

# Short history account of Saint Savvas' Lavra

**From the foundation of the Lavra until the Arab conquest (483-638)**

The Holy and venerable Lavra of our Saint Savvas the Sanctified in the desert of Judea constitutes a unique phenomenon in the Church history, due to its contribution to the configuration of the Orthodox worship, the monastic order and hymn writing, the presence of a multitude of Saints, strict anchorites, God-inspired theologians and martyrs. Moreover, it has significantly contributed to the fight against all the heresies that came up in the Holy Land after the Lavra's foundation and it has defended the Orthodox faith together with the rights of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Numbering more than 1500 years of unceasing activity (483-2002), the Great Lavra of Saint Savvas owes its foundation and subsequent course to the full of grace bearer of the Holy Spirit monk, Saint Savvas (439-532), who became a lamp that stood up high for all who wanted to live the anchorite life and a strong advocate to the Lord for all succeeding "Savvaites" monks. The core of the first Lavra was formed by the 70 anchorites who gathered around Saint Savvas since 483. Later on the Lavra was moved from the east side of Brook Kidron that hosted the hermitage of Saint Savvas, to the west side, where the God-built Cave was made into a church (486-491). The increase in the Brotherhood number imposed the necessity of building the big Church of Theotokos (501) and the efficient organization of the buildings and the services, in order to meet the demands of the Lavra. The fame of Saint Savvas' holiness and by virtue of it, his designation as leader and legislator of all anchorites in Jerusalem (493), had an impact on the Great Lavra, which became the prototype

for the life and the liturgic order, the Typikon, not only for the three Lavrae and the six Coenobitic Monasteries Saint Savvas had founded by the time of his death (532), but also for the rest of the monasteries in Palestine in the intermediate years and for the Church as a whole. Saint Savvas' Great Lavra fought vigorously against Monophysitism in the years 512-516, and juxtaposed Emperor Anastasios and the rest of the Patriarchates in the East which were in the hands of Monophysists. The steadfast assembly and confession of faith of the desert anchorites redeemed the Patriarchate of Jerusalem from heresy. The successor Hegoumens of Saint Savvas recovered the role of the Lavra as a firm bastion against the heresy of Origen. With the guidance of Saint John the Hesychast, former Bishop of Cologne (454-558), the Lavra Hegoumens Gelasios (537-546), Cassian (547-548) and Konon (548-568), repelled the wiles of Origenists and the intrigue against Emperor Justinian, but not without retaliation. The Lavra was one of the few which had been left to the Orthodox, and the monks there endured prosecutions and ferocities, even the violent enthronement of an Origenist Hegoumen (547). Nevertheless, God protected the Lavra and Konon's actions contributed greatly in the convergence of the 5<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Synod (553) which condemned Origen's fallacies. The appearance of the Persians in the Holy Land (614) was the preamble for the Arab advent of Islam (638). Similarly, the beginning of the martyr saints of the Lavra was made by the 44 Savvaites monks who were slaughtered by the Persian army on 16<sup>th</sup> May 614.

### **Arabs, Crusaders and Mamluks (638-1517)**

After the Arab conquest and the reorganization of Saint Savvas' Great Lavra from Patriarch Modestos, the most glorious period followed in the 8<sup>th</sup> and part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The most profound theologian of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Saint John of Damascus, the Hymn composer Cosmas Agiopolitis, Stephen the Melodist, Mihail Sygelos, Theodore and Theophanes Graptoi, and Father

Jonah Savvaitis, Theodore Bishop of Karron, five eminent for their holiness and theology Saints – Stephen the wonderworker, Theodore Bishop of Edessa, Mihail the blessed martyr, and the blessed martyrs Vakhos and George Bethlehem – make up the refined Brotherhood which adorned the Church of Jerusalem and the Church as a whole, and was added to the older Saints and Martyrs of the Lavra – Abramios Bishop of Kratea, Xenophontas, Arkadios, John, Antiohos and Anastasios the Persian. Despite the ferocious attacks, the multitude of barbarians (796,809,813) and the general disorder, the beneficence of the Lavra to the Church reaches its highest point. The significance of the Lavra to Theology is proven by Saint John of Damascus' contribution in the first Iconoclast phase (726-787) and that of Saints Mihail and Sygelos, Theophanes and Theodore Graptoi in the second phase (814-843) for the prevailing honour of the holy icons. In addition to the Theological writings in the Lavra, there was also wide activity in copy-writing and translations. It became the centre of Georgian education from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the translating centre of Church writings from Greek to Arabic. A characteristic example is that the famous "Ascetics" by Saint Isaac the Syrian were translated from the Syrian language to the Greek for the first time in the Lavra, by monks Abramios and Patrikios at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. From the 9<sup>th</sup> until the 13<sup>th</sup> century the liturgic order, the liturgic "Typikon" of the Lavra together with the hymns composed by the Savvaites Saints are widely distributed by prominent holy monastery founders. The "Typikon" of the Lavra influenced greatly the monastic liturgic order, which was written by Saints Theodore of Studion (9<sup>th</sup> century), Paul the New from Mount Latros (beginning 10<sup>th</sup> century), Nikon Mavroritits (end 11<sup>th</sup> century), Christodoulos of Patmos (11<sup>th</sup> century), Lazarus Galisiotis (10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> centuries), Luke of Messina (Sicily 12<sup>th</sup> century), Neophytos the Recluse (Cyprus

12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Nelos of Tamassia (H.M. Mahaira Cyprus beginning 13<sup>th</sup> century). The monastic Typikon of Saint Savvas had already been spread to distant Georgia since the 9<sup>th</sup> century (by Saint Gregory Khandzta in 826). Immense was also the simultaneous spreading of the new hymn style which was mainly developed by Saint John of Damascus and the "Saint Savvas' school of poets", namely of the Canon. The hymnography production of the Lavra became the foundation for the formation of the Church worship after the Iconoclast. The attributed to Saint John of Damascus establishment of the Octoechos (Eight Tones) in the hymn melody, prevailed in Worship and the writing of the Octoechos constituted the first form of the most important liturgic Church book, the Parakletiki. In 808 the Lavra is found again at the role of the defender of the Orthodox faith. Under Hegoumen John's guidance, clergy and lay men counteracted against the Filioque heresy which had been presented by the Benedictine monks of the Mount of Olives. So intense was the opposition of the Orthodox people in Bethlehem and in the Holy Sepulchre, that the Benedictines were forced to turn to the Pope of Rome Leon iii and the Frankish Emperor Karlomagno for help. The Emperor of the West convened the Aachen Synod (809) and formalized the heresy, while Pope Leon dynamically opposed to the addition of Filioque in the Creed. Consequently, half a century before the predominant place of Filioque in Theological dispute between the Orthodox and the Latin fathers, it had been impinged in the Orthodox consciousness of the Jerusalem Christians. During the Crusaders' conquest, the place of the Lavra Hegoumen appears to be extremely superior in relation to the Latin Fathers, due to the absence of an Orthodox Patriarch in Jerusalem. The Lavra is dowered with new land property by Queen Melisanthe (1131-1162), while the Church of Theotokos and the frescoes are refurbished by the Mamluk's Emperor Manuel Komnenos (1143-1180) in 1169. The victory of Salah ad-Din's Mamluks against the Crusaders in 1187 foreshadowed new calamities for the Palestinian monasticism. Despite the new

slaughtering of Savvaites monks, the Lavra remained active, as the last one among the derelict monasteries in the desert. In this period the Lavra activity is gathered around its core, there is the erection of surrounding walls and the abandonment of the Lavra lifestyle with the adaptation of the coenobitic rules of living. It is the most crucial phase for continuing its activity, however the Lavra keeps the role of a remarkable school for the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood, teaching what is necessary for monasticism and relative to Church affairs. The Emperor John Kantakouzinus (1347-1354) refurbished the Lavra Catholicon and the Cubicle of Saint Savvas' tomb in mid 14<sup>th</sup> century. Unprecedented however for the time and determining for the future of the Orthodox worship, was the spreading of the so called "new Savvaitiko liturgic Typikon" (meaning the merging of the old Typikon of Saint Savvas with elements from the Typikon of Studion). This new Typikon overrode the Typikon of the Monasteries of Studion and Evergetidos and was established in Constantinople in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Monasteries Hileon, Saint Demetrios Kellivara, Theotokos Steadfast Hope). At the same time the Typikon was spread in Serbia by Saint Savvas of Serbia (1175-1236) and Archbishop of Serbia Nicodemus (1317-1324). During the Hesychast dispute in Mount Athos the new Typikon was established in a revised form there, and through the radiance of Hesychast Theology it was spread to the rest of the Balkans, in Bulgaria and Russia. Since its final establishment in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Savvaitiko- Athonite Liturgic Typikon has constituted the Liturgical Typikon for all Orthodox World to this day.

### **From the Turkish sovereignty to the present time (1517-2002)**

The Turkish presence in Palestine with Sultan Selim was accompanied by a new slaughtering of the Savvaites monks resulting to adverse living conditions in the Lavra. Even though over the years (1533-1753) there were over thirty Sultans' decrees for tax exemptions and reconstruction works

in the Lavra together with the protection and the rights of the Fathers, they still suffered a multitude of ordeals, even the forced hospitality for whole villages for many years. The fortified presence of Serbian monks in the Lavra was beneficial when the Greek monks were scarce in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However the construction activities of the Serbian monks exceeded their budget and the increasing debts forced them to leave in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Patriarch Theophanes' iii (1608-1644) intervention managed to save the Lavra from the creditors or the covetous Armenians and Latin monks' possessiveness. Among all the benefactors of the Lavra, most memorable are Patriarchs of Jerusalem Nectarios (1660-1669) and Dositheos ii (1669-1707), who managed to restore the Lavra to its former condition of belonging exclusively to the Savvaites Fathers, while Dositheos himself undertook costly refurbishment or extension works of churches, chambers, and the surrounding walls of the monastery (during the years 1667-1686). The present state of the construction in the Lavra was completed after the destruction caused by the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1834 earthquake, and is owed to the building activity of Hegoumen Ioasaph the Cretan (1845-1874), a blessed figure of the Palestinian monasticism. Another proof of the holiness of blessed, humble and discreet Ioasaph was the increase of the number of monks to almost 80. By the grace of God and the intercession of Theotokos, unlike the other monasteries of the Orthodox Patriarchate, the Lavra did not have to face much distress over the recurrent political changes in the Middle East over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the contrary, the return of the imperishable holy relic of Saint Savvas after centuries of absence (perhaps since 13<sup>th</sup> century), was an immense blessing for the striving Hagiotaphite Brotherhood and all Orthodox Christians of the Holy Land, and of course the cause of certain hope in God and evidence of the Saint's Fatherly and unceasing intercession for his Lavra. To this day, the spiritual life of the Lavra and its diverse contribution to

the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood problem solving, the Orthodox congregation and the pious pilgrims, can verify the long ago given ascertainment: "Just as Jerusalem is the Queen of all cities, likewise Saint Savvas' Lavra is the Prince of all deserts, and as much as Jerusalem is the prototype of other cities, similarly, Saint Savvas' monastery serves as an example for other monasteries".