

Introduction

SI.M.ON.A. means the SImonopetra Monastery OttomaN Archive Project. The title of the project refers to the founder of Simonopetra Monastery, Saint Simon, who had lived in the thirteenth century. Saint Simon is said to have lifted a large stone (petra in Greek) as the foundation for this monastery, which he built upon a rock on the western slopes of Mount Athos. He persuaded the builders of this awe-inspiring structure – commanding a magnificent view – to become the first monks of Simonopetra. Later, he is also credited with converting some attacking Muslim pirates to Christianity, who subsequently joined the monastic community.¹

In a homily written no later than 1360, Patriarch Filotheos states that both the ‘Greeks’ and the ‘infidels’ respected and admired Mount Athos while the monks were hospitable towards everybody.² The Athonite monks might have gained in practice some respect from the Muslim crews in the Aegean during these years (crews which could have included some followers of the Ottomans as well), by playing host to them in case of need. And even if it is just a rhetorical claim, this homily of Filotheos promotes the image of Mount Athos as a “safe and holy harbour”, which should be respected.³

A tradition recorded by the Athonite monk Gerasimos Smyrnakis in 1903 relates that the Athonite monks, foreseeing that Constantinople would fall to the Ottomans because of the civil wars taking place in Byzantium during the second half of the fourteenth century, hastened to offer their allegiance to the sultan at a time when his seat was in Bursa; in return, he confirmed the monasteries’ estates and privileges.⁴ For the monks of Mount Athos as subjects of the sultans this story was intended to show the Ottomans their allegiance to the founder, or founders, of the empire, in return for respect for their religious identity in an Islamic state.⁵

¹ Manolis Velitzanidis, *Σιμωνόπετρα, ιστορία και πνευματική παράδοση* [Simonopetra, History and Spiritual Tradition], Athens: Indiktos, 2023, pp. 23-33.

² Dimitrios V. Kaimakis, *Φιλοθέου Κοκκίνου Δογματικά Έργα*, Vol. 1, Thessaloniki: Center for Byzantine Studies, 1983, p. 482.

³ Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, “Mount Athos and the Ottomans c. 1350-1550”, in: Michael Angold (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 158-159. See also eadem, “A safe and holy mountain: early Ottoman Athos”, in: Anthony Bryer and Mary Cunningham (eds), *Mount Athos and Byzantine monasticism; Papers from the Twenty-Eight Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1994*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 127-132.

⁴ Gerasimos Smyrnakis, *Τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος* [The Holy Mountain], Karyes Agiou Orous: Ekdoseis Panselinos, 1988 [reprint of the 1903 edition], p. 109.

⁵ Elias Kolovos, “Mount Athos and Ottoman Rule”, forthcoming in the Routledge *Handbook of Mount Athos*.

Even if they were forged in later years, we should not discard the stories about Osman and the monks as not useful for our investigation of the Ottoman history of Mount Athos. They show that the monks of Mount Athos preserved under the Ottomans a strong sense of their religious identity, which, they believed, should be protected even by an ‘infidel’ ruler: their submission to the Ottoman ruler did not mean their submission to Islam; quite the opposite. At the same time, these stories show that the Ottomans were eager to respect and include into their growing political enterprise the religious institutions of their Christian Orthodox subjects.

This is the main story that the Ottoman documents preserved until today in the monasteries of Mount Athos relate. In a paper published in 2019, Elias Kolovos and Phokion P. Kotzageorgis argued that, “on the basis of certain publications of Demetriades, Fotić, Kotzageorgis and Kolovos we can roughly estimate the overall number of the Ottoman documents kept in Athonite monasteries to be about 15,000. We would like to stress the importance of publishing the full body of these Ottoman Athonite documents, as envisaged by Wittek and Lemerle in the 1930s, following the model of the Archives de l’Athos series in which the Greek documents of the Byzantine era are edited”.⁶ The SI.MO.N.A. project is targeting to contribute to this aim.

According to the draft catalogue compiled by Professor Vasilis Demetriades – though it is no longer considered adequate for the needs of current research – the Ottoman documents of the Simonopetra monastery number 372, most of which date from the late 19th century. If one includes several later documents that were not incorporated into Demetriades’ draft catalogue, the total number of Ottoman Turkish documents in the Simonopetra archive rises to approximately 680.

The aim of the SI.M.ON.A. project is the complete publication and translation – into English and Greek – of the Ottoman documents preserved at the Monastery of Simonopetra. The objective is not to produce a catalogue, which is no longer considered sufficient for advancing knowledge of the monastery’s history, especially that of landholding.

The SI.M.ON.A. Project is implemented by the Monastery of Simonopetra, in collaboration with the Mount Athos Studies Laboratory at the Institute of Historical Studies, National Hellenic Research Foundation, with a sponsorship by the Athanasios and Marina Martinos Foundation. For the publication of the first volume of the project, Dr. Elias Kolovos, Research Director in Ottoman History at the Section of Neohellenic Research and collaborating member at the Mount Athos Studies Laboratory of the Institute of Historical Research of the National Hellenic Research Foundation has worked together with father Kosmas Simonopetritis (Dr. Panagiotis Kyranoudis). Elias Kolovos has prepared the transliterations and translations of the Ottoman documents and father Kosmas Simonopetritis the commentaries

⁶ Elias Kolovos and Phokion P. Kotzageorgis, “*Turco-Athonica: The Ottoman Archives of the Athonite Monasteries*”, *Travaux et Mémoires* 23/2 (2019) [=Lire les archives de l’Athos, Actes du colloque réuni à Athènes du 18 au 20 novembre 2015 à l’occasion des 70 ans de la collection refondée par Paul Lemerle, eds. Olivier Delouis and Kostis Smyrlis], p. 650.

for the persons and places mentioned in these documents. At an earlier stage, Dr. Vanessa de Obaldia had contributed to the project by preparing draft transliterations and translations of some of the documents published here.

For the publication of the Athonite Ottoman archives, we consider it essential to follow the rigorous standards of the *Archives de l'Athos* series, through which the documents of the Byzantine Empire are published. The careful reading and edition of historical sources constitutes the cornerstone of historical research and a prerequisite for broader interpretations and conclusions, ultimately serving the advancement of scholarly inquiry and knowledge itself.

In our project, each document is classified for publication together with its metadata, which include

- the **title** assigned by us,
- its **identity** or **classification number**,
- the **date** (with accurate conversion to both the Julian and Gregorian calendars),
- the document **type** (based on the classifications of Ottoman diplomatics),
- a **description**, including script type and dimensions,
- the **issuing authority and place of issuance**,
- as well as any **notes** –contemporary or later– found on the recto and verso
- a **short summary**
- possible **earlier editions**,
- full **transliteration**
- index of **persons**
- index of **places**
- **translation**
- **other documents referred to** in the document
- **commentary**

Each document is being published, first and foremost, through a transliteration from Ottoman Turkish, following a transliteration system based on that of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, further enriched to allow for the full representation of the original Ottoman Turkish text. For the system used see in detail Elias Kolovos, *Kalem: Εἰσαγωγή στὰ ὀθωμανικὰ τουρκικὰ καὶ στὴν ὀθωμανικὴ παλαιογραφία*, 2025 (accessible in: <https://hdl.handle.net/10442/19205>).

For the Romanization of Greek we used the ELOT 743 standard, revised in 2001, Type 2, which has been adopted by the Greek and Cypriot governments.

The present volume publishes the sixteenth-century Ottoman documents preserved in the archive of the Monastery of Simonopetra: forty-three documents as independent publication units –though the actual number is higher, since some of the documents include drafts, variants, or copies. These documents are extremely important for the history of the monastery and its properties under Ottoman rule.

A pivotal event in the history of the monastery during this period was the devastating fire of 11 December 1580, described in the Ottoman documents as “a calamity from heaven” (doc. **no. 13**), caused by lightning. The fire largely consumed the monastic complex of Simonopetra, with the exception of its katholikon. Many monks escaped down the cliff using ropes, while others perished – some in circumstances described in the sources as a martyr’s death. In the aftermath, the monks sent delegates to the imperial court of Sultan Murad III in Constantinople, where they secured two firmans in mid-April 1581, published in full in our volume.

The first decree (**no. 11**) forbade the harassment of the monks under the pretext of collecting “blood money” for those who had died in the fire. The second (**no. 12**) authorized the reconstruction of the impressive monastic complex of Simonopetra. Before petitioning for the sultanic decree, the monks had already obtained a legal opinion (*fetvā*) from the Şeyhü’l-islām, the Grand Müftī of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire, defining – on the basis of Islamic law – the conditions under which Christian monastic buildings could be rebuilt. This text is extremely valuable for the broader study of the legal status of Christians under Ottoman rule.

With these documents in hand, the monks then appeared before the Sharia Court of Sidirokavasia in late September 1581 to obtain formal judicial permission for reconstruction (doc. **no. 13**).⁷ This judicial act contains a very interesting Ottoman description of the Holy Mountain: “The place called Holy Mountain measures, in breadth, one mile on land, the rest being in the sea. Within this place there are no villages at all, but twenty houses in the form of fortresses, each with a church in its centre, and around the inside cells for the accommodation of monks and travellers and storehouses for keeping their food and drink. When they were conquered, the monks were permitted to retain these places, and to this day they dwell in them and possess them. They cultivate whatever lands can be tilled and have turned them into vineyards and orchards”.

After the devastating fire of 11 December 1580, the monks of Simonopetra found temporary refuge at the Monastery of Xenophontos, as attested by the *sigillion* of Patriarch Ieremias II (May 1581). Under the initiative of the Holy Community of Mount Athos – and as an expression of broader Athonite solidarity – the Simonopetrites assumed not only the administration of Xenophontos and its metochia, but also the repayment of the monastery’s considerable debts, amounting to more than 200,000 *akçes*, incurred in the process of refeeming its confiscated properties in 1568/69. This arrangement is reflected in a document of mid-October

⁷ For the reconstruction after the fire, see the detailed study by Phokion P. Kotzageorgis and Monk Kosmas Simonopetritis, “Συμβολή στην ιστορία τοῦ καθολικοῦ τῆς Μονῆς Σιμωνόπετρας” [Contribution to the history of the Catholicon of the Simonopetra Monastery], *Αθωνικά Τετράδια* 2 (2015), pp. 45-84.

1581 (**no. 17**), which shows that the Simonopetrites had already returned to their own monastery after a stay of approximately five months at Xenophontos. It may thus be inferred that Simonopetra possessed, in 1581, the necessary financial resources – made possible through the support of an important benefactor – to undertake both the reconstruction of its monastic complex and the repayment of Xenophontos’s liabilities, which probably exceeded 160,000 *akçes* (cf. also **no. 16**, dated 5 March 1582, a judicial confirmation of the debt of the Simonopetrites for the repurchase of the winter pasture of Xenophontos Monastery in the Longos peninsula, and **no. 17**, dated mid November 1582, a declaration by the monks of Xenophontos that they do not anymore hold the Simonopetrites co-responsible for their debts).

Hegoumenos Evgenios of Simonopetra subsequently travelled to Wallachia, where the monastery already maintained a metochion in Bucharest – the first Athonite monastery to acquire a dependency in Wallachia – donated around 1565 by the Great postelnik and ban Ghiorma, an Epirote. In 1586 Evgenios sought additional support for Simonopetra’s reconstruction.⁸ The metochion of Ghiorma in Bucharest was rebuilt from the foundations between 1589 and 1591 by Michael the Brave (Mihai Viteazul) on a scale far larger than the original structure, with a new church dedicated to St Nicholas and endowed with sacred vessels. Known later as Mănăstirea Mihai Vodă, the foundation was confirmed as a stavropegion by a sigillion issued during the visit of Patriarch Ieremias II in 1591, at Evgenios’s request. In 1599, Michael the Brave reaffirmed its endowments through his own chrysobull. Michael – himself an Epirote on his father’s side, as confirmed by the diptychs of Simonopetra – maintained an exceptionally close relationship with the monastery. So extensive were Simonopetra’s ties with the influential Epirote network in Wallachia, of which Michael was the most prominent figure, that the monastery could be described, without exaggeration, as both “the Monastery of the Epirotes” and “the Monastery of Michael the Brave”.

Simonopetra’s deep involvement in Wallachian affairs is further illuminated in an Ottoman document of late October 1597 (**no. 40**). Four monks serving at the Simonopetra metochion in Potholinos on the Strymon River were selected to undertake an important mission to Wallachia. Their point of departure – Potholinos – was chosen because it was the monastery’s dependency closest to the Danubian principalities. Acknowledging the dangers of the journey, they hired a local Janissary as their escort. During their mission, the group was caught in the turmoil of the Wallachian uprising, almost certainly the Battle of Călugăreni (26 August 1595). The Janissary was killed, likely by local rebels. The monks suddenly faced grave danger – not only from the instability of the region, but also from the possibility of being accused of murdering their escort to avoid paying his fee. Moreover, their well-known ties to Michael the Brave rendered them vulnerable to suspicions of collaboration with the insurgents.

⁸ See, in detail, Monk Kosmas Simonopetritis, “Ο ρόλος τῶν Ἑπειρωτῶν στὴν ἀφιέρωση μετοχίων στὶς Παραδουνάβιες Ἡγεμονίες τὸν 16ο αἰῶνα (οἱ περιπτώσεις τοῦ Γκιόρμα καὶ τοῦ Μιχαὴλ Βοεβόδα)” [Epirotes’ Role on the Donation of Metochia to Athos Monasteries in the Romanian Principalities (16th c.): the cases of Ghiorma and Michael the Brave], in: *Mount Athos: Spreading the Light to the Orthodox World: The Metochia, Proceedings of the IX International Scientific Conference (21-23 November 2014)*, Thessaloniki: Mount Athos Center, 2015, pp. 219-245.

To avert further complications, the monks concluded a settlement with the Janissary's father, Memi Beşe of Potholinos, paying a substantial "blood tax" of 6,000 *akçes* – three times the originally agreed salary of 2,000 *akçes*. This payment released them from all present and future claims. This episode underscores the significance of the Simonopetrite mission. The monks did not travel merely to inspect their metochion; they were entrusted with a special task connected to the coordinated efforts of Michael the Brave and the Ecumenical Patriarchate to support Orthodoxy in regions north of Wallachia threatened by the Union. The mission culminated in the participation of the Simonopetrite delegate Hieromonk Makarios in the Synod of Brest (6-9 October 1596), convened to resist Catholic proselytism.

The Ottoman documents published in this volume illuminate with exceptional clarity the real property, legal status, and economic life of the Monastery of Simonopetra under Ottoman rule. Because the catastrophic fire of 11 December 1580 destroyed a substantial part of the monastery's archive, only a handful of documents predating this event have survived – presumably those preserved not in the monastic archive itself but in its metochia. Among these, the most important is undoubtedly the endowment deed (*vakfiyye*) of 1569 (**no. 5**), the foundational document defining the legal and administrative framework of every Athonite monastery under Ottoman law.

The 1569 *vakfiyye* was produced in the immediate aftermath of the confiscation of ecclesiastical and monastic properties ordered by Sultan Selim II in 1568, an event that reshaped the fiscal and legal foundations of Christian religious institutions throughout the empire.⁹ On Mount Athos, confiscation was followed by the repurchase of monastic properties and their subsequent reconstitution as pious foundations (*vakf*), in accordance with the legal interpretations of Ebū's-su'ūd, the Şeyhü'l-islām whose jurisprudence redefined the application of Islamic law to non-Muslim institutions. Within this framework, each Athonite monastery created its own *vakf* and appointed a trustee (*mütevelli*) to administer it.¹⁰

The 1569 deed of Simonopetra records that the monastery was represented by monk Gennadios, son of Dimos, acting on behalf of three senior monks who served as leaders (*kethüdā*) of a community of thirty-one Simonopetrite brethren: Priest Makarios son of Giannis, Priest

⁹ See, in detail, John C. Alexander, "The Lord Giveth and the Lord Taketh Away: Athos and the Confiscation Affair of 1568-1569", in: *Athos in the 14th -16th Centuries*, *Αθωνικά Σύμμεκτα* 4, Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 1997, pp. 149-200; Alexandar Fotić, "The Official explanations for the confiscation and sale of monasteries (churches) and their estates at the time of Selim II", *Turcica* 24 (1994), pp. 33-54; Evgenia Kermeli, "The Confiscation and Repossession of Monastic Properties in Mount Athos and Patmos Monasteries, 1568-1570", *Bulgarian Historical Review* 28/3-4 (2000), p. 39-53. For a broader historical evaluation, see Elias Kolovos, "Monasteries, Economy, and Politics in the Orthodox World from Medieval to Modern Times", in: Roumen Avramov, Aleksandar Fotić, Elias Kolovos, Phokion K. Kotzageorgis (eds), *Monastic Economy Across Time: Wealth Management, Patterns, and Trends*, Centre for Advanced Studies, Sofia 2021, pp. 217-228.

¹⁰ Cf. the endowment deed of Xeropotamou monastery in Elias Kolovos, "Christian Vakıfs of Monasteries in the Ottoman Greek Lands from the Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries", in: Sabine Mohasseb Saliba (ed.), *Les fondations pieuses waqfs chez les chrétiens et les juifs du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, Geuthner, Paris 2016, pp. 103-127.

Kostas son of Nikolas, and Isaïas son of Thodoris. The office of *mütevelli* was assigned specifically to Priest Makarios, son of Giannis.

The *vakfiyye* enumerates the monastery's possessions at that time – many of which appear again in the Ottoman documents published in this volume. Beginning with the monastery's properties within Mount Athos itself, these include the monastery complex and its delineated boundaries, together with various dependent cells such as the Cell of Dontas – at the centre of a prolonged dispute with the neighboring Xeropotamou Monastery – the Kellion of Karyes near the Protaton, granted to Simonopetra by the Protos and the Holy Synaxis, and the Kellion of Prophet Elias, which was eventually sold to Stavronikita in 1724.

Beyond Mount Athos, Simonopetra maintained an extensive network of metochia and estates. Among these was the metochion at Provlakas on the isthmus of Ierissos, now vanished but still attested in 1581 (**no. 15**). The monastery also possessed – according to the *vakfiyye* – a residence at Izvor (mod. Stratoniki), in the conglomeration of Sidirokavsia, the administrative centre to which Mount Athos was subject during the early centuries of Ottoman rule.

On the Longos (mod. Sithonia) peninsula, lay the metochion of Vava – an endowment of Simonopetra's founder John Ughlesa – (see also doc. **no. 8** dated 1577) while on the coastline of Vourvourou the monastery held another substantial metochion, preserved to the present day. This latter estate included the church of the Panagia at the site still known as Panagia or Panagouda, which has given the entire bay the modern name Mesopanagia Bay. A series of documents from 1571 to 1599 record the gradual expansion of this metochion through the purchase of surrounding lands from the inhabitants of Agios Nikolaos (see docs **nos 6, 7, 28, 31, 42**), as well as the permissions granted for the repair of its church following earthquake damage in 1589, 1593 and 1594 (**nos 29, 38, 39**).

Simonopetra, according to the *vakfiyye*, possessed another estate in the region of Serres, at Varnarous and Esfagmenou, likewise a foundation of John Ughlesa (docs **nos 19** [1583], **24** [1588]).

On the island of Limnos, Simonopetra held the metochion of Trygi, still functioning today. A foundational document of 1557 (**no. 2**) – whose survival from the 1580 fire must be due to its preservation on the island – confirms the Byzantine origins of this estate and offers a rare, detailed description of an Ottoman cadastral survey conducted in situ. Subsequent documents of 1578 and 1586 (**nos 10** and **23**) continue the history of the metochion, while the unusual record of its sale in 1588 (**no. 25**) to a Muslim purchaser likely reflects the severe financial pressures Simonopetra faced after the confiscation of 1568 and the fire of 1580. By 1591, however, the monastery appears to still maintain property on the island (**no. 36**).

A document referring to the sale of a vineyard in the village of Karvia (**no. 1**) in 1548 probably constitutes indirect evidence for a property of the Monastery of Simonopetra in this village in western Chalkidiki. This property was of Byzantine origin, at a time when the same area was also known as Koumoutzoulou or Koumoutzoula. The Simonopetra metochi at Karvia is already recorded in an Ottoman register of 1519, and again in the register of 1568, where it is described as a “*çiftlik* in the locality of Osinos, under Thessaloniki, in

Kalamaria, on the borders of the village of Kalvia [=Karvia]. It pays tithe. Vineyards in Kalamaria: 4 dönüm”.¹¹ The toponym Oxynos is located on a hill approximately one km southwest of present-day Nea Triglia, although no visible remains survive there today. It lay in the immediate vicinity of Karvia and constituted a short-lived settlement attested in Athonite documents between 1302 and 1420. By 1407-1420 it had already been abandoned, as it is listed among the “old villages” (palaiochoria in Greek) of Drimosyrta that were granted to the Great Lavra of Saint Athanasios.¹² Nevertheless, the place-name Oxynos continued in use. The Simonopetra metochi derived its name from this toponym and remained in the possession of the monastery at least until 1568.

The decades after 1568/69 also saw the acquisition of several new properties for Simonopetra. In 1583-84, Simonopetra purchased a buffalo fold at Lapra, located in the *vakf* territory of Gāzī Evrenos Beg near the lower Axios River (**nos 18** and **21**). Around the same time, two monks of the monastery acquired a residence in the port town of Ainos (**no. 20**), while in 1591 the monastery added an orchard, dedicated to the Monastery at the village of Theologos on the island of Thasos (**no. 35**).

Finally, the late sixteenth century witnessed Simonopetra’s expansion into the Kassandra Peninsula. In 1587, Sultan Murad III granted the entire peninsula as private property (*temlik*) to the Chief White Eunuch, Ġazanfer Āga, who integrated it into his extensive pious foundation and issued privileges to encourage its resettlement. All Athonite monasteries subsequently obtained title-deeds for their holdings in the peninsula from Ġazanfer Āga or his representatives. Simonopetra acquired the Petriotiko metochion, situated immediately south of the isthmus known as Portes in Greek, i.e. Gates, in the area of present-day Nea Poteidaia. A series of documents from 1589 to 1598 (**nos 30, 32, 33, 34, and 41**) record the acquisition of the estate, the recognition of the monastery’s payment of the title-deed tax, and the issuance of an imperial firman securing the metochion’s protection, followed by a formal confirmation of its title-deed.

Taken together, the forty-three Ottoman documents included in this volume constitute an exceptionally rich dossier for the history of Simonopetra in the sixteenth century. They document the monastery’s territorial footprint across Macedonia, Thrace, and the islands; its adaptation to the legal framework of the Ottoman *vakf* system; its strategies of financial recovery and reconstruction after the fire of 1580; its complex relationships with Ottoman authorities, local communities, and other Athonite monasteries; and its continuing transformation during a century of profound political and economic change.

We complete this edition in honor of the memory of our professor, John Chr. Alexander (Alexandropoulos, 1940-2026), who took the lead in the effort to study the Ottoman documents preserved in the archives of Mount Athos.

¹¹ Kolovos, *Χωρικοί και μοναχοί*, vol. II, 202-203.

¹² *Actes de Lavra III*, 158, no. 161, l. 42; 175, no. 165, l. 50.