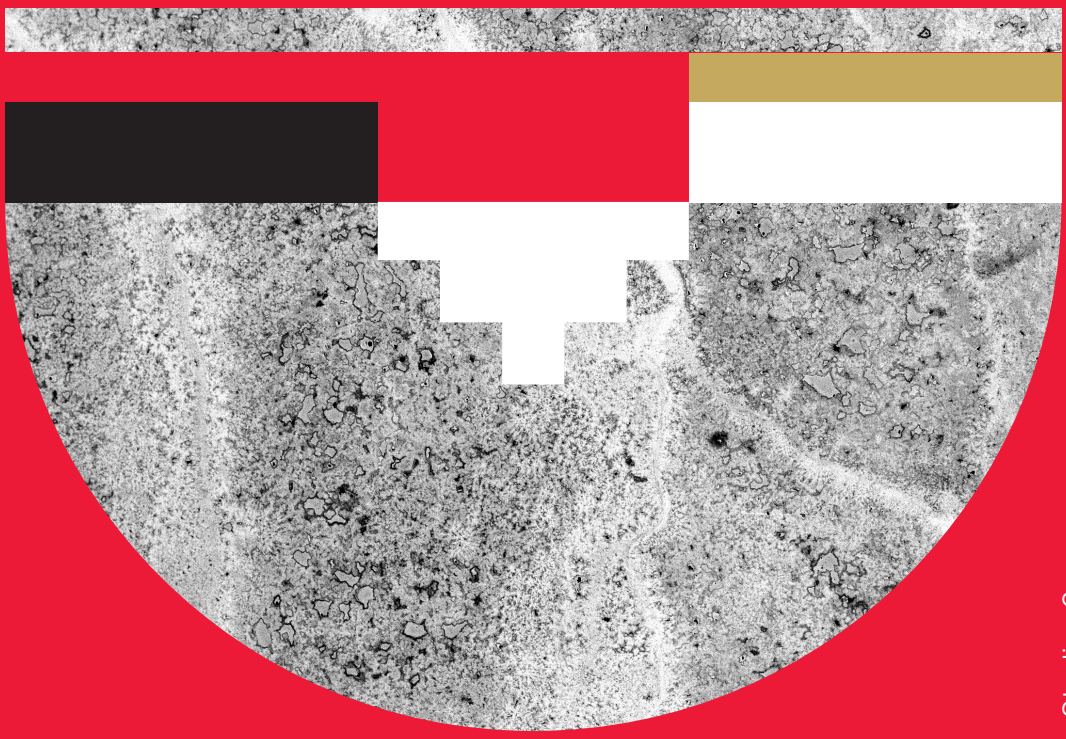
Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond

edited by
Antonio Rigo, Berenice Cavarra
and Gianfrancesco Zanetti



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Abstract

The term ‘holy mountains’ is frequently employed and not only in Byzantium. The sacred character is mostly derived from their comparison or assimilation with the holy mountains of the Bible and the New Testament, as well as with the ‘Mount of God’ found in patristic literature. The studies contained in this volume explore the relationship between the ‘holy mountain’ as an image and symbol and the various ‘holy mountains’ which, in Byzantium and elsewhere – from Sinai to the Balkans – have made it a concrete reality.

Keywords Patristic Literature. Byzantine Literature. Art History. Mount Sinai. Mount Athos. Crete. Byzantine Monasticism.

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edited by Antonio Rigo, Berenice Cavarra, Gianfrancesco Zanetti

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Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond

Preface

Antonio Rigo
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

The ambivalence of the title, hinging on the key word 'Mountain' and the interplay between singular and plural, evokes the central theme of this volume: the 'Mountain of God', the mountain of theophany and the Holy Mountain of Scripture, the Fathers, and so many ancient and medieval authors.

Yet, Scripture itself speaks of 'holy mountains': Sinai and Horeb, and then Tabor, the mountain of Christ's Transfiguration. The singular thus finds expression in the plural, as particular places give material, visible, and tangible form to the Mountain of God.

With the birth and flourishing of Christian monasticism, these places became the setting for a renewed theophany. It is hardly by chance that Sinai occupies a central place in this development, since monastic life had taken root there from a very early period.

The essays gathered here explore this theme as it emerges from ancient Christian and patristic literature and, above all, from the literature, history, and iconography of Byzantine and Eastern monasticism. Their geographical horizon extends from Sinai to Mount Athos and to the mountains of the Balkans and Asia Minor; their approaches, whether art-historical, iconographic, literary, historical, or archival, are independent but complementary.

Taken together, these different perspectives encompass much of the Byzantine millennium and reach beyond it into modernity, while ranging geographically from Sinai and Greece to medieval Bulgaria and Serbia. They also touch upon some of the great summits

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of literature and art, Byzantine and otherwise, among them the mosaics of the Sinai monastery, the *Ladder* of John Climacus, and the paintings of El Greco. Particularly striking is the recurrent presence of Sinai across more than a millennium and in several of the essays, as though, amid this plurality of sacred landscapes, it retained a singular status as the Mountain of God par excellence.

The essays are expanded versions of papers delivered at the conference held at the Fondazione San Carlo in Modena on 7-8 November 2025, an event that also marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the Foundation.

As this undertaking reaches its conclusion, we wish above all to thank the authors for their contributions, together with all those who, in various ways, made possible both the organization of the conference and the publication of this book.

September 2026

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Monter à la rencontre du Seigneur
La montagne, lieu de rencontre entre l'homme et Dieu chez quelques Pères grecs

Matthieu Cassin
CNRS, IRHT

Abstract Mountains are a geographical feature that figure prominently in both the Old and New Testaments, including at key moments such as certain theophanies or some of Jesus's discourses. In early Christianity, however, physical mountains do not occupy a central place. Rather, it is as an allegorical reality that they play an important role, signifying both man's necessary ascent towards God and the place of encounter with him, amongst many other meanings. Following an overview of the uses of the term and its polysemy in exegesis, we examine several texts by Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus. The former, alongside the allegorical mountain, makes several references to the sensations experienced at the summit of a mountain. Finally, the place of the mountain in the ascetic traditions of Cappadocia, Egypt and Syria is compared, based on a few examples.

Keywords Asceticism. Evagrius of Pontus. Greek Patristic. Gregory of Nyssa. Mountain.

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1 Introduction

Que la montagne ait été vue comme un symbole des relations entre la terre et le ciel, entre les hommes et les dieux depuis de longs siècles, c'est ce que la consultation de toute étude d'histoire des religions viendrait confirmer.[1] Il en va de même dans la Bible et les études à ce sujet sont tout aussi nombreuses, même si on observe bien entendu des glissements significatifs dans l'importance et le rôle dévolu à ces réalités. Cependant, certains savants ont voulu voir une rupture radicale, chez les auteurs chrétiens, dans la perception de la montagne, au point de parler d'une désacralisation et d'une rupture de toute continuité avec les approches antérieures, ce qui aurait conduit à faire de la montagne un simple « idéogramme sacré ».[2] On cherchera ici moins à fournir une évaluation globale de la valeur symbolique accordée à la montagne dans les textes chrétiens de l'Antiquité grecque, qu'à proposer un parcours à travers un certain nombre de ces textes anciens, afin d'éclairer différents versants de cette réalité géographique et symbolique, de cet élément du paysage physique et mental. En effet, si la montagne est une réalité symbolique, elle est aussi une réalité concrète et matérielle, un lieu et un décor. La chose a été relevée pour le domaine ascétique, qui serait un contexte particulièrement propice à la réémergence du contenu religieux assigné à la montagne.[3] Cependant, un tel constat n'est pas forcément généralisable à toutes les zones géographiques et à tous les contextes, comme on le verra par la suite. On se propose donc de regarder, dans les pages qui suivent, la montagne sous divers angles, à partir de plusieurs textes chrétiens de l'Antiquité de langue grecque, pour l'essentiel. Après une rapide présentation de l'état des études et de quelques facettes de la présence biblique de la montagne, tant dans l'Ancien que dans le Nouveau Testament, ainsi qu'un rappel de la diversité des lectures antiques chrétiennes, on s'arrêtera à trois dossiers successifs : les usages variés de la montagne dans l'œuvre de Grégoire de Nysse, ses interprétations évagriennes, avant d'envisager quelques aspects du rôle de la montagne dans la littérature ascétique.

1 Dans l'excellent *Dictionnaire des mythologies* dirigé par Y. Bonnefoy (1999), on trouve par exemple deux articles à ce sujet : « Montagne. Axe cosmique. Turcs et Mongols » (2 : 1353-4) et « Montagnes. Au Japon » (1354-7).

2 C'est la formule de Neri (2001, 65). Elle est reprise avec approbation par Ressa (2010, 328).

3 Neri 2001, 74-6.

2 De l'historiographie aux contextes bibliques

On ne peut certes pas dire que la montagne soit une réalité matérielle et symbolique qui soit absente du paysage des études sur l'Antiquité biblique et chrétienne. Cependant, sauf oubli de ma part, tout à fait possible, je n'ai pu identifier d'étude complète et exhaustive à ce sujet. Sur le versant de l'histoire des religions, on peut par exemple mentionner l'article maintenant assez ancien de L. Beinaert, enquête menée dans le cercle des Rencontres d'Eranos, tout à fait favorable à ce type d'approche ;[4] la montagne y occupe cependant une place assez secondaire, comme l'un des aspects du symbolisme ascensionnel, de la verticalité et de l'ascension. Ce sont bien là certaines, mais certaines seulement, des symboliques de la montagne dans l'histoire des religions : la montagne est en effet à la fois lieu de hauteur, lieu de culte, marqué par sa proximité avec le ciel, et donc avec le divin, lieu de séparation avec les hommes, lieu à l'écart aussi par sa difficulté d'accès ; elle est en outre parfois perçue comme un axe du monde qui relie ciel et terre et les articule l'un à l'autre. Si l'on revient au contexte du christianisme ancien, deux études se distinguent, celle de V. Neri[5] et celle de P. Ressa ;[6] l'une comme l'autre traite principalement, mais pas exclusivement, du monde latin. On y ajoutera un article de M. Dulaey, consacré à deux des textes patristiques importants pour cette question, Is 2,2-6 et Mi 4,1-3.[7] Cette contribution a été publiée dans les mélanges en l'honneur de Pierre Maraval, un volume consacré aux pèlerinages et aux lieux saints, ce qui souligne une dimension importante des déplacements vers les montagnes, et plus largement des montagnes elles-mêmes, dans le christianisme ancien, sur laquelle on reviendra. On peut encore y joindre un article intéressant, consacré à la montagne par excellence des mondes juifs et chrétiens, le Sinaï, et dû à S. Heid.[8] Enfin, il faut mentionner une thèse de théologie consacrée à la montagne et aux montagnes dans les homélies d'Origène, extrêmement analytique mais non dépourvue d'intérêt, publiée par J. Fernandez Lago en 1993.[9]

Ce n'est pas le lieu de parcourir ici les montagnes de la Bible et leur rôle, les événements qui s'y sont produits ou le symbolisme qui leur est attaché. D'autres ont déjà longuement rassemblé et étudié

4 Beinaert 1950.

5 Neri 2001 (colloque tenu en 1999).

6 Ressa 2010.

7 Dulaey 2006.

8 Heid 2003.

9 Fernandez Lago 1993. Il n'y a pas, en revanche, d'article montagne dans l'excellent Dictionnaire Origène (Monaci Castagno 2000), non plus que dans le Dictionnaire Grégoire de Nysse (Mateo-Seco, Maspero 2010).

cette documentation.[10] Il n'y aurait pas grand sens à énumérer ici toutes les montagnes citées dans les textes bibliques, non plus qu'à analyser toutes les mentions de montagnes, identifiées ou non. On pense bien sûr à la théophanie divine, qui a lieu sur la montagne du Sinaï (Ex 19), ou à l'autre théophanie vers laquelle chemine le prophète Élie (3 Rg 19), tandis que des textes prophétiques mentionnent, eux, la maison du Seigneur visible au sommet des montagnes (Is 2,2-6 // Mi 4,1-2), ou diverses caractéristiques de la montagne de Dieu (Ps 67,16). La montagne est donc à la fois l'un des lieux de la manifestation divine (mais pas le seul : qu'il suffise de penser aux visiteurs d'Abraham ou au songe de Jacob), celui de la présence divine, mais ce peut tout aussi bien être un lieu du culte rendu aux faux dieux. La montagne n'est donc pas uniquement un lieu positif ou divin, et ce n'est pas le seul lieu divin.

Du côté du Nouveau Testament, l'étude menée par G. Ceschi a le grand mérite d'analyser en détail les emplois du terme ὄρος, en relevant différentes dimensions :[11] un lieu d'isolement et de solitude, un lieu de prière et de proximité avec Dieu, un lieu de révélation au peuple, mais aussi un lieu apocalyptique et eschatologique. L'auteur souligne qu'une petite minorité des emplois seulement (18 sur 63) comporte un nom propre aux côtés du terme ὄρος : il en conclut donc que la montagne serait, dans le Nouveau Testament, un paysage de l'âme, plutôt qu'un lieu réel, préfigurant ainsi le changement relevé par V. Neri pour les textes de l'Antiquité chrétienne. En outre, la verticalité de la montagne serait relativement peu exploitée, sinon pour signaler le caractère dynamique, et non statique, du ministère de Jésus, qui monte et descend, sans jamais s'arrêter durablement, pas plus au sommet qu'au pied de la montagne d'ailleurs, pourrait-on ajouter, qu'il s'agisse de la Transfiguration, au sommet, ou de la veille au Jardin des Oliviers, au pied. Sans doute faudrait-il d'ailleurs élargir l'enquête à d'autres termes, qui concernent les collines et plus largement toutes les élévations du relief, afin de mieux mettre en évidence le contexte géographique et symbolique dans lequel se déploient les usages du terme ὄρος.

Ces quelques exemples n'ont aucune visée à la complétude, ni même à la représentativité ; ils tendent simplement à rappeler un panorama d'ensemble, dans lequel viennent s'inscrire les usages de la montagne chez les auteurs chrétiens de l'Antiquité qui vont être maintenant abordés.

10 Voir par exemple Foerster 1954 ; Stommel 1954 ; Bohlen 1994 ; Ceschi 2019.

11 Ceschi 2019.

3 Une pluralité d'interprétations patristiques

On a vu que les études précédentes mettaient en avant, chez les auteurs chrétiens antiques, une lecture symbolique et allégorique de la montagne, vue comme « idéogramme sacré » selon la désignation de V. Neri. Cette approche symbolique conduit presque inévitablement à une multiplicité d'interprétation de la montagne, comme l'a déjà laissé apercevoir l'énumération des contextes et des sens que prennent le terme et la réalité géographique. On rappellera ici quelques textes patristiques, dont plusieurs sont déjà bien connus, et qui soulignent cette polysémie ; ces textes théoriques sont tous latins : on ne trouve par exemple rien de semblable dans l'*Isagogè* d'Hadrien, pour ne mentionner que l'un des manuels qui pourrait être comparé au dernier texte de notre énumération.

Le texte le plus ancien est celui d'Augustin dans les *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (97.9) : *ergo sunt montes boni, sunt montes mali : montes boni, magnitudo spiritalis ; montes mali, tumor superbiae* (Il y a donc des montagnes bonnes et des montagnes mauvaises : les montagnes bonnes, c'est la grandeur spirituelle ; les montagnes mauvaises, c'est l'enflure de l'orgueil). Cette formulation très ramassée se retrouve, sous une forme plus ample, chez Cassiodore (*Expositiones in Ps*. 10.31-5) :

> Mons enim in scripturis diuinis aequiuocus est, quod dissimilibus rebus pro aliqua comparatione deputatur. Frequenter enim et in bono et in malo ponitur ; nam cum in bono mons dicitur, firmitas eius consideratur et honorabilis altitudo ; cum in malo, stupor mentis et eleuata superbia. Sic unum nomen diuersis rebus, consideratis qualitatibus, congruenter aptatur.
>
> « Montagne » est en effet équivoque dans les divines Écritures, qui est appliqué à des réalités dissemblables en fonction d'une comparaison. Car le terme est utilisé fréquemment et en bonne et en mauvaise part ; car, lorsque 'montagne' est dit en bonne part, on considère sa solidité et son élévation digne d'être honorée ; lorsque c'est en mauvaise part, la stupidité et l'orgueil enflé. Ainsi un nom unique est appliqué de manière appropriée à des choses différentes, en fonction de ses qualités.[12]

Chez Grégoire le Grand, dans les *Moralia in Iob* (33.1), on rencontre une énumération plus large, qui s'appuie en outre sur la distinction entre emplois au singulier et emplois au pluriel, chacun des deux types conduisant d'ailleurs à des interprétations multiples :

12 Trad. de l'auteur.

> In scriptura sacra cum numero singulari mons ponitur, aliquando incarnatus Dominus, aliquando sancta Ecclesia, aliquando testamentum Dei, aliquando apostata angelus, aliquando quilibet haereticus designatur. Cum uero montes plurali numero nominantur, aliquando celsitudo apostolorum atque prophetarum, aliquando uero saecularium potestatum tumor exprimitur.
>
> Dans l'Écriture sainte, lorsque le terme de montagne est employé au singulier, il désigne parfois le Seigneur incarné, parfois la sainte Église, parfois le testament de Dieu, parfois l'ange apostat, parfois n'importe quel hérétique. Mais lorsqu'il est question de montagnes au pluriel, il s'agit parfois de l'élévation des apôtres et des prophètes, parfois aussi de l'orgueil des puissances séculières.[13]

Dans son manuel herméneutique intitulé *Clefs pour l'intelligence spirituelle* (3.5-6), Eucher de Lyon met en série une pluralité de sens plus riche encore :

> Montes : Dominus, ecclesia, apostoli siue sancti a celsitudine uirtutum ; in psalmo : Qui descendit super montes Sion. Item in aliam partem in propheta : Ne quando offendant pedes uestri ad montes caligosos, id est hereticos. Colles : sancti sed minoris meriti ; in psalmo : Montes et omnes colles. Item in malam partem in euangelio : Omnis collis et mons humiliabitur.
>
> Monts : le Seigneur, l'Église, les apôtres ou les saints, en raison de l'élévation de leurs vertus ; dans le psaume : *Il descend sur les monts de Sion* [Ps 132,3]. Aussi en un autre sens dans le prophète : *Pour que vos pieds n'achoppent pas aux monts ténébreux* [Jr 13,16], c'est-à-dire aux hérétiques. Collines : les saints, mais de moindre mérite ; dans le psaume : *les monts et toutes les collines* [Ps 148,9]. En mauvaise part aussi dans l'Évangile : *Toute colline et toute montagne seront abaissées* [Lc 3,5].[14]

Bien évidemment, dans ces différentes listes de sens, le caractère dominant reste l'élévation, qu'elle rapproche l'homme de Dieu, selon un schéma classique de répartition verticale qui place la divinité au sommet, ou qu'elle désigne l'élévation démesurée, déplacée de l'homme, c'est-à-dire la superbe, l'orgueil, voire ceux qui en font preuve par excellence, à savoir les hérétiques. Les collines (βουνοί) ne sont pas toujours distinguées des montagnes ; elles sont cependant parfois introduites dans une hiérarchie à plusieurs niveaux,

13 Trad. Moniales de Wisques 2010, 18-19.

14 Trad. Dulaey 2021, 122-5.

plaines et vallées, collines, montagnes, où la différence de hauteur correspond à une différence de statut ontologique ou de sainteté, de proximité avec le divin – ce qui revient, d'une certaine manière, au même. C'est entre autres le cas chez Origène et chez Jérôme,[15] ou encore dans la synthèse d'Eucher, comme on vient de le lire. En outre, ces différents niveaux ne sont pas seulement des réalités isolées et dont le symbolisme ne vaut que par l'identification d'un élément séparé : des trajets, des montées et des descentes, relient ces différents lieux, comme on l'a déjà suggéré à propos du Jésus en mouvement des évangiles. Cependant, au-delà de ces variations et de ces mouvements, les montagnes sont majoritairement utilisées pour signifier des réalités bonnes : saints, anges, prophètes, Christ, Église, etc., du fait de leur élévation.

Il faut encore mentionner une autre identification allégorique de la montagne, qui émerge semble-t-il plus tardivement : elle est alors considérée comme une figure de la Vierge Marie, à partir de l'interprétation de Dn 2,34, la pierre détachée de la montagne sans qu'intervienne une main d'homme. La montagne est identifiée à la Vierge, et la pierre au Christ. Cette interprétation se développe au moins à partir de Théodoret de Cyr, alors que le verset avait auparavant été appliqué plutôt à la nature humaine, dont était détaché le Christ.[16]

Revenons cependant à un dernier exemple patristique, grec cette fois, de la pluralité des interprétations de la montagne, qu'on prendra dans les scholies exégétiques d'Évagre le Pontique. Dans les *Scholies aux Psaumes*, on trouve par exemple ces deux équivalences différentes proposées pour le terme « montagne » :

> 3,5. φωνῇ μου πρὸς κύριον ἐκέκραξα,
> καὶ εἰσήκουσέν μου ἐξ ὄρους ἁγίου αὐτοῦ
> γ′. Ὄρος ἅγιόν ἐστιν ὁ Χριστός.
>
> 3,5. De ma voix, j'ai crié vers le Seigneur, et il m'a entendu depuis sa sainte montagne
> 3. La sainte montagne est le Christ.[17]

15 Voir sur ce point Fernandez Lago 1993, 62-4 ; Neri 2001, 78 note 20 pour Jérôme.

16 Sur ce verset et son interprétation, ainsi que sur d'autres passages bibliques connexes appliqués à Marie, voir en particulier Giannarelli 1988; 1989.

17 Voir aussi Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, 2 *in Ps* 42,3 : "αὐτά με ὡδήγησαν καὶ ἤγαγόν με εἰς ὄρος ἅγιόν σου καὶ εἰς τὰ σκηνώματά σου β′. Ὄρος ἅγιόν ἐστι τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ Χριστός · σκηνώματα δὲ αὐτοῦ αἱ ἅγιαι δυνάμεις ἐν αἷς κατοικεῖ" (Elles, elles m'ont guidé et m'ont mené à ta sainte montagne et à tes tentes 2. La sainte montagne de Dieu est le Christ, et ses tentes sont les puissances saintes dans lesquelles il habite ; Rondeau, Géhin, Cassin 2021, 600-1).

> 14,1. καὶ τίς κατασκηνώσει ἐν τῷ ὄρει τῷ ἁγίῳ σου ;
> α'. Ὄρος ἅγιόν ἐστιν ἡ γνῶσις ἡ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἥτις ἐστὶ θεωρία τῶν γεγονότων.
>
> 14,1. Et qui dressera sa tente sur ta sainte montagne ?
> 1. La sainte montagne est la science du Christ, c'est-à-dire la contemplation des êtres.[18]

Ici, la montagne est l'équivalent non plus du Christ, mais de la partie de la philosophie qui est la physique.

Au contraire, dans l'une des *Scholies aux Proverbes* (sur Pr 27,25), les montagnes sont cette fois l'équivalent des saints :

> Πεδίον λέγει τὸν νοῦν, χλωρὰ δὲ τὰς ἐν αὐτῷ κατὰ δύναμιν ἐνυπαρχούσας ἀρετάς, ὧν ὁ ἐπιμελούμενος κερεῖ πόαν, σύμβολον οὖσαν τῆς γνώσεως τοῦ θεοῦ, ἣν καὶ χόρτον πάλιν ὀρεινὸν ὀνομάζει · χόρτος γάρ ἐστιν ὀρεινὸς γνῶσις ἁγίων δυνάμεων ἁρμόζουσα τῇ ἀλογωτέρᾳ τῶν ψυχῶν καταστάσει. Ἔθος δὲ τῇ γραφῇ τοὺς ἁγίους ὄρη καλεῖν. Οὕτω καὶ ὁ Δαυὶδ αἴρει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰ ὄρη πόθεν ἥξει ἡ βοήθεια αὐτοῦ · καὶ πάλιν · ὄρη σκιρτῶσιν ὡς κριοὶ καὶ βουνοὶ ὡς ἀρνία προβάτων ἐπὶ τῇ σωτηρίᾳ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ.
>
> Il appelle 'plaine' l'intellect, 'herbages' les vertus potentielles qui sont en lui ; celui qui prend soin d'elles coupera le foin qui est le symbole de la science de Dieu, et qu'il a aussi nommé 'fourrage des montagnes'. 'Le fourrage des montagnes' est en effet la science des saintes puissances qui sied à l'état irrationnel des âmes, car l'Écriture a l'habitude d'appeler 'montagnes' les saints ; c'est ainsi que David élève son âme *vers les montagnes d'où viendra pour lui le secours, et qu'il dit encore* : *Les montagnes bondissent comme les béliers et les collines comme les agneaux des brebis*, à cause du salut d'Israël.[19]

On voit donc que les montagnes sont certes largement utilisées de manière métaphorique, voire allégorique, mais avec des correspondances qui ne sont pas fixes : elles désignent des réalités élevées, de manière généralement positive, mais aussi négative. On peut en outre trouver, plus ponctuellement, une utilisation des différences de niveau dans le paysage pour y faire correspondre une échelle des êtres ou des réalités. Dans ces cas, la montagne correspond au degré le plus haut, c'est-à-dire globalement au niveau

18 Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, 3,3 et 14,1, ed. Rondeau, Géhin, Cassin 2021, 286-7 et 360-1.

19 Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Proverbes*, 341, ed. Géhin 1987, 430-1.

divin, ou du moins à celui du Christ, si la divinité reste mise à part au niveau céleste, échappant donc à l'énumération des éléments terrestres du paysage.

4 Grégoire de Nysse

Après ce tour d'horizon panoramique, on peut s'arrêter un peu plus longuement sur la place des montagnes chez un auteur du IVe s., Grégoire de Nysse. Parmi les nombreux usages du terme,[20] on verra qu'à côté des emplois allégoriques, on trouve aussi plusieurs références concrètes aux montagnes et aux sensations qu'elles provoquent chez l'homme. Les textes nysséens, très attentifs aux réalités naturelles et sensibles, ainsi qu'aux images, permettent en effet d'approcher une conception plus concrète de la montagne, qui cohabite sans difficulté avec les interprétations allégoriques déjà relevées.

4.1 Montagnes interprétées négativement

On trouve certes chez Grégoire les lectures allégoriques de la montagne que nous avons déjà relevées plus haut, y compris sous leur versant négatif. C'est par exemple le cas dans le traité *Sur les titres des Psaumes* (II, XII, 59, 7-10), lorsqu'il commente Ps 45,4b, « Les montagnes ont été troublées par sa force » :

> δι' ὧν ἁπάντων τὴν διὰ σαρκὸς προαγορεύει τοῦ Κυρίου ἐμφάνειαν, ὅτε ἠχεῖ μὲν καὶ ταράσσεται τῶν δαιμόνων ἡ φύσις, μεταβαίνει δὲ καὶ ὄρη, τὰ γεώδη τῆς κακίας φρονήματα, ἀκίνητα εἶναι δοκοῦντα τοῖς πάλαι καὶ ἀμετάθετα.
>
> Par tout cela, il annonce la manifestation dans la chair du Seigneur, quand la nature des démons gronde et est ébranlée, quand des montagnes changent aussi de place, ces pensées terrestres du mal, elles qui paraissaient aux anciens immobiles et immuables.[21]

Ici, les montagnes ne sont pas un symbole de puissance, mais de fausse puissance, dont le poids et l'immobilité ne peuvent tenir face à la puissance réelle de Dieu. Dans le Prologue des *Homélies sur le Cantique* (§ 6), on rencontre une lecture qui n'est pas sans liens

20 On consultera par exemple le riche article Mann 2006.

21 Grégoire de Nysse, *Sur les titres des Psaumes*, II, XII, 59, 7-10, ed. Reynard 2002, 396-9.

avec celles-ci, à propos de l'interprétation de Mi 4,1 (« Et voici qu'en les derniers jours, la montagne du Seigneur deviendra bien visible, prête sur la cime des montagnes, et elle sera élevée au-dessus des collines »).[22] Alors que le verset distingue la montagne du Seigneur et les collines (βουνῶν), Grégoire ne retient que des montagnes, opposant celle du Seigneur et les montagnes qu'étaient les puissances adverses :

> Καὶ μακρὸν ἂν εἴη τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐκ τῶν προφητῶν ἀναλέγεσθαι · πῶς ὁ Μιχαίας ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐμφανὲς ὄρος λέγει γενήσεσθαι ἐπὶ τὰς κορυφὰς τῶν ὀρέων, τὸ ἐπὶ καθαιρέσει τῶν ἀντικειμένων δυνάμεων ἀναδεικνύμενον τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον οὕτω κατονομάζων;
>
> Il serait trop long de passer en revue, une à une, les paroles des prophètes. Comment Michée dit qu'à la fin des temps une montagne apparaîtra au-dessus du sommet des montagnes [Mi 4,1], nommant ainsi le mystère de la piété proclamé pour la destruction des puissances adverses ?[23]

Ici, comme, dans une certaine mesure, dans la citation précédente, Grégoire s'attache moins à la montagne comme telle, qu'aux relations entre divers éléments du paysage, et en l'occurrence entre diverses élévations. La montagne du Seigneur de Mi 4,1 vient dépasser radicalement, et coiffer, les fausses montagnes, les fausses élévations, que sont les puissances adverses, les démons. L'interprétation n'est plus simplement celle du terme 'montagne', mais elle met en relation, et en opposition, plusieurs montagnes, de même qu'on a vu plus haut Origène ou Jérôme distinguer plusieurs éléments du paysage, vallées, montagnes et collines.

4.2 Moïse sur la montagne du Sinaï : théophanie et inaccessibilité

Pourtant, chez Grégoire, comme chez bien d'autres auteurs, la montagne par excellence est celle de la théophanie ; elle est à la fois le symbole de la puissance divine et le lieu de sa manifestation. Cet épisode est bien évidemment abondamment traité dans la *Vie de Moïse* composée par l'évêque de Nysse. Moïse y est présenté comme le modèle de l'ascension de l'homme vers Dieu et cette ascension

22 Sur ce verset et ses interprétations, voir Dulaey 2006.

23 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Cantique des cantiques*, Prol., 6, trad. Canévet 2021, 122-3.

vers la contemplation prend, physiquement, la forme de l'ascension de la montagne du Sinaï – du mont Horeb si l'on considère que les deux montagnes n'en font qu'une – à la suite du récit de l'*Exode* que commente le texte nysséen. Il faudrait citer de longs passages de ce texte, dont on ne retiendra que deux courts extraits, significatifs :

> Ὄρος γάρ ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄναντες καὶ δυσπρόσιτον ἡ θεολογία, ἧς μόλις ὁ πολὺς λεῶς τῆς ὑπωρείας φθάνει. Εἰ δέ τις Μωϋσῆς εἴη, γένοιτ' ἂν καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ τῆς ἀνόδου, χωρῶν τῇ ἀκοῇ τὰς τῶν σαλπίγγων φωνάς, ἅς φησιν ὁ τῆς ἱστορίας λόγος ἰσχυροτέρας ἐν τῷ προβαίνειν γίνεσθαι. Ἀληθῶς γὰρ σάλπιγξ τὴν ἀκοὴν καταπλήττουσα τὸ περὶ τῆς θείας φύσεως κήρυγμα, μέγα μὲν καὶ παρὰ τὴν πρώτην φαινόμενον, μεῖζον δὲ καὶ μᾶλλον τῆς ἀκοῆς καθικνούμενον ἐν τοῖς τελευταίοις.
>
> C'est en effet une montagne escarpée et d'accès vraiment difficile que la connaissance de Dieu (théologie). À peine la foule peut-elle parvenir à sa base. Mais s'il s'agit de quelque Moïse, il pourra parvenir très avant dans la montée et percevoir « le son des trompettes qui devient plus fort », nous dit le texte, « à mesure qu'on avance ». La véritable trompette qui frappe l'oreille, c'est la prédication de la divinité, qui, puissante dès l'abord, devient plus forte et frappe davantage les oreilles dans les derniers temps.[24]

La montagne figure la difficulté de la tâche qui s'offre à l'homme pour tenter d'approcher de Dieu, ou plutôt de la connaissance de Dieu – on retrouve ici l'importance qu'a, chez Grégoire de Nysse, l'impossibilité pour l'homme de connaître véritablement Dieu. Les fatigues de l'ascension, qui découragent la plupart des mortels, reflètent la difficulté du chemin intellectuel et spirituel qui permet à l'homme de se rapprocher de son créateur.

Un peu plus loin ces étapes sont rassemblées en une sorte de résumé :

> Μετὰ τοῦτο ἐν τῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ σκηνῇ γίνεται. Τίς ἀκολουθήσει τῷ διὰ τῶν τοιούτων ὁδεύοντι καὶ ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ὑψουμένῳ τὸν νοῦν, ὅς, καθάπερ τινὰ κορυφὴν ἐκ κορυφῆς μεταλαμβάνων, διὰ τῆς τῶν ὑψηλῶν ἀναβάσεως ἀεὶ ἑαυτοῦ γίνεται ὑψηλότερος ; Πρῶτον κατέλιπε τὴν ὑπώρειαν, πάντων τῶν πρὸς τὴν ἄνοδον ἀτονησάντων ἀποκριθείς. Εἶτα δέχεται τῇ ἀκοῇ τὰς τῶν σαλπίγγων φωνάς, τῷ ὕψει τῆς ἀνόδου συνεπαιρόμενος. Ἐπὶ τούτοις εἰς τὸ ἀόρατον τῆς θεογνωσίας ἄδυτον παραδύεται. Καὶ οὐδὲ ἐν τούτῳ μένει, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν ἀχειροποίητον μεταβαίνει σκηνήν. Τῷ ὄντι γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῦτο

24 Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Moïse*, 2.158, ed. Daniélou 1968, 206-7.

καταντᾷ τὸ πέρας ὁ διὰ τῶν τοιούτων ἀνόδων ὑψούμενος.

> Et ensuite, on arrive au tabernacle qui n'est pas fait de main d'homme. Qui suivra Moïse, tandis qu'il fait route à travers de telles réalités et élève son esprit à de si grandes hauteurs ? Passant de sommet en sommet dans son ascension vers les choses d'en-haut, il s'élève toujours plus au-dessus de lui-même. Il a commencé par laisser la base de la montagne, s'étant discerné de tous ceux qui manquaient de forces devant l'ascension ; puis parvenu sur les hauteurs, ses oreilles ont perçu le son des trompettes ; après quoi il a pénétré dans le sanctuaire caché et invisible de la connaissance de Dieu. Mais, même là, il ne reste pas, mais il passe au tabernacle « qui n'est pas fait de main d'homme ». Car c'est là enfin vraiment le terme auquel parvient celui qui s'est élevé par de telles ascensions.[25]

La montagne est donc le lieu de la théophanie par excellence, qui est au cœur de la *Vie de Moïse* ; c'est le lieu de la révélation de Dieu, mais aussi de la non-connaissance, caractéristique du rapport de l'homme à Dieu chez Grégoire. L'ascension de Moïse le conduit *vers* Dieu plutôt que *jusqu'à* Dieu ; en effet, au sommet de la montagne, c'est encore Dieu qui vient à lui, plutôt que le contraire. Dans les dernières sections de la *Vie de Moïse*, enfin, Grégoire n'arrête pas Moïse au sommet de la montagne : celui-ci redescend auprès du peuple. Le sommet de la montagne, lieu de rencontre avec Dieu, n'est pas le lieu de demeure de l'homme.[26]

Cependant, la figure de Moïse est également liée à d'autres montagnes que celle du Sinaï ; en particulier celle de sa mort, c'est-à-dire le Mont Nebo :

οὗ ἡ τελευτὴ τῆς ζωῆς ἱστόρηται ὑψηλοτέρα · ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς ἀκρωρείας τοῦ ὄρους γενόμενος, καὶ μηδὲν ἴχνος, μηδὲ μνημόσυνον τῆς γηΐνης ἀχθηδόνος τῷ βίῳ ὑπολειπόμενος · ὁ μὴ παραλλάξας τὸν χαρακτῆρα τοῦ κάλλους ὑπὸ τοῦ χρόνου, ἀλλὰ διασώσας ἐν τῇ τρεπτῇ φύσει τὸ ἐν καλῷ ἀναλλοίωτον.

> On rapporte que sa fin fut plus sublime que sa vie : parvenu au faîte de la montagne, il ne laissa à la vie ni trace ni mémorial du fardeau terrestre ; le temps n'altéra pas la beauté qui le marquait, mais il conserva dans la nature muable l'état inaltéré du beau.[27]

25 Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Moïse*, 2.167, ed. Daniélou 1968, 214-15.

26 Sur ce point, voir en particulier Laird 2004.

27 Grégoire de Nysse, *Sur les titres des Psaumes*, 1,7,14,41-6, ed. Reynard 2002, 208-9.

Le faîte de la montagne (τῆς ἀκρωρείας τοῦ ὄρους) auquel parvient Moïse est certes le sommet réel mentionné dans le récit (Dt 34,1-5), mais c'est aussi le terme ascensionnel d'un parcours de vie qui l'a conduit à se rapprocher sans cesse davantage de la divinité. De nouveau, le lieu matériel est à la fois considéré comme lieu réel et symbolique, ou plutôt la géographie biblique reçoit une couche supplémentaire d'interprétation symbolique et allégorique, qui vient se superposer à la géographie réelle, sans l'annuler.

D'autres textes nysséens utilisent en passant la figure de Moïse, témoin par excellence qui a été gratifié de la vision divine, pour faire l'éloge d'une personne plus proche de Grégoire, qui est magnifiée par son rapprochement avec le grand Moïse.[28] Or, dans ces rapprochements, l'ascension de la montagne par Moïse joue souvent un rôle important – entre autres, bien sûr, parce qu'elle est l'occasion de la rencontre avec Dieu. On en retiendra deux exemples, pris respectivement à l'*Éloge de Grégoire le Thaumaturge* et à l'*Éloge de Mélèce d'Antioche* :

> Ὡς γὰρ τὸν Μωϋσέα φησὶν ὁ λόγος ἔξω τοῦ φαινομένου γενόμενον καὶ ἐντὸς τῶν ἀοράτων ἀδύτων τῇ ψυχῇ καταστάντα – τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ γνόφος αἰνίττεται – μαθεῖν τε τὰ θεῖα μυστήρια καὶ δι' ἑαυτοῦ τῆς θεογνωσίας παντὸς τοῦ λαοῦ καθηγήσασθαι, τὴν αὐτὴν ἔστι καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ μεγάλου τούτου κατιδεῖν οἰκονομίαν, ᾧ ὄρος μὲν ἦν οὐκ αἰσθητὸν γεώλοφον ἀλλὰ τὸ ὕψος τῆς τῶν ἀληθινῶν δογμάτων ἐπιθυμίας, γνόφος δὲ τὸ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀχώρητον θέαμα, δέλτος δὲ ἡ ψυχή, τὰ δὲ ἐν ταῖς πλαξὶ γράμματα ἡ τοῦ ὀφθέντος φωνή, δι' ὧν ἁπάντων αὐτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς παρ' ἐκείνου μυσταγωγουμένοις ἐγένετο ἡ τῶν μυστηρίων φανέρωσις.
>
> Le texte dit de Moïse, qui était allé au-delà du visible et était entré par son âme à l'intérieur des sanctuaires invisibles – c'est cela que désigne la ténèbre –, qu'il y apprit les divins mystères et, grâce à sa propre connaissance de Dieu, instruisit tout le peuple. Or on peut voir chez ce Grand aussi le même phénomène : pour lui la montagne ne fut pas une colline visible, mais la hauteur de son désir des doctrines véritables ; la ténèbre, ce fut cette vision inaccessible aux autres, la tablette son âme, les lettres gravées sur les tables, la voix de l'apparition, toutes choses grâce auxquelles la révélation des mystères fut faite et pour lui et pour ceux qui furent par lui instruits des mystères.[29]

28 Pour cette utilisation de la figure de Moïse dans les éloges, voir en particulier Harl 1993 ; voir aussi Munnich 2008.

29 Grégoire de Nysse, *Éloge de Grégoire le Thaumaturge*, trad. Maraval 2014, 140-1.

Cet extrait intervient dans l'*Éloge* juste après la révélation de la Profession de foi au Thaumaturge par Marie et Jean, donc au moment où est donnée à celui-ci la connaissance de Dieu, venue directement d'une source divine. La comparaison avec Moïse, lequel avait bénéficié lui aussi d'une théophanie, vient asseoir cette révélation divine de la connaissance, qui est marquée par une reprise allégorique de la montagne, identifiée au désir qu'il avait manifesté pour la connaissance de Dieu.

De manière assez similaire, dans l'*Éloge funèbre de Mélèce d'Antioche*, la comparaison avec Moïse intervient au sein d'une série de comparaisons avec des personnages bibliques ; Grégoire retient quelques étapes essentielles de la vie de Moïse, parmi lesquelles l'entretien avec Dieu, qu'il prend soin de localiser sur la montagne :

> Κατέλιπε τὴν Αἴγυπτον, τὸν ἰλυώδη βίον. Ἐπέρασεν οὐχὶ τὴν ἐρυθρὰν ἐκείνην, ἀλλὰ τὴν μέλαιναν ταύτην καὶ ζοφώδη τοῦ βίου θάλασσαν. Εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὴν γῆν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους προσφιλοσοφεῖ τῷ θεῷ. Ἐλύσατο τὸ ὑπόδημα τῆς ψυχῆς, ἵνα καθαρᾷ τῇ βάσει τῆς διανοίας τῆς ἁγίας γῆς ἐπιβατεύσῃ, ἐν ᾗ καθορᾶται θεός.
>
> Il a laissé l'Égypte, la manière de vivre matérielle et sombre, il a traversé non la mer Rouge, mais la noire et sombre mer de l'existence, il est entré dans la terre de la promesse, il s'entretient avec Dieu sur la montagne, il a enlevé les sandales de son âme pour pouvoir monter, dans une pure disposition d'esprit, dans la terre sainte où l'on voit Dieu.[30]

Ici, c'est la sortie de la vie terrestre, la mort de Mélèce, qui est rapprochée des étapes de l'itinéraire de Moïse ; ce que celui-ci a vécu dans la chair et pendant sa vie, Mélèce l'expérimente après sa mort.

4.3 Moïse et Jésus sur la montagne

Si la montagne est le lieu par excellence de l'expérience divine de Moïse, elle est aussi l'un des lieux importants du Nouveau Testament, puisqu'en plusieurs occasions, c'est sur une montagne, plus ou moins clairement identifiée, que Jésus parle et agit. Or dans ses *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, Grégoire de Nysse articule explicitement, en les distinguant, voire en les opposant, la montagne de Moïse et la montagne de Jésus, ou plutôt la manière dont l'un et l'autre montent sur la montagne, la manière dont l'un et l'autre conduisent leurs

30 Grégoire de Nysse, *Éloge funèbre de Mélèce d'Antioche*, trad. Maraval 2019, 66-7.

auditeurs ou leurs disciples à Dieu, sur la montagne. À la théophanie du Sinaï répond le Discours sur la montagne.

Au début de la deuxième homélie, Grégoire commence par résumer, de manière négative, les modalités d'accès à la montagne de la théophanie, pour le peuple guidé par Moïse. Ce dernier est présenté comme un médiateur qui a seul accès à Dieu, et qui ne peut que retransmettre ensuite au peuple la manifestation divine (θείαν ἐμφάνειαν) à laquelle le peuple ne peut accéder directement.

> Ὅτε προσῆγεν ὁ μέγας Μωϋσῆς τῇ κατὰ τὸ ὄρος μυσταγωγίᾳ τὸν Ἰσραηλίτην λαόν, οὐ πρότερον αὐτοὺς τῆς θεοφανείας ἠξίωσε πρὶν ἁγνείᾳ καὶ περιρραντισμῷ νομοθετῆσαι τῷ λαῷ τὸ καθάρσιον · καὶ οὐδὲ οὕτως ἐθάρσησαν τῆς θείας δυνάμεως τὴν ἐμφάνειαν ἀλλὰ πρὸς πᾶν κατεπλάγησαν τὸ φαινόμενον, τὸ πῦρ, τὸν γνόφον, τὸν καπνόν, τὰς σάλπιγγας, καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς πάλιν ἀποστραφέντες ἠξίουν τὸν νομοθέτην μεσίτην αὐτοῖς γενέσθαι τοῦ θείου βουλήματος, ὡς οὐχ ἱκανῆς οὔσης τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτῶν προσεγγίσαι τῷ θεῷ καὶ θείαν ἐμφάνειαν δέξασθαι.
>
> Quand le grand Moïse conduisait le peuple israélite à la mystagogie sur la montagne, il ne les jugea pas dignes de la théophanie avant d'avoir donné comme loi au peuple de se purifier par la chasteté et les lustrations ; et même ainsi, ils n'osèrent pas soutenir la manifestation de la puissance divine, mais ils furent frappés de terreur par tout ce qui leur apparaissait, le feu, la ténèbre, la fumée, les trompettes, et après s'être retournés de nouveau vers eux-mêmes, ils demandèrent au législateur de se faire pour eux médiateur de la volonté divine, dans l'idée qu'ils n'avaient pas la force suffisante pour s'approcher de Dieu et recevoir la manifestation divine.[31]

Jésus, qui est présenté comme Seigneur et législateur, voit d'abord son action décrite par négation de la situation mosaïque,[32] avant qu'elle ne soit reprise, toujours en opposition à la théophanie du Sinaï, afin d'en dégager les traits propres :

> Ἀλλὰ πρῶτον μὲν ἀντὶ τοῦ ὄρους ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἀνάγει τὸν οὐρανόν, βατὸν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις αὐτὸν διὰ τῆς ἀρετῆς καταστήσας · ἔπειτα δὲ οὐ θεατὰς μόνον τῆς θείας δυνάμεως, ἀλλὰ καὶ κοινωνοὺς ἀπεργάζεται, καὶ εἰς συγγένειαν τρόπον τινὰ τῆς ὑπερκειμένης φύσεως τοὺς προσιόντας ἄγων · οὐδὲ γνόφῳ κατακρύπτει τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν δόξαν ὡς δυσθεώρητον τοῖς ἀναζητοῦσιν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ τῷ τηλαυγεῖ φωτὶ τῆς

31 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, 2, ed. Boudignon, Cassin 2018, 348-51.

32 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, 2, Boudignon, Cassin 2018, 350-1.

διδασκαλίας τὸν γνόφον καταφωτίσας ἐπὶ λαμπρᾶς αἰθρίας τοῖς καθαροῖς τὴν καρδίαν τὴν ἄφραστον καθορᾶσθαι δόξαν ἐποίησεν · ὕδωρ δὲ περιρραίνων οὐκ ἐξ ἀλλοτρίων ναμάτων ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἀναβρύον χαρίζεται, εἴτε τὰς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν τις λέγοι πηγὰς εἴτε τὴν καθαρὰν τῆς καρδίας συνείδησιν, μηδεμίαν ἰλὺν ἀπὸ κακίας ἐπαγομένην · ἁγνείαν δὲ οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐννόμου τῶν γαμετῶν ὁμιλίας, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ πάσης ὑλικῆς τε καὶ ἐμπαθοῦς διαθέσεως νομοθετήσας, οὕτω προσάγει διὰ τῆς προσευχῆς τῷ θεῷ. Αὕτη γὰρ τῶν ῥημάτων ἡ δύναμις, δι' ὧν οὐχὶ φωνάς τινας ἐν συλλαβαῖς ἐκφωνουμένας μανθάνομεν, ἀλλ' ἐπίνοιαν τῆς πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἀναβάσεως δι' ὑψηλῆς πολιτείας κατωρθωμένην.

Tout au contraire, d'abord il fait monter non vers la montagne, mais vers le ciel lui-même, puisqu'il l'a rendu accessible aux hommes par la vertu. Ensuite, il ne fait pas d'eux de simples spectateurs de la puissance divine, mais des participants, puisque, précisément, il conduit à une sorte de parenté avec la nature supérieure ceux qui s'approchent de lui ; il ne cache pas non plus sous la ténèbre la gloire suprême au point de la rendre difficile à saisir par ceux qui la recherchent, mais, en illuminant la ténèbre par la lumière de son enseignement, qui brille au loin, il a rendu visible à ceux dont le cœur est pur sa gloire ineffable dans l'air lumineux ; il fait grâce d'une eau d'aspersion qui ne vient pas de fontaines étrangères, mais sourd de nous-mêmes, qu'on parle soit des sources des yeux, soit de la conscience pure du cœur, sans aucune boue introduite par un quelconque vice ; après avoir établi comme loi une chasteté qui se tient à l'écart non pas des relations conjugales légitimes, mais de toute disposition matérielle et marquée par une passion, c'est ainsi qu'il conduit à Dieu par la prière. Car voilà la signification de ces mots, par lesquels nous apprenons non pas des sons articulés en syllabes, mais une conception de la montée vers Dieu rendue parfaite par un mode de vie élevé.[33]

Comme Grégoire l'indique dès le début de ce second passage, l'ascension conduite et permise par Jésus mène non plus au lieu figuré de la puissance divine, la montagne, mais directement au ciel, au lieu divin par excellence. Autrement dit, il ne s'agit plus de décrire une théophanie de manière figurée, en recourant aux manifestations sensibles et aux symboles (feu, bruit, fumée, etc.), mais bien de faire entrer directement l'homme dans l'expérience de Dieu, rendue possible par la transformation de la vie humaine proposée par le Christ. La prière du Notre Père est enseignée sur une montagne, mais

33 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, 2, ed. Boudignon, Cassin 2018, 350-5.

elle enseigne à devenir enfant de Dieu, comme Grégoire le développe assez longuement dans le reste de l'homélie.[34]

Dans les *Homélies sur les Béatitudes*, Grégoire commente également la prédication de Jésus lors du Discours sur la montagne ; de nouveau, le lieu physique est pour ainsi dire imposé par le référent néotestamentaire. Cependant, ce lieu réel est aussi un lieu d'expérience spirituelle et Grégoire de Nysse le lit de manière allégorique ; la montagne réelle est présentée comme un signe de l'expérience modifiée du monde et de Dieu qui est offerte à celui qui suit les enseignements de Jésus :

> Τίς ἄρα τοιοῦτός ἐστιν ἐν τοῖς συνειλεγμένοις ὡς μαθητής τε εἶναι τοῦ λόγου καὶ συναναβῆναι αὐτῷ χαμόθεν ἀπὸ τῶν κοίλων τε καὶ ταπεινῶν νοημάτων εἰς τὸ πνευματικὸν ὄρος τῆς ὑψηλῆς θεωρίας ; Ὃ πᾶσαν μὲν σκιὰν τὴν ἐκ τῶν ὑπερανεστηκότων τῆς κακίας γεωλόφων ἐκπέφευγεν, ἁπανταχόθεν δὲ τῇ τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ φωτὸς ἀκτῖνι περιλαμπόμενον ἐν καθαρᾷ τῇ τῆς ἀληθείας αἰθρίᾳ πάντα δίδωσιν ἐκ περιωπῆς καθορᾷν ὅσα τοῖς ἐν τῷ κοίλῳ καθειργμένοις ἐστὶν ἀθέατα. Τὰ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕψους τούτου κατοπτευόμενα οἷα καὶ ὅσα ἐστὶν αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς λόγος, μακαρίζων τοὺς συναναβάντας αὐτῷ, διεξέρχεται οἷον δακτύλῳ τινὶ δεικνὺς ἔνθεν μὲν τὴν τῶν οὐρανῶν βασιλείαν, ἑτέρωθεν δὲ τῆς ἄνω γῆς τὴν κληρονομίαν, εἶτα ἔλεον καὶ δικαιοσύνην καὶ παράκλησιν καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν τῶν ὅλων γινομένην συγγένειαν καὶ τὸν ἐκ τῶν διωγμῶν καρπόν, ὅ ἐστι τὸ σύνοικον θεοῦ γενέσθαι, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα πάρεστι πρὸς τούτοις βλέπειν ἄνωθεν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους, δακτυλοδεικτοῦντος τοῦ λόγου τὸ ἐκ τῆς ὑψηλῆς σκοπιᾶς διὰ τῶν ἐλπίδων ἀποβλεπόμενον.[35]

> Qui donc, parmi ceux qui sont rassemblés, est tel qu'il soit un disciple du Verbe et monte avec lui depuis la terre, loin des pensées basses des creux, vers la montagne spirituelle de la contemplation sublime ? Montagne qui échappe à toute ombre que projettent les collines du mal, mais, parce qu'elle est illuminée de toute part par le rayon de la lumière véritable, accorde de voir, dans la pure splendeur de la vérité, depuis un observatoire, tout ce qui est invisible à ceux qui sont enfermés dans le creux. Quelles sont les choses qu'on peut voir depuis cette hauteur et combien elles sont nombreuses, le Dieu Verbe lui-même le raconte, lorsqu'il bénit ceux qui ont fait avec lui l'ascension, quand il montre comme du doigt d'un côté le royaume des cieux, de l'autre la terre de l'héritage, celle d'en-haut, puis la pitié, la justice, la consolation, la parenté qui advient avec le Dieu de toutes choses, le fruit des persécutions,

34 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, 2, ed. Boudignon, Cassin 2018, 362-5.

35 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur les Béatitudes*, 1, ed. Callahan 1992, 77, 4-78, 11.

> qui est d'habiter avec Dieu, et tout le reste qu'il leur permet de voir d'en haut depuis la montagne, puisque le Verbe montre du doigt ce qu'on voit depuis cette guette élevés à travers ce qu'on espère.[36]

Cet extrait, qui ouvre la première homélie, introduit donc toute l'interprétation nysséenne des *Béatitudes* ; la localisation géographique du discours de Jésus, sur la montagne, lui permet de présenter l'ensemble des Béatitudes comme une vision panoramique du monde, vue depuis le point de vue divin. La montagne, ici, qui vient à l'origine du texte évangélique, devient pour l'auteur un point d'observation du réel à partir du regard divin, reflet de son interprétation des Béatitudes.

4.4 Les montagnes réelles, lieu d'expérience spirituelle ?

Cette utilisation allégorique des montagnes s'appuie-t-elle sur une connaissance réelle de ce type de lieux, et des sensations qu'ils peuvent provoquer ? Un bref passage du *Sur l'Hexaemeron* laisse cette question ouverte, du fait de l'indétermination relative du sens du verbe ἱστορέω, qui peut renvoyer aussi bien à une enquête personnelle qu'à une connaissance médiée par la lecture :

> Οὕτως οὖν καὶ ὀρῶν τινων ὑπερμεγεθῶν τὰς ἀκρωρείας οἱ ἱστορήσαντες λέγουσιν ὑπερνεφεῖς μὲν εἶναι ἀεὶ καὶ ἀνεφίκτους τοῖς πνεύμασι καὶ τοῖς πτηνοῖς ἀμήχανον τὴν ἐπ' ἐκείνων γενέσθαι πτῆσιν οὐχ ἧττον ἢ τοῖς ὑποβρυχίοις τὴν ἐν ἀέρι ζωήν.[37]
>
> De même, donc, ceux qui ont enquêté / ceux qui rapportent des connaissances aussi sur les sommets de très hautes montagnes disent qu'elles sont toujours au-dessus des nuages, inaccessibles aux vents et qu'il n'est pas moins impossible aux oiseaux d'y voler que ne l'est la vie dans l'air aux êtres qui vivent sous la mer.[38]

On trouve en d'autres passages de l'œuvre nysséenne des références, plus explicites encore, aux sensations provoquées chez l'homme par sa présence au sommet d'une montagne – et plus seulement à ce que représente la montagne, par son élévation et la proximité qu'elle permet avec les cieux, donc avec Dieu. Deux textes célèbres de Grégoire évoquent ce vertige qui saisit celui qui se trouve au sommet, et regarde vers le bas. La configuration

36 Trad. de l'auteur.

37 Grégoire de Nysse, *Sur l'Hexaemeron*, 36, ed. Drobner 2009, 49, 19-50, 1.

38 Trad. de l'auteur.

des lieux évoque d'ailleurs tout autant le sommet d'une falaise que celui d'une montagne ; autrement dit, c'est moins le lieu exact, que l'effet d'une configuration géographique sur l'homme que retient Grégoire. Le premier passage figure dans la septième des *Homélies sur l'Ecclésiaste* :

> Καὶ τὰ μὲν γινωσκόμενα πάντα διὰ τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης παρέδραμε, τὴν δὲ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἔννοιαν παραδραμεῖν οὐδεμίαν μηχανὴν ἐξευρίσκει, ὅπως ἂν ἔξω ἑαυτὴν στήσειε καὶ ὑπερθείη τοῦ προθεωρουμένου τῶν ὄντων αἰῶνος. Ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ὁ ἐπί τινος εὑρεθεὶς ἀκρωρείας – ὑποκείσθω δὲ πέτρα τις εἶναι λεία καὶ ἀπότομος, κάτωθεν ἐν ὀρθίῳ τε καὶ περιεξεσμένῳ τῷ σχήματι εἰς ἄπειρον μῆκος ἀνατεινομένη καὶ ἄνωθεν ἐπὶ τοῦ ὕψους τὴν ἄκραν ἐκείνην ἀνέχουσα τὴν ἐν τῇ προβολῇ τῆς ὀφρύος εἴς τι βάθος ἀχανὲς κατακύπτουσαν –, ὅπερ οὖν εἰκὸς παθεῖν τὸν ἄκρῳ τῷ ποδὶ τῆς ἐπινευούσης τῷ βάθει ῥαχίας ἐπιψαύοντα καὶ οὐδεμίαν ἔτι οὔτε τῷ ποδὶ βάσιν οὔτε τῇ χειρὶ ἀντίληψιν ἐξευρίσκοντα, τοῦτό μοι καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ παρελθοῦσα τὸ ἐν τοῖς διαστηματικοῖς νοήμασι βάσιμον ἐν τῇ ζητήσει τῆς προαιωνίου τε καὶ ἀδιαστάτου φύσεως πάσχει. Οὐκ ἔχουσά τι οὗ περιδράξηται, οὐ τόπον, οὐ χρόνον, οὐ μέτρον, οὐκ ἄλλο τι τοιοῦτον οὐδὲν ὃ δέχεται τῆς διανοίας ἡμῶν τὴν ἐπίβασιν, ἀλλὰ πανταχόθεν τῶν ἀλήπτων ἀπολισθαίνουσα ἰλιγγιᾷ τε καὶ ἀμηχανεῖ καὶ πάλιν πρὸς τὸ συγγενὲς ἐπιστρέφεται, ἀγαπῶσα τοσοῦτον μόνον γνῶναι περὶ τοῦ ὑπερκειμένου ὅσον πεισθῆναι ὅτι ἄλλο τι παρὰ τὴν τῶν γινωσκομένων φύσιν ἐστί.

> Et elle parcourt avec grande attention tout ce qui est connu, mais elle ne trouve pour parcourir la pensée de l'éternité aucun moyen qui lui permette de se tenir hors d'elle-même et de s'établir au-dessus de la durée des êtres, qu'elle a contemplée d'abord. Il en est comme de celui qui se trouve sur le sommet d'une montagne : supposons qu'il y ait au-dessous de lui un rocher lisse et coupé à pic, qui s'étende vers le bas sur une longueur infinie, d'une forme droite et polie, et qui d'en haut supporte à son sommet cette pointe qui, avec l'avancée de l'escarpement, penche vers l'abîme béant ; le sentiment naturel de celui qui, du bout du pied, effleure la roche qui s'incline vers l'abîme, et qui ne trouve plus aucun support pour son pied ni aucune prise pour sa main, c'est celui qu'à mon avis éprouve l'âme qui, dépassant ce qui est accessible par les concepts propres à l'intervalle, cherche la nature qui a précédé le temps et qui n'est pas comprise dans l'intervalle : n'ayant rien à empoigner, ni lieu, ni temps, ni mesure, ni rien d'autre qui soit capable de recevoir la marche de notre pensée, mais glissant de tous côtés sans trouver de prise, elle est saisie de vertige, désemparée, et se tourne de nouveau vers ce qui est de la même origine qu'elle, et elle se contente, quant à ce qui est

> au-dessus d'elle, d'en connaître juste assez pour être convaincue qu'il y a autre chose que la nature des choses connues.[39]

Dans ce passage, la sensation de vertige provoquée par la proximité du vide et la hauteur sert à Grégoire à dire la sensation que provoque dans l'âme de la créature la prise de conscience de la grandeur divine, et de son caractère incommensurable avec la création. Ce n'est donc plus la montagne comme lieu de proximité avec le divin qui est mise ici en avant : elle n'est même plus un point d'observation pour tourner le regard vers Dieu. Grégoire s'attache au contraire aux sensations physiques que provoque une configuration des lieux pour éclairer à partir d'elles le rapport de l'homme à Dieu.

On trouve un développement analogue dans la sixième des *Homélies sur les Béatitudes* :

> Ὅπερ παθεῖν εἰκὸς τοὺς ἔκ τινος ὑψηλῆς ἀκρωρείας εἰς ἀχανές τι κατακύπτοντας πέλαγος, τοῦτό μοι πέπονθεν ἡ διάνοια, ἐκ τῆς ὑψηλῆς τοῦ κυρίου φωνῆς, οἷον ἀπό τινος κορυφῆς ὄρους, εἰς τὸ ἀδιεξίτητον τῶν νοημάτων βλέπουσα βάθος. Καθάπερ γὰρ ἐν πολλοῖς τῶν παραθαλασσίων ἔστιν ἰδεῖν ὄρος ἡμίτομον, κατὰ τὸ παράλιον μέρος ἀπὸ κορυφῆς ἐπὶ τὸ βάθος δι' εὐθείας ἀπεξεσμένον, οὗ κατὰ τὸ ἄνω πέρας ἄκρα τις προβεβλημένη πρὸς τὸν βυθὸν ἐπινένευκεν, ὅπερ οὖν παθεῖν εἰκὸς τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς τοιαύτης σκοπιᾶς ἐκ πολλοῦ τοῦ ὕψους ἐπὶ τὴν ἐν τῷ βάθει διακύπτοντα θάλατταν, οὕτως ἰλιγγιᾷ μου νῦν ἡ ψυχή, ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ ταύτῃ τοῦ κυρίου φωνῇ γενομένη μετέωρος [...]. Αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ λεία καὶ ἀπότομος πέτρα ἡ μηδεμίαν ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς τῶν νοημάτων βάσιν ὑποδεικνύουσα, ἣν καὶ ὁ Μωϋσῆς ὡσαύτως ἀπρόσιτον τοῖς καθ' ἑαυτὸν δόγμασιν ἀπεφήνατο ὡς μηδαμοῦ δύνασθαι προσβῆναι ἡμῶν τὴν διάνοιαν, πάσης ἀντιλήψεως ἀποξεσθείσης διὰ τῆς ἀποφάσεως.
>
> Ce que ressentent vraisemblablement ceux qui se penchent du sommet d'une montagne élevée vers une mer immense, voilà ce que mon esprit a ressenti quand il a fixé son regard, depuis la parole élevée du Seigneur, comme du chef d'une montagne, vers la profondeur insondable de ses pensées. De même en effet qu'on peut souvent voir, au bord de la mer, un mont coupé en deux, lorsque le front qui fait face à la mer est tranché tout droit de la tête aux profondeurs et que, du côté de sa partie supérieure, il y a comme un sommet dressé qui se penche vers l'abîme, ce qu'éprouve donc vraisemblablement celui qui, d'une telle guette, regarde depuis cette grande hauteur jusqu'à la mer tout au fond, voilà le vertige qui saisit maintenant mon âme lorsqu'elle se trouve

39 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur l'Ecclésiaste*, 7.8, trad. Vinel 1996, 382-5.

> ainsi élevée par la grande parole du Seigneur : [vient ensuite une citation de Mt 5,8, qui introduit deux citations scripturaires sur la vision de Dieu : Jn 1,18 ; 1 Tm 6,16]. Voici la roche lisse et escarpée, qui ne montre aucune base pour nos pensées, que Moïse aussi nous a dévoilée, dans ses doctrines, comme si inaccessible que notre esprit ne peut l'approcher nulle part, dans la mesure où toute saisie intellectuelle est retranchée par la négation [suit une citation d'Ex 33,20].[40]

Dans cet extrait, le rapprochement entre montagne et falaise au bord de la mer est explicite ; explicite, également, le renvoi à la théophanie dont a bénéficié Moïse. Cependant, la référence biblique n'oblitère pas le recours à l'expérience physique du vertige, qui est présenté par Grégoire comme l'analogue de la connaissance imparfaite mais saisissante de Dieu.

Dans ce dernier passage se trouvent ainsi rassemblés les différents fils de l'usage que fait Grégoire de Nysse de l'image de la montagne, en privilégiant certes la théophanie mosaïque du Sinaï, mais en y joignant une expérience physique de la montagne, et plus particulièrement du vertige. En outre, ces expériences bibliques et sensibles sont utilisées pour faire comprendre les modalités de la connaissance humaine de Dieu, impossible comme telle : l'approche de Dieu saisit l'homme et lui fait percevoir l'écart qui l'en sépare, sans lui permettre de connaître Dieu lui-même. Seule la médiation du Christ permet cette connaissance, introduisant non dans la dissemblance mais dans la parenté entre le Père et ses fils adoptifs, comme nous l'avons vu à propos des *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, lorsque c'est Jésus qui fait monter avec lui tous les fidèles sur la montagne.

5 Interlude évagrien : la montagne et le lieu de Dieu

On a vu plus haut qu'Évagre, comme la plupart des autres auteurs chrétiens, ne s'en tient pas à une seule interprétation de la montagne.[41] Cette dernière est nettement, pour Évagre, une réalité symbolique lorsqu'il en explique les occurrences dans l'Écriture ; le lieu concret de l'ascèse n'apparaît que fort peu, contrairement à ce qu'on peut constater chez d'autres auteurs du monachisme égyptien.[42]

Cette montagne rassemble pour Évagre les différentes théophanies de l'*Exode*, depuis le buisson ardent (Ex 3), la grande théophanie que nous avons déjà évoquée plus haut (Ex 19-20), jusqu'à celle d'Ex 24 où

40 Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur les Béatitudes*, 6, Callahan 1992, 136, 25…137, 21.

41 Voir *supra*, section 3.

42 Voir *infra*, section 6.2.

les Anciens se joignent à Moïse. L'unité de lieu, ici, prime sur l'unité de temps, et les diverses théophanies paraissent éclairer différentes facettes d'une même réalité : la montagne est le lieu symbolique de la révélation et de la connaissance de Dieu. On trouve par exemple dans les *Pensées* une mention du Sinaï, au pied duquel se réfugier pour être appelé par Dieu. Si la théophanie et la montagne sont bien mentionnées, la scène symbolique trouve ici place au pied de la montagne, non à son sommet, et correspond à la scène du buisson, à une étape qui intervient donc relativement tôt dans la vie de Moïse et où la montagne ne joue ordinairement pas un rôle central :

> Εἰ δέ τις ἐκ τοῦ καμάτου καὶ ἀκηδία ἡμῖν προσγίνεται, μικρὸν ἀναδραμόντες ἐπὶ τὴν τῆς γνώσεως πέτραν τῷ ψαλτηρίῳ προσομιλήσωμεν, πλήσσοντες διὰ τῶν ἀρετῶν τῆς γνώσεως τὰς χορδάς · βοσκήσωμεν δὲ πάλιν καὶ ὑπὸ τὸ Σιναῖον ὄρος τὰ πρόβατα, ἵνα ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς βάτου καλέσῃ καὶ τοὺς λόγους τῶν σημείων καὶ τῶν τεράτων καὶ ἡμῖν χαρίσηται.
>
> Mais si, sous l'effet de la fatigue, nous survient une certaine acédie, réfugions-nous un moment sur le roc de la science, prenons notre harpe et frappons par les vertus les cordes de la science ; puis retournons faire brouter nos brebis au pied du mont Sinaï, afin que le Dieu de nos pères nous appelle, nous aussi, du milieu du buisson et nous fasse, à nous aussi, la grâce de connaître les raisons « des signes et des prodiges ».[43]

Comme le soulignent les éditeurs en note, c'est la patience de Moïse à ce stade de son existence qui va permettre les révélations qui vont suivre, de même que la patience de l'ascète, son endurance dans l'épreuve, lui permet d'échapper à l'acédie et de s'approcher de Dieu. Le séjour au pied de la montagne est donc la figure de l'attente patiente, par l'ascète, des révélations divines.

En revanche, la montée au sommet de la montagne dit l'ascension vers la connaissance de Dieu lui-même, présentée par Évagre comme science de la sainte Trinité ; cette connaissance est simple, au contraire de la multiplicité qui concerne les créatures :

> Pour la contemplation des êtres, il y a les nombreux récits des voyants, tandis que pour la contemplation de la sainte Trinité, il n'y a qu'une seule intellection de science la concernant, parce qu'elle est science essentielle et se révèle à l'intellect qui est nu de passions. Or l'intellect ne peut être sauvé s'il ne court pas vers

43 Évagre le Pontique, *Pensées*, 17.32-9, ed. Guillaumont, Guillaumont, Géhin 1998, 212-5.

> le sommet de cette montagne, car la montagne spirituelle est la science de la sainte Trinité (située) sur un sommet élevé difficile d'accès, mais si l'intellect en est jugé digne, il se détourne du souci des objets. C'est vers cette montagne que les anges conduisaient le bienheureux Lot, en disant : *Sauve-toi sur la montagne, afin que le mal ne t'atteigne pas* [Gn 19,17].[44]

Ici, outre la référence à la montagne comme lieu de rencontre avec Dieu par excellence, le recours à l'image de l'ascension de la montagne fait sûrement référence à la fois à la difficulté du processus qui mène à ce type de connaissance, au caractère ardu de l'ascèse physique et du dépouillement intellectuel qu'elle demande, mais aussi à la séparation de l'homme d'avec le monde qu'implique une telle ascension. Ce dépouillement est explicitement mentionné, en référence à Col 3,9-10, dans un autre passage des *Pensées*, à propos d'une autre formulation pour dire la proximité de l'homme avec Dieu. Il s'agit du « lieu de Dieu », ou plutôt du lieu où se tenait le Dieu d'Israël (τὸν τόπον, οὗ εἱστήκει ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ισραηλ [Ex 24,10]), formule de la Septante qui correspond au simple « Dieu d'Israël » de l'Hébreu massorétique ;[45] ce lieu de Dieu renvoie chez Évagre à l'intellect qui contemple Dieu :

> Ὅταν ὁ νοῦς τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀποδυσάμενος τὸν ἐκ χάριτος ἐπενδύσηται, τότε καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ κατάστασιν ὄψεται κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς σαπφείρῳ ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ, ἥντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἡ γραφὴ ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ.
>
> Quand l'intellect se sera dépouillé du vieil homme et aura revêtu celui qui naît de la grâce, alors, c'est son propre état qu'il verra au temps de la prière, pareil au saphir et à la couleur du ciel ; c'est l'état que l'Écriture nomme le lieu de Dieu, qui a été vu par les Anciens sur le mont Sinaï.[46]

La théophanie d'Ex 24 offre donc une autre figuration de la connaissance de Dieu, en ce qu'elle permet à Évagre d'indiquer un

44 Évagre le Pontique, *Lettres*, 58.4, ed. Géhin 2025, 512-5, avec la note *ad loc*.

45 L'écart est déjà relevé dans la note au texte évagrien, voir note suivante.

46 Évagre le Pontique, *Pensées*, 39.1-6, ed. Guillaumont, Guillaumont, Géhin 1998, 286-9, en particulier 288 note 3. Voir également Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, 75,1-2, avec la note *ad loc.*, et *Skemmata*, 25 ; ces textes ne font cependant pas mention de la montagne, dans la mesure où ils s'appuient sur Ps 75,3, « Et son lieu a été établi dans la paix, et sa demeure dans Sion » (καὶ ἐγενήθη ἐν εἰρήνῃ ὁ τόπος αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ κατοικητήριον αὐτοῦ ἐν Σιών), même si la mention de Sion ramène discrètement à une autre montagne biblique.

état restauré de l'intellect, condition nécessaire pour que l'homme puisse approcher Dieu. Ici, c'est la description biblique du sommet de la montagne – et en l'occurrence la forme propre qu'elle prend dans la Septante, avec la double mention du lieu et, dans la lecture d'Évagre, de la couleur au lieu du firmament[47] – qui sert de référent à l'état de l'intellect. L'ascension vers Dieu est sûrement présente, mais c'est bien le sommet de la montagne comme lieu de rencontre avec Dieu qui est pris pour équivalent de l'état de l'intellect dans sa rencontre avec Dieu. Au sommet de lui-même, l'intellect est transformé, on serait tenté de dire transfiguré, par la présence divine.

On trouve, dans la *Lettre* 39, un autre développement relatif à ce « lieu de Dieu », en référence à Ex 24,10 :

> « Si donc, avec la grâce de Dieu, l'intellect leur échappe et dépouille le vieil homme, au temps de la prière, son état lui apparaîtra comme un saphir ou pareil à la couleur du ciel : c'est ce que l'Écriture appelle le lieu de Dieu, qu'ont vu les Anciens au mont Sinaï [Ex 24,10-11] ; ce lieu, elle l'a aussi appelé *vision de paix* [Ps 75,3], parce qu'on voit en soi *la paix qui surpasse toute intelligence et qui garde nos cœurs* [Ph 4,7].[48]

Évagre réunit ici les deux fils d'Ex 24 et de Ps 75,3.[49] La théophanie du Sinaï est explicitement située sur une montagne, mais c'est bien la couleur qui est de nouveau mentionnée (saphir ou ciel). Le texte biblique est ici évidemment premier ; on peut toutefois se demander si la référence répétée à la couleur n'est pas également motivée par une expérience concrète de la vue du ciel depuis un sommet montagneux, de même que, chez Grégoire de Nysse, l'expérience du vide ressenti au sommet de la montagne venait renforcer le recours biblique au lieu qu'est la montagne lorsqu'il s'agissait de dire la connaissance de Dieu.

6 La montagne, lieu d'ascèse ?

Après ces textes qui lient montagne et connaissance (mystique) de Dieu, il est temps d'en venir à la dernière étape de notre parcours, qui concerne cette fois la montagne dans le contexte ascétique. Les textes évagriens nous en avaient déjà rapproché, mais je voudrais maintenant envisager non plus l'utilisation allégorique

47 Sur cette autre lecture, voir, outre la note *ad loc.* de l'édition des Sources chrétiennes, Guillaumont 1984.

48 Évagre le Pontique, *Lettres*, 39.7, ed. Géhin 2025, 428-9.

49 Voir *supra*, note 46.

de la montagne, en lien avec le texte biblique, au premier chef les théophanies vétérotestamentaires, mais le rôle de la montagne comme lieu concret de l'ascèse, comme environnement physique de celle-ci. En effet, dans la représentation actuelle de l'ascèse tardo-antique, le désert et la montagne semblent les deux lieux par excellence de l'ascèse ; ces deux types de paysages paraissent correspondre l'un et l'autre au désir de retrait du monde qui marque et détermine l'ascèse. Cependant, la montagne est-elle unanimement perçue et présentée comme un lieu par excellence de l'ascèse, dans le monde antique de langue grecque ? On examinera successivement la situation dans des textes du 4e et du 5e siècles de Cappadoce, d'Égypte et de Syrie, sans prétendre aucunement à l'exhaustivité.

6.1 Cappadoce

Ce n'est pas sans surprise, tout d'abord, qu'on constate que le corpus ascétique attribué à Basile est étrangement silencieux lorsqu'il s'agit de montagne ; le terme ὄρος n'y apparaît pas, en effet, sinon dans des citations de Lc 5,14 (une ville sur une montagne ne peut être cachée), mais c'est alors pour parler de l'ascèse et de l'ascète, non de la montagne. Le seul texte où il est largement question de montagne est la *Lettre* 42, un texte certes ascétique mais unanimement reconnu comme inauthentique.[50] L'auteur, assez avant dans la lettre, reprend les termes du Ps 10,1 pour dire la mise à l'écart du monde : « Voilà pourquoi j'émigre dans les montagnes comme un passereau » (Διὰ τοῦτο οὖν ἐγὼ μεταναστεύω ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη ὡς στρουθίον).[51] Dans la suite du paragraphe, qui enchaîne les exemples bibliques, plusieurs font encore référence aux montagnes (Mont Carmel pour Élie, Mont des Oliviers pour le Christ, mais aussi des indications plus génériques comme celle d'He 11,38) ; cependant, les montagnes n'y jouissent d'aucun traitement privilégié et sont mentionnées aux côtés d'autres formes du paysage. Même aux marges inauthentiques du corpus basilien, la montagne n'est donc pas un lieu d'ascèse privilégié.

On en voudra encore pour preuve la célèbre *Lettre* 14 de Basile à son ami Grégoire de Nazianze, authentique celle-là, dans laquelle il décrit son lieu d'ascèse. Sans entrer dans l'analyse détaillée d'un texte qui en a déjà suscité de si nombreuses, on rappellera simplement que le lieu choisi par Basile se trouve au pied de la montagne, non à son sommet, dans un lieu certes isolé, mais qui n'est en rien marqué

50 Amand de Mendieta 1968, 241-5 ; voir aussi Cavallin 1944, 108-9. La question de la montagne n'est pas relevée dans ces études.

51 [Basile de Césarée], *Lettres*, 42.5.2, Courtonne 1957, 106 ; la référence biblique n'est pas relevée par l'éditeur.

par l'altitude, non plus que par la sauvagerie, seulement par la mise à l'écart du monde.[52]

6.2 Athanase, *Vie d'Antoine*

Au contraire, si l'on se tourne vers l'un des textes fondateurs de la littérature ascétique, la *Vie d'Antoine* d'Athanase, le vocabulaire de la montagne supplante largement celui du désert. On relève en effet 45 occurrences d'ὄρος (même si l'index de l'édition de référence ne relève que 40 passages), alors que, par comparaison, le terme ἔρημος n'y figure que 15 fois. En outre, la montagne y est une réalité ascétique suffisamment structurante pour se voir elle-même divisée en deux lieux, la montagne extérieure et la montagne intérieure. De manière assez classique, la montagne peut être présentée comme un lieu de proximité de l'ascète avec le divin ; c'est par exemple le lieu par excellence des visions, pour Antoine.[53] Mais c'est aussi le lieu propre du moine ; on a retenu depuis longtemps la formule « Et le désert devint une cité », à la suite par exemple du titre de l'ouvrage de D.J. Chitty.[54] Cependant, dans le texte de la *Vie*, ce sont d'abord les montagnes qui sont transformées et peuplées par les moines :

> Καὶ οὕτω λοιπὸν γέγονε καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι μοναστήρια, καὶ ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη μοναχῶν, ἐξελθόντων ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων καὶ ἀπογραψαμένων τὴν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς πολιτείαν.
>
> C'est ainsi que dès lors, dans les montagnes aussi, des ermitages s'élevèrent et que le désert devint comme une cité de moines qui avaient quitté leurs biens et reproduisaient la vie de la cité céleste.[55]
>
> Ἦν οὖν ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι τὰ μοναστήρια ὡς σκηναὶ πεπληρωμέναι θείων χορῶν, ψαλλόντων, φιλολογούντων, νηστευόντων, εὐχομένων, ἀγαλλιωμένων ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν μελλόντων ἐλπίδι καὶ ἐργαζομένων εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν ἐλεημοσύνας, ἀγάπην τε καὶ συμφωνίαν ἐχόντων εἰς ἀλλήλους. Καὶ ἦν ἀληθῶς ἰδεῖν ὥσπερ χώραν τινὰ καθ' ἑαυτὴν οὖσαν θεοσεβείας, καὶ δικαιοσύνης.

52 Voir par exemple Calvet-Sebasti 2015. Voir également les remarques fines de Forlin Patrucco 1983, 315-6, qui ne relève cependant pas la position relative à la montagne.

53 Voir Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, 59.6 ; 60.1 (cf. 4 Rg 1,9) ; 66.1 ; 82.3 ; 93.5.

54 Chitty 1980. C'est également le cas dans le titre anglais d'origine (1966) : *The Desert, a City*.

55 Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, 14.7, ed. Bartelink 1994, 174-5.

> Dans les montagnes, les ermitages étaient donc comme des tentes remplies de chœurs divins, chantant des psaumes, lisant les Écritures, jeûnant, priant, se réjouissant dans l'espérance des biens futurs, travaillant pour faire l'aumône et menant une vie d'amour mutuel et de concorde. On pouvait vraiment y voir comme une région à part de piété et de justice.[56]

> Πάλιν τε ἦν καρὰ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι καὶ ζῆλος προκοπῆς καὶ παράκλησις διὰ τῆς ἐν ἀλλήλοις πίστεως.

> De nouveau c'était la joie dans les montagnes, le zèle pour progresser et la consolation par la confiance mutuelle.[57]

On voit que dans ces différents passages, plus que le désert, c'est la montagne, ou plutôt les montagnes, qui sont le lieu de l'ascèse ; ce sont elles qui sont transformées par la présence des solitaires. On en veut pour preuve le passage plus célèbre encore de 85.3-4 qui compare les ascètes hors de leur lieu avec des poissons hors de l'eau : le lieu vers lequel ils doivent se hâter, ce n'est pas, dans le texte athanasien, le désert, mais la montagne :

> Ὥσπερ οἱ ἰχθύες ἐγχρονίζοντες τῇ ξηρᾷ γῇ τελευτῶσιν, οὕτως οἱ μοναχοὶ βραδύνοντες μεθ' ὑμῶν καὶ παρ' ὑμῖν ἐνδιατρίβοντες ἐκλύονται. Δεῖ οὖν, ὥσπερ τὸν ἰχθὺν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, οὕτως ἡμᾶς εἰς τὸ ὄρος ἐπείγεσθαι, μήποτε βραδύνοντες ἐπιλαθώμεθα τῶν ἔνδον.

> Comme les poissons meurent lorsqu'ils restent longtemps sur la terre sèche, de même à s'attarder avec vous et à séjourner chez vous, les moines se relâchent. Il faut donc que, comme le poisson vers la mer, nous nous hâtions vers la montagne, pour ne pas oublier, en nous attardant, les choses intérieures.[58]

On pourrait encore ajouter à cette énumération, par exemple, la mort d'Antoine, qui prend place dans la montagne intérieure, de même que sa sépulture (*Vie d'Antoine*, 91-2). Il faut cependant prendre en compte en cette matière une particularité du grec d'Égypte :

56 Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, 44.2-3, ed. Bartelink 1994, 254-5.

57 Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, 54.7, ed. Bartelink 1994, 280-1.

58 Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, 85.3-4, ed. Bartelink 1994, 354-5 ; l'éditeur, en note (355 note 1) considère que le lieu propre dont il est question est la cellule, reprenant ainsi les conceptions dont témoignent par exemple Évagre ou les *Apophtegmes*. Cependant, dans le passage en question, il n'est pas question de cellule, mais seulement des montagnes, comme le lieu propre, le milieu de vie qui doit être regagné au plus vite.

en effet, on a montré depuis longtemps que, dans les papyrus, ὄρος signifiait aussi bien montagne que désert, puis, par la suite, monastère (dans l'expression « la montagne de »).[59] Il s'agit bien là d'un sens proprement égyptien, qui tient à la conformation du terrain dans cette région, ainsi qu'au sens d'un signe hiéroglyphique – on retrouve d'ailleurs cet usage en égyptien actuel, à propos du mot *djebel* : ces termes désignent ce qui n'est ni la vallée du Nil, ni le delta. Au contraire, un monastère situé véritablement en haut, au sommet de la falaise ou sur une montagne, peut être désigné par le terme πέτρα, comme c'est le cas de l'église du même nom située dans le nome d'Antinoopolis, dont J. Gascou, à la suite d'A. Boud'hors et R. Boutros, a étudié la dénomination.[60]

Ce constat lexicologique conduit donc à nuancer fortement les remarques faites auparavant : si l'on suit l'usage égyptien que suggèrent les papyrus pour interpréter le texte de la *Vie d'Antoine*, ainsi que le premier passage cité, qui propose déjà une équivalence entre montagne et désert, il n'y aurait pas tant un usage privilégié du terme ὄρος pour désigner le lieu de l'ascèse, qu'une utilisation parallèle des termes ὄρος et ἔρημος, dans la mesure où le premier terme est un équivalent du second. Ou du moins, si elle garde une nuance propre, la référence à la montagne ne paraît pas particulièrement motivée par ses usages bibliques. La réalité géographique est simplement mobilisée pour souligner la mise à l'écart de l'ascète, son retrait du monde (ξενιτεία), loin des villes et villages, et des lieux cultivés, au profit d'un endroit sauvage, comme le montre tout l'itinéraire d'Antoine dans la *Vie*, lequel ne cesse de s'éloigner davantage de la partie civilisée, cultivée du pays.

6.3 Théodoret et les ascètes de Syrie

Pour terminer, je voudrais examiner les références ascétiques à la montagne dans une troisième zone géographique, la Syrie, à partir de l'*Histoire philothée* de Théodoret de Cyr. En effet, les différentes notices de ce texte sont très attentives aux environnements géographiques et aux reliefs dans lesquels évoluent les différents ascètes. En est-il de même qu'en Égypte, et la montagne y est-elle un simple équivalent, éventuellement un peu plus rude, du désert ? C'est ce que laisse entendre une note des éditeurs, dans la Vie de Macédonios (XIII, 14), à propos de la « vie dans les montagnes » (τὴν ὄρειον πολιτείαν) ; pour eux, l'expression serait ici à prendre au sens propre, mais ailleurs dans le texte de Théodoret, elle serait un synonyme de « vie au désert ». Les

59 Cadell, Rémondon 1967.

60 Gascou 2011. Voir aussi Boud'hors, Boutros 2000.

éditeurs proposent explicitement d'étendre les remarques de Cadell et Rémondon à la Syrie.[61] La chose paraît surprenante, vu la différence du paysage, la diversité de configuration des lieux entre l'Égypte et la Syrie (sans parler de la différence de langue vernaculaire). On trouve d'ailleurs un peu plus loin dans le texte une formulation qui indique clairement qu'il ne peut en aller ainsi : τὰ ἐρημότερα τοῦ ὄρους, « les déserts de la montagne » (XXVI, 6.1). En outre, les usages des deux termes sont beaucoup plus équilibrés que dans la *Vie d'Antoine*, puisqu'on trouve 40 occurrences d'ὄρος, pour 26 d'ἔρημος.

Dans les différentes notices biographiques de l'ouvrage, la montagne figure nettement comme l'un des lieux privilégiés de l'ascèse. Voici quelques exemples :

> ἐκ ταύτης ὁρμώμενος ὁ μέγας Ἰάκωβος τὸν ἐρημικὸν καὶ ἡσύχιον ἠσπάσατο βίον καί, τὰς τῶν ὑψηλοτάτων ὀρῶν καταλαβὼν κορυφάς, ἐν ἐκείναις διῆγεν.
>
> Originaire de cette cité, le grand Jacques embrassa la vie recueillie du désert et, gagnant la cime des plus hautes montagnes, y faisait son séjour.[62]
>
> Οὗτος τοίνυν παλαίστραν ἔσχε καὶ στάδιον τὰς τῶν ὀρῶν κορυφὰς οὐκ ἐφ' ἑνὸς ἱδρυμένος χωρίου, ἀλλὰ νῦν μὲν τούτῳ ἐνδιαιτώμενος, νῦν δὲ εἰς ἐκεῖνο μεταβαίνων.
>
> Macédonios avait pour palestre et pour stade le sommet des montagnes : il ne s'était pas fixé en un endroit, mais tantôt il vivait ici et tantôt s'en allait ailleurs.[63]

La montagne n'est cependant pas le seul lieu d'ascèse, comme en témoigne par exemple le recours à la citation, déjà évoquée, d'He 11,37-8, qui fait figurer la montagne aux côtés des déserts, des cavernes et des antres, comme lieu de retraite ascétique :

> Μαρκιανὸν δὲ τὸν πάνυ πῶς ἂν ἀξίως θαυμάσαιμεν ἢ δῆλον ὅτι Ἠλίᾳ καὶ Ἰωάννῃ καὶ τοῖς κατ' ἐκείνους συντάττοντες οἱ «περιῆλθον ἐν μηλωταῖς, ἐν αἰγείοις δέρμασιν, ὑστερούμενοι, θλιβόμενοι, κακουχούμενοι, ὧν οὐκ ἦν ἄξιος ὁ κόσμος οὗτος, ἐν ἐρημίαις πλανώμενοι, καὶ ὄρεσι καὶ σπηλαίοις, καὶ ταῖς ὀπαῖς τῆς γῆς».

61 Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 499 note 1. Cadell, Rémondon 1967.

62 Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire philothée*, 1.2.3-6 (Jacques de Nisibe), ed. Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 162-3.

63 Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire philothée*, 13.2.1-3 (Macédonios), ed. Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 476-7.

> Comment rendre au célèbre Marcianos l'admiration qu'il mérite ? Évidemment, en le comparant à Élie, à Jean et à leurs semblables, qui, « vêtus de mélotes, de peaux de chèvres, dépourvus de tout, éprouvés, malmenés, eux dont le monde n'était pas digne, erraient dans les déserts, les montagnes, les cavernes et les antres de la terre ».[64]

Contrairement aux formulations de la *Vie d'Antoine*, donc, les montagnes de Syrie sont un lieu particulièrement propice à l'ascèse, mais ils ne sont pas le seul. Qui plus est, Théodoret est attentif à distinguer précisément les configurations du paysage de l'ascèse, parmi lesquels les sommets des montagnes ne sont que l'un des lieux possibles.

Dans l'*Histoire philothée*, il y a cependant une montagne par excellence, pour les ascètes, et c'est sans trop de surprise le Sinaï. Cependant, cette montagne biblique de référence n'est pas un lieu monastique, un lieu où s'installe le ou les ascètes, mais un lieu de pèlerinage, un lieu où l'on va chercher la rencontre avec Dieu et la confirmation de la vocation monastique. On en trouve un exemple remarquable dans la notice consacrée à Julien Saba : celui-ci part en pèlerinage au mont Sinaï ; Théodoret souligne qu'il passe par le désert, évitant toute ville ou bourg :

> Τοιγάρτοι πολλῶν ἡμερῶν ὁδὸν ἐξανύσαντες, καταλαμβάνουσι τὸ ποθούμενον ὄρος καί, τὸν οἰκεῖον προσκυνήσαντες δεσπότην, πολὺν ἐκεῖ διετέλεσαν χρόνον, τοῦ χωρίου τὴν ἐρημίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἡσυχίαν τρυφὴν μεγίστην ἡγούμενοι. Ἐν ἐκείνῃ δὲ τῇ πέτρᾳ, ὑφ' ᾗ κρυπτόμενος Μωϋσῆς τῶν προφητῶν ὁ κορυφαῖος ἠξιώθη τὸν θεὸν ἰδεῖν, ὡς δυνατὸν ἦν ἰδεῖν, ἐκκλησίαν δειμάμενος καὶ θεῖον ἁγιάσας θυσιαστήριον ὃ καὶ εἰς δεῦρο διέμεινεν, εἰς τὴν οἰκείαν ἐπανῆκε παλαίστραν.
>
> Ainsi donc, après avoir marché bien des jours, ils atteignent la montagne de leurs désirs où, après avoir adoré leur Maître, ils passèrent un long temps, car la solitude de ce lieu désert et leur tranquillité d'esprit leur paraissaient la suprême jouissance. Sur cette roche au creux de laquelle Moïse, le prince des prophètes, s'était caché et avait été jugé digne de voir Dieu, autant qu'il est possible de le voir, Julien bâtit une église et, après avoir consacré un autel divin, qui demeure debout jusqu'à maintenant, il s'en retourna dans sa palestre.[65]

64 Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire philothée*, 3.1.1-6 (Marcianos), ed. Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 246-7.

65 Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire philothée*, 2.13.10-18, ed. Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 222-5.

Cette fois, c'est la théophanie indirecte, de dos, d'Ex 33,18-23, qui est mobilisée, et Julien sanctifie par la construction d'une église et d'un autel la roche où se cachait Moïse. Cependant, ce lieu n'est qu'une étape, si désirable soit-il, et l'ascète retourne ensuite à son lieu d'origine : il ne reste pas sur la montagne du Sinaï. Il en va de même pour Syméon l'Ancien, qui fait lui aussi un pèlerinage au Sinaï ; la montagne y est un lieu de manifestation particulière du divin (vision, audition, mais aussi nourriture envoyée par Dieu) :

> Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν τὸ ποθούμενον κατέλαβον ὄρος, φασὶν ἐκεῖνον τὸν θαυμάσιον γέροντα ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ χωρίῳ ἐν ᾧ τὸν θεὸν Μωϋσῆς ἰδεῖν ἠξιώθη, εἶδε δὲ ὡς δυνατὸν ἦν φύσει θνητῇ, κλῖναι τὰ γόνατα καὶ μὴ πρότερον ἀναστῆναι ἕως θείας ἐπήκουσε φωνῆς, τὴν δεσποτικὴν αὐτῷ μηνυούσης εὐμένειαν. Ἐπειδὴ δὲ καὶ ἅπαντα τῆς ἑβδομάδος τὸν κύκλον οὕτω συγκεκυφὼς διετέλεσε, τροφῆς οὐδὲ βραχείας μεταλαχών, ἐκέλευσεν ἡ γενομένη φωνὴ καὶ τὰ προτεθέντα αὐτῷ λαβεῖν καὶ προθύμως καταφαγεῖν · ἐκτείνας δὲ τὴν χεῖρα καὶ τρία μῆλα εὑρὼν καὶ τούτων ἐμφορηθεὶς ὡς ὁ δεδωκὼς παρηγγύησεν, ἰσχύος τε γέγονεν ἁπάσης ἀνάπλεως καὶ μετὰ θυμηδίας τοὺς συνόντας, ὡς εἰκὸς ἦν, ἠσπάσατο. Γεγηθὼς τοίνυν καὶ γαννύμενος ἐπανῄει ἅτε δὴ καὶ θείας ἐπακούσας φωνῆς καὶ θεοσδότου πάλιν ἀπολαύσας τροφῆς.
>
> Lorsque Syméon arriva donc à la montagne de ses désirs, on dit que cet admirable vieillard se mit à genoux à l'endroit même où Moïse mérita de voir Dieu et le vit, autant qu'il est possible à la nature mortelle, et qu'il ne se releva pas avant d'avoir entendu une voix divine lui signifier la bienveillance du Maître à son égard. Il resta ainsi prosterné toute une semaine sans prendre la moindre nourriture, puis la voix se fit entendre qui lui ordonna de prendre ce qui lui était présenté et de le manger de bon cœur. Il tendit la main et trouva trois pommes dont il se régala comme on le lui avait recommandé en les lui donnant ; il récupéra toutes ses forces, et, tout heureux, comme bien on pense, il embrassa ses compagnons. Rayonnant de joie, il se remit donc en route, maintenant qu'il avait entendu une voix du ciel et pris une nourriture qui était encore un don de Dieu.[66]

L'épisode n'est pas sans rappeler la nourriture fournie par Dieu à Élie, dans son chemin vers le mont Horeb (3 Rg 19,5-8) ; ici, c'est sur la montagne même que Dieu nourrit Syméon, et c'est après la théophanie, non avant. On notera, dans cet extrait comme dans le précédent, la désignation de la montagne du Sinaï par la formule τὸ

66 Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire philothée*, 6.12, ed. Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 362-3.

ποθούμενον [...] ὄρος, qui semble apparaître avec Théodoret et n'est employée que par lui, dans l'Antiquité tardive, du moins d'après les indications du *Thesaurus linguae graecae*. En tout cas, la montagne du Sinaï n'est pas, pour les ascètes de Théodoret, un lieu d'ascèse : elle est, comme chez les auteurs plus anciens, un lieu de théophanie, qui vient confirmer la vocation ascétique. Le pèlerin retourne ensuite à son lieu propre, qui peut, ou non, être une montagne.

Il faudrait bien sûr poursuivre l'enquête sur les usages ascétiques du terme ὄρος, par exemple dans les *Apophtegmes*, ainsi que dans d'autres textes ascétiques et hagiographiques. Mais la prégnance du terme semble sinon limitée au contexte égyptien et à l'usage particulier du terme dans cette région, similaire d'ailleurs en copte, du moins prépondérante principalement dans cette région, du fait de la conflation entre montagne et désert. Ailleurs, la montagne n'est qu'un lieu de retraite, de mise à l'écart parmi d'autres, une variété de désert, mais elle reste toutefois un lieu particulier d'expérience de la proximité avec le divin, au point de justifier un pèlerinage.[67]

7 Conclusion

Au terme de ce petit panorama des montagnes de l'Antiquité grecque chrétienne, c'est la polysémie qui demeure frappante. Les montagnes bibliques sont évoquées comme des lieux physiques, mais surtout comme des lieux symboliques, marqués par la proximité avec Dieu. Parmi elles, une seule émerge vraiment et est privilégiée : c'est le Sinaï, lieu de la théophanie à Moïse (et de la théophanie à Élie, même si cette référence apparaît moins nettement) ; cette prépondérance est confirmée par le fait que cette montagne devient un lieu de pèlerinage monastique, tout autant que de pèlerinage tout court.

On a vu d'autre part que la montagne était un élément codé pour dire la connaissance de Dieu, chez Évagre et chez Grégoire de Nysse en particulier, à la suite d'Origène sans doute ; cependant, de manière remarquable chez l'évêque de Nysse, cette utilisation figurée de la montagne est également liée à la géographie réelle, ou plutôt à l'expérience physique de la montagne, ce qui est peut-être aussi vrai, quoique dans une moindre mesure, d'Évagre.

Enfin, la montagne est un lieu ascétique, mais pas partout, ni de manière uniforme. Elle l'est universellement dans la mesure où elle est un lieu à l'écart des habitations communes, mais étrangement, la montagne est rarement choisie comme lieu ascétique du fait de sa proximité supposée avec le divin. Ce motif surnage cependant ici et là, par exemple dans la *Vie d'Antoine*, puisqu'être assis au sommet

67 Maraval 2011, 308-10.

de la montagne est la position privilégiée pour les visions dont est gratifié Antoine.

Il y a donc beaucoup d'usages et d'interprétations possibles de la montagne, qui ne sont pas tous réalisés chez tous les auteurs, et qui seraient encore multipliés si l'on étudiait l'interprétation de tous les passages bibliques où il est question de montagne… L'enquête ici proposée a privilégié volontairement quelques auteurs et quelques lieux bibliques, sans prétendre aucunement qu'ils fourniraient un aperçu global des usages et des réceptions de la montagne dans le christianisme ancien de langue grecque.

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Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
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Holy Mountains of the Byzantine East and Mystical Experience (Ninth-Fourteenth c.)

Stephanos Efthymiadis
Open University of Cyprus

Abstract Between the ninth and fourteenth centuries such mountains as Olympos in Bithynia, Galesion in W. Asia Minor, and especially Athos in Macedonia became important centres of ascetic and communal life. Inspired by biblical mountains, particularly Sinai and Tabor, they were regarded as sacred spaces where monks could approach God and experience divine presence. Byzantine hagiography frequently associates holy ascetics with visions of supernatural light, following the example of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Ioannikios, Lazaros of Galesion, and Gregorios of Sinai were among the saints who illustrated this tradition. Nevertheless, mystical experience was not a privilege for those living in isolation on mountains but extended to holy persons who dwelt in the city or the countryside and were distinguished for their spiritual life.

Keywords Mt. Sinai. Moses. Athos. Mt. Olympos (Bithynia). Mt. Galesion. Mt. Latros (W. Asia Minor). Divine light. Hesychasm.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Lofty Spiritual Pursuits and Moses' Experience on Mt. Sinai. – 3 Sacred Mountains Revealing a Person's Holiness. – 4 Mystical Experience in the Age of Hesychasm. – 5 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

Holy mountains in the Byzantine East would have been home to ascetics seeking to build their nests of isolation and the places in which groups of monastics would settle to lead a communal life. If holy mountains are a rather small chapter in the history of late antique monasticism, known to have taken root and flourished largely in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, they are nonetheless central to understanding the development of monasticism and grasping its character and related activities after the loss of these provinces in the mid-seventh century. Mount Athos, previously sparsely inhabited by hermits, but later a monastic polity and finally hosting all kinds of anchoritism, epitomises the history of all the other holy mountains that, from the fifth century onwards, saw the gradual establishment of monastic communities in their formerly uninhabited surroundings.[1] Indeed, the history of the development of Mt. Athos as a monastic centre can be closely related to that of the monastic colonies that ultimately emerged in the heartlands of the post-late antique empire, first in Asia Minor, then in the Balkans. I am referring to Mounts Auxentios and Olympos which saw their first monastics settled on their soil in the fifth century, Kyminas and Latros in the tenth, Galesion in the eleventh, and other later ones in the Balkan peninsula (Ganos, Paroria, Meteora, etc.), all undoubtedly less high-profile than Mt. Athos.[2]

Parallel to their geographical and historical contexts, as religious sites and landscapes, holy mountains by default evoked biblical reminiscences by virtue of the holy figures that they had hosted and the associations these had summoned up with episodes from the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament's Mt. Horeb, which came to be identified with Mt. Sinai, Mt. Carmel, where Elijah performed his miracles, and the New Testament's Mt. Tabor, the site of Jesus' Transfiguration, stand out as exempla that could be variously explored in Christian writings. In fact, if seen as a sequence of events leading to a dramatic culmination, Jesus's life can be plotted from the mountain where he defeated the Devil's temptations to the Mount of Beatitudes, the Mount of Feeding the 5,000 (most likely Mt. Arbel), Mt. Tabor, and the Mount of Olives, ending on Golgotha, the site of the Crucifixion.[3] Thus, as sites of theophany in every sense of the word, biblical mountains in Christian literature were cited either as corroboration of the lofty and sacred character of mountains as such or as confirmation

1 On this topic still valuable is Papachryssanthou 1975, 2-41.

2 On these mountains see in general Talbot 2024.

3 Della Dora 2016, 148-9.

of the supernatural qualities of the saintly figures who dwelt on them, devoting themselves to prayer and all kinds of ascetic practice.

In keeping with the first of these two usages or perceptions, the enigmatic author known as Dionysios the Areopagite (or Pseudo-Dionysios) introduces his treatise *On Mystical Theology* with an invocation to the Holy Trinity:

> to lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.[4]

In fact, this "highest peak of mystic scripture" can be identified as Mt. Sinai as will be brought out in a later chapter of the *Mystical Theology* in which Pseudo-Dionysios will refer to Moses' ascent into the darkness of God. "When he is separated from the many and together with the chosen priests, he attains the summit of the divine ascent" and "is united by the cessation of all knowledge to God".[5] This famous passage is key to understanding the potential, so to speak, of a mystical experience and how a holy mountain can be the place *par excellence* where, as Pseudo-Dionysios puts it, "not God himself may be seen (for he cannot be beheld), but the place, where He is".[6]

2 Lofty Spiritual Pursuits and Moses' Experience on Mt. Sinai

The theme or motif that any lofty spiritual pursuit plausibly admits a comparison with Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai recurs in a broad range of texts and, as such, is noteworthy. Even before the end of late antiquity, Symeon the Stylite the Elder's choice to live on a pillar is modelled upon this precise exemplum. In his *Syriac Life* (*BHO* 1121) the saint is characterised as "a new Moses, dispensing from his new Mount Sinai (i.e. his pillar) the new Law for God". Evidently, what is implied here is that his awkward ascetic practice must be understood in the light of a biblical tradition, i.e. in claiming a biblical precedent, and in respect of Symeon's belief that God wanted him to be his earthly mouthpiece. It is no coincidence that the stylite's other

4 Ch. 1, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 141-2.

5 Ch. 1.3, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 144.

6 Ch. 1.3, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 143:18-144:15.

model is none other than Elijah, in turn highlighting Symeon's call to advocate for the poor and the oppressed.[7]

Many centuries later, in a period far removed from the late antique clash between Christianity and paganism, we encounter much more daring associations with Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai. In his well-known apologetic letter addressed to the former patriarch John Xiphilinos (ep. 202), Michael Psellos will contend that Mt. Sinai should be regarded as some sort of physical mountain that led Moses up and God down. Or rather, according to his Platonic interpretation, Mt. Sinai is a symbol for the ascent of the soul out of matter.[8] A century later, towards the end of the year 1182, Michael Choniates will introduce himself as archbishop of Athens in an *Inaugural Address* in which he goes on to make an amazing comparison between the Parthenon and its burning light and Moses' experience on Mount Sinai. Declaring the Atheniotissa church and the hill of the Acropolis to be a locus of theophany, Choniates argues rhetorically that it is on this awesome place that the supercelestial light pours down and shines eternally. This is the light that burns inside the Christian Parthenon, and, to further highlight its significance, Choniates fills his narrative with qualitative epithets starting with either privative alpha or the adverbial prefix ἀεί, 'ever': ἀκάματον, οὐκ ἀμαυρούμενον ἡμέρας, οὐ διακοπτόμενον νυκτί, ἄξυλον, ἄϋλον, ἀκραιφνέστατον, ἀειλαμπές, ἀειφανής.[9] Besides employing terms from apophatic theology, which hark back to Pseudo-Dionysios and other early authors, he further asserts that it (i.e. the Parthenon) is a pillar of fire and the rain that falls from what we call the mystical and light-containing cloud (τῆς καθ' ἡμᾶς μυστικῆς καὶ φωτοδόχου νεφέλης ἀπόρροια), by which we may reach the promised land and the metropolis of the first-born, i.e. Paradise. What is more, he reserves for himself the mission of the one who ascended Mt. Horeb with his flock and gazed upon a burning bush, where he heard a resonant, divine voice urging him to move on from that place and inherit the Promised Land.[10]

Confronted, as we are, in both Psellos and Choniates with this bold attempt at reconciling two conflicting traditions, no doubt motivated by the archbishop of Athens' infatuation with Greek erudition, we get a clear idea of the symbolic dimensions that a biblical holy mountain, especially Mt. Sinai, could acquire and of the mystical experiences

7 See chs 79, 82, 112-13, 117; ed. Bedjan 1894, 571, 573-4, 617-8, 621-2; transl. Hilgenfeld 1908, 126, 128, 160-1, 164. Cf. Ashbrook Harvey 1988, 381-6; Efthymiadis 2026, 861-2.

8 See ed. Papaioannou 2019, 539: "τὸ δὲ Σίναιον [...] οὐχ ὡς αἰσθητὸν ὄρος ἀνάγει Μωσέα καὶ κατάγει θεόν, ἀλλ' ὡς συμβολικὸν τῆς κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης ἐπάρσεως". For an English transl. see Kaldellis 2015, 173.

9 See ed. Lampros 1879, *passim*.

10 On this text and its language inspired by mystical theology see Efthymiadis 2012.

that it was, as it were, prone to generate. This exceptional association was not unknown in other writings but was never articulated in such bold terms as, for instance, in Michael Choniates' erudite composition. The idiosyncratic *Vita of David, Symeon and Georgios*, i.e. the one that honours the three saintly brothers from Lesbos who defended the veneration of icons, can offer a similar but far less high-minded example of inspiration from Greek antiquity. We hear of David, the eldest of the three brothers, practising *askesis* on Mt. Ida in Bithynia. According to the hagiographer, who confused Mt. Ida near Troy with the homonymous place on Crete that was said to be the birthplace of Zeus, David 'settled there so that this very place that the Greeks claimed in myth to be the home of Zeus might accurately be called the abode of a divine man and the sacred precinct of holy souls'.[11] However interesting, this apostrophe is rather parenthetical, merely suggesting that the mountain where David chose to follow his spiritual path had enjoyed a sacred reputation in antiquity.[12]

3 Sacred Mountains Revealing a Person's Holiness

Apart from being endowed with biblical overtones, sacred mountains were revealing of a person's holiness and/or of his/her spiritual gifts, more often than not, manifested through the performance of miracles. More significantly, it was a privilege reserved to a select few holy monastics to have their presence on a mountain associated with a mystical experience, which was usually recorded by an external or accidental witness. Ioannes Moschos in his *Pratum Spirituale*, which circulated after his death in ca. 620, relates the story of an anchorite found in a cave on Mt. Amanon in the vicinity of Antioch in Syria.[13] The narrator saw him kneeling on the ground with his hands stretched out to the heavens and the hair of his head reaching down to the floor. The author thought that the recluse was alive, but, as he heard from another ascetic living in a cave nearby, the anchorite had by then been dead for fifteen years. He looked, however, as if he had died no more than an hour before.[14] Put together in this extraordinary episode, mountain and cave make the ideal setting for keeping epiphanies of divinity and holiness away from the sight and out of reach of the many. Moreover, for all its brevity and thanks to the way it is embedded, the story succeeds in conveying the dual character of the mystical

11 Ch. 5, ed. van den Gheyn 1899, 215; English transl. 156. Comments on this passage by Talbot 2024, 93-4.

12 See the comments of Talbot 2024, 93-4.

13 On this mountain see Hild, Hellenkemper 1990, 174-6.

14 Ch. 89, *PG* 87/3, 2945C-2948A; English transl. Wortley 1992, 71-2.

experience implied for the ascetic found in a statuesque position. In the first place, the story offers one of many examples of hidden or secret sanctity, so common in late antique hagiography; the ascetic's holiness had to remain undisclosed for fifteen years until the witness who ultimately attested it emerged. In the second place, the story bears witness to an epiphany, i.e. a manifestation of the divine in a living person, not directly experienced but mediated by other persons, another ascetic and the narrator. In a sense, the latter's testimony was essential to the uncovering of this extraordinary experience.

In the hagiography produced in the iconoclastic and post-iconoclastic eras the theme of hidden or secret sanctity receded.[15] Whether involved in contemporary controversies or not, new saints were portrayed in a more realistic light, which means that the historical perspective was allotted much more space in the narrative than had previously been the case.[16] Nonetheless, in such a change of perspective of a saint's biography, miraculous accounts were still a necessary element for dispelling any doubt about his/her holy identity. This applied to monastic saints *par excellence*, especially the ones who lived in isolation on the holy mountains that are of interest to us.

The case of St Ioannikios, also referred to as Ioannikios the Great, deserves special attention. After a rather unsuccessful career in the army, he spent the last fifty years of his life on Mt. Olympos in Bithynia. One might say that, of all the holy monastics of his time, Ioannikios was the one who most obviously enjoyed acclaim in his lifetime in that his holiness and miraculous activity were widely acknowledged well before his passing in 846 at the age of 93. In other words, Ioannikios' sanctity needed no posthumous revelation to confirm it. The fact that two biographies were produced consecutively in his honour is another indication of his popularity, at least among the iconophile circles that gained the upper hand following the death of Emperor Theophilos in 842. Now, a feature that clearly distinguishes the earliest *Life*, written by the monk Peter, from the later one by the monk Sabas is that Ioannikios is not portrayed there merely as a wonderworker performing miraculous acts that benefit other people or as a charismatic figure predicting events of major importance for the empire. On more than one occasion, Ioannikios is represented by Peter as radiating divine light. Moreover, in the *vita*'s preamble, by virtue of his residing on Mt. Olympos, he is introduced as

> the one who slipped into the darkness of divine grace and like Moses on the mountain received tablets, not with his hands, but

15 On this common theme in late antique hagiography see now van Pelt 2025.

16 See Efthymiadis, forthcoming.

> with his mind, with the finger of the spirit, and gave laws to the people through his actions.[17]

Again, when, in his final days, he was visited by Patriarch Methodios and had to preach against the Stoudites who opposed them, the patriarch is said to 'have climbed down from the mountain initiated into the mysteries, carrying back, as if from a second Moses, spiritual tablets written by God, the teachings of the saint'.[18]

No such theologically eloquent pronouncements can be found in the *vita* by the monk Sabas. By contrast, some decades before the two biographies were composed, Ioannikios' mystical charismas were acknowledged by one who, we hear, opposed his monastic paradigm. This is none other than Theodore the Stoudite who, in a letter addressed to 'Ioannikios the hermit' (Ἰωαννικίῳ ἐρημίτῃ) and dated to the year 823, i.e. after the two monastics met on Mt. Olympos, appears generous in his praise: 'we greatly enjoyed seeing a man of God, God's grace shining on his face and in his speech and calling for rendering glory to God. You got this thanks to your hermitic isolation and your adherence to prayer, thus being illuminated on your face by the ineffable light as Moses was'.[19] Interestingly, in this instance, the Stoudite abbot, a staunch advocate of cenobitic monasticism, sees no problem in extolling the ascetic for his miraculous feats he performed by means of his eremitical retirement and constant prayer.

As in the case of the two biographers of St. Ioannikios who do not pay the same attention to their subject's mystical experiences, a similar dichotomy can be observed between the early anonymous biographers of St. Auxentios, a fifth-century monastic, and Michael Psellos who extolled the same saint in the eleventh century. St. Auxentios stands out as the only saint whose name was given to the mountain (Mt Oxia in Bithynia across from Constantinople) on which he practised askesis.[20] Whereas no such description appears in any of the earlier pieces that make up the saint's relatively rich hagiographical dossier, Psellos takes the liberty of adding a full account of the ecstatic vision Auxentios experienced not long before his passing. It seemed to the holy man that the air was filled with light, and, as he came to realize, a host of angels were facing him while an unidentified figure emerged out of the darkness. Subsequently, thanks to a voice coming from the air, this person was identified as

17 See ch. 2, ed. Polemis, Mineva 2021, 363-4; also, *AASS* Nov. II, 385. English transl. Sullivan 1998, 257.

18 See ch. 71, ed. Polemis, Mineva 2021, 437-8; also, *AASS* Nov. II, 432. English transl., Sullivan 1998, 344.

19 See ep. 461, ed. Fatouros 1992, 657-8.

20 On this mountain, see Belke 2020, 438-41.

Symeon Stylites. Psellos specifies that, when Auxentios shared this experience with the assembly of his fellow monks, they all marveled at the power of his virtue, which enabled him, while still in bodily form, to be reckoned among the immaterial orders. As some of them later found out, Auxentios's vision had occurred at the very moment when Symeon departed this life.[21] No obvious answer can be given to the question why Psellos wove this story of ecstatic experience into his *vita* and made analogies between the two famous, late antique holy ascetics. If we give credit to Alexander Kazhdan's contention that this whole piece was an attempt at auto-hagiography on Psellos's part and that it reflected his personal ambitions,[22] it may be inferred that he was merely endorsing the benefits of withdrawing from public life in Constantinople and retiring to the monastic abodes in the mountains on the Asiatic shore, a challenge that he was about to take up or had already taken up earlier in life.

A saint who was Psellos' contemporary and, like Auxentios, pursued his monastic career on a mountain was Lazaros of Mt. Galesion. His case deserves some attention in that, once he took up residence on that mountain, he made it a priority to make it a holy site.[23] This holiness was demarcated by Lazaros's own ascetic paradigm and was showcased by the practice of stylitism. By imitating the example of late antique stylites Lazaros both attracted visitors to his column and encouraged many local people to take monastic vows and join a community under his spiritual guidance. Several of his visitors bore witness to supernatural phenomena in relation to the presence of St. Lazaros on his column. For instance, the monk Nikephoros related that, while he was heading from the church to his cell at dusk, he saw the dome of the church surrounded by fire. From there the fire spread uncontrollably and engulfed the column of the saint.[24] Moreover, when the strategos Romanos Skleros, one of the saint's visitors, climbed the stylite's column, he saw the face of the saint shining like fire, a vision that temporarily blinded him and forced him to go back.[25] This vision recalls a similar one that occurred on Mt. Latros, also in Western Asia Minor, a century before St. Lazaros' lifetime. It was witnessed by St. Paul of Latros soon after he was introduced to Peter, abbot of Karya, a famous local monastic who attested to the holiness of the mountain. According to his anonymously preserved

21 See ch. 32, ed. Varalda 2014, 46-8.

22 Kazhdan 1983, 546-56.

23 Cf. Veikou 2023, 20-1.

24 See ch. 86, ed. Delehaye 1910, 535-6; English transl. Greenfield 2000, 177.

25 See ch. 87, ed. Delehaye 1910, 536; English transl. Greenfield 2000, 177-8.

vita (*BHG* 1474), Paul saw him in his cell, appearing like a fiery pillar, a vision which he too could not face for long.[26]

4 Mystical Experience in the Age of Hesychasm

All these themes and topics will gain currency at the dawn of the fourteenth century which saw the rise and gradual expansion of the Hesychastic movement, which radiated out from a central hub on Mt. Athos. This form of devotion recommended repeating the Jesus Prayer, while bending from the waist with head slightly inclined. This prayer posture was to be adopted when embarking on the ascetic-spiritual journey towards perfection.[27] Creating as, according to the teachings of the Hesychast Fathers, it does such psychophysical effects as 'exultation', 'leaping' and 'perturbation', this prayer posture, which evidently contrasts with the one recorded in the story of the *Pratum Spirituale*, paves the way to receiving the experience of light as seen in the Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor.

Contemporary hagiography provides a number of suggestive attestations to this experience of light. A first noteworthy example is provided in the extensive *Life* of one of the first prominent defenders of Hesychastic doctrine, namely Gregorios of Sinai (1255-1346), who lived into the first half of the fourteenth century. The narrative is built around Gregorios' successive moves from one place to another and especially dwells on his long stays in holy sites. The first of these is none other than Mt. Sinai and that is followed by Mt. Athos, regularly referred to as the Holy Mountain. Perhaps because of the young age of his subject, Patriarch Kallistos I, his biographer, refrains from attributing any ecstatic experience to him during his time on Mt. Sinai, the place where Gregorios was tonsured a monk. By contrast, in the section devoted to Mt. Athos, Kallistos does make reference to such an experience. Gregorios, we are told, joined the Sketis of Magoula, situated opposite the monastery of Philotheou, and took three monks under his guidance. No sooner had he pronounced the Jesus Prayer and shed tears on the ground than his abode was filled with light, a light that, as we hear, never abandoned him.[28]

Yet more *Lives* of Hesychast saints are infused with descriptions of visions of the divine light and/or of participation in the life to come while still living. For instance, Philotheos Kokkinos describes the mystical experience that his teacher Gregorios Palamas had during Holy Week while a resident of the Lavra of St. Sabas, i.e.

26 See ch. 4, ed. Delehaye 1913, 107.

27 On the posture used for prayer see lately Rigo 2023.

28 Ch. 12, ed. Beyer 2006, 132. On Gregorios Sinaites see, *inter alia*, Rigo 2002.

Hilandar. Prior to that, Philotheos inserts a long extract on divine illumination taken from Palamas' own *Antirrheticus*.[29] In turn, in his *Life of Maximos the Hutburner* (*BHG* 1237), Theophanes of Vatopedi gives a detailed account of the visionary experiences of his hero (1272/85-1367/80). Interestingly enough, these experiences occurred after Maximos chose to pursue the solitary life, leaving the cenobium of Megisti Lavra and taking up residence on the slopes of Mt. Athos. Among the various Hesychastic practices recorded in his *Life* was an ascent to the peak of Athos itself, where he had a vision in which he saw the Virgin Mary granting him power over demons as well as heavenly bread for his nourishment and recovery.[30]

5 Conclusions

Mountains are spiritual spaces *par excellence*. Although no Byzantine author other than Nikephoros Gregoras in his *Roman History* painted a holy mountain as a *locus amoenus* for the solitary life and retirement from the world,[31] mountains were by and large envisioned as such in the common mind. For those attracted by this way of life, they operated as 'innocent' sites untouched by the secularisation that affected Christians living in the world.[32] What is more, mountains could represent a 'transcendental space', i.e. a spot essential for a human being to be in direct contact with the divine and be granted mystical experiences.

This 'transcendental space', however, was not only the privilege of those who retired to mountains, holy or otherwise. Symeon the New Theologian, nowadays regarded as the most acclaimed mystic of the Middle Byzantine period and highly influential in the Hesychastic movement, was the frequent recipient of such mystical experiences while residing in the monastery of Saint Mamas in a neighborhood of Constantinople.[33] Clearly, by having these experiences within the confines of his monastery, in church or in his cell, he endorsed their ubiquity, i.e. that they might occur in any place sanctified by the presence of a holy person. As has been calculated, these episodes occupy approximately one third of Symeon's *Life*.[34] In the early

29 See respectively chs. 34 and 32, ed. Tsames 1985, 465-6 and 460-4.

30 See ch. 9, ed. Greenfield, Talbot 2016, 472-8.

31 See book XIV.7, ed. Schopen 1830, 714-8. On Gregoras's preoccupation with mountains in general see Lounghis 1990, 47-8.

32 Della Dora 2016, 147-75.

33 See e.g. chs. 69-70, 117, 126-7, ed. Koutsas 2005, 188-91, 292-4, 316-21; English transl., Greenfield 2013, 154-8, 274-6, 302-6.

34 Veikou 2023, 64.

thirteenth century, another ascetic Father, Neophytos the Recluse in Cyprus, would borrow a saying from John Chrysostom and expand it accordingly in his *Testamentary Rule* (Τυπική Διαθήκη):

> it is not the place but the manner [of living] with [the help of] God which saves man. For if the place on its own and without the manner saved man, the angels would not have fallen from heaven, our forefathers would not have fallen from paradise, Judas would not have become a traitor to the apostolic company.[35]

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35 Ch. 12: ὅτι οὐχ ὁ τόπος ἀλλ' ὁ τρόπος μετὰ Θεὸν σῴζει τὸν ἄνθρωπον. Εἰ γὰρ τρόπου χωρὶς ἔσῳζε τόπος, οὐκ ἂν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐξέπεσον ἄγγελοι, οὐκ ἂν ἐξέπεσον τοῦ παραδείσου ἡμῶν οἱ προπάτορες, οὐκ ἂν ἐξ ἀποστολικῆς φάλαγγος προδότης Ἰούδας ἐγένετο. English transl., Galatariotou 2000, 1356. The same expression is in Neophytos's *Fourth Homily on Christ's Commandments*, ch. 43, ed. Stephanis 1996, 65. The allusion is to John Chrysostom's Homily VI *Ad populum Antiochenum* (*CPG* 4330), ch. 4, *PG* 49, 87: ἵνα μάθῃς, ὅτι οὐχὶ τόπος, ἀλλὰ τρόπος σωτηρίαν φέρει καὶ κόλασιν, οἱ ἔνδον διέφυγον, οἱ ἔξω διεφθάρησαν.

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Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
edited by Antonio Rigo, Berenice Cavarra, Gianfrancesco Zanetti

Climbing Sinai, Ascending the Ladder
The Mountain as Spiritual Paradigm in John Climacus

Maxim Venetskov
University of Glasgow, Scotland

Abstract In Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the dominant metaphor is the ladder inspired by Jacob's dream (Gen 28,10-17). Yet although the thirty discourses rarely name Sinai directly, the mountain becomes the figure through which the work was originally framed and subsequently read. Composed within the Sinaitic context, the *Ladder* carries traces of this setting that extend well beyond its explicit references, surfacing instead in the textual and visual frameworks that came to surround it. This article follows that figure across several interconnected sites of reception: the paratextual material associated with Raithou, the manuscript imagery of the *Tabula retrograda*, the iconography and text of the *Canon katanyktikos*, and the layered allegorical language that closes the Discourse to the Shepherd. Read together, these sources show how the mountain functioned not merely as a backdrop to the *Ladder*'s composition but as an organizing figure for its ascetic vision – one that shaped how commentators, later readers, scribes, and artists understood the work's structure and spiritual aims. In tracing this figure through both text and image, the article argues for the mountain's full significance within the ascetic imagination the *Ladder* inspired.

Keywords Ladder of Divine Ascent. John Climacus. Spiritual Tablets. Tabula retrograda. Canon katanyktikos. Discourse to the Shepherd. Mount Sinai.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Composition of the *Ladder*: Sinai, Raithou, and the *Plakes*. – 3 The *Ladder* Between Earth and Heaven: Comparison to the Mountain. – 4 Mountain Models in the Final Part of the Discourse to the Shepherd.

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1 Introduction

The mountain known as Horeb or Sinai stands at the very heart of the biblical narrative as the preeminent site of divine revelation. The Book of Exodus conveys the mountain's numinous theophanic power: "The mountain of Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire".[1] In Hebrew, the name 'Sinai' may derive from *seneh*, the burning bush, evoking an inscrutable divine presence.[2] The Epistle to the Galatians contrasts this mountain, associated with Hagar and the old covenant of slavery, with the freedom of the heavenly Jerusalem and the new covenant.[3]

By the fourth century, this remote place had already become home to a monastic community. The pilgrim Egeria, in her *Itinerary* (383-4), records a church on the holy summit and, at the site of the Burning Bush, a carefully tended garden with abundant water.[4] Shortly thereafter, an episcopal see was established at Pharan (modern Wadi Feiran), north of what would become Saint Catherine's Monastery. The diocese of Pharan extended across the entire Sinai region and included the important monastic centre at Raifa (modern Et-Tur).[5]

In the mid-fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus provides the earliest narrative account of monastic life on the mountain. In his *Historia Philothea* (Vita 2, §13), he recounts how Julian, known locally as Saba, journeyed with a small group of companions to Sinai. Rather than settling in any city or village, he made the impassable desert accessible (τὴν ἄβατον ἔρημον βατὴν ἐργαζόμενος),[6] establishing a community of brothers in this sacred wilderness.

Procopius of Caesarea offers one of the most vivid descriptions of the Sinai region in his *De aedificiis* (Book 5, Chapter 8), a work devoted to Justinian's building projects.[7] Procopius portrays the area as lying in ancient Arabia, later known as Third Palestine: an extensive desert (χώρα ἔρημος), barren and devoid of fruits, water,

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1 Ex 19,18.

2 See Levenson 1985, 19-20.

3 Gal 4,24-25.

4 Cf. *Itinerarium Egeriae* 3.1-4.8; ed. Franceschini, Weber 1965, 37-40. See also Elsner, Wolf 2010, 47-9.

5 For a broader context on Pharan, Raifa, and early settlements, see e.g. Dahari 2000; Pierre-Beylot 2011.

6 See Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 176-7 (Greek text with French translation).

7 It was at the emperor's initiative that the Sinai community received a fortified monastery, whose main structures were completed between 548 and 560.

or provisions, dominated by a steep and fiercely wild mountain (ὄρος ἀπότομόν τε καὶ δεινῶς ἄγριον) that stretches almost to the Red Sea.[8] This naturally inhospitable landscape became the setting onto which the monastic tradition projected a dense symbolic reading.

The mountain emerged as a privileged space for ascetic life, divine encounter, and spiritual transformation. Scholars have traced how this symbolism draws on a long tradition linking mountains with isolation, refuge, and elevation – both literal and metaphorical – turning harsh wilderness into a new paradise and a restored Eden.[9]

This paper examines John of Sinai's *Ladder* through selected key passages, particularly those in the framing sections of the work, and through the rich evidence of its reception in the Byzantine manuscript tradition. Three main threads guide the analysis. (1) The composition of the work is intimately linked to Sinai. The redactors at Raithou framed the core ascetic discourses of the Sinaitic hegumen with a network of paratexts that present the book itself as issued from the holy mountain. (2) The *Tabula retrograda*, the inverted index of the thirty steps, invites a visual and symbolic assimilation. Positioned between earth and heaven, the ladder in this table evokes the mountain without depicting it. Concrete illustrations of physical mountains appear, however, only in connection with the *Canon katanyktikos* (Canon of the Penitents), transmitted in several manuscripts. In these miniatures, monks are shown either at the base or on the peaks of the mountains, engaged in specific practices of ascetic humility and compunction. (3) The final part of the concluding *Discourse to the Shepherd* brings the mountain imagery to its fullest expression. Here the spiritual guide moves gradually from Horeb through successive symbolic heights until reaching the holy mountain, encompassing models and images drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. In this ultimate section, the physical and spiritual mountains converge with the ladder of virtues itself, presenting the ascetic life as a single, continuous climb toward divine union.

2 The Composition of the *Ladder*: Sinai, Raithou, and the *Plakes*

Sinai is both a biblical place and a part of the monastic pair Sinai–Raithou from which the *Ladder* was requested and composed. The analysis that follows is concerned less with a mountain allegory running through every step than with the editorial context and

8 For the Greek text, see Wirth 1964, 159-60. On the Justinianic construction, see also Ševčenko 2006.

9 See, for example, Della Dora 2016, 147-202; Talbot 2001, esp. 264, 275.

reception history of the book. The choice of Sinai as the setting of the *Ladder* carries deep significance. It is the biblical mountain par excellence – the site of Moses' theophany and the giving of the Law, when the prophet received the stone tablets (*plakes*).[10] The author is known as John of Sinai from his office as hegumen of the monastery on the holy mountain; the name Climacus (ὁ τῆς Κλίμακος) derives from the title of this book. The community of Raithou played a decisive role in presenting John of Sinai's work as a text profoundly rooted in this holy mountain. This emphasis on its Sinaitic origin is clearly visible in the elaborate paratextual framework that surrounds the core discourses in the manuscript corpus.[11]

The composite structure of the *Ladder* took shape in three main stages. First comes the letter from John, hegumen of Raithou, requesting the work from John, hegumen of Sinai. This is followed by the main body of the treatise – the *Ascetic Discourses*, including the final and structurally appended *Discourse to the Shepherd* – accompanied by an epilogue. Finally, a series of supplementary pieces were added: the *Life* of John Climacus, the *Tabula retrograda*, along with various titles, concluding formulas, and an exhortative epilogue. These additions were designed to refine and complete the text as it was received at Raithou.

This redactional choice carries important implications for interpreting the mountain of Sinai as a spiritual paradigm. It suggests that the ascent described in the *Ladder* truly begins only after the Sinaitic setting and Mosaic typology have been firmly established. The reader is thus invited to approach the thirty steps as a path unfolding directly on the sacred ground of Sinai.

In his letter, John of Raithou compares John of Sinai to Moses and figuratively describes the work as "tablets written by God" (πλάκας θεογράφους) and "precious inscriptions engraved on the tablets" (τίμια ταῖς πλαξὶν ἐγχαράγματα).[12] Just as the prophet Moses spoke through the mouth of Aaron, John of Sinai conveys his teaching through the intermediary of John of Raithou. This collaborative dimension is essential for understanding the *Ladder*. The work is not the solitary achievement of a Sinaitic ascetic, but a text born from

10 See Ex 31-34.

11 On the relationships between Sinai and Raithou in the composition and paratextual framing of the *Ladder*, see Venetskov 2018; 2019; 2020; 2025. The present study takes a different object: the mountain as a figure that organises the book's frames, its manuscript imagery, and its later reading. A forthcoming monograph by the same author examines the composition of the *Ladder* and its scalary imagery at greater length; it does not replace the argument developed here.

12 *Letter* of John of Raithou, PG 88, 624B:7; 625A:12-B:1. See also the *Reply* of John of Sinai, where he likewise refers to the 'tablets' (πλακῶν) in connection with the 'spiritual law' (νόμου πνευματικοῦ) intended for monks (PG 88, 625A:15-B:1). Cf. Venetskov 2025, 178.

dialogue between two monastic communities and carefully prepared for wider dissemination. The exchange between Raithou and Sinai strengthens the image of the mountain as a living spiritual paradigm. The *Ladder* emerges directly from the soil of Sinai, shaped by its rugged geography and the ascetic tradition that had long flourished across Egypt, Palestine, and the surrounding regions.

In the great majority of manuscripts of the *Ladder* (Κλίμαξ), John of Sinai's work bears a second, evocative title: Πλάκες πνευματικαί (Spiritual Tablets). This designation rarely appears at the opening of the book. Instead, often written in capital letters, it is typically placed before John of Sinai's *Reply* to the abbot of Raithou. When it recurs at the end of the *Reply*, it forms part of a concluding formula that marks the close of the introductory section, clearly distinguishing it from the thirty discourses that follow. Unlike the title Κλίμαξ, the placement of Πλάκες πνευματικαί makes it difficult to regard it as an overarching title for the entire work. Nevertheless, the concluding formula explicitly presents Πλάκες πνευματικαί as the proper name (ἐπωνυμία) of John of Sinai's writing.[13]

The dual titles enrich the mountain paradigm that runs through Climacus' thought. While the *Ladder* draws on the imagery of vertical ascent, *Spiritual Tablets* anchors the work firmly in the biblical and geographical reality of Mount Sinai. The *Ascetic Discourses* thus present themselves as a new law, modelled on the tablets Moses received on the holy mountain. John the hegumen becomes the new Moses, the lawgiver for his monastic community, and the divine commandments are reinterpreted as the guiding principles of ascetic discipline. The stone tablets are transformed into a living spiritual book, offered to ascetics for reading, reflection, and daily practice.

In the opening paragraph of Step 1, the author describes how the spiritual lawgiver inscribes the divine words upon the "tablets of the heart", thereby extending the assimilation of the *Ladder* to Mount Sinai and the biblical Tablets of the Law. He explains that he has traced these words on hearts as if on parchment or paper (μεμβράναις / χάρταις) or, more fittingly, on spiritual tablets (μᾶλλον δὲ πλάκαις / πλαξὶ πνευματικαῖς).[14]

A curious case appears in a series of manuscripts, where this introductory paragraph is followed by a marginal rubric ἀρχή (beginning).[15] This note signals that the authentic beginning authored

13 See especially Venetskov 2025, 176-80. The suggestion that Πλάκες πνευματικαί is the older title compared to Κλίμαξ (cf. Duffy 1999, 5-6) finds no support in the manuscript evidence: both titles appear together in the earliest complete witnesses.

14 Cf. *PG* 88, 632C:10-633A:1. It echoes 2 Cor 3,3.

15 For instance: Vat. Ottob. gr. 256 (12th c.), f. 7v; Paris. gr. 863 (11th c.), f. 7v; Hierosol. Sab. 175 (year 1292), f. 10r; Vat. Barb. gr. 309 (11th c.), f. 12v (hand A).

by John of Sinai starts only with the systematic classification of "all those who have the power of choice" (πάντων τῶν προαιρουμένων).[16] The scribal intervention, which appears as a model across a group of manuscripts, suggests that the first paragraph serves primarily as a paratextual framing device rather than as the original core of the composition. By distinguishing this prologue from the true start of the thirty steps, the Raithou-influenced tradition reinforces a crucial idea: the *Ladder* as a spiritual law issued from Sinai. The mountain thus stands as the authoritative source of the new ascetic legislation, with John Climacus cast in the role of a new Moses delivering πλάκες πνευματικαί to the monastic Israel.

The interplay between physical and allegorical dimensions of the mountain finds eloquent expression in the *Life of Climacus* attributed to Daniel of Raithou. There, John of Sinai is described as one who, "while his body remained on Sinai, had already carried his soul to the heavenly mountain (ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ ὄρει)". This striking image captures the seamless passage from the physical mountain of Sinai to the celestial mountain of contemplation and union with God.[17]

3 The *Ladder* Between Earth and Heaven: Comparison with the Mountain

The connection between the ladder and the mountain finds expression in several liturgical hymns, mentioning the ladder of Jacob alongside "the shady mountain" or inviting praise of "the holy mountain, the bush, and the ladder that was foreseen".[18] Broader reflections on the assimilation of ladders to heavenly mountains add further depth to this symbolic field.[19]

A particularly fruitful approach lies in the manuscript transmission of the *Ladder*. Among its paratextual elements, the iconography accompanying the *Tabula retrograda* offers the most compelling visual synthesis. With its clear inscriptions of 'earth' at the base and 'heaven' at the summit, the retrograde table presents the ladder as a vertical axis of spiritual movement. In this schema, the ladder corresponds to the physical mountain in several essential ways: both serve as meeting places between God and the ascetic; both demand

16 *PG* 88, 633A:4 *sqq*.

17 σῶμα μὲν τούτου ἐν τῷ Σιναίῳ, ψυχὴν δ' αὖ ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ ὄρει εἰσκεκομικώς (Vita Ioh. Sin. *PG* 88, 597A:7-8).

18 ἡ κλίμαξ Ἰακὼβ ἣν ἐθεάσατο, τὸ ὄρος τὸ κατάσκιον; ὄρος ἅγιον βάτον καὶ κλίμακα προοραθεῖσαν πάντες ἀνυμνήσωμεν (ed. Eustratiades, Spyridon 1931, 1, 8:110-111; 1, 31:91-3).

19 See especially Della Dora 2016, 165-70.

a strenuous upward journey; and in both, the summit represents not mere arrival but a transformative encounter leading to *theosis*.

3.1 *Tabula Retrograda*

Byzantine illuminated manuscripts of the *Ladder* frequently include a distinctive visual feature:[20] the *Tabula retrograda*, or inverted index of the thirty steps. This table, accompanied by a diagrammatic or inscribed image of the ladder, usually appears at the end of the book, just before the *Discourse to the Shepherd*. Like the conventional index placed among the prefatory materials, it was most likely prepared by the editors at the monastery of Raithou.[21]

In contrast to the ordinary index, which is read from top to bottom, the *Tabula retrograda* is designed as a visual image positioned above the reader's eye level. The thirty rungs are therefore read from bottom to top, inviting an ascending movement of the gaze. This vertical orientation enacts the spiritual progression of the ascetic, whose attention is continually drawn upward, without interruption or deferral. The iconography surrounding the *Tabula* is rich in symbolism. It portrays the scalary movement as a dangerous yet supported ascent between earth and heaven, both firm and perilously unsteady, as the monks strive toward the summit where Christ awaits them.

The *Tabula retrograda* is sometimes structurally divided into three parts, thereby highlighting the three major stages of the ascetic's progress toward spiritual perfection: "Ascend – the beginning" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ ἀρχή), "Ascend – the middle" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ μεσότης), and "Ascend – the perfection" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ τελειότης). In these manuscripts, the ladder is depicted as three distinct sections, each comprising ten rungs.[22] This tripartite arrangement lends rhythm and dynamism to the depiction of spiritual progress, suggesting an inner unfolding in three phases. Yet it should not be read as a rigid division of the thirty steps according to levels of attainment. The first ten rungs are not reserved exclusively for beginners, the middle ten for those advancing, nor the final ten solely for the perfect.

The vertical dimension of the ladder acquires its full resonance when considered alongside the mountain paradigm. Just as Mount Sinai rises from the desert floor toward the divine presence at its

20 Cf. Martin 1954, figures II-III (at the end of the monograph).

21 On the *Tabula retrograda*, its placement in manuscripts, and the critical edition of its text, see Venetskov 2019, 226-7.

22 Cf. Ath. Batop. 364, 12th century, f. 228r. See also Paris. gr. 863, 11th century, f. 131v (to the left of the *Tabula retrograda*, only two rubrics are preserved: ἡ ἀρχή and ἡ μεσότης; the drawn ladder is intentionally divided into two parts by a blank space between the titles of steps 15 and 16).

summit, the ladder serves as a living bridge spanning the distance between earth and heaven.[23] This symbolic space is rendered with clarity in the illustrations accompanying the *Tabula retrograda*. The interval between earth (ἡ γῆ) and heaven (ὁ οὐρανός) is designated "above the earth" (ὑπὲρ γῆν), a detail often emphasized in the drawings. In the fourteenth-century manuscript Athous, Stavronikita 30 **[fig. 1]**, for example, the phrase "ὑπὲρ γῆν" marks the base of the ladder, while its uppermost section is enclosed in a circular celestial frame bearing a cross and the monogram of Christ (IC XC NI KA), flanked by the sun and moon. A similar scheme appears in the twelfth-century Athens, EBE 310 **[fig. 2]**, where the same inscription is written at the foundation and the blessing hand of Christ surmounts the ladder from the heavenly sphere. In other examples,[24] the base of the ladder bears the dual inscription "earth" (ἡ γῆ) and "what is above the earth" (τὰ ὑπὲρ γῆν), while the icon of Christ crowns the summit.

In certain manuscripts[25] the iconography of the ladder is further enriched with inscriptions that underscore its eschatological and eternal character. At the summit one reads "the beginning and the end" (ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος), while at the base appears the reverse inscription, "the end and the beginning" (τέλος καὶ ἀρχή), followed by the designations of the earthly and subterranean realms: "the earth and what is beneath the earth" (γῆ καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆν). In these cases, the visual representation of the ladder is often accompanied by poetic texts dedicated to the *Ladder* rather than by the step titles characteristic of the *Tabula retrograda*.

Through these visual and textual elements, the *Tabula retrograda* elevates the ladder into a coherent cosmic figure – a vertical path that mirrors the rigorous and transformative ascent of Mount Sinai itself. In Climacus' vision, the two images converge: the monk's spiritual path is at once a climb up the holy mountain and a step-by-step ascent of the ladder, uniting earth and heaven in a single, perilous movement toward God.

23 For the symbolism of the ladder as "the air whose base is the earth and whose top is heaven", see Philo of Alexandria, *De Somniis* I, 134, ed. Wendland 1898, 234.

24 Cf. Mediol. Ambros. G 20 sup., 14th c., f. 212v.

25 E.g. Sinai. gr. 417, 10th c., f. 13v; Mediol. Ambros. D 58 sup., year 1258/59, f. 2r-v.



Figure 1 Ath. Stavronik. 30, y. 1324, f. 260v
© Ἅγιον ὄρος, Μονὴ Σταυρονικήτα



Figure 2 Athen. EBE 310, 12th c., f. 202r
© Ἐθνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς Ἑλλάδος

For John of Sinai, the monastery itself constitutes "an earthly heaven" (κοινόβιόν ἐστιν ἐπίγειος οὐρανός).[26] This understanding of monastic life as a terrestrial reflection of the celestial realm receives visual form in certain copies of the *Tabula retrograda*. There, the cosmological dimension of the ladder, symbolically spanning the material and the immaterial, is reinforced by an illustration in the

26 Step 4. *PG* 88, 713B:14.

eleventh-twelfth-century codex preserved in Messina **[fig. 3]**, where stars and planets are delicately sketched at the head of the diagram.

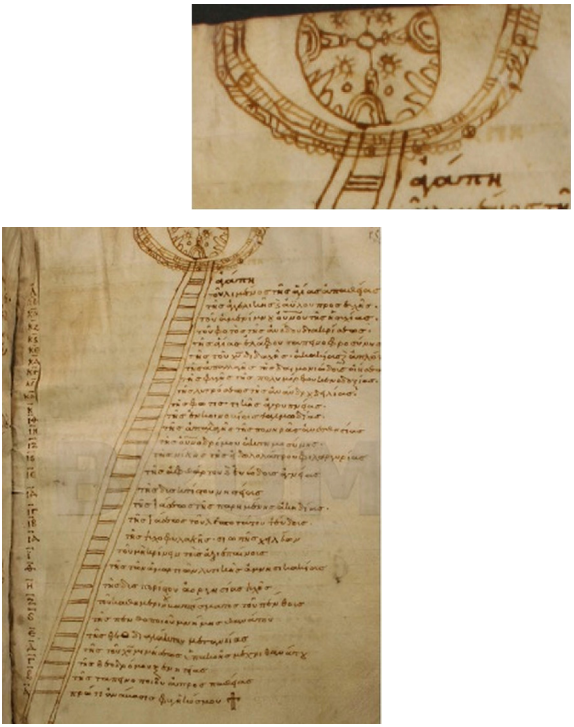


Figure 3 Messan. Salv. 91, 11th-12th c., f. 158r
© Biblioteca Regionale Universitaria "Giacomo Longo" di Messina

By placing the ladder within this cosmic setting, John Climacus and the editors at Raithou invite the reader to see the ascetic journey as more than a personal moral struggle. It becomes a participation in the divine order of creation. Just as Mount Sinai once joined heaven and earth, the ladder becomes the monk's own Sinai: a path rising from the earthly monastery toward the true celestial realm. In this way, the *Tabula retrograda* transforms the spiritual ascent into a vividly cosmological vision. Every step taken by the ascetic echoes the harmony of the universe and anticipates the final union with God. The retrograde table, with its upward reading direction and cosmic framing, reinforces this mountain paradigm. The viewer's gaze is drawn vertically along the rungs, mirroring both the physical effort of climbing Sinai and the inner discipline of the ascetic life. In both the holy mountain and the illustrated ladder, the path is vertical, arduous, and oriented toward the divine. The presence of stars and

planets at the summit, together with Christ's blessing hand, serves as a reminder that the goal of monastic ascent is not merely moral improvement but full participation in the divine order.

The close association between the ladder and the mountain paradigm is vividly illustrated in the manuscript Messina, Biblioteca del Monastero del Santissimo Salvatore, gr. 90 **[fig. 4]**. Here the ladder is depicted not as a mere diagram but as a dynamic path of ascent. Two ropes run along its sides, which the ascetics at the base grasp as they pull themselves upward – a gesture that strikingly evokes the effort of climbers scaling a steep mountain face. Angels on either side hold these ropes, offering support and guidance, while at the summit Christ Himself secures the upper ends, ready to receive those who complete the climb. The composition presents the Lord as both anchor and welcoming presence at the journey's end. Through images such as this, the *Tabula retrograda* renders the ladder as a figure of ascent analogous to Mount Sinai, rather than as a depiction of the mountain's physical topography.



Figure 4 Messan. Salv. 90, 11th-12th c., f. 185v
© Biblioteca Regionale Universitaria "Giacomo Longo" di Messina

3.2 Iconography of Mountains in the *Canon Katanyktikos*

The search for mountain imagery in the manuscript illustrations of the *Ladder* leads to a particularly revealing text: the *Canon katanyktikos*, or Canon of the Penitents. Transmitted, at least, in nine Greek manuscripts from the eleventh-twelfth to the seventeenth century,[27] this work closely reproduces passages from the fifth step of the *Ladder* concerning monks confined in the "Prison" (Φυλακή). Physical representations of mountains appear in the manuscript tradition of the *Ladder* almost exclusively within these paratextual elements linked to the *Canon katanyktikos*. In these miniatures, the mountain is no longer a distant background but becomes an active setting for the ascetic life.

One of the earliest witnesses to the Canon's iconographic tradition is the manuscript București, Biblioteca Academiei Române, gr. 1294 (11th-12th c.).[28] In this manuscript, a troparion of the Canon reads: "Having fallen from a high rank and station, we vain-minded ones have reached the bottom of Hades and the shadow of death; unable to rise from there, let us strike our foreheads against the ground".[29] This passage is illustrated in a densely composed miniature **[fig. 5]**. The penitents are shown prostrate on the bare ground, and heads pressed to the stone. The rugged peaks rise behind and beneath them, evoking both the sacred topography of Sinai and the spiritual landscape of repentance. The mountains in the image carry a rich and ambivalent meaning. In the distance, they evoke the pride from which the penitents have fallen. In the foreground, they signify the necessary descent: to rise again, one must first reach the bottom, exhaust oneself in humility, and strike one's forehead against the earth. The *Canon* thus reveals a sharp ascetic paradox: the summit is not attained by climbing upward alone, but by descending into the abyss.

27 Cf. Athen. EBE 742, 17th c., f. 61r-73v; Athen. EBE 1395, 15th c., f. 1r-16v; Ath. Batop. 376, 11th-12th c., f. 477r-84v; Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294 + Lond. Robert Mc Carthy BM 2042, 11th-12th c., 11 folios; Mediol. Ambros. F 221 inf., No. 5, 17th c., 1-32 (accompanied by a Latin translation); Sinai. gr. 427, 16th c., f. 1r-17r; Vat. gr. 1754, added in the 12th-13th c., f. IVv, 1-19; Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, added in the 15th c., f. 170-71, 202-19; Venet. Marc. gr. II.44, 16th c., f. 180r-95v. For editions of the text, see Delatte 1926, 97-105, Martin 1954, 128-49, and Barnea 1963, 321-4. On the *Canon* and its manuscript witnesses, see also Rigo 2023, 224-9. The recent monograph by Popova (2024), by contrast, cannot be relied upon as a guide to the manuscript tradition of the *Canon of the Penitents*. Its list of Greek witnesses, for instance, includes București BAR gr. 850 on the strength of Camariano (1940, 8, no. 850). That entry, however, describes a nineteenth-century musical booklet ending with a synoptic table headed Γ.Λ. Κανόνιον περὶ τῆς μεταβολῆς τῶν κλιμάκων – a short theoretical table on the ēchoi and klimakes of Byzantine chant, entirely unrelated to the Penitential Canon on Step 5 of the *Ladder*.

28 See Barnea 1963, 319-30 and figures 1-20; see also Barbu 1984, 23-30 (with illustrations).

29 Cf. Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294, f. 7v: ὑψηλῆς ἐκπεσόντες τάξεως καὶ στάσεως οἱ ματαιόφρονες, εἰς πυθμένα ἅδου καὶ θανάτου σκιὰν κατηντήσαμεν, ἀφ' ὧν ἀναστῆναι ἐξατονοῦντες τῷ ἐδάφει τὰ ἡμῶν προσαρράσωμεν μετώπα.



Figure 5 Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294, 11th-12th c., f. 7v

A closely related yet distinct iconographic tradition appears in two other witnesses of the *Canon katanyktikos*, preserved in the Vatican and Venice **[figs 6-7]**. These manuscripts contain similar miniatures accompanied by another troparion from the same Canon: "Seated upon the height of the ground, they cover their faces with their knees and weep".[30]

The miniatures render the Canon's description while introducing a significant visual addition: the penitents are not seated on ordinary ground, but on elevated rocky slopes or isolated peaks (ἐπὶ ψηλοῦ τοῦ ἐδάφους). Their bodies are folded in profound compunction, faces hidden against their knees, with feet dangling over the edge of the precipice. This placement on the heights intensifies their isolation and the inward character of their repentance.

This elevated placement transforms the scene. The monks are suspended between heaven and the abyss, embodying the ascetic tension between divine aspiration and human frailty. The rugged mountain becomes both stage and symbol: a place of radical humility where one must descend to ascend, and a theophanic space

30 Cf. Vat. gr. 1754, 12th-13th c., f. 7v, and Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, 15th c., f. 208r: οὗτοι ἐπὶ ψηλοῦ τοῦ ἐδάφους καθήμενοι, τοῖς γόνασι τὰ πρόσωπα ἐπικαλύπτουσι· καὶ δακρύουσιν. This text closely paraphrases a passage from the fifth step of the *Ladder*: ἄλλους ἐν τῷ ἐδάφει ἐπὶ σάκκου καὶ σποδοῦ καθημένους, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον τοῖς γόνασι καλύπτοντας, καὶ τὸ μέτωπον εἰς γῆν τύπτοντας (PG 88, 765B:9-11).

where grace and weakness meet. Through these images, the *Canon katanyktikos* situates John Climacus' text by rooting the spiritual "Prison" in the sacred and austere landscape of Sinai itself.



Figure 6 Vat. gr. 1754, 12th-13th c., f. 7v
© Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana



Figure 7 Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, 15th c., f. 208r
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4 Mountain Models in the Final Part of the Discourse to the Shepherd

The most eloquent passages concerning the image of the mountain, in all its mystical and allegorical depth, appear at the conclusion of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* (*Ad pastorem*). Here, the author – whether John of Sinai or John of Raithou – unfolds a rich metaphorical encomium of the ideal shepherd, moving successively through the figures of Moses the lawgiver, Joshua son of Nun, and Christ Himself. The text is deliberately ambiguous. It may be addressed to the hegumen in general, or more specifically to John of Raithou, the original recipient of Climacus' work. The most convincing interpretation, however, sees it as a posthumous addition by John of Raithou himself, who turns to address John Climacus as the true guide and head of the Sinaitic monastic community.[31]

The first stage of the mountain ascent is expressed in the final part of the *Discourse*, where the author, addressing the hegumen as spiritual guide, declares: "You have ascended to the height, having passed through every darkness, gloom, and storm".[32] This ascent, the author explains, culminates in an approach to the light after traversing the threefold darkness of ignorance, a light far more venerable and exalted than the burning bush,[33] and is followed by a descent into the deepest valley of humility at Horeb, undertaken after the vision of God.[34] These lines, along with related passages, were later read as a sequence of mountains. A continuous commentary on the *Discourse to the Shepherd* (ἐξήγησις εἰς τὸν λόγον τοῦ ποιμένος), preserved in the fourteenth-century manuscript Chisianus graecus 38 and attributed to Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos,[35] traces this identification step by step, aligning the 'height', Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, and the 'holy mountain', ultimately assimilated to the summit of the ascetic *Ladder of virtues*. The commentary begins to unfold the mountain's meaning in stages, starting here:

31 For a detailed study of the manuscript tradition of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, its final section, and questions of attribution, see Venetskov 2020.

32 εἰς ὕψος ἀναβέβηκας, πάντα γνόφον καὶ ζόφον καὶ θύελλαν διακρουσάμενος (PG 88, 1204C:1-2). Cf. Heb 12,18.

33 τῷ φωτὶ πολύ γε τῆς βάτου αἰδεσιμωτέρῳ καὶ ὑψηλωτέρῳ (this reading reflects the majority of manuscripts). Rader's edition (PG 88, 1204C:3-5) inserts καὶ ἀμαυρωτέρῳ between the two adjectives. Manuscript variants for the light described as "far more venerable and exalted than the burning bush" include ἀμαυρωτέρῳ (darker), τρανοτέρῳ (clearer), καθαρωτέρῳ (purer), and λαμπροτέρῳ (brighter).

34 εἰς βαθυτάτην που κοιλάδα ταπεινώσεως ἐν Χωρὴβ ἐκ τῆς θεοπτίας κατελήλυθας (PG 88, 1204C:9-11). For the text of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* and the unique commentary by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, see Venetskov 2020, 169-82.

35 For a detailed analysis of this commentary, see Venetskov 2020, 134-41.

You too have ascended to the summit of Mount Sinai; I mean the height of knowledge. Having passed through every ignorance of the soul that, being more material, obstructs the reception of divine illumination, you have drawn near to the divine light.[36]

The commentator explicitly identifies the summit with Mount Sinai and the "height" with the divine illumination and knowledge granted to the soul. In this way, the final section of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* presents John Climacus himself as the new Moses of Sinai – one who has traversed the darkness to reach the light, descended into the valley of humility, and now guides his flock from the sacred mountain.

The highest stage of the ascent, "more sovereign and more powerful than all", is expressed in these words, as the heavenly Jerusalem rises above Mount Sinai: "You have ascended to Jerusalem, the vision of the perfect peace of souls; you behold Christ, the God of peace".[37]

The commentary explains that, while narrating and allegorizing the events of Moses' life, the discourse advances to Joshua son of Nun. He too ascended (ἀναβέβηκε) to Jerusalem[38] and allotted the land as an inheritance.[39] Then, with a bold transition (τολμηρῶς ἔρχεται), the narrative moves to Christ, to His Passion, death, and Resurrection. Jerusalem thus becomes the vision of perfect peace, established in the soul of the hegumen who has been liberated from the passions.[40]

The tension rises to its highest pitch as the narrator has the shepherd – whether John of Raithou or John of Sinai – ascend the Mount of Olives,[41] a site rich in evangelical and psalmic memory.[42]

Nikephoros Kallistos explains the passage with precision. Here the hegumen is compared to David and, perhaps even more boldly, to Christ Himself: "following the excellent runner David, or perhaps

36 εἰς τὴν τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ καὶ σὺ κορυφὴν ἀναβέβηκας· τὸ ὕψος λέγω τῆς γνώσεως· καὶ παρελθὼν πᾶσαν ἀγνωσίαν ψυχῆς ἐπιπροσθοῦσαν ὡς ὑλικωτέραν τὸν θεῖον δέξασθαι φωτισμόν, ἐπλησίασας τῷ θείῳ φωτί (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 244r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 170).

37 εἴπω βούλει τὸ πάντων κυριώτερόν τε καὶ κραταιότερον; ἐπὶ τὴν Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἀναβέβηκας, τὴν ὅρασιν τῆς τελείας εἰρήνης τῶν ψυχῶν· Χριστὸν ὁρᾷς, τὸν Θεὸν τῆς εἰρήνης (PG 88, 1205A:12-15).

38 The movement from Horeb to Jerusalem also recasts the contrast of Gal 4,24-25. The Sinai of the old covenant is not discarded; it is reread as the first height on a path that ends in the Jerusalem of peace in the hegumen's soul.

39 τὰ κατὰ τὸν Μωϋσῆν διεξιὼν καὶ ἀλληγορῶν, ἐπὶ τὸν τοῦ Ναυῆ μεταβέβηκεν Ἰησοῦν· οὗτος γὰρ εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἀναβέβηκε καὶ ἐκληροδότησε τὴν γῆν (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 175).

40 Cf. Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 175.

41 ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρος τῶν Ἐλαιῶν ἔρχῃ (PG 88, 1204B:14-C:1).

42 Cf. Mt 24,3; 26,30; Mc 13,3; 14,26; Lc 21,37; 22,39; Io 8,1; Act 1,12.

Christ as well, you yourself have come to the base of the mountain, that is, to its summit".[43]

The hegumen no longer merely receives commandments; he embodies them. He is David singing victory over the demons; he is Christ who, after the agony in the garden, opens the way to heaven. The mountain's base and its summit are named as one and the same, and for the hegumen who has attained it, the foundation of ascetic life and its highest peak likewise coincide. At this point, the shepherd ceases to be a simple guide: he becomes a living icon of the Logos, the one who leads the flock from daily combat to the Jerusalem of peace.

At the very end of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, the text reaches its clearest and most exalted summit. The hegumen, perfect ascetic, ascends the holy mountain and reaches heaven in a single, continuous movement. The language moves beyond metaphor, evoking a lived experience patterned on the imitation of Christ:

> You have drawn near to the holy mountain and lifted your eyes toward heaven; you have set your foot upon the base, you have run and run upward, you have been exalted, and you have mounted upon the Cherubim of the virtues.[44]

Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos contextualizes this mysterious 'holy mountain' with illuminating precision. In this reception, the mountain is no longer only Horeb: it is the living book that John Climacus has written to teach the acquisition of the virtues through the most arduous combat against evil and the demons.

For you have trampled upon the enemy, the devil, and you were the first to ascend the difficult Ladder of the virtues (δυσχερῆ τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακα προανέβης), making for us the way and showing us how we must follow you as our guide. Or rather, since you are still in the body, you continue to lead and precede us all, and you have ascended to the summit of the divine Ladder of the virtues (τὸ ἄκρον τῆς θείας τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακος); and the end of this Ladder is divine and perfect love.[45]

43 τῷ καλλιδρόμῳ Δαυὶδ καὶ αὐτὸς παρακολουθῶν, ἢ ἴσως καὶ τῷ Χριστῷ, πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ὄρους βάσιν, ἤτοι τὴν κορυφὴν ἐλήλυθας (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245v; edition in Venetskov 2020, 179).

44 προσεπέλασας τῷ ὄρει τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ τὸ ὄμμα εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀνέτεινας, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν βάσιν τὸν πόδα προσεβίβασας, καὶ ἔδραμες καὶ ἀνέδραμες, καὶ ὑψώθης, καὶ ἐπέβης ἐπὶ Χερουβὶμ ἀρετῶν (PG 88, 1208A:2-5). Cf. Ps 17,11.

45 ὅτι τὸν ἐχθρὸν διάβολον κατεπάτησας καὶ τὴν δυσχερῆ τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακα προανέβης, ὁδὸν ποιήσας ἡμῖν καὶ δείξας, πῶς δεῖ σοι ἕπεσθαι ὡς ὁδηγῷ· μᾶλλον δὲ ἐπεὶ ἐν σώματι εἶ, καὶ ἔτι ὁδηγεῖς ἡμᾶς καὶ προβαίνεις πάντων ἡμῶν καὶ ἀνέβης εἰς τὸ ἄκρον τῆς θείας τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακος· τέλος δὲ ταύτης ἡ θεία καὶ τελεία ἀγάπη (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 246v; edition in Venetskov 2020, 182).

In conclusion, Mount Sinai emerges in the *Ladder* as a multilayered and profoundly rich symbol of asceticism and spirituality. The mountain is less the dominant metaphor of the thirty discourses than the figure through which Raithou and later scribes located the work: law from Sinai, path from earth to heaven, penitential rock, and finally the book itself.

The mountain is presented as the biblical site of Moses' tablets of the Law; John Climacus is reinterpreted as the new Moses delivering spiritual tablets for monastic guidance. It is also the mountain-ladder that bridges earth and heaven, rendered in the schematic representations of the *Tabula retrograda*. Finally, it unfolds through a series of allegorical heights – from Sinai to Jerusalem, then to the Mount of Olives, and ultimately to the 'holy mountain' as an intelligible space of ascetic practice. In this final transformation, the mountain ceases to be a geographical location and becomes the living guide of the monastic tradition embodied in the *Ladder* of virtues itself.

Through the paratexts added at Raithou, the manuscript imagery of the *Tabula retrograda*, the *Canon* miniatures, and the closing sequence of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, the physical and biblical mountain of Sinai ceases to be merely the place where the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* was written and becomes the form of the book itself – tablets, ladder, and ascent from Horeb to the holy mountain of the virtues – and thus into the supreme paradigm of the ascetic tradition.

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

Antonio Rigo
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

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.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Mount Athos as a Holy Mountain. – 3 Mount Athos as a *Locus Amoenus* and Dwelling Place of Holy Monks. – 4 The Holy Mountain as the Virgin's Legacy: From the *Life* of Peter the Athonite to the End of the Fourteenth Century. – 5 The Text of the *Patria of Mount Athos* and Its Legacy. – 6 Conclusion.

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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 ἔγειτεν 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 βορρᾶν 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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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

Diana Atanasova
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria

Ivan Biliarsky
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

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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Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
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The Admired Mountain
The Sinai Theophany as a Visual Paradigm of Sacred Space in Late Byzantine Ohrid

Andrei Dumitrescu
Stanford University, USA

Abstract This study examines the earliest known Byzantine mural depicting Moses' encounter with the burning bush on Mount Sinai as a typological vision of the Virgin Mary. Painted by the Astrapas workshop at the Peribleptos church in Ohrid (ca. 1294-95), the fresco adapts an older schema articulated as a titular image of the ancient Sinai monastery. The Peribleptos murals, however, detach this theme from its initial localism and integrate it into a narrative program structured around the spatial mirroring of Old and New Testament scenes. The locus of the holy mountain, therefore, becomes a visual paradigm of sacred space as the material site of God's manifestation.

Keywords Late Byzantine murals. Astrapas. Theotokos. The burning bush. Painting and rhetoric.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Emplaced Sacredness: From *Locus Sanctus* to the *Locus* of the Incarnation. – 3 Mirroring Mountains: Sinai and Sion as Topographical Poles of Sacred History. – 4 Chiastic Paths: The Reversed Spatial Narrative of the Holy Mountains.

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1 Introduction

In the late thirteenth-century church of the Mother of God Peribleptos (the Admired) in Ohrid, North Macedonia, the tympanum surmounting the doorway on the west wall of the narthex bears an elaborate depiction of Moses' theophanies on Mount Sinai **[fig. 1a-b]**.[1] The composition belongs to a sophisticated mural program painted in ca. 1294-95 by the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios from Thessalonike.[2] Their patron, Progonos Sgouros, was a high-ranking Byzantine military commander of Albanian origins, closely associated with Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (r. 1282-1328).[3] The Sgouroi, or Skuraj, seem to have been involved in the tensions between the Palaiologoi and King Charles I of Anjou (r. 1266-85) during the latter's campaign in Albania.[4] Progonos may have exercised political influence in the region surrounding Ohrid (Byzantine Achris) and possibly held land there, although the extent of his possessions remains uncertain. Yet, his presence in this region must have been

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1 Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 68-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 50.

2 On the painters, who inscribed their names and initials in several spots within the naos, see Miljković-Pepek 1967, especially 43-51; Todić 1999, 227-62; Marković 2010; Drpić 2013; Vapheiades 2019; Kostić 2023. The church's iconographic program and its Greek inscriptions are inventoried by Marković 2011. Schroeder 2012 provides a more focused analysis of the narthex frescoes, while Rossi 2024, 256-70 reassesses the narrative imagery within the naos, centering on the cycle of Christ's miracles.

3 The Peribleptos mural program emphasizes Sgouros' Albanian background and his connection with ancient Dyrrachion (Durrës) by including the figure of the local martyr Asteios in the diaconicon; see Grozdanov 2001, 85-6; Christidou 2014, 166. On the magnate's ancestry and relationship with Andronikos II, see Zarov 2007, 51-3.

4 Zarov 2007, 53-6; see Fine 1987, 170, 184-94, and Abulafia 1997, 62-6 for the context of the Neapolitan Angevin expansion into the Balkans.

under King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282-1321).[5] The construction of the Peribleptos church embodies Sgouros' authority and prestige within Ohrid. Serving as the *katholikon* of an urban monastery, the building was designed as a domed structure with a cross-in-square naos, a tripartite sanctuary at the east end, and a narthex toward the west **[fig. 2]**.[6] This narrow vestibule comprises three bays, whose vaults and tympana provide an architectural framework for the fresco program devised by Michael and Eutychios, perhaps in collaboration with the monastery's clergy.[7]

Situated in the chamber's central compartment, which is distinctively covered by a domical vault, the Sinai fresco occupies a key position within the economy of the sacred space. Its iconography synthesizes the biblical episodes of Moses' encounter with the burning bush and the transmission of the Law recounted in Exodus 3 and 24-33, respectively. The two episodes are identified by Greek inscriptions written in elegant majuscules: "The flaming bush (*batos*)" and "The Prophet Moses receiving the God-written tablets".[8] The Old Testament story is visualized as a continuous narrative winding clockwise around an arched window, whose sill marks the painting's ground level as a horizontal axis. This imaginary line divides the composition's terrain into two superimposed compartments deployed as topographical containers of the Moses scenes. The episodes' sequence unravels along a stony path ascending from the valley beneath the holy mountain onto its summit.

In the lower part of the tympanum, at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses appears before the shrub that burns with flaming fire without being consumed.[9] Clad in a purple-gray himation, the prophet is shown twice. First, in the far-right corner, Moses' standing figure heeds the divine voice calling him from the bush depicted across the valley, on the left side of the window. The prophet raises his hands in a gesture of awe, while directing his gaze toward the still distant shrub.[10] In his second

5 On Byzantine-Serbian relations in the late thirteenth century, see Fine 1987, 219-20.

6 Ćurčić 2010, 571-2.

7 Ćurčić 2010, 571-2. In its present form, showcased by the ground plan included in this study **[fig. 2]**, the original naos-narthex compound is framed by a mid-fourteenth-century U-shaped ambulatory.

8 In original: ἡ κατάφλεκτο(ς) βάτο(ς) and ὁ προφ(ή)τ(η)ς μουσῆς δεχόμενος τ(ὰς) θεογράφ(ους) πλάκας. Marković 2011 omits these *tituli*. Unless otherwise mentioned, all transcriptions and translations are mine.

9 καὶ ὁρᾷ ὅτι ὁ βάτος καίεται πυρί, ὁ δὲ βάτος οὐ κατεκαίετο (and he saw that the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not burning up). All quotes from the Old Testament follow the Septuagint edition of Rahlfs [1935] 1971 and the translation of Pietersma, Wright 2009 sometimes with minimal contextual adjustments.

10 On the role of Moses' gesture to call attention to the wondrous sight before him, see Crostini 2026, 9-11.

narrative iteration, Moses draws closer to the bush but ultimately stops as if hearing God's admonition: "Do not come near here! Loose the sandal from your feet! For the place (*topos*) on which you are standing is holy ground (*gē hagia*)!" (Ex 3,5).[11] The once towering prophet is now crouching in fear beneath the window's frame. With a careful movement, he unties his leather footwear. His eyes are fully absorbed by this action as if avoiding the astounding sight that unfolds before him.

The painters placed the miraculous thornbush just a few steps ahead, granting it gargantuan dimensions. The oversized shrub rises in an impressive upward sweep, which mirrors Mount Sinai's conical silhouette almost like a vegetal double. Set ablaze with rippling tongues of fire, the bush's dense foliage follows the lunette's curve, leaning toward Moses to reveal its mystery. In accordance with the Exodus narrative, an "angel of the Lord" emerges from the incandescent branches, his hand stretched toward the prophet in the customary gesture of speech.[12] In the biblical story, the messenger announces God's coming on earth for the liberation of the enslaved people of Israel.[13] The Ohrid fresco, however, departs from a literal visualization of the scriptures, leaning into typology.[14] More precisely, the composition portrays the angel not only as a divine mouthpiece foretelling the historical deliverance of the elect nation, but also as a mediator of a higher vision announcing the salvation of the entire human race through the future advent of Christ. Beneath the celestial messenger, the bush's leaves enshrine an image of the Virgin Mary. Though already used on twelfth- and thirteenth-century painted panels from Mount Sinai and the Holy Land, this iconographic

11 Μὴ ἐγγίσῃς ὧδε· λῦσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα ἐκ τῶν ποδῶν σου· ὁ γὰρ τόπος, ἐν ᾧ σὺ ἕστηκας, γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν.

12 ὤφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φλογὶ πυρὸς ἐκ τοῦ βάτου (Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame; Ex 3,2). On hand gestures as pictorial speech acts, see Barasch 1987, 15-39; Betancourt 2021, 39.

13 εἶπεν δὲ κύριος πρὸς Μωυσῆν Ἰδὼν εἶδον τὴν κάκωσιν τοῦ λαοῦ μου τοῦ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τῆς κραυγῆς αὐτῶν ἀκήκοα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐργοδιωκτῶν· οἶδα γὰρ τὴν ὀδύνην αὐτῶν καὶ κατέβην ἐξελέσθαι αὐτοὺς ἐκ χειρὸς Αἰγυπτίων καὶ ἐξαγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἐκείνης καὶ εἰσαγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς γῆν ἀγαθὴν καὶ πολλήν, εἰς γῆν ῥέουσαν γάλα καὶ μέλι (The Lord said to Moses, 'When I looked, I saw the affliction of my people in Egypt and I heard their cry on account of the taskmasters. For I know their pain. And I came down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey; Ex 3,7-8). The Old Testament text does not make a clear distinction between the Lord and the messenger acting as his voice. On the ambiguous identity of the "angel of the Lord", see Barker 1992.

14 Though only coined in nineteenth-century scholarship, the conventional term 'typology' describes a much older Christian exegetical strategy, which identifies persons, objects, and events from the Old Testament as *typoi* (imprints) or *figurae* of the New Testament; see Young 1997, 186-214; Bucur 2019, 260-75 with references to previous literature.

formula has no known precedents in the earlier repertoire of wall paintings from the Byzantine Empire.[15]

Mary's insert as an anachronic object of Moses' vision lends pictorial substance to an older exegetical tradition. Late antique and Byzantine theologians saw the Sinai shrub as a foreshadowing of the Virgin's role in the Incarnation.[16] Like wooden branches burning without being consumed, her human womb contained the spiritual fire of the Logos, the co-eternal Word of God, without being harmed by his power.[17] Moreover, just as the bush sustained the heavenly flames but suffered no material alteration, Mary conceived and gave birth to the incarnate Lord without breaking the bodily seals of her virginity. The notions of God's paradoxical containment and corporeal revelation receive special emphasis in the Peribleptos mural **[fig. 3]**. Wearing the golden vestment of celestial majesty, a diminished figure of the infant Christ nestles within his mother's dark purple maphorion. Like a ray of light shining through a tree's leafage, the divine-human child extends his radiant arm from her bosom toward Moses. The Savior's small hand performs a conventional gesture of blessing and speech, providing a literal rendition of the Logos, God's utterance addressing the prophet from the bush. The image's aural dimension becomes even more conspicuous as Moses looks downward, averting his gaze from the luminous sight, while angling his uncovered ear to hear the Lord's voice.

As the narrative circles back to the right side of the window, Christ's outreaching gesture within the shrub finds a visual parallel in the synthetic depiction of God's manifestation on the mountain's summit **[fig. 4]**. In the upper register of the tympanum, the Lord's mighty hand stretches down from an arc of heaven, offering Moses the stone tablets inscribed with a pseudo-Hebrew text. The prophet appears in a third narrative instantiation, standing on the craggy peak of Sinai, his hands ritually covered in the himation. In contrast to the burning bush, the tablets display no Marian figure. Nevertheless, an imaginary diagonal unites them with the Virgin's

15 Der Nersessian 1975, 336-7. The episode's earlier Byzantine renditions offer a more literal illustration of Moses' scriptural interaction with the bush and the angel. A double vignette from an eleventh-century *Octateuch* likely produced in Constantinople (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.gr.746, pt. 1, f. 157r) provides an eloquent comparison in this respect; see Weitzmann, Bernabò 1999, 1: 148-9; 2: fig. 613; a digital facsimile is available at `https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.746.pt.1`. The miniature simply shows Moses encountering the burning bush and then untying his sandals while an angel voices God's plan for the liberation of the enslaved Israelites. Though employing a similar narrative sequence in a condensed form, the Peribleptos composition does not stick to the historical surface of the Exodus tale and links it to the New Testament.

16 Grillmeier 1995, 39-40. A more detailed analysis of this exegetical tradition is provided below.

17 Dennis 2023, 132-9.

apparition within the shrub, suggesting a typological connection. Moreover, the tablets' materiality, which indexes the emblematic red granite of Mount Sinai, actualizes the typological metaphor of Mary's flesh inscribed with the divine Logos by the Holy Spirit – the Father's finger **[fig. 5]**.[18]

In fact, the joint representations of the burning bush epiphany and the reception of the Law are integrated into a broader cycle of prophetic visions.[19] Building on patristic exegesis, these compositions depict Old Testament epiphanies as *typoi* or proleptic imprints of Mary's role as the vessel of Christ's divinity and the instrument of his Incarnation.[20] Apart from the Moses composition above the entrance, six other scenes, comprehensively examined in previous scholarship, are featured on the tympana that crown the walls of the narthex's lateral bays **[figs 6-7]**.[21] Their selection echoes the Old Testament pericopes read at the vespers of great festivals of the Theotokos.[22] The left-hand-side compartment displays Jacob's dream of the ladder and his fight with the angel (west),[23] alongside King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the stone cut from a mountain, which crushes the idol personifying his empire (north),[24] and a depiction of Moses and Aaron at the Tabernacle (east).[25] The right-hand bay comprises King Solomon's bed surrounded by 60 armed warriors (west),[26] the allegorical image of Wisdom's banquet before her newly built house (south),[27] and a composite representation of the Heavenly Temple featuring Ezekiel before the sealed door and Isaiah receiving the blazing coal from the seraphim (east).[28] In all these murals, the objects, buildings, and landscape elements foreshadowing the Incarnation bear medallions enclosing the Virgin's bust effigy. Despite its spatial prominence and iconographic complexity, little attention has been paid to the portrayal of Moses' two theophanies at Sinai. At

18 On the connection between Moses' tablets, the red Sinai granite, and the Virgin, as it was imagined in the late medieval Holy Land, see Rachman-Schrire 2015.

19 Marković 2011, 131.

20 On the theological and poetic background of this interpretive stance, see Cunningham 2004; 2021, especially 141-75.

21 For an overview of Marian *typoi* in Palaiologan painting, see Studer Karlen 2018.

22 Todić 1999, 106. Engberg 1967 argues this in the case of the early fourteenth-century Old Testament cycle at the Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii) in Constantinople.

23 Gen 28,10-15 and 32,24-30; see Miljković-Pepek 1967, 51.

24 Dan 2,31-3; see Grozdanov 2012.

25 Miljković-Pepek 1967, 51.

26 Song of Songs 3,7; see Der Nersessian 1963, 80-1; Xyngopoulos 1963.

27 Prov. 9,1; see Meyendorff 1959, especially 270-2, fig. 7; 1987, especially 394. Radojčić 1975, Willson 2020, and Brzozowska 2024 discuss the theme's later Palaiologan and Post-Byzantine iterations.

28 Ezek 44 and Isa 6,6-7; see Babić 1968, Negrău 2024.

an immediate level, my paper seeks to fill this lacuna. More broadly, however, it demonstrates the image's pivotal role within the mural program of the Peribleptos church and relates it to wider modes of conceptualizing sacred space that emerged from a dialogue between Palaiologan Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean *loca sancta*.

The scene's symbolic prominence is hinted at by its placement within the central bay of the narthex, in an area reserved for the dedicatory inscription.[29] On the door's lintel, beneath the Moses composition, an elaborate Greek text commemorates the church's foundation by Progonos Sgouros. The inscription runs as follows:

> This divine and all-revered temple of our Most Pure (*panyperagnou*) Queen Bearer of God (*Theotokou*) the Admired (*Peribleptou*) was raised with the effort and expense of Lord Progonos Sgouros, the great hetaeriach, and [with those] of his spouse, and of the son-in-law (*gambrou*) [most likely still referring to Progonos] of our mightiest and holy sole-ruling emperor (*autokratoros basileōs*), Lady Eudokia, during the reign of the Most Pious Emperor and Sole-ruler of the Romans Andronikos Palaiologos and of Eirene, the Most Pious *Augousta*, during the tenure of Makarios, the most holy archbishop of Justiniana Prima [i.e., Ohrid] and of all Bulgaria in the year [of the world] 6803 [i.e., AD 1294/95], in the indiction 8.[30]

It is plain that through the juxtaposition with this votive epigraph, the program's designers tried to incorporate the representation of the Sinai theophanies into a symbolic rhetoric of the foundation act. What has to be clarified, though, are the reasons that motivated this iconographic choice. Why would a late thirteenth-century Balkan program interweave the story of the prophet's encounters with God on the holy mountain into the symbolic narrative of the church's foundation? And more importantly, to what effects? The answers I shall advance here lie in the broader use of the Sinai narrative in

29 On the position, structure, and function of such epigraphs in Palaiologan foundations, see Adashinskaya 2018, 317-62; especially 334 on the example quoted here.

30 ἀνηγέρθη ὁ θεῖος καὶ πάνσεπτος ναὸς οὗτος πανυπεράγνου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν θεοτόκου τῆς περιβλέπτου διὰ συνδρομῆς καὶ ἐξόδου κῦρ Προγόνου τοῦ Σγουροῦ μεγάλου ἑταιρειάρχου καὶ τῆς συζύγου αὐτοῦ κυρᾶς Εὐδοκίας καί γαμβροῦ τοῦ κρατίστου καὶ ἁγίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος βασιλέως ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ εὐσεβεστάτου βασιλέως καὶ αὐτοκράτορος Ρωμαίων Ἀνδόνικου τοῦ Παλαιολόγου καὶ Εἰρήνης τῆς εὐσεβεστάτης αὐγούστης ἀρχιερατεύοντος δὲ Μακαρίου τοῦ παναγιοτάτου ἀρχιεπισκόπου τῆς πρώτης Ἰουστινιανῆς καὶ πάσης Βουλγαρίας ἐτους ,ϛωγ, ἰνδ. η′. The inscription was published by several scholars, among whom Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 23. Marković 2011, 133 amends their transcription and provides a survey of the epigraph's bibliography. Zarov 2007, 49-50; 2024 comments on the historical background of Sgouros' relationship with the emperor and analyzes the inscription's discovery and reception by modern scholars.

shaping a Christian notion of sacred space as a ritually demarcated precinct where God makes himself present in the material realm.

In Exodus 3,5, the Lord's thundering voice declares the mountainous site of the Sinai shrub as a "holy ground" separated from profane existence by a set of ritual restrictions. To step on it, Moses must untie the sandals from his feet. Since the patristic age, Christian exegetes have understood these leather-made items as symbols of impure matter, sin, and mortality, all of which had to be removed in God's presence.[31] The prophet's action is conspicuously displayed in the Ohrid fresco.[32] His crooked figure surmounts both the founder's inscription and the physical threshold that marks an ontological rupture between the consecrated ground and the outside world.[33] The ceremonial removal of the prophet's footwear sets the symbolic boundaries of the place or *topos* where the Lord reveals himself on earth.[34] Veronica Della Dora notes that, in biblical and patristic language, the term *topos* designates the material or conceptual locus where divinity renders itself perceptible and allows humans to encounter it.[35] In the Ohrid mural, this concept bodies forth in the typological depiction of the Mother of God within the burning bush.[36] It is her figure that physically envelops the radiant image of Christ, presenting it both to Moses' prophetic gaze and to the viewers standing before the tympanum.

Within the foundation rhetoric prompted by the prominent pairing of the Sinai scenes with the dedicatory inscription, the visualization of Mary as a human container of divinity provides an iconic paradigm for the church's status as a receptacle of Christ's salvific presence. In this logic, the holy mountain of Sinai, the burning bush, and the church

31 Dulaey 1992; Boulnois 2015.

32 Late antique depictions of the Sinai scene assign a secondary position to the bush itself, focusing on Moses' ritual gesture; see Dulaey 1992, 99.

33 My analysis takes inspiration from Eliade's classical conception of sacred space; see Eliade 1959, 20-9. Although this model has been criticized for its universalizing and insufficiently historicized character (e.g., Smith 1987), Eliade 1959, 20 takes direct inspiration from Moses' encounter with the burning bush. While remaining cautious about applying his framework indiscriminately to different historical periods and cultural contexts, I find it a useful heuristic instrument for approaching the Late Byzantine reception of the burning bush. For a more historically grounded account of Christian attitudes toward holy places, see Markus 1994, 257-71. On thresholds, liminality, and Byzantine and Western medieval sacred spaces, see Gerstel 2006; Doležalová, Foletti 2019.

34 Eliade 1959, 20.

35 Della Dora 2016, especially 33-60 on the concept of *topos*, and 147-75 on its inflection in the form of holy mountains. Pentcheva 2024 provides an analysis of Della Dora's ideas in the context of eleventh-century mosaics of the Hosios Loukas Monastery in Steiris, Greece.

36 On the Incarnation as the process through which divinity inhabits the earthly realm, that is, 'takes place', see Della Dora 2016, 48-9.

itself are concomitantly portrayed as providential sites that actualize the mystery of the Savior's coming in flesh. My paper unpacks the typological use of the burning bush and Mount Sinai as a means to transform the Virgin's figure into a corporeal model of containing divine presence. This schema, I contend, had a paradigmatic value for the symbolic articulation of sacred space. Sgouros' foundation in Ohrid showcases the earliest known Byzantine mural depicting Mary within the Sinai theophany.[37] Although this theme had a rapid dissemination across the early fourteenth-century Balkans, the pictorial configuration it engendered at the Peribleptos remains unique.[38] Accordingly, my analysis focuses on this example, leaving the theme's subsequent development for future research. However, to account for the image's function within the Ohrid program, it is necessary to uncover the circumstances of its formation and adoption into the Palaiologan repertoire. The history of this pictorial theme, which has not been written in a systematic manner so far, leads us beyond the empire's borders.[39] Its development points to a series of largely uncharted connections between the Late Byzantine Empire and the eastern regions of the Mediterranean basin, where Greek, Arabic, Latin, and Armenian Christians cohabited within the orbit of the so-called crusader states.[40]

This study picks up the trail of the Marian iconography of the burning bush along the Levantine coast, aiming to reach a better understanding of its assimilation and reinterpretation in the

37 At this point, a terminological clarification is required. I am using a narrow definition of 'Byzantine' to designate visual artifacts engendered by workshop traditions and spiritual trends from Constantinople, Thessalonike, and other Greek-speaking centers within the territories of the Eastern Roman polity.

38 Throughout the first decades of the fourteenth century, the Marian rendition of the burning bush entered the customary repertoire of wall paintings associated both with the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios and with other contemporaneous elite artisans. In Thessalonike, where the Ohrid masters hailed from, the scene is featured within the south compartments of the ambulatories at Dodeka Apostoloi (ca. 1310-14 or 1320s) and Hagios Nikolaos Orphanos (ca. 1310-20); see Tsigaridas 2021, 305, 386-7; Tsigaridas, Loverdou-Tsigarida 2023, 151-5; Tsitouridou 1986, 157-9; and Todić 1999, 106, 349. During the same period, the theme was also assimilated into the sanctuary program of the Protaton church in Karyes, Mount Athos (ca. 1300), and the chapel attached to the south of the bema in the *katholikon* of Gračanica Monastery in Kosovo (ca. 1320-21); see Studer Karlen 2018, 124; Tsigaridas 2003, 32-3; Todić 1999, 106, 152, 254, 334. Other fresco ensembles display it in funerary spaces, such as the *parekklesion* at the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (Istanbul) and the arcosolium of Archbishop Danilo II (in office 1324-37) in the Hodegetria church at the Peć Patriarchate, Kosovo; see Der Nersessian 1975, 336-7; Fogliadini 2022.

39 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, especially 15-19; Collins 2006, 95-118 provide preliminary surveys of this theme in Byzantine and Orthodox iconography more broadly. On the use of analogous images in the late medieval and early modern West, see Harris 1938.

40 On the notion of 'crusader' states, its limitations, and use in historiography, see Buck 2020 with an evaluation of previous scholarship.

Palaiologan context. My investigation begins amidst the rocky peaks believed to have witnessed Moses' theophanies in biblical times. Its first section addresses the image's emergence within the milieu of the monastery at Mount Sinai in present-day northern Egypt, an ancient shrine originally dedicated to the Mother of God and later to St. Catherine of Alexandria. Then, it formulates a tentative scenario regarding the theme's Mediterranean dissemination through icons and manuscripts produced in the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century crusader milieu. Although this essay adopts a periegetic layout, its purpose is not to produce an exhaustive survey of Marian representations of the burning bush scene. Rather, it attempts to draw a trans-regional constellation of key examples reflecting the image's initial articulation within the Eastern Christian milieu and its subsequent crusader and Byzantine use.

The depiction of the Virgin within the miraculous shrub appeared within a broader category of painted images distilling the topography and epiphanic aura of the sacred mountain. Kurt Weitzmann, Robin Cormack, Kristen M. Collins, Jas' Elsner, Gerhard Wolf, and Bissera V. Pentcheva have extensively discussed the importance of such site-inspired images for building Sinai's identity as a *locus sanctus*.[41] However, the precise role of Marian iconography as part of this visual phenomenon demands further exploration. Expanding on previous studies, particularly that of Collins, I show that the Virgin's portrayal within the *batos* was articulated as a titular image of the Sinai Monastery, foregrounding the site's centrality within the history of salvation.[42] Despite its initial embeddedness into the Sinaitic landscape, the image of Mary within the burning bush, as well as the spatial model of the theophanic mountain, acquired a more universal function, being adopted into wall paintings from the Palaiologan Empire.

This line of thought will bring me once again to the Ohrid mural, whose designers reshaped the *locus sanctus* model in accordance with their site's specificities and spiritual expectations. The second and third sections, therefore, show how the Peribleptos program turns the mountain of theophany into a conceptual pattern underlying the selection and spatial arrangement of narrative scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The painters Michael and Eutychios, likely directed by their commissioners and the monastery's clergy, inserted the Sinai composition into a broader network of images visualizing biblical episodes believed to have occurred on sacred summits. Thus, the notion of holy mountain becomes a principle of iconographic association, being abstracted into what Jérôme

41 Weitzmann 1982; Cormack 2000; Collins 2006; Elsner, Wolf 2010; Pentcheva 2014-15.

42 Collins 2006, 99, 106-12.

Baschet defines as a 'hypertheme' and Alexei Lidov as an 'image-paradigm'.[43] While approaching such systems of pictorial linkages from different theoretical standpoints, both scholars emphasize the overarching patterns that tie together images traditionally regarded as independent.[44] In the Peribleptos frescoes, the mountain *topos* generates such an associative node prompting a complex pictorial reflection on God's manifestation in space and time.

From the west tympanum of the narthex, the twofold Moses scene mirrors across the architectural space the joint depictions of the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Dormition (*Koimēsis*) of the Mother of God, displayed on the equivalent spot within the naos.[45] Medieval tradition placed both these events, which conclude the Byzantine cycle of great festivals, on a Mount Sion in Jerusalem. The Ohrid program, I argue, exploits this topographical underpinning of Pentecost and the Virgin's Dormition to build a typological parallel between Sinai and Sion as landmarks of the historical unfolding of God's plan. Thus, the representation of the burning bush as a proleptic vision of the Savior's Incarnation participates in a spatialized mechanism of depicting and interpreting the concatenation of biblical events. The two holy mountains appear as sites where human history takes major turns toward the divine, first through the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant and later, through the foundation of the Christian Church. Consequently, from a localized model of circumscribing divine presence in space, the notion of holy mountain is sublimated into a general device for conceptualizing the Lord's manifestation in time. Michael and Eutychios picture this development by inserting the Sinai and Sion scenes into a system of spatial correspondences that emphasizes their pivotal position within the redemption narrative. The episodes mirror each other in pairs, within a complex geometrical structure that eschews any expectation for a linear sequence. The images' spatial association follows a chiastic schema inspired by Ancient Greek poetry and rhetorical thought. This crosswise arrangement, I suggest, offers an almost diagrammatic means of visualizing the working of providence, rendering perceptible the

43 Baschet 2008, 274-9; Lidov 2009a, 291-345; 2009b with a synthetic view of his previous studies.

44 I have investigated the articulation of such relational networks in the monumental programs of several thirteenth- through late fifteenth-century monastic churches from Southeastern Europe; see Dumitrescu 2022; 2025. My work aligns itself with other recent studies: Pentcheva 2024; 2027 discusses an analogous phenomenon in the eleventh-century *katholikon* of Hosios Loukas, focusing on the role of chanted hymns as an interpretive binder of mosaic compositions; Gerstel 2019 and Schroeder 2026 propose cognate directions for understanding the décor of Late Byzantine churches.

45 Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 69-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 48-9.

hidden correspondences through which the divine mind orders the economy of salvation.

2 Emplaced Sacredness: From *Locus Sanctus* to the *Locus* of the Incarnation

The depiction of Moses witnessing the anachronic apparition of the Mother of God within the burning bush emerged about a hundred years before Michael Astrapas and Eutychios painted the west tympanum in the Peribleptos narthex.[46] Its origins point to the environment of the Virgin's Monastery on Mount Sinai. Since late antiquity, this shrine had housed the miraculous shrub from which Moses heard the Lord's calling.[47] Though it only acquired a figural form during the later Middle Ages, the typological link between the burning bush and the Mother of God had a major role in shaping the perception of the holy mountain as a site of theophany and a material container of divine presence. In what follows, I show how this idea took shape within the exegetical thought of the Greek Church Fathers and was subsequently embedded into the sacral layout of the Sinai landscape. The overlaying of such theological views onto the site's topography would eventually give rise to an image of Moses' vision of the Mother of God within the burning bush. This emblematic representation not only encapsulated Mount Sinai's scriptural aura prompted by its connection with the Exodus narrative but also emphasized the mountain's pivotal position within a broader Christian narrative of human redemption.

To understand this process, one must start with a closer look into the Marian interpretation of the Sinai topography and its patristic background. In his mid-sixth-century account of imperial building campaigns, Procopius of Caesarea mentions that Justinian I (r. 527-65) built an imposing monastery of the Theotokos at the foot of Mount Sinai, on whose pinnacle Moses had received the divine Law.[48] Procopius does not explicitly connect the shrine's location with the epiphany of the burning bush. However, his text likely assumes a topographical link as self-evident. Late antique pilgrim accounts, such as the fourth-century Latin *Itinerary* of Egeria, confirm this subsistent interpretation. In the winter of 383-84, Egeria and her companions found the vegetal relic of the burning bush "at the head of the valley" beneath the "mountain of God".[49] The shrub grew

46 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, 15-19; Collins 2006, 95-118.

47 For a diachronic approach to the monastery's spiritual significance, see Nelson 2006.

48 Proc. *Aed*. V. 8, ed. Dewing, Downey 1954.

49 *Itinerarium Egeriae* II.1, IV.6-8, ed. Prinz 1960. The translation follows Wilkinson 1999.

near an older monastic complex, which included a church, cells, and a garden. Within its precinct, the pilgrims read "the appropriate passage from the Book of Moses", that is, Exodus 3, seeking to map the scriptural events onto the surrounding terrain.[50]

It was this narrativized topography that Justinian's new foundation sought to exploit by placing the Virgin's monastery on the site where pilgrims desired to relive the Moses story. His endeavor goes beyond the textual commemoration of scripture, using ecclesiastical architecture and Marian devotion as a way to project Christian exegesis onto the Old Testament landscape. The monastery's dedication to the Mother of God speaks to an established theological tradition identifying the burning bush as a foreshadowing of the Incarnation. Beginning with Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), in his fourth-century allegorical *Life of Moses* (BHG 2278), Christian commentators interpreted this theophanic episode as a prefiguration of Mary's virginal motherhood: "From this, [Gregory writes,] we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: the light of divinity which, through birth, shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth".[51]

This reading gained further doctrinal weight in the fifth-century Christological debates elicited by Mary's veneration under the epithet Theotokos or 'Bearer of God'.[52] The Virgin's Old Testament *typoi* were intensely mobilized by theologians who sought to counteract the term's opponents, namely, Archbishop Nestorius of Constantinople (in office 428-31) and his Antiochian acolytes. Like Gregory before him, Proclus of Constantinople (in office 434-46) evokes the thornbush that burned without being physically consumed as a symbol of the Virgin's paradoxical motherhood.[53] In the same period, Cyril of Alexandria (in office 412-44) expanded this metaphor's dogmatic scope, connecting it with the union of the Savior's divine and human natures in Mary's womb. In his treatise *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril writes that God revealed his capacity to assume "the limitation of humanity" by "depicting [or painting] (*zōgraphōn*) the manner of his Incarnation in types".[54] The Lord descended onto the bush in the form of fire. Yet, despite wood's highly ignitable nature, the celestial

50 *Itinerarium Egeriae* IV.6-8, V.8-10, ed. Prinz 1960.

51 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysii* II.21, ed. Daniélou 1955. For an English translation, see Malherbe, Ferguson 1978. Whenever possible, hagiographical works are accompanied by the numbers assigned by *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* (BHG); see Halkin 1957.

52 Grillmeier 1995, 39-40.

53 Proclus of Constantinople, *Homilia in Nativitatem Domini* 16-17, ed. Martin 1941; and *Laudatio de genitricis Mariae* VI.6, ed. Leroy 1967.

54 Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* 737, ed. De Durand 1964; transl. by McGuckin 1995.

flames did not consume the shrub's branches, thus, showing "how the divine nature of the Logos supported the limitations of humanity".[55] As a logical consequence of Cyril's demonstration, the instrument of the Incarnation – that is, the Virgin – became a sanctified receptacle that brought incompatible ontologies – fire and wood, divinity and humanity – into a mutually unaltering junction. It is noteworthy that, through the Greek verb *zōgrapheō*, Cyril presents the process through which God revealed this salvific miracle to Moses in terms of painting or pictorial representation. The analogy between prophetic vision and image-making played a decisive role in the later understanding of the burning bush *typos*.

After Nestorius' condemnation at the Council of Ephesus (431) and the subsequent Christological development at Chalcedon (451), the Marian reading of the Moses epiphany became a canonical reference in Byzantine homilies and hymnography.[56] Moreover, the Justinianic construction of the Virgin's Monastery at Sinai physically enshrined it into the biblical landscape. Despite this, Mary's typological association with the burning bush did not elicit a substantial figural tradition for many centuries to come.[57] The conceptual groundwork for this pictorial development, I believe, was laid during the eighth- and ninth-century debate around images. It was in this period that Greek-speaking writers from Syro-Palestine spearheaded the defense of figural imagery against its imperial detractors in Constantinople. One of these authors, John of Damascus (d. mid-eighth century), referred to the charismatic aura of the Sinai *locus sanctus* to ground the doctrine on icons.[58] This connection was all the more necessary since the main scriptural argument mobilized by the iconoclast party was the second commandment given to Moses on the holy mountain: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything" (Ex 20,4).[59] John composed ample treatises showing that the Mosaic interdiction did not apply to Christian images, whose

55 Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* 737, ed. De Durand 1964.

56 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, 11-15 offers a selection of key examples.

57 Der Nersessian 1975, 336. References to the Marian exegesis of the burning bush were sometimes featured in earlier medieval visual culture. For example, a seventh- or eighth-century mural at the Deir al-Surian monastery in the Nitrian Desert, Egypt, portrays the Virgin's Annunciation amid four prophets, including Moses. The latter holds a scroll inscribed with the Coptic translation of Ex 3,2; see Innemée 1995; Kessler 2023, 22. Yet, such cases are rather exceptional and generally coming from outside the Byzantine environment. There is no compelling evidence of a coherent iconographic tradition going back earlier than the twelfth century.

58 Without explicitly linking these writings to Sinai, Pentcheva 2014-15 emphasizes the site's role in formulating a particular definition of Christian icons.

59 Barber 2002, 54-9; Louth 2002, 200-1. On the negotiation of this Mosaic prohibition in Byzantine image-making, see Kessler 2000. Elsner, Wolf 2010, 62; Pentcheva 2014-15, 201-2 examine its implications for the Sinai shrine.

legitimacy stemmed from the mystery of the Incarnation and thus surpassed the Hebrew Law.[60] Unfortunately, even a brief review of his full conception would go beyond the limits of this paper.[61] Suffice it to say that, among other arguments, John emphasizes that Sinai was a holy place not because of its association with the ban on material imagery, but precisely because it had harbored God's visual manifestation within the burning bush. The theologian believed that the *batos* itself was or contained an image, and that the biblical site derived its sanctity from this image's capacity to catalyze the sacred and imprint it into space.

Thus, in his *Second Apology against Those Who Attack the Divine Icons*, John amasses scriptural evidence showing that the Lord himself has always operated through images. God created man "in his own image" and expressed his salvific plan through images, which took shape in the prophets' visions almost as immaterial depictions.[62] This idea had already been embraced in the writings of earlier Church Fathers, such as the above-quoted Christological treatise by Cyril of Alexandria. Yet, for Cyril, the equivalence between prophetic visions and (painted) images was primarily rhetorical, serving as a compelling simile for his understanding of biblical typology. John turns this analogy into a self-standing theological argument. His demonstration invokes the burning bush not only as a symbolic foreshadowing of the Incarnation, but as "an image (*eikōn*) of God's Mother" – in a sense, her original icon.[63] The epiphanic shrub, John maintains, concentrated the Lord's presence into a visible form, anticipating the Savior's revelation in flesh and by extension, in material icons. Thus, he argues, the image-bearing bush must have possessed an inherent sacredness, which manifested itself spatially. The surrounding site, that is, absorbed the vision's aura, becoming a *locus sanctus*. To demonstrate this idea, John emphasizes that God himself called holy the ground where the epiphanic image of his future Incarnation was revealed to Moses. By recognizing the holiness of the site housing the image, the Lord implicitly sanctioned the latter's status as a source of sanctity. The theologian sums up the argument with a rhetorical question: "If the ground on which the image of the Theotokos appeared to Moses is holy, how much holier will it be the image itself? For it is not merely holy, but I dare say, the Holy of

60 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.7-10, ed. Kotter 1975; translated by Anderson 1980. For further context, see Barber 2002, 70-2.

61 Barber 2002, 70-6; Louth 2002, 193-221 provide an analysis of his ideas and works.

62 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975, with comments by Louth 2002, 206-7.

63 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975.

Holies".[64] John emphasizes the image's ability to generate emplaced sacrality. Moses' iconicized vision of the Virgin turns Mount Sinai into "holy ground", a consecrated area similar to the later Temple in Jerusalem. In this spatial container of visual revelation, Mary's proleptic figure functions as an epicenter of sacredness, that is, the Holy of Holies. Therefore, one should not be surprised that the subsequent figural tradition turned this visionary depiction of Theotokos into a driving principle of the site's aura as a *locus sanctus*.

The interdependence between the Virgin's epiphanic image and the mountain's divinely proclaimed status as "holy ground" constituted, in my view, the main theological impetus for articulating the Marian iconography of the burning bush. As far as the surviving material leads us, this figural step was only taken in the crusader period. Collins has convincingly shown that the earliest preserved panels depicting Mary within the *batos* were made toward the end of the twelfth century and at the beginning of the thirteenth, which is to say, in the decades around the 1187 reconquest of Jerusalem by the Ayyubid Sultan Salah ad-Din (r. 1174-93).[65] Their emergence testifies to a spiritual and artistic network connecting Mount Sinai with other centers of the Holy Land, such as Jerusalem and Acre. At a conceptual level, however, these representations bespeak a broader desire to distill the sanctity of the holy mountain into a visually graspable form.[66] Such aspirations had long been nurtured by local monks and pilgrims.[67] Yet, it was only in the late twelfth century that the site's biblical charisma was decisively poured into the Virgin's figure. In doing so, these novel images did not necessarily illustrate John of Damascus' writings. Rather, they advanced a similar theological reasoning in a pictorial fashion. While John strove to ground the icon's sacredness into the indisputable charisma of a biblical site, our panels used the Virgin's likeness to affirm the mountain's status as a *locus sanctus* connected with the history of salvation. To understand why this happened, it is necessary to have a closer look into the extant visual evidence.

Among the oldest examples of Mary's portrayal within the Sinai shrub, there is a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century icon preserved in the collection of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in

64 Ἡ βάτος εἰκὼν ἦν τῆς θεομήτορος, καὶ μέλλοντι τῷ Μωσῇ ταύτῃ προσιέναι εἶπεν ὁ θεός· «Ὑπόλυσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα τῶν ποδῶν σου· ἡ γὰρ γῆ, ἐν ᾗ ἕστηκας, γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν.» Εἰ οὖν ἡ γῆ, ἐν ᾗ εἰκὼν τῆς θεοτόκου ὤφθη τῷ Μωσῇ, γῆ ἁγία ἐστί, πόσῳ μᾶλλον αὐτὴ ἡ εἰκών; Οὐ μόνον γὰρ ἁγία, ἀλλά, τολμῶ λέγειν, καὶ ἁγίων ἁγία (John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975).

65 Collins 2006, 106-8.

66 Pentcheva 2014-15, 196, 203-7 attributes a similar function to the light effects produced by the burnished gold haloes and 'whirling' discs on eleventh- and twelfth-century Sinai icons; for a specific example, see below.

67 Weitzmann 1974, especially 52-4; 1982, 21.

Jerusalem **[fig. 8]**.[68] The panel shows the Sinai shrub within a rocky valley, flanked by two peaks. Its dark branches seem to grow along the Virgin's bust-length figure. In the background, a gigantic flame bursts from the ground, encasing Mary's body in a mandorla-like shape. A gleaming red effigy of the infant Christ floats before his mother's chest, as if the supernatural fire had permeated her flesh being molded into iconic representation. Like in the later Ohrid fresco, "the angel of the Lord" calls Moses' attention to the vision. This time, however, he does not speak from the bush but flies into the composition from the left side. Collins interprets this alteration of the expected narrative setting as an allusion to the Virgin's Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel.[69] The Gospel scene is also referred to by what seems to be a wool skein depicted in Mary's right hand.[70] Upon witnessing this foreshadowing of Christ's Incarnation, Moses removes his sandals and then, in a second narrative iteration, approaches the shrub barefoot.

Apart from the novel typological iconography, the panel exhibits an uncommon attentiveness to the topography of Mount Sinai. As mentioned above, the Marian shrub stands in a rocky hollow between two mountains of different heights. This configuration mimics the real location of the Burning Bush Monastery, which is situated between two major peaks. Commonly known under the Arabic name Jebel Musa (i.e., Mount Moses), the lower one was believed to be the place where the prophet received the tablets of the Law.[71] The higher summit, however, had elicited a different narrative tradition by that time. According to legend, the beheaded body of the martyr Catherine of Alexandria was miraculously transported by angels onto the highest peak of Mount Sinai, which was thereby called Jebel Katrina (i.e., Mount St. Catherine). Her relics were later discovered by monks and brought to the monastery for veneration.[72] In the period when the Jerusalem panel was painted, Jebel Musa and Jebel Katrina were widely recognized as the major landmarks of the Sinai Monastery.[73] Their incorporation into the spatial setting of the burning bush scene allows us to include the icon into the larger

68 Collins 2006, 108. The chronological sequence of this panel and the examples discussed below can only be relative, since their dating is exclusively based on formal and iconographic examination.

69 Collins 2006, 108.

70 Collins 2006, 108. The current situation in the Middle East has prevented me from inspecting this panel directly. Moreover, all available photographs, including the picture published by Collins, are of a mediocre quality. Therefore, the identification and analysis of such minute details should be subject to further analysis.

71 Jacoby 2006, 79-80.

72 On St. Catherine's cult at Sinai, see Ševčenko 2006.

73 See Drandaki 2006, 493-4 for a comprehensive discussion of pilgrim accounts.

category of *loca sancta* images previously discussed by Weitzmann.[74] This group of representations produced within or for the Holy Land is characterized by a great investment in "very specific topographical details" meant to assist or simulate the experience of pilgrimage.[75] Therefore, it is safe to assume, in line with Weitzmann's reflections, that the panel's iconography spoke to a tradition from the shrine's spiritual, if not geographical sphere.

Further evidence in this sense is adduced by the ample corpus of icons currently in the collection of St. Catherine's Monastery.[76] Due to the lack of documents, the exact dating and provenance of these panels remain famously insecure. However, whether they were made at Sinai, brought by pilgrims, or sent as donations from abroad is a secondary matter to my argument. What is important to acknowledge is that their impressively coherent iconography reflects a broader elevation of the Virgin's image as the central expression of the site's sanctity, continuing John of Damascus' line of thought.[77] Compared to the Jerusalem example, these icons take a different approach to the Marian iconography of the burning bush. Instead of depicting a fully fleshed-out narrative scene, they provide an iconic synthesis of the Old Testament story.

Though it only reached its complete development around 1200, this formula was already outlined on a panel generally dated to the late eleventh- or the early twelfth century. The icon displays the enthroned Mother of God within an elaborate frame composed of twelve rectangular compartments **[fig. 9]**.[78] These marginal vignettes are mainly inhabited by prophets holding unfolded scrolls inscribed with Greek texts referring to the Virgin's scriptural *typoi*. Amidst them, on Mary's right-hand side, Moses stands before a depiction of the burning bush, which rises atop a minute rendition of the holy mountain. His scroll quotes Exodus 3,3: "When I pass by (*parelthōn*), I will look at this great sight (*to horama to mega touto*)".[79] Although the flaming shrub does not contain a Marian effigy, Moses' gaze moves past it – in keeping with the sense of the Greek verb *parerchomai* – and

74 Weitzmann 1974; 1982.

75 Weitzmann 1982, 21.

76 Collins 2006, 100-4.

77 Elsner, Wolf 2010 foreground the strong iconographic localism of the Sinai panels, which undergirds their formal diversity.

78 Mouriki 1990, 105; Belting 1994, 290; Weyl Carr 1994; Collins 2006, 108.

79 παρελθὼν ὄψομαι τὸ ὅραμα τὸ μέγα τοῦτο; the inscription was published by Mouriki 1990, 385 fn. 27 alongside the texts written on the scrolls of the other characters.

rests upon the central portrayal of the Mother of God.[80] The *batos*, therefore, is not looked at but looked through. It serves as a visionary channel through which the prophet contemplates the great *horama*, that is, the comparatively gigantic Virgin holding the incarnate God. While no sources attest to the panel's place of origin and makers, who may have been linked to Constantinople, Doula Mouriki and Annemarie Weyl Carr suggest that it was commissioned for the Sinai community.[81] Pentcheva brings further arguments in this sense, proposing that the characters' burnished haloes captured the incandescent appearance of the rocks that witnessed the Lord's manifestation before Moses.[82]

Several thirteenth-century Sinai panels expand on the prophet's pairing with the Virgin within a pictorial setting alluding to the Exodus 3 episode. On them, Mary's figure and the burning bush are not only juxtaposed, but conflated, similar to the abovementioned Jerusalem depiction and the later Ohrid mural. One of these icons, for instance, shows the Theotokos carrying Christ alongside the martyr Catherine **[fig. 10]**. The incandescent branches of the bush creep like ivy upon the Virgin's body. At her feet, Moses' reduplicated figure appears in the customary iconographic schema associated with Exodus 3.[83] While this example maintains a series of narrative attributes, the vast majority of coeval Sinai icons limit themselves to a laconic depiction of Mary with no further elements save the divine child before her chest.

Nonetheless, as we can see on another early thirteenth-century panel depicting the Theotokos among saintly hermits, this otherwise generic representation is pinned to the spiritual landscape of Mount Sinai through the highly idiosyncratic *titulus M*(*ētē*)*r Th*(*eo*)*u <tēs> Batou* (The Mother of God of the <Burning> Bush) **[fig. 11]**.[84] The Sinaitic background of the bystanding saints – from left to right, Georgios, Neilos, Anastasios, and John Klimakos – strengthens the image's localism. By flanking the Virgin of the Burning Bush, the four Sinai hermits tie Moses' experience of contemplating the Lord's visible form to the spiritual practices of thirteenth-century

80 Belting 1994, 290 remarks that the dynamics of gazes is particularly important on this panel: for instance, the Virgin looks down toward the elder Symeon, recalling the narrative schema of Christ's Presentation in the Temple; see also Weyl Carr 1994, 247-8.

81 Mouriki 1990, 385 fn. 28; Weyl Carr 1994, 248. Belting 1994, 290 regards it as a Constantinopolitan product without elaborating on the original purpose of its commission. It is not unlikely that the panel was a Byzantine gift for the Sinai monastery; Drandaki 2006, 498-9; and Pentcheva 2014-15, 207-10 elaborate on the eleventh- and twelfth-century connections between the imperial capital and the holy mountain.

82 Pentcheva 2014-15, 204.

83 Nelson, Collins 2006, cat. no. 56.

84 Collins 2006, 101.

local monks. The icon's visionary dimension becomes particularly evident in the case of St. Anastasios, who stands on Mary's left side. Unlike the other fathers, whose poses are rigidly frontal, Anastasios turns his gaze to the small figure of Christ held by his mother. This discreet move might not have been haphazard. As a leader of the Sinai community in the seventh and early eighth centuries, Anastasios composed a homily on the Lord's Transfiguration or *Metamorphōsis* (August 6; BHG 1999), in which he presented the holy mountain as an ideal site of spiritual contemplation (*theōria*) directed at the visionary encounter with God.[85] Our panel alludes to this Sinaitic tradition presenting Anastasios as an exemplary portrayal of contemplative practices. However, in this new figural context, the monastery's ancient ideal of *theōria* was rearticulated around Mary, whose figure had become Sinai's spiritual core. It is her image that serves as the framework and medium for the vision of the Lord, which local ascetics sought to attain by emulating Moses.[86]

Elsner and Wolf connect the rise of the Virgin *tēs Batou* theme with a contemporaneous reconfiguration of the monastery's identity as a *locus sanctus* and a pilgrimage center.[87] In the early thirteenth century, the devotional emphasis of the Sinai shrine shifted from the sites of biblical events to the cult of St. Catherine. Her miracle-working body had been transferred to the sanctuary area of the main church sometime before 1214, when Abbot Symeon wrote a liturgical *typikon* attesting to its presence within the monastery's precinct.[88] The veneration of the virgin martyr spurred an immense popularity in the crusader period, particularly among Latin Christians.[89] The Virgin of the Burning Bush was likely meant to preserve and enhance the monastery's association with Moses' visionary experiences alongside the veneration of the martyr's bodily relics. The typological representation of Mary within the shrub provided a corporeal counterpart to St. Catherine's physical presence, accentuating the major role that Sinai played in the history of human salvation.[90] This refashioning responded to a growing importance of the devotion to

85 Anastasios of Sinai, Λόγος εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν μεταμόρφωσιν, ed. Guillou 1955; for an English translation, see Daley 2013, 163-78.

86 Cf. Kessler 2019, 81-4 for a discussion of the Virgin as a medium in Western medieval thought.

87 Elsner, Wolf 2010.

88 Ševčenko 2004; 2006, 2; Safran 2023, 85-9.

89 Safran 2023.

90 Elsner, Wolf 2010, 69.

the Mother of God, which characterized both the Eastern and Western sides of Mediterranean Christendom during the later Middle Ages.[91]

One cannot help but wonder whether this incarnational turn in local imagery could have been facilitated by the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century political context of the Holy Land. In the period when the images of the Mother of God *tēs Batou* were created around Sinai, Christian control of major locales of Jesus' earthly life, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth, had become increasingly precarious due to the restored Islamic rule.[92] Under such circumstances, it is not unlikely that the Sinai shrine tried to absorb part of the New Testament charisma of Palestine by presenting the burning bush episode as a major step toward the accomplishment of God's salvific plan. In other words, the material *locus sanctus* originally linked to Mosaic theophanies was now turned, by means of Marian imagery, into a mystical *locus* of the Incarnation. The locally assimilated image of the Virgin endowed Sinai with a charismatic aura comparable to Palestinian shrines such as Joseph's house in Nazareth or the Nativity cave in the Bethlehem Basilica.[93] This typological restyling catered to both Greek and Latin Christians.[94] Moreover, it had significant echoes across the Levant as the depiction of the Virgin within the burning bush was disseminated through the monastery's outposts or *metochia* within the crusader states.[95]

Sinai stood at the center of an impressive network that benefitted from the protection and support of the Latin ecclesiastical hierarchy and secular overlords.[96] A document from the chancery of Pope Honorius III (in office 1216-27) provides a comprehensive picture of the community's Eastern Mediterranean satellites.[97] On August 6, 1217, on the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration, the pontiff confirmed the properties and privileges of St. Mary's Monastery on Mount Sinai. The text lists countless houses and subordinate priories that the shrine possessed in Egypt, the Holy Land, and across the Levant. Among them, Honorius' scribes mention "the hospital and the dependency of St. Moses (*obedientiam Sancti Moysi*), houses and an oven" in Jerusalem, "houses and lands" in Jaffa, "St. Catherine's dependency (*obedientiam Sanctae Catherinae*)" in Acre, "the church

91 Rubin 2009, 177 describes a "creeping 'marianization' of religious culture" in twelfth-century Europe, which continued in the subsequent period.

92 Folda 2008, 84-5.

93 On the significance of the Bethlehem shrine in the crusader period, see Bacci 2017, 113-219.

94 Drandaki 2006, 495-6; Collins 2006.

95 Folda 2008, 84; Corrie 2010.

96 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1996, 116-17.

97 Tăutu 1950, no. 17, 35-7.

of St. George" in Damascus, "two confraternities" at the Monastery of St. George in Mangana, Constantinople (at that time, under Latin rule), as well as outposts on the islands of Crete and Cyprus.[98] These establishments must have acted as hubs for the circulation of images, texts, objects, and religious ideas from and toward Mount Sinai.[99]

At least two icons from the monastery's collection, attributed to painters active in the mid-thirteenth-century Levant, bear witness to this phenomenon.[100] A strong case was made that these panels were produced in Acre, the center of the shrinking Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.[101] Their dating and attribution draw on the striking formal resemblance to deluxe illuminated manuscripts produced at Saint-Jean d'Acre, such as a missal from the San Lorenzo Cathedral in Perugia (Museo Capitolare, MS 6) and the Arsenal Bible (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5211) commissioned by King Louis IX of France (r. 1226-70).[102] The panels' iconography, style, and technique combine the Byzantine tradition with Frankish features, providing the best example of images designed around the *loca sancta*, which could appeal to both Eastern and Western audiences.[103]

The first one is a small devotional panel portraying the Mother of God *tēs Batou* between Moses, Elijah, and the saintly bishop Gregory of Nazianzos, whose surprising presence may relate to a personal devotion of an unknown patron **[fig. 12]**.[104] With gentle hands, Mary touches her infant's shoulder and thigh, without actually supporting him.[105] Rather, Christ seems to float in front of his mother's bosom in a manner more akin to a vision than a solid presence. The panel exhibits no inscription linking the Mother of God with the burning bush and does not visualize any painted branches growing on her body. Yet, both the Virgin and the three bystanding saints are surrounded by spiraling acanthus-like vines. These interlacing scrolls were meticulously modelled in pastiglia and then coated in what appears to be silver leaf with some gold accents.[106] This ornamental device

98 Tăutu 1950, no. 17, 35-6.

99 Drandaki 2006, 495.

100 Weitzmann 1963, 192-4, 199-200; 1982, 291-324.

101 Weitzmann 1963, 200-2; Folda 2005, 327-34; Corrie 2010, especially 429, 435; cf. Cormack 2008, 80-2.

102 Folda 2005, 324; Cormack 2008, 71, 74. A digital facsimile of the Arsenal Bible is available at `https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550071673/f13.item`.

103 Cormack 2008, 74.

104 Weitzmann 1963, 199-200; Folda 2005, 328-9.

105 Folda 2005, 328.

106 Its exact metal components can only be determined through scientific investigations which I have not been able to conduct at this stage.

had a broader use in panels attributed to the crusader environment.[107] It also occurs, for example, on a contemporaneous icon representing St. George on horseback, now at the British Museum in London.[108] However, this relief background acquired a special meaning in relation to the Virgin's figure. The vegetal motifs, I suspect, served as an evocation of the bush's branches from the Moses story.[109] Due to the highly reflective properties of metal leaf, in the medieval context of reception, the molded tendrils would have been set ablaze by the fire of candles and natural light. Through this optical activation, the panel's silver background would have provided an animated actualization of Mary's epiphanic image within the shrub's foliage.[110]

For a beholder familiarized with the thirteenth-century Sinai shrine, the glittering relief vines would probably have recalled the setting of the ancient Burning Bush chapel, erected at the eastern end of the Justinianic basilica on the site traditionally associated with Moses' encounter with God. Though most of its medieval furnishings went missing, the chapel's appearance during the crusader period was described by Thietmar, a German pilgrim who visited the monastery in 1217.[111] Thietmar reports that the bush itself no longer existed, its branches having been cut and distributed as relics.[112] The site was instead marked by a material representation:

> In its likeness, however, a golden bush was made from sheets of gold, with a golden image of the Lord above the bush and a golden image of Moses standing to the right of the bush, taking off his sandals. Another golden image of Moses stands on the left side of the bush, as though already barefoot.[113]

107 Folda 2005, 328; Corrie 2010, 435-6.

108 Cormack, Mihalarias 1984; Cormack 2002; 2008; Folda 2005, 329-30; for a digital reproduction, see `https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1984-0601-1_1`.

109 Kessler 2024, 109 highlights similar uses of acanthus vines in Western European art, including a twelfth-century depiction of the burning bush (without the Virgin's figure) at S. Maria Immacolata in Ceri near Rome; cf. Zchomelidse 2003.

110 On the phenomenal activation of gold relief icons, see Pentcheva 2010, especially 121-54.

111 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857, comprehensively discussed by Pringle 1998, 52-3; Drandaki 2006, 495-501.

112 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857.

113 *[…] ad instar autem illius rubi factus est aureus rubus ex laminis aureis, et ymago Domini aurea super rubum, et ymago Moysi aurea stans ad dexteram rubi, discalcians se. Stat et alia ymago Moysi aurea in sinistra parte rubi tamquam discalciata et nudis pedibus*. *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857; the translation follows Pringle 1998, 52 with minor changes.

As Anastasia Drandaki points out, Thietmar likely saw a now-lost relief image – a panel or perhaps self-standing silhouettes – depicting Moses' encounter with the bush as a vision of the pre-incarnate Logos.[114] This metal image marked the holiest area of the monastic precinct. According to Thietmar, the chapel attracted all kinds of Christians, as well as Muslims. All of them, from bishops and monks to the great sultan of Babylon (i.e., Cairo), who had also come as a pilgrim, were required to remove their footwear at the entrance, in imitation of Moses' gesture in Exodus 3.[115] It is therefore plausible that a thirteenth-century panel invested in Sinai's status as a *locus sanctus* would incorporate visual allusions to the shrine's epicenter of sanctity. By enveloping the figure of the Mother of God *tēs Batou* in a web of silver-coated *pastiglia* vines, the icon may have evoked the memory of the metal relief seen by devotees such as Thietmar within the Burning Bush chapel, thereby linking the Virgin's body to Sinai's most sacred place.

Perhaps more explicitly than the silvered scrollwork background, the Virgin's epiphanic dimension is foregrounded by her association with Moses and Elijah. The two prophets direct their gazes and right hands toward the Savior, in the customary gesture of theophanic scenes. Indeed, their pairing around the figure of Christ evokes the traditional schema of the Transfiguration on Mount Thabor.[116] This image had a particular significance for the Sinai Monastery, as it constituted the iconographic core of the well-known mid-sixth-century mosaic program commissioned by Emperor Justinian **[fig. 13]**.[117] By depicting the infant Christ between the two prophets, our crusader icon yields further symbolic depth to the Marian image of the burning bush. Within this intervisual configuration, the representation of the Virgin acts not only as a retrospective reference to the Sinai shrub, but also as a corporeal actualization of the holy mountain – be it Sinai or Thabor – as a *locus* of divine manifestation.[118] This metaphorical extrapolation is also marked by the inscription on Moses' open scroll, which quotes God's calling onto the mountaintop in Exodus 24,12:

114 Drandaki 2006, 495-7. Christ's image within the burning bush constitutes a distinct iconographic tradition, whose history is beyond the scope of this paper; see Zchomelidse 2003.

115 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857.

116 Matt 17,1-8; Mark 9,2-8; Luke 9,28-36.

117 Weitzmann 1982, 5-18; Elsner 1994.

118 Elsner 1994, 94 observes that the sixth-century apse mosaic overlays the visionary topographies of the two mountains; see also Voordeckers 1988, 177-8.

"The Lord said to Moses: 'Ascend toward me [on the mountain]'".[119] Yet in contrast to the ancient Transfiguration mosaic, the crusader icon moves the emphasis from the overt epiphany of Christ's divine majesty to its concealed revelation in the humble form of a babe.

The second Acre panel testifies to this metonymic expansion of Mary's visionary image, using her not only as an iconic reference to the burning bush, but also as representation of the theophanic mountain as a site of visions **[fig. 14]**. As usual, the composition centers on the standing figure of the Mother of God.[120] This time, however, the Virgin appears in the *Hodēgētria* formula. Elevated on a rectangular pedestal, Mary carries Christ in her left hand and points to him with the right in a gesture of revelation and intercession. The Apostles Peter and Paul flank her, accompanied by the saintly hermits Antony the Great and Euthymios, the champions of late antique asceticism in Egypt and Palestine.[121]

Above them, a stylized depiction of Mount Sinai stretches like a stony canopy. This quasi-architectural framing is reminiscent of tenth- and eleventh-century Constantinopolitan ivories, which often enshrine depictions of the *Deēsis*, as well as biblical episodes, in ciborium-like structures. On the icon, however, the canopy's extrados accommodates two abbreviated narrative scenes, which occupy the panel's spandrel-like corners. On the left side, an elderly Moses raises his covered hands waiting to receive the divine tablets. Before him,

119 Written in black majuscules, the original text on Moses' *rotulus* reads: + ὴπεν κ(υριο)ς προς μωσην ανα<βηθι>. At an unknown later date, this inscription was overwritten in red letters. The second layer preserves a longer portion of the same verse: + ὴπεν κ(υριο)ς προς μωσης αναβι προσ με κ(υριο)ς πη...εε. Weitzmann 1963, 199 identifies the passage but does not provide a transcription. The Septuagint text of Exodus 24,12 reads: καὶ εἶπεν κύριος πρὸς Μωυσῆν Ἀνάβηθι πρός με εἰς τὸ ὄρος καὶ ἴσθι ἐκεῖ. In addition to rewriting the scriptural quote, the later hand retraced the scroll's contour and altered its layout by distributing the text over a greater number of lines. The script is less accomplished than that of the mid-thirteenth-century original. Elijah's *rotulus* follows the same palimpsest pattern. Its original black inscription, later retraced in red, refers to the emblematic oath formula marking the prophet's entrance into the biblical narrative: ζη κ(υριο)ς και ζη υ ψυχη μου η εστην ηετος (The Lord lives, and my soul lives, if there shall be rain). The text reproduces 1 Kings 17,1 in an abbreviated form, likely quoted from memory and perhaps mediated through a liturgical source; cf. the Septuagint version: ζῇ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν δυνάμεων ὁ θεὸς Ισραηλ, ᾧ παρέστην ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, εἰ ἔσται τὰ ἔτη ταῦτα δρόσος καὶ ὑετὸς ὅτι εἰ μὴ διὰ στόματος λόγου μου (The Lord lives, the God of powers, the God of Israel, before whom I stand, if there shall be dew and rain these years, except by the word of my mouth). The icon's inscriptions display pronounced signs of iotacism, a common feature of medieval Greek epigraphs. As Agapitos 2018, 90 observes, this phenomenon should not be regarded as corruption or provincialism, but rather as evidence of the inscriptions' oral dimension.

120 Folda 2005, 333-4.

121 Weitzmann 1963, 192-4.

there is a small bush. [122] Yet, his gaze passes over it, fixating the mountain's summit, which rises as the canopy's apex. On the other slope, Elijah is seated within a crevice, turning his eyes toward the same peak, while a raven brings him a circular loaf. This scene conflates several episodes from the prophet's scriptural story in a typical formula of Sinaitic visual culture.[123] It uses Elijah's sojourn in the Judean desert, when the Lord nourished him through ravens (1 Kings 17,4-6), as an iconographic matrix. However, it also alludes to the prophet's journey to Sinai. Elijah took shelter in a cave on Mount Horeb, from where he witnessed God's manifestation in a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19,9-13). This local reference activates Elijah's visionary dimension, which is additionally enhanced by his coupling with Moses on the slopes of the theophanic mountain.

By inserting her figure into this elaborate topographical framing, the panel portrays the Virgin as a corporeal equivalent of the holy mountain. The Mother of God *Hodēgētria* and the theophanic summit are aligned along the composition's central axis. Even so, beyond their functional overlap as receptacles of divine presence, Mary's figure and the depiction of Mount Sinai differ in a major aspect. While the Virgin holds the incarnate manifestation of God, the Sinai landscape is rendered as completely barren. Although the two prophets gaze intently at its rocky peak, in a formula evoking the Transfiguration, their eyes do not encounter any palpable vestige of the Lord's presence. This omission could not have been accidental, especially since Moses raises his hands in expectation of the God-written tablets. However, no celestial hand descends to offer them. Nor is there a divine flame to kindle the withered bush before him.

By contrast, the Virgin's hand gesture guides the viewers to the infant Christ. Her image, therefore, fulfills and supersedes the role of the actual mountain as a site of theophanic encounter. Metaphorically speaking, the icon of the Theotokos absorbs the blaze of the Old Testament theophany, leaving the shrub extinguished and the rocky summit empty. The panel proclaims Mary's immaculate body, inscribed in painting, as the true mountain of God, which in the words of Psalm 68,15, is a fertile mountain, "rich" and "curdled like cheese". It is on this corporeal site of vitality and abundance that Christians can mystically experience the Lord's revelation in flesh. Notably, the Virgin's rendition as the mountain of theophany is accompanied by the leaders of the apostles, the main witnesses of the Savior's coming on earth and the pillars of his Church. Their testimonial role

122 Weitzmann 1963, 192; Folda 2005, 334.

123 On the depiction of Elijah in the wilderness and its implications for Eastern monasticism, see Voordeckers 1988, 177-82; cf. Rigo 2023, especially 215-31; Dumitrescu 2025, 275-82.

is complemented by Antony and Euthymios. As exemplary hermits, the two saints connect the visionary models of Moses and Elijah with the Christian monasticism flourishing on Mount Sinai.[124] However, their juxtaposition with the Mother of God indicates that it was through her mediation that local ascetics could attain the most direct encounter with the Lord.

Whilst attributed to a workshop from Acre, the two panels examined above exhibit an exceptional familiarity with both the visual culture and devotional atmosphere of Mount Sinai. It is very likely that these icons were intended as gifts for the Burning Bush shrine and perhaps even made, as Jaroslav Folda suggests, at the house in Acre.[125] If this hypothesis is correct, the Sinai *metochion* in the crusader capital must have constituted one of the main channels through which the *locus sanctus* iconography of Mary was transmitted across the Levant.

A slightly later miniature from an Armenian lectionary commissioned by Prince Hethum II, the future king of Cilicia (r. 1289-1307), lends further support to this idea.[126] Produced in 1286, this lavishly illuminated manuscript (Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 979) contains two marginal representations of Mary within the burning bush.[127] The first accompanies the passage from Exodus 3,2-5 on f. 94v **[fig. 15a]**.[128] The shrub's lush branches wind around the holy mountain, enfolding Moses, who appears in the customary pose untying his sandals. The prophet directs his gaze toward the summit, where the Virgin's bust emerges from the foliage with her hands raised in prayer and the Christ Child wrapped in her maphorion. Mary's rounded visage, slightly turned posture, and half-length format, together with the shrub's elongated outline, are remarkably akin to the later Ohrid mural. In the Hethum manuscript, however, the bush's fleshy leaves curve around her nimbus, forming a symmetrical structure reminiscent of an acanthus-shaped acroterion. At its summit blooms a small, multi-petaled flower touched by the rays emanating from a golden orb, which hovers in the air. The shining medallion bears an effigy of the "Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7,9-10), the manifestation of the Logos as the Father's image.[129] In a typical formula of Byzantine and Eastern Christian iconography, this image acts as a pre-incarnational counterpart to the depiction of the

124 Weitzmann 1963, 193-4; Folda 2005, 334.

125 Folda 2005, 329; Corrie 2010, 425-9 proposes additional arguments. On Sinai's Acre outpost, see Pringle 2009, no. 400, 73.

126 On Hethum II, see Stewart 2001, 65-183.

127 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120-1; Rapti 2008, 122-3, 140.

128 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120.

129 On this theme, see Grabar 1968; Bucur 2019, 208-46.

infant held by his mother.[130] The radiance surrounding the elderly God seems to imbue the holy mountain with vitality and kindles its expansive vegetation with immaterial fire.[131] Thus, the composition depicts the Logos as a luminous source of life that permeates creation and becomes manifest in the human form of an infant.

An analogous incarnational symbolism is articulated in the second miniature **[fig. 15b]**. Located on f. 228r, the scene is appended to a liturgical reading from the New Testament, namely Acts 7,30-4.[132] The pericope consists of St. Stephen's speech before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, in which the protomartyr recalls Moses' encounter with the Sinai shrub as a prefiguration of the salvific mystery enacted through Jesus Christ. The Virgin is depicted as a standing figure poised upon the shrub's flaming foliage. Here too, her hands are lifted in the orant pose, while a medallion containing the bust of Christ appears before her chest.

Although iconographically distinct, the Hethum miniatures exhibit a certain formal affinity with the Acre icons. In the second image in particular, the Virgin's physiognomic features and the treatment of her vestments are particularly similar to the panel depicting the Mother of God *tēs Batou* between Moses and Elijah. Since Armenian Cilicia fostered strong connections with the neighboring Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, one might assume that the illuminators of the Hethum codex adapted an earlier Sinaitic model filtered through the crusader milieu.[133] The inflection of the *Batos* iconography in the Cilician manuscript was merely a symptom of a much broader reception across the Eastern Mediterranean.

3 Mirroring Mountains: Sinai and Sion as Topographical Poles of Sacred History

Already in the 1286 Hethum lectionary, the Marian image of the burning bush had been detached from any overt form of Sinaitic localism. What was originally meant as a titular representation of the monastery had now been transformed into a typological image of salvation conveying a more universal message activated in the performative framework of liturgical lections. This tendency gained further traction in late thirteenth-century Byzantium. Less than a decade after the Cilician manuscript, the Ohrid rendition of Moses

130 Dumitrescu 2025, 273-4, 286-7.

131 Cf. Baschet, Bonne, Dittmar 2012, 43-95; Kessler 2024.

132 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120, where the miniature is erroneously listed on f. 229r.

133 On the relationship between the thirteenth-century Cilician Kingdom and the crusader states, see Ghazarian 2015; Chookaszian 2021.

before the burning bush proves how the Sinai rhetoric of the holy mountain as a *locus* of God's salvific presence could be symbolically replicated beyond the physical *loca sancta*.[134] Put differently, a representation originally meant to explicate the soteriological meaning of an individual place sanctified by a divine manifestation in a distant past could provide a model of sacred space: that is, a symbolically demarcated precinct framing the encounter with God in the ever-renewed present of liturgical time.

The precise channels through which the Sinaitic iconography of the Virgin within the burning bush entered the Palaiologan repertoire cannot be determined with certainty. Nevertheless, the circulation of painters and visual traditions connected with the Levantine environment is attested in thirteenth-century Southeastern Europe. Made sometime between 1222 and 1227, the frescoes of Mileševa Monastery in Serbia showcase conspicuous affinities with contemporaneous crusader icons from Mount Sinai.[135] Likewise, a mid-thirteenth-century master trained in the same tradition as the Acre workshop painted a mural cycle of St. Francis of Assisi at the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa (Kalenderhane Camii) in Constantinople.[136] In addition, monks, prelates, and noblemen from the Late Byzantine Empire and the Southern Slavic Kingdoms traveled to Mount Sinai and the Holy Land, facilitating the transmission of images, religious texts, and ideas.[137]

This last aspect is particularly important for understanding the Ohrid depiction of the Virgin within the burning bush. While resembling some features of the first miniature in the Hethum lectionary, the fresco does not seem to reproduce a pre-existing model. Rather, it reinvents the theme and adapts its conceptual premises to the broader iconographic and theological program of the Peribleptos church. As posited above, the monumental composition on the west wall of the narthex offers a paradigmatic scenario of circumscribing the space of the Lord's epiphany. The designers of the Ohrid wall paintings drew a parallel between the biblical site of the burning bush and the sacred precinct of the church, mobilizing the archetypal logic of the ritual delimitation between the sacred and profane spaces.[138] Once again, this interpretation is reminiscent of John of Damascus' iconophile oration. The text regards the *locus* of Moses' vision as a temple-like

134 This pattern of translocation finds a slightly later parallel in Latin Christendom: Safran 2023, 113-16 identifies an attempt at replicating the architecture of the Sinai basilica at the late fourteenth-century church of S. Caterina in Galatina, Southern Italy.

135 Živković 2021.

136 Striker, Kuban 1997, 128-42, pl. 155-70; Folda 2005, 299-336; Corrie 2010, 416.

137 Dragojlović 1987; Tarnanidis 1987; Rigo 2002.

138 Eliade 1959.

structure, where the "image of the Mother of God" stands for the most sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies.[139]

In the Ohrid example, the symbolic equivalence between the epiphanic mountain and the sacred building was suggested by the latter's position on a flat hill overlooking the medieval city and the nearby lake **[fig. 16]**. From this conspicuous spot, the church seems to embody the Greek epithet *peribleptos*, literally translated as 'the one to be looked at from all sides', hence 'admired'.[140] More significantly, however, the building's place within the Ohrid terrain facilitates a synergy between the iconography of its painted interior and the characteristics of its natural surroundings. Upon noticing the semantic centrality of the Sinai composition, the community of medieval monks and believers were likely encouraged to identify the site of the Peribleptos monastery as a holy mountain. Within the church's walls, God manifested his presence as he had done before both in the shrub that Moses encountered on the slopes of the mountain, and on the latter's peak.[141] Through the symbolic conflation with the biblical site, the building becomes an architectural counterpart to the Mother of God herself, whose sanctified body acted as a *locus* of the Incarnation.[142]

The cycle of Old Testament *typoi* painted on the narthex walls enhances this nexus of analogies. On the north tympanum, Nebuchadnezzar sees the Virgin's prefiguration as a stony mountain imprinted with her *imago clipeata* **[fig. 6]**. Similarly, on the south side, the divine Logos appears in the angelic guise of Sophia, God's Wisdom, who "built herself a house and supported it with seven pillars" (Prov. 9,1). The edifice rises in the background as a temple whose pediment bears Mary's sculpted bust, alluding to her role as Christ's corporeal abode **[fig. 7]**. These two compositions face each other across the chamber, framing the burning bush scene spatially and strengthening the functional equivalence between the Virgin's

139 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975.

140 On the term's meaning, see the entry in Liddell, Scott 1996; Zarov 2007, 58. The monastery's dedication to the Mother of God Peribleptos references a major Constantinopolitan monastery founded by Romanos III (r. 1028-34) and restored by Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259-82) after the 1261 reconquest of the Byzantine capital; see Mango 1992; Dark 1999. Marian churches bearing the same title are attested in Thessalonike and Mystras. The rules of other Greek monasteries of the Virgin include *peribleptos* as a secondary epithet. The late thirteenth-century *typikon* of S. Maria in Grottaferrata near Rome provides such an example: the document mentions Abbot Blasios τῆς περιβλέπτου μονῆς τῆς ὑπεραγίας θ(εοτό)κου τῆς ἐπονομαζομένης τῆς κρυπτοφέρρης (of the admired monastery of the Most Holy Bearer of God, which is called of Grottaferrata); see Grottaferrata, Biblioteca del Monumento Nazionale, Γ.α.1 = gr.210, f. 1r.

141 Della Dora 2016, 147-75.

142 Cf. Pentcheva 2004.

body, the *topos* of the holy mountain, and the temple's – or the church's – sacred building.

While being explicitly thematized within the narthex murals, the topographic symbolism developed around Moses' theophanies on Sinai provides a more general structural principle for the church's fresco program. This conceptual pattern reverberates into the selection and spatial arrangement of narrative scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin painted in the upper zones of the cross-in-square naos. Within the church's main compartment, the west tympanum and wall display the superimposed depictions of the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and Mary's Dormition and Assumption or Transferal (*Metastasis*) into heaven **[fig. 17]**. In his seminal essay on Middle Byzantine mosaic programs, Otto Demus emphasizes the capacity of narrative programs to evoke the major locales of the Gospel history in a visual actualization of the Holy Land.[143] Drawing on Demus' observation, I suggest that the Pentecost-*Koimēsis* nucleus appears as a topographical counterpart to the narthex images of the Sinai theophanies.

Christian tradition claims that both the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin's death took place on a sacred height, namely, Mount Sion outside the walls of Jerusalem. [144] Pilgrim accounts, such as the late twelfth-century *Ekphrasis* traditionally attributed to John Phokas, situate these events even within the same architectural complex.[145] According to John, the Holy Sion was "a church of great size with vaulted roof" rising within a castle on the right-hand side of Jerusalem. Within its precinct, there is "the house of St. John the Evangelist, where the thrice-blessed Virgin dwelt after the Resurrection, and where she fell asleep". An "iron railing" marked the spot where Mary "yielded up her soul to her Son and God". In the same church, on the right-hand side of the altar, "a stair of 61 steps" led to "an upper chamber (*hyperōon*)".[146] There, on the left side, John saw "where the Lord's Supper took place". Moreover, he mentions that the apse (in fact, "the sanctuary conch") harbored the descent (*kathodos*) of the Holy Spirit.[147] Latin sources, such as

143 Demus 1955, 6-7.

144 On the topography of Mount Sion in medieval Jerusalem, see Pringle 2007, cat. no. 336.

145 John Phokas, Ἔκφρασις ἐν συνόψει τῶν ἀπ' Ἀντιοχείας μέχρις Ἱεροσολύμων κάστρων καὶ χωρῶν XIV, ed. Troickij 1889; for an English translation, see Stewart 1889. Messis 2011 provides a detailed literary analysis and proposes the identification of John Phokas with the Great Hetaeriach John Doukas from the time of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143-80).

146 Cf. Acts 1,13.

147 John Phokas, Ἔκφρασις ἐν συνόψει τῶν ἀπ' Ἀντιοχείας μέχρις Ἱεροσολύμων κάστρων καὶ χωρῶν XIV, ed. Troickij 1889.

the Description of the Holy Land composed by Burchard of Mount Sion shortly before the 1291 fall of Acre, also emphasize the spatial connection between the Virgin's abode after Christ's Ascension and the building where the apostles received the Spirit.[148] Of course, one cannot determine if the designers of the Peribleptos program could rely on such travel reports. Nonetheless, the topographical connection between Dormition and Pentecost could be inferred from liturgical homilies. These texts had a broad circulation across the Byzantine environment and provided the main reference point for church iconography.

In a highly influential *Homily on the Holy and Most Glorified Dormition and Transferal of Our Lady the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary* (BHG 1097), John of Damascus reminds his audience that the Mother of God gave her last breath on Mount Sion, where the culminating moments of Christ's salvific work, including Pentecost, had also taken place. Composed in eighth-century Jerusalem, this text was well-known to the Late Byzantine milieu, being frequently read for the celebration of the Dormition feast on August 15.[149] John conjures up an image of Mary's body reclining in her house on Sion.[150] In a typical ekphrastic move inspired by late antique handbooks of rhetoric, the site was meant to appear vividly before the audience's eyes, turning listeners into spectators.[151] Intriguingly, within this imaginative evocation, the Virgin's abode on the holy mountain does not take shape through an architectural description. Rather, John renders visible the Sion *topos* by recapitulating the major New Testament events that had occurred there, from the Last Supper to the Descent of Holy Spirit. One could say, in the logic of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary chronotope, that the building on the holy mountain coalesces from the temporal sequence of sacred history:[152]

> For I can see in my mind (*dokō gar moi*) this woman holier than all things holy, sacred and venerable above all others – the sweet vessel of manna or rather its true source – lying on a pallet in the celebrated Holy City of David: on Sion, that prominent (*perioptō*)

148 Burchard of Mount Sion, *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* 80, ed. Bartlett 2019.

149 This sermon survives in *panegyrika*, that is, collections of hagiographical works and festal homilies meant to be read as part of liturgy; the *Pinakes* database lists over 50 witnesses dating between the ninth and the late fifteenth century, as well as over 20 from the Post-Byzantine period, going up to the 1800s; for a complete list, see the entry for "Jean Damascène, *In Dormitionem Deiparae 2*" at `https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/recherche.html`.

150 John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis*, ed. Kotter 1988; translated by Daley 1998.

151 Webb 2009.

152 Bakhtin 1981, 84-258.

> and most glorious (*perikleestatē*) mountain, where the law of letter was fulfilled and the law of the Spirit proclaimed; […] where the God of the Old and the New Covenant gave us the true Pascha; where 'the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world' [John 1,29], initiated his disciples into the mystical banquet […]; where Christ was seen by the [a]postles when he rose from the dead […]. This [i.e., Sion] is the acropolis of the Churches, she is the refuge of the disciples. Here the All-Holy Spirit was poured forth on the [a]postles in the form of fire, making a great sound and communicating in many tongues. Here John the Theologian received the Mother of God into his care and ministered to her needs. It was this [i.e., Sion], the mother of the world's churches, which played home to the Mother of God, after her son's return from the dead. In her, then, the Blessed Virgin lay on a bed one can only call thrice blessed.[153]

To understand its implications for the Ohrid program, it is worth juxtaposing this passage to John's above-quoted oration on the divine images, where he discusses the burning bush scene. Not unlike his previous reading of the Sinai epiphany, the Dormition sermon turns Mount Sion into an archetypal rendition of sacred space catalyzed around Mary's corporeal presence. However, while on Sinai, the Virgin's body only appeared in an image, Sion bore it physically. As such, the former is treated as an Old Testament Temple, where Moses' vision serves as the sanctuary, whereas the latter appears as a mother and implicitly, a symbolic matrix of all Christian churches. The designers of the Ohrid program might have thought in a similar manner when they created a spatial correspondence between the

153 Δοκῶ γάρ μοι ταύτην τὴν ἁγίων ἁγιωτέραν καὶ ἱερῶν ἱερωτέραν καὶ ὁσίων ὁσιωτέραν, τὴν γλυκεῖαν τοῦ μάννα στάμνον, πηγὴν δὲ μᾶλλον εἰπεῖν ἀληθέστερον, ἀνακεκλίσθαι ἐπί τινος σκίμποδος ἐν τῇ θείᾳ καὶ περιωνύμῳ πόλει Δαυίδ, Σιών φημι τῇ περιόπτῳ καὶ περικλεεστάτῃ, ἐν ᾗ πεπλήρωται μὲν ὁ νόμος τοῦ γράμματος, ὑπηγόρευται δὲ ὁ νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος· ἐν ᾗ τὸ πάσχα τὸ τυπικὸν ὁ νομοδότης Χριστὸς ἐκτετέλεκε καὶ πάσχα τὸ ἀληθὲς ὁ παλαιᾶς καὶ νέας διαθήκης θεὸς παραδέδωκεν· ἐν ᾗ τὸ δεῖπνον τὸ μυστικὸν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μαθηταῖς «ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου» μεμυσταγώγηκε καὶ τούτοις ἑαυτὸν οἷα μόσχον σιτευτὸν τέθυκε καὶ τῆς ἀληθινῆς ἀμπέλου τὸν βότρυν ἐληνοβάτησεν· ἐν ᾗ Χριστὸς τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ὀπτάνεται ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνιστάμενος καὶ Θωμᾶν πιστοῦται καὶ διὰ τούτου τὰ πέρατα, ὡς εἴη θεός τε καὶ κύριος δύο φύσεις φέρων ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναβίωσιν, καὶ ταύταις καταλλήλους δύο τὰς ἐνεργείας αὐτεξούσιά τε θελήματα εἰς αἰῶνα τὸν ἄπειρον αἰωνίζοντα. Αὕτη τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν ἡ ἀκρόπολις, αὕτη τὸ τῶν μαθητῶν καταγώγιον· ἐν ταύτῃ τοῦ παναγίου πνεύματος ἡ πολύηχος καὶ πολύγλωσσος καὶ πυρίμορφος ἐπιφοίτησις τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ἐκκέχυται. Ἐν ταύτῃ ὁ θεολόγος τὴν θεοτόκον παρειληφὼς ἐλειτούργει τὰ δέοντα. Αὕτη ἡ μήτηρ τῶν ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐκκλησιῶν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ μητρὸς ἐνδιαίτημα πέφηνε μετά γε τὴν τοῦ υἱοῦ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναφοίτησιν. Ἐν ταύτῃ τοίνυν ἡ μακαρία παρθένος ἐπί τινος τρισολβίου κλίνης κατέκειτο. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 4, ed. Kotter 1988; the translation follows Daley 1998 with some adjustments.

Mosaic theophanies on Mount Sinai and the New Testament events on Sion. Although the conventional means of depicting mountains are omitted from the Pentecost and *Koimēsis* compositions, whose background only comprises elaborate architecture, the terrain of their biblical locale is alluded to by the shape of the wall crowned by a tympanum. This architectural framework situates the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin's Dormition in a subtle conversation with the figurally explicit depiction of Mount Sinai on the narthex west lunette. The two holy mountains are, therefore, presented as mirroring sites of theophany.

The use of analogous compositional strategies, aptly maneuvered by the painters Michael and Eutychios, facilitates this link. First, the double-tier configuration of the Sion complex bears striking resemblance to the twofold organization of the Sinai terrain on the narthex lunette. There, Moses encounters the burning bush in the valley beneath the mountain and later receives the tables on its rocky pinnacle. Second, much like the narthex fresco, the joint scenes of Pentecost and Dormition take shape around an arched window piercing the west tympanum of the naos. In the upper zone, the opening provides a compositional axis to the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The twelve apostles led by Peter and an anachronically inserted Paul appear seated on two curved benches, whose circular disposition echoes the tympanum's architectural outline **[fig. 18]**. Above them, the Paraclete descends as tongues of fire along diaphanous rays of light emerging from an open arc of heaven. Below, the inner margins of the circular benches enclose a dark chasm, where the allegorical personifications of the gentile "tongues" and "tribes" – the future members of the Christian Church – stand on each side of the window's frame. During the day, sunlight enters the building through this physical opening, enacting a literal illumination of the painted nations.[154] Thus, echoing John of Damascus' praise of Sion as the "the mother of the world's churches", the shadowy container within the fresco functions almost as a womb that prepares the gentiles to be reborn through the light of baptism.

The tympanum's rhythm of concentric circles is replicated in the lower zone by the *Koimēsis* scene. Once again, the apostles appear in a circular configuration. This time, drop-shaped clouds carry them to Mount Sion, where the Virgin is about to depart from earthly life. The hovering disciples hedge the architectural setting of the Dormition episode, which unfolds against another celestial arc. Imagined as a gigantic sphere of light descending from above, this segment of heaven functions as a diaphragm between the visible and invisible realms, framing the open gates of heaven. Echoing

154 On natural light in medieval churches, see Ivanovici, Sullivan 2023.

the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a dense crowd of angels issues therefrom, escorting Christ into Mary's house. The Savior appears in his celestial majesty, within a radiant globe of light. He bends over his mother's body, collecting her soul under the sorrowful, yet amazed gazes of apostles, hierarchs, and pious women. Christ's portrayal in golden vestments rhymes with the depiction of his pre-incarnational majesty within the burning bush. However, the characters' roles are reversed. While in the Moses scene, the Virgin's purple maphorion enwraps the gold-clad infant, in the Dormition, Christ's resplendent vestment enfolds the winged babe symbolizing his mother's unstained soul **[fig. 19]**.[155] This relationship of reciprocal embracing generates another iconographic analogy between the theophanic events on Sinai and Sion.[156]

Constructed through an elaborate system of architectural and pictorial linkages, the spatial correlation between the two sacred summits would have been conceptually strengthened by the viewers' familiarity with the exegetical traditions encapsulated by liturgical poetry and hagiography. The typological parallel between Sinai and Sion constitutes a major theme in the representation of the enactment of God's salvific plan. From a historical perspective, the two mountains mark the topographic poles of the scriptural narrative of Israel's liberation from Pharaoh's yoke and conquest of the promised land. However, at a spiritual level, these *loca sancta* frame the history of human redemption. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses witnessed the chief foreshadowing of Christ's Incarnation within the burning bush and later on, fifty days after the crossing of the Red Sea, received the tablets of the Law. Similarly, fifty days after passing from death to life, Christ poured the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples gathered on Mount Sion. Festal hymnography imagines the Spirit's Descent as the transmission of a New Law that replaced the one delivered on Sinai.

This idea is prominently featured in the eighth-century Iambic *Kanon* of Pentecost composed by John Arklas, a Greek-language Syro-Palestinian poet piously (though fictitiously) identified with John of Damascus.[157] The *kanon* is a multi-stanzaic poem chanted during the Byzantine morning service (*orthros*). Its emergence goes back to the seventh and eighth centuries, within the cathedral rite of Jerusalem

155 Xyngopoulos 1972; Semoglou 2003, 89-93 investigate the portrayal of Mary's soul as a winged infant.

156 Maguire 1981, 59-68 notes a similar antithetical correspondence between other Dormition compositions on the west wall of the naos and the apse image of the Virgin holding the Christ Child.

157 The conflation of the two Johns was already questioned, on stylistic grounds, by the twelfth-century commentator Eustathios of Thessalonike; see Ronchey 2001.

and the monastic environment of Palestine.[158] Usually consisting of eight or nine odes, the *kanon* is a palimpsest composition. Its strophes (*troparia*) are written in response to nine biblical canticles and used to be intercalated between their verses. In Arklas' work, the introductory stanza (*heirmos*) of the fifth ode alludes to the eschatological revelation of the Lord's holy mountain in Isaias 2,1-3. The Old Testament prophet emphasizes the universal vocation of the God of Israel, summoning all nations to Sion, his mountainous dwelling place, where the Law is proclaimed. Arklas' *kanon* responds to this scriptural passage through an address to the Church. Her children are called to the illumination of baptism founded on the New Law established by the Holy Spirit on Mount Sion:

> As a [baptismal] font, as purification of faults,
> receive the Spirit's fire-breathing dew,
> o light-formed children of the Church!
> for now, the Law has issued forth from Sion,
> the grace of the Spirit shaped as tongues of fire.[159]

Both Isaias 2 and its poetic re-elaboration in the Pentecostal *Kanon* present Sion as an eschatological counterpart to Sinai. The holy mountain, thus, becomes less of a physical place and turns into a conceptual framework for a specific understanding of salvation. On Mount Sion, God manifests his law-giving authority by sealing a renewed covenant. Unlike the Sinai episode, where the latter is only meant for the sons of Israel, here, the alliance comprises humanity in its entirety. The Peribleptos mural conveys the universal dimension of the Spirit's Law by synecdochally showing all human races beneath the apostles, still being gestated in darkness but ready to be formed anew by the light of the Gospel.

This typological comparison is further expanded within the narrative of the Virgin's Dormition. Mount Sion witnessed Christ's apparition at the hour of his mother's death. The elaborate *Life of the Virgin* (BHG 1102g-h) by John Geometres, a tenth-century Constantinopolitan writer, links this theophanic moment to God's manifestation on Sinai.[160] Geometres uses the narrative of Exodus 19

158 On the *kanon* as a genre, see Wellesz 1949, 168-215, and more recently, Giannouli 2019.

159 Λουτήριον κάθαρσιν ἀμπλακημάτων | Πυρίπνοον δέξασθε Πνεύματος δρόσον, | Ὦ τέκνα φωτόμορφα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας· | Νῦν ἐκ Σιὼν γὰρ ἐξελήλυθε νόμος, | Ἡ γλωσσοπυρσόμορφος Πνεύματος χάρις. John Arklas, *Canon iambicum pentecostale*, ode 5, heirmos, ed. Cesaretti, Ronchey 2014.

160 John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 103-4, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023, including an English translation.

as a typological hypotext for an imaginative description of Christ's advent at the end of his mother's terrestrial life. He recounts that "God was going to descend once again upon the *conspicuous and overshadowed mountain*, which is *admired* (*periblepton*) by all, richly adorned with virtues".[161] The intertextual allusions to the Old Testament mountain *topos* are ambiguously deployed to designate both Sion, the physical locale of the Dormition scene, and the Virgin herself. Perhaps referencing the compound adjectives *perioptos* (prominent) and *perikleestatē* (most glorious) employed by John of Damascus, Geometres eulogizes the holy mountain as *peribleptos*, that is, "admired". In fact, the Damascene himself uses this epithet when describing the apostles as "kings who bring precious gifts from the Lord's temple of the admired (*peribleptou*) Sion" to Mary, "the living city of the Lord God of Hosts".[162] Due to its established association with the *topos* of the Virgin's Dormition, the term *peribleptos* likely had a special resonance for the designers of the Ohrid fresco, accentuating the church's perception as a sacred mountain. John the Evangelist, Geometres continues, "became a new Moses. He entered the cloud and received the tablets of the Virgin's testament" identified as the "secrets of the miraculous things that had taken place".[163] Like the Old Testament prophet, the *vita* suggests, the Savior's beloved apostle was initiated into the supreme mystery of Mary's glorious transferal into her son's kingdom.

The Peribleptos fresco incorporates Geometres' mystical analogy with Moses' experience on Sinai by picturing John as a direct witness to two key moments of the Dormition narrative: the departure of the Virgin's soul and the Assumption of her resurrected body. In the composition's foreground, the evangelist stands at Mary's head, as Christ descends in a cloud-like conglomeration of heavenly powers. John appears again in the mural's upper right corner, this time, in the literal cloud that carries him to Mount Sion. Though taking place

161 My emphasis. Ἔμελλε γὰρ καὶ πάλιν ὁ Θεὸς καταβαίνειν ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρος τὸ ἐμφανὲς καὶ κατάσκιον, εἴτ'οὖν περίβλεπτον καὶ ἀρεταῖς κατάκομον. John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104: Constas, Simelidis 2023; cf. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 4, ed. Kotter 1988.

162 Ἡ γὰρ ζῶσα πόλις κυρίου θεοῦ τῶν δυνάμεων μετάρσιος αἴρεται καὶ βασιλεῖς ἀπὸ ναοῦ κυρίου τῆς περιβλέπτου Σιὼν ἐπὶ τὴν ἄνω Ἱερουσαλὴμ τὴν ἐλευθέραν τὴν ἑαυτῶν μητέρα δῶρον προσάγουσι τιμαλφέστατον, οἱ πρὸς Χριστοῦ πάσης τῆς γῆς καταστάντες ἄρχοντες, τοὺς ἀποστόλους φημί, τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μητέρα τὴν ἀειπάρθενον. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 3, ed. Kotter 1988.

163 Τοιγαροῦν καὶ Μωσῆς πάλιν Ἰωάννης ἦν, ὁ μετὰ τὸν φύσει υἱὸν υἱός· ὁ καὶ τῆς νεφέλης εἴσω χωρῶν καὶ δεχόμενος πλάκας τῆς παρθένου τὰς διαθήκας, ᾧ κἀκεῖνος μὲν ἀπιὼν τὴν παρθένον, ἡ δὲ παρθένος αὖθις πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἐπαπιοῦσα τὰ μυστικώτερα τῶν θαυμάτων προσανατίθεται. John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023.

before Mary's death and funeral, John's miraculous translocation intersects a scene happening afterwards, namely, the Virgin's transferal into heaven **[fig. 20]**.

The Ohrid program abounds in iconographic novelties. Just as the narthex frescoes contain the earliest Byzantine depiction of the Theotokos within the burning bush, the naos displays the first known Dormition image expanding the main composition through a series of apocryphal episodes **[fig. 21]**.[164] Thus, the *Koimēsis* scene stands at the center of an almost cinematic frieze whose continuous narrative takes up the middle register of the west wall of the naos. On the left side, the main Dormition scene is prefaced by the announcement of the Virgin's death by the Archangel Gabriel, her prayer on the Mount of Olives, where nature bows to her in reverence, and the farewell that Mary bids to her female companions from Jerusalem. On the right side, the composition of Mary's death blends into the funerary procession that carries her body from Mount Sion to the tomb in the Garden of Getsemani.[165]

The amplified Dormition narrative reaches its apex with a highly idiosyncratic rendition of Mary's Christ-like resurrection and ascension into heaven.[166] In the thirteenth century, this scene had received a new iconographic rendition, which took shape simultaneously in Byzantine and Latin visual cultures.[167] Its emergence and dissemination, which I shall comprehensively discuss in a future monograph, are tightly linked to the milieu of Andronikos II Palaiologos and the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios.[168] In the Peribleptos naos, the Assumption episode is artfully concealed within the dense pictorial fabric of the central *Koimēsis* scene. It is almost as if the painters sought to test the viewers' attention and surprise them with unexpected narrative turns and iconographic details.[169] Only a keen eye can discern the diminutive figure of the Theotokos, who has just risen from the dead and is taken aloft

164 Numerous studies deal with the development of the Dormition narrative in late antique and early medieval textual sources, see e.g., Jugie 1944; Wenger 1955; Shoemaker 2002; Mimouni 2011.

165 On the emergence of such cycles in Late Byzantine murals, see Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 68-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 111-19; Davidov-Temerinski 1995; Tsigaridas 2000, 131.

166 Todić 1999, 114, 121.

167 On the theme's western versions, see Van Os 1969, 149-56; Schmitt 2005.

168 This pictorial theme stands at the core of my doctoral dissertation titled *Painting the Mystery: The Invention of the Virgin's Assumption in Early Palaiologan Murals*, which I am currently writing at Stanford University.

169 Arasse 1992, 7-8 makes similar remarks about late medieval and early modern Italian masters. In Western painting, such carefully hidden elements often encapsulated crucial theological statements; see Acres 2006.

by an angel within a cloud. The Virgin stretches her hand outside of the celestial vehicle, offering her holy belt (*hagia zōnē*) to St. Thomas.[170] Legends claim that the apostle's arrival was delayed by divine providence in order for him to receive this material proof of Mary's bodily transferal into heaven.[171] Due to its position in the scene's upper right corner, this hardly noticeable, but tremendously important vignette intersects the arc of the other apostles' clouds in the most anachronic way possible. Thus, the depiction of the assumed Virgin handing her belt to Thomas hovers alongside John the Evangelist. This overlap of diegetic planes might seem accidental.[172] However, from what I have presented so far, it is clear that Michael and Eutychios possessed an outstanding ability to deploy visual storytelling and iconographic exegesis to the most minute details. The meticulous nature of their pictorial craft and their program's general erudition makes such an explanation rather unlikely.

In fact, Geometres' typological comparison between Moses and John provides the necessary background to show that the abovementioned chronological inconsistency was programmatic and served a higher symbolic purpose. The three drop-shape clouds form a triangular structure emphasizing the figures' interaction. This underlying geometrical schema places the evangelist in an analogy with Thomas. Both apostles extend their right hands toward the Mother of God. Thomas receives the belt that ascertains her corporeal departure from the terrestrial world. John, in turn, is granted a vision of the Virgin's resurrection and ascension. In a posture reminiscent of Thomas, but also of the typical depiction of prophets, the evangelist looks straight to Mary and directs his wide-open palm toward her in a gesture of astonishment. This intercrossing of narrative planes resonates with the scene described in Geometres' *vita*, in which the evangelist receives the 'secrets' of the 'miraculous things' that happened at the Virgin's departure from this world. The author does not clarify what these secrets consisted of, but simply presents them as the 'the tablets of the Virgin's testament' received by John as a 'New Moses' within the epiphanic cloud.[173]

170 Miljković-Pepek 1967, 112-15.

171 The delayed apostle is a common motif in Byzantine Dormition narratives; see Shoemaker 2002, 67-71. However, Thomas' encounter with the resurrected Virgin and the transmission of the belt are attested only in the Latin tradition; see *Transitus Mariae A* 18, ed. Tischendorf 1866, discussed by De Giorgi 2016, 80-5. How and why this tale came to inform Palaiologan iconography is a question to which I will return elsewhere.

172 Betancourt 2016, 179, 188-96 identifies such temporal conflations in Middle and Late Byzantine Last Judgement compositions.

173 John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023.

The ambiguity of these terms, which were primarily meant to build an intertextual link between the evangelist and Moses, would have left enough room for the painters and their learned advisers to identify the Virgin's 'testament' as a mystical vision of her impending departure into heaven. John hears the 'secret' of Mary's coming resurrection at her deathbed. Then, the intersection between his cloud and that of the Virgin visually suggests a sort of access to the mystery of her corporeal *Metastasis*. The aerial meeting between John and Virgin was likely not meant as a historical event, but as a symbolic representation of the evangelist's visionary role, which turned him into a 'New Moses'. This interpretation finds further support in the vignette's spatial parallel to the actual scene of the prophet receiving the Law at Sinai. Situated on the mountain's summit, this episode occupies the corresponding spot in the upper right corner of the narthex lunette. Through their mirroring locations, the two murals compare the divine act of handing the stone tablets to the prophet with Mary's gesture of transmitting her belt to Thomas and the 'secret' vision of her transferal into heaven to John. Educated medieval beholders, probably monks immersed in hagiographical lore and hymnography, must have been able to trace such finely tuned symmetries and, one could imagine, took great pleasure in doing so. Within the program's global design, these accumulating correspondences ultimately strengthen the larger typological parallel between the epiphanic events taking place on the holy mountains of Sinai and Sion.

4 Chiastic Paths: The Reversed Spatial Narrative of the Holy Mountains

The sheer number of correspondences between narrative details can only become meaningful when viewed within an overarching mechanism of spatial mirroring. Such a macro-structure, which governs the trans-historical relationship between Sinai and Sion, emerges from the arrangement of the two pairs of the scenes within their architectural compartments. The topographical connections between the west wall of the narthex and its naos counterpart facilitate an abstraction of the notion of holy mountain. In the final section of this study, I demonstrate how the Ohrid program turns the figural evocation of theophanic landscape into a geometric device for visualizing the unfolding of God's plan throughout history. The mountain *topos* thus becomes increasingly detached from the portrayal of physical geography, assuming an almost diagrammatic character. Faith Wallis regards medieval diagrams as graphic schemata accompanied by inscriptions, which "represent the relationship between entities or concepts" and can serve as a form

of "visual exegesis".[174] To be sure, the Peribleptos program cannot be literally equated with a diagram. Yet, I argue that the pictorial evocation of the two holy mountains develops a diagrammatic dimension, acting as a visual instrument for mapping out the major axes that link the human and divine realms. At first glance, these imaginary vectors function as spatial representations. However, the Peribleptos program turns them into an underlying structure for imagining the temporal progression of events according to the divine plan. This pictorial schematization of the Sinai-Sion parallel reveals an exceptional synergy between image-making, poetry, and rhetoric.[175]

The episodes containing the physical presence of Mary, namely, the epiphany of the burning bush and the *Koimēsis*, are situated at the foot of the sacred mountains, which corresponds to the lower register. This link is enhanced by the visual parallel between the flaming *batos* and the gold vessel with burning incense inserted on a small pedestal before the Virgin's deathbed **[fig. 22]**. Both motifs allude to Mary's role as the material vessel containing the fire of Christ's divinity.[176] Conversely, the reception of the tablets by Moses and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, construed as the parallel transmission of God's Old and New Laws, appear in the lunettes. This spatial configuration prompts a paired reading of the four images, allowing the separating wall between the narthex and the naos to be perceived as exegetically translucent.[177] Nevertheless, a correlative interpretation of these scenes seems to hinder the chronological reading of the narrative program. The typological matches between the burning bush and the Dormition, the reception of the Law and Pentecost might seem to impose a bottom-up reading of both walls. In this scenario, the beholders would be forced to place the *Koimēsis* before Pentecost, thus altering the sequence of the salvific history and the liturgical cycle of great feasts.

174 Wallis 2015, 3. Hamburger 2020 discusses diagrams as visual devices of medieval relational thought, thereby providing a useful framework for how pictorial forms could function as conceptual schemata; cf. Hamburger, Roxburgh, Safran 2022; D'Agostini 2026 for an expansion of this line of inquiry into Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean.

175 The premises of this broader cultural phenomenon are examined by Maguire 1981; 1988. His analysis shows that the collocation of scenes in eleventh- and twelfth-century church interiors conforms to the principles of Greco-Roman rhetorical composition. Middle Byzantine programs, according to Maguire, formulate comparisons (*synkriseis*), hyperboles, and antitheses between different episodes from the lives of Christ and Mary. Though extremely insightful, his observations are largely confined to the figures described in the *progymnasmata*, that is, the elementary exercises of Byzantine students. My study extends this interpretive line by exploring the relationship between painting and more complex modes of rhetorical composition.

176 Cf. Dennis 2023, 132-9.

177 On iconographic transparencies in mural programs, see Vasiliu 1994.

Even so, a closer assessment of the visual logic elaborated by the painters Michael and Eutychios reveals a more complex system drawing on their plausible familiarity with rhetorical devices. I suggest that the viewers are not meant to adopt the same direction of reading for both iconographic clusters. On the contrary, the program's inherent chronology encourages them to move their eyes across the two tympana from opposite starting points: bottom-up on the west wall of the narthex (which is to say, from the burning bush to the transmission of the Law) and top-down in the naos (from Pentecost to the *Koimēsis*). This reversed, yet corresponding sense of reading also stems from the basic narrative moves embodied by the Sinai and Sion episodes. The narthex tympanum shows Moses ascending from the valley where he converses with the epiphanic shrub to the mountain's pinnacle. By contrast, the images on the west wall of the naos follow a general pattern of descent, illustrating the Greek notion of *kath-odos* (literally 'downward path'): the Spirit's tongues of fire fall upon the heads of the seated apostles; the latter descend on clouds for Mary's funeral; the angelic hosts enter the earthly plane as a cascade pouring down from the heavenly gates; and finally, Christ comes to his mother's house and bends his glory over her deathbed. While putting together the typological pairs (namely, burning bush-Dormition and reception of the Law-Pentecost), based on memorized knowledge of hymns and hagiography, one notices that the scenes' exegetical entwinement does not follow a linear logic, but represents a spatialized chiastic schema.

Also known as *antimetabolē*, the so-called *schēma chiaston* or simply chiasm is a figure of speech termed as such and theorized in the Pseudo-Hermogenic tradition.[178] This device belonged to the usual arsenal of Byzantine teachers and literati, which they derived from ancient rhetorical manuals. For example, an anonymous treatise *On Invention*, widely attributed to the famous second-century teacher Hermogenes of Tarsus, defines chiasm as the inverted construction of a fourfold period. This figure, according to Pseudo-Hermogenes, consists of the repetition of two elements in reversed order, following an ABB'A' pattern.[179] Thus, chiasm appears as a reconfiguration of natural syntax, which tends to adopt a more linear sequence, such as ABA'B'. The schema can apply to words or phrases within a sentence whose morphological characteristics and number of syllables resemble each other symmetrically. Pseudo-Hermogenes uses this device to explain the artful reordering of four single clauses or cola, which harmonize with one another crosswise. Their mirroring effect

178 Welch 1981; Isar 2005 examine the broader use of this schema in Ancient Greek thought.

179 Ps.-Hermog. *Inv.* IV.3: Kennedy 2005.

is consequently imagined as a verbal intercrossing assimilated to the cross-shaped Greek letter X/*Chi*. Though they only acquired a formalized definition in later rhetorical theory, chiastic structures had long been used in Archaic and Classical Greek literature both at a syntactic level and in structuring broader narratives and speeches.[180] In his *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle comments on the aesthetic and cognitive effects of such mirroring syntax in the formulation of 'witty sayings' (*asteia*). The latter find their best vehicle in the tense balance of antithetical elements, which pleases the audience and encapsulates knowledge (*mathēma*) most effectively.[181] The philosopher's reflections do not strictly refer to what later authors define as chiasm. Nonetheless, the use of this device strives to achieve, indeed amplify the expressive power of mirroring constructions.[182]

Interpreted in the order described above, the four-scene sequence on the west walls of the Ohrid narthex and naos conforms, through its reversed direction of reading, to the standard structure of a chiasm, that is to say, ABB'A' or in our case, down-top-top-down. This elaborate configuration shows that the ingenuity of rhetorical invention (*heuresis*) could be translated into cleverly wrought painted programs. When the Peribleptos murals were made, the spatialization of chiasm had already accumulated a long history in Byzantine visual culture. Pentcheva has shown how, in the sixth century, this geometrical pattern structured the architectural setting, aniconic mosaics, and liturgical chant of Justinian's Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.[183] By recalling the letter X/*Chi*, this device constituted an implicit invocation of Christ's sacred name. The use of chiastic signs within mosaic *clipei* typified the Spirit's mystical descent into the material *locus* generated by the magical intersection of the two oblique axes.[184] Pentcheva maintains that, at Hagia Sophia, this figure likely acquired a theurgic function, actualizing the mystery of the Incarnation. Though belonging to a distant epoch and a different cultural environment, the Great Church provides an important formal precedent for the Peribleptos program, with its strong incarnational emphasis. Even so, the geometric construction of the Sinai-Sion parallel reveals a different aspect of the intercrossing schema, whose implications in narrative iconography have not been

180 Welch 1981, 250-68; Isar 2005; Douglas 2007.

181 Aristot. *Rhet*. III.1412b, ed. Freese 1926, translation included.

182 On the cognitive function of chiasm, see Isar 2005.

183 Pentcheva 2017, 11, 85-93; 2023a; more recently, the scholar has expanded this framework to the Benedictine church and liturgy of St. Foy in Conques; see Pentcheva 2023b. These studies, together with Prof. Pentcheva's seminars on Christ's image in Byzantine domes and Hagia Sophia, sharpened my awareness of such patterns.

184 Pentcheva 2017, 88-9; 2023a, 137, 146-9.

sufficiently investigated.[185] Rather than fulfilling a mystical function, in the Ohrid frescoes, the inverted mirroring remained closer to the rhetorical employment of the *schēma chiaston*. As will become apparent, chiasm serves as an instrument of visual exegesis and a virtuous mode of creating dramatic narrative turns by balancing antithetical elements and compelling the audience to reconstruct their sequence in reverse order.[186]

Just as the narrative minutiae generate unexpected correspondences between the Sion and Sinai compositions, their chiastic sequencing surprises cultivated beholders and synthesizes the holy mountains' role as spatiotemporal nodes of sacred history. The question that arises now is how exactly Michael and Eutychios integrated this rhetorical figure among their compositional devices and why they chose to use it as an underlying structure of the mirroring theophanic summits. The Pseudo-Hermogenic corpus, including the treatise *On Invention*, had an enormous popularity among Byzantine elites, serving as a fundamental tool of rhetorical training.[187] Throughout the centuries, Greek intellectuals produced numerous commentaries and paraphrases of these works.[188] For example, in the eleventh century, Michael Psellos (1018-ca. 1078) composed a versified synopsis dedicated to Emperor Michael VII Doukas (r. 1071-78). Among other things, Psellos remarks that "a period takes chiasm too and it is inverted in some way".[189] There is compelling evidence that the later milieu to which the Peribleptos painters belonged fostered an intense dialogue between high-profile artisans and scholars who, similar to Psellos, had extensive knowledge of rhetorical theory and its employment.

The two masters belonged to an elite family of craftsmen from Thessalonike, whose members practiced both the art of painting and that of manuscript illumination.[190] These artisans also seem to have nurtured their own intellectual inclinations. In the early fourteenth century, the painter Ioannes Astrapas, probably Michael's kinsman, collaborated with Demetrios Triklinios, a scholar based in Thessalonike, for a treatise on the surface of the moon and its optical

185 Thomas 2013, 75-80 interprets the inverted parallel arrangement of the narrative reliefs on the early fourth-century Arch of Constantine in Rome as a spatial chiasm.

186 Cf. Isar 2005, who stresses the cognitive aspect of the *schēma chiaston* in Ancient Greek literature.

187 Pizzone 2026a. The so-called *Corpus Hermogenianum* consists of the five treatises Περὶ στάσεων, Περὶ εὑρέσεως, Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγων, and Περὶ μεθόδου δεινότητος, usually accompanied by Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata*; see Pizzone 2026b, 1.

188 Pizzone 2026a provides the most substantial assessment of this tradition with a particular focus on its use in the twelfth century.

189 Walker 2001.

190 Lovino 2016.

perception from earth.[191] Astrapas did not simply illustrate Triklinios' work, but acted as a partner in the latter's scientific enquiries. This collaboration sheds light on a possible channel through which the Peribleptos painters could have become acquainted with other aspects of Byzantine scholarship, such as rhetorical composition and the formal interpretation of Ancient Greek texts.

Roughly at the same time when he was studying the moon with Ioannes, between 1316 and 1319, Triklinios also produced a copy of Hesiod's *Shield* (*Aspis*) *of Heracles*, *Works and Days*, and *Theogony*. The manuscript later belonged to the fifteenth-century Greek Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472) and is now housed at the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Marc.gr. Z 464 = coll. 762).[192] Triklinios supplemented the poems with an ample exegetical apparatus spanning from Proclus (fl. fifth century) to John Tzetzes (ca. 1110-ca. 1180), John Pediasmos (ca. 1250-ca. 1310), and Manuel Moschopoulos (fl. late thirteenth-fourteenth century).[193] These scholia exhibit a keen interest in tracing the geometrical patterns underlying ancient poetry, which are graphically illustrated with marginal schemata. Such is the case of two lines from the invocation of the Muses opening *Works and Days* (f. 20r):

> Muses from Pieria, glorifying in songs,
> Come here, tell in hymns of your father Zeus,
> Through whom mortal men are unfamed (*aphatoi*) and famed (*phatoi*) alike,

191 Manolova 2021; Peers 2024, 200-40. Bianconi 2005, 91-188 offers a broader contextualization of Triklinios' work.

192 Furlan 1981, 25-8; Mioni 1985, 248-51, who notices that the codex was made in two distinct phases: the first section was completed on August 20, 1316; the second on November 16, 1319.

193 Mioni 1985, 248-51 provides the full *pinax*: Hes. *Sc.* (ff. 2r-13r) with interlinear scholia by John Pediasmos and another set of marginal *Scholia in scutum*; John Pediasmos, *Technologia in Scutum* (ff. 14r-19v); Hes. *Op.* (ff. 20r-46r) with interlinear and marginal scholia likely by Manuel Moschopoulos; Moschopoulos, *Scholia ad Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 46v-78r); John Protospatharios, *Commentarius in Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 78v-84r); John Tzetzes, *Scholia in Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 84v-116r); Proclus, *Ex* scholiis in *Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 116v-143v); Hes. *Th.* (ff. 145-169) with a set of ancient scholia and another one by Triklinios himself (ff. 145r-169r); *Scholia antiqua in Hesiodi Theogoniam* (ff. 170-184v); John Galenos the Deacon, *Allegoriae in Hesiodi Theogoniam* (ff. 185r-218r); John Galenos the Deacon, *Allegoria in Homeri Iliadem Δ 1-4* (ff. 218v-220r); Michael Psellos, *Allegoria de Tantalo* (ff. 220v-221r), *Allegoria de Sphinge* (ff. 221r-223r), *Allegoria de Tantalo* (ff. 223r-224v); *Mythologica varia* (ff. 225r). On Pediasmos' Late Byzantine scholia, see Panegyres 2021; Juan-López 2024, who argues that the scholia by John Protospatharios and John Galenos the Deacon belong, in fact, to Pediasmos, whom Triklinios styles with different titles. Cardin, Pontani 2017 investigate Hesiod's broader reception in Byzantium.

> And named (*rhētoi*) and unnamed (*arrhētoi*) alike by the will
> of great Zeus.[194]

Along the lines of Aristotle's later observations, Hesiod employs chiasm to enhance the expressive effect of two antithetical pairs. This mirroring structure marks a highly dramatic moment when the Muses are summoned to convey the intricacies of Zeus' all-governing volition. On the page's right margin, a scholium attributed to Moschopoulos signposts this device as a *schēma chiaston* **[fig. 23]**. Beneath this comment, the scribe drew a *Chi*-shaped figure showing the crosswise matching of the reversed pairs *aphatoi-phatoi* and *rhētoi-arrhētoi*.[195] It is highly probable that, through their familiarity with scholars like Triklinios, Ioannes Astrapas and his relatives, including Michael, were initiated in such technical devices of Greek literature. In fact, the Venice codex, in which the chiastic schema is preserved, showcases a special affinity with image-makers. The poems that the scholar copy have a strong ekphrastic dimension, describing the visual program on Herakles' imaginary *Aspis*, as well as various tools and techniques associated with agriculture. The latter are also illustrated by two miniatures, which are relatively rare in Byzantine editions of ancient texts. Juxtaposed on ff. 33v and 34r, the images portray two husbandmen operating a mortar and a plow, alongside a panoply of farming tools duly accompanied by their Ancient Greek names from Hesiod **[fig. 24]**.[196]

Certainly, the manuscript was made more than two decades after the completion of the Peribleptos frescoes. Nevertheless, its emphasis on craft – be it verbal, mechanical, or agrarian – substantiates an atmosphere of intellectual permeability, which must have characterized Palaiologan Thessalonike more broadly. Erudite scholars like Triklinios moved in the same circles as elite painters, such as Ioannes Astrapas and perhaps Michael or the unknown illuminator of the Marciana Hesiod. These masters not only contributed to projects of secular learning but also assimilated certain scholarly skills and conceptual devices, putting them to work in their predominantly religious visual craft. In fact, the Peribleptos frescoes showcase a strong investment in the writerly dimension of painting. As Ivan Drpić notes, Michael and Eutychios

194 Μοῦσαι Πιερίηθεν ἀοιδῇσι κλείουσαι, | δεῦτε Δί' ἔννέπετε, σφέτερον πατέρ' ὑμνείουσαι. | ὃν τε διὰ βροτοὶ ἄνδρες ὁμῶς ἄφατοί τε φατοί τε, | ῥητοί τ' ἄρρητοί τε Διὸς μεγάλοιο ἔκητι. Hes., *Op.* 1-4: Most 2006, translation included.

195 On chiastic diagrams as an instrument for visualizing antithetic relationships between ideas and terms, see D'Agostini 2026, 104-7.

196 Furlan 1981, 26-7; Bryer 1986, 63, 66-80. A full digital facsimile is available at `https://www.internetculturale.it/jmms/iccuviewer/iccu.jsp?id=oai%3A193.206.197.121%3A18%3AVE0049%3ACSTOR.240.10174`.

emulated contemporaneous scribal practices by including signatures formulated as metrical epigrams similar to those left by copyists in their manuscripts.[197] However, their engagement with literary culture seems to have extended beyond the reinterpretation of scribal markers. Their work, I suggest, proposes a functional equivalence between the design of monumental programs and the processes of rhetorical invention.[198]

The spatialized chiasm at the Ohrid church is far from being singular among the murals made by Michael, Eutychios, and their associates. One notices an even more conspicuous example at the cathedral of the Mother of God Ljeviška in Prizren, present-day Kosovo. The church underwent an extensive renovation at the beginning of the fourteenth century under the patronage of the Serbian King Stefan Milutin, who, by that time, had also become the son-in-law of Emperor Andronikos II.[199] Like Sgouros, Milutin hired the Astrapas workshop, which was now led by Michael himself or another master Astrapas.[200] Dating to the eleventh century, the building was originally designed as a three-aisled basilica serving as the city's cathedral. However, Milutin turned its nave into a domed naos of the cross-in-square type.[201] Astrapas used the four masonry piers supporting the main dome as an architectural framework for another spatial chiasm **[fig. 25]**.

Here, the schema is no longer employed to organize narrative scenes. Instead, it establishes a reversed mirroring relationship between two repeated pairs of Christ and the Virgin distributed across the naos, similar to a quadruple period described by Pseudo-Hermogenes **[fig. 26]**. Upon entering the naos from the west side, viewers saw the juxtaposed images of the Savior and his mother on the east faces of the west pair of pilasters under the cupola.[202] Then, as they moved eastward, beneath the dome, they would have encountered the same iconic couple on the next two piers. Intriguingly, the repeated figures of Christ and Mary are arranged in a crisscross pattern along the imaginary diagonals of the square defined by the four dome-supporting piers. The first time, the Virgin is shown on the northwest pilaster and her son on the southwest one. The second time, however, they switch positions: the Savior is

197 Drpić 2013, 341-7.

198 Cf. Maguire 1981.

199 Panić, Babić 1975; Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 23-39; Jevtić 2021-22.

200 Kostić 2023, 63 questions the identity between the Ohrid and the Prizren Astrapades.

201 Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 23-39; Jevtić 2021-22, 139-45.

202 Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 57 records the repetition of Christ's and the Virgin's figures but does not notice their underlying geometry.

painted on the northeast pier, while his mother would have appeared on the southeast one, which unfortunately lost its decoration. Even so, given that the repetition of the Christ-Virgin pair was a common feature of Late Byzantine murals, it is reasonable to infer that a second image of the Mother of God originally accompanied Christ on the southeast pier, at the threshold of the sanctuary.[203] What distinguishes the Ljeviška program is that the spatial disposition of this reduplicated couple follows an ABBA pattern, producing a monumental *X*/*Chi* traced along the diagonals connecting the four dome-supporting piers.[204]

While the Prizren example represents a fairly literal application of chiasm, its earlier use in Ohrid showcases a much more sophisticated spatiotemporal thought. By placing the poles of sacred history – Mounts Sinai and Sion – in a relationship of crosswise mirroring, Michael and Eutychios crafted more than a pictorial analogue to an ancient rhetorical figure. Their narrative program employs underlying geometries to render visible the paradoxical convergence of opposites in the unfolding of the divine plan. Hesiod uses chiasm to express the ungraspable wits of Zeus' mind, which makes men "unfamed and famed", "named and unnamed", in a passage meant to channel divine knowledge through the Muses.[205] Similarly, Michael and Eutychios use the chiastic construction of the holy mountains to reveal the mystery of God's providence, which begins with the burning bush and culminates with the Virgin's transferal into heaven. Their pictorial narrative centers the theme of divine-human reciprocity materialized in the mirroring topographies of the sacred mountains. On Sinai, God descends within the burning bush to reveal himself to Moses. Then, the prophet ascends onto the summit to meet God. Likewise, on Sion, the Holy Spirit comes down on the apostles and Christ descends to take his mother's soul. Finally, Mary rises from the dead and ascends into her son's glory as the perfected human being. Taken together, these reciprocal descents and ascents transform the Sinai-Sion parallel into a diagrammatic representation of salvation history, in which the holy mountains frame symmetrical exchanges between the human and the divine.

203 Kalopissi-Verti 2006, 118-31. At Prizren, Mary's standing figure is repeated both alongside Christ and independently several times across the naos; see Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 57.

204 Cf. Pentcheva 2017, 41, 85-92; 2023a, who discusses the crossed axes enclosed by a circle within the spatial poetics of Hagia Sophia.

205 Without postulating a direct connection with the Peribleptos murals, it is worth noting that in Marc.gr. Z 464, John Galenos' (in fact, Pediasmos') commentary on the *Theogony* interprets Zeus as an allegorical rendition of the Christian God; see Pontani 2015, 376.

The chiastic arrangement of the Sinai and Sion compositions not only captures the providential design of history but also visualizes the retrospective manner in which its hidden logic is disclosed to humanity. From a typological perspective, the meaning of Old Testament episodes, such as Moses' encounters with God, can only be discerned through their correspondence with the events set in motion by Christ's Incarnation. The Ohrid program translates this hermeneutic hindsight through the reading pattern imposed by the inverted mirroring of the holy mountain scenes. In the Prizren naos, the chiastic disposition of the reduplicated figures of the Savior and his mother leads the beholders eastward, drawing their gazes toward the sanctuary. At the Peribleptos, however, the Sion-Sinai sequence accompanies its audience as they walk away from the altar, heading toward the exit.

The frescoes' intended beholders, probably late thirteenth-century monks, could only encounter this fourfold concatenation of biblical episodes in reverse chronological order. One can imagine how, having left the cross-in-square naos, the members of the monastic community first saw the image of the Virgin's Dormition in St. John's house on Mount Sion. Then, they would have raised their eyes toward the tympanum depicting the *hyperōon* where the Spirit descended on the apostles. Upon passing into the narthex, before stepping out of the church, these unknown monks beheld the representation of Moses receiving the Law on Sinai's peak and witnessing a proleptic vision of the Lord's Incarnation through Mary within the burning bush. Thus, as viewers moved toward the exit, sacred history unfolded before their eyes in reverse order, from fulfilment to prefiguration, in the typical retrospective layout of typological exegesis.

The inverted, chiastic sequence of the Sion-Sinai images would have allowed beholders to leave the church's precinct with a vivid sense of the holy mountain as a spatial catalyst of God's intervention in history. Having passed through the building's west door, medieval viewers would have immersed themselves in the exterior landscape and become aware once again that the monastery stood on a height above the city of Ohrid. Positioned along the route of departure, the Sion-Sinai scenes likely encouraged beholders to project the figural *topos* of the holy mountain onto the church itself and its surroundings, thus completing the interpretive circle traced throughout this essay. At the Peribleptos, the Marian interpretation of Moses' theophanies, which had initially encapsulated Sinai's charisma as a *locus sanctus*, became an iconographic pivot through which the spatial paradigm of the holy mountain was reconfigured within a new geographical, devotional, and intellectual setting.

Figures





Figure 1a-b Moses before the Burning Bush and the Reception of the Law on Mount Sinai above the Dedicatory Inscription, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photos: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

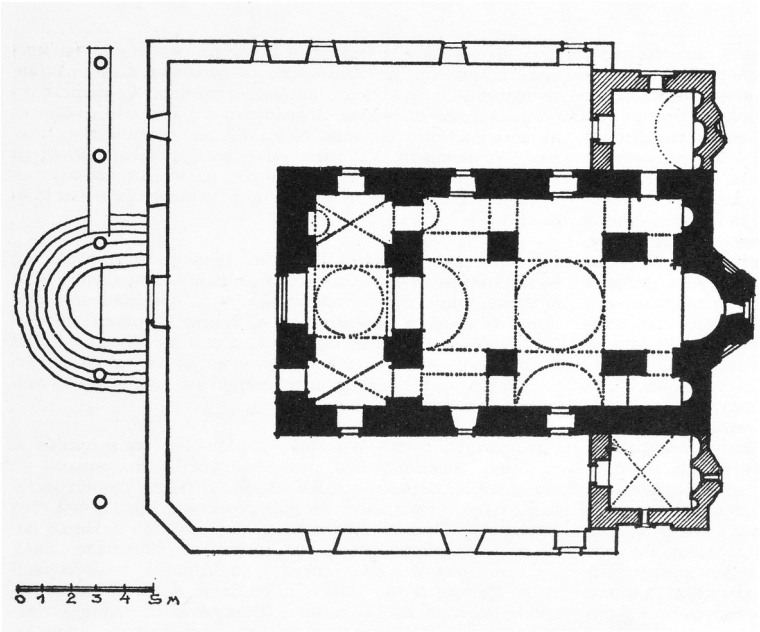


Figure 2 Ground Plan of the Virgin Peribleptos Church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, ante 1294-95 with a mid-fourteenth-century U-shaped ambulatory. Source: Grozdanov, C. (1980). *Ohridskoto zidno slikarstvo od XIV vek*. Ohrid: Zavod za zaštita na spomenicite na kulturata i Narodei Muzej, 122



Figure 3 Moses before the Burning Bush (Detail: The Mother of God), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 4 The Reception of the Law on Mount Sinai, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 5 View of Mount Sinai at Dawn (August 31, 2006). Photo: Einsamer Schütze, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 6 King Nebuchadnezzar's Dream Interpreted by the Prophet Daniel, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, north tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 7 "Wisdom Built Herself a House", fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, south tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

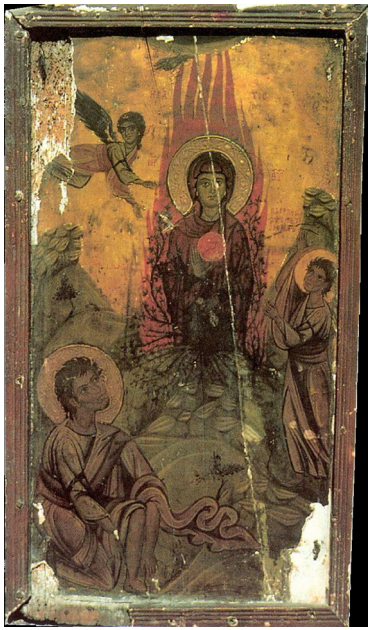


Figure 8
Moses before the Burning Bush, icon, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Jerusalem, late twelfth-early thirteenth century. Source: Public domain



Figure 9
The Mother of God among Ancestors, Prophets, and Apostles, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, late eleventh-early twelfth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai

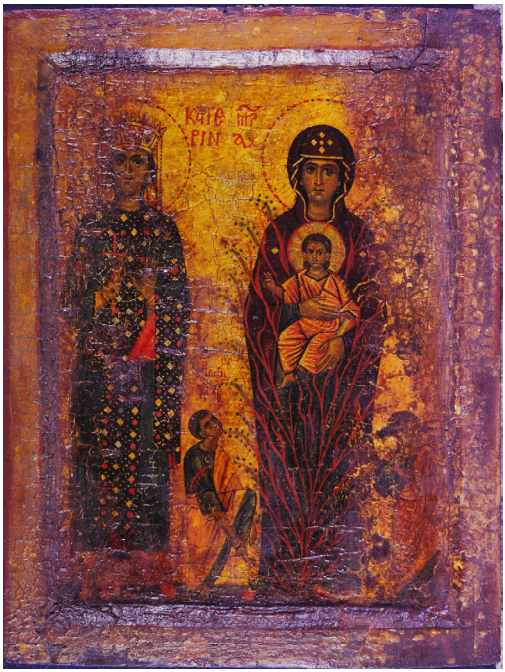


Figure 10
St. Catherine and the Virgin of the Burning Bush, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 11
The Virgin of the Burning Bush Flanked by Sinai Saints, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 12 The Virgin of the Burning Bush flanked by Moses, Elijah, and St. Gregory of Nazianzos, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, mid-thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 13 The Transfiguration of Christ, mosaic, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, *katholikon*, apse conch, post 548. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 14
The Virgin as the Holy Mountain Flanked by SS Peter, Paul, Antony, and Euthymios, and Surmounted by Moses and Elijah, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, mid-thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai

Figure 15
a) Moses before the Burning Bush, Gospels of Hethum II, Yerevan, Matenadaran 979, f. 94v, 1286; **b)** Moses before the Burning Bush, Gospels of Hethum II, Yerevan, Matenadaran 979, f. 228r, 1286. © Matenadaran – Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan







Figure 16 View of the Monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos and its Surroundings (early August 2025), Ohrid, North Macedonia. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu



Figure 17
The Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 18 The Descent of the Holy Spirit, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 19 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: Christ Embracing Mary's Winged Soul), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 20 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: The Virgin's Transferal into Heaven), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

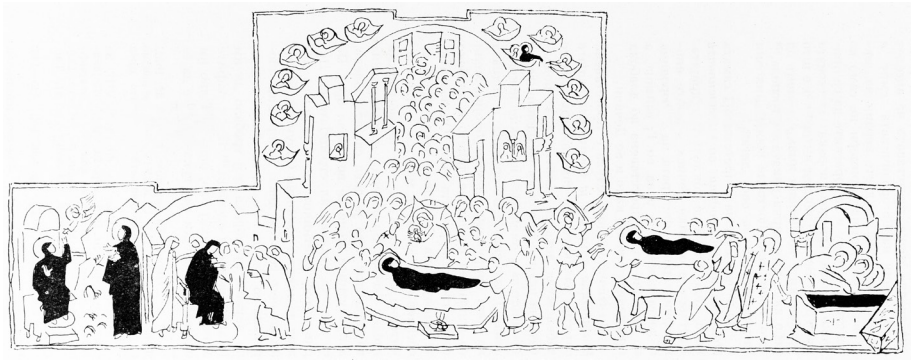


Figure 21 Narrative Cycle of the Virgin's Last Days on Earth, Dormition, and Assumption into Heaven, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Source: Miljković-Pepek, P. (1967). *Deloto na zografite Mihailo i Evtihii*. Skopje: Patrimoine culturel et historique de la R.S. de Macedoine, 112



Figure 22 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: Brazier with Incense), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

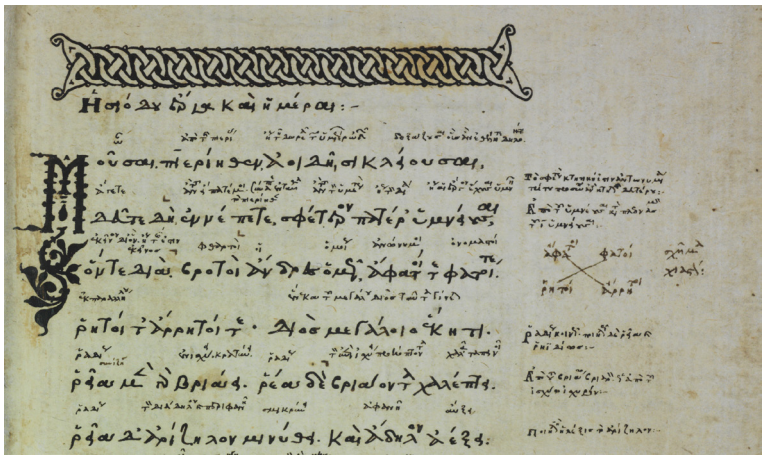


Figure 23 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Marc.gr. Z 464 (= coll. 762), f. 20r, Copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days* by Demetrios Triklinios, 1316-19. © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice



Figure 24 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Marc.gr. Z 464 (= coll. 762), f. 34r, Miniature Attached to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 1316-19. © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice

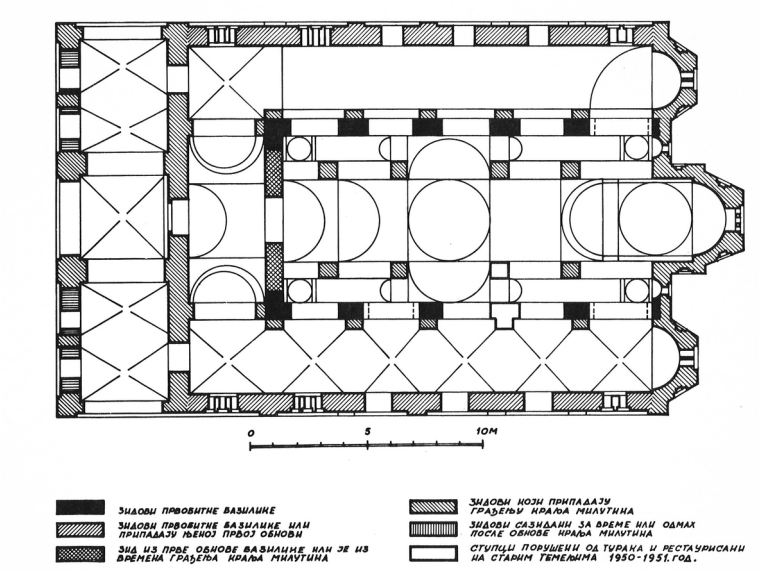


Figure 25 Ground plan of the Bogorodica Ljeviška church, Prizren, Kosovo, ca. 1306-09. Source: Panić, D.; Babić, G. (1975). *Bogorodica Ljeviška*. Belgrade: Utmenički Spomenici Jugoslavije, 34, fig. 2



Figure 26 The Reduplicated Virgin-Christ Pair Forming a Spatial Chiasm under the Dome, frescoes, Astrapas workshop, Bogorodica Ljeviška church, Prizren, Kosovo, naos, central bay, ca. 1307-13. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Raška and Prizren

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The Sinai Landscape in Cretan Icon-Painting (Fifteenth-Sixteenth c.)

Maria Vassilaki
University of Thessaly, Greece

Abstract This paper investigates the association of the monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai with Venetian Crete. Drawing on documentary evidence in the form of commissions preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, it examines Cretan icon-painting and traces the development of the iconographic theme of the Sinai landscape as an independent composition on Cretan icons and triptychs. Finally, it highlights the essential role played by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Cretan painters, such as Andreas and Nikolaos Ritzos, as well as Georgios Klontzas and Domenikos Theotokopoulos in shaping the iconography of the Sinai landscape.

Keywords Sinai. Venetian Crete. Sinai landscape. Cretan icon-painting. St. Catherine.

Sinai, associated as it is with well-known events narrated in the Old Testament,[1] became the ultimate holy place, a *locus sanctus* as it is usually called. It was at the foot of Mount Sinai that Moses saw the Burning Bush and heard the voice of God asking him to remove his sandals, while he was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. It was also at Sinai that God appeared to Moses and delivered the

1 According to the Book of Exodus (3,1-5), it was on Mount Horeb and at the foot of Mount Sinai that Moses while tending the flock of his father-in-law, saw the Burning Bush and heard the voice of God asking him to remove his sandals. Later in the same book (24,16) God appeared to Moses at Sinai, again on Mount Horeb, and delivered to him the tablets of the law with the Ten Commandments. Therefore, it is reasonable to find in the book Exodus (24,16) the phrase: *The Glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.*

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Tablets of the Law to him. A fortified monastery dedicated to the Virgin was built by the Emperor Justinian in the mid-sixth century at the foot of Mount Sinai, on the site of the Burning Bush.[2]

Sinai – already an Old Testament *locus sanctus* – also became the repository of St. Catherine's body. After the saint was decapitated in Alexandria, her body was transported by angels and buried at Sinai. We can't be certain when the relics of the saint were discovered at the top of the mountain named after her. Once discovered, they were transferred to the monastery's main church, the *katholikon*, and placed in a marble sarcophagus on the south side of the sanctuary, where they started miraculously to exude oil.[3]

At Sinai, the landscape and the monastery itself both signify the holiness of the site and thus become inseparable **[fig. 1]**. This paper explores how and when the Sinai landscape was visually transformed from merely serving as a background to Old Testament events associated with the region into an independent pictorial composition. In this context, my aim is to investigate the role played by Cretan icon painters in the formation of themes of Sinaitic iconography, with particular emphasis on the Sinai landscape itself. First, however, it is necessary to examine the circumstances that enabled Cretan painters to produce a remarkable number of icons and triptychs for Sinai.

The monastery of Sinai maintained strong connections with Crete because it owned a large number of properties on the island: villages, vineyards, mills and churches. These possessions were of such importance to Sinai that, soon after the Venetians arrived in Crete in 1210, the abbot of Sinai, Symeon, appealed to the doge in Venice to confirm the monastery's ownership of these properties. In March 1212, the doge of Venice, Pietro Ziani, issued a decree guaranteeing Sinai's rights over its Cretan possessions and granting the monastery exemption from various export duties.[4] One of Sinai's most prestigious dependencies in Crete was its *metochion* in Candia, the capital city of Venetian Crete. This complex included a church dedicated to St. Catherine, built in 1555, which survives to this day. The church of St. Catherine in present-day Heraklion houses an important collection of icons.

The decree of 1212 clearly demonstrates, on the one hand, Venice's desire to maintain close and amicable relations with the Sinai monastery and, on the other, the importance of the Cretan dependencies to the monastery at Sinai. The close connection between Sinai and Crete is reflected in the considerable number of Cretan

2 Grossmann 1990, 29-40; Koufopoulos, Myriantheos 2024, 41-105.

3 Ševčenko 2006a, 118-37; Ševčenko 2006b, 130-3.

4 Tafel, Thomas [1856-57] 1964, 2: no. 233, 146-50; Ševčenko 2006a, 119-20; Maltezou 2023, 53-5; Tsougarakis 2026, 62-9.

icons produced for the monastery. Indeed, a remarkable number of Cretan icons and triptychs are found in the monastery. Some of these works bear the signatures of well-known Cretan painters. For example, an icon with St. John the Theologian dictating the text of his Gospel to his disciple Prochoros before a cave **[fig. 2]**, is the work of the most distinguished painter of Candia during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, Angelos Akotantos. The painter's original signature, ΧΕΙΡ ΑΓΓΕΛΟΥ, which presumably existed on the lower right side of the composition, was overpainted in the late eighteenth century.[5] An icon of the Deesis also bears the signature of Angelos, quite worn, beneath the footstool of Christ's throne.[6] At least five more icons in the monastery can be attributed to the painter Angelos, on iconographic and stylistic grounds.[7]

According to Angelos' will, drawn up in 1436, the painter had a close relationship with the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia, to which he bequeathed a sum of money and, under certain conditions, part of his immoveable property. He also bequeathed to the Sinaitic *metochion* of Candia a tondo icon of St. Catherine, which was to be displayed annually on the saint's feast day in commemoration of him. The icon itself has either not survived or has not yet been located. However, a tondo icon of St. Catherine, formerly in Skradin, Croatia, and now in the Episcopal Palace in Šibenik, may be attributed to Angelos on iconographic and stylistic grounds.[8]

It seems that Angelos was not the only fifteenth-century Cretan painter to have connections with Sinai. Indeed, Andreas Ritzos (documented 1451-92) and his son Nikolaos (doc. 1482-1503), both active during the second half of the fifteenth century,[9] were also associated with the monastery. The central panel of a triptych surviving at Sinai **[fig. 3]**, which is divided into two registers, shows on the upper register Moses standing before the Burning Bush on the left side, Moses untying his sandals in the middle, and Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law on the right side.[10] On the lower register there is the Burial of St. Catherine. On the left wing of the triptych, also divided into two registers, St. John the Baptist and

5 Drandakis 1990, 127, fig. 80; Vassilaki 2021, 18-20, figs. 4, 5a.

6 Drandakis 1990, 127, fig. 77; Vassilaki 2021, 20, fig. 6.

7 These are, for example, the icons of the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple, an icon of the Deesis, and one more icon of the Deesis with St. Phanourios instead of St. John the Baptist, and a tondo icon with the Embrace of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Drandakis 1990, 127, figs. 77, 78, 81; Vassilaki 2021, 20, 22, figs 6, 7.

8 Vassilaki 2021, 26-7, fig. 9.

9 Cattapan 1973, 238-82.

10 Nelson, Collins 2006, entry no. 58, 270-3 (Angela Volan); Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 5, fig. 2; Vassilaki 2021, 33-5, fig. 11.

St. James are depicted, while on the right wing, we see St. Andrew and St. Anthony. This triptych can be attributed, on iconographic and stylistic grounds, to the Cretan painter Andreas Ritzos, and is therefore dated to the second half of the fifteenth century. In this triptych the landscape of Sinai takes the shape of three mountainous peaks, which correspond to the actual landscape of the monastery: Mount Horeb or Mount Moses stands in the middle, the Mount of St. Catherine is on the right and the Mount of St. Episteme is on the left.

Andreas Ritzos can also be associated with additional triptychs of Sinaitic iconography preserved at Sinai, such as one (inv. no. 1566) showing the Burial of St. Catherine on the right wing of the front side and Moses untying his sandals before the Burning Bush on the right wing of the reverse **[figs 4-5]**.[11] Both the signature ΒΙΚΤΟΡΟC ΚΡΗ(ΤΟC) (by Viktor the Cretan) and the date ΑΧΝΑ (1651) were added in the eighteenth century.[12]

On a third triptych (inv. no. 1574), which can also be attributed to Andreas Ritzos, the right wing of its rear side is divided into two horizontal zones: the upper zone shows Moses before the Burning Bush, untying his sandals and receiving the Tablets of the Law; the lower one shows the Burial of St. Catherine **[fig. 6]**.[13] Once again, the signature of a sixteenth-century Cretan painter, Michael Damaskinos, was added in the eighteenth century.[14]

In all these examples the Sinai landscape has taken the shape of the three mountainous peaks, which correspond to the actual landscape of the monastery: Mount Horeb (or of Moses) in the middle, the Mount of St. Catherine on the right side, and the Mount of St. Episteme on the left. In these triptychs two new iconographic variations for the Virgin of the Burning Bush made their appearance. In the first, the bust of the Virgin with the Christ Child in a *mandorla* is reminiscent of the Virgin Platytera **[figs 5-6]**. In the second, the Virgin and the Christ-Child are shown full-length seated in a *mandorla* of heavenly light **[fig. 3]**, in the centre of a green bush surrounded by bright red flames.

On one of my visits to Sinai, in September 2006, I came across a rather unusual piece of work: a polyptych, in the form of a pentaptych (inv. no. 1578), with minute dimensions.[15] Each of its panels measures just 7.6 cm in height, and 5.4 cm in width. One wing of the polyptych is missing. Twelve Gospel scenes, from the so-called Dodekaorton,

11 Vassilaki 2021, 35, figs. 12-14.

12 Vassilaki 2023, 199, fig. 10.5.

13 Vassilaki 2021, 39, fig. 15.

14 Vassilaki 2021, 39, fig. 16; 2023, 201-2, fig. 10.6.

15 Vassilaki 2009, 746-8, pls 5-9; 2021, 40-7, figs 17-19; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 7-8, fig. 3.

are to be found on the pentaptych's wings **[fig. 7]**. The front side of the central panel shows the Nativity of Christ, while the wings show the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Annunciation, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, the Ascension of Christ, the Pentecost, the Doubting of Thomas, and the Dormition of the Virgin. On the rear side of the central panel there is a representation of the three mountains of the Sinai landscape and this makes it very important for this paper **[fig. 8]**. This view of Mt. Sinai remains visible when the pentaptych is closed and this adds further importance to its representation.

The significance of this polyptych becomes even greater when considered alongside a contract drawn up by the Cretan notary Giorgio Cumno, and signed in Candia on 11 September 1499 between the painter Nikolaos Ritzos and Gerasimos Kypraios, a monk in the Sinaitic *metochion* of Candia.[16] The contract concerned twenty-four works in the form of icons, *panaghiaria*[17] and triptychs, presumably painted by Nikolaos Ritzos himself. Kypraios, who was about to travel from Crete to Mount Sinai, wanted Nikolaos Ritzos to safeguard them for as long as he was away. In the event of Kypraios' death, the painter was to deliver each of these works to monasteries in the Aegean (the monastery of St. John the Theologian on the island of Patmos), the Dodecanese (the monastery of St. Anthony on the island of Rhodes), the Ionian islands (the monastery in Strophades near Zakynthos), to Mount Athos (the monastery of Dionysiou), and most importantly to Sinai. In fact, seventeen works were to be delivered to St. Catherine's monastery at Sinai. The contract makes it clear that all these works had to be handed over in person to the monk Klimis or to the monk Janni Griparis, both of them monks at Sinai.

Although this contract is not a commission, it nevertheless documents an exceptionally close relationship between Nikolaos Ritzos and the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia. It demonstrates not only that the *metochion* entrusted him with valuable works, but also that Sinai itself was a major recipient of his production. Though there is no concrete evidence, there is every reason to believe that the seventeen works intended for Sinai reached the monastery. Seen in this light, the survival of the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos at Sinai is entirely consistent with the documentary evidence. However, whether it can be identified with one of the seventeen works mentioned in the contract must remain an open question.

16 First published in Cattapan 1972, 213-14, doc. no. 9; also published in Cattapan 1973, 253, 265-6, doc. no. 27; Vassilaki 2009, 741-3, 746-8.

17 A *panaghiarion*, which owes its name to that of the Virgin (*Panaghia*), is a small liturgical paten with a representation of the Virgin, and is intended to carry the bread offered to the Virgin by monks during the liturgy. *ODB* 1991, 3: 1569.

The representation of Mt. Sinai on the pentaptych, attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, is of particular interest, as it constitutes the oldest surviving representation of the view of Mt. Sinai in Cretan icon-painting, in which the landscape becomes an independent composition. This seems to suggest that already by the end of the fifteenth century representations of Mt. Sinai, in the form of drawings or prints from woodcuts, were circulating in Venetian Crete. A very telling example is the print from a woodcut based on an on-site sketch by Erhard Reuwich **[fig. 9]**, a painter from Utrecht, who had accompanied Bernard of Breydenbach on his journey to the Holy Land and Sinai in 1483. The travel book by Bernard of Breydenbach, illustrated with woodcuts by Reuwich, was first published in Latin in 1486, and became so popular that between 1486 and 1522 it was reprinted twelve times and was also translated into German, Dutch, French and Spanish.[18]

In this pentaptych the landscape takes the form of a triple-peaked complex, placed against a blue background rather than a golden one, which is more typical in such a work. It is obvious that the landscape dominates the composition, while the sacred events are, by comparison, miniature in scale. In the middle is Mount Moses with Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law. Lower down and to the left Moses is standing before the Burning Bush. On the peak to the right, which is the Mount of St. Catherine, there is the translation of St. Catherine's body by angels from Alexandria and its burial at Sinai. There is also an oasis with trees in a narrow valley to the right. It's not clear whether the monastery of St. Catherine was also included in this representation.

The polyptych's iconography and style suggest that it was painted in Venetian Crete in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, its miniature-like quality makes it highly possible that it was painted by Nikolaos Ritzos, the son of Andreas Ritzos. Nikolaos was active in Venetian Candia, in the last decades of the fifteenth century. There is only one icon known to bear the signature of this painter. It is in the Icon Museum of the Old Orthodox church in Sarajevo, Bosnia.[19] The icon shows the Deesis in the middle, ten Dodekaorton scenes and single saints on the border. The inscription on the Sarajevo icon gives the name of its painter, Nikolaos Ritzos, and also pays tribute to his father. It reads: ΧΕΙΡ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ ΡΙΤΖΟΥ, ΥΙΟC ΤΟΥ ΜΑΙCΤΡΟΥ ΑΝΔΡΕΟΥ (the hand of Nikolaos Ritzos, son of the master Andreas).

The contract discussed above, although not itself a commission to Nikolaos Ritzos, nevertheless demonstrates that the Sinaitic

18 von Breydenbach 1486; Jacoby 2006, 85, fig. 72.

19 Vocotopoulos 2005, 207-26.

metochion in Candia commissioned works from Cretan painters on a substantial scale. This would explain why painters such as Andreas and Nikolaos Ritzos developed a repertoire of Sinaitic themes to satisfy the monastery's demand.

It is this view of Mt. Sinai that also appears on the central panel of the rear side of the so-called Modena triptych, which is to be found in the Galleria Estense of Modena **[fig. 10]**. It bears the signature of Domenikos Theotokopoulos/El Greco ΧΕΙΡ ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ (hand of Domenikos). The Modena triptych is dated between 1566 and 1569 depending on whether it was painted while Theotokopoulos was still in Crete, till at least the end of 1566, or after his arrival in Venice in 1567/1568. The Sinai landscape as it appears on the central panel of the rear side of Theotokopoulos' Modena triptych shows parallels with that in the pentaptych. Of course, we have to take into account that we're comparing two works of completely different dimensions. As already mentioned, the dimensions of each of the pentaptych's panels are 7.6 cm in height, and 5.4 cm in width. The dimensions of the panel depicting the Sinai landscape on the Modena triptych are 37 × 23.8 cm, which means it is about five times larger than the pentaptych's panel in both height and width.

In the Modena triptych the three peaks of Sinai are placed diagonally, and the monastery is placed at the foot of the central mountain, Mount Moses. A caravan of travellers approaches the monastery from the right and is welcomed by Sinai fathers. A second group of pilgrims approaches from the far left. An inscription on the upper part of the Modena triptych composition, written in gold letters, reads: ΤΟ ΑΓΙΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΒΑΔΙΣΤΟΝ ΟΡΟΣ ΤΟ ΣΙΝΕΟΝ (the Holy and God-trodden Mount Sinai), making reference to Mount Sinai alone and not to the monastery of St. Catherine.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the depiction of the Sinai landscape on the pentaptych derives from a larger composition, presumably also executed in the workshop of the Ritzos family. This, in turn, suggests that long before copperplate engravings of the Sinai landscape began to circulate in the final decades of the sixteenth century, representations of Sinai – whether in the form of drawings or woodcut prints – were already available to Cretan painters by at least the closing decades of the fifteenth century. If so, Domenikos Theotokopoulos would have been familiar with such representations before leaving Crete. His View of Mt. Sinai would therefore not have depended exclusively on Giovanni Battista Fontana's copperplate engraving, printed in Venice in 1569.[20] Perhaps both the Modena Triptych and Fontana's engraving were based on

20 Kühnel 1981, 171-4, figs 8, 10, 11; Dillon 1995, 236-7, fig. 7; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 18-20, fig. 10.

an earlier representation of Mount Sinai that has not survived or has not yet been located.

El Greco was to paint the View of Mt. Sinai once again on a panel, housed today in the Historical Museum of Crete, in Heraklion **[fig. 11]**.[21] This is believed to be the panel mentioned on 31 January 1600 in the inventory of Fulvio Orsini, the librarian of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in Rome. The panel was to be bequeathed to Cardinal Odoardo Farnese. In the inventory of Fulvio Orsini the panel is described as "having a walnut frame with a landscape of Mount Sinai, painted by the hand of a Greek disciple of Titian" (*Quadro corniciato di noce con un paese del monte Sinai, di mano d'un greco scolare di Tiziano*). Though the panel does not bear the painter's signature, its attribution to Domenikos Theotokopoulos has been generally accepted. It is known that Theotokopoulos lived in the palace of Alessandro Farnese between the years 1570 and 1572. In these years, it's believed that the panel with the View of Mt. Sinai was painted. The composition shows the Sinai landscape, the monastery of St. Catherine and small-scale scenes of pilgrims. In the left corner of the foreground, three Western pilgrims wearing short capes and hats are approaching. On the right side of the foreground three pilgrims are arriving on camels, while a fourth one has descended from a horse and is kissing the hand of a Sinaite monk, who is welcoming him to the monastery. Mt. Moses in the middle is scattered with small chapels (hermitages), and also includes the staircase that leads up to its peak, which survives to this day. The fortified monastery has been placed diagonally at the foot of Mt. Moses. There is no doubt that El Greco's composition relies heavily on Fontana's copperplate engraving, which, as already mentioned, was printed in Venice in 1569.

El Greco was not the only Cretan painter who depicted the View of Sinai during the second half of the sixteenth century. The Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas,[22] a contemporary of El Greco, also painted the View of Mt. Sinai and of the monastery in two triptychs, both of which bear his signature.

The first one, known as the Yorkshire triptych, is today in the collection of Marianna Latsis in Athens **[fig. 12]**.[23] The View of Mt. Sinai is on the reverse of the central panel. The three mountainous peaks are pulled back towards the background in order to leave more space for the inclusion of the monastery, of scenes from the everyday life of the Sinaite monks, and of Old Testament scenes. For the depiction of the monastery, Klontzas adopted an imaginary

21 Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 32-43 with all the previous bibliography.

22 On the Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas and his work, cf. Chatzidakis, Drakopoulou 1997, 83-96.

23 Fotopoulos 1996, no. 24, 96-111, esp. 105-7 (M. Kazanaki-Lappa).

architectural representation with a high bell tower and a wing with an arched two-storey portico in the background. The landscape is full of scenes of monastic life and also of the Old Testament scenes, such as the Crossing of the Red Sea in the foreground and the Worship of the Golden Calf.

The second triptych by Georgios Klontzas, known as the Spada triptych,[24] also shows the View of Mt. Sinai on the reverse of its central panel **[fig. 13]**.[25] Once again, the three mountainous peaks are pulled back towards the background offering most of the surface to scenes of monastic life and to the Old Testament scenes of the Crossing of the Red Sea and the Worship of the Golden Calf.

The Cretan triptychs with Sinaitic scenes that are preserved in the monastery of St. Catherine to this day were most probably commissioned by the monastery itself or were commissioned by individuals and offered to the monastery on the occasion of their pilgrimage to Sinai. The document of 1499, mentioned above in relation to the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, can easily support the hypothesis of works commissioned by or for the monastery at Sinai and executed in Candia.

The impressive number of Cretan icons and triptychs depicting Sinaitic subjects might suggest that at least some of these works were produced *in situ*. In other words, is it possible that some Cretan painters established themselves at Sinai? Appealing though this hypothesis may be, I find it difficult to accept it in the absence of convincing supporting evidence. Rather, I believe that very few, if any, Cretan painters travelled to Sinai during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The available evidence instead suggests that works were produced in Crete and transported to Sinai through the well-established network linking the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia with the monastery of St. Catherine.

This paper tried to show the role played by Cretan painters in establishing themes of Sinaitic iconography. Moreover, it tried to show the role of Cretan painters in establishing the view of Sinai and turning it into an independent composition. What I find really interesting is the fact that the depictions of the View of Mt. Sinai – as it appears in the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, in the Modena triptych by Domenikos Theotokopoulos, in the Blunt triptych today in the Marianna Latsis collection and in the Vatican triptych – all seem to have made use of a similar prototype. As we are absolutely certain that the pentaptych and the Blunt and the Vatican triptychs were executed in Crete, it is beyond any doubt that their painters had access to this prototype while living and working in

24 This triptych is now in a private collection in Washington D.C.

25 Petsopoulos 1987, no. 74, 88-95 (P.L. Vocotopoulos).

Crete. Rather than inaugurating the iconography of Sinai, Fontana's engraving may have drawn upon an established visual tradition that had already circulated for decades between Crete and the monastery of St. Catherine. Given this, I would like to conclude this paper by addressing the following question. Could this also be used as evidence for the painter of the Modena triptych? In other words, could Domenikos Theotokopoulos have painted the Modena triptych while he was still living and working in Crete?

Figures



Figure 1 St. Catherine's monastery, Sinai



Figure 2 Sinai, icon with St. John the Theologian and his disciple Prochoros by Angelos



Figure 3 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes



Figure 4 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes (front side)



Figure 5 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes (rear side)



Figure 6 Sinai, wing of a triptych with Sinaitic scenes



Figure 7 Sinai, central panel of a pentaptych. The Nativity



Figure 8 Sinai, pentaptych. View of Mt. Sinai

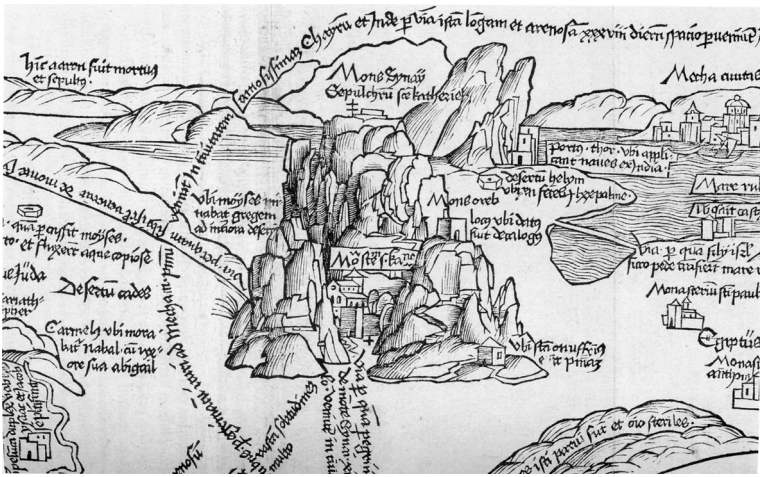


Figure 9 View of Mt. Sinai. Detail from a woodcut by Erhard Reuwich (1486)



Figure 10 Modena, Galleria Estense. The Modena triptych by Domenikos Theotokopoulos/El Greco



Figure 11 Heraklion, Historical Museum. Panel with the View of Mt. Sinai and St. Catherine's monastery



Figure 12 Athens, M. Latsis' collection. The Yorkshire triptych by Georgios Klontzas



Figure 13
The View of Mt. Sinai on the Spada triptych by Georgios Klontzas

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The term ‘holy mountains’ is frequently employed and not only in Byzantium. The sacred character is mostly derived from their comparison or assimilation with the holy mountains of the Bible and the New Testament, as well as with the ‘Mount of God’ found in patristic literature. The studies contained in this volume explore the relationship between the ‘holy mountain’ as an image and symbol and the various ‘holy mountains’ which, in Byzantium and elsewhere – from Sinai to the Balkans – have made it a concrete reality.

Università
Ca’Foscari
Venezia