In Greece, springs in caves have long played a central role in religious beliefs and practices. In ancient times, springs represented water nymphs. Today, springs are dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Panagia) under her attribute of the Life-giving Spring (Zōodochos Pēgē). Both ancient and Christian believers have expressed their beliefs in rituals connected to purity and water by fetching holy water from the caves dedicated to these female divinities. The water is thought to be particularly healing and purifying during the festivals dedicated to the goddesses and saints. These beliefs are reflected in the modern festival of the Life-giving Spring, which is celebrated on the first Friday after Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of Christ. During this festival, Athenians visit the Virgin Mary’s chapel inside a circular Spring House, hewn in the rock on the southern slope of the Acropolis to obtain life-giving water. The Sacred Spring is situated inside a cave over which is constructed a church (Plate 1). Many believers underscore the importance of being baptised in water from one of the many sacred springs, which are dedicated to the Virgin. Cults dedicated to the sacred and healing spring-water, have also been important for political purposes both in ancient and modern Greece.
Cleaning the Acropolis caves

At nine o’clock in the morning on Saturday, April 4, 1992, my mother and I arrive at the cave of the Life-giving Spring.\(^1\) Eirinē Melas, who cleans the Acropolis caves on a monthly basis (Plate 3), tells us it is dedicated to Agioi (cf. Agios, i.e. Saint) Anargyroi, the patron saints of healing.\(^2\) Eirinē has carried out this task since the death of her husband who worked at the Acropolis.\(^3\) Today, Eirinē’s daughter, two other women, and a young man, Panagiotis, are also present. He shares Eirinē’s religiosity, and, during our stay, he presents several newspaper cuttings about the “cave-churches.”\(^4\) I always have regarded the two as caves, but my informants always refer to them as churches. With the exception of Panagiotis’ participation, the key performers of the rituals in the caves are women. They assert that since childhood they have been brought to the Life-giving Spring to fetch holy water along with their mothers: “It has always been like this.” A clear example of how Greek children are socialised, this is a common response to researchers’ questions—a reaction that underscores the differences between the perspective of many Greeks and the more linear view of time and history shared by most Western Europeans.\(^5\)

Eirinē tells me her arrival this day was delayed by a visit to a church in Monastiraki. While she lights candles and fetches water in the cave, we chat about the annual festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring, scheduled in the cave in approximately a month. It is not clear whether the festival will be celebrated this year due to two practical problems, one the actual date of the festival in 1992, coincides with the celebration of Workers Day on May 1. The second is the relationship between the new parish priest and the celebrants: According to Eirinē’s daughter, the young successor to the elderly priest in the nearby Byzantine Church resists participating at the festival, claiming it represents a pagan custom. During the conversation, I learn the previous year, the younger priest stated he was ill, suffering from a heart disease. “But, we don’t believe that,” added Maria.

Despite the commonalities between Orthodox practices and popular traditions, tensions between the two often come to the fore during celebrations.\(^6\) In 1991, the festival was observed only after Eirinē’s son invited a priest from the University of Piraeus to officiate at the ceremony. Later that day, Eirinē and Panagiotis tell me they also plan to talk with the priest from Piraeus to ensure the ceremony will be held. Eirinē plans to be here during the afternoon on May 1, but the service/mass will be in the morning, starting at approximately 8:30.

The cave is situated within the archaeological quarter of the Sanctuary of Asklepios, the ancient healer of sickness, and today the entrance is secured with bars and several padlocks. When they reach the cave this morning, everyone washes in the spring and drinks the water. The two women assert the water is miracle-working and healing. They have been here regularly since childhood. They explain that among the many icons in the cave, the most holy represents the Panagia and the Child. In front of the icon, one of the women arranges a bunch of flowers (nasturtium). So, even if the cave is still dedicated to Agioi Anargyroi, in reality the Panagia is the one who gets the gifts.

Similarly, while the icon of Agioi Anargyroi is still in the cave, the tamata (i.e. metal plaques depicting a vow or request) are mainly dedicated to the icons of the Panagia. The most common offering is a silver- or gold-plated ex-voto representing the person or limb that has already been, or is seeking to be, cured by the icon in combination with the water. Before she leaves the cave, the flower-arranging woman fills a bottle with holy water, in keeping with a tradition she learned from her mother when she was five years old. The other woman also brings with her a bunch of flowers. She only “gives half of it to the icon in this cave, because the other half is going to be offered to the icon of the Panagia in the other cave, where we will go when we have finished here.” She states “this is the oldest church in Greece, and Paul was preaching here.” She lights the candles in front of the icon, and she and her partner light the many olive-oil lamps. All the devotees fill their bottles with water, while saying “even if it is not raining, there will always be water in the cave.”

After a while, Eirinē fills a bucket with holy water, which we carry further up the rock into the other cave-church along with a candelabrum for votive candles as well as a broom, some soap, and other objects. The church opens above the theatre of the ancient god, Dionysus. This cave is dedicated to the Panagia Cryospēiōtissa, or the Chapel of Our Lady of the Golden Cavern (Plate 4).\(^8\) Within, Eirinē or someone else lights a lamp every evening.

On the walls of the church are faded Byzantine paintings, but the cave was also important for the ancients. The two churches are from the fifth or the sixth century. In both churches we see a newspaper...
article framed and glazed. Panagiotis tells me that he put it up himself. He does not remember exactly when and where the article was published, only that he “found (i.e. read) it some years ago...the year I was on Tinos during the Panagia” (i.e. August 15, 1989). The article describes the legend behind the cult dedicated to the Panagia Cryospeliotissa in this particular cave. Eirinē and Panagiotis recount the article in their own way: “In the beginning of Christianity there was a miraculous icon in this cave. It was painted by Agios (i.e. the Evangelist) Luke (i.e. during Mary’s lifetime). Roxane, the daughter of a pagan medical doctor, was approached by Panagia in a dream, who asked the young woman “to set her free.” “She was imprisoned.” In other words, the icon was buried here. After three dreams, Roxane asked the other Christians to go along with her. By digging up the icon, she liberated the Panagia, who then appeared to her in a vision. The Panagia promised to help Roxane liberate Athens from the Goths. When their leader, Alaric, came, he wanted to destroy the city. But a light appeared before them, and Alaric, who was a Christian himself, departed after recognizing an image of the Panagia on the city-wall. The article also asserts many of the pagan Athenians interpreted the miracle in their own way—they thought the goddess Athena, who was believed to be the protector of her namesake city, had appeared on the city-wall. The miracle happened in August 395 and therefore 15 August is celebrated here in commemoration of the miracle. Unable to date the article precisely, I am also aware of the potential interpretative biases of my informants. Their accounts of the article emphasize the magical powers of the icon, and we are able to see the similarities between the pagan and Christian beliefs. Accordingly, they also maintain the icon was brought to the cave when people who did not believe in Christianity were present. The article does not say anything about that part of the story. Instead, it recounts how the icon helped the Athenians save the city from the assault of the Goths.12

My informants tell me at an earlier time, they used to be in both churches during the festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring. They always started in the Life-giving Spring, and sometimes they continued the celebration in the Cryospeliotissa. In the cave dedicated to Panagia Cryospeliotissa, they perform a memorial service called “Nine days after the Dormition” on August 23.13

There were once two storeys separated by a wooden-floor in the chapel dedicated to Panagia Cryospeliotissa. The upper-floor was situated where the ladder leading up to the icon of the Sleeping Panagia (i.e. her Epitaphios) stops (cf. Plate 4). While Eirinē is cleaning, she arranges the candelabra she brought from the cave dedicated to the Life-giving Spring on a certain place, claiming this is where the “holy table” used to be, and “there was a church above,” referring to the second floor.14 She continues explaining this actual “upper” church “is named after the death or ‘Dormition’ of the Panagia, because the icon from 1894 depicts her death.” They decorate the icon with olive-oil lamps and flowers. They also decorate the rest of the cave, but they leave all the lamps in front of the icon of the Panagia and the Child. When asked if the location of the lamps is purposive, Eirinē replies “No.” The most important icon was actually moved to Moscow; only a copy remains in the cave. Many votive offerings have been dedicated to this copy in the cave.

The first time I visited the cave, August 19, 1990, I also saw icons dedicated to the Panagia Athiniotissa and Agios Attikos.15 The cave contains many icons of different saints (cf. Plate 4), including Agios Constantine and Agios Gregorios. Several icons hang over older Byzantine frescos, which are not restored (i.e. in 1992). There is also a picture of the Holy Ephraim. He suffered martyrdom under the Turks, who burned him. His remains are in a monastery, dating to the eleventh century, in the neighbourhood of Nea Makri. According to my informants, many miracles have occurred there: Panagiotis’ cousin Sophia, who was barren, reportedly became pregnant following a visit to the monastery.16

Religious symbols, stories, and legends play a central role in nurturing the faith of many followers. During my visit, Panagiotis supplies me with several small pictures of different saints and other gifts, for instance a medallion of Agios Pandeleimon, the Healer, the patron-saint of invalids and cripples. I also received a picture representing a tree, which had a cross inside it when it was cut.17 They also tell me a miracle has probably occurred recently in the church at Kypseli dedicated to Agios Epftimidos: Last week, they found blood on the icon of Jesus Christ. They summoned experts, who were unable to pinpoint the source of the blood. I also learn that some years ago, Eirinē found all the icons broken when she arrived at the cave-church. This is why both the churches are now locked...
up with bars and secured with chains and padlocks. Aided by volunteers, Eirinē managed to repair some of the broken icons, and she received several new ones. Panagiotis lights the incense burner and emphasizes the incense is from Athos and is called desert-flower. Eirinē tells him to polish all the framed and glazed icons with Ajax and wash-leather. Meanwhile, Eirinē sweeps and dusts all the icons. In both churches she scrubs the candelabras with steel wool and olive oil.

When she has finished sweeping, she sprinkles water from the Life-giving Spring throughout the cave. Then, after seeing to it that all the lamps are lit, we return to the first church. Once there, my informants show me a hole in the ground close to the entrance sill. This is where they used to behead the priests they explain. To protect themselves, the priests used to hide in the water behind the wall on the right side of the icon. Eirinē and Panagiotis are eager to share their beliefs and interpretations with me and teach me more about the caves. According to them, an ancient column, situated in the middle of the ground floor, served as the “holy table (see Plate 1), and has relics from saints inside!19 Panagiotis emphasizes that formerly this church had a “greater church above,” and (the emperor) Constantine built it. Accordingly, the church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring was part of the large Byzantine Church-complex covering an extended area. He shows another picture of Ephraim, the monk who was burned on May 5, 1426. May 5 is now an annual holiday, celebrating the saint in the monastery that is dedicated to him. “There he lays in a silver-coffin and over his relics is the Byzantine banner decorated with the two eagles.” In the cave are many icons (cf. Plate 1) as well as many votive offerings.

While talking about icons, my informants recount a popular belief among many Greeks that the holy icon on Tinos is the work of the Evangelist, Luke. They say when King Paul became ill his family bestowed all the gold and precious stones that cover the icon. The icon in the cave dedicated to the Life-giving Spring was made in 1917, and shows, according to Panagiotis, “how the water was turned on formerly, when there was a fountain here.”20

Upon our departure, Eirinē wishes my mother and me “Happy Easter” and adds, as most faithful Greeks do, “Happy Resurrection” (Kalē Anestasē).

“New” Friday in the “White Week”: The Celebration of the Life-giving Spring

Easter celebrations in Greece last throughout the week that follows Easter Sunday. The first week after Easter is known as the “White Week” or the “Bright Week.” (Lamprē signifies both bright and Easter in Greek). On New Friday in the White Week, the Greeks commemorate the Virgin Mary under her attribute of Zōodochos Pēgē, the Life-giving Spring. The festival is a part of the spring festivals, which are celebrated during the first week after Easter. In several places, on this day, there are special services and processions followed by folk dances.21 In Athens, the festival is celebrated in the church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring, which is situated inside the archaeological site of the Athenian Acropolis.

In 1992, the Friday after Easter coincided with May 1, which is the annual Workers Day.22 This is also a general holiday also for the guards working at the Acropolis area. Approximately two months before the Easter celebration, some guards told me they believed officials might close the entire Acropolis area on May 1, which would prevent pilgrims from visiting the Life-giving Spring on the feast day.

It remained unclear for some time whether the “holiday of the workers,” a more secular celebration, would win out over the religious celebration, which is rooted in the traditional customs and value systems of the common people.23 Both festivals represent the people, but one is related to a modern and Western-oriented nationalist ideology while the other represents
the “Romeic” (or inward-facing Orthodox Christian) tradition to which the overwhelming majority of Greeks still adhere.

Finally the AcropolisAuthorities decided to keep the area open for a short period of time, and the popular religiosity of the Greeks triumphed. The festival is celebrated from 8:30 until 11:00 A.M. The guards working at the Acropolis are on duty at the two entrances to the Acropolis area. Greeks from the neighbourhood are “filtered out” from the rest of the people, and only the Greeks are admitted into the area. To the many frustrated tourists, the message is quite clear: “only Greeks are admitted, since it is their festival.” So, the Romeic (“inside”) tradition gains the victory over the “Hellenic” practice, which is “outward-directed” (i.e. the “common Ancient heritage” which the Greeks share with the Western world). As in other instances, the Romeic tradition is hidden from Europeans and other Western people. Underscoring the tensions between the popular religious traditions and official practices, the parish priest claimed the Romeic ritual was pagan and refused to officiate. Accordingly, he had to be replaced by another celebrant.

During the ceremony, which takes place at the cave dedicated to the Life-giving Spring, Athenians fetch holy water. Many people are present, old and young, female and male. The service lasts for two hours, and the officiating priest is the same as the year before. Several tables are set up outside the entrance to the cave-church. They are laid with a variety of special breads brought by the participants as offerings, particularly the round holy bread, prosphoro, which is blessed by the priest. In addition, the ceremony also features sweet breads (cakes sprinkled with sugar icing), which are baked and offered at annual festivals dedicated to saints. Inside the church several candles are lit in the candelabras near the altar (cf. Plate 7). At the altar, in front of the wall behind which is the spring, the priest is officiating. When he concludes the mass, he starts to assemble the rest of the holy bread, which he has blessed and distributed to the participants. He also packs up his briefcase, which is situated in the middle of the altar (Plate 5).

Although most of the participants have left with their small bottles of holy water and pieces of holy bread, some people still flow into the cave-church. An old priest leaves, carrying with him a bottle of holy water for the following year. People who flow into the cave-church also wash in the spring and drink from the water.

The water scoop is often used in the cave dedicated to the Panagia, the Life-giving Spring, during the festival. A man using crutches sits next to the spring occupied with drawing water (Plate 6). Supplied with the water scoop, he continually receives empty bottles, which he fills and returns to the people who are queuing up. Other people drink from the spring, sprinkle their heads, or fill small bottles they have brought for just this purpose by putting the bottles directly into the spring. In the middle of the ground floor, a basket filled with pieces of bread is placed on the ancient column (cf. Plate 7), i.e. the “holy table,” containing the saints’ bones. When the last slice of bread is taken, a faithful seizes the basket and pours the rest of the crumbs over him. While people are occupied with their own water-fetching ritual, the guards working at the Acropolis become more and more impatient: They are shouting, arguing that we have to get out (Plate 7).

But, the people ignore the officials and continue to fetch water and bread, to drink and eat, to kiss the various icons, and cross themselves. Eirinē becomes very angry and argues ardently with the head of the guards. At 11 o’clock, we are more or less thrown out. The evening service is cancelled, but the Acropolis authorities are forced to open the church, let people in, and keep several guards on duty for more than three hours on May 1, 1992.

The cults in the Acropolis caves at Athens: continuity and change

Ancient Greeks generally viewed springs and pools of water in caves and caverns as manifestations of the divine. With the spread of Christianity, most of the caves were transformed into churches, as in Athens, where we find the church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring. Here, and in other locations, Christian symbols have replaced pagan ones.

Initially the Life-giving Spring and its surroundings were sacred homes of the water nymphs. The structure housing the spring dates back to the late sixth century B.C., and several remains of votive reliefs depicting nymphs have been found throughout the area. Pan was also worshipped there from the fifth century B.C. onward. A large marble altar or altar-table (IG II² 4994) bearing the names of Hermes, Aphrodite, and Isis might suggest these gods also have been linked to the spring since they were worshipped in the area.
Sometime before the middle of the first century, a modest shrine for Isis, an Egyptian import, was established on the slope just south of the Archaic Spring House beside an even smaller temple to the goddess Themis.

So, the original cult of the spring, followed by the Archaic round Spring House, later situated within the Asklepieion, or the sanctuary of Asklepios in the City (cf. Plate 2) are very much older than the shrine of Asklepios, which was dedicated in 419/418 B.C. by Telemaertsos of Acharnaei, a devout private donor. The sacred territory of the spring was not officially marked until this last quarter of the fifth century, the era of Telemaertsos’s beneficence, when a marble boundary stone inscribed with the words ἐκοίμησις (boundary of the spring) was placed, establishing the limits of the Spring House terrace.

Asklepios owes his status and popularity to the healing of sickness. His daughter who is named simply Hygieia (Health), also illustrates the healing aspect. News of the miracle cures drew hordes of visitors to Epidaurus, the home or original cult centre of Asklepios (cf. Paus. 2.26,8), and gave rise to a regular health business. The worship of Asklepios, was introduced into Athens on the occasion of the plague of 429 B.C. According to the Historian Thucydidides: “In the city of Athens it [the plague] appeared suddenly, and the first cases were among the population of Piraeus, where there were no wells at that time, so that it was supposed by them that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the reservoirs” (Thuc. 2.48). “Words indeed fail one when one tries to give a general picture of this disease; and as for the sufferings of individuals, they seemed almost beyond the capacity of human nature to endure” (2.50). The “cure” followed a ritual, during which patients washed in the Sacred Spring, offered at an altar, and then retired to the stoa (a porch or portico not attached to a larger building) where the mysterious process of incubation (ἐγκοίμησις) was assisted by incense from the altars (cf. Paus. 2.27,1 ff.). This ceremony and the religious excitement it encouraged produced dreams, through which Asklepios was supposed to effect his cure. Many ex-voto tablets to Asklepios and Hygieia have been found showing the portion of the anatomy treated. These were affixed to a wall or were inlaid in the columns; larger votive stelai, some showing the god visiting sick patients in their sleep, were affixed to the stoa steps. The traveller and writer, Pausanias, living in the second century A.D., recounted the votive offerings he saw while visiting the Acropolis cave (1.21,4-7).

He specifies (1.21,4): “In it there is a spring, by which they say that Poseidon’s son Halirrhothios (Seafoam) deflowered Alkippe the daughter of Ares ….”

The baths were important in the shrines of Asklepios, since the ancient Greeks believed Asklepios would not accept or come into personal contact with patients who had not been washed. Accordingly, sacred springs are mentioned in all three hundred twenty documented Asklepieia. The clear bubbling water of a spring, rising out of the earth by a power, habitually regarded as a water nymph, was, in the imagination of the ancient Greeks, a gift of the water deities, the goddesses by which all life on earth was fed. Accordingly, it is quite understandable that even pure water was considered to have therapeutic properties. Ancient medicine employed water treatments in various ways for a great variety of maladies including eczema, rheumatism, gout, and psychosomatic disorders. The physician, Galen (approximately A.D. 129–199) gave detailed instructions for particular water treatments, which took place in Pergamon in Asia Minor.

In the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century A.D., all the buildings were demolished and on the foundations a large three-aisled Christian basilica was built to the memory of Ag. Anargyroi, the patron saints of healing. When early Christians built a structure on the remains of the Asklepieion, the sanctuary dedicated to the ancient god of healing became a Byzantine Church. Here, under the patronage of Ag. Kosmas and Ag. Damianos (i.e. Ag. Anargyroi), many of the healing traditions of the ancients continued under the cloak of Christianity. When the area around the Asklepieion was excavated in 1876, the cave with holy water also became dedicated to the Panagia.

Some scholars have emphasized the continuities in the cults of male divinities at the site—first the pagan, Asklepios, and then the Christian, Ag. Anargyroi. In the practical rituals of contemporary locals, however, the female Panagia has emerged as the most important saint. In antiquity, the two Acropolis caves were dedicated to the water nymphs and Artemis respectively, and later they became churches where the Panagia is worshipped. In other words, in the two caves there have been cults dedicated to female fertility and healing divinities in ancient (i.e. archaic) and modern times, even if the names of the divinities have changed. The male elements in the Classical (Asklepios and Dionysos respectively, Asklepios nevertheless together with Hygieia) and the Byzantine periods.
were intermezzos. Even as Christian divinities have replaced pagan ones, the archetypal symbols of the Life-giving Spring as well as many of its attendant rituals have remained almost completely unchanged. Indeed, contemporaries continue to fetch the holy water from the cave much as their ancient counterparts did more than two thousand years ago.

From the Life-giving Spring at Athens to other cults of the Life-giving Spring

Holy water, agiasma, is found in most contemporary Greek sanctuaries, but some sanctuaries offer water that is said to possess especially strong miracle working properties. And several caves with springs, which were dedicated to ancient gods and goddesses, particularly water nymphs, are now transformed to chapels dedicated to the Panagia. The linkages between female divinities and water are particularly striking on the Aegean island of Tinos, the site of a chapel dedicated to the Life-giving Spring—that belongs to the greatest shrine of Greek Orthodoxy.

In 1822, a pious nun named Pelagia saw a series of visions in which the Panagia ordered her to persuade island elders to search for her buried icon in a barren field and to build a church on that spot. On January 30, 1823, the icon was unearthed at the site of a Christian church that had been built on the ruins of a pagan temple to Dionysus and then destroyed by the Saracens during the tenth century. The miraculous discovery of the icon took place only two years after the first uprising of what would become known as the Greek War of Liberation. The Greeks would have to wait until 1832 before the major European powers recognized their independence.

During the violent and uncertain birth of modern Greece, many patriots found comfort and hope in the miraculous developments on Tinos. Pelagia eventually became recognized as a saint in 1971, when the Greek government also decreed Tinos a sacred island. In addition to the thousands of pilgrims who visit Tinos on their own, several pilgrimages are organised by representatives of the Orthodox Church in connection with the most important festival on August 15.

The first excavations on Tinos brought to light the ruins of the foundations of the Byzantine Church, including a deep but dry well. Some months later, in 1823, the cornerstone of the church of the Life-giving Spring was laid. Later, the icon was found approximately two meters from the well, and local leaders oversaw the construction of a big church above the chapel dedicated to the Life-giving Spring. So, the chapel or church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring, which is formed as a cave, is situated below the Church of the Annunciation. On the day of the laying of the cornerstone of the Holy Church, the formerly dry well became filled with water and has since become a rich fountain—a development that quickly became recognized as one of the most important miracles of the Panagia of Tinos. Some faithful not coming from Tinos however, believe the Panagia sent the water herself to provide a cleaning agent for her dirtied icon.

Pilgrims view the sacred water as a miracle-working agent and have long collected it in bottles, which they then take home. Baptisms are not performed in the church itself but in the baptistry, located off the chapel of the Life-giving Spring. During the Dormition of the Panagia, on August 15, many children are baptised in the chapel of holy water, in the Life-giving Spring (Plate 8).

Rituals connected with water are very important, both in modern and ancient Greece, as is exemplified in the festival dedicated to the Panagia, under her attribute of the Life-giving Spring. In this connection, it is important to mention the establishment of the festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring in Constantinople by the Patriarch in 1833. Through the important blessing of the agiasma, we again encounter holy water, a very old purification symbol, whose significance was re-established by the Patriarch in service of the national ideology in the same year the Greek struggle for independence came to a successful conclusion. In Greece, then, popular traditions and symbols merge with the ideology of nationalism. In this manner, belief systems that might otherwise appear contradictory have become complementary and interdependent.

From the Greek context to other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Springs

Resonating far beyond Greece, the underlying religious patterns found in the Acropolis caves and on the island of Tinos are also at work in the stories and traditions associated with a much more famous cave in Lourdes, France. Here, beginning in February 1858, Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879), had eighteen
mystical visions, during which the Virgin Mary appeared to her. During the ninth vision, in front of several spectators, Bernadette started to scratch the earth with her fingers and a thin jet of water began to pour forth. In 1862, the Catholic bishop decided to build a sanctuary in connection with the cave. Later, Bernadette became a nun and in 1933 she was sanctified. This religious centre has been characterised as the greatest pilgrimage centre in the world. In addition to pilgrims coming on their own, “Assumption priests,” since 1873, have organized “National Pilgrimages” in Paris. In 1963, the first organised pilgrimage for the poliomyelitis took place, eventually disabled persons in wheel chairs also participated, thus, paralleling the circumstances on modern Tinos. Next to the cave with the marble Holy Virgin in Lourdes are the fountains and the pools where the pilgrims take their baths. Today, the pilgrims, much like their counterparts on Tinos, fetch holy water from the cave in small bottles. In addition, the church sends small bottles of water all over the world at the request of people who do not have the opportunity to personally visit Lourdes. The main church built over the miraculous cave, where Bernadette had the visions, is dedicated to the “Immaculate Conception.” In the cave, a marble Holy Virgin indicates the spot.

Throughout much of the Catholic world, images of Bernadette kneeling in the cave while she receives a vision have been reproduced. One such image is found on the backside of a small church in the little south Italian village of Villammare, dedicated to the Holy Virgin under her attribute of Saver of the port (Maria S.S. di Portosalvo).42 Other places in the Mediterranean and Roman Catholic world also have holy springs, including Il Santuario Pietraanta, in the village of San Giovanni a Piro, situated in the mountains over the Bay of Policastro in southern Italy. The most important statue in the church represents the Madonna and the Child, and the spring in San Giovanni a Piro is also thought to be particularly healing and purifying.43

The ancient and Christian demands for ritual purity have their parallels in Islamic rituals, since prayer is valid only when performed in a state of ritual purity, and therefore has to be preceded by ablution, wudū’. The Koran (5:8-9) ordains: “…wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles…”44 The duty of ablution accounts for the presence of fountains in the mosque courts.

In conclusion, springs are connected to healing and purification both in the ancient Greek and Graeco-Roman worlds and in the modern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In ancient and contemporary Greece, water has been linked with exceptional powers. Water is also often viewed as dangerous, because it is around such sources where the Nereids may gather.45 Even as the official religions of the Western, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern worlds have diverged, water remains a central motif. Water has fertility-enhancing, healing, purifying, and protecting powers; in the form of holy water, it is central to many rituals designed to ward off evil and ensure blessings. It is also used in conjunction with different magical remedies. It is said the spring at the Church of Christ at Spata lends power to stones gathered there, these, added to holy water and passion flowers, make a charm which protects a house from illness.

Throughout the ages, springs have been places to which one is directed by a dream for the cure of illnesses; “silent water” is said to cure muteness and rainwater is said to cure warts. Today, people from throughout the world come to Lourdes and Tinos, because of their holy healing and purifying waters, which the pilgrims take home in bottles. In diverse cultures, modern sanctuaries are often situated at places where ancient pre-Christian people also made pilgrimages to holy springs, for example in Greece, where Agia Marina of the Holy Springs has her church next to the ancient site of a temple holy to the goddess, Themis.46 The holy city of Mecca is situated on a place where, in earlier times, were found a stone and a holy spring.47

ENDNOTES
1. I have not attempted to disguise the location of my field research, although I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the individuals who are discussed in this article.
2. See also Loukatos 1982: 153, cf. nevertheless infra and Håland 2003, 2005, 2007. It may be noted that Saint in Greek is Agios (m.) or Agia (f.), Agioi (pl.).
3. He was working here for 31 years.
4. I am particularly grateful for this, because I would probably not have been able to track them down without his help. I learned this when talking with several other persons, who found the ritual quite uninteresting compared to the other materials found in the Acropolis-area. Certainly, the two other women may also have been present because of curiosity.
5. For the problem with different histories, see Håland 2007: ch. 2 f., 6, cf. Hastrup 1992. See also infra for the problematical dating of a newspaper article.
6. Such as the Anastenaria, cf. Håland 2007: ch. 3 f., 6 for discussions of the practical problems that may arise, resulting from the (sometimes) difficult relations between the official Orthodox Church and popular religion, i.e. in practical life, we meet another reality than the official one given by Alexiou 1974.
7. She leaves the rest of the flowers in the other cave, and departs soon afterwards.
8. Eirinē always finishes her cleaning of the church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring before she goes up to the Cryospellitissa. Cf. the ritual on Aegina, where they fetch the icon of the Panagia to get rain, Håland 2005.
11. So, in this instance another meaning is added to the celebration of August 15, the Dormition of the Panagia.
12. They also tell that today the icon is to be found in the church dedicated to the Panagia Cryospilíttisa, in the neighbourhood of Omonia square. They also call it Eirínē (i.e. Peace) or the Sleep, i.e. the Death.

13. In 1992 the ritual was not performed. Some days before the festival Eirínē and Panagiotis were cleaning and tidying up both churches, but Eirínē goes to the church in Monastiraki on the festival day. She does not tell why, but it might be that they have difficulties when trying to find a priest. Early in the morning, a woman reaches the entrance to the theatre of Dionysos, asking if the ceremony is going to be performed. But, she gets a negative answer.

14. Over the table is a Byzantine wall-painting representing Agios Athanasios from the 16th century. Several dates are also scratched on the rock.

15. So one may suggest that even if the cult dedicated to Athena on the top of the Acropolis was prohibited in the 5th century, when Athena's Parthenon was transformed into a church dedicated to the Panagia after the termination of the Panathenaea in 410 A.D., it has continued in one of the cave-churches on the slope of the same rock.

16. I observe a cross, which looks like a phallus, and they tell that it is sewn.


18. It is worth mentioning that after a while the leader of the guards working at the Acropolis-area comes around. He got a copy of my permission-letter to do research in the caves. All the way, I experienced that they found it quite incomprehensible that I was interested in talking with the people performing their religious rituals as with the archaeologists.

19. Cf. ancient Greek death-cult and the belief that the power of the dead was most strongly experienced in the neighbourhood of the grave, cf. Garland 1985: 4 and fig. 1 for a parallel to the bones of the saints in the cave.

20. Panagiotis also tells that the best candles are made of honey, cf. the beeswax-candles on Aegina.


22. May Day is also celebrated with other particular customs, i.e. people gather spring flowers. With these they make wreaths and hang them on their front door.


24. Arriving directly with a delayed plane from Karpathos, I was late, and the guards would not let me enter: They take me for one of the other ordinary tourists who are persistent outside the entrance-gate, even thought most of them know why I am here. They say that, “the festival is only celebrated for the Greeks.” Finally, they admit me into the area because I am able to present the letter I got from the Acropolis-authorities, giving me permission to visit the caves in connection with my research.


26. See also Håland 2003: fig.3 and 2005: fig.8.

27. See also Håland 2003: fig.4; Travlos 1971: 127, 138, fig.178, cf. figs.192 f. Fig. 192 is also dedicated to Pan, cf. the following. Also Hdt. 6.105, cf. Ar. Lys. 720-723; Eur. Ion. 492-502, see also Men. Dysk. 432-434. For the Athenian Acropolis, see for example Hurwit 2004.

28. Travlos 1971: 127. The ancient Athenian calendar year began in the summer of one of our years and ended in the summer of the next, accordingly ancient dates are often expressed in slashed terms.

29. See Kasas and Struckmann 1990.


Hurwit, Jeffrey M. 2004. The Acropolis in the age of Pericles. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. (A longer version, The Athenian Acropolis: History, mythology, and archaeology from the neolithic era to the present, was published in 1999.)


