Oliver Hellmann/Arnaud Zucker (eds.): On the Diffusion of Zoological Knowledge in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Period. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2023 (AKAN-Einzelschriften 14). 198 p. € 29.50. ISBN 978-3-86821-982-1.

The volume under review presents the outcome of a 2019 conference with the same title. Eight contributions, all in English except for one, deal with the different functions animals' motives played in different genres of Greek, Latin and Arabic literatures from the second (or third) to the thirteenth century CE. The short editors' preface (pp. 7–11) provides brief summaries of each article. As the editors acknowledge, "[i]t seems clear that this collection of studies cannot give a comprehensive presentation of 'the Diffusion of Zoological Knowledge in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Period'" (p. 10), especially because not all of the studies are in fact concerned with "zoological knowledge" in the strict sense. The expression "zoological knowledge" is used thirteen times within the four pages of the introduction and "zoological data" three times (p. 7 and 9).[1] Of course, the adjective "zoological", primarily meaning "relating to zoology; belonging or devoted to the scientific study of animals",[2] can also be understood in extended use,[3] but I think that it is confusing to call a "zoological text" (p. 8) something which is a literary (or fictional) work using animals' motives, such as the *Physiologus*. Moreover, another expression surfaces three times in the preface (about Basil of Caesarea's *In Hexaemeron* and Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*), "animal lore" (p. 8),[4] which clearly contrasts to "zoological knowledge". If a difference is indeed to be made between "zoological knowledge" and "animal lore", then it seems that most of the articles in the present collection are concerned with "animal lore" and not with "zoological knowledge".

1 The following terms or expressions are used once or twice: "zoological work" (p. 8), "zoological text" (p. 8), "zoology" (p. 8 n. 3, p. 9), "zoological section" (p. 9), "zoological writers" (p. 9), "zoological [...] sources" (p. 10).

2 Oxford English Dictionary online, s. v. zoological (*adj.*), sense 1.

3 Oxford English Dictionary online, s. v. zoological (*adj.*), sense 2: "relating to animals generally".

4 The article of the Oxford English Dictionary online, s. v. lore (*n.1*), sense 5.a, is worth reading: "That which is learned; learning, scholarship, erudition. Now only *archaic* and *Scottish* [...] Also, in later use, applied [...] to the body of traditional facts, anecdotes, or beliefs relating to some particular subject [...]".

[1] This issue is central in Álvaro Pires's article, "A Fiction of Nature and the Nature of Fiction: The Role of Fictionality in the Allegorical Hermeneutics of the Greek *Physiologus*" (pp. 13–36). Pires claims that "the question of how to account for the fantastic character of the zoological descriptions in the text [of the *Physiologus*] remains unanswered" (p. 14) and proposes to approach this question from the point of view of "the fictionality topos in interpretative discourse" (p. 28), as expressed in Porphyry, Philo, or Origenes. For that purpose, Pires takes as a case-study the chapter on "sirens and onocentaurs" (chapter 13 in Francesco Sbordone's edition published in 1936),[5] which is one of the chapters in the *Physiologus* where the creatures described are obviously fictional in both ancient and modern sense), being "Misch-" und "Fabelwesen" at the same time.[6] Indeed, I think that most modern scholars have let themselves being deceived by the fictional character appearing in the *Physiologus*, i. e. the so-called Φυσιολόγος to whom the physiological descriptions are attributed in the book. This fictional device was taken far too seriously by modern scholars, who have assumed that the *Physiologus*, or at least its physiological part, was intended as a "zoological text" (p. 8, as stated in the introduction of the present volume). As Pires claims, the "fabulous zoological information" present in the *Physiologus* could only incite "previous scholarship" "to denigrate the *Physiologus* as infantile and naïve" (p. 13). I think that most scholars nowadays would not categorise the *Physiologus* as a work with any kind of scientific contents or purpose and would therefore not evaluate it in terms of exactness in its rendering of natural phenomena. However, there is obviously still an approach to the *Physiologus* "insisting that the *Physiologus* served [...] also as an account of natural history" (p. 15). As Pires notes, such an approach is exemplified in Stavros Lazaris's 2016 book, with the telling subtitle "The Rewriting of Antique Natural History":[7] "[h]is [Lazaris's] understanding of the text thus hews more closely to earlier scholarship, but he avoids the negative appraisal of prior critics" (p. 15). Pires's concept of fictionality is undoubtedly more fruitful

5 F. Sbordone (ed.): Physiologus. Milan 1936.

6 Cf. H. Schneider: Mischwesen im Physiologus. Das Echidna-Kapitel in den griechischen Fassungen des Physiologus. In: RQA 116, 2021, pp. 151–162.

7 S. Lazaris: Le *Physiologus* grec. Vol. 1: La réécriture de l'histoire naturelle antique. Florence 2016 (Micrologus Library 77/1). The perspective is not different in Lazaris's second volume (and there again the subtitle is programmatic): Le *Physiologus* grec. Vol. 2: Donner à voir la nature. Florence 2021 (Micrologus Library 107 = 77/2).

(and historically correct) than a zoological interpretation of the *Physiologus*. However, the choice of the case-study and the approach to the text are not so fortunate, in my opinion. Pires selected the chapter about the "sirens and onocentaurs", but chose to focus on an alternative version of the Greek text, attested by two late manuscripts ("WO") and edited by Sbordone as Chapter 13bis.[8] This alternative version is characterized by a "caution" and an "ambivalence about the creatures' existence" (p. 23), which contrast to the usual contents of the *Physiologus* (what Pires calls the "standard version", p. 20) and may serve Pires's purposes well, but cannot be used as representative of the *Physiologus*' original text. The text of the *Physiologus* in "WO" is obviously a late rewriting, perhaps not much older than the date when the oldest of the two manuscripts, "W", was copied, i. e. the late thirteenth century, and so the peculiarities or innovations it contains cannot be attributed to the time when the *Physiologus* was written (the second or third century). This renders the whole argument of Pires's article unsound.

[2] The conclusion of Diego De Brasi's article ("Basil of Caesarea's *Homilies on the Six Days of Creation*: Scientific Transfer and Moral Education between Aristotle and the Bible", pp. 37–58) contrasts Basil of Caesarea's *In Hexaemeron* (fourth century), with its pedagogical purpose and scientific (Aristotelian) contents, to the *Physiologus*, in which, according to De Brasi, "the description of animal characteristics" is "subordinate[d] [...] to a typological analysis" (p. 54). De Brasi claims that Basil's "homilies on animals" are an example of "knowledge transfer" (p. 49). This is a well-informed article, and although it does not bring anything new, it clearly shows how antique and late-antique knowledge was adopted in fourth-century Cappadocian Christianity.

[3] The *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, written in Latin by Solinus around the middle of the third century, are the topic of Caroline Bélanger's article ("Marvellous, Exotic, and Strange: Zoological Knowledge in Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*", pp. 59–82). As the author points out, the *Collectanea*, which she describes as displaying "fashionable-but-scholarly knowledge" and as "descriptive, literary, and oriented towards the foreign and strange" (p. 59), is "one example among several important Latin zoological

8 The different versions of the text had already been presented in full, with an extensive discussion, in the following article: V. A. Pakis: Contextual Duplicity and Textual Variation: The Siren and Onocentaur in the Physiologus Tradition. In: Mediaevistik 23, 2010, pp. 115–185.

compendia" (p. 74). Bélanger draws an interesting survey of the "many forms" which "Latin zoological-encyclopedic compendia" can take (p. 74), their natures and purposes, sources and influences, as well as the relationships between them and to comparable Greek works.

[4] Steven D. Smith ("Theophylaktos Simokattes: Zoological Knowledge and Sophistic Culture at the End of Antiquity", pp. 83–101) analyses the different functions which animals' motives played in the works of Theophylact Simocatta (first half of the seventh century), the *Quaestiones physicae* and the *Letters*. In the former, "the sophistic display of zoological lore offers an opportunity for the performance of cultural and intellectual mastery" (p. 84); in the latter, "zoological lore and animal fables become a medium for expressing [...] the Byzantine obsession with luxury and ornamentation, the blending of Neoplatonic and Christian thought" etc. (pp. 84–85). Smith highlights the importance of studying Simocatta's work, which is too often neglected by scholars, for the history of mentality and literary history of Byzantium. As he concludes, "[t]hroughout his sophistic works, [...] Theophylaktos Simokattes made zoological knowledge newly relevant within the elite culture of seventh-century Constantinople" (p. 99).

[5] With George of Pisidia's *Hexameron* in poetic form, which is the subject of Daniil Pleshak's article ("Animals and Ideology in George of Pisidia's *Hexameron*", pp. 103–116), we remain in the same period and the same courtly environment of Byzantine Emperor Heraclius' reign as with Simocatta's work. The present paper intends to "show that Heraclian political ideology had considerable influence on the way George of Pisidia used scientific knowledge in his *Hexameron* when speaking about animals" (p. 103). According to Pleshak, "[m]ost zoological exempla in George of Pisidia's *Hexameron* are related to topics that are important for the imperial propaganda of the time" (p. 113). The topics identified by Pleshak are the following: "God's might" (p. 104), "purity and cleansing" (p. 105), "the ability of smaller animals to overcome bigger ones" (p. 106), "miraculous reproduction" (to be related to the "immaculate conception", p. 109), "divine wisdom and exclusion of religious dissidents" (p. 111), and "resurrection" (p. 113). These topics seem to me generally Christian and not specific for the ideology of Heraclius' reign. Browsing through the first recension of the *Physiologus*, for example, which is a few centuries earlier and was known to George, one would find the same topics as prominent. Only the topic of the third block identified by Pleshak, dealing with "power relations in the animal world" (p. 106),

may indeed, as Pleshak shows, be in resonance with other texts in which "Heraclius' wars are often depicted as asymmetrical warfare, in which a small band of Christians face innumerable hordes of non-Christian enemies" (p. 108).

[6] Contrary to the other contributions in this volume, Cristiana Franco's article ("*Quorum postremo naturae est extra homines esse non posse*. Appraisals of Canine Ethology in Early Christian Writers", pp. 117–134) does not focus on one author or work, but on one animal, the dog, in the writings of early Christian writers, mostly Latin. As Franco highlights, the case of the dog is interesting, because it exemplifies "how Christian writers [...] coped with different, and sometimes contradictory ethological notions and evaluations [...] they found in the pagan literature [...] on the one hand, and in the Bible on the other" (p. 119).

[7] Pieter Beullens's article ("Bartholomew of Messina's Role in the Transmission of the Greek *Hippiatrica*", pp. 135–160) is different from the others in the volume as it is philological by nature, intending to shed light on the complex tradition history of different versions of a Greek treatise *De curatione equorum* attributed to Hierocles and their Latin translations, one of them attributed to Bartholomew of Messina, the famous translator active under King Manfred of Sicily (reigned 1258–1266).

[8] The last article in the collection, by Jean-Charles Ducène ["Parmi les sources d'al-Marwazī (XIIe s.): Ptolémée, Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Munağğim (IXe s.) et al-Ǧayhānī (Xe s.)", pp. 161–176], dwells upon three important sources for Šaraf al-Dīn al-Marwazī's *Book on the Natures of Animals* (*Kitāb ṭabā'i' al-ḥayawān*). After a brief presentation of the four (incomplete) manuscripts containing this twelfth-century treatise, which is only partly edited, Ducène provides some information about the author and the contents of his treatise, then shows that al-Marwazī used and quoted the Arabic translations of many antique and Byzantine scientific authors, as well as many works by Arabic writers.

The book ends with an *index locorum* (pp. 179–192) and an *index nominum et rerum* (pp. 193–196).

The case-studies offered in the present collection are of two kinds. The last two articles are philological and dealing with the reception of Greek zoological knowledge respectively in thirteenth-century Sicily [7] and in the Seljuk

Empire (second half of the eleventh, beginning of the twelfth century) [8]. Almost all the other articles [1–2, 4–6] present some insights into the various ways in which Christian authors reworked traditional or scientific knowledge about ethology into their literary creations, to serve different purposes: entertainment, moralistic teaching, general education, display of rhetorical skills, ideological or political propaganda. The orientation towards the marvellous, which is prominent in some of these literary works, was already present in non-Christian zoological compendia, as the case of Solinus illustrates [3].

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