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PRZEMYSŁAW MARCINIAK – TRISTAN SCHMIDT (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Relations in the Byzantine World* (Routledge History Handbooks). Abingdon: Routledge 2025. 366 pp. – ISBN 978-0-367-51964-3

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This is a big book on a big issue: humans and other animals. Given the nature of the evidence at hand (literary sources, visual arts, material culture), the discussion is skewed towards humans with very little room left for animal agency. In Theodore Prodromos' *Katomyomachia*, the mice say that humans call the cat κάτα, but we will never know how they themselves refer to their feline opponent. According to the famous anthropologist CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, 'les animaux sont bons à penser' (usually, but not entirely correctly, translated as 'animals are good to think with'). The ones doing the thinking is us, those that are thought about is them. This essentialist dichotomy runs through the book like an undercurrent, as also highlighted by the recurring term 'nonhuman', which makes as much sense as discussing the automobile industry by referring to Bentleys and non-Bentleys.

The so-called 'animal turn' in the humanities began somewhat belatedly in the early 2000s both as a response to the growing awareness of the impact of human actions on the environment and as a critique of the dominance and hierarchy intrinsic to the capitalist system which expresses itself in the subjugation and exploitation of the animal world (including human females and human non-whites). Since we have come to understand not only that all forms of life on this planet depend on one another, but also that some level of sentience may be detected even in plants, the study of human-animal interaction has now broadened to include all living organisms: this is known as the 'ecological turn'. Heinrich Heine once quipped that if the world were to come to an end, he would go to Holland because everything happens much later there. The same is true for Byzantine studies: everything happens with a considerable delay there. Ecocriticism is only gradually making its way into our field. It is also largely absent from the volume under review which deals with animals as chattels, symbols, and characters, but not as an intricate part of the ecosystem. Another absence is that of hybrids and

cyborgs: e.g. centaurs, dogheads, werewolves, dendrites, which is regrettable because these crossovers help us to rethink the boundaries between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Whereas a predecessor in the field of animal studies, *Ζώα και περιβάλλον στο Βυζάντιο* (Athens 2011), primarily focused on animal husbandry, the emphasis in this volume lies more on literary and artistic representation, with a few, very welcome exceptions such as chapters on osteoarchaeological finds (BARON) and on animals as foodstuff (KOKOSZKO – RZEŹNICKA), diplomatic gifts (DROCOURT), and legal chattels (KODER). There are four strands of beast literature in Byzantium: zoological (discussed in this volume by ZUCKER), allegorical and hexaemeral (both discussed by LAZARIS), and ‘Aesopic’, that is, with talking animals (discussed by STEWART and partly by PAPAVERNANAS, MARCINIAK, and PIOTROWSKA). All other forms of literature treated in this volume deal only indirectly with animals, either as prey in rhetorical texts (MESSIS – NILSSON), extras in saint’s lives (PAPAVERNANAS again), real and concrete beings in historical narratives (EFTHYMIADIS) and other sources (MARCINIAK and PIOTROWSKA again), or as metaphors and symbols (SCHMIDT and EFTHYMIADIS). There are also two chapters on animals in the visual arts: mosaics (MAGUIRE) and illuminated manuscripts (ŠEVČENKO). The chapter of SOMMA – VOGIATZI discusses the philosophical problem of animal rationality in Greek and Arabic sources.

As the title indicates, the collective volume under review is a handbook and like all handbooks it offers an overview of where we are in the field of Byzantine animal studies which, admittedly, is not very far. Such overviews clearly serve a purpose, but as they rehash earlier bibliography and recapitulate well-known facts, they do not make for exciting reading. While the contributions to this volume are generally good, there are two that really stand out because they raise an interesting question: why is there so little real interest in animals in Byzantium? In his excellent study, HENRY MAGUIRE treats animal imagery in floor and wall mosaics and describes how animals gradually disappeared from church interiors as not venerable enough. ARNAUD ZUCKER deplores the lack of ‘naturalist discourse’ after the end of late antiquity: because, for the Byzantines, God was no longer immanent in the material world but transcended it, the pleasure of observing nature as it is – not as a metaphor or a metonymy or a symbol, but as it is in itself – the pleasure of immersing oneself in the beauty and miracle of life faded away. To use the sad words of ZUCKER, the outside world became disenchanted. The animals were still there, in the pastures,

the hunting grounds, the wild, and on the dinner plates; they still figured in literary sources and (mostly classicistic) art forms; and they still haunted the dreams of the Byzantines (for which, see the various *oneirokritika*). But it is as if the Byzantines ceased to look at them with a real interest and no longer engaged with them in the physical world.

**Keywords**

cultural anthropology; animal studies