

# HOLY METROPOLITAN CHURCH OF ST. STEPHEN OF ARNAIA BRIEF HISTORY

In Arnaia of Halkidiki, the seat of the Holy Metropolis of Ierissos, Mount Athos and Ardamerion, is the Metropolitan Church of Saint Stephen. Right next to it is the Town Hall (old primary school) and the iconic bell tower with the clock (1882).



It is dedicated to the **Apostle, First Martyr and Archdeacon Stephen**, because according to written sources, the settlement area was part of the Holy Konstamonitou Monastery of Mount Athos, whose Catholic Church is dedicated to the memory of Saint Stephen.

In the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> September 2005, the church was almost completely destroyed by a large fire that broke out inside and was rapidly expanded. Only the stone masonry and the wooden columns separating the aisles survived the fire. The roof collapsed, while everything inside the church -with a few exceptions- was burnt (including icons, books, various other relics and objects of great historical and artistic value, the large and unique gilded wooden iconostasis and the ornate wooden carved despotic throne).

After the fire, works for the Church's restoration by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Halkidiki & Mount Athos with the cooperation of local

entities, but also with the valuable support of the citizens of Arnaia, began. Everyone's mobilization was massive and unprecedented. The initiator and soul of the whole effort was His Eminence Metropolitan Nicodemus. The initial excavations resulted in the discovery of foundations of older Holy Churches as well as graves.

The excavation revealed numerous movable and immovable finds dating from the early Christian era to the period of the Turkish occupation.

With the new archaeological discoveries, we now know five architectural phases of the Holy Church:

- The early Christian Basilica, according to a bronze coin with a bust of the Emperor Arcadius, which was found in a grave, dates back to the **5<sup>th</sup> century**. This church had a narthex, three aisles, a large semicircular niche on its eastern side and a stone part of the Holy Table, as well as annexes on both the northern and southern sides. The solid and extensive walls of the Basilica, which consist of large and small irregularly shaped stones, lead to the conclusion that it is a splendid monument of the early Christian centuries.
- In the middle Byzantine period (**10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century**), a small church was built in the central aisle of the already destroyed and abandoned early Christian Basilica. On the eastern side of this church, a small semicircular niche was formed, which was added to the large niche of the early Christian Basilica. A part of the first one is preserved and is frescoed: three pairs of feet and the lower part of garments, which probably belong to a representation of the Three Hierarchs, are clearly visible. A total of fifteen graves were discovered in various parts of the north and central aisles of the present church, which seem to belong to more than one chronological period.
- The third and newest building that was found is a large rectangular building, which dates back to the post-Byzantine period (**16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century**). This building was decorated with frescoes, which were found fallen and fragmented inside. In addition, a painting of herbal ornaments

and other subjects has been preserved in its original position on the inner side of the eastern wall of the building. Finally, it should be mentioned that this building had a floor consisting of six-sided clay slabs, which have survived in various places.

- After the revelation of the three older churches, there seems to be a fourth phase, during which the Church takes its present form, but with a smaller size. After the post-Byzantine church, a building is built parallel to the masonry of the early Christian church, larger in size, which probably belongs to the **17<sup>th</sup> century**. According to historical information, during his passage, St. Kosmas the Aetolian from Arnaia taught in this Church the inhabitants of the place. In fact, it is reported that on his departure, after blessing the place, he told the inhabitants the prophecy: *"Humanity will be shaken, the foothills of Cholomondas will be liberated bloodlessly. You will sleep as slaves and wake up free"*, which was confirmed by the liberation of Arnaia from the Turks on 2 November 1912. This prophecy was inscribed on an icon of Saint Kosmas that was on a shrine, which was unfortunately destroyed in the fire.

- The fifth and last building phase of the Church is the current one, dated **1812**, as is evident from a marble inscribed slab embedded in the frontage of the Church and from a ceramic inscription on the eastern wall of the Church. The Church belongs to the type of the three-aisled wooden-roofed basilica. During the revolution of Halkidiki in 1821, there were several damages, which were repaired in the following years.

Until 2004, a lot of maintenance, hagiography and beautification works were carried out in various phases.

After the catastrophic fire and the loss of all the relics, the gradual restoration of the Church began, along with the archaeological excavations.

Its inauguration took place a few months after the disaster, on Christmas Eve (24<sup>th</sup> of December) 2006 in a climate of emotion and joy, while five years after the fire, on 5 September 2010, the Church's inauguration took

place, thus continuing its long history.

Apart from being a place of religious worship, the Church is a place of historical and archaeological interest that can be visited, functioning as a Church-Museum for the pilgrims and visitors who come daily to get to know it, with the floor, in its largest part, being covered with glass panels so that all the findings of the archaeological excavations are visible.

The Holy Church celebrates on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, the day of commemoration- of Saint Stephen and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August which is the celebration of the recollection of his Holy Relics. This day is also celebrated by the beekeepers of Arnaia, who have St. Stephen as their protector.



#### Sources:

- Text for the archaeological findings by Spyros D. Tsafaras, Archaeologist, (*Ephorate of Antiquities of Halkidiki & Mount Athos*)
- *"The Holy Metropolitan Church of Saint Stephen"*, by Demetrios Kyros, Philologist-Theologian-Historian

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