

Myrto VEIKOU, Spatial Paths to Holiness. Literary ‘Lived Spaces’ in Eleventh-century Byzantine Saints’ Lives.

(Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia, 22), Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet 2023, 194 p. ISBN 978-91-5131-964-3.

<https://doi.org/10.58377/byzslav.2025.19>

The book belongs to the wave of scholarship in Byzantine studies that gained momentum in the late 2010s and was aimed at filling the gap in the field of Byzantine spatial research. An important milestone in this development was the conference held at Uppsala University in 2017, where a wide range of approaches to this interdisciplinary problem converged. In a sense, this monograph, which is also a revised version of Veikou’s doctoral dissertation, may be regarded as a synthesis of reflections on theoretical approaches to the question and as

an attempt to apply some of the methodological frameworks systematically to the field of hagiography.

Myrto Veikou concentrates on two eleventh-century hagiographic texts, i.e. the *Life of St Lazaros of Mount Galesion* and *the Life of Symeon the New Theologian*. The author undertakes one of the first sustained attempts to apply modern spatial theories to Byzantine materials. The challenge, however, lies in the absence of established methodological tools which have been effectively tested on Byzantine sources. A substantial portion of the book is therefore devoted-

ed to a survey of diverse theoretical approaches to spatial research, which is conceptually demanding for the reader. The author's principal objective is to identify Byzantine spatial practices/ experience ('lived spaces') and examine the ways in which they are reflected in the two chosen sources. The second key aspect, directly related to the genre of hagiography, is the connection between the narrative representations of these spatial practices, and the process of 'holification.' Ultimately, the study seeks to demonstrate how literary spatialities function as narrative strategies designed to persuade the reader of the protagonists' holiness.

The book is divided into 11 relatively short chapters, in which two main texts are interpreted using different theoretical lenses. In the first chapter, the author draws on the concept of Henry Lefebvre, who proposed a triadic spatial model.¹ According to him, three different space dimensions interact with each other in each society, and this interaction is a process which continuously produces the space of a certain epoch and society. The triad consists of conceived space – representations of space; perceived space – everyday spatial practices; and, finally, lived space – subjectively experienced space. The latter is highlighted in the title of the book as the main focus of analysis.

The second chapter is devoted to literary expressions of spatial practices. The example of the *Life of St Lazaros* shows how the hero appears

as a "wandering body": the narrative is saturated with verbs and images of movement. Here, spatial descriptions become a direct expression of his spiritual path: the saint's departure from the secular space and retreat to a wild mountain symbolize the boundary between the 'secular' and the 'sacred'. A parallel is drawn with St Symeon the New Theologian: although he physically moves little, his spiritual journeys within his cell are also interpreted as a special spatial dynamic.

Chapter Three is devoted to the discussion of rhetorical *topoi* in hagiographic texts, specifically those connected with spatial designations. The author compares the notion of *topos* in antiquity with that in Byzantine hagiography and naturally considers spatial *topoi* in detail. The aim of this chapter is to examine the role these *topoi* played in engaging readers and listeners, since rhetoric in Byzantium represented a form of socially codified knowledge. In this sense, rhetorical *topoi* function as instruments of influence on the audience, as means of involving them in the narrative. The author interprets the spatial *topoi* as follows: the road signifies development; the body – transformation; the desert – eremitic withdrawal; the monastery – a space of collective sustainability; and the pillar – an elevated site raised above the secular world. The road also is treated as a liminal space; the church – both as a sanctuary and as a site of conflict within ecclesiastical circles; the mountain – a wild place

1 H. LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space* (trans. by D. Nicholson-Smith), Oxford, UK – Cambridge, MA 1974/1991.

that becomes domesticated through the saint's presence and prayer. The ladder leading to the platform atop the pillar is understood as a path from the earthly to the heavenly. In Symeon the New Theologian we also encounter a separation from the earthly world, realized through the concept of the "light body" or "bodiless body." His mystical states are described as experiences in which the boundaries of the body dissolve, the soul departs, and the entire cell is filled with divine light and the soul's upward striving.

Chapter Four addresses vertical versus horizontal perceptions of space and respective narrative strategies. Here, the author seeks to analyze narrative strategies employed in the description of space, drawing on the complex theoretical system of Mary Ryan.² Veikou argues that the two texts under examination are constructed around different spatial settings, spatial frames, and story-spaces, and concludes that each hagiographer operates with a distinct spatial narrative strategy, intentionally chosen to reflect divergent theological backgrounds and different intended readerships. However, applying this theoretical framework seems somewhat excessive: the difference between the texts can be explained more directly by the stark contrast in the protagonists and the authors themselves. Symeon is a member of the Constantinopolitan elite – a brilliant intellectual, innovative theologian, philosopher, and poet, in many ways a "countercultural"

figure. The other is a provincial saint, comparable to a whole series of conventional itinerant holy protagonists.

Chapter Five focuses on representations of vertical space and is particularly rich in information about the material construction of the saint's pillar and how it may have appeared in real life. In terms of interpretation, the author draws a parallel between the visionary experiences of Symeon the New Theologian in his cell and the physical ascent of St. Lazaros onto his pillar. It is space itself, she argues, that facilitates the process of sanctification. Space becomes fluid in the vertical dimension; a phenomenon directly connected with Symeon's theology. Further, the chapter discusses spaces that transcend traditional binary oppositions, being simultaneously open and closed, up and down, material and spiritual. Such ambiguous loci correspond to what theorists have described as the "third space."

The following chapter turns to the horizontal perception of space, with the central claim that the description of movement constitutes a key narrative strategy. Through motion, authors create connections with the reader's own lived experience: readers, too, walk and carry their own bodily memories of movement, which resonate with the saint's journeys and thereby strengthen belief in the story. For Gregory, the author of the *Life of Lazaros*, the saint's constant movement becomes a narrative device illustrating personal growth, ascetic development, and the formation of his identity.

2 M.-L. RYAN, 'Space', in: P. Hühn et al. (ed.), *The living handbook of narratology*, Hamburg 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/space> (retrieved 12th February 2019).

Chapter Seven examines a type of movement that is both horizontal and vertical, especially in the second part of Lazaros' Life, where he journeyed through mountainous regions, moving ever farther from inhabited settlements and ever higher altitude. Despite conflicts with local authorities, hostile to his presence, he eventually founded a monastery of three hundred monks – interpreted by the author as a miracle. Thus, the saint's interactions with local populations and officials also acquire a spatial dimension. His sanctity is manifested in the fact that people gather around him, creating a new public space. The saint's dwelling is described as a life lived "on the threshold," at the boundaries of worlds. This liminal existence also characterizes Symeon the New Theologian: expelled from one monastery, exiled, and forced to relocate, he continually generated new and vibrant social spaces around him. His expulsions underscore his exceptionalism, marking him as distinct from other monks. The destruction of his private space – when his cell was searched, overturned, and desecrated following accusations – becomes part of his path to sanctity.

Chapter Nine stresses that holiness itself is a spatial phenomenon: its performance always occurs within, and through, space.

Chapter Ten is devoted to the performativity of holiness as reflected in the texts. The author argues that the saint's very body constitutes a space in which processes of sanctification unfold. At the same time, the saint's body, as situated in the external world, functions as part of the social and

ritual arena. In this sense, the saint and his rituals form a kind of "arena of holiness," reminiscent of the Roman amphitheater as a site of spectacle for the public. Ultimately, holiness is achieved through the body and exists only insofar as it is made visible to others.

The final chapter reiterates the importance of space in hagiographic texts for readerly perception. Spatial descriptions resonate with the audience's mental maps and thus foster belief in the narrative. Taken together, the texts construct two dynamic and flexible narrative landscapes that serve as powerful instruments for the dissemination of Christian teaching.

In our opinion, the monograph has some peculiarities which can be seen as certain shortcomings, above all the overwhelming proliferation of theoretical frameworks. While many of these may indeed be relevant, they are difficult to follow, and at times the discussion of self-evident points seems unnecessarily complicated by theoretical jargon. For example, on the one hand, Lefebvre's theory allows us to construct a coherent framework, but, at the same time, when applied to Byzantine texts, it sometimes gives the impression of a somewhat spontaneous interpretation. The methodological apparatus seems to remain detached from the primary material: the theoretical approaches stand on their own, while the texts themselves appear not to fit them completely. As a result, the distinctions between the different kinds of spaces – particularly the differentiation between *conceived* and *perceived* space – are not always articulated with sufficient clarity.

Nevertheless, the book must be recognized as a significant and much-needed contribution: the subject matter is both highly complex and underexplored, and the author's courage in tackling it is commendable. The volume will be of particular value to those working directly with the two

hagiographic texts under study and with Byzantine hagiography more broadly. More generally, it also provides a stimulating point of departure for further inquiry.

Yulia Mantova (Cyprus)
mantovaiulia@gmail.com