

# The Festival Dedicated to Agios (Saint) Nektarios in his Monastery on the Island of Aegina, Greece

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**Abstract:** In Greece the festival dedicated to the healing saint, Agios Nektarios, is celebrated on the island of Aegina on 9 November. This is an important healing festival dedicated to one of the most recently deceased saints; that is, the former bishop of Pentapolis, who lived a secluded life on Aegina until his death in 1920. The bishop was canonised as Agios Nektarios in 1961, becoming the island's patron saint. His monastery is situated in a geographical area where the cult of deceased holy persons has been particularly important. A key ritual during the festival is connected with a chapel that is reserved to women. This chapel is part of the monastery dedicated to the saint and housing his skull. When I first visited the monastery in 1990, I learnt that Agios Nektarios' relics reposed in more than eighteen churches in Greece and Cyprus. Today this has changed, since his relics have been spread out among many more sanctuaries, inside and outside of Greece; that is, worldwide. His body is indeed of the highest importance for the worshippers, and although several churches both in Greece and abroad today have a share of it, the main pilgrimage centre on Aegina possesses the most important part: his head that rests in a crown made of gold, while the saint's relics repose in a casket inside his chapel.

The article is based on fieldwork which I have carried out on Aegina where I attended the festival in 1991, 2011 and 2012. The study explores especially into the healing function of the festival both for Greeks and the many pilgrims coming from abroad, especially from Romania.

**Keywords:** death cult, festival, fieldwork, Greece, healing, pilgrimage, religion, saint cult



Fig. 1: The monastery dedicated to Agios Nektarios, in front of which is the new church, Aegina, 7 November 2011. (All photos are by the author)

## Introduction

In Greece the festival dedicated to the healing saint, Agios Nektarios, is celebrated on Aegina on 9 November, the anniversary of his death. This is an important healing festival dedicated to one of the most recently deceased saints; namely, the former bishop of Pentapolis, who lived a secluded life on Aegina until his death in 1920.<sup>1</sup> He was canonised as Agios Nektarios in 1961, becoming the island's patron saint. The reason for this is, *inter alia*, that his body did not decompose in a normal way and gave off a sweet fragrance (see Håland 2022, 2023: Ch. 5 and 7). But, Nektarios is known for performing miracles already in his lifetime. He also had the gift of divination. He is particularly renowned for curing cancer, the illness of which he himself died. Although he was sanctified quite recently, his celebrity has spread all over Greece and Europe. Villages and cities compete in the building of churches dedicated to him as votive offerings. His popularity is growing, and his relics repose in more and more churches in Greece, as on Tinos, and Cyprus, and

also further abroad, such as in Bucharest. Nonetheless his main pilgrimage centre on Aegina possesses the most important part: his head that rests in a crown made of gold, while the saint's relics repose in a casket inside his chapel.

Before 1961 this women's monastery, situated six kilometres from Aegina town, was known as the Monastery of *Agia Triada* (the Holy Trinity). It was established by the saint between 1904 and 1910 on the site of a chapel dedicated to the Life-Giving Spring (*Zōodochos Pēgē*), and downhill in front of the monastery a massive church has recently been built (Fig. 1). The monastery is furthermore situated in a geographical area where the cult of deceased holy persons has been particularly important.

The monastery is made up of a complex of buildings, including chapels, two shops selling books, icons, holy oil, candles, postcards, souvenirs, and the old house in which the holy man once lived. The small monastery church housing his relics is the most holy space on the site. The second chapel in the courtyard is the oldest one in the complex, dedicated to *Agia Triada* and is now reserved for women only. The small chapel dedicated to the Archangels, which is partly shaded by a pine tree covers the saint's first resting place, until 3 September 1953 when his relics were transferred to the new chapel, and outside is the spring with holy water.

The church in which his relics rest is packed with votive offerings, such as thanksgiving lamps, and the number of pilgrims to the site is constantly increasing. Several thousand pilgrims visit the monastery and the newer, large church on the anniversary of his death. They come for their *tama* (pl. *tamata*), their pledge which involves offering something to the miracle-working saint in return for his help with problems, mainly concerning health. The same happens in his other churches. A small community of nuns live in the monastery. In 1991, they numbered twenty-two, but by 2011, only fifteen. They take care of the spiritual needs of those who come to seek consolation and healing. The nuns stress that the church in which the saint rests, is much more holy than the "copy tomb" down in the new church. Nonetheless, the "copy tomb" is actually also a tomb since it contains his right arm and hand. The nuns are also eager to stress that they celebrate their own night-long holy vigil in the monastery along with visiting nuns and other women, while the official male one indicated in the festival's programme takes place in the new church. Thus, the nuns prefer their own monastery to the new church.

Both in 1991 and 2012 it was difficult to travel from Athens to Aegina because all the ferries were on strike. On the day before the festival, Flying Dolphins was given dispensation for two departures, more ferries followed but they had to dock at another quay. So, the pilgrims managed to reach the place, and at the little bus station in Aegina town, there were several extra departures up to the monastery.

## The Festival of Agios Nektarios

In the afternoon of 8 November, pedlars had already started to set up their booths in front of the large church. In 1991 the sellers were ordinary Greeks or coming from other Balkan countries, but today they are usually Africans paralleling the change that has occurred steadily on Tinos during the celebration of the Dormition on 15 August from the 1990s until today, when for example South African sellers are present although they underline that they are also Greek, trying to make a living. At the entrance to the new church in 1991, a woman was busy pasting the typical labels – “Agios Nektarios, Aegina”, accompanied by a picture of the saint – on the collars of the jackets and coats of the arriving people. This is a usual custom in other places as well, and allows the festival and its participating people to be identified. Next to the woman, a little boy stood holding a collecting box: one has to pay for the blessing and the label. The church was full of activity, and women were decorating an altar symbolising the saint’s deathbed (*Epitaphios*), with flowers, while repeatedly giving orders to a man carrying a ladder, instructing him what to do.

In 1991, some of the arriving black-clad pilgrim women, entered the new church, but most proceeded up the hill to the monastery. Today most enter the church before they continue through the new and beautifully decorated path linking the monastery and the new church. On their way, they point towards *Paliachōra*, “the Holy Mountain”, literally “Old Town”, while loudly discussing the different sanctuaries. *Paliachōra* is situated on a hill behind the monastery. The mountain is covered with small churches dedicated to a host of saints within the Orthodox Church. According to a monastery priest, these are “abandoned sanctuaries and an archaeological area”. When inspecting the site, one learns the opposite: in some chapels, candles had been lit, and at some of the altars, people had dedicated money and flowers.

At the entrance to the monastery hang a wide variety of skirts and other clothes in different sizes, as in most Greek monasteries. The clothes are intended for the women who are not properly dressed to enter the holy area. The announcement is clear: “It’s strictly forbidden to enter into the monastery men with shorts and women with trousers or half-naked”. Another sign denotes “clothes for women” and under this hang the clothes. Many pilgrims in short skirts or jeans wear these clothes over their own.

In a niche in front of the main entrance to the monastery, is a flower decorated icon depicting the saint. It is the first icon the pilgrims encounter at this sanctuary, while arriving by the old gate. Many pilgrims put some cotton wool on this icon at the entrance. The monastery provides lodging for pilgrims in their two-storey guesthouse, and the day before the festival started, they received dinner along with the other arriving pilgrims. After passing the next entrance, many visit the shops

to buy bottles for holy water or icons they wish to make holy by putting them on the tomb of the saint, as they also do with other objects, as a young woman placing a pair of running shoes on the tomb, alternatively one shoe after the other. Others put baby clothes on the tomb to absorb power. Two candles, formed as coiled snakes, are left as dedications at the tomb, before they are lit.

On 8 November, the annual feast of the Archangels, Michael and Gabriel, is also celebrated. The first, namely, Taxiarchēs, is celebrated especially in the village of Mantamados on the island of Lesbos where he is also patron saint. On Aegina, however, the sanctuary of the Archangels covers Agios Nektarios' first resting place, and by his original tomb, the faithful fetch holy and healing oil from the lamp hanging between the tree and the tomb. One woman, who has drawn quite a lot of oil, finishes her ritual by pouring holy oil from the tap into a small blue plastic bottle. Due to her greed, the monastery staff has to refill the lamp with more oil. Another woman who is less indulgent, takes only a little oil on one of her fingertips and wipes her forehead with it. Others ingest the oil. The large votive candles are lit outside the chapel covering the grave, next to the aforementioned lamp. On the other side of the tree is another door, so the pilgrims do not need to turn around (which would be inauspicious anyway) but can pass in front of the grave, always to the right (cf. du Boulay 2009; Håland 2017: Ch. 4 and 6). So, inside a little consecrated area within the monastery are the original tomb, a tree and holy water. Several pilgrims immediately drink some of the holy water on arrival there; others, mostly young men, brush it through their hair with their fingers. A young couple knelt on either side of the grave, praying intensely. This is where the pilgrims cluster, since at his original tomb, people are especially eager to "hear the saint [that is, his footsteps] inside".





Fig. 2: Pilgrims listen to Agios Nektarios' footsteps at his original tomb, Aegina, 8 November 2012.

To hear him, they place themselves close to the tomb, putting their heads and hands in contact with the stone of the coffin, after having placed their votive gifts on top (Fig. 2). A young woman brought with her a newborn baby, which was also positioned as close to the tomb as possible. She also placed a supplication paper or "letter" on the tomb. Another woman brought with her a dark blue bonnet, evidently belonging to a child, which she laid on top of the tomb while reading aloud from her prayer book. Afterwards, she went down to the other tomb in the new church and repeated the process. A supplication paper or "letter" was also placed on the tomb. Here, the lid has been removed and through a glass top one can see a silver representation of the saint inside, his right arm and hand clearly indicated with the brown bone. Many pilgrims also cluster here to sing prayers over the "sleeping" saint, caress his face, or pass written supplication papers over his body, particularly his arm, hand and face to make them holy. The same procedure is carried out with various items, such as children's clothes and other persons' clothes or amulets (cf. Håland 2014: Fig. 14 and 2019: 162–3 Figs. 49a–c); some of them are placed or

wrapped in plastic bags. Various other items are placed next to the flowers or on the marble shelf that runs around the silver coffin. The women around the coffin perform their own individual rituals.

In the small monastery church housing the saint's relics, are many votive offerings, which are dedicated there in increasing number throughout the festival. People touch the saint's icon with the votive gifts, before attaching them to the string hanging along the icon. All the lamps hanging from the ceiling, are thanksgiving offerings. Further inside the chapel, the saint's relics repose in a casket and his skull rests in a crown made of gold. Many votive offerings hang next to the holy relics. Two swords are showcased just beneath the votive gifts, which are also framed and glazed. Some pilgrims lay flowers on the saint's reliquary. There is a separate exit door used by the pilgrims who have performed the required set of devotions in front of the saint's relics. Outside the entrance doors to the two monastery churches, a large icon depicting the saint is placed for the event and decorated with flowers. When people pass, they kiss the icon and dedicate votive offerings. Access to the other monastery church is reserved to women. The supplication papers (*chartia paraklēseis*) are collected in this chapel, to be read by the priest during the liturgy. In here, today, is an icon of the "*Panagia* (the All-Holy One from *Pan*: all and *Agia*: holy; the Virgin Mary), the defender or supporter" (*ypermachos*), on which she hovers over a circle inside of which is painted the Greek flag along with a map of Greece (cf. Håland 2014: Fig. 76). Its contemporary importance and potency as an icon is all the greater in the light of the country's current economic crisis, the fact that it "feels threatened by Europe" in general, and is, according to some of my informants, in real danger of "being erased from the map" (cf. Håland 2019).

In the monastery's courtyard, many sit in deep concentration, writing their supplication papers or "letters". Since the saint's power is especially strong on his feast day, it is important to ask him to intercede on behalf of one's closest family members. A nun sitting just inside the entrance to the "women's chapel" distribute writing paper. The bread and wine offered by the pilgrims are stored by her feet. A young girl is writing supplication papers on behalf of an old woman who dictates with a loud voice. There is an intense activity in the monastery, especially at the grave: the faithful lit candles, pray, hand in their written supplication papers and buy candles of various sizes. A mother arrives with her daughter who appears to have learning difficulties. A man fetches blessed bread from the nun and touches the saint's grave with a piece of it. Then he wraps the bread in foil and attaches it to his breast pocket, thereby acquiring an amulet for the next year.

Behind the church dedicated to the Archangels, a staircase leads up to the rooms in which the saint had his home. Here, everything is intact. In a closet are several personal belongings: slippers, comb, the red Easter egg from the year he died. A sponge he once found, with a cross at its centre, underscores the fact that these are

holy objects.<sup>2</sup> Pilgrims kneel in front of the bed and all the other holy objects and kiss these as well. In Agios Nektarios' bedroom in 2011, I observed a female pilgrim praying on her knees in front of the bed. She appeared not to be Greek because, like most of the pilgrims from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and other eastern European countries, she wore a scarf on her head. Her husband and young son were waiting for her, and she seemed to be very devout and emotional as she was weeping a lot. They spoke a Slavic language, and the mother was very eager to put the boy on a chair in the living room of the apartment and take a picture of him, although it is forbidden to sit on the chairs, as outlined on nearby notices in Greek, which apparently she could not read. In 2011 and 2012, I encountered many pilgrims from other Orthodox countries, Romania in particular, but also Bulgaria and Russia.

In 1991, below the staircase leading up to Nektarios' private apartment, I entered a room in which some nuns and female helpers were busy cutting bread for the liturgy the next morning. They cut the bread in front of an altar, where it would also be kept in baskets overnight, to render it particularly holy.

Before the start of the celebration, buses of pilgrims arrive continually. Among them are many parents carrying their sick children, some suffering from rickets. People carry with them chairs, flowers and other necessary items for spending the night inside the church. All night pilgrims arrive. It is important to remain in the sanctuary overnight: the saint is thought to be present during his festival and because his potency particularly increases at night, pilgrims have to remain awake. It is for this reason that all saints' festivals start on the eve of the actual feast and culminate in "the holy all-night-service", and procession. Some pilgrims sleep in the courtyard, but most spend the night inside the church, while the priests and cantors sing invocations. According to popular belief, the Holy Nektarios usually wanders around at night, visiting the place he used to live. Accordingly, he receives new slippers once a year.<sup>3</sup>

During my fieldwork in 1991 the new church was not fully completed, and the first part of the festival took place in the monastery. Twenty years later this had changed. Then, as always, the festival starts on the eve of 9 November with a vesper when the head is carried into the women's chapel. But afterwards it is taken down to the new church in a candle procession through the path that links the two sanctuaries. The head is placed in the middle of the church in a decorated wooden lectern. When the ecclesiastics perform the ritual announced in the programme, the activity at the "right hand" tomb becomes very intense: people, kiss the glass top above the silver figure of the saint, pray, and place or rather pass clothes, icons and other items over the silver corpse of the saint in the sign of the cross. The tomb is almost entirely covered with flowers; several pilgrims also bring long candles and sticks. In 2012, many Romanian pilgrims were especially eager to take pictures of the saint. Later, a great dinner is served for special guests in a former school next



to the new church. The official all-night holy vigil service starts in the new church simultaneously as the nuns' ritual up in the monastery, paralleling the gendered tasks and spheres during wakes over the dead (see Håland 2014: Ch. 4).

### **The Feast Day, 9 November**

The feast day starts with a service early in the morning. Pilgrims arrive all through the previous night. This was particularly the case in 1991 and 2012, due to the aforementioned strikes. Before the start of the procession, the situation at the bus station was chaotic: everyone wanted to go up to see the saint and people fought to get on the buses. On the way up to the monastery in 1991, we passed a car decorated with flowers carrying an icon, and the frantic people on the bus started to shout: "Have we missed something? Has the procession already started?"

During the feast day the saint's decorated Epitaphios in the large church received many votive offerings in 1991. This particular icon illustrates the dead saint in a similar fashion to that of the icon that hangs over the door to his sleeping room in the monastery. On the way leading up to the monastery I met many beggars sitting along the path, a common sight at festivals dedicated to saints with powerful healing capacities as well as at pilgrimage centres famous for their healing power, as on Tinos. Many beggars had only one leg. Some pilgrims crawled to the sanctuary on their knees, paralleling the situation on Tinos. Many travelling sellers had set up their booths. At the monastery, the situation was even more chaotic. There was also some money at the icon outside the entrance to the monastery, illustrating that prayers had been fulfilled or were expected to be fulfilled.

While the priests performed the morning liturgy on the feast day in the new church as the case was in 2011 and 2012, people busily worshipped the same three items as the previous evening and night: the saint's icon outside the door, his head in the middle of the church, and the tomb. Many pilgrims lie half-asleep along the walls inside the sanctuary of the new tomb in this church. They have been awake all night, although many of them had brought sleeping equipment with them. In 1991, the procession started with the ecclesiastics setting out from the women's chapel carrying the saint's head. Outside, a hysterical girl stood pouring holy water over herself, another collapsed. On their way down from the monastery, many women were busy collecting herbs, flowers and green leaves in the grass growing on the hillside. The herbs are thought to be particularly holy when the saint's head is carried in procession, thus paralleling the holy earth traditionally collected on Tinos as well as the "dust" from the tomb of Agios Gerasimos on Kephallonia (Håland 2014: Ch. 2, 2023: Ch. 7).

After the liturgy, the saint's head is taken to the town by a flower decorated car. When the head emerges from the church, carried by a priest, people become quite

excited and wild, many of them because of lack of sleep. The saint's head is placed into a decorated car to be carried to the town. An old woman, clad in black, manages to come close to the head before it is passed over to an older priest who, in turn, passes it back to the former once he has taken his seat in the car. In recent years, all the visiting pilgrim groups have their own buses back to town. The older women struggle and jostle a lot to get onto the public bus when it finally arrives. On the bus to town in 1991, two women started to fight; emotions were running high on this day and many of the pilgrims were in a particularly bad or excited mood after a combination of fasting, the sleepless night and all the incense in the sanctuary.

Along the road leading down to Aegina town, many villagers have removed the saint's icon from among the other family icons in their holy corner, putting it in front of their houses, along with the oil lamp and their household censer. In this way, the household cult shifts from the innermost to an outer space. The holy symbols are placed at the roadside or in a niche at the gate, thus their power will be renewed at the same time as ensuring the saint's relics pass through clean air, like in the village of Olympos on the island of Karpathos during the procession on Holy (Good) Friday, and on Tinos. As the holy head passes before the house, the housewife throws incense on the embers, and the priest rewards her for having made the air smell sweetly for its passage by pausing to say a prayer for her. The procession is assembled at the outskirts of the town. As on Tinos and in other festival locations, the processional route is marked with white crosses bordered with apotropaic (cf. *apotrepein*, to ward off) blue (as on the Greek flag itself), and two crossed Greek flags, as well as the usual flags at the sanctuaries.

At 11:30 am the procession around Aegina town begins, attended by many visiting bishops in full regalia. Carpets are laid in the streets and strewn with flowers and green branches, and icons and lamps are placed in the windows or outside the houses along the route to greet the saint. At the various stops by the churches and public administrative buildings, services are held and the head and icon are sprinkled with flowers. It is also important to walk under the canopy carrying the head in his golden crown to be purified and therefore protected for the next year (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: At all stops it is important to walk under the canopy carrying the head to be purified and therefore protected for the next year, Aegina, 9 November 2012.

Scouts, Guides and school children head the procession. The latter, starting with the youngest pupils, lead the way carrying flags; all the schools on the island are represented. They pass by the church of the Panagia or Panagitsa, as many locals say, next to which a small market is held on occasion of the feast. The children are followed by marching bands. Choirboys lead the ecclesiastical procession, in which nuns and priests are present. They swing their censers, in order to “purify” the area before the arrival of the head. Some carry banners with various symbols, and their coats are a diverse range of colours. A priest dressed in a yellow robe carries the Holy Bible. In 2011 and 2012, two laymen or non-ecclesiastics, carried an icon of the saint. Next, follows a boy, clad in black, carrying a censer. Then follows the icon decorated with flowers, carried by young priests, also dressed in black. After this come the nuns, and an old nun follows carrying a censer. In 1991, a car with loudspeakers came next, and a “rolling” or “moving” service was being held from the car. The priests chanted in turn. In the intervening years, the technical apparatuses have improved, and today the car has been substituted by a portable microphone. The priest carrying this is followed by more members of the clergy with Agios Nektarios’ skull in the golden crown. The icon and head are carried by

priests, and nowadays (in 2011 and 2012) the officiating priest comes next. The most important part of the procession, the priests carrying Agios Nektarios' head, are walking below a sort of "moving" canopy carried by policemen, under which is the *koubouklio* (canopy), the "movable sanctuary", bier or platform and on which rests the head, carried by the priests. The metropolitan bishop of Hydra, Spetses and Aegina and other bishops wearing crowns on their heads and carrying staffs in their hands follow the bier. One also carries some green leaves. In the middle of the last section of the ecclesiastical part of the procession, a priest dressed in black carrying a staff is the leading person. The procession ends with the people following the saint through the town.

In 1991, a woman went up to the saint's head, strewing petals and leaves around the relic from a sack. In several places parts of the house altars have been moved outside to greet the saint. At the church of the Panagitsa (or Panagia), the church version of the saint's icon has been transferred outside. Here the saint's icon, heading the sacred part of the procession, makes his first stop, thus greeting his other icon, which is placed on a lectern outside of the church. The latter is decorated with flowers, thus, in "festival attire" it meets and greets the icon that has been brought from the saint's main sanctuary outside of the town. When arriving in front of the church, both the visiting icon and following holy head, below the canopy, are sprinkled with white flower leaves, and a choirboy swings a censer. Helpers roll out red carpets in front of the church, and a service is held. A second stop is made at the town hall where an icon depicting the saint is suspended. During the procession, a woman on a balcony holds the saint's icon over the procession passing underneath. On several streets in the historical centre of the town, beautiful carpets have been rolled out awaiting the procession, and they are sprinkled with green leaves and flower buds. There is a third stop in front of the church dedicated to Agios Nikolaos. The final stop is made at the church dedicated to the Dormition of the Panagia, generally called only *Mētropolis*, perhaps to distinguish it from the first church, since both are dedicated to the Panagia. At the third and fourth stops, the head and icon are sprinkled with flowers; at the former, an old woman does the sprinkling, while a young man holds the censer. Here, at Agios Nikolaos' church, two decorated icons have been moved out in their lecterns and some of the women start their own singing.





Fig. 4: A house altar awaiting the procession with the head of Agios Nektarios, Aegina, 9 November 2011.

All along the road, beautiful decorated house altars await the procession (Figure 4, see also Håland 2014: Fig. 15). In some places, the women also stand next to their altars holding lighted candles. Some nurses in uniform have put a decorated icon of the saint in a lectern outside the building housing the first government building of John Kapodistrias. The local hospital of Agios Dionysios is some five hundred metres away on the same road. The procession traverses the town, tracing a route between the local churches. In front of nearly every single house, the “household altar” or parts of the household cult are displayed outside, and as the holy saint passes before each one; the woman of the house, standing ready with a sack of flower buds, throws them at the procession. The procession ends up at the Metropolitan Church, where the last prayer is held in favour of the town, its residents and the pious pilgrims. At this final stop, only a few pilgrims are permitted to enter with the ecclesiastic procession, since the police close the gate after them. The rest can enter after the termination of the liturgy and speech, which is followed by the national anthem. During the final speech at the last church to be visited by the procession in 2011, all the foreign pilgrims from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and other eastern European and Balkan countries; that is, all the non-Greek Orthodox



believers present, were given a special mention alongside the Greek worshippers. Through the procession the town is blessed, and so are, particularly, its churches and public administrative buildings, thus paralleling other festivals both in Greece and abroad. So, the procession terminates with a service in the church dedicated to the Panagia or Mētropolis, while it is visited by Agios Nektarios' icon and head.

When the service in the Metropolitan church is finished, people are enthusiastic to receive blessed bread after the ceremony. Some fetch the flowers and green leaves from the canopy in which the head was transported. Simultaneously, people line up outside the entrance of the church waiting their turn to making their devotions in front of the head, now displayed on a tall table draped with red silk, next to the decorated icon (Håland 2014: 379, Fig. 44). In the church of the Panagia then, three objects are worshipped by the faithful: everyone bows and kisses the holy head, then, they proceed to the icon, and finally many bow their heads into the empty canopy. People move around wishing each other "*Chronia Polla*" (Many Years), and most pilgrims rush onboard the Flying Dolphin which is bound for Piraeus; others await later boats. Some of them eat their packed lunches in the parks or in the streets, while others still invade the various *tabernas* in the town. The priests go up to their lunch, which starts at 1 pm in the building called *scholē* (a former school for girls who were taught practical handicraft or needlework, "housekeeping"), next to the new church.

In 2011, while waiting the return of the saint's head to the monastery in the late afternoon, an old woman was very excited, telling the saint had opened one of his eyes the previous night, asking me if I had managed to catch this moment when taking pictures from the gallery. I said no, having to confess that although I also took several pictures of the silver figure under the glass top in the chest of the right-hand tomb and of the detached lid, I did not see that he had opened one of his eyes. She looked at me as if I had really missed something. I did not reflect on the issue then, but later I would be reminded of the topic. Down in the new church the following year, a female Romanian pilgrim sweeps pieces of candles, dust and flower buds from the new tomb putting these holy amulets into a plastic bag, before going up to the monastery. Here, as usual, pilgrims line up waiting their turn to perform devotions in front of the saint's head, and in its absence, they pay homage to the space it usually inhabits and to the icon that has temporarily replaced it. More votive gifts had been dedicated, also at the saint's tomb, including money and a box containing 500-milligram tablets of cortisone along with a supplication letter and a plastic syringe in a plastic sack. Just before the service starts, the ritual activity becomes intense: the head is brought back up from town accompanied by screaming sirens. It is escorted ritually into the women's chapel in the same way as when it was removed from its usual space, posed on a table and people start to venerate it, while the bishop sits down next to it. His closing speech by the end of

the vespers touches on most aspects of the present situation in Greece, including the crisis. Next, the head is ritually returned to its own chapel. Since Agios Nektarios leaves and returns via the women's sanctuary, we observe a symbolic rebirth, via the female sanctuary and female aspect, paralleling other passage rites both in Greek and other contexts.<sup>4</sup> So, through the annual liturgy in the women's chapel that officially concludes the festival, Agios Nektarios, who instituted a women's monastery, has been "reborn". During the entire service, and after venerating the saint's head though, everybody eagerly lines up on the steps awaiting the climax of the festival: the opening of the saint's closet in his flat. Now he will have his new clothes and slippers, and the enthusiastic pilgrims are venerating all the holy items in his closet in the same way as his holy head.

After the liturgy in 2011, I shared a taxi back to the town with two young Greek women. One of them was very excitedly telling us that she had noticed the saint opening one of his eyes. In the beginning, she did not believe her own eyes, but another woman said she had witnessed the same, convincing her that she had in fact seen what she thought. All the way down to the town, while repeatedly telling the story, she crossed herself continually, and the female driver started to share her own story; that is, "her miracle": she had an allergy, eczema on her hands, but had been healed through the help of Agios Nektarios. I feel it is important to note here that although the aforementioned woman from the gallery is an older woman, the driver is middle-aged and the two pilgrims I travelled with are quite young. In addition, I met several young women who brought along their newborn babies, and placed them next to the head to kiss it. In other words, women of all ages come to Agios Nektarios to get help.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that all the rituals left out of the official programme, such as the meals, the annual opening of the closet, and so on, are popular and female rituals that seem to be particularly important to the female pilgrims I talked with along with their personal worship of the saint's head and body in his two tombs at the area. I assume that all the discussion about the saint opening his eye both in Greece and Romania accounts for the fact that so many, particularly Romanian, pilgrims were eager to take pictures of the saint in 2012. The same year, I noticed that the main icon of the saint in the women's chapel is painted so it seems that the saint is winking with his right eye.

The day after the festival dedicated to this dead mediator, the remaining pilgrims in the monastery receive *kollyba*; that is, a mixture of wheat, nuts and fruit usually offered to the dead during memorial services at the tombs. The ingredients symbolise immortality, abundance and pleasures, and the wish for a plentiful future crop, November being the time of sowing in Greece (Håland 2014: Ch. 5; cf. 2017: Ch. 6).

In 2011 and 2012, I encountered many Romanian pilgrims on Aegina, many wore yellow caps stating they were from Romania, reminding me of the poster I

had seen pinned outside the Orthodox cathedral in the northern Romanian city of Alba Iulia in October 2011 that invited people to make a pilgrimage to Aegina in the period 6–13 November, during the festival of Agios Nektarios.<sup>5</sup> This invitation and the many nuns and several buses filled up with pilgrims from Romania attending the festival both years, illustrate his growing importance in that country.

Although my descriptions have been based on three periods in the field studying the festival in 1991, 2011 and 2012 (with a gap of twenty years between the first and second periods), I hope I have managed to illustrate that even though much of the decor has changed, primarily because of the enlarged importance of the new church during the festival, the core of the rituals endure as does the attendees' faith in the saint. To quote a female Greek PhD student in 2011: "I am looking forward to meeting you and sharing your experiences from Aegina. I have never been to Aegina and Agios Nektarios is considered to be one of the most Divine Saints who performed many miracles". The same opinion is expressed by other people, particularly women in Athens. One woman in her thirties asked me to light a candle for her during the festival in 2012, saying that "Agios Nektarios is so special since he is one of the most recent saints here in Greece, and he is indeed a proven wonder-worker, otherwise people would not return to Aegina".

In the article I have stressed the importance of the house altars greeting the saint, because this is an important parallel to the custom in small villages and communities in northern Greece where the icons carried in procession actually are brought into every single house to bless the house and its altar for the next year (Håland 2017: Ch. 4, 2019: 10, 96, 214, 309).

## Some Concluding Remarks

In 1990, the first time I visited the monastery on Aegina, I learnt that Agios Nektarios' relics reposed in more than eighteen churches in Greece and Cyprus. Today this has changed. According to Abbess Valentina Drumeva of the Bulgarian monastery dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple in the town Kalofer, with whom I spoke in June 2012, some of the nuns from the monastery had already gone to Aegina in 1990 to obtain some of his relics. A small relic is on display in their monastery church, that today has eleven nuns, one of whom is named Nektaria. I have also learnt of a monk called Nektarios, which is also a typical male name on Aegina (cf. Håland 2014: 131 for the background). In addition, Agios Nektarios' relics repose in more and more churches, such as in Romania and Spain. The Romanian Orthodox Church; that is, the Radu Vodă Monastery in Bucharest, obtained one of his relics in 2002, and he is particularly famous for healing cancer in a country where the health system is on the verge of collapse<sup>6</sup> Actually, an important explanation for the saint's body starting to decompose is

that it indicated that he, or rather his relics, should be spread out among many sanctuaries, inside and outside of Greece; that is, worldwide (Dionysiatēs 1979: Ch. 8.2, i.e., 163; Håland 2014: Ch. 2). The situation today means it is by no means certain how many places can boast of having an actual relic of Agios Nektarios residing in their church. As already mentioned, Agios Nektarios now also resides in the Church of the Annunciation on Tinos, since the Metropolitan of Aegina and several nuns came to Tinos with his relic during the festival of the “Finding of the Icon” in 2012. After being on display in the church during the day, he resides next to the miraculous icon of the Annunciation in its “safe” every night (see Håland 2014: 381 Figure 45). Before receiving this relic, they already had a relic of the saint in the nuns Monastery of Kekhrovouno on Tinos. He is indeed a “migrant saint”.

### **List of Figures (all photos are by the author):**

- 1: The monastery dedicated to Agios Nektarios, in front of which is the new church, Aegina, 7 November 2011.
- 2: Pilgrims listen to Agios Nektarios’ footsteps at his original tomb, Aegina, 8 November 2012.
- 3: At all stops it is important to walk under the canopy carrying the head to be purified and therefore protected for the next year, Aegina, 9 November 2012.
- 4: A house altar awaiting the procession with the head of Agios Nektarios, Aegina, 9 November 2011.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The following article builds on Håland 2014, especially Ch. 2. See also Tsotakou-Karbelē 1991: 226 f.; Dionysiatēs 1979; Chondropoulos 1998; Panagopoiloi 1987. I visited the monastery in 1990 for the first time, and the festival in 1991, 2011 and 2012.

<sup>2</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. the sponge trade was particularly important and many rich sponge merchants lived on the island.

<sup>3</sup> Today the same custom is found in Mantamados on Lesbos: in front of the holy icon of Taxiarchēs, which, according to legend, is made of earth and blood from monks killed by the Turks, many pairs of golden shoes are dedicated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. passage rites, when people are reborn after being at “the place of death”, Dowden 1989: 36.

<sup>5</sup> And, for the price of 280 euros, to also visit other places in Greece, such as Thessaloniki, Meteora and the Akropolis of Athens.

<sup>6</sup> The information relating to Romania was communicated to me by Irina Stahl (Romania) who presented the paper, “Saint Nektarios, ‘The Migrant Saint’: Healing Rituals in Post-communist Romania”, at the Eight Conference of the SIEF Working Group on The Ritual

Year, *Migrations*, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 2012, later published as Stahl 2014. She also tells that from Romania his cult has spread to the Romanian parish in Coslada, a suburb of Madrid, Spain. See also Håland 2014: Ch. 2.

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