
Perceptions of a 'Journey to the Past'
in Some Viatical Stories at Mount Athos
*Percepcije »potovanja v preteklost«
v nekaterih potopisih o gori Atos*

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Abstract

A careful examination of selected extracts from French travellers who visited Mount Athos between the 19th and 21st centuries reveal the distinctiveness of this millennium-old Monastic Republic, which remains inaccessible to women. These travellers have articulated this sacred site's unique character through their acute powers of observation. Their accounts reflect a broader narrative concerning the evolving perceptions of those who regard this Holy Mountain, which has largely retained its traditional rituals and way of life. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the essence of Orthodox monasticism has enriched Western literature surrounding this living relic of the Byzantine peninsula. This enhanced comprehension has transformed the depiction of Mount Athos into a compelling account of an initiatory journey, offering readers a vivid and immersive experience of its spiritual and cultural significance.

Keywords: Travel literature, Mount Athos, shifting mentalities, initiatory journey

Izvleček

Natančna analiza izbranih odlomkov francoskih popotnikov, ki so med 19. in 21. stoletjem obiskali goro Atos, razkriva posebnosti te tisočletja stare samostanske republike, ki ostaja nedostopna ženskam. Ti popotniki so z natančnim opazovanjem izrazili edinstven značaj tega svetega kraja. Njihovi zapisi odražajo širšo pripoved o spreminjajočem se dojemanju tega svetega prostora, ki je kljub temu v veliki meri ohranil svoje tradicionalne obrede in način življenja.

Poleg tega je poglobljeno razumevanje bistva pravoslavnega samostanstva obogatilo zahodno literaturo, ki obravnava to živo relikvijo bizantinskega polotoka. To razumevanje je opis gore Atos preobrazilo v prepričljivo pripoved o iniciacijskem potovanju, ki bralcem ponuja živahno in poglobljeno izkušnjo njenega duhovnega ter kulturnega pomena.

Ključne besede: potopisna literatura, gora Atos, spreminjanje mentalitet, iniciacijsko potovanje

Introduction

Throughout the centuries, travellers to Mount Athos have engaged in a profound 'journey into the past' by residing in the monasteries of this venerable Holy Mountain (fig. 1). This experience prompts critical inquiry into how these visitors interacted with the intellectual and social contexts that shaped Byzantine civilization. It raises the question of whether their perceptions were influenced by a romanticized vision of this rich cultural heritage manifested through their capacity to artic-

ulate sensory experiences in both verbal and artistic forms. Such expressions encompass the visual splendour of monastic art—encompassing architecture, frescoes, and icons—as well as the auditory dimensions of Byzantine life, including chants and prayers. The olfactory experiences derived from incense and beeswax also contribute to this multisensory engagement. Beyond doubt, the enduring beauty of the landscape, revered over the centuries, adds another layer of significance to the travellers' experiences, inviting reflection on the sacredness attributed to this unique environment.



Figure 2: The Holy Mountain Counsel in Karyes (De Vogüé 1878, between p. XII and p.1.)

A journey to Mount Athos offers an encounter with a vibrant past. Diehl's reflections resonate with De Vogüé's assertion that traveling to Athos entails an attempt 'to search memories and to ask with confidence to contemporary Orientals a living lesson of the past'³ (De Vogüé 1894, 255), essentially in the Magazine *Le Tour du Monde*. For De Vogüé, the Orient of his era is populated by 'faithful guardians of old historical deposits'⁴ (De Vogüé 1894, 255), underscoring the enduring significance of this pilgrimage for understanding historical continuity and cultural heritage.

Visual Impressions

Charles Diehl, a noted Byzantinist, articulates the essence of monastic life by focusing on the katholikon, or central church, describing its profound atmosphere: 'And the effect is even more striking in the already dark church, where the candles cast an uncertain and flickering light: in the mysterious half-light, reflections light up in the large copper chandeliers; lightning flashes from the gilding of goldwork and icons; on the walls decorated with ancient paintings and mosaics, figures, appearing at the end of a candle, suddenly emerge from the darkness, strange, almost alive in this unexpected lighting, and then suddenly re-enter the night; and sumptuous fabrics, exposed behind the iconostasis, take on shimmering and tender reflections in the falling daylight; and it is good to forget yourself there, in the high choir stalls, in the calm of the dark

itée autrefois la plus sauvage, le moyen âge grec n'avait laissé une des plus extraordinaires créations.'

3 'Chercher des souvenirs et demander avec confiance aux Orientaux contemporains la leçon vivante du passé'

4 'fidèles gardiens des vieux dépôts historiques'

church, full of the poetry of the past⁵ (Diehl 1909, 199).

In his preamble to a description of the frescoes, De Vogüé similarly evokes the ecclesiastics he observes 'sitting side by side' on the vessel transporting him to Athos, likening them to 'one of those dark-tinted frescoes where the conciliar assemblies take place, in the night Byzantine naves, above the altar lamps⁶ (De Vogüé 1894, 257).

Recognizing the significance of the Protaton frescoes, De Vogüé asserts that their 'frescoes reach the highest degree of perfection,' albeit acknowledging that 'bastard restorations [have] disfigured the majority.' He draws comparisons between these works and those of Fra Angelico, employing this juxtaposition to communicate his appreciation of Athonite art to his audience (fig. 2). However, a sense of disdain for this Oriental art emerges in his writing, as he criticizes the monks for providing vague information regarding their artistic heritage, attributing 'indistinctly all their masterpieces to the famous Panselinos, the Raphael of the Athos⁷ (De Vogüé 1894, 294–294). Nevertheless, the hegumen of Iviron, described as 'an old man of a certain education,' reassures De Vogüé, asserting that 'the frescoes of Karyès would be the only authentic productions of Panselinos,' while those

of Lavra, Vatopedi, and Dochiariou could be credited to his disciples.

De Vogüé contends that Athonite painters 'maintained for three centuries an artificial life and an incontestable brilliance to the immobile tradition, but the day comes when this embalmed art undergoes the law of everything that dies and decomposes; under the lies of the hieratic canon, only paltry remains reach us, the ashes of a plant which could not grow in a dried-out earth and which gave its most beautiful flowers at the beginning⁸ (De Vogüé 1894, 298).

Western values permeate De Vogüé's reflections. This was a common tendency among 19th-century traveller-writers, who often approached other cultures with a sense of superiority. This perspective underscores the broader issue of failing to appreciate diverse ways of living and understanding the world from multiple viewpoints.

The traveller is notably struck by the sacralization of secular communal spaces, particularly the refectories. The palaeographer Emmanuel Miller (1812–1886) described the refectory of Lavra as 'perhaps the most curious thing' due to the presence of frescoes adorning its 'walls (..) painted by the famous Panselinos' (Miller 1889, 113).

In the 1930s, the erudite historian and former member of the French Armée d'Orient, Eugène Mercier, expressed a desire to visit the illustrated refectory of Dochiariou monastery: 'He remarked on its small Byzantine windows, which, adorned with elegant capitals, frame the horizon of the sea in their diptychs, evoking a sense of infinity^{9,10} (Mercier 1933, 355). Mercier's

5 'Et l'effet est plus saisissant encore dans l'église déjà obscure, où les cierges mettent une lumière incertaine et vacillante: dans le demi-jour mystérieux, des reflets s'allument aux grands lustres de cuivre; des éclairs brillent aux dorures des orfèvreries et des icônes; sur les murailles décorées de peintures et de mosaïques anciennes, des figures, apparues au bout d'un cierge, sortent brusquement de la pénombre, étranges, presque vivantes sous cet éclairage inattendu, et puis brusquement rentrent dans la nuit; et des étoffes somptueuses, exposées derrière l'iconostase, prennent dans le jour qui tombe des reflets chatoyants et tendres; et il fait bon s'oublier là, dans les hautes stalles du chœur, dans le calme de l'église sombre, toute pleine de la poésie du passé.'

6 'Assis côte à côte... On dirait d'une des fresques aux teintes sombres où se déroulent les assemblées conciliaires dans la nuit des nefes byzantines, au-dessus des lampes de l'autel.'

7 '[...]ces fresques atteignent le plus haut degré de perfection: des restaurations bâtarde ont défiguré le plus grand nombre[...]indistinctement tous leurs chefs-d'oeuvre au fameux Panselinos, le Raphaël de l'Athos.'

8 Ils 'maintiennent durant trois siècles une vie factice et un éclat incontestable à la tradition immobile; mais le jour vient où cet art embaumé subit la loi de tout ce qui meurt et se décompose; sous les mensonges du canon hiératique, il n'en arrive que des restes dérisoires, cendres d'une plante qui n'a pu grandir dans une terre desséchée et qui a donné ses plus belles fleurs au début.'

9 'Le réfectoire est peut-être ce qu'il y a de plus curieux. Les murailles ont été peintes par le célèbre Panselinos.'

10 '...les petites fenêtres byzantines, aux gracieux chapiteaux, présentent l'horizon de mer dans leurs diptyques, comme un rappel de l'infini.'

writings articulate a subtle mystical connection between architecture and nature as he endeavors to revive the Byzantine spirituality that Athos embodies.

The didactic nature of the frescoes in the refectory of the Serbian monastery of Chilandari indicates an emerging interest in the dogmatic significance of these paintings. However, this interest does not fully engage with the concept of an iconographic program, a topic previously explored by the eminent Byzantinist Gabriel Millet in his seminal work, *Researches on the Iconography of the Gospel*. Nonetheless, Mercier's analysis reinforces a Western perspective on Byzantine fresco painting while acknowledging the pivotal role of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, as the protector of Athos and its sacred spaces.

Mercier describes the trapeza, or refectory, as 'entirely populated by eloquent and naive paintings that inspire the imagination.'

'This trapeza, itself entirely populated by eloquent and naive paintings, which inspire the imagination. These lively compositions must undoubtedly be attributed to the 14th century. In the curve of the apse is the Eucharistic Supper, the supreme meal, where Christ, as an inheritance, leaves below the bread of angels to the humble humanity he is preparing to leave. Above this large motif, whose traditional texture is flexible, here is the Annunciation: on the right, Mary the Immaculate Virgin, and on the left, the angel Gabriel, all radiant with celestial glories. Elsewhere, Solomon is in the palace tower, and the Virgin is kneeling near another tower where Isaiah and David reign because the career of the Theotokos will take place on the walls. And these walls, in a word, have drunk all the colours and all the poetry of the sacred Scriptures, so much so that in these cascades of effusive allegories of the divine Testaments, the prophetic vision of Jacob's Ladder appears only a trait of no longer between heaven and earth. This refectory also presents the usual shapes of

the trapezas of the Holy Mountain (Mercier 1933, 374).'¹¹

Despite their limited visibility—given that Athonite churches are seldom open outside of service hours and exist in the subdued light of candles—the frescoes significantly impact the narratives of the viaticum, enriching the viewer's spiritual experience.

The frescoes of the Byzantine monasteries have captured the attention of the archaeologist Adolphe-Napoleon Didron (1806–1867), who enthusiastically discusses them. Examining the frescoes at the monastery of Esphigménou, Didron addresses the theme of imperial patronage, notably the representations of the imperial couple, Theodore and Pulcheria. These figures pay homage to the work of an iconographer, whose contributions to the church in 1810 led to the discovery of the 'Guide to painting' (Didron 1845). Didron published a French edition of this work in 1845, dedicating it to Victor Hugo, while contemporaneously, the palaeographer Miller lamented the recent restorations at Iviron. Thus, the frescoes evoke a dual response of attraction and repulsion. Approximately two hundred and forty years later, the French writer of Russian descent, Jean Blot (Alexandre Blokh, 1923–2019), visited Lavra and remarked on the restoration of certain frescoes with a less favourable perspective:

11 'Cette trapéza elle-même est entièrement peuplée de peintures éloquentes et naïves, qui portent l'imagination vers ses sources lointaines. C'est au XIV^e siècle qu'il faut attribuer sans doute ces vives compositions. Dans la courbe de l'abside, voici la cène eucharistique, repas suprême, où Christ, en héritage, laisse ici-bas le pain des anges à l'humble humanité qu'il s'appête à quitter. Au-dessus de ce grand motif, dont la texture traditionnelle ne va pas sans souplesse, voilà l'Annonciation: à droite, Marie la Vierge immaculée, à gauche, l'ange Gabriel tout rayonnant des gloires célestes. C'est d'ailleurs Salomon dans la tour d'un palais, et la Vierge agenouillée auprès d'une autre tour où règnent Isaïe et David; car la carrière de la Théotokos va se dérouler sur les parois. Et ces murs en un mot ont bu toutes les couleurs et toute la poésie des Écritures sacrées, si bien que ces cascades d'allégories effuses des Testaments divins, la vision prophétique de l'Echelle de Jacob ne figure qu'un trait de plus entre le ciel et la terre. Ce réfectoire présente au reste les formes habituelles des trapézas de la Sainte Montagne.'

As for the frescoes, alas, they are the instrument of worship, that is to say, they must not be beautiful but useful, and they have been savagely restored. There, on the walls, where the incense has extinguished the colours and blurred the design, it is barely visible, but still beautiful. Here, in the narthex, it's freshly painted, shiny, hideous.¹² [Blot 1984, 74]

This shift in perception may suggest a transformation in the conceptualization of aesthetics and beauty, akin to the historical analysis offered by Umberto Eco in *History of Beauty* (Eco 2004). Eco's work actually shows us an evolution of mentalities in terms of defining beauty throughout the ages. This is how we could consider that the part of 'naivety' in the techniques of the recasting of the murals described by Blot would remain completely acceptable today.

However, at the onset of the 20th century, the artist Maurice Feuillet (1873–1968) distinguished between the artistic merits of different periods. He praised the 'superb paintings dating from the 12th century, of remarkable expression, stunning works of the master Manuel Panselinos'¹³ (Feuillet 1900, 666) while simultaneously critiquing the post-Byzantine works as a significant decline in the Athonite pictorial tradition.

At present, nothing like this. The traditions of Manuel Panselinos and Dionysius of Agrapha seem irretrievably lost. The painters of Athos are nothing more than workers carrying out their work as quickly as possible and flooding the Panaghias peninsula with Greek saints with stiff gestures, fixed gaze, archaic physiognomy, always the same. Placed under the despotism of the Byzantine canons, they carry out their task

12 'Quant aux fresques, hélas, elles sont instrument du culte, c'est-à-dire qu'elles doivent non être belles mais servir, et qu'on les a sauvagement restaurées. Là-bas, sur les murs où l'encens a éteint les couleurs et brouille le dessin, c'est à peine visible, mais beau encore. Ici, dans le narthex, c'est frais, brillant, hideux.'

13 'Les peintures superbes datant du XIIe siècle, d'une expression remarquable, œuvres très belles du maître Manuel Panselinos.'

imposed in advance without any personal inspiration, without variety, mechanically, blindly following the precepts of the ancients of implacable usage. I realised while observing a monk who was brushing on an enormous canvas Saint George Taxiarch, armoured and armed with a spear. It was simply abominable.¹⁴ [Feuillet 1900, 667]

This critique underscores a broader discourse concerning the evolution of artistic values and the integrity of tradition within the context of Byzantine iconography.

Over half a century after the observations made by Feuillet, Jean Décarreaux (1899–1988), an art historian attuned to the nuances of Byzantine art, drew attention to the frescoes of Cretan style located within the Saint George Chapel of the Saint Paul monastery, advocating for their preservation against the detrimental effects of humidity (Décarreaux 1956, 118).

At the turn of the 20th century, as noted by Feuillet, and again in the 1980s with the work of Blot, there existed a prevailing sentiment that post-Byzantine painting was irrevocably marginalized. However, the same frescoes from the Lavra monastery, which had been subjected to Blot's critical assessment three decades earlier, underwent a re-evaluation by French photographer Ferrante Ferranti (born in 1960). Ferranti emphasized the didactic nature of these frescoes, specifically interrogating the portrayal of the celestial Jerusalem as envisioned by the Orthodox tradition. He described a representation of a hill situated 'between the throne of Glory where God the Father sits and the ruins of a city,

14 'À l'heure actuelle, rien de semblable. Les traditions de Manuel Panselinos et de Denys d'Agrapha semblent irrémédiablement perdues. Les peintres de l'Athos de ne sont plus que des ouvriers exécutant leur travail le plus rapidement possible et inondant la presqu'île de Panaghias, de saints grecs aux gestes roides, au regard fixe, à la physionomie archaïque, toujours les mêmes. Placés sous le despotisme des canons byzantins, ils font leur tâche imposée d'avance sans aucune inspiration personnelle, sans variété, machinalement, suivant aveuglément les préceptes des anciens d'un usage implacable. Je me rendais compte en observant un moine qui brossait sur une toile énorme saint Georges Taxiarche, cuirassé et armé de la lance. C'était tout simplement abominable.'

by myriads of angels arranged in crowns. At its summit, the Lamb of God carries the standard of the Resurrection"¹⁵ (Ferranti 2015, 25).

These instances exemplify a significant shift in scholarly perspectives. The mid-19th century marked the inception of a structured discourse surrounding Byzantine art in France. Scholars began to engage with frescoes from a predominantly technical standpoint, culminating in influential works such as the *Guide to Painting* by Didron, which referenced the painter Denys de Fournà. This trajectory ultimately led to Charles Diehl's publication *Manual of Byzantine Art* (Diehl 1910) and Gabriel Millet's *Researches on the Iconography of the Gospel* (Millet 1916). Benedictine Abbot and musicologist Neyrat (1825–1913) noted the intrinsic merit of the frescoes, asserting that 'the figures possess a very great and noble character.' Nevertheless, he felt compelled to draw parallels with 'the ancient frescoes of Orcagna and Giotto, and occasionally with select works of Albert Dürer'¹⁶ (Neyrat 1884, 99). This reference to Western art highlights a critical juncture in which the engagement with other cultures was often framed within a comparative context that frequently undermined the value of the encountered civilizations.

Literate travellers of the 20th century, such as Jean Blot, often rejected the fresco-monks' inclination to refresh their paintings. This rejection stemmed from a belief that such practices did not align with their Western bourgeois values, which elevate the artist to a pedestal and dismiss art characterized by naivety and anonymity. This art, inherently didactic, is distinguished by its humility and popularity. In contemporary society, particularly in the second decade of the 21st century, Ferrante Ferranti has revitalized these discussions by reframing the aesthetic con-

siderations of post-Byzantine art within the context of its theological significance.

Jacques Lacarrière (1925–2005) articulated a transformative understanding of Byzantine art in his renowned work *L'Été grec*. He acknowledged 'to have truly felt the meaning and the life of this art only during his final visit.' Lacarrière's reflections suggest an initiatory experience, as he admitted that his previous ignorance 'about Orthodox hagiography, Byzantine history, painting techniques' made him 'experience a sort of dizziness at the sight of these hundreds of saints, anchorites, bishops, of martyrs populating the walls of Athos.' His avant-garde approach, which prioritized meaning, appeared to diverge from the aesthetic emphasis of Jean Blot; instead, Lacarrière deems that 'frescoes and icons' respond 'to a double function, narrative and aretological: showing the history of the world according to tradition of the unction Orthodox East and demonstrate, by recounting the lives, deeds, miracles and martyrdoms of these exemplary figures, the permanence of their faith, and the transcendence of profane time'¹⁷ (Lacarrière 1975, 83).

Jean Biès (1933–2014) followed in Lacarrière's footsteps along this initiatory journey. The revised and corrected edition of his seminal work (1963), published in 1997, introduced a sub-chapter entitled 'Theology of the Icon,' which echoed Lacarrière's insights: 'This formula pre-existed in the 1963 edition'¹⁸ ... (Biès 1963, 69) and 'there is not only an aesthetic of the icon;

15 '...une colline est portée entre le trône de Gloire ou siege Dieu le Père et les ruines d'une cité, par des myriades d'anges disposés en couronnes. À son sommet, l'agneau de Dieu porte l'étendard de la Résurrection.'

16 '...les figures ont un très grand et très noble caractère.[...] aux anciennes fresques d'Orcagna et du Giotto, parfois à certaines têtes d'Albert Dürer.'

17 'trop de choses sur l'hagiographie orthodoxe, l'histoire byzantine, les techniques de la peinture » lui fit « éprouver une sorte de vertige à la vue de ces centaines de saints, d'anachorètes, d'évêques, de martyrs peuplant les murs de l'Athos [...] d'importance secondaire', valorisant les 'fresques et les icônes' dans une perspective répondant 'à une double fonction, narrative et aréologique : montrer l'histoire du monde selon la tradition de l'Orient orthodoxe et démontrer, en racontant la vie, les actes, les miracles et les martyres de ces figures exemplaires, la permanence de leur foi, l'abolition du temps profane.'

18 But the word 'philosophie' (philosophy) was used at that time, instead of 'theologie' (theology).

this has its theology¹⁹ (Biès 1997, 74). Biès emphasized that the analysis ‘includes an *alchemical* aspect, concerning the spiritualization of matter: this is its transfiguring function; a *symbolic* aspect, concerning the transposition of archetypes into visible images: this is the purifying function; finally, a *liturgical* aspect, concerning the ‘descent of heaven onto earth,’ and this is its cultural function²⁰ (Biès 1997, 74).

It is evident that travel writers of the 1970s began to adopt a novel perspective on Byzantine and post-Byzantine art, a shift that appears to correlate with the increasing frequency of their stays at the Holy Mountain. These prolonged engagements encouraged a more profound exploration of the essential elements of monastic life, with the Orthodox imagery of icons and frescoes emerging as a crucial focal point in their analyses.

Sounds Impressions

In his 1555 work, the French naturalist, writer, diplomat, and traveller Pierre Belon du Mans (1517–1564) observed that ‘the caloières go every day to sing the service’²¹ (Belon du Mans 1555, f. 66. v.). However, he offered merely a factual account without delving into further details. It was not until the 19th century that a more reflective narrative emerged regarding the liturgical practices, particularly as Father Braconnier’s travel report from 1706 included no commentary on this subject.

The earliest substantial testimony can be attributed to the manuscript specialist Miller, who, upon his arrival at the Russian site of Saint Andrew on a Sunday, expressed his intention to attend the Russian ‘mass’ [sic]. He remarked, ‘The chants are beautiful,’ contrasting

them with what he described as ‘this abominable Greek chant for which the nose bears all the costs’²² (Miller 1889, 15). This apparent disdain for Greek Byzantine chant may be linked to his expertise in Byzantine manuscripts, yet a further examination of Abbot Stanislas Neyrat’s observations reveals an equally critical perspective. Neyrat, serving as Chapel Master during the celebration of the feast of Saint John Prodromos, recounted (Neyrat 1884, 125–126):

(..) the office of the great vigils or agripnias begins before ten o’clock and lasts until the morning. We go there as curious people, hoping for masterpieces. But what a disappointment! Nasal melodies performed by six or eight monks placed in the two arms of the cross. Two or three sing a monotonous, interminable hymn, the vague tone of which one would hardly recognise; while another voice, no less nasal, performs a droning hold on a single note, in tune or not with the melody: which recalls quite well, but much less musically and much more unpleasantly the effect of our Savoyard oldies.²³

Notably, art historian Jean Décarreaux, writing in the following century, echoed the sentiments of both Miller and Neyrat, characterizing the chants as ‘ugly’²⁴ (Décarreaux 1954, 94). Despite being a specialist in Western religious chant, Neyrat struggled to appreciate this new form of liturgical music, merely noting its duration. Vendômois Eugène Mercier, in the early 1930s, articulated a more poetic response to the

19 ‘Il n’existe pas seulement une esthétique de l’icône; celle-ci a sa théologie.’

20 ‘... comporte un aspect *alchimique*, concernant la spiritualisation de la matière: c’est là sa fonction transfigurante; un aspect *symbolique*, concernant la transposition des archétypes en images visibles: c’est la fonction purificatrice; un aspect *liturgique* enfin, concernant la ‘descente du ciel sur la terre’, et c’est sa fonction culturelle’

21 ‘les caloières vont tous les jours chanter le service’

22 ‘d’aller entendre la messe russe. » « Les chants sont beaux, et contrastent avec cet abominable chant grec dont le nez fait tous les frais’

23 ‘(..) l’office des grandes vigiles ou agripnias commence avant dix heures pour durer jusqu’au matin. Nous y allons en curieux, espérant des chefs-d’œuvre. Mais quelle déception! Des mélodies nasillardes exécutées par six ou huit religieux placés dans les deux bras de croix. Deux ou trois chantent une hymne monotone, interminable, dont on reconnaîtrait à peine la tonalité indécise; tandis qu’une autre voix, non moins nasillarde, fait une tenue bourdonnante sur une note unique, juste ou non avec la mélodie: ce qui rappelle assez bien, mais bien moins musicalement et bien plus désagréablement l’effet de nos vieilles savoyardes.’

24 ‘Les chants sont laids’

liturgical experience, during which the monks of Vatopedi adapted their practices into 'Agrypnie or Pannikis (the whole night), which start before sunset, and are not exhausted until well after daybreak' (Mercier 1933, 203):

One could hear through the stone, like the murmur of a river: it was a confused mass of sounds that the sacred melody rolled relentlessly. The ear sometimes thought it could guess that this sound flow was the majestic slide of free and easy water, sometimes that it broke among the returns and rocks of a torrential bed. The waves criss crossed each other in their agitated courses, were torn apart at times under the sudden thrust of a more imperious stroke, sometimes even nourished a rumour which rose to the tumult, or calmed down like a tired flood, until giving the illusion of silence.²⁵

In his scholarly examination, Mercier distances himself from the unfavourable evaluations articulated by his predecessors, while simultaneously acknowledging his familiarity with their works. Notably, in a footnote accompanying the aforementioned passage, he references the organisational structure of ecclesiastical offices as detailed by Abbot Neyrat. Mercier's palpable enthusiasm for the auditory ambiance of Eastern liturgies serves as a cornerstone of his endeavour to explore the resurgence of Byzantine philosophical thought within this sanctuary, which has perpetuated such traditions into the twentieth century, primarily through the benevolent stewardship of the monks residing in the monasteries of Mount Athos.

25 'On entendait à travers la pierre, comme le murmure d'un fleuve : c'était une masse confuse de sons que roulait sans relâche la mélodie sacrée. L'oreille croyait tantôt deviner que cet écoulement sonore était le glissement majestueux d'une eau libre et facile, tantôt qu'il se brisait parmi les retours et les rocailles d'un lit torrentueux. Les ondes s'entrecroisaient dans leurs cours agité, se déchiraient par instants sous la poussée soudaine d'un trait plus impérieux, nourrissaient parfois même une rumeur qui s'élevait au tumulte, ou s'apaisaient comme un flot fatigué, jusqu'à donner l'illusion du silence.'

This intellectual and philosophical inquiry into Byzantine spirituality is manifest in the domains of 'photography, music, and liturgy.' It is pertinent to note that in various monasteries, liturgical services do not consistently occur within the central church. The fluctuating presence of pilgrims, which swells during the summer months compared to the winter season, significantly influences the number of chapels used for these services. For instance, ethnologist Panagopoulos (born in 1975) elucidates that 'in the winter, because there were not many visitors, the liturgies took place in seven chapels. In the summer, they used nine chapels to accommodate the greater number of participants, as it was the tourist season' (Paganopoulos 2012, 210). Thus, the organisation of liturgical life within the monastery is intricately linked to the volume of pilgrims or visitors, whom this researcher characterises as tourists. This observation punctuates the journey toward the Athos of Ferranti, who also experiences the captivating phenomenon of agrypnia, to him, a 'solemn celebration which owes its name to the 'standing' position and lasts all night' (Ferranti 2015, 94):

My first vision is a large wooden crucifix standing at the entrance to the narthex. As at Vatopedi (Ferrante Ferranti describes this passage at Dochiariou during Pentecost), Christ is crowned by the representation of God the Father and the dove of the Holy Spirit. Indifferent, pilgrims flock and kiss the icons lined up along the walls.

The first readings are done in the liti by the light of a simple candle, which irises the icon of the Virgin and relegates the fresco-painted saints to the darkness. (...) Placed in front of the tarnished branches of the tree of Jesse, I measure how the sculptors of the Hispanic world, galvanised by the edicts of the Catholic Reformation, knew how to exploit the wood of the altarpieces so that, in sim-

ilar light conditions, vibrates with gold and bright colours the genealogy of Christ.²⁶

Ferranti's exploration begins with a detailed examination of the frescoes, which Mercier had previously described as embodying a 'mystical atrium' within the 'beautiful liti,' a space defined by its 'gentle forest of columns'²⁷ (Mercier 1933, 355). This description draws a parallel to Spanish religious art while simultaneously inviting the reader to immerse themselves in the vibrant atmosphere of Orthodox rituals, particularly those distinctive to the monastic communities of Mount Athos.

The clergy in festive attire enters the naos, the ground of which is strewn with laurel branches. The abbot takes place on his throne leaning against a pillar. He begins a long chant, lit by a thin candle held by a monk whose profile glowing red is silhouetted, from where I am, against the burnished gold of the iconostasis.²⁸ [Ferranti 2015, 94–95]

Added to his description is the birth of a closer relationship between Ferranti and the abbot when the latter, 'who senses his emotion and shyness, calls out to him and orders him to take

photographs'²⁹ (Ferranti 2015, 95). The abbot, perceiving Ferranti's emotional response and reticence, encourages him to take photographs, thereby fostering a new dimension of trust and acceptance between the photographer and the Athonite monks. The abbot's approval signifies a broader acceptance by the monastic community, an affirmation of Ferranti's presence among them.

However, this moment of exchange, which allows for participation in the various rites, is not universally attainable. The experiences of Claude Chevreuil, a former headmaster of a Parisian high school (1937–2023), illustrate this difficulty. 'Awakened by a chanted hammering' of a simander during a liturgical service, he hesitates to join the monk who, after calling for him, soon enters the katholikon. He reflects on his uncertainty, pondering, 'Where to go?' and remarks, 'Killing time is a murder I will often commit on Mount Athos'³⁰ (Chevreuil 2008, 48–49). This introspection reveals the challenges that visitors may face in assimilating into the rhythm of monastic life, suggesting that such integration is not always straightforward.

That said, Ferranti vividly describes the scene, striving to convey the captivating sensory experiences that arise from it: 'The elders come and go through the side doors of the holy of holies, resembling actors in an ancient tragedy. The central door opens to reveal the golden disk of a paten, the Eucharistic saucer. The hegumen appears, adorned in a shimmering star-embroidered cape, bordered by a trellis of alternating gold clusters and silver leaves. He kneels and reads before an assembly that is collectively bent over, their foreheads touching the ground. Father Gabriel and then a priest chant in turn, while none among us dares to move. Suddenly, the atmosphere becomes animated. The thurifer, whose large, long-lashed eyes evoke an Egypt-

26 'Ma première vision est un grand crucifix de bois dressé à l'entrée du narthex. Comme à Vatopédiou (Ferranti décrit ce passage à Dochiariou durant la Pentecôte.), le Christ est couronné par la représentation de Dieu le Père et de la colombe de l'Esprit Saint. Indifférents, les pèlerins affluent et baissent les icônes alignées le long des murs.

Les premières lectures se font dans la liti à la lueur d'une simple chandelle, qui irise l'icône de la Vierge et relègue dans la pénombre les saints peints à fresque. (...) Placé en face des ramifications ternies de l'arbre de Jessé, je mesure combien les sculpteurs du monde hispanique, galvanisés par les édits de la Réforme catholique, surent exploiter le bois des retables pour que, dans des conditions de lumière similaires, vibre d'ors et de couleurs vives la généalogie du Christ.'

27 Mercier avait relevé 'l'atrium mystique' de la 'belle liti', composée 'de sa douce futaie de colonnes'

28 'Le clergé en habit de fête pénètre dans le naos, dont le sol est jonché de branches de laurier. L'higoumène prend place sur son trône appuyé contre un pilier. Il entame une longue psalmodie, éclairé par une fine bougie tenue par un moine dont le profil rougeoyant se découpe, de l'endroit où je me trouve, contre les ors brunis de l'iconostase.'

29 'qui devine son émotion et sa timidité, lui hèle et le somme de prendre des photographies.'

30 '...réveillé par un martèlement scandé[...] Où aller? Tuer le temps, c'est un meurtre que je commettrais souvent au Mont Athos.'



Figure 3: Docheiariou Monastery: The Dance of the Chandeliers during the Festival of the Pentecost (Ferranti 2015, between p. 96 and 97)

tian portrait from the Fayoum, emerges from the den of mystery, incensing each of us in turn, as a monk hoists the silver nightlights aloft, accompanied by the creaking of pulleys attached to the large chandeliers (fig. 3). With meticulous care, another monk lights the wick of long blasters and ignites the pairs of candles positioned at the cardinal points of the *polyelaïos*, each of its twelve sides punctuated by a small icon and an ostrich egg, symbolizing the Resurrection. The *typikaris*, as a worthy master of ceremonies, indicates the troparia to the cantors and goes from one choir to another. The chants in response mingle with the clicking of cowbells in censer bells³¹ (Ferranti 2015, 95).

31 'Les anciens vont et viennent par les portes latérales dans le saint des saints, comme des acteurs de tragédie antique. La porte centrale s'ouvre et laisse entrevoir le disque d'or d'une patène, la soucoupe eucharistique. L'higoumène apparaît dans sa cape scintillante d'étoiles brodées, bor-

In 1997, Bernard Noël (1930–2021) employed a poetic lens to describe the Saint André skete, an abandoned site near Karyès that has remained in a state of disrepair since a fire in 1958, yet yearns for revival following a partial restoration. Noël's depiction draws attention to the harmonious interplay between the bells of the censer and the vocal expressions of the prayer of the heart. He notes, 'Maximos celebrates the three daily offices at six seven and nine I like how he's able to handle the thurible with twelve small bellsones for each apostle and makes us a path of smoke I also like how he psalmodies Kyrie Jesou Chistou Yie tou Theou eleison imas our Lord Jesus Christ son of God have pity on us I counted up to seventy-seven times this morning eighty-three times yesterday at the evening office this appeal dates to its beginning with the hermetic life of Saint Anthony chanted while facing demons Saint Gregory Palamas introduced it at Mount Athos' (Noël 2011, 9–10).

It is essential to recognize that these ecclesiastical services, during which the bells of the censer resonate, are preceded by the sounding of bells and the *semantron*—a suspended wooden or metal percussion instrument (fig. 4). Byzantine art historian Charles Diehl invites us to contemplate the profound impact of these auditory elements: 'And at the end of the day, the impression is deep, almost solemn, of this entry into the ancient monastery, to the sound of the bells ringing out loud, to the sound of the chimes playing

dée d'une treille où alternent grappes d'or et feuilles d'argent. Il s'agenouille et lit devant l'assemblée, toute entière courbée, les fronts touchant le sol. Le père Gabriel puis un prêtre psalmodient tour à tour sans qu'aucun de nous ne bouge.

Soudain, tout s'anime. Le thuriféraire, dont les grands yeux aux longs cils m'évoquent un portrait égyptien du Fayoum, jaillit de l'autel du mystère et nous encense un à un tandis qu'un moine hisse dans un grincement de poulies les veilleuses d'argent à hauteur des grands lustres. Avec un soin infini, un moine allume la mèche de longs boutefeux et enflamme les paires de bougies placées aux points cardinaux du *polyelaïos*, rythmé sur chacun de ses douze côtés par une petite icône et un œuf d'autruche, symbole de la Résurrection.

Le *typikaris*, en digne maître de cérémonie, indique aux chantres les tropaires et va d'un chœur à l'autre. Les chants en répons se mêlent au cliquetis des sonnaillies en grelots de l'encensoir.'



Figure 4: Docheiariou Monastery: The Call for Prayer Using the Semantron (Ferranti 2015, between p. 96 and 97)

their arpeggios, in an envelopment of vibrations that the great evening peace makes more sonorous, and where on the deep bass of the bells the bronze semantron, struck with great blows of a hammer, sometimes throws its strident and clear notes³² (Diehl 1909, 198–199).

In contrast, Diehl describes a different auditory landscape at a Russian monastery, where ‘the bells ring loudly from all the bell towers of the monastery; and in this rustling of sounds, thin or sonorous, which seem to fall from every-

where and envelop us in a vibrant harmony³³ (Diehl 1909, 202). This emphasizes the notion that the Russian interpretation of Orthodoxy transcends mere ritual, elevating its spiritual power through this rich auditory experience.

And while once again the bells are ringing loudly, we return to shore in the boats manned by black teams of monks, very struck by this Russian wealth and strength, born yesterday at Athos and already all-powerful.³⁴ [Diehl 1909, 203]

The demonstration of power within the context of Russian monasticism is poignantly articulated in Diehl’s reflections on the liturgical service, where he notes: ‘In front of the iconostasis overloaded with gilding, we attend a solemn office³⁵ (Diehl 1909, 202). This observation underscores the grandeur of the setting, which serves to elevate the spiritual experience. Diehl further illustrates the harmonious atmosphere of the Russian monastery through the unifying effect of the chants, stating, ‘Then, through a charming courtyard, where the jet of water from the holy fountain gives its cool murmur, we are led to the refectory, and from floor to floor, to yet another church, where other religious chants take us greet, these Russian songs of such simple and powerful beauty³⁶ (Diehl 1909, 202).

This notion of the aesthetic appeal of Russian sacred music is not novel; De Vogüé, writing over twenty-five years before Diehl, similarly emphasized this aspect. He remarked, curios-

33 ‘les cloches sonnent à toute volée à tous les clochers du monastère ; et dans ce bruissement de sons, grêles ou sonores, qui semblent tomber de partout et nous enveloppent d’une vibrante harmonie.’

34 ‘Et tandis que de nouveau les cloches sonnent à toute volée, nous regagnons le bord dans les barques que manœuvrent de noires équipes de moines, très frappés de cette richesse et de cette force russes, nées d’hier à l’Athos et déjà toutes-puissantes.’

35 ‘devant l’iconostase surchargé de dorures, nous assistons à un office solennel’

36 ‘Puis, à travers une cour charmante, où le jet d’eau de la fontaine sainte met son frais murmure, on nous mène au réfectoire, et d’étage en étage, à une autre église encore, où d’autres chants religieux nous saluent, ces chants russes d’une si simple et si puissante beauté’.

32 ‘Et dans cette fin de jour, l’impression est profonde, presque solennelle, de cette entrée dans l’antique monastère, au son des cloches sonnant à toute volée, au bruit des carillons égrenant leurs arpegges, dans un enveloppement de vibrations que la grande paix du soir fait plus sonores, et où sur les basses profondes des cloches la simandra de bronze, heurtée à grands coups de marteau, jette parfois ses notes stridentes et claires.’

ity had kept us all night in church, seduced by the Russian service's pomp, by the song's beauty, by the strange types of this multitude which went up to the altar praying for the Tsar, like an army marching to conquests. All night long...,' and 'the pale flock of monks,' as the poet notes, 'standing under the dying light of the candles, had chanted to the vigils without one being able to read on these mystical faces any concerns other than those of heaven. We went to bed at dawn and early we were awakened by the sound of bells'³⁷ (De Vogüé 1894, 327).

In a subsequent account, De Vogüé provides an exceptional observation of a ritual he initially perceives to be the enthronement of the new abbot of Saint Panteleimon. However, he soon realizes it is, in fact, a funeral procession for a caloyer he had observed succumbing to illness in the monastic hospital. He describes the scene with evocative detail: 'The bells [which] rang out in slow volleys, a procession of monks, their heads covered with the mourning veil while holding candles in their hands, lay down on the square chanting sad litanies. All these pomps have a funeral character at Athos'³⁸ (De Vogüé 1894, 329).

What about fragrances?

The representation of perfumes and olfactory experiences in travel literature is notably sparse. However, examining the correspondence between the writer François Augiéras (1925–1971, fig. 5) and his friend Paul Placet (1928–2023) reveals a significant shift. This shift is particular-

37 'la curiosité nous avait retenu toute la nuit à l'église, séduit par la pompe de l'office russe, par la beauté du chant, par les types étranges de cette multitude qui montait à l'autel en priant pour le tsar, comme une armée marchant à des conquêtes. Toute la nuit, 'le pâle troupeau des moines », comme dit le poète, debout sous la clarté mourante des cierges, avait psalmodié les vigiles sans qu'on eût pu lire sur ces faces mystiques d'autres soucis que ceux du ciel. Nous nous étions couchés à l'aube et de bonne heure nous fûmes réveillés par le son des cloches.'

38 'les cloches [qui] s'ébranlèrent à lentes volées, une procession de moines, la tête couverte du voile de deuil en tenant des cierges à la main, s'allongea sur le parvis en psalmodiant de tristes litanies. Toutes ces pompes ont un caractère funèbre à l'Athos.'

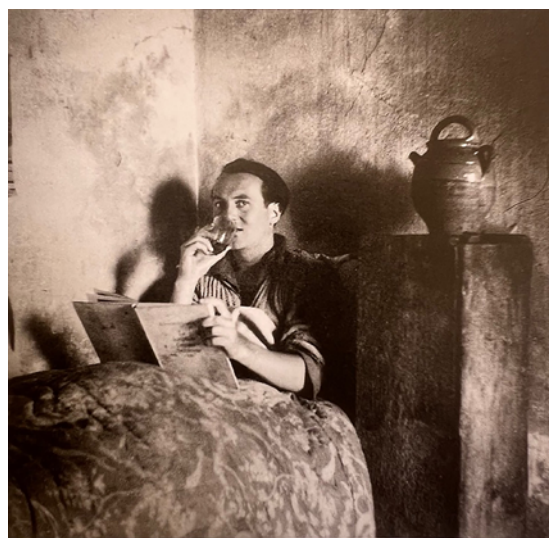


Figure 5: François Augiéras (1925-1971), portrait taken in 1954, Eyzies de Tayac, France (Augiéras 1994, 9); © Fata Morgana Publisher

ly evident in religious rituals, which serve as a backdrop for olfactory descriptions.

On the 18th of August 1956, Augiéras wrote: 'The chapel shone with a thousand lights. Among the monks, I saw children aged 13 to 14, dressed in black robes, with long girly hair, with wild and gentle looks. The monks sang, burned incense, the children lit the candles, only to extinguish them almost immediately, and relight them among the songs: they were playing in Paradise, they were angels and prophets among the seraphim and the constellations. Then they began to recite the litanies of the Saints, of the martyrs of the beginnings of Christianity, those of the children tortured under Tiberius, under Nero, flogged to death, burned alive. More songs of incredible sweetness, heartbreaking melancholy, cries of joy, love, sobs, and sometimes the murmur of voluptuousness. My turn came to be praised; I bowed in silence and breathed in the pungent scent of incense. Some old monks looked like my uncle'³⁹ (Augiéras 1994, 21–22).

39 'La chapelle brillait de mille feux. Parmi les moines, je vis des enfants de 13 à 14 ans, vêtus de robes noires, aux longs cheveux de filles, aux regards sauvages et doux. Les moines chantaient, encensaient les enfants allumaient les chandelles, pour les éteindre presque aussitôt, et les rallumer

Gestures and Rituals

The episode concerning the veneration of icons, as recounted by Swiss journalist Michel Egger in 1993, elucidates the distinctive Orthodox perspective on monastic practices. Egger, born in 1958, articulates that the devotional act of venerating icons ‘does not bother him’ and, for him, carries ‘nothing idolatrous or superstitious.’ Commenting on ‘these ballets of monks’ during services, Michel Egger specifies how, by becoming Orthodox, he ‘had to relearn’ that he had ‘a body and that this body, far from being the ‘sepulchre of the ‘soul’, could be the ‘temple of the Spirit’. The first sign of the cross was a terrible fight. Heavy with a Catholic education rejected as a teenager, he was slow to come’⁴⁰ (Egger 1993, 32).

In a subsequent narrative, Egger also recounts that ‘his unbelieving and Protestant friends’ had found the veneration of icons shocking on another trip when they visited Romanian churches. We thus see that he adapts to his status as an Orthodox pilgrim but specifies that this veneration ‘does not really affect him’ and that he does not ‘yet understand its full depth’⁴¹ (Egger 1993, 32).

parmi les chants: ils jouaient au Paradis, ils étaient des anges et les prophètes parmi les séraphins et les constellations. Puis ils commencèrent à réciter les litanies des Saints, des martyrs des débuts du Christianisme, celles des enfants torturés sous Tibère, sous Néron, flagellés à mort, brûlés vifs. Des chants encore, d’une incroyable douceur, d’une mélancolie déchirante, des cris de joie, d’amour, des sanglots, et parfois le murmure de la volupté. Mon tour vint d’être encensé; je m’inclinai en silence et respirai l’âcre parfum de l’encens. Certains vieux moines ressemblaient à mon oncle.’

40 ‘ce geste dévotionnel ne le gêne pas », n’ayant pour lui, « rien d’idolâtre ni de superstitieux. » 152 Commentant « ces ballets de moines » lors des offices, Michel Egger précise combien, en devenant orthodoxe, il lui « a fallu réapprendre » qu’il avait « un corps et que ce corps, loin d’être le ‘sépulchre de l’âme’, pouvait être le ‘temple de l’Esprit’. Le premier signe de croix fut un combat terrible. Lourd de toute une éducation catholique rejetée à l’adolescence, il fut lent à venir.’

41 ‘ses amis mécréants et protestants » avaient trouvé choquante la vénération des icônes, dans un autre voyage, visitant les églises roumaines. On constate ainsi qu’il s’adapte à son statut de pèlerin orthodoxe, mais précise que cette vénération « ne le touche pas vraiment », et qu’il n’en sait « pas encore toute la profondeur’

In contrast, the approach to icon veneration presented by author Maryse Choisy (1903–1979) is particularly striking. After undergoing a mastectomy, Choisy claimed to have entered the male-restricted peninsula of Mount Athos disguised as a man. Her narrative is imbued with irony, especially in her description of the renowned icon of the Virgin Portaitissa from the Iviron Monastery. She recounts that, following a ‘surgical sword stroke’ inflicted by an ‘iconoclast,’ the icon ‘began to bleed and still bleeds on days of mourning.’ Choisy notes, ‘Naturally, I didn’t see her on a day of mourning,’ and adds that ‘the wound is so gaping that your breasts hurt (even when they are cut) just by looking at her’⁴² (Choisy 1931, 74–75). While the veracity of her account may be questioned, her perspective remains a compelling contribution to the discourse surrounding the history of literature and the cultural significance of icon veneration.

Jacques Lacarrière presents an innovative approach to depicting Mount Athos in his inaugural work dedicated to this monastic community. Lacarrière’s narrative is significantly shaped by the monks’ writings and reflections, which reinforce the imagery associated with Athos. The text is organized into concise sections, including ‘The Monasteries,’ ‘The Historians at Mount Athos,’ ‘The Days and the Nights,’ ‘The Monks,’ and ‘The Hermits.’ These segments collectively explore the interplay between legend and historical reality as conveyed through the perspectives of the monks, manifesting as brief visual vignettes—akin to photographic snapshots—articulated in Lacarrière’s fragmented prose: ‘After which comes night. We wake up, everything shakes, we are surprised by a kind of ballet in the dark: the monks and their shadows who waver in the corridors, who kneel in the church, lavish kisses on the Virgin, on Christ and to the saints,

42 ‘d’un coup d’épée chirurgical » par « un iconoclaste » « se mit à saigner et saigne encore les jours de deuil. », elle note: « naturellement, je ne l’ai pas vue un jour de deuil » et ajoute que « la blessure est si béante qu’on a mal aux seins (même quand ils sont coupés) rien qu’en la regardant.’

wander from icon to icon⁴³ (Lacarrière 1954, 12). Using the image via the choice of photographs and a refined text, Lacarrière opened in 1954 the era of an intimate look at the Holy Mountain, which would be corroborated not only by his following works but by a certain number of authors including François Augiéras in the form of a reasonably autobiographical novel and Jean Biès through questioning of faith and a questioning of 'the sensitive world' of which 'even time no longer depends on it (...) so much complexity in the calendar as in the 'schedule' ending 'by making your head spin'⁴⁴ (Biès 1963, 26).

The Relics

Brother Jean (born in 1947) articulates a guiding framework for understanding the pilgrimage experience at Mount Athos, positing that 'the pilgrim comes, in general, to Mount Athos, to venerate the relics, to accomplish a wish or participate in an important celebration: Easter, Christmas. He asks a few questions. (..) In monasteries, he participates in the life of the monk'⁴⁵ (Frère 1991, 67).

In contrast, Jacques Lacarrière, in his renowned work *L'Été grec*, critiques the reverence often afforded to the relics of monks, expressing a sense of disillusionment: he states that he is 'sickened at the sight of these absurd remains,' which, in his view, do not contribute to the maturation of the 'adulthood' (Lacarrière 1975, 92). For Lacarrière, true maturity is found in pursuing the hermits who sought solace in the desolate landscapes surrounding the Prodromos Skete. His encounter with the hermit Gabriel illustrates that the perceived ignorance of monks

is relative because even if he 'barely knows how to read and write (...), he has formed an image of the unique world. (...) This strange geography, forged during his years of solitude, this naive and tragic image of the world - a torn, absurd and inhuman world - reinforces him in the idea that men are crazy, that all history is nonsense, that wisdom and peace reign only in Athos. (...) No real trip to Athos could do without a stay in the land of hermits. There is the mystical heart of the mountain, the place of the most extreme and voluntary deprivation'⁴⁶ (Lacarrière 1975, 98–99). It is this transmission of the monks' mystical quest that Lacarrière endeavors to convey to his readers.

Conversely, Jean-Claude Larchet (born in 1949), a trained theologian, recounts his first pilgrimage to Mount Athos in 1974, during which he observed a significant ritual involving relics. Following vespers, Father Cyril requested permission from Father Serge, a young English-speaking Russian hieromonk, to venerate 'the most precious relic of the monastery: the venerable head of the great martyr and anargyri Saint Panteleimon, which is kept in the church dedicated to him.' Larchet further emphasizes the personal significance of this relic, noting, 'He is a saint that I particularly venerate because I was born on the day of his commemoration by the Orthodox Church, and he is in a way my second patron and protector saint, after Saint John the Baptist, whose monastery also has a precious relic that I have the privilege of venerating (because I am the only pilgrim in the monastery today)'⁴⁷ (Larchet 2022, 32).

43 'Après quoi vient la nuit. On s'éveille, tout s'ébranle, on surprend dans le noir des sortes de ballets: les moines et leurs ombres qui vacillent dans les couloirs, qui s'agenouillent dans l'église, prodiguent les baisers à la Vierge, au Christ et aux saints, se promènent d'icônes en icônes.'

44 'du monde sensible » dont « même le temps n'en dépend plus », « tant de complexité dans le calendrier comme dans l'horaire » finissant « par faire tourner la tête »

45 'le pèlerin vient, en général, au Mont Athos, pour vénérer les reliques, pour accomplir un vœu ou participer à une fête importante: Pâques, Noël. Il pose peu de questions. (..) Dans les monastères, il participe à la vie du moine.'

46 'sait tout juste lire et écrire (...), il s'est fait une image du monde bien singulière. (...) Cette étrange géographie, forgée au cours de ses années de solitude, cette image naïve et tragique du monde - un monde déchiré, absurde et inhumain - le confortent dans l'idée que les hommes sont fous, que toute l'histoire est un non-sens, que la sagesse et que la paix ne règnent qu'à l'Athos. (...) Aucun véritable voyage à l'Athos ne saurait se passer d'un séjour au pays des ermites. Là est le cœur mystique de la montagne, le lieu des plus extrêmes et volontaires dénuements.'

47 'C'est un saint que je vénère particulièrement car je suis né le jour de sa commémoration par l'Eglise orthodoxe et il est en quelque sorte mon second saint patron et protecteur, après saint Jean-Baptiste, dont le monastère possède une

The Monks' Hospitality

In the early twentieth century, Charles Diehl articulated a nuanced perspective on the reception afforded to visitors at Vatopédi Monastery, noting that the 'reception, although different, [which] is no less cordial at Vatopédi than at Lavra: in the great salon of the hegumen, where the portraits of the past and present sovereigns of Europe are lined up, from the sultan and the czar to the presidents of our republic, the refreshments circulate, and the gifts shower us, and they would like to detain us more, to keep us until the next morning: but time is running out and we must leave, taking away the regret of the visit too brief, of the barely glimpsed vision of this monastic world of yesteryear'⁴⁸ (Diehl 1909, 199).

In a similar vein, the observations of De Vogüé regarding the representatives of the Holy Community in Karyès evoke a poignant comparison to the councils of the early Church. He remarked upon the venerable age of these men, suggesting that 'these old men are eight hundred years old, double that perhaps. Are we not in Chalcedon or Ephesus, in one of the committees of the conciliar assembly?'⁴⁹ (De Vogüé 1894, 274).

Authorities have streamlined the process for visitors, no longer requiring the inspection of passports or other documents. Instead, access to Mount Athos is facilitated by issuing a Diamonitirion visa (since the 1980s), a pass that officially authorized entry into the monks' territory. This pass is obtained from an office in Ouranoupoli, aptly named 'the city of the sky.' Visitors are typ-

précieuse relique, que j'ai également le privilège de vénérer (car je suis ce jour dans le monastère le seul pèlerin).'

48 'Et la réception, pour être différente, n'est pas moins cordiale à Vatopédi qu'à Lavra : dans le grand salon de l'higoumène, où s'alignent les portraits des souverains passés et présents d'Europe, depuis le sultan et le czar jusqu'aux présidents de notre république, les rafraîchissements circulent et les cadeaux nous comblent, et l'on voudrait nous retenir davantage, nous garder jusqu'au lendemain matin : mais le temps presse et nous devons partir, emportant le regret de la visite trop brève, de la vision entrevue à peine de ce monde monastique d'autrefois'

49 'Ces vieillards ont huit cents ans, le double peut-être. - Ne sommes-nous pas en Chalcédoine ou à Ephèse, dans un des comités de l'assemblée conciliaire?'

ically granted a minimum stay of four days, during which they are invited to observe and participate in the monastic life at their own pace. The hospitality extended by the monks leaves a lasting impression on travellers, as evidenced by the reflections of Belgian priest Dom Théodore Belpaire (1882–1968), who articulated his experience of being 'at the mercy of the hospitality' of the monks, and 'becomes aware of being here, in this Orthodox environment, foreign to everything: to the language, to the customs, to their table, to their piety'⁵⁰ (Belpaire 1929, 29).

Conclusion

The concept of a living past, a past that is still alive, a dive-like journey through time,⁵¹ (Lacarrière 2002, 8), plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of travel to Mount Athos. This idea, which has been previously articulated through readings with vivid 'descriptions of all these convents, these hermitages, nestled in the crevices of the mountain'⁵² (De Launay 1897, 148) that we come to encounter, allows travellers to engage with and verify the authenticity of these sites during their journeys. This notion began to take root in the 19th century, evolving throughout the 20th century, and it fundamentally characterizes the essence of travel narratives related to Mount Athos.

In 1884, Father Neyrat articulated this perspective, expressing his desire to witness firsthand a region that had only been accessible to a select few. He spoke of the churches where the

50 'À la merci de leur hospitalité. [...] d'être ici dans ce milieu orthodoxe, étranger à tout: à la langue, aux mœurs, à leur table, à leur piété...'

51 Lacarrière takes up this idea in his latest book devoted to Athos where for him we 'penetrate the heart of another time, in some print inhabited by silhouettes from another age' which are compared to 'very real ghosts, (...) who move around, greet you, accompany you, even inquire about your nationality, your age and your health.' ('on « pénètre au cœur d'un temps autre, en quelque estampe habitée de silhouettes d'un autre âge » qui sont comparées à « des fantômes bien réels, (...) qui s'agitent, vous saluent, vous accompagnent, s'enquêtent même de votre nationalité, de votre âge et de votre santé.'

52 'de descriptions de tous ces couvents, ces ermitages, nichés dans les anfractuosités de la montagne'

tradition of Byzantine art was purportedly preserved, thus highlighting the rarity and exclusivity of this experience. This idea seemed to germinate in the 19th century, which wandered throughout the 20th century and truly characterizes the essence of travel stories to Mount Athos. Father Neyrat, in 1884, spoke of it as follows: 'I wanted to see in my turn this region that only a few privileged people had been able to contemplate; these churches where, it was said, the tradition of the purest Byzantine art was preserved'⁵³ (Neyrat 1884, 3). This image of rarity, the notion of a closed community of purity ('In fact, it is not very easy for a Frenchman to approach this remote country...' ⁵⁴ (Neyrat 1884, 2)), is the basis of a viaticum narrative that fosters a vision of timeless otherness, interweaving landscapes, architecture, and individuals who embody an anachronistic past. The Russian Viscount De Vogüé's 1876 account, subtitled 'A Journey to the Twelfth Century,' exemplifies this sentiment. The enduring enthusiasm for De Vogüé's work, which reached its fourth edition in 1894, serves as an invitation for readers to embark on a true epic of pilgrimage, as the author himself asserted: 'Here we are in the middle of the marvelous and, as we were promised, in the middle of the Middle Ages'⁵⁵ (De Vogüé 1894, 260).

The themes of lost paradise and preserving the past through the sustainability of monasteries serve as fundamental drivers in portraying otherness. Henri de Régner (1864–1936), writing in the early 20th century, describes 'the transparency' and 'the delicious purity' of the 'water of the little bay'⁵⁶ (Régner 1913, 292). For Régner, this paradisiacal beauty appears not only transmissible but also harmonious with its inhab-

itants. He recounts an encounter with a kind monk who aided him and his companions on the peninsula, illustrating the profound connection between the natural environment and its monastic residents: 'The good monk preceded us. He would nimbly lift his dress to cross a ditch or tumble down an embankment and advise us on the best passages'⁵⁷ (Régner 1913, 297).

This deep-seated harmony (Zaitsev 2017, 22)⁵⁸ between humanity and nature emerges as a recurrent theme in viaticum accounts, with notable exceptions in Maryse Choisy's controversial 1929 (reprinted in 1931) work *Un mois chez les hommes*. Additionally, François Augiéras, in his *Letters from Mount Athos*, provides a more critical perspective on the monks. However, he acknowledges their sense of community and sharing, as evidenced by a monk who offered him the last remaining piece of bread.

The vision of the territory encompassed by this republic of monks can be succinctly articulated through the insightful observations of Boris Zaitsev, who encapsulated the multifaceted experiences of the traveller in 1927 in a manner that remains relevant to contemporary visitors. Zaitsev's description evokes a rich tapestry of natural and spiritual elements that define Mount Athos (Zaitsev 2017, 24):

Mountains, winds, forests, here and there vineyards and olive trees, isolated monasteries with their monks, the solitary ringing of bells, cuckoos in the woods, eagles above the peaks, flights of swallows making a stop on their road to the north, chamois and wild boars, silence, peace, sea around... and above everything: God - that is what Athos is.

Summary

As travellers to Mount Athos have over the centuries experienced a 'journey into the past' by staying in the mon-

53 'Je désirais voir à mon tour cette région que quelques privilégiés seuls avaient pu contempler; ces églises où, disait-on, était conservée la tradition de l'art byzantin le plus pur.'

54 'De fait, il n'est pas très aisé à un Français d'aborder en ce pays reculé...'

55 'Nous voici en plein merveilleux et, comme on nous l'avait promis, en plein moyen âge'

56 'la transparence' et de 'la pureté délicieuse' de 'l'eau de la petite baie'

57 'Le bon moine nous précédait. Il relevait lestement sa robe pour enjamber un fossé ou dégringoler un talus et il nous conseillait les meilleurs passages.'

58 The Russian traveller Boris Zaitsev said in 1927 that he immediately felt that 'in this new world, everything is marvellous.'

asteries of the Holy Mountain, one is entitled to wonder whether their varied approaches to their intellectual and social environments which produced them were not a romantic vision to varying degrees of Byzantine civilization based on their ability to transcribe the visual senses into words and expressions: the art of monasteries: architecture, frescoes, icons, the auditory sense: Byzantine chants, prayers, without forgetting a certain beauty of the landscape said to be preserved, even considered sacred over the centuries. This symphony of the senses, therefore, generated viatical texts in the form of stories, descriptions, and epistolary exchanges where the part of a particular shared imagination for the medieval period materialized through the words and expressions of a language conveying an ideology, according to their cultural background, ranging from passion to self-sacrifice to criticism. As for French-speaking literature, since the 16th century, from Pierre Belon du Mans (1555), botanist, to Byzantium enthusiasts like Eugène Mercier (1933), to the foundations of a spiritual search of Orthodox theologian Jean-Claude Larchet (2022), via the initiatory gaze of a lover of the Greek language and civilization, Jacques Lacarrière (1954; 1975; 2002), and the sarcasm of a journalist-future psychoanalyst Maryse Choisy (1931) or the criticism of a Oblate of the Catholic Church and former high school headmaster, Claude Chevreuil (2008).

We will attempt to use textual analysis to reveal the archeology of the meanings emerging from a particular narrative evolution of the French-speaking viaticum story at the Holy Mountain of Athos for almost half a century.

Povzetek

Popotniki, ki so skozi stoletja obiskovali goro Atos in bivali v samostanih svete gore, so pogosto doživljali »potovanje v preteklost«. Upravičeno se lahko vprašamo, ali njihovi različni pristopi k intelektualnemu in družbenemu okolju, ki jih je oblikovalo, ne odražajo romantične vizije bizantinske civilizacije. Ta vizija temelji na sposobnosti pretvarjanja vizualnih občutkov v besede in izraze. V tem kontekstu lahko govorimo o umetnosti samostanov: arhitekturi, freskah, ikonah ter slušnih zaznavah, kot so bizantinski spevi in molitve. Pri tem ne smemo zanemariti lepote pokrajine, ki naj bi se skozi stoletja ohranila in veljala za sveto.

Ta simfonija čutov je ustvarila potopisna besedila v obliki zgodb, opisov in epistolarnih izmenjav, ki so materializirala del posebne skupne domišljije za srednjeveško obdobje. To je bilo izraženo v jeziku, ki je ideologijo, zaznamovano z avtorjevim kulturnim ozadjem, prenašal od strasti in samožrtvovanja do kritike.

Francosko govoreča literatura o gori Atos se je razvijala od 16. stoletja dalje. Začela se je s Pierrom Belonom du Mansom (1555), botanikom, in se nadaljevala z navdušenci nad Bizancem, kot je Eugène Mercier (1933), ter s pravoslavnim teologom Jean-Claudom Larchetom (2022), ki je v svojih delih poudaril duhovno iskanje. Pomembni prispevki vključujejo tudi iniciacijske poglede ljubitelja grškega jezika in civilizacije Jacquesa Lacarrièra (1954, 1975, 2002), sarkazem novinarka in bodoče psihoanalitičarke Maryse Choisy (1929) ter kritiko oblata Katoliške cerkve in nekdanjega ravnatelja srednje šole Clauda Chevreuila (2008).

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