

ПРЕГЛЕД / ОБЗОРИ И РЕЦЕНЗИИ / SURVEY AND BOOK REVIEWS

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A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE BYZANTINE *PHYSIOLOGUS*

The Multilingual Physiologus. Studies in the Oldest Greek Recension and its Translations. Edd. C. Macé, J. Gippert (= Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia, 84). Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. 661 p., 28 colour ill. ISBN 978-2-503-58974-9.

As one of the most famous works of Byzantine literacy, widely used for education and entertainment, the *Physiologus* has been an object of prolific reception and numerous translations in most classical languages of the Christian East. Accomplished around the beginning of the 3rd century in Alexandria, the text introduced its readers to more profound and more complex theological ideas via descriptions of the Creation, where the same concepts were believed to have been expressed. This allegorical interpretation was rooted in the Greek exegetical tradition, e.g. the Alexandrian commentary tradition on Homer and, in a more Bible-related aspect – those of the pre-Christian Jewish Alexandrian author and thinker Philo about the books of Law.

The brave attempt of the volume under review to approach such a prolific multilingual reception, presenting both the state of the art in each tradition and proposing a critical edition of two selected chapters in each language, is, to my knowledge, the

first of its kind. The complex text tradition in each language makes the chosen comparative approach even more fruitful and laudable.

In the book a general preface by Caroline Macé and Jost Gippert (p. 15–25) introduces the reader to some general questions concerning the history of the *Physiologus* together with remarks on its reception. Here, the use of the two often interchangeable terms ‘recension’ and ‘redaction’ is also discussed, using the former for the three Greek versions of the *Physiologus*, identified for the first time by Francesco Sbordone¹ (*redactio prima*, *redactio secunda/byzantina* and *redactio tertia/pseudo-Basiliana*, although the last two being versions of the first, though

¹ S b o r d o n e, Fr. *Physiologus*. Mediolani–Genuae–Romae–Neapoli, 1936. Repr. Hildesheim–Zürich–New York, 1991. This is actually the only critical edition of all 77 extant Greek manuscripts containing the *Physiologus*.

with their literary specifics, audience and tradition of transmission²). On the other hand, the latter term is reserved for the later modifications of the oldest Greek text (*redactio prima* by Sbordone, ‘first recension’ in the current book).

The Preface is followed by a short appendix about the situation in Coptic by Alin Suciú (p. 26–27). Although a separate Coptic translation must probably have existed, the current state of scholarly knowledge and, above all, the highly fragmented remains of the *Physiologus* in Coptic do not allow extensive research on the subject.

The first part of the book core starts with another Introduction by Horst Schneider (p. 31–47), explicitly dedicated to the Greek *Physiologus*. Schneider pays special attention to most of the essential features of the text, e.g. the literary genre, the exegetical method, the order of the chapters and their formal structure, the variants of transmission, and its emergence and interpretation.

Then follows a chapter about the First recension of the Greek tradition (*Phys. Gr. I*), more precisely its most ancient recension, by C. Macé (p. 49–106). In her extensive research, the author presents the publication history of the text and reviews the four families (classes) into which F. Sbordone had divided the tradition of *Phys. Gr. I*, adding more witnesses and reevaluating the relation among them. A detailed table presents the order of the chapters in the Greek manuscripts compared to Sbordone’s edition – a valuable starting point and apparatus for every future work with this literary monument. The reader is also introduced to the elaborated relations be-

tween the thoroughly commented manuscripts. As a result, C. Macé establishes two redactions of the oldest Greek recension – *Phys. Gr. I. α* (Sbordone’s *quarta classis*) and *Phys. Gr. I. β* (*antiquissima, altera et tertia classes*). Each of the redactions is edited separately later on in the book.

The next chapter focuses on the Latin tradition (Shari Boodts and Caroline Macé, p. 109–158). The Latin translation was accomplished before the 8th c. and existed in several versions. The authors propose three redactions (signed *Phys. Lat. x, y* and *b*) and provide a thorough overview of the scholarly tradition. Further in the chapter, special attention is dedicated to each of the Latin redactions, the manuscripts that belong to them, and their treatment in the scholarly literature. The additional notes on single witnesses will be a valuable *sine qua non* for a future comprehensive edition of the Latin tradition and its elaborated relations with the Greek original. The Latin *Physiologus* had a significant impact throughout time, developing into what is later known as *bestiaries*. It was translated into many medieval European languages, such as Old High German, Old Norse, Old and Middle English, Old French and Old Italian, mainly on the basis of what is known as the ‘b-Isidore’ version, that is, chapters of *Phys. Lat. b* augmented with extracts from Isidore’s *Etymologiae*.

A similar approach and structure is followed in the next chapter, presenting the Ethiopic tradition (Massimo Villa, p. 159–196). The Ethiopic version (extant in at least three recensions, respectively, α , β , and γ , of an initially unitary text) follows the first Greek recension (*Phys. Gr. I. α*), sharing the species treated and their number and repertory. It was supposedly translated in the 5th–6th c. In the appendix at the end of the chapter, the reader can find a comparative table showing the subject of

² Cf. the respective terms in *Parvum Lexicon Stemmatalogicum*: <https://wiki.helsinki.fi/display/stemmatology> (last visited 02.12.2021).

each chapter in *Phys. Gr. I. α*, the Ethiopic equivalent, and the corresponding chapter number in *Phys. Eth. α, β*, and *γ*.

The Syriac tradition is the focus of the next chapter (Sami Aydin, p. 197–236). Most of the Syriac witnesses of translations and recensions are often only one or two in number, even incomplete, which is somehow contrary to the wide diffusion of the *Phys.* in the Syriac literary tradition. What has reached us are two incomplete manuscripts with a translation close to *Phys. Gr. I. α*, separate chapters from it as part of various bestiaries and compilations of animal books, and an expanded version augmented with sections of Basil the Great's *Hexaemeron*. Again, the chapter follows the approach of presenting the scholarly tradition and editions concerning the Syriac reception and closely commenting on the individual features of various witnesses. Furthermore, Aydin adds new manuscripts to the academic discussion, proposing new observations of the relationships between Syriac translations and versions. There are two Syriac translations, *Phys. Syr. α* and *Phys. Syr. β* for which Aydin assumes that they were accomplished in the 6th or 7th c., and the second half of the 6th c., respectively. Another possibility is that a lost earlier translation was later revised more than once in the following centuries. A special section is dedicated to the indirect influence of *Phys.* in the Syriac hexaemeral literature.

Next follow two chapters on the Arabic traditions – *Phys. Ar. β* (Sibylle Wentker, p. 237–261) and the newly discovered *Phys. Ar. α* (Adrian Pirtea, p. 263–280). Whereas it is hard to determine whether the former was translated from a Greek or a Syriac source (being much shorter and often periphrastic), the latter demonstrates an apparent closeness to *Phys. Gr. I. β*. Both chapters present the scholarly tradition of the researched topic and the various text

witnesses with commentary and notes on each manuscript. A. Pirtea dedicates special attention to the four manuscripts of the Sinaitic collection, where the new *Phys. Ar. α* is extant. Additionally, S. Wentker investigates the language and the terminology attested in *Phys. Ar. β*, as well as the general characteristics of the translation. Wentker's hypothesis, based on the many discrepancies between the Greek and the Arabic texts, is that “the less intelligible the stories were, to begin with, the more they were changed to offer to the reader a functional story” (p. 255). A. Pirtea, on the other hand, puts the focus more on the relations between *Phys. Ar. α* and the other forms of the *Physiologus*. In his opinion, the differences between the two Arabic translations prove that they go back to different Greek (or Syriac, as it is supposed for *Phys. Ar. β*) models. The two Arabic translations, dated to the 11th c. at the latest, were made separately, targeting the Arabic-Christian milieu. They seem neither to have been influenced by the Muslim environment nor to have been received by it in any way. Further, two appendices after the chapter dedicated to *Phys. Ar. α* show a comparative table of selected passages (provided with English translations both of the Greek and the Arabic texts), and a contrastive table juxtaposing the content of the Greek text in Sbordone's edition and the two Arabic translations.

Gohar Muradyan and Aram Topchyan investigate and present the Armenian tradition (p. 281–303). The initial Armenian translation (*Phys. Arm. α*) is extant in two more recensions (*Phys. Arm. β* and *Phys. Arm. γ*), reworked versions of the first one. As per the translation technique and the linguistic characteristic of the translation, *Phys. Arm. α* can be regarded as an example of the earliest texts from the Classical period. The Greek original was a text close to *Phys. Gr. α*. Further atten-

tion is dedicated to the animal names in the Armenian text, the additional chapters presented in this tradition, and the composition of recensions β and γ . This is additionally illustrated by a table showing the list of chapters in the three Armenian recensions compared to the Greek text. The chapter ends with a somewhat extensive overview of the reception ('traces') of the *Phys.* in the later Armenian literature and art.

Jost Gippert provides research on the Georgian tradition (p. 305–350), starting with an overview of the scholarly reception and the manuscripts. A thoroughly detailed study of the relations between the Georgian translation and its supposed *Vorlage* – probably an Armenian codex, lays a valuable foundation for any further research on this tradition, which by the way, still poses numerous questions that need to be addressed in future. In the Appendix, the reader finds a list of the 34 chapters of the Georgian *Physiologus*, two tables with the *tree* birds from Lev. 11:13–19 and Deut. 14:12–18 in the Georgian recension compared with the Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Hebrew equivalents, and a contrastive table of the chapters in *Phys. Georg.* juxtaposed with *Phys. Arm.*, *Phys. Gr. I α* and *I*, and *Phys. Lat. γ* .

The last chapter of this part is dedicated to the Slavonic *Physiologus* (by Ana Stoykova, p. 351–386).³ A general, very brief, and precise introduction to the history of Slavonic translations, as well as the previous scholarship on the *Phys. Slav.* is followed by a thorough overview of the manuscript tradition. As a result, two major branches of the Slavonic tradition are established – the earliest recension (*Phys. Slav. α*) and a second, partial one (*Phys.*

Slav. β) of the first. The former, containing 48 chapters, was a translation of a text very close to *Phys. Gr. I. β* (Sbordone's classes 1–3), although often abridged. Stoykova distinguishes, furthermore, two groups of witnesses among those that contain it. The latter consists of 34 chapters; preserved in a single manuscript (a Serbian copy of the 15th c., likely going back to a manuscript of Middle Bulgarian provenance), it is a translation of *Phys. Gr. III (redactio pseudo-Basiliana)*. Additionally, Stoykova comments on the chapter sequence of *Phys. Slav. α* and *Phys. Slav. β* , some mistakes and confusions of words, also providing text-critical notes on the various copies. The indirect tradition, the illustrations and the other recensions and versions in Slavonic translation are also briefly discussed.

This first part of the book provides the necessary background for the second (pp. 389–572) one, which consists of multilingual editions of the chapters on the pelican and the panther. The two texts are published as they are represented in each tradition, with a critical apparatus and an English translation. Those mini-editions are a perfect illustration of how the discussions mentioned above on each tradition could foster the editorial text-critical work on the whole text of the *Physiologus*. In the end, four indices are dedicated to the Biblical verses, the names, titles and selected realia, the animals, plants and minerals, and finally – the manuscripts and papyri. The volume ends with pictures from manuscripts representing each tradition.

As a whole, given the length and the extent of the research scope, the volume presents few shortcomings, mainly of a layout manner. A misprinted heading on p. 309 in the chapter on the Georgian tradition says "Armenian recension", which might cause some confusion to readers opening the book for a quick reference. Some words in

³ See also a previous online edition by the same author at: <http://physiologus.proab.info> [last visited 14.02.2022].

the Slavonic chapter are given in a modern Cyrillic font. A bit more confusing might be the terms regarding the different Greek recensions, especially in the non-Greek chapters in the first part. Although the separate chapters on each tradition follow more or less the same formal sequence, sometimes more attention is given to particular questions in one chapter than in the others. Of course, this cannot be regarded as a shortcoming, provided the various specific features in each of the traditions. Still, the volume would have benefited even more from a more unified approach, where, say, the later reception, illustrations, or translation features were handled in each chapter in a similar way.

None of the aforementioned critical remarks, however, lessens in any way what has been accomplished in this spectacular volume. This book introduces a valuable and much-needed perspective of how a literary text with such multilingual impact should be considered in the medievalist discourse. Crossing the borders, which usually keep each tradition in its scope, the multilingual overview gives a more detailed and mature understanding of the *Physiologus* and its impact. The specialised readership might hope to see many more similar endeavours accomplished and further volumes with critical editions of the other chapters of the *Physiologus*.

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