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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Living Religious Heritage and Challenges to Museum Ethics: Reflections from the Monastic Community of Mount Athos

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This paper reflects on the challenges living religious heritage poses to contemporary museum ethics and specifically with regard to public display and accessibility. Drawing on extensive research conducted in the monastic community of Mount Athos, Greece, this study outlines the development of the museum concept through the organisation of treasury displays and exhibitions. It examines the ethics that underlie current approaches in the monastic community towards displaying and providing access to collections. It is emphasised that the perceived threats of touristification and museumification are at the centre of an apparent reluctance towards embracing widely adhered to principles of contemporary museology. Nevertheless, it is argued that the role of museum and heritage professionals is crucial in respecting the different value systems of the monasteries while advocating solutions that render Athonite heritage more open to the public.

Introduction

Concern regarding stewardship and public display of objects belonging to living religious traditions has been recently increasing within museum and heritage literature (Paine 2000; Sullivan and Edwards 2004). Within this context, international discourse and contemporary museum practice often stress the ethical obigation of museum and heritage professionals to accept values that are often different, if not contrary, to their principles and codes of conduct. The monastic community of Mount Athos, Greece, provides an interesting case study for the examination of the compromise dictated by the apparent clash between 'experts'' principles (heritage professionals) and intangible values of the 'non-experts'.

This article begins by outlining the role of museum ethics in advocating wider access for the public through the display of museum collections and considers the special parameters springing from projects that deal with living religious heritage. Drawing on research conducted for my MA dissertation and PhD thesis (Alexopoulos 2002, 2010), the changing attitudes towards the management of the Athonite collections are presented followed by an investigation of specific projects that demonstrate a significant influence from contemporary museum principles.[1] The inevitable compromises imposed by the value system of the monastic community and consequent reservations over the purpose and actual extent of public display and accessibility are explored. The underlying ethics are discussed in an effort to address the challenges and wider implications for museum/heritage professionals who work with religious communities. It is argued in this paper that because values placed by stakeholders evolve and change over time – as much as ethical standards shift and become subject to revisions – the responsibility of the museum/heritage professional is to avoid dictating rules but rather to actively strive to reconcile the often-contested views that their work generates.

Museum Ethics and Living Religious Heritage: The Wider Context

Codes of Ethics for Museum and Heritage Professionals: Implications for the Public Display and Accessibility of Cultural Heritage

Codes of ethics have been established in museums as systems of principles and rules that provide guidelines for 'higher standards of conduct' (Edson 1997: 5). Such profession-wide codes have been considered as both desirable and necessary (Alexander and Alexander 2008: 310). According to Besterman (2006: 431) 'ethics is useful because it maps a principled pathway to help the museum to navigate through contested moral territory'. For the museum profession the goal of raising the level of professional practice is two-fold (Edson 1997: 6): 'helping to maintain the professional status of the museum community' and 'strengthening the role and responsibilities of museums in society'. Overall, museum ethics seek to 'provide a purposeful, philosophical framework for all that museum does' (Besterman 2006: 431). Both national and international museum institutions have created enforceable codes and have established mechanisms that encourage adherence to ethical principles. Among the most frequently cited codes of ethics for museum professionals are the ones advocated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM 2006), the American Association of

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Museums[2] (AAM 2000) and the Museums Association of the UK (MA 2008). In addition, individual museums have also formulated their own codes of ethics covering issues of general concern and even very specialised aspects of museum activity.

The role of museum displays has been central to the interpretation of material culture (collections, artefacts etc.). Rendering museum collections accessible to the wider public in many different ways is among the core principles of contemporary museum ethics. Museums have changed considerably in recent decades and have evolved not only into active learning environments for people and establishments for public enjoyment (Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 1–2) but also into champions of social responsibility and active agents for social change (Sandell 2002; Silverman 2010). Accessibility and public display of objects have emerged as basic requirements for the afore-mentioned educational and social role of the museum (Dean 1994: 7; Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 52; ICOM 2006: Articles 3 and 4). This concept of accessibility undepins, for example, several articles of the code of ethics of the Museums Association in the UK (MA 2008).

In a much broader context, museum ethics are closely linked to theoretical developments in the field of cultural heritage management and the 'democratisation' of the latter through the tendency of relevant heritage professionals (archaeologists, architects, conservators, historians etc.) to be more self-reflexive. Ethical issues are therefore reflected in international conventions and charters concerning cultural heritage, the proliferation of literature on the social value and role of heritage as well as the wider emphasis on heritage management that is integrated, values-based, sustainable and based on active stakeholder participation (Feilden and Jokilehto 1998; Hall and McArthur 1998; Clark 2008). International principles have advocated the importance of interpretation as a medium for facilitating the meaning and understanding of heritage (Venice Charter 1964: Articles 14–15; Burra Charter 1999: Article 25) and as a means of promoting heritage protection (ICOMOS 1990: Article 7). Such international documents have also highlighted the importance of access and democratic participation in cultural heritage (see for example Council of Europe 2005: Articles 12–14; Ename Charter 2008: Principles 1 and 6).

Dealing with Living Religious Heritage: A Challenge for Museum and Heritage Professionals

A great challenge for museum/heritage professionals worldwide is to reconcile contemporary standards with practice in cases where religious communities are directly involved. Tensions and conflicts among the two sides are often generated by the existence of very different value systems. Indeed, communities that live together specifically for religious purposes, as in the case of monasteries, tend to follow traditional ways of life and faith that frequently pay little attention to concerns such as the appropriate stewardship of museum collections. International discourse regarding the management of living religious heritage has focused on issues surrounding the concepts of living and dynamic sites, the limits of authenticity in restoration projects, the recognition of the heritage of indigenous and source communities – with particular attention to the requirements of sacred places (Carmichael *et al.* 1994; Layton 1989; Shackley 2001). The ever-growing emphasis on immaterial heritage values – including oral traditions and expressions, language, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events and traditional craftsmanship – have culminated in UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) thus broadening the concept of cultural heritage and encompassing living religious heritage. International organisations – such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM – are increasignly promoting the management of sacred, religious, living and intangible heritage (Bortolotto 2007; Stovel *et al.* 2005; Smith and Akagawa 2009).

A key concern with regard to the public display and the provision of wider access to objects of living religious heritage is the extent to which these activities are accepted by custodians of sacred places. The latter can often be reluctant or negative because they may deem the placement of an artefact within a museum context or merely behind a glass-case as inappropriate treatment or as an act of deconsecration. The impetus again for the discussion of these issues has been provided, to a great extent, by the wider discourse on indigenous heritage and the repatriation and display of human remains in particular. Following up on the afore-mentioned importance of intangible values, it is evident that museums can often find it very hard to tackle religion as 'it is not fundamentally based on objects' (Paine 2000: xiii). A major challenge for heritage professionals is to pin down religion due to its complex felt realities and social phenomena (McNally 2011: 174). Consequently, museums of all kinds 'wrestle with questions about the care of sacred objects and the interpretation of sacred themes' (Edwards and Sullivan 2004). Quite interestingly, in the context of Greek Orthodox heritage, it has been recently argued that artefacts with a religious aura – religious offerings, *tamata*, to be specific – can be exhibited in a manner that complies with their physical and behavioural environment (Handaka 2007: 60–66). Although wordlwide consensus among museum professionals is difficult, if not impossible, to be reached in terms of how religious life should be presented interesting attempts have been made to address this issue (Paine 2000, 2013; Sullivan and Edwards 2004). Despite the difficulties, awareness and display of sensitivity and respect towards the values of parties-at-interest with intangible religious values is widely considered as a useful approach.

The Case Study of Mount Athos

Heritage professionals working with religious communities and dealing with living religious heritage have to pay attention to a range of issues related to worship and various notions of sacredness as the latter often define atttitudes towards ownership, right to access and co-operation in museum/heritage projects.[3] The Orthodox monastic community of Mount Athos (*Άγιον Όρος*, that is Holy Mountain, in Greek) therefore constitutes a very interesting case study.

Mount Athos is located in the easternmost peninsula of the prefecture of Halkidiki in the region of Macedonia, Northern Greece. The Athonite peninsula is approximately 56 km long, 2.5–8.5 km wide, and covers an area of around 336 square kilometers. The community itself is self-governed under the sovereignty of the Greek state and the territory of Mt Athos is divided among twenty ruling monasteries the first of which was founded in AD 963. Today Mt Athos hosts a population of around 2,000 monks and is a thriving Pan-Orthodox monastic community with significant worldwide spiritual and religious radiation (see also Speake 2002). The cultural heritage preserved by the Athonite monasteries is very rich and of universal value as it comprises movable and immovable elements representing over a millennium of Greek, Balkan and Eastern European history. The collections held by the monasteries are deemed to manifest almost every aspect of the art and heritage of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine periods in Greece and the Balkans (Kadas 1986: 143; Papadopoulos 1992: 26). This tangible heritage includes artefacts from the ancient Greek period, the largest collection of Orthodox portable icons in the world, manuscripts (including the largest collection of Greek manuscripts worldwide), more than 200,000 printed books, archival documents of enormous historical importance, numerous textiles, works of minor arts, pottery, engravings, artefacts of gold- and silversmithery as well as ethnographic material pertaining to traditional technologies (Karakatsanis 1997).

A very important element of the heritage preserved on Mt Athos is the intangible dimension of the living Athonite Orthodox tradition. This dimension imbues living heritage value to many elements of both the built environment and the material culture of the area but also to numerous aspects of the everyday life of the brotherhoods. The Athonite monasteries today are regarded as 'the cradle of Orthodoxy' and 'the bastion of Eastern Christianity' (Kadas 1986: 10; Speake 2002: 2) and the monastic community as a whole constitutes a principal destination for Orthodox pilgrims that seek spiritual healing, worship, prayer and confession. Four types of monasticism are currently practiced in the Athonite peninsula (eremitic, semi-eremitic, coenobitic, idiorrythmic). The community also constitutes a conservatory of century-old agricultural traditions, arts and crafts and Orthodox ecclesiastical chant.

Along with the special characteristics of the Athonite monastic life, museum and heritage professionals working in the area need to understand and respect the special religious and ecclesiastical value that numerous artefacts hold for both the monks and the Orthodox pilgrims. The intangible values afforded to specific collections create a separate category of heritage which is referred to as *keimelia* (*κειμήλια*, that is relics/heirlooms) and is linked to Orthodox theology and cosmology and Athonite customary traditions (Alexopoulos 2010). For example, holy icons are not only viewed as paintings but they are venerated, used in feasts and processions. Along with the numerous collections of holy relics (usually placed in elaborate reliquaries), miracle-working icons in particular are believed to hold healing and other thaumaturgical properties and have a special adorational value. Incense-burners, sacred vessels, crosses and various items of church embroidery are used by the monks in liturgies and other events despite their often enormous historical or artistic value and their relevant vulnerability to physical degradation (Alexopoulos 2010).

The responsibility for cultural heritage management in the Athonite peninsula lies within each monastery (for its relevant territory) and with the collective administrative bodies situated in Karyes, the capital of Mt Athos (Alexopoulos 2010). Furthermore, a significant role in the implementation of various heritage-related projects is held by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture through its peripheral agency, the 10th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities (EBA). The latter shares responsibilities, since the 1980s, with KEDAK (*ΚΕΔΑΚ*, the Centre for the Preservation of Athonite Heritage) a multi-disciplinary body of academics, heritage professionals and Athonite representatives (Alexopoulos 2013: 67–70). It is also worth noting that in 1988 Mt Athos was included in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites.

At this point, it is important to highlight the special regulations that restrict access to the Athonite peninsula and regulate the flow of visitors to the monastic community. According to a rule (widely known as the *Avaton*) established by Byzantine imperial decrees no female visitors are allowed to set foot on the territory of Mt Athos (Speake 2002: 63). The Avaton has been occasionally criticised and condemned by female activists and politicians and certainly constitutes a measure that does not seem to comply with contemporary ethics of gender equality and human rights.[4] Nevertheless, this ban of access to female visitors remains a legal right of the Athonite community recognised by both Greek and European law (Papastathis 1993: 62). In addition, the monasteries of Mt Athos allocate specific visitor permits according to a strict quota of 110 visitors per day. Within this quota only 10 permits per day are issued to non-Greek/non-Orthodox visitors. The afore-mentioned measures dictate the current situation with regard to accessibility to Athonite heritage and they also define, to a great extent, the religious tourism that operates in the area.

The Development of The Museum Concept in Mt Athos: The Organisation of Athonite Treasury Displays and Exhibitions

Attitudes Towards the Display of Athonite Collections Until the Early Twentieth Century

The gradual change of perceptions towards cultural heritage from the part of the brotherhoods coupled with the impact of heritage professionals has brought new attitudes to the management of collections in the monastic community of Mt Athos. These changes, however, have been adopted slowly and do not, by any means, represent the attitudes of the community as a whole. It is fair to say that co-operation between certain monasteries and museum/heritage professionals has, to a significant extent, resulted in a growing awareness and appreciation of professional standards of collections care and management.[5]

Throughout their millennial history Athonite monasteries have served as depositories of various artefacts. Provision for the preservation of these collections has depended on both circumstances as well as the values (mainly functional, artistic, spiritual) attributed to such material objects by the monks themselves. For several centuries such collections were kept in strongholds and later in specially designed treasuries or sacristies that did not cater for the display of artefacts nor accessibility. Indeed, these spaces rarely provided the necessary environment for their physical preservation (Alexopoulos 2007). Artefacts were scattered in various parts of the monastic complexes: icons were kept in the icon-galleries or – depositories (*εικονοφυλάκια*), libraries usually hosted the manuscripts and printed books and the majority of the archival documents were kept in relevant spaces. Holy relics and reliquaries, sacred vessels and vestments were commonly stored in the main churches (*katholika*) and other artefacts were placed in boxes, wall cabinets or cupboards in various spaces according to their functional use. Numerous items that had been passed over from generation to generation, such as ecclesiastical and liturgical vessels, crosses, icons, gospel books, were used in the everyday life of the brotherhood often without any concern for their potential historical value.

The Athonite monks, however, have always distinguished certain artefacts as precious and have considered them as *keimelia*. Such artefacts were kept in spaces referred to as *skevofylakio* (σκευοφυλάκιο=space for safekeeping sacred vessels), *thesavrofylakio* (*θησαυροφυλάκιο*=space for safekeeping treasures) or even *keimeliothiki* (*κειμηλιοθήκη*=space for safekeeping *keimelia*) (Alexopoulos 2002). These rooms were located in strongholds such as fortified towers, in free-standing buildings in the middle of the monastery's courtyard or within the main churches, usually on a separate floor above the narthex (**figures 1** and **2**).

Naturally the spaces described in this section served to protect the collections mainly from theft and fire and were hardly accessible to most of the members of the brotherhood, let alone to pilgrims and visitors. Numerous sources from the vast travel literature concerning Mt Athos (from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century) reveal that treasury collections were kept in disorderly manner and suffered from inappropriate storage and handling conditions and bad maintenance (Alexopoulos 2007: 78–80). In addition, the ignorance of the Athonite monks towards the value of their collections coupled with the activity of the so-called 'manuscript-hunters' resulted in several artefacts being damaged, lost, sold or stolen from the monasteries (Alexopoulos 2007: 79). Within these circumstances artefacts were stored, rather than displayed, and certain ecclesiastical and liturgical objects were systematically used by the brotherhoods, like today, in everyday life activities. For this particular period one can clearly not speak of any worldwide ethics concerning heritage management and collections care as the museological profession was yet to emerge even in occidental Europe.

Fig. 1: The tower of the Karakallou monastery (Georgios Alexopoulos 12/08/2005).

Fig. 2: Great Lavra monastery: the main entrance of the treasury, built in the 1960s (Georgios Alexopoulos 24/08/2005).

Provision for Display of the Athonite Collections: The First Steps

The cultural heritage of the Athonite monasteries came under the protection of the Archaeological Service of the Greek state after the annexation of Macedonia from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. However, it is only after the 1960s that changes within the monastic community itself gave way to new approaches towards the safekeeping and display of collections (Alexopoulos 2010). First of all, the so-called 'spiritual renewal' of the monastic community, heralded by the incoming flow of new and well-educated brotherhoods, contributed to important efforts to improve the care and management of collections (Petherbridge 1993: 127–128). From the 1970s the interest of Greek state agencies and the work of individual museum/heritage professionals paved the way for improvements in the treasury facilities (Mylonas 1975; Papadopoulos 1980). Moreover, the establishment of KEDAK in the 1980s coupled with the significant funding provided by the European Community (former EEC) resulted in a series of architectural interventions for the refurbishment of Athonite infrastructure as well as existing treasury displays (KEDAK 1999).

At this point it is important to stress that the display of Athonite collections outside the monastic peninsula in the last decades has been a significant development with wider implications on how the monasteries themselves view and manage their heritage, both tangible and intangible (Alexopoulos 2010). The *Treasures of Mount Athos* exhibition held in Thessaloniki in 1997 (featuring more than 1,500 artefacts) constituted a milestone for the presentation of Athonite heritage to the wider public and was followed between 2006–2009 by three major exhibitions held in Thessaloniki (*Mount Athos – The Treasury of the Protaton*), Helsinki (*Athos - Monastic Life on the Holy Mountain*) and Paris (*Athos and Byzantine Empire: Treasures of the Holy Mountain*). Nevertheless, the context for the organisation of such events and the consequent negotiation that has to take place between heritage professionals and the monasteries is quite different from the reality that prevails within Athonite territory. Therefore, this particular medium of presenting Athonite heritage to the public (i.e. public display outside the monastic borders) is not within the scope of this paper.

The displays organised in certain Athonite monasteries during this period did not embrace the characteristics of an exhibition (see endnote 5), even in cases – such as the treasury of the Simonopetra monastery which opened in 1996 – where sophisticated equipment and display cases were deployed. Resembling the early European (and Greek) museums which functioned as show-cases characterised by the display philosophy of didactic and aesthetic values (Gazi 1994: 56–62) these treasuries were object-oriented and were not arranged in thematic units supported by informative material (text panels, pictures etc). Serving mainly purposes of safekeeping and storage, these spaces did not aim at providing public access either (**figures 3** and **4**).

Fig. 3: St Dionysios monastery: treasury display (Georgios Alexopoulos 06/07/2002).

Fig. 4: Simonopetra monastery: treasury display (Georgios Alexopoulos 02/07/2002).

From Displaying to Exhibiting: The First Athonite Treasury Exhibitions

The late 1990s saw a shift in the attitudes of the Athonite monastic community (or, to say the least, a significant segment of it) towards heritage preservation and presentation owing to the developments mentioned in the previous section as well as the increasing scientific interest and funding for the conservation of collections and the publication of the Athonite heritage (Alexopoulos 2010). Certain brotherhoods agreed to develop their treasury displays or create new facilities for housing their collections in the format of an exhibition. Although the extent to which contemporary museum principles were pursued varies, this overall change of heart could be deemed as an attempt – from the part of the Athonites – to experiment on the level of public display and accessibility they could afford. As a result, new treasury exhibitions in collaboration with museum professionals and Greek state agencies were arranged in the monasteries of St Xenofon, Pantokrator, Vatopedi and the Protaton tower at Karyes.

Fig. 5: St Xenofon monastery treasury exhibition (Georgios Alexopoulos 26/08/2005).

In 1998, the south-western wing of the St Xenofon monastery was refurbished in order to provide space for the storage and display of the monastery's collections on the occasion of the monastery's millennial (998–1998) celebrations. The resulting treasury exhibition introduced for the first time in Athonite history the concept of an organised exhibition that follows contemporary museum standards. Standards that according to the late Stelios Papadopoulos (2000: 11) had been rarely employed even in contemporary Greek museums. The exhibits are arranged following specific thematic units within a chronological sequence and are all captioned and labelled (**figure 5**). A wide range of interpretive material (photographs, maps, drawings, text panels) enhances the communication of information and provides a clear educational/informative focus on the treasury exhibition (**figure 6**).

The use of small-scale replicas of Athonite buildings and a photographic display were also included in the supportive material. Quite interestingly, the exhibition provides useful insights into various aspects of everyday Athonite life, art, and technology constituting, therefore, a milestone in the presentation of Athonite collections to the public. Among the groundbreaking features of this exhibition was also the employment of background music – consisting of traditional Athonite chanting, the publication of a catalogue/exhibition guide and the creation of a small shop for the sale of books, Athonite souvenirs etc. Overall the museological concept for this space was absolutely unique for Athonite standards and clearly raised the stakes with regard to the potential of presenting Athonite collections.

Only a couple of years later (in 2000) the monastery of Pantokrator acquired its own treasury exhibition situated in a fourteenth century tower within the monastic complex. The standards followed for the arrangement of the exhibits differ to a great extent from the St Xenofon exhibition as the responsible team together with the brotherhood in question opted for a chronological and typological ordering of the artefacts without the addition of interpretative material (**figure 7**). In roughly the same period, a treasury exhibition was organised at the Protaton tower, in Karyes. In this case, the exhibits were arranged chronologically and were accompanied by interpretive material. Although the exhibition is confined to a small space it provides visitors with information and orientation.

Finally, the treasury exhibition of the Vatopedi monastery, located in the north wing of the complex, was inaugurated in 2000 and incorporated several innovative – for Athonite standards – elements. The artefacts on display were accompanied not only by exhibit labels but also by informative panels (in both Greek and English), altogether arranged in thematic units and under a chronological order. Additional media employed in the

Fig. 6: St Xenofon monastery treasury exhibition (Georgios Alexopoulos 26/08/2005).

presentation of the collections included photographs, maps, small-scale replicas of the monastery and other media (**figure 8**).

The treasury exhibitions mentioned in this section clearly represent a 'progressive' tendency to open up the Athonite collections to a certain public (by making an effort to interpret and present artefacts within an exhibition context). Under the influence of museum and heritage professionals contemporary museum standards were followed to various degrees – more so in the example of St Xenofon, Vatopedi and the Protaton tower and less in the case of Pantokrator. One could argue that these treasury exhibitions reflect changing perceptions of certain brotherhoods not only in terms of their collaboration with heritage professionals but towards cultural heritage management in general. These examples offer ample reasons for optimism for the potential of widening access to the Athonite collections: implying both physical access (to view and marvel at the artefacts) and intellectual access (access to information, opportunities to learn). Indeed the treasury displays and exhibitions of Mt Athos constitute perhaps the most effective medium for interpreting and presenting Athonite cultural heritage to the public. This is particularly true when one considers that the special nature of the Athonite monastic community and consequent sensitivities render any other form of visitor-oriented information almost impossible. The displays and exhibitions in question provide the only opportunity for direct access to the Athonite collections.

It is, however, worth stressing that one aspect of this progress – albeit a significant one – has not been fully implemented. Until a few years ago all of the afore-mentioned treasury exhibitions were accessible only to a very restricted number of people. The exhibition at the St Xenofon monastery was accessible to pilgrims and visitors on specific hours and days and under the supervision of members of the brotherhood that were trained for this purpose. With few exceptions though, this openness has been considerably restricted by the brotherhood itself. In addition, exhibitions of the Pantokrator and Vatopedi monasteries as well as the Protaton tower did not cater for a wide audience from the beginning. What's more, the majority of Athonite brotherhoods are still resisting abandoning their traditional approaches and ways of dealing with their collections – resistance referring here to reluctance towards public display. The reasons behind this restriction will be addressed and explored in the following section.

The Underlying Ethics of Display and Accessibility of the Athonite Collections

Modernity and Fear of Touristification

One could reasonably argue that the issue of whether the cultural heritage of Mt Athos should be displayed or not and to whom is mostly related to the fear of the

Fig. 7: Pantokrator monastery treasury exhibition (Georgios Alexopoulos 05/07/2002).

Fig. 8: Vatopedi monastery's treasury exhibition (Georgios Alexopoulos 04/07/2002).

monastic community towards the influences of the 'outside' world and the pressure to change its traditional way of life and values. Indeed, the encounter of living heritage with modernity in various parts of the world and in various religions often accompanies certain conflicts that are generated by the reluctance of religious communities towards new ideas and the consequent secularisation which is often associated with modernisation and globalisation (Stanley-Price 2004: 2; Inaba 2005: 46). In a traditional and isolated monastic society, such as Mt Athos, changes *per se* can naturally be viewed as threatening and the Athonite community is reasonably conservative and resistant to the introduction of foreign concepts (Petherbridge 1993: 128). For example, the proposals for the introduction of a peninsula-wide electrical grid and an all-weather asphalt road network have been deemed by the most conservative voices as a 'material from the devil's domain' (Chatzigogas 2005: 72).

Among the greatest challenges for places of religious worship is to reconcile the growth of tourism that often places additional pressure by imposing certain requirements of access to the public (Shackley 2001: 51–54). The preservation of the spiritual atmosphere – a vital component of places with living religious heritage such as churches and monasteries – is vital and necessitates relevant visitor management procedures. In the case of Mt Athos, the potential conflict between worshippers and secularly oriented visitors and the protection of the carrying capacity seem to have been solved by the existing framework of strict visitor control. As mentioned previously, only 100 Greek and 10 non-Greek visitors are admitted daily to the monastic community and the duration of the visit is limited to four calendar days (including three overnight stays in different monasteries). The century-old *Avaton* rule, the regulation of visitor transportation (access is provided only by sea) and the existing dressing and behaviour codes contribute to what the Athonite monks deem as controlled tourism (Alexopoulos 2010). It should be emphasised that the display of original Athonite artefacts and collections outside the borders of Mt Athos (and Greece) can be considered an alternative solution (at least one way) for allowing both genders to access the cultural heritage of the community. Indeed, this has been achieved by the organisation of several exhibitions in the last two decades (see above). This ethos, which avoids 'intruding' in the space of the Mt Athos and imposing solutions that do not fit with the sensitivities of the monastic community, is in line with approaches such as principle 1.6 of the ICOMOS Ename Charter.[6]

The Perceived Threat of 'Museumification' of Mt Athos

The afore-mentioned case studies have demonstrated that the introduction of displays and exhibitions to Mt Athos according to contemporary museum standards has been gradual and not void of certain restrictions. In fact, the concept of a treasury exhibition has been embraced by specific brotherhoods and to different degrees. The underlying fear of turning Mt Athos or its individual monasteries into museums has been a theme that often emerged during fieldwork in the monastic peninsula. The problem lies first of all in a misconception or, rather, a negative connotation attributed to the term 'museum' itself. In discussions with members of the monastic community it became evident that the latter disliked any association of their treasury exhibitions with either the term 'museum' or with contemporary museum principles. On the contrary, most of the discussants and interviewees attempted to distinguish the concept of the museum from what their collections strived to represent (Alexopoulos 2010).

As mentioned previously, the material culture referred to as *keimelia* by the Athonite monks is attributed with enormous intangible value – spiritual and religious associations and meanings. These values naturally dominate over any scientific (historical/archaeological) or artistic value – usually emphasised by heritage professionals. So long as, for example, the sacred and venerational character of a holy icon or holy relic is not undermined or played down by an exhibiting environment the latter is not depriving it from its initial purpose (in the eyes of an Athonite). One could argue that this is the case not only with Athonite monasteries but Orthodox monks and clergy elsewhere in the world as well (see Paine 2013: 50–51). Again, however, it is vital to underline that exhibitions about Mt Athos and containing Athonite collections outside the monastic peninsula usually employ a wide array of museum techniques to present the Orthodox faith and to contextualise artefacts that are imbued with religious/spiritual value. The reluctance therefore to accept the display of an Athonite collection (depending on the specific content) within the monastic territory is often linked with the conviction that it is inappropriate to render *keimelia* as museum exhibits within the context of Mt Athos. This view has further implications for the extent to which exhibited artefacts may lead the visitor/pilgrim to not appreciate the intangible qualities and connotations because of their exposure to the neutralising 'museum' environment. Obviously, this view is not dominant among all brotherhoods or Athonite individuals and the examples of treasury exhibitions presented in this paper certainly point to the potential coexistence of these conflicting values within an exhibition space. In any case, it is hardly possible to define what feelings, emotions or possible combinations of values will be evoked among the audience (any visitor/pilgrim allowed to enter such an exhibition).

The everyday use value that certain artefacts and collections have for the Athonite community can also contribute towards a reluctance to place them behind a glass-case that would turn them from liturgical and ecclesiastical objects to 'dead' museum exhibits. Although the ethics of conservation, which prioritise the physical integrity and preservation of a valuable object, go against the contemporary use of valuable collections (see for example Karydis 2010) this is yet another area that requires compromising solutions. One has to stress that heritage professionals collaborating with Athonite brotherhoods in the preparation of displays and exhibitions have managed to overcome this issue by offering practical solutions: e.g. adding drawers to showcases for easier access and handling of artefacts that are used by the brotherhood. Advocating the withdrawal of a specific object from contemporary use certainly requires additional negotiations.

Compromising Wider Accessibility and the Interpretative Material of an Athonite Exhibition

The afore-mentioned fears of 'museumification' have clearly left their mark in the qualityand quantity of interpretative material at the existing treasury exhibitions and most importantly in the final decisions of whether Athonite collections should be accessible at all. The style of presentation that avoids communicating a certain narrative through text, visual aids and any kind of information seems to support in many cases the will of a brotherhood not to deviate from the sacred dimension and the spiritual aura that is suitable to a *keimelio*. The employment of a variety of exhibiting media, particularly in the examples of the St Xenofon and Vatopedi treasury exhibitions, however, indicates that decisions are based solely on an individual basis – attitudes can change and initial reservations can be overcome.

The examination of the treasury exhibitions mentioned earlier in terms of accessibility to the public is also very revealing. Even the brotherhoods that had ambitious initial plans ended up restricting the frequency of visits to their exhibition. In most cases provision for allowing visitors/pilgrims to marvel at the precious collections of the monasteries in question was deemed incompatible with the everyday duties of a monk and too time-consuming (Alexopoulos 2010). Only very special guests and officials are systematically provided with a tour to the treasury exhibitions. Naturally this situation calls for a questioning of the purpose of organising such exhibitions and raises several issues about the extent to which heritage professionals working on Mt Athos should advocate and exercise pressure for a change of attitude.

Conclusion: Museum Ethics and Conflicting Value Systems – Challenges and Implications for Heritage Professionals

Perhaps not surprisingly, Mt Athos is yet another example of a community adhering to a living religious tradition that fears for the perceived 'museumification' and/or 'touristification' of its living religious heritage and values. This fear underpins several issues that render the public display of the monastic collections and their overall accessibility a task often too ambitious for the museum/heritage professional to promote. As mentioned earlier contemporary museum ethics pursue, among other things, the public/social value of the collections through wider access. On the other hand Athonite ethical standards focus on preserving a centuries-old tradition and its customary laws. The encounter of these two, totally different sets of ethical standards poses certain questions with regards to the role of museum/heritage professionals in this debate. Although one must admit that ethics define 'the relationship of the museum with people, not with things' (Besterman 2006: 431) it is exactly the way different groups of people value and use their tangible heritage that often underpins potential tensions and conflicts in the co-operation between museum professionals and religious communities with living religious heritage.

The Athonite treasury exhibitions examined in this paper demonstrate that the public display of collections has been accepted and applied, with various degrees of success, in some cases and has been rejected in others. The cases in which a balance was achieved between the monastic life of the Athonites and the needs of the public for access to the Athonite heritage imply that there is great potential in the dissemination of knowledge about Mt Athos. This type of knowledge can combine both tangible and intangible values of the cultural heritage in question and therefore promote the vision of both the museum professionals and the host community.

It is widely acknowledged that in the museum context the ethics surrounding choices 'are rarely between right and wrong but often involve informed judgment about "competing goods"' (Besterman 2006: 432). A major incentive for ethical values to be subject to systematic review is the fact that ethical concerns, in societies that change rapidly, very often shift and evolve continually (Besterman 2006). One could very well ask then: what is the role of ethics in debates between tangible and intangible values? Is it necessary to revise existing codes of ethics to include a wider range of perspectives or should ethical standards be flexible enough to adapt to different value systems? In the case of Mt Athos, would the monastic community require some sort of comprehensive heritage legislation? Would setting up codes of ethics for the whole of the community (with a consensus from all 20 ruling monasteries) and/or for specific brotherhoods alleviate the problems?

The treasury displays and exhibitions housing and presenting the collections held by the Athonite monasteries do not constitute museums and are under private rather than public ownership. Although there is a legal framework suggesting a certain code of ethics for how things should be conducted it is not efficient as it does not cover and articulate important aspects concerning the management of the collections (Alexopoulos 2010). The ethics adhered to by the representatives of the Greek state agencies (10th EBA and KEDAK) do not always conform to the values of the Athonite community and therefore have less of an impact within Mt Athos. What's more, the existing legal documents fall short of properly addressing issues of display and accessibility within the context of the contemporary world (although they do provide restrictions and define very strict rules on how access can be provided). The values underpinning existing Athonite ethics are dependent on customary laws and traditional operating systems but these values are, however, also open to different interpretations by individual brotherhoods – they are also subject to influences by individual heritage professionals and agencies.

The implication for heritage professionals is two-fold: respect towards the Athonite perceptions but also active communication of contemporary museum ethics and principles. It would probably be reasonable to argue that public display of and wider accessibility to the Athonite collections need not be a priority bearing into consideration the enormous needs for conservation and preservation in appropriate facilities. Nevertheless, the initial reservations of an individual brotherhood or the community as a whole can change over time – as demonstrated, for example, by the introduction of treasury exhibitons – while different circumstances can offer opportunities for the discussion and introduction of new solutions. The role of the museum professional could therefore be to intermediate, influence decisions, advocate changes, offer consultation and be available when the time is ripe.

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Notes

1. This research has synthesised wide-ranging material such as personal experience (from participation in documentation projects on Mt Athos), the analysis of written sources (literature, published research, newspapers) and ethnographic research (interviews, discussions, participant and unobtrusive observation). An initial assessment of several treasury displays and exhibitions was conducted through on-site visits and interviews in 2002 (Alexopoulos 2002). This data was further enhanced and enriched during fieldtrips conducted for my PhD research (Alexopoulos 2010).
2. Currently known as American Alliance of Museums.
3. Mount Athos must be viewed in the wider context of Greek Orthodox heritage and the role that the latter plays in contemporary Greek society (Makrides and Molokotos-Liederman 2004). The special *gravitas* of Orthodoxy in the country also poses certain challenges

to heritage professionals (see Alexopoulos 2013: 61–63).

4 Gender restrictions to cultural heritage places of religious/spiritual value and relevant restictions to access and handling of specific sacred objects can be encountered in many countries, cultures and religious groups. In the case of Mt Athos the *Avaton* rule is linked, among other reasons, to the virtue of celibacy, to legendary beliefs (referring to the dedication of the peninsula to the Mother of God) and has been deemed to represent an extension of the traditional prohibitions with regard to members of the opposite sex observed with various degrees of strictness at different Orthodox religious institutions (Talbot 1996: 68–69). The question whether heritage professionals should advocate for and exercise pressure towards the abolition of such a ban is a very personal matter. For practical reasons this paper cannot focus on this specific issue, even though it does pertain to discussions about ethics. However, it is important to stress that both the importance afforded by the Athonite monastic community to the preservation of the Avaton rule and the author's research and working experience in the area clearly indicate that any such change could and should only happen from within (i.e. it could only be imposed by force and that is clearly unacceptable).

5 It important to clarify the use of the terms 'treasury', 'sacristy', 'display', 'exhibition' and 'museum' in the specific context of Mt Athos. The more generic term 'treasury' (implying a repository of treasures) has been preferred over the term 'sacristy' (denoting a room in a church where vestments and sacred objects are kept) in order to generally describe the efforts to display Athonite collections in specially organised spaces. The terms 'display', and 'exhibition' have been chosen implying different degrees of interpretation and presentation. Following the distinction presented by David Dean (1994: 160–161), the term 'display' is used to describe treasuries that follow a conservative/traditional approach and do not make any use of interpretative material to convey a specific meaning and message. On the contrary, the term 'exhibition' refers to displays which have been enhanced with relevant supporting material and therefore attempt to offer a more complete presentation of the existing artefacts. The term 'museum' in the Athonite context will be avoided because the Athonite monasteries, as entities, are far from functioning according to the principles adhered to by the majority of museum institutions. In fact, even the most progressive treasury exhibitions contain features that render them incompatible with the criteria set out by the widely accepted museum definition by ICOM (2009).

6 This principle which deals with the necessity to facilitate physical and intellectual access to cultural heritage places states that: 'In cases where physical access to a cultural heritage site is restricted due to conservation concerns, cultural sensitivities, adaptive reuse, or safety issues, interpretation and presentation should be provided off-site' (Ename Charter 2008, Principle 1.6).

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