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## ‘Other’ Spaces in Ancient Civilization – Christian Asceticism as Heterotopia

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# ‘Other’ Spaces in Ancient Civilization – Christian Asceticism as Heterotopia

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This article discusses how classical studies can use the concept of heterotopia to analyze both physical and imagined spaces in ancient civilizations. Michel Foucault has adopted the notion of heterotopia to refer to spaces and places that exist in reality, but are strikingly different from the surrounding space and reflect, negate and invert it. First, Foucault’s criteria for such other spaces are presented, and the concept of heterotopia is critically discussed before applications in ancient studies are outlined. Finally it is shown, as an example, how Foucault’s approach can help to understand the ideology and practice of ascetic monasticism in the Greek East in Late Antiquity.

heterotopia; Michel Foucault; Christian asceticism; physical space; imagined space; relationships between spaces; discourse analysis

Dieser Artikel erörtert, in welcher Weise die Altertumswissenschaften das Konzept der Heterotopie verwenden können, um physische ebenso wie ideelle Räume in antiken Kulturen zu analysieren. Michel Foucault hat den Begriff der Heterotopie aufgegriffen, um Räume und Orte zu bezeichnen, die real existieren, aber sich in auffälliger Weise vom umgebenden Raum unterscheiden und diesen spiegeln, negieren und umkehren. Zunächst werden die von Foucault aufgestellten Kriterien solcher anderen Orte vorgestellt und das Konzept der Heterotopie kritisch diskutiert, bevor Anwendungsmöglichkeiten in den Altertumswissenschaften skizziert werden. Schließlich wird als Beispiel gezeigt, wie Foucaults Ansatz helfen kann, die Ideologie und Praxis des asketischen Mönchtums im griechischen Osten der Spätantike zu verstehen.

Heterotopie; Michel Foucault; christliche Askese; materieller Raum; ideeller Raum; Raumrelationen; Diskursanalyse

## I Introduction

To the extent that it is shaped, constructed, and represented by people, space in the cultures of antiquity appears to be dichotomously organized. Political center and periphery, civilization and exotic margins of the world, city and country, sacred sphere and profane space, world of the living and realm of the dead, perceptible space and intelligible world; it would seem that the spatial experience and thinking of ancient peoples is dominated by binary oppositions.<sup>1</sup> The ancient cultures doubtless were familiar with the thresholds and zones of transition that were sometimes marked by rites, but they tended to structure the

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1 For a structuralist perspective on ancient space, see Vernant 1982 [1962], esp. 56, 119–129 and Vidal-Naquet 1986 [1981]. Further, also on the spatial conceptualization of values, Sluiter and Rosen 2006. See the introduction in Scott 2013 for an overview of scholarship on space in Greco-Roman civilization; further Gilhuly and Worman 2014, esp. 2–4.

physical, political, religious, and cultural space dichotomously. They usually attributed positive values to one of the two poles and negative values to the other.<sup>2</sup> All the same, what appears so grossly simplistic, lucid, and clear left room for deviations, for exceptions that did not conform to the structure and were out of place in some way. Or we may say that such a dichotomy of spaces rather provoked and thus produced these deviations.

When, as legend has it, the Scythian Prince Anacharsis came to Athens and proved to be a wise interlocutor, defying expectations, the accepted categories of Greek civilization and the barbarian world were revoked for a moment. When a procession of celebrants passed from Ceramicus in Athens to Eleusis, or passed through the city center during the Panathenaea, the boundary between the secular and the sacred was redrawn for the duration of the procession. For a precisely defined time, the Roman festival of Saturnalia allowed room for chaos and thwarted the established structure of social space. Additionally, in late antiquity, centuries of ideas about the center and the periphery shattered when the emperors took long absences from the city of Rome and resided in other cities, sometimes with several rulers residing in different places at the same time. All of these examples show that the spatial dichotomies were not static and defined once and for all, that they could sometimes collapse. It seems that, given the rigid stratification of 'normal' space, these kinds of spatial insurrections were almost inevitable. This paper suggests an appropriate method of analysis for a particular type of exception or deviation that calls the spatial organization into question. Since such dichotomies are cultural constructs and result from processes of semanticizing, we will mainly focus on how the attribution of meanings and values creates and transforms space. The heuristic value of this will be discussed critically, according to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, before we take a look at possible applications in ancient studies. Finally, asceticism in early Christianity will be examined in more detail as a space of deviation.

## 2 Michel Foucault and heterotopia

The structuralist view of space was exactly what the philosopher Michel Foucault objected to in the sixties. In his thinking, the category of space played a central role, but in regard to spaces of exception, he did not develop a fully-fledged, systematic theory as much as a hastily drafted sketch that claimed to question established views. He introduced the concept of heterotopia, 'the other place,' into the debate in December 1966, in a radio lecture entitled *Les Hétérotopies* that he repeated the following year for a group of architectural theorists; it became more widely known in translation.<sup>3</sup> The concept was interdisciplinary from the beginning, since the term itself originates from the field of medicine and cell biology, where it refers to material not found in its regular location; Foucault's embrace of it, moreover, took place within the framework of architectural theory and criticism. Yet the lecture leaves no doubt that architectural critics are not its primary audience. Instead, it proposes a discourse analysis that spans across time and cultures and is meant to overcome structuralist dichotomies. Heterotopia's close connection to Foucault's discourse archaeology and to literature is evident from the fact that its initial appearance is in Foucault's work, *The Order of Things*. In this work, Foucault refers to a fantastic Chinese encyclopedia, mentioned by Borges, whose taxonomy appears utterly nonsensical to Western eyes and can only be understood as heterotopia.<sup>4</sup> Foucault indicates the wider significance of his reflections by situating them in the history of time and space. His cause is nothing less than to help space reclaim its rightful place

2 For the model of liminal space in classical Greece see Vidal-Naquet 1986 [1981].

3 Foucault 1984; English version, Foucault 1986.

4 Foucault 1994, xv–xvii; Klass 2009, 149–150.

in comparison to time, and at the same time to de-sanctify it, since, as he asserts: “In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.”<sup>5</sup> Following the medieval space of ‘emplacement’ and the early-modern concept of ‘extension’ that replaced it, the dominant space in modernity is the ‘site,’ i.e., the relations of proximity between points or elements. Space is in need of de-sanctification, writes Foucault, because oppositions such as those of public and private or leisure and work still dominate our world.

So what is the heterotopia introduced here with such aplomb? It is no accident that the term brings to mind utopia, a concept from which Thomas More, in the sixteenth century, inaugurated an entire genre of literature.<sup>6</sup> Foucault’s heterotopias, however, are “real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia,”<sup>7</sup> whereas utopias are ideal counter-sites to reality that do not exist anywhere. Thus, the reference to other places and spaces – that is to say, relations – is inscribed in the concept from the start, and Foucault says right away that such placements are an essential concern, since for him space is fundamentally heterogeneous and relational.<sup>8</sup> If space is always already relational in its arrangement, much depends on where and how one is placed in it. Against the backdrop of the *spatial turn*, it is not surprising that geographers, cultural scholars, and literary researchers alike have gratefully adopted Foucault’s conception of the term, especially since its sketch-like character has opened up a wide range of possible applications.<sup>9</sup> Ancient studies, by contrast, has thus far largely ignored this tool, even though Foucault underlines the universal nature of heterotopias.<sup>10</sup> This neglect may come from the fact that, for the disciplines that study ancient cultures, Foucault’s concept of discourse and his studies on the care of the self have always overshadowed other aspects of his oeuvre.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, my objective is to offer suggestions as to how research into ancient cultures could employ the toolbox that Foucault has left us and to explore its heuristic potential.

The relation of utopias to reality often remains in limbo because they do not exist materially, even if it is undeniable that their point of departure is existing reality. For example, it has often and contentiously been debated whether Plato’s utopian state in the *Republic*, as a criticism of existing political conditions, was intended merely as a thought experiment or as a blueprint for a real *polis*. Heterotopias also have a reference to reality at their core from the beginning, as already implied by their element of ‘otherness.’ Before Foucault explains the main characteristics of counter-sites, he emphasizes that they exercise three functions with regard to reality: they represent, contest, and invert the real sites.<sup>12</sup> However, it remains an open question, how these mirroring or inversion effects manifest. Only the subversive power of heterotopia to throw established spatial structuring into question emerges clearly from this triad. In any case, the study of these kinds of other sites, if we wish to speak of a field of study, has the task of determining their relations to the remaining space, as well as their functions within the surrounding

5 Foucault 1986, 23.

6 Thomas Morus, *De optimo reip. statu deque nova insula Vtopia*, Leuven 1516.

7 Foucault 1986, 24.

8 Foucault 1986, 23.

9 Warning 2009; Crampton 2013; Warning 2015.

10 Foucault 1986, 24 (“probably in every culture, in every civilization”).

11 E. g., Goldhill 1995.

12 Foucault 1986, 24: “[...] the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted?”

space.<sup>13</sup> What we should be looking out for as we do so is demonstrated in the catalog Foucault presents of the six criteria that constitute heterotopias.<sup>14</sup>

According to this catalog, heterotopias are anthropologically universal, even if they take on culturally different forms. Foucault distinguishes between two main types: heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation. The first type comprises places reserved for people in a state perceived as a crisis, for example adolescents or the elderly.<sup>15</sup> In the first case, one could also speak ethnologically, following Arnold van Gennep, of a *rite de passage* that finds its physical site in the heterotopia.<sup>16</sup> Heterotopias of deviation, which Foucault says have in our time largely displaced heterotopias of crisis, are used by society to house groups of individuals whose behavior is deviant in some form, thus subjecting them to control. Foucault refers, among other things, to psychiatric hospitals and prisons.

The second principle is that the functions of counter-sites change diachronically in step with the historical development of society. Foucault's example here is the cemetery, whose location, appearance, and function underwent a fundamental transformation that began in the late eighteenth century, when social attitudes toward death and hygiene changed.<sup>17</sup> Changes in social conditions and discourses, thus, can lead to the heterotopian character of a site increasing, weakening, or possibly disappearing altogether.

The third principle is that a heterotopia can juxtapose several spaces or places at a single site that are in themselves incompatible.<sup>18</sup> For example, just as the theater stage presents a series of different places in rapid succession, traditional Oriental gardens, like those of the Persians, unite the four parts of the world, mimetically forming a veritable microcosm.

The fourth principle introduces the chronological dimension. According to Foucault, heterotopias are often linked to heterochronies, meaning that they perform their full function only when people break with the traditions of their time. On the one hand, a counter-site like a museum or library can concentrate and accumulate time, enclosing all epochs and tastes and removing them from time. On the other hand, sites such as fairgrounds and resort towns are precarious and designed for rapid transience, even if the fairgrounds' example, similar to the museum, spans a kaleidoscope-like panorama of extremely heterogeneous objects.

Fifth, heterotopias always presuppose a complex system of opening and closing, so that they oscillate between isolation and permeability. In the case of a prison, one is forced to enter by the authorities, while consecrated sites can only be entered by completing a ritual or submitting to a purification. Once again, the interplay of exclusion and inclusion underlines the aspect of power and regimentation.

Finally, and without exception, heterotopias always perform one or several functions in relation to the rest of the space. Foucault's outline here is limited to two extreme poles, without discussing the possibilities of further functions. One function is to create a 'space of illusion' that exposes the entire remaining space of human life as illusory. The 'otherness' of the counter-site, thus, undermines the established conceptions of reality and subjects them to fundamental criticism. The compensatory heterotopia, by contrast, constitutes a reserved space whose perfection and well-formed order works as the perfect counter-image to the deficient reality of life. One might perhaps speak of a relief function

13 In an ironic gesture, Foucault 1986, 24, drops the notion of 'science' and chooses instead that of 'systematic description,' a 'heterotopology'.

14 Foucault 1986, 24–27.

15 Foucault 1986, 24.

16 Van Gennep 1909. – This model emphasizes the dichotomy of the sacred and secular spheres.

17 Foucault 1986, 25.

18 With this, he refers back to the idea of the heteroclitite in *The Order of Things*, Foucault 1994, xvii.

here; Foucault thinks of the Jesuit colonies in South America, where according to him “human perfection was effectively achieved”.<sup>19</sup>

### 3 The usefulness and limitations of Foucault’s concept

What are the strengths and limitations in Foucault’s conception? And, how could it be made fruitful for research? After all, Foucault himself briefly contemplates a systematic description of the counter-sites, a heterotopology. The great advantage of the concept, in my view, is that it draws attention to the ‘character,’ speaking metaphorically, of sites in a cultural system of socially produced spaces.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective, spaces do not simply exist materially *a priori*, as a physical context for human action and experience, but are constantly produced and organized by societies through social interactions.<sup>21</sup> These then constitute space as a manifestation or reflection of social and cultural processes. Foucault is not alone in his view, of course: not far off is Henri Lefebvre’s Marxist idea of the social production of space and its interaction with everyday practices.<sup>22</sup> If nothing else, Lefebvre, like Foucault, emphasizes that space, as a social product distinct from plain physical space, is an instrument of power and control.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that space within a culture is never a homogeneous entity, because we constantly deal with an unlimited number of spaces: geographical, economic, sociological, political, global, etc.<sup>24</sup>

The production of such spaces is accompanied by attributions: groups and whole societies assign meanings to places and relate them to one another. For example, when countless ancient speakers and writers conceptualize the city of Athens as a haven of human civilization and Hellenic culture, cultural achievements such as rhetoric and philosophy as well as virtues such as courage and philanthropy become anchored in the mental cityscape, especially when the texts enter into dialogue with buildings and monuments.<sup>25</sup> The perceived and constructed space, thus, becomes a repository of meanings, values, and self-images, that is, a semiotic or even symbolic space, as in the case of Athens. As a result, spaces are historically and culturally variable; they evolve by necessity and their character depends on the perspective of the group that attaches specific meanings to them. Furthermore, it is important that places and spaces are relational phenomena. They only obtain their specific character through interplay and exchange processes with other spaces: in the case of classical Athens, for example, by its opposition to Sparta, Persia, or Rome. Hence, it is the researcher’s task to always analyze different places in comparison. As part of this comparison of places, the concept of heterotopia alerts us that selected sites within a culture can perform a mirror function for the ‘normal state.’ The society or political authorities allocate certain groups and areas of life to specially created

19 Foucault 1986, 27.

20 The metaphor of the ‘character’ of a site, however, carries the risk of inappropriately homogenizing the site’s nature and ignoring its inherent contradictions and conflicts. Current urban sociology discusses the ‘character’ or *Eigenlogik* of cities as an analytical category. See Kemper and Vogelpohl 2011. The metaphor of the ‘character’ (*ethos*) of a city can be found, for example, in Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum* 3 (PG 49:48–49), 17.2 (PG 49:175).

21 See also Soja 1989, 79–80: “Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience”.

22 Lefebvre 1991 [1974]; see also Certeau 1984, 117, according to whom, “a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence?” As “an instantaneous configuration of positions”, place implies stability, whereas “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements”. Space is a practiced place.

23 See Crampton 2013, 385.

24 Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 8.

25 Loraux 1986.

sites in order to control them and stabilize the majority society. Through these counter-sites, individual groups such as adolescents or the mentally ill are defined as 'other.' It is, therefore, worthwhile to investigate in more detail who defines a site as a counter-site and possesses control over it, since this information promises to reveal how the majority society sees itself, what it regards as a norm, and how it deals with deviations.

Finally, Foucault's approach also makes us aware that sites can be linked with sometimes surprising or paradoxical experiences of time, and, thus, permit a completely different experience of space. This can happen, for example, when a participant in a Greek symposium, animated by poetic imagination, believes himself to have returned to his youth during the festivities,<sup>26</sup> or a Christian believer, overwhelmed by a powerfully eloquent sermon at a martyr's grave, can almost physically experience her encounter with a saint who died centuries before.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely when we direct our view toward such uses and experiences of other sites that we are able to discern the diverse functions a site can assume in its interplay with other sites. Foucault's concept, thus, stimulates us to pursue the nexus of physical space, human experience of space, perception, and construction of space. What we gain through this approach is a more profound understanding of the interplay of material structures and discourses that distinguishes certain sites from their spatial context.

The great value of Foucault's sketch of counter-sites lies in areas that its author did not consider at all in this context. He stresses in his lecture that, in contrast to utopias, the other sites – whether the brothel, the cemetery, the psychiatric clinic, or the cinema – exist and are accessed, sensed, and used in reality. Surprisingly, however, Foucault's concept has exerted considerable influence on that very field that is concerned with either imagined or purely metaphorical spaces, namely that of literary studies.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, literature creatively and ceaselessly conjures up places that, while nowhere to be found in reality, are related to other, equally imagined places within the textual world. Within this relational spatial fabric, the individual fictional place, which may be derived from a real existing place, assumes various functions: not only for the figures of a novel, but for its plot as well. Since such fictional places are generally endowed with the same properties as real places, it makes sense to use the same set of instruments to analyze the relationships between them and their counter-sites.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, there is a long tradition of interpreting the text itself metaphorically as a space, according to the process of reading, in dialectics, or for the purposes of mnemonic technique. When we read, we 'go through' the work, finding ourselves 'above' and then again 'below,' while the rhetorical mnemonic techniques visualize the text of a speech as a sequence of rooms.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, this text space consists of individual 'places' such as episodes, scenes, digressions, and catalogs, some of which may act as counter-sites to the other textual elements. Anyone using clear textual signals as a starting point to analyze such components as heterotopias is able to recognize in context how they mirror, invert, or subtly question other components of

26 See Bacchylides, fr. 20B, where the experience of heterochrony is combined with the juxtaposition of distant spaces. The latter motif can also be found in Pindar, fr. 124ab.5–11.

27 Particularly imposing is the description in Chrysostom, *pan. mart.* 2 (PG 50:663–664); further *pan. Juln.* 3 (PG 50:670–671); and *Laz.* 1.1 (PG 48:963). In passages such as these, Chrysostom creates textual 'other' worlds into which the audience, guided by his gripping rhetoric, becomes immersed so that they virtually interact with spiritual powers and the saints of distant periods. See Stenger (in press).

28 Warning 2015; Warning 2009 discusses the link between heterotopia and aesthetic experience, with 'other spaces' as performative text spaces.

29 Dennerlein 2009 attempts a systematic survey of the narratology of space.

30 For the spatial dimension of mnemotechnics, see the famous anecdote about the poet Simonides in Cicero, *De orat.* 2.352–353.

the text. This approach can help to describe the narrator's status more precisely than is possible with narratological categories alone.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its heuristic strengths, however, we ought not to overlook some weaknesses and obstacles in Foucault's conception. First of all, as so often happens with Foucault, we may find fault with his concept of heterotopia for being incomplete and very vague in patches; it has numerous gaps that positively provides some room for creative use. Above all else, it remains unclear whether the six criteria mentioned are sufficient or essential, nor do we know whether the list is meant to be exhaustive. Some of the examples adduced by Foucault, such as the brothel, do not seem to fulfill all the criteria. What would be the heterochrony of a house of ill repute? Further, the functions of heterotopias remain underdetermined. Illusion and compensation mark only the two extremes, with Foucault leaving open what could lie in between. What Foucault does in his lecture is suggest associations; he is content with fleeting hints, instead of striving for precise terminology and meticulous analysis of counter-sites over the centuries. This is not necessarily negative, but one should be aware that his conception is in need of further development for each respective purpose.

It would be beyond the scope of this essay to discuss in detail whether, and to what extent, the historical examples Foucault relies on are accurate. It was, of course, not crucial for his objective to examine exactly whether such divergent phenomena as ancient Persian gardens, early-modern Jesuit colonies, and nineteenth-century psychiatric hospitals fulfilled all of the criteria mentioned above. What is clear, however, is that he uses a very broad brush to simplify historical phenomena from other cultures and abridges them to a few points without concern for precision. Precisely because he argues historically, one should at least expect a certain amount of historical research and reliability, especially in regard to the universality of heterotopias. Occasionally, Foucault's examples are not suited to where he discusses them in the lecture. For example, to my knowledge, there is no specific system of opening and closing present in the American motels that have sprung up since the 1920s, other than the room rate one must pay to get the key.<sup>32</sup> The heterogeneity of all of the examples cited supports the assumption that Foucault's concept of heterotopia, as an umbrella term, could obscure the differences between phenomena, thereby forfeiting its heuristic utility.

While Foucault takes account of the diachronic variability of the counter-sites, he exhibits a remarkable blind spot about the synchronic dimension. He completely ignores the fact that sites can be coded differently and occupied not only in the course of history, but also at one and the same time, depending on which group uses and constructs the site or appropriates it. Certainly, Foucault saw something essential when he established a link between the removal of cemeteries to the outskirts of the city and the new discourses of hygiene and death in the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> This example shows very clearly that the site fulfilled wholly different functions in the religious thinking of medieval people than in a world of modernity, informed by scientific rationality and progressive secularization. At the same time, however, Foucault overlooks the fact that graveyards are by no means functionalized and defined invariably, or by everyone. For public administrations in the twentieth century, they may have been a space that maintained the 'hygiene' of places by sharply distinguishing functions and separating the living from the dead. Mourners, by

31 Needless to say that heterotopology and narratology are by no means incompatible. In fact, they can complement each other fruitfully because the heterotopic status of a text passage is created and communicated above all through narrative techniques.

32 It needs to be taken into account, however, that the building type of the motel has yielded a distinctive architectural language and semantics. In addition, apart from being associated with specific kinds of criminal offences, motels in literature and film have caught the popular imagination so that they unquestionably possess the status of a clearly identifiable and even iconic place.

33 Foucault 1986, 25.

contrast, come together with deceased relatives at these sites and put themselves into a social encounter that is not possible in the remaining space. Those simply out for a stroll, in turn, use the cemetery as a space of recreation and contemplation that is antithetical to busy everyday life, while some followers of the gothic scene may use occult practices to make the graveyard into a counter-site between life and death. With these varied uses, perceptions, and constructions of the cemetery, its function for the remaining space changes dramatically.

If a site can be experienced and constructed differently as a heterotopia at one and the same time depending on the social group, or perhaps only defined as a counter-site by a certain group, while the rest of society regards it as a normal site, it is evident that heterotopias are not objectively given facts, and instead are only defined and perceived as such from a certain perspective. Foucault, however, does not pay sufficient attention to the factor of perspective. As a discourse analyst, he posits, or reconstructs, the perspective of the 'norm society.' Furthermore, he absolutizes the intentions of the initiators or the majority discourse. He wants to de-sanctify space, that is, to deconstruct its hierarchy, but he is still bound to dichotomous thinking, according to which the space of the norm is completely homogeneous, whereas the counter-site is fundamentally different. The question goes unasked as to whether there is a homogeneous norm at all. It is also unclear what Foucault means by "all the other real sites" and "all places" to which the heterotopia is supposed to be opposed.<sup>34</sup> A site can hardly be wholly 'othered' from all existing or conceivable sites in a defined space or society. Foucault, however, neglects to specify the nature of that very 'otherness,' the fundamental characteristic of heterotopias.

All in all, it seems to me that because he is primarily interested in the triad of space, power, and meaning, Foucault assumes an excessively stable dichotomy of norm and deviation. He presupposes static power relationships in which the normal state and what constitutes deviant behavior are clearly defined. Where, then, is room for dynamics and process, for precisely the procedures and interactions in which norms are established and modified?<sup>35</sup> When Foucault finally singles out illusion and compensation prominently, it also raises the question of whether the functions of heterotopias are essentially restricted to cognition, but this is hardly likely to be true of heterotopias of deviation such as psychiatric institutions. Could counter-sites not themselves also actively influence the remaining space in such a way that they have an effect on the norms? Therefore, we would need to consider more thoroughly to what extent the triad of representation, questioning, and inversion that Foucault attributes to heterotopias can be useful as an analytical tool. Does the triad not obscure the fact that counter-sites have a nowhere near uniformly subversive effect on the remaining space, but rather quite the opposite? Indeed, they often have an affirmative effect because they locate and contain problematic deviations, confining them to the sphere of what is out of the ordinary. Foucault's casual neglect, thus, calls on the researcher to forge a precise tool from this raw material, so that gains in knowledge can be achieved.

#### 4 Heterotopias in ancient civilizations

In the next section, I will suggest fields of research in ancient studies that could benefit from this point of view, to illustrate the possibilities offered by heterotopian thinking. I can envision the application of Foucault's concept benefiting a number of disciplines: ancient history, religious history, social history, ancient philosophy, classical philology, archaeology, and prehistory. As already mentioned above, however, this has so far hap-

34 Foucault 1986, 24.

35 Crampton 2013, 397.

pened only occasionally. I tried to use the categories of heterotopia as an interpretive tool for the famous Roman digressions in the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>36</sup> If one reads the textual signals with which Ammianus marks these digressions as indications of the heterotopian character of the passages, one can more fully understand how the historian made the diagnosis of his time. By constructing the social and cultural life in the Eternal City as completely ‘other’ and as illusory above all, he encourages his readers to reflect on the state of the Roman Empire as if its very heart is a world of illusion and artificiality. Ammianus sketches Rome as an ‘othered’ space, so as to vividly depict the constitution of the Roman society of his time, on the one hand, and enable historical understanding, on the other.

The concept of heterotopia has also been taken up within archaeology. Since Foucault himself has already drawn attention to the cemetery as a prominent example, it makes sense to use his approach to analyze attitudes towards death and the dead. Stephan G. Schmid attempted to do this with the funerary complexes of Petra (first century AD, now part of Jordan), which he sees as the backbone of Nabataean society.<sup>37</sup> In a recent monograph, Eric C. Smith described the Cubicula of the Sacraments within the Callistus Catacomb in Rome (second to fourth centuries) as a counter-site.<sup>38</sup> In his view, the practices and rituals performed by the faithful there (funeral rites, communal meals, and initiation rites) in interplay with the architectural design and the pictures and biblical texts installed there, constituted the *cubicula* as heterotopias where people could have a liminal experience. According to this thinking, the identity of the religious group is formed by the ensemble of the buildings of the *coemeterium Calixti*, its frescos, its texts, and its practices, located outside the urban space. In this context, Smith also briefly remarks that catalog-like lists in texts, such as the Catalog of Ships in Homer’s *Iliad*, can be understood as heterotopias. The catalog does in fact exhibit properties that can be found in Foucault’s concept: it suggests an endless number of ships and bundles the entire Greek world into one point. We might also use this approach to characterize Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles, as it presents a microcosm in a limited and unambiguously marked textual space that comprises the whole of human life, as well as the world of the gods. It would certainly be worthwhile to more closely examine the extent to which such heterotopian textual spaces allow for idiosyncratic aesthetic experiences, as well as the nature of their relation to the rest of the text. The study of language and literature could, thus, benefit from Foucault if we were to understand the text (above all narratives) as a space or spatial configuration, and on the basis of this hypothesis, to look at the relations between individual placements in the text. It is crucial, however, that there be consideration in each individual case of whether the objects, be they architectural structures, texts, or practices, have sufficiently relevant properties to be considered heterotopias. Even more fundamentally, it is important to be clear as to whether Foucault’s concept indeed generates a new understanding of these objects.

## 5 Christian asceticism as counter-space

Both Smith’s study and Schmid’s investigation illustrate very nicely how different media and practices can become intertwined at one counter-site. In my view, an essential advantage of Foucault’s concept is precisely its attention to this interdependence. I would like to sketch this in a case study taken from late antiquity. During the course of the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the progressive Christianization of all

36 Stenger 2012.

37 Schmid 2013; see also Cormack 2004 on tombs as heterotopias in Roman Asia Minor.

38 Smith 2014.

social classes, a new movement emerged within the new religion in the fourth century that was positioned as a counter-scheme to both the pagan culture and the way in which most secular Christians led their lives. First in Egypt, then in Syria and Palestine, and ultimately in other regions as well, believers following Saint Antony’s example withdrew from civilization into the desert and the mountains to renounce the world and follow radical asceticism, seeking a path to God. Studies on ascetic and hagiographic literature of late antiquity have already clearly shown the textual strategies and motifs authors used to propagate an ‘ideology of the desert’ and, thus, conceptualize a spiritual and social ideal, signifying the complete negation of the world.<sup>39</sup> In what follows, I would like to explore why asceticism situated in the wilderness could exert an almost magical attraction for the Christians of late antiquity.<sup>40</sup>

St. Antony, born around 250 CE, was the scion of a fairly affluent Egyptian family, yet despite his origins he became the model for a self-denying, ascetic way of life in the centuries that followed. The enormous success of the ascetic paradigm was owed to the biography penned by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295–373), who by the mid-fourth century had retraced the path of the Desert Father to the wilderness between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Raised without any formal education, as the author emphasizes,<sup>41</sup> Antony gave away all of his possessions in order to embark on the path of asceticism, initially in the vicinity of his home village.<sup>42</sup> After spending some time there, sheltering in tombs, he decamped to an abandoned fort near the Nile Valley, where he lived as a hermit for the next twenty years.<sup>43</sup> However, a steady influx of admirers led Antony to retreat farther into the desert a number of years later, where he ultimately died at the advanced age of 105.<sup>44</sup> By the time Antony died, around the year 355, a monastic community had already formed at his original retreat in the desert. Although Antony was by no means the first to devote his life to Christian asceticism, Athanasius’ tremendously successful hagiography ensured that the entire later monastic movement referred to him as its forefather.<sup>45</sup>

Readers of the *Vita Antonii* (*Life of Antony*) have always been fascinated by the role played by the location of the action, the topographical site of the life of the saint, and how Athanasius elevates the space to virtually another character in the drama of asceticism. No one can escape the fact that the success of Antony’s path of life and suffering is inextricably linked to his successive withdrawal from the world of civilization into the utterly uncultivated desert (*erēmos*, ἔρημος). We accompany the saint through the different stages of his distancing from the civilized human community; through the vivid portrayal by Athanasius, we share in Antony’s experience of God in the primeval wilderness, on the one hand, and his survival of attacks by the devil and demons, on the other. The narrative of the saint’s biography is unmistakably structured by a spatial or topographical dichotomy: on one side is the sphere of human civilization and society, situated in the city and village, while on the other, Antony finds fulfillment in the solitude of the wild and often chaotic and menacing nature.<sup>46</sup> The hermit’s existence in an atavistic space, where

39 Goehring 1993 and Goehring 2003 on the construction of ‘the myth of the desert’; see also Brown 1988, 215–216.

40 For a cross-cultural perspective on the concept of wilderness in myth and religions see the contributions in Feltdt 2012.

41 *Vita Antonii* 1.2–3.

42 *Vita Antonii* 2.4–5.

43 *Vita Antonii* 11–14.

44 *Vita Antonii* 49–93. – See the outline of his life in Harmless 2004, 61.

45 Athanasius himself mentions that by the second half of the third century there were already a number of ascetic hermits in Antony’s home region, whom the young man could ask for advice (*Vita Antonii* 3.2–4, 4.1–4 and 11.1). Harmless 2004 provides a comprehensive overview of the early monastic literature.

46 Athanasius draws here on a long-standing ideology, Endsjø 2012; see the contributions in Sluiter and Rosen 2006 on the polarity of city and countryside in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Antony is exposed to natural and supernatural forces, stands in opposition to the world of social ties. Monastic asceticism is shifted into a truly mythical remoteness, as James Goehring has emphasized, affording a symbolic meaning to the spatial dichotomy.<sup>47</sup> Athanasius constructs the wilderness as a semiotic space that reflects his ideal of a Christian way of life and becomes the symbol of the victorious struggle of the Christian soul against the devil.

Just as the desert is clearly separated from the city by its topographical distance, it is positioned by Athanasius through attributions as the ‘other’ in relation to human civilization. The saint tries to avoid the human community: he lives among wild beasts and in inhospitable nature. Furthermore, as Athanasius stresses, he is uneducated and illiterate, even though he proves himself vastly superior to the Greek philosophers in debate. Everything that in the established spatial structure of Greco-Roman culture is associated with the *polis* is nullified and negated in the wilderness of the ascetic. Much like the Cyclops, the savage of the Homeric epic, Antony possesses a curiously ambivalent status: he lives outside the civilized world, in an intermediate realm between the human and the divine. He himself does not neglect to announce that this way of life is something completely new, unheard of, in an encounter with the devil; he is entering previously untrodden terrain, closed off to ordinary humanity.<sup>48</sup>

Antony’s experiences provide dramatic proof that the desert is a different, strange space. Once the hermit has left the sphere of human civilization, he continues to have experiences and encounters of a supernatural nature, which seem only possible within this exceptional space.<sup>49</sup> Often these encounters prove to be attacks and temptations by demonic forces that put his steadfastness to the test:

The devil, therefore, as David says in the Psalms, observed Antony and gnashed his teeth against him. But Antony was consoled by the Saviour and continued unhurt by his wiles and varied devices. As he was watching in the night the devil sent wild beasts against him. And almost all the hyenas in that desert came forth from their dens and surrounded him; and he was in the midst, while each one opened its mouth and threatened to bite. Seeing that it was a trick of the enemy he said to them all: “If you have received power against me I am ready to be devoured by you; but if you were sent against me by demons, stay not, but depart, for I am a servant of Christ”. When Antony said this they fled, driven by that word as with a whip.<sup>50</sup>

Athanasius creates a space of the exotic in these episodes, but it is a threatening kind of exotic, where the laws of nature as we know them do not seem to apply. The landscape is not what it first seems; instead, it turns out to be a dreamlike vision, a phantasmagoria. The ‘othered’ character of this space is inimitably captured in the paintings of the early modern period, in which Antony is shown in an open landscape surrounded by fantastically menacing creatures.<sup>51</sup> Just as with the diabolical threat, the ‘otherness’ of the wilderness also manifests itself positively in spiritual experiences. Antony finds God in the Egyptian desert and experiences God’s power and providence in direct encounters. For example, when he wants to withdraw further into the desert, he hears the divine voice show him the way and is guided by providence.<sup>52</sup>

47 Goehring 2003, 443.

48 *Vita Antonii* 11.3: “This road is not well-worn; nor is there here a trace of any wayfarer”.

49 *Vita Antonii* 49.2–6, 60.1–11, 66.1–5.

50 *Vita Antonii* 52.1–3. The translation is based on Athanasius [Robertson].

51 See the exhibition catalog in Philipp 2008.

52 *Vita Antonii* 49.2–6, further 10.1–4.

The description in the *Vita Antonii*, which is reminiscent of ethnographic literature, suggests that there is a causal nexus between the character of the counter-site and peculiar spiritual, as well as aesthetic, experiences. As often happens in the Old Testament, the encounter with God can only take place in a space that is fundamentally different from civilization; the otherwise valid structures and rules are suspended in the heterotopia of the desert.<sup>53</sup> For one thing, the dimension of space collapses when Antony is able to miraculously perceive things that are actually located at an unattainable distance, and the biblical Garden of Eden is evoked in the wilderness as well.<sup>54</sup> For another, the rules of progressive linear time are thwarted: Antony's life in the desert recovers a paradisiacal, Edenic state, but at the same time appears to repeat the time of the Bible by presenting the ascetic as a second Moses or Elijah.<sup>55</sup> As if this were not enough, the eschatological future also converges with the distant past and the present at a single point. Specifically, as more monks join the hermit, a new monastic city appears, a city that does not simply mirror the real *polis* in ideal fashion, but anticipates the celestial community: "The desert has been made a city by monks who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in the heavens."<sup>56</sup> Since the monks are registered for celestial citizenship, their *polis* forms a reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem, as will dawn at the end of days. In this way, heterotopia and heterochrony go hand in hand.

In this foundational text of Christian monasticism, Athanasius introduces asceticism, as a *sui generis* space, into the history of Christianity and literature. Building on Greek concepts of geographical periphery and the exotic, he has put the desert on the map as an archetypal counter-site to urban civilization.<sup>57</sup> In its perfect self-sufficiency, the counter-site represents a self-contained cosmos independent of social ties.<sup>58</sup> Spatially removed asceticism forms a symbolic or semiotic space whose otherness and opposedness expresses the radicalism of a new life plan. Until this point, monks had lived in the civilized world of the villages, whereas Antony accomplished a radical departure.<sup>59</sup> Only this departure, as the *Vita Antonii* tells it, enabled the anticipation of an apocalyptic Jerusalem, which cannot be of this world.

It did not take long after Athanasius' idealization of Antony's life for many Christians to become enthralled by the image of the desert, both in practice and in discourse.<sup>60</sup> The asceticism situated in the desert or the mountains occupies a prominent place, for example, in the work of the preacher and Bishop John Chrysostom (349–407), active in Antioch and Constantinople.<sup>61</sup> In his writings and homilies, the mountains as an imaginary space fulfill similar functions as were already assigned to them in Greek mythology. According to Richard Buxton, the mountain, *oros* (ὄρος), possessed three predominant characteristics for the ancient Greeks: "mountains were outside and wild, ... mountains are before ...

53 See Endsjø 2008, 65–69.

54 E. g., *Vita Antonii* 59.3, 59.6, 82.3; Endsjø 2008, 42–44.

55 *Vita Antonii* 54.4–5, 7.13, 34.2–3; see Athanasius [Bartelink], 49–52, on Antony's Old Testament role models. Jerome captures the annihilation of time very well when he depicts Antony saying to two of his disciples: "I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, and I have really seen Paul in Paradise" (Jerome, *Life of Paul* 13).

56 *Vita Antonii* 14.7.

57 Endsjø 2012.

58 See *Vita Antonii* 50, where Athanasius relates how Antony starts farming so he no longer needs to depend on others' support.

59 Goehring 1993, 296, stresses that the literary model of desert asceticism promoted by Athanasius came to dominate the image of early Egyptian monasticism, although the reality of the movement was more diverse.

60 For the ancient reception of the *Vita Antonii* see Athanasius [Bartelink], 37–42 and 68–70, and Harmless 2004, 97–100.

61 Chrysostom knew Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, as *homilia* 8.5 in *Matthaeum* shows (PG 57:89); Illert 2000 discusses the place of monasticism in Chrysostom's thinking.

[and] a mountain is a place for reversals”<sup>62</sup> In particular, the mountain as a place of reversal(s) is a privileged site for humans to encounter the divine, for metamorphoses to take place, and for social role models to be turned upside down. Chrysostom himself had accumulated extreme ascetic experiences as a young man in the mountains bordering Antioch, to the extent that he jeopardized his own health. Even after he had returned to the big city out of necessity, the ideal of the desert retained its hold on him.<sup>63</sup> His thinking was also dominated by the fundamental opposition between the *polis* and the uncivilized, inhospitable nature.<sup>64</sup> In countless sermons, he sought to persuade his congregation that the city was a den of sin where the Christian soul was ceaselessly exposed to the devil’s attacks. As citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, Christians must condemn the earthly city, says Chrysostom.<sup>65</sup> Fulfillment and protection, on the other hand, are to be found in the wilderness, where virtuous life is at home.<sup>66</sup> Only there can we expect the salvation of the city – its transformation in the Christian sense – to arrive.<sup>67</sup> Chrysostom hints that the earthly laws of time are also negated in the heterotopia of asceticism, as he describes how the laborious rural life of the monks and its diametric opposition to the pleasure of the city restores the conditions before the advent of sin. Just as Adam was leading a virtuous life through his care of the Garden of Eden, the ascetics regained the Edenic state through agriculture.<sup>68</sup>

While Chrysostom initially promoted a radical change of scenery from the metropolis to the mountains,<sup>69</sup> he later worked pragmatically on the Christianization of urban society, for which the ascetic wilderness was to be the blueprint. The ideal counter-site, Antony’s utopia realized, could be transferred to the urban space, together with his angelic way of life (*philosophia*), or so his admirer hoped.<sup>70</sup> When Antioch was rattled by the so-called Riot of the Statues in 387 CE and, according to Chrysostom, saved by the monks hurrying down from the mountains at the last minute, the preacher saw his dream come true: the heretofore error-prone Antioch had all at once become a church, even a monastery.<sup>71</sup> Chrysostom’s rhetoric makes very clear that the symbolic space created by Athanasius could become pragmatically relevant. The Antiochene preacher, however, goes beyond the Bishop of Alexandria by bringing the asceticism of the wilderness back into the city. This is emblematically expressed in the movement of reversal: the hermits, although they have withdrawn from civilization, came back down from the mountains

62 Buxton 1992, 7–9.

63 Stenger 2016 explores Chrysostom’s rhetorical construction of the wilderness as the place of Christian conduct and wisdom.

64 See, for example, *Ad populum Antiochenum* 19.1 (PG 49:188–190), *homilia* 26.4 in *Rom.* (PG 60:644), *catech.* 8.1–2, and *Adversus oppugnatores* passim.

65 *Ad populum Antiochenum* 17.2 (PG 49:177–178).

66 E. g. *Adversus oppugnatores* 1.7 (PG 47:328), 2.5 (PG 47:337–339), 2.7 (PG 47:341).

67 In *homilia* 72.3 in *Matthaeum* (PG 58:671), Chrysostom calls the wilderness and the mountains where the monks live tellingly the “city of virtue”.

68 *Ad populum Antiochenum* 19.1 (PG 49:188–189): “For among these men there are no spectacles of iniquity – no horse races, nor harlots, nor any of that riot which pertains to a city, but every kind of licentiousness is banished and great sobriety flourishes everywhere. And the reason is that their life is a laborious one; and they have, in the culture of the soil, a school of virtue and sobriety and follow that art which God introduced before all others into our life. For before the sin of Adam, when he enjoyed much freedom, a certain tillage of the ground was enjoined upon him; not indeed a laborious or a troublesome one, but one which afforded him much good discipline, for he was appointed, it is said, ‘to till the garden, and to keep it’”.

69 *Adversus oppugnatores* 3.18 (PG 47:379–381).

70 *Adversus oppugnatores* 1.7–8 (PG 47:328–329); *homilia* in *Rom.* 26.4 (PG 60:643–644).

71 *Ad populum Antiochenum* 17 (PG 49:175 und PG 49:172–173), similarly, in respect to Constantinople, *De terrae motu* (PG 50:714); see further *Adversus oppugnatores* 3.12 (PG 47:370) on the annihilation of the difference between the Christian household and the monastery.

to the city in a time of crisis.<sup>72</sup> With this move Chrysostom detaches the imaginary space of the ascetic desert from its physical context and inserts it into a new spatial formation. There the totally ‘other space’ fundamentally challenges the ‘norm space’ and is destined to extinguish it. Chrysostom’s vision perfectly exemplifies the transition of a physically anchored heterotopia to a heterotopian concept that retains its spatial connotations but can freely be applied to new contexts.

The heterotopia of the desert not only spurred the imagination of the late-antiquity Christians (and precisely the educated urban residents as well), but also inspired numerous people to make this utopia a reality, whether in a monastic community (*cenobium*) or as hermits. The ideal counter-site found its physical form in the early monasteries and was an incessant thorn in the side of secular society, as it were. Although a number of ascetics lived as hermits, many joined together in monastic communities. Their practical mechanisms made these *cenobia* an unmistakable counter-site to all remaining sites from very early on. Even if they were not far from the villages in places like Palestinian Gaza, they were clearly distinct from the settlements, as separately structured complexes sometimes shielded from the outside world by walls.<sup>73</sup> Access to them was limited and linked with rituals. If a young man decided to follow the call of monastic asceticism, he was expected to abandon his worldly possessions, sever his family and social ties, and radically change his lifestyle.<sup>74</sup> The monks’ garments were a visible expression of the entry into another world.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the daily routine at the monastery was strictly regulated and ritualized. Communication sometimes conformed to entirely different rules than in secular society. In Tawatha, for example, near Gaza, the two “Old Men” Barsanuphius and John (early sixth century) refused any direct contact, instead using letters alone to communicate with their brethren and the laity.<sup>76</sup> If we bear in mind that the monks provided for all of life’s necessities on their own to the greatest extent they could, up to and including nursing in the monastic hospital, it becomes clear that the community formed its own self-sufficient world. It was a world of exception in the sexual sense as well, since it was populated exclusively by men. All of this is evidence that, as far as their basic conditions were concerned, the early Christian monasteries were constructed as worlds of deviation, spaces that were, in heterotopian fashion, opposed to the norms of the hegemonic space.

The lives of Dorotheus of Gaza and his disciple Dositheus in the sixth century show us how radical the reversal was that took place upon entry into the monastery.<sup>77</sup> Both men came from prestigious, wealthy families, and Dorotheus had enjoyed a thorough, classical education that promised him a successful career. With their decision to follow the monastic life, they devoted themselves completely to God; their departure from the world was certainly not without its problems, as tensions and conflicts show. Dorotheus, who had chosen St. Antony as his model,<sup>78</sup> was fully aware that the novices were moving out of the world and had to divorce themselves radically from the world in order to start a foreign life in the monastic community.<sup>79</sup> Like Athanasius, he saw the relationship between

72 See Stenger 2016.

73 Hevelone-Harper 2005 and Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2006 give accounts of the monastic community in the vicinity of sixth-century Gaza.

74 E. g., Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.11.

75 The monk’s habit is the object of a symbolic interpretation in Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.15–19.

76 Occasionally this led to doubts about the existence of the two Old Men and to arguments in the monastic community; see Barsanuphius and John, *ep.* 125, 226, 231.

77 Details about Dorotheus’ life are known from the letters of Barsanuphius and John, and from autobiographical passages in his own works. Dositheus’ life in the monastery is described in the anonymous *Life of Dositheus*, which has been transmitted among Dorotheus’ writings. See Hevelone-Harper 2005.

78 Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.11, 2.30, 4.48, 7.86, *epistula* 13.198.

79 Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.11: κατενόησαν ἑαυτοῖς ξένον βίον, ξένην τιὰ διαγωγὴν, λέγω δὴ τοῦ μονήρους βίου καὶ ἥρξατο φεύγειν τὸν κόσμον καὶ οἰκεῖν ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις (“They [Antony, Pachomius, and the other

the *cenobium* and urban society as one of fundamental opposition. Although he did not repudiate his former secular life in his writings, he leaves no doubt that Christian virtue can only be realized in the monasteries. This is particularly reflected in the monastery's value system: whereas in the *polis* society it is important to accumulate material wealth and prestige and to compete with one's fellow citizens in the social hierarchy, the monks primarily live for one another. The vanity and ambition of the urban elite must give way to humility and unconditional obedience – ultimately, for the deadening of one's own will. The disturbing 'otherness' of the monastic heterotopia could hardly be more clearly expressed:<sup>80</sup> it strives to invert all worldly values and norms, since only then is a return to the original state possible.

As we have already seen in the hagiography by Athanasius, it was not only the practices among the ascetics of Gaza that constituted their heterotopia, but the discourse as well. With their expositions of monastic life and use of graphic metaphors, the letters of Barsanuphius and John and the monastic lectures of their disciple Dorotheus are an attempt to conceptualize the *cenobium* as a spiritual counter-site to all other spaces. What is striking about these writings is the effort to make existence in the monastery analogous to an "alternative symbolic universe" or "new subjectivity", to quote Richard Valantasis:<sup>81</sup> something radically other. Not only does Dorotheus compare monastic asceticism to an entirely new construction of a building, but for him, the renunciation of the values and passions of the world also means that the monk 'crucifies' the world for himself and, in his discipleship of Christ, crucifies himself for the world.<sup>82</sup> The ascetic, thus, dies a symbolic death when he frees himself from earthly concerns. We find the same ideas in the story of the two Old Men; for Barsanuphius and John, not only are monks the temple of God, but the monastery cell represents a site where one finds absolute rest – a cemetery, even, or a grave.<sup>83</sup> The devil has no access to this realm. When a monk has liberated himself from the passions of the 'old man', he attains perfect rest by dying the death of Christ.<sup>84</sup> The dramatic transformation from old person to new person in asceticism is tantamount to a symbolic death. Only in this new, paradoxical existence is it possible to return to the paradisiacal, primal state of innocence. Just as in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, we encounter here a reversal of temporality and an obliteration of the boundary between life and death. It is crucial for the ideology of the monastic movement that this ideal can only be realized in its demarcation from all other spaces, in the monastery space alone. Similar to Athanasius, Dorotheus sees the spiritual path taken by the monk as a peregrination to

Desert Fathers] knew very well that, being in this world, it was not possible with ease to attain virtue and they devised for themselves a foreign life, a foreign way of passing their time, I mean the solitary life. And they began to flee the world and live in the desert"); additionally, 1.13–14.

80 The opposition between the two value systems of the city and the monastery emerges very clearly from Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.14; further 2.34–35.

81 Valantasis 2008, 54–55. See also Foucault 2005 on the link between ascetic practices, not only Christian, and the relationship with oneself (esp. 319–320, 331–333 and 416–417).

82 Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 1.11 and, in more detail, 1.13: καί, καθώς προείπομεν, ἐσταύρωσαν ἑαυτοῖς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγωνίζον τὸ λοιπὸν ἵνα καὶ ἑαυτοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ σταυρώσωσι, καθὼς λέγει ὁ Ἀπόστολος· Ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται, καὶ γὰρ τῷ κόσμῳ. ("... and, as I said before, they [the Fathers] crucified the world to themselves and struggled further to crucify themselves to the world, as the Apostle says [Gal 6:14], "The world is crucified to me and I to the world")

83 Barsanuphius and John, *ep.* 71 (the monk, if cleaned from passions, as God's temple, after 2 Cor 6:16), *ep.* 142: Ὅτι ἀνεπαύσατο ἀπὸ τῶν παθῶν ὄλων. Ἀπέθανε γὰρ τελείως τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, καὶ τὸ κελλίον αὐτοῦ ἐν ᾧ ζεζώρηται ὡς ἐν τῷ τάφῳ διὰ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ τόπος ἀναπαύσεώς ἐστιν, ἐνθα οὐ πατεῖ δαίμων οὐδὲ ὁ ἄρχων αὐτοῦ διάβολος. Ἀγιαστήριον γὰρ ἐγένετο, ἐχώρησε γὰρ τὸ κατοικητήριον τοῦ Θεοῦ ("This is because he [the old man] has found rest from all the passions there. For he has died completely to sin, and his cell, wherein he is enclosed as if in a tomb for the sake of Jesus' name, is the place of rest, where neither demon nor the devil, the chief of demons, treads. Indeed, it has become a sanctuary inasmuch it contains the dwelling-place of God?") Additionally, *ep.* 141.

84 Barsanuphius and John, *ep.* 6, after 2 Cor 4:10.

a city, namely, holy Jerusalem. In this way, he indicates that the *cenobium*, as a timeless city, is constituted completely differently from the earthly *polis*.<sup>85</sup>

As has been demonstrated here, for some of its stages, early Christian asceticism was a realized, localizable utopia, indeed a tangible utopia, one that united the two extreme poles mentioned by Foucault. On the one hand, the monastery is an illusory heterotopia: it exposes earthly life, its fixation on material things and apparent values in the light of the hereafter, as a true illusion; it radically challenges the world. On the other, it is a compensatory heterotopia: in the monastic community, the aspirations to a spiritual life are realized to perfection, whereas an earthly existence is riddled with errors through and through. Asceticism that is situated in imaginary deserts or mountains inverts the *polis*, the leading paradigm of Greco-Roman culture, in order to roundly repudiate it. It is remarkable how material structures, human practices, texts, and images work together in this rejection of all other sites so as to position asceticism as the quintessential other. For those who achieve access, this semiotic space stands ready to offer peculiar aesthetic, spiritual, and existential experiences, embodied in the symbolic death and birth of a new human being. The space of asceticism can only perform its specific functions for the remaining space if it is not simply one option among many, but represents the total 'other' of all the rest of the real spaces: ultimately, the liberation from the world.<sup>86</sup>

A diachronic analysis of the concept is also able to show how its functionalization produces different accents depending on the context. Whereas Bishop Athanasius, with his construction of the ascetic wilderness as a counter-site, attempts to impose his vision of monasticism as a new and attractive paradigm against existing monastic ways of life, Chrysostom uses the already existing ideology of the desert to undermine the urban value system and transform the classical *polis*. In the sixth century, asceticism in the monasteries around Gaza was conceptualized as a fundamentally 'other', localized way of life, one which established the group identity of the *cenobium* in opposition to human society in the world. My analysis of the monasticism of late antiquity has taken Foucault as a starting point, but to me it seems important to emphasize, beyond his concept of heterotopia, that the counter-site of asceticism opens up a definitive egress from the world of the norm and ultimately transcends the boundaries of this world. This power of the counter-site is chiefly expressed in its heterochrony, which makes it unique: whereas pagan concepts of salvation locate a perfect existence in the next world, after physical death, ascetics can already anticipate the paradisiacal ideal in a space that exists in reality. At the same time, the ascetic heterotopia implies an appeal to the whole of society, specifically, a call to overthrow the rules and behavioral norms of secular spaces.

## 6 Conclusion

Now that the interdependence between space and knowledge has attracted more attention in ancient studies, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia promises greater insight for the fields that investigate how human actors, social groups, and entire societies conceptualize their norms and self-images, how they mark themselves off from that which is deviant, and project this demarcation onto the physical space, how practices localize cultural concepts and identities to specific places, and how such concepts and identities construct and semanticize these places as counter-conceptualizations. Heterotopias have an *a priori* connection to the knowledge of a culture. They reflect what a culture would like to be, what it fears or wants to keep out, how it deals with norms and deviation, but partly also how it defines humanity's relation to the cosmos. These sites are, there-

85 Dorotheus, *Didascaliae* 10.107.

86 Brown 1988, 215–216, 256–257.

fore, culturally charged and related to the formation of knowledge. Attention to the tensions between sites, thus, illuminates how knowledge generates, alters, and organizes the space. As counter-sites are usually linked to the question of who constructs, controls, and uses them, the concept of heterotopia also helps us to understand sites as resources of power in social interactions. Finally, Foucault's concept is a versatile tool because from the beginning, it relates to both discourse and practice, as well as how they interact. As a consequence, we can productively combine Foucault's approach with established methods, whether these are literary, historical, archaeological, or cultural, so that it facilitates communication between disciplines.

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