

## CHAPTER 5

# Description of Meteora: landscape, and history

### The landscape of Meteora

Meteora is a geologically important landscape that contains monasteries built on high rocks (**figure 5**). The monasteries look as if they are ‘suspended/floating in the air’, as the Greek term ‘Meteora’ means. Meteora is located in central Greece, District of Thessaly, Prefecture of Trikala, Province of Kalampaka, next to the village of Kastraki and the city of Kalampaka (**figure 6**). The monastic complex is in state ownership under the control of the Greek Orthodox Church. Each of the individual monasteries of the complex has its own property and the exclusive rights to use it, but their finances are under the control of the State and the Church (UNESCO 1988, 3–4).

The space of Meteora could be described as follows (**figures 7 and 8**). In terms of physical topography, Meteora may be divided into the space inside the physical boundaries of the individual monasteries (i.e. the internal space of the monasteries) and the space outside the physical boundaries of the individual monasteries (i.e. the external space of the monasteries). In terms of status of ownership, the internal space of the monasteries belongs exclusively to the monastic communities, while the external space of the monasteries is mostly public land and, only to a small extent, private land belonging to the monasteries and to citizens. In terms of status of use, the internal space of the monasteries is the exclusive responsibility of the monastic communities, in accordance with the regulations of the Greek government and under the supervision of the relevant government bodies (namely the Ministry of Culture). The status of use of the external space of the monasteries is much more complicated, with the involvement of various groups of people (such as the monastic communities, the local community, the visitors and the tourist agencies), in accordance with the regulations of the Greek government and under the supervision of the relevant government bodies (namely the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry for the Environment, Spatial Planning and Public Works, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Tourism).

### The history of Meteora from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to approximately 1940: Meteora as an exclusively monastic site

Meteora has been an Orthodox monastic site, with continuous conduct of ritual activities, since the end of the tenth-beginning of the eleventh century to the present date. Meteora contains



**Figure 5:** Meteora: a general view of the site (source: photo of Kostas Liolios).

monastic communities of monks and nuns: initially only monks lived at the site, but later, in 1925, monastic communities of nuns also appeared (this was after a major fire in 1925 when the monks asked for the help of the residents of the nearby village of Kastraki, who subsequently established the first monastic communities of nuns on the site: Kotopoulis 1973, 125–127; Tetsios 2003; 342–343; pers. comm. Kastraki village).

The history of the monastic site of Meteora may be summarised as follows (Kontoyannis 1990, 19–28; Nikonanos 1992, 18–19; Sofianos 1990, 11–18; Tsiatas 2003, 161–162; Nikodimi 2002, 21–22; Choulia-Albani 1999, 152–155). At the end of the tenth-beginning of the eleventh century, the first hermits established themselves on the rocks of Meteora. In the twelfth century, the monks concentrated around the *skiti* [house of groups of monks] of Doupiani, forming the first monastic community in the area. The milestone in the monastic life of Meteora was the establishment of the first *koinobio* [organised monastery], the Great Meteoron Monastery, by monk Athanasios in 1347. It was monk Athanasios (later St Athanasios of Meteora) who gave the name ‘Meteora’ to the site. Monastic life at Meteora reached its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when there were twenty four monasteries and numerous independent cells at the site. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were periods of decline for monastic life on the site, which reached its nadir in the first half of the twentieth century. An odd incident occurred in the early 1930s, when members of the village of Kastraki set fire to one of the Meteora monasteries because the monks were – claimed to be – seducing girls from their village (pers. comm. Kastraki village). In the 1940s, under the pressure of World War II and the Greek Civil War, the monastic communities left the site, with the exception of a couple of monks who remained at the Great Meteoron and the Varlaam Monasteries.



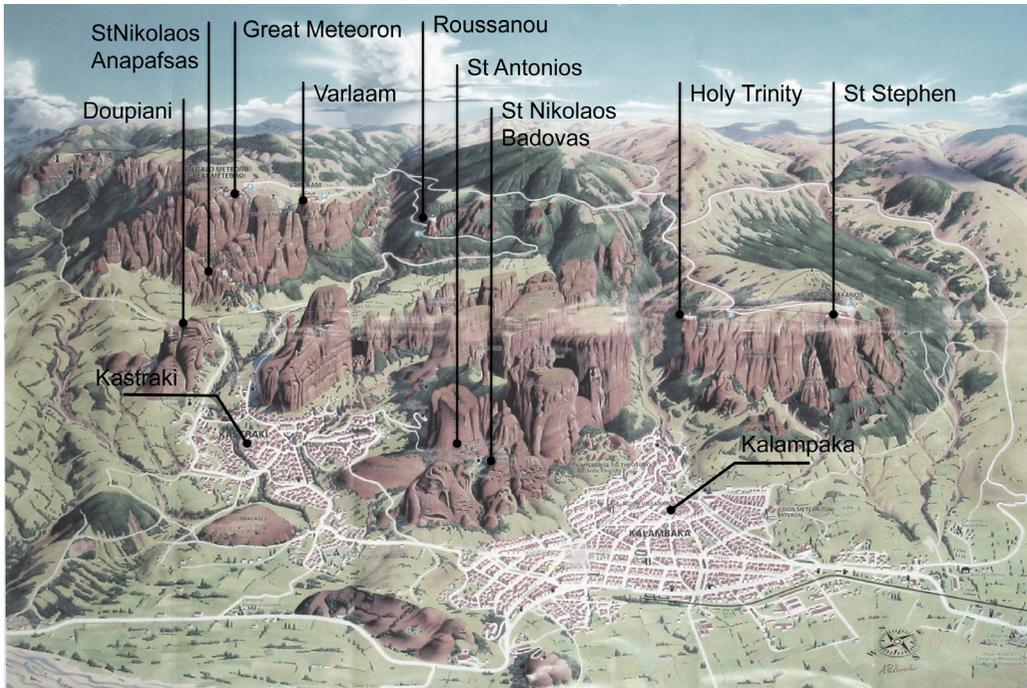
Figure 6: Meteora: location.

### The history of Meteora from the 1960s to present: a monastic site within the development of heritage and tourism industries

The monastic communities were re-established on the site in the 1960s, and increased over time. Today Meteora contains six monastic communities (four of monks and two of nuns), being one of the largest monastic complexes in Greece and in the entire Orthodox world. The monastic communities perform significant spiritual and philanthropic activity for the benefit of the local community (i.e. the residents of the village of Kastraki, the town of Kalampaka and the broader region), which comprises the congregation of the Monasteries.

During the twentieth century Meteora was designated by the Greek government as a heritage site. In 1921, and especially in 1962, the monasteries were officially recognised and protected for their historic and artistic significance as individual monuments. Later, in 1967, Meteora was recognised as a single heritage site with unified boundaries including the local village of Kastraki and part of the town of Kalampaka. In 1988, Meteora was recognised at an international level through its inscription as a World Heritage Site of 'outstanding' cultural and natural ('mixed') significance.

Since the establishment of the first *koinobio* (the Great Meteoron Monastery) by monk Athanasios in 1347 and especially since the peak of the monasteries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Meteora acquired fame as a monastic site of remarkable artistic significance, located in an impressive landscape, attracting the attention of numerous visitors from all over

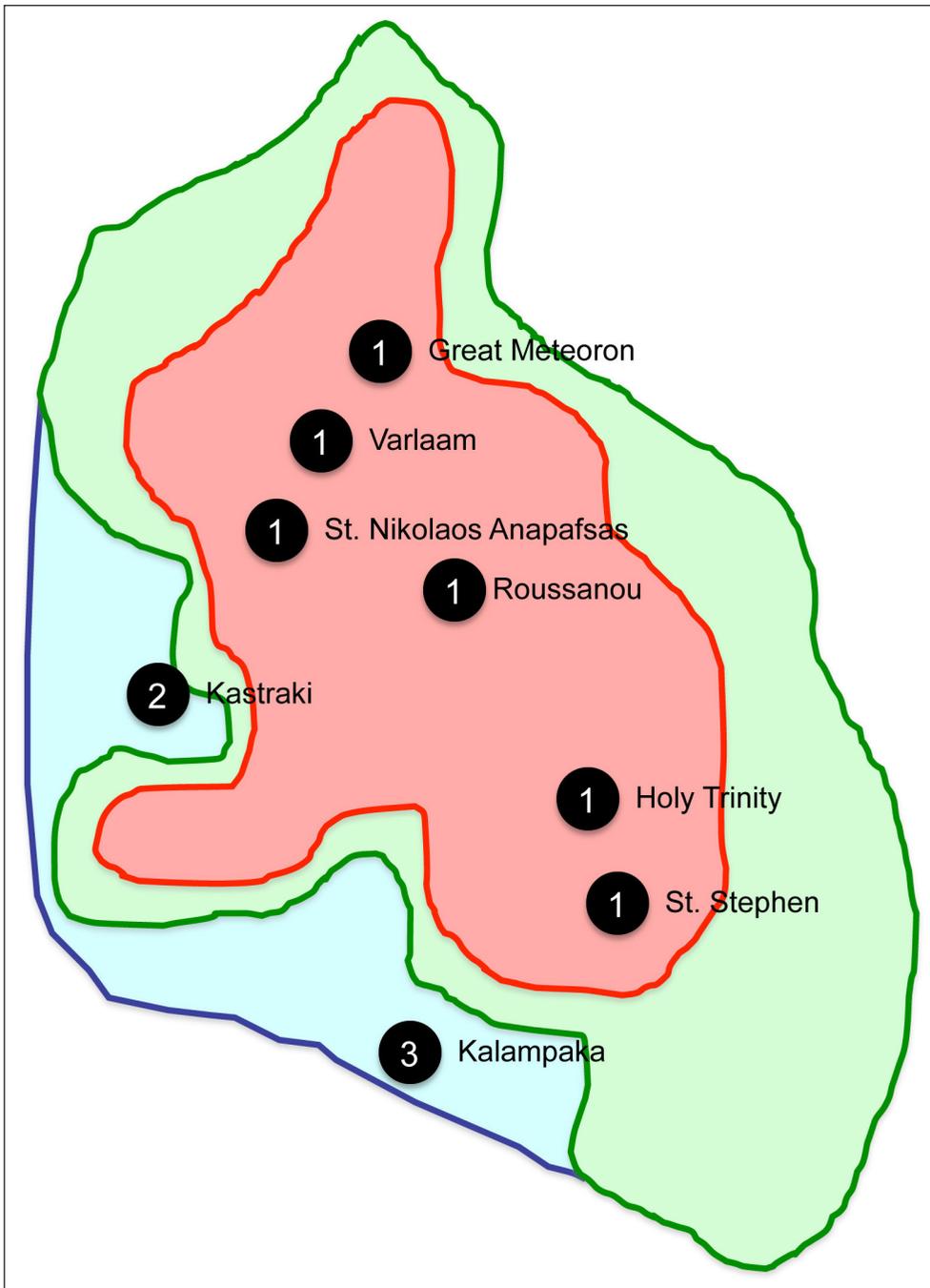


Meteora Map 1996

**Figure 7:** Meteora: a detailed map of the site (original figure: Meteora map 1996, with author's additions). The map depicts the monasteries (Great Meteoron, Varlaam, Roussanou, Holy Trinity, St Stephen, and St Nikolaos Anapafsas) and the *skites* (Doupiani, St Antonios, and St Nikolaos Badovas) that are still in use, the city of Kalampaka and the village of Kastraki, and the road network.

the Christian world (Kontoyannis 1990, 24; Xydias and Totsikas and Braoudakis 1997, 221–222 and 235–240). Yet, it was during the twentieth century that Meteora gradually developed as a tourist site attracting non-Christian visitors. The events that helped to develop tourism at the site were the following (Anastasiou 1994a, 203): first, the construction of stairs for the easier access to the monasteries in the 1920s, which meant the abandonment of the original way of access to the monasteries through the *vrizoni* (*vrizoni* is ‘an elevator peculiar to Meteora, used until today for the transportation of heavy loads; it is made of a net, inside which the visitor entered and was pulled upwards through a wheel situated on the monastery tower’: Choulia-Albani 1999, 157); second, the construction of a road network for the easier access to the site in the late 1940s; and third, the abolition of *avaton* (i.e. the exclusion of women from entering the monasteries), which continued at the Great Meteoron and the Varlaam monasteries until the 1940s. The main tourism development took place after World War II and the Civil War, and in the last two decades Meteora has developed as an international mass tourist destination. Today, Meteora attracts approximately one million and a half visitors per year, being one of the most popular tourist destinations in Greece.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are no accurate visitor numbers of the site; the number provided in the present study is an estimate based on interviews with professionals concerned with the tourism development of the site and the region, and also on an analysis of the available data concerning the accommodation of the visitors in the region.



**Figure 8:** Meteora: map of zones of protection (see also Kalokairinos 1995). The green line marks the boundaries of zone A of the heritage site of Meteora. This zone includes the monasteries that are still in use (indicated by number 1) and their broader surrounding area. The blue line marks the boundaries of zone B of the heritage site, which includes the village of Kastraki (indicated by number 2) and part of the city of Kalampaka (indicated by number 3). The red line marks the boundaries of the area recognised and protected as 'holy', which includes the monasteries that are still in use and their directly surrounding area (Greek Government 1995; see below).

## Conclusion

Meteora has been an Orthodox monastic site since the end of the tenth-beginning of the eleventh century to the present date. Initially, since the end of tenth-beginning of the eleventh century until approximately the 1960s, Meteora was exclusively a monastic site. Later, from the 1960s onwards, Meteora retains its monastic function, while increasingly being used as a major heritage and tourist site at a national and international level. As a result of this increasing popularity of the site, a variety of groups of people, of different backgrounds, with different, sometimes conflicting needs, views and practices concerning the present operation and the future development of the site, are involved in its life at local, national and international level.