

# The 2015 Path Clearing Pilgrimage

Twenty FoMA members from five different countries took part in the 2015 path-clearing pilgrimage between 8 and 24 May 2015. We divided the group into four and, as usual, tried to ensure that each person spent time in two different monasteries. The monasteries that welcomed us were Vatopedi, Hilandar, Zographou, Konstamonitou, Koutloumousiou, Dionysiou, Grigoriou, Pantokrator, and, for the first time, Great Lavra and the Skete of the Prophet Elijah.

Over the years, the project has added to the footpaths it describes and maintains, so we now have over 240 kilometres of described routes covering much of the Holy Mountain. Many of these are along roads and tracks, and there is some duplication within the various routes, so, fortunately, only about 50 kilometres need regular clearing.

Work completed included clearing to a high standard those footpaths that get the most use, for instance Vatopedi to Zographou. Less well-used footpaths, such as Hilandar to Zographou, were checked and cleared sufficiently to allow pilgrims to pass easily. New signposts and waymarks were installed, and existing signposts checked. In addition, members of the team helped the monasteries as requested, which included opening up paths to cells, clearing an old vineyard, and even offering a legal opinion on a contract. (This may not be path-clearing, but it certainly fits our aim of helping the monasteries in any way we can.) We also tested the new map being prepared by Peter Howorth and will be supplying corrections and suggestions to him along with GPS tracks and other information.

It is encouraging to hear that the number of people using the paths continues to grow, albeit slowly, and to find that an increasing number of the monks are not only aware of but also very supportive of our efforts. It is also encouraging to see that some of the paths we have been clearing regularly over the last decade are becoming a bit easier to keep clear. In a number of places softer plants are gradually replacing hard, woody shrubs, and there are fewer times when we need to use saws.

The footpath descriptions are currently available on the Friends' website in English and Greek, and there is clearly a demand for Russian, Serbian, and Bulgarian translations. We hope that we shall be able to find volunteers to make these.

Thanks are due to many people and organizations. In no particular order, these are the Holy Epistasia for supporting the project, the monasteries that hosted teams, SETE for funding and arranging travel, and the path-clearers for hard work and good companionship. My particular thanks go to Dimitri Bakalis for his firm and unstinting support, to David Bayne for his meticulously detailed work on the footpath descriptions, and to Roland Baetens who brings his encyclopaedic and practical knowledge of the Holy Mountain to the project. I must also thank Arnell for his continued guidance and wise counsel.

For the future, there are three issues that need attention to ensure that the Footpaths Project continues successfully:

1. To widen the pool of volunteers to include fitter and younger members. Walking and working on the footpaths in the southern half of the Holy Mountain and on the remote

section of the path from Karyes to Esphigmenou is challenging, so needs a level of fitness and stamina. We understand that it is often difficult for younger members to take a full two weeks away from family work commitments, so as a trial in 2016 we shall offer a number one-week places.

2. To find and encourage future team leaders. This year there only four out of twenty members who had leadership skills the necessary level of knowledge of the Holy Mountain. We identified two potential future leaders within this year's team, would like to have more.

3. To find and train replacements for David Bayne and Andrew Buchanan over the next two years. Both will continue to support and work for the project, but feel that their years of 'active service' are numbered.

Planning for the 2016 pilgrimage is now well under way, with seventeen FoMA members going for two weeks, and nine for one week. They will arrive on the Holy Mountain on Saturday 14 May and leave on Friday 27 May, and we hope ten or eleven different monasteries will welcome during our pilgrimage. Once again SETE and the Latsis Foundation most generously supporting our travel costs.

Overall the project is in good shape. Despite the amount of work needed on the paths, it still fulfils its other purpose of allowing participants to experience Orthodox monastic life, to share worship, to build their knowledge and understanding of Orthodoxy and the Mountain.

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