium, in 1770 according to the founder's inscription. The church is dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary and its feast day is on August 15.

THE MONASTERY OF KIPINA

The monastery is situated near the village Christoi, which lies between the villages Kalarrytes and Pramada. It is said that it got its name from the gardens ("kipi" in Greek) that the monks grew near the monastery. It was founded in 1212 [9] by an Archbishop named Grigorios, and it is dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary. It is one of the most impressive monasteries in Epirus as it is built in a cavity of a high vertical rock. The asphalt road reaches the foot of the rock, from where a path, carved on the rock, and a wooden bridge lead to the monastery. During the Ottoman domination it was a drawbridge. The monks used to lift it with a lever in order to protect themselves from raids, and that is why the monastery hasn't ever suffered any kind of damage. On the left of the narthex of the catholicon there is a deep dark cave, where the people of nearby villages found shelter, during the difficult times of the Ottoman domination.

Prefecture of Arta

Arta, which became the capital of the Despotate of Epirus in 1204, was very prosperous and many craftsmen from different places of the Byzantine world and the West created impressive religious and architectural manuments.

PANAGHIA OF BRIONIS

The monastery of Panaghia of Brionis is located in the village Neochoraki in Arta. It is a picturesque, small, Byzantine church with ceramic decoration. It is the only thing left from a once great monastery, which was burnt in 1821 and renovated in 1870. There are several versions concerning the name of the monastery. The folk tradition concerning the name "Brionis" is recorded by Orlandos [23]: *"...during the time that these places were under the Turkish rulers, a Turkish Aga, named Brionis, wanted to cut down the cypress at the back of the sanctuary of Panaghia, in order to take its trunk. However, the moment that he started cutting down the tree, he lost his sight. He stopped and, desperate as he was, he promised to offer a present to the church if Virgin Mary gave him back his sight. Panaghia fulfilled his wish and so, the cypress was saved and flourished more than ever."* According to a second version [9], the name came from the corruption of the word "perionimi" (meaning "famous"), perionimo monastery, so the correct name would have been "Panaghia Prioni". The church's feast day is on the Assumption of Theotokos.

CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY OF THEOTOKOS IN KORONISIA

In the village of Koronisia, on the coast of Amvrakikos bay, lies the small church of the Nativity of Theotokos, which is the remnant of an old and wealthy monastery [32]. It is one of the oldest monuments of Byzantine Arta. According to written accounts, it was founded in 1193, it had a lot of monks, and it was very famous and especially wealthy. From this monastery, only the church and the small chapel of Osios

Onoufrios – a few metres away to the east of the church – still exist. In fact, according to the relevant tradition, the well of the monastery was built by Osios Onoufrios himself. Today, the church functions as a parish church.

THE RED CHURCH OF VOURGARELI

The church of the Nativity of Theotokos in the settlement Paleochori of Vourgareli is a brilliant sample of Byzantine art. The locals call it “Red Church” because of the numerous plinths that were used for its construction¹⁸. Among intellectuals, the church is known as Panaghia Vella because it was a dependency of the monastery of Vella in Ioannina. Concerning the foundation of the church, there is the following tradition: the master builder of this church had earlier built the church of Panaghia in the village Vlacherna in Arta. His apprentice, however, built the church of Parigoritria, which was more impressive than his (there’s also a relevant folk song referring to this incident). When the master builder learnt that his apprentice had done a better job than his, he felt dizzy, fell from the roof of the Red Church and died. According to that tradition, Parigoritria and the Red Church were built at the same period, which is actually true.

PANAGHIA OF VLACHERNA

The church of Panaghia of Vlacherna, one of the most famous Byzantine monuments of Arta, is situated at the municipality of Vlacherna and it is its parish church. It is a brilliant sample of the religiousness of the Christians in Byzantine Arta and of their rulers. Built opposite to the deserted palace of the Komninos dynasty, within the castle, with two royal sarcophaguses in it, *“it looks as if it is the antipode of an imaginary bridge, which joined a town full of life and the asceticism of the monastery, the cradle of royal seed with its eternal retreat; the beginning and the end of an eventful and creative life that stamped the whole era and its civilization.”* [23] The church was named after the famous Panaghia of the Vlachernon in Constantinople. It was founded at the beginning of the 10th century, as an arched basilica and was renovated in the 13th century. The most important feature of the interior is the depiction which was revealed on the south arch of the narthex, which, according to the relevant inscription, depicts the procession of the icon of Panaghia Odigitria, which took place every Tuesday evening in Constantinople. Initially the church was dedicated to the Assumption of Theotokos. However, since 1814 it has been dedicated to the Katathesis of Timia Esthita of the Virgin (i.e. the Recovery of the Holy Dress of the Virgin) on July 2nd.

PANGHIA PARIGORITRIA

It is a magnificent church, the biggest church of Byzantine architecture in Epirus and the second biggest in Greece [33].

This really impressive monument replaced a smaller church¹⁹ and it was built in its present form precisely between 1294 and 1296 A.D. by Nikiforos I Komninos, his wife Anna Paleologina Kantakouzini, and their son Thomas, despots of Epirus, and it constitutes the catholicon of the monastery of the Annunciation of Virgin Mary, as it

¹⁸ This is mentioned by K. Giannelos [23]. Votokopoulos [27] mentions: *The name Red Church is usually given to churches built with plinths. In this case, only the plaster used in wall building was of red colour.*”

¹⁹ The construction of this small church is placed within the 12th century. Today, one can see its remains on the south-west of the catholicon.

was named back then. The founders' inscription on the lintel of the Royal Gate functions as a certificate of the monument's foundation.

The architectural novelties, the originality of the building, and the rich ceramic decoration make the monument a unique sample of Byzantine church building in the whole Christian world. The technique used on the sculptures of Parigoritria reflects the properties of Italian art in the Middle Ages. According to Eustathios Stikas [35], excessive styling, the loose bas-relief of the pleats of clothes, stubby bodies, tight-fitting clothes, and the intense bas-relief of heads consist concrete proof that the sculptures were commissioned to western artists. Linda Safran [34] focuses on the great similarity between Parigoritissa and Santa Maria della Cerrate, a Greek monastery of Apulia near Lecce, which resembles a lot to Parigoritria on technical grounds.

The icon of Panaghia Parigoritria, in the style of Deksiokratousa (i.e. holding baby Jesus in Her right arm), which dominates on the icon screen of the sanctuary is of great architectural and worshipping value. The figure of Parigoritria represents one of the main qualities of Virgin Mary: all of us turn to Her for comfort, support, incitement and encouragement. The time of the icon's creation is unknown. According to the inscription on it, it was plated in colour in 1792.

In the past, Parigoritria had been an important monastery. In the 16th century, however, the monastery went bankrupt and became a dependence of the monastery of Kato Panaghia.

Today, the church of Parigoritria, or Parigoritissa as local people usually call it, is a Byzantine monument still dedicated to the Annunciation of Theotokos, just like at the time it was founded, and it is open to visitors and pilgrims for a few hours daily. The church rarely officiates throughout the year. The feast day of the Annunciation of Virgin Mary on March 25th is really special for the faithful, who swarm into the monument for two days in order to worship the old icon of Parigoritria.

Easter is another impressive celebration in the church of Parigoritria. Purple curtains cover the two sides of the gates during the Holy Week in token of the grief for the Suffering and the Crucifixion of Christ.

THE MONASTERY OF THEOTOKIO

At Pournari in Arta, at the foot of the hill of Peta, there is the monastery of Theotokio [36], which is dedicated to the Assumption of Theotokos. The church was built in the 14th century [9] and it was reconstructed from the beginning in 1874.

At first it was a male monastery. During the Ottoman domination and later on, it offered many services to local people.

Nowadays, Theotokio is an especially active, female monastery, which has four dependent monasteries in its possession, all of them in Arta:

1. The monastery of Sellades, which celebrates on the feast day of the Assumption of Virgin Mary. It is a Post-Byzantine church.
2. The Monastery of Agia Aikaterini in the village Katarraktis, where the icon was found in a miraculous way.
3. Panaghia Chryssospilotissa in the village Gourgiana.
4. The monastery of Theotokos in the village of Skoulikaria, which was founded in the 11th century.

Even though the monastery is not one of the main places of pilgrimage in the area, it attracts lots of faithful and visitors. On 15th August, when it usually celebrates, the events taking place there are really unique. The whole process reminds us a lot of Good Friday and the litany of the epitaph. Early in the afternoon, the day before the feast, the nuns start decorating the epitaph. In the evening, during the Mass, they chant the

encomiums, followed by the eulogies and the litany of the epitaph. The encomiums are extremely lyrical lines, having the same rhythm with the encomiums of Christ, chanted on Good Friday and brought from Jerusalem by the current Bishop of Argolida, Iakovos (Jacob) in 1977-8.

Apart from the official feast days and Sundays, during which the faithful come to attend the Holy Mass, the monastery is open daily for anyone wishing to pray. Usually, spontaneous visits are the most interesting, as was the case with the spontaneous visit of a group of young Italians. *"...they came at noon; we opened the door... We managed to communicate even though we didn't speak each other's language. We sat for a long time in the shade, talking. While they were leaving, they were playing their guitars and singing. They didn't want to leave..."*, said the nuns. *"What really impressed us was the fact that they admitted that the grounds of the Orthodox Church are more peaceful and cosier than those of the Catholic Church. The Orthodox grounds have freedom. The Orthodox religion is not typicality; it is love and essence."*

THE MONASTERY OF KATO PANAGHIA

The monastery of Kato Panaghia was founded in 1250 by the despot of Epirus Duke Michael II and his wife Theodora, who later became the patroness saint of Arta. The monastery was given the name Kato Panaghia to differentiate from the great Byzantine of Panaghia Parigoritria, which was situated at a focal point of the town [37].

The monastery acquired a lot of wealth ever since that night in 1491 when the Sultan Vajiazit II, spent the night there without revealing his identity. In the morning, while he was leaving the monastery, he forgot a pouch full of golden coins under his pillow. As soon as the abbot of the monastery realized what had happened, he ran after him to deliver him the money. In return to his honesty, the Sultan not only offered him the money, but also, when he got back to Constantinople, he signed a document according to which the fields that were taken from the monastery should be returned to it, while at the same time he offered plenty of other things.

In 1953, when Seraphim (Tikas), who later became the Archbishop of Athens, was the bishop of Arta, the monastery became female instead of male. Agni Papadimitriou was the first prioress of the monastery. Thanks to her, the monastery was regenerated and acquired the shape and form it has today.

Today, it is a female monastery. The icon of Panaghia "Gerontissa", the miracle working icon of Zoodochos Pigi (the Source of Life) and the icon Rodon Amaradon (i.e. the Rose that does not wilt), which were brought from the monastery of Odigitria, are kept like a valuable treasure within the monastery.

The church celebrates on the feast day of the Assumption of Theotokos.

Prefecture of Preveza

THE MONASTERY OF AVASSOS

In the prefecture of Preveza, in the village Vrysoula, there was the monastery of Avassos, dedicated to the Assumption of Virgin Mary. It got its name from its founder, the merchant Avassiotis. Today, one can only see the church. The Mass on the feast day is followed by a fête attended by local people.

THE CHURCH OF PANAGHIA LAMBOVITISSA

It is a church at the centre of the village Thesprotiko, built in 1794 exactly where the monastery, which was a dependency of the famous monastery of Stavropigiaki of Lambovo, used to stand. It is an important place of worship in the area due to its miracle

working icon that was brought from Lambovo. It is dedicated to the Nativity of Virgin Mary.

IN CONCLUSION

Mother, mediator, perfect woman, protector, ally and companion, helper in every difficult moment, a figure the apparition of which does not cause the awe or fear that man feels before God, but intimacy, Virgin Mary was loved the most in Epirus. The numerous monasteries, dedicated to Her grace, standing haughty at distant and steep parts of the mountains of Epirus, the churches, found in almost every populated area, and the candles, burning in every corner of the land of Epirus, are witnesses of this love. Witnesses are also the brilliant and festive celebrations of Her feast days, the number of the depictions of Her, and the names attributed to Her. Witnesses are also people of Epirus themselves, who never cease to refer to the numerous miracles of Her and name their children after Her

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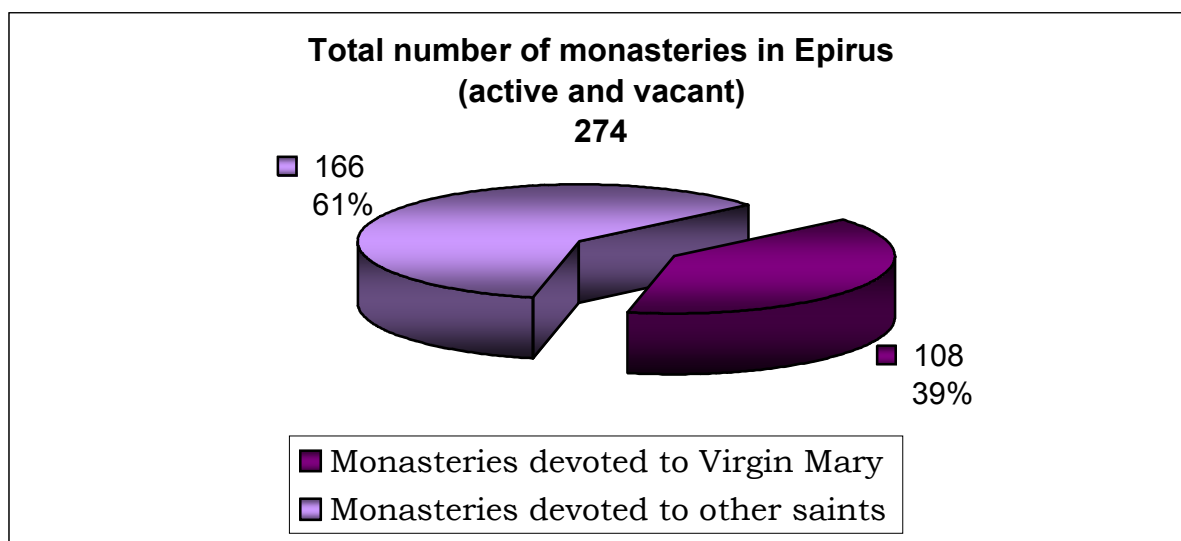
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Appendix

WORSHIP PLACES OF VIRGIN MARY IN EPIRUS

MONASTERIES



Monasteries in the prefecture of Arta (vacant or active)

Byzantine monuments

The Nativity (8 September)

- Panaghia of Koronisia (only the church of the Nativity of Theotokos remains) on the shores of Amvrakikos Bay. It was built in 1193.
- Monastery of Kato Panaghia. A significant religious center of the area. It was founded in the middle of 13th century by the Komninodukes of Epirus.
- Panaghia Vella or The Red Church or the Church of the Nativity of Theotokos, in Paleochori, a small village just before Vourgareli. It was founded in 1281 by Nikiforos A', Despot of Arta.

The Assumption (15 August)

- Panaghia of Brionis, in Neochoraki of Arta. It was named after the founder of the church or due to the corruption of the word "perionimi".

The Annunciation (25 March)

- Parigoritissa; nowadays, a Byzantine monument. The magnificent feast day is attended by crowds that swarm the church in order to pray in this important religious monument of the area.

Katathesi of Timia Esthita (2 July)

- Panaghia of Vlacherna. It was founded in the middle of 13th century by Komninodukes of Epirus. Until 1814 it was devoted to the Assumption of Theotokos but today the official feast day is the Katathesi of Timia Esthita of the Virgin. It is a major pilgrimage place of the area.

Other

- Monastery of Faneromeni in Arta. Initially a small church and later on a monastery were built at the place where the icon of the Holy Trinity and Virgin Mary presented themselves. The monastery was named after the miraculous way that the icon was presented.

Post-Byzantine and later monuments

The Nativity (8 September)

- ❑ Monastery of Rovelista. A well-known monastery in the regions of Epirus and Aitolokarnania, mainly due to the miracle-working icon of Panaghia Moschovitissa. It is a major pilgrimage place of the area.
- ❑ Panaghia Megalochari in the village Megalochari in Arta (built in the 13th century). Nowadays only the Narthex remains intact. The church offered its name to the village, which was earlier named Mpotsi (this is why the church is also known as Panaghia Mpotsiotissa).
- ❑ Monastery of the Nativity of Theotokos in Melates (male). It was founded in 1797.
- ❑ Chryssospilotissa in Gourgiana. An important monastery, mainly because of the miracle-working icon of Virgin Mary.
- ❑ Monastery of the Nativity of Theotokos in Theodoriana. It was founded in 1793.
- ❑ Monastery of Pistiana (built in the 18th century). Nowadays there is only the narthex.

The Assumption (15 August)

- ❑ Monastery of Seltos in the village Piges in Arta. It is a historical monastery devoted to the Assumption of Theotokos. However, the official feast day is the Novena of Virgin Mary on 23 August, when a three-day celebration takes place.
- ❑ Panaghia of Rodia or “Rodon to Amaranton” (the rose that does not wilt) in the village Vigla. It is a major religious center of the area.
- ❑ Theotokio. A monastery devoted to Virgin Mary in the village Peta. It is an active female monastery with important history and contribution to the area.
- ❑ Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos in the village Skoulikaria. An important religious and historic monument of the area, since Georgios Karaiskakis (a well-known hero of the Greek Revolution) was born in one of its cells.
- ❑ Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos in the village Sellades. A dependency of the monastery of Theotokio.
- ❑ Monastery of Panaghia Portaitissa in the Village Kostakioi. It was destroyed and only the church exists today. It is a dependency of the Monastery of Iviron in Agion Oros.
- ❑ Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos of Tserkista (klisto of Peta). Only the walls of the narthex remain.
- ❑ Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos in the village Dimario. A newly built church (the cemetery church of Diasello) stands where the monastery used to be.

The Presentation (21 November)

- ❑ The Presentation of Theotokos in the village Melisourgioi (built in 1745). Today there is only the narthex. It is a dependency of the monastery of Kato Panaghia.
- ❑ Saint Merkourios – the Presentation of Theotokos. It is an historical monument. For a long time it had been the cathedral of Arta.

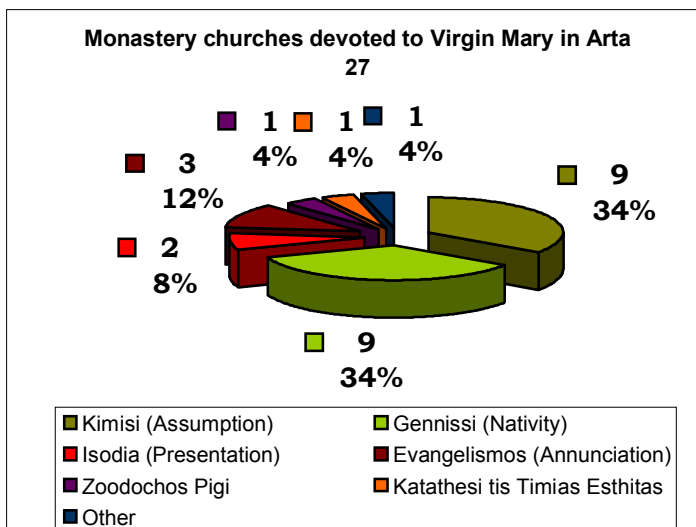
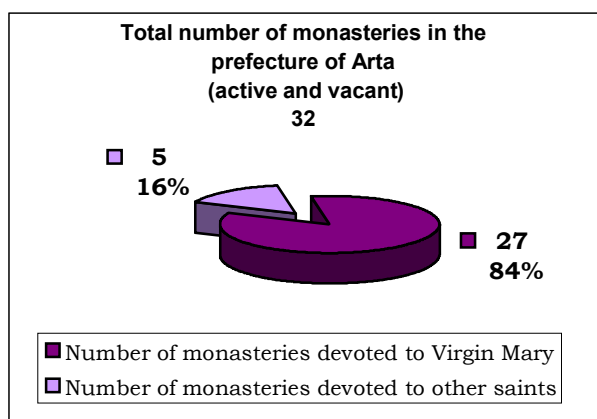
The Annunciation (25 March)

- ❑ Monastery of Evangelistria in the village Kipseli (Chosepsi). Only the narthex remains. A small building has been built lately, in order to cover for the needs of the Holy Masses as well as pilgrims who swarm there during the feasts of the Annunciation and Zoodochos Pigi, when the monastery officially celebrates. During the Ottoman Domination, the historical monastery of Evangelistria had been a prop for the enslaved residents of the area, while today it is the point of reference for all people from Kipseli.
- ❑ Monastery of the Annunciation of New Pistiana (Distrato, the location Paliomonastiro). Lately, a small church devoted to Evangelistria was built on the ruins of the monastery but it vaguely reminds us of the old monastery.

Zoodochos Pigi

- ❑ Panaghia Odigitria in the center of Arta. A dependency of the monastery of Kato Panaghia, it officiates only on its feast day. Two icons of Virgin Mary, Zoodochos Pigi (a miracle-

working icon) and “Rodon to Amaranton”, which can be found in the monastery of Kato Panaghia and attract a lot of people, come from Odigitria.



The monasteries of the Metropolis of Paramythia, Filiates, Gyromeri and Parga

The Nativity (8 September)

- Monastery of Michla (dependency of the monastery of Paganion) close to the village Polydroso. A great fête takes place here on 8 September. It is a historic monument.

The Assumption (15 August)

- Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos in Gyromeri. A historic monument the construction of which was due to a miracle. The national and social contribution of the monastery during the Greek Revolution and the National Resistance was very important. According to tradition, during the Ottoman Domination, a secret school, the classroom of which still exists, was operating within the monastery.
- Monastery of the Assumption Ragiou (male). It remains unknown when this historic monument was built (probably in the 11th century). During the difficult times of the Ottoman domination it was contributing financially to many local schools.
- Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos Paganion (male), close to the village Kallithea in Paramythia. A historic monument which was built in 1652. It was a wealthy monastery with significant activity and contribution. Nowadays, the narthex is of good condition while the rest of the buildings were recently renovated. It officiates on the last Sunday of each month and it constitutes an important place of pilgrimage for crowds of people from Epirus and the rest of Greece.

The most well-known monasteries (vacant or active) devoted to Virgin Mary in the prefecture of Ioannina

The Nativity (8 September)

- Monastery of Durachani (male). It is located on the shores of lake Pamvotida of Ioannina. It was founded after a miracle that took place in 1434. Nowadays, the monastery attracts the interest of both locals and foreigners.
- Monastery of Tsouka in Helliniko. It is an active male monastery with significant contribution to local history. The founding of the monastery (1190) followed a miracle of the holy icon of Virgin Mary. The contribution of the monastery as a religious and national center during the Greek Revolution was significant and it served as a shelter for Greek

rebels of the area during all national struggles. Nowadays, it is the most important place of pilgrimage in Ioannina. Its doors are open daily for all those locals and foreigners who feel the need to pray.

- ❑ Monastery of Plaka or Panaghia Plakiotissa. A historic monastery on the borders of the prefectures of Arta and Ioannina which was built after a miracle attributed to Virgin Mary. The monastery kept an icon of Virgin Mary, the miracles of which had made the monastery an attraction point for the people of the broader area of Tzoumerka and the icon a miracle-working one. Nowadays, the monastery is no longer active and has lost its previous prestige. However, it remains a point of reference for the residents of the area, who honour Her grace once a year, and for visitors in the area, who never forget to pray whenever they happen to be there.
- ❑ Monastery of the Nativity of Theotokos of Stomio (male). The monastery, which is also called Panaghia Stomiotissa, got its name from the narrowing of the Aaos gorge at the point that it was built. Initially, it was built on the opposite bank of the river, where the location Paleomonastiro lies, in 1412 (according to some others in 1590). According to tradition, the monastery was transferred to its present position in 1774 by prior Konstantinos.
- ❑ Monastery of Paliouria (male), in the village Grammenochoria. This is where the icon of Panaghia Paliouriotissa lies.
- ❑ Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos in Sistruni.
- ❑ Monastery of Panaghia Aggelomachos (Angel-fighter) in Kourenta.

The Assumption (15 August)

- ❑ Monastery of Faneromeni of Vounoplaghia (mountain slope). One can see only the church.
- ❑ Monastery of Iliokali. A fortress type monastery on a flat area on the west slope of Driskos.
- ❑ Monastery of Stoupena or Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos in Perivleptos. It got its name from the wife of someone called Stoupis who made the donation. The narthex was built in 1724. During the Ottoman Domination, the monastery financed the schools of Perivleptos, Kranoula, Dikorifo, Kipoi, Manasi and Kalota of Zagori. Apart from its narthex, it was totally destroyed by the occupation troops in 1941 and also suffered damage during the Civil War. The cluster of buildings is gradually restored.
- ❑ Monastery of Votsa or Panaghia of Pogoniotissa in Greveniti (male).
- ❑ Monastery of Vella in Kalpaki. A male monastery which still houses a clerical school.
- ❑ Monastery of Molyvdoskepasti. The founder of the monastery was probably the Byzantine emperor Constantine IV Pogonatos in the 7th century. It was given the name “Molyvdoskepasti” due to the leaden plates that used to cover the roof and were taken by the Turks for the manufacture of ammunition. The greatest treasure of the monastery is the miracle-working icon of Panaghia “Pogonianitissa”, to which numerous miracles have been attributed. The contribution of the monastery had been significant throughout its history. During National struggles it served as a sally point and also as a school. Even today, the monastery remains an important religious center, which, due to its stature, attracts visitors from all places of Greece.
- ❑ Monastery of Panaghia in Makrino.
- ❑ Monastery of Zerma or Monastery of Theotokos of Plaghia (Slope).
- ❑ Monastery of Theotokos of Kipina in Kalarrites.
- ❑ Monastery of Panaghia of Metsovo (female).
- ❑ Monastery of Abel in Vissani.
- ❑ Monastery of the Assumption of Theotokos Toskesi (Achladea). The church is dated some time within the 18th century. The cells of the monastery functioned as nursing homes for sick people. Nowadays, apart from the narthex one can see two cells, the renovated ossuary and a tank for the collection of rain water. Close to the monastery there is a small church devoted to the Nativity of Theotokos (Panaghia of Lambovo), a small single-arched basilica of the 13th-14th century.
- ❑ Monastery Pateron (of the Fathers) in Lithino Zitsa.

- ❑ Monastery of Raidiotissa in Vrosyna. A post-Byzantine monument.
- ❑ Monastery of Kladormi of Fourka.
- ❑ Monastery of Dramesia.
- ❑ Monastery of Makryaleksis close to Kato Lavdani of Pogoni. The once wealthy monastery no longer exists, apart from the narthex and part of the cells. Within the church there are icons, two of which are dated back to 1593 (one of them depicts Virgin Mary sitting on Her throne and holding Her baby). Both icons can be found in the Byzantine Museum of Ioannina.
- ❑ Monastery of Vissikos.

The Presentation (21 November)

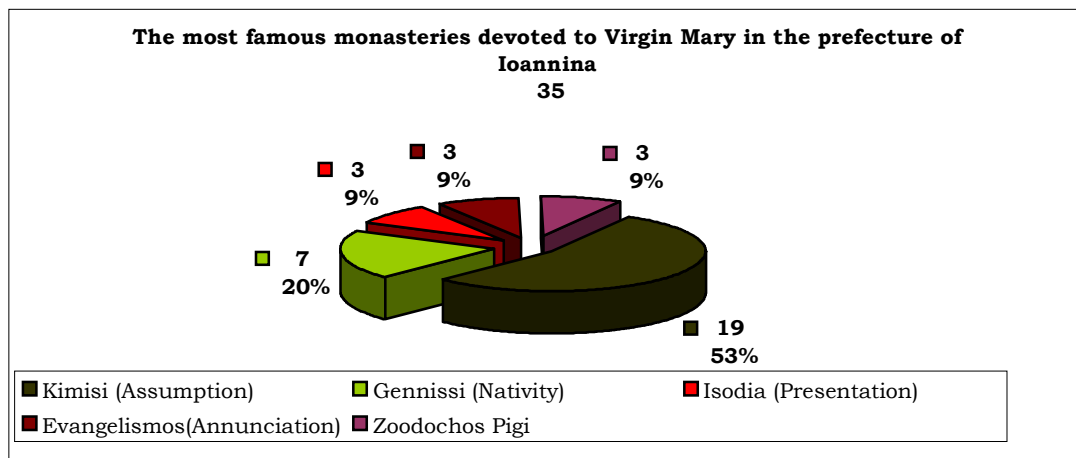
- ❑ Monastery of Eleousa, on the island of Ioannina (male).
- ❑ Monastery of Molistes or Monastery of the Presentation of Theotokos (male).
- ❑ Monastery of Konitsa

The Annunciation (25 March)

- ❑ Monastery of Vyliza in Matsouki. The name Vyliza comes from the latin word *vigilo* (meaning *to guard, to watch*), as the monastery is situated at an altitude of 1050m and looks like a watchtower.
- ❑ Monastery of the Annunciation of Theotokos in Ano Pedina (female). Today the monastery looks like a fortress with tall walls on the northeast and cells on the southwest.
- ❑ Monastery of Sosinos in Parakalamos of Zitsa.

Zoodochos Pigi

- ❑ Monastery of Panaghia Spileotissa (of the Cave) in Aristi.
- ❑ Monastery of Zoodochos Pigi in Anthochori of Metsovo. It was probably founded in the 17th century.
- ❑ Monastery of Zoodochos Pigi (of Tzontila or Zontila). There is only the Narthex.



Important monasteries devoted to Virgin Mary in the prefecture of Preveza

- ❑ Monastery Vlachernon in Valtos of Parga. It was founded by Anna Komninos and one can see only its ruins.
- ❑ Monastery of Kozili on the foot of the hill of Zalogo, northeast of the village Kamarina. A historic monument.
- ❑ Monastery of Avassos in the municipality of Louros in Preveza. The church is devoted to the Assumption of Theotokos.
- ❑ Monastery of Kastri. According to the relevant inscription it was built in 1670.
- ❑ Monastery of Theotokos of Rogon.

- Monastery of Faneromeni of Kerasovo. The remains of it are hidden on a wooded hill right over the village Kerasonas. The icon of Virgin Mary lies on a small recess above the west entrance.
- Monastery of Gionala.

HOLY CHURCHES

Statistical data

