Title: Preliminary remarks on Byzantine literary perception(s) of fatness (11th to 12th centuries)

Author: Tomasz Labuk

Citation style: Labuk Tomasz. (2016). Preliminary remarks on Byzantine literary perception(s) of fatness (11th to 12th centuries). "Scripta Classica" (Vol. 13 (2016), s. 101-114).
Preliminary remarks on Byzantine Literary Perception(s) of Fatness (11th to 12th Centuries)¹

Abstract: The article discusses various ways in which fat body was represented and used as a means of social, religious and political critique in Byzantine literature from eleventh to twelfth century. The analysis is put within a broader context and traces the sources of the discourse of overindulgence to ancient Greek tradition (Plato, Aristophanes, Athenaeus), as well as to Christian frameworks (Old and New Testament, Church Fathers).

Key words: Byzantium, fatness, gluttony, ancient literature.

We live in a world of striking paradoxes. As Martín Caparrós has shown in his recent and disturbing bestseller entitled Hunger (El Hambre), every ninth inhabitant of the Earth is starving. At the very same time the obesity rates in the “first-world” countries are peaking. In the social realities of the industrialised West, food is omnipresent. Eating has become a modern-day obsession to such a point that there has even emerged an interdisciplinary scholarly field of fat studies which aims to challenge and undermine prevalent negative stereotypes associated to fatness.²

¹ This article is a part of project funded by the National Science Centre Poland within the scheme of the Programme “Sonata-Bis 3”, project title: “Intellectual History of 12th-Century Byzantium – Adaptation and Appropriation of Ancient Literature”, grant number: UMO-2013/10/E/HS2/00170.

Eating in Byzantium

Nonetheless, there is nothing new about this modern obsession with consumption. Indeed, eleventh- as well as twelfth-century Byzantine literati seem to have been equally obsessed with what and how others ate, and reproaching individuals for their gluttony, drunkenness or obesity was a literary topos widely explored by the authors of the period.

Historical and archaeological scholarship on Byzantine foodstuffs and dietary prescriptions is prolific. The seminal and widely quoted study of Koukoules, still remains the most wide-ranging scholarly analysis of Byzantine food culture. The vast work of Johannes Koder has brought new insights into the provision of fresh food products in Constantinople, Byzantine eating habits and Byzantine cuisine. Of no less value is the work of Ilias Anagnostakis, who enriched scholarly perspective on Byzantine food consumption with many insights. Andrew Dalby’s Siren Feast and Flavours of Byzantium offered some pioneering insights into Byzantine cuisine, while Ewald Kislinger added significant contributions to the field.

Fat Studies Reader. New York 2009. For the definition of the field see E. Rothblum: Fat Studies. In: The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Obesity..., p. 174. The applicability of this theoretical framework to Medieval literature is highly questionable. The scholars within the field perceive themselves as a part of what they call as “fat pride community” or the “size acceptance movement”, which are social concepts that are totally alien to any Medieval society. Moreover, even though one of the aims of the field is to understand the sources of modern perceptions of fatness, vast majority of the publications within the field is concerned only with modern societies and cultures. In this sense, it seems that rather medievalists might contribute to the fat studies, not the other way round.

Last but not least, one could not omit a series of studies on Byzantine diet conducted by a Polish Byzantinist Maciej Kokoszko.\(^8\)

Copious though it may seem, the field lacks almost completely in literary analyses of various uses of food, cuisine-related terms, literary representations of physical acts of consumption as well as the meaning of fat bodies – the area on which I intend to focus in the second part of this article.\(^9\) Although Byzantine literary texts form the core of the studies mentioned above, Byzantine food scholarship, for the major part, has paid almost no attention to literary tradition within which they emerged, their complex intertextual allusiveness, or has even ignored the very fact that the Byzantines produced and read literature chiefly for pleasure.\(^10\)

Such approach leads sometimes to baffling results. Jonathan Harris, commenting on the realities of 12th-century Constantinople, quotes a passage from Niketas Choniates’ *Chronike Diegesis*, which derides John of Poutza, a gluttonous official from the retinue of emperor Manuel Komnenos.\(^11\) In the scene, John cannot curb his appetite for his beloved meal and, on his way back home, he has to stop by in a roadside tavern to have his fill of the soup. He gulps it down, paying two obols to the tavern keeper. Harris, taking what is written at face value, concludes that the price of a bowl of soup equalled to two bronze coins in the 12th-century Constantinople. Yet, as I argue elsewhere, the entire episode might be as well a literary fiction, which, through subtle intertextual hints, refers the reader to Aristophanes’ comedies.\(^12\)

Similarly, E. Kislinger, discussing another portrait of a drunken imperial official, John Kamateros, depicted by Choniates,\(^13\) concludes that some officials, inspired by the introduction of new extravagant customs in the twelfth century, went as far as drinking seven litres of water directly from a huge vase. Once again, such

---


\(^12\) E. Kislinger: “Being and Well-being…”, p. 153; T. Labuk: “Aristophanes…”.

\(^13\) vD 113.87–114.10.
a reading ignores the fact that Choniates operates here with well-known literary topoi which stemmed from the comedic tradition – such as drinking wine from huge “breathless” cups or engaging in drunken wagers. As I, again, argue elsewhere, the wording used by Choniates in the passage seems to refer the reader to Athenaeus and Aristophanes, adding layers of additional covert meanings. Such a reading is all the more possible if we consider that both of these ancient authors were widely read and studied by the Byzantines. The episode, once again, might as well never have happened at all, but its historical veracity was, in my opinion, not a chief aim of Choniates.

Still, the most extreme example of such a word for word reading has been recently proposed by a Polish scholar, Anna Kotłowska. Quoting one of the letters composed by a twelfth-century intellectual, Michael Italikos, to Theodore Prodromos, Kotłowska concludes that the Byzantines disliked cheese and incorrectly linked the Greek word for a tyrant (τύραννος) with a noun which denoted cheese (τυρός). What Kotłowska seems to ignore, is the fact that Italikos, an accomplished scholar and a thoroughly educated author, might be simply poking fun at Prodromos – a polymath and an author of numerous witty literary satires.

Byzantine “fat savages”

Sadly enough, this seeming lack of interest in deeper meanings pertains to the co-related field of literary depictions of fatness in Byzantine literature. Ex-
cept from Alexander Kazhdan’s and Simon Franklin’s study of different accounts of the revolt of John Komnenos the Fat, as well as Liz James’ and Anthony Eastmond’s article on the consequences of gluttony, the topic of representation of fat body in the middle and late Byzantine periods seems to be practically untouched. While some additional insights can be added to both of the quoted studies, my aim in the subsequent part of this article will be to suggest some additional methods of literary representations of fatness within Byzantine literature.

Undoubtedly, Byzantine discourse of obesity and gluttony stemmed on the one hand from ancient Greek tradition, on the other, from Christian frameworks, both of which have been finally blended into a uniform system of thought. It is hard not to discern Platonic threads within the discourse itself. In his *Timaeus* Plato speaks of the lower mortal soul, which is the seat of “fearful and necessary passions” (δεινὰ καὶ ἀναγκαῖα ἐν ἕαντῳ παθήματα), among which there is a desire for pleasure, “the greatest attraction to evil” (μέγιστον κακοῦ δέλεαρ). As Plato argues, the gods mixed all other irrational sensations along with this urge (αἰσθήσει δὲ ἀλόγῳ καὶ ἐπιχειρητῇ παντὸς ἔρωτι συγκερασάμενοι). Accordingly, the lowly mortal soul was placed by the gods in another part of the body (i.e. the chest), to prevent the defilement of the immortal and godly soul, which was situated in the human head. The lowest part of the mortal soul (which is close to a savage creature — ὡς θρέμμα ἄγριων), responsible for the intake of food and drink, was situated as far as possible from the rational immortal soul, that is in the belly (γαστήρ). Such a solution ensured that the rational soul was distanced maximally from the inescapable bodily appetites (70d–e). But, as Plato argues further on, since the body must be fed in order to continue to live, the appetite for food and drink cannot be simply subdued and the rational soul must exert constant control over the mortal soul. When it fails to do so, the basest desires take charge of a human being.

Analogous frameworks, imbued with additional Christian connotations, can be gleaned from numerous passages from the Church Fathers, chiefly John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria. I would not like to engage in a detailed analysis of their outlooks on bodily overindulgence; hence I shall limit the discussion only to a number of representative quotations. Gluttony, according to both John and Clement, leads inevitably to fatness (πολυσαρκία), and to the utter perdition of one’s soul. The very term used frequently to denote obesity, πολυσαρκία, bears strong connections with animality and savagery. Chrysostom uses this noun in his *Ninth Homily on the Hexaemeron* where, in his description of the elephants,


he calls them “the mountains of flesh” (βουνοί τινες σάρκινοι). Further, in his *Sermo Against the Jews*, he discerns:

But what is the source of this hardness? It come from gluttony and drunkenness. Who say so? Moses himself. “Israel ate and was filled and the darling grew fat and frisky”. When brute animals (tà ἄλογα) feed from a full manger, they grow plump and become more obstinate and hard to hold in check; they endure neither the yoke, the reins, nor the hand of the charioteer.

It is clear from the passage that living by one’s stomach renders one closer to a wild animal. In the *Paedagogus* Clement openly declares that those who live with the sole intention to eat are like irrational animals, for whom life is nothing more than their belly. According to Clement, the proper name for those who live to eat is a “savage tribe of parasites” (II.1.7.3: ἄγρια τῶν παρασίτων φύλα), for they live “wallowing on their bellies” (II.1.7.6: ἐπὶ γαστέρας ἔρποντες). After the image of their father, himself a gluttonous beast (II.1.7.6–7: κατ’ ἑκόνα τοῦ ἔλιχνου θηρίου), they resemble rather wild beasts clothed in the form of men (θηρία ἀνδρείκελα). Last, but not least, in the 35th *Homily on the Acts of the Apostles* Chrysostom compares the fat to the seals who drag their bodies along, commenting further that eating from dawn until dusk is the property of an irrational beast. A fat glutton spends his life in idleness, he has nothing manly in his appearance and resembling rather a savage beast in the shape of a man, and is unable to rise from his bed due to the elephant-like weight of his body.

As can be seen from this brief summary, overindulgence in corporeal delights, along with fatness which stems from it, perceived as emblems of savagery

---


25 II.1.1.4 Ὁι μὲν δὴ ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι ζῶσιν, ἵνα ἐσθίοσιν, ὤσπερ ἀμέλει καὶ τὰ ἄλογα ζῷα, οὗς οὐδὲν ἄλλα γαστήρ εἰσίν ὁ βίος.


27 PG 60.256 col. B: Τίνι δὲ οὐκ ἐστιν ἀνδής ἄνθρωπος πολυσαρκίαν ἀσκῶν, φώκης δίκην συφόμενος.

28 Ibidem.

29 PG 60 col.256.G: οὐδὲν ἔχον ἄνθρωπον, ἄλλα πάντα θηρίου ἄνθρωπομορφῶν· οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ δίνηροι, οὗν τὸ στόμα ἄποξον, τῇ ταλαίπωρις ψυχῇ καθάπερ ἐπὶ κλίνης βεβλημένη ὑπὸ τῆς ἀμέτρους ἐγχειμομένης ἐφολκρασίας, τὸ μέγεθος τῶν σαρκῶν περιφέρουσα καθάπερ ἔλεφας.
As Anthony Kaldellis has shown in his recent study, barbaric appetite for food (such as raw meat) and drinking was also a motif of ancient pedigree, and was repeatedly used in Byzantine ethnographical discourse. Hayden White has moreover argued, wildness or savagery is a complex of symbols applied by social groups “to designate an area of sub-humanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not.” Following Foucault, White has discerned that such concepts can be filled with diverse contents depending on changing social context wherein they are used. Adapting this argument, I would like to contend that fatness-savagery had three essential facets in the eleventh and twelfth-century Byzantine literature. It pointed to political savagery (that is: using state’s resources to satisfy one’s personal whims), social savagery (that is: living at the expense of others, breaking the rules of commensality) and religious savagery (that is: living ungodly). From this perspective then, fatness and gluttony can be perceived as a means of differing oneself as a civilised/socialised man from the ones who break the norms prevalent in society.

Michael Psellos in his *Chronographia* famously portrayed the Emperor Constantine VIII (1025–28), as a man of enormous size (ἐγοιευθὸς τὸ σῶμα) and of constitution more robust than what is natural (ῥωμαλεύτερον εἰς τῆς φύσεως). Constantine was a slave of his own lust and stomach, (ἡττητο δὲ καὶ γαστρὸς καὶ ἀφροδισίων) and his belly possessed a specious ability of receiving foodstuffs of every kind. As a result, Psellos writes, Constantine demonstrated an extraordinary ability to prepare rich sauces, and “subjected his entire nature to appetency” (καὶ πᾶσαν φύσιν πρὸς ἄρειν ἐκκαλούμενος). Overcome by his bodily desires, he was moreover suffering from gout (τὰ ἀρθρα ἀλγημα), so that after his ascension to the throne he had to be carried by his servants. Politically “savage” Constantine, who turned his full attention to horse races, beast-fighting shows and gambling, completely neglected the affairs of the state.

---

32 Ibidem.
33 In the original: ‘ἐρρωτό τε αὐτῷ ἡ γαστὴρ’. The verb ἐρρωτό seems to suggesting that emperor’s only physical strength was an enormous capacity of his own stomach.
The argument, goes along the traditional lines which were expounded by Plato, Chrysostom and Clement (among others). The equation of the belly (γαστήρ) to sexual appetite is a motif as old as the Old Testament, where one of the frequent meanings of the above mentioned noun is “female womb”. Plato notoriously ascribes rationality to men and masculinity, while femininity is equalled by him to the lowest of bodily urges, including appetite for food. Similar insights are present in numerous Byzantine literary works. After all, it was Eve who incited Adam to eat the forbidden apple and, in its only extant Byzantine depiction, gluttony is illustrated as a woman, who is carrying an apple in one of her hands. By extension, gluttony came to be inextricably connected to sexual lust, as, for instance, John Climacus explicitly states in his Scala Paradisi: γαστριμαργία ἐστιν … πορνείας πατήρ. These are the sources of the equation mark in Psellos’ portrayal of Constantine between being a slave both to one’s stomach (γαστήρ) and lasciviousness (ἀφροδισία). Gambling and frequenting spectacles, mentioned by Psellos, were also standard topoi of the discourse of luxury. What is interesting, nevertheless, is Constantine’s bestial stature – Psellos in fact does not use the standard term fat (e.g. εὔσαρκος, πολύσαρκος), but the adjectives which point to unnatural, bestial constitution of the Emperor. He is large, unnaturally robust and of nine feet height. Just as other savage animals he is overcome by his appetite and can eat anything – his entire life is given to bodily pleasures.

As numerous studies have shown, the Byzantines were fond of laughing at bodily deformations and disabilities, and fatness was perceived as another occasion to deride an individual. This, along with other traditional lines of discourse on fatness, was widely explored by an anonymous writer of a twelfth-century satire Timarion. It has already been noticed that the characters in the dialogue are ostensibly obsessed with food – and this is true especially of Theodore of Smyrna.


the teacher of the main protagonist of the satire.\textsuperscript{41} Fatness becomes an incentive not only to expound Theodore’s animal appetite but also, to mock his foolishness. When Timarion meets him in Hades, Theodore’s stature is already skeleton-like (κατεσκληκώς). In addition, he is full of “wordiness/silly talk” (στωμυλίας μεετός)\textsuperscript{42} and he blows up his mouth while talking (το στόμα διογκόν).\textsuperscript{43} Not recognised by the protagonist of the satire, Theodore introduces himself, perhaps jokingly, as “the biggest sophist” (τὸν λαμυρῶτατον σοφιστήν). The adjective λάμυρος encapsulates the multi-layered meaning of obesity in Byzantium. \textit{LSJ} notes its meanings of full of abyssness, but also gluttonous and wanton. The lexicon of pseudo-Zonaras moreover equates it with the adjective φλύαρος which carries the meanings of foolery, silly banter and nonsense.\textsuperscript{44} Hence, Theodore’s “fullness of words”, his unnatural “puffing up” of his cheeks seem to be pointing to the fat body which he possessed during his life on the Earth as well as his actual lack of ability as a teacher of rhetoric. Timarion, upon recognising his teacher, is unable to understand how this healthy in vigorous body (ψύχαιν καὶ εὐξείαν τοῦ σώματος) could possibly belong to Theodore of Smyrna, who was once famous mainly for the enormous size of his body (σώματος εὐμεγέθειαν). As a result of his gluttony and fatness, during his earthly life, Theodore was crippled by gout to such a point that had to be carried in front of the kings to deliver speeches (ἐξήρθωτο τῇ ἀρθρίτιδι) – a motif present already in Psellos’ \textit{Chronographia}.\textsuperscript{45} Theodore’s current “lean” stature stands in stark contrast to his previous εὐμεγεθία; but even now some degree of monstrosity remains in the sophist, for in Hades he looks like a skeleton (κατεσκληκώς).

Theodore continues to explain to Timarion the reasons for his skinny silhouette. In the course of his earthly life, he earned a lot of gold which he squandered on extravagant meals (ἔστιάεις πολυτελεῖς) and Sybaritic feasts (Συβαριτικὰ δείπνα).\textsuperscript{46} Just as other tyrants, he lived “by the table”.\textsuperscript{47} All of these caused arthritis and exhausted Theodore’s body and soul\textsuperscript{48} – it is only in Hades that he

\textsuperscript{41} D. K r allis: “Harmless Satire, Stinging Critique: Notes and Suggestions for Reading the Ti-

\textsuperscript{42} For στωμυλία see: \textit{Suda} σ.1152.


\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Timarion}, 24.601–4.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Timarion}, 24.607.

\textsuperscript{48} See the twelfth-century \textit{Life of St. Cyril Phileotes}, penned by Nicolaus Kataskepenos. According to the text, a fat body (polusarkes) stuffed with food is just like a vessel loaded with cargo
“stopped his maddened stomach” (μαργαίνω γαστέρα κατέπαυσα), by living on healthy and restrictive diet.\textsuperscript{49} Interestingly enough, the verb μαργαίνω, put into the “mouth” of Theodore in the passage, is a constituent of one of the Greek nouns which denote gluttony (γαστριμαργία), and it has close links with animality and irrationality.\textsuperscript{50}

Still, one of the most famous accounts of fat body from twelfth century Byzantium, is known from at least four sources: Niketas Choniates, Nikephoros Chrysoberges, Georgios Tornikes and Nicholas Mesarites – the accounts have already been compared and juxtaposed by A. Kazhdan.\textsuperscript{51} Their imagery, as Kazhdan has, perhaps too generally, pointed out, is quite similar. Tornikes, following well-worn literary \textit{topoi}, refers indirectly to John as corpulent (full-of-meat, κρεωβαρής) or monstrous (ἀποφόλιος).\textsuperscript{52} Although gluttony is not named explicitly, direct Biblical quotations clearly associate John to the deadly sin: for instance 12.7–8 quotes Deuteronomy 32.15: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek.” Other terms employed by Tornikes, which clearly point to John’s fatness are: σάρξ πεφυσημένος, ὑπέρογκος, μέγα σῶμα, ὁλκὸν τοῦ σώματος.

John is also indirectly called an apostate (ἀποστάτης), a term which refers not only to his seditious nature, but also to his ungodliness. It must be borne in mind that in the Greek and Byzantine tradition the very area of the bowels (γαστήρ, ἔντερα), especially its upset and deformation, was traditionally linked with blasphemous heretics. This link can be gleaned for instance from Joseph Flavius’ account of Herod’s gastric illness and his subsequent death, or in the popular narrative of Arius’ death in Socrates’ Hist. Eccles.\textsuperscript{53} Seen from this perspective, the epithet associated by Tornikes to John – ἀποστάτης – the obesity of the defector might be alluding to comparable meaning of religious transgression.

In addition, just as in the case of Theodore and Constantine VIII, John’s fatness is an indication of weak physical health. He breathes hard (ἀσθμάινοντα), – it cannot be guided and is easily wrecked. La Vie de Saint Cyrille le Philéote Moine Byzantin. Ed. E. Sargologos. Bruxelles 1964, 40.6.21 ff. Katasepenos quotes here Basil’s Commentary in Isaiam, 2.93.

\textsuperscript{49} Timarion, 24.615.

\textsuperscript{50} LSJ, cf. Hom. II. 5.882.


\textsuperscript{52} Tornikes, Or. I.12.19–20.

the enormous weight of his body (ὑπὸ τοῦ βαρέος ἐκεῖνου καὶ νωθροῦ) causes the throne to break – an image with which adds additional comic force to the scene.\(^{54}\) John’s body is moreover “blown out” (φυσῶδες), which might be yet another pun on his gluttony – in the Greek Materia Medica the adjective was used to denote the gas-producing food.\(^{56}\) John is depicted moreover an Empedoclean monster (τὰ ἐμπεδόκλεια τέρατα), or a gorgon, whose head was to be cut off (and indeed: John was finally decapitated). Kazhdan is certainly right to notice that the portrayal dwells upon deconcretisation, and not many factual details are present in the text. However, what the speech points to at literary level is a complex web of opposite pairs of meanings of good and evil, savage and civilised, beastly and manly, abnormal and ordinary – all of which are conveyed by the references to gluttony and fatness. All of these motives, once again, equate fatness with savagery on the social, religious and political levels.

Yet, the account of Niketas Choniates appears as somewhat more intricate than that of Tornikes. Choniates describes John as possessing large stomach and as a jar-like man: προκοίλιος, πιθώδης.\(^{57}\) The jar, πῖθος is, of course, a traditional wine-jar, thus the term might potentially point to John’s drunkenness, another moral vice endemic to the gluttons.\(^{58}\) John’s stupidity (or sloth) is alluded to as well – he did not care either to set guards or to reinforce the gates pulled down by his accomplices.\(^{59}\) Fatness (and gluttony) and silliness went hand to hand in ancient Greek tradition – for Plato, gluttony meant delving into utter irrationality of base bodily impulses, while Herakles and Odysseus in their popular fat guises were presented as complete fools.\(^{60}\) Choniates, just as Tornikes, does not miss the chance mock John’s corpulent posture. Animality is present as well in Choniates’ portrait – because of his obesity, John “poured out gushes of water just like a dolphin,”\(^{61}\) and evaporated litres of sweat. Due to this sickly excessive perspiration John is portrayed emptying the entire vessels of water (ὑδατος ὅλα κεράμια.

---

\(^{54}\) Tornikes, Or. I.13.19–20. Ὅ δὲ γε θῶκος οὔκετι θῶκος μεῖναι πάλιν ἱνέσχετο· κατεάγη γὰρ ἐς τὸ παντελὲς ὑπὸ τοῦ βαρέος ἐκεῖνου καὶ νωθροῦ σῶματος.

\(^{55}\) An aspect which is present in other accounts of the revolt. A. Kazhdan, S. Franklin: Studies..., pp. 244–245.

\(^{56}\) As TLG search indicates, a vast majority of instances of uses of this adjective is restricted to medical sources.

\(^{57}\) vD 526.14–15: προκοίλιος δ’ ὄν καὶ πιθώδης. Trapp translates προκοίλιος as “mit vorgewölbtem Bauch” (LBG).

\(^{58}\) Correspondingly, Psellos in his canon (Psell. Poem. XXX) against the drunken monk Jacob, who “squeezes wine into the pitsos of his stomach” (XXII.11–12: ἀποθήλιει τὸν οἶνον ὠσπερ εἰς πίθον τὸν στόμαχον); XXII.30 and 70: ἐν τῇ τοῦ πίθου γαστρί. Jacob is otherwise presented as an unsatiated animal (XXII.13 ζῷον ἄκροβετον) with a “broad stomach (XXII.23: πλατεῖαν γαστέρα) which is familiar only to the business of drinking (XXII.67: τῇ ἐργασίᾳ τῆς μέθης). I am referring to the following edition: Michaelis Pselli Poemata. Ed. L.G. Westerink. Leipzig–Stuttgart 1992.

\(^{59}\) vD 527.47–48.

\(^{60}\) See the discussion in: S.E. Hill: Eating to Excess, pp. 81–102.

\(^{61}\) vD 527.50: κατά δέλφινας ἀναφυσῶν.
ἐκκενῶν). Finally, John, the enormous beast, fails in his revolutionary attempt and is killed in a beastly manner: his head is cut off and, still spilling blood, suspended on the arch in the agora. In one of the last scenes of the episode, the emperor Alexios III stares at John’s corpse which appears to him to be larger than a swollen gigantic bull (ὑπέρ βοῦν διωδηκότι μεγαλόπλευρον).

One more fat “savage” can be found in Choniates’ *Chronike Diegesis*. This is a man by the name of Thomas who arrives from Venice as a Patriarch of Constantinople, who is fatter than a well-fed swine (τὴν δὲ σωματικὴν πλάσιν λακκευτού συνὸς εὐτραφέστερος).

His gluttonous effeminacy and lasciviousness is only confirmed by his smoothly-shaved (thus feminine or barbarous) face (λείος) and head, while his chest is “as smooth as a pitch-plaster” (καὶ τὰς ἐνστηθίους παρατετιλμένους τρίχας ἀκριβέστερον δρώπακος). Even his attendants are as closely shaved and as effeminate as their master. The very word λακκευτός (lit. cistern-like, hence also cavernous) seems to be a pun on Thomas’ boundless greed.

The abyss of an insatiable belly, a theme which so frequently recurs in the above portraits of the fat, is also widely discussed in the ninth oration of Eustathios of Thessalonike. In one of the paragraphs which dwells on the idea of fasting and which censures living in luxury, Eustathios leaves a number of remarks which connect fatness with luxury, waste, animality and perdition. The life of an over-indulgent man, led in between the table and his flesh, is as ungodly as possible. For the chasm of the belly (τὸ τῆς γαστρὸς χάος) can never be filled. The belly is a cistern, a pit, or even an abyss (which Eustathius describes in the familiar terms:


63 vD 647.8–9. See also the description of fat George Dishypatos in: vD 266.17–18.


65 *LBG* notes the meaning “gemästet” (battened). In the tradition of Old Comedy, known to Choniates through Aristophanic comedies, *lakkos*- derivatives were used as the cognomens of prostitutes and sexual pathics. *Lakkos* denotes a cistern and the metaphor points to enormous capacities for the intake of food and semen of the ones who are cistern-like. See: J.N. Davidson: *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, pp. 176–177. Choniates might be pointing to such a meaning here.

66 vD 647.19 ff.


Preliminary remarks on Byzantine Literary Perception(s) of Fatness…

λάκκος, βόθρος, φρέαρ) into which one can so easily fall, but out which it is not easily to recover.70 It is a wild animal, a beast (ἐρπετόν), for it is omnivorous, gluttonous and instatiable.71 It is like a boundless sea which cannot be sailed through and, as Eustathius continues, “one must refrain from the waters of this sea in order that the wild beasts are not multiplied, and so that the deceiving serpent might not triumph in it.”72 This destructive pit (φρέαρ ἀλλότριον) was dug out under ourselves, it violates symmetry, it is always engrossed by living in opulence.73 The mouth of this cistern, therefore, must be necessarily closed – if not completely (as it is simply impossible), it must be reduced through the intake of little nourishment to the size of the tiniest hole.74 Only in this way might a man slip from the utter destruction. The passage, in short, summarizes the ideas conveyed by the above-mentioned texts – gluttony is a bestial urge and the individual who serves his stomach becomes a savage animal. The stomach is a chasm which can never be filled to the full. Attempts to fill this beastly abyss will simply end up in one’s utter destruction and downfall to Hades (Hell).75

Concluding remarks

Although there is vast amount of work yet to be conducted, this preliminary sketch shows that the Byzantine perceptions of fatness, as represented in the literary sources, show common features in a number of points. Obesity was regularly used by the Byzantine authors as an element of the discourse of luxury, which was founded both on ancient Greek themes (e.g. Plato) and Christian topoi (e.g. Biblical tradition; Church Fathers). Since the ancient times fatness seems to have been an emblem of animality, irrationality and beastly living “with one’s mind concentrated on flesh” (νοῦς σάρκινος). Following Hayden White, I have been attempting to suggest that fatness-gluttony can be read as “savagery”, understood as heuristic…

70 Eust. Or. 9.165.53–54: λάκκος αὐτή καὶ βόθρος, εἰς ὅν κύψας τις (μὴ γὰρ γένοιτο κατακυλισθῆναι τινα εἰς αὐτόν).
71 Eust. Or. 9.165.57–60: εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐρπετά εἶναι ἐξῆς τις περὶ αὐτόν … οὐδὲ τοῦτο ἀν ἔχοι τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπάδειν διὰ τὸ παμφάγον καὶ λίχνον καὶ βορὸν τῆς ἐν ἥμιν ὀρέξεως.
72 Eust. Or. 9.165.62–64: Ταύτης τῆς θαλάττης ἐπισχετέον τὰ ἐπιρρέοντα, ἵνα μήτε τὰ ἐρπετὰ πληθύνωνται μήτε ὁ ἐμπαίκτης ὁρᾶτον καταχορεύῃ αὐτῆς.
73 Eust. Or. 9.165.64–65: φρέαρ καὶ ἡ γαστήρ ἀλλότριον ὑπὸ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ὀρυσσόμενον, ὑπηνίκα πρὸς τρυφής πλατύνεται καὶ τὴν συμμετρίαν παραβιάζεται.
74 Eust. Or. 9.165.66–69. Similarly, Climacus, Scala Paradisi PG 88 col. 868.B: Μαλασσόμενοι ἀσκοὶ επιδιούσει τῇ χορήσει, περιφρονοῦμενοι δὲ ὡς τοσοῦτον δέχοντα· ὁ καταναγκάζων γαστέρα αὐτοῦ, ἐπιλάττον ἄντερα· ὁ δὲ ἀγονιζόμενος πρὸς αὐτήν, συνέσφιξε ταῦτα· τοῦτον δὲ συσφιγχθέντος, οὐ πολλὰ δέχοντα· καὶ τότε λοιπὸν γινόμεθα φυσικῶς νηστεύοντες.
75 Eust. Or. 9.165.70–72.
tool which differentiates the civilised and socialised “us” from barbaric, unsocial, immoral and blasphemous “others”.

I have commenced this article with some remarks on historical analysis of literary sources, analysis which is still much-needed in the area of Byzantine cuisine and diet, but which has its limitations. The field, will not be fully comprehended if we limit our efforts to extrapolating raw data from the texts and ignoring literary artistry, complexity and cultural milieu of their authors. Yet, as Stanley Fish in his much-debated theory of “interpretive communities” has stressed, the immense significance of cultural context on our interpretation of a literary text. According to Fish, the individuals who participate in common educational system, share similar set of social values, perceptions of both the reality and the self become also the members of the interpretive communities and “share interpretive strategies” for understanding the written works. These strategies therefore deeply influence the understanding of what is read by the individuals within a given cultural context. Following these lines, I would like to conclude with a remark that Byzantine representations of consumption need be considered within their specific and complex background so that their hidden meaning can be uncovered, at least to some degree.