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 June 2019
 Mount Menoikeion Seminar
 Pre-Trip Seminar Paper

The Human in the *Hierotopos*: Charting the Co-Construction of Monastic Landscapes and Spiritual Disciplines

In his incisive article on the Timios Prodromos Monastery near Serres, Prof. Nikos Bakirtzis of the Cyprus Institute characterizes that site as a *hierotopos*, a sacred space. Utilizing that work as a point of departure, I will consider the origins and conditions of such a designation. What makes a sacred space? How does the human element factor into a status calculated to remind of the divine? Drawing on the example of the Mount Menoikeion monastic community, this paper will posit a co-constructive view of the human and the sacred in the material context of monastic life and practice. Importantly, this paper will serve not as the final, but rather the first word on this subject, and is intended primarily as a thought primer to ground the author's upcoming visit to the monastery. Only then—after having listened to, worked with, and charitably observed the nuns of Mount Menoikeion—will a fuller picture of spiritual life and its relation to the monastic physical environment begin to emerge.

Since the 13th century, Mount Menoikeion has been associated with religious activity, the human endeavor to approach the Divine through the cultivation of the sacred. And in this setting, literal cultivation was quite necessary for such an effort—early monastics and ascetics had to tame the rugged mountain landscape in order to even inhabit the area.¹ That this activity was difficult was of little negative consequence. In fact, it is likely that in their quest to flee from the 'secular' world, early monastics relished the opportunity to labor as their Lord did during his sojourn on Earth. But Menoikeion was not chosen solely for its difficulty to inhabit. The fact that Menoikeion is a *mountain*

¹ Bakirtzis, Nikolas. "The Creation of a Hierotopos in Byzantium: Acetic Practice and its Sacred Topography on Mt. Menoikeion." In *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, 126-149. Moscow: Indrik, 2006, p. 135.

carries a significance that has fundamentally altered the course of various communities' development on its rocky slopes. A major theme of Daniel Miller's *Stuff*, and of material culture studies more broadly, is that much of who we are as human beings is constituted by the normal, everyday, and usually unremarked-upon elements of our physical environment.² As three-dimensional creatures who inhabit space and use stuff, we are shaped by those constraints. In this vein, the fact that the Menoikeion monastery sits atop a mountain is both simple and profound, and inspires the question, "What can the student of material culture and religious practice infer from the mountainous location of this Orthodox community?"

Beyond its ruggedness, Mount Menoikeion is isolated. This has obvious benefits for a community seeking to exist in this world, yet in a manner not *of* this world.³ With elevation comes a sense of detachment and of removal from neighboring secular villages. Even the placement of the monastery on the mountain is itself revealing. As Bakirtzis relays the geography—though I'm curious to see for myself—the monastery is neither at the base of its host mountain, nor at its peak. Instead, it occupies a liminal middle, a perch from which removal from the everyday-secular can be achieved along with easy access to the hallowed caves higher still up Menoikeion's weathered grade. In years gone by, those caves provided a home to particularly devout ascetics; nightly candles lit near the mouths of the caves served to communicate a hermit's presence (and dedication) to their brothers stationed in the monastery-proper below.⁴ In this way, the environmental materiality of the monastery served—and doubtless continues to serve—as a memory vehicle for the monks and nuns who inhabit the space, one that illumines the key values of the monastic lifestyle.

This warrants a few words about the content of those monastic values, with attention to how the mountainous setting of the monastery reinforces their inculcation. The rejection of the

² Miller, Daniel. "Stuff." Polity Press, 2010, pp. 16–64.

³ Paraphrasing John 17:13-16.

⁴ Bakirtzis, p. 134.

secular provides one key to the monastic disposition, along with regular prayer and psalmody and obedience to spiritual elders.⁵ Also of critical importance are a renunciation of willed pleasures and a feeling of freedom from possession.⁶ Together, these virtues and practices coalesce into *hesychia*, a feeling of serenity on Earth modeled after the peacefulness of the Heavenly realm. Here again, the mountainous locale of the monastic complex embodies, and indeed fosters, the practice of hesychasm. Further, as our previous discussions of the Menoikeion soundscape suggest, the quiet ambiance of the site, its pastoral mood, and overall sense-calming characteristics serve to support a feeling of inward peace and communal harmony.

Thus far, this paper has focused on the natural environment of Mount Menoikeion and has sought to demonstrate how features of the physical landscape have inspired and supported the ascetic practices of its various denizens. But to truly appreciate the impact of the material environment on spiritual practice, we must also consider the human-made elements of the area as well. One striking example of such features is the system of seven chapels roughly ringing the monastery. On one level, these outer buildings diversify the sites of religious practice, as well as its inflection: the chapels' varied styles and decorative content highlight different tenets and key figures of the Orthodox faith. They also provide monastics with additional religious facilities at distributed locations, allowing for the observance of religious ceremonies even if work duties necessitate a monk or nun's absence from the main monastic complex. Most fundamentally, however, the ring of chapels serves to demarcate the physical and spiritual bounds of the Mount Menoikeion *hierotopos*. In the eyes of centuries of Orthodox practitioners, the system of chapels maintains an apotropaic function—that is, it serves to ward off evil.⁷ This perhaps most clearly demonstrates the tight

⁵ Ibid., p. 128.

⁶ Lingas, pp. 157-167.

⁷ Bakirtzis, p. 137

interrelation of human-constructed environmental elements and practitioners' religious beliefs. The work of human hands channels and reifies the designs (and protections) of an immaterial architect.

Once on the ground, I hope to investigate further the materiality of sacred geography. What elements of the environment most poignantly communicate, mirror, or influence core tenets of monastic practice? How do the nuns of Mount Menoikeion—the current custodians of a nearly thousand-year-old monastic tradition in the area—think about and interact with the overall layout of their surrounding landscape? For now, I feel that these must remain open questions for us to ponder both individually and as a group. Matters of interior life and ultimate concern—the Tillichian cornerstone of faith—are as idiosyncratic as they are individual. For an American author with little exposure to Greek Orthodox monasticism to conjecture from afar on the most spiritually salient elements of Menoikeion's geography and materiality would be unwise. However, I hope that this essay has touched upon some of the key environmental features that we may all observe and reflect on when we arrive in the *hierotopos*. To state the sentiment more formally, critical pre-reflection sets the conditions of possibility for sympathetic and open-minded engagement and participation once on the ground in Greece. In this way we may realize that the study of the interrelation between the physical and the spiritual cannot be executed in the academic abstract. On this trip, we are all inescapably *participant-observers* with much to learn about life on Mount Menoikeion from its vast reservoir of local knowledge and experience. As such, our thinking about how we see—what set of eyes we bring to the site—will impact *what* we see. I hope that we may all reflect upon this in our own ways...

I close this essay by bringing us back to its beginning: a concern for locating the human in the context of a sacred monastic setting. Ultimately, this concern amounts to more of an awareness about the right disposition going into our trip than a fixed answer about where the human resides, or how the geography of a Greek monastery informs its spiritual character. Observation with the

right disposition is prerequisite to understanding either. Having prepared the mind's eye to see with such a disposition, all that remains is what remains to be seen.

Honor Code: I pledge my honor that this paper represents my own work, in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Shanon FitzGerald

Author's Note: This paper was written in advance of the 2019 Mt. Menoikeion Seminar and subject to online publication pursuant to the terms of participation in that program. Additional writing samples are available from the author upon request.