

**Ambiguous liminality: the depiction of the frontier zone
in *Digenes Akrites*, *Grottaferrata V*.**

This paper is about the image of the frontier between Byzantine and Arab territory in the *Grottaferrata* version of *Digenes Akrites*. As Catia Galatariotou (*BMGS* 1987) showed, the situation depicted corresponds more or less to the reality of the 10th century: a frontier which was no clear dividing line, but rather a broad and vague margin where considerable exchange took place between Byzantines and Arabs. The scope of this paper is to show that this characteristic ambiguity of the frontier zone in *Digenes Akrites* is not only a matter of politics and culture, but is also of spiritual kind.

The meeting between Digenes Akrites and the so-called ‘daughter of Haplorrabdes’ in book V of the *Grottaferrata* version is one of the most elaborated instances of a meeting between Arab(s) and Byzantine(s). Its explicit setting in the Syrian desert, borderland par excellence, and the peculiarity of the depicted relations between Byzantines and Arabs make this episode an ideal starting-point.

A second purpose is to prove how the setting has a specific influence on the way these two characters can be interpreted.

I intend to show the spiritual character of the borderland by the concrete means of intertextuality (cf Paul Claes) between *Digenes Akrites* and hagiography. I will make use of intertextuality on two levels: one is the more general level of the genre (building on Alison Goddard Elliott 1987), the second is the more specific level of the intertextual relations between *Grottaferrata V* and the *Life of Theoktiste*. The latter will be an illustration of the former on a more concrete level. Erich Trapp (*AnBoll* 1976) has proved that in *Grottaferrata V* this *Life* is used extensively as a source.

It will be made clear that the structure of the stories (1) which Digenes tells himself in V, and (2) which the daughter of Haplorrabdes tells Digenes, closely resemble the structure of the story of the holy wanderer who sets off for the desert.

By means of the model developed by Elliott (1987), I will divide (1) and (2) into themes and within each theme, I will consider several motives. Space is one of them: the desert is a traditional setting for hagiographical texts and thus a motive that can be discussed within this frame. The concept of the chronotope, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1937-1938) can serve as a means to focus on the relations between the texts when it comes to their use of time and space.

In lives of desert saints, the desert is an intermediate space where nothing is what it seems, where oppositions meet, where the identity of individuals is uncertain and expectations are easily broken: there rites of passage take place and future saints are confronted with themselves.

The identity of the characters in V is ambiguous and no one is what he or she seems. The setting used, that of a saint’s life, creates certain expectations within the reader. The reader is encouraged by the intertextual similarities to compare Digenes and the daughter of Haplorravdes’ to saints. However, the content of several important hagiographical motives is inverted both for Digenes and for the daughter of Haplorravdes. This is true for both the comparison on the level of the genre and the comparison with the *Life of Theoktiste*.

The liminality has the same effect on both Digenes and the Arab girl: both go through a rite of passage with an unexpected outcome. Thus it can be proved that the daughter of Haplorravdes is some sort of ‘anti-saint’. Digenes as well fails to meet the expectations, and new light can be shed on his heroic status. The literal intermediacy of the frontier between two people is also a spiritual zone of intermediacy.