

The Symbolism of the *Ladder of Spiritual Ascent* by St. John Climacus: text and image¹

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Abstract

The paper underlines a few aspects of the treatise *Scala Paradisi* by John Climacus² which are less known or discussed. The most important of them is that, despite the fact that the virtues symbolized by the rungs of the Celestial Ladder are positioned in such a manner as to take the person who follows them closer to God, even after reaching the highest of them he/she continues to develop in parallel from other points of view.

My text also pinpoints a few elements of symbolism which the motif of the Ladder entails. New information that regards the history of the treatise within the Byzantine Empire and that was not included in my chapter “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder” within the book *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*³ is communicated.

Additionally, the paper includes new images that do not exist in the above-mentioned publication.

Key words: Byzantium, icons, the treatise of the Heavenly Ladder, John Climacus, the Ladder of Ascent, Byzantine art

¹ This text is based on a paper I presented at the Workshop “Lectio. The Ladder of John Climacus”, Leuven, on the 30th of April, 2019.

² Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*. For the Greek text see J. P. Migne (ed.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1864, vol. 88 (PG88), 632-1161, with prefatory texts on 596-631, and the Liber ad Pastorem on 1165–1208. The most recent English translation is thus: John Climacus, *John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, edited and translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel, Introd. Kallistos Ware, London and New York: SPCK, 1982, p. 6. More translations in English and other languages are mentioned in the Bibliography at the end of the paper; various translations offer slightly different titles for this text. I will also use a few titles for John’s text in addition to *Scala Paradisi*: the Heavenly Ladder, The Ladder of Virtues, and the Celestial Ladder.

³ Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder”, *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*, Liz James and Antony Eastmond (eds.), Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 176-184.

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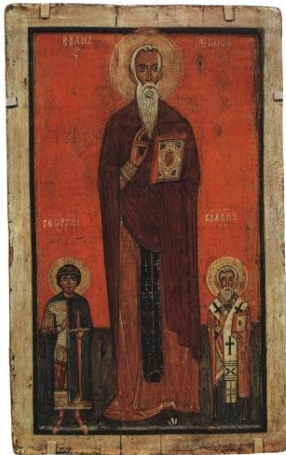


Fig.1.The icon of St John Climacus with St George and St Blaise. Tempera on wood, thirteenth century. Novgorod School; Image used in accordance to the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence; accessed 19 April 2019.

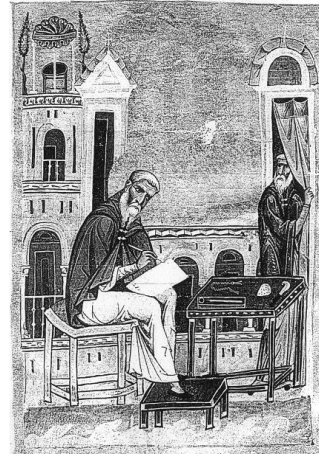


Fig. 2. St John Climacus's portrait. The Heavenly Ladder] Vatican. Cod. Gr. 394. Fol. F 6v; John Rupert Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. XVII, fig. 69 in that book.



Figs. 3-4. St Catherine Monastery; images used in accordance to the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence; accessed 19 April 2019.

Introduction

This presentation flags out a few elements of symbolism around the theological motif of the Ladder in the treatise *Scala Paradisi* by John Climacus/Scholasticus.⁴ Information which regards the story of the text throughout the Byzantine Empire that was not available when I published the chapter “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder” within the book *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*⁵ shall be communicated. Additionally, the paper introduces some images that have not been included in the above-mentioned publication.

In his *Homily on the Holy Maryrs* St. John Chrysostom (347- 407) says rather surprisingly that “the ladder that they [the martyrs] were tied to is like an inversion of Jacob’s Ladder.. ” (PG 50. “On the Holy Martyrs”, 706 [705-712]).⁶ As one can notice, he states this long before John Climacus (c. 579–650; figs. 1-2) wrote his

⁴ Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*. For the Greek text see J. P. Migne (ed.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1864, vol. 88 (PG88), 632-1161, with prefatory texts on 596–631, and the Liberad Pastorem on 1165–1208. The most recent English translation is thus: John Climacus, *John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, edited and translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel, Introd. Kallistos Ware, London and New York: SPCK, 1982, p. 6. More translations in English and other languages are mentioned in the Bibliography at the end of the paper; various translations offer slightly different titles for this text. I will also use a few titles for John’s text in addition to *Scala Paradisi*: the Heavenly Ladder, The Ladder of Virtues, and the Celestial Ladder.

⁵ Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder”, *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*, Liz James and Antony Eastmond (eds.), Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 176-184.

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, “On the Holy Maryrs”, in J. P. Migne and Garnier Brothers (eds.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1862, vol. 50 (PG 50) 705-712; *Corpus Christianorum. Clavis Patrum Graecorum CCCPG/CPG 2*: 4365, Turnhout: Brepols, vol. 2: *Ab Athanasio ad Chrysostomum* (nos 2000 to 5197), 1974. All entries referring to John Chrysostom are at 4305-5197. See St. John Chrysostom, “A Homily On the Holy Maryrs”, in John Chrysostom, trans. by W. Mayer, in J. Leemans; W. Mayer; P. Allen, and B. Dehandschutter, *Let us die that we may live: Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria* (c. AD 350-AD 450), London; New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 115-126. St. John Chrysostom, *The Cult of the Saints*, Selected homilies and letters introduced, translated, and annotated by Wendy Mayer with Bronwen Neil, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006, p. 218. The Homily on the Holy Maryrs “appeared to have been delivered at a particular martyrium”, p. 218; this because in its last paragraph (7) it is written: “Don’t you tremble in front of this martyrium?”, p. 224.

Scala Paradisi.⁷ The Sinaxarion for March written by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite (+ 1809) describes St. John as being at 16 as advanced in ‘understanding’ as someone 1,000 year old; because he communicated with God day and night he could see Him [Christ] in the clear mirror of his soul.⁸ Judith Waring affirms that this treatise was written in the sixth century,⁹ but I think the Sinaite would have been too young to write it – being in his twenties – despite his very profound spirituality. Therefore it is more probable that it was written in the seventh century; among other scholars, Nancy Ševčenko also believed that it was penned in its first half.¹⁰ The above-quoted statement from the Liturgist confirms that the motif of the ladder circulated throughout the Byzantine Empire during Late Antiquity.

As we know, John is celebrated on both the 30th of March and on the fourth Sunday in Lent, and on both these days the readings in the Byzantine – and now the Orthodox Church – are the Beatitudes. This is because people who follow the saint’s guidance strive to attain the state of ‘beatitude’ (holiness).

i. The theology and symbolism of the text

The treatise *Scala Paradisi* occurred between two other major books of Byzantine Late Antiquity: the *Apophthegmata Patrum*/The Sayings of the Desert Fathers [from Egypt] and *The Life of Basil the Younger*. The former is the earliest

⁷ Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*. For the Greek text see Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*. For the Greek text see J. P. Migne (ed.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1864, vol. 88 (PG88) 632-1161 with prefatory texts on 596–631, and the Liberad Pastorem on 1165–1208. The most recent English translation is thus: John Climacus, *John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel, Introd. Kallistos Ware, London and New York: SPCK, 1982, p. 6. More translations in English and other languages are mentioned in the Bibliography; various translations offer slightly different titles for this text.

⁸ St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Sinaxarion for March* (the modern edition), Mount Athos: Iera Moni Simonos Petras/The Monastery of Simonos Petras, 1998.

⁹ Judith Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, in Liz James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwells, 2010, p. 282.

¹⁰ Nancy P. Ševčenko, “Monastic Challenges: Some Illustrated Manuscripts of the Heavenly Ladder”, in Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Byzantine Art: Recent Studies*, 2009, p. 39 [pp. 39-62].

record of a long oral tradition; it appears to have been written at the end of the fourth century AD.¹¹ The latter, dating to the tenth century, tells how the soul of Theodora (the helper of a holy man called Basil), on its journey up to heaven, passes through 21 tollbooths or tallgates (*teloneia*) in which rolls are open for the woman to see the ‘inventory’ of her sins.¹² Therefore, Climacus’s treatise not only assimilated the *kerygma* of the Church but also continued it, adding some novelty to its precepts. Perhaps we shall also consider the romance of Barlaam and Joasaph, which glorifies the monastic life as being a part of the same tradition. That story circulated in the Far East from the second century, but was translated into Greek in the seventh.¹³ John Rupert Martin affirms that this is evidence of the creativity of that historical epoch.¹⁴

¹¹ *Apophthegmata Patrum/The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* [from Egypt], in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Imprimerie Catholique, vol. 65 [PG 65], Paris, 1864. See also Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the desert: scripture and the quest for holiness in early Christian monasticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 76–84; Sr. Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (revised ed.), Penguin Classics, 2003; and Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh and Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (revised ed.), Cistercian Publications, 1987.

¹² Gregory, *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version*, trans. and edited by Denis F. Sullivan, Alice-Mary Maffry Talbot, and Stamatina Fatalas-Papadopoulos McGrath, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2014 where, in chapter 9, the afterlife journey of the woman Theodora is described. See also Giles Constable and Alexander P. Kazhdan, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, Center for Byzantine Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 1982, p. 150. See also Judith Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, in Liz James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 282 [pp. 276-288].

¹³ Some sources affirm that the tale derives from a second to fourth century Sanskrit text, via a Manichaean version, and that in the eighth century the Arabic *Kitab Bilawhar wa-Yudasaf* (Book of Bilawhar and Yudasaf), was written in Baghdad, from where it entered into Middle Eastern Christian circles before appearing in European versions. John Rupert Martin mentions it in *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 151. Other sources state that the first Christianized adaptation of a Greek legend was that by John of Damascus; see John Damascene, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, Loeb Classical Library 34, Introduction by David M. Lang, F.C. Conybeare contests this and avers that the Georgian epic *Balavariani* that dates to the tenth century was translated into Greek and adapted to Christianity in the eleventh century by the Georgian monk Euthymius of Athos. He did this work some time before his accidental death in 1028 during a visit to Constantinople. In the capital of the Byzantine Empire the Greek adaptation of the text was translated into Latin in 1048 and soon became well known in Western Europe as the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat*; see Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare, *The Barlaam and Josaphat Legend in the Ancient Georgian and Armenian Literatures*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007. The story of Barlaam and Josaphat was popular in the Middle Ages, when appeared in works like the *Golden Legend*.

¹⁴ John Rupert Martin mentions it in *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954 (book based on his doctoral dissertation).

The subject of the ladder itself, known from the Old Testament (when appeared in Jacob's dream, cf. Gen. 28. 13¹⁵) migrated from there to the New Covenant – we remember that in Matthew 4. 11 is written: “suddenly the angels came and waited on him [Christ]”, and that certainly sends our mind to the celestial ladder. As we have seen, John Chrysostom refers to this topic in the fourth century. The Saviour is ‘the Ladder’ because He is ‘The Way’ to Heaven and this is what the motif signifies. In the same manner in which the ascending of some stairs lead to the Holy of Holies within the Old Testament, people's spiritual steps lead them/us to God according to the New Scripture.

But what and who else has been seen as a ladder to Heaven in a Christian context, additionally to Christ?

2. The Cross which Jesus climbed to obtain grace from God on our behalf was thought as such, among others by St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395) in the fifth Homily within the series on ‘The Songs of Songs’ (PG. 44, 876B);¹⁶ it was seen thus also by Jacob of Sarug (451-521), as testified by his homilies (*Homiliae selectae*, in particular 521).¹⁷

¹⁵ The Bible, Genesis 28. 13, “Jacob dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “In Cantica Cantorum. Homilia V”, J. P. Migne (ed.), *Cursus Completus Patrologia Graecae*, Imprimerie Catholique, vol. 44 [PG 44], Paris, 1863, “Videmus ergo tanquam in scalarum ascensu per virtutis ascensiones spousam a Verbo deduci. Immitti primo Verbum radium per fenestras propheticas, aut cancellos perceptorum legis, et cum advocate ut appropinquet luci, et pulchra fiat instar columbae formata in luce.”/ “We see, then, as it were in the power of the Word of the Bridegroom to ascend through a ladder in the House of God. And then, according to the sayings of the prophets, He leans through the windows of that house, which doubtless were open to admit the light and to bring it inside. [While] leaning and looking through those windows, then, the Word of God calls on the soul to rise and come to him”; my translation.

¹⁷ Jacob of Serug, *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug/Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, edited by Paul Bedjan, with additional material by Sebastian P. Brock, and biography of Paul Bedjan by Heleen Murre-van den Berg]; Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006.



Fig. 5. The Icon of the Crucifixion. Tempera and gold on wood, 28.2x21.6 cm, Late Comnenian art, Constantinople; today in St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 274, Fig. 164 in the respective book, a description and interpretation of it on pp. 276-277.

3. The Mother of God is a ladder because the Son of God came down through Her to humans in order to save them. Francesca Dell'Acqua has written a piece entitled "Mary as 'scala caelestis' in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Italy" that will come out as a chapter in a book published by Cambridge University Press.¹⁸

4. Martyrdom is a well-known path to Paradise – as was suggested at the beginning of the paper. On this topic, further to what has already been mentioned, in the same 'Homily on the Holy Marys', St. John Chrysostom exhort further his listeneres thus: "When you hear 'iron ladder' remember the envisioned ladder that patriarch Jacob saw stretching from earth into heaven (cf. Gen. 28.13). By means of that one angels descended, **by means of this one martyrs ascended**. Each [of these ladders] the Lord propped up. The saints couldn't have endured the pain, if they hadn't been **fastened to it**. But while by means of that [ladder] angels ascend and descend, it's obvious to anyone that by means of this [ladder] martyrs too ascend."¹⁹ Because the historical forms of martyrdom peculiar to the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages are not

¹⁸ Francesca Dell'Acqua, "Mary as 'scala caelestis' in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Italy", in: T. Arentzen and M.B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

¹⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *The Cult of the Saints*, Selected homilies and letters introduced, translated, and annotated by Wendy Mayer with Bronwen Neil, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006, p. 222; emphases added.

longer in practice, the spiritual tribulations/trials of the believers are considered one of its new form.

5. The pillars on which some Desert Fathers dwelt can be understood as being ladders towards heaven. The most known examples of saints who carry out an important part of their lives in this manner are Simeon Stylite the Elder (c. 390?–459) and Simeon Stylite the Younger (the latter is also known as ‘St. Simeon of the Admirable Mountain’; 521–592). Simeon the Elder had to descend from his column in obedience to the monastic elders. It was a point in his life when, due to wounds on his leg, he was forced to stand atop his column on one leg only.²⁰ Simeon Stylite the Elder had various followers, like Daniel (c. 409-493), who is especially known because he expressed opinions against Monophysitism in the dispute between Emperor Basiliscus (a Monophysite) and Acacius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. I elaborate here to some extent on his life because he is a good example of what was achievable spiritually via a physical ladder. Daniel had his pillar four miles north of Constantinople and famously came temporarily down from it to go inside the capital in order to express his stand against the theological views of the imperial Ruler of Byzantium. Daniel was born in Maratha, a village in upper Mesopotamia near Samosata, present-day Iraq. He entered a monastery at the age of 12 and lived there until he was thirty-eight. During a journey he made with his abbot to Antioch, he passed by the city of Telanissos (today Deir Semaan) and received the benediction and encouragement of St. Simeon the Older. Then he visited holy places, stayed in various convents, and retired in 451 A.D. into the ruins of a pagan temple.

²⁰ Palladius of Galatia, Bishop of Helenopolis (approx. 430), *The Lausiatic History of Palladius*, edited and translated by W. K. Lowther Clarke, London: The Macmillan Company, 1918, pp. 154-155. See also Palladius, Bishop of Aspsuna, *The Lausiatic history of Palladius: a critical discussion together with notes on early Egyptian monachism*, edited by Cuthbert Butler, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2 vols. in 1, 1967; and Tim Vivian and Rowan A. Greer (eds., trans.), *Four desert fathers: Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt, and Macarius of Alexandria: Coptic texts relating to the Lausiatic history of Palladius*, Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004.

The owner of the land where he placed his pillars had not been consulted, hence he appealed to the Byzantine emperor and patriarch Gennadius of Constantinople to have the column removed. The Patriarch agreed to do so, but was deterred in his attempt by unknown obstacle, and that made him to consecrate Daniel as a priest. When the ritual was over, the patriarch climbed the ladder himself and administered the Eucharist to Daniel. Gennadius then received the Eucharist from Daniel in turn. People from Constantinople came to see the saint and touch his pillar in order to be healed, and that happened. The feet of the saint were reportedly covered with sores and the winds sometimes blew away his clothing;²¹ nevertheless he lived on the pillar for 33 years, and was visited by both Emperor Leo I the Thracian accompanied by King Gubazes I of Lazica, and Zeno the Isaurian.²² St. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390) also mention a Stylite in one of his poems dedicated ‘to others’ (*Patrologia Graeca* 37, 1457A),²³ and a later similar holy man, Sergius/Sargis the Stylite of Gusit (sometime between 700-800), is known.²⁴

²¹ *Vita S. Daniel*, edited by (ap.) Surium, ad diem ii. decemb. cap. xli., xlii., xliii.

²² *Vita S. Daniel*, ad diem ii. decemb. cap. xli., xlii., xliii; James Craigie Robertson, *Christian History/History of the Christian Church* ii. 41-3, London: J. Murray, 1858, 274; *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram illustrantia*, edited by Augustin Theiner, Romae: Typ.Vaticanis, 1874; Caesar Cardinal Baronius, *Annales ecclesiastici a Christo nato ad annum 1198*/Ecclesiastical annals from Christ’s nativity to 1198, continued/edited by Augustin Theiner, vol. VIII, ad. An. 460, &20; 464, & 2; 465, &3, 12, 13; 476, &48, 50, 51, 53; 489, &4. See also Elizabeth Dawes (trans.) and Norman H. Baynes (‘Introduction’ and notes), *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies of St. Daniel the Stylite, St. Theodore of Sykeon and St. John the Almsgiver*, London: B. Blackwell, 1948, p. 79, where there is particular prayer Daniel used to say.

²³ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in “Poemata quae spectant ad alios”/Poems dedicated to others, *Patrologia Graeca* 37, 1457A). Here is a significant quotation describing this man: “Qui eum undique circumstantes amplectebantur;/ sed fortiter Christo inhaerebat magno regi/Mentem suam procul a mortalibus attollens;/Donec eo animam afflante novam sedem circumstruxerunt, cum jam officiosam menum non sentiret”. (He was surrounded and embraced by people/on all sides/But he kept his mortal mind undisturbed/and also his soul in the realm above); my translation.

²⁴ Sergius/Sargis the Stylite, who had his column in Hıms, near Gusit (a town close to Antioch), is known from a Christian anti-Jewish work, written sometime between 730 and 770, and which is attributed to him. The text is based on several sources, among them a collection of testimonia; it has a section on images. A manuscript within the British Museum, BM Add. 17199, contains the original Syriac text. In literature this writing has circulated as the “Disputation of Sergius the Stylite”. See Allison Peter Hayman Hayman “The Disputation of Sergius the Stylite against a Jew”, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO), 338-339, Leuven: Peeters, 1973; also A. P. Hayman, “The Biblical text in the Disputation of Sergius the Stylite against a Jew”, in B. ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *The Peshitta, its use in Literature and Liturgy*, 2006, 77-86, and Sebastian P. Brock, “Sargis the

We continue now our discussion about symbolism in the framework offered by the title of the paper.

6. A mountain can be considered a ladder. The physical movements that are required to climb it are easily associated with the spiritual ascension. That is even more so in the case of holy mountains; those who have seen Mounts Athos and Sinai or Meteora can testify that such an understanding comes to mind with no effort.²⁵ Veronica della Dora emphasizes that “Other mountain iconographies, besides that of Sinai, are superimposed on Athos. Three crosses top the eastern ridge of the peninsula, transforming the Aegean mountain-peninsula into a Golgotha.”²⁶ She also reproduces in her book *Imagining Mount Athos* the version of the Ladder of Saint John Climacus painted by Emmanuēl Tzanē-Bounialēs in 1663.²⁷

7. Byzantine and post-Byzantine, i.e. the Orthodox Christian, images (perhaps also other religious representations?) can be perceived as having the role of ladders inclining towards heaven. Della Dora gives an example from this point of view. She indicates that the two slopes of Mount Athos depicted in the *exonarthex* of Polovraci Monastery, Wallachia (1702) through which people have been entering the church

Stylite”, in Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz and Lucas Van Rompay (eds.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, Gorgias Press, NJ: Piscataway, 2011; this publication has also an electronic edition, thus: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Sargis-the-Stylite>.
²⁵ Veronica della Dora, for instance, has written about it in her book *Imagining Mount Athos. Visions of a Holy Place from Homer to World War II*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Especially chapter 3, “Iconic Athos”, pp. 84-124, is significant from the point of view of describing the ascending spiritual journey of a person. See also Eleonora Contescu, “L’image du Mont-Athos dans l’exonarthex de Polovraci”, *Balkan Studies* 14, no. 2, 1973, p. 311 [pp. 308-312]. See Iōannēs Komnēnós, *Proskynētáron of the Holy Mountain of Athos, written and printed under the most serene rule of the most pious, illuminated and highest autocrat and ruler of all Hungro-Wallachia sir John Constantine Basarab Voievod; dedicated to his eminence sir Theodosios, Metropolitan of Hungro-Wallachia, with the zeal and expenditure of the most eminent doctor sir John Komnēnós, in order to give peace to the pious [Orthodox Christians] for the salvation of their souls. Printed in the monastery of Snagov by hieromonk Anthimios from Iberia, 1701*. This is how Della Dora translated the title in her book *Imagining Mount Athos*, p. 254. Today the document is in the British Library [868.d.G. 7300], copyright British Library Board.

²⁶ Della Dora, *Imagining Mount Athos*, p. 99.

²⁷ Della Dora, *Imagining Mount Athos*. The image of the Ladder by Tzanē-Bounialēs (1663) is today in the Museum of the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and post- Byzantine Studies, Venice. It is reproduced in Della Dora’s book on p. 98, fig. 27 and commented on p. 99.

since they were painted have become “a threshold between sacred and secular, heavenly and terrestrial, referent and symbol. Above all [it, i.e. this scene] remained a doorstep to salvation for, as Saint Augustine stated, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*” The scene yields itself as an aid for the pious clergy and laymen; it does so in the same manner the “heavenly Ladder whereby God came down” does; it constitutes a “bridge leading *those* of earth to Heaven”, and suggests the “Gate of Salvation” with which the Mother of God is identified in the “Hymn Akathistos” (this hymn in the first within the *Proskynētáron of the Holy Mountain of Athos* by Iōannēs Komnēnós,²⁸ which was written and printed during Constantine Brancoveanu’s rule; 1654 –1714).²⁹

One can notice what a diverse and surprising array of forms the symbolism of the Ladder has taken in time; chiefly it is the means through which one can access the Kingdom of God.

²⁸ Iōannēs Komnēnós, *Proskynētáron of the Holy Mountain of Athos, written and printed under the most serene rule of the most pious, illuminated and highest autocrat and ruler of all Hungro-Wallachia sir John Constantine Basarab Voievod; dedicated to his eminence sir Theodosios, Metropolitan of Hungro-Wallachia, with the zeal and expenditure of the most eminent doctor sir John Komnēnós, in order to give peace to the pious [Orthodox Christians] for the salvation of their souls. Printed in the monastery of Snagov by hieromonk Anthimios from Iberia, 1701.* This is the title given by Della Dora in her book *Imagining Mount Athos*, p. 254. Today the document is in the British Library [868.d.G. 7300], copyright British Library Board.

²⁹ Della Dora, for instance, has written about it in *Imagining Mount Athos*, pp. 101-102. The usual scene in the *exonarthex* of a painted post-Byzantine (Orthodox) church is The Last Judgment.

ii. The circulation of the text of *Scala paradisi*

Nancy P. Ševčenko affirms that “some of the surviving manuscripts of the *Heavenly Ladder* date back almost to the time of John himself”,³⁰ but she does not mention what those codices are. Before attending the workshop ‘LECTIO’ I knew that the earliest surviving manuscript of the *Heavenly Ladder* were supposed to be a Syriac translation from 817 – MS. London, B L. Add. 14593³¹– and a Greek manuscript that dates to the first half of the tenth century; the latter is known as Sinai gr. 417 (the ladder is on fols. 13v³² and John’s portrait on fol. 13r³³).³⁴ An almost identical copy of Sinai gr. 417 exists as MS. Patmos 121. This was written in the early eleventh century; within it the ladder is on fol. 3v³⁵). During the event in Leuven I found out that, in fact, hundreds of manuscripts exist; some of them were written in very early times. Given this fact it is difficult now to assess which manuscript is the oldest. In any case, within the *Life of Euthymios the Younger* compiled in the ninth century there is a reference to “John of the Ladder” as being a man who wrote the Christian virtues on a ‘tablet’ (sometimes the treatise *Scala paradisi* was entitled the *Spiritual Tablets*).³⁶ The Latin version was completed in the thirteenth century, and was printed in Venice in 1518, preceding the Greek edition by one hundred years.

³⁰ Nancy P. Ševčenko, “Monastic Challenges: Some Illustrated Manuscripts of the Heavenly Ladder”, in Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Byzantine Art: Recent Studies*, Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009, p. 40 [pp. 39-62]; she enumerates sources concerning John’s treatise about the Ladder, and I have borrowed a few titles from there, especially from pp. 39, 41.

³¹ Sebastian Brock, *Catalogue of Syriac Fragments (New Finds) in the Library of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Mount Sinai, Athens: Saint Catherine’s Monastery, 1995, xlvi, n. 13.

³² N. P. Ševčenko discusses about it in “Monastic Challenges”, p. 42; she reproduces the folio representing the Heavenly Ladder on p. 43, fig. 1.

³³ Ševčenko reproduces the folio with John’s portrait on p. 46, fig. 3.

³⁴ Kurt Weitzmann and George Galavaris, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Illuminated Greek Manuscripts, Vol. 1: From the Ninth to the Twelfth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 28-31 (#9); pl. 1b; figs. 32-44; 39-40 (#15), figs. 83-84.

³⁵ Ševčenko discusses about it in “Monastic Challenges” on p. 44; she reproduces the folio that represents the Ladder in Patmos. Ms. Gr. 121 on p. 45, fig. 2. According to Ševčenko this codice was unknown to Martin, Weitzmann, and Galavaris; Ševčenko “Monastic Challenges”, p. 44.

³⁶ Judith Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, in Liz James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwells, 2010, p. 283 [pp. 276-288].

Also, as Waring indicates, the text of the 'Ladder...' is mentioned in an inventory written in Georgian as early as 1083 within the monastery of Theotokos *tes Petritzonitisses* in Bulgaria.³⁷ (This monastic complex was the foundation of the Byzantine army commander Gregory Pakourianos³⁸). Among the few manuscripts of John's text that have survived from the eleventh century one is Vatican gr. 394. Kathleen Corrigan describes it while focusing on the tasks its scribe, Constantine, had to fulfill.³⁹ There is another codice about the Ladder – on parchment – from the same century in London (British Library. Add. 39610).⁴⁰ Before attending 'LECTIO' I was aware of the existence of 15 manuscripts within St. Catherine Monastery; according to Waring these are "from the twelfth century and earlier";⁴¹ unfortunately she does not mention how early they are, but I am aware that a particular codice there, MS. Sinai gr. 418, dates to the early twelfth century. Now, thanks to the contribution of Fr. Justin Sinaitus present at this workshop, we know that there is a list of all manuscripts of the Ladder in St. Catherine, and also of their dates. From the fourteenth century MSS Athos Xenophontos and Athens, B.N. 2466 of 1342 have been discovered.⁴² N. Ševčenko was aware that over seven hundred Byzantine manuscripts that contain this text exist: only Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos hosts at least twenty-five of

³⁷ J. Waring, "Byzantine Book Culture", p. 283.

³⁸ Details about Gregory Pakourianos in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents (BMFD)*, vol. 2 (out of 5), 507-563.

³⁹ Kathleen Corrigan, "Constantine's Problems: The Making of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus, Vat. gr. 394," *Word & Image* 12 (1996): 61-93. On this manuscript see also S. Kotzampasse, *Βυζαντινὰ χειρόγραφα ἀπὸ τὰ μοναστήρια τῆς Μικρᾶς Ἀσίας*, Athens, 2004, pp. 85-88 (#24); pl. 16; Francesco D'Aiuto, "Su alcuni copisti di codici miniati mediobizantini," *Byzantion* 67 (1997): 5-59, esp. 25-34 (D'Aiuto associates Constantine, the scribe of Vatican gr. 394, with the scribe of Athos Dionysiou 61 and Ivion 463). On its concluding poem (fol. 214r), see Wolfram Hörandner, "Visuelle Poesie in Byzanz", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 40 (1990): 1-42, esp. 22; fig. 6; see his comment about the concluding poem from Vat. gr. 394, fol. 214r.

⁴⁰ Waring, "Byzantine Book Culture", p. 284, fig. 21.2; on this page there is a reproduction in black and white of fol. 206r that shows the diagram of the ladder in the manuscript British Library. Ad. 39610.

⁴¹ Waring, "Byzantine Book Culture", p. 283.

⁴² Ševčenko "Monastic Challenges", footnote 40 on p. 62.

them.⁴³ In the inventory of St. John the the Evangelist in Patmos six copies are recorded (four on paper and two on parchment); three eleventh century complete manuscripts have survived there. As I mentioned above, the information gathered in Leuven shows that the manuscripts about the Ladder of Divine Ascent are much more numerous than we were aware of before this scholarly meeting.

From the beginning of the ninth century translations from the Greek were carried out into Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Russian,⁴⁴ and later, in Romanian (As I indicated in “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder”, a copy of it was made in 1773 in Horezu Monastery⁴⁵). Before the workshop in Leuven I presumed that nowadays John’s treatise also has editions in other languages, and indeed during the event we found out how many manuscripts exist in Slavonic languages. According to Waring, the medium on which books were written in Late Antiquity indicates the audience in the mind of the authors, patrons, and scribes: chiefly parchment was used for large readership and paper for private devotion.⁴⁶ She mentions that on Patmos only the copies of the Climacus’s book written on parchment have survived in their entirety.

Usually the treatise *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is accompanied by other texts (CPG 7850-53).⁴⁷ They include the following or only some of these: the letters exchanged by John Climacus with John of Raithou,⁴⁸ who encourages the former to write this book; Climacus’s homily *To the Shepherd* addressed to the same

⁴³ Ševčenko “Monastic Challenges”, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, p. 283.

⁴⁵ Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder”, *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*, Liz James and Antony Eastmond (eds.), Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, p. 146.

⁴⁶ Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, in Liz James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 286 [pp. 276-288].

⁴⁷ Maurice Geerard (ed.), [*Clavis patrum graecorum: qua optima quaeque scriptorum patrum graecorum recensione a primaevis saeculis usque ad octavum commode recluduntur* (CPG)], ed. Maurice Geerard, vol. 5?? Of 1-5 vols., Turnhout: Brepols, 1974-2003.

⁴⁸ Waring indicates that Raithou is the modern Tor, in the gulf of Suez; J. Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, p. 283.

hegumenos from Raithou⁴⁹ (about what it meant to hold such a position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy); a concise *Life of Climacus* written by Daniel of Raithou (a near contemporary of John), and a prologue written by an anonymous author.⁵⁰

iv. The iconography of the ladder (and its symbolism)??

Not all the extant copies of the treatise *The Heavenly Ladder* are illustrated, but some of them are richly so; John Rupert Martin mentions those and reproduces some of the illustrations, a few of which I am showing here. The iconography of this motif is not as rich as that referring to Christ, His Mother, and the saints,⁵¹ but is still impressive (and still developing, i.e. contemporary to us iconographers still paint this iconographic motif and they innovate; one of these novelties is to have nuns represented climbing the ladder as I have seen in a Syriac icon). According to Ševčenko, the first **decorated** manuscript of the ladder appeared in the tenth century.⁵² The visual renderings of the motif, schematic in the beginning (some of the representations only consisted in simple drawing at the end of the text of the treatise of a vertical ladder with the vices and virtues written on them) were dissiminated via the illuminated manuscripts of Climacus's book, which was copied "almost immediately".⁵³ The depiction of monks climbing up the rungs of the ladder is an innovation of the eleventh century; from that period it exists in Ms. Paris, B. N.

⁴⁹ John Climacus, *The Heavenly Ladder with the To the Shepherd*, ed. and trans. by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore. London: Faber & Faber, 1959, rev. ed. Boston, 1979, repr. 1991.

⁵⁰ Waring, "Byzantine Book Culture", p. 283.

⁵¹ J. R. Martin, in *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, also makes this remark and, in addition to what I have mentioned, he refers to the icons of the Nativity of Christ, of his Baptism and Crucifixion, and also to that of the Pentecost. Indeed these are the most frequently depicted icons in Christianity. Even though the Ladder was not depicted as often as other iconographical themes referred to within the body of the chapter, in the twenty-first century an interest has developed for the representation of this motif.

⁵² Ševčenko "Monastic Challenges", p. 40.

⁵³ Waring, "Byzantine Book Culture", p. 283.

Coislin gr. 263 (dated 1059),⁵⁴ and in a miniature at Princeton University, Garrett 16, which dates from 1081; later examples will be further presented.⁵⁵ Martin has recorded some of those in his book *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*.⁵⁶ I further mention a few of those and others: in London (British Library. Add. 39610); Vatopedi, Athos. Cod. 368, [Fig. 6],⁵⁷ another one on Mount Athos in Vatopedi Monastery, Cod. 376; (Fig. 7); the Vienna Manuscript, Nationalbibl., Cod. Theolog. Gr. 207 (Fig. 8); Paris. Cod. Coislin 88; (Fig. 9); one at the Vatican, Gr. 394 (Fig. 10); one in Sinai, cod. 423 (Fig. 11), one in Washington (Freer Gallery of Art. De Ricci 10. Fol. 2); one in Moscow (Hist. Mus. Cod. Gr. 146. Fol. 278vr), one in Milan (Bibl. Ambros. Cod. G 20 sup. Fol. 212v: Table of Contents); and one in Paris. Cod. Coislin 262; fol. 1r: Title Page.



21. ATHOS, VATOPEDI. Cod. 368. Fol. 178^v:
The Heavenly Ladder

Fig. 6. The Heavenly Ladder. Athos. Vatopedi. Cod. 368. Fol. 178v; John Rupert Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, p. VI, fig. 21 in the respective book.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly*, pp. 217-218, figs. 12, 14.

⁵⁵ Ševčenko "Monastic Challenges", pp. 39-40. S. Kotzabassi and N. P. Ševčenko, with the collaboration of D. Skemer, *Greek Manuscripts at Princeton, Sixth to Nineteenth Century: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Princeton, 2009), forthcoming.

⁵⁶ Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, pp. 11, 13-17; figs. 31, 66 and the other 33 recorded in his book.

⁵⁷ Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*; fig. 21 in that book.



Fig. 7. The Heavenly Ladder. Athos. Vatopedi. Cod. 376. Fol. 421 v. Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. V, fig. 17 in the respective book.

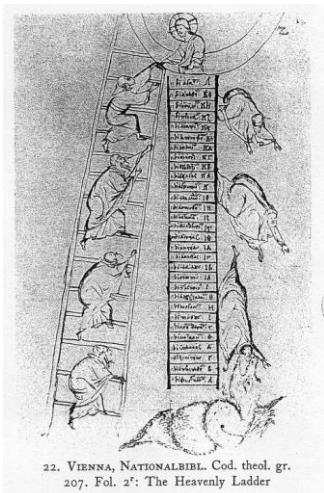


Fig. 8. The Heavly Ladder. Vienna, Nationalbibl., Cod. Theolog. Gr. 207, fol. 2r, Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. VII, fig. 22 in the respective book.



Fig. 9. Heavenly Ladder. Paris. Bibli. Nat. Cod. Coislin 88. Fol. 12v: Table of Contents, J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. VI, Fig. 19 in the respective book.

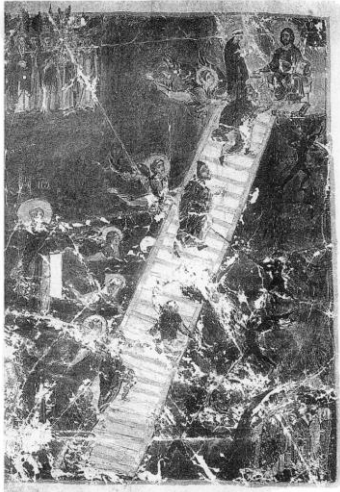


Fig. 10. The Heavenly Ladder. Vatican. Cod. Gr. 394. Fol. F v; Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. XVI, fig. 67 there.



23. SINAI Cod. gr. 423. Fol. 10^v:
The Heavenly Ladder

Fig. 11. The Heavenly Ladder, Sinai Cod. Gr. 423, fol. 10v; John Rupert Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, p. VII, fig. 23 there; it dates to 1059.

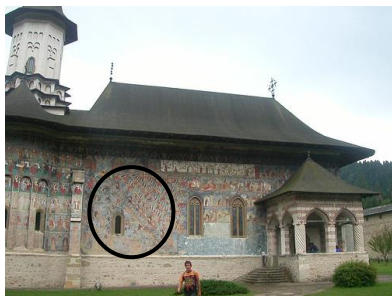
From manuscripts the motif of the ladder migrated to icons and frescoes.

Concerning icons, the very known one representing it has survived from the twelfth century; it was made in Constantinople or Sinai, fig. 12.



Fig. 12. Icon of the Heavenly Ladder of St John Klimakos (Cat. 323) Constantinople or Sinai, late twelfth century. Egg tempera and gold leaf on wood with cloth and gesso, 41.1x29.1 cm. The Holy Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai. Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki (eds.), *Byzantium 330-1453*, The catalogue of the exhibition *Byzantium 330-1453*, 25 Oct 2008 – 22 March 2009, Royal Academy of Arts with the collaboration of Benaki Museum in Athens, London, 2008, p.375, description p. 462.

With regard to frescoes, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we find the ladder in the frescoes which decorate the walls of churches, as for instance of that from Sucevița monastic complex (Figs. 13) Râșca Monasteries (Fig. 14), Pângărați Monastery in Moldova, Romania, still visible today (Fig. 15), and also in Hilandar (Fig. 16)⁵⁸ and Docheiarious Monasteries (Fig. 17), on Mount Athos.



Figs. 13 a, b). The fresco of the Heavenly Ladder; the church of the Resurrection, Sucevița Monastery; (UNESCO monument); fresco painting from 1595-1596 by Ioan and Sophronius from Suceava. My photographs.

⁵⁸ I am grateful for this photograph to Fr Romilo, who was one of the librarians in Hilandar and studied in Oxford for a while.



Fig. 14. The Heavenly Ladder, St. Nicholas Church, Râșca Monastery, Suceava county, south wall; 552-1554. The murals were started during the reign of the second son of Petru Rareș, Ștefan (1551-1552); my photograph, July 2010.⁵⁹ Vasile Drăguț and Petre Lupan, *Pictura murală din Moldova: secolul XV-XVI*, Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House; the Ladder at Râșca is represented in figs. 200 and 203. A detail of this image in Râșca has been published in the chapter Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, “The Last Wonderful thing. The icon of the Heavenly Ladder”, *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*, Liz James and Antony Eastmond (eds.), Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, p. 147, fig. 10. 3, but here we have the contexts in which the image is presented.



Fig. 15. The Ladder of Virtues. St. Dimitrios Church within Pângărați Monastery; Neamț County, Romania; 1560; personal photo, July 2015.

⁵⁹ Vasile Drăguț and Petre Lupan, *Pictura murală din Moldova: secolul XV-XVI*, Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House; the Ladder at Râșca is represented in figs. 200 and 203.



Fig. 16. The Heavenly Ladder. St Church of Michael and Gabriel within Docheiariou Monastery, Stylianos G. Papadopoulos (ed.), *Parousia: I.M. Docheiariou*, Aghios Oros, IMD, 2001, Fig. 13, p. 304 in the respective book.⁶⁰ Perhaps the Ladder was painted by the Cretan painter Tzortzis in c. 1546/7 (He painted the frescos within the katholikon, i.e. the main church). The monastery was founded in the tenth century and it is not know for certain when each layer of painting was added.

The frescoes in Râșca and Hilandar are placed next to the window. Is the window a suggestion to a ladder from Earth to the Heaven? Or is the Church itself seen as the ladder guiding to Salvation? I think that this is the case.



Fig. 17. The Heavenly Ladder. Fresco in the church 'The Dedication of the Mother of God', Hilandar Monastery.

The Ladder fresco is also to be found at Dobrovăț, Cetățuia (in Iași), St. Elias [Sfântul Ilie] (in Suceava), both in Moldova, but also in Wallachia, for example on the walls of the church in Hurezu Monastery where it was painted between 1692 and 1702 by Constantinos, Ioan and their (Brâncovan) school.

Also John's portrait appears in manuscripts as early as the ninth century, as for instance in Pseudo-John of Damascus's *Sacra Parallela*, Ms. Paris gr. 923. This texts

⁶⁰ Thanks to Prof. Veronica Della Dora from King's College, London, for indicating this source to me.

was written either in Palestine or Italy and the depiction of Climacus with John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor is in a medallion (fol 146r).⁶¹ As mentioned above, he is also represented in the tenth manuscript Sinai gr. 417 (on fol. 13r⁶²). On a processional cross (the ‘Cleveland cross’ that has only survived in part) John is rendered on its right-hand arm with Anastasios of Sinai.⁶³

As suggested throughout the paper, the circulation of images representing the ladder of spiritual ascent took place simultaneously with the text of the *Ladder* treatise being copied in the scriptoria of these and other monasteries. The closest to a critical edition is the Greek reprint of the seventeenth century *editio princeps* published in Paris by the Jesuit scholar Matthaeus Raderus in 1633, when he consulted eight manuscripts.⁶⁴ Since so many other exists, to wish a modern critical edition is very justified indeed.

⁶¹ Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, p. 283.

⁶² Ševčenko, “Monastic Challenges”; the reproduction of the folio is on p. 46, fig. 3.

⁶³ Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, p. 284.

⁶⁴ Waring, “Byzantine Book Culture”, p. 285.

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