

World Heritage Sites

Protected Areas and World Heritage



METEORA GREECE

This group of six monasteries known collectively as Meteora ('hovering in the sky') was built as refuges on isolated almost inaccessible towers of sandstone. From the 11th century on monks settled on top of these pinnacles and, between the 13th and 16th centuries, built twenty-four monasteries. This was at the time of the great 15th century revival of the eremitic ideal as the Eastern Roman empire gave way to Ottoman Turkey. Their 16th-century frescoes mark a key stage in the development of late Byzantine painting.

COUNTRY

Greece

NAME

Meteora

MIXED CULTURAL AND NATURAL WORLD HERITAGE SERIAL SITE

1988: Inscribed on the World Heritage List under Cultural Criteria i, ii, iv and v + Natural Criterion vii.

STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE [pending]

IUCN MANAGEMENT CATEGORY

III Natural Monument

BIOGEOGRAPHICAL PROVINCE

Balkan Highlands (2.33.12)

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Meteora is situated to the east of the Pindos range in northeastern Thessaly approximately 25 km north-northwest of Trikala. The site lies just north of the main highway between Ioannina and Larisa. The protected area extends from some 0.5 km north of the town of Kalambaka northwest for some 2 to 3 km. It is 1.5 km at its widest point and includes the village of Kastraki: 39° 45'N x 21° 37'E.

DATE AND HISTORY OF ESTABLISHMENT

1988: The area is protected by legislative provisions including protective status for the village of Kastraki.

LAND TENURE

Owned by the state. The monasteries are under the control of the Greek Orthodox Church. The archaeological relics are under the care of the Direction of Conservation & Seventh Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, in the Ministry of Culture

AREA

271.9 ha with a buffer area of 1884.1 ha (UNESCO, 2005). In 1988 an area of 375 ha was given.

ALTITUDE

The mean altitude is 300m, rising to above 700m.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

The monasteries are sited on the south-facing slopes of the Antikhassia Mountains in the upper valley of the Pinios River, as the foothills of the Pindus mountains die into the Thessalian plain. Each of the monasteries is built directly on the flat rock surfaces of abrupt high grey-brown sandstone pinnacles, which rise some 400m above the plain. The pinnacles were created some 60 million years ago in the Tertiary period from sands emerging from the delta of a river, later split up and transformed by earthquakes. They are scenically extraordinary.

CLIMATE

The mountain range to the east and north of the site experiences a wide climatic variation from baking heat in summer to severe cold with heavy snowfalls in winter. Summer is the driest period, July and August being very hot. But storms occur year round, especially at higher altitudes.

VEGETATION

The relict fauna and flora associated with these outstanding cliff faces are relatively undisturbed owing to their inaccessibility. The area includes forested hills and valleys with riverine forests of oriental plane *Platanus orientalis* and local endemics such as the knapweeds *Centaurea lactifolia* found near Koniskos village, and *Centaurea kalambakensis*. The nearest protected area is the small Trikala Aesthetic Forest (78 ha), which was planted with Aleppo pine *Pinus halepensis* and Italian cypress *Cupressus sempervivens* in 1979. The vegetation cover is described as supra-Mediterranean, with a potential cover of oaks *Quercus* spp., and European hop hornbeam *Ostrya carpinifolius* with beech *Fagus sylvatica* forest above 700m.

FAUNA

Mammals include grey wolf *Canis lupus* and Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra*. The region was well-known in the 1970s for its population of raptors, with four species of vulture, lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, black *Aegypius monachus*, griffon *Gyps fulvus* and Egyptian *Neophron percnopterus* (EN); four eagle species, golden *Aquila chrysaetos*, Bonelli's *A. fasciatus*, short-toed *Circaetus gallicus* and booted *Hieraetus pennatus*, and breeding lanner falcons *Falco biarmicus*. Other birds include rock and cliff haunting species, such as alpine swift *Apus melba*, crag martin *Hirundo rupestris* and red-rumped swallow *Hirundo daurica*. Sombre tit *Parus lugubris* occurs in the valley. The area remains of importance for birds of prey, and the populations when described by Grimmett and Jones in 1989 were as follows: black kite *Milvus migrans* (ten pairs), Egyptian vulture (50 pairs, the largest population in Greece, but declining), short-toed eagle (five pairs), Levant sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*, lesser-spotted eagle *Aquila pomarina* (one pair), booted eagle (three to five pairs), Bonelli's eagle (one pair), peregrine falcon and honey buzzard *Pernis apivorus*. In addition, black stork *Ciconia nigra* (two pairs) and roller *Coracias garrulus* (ten pairs) were also breeding in 1989.

CONSERVATION VALUE

Monks settled in this region of inaccessible sandstone pinnacles from the 11th century on, creating an outstanding example of human use of the environment. The 16th century frescoes in this group of six, originally 24, monasteries, illustrate a vital stage in the development of post-Byzantine painting. The site lies within a C.I.-designated Conservation Hotspot and a WWF Global 200 Eco-region.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

This is the largest group of monasteries in Greece after Mount Athos. It comprises six foundations which preserve a rare example of monastic organisation and vernacular building as they existed between the 14th and 16th centuries, though very few monks continue to live there now. Religious occupation started with hermit settlements around 1,000 AD. The first buildings recorded were in the 11th century at Doupiani where anchorites gathered for Sunday worship. The first monastic community emerged in the 14th century: Athanasius from Athos founded the Great Meteoron in 1356 following the strict Orthodox rule of St Basil. It was early entered by a Serbian prince who endowed it and it became the largest and richest of the foundations. Monastic life was the most successful during the 15th and

16th centuries when twenty-four monasteries flourished. Those which remain are: the Great Meteoron (Transfiguration), Varlaam, Agios Nikolaos Anapafsas, Rousanou (S.Barbara, occupied by nuns); Agia Triada (Holy Trinity) and Agios Stephen. Accounts of individual monasteries are given in the World Heritage nomination.

The monasteries provided refuge and kept Greek culture alive during the time that Byzantine culture was beginning to give way to and then succumb to Ottoman domination. But by the 18th century, after occupation and punitive taxation, the monastic population had dwindled to a third of its original size and rebels and refugees from the Ottomans were also living there. Until the 1920s, when steps were cut, access was by ladders and winched baskets only. The area was bombed during World War II when many art treasures were stolen. However, 16th century frescoes by Theophanes the Cretan and Franco Castellano still remain in St Nicholas and Varlaam respectively, and there is still a small wealth of vestments and crosiers, relics and manuscripts, chrysobulls and codices. Emptied by war, lands expropriated by the government and no longer receiving revenues from abroad, the monasteries have effectively become astonishing museums. The monasteries lie within a WWF Global 200 Eco-region.

LOCAL HUMAN POPULATION

Within the area there is the small village of Kastraki, and the small town of Kalambaka is only 2 km away. Local activities include agriculture, forestry, stock raising, hunting and recreation.

VISITORS AND VISITOR FACILITIES

The monasteries are visited by both tourists and pilgrims. All are open daily and three have small museums. The sheer rock faces are also used by rock-climbers. Road access is good and there were 400,000 visitors to Meteora in 1992; more recently this total has doubled. Most visitors come between May and September which leads to overcrowding. Kalambaka has hotels and restaurants.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND FACILITIES

The site is of geological interest with reference being made to it by ancient Greek writers such as Herodotus and Strabo, as well as modern observers such as Pouqueville, Leake, Giannopoulos, Ussing and Philipson and Papadakis

MANAGEMENT

Since 1972 the monasteries have been restored with conservation carried out annually by specialists including archaeologists, restorers, craftsmen and labourers. A variety of methods is used in the work, including chemical analysis of colours and concrete injection. The monasteries lie in an area within which different types of building work are prohibited or limited.

MANAGEMENT CONSTRAINTS

The major threats to the sites are both natural and man-made. The former includes the possibility of earthquake damage: earthquakes occur frequently but are not of high intensity. The latter include disturbance by low-flying aircraft, felling of the *Platanus* forests and meeting the needs of the uncommon locally occurring species of vulture which require access to safe artificial feeding sites.

STAFF

The groups of specialists dealing with the restoration and conservation of the site are public employees of the Ministry of Culture and of the Archaeological Service.

BUDGET

Each monastery owns property to which it has exclusive right, but their finances are under the supervision of both church and state. The Ministry of Culture applies an annual grant for the conservation and restoration of the site.

LOCAL ADDRESS

The Director, Direction of Conservation & Seventh Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Ministry of Culture, Athens, Greece.

REFERENCES

The principal source for the above information was the original nomination for World Heritage status. Some 140 references were listed in the World Heritage nomination.

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Grimmet, R. & Jones, T. (1989). *Important Bird Areas in Europe*. International Council of Bird Preservation, Technical Publication No.9. ICBP, Cambridge, UK.

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DATE

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