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Spiritual ascent in a Sinaite monastery : the icon of the ladder

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Spiritual Ascent in a Sinaite Monastery: The Icon of the Ladder

Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, Oxford

I. Description and dating of the icon of the Heavenly Ladder

“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.”
(Genesis 28: 12).

This is what is happening in this icon of *The Heavenly or Celestial Ladder*, the last ‘wonderful thing’ which a visitor to the ‘Byzantium’ exhibition at the Royal Academy saw before leaving the place. Except that on the Sinai ladder there are not only angels depicted, but also their ‘counters’ – the devil figures (Fig. 1).

In the icon from Sinai a ladder with 30 rungs crosses the composition diagonally and unites earth with heaven. On a golden and luminous background the dark silhouettes of the monks caught in their struggle, helped by the chants of two choirs, capture the viewer’s eye. The mouth of Hell is at the bottom of the ladder and one of the monks is already half inside it. Other monks at the bottom right are attending the scene and are raising their arms in prayer. Some angels at the upper left are also part of the narrative, as they have a vital role to play in people’s ascension to Heaven.

As shown by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki in the catalogue of the exhibition, “Their haloes resemble spinning wheels, as they are polished to reflect light. This technique of burnishing is a characteristic of several icons produced at Sinai”¹ The authors continue,

¹ *Byzantium. 330–1453*, ed. R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki, The catalogue of the exhibition *Byzantium. 330–1453*, 25 October 2008–22 March 2009, Royal Academy of Arts with the collaboration of the Benaki Museum in Athens, London, 2008, p. 462.

emphasizing further the similarity between the icon under discussion and another particular icon, also from St Catherine: “The back of the icon [of Heavenly Ladder; Fig. 3] shows crosses within medallions, a decoration found in other twelfth-century icons from Sinai, with which this icon has been connected in style, such as the icon of the Annunciation”² (Fig. 4). In addition to this example, the icon of the Crucifixion (Fig. 5) and the icon with the Miracle at Chonai (Fig. 6), both from the Monastery of St Catherine, can be used to illustrate the similarity of the technique of burnishing, and of the icons themselves. In this latter case, however, the cross on the back is not identical to those of the back of the previous two icons, and the medallions are absent (The back of the icon of the Crucifixion has not been published).

This similarity, especially with the icon of the Annunciation, is the major factor in the latest dating of the Ladder icon. Other attempts placed it to a somewhat earlier period. Thus, Weitzmann says: “One cannot avoid the impression that the icon of the Scala Paradisi, the Ladder to Heaven, must have been copied directly from the title-page miniature in one of the many manuscripts of the treatise on that subject by John Climacus. The monks clamber zealously up the thirty rungs of the ladder, corresponding to the thirty virtues treated by John in an equal number of chapters. Their ascent is impeded by the temptations of vices, personified by tiny devils who try to cause the stumbling monks to fall. Only one has virtually succeeded in reaching the goal of Heaven; this is John Climacus himself,

the author of the treatise and the abbot of the monastery on Mount Sinai. Directly behind him follows a certain Archbishop Anthony, who most likely was another abbot of Sinai, presumably at the period when the icon was made, which means sometime during the eleventh to twelfth centuries.”³

Weitzmann goes further, and in the process of describing the icon, he brings also elements to justify why



Fig. 1. Icon of the Heavenly Ladder of St John Climacus Constantinople or Sinai, late twelfth century, Egg tempera and gold leaf on wood, primed with cloth and gesso, 41.1 x 29.1 cm. The Holy Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai; ed. Cormack and Vassilaki, *Byzantium. 330–1453*. Cat. 323, p. 375, description p. 462 in the catalogue of the exhibition *Byzantium*

² *Byzantium 330–1453...*, p. 462.

³ K. Weitzmann, „I. Sinai Peninsula. Icon Painting from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century”, in: K. Weitzmann, M. Chatzidakis, K. Miatev, S. Radojčić, *Icons from South Eastern Europe and Sinai*, Thames and Huston, London, 1968; p. XIII. In describing this icon the authors use J. R. Martin’s study *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1954, which we will also use further in the paper.

he attributed to it such a date: “The quality of this icon as a work of art is revealed in the animated rhythm of the climbing monks, in the mixture of typified and individual characterization in the heads, and, not least, in the subtle colour range of the monks’ garments. This range is rich in nuances and at the same time subdued, in contrast to the gay light colours of the angels’ robes. The broad expanse of gold background, against which the devils stand out sharply in silhouette, is itself a daring feat.”⁴

It seems a natural psychological tendency for people to try to posit chronologically everything around them, “[a]lthough the value of finding a chronology for icons ought to be a subject of controversy and debate”, as Cormack shows⁵. As he states, “While it was clearly an intention to make icons look ‘timeless’ and while this was indeed achieved, this very success may make the context of production necessary to find.” It is important to know, says Cormack, “How was timelessness achieved at different times”.⁶

As regarding the place where the icon of the Heavenly Ladder might have been painted, Weitzmann thinks that: “The subject matter of the icon suggests that it may have been made, not at, but for Mount Sinai; the icons that we can be fairly certain were executed there are rougher in style. Thus it seems likely that the icon was made as a gift for the Sinai monastery, and we must again assume that Constantinople was the most likely place of origin.”⁷

Other specialists dated this icon by associating it with other icons of the period. This is what Doula Mouriki does. She also considers that the icon which is the topic of this paper was painted at the same time with the icon of Annunciation, and



Fig. 2. St Catherine Monastery, Sinai, Photo by Mirela Şova

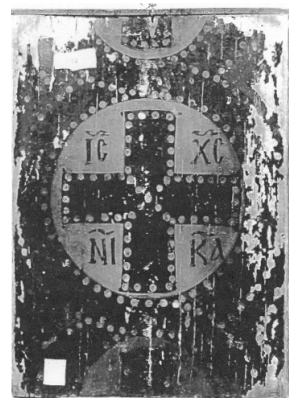


Fig. 3. The back of the icon of Heavenly Ladder from Sinai. Thelma K. Thomas, “Christianity in the Islamic East”, in Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium: Arts and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A. D. 843–1261*, Exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 11–July 6, 1997, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997, Fig. 247, p. 376 in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Glory of Byzantium*

⁴ Weitzmann, “I. Sinai Peninsula. Icon Painting from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century”..., pp. XIII–XIV.

⁵ R. Cormack, *Painting the Soul. Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds*, Reaktion Books, London, 1997, p. 21.

⁶ Cormack, *Painting the Soul*, p. 21.

⁷ Weitzmann, „Icon Painting from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century”, p. XIV.



Fig. 4. Annunciation icon. Front and Back. St Catherine Monastery, Late 12th century. 61 x 42.2 cm, Tempera on wood,
 Thelma K. Thomas, “Christianity in the Islamic East”, in Evans and Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium*. Fig. 246, p. 375 in the catalogue; description on pp. 375–376.
 In the book by Konstantinos A. Manafis (ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Ekdotike Athenon, Athens, 1990, Fig. 29, p. 160, description on p. 107

with other two icons from St Catherine on Sinai peninsula. She also opts for a Constantinopolitan hand in the painting of the Celestial Ladder. This is what Mouriki states: “The Sinai icon of the Annunciation has been generally acknowledged as a masterpiece of Late Comnenian art, despite the alteration in colour caused by excessive use of varnish in a much later period, which resulted in the loss of the brilliance of colours and the delicate gradation of tones. A rare iconographic element is the Child, rendered in grisaille within a transparent mandorla at the breast of the Virgin, according to the scheme of prolepsis, since the Annunciation prepared the way for the Incarnation. The waterscape with its impressive variety of animal life remains a striking peculiarity of the iconography of the scene. Nevertheless, the hint of water appears from the 12th century onwards in a few examples which depict a fountain. The inclusion of the stream in the Sinai icon has been attributed mainly to the influence of hymnography, which addresses the Virgin as the ‘Source of Life’, but also to rhetorical texts that praise the coming of Spring, which coincides with the date of the feast of the Annunciation (March 25). The icon must have been painted by a Constantinopolitan artist at the Monastery, as is suggested by the technical handling of the gold and by the intricate painted design on the reverse, also found on the icon of the Heavenly Ladder, a tetrptych with the Dodekaorton (Fig. 7 below), and another tetrptych including

Fig. 5. The Icon of the Crucifixion. Tempera and gold on wood, 28.2 x 21.6 cm, Late Comnenian art, Constantinople, today in 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 is given on pp. 276–277.

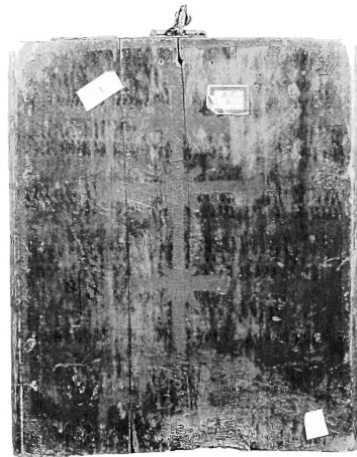
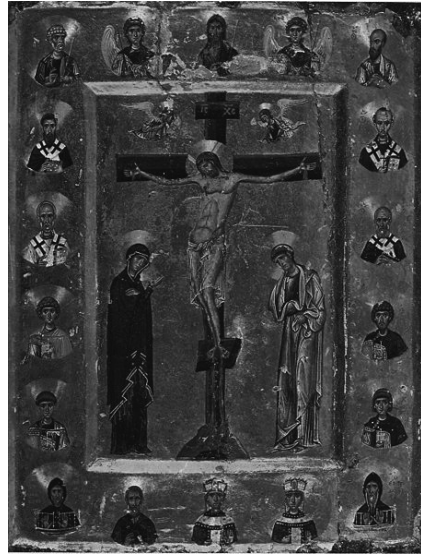


Fig. 6. Icon with the Miracle at Chonai, front and back. Tempera and gold on wood, 37.5 x 30.7 cm, Byzantine (Constantinople); today in Sinai; second half of the 12th century, Anemarie Weyl Carr, “Popular Imagery”, in Evans and Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium*: Fig. 66, p. 119, caption on p. 118, description on pp. 118–119 in the catalogue



Fig. 7. Tetraptych with Dodekaorton, 57 x 41.8 cm., each one of the panels 49.6 x 38 cm., each of the wings. Tempera on wood, late 12th century, Manafis (ed.), *Sinai: Treasures...*, pp. 158–159, description p. 108, fig. 28 in the respective book. Four half-length images of hierarch (Sts John Christostom, Gregory the Theologian, Nicholas and Basil) are in the spandrels formed by the relief arches of the two central panels

the Last Judgement, the Dodekaorton, two scenes from the Life of the Virgin, and saints; all works must have been painted at Sinai.”⁸

Regarding the Tetraptych, Mouriki enlists other stylistic characteristics to help her in dating it to the twelfth century. They consist in the “dynamic quality that pervades the figures in their poses, gestures, facial expressions, and in the drapery.”⁹ Further iconographical elements which are common to other icons of that century are the ‘hanging’ garden behind the Virgin (this is common with that in the icon of Annunciation), the ladder which leads to it (it seems that the ladder was a topic of the time), etc.

Moreover, she not only dates the Heavenly Ladder icon to the twelfth century in general but, bringing more evidence to support her opinion, she is more precise and concludes that it was painted in the late part of this century: “The icon of the Heavenly Ladder belongs to the group of didactic works that derived elements from the monastic literature which blossomed in the Monastery of Sinai from an early period. A major author was John Climacus, the seventh-century Abbot whose name is derived from his well-known treatise for the moral perfection of monks, the *Heavenly Ladder*. In order to reach the goal of heaven, the monks must acquire thirty virtues which are presented in metaphorical form as the equivalent number of rungs of a ladder. The composition on this panel is the earliest extant pictorial example of this metaphor for the code of perfection of monastic life on a portable icon. The struggle of the monks for moral perfection and the resulting heavenly salvation is demonstrated to be

⁸ Doula Mouriki “Icons from the 12th to the 15th century”, in Konstantinos A. Manafis (ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Ekdotike Athenon, Athens, 1990, pp. 107–108; the fig. numbers there refers to the numbering in the book *Sinai. Treasures...*

⁹ Mouriki “Icons from the 12th to the 15th century”, in , *Sinai: Treasures...*, p. 108.

difficult and often unattainable. The only certain victors are John Climacus himself at the top of the ladder and the Archbishop Antonios of Sinai behind him. The dematerialization of the figures in the broad expanse of the gold background, which interacts with the brown, olive, and ochre of the monks' garments, is the main stylistic characteristic of the icon. The psychological intensity on the faces and the agitated drapery with the wavering highlights on the robes argue for the dating of the icon to the late 12th century. Moreover, the decoration on the reverse side of the panel is of the same type as that found on the icon of the Annunciation, which can be dated to the late 12th century on more definite stylistic criteria."¹⁰

It seems plausible that indeed the icon of the Heavenly Ladder was painted in late twelfth century: the dynamism and the movement within it are specific to a later period of Byzantine iconpainting than the eleventh century, initially thought as the date of the icon by Weitzmann; especially the icons with which it is associated, as for example the Tetrptych in Fig. 6, have almost the characteristics of Giotto's paintings as it is visible, for instance, in the movement of Angel Gabriel while delivering the 'good news' to the Virgin, the gesture of Christ in front of Lazarus' tomb, and of the figures around him in the baptism scene. All those elements point to a date of late twelfth century.

II. Connection of the Heavenly Ladder icon with the written text of *Scala Paradisi*

The theme of the ladder as a metaphor for the spiritual progress of a person, especially one who has chosen the monastic life, came up from time to time in iconography after St John Climacus (c. 579–650), Figs. 8-9, wrote his *Scala Paradisi* treatise in the 7th century¹¹. John was a monk at Sinai, who later became the abbot of the monastery of St Catherine. There is no evidence that he was ever ordained as a priest.¹² His feast is celebrated on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

I have to admit with Martin that the theme of the ladder in iconography is not as frequent as others. It was first developed in illuminated manuscripts with this popular text from the eleventh century onwards, as Weitzmann quoted above, also testifies. Its spread after the eleventh century took place especially in connection with the attempt of St Symeon the Theologian (c. 965-c. 1040) to revive mysticism in Constantinople about 1000. Both Martin, in his works mentioned here, and Hans Belting draw attention to this fact, and they based their statements on Symeon's writing in, for example, his *Homily on Confession*¹³, and on the 'Vie

¹⁰ *Sinai: Treasures...*, p. 107.

¹¹ Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*, PG88, 632-666.

¹² *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibheid and N. Russel, Introd. K. Ware, SPCK, London, 1982, p. 6.

¹³ Symeon the New Theologian, "Homily on Confession", in: *Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum; eine Studie zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen*, ed. K. Hall Leipzig, 1898, pp. 110–127.

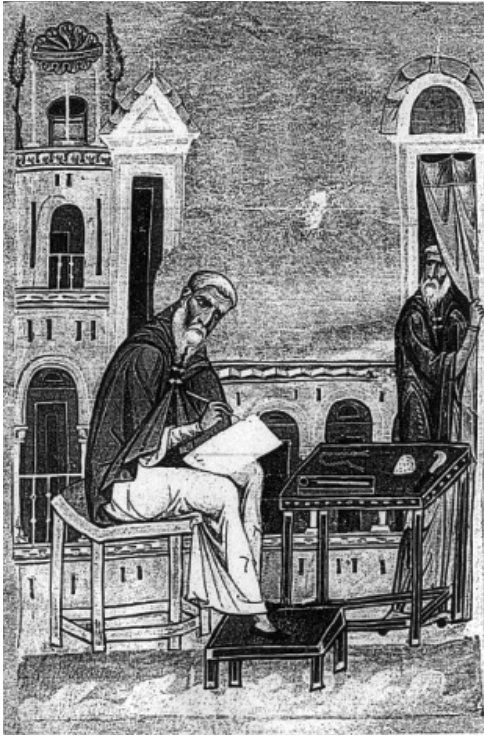


Fig. 8. [The Heavenly Ladder] Cod. Gr. 394. Fol. F 6v. The author's portrait. Vatican, John Rupert Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. XVII, Fig. 69 in the respective book



Fig. 9. The icon of St. John Climacus with St George and St Blaise. Tempera on wood, thirteenth century. Novgorod School

de Syméon”, written by his disciple and biographer, Nicetas Stethatus (c. 1000 - ?). Nicetas was a monk at the Studios Monastery – from which St Symeon was effectively expelled.¹⁴

Among the manuscripts which contain the motif of the ladder within them there is one in Sinai itself: cod. 423 (Fig. 10), one on Mount Athos in Vatopedi Monastery, Cod. 376 (Fig. 11), one at the Vatican, Gr. 394 (Fig. 12), one in Washington (Freer Gallery of Art. De Ricci 10. Fol. 2: The Heavenly Ladder), one in Moscow (Hist. Mus. Cod. Gr. 146. Fol. 278v: The

¹⁴ I. Hausherr and G. Horn (eds.), “Un grand mystique byzantine. Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien par Nicéas Stéthatos”, *Orientalia Christiana* 12 (1928), no. 45 (usually known as ‘Vie de Syméon’). Hausherr, in his Introduction to this book, on p. XXIII, gives this date for the birth of Nicetas. For St Symeon see also V. Laurent, ‘Un nouveau monument hagiographique; la vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien’, *Echos d’orient*, 27 (1929), pp. 431-443. Martin speaks at length about St Symeon in his *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, pp. 156–160, and Belting in his *Likeness and Presence...*, p. 272.



Fig. 10. The Heavenly Ladder. Sinai. Cod. 423, Fol. 10v, Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. Vll, fig. 23 in the respective book



Fig. 11. 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

Heavenly Ladder), one in Milan. (Bibl. Ambros. Cod. G 20 sup. Fol. 212v: Table of Contents), one in Paris (Bibli. Nat. Cod. Coislin 88. Fol. 12v; Fig. 13 below), etc.

The icon here discussed was painted noy long after the moment when the ladder motif entered the iconography as a sign of the inventiveness which the monastic Byzantine iconography began displaying around the beginning of the 11th century. (According to Martin, another contemporary sign of this creativity was the romance of Barlaam and Joasaph which glorify the monastic life¹⁵). Manuscripts might have been illustrated as early as the 9th century, as for example the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Egyptian desert fathers' writings)¹⁶, but the topic of the ladder came with the new spirit in iconography.¹⁷

Beyond the fullness of the message the Sinai icon of the Heavenly Ladder conveys, it is a beautiful piece originally meant to add to the beauty of the Liturgy. Belting sees a rhetorical structure in this icon, expressed “both in the ordered advance of the rising monks and in the wild disorder of the falling monks. The double movement, couched in a dramatic con-

¹⁵ J. R. Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 151.

¹⁶ Migne, PG, 65.

¹⁷ Martin, *The illustration...*, p. 161.

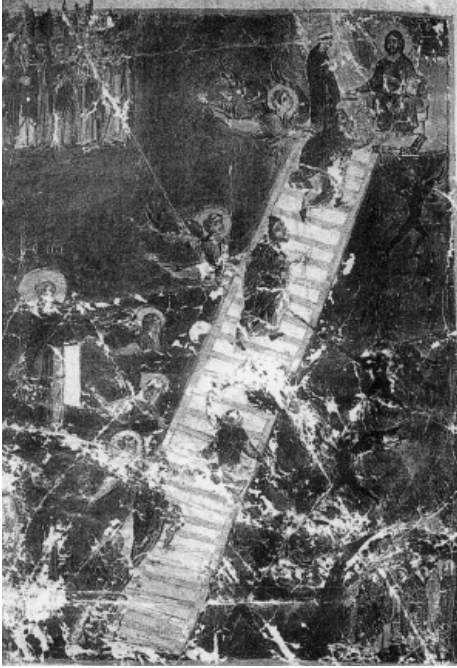


Fig. 12. The Heavenly Ladder. Vatican. Cod. Gr. 394. Fol. F v; Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. XVI, fig. 67 there

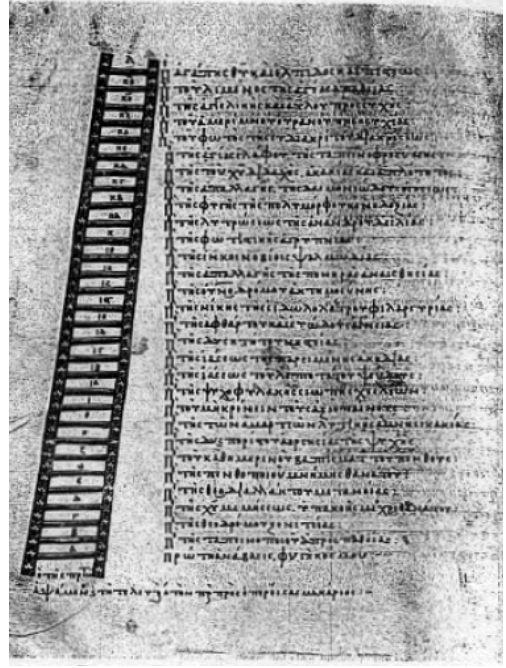


Fig. 13. Heavenly Ladder. Paris. Bibli. Nat. Cod. Coislin 88. Fol. 12v: Table of Contents, Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. VI, Fig. 19 in the respective book

trast, fills the space between heaven and earth, which is inhabited, on both ends, by angels and monks – or, to use a metaphor of the time, by heavenly and earthly angels [...] The underlying rhetorical structure, based on antithesis and hyperbole, here is transferred into a convincing visual form.¹⁸ However, in general he sees the capacity of icons to play such a role in a manner which is disputable. He affirms that: “As soon as the icon had become an object of rhetorical *ekphrasis*, it revealed how much it was at a disadvantage to church poetry and sermons as a narrative medium.”¹⁹ His statement is not true because the icon has not replaced anything in the Church; it has added to the richness of its Liturgy, which has kept the sermons and the hymns as its core.

John Climacus’ treatise *Scala Paradisi* - The Ladder of Divine Ascent or of the Virtues, as it is also known- is divided into 30 chapters, as was the age of Christ before baptism. The text speaks of the vices that a monk has to avoid and of the virtues that he has to acquire in order to reach God. The thirty steps of the ladder which a monk has to climb are as fol-

¹⁸ H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 273.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

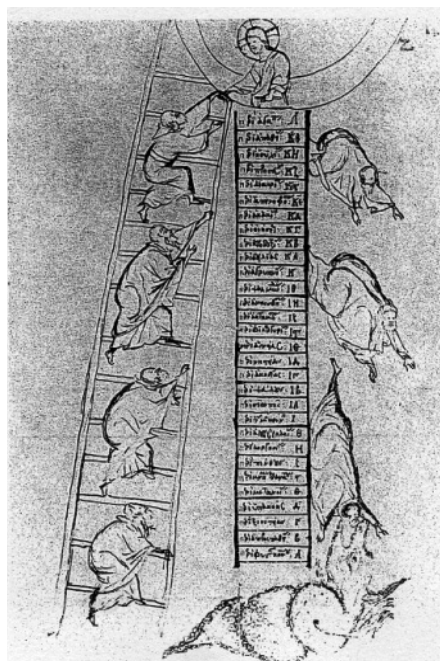


Fig. 14. The Heavily Ladder. Vienna, Nationalbibl., Cod. Theolog. Gr. 207. Fol. 2r, Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. VII, fig. 22 in the respective book

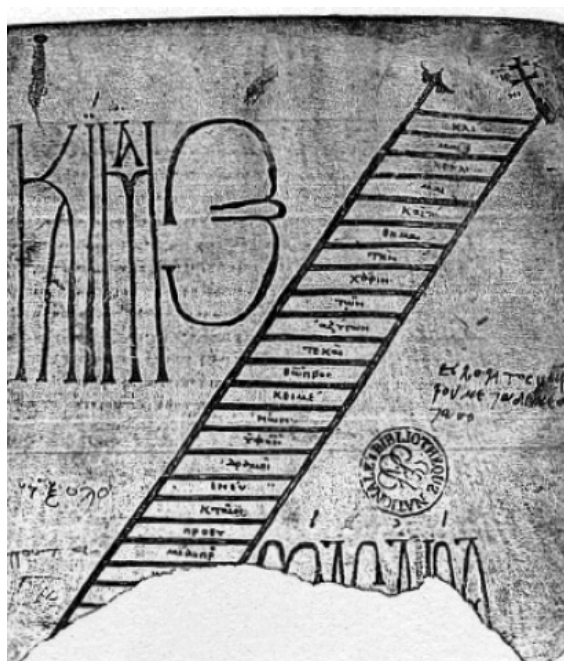


Fig. 15. The Heavily Ladder. Paris. Bibli. Nat., Cod. Coislin 262. Fol. 1r: Title Page, Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder...*, p. VI, fig. 20 in the respective book

lows: [I. (The Break with the World): with three steps] 1. Renunciation (of the World), 2. Detachment, 3. Exile; [II .The practice of the Virtues ('Active Life')] (i) Fundamental virtues: 4. Obedience 5. Penitence 6. Remembrance of Death 7. Sorrow [(ii) The struggle against the passions (Passions that Are Predominantly Non-physical): 8. Anger 9. Malice 10. Slander 11. Talkativeness 12. Falsehood 13. Despondency (b) Physical and Material Passions 14. Gluttony 15. Lust 16 – 17. Avarice (c) Non-Physical Passions (cont.): 18-20 Insensitivity 21. Fear 22. Vainglory 23. Pride (also Blasphemy) (iii) Higher Virtues of the "Active Life": 24. Simplicity 25. Humility 26. Discernment; [III. Union with God (Transition to the "Contemplative Life") 27. Stillness 28. Prayer 29 and Dispassion :30. Love.²⁰ In some of the manuscripts the name of the vices and virtues were written on the corresponding rung, as for example in the Vienna Manuscript of the Ladder (Fig. 14), but also in Cod. Coislin

²⁰ I have summarised some of the text of Joannis Climaci, *Scala Paradisi*, PG88, 632-666; John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibheid and N. Russel, Introd. K. Ware, SPCK, London, 1982; I. Scărarul, *Scara Raiului precedată de Viața pe scurt a lui Ioan Scolasticul și urmată de Cuvintul către Păstor*, trans., introduction and notes by N. Corneanu, Amacord Publishing House, Timișoara, 1994.



Fig. 16. The Heavenly Ladder. Athos. Vatopedi. Cod. 368. Fol. 178v, Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, p. VI, fig. 21 in the respective book

262. Fol. lr: Title Page. Paris (Fig. 15 below), and Cod. 368. Fol. 178v: The Heavenly Ladder (Vatopedi. Athos) [Fig. 21 in Martin's book].

On the top of the ladder is St John, followed by the abbot of the monastery Antonios, who may have commissioned this icon. Their names are written in red majuscule letters on the golden background; this is how we identify them. Christ, half-length, appears from a quadrant, which represents heaven, and is blessing John, as he reaches. St John and the Abbot are the only ones who have their names written above their heads in the icon. Also in a manuscript from Athos (Athos. Vatopedi. Cod. 368. Fol. 178v), the name of the monk who arrives at the upper end of the ladder is indicated as being that of St John Climacus (Fig. 16).

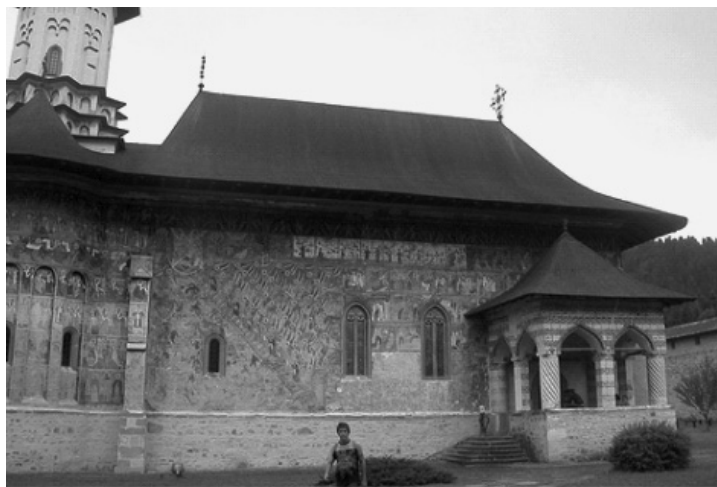


Fig. 17. Sucevița Monastery, fresco painting (1692-1702) by Constantinos, Ioan and their (Brâncovan) School



Fig. 18. Sucevița Monastery, detail with the Heavenly Ladder (Scara Virtuților – The Ladder of Virtues, as it is known there)



Fig. 19. The Heavenly Ladder. Râșca



Fig. 20. The Heavenly Ladder, Docheiariou Monastery, Monastery, Stylianos G. Papadopoulos (ed.), *Parousia: I.M. Docheiariou*, Aghios Oros, IMD, 2001, Fig. 13, p. 304 in the respective book. (Thanks to Veronica Della Dora from Bristol University, UK, for indicating this source to me)

Do these works state that the word (the written word in this case) by naming people, saves their souls? Are they speaking about the saving power of the word?

From manuscripts the ladder topic passed to portable icons, and from there in printed works, and also, in the 16th and 17th centuries, in the frescoes which decorate the churches' walls, as seen in the examples of Sucevița (Figs. 17–18) and Râșca Monasteries (Fig. 19)

in Moldova, Romania, still visible today, and also in Docheiarious Monastery (Fig. 20) and Hilandar Monastery (Fig. 21), both on Mounth Athos. It is also to be found at Dobrovăț, Cetățuia (in Iași), St. Elias (in Suceava), both in Moldova, but also in Wallachia, for example on the walls of the church in Hurezu Monastery, where the frescoes were painted between 1692 and 1702 by Constantinos, Ioan and their (Brâncovan) school. That happened in parallel with the text of the „Ladder” being copied in the scriptoria of these and other monasteries; at Hurezu, for example, a copy was made in 1773. Today the text of the Heavenly Ladder is still read in many Orthodox monasteries during Lent²¹, as for example, on Mount Athos, where some fragments of the Triologion contain some of the text of the *Heavenly Ladder*.²²

Climacus’ ladder model has entered the folklore, and in some countries it has concretised in various customs which take place especially when a person dies (when money are put in the coffin for the departed to pay each step of the ladder to the other world, in the fact that the bread people share at the funerary meal is shaped in the form of a ladder, etc.).²³

This model was influential not only, as shown above, within a strictly religious context – on “the spiritual imagination of the Christian East”²⁴ and on St Symeon’s mysticism mentioned earlier, but also on literary works in general, as for example, on Dante’s *Divina Commedia*.²⁵

The passing of the author/the main character, accompanied by Vergilius, from the Inferno to the Purgatory, and then to the Paradise in searching for peace symbolises the idea of a continual progress of the soul, and looks like a climbing of a mountain or of a ladder, as a progress towards perfection, i.e. towards God.

²¹ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Introd. Kallistos Ware, p. 1.

²² Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului*, p. 66.

²³ Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului*, p. 64.

²⁴ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent...*, p. 11.

²⁵ Ioan Scărarul, *Scara Raiului...*, pp. 62–64 .