

BULGARIAN MEN'S TRAVELS TO MOUNT ATHOS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RITUAL YEAR

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Abstract: As several monasteries and shrines of the monastic republic Mount Athos are connected with the Bulgarian history, in some cases they function not only as places of religious worship by Bulgarian men but also as sites of national memory. Therefore, placed in the context of the ritual year of pilgrimage, as an object of research are chosen Bulgarian men's 21st century group travels to Mount Athos. More exactly, the focus lies on the places, holidays and celebrations instigating Bulgarian men to visit different destinations at the monastic peninsula, following different routes and motives. Further attention is paid to the performed religious and commemorative practices at the various locations of the Athonite peninsula.

Keywords: commemorative practices, Mount Athos, religious rituals, trails, worship

Located in northern Greece, in the Eastern peninsula of Chalkidiki, the UNESCO World Heritage Site Mount Athos houses hundreds of monks and novices of different national and ethnic origin. It is a self-governed part of the Greek state, politically subject to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople because of its religious aspect.

There are twenty monasteries: a Serbian one, a Russian one, a Bulgarian one and seventeen Greek ones. The area of every monastery belongs to the very monastery and not to the state from which the brotherhood originates.

Mount Athos, and more exactly Zographou monastery “Saint great-martyr George the Zographos”, is also one of the reasons for the millennial Bulgarian history as it preserved the very national spirit of the Bulgarians, their national awareness, language, culture, written records, architectural monuments and other heritage in the years when Bulgaria had been under foreign rule. As such it functions not only as a place of worship but also as a site of memory.

Pilgrimage of Bulgarians towards Mount Athos begins with the foundation of the first monasteries on the peninsula as Bulgarian tsars help by the appraisal of Zographou monastery in 9th–10th century (see Bolutov 1961: 106). During the period of the Ottoman Empire in Bulgaria and the following centuries (from 14th century onwards) travelling to Mount Athos does not stop and happens as before with a slow tempo, led by monks or clergymen and including above all Bulgarian men of means. For example, the Third Zographou obituary list encompassing the period 1527–1728 includes names of pilgrims from Tarnovo, Lovech, Gabrovo, Etropole, Vratsa, Samokov, Dupnitsa and other towns (Todorova 1997: 267). With the improvement of the vehicles and therefore the ability for a faster and easier mobility journeys to Mount Athos get less complicated. Even though in Bulgaria there is not a continuous tradition for advertising pilgrimage movements and during the socialist period (1944–1989) migration is restricted (see Radev 2016), the monastery continues also nowadays to attract Bulgarian clergymen and secular people. As a consequence, thousands of Bulgarian men moved by different reasons and following various routes visit Zographou monastery and other shrines on the Athonite peninsula. The post-socialist period is characterized by a redirection of the faith of Bulgarians, returning to the Orthodox Church and (re)vitalisation of the personal religiousness¹ through visits to new and old sacred places. As a result, are grounded many “religious associations and non-governmental Orthodox organizations and church brotherhoods that take over the care for the organization of pilgrimages to main Christian Orthodox holy places and objects” (Troeva 2019: 613).

Rarely men travel individually, most often they do it in small groups. Some of the pilgrims set off if a motive occurs (for example, to bring a thanksgiving), others do it as a part of their Athonite ritual year, several times on appointed dates every year.

Research Object

It is nowadays accepted among scholars studying pilgrimage practices that pilgrimage is a blended with tourism “major journey, usually by modern means of transportation, to a national or international shrine” (Turner & Turner 1978: 240) that combines pious intentions with historical and cultural behaviors and meanings (Eade & Sallnow 1991: 3). Pilgrimage is in fact “a holistic phenomenon with religious and secular foundations, encompassing sites that can emerge from both religious and secular contexts” (Collins-Kreiner 2016: 6; Coleman & Eade 2004).

Having this in mind, as an object of research are chosen Bulgarian men's group travels to Mount Athos in the 21st century, presented through the emic view of the individual participants. They will be examined from the perspective of the ritual year, featuring ritual celebrations at liturgical holidays, calendric national commemorative practices, donations and different places of worship reached via different routes. The men included in the research are of different social status: students, cooks, photographers, businessmen as well as highly educated doctors, engineers, scientists, journalists but also novices in monasteries, priests, monks and retirees.

Empirical data for the comparative and phenomenological approach² is gathered through primary and secondary sources. The first ones include semi-structured face-to-face and structured email-interviews with travelers of the route (organizers, participants, route-leaders) and monks involved somehow in the pilgrimages (eight men altogether). As secondary resources are chosen published news on the internet, in books and participants' online travelogues (more than 30 text and video travelogues).

Travelling Groups

The groups going to Athos that will be analyzed here are usually not numerous, generally up to seven-eight men, setting up from municipal towns as Sofia, Bansko, Sandanski, Stara Zagora, etc.³. Travels are explored according to the route configuration and implementation. Some group travelers aim to reach directly their destination, the Bulgarian Zographou monastery. One *communitas* (Latin ‘unstructured community in which all members are equal’, Turner & Turner 1978) tries to cover every year the so called itinerary “On the trails

of Zographite saints” that combines old disused pilgrim and travel paths, main road and highway segments and above all intentionally added stops related to the Bulgarian history and to the life of Bulgarian saints who at some point lived in the Zographou monastery or played an important role for the Bulgarian Revival and the preservation of the Bulgarian cultural and Orthodox spiritual heritage. In comparison to them members and friends of the “Athonite Balkan Association” combine pathways between Xenophontos monastery and other sacred places situated on the Southern side of the peninsula. At the end are presented group travelers – with a clergyman at the head – whose ritual year comprises several travels to Mount Athos connected mainly with liturgical holidays of different Athonite monasteries and hermitages (sort of colonies of the larger monasteries that are smaller and easier to keep up).

Directly to Our Monastery on Mount Athos

Bulgarian men from the town of Bansko feel especially connected with Zographou monastery as one of the founders of the monastery of the 18th century, Hadzi Valcho (one of the brothers of Paisius Chilandarite), was born in their native town. Since the beginning of the 21st century “Bansko reconstructs its active linkage with the Zographou monastery – as a spiritual necessity, a historical duty, and for material assistance” (Trencheva 2019). Not only groups of young men from the town but also men from Bansko municipality offer their mite for the monastery: “They organize the main repair activities, donate money, work, repair materials, foodstuffs, etc.” (Zherev 2018). A co-chairman of the initiative committee for the restauration of the Bulgarian monastery is mayor Alexander Kravarov and after his death this generous act is continued by his follower, Georgi Ikonov. According to a monk of the Zographite brotherhood there is “a group of young men from Bansko who take part in the repair activities twice a year” (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1). Here should be mentioned that donations for religious purposes are not only a kind of a sacrifice of personal time and money for God which will be memorized in the corresponding monastery (or church) list of *ktetors* (Greek ‘donators’) but gain also a higher public status.

Another group from Bansko “cleans the kitchen before monastery holidays and after that washes glasses and dishes” (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1). They go also to help with the harvest of olives:

*The monks make olive oil because they earn their daily bread. (...) We would have to expend effort in the kitchen as more than 500 guests are expected for the holiday. It does not oppress us, then we often go to work on Athos.*⁴

The important task to prepare the fish for the monastery feast on 6th May/23rd April⁵ is given to a cook from the town of Sandanski: "There is Sandi, the owner of pizzeria 'Sandi' in Sandanski who comes with other men and together they prepare the fish" (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1).

For the *panegyrs* (Greek 'religious celebrations associated with church patron saints' days') a party of men from Asenovgrad and Plovdiv comes also and

serves in the refectory, because it is... while you serve and clear the communal tables once or twice for lunch⁶, the time to cook for dinner has come. (...) They are very well organized and are at about thirty men (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1).

Many of those men from Bansko, Sandanski, Asenovgrad travel to Zographou monastery also on 18th/5th January for the feast of Epiphany (19th/6th January). Since the beginning of the 21st century, after the end of the divine liturgy in the church most of the men go downhill to the shoreline to participate in the ritual "throwing of a cross" at the shoreline of the monastery harbor. In Bulgaria and some other countries usually one cross is being thrown in the water and then taken out by the fastest young man. The ritual practice in Zographou monastery differs: there are several wooden crosses and one silver cross being thrown into the sea. About fifty men jump into the waters of the sea to take out the crosses thrown inside by priest-monks of the brotherhood. This cultural practice is performed not only Bulgarian Athonite monastery⁷ but also in Iviron and Xenophontos monasteries and it is believed that catching the silver cross promises a blessed year for the winner and his family.

To this category should be added also the group of Bulgarian dentists who travel to Zographou in order to treat gratuitously the monks' teeth, but also to participate in the calendric holidays:

A dentist from the town of Chirpan gave the equipment. Dr. Lenkov from Stara Zagora is the main person who managed its creation. There is an x-ray too. Two-three doctors from Sofia go there, and from Sandanski as well. They travel in their holidays and treat their teeth (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1.).

One of them shares: “Every time we go there they expect us as they know the group of dentists is coming. Thus we help them. If there is a great feast, we help also washing the dishes, cleaning the refectory” (AIF I No 595, a. u. 3.). This respondent tries, if possible, twice a year to visit the monastic peninsula, every time with a stop at Zographou:

I go when I have an opportunity to go, not always for a panegyri. With the group we visit monasteries we like and on every journey we try to visit also other monasteries that we haven't visited before. (...) I like the atmosphere in the Zographou church. There is no electricity. Everything is old styled. Candles are lit, prayers are read. Everything is mystical and muffled. The monks sing. When I was there for the first time I didn't know where I was (AIF I No 595, a. u. 3.).

Another example for groups visiting the monastery for work are the *harisanins* (a man who gives (God) something as a present), who so to say donate their work and time. One of them says:

I traveled with a group of harisanins. We were three cars with four-five men in each car... The men come from all over Bulgaria and exercise different professions. A man, not a company, organizes the diamonitirions (Greek 'visa'), ship tickets and coordinates with the monks the work that must be done: picking olives, cutting fruit trees, working in the vegetable gardens, chopping wood, etc. Sometimes we mix concrete for the running restoration works. The last time I helped in the archontariki (Greek 'guest room'), i.e. I cleaned rooms, washed blankets (FnAIF No 2987, a. u. 4).

If the above mentioned groups follow normally the fastest route from their starting point to Zographou monastery, one *communitas* covers – if possible every year – a special itinerary “On the trails of Zographite Saints”.

“On the Trails of Zographite Saints”

The itinerary “On the trails of Zographite Saints” was started in 2010 as a fulfillment of the *idea* of a clergyman, hieromonk Gabriel from the Zographite brotherhood, co-elaborated with a layman, Dimo Uzunov from Stara Zagora. All stops, proposed by the layman and blessed by the abbot of Zographou Archimandrite Ambrosio, are related, respectively dedicated to the Zographou

monastery (its patron the saint St. George) and to the Bulgarian saints Kosmas Zographite, Pimen Zographite, Paisius Chilandarite, 26 Zographite martyrs and St. John of Rila – the protector of all Bulgarians “and to everything related to the spiritual and cultural fortress of the Bulgarian Orthodoxy during the time: the Zographou monastery” (Uzunov 2012: 70).

The length of the whole combined trail is about 775 km, 516 km of which is on the territory of Bulgaria, 174 km – in Greece, 65 km – waterway, and 20 km – on the Holy Mountain. At about 55 km the participants go on foot: 35 km in Rila Mountain⁸ and 20 km on the monastic peninsula. Unlike Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. Olav, Via Romea, and others this route is not a natural one but a purposively constructed (“designed”) trail, because it is comprised of segments that are intentionally developed to link together routes (some of them of organic origin) and locations that have some sort of common history and thus commemorate the lives of celebrated religious figures and the given sacred places.

Concerning the stops of the trails, it is typical for pious pilgrims to worship a saint at his holiday in his shrine during a divine service. That is why as a beginning for this journey is chosen the day of 22nd September, when according to the Christian Orthodox calendar in Bulgaria is honored one of the saints worshiped during the trail, namely, St. Kosmas Zographite. A starting point is always the church “St. Kosmas Zographite” in the mineral water baths complex close to Stara Zagora, i.e. the only sacred place under his protection in Bulgaria the construction of which is initiated by the group participants. After a blessing by the local priest the group – including mainly men (most often aged over 40) from the region of Stara Zagora (and Plovdiv) – drives to the nearby town and visits the church of “St. Paisius Chilandarite” there. Reaching Sofia by car they go to the church-rotunda “St. George” that was passed in the 13th century by Bulgarian tsars into the hands of Zographou monastery. Here another Zographite saint, the born in Sofia St. Pimen Zographite, as a novice had learned and icon-painted the interior (Uzunov 2012: 71). Next stop is the German monastery “St. John of Rila” which is an extraterritorial foundation of Zographou since 1926. After spiritual conversations with the local monks – who are representatives of the Zographite brotherhood – the pilgrims drive further to the Rila monastery “St. John of Rila” with a short stop at a heritage site, the monument of another Zographite saint, St. Paisius Chilandarite. During their stay in Rila monastery they pay homage to the relics of St. John of Rila there, visit church services, talk with the monks of the brotherhood and hike to the grave and the cave of St. John some kilometers away from the monastery

(Uzunov 2012: 81). On the next day the men start a pilgrim walk, which is at about 40 km long and goes through the so called “Rila desert” encompassing some high Rila mountainsides. This trail section has been a part of an ancient (pedestrian) path from Sofia to Mount Athos, as well as of the Bulgarian Revival (17th–18th century) pilgrim route between Rila and the Zographou monasteries. That is the reason why it is chosen to be a part of the route under study. After two days they arrive at the village of Dobarsko, which according to a Rila charter of Tsar Ivan Shishman from 1378 together with other villages, lands and forests is being donated to the Rila monastery and as such has been traversed by pilgrims, walking from Rila monastery to Zographou monastery (Uzunov 2012: 83). In Dobarsko they are welcome by the local mayor and the church manager who introduce them in the built in 1614 church “St. Theodore Thiron and St. Theodore Stratilat”, which because of its ancient frescoes and authentic architecture is declared a monument of the Bulgarian cultural heritage and is under the protection of UNESCO. The next stop is Bansko where they visit the local church, the chapel dedicated to the saint and the memorial house with a reconstruction of the his Chilandar cell.⁹ In the house they have a lecture by the museum-curator about the life of saint Paisius, the vernacular mnemonic practices and the strong linkage between the people in Bansko and the Zographou monastery (Uzunov 2012: 84). Shortly after that they continue their trip by car to the resort of Ouranoupoli, where early in the morning they get on board of a ferry that brings them to the harbor of “St. Anne” hermitage. Getting there and paying homage to the wonderworking icon of St. Anne in the hermitage church, they start their six-hour’ trek that goes through the chapel devoted to the Mother of God and continues to the peak Athos and the chapel “Transfiguration” at 2033 meter above sea level, where they make photos of the whole Garden of Virgin Mary. With a ferry from the harbor of “St. Anne” hermitage they reach the harbor of Zographou monastery and then walk up the hill arriving on (the eve of) 27th September – St. Cross’s day (local calendar, so called “old style”) at their destination: Zographou monastery. Upraised in the 9th–10th centuries four kilometer aside from the South-West coast, this monastery is the most often visited place by Bulgarians on Mount Athos. It is perceived as a Bulgarian national monument (Bolutov 1961: 106) even it has not the status of an official Bulgarian national territory. The participants attend church services, have a meeting with the brotherhood, in which they share their experiences of the Zographite trail. Some of them make a confession and take communion. If possible, they visit the cave of St. Kosma Zographite not far

away from the monastery. The pilgrims go also into the library of Zographou, a heritage site, in which are kept a multitude of handwritings from the Second Bulgarian State tsar's letters, divine service books. A more special respect there receives the original of the "Slav-Bulgarian history". In the yard of the monastery there is another memorial site, namely a monument of the 26 Zographite martyrs.¹⁰ Here the travelling men take photos of themselves in front of the heritage site and on the next day with the blessing of the abbot they travel back to Bulgaria (Uzunov 2012: 103).

The same men like visiting Zographou also at other occasions. At Easter they transport very often the Holy Fire brought to Sofia from Jerusalem.

Actually, the pilgrimage trips of these men start in 2001 and since then male groups from the regions of Stara Zagora and Plovdiv, led by Dimo Uzunov, help the monastery with finances, with the repair and other development activities or clean the church accessories in all three churches before a monastery holiday:

They are the main group. They come from the Thermoelectric Power Station "Maritsa Iztok" and clean the big chandeliers. They take them apart, clean and assemble them again. Depending on their engagements, sometimes they stay also for the panegyri, sometimes they leave before the feast (AIF I No 595, a. u. 1).

One of them writes later: "I had the chance to wash seven silver hand censers three centuries old. And such a feeling I have never experienced before and afterwards" (Enev 2017).

Regardless of the motives of the participants and whether or not the trail is organic or purposive, consisting of religious or memorializing national sites, it plays an important role for the awareness and conservation of this heritage as well as for the strengthening of the faith of the Bulgarian participants and the veneration of Bulgarian saints.

Travels to Xenophontos Monastery

The analysis of the online travelogues of the pilgrimages of representatives of the Balkan Athonite Association shows that in difference to the mentioned above groups this one has usually as a destination Xenophontos monastery. Since the establishment of the association in 2010 members visit this monastery at least once a year for its great feast on 6th May/23rd April, St. George's Day.

Since the formation of the association they organize travels also for non-members. First, these are boys of the Russian school at the Russian Embassy in Sofia and representatives from Russian institutions (the Embassy, the church). After the year of 2017 travels – lasting two-three days – are opened also to every man in Bulgaria regardless of his ethnic origin and nationality. These groups of six-seven men have different itineraries combining paths between monasteries and hermitages in the upper, Northern part of the peninsula (the monasteries “St. Panteleimon”, Docheiarou, Iviron, Stravronikita, Xeropotamou, Vatopedi, the cell “Xilurgou”, etc.) always passing through or arriving at Xenophontos. The ritual year of the organizers of these travels, one of which always participates in the journeys, encompasses visits during the Lent, at and after Easter, at Epiphany, at *panegyri* feasts but also usual calendar days in the spring, summer or autumn. Sometimes their travels are connected with the transportation of a copy of a miraculous icon or relics between Mount Athos and Bulgaria and as during their other visits they take part in the divine services held in the church.¹¹

Even this kind of group travels is not related to the maintenance of Bulgarian heritage and national memory on the peninsula as Zographou monastery and other historically Bulgarian places are not a priority during the trips, this kind of travels are contributory for the strengthening of the participants’ faith, for the cultural acquaintance with the Byzantine architecture, art, rituals and monastic life.

All around Mount Athos

Groups led by pilgrims differ from the ones with a clergyman at the head, because the latter predisposes a more theological journey as the presence of a priest means a greater access to sacred spaces and relics in the monasteries but also the presence of the Holy Spirit, of a theology expressed in conversations while walking or consuming coffee, *raki* (Greek ‘brandy’) and *loukoumi* (Greek ‘traditional sweet’) at an *archontariki*.

The last example is about journeys starting in Sofia and going via Ouranopoli which are organized by a monk, living in a monastery in Western Bulgaria who, accompanied by other clerics or laymen, visits regularly the Holy Mountain “to learn and to participate in services” (AIF I No 481, a. u. 1). At the beginning journeys happen mainly around the *panegyri*s of Zographou monastery (St. George: 6th May/23rd April, 16th/3rd November; St. Kozma Zographite: 5th October/22nd September; 26 Zographite Saints: 23rd/10th October). During

a stay on Mount Athos, if possible, are visited also other spaces of religious and national worship as the already mentioned monument of the 26 Zographite saints, the cave of St. Kosmas Zographite but also cells that have been inhabited by Bulgarian monks or are linked with the Bulgarian history as “Axion esti”, “Xilurgou”, and others.¹² Everywhere the clergymen of the group take part in the divine services as priests or chanters. Their contemporary Athonite ritual calendar includes many travels with various routes to most of the monasteries and several hermitages regardless of their geographical location. Instantly visited places besides Zographou are also the Grand Lavra,¹³ Esphigmenou monastery¹⁴ the cell “Mikri Agia Anna” (Greek ‘Little St. Anne’),¹⁵ the cell “St. Eustace”,¹⁶ the *hesychasterion* (Greek ‘a small hermitage where intensive hesychasm is practiced’) “St. Sava of Serbia” in the region of Karoulia,¹⁷ and others. Even all sacred spaces are visited lead by religious or educational motives, their descriptions of stays at holy places connected somehow with the Bulgarian history and the life of Bulgarian monks, reveal the pilgrims’ national pride and joy of being at places where have lived great Bulgarian men. Thus such places become also spaces beyond religious worship: “On the left side of the nartex, where frescoes were recently restored, we read with joy the names of *ktetors* of the cloister from the 18th century: Valko, Stoyko, Dobrinka – evidence for the former piety of our people” or

*In cell St. Eustace, famous also as Mylopotamos, we were welcomed by monk Joachim. (...) It is not a well-known fact that founder and restorer of this cell is metropolitan Joachim of the Patriarchate of Constantinople who was throned twice as a patriarch.*¹⁸

Performed Rituals: Religious and National Commemorative Practices

Religious Elements

Ritual performances, such as sayings of prayers individually or collectively during a liturgical worship are essential elements of Orthodox Bulgarians visiting the Holy Mountain. The collective rituals “create affective connections between pilgrims, raising profound feelings of togetherness, the so called *communitas* (Turner & Turner 1978), based on the sharing of faith; they embody

and celebrate symbolic reality” (Terzidou *et al.* 2017: 124). Additionally, all male participants perform also other typical for pilgrimages rituals such as veneration of icons, making the sign of cross, lightning of candles, attendance of church services, conversations with monks, familiarization with the biographies of the saints and greater monks of the brotherhoods: “After an hour and a half they reach the peak Athos – 2033 m above sea level – and the chapel Transfiguration. Here as at other already marked stops are sent up prayers” (AIF I No 595, a. u. 4).

Very often men are motivated to set off to Mount Athos as they believe that with the mercy of God their religious ritual practices could provide cure of an illness, disability or pain. In this regard, should be mentioned the *liti* (Greek ‘a procession with an icon’), performed in Zographou monastery (but also at other monasteries). On its saint’s day – 6th May – the miraculous icon of St. George is brought out of the church and the monastery yard, held by a monk and two laymen whereas the laymen change every several meters (actually every ten steps), and is moved to the chapel “St. George” nearby and back again passing also by the monument of 26 Zographite saints in the yard. Bulgarians believe that according to their faith God could bring them health or fulfill their wishes: “I pray to St. George to give me health”.¹⁹ A monk of the brotherhood shares that many men after holding the icon during the procession their life has changed and their wish has been fulfilled.²⁰ According to another monk a stay in the monastery is enough as “before he knows, a man cleans his soul, removes his burden. Many of them get free of a disease” (AIF I No 595, a. u. 4).

Generally, all pious pilgrims while attending church services or individually (between the services) express their devotion to God through different ritual performances characteristic for Orthodox Christians. Visiting the elective monasteries gives them the opportunity, on the one hand, to mediate away from their cares and distractions of everyday lives and, on the other hand, to derive spiritual sustenance.

A common characteristic of the ritual year of the studied Bulgarian men is that their travel to the Holy Mountain is connected with the cloisters’ feast days, their *panegyrs*. Depending on the groups’ interests the ritual calendars include St. George’s Day – which in Bulgarian is a (day off) national holiday – and other feasts on which Bulgarian or other ethnic saints are venerated. More seldom Holy Mountain is visited for Christian Orthodox holidays as Easter, Nativity, Epiphany, Transfiguration and others. On the one hand, it could mean that the latter feasts are preferably celebrated within the family, the parish, the homeland. On the other hand, monastery (hermitage, cell) patron days are visited

by more guests who at the same time have the opportunities to enjoy their stay there by attending church services or/and to help with the feast preparations.

Maintenance of National Memory

The most contributory role for the maintenance of the Bulgarian memory and heritage in national and extra-national settings have the stops at Bulgarian memorial signs (monuments, exhibitions, a cave, a library) included in the trail of Zographite saints but also visited places connected with the Bulgarian history that function as markers of national collective memory and identity too.²¹ In such cases religious sites are simultaneously significant cultural sites. Zographou monastery could be considered as a memorial sign of the Bulgarian history as well, because it connects the Bulgarian man with his past and his heritage: "The magnificent view makes us feel as sand particles and at the same time proud to see what and how our ancestors had built, incited by their faith in Christ" (Dimitriy 2008). In the opinion of the contemporary Bulgarian metropolitan Naum:

every Bulgarian man who has visited Zographou had the genuine feeling of national pride and spiritual consolation by the contact with the power of the holiness, combined with the material evidence of a strong belief and a high national spirit (Radev 2016: 7).

Being there pilgrims immerse themselves in the history and heritage of the monastery and Bulgaria and "unconsciously absorb from the feats of the Zographite saints" (AIF I No 595, a. u. 4). In some cases it is the interplay of memories and feelings triggered by the site, the sharing of stories among friends or lectures at the place that illustrate what the site 'means' to people: if it is perceived as vernacular or national heritage or religious site, because "heritage sites also have the ability to possess heightened meaning for their visitors" (Palmer 2003 in Gouthro & Palmer 2010: 5): "when you see the monastery for the first time, beamed with its sacred millennial history and charters of many Bulgarian tsars, there is no way not to be bowled over" (Enev 2017).

Furthermore, the itinerary "On the trails of Zographite saints", but also all other routes having points of contact with the Bulgarian culture and history, contribute for the preservation of the Bulgarian heritage and memory about the great Bulgarians outside the territory of Mount Athos, because the effect of

the experienced is certainly being shared with their compatriots as travelogues are written and presented in social media, exhibitions are shown in different Bulgarian towns, conversations with students are organized and books are published and translated.

Conclusion

The present paper explored male visitors' ritual year(s) on the holy place Mount Athos. It involved comparative and phenomenological approaches undertaken through interviews with visitors and reviews of narratives published online.

From the findings of the study, it is evident that Bulgarian men's pilgrimage calendars include visits at different cloisters (and their cells) on the peninsula. Regardless of the type of group, the itineraries, the religiousness and motives of the travelers described above, all travelers return again and again to the Holy Mountain. Some of them are impressed by the Christian Orthodox atmosphere, present in the churches through old icons, frescoes, mosaics, ancient manuscripts but also by the day-to-day routines of the monks' "authentic" primitive life, traditional lifestyle, still unspoiled by the ravages of the contemporary external world. Most Bulgarians feel attracted by the Bulgarian monastery because besides the holy intervention they can experience there, they are able to get in touch with the ancient material evidence of the legendary past of their people, i.e. to be in contact with Bulgarian architectural monuments, Bulgarian literature and cultural heritage beyond the Bulgarian borders.

Generalized, Bulgarian men's Athonite pilgrimage year consists of religious journeys combining liturgical holidays (with visitations of divine services), ritual performances (prayers, venerating icons, lighting of candles), voluntary activities (helping as a *harisanin* or in holiday preparations), tourist moments (hiking to peak Athos, buying of souvenirs, taking photos) and national commemoration being experienced in both sacred places and spaces beyond religious worship.

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Notes

- 1 More about the religiousness of people since the end of 20th century see Valtchinova 2007; Nazarska & Shapkalova 2009; Baeva 2012; Georgieva 2012; Karamihova 2013.
- 2 The phenomenological approach allows understanding of human experience (Casmir 1983), as the researcher attempts to provide a direct description of somebody's experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which could be also provided (Merleau-Ponty 1962: vii).
- 3 Of course, Bulgarian men from all over Bulgaria visit the Holy Mountain but it is difficult to find and analyze information for all groups travelling there.
- 4 https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-obshtestvo/banskalii_berat_maslinite_na_aton-122502.html, last accessed on 15.04.2020.
- 5 St. George's Day celebrated in Bulgaria on 6th May is also a national holiday.
- 6 Sometimes when there are plenty of guests they eat "in shifts", i.e. after the first part of visitors is ready with the lunch, helpers must prepare the tables for the next part.
- 7 Normally in Bulgaria but also in Bulgarian Orthodox parishes abroad (in Germany, Cyprus) just one cross is thrown.
- 8 Along the road they repair old markings and put new ones (AIF I No 595, a. u. 4).
- 9 This place is famous among Bulgarians as there Saint Paisius wrote the "Slav-Bulgarian history" to awake the national consciousness of the captive Bulgarian people during the Ottoman empire. Because of its content, the book is perceived by Bulgarians as a very special object of the tangible Bulgarian cultural historic heritage.
- 10 According to liturgical texts these 22 monks and 4 laymen of Bulgarian or Slavic origin were burnt alive in the monastery tower during the devastating attacks on the monastery by Catalanian Crusaders in 1275. This heritage site is put in 1873 on the place of the tower in which they were burnt.
- 11 See <https://www.afon-balkani.org/>, last accessed on 15.04.2019.
- 12 See for example <http://www.svetogorie.com/159-На-поклонение-в-Света-гора-ден-първи>, <http://www.svetogorie.com/160-На-поклонение-в-Света-гора-ден-втори>, last accessed on 15.04.2020; <http://www.svetogorie.com/163-Поклоничество-в-Света-гора---ден-трети>, last accessed on 26.11.2019.
- 13 The patron day of St. Athanasios is 18th/5th July.
- 14 This monastery of the canonic brotherhood is visited for its patron's day on Ascension Day.
- 15 This hermitage belongs to the Grand Lavra and celebrates its feast day on 22nd/9th June, St. Dionysios and St. Metrophanes.
- 16 It obeys to the Grand Lavra too and celebrates its saints' day on 3rd October/20th September.

17 This hermitage celebrates its panegyric on the 27th/14th January. The name of this area (in the West-Southern part of the peninsula) comes from the *karouli* (Greek ‘pulleys’) which the hermits use to hang the basket where the passing monks, pilgrims or fishermen put some water and a piece of bread.

18 <http://www.svetogorie.com/159-На-поклонение-в-Света-гора-ден-първи>, last accessed on 15.04.2020.

19 <https://www.24chasa.bg/ojivlenie/article/5884476>, last accessed on 15.04.2020.

20 <https://www.24chasa.bg/ojivlenie/article/5884476>, last accessed on 15.04.2020.

21 Further hermitages and cells connected with the Bulgarian presence on the monastic peninsula are described in Matanova 2019.

Archives

AIF I = (Written) Archive of the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

FnAIF = Phono-archive of the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

a. u. = archive unit

Primary Sources (Interviews)

AIF I No 481, a. u. 1, male, hieromonk and abbot of Chernogorsky monastery “St. St. Kozma and Damyan”, Bulgaria.

AIF I No 595, a. u. 1., male, hieromonk and abbot of German monastery “St. John of Rila”, Bulgaria.

AIF I No 595, a. u. 3., male, dentist.

AIF I No 595, a. u. 4., male, hieromonk at the Zographou monastery “St. George the Zographos”, Mount Athos.

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