My cell is bare and austere. It has white walls and a flagstone floor. Only two pieces of furniture break the severity of its emptiness: in one corner stands an olive-wood writing desk, in the other an iron bedstead. The latter is covered with a single white sheet, starched as stiff as a nun’s wimple.

Through the open window I can see a line of black habits: the monks at work in the vegetable garden, a monastic chain-gang hoeing the cabbage patch before the sun sets and the wooden simandron calls them in for compline. Beyond the garden is a vineyard, silhouetted against the bleak black pyramid of the Holy Mountain.

All is quiet now but for the distant breaking of surf on the jetty and the faint echo and clatter of metal plates in the monastery kitchens. The silence and solemnity of the place is hardly designed to raise the spirits, but you could hardly find a better place to order your mind. There are no distractions, and the monastic silence imposes its own brittle clarity.

It’s now nine o’clock. The time has finally come to concentrate my thoughts: to write down, as simply as I can, what has brought me here, what I have seen, and what I hope to achieve in the next few months.
My reference books are laid out in a line on the floor; the pads containing my library notes are open. Files full of photocopied articles lie piled up below the window; my pencils are sharpened and upended in a glass. A matchbox lies ready beside the paraffin storm lantern: the monastery generator is turned off after compliance, and if am to write tonight I will have to do so by the light of its yellow flame.

Open on the desk is my paperback translation of The Spiritual Meadow of John Moschos, the unlikely little book which first brought me to this monastery, and the original manuscript of which I saw for the first time less than one hour ago. God willing, John Moschos will lead me on, eastwards to Constantinople and Anatolia, then southwards to the Nile and thence, if it is still possible, to the Great Kharga Oasis, once the southern frontier of Byzantium.

This morning, six days after leaving the damp of a dreich Scottish June, I caught ship from Ouranopolis, the Gate of Heaven, down the peninsula to the Holy Mountain.

We passed a monastic fishing boat surrounded by a halo of seagulls. Opposite me, three large monks in ballooning cassocks sat sipping cappuccinos under an icon of the Virgin; over their grey moustaches there rested a light foam of frothed milk. Behind them, through the porthole, you could see the first of the great Athonite monasteries rising up from sandy bays to crown the foothills of the mountain. They are huge complexes of buildings, great ash-coloured fortresses the size of small Italian hill-towns, with timber-laced balconies hanging below domed cupolas and massive, unwieldy medieval buttresses.

The first monastic foundation on Athos was established in the ninth century by St Euthymius of Salonica who, having renounced the world at the age of eighteen, took to moving around on all fours and eating grass; he later became a stylite, and took to berating his brethren from atop a pillar. Some two hundred years later – by which time St Euthymius’s fame had led to many other monasteries and sketes springing up around the saint’s original foundation – it came to the ears of the Byzantine Emperor that the monks were in the habit of debauching the daughters of the shepherds who came to the mountain to sell milk and wool. Thereafter it was decreed that nothing female – no woman, no cow, no mare, no bitch – could step within its limits.

Today this rule is relaxed only for cats, and in the Middle Ages even a pair of Byzantine Empresses were said to have been turned away from the Holy Mountain by the Mother of God herself. But 140 years ago, in 1857, the Virgin was sufficiently flexible to allow one of my Victorian great-aunts, Virginia Somers, to spend two months in a tent on Mount Athos, along with her husband and the louche Pre-Raphaelite artist Coutts Lindsay. A letter Virginia wrote on her visit still survives, in which she describes how the monks had taken her over the monastery gardens and insisted on giving her fruit from every tree as they passed; she said she tasted pomegranate, citron and peach. It is the only recorded instance of a woman being allowed onto the mountain in the millennium-long history of Athos, and is certainly the only record of what appears to have been a most unholy Athonite ménage-à-trois.

This unique lapse apart, the Holy Mountain is still a self-governing monastic republic dedicated to prayer, chastity and pure, un tarnished Orthodoxy. At the Council of Florence in 1439 it was Athonite monks who refused to let the Catholic and Orthodox Churches unite in return for Western military help against the Turk; as a result Constantinople fell to the Ottomans within two decades, but Orthodoxy survived doctrinally intact. That deep pride in Orthodoxy combined with a profound suspicion of all other creeds remains the defining ideology of Athos today.

I disembarked at Daphne, caught the old bus to the monastic capital at Karyes, then walked slowly down the ancient foot-polished cobbles, through knee-high sage and clouds of yellow butterflies, to the lavra* of Iviron.

The monks had just finished vespers. As it was a lovely balmy

* Explanations of all ecclesiastical and technical terms can be found in the glossary.
evening, many were standing around the courtyard enjoying the shade of the cypresses next to the katholikon. Fr. Yacovos, the guestmaster, was sitting on the steps of the domed Ottoman fountain, listening to the water dripping from the spout into the bowl. He stood up when he saw me enter the courtyard.

‘Welcome,’ he said. ‘We’ve been expecting you.’

Yacovos was a garrulous, thick-set, low-slung monk, bearded like a brigand. On his head, tilted at a jaunty angle, sat a knitted black bonnet. He took my bags and led me to the guest room, where he poured a glass of ouzo and offered me a bowl full of rose-scented loukoumi. As he did so, he chattered happily about his life in the merchant navy. He had visited Aberdeen on a Cypriot ship in the winter of 1959, he said, and had never forgotten the fog and the bitter cold. I asked where I could find the librarian, Fr. Christophoros. It had been Fr. Christophoros’s letter — surmounted by the great Imperial crest, the double-headed eagle of Byzantium — that had originally lured me to Athos. The manuscript I was looking for was in Iviron’s monastic library, he had said. Yes, it had survived, and he would try to get the Abbot’s permission for me to see it.

‘Christophoros will be down at the Arsenal at this time,’ said Fr. Yacovos, looking at his fob watch, ‘feeding his cats.’

I found the old man standing on the jetty, holding a bucket full of fishtails. A pair of enormous black spectacles perched precariously on his nose. Around him swirled two dozen cats.

‘Come, Justinian,’ called Fr. Christophoros. ‘Come now, Chrysostom, wisswisswisswiss . . . Come on, my darlings, ela, come . . .’

I walked up and introduced myself.

‘We thought you were coming last week,’ replied the monk, a little gruffly.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I had trouble getting a permit in Thessaloniki.’

The cats continued to swirl flirtatiously around Christophoros’s ankles, hissing at each other and snatching at the scattered fins.

‘Have you managed to have a word with the Abbot about my seeing the manuscript?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Christophoros. ‘The Abbot’s away in Constantinopole. He’s in council with the Ecumenical Patriarch. But you’re welcome to stay here until he returns.’

‘When will that be?’

‘He should be back by the Feast of the Transfiguration.’

‘But that’s — what? — over a fortnight away.’

‘Patience is a great monastic virtue,’ said Christophoros, nodding philosophically at Kallistos, a rather scrappy, bow-legged old tom-cat who had so far failed to catch a single fishtail.

‘My permit runs out the day after tomorrow,’ I said. ‘They only gave me a three-day diamonitirion. I have to leave by the morning boat.’ I looked at the old monk. ‘Please — I’ve come all the way just to see this book.’

‘I’m afraid the Abbot insists that he must first question anyone who . . .’

‘Is there nothing you could do?’

The old man pulled tentatively at his beard. ‘I shouldn’t do this,’ he said. ‘And anyway, the lights aren’t working in the library.’

‘There are some lamps in the guest room,’ I suggested.

He paused for a second, indecisive. Then he relented: ‘Go quickly,’ he said. ‘Ask Fr. Yacovos: see if he’ll lend you the lanterns.’

I thanked Christophoros and started walking briskly back towards the monastery before he could change his mind.

‘And don’t let Yacovos start telling you his life story,’ he called after me, ‘or you’ll never get to see this manuscript.’

At eight o’clock, I met Fr. Christophoros outside the katholikon. It was dusk now; the sun had already set over the Holy Mountain. In my hands I held the storm lantern from my room. We walked across the courtyard to the monastic library, and from his habit Fr. Christophoros produced a ring of keys as huge as those of a medieval jailer. He began to turn the largest of the keys in the topmost of the four locks.

‘We have to keep everything well locked these days,’ said Christophoros in explanation. ‘Three years ago, in the middle of winter, some raiders turned up in motorboats at the Great Lavra. They had Sten guns and were assisted by an ex-novice who had been thrown out by the Abbot. They got into the library and stole
many of the most ancient manuscripts; they also took some gold reliquaries that were locked in the sanctuary.'

'Were they caught?'

'The monks managed to raise the alarm and they were arrested the following morning as they tried to get across the Bulgarian frontier. But by then they had done much damage: cut up the reliquaries into small pieces and removed the best illuminations from the manuscripts. Some of the pages have never been recovered.'

Three locks had now opened without problem; and eventually, with a loud creak, the fourth gave way too. The old library doors swung open, and with the lamps held aloft, we stepped inside.

Within, it was pitch dark; a strong odour of old buckram and rotting vellum filled the air. Manuscripts lay open in low cabinets, the gold leaf of illuminated letters and gilt haloes from illustrations of saints' Lives shining out in the light of the lantern. In the gloom on the far wall I could just see a framed Ottoman firman, the curving gilt of the Sultan’s monogram clearly visible above the lines of calligraphy. Next to it, like a discarded suit jacket, hung a magnificent but rather crumpled silk coat. Confronted dragons and phoenixes were emblazoned down the side of either lapel.

'What is that?' I whispered.

'It's John Tzimiskes's coat.'

'The Emperor John Tzimiskes? But he lived in the tenth century.'

Christophoros shrugged his shoulders.

'You can't just leave something like that hanging up there,' I said.

'Well,' said Christophoros irritably, 'where else would you put it?'

In the gloom, we found our way past rank after rank of shelves groaning with leather-bound Byzantine manuscripts, before drawing to a halt in front of a cabinet in the far corner of the room. Christophoros unlocked and opened the glass covering. Codex G.9 was on the bottom shelf, wrapped up in a white canvas satchel.

It was a huge volume, as heavy as a crate of wine, and I staggered over to a reading desk with it, while Christophoros followed with the lamp.

'Forgive me,' he said, as I lowered the volume gently onto the desk, 'but are you Orthodox or heretic?'

I considered for a second before answering. A Catholic friend who had visited Athos a few years previously had warned me above all never to admit to being a Catholic; he had made this mistake, and said that had he admitted to suffering from leprosy or tertiary syphilis he could not have been more resolutely shunned than he had been after that. He told me that in my case it was particularly important not to raise the monks’ suspicions, as they have learned to distrust, above all their visitors, those who ask to see their manuscripts. They have long memories on Athos, and if the monks have never forgiven the Papacy for authorising the ransacking of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade over eight hundred years ago, they have certainly not forgotten the nineteenth-century bibliophiles who decimated the libraries of Athos only a century ago.

The English traveller the Hon. Robert Curzon is still considered one of the worst offenders: after a quick circuit around the monastic libraries of Athos in the late 1840s (in the company, I am ashamed to say, of my great-great-uncle), Curzon left the Holy Mountain with his trunks bulging with illuminated manuscripts and Byzantine chrysobuls; in his travel book Visits to Monasteries in the Levant he writes of buying the priceless manuscripts from the Abbot by weight, as if they were figs or pomegranates in an Ottoman market. Worse still is the memory of the German bibliophile Herman Tischendorff. Some twenty years after Curzon’s trip to Athos, Tischendorff left the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St Catherine’s in Sinai with the Codex Sinaicus – still the earliest existing copy of the New Testament – tucked into his camel bags. Tischendorff later claimed that he found the various leaves of the manuscript in a basket of firewood, and that he had saved it from the monks, who were intent on burning it to keep them warm in winter. The monks, however, maintain to this day that Tischendorff got the librarian drunk and discreetly swapped the priceless manuscript – which, like Curzon’s plunder,
duly found its way into the British Library— for a bottle of good
German schnapps.

Noticing my silence, Christophoros asked again: What was I,
Orthodox or heretic?

'I'm a Catholic,' I replied.

'My God,' said the monk. 'I'm so sorry.' He shook his head in
solicitude. 'To be honest with you,' he said, 'the Abbot never
gives permission for non-Orthodox to look at our holy books.
Particularly Catholics. The Abbot thinks the present Pope is
the Antichrist and that his mother is the Whore of Babylon. He
says that they are now bringing about the Last Days spoken of by
St John in the Book of Revelation.'

Christophoros murmured a prayer. 'Please,' he said, 'don't ever
tell anyone in the monastery that you're a heretic. If the Abbot
ever found out, I'd be made to perform a thousand prostrations.'

'I won't tell a soul.'

Christophoros relaxed slightly, and took off his glasses to polish
them on the front of his habit. 'You know, we actually had another
Catholic in the monastery earlier this year,' he said.

'Who was that?' I asked.

'He was a choirmaster from Bavaria,' said Christophoros. 'He
had a beautiful voice.'

I eased the book up onto a reading stand, and began to unbutton
its canvas cover.

'He said our church had wonderful acoustics,' continued
Christophoros, arranging the lamps on the desk. 'So he asked Fr.
Yacovos if he could sing a Gloria inside the katholikon, under the
dome.'

'What did Fr. Yacovos say?'

'He said that he didn't think he could let a heretic pray inside
the church. But just this once he said he would let him sing a
little alleluia in the porch.'

I had now got the protective canvas off, and the beautifully
worked leather binding gleamed golden in the light of the lantern.

I opened the cover. Inside, the text was written in purple ink
on the finest vellum— strong, supple and waxy, but so thin as to
be virtually translucent. The calligraphy was a beautifully clear

and cursive form of early medieval Georgian. According to the
library's detailed catalogue, the volume had bound together a
number of different early Byzantine devotional texts. The first
folio I opened was apparently a shrill sermon by St Jerome,
denouncing what he considered the thoroughly pagan practice of
taking baths: 'He who has bathed in Christ,' fumed the saint, 'does
not need a second bath.'

Only towards the end, on folio 287 verso, did I come to the
opening lines of the text I had come so far to see. Its author was
the great Byzantine traveller-monk John Moschos, and the book
had been compiled at the end of his life as he prepared for death
in a monastery in Constantinople, 1,300 years ago.

'In my opinion, the meadows in Spring present a particularly
delightful prospect,' he wrote. 'One part of this meadow blushes with
roses; in other places lilies predominate; in another violets blaze out,
resembling the Imperial purple. Think of this present work in the
same way, Sophronius, my sacred and faithful child. For from among
the holy men, monks and hermits of the Empire, I have plucked the
finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a crown
which I now offer to you, most faithful child; and through you to
the world at large...'

Turning up the lamp, I opened a fresh page.

In the spring of the year 578 A.D., had you been sitting on a bluff
of rock overlooking Bethlehem, you might have been able to see
two figures setting off, staves in hand, from the gates of the great
desert monastery of St Theodosius. The two—a old grey-bearded
monk accompanied by an upright, perhaps slightly stern, and
certainly much younger companion—would have headed off
south-east through the wastes of Judaea, towards the fabulously
rich port-metropolis of Alexandria.

It was the start of an extraordinary journey that would take
John Moschos and his pupil, Sophronius the Sophist, in an arc
across the entire Eastern Byzantine world. Their aim was to collect
the wisdom of the desert fathers, the sages and mystics of the Byzantine East, before their fragile world – already clearly in advanced decay – finally shattered and disappeared. The result was the volume in front of me now. If today in the West it is a fairly obscure text, a thousand years ago it was renowned as one of the most popular books in all the great literature of Byzantium.

Byzantine caravanserais were rough places, and the provincial Greek aristocracy did not enjoy entertaining: as the Byzantine writer Cecaumenus put it, 'Houseparties are a mistake, for guests merely criticise your housekeeping and attempt to seduce your wife.' So everywhere they went, the two travellers stayed in monasteries, caves and remote hermitages, dining frugally with the monks and ascetics. In each place, Moschos seems to have jotted down accounts that he had heard of the sayings of the fathers, and other anecdotes and miracle stories.

Moschos was taking to an extreme the old Orthodox tradition of the wandering monk. In the West, at least since St Benedict introduced the vow of stability in the early sixth century, monks have tended to be static, immured in their cells; as the saying went, 'A monk out of his cell is like a fish out of water.' But in the Eastern Churches, as in Hinduism and Buddhism, there has always been a tradition of monks being able to wander from guru to guru, from spiritual father to spiritual father, garnering the wisdom and advice of each, just as the Indian sadhus still do. Even today, modern Greek Orthodox monks take no vow of stability. If after a period of time in a monastery they decide they want to sit at the feet of another teacher in a different monastery, possibly in a completely different part of Greece (or indeed in Sinai or the Holy Land), then they are free to do so.

The Spiritual Meadow was a collection of the most memorable sayings, anecdotes and holy stories that Moschos gathered on his travels, and was written as part of a long tradition of such apophthegmata, or Sayings of the Fathers. However, Moschos’s writings are infinitely more evocative, graphic and humorous than those of any of his rivals or contemporaries, and almost alone of the surviving examples of the genre, they can still be read with genuine pleasure.

For as well as carrying a still potent spiritual message, on another level the book can be enjoyed today simply as a fascinating travel book. Moschos did what the modern travel writer still does: he wandered the world in search of strange stories and remarkable travellers’ tales. Indeed his book can legitimately be read as the great masterpiece of Byzantine travel writing. For not only was Moschos a vivid and amusing writer, he also had an extraordinary tale to tell.

Reading between the lines of John Moschos’s memoirs, it is clear that he and his friend were travelling in dangerous times. Following the collapse of Justinian’s great attempt at reviving the Empire, Byzantium was under assault: from the west by Avars, Slavs, Goths and Lombards; from the east by a crescendo of raids by desert nomads and the legions of Sassanian Persia. The great cities of the East Mediterranean were in fast decay: in Antioch, huts full of refugees were springing up in the middle of the wide Roman avenues which had once buzzed with trade and industry. The great Mediterranean ports – Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Seleucia – were becoming idle; many were reverting to little more than fishing villages.

As the physical world fell into decay, thousands left their families, intent, like Moschos and Sophronius, on becoming monks and hermits in the desert. Yet even in the great monasteries there was no safety: frequently the two travellers arrived at a destination to find that the abbey where they intended to spend the night had been torched by raiders, and the monks massacred or led off in great stumbling caravans to the slave markets of Arabia. It was not a picture of total holocaust: in those isolated areas of the Empire unaffected by the-Persian wars, the monastic scriptoria and workshops were hard at work producing some of the most beautiful Byzantine manuscripts, ivories and icons ever designed. But these oases of monastic calm were exceptions. John Moschos’s writings make clear the horrifying, almost apocalyptic, nature of the destruction he witnessed around him.

In 614 A.D. the travellers’ own home monastery of St Theodosius was burned to the ground by the marauding Persian army, and all their brethren – hundreds of unarmed monks –
were put to the sword. Shortly afterwards Jerusalem fell and those
who survived the massacre – including the city’s Patriarch – were
led off as slaves to the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon. From then
on John and Sophronius continued on the road as much refugees
as travellers. They took shelter in Alexandria, and when the Per-
sians massed outside the city walls, the pair managed to get onto
the last galley out of the beleaguered city.

The following year, the two pilgrims finally reached the shelter
of the great walls of Constantinople. There, just before exhaustion
brought about his death, Moschos completed his travel memoirs.
The Spiritual Meadow received an ecstatic reception across the
Empire. Within a generation or two it had been translated into
Latin, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, and a variety of Slavonic lan-
guages; to this day many of its anecdotes are common currency
among monks and peasants across the Orthodox world.

Most surviving Byzantine texts from the period have a curiously
opaque quality: we read either of the shifting shadows of a hundred
upstart emperors, rising suddenly through palace coups and dis-
appearing equally rapidly via the assassin’s dagger; or else of saints
so saintly as to be virtually beyond comprehension. Nor, for all
its often hypnotic beauty, does the surviving corpus of Byzantine
art much help in visualising the world that gave it birth. There
are the great mosaics at Ravenna with their celebrated portraits of
Justinian and Theodora accompanied by their retinues of eunuchs and admirals, generals and bishops, courtiers and syc-
ophants; the same intrigue-ridden court familiar from the written
sources. But away from these two isolated Ravenna panels, Byzan-
tine art is strictly non-secular, strictly transcendent. Across the
broken apses and shattered naves of a hundred ruined Byzantine
churches, the same smooth, cold, neo-classical faces of the saints
and apostles stare down like a gallery of deaf mutes; and through
this thundering silence the everyday reality of life in the Byzantine
provinces remains persistently difficult to visualise. The sacred
and aristocratic nature of Byzantine art means that we have very
little idea of what the early Byzantine peasant or shopkeeper looked
like; we have even less idea of what he thought, what he longed
for, what he loved or what he hated.

Yet through the pages of The Spiritual Meadow one can come
closer to the ordinary Byzantine than is possible through virtually
any other single source. Although it often seems a fairly bizarre
book – an unlikely fricassee of anecdote, piety and strange miracles
– as a historical text it adds up to the most rich and detailed
portrait that survives of the Byzantine Levant immediately before
the advent of Islam. Through its pages forgotten monasteries rise
suddenly from the sand; even a great metropolis such as Byzantine
Alexandria – from which not one building, indeed barely one
wall, has survived – is brought back to life, peopled by credible
characters, villains and eccentrics.

Most intriguing of all are the tales which tell of the more humble
folk, the sort who normally slip through the net cast by the his-
torian. One typical story tells of a muleteer from Rome whose
donkeys trample and kill a small child at an inn. He takes ship
to the Holy Land and flees to the desert, where he is overcome
by remorse and tries to kill himself. Only when a lion refuses to
savage him does he reconcile himself to the possibility of divine
forgiveness. We meet a repentant Alexandrian grave-robber who
claims he was seized by a corpse whose shroud he had tried to
steal (he was not released until he promised to take up a more
respectable profession); a novice who, overcome with desire, pays
a visit to the brothel in Jericho (he is quickly struck down by
leprosy); a merchant’s wife from Ascalon who is forced to pro-
stute herself after her husband’s ship goes down.

Some of the figures are oddly familiar. One story revolves
around a Byzantine version of Fr. Christophoros, an animal-loving
monk from a suburban monastery outside Alexandria who not
only feeds the monastery’s dogs, but also gives flour to the ants
and puts damp biscuits on the roof for the birds. Other characters
are rather more exotic than anything you are likely to find
today, such as the monk Adolas who ‘confined himself inside a
hollow plane tree’ in Thessaloniki, cutting ‘a little window in the
bark through which he could talk with people who came to see
him’.

Moschos is an unpredictable narrator. He was a champion of
Orthodoxy at a time when it was challenged by a dazzling variety
of heterodox currents circulating through the caravan cities of
the East, and Monophysites, Jews, Manicheans, Zoroastrians and
Gnostics all receive short shrift from a man whose tolerance of
the beliefs of others was clearly every bit as limited as that of his
modern successors on Mount Athos. Yet there is also a carefree
scholar-gypsy feel to The Spiritual Meadow, and an endearing
lightness of touch and gentle sense of humour evident in its stories.
One of my favourite tales concerns a novice from Antinoe in
Upper Egypt 'who was very careless with his own soul'. When the
novice dies, his teacher is worried that he might have been sent
to Hell for his sins, so he prays that it be revealed what has
happened to his pupil's soul. Eventually the teacher goes into a
trance, and sees a river of fire with the novice submerged in it up
to his neck. The teacher is horrified, but the novice turns to him,
saying: 'I thank God, oh my teacher, that there is relief for my
head. Thanks to your prayers, I am standing on the head of a
bishop.'

Of course to the modern eye much of the world described in
The Spiritual Meadow is not just curious: its beliefs and values are
so strange as to be virtually incomprehensible. It was a world
where eunuchs led the imperial armies into battle; where groups
of monks were known tolynch and murder pagan ladies as they
passed in their litters through the fashionable bazaars of Alexan-
dria; where ragged, half-naked stylites raved atop their pillars; and
where dendrites took literally Christ's instruction to imitate the
birds of the air, living in trees and building little nests for them-

But what is perhaps most surprising about the Eastern Medi-
erranean as it emerges from the pages of Moschos is the fact that
it is Christian at all. In the popular imagination, the Levant passes
from a classical past to an Islamic present with hardly a break. It
is easy to forget that for over three hundred years — from the age
of Constantine in the early fourth century to the rise of Islam in
the early seventh century — the Eastern Mediterranean world was
almost entirely Christian. Indeed, at a time when Christianity had
barely taken root in Britain, when Angles and Saxons were still
sacrificing to Thor and Woden on the banks of the Thames and
in the west the last Christian Britons were fighting a rearguard
action under a leader who may have been called Arthur, the Levant
was the heartland of Christianity and the centre of Christian civil-
isation. The monasteries of Byzantium were fortresses whose lib-
raries and scriptoria preserved classical learning, philosophy and
medicine against the encroaching hordes of raiders and nomads.
Moreover, for all the decay, the Levant was still the richest, most
populous and most highly educated part of the Mediterranean
world: three quarters of the revenue of the Byzantine exchequer
came from the eastern provinces. They contained the main centres
of industry and within living memory their ships and caravans
had conducted a hugely profitable trade with the Orient; even in
the chaos of the late sixth century that trade had still not entirely
disappeared. There was nothing in the West to compare with this
high Eastern Byzantine culture. In the late sixth century, Byzan-
tium was still the focus of the entire Eurasian land mass.

It was not to remain so for long. John Moschos was an almost
exact contemporary of Mohammed. When Moschos died in 619,
the Empire was still ruled, however shakily, from the Veneto to
Southern Egypt. But a few years later, Moschos's young com-
panion Sophronius saw the eastern half of the Byzantine dominion
shatter and fragment. In his old age Sophronius was appointed
Patriarch of Jerusalem, and it was left to him to defend the Holy
City against the first army of Islam as it swept up from Arabia,
conquering all before it.

Fresh from the desert, the Arabs were not very adept at siege-
craft: when stalled outside Damascus, the great army of the
Prophet had to borrow a ladder from a nearby monastery to get
over the walls. But with the Imperial legions already ambushed
while crossing the River Yarmuck, there was no prospect of relief
for Jerusalem. After a siege lasting twelve months Sophronius
prepared to surrender, with only one condition: he would hand
Jerusalem over to no general. The Holy City would surrender only
to the Caliph himself.

On a February day in the year 638 A.D., the Caliph Omar
entered Jerusalem, riding upon a white camel. The Caliph wore
the filthy robes in which he had conducted his campaign; but the
Patriarch was magnificently dressed in his robes of Imperial silk. Sophronius handed over the keys of the city and through his tears was heard to murmur: 'Behold the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.'

He died, heartbroken, a few months later. He was buried in the ruins of the Monastery of St Theodosius; in the next niche lay the body of his friend, teacher and travelling companion John Moschos. Sophronius had faithfully honoured his friend's last wish: that his embalmed corpse be carried from Constantinople to be buried in what was left of his own home monastery, at the edge of the deserts of the Holy Land.

I first read about John Moschos in Sir Steven Runciman's great three-volume History of the Crusades. Intrigued by a passing reference to The Spiritual Meadow, I wrote to Runciman and received — by return of post — a reply in Edwardian copperplate asking me over to the historian's medieval tower house in the Scottish Borders. One cold April day I drove under grey cloudbanks, through the barren sheep tracts of Annandale and Eskdale, to take up the invitation.

Runciman has always been a most undonnish don: he has been besieged by Manchu warlords in the city of Tianjin, but escaped to play a piano duet with the Emperor of China; he has lectured Ataturk on Byzantium and been made a Grand Orator of the Great Church of Constantinople; he has smoked a hookah with the Celebi Efendi of the Whirling Dervishes and, by reading their tarot cards, correctly predicted the death of King George II of the Hellenes and Fuad, King of Egypt.

He is well into his nineties: a tall, thin, frail old man, still very poised and intellectually alert, but now physically weak. He has heavy-lidded eyes and a slow, gravelly voice, with a hint of an old fashioned Cambridge drawl. During lunch, Runciman talked of the Levant as he knew it in his youth: of Istanbul only a month after the last Ottoman was expelled from the Topkapi, when there were camels in the streets, when there were still hundreds of thousands of Greeks in Anatolia, and the Turks still wore the red tarboosh; of the Lebanon, 'the only place I've seen books bound in human skin'; of the monasteries of Palestine before the Zionists expelled half the Palestinians and began to turn the country into an American suburb; of Egypt when Alexandria was still the most cosmopolitan city east of Milan.

Later, over coffee, I broached the subject of John Moschos and his travels. What had attracted me to The Spiritual Meadow in the first place was the idea that Moschos and Sophronius were witnessing the first act in a process whose dénouement was taking place only now: that that first onslaught on the Christian East observed by the two monks was now being completed by Christianity's devastating decline in the land of its birth. The ever-accelerating exodus of the last Christians from the Middle East today meant that The Spiritual Meadow could be read less as a dead history book than as the prologue to an unfolding tragedy whose final chapter is still being written.

Islam has traditionally been tolerant of religious minorities: to see this, one has only to contrast the relatively privileged treatment of Christians under Muslim rule with the terrible fate of Christendom's one totally distinct religious minority, the unfortunate European Jews. Nevertheless that Islamic tradition of tolerance is today wearing distinctly thin. After centuries of generally peaceful co-existence with their Muslim neighbours, things are suddenly becoming difficult for the last Christians of the Middle East. Almost everywhere in the Levant, for a variety of reasons — partly because of economic pressure, but more often due to discrimination and in some cases outright persecution — the Christians are leaving. Today they are a small minority of fourteen million struggling to keep afloat amid 180 million non-Christians, with their numbers shrinking annually through emigration. In the last twenty years at least two million have left the Middle East to make new lives for themselves in Europe, Australia and America.

In Istanbul the last descendants of the Byzantines are now leaving what was once the capital city of Christendom. In the east of Turkey, the Syrian Orthodox Church is virtually extinct, its ancient
monasteries either empty or in the process of being evacuated. Those who have made it out to the West complain of protection racket, land seizures and frequent murders. In Lebanon, the Maronites have now effectively lost the long civil war, and their stranglehold on political power has finally been broken. Most Maronites today live abroad, in exile. The same is true of the Palestinian Christians a little to the south: nearly half a century after the creation of the State of Israel, fewer Palestinian Christians now remain in Palestine than live outside it. According to a Palestinian Christian writer I talked to in London, things have got so bad that the remaining Christians in Jerusalem could be flown out in just nine jumbo jets; indeed there are now said to be more Jerusalem-born Christians living in Sydney than in Jerusalem itself.

In Egypt, the Copts are also profoundly troubled and apprehensive: already facing a certain amount of discrimination under the current regime, they are well aware that things are likely to get much worse if President Mubarak falls and an Islamic revolution brings the fundamentalists to power.

Everywhere, in short, the living successors of those Christian merchants, monks and bishops visited by John Moschos now find themselves under intense pressure. Yet when I began to research into Moschos's travels, I discovered that despite this great Christian exodus, a surprising number of the monasteries visited by Moschos and Sophronius still – just – survived.

The monasteries on Mount Athos and in Coptic Egypt are apparently relatively healthy. Elsewhere, in south-east Turkey, Lebanon and Palestine, these timeless islands of Byzantium, with their bells and black robes and candle-lit processions, are said to be occupied by an ever-diminishing population of elderly monks whose heavily-whiskered faces mirror those of the frescoed saints on the monastery walls. The monks' vestments remain unchanged since Byzantine times; the same icons are still painted according to the same medieval iconographic rules. Even the superstitions have endured unaltered: relics of the True Cross and the Virgin's Tears are still venerated; demons and devils are still said to lie in wait outside every monastery wall. In the early fifth century Bishop Parthenius of Lampsacus reported that he had been attacked by Satan in the form of a black dog; on my last visit I was told an almost identical story by an old Greek monk in the Holy Sepulchre. A couple of years ago there was great excitement in a Coptic quarter of Cairo, when the Virgin was clearly seen floating over the towers of the Church of St Damiana.

Driving back home from Runciman, I knew what I wanted to do: to spend six months circling the Levant, following roughly in John Moschos's footsteps. Starting in Athos and working my way through to the Coptic monasteries of Upper Egypt, I wanted to do what no future generation of travellers would be able to do: to see wherever possible what Moschos and Sophronius had seen, to sleep in the same monasteries, to pray under the same frescoes and mosaics, to discover what was left, and to witness what was in effect the last ebbing twilight of Byzantium.

The wooden simandron has just begun to call from the church; matins will begin in ten minutes.

Soon it will be dawn. The first glimmer of light has begun to light up the silhouette of the Holy Mountain. The paraffin in my lamp is exhausted, and so am I. The day after tomorrow I must leave Athos; ahead lies four or five days' travel across Thrace to Constantinople, the great Byzantine capital where John Moschos completed his Spiritual Meadow.

The simandron is being rung for the second time. I must shut this book and go down to the church to join the monks at prayer.
THE MONASTERY OF MAR SABA, ISRAELI-occupied
WEST BANK, 24 OCTOBER 1994

Again I inhabit a bare cell with white walls and a blue dado. Again, through the window, I hear the quiet rumour of hushed monkish talk, the occasional peal of bells, the purposeful rustle of habits. On the balcony next to mine a black-robed figure with a short beard, long hair and a tall cylindrical hat – Fr. Gregori, the monastery cook – is watering his pots of basil and tending his orange trees. Nearby a myna bird chatters in a cage. It could be Athos, and indeed an old oleograph of the Holy Mountain is framed on the wall of a corridor outside; but one glance at the bare rock wall of the cliff-face opposite my cell places this monastery firmly in the wilderness of Judaea, far from the cooling waters of the Aegean.

This is the desert where John Moschos took his vows and where he spent most of his monastic life, and tales of the monks of these bare hills fill most of the pages of The Spiritual Meadow. Having read so much about these Judaean desert fathers it is strange finally to see the austere landscape that forms the background to their exploits. It is stranger still to find many of their superstitions, fears and prejudices alive in the conversation of the monks who still inhabit this, the last of the ancient monasteries of the Holy Land to survive as a functioning community. But the stories of devils and demons, visions and miracles which sometimes seemed
ludicrously outlandish when I first read them under a grey London sky sounded quite plausible last night, when told in the starlight looking out onto a cliff-face honeycombed with the cells of long-dead hermits and holy men.

'Look at it!' said Fr. Theophanes, the monastery's tall, gaunt Guest Master, waving a hand at the dark rocky gorge beneath us. 'There it is: the Valley of Doom. The Valley of Dreadful Judgement.'

Below us the monastic buildings of Mar Saba fell away in a ripple of chapels, cells and oratories, each successive layer hanging like a wasps' nest from a ledge on the rockface. Opposite, the top of the cliff wall had turned an almost unnatural shade of red in the last of the evening light. The rock was pitted with caves, each formerly the cell of a Byzantine monk. All were now deserted.

'It's very beautiful,' I said.

'Beautiful?' said Fr. Theophanes, rustling his robes in horror. 'Beautiful? See down there at the bottom? The river? Nowadays it's just the sewage from Jerusalem. But on Judgement Day that's where the River of Blood is going to flow. It's going to be full of Freemasons, whores and heretics: Protestants, Schismatics, Jews, Catholics ... More ouzo?'

'Please.'

The monk paused to pour another thimbleful of spirit into a small glass. When I had gulped it down, he continued with his Apocalypse. 'At the head of the damned will be a troop composed of all the Popes of Rome, followed by their deputies, the Vice-Presidents of the Freemasons ...'

'You're saying the Pope is a Freemason?'

'A Freemason? He is the President of the Freemasons. Everyone knows this. Each morning he worships the Devil in the form of a naked woman with the head of a goat.'

'Actually, I'm a Catholic.'

'Then,' said Theophanes, 'unless you convert to Orthodox, you too will follow your Pope down that valley, through the scorching fire. We will watch you from this balcony,' he added, 'but of course it will then be too late to save you.'

I smiled, but Fr. Theophanes was in full swing and clearly in no mood for joking. 'No one can truly know what that day will be like.' He shook his head gravely. 'But some of our Orthodox fathers have had visions. Fire — fire that will never end, terrible, terrible fire — will come from the throne of Christ, just like it does on the icons. The saints — those who are to be saved, in other words the Orthodox Church — will fly in the air to meet Christ. But sinners and all non-Orthodox will be separated from the Elect. The damned will be pushed and prodded by devils down through the fire, down from the Valley of Josephat, past here — in fact exactly the route those Israeli hikers took today — down, down to the Mouth of Hell.'

'Is that nearby?'

'Certainly,' said Theophanes, stroking his beard. 'The Mouth of Hell will open up near the Dead Sea.'

'That is in the Bible?'

'Of course,' said Theophanes. 'Everything I am telling you is true.'

---

I had arrived at the Great Lavra of Mar Saba earlier that afternoon. From Beirut the distance is less than three hundred miles, but this being the Middle East it took a six-hundred-mile detour via Damascus and Amman — three and half days' non-stop travel — to get here. I finally crossed the Jordan into Palestine at noon yesterday.

The West Bank, and with it East Jerusalem, were captured by Israel from the Jordanians following Israel's great victory in the 1967 Six Day War. To create a buffer zone between the Jewish state and its hostile Arab neighbours East Jerusalem was annexed, while the West Bank was placed under Israeli military occupation. In defiance of international law both areas have since been subject to a campaign of colonisation: around 150 exclusively Jewish settlements have been established in the conquered territory, between them containing some 280,000 Israeli settlers (including the 130,000 settlers living in East Jerusalem). The military authorities
have also appropriated 80 per cent of the West Bank's water, most of which is now piped south to Israel.

The Palestinian intifada made this great tract of land familiar territory, images of which were broadcast nightly into the world’s sitting rooms, the backdrop to countless scenes of stone-throwing Palestinians confronting the Israeli army. Despite the stumbling peace process and the handing over of some Arab towns to Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, the area, like Bosnia or Rwanda, still seems inexorably linked to violence, refugee camps and army patrols.

What is therefore so surprising when you first leave the small Jericho oasis and your taxi climbs through this great expanse of rolling hill country, past the Bedouin encampments with their brindling sheep and chickens, is the astonishing, unexpected beauty of the West Bank’s dry, stony hills. Many of the valleys appear at first to be empty; dry hills whose pale rocks are scattered like lumps of feta cheese amongst the scrub-gorse. But as you wind your way down the slopes, under the weak light of a winter sky, forms begin to take shape: the stone roof of a stable hidden by a small cypress grove, the domes of an abandoned caravanserai, the minaret of a ruined mosque, the gently rolling slopes topped by newly harvested olive groves. It is a familiar Mediterranean picture; the same carefully pollarded olive slopes form the backdrop to a hundred Tuscan paintings, and nearly a millennium before that, to the landscape mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

The ancient Palestinian villages that you pass are built of honey-coloured limestone which changes tone according to the colour of the sky. Shepherd boys lead their flocks out into the valleys; old men in full Arab jellaba and keffiyeh suck hubble-bubbles in the shade of vine trellising; from cafes you can smell the charcoal scent of cooking kebabs and the hot, sweet odour of Turkish coffee. At first sight, the modern West Bank is still much closer to David Roberts's prints of mid-nineteenth-century Palestine than to the harrowing television images of refugees and razor wire.

Yet beautiful as it is, the signs of conflict are still there. In some valley bottoms where there should be cornfields, there are UN camps, home to those Palestinians expelled from their ancestral homes at the birth of Israel in 1948: huge, shockingly dirty shanty towns surrounded by army watchtowers and floodlights. Above them squat newly built Israeli settlements, modern suburban housing estates made up of ranks of detached whitewashed bungalows, with long lines of solar panels glinting on their roofs. Two different peoples, separated by thick tangles of razor wire and a small matter of legal status: the settlers have guns, vote in elections, enjoy Israeli civil justice and can join the army; the Palestinians under Israeli occupation are forbidden to own weapons of any sort, cannot vote in Israeli elections and are subject to the arbitrary and dismissive verdicts of military courts.

The largest of the Israeli settlements is Ma'ale Adumim, a ring of concrete blockhouses, cranes and half-completed apartment blocks, recently built over the site once occupied by the great Byzantine monastery of St Martyrius. It is currently home to thirty thousand Israelis – mostly new emigrants from Russia, Canada and the United States – yet despite the peace process the Israelis have announced plans to double the town’s population over the next decade. Around the settlement's perimeter stretches an electrified razor-wire fence. Above it cluster blocks of identical eggbox houses: Milton Keynes transported into the landscape of a medieval Italian fresco.

Just beyond Ma'ale Adumim the road splits. The main branch heads on to Jerusalem. The smaller branch – potholed and neglected – winds off to the south. We bumped along this track for a few miles before arriving at a ledge overlooking the cliffs of the Valley of Kidron, a deep, arid canyon of wind-eroded chalk-like rock. At the top of the far side of this ravine stood a domed Greek Orthodox church, enclosed by a towering wall. Before I did anything else in Palestine – and certainly before I headed on to Mar Saba for the night – I knew I had first to make a pilgrimage to this shrine.

The driver parked the car in front of the gatehouse and I pulled at the bell rope; there was a distant ringing, but no one appeared. I rang the bell a second time, and soon afterwards the wimpled head of a nun peered suspiciously down over the parapet and
asked in Greek what I wanted. I explained why I had come. After a few minutes there was a rattling of bolts and the great black gate swung open.

At the far side of the courtyard stood a gleaming new basilica with an octagonal dome, a bell tower and a red-tiled roof; around its edge ran the arcade of a cloister. The nun led me to a small cupola in the centre of the courtyard, and taking a huge bunch of keys from her pocket, unlocked a door. Then she lifted a storm lantern from a niche, lit it and led me down a flight of ancient stairs. From the dark below seeped a dank smell of musty air tinct with the sweet scent of burning oil-lamps.

As we sank deeper underground, masonry gave way to the living rock of a cave wall, and we entered a wide, echoing underground cavern. A pair of recesses at the far side of the cave were illuminated by the dim, flickering light of a cluster of lamps placed in front of two gilt icons, each depicting a heavily bearded Byzantine saint. Another group of lamps flickered at the bottom of the stairs, under an ancient icon of the Magi. To one side of it stood a huge pile of skulls.

'This was the cave where the three wise men hid from King Herod,' whispered the nun, holding the storm lantern aloft. 'St Theodosius saw the cave in a vision and founded his monastery in this place to honour the Magi.'

'And the skulls?'

'They belong to the monks that were slaughtered by the Persians when they burned the abbey.'

'When did that happen?'

'Not so long ago,' she said. 'Around 614 A.D.'

The nun held the storm lantern above the charnel so that the light picked out the sword-gashes cleaving the crania of the top-most skulls.

'What you have come to see lies over there,' she said, pointing at the lamplit recesses on the far side of the cave.

I walked over towards the lamps. As I drew nearer I could see that they rested on a pair of Byzantine grave-slabs, both of which had been propped up some time in the last century by a pair of small neo-classical pillars. On both the tomb-slabs had been carved in shallow relief an intricate design of equal-armed Byzantine crosses, some set in diamonds, others in circles. Between the crosses were carved inscriptions in clear Byzantine Greek. That on the left read 'Sophroneus'; that on the right bore the name of John Moschos.

'St John Moschos died in Constantinople,' said the nun, 'but his dying wish was that he should be brought back here to the Lavra of St Theodosius. He regarded this as his home: this was where he was first tonsured, and where he spent most of his life. But the Holy Land was still occupied by the Persians and it was not until much later that St Sophroneus was able to fulfil his promise to bring back John Moschos's body and to rebuild the monastery.'

'And the monks?'

'Before the slaughter there were seven hundred elders here. It was the most celebrated monastery in the Holy Land. There was a hospital for lepers and a rest house for pilgrims; also an inner monastery for those driven insane by the rigours of their asceticism. There were four separate churches. Monks came here from as far away as Cappadocia and Armenia... But after the Persians the monastery never recovered. It has never had as many monks ever again.'

'And now? How many of there are you today?'

'What do you mean? There is only me. I am the last. A priest is supposed to come from Jerusalem once a week to celebrate the liturgy, but he is old and sometimes he forgets.'

The nun bent forward and kissed the icon of Moschos. 'I will leave you,' she said. 'If you have come all the way to see the grave of St John Moschos you will want to be alone with him. Bring the lantern with you when you have finished.'

Holding the lamp aloft, I looked around the crypt and paused for a second before the macabre pile of skulls. I had read so much about the monks of St Theodosius in the pages of The Spiritual Meadow that I felt I must know some of the men who had been slaughtered by the Persians, men whose anonymous bleached bones now lay piled in front of me. They were characters like Brother George the Cappadocian, 'who was pasturing swine in
Phasaelis when two lions came to seize a pig; rather than running off ‘he seized a staff and chased them as far as holy Jordan’. Then there was Moschos’s friend Patrick, ‘the native of Sebastea in Armenia, who was of very great age, claiming to be one hundred and thirteen’. He had once been an abbot, but ‘being very humble and much given to silence’ had relinquished his position and ‘placed himself under obedience, saying that it was only for great men to shepherd the spiritual sheep’. What had been the fate, I wondered, of another of Moschos’s companions, Brother Christopher the Roman? Every night he deprived himself of sleep, performing a hundred prostrations on each of the steps that led down into the cave-crypt, never stopping until the bell rang for matins. I could certainly guess what happened to Brother Julian the Arab. He had made the pilgrimage to the pillar of St Symeon Stylites the Younger on the Mons Mirabilis outside Antioch, several weeks’ journey from Judaea; but being completely blind, of all the brethren he must have been the least likely to have escaped the massacre.

Indeed, of the monks of St Theodosius mentioned by Moschos, only two definitely did avoid the Persians’ swords. These were ‘two brothers [at the monastery] who had sworn an oath that they would never be separated from each other, either in life or death. While they were in the community, one of the brothers was attacked by a yearning to possess a woman. Unable to withstand this yearning, he said to his brother: “Release me brother, for I am driven by desire and I want to go back into the world.” But the brother did not want to release him from his vow, so he went to the city with him. The first brother went into a brothel whilst the other stood outside, throwing dust from the ground onto his own head. When his brother who had gone into the bordello came out, having done the deed, the other said to him, “My brother, what have you gained by this sin? Let us go back to our cloister.” But the first replied, “I cannot go back into the wilderness again. You go. I am staying in the world.”’

Unable to change his mind, the second brother stayed with him, and the pair found work on a construction site on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where a new monastery was being built. The brother who visited the brothel would take both their wages and go off to the city each weekend where he would squander their earnings in riotous living. But the other brother never complained. Instead he would fast all day long, performing his work in profound silence, not speaking to anybody.’ The other workmen on the building site soon realised that something odd was going on and eventually told the Abbot, Abba Abraham. The Abbot soon winkled out the whole story.

‘It is because of my brother,’ said the good monk, ‘that I put up with all this, in the hope that God will look on my affliction and save my friend.” When the godly Abraham heard this, he replied: “The Lord has granted you the soul of your brother too.” He dismissed the good brother, and behold! Outside the Abbot’s cell, there was his fallen brother, crying: “My brother, take me into the wilderness so I can be saved!”’ He immediately took him and went to a cave near the holy Jordan where he walled him up. After a little while, the sinful brother, having made great spiritual progress in things that are God’s, departed this life. The other brother, still faithful to his oath, remained in the cave, and eventually he too died there.

I stood before the grave of John Moschos, the man whose writings had brought me on this journey, and in whose footsteps I was travelling. On top of the slab rested a modern icon of the man, shown old and grey with a scroll in one hand and a quill in the other. So, I thought, this was where he started off, and where, after all his travels through the width and breadth of the Byzantine Levant, he ended up.

Prompted by the example of the nun, despite having half dropped the habit, I began to pray there, and the prayers came with surprising ease. I prayed for the people who had helped me on the journey, the monks who had showed me the manuscript on Mount Athos, the frightened Suriani of Mar Gabriel, the Armenians of Aleppo and the Palestinian Christians in the camp at Mar Elias. And then I did what I suppose I had come to do: I sought the blessing of John Moschos for the rest of the trip, and particularly asked for his protection in the badlands of Upper Egypt, the most dangerous part of the journey.
Then I rose, climbed the stairs, and emerged blinking into the bright light of the Judaean midday.

The Monastery of Mar Saba lies ten miles from that of St Theodosius, a little to the north of the Dead Sea. Around St Theodosius the soil is still grudgingly fertile, and the olive trees stand out against the terraces cut into the hard white hillsides. But as you drive east, the cultivation recedes. The soil becomes thinner, the valleys deeper, and the villages poorer. The taxi driver warned me that we were entering Hamas territory, and hung a Palestinian keffiyeh over half of the windscreen to make sure we would not be mistaken for Israeli settlers and stoned by the local shabab.

Passing the last village, we entered the desert; the locus horrendae et vastae solitudinis of the Bible. Below us the barren shale hills fell away towards the lowest point on earth, the Dead Sea, a quivering drop of mercury in the far distance. Straight ahead, in the distance a pair of small rectangular Byzantine watchtowers rose vertically against the lip of a deep wadi. In the forty miles of landscape visible from the hilltop, those two towers were the only buildings in sight.

It was only when we passed underneath the machicolation of the nearest tower that we caught our first glimpse of the great monastery that lay hidden in the lee of the sheer cliff-face below. It was the most extraordinary sight. The two towers are linked by a jagged wall which sweeps audaciously down in a near-vertical plunge to enclose the monastery’s great spread of turquoise domes and cupolas, balconies and cave-cells, staircases and platforms, all propped up on narrow artificial ledges by great ranks of heavy, stepped buttresses. Despite its massive rocky solidity, the monastery’s implausible position on a cliff-face in the midst of the wilderness somehow gives the whole place a fantastic, almost visionary appearance, like one of those castles in children’s fairy tales capable of vanishing in the blink of an eye.

At the time of John Moschos, the wastes of Judaea had become so densely filled with monks and monasteries that, according to one chronicler, ‘the desert had become a city’. Yet of the 150 monasteries founded during the Byzantine rule, only six are still lived in, and of those only one, Mar Saba, still supports enough monks to really qualify as a living monastery. It has been occupied continuously since its foundation in the late fifth century: since the two-week hiatus following the massacre of the monks by the Persians in 614 A.D. – the same raid that devastated St Theodosius – divine office has been sung in the rock chapel of St Sabas every morning for the last 1,380 years. As in St Theodosius, the skulls of the hundreds of monks killed by the Persians, along with those subsequently murdered by marauding Bedouin, have been carefully kept in the abbey church, stacked in neat rows as nonchalantly as other churches might stack their hymn books.

Mar Saba, I quickly discovered, remains the most austere of monasteries. The monks rise at two in the morning and sing the office for five hours, until dawn begins to break over the iconostasis of the abbey church. The fathers then rest until eleven, when they eat their one meal of the day: bread (baked once a week, palatable enough for three days but increasingly hard and stale thereafter), thin soup, boiled vegetables and strong feta cheese. They do not eat meat, and allow themselves fish and oil (for dressing the vegetables) only on Sundays and feast days. After their meal they retire to their caves and cells for the rest of the day, emerging only to sing vespers and compline at the appointed times.

If Mar Saba is now remarkable mainly for the terrible severity of its asceticism, it was once famous for its scholarship, and despite the monastery’s extreme isolation it was nevertheless one of the intellectual and philosophical powerhouses of Byzantium. When the Anglo-Saxon pilgrim St Willibald visited it in the early eighth century he remarked on the fact that all the monks were busy copying out manuscripts and composing hymns and poems. The monastery’s library, now kept in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Palace in Jerusalem, is almost unrivalled amongst medieval collections in the esoteric breadth of its interests and the number of
languages represented; it is also evidence of the extraordinary quality of the copying and calligraphy produced in the Mar Saba scriptorium.

Here Cyril of Scythopolis wrote his History of the Monks of Palestine, an unusually critical and intelligent work of hagiography. Mar Saba's hagiography, the work among others of Romanos the Melodist, was, according to the great Byzantine scholar Brehier, 'the most original manifestation of the poetic genius of the medieval Greeks'. Moreover it was in a cell in Mar Saba that St John Damascene wrote his great Fount of Knowledge, probably the most sophisticated and encyclopedic work of theology produced anywhere in Christendom until the time of Thomas Aquinas; indeed, Aquinas drew heavily on John's theology, and wrote that he read a few pages of John Damascene's work every day of his adult life. But the scope of the monastery's manuscript collection, and the erudition of John Damascene, is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated by one of his more unusual productions, the Romance of Barlaam and Josaph, an Indian tale of the Buddha reworked in Christian form; it was later translated from Greek into Latin and widely circulated in the West. But you would never guess any of this from talking to Mar Saba's current inhabitants.

'So, you're a writer, are you?' asked Fr. Theophanes when he brought me my supper on a tray after vespers that evening. 'I've stopped reading books myself.'

'Oh yes?'

'The Divine Liturgy contains all the writing I need. Once you've read the Word of God everything else becomes very dull.'

'They say books are like food,' pointed out Fr. Evdokimos, the Deputy Archimandrite. 'They feed your brain.'

'But Father,' said Theophanes quietly, 'monks should try to eat as little as possible.'

It was nearly dark. We were sitting out on the terrace, watching the last of the light begin to fade from the sky. As we talked, Theophanes took out a box of matches and began to light a pair of battered old paraffin storm lanterns: there is no electricity in Mar Saba.

'Look at those clouds in the east,' said Fr. Evdokimos. 'There may be rain tomorrow. What do you think, Theophanes?'

'The rains here in Palestine are not like the rains of Greece,' replied the other monk. 'There we get big rains – proper cloud-bursts.' He smiled happily at the memory. 'Ah, the rains of Greece,' he said. 'They are a reminder of the Deluge.'

'What did you do in Greece before you became a monk?' I asked Theophanes.

'I was a policeman, in Athens,' he replied, looking up from the lanterns, whose wicks he was engaged in trimming. 'I came here for the first time on a pilgrimage. As soon as I saw this monastery I recognised it as my true home. I went back to Athens, handed in my resignation and said goodbye to my mother. A week later I was back here. Since then I've never left.'

'Never?'

'I went back only once. For forty days.'

'Was that difficult?'

'My mother cried sometimes. But otherwise, no. Things change very quickly. I hardly recognised my old city. My people had suddenly become rich from your European Community. There were so many new buildings. New buildings and new crimes.'

'And you don't miss anything of your old life?'

'What is there to miss? I have everything here.'

'But this must have been quite a change from your previous work.'

'Not so different,' replied the monk. 'Now I am the policeman of my soul. Demons are very like criminals. Both are very stupid. Both are damned.'

The lanterns were alight now, and the flickering of their flames threw shadows over the terrace and across the face of Fr. Theophanes.

'You believe in demons?' I asked.

'Of course. They are in the Bible.'

'Sometimes, when we are praying, the demons make strange noises,' added Fr. Evdokimos, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, stroking his beard. 'At first I thought it was just the animals of the desert. But then I noticed the noises came most loudly
when I was praying. It is the demons trying to distract us.'

'Each demon has its own personality,' said Theophanes. 'They live in the desert and come to the cities to make men into criminals and Roman Catholics.'

'They can work miracles and make false prophecies,' said Evdokimos.

'They are worse than criminals,' said Theophanes. 'But here, within the walls of Mar Saba, we are protected.'

'What do you mean?'

'St Saba is alive here. He protects his monastery. I have experienced it myself.'

'How?'

'Three years ago on a windy night in winter I was praying in my cave. I had not lit a lamp so my cell was pitch black. As I prayed I heard footsteps coming up the corridor. It was the noise of a monk walking: I could hear the rustling of his habit. The footsteps came closer and closer and then stopped outside my room. I waited for the monk to speak, but nothing happened.

'Suddenly I heard very clearly the noise of many feet tripping down the stairs from the opposite direction. They were like madmen, jumping down the steps very quickly — loud, irregular footsteps: there were maybe nine or ten of them, all running. I thought: the Bedouin have climbed the walls and broken in and now they want to kill us all. I froze behind my door, but nothing happened. Five minutes passed. Still they didn't come in. So very slowly I opened the door and went out.

'It was a full moon that night. I could see clearly that the corridor was empty. There was silence in the monastery. I walked up to the courtyard and at that moment I saw Fr. Evdokimos's light moving from the latrines to his room. So I went up and said: 'Father — there are thieves in the monastery.' He asked: 

'You are sure?' I said I was. 'All right,' he said, 'we'll look together.' So we both took sticks and for an hour we went all around. We searched in the church, in the towers, inside the deepest caves. Nothing: the door was secure and no one had come in over the wall.'

'It was only later,' said Fr. Evdokimos, 'when we discussed the matter with the Archimandrite, that we understood what had happened. The first set of footsteps were those of St Saba. The rabble were demons coming to turn Fr. Theophanes into a Free-mason. St Saba knew what they were planning, so he stood in front of Fr. Theophanes's door to guard it. Then he chased the demons away.'

'The Devil will capture everyone if he gets the chance,' said Theophanes gravely. 'But the saints protect us. In this monastery I feel secure, although it is in the middle of the desert, with Bedouin all around us. We are protected.'

It was late, and the monks began to drift off to their cells carrying their lanterns. Theophanes showed me to mine and promised to wake me for matins at two.

All night, it seemed, bells were pealing. At one o'clock a monk began to knock the wooden *simandron* to call the brethren from their beds; he rang it again at one-thirty and at five to two. At two I was treated to a full-scale bell-ringing display: the bells in the campanile assisted by a selection of handbells, one rung very loudly at the door of my cell by Fr. Theophanes. But as soon as silence had returned I fell asleep again, and it was nearly four a.m. before I finally pulled myself out of bed. It was pitch dark and very cold. I dressed by the light of the lantern, then picked my way down through the empty stairways and corridors of Mar Saba, towards the deep swell and eddy of monastic chant.

In the church all the lamps were lit, casting a dim glow over the basilica. The monastic *kyries* echoed around the dome. Only the occasional creak of a misericord gave away the position of the singers; the monks themselves were invisible in their black robes as they roosted in the choirstalls. Every so often a breeze would swing one of the chandeliers, rotating it slightly so that shadows raced around the church, the returning flash of candlelight picking out the highlights in the frescoes: the wings of angels and the long white beards of the desert fathers. The chant eddied out across the narrow valley, echoed and amplified by the domes and cupolas. As I sat at the back, I kept thinking that the very same sound would have been heard by John Moschos over fourteen hundred years ago.
Towards six o'clock first light began to filter in, gently illuminating the Christ Pantocrator in the dome. Half an hour later, with the sun now rising over the desert, I began to be able to pick out the monks themselves, black bearded, black robed, hooded and veiled in their stalls. What I had initially taken to be a low table near the lectern turned out to be Fr. Evdokimos, kneeling, bent forward on the ground in a long prostration before the iconostasis.

One by one the monks glided from the church, each stopping to kiss images of the saints on the frescoes and icons as they went. I returned to my bed and slept until noon, when Fr. Theophanes woke me with a tray of food: a lump of strong-smelling feta cheese, some coarse monastic bread and, sitting proudly on its own on a white plate, a small round chocolate.

'It is the feast of St Methodius the Stylite,' said Fr. Theophanes gravely. 'This is for you to celebrate it with.'

I spent the afternoon in my cell reading John Moschos’s stories of the monks of the Judaeaean desert. Together, the stories in The Spiritual Meadow form a detailed picture of one of the strangest periods in the region’s history. For around two hundred years the deserts of the Holy Land were filled not only with 150 fully functioning monasteries, but also with countless cave-dwelling hermits and great herds of ‘grazers’, nomadic monks who, according to Moschos, ‘wander in the desert as if they were wild animals: like birds they fly about the hills; they forage like goats. Their daily round is inflexible, always predictable, for they feed on roots, the natural products of the earth.’

Today it seems inexplicable that so many people – many of them highly educated – from across the width of the civilised Byzantine world would give up everything and travel for thousands of miles to live a life of extreme hardship in the discomfort of the desert; yet to the Byzantine mind nothing could have been more logical. In one of Moschos’s stories, a stranger visits the renowned holy man Abba Olympios in his monastery in the heat and humid-

ity of the Jordan Valley. ‘How can you stay in this place with its burning heat and so many insects?’ he asks. The holy man gives a simple answer: ‘I put up with the insects to escape from what scripture calls “the worm that sleeps not”. Likewise, I endure the burning heat for fear of the eternal fire. The one is temporary, but of the other there is no end.’

Yet this was not the whole story. While Moschos never underestimates the hardship involved in the life of the desert fathers, he is also well aware of its joys. Indeed one of the principal themes of his writing is that by living in utter simplicity and holiness, the monks were returning to the conditions of the Garden of Eden, in harmony with both the natural world and its Creator. This is particularly true of the grazers, who like Adam ate without planting and were supposed to have command over the wild animals. ‘With Christ,’ wrote the early Christian traveller Sulpicius Severus, ‘every brute beast is wise, and every savage creature gentle.’ The close relationship of beasts and saints was not a new theme in monastic literature: the early Coptic Life of St Pachomius, for example, tells how the saint summoned crocodiles to ferry him across the Nile, rather as today one might call a cab from a taxi rank. Moreover The Paradise of the Fathers, one of Moschos’s principal literary models, contains a number of stories on this theme:

‘There was an old man who dwelt by the Jordan practising asceticism. One day he went into a cave to escape from the heat, and there he found a lion. It began to gnash its teeth at him and to roar. So the old man said to it, “Why are you annoyed? There is room here to take me and to take you also. If you do not wish to abide with me, arise and go!” And the lion did not carry him off but instead went out.’

Moschos first introduces this theme in a story told by Abba Agathonicos, the Abbot of Castellium, once the sister monastery to Mar Saba, now a ruin five miles further down the Kidron Valley:

‘One day,’ Abba Agathonicos tells Moschos, ‘I went down to Rouba to visit Abba Poemen the Grazer. When I found him, I told him the thoughts which troubled me. When night fell he left
me in a cave. It was winter and that night it got very cold indeed. I was freezing. When the elder came at dawn, he said to me: “What is the matter, child? I did not feel the cold.” This amazed me, for he was naked. I asked him of his charity to tell me how he did not feel the cold. He said: “A lion came down and lay beside me; he kept me warm.”

But perhaps the most memorable fable of the Eden-like closeness of monks and beasts in the desert is Moschos’s famous tale of St Gerasimos and the lion. Centuries later in the West, the story was mistakenly grafted onto the life of St Jerome, apparently through the ignorance of Latin-speaking pilgrims. In the Eastern Church, however, the tale has remained correctly attributed to St Gerasimos, and is still one of the most popular Orthodox saints’ tales. Moreover, it is one of the few of Moschos’s tales to have entered the repertoire of Byzantine art, and is occasionally found frescoed on Orthodox monastery walls: in Athos, for example, I saw several scenes from the story painted in the porch of the abbey church of the Monastery of Xenophonota. The story is set in St Gerasimos’s monastery, ‘about a mile from the Holy Jordan’.

‘When Sophronius and I were visiting the monastery,’ writes Moschos, ‘the residents told us that St Gerasimos was walking one day by the banks of the Holy Jordan when he met a lion, roaring mightily because of the pain in its paw. The point of a reed was deeply embedded in it, causing inflammation. When the lion saw the elder, it came to him and showed him the foot, whimpering and begging some healing from him. When the elder saw the lion in such distress, he sat down and, taking the paw, he lanced it. The point was removed and also much pus. He cleansed the wound well, bound it up and dismissed the beast. But the healed lion would not leave the elder. It followed him like a disciple wherever he went. The elder was amazed at the gentle disposition of the beast and, from then on, he began feeding it, throwing it bread and boiled vegetables.

‘Now the lavra had an ass which was used to fetch water for the needs of the elders, for they drink the water of the Holy Jordan which lies about one mile away from the monastery. The fathers used to hand the ass over to the lion, to pasture it on the banks of the Jordan. One day when the ass was being taken to pasture by the lion, it went away some distance from its keeper. Some camel-drivers on their way from Arabia found the ass and took it away to their country. Having lost the ass, the lion came back to the lavra and approached Abba Gerasimos, very downcast and dismayed. The Abba thought the lion had devoured the ass. He said to it: “Where is the ass?” The beast stood silent, very like a man. The elder said to it: “Have you eaten it? From now on [as a punishment] you will perform the same duties the ass performed.” From then on, at the elder’s command, the lion used to carry the saddlepack containing four earthenware vessels and bring water.

‘[Many months later] the camel-driver who had taken the ass came back to the Holy City with the animal loaded up with the grain he hoped to sell there. Having crossed the Holy Jordan, he suddenly found himself face to face with the lion. When he saw the beast, he left his camels and took to his heels. Recognising the ass, the lion ran to it, seized its leading rein in its mouth just as it had been trained to do, and led away not only the ass, but also the three camels. It brought them to the elder, rejoicing and roaring. The elder now realised that the lion had been falsely accused. He named the lion Jordanes and it lived with the elder in the lavra, never leaving his side for five years.

‘When Abba Gerasimos departed to the Lord and was buried by the fathers, by the providence of God the lion could not be found. A little later the lion returned, searching for the elder, roaring mightily. When Abba Sabbatios and the rest of the fathers saw it, they stroked its mane and said to it: “The elder has gone away to the Lord and left us,” yet even saying this did not succeed in silencing its cries and lamentations. Then Abba Sabbatios said to it: “Since you do not believe us, come with me and I will show you where Gerasimos lies.” He took the lion and led it to where they had buried the elder, half a mile from the church. Abba Sabbatios said to the lion: “See, this is where our friend is,” and he knelt down. When the lion saw how he prostrated himself, it began beating its head against the ground and roaring. Then it promptly [rolled over and] died, there on the elder’s grave.’
Over the days that followed I explored many of the caves, cells and chapels which honeycomb the cliffs within the great boundary walls of Mar Saba. Earthquakes and Bedouin raids have led to much rebuilding over the centuries, but if you look hard enough, many fragments of the Byzantine monastery known to John Moschos still survive. The great cave chapel 'Built by God' stands as bare and austere as it would have done in the early Byzantine period. The only obvious additions are some late-medieval icons, a line of eighteenth-century choirstalls and the four hundred stacked skulls of the monks slaughtered in the seventh-century Persian invasion. In another grotto, the Retreat of St Sabas, the floor is still covered with the fragmentary tesserae of a simple geometric mosaic dating from the late sixth century. But the most interesting chapel of all is that built around the tomb and hermitage of St John Damascene.

John Damascene is probably the most important figure ever to have taken the habit at Mar Saba. He was the grandson of the last Byzantine Governor of Damascus, a Syrian Arab Christian named Mansour ibn Sargun. Ibn Sargun was responsible for surrendering the city to the Muslim General Khalid ibn Walid in 635, just three years after the death of Mohammed. Despite the change from Christian to Islamic rule, the family remained powerful. John's father, Sergios ibn Mansour, rose to become a senior figure in the financial administration of the early Umayyad Caliphate, whose accounts, significantly enough, continued for many decades to be kept in Greek. Because of this John grew up as a close companion of the future Caliph al-Yazid, and the two youths' drinking bouts in the streets of Damascus were the subject of much horrified gossip in the new Islamic capital. In due course John assumed his father's post in the administration, and he remained throughout his life a favourite of the Caliph. This relationship made him one of the very first Arab Christians capable of acting as a bridge between Christianity and Islam, even if, like so many who attempt to bring together two diverging cultures, he eventually ended up being regarded with suspicion by both: dismissed from his administrative job after Caliph Yazid's death and falsely accused of collusion with the Byzantine Emperor, he was nevertheless regarded with great mistrust in the Byzantine capital, where he was dubbed Sarakenophron, or Saracen-Minded.

John was in an excellent position to write the first ever informed treatise on Islam by a Christian, and when he retired to Mar Saba he dedicated his declining years to writing doctrinal homilies and working on his great masterpiece, a refutation of heresies entitled The Fount of Knowledge. The book contains an extremely precise and detailed critique of Islam, which, intriguingly, John regards as a form of Christian heresy related to Arianism (after all, like Islam, Arianism denied the divinity of Christ). It never seems to have occurred to John that Islam might be a separate religion, and although he looked on it with considerable suspicion, he nevertheless applauds the way Islam converted the Arabs from idolatry, and writes with admiration of its single-minded emphasis on the unity of God.

If a theologian of the stature of John Damascene was able to regard Islam as a new – if heretical – form of Christianity, it helps to explain how Islam was able to convert so much of the Middle Eastern population in so short a time, even if Christianity remained the majority religion until the time of the Crusades. Islam was as much a product of the intellectual ferment of late antiquity as Gnosticism, Arianism and Monophysitism, and like those heresies it had its greatest success in areas disgruntled by Byzantine rule. Many Syrians expressed opposition to Byzantium and its ruthless attempt to impose its rigid imperial theology by converting en masse to the heterodox Christian doctrine of Monophysitism; later they greeted the conquering Arab armies as liberators and many converted again, this time to Islam. No doubt they regarded the Arabs’ new creed as a small step from Monophysitism; after all, the two faiths started from a similar position: that God could not become fully human without somehow compromising his divinity.

Whatever the reason for its success, Islam certainly appealed to the former Monophysites, and within a century of the Arab
conquest Syria was a mainly Muslim country. By contrast, the inhabitants of Palestine, who had done well out of Byzantine patronage of the Holy Places, never showed much interest in converting either to Monophysitism or to Islam, and Jerusalem remained a predominantly Orthodox Christian city until the Crusaders conquered it in 1999.

In Damascus’s own lifetime, however, the most influential part of The Fountain of Knowledge was not the section on Islam, but his attack on the heresy of Iconoclasm. For at the same time as John was becoming a monk, Byzantium was being engulfed by a wave of image-smashing. All the icons in the Empire were ordered to be destroyed, and their painting was henceforth banned. The reason for this may well have been the rise of Islam and the profound soul-searching which the loss of the Levant provoked in Byzantium. Many came to the conclusion that God was angry with the Byzantines for their idolatry, and thus gave the iconoclastic Muslims success in their wars.

Just as John’s public life demonstrates the astonishing political tolerance of the Umayyad Caliphate in its willingness to employ a Christian in a senior administrative role, despite almost continuous hostilities with the rest of the Christian World, so his retirement demonstrates the surprising degree of intellectual freedom it permitted. For under the Umayyads John was able to do what no Byzantine was permitted to attempt: to write and distribute a systematic defence of images, in which he provided the fundamental theological counterblast to iconoclasm. John argued that although no man has seen God at any time, nevertheless, since Christ deigned to take upon himself the human form, it was necessary to worship the human face of God in the sacred icon. Moreover he demonstrated that not only was their cult based on reason, but that it was sanctioned by ancient precedent:

Paintings are the books of the illiterate. They instruct those who look at them with a silent voice and sanctify life ... Since not everyone knows how to read, or has the leisure for reading, the Fathers of the Church saw fit that the Incarnate Christ be represented by images.

like deeds of prowess, to serve as reminders. Often when we are not thinking of the Lord’s passion, we see the image of the crucifixion, and being reminded of that salutary passion, we fall to our knees and revere ... If I have no books I go to church, pricked as by spines by my thoughts; the flower of painting makes me look, charms my eyes as does a flowering meadow and softly distils the glory of God in my soul.

This afternoon, after I had woken from a siesta, Theophanes took me to John Damascus’s old cell. We walked along the narrow staircases and winding paths that connect the different platforms of the monastery. Eventually we came to a small chapel backing onto the rock wall. ‘This chapel was where St John’s body used to lie,’ said Theophanes, ‘before your Pope’s Crusaders came and stole him.

‘Where is he now?’

‘In Venice,’ said Theophanes. ‘One of the world capitals of body-snatching and criminal Freemasonry.’

Inside the chapel hung a line of icons, and over the spot where the tomb used to lie, a fresco showing the death of St John Damascus, an icon clutched firmly to his breast. Below this a narrow wooden staircase led down into a tiny cave, its ceiling cut so low as to make standing virtually impossible.

‘St John spent thirty years in that place,’ said Theophanes. ‘Although he could not stand he hardly ever went out of it. He believed he had become too proud because of his high position in the court in Damascus, so he chose this cave in which to live as a monk. He said it was very humbling – very good for the soul – to live in such a place for many years.’

‘After an hour in there you must feel like a hunchback,’ I said.

‘Better hunched back than damned,’ replied the monk.

While Theophanes stood by the empty tomb, contemplating, no doubt, the damnation of the Papist body-snatchers, I clambered down the wooden stairs into the gloom of the saint’s cave. On either side two stone benches had been cut from the rock, while ahead stood a low shelf that had once acted as the saint’s writing
desk. Beyond was a small shrine: at the far end of the cave stretched a recess, four feet high, six feet deep, which John Damascene had used as a bed. A small Byzantine icon of the Madonna hung from the wall; otherwise the cell was almost impossibly austere.

It seemed strange that a book of such breathtaking sophistication as The Fount of Knowledge could be produced in so astonishingly crude and primitive a cave. It was certainly an unlikely setting for the writing of one of the most important tracts ever to be penned in defence of artistic freedom. What Damascene wrote in this cave was largely responsible for saving Byzantium from the ban against sacred art that has always been a part of Islam and Judaism. Without Damascene's work, Byzantine ars sacra would never again have been permitted, Greek painters might never have been able to pass on their secrets to Giotto and the Sienese, and the course of the Renaissance, if it had happened at all, would have been very different.

Sometime in the late 1960s, soon after the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, the number of monks at Mar Saba fell for the first time below twenty. At this time the Abbot of the monastery had been persuaded by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Jerusalem to cease trying to be self-sufficient. He should sell Mar Saba's ancient lands to the Israeli government, advised the Patriarch; the Orthodox hierarchy would invest the money and in return send to the monastery all the cheese and fish the monks could possibly need. The Abbot acceded to the Patriarch's wishes, and ever since then the monks' food has been brought in by van from Jerusalem once a week. The van was due on the last day of my stay at Mar Saba, and Fr. Theophanes promised to arrange that it should take me back to Jerusalem on its return journey.

There were still many Byzantine remains in the valley below the monastery that I had not seen, and I woke early on my final morning, in the hope of seeing some of the more distant cells and grottoes before I was collected later that afternoon.

I was let out by Fr. Cosmas, the gatekeeper, who slid back the heavy medieval bolts of the gate behind me. Outside I found the old path down the cliff-face into the valley. It led off from the top of the cliff beside the Byzantine tower built by the Empress Eudoxia; it had once been home to a small convent of nuns, but was now abandoned and quite deserted. I picked my way down the hairpin bends, stopping to pluck a sprig of wild rosemary from a bush and squeeze it between my thumb and forefinger. As I was standing there, a dun-coloured desert fox darted from its shelter in an abandoned cell and shot off behind a bend in the wadi.

At the bottom of the valley I forded the dark waters of the heavily polluted river. It was a steep climb up the other side of the valley, but the reward was a breathtaking view of the monastery. Indeed it was only from the opposite lip of the chasm that the full strangeness of Mar Saba's position became apparent: the great tumble of lavender domes and egg-shaped cupolas were perched precariously on the narrowest of ledges and overhangs. All this was enclosed by the near-vertical wall built soon after the Persian massacre whose massive strength had, for nearly 1,400 years, successfully protected the monks from human and natural calamities.

Looking down the steep slope on which I was standing, I saw that the rockface was pockmarked by the entrances to monks' cells, all of which were now deserted. Some of these cells were little more than burrows; others, perched on ledges above the gorge, were relatively sophisticated conical beehives, intriguingly similar in design to the cells of the Celtic monks of the same period preserved in the more remote corners of Ireland, such as the coastal island of Skellig Michael. Like their Irish counterparts, these cells were drystone, built without mortar, and rose to steeply pitched gables; like the cells of Skellig Michael they were usually bare and unornamented but for an arched prayer niche on the east wall; like them they had the same low entrance capped with a monolithic lintel.

There were also other quite distinct cell-types. Some were partially-walled-up caves. A few were elaborate multi-storeyed affairs
containing cisterns, living quarters and oratories; like the kelli of modern Athos, these were clearly designed not for single hermits but for the use of small groups of monks: perhaps a superior and four or five of his disciples, or a party from some distant and distinct ethnic group – say Georgians or Armenians – who wished to keep together. In some of the chapels and oratories attached to these more elaborate cells there were still traces of mosaic floorings and even fragments of simple geometric frescoes on the walls: floral patterns created by overlapping circles, or designs of intermeshing crosses.

Different as they were, all the monks' cells in the valley had two things in common. One was that nearly all had been attacked at some stage by treasure hunters who had dug great holes in their floors, presumably in search of buried coins or precious chalices. The other was the prayer niche, a small arched cut in the eastern wall of the cell indicating the proper direction for prayer. As I passed from cell to cell, I realised that the prayer niche must be another of those features of the early Christian world which has been lost to modern Western Christianity, yet which is still preserved in Islam. No mosque is complete without its mihrab pointing in the direction of Mecca; yet how many Western churches today contain prayer niches? Certainly all are still orientated towards the east, but the idea of a niche emphasising this fact is now quite forgotten. Just as St John Damascene's life stressed the close relationship between Christianity and early Islam – a kinship and proximity that is now forgotten by both faiths – so the prayer niches contained in the cells around Damascene's old monastery seemed to emphasise how much Islam inherited from the Byzantine world.

As at Cyrrhus, I was left pondering the probability that if John Moschus came back today, he would be likely to find as much that was familiar in the practices of Islam – with its fasting, prostrations, prayer niches and open prayer halls, as well as its emphasis on the wandering holy man – as in those of modern Western Christendom. In an age when Islam and Christianity are again said to be 'clashing civilisations', supposedly 'irreconcilable and necessarily hostile', it is important to remember Islam's very con-

siderable debt to the early Christian world, and the degree to which it has faithfully preserved elements of our own early Christian heritage long forgotten by ourselves.

Mar Saba, 1 November

Fr. Theophanes brought me my lunch on a tray and announced that the van would soon be ready to carry me to Jerusalem. He stood by as I ate, like a maître d'hôte waiting to see a diner's reaction to some especially delicate soufflé. This precipitated something of an etiquette problem.

Lunch at Mar Saba was never a very ritzy affair at the best of times, but towards the end of the week, when the bread baked days earlier had hardened to the texture of pumice, and the feta cheese had begun to smell increasingly like dead goat, eating Fr. Theophanes's offerings became something of a penitential exercise, and sounding sincere in one's appreciation of the monks’ culinary abilities was a task that needed advanced acting skills. I looked at the lump of rock-bread and the festering cheese, and tried to think of something nice to say about them. Then I had a flash of inspiration.

'Mmm,' I said, taking a sip from the glass. 'Delicious water, Fr. Theophanes.'

This, oddly enough, went down very well.

'The water here is very sweet.' The monk allowed himself a brief smile.

'Very sweet, Fr. Theophanes.'

'During this summer we had a drought. Our cisterns were beginning to run dry. August went by. Then September. One after another our cisterns gave up. We were like the Children of Israel in the wilderness. But St Sabas takes care of us. We are never without some drinking water. We always have the spring.'

'The spring?'
‘The spring of St Sabas. He prayed and it came. You do not know the story?’

‘Tell it to me.’

‘In the days of St Sabas more and more monks were joining the lavra to be with the saint. Eventually the number of brethren grew to seven hundred, and there was not enough water to go around. So St Sabas prayed. For thirty days and thirty nights he prayed on the roof of his cell, refusing to eat in the hope that our Lord would look down with mercy on his people. Finally, at the end of the thirty days and thirty nights, it happened to be a full moon. St Sabas went onto the roof for the last time to beg the Lord for mercy. He began to pray when all of a sudden he heard the beating of a wild ass’s hooves in the valley below. He looked out and saw the animal. It was charging down the valley as if sent by the Angel Gabriel himself. Then it stopped, looked around and began digging deep into the gravel. It dug for twenty minutes, then it bent down and began to drink.

‘St Sabas spent the night giving thanks to the Lord. The following morning he climbed down the cliff. At the bottom, just as he expected, he found that the ass had revealed a spring of living water. It was a constant supply that never ever fails. Even today. And incidentally it tastes very good in ouzo. This is one of the compensations that St Sabas gives us for our sufferings.’

‘What are the others?’ I asked.

‘There are many,’ he said. ‘But the most remarkable is this: after we leave our mortal frame, our bodies never grow stiff.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘After we are dead we never get stiff. We never suffer from ... how do you say ...?’

‘Corruption? Decomposition?’

‘That’s right: decomposition.’ Fr. Theophanes rolled the word around his mouth as if savouring the notion of mortal decay. ‘But the monks of this monastery, instead of giving off a foul stench of decay, emit a sweet fragrance. Like the scent of precious myrrh.’

I must have looked sceptical, for Theophanes added: ‘It is true. Many scientists have visited the monastery and declared them-

selves baffled. Anyway,’ he said, changing the subject, ‘what were you doing in the valley this morning?’

I told him, and remarked on the number of cells which appeared to have been desecrated by treasure hunters.

‘It is the Bedouin,’ replied Theophanes. ‘They are always looking for buried gold. Sometimes they ring the bell of the monastery and ask for incense from the cave of St Sabas to help them find their gold.’

‘How does that help?’

‘Sometimes they find gold in caves or old ruins, but they dare not take it in case it is guarded by a djinn. They go to their sheikhs, but they can do nothing, so the sheikhs tell them to come here. The Muslims believe that if they get incense from here they can burn it and the holy fumes will scare away the djinn.’

‘Do you give them incense?’ I asked.

‘No. It would be blasphemous to use a holy substance for such a purpose. But sometimes I wonder ...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well ... Once a man from Bethlehem came here. He was a taxi driver, named Mohammed. I knew him a little because he sometimes brought monks or pilgrims to us. Anyway, one day he rang the bell and asked for incense, saying that he had found some gold in a pot: it had been turned up by a plough on the land belonging to his family. He said his family were worried in case it was guarded by an evil djinn. I said no, he could not have it. Now he is dead. Sometimes I wonder whether I should have said yes.’

‘What do you mean, “Now he is dead”?‘

‘He left here, went home and broke open the pot. Straight away he went crazy. He got iller and iller, skinnier and skinnier. Before, he was a strong man. But slowly he became like a skeleton. Bones, a little skin, nothing more. Finally, three months ago, he died.’

Theophanes shook his head. ‘The Muslims think the djinns are different from demons, but this is just a trick of the Devil. There is no such thing as djinns: just devils in disguise. Now this man’s soul will go to Hell.’

Theophanes crossed himself, from right to left in the Orthodox
manner: 'He lost the gold and he lost his soul. Now he will burn like a Freemason.'

'Fr. Theophanes,' I asked, my curiosity finally getting the better of me, 'I don't understand why you are so worried by the Freemasons.'

'Because they are the legions of the Anti-Christ. The storm-troopers of the Whore of Babylon.'

'I always thought Freemasons just held coffee mornings and whist drives and that sort of thing.'

'Wheest drives?' said Theophanes, pronouncing the word as if it were some sort of Satanic ritual. 'Probably this wheest drive also. But their main activity is to worship the Devil. There are many steps,' he said, nodding knowingly. 'But the last, the final step, is to meet with the Devil and have homosexual relations with him. After this he makes you Pope or sometimes President of the United States.'

'President of the United States . . . ?'

'Certainly. This has been proved. All the Presidents of the United States have been Freemasons. Except Kennedy. And you know what happened to him . . .' Theophanes was still raving about the Freemasons, and the way they had masterminded the Ecumenical movement and invented the supermarket barcode, when a young novice knocked on the door to tell us that the Patriarchate van was ready to take me to Jerusalem. Theophanes helped carry my luggage to the gate.

'Be careful,' he said, as we stood by the great blue door. 'These are the Last Days. They are near their goal. They are everywhere now. Always be on your guard.'

'Goodbye, Fr. Theophanes,' I said. 'Thank you for everything.'

'They say this may be the last Pope.'

'Yes?'

'Some Holy Fathers have said this. Then the Arabs will be in Rome and the Whore of Babylon will be in the Vatican.'

'And the Freemasons?'

'These people. Who knows what they will do . . .' Theophanes frowned. 'Anyway,' he said, 'you must visit us again.'

'Thank you.'

'Maybe you will have converted to Orthodoxy by then?' I smiled.

'I will pray for you. While there is still time. Maybe you can be saved.'

Taking a huge key from a gaoler's ring, the monk undid the bolts of the low gate in the monastery wall. 'Think about it seriously,' he said as he let me out. 'Remember, you will be among the damned if you don't.'

The heavy metal door swung closed behind me. Outside, a dust storm was just beginning.

---

**Ararat Street, The Armenian Quarter, Old City of Jerusalem, 4 November**

The Armenian Quarter is the most secretive of the divisions of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Muslim, Christian and Jewish Quarters all look outwards; wandering down their cobbles it is impossible not to get sucked into their flea-markets and junk shops, cafés and restaurants. The Armenian Quarter is very different. It is easy to pass it by without realising its existence. It is a city within a city, entered through its own gate and bounded by its own high, butter-coloured wall.

The gatehouse gives onto a warren of tunnels and passageways. Off one of these I have been given an old groin-vaulted room smelling of dust and old age, with a faint whiff of medieval church. In the streets around my room, hidden behind anxiously twitching lace curtains, lives a displaced population, distinct from their neighbours in language, religion, history and culture.

At the time of John Moschos, Jerusalem contained many such communities: large groups of Georgians and Armenians, Syrians and Galatians, Italians and even some Franks, most of whom had initially come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage and stayed on. Although the city is still full of small church missions, usually staffed by