

Topography and Sanctity in the North Syrian Corridor

In this paper, systemic topography, as currently being developed especially in France, will be used to cast light on aspects of the sanctity in Theodoret's *Philotheos*. In particular, the notion of a corridor will be used to illumine the diversity in unity of that sanctity, the special role within it of Simeon Stylites, and its possible relationship to an ancient and ongoing Judaeo-Christian ascetic tradition.

Syrian topography and Christian sanctity are, of course, no strangers. Peter Brown, in his famous paper "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" and in his Madrid conference paper "Town, Village and Holy Man: the case of Syria", acknowledges more than once his dependence on Georges Tchalenko's *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord*. "Masterly archaeological survey" is his tribute in the former, "inspired evocation of a distinctive area" in the latter. Since Tchalenko and Brown, we have had to see the saints of the Syrian desert as figures in a landscape: the landscape of the lost villages of the limestone massif on the road from Antioch to the imperial frontier, or more widely, from Seleucia on the sea to Seleucia on the Tigris. Yet in his latest book *The Body and Society* Brown has relinquished, where Syria is concerned, the geographical perspective in favour of a more theological tradition in Judaeo-Christian asceticism as his main explanatory theme. It will be argued here that retention of the geographic inspiration, reinvigorated by recent debate, might have served him better. For we feel that in Chapter 16 (the Syrian chapter) something has been forfeited¹.

When Tchalenko wrote, it was against the background of the escape in geography from determinism into "possibilisme": not the milieu making man, but rather the space-time conjuncture offering a range of possibilities. As Lucien Febvre wrote: "Des nécessités, nulle part. Des possibilités, par-

1 P. R. L. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" *JRS* 71 (1971) 80-101; "Town, Village and Holy Man: the case of Syria" in D. M. Pippidi, ed. *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien* (Paris, 1976); G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord* (Paris, 1953); P. R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society* (London, 1988) ch. 16.

tout"². Since the 1960's, however, it has been increasingly recognized that "possibilisme" was not enough: "une philosophie un peu courte" in the words of Pierre Claval, meaning, perhaps, that the field was left too wide open, too little excluded³. In particular, possibilisme seemed to shut social and human geography off from the formal systems and theories of systems taken from cybernetics, with which the rest of geography was increasingly preoccupied. Recently therefore the French school has been revitalized by the introduction of a more systemic approach. Since the 1980's there has been an energetic dialogue going on, to which the 1985 *L'Espace géographique* colloque of six papers has made a particularly notable contribution. Other good starting points are the Journal *Le Débat* throughout 1980 and the 1984 Avignon conference *Systèmes et localisations*. Recent developments are conveniently summarized by J.-R. Pitte in "Le Retour de La Géographie" in the revue *Vingtième Siècle* for July-September 1989⁴.

What is to be understood by system in this context? Loosely, anything that consists of parts connected together may be called a system. In a system as conceived by human geography, the components will not only be spatio-temporal (the physical landscape of North Syria 360-460 AD, with its orography, climate, flora and fauna), but also cultural: the population, their perceptions and expressions, their interaction with the natural world, their mutual communications. Together these form a whole microcosm which is yet susceptible of formal, even diagrammatic, analysis. In this sense, a system therefore is something to be understood rather than simply observed, as was the case with both the determinist and the possibilist versions of the milieu. A system will have both a history and a geography, its operations will take effect in a variety of time scales, and those effects may be seen as variously determined, probable or only possible in terms of laws, initial conditions, adventitious facts, etc.

The particular system which is relevant to Theodoret's *Philotheos*⁵ is that of the North Syrian corridor. A corridor may be defined as a preferred line of movement, whether for war, trade or cultural exchange, between two areas of settled and less restricted circulation. Before Bulliet's revolution of the camel

2 L. Febvre, *La Terre et l'Évolution humaine* (Paris, 1922) p. 234.

3 P. Claval, "Causalité et Géographie" *L'Espace Géographique* 2 (1985) p. 111.

4 *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d'histoire* 23 (juillet-septembre, 1989) 83-90.

5 The translations given are those of R. M. Price in his *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus* (Kalamazoo, 1985). For the text we have used P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, *Théodoret de Cyr. Histoire des Moines de la Syrie. Sources Chrétiennes* 234, 257 (Paris 1979). P. Canivet's *Le Monachisme syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr. Théologie historique* 42 has also been indispensable, particularly ch. 7 "Chronologie et Topographie", even though our conclusions differ from those he reached.

against the wheel, North Syria formed such a corridor⁶. It extended, at its widest extent, from one Seleucia to another, at a lesser extent from Antioch to Zeugma, imperial capital to imperial frontier. It was a corridor because to the north lay the escarpment of the Taurus and to the south lay the wilderness of the Desert. Only in the narrow line in between, could waggons and pack animals find the gradients, food, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and other back-up services they required. The only alternative to the road was the river, but it had its problems and Julian's use of it in his attack on Ctesiphon was not encouraging. But the corridor, west to east, was not uninterrupted. Beside the Taurus, there were lesser ranges going north and south: Mt Amanus separating the Antiochid from Cilicia; Mt Silpius, the beginning of the Lebanon, separating the Antiochid from the Upper Orontes, Coele-Syria and the Bekaa; Mt Belus, as Tchalenko called it, the beginning of the Anti-Lebanon, separating Antioch from Beroea, the modern Aleppo. Beyond these, the corridor was interrupted again, north-south, by the gorges of the Euphrates and the Tigris. A corridor, yes, but also a low switchback.

In Theodoret's time, the century between the external schism in northern Syria produced by the rendition of Nisibis in 363 and the internal schism produced by the definition of Chalcedon in 451, the corridor ran most effectively from Antioch to the Roman forts beyond the Euphrates on the upper Khabur. This stretch was divided by its undulations into five sections. First, there was the coastal plain, interrupted by Mt Amanus, but present in Cilicia and extending to the south as far as Latakia. Second, there were the seaward foothills, principally Mt Silpius, focused towards Antioch. Third, there was the limestone massif, skirted to the north by the main road from Antioch to Cyrrhus. Fourth, there were the landward foothills, focussed towards Cyrrhus and the other interior oases such as Edessa. Finally, there was the inland plain, the frontier beyond the Euphrates. It was these five sections which were the habitat of Theodoret's North Syrian sanctity. They provided the opportunities and constraints with which it lived, defining its freedoms of pitch and play. Thus understood as a topographical system, a self-constituting collection of parts, the North Syrian corridor may now be examined as a factor in 3 aspects of the sanctity depicted by Theodoret: its diversity in unity, the specific persona within it of Simeon Stylites, and its relation to earlier forms of Christian spirituality.

6 R. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Harvard, 1975).

The Diversity in Unity of North Syrian Sanctity

Because it was a collection of *parts*, the North Syrian corridor provided Theodoret's holy men with a variety of environments. Consequently a single spirituality was differently schematized as to its base, audience, sphere of activities, and enemies. To bring this out, we will focus on the 3 middle sections of the corridor, the 2 sets of foothills and the massif central, since the coastal and inland plains are more marginal to Theodoret's account.

First, the single spirituality. It was a highly physical spirituality of radical somatization. The body became the expression of the Spirit. Theodoret makes this clear when, having described James of Nisibis' asceticism, he says: "while he thereby wore down his body, he provided his soul unceasingly with spiritual nourishment. Purifying the eye of his thought he prepared a clear mirror for the Holy Spirit and ... he was changed into His Image from glory to glory"⁷. Moreover it was a somatization of a particular kind. Of the three later monastic virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Syrian ascetics most emphasized poverty. Chastity was taken for granted, virginity being only invoked by Theodoret in a passage which dismisses gender differences, and obedience, in a Benedictine or Ignatian sense, was hardly recognized as a virtue⁸. Again, within the category of poverty, of the three basic human needs of food, clothing and shelter, it was the renunciation of shelter which was most emphasized. As Festugière noted, the ascetics of North Syria were characteristically *ὑπαίθριοι hypaithrioi*, out of doors folk⁹.

Thus in the case of James of Nisibis, his prototype, Theodoret says: "In spring, summer and autumn he used the thickets with the sky for roof; in the winter season a cave received him and provided scanty shelter"¹⁰. Peter the Galatian lived in an old tomb as did Zeno of Pontus¹¹. Of Maron, the first hermit in the Cyrrhestica, Theodoret tells us that, "Embracing the open air life, he repaired to a hill-top formerly honoured by the impious. Consecrating to God the precinct of demons on it, he lived there pitching a small tent which he seldom used"¹². Similarly, Eusebius of Asikha: "Repairing to a mountain ridge *ῥαχία τις ὄρους* and using a mere enclosure *θηγικίον* whose stones he did not even join together with clay, he continued for the rest of his life to endure the hardship of the open air ... Frozen in winter and burnt in summer, he bore with endurance the contrasting temperatures of the air"¹³.

7 Theodoret, p. 13.

8 Theodoret, p. 187.

9 A. J. Festugière, *Antioche Païenne et Chrétienne*, de Boccard, Paris, 1959, pp. 295, 299-306.

10 Theodoret, p. 13.

11 Theodoret, pp. 82, 96.

12 Theodoret, p. 117.

13 Theodoret, p. 126.

Limnaeus lived on a hillside “without a cell or tent or hut” i.e. in another θηρίκιον possibly a sheepfold, while his companion John, “Repairing to a jagged ridge, prone to storms and northward facing ... has now spent twenty-five years there exposed to the contrasting assaults of the atmosphere”¹⁴. Even in the case of those ascetics who were not *hypaithrioi* in a strict sense, shelter was kept to a minimum or turned into a form of discipline. Thus Marcianus lived in a cell too small for his body, while Baradatus constructed a chest κιβωτός of similar dimensions¹⁵. If Francis of Assisi naked followed the naked Christ and Caroline Bynum’s holy women saw Christ and themselves as sacred food, the saints of the Syrian desert par excellence proclaimed the homeless Christ, *salus* without *domus*, to use the language of Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*¹⁶, and this holds true whichever section of the corridor they inhabited.

Next, the localized variations, shaped by the parts of the topographical system.

First, there was a variant of the seaward foothills focusing on Antioch. Here Macedonius the Barley Eater may be taken as typical. His base was mobile, in the hills above Antioch; his primary audience was the pious women of the city; his sphere of activity was the imperial capital; and the enemies he confronted were people involved in imperial politics. Theodoret tells us: “He had as his wrestling-ground and stadium παλαίστραν – καὶ στάδιον the tops of the mountains; he did not settle in one place, but now dwelt in this one and then transferred to that. This he did not through dislike of the places but to escape from the crowds of those who visited him ... He continued living in this way for forty-five years, using neither tent nor hut, but making his stops in a deep hole”¹⁷. Among his visitors, Theodoret mentions his own mother who consulted him about her sterility, another patrician lady who suffered from acute *boulimia*, the father of a demoniac girl, and the father of a delirious anorectic. To all these he gave relief, either instantly, or by a house call to the city. In the public sphere, Macedonius was involved in the affairs of the empire. Following the famous riot against the statues in 387, he remonstrated with the generals deputed to punish the city, ordering them to tell the emperor that he could destroy bodies but not recreate them. “He said this in Syriac τῇ σύρῳ γλώττῃ”, Theodoret tells us, “and while the interpreter translated it into Greek, the generals shuddered as

14 Theodoret, pp. 151-152.

15 Theodoret, pp. 38, 178.

16 C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast, The Religious significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California, 1987); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, Village Occitan de 1294 à 1324*, Gallimard, Paris, 1975.

17 Theodoret, p. 100.

they listened, and promised to convey his message to the emperor”¹⁸. No doubt, if he had lived a generation earlier, he would, like his predecessor Aphrahat the Persian, have taken part in the campaign against Arianism, very much an imperial heresy in the days of emperor Valens¹⁹. Thus on the seaward foothills, ascetics had a mobile base, their primary audience was pious women, their sphere of activity was the empire, and their enemies were imperial officials and imperial heresies.

Second, there was a variant of the spirituality of massif central, Tchalenko’s limestone massif covered with its oil producing villages. Here Simeon Stylites himself may be taken as typical. On his pillar, Simeon was nothing if not conspicuous, but his base, unlike Macedonius, was not mobile but static, and static within a coenobitic community. Simeon was not in any true sense a solitary, and contrary to what Gibbon thought, his elevation on the pillar was more evangelical than ascetic. Theodoret comments: “Just as those who have obtained kingship over men alter periodically the images on their coins ... so the universal Sovereign of all things by attaching to piety ... these new and various modes of life τὰς καινὰς ταύτας καὶ παντοδαπὰς πολιτείας, stirs to eulogy the tongues not only of those nurtured in the faith but also of those afflicted by lack of faith”²⁰. Simeon’s first audience were the faithful of Tolanissus, but he soon attracted pilgrims from all over North Syria and eventually from the whole *oikumene*. Because he became a figure in the universal church, his public sphere of activity was its controversies, and his enemies were Nestorianism on the one hand, and Monophysitism on the other. For, again contrary to what Gibbon thought, Simeon was not an extremist. A figure of the universal church, he was well aware of the Catholic *via media*. Thus he reconciled Nestorianizing bishops to Ephesus I, and Monophysitizing monks to Chalcedon. After his death, when his body was peremptorily seized by the patriarch of Antioch, the quadruple pilgrimage basilica of Qalat Seman was built by emperor Zeno as part of his policy of reconciliation between the churches. Theodoret emphasizes the ecclesial character of Simeon’s sanctity: “he does not neglect care of the holy churches — now fighting pagan impiety ἑλληνικῇ δυσσεβείᾳ, now defeating the insolence of the Jews, Ἰουδαίων θρασύτητα, at other times scattering the bands of the heretics, sometimes sending instructions on these matters to the emperor, sometimes rousing the governors to divine zeal, at other times urging the very shepherds of the churches to take still greater care of their flocks”²¹.

18 Theodoret, pp. 103-104.

19 Theodoret, p. 74.

20 Theodoret, p. 166. The comparison of Simeon to a dazzling lamp on a lampstand in Theodoret ch. 13 is to the point here but Canivet doubts the authenticity of the passage.

21 Theodoret, p. 177.

Third, there was a variant of the landward foothills focusing on the oases to the south of the Taurus escarpment. Here James of Cyrrhestica may be taken as typical. James was based on the hill of Sheih Khoros, four miles west of Cyrrhus. Like Macedonius the Barley Easter, he was a *hypai thrios*: "this man bidding farewell to all those things, tent and hut and enclosure, has the sky for roof, and lets in all the contrasting assaults of the air, as he is now inundated by torrential rain, now frozen by frost and snow, at other times burnt and consumed by the sun"²². But unlike Macedonius and more like Simeon, he was relatively static and public: "Living in this place he is observed by all comers, so that it is unceasingly under the eyes of spectators that he serves in combat"²³. Unlike Simeon, however, James was not associated with any coenobitic community: he was a true hermit. Moreover his audience was only local. When it was thought he was dying, "all the men of the town" οἱ τοῦ ἄστεως ἅπαντες, Theodoret tells us, formed a bodyguard to prevent "the local inhabitants" οἱ περιόικοι from dismembering him prematurely in search of relics"²⁴. His miracles too were local: "Through his blessing many fevers have been quenched, many agues have abated or departed completely, many demons have been forced to flee and water blessed by his hands becomes a preventive medicine"²⁵. His public sphere of activity was thus the diocese rather than the church and the enemies he helped Theodoret to combat were not imperial Arianism or the universal Christological heresies, but the by now provincial sect of Marcionism, superannuated even in Gnostic circles by Manichaeism. Though he did not refuse Theodoret's calls for help, James was a more private person than either Macedonius or Simeon. "I did not come to the mountain for another's sake but for my own" he told Theodoret²⁶.

Vööbus, Festugière and Brown have all in different ways stressed the unity of North Syrian sanctity in the fourth and fifth centuries: its rigorism, orientation to prayer, its combination of somatization and social service²⁷. Yet there was diversity as well as unity, and to relate it to the parts of the North Syrian corridor serves to set this in relief. Nonetheless that corridor was also a coherent *collection* of parts. The influence of the corridor *as a whole* may be seen in the special persona of Simeon Stylites.

22 Theodoret, p. 134.

23 Theodoret, p. 124.

24 Theodoret, p. 136.

25 Theodoret, p. 138.

26 Theodoret, p. 246.

27 A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient, A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, CSCO 184, 195 Subs. 14, 17 (Louvain, 1958, 1960); A.-J. Festugière, *Les Moines d'Orient* (Paris, 1960-1964); for Peter Brown, see the papers cited in N.I.

Simeon Stylites

Brown's Simeon was a mediator, the good patron between town and country: this relationship, "transvalued" as he put it, made Simeon (and of course the other holy men) mediators in other, further, relations between church and state, between earth and heaven. This interpretation was at once recognized as superior to that of martyr manqué, peasant spokesman, austere enthusiast. Yet there is perhaps more to be said about "the great wonder of the world", Theodoret's μέγα θαῦμα τῆς οἰκουμένης and perhaps the concept of a corridor system will elucidate what that is.

First, Theodoret stresses the vast diffusion of Simeon's fame (φήμη) — "known by all the subjects of the roman empire and has also been heard of by the Persians, the Medes, the Ethiopians, and the rapid spread of his fame as far as the nomadic Scythians has taught his love of labor and his philosophy"²⁸. There is a similar passage in ch. 11, including Iberians, Armenians, Himyarites, Spaniards, Britons. It was surely the fact that the transit zone in which his pillar stood linked two populous, developed termini that ensured this wide diffusion, so that both Rome and Ctesiphon were aware of his extraordinary witness. The termini guaranteed his fame.

Second, Theodoret presents the population traversing the area as extremely diverse, ethnically, linguistically, culturally. A Saracen chief, an Ishmaelite queen, bands of Bedouin, locals, not-so-locals, Persian courtiers, Christian deacons "a sea of men standing together in that place, receiving rivers from every side"²⁹. While Simeon does of course address the crowds, giving two exhortations (παραινέσεις) a day, Theodoret clearly recognizes that his true message is as a sign or spectacle (θέαμα καινὸν καὶ παράδοξον), something metalinguistic, an arresting *logo* along the journey that both Greek and Syrian, literate and illiterate could all comprehend: the man on the pillar himself. But to be a traffic logo there must be traffic, to be a street lamp there must be a street. So the floating world of the corridor is closely related to the message it is given. One could even go on to speculate on a true "feedback" effect whereby Qalat Seman drew pilgrims to its vast basilica in later centuries, thus itself ultimately altering the character of the system.

Universal and metalinguistic, Simeon was a mediator in a further sense than the other North Syrian ascetics. While he, like they, was a mediator between static groups of the population (this is an aspect emphasized particularly by the Syriac life), he was also a mediator between mobile people: police and robbers, nomads and sedentarists, different groups of

²⁸ Theodoret, p. 160.

²⁹ Theodoret, p. 165.

nomads. Though immobile himself, he was a man of the road, the unifying factor of the topographical system, and not really conceivable without it. He needed the corridor just as the corridor needed him: a mutual implication of topography and sanctity which can last light on the question of North Syrian spirituality to earlier Judaeo-Christian ascetic tradition.

North Syrian sanctity and the Judaeo-Christian ascetic tradition

Recent scholarship has tended to interpret North Syrian asceticism in terms of an ongoing Judaeo-Christian ascetic tradition. There are several reasons for this. First, there is the tendency, exemplified by the work of Helmut Koester, to see developed Christianity as the product of the confluence of distinctive primitive Christianities, among which the Judaeo-Christian stream, stressed by Jean Daniélou and others, was an important one too often underestimated by Western "Pauline" Christians. Second, there has been the delayed but profound impact of the work of Vööbus, which undertakes to provide a systematic account of that stream from its Jewish origins through Tatian and the Encratites to later Christian Syriac piety. Third, traces remain, even in Vööbus, of an orientalizing interpretation: a wish to associate the North Syrian ascetics with fakirs, gymnosophists, Persian dualists, Manichaean *perfecti*, Messalian extremists, etc., and a failure to see the different basis of Christian asceticism as somatization of the Spirit rather than pneumatization (or rejection) of the body. As a result of these reasons, North Syrian asceticism has seemed to require a genealogy and the Judaeo-Christian ascetic tradition has seemed to provide one.

An advantage of the approach through systemic human topography is that it makes any such appeal to long term history less necessary. While background can never fully explain foreground and history must always accept a principle of insufficient reason, it may be argued that North Syrian asceticism can be adequately explained in terms of its own time and place. It was the product of a post-persecution, post conciliar, triumphalist Christianity for which there were no limits to the somatization of the Spirit; a single orthodox culture in two languages along the corridor; and a compression, as a result of the rendition of Nisibis, of that orthodoxy to a new degree of organization and articulation. As noted above, the notion of systemic topography includes not only the spatial, but also the temporal and cultural. For the human geographer, who is thinking in terms of systems rather than possibilities, there can be no pure "milieux naturels". As Jean-Robert Pitte says, once this is appreciated, "personne ne songera plus à couper la géographie dite

