Part Two - 'The Symbol of Mount Athos in the West' and 'Utopia in the Americas' Transcript

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Edens and Utopias are both spaces of desire. They stand for different things and come in different forms. Terrestrial paradises represent the ‘no longer’; utopias the ‘not-yet’. Eden is a place that stands for what has been lost to corrupted mankind; utopia is a non-place for rational redemption. Biblical Eden was a God-ordained verdant garden; Renaissance utopias were man-made ideal cities.

Surrounded by oceans or deserts, encircled by walls of stone or fire, utopias and Edens have traditionally come in a self-enclosed cartographic form; as ‘islands of the mind’, to borrow the phrase from John Gillis. As islands of all sorts: existing and non-existing islands; invisible islands in the Atlantic, anticipating Renaissance discoveries; green Edenic islands in the arid Mesopotamian desert longed by early pilgrims and lost to mankind; urban islands in the mainland of ancient Greece; or again, monastic islands separated from the rest of the world by high brick walls.

Islands, it has been observed, are central features in western geographical imagination. They are liminal places and metaphors of the mind. They are objects for contemplation, but also instruments for knowledge-making. They are the favourite sites for loss and recovery, for visions of the past and of the future.

Islands are reassuring in that they present us with the well-defined boundaries of their coastline. Like mountains and other geographical features, islands just are. But islands can also be carved out of territory by human action and imagination.

Today I want to show how a mountain-peninsula in the north Aegean became an island of the mind and a symbol: an island conflating Edenic and utopian traditions; an island of desire transcending its physical boundaries to float in late Byzantine and western Renaissance geographical imagination through textual and cartographic representations; an island that maybe even inspired western utopian visions; and finally, an island that became an emblem.

Mount Athos is the eastern-most of the three protuberances of the Chalcidic peninsula in Northern Greece and it is the only example of monastic republic in our contemporary world. It measures about 50Km and culminates into a 2,000m-high peak, after which it is named. This has long constituted a primary node in an extensive net of Aegean mountain-landmarks, fundamental in coastal navigation. When visibility is good, it is possible to glance its majestic summit from a distance of 93 to 105 miles.

The geomorphology and vegetation of the peninsula are dramatically different from its typically Mediterranean surroundings. Its unique variety of floristic species and endemics make Athos a true botanical island.

The majesty of the peak and the secluded wilderness of the peninsula have inspired the most incredible challenges to nature, making Athos a place of contrasts and paradoxes since antiquity.

Herodotus tells us that after the famous Persian shipwreck occurred off Athos’ tempestuous point in 492 BC, Xerxes, the son of Darius, decided to cut a canal on the neck of the peninsula, in order to avoid its circumnavigation and the repetition of a similar disaster. Had it ever existed, the canal soon collapsed after its excavation, probably after an earthquake, leaving no visible trace. From temporary island, Athos thus permanently returned to its peninsular status.

According to Vitruvius, because of its dramatic grandeur and inaccessibility, Athos was chosen by Dinocrates, the architect of Alexander the Great, as the site for the foundation of Alexandria. The mountain was to be carved into a giant human figure (by implication that of Alexander). In his left hand, the colossus held a very extensive city; in the right, the bowl to receive the water of all the rivers in the mountain. But Alexander refused the project on logistical grounds.

Later authors like Lucian of Samosata took Xerxes’ challenge to nature as an act of arrogance, and Alexander’s refusal as an example of virtue. Athos, a place most authors never visited, became a famous ‘moral landmark’ in Hellenistic and Latin literature; one embodying contrasting metaphors: on the one hand, barbarian foolishness; on the other ‘Greek’ rationality and equilibrium.

By a strange paradox, since the 8th century AD, from abode of titanic pre-Christian myths, Athos gradually became abode of humble Christian hermits escaping iconoclastic persecution. Its secluded wilderness, with its thick forests, steep slopes, caves
and ravines made Athos the ideal arena for ascetic struggle. The monks envisaged the peninsula as a safe refuge - as an island geographically and spiritually removed from the temptations of the outer world.

In 963 Saint Athanasius founded the first coenobitic monastery on the peninsula (the Great Lavra). In so doing, he imported a new model of monasticism resting on a common life of work and prayer: a model in which private property did not exist.

The model imported by Athanasius implied also a new relationship with the environment. His was a titanic struggle to tame wilderness; one that paralleled the monk's inner spiritual struggle to tame passions. Carving Eden out of a fierce landscape was understood as a domestication not only of nature, but of the soul itself. Conversely, gardening was not simply a necessary source of living for the monks: it meant setting moral boundaries, mapping a spiritual landscape on the physical one.

During the last century of the Byzantine Empire, Athos' fierce wilderness became increasingly punctuated by gardened 'monastic islands', with nineteen of the twenty still-existing coenobitic foundations established or restored. The only major Byzantine monastic center that survived the Turkish conquest of Asia Minor and the Latins practically untouched, Athos itself became a true island of Orthodoxy.

Rather than an untamed arena for ascetic struggle and for the carving of garden-islands, 14th-century Athos was itself idealized as an insular utopian space presenting the visitor with a 'given', rather than negotiable boundary - that of its coastline.

Ioseph Kalothetos characterized Athos as 'mainland among the islands, and island among the mainlands'; as a space the visitor could walk or sail around, finding shelters and ports along its perimeter; a space protected by 'secure fortresses [the monasteries] encircled by walls, - disposed as to form a dance,or, as one might say, similar to armed soldiers lined up against the enemy, securing peace' to the peninsula.

In the late 1350s, Nikephoros Gregoras, the famous chronicler of Andronicus Palaeologus II, described the peninsula as one of those real and imagined pleasure gardens chanted by his Byzantine and ancient predecessors, Homer to start with.

In his ekphrasis, Gregoras' portrayed Athos as a self-sufficient agricultural institution moulded on the sample of the small, circumscribed ideal polis devised by Plato (who was himself familiar with Athos and the story of Xerxes' canal).

The Athos described by Gregoras was a true locus amoenus, a garden island in which the dramatic mountain peak found no place. The goal of Byzantine ekphraseis (or rhetorical descriptions) was to make present not the actual picture, but the spiritual reality behind it. Like sacred icons, descriptions of real and imagined loci amoeni served as windows to other worlds, as tools for inner elevation. Anticipating western Renaissance utopias, Byzantine ekphraseis served as useful fictions for self-edification.

Byzantine loci amoeni brought together the Classical and Christian tradition. They were imbued with Edenic elements, but unlike Eden, they remained within the realm of possibility. Like the utopias of the ancient world, they were associated with golden ages of the past that might yet be regenerated in the present.

In Gregoras' ekphrasis, the Edenic nature of Athos was a reflection of a perfect monastic life, and Athonite monastic life was in turn inspired by a sweet landscaped nature. Monastic virtues fused in a harmony of colors, scents, and sounds, 'as if flowing out of a treasure house'. An amiable mantle of varied woods and cultivated lands covered the peninsula during all the seasons: like Eden and the garden of Alkinoos, Athos was blessed by eternal spring.

Among its woods, in the early morning, one could hear the music of the nightingale, 'as if chanting and praising the Lord together with the monks'. Little water streams flew quietly, in harmony with the monks' silent way of life, because, the author explained, 'Mount Athos itself offers many occasions for inner quietness to those who desire to live a celestial life on earth'.

If the nature of the peninsula reflected the botanical totality of Eden, the perfect way of life of its inhabitants was that of a utopian community, a community following the 'ancient Doric way', and extraneous to commerce and slavery; an entirely male community 'naturally' protected by the evils of the world thanks to the geography of the peninsula. Its quasi-insular, secluded nature granted Athos defence from multiple perils, such as vicious gazes and women. Athos was a paradise in which one did not risk temptation, or 'the ancient discussion with the snake', as Gregoras put it.

In the fifteenth century, this vision of a real/perfect monastic community travelled beyond the boundaries of the dying Byzantine Empire and was given graphic form. Athos became one of the most distinctive features in the Aegean represented on western isolari until the late seventeenth century.
Derived from the ancient tradition of the periplus, isolari (or island books) featured a map of a different island on each page, accompanied by notes about its history, geography, climate, economy, customs, antiquities, legends, and all kinds of 'curiosities'. Each island was depicted as a world on its own, onto which could be projected any of the diverse desires and fears that were being generated within Western Europe itself.

The island was the principal cognitive form in Renaissance geographical descriptions, as well as an effective mnemonic tool. Its self-enclosed spatiality allowed the compiler to blend fact and legend, personal observation and hearsay, past and present; it gave textual coherence to disparate information.

Microcosms to be explored and described, easy to grasp by the eye and imprint on memory, islands constituted narrative cabinets of curiosities delimited by their coastline. They were basic narrative units held together like precious stones, by the compiler's island-hopping journey, a journey re-iterated by the reader, as he leafed through the pages of the island book.

Athos was not an island, but, thanks to its unique status, it continued to be conceptualized and narrated as such.

In his Liber Insularum Archipelagi, the first island-book and systematic antiquarian mapping of Greece, the Florentine priest Cristoforo Buondelmonti depicted Athos in a round insular shape, a trope that became standard for the next couple of centuries. This graphic rendering reflected and reinforced the Byzantine idealization of Athos as a utopian microcosm set apart from the rest of the world.

Buondelmonti described the peninsula as 'a palace of the angels', populated by coenobitic monks dwelling in fortress-like monasteries, and by hermits, with their eyes 'set towards heaven, sighing with all their soul at the thought of Paradise, the Eternal Motherland'. 'Contemplative in his heart of hearts,' - he continues - 'the monk trains himself not to fear solitude because God is with him, but always to delight in looking at the sky without any worries about money'.

Like the citizens of Plato's ideal polis, the monks of Athos, Buondelmonti wrote, 'lead a way of life just like those who are content with little and who have no desire for what the vast majority considers to be wealth - Their life is truly peaceful and joyful, their nights are pleasant, their days busy, their meals quiet'.

Like the Athos in Gregoras' ekphrasis, that described by Buondelmonti was a perfumed landscaped garden-island, with fig trees, olives trees, and numerous bee-hives. But the Florentine priest envisaged the peninsula also as 'large-scale cabinet of curiosities', as a container of myths and wonders.

Forefather of Greek antiquarianism, Buondelmonti boasted a solid humanistic education, reinforced by its sixteen-year wanderings through the Aegean islands, where he discovered antiquities and purchased manuscripts (of which Athos, by the way, was a major reserve).

At ease with Pliny, Buondelmonti knew that on the summit of Athos there was 'in the olden days - a fortified town whose inhabitants lived much longer than anyone else'. Having made Herodotus one of his guides, of course, he also knew that at the time of Xerxes the Athonite peninsula 'was crossed by the sea and was an island', as we read on the map in the Ravenna mss. The memory of the no-longer existing canal reinforced the insularity of Athos and its distinctiveness.

In 1480 the German miniaturist Henricus Martellus, who was then working in Florence, took Buondelmonti's project further. He created an isolario containing a number of islands and peninsulas beyond the Aegean plus an introductory Ptolemaic world map where these could be located by the reader.

The insularity of Mount Athos was further accentuated. The isthmus turned into a thin neck of land precariously connecting Athos to the mainland. A vast gulf on the eastern coast imprinted the peninsula with a new shape (common on Ptolemaic maps). The mountain-peninsula turned into mostly flat territory, into an Edenic garden traversed by rivers and punctuated with trees and high-walled monasteries. From the six foundations on Buondelmonti's map, the monasteries increased to sixteen.

Martellus' map of Athos contained all the elements of a utopian island. Produced just a couple of decades before the first edition of Thomas More's utopia, this illustration, some scholars have argued, and especially Athos as an institution might have served as a source of inspiration for the British statesman.

In his account, More begs the philosopher-traveller Raphael Hythloday to describe the island of Utopia in terms of 'soil, rivers, towns, people, manners, constitution, laws, etc.' - in other words, he asks to provide him with all the information one generally
encounters in an island book. And like island-books, More's account was illustrated with a map drawn by the artist Ambrosius Holbein for the benefit of the armchair traveller.

Raphael opens his narration with the same kind of description we usually expect to find at the beginning of island books' descriptions:

'The island of Utopia - he writes - is in the middle 200 miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it; but it grows narrower toward both ends'.

Geographically, Utopia is thus bigger than Mount Athos, but has a similar shape, were we to trust Martellus' map: 'Its figure' - More says - 'is not unlike a crescent: between its horns, the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay'.

Like in the description of Athos by Ioseph Kalothetos, More tells us that 'on the other side of the island there are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art, that a small number of men can hinder the descent of a great army'. Athonite monks' fear of pirates lead them to build no less impressive fortifications.

Like Athos, cut by Xerxes from the mainland, Utopia is also an artificial island:

'...they report (and there remain good marks of it to make it credible) that this was no island at first, but a part of the continent. King Utopus that conquered it - brought the rude and uncivilized inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind; having soon subdued them, he designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them. To accomplish this, he ordered a deep channel to be dug fifteen miles long'.

Like Xerxes, Utopus employed a vast number of workers and brought the canal to a speedy conclusion. But while Xerxes' canal became despised by Classical authors as a symbol of barbaric foolishness and excess, Utopus' canal was looked by his neighbours with admiration and terror.

The memory of Utopia's peninsular origins was still visible on territory. On the contrary, the memory of Athos' temporary insularity was made visible only through maps and today by artificial markers.

An experienced humanist, More was well-familiar with the story of Xerxes. Few years before the publication of Utopia, he had collaborated with Erasmus of Rotterdam on a Latin translation of the works of Lucian, which was published in Paris in 1506.

In his account, More also tells us that 'there are fifty-four cities [on Utopia], all large and well built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow'. Today there are twenty sovereign monasteries on Mount Athos, but Athos' first charter (972) was signed by representatives of 54 monasteries, sketes and cells. 54 like the towns on Utopia.

Just like the monasteries of Athos, the towns of Utopia, More tells us, 'are compassed with a high and thick wall, in which there are many towers and forts and they are so like one another, except where the situation makes some difference'.

Mount Athos and Utopia share also institutional similarities. A self-regulated monastic community, Athos is the most ancient still-existing democracy in the world, with an administrative system dating back to the 10th century. Every year on June 1st, a council formed by representatives from five different monasteries is elected in Athos' administrative capital, the village of Karyes, where it meets to discuss public administration matters.

Similarly, on Utopia, 'every city sends three of its wisest Senators once a year to Amaurot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is the chief town of the island, being situated near the centre of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies'.

As with Athonite monks, Utopians live on agriculture. We are informed that 'they cultivate their gardens with great care, so that they have vines, fruits, herbs, and flowers in them; and all is so well ordered, and so finely kept...'.

But Utopians are also highly literate people. They read Plutarch and Lucian, whose writings are available in thousands of copies on the island. Were they familiar with more authors, they would have probably turned Utopia into a library hosting a literary collection no smaller than Athos' with its 16,000 precious mss., many of which of Classical authors.
Like the monks, Utopians abhor fowling and gaming as foolish occupations and they 'wear the same sort of clothes without any other distinction'. 'Their fashion never alters and it is calculated both for their summers and winters'.

The main similarity between the Utopian and the Athonite community is the lack of private property, but also the lack of desire for money, which according to More is the main cause of anxiety and mischief.

Whether Athos was a direct predecessor of Utopia, we don't know. Besides the striking parallels between the two communities, we don't have any actual proofs indicating that More constructed his non-existing island on an existing peninsula. And even if he did, it has been suggested, an acknowledgement of Orthodox Athos would have been compromising and thus very unlikely.

More's fascination with monastic life is nevertheless well documented. We know for example that before turning to politics, he lived in the Catholic monastery of Karthauser in Germany from 1499 to 1503. And maybe it is not a case that Raphael Hythloday lived on Utopia about the same amount of time.

Evaggelos Livieratos has ventured to draw a systematic comparison between Martellus' map and the 1518 map of Utopia. For example, he has looked at the disposition of the cities and the monasteries, and has even identified the tower on the eastern side of Utopia with the tower of the Amalfitans, the remains of a Catholic monastery functioning on the peninsula between the 10th and 12th century.

But Utopia and Athos are connected by more subtle ties. At the moment of his tonsure, a monk dies to the world. The life of the Athonite monks rests on the continuous remembrance of death. 'If you die before you die you will not die when you die', a popular motto on the peninsula goes.

By confining himself within the monastic walls and within the perimeter of Mount Athos, by turning his soul to life eternal, the monk also realizes the vanity, the foolishness of mundane affairs.

Raphael Hythloday came to the same realization through his encounter with the Utopians, away from the familiar world of Western Europe. His journey to a distant non-place allowed the traveller-philosopher to take a distance from the world in the best neo-Stoic tradition.

Utopia itself became an uncanny memento mori.

According to Malcolm Bishop, Erasmus of Rotterdam who oversaw the first edition of More's Utopia and worked with Holbein would have ordered the artist a reworking of the original map for this 1518 second edition, after envisioning a possible skull.

Remembrance of death was concealed behind the island of Utopia, but also behind the name of its author, Morus, gen. Mori. So by remembering death (memento mori) one would also remember Thomas More.

Bishop links this map to other anamorphic representations, such as those produced fifty years later by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, in which human heads were hidden behind dead natures.

But Holbein's map might also be located within a broader neo-Stoic Renaissance mapping tradition; a tradition in which cartographic representations acted as mnemonic devices and as moral emblems: as images representing a visible thing and also something different from it; as objects of contemplation through the assistance of which the individual could rise above the mundane in order to observe the theatre of the world.

Maps could work as emblems at various scales: at a national scale, like the Leo Belgicus, standing against the aggressor, but also at global scale. They could become, for example, emblems of universal love, such as Appian and Gemma Frisius' famous cordiform projections; emblems of 'unity in diversity' and universal tolerance at a time of bloody religious conflict, like Ortelius' world map with Stoic inscriptions; or again, emblems of human foolishness, no less disturbing than the skull hidden behind utopia.

Remembrance of death invites to self-reflection and leads to moral self-improvement. In front of a skull, our gaze wanders through its empty orbs. It wanders through a universe of emptiness in which all that is materially worthy on this earth becomes vain, meaningless. In front of this Ptolemaic map by an anonymous (1590), we look at a face, but a senseless world is reflected back to us, a world of wars, a world of greedy desires and thirst for power, a world far removed from Utopia and Mount Athos. 'Nosce te ipsum': know thyself; know thy foolishness, poor mortal - the joker seems to say.
Like Utopia, Athos itself became an emblem. And unlike utopia, one it could be located on western maps. For example, in the island book by the Venetian captain Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti, it became the head of a monk kneeled in prayer with his *komboschoini* (prayer cord). The sanctity of the peninsula filled with monasteries in every corner and the piety of the monks were reiterated on the accompanying verses:

Da Stalimene in fin a Monte Sancto E circha mia sesanta inuer ponente Che Atos gia gli fu dito antiquamente Altissimo e divoto tuto quanto Per tuto e monasteri in ogni canto De chalbieri pieni che sovente Fano suo oration giemente Pregando Idio chi cuopri col suo manto.

Bartolomeo made 15 journeys to the Aegean, calculating, he argued, the precise location of the islands on the map. His *isolario* was thus explicitly conceived for practical navigational purposes, and yet, like Buondelmonti, it retained through its poetic and philological project the humanist interest in the locations and landscapes of Greek antiquity.

Two centuries later, Vincenzo Coronelli, the official cosmographer of the Serenissima, turned island books and maps into tools for political propaganda. Rather than remembering death, he seemed more concerned about the Turks. And so, from utopian quasi-island, or kneeled monk, on his *Geographical Parallel of the Ancient with the Modern Archipelago* (1697), Athos turned into a giant crosshelping Venice's lion chase the infidel Turk outside of the Aegean (note Athos' proportions and centrality in the Aegean). On this map, we read that:

'The Holy Mountain, or Agion Oros, called Monastir by the Turks and Athos by Ptolemy is inhabited by monks who make it famous for the quantity and quality of their monasteries'.

But Coronelli's map is more about non-presences than presences, of quotations rather than observations:

- The history of Xerxes' canal is not simply mentioned but 'mapped' back to the year 3487 of the world.
- The point where the Persian fleet was shipwrecked is mapped too. 'Here Mardonius crashed with 100 vessels and lost 20,000 men in the year 3470 of the world'.
- And mapped is also the shade of Mount Athos projecting, according to Apollonius Rhodius and Pliny the Elder, on the island of Lemnos (which is 34 miles away).
- And if that's not enough, go to the original text: Pliny, book 4, chapt. 10.

Rather than tracing a 'parallel' with the ancient world, this map conflates ancient and modern. It brings the Classical past and the invisible back to life through its very spatialization.

Only mentioned by previous authors, Xerxes' canal here is given a prominent visual form, along with a wall 'that has been separating the peninsula from Macedonia'.

This tradition has continued to our days, as maps claimed to become less 'emblematic' and more 'scientific', as the ancient wall depicted by Coronelli was substituted by a concrete wall and multilingual signs, as monks and visitors (exclusively male visitors) to Athos are allowed to enter the peninsula only by sea (by ferry).

To conclude, utopias are by definition non-places. But even imaginary non-places are produced in space and time. In this paper I have tried to explore possible links between utopia and territory, for great utopias, it has been argued, startle and yet are recognizable and conceivable. Like Mount Athos, they are isolated from the outer world and yet they belong to the realm of possibility.

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