Jakov Đorđević

Taming the (Super)Natural
Negotiating and Appropriating the Powers of Heaven and Hades in Late Medieval Eastern Christian Monasticism

Jakov Đorđević
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
jakovdj@gmail.com

Medieval Christian monasticism cultivated a particular kind of environmental imagination. The monastic vocation being devised as a spiritual path of redemption and inner cleansing often referenced the fall of Adam and Eve and the loss of the Garden of Eden. Therefore, nature was conceptually framed between the tamed habitation and the hostile wilderness. This paper discusses monastic environmental engagement in the context of the creation of a sacred place. Special attention is devoted to the relations between humans and nature as seen from the perspective of post-humanism and ecocritical theory. Hence, the paper is concerned with three particular issues: 1) the cleansing and sacralization of the landscape by ascetic endeavors; 2) the reaffirmation of the harmonious order; 3) the monastic attitude toward carnivorous beasts.

Keywords: sacred landscape, monastic environmental imagination, animals, post-humanism, queer ecocriticism, Peter of Koriša, Dečani Monastery

Introduction

According to numerous medieval accounts, contact with the locus of sacred power provided miraculous outcomes and transformative experiences. While certainly desirable, approaching sacredness was also a serious affair that demanded the right attitude and spiritual readiness. One prominent example is found in the Old Testament when Moses encountered the burning bush and had to take his sandals off while stepping on the holy ground (Exodus 3:5). On the other hand, Mary of Egypt was prevented by an invisible force from entering the church where the relic of the True Cross was displayed because of her sins (*Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, 1996, 82).

Acts of human creativity in the form of erecting particular structures or monuments at places potent with power were done in an attempt to frame that power, making it more approachable and easier to channel in the desired manner. Medieval reliquaries represent a perfect example if they are perceived not only as the containers of the relics but also the vehicles for wielding their "abilities". Particularly telling are those shaped in the form of a hand since the gestures they were displaying made it possible to perform specific functions in the ritual encounter with the faithful (Hahn, 1997). The whole sacred building with its gradation of sanctity distributed through its various parts enabled gradual access to holiness, orchestrating a person's attitude while inviting reassessment of one's own inner state. In essence, the church was a "controlled environment" where everyone had to abide by the rules of right positioning in proper veneration. Moreover, the church was imagined as a microcosm encompassing within it the harmony between the created world and the heavenly realm.

In the Christian imagination, the natural world could have been invested with powers including those instigated by the evil spirits. The monastic cultural context developed an especially elaborate conceptual system reconsidering the relationship between nature and humans in creating, i.e. "framing", the sacred places. The aim of this paper is to discuss this complex process of accomplishing the harmonious order.

Nature and the Monastic Self

Medieval Christian monasticism cultivated a particular kind of environmental imagination. The monastic vocation being devised as a spiritual path of redemption and inner cleansing often referenced the fall of Adam and Eve and the loss of the Garden of Eden. Therefore, nature was conceptually framed between the tamed habitation and the hostile wilderness (Della Dora, 2016, 144). To take the monastic habit meant to embark on a journey of retrieving the earthly paradise together with the human state lost through original sin. To observe this environmental imagination, it is useful to engage with the narratives presented in the monastic vitae, particularly those recounting the stories of dedicated hermits who devoted their lives to the pursuit of ascetic ideals in the desert.

The Christian desert is synonymous with the wilderness. Its scenery goes beyond the rocky terrain surrounded by dunes. The spreading of monasticism together with its extreme form of eremitism across Europe added to the desert landscape wild forests and high mountains (see Della Dora, 2016, 118-175). The vita of St. Peter of Ko-

riša, a hagiography written by the monk Teodosije of Hilandar at the beginning of the 14th century is very illustrative in the context of ascetic environmental engagement because it tells the story of one celebrated Balkan hermit by employing some of the most prominent topoi found in the lives of saintly recluses in the East. According to the narrative, Peter wanted to devote his life to God from his early youth. After receiving his monastic habit and making a firm decision to pursue his childhood dream, he found a cave among many caverns in a rocky scenery at the foot of Mt Rusenica in the gorge of the River Koriša. After his death, a monastery was erected around his hermitage and it still exists today, though in ruins. During the Ottoman period, monks had to leave the monastery taking with them the relics of St. Peter of Koriša in order to preserve them (Popović, 1997).

The choice to settle in a cave as the perfect dwelling place for his purpose is particularly revealing. In Byzantine visual culture caves often alluded to entombment, enabling the sight of the body as though it was buried inside the earth (Talbot, 2016, 712-713; Đorđević, 2018, 21-24). This connection provided the opportunity for the poetic association between cradle and sepulcher in Nativity scenes, insinuating Christ's future suffering and death for humankind. This also might be the reason why the cavern as the place of Christ's birth was never substituted with the image of a stable in Byzantine art. Eremitic cells were often represented as gloomy gaps in stony surroundings where their inhabitants were preoccupied with prayer and penance. In one interesting illumination from a manuscript of *The Heavenly Ladder* (Vat. gr. 394, fol. 46r), a popular monastic manual on attaining spiritual perfection, the conscious association with the tomb can be perceived by observing the anchorites engaged in severe bodily mortifications (fig. 1). They are depicted as skeletal apparitions, almost as reanimated corpses (Đorđević, 2019, 32). This same notion is present in the vita of St. Peter of Koriša. The hermit is described as "the enemy to his body" (Teodosije, 1988, 272). There are several instances in the text that mention his harsh transformation into a slender figure of darkened skin, deprived of food and sleep. He is even addressed by demons with the following words: "Burned by the sun, by wind and rain being racked, in the stony cave your body is frizzing and rotting; and because of the nudity your flesh has darkened like earth, and inside it, like in a sack, your bones resemble dried hay that barely holds on" (Teodosije, 1988, 280). The natural environment of St. Peter's abode is purposefully displayed as unwelcoming and uninhabitable. It is an untamed wilderness that constantly challenges the basic needs of a peaceful life.

On the other hand, caves are fraught with chthonic symbolism. They are loci that connect earth with the underworld (Talbot, 2016, 717) and many of the late Byzantine representations of Hades are envisioned as gloomy caves with souls trapped inside (Đorđević, 2018, 21-24). The belief that caves are the potential entrances to the underworld is reinforced by the presence of evil spirits in the vita. The reason for the animosity of demons toward Peter of Koriša is directly addressed: "Among other humans, you haven't found your place, so you came to our dwellings to banish us and unrightfully seize our cliffs and our caverns for yourself" (Teodosije, 1988, 277). Their many attacks on the recluse resemble the beatings of souls in Hades before the future resurrection. The process of monastic penance was imagined as a posthumous experience. Since the person was conceived to be a psychosomatic unity, the ultimate cleansing of the whole being had to include both body and soul. While inner experiences in monastic imagination emulated the hardships of the imprisoned soul in Hades, the physical sufferings closely corresponded to the sufferings the buried body was subjected to in the grave. Thus, a monk was conceptually reliving the fates of the condemned soul and the buried body simultaneously as part of the penitent process of cleansing oneself (see Đorđević, 2019, 32).

Taking this perspective into consideration, the monastic advancement up "the ladder of divine ascent" meant physical transfiguration as well as the practice of mental will. To put it differently, those devoted to asceticism were determined to tame and transform their human nature, transcending the outcomes of the fall of Adam and Eve. The ideal and desired body in this context is the one devoid of its carnal vitality which conceptually equates it with the angelic state (Đorđević, 2022). In the vita of St. Peter of Koriša, the hagiographer most directly praises the "bodilessness" achieved by the saint, linking it to that of the angels (Teodosije, 1988, 265, 284).

It is convenient to reconsider this "enhancement of the body" through the prism of post-humanism because the eremitic body is the product of hybridization with the non-human, i.e. the environment.[1] The formidable natural surroundings confronts the (fallen) human condition of the recluse's body. The wilderness of the desert participates in its transformational process, transfiguring it into a spectacle that perfectly fits the scenery. That is why descriptions of the landscape so often reflect the inner struggles of saintly hermits in their vitae while simultaneously presenting the challenge. The hermit becomes part of the landscape. At the end of those narratives, when anchorites attain the "bodiless state", the natural world is changed. The wilderness is tamed just

like the human body of a saint. They both become sanctified and continue in peaceful coexistence. However, what is interesting is that, while the ontological nature of the environment is changed, its outer appearance stays the same. For example, after he had achieved spiritual perfection, St. Peter of Koriša was delighted with his caverns as though with the "splendid palaces" and bitter oak nuts and raw wild plants changed their tastes into a sweetness that cannot be experienced even "at the tables of the richest" (Teodosije, 1988, 282). Maybe the best visualization of this discourse is expressed by the sixteenth-century fresco of Nativity Troparion at the Docheiariou Monastery where the personification of the Desert is painted identical to the figure of St. Mary of Egypt (fig. 2). This renowned female saint, with her sunken body and intentionally unflattering features, was the paradigmatic image of a repentant sinner and ascetic endeavorer. Hence, the given personification of the Desert is imbued with positive connotations, having the same image of the body as her monastic inhabitants (Della Dora, 2016, 130-133).

Still, from the point of view of the presence of the mysterious power instilled in the desert's wilderness, one has to acknowledge its association with the evil spirits. The vita of St. Peter of Koriša offers a multitude of stirring episodes where demons attack the hermit trying to harm him and drive him away from their realm. They sometimes present themselves in the shape of predatory animals or in the guise of soldiers with frightening beastly hamlets. On some occasions, St. Peter is accompanied by Archangel Michael to withstand their attacks, while other times he is almost beaten to death by them. However, the process of his spiritual ascent is simultaneously the act of taming (cleansing) and appropriating the evil powers. The landscape becomes the hallowed scenery of a new sacred place (Talbot, 2016, 713-714). Particularly telling is the episode after the demons had made a deal with a terrible serpent living in a cave below the saint. The slithering predator was supposed to incite fear in St. Peter. Nevertheless, after the ritual preparation of forty days, the hermit went to the beast's lair and, with the help of Archangel Michael, cast it out. Afterward, "he venerated the serpent's cave as God's church and the holy place" (Teodosije, 1988, 275). In some surviving medieval hermitages, we find devotional fresco paintings that testify to the ritual practices performed in caves by the recluses (Popović et al., 2011; Velmans, 1965). They are testimonies of the tamed environment and its powers. In the realm of cultural imagination, this process of appropriating the abode of evil spirits consciously alluded to the harrowing of Hades that followed Christ's death on the cross (Talbot, 2016, 718).

1 The Ascetic Penance, Vat. gr. 394, fol. 46r, 11th c.

2 Representation of Nativity Troparion, fresco, Church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel (central vault), Docheiariou Monastery, 16th c.

As a rule, the newly established sacred place with its sublime natural scenery would present a tamed environment similar in essence to the lost earthly paradise, attracting new potential monastic dwellers and even pilgrims (Della Dora, 2016, 170-175). Usually, an eremitic settlement or a proper monastery would have been built in its proximity (Della Dora, 2016, 161). Therefore, compositions that show almost bare stony landscapes populated with hermits, like in the case of the Dormition of St. Ephraim the Syrian (fig. 3),[2] actually represent sanctified natural surroundings, the tamed desert or *desertum-civitas* (Bartelink, 1973), a *topos* that implies a heavenly abode where its inhabitants live in harmonious order with their environment just as the first humans did before the fall. Similar allusions are encountered in accounts that describe visits to such places. Nature is often presented there as sublime and awe-inspiring and yet in harmony with its inhabitants that attained the angelic likeness (Della Dora, 2016, 147-175; Talbot, 2001).

Gaining the Sense of the Harmonious Order

Medieval monasteries were sometimes erected within city walls. Nevertheless, they were always envisioned as the manifestations of earthly paradise. While planting a garden had its practical purpose connected to the daily monastic diet, its domesticated space was also useful for contemplation, enhancing the notion of the Garden of Eden (Della Dora, 2016, 110-113). On the other hand, monasteries built outside the cities often embraced their natural surroundings in the construction of the image of the heavenly abode. They were striving toward the utopic vision that referenced the golden age – the primordial period before the human fall.

The Dečani Monastery (14th century) can provide an insightful case study for the notion of monastic environmental engagement. In Dečani chrysobull, King Stefan Dečanski, the founder of the monastery, directly addressed the sacrality of the place he had chosen to erect his endowment. In the words of this charter, St. Sava, the celebrated forebear of the Serbian king, "marked it and blessed it with his holy hands that it might be a holy shrine". Since the saint did not manage to build the "place of worship", St. Sava kept the location hidden for a century so that it could be revealed to Stefan Dečanski (Translation of the First Dečani Charter in English, 2004, 88). The very motif of concealment alludes to the association of the place with the earthly paradise. Moreover, in the hagiography of Stefan Dečanski, written by Gregory Tsamblak, the monastery's landscape is described by way of the deliberate employment of verbal imagery that references the Garden of Eden (Camblak, 1989, 65-66).

Ritual practices were able to enhance the sense of the achieved harmonious order in the monastic inhabitants. In the case of the Dečani Monastery, it is useful to observe one peculiar image in its performative context – the relief of Christ's baptism set in the lunette above the south portal of the narthex (fig. 4).[3]

The scene bears unusual iconography. The waters of the River Jordan are rendered as forming an open sarcophagus flanked by two flowers on its sides. Hence, the standing figure of Christ echoes depictions of the resurrected dead who are rising from their tombs. However, the true peculiarity of the relief lies in the too-familiar gesture of St. John the Baptist who is holding Christ's arm. It is almost as though St. John is resurrecting Christ by pulling him out of the sarcophagus while pouring water on his head. Of course, such an insinuation would have been perceived as heretical. Still, there must be a reason why this daring visual element was included in the representation.

The answer can be grasped if one considers the image in connection with the specific service during which the relief was encountered by the monks. It was the Great Blessing of Waters. There were two Great Blessings of Waters – one was officiated on the eve of Epiphany, taking place in the narthex, while the other was performed in the morning by a spring or a river (Kandić, 1998-1999, 61-64; Mirković, 1983, 151-157). The latter rite was introduced in medieval Serbia at the beginning of the 14th century by the general acceptance of provisions taken from the Typikon of Jerusalem (Kandić, 1998-1999, 64), allowing monasteries to ritualistically transfigure their surroundings into the symbolic landscape of the Holy Land. In the case of the Dečani Monastery, the local Bistrica River was appropriating the identity of the River Jordan. The presence of the scene of Christ's baptism indicates that the returning procession would have entered the main church through the south portal of the narthex. It staged the liminal point that was meant to finally define the overtone of the performed service. Since the south portal contains the inscription as well, it is highly plausible that monks would have gathered in front of the doorway to hear the inscribed words read aloud.[4] This was the perfect opportunity to gaze at the unusual image. The fact that St. John is shown as "preoccupied" with the performance, in sharp contrast to the very static figure of Christ, suggests that he was the mirror image of the monks who were involved in the ritualistic recreation of the same event. Thus, they would have been able to perceive the illustration of the immediate outcomes of their work – namely the cleansing of the environment. It is true that the service of Great Blessing relates to water, however, the atypical abundance of vegetable elements in this relief induces the

3 *Dormition of St. Ephraim the Syrian*, icon, Crete, 15th c.

4 Baptism of Christ, *relief in the lunette of the south portal of the Church of Christ Pantocrator*, Dečani Monastery, 14th c.

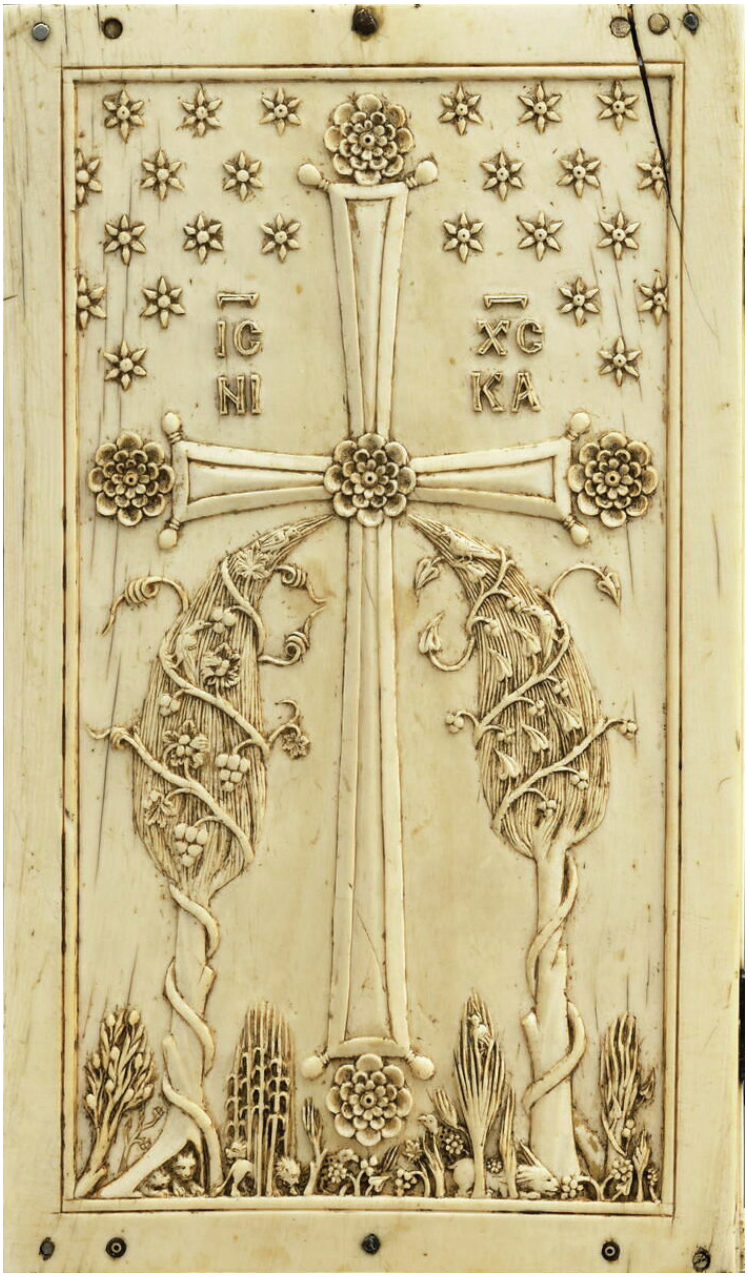
sense of awakening of the natural world by Christ's baptism, or, to put it more directly, by baptizing Christ. It is the agency of monks that is underlined here. It is also worthwhile to remember that the feast of Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th. Therefore, the contrast of the once brightly colored relief with its emphasized vegetable forms to the winter reality of the actual landscape must have been striking, enhancing further the sense of the importance of the performed service. Hence, the monks of the Dečani Monastery were annually provided with the impression of reaffirming the harmonious order with their environment in a meaningful way.

Monks and Carnivores

The natural world includes animals as well. Just like humans, they were also the original inhabitants of the earthly paradise. Moreover, their way of living in this Edenic utopia was different than the one after the expulsion too. The central panel of the tenth-century Harbaville triptych illustrates the peaceful cohabitation between lions and rabbits in the same space under the blooming cross (fig. 5). The paradisiac vision in ivory denotes, among other things, a place where carnivorous instinct does not exist (Maguire, 2002, 29).

Yet, this is a rare example of post-iconoclastic art that shows animals in connection to the depiction of the heavenly abode (Maguire, 2012, 92-98). One does not find animals in the late Byzantine compositions of paradise (fig. 6). When it comes to the representations of the afterlife, their images are mostly limited to the scene of the General resurrection, where they regurgitate eaten human bodies that are coming back to life (fig. 7). The animals are not the recipients of resurrection because, according to the official theological teachings, they do not have a rational soul. After the iconoclasm, the depictions of animals in religious visual culture predominantly performed apotropaic/magical or symbolic functions (Maguire and Maguire, 2007, 58-96; Erdeljan, 2000).

If one wants to observe the placement of animals in the monastic imagination beyond symbolism and, for lack of a better phrase, magical practices, it is useful to turn once again to the vitae of the celebrated hermits. Ecocritical theory may be of use in that regard. Ecocriticism invites interrogation of the power dynamics intending to expose the power hierarchy that determines relations between human and nonhuman subjectivities (Goldwyn, 2018, 1-33). The basic premise of intersectional subfields such as postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and queer ecocriticism is that the ideology which authorizes marginalization or oppression toward particular groups in



5 *Harbaville Triptych*, central panel (verso), ivory, 10th c.

6 Paradise, fresco, narthex of the Church of the Dormition of the Holy Virgin (west wall), Gračanica Monastery, 14th c.

human societies is the same ideology which sanctions similar relationship to nature (Goldwyn, 2018, 7-19).

Therefore, if we go back to the vita of St. Peter of Koriša, from the point of view of ecocritical theory, it is useful to look for relations between the saint and other humans in the vita. The most prominent one is certainly the relationship he had with his sister at the beginning of the narrative. After the death of their parents, Peter, as a young man, wanted to pursue his ascetic dream. However, he was left with his sister who begged him not to arrange a marriage for her, nor to leave her. She was willing to follow him wherever he decided to go and obey his way of life. Thus, when Peter of Koriša received his monastic habit, they were living for some time in two simple huts near one church outside the village. However, because he wanted to distance himself from the people completely, one day they went into the wilderness. During their journey, Peter pronounced the following words to himself: "O, how great a nuisance is this woman that happened to me" (Teodosije, 1988, 269). Though the hagiographer tries to emphasize that he had a great love for his sister, his love for God was greater. Therefore, Peter of Koriša decided to abandon her in the forest while she was still asleep,

7 General Resurrection, fresco, detail, narthex of the Church of the Dormition of the Holy Virgin (west wall), Gračanica Monastery, 14th c.

leaving his blessing upon her. What follows when his sister wakes up is a heart-breaking scene of her lament over her fate and the loss of her brother (Teodosije, 1988, 270). Should we consider the actions of Peter of Koriša from the perspective of ecofeminism? As a matter of fact, this would be deceiving. His actions, though certainly harsh and disagreeable from the point of view of today's reader, actually fall outside the patriarchal norms. His role as a brother in medieval society prescribed that he should either arrange a marriage for his sister or look after her himself. However, Peter of Koriša decided to do neither.

One prominent feature of the monastic vitae is the emphasis on the monk's overcoming of all human passions and emotions in order to attain the passionless state – *apatheia*. This pursuit usually starts with leaving dear family members in an emotionally charged episode. The *apatheia* is actually the angelic state (Maguire, 1996, 66, 68, 72-73). While angels are capable of expressing the full spectrum of emotions, both stereotypically male and female as defined in the medieval culture, they are affected to do so by different circumstances other than the humans of either gender (Maguire, 2017). Moreover, the *apatheia* is connected to angelic gender, i.e. to their lack of gender, for they are imagined as both bodiless and genderless beings (Đorđević, 2022). As was mentioned before, the monastic life was conceptualized as a path toward achieving the angelic likeness. Since the monastic experience of the world is tied to this particular sort of (culturally constructed) embodiment/identity, the queer ecocriticism is of help in analyzing the actions of St. Peter of Koriša, as well as of the other saintly recluses.[5] The ascetic activities and emotional states are the product of identity performance which diverts from the norms of lay society.

Angels do not cry over mere human misfortunes. They lament the sinful deeds that people carry out, which in turn leads to their condemnation in the afterlife. On the other hand, the angelic interference and help with human struggles are granted when there is a potential for spiritual advancement. The monastic engagement with animals might seem ambivalent when we consider numerous stories from various vitae. Some appear harsh, while others present affectionate relationships. However, if they are looked at through the "queer" prism of the "angelic mode", they do share some common ground.

The vita of Peter of Koriša does not discuss at length the "animal affairs" aside from the troubles with the serpent. It is only mentioned briefly that when the saint came to his cave, he lived in peace with wild beasts as their neighbor until eventual-

ly they all left their natural habitat (Teodosije, 1988, 272). This piece of information, though delivered in passing, is actually quite telling for a few reasons. Firstly, the emphasis on the harmonious cohabitation with the carnivores suggests the special spiritual advancement of St. Peter that is already present at the beginning of his ascetic endeavors. It is a well-established *topos* that predators reject attacking holy anchorites. On the other hand, there are monastic tales that recount unfortunate events when a monk is eaten by a beast because of unrepentant sin (Ševčenko, 2000, 78). Secondly, "neighborly living" implies the harmonious order associated with the Garden of Eden – the time when Adam lived in peace with all God's creation. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, the fact that all beasts finally decided to leave the surroundings of St. Peter's cave simultaneously implies the advancing process of sanctification of the landscape as well as their inability to adjust to the paradisiac environment and its demands. The prolonged lingering of the serpent is supported by demonic interference and, therefore, its forceful expulsion is the important "milestone" in the sacralization of the scenery. However, the willing departure of carnivorous animals indicates that Peter of Koriša had already started to tame the natural world together with his own human nature. For the flesh-eating animals to live in the hallowed place meant to renounce their urge to devour meat. Early monastic vitae are filled with stories of lions that become monastic companions, leaving their "post-garden-of-Eden" nature behind (Ševčenko, 2000; Miller, 2018, 119-154).

On the other hand, if this adjusted diet is violated, the beast is punished by the hermit or harshly chased away. The modest narrative cycle in the fourteenth-century Church of Nicholas Orphanos in Thessalonike illustrates the story of St. Gerasimos and the lion (fig. 8).[6] The lion in a sense became part of the eremitic community after the saint had removed the thorn from its paw. According to the written version of the tale in *The Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschos, the lion was being fed with bread and boiled vegetables and had the daily responsibility of pasturing the donkey that fetched water from the river. When the lion was wrongly accused of eating the animal, it had to endure "penance" despite the affectionate relationship that developed between the saint and the beast (Miller, 2018, 130-131). *The Spiritual Meadow* also tells of Abba Paul who banished a lion with three blows and a stern rebuke for not foregoing eating meat after they had the agreement (Ševčenko, 2000, 83-84).

In yet another particularly reviling monastic tale of desert fathers, Flavius, a disciple of a monk named Sabas, used to place his donkey in the care of a lion of

8 *Life of St. Gerasimos*, fresco, Church of Nicholas Orphanos, Thessaloniki, 14th c.

his elder. However, the story tells us that on the day that Flavius deviated from his angelic path and fell into fornication, the lion devoured the other animal (Miller, 2018, 153-154). Because the unwanted body's vitality was the true locus of sexual potency, giving in to fornication (the sin of the flesh) for monk Flavius meant the regaining of his "bodilessness" and, hence, the loss of the harmonious order. Therefore, while the carnivore could have been chased away from the consecrated environment if it had not abided by the Edenic diet, the monk's corruption meant the reenactment of the original sin and its consequences, including those relating to nature.

The hollowed landscape of the desert was the utopic abode of the earthly paradise retrieved from the wilderness and the monastic task was to obtain it and sustain it. The emotional engagement was governed by this goal. The sister of Peter of Koriša, whom he loved dearly, is presented in his vita as an obstacle toward spiritual advancement. Her abandonment is the marker of the saint's determination to achieve angelic likeness and perform *apathia*. If the spiritual state of his sister had been at stake, the narrative would have been different, since angelic protection is present whenever the potential for redemption is involved. However, the mention of the blessing he left her with is enough to denote his care to the medieval reader. Similarly, the indication that St. Peter settled in a cave as a "neighbor" to the beasts that were living

in its vicinity also implies care. Nevertheless, because they were unable to forsake their "post-Edenic" ways, the animals had to leave, insinuating the process of sanctification of the landscape surrounding the newly established sacred place. The expulsion from the earthly paradise happened once and it could happen again, whether to a sinful human or a meat-eating animal.

Endnotes

1 Cfr. Goldwyn (2018, 191-203) for the post-human discourse and the environmental engagement in relation to the Byzantine romances.
2 On the iconography of the Dormition of St. Ephraim the Syrian, see Martin (1951).
3 For the general iconographic analysis of this relief, see Maglovski (1989, 199-203).
4 On the performative aspect of church inscriptions, see Papalexandrou (2007).
5 On the notion of "queerness" and its applicability in the research of the premodern epochs, see Kruger (2009).
6 On the church and its frescoes, see Bakirtzis (2003). A particular contextualized interpretation of this cycle is presented in Schroeder (2010, 262-264).

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Illustrations

Fig. 1 *The Ascetic Penance*, Vat. gr. 394, fol. 46r, 11th century, Vatican Library, from: J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton, 1954, fig. 91.

Fig. 2 *Representation of Nativity Troparion*, fresco, narthex of the Church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel (central vault), Docheiariou Monastery, 16th century, from: V. Della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge, 2016, fig. 25.

Fig. 3 *Dormition of St. Ephraim the Syrian*, icon, 15th century, Crete, 51.5x69 cm, Athens, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Fig. 4 *Baptism of Christ,* relief in the lunette of the south portal of the Church of Christ Pantocrator, Dečani Monastery, 14th century, photo: Jakov Đorđević.

Fig. 5 *Harbaville Triptych*, central panel (verso), ivory, 10th century, © 2021 RMN-Grand Palais, Louvre Museum, photo: Adrien Didierjean.

Fig. 6 Paradise, fresco, narthex of the Church of the Dormition of the Holy Virgin (west wall), Gračanica Monastery, 14th century, photo: Jakov Đorđević.

Fig. 7 General Resurrection, fresco, detail, narthex of the Church of the Dormition of the Holy Virgin (west wall), Gračanica Monastery, 14th century, photo: Jakov Đorđević.

Fig. 8 *Life of St. Gerasimos*, fresco, Church of Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki, 14th century, from: Ayios Nikolaos Orphanos: The Wall Paintings, Ch. Bakirtzis (ed.), Athens, 2003, figs. 78, 79.