Gender exclusion and local values versus universal cultural heritage significance: the Avaton debate on the monastic community of Mount Athos

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Abstract:

This article explores the discrepancy between 'universal values' and 'local values' in the case of world heritage sites of sacred/religious nature. It focuses on the example of the world heritage site of Mount Athos, a self-administered peninsula in Northern Greece inhabited by an Orthodox monastic peninsula and accessible only to male visitors/pilgrims. Special emphasis will be placed on the *Avaton* rule (prohibition of access to women) which has constituted an issue of debate since the inclusion of Greece in the European Union and, to some extent, since the inscription of Mt Athos to the World Heritage List. The issue of *Avaton* generates the question: "should a religious site of local, national and international significance that excludes half of the world population be designated as a heritage place of universal value?"

Keywords: world heritage, universal values, local values, Mt Athos, sacred sites

Introduction

The article aims to offer a critical insight into the concept of 'world heritage' by looking specifically at the example of Mount Athos, a religious site located in Northern Greece. We will explore the emerging tensions after a religious place becomes a heritage site of universal value as a result of its inscription to the World Heritage List. Mount Athos, an Orthodox monastic community and World Heritage Site since 1988, is accessible only to male pilgrims. Its inscription to the World Heritage List was purely based on the artistic and historic significance of its cultural heritage and less so on the continuity of its living traditions since the Byzantine era. The process of nomination has been instigated by the Greek state authorities resulting in the creation of a heritage place which is, however, viewed purely as a

religious site by the local monastic community. As a result, the 'universal' value of Mount Athos has been developed on the basis of values assigned by heritage experts at national and international level without taking fully into consideration the views of the monks towards the material culture of Mount Athos. Interviews with members of the Athonite monastic community reveal the discrepancy between the values assigned by the experts (heritage professionals) as opposed to the non-expert custodians and owners (monastic community). More importantly, the exclusion of women from Mount Athos –a 'local value' that is highly maintained and supported by the monastic community as a unique attribute of the spirituality of the place– raises the ethical question: should a religious site that excludes half of the world population be nominated as a heritage place of universal significance? Given that Mount Athos receives funding from national and international taxpayers (including women), is it possible to lobby and negotiate for provisions for women to access Mount Athos?

It will be argued that the nomination of a religious site (as with any site) into the World Heritage List introduces significant changes which need to be thoroughly considered and addressed before the nomination process begins. The process of nomination itself is a process of attributing a name, a label, as well as certain values and characteristics to a place leading to the formation of a new identity of place. Since the nomination process involves state authorities, the new attributes and the new place identity do not always accord with the values and attitudes of the local community – in the case of Mount Athos, the monastic community. Consequently, the 'universal value' can often contradict with the 'local value' of a place. Mount Athos was converted (at least theoretically) as a result of the world heritage nomination from a religious site to a heritage place of universal significance. This re-nomination raised the legitimate claim of women, who have been excluded from the area since its establishment, to access Mt Athos under their human and cultural right of access to cultural heritage. In view of this, the central question that this paper will address is "Should a religious site that excludes half of the population be designated as a heritage place of universal significance?"

This paper draws extensively from unpublished research conducted by one of the authors for the purposes of a PhD thesis (Alexopoulos 2010). The data was collected through field research between 2002-2005 with the employment of a variety of qualitative methods including structured and semi-unstructured interviews, free discussions, participant and unobtrusive observation (Alexopoulos 2010: Chapter 1.4.5). This data was compared with available literature and enhanced particularly through the collection of newspaper articles from the Greek and international daily press.

Brief background to Mt Athos

Mount Athos (known in Greece as Holy Mountain= Ἅγιον Ὄρος) is an Orthodox monastic community occupying the easternmost peninsula of the prefecture of Halkidiki in the region of Macedonia, Northern Greece (Pentzikis 2003). The entire peninsula is divided into territories among twenty ruling monasteries while the area can be accessed only by sea through ferryboat services from the nearby towns of Ouranoupolis and Ierissos. In terms of administration, the Athonite territory is under the sovereignty of the Greek state since 1912 but the monastic community is self-governed (Papastathis 1993). The Great Lavra monastery, which ranks first in the Athonite hierarchy, was founded in AD 963 and throughout the centuries –from the Byzantine era to the present– the area has managed to retain its status quo and several privileges (Kadas 1986, pp. 11-13). With an area covering approximately 336 square kilometers and a population of more than 2,000 monks Mount Athos constitutes a very significant sacred site for Eastern Christianity and a popular pilgrimage destination (Speake 2002, pp. 176-182; Andriotis 2009). The universal value of Mount Athos in terms of cultural heritage was demonstrated through the inclusion in 1988 of the area to UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. Indeed the Athonite monasteries have preserved a wide range of archaeologically and historically significant buildings and architectural complexes, important and valuable collections and several movable and immovable cultural heritage elements (Papadopoulos 1992, p. 26; Karakatsanis 1997)[1]. However, apart from this rich heritage in tangible terms Mount Athos is a very special place for the safekeeping of intangible cultural heritage traditions. This is, among other things, illustrated by the significant spiritual role of the Athonite monasteries the brotherhoods of which preserve a unique living Orthodox tradition and way of life (Kadas 1986, p. 10) (see Appendix for the criteria under which Mt Athos was inscribed into the World Heritage List).

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[1] The Advisory Body Evaluation document stated that 'the monasteries of Athos are a veritable conservatory of masterpieces ranging from wall paintings by Frangos Castellanos at the Great Lavra to portable icons, gold objects, embroideries or illuminated manuscripts which each monastery jealously preserves' (ICOMOS 1988, p. 10).

Figure 1: View of the Xiropotamou monastery with the slopes of Mount Athos in the background (Georgios Alexopoulos, August 2005).

Holding a unique status quo within the Greek state, each monastery has responsibility for the management of its cultural heritage within its relevant territory while collective administrative bodies take decisions about the wider peninsula (Papastathis 2004; Alexopoulos 2010: chapter 4). Nevertheless, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and its regional agency, the Ephorate of Antiquities for Halkidiki and Mount Athos[2] has an important role in collaborating with the monasteries and offering its human resources, expertise and technical support. In addition, responsibilities for heritage management and all sorts of interventions are also shared with KEDAK (*KEΔAK*=Centre for the Preservation of Athonite Heritage) an agency comprised of representatives from the monastic community, academia, and various heritage professionals (Alexopoulos 2013a, pp. 67-70).

Before discussing the ban of access for women that exists on Mount Athos it is important to emphasise that the area is not an easily accessible peninsula that enjoys an island-like isolation from the Greek mainland. Although a peninsula-wide road network exists within the monastic territories no vehicle can access the area from the outside borders (from mainland Greece to Mount Athos). A ferry-boat connection is the only way for both monks and visitors to enter the Holy Mountain. In addition to this arrangement the Athonite community has established a very strict quota system for regulating visitors in terms of both numbers and religious affiliation. Currently only 110 male visitors per day –that have applied

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[2] Prior to the significant changes in the structure of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and its regional services this agency functioned under the name 10th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities.

for and have been granted specific visitor permits (usually well in advance)– are allowed to enter the peninsula. Among these permits only 10 are allocated to non-Greek/non-Orthodox visitors in a process that requires documentation of religious affiliation.

The Avaton rule: exclusion of women as a means to preserve a traditional way of life

The monastic community of Mt Athos has been following a century-old rule that prohibits women from entering its territory. The *Avaton* (*Άβατον*=inaccessible in Greek) is related to the virtue of celibacy and has been deemed to represent an extension of the traditional monastic rule prohibiting men and women to enter a monastery housing members of the opposite sex observed with various degrees of rigour at different institutions (Talbot 1996, p. 68). Athonite monks account this exclusion to the tradition according to which the Virgin Mary paid a legendary visit to the area of Mt Athos which thereafter became her Garden – since then the Mother of God became its patron and protector and the area was dedicated to her exclusively (Speake 2002: p. 25)[3]. The exclusion includes also female animals and it has been suggested that this regulation was motivated by both the desire to safeguard the sexual purity of the monks but most importantly to avoid the engagement of the monastery in stockbreeding which could lead to the development of a large commercial enterprise (Ware 1996, p. 9). It has been argued that the *Avaton* was an unwritten rule as the various Byzantine imperial decrees only implied this prohibition but the principle was 'so ingrained in Athonite custom law and tradition that it seemed unnecessary to put such a rule in writing' (Talbot 1996, pp. 68-69). In fact Alice-Mary Talbot (1996: p. 69) has argued that this tradition enjoyed so extensive respect that 'virtually no women ever dreamed of attempting to enter the sacred peninsula; hence there was no need for a specific written prohibition' (ibid: 69). Throughout the centuries, however, there have never been occasional violations of this rule (Talbot 1996: p. 70; Speake 2002: p. 62-63). In addition to anecdotal and historical evidence of violations of the Avaton rule an interesting symbolic act of resistance to the exclusion of women took place in January 2008 during a public protest by members of local communities from the prefecture of Halkidiki at the Mt Athos borders. Although the reason for the rally was focused on the perceived encroachment of certain Athonite monasteries on public and private land a group of female protesters, including an MP of a left-wing party, seized the opportunity to violate the *Avaton* under media coverage by crossing the border fence (Eleftherotypia 09/01/2008).

The big ethical question that the Avaton rule raises is how can a monastic peninsula that means so much to the cultural heritage of the Greek nation and even more broadly to Orthodox Christianity (beyond the existing national borders) enjoy such a privileged status

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[3] Mount Athos is still widely called as the "Garden of Panagia (the Mother of God)".

within the Greek state with significant funding (from tax payers money) and human resources involved in heritage protection, conservation and management? On a European level one could question why has so important financial support been allocated to projects on Mount Athos without reflection on gender restriction issues posed by the ban of access to female visitors. Even more broadly, how can a World Heritage Site of universal value advocate the exclusion of half of the world population from accessing and enjoying its natural and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible?

The Avaton rule contested

Reflecting on the preservation of such a seemingly contradictory principle (at least according to contemporary standards of gender equality) Graham Speake (2002: p. 27) has noted that the Avaton rule '…was so well established, so widely understood and so deeply respected that there was no need to spell it out. No one ever questioned it; and so it has (almost) always been'. Nevertheless, this restriction has not been spared of criticism and several attempts in the last decades have been made to exercise political pressure for its abolition.

In the 1970s (on the occasion of International Women's Year) the Greek Parliament rejected the proposal of an MP for the lifting of the ban. This issue was actually brought to court under the initiative of a group of political activists and female MPs but the abolishment of the restriction was not accepted based on two reasons (Papastathis 1993, p.74; Speake, 2002: p. 163): 'the ban had always been in place' and therefore constituted one of the traditional and internationally protected rights of the Athonite community; the Mount Athos Charter, which serves as a constitution for the area, establishes this rule and any amendments can be instigated only by the Athonite monasteries themselves. The issue of the abolishment of the Avaton was again raised some decades later by a Greek female member of the European Parliament and indeed the latter issued in 2003 a resolution requesting the lifting of the ban.[4] The gender restriction was also deemed anachronistic, and misogynist (Ta Nea 21/08/2001; Thomas, 2002). What's more, the fact that female visitors are forbidden and male potential visitors gain access only through the existing restricted quota system has been considered as a type of political control while the community itself has been termed as a 'semi-autonomous monastic theocracy' (Shackley 2001, 183)[5].

These attempts have in turn raised great concerns within the Athonite monastic community and have resulted in cautiousness in the dealings of the monasteries with the

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[4] According to the resolution the prohibition 'nowadays violates the universally recognised principle of gender equality, Community non-discrimination and equality legislation and the provisions relating to free movement of persons within the EU' (European Parliament 2003).

[5] Sean Thomas (2002) wrote for the Guardian: '…And yet, and yet. In a way Athos is a kind of courageous test, a brave, ridiculous, 1,000-year-old experiment to see what the world would be like without the destabilising effect of sexual desire. And so perhaps we should allow the Athonite monks just a few more centuries in their strange, unreal, pristinely beautiful laboratory'.

'outside' secular world. The debate has, at times, enjoyed wide media coverage in Greece but has also included the views of the people strongly opposing any attempt to change the monastic peninsula with many members of the Orthodox clergy being vocal (Eleyftherotypia 17/01/2003). Most of the voices representing the Athonite perspective have emphasised that Athonite monks 'do not hate women' (Ta Nea 02/11/1998) and that the absence of the latter makes concentration to monastic duties more feasible (Thomas 2002). Others have highlighted the overall negative impact of changes imposed to the Athonite way of life from the outside world (Ta Nea 23/11/1999). On the occasion of the Treasures of Mount Athos Athos exhibition, which took place in Thessaloniki between 1997-1998[6], Father Vassilios, (former) abbot of the Iviron monastery highlighted that the exhibition itself was a medium for overcoming the exclusion of women (To Vima 22/06/1997).

The issue still raises discussions and conflicting views in relation to women's rights and international law. In a legislative analysis of the matter by professor of Ecclesiastical Law Ioannis Konidaris (2003) it has been argued that the *Avaton* is a manifestation of religious freedom, especially for the practice of worship, and comes under the principle of respect for private ownership. This legal approach imposes certain human rights related to private ownership but obviously contradict cultural rights related to access to heritage.

Gender restriction as a "local value": The values of the Athonite community

Myra Shackley (2003, p.163) has argued that 'many religious sites have rigidly hierarchical, clerically dominated management structures which may have functioned in the same way for thousands of years' but 'are largely unaffected by modern management trends, with the exception of their peripheral activities (often financial)'. In a similar fashion and to a great extent, the aspirations and values of the Athonite monastic community, which clings to a set of traditions and values stemming from a millennium of continuous active presence, are usually characterised by stability. Nevertheless, one cannot argue that the attitudes and perceptions of the Athonite community, which inevitably affect decision-making, have always been immutable. What's more, the views of the individual monasteries in various issues that extend well beyond the confines of cultural heritage have also differed, sometimes even radically.

Interviews with Athonite monks have revealed the different attitudes of the monastic community towards the cultural heritage of Mt Athos. For the abbot of a small Athonite monastery the name 'treasures' –a term that is often used to connote the moveable cultural and sacred objects– is a term that refers not only to the artistic significance of those objects

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[6] On the occasion of the celebration of Thessaloniki as Cultural Capital of Europe the "Treasures of Mount Athos" exhibition with more than 1500 artefacts from Mount Athos was organised at the Museum of Byzantine Culture from 19/06/1997 to 30/04/1998.

but also the spiritual treasures (Interview 1, 2004):

'*The word "treasures" has a general meaning, it includes artistic but also spiritual treasures. Of course the key element of the treasures found on Mount Athos is the spiritual life: for example, the hagiographies (depictions of saints), the context that exists behind the service. All these elements that constitute the treasure of Mount Athos are not kept by the monks secretly and faithfully in a miserable way for themselves but are open to the world and this is why visitors have existed and continue to exist*'.

The emphasis is strongly on the intangible elements of heritage rather than its artistic or historic significance. The traditional Athonite way of life that has been followed up to the present is viewed as the most important value by monks themselves.

For certain monks, the *Avaton* is what distinguishes Mt Athos from other monasteries and a vivid example of the living tradition and continuity (Interview 1, 2004):

'*The Avaton naturally contitutes a difficulty for some people to understand because it is a result of deep spiritual struggle that the monastic life requires from the monks. This struggle has some credos and some conditions which one needs to know in order to understand the Avaton. It's about the struggle of the human against the temptation, the devil, who tries to prevent him from his high spiritual destination. In this struggle the monk leaves the world, the secular life that attaches humans to everyday human habits and concerns*'.

'*The Avaton does not contain any element of devaluation towards women. There has never been anything like this and certainly there exists nothing now. It is worth noting that after God, the person that is honored more on Mount Athos is the Panagia (All Holy) mother of God, which is a female person and this is how she is honoured here*'.

Non-Greek people with a first-hand knowledge of the Orthodox Christian faith have also demonstrated their understanding towards the Athonite perceptions. British scholar Graham Speake (2002: p. 25) has mentioned that 'the exclusion of women is not a stand against women or feminism, but a purely practical matter' and has referred to the need for ensuring circumstances that allow 'the highest possible degree of concentration'. Museum director Berndt Arell, who was directly involved in the organisation of an exhibition about Mount Athos in Helsinki, Finland, has stated that although 'many people may find this annoying and difficult to explain in our day and age' it is a choice for the Athonite brotherhoods have chosen this way of life and brotherhood in order to serve their Creator in

the best possible manner, free of all worldly temptations, it may be a little easier for us to accept. Monasteries exist for men and convents for women, and Mount Athos is one huge monastery' (Arell 2006: p. 10).

Within this context one could pose the question: is the *Avaton* an aspect/element that contributes to the heritage value of Mount Athos? If so, does this contradict with the concept of 'universal value'? If cultural heritage is both a cultural and human right, is Mt Athos, as a world heritage site, against human rights? It is important to stress that the exclusion of women was mentioned only once in the ICOMOS Evaluation document (ICOMOS 1988, p. 10) and in this case without any particular critical stance.

Heritage, Human and Cultural Rights

The case of Mount Athos reveals the issues generated from the moment a religious site becomes a 'cultural heritage' place of 'universal value'. This example further reveals how the human right of a monastic community to determine their rule and governance contradicts with the human and cultural right of women to access a place of universal heritage value. It is therefore a typical example of a dissonant place where the human/cultural right of a local community to determine their own rule of governance conflicts with the human and cultural right of the women population to access this site. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the ambiguous clash of human and cultural rights (e.g. Silverman and Ruggles 2007) it is worth noting that, as access to culture is a recognised human right, the exclusion of female visitors from visiting the Athonite peninsula could be regarded as a breach of well-established cultural heritage management principles which advocate accessibility of the general public, public value, social inclusion and gender equality. Nevertheless, the flip side of this angle would be to look at the issue of the *Avaton* as a fundamental human right of a group of people (in this case the Athonite community) to religious freedom and to be in charge of their private property – particularly as both of these rights seem to be supported by local, national and international law. In fact, another commonly highlighted cultural heritage management principle (according to which the views of the Athonites should again be respected) is respect to local communities, minorities, different cultures and religions and the avoidance of top-down decision-making all of which have been among the most important achievements of the field (e.g. O' Keefe 2000).

Ethnographic research on cultural heritage management issues conducted on Mount Athos (Alexopoulos 2010) revealed the sensitivity of the *Avaton* issue, as a result of the increasing national and international pressure, criticism and media coverage exercised by certain activists and politicians.[7] The views of the Athonite community in this particular issue

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[7] This was further demonstrated by the refusal of a certain brotherhood to answer a questionnaire that

have been well published in a variety of media and are to a great extent homogenous, whether belonging to open-minded or conservative brotherhoods and individuals. The comments received from interviews confirmed this and additionally underlined the *Avaton* as another fundamental expression of the resistance of Mt Athos to change.

All of the interviewed Athonite fathers highlighted in their responses the significance of the *Avaton* for securing the preservation of the peaceful traditional Athonite life, the ascetic aspect of which demands celibacy and abstinence from the temptations and the worries of personal relationships of the secular world (Interview 2, 2004). The ban of access is considered to be one of the great virtues of the Athonite community and one of its most cherished and unique characteristics (Interview 1, 2004). It has been rightly pointed in terms of the reluctance of religious communities to change when faced with heritage management issues that 'Situations can change. Governments fall, national religious affiliations change and society becomes more tolerant, with the result that site access codes are altered' (Shackley 2001: p. 154). The fact that Athonite approaches need to change from within and cannot be forced upon the monastic community has been underlined in the following interesting statement by a monk with a long experience in the Athonite administrative bodies:

'*I believe that the Avaton will be preserved as long as Mount Athos will be populated by Orthodox monks dedicated to the worship of God. No power, secular or ecclesiastical, can change what monasticism established throughout the centuries and what is substantial for the conditions of development of Orthodox monasticism. The castles usually fall from within, as our wise people say*' (Interview 4, 2004).

The exclusion of women is by no means peculiar to Mt Athos as two other Orthodox monastic establishments, currently World Heritage Sites, the monastery of St John on Patmos and the Meteora in Thessaly also have had similar rules in the past (Speake 2002: p. 25). In fact, gender restrictions to cultural heritage places of religious/spiritual value can be encountered in many countries, cultures and religious groups – Australian Aboriginal places such as Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (Kaus 2008). The existence of similar sites worldwide renders the question of this article even more critical. Should exclusive, religious sites be nominated as world heritage sites? If they are nominated as world heritage sites, what are the implications from a funding and access point of view?

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covered a wide range of heritage management issues – the reluctance was justified partly by the inclusion of a question that addressed the Avaton rule.

Resistance to change

As mentioned above, the world heritage nomination endeavours to prevent rapid development and change that threatens the 'universal value' of the place (UNESCO-WHC 1988). The paradox here is that the act of inscription of a place to the world heritage list imposes inevitably significant changes. In the case of Mount Athos, a religious site is re-nominated into a heritage place of universal value. For several monks this was viewed as an opportunity for funding but for others as a threat to the spirituality of the place (Chatzigogas 2005, p. 72; Petherbridge 1993, pp.129-130).

Resistance to change in the cultural heritage context is very common. Timothy Darvill (1995, p. 48) has attributed this to the 'existence value' that people place on something from the past and to the phenomenon whereby 'every generation believes that the world is changing uncontrollably and at a more rapid pace than ever before'. The encounter of living heritage with modernity, in all world religions, is believed to be facing conflicts due to the pace of change, the quick and wide communication of new ideas and secularisation which is associated with modernisation and globalisation (Inaba 2005, p. 46; Alexopoulos 2013c). David Lowenthal (1985, p. 40) has claimed that often 'historical precedent legitimates what exists today' and we 'justify current practice by referring to 'immutable' tradition' and the notion that 'what has been should continue to be or be again'. This is particularly relevant at sites of sacred worship and pilgrimage, where monuments are deemed to play as much a symbolic as an actual role by constituting landscapes of memory, myth and tradition (Coleman & Elsner 1995, p. 48). According to Myra Shackley (2001, p. xviii) 'visiting a sacred site should be an essentially spiritual experience, uncontaminated (as far as possible) by technical and commercial realities' as such as a site serves predominantly to 'offer the attendee a window on infinity'.

Experience in Greece has shown that a certain moral flexibility is required by the clergy-custodians in cases where Orthodox sites are used to host events irrelevant to religious activity, as has been demonstrated by the conflicts caused by the use of the Rotonda monument in Thessaloniki for the organisation of a concert in the late 1990s (Stewart 2001) and the initial refusal of the brotherhood of the Holy Trinity monastery on Meteora to allow the filming of certain scenes of a James Bond action movie ("For Your Eyes Only", 1981) to take place in their monastery (Moore 2012, p. 176). These examples have proved that in cases where the local religious community or the custodians have not been consulted properly unfortunate consequences may follow. These conflicts can of course be rooted both in unreasonable conservative claims as well as legitimate attempts to obstruct incompatible and desecrating uses. In many ways the examples of Orthodox tradition and the living tradition of Mt Athos reflect the natural human tendencies of traditional societies analysed by David Lowenthal. What these societies pursue, according to the scholar, is

validation of the present through the past by invoking the 'continuance of practices that supposedly date from time immemorial' and by asserting that things are (and should be) the way they always have been' (Lowenthal 1985, pp. 40-41). In a similar fashion, Athonite monasteries pursue to preserve timeless values that link them with the early forms of Christian monasticism and the era of the establishment of the Orthodox dogma and ideals. This attitude explains, to a great extent, the reluctance to accept changes in the traditional Athonite way of life and the way the monastic community has dealt with both its own affairs and the influence from the 'outside world'.

The traditional Athonite way of life seems to be a strong element of the sense of place praised by the majority of pilgrims and an aspect that most visitors would not wish to be altered. This has been evidenced in thorough accounts about life on Mt Athos (Gothóni 1993) but it has also been confirmed through ethnographic data (Alexopoulos 2010). Visitors of all possible backgrounds highly esteem the serenity and the peaceful atmosphere of the peninsula that keeps far away the haste, worries and stress of everyday life in the outside world. Therefore keeping the Athonite community protected from elements that spoil the above atmosphere seems to be important not only for the brotherhoods living on Mt Athos but also for the people seeking refuge and wanting to experience, even for a few days, the 'true' Holy Mountain. Road expansions, the increase in the number of shops and commodities at the capital of Karyes, the constant rise in the number of various vehicles is often criticised by the visitor himself, whether a conservationist or a romantic. Similarly, the Athonite monasteries dislike any association with the term museum and are reluctant to open access to their collections despite recent developments in the area (Alexopoulos 2013b).

The *Avaton* has been maintained as a result of resistance to change. However, the characterization of the site as world heritage has already introduced a remarkable change in the status and the values of the place leading to legitimate claims for access by women.

Conclusion

The analysis has shown the large gap between the values assigned by official authorities (national and international) and the monastic community itself on Mount Athos. Official authorities defined the universal value of Mount Athos on the basis of its artistic, architectural and historic significance while local monks highlight the uniqueness of the living tradition stressing the importance of *Avaton*. The inscription of Mount Athos into the World Heritage List has attributed a heritage dimension to the site with which several monks do not agree. The 'cultural treasures' of Mount Athos are viewed by the monastic community as spiritual,

everyday objects. Furthermore, the lack of access of women to Mount Athos (Avaton) is viewed as a unique signifier of the spirituality of the place. However, this has also brought the issue of whether a sacred site which excludes women should be inscribed into the world heritage list in the first place?

We argued that the inscription of a place into the World Heritage List introduces radical and unpredictable changes. The process of inscription assigns a new form of identity and new values to that place. Although the intention of the nomination is often to 'freeze' a certain place in time through the prevention of change, the nomination process introduces changes. The case of Mount Athos is a typical example. The conversion of the site into a 'world heritage site' immediately legitimises women's claim for access. However, it is uncertain if a heritage/sacred place, which excludes half of the world population, should be considered to hold universal value. Without undermining the role of world heritage list in the preservation and management of heritage sites that are at risk, we would advocate for alternative ways of preservation in the case of religious sites that are by tradition excluding certain groups of people.

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Appendix: UNESCO's World Heritage criteria in 1988 (UNESCO 1988: 5-8) and their applicability to Mount Athos as expressed in the ICOMOS Advisory Body Evaluation document (ICOMOS 1988).

UNESCO's World Heritage criteria (1988)	Mount Athos World Heritage criteria (1989)
natural (iii): contains superlative natural phenomena, formations or features, for instance, outstanding examples of the most important ecosystems, areas of exceptional natural beauty or exceptional combinations of natural and cultural elements.	'The natural features of all these sites provide the setting which attracted settlement and the building of religious structures in historic times. All, thus, have natural features which form an important backdrop for a cultural landscape which now represents the dominant values' (UNESCO-WHC 1988).
cultural (i): represents a unique artistic achievement, a masterpiece of human creative genius	"the transformation of a mountain into a sacred place made Mount Athos a unique artistic creation combining the natural beauty of the site with the expanded forms of architectural creation" (ICOMOS 1988, p. 10)
cultural (ii): has exerted great influence, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture, monumental arts or town-planning and landscaping	"Mount Athos exerted lasting influence in the orthodox world, of which it is the spiritual centre, on the development of religious architecture and monumental painting. The typical layout of Athonite monasteries…was used as far away as Russia. Iconographic themes, condified by the school of painting at Mount Athos and laid down in minute detail in the Guide to Painting (discovered and published by Didron in 1845), were used and elaborated on from Crete to the Balkans beginning in the 16th century. (ICOMOS 1988, p. 10)

cultural (iv): is an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural ensemble which illustrates a significant stage in history	The monasteries of Athos present the typical layout of orthodox monastic establishment: is a square, rectangular or trapezoidal wall flanked by towers, which constitute the periobolus of a consecrated place, in the centre of which the community's church, or the catholicon, stands alone. Strictly organized according to principles dating from the 10th century are the areas reserved for communal activities (refectory, cells, hospital, library), those reserved solely for liturgical purposes (chapels, fountains), and the defense structures (arsenal, fortified tower). The organization of agricultural lands in the idorrythmic skites, the kellia and kathismata (farms operated by monks) is also very characteristic of the medieval period. (ICOMOS 1988, p. 10-11).
cultural (v): is an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement which is representative of a culture and which has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.	The monastic ideal has, at Mount Athos, preserved traditional human habitations, which are representative of the agrarian cultures of the Mediterranean world and have become vulnerable through the impact of change within contemporary society. Mount Athos is also a conservatory of vernacular architecture and agricultural and craft tradition. (ICOMOS 1988, p.11).
cultural (vi) is directly or tangibly associated with events or with ideas or beliefs of outstanding universal significance.	In 1504, the sacred mountain of Athos, a holy place in the Christian world, became the principal spiritual home of the Orthodox church. It retained this prominent role even after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the establishment of the autocephalous patriarchy of Moscow in 1589. (ICOMOS 1988, p.11).