Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
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Mount Athos as the Holy Mountain
Between *Ekphrasis* and Patriographic Literature

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Abstract The article is devoted to the definition of Athos as the 'Holy Mountain': on the one hand, its history and the tradition of the encomium and the *ekphrasis*, and on the other, the tradition of patriography, as recorded in hagiography and later in collections such as the Patria of Mount Athos.

Keywords Archive documents. Ekphrasis. Hagiography. Mount Athos. Patriographic Literature. Rhetoric.

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1 Introduction

In the Byzantine world, 'holy mountains' is a term frequently employed to designate "des montagnes consacrées à la tranquillité et calme monastique".[1] Their sacred character is most commonly derived from their comparison or assimilation with the holy mountains of the Bible (Sinai – Horeb) and the New Testament (Tabor), as well as with the 'Mount of God' found in patristic literature.[2] Among all of these, Mount Athos undoubtedly occupied a distinctive position from the very outset, even though in antiquity it certainly did not possess a sanctity that subsequently carried over into the Christian era. The question here is therefore the following: when did Mount Athos begin to be designated as the 'Holy Mountain', and for what reason – in light of its intrinsic qualities and characteristics, or on the basis of a 'discourse of origins'?

2 Mount Athos as a Holy Mountain

A good starting point for our analysis might be to try to establish when and how Mount Athos came to be regarded as the Holy Mountain. So here is a brief overview of the definitions, terms, and adjectives employed in texts and documents to designate Athos, from the earliest days of monastic history on the peninsula.[3]

We begin with the acts from the Athonite archives. While in the oldest documents, by Basileios I (883), Leo VI (908), Roman I Lekapenos (934) and the deed of 942,[4] Athos is simply called 'the mountain' (τὸ ὄρος), already the chrysobull of 964 issued by Nikephoros Phokas recalls that "the emperor has planted upon the Holy Mountain the mystical vineyard" (τὸν μυστικὸν καὶ μέγαν ἀμπελῶνα τῷ ἁγιωνύμῳ ὄρει) of his spiritual father Athanasios.[5] Two deeds of the Athonite *protos* John from some thirty years later (991 and 996) speak of "our Holy Mountain of Athos" (τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἁγίου ὄρους).[6] Athos as the 'Holy Mountain' is subsequently mentioned in numerous documents from the eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth century, including the *typikon*

1 Papachryssanthou 1975, 25.

2 See Talbot 2001 and the article by Matthieu Cassin, in this volume.

3 See previous references in Papachryssanthou 1974, 37-9.

4 Papachryssanthou 1975, no. $1^{15, 20-1}$, 180; $2^{4, 55}$, 184, 185; 3^{8}, 187; 4^{9}, 191.

5 Lemerle, Guillou, Svoronos, Papachryssanthou 1970, no. 5, 104-6.

6 Lemerle, Guillou, Svoronos, Papachryssanthou 1970, no. 9^{1}, 120; no. 12^{1}, 132.

of Konstantinos Monomachos (1045).[7] The numerous later attestations logically do not deserve any particular mention.

Testimonies of considerable interest, particularly in light of the dating of the earliest examples, emerge from the Georgian monastic community in connection with the establishment of the Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos. These comprise chiefly the colophons of several manuscripts.

The *Paradise* copied in Oshki in 977 by Stephen (MS Iviron georg. 9) contains several colophons.[8] One colophon written by a different hand makes reference to "the holy abode, elect by you, of the holy fathers, on the Holy Mount, which is Mount Athos". The homiletic works of the Cappadocian Fathers translated by Euthymius the Athonite (MS Iviron georg. 32) present the commissioner's colophon of John the Athonite from the same year 977: "written on the Holy Mountain Athos, in the abode of the Holy Theotokos, in the monastery of Saint John the Evangelist".[9] John Climacus' *Ladder* of 983 (MS Iviron georg. 5) "was written in the land of Greece, in the hermitage of the Holy Mountain".[10] The three-volume translation by Euthymius the Athonite of John Chrysostom's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (MS Iviron georg. 13, 4 and 10), copied in the year 1008, has similar colophons.[11] Thus, MS Iviron georg. 4, f. 263*r*: "And written was on the Holy Mountain Athos in the monastery of the holy fathers John and Euthymius in the abode of the Holy Theotokos". We continue to find the same subscriptions with the indication "on the Holy Mountain, in the abode of the Holy Theotokos" in the following decades, see for example MS Iviron georg. 60 (1043),[12] MS Tbilisi A-1101 (year 1047),[13] MS Iviron georg. 30 (year 1071),[14] MS Iviron georg. 55 (1080-81).[15] All these colophons attest to the customary use, in Georgian, of the appellation 'Holy Mountain' for Athos during the decade from 970 to 980, i.e. at a date very close to the earliest attestations in Byzantine documents. In any case the expression "in

7 Bompaire, Lefort, Kravari, Giros 2001, no. 3, 74 (1001); Lemerle, Guillou, Svoronos, Papachryssanthou 1970, no. 20^{63}, 160 (1016); 23^{27}, 170 (1018-19); 25 18, 175 (1024); Lemerle, Dagron, Ćirković 1982, no. 1^{8}, 30 (1030); Oikonomidès 1984, no. 1, 53 (1037); Papachryssanthou 1975, no. $8^{21, 31, 36, 175}$, 225, 226, 231; Papachryssanthou 1986, no. 1, 10, etc., 70 (1089); Živojinović, Giros, Kravari 1995, no. 2. 98 (1095); Lemerle, Guillou, Svoronos, Papachryssanthou 1970, no. 54^{26}, 281 (1101-02); 62^{49}, 322 (1153).

8 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 99-115.

9 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 308-18.

10 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 49-56.

11 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 164-9, 42-9, 115-33.

12 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 539-50.

13 See Lefort, Oikonomidès, Papachryssanthou, Métrévéli 1990, 10.

14 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 293-301.

15 Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 502-6.

the abode of the Holy Theotokos" (of New Testament origin)[16] does not refer specifically to Mount Athos, since we find it in connection with Georgian monasteries in the region of Antioch.[17]

Turning to the Greek texts, as early as 960-70 in the *Life* of Peter the Athonite, the sailors, when they find themselves in the sea before the peninsula, responding to a question from the saint, say: "This is the Holy Mountain, which from its origin has received the name of Athos" (τὸ ἅγιόν ἐστιν ὄρος [...] ὅπερ ἀρχῆθεν τὴν τοῦ Ἄθω εἴληφε προσηγορίαν).[18] Also in the *Typikon* of the monastery of Lavra (early eleventh century), Athos is indicated as the 'Holy Mountain' (ἅγιον ὄρος).[19]

The documentation at our disposal thus reveals that Athos began to be referred to as the 'Holy Mountain' during the second half of the tenth century, in the years that witnessed the foundation of Lavra and other major monasteries such as Iviron.

3 Mount Athos as a *Locus Amoenus* and Dwelling Place of Holy Monks

τὸ ἁγιώτατον τουτὶ ὄρος, τὸ ὡς εἰπεῖν
ἁπάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης ὀφθαλμόν
Chariton of Kutlumus, *First Testament* (1370)

A recognizable tradition sees natural beauty, geographical location, and climate as the defining characteristics of sacred mountains. This portrayal of the mountain as a *locus amoenus* has been traced back to the eleventh century and to Michael Psellos's writings on Mount Olympos, described therein as a 'second paradise' and a 'second heaven', celebrated for its scenic splendours.[20] In reality, Athos had already been depicted in a similar fashion – apparently independently – in a hagiographic text predating Psellos by a short interval. Of considerable interest is a passage from *Vita* A of Athanasios the Athonite (first quarter of the eleventh century), for here appears already, and for the first time, an attempt to explain the reasons for the appellation 'Holy Mountain' used for Athos. The lines in question are as follows:

> like a deer he [sc. Athanasios] ascended the mountain: that very mountain which is called 'Athos' and 'Holy' (ὄρος τοῦτο ὃ

16 See Martin-Hisard 2005, 88.

17 See Djobadze 1976, 12-22. In other colophons, the words: "in the abode of the Holy Baptist", Iviron georg. 1 (year 978), see Gippert, Outtier, Kim 2022, 1-29; Iviron georg. 3 (year 980), see 39-42.

18 Lake 1909, 26.

19 Meyer 1894, 104[8, 29].

20 Beyer 1981; see also Della Dora 2011, 65-7.

> καὶ Ἄθως καὶ ἅγιον διωνύμως ὠνόμασται). Yet the custom of calling it 'Holy' prevails, whether this name is owed to those who practice asceticism there, or indeed to the favourable climate and the position of the place, since these too can contribute greatly to the sanctification of ascetics. It has a wholesome climate and salubrious air and excellent conditions of safety and tranquillity, since it is situated far removed from human intercourse.[21]

In this text, the holiness of Athos derives from reasons of different orders: the presence of numerous venerable monks who dwell there, and its physical characteristics, which evoke those typical to a *locus amoenus*.

In the three following centuries, references to the 'Holy Mountain' continue, either invariably providing this twofold explanation (the sanctity of its inhabitants and the special qualities of the place), or being confined to one of these alone. The *Life* of Barnabas and Sophronios, written by Akakios Sabaites (thirteenth century), among other things, presents the arrival of Athanasios on Athos, and his interlocutor recalls that it is called the 'Holy Mountain' because holy men dwell there.[22] Let us remember two other testimonies from the same period.

In his letter to Sava of Serbia, Demetrios Chomatianos mentions "Athos near the sea, the Holy Mountain which is such and is thus rightly called on account of its sons, the ascetics who dwell there" (τὸν παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν Ἄθων, τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος, διὰ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ υἱοὺς ἀσκητὰς ἅγιον Ὄρος καὶ ὄντα καὶ λεγόμενον).[23]

The other text is more interesting, since it is not Byzantine but originates in the West. It is the preamble of Pope Innocent III's letter to the abbot of the Lavra monastery and to the other abbots and monks, dated 17 January 1214. The text presents points in common with what we have just seen (inhabitants, physical characteristics, and geographical location), but it also exalts Mount Athos as the dwelling place and abode of God more elevated than all others on the earth, according to the Scriptures.

> He who is the "mountain of the Lord's house, prepared upon the summit of mountains, that unto it all nations might flow together" [Is 2,2] – that is, the Holy of Holies, who established the foundations of the Church upon holy mountains – chose your

21 *Vita* A of Athanasios, 37^{28-34}, ed. Noret 1982, 18.

22 Καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος· Κύριε μου, ἔφη, τὸ ὄρος ἐστιν τὸ λεγόμενον Ἅγιον. Καὶ ὁ Ἀθανάσιος· Καὶ ἵνα τί καὶ πῶς καλεῖται Ἅγιον; Ὁ δέ, ἄνδρες ἅγιοι, φησί, κατοικοῦσιν ἐκεῖσε, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν κλήσιν ἔλαχε τὸ Ἅγιον (Martinis 2012, 102-3).

23 Prinzing 2002, no. 86^{11-12}, 296.

> mountain, situated above the sea, for His faithful to inhabit: which, bearing within itself the devotion of His name and divine will, though it be arid and harsh and destitute of the grace of temporal fertility, is nevertheless among all the mountains of the world wondrously made fruitful with the greatest abundance of spiritual gifts. For adorned as it is with three hundred monasteries and a glorious multitude of religious men leading a strict and poor life, it has flourished until now with such excellence of virtue, has shone forth with such brilliance of extraordinary religion, that concerning it one might rightly say with Jacob in wonder: "Truly this place is holy for here is the house of God, and in some manner the gate of heaven" [Gen 28,16-17], where the multitude of the heavenly host, arrayed and prepared like the battle-lines of encamped armies, rises up to vanquish Leviathan, fighting ceaselessly and victoriously against the dragon, while singing wisely unto the Lord.[24]

A substantial number of fourteenth-century Byzantine texts and documents constitutes a veritable celebration of Mount Athos, consecrating its by-now central position in the monastic, religious, and political scene, continuing in the tradition of *ekphrasis*, and thus emphasising the physical and climatic qualities, and the virtues of its inhabitants, without dwelling excessively upon other aspects.

We can start with the letter of Thomas Magistros, in which a brief reference appears: "Mount Athos, that hallowed headland, truly the great and wondrous arena of virtue's contest, the most excellent shepherd of Olympos' affairs" (Ἄθω, τὸν ἱερὸν χηραμόν, τὸ μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν ὄντως τῆς ἀρετῆς παγκράτιον, τὸν των Ὀλύμπου πραγμάτων διαφερόντως νομέα).[25]

A former monk of Lavra, Philotheos Kokkinos, revisited Mount Athos repeatedly throughout his writings. He would above all echo

24 [I]lle qui est *mons domus Domini praeparatus in vertice montium, ut ad eum confluant omnes gentes*, sanctus vidilicet sanctorum, qui Ecclesiae fundamenta in sanctis montibus collocavit, montem vestrum super mare situm ad inhabitandum suis fidelibus praeelegit: qui affectum sui nominis et numinis in se habens, licet aridus sit et asper ac temporalis fertilitatis gratia destitutus, est tamen inter alios mundi montes maxima spiritualium ubertate mirabiliter fecundatus. Nam cum trecentis monasteriis et gloriosa religiosorum virorum multitudine arctam et pauperem vitam ducentium decoretur, tanta usque modo refloruit excellentia honestatis, tanta religionis eximiae claritate refulsit, ut de ipso cum Iacob recte possit quis dicere admirando: Vere sanctus est iste locus, *quia hic est domus Dei, et quaedam quodammodo porta coeli*, ubi multitudo coelestis exercitus tamquam castrorum acies ordinata et parata suscitare Leviatam victoriose pugnat iugiter cum dracone psallens Domino sapienter (*Sancti Athanasii caeterisque abbatibus et monaci Montis Sancti*, *PL* 216, 956d-958a; Hofmann 1925, no. 1, 148-9).

25 Treu 1902, $6^{13\text{-}16}$.

the words of his master Thomas Magistros,[26] while on another occasion he would invoke the verse from the Psalm (Ἄθως [...] τὸ πῖον καὶ τετυρωμένον [...] ὄρος. τὸ ὄρος τοῦ Θεοῦ, Ps 68,16) about the "mountain of God", traditionally applied to the Theotokos.[27] In another passage, Philotheos accumulates expressions derived from Scripture and hymnography: "the holy Athos, the all-powerful arena of asceticism, the venerable mountain I speak of, the homeland of monks, the heavenly Jerusalem, truly the august metropolis of the firstborn who are enrolled in the heavens [Heb 12,23]" (τὸν ἱερὸν Ἄθω [...] τὸ παγκράτιον τῆς ἀσκήσεως, τὸ σεβάσμιον ὄρος φημί, τὴν πατρίδα τῶν μοναζόντων, τὴν οὐράνιον Ἰερουσαλήμ, τὴν τῶν πρωτοτόκων τῶν ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς σεπτὴν ὄντως μητρόπολιν).[28]

Similar words were employed by another Patriarch of Constantinople and former Athonite monk, Kallistos I: the Holy Mountain "the truly authentic workshop of virtue, the second Zion, the heaven manifestly present upon earth, the paradise of Eden, the land of monks and the resting place of those living according to God, my glory" (τὸ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐργαστήριον τῆς ἀρετῆς, τὴν δευτέραν Σιών, τὸν ἄντικρυς ἐπὶ γῆς οὐρανόν, τὸν ἐν Ἐδὲμ παράδεισον, τὴν τῶν μοναχῶν χώραν καὶ κατὰ Θεὸν ζώντων ἀνάπαυσιν, τὸ ἐμὸν καύχημα).[29]

In the same vein, we find a few lines in the *Life* of Peter the Athonite by Gregory Palamas. The words, pronounced by the Virgin during her apparition to the saint, anticipate the theme of Athos as the dwelling place of the Theotokos.

> Here is a mountain in Europe, at once the most beautiful and the largest, facing towards Libya, and extending far into the sea. Having chosen this spot from all the earth, I have decided to assign it as a dwelling place suitable for monastic life. Therefore, I have dedicated this as a most private residence for myself, and henceforth it shall be called Holy.[30]

The most significant passage from this period is the work of a former Athonite monk, Joseph Kalothetos. In the *Life* of the Patriarch Athanasios, he composes an extensive *ekphrasis* of the Mount which,

26 *Antirrhetics against Nikephoros Gregoras*, 12, ed. Kaimakis 1983, 216; see Delouis 2025, 216.

27 *Life* of Germanos the Athonite, 1, ed. Tsamis 1985, 98.

28 *Life* of Saba, 6, ed. Tsamis 1985, 171[13, 17-20].

29 Rigo 2026b.

30 ἔστιν ὄρος ἐπ' Εὐρώπης, κάλλιστον ὁμοῦ καὶ μέγιστον, πρὸς Λιβύην τετραμμένον, ἐπὶ πολύ τε τῆς θαλάττης εἴσω προϊόν· τοῦτο τῆς γῆς ἁπάσης ἀπολεξαμένη, τῷ μοναχικῷ πρέπον καταγώγιον προσκληρῶσαι διέγνων ἔγωγε· ταῦτ' ἄρα καὶ ἰδιαίτατον ἐνδιαίτημα τοῦτ' ἀφιέρωσα ἐμαυτῇ, καὶ Ἅγιον τοὐντεῦθεν κεκλήσεται (*Life* of Peter the Athonite, 11, ed. Chrestou 1992, 167[21-26]).

despite its length, deserves to be quoted in full. The elements drawn from his predecessors are here revisited and amplified to assert that this is the only place on all earth that may truly be called holy.

> This place is situated above all the earth and is the most beautiful of all sights anywhere on earth. For as soon as one appears and opens one's eyes, casting one's gaze on both sides, it presents an easy and smooth view from all directions, and after entertaining the viewer for many hours, it sends them on their way rejoicing. Islands dance around Mount Athos at a distance, some larger and some smaller, some uninhabited and some inhabited, fulfilling the role, one might say, of most loyal handmaidens and almost rejoicing in their servitude, keeping watch at night, standing guard, and already reporting approaching plots. Of all the sights on earth, this place alone does not take second place. You might pass by the Colossus of Rhodes, the pyramids of Egypt, the walls of Babylon, and all other sights that have been destroyed by time, upon looking at this. It stretches out towards the sea, as if extending a hand in welcome to those coming in from the sea; you might call it a mainland among islands and an island among mainlands. It is possible both to sail around it and to sail alongside it. It presents all around itself various anchorages and harbors for those coming in from the sea, and provides every other entertainment and ease for those who stop over from the neighboring land for any need. And for those who have come from wherever on earth for observation, and everyone who has been hosted for many days, having stopped at whichever of the dwellings there they happen to, and having made their soul better along with their body, is sent on to the neighboring place. It is possible to see, as if in the role of an outpost, the well-walled and enclosed populous fortresses, or rather monasteries, preserving the shape of a dance or, as one might say, like armed soldiers encircling Mount Athos itself and blocking the invasions of approaching enemies and fighting in front for those behind and awarding peace to the rest of the system of sacred dwellings. Inside these are strong towers, well-walled and lying in a circle and standing guard, like some hoplite and cavalry phalanx, for the unwalled dwellings. In the very middle of the place is another small city, strongly enclosed and urbanized; you might say, upon seeing it, that it lies in the role of an acropolis. Around it are lesser and greater ascetic dwellings, priding themselves on beauty and size, like bodyguards to a king and rejoicing in it, and there is no part which does not provide the greatest benefit to the rest, thus leaving no place idle for those wishing to praise. For the rough places and ravines and foothills, which might not unreasonably have been scorned by some, we now invest with even more honor and reverence than the others.

They truly nourish beautiful men, watered by streams, reaching up to the very untouchable heaven in the loftiness of their minds, and not shedding their shady leaf in the many-whirled turns of winds – that is, their unadulterated and firm faith in God and unshakeable confidence, which are naturally the first to grow as they are also protective of the fruits, and all that they might say and do is well prospered and directed. But enough about these things. For it is not the present occasion to string together a long discourse about these matters. I will say only this one brief thing: that what the eye is in the body and the king in the royal palace and the inner sanctum in sacred places, or to speak more aptly, what the sun is in this terrestrial world of ours, this sacred place might be to other places and people, which alone of all the earth has long been rich in the appellation of holiness.[31]

31 Ὑπέρκειται μὲν γὰρ οὗτος ὁ χῶρος ἁπάσης γῆς καὶ τῶν ὅπου δὴ γῆς θεαμάτων ἐστὶν ὁ κάλλιστος. Εὐθὺς γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀναφανέντα τε καὶ τὰ ὄμματα ἐκπετάσαντα καὶ τὰς ὄψεις ἑκατέρωθεν ἐπιβαλόντα ῥᾳδίαν καὶ ὁμαλὴν πανταχόθεν προβάλλεται τὴν θέαν καὶ τὸν θεατὴν ἐπὶ πολλαῖς ταῖς ὥραις ψυχαγωγήσας χαίροντα ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσω παραπέμπει. Περιχορεύουσι δὲ περὶ τὸν αὐτὸν Ἄθω νῆσοι ἐκ διαστήματος, μεγέθει μείζους τε καὶ ἐλάττους, ἄοικοί τε καὶ οἰκούμεναι, θεραπαινίδων, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, εὐνουστάτων τάξιν ἐκπληροῦσαι καὶ μονονοὺ ἐπὶ τῇ δουλείᾳ σχεδὸν ἐπαγαλλομένων, νυκτοφυλακοῦσί τε αὖ καὶ προφυλάττουσι καὶ τὰς ἐπιούσας ἐπιβουλὰς ἤδη καταμηνύουσι. Μόνος γὰρ οὗτος ὁ χῶρος τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς θεαμάτων τὰ δευτερεῖα οὐκ ἀποφέρεται. Παρέλθοις ἂν καὶ Ῥόδου κολοσσὸν καὶ Αἰγύπτου πυραμίδας καὶ τείχη Βαβυλώνεια καὶ ἄλλ' ὅσα τῶν θεαμάτων τῷ χρόνῳ πάντα καταλυθέντα πρὸς τοῦτον εὐθὺς ἀπιδών. Προμήκης μέν ἐστι πρὸς τὸ πέλαγος, ὡσπερεί τις χεῖρα προτείνων εἰς ὑποδοχὴν τοῖς ἐκ πελάγους καταίρουσιν, εἴποις ἂν ἤπειρον ἐν νήσοις καὶ ἐν ἠπειρώταις νῆσον. Ἔξεστιν οὖν ἐν τούτῳ καὶ περιπλεῖν καὶ παραπλεῖν. Προΐσχεται δὲ κύκλῳ περὶ αὐτὸν παντοίους ὅρμους καὶ λιμένας τοῖς ἐκ πελάγους καταγομένοις καὶ πᾶσιν ἄλλην ψυχαγωγίαν καὶ ῥαστώνην τοῖς κατὰ χρείαν ἐκ χέρσου γείτονος καταλύουσι. Καὶ ὅθεν γῆς καθ' ἱστορίαν ἀφιγμένοις καὶ πᾶς τις ἐπὶ πολλαῖς ταῖς ἡμέραις ξενισθεὶς εἰς οἵαν οὖν τύχῃ καταλύσας τῶν ἐκεῖσε μονῶν καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν βελτίω σὺν τῷ σώματι ποιήσας πρὸς τὴν γείτονα παραπέμπεται. Ἔνεστι δὲ ὡς ἐν προβόλου μοίρᾳ ὁρᾶν τὰ καλῶς διατετειχισμένα καὶ περιπεφραγμένα πολυάνθρωπα φρούρια, εἴτουν μοναστήρια, χοροῦ σχῆμα σῴζοντα ἤ, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, ἴσα καὶ στρατιώταις ἐνόπλοις περὶ αὐτὸν Ἄθω περιειλούμενα καὶ τὰς εἰσβολὰς τῶν ἐπιόντων πολεμίων ἀποφράττοντα καὶ προμαχοῦντα τῶν ὄπισθεν καὶ εἰρήνην τῷ λοιπῷ τῶν ἱερῶν ἐπαύλεων συστήματι βραβεύοντα. Ἐνδοτέρω δὲ τούτων πύργοι στερροὶ καλῶς περιτετειχισμένοι καὶ κυκλικῶς περικείμενοι καὶ προφυλακοῦντες, οἵα τις ὁπλιτικὴ καὶ ἱππικὴ φάλαγξ, τὰς ἀτειχίστους μονάς. Ἐπ' αὐτοῦ δὲ τοῦ μεσαιτάτου χώρου πόλισμα ἕτερον στερρῶς περιπεφραγμένον καὶ πεπολισμένον, εἴποις ἂν ἰδὼν ἐν μοίρᾳ ἀκροπόλεως κεῖσθαι. Περὶ αὐτὸ δὲ ἧττο καὶ μείζω ἀσκητήρια, κάλλει καὶ μεγέθει σεμνυνόμενα ἴσα καὶ βασιλεῖ δορυφοροῦντα καὶ αὐτῷ ἐπαγαλλόμενα καὶ οὐδέν ἐστι μέρος, ὃ μὴ πλείστην ὠφέλειαν τῷ λοιπῷ μέρει πορίζον ἐστίν, οὕτως οὐδένα τόπον ἀργὸν ἀπολείπει τοῖς εὐφημεῖν βουλομένοις. Τὰς γὰρ δυσχωρείας καὶ τοὺς χαραδρεῶνας καὶ τὰς ὑπωρείας, αἳ οὐκ ἀπεικότως ἂν ἀπηξιώθησαν παρ' ἐνίοις, ἤδη καὶ πλείω τῶν ἄλλων τὴν τιμὴν καὶ τὴν αἰδὼ αὐτὰς περιτίθεμεν. Τρέφουσι μὲν οὖν τῷ ὄντι ὡραίους ἄνδρας παρ' ὕδατα ποτιζομένους ἄχρι καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀψαύστου οὐρανοῦ διήκοντας τῷ μεταρσίῳ τοῦ νοὸς καὶ τὸ εὔσκιον φύλλον οὐκ ἀπορρυέντας ἀνέμων πολυελίκτοις στροφαῖς, ἤτουν τὴν εἰς θεὸν ἀπαραποίητον καὶ ἑδραίαν πίστιν καὶ ἀπαρεγχείρητον πεποίθησιν, ἃ καὶ πρῶτα πεφύκασι φύεσθαι ὡς καὶ προφυλακτικὰ τῶν καρπῶν ὄντα καὶ πάνθ' ὅσα ἂν λέγωσι καὶ πράττωσι καλῶς εὐοδούμενά τε καὶ κατευθυνόμενα. Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν τούτων ἅλις. Οὐδὲ γὰρ τοῦ παρόντος καιροῦ μακρὰ περὶ τούτων συνείρειν. Τοῦτο δὲ μόνον καὶ σύντομον

There is also the extensive passage by Nikephoros Gregoras on Mount Athos as a *locus amoenus* (which, for reasons of space, we cannot quote), describing its physical features and inhabitants, with an evocation of antiquity and Xerxes' Isthmus.[32]

From the prologues of certain documents from the period, issued for the Athonite monasteries, we may glean similar indications. Should be mentioned first the chrysobull of the Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos of 1312, which reaffirms that the appellation 'holy' for Athos derives from the physical characteristics of the place and from the virtue of its inhabitants:

> Mount Athos is truly wonderful and most delightful in many ways, and no less so than the renowned places in the East. If one were to call it another paradise or a starry heaven or even a dwelling place of all virtues, one would not be far from the truth. For there one can see holy monasteries and pious retreats, flourishing and adorned with beauty, size, and all other delights. Moreover, there are orders and communities of monks, almost beyond number, adorned with contemplation and practice, and shining like bright stars in the radiance of their life, being outside the world and the flesh, constantly meditating on divine matters and delighting in them as much as possible, receiving illumination and enlightenment from there, and desiring nothing else but to depart and be with Christ. These are the trees that the Lord planted (Gen 2,8), heavy with the fruits of the divine spirit. These are those who dwell in deserts and mountains, and are confined in caves and holes of the earth, of whom the divine Paul speaks (Heb 11,38). It is likely that from their virtue and lofty way of life and conduct that this mountain has received the name of holiness. And if it is also because this place happens to be suitable, favorable, and very fitting for the reception of earnest and pious men, or because it is otherwise conducive to greater virtue and holiness for those who dwell in it, and hence has received this appellation, this too is certainly not far from the truth.[33]

ἐρῶ, ὡς, ὅπερ ἐν σώματι ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ βασιλεὺς ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις καὶ ἐν ἱεροῖς τὰ ἄδυτα ἢ προσφυέστερον εἰπεῖν, ὅπερ ὁ ἥλιος ἐν τῷ καθ' ἡμᾶς περιγείῳ τῷδε, τοῦτο καὶ οὗτος ὁ ἱερὸς χῶρος γένοιτ' ἂν τοῖς ἄλλοις τόποις τε καὶ ἀνθρώποις, ὃς καὶ μόνος ἁπάσης τῆς γῆς τὴν τῆς ἁγιότητος ἐπωνυμίαν ἐκ μακροῦ τοῦ χρόνου πλουτεῖ (*Life* of Athanasios, 8, ed. Tsamis 1980, 461[241]-462[294]).

32 *Historia Byzantina*, 14: 7, 3-4, eds Schopen 1829-30; Bekker 1855, 2: 714[20]-718[7]. *Antirrhetika*, 1: 1, 1, ed. Beyer 1976, 123-9.

33 Τὸ ὄρος τοῦ Ἄθω ἔστι μὲν ὡς ἀληθῶς τά τε ἄλλα θαυμαστὸν καὶ τερπνότατον καὶ τῶν πρὸς ἀνατολὰς κειμένων καὶ διαβεβοημένων οὐκ ἔλαττον· εἰ δὲ καὶ παράδεισον ἕτερον ἢ κατάστερον οὐρανὸν ἢ καὶ ἀρετῶν πασῶν καταγώγιον τοῦτ' ἄν τις καλέσειεν, οὐκ ἂν καὶ ἁμάρτοι τοῦ δέοντος. Σεμνεῖα γὰρ ἐκεῖσε καὶ εὐαγῆ φροντιστήρια ἔστιν ἰδεῖν κάλλει τὲ καὶ μεγέθει καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσι τερπνοῖς ἐνευθηνούμενα καὶ ὡραϊζόμενα ἔτι τὲ

The contemporary *sigillion* of Patriarch Niphon attests that the mountain, anciently known as Athos, was thereafter designated "Holy" by Christ himself.[34]

The chrysobull of Andronikos II Palaiologos for the monastery of Kutlumus, dated 1322, recalled that Athos, consecrated to God from the beginning, is called 'Holy', and subsequently mentioned its monasteries, inhabited by spiritual soldiers.[35]

4 The Holy Mountain as the Virgin's Legacy: from the *Life* of Peter the Athonite to the End of the Fourteenth Century

The appellations and definitions, employed for Mount Athos, offered an explanation of the qualities inherent to the place, yet revealed nothing concerning the reasons and origins of its special status distinguishing it from all other mountains on earth. To endeavour to comprehend this, we must consider when the idea of Athos as the rightful inheritance of the Mother of God, and consequently that of a special bond between the Holy Mountain and the Virgin emerged. In other words, a 'discourse of origins' serves as the explanation for the sanctity of the place.

The starting point is undoubtedly the *Life* of Peter the Athonite, written by Nicephorus in the second half of the tenth century, 960-70 ca., which contains the story of a mysterious figure who is said to have been the first monk of the Holy Mountain.[36] There is no need

μοναζόντων τάγματα καὶ συστήματα, κρείττω μὲν σχεδὸν ἀριθμοῦ, θεωρία δὲ καὶ πράξει κοσμούμενα, καὶ ὡς ἀστέρας δεικνύμενα φαεινοὺς τῇ τε τοῦ βίου φαιδρότητι καὶ τῷ ἔξω κόσμου καὶ σαρκὸς εἶναι καὶ τὰ θεῖα δια παντὸς μελετᾶν καὶ τούτων κατατρυφᾶν ὡς ἐνόν, κἀκεῖθεν τὸν φωτισμὸν καὶ τὰς ἐλλάμψεις εἰσδέχεσθαι καὶ μηδὲν ἄλλο ποθοῦντας ἢ τὸ ἀναλῦσαι καὶ συνεῖναι Χριστῷ· ταῦτά ἐστι τὰ ξύλα ἃ ὁ Κύριος ἐφύτευσε τοῖς τοῦ θείου πνεύματος καρποῖς ἐπιβρίθοντα, οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐν ἐρημίαις καὶ ὄρεσι διατρίβοντες καὶ σπηλαίοις καὶ ὀπαῖς τῆς γῆς συγκλειόμενοι, περὶ ὧν ὁ θεῖος Παῦλος φησίν. Ἐκ δὴ τῆς τούτων ἀρετῆς καὶ ὑψηλῆς πολιτείας καὶ ἀγωγῆς καὶ τὴν τῆς ἁγιωσύνης ἐπωνυμίαν τὸ ὄρος τοῦτο προσείληφε κατὰ τὸ εἰκός. Εἰ δὲ καὶ ὅτι εὔθετον ἔλαχεν εἶναι τοῦτο καὶ δεξιὸν καὶ ἄγαν ἁρμοδιώτατον εἰς ὑποδοχὴν ἀνδρῶν σπουδαίων καὶ εὐλαβῶν ἢ καὶ ἄλλως ἀρετῆς μείζονος πρόξενον καὶ ἁγιότητος τοῖς ἐν αὐτῷ διατρίβουσι κἀντεῦθεν καὶ τὴν προσηγορίαν ταύτην μετείληφε, καὶ τοῦτο πάντως οὐ πόρρω τῆς ἀληθείας ἐστίν (Papachryssanthou 1975, no. 12[47-77], 251-2; preamble most likely written by Theodoros Metochites, see Beyer 1981, 194).

34 Ὄρος ἔστι μέγα περὶ τὰ δυτικὰ πάλαι μὲν τὴν τοῦ Ἄθω λαχὸν ἐπωνυμίαν, ὕστερον δ' ἐφ' ἡμῶν ὧν βασιλεὺς καὶ Χριστὸς ὁ Θεὸς ἅγιον μετονομασθέν, ἐκ τῆς ἐκεῖσε κατὰ Θεὸν συνεχοῦς ἀρετῆς μετονομασθὲν οὕτω (ed. Papachryssanthou 1975, no. 11[26-43], 246).

35 Ὅτι μὲν γὰρ θεῖος ὁ χῶρος οὗτος τοῦ Ἄθω καὶ τῷ Θεῷ ἀφωσίωτο ἐξαρχῆς καὶ ἅγιόν ἐστιν ὄρος καλούμενον, τὰ δ' ἔν αὐτῷ φροντιστήρια ὅσα καὶ πόλεις ἄλλαι, ἔν οἷς δῆτα καὶ πνευματικοὶ ὁπλῖται τοῦ ἀθανάτου Θεοῦ οὐκ ὀλίγοι τυγχάνουσι (ed. Lemerle 1988, no. 11[6-8], 62).

36 See Papachryssanthou 1974; Rigo 1999.

here to dwell on the composition of the *Life*, which resulted from the assemblage of diverse materials, nor on the author's evident intentions as spokesman for the eremitic circles of Athos, which were mistrustful if not hostile to the foundation and development of the great cenobitic monasteries (foremost among them the Lavra). Before Peter's miraculous arrival upon the Mountain by sea, the Virgin appears to him together with Saint Nicholas and delivers to him a prophecy concerning his dwelling and the glorious monastic future of the Holy Mountain. In these words it is explicitly affirmed for the first time that the mountain is the Virgin's own inheritance, and we find ourselves clearly before the immediate precedent of what would be reasserted in various forms in the modern period.

> Her dwelling shall be upon Mount Athos, which at my behest I have received as an inheritance from my Son and God. There those who forsake worldly turbulence and embrace spiritual things, according to their strength, and invoke my name in truth, faith, and disposition of heart, shall pass their present life in the absence of care and shall gain the life to come through works pleasing to God. This mountain affords me great delight, and my spirit rejoices upon it. For I know with certainty that a time shall come when it will be filled with monks from one end to the other, and if they follow the salvific commandments, the mercy of my Son and God shall not depart from them. And I shall spread them abroad in the south and in the north of the mountain, and they shall possess it from sea to sea, and I shall make their name renowned in every land beneath the sun, and I shall protect those who persevere upon this mountain.[37]

In the late Byzantine period, the *Life* of Peter written by Nicholas gained a certain circulation, though still limited to Mount Athos, as evidenced by the manuscripts that preserve it.[38] Further proof of this renewed popularity is found, first and foremost, in the *Life*

37 Ἐν τῷ τοῦ Ἄθω ὄρει ἔσται ἡ ἀνάπαυσις αὐτοῦ, ὅπερ εἰς κλῆρον ἐμὸν αἰτησαμένη εἴληφα παρὰ τοῦ ἐμοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ Θεοῦ, ὅπως οἱ τῶν κοσμικῶν ἀναχωροῦντες συγχύσεων, καὶ τῶν πνευματικῶν, ὅση δύναμις, ἀντεχόμενοι, καὶ τὸ ἐμὸν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ πίστει καὶ διαθέσει ψυχῆς ἐπικαλούμενοι ὄνομα, τήν τε παροῦσαν ζωὴν ἀμέριμνον διανύωσι, καὶ τὴν μέλλουσαν δι' ἔργων θεαρέστων κληρονομῶσι. πάνυ γὰρ ἐπιτερπῶς ἔχω τούτου, καὶ λίαν μου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἐπευφραίνεται, καὶ γὰρ σαφῶς οἶδα ὅτι ἔσται ποτὲ ὅτε πλησθήσεται τοῦ τάγματος τῶν μοναχῶν ἀπ' ἄκρων ἕως ἄκρων αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ ἔλεος τοῦ ἐμοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ Θεοῦ, εἴ γε καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν σωτηριῶν ἐντολῶν ἀντέχονται, εἰς τὸν σύμπαντα αἰῶνα ἀπ' αὐτῶν οὐ διασκεδασθήσεται. καὶ πλατυνῶ αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ νότον καὶ βορρᾶν τοῦ εἰρημένου ὄρους, καὶ κατακυριεύσουσιν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ θαλάσσης ἕως θαλάσσης, καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτῶν ἐν πάσῃ τῇ ὑφηλίῳ περιβόητον θήσω, καὶ τῶν διακαρτερούντων ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπερασπιῶ (ed. Lake 1909, 25[13-29]).

38 See Papachryssanthou 1974, 20-1; https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr (*BHG* 1505).

written by Gregory Palamas (*BHG* 1506) during his youth, which was subsequently included in the third book of his works alongside the *Homilies* and ascetic-spiritual writings.[39] In the very last years of Byzantium (in any case, within the fifteenth century), a 'short' *Life* of Peter was composed – a notice for the saint's *synaxarion*.[40] Further evidence of the popularity of the *Vita* in the hesychastic circles of the mountain is provided by the *Life* of Maximus the Hutburner written by Theophanes: the saint, upon arriving at Mount Athos, settled at the Lavra, where he read the *Life* of Athanasios and that of Peter as models of the cenobitic and eremitic life respectively.[41]

Between the close of the thirteenth century and the half of the fourteenth, various sources make mention of small settlements on Athos associated with the name of Peter the Athonite:[42] the oratory "of the Mother of God and of Peter the Athonite", belonging to the hieromonk Neilos, and the hermitage in which Niphon the Athonite took up his abode.[43] Some Russian manuscripts from the first half of the fifteenth century were copied, as the colophons record, "in the vicinity of the Lavra of Saint Athanasios, under the protection of Saint Gregory Palamas and of our father Peter the Athonite, in the house of the holy and glorious prophet Elijah".[44]

The iconographic evidence concerning Peter also dates from that period: the church of the Protaton at Karyès.[45]

Let us return to the prophecy of the Mother of God addressed to Peter, as recounted in the *Life* written by Nicholas (*BHG* 1505e)**.** This page was greatly popular and was transcribed on its own, in the form of an extract, throughout numerous manuscripts from the first half of the fourteenth century.

It was thus inscribed in the margins of an already mentioned manuscript belonging to the oratory of Peter the Athonite, at the uttermost extremity of the Athonite peninsula, not far from Lavra, MS Paris, BnF Coislin 109 (*Diktyon* 49253), ff. 249*r*-250*v* † Ἐκ τοῦ βίου τοῦ ὁσιωτάτου καὶ ἁγίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Πέτρου τοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἄθῳ ἁγίῳ ὄρει ἀσκήσαντος ἔτη νγ′. Inc.: Ἐρχομένου δὲ αὐτοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πλοίου, καὶ ἔν

39 Chrestou 1992, 161-91; see Rigo 1995.

40 Halkin 1988; the oldest manuscript is İstanbul, Patriarchike Bibliotheke, Hagias Triados 68 (a. 1508) (*Diktyon* 33566).

41 Theophanes, *Life* of Maximus, 6, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 72^{19}-73^{4}; see also Niphon, *Life* of Maximus, 2: here, 44^{5-6}.

42 For the modern period see Papachryssanthou 1974; Rigo 1999, 43-5.

43 See Rigo 2026a, 20, 41-2.

44 Pavlikianov 1997, 82-5; the settlement of the Prophet Elijah, located in Mylopotamos, see Smyrnakis, 420.

45 See Tomeković 2011, 244. We will return to the hagiography and iconography of Peter in the fourteenth century in Byzantium and in the South Slavic milieu on another occasion.

τινι τόπῳ ἡσύχῳ προσορμοσθέντος, des.: καὶ τῶν διακαρτερούντων ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπερασπῶ (*Vita*, ed. Lake 1909, 25[1-29]).

A slightly longer excerpt is preserved in another fourteenth-century manuscript of Athonite origin,[46] MS Città del Vaticano, BAV Vat. gr. 375 (*Diktyon* 670006), ff. 199*v*-200*r* Ἐκ τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἁγίου Πέτρου τοῦ Ἀθωνίτου, inc., ed. Τούτων οὕτω γενομένων καὶ τοῦ Κυρίου δοξάσαντος ἐν πᾶσι τὸν ἴδιον οἰκέτην, des.: καὶ τῶν διακαρτερούντων ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπερασπῶ (*Vita*, ed. Lake 1909, 24[35]-25[29]).

The prophecy of the Theotokos to Peter continued to be copied in the subsequent centuries as well, at times together with the first chapter of the *Patria* of Athos.[47]

- **MS Athos, Monê Koutloumousiou 56 (3125)** (16th century) (Diktyon 26081)
  ff. 215v-216r Τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου περὶ τῷ ἁγίῳ ὄρει τοῦ Ἄθω ὅπερ εἰς κλῆρον αἰτησαμένη εἴληφε παρὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ Θεοῦ αὐτῆς, inc.: Μικροῦ μετασχὼν ὕπνου, des.: τῷ Κυρίῳ ἀποδοθῆναι πεποίηκε (*Vita*, ed. Lake 1909, 25[4-35]).
  f. 216rv Ὅρα φοβερὸν τῆς Θεοτόκου θαῦμα ὧς ἔγεινεν εἰς τὸ ἅγιον ὄρος, inc.: Τοιγὰροῦν ὁ θεῖος Σιναΐτης ἀπαῖρον εἰς τὰ Παρόρια κατὰ τὴν τοῦ μεγάλου Μαξίμου τοῦ Καψοκαλλύβη πρόρρησιν, des.: πρὸς τὴν θείαν Λάβραν, καὶ γεγονὼς δοκιμότατος, αὐτόθι καταλύει τὸν βίον. Ioannikios Kochilas (Life of Maximus the Hutburner, 32, ed. Patapios 2007, 547-8).
- **MS Athos, Monê Xeropotamou 175 (2508)** (17th century) (Diktyon 30728)
  ff. 344v-346v Ἐκ τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἁγίου Πέτρου τοῦ Ἀθωνίτου, inc.: Τούτων οὕτω γενομένων, des.: τὸ σκάφος ἔστη παρ' ἐλπίδα (*Vita*, ed. Lake 1909, 24[35]-25[7]).
  ff. 346v-350v Διήγησις περὶ τῆς ἀφίξεως τῆς Θεοτόκου ἐν τῷ ἁγιωνύμῳ ὄρει τοῦ Ἄθω, inc.: Μετὰ τῆν ἀνάστασιν, des.: τοῦ Ἰωάννου λεχθέντα, καὶ οὕτω ἔχει τὸ ἀληθὲς καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὕτως περὶ τούτου (Patria, ed. Livanos 2025, 62[3]-64[22]).
- **MS Athos, Monê Panteleêmonos 813 (6320)** (17th century) (Diktyon 22952)
  ff. 86v-88r Ἐκ τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἁγίου Πέτρου τοῦ Ἀθωνίτου, inc.: Τούτων οὕτω γενομένων, des.: τὸ σκάφος ἔστη παρ' ἐλπίδα (Vita, ed. Lake 1909, 24[35]-25[7]).
  f. 88rv Διήγησις περὶ τῆς ἀφίξεως τῆς Θεοτόκου ἐν τῷ ἁγιωνύμῳ ὄρει τοῦ Ἄθω, inc.: Μετὰ τῆν ἀνάστασιν, des. mut.: διὰ τὸν [... (Patria, ed. Livanos 2025, 62[3-21]).

46 See Melissakis 2012, 299.

47 So at the end of the first chapter of the *Patria* on the arrival of the Theotokos etc., in the MS Athos, Monê Pantokratoros 135 (1169) (17th century) (*Diktyon* 29154), edited by Gedeon 1885, 299, this passage is included, with an explicit reference to the *Life*: Εἰ βούλει δὲ εὑρεῖν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἀνάγνωθι τὸν λόγον καὶ βίον Πέτρου τοῦ Ἀθωνίτου, ἔνθα γέγραπται ὅτι κλῆρός ἐστι κατὰ πάντα τὸ ὄρος τοῦ Ἄθω τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου, καθὼς καὶ αὐτὴ εἶπε τῷ ὁσίῳ Πέτρῳ διὰ στόματος αὐτῆς, ὅτι ἄπελθε ἐν τῷ τοῦ Ἄθωνος ὄρει ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ κλήρῳ, ὅπερ παρὰ τοῦ Υἱοῦ μου καὶ Θεοῦ ἔλαβον εἰς ἐμὸν κλῆρον· καὶ πληρωθήσεται μοναχῶν κατὰ βορρᾶν καὶ νότον.

This renewed popularity of the *Life* of Peter, and in particular of the prophecy of the Virgin concerning the future of the mountain, occurred during a period of great revival in monastic life on Mount Athos, as evidenced by the ascetic-spiritual works copied or composed there and the large number of hagiographic texts dedicated to contemporary Athonite holy monks. The centrality of Athos in Byzantium is further attested by the writings of scholars. Of more direct relevance to this paper, is one of the four *Lives* written in honor of the Athonite Maximus the Hutburner (died c. 1365).[48] Generally, we must turn our attention to the two oldest texts: the *Life* written by his disciple, Niphon the Athonite (*BHG* 1236z),[49] and the second one composed by Theophanes, abbot of Vatopedi and metropolitan of Peritheorion (*BHG* 1237).[50]

The first *Vita*, composed by Niphon approximately a decade after the saint's death (1375-80),[51] serves as primary source for the second *Vita*, as evidenced by the simple comparison of two texts and also by the explicit reference made by the second hagiographer to the first one.[52] The second *Vita* was written by Theophanes, after his appointment as metropolitan of the city of Peritheorion in Thrace (post 1381?) and probably after the death of Niphon (1383).[53] Beyond the biographical events of Maximus, whose figure is markedly reinterpreted on the model of the *saloi*, the 'holy fools', and particularly on that of Andrew,[54] the *Life* by Theophanes contains long digressions dedicated to themes and figures which were evidently central and significant in the Athonite spiritual circles in the late fourteenth century. These pages, in our view, provide valuable testimony to the sensibilities, ideas, and aspirations of the Athonite monks of this period.

48 On which see Rigo 2005, Patapios 2010.

49 Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 42-65; English transl. in Greenfield, Talbot 2016, 369-439. On Niphon see Rigo 2026a.

50 Halkin; Kourilas 1936, 65-109; English transl. in Greenfield; Talbot 2016, 441-567. For Theophanes see *PLP* 7616. The chronology proposed here (also taken up by Preiser-Kapeller 2008, 349) must in all probability be slightly modified, as indicated by Bompaire, Lefort, Kravari, Giros 2006, 16.: igumen of Vatopedi, c. 1375, metropolitan of Peritheorion (on which Soustal 1991, 394-5, 161, 369), post 1381? To this latter period date the two works of Theophanes, the *Life* of Maximus and the short treatise against the Latins preserved in the MS Athens, Βυζαντινό και Χριστιανικό Μουσείο. Mss. Loberdou 57 (18th century) (*Diktyon* 1420), ff. 185*v*-192*r* (Οὗτος ὁ λόγος γέγονε παρὰ τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου μητροπολίτου κῦρ Θεοφάνους Περιθεωρίου κατὰ Λατίνων).

51 See Rigo 2026a, 100-1.

52 See *Life* of Maximus, 31, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 102[12-26].

53 *Life* of Maximus, 28, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 100[7-8] (μητροπολίτης Μοραχριδῶν) for the mention of his office as metropolitan of Peritheorion. In fact, Niphon, named as a saint and theophore (τὸν ὅσιον καὶ θεοφόρον Νίφωνα τὸν Ἀθωνίτην, 31: 102[12-13]), seems to have already died.

54 See Rigo 2005, 199-200; also Ivanov 2006, 237-9.

The extensive space devoted to the figure, biography, and teachings of Gregory of Sinai († 1346 c.)[55] aptly illustrates the powerful influence of the latter and his school on Athonite monasticism after the middle of the fourteenth century. Similarly, the strong emphasis placed on Maximus's Marian devotion, the Virgin's interventions throughout his life (from his young years in Lampsacus to his visions at the top of the mountain), and the practice of interior prayer and its concomitant effects,[56] provides a vivid and concrete testimony to the spiritual practices and conceptions of the Athonite monks of the period. In one of these digressions, Maximus dwells on the Holy Mountain of Athos, whereas previously Theophanes had only alluded to the monastic centre of Mount Papikion, in terms that echo the Pauline verse, as "the holy men, equal to those great Fathers of old, I mean Antony and Euthymius, Arsenius and Pachomius, living without a home, in seclusion, spending their time in of lofty mountains, tranquil caves and inaccessible places" (ἄνδρας ἁγίους ἴσα τοῖς μεγάλοις πατράσιν ἐκείνοις, Ἀντωνιον λέγω καὶ τὸν Εὐθύμιον, Ἀρσένιον καὶ Παχώμιον, ἀοίκους, ἀπροΐτους, πελαζομένους ἐν ὄρεσιν ὑψηλοῖς καὶ σπηλαίοις ἡσύχοις καὶ ἀβάτοις τόποις).[57]

In a long passage specifically dedicated to Mount Athos, Theophanes resumed the thread of tradition dating back to the *Life* of Peter the Athonite, but significantly amplified it, clearly demonstrating the prevailing sentiment regarding the Holy Mountain, its qualities, its status, and its models at the end of the fourteenth century. We quote it in full.

> But just as Mount Sinai called to Moses, and Carmel to Elijah, and Mount Horeb to Ezekiel, and the desert to John (Ἀλλ' ὡς τὸν Μωυσῆν τὸ Σίναιον ὄρος καὶ τὸν Ἠλίαν ὁ Κάρμηλος καὶ τὸν Ἰεζεκιὴλ ἐκάλει τὸ ὄρος Χωρὴβ καὶ τὸν Ἰωάννην ἡ ἔρημος), [58] so Athos, the flower of mountains, called out to the holy Maximus, so that the righteous man might blossom upon it and bear abundantly the ripe fruit of the Spirit "thirty and sixty and one hundredfold" [Mk 4,20]. For this chosen Athos is like "a vineyard of the Lord Sabaoth" [Is 5,7], dedicated from the beginning by the Lord and the all-pure Mother of God, our Lady and Mistress, as an abode for those who wish to be saved and converse with God in purity. This is exactly what that most holy Peter was clearly told by the

55 Theophanes, *Life*, 13-18, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 82-91.

56 Theophanes, *Life*, 15, 33, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 85, 105.

57 Theophanes, *Life*, 4, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 69^{24}-70^{4}; transl. Greenfield, Talbot 2016, 455.

58 In this list of biblical and New Testament figures, Theophanes made an obvious mistake when he spoke of Ezekiel and Mount Horeb.

> Mother of God, Peter who is called the Athonite on account of his residence and super-human asceticism here. And the holiest of ascetic fathers, our greatest father Athanasius, who truly bore the name of immortality, was also told this by the Mother of God, and that this vine will "send forth its shoots as far as the sea" (Psalms 79,12) and will "flower like a lily" (Isaiah 35; 1), and grow like a rose and produce ripe and abundant fruit for Christ our God, the creator of all things. One might even say that for this reason David said: "This is the mountain which God has delighted to dwell in, a rich mountain, a swelling mountain, a divine mountain" [Ps 67,17,16]. For this reason, our fathers gave the name 'Holy' only to Athos out of all the mountains of creation (Διὰ τοῦτο καὶ Ἅγιον μόνον τοῦτο προσηγορεύκασιν οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄρη τῆς κτίσεως τὸ τοῦ Ἄθωνος), Athos which forever teems with flocks of monks, like another city of the almighty living God. And as "the chariot of God once appeared ten thousand fold" (Psalms 67,18) on Mount Sinai, and, in particular, as the ranks of the angels and the incorporeal divine powers, those armies marshalled in the heavens, stand next to God and continually celebrate Him with unceasing hymns as the founder and creator of all, so you might also visualize the Holy Mountain on Athos. [...] These blessed men have gathered together in this harsh and inaccessible place from all over the world, and live all around Athos, as if in a meadow that is always in flower (οἱ μάκαρες κατοικοῦσιν ἐπὶ τῷ Ἄθωνι κύκλωθεν ὡς ἐν λειμῶνι ἀειθαλεῖ), and they rejoice in the Spirit. Not only are the areas all around this most lofty Athos thus adorned with eternal shining luminaries, but also all the most splendid and holy monasteries on this Holy Mountain are abundantly adorned through the grace of Christ and the succor of the Mother of God with innumerable multitudes of holy and hallowed men, such men as are richly endowed with divine virtues. And, as we said, the Holy Mountain was another heaven on earth (Καὶ ἦν τὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος, ὡς ἔφημεν, ἄλλος οὐρανὸς ἐπίγειος), rich with ranks and multitudes of monks instead of ranks of celestial beings, monks who praise the all-pure Mother of God in the same way that those on high hymn with eternal praise the Lord of glory.[59]

This lengthy encomium of Mount Athos, woven with biblical quotations and reminiscences, takes up the prediction made by the Virgin to Peter the Athonite and places it alongside one addressed to Athanasius the Athonite – a kind of doublet which, as far as we know, is not attested in any other source, and may perhaps represent an

59 Theophanes, *Life*, 8, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 74[32]-76[4], 76[20]-77[1]; transl. Greenfield; Talbot 2016, 467-71.

amplification of the Lavra tradition concerning the Mother of God as *oikonomissa* of the monastery.[60] The twofold prediction is, in any case, accounted for by the fact that Peter and Athanasius here function as two complementary figures, representing respectively the eremitic and the cenobitic forms of monasticism on the Holy Mountain.

5 The text of the *Patria of Mount Athos* and Its legacy

Approximately one century after the *Vita* of Maximus written by Theophanes, the so-called *Patria* were compiled. The *terminus ante quem* for their composition is provided by the Serbian translation made by Gabriel of Chilandar in 1508. The earliest manuscripts date precisely from the sixteenth century, and the oldest one preserving the entire text is MS Oxford, Lincoln College, gr. 29 (*Diktyon* 48683), dated 1547/1548.[61] Oral traditions were undoubtedly circulating in the meantime, but unfortunately we have no concrete evidence of them.[62]

The text of the *Patria* (title: Ἀνάμνησις μερικὴ τοῦ ἁγίου ὄρους τοῦ Ἄθω· τὰ λεγόμενα Πάτρια) [63] is divided into five chapters:

[1] The Visit of the Virgin to Mount Athos.
[2] The Foundation of the Monastery of Vatopedi and the Image of the Mother of God.
[3] The Icon of the Virgin Portaitissa and the Monastery of Iviron.
[4] The Icon of Saint George and the Monastery of Zographou.
[5] The Miracle of the Forty Martyrs and the Monastery of Xeropotamou.

The chapter of particular relevance to the present discussion is evidently the first one. Following the Ascension, the Virgin was residing in Jerusalem together with the Apostles. She subsequently undertook the journey to Cyprus in the company of John, with the purpose of visiting Lazarus.

> They then boarded a ship and set sail toward Cyprus. A strong wind was blowing, and the vessel was driven to Mount Athos, to the harbour known as Clement's. […] The mountain was given over to idolatry, and a temple of Apollo stood upon it. All the Hellenes of the oecumene held Mount Athos in great and venerable esteem.

60 See the *Life* of Barnabas and Sophronios, ed. Martinis 2012, 107; Millet, Pargoire, Petit 1904, 121-2, no. 371; Smyrnakis 1903, 386; Papastratos 1990, no. 430-3, 434-6.

61 See Parpulov 2013, 7-14; 2023, 279, ed. Livanos 2025, 33.

62 See already Lampros 1912, 117.

63 We are using the recent edition of Livanos 2025, 61-9, which is based on the oldest manuscript.

The Virgin thereupon evangelised and converted the idolaters. The text of the *Patria* then continues: "The holy Mother of God rejoiced with great joy and exulted in spirit over all that had come to pass, saying: 'This mountain has been given to me as an inheritance by my Son and God (Τοῦτο γὰρ τὸ ὄρος ἐδόθη μοι εἰς κλῆρον ἐμὸν παρὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ Θεοῦ μου), and I give Him thanks, for He has not left me excluded'". The subsequent prayer is of particular interest to us, as it clearly echoes the Virgin's prophecy in the *Life* of Peter the Athonite – most notably the reference to "from one end to the other" of the Mountain and "from north to south". She then said:

> Υἱέ μου καὶ Θεέ, εὐλόγησον τὸν τόπον τοῦτον καὶ ἔκχεον τὸ ἔλεος σου ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος, καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐν αὐτῷ, διὰ τὸ ὄνομά σου καὶ διὰ τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα. Διὰ μικροῦ κόπου καὶ ἀγῶνος, ἄφες τὰ πλημμελήματα αὐτῶν καὶ ἀπάλλαξον αὐτοὺς τῆς αἰωνίου κολάσεως. Ἔμπλησον αὐτοὺς παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν αἰῶνι, καὶ ζωὴν ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι. Καὶ δόξασον τὸν τόπον τοῦτον ὑπὲρ πάντος τόπου, καὶ πλάτυνον τὰ σκηνώματα ἐν αὐτῷ ἀπ' ἄκρου ἕως ἄκρον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ βοῤῥὰν καὶ νότου. Καὶ σῶσον αὐτὸν ἀπὸ παντὸς πειρατηρίου, ἐκ τῶν ὁρατῶν καὶ ἀοράτων ἐχθρῶν.
>
> My Son and God, bless this place and pour forth Thy mercy upon this mountain and upon its inhabitants until the end of the world, for the sake of Thy name and mine. Grant that their sins may be remitted with little effort and toil, and deliver them from eternal damnation. Fill them with every good thing in the present age and with life in the age to come. Glorify this place above all others and spread their dwellings here from one end to the other, from north to south, and preserve it from every assault of enemies both visible and invisible. A voice from heaven answered her: "It shall be so according to thy prayer, provided that these also keep the law of salvation". Having given thanks to God for all things, she blessed the place and the people, and, having boarded the vessel, she and John arrived together in Cyprus.

The patriographic account is evidently in keeping with the preceding tradition, amplifying and enriching it with new elements. Also worthy of note, remaining within this first chapter, is the application of the exegesis of Apocalypse 12,14 to Mount Athos and, above all, the tradition according to which the Emperor Constantine erected upon the mountain three churches consecrated to the Virgin and "installed monks there, calling it the Garden of the Mother of God (παράδεισον/περιβόλιον τῆς Θεοτόκου), and ordained that the mountain should everywhere be designated 'holy' (ἅγιον), and changed the name of the city of Apollo to Hierissos". The sanctity of the mountain is therefore

always linked to the story of its origins and the Virgin's visit, but it can be traced back to an official decree by Emperor Constantine.

A reprise of this visit to Athos and the assertion that the Holy Mountain is the Virgin Mary's legacy and part of her is found in various accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[64] Alongside these literary accounts, we should also mention the iconographic evidence provided by eighteenth – and nineteenth-century prints, beginning with that of Alessandro dalla Via, featuring general views of Mount Athos with the Virgin and Christ above.[65]

As a rather tentative conclusion to this rich tradition, it may be noted that as late as 1855, a particularly prominent Athonite monk in the intellectual and religious life of the Holy Mountain, Iakovos of Nea Skete,[66] wrote the monumental *History of Athos* (Ἀθωνιάς), in which he noted that concerning the donation of the Holy Mountain to the Virgin by Christ "there exist many manuscript books in the libraries of the monastery of Vatopedi, of the *skete* of Haghia Anna, of Philotheou, of Kastamonitou, of Stavronikita, and in many other monasteries, sketes, and cells. At Zographou a book in Slavonic on the same subject is preserved. There also exists a printed one in the idiom of Dacia and Ungro-Valachia". On the basis of the ancient manuscripts, he also reaffirmed the 'historical' reality of this donation, which was, however, contested by many, and particularly by the most educated. "But on the other hand, 'we walk', says the Apostle, 'by faith, not by sight' [2 Cor 5,7]".[67]

64 See, e.g. Patapios 2014a; 2017-19.

65 See first of all Papastratos 1990, 386-402. *En passant*, I would also like to mention the precedent for these illustrations, namely the description of the Mount Athos as it appeared during a vision experienced by a monk named Mark following some words spoken by Maximus in the *Life* written by Theophanes: "Ὁρᾷ κύκλωθεν ὅλῳ τῷ ὄρει ὑπὸ κοκκίνων πύργων ὡς κάστρον κτισμένον ἐν ὕψει ἐπαιρόμενον· πρὸς δὲ τὴν λεγομένην Μεγάλην Βίγλαν παλάτια χρύσεα πάντερπνα, βασίλισσαν φέροντα τὴν Θεοτόκον σὺν ἀσωμάτοις ἀπείροις καὶ ἀρχαγγέλοις, καὶ τὰ πλήθη κύκλωθεν τῶν μοναζόντων τῇ Θεοτόκῳ ὑμνούντων καὶ προσκυνούντων" (He saw the entire mountain surrounded on all sides by red towers, like a castle built and raised upon a height; and towards the so-called Megali Vigla, enchanting golden palaces, bearing upon them the Mother of God as their queen, together with countless angels and archangels, and, all around, a multitude of monks singing hymns and venerating the Mother of God; Theophanes, *Life* of Maximus, 17, ed. Halkin, Kourilas 1936, 89-90; English transl., slightly modified, in Greenfield, Talbot 2016, 509; see also above, 88)

66 On which see Patapios 2014b.

67 Περὶ τοῦ κλήρου τῆς Θεοτόκου Ἄθω, MS Athos Monê Panteleêmonos 282 (5789) (Diktyon 22421), 75-7 edited by Lampros 1912, 135-7. For critical views of these traditions in the 17th-18th centuries, see Livanos 2025, 73-4.

6 Conclusion

At the conclusion of our overview, we may observe that two distinct lines have emerged with regard to the definition of Athos as the 'Holy Mountain': on the one hand, the rhetorical tradition of the encomium and the *ekphrasis*, and on the other, the tradition proper to patriography.

In the introduction to the volume devoted to 'Constantinople imaginaire', Gilbert Dagron observed:

> De la cité antique dont on voulait vanter l'excellence ou décrire les singularités, on pouvait dire sans vraie contradiction et en changeant simplement de registre, comme pour telle homme ou telle femme, soit qu'elle était conforme à l'idéal que suggéraient la civilisation et ses modes, soit qu'elle était unique par sa situation géographique, par son nom et par le faisceau d'anecdotes qui, de sa fondation à son état présent, lui tenait lieu d'histoire. De ces deux langages sont nés deux genres littéraires bien caractérisés, l' ' éloge ' et ces ' récits des origines ' qu'on désigne du nom de *Patria*.[68]

Mutatis mutandis, these words, originally referring to the city – and to Constantinople in particular – may be retrieved here and applied to Mount Athos. Its special status and excellence are progressively asserted – almost by a process of accumulation – through praise and encomium on the one hand, and through the 'discourse of origins' on the other: two types of writing that are only apparently akin, yet prove upon closer examination to be distinct, if not indeed opposed to one another.

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68 Dagron 1984, 9.

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