Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
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The Mountain as a City
Dissemination of the Image of the Holy Mount in the Balkans

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Abstract The article examines the concept of the sacred mountain in medieval Orthodox culture, focusing on parallels between Mount Athos, Constantinople, and Balkan monastic centers. It argues that the idea of the Holy Mountain as the Garden of the Mother of God originates in monastic tradition and later acquires political meaning. Through examples from Bulgaria, especially Tarnovo and Rila, the study shows how the mountain is conceived as a spiritual 'city', complementing the imperial capital and forming part of a unified sacred geography linking monasticism, Marian devotion, and state ideology.

Keywords Byzantine ideology. Marian cult. Monasticism. Mount Athos. Sacred mountain.

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The mountain has always evoked divine images and representations in the mind of the believing person across virtually all cultures, albeit in different ways. It is something elevated, rising above the surrounding plain, and is thus associated with the idea of 'height', and consequently with a connection to the divine. In this sense, it becomes a kind of space of 'hierophany' – the place where the profane and the sacred, the earthly and the divine, meet, as Mircea Eliade writes in his study of the sacred.[1] Its physical elevation itself contributes to this perception. The mountain is either sacred in itself and inherently divine, or it occupies a special place within the mythological explanation of the world, or it serves as a dwelling place of the gods, as is the case with Mount Olympus.

In the Old Testament religion of the Chosen People, the mountain – namely Mount Sinai – also holds a reserved and significant place. There the prophet Moses receives from the Lord the tablets of the Law (*Book of Exodus,* 20; 34; *Deuteronomy,* 5), and thus – through the Law – Israel becomes the Chosen People. In the biblical narrative, we observe in its purest form theophany, which constitutes the highest expression of 'hierophany'. This is the place – the only place – where a human being has seen God, albeit not in His full glory (*Exodus*, 34). The mountain occupies a significant role in both the Old and the New Testaments (Sinai, in the prophecy of Isaiah, the Temple Mount, the hill of Golgotha, the Sermon on the Mount, etc.).

In the present study, however, the focus will be placed on a specific aspect of the sacredness of the mountain, namely its perception as a 'desert', that is, as a space of monastic seclusion and the attainment of spiritual perfection. Already in the early Christian era, the withdrawal of the monk was not merely an escape from the world or resistance against the bonds of the material, but rather a choice and a process of spiritual transformation. In this context, one of the fundamental paradoxes of monasticism (as a form of seclusion and solitary life) emerges, whereby the desert becomes a community. Or, as Derwas Chitty reminds by quoting Athanasius' Vita Antonii, "the desert was made a city by monks coming out from their own and enrolling themselves in the heavenly citizenship"[2] – a phrase which became a proverbial expression in monastic literature. It must be emphasized that the 'city' is not necessarily an urban reality, it may also represent a spiritual community founded upon the pursuit of Salvation. It is no coincidence that in the Life of one of the prominent representatives of Hesychasm – Theodosius of Tărnovo – we find not only multiple episodes illustrating this idea, but also a direct

1 See Eliade 1965. For the mountain as the center of the world, *axis mundi*, etc., cf. Eliade 1965, 38-47.

2 Chitty 1999, 5.

statement that "the monks who gathered from different places made the desert into a city".[3]

The idea of the desert is associated above all with the absence of people, regardless of whether it refers to a sandy expanse, endless forests, distant seas, or something else. By virtue of its geographical characteristics, the mountain presupposes such a space and becomes a refuge for anchorites from the earliest centuries. A particularly illustrative example in this regard is provided by the *Life of Saint John of Rila*, a Bulgarian anchorite of the tenth century, who laid the foundations of this form of Christian practice, eremitism, in Bulgaria. John of Rila withdrew into seclusion in one of the highest mountains, Rila Mountain, reaching remote and wild locations that were difficult to access. His example attracted many other Christians who were determined to follow his path. Moreover, a community soon formed, which later developed into a monastic center, as attested by the sources. In the saint's *Life*, written in the twelfth century by the Byzantine author George Skylitzes, it is recounted how a community gradually gathered around the hermit: "And some of them came to dwell together with the venerable one […], having built dwellings for themselves and having pledged to endure until their death together with the venerable one".[4]

Here, it is clearly evident how the individual choice of living in seclusion gradually transforms into a community, into an organized spiritual space. The mountain ceases to be merely a place of solitude and becomes a center of communal life, which further prepares its conceptualization as a kind of 'city'. A similar process is reflected in the Life of Theodosius of Tărnovo, where the desert space, from being a place of seclusion, becomes a spiritual center attracting people from different lands and gradually leading to the formation of a monastic community. Theodosius is compared to a "stream" in the desert, toward which those thirsting for spiritual life gather "like deer" (*Ps* 41; 42).

The classical example of the transformation of an empty, secluded place into a shared spiritual space is Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain. Yet even prior to the formation of this monastic republic, we encounter such examples as Mount Olympus in Bithynia and the Black Mountain near Antioch, among others. Subsequently, the influence of the Athonite Holy Mountain became so great that its image spread throughout the Orthodox world as a model and archetype of monasticism. Thus emerged the New Athos in Georgia, the Valday

3 Ivanova 1986, 451. The Life of Theodosius of Tărnovo is cited according to its translation into modern Bulgarian, published in Ivanova 1986, 443-67. English transl. by the authors.

4 Ivanova 1986, 107.

Iversky Monastery in Russia,[5] and in Serbia the region of Fruška Gora fulfilled similar functions. In Bulgaria, there is evidence of numerous 'Holy Mountains', designated as 'Little', 'New', 'Sofia', or otherwise. This, however, represents more the diffusion of the Athonite idea than an independent conceptualization of the mountain as a sacred place, even though the latter may be understood as a continuation of the former. This notion of sanctity derives from the understanding of the Holy Mountain as the 'Garden of the Mother of God' and acquires a strong political and identity-forming significance, endowing its space with a unique status, which we shall attempt to trace further in the present exposition.

The sanctity of Athos constitutes a complex religious-political phenomenon that does not originate in the mountain itself, although it is closely connected to it – the very designation 'Holy Mountain' attests to this. At first glance, this sanctity appears to derive from the monastic settlement of the mountain and from the special care of the emperors for the monastic community. Yet these factors themselves are rooted in the attribution to the mountainous peninsula of a special relationship with the Mother of God, as protectress of her Garden (Athos), of the Empire and its capital, and of the Christian world. For more than half a millennium, the Holy Mountain was the object of particular attention, care, and protection on the part of the Empire, and in later periods also of other Orthodox rulers. After the Fall of Constantinople, the capital of the universal Empire fell into the hands of non-believers. Constantinople thereby lost at least part of its ideological significance as the 'God-protected City', although the Patriarchate was preserved and even acquired additional authority. Thus, the monastic republic of the Holy Mountain remained one of the few places that retained its status almost intact from the period prior to the Ottoman conquest. This is one of the reasons for the preservation within monastic circles of ideas originating in the earlier period – namely, certain imperial cults through which the sanctity of the Empire and its role in world history, in the history of the Salvation of humankind, were articulated. In the present study, we shall attempt to examine certain texts in which we encounter an intersection with the veneration of the Mother of God as protectress of the Empire.

During the period of Ottoman rule, the Holy Mountain acquired exceptionally important political and ideological significance for the entire Orthodox world. The influence of the sacred mountain increased considerably, and this was reflected in monastic life and

5 See archimandrite Efrem (Barbinyagra), hieromonk Seraphim (Ignatiev): "In heaven is paradise – on earth Valday: the Iveron Mother of God Holy Lake Monastery", 77-95 (https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/na-nebesi-ray-na-zemli-valday-iverskiy-bogoroditskiy-svyatoozerskiy-monastyr/viewer).

in the monasteries throughout the Balkans. Its effects may be traced in all aspects of the perception of monasteries – in their economic and social significance, as well as in their political and ideological roles, particularly in the context of Athos. The special importance of the monastic establishments on the peninsula, and their weight for the identity and imagination of Orthodox peoples, is demonstrated in the narratives concerning the founding of monasteries and in the traditions associated with them, collected in the so-called *Patria Hagioritika*.[6] These are various accounts that may be described as *topoi* concerning the origins of monasteries. They are diverse, yet they invariably emphasize the sacrality of the act of creation and of the foundation itself. Attention must be paid to the legend of the visit of the Mother of God to Athos, during which she received the mountain as her earthly domain.

Above all, it must be emphasized that the ideological significance of the monastic republic of the Holy Mountain extends not only to the Empire but to the entire Orthodox world. This concerns the role of Athos in legitimizing power within the countries of the so-called 'Byzantine' commonwealth, manifested above all as the legitimization of a ruler's affiliation with the imperial traditions of Constantinople. There is abundant evidence supporting such a conclusion. In this regard, we would like to draw attention to the numerous works devoted to this subject by the Romanian and Greek scholar Dimitri Năstase.[7] In these studies, he advances the idea of the Holy Mountain as a microcosm, a symbol of the Orthodox Empire, and an image of the Universe. This sacred place acquires such qualities through the presence in its monasteries of monks from most Orthodox peoples, including Greeks, Georgians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians, Arabs, and Italians. In this way, dominion over the microcosm becomes a form of legitimization of authority – not necessarily over the entire Christian world (which in this period could only be a doctrinal claim), but at least within a state whose political ideology reflects the universalism of Constantinople. This thesis deserves our attention, as it explains certain mechanisms of legitimizing power through the support and protection of the Holy Mountain. We would, however, like to focus not so much on the political roots of the significance of the Holy Mountain within the Orthodox community as on its spiritual foundations. These are connected, on the one hand, with the truly remarkable importance of monasticism in Eastern Christianity, and on the other, with the cult of the Most Holy Mother of God as protectress of the Empire, the capital, and Athos – her earthly garden.

6 Lambros 1912; Tsibranska-Kostova, Biliarsky 2013.

7 Năstase 1983; 1985; 1993a; 1993b.

The origins of the Marian cult as a central element in Constantinople should be sought in the development of Byzantine society during the second half of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century. Undoubtedly, this was the result of the Christianization of public life and its liturgization,[8] whereby purely religious ideas became not only predominant but almost exclusive in the public sphere. Evidently, political power was not excluded from this process, and religious conceptions of authority came to be presented as essential frameworks for understanding the realities of social and state life. This applies not only to the Empire throughout its millennial historical trajectory but also to other countries under its influence.[9]

The Byzantine theocracy conceptualizes the state as a structure analogous to the Church in its mission of preparing human beings for Salvation. It is precisely from this mission that the particular significance of Marian veneration derives – the veneration of the one through whom the Incarnation took place, who gave earthly life to the Savior, namely the Mother of God as the heavenly protectress of humankind. In this context, the emergence of her cult as Protectress of the City during the second half of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century, as well as its subsequent development, must be examined.[10] This idea lies at the very foundation of Byzantine theocracy. Precisely because of the salvific mission of the Empire, and as protectress of humanity not only at the Last Judgment but throughout the entirety of history, the Mother of God is the heavenly defender of the Empire and of the City. The Empire cares for Salvation, and its heavenly protection by the Mother of God constitutes care for the Christian people.[11]

The emergence of the Marian cult as protector of the city is usually associated with the events of 626, during the siege of Constantinople by the Persians and the Avars. Undoubtedly, this is a very important moment, although it should be regarded more as a result than as a cause of this form of veneration of the Mother of God. In this context, we would like to draw attention to a text that has already attracted scholarly interest: the well-known homily of Theodore Syncellus, in which the author proclaims the significance of Constantinople, calling it 'the Eye of the Christian world' and asserting that every attack against the City constitutes an obstacle on the path to Salvation and a hindrance to the salvific mission of Jesus Christ.[12]

8 Treitinger 1956, 27; Cameron 1978, 80-1.

9 Naumov 2006, 188-9.

10 Cameron 1978, 99; Păun 2001, 199.

11 Naumov 2006.

12 Alexander 1962, 355.

In order to establish the connection with the Holy Mountain, we shall cite a document of the ruler of Wallachia, Ioan Vladislav of Wallachia, from the year 6878 from the Creation of the World (= 1369 AD), in which Athos is described as "the wondrous and holy mountain which is the eye of the entire universe".[13] This expression is attributed to the hegumen Chariton, who also cites it in his testament.[14] Evidently, this constitutes a direct reference to the aforementioned homily of Theodore Syncellus, dedicated to the miraculous deliverance of Constantinople by the Mother of God in 626.[15] In general, this expression was used for the capital of the Empire, conceived as a place specially protected by God, whose significance for the history of Salvation is evident.[16] It represents a constant and customary usage, attested in texts from the seventh century as well as in those composed only about fifty years prior to the fall of the City in 1453: "τὸν τῆς οἰκουμένης ὀφθαλμόν".[17]

Thus, we observe that the Holy Mountain is designated by the Orthodox in the same way as Constantinople is referred to in Byzantine sources. This is unlikely to be coincidental and clearly derives from the analogous perception of both *loci* as sanctuaries of Orthodoxy. In this sense, it should be recalled that the homily of Theodore Syncellus is directly connected with the Marian cult of the city's protection, which emerged in connection with the siege of 626 and the miraculous defense of Constantinople by the Mother of God. It is also linked with the tradition of the Akathist Hymn, in whose text important additions were made during these events.[18] These observations compel us to consider the sources collectively, as a complex, and to seek traces of Marian veneration also within the Athonite tradition. These are evident and well known, since the Holy Mountain is a sacred place for Orthodoxy precisely as the earthly possession of the Mother of God, or as the 'Garden of the Theotokos'.

Below, we shall present briefly the legend that lies at the foundation of the Athonite Marian cult. It recounts the visit of the Mother of God to the Holy Mountain and explains how she received the peninsula as her inheritance.[19] In this way, we understand how the Mother of

13 Lemerle 1988, 103, l. 10.

14 Lemerle 1988, 113, l. 21.

15 Alexander 1962, 355.

16 Fenster 1968, 132 ff.

17 Gauthier 1965, 110, l. 25

18 It refers to the Akathist Hymn, which presents the Mother of God as the protector of Constantinople (Wellesz 1957, LXVIII; Trypanis 1968, 29).

19 There are numerous similar accounts in the Athonite Patria. Cf. Dawkins 1936, 87 ff.

God became the protectress of Athos.[20] According to tradition, the Mother of God, accompanied by John the Evangelist, departed from Jerusalem for Cyprus in order to visit Lazarus of Bethany, who had become a bishop there. On their journey, a violent storm suddenly struck their ship and drove it to the shores of Athos, where it came to rest near the location where the Iviron Monastery stands today. The Virgin was deeply impressed by the beauty of the place and asked her Son to grant it to her, although its inhabitants were still pagans. At that moment, a voice was heard, saying: "Let this place be your inheritance and your garden, a paradise and a heaven for all those who seek salvation!". Thus, the Holy Mountain became the earthly inheritance and Garden of the Mother of God.

This legend is complemented by another tradition that associates the Holy Mountain with the veneration of Constantine the Great, the *Evangelizer* of the Empire, the emperor who Christianized the Empire and became a model Christian ruler. We find this in the narrative concerning the foundation of the Kastamonitou Monastery, which we shall present here following N. Oikonomides.[21] The text begins with the assertion that Athonite monasticism has its origins in the time of the Apostles. After his victory, Saint Emperor Constantine relocated the tribe of the Tsakonians from the Holy Mountain to the Peloponnese, in order to make space for monks in the Athonite desert. Saint Macarius, bishop of Ierissos, visited Constantine in Thessaloniki and informed him that the Holy Mountain was the earthly inheritance and garden of the Mother of God, who had once visited the peninsula and converted its inhabitants. The emperor then ordered the construction of the churches of the Dormition of the Mother of God at the Protaton and of the Annunciation at Vatopedi Monastery. At the same time, the first *protos* of the Holy Mountain was appointed, with his particular rights and privileges. At that time, the emperor died (337), and the construction works were completed by his son Constans, who, upon completion, decreed that the foundation should bear his name, hence 'Κωνστάντου μονή' (Monastery of Constans), from which the name 'Kastamonitou' is derived. During the reign of Julian the Apostate, Macarius of Ierissos went into hiding to avoid persecution and reappeared only when Theodosius I came to power; it was this bishop who restored the monastery and the church of Saint Stephen and remained there until the end of his life.

For the purposes of the present study, we shall consider only this part of the Kastamonitou legend, as the remainder lies beyond the scope of the present study. It is not necessary to argue for the

20 Kadas 1980, 10-11; Sherrard 1982, 12.

21 Oikonomides 1978, 98-9.

legendary character of this account.[22] For our thesis, it is important not as a source of information concerning fourth-century events related to the actual activity of Emperor Constantine the Great, but rather as evidence of his veneration within monastic circles in the context of the cult of the Mother of God. It should be noted that he is presented as an executor of divine will with regard to the special protection of the Holy Mountain by the Mother of God. This fact is significant for understanding the relationship between the two cults (that of the Mother of God and that of Saint Constantine), both of which hold exceptional importance for the political ideology of the Empire. To this, we must add the considerable influence of the Athonite monastic community, despite the relatively late origin of the texts.

Thus, we encounter a legend according to which Saint Constantine was the first imperial protector and benefactor of the Holy Mountain, laying the foundations of the monastic community through the construction of churches and the establishment of a community governed by a *protos*, thereby marking the beginning of its special status. This follows the conversation between the emperor and Bishop Macarius, who relates to him the story of the visit of the Mother of God. In this case, what interests us is the existence of a narrative according to which the first Christian emperor becomes the executor of divine will concerning the special significance of the mountain as the Garden of the Mother of God. In this account, we discern an attempt to consolidate sanctity for the benefit of the entire monastic community. It should be emphasized that Saint Constantine is not only the herald of the Empire and the ideal of the Christian ruler, but also the founder of the capital that bears his name. It must also be borne in mind that it is precisely through the protection of Constantinople by the Virgin Mary that the heavenly protection of the entire Empire – and consequently of the Christian world – is achieved.

The legend of the Garden of the Mother of God developed particularly within monastic circles during the later period.[23] Even the aforementioned text of the charter of the Wallachian ruler from the fourteenth century was not produced by the princely chancery, but by the hegumen Chariton. The period of Ottoman rule was the time when these ideas flourished. However, we possess rather early texts containing the legend that concerns us. The earliest among them is the *Life of Saint Peter of Athos*, in which it is explicitly cited.[24] It can reasonably be assumed that this work was composed in the

22 Oikonomides 1978, 99, fn. 7.

23 Papachryssanthou 1974.

24 Lake 1909, 25; Pitsakis 1999, 151.

tenth century,[25] although the earliest copy that has come down to us dates from the twelfth century.[26] All these observations lead us to two conclusions. First, that the tradition of Athos as the earthly possession of the Mother of God has its origins in the Middle Ages and should not be sought in later periods. And second, that it originated within and for a monastic milieu, from which its transfer into the political sphere occurred relatively late, though still within the medieval period, prior to the Ottoman conquest, rather than after it or as a consequence of it. The same applies to the other legendary tradition, which likewise attributes a role to Constantine the Great. It is evident that it is of later origin and is likewise associated with monastic circles. This narrative, elaborated during the Middle Ages within certain monasteries, by and for monks, acquired particular significance during the period of Ottoman rule. Thus, the texts in question reveal a synthesis of two traditions of sanctity – one monastic and the other imperial – which together shape the memory of the Orthodox Empire during the Ottoman period.

In fact, our subject is primarily concerned with the Holy Mountain, insofar as this image relates to the theme of the sacred mountain. Here, it is presented to us with two principal characteristics. The first is the fulfillment of divine will, since the Lord Himself grants the mountain as a garden to His Mother, and the very participation of the Mother of God intensifies this sanctity and points to the significance of the mountain for Salvation. The second characteristic, indicating the holiness of the place, relates to the monastic theme, which proceeds directly from the first: the mountain is inhabited by monks because it is the Garden of the Mother of God and because it is called to assist humanity on its path toward Salvation. In this line of thought, monastic communities are not merely collections of hermits but a new form of communal life that serves as a model, thereby transforming the mountain into a place of Salvation. The Holy Mountain is a sacred place, a place of Christian prayer, and this becomes the cause of many of the religious, political, cultural, and other phenomena associated with it. We have already seen how, in the verbal imagery used to name and describe the Holy Mountain, forms directly borrowed from the language of veneration and description applied to Constantinople and to the Empire are employed.

The Empire is a city. In both Roman and Byzantine contexts, this statement is self-evident, and it requires no further elaboration here. Rome, the Eternal City, became a world empire and conquered the universe through citizenship and law. The Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) was likewise represented by Constantinople as its focal

25 Lake 1909, 14-17; Pitsakis 1999, 151.

26 Cf. Lake 1909, 9.

point. The ideology of the capital city is characteristic of all Orthodox countries, and not only of them. This also constitutes our approach to the theme of the mountain as a city.

The city has its place within the liturgy, where its commemoration encompasses not only the concrete community or parish but also the universe, insofar as the Eucharistic liturgy possesses a universal character. This is the community of the faithful. The city is mentioned in the litanies – 'for this city, for every city' – and this has nothing to do with geographical location. Christianity emerged and developed within an urban cultural environment, and the liturgy reflects this fact.[27] The city here is not merely an urban center, but encompasses the faithful – all believers, wherever they may be, gathered for union with the Lord. This union is the sole path to Salvation, and in this context the city acquires particular significance.

The city is not simply a populated place, fortified, a political and economic center with administrative functions. It occupies a distinct place within the ideology of the state and becomes its image and focal point.[28] This ideology is typically constructed upon the reproduction of the image of Rome as the center of every imperial idea, at least within the European-Mediterranean cultural sphere. Constantinople is the New Rome. In the construction of the new capital, Constantine the Great and his successors sought to reproduce Rome both urbanistically (through the *pomerium* and various elements of city planning) and socially (through the settlement of ancient senatorial families on the shores of the Bosporus). This designation 'New Rome' remains to this day part of the title of the Ecumenical Patriarch. There is also evidence that it was used for the Ottoman capital in sultanic documents.[29] The medieval capitals of Bulgaria (Preslav and Tărnovo) and of Serbia likewise sought to reproduce the City.[30] In the sixteenth century, the theory of Moscow as the 'Third Rome' developed in Russia, acquiring a more clearly structured form and more enduring consequences. In general, the idea of the Empire entails the reproduction of already existing models, above all that of its capital as a center of power and a bearer of a particular mission, from which derives the God-protected character of the place. This is also one of the reasons why Muscovite literature provides us with the richest material concerning Marian protective icons of cities.[31] At this point, we should also mention an

27 Baldovin 1987.

28 Eliade 1965, 47-9.

29 Bojović 1998, 176, 299.

30 Biliarsky 2013, 169.

31 Naumov 2006, 193-6.

interesting application of the cult of a Marian icon as protector of a monastery, namely the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius.[32]

The city is the place that encompasses the faithful – that is, the earthly Church – and it is there that participation in communion with the Savior is realized in the Eucharistic liturgy. This is the place where 'hierophany' is realized in the sense given to the concept by Mircea Eliade. In turn, Constantinople is the universal image, the mother and queen of cities. For this reason, it is referred to simply as 'The City' (with a capital letter), a usage that extends throughout the Middle Ages and has been preserved in the Greek milieu to this day. It is not merely the capital, the seat of the emperor and of the Ecumenical Patriarch. The City is a gift from the Lord, it is marked by the constant presence of God and bears an important significance within an eschatological context.[33] It is a sacred place, connected with the meaning of history – the Salvation of humankind. For this reason, the City is God-protected and is the eye of the Christian universe. The Holy Mountain is called by the same designation, and this cannot be a coincidence within an isolated text. It is rather an expression of an attitude toward two phenomena that, in this context, are regarded as analogous. It is precisely this idea that motivated us to entitle the present study 'The Mountain as City'.

At the same time, this mountain, the Holy Mountain, visited by the Mother of God and granted to her as her garden by her Son, who revealed Himself in a voice at that very place, which was subsequently populated with monasteries – this mountain multiplies its image throughout the entire Orthodox world. We shall confine ourselves to only a few examples from the Balkans, while emphasizing in advance that these examples possess not only religious but also political dimensions.

The most accessible example is that of the Sofia Holy Mountain. The concentration of monasteries in the mountains surrounding the present-day capital of Bulgaria undoubtedly began in the Middle Ages and has continued to flourish to this day. One of the few preserved medieval Bulgarian royal charters, the so-called 'Vitosha chrysobull', was issued precisely for the Dragalevtsi Monastery in the mountain near the city.[34] The existence of such a phenomenon cannot be accidental and undoubtedly testifies to its importance as a center. Serdica/Triaditsa/Sredets/Sofia has always been an important place from religious, administrative, cultural, and economic perspectives. During the period of Ottoman rule, it served as the principal city

32 Naumov 2006, 194-5.

33 Naumov 2006, 190-2.

34 Ivanov 1931, 600-1.

of the *beylerbeylik* of Rumelia, which encompassed the European possessions of the empire, thereby defining its significant position.

At the same time, it should be noted that the cult of Saint John of Rila is, in a certain sense, a Sofia-centered cult, alongside its present nationwide significance. This is determined not only by the relative proximity of the Rila Mountain and his monastery to Sofia, but above all by the presence of the saint's relics in the city, where the veneration of the saint arose and where the earliest texts associated with his cult were composed.[35] We would also like to emphasize two points of particular importance. The first concerns the miraculous return of the relics from Esztergom to Sofia, an event that took place in the twelfth century.[36] This does not occur in other accounts of the wanderings of his relics, except perhaps for the analogous episode describing the 'flight' of the reliquary during their translation from Tărnovo to Rila in the fifteenth century (to which we shall return later). Of particular interest here is the fact that the saint did not wish to return from Esztergom to the monastery, but directly to Sredets. The second point is related to the translation of the saint's relics from Tărnovo to the Rila Monastery, which, as mentioned, took place in the fifteenth century, in this connection, the extended narrative of the passage and stay of the relics in Sofia on their way back to the monastery, as described in the text known as the *Rila Tale*, written by the Bulgarian man of letters Vladislav the Grammarian, is of particular interest.[37]

Sofia undoubtedly occupies a special place in connection with this journey. It appears, however, that for the formation of the idea of a Holy Mountain in the mountains surrounding Sofia, the decisive factor was the transformation of the city into the most important cultural and religious center during the sixteenth century, as well as the events associated with the so-called New Martyrs of Sofia.[38] This religious phenomenon, which also possesses political significance and exerts influence on the development of literary culture, sacralizes the place and justifies the unity of the city and the mountain.

Of particular interest in this regard is the already mentioned account of the translation of the relics of Saint John of Rila from Tărnovo to the Rila Monastery, as recounted in the *Rila Tale*, especially in its portrayal of the movement toward the mountain as a miraculous and sacral act. This concerns the final stage of the journey of the relics, when the ultimate ascent of the mountain precedes their arrival at the monastery. It is said that at a certain

35 Dobrev 2007, 12-13, 335.

36 Ivanova 1986, 131, 133, 146.

37 Biliarsky 2019.

38 Biliarsky, Tsibranska-Kostova 2021.

moment those carrying the coffin experienced not merely lightness, but as if some force were carrying them upward, so that it was not the people who bore the saint, but rather "he bore them invisibly".

> Here some of the people, taking up the saint, being winged by the swift-moving lightness of the divine spirit, soon became invisible to the others, for they ran more swiftly than the fleet deer and the flight of eagles. It was as though they did not carry the saint, but he carried them invisibly. Yet this wonder was followed by other wonders. Some mounted horses and rushed after them, now ascending, now descending, but they could neither overtake the saint nor even see him with their eyes. Greatly astonished by what they saw, many cried out: What wondrous and most glorious miracle can this be! And the men who bore the saint barely managed with difficulty to restrain the coffin, so as to wait there for the horsemen and the people who lagged behind.[39]

The path towards the monastery may thus be interpreted as a kind of mystical return of the saint. Here, the beginning of this path is of great importance – the movement commences from Tărnovo, which preserves the memory of a sacral and political center of the Second Bulgarian Empire, and concludes high in the mountains, in the Rila Mountains, where the monastery is situated. Thus, a symbolic connection is established between the city and the mountain, analogous to that between Constantinople and Mount Athos. It does not appear accidental that precisely Rila, the highest mountain in the Bulgarian lands and the place of dwelling of the first great Bulgarian hermit, becomes the final point of this sacred movement. The mountain here functions as a place of divine presence and spiritual center, standing in a particular relationship to the capital and the Empire. In this sense, the translation of the relics may be interpreted as a symbolic linking of the two sacred poles of medieval Bulgaria – the royal city of Tărnovo and the holy mountain. It would not be an exaggeration to state that this scene in the *Rila Tale* implicitly conveys the idea of the interconnection between the city and the mountain through the movement of sanctity.

More difficult to investigate is the so-called 'Little Holy Mountain' near the town of Sliven. The available data concerning it are relatively scarce, and it seems that it may be explained primarily through the penetration of Hesychast teaching into Bulgaria and the monastic centers in Paroria, although the precise delineation of this space remains unclear. This question will be left for future study, while we now turn our attention more fully to the 'Holy Mountain near Tărnovo'.

39 Ivanova 1986, 390.

It possesses particular significance insofar as it is associated with the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire. In fact, this is a tradition that appears to have been lost at some point. Today, the presence of monastic life on the hills around Tărnovo is attested primarily through archaeological evidence. Of interest is the designation *Devingrad*,[40] which points to the veneration of the Most Holy Virgin Mary as protectress of the capital.[41] This protective Marian cult connects the idea of the God-protected character of the capital and the Empire with the idea of the Holy Mountain in its vicinity. For Tărnovo, this constitutes a particularly significant element, since we possess several narratives that present the Bulgarian capital – and especially the account of its foundation – as a sacred act, comparable to the founding of Athonite monasteries in the Athonite *patria*.

In this context, important testimony is found in the *Life of Theodosius of Tărnovo*, written by Patriarch Callistus I of Constantinople, which reveals the conscious reproduction of the Byzantine model within a Bulgarian context. Of Theodosius it is said:

> He arrived at Tărnovo, the capital city of the Bulgarians, which is second both in word and in reality, after the **City of Constantine**. There he also found a monastery, very renowned, [dedicated] to the all-glorious **Virgin** and **Mother of God**, the Mother of Christ. He settled there, in the place which even to this day is commonly called by the name of the **Holy Mountain**.[42]

Particularly revealing in this passage is the presence of all three elements that construct the ideologeme of the Holy Mountain. Tărnovo is defined as "second… after the City of Constantine" which, through rhetorical formulation, clearly expresses a claim to participation in the imperial tradition of Constantinople. The idea of political imitation is thus articulated – an incorporation into a universal model in which the capital city is conceived as a God-protected center of the world, placed under the special protection of the Mother of God. Of great importance is also the mention of the monastery dedicated to the "all-glorious Virgin and Mother of God", namely the Hodegetria, situated within a space designated as the "Holy Mountain", clearly not by accident. Through the parallel drawn between the Bulgarian and the Byzantine capital, the model of Mount Athos as the Garden of the Mother of God is likewise reproduced – a sacred space set apart from the world, yet at the same time closely connected to it through its salvific function. This parallel is not accidental, just as

40 *Devingrad* means 'town of the Virgin' in Bulgarian.

41 Polyvjannyj 1984, 81-5; 1989, 158-60.

42 Ivanova 1986, 446.

'the City', Constantinople, is protected by the Mother of God, so too the 'mountain-city', Athos, as her earthly domain, is safeguarded and protected by her. It is precisely here that we observe how Tărnovo emerges as the place where these two models intersect and, in a certain sense, mutually reinforce one another.

This idea is even more clearly visible in a passage from the text describing a vision of Theodosius of Tărnovo:

> And in a vision Theodosius saw the entire mountain filled with various flowers and wondrous and diverse trees, full of all kinds of fruits; and a radiant man, standing and commanding him to gather the fruits diligently. When he came to himself, he understood in spirit that that desert would be filled with monks, who would cultivate many fruits of virtues. This indeed came to pass not long thereafter. For up to fifty monks who had gathered from different places made the desert into a city. Like sweet-voiced swallows, building nests here and there, they offered praises to God day and night. And it will suffice for only one of them to be singled out, so that from him may be understood the life and the eremitic practice of all.[43]

Here the transformation of the desert into a spiritual community is clearly evident. It is precisely this image that is of particular importance, as it recreates the fundamental *topos* of the monastic tradition – the transformation of the desert into a city, understood not in an urbanistic but in a spiritual and liturgical sense. At this point, we may once again recall the idea that "the desert was made a city by monks coming out from their own and enrolling themselves in the heavenly citizenship", which demonstrates that the monastic community is conceived as a form of citizenship of the heavenly city.

In the case of Tărnovo, this model acquires an additional dimension. The vision of the mountain filled with fruits and flowers to be gathered clearly refers to the image of the garden – a motif closely connected with the idea of Mount Athos as the Garden of the Mother of God. Thus, the mountain near the capital Tărnovo is conceived simultaneously as desert, garden, and city – three images unified within a single sacred geography. The monks who established this community, "like sweet-voiced swallows", through their unceasing praise transform the space into a liturgical center analogous to the city.

For this reason, it may be said that in the *Life of Theodosius of Tărnovo* we encounter a deliberate construction of a complex image in which the capital and the mountain function together as

43 Ivanova 1986, 451.

complementary forms of sacred space – an image built upon the model of Mount Athos. In this way, it is emphasized that the Bulgarian capital is integrated into the universalist model of the Christian Empire, where the Mother of God is the patroness both of the city and of the monastic community, and where their unity guarantees both political legitimacy and participation in the history of Salvation.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the portrayal of the personality of the saint and of his eremitic space, which gradually becomes communal. Theodosius is described as a spring in the desert: "And just as a stream, situated upon the summit of a hill, with its sweet waters […] draws to itself […] all animals […] so appeared the deeds of that divine man".[44]

It is especially important that the text emphasizes how the fame of the saint spreads "not only among the Bulgarian people themselves, but also among the Serbs, the Hungarians, and the Vlachs". In this way, the space acquires a supra-ethnic character, functioning as a spiritual center of Orthodoxy. Precisely in this sense, the Tărnovo Holy Mountain may be regarded as a reflection of the Athonite model. Like Mount Athos, it represents a space in which the desert is gradually transformed into an organized spiritual community. Thus, the Tărnovo Holy Mountain begins to function as a kind of counterpart simultaneously to Athos and to Constantinople. Like the City, which is 'the Eye' of the Christian universe and the center of the Empire, the mountain near the capital appears as its particular spiritual extension. It is no coincidence that in the *Life of Theodosius* Tărnovo is defined as "second, both in word and in reality, after the City of Constantine". In this context, the Holy Mountain near the capital is a monastic space, but also an element of imperial sacred topography through which the Bulgarian capital is integrated into the heritage of Orthodox Constantinople.

In this connection, attention should be paid to an exceptionally emblematic episode from the tradition concerning John of Rila – the 'encounter' between the Bulgarian ruler and the saint, which reveals the sacred function of the mountain in medieval Bulgarian culture. According to the hagiographical tradition, Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria wished to meet the hermit, but this proved physically impossible, as the ruler could not reach the place where the saint resided. In one of the hagiographical texts, the two stand on two neighboring peaks and communicate by means of signs – the ruler pitches his tents, while John of Rila lights a fire, the smoke of which "rises like a pillar to heaven".

> And the holy father answered them, saying: "Go and tell him: 'Holy and glorious Tsar, all things are possible with God, but not with

44 Ivanova 1986, 455.

> men! If you wish to see me and I to see you, set up your tent upon the peak, and I shall make smoke, that you may see the smoke and I may see the tent. Thus it is ordained for us to behold one another'". And the holy father made smoke like a pillar unto heaven. And Tsar Peter saw the sign of the holy father, and the holy father gazed toward the tent, and both glorified God and bowed to one another.[45]

This scene unequivocally demonstrates the space of the 'desert' as already sacralized through the presence of the saint and, precisely for this reason, inaccessible to the representative of secular authority. The ruler may approach the boundaries of the sacred space, but not enter it. In this way, the mountain is presented as a kind of zone of mediation between the earthly and the heavenly. The vertical image of the smoke, which connects the two peaks, symbolically establishes the link between the ruler and the hermit, between political and spiritual authority. In the *Life of St. John of Rila* by Euthymius of Tărnovo, this relationship is further developed through the exchange of messages between the ruler and the saint. In his letter to Peter, John of Rila instructs him on how he should exercise his power – with humility, mercy, and in service to the Church and the poor. Presented in this way, the mountain-desert appears not as a periphery, but as a spiritual center of the state.

Such a model corresponds directly to Byzantine imperial ideology. Here we see how Rila Mountains are assigned the same role – as a space of heavenly protection over the ruler and, consequently, the state. Just as Constantinople exists under the protection of the Mother of God, and Mount Athos gradually establishes itself as a spiritual support of the Byzantine Empire, so too Rila begins to acquire the function of a sacred center of Bulgaria. It is precisely in this context that the later formation of the Tărnovo Holy Mountain should be understood, for it is here that the model of the sacred mountain – associated both with the monastic community and with the idea of Christian statehood – reaches its fullest development.

Thus, we observe that the idea of the sacred mountain as a monastic community spreads throughout the Balkans and forms a complex nexus with the idea of the divinely protected city and power, and hence of the world itself. It is also directly connected with the Marian city-protecting cult, since it is through the Mother of God that divine protection itself is realized. This protection may manifest itself in various ways, but the two most widespread forms are through Marian icons[46] or through monastic centers.

45 Ivanova 1986, 128-9.

46 Cf. Naumov 2006, 187-98.

In Byzantine practice, especially in the earlier period, urban monasteries are particularly characteristic. This is undoubtedly the case for Constantinople and Thessaloniki, as well as for other major centers. At the same time, with the strong development of anchoritism and the tendency of hermits to withdraw into the desert, the mountain acquires ever greater significance. It proves to be no less characteristic a place for solitude and for the struggle with the demons of the world and of one's own soul than the sandy desert. The same may be said of cenobitic monasteries, in which the same aim is pursued and achieved in different ways. Thus, from an early period, large monastic centers located on mountains begin to appear. Among these may be listed Mount Olympus in Bithynia, the Black Mountain near Antioch, and others. From the eleventh century onward, the significance of Mount Athos becomes immense, as it preserves a longer tradition and develops a more clearly structured ideology of the monastic community. At the same time, it attracts the attention and patronage of imperial authorities and thus itself acquires considerable political importance.

In the present study, we are not concerned with whether the Marian Athonite cult precedes or follows the formation, consolidation, and dissemination of the significance of Mount Athos in the Orthodox world. The same applies to the much less pronounced veneration of Saint Constantine. What is essential for us is that, in the Late Middle Ages, it constitutes an important element in the perception of the holy place. We have also sought to present the penetration and spread of the idea of the sacred monastic mountain in the Balkans, which is inseparably connected with the already established image of Mount Athos. In fact, the visits of *taxidiotes*, the *metochia* of Athonite monasteries, and the widespread veneration of (copies of) miracle-working icons all contribute to such a development.

More difficult to explain is the connection of these centers – images of the Holy Mountain, with the imperial capital and ideology. We would argue that this should be understood within the framework of the Marian cult of the city's protection, which perceives the Mother of God as an intercessor for humanity before her Son, and thus as the protectress of the Empire and Constantinople. There is sufficient evidence for this in the sources, the most significant being the designation of both the City and the Holy Mountain as the eye of the Christian world. The other, less promising line of inquiry concerns the veneration of Saint Constantine and its connection with the Holy Mountain.

The Garden of the Mother of God is a place of importance in every respect and is continuously affirmed by the Orthodox and their rulers. It becomes an essential element of political culture and practice in the first centuries of Ottoman rule, when the Church assumes a significant portion of the Roman (Byzantine) heritage,

and together with it the mountain – the Garden of the Mother of God – which has become an image of the Christian universe, just as the City has always been.

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