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Museographic Objects, Saints, and Sacred Places: Saint Antony Pechersky, Esphigmenou Monastery (Mount Athos), and the Museum of Christian Antiquities (Athens)

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RESUMÉ : L'article nous présente la manière dont trois histoires, avec des finalités très différentes, s'avèrent en réalité interconnectées. La première histoire est celle de saint Antoine Petchersky (x^e-xi^e siècle), père du monachisme russe et fondateur de la Laure des Grottes de Kyiv ; la deuxième concerne un monastère du Mont Athos, où ce saint aurait vécu pendant un certain temps au xi^e siècle ; la troisième nous parle d'un objet qu'il aurait porté. La présente étude permet d'explorer la rivalité entre Grecs et Russes au Mont Athos dans la seconde moitié du xix^e siècle. Elle permet également d'interroger la question des 'faux' objets et la pertinence culturelle de ces derniers.

MOTS-CLÉS: Mont Athos ; musées ; pratiques pénitentielles ; vie monastique ; hagiographie.

REZUMAT: Articolul ne arată cum trei povești, cu finalități foarte diferite, se dovedesc a fi, de fapt, interconectate. Prima poveste este cea a Sfântului Antonie Pechersky (secolele x-xi), părinte al monahismului rus și întemeietor al Lavrei Peșterilor de la Kyiv; a doua se referă la o mănăstire de pe Muntele Athos, unde se spune că acest sfânt a trăit o perioadă în secolul al xi-lea; a treia ne vorbește despre un obiect pe care l-ar fi purtat. Acest studiu explorează rivalitatea dintre greci și ruși pe Muntele Athos în a doua jumătate a secolului al xix-lea. De asemenea, face posibilă chestionarea problemei obiectelor „false” și a relevanței culturale a acestora din urmă.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: Muntele Athos; muzee; practice penitențiale; viața monahală; hagiografie.

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MONTRAS

VISUAL CULTURE, PIETY
AND PROPAGANDA:
TRANSFER AND RECEPTION OF
RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS ART IN THE BALKANS
AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
(16TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY)

When Georgios Lampakis published in 1908 the Catalogue of the newly founded Museum of Christian Antiquities in Athens,¹ he referred in detail to two items of the section “Objects of monastic life”. One of them was an iron vestment from Mount Athos, bearing an inscription in Russian: “We bow before your Cross, Lord”.² It was given to the Museum by the abbot of Esphigmenou Monastery, archimandrite Loukas. According to the testimonies that Lampakis gathered on Mount Athos, it belonged to the “Russian hermit Saint Antonios” who had lived in a cave near the monastery of Esphigmenou.³

Although the text of Lampakis is not very precise, everything seems to indicate that the hermit was Antony Pechersky, the founder of the Caves Lavra in Kyiv. It is around 1840 that a legend was created, according to which Saint Antony had lived at Esphigmenou Monastery and had even received the tonsure there. Despite the absence of historical evidence, a chapel was inaugurated in July 1850 and decorated with icons sent by Russian ecclesiastics from Kyiv and Saint Petersburg. This legend echoes still: “[...] sometime in the early eleventh century,

the Primary Chronicle tells us that a layman from the city of Lyubech in modern-day Ukraine went as a pilgrim to Mount Athos and, having visited the monasteries, was so charmed by what he saw that he decided to enter the monastic life. The abbot of the monastery where he was staying, identified in some traditions as Abbot Theoktistos of Esphigmenou, tonsured him with the name Antony”.⁴

My article unfolds three different and interconnected stories: a story about a saint; a story about a place (where this saint supposedly lived for some time in the eleventh century); and a story about an object (that this saint allegedly was wearing and that Lampakis exposed in the Athenian Museum he founded at the end of the nineteenth century). This case study, on the one hand, illustrates the rivalry between Greeks and Russians on Mount Athos after the second half of the nineteenth century; and, on the other hand, allows us to question what is a “fake” object from a museographic point of view as well as the cultural relevance of such items.



▲ Fig. 1. Bronze etching from Benaki Museum, made in March 1847 in Saint Petersburg. Benaki Museum.

Credits: Dimitris Giavasis.

A STORY ABOUT A SAINT

Antony is said to have been born in Lyubech, in the Chernigov region, around 983. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* refers to his sojourn to Mount Athos in 1051 (he would have been by then 68 years old!), without any other element about the monastery that hosted him. This date has often been contested. According to the archimandrite and scholar Christophoros Ktenas, Saint Antony came and stayed on Mount Athos for about ten years when Theoktistos was the abbot of Esphigmenou, that is at the very beginning of the eleventh century; he returned to Kyiv in 1012, but came back to the Holy Mountain for a second stay between 1017 and 1027.⁵ Hence, Antony passed a part of his youth on Mount Athos that he definitively quit when he was around thirty-five years old.

There are, in fact, very few certainties about this saint. One of them is that he “lived as a monk on the Holy Mountain and did so during his youth”.⁶ Nevertheless, some scholars even dispute Antony’s stay on Mount Athos. With no substantial arguments, they claim that he had lived in Bulgaria. Zozul’ak, who refutes this thesis, accepts that historical sources do not provide clear testimonies of Antony’s sojourn to Mount Athos and that,

even if he did live there as a hermit for a time, “he had not come into contact with the monastic typikon of Athanasius the Athonite of the Great Lavra”.⁷ Interestingly, there is a Greek local tradition confirming that the Lavra in Kyiv was not established by Antony in the eleventh century, but by a fellow monk of Athanasius the Athonite (c.920–c.1000). According to this version, Saint Athanasius founded the Great Lavra on Mount Athos with two other (obviously Greek-speaking) monks, but because of a quarrel, his fellows abandoned him; the one of them, Auxentios, went to set up the Lavra in Kyiv and the other one, Hieronymos, the Lavra in Kalavryta. Lappas clearly explains that this implausible narrative emerged in Kalavryta during the end of the eighteenth century in order to render their local Lavra more prestigious.⁸ In other words, there are no historical elements about any kind of relationship between Athanasius the Athonite and Antony Pechersky, even if a certain number of icons represent Panagia Oikonomissa of Great Lavra with Saint Athanasius the Athonite (on the left) and Saint Antony Pechersky (on the right), as we will see below.

The creation of the Lavra in Kyiv gave rise to another debate. The minimization of Antony’s role, in this case, had nothing to do with Greeks or with the Holy Mountain, but was related to the contribution of Christian Scandinavians, since the cave where Antony had initially settled was considered to be a “Varangian cave.”⁹

Even the death of Antony has been surrounded by controversy. After the comparison of different sources, Louis Petit gives two possible dates for his death: on 10 July 1063 or on 7 May 1073.¹⁰ It is important to mention that for some scholars, like Behr-Sigel,¹¹ the saint could not even be a historical person.

It is, precisely, the scarcity and uncertainty of information that explain the development of different “traditions” concerning the monastery on Athos in which Antony supposedly spent his novitiate. Interestingly enough, Francis Thomson wrote his article after a Symposium of Byzantine Studies, where he received a remark about his credulity “to accept the theory that St. Anthony went to Athos”.¹²

Another point should be mentioned here. The saint has been systematically presented as “Russian”, even if there was no “Russia” between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, just a territorial and political entity named Rus’, assembling different groups of Eastern Slavs.¹³

A STORY ABOUT A PLACE

(a) The decade of 1840.

If the lack of historical elements makes the narrative about Saint Antony lacunar, the story about his relations with Esphigmenou monastery and its Abbot Theoktistos (who allegedly tonsured him with the name Antony) suffers equally from imprecision. It seems that this version “first surfaced in about 1840.”¹⁴ In 1841, Saint Antony was painted in the narthex of Esphigmenou’s katholikon; he was defined in this fresco as Ἐσφιγμενίτης (ὁ Ρῶσος),¹⁵ thus accumulating two identities – the first one linking him to Esphigmenou and the second one to Russia, presented here as his country of origin. In 1845, the chapel in honour of Saint Antony started to be built on Mount Samaria [Μεγάλη Σαμάρεια],¹⁶ next to the cave where he was supposed to have lived as a hermit. According to Esphigmenou version, after the death of Prince Vladimir in 1015, Antony returned to the Holy Mountain and “was given a blessing by Abbot Theoktistos to withdraw to a cave on Mount Samaria, a short distance from the monastery. Here he lived as a hermit, apparently for some decades, though the chronology is somewhat confused between

the various traditions.”¹⁷

In March 1847, a bronze etching was made in Saint Petersburg depicting Esphigmenou, with Greek and Russian inscriptions: the text enumerates those who have served as monks in Esphigmenou; among them is (designated as number five) “Saint Anthony Pechersky, who later became the founder of the Holy Lavra of Koba [the Kyiv Caves Lavra] in Russia” [ὁ ὁσῖος Ἀντώνιος ὁ πετζέρσκη, ὃς καὶ γενόμενος ὑστερον κτίτωρ τῆς / ἐν τῇ ροσσίᾳ Ἱερᾶς Λαύρας τῆς κοβά (sic)]. After the presentation of the saints linked to Esphigmenou, the etching enumerates the chapels under the monastery’s jurisdiction; one of them (number eleven) corresponds to “the newly built (chapel) of Saint Anthony Pechersky” [τοῦ ἁγίου Ἀντωνίου πετζέρσκη τοῦ νέου ἀνεγερθέντος]. This etching is currently in the Benaki Museum in Athens (Fig. 1).

There is another Russian engraving, with Greek and Russian inscriptions, made in 1848 by a Russian artist, Vasil Denotkin, which is exposed today in the National Museum of Warsaw (Poland). It shows Esphigmenou and different saints of Greek origin, “but also Ruthenian saints such as Saint Antony Pecherski”.¹⁸ A year later, in April 1849, the golden-plated iconostasis of the chapel of Saint Anthony Pechersky in Megali Samareia, that was fabricated in Russia, was offered as a gift by the archimandrite Juvenal, who was the treasurer [οἰκονόμος] of the bishop of Saint Petersburg.¹⁹ The chapel of Saint Anthony Pechersky was inaugurated on 10 July 1850, the 10th of July being the religious feast of the saint (and one of the two possible days of his death, as seen above).

To sum up, the decade of 1840 was defined not only by the construction of the chapel, but also by the production of engravings that largely diffused the legend outside the Holy Mountain, since paper icons of this kind were often given to pilgrims. That means that even before the end of the chapel’s construction in 1850, Russian engravings were already reproducing this narrative, their circulation being a form of validation. We have thus two different means of diffusion for this legend: a commemorative chapel, anchored in the ground where the saint was said to have lived in the eleventh century; and engravings, which conveyed their message not through spatial connections but through unlimited circulation. In this case, the chapel seemed to function as a declaratory landmark, reminding to all that Russian monasticism started on this spot centuries ago.

(b) Between 1850 and 1875.

The association of Saint Antony with Esphigmenou was considered by certain Russians to be unreliable. Antonin Kapustin (1827-1894) who came to Esphigmenou on 3 September 1859 was doubtful: he visited the chapel and the cave, which was small and humid and, consequently, unsuitable for human habitation.²⁰ He was wondering why Vasilij Grigorovič Barskij (1701-1747) did not mention anything about this tradition; and why the monks of Esphigmenou never referred to it in the letters they were exchanging with the Tsar and the Patriarch of Moscow. Hence, he tried to understand how this version was progressively created.²¹

If Kapustin was sceptical, Andrei Nikolaevich Murav’ev (1806-1874) fully supported this tradition. The codex of 1849 with Saint Antony’s *Vita* was made after the command given by Murav’ev who visited Mount Athos from 7 August to 16 September and who wanted to offer it, after his return, to the bishop Philaretus Amfiteatrov of Kyiv (1837-1857), the *ex officio* head of the Kyivan Caves Monastery.²² This is the first text, after the fresco in the narthex of Esphigmenou’s katholikon, to present him as

“Antonios Esphigmenou” [Ἀντωνίου Ἐσφιγμένου] – term stressing the links between the monastery and the saint.

Despite various lingering objections, gifts from Russia continued to flow. On 30 September 1858, a bronze icon of Saint Antony was sent from the Lavra of Pechersk in Kyiv to Esphigmenou for the newly founded chapel.²³ An icon of the Virgin of Pechersky (showing Saint Antony and Saint Theodosius of Pechersky kneeling in front of the Virgin and the infant Jesus blessing with both hands) was made in Moscow and offered to Mount Athos on 24 November 1859, according to a Russian inscription in the lower part of the frame.²⁴ The icon is currently in Simonos Petra monastery (Fig. 2).

This story created a network of objects, donors, and monks circulating between the Holy Mountain and Russia. It was defined by lively debates, multiple protagonists and disputing claims. Russians who commanded respect and authority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like Barskij,²⁵ Kapustin, and Murav’ev, were (voluntarily or not) implicated in it.

CONTESTED PLACES AND THEIR OWNERSHIP: MONASTERIES, SKETES, AND METOCHIA

The Russian Abbot of St. Panteleimon’s, Makarios (Sushkin), was elected on 10 May 1875. This was an important event that aroused Greek distrust toward Russian intentions and Pan-Slavism. Greeks were conscious of the geopolitical asymmetry between their newly founded and economically unstable kingdom, and the powerful and expanding Russian Empire, which was a major player in the European state system. Russians were not anymore humble receivers of Greek Orthodox influences, as in the times of Saint Antony.

Greeks suspected Russians of having planned to put Mount Athos under their control. The Russian domination was not only economical, but also demographical: “Until the nineteenth century there had never been more than two hundred Russians on Athos at any time; by the end of the century the Russian Athonite community had grown to five thousands”.²⁶ In 1898, two Russian fathers of St. Panteleimon tried to buy the chapel of Saint Antony for 600 Ottoman liras, but the monks of Esphigmenou refused the offer.²⁷ Some years earlier, a Russian monk named Bourazeri bought a cell that belonged to Esphigmenou in order to transform it into a skete, but a Patriarchal document [σιγίλλιο] in 1891 cancelled the sale.²⁸ Hence, the chapel of Saint Antony was not only a means to spread a legend; unlike the offered paper icons, the chapel also represented a property asset that had monetary value. A chapel or a cell on Mount Athos was a good that monks could buy or sell. Even if this estate market was defined by a rigid pattern of land-ownership, the prices got progressively very high because of the rise of the demand, since the Russians were ready in some cases to pay a lot of money in order to acquire a plot. Many Greek texts from this period criticized the inflation of prices and denounced its incompatibility with monastic life and its principles.

If Greeks were accusing Russians of religious and political entrepreneurship, Russians were equally questioning the sincerity of Greek intentions: the invention of the whole story about the links between Saint Antony and Esphigmenou could be explained by the desire to increase Russian pilgrimage traffic and to attract gifts. According to the book published in 1901 by the Russian church historian Evgenii E. Golubinskij, this version was created by the monks of Esphigmenou who wanted to put the monastery under the protection of Russia.²⁹ In 1895, Abbot Loukas of Esphigmenou (the same who gave one



◆ Fig. 2a-b. *Virgin of Pechersky*.

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year later, in 1896, the iron vestment to Lampakis) asked the Kyiv consistory whether a metochion could be set up in Kyiv; on 24 June 1895, the consistory turned down the request because of insufficient evidence about Saint Antony's relation with Esphigmenou.³⁰

In this case, both sides accused each other of unscrupulous behaviour. This tradition illustrates the complexity of relationships between Greeks and Russians on Mount Athos for one more reason: it was used as an argument for those from the Greek side who wanted to prove that there was no Russian monastery on Mount Athos in the past.

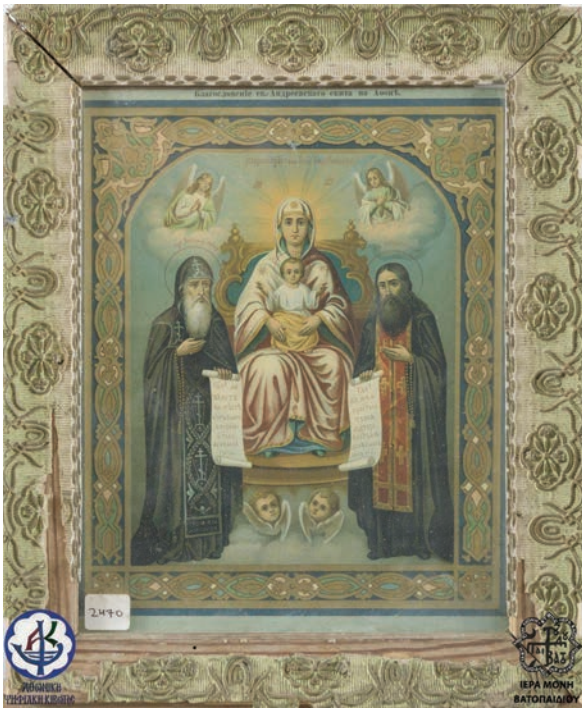


DIFFERENT PLACES, DIFFERENT STORIES?

Let us start with the argument of Ktenas according to which, only one Russian came to Mount Athos during the eleventh century, Antony Pechersky: Antony established himself in Esphigmenou and his choice could not but reveal the absence of other Russians, since he would have preferred to live with them otherwise.³¹ Even if Ktenas' po-

sition is totally improbable, it is sure that the massive Russian pilgrimage to Mount Athos developed after the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji in 1774, which granted Russia religious rights in the Ottoman Empire and freedom of passage for Russian pilgrims to Jerusalem.

In fact, Ktenas did not hesitate to go one step further: no Russian came to Mount Athos between the twelfth and the end of the eighteenth century, with the exception of



the two Russian monks mentioned by Barskij.³² For Ktenas, the occupation of Russia by the Mongols from 1224 to 1480, as well as the absence of regular means of transportation and the Russian-Turkish wars that followed, prevented Russian pilgrims from going to Jerusalem during this long period; and Mount Athos was a traditional stop in this journey from Russia to Jerusalem.³³

However, not all Greek scholars adopted such extreme and improbable positions. In 1874, sixty years before the publication by Ktenas, Ioannis Tantalidis published (under the pseudonym “Philalithis”) a book about St. Panteleimon Monastery. Tantalidis considered that Saint Antony was certainly imitated by other Russians, who, following his example, came after him to the Holy Mountain to become monks. He also mentioned two other facts: that there was a Russian monastery in Jerusalem from the beginning of the twelfth century; and that there were many testimonies about the presence of numerous Russians in St. Panteleimon during the sixteenth century.³⁴ In this text, Tantalidis preferred not to specify the monastery where Antony was tonsured: it was simply one of the Holy Mountain’s foundations [ἐνθα τὸ μοναχικὸν ἐνεδύσατο σχῆμα ἐγκατασταθεὶς ἐν τινὶ τῶν ἱερῶν τοῦ Ἄθω καταγωγῶν].³⁵

Among the Greek scholars of the nineteenth century, Tantalidis occupied the position of a dissenter. Presented in a book published in 1896,³⁶ Pavlos Karolidis’ stance was also unusual. Karolidis considered, on the one hand, that St. Panteleimon Monastery was initially Greek but was conceded to Russians around the end of the twelfth century; and on the other hand, that Esphigmenou Monastery was honored by Russians as “an ancient Russian institution” [ὡς ἀρχαῖον ἴδρυμα Ρωσσικόν]. According to the testimonies he had gathered, Esphigmenou had Russian abbots during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Notwithstanding these exceptions, the association of Saint Antony with Esphigmenou was reliable for many Greeks, since it proved that Antony had been one of the few Russians on Mount Athos for a long time. It was the same argument that made the version of Esphigmenou



◀ Fig. 3. Virgin, Saint Antony of Pechersky and Saint Theodosius of Pechersky, 1880-1920.

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▲ Fig. 4. Iron for ascetic life (σιδεριά ασκητικής ζωής), ca. 1000; front and back side.

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attractive for the Greek side and problematic for the Russian side. Apparently, what was at stake was less the concern for historical accuracy or the interest for filling a hagiographical lacuna than geopolitical debates about the status of Athos. In this monastic environment, a rivalry that took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century was sustained by different interpretations of an eleventh-century *Vita*. Interestingly enough, argumentation was always rational – since it was about historical facts, paintings or texts and never about supernatural interventions of saints, visions or miracles.

However, there is historical evidence that the Russian monks of St Panteleimon’s considered Antony Pechersky to be a saint patron who could intervene miraculously: when, in 1895, a Russian monk stayed in delirium for twelve days, he had a vision in which Saint Antony “thrice instructed the abbot to forbid the consumption of raki in the monastery” since 7 000 monks had already perished on account of this alcohol, according to the vision.³⁷ The tendency that characterizes all monastic environments to give a metaphysical sense to different forms of human experiences sharply contrasts with the absence of similar narratives about our affair.

Unsurprisingly, Russians opted for another narrative: for them, the saint chose to stay in the already existing Russian monastery. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, “the first mention of a monastery ‘tou Rhos’ (i.e., of the Rus’) on Athos dates from 1016. This was probably Xylourgou Monastery, the first cenobitic Russian house, mentioned by name in documents from 1030 on, which stood on the site of the existing skete of Bogoroditsa”.³⁸ This monastery’s links with Saint Antony stayed however vague. Antonin Kapustin, for instance, thought that “in all probability St Antony Perchesky lived in Xylourgou, which was perhaps founded by him”.³⁹

The Xylourgou story was not the only alternative. Others tried to connect the saint with Iviron Monastery⁴⁰ or with the Great Lavra. Not far from the Great Lavra, there was another cave that was also ascribed to Saint Antony: Ippolit (Vishensky) of the Monastery of Saints Boris and Gleb at Chernigov, who travelled to Jerusalem, Sinai and Mount Athos from October 1707 to August 1709, mentioned this cave in his pilgrim's report.⁴¹ According to Thomson, Ippolit visited this abandoned cave on 6 June 1709 and reported in the diary he was keeping that Antony "had allegedly dug [it] with his own hands". This story was linked not only to a specific place – supposedly named initially "the cave of St Antony" and later known as the cave of Saint Peter⁴² – but also to a person, the superior Eustratius (1016 – after 1018) who allegedly tonsured Antony.⁴³ There is also an engraving (which is part of Dori Papastratou collection) from the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with Greek and Russian inscriptions, showing Panagia Oikonomissa of Great Lavra with Saint Athanasius the Athonite (on the left) and Saint Antony Pechersky (on the right): this would be a means to broadly diffuse this legend. Apparently popular between the beginning of the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth century, the Great Lavra version was probably forgotten after the broad circulation of the Esphigmenou story and the construction of the chapel in the 1840s.

Among these four monasteries, two were the most serious candidates: Esphigmenou for the Greeks side; and Xylourgou for the Russian side. The Greek version about Esphigmenou seems to have gained ground on an international level: we have seen that Speake refers to this tradition – his analysis being, however, based on a Greek source (see note 3). This was also the opinion of Petit and Regel at the beginning of the twentieth century: *C'est, en effet, dans une des grottes de Samaria, à l'ouest d'Esphigmenou, que le moine russe Antoine, surnommé depuis Kievopetcherski, s'initia à l'ascétisme sous la direction de l'higoumène Théocliste.*⁴⁴

Antonios-Aimilios Tachiaos is one of the rare Greek historians to consider that the Russians had already their monastery on Mount Athos in the eleventh century and that Saint Antony stayed there.⁴⁵ However, he stresses the fact that the *Russian Primary Chronicle* did not focus on the first contacts of Russians with Mount Athos but on the foundation of the Kyiv's Lavra: its aim was to associate the latter to the center of Orthodox monastic life that the Holy Mountain incarnated at that time.

To sum up then, in order to promote their own interests in the nineteenth century, both Russians and Greeks accused each other of manipulation: their versions were equally weak, since they could not be linked to historical facts, only to probabilities. Used as a tool for the re-consideration of the Russian presence's chronological boundaries on Mount Athos, this story was a source of much debate and little historical certainty.

But this was not only a story that became important in the nineteenth century. Kirill Vakh mentions a new version that appeared recently, according to which "St Antony was tonsured in Esphigmenou Monastery in 1016. There is no explanation offered either for this date [...] or for the basis (or revelations) of the sources upon which this date is grounded. One has the impression that the date was artificially connected with the millennium year of Russian Athonite monasticism," that was celebrated in 2016.⁴⁶ A "Ruthenian" saint was thus solicited to take part in this official celebration: apparently, Saint Antony continues to be an object of discord – between Russians and Ukrainians, this time.

A STORY ABOUT AN OBJECT

Let us go back to Lampakis and to the Athenian Museum of Christian Antiquities. Although the Museum started to function in 1886, it was officially inaugurated on 4 March 1890. In August 1893, it was transferred and incorporated into the National Archeological Museum.

Objects "exert a power over their viewers – a power not simply inherent in the objects, but given to them by the museum as an institution within a particular historical sociocultural setting."⁴⁷ By exposing the Esphigmenou iron vestment, Lampakis made of it a "museum-worthy" object. Was this the material proof of Antony's stay in Esphigmenou? Did this item, after its exposition in an Athenian museum, constitute a third way of disseminating the legend besides the chapel in Megali Samareia and the printed engravings distributed to pilgrims?

Whereas we may consider it today as one of the material traces that the confrontation between Greeks and Russians on the Holy Mountain left behind, we cannot know with certainty if it evoked, at least for some of its viewers at the end of the nineteenth century, the controversial story examined here. For all those who, like Lampakis himself,⁴⁸ believed that Russia was the generous protector of all Orthodox people, the fact that it could be seen as the reminder of the Greek-Russian discordance on Athos would probably have been problematic.

After having been removed from its original context and brought into a museographic environment, the Esphigmenou iron vestment was mainly linked to ascetic monastic practices. The first question that arises is the definition of the object, which is unknown to us: there is no trace left of it today, as far as I know. We have no description or picture of this item. Lampakis designated it in his Catalogue as "iron vestment." But what exactly was an iron vestment? The *Vita* of Saint Theodosius of the Kyiv Caves / Pechersky (a saint of the eleventh century and co-founder of this Lavra, represented in many icons with Saint Antony) can give us an idea (Fig. 3). According to his *Vita*, before leaving for Kyiv to become a monk, Theodosius went to a blacksmith and commanded an iron belt. When the belt was ready, he started to wear it in a permanent way; the belt was very tight and painful and made him bleed.⁴⁹ By reminding its bearer that his attention should not be focused on earthly or bodily concerns, the iron vestment had a disciplinary function.

According to the Catalogue that Lampakis published in 1908, this high-prestige and valuable object was initially kept with the manuscripts of Esphigmenou: it was part of its Treasure (see note 2). But this was not a "contact relic". Apparently, there was no relic of this kind exposed and venerated in Esphigmenou or in the chapel of Saint Antony. Hence, this object was not a focus of religious devotion, as far as we know from the sources. Lampakis (who, as we have seen, referred to the relationship of this object with Saint Antony with caution) never treated this object as a relic but as a typical item showing the penitential dimension of monastic life.

As explained at the beginning of my article, Lampakis presented in his Catalogue only two items of the section "Objects of monastic life:" the other one was an iron belt with three eyelets, from which weights could be hung.⁵⁰ This object, which came from Dousikou Monastery in Thessaly and had the registration number 2141, was also controversial, since its use as an ascetic instrument had been contested by a member of the Christian Archeological Society on 19 April 1896. In a letter sent on 10 August 1896, the Abbot of Dousikou explained how this belt was used by older monks in the past: it helped them to stay awake while praying and prevented them from falling down, since they were tied to the ceiling through it.⁵¹ It

is interesting to note that when Lampakis published his Catalogue, he did not take this explanation into account: for him, the eyelets served to add more weight to the belt, whereas the abbot attributed a totally different function to them. Apparently, the practice evoked by the abbot was relatively common, since the elder Hilarion from Georgia (1776-1864), who was proclaimed a saint by the Georgian Church in October 2002, used to be hung on Mount Athos by chains [χρησιμοποιοῦσε αλυσίδες ως κρεμαστήρες] in order to avoid falling asleep during his long-lasting prayers.⁵²

Everything seems to indicate that when Abbot Loukas of Esphigmenou gave the iron vestment to the Museum in 1896, Lampakis saw this donation as an opportunity to create a series of ascetic instruments having been used by “ironed monks” [μοναχοὶ σιδηρούμενοι].⁵³ Hence, Lampakis was interested, on the one hand, in the artifact’s function and meaning; and on the other hand, in the new possibilities of arrangement after the creation of a museographic series. This becomes clear when we examine the report of the visit that the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece paid in the Christian Archeological Museum on 18 March 1904: they saw with interest “the iron weights and the iron belts [τα σιδηρά βάρη και τας σιδηράς ζώνας], that the ascetics were bringing, and from which they were liberated only after the dissolution of their bodies in the grave”⁵⁴ (Fig. 4).

De Nadaillac, who visited the Russian skete of Saint Andrew on Mount Athos in September 1891, describes a scene that Lampakis probably observed when he decided five years later to bring the iron vestment to Athens: De Nadaillac speaks about the ossuary, on the wall of which were hanging *des chaînes petites ou grosses, des carcans, des croix avec des pointes. On m’expliqua que c’étaient des instruments de pénitence enterrés avec les moines qui les avaient portés.*⁵⁵ Thus, these iron instruments were revealed after the ritual exhumation of the monks’ corpses.

It seems that until the beginning of the twentieth century, this type of objects was particularly appreciated: in the Greek church of Saint Dimitri in Tatavla (a neighborhood of Istanbul), there was an “Iron Belt with collar and crosses” (Σιδηρά Ζώνη μετὰ περιλαμίου και σταυρών), used in the past, according to the legend, by a sacristan of the church who had lived like a hermit. This object was hung next to the icon of Saint Dimitri and when the priest was reading a benediction, the belt was held next to the person’s head.⁵⁶ Thirty years before, the French traveller De Vogüé described how during his sojourn in Jerusalem, *Madame Kajevnikof nous fait voir une énorme croix en fer brut pesant au moins dix-huit ou vingt livres. Elle a été trouvée pendue au cou d’une vieille femme morte dans l’hospice ; la malheureuse était venue à pied de Jaffa avec ce singulier cilice, qu’elle portait depuis des années.*⁵⁷ These two last cases show that not only Athonite monks were wearing iron vestments: also laymen and, even, laywomen could use them.

GENUINE OBJECTS BUT FAKE ASSOCIATIONS

This case study raises different questions: Is the taste and expertise of museum professionals and scholars an unquestionable parameter for shaping the historical interpretation of the past? Who decides what is meaningful or useless in the case of an object, either fake or genuine? For instance, could it be possible to expose a fake object in a museum today, while explaining the whole story: who forged it and for what purpose, and what did it represent for a certain period of time?⁵⁸

Objects are carriers of memory – real and imagined. If objects can deceive, they can also convince. Hence, which is the power of conviction of objects? Or to put it differently, how can an object prove the veracity of a story or, on the contrary, deform and falsify our understanding of the past? What kind of attitude toward history do the objects foster? From that point of view, to what extent museums, through the exposed objects they host, are *loci* of conviction? It is interesting to consider here a passage by Sergey Shumilo⁵⁹: “The version accepted all over Mount Athos, and reflected in its hagiography and iconography, never associated Antony Pechersky with Esphigmenou Monastery. This is *proved* [my italics] by the icon of the Host of Holy Fathers who have Shone Forth on the Holy Mountain of Athos, painted in 1859 in the Romanian Prodromou skete. It depicts saints next to the houses they belonged to; and St Antony is placed next to the Russian monastery, not Esphigmenou”. Shumilo presents here this icon as material and visual proof. The question is whether this icon can be considered to be a more credible argument than the iron vestment exposed in an Athenian museum after its donation in 1896. In other words, how objects can be used for the assessment of historical evidence? How do objects intervene in historical debates as the one presented here?

The object exposed by Lampakis was genuine, since it was most surely used by an anonymous Athonite hermit. It was not just an explicatory object, but carried its own kind of sanctity. What was fake, in this case, was the association of an object with a particular person; this was also the case with the caves of Megali Samareia, where different hermits had lived for centuries, but not necessarily Saint Antony and not necessarily in the indicated cave next to the chapel built in his honor.

Thomson, who dismisses this legend as unhistorical, concludes his article in this way: “It is high time that Anthony’s Esphigmenou connection be once and for all re-allocated [...] from the category of *veritas historica* to that of *impia fraus*”.⁶⁰ The question that arises here is not to define whether this fraud was pious or impious (the first case being characterized by Nietzsche as worse), but to examine the historical reasons that made conflicting truth claims be raised by different groups on Mount Athos at a certain point of time.

Notes:

1 The Society of Christian Archeology, of which Georgios Lampakis (1854-1914) was an important member if not the unofficial leader, was created on 23 December 1884. Through the Museum set up by Lampakis, the Society aimed at highlighting the importance of Christian art, which was neglected and underestimated until then. See Seraïdari 2020.

2 The object’s registration number was 2232. It was described as *Σιδηροῦν μοναχικὸν σχῆμα ἐξ Ἁγίου Ὄρους, ἐφ’ οὗ ἀναγινώσκουμεν ρωσιστί: «Τὸν Σταυρὸν σου προσκυνοῦμεν Δέσποτα»*. Lampakis 1908, p. 37-38. I will respect the historical orthography and the polytonic Greek fonts only in the text and not in the bibliography, since most Greek titles in the nineteenth century were in capital letters on the front page.

3 This is explained in a note: *Κατὰ δοθείσας μοι πληροφορίας ἐν Ἁγίῳ Ὄρει τὸ σχῆμα τοῦτο ἀναφέρεται ὅτι ἔφερον ὁ Ρώσσοσ ἀσκητῆς Ἅγιος Ἀντώνιος, ὅστις ἠσκήτευσεν ἐν σπηλαίῳ ἀνήκοντι εἰς τὴν Μονὴν τοῦ Ἐσφιγμένου. Ἐφυλάσσετο δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐγγράφων τῆς Μονῆς*. Lampakis 1908, p. 38, note 1.

4 Speake 2018, p. 66. Speake uses as source the book by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion: The lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church*, vol. 6 (Ormylia, Holy Covent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, 2008, p. 97).

5 Ktenas 1935, p. 410. See also Tachiaos 2013, who considers that these inaccuracies (Antony deciding to go to Athos in 1051, at the age of 68 years) hurt the Chronicle’s credibility.

- 6 Shumilo 2018, p. 32.
- 7 Zozul'ak 2021, p. 1.
- 8 Lappas, 1975, p. 3-4.
- 9 Riasanovsky 1980, p. 267-268.
- 10 Petit, Regel 1906, p. vi.
- 11 Behr-Sigel 1963, p. 986.
- 12 Thomson, 1995, p. 637. The main idea of the article is that "the Kievan Caves Monastery was established with a Volhynian, not an Athonite blessing." Thomson, 1995, p. 661.
- 13 On this issue, see Pelenski, 1922, who shows that Russia's "creation myth" was based in Kyiv. In my text, I chose to present Saint Antony as Russian, even if Kyiv (where the saint lived) and Lyubech (from where he was) are Ukrainian cities. Saint Antony may also be classified as "Ruthenian," as it will be seen below. However, he was presented during the period examined here by both Greeks and Russians as the founder of Russian monasticism, and the questioning of this is well beyond the scope of my article.
- 14 Shumilo 2018, p. 36. See also Thomson, 1995, p. 666, who considers that the "origins of the legend cannot possibly antedate 1840 by more than a few years" since it was not recorded in the history of Athos written by the superior of Esphigmenou that Porphyrius Uspensky read during his stay on the Holy Mountain from 8 January to 1 July 1846.
- 15 Papoulidis 2004, p. 19.
- 16 Papoulidis 2004.
- 17 Speake 2018, p. 67.
- 18 Deluga 1997, p. 244.
- 19 Smyrnakis 1903, p. 638. Apparently, according to this text, Juvenal came to live near to the chapel as hermit in 1858.
- 20 Papoulidis 2004, p. 19-20.
- 21 Papoulidis 2004, p. 20.
- 22 Iordanidis 2018, p. 209; Thomson, 1995, p. 666. For the compilation of this *Vita* by hieromonk James of Vatopedi in c.1840, see Thomson, 1995, p. 664. Shumilo accepts the fact that Murav'ev "was taken by the Esphigmenou legend and was one of the first to popularize it in Russia." However, in his article, he gives only elements mentioned by Murav'ev that suggest doubt: concerning the size of the cave (too cramped to serve as habitation) or the absence of Saint Antony in an ancient icon depicting Esphigmenou fathers. See Shumilo 2018, p. 37-38.
- 23 Smyrnakis 1903, p. 637.
- 24 I would like to thank Aleksandr Preobrazhenskii who translated this inscription for me.
- 25 According to Pierre Gonneau, Barskij was without doubt a "Ruthenian" but also *un fidèle sujet de l'empereur (ou de l'impératrice) de Russie*. Gonneau 1998, p. 406. This article also insists on the way Barskij was criticizing the "hegemonic ambition" of Greek monks on Athos: for him, the monastery of Saint Panteleimon was Russian until 1735. Interestingly enough, the Greek translation of Barskij's travels on Athos in 2009 by the editions *Agioreitiki Estia* presents him as an "Ukrainian traveller."
- 26 Fennell 2001, p. 39.
- 27 Papoulidis 1981, p. 171.
- 28 Papoulidis 1981, p. 170-171. Karolidis describes this affair in detail, but he gives a different spelling for the Russian monk's name: Πουραζέλης. See Karolidis 1896, p. 102. On this issue, see also Petit, Regel 1906, p. xxxiv: *Combien suggestive, par exemple, l'histoire de cette vente au moine russe Néophyte Bourajéri du kelli des Saints Anargyres par les moines d'Esphigménou. L'acte était des plus réguliers; il n'en fut pas moins cassé, le 28 mars 1891, à la suite de démêlés et de procès presque invraisemblables, où le patriotisme tint lieu d'équité.*
- 29 Papoulidis 2004, p. 18.
- 30 Shumilo 2018, p. 34-35.
- 31 Ktenas 1935, p. 411.
- 32 *Ibidem*, p. 104-105.
- 33 This statement contradicts historical data. Russian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Athos gained in importance after the second half of the fourteenth century, with the archimandrite Agrephenius and the hierodeacon Ignatius of Smolensk (who made a journey to Constantinople in 1389-92) being the most well-known pilgrims.
- 34 Philalithis [Tantalidis] 1874, p. 96-97. Ottoman Greek poet and scholar Tantalidis was considered to be a "Pan-Orthodox figure," who had nothing to do with "Greek nationalists," by a small part of Russians who saw the 1872 Ecumenical Council "as the only way to restore some freedom and dignity to the Russian Church, which had been reduced to the status of a government agency by Peter the Great in the early 1700s." See Vovchenko 2012, p. 310.
- 35 Vovchenko 2012, p. 95.
- 36 Karolidis 1896, p. 83 and 100.
- 37 Fennell 2021, p. 97.
- 38 Speake 2018, p. 66. For the Xylourgou monastery, see also Christou 1987, p. 104-106. After having cited Paul Lemerle and his arguments (according to which the monastery was Russian in 1142), Christou maintains his position that it was never purely Russian, but either Greek or mixed. See also Thomson, 1995, p. 655-656 and p. 663, who characterizes this hypothesis as "wild," since that was a Greek minor house in the eleventh century. According to him, there is "no trace of close Russian contacts with Athos" before the twelfth century.
- 39 Shumilo 2018, p. 36. The Russian priest A. A. Smirnov, who spent two weeks on Athos in 1880, also considered that Saint Antony settled in Xylourgou. See Smirnov 1887.
- 40 This hypothesis was linked to the events of 1043, and more precisely "the unsuccessful Russian expedition against Constantinople and the subsequent blinding of many Russian prisoners." See Thompson, 1995, p. 663.
- 41 Shumilo 2018, p. 33.
- 42 On the claim made by Leonid (Kavelin) in 1876 that "the name of the cave was deliberately altered from St. Anthony's to St. Peter's when the Greeks took over Panteleimonos in the 18th century," see Thomson 1995, p.664, note 236.
- 43 Thomson 1995, p. 664. Thomson considers Ippolit's testimony to be the "earliest known speculation" about where Antony actually stayed on Athos. Thomson also mentions the "curious attempt to reconcile" this legend with the one of Esphigmenou, that was made by Simeon Vesnin (1814-1853), a monk of the Holy Mountain: according to this version, "Anthony first entered the Grand Laura but on his second visit to Athos lived as a hermit at Samareia." Thomson 1995, p. 667.
- 44 See Petit, Regel 1906, p. vi. However, in a book published in 2021 (which is the first one to present the "thousand year history of St Panteleimon's" in English), it is stated that "most Russian historians today along with the brethren of St Panteleimon Monastery give no credence to the Esphigmenou legend." See Fennell, 2021, p. 196, note 7.
- 45 See Tachiaos 2013.
- 46 Cited by Fennell 2021, p. 167.
- 47 Stocking 1985, p. 5.
- 48 For the way Lampakis constituted his collection of ecclesiastical objects and his relations with Russia, see Seraïdari 2020.
- 49 It seems that it was common for Russian holy men to wear iron vestments. This was also the case of Saint John of Moscow (sixteenth century): "He was wearing heavy irons [βαριά σιδερικά] under his cloths". See: <https://proskynitis.blogspot.com/2011/07/3.html> (in Greek). The term "cilice" is generally used to describe ritualistic devices of this kind that are worn in order to deny and punish the flesh in the whole Christian world.
- 50 Here is the text in Greek: Σιδηρᾶ ἀσκητικὴ ζώνη φέρουσα τρεῖς κρίκους, ἀφ' ὧν ἐξηρτῶντο βάρη πρὸς πνευματικὴν βίασαν τῶν μοναχῶν.
- 51 Lampakis 1903, p. 50-51. From the answer of the abbot, we understand that the belt was wrongly considered by some to have been used to detain mentally ill people who came to monasteries to be miraculously healed; according to this misinterpretation, the eyelets were used as "handcuffs" [κρίκοι και ἀλύσεις [...] ἐξ ὧν δένουσι μέχρι σήμερον τοὺς τρελλοὺς].
- 52 See <http://agioritikesmnimes.blogspot.com/2013/07/3355.html> (in Greek).
- 53 Lampakis 1903, p. 50, note 1.
- 54 Unsigned press article, entitled *Επίσκεψις της Ι. Συνόδου εις το Χριστιανικόν Μουσείον* [Visit of the Holy Synod to the Christian

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 55 De Nadaillac 1896, p. 372.
 56 Pamfilos, 1913, p. 68.

57 De Vogüé, 1876, p. 214.
 58 On this issue, see Sellen 2014, p. 160.
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