

The Cave-Church of the Apocalypse on Patmos



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THE CAVE-CHURCH OF THE APOCALYPSE ON THE ISLAND OF PATMOS

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The Book of Apocalypse or Revelation is the last one in the series of New Testament books. A strong and ancient tradition insists that this book is the fruit of visions experienced by the Apostle and Evangelist Saint John, and that it was written around the year 95 AD when the same Apostle was exiled by Emperor Domitian. As the same Apostle testifies, while he was living in the Christian community of Ephesus he suffered exile in an island called Patmos, one of the Greek islands of the Dodecanese group in the Aegean Sea, some kilometres away from the coast of Turkey and somewhat southwest of the same latitude of the town of Ephesus (Selçuk). This island has been linked with the the Apostle Saint John and especially with the Book of Apocalypse, and on it one can visit a cave-church that marks the place where John received the revelations he wrote down in the Apocalypse.



View of Patmos Island

Patmos and the Book of Apocalypse

It is John himself who gives witness to his presence on the island of Patmos, when he writes: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that our ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea’” (Apoc 1:9-11). The island which is mentioned is precisely that of Patmos. This island (in Greek Πάτμος) is located on the northern section of the group of islands of the Dodecanese. It is roughly 34

square kilometres and is characterised by three mountains which are joined by narrow strips of land, and has a good number of natural bays and inlets. The highest point is called Profitis Ilias (Prophet Elias), and rises to 269 metres above sea-level. The hilly island is covered by typical Mediterranean vegetation, especially the Mediterranean pine, and one gets the impression that the island looks larger than it actually is. The island is also characterised by many cliffs, rocks and natural caves. The fact that it is rather isolated from other groups of islands further inland was certainly a contributing factor to its use as a place of exile, and during the early Christian era, as an island ideal for hermitage and contemplation. On this island John was exiled from Ephesus, on account “of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” words which indicate that he suffered as a Christian for having rendered witness to his faith in the community in which he was considered as a leader (πρεσβύτερος). In fact the list of towns that are mentioned in the Biblical text, and to which John is invited to send his prophecies and visions, were all towns that were close to the metropolis of Ephesus and which fell within the evangelising mission of the Apostle: Ephesus (Selçuk) itself, Smyrna (Ismir), Pergamum (Bergama), Thyatira (Akhisar), Sardis (Sart), Philadelphia (Alaşehir) and Laodicea (Laodikeia/Guncali).

From the sea the island of Patmos appears to have two principal centres. The port of the island, which is nowadays a hub for tourists, is called Skala. It is the port that provides communication with the other Greek islands of the Aegean Sea. On the mountain at the centre of the island there is the village of Chora, which is the principal village of Patmos. The village is dominated by the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian (Μοναστήρι του Αγίου Ιωάννη του Θεολόγου), which appears like a large fortress on the white terraced houses underneath, and further down on its side there are three ancient wind-mills. Half-way up the mountain slope, in the midst of many pine trees, there is the Cave-Church of the Apocalypse, which is linked to the monastery by means of a steep stairway, and which marks the sacred place where John received the visions that he documented in the Apocalypse.

Before describing this Cave-Church and the Monastery of Saint John, we will explain the meaning of the word “Apocalypse.” The Greek word *Apokálypsi* (Αποκάλυψη) comes from the verb *apokalyptō* (ἀποκάλυπτω), meaning “to uncover by taking off a veil.” We find a splendid example of this meaning of the Apocalypse in the liturgy, in the sign of the “unveiling” of the chalice and paten before the Offertory, when the priest takes off the chalice veil. This action means that the “mystery” hidden up to that moment is now “unveiled” (revealed) during the moment of consecration of the Eucharistic species in the paten and chalice. Therefore Apocalypse means a mystery that is unveiled or, better still, revealed (revelation).

The literary genre of the Apocalypse takes different forms. The most important are the visions (the man of God “sees” mysterious realities), symbolism (metaphors, numbers, objects implying a totally different reality), urgency (reference to the end of times that have already begun), perseverance (in the fact of persecution), anti-dating (a message in the present which is described by referring to ancient prophecies), pseudonymy (a message referred to a famous personage who is not necessarily its author), and above all a theological interpretation of the world and of history.

This last element is fundamental in order to understand the Apocalypse. The apocalyptic literary genre does not have the aim of announcing the end of a particular moment of history of the world. This interpretation has often been applied and it was always a source of problems, as it was, for example, in the case of the millenarist interpretation based on Apoc 20:1-6. The Apocalypse is a theological interpretation of history. It shows that, at all times,



View of Patmos from village of Chora



Port of Skala and (below) view of the Cave-Church



we are living in the end of times, where the struggle between God and Satan is always present, and where the disciples of Jesus (the Church) have to pass through persecutions in order to give witness to their faith unto martyrdom, and until they arrive at the peace of the heavenly Jerusalem which comes down from heaven. Thus, the persecution of the time of Domitian, to which John probably refers in the Apocalypse, becomes an emblem of all persecutions that see the people of God living in the end of times and having to face the Antichrist. Every interpretation that has been made regarding the Apocalypse, especially during the Middle Ages, was always partial, but has to be applied to all times.

Where was the Apocalypse written? Tradition has always maintained that John wrote it in Ephesus, where he also wrote the fourth Gospel and his Letters. However, the visions that led John to write the Apocalypse occurred precisely on the island of Patmos, in the Cave-Church venerated by Christians, particularly as a centre of cult for the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Cave-Church of the Apocalypse

The tradition that John wrote the Apocalypse after the visions he experienced when he was exiled on Patmos, and was in contemplation in a cave is strong and constant (cfr. Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, *The Cave of the Apocalypse*, in academia.edu published as a book in 1989). This is a study of a small Gospel book found in the famous library of the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian in Patmos, dated 1334/35. In the miniature at the beginning of the illuminated manuscript of the Gospel of John, the Evangelist appears standing up and dictating words to Prochoros, who was his disciple and scribe. Prochoros appears sitting down on a rock and writing the opening words of the Gospel of John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word." Behind these two personages there is a rocky mountain.

Orthodox Tradition holds that Prochoros was one of the seven deacons chosen by the Apostles in order to take care of the poor members of the mother Church of Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). He is considered to be the nephew of Saint Stephen, the first martyr, and also one of the seven deacons. He accompanied Saint Peter who ordained him bishop of Nicomedia. He was also a disciple of Saint John, and in iconography always appears to be the scribe of John. Sometimes he was considered to be the author of the apocryphal *Acts of John*, dated towards the end of the 2nd century. He is also said to have been bishop of Antioch, where he died as a martyr.

A story in the *Acta Joannis* states that Prochoros accompanied Saint John on the island of Patmos: "John took me with him, and we went out of the town towards a quiet place. This place was called Katastasis; in this place there is a small mountain. We went up and remained for three days on the mountain. John spent the time without eating, praying to God to give him a good news for the brethren. On the third day John spoke to me and said: 'Prochoros, my son, go down to the town and bring me ink and paper (χάρτας), but do not tell anyone of the brethren that we are here.' I went to the town and brought ink and paper and returned to John, and he said to me: 'Leave the ink and paper here and go back to the town, and then come back here in two days' time.' I went to the town. After two days I went up back to him and I found him standing up and praying, and he told me: 'Take the ink and paper, and sit down on my right hand side.' And I did so. At that very moment claps of lightning and thunder fell down so strongly that the mountain trembled, and I fell down on my face to the ground as if I were dead. But John took me by my arm and raised me up and said: 'Sit down on the



Cave-Church of the Apocalypse entrance



Iconostasis of the Cave-Church and the holy Cave



floor on my right hand side.’ And I did so. He prayed, and after praying told me: ‘Prochoros, my son, now write the words you hear coming out from my mouth.’ And John opened his mouth, and standing up and looking towards heaven, he said: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ [...] And then he went on, while he remained standing up and I was sitting down and writing. We remained two days and six hours on that spot. He was speaking and I was writing. When the divine words were written down, John took me with him to the town and we went to live in the house of Sosipatros and his mother Proklane.”

The witness of Prochoros became so popular that even the fourth Gospel began to be associated with Patmos rather than with Ephesus, and the island became the place where the Apocalypse was said to have been composed.¹ Among the witnesses of this fact, from the 10th century onwards, we find Teodoros Studita, Arethas of Caesarea, Niketas of Paphlagon and Symeon Metaphrastes. In 1106/07 the Russian Abbot Daniel visited Ephesus and he mentions Patmos as the place where John dictated the Gospel to Prochoros, although Daniel himself never went personally to Patmos. This tradition then prompted Christódoulos in 1088 to found the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian on the island. We shall speak about the monastery in the next section. Christódoulos states that he was attracted to Patmos because it was the place in which the beloved Apostle of Jesus lived, the virgin Evangelist, who heard the voice of God as thunder and wrote down what he saw in his divine visions. From that moment Patmos began to be compared to Mount Sinai, because if on Sinai God gave the tablets of the Law to Moses, on Patmos He transmitted the Words of life of the Spirit which wins over the letter of the Law.

Towards the mid-12th century the cave that is found half-way up the mountain between Skala and Chorio, where the Monastery is found, began to be indicated as the Cave-Church in which John received the divine revelations which he wrote in the Apocalypse. We can conclude that, if in the very beginning, the entire island of Patmos was considered to be a sacred island because John had lived there in exile and wrote his Gospel and the Apocalypse, as time went on, after the foundation of the Monastery, this particular Cave began to be indicated as the holy Cave of the revelations and it became a place of worship and pilgrimage. We shall now present a description of this picturesque Sanctuary before speaking also about the Monastery on top of the central mountain of the island of Patmos.

One arrives at the Cave-Church of the Apocalypse by walking up the hill from the port of Skala along the winding road that goes up to Chora. The Cave is found half-way up the mountain, hidden by many pine trees, but characterised by the white hermitage that encloses it. The Cave-Church has rather small dimensions, 6.60 metres long and 5.50 metres wide. One enters through a narrow entrance. In the small courtyard one finds the entrance to the Cave-Church, upon which there is an icon of Saint John the Evangelist. In the Cave itself there is another icon of the Apostle, which depicts him as an elderly man, since John was exiled on Patmos in the year 95, when he was already an old man.

The Cave-Church is divided into two sections. The central part is characterised by the iconostasis, behind which there is an apse with the altar, according to the typical style of Greek Orthodox Churches. The most sacred part of the Cave-Church is found on the right-hand side facing the iconostasis. This part is evidently a rocky cave. This Cave also has a small apse in front of which there is an iconostasis. In the iconostasis one sees a large icon representing the glorious Christ in the clouds and surrounded by angels, and under him the Apostle John who seems to have fallen down face upwards on the ground in an ecstatic vision. The scene refers to what the Book of Apocalypse says in 1:12-20, when it describes the vision

that John has regarding the Son of Man clothed in dazzling white robes, in front of whom John falls down as if dead, until the same Son of Man raises him up in order to show him the revelations that he puts down in writing. The most important element in this Cave is the right-hand rocky wall. On this wall, at a very low level close to the floor, one sees a cavity in the rock which is surrounded by a rich silver frame. This marks the place where John placed his head in the Cave. In the same Cave there are seven lamps, recalling the seven golden candelabra that John saw around the Son of Man. On the ceiling of the Cave one notices a triple fissure in the rock, which indicates the place from where John could hear the oracles of the prophecies and visions that he recorded in the Apocalypse. The triple fissure is the symbol of the voice of God-Trinity.

The symbolism of the Cave-Church of the Apocalypse in Patmos is very strong. Although we know that in the Bible the symbolism of the cave is always evident, particularly as a place of burial and resurrection, there is another cave symbol that has a special significance, namely that of the Cave as a place of revelation. Thus, for example, Elijah enters into a cave on Mount Horeb and from that cave God calls him to reveal to him his word (1Kings 19:8-9). The cave in which Elijah found shelter on Horeb is linked with another cave, which might have been the same one, namely the cave in which Moses was sheltering on Mount Sinai (Ex 33:21-23) when he prayed that he would see the face of God. This category of the cave as a place of revelation is important in order to understand the strong symbolic significance of the Cave of the Apocalypse in the rich tradition of the Oriental Church, and in many writings of Christian antiquity (cfr. Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, Oxford University Press 2013).

The presence of the Apostle John in the region of the Aegean Sea forms part of an Oriental tradition which is held very dear to the Orthodox Churches. It is sufficient to mention the fact that Saint John went to live in Ephesus and that a different tradition from that of the Church of Jerusalem holds that he was accompanied by the Virgin Mary, who died in Ephesus. This tradition is maybe linked with the Council of Ephesus in the year 431, which declared the Virgin Mary as *Theotókos* (Θεοτόκος), Mother of God. An ancient document by a certain Bar-Hebraeus, who was a Jacobite, states that John took with him the Virgin Mary on the island of Patmos, and then he and Mary went to live in Ephesus where they died. Similar stories are common in this region, and might have contributed to the association of the Cave-Church of Patmos to different experiences of eremitic and monastic nature, as in fact happened on Patmos when Christódoulos founded the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian. Even in the case of the famous Monastic Republic of Athos we find similar stories, which narrate how John and the Virgin Mary were caught up in a tempest and landed at Mount Athos, and how the Virgin Mary pleaded with her Son Jesus to give her that mountain as her own personal garden. In the same time in which the tradition of the Cave-Church of Patmos was born we find the beginnings of eremitic life on Mount Athos, with Athanasius the Athonite in the 10th century. The cave is always associated with the symbolism of darkness and solitude, and it becomes the place where one retires in order to struggle against the powers of darkness and in order to receive the light of revelation of God, which is transmitted through visions, prophecies and writings. This was precisely the case of the Book of Apocalypse, which was born as a fruit of the mystical experience of John on the island of Patmos.

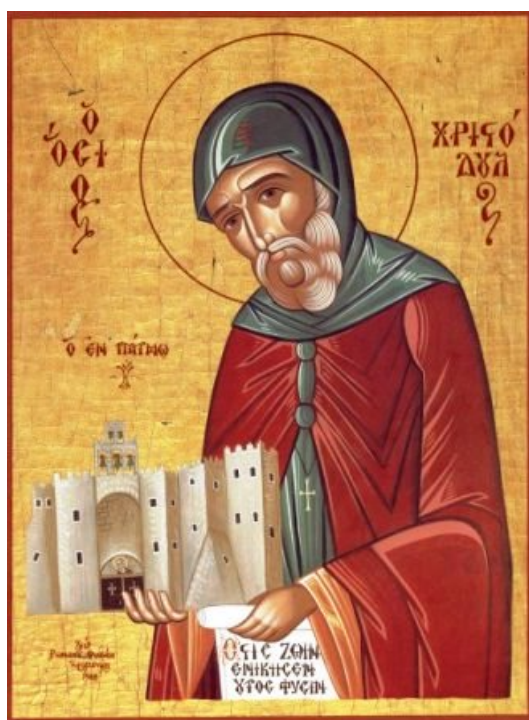
The Monastery of Saint John the Theologian

During the 7th century the island of Patmos was destroyed by Saracen pirates and was practically depopulated for nearly two centuries. It was in 1088 that Abbot Christódoulos Latrinos (known also as Saint Christódoulos the Holy of Patmos), who had already founded some monasteries on the islands of Leros and Kos, went to the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenos in Constantinople, and asked for permission to let him found a monastery on the island of Patmos so that the island could be repopulated. Emperor Alexius not only gave him permission, but also gave him total sovereignty over the tiny island of Patmos. In 1091 Christódoulos began to build the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian upon the remains of a 4th century basilica dedicated to Saint John the Apostle. The monastery was built in the form of a fortress on the summit of the mountain overlooking the port of Skala, the same mountain upon which lies the Cave-Church of the Apocalypse. A village was built around and underneath the monastery and was called Chora. It is the main village of Patmos.



The Monastery of Saint John the Theologian

When he was born in Nicea of Bythinia in Asia Minor, John, as he was called in baptism, was the son of a family of farmers, but from a young age began to show a particular interest in books and learning. As a young man he went to live as a hermit in Asia Minor on Mount Olympos (Ulus Dağ) and also in the desert of Palestine. He then became a monk and took the name Christódoulos (Χριστόδουλος), which means “slave of Christ.” He became Abbot of the Monastery of Larnos, but after an attack by Saracens in 1085 he escaped together with other monks to the island of Kos. There he founded a monastery dedicated to the Theotókos. Together with his disciple Arsenios Skinouris, he dreamt of founding a monastery on the uninhabited island of Patmos. Before doing this he founded a monastery on the island of Leros. As we have said, in 1088 he asked the Emperor Alexius I Comnenos to give him the island of Patmos, and there he began to build the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, and also brought some inhabitants to cultivate the island, which had been abandoned after the attacks of the Saracens. When Patmos was again attacked by Saracens in 1093, the Abbot



Abbot Christódoulos of Patmos

Christódoulos escaped with the monks to the island of Euboea (Evia), where he died on 16 March 1093.

After having been driven out of Patmos by Saracen pirates in 1091, the monks returned after some years to continue the work of building the monastery. They brought with them the relics of Christódoulos, who had died on the island of Evia. After some time the monastery was fortified and took the shape it has today, namely that of a strong fortress with high walls and towers, which dominates the white houses of the village of Chora underneath it. The monastery began to receive various generous contributions, especially from Emperors Alexius and Manuel Comnenos. In 1204-1261 the monastery was affiliated with the Empire of Nicea and acquired many lands in Asia Minor.

The monastery is one of the richest because of the treasures housed in it. The main church is dedicated to the Panagia, the Virgin Mary, which contains many icons and ancient frescoes. Above all the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian is famous for the rich library in which are conserved some 330 manuscripts, 267 of which are on parchment. Some of these precious manuscripts are exhibited in the museum of the monastery which is open to visitors. Among the precious relics of the monastery we find the skull of the Apostle Saint Thomas, which is enshrined in the small chapel to the right of the principal church. The chapel is dedicated to Saint Christódoulos, and in it there are also the remains of the founder of the monastery, together with the relics of the true Cross.

The name of the Monastery, Μοναστήρι του Αγίου Ιωάννη του Θεολόγου (Monastery of Saint John the Theologian) indicates the great devotion of the Greek Orthodox Church towards Saint John as the Evangelist who spoke about God in a mystical way in his writings. The Greek Orthodox Church also venerates the two disciples of Saint John, namely Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and Martyr in 117 AD, and Antipas, mentioned by John himself in Apocalypse 2:13



View of the Monastery and the village of Chora



The windmills of Patmos

in the context of the Letter to the Church of Pergamum. Antipas is called “my faithful witness” and is indicated as a martyr in the city “where Satan has his throne.”

The view of the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian from outside is very impressive. It appears like a fortress, 70 metres long and with strong and sturdy walls some 15 metres high, with a belfry on top in which there are many bells. The monastery did not only serve as a centre of prayer and contemplation for the monks who lived there, but also functioned as the principal fortress of the island, in order to offer refuge to the inhabitants every time the island was attacked by pirates. Some distance up from the main entrance of the monastery, which is a steep alley to the right of whoever enters the fortress, there is an opening in the walls from which the defenders would pour boiling oil, water and even lead on their attackers. The internal buildings of the monastery show various phases of construction, since they are very

irregular. The fortress is witness to the various dangers faced by the inhabitants of the island from time to time, in such a way that they had to work hard to strengthen the formidable fortress from which one has a marvellous view of the entire island of Patmos. The most ancient part of the monastery is the one looking towards east and north. Upon entering the monastery and going up the steep alley one arrives at a central courtyard. In the centre of the courtyard there is a large jar which was used to store wine, but which is nowadays used for holy water.

In the courtyard there is the entrance to the *katholikón*, or main church. The façade has a colonnade with four arches and an outer narthex. From the narthex one enters the church, which is famous especially for the iconostasis of carved wood, the gift of Nektarios, metropolitan of Sardis, and the work of wood carvers and artists from the island of Chios.

The monastery has various chapels, both inside as well as outside its limits. These include the chapels of the Apostles, Saint George, Saint Fanourios, Saint Christódoulos, Saint Nicholas, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Basil, the Holy Cross, All Saints and the Virgin Mary.

Not all the areas of the monastery are open to visitors, but one can arrive on the terrace close to the belfry, from where one gets a wonderful view of Patmos. Visitors especially go to see the museum with many treasures of the monastery, including icons, manuscripts, Bibles, gold and silver chalices, reliquiaries, liturgical vestments embroidered in gold and encrusted with precious gems.

In 1999 both the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian on Patmos were included in the list of World Heritage Sites of UNESCO.

In the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian the feast of Saint John Apostle and Evangelist is celebrated twice in the calendar of the Greek Orthodox Church, namely on 8 May and on 26 September. On those days many Orthodox pilgrims visit the island and the Sanctuary. The feast of 8 May is called "Synaxis of the Holy Powder (or Manna) of the tomb of Saint John the Theologian," whereas the feast of 26 September is known by the name "The dormition (death) of Saint John Evangelist and Theologian." Oriental tradition holds that John the Evangelist died in Ephesus, and was buried where nowadays there stand the remains of the Basilica dedicated to him, built by Emperor Justinian during the 6th century. When he was more than 100 years old John took with him seven disciples outside Ephesus and asked them to dig a grave for him, where he entered in order to die and be buried. When his tomb was opened, his body was not found, but the dust (also called manna) from the tomb became a source of healing of many sick persons and devotion began to flourish towards this relic of the "beloved disciple" of the Lord.