

“Going ashore in Byzantium”

On border crossings in Swedophone travelogues from Mount Athos in the 1950s and 60s

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Abstract

The article explores how Byzantium was represented by Mount Athos, the Orthodox Christian monastic republic, in Swedophone travelogues from the 1950s and 60s, and from which bases of knowledge and values this was done. The issue is addressed from a cultural semiotic perspective, based on Yuri Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere in combination with Itamar Even-Zohar’s method of studying cultural and dynamic polysystems.

Mount Athos is a cultural and religious centre of great importance to all of “the Byzantine commonwealth”, i.e. a centre within the Byzantine semiosphere. The travellers crossed or faced political, cultural, linguistic and religious borders, yet some of them failed to notice the epistemological border between the semiospheres. Decisive to how Byzantium was represented by Mount Athos was whether the monastic republic was judged and evaluated according to the norms of the Byzantine or the Western cultural system – that is, whether Mount Athos was regarded as central within the Byzantine semiosphere, or as peripheral within the Western semiosphere.

Introduction

As a rule, we have the idea that we have to go far away to foreign continents to experience something characterized as strange. But in fact, we can do this within our own part of the world. I would now like to say something about a place in Europe, where to an unusual degree you encounter something strange (Odenbring 1958: 25).

In this way, Folke Odenbring, a Swedish traveller and clergyman, began his travelogue from Mount Athos, the Orthodox Christian monastic republic, in the late 1950s. Further, he described it as “a preserved fragment of the world empire, which once was called Byzantium”. In the title of his article, it was called “the last abode of the strange in Europe” (Odenbring 1958: 25). Many visitors to Mount Athos perceived, just like Odenbring, that they had arrived at Byzantium.

Despite the fall of the empire five centuries earlier, they found a Byzantine culture still alive on Mount Athos, as if in a reserve.

The aim of this article is to explore from which bases of knowledge and which values Byzantium was represented by Mount Athos in Swedophone travelogues of the 1950s and 60s. The issue is addressed from a cultural semiotic perspective, based on the Russian-Estonian literary scholar Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotic theory and notion of the semiosphere. It denotes the semiotic space, which makes linguistic communication possible, and provides both the condition and the result of the development of a culture (Lotman 1990: 123ff; Zylko 2001: 398). According to Lotman, the relation between the centre and the periphery of a semiosphere, as well as the relation between different semiospheres, is characterized by dynamic and dialogic conditions (Lotman 1990: 125ff; Torop 2005: 162), in the sense that they are mutable, shifting, and interchanging.

Lotman's notion of the semiosphere is combined with the Israeli literary scholar and semiotician Itamar Even-Zohar's method of studying cultural and dynamic polysystems (Even-Zohar 1990; 2005: 38-48). According to Even-Zohar, a system is a network of relationships, rather than a conglomerate of various single elements. The polysystem is a multiple system, a system of systems, which – like Lotman's semiosphere – is characterized as open, dynamic and heterogeneous (Even-Zohar 2005: 35). There is more than one centre and thus also several peripheries in a cultural polysystem (Even-Zohar 1990: 88; 2005: 38-48), and certain literary and cultural repertoires are tied to each of its systems (Even-Zohar 1990: 91). Any cultural phenomenon can thus be used and evaluated in different ways. Depending on which cultural centre it is related to, a certain cultural phenomenon might be regarded as central, worthy of interest and canon-founding, or, on the contrary, as peripheral, uninteresting and incomprehensible. One of the basic premises of Even-Zohar's polysystem theory is that a periphery is always judged according to the norms of the centre of its system (Even-Zohar 1990: 92f; 2005: 50-75).¹

For the purpose of this article there is no need to differentiate between these two notions: the semiosphere and the cultural system. However, the theory of Lotman provides the wider base for a semiotic understanding of culture, while the terminology of Even-Zohar is the more accurate and specific one.

To apply Lotman's and Even-Zohar's theories to the study of travelogues from Mount Athos, I have chosen to work with the notion of a cultural polysystem, in which two different semiospheres or cultural systems will be in focus: a Byzantine and a Western one. Unlike the Byzantine Empire, which from a historical point of view did not survive the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Byzantine semiosphere still exists and sets the framework for semiotic processes in Orthodox Christian cultures and nations. Its centre is the city today known as

¹ This article is a revised version in English of a chapter in my Swedish monograph *Bruken av Bysans. Studier i svenskspråkig litteratur och kultur 1948-71* [The uses of Byzantium. Studies in Swedophone literature and culture 1948-71], Skellefteå: Norma 2011. I would like to thank the participants in the multidisciplinary workshop "Changes in the boundaries of knowledge" for creating an open-minded atmosphere and fruitful discussions, which helped me to complete the book. My special thanks to Professor Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, who pointed out the relevance of Itamar Even-Zohar's works on cultural polysystems to my project.

Istanbul, which is still often called by its Byzantine name, Constantinople, within the Byzantine semiosphere. Another cultural centre of great importance to the Byzantine semiosphere is Mount Athos. The Byzantine cultural system interacts with the Western one, which ever since modern times has had its cultural centre in Paris (cf. Casanova 2004; Bodin 2009: 365; Bodin 2011: 23, 27). In geographical areas and in situations where these cultural systems overlap, as on Mount Athos, their different norms are confronted.

Travelogues from Mount Athos have been written in modern European languages for hundreds of years and offer an interesting example of the much discussed literary genre of travelogues and travel books, which in several respects is a border-crossing genre, a hybrid.² Another interesting aspect is that later visitors tend to follow in the literary footsteps of their predecessors (cf. Lindgren Leavenworth 2010; Pfister 1993). Two important modern classics in this respect are Robert Byron's *The Station* (1928) and Erhart Kästner's *Die Stundentrommel vom heiligen Berg Athos* (1956).

This contribution is, however, restricted to a discussion of Swedophone travelogues from Mount Athos written during the 1950s and 60s. A few short articles and news items, published in Swedish Orthodox Christian journals, concerning the monastic republic are also included. The period has been chosen because it was a time of transition, when several different views of Byzantium were prevalent. By the mid-20th century, Byzantium could be represented in an aesthetically and existentially new, creative way in modern Western literature and arts, while older views of Byzantium – as a fallen and therefore static empire, clearly defined both historically and geographically – were still current (Bodin 2005, 2009, 2011).

During the 1950s and 60s Greece was established as a tourist country, and travelling there grew rapidly. The possibility to visit Mount Athos, a Byzantine milieu within the boundaries of Europe and modern society, fascinated many travellers, and since women are not admitted to Mount Athos, they were all male. A special reason to go to Mount Athos in the early 1960s was the celebration of the millenary of the monastic republic in 1963, a festival which received much attention. Other reasons were the seeking of knowledge of various kinds, such as manuscript studies in the rich but mostly inaccessible monastery libraries, or a desire to understand Orthodox Christian monastic and liturgical practices better.

The travellers, coming from Sweden and Finland, were philologists such as Gustav Karlsson (1909-95), Jan Risberg (1929-2009) and Stig Y. Rudberg (1920-2011), theologians and clergymen such as Folke Odenbring (1902-90), Per-Olof Sjögren (1919-2005) and Axel Weebe (1890-1967), and the journalist and essayist Bengt Widehag (1914-1990). Some of the most well-known Swedophone writers of the 20th century also went to Mount Athos: the Swedish story writer Tage Aurell (1895-1976), the later master of nonsense poetry, Lennart Hellsing (b. 1919), and the later social critic Sven Lindqvist (b. 1932), as

² For a broader discussion on the literary genre of travelogues, see Brenner 1990; Kowalewski 1992; Fussell 1980.

well as the Finno-Swedish essayist Göran Schildt (1917-2009). One of the visitors, Bengt Olsson, has not been possible to identify more closely.

The texts studied in this article were published in travel magazines, in books on Greece or in church publications for Christmas, or they were designed as essays or illustrated articles, published in books or various newspapers. A couple of the travelogues were published as parts of literary works: Lindqvist's depiction of his visit to Mount Athos is included in *Hemmaresan* (1959) [The travel home], which in 1965 was described in the publisher's blurb as Lindqvist's "greatest attempt to summarize his philosophy of life", and Aurell's "Grekiskt fragment" [Greek fragment] is part of his short prose collection *Samtal önskas med sovvaagnskonduktören* (1969) [Conversation wanted with the conductor of the sleeping-car]. The growing interest in Mount Athos was also shown by news items and travel reports published in Swedish Orthodox Christian journals, launched in the 1960s. The ambition has been to base the study on all of the Swedophone travelogues from Athos written and published during the 1950s and 60s, but it might still be possible to find occasional further texts.³

In *Tales and Truth. Pilgrimage on Mount Athos Past and Present* (1994), the psychologist of religion, René Gothóni, has examined a number of travelogues from Mount Athos using a historical and anthropological perspective. It was the Italian monk Cristoforo Buondelmonti who 'discovered' and presented the peninsula and its Orthodox monastic life to the West in *Librum Insularum Archipelagi* (1442) (Gothóni 1994: 23, 11f). By then, the Holy Mountain had already existed for more than 450 years. However, this article will have another focus than Gothóni's study. The point is not to study changes in the travelogues' descriptions in the long run, from one time to another, in order to increase our knowledge of life on Mount Athos. Instead, the structural likenesses of about twenty travelogues from only a few decades will be used as a point of departure for a discussion of how Byzantium was represented in a Swedophone context in the middle of the 20th century.⁴

In these travelogues, the travellers to Mount Athos speak recurrently of phenomena and events, which may be regarded as literary and rhetorical topoi within the literary genre of travelogues.⁵ As a rule, the writer initially comments on the history of Mount Athos, and then describes his journey. Next come descriptions of the arrival and the permits required for a stay, accounts of the official reception, depictions of nature, accommodation and food, work and devotional life in the monasteries, the treasures of manuscripts and art, and a presentation of the calendar used. The visitor also tells about his encounters with

³ A few of these travelogues are found in the bibliographies of Gothóni and Gullman, to which travelogues published in newspapers, found with the help of the Clipping Archive of the Sigtuna Foundation, have been added. Swedophone travelogues from Greece, published as books during the 1950s and 60s, and the Swedish Orthodox journals *Kérygma* and *Ortodox kyrkotidning* from the 1960s, have also been examined. All translations are my own, except for the quotations from Schildt (1959). Some of the travelogues cover only one page in a newspaper, and therefore do not need references to specific pages.

⁴ For a more general overview of Mount Athos, see Gothóni, and *Athos. Monastic Life on The Holy Mountain* (2006).

⁵ For a similar study on travelogues from Valaam, the Russian Orthodox and later Finnish Orthodox monastery, see Bodin 2008.

individual monks and about his observations on the communications between the various monasteries. He discusses language issues, hygiene and poverty, and finally the uncertain future of the monasteries. Eventually the time has come for departure, and then the memories of the trip take over. In addition, the fact that all those of the female sex are banned from Mount Athos is often mentioned.

Connected with many of these topoi, and recurring in all of the Swedophone travelogues of the 1950s and 60s, are also the visitors' explicit associations of Mount Athos with Byzantium or with Byzantine traditions. The analysis will concentrate especially on the topoi in which Byzantium appears in the travelogues: the free status of the Holy Mountain, its calendar, way of life, treasures, languages and future possibilities as well as reflections on the strangeness and paradoxes of the monastic republic. These recurrent topoi, which made the visitors associate Mount Athos with Byzantine traditions, set the background of this analysis; they provide a structural likeness and form the basis for several comparisons between the travelogues. Against this background, special attention is paid to small differences in the wordings and values conveyed in the travelogues, depending on the travellers' various bases of knowledge, i.e. on their choice of orientation, within either the Western or the Byzantine semiosphere. As the analysis will show, the Swedophone travellers came to Mount Athos with other prerequisites than the monks and the Orthodox Christian pilgrims; their pre-understanding as well as their basis of knowledge differed, especially regarding language skills and liturgical practice.

As the Western and Byzantine semiospheres overlap on Mount Athos, special attention is also paid to the various borders – political, cultural, linguistic, religious and epistemological (between the known and the unknown) – which separate them, borders which the travellers could cross, recognize as hindrances, or sometimes not even notice. The chosen topoi and borders are also allowed to structure this article.

"Going ashore in Byzantium" – crossing the political border

Mount Athos is the eastern part of the northernmost of Chalkidiki's three peninsulas and also the name of the mountain, about 2000 metres high, on the outermost tip of the peninsula. The region, which has been consecrated ground since 963, comes ecclesiastically directly under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and is recognized as a spiritual centre for the entire Orthodox Christian world. At a local level it is governed and administrated by a 'parliament', which consists of elected representatives of the monasteries, and by a 'government', a smaller group, which exercises the executive power and commands a small police force. The Greek state exercises its powers on the Holy Mountain by a governor, who is subordinate to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Gothóni 1994: 15).

Accounts of the governance of Mount Athos were an important topos in the Swedophone travelogues of the 1950s and 60s, along with descriptions of the issuance and control of the permits required to cross the political border between Greece and Mount Athos (Widehag 1962: 82). The semi-autonomous status of

Mount Athos made the visitors associate with Byzantium. Schildt stated that he had ‘gone ashore in Byzantium’, as his sailboat was anchored at one of Mount Athos’ bridges (Schildt 1960: 192, ill.).

The dual status of Mount Athos as both a secular and a spiritual state was often emphasized, for example by Rudberg: “Athos, or, as the Greeks themselves say, the holy mountain, is something completely unique: the world’s only monastic republic. Although it lies within the borders of Greece, it is recognized by the government in Athens as a free state with its own governing body and constitution”. Rudberg thus drew a clear difference between the two names of Mount Athos – Athos, or Mount Athos, is the name used within the Western semiosphere, while the Holy Mountain is the one used by the Greeks, i.e. within Orthodox Christian tradition and the Byzantine semiosphere, and also the official name of the monastic republic as a semi-autonomous part of the Greek state. Both designations could occur in the Swedophone travelogues (cf. Sjögren 1967: 28f). Similarly, Weebe’s story highlights the problems that could arise for the traveller because of the naming of the peninsula. At first, upon his arrival at the port, he could not make himself understood, when talking to the Greek men on the quayside: “When I said that I wanted to travel to Athos, they looked completely blank, but when I finally added that I wanted to go to Hagion Oros (the Holy Mountain), it became clear at once” (Weebe 1960: 49).

As mentioned above, a trip to Mount Athos required permits from both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. On arrival, these documents had to be presented to the four monks in the main town of Karyes, who ruled the monastic republic. The documents were replaced by a *diamonitirion*, which gave its holder the right to stay as a guest in all of Mount Athos’ monasteries. In the travelogues it was called a passport, a *laissez passer*, an Athos Pass or a *carte blanche*. Some travellers noted in particular that this passport was stamped with the Byzantine double eagle (Odenbring 1958: 27; Rudberg 1951). It was found not only in the passport but also in the servant’s “skullcap with a double eagle in its cockade”, as noted by Risberg during the reception ceremony: “The Byzantine double eagle is a deeply meaningful symbol on Athos.”

The travelogues show that the requirement for the traveller to bring these documents had an exclusionary but also invitational function. The documents identified the passengers as strangers and pilgrims on Mount Athos, but once they had been replaced by the special Athos Pass, the doors were opened to all the monasteries on the peninsula (Hellsing 1952: 542, 546). As pointed out by Gothóni, every single visitor to Mount Athos – Orthodox Christian or not – is defined as a pilgrim by the Orthodox monks, for whom the norms and values of the Byzantine cultural system are valid, and for whom therefore no category of visitors exists other than pilgrims (Gothóni 1994: 170). However, only Orthodox Christian pilgrims are invited to participate fully in divine services and the devotional life, in the eucharistic celebration and in the veneration of icons and relics. In the travelogues studied in this article, none of the visitors describes himself as a pilgrim – in sharp contrast to the view of the monks.⁶

⁶ The only exception is Schildt 1960. The heading of his chapter on Mount Athos says, “As sailing pilgrims at the Holy Mountain”.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, only males have access to Mount Athos, since the only woman on the Holy Mountain is to be the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God (Sjögren 1967: 18). Sometimes, the fact that the travellers' wives are not allowed to accompany them on this particular part of the trip is mentioned in the travelogues (Weebe 1962: 49; Schildt 1957: 62). Mount Athos is thus not only surrounded by a political border, but also by a gender border, which runs together with the political border and is totally impossible to cross for women and all creatures of the female sex.

As we have seen, the crossing of the political border to Mount Athos was described in the travelogues as a complicated and solemn procedure, which called Byzantium to mind as the Byzantine double eagle was stamped in the travellers' new passes. Their further travel between the monasteries was undertaken under a Byzantine sign.

"A Byzantine way of life" – facing the cultural border

The view of Mount Athos is dominated by the imposing mountain on the very tip of the peninsula. A topos in the travelogues was the depiction of its many monastic buildings and hermitages, which were often associated with Byzantium and its characteristic architecture (Risberg 1962; Rudberg 1951; Sjögren 1967: 34). Another important topos related to Byzantium was the origin and history of Mount Athos, and of the monks' way of life. As pointed out above, the peninsula was described as a unique Byzantine reserve (Odenbring 1958: 25; cf. Schildt 1957: 57). Widehag stated: "On Athos one still thinks of oneself as living in a Byzantine society where time has stood still. Here is a cultural reserve without comparison in our continent" (Widehag 1962: 82).

As noted by the travellers, a special calendar, the Julian – the one used in Byzantium, and also the sacral calendar still in use in several Orthodox churches – served the Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos. In the travelogues, it was usually called a Byzantine calendar, and was applied to the counting of hours as well as to the counting of days and months. Sjögren wrote about the use of the Julian calendar and the Byzantine way of counting hours in the monasteries: "The Julian calendar is still in use. Due to this, we left Ouranópolis with the launch on August 5 and arrived after a three-days-long journey at Dafni on July 23! The counting of hours is also the ancient, biblical, here called the Byzantine method, which means that you are 4 1/2 hours ahead of our counting of hours. The first hour (1 o'clock) is at 6 in the morning" (Sjögren 1965; 1967: 39).

Hellsing started a discussion about the calendar with some of the monks, but failed: "The philosophers living here are meek and wise, they are men whose blood is stirred only by one thing: The calendar! When that issue is discussed, an eloquence is developed, which would have honoured any ancient Greek philosopher" (Hellsing 1952: 540). Lindqvist met a problem of a deeper kind, caused by the different calendars. It made him feel uncomfortable, and he asked himself why he stayed on Mount Athos: "Ti na kamnomen? What to do? Through me time is flowing like water, like a murmur of reality. The lawyer and I compare our watches with the kitchen clock – no clocks are right on the

Mountain because of this quarrel with different calendars. We can smell the centuries” (Lindqvist 1959: 221).

The Byzantine way of life, which Lindqvist encountered on Mount Athos, was one from which all splendour had departed: “A Byzantine way of life is still maintained, including the Julian calendar, the old neumatic musical notation and rigid ceremonies. But it is now sunk in ignorance and unspirituality. I found a primitive club for eccentric bachelors, a retirement home for hardened fanatics and lethargic pot-bellied people” (Lindqvist 1959: 15). However, another traveller, Olsson, whose article was published in the Swedish Orthodox journal *Kérygma*, reported the opposite experience. He thought that there was still the opportunity of encountering “real monks” and “real hermits” on Mount Athos, due to “living contact with the great Byzantine tradition, which like a miracle is still enduring there, in spite of invasions and occupations” (Olsson 1967: 74; cf. Sjögren 1967: 39f). He underlined the viability of the Byzantine tradition on Mount Athos, which he called the Holy Mountain. According to Olsson, it was the “spiritual and religious richness of Byzantium”, which had been deposited in the monasteries and hermit huts of the peninsula (Olsson 1967: 74).

The comparison of Lindqvist’s and Olsson’s experiences shows that, from Lindqvist’s perspective oriented from a Western cultural centre, the monks appeared as hardened, blunted eccentrics, still practising a Byzantine lifestyle and a Byzantine calendar. But, from the Byzantine-oriented perspective of Olsson’s article, characterized by the view that life on Mount Athos is culturally and religiously valuable and meaningful, the same persons were called “real monks” and “real hermits”, in the sense that they possessed spiritual wealth and a living contact with the Byzantine tradition.

Schildt told of yet another experience of time passing on Mount Athos, an experience that had to do neither with calendars, nor with discussions. During a sleepless night, he had followed the monks’ example and participated for many hours in the nocturnal vigil. He experienced that the time and the world of this nocturnal service became the only true reality for him: “When the service ended at dawn and bent, white-bearded figures went up to the tray with the eucharistic wafers before disappearing down the endless corridors, it was merely as if a spell had been temporarily broken, as if a pause had begun. For the world of night is the only real one at Athos – the sun glittering on the sea, the bird-song in the woods and the ripple of the fountain in the cloisters are nothing but illusion” (Schildt 1959: 75).

In most of the travelogues, we have seen that the use of the Julian calendar represented the firm dividing line between the past and the present, between holiness and secularism, between otherworldliness and a sense of reality, between Byzantium and the West – i.e. between the two semiospheres. However, for Schildt, who participated in the divine services according to the prevailing conditions of the monasteries – during many hours and even at night – a shift of semiospheres occurred. It made him look at the world with the eyes of the monks, as a pause in a continuous, never-ending divine service. Even for him as a visitor, the nocturnal, gleaming world of the divine services in these cases became “the only real one”, while the daylight and the sounds of the outside world were perceived as “an illusion”.

The poverty and misery of many of the monks were vividly described in the travelogues and constitute yet another topos related to the Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos. But also the treasures and riches of the monasteries – the manuscripts, imperial robes and insignia, seals, liturgical vestments and utensils, icons and frescoes – fascinated the visitors and functioned as a topos in the travelogues. Several of them had come to Mount Athos to study and, if possible, also photograph various manuscripts kept in the monasteries' libraries. As Rudberg pointed out, there was a philological interest in "text-critical studies of the Greek Church Fathers as well as Byzantine authors".

Such items, especially liable to be stolen and therefore heavily guarded, were often characterized as Byzantine in the travelogues. Hellsing listed a number of objects stored in the monastic treasury. He had almost had his head turned by all the gold: "There are old imperial crowns and patriarch staffs ornamented with precious stones, magnificently adorned shrines, and eucharistic chalices of silver and gold, and glorious crosses with miniatures, altar cloths [- -]. With your head feeling heavy from all the gold that glitters, you stagger out" (Hellsing 1952: 551). Other travellers reported being astonished during the celebration of the millenary in 1963, that some of Mount Athos' treasures were really used in the celebrations (*Hellas* 1968: 75; Karlsson 1964).

The paintings and icons of the monasteries were also often characterized as Byzantine treasures in the travelogues. Widehag mentioned in particular the monasteries' frescoes and their "mosaics, icons, magnificent bejewelled reliquaries and fine incunabula". He emphasized: "To study Athos is inevitable for anyone who is interested in the Byzantine tradition of art" (Widehag 1962: 82). Odenbring set out the long outlines of art history, but he also pointed to Mount Athos' great importance to the search for knowledge of more than one kind, to "Greek and Slavic Medieval Studies but particularly to our understanding of the mysticism and piety of the Eastern European Church" (Odenbring 1958: 33; cf. Sjögren 1967: 35f). However, usually the travelogues did not mention that the icons were considered holy by the monks and by the Orthodox pilgrims. Neither did they mention that the icons functioned as objects of veneration, nor that frescoes as well as portable icons were carrying out important liturgical functions. Monastic frescoes and icons were described primarily as art, and as such they gave rise to reflections on art history and were commented upon as aesthetic objects.

The travelogues thus show that the visitors perceived the treasures of Mount Athos to be its old and precious objects, as well as the libraries' manuscripts, all of them having the character of museum pieces. But for the monks these objects still kept their liturgical value, and they were therefore put to use during the celebration of the millenary. For the monks, the relics constituted the *real* treasures of the monasteries, but the travellers did not show any interest in them – and if they did in exceptional cases, the relics were not considered to be valuable. When Weebe mentioned the relics, it was in an equally rapid and dismissive list: "That the monasteries have a lot of relics goes without saying, pieces of the cross of Jesus, a part of Peter's prison chain, Sancta Anna's left foot" (Weebe 1960: 54). He associated the Orthodox icons with fetishism and related "the most incredible stories", in particular about one of them, "the Virgin Mary

kissing baby Jesus”, before he concluded: “The monks believe rock-steady in these stories” (Weebe 1960: 54; cf. Hellsing 1952: 554).

Which objects should be considered the real treasures of the monasteries and therefore worth studying? We have seen that the difference between a perspective oriented from a Western cultural centre and one oriented from a Byzantine centre was clearly expressed in the travelogues. According to the Swedophone Western-oriented travellers, the answer was the precious objects, such as the old manuscripts and the golden items. According to the Byzantine-oriented monks’ and the Orthodox pilgrims’ views, reflected in the travelogues, it was the holy items, i.e. the relics and icons.

“Unfortunately, as a rule he speaks only Greek” – at the linguistic border

On Mount Athos there are not only Greek Orthodox monasteries, but also monasteries from other parts of those regions, which the Russian scholar Dimitri Obolensky has called “the Byzantine Commonwealth” (Obolensky 1971). For example, there are a Russian and a Serbian monastery (Gothóni 1994: 173ff). Several different languages and nationalities are thus represented on Mount Athos. As a whole, the monastic republic can be characterized as multicultural and multilingual, at least within an Orthodox Christian context.

The encounter with this linguistic and cultural miniature of ‘the Byzantine Commonwealth’ is a topos in the Swedophone travelogues studied here. The travellers noticed that several different languages were in use on Mount Athos, both in daily life and in the divine services, according to Orthodox Christian multilingual traditions. In the Greek monasteries, Modern Greek was used in daily life, and an older, no longer changing or developing form of Greek was used as the liturgical language. In monasteries of other national traditions, Russian and Serbian could be used in conversations, and Church Slavonic as the liturgical language. The travellers also noticed that various national musical traditions of liturgical singing were connected with the different liturgical languages (Sjögren 1965; Hellsing 1952: 558).

Like many other phenomena on Mount Athos, even language could be obsolete, and the visitors noticed that not only treasures from Byzantine times but also older linguistic forms were in actual use. In particular, the singing in the Greek monasteries was called Byzantine in the travelogues. Many of the visitors perceived it as both strange and beautiful. Widehag wrote: “It may seem hard to us to understand the monks of Athos, but it is still worthwhile to stay in their milieu [- - -] to let one’s ear get accustomed to the strange but expressive and beautiful melodies” (Widehag 1962: 84).

But although Mount Athos as a whole was perceived by the travellers as a multilingual and multicultural milieu, within a Byzantine framework, the travelogues reveal that only a few of the monks mastered any other language than their own or knew any Western European language, such as French, German or English. Among the travellers, the situation was the reverse. All of them knew several Western European languages and Classical Greek, but only a few of them, for example Karlsson, mastered Modern Greek or Russian for conversations.

Given that many of the visitors were philologists or theologians, it might seem odd that they did not have knowledge of the languages used on Mount Athos, but to study "ancient Greek manuscripts", as Rudberg put it, and to master a conversation in Modern Greek obviously demanded different competences.

The monks' lack of linguistic skills was often noted as a problem in the travelogues, while the fact that the visitors themselves did not know the language of their hosts was regretted less frequently. Rudberg remarked: "Each monastery has a special monk, archondáris, who takes care of the guests. Unfortunately, as a rule he speaks only Greek". To make their stay on Mount Athos a success, it was therefore crucial that the travellers made contact with the few monks who knew Western European languages. Such a one was the monk Hypatius in the Russian monastery, who spoke "fluent Russian, Greek, German, English and French", and whom both Rudberg and Hellsing were lucky enough to meet (Rudberg 1951; Hellsing 1952: 556f). To the great delight of the visitors, there was even the odd monk who knew a little Swedish, and with whom the Swedophone travellers could interact in a different way, as Lindqvist experienced in a conversation about "the delicious sweets" in Sweden (Lindqvist 1959: 27f).

Weebe talks about a trip on a donkey in company with the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Paris and the monk Elias. His story illustrates the tendency to talk about different topics in different languages. The Russian bishop used German, English or French when talking to Weebe, but Greek or Russian when talking to the monk. This switch of language made the topics of their conversations differ as well:

When we came near to each other, the bishop was kind enough to find out how I was getting on and also gave me some useful information. But all the way, as far as I could understand, his conversation with Elias turned to saints and martyrs. The Orthodox Christians live and breathe in an air, which is full of these holy figures, their lives, their miracles, etc. As a Greek student once told me, there is something mystikos about the Orthodox faith. Knowledge seems not to be emphasized as much as the mysterious relation to all those whose icons appear in the churches, before which you cross yourself humbly and then kiss them passionately (Weebe 1960: 52).

The switch of language during Weebe's short trip thus seems to have also involved a shift of semiospheres. The conversation in Western European languages between the Orthodox bishop and the Lutheran clergyman Weebe was conducted in the realm of the Western semiosphere, in a most polite and courteous way, while the bishop's conversation in Greek and Russian with the monk went on within the Byzantine semiosphere and concerned the mystic life of Orthodoxy. However, Sjögren was asked an interesting question by one of the monks – "How many mysteries do you have in your church?" – a question which made him reflect on the difference between the rationalism of the Western churches and the mysticism of the Eastern ones. But, unfortunately, he does not inform his readers in which language they talked together (Sjögren 1967: 38f).

The visitors' difficulties in understanding the monks could also lead to contempt for the life of uttermost poverty, which many of them had chosen. Rudberg took it upon himself to judge the monk who accompanied him on his way to the Russian monastery:

[...] a terrible old man, a one-eyed, bareheaded, barefoot and indescribably dirty monk, dressed in the most horrible rags. It was raining, and I preferred to walk, but he rode all the way in front of me with his legs dangling along the sides of the mule, edifying me by reciting selected passages from the old Byzantine liturgy in a hoarse loud voice. The scene was at once grotesque and comical – the dirty old man constantly singing in the pouring rain. He did not cease until we reached the monastery gate (Rudberg 1951).

Rudberg could not convey to the reader why or what the monk chanted. Instead, the whole scene was depicted as “grotesque and comical”, as seen through the uncomprehending gaze of the visitor.

The fact that so few of the travellers had a useful knowledge of Greek or Slavic languages also affected their understanding of the divine services. They rightly perceived the services as spectacles for all the senses, but the meaning of the readings and hymns remained hidden from them. One example is the quite detailed description of a vigil, in which the strange and exotic character of the performance was emphasized:

The tinkling censers enfold the whole room in fragrant fumes, illuminated by the flickering flames the monks are singing hour after hour. The bishop sits motionless on his throne with a huge golden staff crowned by the Byzantine double-headed eagle and an imperial crown. You are in a strange exotic world, which we thought was lost long ago. [...] Albeit that the bishop drops off sometimes and that you are a bit anxious that the golden staff will fall crashing to the floor, in fact, it never does; at the crucial moment he rises in all his glory chanting the verses required by the ritual. After all, you are closer to God than out in the Europe of Atomic Age (Hellsing 1952: 550).

Such Greek terms as denote Orthodox realia and various phenomena on Mount Athos were reproduced in many travelogues, but very few of the travellers seem to have been able to orient themselves among the texts that were read and chanted in the divine services. For example, Rudberg confessed – n. b., he was a philologist and had travelled to Mount Athos for the sake of manuscript studies: “The meaning of most that is going on is of course hidden from the uninformed.”

Easter was the only festival paid attention to in the travelogues, and to some extent it was able to bridge the confusion of tongues. No one could fail to notice the celebration of Easter on Mount Athos. The Paschal greeting “Christ is risen” was then used also for the ordinary greeting man to man. Hellsing recounted: “[Brother Petros] raises his glass and welcomes you with the words: ‘Christos anesti!’ (Christ is risen!) If you know how to behave, you answer: ‘Alitos anesti!’ (Indeed risen!) cross yourself (using three fingers from right to left) and empty your glass” (Hellsing 1952: 542).

Odenbring was the traveller who spent most effort on describing the performance of the divine services and on interpreting their symbolism. As mentioned above, he was a Swedish clergyman, but following an earlier visit to the Russian Orthodox monastery of Valaam, he was also familiar with the practices of the Orthodox Church. He was able to shift semiosphere and to apply a double gaze on the Orthodox liturgy, both the one oriented from a Western cultural centre, and the one oriented from a Byzantine cultural centre: “Everything that is done has its deep symbolism. Not a single one of the,

according to the stranger's view, pointless walks out and in through the doors of the iconostasis is without meaning" (Odenbring 1958: 30f).

Especially the length of the divine services was pointed out as amazing. Otherwise, they were mentioned only briefly in the travelogues. Since their content was not touched upon, they were represented as strange and incomprehensible, or at least as very hard to understand. The exceptions were Schildt's depiction of his nocturnal visit to a vigil, referred to above, and the advice to read Russian literature, which Karlsson gave to readers who would like to gain a better understanding of the Orthodox monastic piety.

Even Weebe spoke about how he became acquainted with monks over "a cup of strong Turkish coffee or a glass of wine" at the hotel in Karyes (Weebe 1960: 55). Nor did the monks refuse a cigarette, and when Weebe "recited 'For God so loved the world' to them with a Greek pronunciation quite far from Modern Greek, they recognized the words of the Gospel and their faces lit up and they nodded jovially at each other" (Weebe 1960: 57). But this kind of contact, which in Weebe's case was established over a glass of wine and a cigarette, occurred only seldom in connection with the divine services (cf. Sjögren 1967: 21ff). Usually, the travelogues underlined the strange and peculiar aspects of the divine services of the monasteries, while they omitted what the monks and the visitors could easily have in common.

The travellers who made an effort to make themselves understood could therefore, despite the linguistic difficulties, have some opportunities to meet the monks and have a drink or unite in praising Swedish sweets. If they had known Modern Greek or any Slavic language, they might have been able to discuss topics of more substantial interest, such as handicrafts, the writings of the Church Fathers, the life stories of the monks, or the Greek Orthodox polemics against Islam – as Karlsson managed to do.

With the help of the required permits, the travellers had crossed the political border between Greece and the monastic republic and obtained a passport for their stay on Mount Athos. But the ones who mastered neither the Orthodox liturgical languages, nor Modern Greek or Russian for conversations, remained excluded from the Byzantine semiosphere. The travelogues show that the conversations which used Western European languages usually concerned life outside Mount Athos, while conversations in Greek and Russian concerned the Orthodox Christian tradition and its pieties. Therefore, it was with the help of the languages used in Orthodox practice that the travellers were able to gain access to the Byzantine semiosphere. For those who stuck to the Western European languages this linguistic border remained closed. The travellers' and the monks' mutual lack of language skills thus appears to be one of the factors that largely contributed to maintaining the border between the Western and the Byzantine cultural systems on Mount Athos.

"To him miracles still happen" – at the religious border

It was a topos in the travelogues to comment on Mount Athos's prospects, which were said to look very bleak. Recruitment from the communist Eastern bloc had

virtually ceased in the 1950s and 60s, with the exception of Yugoslavia (cf. Karlsson 1964). Weebe showed the problems in pure numbers: “in a monastery in the capital with room enough for about 1, 000 there are 8” (Weebe 1960: 53; cf. Odenbring 1958: 33; Risberg 1962). As Schildt pointed out, Mount Athos was totally dependent on recruitment from outside – not only of monks but also of cattle and domestic animals (Schildt 1955: 58), because of the gender border.

In this light, it was not surprising that the future of Mount Athos was frequently discussed in the travelogues. The fact that it had worked as a miniature of ‘the Byzantine commonwealth’ and had been one of the cohesive forces within Orthodox Christianity was apparent in various ways from the travelogues. Karlsson was worried that Mount Athos, due to the decline in recruitment, would become “a purely Greek affair”, no longer able to keep its position as a hub for the entire Orthodox Christian world. A notice from 1966 in *Ortodox kyrkotidning* [the Orthodox Church journal] talked about the plans of the Greek state to turn Mount Athos into an archaeological region, plans that prompted the monks to plead the Holy Mountain’s status as a semi-autonomous republic as well as “the international warranty, which protects Mount Athos and denies the Greek state the right to intervene” (*Ortodox Kyrkotidning* 32, 1966: 329). In this way, national Greek interests conflicted with the wishes of the monastic republic and the rest of the Orthodox Christian world.

Reports in the Swedish Orthodox journals also show that the Orthodox Church wished that Mount Athos should work not only as an Orthodox but also as an ecumenical spiritual and cultural centre (cf. Olsson 1967: 75). When Athos’s millenary was celebrated in 1963, *Ortodox kyrkotidning* quoted the speech of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in which he said that Mount Athos’s monasteries must set an example “to make the ecumenical movement advance”. Among the projects proposed by the Patriarch for the renewal of Mount Athos were the creation of a “pan-Orthodox academy” at one of the monasteries and the establishment of “a Christian academy for Byzantine Studies” (*Ortodox Kyrkotidning* 19, 1963: 128).

It is evident that the Orthodox Church chose to assert the stable and free status assigned to Mount Athos during Byzantine times, when the monastic republic during the late 1960s was about to fade away and faced the threat of being turned into a museum area, subject to the Greek state. During this very difficult period of decline, the Orthodox Church wanted to stress the future ecumenical and international importance of Mount Athos for Orthodox and Byzantine Studies. However, it seems mainly to have been journals with an Orthodox orientation that were interested to talk about the commitment to ecumenism and international cooperation of the Orthodox Church. This point was thus made especially within the Byzantine semiosphere.

In individual cases, the travelogues show that the Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos was neither just a historical remnant nor a living contact with the tradition, as it was perceived by the visitors, but that it meant a promise for the future for the monks. But this view was less frequently mentioned in the travelogues, since it required that the visitor had knowledge about and was able to apply the way of thinking practised within the Byzantine cultural system. One of the travellers who had that ability was Widehag, who pointed out that the fall of Constantinople in 1453 had meant that Mount Athos lost the protection

afforded by the Byzantine emperor. Nevertheless, he continued, the monks' hope of a revived Byzantium was still alive: "it is expected that when Constantinople is liberated, the emperor will execute the deed of gift he once signed in red ink" (Widehag 1960). Widehag meant also that the monks must be judged according to "the background of the distinctive character of the entire Greek world", and he emphasized the importance of the Byzantine tradition:

The Greek makes use of completely different realities from the Western European. Surely you will get further, if you look not only at his general characteristics, if you recall not only his roots in the Byzantine tradition, but also his individualism, his Orientalism, his lingering ability to give life to symbols. What is preposterous has never been incredible in his world. To him miracles still happen. Why then should not even the Tsar be able to return, as well as the Emperor of Constantinople, and the entire Byzantine Empire? [...] Why should the Western world possess the hegemony in the long run, when the truth is of course in the East? (Widehag 1960).

Perhaps such a discussion on Byzantine hegemony and Greek views would have been illuminating for another of the Swedish travellers to Mount Athos, Aurell, when he and his travel partner were met by accusations of Catholic espionage from the monastery's director and effectively discouraged (Aurell 1969: 85ff). Afterwards, his thoughts on the "fiasco with the higoumen" kept him awake all night – "how unsuspecting, unreserved, childish-touching, quite simply" he and his friend had been (Aurell 1969: 93).

But there are also several examples in the travelogues, which show that the visitors felt themselves to be welcome. Sometimes, they made attempts to look at themselves with the eyes of the monks, as when Karlsson called himself "a Lutheran heretic". Hellsing experienced that the monks "watch you as some kind of semi-heathen oddity, look at you with a sense of pity and sometimes amused indulgence" (Hellsing 1952: 540). Lindqvist said that the monks were generally forbearing. He likened their view of the visitors to their view of the holy fools of the Orthodox tradition:

Greeks and Russians have patience with idiots, the fools are kissed by God – the Orthodox religion unites these otherwise very different peoples.

My unbelief is regarded as a kind of harmless insanity. Faith is so natural that it does not occur to them to argue about or sentimentalize it. The atmosphere is therefore not really religious as we understand it. Their religion is a fact, just as that we come from different countries (Lindqvist 1959: 221).

From the perspective of the monks, oriented from a Byzantine cultural centre, the Swedish visitors were viewed as strangers, which meant that they – at least according to Hellsing and Lindqvist – were treated with mild indulgence and could be likened to fools. The circumstance, mentioned above, that all visitors to Mount Athos were defined as pilgrims by the monks, while none of the travellers called themselves so, is another example of how the Byzantine and the Western perspectives differed. In these ways, the travelogues came to talk about how the two different cultural systems, the Byzantine and the Western, overlapped on Mount Athos – at least to the extent that the travelogues reflected also the perspective of the monks.

“It is a fringe land” – at the epistemological border

All of the Swedophone travelogues of the 1950s and 60s demonstrate that the travellers experienced an encounter with Byzantium and Byzantine traditions during their trip to Mount Athos. Byzantium became apparent to them in the semi-autonomous statehood of the Holy Mountain, in the monks’ way of life, in the so-called Byzantine calendar, in the architecture and milieu of the peninsula, in the treasures of the monasteries, in the ways languages were used, and in the discussion of the future of Mount Athos. But, as we have seen, the majority of the visitors gave their experiences on Mount Athos the meanings and values they had within the Western cultural system, which differed from those of the monks, within the Byzantine semiosphere.

Although Mount Athos maintained a pivotal role in the Byzantine cultural system, it was mostly depicted in the travelogues by conditions and cultural norms provided by the Western cultural system, as peripheral but still located within its boundaries. The travellers’ choice to orient themselves from a Western cultural centre implied that the monks’ Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos was depicted as strange, by strange features situated *within* the ordinary, known world of the travellers (cf. Lotman 1990: 137). What Odenbring stressed in his account of Mount Athos as “the last abode of the strange”, quoted above, was precisely that it existed within Europe, “in our own part of the world” (Odenbring 1958: 25; 34). Another example, also mentioned above, is how Byzantine traditions, like the Byzantine chanting of the monks, were perceived by the visitors as difficult to comprehend and appreciate, but nevertheless they could be described in the travelogues in traditionally Western terms, though in a superficial way.

Lindqvist offers another interesting example of how the strange was included in the traveller’s own world and tradition. After having described his mixed experiences of discomfort, the beauty of nature and his constant questioning of himself during his stay at Mount Athos, he concluded by a comparison between “the Mountain” and Sweden. He found that they resembled each other, since each of them was what he called “a fringe land”, “a laboratory of life”:

The meaning of holiness is to be an end point: to show what the target looks like when it has been brought as far as possible under favourable conditions.

[...] The Mountain is a laboratory of life where the Orthodox values are put to the test. Do we have any equivalent to this? Who among us discover, exercise and clarify life values?

Even Sweden is a model where some of the dreams and nightmares of the world become reality in miniature. Sweden is interesting in the same way as The Mountain. It is a fringe land, and from the point of view of the rest of the world, the lives of most Swedes are far more strange than these hermits’ (Lindqvist 1959: 233).

Lindqvist thus likened the Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos to the modern Swedish welfare state of the 1950s – not in substance but as a phenomenon. Both of them offered a model of life, intended to be tested in use.

According to some of the travelogues, the most fabulous transformations could take place on Mount Athos – in its “laboratory of life”, to quote Lindqvist. During an overnight stay in one of the monasteries, Schildt experienced how he

"lost the last touch with reality" when the paraffin lamp was put out, and half asleep he likened the monastery to a sailing-ship:

It was as if the vast old monastery had cast off like a sailing-ship and glided out into its rightful element. A strange crossing began, and as we lay on our hard bunks, grappling with the bugs, we heard the ship's bell sound at intervals – the first, the second, the third watch. Footsteps shuffled past, we sensed that the crew were at work, each at his appointed post, and outside, along the endless wooden balconies, the wind whined, a shutter banged, the huge trees surged like waves (Schildt 1959: 70f).

Schildt used almost the same metaphor in another context, where the monastery was not likened to a sailing ship, but to a spaceship, making a ten-hours-long ascent through the night (Schildt 1955: 62).

In other travelogues, Mount Athos could be located completely beyond the time and space of reality, and be likened to the world of fairy tales: "Already during classical antiquity there was an air of fairy tales over this corner of Macedonia", Risberg wrote. With a matching simile, he recounted that the librarians of the monasteries guarded their manuscripts "as dragons their gold". When Aurell was received in one of the monasteries, a novice served him refreshments. Fascinated, he likened the boy to a character from "the middle of a fairy tale" (Aurell 1969: 82). Schildt saw Mount Athos from the humorous perspective of fairy tales and folklore: "One finds oneself in Looking-glass Land, where it would not seem in the least surprising to see the wolf guarding the sheep and the ox walking behind the plough – do not great hefty men stand on the balconies plaiting their flowing hair and does one not sleep away most of the daylight hours in order to hold vigil all night long in the churches?" (Schildt 1959: 68).

Many of the travellers emphasized deliberately the strangeness of the world and the way of life they encountered on Mount Athos, for example Hellsing, who called Mount Athos "a peculiar corner of the world, full of strange and curious things" and underlined its indescribable features: "The atmosphere is such, that it can not be explained, not be described – only be experienced" (Hellsing 1952: 540; 558; cf. Sjögren 1967: 14).

Schildt began his depiction of Mount Athos in a similar way: "the occurrence is so intangible that any attempt at interpretation is merely a cross-section [...]. Seen in retrospect, our visit there has something of the shapelessness and fragmentary close-up perspective of a dream" (Schildt 1959: 65). Nevertheless, Schildt had actually made such an attempt at interpretation a few years earlier, in a poem in which Mount Athos was apostrophized by an enumeration of epithets, often with a humorous twist, as a "climbing-mountain for hermits", and as an "evening school for saint candidates". In several of these epithets, Schildt challenged the traditional view of monastic life by using *oxymora*, such as "penal colony for free men", or surprising metaphors and unexpected words boldly combined in phrases, such as "paradise quarantine" or "catapult for heaven's pilots" (Schildt 1955: 58). His use of paradoxical twists and compressed metaphors brings to mind how an indescribable and elusive experience *can* yet be articulated in the aesthetics of Byzantine hymnography, precisely by the accumulation of a variety of paradoxical epithets, as, for example, in the

Akathistos hymn (on Orthodox Christian literary taste, see Averintsev 2006: 222 ff).

During his visit to the monastery Dionysiou, Schildt had yet another peculiar experience. Through the window of the reception room, he saw the entire world outside as a “window view”. He said:

I was suddenly overcome by happiness at being here inside the mighty walls, which transformed the whole world to a view from a window. It seemed to me as if everything at Athos was aimed at teaching man this perspective, at making that which is visible a mere shell. We were guests in this room, guests like all pilgrims at Athos, but those who live here become instead the guests of reality (Schildt 1959: 73).

To Schildt, this view held an existential meaning, which explained the conditions of life to which the monks had submitted themselves.

Visiting Mount Athos, most of the travellers thus found themselves transferred to a strange and Oriental space within Europe, within their own Western semiosphere. All of them had crossed the political border to Mount Athos and encountered several other borders – cultural, linguistic and religious ones. Nevertheless, those who did not notice that there was yet another border to cross – the border between the known and the unknown, the epistemological border between the semiospheres – kept orienting themselves towards a Western cultural centre. But the analysis of the travelogues has also shown that in a few cases the travellers also crossed the epistemological border, which made a shift of semiospheres possible. Schildt’s experiences provide the best examples: his playful depiction of a paradoxical state of being, using expressions that seem to be inspired by Byzantine literary aesthetics, i.e. by the repertoire of the Byzantine cultural system, his sudden view from inside the monastery of the surrounding world as a “window view”, transforming the visible into a “mere shell”, and finally, referred to above, his nocturnal experience, in which life on Mount Athos had become the only reality to him.

To cross the epistemological border, the visitor had to recognize the legitimacy of Mount Athos as a centre within the Byzantine semiosphere. This required a knowledge of the worldview and priorities of the Byzantine cultural system, as well as some knowledge of its literary and cultural repertoire, combined with such language skills as made it possible for the traveller to become acquainted with and talk to the monks – not only about Western, secular phenomena but also about religious matters and Orthodox piety.

Besides Schildt, we have seen that some of the travellers who possessed these qualifications were Widehag, Sjögren and Karlsson. Widehag’s depiction, quoted above, of how the hegemony of the Western world could be questioned from a Greek point of view, exemplifies a reasoning from a perspective oriented from a Byzantine cultural centre. Sjögren showed great respect for the monks’ Byzantine way of life, especially in his longer travelogue, and associated it not only with an old world but with an eternal young one; to him it represented eternity (Sjögren 1967: 40). Like for Karlsson, his strength was his linguistic skills; he could talk to the monks’ in both Modern Greek and Russian.

Conclusion

We have seen in the travelogues that all of the Swedophone travellers to Mount Athos during the 1950s and 60s elaborated on *topoi*, which activated their associations with Byzantium and confronted them with the political, cultural, linguistic and religious borders of Mount Athos. But it was only a few of them who also noticed and crossed the epistemological border between the Western and the Byzantine semiospheres.

The analysis has shown that decisive to how Byzantium was represented by Mount Athos in Swedophone travelogues of the 1950s and 60s was whether the monastic republic was judged and evaluated according to the norms of the Byzantine or the Western cultural system. For some of the travellers the trip to Mount Athos took place in the periphery of the Western cultural system, for others *within* one of the most forceful centres of the Byzantine cultural system. The crucial point was whether Mount Athos was regarded as central within the Byzantine semiosphere, or as peripheral within the Western semiosphere – that is, whether the Byzantine semiosphere was recognized.

If this was the case, the travellers held the originally Byzantine, Orthodox Christian tradition to be a legitimate source of knowledge. They were able to look at life on Mount Athos from the monks' Byzantine point of view, and they could also experience their own reality and cultural tradition from a perspective oriented from within the Byzantine semiosphere, as well as conveying these experiences to their readers. For these travellers, Byzantium was represented by Mount Athos not merely as a historical empire of the past. They regarded the Byzantine way of life on Mount Athos as a supportive, indispensable part of the monks' continuous tradition, old but still alive, and meaning a hope for the future. It was also characterized by multilingual and multicultural traits.

On the other hand, if the Byzantine semiosphere was not recognized, the same Byzantine tradition was judged as strange, uninteresting and incomprehensible, according to the cultural norms and repertoires of the Western cultural system. The travellers continued to regard Mount Athos as a periphery within the Western semiosphere, within their own cultural system. To them Byzantium remained a strange phenomenon, an especially interesting 'outside', paradoxically situated within their own Western semiosphere, like an obscure Orient within the boundaries of Europe.

Finally, we have also had a glimpse of a third possibility: to balance right on the epistemological border, as Lindqvist did, when he called Mount Athos "a laboratory of life", where life values were put to the test – an important task for both the Byzantine and the Western semiosphere, a core issue with an impact on the semiotic conditions and processes of the whole cultural polysystem.

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