Introduction: placing topographies

The reassuring enclosure of a garden and the overwhelming vastness of a desert swept by the wind; the majestic charisma of a mountain looming on the horizon and the impenetrable darkness of a cave; the flamboyant glistening of a torrent and the touch of the waves caressing the seashore as the sun is about to set. Certain places seem to have a special hold on the human imagination and return to us again and again.

Gardens, deserts, mountains, caves, rivers, and seas deeply mark the Judaeo-Christian tradition; they hold a symbolic power. Sites of prayer and revelations, they are the media in and through which the drama of human salvation takes shape and meaning. By virtue of their vivid elemental peculiarities, not only do they help anchor supernatural events and map spiritual pathways, but they also solidly imprint them in the collective memory. Through the centuries, prophets and holy men, solitaries and thinkers, philosophers and poets have chosen these places as sites for withdrawal and meditation, or simply as metaphors for different states of mind and stages of life. To such places we still turn for consolation and therapy. In such places we experience a break from the everyday and a gateway through which we can reconnect with the totality of the cosmos, even for a brief moment. This book is about Byzantine perceptions of such places; it is about *topoi*.

The ancient Greek word *topos* is substantially different from our modern concept of space, which we have been taught to think of as an abstract geometrical dimension. At the same time, however, *topos* also spans a wider semantic spectrum than the word 'place'. In its original sense, *topos* is not simply a place, but an 'evocative place'. In its philological roots is embedded a sense of beauty that has been lost in translation.[1] *Topos* is not simply a geographical location, a pause in space, or a node within a network; it is a dynamic rhetorical figure. It is an image that keeps recurring over and over again across space and time, regardless of originality and context (we still talk about literary topoi, or 'commonplaces', though we do not necessarily identify them with the evocative and the peculiar).

[1] Cottini 2004: 13.

Topoi enable us to memorize concepts and make sense of the world. The ancients, and then the Byzantines, experienced and narrated the earth primarily as a horizontal, yet richly layered, sequence of *topoi*. Today, with the emergence of new digital mapping technologies, we are ironically witnessing a resurgence of a similar approach to space. We turn to Google Street View to identify places we are planning to visit, and seek it for landmarks we can easily keep in mind and promptly recall once we get to the spot. We upload (often nearly identical) snapshots of iconic places on Google Earth and on blogs to pin down memories of a recent trip – perhaps the ultimate expression of Susan Sontag's claim that 'to collect photographs is to collect the world'.[2] Conversely, we launch ourselves in virtual explorations of the globe, hopping through these same digital *topoi*.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to dip into the origins and workings of topography, a concept and a trope that frames and structures Byzantine perceptions of space and nature – and the chapters in this book. Placing this concept within a wider historical and cultural context is a necessary first step to attune our mind and eyes to such perceptions and venture on the winding path of Byzantine topographies. This first part of the journey requires a slightly extended trek through some dense terrain, as the topographic mode is compared and contrasted to modern western ways of seeing, placed side by side with other spatial traditions, and navigated through Graeco-Roman texts, maps, and paintings. The final part of the chapter introduces the reader to Byzantine topographies and to the structure of the book.

Ways of seeing

Since antiquity, the power of geography has lain in its palpable ability to evoke places and their individual qualities; to bring them before the mind's eye of listeners and readers and impress them in memory – hence the intimate tie between *topos*, vividness, and the art of memory.[3] In modern geography *topos* has nevertheless lacked the same critical engagement as other spatial concepts. In particular, for the past thirty years, in Anglophone

[2] Sontag 1977. Sontag also reflects on the way modern western experience of place has been increasingly mediated by the lens of the camera, at once justifying our presence in a place and distancing us from it. On the amplification of this effect through digital mapping technologies see della Dora 2012.

[3] Mangani 2006.

cultural geography, landscape seems to have overshadowed any discussion of place, let alone *topos*.[4]

There are good reasons for that. Unlike place, landscape often embeds a scenic quality. It presupposes distancing from the land. While place is usually ascribed emotional connotations, as a concept, landscape grants the geographer the necessary distance to look at the world from a critical stance. It offers the illusion of simultaneous immersion and detachment. If place evokes enclosure and coziness – the English word 'place' comes from the Greek *plateia* (that is, an open-air but bounded space) – landscape embeds a tension between the near and the faraway, proximity and distance. It implies synoptic vision, spatial control. At the same time, however, unlike 'space', landscape does have a material texture. Hence its special appeal to contemporary geographers.

Visual mastering and distanced aesthetic contemplation characterize the history of landscape as a typically modern western way of enframing and therefore 'picturing' nature.[5] The emergence of this 'way of seeing'[6] is commonly deemed a Renaissance invention linked to the theorization and development of linear perspective. This is an artistic practice that produces the illusion of a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. Visual axes converge at a vanishing point in (or beyond) the canvas, creating a sense of depth, whereas objects diminish progressively as their distance from the observer increases. Any portion of the picture is therefore calculable from the preceding or following portion – linear perspective systematizes and 'mathematizes space'.[7] As such, linear perspective has often been considered a characteristic of, if not a metaphor for, modernity itself; as the visual culmination of a longer tradition of progressive reification and disenchantment with nature initiated in the thirteenth century

[4] Place saw its heyday in the 1970s through the work of humanistic geographers reacting against a 'spatial science' disrespectful of subjectivity and human creativity (Tuan 1974; Relph 1976). In the 1990s place and *topophilia* (attachment to place) were somewhat eclipsed by critical discussions on landscape, initially as a reaction to what some perceived as a 'naive' and 'socially disengaged' humanistic geography (Cosgrove 1985; Mitchell 2000). For an account of shifting approaches to place in human geography, see Cresswell 2004. Through the decades, discussions of place have also been taken up by scholars from other disciplines in the humanities, including anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians (Smith 1987; Feld and Basso 1996; Werblowsky 1996; Malpas 1999; Inge 2003; Brown 2004).

[5] Crandell 1993; Howe and Wolfe 2002: 2.

[6] The phrase is taken from Berger (1972), who explores the social implications of visual conventions. A similar approach was devised by Michel Baxandall in the same year. His 'period eye' emphasized the cultural constructedness of vision and examined how artists and their works functioned in their original contexts (Baxandall 1972).

[7] Panofsky 1991 (1975): 71.

with technological innovations and underpinned by an objectifying, scientific attitude peculiar to the West.[8]

According to Denis Cosgrove, such attitude generated what he called 'the landscape idea', or a way in which, since the early Renaissance, 'some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations'.[9] As suggested earlier, this visual ideology was closely bound up with the conceptual mastery and physical appropriation of space, for example, through land survey and the science of ballistics. Indeed, Cosgrove argued, the principles to be learnt in the perspectival representation of landscape were identical to those of map-making and artillery science, both resting on Euclidian geometry.[10] Thus conceptualized, landscape became an external position from which the workings of nature and society could be ordered and controlled.

The invention of linear perspective and the emergence of the 'landscape idea' have been usually narrated as the apotheosis of a 'linear' history of seeing and depicting the world in an increasingly 'accurate' (or more realistic) fashion reflective of technical progress and the domestication of nature.[11] As Erwin Panofsky famously wrote, 'the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world'.[12] Creating the effect of seeing spatial relationships from a single vantage point, linear perspective glorifies the spectator: 'it takes absolute control of the subject and submits it as an object for view'.[13]

Rather tellingly, everyday speech emphasizes the dualistic effect produced by such mono-focality. For example, we consider situations from our 'own perspective' (thus ascribing perspective an individualistic and relativistic value), but we also 'put things into perspective', meaning that by taking a distance from reality we are enabled to approach it more 'rationally'. Art historian James Elkins writes about this curious disjunction: 'perspective' as near tyrannical mathematical certainity, *and* as total relativism.[14] While Marxist and feminist geographers have not failed to point out the power implications of the mercantilist, bourgeois, masculine 'distanced gaze' over the land, and phenomenologists its

[8] White 1964: 134. See also Collingwood 1960; Olwig 1984; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1996; Lidov 2008.
[9] Cosgrove 1998 (1984): 1. [10] Cosgrove 1985: 46.
[11] See Cosgrove 1998 (1984). [12] Panofsky 1991 (1975): 68.
[13] Crandell 1993: 8.
[14] In particular, Elkins shows how for Renaissance artists originally there were many compatible perspectives, yet over time perspective has come to be regarded as a metaphor, rather than a practice, 'a concept for ordering our perception and accounting for our subjectivity' (1996: xi).

dehumanizing effects, linear perspective has been largely naturalized as *the* way through which we 'look at' the world.[15] We simply take it for granted.

Put into 'perspective', however, linear perspective is an exception rather than the rule. Children usually tend to draw things as if they were seeing them from a point of view within the picture; they start to sketch things in perspective only after they have been taught to do so. Likewise, ancient Asian, Egyptian, and pre-Colombian civilizations all represented the world in non-linear fashions, as did western European societies before and during the Middle Ages.[16] Many of these non-linear visual histories have been overshadowed by modernity and western 'linear narratives'. While most landscape histories produced by cultural geographers, for example, do acknowledge that before the fifteenth century Europeans looked at and represented the world 'differently', they almost never explain how and why, except (briefly) when using such views to define the modern.[17] Pre-Renaissance representations and descriptions of the environment have been often dismissed as 'artificial', 'inaccurate', or 'disregardful of perspective', and have thus been largely consigned to oblivion.[18] Only recently have geographers begun to problematize this narrative and to call for the study of neglected pre-modern spatial traditions, alongside a renewed interest in modern artists employing non-linear techniques.[19]

This book explores an alternative way of seeing, a 'Byzantine way of seeing'. But who were the Byzantines? The Byzantines were the citizens of the Eastern Roman Empire during late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and the self-proclaimed Christian inheritors of the Greek cultural tradition.[20]

[15] See for example, Cosgrove 1998 (1984) and 1985; Rose 1993; Mitchell 1994, 1996; etc. For a phenomenological critique, see for example, Tilley 1994; Ingold 1993; and more generally Wylie 2007. Alternative techniques employed by modern artists, such as cubists and futurists, for example, often emerged as provocative reactions to linear conventions (see, for example, Gregory 1994: 393–7; Olsson 2007; Cosgrove 2008).

[16] See, for example, Scolari, 2013; Damisch 1995: 43–55; Crandell 1993: 6. Swiss historian of science and educator Jean Piaget (1967 [1948]) controversially related the change in children's development of the perception of space from non-perspectival to a perspectival to the history of mankind. The study has been criticized for being based on western children therefore reflecting western values and predispositions (Edgerton 1975; see also Olwig 2001).

[17] See for example, Cosgrove 1985.

[18] Casey 2002: 3; Rees 1973.

[19] On pre-modern geographies, see Mangani 2006; Olwig 2008; Lilley 2011. Examples of modernist and contemporary non-linear painting techniques discussed by geographers include futurism and Italian aeropainting (Cosgrove 2001: 237–41), Cezanne (Wylie 2007), and Lanyon (Crouch and Toogood 1999). In her history of the 'geographical unconscious', Loukaki (2014) has recently traced a compelling comparison between the spatial conventions of Byzantine and cubist art.

[20] Byzantine culture wove together the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition with elements of classical culture, including Greek literature and philosophy and Roman law and institutions. 'While being the direct continuator of the Roman Empire in the East, Byzantium underwent

Their empire lasted – remarkably – for more than a thousand years (AD 330–1453) and at its zenith it encompassed a vast geographical extent spanning from Italy to Egypt and from Gibraltar to the Caucasus (Map 1). Byzantine visual culture nonetheless transcended its temporal and geographical boundaries. Outlasting the fall of the empire to the Ottomans, it survives to this day in and through the Orthodox Church. This culture has never accepted to view the world through 'the immovable, Cyclopean eye of the Reinassance' and its monofocal gaze.[21] It rather privileged a revelatory, multiperspectival approach whereby space was viewed simultaneously from different angles and wrapped the viewer, rather than setting him or her at a distance.

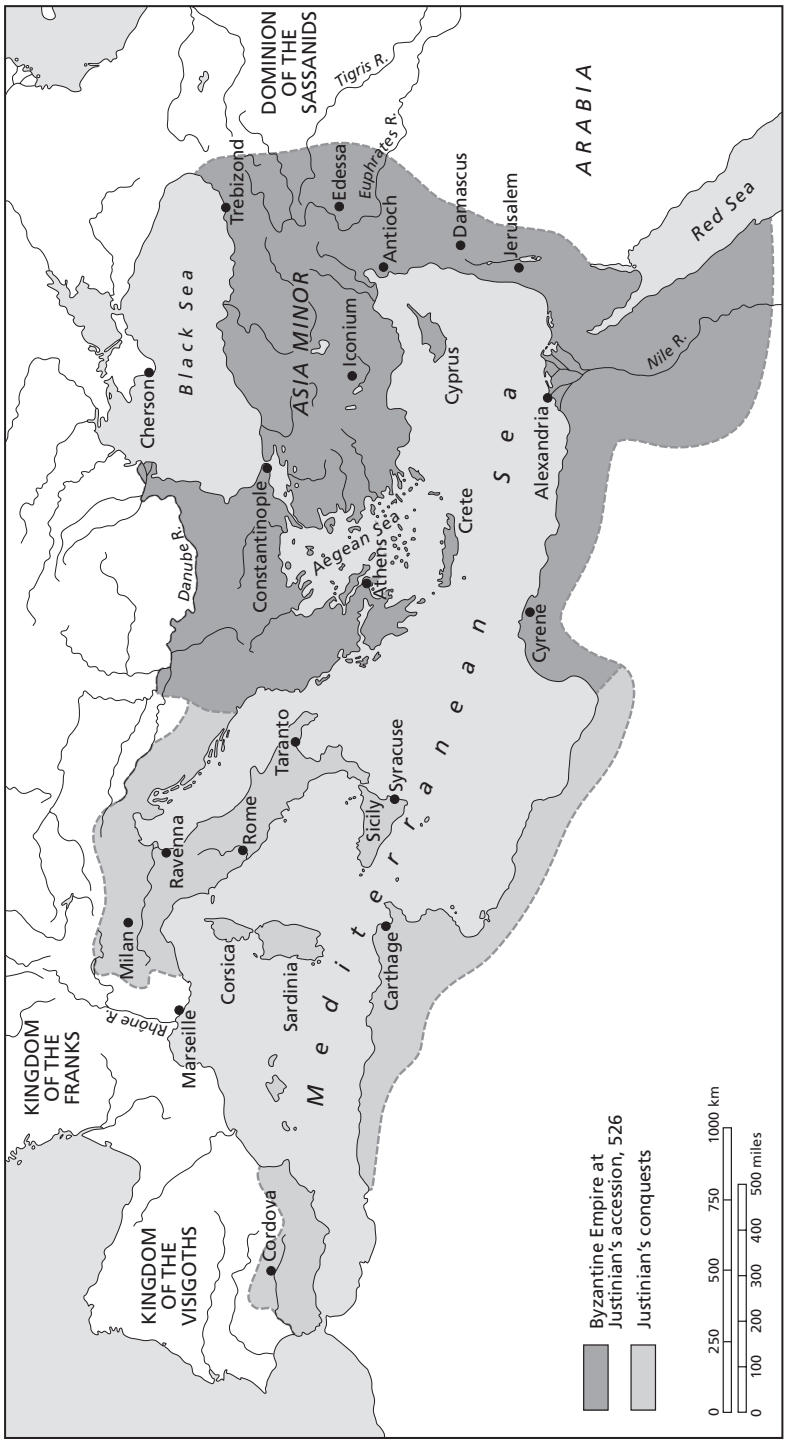
As with most pre-modern cultures, Byzantium perceived the world and itself as part of 'an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories'.[22] Its seminal work was 'the Bible', that is, *the* Book, and Byzantines imagined themselves as part of a universal chronicle starting from Adam and ending with the Second Coming of Christ. The Anaphora (i.e. Eucharistic prayer) of Saint Basil, which was part of the daily liturgy of the Byzantine Church, for example, unfolded a sprawling narrative beginning with God, passing through the angelic world, and recounting the creation, fall, and restoration of humanity through more than two hundred biblical citations and allusions. The Byzantine monk and ascetical writer John Moschos (AD 550–619) said that the prayer was so well known that village children could recite it by heart.[23] According to the Greek Church Fathers, Old Testament events were prefigurations of New Testament events and revelations – and so were the physical places attached to them: gardens and the wilderness, mountains and caves, rivers and seas. For example, Christ's temptation in the garden of Gethsemane recapitulates the temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden, whereas reprising his ascent on Mount Sinai, Moses appears with Christ on Mount Tabor. The Creator did continue to speak to humans through His works, which the Fathers interpreted as *loci memoriae*, or in the words of Basil, 'memorials of His wonders'.[24]

a period of transformation between the fourth and seventh centuries that turned it into a thoroughly Christian and medieval society. One of the principal turning points was the foundation of Constantinople in 330, accompanied by the introduction of Christianity as the official religion' (Angelov et al. 2013: 2–3).

[21] Loukaki 2014: 99. [22] Silko quoted in Foltz 2001: 40.

[23] Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 196 (Moschos 1992: 172–4).

[24] Bas. Caes., *Hexaemeron* 8.8. In the *anaphora* Basil uses similar phrases, such as 'wonderful deeds' and 'works of Thy hands'.



Map 1 Map of the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century during its maximum territorial expansion.

This book takes the reader on a journey through these different biblical *topoi* and their cyclical returns in patristic writing and Byzantine literature and art. The prominent defender of icons John of Damascus said that places are also icons. Like icons, place is self-enclosed, well-defined, 'graspable'; it is the 'corporeal boundary of that which contains, by means of which that which is contained is contained'.[25] According to John, through 'the veiled language of Scripture' intellectual realities are made accessible by means of sensible *topoi*. The intangible is 'clothed and multiplied in a variety of different symbols', including the earth and all its environs.[26]

Like a holy icon, the earth and its variety of *topoi* were thus symbolic in the ancient, strong sense of the word, since 'symbol', *sym-bolon*, denotes coming together of two halves, the visible and the invisible.[27] Through the centuries, writers of saints' lives superimposed biblical *topoi* on geographically distant or unrelated places. Once embedded in the land, these *topoi* were used to signpost lives of saints, which would in turn be reappropriated as models by other holy men and women. The same *topoi* would thus recur generation after generation, as in a spiral – remaining always the same, yet never exactly the same. It was through these repetitions, through the juxtapositions and superimpositions of evocative images and symbols, through overlapping sacred topographies that Byzantines looked at and beyond the world and nature.

Seeing nature

Nature is a slippery concept. It is material and spiritual, pure and undefiled, given and made. Nature is order and disorder, wholeness and the sum of its parts; it is mastered and mastering, garden and wilderness.[28] At the root of its polysemy lies a fundamental paradox. In everyday speech we call someone 'good-natured' or 'ill-natured'; we speak of 'the natural way' of doing things, implying that there is no other legitimate way; we say that

[25] Τόπος ἐστὶ σωματικὸς πέρας τοῦ περιέχοντος, καθ' ὃ περιέχεται τὸ περιεχόμενον (John Dam., *Concerning the Place of God* 13.1 [trans. Schaff and Wace 1899]), cf. Arist., *Physics* 4.4.

[26] John Dam., *On Holy Images* 2.32.

[27] As opposed to sign, which is purely relational, symbol in this stronger sense embeds the presence of what is symbolized (on the origins of the concept see Struck 2004 and on its use in patristics see pp. 257–66). Whereby, the landscape was symbolic in the sense that it contained the invisible and, as with sacred icons, it made it visible thanks to its visibilities. In the words of Maximos the Confessor, 'the entire world of beings produced by God in creation is divided into a spiritual world filled with intelligible and incorporeal essences and into this sensible and bodily world which is so ingeniously woven together of many forms and natures' (*Mystagogy*, trans. Berthold 1985: 188).

[28] Smith 1984: 1.

something is 'second nature' to someone, or that just it comes 'naturally', meaning that it is spontaneous, or intrinsic to that person. In other words, we use the term nature to indicate the fundamental essence of something.[29] At the same time, however, we also refer to nature as synonymous with the physical environment and, more specifically, with areas of the earth that have not been modified by human action. In this sense, nature is defined as a reality 'other' from humans; as something out there that exists independently and separately from us.

Nature is thus an abstraction and yet something that is overwhelmingly physical and geographical; something we cannot quite grasp, and yet we put on the map, bound within wilderness preserves, urban parks, and even in our backyards. 'Nature' nonetheless continues to embed a more philosophical, religious, and theological aura than words such as 'environment'. Occasionally it attains grandeur; Buffon, for example, characterized nature as 'the exterior throne of divine magnificence'.[30]

As with the Greek and Latin words for earth (*gē* and *terra*), *physis* and *natura* are both gendered in the feminine. 'The earth … is a mother,' wrote Philo of Alexandria in the first century AD. 'As Plato says,' continues the Jewish philosopher, 'earth does not imitate woman, but woman earth … Fitly therefore on earth also, most ancient and most fertile of mothers, did nature bestow, by way of breasts, streams of rivers and springs, to the end that both the plants might be watered and all animals might have aboundance to drink.'[31] As with 'earth', the word 'nature' continues to suggest nurture and organicity (and thus we still talk about Mother Nature and Mother Earth); yet, to modern western minds, it also suggests an object of domination and exploitation – a landscape enframed and mastered from a distance through linear perspective.

Progressive separation and alienation from nature have been envisaged by many as the hallmark of western modernity and the root of the environmental crisis.[32] Although we are used to dividing nature from human action and perception into separate realms, in reality, some argue, the two are indivisible.[33] Over the past twenty years, the very concept of nature as a fixed ontological entity has been problematized by historians, geographers,

[29] Cronon 1995a: 34. [30] Cited in Glacken 1967: xiv.

[31] Quoted in Glacken 1967: 14. Ancient Greek philosophers originally understood nature as a spontaneous principle of inner motion inside each thing. It was only in the first century BC that nature started to become personified as a goddess and conceived as the 'mother' of all things, as Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* (37.205). This transition and its effects and reception throughout western history are compellingly illustrated by Pierre Hadot (2006).

[32] See Worthy 2013, for example. [33] Schama 1995: 8.

and philosophers alike. 'Nature is not nearly as natural as it seems,' argues environmental historian William Cronon.[34] Instead, it is a deeply human construction, or, more precisely, a cultural construction entangled with the earth's matter. Nature can never be separated from our own values and beliefs; it can never be understood independently from the specific contexts in which it is embedded, narrated, and represented. Nature ultimately depends on our ways of seeing.

Yet, ways of seeing are in turn the product of cultural histories and spatial traditions. To this general rule, Byzantine topographies make no exception. They do not appear in isolation, nor do they suddenly surface at a specific moment in time. Instead, they are the result and fulfilment of complex overlayerings and encounters with pre-existing ways of experiencing, perceiving, and representing space. This is a crucial theme for the argument of this book, and the remainder of this introductory chapter briefly sketches the genealogies of such ways of seeing.

Geography, chorography, and topography

Byzantine spatial perceptions and representations find their roots in ancient Graeco-Roman traditions of chorography and topography, that is, in descriptions of regions and places of the earth, and especially in their emphasis on vividness, memorability, and local specificities, what Steven Feld and Keith Basso called 'the intense particularity of place'.[35] The Byzantines perceived the earth and its places as interlocking parts of a fully integrated whole, the cosmos. These different scales – local, regional, global, cosmic – were for the first time combined and systematized in the second century AD, by the Alexandrian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy. In his *Geōgraphikē Yphēgēsis* ('Geographical Guidebook'), one of the most influential texts in the history of cartography and geographical thought, Ptolemy operated a basic distinction between these scales, whose description (*-graphia*), he argued, demanded different types of approaches.

[34] Cronon 1995a: 25; see also Castree 2013. Bruno Latour (1993) provocatively argued that 'we have never been modern' as the process of 'purification' between ontological spheres such as nature and culture in reality never happened. Instead, he argues, the human and the natural are interfused as hybrids. The blur between human and non-human has also become a popular theme among non-academic creative nature writers (for example, see Price 2006). Recently, geographers have emphasized material agencies and 'livingness' of the 'more-than-human world', thus moving away from strict constructionism and prime emphasis on discourse (Whatmore 2002).

[35] Feld and Basso 1996.