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# A multitude of versions: the study and publication of an open text tradition.

Review essay of Alison Noble, Alexander Alexakis & Richard Greenfield, *Animal fables of the courtly Mediterranean: the Eugenic recension of Stephanites and Ichnelates*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2022. 528 pp. – ISBN: 9780674271272.

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In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the study of medieval texts produced in the Mediterranean region and beyond from a cross-cultural perspective. This development can be viewed in tandem with the increasing awareness amongst historians that Byzantium, its inhabitants and their cultural production should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as part of a wider intercultural framework. As a part of this trend, there has been an increased appreciation of texts that were transmitted and came into existence through these cross-cultural encounters. These include for example the Arabic and Byzantine Sinbad, the Alexander romance, *Digenis Akritis*, Aesop's fables, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, the *Life of Secundus*, the Book of Ahiqar and the wider novel and romance traditions.<sup>1</sup> Understanding cultural mobility is vital for our understanding of the cultural contacts in the Mediterranean, as it formed a shared space where these texts “were common intellectual property of all peoples and cultures located around the Mediterranean shores at the crossroads of Europe, Northern Africa and Asia.”<sup>2</sup> It is especially important to make these texts accessible to a wider audience by publishing editions and translations. The fable collection *Stephanites*

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<sup>1</sup> Cupane & Krönung 2016, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, 3-4.

*and Ichnelates* has been transmitted and translated through different regions and cultures. As the wider themes of the book are universal and not limited to a specific cultural context, it was especially suited for transmission through different cultural environments.<sup>3</sup> *Stephanites and Ichnelates* is therefore of great importance for cross-cultural studies of the medieval Mediterranean. The recent publication by Alison Noble, Alexander Alexakis and Richard Greenfield of the edited text and English translation of the Eugenic recension of *Stephanites and Ichnelates* can be viewed within this wider trend. The publication of a new edition and translation is of great value as it makes the text readily available and accessible to a wide audience.

*Stephanites and Ichnelates* originates in India as the Sanskrit *Pancatantra*, which was composed around the year 300 CE.<sup>4</sup> In subsequent centuries it was translated into many languages, including middle-Persian, Syriac, Arabic and Greek. One of the earliest and arguably most studied Greek translation is the eleventh-century shortened version, composed by Symeon Seth (active in the second half of the eleventh century) in Constantinople. The Greek translation associated with the admiral Eugenios of Palermo (ca. 1130–1203) contains a longer version, with added material translated from an Arabic version of *Stephanites and Ichnelates*. Some of the most notable additions are the three *prolegomena*, which were likely originally written by the Persian (*prolegomena* A and C) and Arabic (*prolegomenon* B) translators. Until now the Greek versions of these parts had only been published by Puntoni (1889), who had access to a limited number of manuscripts and used a different division of manuscripts than is now generally accepted.

The editors of the current edition aim to provide an updated, non-critical edition of the Eugenic recension of *Stephanites and Ichnelates* (vii; 393). They also provide an excellent English translation, which is easy to read while still staying reasonably close to the Greek, only making alterations where strictly necessary. The Introduction offers an overview of the development and transmission of the text, historical background

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<sup>3</sup> Krönung 2016.

<sup>4</sup> De Blois 1990, 1.

behind the Eugenic recension, as well as a summary of the content and some comments on the language of the text. After the edition and translation, the Notes on the Text offer a brief overview of the state of the field and details on the manuscripts used for the edition. In the Notes to the Text, the authors provide the variations in the readings in these manuscripts. Finally, in the Notes to the Translation, the authors offer commentary on the contents of the text and some variations between the manuscripts.

*Stephanites and Ichneletes* has a so-called open tradition and throughout the centuries of transmission it has undergone significant changes. This complex textual tradition has resulted in much debate about the authority of and relations between the manuscripts. However, no full qualitative study of the text has yet been completed. It has been argued that “Scholarship has been so busy reconstructing the contents (...), that it has neglected the study of the text itself”.<sup>5</sup> Sjöberg’s book on the manuscript tradition of *Stephanites and Ichneletes* is currently the leading publication on this topic.<sup>6</sup> Scholars still widely adopt his division of the manuscripts into two main redactions A and B and several subgroups. Redaction A comprises all manuscripts containing the Sethian text. Redaction B represents all the versions of the text that are *not* Sethian and is subdivided into groups  $\delta$ - $\iota$ .<sup>7</sup> Subgroup B $\epsilon$  is often identified as the Eugenic recension and might indeed be the closest we can get to this version. Nine manuscripts are ascribed to this group, three of which are thought to contain uncontaminated versions of the text. These are the manuscripts cod. *Barberinianus* 172 (B), cod. *Leidensis Bonaventurae Vulcanii* 93 and cod. *Oxon. Misc.*

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<sup>5</sup> Lauxtermann 2018, 67. Recently, scholars have started to fill this need for more in-depth study of the text. For example, Lilli Hölzlhammer (Uppsala University) aims to trace the scholarly interest into the text since the Indian version. She also aims to discover the most likely Arabic predecessors of the Sethian text, whilst also offering a full analysis of the didactic narrative qualities of the text and its ability to absorb knowledge and values of different cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Sjöberg (1962) challenged the views of Puntoni (1886; 1889) and Papademetriou (1960) and identified the shorter version as the Sethian translation.

<sup>7</sup> Sjöberg 1962, 61-68.

272 (O).<sup>8</sup> It has recently been argued, however, that despite the status of Bε as ‘the closest we can get’, we should not automatically identify these manuscripts with the Eugenic recension. The Bε manuscripts are “several removes from the Eugenic archetype” and contain important scribal errors and contaminations.<sup>9</sup>

In recent decades the understanding of the manuscript tradition has developed significantly, but no updated edition of the Eugenic recension had until now been published. The current new edition is therefore a valuable addition to the study of *Stephanites and Ichnelates*. At the same time, it raises questions about how scholars should handle and publish texts with an open tradition, which have been transmitted in a multitude of different versions. The choice of the editors to create a single, non-critical edition has a few important implications. On the one hand the edition and translation are easily accessible. On the other, it is difficult to present all the complexities and nuances of the full textual tradition in a single edition and it might offer a somewhat simplified image. The edition would therefore have benefitted from a clearer outline from the start of the full manuscript tradition.

The editors use cod. *Paris. Suppl.* 692 (siglum P in this edition) from the Bε group as their preferred manuscript and additionally the aforementioned manuscripts BLO. They have used cod. *Laurent.* LVII, 30 (F) to supplement folium 91, which is missing in P. The editors use P as the preferential manuscript for their edition, because, “it seems that it might be the closest one to the Eugenic recension (or at least the closest compared to the manuscripts used by them [i.e. Puntoni and Sjöberg])”. The editors argue that this manuscript often offers a better reading, a more complete text and a higher stylistic level than BLO (394). A significant problem with this manuscript is, however, that it shows signs of contaminations from the Bθ group. This can be seen most clearly in *prolegomenon* B.6.<sup>10</sup> These contaminations are not always

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<sup>8</sup> The other six manuscripts are cod. 692, cod. *Paris. Suppl.* 1233, cod. *Const. Zographieon* 43, cod. *Hierosolymitanus Patr.* 208, cod. *Bucurest.* 292 and cod. *Athous Iviron* 1132.

<sup>9</sup> Lauxtermann 2018, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Sjöberg 1962, 68 n1; Lauxtermann 2018, 61.

corrected in the edition, which thereby is not always fully consistent. The manuscripts B and L are often regarded as uncontaminated, but the problem remains that they have material added in the margins. They can therefore still not be regarded as transmitting the ‘true’ Eugenic version.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript O is a direct apograph of L and includes the material from the margins in its main text. The editors do not clarify why they choose to use F to supplement fol. 91, but this can be guessed. The main part of Puntoni’s edition has been based on this manuscript and he regards it as having the right order of paragraphs. This firstly brings us back to the issue described earlier, that this choice has been made on the basis of quantitative arguments, rather than through a qualitative study of the actual text. Moreover, Sjöberg places manuscript F in B<sub>η</sub>, a different group from PBLO. F therefore contains a version of the text which differs significantly from the other manuscripts used for the edition. Using F to complement an otherwise (mostly) B<sub>ε</sub> edition might compromise the uniformity of the whole.

This leads to the more general question which version of the text the editors were indeed aiming to publish. Referring to Lauxtermann’s 2018 publication, they admit that B<sub>ε</sub> contains contaminations and that therefore the true Eugenic recension is lost, but they still formulate that they are “seeking to establish the Eugenic recension of *Stephanites and Ichneutes*” (396–397).<sup>12</sup> Given the complexity of the textual tradition, it is arguably impossible to achieve this. We can try to get as close as possible to the authentic text using all available evidence from Sjöberg’s redaction B, but we should avoid trying to establish a definitive version. It is therefore in itself not problematic that the editors have chosen to produce a single edition, but it could have benefitted from a clearer positioning of this edition within the full textual tradition. It is regrettable that none of the other manuscripts from redaction B (27 manuscripts in total) have been taken into consideration, and in fact are not mentioned in the Introduction or Notes to the Text. By using these

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<sup>11</sup> Lauxtermann 2018, 58–59; For a full description of manuscript L: Noble 2003, 52–60.

<sup>12</sup> Lauxtermann 2018, 59.

Greek manuscripts it would have been possible to trace at least some of the later contaminations and scribal errors in the B $\epsilon$  manuscripts which are not authentic to the Eugenic version. Admittedly, this would have required the creation of a critical edition of the text, which was not the aim of the editors of the current book. Alternatively, the editors could have indicated more clearly that they are publishing manuscript P, rather than *the* full Eugenic recension.

I would like to address two further points. Firstly, the editors of the current publication regrettably do not discuss the Latin translation even though it forms a crucial part of the textual tradition of *Stephanites and Ichnelates*. It has been shown and is by now widely accepted that the Latin translation was most likely created in the thirteenth-century Hohenstaufen Kingdom of Sicily.<sup>13</sup> Because of this chronological proximity to the Eugenic text, it is thought that the Latin translation was produced using a copy of the Greek text that closely resembled the Eugenic original. This makes the Latin useful and arguably even crucial for deciding between manuscript variations in the Greek version. Admittedly, as we are dealing with a translation of the Greek we should use the Latin text only to decide whether a certain phrase or element could have featured in the Eugenic original.<sup>14</sup> A second significant omission for the *prolegomena* specifically is the manuscript cod. *Paris. gr.* 2231 (siglum P1 in Sjöberg). This thirteenth-century manuscript has the Sethian main text with the *prolegomena* added to it. For this reason Sjöberg categorises it under recension A. However it is by far the earliest witness for the *prolegomena* and should be included in the study of these parts.

In the next section, I give two examples through which I aim to show the advantage of a critical approach, which can help us come closer to uncovering the Eugenic version by critically reviewing all B $\epsilon$  manuscripts and the Latin translation. Both examples are from *prolegomenon* C. Although the *prolegomena* can arguably be viewed

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<sup>13</sup> For this discussion: Van Riet 1985, 156–159; Lauxtermann 2018, 63; Lauxtermann *forthc.* (b).

<sup>14</sup> Lauxtermann 2018, 64–65; Lauxtermann *forthc.* (b).

as somewhat separate from the main text, they are crucial for the understanding of the Eugenian recension and the Bε group.<sup>15</sup>

*Prolegomenon C* contains four fables of various length. The first describes a man deceiving a band of thieves who try to rob his house (*About a foolish thief who believed in the “Selem”*, §8). I would like to discuss the phrase καὶ γὰρ οἱ τοῖχοι ὄτα ἔχουσι (*for the walls have ears*), which is the reading from manuscript P and is printed as such in the edition.<sup>16</sup> When assessing the readings in other manuscripts it becomes clear that the phrase does not feature in the other Bε manuscripts BLO, nor in the Bζ and Bη manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> The Latin translation does not have this passage either. However it does appear in the thirteenth-century witness P1, which has γὰρ καὶ οἱ τοῖχοι ὄτα ἔχουσι and also in the Bθ manuscript V4, which has καὶ φασὶ γὰρ τοὺς τοίχους ὄτα ἔχειν. This leads to the question: which reading is most likely authentic to the Eugenian recension? Given that P contains contaminations from Bθ, it is not surprising that these versions have a similar reading here. The reading in P is therefore most likely the result of contamination from Bθ. The fact that the Latin does not have this element further supports the idea that this passage is a contamination from a later date and originally did not feature in the Eugenian recension. This also explains why it does indeed not feature in Bε, Bζ and Bη. The only problem remains P1, which is an early witness of the *prolegomena* and does in fact have this passage. If we conclude that the passage did not feature in the Eugenian original, it must have been inserted by an early copyist for it to appear in P1. It seems that the evidence points towards this scenario. The Bε manuscripts L and B therefore most likely give the authentic reading.

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<sup>15</sup> This is because the main text of the Bε manuscripts has been shown to be contaminated with material from the Bδ group. Since the Bδ group does not have the prolegomena, these are the only ‘pure’ Bε parts of the text. Niehoff-Panagiotidis 2003, 41.

<sup>16</sup> This argument is based on Huig 2022, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the manuscripts from the Bζ, Bη and Bθ groups studied here are: cod. *Monacensis* 551 (M2), cod. *Paris. Suppl.* 118 (P2), cod. *Upsaliensis gr.* 8 (U), cod. *Laudianus* 8 (O2) (all Bζ), cod. *Laurent.* LVII, 30 (F, Bη) and cod. *Vatic. gr.* 2098 (V4, Bθ).

This example shows that the reading in P, printed by the editors, is in this case the result of a contamination from B $\theta$ , and that this reading most likely does not go back to the Eugenic original. It moreover shows that contaminations and errors may be identified using other Greek manuscripts and the Latin translation.

The fourth and final fable in *prolegomenon* C could actually better be described as an allegory for the human condition (§§17–18). In this story a man flees from a unicorn and tries to hide in a lake. He hangs onto the branches and stands on the roots of a tree on the bank of the lake, preventing him from falling in. There are four snakes circling around the lake and in it sits a dragon with its mouth open. Two mice are eating away the roots of the tree on which the man is standing. First the man panics, but then he notices honey dripping from the tree and the sweet taste makes him forget all the danger. Therefore, the honey becomes his downfall. The narrator next explains the allegory as follows. The lake represents life itself and all its dangers, the four snakes are the four humours, the roots of the tree represent the temporary human life, the two mice are day and night which consume the human life, the dragon stands for death, and the honey represents the pleasures of life which let you indulge for a short while whilst keeping you away from real salvation.<sup>18</sup>

The unicorn does not appear consistently in all versions of the text.<sup>19</sup> For example, P1 does not have the unicorn at all. As noted by the editors, BLO initially omit the unicorn in the allegory (467), but later introduce it in the explanation of the allegory. P ( $\mu\omicron\nu\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ), B $\theta$ , B $\zeta$ , B $\eta$  and the Latin translation have the unicorn from the beginning. In the explanation of the allegory, the unicorn is explained as representing death in BLO, P, B $\theta$ , B $\zeta$  and B $\eta$  ( $\acute{\Omega}\mu\omicron\iota\omega\iota\sigma\alpha\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \tau\omicron\nu\ \mu\omicron\nu\acute{\omicron}\kappa\epsilon\rho\omega\nu\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\ \theta\alpha\nu\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$ ). In the Latin translation the unicorn is explained as representing the devil (*Ego unicornis assimilator diabolo*). These inconsistencies raise the question

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<sup>18</sup> This allegory occurs in many other contemporary works but all Byzantine sources go back to *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, as discussed by the editors (466–467). For the tradition behind this story: Kuhn 1888; Odenius 1972–1973; Volk 2003; Volk 2008, 171–176; Volk 2009, 105–107.

<sup>19</sup> This argument is based on Huig 2022, 72–74. See also: Lauxtermann 2023.

whether the unicorn originally featured in the Eugenic recension and what it should signify.

The issue of the unicorn needs to be viewed in tandem with the element of the dragon in the allegory. In the Latin translation, P1 and BLO, the dragon is also explained as representing death. In P, B $\theta$ , B $\zeta$  and B $\eta$  the dragon represents Hades' mouth and it is printed as such by the editors. For BLO, this results in the situation that both the unicorn (which is only introduced later) and the dragon both represent death. What could have happened here? At the point where BLO suddenly introduce the unicorn, it is no longer relevant to discuss this creature as the allegory is at that point already completed and it appears as an afterthought. This is in fact exactly what it might be. It is imaginable that the scribe of the archetype of BLO started writing without including the unicorn, only to realise later that he should have added the unicorn, doing so in the explanation of the allegory. This means that the earlier version this scribe was copying did not have the unicorn. Next, we have seen how the Latin translation compares the unicorn to the devil, which is not the case for any of the studied Greek manuscripts. It has already been noted by Hilka that the phrase of the *unicornis* could indeed be a later addition. We can therefore suspect that the Greek version used by the Latin scribe did not feature the unicorn, but that the Latin scribe has independently added this element. Based on the evidence from BLO, P1 and the Latin translation, we can conclude that the unicorn did not originally feature in the Eugenic recension, but must have been added later by the scribe of the archetype of B $\epsilon$ , by the scribe of the archetype of all other manuscripts containing the unicorn (including P), and finally by the Latin scribe. This scenario is not unthinkable as all contemporary literati would have been familiar with the version of this allegory as it appears in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*.

These examples clearly show instances where the readings from manuscripts PBLO should be critically reviewed and corrected when trying to come closer to the Eugenic original, which can be done using other Greek manuscripts and the Latin translation. It shows that through a critical approach we can indeed get closer to uncovering this

version although we can never establish the definite authentic text. Much uncertainty still exists about the development of and the exact relations between the different versions of *Stephanites and Ichneletes*. It is often difficult to detect at which point in the manuscript tradition scribal intervention has taken place. In many instances it is therefore not possible to decide which reading should be adopted and which manuscript should take preference. Texts with an open tradition thereby pose challenges for scholars aiming to publish them. We have seen how the editors of the current book have chosen to publish a single edition, using P as their *Leithandschrift*, supplemented by a few others. This benefits the accessibility of the text, but compromises the completeness of the study. This edition could have benefitted from a clearer outline of the nuances and complexities of manuscript tradition and the position of this edition within it. The editors hint at a closer study of the manuscript tradition to be published by Alexakis (393), which is a promising prospect. Arguably it would have been preferable to first do a fully critical examination of the text before publishing a single and somewhat simplified version of the textual tradition.

In general, we can roughly distinguish between four possible options for the publication of this type of text. Editors can choose to follow one manuscript as their *Leithandschrift*, like Puntoni did with manuscript F. Alternatively, they can choose to publish a single edition of a group of manuscripts, for example the B $\epsilon$  group. Next, editors could attempt to reconstruct the archetype of the existing manuscripts. Finally, editors can choose to publish a synoptic edition, providing different versions in parallel. For *Stephanites and Ichneletes*, the reconstruction of an archetype would be most problematic as too many uncertainties exist about scribal contaminations and later alterations to the text to be able to reconstruct the archetype. A single edition of either a *Leithandschrift* or a manuscript group has the advantage that it forms a clear and accessible whole. However in the case of *Stephanites* and *Ichneletes*, it is difficult to qualify one manuscript as superior. As discussed previously, all surviving manuscripts are to some degree contaminated. A single edition of *all* manuscripts containing the Eugenic recension in some shape or form is in any case impossible given the multitude of varieties. A synoptic edition gives the most complete overview of all existing

varieties. It has been argued by modern scholars that this is indeed the preferred option for texts with an open tradition.<sup>20</sup> The downside of this method is that it compromises the accessibility. It creates a large volume of text which is in itself difficult to publish, let alone to navigate through as a reader. It also makes the task of providing a translation practically impossible.

In conclusion, the editors have made a valuable and much needed contribution to the study of the Eugenic recension of *Stephanites and Ichneletes* through the publication of an accessible edition and good translation. At the same time, this book could have benefitted from a clearer outline of the nuances and complexities involved in the manuscript tradition. It has been shown that through critical examination of the redaction B manuscripts, the Latin translation, and P1 for the *prolegomena*, contaminations and inconsistencies in Bε can be traced. The edition raises important questions about the publication of texts with an open tradition in general. The different possible forms each have their own advantages and disadvantages related to accessibility and completeness of the study. This is an important discussion for the field of medieval Mediterranean literature in general. Much debate still exists about similar open texts and this book offers an excellent starting point for further exploration of similar cross-cultural traditions.

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<sup>20</sup> Beaton 1996, 218; Smith 1986, 315; Jeffreys 1983, 124. A successful example of such a publication is Bakker & Van Gemert 1988.

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