
KALLIOPE MAVROMMATI, *The Natural Environment in Late Byzantine Correspondence (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture)*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2025. xii, 544 pp. – ISBN 978-3-031-66177-8

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In recent years, the study of Byzantine nature – understood both as the physical environment and as its literary and artistic conceptualisation – has gained considerable momentum in scholarship. Not only have new avenues of research opened up, but scholars have also become increasingly willing to acknowledge that nature, including non-human animals, constituted important, if sometimes shadowy, actors (I use this term deliberately) throughout the existence of the Byzantine Empire.

KALLIOPE MAVROMMATI's recent book is part of this newly awakened interest in the less explored aspects of the Byzantine culture. One important caveat should, however, be made: this is clearly a work written by a historian who only occasionally ventures into the field of literary studies. While such strict binary oppositions (history vs. literature) are perhaps somewhat artificial in Byzantine studies, I nevertheless approach this volume primarily as a literary scholar. Consequently, some of my conclusions and remarks may reflect this different perspective.

Spanning more than five hundred pages, the book comprises two volumes and four parts with thirteen chapters devoted to subjects such as environmental history, ecosystems, meteorological and seismic phenomena, and non-human animals (referred to here as 'beasts'). It is a revised English-language version of the author's 2014 doctoral thesis.

The principal sources discussed in this volume are the letters of Late Byzantine literati, although earlier materials, such as the correspondence of John Tzetzes, occasionally appear, slightly undermining the title of the book. While this disrupts the flow and creates a disjointed quality at times, it is understandable that Late Byzantine authors did not emerge out of thin air but developed within an existing literary tradition. Nonetheless, MAVROMMATI is to be applauded for her command of the sources – the sheer amount of work required to read through such a vast body of material must have been immense.

Yet the organisation of the book is somewhat unconvincing. Chapters that appear intended to provide the theoretical backbone of the study are interspersed with chapters devoted to more specific issues. For example, Chapter 4 on the annual cycle is sandwiched between a Chapter 3 dealing with the philosophical and rhetorical tradition and a Chapter 5 on politics, the economy and environment. The volume includes two sections that I found rather disappointing. The first is a methodological discussion included in Chapter 1. Unfortunately, this section discusses primarily the rationale behind the selection of the source material, the bibliography, and Byzantine epistolography. MAVROMMATI explains *what* she analyses and, to some extent, *why* she analyses these sources, but says virtually nothing about *how* she analyses them. For instance, there is no mention of any methodology facilitating the analysis of the descriptions of the environment, nor any sustained methodological engagement with human-animal studies.

The other important, yet not fully developed, chapter is Chapter 3, 'The Philosophical and Rhetorical Tradition in the Intellectual Communication.' As far as I can tell, this chapter is intended to provide the narrative framework for the entire work by situating Byzantine writings on the natural world within a broader intellectual context. Consequently, it includes a broad introduction to the study of the natural world in Byzantium, although a more structured presentation would be desirable.

This chapter offers a very general overview of sources of diverse authors and provenance. The discussion tends to treat works like Aelian, Timotheos of Gaza, the *Physiologos*, and Aristotelian commentaries as a single group, which can be sometimes confusing. This survey makes clear — and Mavrommati herself acknowledges — that reading Byzantine literature on the natural world is complicated by the need to read through an inherited ancient tradition.

In this chapter MAVROMMATI discusses – and rightly so – not only technical literature such as botanical works and pharmacological treatises but also texts of a more literary character. Throughout the chapter, MAVROMMATI offers a number of insightful observations, for instance when discussing how literary works may reflect Byzantine society's relationship with nature (p. 67). Particularly noteworthy is her observation that this literature 'conveys the actual dimensions of a society's relationship to nature and emphasises the value of certain features of the environment in Byzantine thought' (p. 67). This insight could serve as a starting point for a more developed ecocritical analysis. Yet ecocritical perspectives remain entirely

absent from the volume, despite its explicit concern with the Byzantine environment and human interactions with the natural world.

In the Chapter 4, ‘The Annual Cycle as an Axis of Human Activity’, MAVROMMATI shows how human activities intersect with the seasonal cycle. Once again, the chapter is an incredibly rich source of material for further analysis. Among the more amusing examples discussed is a text by Michael Psellos in which he reproaches his students for failing to attend school because of the rain (pp. 83–84). The episode will strike a familiar chord with modern readers, recalling situations in which adverse weather serves as a convenient excuse for avoiding one’s obligations. MAVROMMATI’s argument is not necessarily socio-cultural but rather environmental: Byzantine authors recorded in their writings climatic events that made people’s lives difficult. MAVROMMATI also offers a number of observations on weather phenomena that resonate with similar concerns expressed by Byzantine—and, more generally, premodern—authors regarding the animal world—see for instance her observation that ‘Snow, although viewed as a necessary evil, was problematic for them too, but a life-giving benefit for nature’ (p. 84).

The second part of the book (from Chapter 6 onwards) offers a wealth of material organised roughly along two axes: geographical regions and environmental spaces (land, air, water, woodlands). This is an interesting approach, even if it effectively structures the volume as a kind of environmental counterpart to the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*. However, as before, this particular environmental lens, allows MAVROMMATI to include a plethora of fascinating remarks. While discussing Terebinthos she refers to Michael Choniates’ letter in which he mentions a surplus of hares on the island. However, I think that she overstates the extant evidence. MAVROMMATI notes ‘Concluding the description, Choniates adds that on the island, there were many hares, which were causing damage to the crops, thus giving also a picture of the fundamental challenges of rural life’ (p. 149). The passage indeed suggests that hares posed a nuisance by damaging cultivated vegetables. However, it is less clear that Choniates intended this observation as a broader commentary on the challenges of rural life. In context, the remark is primarily a humorous comparison between hares and snakes and perhaps directed at the practical difficulties of monastic subsistence (as Choniates says that hares devour vegetables, the favourite food of ascetics: τὸ φίλον ὄψον τῶν ἀσκητῶν, 30.64–5).

The next part (III) discusses meteorological phenomena and even pirates. I

found the discussion regarding the pirates entertaining (surely much more entertaining for me than for the Byzantines affected by them). However, I remain slightly unconvinced that even very entertaining pirates have a place in a book on the environment. Even when considered alongside storms as a common hazard of travel, they sit somewhat awkwardly within a study devoted to the natural environment.

The final part of the book (IV) is devoted to ‘Beasts’. Chapters 11–12 were the sections of the book that I approached with the greatest interest (‘Approaches to the Alogos Cosmos’ and ‘Details of Daily Life’, with subsections devoted to various animals such as horses, cats, and dogs). To my mind, the main problem with these chapters is that they contain so much material that they could easily constitute a stand-alone volume of their own. Chapter no. 11 offers a broad overview of Byzantine approaches to non-human animals (although MAVROMMATI herself does not employ this terminology). Some of her findings are of great importance – for instance Michael Choniates’ remarkably explicit endorsement of empirical zoological investigation (p. 386). On the other hand, some of the interpretations strike me as unconvincing. For instance, Tzetzes’ remarks in his letter to Pantechnes should, in my view, be interpreted differently, as the text itself does not support the conclusion drawn by MAVROMMATI (p. 385). It should also be noted that MAVROMMATI has unearthed the name of a dog, Hyellobourtes, sent by Theodore II Laskaris to Georgios Mouzalon. This is a particularly noteworthy discovery, not least because named animals are exceptionally rare in Byzantine sources—perhaps even rarer than the bears that, according to Michael Choniates, ended up on Latin dining tables in the passage where he discusses the dissection of animals (pp. 386–387).

The book would undoubtedly have benefited from more careful copyediting. This would have helped avoid such issues as the conflation of Latin and English (*Excerpta ex libris of animalibus*, p. 63), the misspelling of KAZHDAN as Kazdhan (repeatedly), and the unnecessary capitalisation of terms such as ‘Rhetoric’ (p. 67). Likewise, ‘linguistic’ and ‘literary’ denote distinct categories and should not be used interchangeably – I have to admit that I found the use of the term ‘linguistic/philological genres’ instead of ‘literary genres’ somewhat irritating (for instance p. 66: ‘various linguistic genres’). Yet let one who is without a typo and error cast the first stone.

This is one of the longest reviews I have ever written, which itself demonstrates that MAVROMMATI’s book is an intellectually stimulating one for the reader. It invites criticism, debate, and discussion. This is surely the

result of an enormous scholarly effort, and its value as a source for further, more detailed investigation is beyond question. I learned a great deal from reading it, which, I think, is among the highest compliments one can pay to a scholarly book.

Keywords

environmental studies; animal studies; Byzantine epistolography