

METEORA

The first hermits or monks in Christianity appeared in the third century A.D., notably in Egypt and in Syria. The term “hermit” comes from the Greek word *erēmitēs*, which means “of the desert.” It refers to one who chose to live in a “desert” or “deserted place” (*erēmos*). The term “monk” is based on the Greek word *monachos*, which in turn is derived from the adjective *monos*, meaning “alone.” Individuals chose to live in caves, tombs, or abandoned settlements where they could be by themselves, meditate, and pray.

The rationale for this practice was that one could escape temptation by being alone, being fully set apart from the world. In this way, one could reach for perfection and practice self-denial through asceticism. He would take Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler as a personal directive for himself: “If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mt. 19:21).

It is not surprising that the church was initially against monasticism, since the concept of withdrawing from the world contradicts Jesus’ call to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-16). The Great Commission requires Christians to go into all of the world and preach the gospel to every person (Mk. 16:15, 16; Mt. 28:18-20), rather than isolating oneself from the world. Christians must remain in the world without embracing the evil practices of the world (Jn. 15:19; 17:18; 1 Jn. 2:15). Over time, however, monks such as Anthony the Great and Pachomius came to be highly revered. Instead of being totally isolated, monks were organized into small communities, and monasteries were formed. This arrangement is referred to as “cenobitic monasticism”; the term “cenobitic” is derived from the Greek words for “common” (*koinos*) and “life” (*bios*).

The cliffs at Meteora in northwestern Thessaly (Greece) were viewed as a place where one could find isolation, peace, and harmony. Sometime between the ninth and eleventh centuries, hermits came to live in the many caves and crevices found there on the lower rocks. The Chapel of Doupiani was constructed for worship in the twelfth century. Later, the monks were organized into communities. In the fourteenth century, they began to build monasteries on top of the large pillar-like rock formations for security. Their dwellings explain the name Meteora; it is based on the Greek word *meteōros*, meaning “lofty,” “suspended in the air.” The energy and time taken to get building materials on top of the rock formations boggles the mind—not to mention the actual construction of the buildings! Items had to be hoisted up with ropes, hooks, baskets, and nets. At Meteora’s peak, twenty-four historic monasteries existed there; lesser known ones bring the count to thirty. However, only six of the monasteries survive today: St. Stephen, Holy Trinity, Rousanou, St. Nicholas, Varlaam, and Great Meteoron. Four are inhabited by monks and two by nuns. In the 1920s, steps were carved into the rock to make access to the monasteries easier. Meteora is a popular tourist destination today.

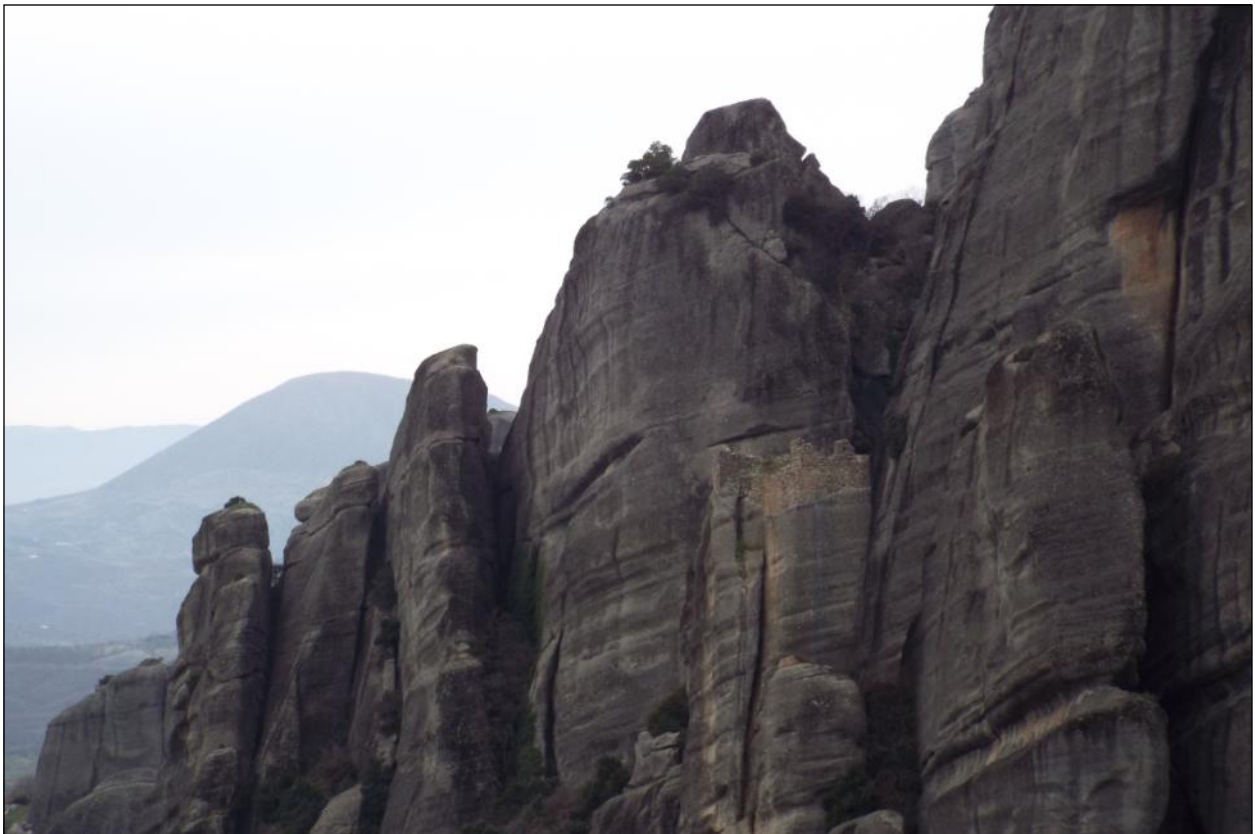


Meteora





Meteora





Monastery of the Holy Trinity





Monastery of Rousanou



Monastery of Varlaam





Monastery of Varlaam





Monastery of Great Meteoron



Collection of Monks' Skulls at Great Meteoron