

Cave Churches: an Undiscovered Experience



Spring is, for sure, the time to wander around Macedonia and discover its hidden and less known treasures. Numerous cave churches and monasteries, although not well known and not frequently included in tourist itineraries are real jewels. Over a hundred such spots exist around Macedonia. They are a curious phenomenon: centuries ago civilization and high spirituality blossomed in traditional animal shelters.

It is believed that Macedonian cave churches appeared around the 9th century, while their frescoes date back to the 13th and 14th centuries. They are a result of the very popular and original Orthodox Christian monastic teaching, the so-called hesychasm. It is a special religious practice of isolation, of living alone and devoting one's life to asceticism and prayer. The hesychast seeks enlightenment in God by being totally focused and concentrated on one dot. After hours of silent prayers these mystics would see the divine light

that makes them one with God.

These mystic monks and ascetics usually resided in hidden places, such as beautiful caves formed in volcanic, limestone or erosion rocks. Such caves can be found around the Ohrid Lake, Babuna River, near Prilep and Tikvesh, in the Kratovo region and all over the Osogovo Mountain. The caves can be of different sizes but they are typically rather small. Each was a dwelling space for only one monk. Wherever the geology allowed for many such caves, whole monastic communities flourished. The monks around Lesnovo counted a few hundred and the Lesnovo community was called Lesnovo Lavra, after one of the most famous Mount Athos monasteries, the Great Lavra.

Lesnovo and its caves are famous for the four monks who started their ascetic life in the region. According to the hagiographies, or lives of saints, the four greatest saints of the region, St. Gabril Lesnovski, St. John Rilski (after the Rila Mountain, near

Sofia, Bulgaria), St. Prohor Pcinjski (after the river Pcinja) and St. Joakim Osogovski (after the Osogovo Mountain) all lived in one cave for more than thirty years. Having attained high levels of devotion to God they decided to further spread the faith in different regions. They decided to leave their cave and travel in different directions without telling one another where they would go. They agreed to leave one by one as they wake up one morning. Thus the three monks and later saints set off for the regions which subsequently became associated with their names, while Gabriel, who was the last one to wake up decided to stay in the Lesnovo area.

Another legend connects important historic figures with St. Prohor and this region. It is believed that St. Prohor who lived at the time of the Macedonian Tsar Samuil, was also a contemporary of the Byzantine Emperor Roman IV Diogenes born in this part of the world. Roman IV who was a soldier and an avid hunter, discovered the cave the holy man used to live in. Later, after making an astonishing military career and marrying the widowed empress, thus becoming Emperor of the greatest empire of the time, he remembered his native region, and near the hermit's cave he erected the church in honour of St. Prohor Pcinjski. It is believed that the Church of St. George near the village of Staro Nagoricane was built on the ruins of that church by another royal, the Serbian King Milutin in the 14th century.

The cave churches near Ohrid and Prespa Lakes, because of the closeness to the water and higher humidity have better preserved paintings. Even the names of the saints, of the *zografs* who painted them and of the patron donors can be discerned among the inscriptions. The caves around Ohrid are connected with the arrival and the work of the Sts Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century.

It has long been believed that eremitic monasticism (another name for this religious practice) came to Macedonia

as an influence of the Mount Athos monasteries and their way of life. But archaeological excavations in the caves around the Monastery of Zrze, near Prilep, revealed that monastic life existed there 100 years before Mount Athos eremitic communities.

Older people recall the fact that during the Ottoman rule, many rebels and revolutionaries also hid themselves in the caves. Between military operations and attacks on the hated rulers they found there perfect shelters. There is a legend about a monk called Kozma who used to hide the rebels until he was discovered and sent to prison in distant Anatolia.

Visiting old and abandoned monastery caves can be a perfect springtime experience. Situated away from the main roads and accessible through narrow paths, they can be a real challenge to reach. But the experience of discovering former monastic dwellings is worth the effort. Usually, one can still recognize religious motives among the fresco remnants on the rocky walls of the caves. They usually reveal to which saint the church is dedicated. Very often you will find an icon on the rock shelf left there by some visitor, along with candles, thyme or basil and oil, the usual gifts. So anyone, even if he or she comes unprepared, can light the candles and worship. Or just enjoy the scenery.

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