


The Motif of Wisdom in the Byzantine ‘Book of Syntipas the Philosopher’

Abstract ‘The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher’ (‘BSP’) was translated from Syriac into Greek during the last decades of the 11th century. The prologue implicitly situates this work within didactic court literature. Much of the ‘BSP’ unfolds in a manner common to all Eastern versions, with two distinctive sections – the Ten Ethical Chapters and the Twenty Questions and Answers on Kingship, Morality, and Fate – being more elaborate than in any other surviving tradition. Their topics additionally emphasise the didactic character of this work by elaborating on the importance of philosophical instruction and ethical life. This paper focuses on the motif of wisdom and examines its impact on the architecture, narrative motivation, and character formation of the ‘BSP’. It also considers possible resonances of this *topos* for Byzantine reading audiences.

Keywords Syntipas; Greek; Byzantine; Frame; Subplots

‘The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher’ (‘BSP’) made its appearance in the multi-cultural setting of the Byzantine eastern frontier in a late 11th-century translation from Syriac into Greek.¹ The title itself hones in on Syntipas as the pivotal figure, while the accompanying verses refer to this protagonist

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¹ This translation is available in the edition by Jernstedt and Nikitin 1912: *Michaelis Andreopuli Liber Syntipae*.

as an author of fables (μυθογράφος), thus referencing the collection of fables that some traditions attribute to him.² The title abbreviates the prologue by omitting the remaining *personae dramatis*, including the Seven Wise Men (literally, “philosophers”), who feature as the eponymous characters in a significant number of other traditions.³ Modern scholarship has noted the importance of the ‘BSP’ as the oldest and most elaborate fully preserved witness of the earliest known version of this work.⁴ Somewhat less attention has been paid to its sophisticated compositional technique and to the aspect that informs the central plot of the Syriac/Greek witness: the depiction of philosophers as princely tutors and court advisors. The present study explores the importance of the motif of wisdom for our understanding of the architecture, narrative motivation, and character formation of the ‘BSP’. It also asks how the ideas of philosophy and philosophers in the ‘BSP’ resonated with Byzantine reading audiences. This question is even more compelling in view of the circumstances of the appearance of the ‘BSP’ in Byzantium, which coincided with the resurgence of interest in philosophy and wisdom literature and with the imperial patronage of scholars, who presented themselves as ‘philosophers’ and acted as court advisors and teachers of princes.

1 Framing Wisdom

The ‘BSP’ is an effective, well-constructed, and fully developed frame story.⁵ Intended as an exemplary didactic narrative, it follows the fate of a young prince from his birth, and recounts how he was instructed by the most notable teacher of his time, accused of rape by his stepmother, defended by the seven philosophers, and finally exonerated by his father, King Cyrus. Embedded into the central plot

Jernstedt’s and Nikitin’s edition has been translated into several languages, including English: The Byzantine Sinbad.

- 2 The ‘BSP’ was translated from Syriac into Greek by Michael Andreopoulos, a *grammatikos* (secretary) of the *dux* and *amir* of Gabriel de Melitene. Andreopoulos wrote a book epigram, in which he refers to Syntipas as a μυθογράφος; cf. Toth 2014, pp. 87–90; Toth 2016, pp. 383 f.; The Byzantine Sinbad, pp. vii–x. In the two surviving manuscripts (Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synod. gr. 298/Vladimir 436 and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. graec. 525), the ‘BSP’ is accompanied by a collection of Syntipas’ fables. The translation of this collection into Greek has also been attributed to Andreopoulos: Aesopica, pp. 515–520; The Byzantine Sinbad, pp. xvii f.
- 3 The text of the prologue: Michaelis Andreopuli Liber Syntipae, p. 3, ll. 4–9. For a critical assessment of the scholarship of the ‘Seven Sages of Rome’, see the editors’ ‘Einleitung’ and Marzolph in this volume.
- 4 Perry 1960; Belcher 1987.
- 5 On the framing of the ‘BSP’, see Perry 1960, p. 17; Kechagioglou 1988, pp. 158 f.; Toth 2014, pp. 95–99.

are a total of twenty-seven subsidiary stories, told respectively by the seven philosophers to stall the prince's punishment, by the stepmother to discredit her opponents, by the prince to prove his intellectual acumen, and by Syntipas to expound the importance of learning. The epilogue sums up the entire book as follows:

The story features fourteen parables, also six by the woman including the fable of the fox, six by the boy including his interpretation of the ten chapters, in which he was instructed, and his life-improving answers to his father, and one by Syntipas: these make up the total of twenty-seven stories.⁶

As well as serving as a reading aid, this synopsis highlights the overall structure, in which each section occupies a precisely allocated slot.⁷ Such a narrative architecture also shows that both the main and subsidiary stories are motivated by the motif of wisdom: (φιλο)σοφία.

The book epigram and the prologue confirm as much when they explicitly state that the 'BSP' is a "philosophical narrative" (διήγησις ἐμφιλόσοφος) and that it "celebrates noble deeds" (πράξεις ἐπαινεί τὰς καλῶς εἰργασμένας).⁸ They situate the 'BSP' in a cultural context undoubtedly familiar to Byzantine reading audiences. Described in such a way, the 'BSP' would have prompted associations with the ancient (both Greco-Roman and Christian) ethical teaching of the *kalon*, but it would have been even more evocative of the contemporary Byzantine rhetorical practices, which often involved praise (ἔπαινος) of prominent individuals, including rulers, according to their virtues and actions. Read in this way, the paratexts define the 'BSP' as a piece of encomiastic literature.

The basic premise of the narrative itself is that the acquisition of wisdom through education (σοφιστικὰ μαθήματα) provides the ruler with advisors and trains the prince to become the most accomplished among philosophers. In the description of the prince's studies under Syntipas, a great deal of attention is given to the length, method, content, and venue of the boy's training. The prince spends six months alone with his teacher in a specially designed house whose walls are depicted and inscribed with the lessons he learns, which predominantly relate to astrology and philosophy.⁹ Syntipas' own expertise in astrology helps him to predict great danger for the prince and to instruct him on how to avoid it. Following

6 Michaelis Andreopuli Liber Syntipae, p. 129, l. 14–p. 130, l. 3 (my translation).

7 See Appendix: 'The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher', Table of Contents.

8 Michaelis Andreopuli Liber Syntipae, p. 2, l. 18; p. 3, l. 4.

9 Ibid., p. 6, l. 6–p. 7, l. 2; p. 119, l. 7–p. 121, l. 9. See also Hinterberger 2022.

his teacher's advice, the prince remains silent for seven days. Syntipas, meanwhile, goes into hiding. During this period, one of the king's wives tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade her stepson to break his silence and join her in deposing his father. When the prince threatens to denounce her, she accuses him of rape. Thinking his son guilty, the king orders his execution. Thereafter follows a seven-day-long battle of stories. While the prince remains quiet, the Seven Philosophers stall his punishment by each telling the king two tales to show the dangers of rashness and slander¹⁰ and the malice and mischief of women.¹¹ The king's wife reiterates by criticising the duplicity of court advisers¹² and by warning of the dangers to her husband's reign and her own life if the prince remains unpunished.¹³ All their accounts vary in character: modern scholarship would likely apply to each a descriptive term such as a 'wonder tale' or a 'humorous story' or a 'novella' or, indeed, a 'fable'; however, the 'BPS' assigns uniform terminology to all, categorising them as "parables" (παραβολικοί ὁμιλῖαι) and encouraging readers to consider their overall didactic character.¹⁴ The embedded stories, therefore, are understood primarily as performing an educational and paradigmatic function. Structurally, they are framed by formulaic opening lines and by well-defined parenetic conclusions, although, occasionally, these show a slight discrepancy between the stated and inferred morals.¹⁵ Overall, the temporal and thematic architecture within the book as a whole is both robust and stable, and it clearly demarcates the main plot from the sub-stories as they branch out into a novelistic space far removed from the courtly world governed by the ideals of wisdom and virtue. The backdrop of Cyrus' palace against which the central story takes place is replaced by a variety of domestic, urban, rural, and pastoral settings and by the plotlines upturning the norms, expectations, ceremonies, and rituals of the royal court. This topsy-turvy world authorises violence, cunning, betrayal, permissiveness, ignorance, and foolishness in order to show the consequences of actions unchecked by philosophy and learning. Some of the embedded tales, moreover, evoke a sense of distance and otherworldliness by adding elements of the grotesque, marvellous, and supernatural.¹⁶ Within the overarching narrative, the coexistence of contrasting, even incompatible, concepts operate on the level of antithesis. This kind of narrative feature had a didactic function. It was a tool of rhetorical reasoning commonly

10 See Appendix, Stories 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16.

11 See *ibid.*, Stories 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17–19.

12 See *ibid.*, Stories 6, 9.

13 See *ibid.*, Stories 3, 12.

14 Toth 2014, pp. 97 f.

15 See Appendix, Stories 4, 9, 11.

16 See *ibid.*, Stories 6, 9 f., 18.

used in both literary and visual culture to underline contradictions and underscore paradoxes.¹⁷ The Byzantines were attuned to such stylistic strategies: the more accentuated the differences, the more effective the messages that they send.

The final section of the ‘BSP’ provides a stage for the most developed wisdom-themed storytelling, which is also marked by a switch in the narrative mode from the successive soliloquising to an interactive debate.¹⁸ It opens with the prince and Syntipas presenting themselves before the king and giving reasons for the prince’s silence and, in Syntipas’ case, for hiding.¹⁹ Hereafter, the king presides over an assembly of philosophers, learned courtiers, and noblemen, and for the first time in the narrative, he assumes the role of a moderator. All elements of narration henceforth hinge on Cyrus’ promptings, to his son (“Why did you not speak?”); to Syntipas (“Where have you been until now?”); to his philosophers, Syntipas, and the prince (“Who would have been responsible if my son had been unjustly executed?”); to his wife (“Why did you want to kill my son?”); and to both the prince and Syntipas (“How has my son become so wise?”). These questions trigger another sequence of storytelling about the benefits of learning and wisdom. Syntipas instructs on astrological predictions and destiny by telling an exemplary tale about a king, a philosopher, and his ill-fated son.²⁰ This story is effectively an inverted ‘mirror of princes’ and an inverse *mise-en-abîme* for the plotlines revolving around the prince’s education. Syntipas’ student also takes centre stage and delivers three lengthy tales about the manifestations of wisdom in different stages of life.²¹ His presentation culminates in two accounts: the Ten [Ethical] Chapters listing topics covered by in Syntipas’ lessons, followed by a set of twenty-one *erotapokriseis*, in which he answers his father’s questions on kingship, morality, and fate.²² Both his accounts include advice on fitness to rule, personal ethics, conduct towards subjects, family, friends and strangers, and, most conspicuously, on the universal values of virtue and wisdom.²³ It is not known when and under what circumstances these discourses were adopted into the ‘BSP’, but their presence shows how such additions to the frame story can enhance the educational and paretic content at the expense of other prominent themes, such as, for example, the dangers of hasty decisions and the malice of women.

17 Caruso 2016; Maguire 1994, pp. 53–83.

18 See Appendix, Day Eight; Stories 20–27.

19 Michaelis Andreopuli *Liber Syntipae*, p. 71, l. 12–p. 76, l. 9.

20 See Appendix, Day Eight; Story 25.

21 See *ibid.*, Day Eight; Stories 21–23.

22 See Appendix, Day Eight; Stories 25 and 26. Shorter versions of these sections also feature in some Persian witnesses: Perry 1959, pp. 76–94.

23 Such themes have been defined as ‘popular philosophy’: Owervein 2016, pp. 345–350.

2 The Wisdom of Characters

The ‘BSP’ features elaborate storylines and an abundance of colourful characters, many of whom are referred to as wise. The protagonists described as “philosophers” are provided with specific designations indicating their status and role within the narrative:

- The eponymous character, Syntipas, is a teacher, “a very wise man, who surpasses all others in learning” (σοφιστικός ὁ ἀνήρ [...] τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων τοῖς λόγοις ὑπερτερῶν).²⁴ His elevated position allows him to make independent decisions and dictate his own terms.
- Syntipas’ student, the prince, is referred to as a “boy” (παῖς), a “young man” (νεανίας, νέος), “the king’s son” (υἱὸς τοῦ βασιλέως), “the child of the purple” (γόνος τῆς πορφύρας);²⁵ he is loyal and obedient to both his father and his teacher. Following his studies with Syntipas, he becomes “perfect among philosophers” (τέλειος ἐν φιλοσόφοις) and dispenses advice on exemplary life and good government.
- The Seven Philosophers (φιλόσοφοι, σύμβουλοι φιλοσοφώτατοι ἑπτὰ) are Cyrus’ counsellors, who customarily advise the king. Although one of them seems to be the chief philosopher (ὁ τῶν φιλοσόφων), they all act as one to prevent the king from killing his son.

A strong ‘Eastern flavour’ in the ‘BSP’ is detectable throughout the narrative, including the vocabulary, phraseology, imagery, and the prose style of the 11th-century translation.²⁶ Even though the comparison of this version with the earliest surviving Syriac witness suggests that most of the ‘original’ features were retained in Greek in order to convey a sense of alterity and otherness, it is nonetheless possible to identify some adaptations to Byzantine cultural realities, civil norms, and religious sensibilities.²⁷

Many features of the ‘BSP’ must have resonated strongly with Greek reading audiences. The characters of philosophers in particular would have been easily recognisable, not least because of the wide and well-attested popularity of the

²⁴ Michaelis Andreopuli *Liber Syntipae*, p. 4, ll. 8–9.

²⁵ The Byzantine term *porphyrogennetos*, “born in purple”, describes a child born while his/her father holds the imperial office. This expression features only in the Greek ‘BSP’, while the Syriac witness uses “the youth” (ܠܘܘܬܐ): cf. Minets in this volume.

²⁶ See above fn. 2 and Minets in this volume.

²⁷ Toth 2014, pp. 99–101; Minets in this volume.

collections of sayings and stories about wise men, including the Seven Sages of Greece.²⁸ Another aspect of familiarity transpired from the highly evocative idea that leading intellectuals were best qualified to advise emperors and compose parenetic court literature.²⁹ The translation of the ‘BSP’ into Greek coincided with an increased Byzantine interest in philosophy and with the imperial patronage of scholar-philosophers, who occasionally held high offices and tutored princes.³⁰ These aspects of contemporary court culture made the highly-stylised characters in the ‘BSP’ evocative of Byzantine realities.³¹

If the portrayals of Syntipas, the prince, and the court advisers struck a chord with Greek readers, the depictions of the other two protagonists – Cyrus and his wife, the prince’s stepmother – were probably somewhat less intuitive.

The Persian king (βασιλεύς) Cyrus, whose historic reign was commonly referenced in ancient and mediaeval Greek imperial rhetoric as propitious and successful,³² is given a careful treatment in the ‘BSP’. He is depicted vividly, presiding over an assembly of courtiers, whom he addresses with his questions and requests. He possesses absolute authority and power of life and death.³³ Wisdom (σοφία) is not his strong suit, but he is often praised for his intelligence (σύνεσις). He shows a full range of emotions – he is happy and hopeful about his son’s education; shocked and distressed by his son’s silence; afraid that his wife would kill herself; joyous that his son speaks again; delighted about his son’s accomplishments – with one emotion in particular, his temper (θύμος), being singled out as crucially important for the plot development.³⁴ Both bemoaned and feared by the philosophers in the ‘BSP’, the vehemence of Cyrus’ anger prevents the king from examining evidence and making just decisions.³⁵ A further aspect of his conduct questions his credentials as an ideal ruler: his vacillation. Under pressure and/or

28 Morgan 2013.

29 Toth 2016, p. 392. Byzantine authors did not use the term ‘mirror of princes’, but they produced a considerable body of parenetic court literature. For a useful overview of the *status quaestionis* in Byzantine Studies, see Prinzing 2022.

30 See e.g. Papaioannou 2013, pp. 29–50; Trizio 2017.

31 Andreopoulos’ translation does not allow us to see the construction of characters in the ‘BSP’ as a reflection of social, religious, and cultural circumstances in Byzantium, as has been possible in the case of some freer adaptations of the ‘Seven Sages’ material. See e.g. Lundt 2002.

32 Menander Rhetor, Imperial Oration, pp. 80f.; Pérez Martín 2013.

33 On the elements of juridical discourse in the ‘BSP’, see Minets in this volume. On legal concepts in other versions of the SSR: Kunkel 2020, pp. 189–191.

34 Cyrus is not the only ‘emotional’ protagonist in the ‘BSP’, but the range of his emotions is certainly the most striking. For an insightful reading of the representations of emotions and masculinities in one of the Persian versions of Sindbād-nāmeḥ, see Hoffmann 2020.

35 Michaelis Andreopuli Liber Syntipae, p. 12, ll. 8–15.

compelling arguments, Cyrus is prone to reversing his judgements. The ‘BSP’ sees him change his mind over his son’s verdict the total of thirteen times. Although his fury and wavering did not recommend him to the Byzantines as a model of kingship,³⁶ they were likely to increase Cyrus’ appeal as a fully fleshed out and relatable literary character.

In contrast, Cyrus’ wife is portrayed as entirely unredeemable. She is referred to generically as “woman” (γυνή), “stepmother” (μητρυιά), and “concubine” (παλλακί) but, from the outset and throughout the book, also as “wicked” (πονηρά) and “most wicked” (πονηροτάτη), “most foul” (μιαρωτάτη), and “malicious” (κακότροπος). While it is important to note that the ‘BSP’ vilifies the woman on account of her actions, a reader may be left somewhat perplexed trying to grasp their every detail. Let us examine the available evidence. According to the heterodiegetic narrator, the king sent the woman to learn the reason for his son’s silence; she then took the prince to her quarters and proposed that they dethrone his aged father and rule together in his stead. The prince – the narrator states – was so enraged that he broke his vow of silence but only to say that he would respond to this proposal in seven days’ time.³⁷ In his subsequent statement to his father, the prince omits the stepmother’s treason, recounting only her sexual assault and his categorical refusal.³⁸ Incidentally, one of the king’s philosophers finds a justification for the stepmother’s behaviour: he explains her erotic desire for the prince by her weak female nature, which could not resist the sight of an attractive young man.³⁹ The king’s wife herself attributes her lying and deceit to her fear for her life and also to her wish to obey the king.⁴⁰ Without needing to establish whose account should be given more credence, we need to note the narrative dissonance in the pivotal plot related to the female protagonist, whose depiction as a seductress developed a strongly-pronounced misogynist discourse in all traditions of this work.⁴¹

Despite the discrepancies between the individual accounts in the ‘BSP’, the focus on the stepmother’s negative traits is consistent throughout. As the events unfold, the woman’s actions expose her as scheming, mendacious, unrestrained, manipulative, violent, and pitiful. Neither do her role as a king’s wife and her authority in the court hierarchy moderate this narratorial harangue. Rather, they

36 Cyrus’ character does not correspond to the Byzantine ideals of imperial temperance and wisdom. On these, see Menander Rhetor, *Imperial Oration*, pp. 88–93.

37 Michaelis Andreopuli *Liber Syntipae*, p. 9, l. 9–p. 11, l. 5.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 73, l. 14–p. 75, l. 12.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 78, l. 1–12. This claim is reversed in Story 18 (see Appendix, Day Seven), in which a woman tricks a man into thinking that she desires him for his youth and strength.

40 Michaelis Andreopuli *Liber Syntipae*, p. 105, l. 4–p. 106, l. 10.

41 See e.g. Skow-Obenaus 2001; Foehr-Janssens 2020.

serve to additionally undermine the character's integrity by providing more scope for cunning manoeuvre (as a king's wife, she can demand the death sentence for an assault against her) as well as an escape route (once her lies are uncovered, her status helps her evade a death sentence). Her rhetorical prowess is unquestionable. Her voice is strong and impactful. Although she has fewer opportunities to use it – each of her addresses is countered by two responses from her opponents – she combines eloquence with affective actions (weeping, suicide threats) to achieve her goals. However, her clout and persuasiveness do nothing to recommend her to readers.

In narratological terms, the stepmother activates two distinct types of storytelling. As a rule, her own tales feature defective male characters; they are shorter and fable-like, and are also more likely to include elements of the supernatural.⁴² The second type carries a strong misogynist slant.⁴³ It is relegated to the subplots and generated by the Seven Philosophers, who, despite being distinguished by wisdom, cannot direct an *ad personam* attack against the woman shielded by her status as a king's wife. By having to exemplify her wrongdoings with paradigmatic stories about women in general, they become self-appointed advocates against the female sex as a whole.

The multiplicity of voices and truth-making techniques in the main frame of the 'BSP' creates characters within the subplots as the mirror images of the protagonists or as the personifications of the protagonists' major flaws. Such characters heighten or subvert stereotypes; moreover, their wickedness, anguish, virtue, and weakness show no bias towards gender, age, or social status. They appear in a wide diapason of roles liberally assigned to wily, violated, foolish, and (only sporadically) virtuous women; cuckolded, naïve, greedy, cunning, and (exceptionally) sensible men; to predatory strangers and swindling tradespeople; but also to 'other-worldly' characters like talking animals and demons.

Overall, the 'BSP' is consistent in the way it constructs the main characters. While declaring their agendas to be didactic, the extra- and heterodiegetic narrators (i.e. the author-persona speaking in the preface, the translator-persona in the book epigram, and the heterodiegetic narrator in the main frame) show the same biases.⁴⁴ These biases include the stepmother being consistently undermined as wily and the male protagonists reinforced as wise, intelligent, and/or learned.

With the educational function being so strongly emphasised, what lessons of wisdom do readers stand to learn from the 'BSP'? Most directly that wisdom is about living a virtuous life, keeping passions in check, being guided by truth, and

42 See Appendix, Stories 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 24.

43 On the motif of misogyny in the 'BSP', see Maltese 1988, pp. 234–240; Romano 2008; Opstall [forthcoming].

44 On the narrators' bias in the 'Dolopathos', see Bildhauer 2021.

staying mindful of the power of Fate.⁴⁵ Wisdom is, therefore, connected to ethics. It pertains to all, but the path towards its accomplishment (and the predilection for achieving it) differs according to status and gender.

Another important moral is that courts and rulers should be crucially concerned with the attainment of wisdom as well as conducting themselves according to its tenets. Rulers, ideally, possess wisdom, but they can also be possessed by anger. “In their rage, kings are no different than burning fire”; court advisers, who need to be “perfectly practiced in the physician’s arts”, must converse with their rulers to prevent them from harming any of their subjects.⁴⁶ Importantly, wisdom can be obtained through education. Rulers should be intelligent and have a desire to study, but, more vitally, they should make sure that their princes are taught by the best teachers in order to achieve perfect wisdom and provide life-improving advice to their fathers.

And what about the wisdom of women? Clearly, virtue and truthfulness are crucial, but they should be practised within the boundaries of prescribed gender roles. When the ‘BSP’ showcases ‘wise’ women, it assigns to them the same markers as to men, such as ‘intelligent’, ‘knowledgeable’, ‘clever’, but, when appropriate, also ‘chaste’.⁴⁷ Overall, the ‘BSP’ is at its most creative when it shows how norms and boundaries are undermined and transgressed by men and women alike. From the reading audiences’ perspective, the features of the *carnavalesque* found in the subsidiary plots are more captivating (and therefore probably more attractive), and they have the added benefit of making the moralising earnestness of the central story more obvious and effective.⁴⁸

3 Reorienting Byzantine Syntipas

The ‘BSP’ is generally classified as belonging to the so-called ‘Eastern group’, which includes Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Old Spanish, Hebrew, and some Latin versions.⁴⁹ Although the Greek ‘BSP’ unfolds in a manner common to all of these, it is more elaborate than the most, and, as has been already mentioned, it

⁴⁵ Michaelis Andreopuli *Liber Syntipae*, p. 122, l. 1–p. 129, l. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4, l. 16–p. 5, l. 6.

⁴⁷ See Appendix, Stories 1 and 23. In Story 1, a woman was “very intelligent and clever, and rather prided herself on her chastity”: *The Byzantine Sinbad*, p. 21, ll. 22f.; in Story 23, another woman was “adorned with great knowledge and intelligence”: *ibid.*, p. 165, l. 2.

⁴⁸ One of the possible readings of the ‘BSP’ is through the prism of Bakhtin’s theory of *carnavalesque*, which provides a constructive approach to the literary representations of disorder, subversion, permissiveness, violence, and the grotesque: Bakhtin 1984.

⁴⁹ Perry 1960; Krönung 2016. Cf. Zakeri in this volume.

incorporates several distinct sections that securely situate this narrative within the field broadly defined as imaginary wisdom literature.⁵⁰ This category of texts also includes the ‘Life of Secundus the Silent Philosopher’, the ‘Life of Aesop’, and the ‘Life of Alexander’ (the Great), whose dissemination in the geographic regions east of the linguistic boundaries of the Greek-speaking world crucially changed and reshaped their character.⁵¹ To these we can add a further two ‘Eastern’ narratives featuring the motifs of ‘mirrors of princes’: ‘Barlaam and Ioasaph’ and ‘Stephanitēs and Ichnilatēs’.⁵² All these works were copied and circulated in very similar literary contexts across diverse storytelling traditions, and they undoubtedly belong in the same section of ‘a shared library of the Middle Ages’.⁵³

When we use ‘Eastern’ to describe the ‘BSP’, we must bear in mind two separate issues: the first relates to the Byzantines themselves, who recognised and associated this notion (vaguely connected with the Sassanian–Arabic cultural sphere) with ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’ artistic, architectural, and literary styles;⁵⁴ the second concerns the modern scholarly approaches to literary studies from global, transcultural, and postcolonial perspectives, which render this term unhelpful.⁵⁵ Using the traditional designation ‘Eastern’ to describe the vagaries of the ‘BSP’ promulgation is additionally disorienting as a sort of compass marker because of the abundant evidence attesting that several traditions in the so-called ‘Eastern group’ in fact originated in the mediaeval (European) West.⁵⁶ Any vagueness here is perhaps best avoided by using such linguistic determinants as Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Hebrew, Catalan, etc. Such a nomenclature allows scholars to study individual (language-based) strands of transmission as well as focusing on the issues of translations and creative adaptations, which are crucially important for our understanding of the intercultural exchange as the main driving force behind the dissemination of this work.

As to the Greek ‘BPS’, the 11th-century translation signified the beginning of a tradition that carried on for many centuries and generated several mediaeval and early modern modifications. These survive in over twenty manuscripts dating to the time between the 14th and the 17th centuries.⁵⁷ However, there is no doubt

50 See above fn. 22 and 23. I use ‘imaginary’ to denote literary ‘discursive production based on imagination’: cf. Roilos 2014, p. 9, fn. 1.

51 Karla 2016; Moennig 2016; Overwien 2016.

52 Kechagioglou 1988; Toth 2016, p. 382; Messis and Papaioannou 2021.

53 Toth 2016, pp. 387–391; Cupane and Krönung 2016, p. 4 and *passim*.

54 Walker 2012.

55 Lundt 2020. Also see Marzolph in this volume.

56 Such as, e.g. Old Spanish and Hebrew versions: Krönung 2016, pp. 366–372.

57 Kechagioglou 1982; Roueche 2009, pp. 134–137; Hinterberger 2005; Messis and Papaioannou 2021, pp. 209f.

that this number represents only a fraction of what must have been originally produced. There are many unknowns about the transmission of the ‘BSP’ (which may not have been as linear as has been suggested) and about its geographical spread (which was probably wider than we think). Reassessing the extant evidence with the help of the new methodologies aimed at correcting the ‘survivorship bias’ is a major desideratum in the study of the ‘BSP’.⁵⁸ Their application can potentially explain the popularity and impact of this work against the testimony of the sparse and much delayed manuscript material.

Alongside many uncertainties, one claim that can be safely made is that the prominence of the themes of wisdom, popular philosophy, and princely education *in the frame story* is the common denominator of all surviving Greek redactions of the ‘BSP’. The degree to which these themes prevail could provide a useful criterion for the classification of all other strands of transmission as well as uncovering individual sets of ethical, ideological, and political values within cultures that received, adapted, and promulgated this work.⁵⁹ Such an approach can also offer valuable insights into existing commonalities across surviving traditions and highlight reasons for the universal appeal and longevity of the ‘BSP’ among so many generations of diverse reading audiences.

4 Appendix: The ‘Book of Syntipas the Philosopher’

The table (Tab. 1) presents an overview of the content of the oldest Greek version of the ‘BSP’. The subsidiary stories are numbered 1–36. Each of them is labeled with descriptive titles and also according to the Latin index from the Japanese translation of Perry’s ‘Origin of the Book of Sindbad’: Nishimura 2001, pp. 329–352. I am grateful to Masami Nishimura and Ulrich Marzolph for making the index available to me.

⁵⁸ For an approach aimed at applying unseen species models to gauge the loss of narratives from mediaeval Europe, see Kestemont, Karsdorp, de Bruijn et al. 2022.

⁵⁹ See also Zakeri in this volume.

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Paratexts	Frame	Stories
Epigram by the translator Michael Andreopoulos		
Prologue listing <i>personae dramatis</i> and attributing authorship to Mousa the Persian		
	Introduction: A son is born to Cyrus; he studies under Syntipas; Syntipas' prediction of danger and instruction of seven-day silence; the stepmother tempts the prince to a coup, fails, and accuses the prince of rape; the king sentences his son to death.	
	Day One: Philosopher One	1. A King Who Falls in Love with a Married Woman ('Leo') 2. A Merchant, His Wife, and a Discredited Parrot ('Avis')
	Day Two: Stepmother	3. A Fuller Who Dies Saving His Drowning Son ('Lavator')
	Day Two: Philosopher Two	4. Two 'Pure' Cakes ('Panes') 5. A Woman, Her Husband, an Officer, and His Slave ('Gladius')
	Day Three: Stepmother	6. A Prince and an Ogress ('Striga')
	Day Three: Philosopher Three	7. The War over a Stolen Beehive ('Mel') 8. A Woman with an Appetite for Sugar Rice ('Zucchara')
	Day Four: Stepmother	9. A Prince, a Gardener, and a Gender-Changing Spring ('Fons')
	Day Four: Philosopher Four	10. An Obese Prince, a Bath-Keeper, and His Wife ('Senescalculus I') 11. A Woman Tricked into Infidelity by a Procuress ('Canicula I')

Table 1 | (continued)

Paratexts	Frame	Stories
	Day Four: Stepmother	12. A Wild Boar and a Monkey ('Aper')
	Day Five: Philosopher Five	13. An Officer and His Dog ('Canis') 14. A Suitor, a Woman, and a Burnt Mantle ('Pallium')
	Day Five: Stepmother	15. A Thief, a Lion, and a Monkey ('Simia')
	Day Six: Philosopher Six	16. Two Doves and a Store of Corn ('Turtures I') 17. Elephant-Shaped Honey Cake ('Elephantinus')
	Day Seven: The stepmother threatens to kill herself.	
	Day Seven: Philosopher Seven	18. Three Wishes ('Nomina') 19. The Ultimate Collection of Women's Tricks ('Ingenia Ia')
	Day Eight: The prince and Syntipas speak out. The King, four philosophers, the prince, and Syntipas deliberate on guilt and blame.	
	Day Eight: Prince	20. A Slave and Poisoned Milk ('Lac venenatum') 21. The Wisdom of a Three-Year-Old ('Puer 3 annorum') 22. The Wisdom of a Five-Year-Old ('Puer 5 annorum') 23. The Wisdom of an Old Woman ('Senex')
	Day Eight: Stepmother	24. A Trapped Fox ('Vulpes')
	Day Eight: Syntipas the Philosopher	25. On Good and Bad Fortune ('Fatum')

Table 1 | (continued)

Paratexts	Frame	Stories
	Day Eight: Prince	26. Ten Ethical Chapters
	Day Eight: King and Prince	27. Twenty Questions and Answers on Kingship, Morality, and Fate [I.D.: The actual number in the 'BSP' is twenty-one.]
Synopsis summarising the plot and tallying up the stories and their narrators		

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