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CHOROTOPE: THEODORE OF SYKEON  
AND HIS SACRED LANDSCAPE

In thinking on this topic, I was inspired, in part, by an illustration in the superb catalogue of the 1986 Exhibition *Byzantium at Princeton*, edited by Professor Slobodan Ćurčić and Professor Archer St. Clair. I was struck by a particularly vivid illustration of the *Spiritual Ladder* of John Climakos. Made in the late eleventh century, it is the first representation of Mount Sinai. At the bottom lies the monastery: its walls, gates, towers and the open window from which a monk leans, occupy the bottom of the picture. The monastery lies at the foot of a cone. It is the mountain of Sinai. Halfway up, on the viewer's left, is the Burning Bush. And at the very top of the mountain, the arm and torso of another monk emerges from a cave. His remoteness is stressed by the basket which he lets down the side of a precipitous cliff from his mountain-top cell. It is a starkly *vertical* image<sup>1</sup>.

For a Byzantine, to live on the top of a mountain in that manner was to live the *bios angelikos*, the “life of the angels”, at its most concrete. Nature itself provided a majestic backdrop to the position of the hermit as an “angelic” man — as a mediator between earth and sky.

Faced by such a dramatic image, however, I wondered what it was like to live as a saint of early Byzantium in less dramatically contoured lands.

To answer this question, I turned back to a well known early Byzantine text: the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*. This text was written only a few decades after the death, in 613, of Theodore, a holy man from the village of Sykeon (a placename which is conventionally written as Sykeon, with a “y”, although the correct spelling is Sikeon, with an “i”)<sup>2</sup>. This text has always

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<sup>1</sup> *Byzantium at Princeton* / Ed. S. Ćurčić and A. St Clair. Princeton, 1986, p. 149–151.

<sup>2</sup> The reading “Sikeon” has been proved by *Rosvenqvist J. O. Studien zur Syntax und Bemerkungen zum Text der Vita Theodori Syceotae* // *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* 15. Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1981, S. 95, and has been confirmed from the Old Church Slavonic translation by *Afinogenov D. E. Zhitie Feodora Sikeota*: original tserkovnoslavianskogo

been acclaimed by its various editors and translators as a document of quite unusual circumstantiality. Completed around 640, the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* is so vivid and detailed that it figures as the center-piece of the classic English translation of late Roman saints' lives, *Three Byzantine Saints*, made in 1948 by Elizabeth Dawes, in collaboration with the great English Byzantinist, Norman Baynes: as Norman Baynes wrote, the text was chosen because it gives the best picture known to us of life in Asia Minor in the Byzantine period before the Arab invasions<sup>3</sup>.

Even before Baynes and Dawes made this vivid text available to the English-speaking world, it had earned the esteem of the great traveler-scholar, William Anderson. In his ground-breaking article of 1899, "Explorations of Galatia cis Halym", Anderson spoke of the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* as well worthy of perusal for its wealth of geographical information and for the picture — not a bright one! — which it gives of the social life of Galatia in the sixth century of our era<sup>4</sup>.

It is, indeed, the unremitting topographical circumstantiality of the *Life of Theodore* that strikes any reader who comes to it from the study of contemporary Byzantine saints' lives. A document of only 161 pages contains the names of at least 68 sites in the region.

George, the author of the *Life of Theodore*, plainly wrote with a map in his head. More than that: the main physical features of the landscape around Sykeon are presences in the *Life* which are almost as vivid as is Theodore himself: these are — first and foremost, the Roman imperial road to the East, the "spinal chord of Roman Anatolia" (to use the words of Stephen Mitchell)<sup>5</sup>, which ran through the village itself; secondly, the treacherous waters of the river Siberis over which the emperor Justinian had recently built a bridge; and, last but not least, in the imagination of the author, the wild crags of the mountain crest in which Theodore lived out the first stage of his ascetic career. Road, river, mountaintops: these are the three vividly conveyed topographical "zones" which give structure to the *Life*.

But George, we must remember, was a man of the early seventh century. He did not write only so as to inform modern historians of the *realia* of Byzantine Anatolia. We have to ask ourselves what were the preconditions of topographical "realism" in such a text and what form did this "realism" take?

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perevoda i grecheskaia rukopisnaia traditsiia. Индрик. 10 лет. Moscow, 2003, 193–205, at p.198. I thank Professor Afinogenov for having brought his important new contribution to my attention at the time of the conference.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Theodore* / Transl. Elizabeth Dawes and Norman H. Baynes // *Three Byzantine Saints*. Oxford: Blackwell 1948 (Crestwood, New York, 1977, p. 87–192, at p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson G. C. Explorations in Galatia cis Halym // *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 19 (1899), p. 52–134, at p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell S. Anatolia. Land, Men and Gods in Asia Minor, vol. II: The Rise of the Church. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 123.

In the first place, Theodore himself had come to remember his life, in his old age, in terms of places. The fuller version of the *Life of Theodore*, edited by André Festugière<sup>6</sup>, shows Theodore in this last years. Every year, in Holy Week, Theodore would be carried on a litter, to perform the liturgy or to read the Gospels in his sweet, resonant voice, at all the “places of memory” of his life as a Christian: “the oratories in the crags, the churches in village, the chapels round about”. Up in the oratory of Saint George, where he had once passed two entire years in seclusion, Theodore would settle down to lunch: eating with good cheer, speaking with us with great joy and openness, and would tell us, smilingly, of how he was led by the glorious martyr [George] throughout his childhood years<sup>7</sup>.

Let us note that the first memories of the old Theodore were of the protection of Saint George, “among the crags”. The author of the *Life of Theodore* had been named “George” by the saint himself. This was because, in the imaginative topography of Theodore himself, Saint George had played a very special role. Saint George stood for the “zone” of the mountain-tops. Theodore had begun his ascetic adventures, as a young teen-ager, by a movement of sharp verticality. He had left his village to go “up into the mountain”. In so doing, he went into wild land. It was dangerous to travel in the dark in a landscape fretted with precipices. His parents feared that he might be devoured by a *monolykos*, a lone (and therefore doubly dangerous, because man eating) wolf. Yet, already in the early sixth century, a little oratory of Saint George stood there “among the crags”. Rarely visited until Theodore attached himself to it, the little chapel occupied a charged joining point between heaven and earth, and between the settled world and the wild. It was Saint George who had kept young Theodore safe in his first years<sup>8</sup>.

But these memories did not only include the wild mountain-tops, the scenes of Theodore's earliest ascetic endeavors. They held together the “monastery” which Theodore eventually founded just outside Sykeon. This monastery looked down from the top of a slope, probably at a distance of only half a mile, over the Roman road and the imperial *mansio*, the carvansaray-like imperial staging-post, with its hostel and eating facilities, where Theodore himself had been born.

What is impressive is the speed with which this group of buildings became a “holy place”. It had no wall. Yet it was encircled by an invisible enclosure. This enclosure was delineated and defended by tenacious

<sup>6</sup> Vita Theodori Syceotae / Ed. A. J. Festugière // Vie de Théodore de Sykéon, Subsidia Hagiographica 48. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1970, 2 vols. Users of this text must bear in mind the corrections brought by *Rosenqvist*, Bermerkungen, p. 105–128, further confirmed by *Afinogenov*, Zhitie Feodora Sikeota. See also: *Baker D.* Theodore of Sykeon and the Historians // The Orthodox Churches and the West. Studies in Church History 13. Oxford, 1976, p. 83–96.

<sup>7</sup> Vita Theodori 167.39–41 and 79–82 / Ed. Festugière, p. 155–156.

<sup>8</sup> Vita Theodori 6.39–7.4 / Ed. Festugière, p. 6; 9. 6–12, p. 9; 11. 5–7 and 24–30, p. 9 [the ravine called Tzidrama]; 19, p. 16.

memories. In its central space, no meat could be eaten: it was remembered that workers who had done so, many decades before young George began to write, had suffered the drastic vengeance of God<sup>9</sup>.

We must always remember that Theodore had journeyed on three decisive occasions to the Holy Places, especially to the monastery of Choziba. The settlements of his monastery — strung out in a line along the contour of a hillside — served to bring, to the rolling slopes of Anatolia, a touch of the more dramatic wadi-monasteries of the Judaeen Desert. It was an echo, in Anatolia, of the Holy Places. As such, Theodore's monastery at Sykeon is an early example of a millennial tradition, by which the memory of Jerusalem and of the Judaeen desert moved ever northwards, to landscapes ever more different from the eastern Mediterranean, as far as Russia itself<sup>10</sup>. But, until 1995, nobody knew exactly where Sykeon lay. The authority of William Anderson had placed it on the great Ottoman road which led from Ankara, through Beypazari, to Istanbul<sup>11</sup>. Only in 1981 did the work of David French show that the Roman road did not follow the Ottoman road in all its extent. A little south of Beypazari, as you come from Istanbul, the Roman road suddenly dipped south east, so as to cross what was, in Roman times, the treacherous valley of the Siberis (the modern Kirmir Su). It then made its way up to the southern plateau, which leads through Lagania /Anastasiopolis (the modern Dikmen Hüyük) to Ankara<sup>12</sup>.

It was in 1995 that my friend, David Barchard, and I visited the valley which led up from Beypazari to the plateau of Dikmen Hüyük. It was while drinking tea in this valley that I learned of the presence of remains. They still bore the Turkish name of Kiliseler — the “Churches”<sup>13</sup>. Between 1996 to 2001, a Princeton Survey Expedition, led by myself and my assistant, Professor Joel Walker, now of the University of Washington, explored the valley. We found the trace of the Roman road. We found fragments of the bridge which the emperor Justinian had built over the river Siberis. We found, beside the present road (which largely coincides with the course of the old Roman Road) an impressive early Christian basilica. It was twenty

<sup>9</sup> Vita Theodori 60.9 / Ed. Festugière, p. 51; with 69 and 70, p. 57–58.

<sup>10</sup> Ruggieri V. Byzantine Religious Architecture (582–867): its History and Structural Elements // *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 237. Rome: Inst. Pont. Stud. Or. 1991, p. 245 and 250; Kaplan M. Les sanctuaires de Théodore de Sykéon // *Les saints et leur sanctuaires* / Ed. C. Jolivet-Lévy, M. Kaplan and J. P. Sodini. Byzantina Sorbonensia 11. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1993, p. 65–79.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson. Explorations in Galatia cis Halym, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> French D. Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor: fasc.1, The Pilgrims' Road // British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara Monograph 3, BAR International Series 105. Oxford: BAR, 1981, p. 42–45.

<sup>13</sup> Now recounted in Barchard D. Sykeon rediscovered? A Site at Kiliseler near Beypazari // *Anatolian Studies* 53 (2003), p. 175–179.

five meters long by twelve meters wide. The entire northern side and part of the apse were still standing to a height of two meters. Another church complex was discovered some fifty meters further up the hill.

More significant, on the other side of the road, where the hill slopes upwards towards the plateau of Kirbasi, we discovered terraces strewn with material which dated only from the early Byzantine period. At the edges of a trench made in the process of excavating a water pipeline for the present-day Water Pump Station, we found fragments of unusually fine stone work, which used marbles imported from elsewhere.

In a series of surveys conducted between 1996 and 2001, we have established that this site is, indeed, the site of Theodore's Sykeon. The basilicas beside the road are consistent with a prosperous village, whose ceramics go back to Roman times. The unusual scatter of ceramic and rich marble fragments on the steeper terraces around the Water Pump opposite the village point to a set of prestigious buildings put up at one period only and then rapidly deserted<sup>14</sup>.

Neither sites extend beyond the seventh century. It is a complex of village and monastery which, as it were, "went dead". This happened when the Roman road, which had once functioned as the "spine" of Roman Anatolia became, instead, a dangerous pathway for invading armies — first Persian and then Arab. Archaeologically, and even in terms of subsequent human settlement, a thriving Roman valley went asleep, after 650, for over a millennium. Then, in 1996, we found that this valley contained both the village and the monastery of Theodore of Sykeon.

What I wish to report on this occasion is how the exploration of the landscape of Sykeon and of the topography of the valley in which it is placed has enabled us, for the first time, to compare an early Byzantine landscape with the manner in which an early Byzantine writer perceived it. By so doing, we can recapture the imaginative building-blocks which enabled George, the author of the *Life of Theodore*, to conjure up the landscape of his saint.

George plainly saw this landscape in terms of distinctive "zones". These "zones" were juxtaposed with each other according to an imaginative logic which had deep roots in the early Byzantine ascetic tradition. In this imaginative logic, the contrast between the "settled" land and the "desert" — between *oikoumené* and *erémos* — was of primary importance. Hence the mystique of the deserts of Egypt, which flanked the Nile, and of the Judaeian desert, which lay so close to the Holy Places of Jerusalem. In Anatolia (as in many other regions of the Middle East) the elemental distinction of "settled" land and "desert" had been transposed into a "vertical" dimension. The desert was now to be found in the mountains, "above" the settled land.

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<sup>14</sup> Walker J. Tahirler Project 2002: <http://courses.Washington.edu/tahirler/reports.html>.

So it is with George. He writes, vividly, of the world of high crags and dangerous ravines into which Theodore had disappeared in his first days as an ascetic. He wrote as if this world hung directly above the village of Sykeon — in such a manner that modern persons might expect to reach it (as they might reach an Alpine viewing point) through taking a funicular directly from the village to the mountain-top!<sup>15</sup>

But here the imaginative logic, which brought the two contrasted zones together, provided no help to the archaeologist. It was only by following the course of a tributary of the Siberis away from the village itself, for some miles to the south west, that we scrambled up to find, *behind* a relatively low hilltop, an entirely unexpected, dramatic prospect of tangled rocks and deep ravines, overlooked by the ruins of a Phrygian hill-fort. The ravines formed a little world of their own. Springs in the rock produced miniature valleys (often no more than the width of a person) in the midst of a forbidding landscape. In the fertile cracks of these hidden ravines young Theodore was able to hide for years on end so as to complete his ascetic labors.

This was the local variant of the Egyptian “desert”. But it was a world to whose precise location the text of the *Life of Theodore* gave no indication. Indeed, the insistence of George, that this “desert” must, as it were, hover above its imaginative antithesis, the village, led us for many days to look for it in the wrong direction.

It is the same with other features in George's narrative. The river Siberis was spoken of, by George, as lying “beside the village”. Both Anderson and Baynes (who followed Anderson) took this literally. As a result they placed Sykeon close to the present course of the Kirmir Su, as it flows past Bey pazari<sup>16</sup>.

In reality, as we discovered, the Roman staging-post of Sykeon did not lie beside the river. It was sited, prudently, some 8 kilometers (five Roman miles) further up the road towards the plateau, on higher land at a safe distance from the flash-floods that would have swirled around the bridge itself. But, in the imaginative geography of the *Life of Theodore*, the river Siberis was the antithesis to the settled land protected by Theodore. Like the mountaintop, it was treated as the direct imaginative neighbor of the village. What mattered for George was the juxtaposition between the two antithetical “zones” of river and village, not the physical distance between the two sites.

It is the same with George's description of the monastery itself. In the *Life of Theodore*, it is always presented as a world of its own. It is a place to

<sup>15</sup> Vita Theodori 3.39–7.4 / Ed. Festugière, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Procopius. On the Buildings 5.4. 1–4 // Procopius VII. Loeb Classical Library / Ed. H. B. Dewing. Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 330. 62; Vita Theodori 121. 27–33 / Ed. Festugière, p. 170. See most recently the suggestions of Belke K. Prokops de Aedificiis, Buch V, zu Kleiasien // Antiquité tardive 8 (2000), p. 115–125, at p. 118–119.

which one “ascends”. As George describes it, the monastery of Theodore seems to float above the settled land, on a mountain slope topped by rugged crags. A new oratory dedicated to the Archangel Michael, built beside the chapel of saint George, pointedly heightened the sense of sacred “verticality” and of separation of the monastery and of the places of ascetic retreat above the monastery from the level ground of the village and the road<sup>17</sup>.

In reality, the terraces which still bear the name “Kilisele”, “The Churches”, are a mere ten minutes easy walk above the road. Behind the terrace, the ground slopes more sharply upwards to the edge of the Kirbasi plateau. But there are no crags in sight. These, as we have seen, lay *behind* the edge of the Kirbasi plateau, forming a world of their own, out of sight of the valley in which Sykeon and its road-side monastery are placed. Again, the topographical indications in George's text, when checked against the present-day landscape, appear to follow an imaginative logic of their own.

In the light of these observations, I am tempted to follow the great Russian master, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose studies of the Greek epic and of the Hellenistic novel have acquainted us with the term “chronotope”. Bakhtin uses the term “chronotope” to speak of the units of time in which the characters of a distant, pre-modern literature were imagined to have lived their lives<sup>18</sup>. I am tempted to coin the term “choro-tope”. For, like Bakhtin's “chronotope”, “chorotope” may prove to be a fruitful notion. For “space” is as much a construct of the human imagination, subject to change throughout the ages, as is “time”.

The “space” of the modern archaeological surveyor is a “space” defined by *distances*. Space is spread out for us in maps. It is registered in kilometers of travel. It is orientated along the points of a magnetic compass. George's “chorotope”, by contrast, was the space of an early Byzantine hagiographer. It was organized in terms of antithetical “zones” in which distance has been suspended as being of no significance. George's Sykeon is made up of just such juxtaposed zones. Each zone is conveyed with gripping circumstantiality. But where exactly they are and the distances between them remain hauntingly undefined.

And so to sum up: The modern reader of an early Byzantine text such as the *Life of Theodore* is confronted with a presentation of landscape that is as subtly and decisively molded by strong imaginative patterns as is the exquisite Byzantine illustration of Mount Sinai in the Princeton manuscript

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<sup>17</sup> Vita Theodori 40. 10–18, p. 36, see: *Mango C.* La croix dite de Michel le Cérulaire et la croix de saint Michel de Sykéon // *Cahiers archéologiques* 37 (1988), p. 41–49.

<sup>18</sup> *Bakhtin M.* *Voprosy Literaturny I Estetiki*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1975, p. 234–407 (Transl.: *The Dialogic Imagination*, C. Emerson and D. Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 1983, p. 84–258).

of Saint John Climakos. Mount Sinai is well known to us all. It is a more rare privilege, as traveller and archaeologist, to visit an upland valley of Anatolia, where, in many ways time has stopped since the days of Theodore of Sykeon, and to see with one's own eyes a landscape of which one had read, for decades, in the vivid *Life of Theodore*. In subtle but decisive ways, we do not look at the same landscape with the same eyes as did its seventh century author. And this is why I wished to speak, on this occasion, on this unusually vivid text.

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ХОРОТОП: СВ. ФЕДОР СИКЕОТ  
И ЕГО САКРАЛЬНАЯ СРЕДА

Житие св. Феодора из Сикеона (530–613), написанное его последователем Георгием, долгое время признавалось шедевром ранневизантийской агиографии. Выдающийся британский византист Норман Байнс говорил, что оно дает лучшую из известных нам картину жизни в Малой Азии византийского периода, до арабского завоевания.

Довольно необычно количество содержащейся в нем географической информации. Этот текст, в котором всего 161 страница, содержит названия 68 мест, многие из которых удалены от Сикеона.

До недавнего времени было известно лишь то, что Сикеон находился в Галатии, между городом Юлиополем и Анастасиополем (древней Лаганией) — Дикмен Хуюк в современной провинции Бейпазари. Большинство попыток идентификации было основано на ложных допущениях, самое значительное из которых — представления о древнеримской дороге, якобы совпадающей с османской дорогой из Анкары в Наллихан и Стамбул.

В результате моего топографического исследования и ряда археологических экспедиций, предпринятых группой ученых из Принстонского университета в сотрудничестве с турецким министерством культуры в 1996–2001 годах, стало возможным установить местонахождение селения Сикеон и множества упомянутых в житии св. Феодора мест. Теперь у нас есть ландшафт, с которым можно соотносить поле деятельности византийского святого.

Но у нас есть даже нечто большее. Нам стал доступен реальный пейзаж, который можно сравнить с образом сакральной среды, созданным в ранневизантийском тексте. Моя статья посвящена археологическому исследованию, позволившему установить местонахождение поселения и



всего района, приобретшего особую важность. Кроме того, детально изучены выразительные средства, при помощи которых Георгий, автор жития, «конструировал» пространство, в каждой своей точке одухотворенное связью со святым. Такое создание «сакрального ландшафта» в центре Анатолии ранневизантийским святым и его биографом можно оценить, сравнив с подлинным, наблюдаемым ландшафтом, который мы можем идентифицировать. Возникает редкая возможность проследить процесс становления святого места и оценить византийскую эстетику, посредством которой оно описывалось в житии св. Феодора.

Развивая эти наблюдения, я следовал великому русскому ученому Михаилу Бахтину, чьи исследования греческого эпоса и эллинистического романа обогатили нас термином «хронотоп». Бахтин употребляет его, чтобы обозначить периоды, в которых, как представлялось, обитали персонажи древней литературы, созданной до Нового времени. Я бы хотел предложить еще и термин «хоротоп», так как, подобно «хронотопу» Бахтина он может оказаться плодотворным. «Пространство» — такой же продукт человеческого воображения, как и «время».

«Пространство» современного ученого-археолога — это пространство, определенное расстояниями. Оно разворачивается на картах, измеряется в километрах путешествий, оно ориентировано при помощи компаса на полюсы. Напротив, «хоротоп» Георгия был пространством ранневизантийского агиографа. Он был организован в терминах антистетических «зон», в которых расстояния исключались как не имеющие значения. Сикеон Георгия построен из таких совмещающихся зон. Каждая зона конструируется с затягивающей обстоятельностью, но вместе с тем постоянно остается неопределенным, где именно они находятся и какие между зонами расстояния.

Итак, подведем итоги: современный читатель ранневизантийского текста, подобного житию св. Феодора, сталкивается с сакральной средой, которая тонко и убедительно представлена при помощи различных образных средств, как, например, изображение горы Синай на византийской миниатюре из принстонской рукописи с «Лествицей» св. Иоанна Лествичника. Гора Синай хорошо известна всем нам. Археологу и путешественнику реже удастся посетить Анатолийское нагорье, где время во многих отношениях остановилось со времен св. Феодора Сикеота, и своими собственными глазами увидеть пейзаж, о котором он мог десятилетиями читать в ярком житии св. Феодора. Трудноуловимым, но вместе с тем несомненным образом мы смотрим на тот же пейзаж иными глазами, нежели автор седьмого века. Поэтому я и решил посвятить статью этому необычайно яркому тексту.