

## THE HOLY CITY OF THEBES AND THE ROLE OF THE MONASTERIES OF BOEOTIA IN THE CULTURAL AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION

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### **Abstract**

*Thebes is one of the areas that embraced Christianity from the first years of its development. In Boeotia, monasticism also found fertile ground, with the natural consequence of the foundation of many Holy Monasteries. The creation and development of the monasteries brought visitors and soon Boeotia became known for its monasteries. Today, the region is dominated by the Vasilomonastery and the UNESCO monument of Saint Luke, as well as 28 other Byzantine and newer monasteries, examples of excellent architecture and artistic creation. The reconstruction of the monasteries was initiated in recent years by the then Metropolitan of Thebes and Livadia, now Archbishop of Athens Ieronymos. The project of restoration and rehabilitation of the monasteries continues to this day and some monasteries have even successfully moved forward in the business sector, with the establishment of a dairy unit with publishing activity (Pelagia Monastery) or with cultural entrepreneurship (Osiou Loukas Monastery).*

*Today the monasteries of Boeotia receive a huge flow of visitors in the context of rapidly developing pilgrimage tourism in the region, but also a large number of researchers who conduct studies on the architecture of the monasteries. At the local level, an interoperability of local government bodies has been developed, in order to assist the monasteries to plan further promotion, development and easier access to them, making them a global cultural attraction.*

**Key Words:** *Thebes, Monasteries of Boeotia, UNESCO monuments, Sustainable development, cultural heritage*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Thebes is the third oldest city in Greece and one of the 20 oldest cities in the world. It is the birthplace of Hercules and according to legend, its founder was Cadmus who left Phoenicia, in search of his sister Europe. In the ancient city there were many sanctuaries, where all the ancient deities were worshipped. The most important were the Sanctuary of the God Dionysus,

who was born in Thebes, the Sanctuary of Apollo Ismeneus, the Sanctuary of the Kaverian Mysteries and the important sanctuary of the Theban Demigod Hercules.

According to the archaeological findings, great sanctuaries and palatial buildings of the Mycenaean period were found with linear B' tablets and seal cylinders of eastern origin. (Manola & Trikalitis, 2022).

Thebes continued its impressive development with the most important period being that of the Theban hegemony 371-362 BC and the protagonists in it being the Theban generals Epaminondas and Pelopidas. Thebes is also associated with the ancient tragedies as the great tragic poets, inspired by the myths of the royal house of Labdacides, wrote the masterpieces of Greek tragedy that inspire to this day, and Pindar, the greatest of the lyric poets of antiquity and a praiser of the Olympic Games, was born in Thebes (Berman, 2015).

## **2. CHRISTIAN BOEOTIA**

With the advent of Christianity and its spread to the rest of the world, Thebes receives the message of the new religion from the Apostle Paul, who comes to the city and preaches Christianity, placing Rufus as the first bishop of Thebes. The presence of Evangelist Luke in Thebes was of vital importance. He was a painter and physician who settled permanently in Thebes and died in old age; his tomb can still be found in the city today. With the establishment of the Byzantine Empire, Thebes gradually began to develop in all sectors. Its silk factories, carpet factories, tanneries and its agricultural products were among the most famous in the known world at that time. The destruction of the city of Thebes by the Norman invasion in 1147 AD put a halt on this economic boom. The great economic growth before the Norman disaster, and the direct connection that Thebes had with the capital of the Empire, Constantinople, favoured to a great extent the foundation of monasteries and monasticism throughout Boeotia. The establishment of these monasteries was linked to the productive, cultural and educational level of development of the region, with the Holy Monasteries of Boeotia being points of reference throughout time for all its inhabitants.

These monasteries and their surrounding churches are outstanding examples of Byzantine architecture and supreme artistic creation, such as Hosios Loukas (St. Luke) and Panagia Skripou, which received great financial support, such as land grants and privileges from Byzantine Empire officials. In Boeotia, apart from the royal monastery and the UNESCO monument of Saint Luke, there are 28 monasteries of Byzantine and modern times. The reconstruction of the monasteries and the foundation of new ones was the result of many years of effort and initiative by the then Metropolitan of Boeotia and now Archbishop of Athens, Mr. Ieronymos. It is important that an exhibition space was created in Aliartos, with a digital representation of Christian Boeotia. Today, the monasteries of Boeotia receive a huge flow of visitors from Greece and abroad, which testifies to the dynamic development of pilgrimage and religious tourism in the region. The visitation of the monasteries by researchers for the study of the relics, the archives and the architectural structure is also important. Another noteworthy parameter is the interconnection of the Monasteries with the local community through a form of soft entrepreneurship on the part of the Monasteries, but also through the Local Government by promoting it with modern methods of digital presentation and actions, events that contribute to the arrival of new visitors and the sustainable development of the region of Thebes and Boeotia in general.

The monasteries today are living examples of the glory of the area during the Byzantine period, the most important being the Monastery of Saint Luke. It is the best preserved monastic complex in Greece from the Byzantine era. It has two churches, the Church of the Virgin Mary and the "Catholikon" (Main Church), which are models of architecture for

Byzantine monuments of the 11th century (Conor, 1991). The church of the Virgin Mary was built first in the 10th century while the "Catholikon" was constructed about half a century later to house the relic of the Saint and founder of the monastery. In the Narthex of the Church are the best preserved mosaics, while the Monastery keeps several manuscripts, silks and encyclicals of patriarchs and rulers as well as Ottoman documents. During the Greek Revolution, it served as a centre of action and a place of proclamation of the Revolution in Central Greece (Roumeli).

An important monastery is also the Monastery of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, or the Monastery of Saggata, as it is more widely known. It was built in the 12<sup>o</sup> century on Mount Hypato of Thebes, at the site of an old temple of Zeus. The founder was Hosios Clement with the main financier of the construction of the monastery the Emperor Alexios Komnenos himself, who granted many privileges with 'chrysobula' (golden-sealed documents) to the monastery.

The Byzantine Monastery of St. Nicholas of Kambion of the 12th century is also worthy of mention, with the church being the Main Church of a large monastic complex that has many similarities with the Main Churches of the Monastery of Saint Luke. A special object of study is the elaborate decoration of the exterior facades with elaborately carved stones. In the underground crypt there are frescoes of the 13<sup>th</sup><sup>o</sup> century, of exceptional Constantinopolitan style (Lappas, 1950).

The Byzantine churches of Thebes and the wider area of Boeotia constitute a special category, while most of them were old main churches of monasteries. In Thebes, there is also a temple dedicated to Gregory the Theologian, built in 872 AD, which was designated by the Ministry of Education as an important Byzantine monument and hosts extremely important Byzantine sculptures.

A landmark and reference point is the Holy Church of the Evangelist Luke who, according to tradition, lived, taught, wrote, died and was buried in Thebes. The church is built shortly before the 11th century and is of particular interest because of its timelessness, with the oldest masonry being made of ancient stones and older architectural parts. In the right part of the church there is the urn used for the burial of Luke the Evangelist, dating back to the 2<sup>o</sup> century AD (Hieronymos, 2005). The relic of the Evangelist Luke was transferred in 357 to Constantinople and, after the siege of Constantinople by the Franks in 1204, it was transferred to Padua, Italy, from where in 2000, after the actions of the local Church, a small part of the relic of the Evangelist was transferred to Thebes and placed in its urn.

The Panagia of Skripous in Orchomeno, Boeotia, was the main church of a large monastery built in 873 by the royal protospatharios Leo, a member of the imperial court of Basil I (Vogiatzis, 199). The sculptural decoration of the church is rich with themes from the early Christian period to the oriental style and is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the Apostles Peter and Paul, which is why there is a triple Holy Step.

A monastery of the Late Byzantine period with an important history is the Monastery of Tsatsari in Asopia of Thebes. Its main church is a small dome temple with a narthex of the type of the cross-shaped inscribed tetrastyle temples, dedicated to Prophet Elias. The name is derived from the Slavic TsAR - TsAR which means king of kings, and the monastery was a part of the great monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai until 1880 (Vogiatzis, 2007).

In Davleia of Boeotia, on the eastern side of Parnassus, we meet the famous Monastery of Jerusalem, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, with its foundation dating back to the 11th century and its main church is built in the shape of a square that forms cells and in the center of the square is the "Catholikon" of the monastery. The monastery was an important supply centre for the rebellious Greeks during the 1821 Revolution. (Manola & Trikalitis, 2020).

On the southern slopes of Mount Elikonas above Domvraina in Boeotia is the Monastery of Panagia Makariotissa, with its foundation in the 12th century. The “Catholicon” of the monastery has the form of a four-concave cruciform church with a dome, while the eastern side of the church, the eastern cells and the ruins of the Holy Trapeza are preserved from the original form of the monastic complex (Lappas 1950). The monastery has suffered destruction over the years, the greatest in the recent past by the German military occupation forces, and for years efforts have been made to restore it. The monastery has recently developed business activity through organic farming (Hieronymos 2005).

There are several monasteries that were founded during the years of Ottoman rule, the most important being the Monastery of Saint Seraphim Domvos. The monastery was founded by Saint Seraphim at the end of the 16th century on the south side of Mount Helicon and is a historical monument, with the main church of the monastery being a genuine example of Byzantine style with a tetraconical dome. It suffered extensive destruction by both the Ottomans and the German occupation troops. Today, this monastery has 6 monks and remains a sanctuary for women, while its spiritual and pastoral activity can be heard in many places in Greece.

The Monastery of Lycouresis or Panagia of Myros is located near Chaeronea of Boeotia, built in the 15th century with a special characteristic of the architectural type of the convoluted cruciform with nine small domes in the Catholic Church. During the Greek Revolution of 1821 the monastery was the base of Athanasios Diakos.

Finally, an important monastery worthy of mention and historical value is the one located near Akraifnio in Boeotia at an altitude of 560 meters near the sanctuary of Ptoeus Apollo. The Holy Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin or Pelagia was built between 1200 and 1400 AD and played a significant role in the Greek Revolution of 1821. Today it counts more than 20 nuns and has a high translation and publishing activity in theological books

### **3. THE ROLE OF THE MONASTERIES OF BOEOTIA IN THE CULTURAL AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION.**

Since the foundation of the monasteries and the parallel increase of monasticism in Boeotia, their connection with the local population and the local society at large was continuous and undisturbed. Besides, the construction and erection of so many large and imposing Byzantine monasteries, most of which had the great favour and financial support of the Byzantine Emperors, required a large workforce found in the local population. Moreover, a lot of the inhabitants were employed to work in farms, which added to the economic support of the monasteries. In their long-standing operation, the monasteries have always been places of pre-school education, preservation of national consciousness, strengthening of religious feeling and learning arts such as hagiography. During the period of Ottoman rule, when national consciousness was suppressed, the monasteries of Boeotia and throughout the whole of Greece were beacons of hope and centres of enlightenment for the enslaved Hellenism and were the wombs of the Revolutionary Struggle that culminated in Roumeli, with the most important centre being the Monastery of Saint Luke. With the advent of Otto as the first King of the New Greek State, although the monasteries of Boeotia were stripped of the treasures, lands and privileges they had held for centuries, they did not stop supporting the local population.

As a result of time, many monasteries in the region had fallen into disuse. Since 1981, on the initiative of the then Metropolitan of Thebes and Levadea and now Archbishop of Athens Ieronimos, a wide program of restoration, renovation and re-establishment of many Historical Monasteries began. Even in the last decade many new monasteries and retreats have been founded. During these years of the development activity of the Monasteries of Boeotia, a model of connection and cooperation between the Monasteries and the local society and its

institutions (Local Authorities, the Region, the Chamber of Boeotia, Commercial Associations) is created and developed with very positive results, always in the context of sustainable development for the whole region.

Several monasteries have developed on their own a medium-sized business activity that offers significant benefits. The Makariotissa Monastery has a well-organised organic livestock breeding programme and a network of commercial distribution of dairy products. The Monastery of Agios Ioannos Mazaraki of Vagia Thebes is active in poultry farming in cooperation with private individuals. Another monastery, that of Pelagia, is developing a significant publishing activity. Many monasteries, the most important of which is that of Osios Loukas (St. Luke), are active in the exploitation of their land and olive groves.

Boeotia as a place close to the capital, is a destination that attracts a large number of Greek and foreign visitors, especially to the Byzantine Monasteries. This fact has a positive impact not only on the monasteries themselves, but also on the wider region in general. Citing as a special example of high tourist traffic the most representative example of the monastic complexes of Boeotia, Osios Loukas in Steiri, with an average of 250 to 300 thousand visitors per year, either independently or in organized excursion groups. Such an attendance has a huge economic impact on the towns along the route Athens - Aliartos - Livadia - Distomo - Steriri. To a lesser extent, but nevertheless worthy of mention, is the number of visitors, who visit annually the Archaeological Museum of Thebes (about 30 thousand), the Monastery of Saggata and the Church of St. Luke the Evangelist in Thebes. Another field that has been observed in recent years is the visit of a sufficient number of Greek and foreign researchers to study manuscript relics and the architecture of the monasteries, with the main purpose of scientific observation.

The Holy Monastery of Saint Luke is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This title is awarded to monuments, buildings and sites that are distinguished worldwide for their historical, cultural, artistic or environmental significance. They are managed by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, which is composed of 21 partner states elected by the General Assembly of the partner states for a fixed period. The selection criteria until 2004 were six for cultural heritage and four for natural heritage. This scheme was amended in 2005 by consolidating the ten criteria into a common list and the sites included must be of particular universal value (Vecco and Caust, 2019). . In addition to Hosios Ioukas, Greece has 17 other monuments inscribed on the relevant UNESCO World Heritage List.

The sustainable development for the region of Boeotia is a long-standing issue where the Holy Monasteries, the historic city of Thebes and the city of great natural beauty of Livadia are trying to become a permanent reality. Sustainable development is a great challenge for Humanity and in recent years it has become an important priority for governments, organizations, businesses and civil society internationally. In fact, in recent years, the European Union's policy has been more strongly targeted towards Regional Sustainable Development (Mitoula and Ekonomou 2007). There is no absolute agreement on the definition of Sustainable Development, but in 1981 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the proposal of the Norwegian Prime Minister, who defined Sustainable Development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. At the international conference in 1992, the principles of Sustainable Development were formally formulated for the first time and defined as development that provides long-term economic, social and environmental benefits, while taking care of the needs of present and future generations. In the European Union at the 2001 Gothenburg European Council, sustainable development was formally adopted as a continuous process of change and adaptation, rather than a static situation, aiming to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

generations to meet their own needs through the equal pursuit of all the pillars of sustainable development: economy-environment-society (Parris and Kates, 2003).

The treasures - Monuments of cultural heritage - archaeological sites and especially the monasteries of the wider region of Boeotia have been bequeathed by the older generations like any monument of equal value. Cultural heritage is divided into tangible heritage, such as the monuments of the monasteries of Boeotia and intangible cultural heritage such as customs, traditions, folklore, etc. The aim of the international community is to preserve the cultural heritage in perpetuity and through international organizations support the regions, governments, organizations responsible for the preservation of cultural capital. Objects of high cultural value can be kept in museums, exhibitions, private and non-private collections and there they can be preserved for future generations (Avramopoulou, 2017)

#### **4. THE MONASTERIES AS A SOURCE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TODAY**

The monasteries of Boeotia are monuments that need special care and special protection and an integral link of the local society and local government. The region of Central Greece and the Regional Unit of Boeotia, as well as neighbouring municipalities have conducted several protection programmes and facilitated access to the monasteries. Particular interest has been given to the historic Monastery of Saint Luke where work is being carried out on the anti-seismic shielding of the monument and the maintenance of the frescoes, as well as the restoration and conversion of the underground galleries of the northern wing into a visitable area. At the same time, with funding from the European Regional Development Fund and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Boeotia as beneficiary, studies are being carried out,

- A) for the fixing, restoration and promotion of the south-eastern wing of the Monastery of Saint Luke.
- B) for accessibility to people with disabilities.
- C) for fire protection (the Monastery suffered extensive damage to the surrounding natural area and old buildings without use in the fire in the summer of 2023).

Financing studies and maintenance works are also being carried out in other historical monasteries and churches, e.g. Panagia Skripou.

The exhibition and museum spaces are also important, which store rich treasures and relics of the monasteries of Thebes and Boeotia, with exhibits of sculptures from early Christian basilicas of the 6th century A.D., which are in the Archaeological Museum of Thebes, as well as Byzantine and post-Byzantine objects and archives of the monasteries, which are exhibited in the specially designed area in Aliartos. The initiative to create the Aliartos digital exhibition was taken and fleshed out by the current Archbishop Ieronymos, while it is developing and evolving with the blessing of the current Metropolitan of Thebes and Levadeia, Mr. George. In the Aliartos exhibition there are screens where high-resolution photographs of monuments and relics of Boeotia are displayed, while there is the possibility of viewing documentaries presenting all the monuments of the Boeotian Church. (Papaioannou et al., 2024 ; (Trikalitis & Manola, 2024a ; Maniou et al., 2024 ; Maniou et al., 2025; Maniou, Mitoula, 2025).

The monasteries of Boeotia have the potential to develop cultural entrepreneurship through the production of dairy products. By using Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) certifications, they can enhance the recognition and value of their products. Collaboration with local producers, the creation of trade networks, and the use of both monastery shops and e-commerce will help promote their products nationally and internationally. Despite challenges such as the need for investments and compliance with health regulations, the monasteries can work with local stakeholders for support. This activity combines tradition

with modern entrepreneurship, offering benefits to the local economy and promoting the cultural heritage of the region (Maniou, 2023b ; Maniou, 2024b; Maniou et al.,2024).

Boeotia as a destination close to the capital and having a tourist product that combines history and natural beauty of mountain and sea and thanks to the Monasteries of the chariot of development of the religious feeling of the faithful has a gradual increase in tourist traffic. Characteristically there was a great increase in tourist traffic and tourist accommodation between the years 2006 - 2010 (Manola et al., 2022)with the typically highest record of tourists staying until then reaching 117,000 in the year 2007 (fig. 1).

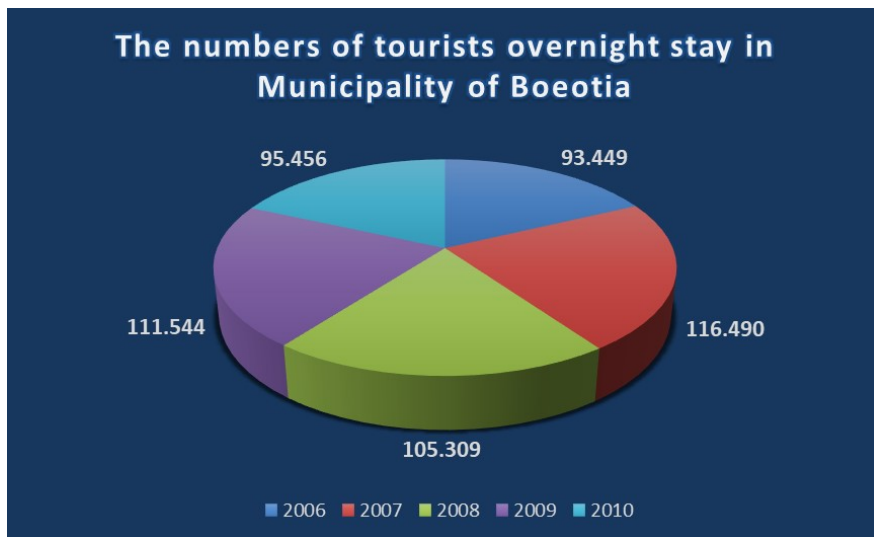


Figure 1

The most important religious and tourist attraction - monument in the region of Boeotia is the monastery of Saint Luke, followed by the town of Arachova and Livadia and the Archaeological Museum of Thebes. The Monastery of Saint Loukas has experienced rapid tourist growth in the last fifteen years from pilgrims and tourist groups, reaching almost 60 thousand visitors in 2018 and 2019, having a big drop in visitation in the years of COVID and recording in 2023 a flow of almost 100 thousand visitors according to recent data. The monastery is located on the route Athens - Arachova - Delphi and is a pole of attraction for foreign tourists and Greek pilgrims (fig. 2).

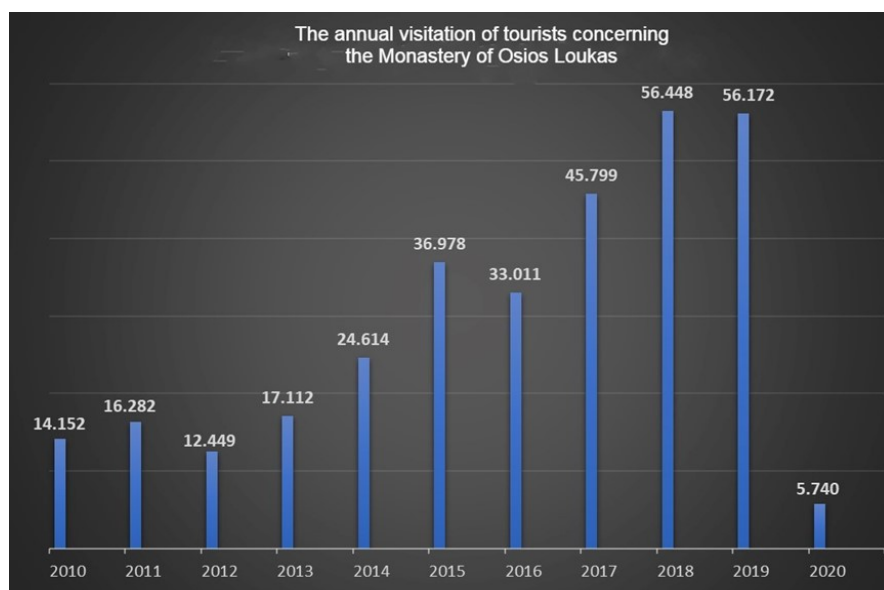


Figure 2

## 5. CONCLUSIONS – PROPOSALS

Boeotia is one of the regions of Greece that hosts several cultural heritage monuments, with a lot of them being 3000 years old. Apart from the monasteries and the Ancient City of Thebes, the region's intangible cultural tradition is also important, with ancient tragedies that originate from the Theban mythological cycle and customs such as the Vlach Wedding of Thebes, which is included in the list of intangible cultural heritage. The timelessness of the area, the three thousand year history of Thebes and its monuments has a significant positive economic impact on the region and is a magnet for tourists, pilgrims and researchers. This vast cultural heritage of the region needs special management. From what we have seen documented, and researched today many bodies are involved in the management of the cultural capital with the result that there are no distinct roles (Holy Metropolis, Ministry of Culture, Municipalities, Region, Ephorate of Antiquities, Local Authorities). The creation of a single entity in the legal form of a public entity that would coordinate all actions related to the maintenance, renovation, the creation of proper access infrastructure and domestic and international promotion of the monuments in cooperation with international organizations and universities would help in extroversion and overall development.

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