Le Physiologus *grec: 1. La réécriture de l'histoire naturelle antique* by Stavros Lazaris

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The Greek *Physiologus* is an early Christian collection of some 40 short chapters on animals (and a few plants and stones), each describing the appearance and the properties of the creature and disclosing its theological or moral sense. The text is the basis of a long and rich tradition of versions in various languages, currently known as bestiaries in Latin and in the European vernacular languages. This tradition has been studied since the 19th century and its bibliography is abundant. Its initial version, however, is still subject to debate and this recent book by Stavros Lazaris takes up the question in a fundamental way.

The preface by Arnaud Zucker [xiii–xxi] underlines the importance of this topic and the many open questions still persisting. He places the text in its early Christian environment and stresses its dissimilarity to classical Greek texts on animals. He also observes that this volume is the first of a two-set publication; the second is expected to treat the illustrations that accompany the Greek *Physiologus* in several of its manuscripts. Curiously enough, Zucker's preface is attributed to Lazaris in the running head; it is only signaled as being by Zucker in the table of contents. This is a printer's mistake that should have been detected in the proofs.

This book is organized in two parts: the first deals with the genesis of the work and its character as a work of Christian natural science; the second concerns the adaptation of pagan science to the Christian faith. In part 1, "Genèse et essor d'une oeuvre scientifique chrétienne", some much debated

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questions take on a new light. The work is anonymous and has no preface, but refers to an authority called *Physiologus* to introduce or to conclude the description of the animals. In spite of innumerable attempts, any identification of this "author" remains uncertain. Lazaris believes that the anonymous character and the absence of a prologue were deliberate, and that the work emerged from a collection of notes and drawings which had some circulation before being put into a proper structure. As to the date, which has varied between the years 130 and 390 in previous scholarship, Lazaris advances new arguments for an early date, the first half of the second century, in a context of primitive Christianity marked by the allegorical method of Philo of Alexandria. Concerning the place of origin, nearly all previous studies point to Alexandria, but Lazaris observes that no linguistic evidence confirms this. A Syrian origin, however, advanced by Max Wellmann, is no longer considered pertinent here. The sources of the text are both classical and Christian, and the author certainly had a sound knowledge of classical and religious literature. Biblical elements are numerous, but the fauna described in the chapters is not limited to animals occurring in the Bible. It is not a book on biblical animals, as has sometimes been written. A certain Aristotelian influence is noticeable, there are traces of a text on sympathies and antipathies attributed to Bolos of Mendes, and some analogies with the *Cyranides* and with the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo can be detected. A very helpful chart of the various influences is drawn on page 45.

The book then passes to more detailed and technical aspects: the versions and the manuscripts of the text. The Greek *Physiologus* is by no means a stable text. It evolved and changed depending on the copyists, the chronology, and the geography. No fewer than four *recensiones* have been distinguished, and some of them have sub-groups. There is an early "Christian" version in 48 chapters with five sub-versions and 23 manuscripts; a "Byzantine" version with 27 chapters is preserved in at least 31 manuscripts; a "pseudo-Basilean" version comprising 30 chapters is known by 11 manuscripts; and finally, a "late Byzantine" rhymed version with 48 chapters survives in only two manuscripts. Lazaris has drawn a table of the chapters present in the four *recensiones*, with detailed footnotes on the animals [53–65], which will be most useful for future research. The final section of part 1 deals with manuscripts and editions, and includes a table of about 100 manuscripts, grouped into eight categories. For several of them, Lazaris corrects the information on content or date, with respect to previous scholarship, thus providing a new list with up-to-date information.

Part 2, "La science païenne au service de la foi chrétienne", contains the most original parts of the book. Its first section reflects on the content and the structure of the 48 chapters of the initial *Physiologus*, the majority of which (40) are devoted to animals both real and fantastic (a distinction without great value for the author and its public), and even hybrids. No real order of species by categories can be observed in the Greek texts, which is also the case in Latin and vernacular versions—the only exception being the Old French *Bestiaire* of Philippe de Thaon, as is stated in note 265; but here one ought to add the Latin version of the *Physiologus* known as *Dicta Chrysostomi*, which also distinguishes between beasts, birds, and fishes. A table of the chapters showing the animals and five various types of allegorical interpretation [89–99] provides a stimulating overview of the tendencies of the author of the *Physiologus*. In the accompanying commentary, Lazaris shows that the text develops chapters whose allegory is directed first against the Jews, then against heretics, and finally against the enterprises of the devil. This might be a sort of "fil rouge" for the text.

In the next section, on literary genres, Lazaris notes a certain proximity with the genres of paradoxography, fables, and gnostic texts, which provides further clues to the genetic background of the *Physiologus*. The following two sections build a sort of diptych. "L'oeuvre dans sa jeunesse" stresses that in the first centuries, the *Physiologus* was not a mere pseudo-scientific, low-level text for simple folk, as has sometimes been claimed, but a relatively elaborate text, using various modes of signification and requiring some subtlety from the public. Lazaris concludes:

> Quoi de plus intelligent qu'un tel ouvrage pour enseigner les préceptes de base du christianisme à un lectorat désireux de culture divertissante et destinée à une "grande consommation"? [115]

Thus, the intended audience was intellectual, probably the more educated Christians who were not ignorant of natural history:

> Le *Physiologus* est une "fable" chrétienne à visage scientifique faite pour un public curieux d'histoires merveilleuses. [118]

The second part of the diptych, "L'oeuvre à son âge adulte", reflects on the later reception of the *Physiologus*. Interestingly, in the Byzantine context the work appears frequently in scientific manuscripts, and Lazaris suggests that it had some link with the schools, where it would have provided useful subjects for pupils. He notices that the work was present both in lay and monastic settings. He also devotes some attention to the illustration of the work, where the alleged author, the Φυσιολόγος, is sometimes portrayed seated in a luxurious chair and making a gesture of teaching, recalling the

portraits of Aristotle in some codices. There is even an analogy with the portraits of evangelists.

On the whole, this book by Stavros Lazaris offers a fresh view of an old text, whose origin, nature, and function have been often debated from particular points of view. In this daring synthesis, which is also a new departure, Lazaris depicts a much wider context for this small work, whose destiny has been surprisingly vast.