

## Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα

Τόμ. 24, Αρ. 1 (2014)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 24



**Book Review: M. CHRONI, 'Η πανίδα στην διατροφή και στην ιατρική στο Βυζάντιο, Σύλλογος προς διάδοσιν Ὡφελίμων Βιβλίων, Athens 2012, pp. 598. ISBN 978-960-8351-65-3**

Maria LEONTSINI

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.1206](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1206)

Copyright © 2015, Maria LEONTSINI



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

LEONTSINI, M. (2015). Book Review: M. CHRONI, 'Η πανίδα στην διατροφή και στην ιατρική στο Βυζάντιο, Σύλλογος προς διάδοσιν Ὡφελίμων Βιβλίων, Athens 2012, pp. 598. ISBN 978-960-8351-65-3. *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα*, 24(1), 413–415. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1206>

M. CHRONI, *Ἡ πανίδα στὴν διατροφή καὶ στὴν ἰατρικὴ στὸ Βυζάντιο*, Σύλλογος πρὸς διάδοσιν Ὡφελίμων Βιβλίων, Athens 2012, pp. 598. ISBN 978-960-8351-65-3

The book is the improved version of the author's doctoral thesis (submitted to the University of Athens, in 2010), focused on the contribution of animal products to diet and medicine in Byzantium. The study of fauna and animal products has become a specialized field of research over the last decade, from the perspective of history, archaeology and bio-archaeology, offering new knowledge on the historical developments of dietary conditions and medicine in Byzantium, also on the evolution of the procedures of agricultural production and on the broader context of the opinions and conditions affecting the relationship between man and nature (environmental history). The book provides a complete picture of the records on animal food products, as a result of the author's ability to go over a wide variety of texts ranging from basic ancient Greek sources (such as Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Harpocration, Plutarch, Polybius, Claudius Aelianus et al.) to various types of Byzantine literary texts, as well as a large amount of medical treatises. The author's research also takes into consideration the conditions that formed the nutritional behaviours as also the mentalities and religious canons on diet which were pivotal over time alongside the limitations set by the prevailing legal context and marketing potential.

In the introduction the author cites the perceptions on the animal world and the multifaceted symbolisms which are outlined in theological and literary texts (poetic, rhetorical, etc.), as well as the cognitive approaches on fauna preserved in special essays and other documents on the subject of natural history, zoology and medicine. Of particular use is her observation that medical texts of the middle Byzantine period rarely make accessible encyclopaedic information relating to alien morals on nutrition and medicine, as was the case in Late Antiquity (p. 21).

Furthermore, she notes that it is not easy to clarify whether the therapeutic raw materials of animal nature suggested by Byzantine physicians came from purely medical procedures, or whether they were at times prescribed as a result of a fusion of customs or beliefs connected with white magic and alchemy (p. 33). Evidence ranging from alimentary practices to therapeutic methods shows in an impressive manner the amplitude of the diversity of the uses of animal products presented in the two distinct parts of the book. Testimonies on the production, consumption and nutritional properties of the meat of poultry and mammals (pp. 63–149); fish and other aquatic species (pp. 149–197); milk and dairy products (pp. 197–217); eggs (pp. 227–234); and apicultural products (pp. 234–286), are discussed in a fully comprehensive manner in the five chapters of the first part of the book, dedicated to nutrition and diet.

The second part, dedicated to the medical use of animal products in Byzantium, is divided into two chapters. In the first section of this part, nutritional and pharmaceutical therapies based on animal products are classified according to treatments for diseases and disorders of the cardiovascular, respiratory, urogenital and gastrointestinal systems; neurological and hematopoietic disorders; diseases of the spinal cord; symptoms affecting the eyes and ears; as well as skin lesions (pp. 287–344). Of great use is the identification of Byzantine medical terms with the corresponding modern scientific vocabulary. The lack of detailed descriptions regarding the implementation of therapies is a visible constant feature of Byzantine medical writings. On the other hand, the confirmation of literary references to patients and diseases, according to symptoms mentioned in Byzantine medicinal texts, is a methodological solution substituting for the lack of information on the stages of treatment that allows the outlining of the boundaries between theories and applicable practices. Furthermore, as medical texts were not accessible to wider social strata, the broader practical dissemination of treatments was essential (p. 344) in ascertaining that the trend of compilations was bypassed; a dynamics was developed during the Byzantine period regarding scientific concepts; and the introduced knowledge was viewed in a critical manner (p. 475).

The approach of nature introduced by Plato and subsequently studied by other ancient Greek scholars, although it underwent many changes and criticism in some respects by the Christian teachings, probably did not halt the mixture of medicinal and magical beliefs. The interfusion of magical elements with medicine, relating mostly to magical activities, becomes clearer from the seventh century onwards, especially in the works of Alexander of Tralles and Theophanes Nonnus;

however, it is also implied in certain instructions in Symeon Seth's directory and the works of Manuel Philes (p. 365). This conclusion is supported by a number of actual data illustrating that the implementation of treatments using natural assets was coexisting with the transcendental and symbolic interpretation of product properties. The book concludes with a detailed inventory of the body parts of every animal (in alphabetical order), in an entry form headed by a term describing the body part of each animal and accompanied by classified subcategories, according to their use in amulets, magic potions and medicaments; the entries are also followed by annotated references to sources in footnotes (pp. 382–457). At the very end of the book there is a catalogue of abbreviations; a bibliography; a list of electronic databases; and three indexes of names of animals and animal products, persons, places and proper names, as well as one of special terms. The exhaustive indexing of material coming from many types of sources and the rich commentaries are of the most important qualities of this study which ensures the prerequisites for a further scientific discussion of the numerous and multifaceted references on animal products found in Byzantine texts.

MARIA LEONTSINI  
IHR/NHRF