

**Veronica della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 294 p.**

This book is a beautiful study on Byzantine perceptions of the sacred places. Written by an eminent scholar, namely Veronica della Dora<sup>1</sup>, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* is a fascinating and welcome contribution to the field of sacred topography.

The volume begins with an extensive introductory within Veronica della Dora describes the sacred space in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The sacred places (gardens, deserts, mountains, caves, rivers, and seas) seem to have a spiritual power in the Byzantine world, and not only. In this context, the art of seeing becomes very important. Holiness is ultimately in the eye of the beholder. From this perspective, as Veronica della Dora has remarked, this book explores a “Byzantine way of seeing”.

*Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* is divided into four parts, and an epilogue.

In her first part “Topos and Cosmos”, Veronica della Dora introduces the main concerns of the study: sacred topographies and sacred cosmographies. More exactly, Veronica della Dora opens her study with a debate on topographic experiences (pilgrimage, symbolic and iconic topographies). A central thesis of this chapter holds that “nature constituted a vast reservoir full of familiar symbols through which the Creator revealed Himself..., the Creator did continue to speak to humans through His works – through symbolic topographies” (pp. 59-60). The author continues with a debate on the sacred cosmographies. She highlights that the sacred place is not simply a place, but a *topos* (“evocative place”), a *theophany*. As we know, for the Saints Fathers nature is permeated by divine energies, so

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that, as Veronica della Dora has remarked “everything in the world was <a seed and a sign> in the vast topographic inventory through which God manifested his presence without violating his unknowability” (p. 90).

Part II (“Land”) covers the topic of the moral places, especially gardens and wilderness. Every garden is a place for cultivating and growing spiritual. As Veronica della Dora has remarked “gardens stimulate the senses and soothe the soul” (p. 95). In other words, gardening and the spiritual life are synonymous terms. In this sense a very good example is the early monastic literature. The early ascetics lived in a symbiotic relationship with the wilderness. The desert movement, more than any other movement in the history of Christianity, has been associated with wilderness. The desert was home for Abba Antony the Great and the other elders who lived there. The desert was a beautiful place, where the monks were able to live with God. As Veronica della Dora has observed “the desert is a metaphor for Christianity and for spirituality in the broader sense” (p. 142).

The following part (“Rock”) examine the mountains and the caves as *topoi*. In its original sense, topos is not simply a place or geographical location, but an “evocative place”. In other words, a mountain can become a holy mountain. The belief that mountains are the places nearest to heaven is shared by the Judaeo-Christian tradition. As we know, the mountains are one of the most important geographical features in the Holy Scripture (for example, Moses’ encounter with God on Sinai, or Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor). The mountain continued to mark sacred topographies during the Byzantine world (and after its fall), because “Sinai and Athos became together with the Holy land the great geographical loci of Orthodox Christianity: not only rhetorical topoi (ladders to heaven and gardens of Eden), but true spiritual islands and beacons to which the faithful in the Ottoman-dominated lands increasingly turned their eyes and souls” (p. 175). The mountain metaphor is followed by a cave metaphor. Also, in the Byzantine world, caves have long been privileged places for spiritual life. Thus “the cave was a place for transformation and for spiritual resurrection” (p. 195).

The final part (“Water”) covers the topic of the dynamic elements in the landscape: rivers and seas. A central thesis of this chapter holds the importance of these imageries in the Byzantine iconography. Here the author makes a few remarks full of insight about the biblical, ascetic, and Byzantine rivers/seas. Its conclusion is that water played a central role in the

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Judaeo-Christian tradition: “Scripture is traversed by complex fluvial topographies through which the Church Fathers mapped spiritual pathways” (pp. 229-230).

In her epilogue, the author reflects about the *topoi* of world seen through the spiritual eyes. For Veronica della Dora geography was a “visible form of theology”, so that “biblical *topoi* populated and transformed Byzantine landscapes, both physically and metaphorically” (p. 257). Her conclusion points out that “from Scripture to the Greek Fathers and medieval hagiographers, these *topoi* were not so much specific geographical places as symbolic realities; they were complex *loci* of experience and reflection, regions of the earth and of the soul” (p. 256).

This is an excellent book, which is indispensable for scholars of sacred topography in the Byzantine world and well worth the attention of a broader audience. Veronica della Dora’s book brings a new perspective to understanding the significance of place in the field of Byzantine world.

Written by a brilliant scholar, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* is a well-documented and an extraordinarily innovative book. Broadly conceived, scrupulously researched, fully illustrated, the book is a remarkable in its insight. Also, an extensive bibliography and index make this book valuable for scholars. Really, Veronica della Dora’s voice demands to be heard.

**Daniel LEMENI**