Light and sight: Vasilij Grigorovich Barskij, Mount Athos and the geographies of eighteenth-century Russian Orthodox Enlightenment

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A B S T R A C T

While over the past fifteen years there has been an increasing acknowledgement of the value of thinking 'geographically' in understanding the nature of eighteenth-century intellectual culture, the geographies of non-western European Enlightenments still remain largely uncharted. This article focuses on the Orthodox Enlightenment through the lens of the accounts and sketches of Vasilij Grigorovich Barskij (1701—1747), a Kievan Orthodox 'self-enlightener' who for twenty-four years travelled by foot across central Europe and the Ottoman Empire recording the places he saw in the utmost detail. His texts and images have usually been considered separately and used by scholars as valuable sources of factual information. Set in conversation with each other, however, they open a fascinating window on the Orthodox Enlightenment as a 'way of seeing' and perceiving the world. Paying specific attention to Barskij's two visits to Mount Athos in 1725—1726 and 1744 (towards the outset and end of his journeys), the article aims to explore the role of the Russian Orthodox Enlightenment in shaping perceptions and representations of space and place, and to show how tensions between critical enquiry and Orthodox tradition were negotiated by Barskij through narrative and visual strategies.

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On 20 July 1723 a twenty-two-year-old student and son of a wealthy merchant from Kiev left his degree, his family and his native country. He would only return home twenty-four years later. Sustaining himself mainly on charity, during these years he uninterruptedly travelled by foot through what are today Poland, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Greece, the Holy Land, Cyprus, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Romania. He visited their main Christian shrines; he perfected his Latin; he picked up Italian and became familiar with its dialects; he learnt Greek; he became a monk. About a month after his return to Kiev in 1747, he died.

Vasilij Grigorovich Barskij (1701—1747) — such was the name of the wanderer — left us with over a thousand pages of accounts of his travels in Slavonic accompanied by scores of drawings.[1] As he moved throughout Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Barskij described and sketched places, buildings, monuments, artifacts, church rituals, costumes and any other thing that he deemed curious or worthy of attention — and he did so in the utmost detail.

The resulting manuscript was first published in a highly abridged and corrupted edition in 1778 (over thirty years after his death) and underwent at least four reprints.[2] Forgotten for decades, it was republished in 1885 in a much improved edition sponsored by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. To date, most of the text remains untranslated.[3]

Because of their extensiveness and almost obsessive attention to detail, Barskij's writings have generally been used by ecclesiastical and architectural historians and Byzantinists as a precious mine of factual information on church architecture and on monastic and

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[1] The accounts, known as *The Travels of Vasilij Grigorovich Barskij in the Holy Lands of the East,* survive in the autograph manuscript of 503 folia, and are accompanied by approximately 150 drawings. The manuscript is preserved at the Akademiia Nauk Archive, Kiev v, No. 1062.

[2] There are later editions dated 1785, 1793, 1800 and 1819.

[3] The most accurate published edition is N. Barsukov (Ed.), *Stranstvovaniia Vasil'ia Grigorovicha-Barskago po sviatym mestamvostoka s 1723 po 1747 g,* 4 vol, St Petersburg, 1885—1887. The only substantive part of Barskij's travels that has been translated into English is his journeys to Cyprus, see A. Grishin (Ed.), *A Pilgrim's Account of Cyprus: Bars'kyj's Travels in Cyprus,* Altamont/New York, 1996. Other parts of his accounts have been translated into other languages, but there is no complete translation or critical edition. The most significant effort has been made by architect Pavlos Mylonas and his successors, which has resulted in a Greek translation and critical edition of over 700 pages of Barskij's journeys to Mount Athos, see P. Mylonas (Ed.), *Βασίλη Γκρηγκορόβιτζ Μπάρσκι: τα ταξίδια του στο Άγιον Όρος, 1725—26 και 1744—45,* Thessaloniki, 2009. All the translations from this text in the following pages are mine.

secular life in the Orthodox East.[4] Likewise, and for the same reason, Barskij's sketches are usually valued for their architectural accuracy in an age before photography.[5] Seldom, however, have text and image been considered together, and even more rarely has Barskij's work caught the attention of historical geographers. Set in conversation, his texts and images provide not only valuable historical records, but also fascinating windows on the spatial perceptions and complex geographies of Orthodox Enlightenments in the first half of the eighteenth century. Together, they offer a unique insight into the largely unknown world of non-Western Enlightenment geographies and the previously unexplored spatialities of religion at this time.[6]

Over the past twenty years the conception of the Enlightenment as a unified secular, metropolitan and scientific philosophical movement has been increasingly problematized. Indeed, the very idea of Enlightenment as a fixed set of beliefs has been largely replaced by an understanding of Enlightenment 'as a way of thinking critically in and about the world'.[7] In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term 'philosophy', J.G.A. Pocock argues, was not always taken to indicate a body of systematic thought: it was 'a method rather than a system'.[8] Likewise, the term 'Enlightenment' was understood differently from how we use it today. It was not employed to 'map' a period of European history, nor was it used as a label for generalization, nor as an inclusionary (or exclusionary) definition. Pocock thus suggests that we would do better to think of 'a *family* of Enlightenments — various movements comprising both family resemblances and family quarrels'.[9] This approach leads to a picture of Europe as a complex world of cross-fertilizations in which rationalism and revealed religion sometimes clashed, but in many other cases coexisted and attempted to come to terms with each other. It was a world in which the Enlightenment project coexisted with a pluralist account of Enlightenments.[10]

As Charlie Withers and others have painstakingly shown, Enlightenment ideas (including critical, analytical and scientific concerns) were not simply dependant on centre-periphery relationships, nor did they 'free-float' over territory. On the contrary, as they moved across space they took on new meanings and were appropriated in ways peculiar to their cultural contexts of reception. These processes of appropriation often resulted in new and unique formations which were often very different from western European forms of radical Enlightenment (such as the French). There was, for example, Pocock argued, a distinctive 'Protestant Enlightenment' in which English Calvinists particularly became involved. Other forms of 'soft' or 'moderate' European Enlightenments, which sought to reconcile pietism and rationalism, spanned the German *Aufklärung*, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the Neapolitan *illuminismo*.[11]

In eighteenth-century Russia, of which Kiev and western Ukraine were part, local 'enlighteners' produced a rich culture that effectively blended Enlightenment ideas of progress, reason and critical enquiry with Orthodox spiritual tradition. As with moderate mainstream and religious Enlightenments across Europe, this Enlightenment 'reconciled reason and revelation, science and religion, human autonomy and providence',[12] and yet, as we shall see, it bore a typically Orthodox imprint which made it distinctive from those European moderate Enlightenments.

These Orthodox Enlightenment principles moved through, and largely by means of, pre-existing religious infrastructures and networks. Church intellectuals actively contributed to the transmission of European ideas to Russia and the rest of the Slavic world, and made an original contribution to the pan-European republic of letters. Their conception of Enlightenment, however, had to do first of all with the enlightenment of the human soul (which was perfectly in line with the Orthodox doctrine). As Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter observes, 'for lay intellectuals reason guided the moral development of the human person. For church intellectuals right reason strengthened religious faith and encouraged conscious Orthodox belief, at least among educated believers'.[13] Unlike its Western radical counterparts, or the Greek Diaphōtismos, the Russian Orthodox Enlightenment was a project for the transformation of the human being, even before that of society.[14]

During his lifelong journey Barskij moved through extended and well-established international networks of Orthodox shrines, ecclesiastical schools, monasteries, patriarchates and other religious institutions which often also served as centres for learning. Towards the later part of his journeys he participated in the Greek Enlightenment movement in Cyprus and acted as a peripatetic link between the Russian and Greek Orthodox worlds. Traced on a map, Barskij's travels allow us to chart the networks and key nodes of eighteenth-century Orthodox geographies of knowledge. Perhaps even more interestingly, however, Barskij's travel accounts and

[4] As Alexander Grishin notes, Barskij's accounts and sketches are in many instances either our earliest, or sometimes our only, records for the original appearance of Byzantine buildings, or for buildings that no longer exist, especially in Greece and Cyprus. For example, his detailed drawing of Hosios Loukas and its accompanying annotations have been invaluable for conservators and art historians trying to determine the original eleventh-century iconographic programme severely damaged during the following century. See A. Grishin, A Byzantine pilgrim: Bars'kyj's manuscript and its real and imagined audiences, in: G. Kratzmann (Ed.), *Imagination, Books and Community in Medieval Europe* Melbourne, 2009, 147. Examples of the use of Barskij's descriptions as sources for archaeological information include: D. Mouriki, Stylistic trends in monumental painting of Greece during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1980/1981) 77–124; D. Winfield and C. Mango, The church of the Panagia tou Arakos, Lagoudera: first preliminary report, 1968, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24 (1969/1970) 377–380; C. Mango, E. Hawkins and S. Boyd, The Monastery of St. Chrysostomos at Koutsovendis (Cyprus) and its wall paintings: part I, description, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) 63–94; C. Mango, Notes on Byzantine monuments, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24 (1969/1970) 369–375; C. Mango and E. Hawkins, Report on field work in Istanbul and Cyprus, 1962–1963, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964) 319–340; A. Frolow, La date des mosaïques de Daphni, *Revue Archéologique* 2 (1962) 183–208.

[5] For example, see G. Speake, *Mount Athos: Renewal in Paradise*, New Haven and London, 2002, 132; G. Athanasiadēs, Σχεδιαστική αφήγηση του Άθωνα (ή παρα τηρώντας προσεκτικά τον Βασίλιο Γρ. Μπάρσκυ), in: S. Athanasiadēs (Ed.), Οδοιπορικό στο Άγιον Όρος, Thessaloniki, 1999, 96.

[6] C.W.J. Withers and R.J. Mayhew, Geography: space, place and intellectual history in the eighteenth century, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2011) 446.

[7] C.W.J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason*, Chicago, 2007, 1.

[8] J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, volume 2, Cambridge, 2001, 18.

[9] R.A. Jones, The work of J.G.A. Pocock, *Religion* 30 (2000) 402.

[10] B. Young, The Enlightenments of J.G.A. Pocock, *History of European Ideas* 25 (1999) 213. Similarly, through his comparative study of the Scottish and Neopolitan Enlightenments, Robertson made the case for the existence of the Enlightenment as a coherent, unified intellectual movement of the eighteenth century, see J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760*, Cambridge, 2005.

[11] Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment*. On the Scottish and Neapolitan Enlightenments, see Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*.

[12] E. Wirtschafter, *Religion and Enlightenment in Catherinian Russia: The Teachings of Metropolitan Platon*, DeKalb, IL, 2013, 5.

[13] Wirtschafter, *Religion and Enlightenment*, 21.

[14] The term Diaphōtismos refers to the Greek Enlightenment. Like the Russian Orthodox Enlightenment, the Diaphōtismos emphasized the role of education. Its historical significance, Paschalis Kitromelides observed, however, lay in its aspiration 'to transform the life of the Balkan peoples living under the Ottoman domination, on the model of Western culture, and … to integrate the nations of the European periphery into the common historical destiny of the continent', see P. Kitromelides, The Enlightenment East and West: a comparative perspective on the ideological origins of the Balkan political traditions, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 10 (1983) 55. See also S. Batalden, *Catherine II's Greek Prelate: Eugenios Voulgaris in Russia, 1771–1806*, New York, 1982.