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**Rapture, Ecstasy, and the Construction of Sacred Space:
Hierotopy in the *Life of Symeon the New Theologian***

International Byzantine Studies Congress, Belgrade, August 2016
Roundtable: “Icons of Space, Icons in Space, Iconography or Hierotopy?”

[Abstract]

Overview

Architectural imagery, with all its attendant spatial properties and perspectives, so abounds in Byzantine religious literature that its scope and application are not easy to assess. In both the Old and New Testaments, the figure of the building is an important human symbol of achievement, whether it is the temple of Solomon, the visionary temple of Ezekiel, or the celestial Jerusalem. As sites of access to the deity, these symbolic structures were mapped onto the body of Christ, understood to be the par excellence temple of the divinity (cf. John 2:19). As the “corner-stone” of a “living spiritual edifice” (Mat 21:42; 1 Pet 2:5), in which “the fullness of the divinity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9), the mystical body of Christ was a structure extended to include the body of the mystic as the site and edifice of mystical encounter—a living, representational space paradoxically contained by the divinity and simultaneously containing it.

This paper applies a broad spatial perspective to Niketas Stethatos’s *Life of Symeon the New Theologian* (scr. ca. 1055), attending to parallel passages in the writings of Symeon the New Theologian (ca. 949-1022). Such a perspective has the advantage of expanding reductively epistemological and/or narrowly linguistic conceptions of mysticism, permitting the incorporation of multiple levels of objects and discourse, including Symeon’s physical and social environment, his individual mystical experiences, and their spatialized exterior representations. In exploring the juxtaposition of space and mysticism presented in the *Life*, this paper endeavors to reveal new insights into the understanding and production of sacred space. The mystical experiences described in the *Life* are always embodied experiences that unfold within a particular space or place, which is the multifaceted place where mystical experience converges with its subsequent social, textual, iconographic, and architectural representations.

Space as Light

In the *Life*’s complex hierotopy, the density of the mystic’s body and its surrounding spatial structures are transformed through the medium of light, which renders them ambiguously fluid, and transposes them to a mode analogous to the spatial forms of an icon. While it is perhaps taken for granted that a “mysticism of light” was a characteristic feature of Byzantine spirituality, no writer before Symeon had emphasized the phenomenon of light to such a degree, nor with such emotional intensity. Dozens of his pages are devoted to his encounters with the divine light, many of which he construes in distinctively spatial terms, to which the *Life* remains faithful. The juxtaposition of space and light described in the *Life of St Symeon* will be framed within the larger context of Byzantine Neoplatonism, with particular emphasis on Proclus’s doctrine of space as light, and related themes in Dionysios the Areopagite and Maximos the Confessor.

It is unlikely that Symeon was directly familiar with Neoplatonic metaphysics, and any philosophical elements in his writings are likely to have been mediated through the Platonizing Christian authors he is known to have read (e.g., Evagrius of Pontus, Gregory the Theologian, and, perhaps, Dionysios the Areopagite). On the other hand, Symeon's reformulation of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (*ED* 1.12), with its distinctive juxtaposition of space and light, would appear to indicate familiarity with the Platonic corpus. The celebrated myth, however, had long been absorbed into Christian discourse, and we can safely assume that Symeon's thought was informed by the general Christian Neoplatonism of middle Byzantine Constantinople, which would soon experience a renaissance associated with Michael Psellos (d. ca. 1078) and John Italos (d. ca. 1082), along with the contemporary publication of the "Constantinopolitan edition" of the works of Maximos the Confessor. Symeon himself did not participate directly in the Neoplatonic revival of the early Komnenian period, although his disciple and biographer, Niketas Stethatos, was exactly contemporary with it.

The Neoplatonic metaphysics of space as light provide a suggestive, if somewhat remote, philosophical framework for the spatial dynamics of the *Life of Symeon the New Theologian*. At the same time, it is clear that Symeon's self-understanding of his visionary experiences—which was shared by Stethatos—is deeply rooted in the tradition of Paul's rapture and ecstatic transport to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:1-4), a tradition supported by a millennium of patristic and early Byzantine exegesis of the *corpus Paulinum*.

Paul's Rapture

The influence of Paul on Byzantine spirituality has not yet been fully appreciated, although the apostle has rightly been called the "model mystic for Symeon the New Theologian" (Golitzin 1995, 117). Symeon's visions are systematically modeled on the "rapture" (ἀρπαγή) of Paul (2 Cor 12:1-4), an event that in the Byzantine tradition had long been identified with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Act 9:1-19; 22:6-11; 26:13-14). Two elements in this dramatic experience were at the fore of Byzantine spirituality: the perceptually overwhelming manifestation of divine light, and the ambiguous spatial location of the body, for at the time Paul confessed not knowing "whether he was in the body or out of the body" (2 Cor 12:3). In the *Life*, Symeon's mystical experiences are explicitly aligned with Paul's rapture, which is equated with the mystical experience of "ecstasy" (ἔκστασις)—a word that means "to stand or be outside of one's self or place"—so that Symeon's cell is flooded with light, which "flashes around him just as it once did with Paul," and "catches him up" (i.e., in rapture), alluding directly to Acts 26:13. Moreover, Symeon's mystical experiences both signal and require the displacement of the body, so that, like Paul, he enters an ambiguously liminal space, which is paradoxically both embodied and disembodied. The simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment of mystical experience reflects philosophical conceptions of space in which the body is at once a spatialized receptacle and the negation of any bounded containing localized within definable space.

The Architecture of the Self

Throughout the *Life*, the cloistral space of the saint's cell is the basic structural unit that is both an extension of the saint's body and a microcosm of the physical world. As the body is enclosed within its cell, the body itself is a cell containing the soul, which in turn contains the uncontainable divinity. Correspondences between the monastic body and its cell were not new, and Symeon would have known of them from multiple sources,

including John Klimakos's *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 27: "Strange as it may seem, the monk is a man who fights to keep his incorporeal self enclosed within the house of the body—the cell of a monk is the body that surrounds him, and within him is the dwelling place of knowledge." The cell/body analogy could, moreover, be extended to include the furnishings of the cell, which are themselves the spatialized forms of the cloistered body projected outward. The simple triad of floor, stool, and mat, for example, makes spatially and therefore steadily visible the collection of postures and positions the body moves in and out of. These furnishings objectify the locations of the body that most frequently hold the body's weight; they objectify the body's continual need to shift within itself the locus of its weight, as well as its need to become wholly forgetful of its weight, and to move weightlessly to a larger mindfulness.

Spaces and physical structures are thus endowed with spiritual meaning, and the spiritual structures or states of the soul are provided with cognate physical symbols. In this way, the mystic's body and its enclosing cell give spatialized, observable expression to his inward spiritual states. As the invisible empties itself into visibility, the spatial dynamics presented in the *Life* enable the translation of spiritual undertakings and achievements into tangible, hierotopic forms. And so closely does the *Life* identify Symeon's body with the space of his cell, that when the latter is dismantled by Symeon's persecutors, Stethatos notes that the "inanimate cell underwent a punishment equal to that of its owner" (*Life* 98). Thirty years after the saint's death, an *epsilon*—the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet—mysteriously appeared on a piece of marble in the saint's cell, foretelling the translation of his bodily remains during the Fifth Indiction (*Life* 129). Similarly, Symeon's restoration of the monastic church of St. Mamas is described by Stethatos as an outward image of Symeon's efforts to reform and renew the inner lives of his monks, a spiritual project spatialized in the physical rebuilding of fallen and dilapidated monastic structures.

Ecstasy and Displacement

Mystical experience does not simply generate the emplacement of the body, but brings about its transcendence, the ecstatic displacement of the mystic into a realm outside the limits of the body's proper spatial location. In the *Life*, this transcendence is typically expressed through the attenuation and even disappearance of the physical space of the cell. As Symeon's cell is "flooded with light from above," the physical space of his cell is "dissolved" (ἀφανισθέντα), while the saint is "caught up into the air" and "completely forgets his body." Afterwards, in reverse order, the saint is "contracted back into himself" (συσταλέντος πρὸς ἑαυτό), back into his body, and back into the space of his cell (*Life* 5). This is a formula that Stethatos repeats throughout the *Life*, so that later, while Symeon is praying in his cell, the "roof of the house is lifted away" (τῆς στέγης ἀρθείσης τοῦ οἴκου), as a "cloud of light" descends from heaven and settles above his head. During another visionary moment, while the saint is standing at prayer inside (ἔνδον) his cell, he "seemed to be outside in the open air" (αἴθριος ἔξω), and "the building and everything else disappeared, and he seemed no longer to be inside" (ἡ οἰκία καὶ πάντα παρήρχοντο καὶ ἐν οἴκῳ οὐδόλως ἐνόμιζεν) (*Life* 69). These experiences are corroborated by Symeon's own writings, which describe them in the same language and using the same images. Two examples will suffice: "I was not aware I was within the house; it seemed I was sitting in the dark open air, and I was utterly oblivious even of my own body" (οἰκίας ἠμνημόνησα ὅτι ἐντὸς ὑπάρχω, ἐν τῷ δοκεῖν ἀέρι δὲ τοῦ σκοτόους ἐκαθήμην, πλὴν καὶ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ λήθην ἔσχον εἰς ἅπαν) (*Hymn* 25); and: "Light appeared to me, and the walls of my cell immediately vanished, and the world

disappeared, and I remained alone in the presence of the Alone. And I do not know if this my body was there, too; I do not know if I was outside of it” (ώραθη μοι ἐκεῖνο τὸ φῶς, ἦρθη ὁ οἶκος τῆς κέλλης εὐθὺς καὶ παρήλθεν ὁ κόσμος, ἔμεινα δὲ μόνος ἐγὼ μόνῳ συνῶν τῷ φωτί, οὐκ οἶδα δὲ εἰ ἦν καὶ τὸ σῶμα τοῦτο τηνικαῦτα ἐκεῖ, εἰ γὰρ ἔξω τούτου γέγονα ἀγνοῶ) (ED 5).

The Saint as Icon and Iconic Space

These literary descriptions of a sainted figure standing in a ground of light devoid of architectural framing are analogous to the artistic forms and compositional features of Byzantine icons. In this way, the saint or mystic is an icon, a model or image of sanctity for others, becoming a sacred site for the faithful and a visible example of liminality, existing visibly within the world but nonetheless representing something beyond it. It is worth noting that Symeon himself was directly involved in the design and production of icons, particularly of his spiritual father, Symeon the Elder. The icon proved to be popular, and local religious leaders requested copies of it. It also proved to be controversial, and when the cult of Symeon the Elder came under attack, resulting in the theft of the icon and the slandering of the saint, Stethatos deemed the affair a “new Iconoclasm,” and its proponents were naturally compared to Iconoclasts (*Life* 92-93). During his lifetime, Symeon the New Theologian, while in his cell, was observed to be suspended six feet in the air, rising to the “same level as a large icon of the Deesis” hanging close to the ceiling. A bright and radiant light emanated from Symeon’s body, and his hands were raised in prayer, not unlike the figures in the icon (*Life* 117; cf. 126). After his death, Symeon himself was depicted in an icon, the face of which was seen to glow a “fiery burning red” (*Life* 143). These passages suggest that the form of space envisioned in the *Life*, the “place” of the sainted body, is a fully iconic space, at once a *hierotopy* and a *heterotopia*, virtualizing the inherent liminality of the icon.

The *Life of St Symeon the New Theologian* is a rich, and in many ways unique, source for the understanding and production of sacred space in the middle Byzantine period. While the *Life* has been studied from various perspectives, its sophisticated juxtaposition of space and mystical experience remains largely unexplored. In studying the spatial dynamics put forward by the *Life*, especially the abolition of spatial perspective in the ecstatic vision of the divine light, this paper will argue that accounts of such visionary experiences influenced, or at the very least encouraged, the depiction of space and spatial perspective in Byzantine iconography.