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SAINTS ALIVE!

(The Bits the Haigiographers Left Out)

“Aw, Mom!”

The Monastic Beginnings of St. Luke the Younger

Nestled high on a hillside, seventeen hundred meters from the valley floor, Hosios Lukas Monastery provides a welcome break from the bustling cities and towns of Attica, Greece. Cool breezes and a myriad of birds sweep over the beautiful stone monastery, and from the courtyard visitors can contemplate a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. The monastery’s spiritual wealth derives from the sanctity of its founder, St. Luke — sometimes called “the Younger” or “of Steiris” to distinguish him from St. Luke the Evangelist, who was originally buried in nearby Thebes (Thiva). The handsome monastic enclosure is one of Greece’s most impressive examples of early monastic architecture. St. Luke’s is also known for its outstanding Byzantine mosaics, which rival those of Nea Moni and Daphni. The monastery is home to only a handful of monks, but the miracle-working relics of St. Luke the Younger continue to be a spiritual beacon for Orthodox pilgrims.

St. Luke was born in July of 896, the third of seven children, to parents who fled the ninth-century Arab invasions of Aegina and settled in Kastorion (modern-day Kastri near Delphi.) The future saint was baptized

Stephen, and even in early childhood refused to eat meat, eggs, or fruit, living on vegetables and bread. His youthful piety expressed itself in extreme generosity and self-forgetfulness. He gave away everything he had to those in need and often came home cold and nearly naked, knowing that he would face the scolding and reprimands of his family. When he was fourteen, two monks passing through the village on their way from Rome enkindled a burning desire in him for the monastic life. Stephen secretly left home with them, later joining a monastery in Athens dedicated to the Mother of God. According to some accounts, this was the Monastery of Atheniotissa on the Acropolis, the formerly pagan Parthenon.

His mother, already a widow, entreated God day and night to bring Luke back to her. Far from intending to hinder his calling, this pious woman had taught him to value God’s service above all else, but she had not expected him to leave her at such a young age and his disappearance brought her to despair. The Lord heard her prayers and for three continuous nights the abbot of the Athenian monastery was discomfited by a dream of Stephen’s mother begging for her son’s return. Finally, the abbot called Stephen to him and curtly sent him home, suggesting that he pursue a life of quiet somewhere else with the words, “Under the present circumstances it is quite impossible that you fail to return to your mother... Her prayer, it seems, is exceedingly persuasive to God and able to overpower your own... Depart then from us, and from the borders of Attica, and give yourself back to the person who gave you birth, and from whom, for three nights now, I have undergone ten thousand harassments.”*

Stephen returned home, but left again four months later (this time with his mother’s blessing) to the area of Ionnitsa, near the shrine of the Holy Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian, and was eventually tonsured with the name Luke. He lived in various parts of southern Greece, finally settling not far from his childhood home and died in his fifty-sixth year. Luke’s fame as a healer and prophet, founded on the bedrock of an ascetic and virtuous life, won him universal affection. Rich merchants, poor villagers, military commanders, bishops and governors; all recognized him as a vessel of the Holy Spirit. After his repose his relics became myrrh-gushing and the monastery a great center of pilgrimage.

St. Luke’s feast-day is celebrated on February 7 and the translation of his relics on May 3. †

* Connor, Carolyn L., and W. Robert, *The Life and Miracles of St. Luke of Steiris*, Hellenic College Press, Brookline, MA, 02146, 1994.



Monastery of St. Luke the Younger.