

# AGIOS NIKONAS

## AGIOS NIKON IS THE PATRON SAINT OF THE CITY OF SPARTA

The phenomenon of Nikon In the course of the tenth century a peripatetic holy man whose name in religion was Nikon travelled and preached extensively on the island of Crete and in the Peloponnese.<sup>1</sup> In both regions he was responsible for setting up an unknown, but large, number of churches and monasteries, testament to his extraordinary evangelical zeal and influence.

He spent twelve years in monastic training at Chryse Petra, on the border of Paphlagonia and Pontos (Lampsides 1982, 20, l. 21ff. (B.), 164, l. 36ff. (K.); Sullivan 1987, ch. 4, l. 8ff.; Bryer and Winfield 1985, 95), before adopting a peripatetic lifestyle.

After three years travelling in Asia Minor he went to Crete, c. AD 961-3, where he continued his mission to call on people to repent, from which he had already earned his eponym, Metanoiètes, Nikon the Converter. He was so successful 'he built churches over all the island' (Lampsides 1982, 48, l. 12-13 (B.), 179, l. 26-7 (K.); Sullivan 1987, ch. 21, l. 4).

Eventually, c. AD 970, he sailed to Epidauros and spent the rest of his life on the Greek mainland and in the Peloponnese. He travelled firstly in Corinthia, Attika and Boiotia preaching in all the main cities and gaining a reputation as a faith healer, especially in Chalkis and Nauplion. From Nauplion he went to the southern Peloponnese and founded churches and monasteries in Lakonia, dying in Sparta c. AD 1000.

Although Nikon was a wandering holy man famous for his long hair and ragged clothing (Lampsides 1982, 433-40) it should be remembered that he was born a nobleman into a wealthy family: his father travelled 'with his servants' (Lampsides 1982, 36, l. 21 (B.), 173, l. 26 (K.); Sullivan 1987, ch. 15, l. 14).

As such, Nikon was accepted by and able to operate among the upper levels of society. Crete had been under Arab rule from the first quarter of the ninth century until 961, when the Byzantines retook it by force. During that time the Church had emerged from the divisive controversy over iconoclasm into a unified body with a widely accepted codification, celebrated in the 'Feast of Orthodoxy', established to mark the restoration of icons in 843.

While it seems that the inhabitants of Crete had been allowed to practice Christianity unimpeded by their Arab rulers (Tsougarakis 1988, 209-10), they had not been able to take part in the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy'. So in 961 Nikephoros Phokas, the deliverer of Crete, wrote to the great monastic centres of the time inviting them to send monks and set up foundations on the recently conquered island (Tsougarakis 1988, 237-8).

In these circumstances, though there is no evidence that he was personally invited, Nikon went to Crete. His reason was "... he recognized that it was necessary for him to sail to the island of Crete, for the Divine Will called him to this" (Lampsides 1982, 46, l. 7-8 (B.), 178, l. 14-15 (K.); Sullivan 1987, ch. 20, l. 5-6).