

Greece

Europe

Teaching the Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'í Geography - Greece

Greece

Greece is a country in the southeast of Europe at the end of the Balkan Peninsula, on the Mediterranean, Ionian and Aegean Seas, with thousands of islands, and a population of about 10.4 million. Its capital, Athens, has a long history starting from ancient Greece as the cradle of Western Civilization to the present. The Greek Orthodox Church, which emerged in the 1st century AD, continues to have a great influence today.

Greece





Athens and the Parthenon



The Lion Gate at Mycenae from 1300 BC



Ancient Theatre



Greek countryside



Greece, a country of many islands

Tablets of the Divine Plan - Europe

Show ye an effort and after this war spread ye the synopsis of the divine teachings in the British Isles, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Portugal, Rumania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, **Greece**, Andorra, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Monaco, San Marino, Balearic Isles, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete, Malta, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Shetland Islands, Hebrides and Orkney Islands.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, 11 April 1916)

Knights of Bahá'u'lláh

Greece was opened to the Bahá'í Faith in 1953 by two couples from America, Amin Banani, originally from Iran but studying in the USA, and his wife Sheila, and Dwight and Carole Allen from California, becoming Knights of Bahá'u'lláh.

Sheila and Amin Banani

Sheila (b. 1932) and Amin Banani (1926-2013), a young couple with a small daughter, wanted to pioneer, and wrote to Amin's father, Hand of the Cause Musa Banani who was already pioneering in Africa, about going there. When showed the letter, the Guardian responded that Amin should first finish his graduate studies and then pioneer to a virgin goal in Europe (Finland or Greece). After the 1953 Intercontinental Conference in Stockholm, Amin was advised to go to Greece, travelling by train.

Sheila and
Amin Banani

1952



Amin Banani

“The emotions of that journey are forever fresh and vivid in my life. The excitement of the opportunity to open a virgin country to the Faith masked... the anxiety of facing the unknown. There was a sense of electric vibrancy that became stronger as the train got nearer to Greece. I was standing in the corridor leaning out of the window into the dark and crying Yá Bahá al-Abhá at the top of my voice – filling the air of that country with the Greatest Name.”

(Amin Banani, quoted in Earl Redman. 2017. *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, pp.361-362)

Amin Banani

“It was nearly noon-time on the 2nd of August 1953 when I arrived... in Athens. I had never been anywhere before where everything was incomprehensible. Here the unfamiliar script and the language, unrelated to any that I knew, were a new and isolating experience.... That same afternoon I cabled my arrival to Haifa, and five days later I received a telegram reading: ‘Assure prayers abiding appreciation. Shoghi.’”

Sheila and Amin Banani

After four weeks trying to find work, Amin secured odd jobs teaching English and as night editor at the *Athens News*, working from 4 pm to 4 am with long bus rides and walks.

“At no time in my life did I feel as vital and happy and thankful as in those days... I remember chanting prayers up and down the hill of the refugee camp, and drawing strength from the hidden sources that aid all pioneers.”

Sheila and baby Suzanne arrived on 16 September and the family moved into a flat at the foot of the Acropolis.



The Acropolis in Athens

Dwight and Carole Allen

Dwight (b.1931) and Carole Allen (b.1933) from America became Knights of Bahá'u'lláh for Greece while Dwight's parents, John and Valera Allen, became Knights while pioneering to Swaziland (now Eswatini). Dwight and Amin Banani had been fellow students at Stanford University, and Shoghi Effendi had told Dwight to go to Thailand or Greece. After marrying Carol at the start of the Ten Year Crusade, on Amin's urging they chose Greece, but Dwight had to agree to return after one year for military service. They arrived in Athens on 15 September 1953, and had to leave at the end of that year on 11 August 1954.

Dwight
Allen
1951



Dwight
Allen
1951



Carole
Allen
(right)
and
Elizabeth
Bevan
(Knight of
Bahá'u'lláh
for Rhodes)



Sheila Banani

“Last Saturday night (Sept. 26th) the four of us held our first Feast.... The last few days we’ve been entertaining Rolf Haug, the young (20) German Bahá’í on his way to Crete. He leaves tonight. He’s a wonderful boy. It’s thrilling to think of the maturity of the Bahá’í youth in this crucial period. They are certainly arising admirably to the call of the Guardian, and with such devotion and self-sacrifice.

(Sheila Banani, quoted in Earl Redman. 2017. *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, p.363)

Sheila Banani

“Everyone, absolutely everyone, loves the baby. She opens doors to new acquaintances with one smile. You’ve never seen such love for children as here....

Already we are making contacts very quickly. We’re going to hold a fireside next Sunday, ‘a very momentous occasion in the history of Greece!’”

Sheila and
Amin Banani
and Suzanne

1954



Carole Allen

“The Greek Orthodox Church was the state religion. Everyone was expected to be a member of the official church. Other religions were not allowed to teach or convert anyone. If a Greek wanted to become a member of another religion, he or she would have to leave Greece and come back after having changed faiths. We had to be cautious as to our teaching methods, honoring the rules of the state. For Americans who were used to unfettered publicity and freedom of speech, we had to constantly remind ourselves of these restrictions.”

Carole Allen

“...the Greek Orthodox Church was an important part of life in Greece, always strongly present in the social, educational, and economic fabric of the life of the Greeks as well as being the spiritual center.”

(Carole Allen, quoted in Earl Redman. 2017. *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*. Oxford: George Ronald, p. 368)

Sheila and Amin Banani

After only four months and problems with residence permits, the Banani family was ordered to leave the country, and only returned in September 1954. They put great effort into teaching the Faith, but success was dishearteningly slow. In 1956, one contact was close to the Faith, and the Guardian said he should be accepted and deepening could come later. Two more declared their faith in early 1957, and with other pioneers a Local Spiritual Assembly was formed in April 1957.

Sheila and Amin Banani

A new government, close to the Greek Orthodox Church opposed to alien religious groups, refused to extend their residence permits, and the Bananis left Greece in July 1958, 'knowing that we were leaving behind an assembly and strong and deepened German pioneers'.

Sheila and
Amin Banani
and Suzanne

1959



Greece

In 1977, when the Greek National Spiritual Assembly was formed, there were only 14 Greek Bahá'ís alongside more than 150 pioneers in the country. Even today, the opposition of the Greek Orthodox Church against other religions is very strong.