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Physiologizing

The Meaning of Species Un/Ravelled

Arentzen, Thomas

Published in:
Ecologizing Late Ancient and Byzantine Worlds

2025

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Arentzen, T. (2025). Physiologizing: The Meaning of Species Un/Ravelled. In L. Borghetti, & T. Arentzen (Eds.), *Ecologizing Late Ancient and Byzantine Worlds* (pp. 137–146). Bloomsbury Academic.

Total number of authors:
1

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

CHAPTER 10

PHYSIOLOGIZING: THE MEANING OF SPECIES UN/RAVELLED

Thomas Arentzen

1

The collection of stories that goes under the name *Physiologos* is among the more influential texts transmitted from the ancient to the medieval worlds. It draws on older historical material – common lore, popular religious tales and biblical notions. Having been composed, most probably, in an Alexandrian environment, the corpus later branched out into Christian bestiaries of the Ethiopian south, the Armenian east and the Icelandic north. During the medieval period, it developed into a broad imaginary overstory. But it started in late antiquity; already in the formative years of Christian identity, the peculiar ‘physiologos’ spoke with a more-than-human tongue.¹

The *Physiologos* texts tell of wild animals, plants and stones that behave in more or less fantastic ways. Michael J. Curley says in his introduction to the translation of a Latin version that the ‘the charm of these legends lies in their simplicity.’² I would not phrase it like that. In fact, not at all. The abundance alone of voices in these stories, of which the so-called physiologos is but one, gainsays simplicity.

Of course, we might, like Curley, think of *Physiologos* as fables or edifying tales where human insights are read into non-human animal behaviour, turning other living creatures into signifiers. In his well-known *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida says that to his project ‘it was necessary to avoid fables. We know the history of fabulization and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man.’³ In this particular lingo, ‘fable’ designates allegorical simplicity and the creation of all things non-human in the human image. The allegory similarly presupposes a structured hierarchy of meanings, a great chain of being, if you will, where certain life-forms spend all their energy trying to point upwards, towards the ultimate animal, the human one. It is easy to see why Derrida shuns such fabulization. Fables, as he understands them, are utterly anthropocentric.

But physiologizing, I’ll suggest, is a stranger dialect, in which critters of all sorts – including human ones – mingle with God and texts and devils. The ‘physio-logos’ (quite literally) speaks nature.⁴ It is nature-speak – although it clearly defies a sense of natural limits. Instead of simple fabulization, might we not appreciate physiologizing as creation fantasizing about itself in words?

Through *Physiologos*’ elaborate tales of similarities and differences, beings come across as shapeshifting. All creatures can be either good or bad, according to the physiologos. God

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can take any shape. No one is really merely species, nothing is entirely predictable or stable – not even God. It's a kind of apophatic theology eaten by apophatic physiology. In physiologizing, non-human animals or plants – both the ordinary and the more fantastic ones – may resemble God. The lion's footprints are reminiscent of Christ's divinity. The lioness, though, gives birth to dead cubs, and Christ is like the stillborn cub presented by the lioness to its lion father.⁵ Non-human animals and plants may also resemble humans.⁶ The *hydrops* (elsewhere called *antholops*), with its great horns that can saw mighty trees, bears resemblance to human devotees, while the human hunter in the same story resembles the devil.⁷ Despite its impurity, the long-eared owl that loves night more than day is reminiscent of Christ.⁸ Such is the complexity, the puzzling idiom, of physiologizing. And the bird *kharadrios* often faces ailing humans; if it turns its gaze away, this means the human person is going to die. In physiologizing, this bird has a distinct resemblance with Christ. But if the ill person is going to live, the *kharadrios* stares at the patient and the patient at the *kharadrios*. Facing the animal means life for humans. 'There is something good [even] in the serpent, for it is wise ... for all the creatures are twofold, praiseworthy and blameworthy.'⁹ Stones may be male and female – and well behaved as well – while angels may end up in hell for loving (human) women.¹⁰ Physiologizing is not an entirely simple language.

2

Do these stories make ecological sense? Not particularly. Not particularly sensibly, I mean. But perhaps, more whimsically, beyond that: nonsense.

Landscapes are like that.¹¹ They are not out to make sense or to tell simple stories. A couple of stones, a heap of dry leaves, a little creek where a frog leaps. A human being stumbling over her own feet. A giant's kettle carved by the unwithering forces of longevity. Caws echoing through the air. It's not that any of it is devoid of sense, devoid of spirit, devoid of meaning, but it is pregnant with an overabundance of sense – even the sense we sometimes call 'nonsense'. But is that really an adequate term? I wonder. Perhaps we might call it *beyondsense*? For rather than being senseless, such a landscape evades the rational simplicity of a simple-minded sense.

Donella Meadows explored ways to bring about systemic change in a world of overconsumption. She found that abandoning certainty and 'let[ting] go into not-knowing' would yield the highest level of attentiveness. 'If you have no idea ... you can listen to the universe.'¹² It is like listening to music, the *beyondsensical* dance of rhythms and tones, or lending one's ear to cuckoo song. And perhaps thus humans can once again, as Vinciane Despret notes, find themselves 'trusting in the musicality of the world (and its rumblings) ... leaving the sphere in which the *logos* of the *anthropos* is exclusively privileged, in order to speak once again with those that are other than human.'¹³

In an early study of literature and ecology, *The Comedy of Survival*, Joseph Meeker makes a plea for the resilient playfulness of comedy, as opposed to the human heroism of tragedy. 'Comedy', he says, 'is concerned with muddling through, not with progress or perfection', and its 'themes are birth, life, conflict, reproduction, necessity, death, and the

fulfillment of human needs'.¹⁴ Although physiologizing hardly amounts to literary comedy, it shares with the comic mode an earthy flavour, a sense that between the themes of birth and death, humans may find themselves beyondsensed. 'Comedy is the art of accommodation and reconciliation ... The comic mode of human behavior represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man as an adaptive animal.'¹⁵ Comedy, for Meeker, is literature that – instead of sacrificing life for rational human ideals – celebrates life in its lingering, often beyondsensual, vitality.

The present chapter muddles through with the physiologos, exploring the comic aspect of its interspecific imaginaire. I take a cue from Patricia Cox Miller. She speaks of the 'animality of the [*Physiologos*] text itself – its cunning, deceptive character';¹⁶ in these stories, she says, 'the world of nature, including animals, does not mirror the realm of the spirit literally, it does so imaginally. In this form of zoomorphism, the pensivity of animals embraces a bestial poetics'.¹⁷ It shows us, as Glenn Peers notes, 'a world where the human probes *itself* through animals, where deep affinities are found, and where new becomings are possible'.¹⁸ Through physiologizing, the anthropomorphic idiom is muddled, and the glittering monkeyshines of nature inflect the language. This bestiary, then, is barely allegorical, barely taming, barely domesticizing. As Derrida also contends, 'thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry'.¹⁹

3

The *Physiologos* seems to be one of its kind, a lonely text. I want to put it into conversation with Daniil Kharms, the Russian poet who lived during the early Soviet period. Like *Physiologos*, Kharms – while verging on the edge of prose – is drenched in poetic thinking, if there is such a thing. In his youth he was expelled from the Leningrad Electrotechnicum – for not 'fitting into the class physiologically'.²⁰ He was an absurdist pioneer, a founder of the avant-garde collective OBERIU, and occasionally associated with the *zaum* movement.²¹

Kharms's famous 'Blue Notebook # 10' contains a story of a reddish man. That's a good place to start:

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.

He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about.

We'd better not talk about him any more.²²

The absurdism in Kharms is all over the place and plain for all to see. Full of absence and hardly heroic. Like Kharms himself, the red-haired man was difficult to place – physiologically. He accomplished quite a bit, this absurdly absent guy, just by being non-existent.

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I do not pretend to know what the story means exactly, nor do I aspire to, but one thing it does, is to create texts that resist referentiality and destabilize hierarchies of meaning. It disturbs the rationality that prefers humans to the so-called irrational beasts, a grand lion to a little ant, up to down.

The physiologos scarcely fits into any class either. He revels in weird transitions. In a slightly absurd register, this nature-voice – or should I say nature-rationality – speaks oracularly:

The physiologos says that the ant-lion has the front parts of a lion and the back parts of an ant. His father is a meat-eater, while his mother is a plant-eater. When they beget the ant-lion they beget him with two natures: he cannot eat meat because of his mother's nature, and not plants because of his father's. So he perishes since there is no food for him.²³

From the outset, the ant-lion challenges our imagination: the presentation of the two parts (ant and lion) as compatible contributes to the text's absurd irony, for we all know that lions and ants do not exactly copulate. Ancients knew that too. The two are in truth strange bedfellows. And, as the reader eventually learns, their fantastic offspring does not actually exist. It's a non-creature, a perishing one, a species that implodes because it cannot be. The ant-lion and the redheaded man share certain family resemblances. They don't exist.

Admittedly, this story may be read as a warning against the dangers of hybridity, at least if we seek simpler morals, but, as is often the case with these stories, a simplified moral betrays the nuances of the more complex narrative. The ironic charm and absurd wit – which this story shares with Kharms – encourages a less simplistic reading. After all, the lost ant-lion evokes sympathy. And in the end of the story, the ancient author says that 'the physiologos spoke well about the ant-lion'. The author apparently appreciated the hybrid absurd, the creature that makes so little sense.

4

The tendency to juxtapose the tales with other textual voices, biblical quotes or rather mystifying morals, distinguishes the *Physiologos* collection from Kharms. While the latter usually speaks with one narrative voice, the former regularly engages a collage of voices that more often than not seem to serve different (and even opposing) agendas. The physiologos itself, then, constitutes only one verbal agency in the texts, and physiologizing may take the form of strange replies to other discourses, replies that follow the logic of its absurd nature-rationality. For instance:

The Apostle Paul says that 'we are not ignorant of his design' and that 'he goes every way that is not good.' The physiologos says: there is a whale in the sea that is called shield-turtle ...²⁴

Hearing these enigmatic words, written by or ascribed to Paul, the physiologos starts to think up the shield-turtle, which he calls a whale. The tales move in associative leaps and not along logical paths.

As already mentioned, the concluding morals in the *Physiologos* stories do not always follow predictable lines of reasoning either. And yet, it is as if it does not really matter that much, for while the morals feel abrupt and uninspired, the fantasized creatures of the stories radiate, outshining the sometimes bothersome conclusions at the end. Fascinating beings appear more important than what we say about them. Or, as Matvei Yankelevich phrases it (writing on Kharms), 'every fable ends with a false moral, or none at all'.²⁵ For example, the ant-lion: despite its alleged perishing, this fantastic hybrid lingers in the reader's mind. Who can hear of an ant-lion and forget? Thus the ant-lion rejects its meaning, its perishing. That the meaning itself borders on the absurd hardly makes the ant-lion moral more sensible: the story ends with the edifying remark that 'every man is double-minded'.²⁶ What could this mean? A nod towards dyophysitism? Or that humans (or men) come across as ant-lions? That none of us humans really exist, since we resemble the ant-lion in this way? Unless, of course, we decide *not* to be double-minded. But such an option was clearly not available to the poor ant-lion, whose problem was not that it went both ways, but rather that it did not go any way. It ate nothing. It ain't nothing. It disappeared. It is probably best not to talk about it any more.

5

In another instance, strange eating leads to stranger conclusions:

The physiologos said regarding the weasel that it has the following nature: It conceives [i.e. receives the sperm] in its mouth from the male, and having become pregnant, it gives birth through the ears. (It is bad to give birth through the hearing organs!)

There are some who eat the spiritual bread in church; when they have gone out, they cast the word out of their ears, resembling the unclean weasel, and they become like the deaf adder that stops its ears.

So do not eat weasel or anything like it.²⁷

There is so much to learn from this: try not to give birth through your ears (not eating sperm is a good start!). The bizarre oral sexuality of the weasel is juxtaposed with eucharistic communion (or perhaps the reception of a more spiritual edification?). Certain beings, certain communicants, cast out a word from their ears – in a movement resembling weasel parturition. Try not to give birth with your ears! Not least because this echoes (if I may use that word) an already deaf adder's stopping of its own ears ... It is really confusing! With all this in mind, the reader is instructed not to eat weasel – which I would agree is helpful advice after all. So: what may at first appear as a comparison

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between the fantastic weasel and human beings turns out to be a comparison of various forms of eating and whatever drifts through bodies in various ways. The weasel–human distinction is rendered irrelevant.

This reminds me of a letter Daniil Kharms wrote to the actress Klavdia Pugacheva in 1933:

At this point, the following plan flew into my head: what if I don't let you out of my heart! It's true, there are those so nimble they come in an eye and crawl out an ear. But I'll stuff my ears with cotton! What are you going to do then? And in fact, I did stuff my ears with cotton and went to State Publishers. At first the cotton wouldn't stay in my ears: I'd swallow and the cotton would fall out of my ears. But after that, using my finger I stuffed the cotton back into my ear more firmly; then it started to stay put.²⁸

Kharms was not about to give birth out of his ears, it is true. But even he is searching for a watertight body, he who, according to himself, was born three times, since his father shoved him back in after the first birth – unfortunately into the wrong hole.²⁹ There is no crawling out of his ear any longer. Klavdia stays put. As does, we'll assume, the plan that flew into his head.

But there is draft in Daniil, as he himself knows. Bodies cross each other – in good ways and bad ways – and they give birth and are pregnant with each other, even when cotton begs to differ. Fortunately, he never considered eating Klavdia.

6

Another thing that has crossed Daniil's mind:

I thought of eagles for a long time
and understood such a whole lot:
the eagles soar above the clouds,
they fly and fly and touch no one.
They live on cliffs and on mountains
and are intimate with water sprites.
I thought a long time about eagles
but confused them, I think, with flies.³⁰

Kharms' eagles befriend water spirits; the *vodyanoy* is a dangerous creature in Slavic mythology. But airborne eagles can be intimate with these inhabitants of water, just as eagles can also turn into flies. Species are exceptionally unstable in Kharms's mind. And it is not because all species are his puppet thoughts, an anthropomorphic taming by his human intellect. Even the I itself is an unstable species, a shapeshifting one – as in another version of the human I's birth, an untitled prose piece: 'I was born in the reeds. Like a

mouse. My mother gave birth to me and put me in the water. I swam away. Some kind of fish with four whiskers on its nose circled around me.³¹ Any nature–culture binary collapses when Kharms writes. In a letter, he writes that he will ‘walk in the park for another hour to take advantage of what they call nature or, simply, “oneself”’.³² No creature or nature is easy to capture in this landscape.

Physiologos pondered eagles too. They’re certainly not flies. Or he hasn’t discovered that they are. Still, they can change, as they migrate between heaven and water:

The physiologos said about the eagle that when it has grown old, its wings become heavy, and its eyes go dim. What shall it do? It finds a pure spring of water, and flies up to the ether of the sun, and burns off his old wings and the dimness of his eyes, and flies down to the spring, and immerses itself three times and renews itself and becomes young again.³³

Not unlike Ikaros, the eagle flies towards the sun, but by cleverly combining its burning heat with a cold spring of water, the old eagle is able to rid itself of wings and dimness, turning into a new-hatched chick, naked but clear-sighted. It is as if it were baptized – only it has turned vulnerable. Shapeshifting, it moves backwards in time.

7

When Derrida is asked what poetry is, he replies, ‘hedgehog’. He says, ‘Not the phoenix, not the eagle, but the hedgehog’, the one that rolls itself up into a ball for protection while at the same time exposes itself to traffic on the road. ‘[It] can roll itself up in a ball, but it is still in order to turn its pointed signs toward the outside.’³⁴ Hedgehogs and poetry are ancient creatures – vulnerable creatures. My main concern here, however, is not with Derrida’s animals and his fables, but the hedgehog. The hedgehog is a mysterious animal. Kharms knows it as brave:

On the table there stood a box.

The animals approached the box and started to examine, smell, and lick it.

And the box suddenly – one, two, three – popped open.

And from the box – one, two, three – popped out a snake.

The animals got scared and ran off.

Only the hedgehog didn’t get scared and yelled: ‘Kukareku!’

No, not that way! The hedgehog yelled: ‘Af-afaf!’

No, and not that way! The hedgehog yelled: ‘Meow-meow-meow!’

No, again not like that! I myself don’t know how.

Who knows, how do hedgehogs scream?³⁵

The story ends in aporia, where the imaginary road suddenly ends, a place where Kharms likes to dwell. The absence of the hedgehog scream resounds with the other animal

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sounds – those that the hedgehog (like the poet himself) does and does not utter but tries on for size. Ultimately, the hedgehog speaks a stranger vernacular, one that yields to no simple pedagogy of human onomatopoeics.

The physiologos speaks of a different hedgehog. This one goes about its daily routine:

There is a creeping animal called hedgehog, with a spherical shape, and its back is thoroughly covered with quills. And its quills look like those of the sea-urchin. When it walks, it looks like a mouse. The physiologos says about the hedgehog that when it climbs to the bunch of grapes of the vine, it drops the fruits down and scatters them on the ground, and it itself rolls on top, and the grapes stick to its quills, and it takes them to its young and leaves the spray of the bunch empty.³⁶

As we see, the hedgehog is a decent climber. But more importantly, it has a rather playful way of picking grapes. Derrida's hedgehog may be an exposed ball on the road, Kharms's a daring snake-watcher. The physiologos imagines a rolling grape-picker who comes home with grapes on all the quills. The literary climber climbs up and down the hierarchy of rational being, dressed in sea-urchin and mouse, leaving but empty bunches up there. No sound, apart from the physiologos. It's a giant leap for any old hedgehog.

The moral

So then, what does Kharms have to *say* to the physiologos? Can he help?

Not sure.

One thing I know is that his crayfish seems to agree with Derrida. According to Kharms, the crayfish says that 'we [animals] are only smart in the fables that man writes about us, i.e. it means once more that it is the human that is smart and not us'.³⁷ Fables dwarf the animals. At the same time, there is a fine irony in what the crayfish says; Kharms's humans are not particularly smart – if at all particularly human. The crayfish's metafictional comment, on the other hand, makes it a clever reader of animal fables, and a greater complexity rears its not so ugly head in Kharms's eerie scenes.

But does it make sense? Might wandering these verbal terrains offer us anything but the absence of sense? Is there anything beyond this nonsense? Well. Since the stories – like any ~~old~~ landscape – duck rational sense-simplicity and the trim categories of hierarchical being (rather than being senseless), the term 'beyondsense' returns to me. For beyondsense tells of a meaning beyond meaning, a value in beings, even when they do not seem to guide us towards aims and goals. Where fables threaten to reduce animals to simple narratives of meaning, physiologizing – just like Kharms – finds only the absence of simple meaning, and a forest of possibilities. Beyondsense suggests that greasy hands may tell us as much as clean hands, that even numbers too may be quite odd, that a slip of the tongue may outstrip a sleight of hand, and that perhaps it's the crayfish that is reading the fable. And that, after all, stones have feelings too.

And perhaps Kharms is saying something like this:

A man looked in the mirror sideways and saw a parrot. The man said, 'I'm a parrot!' The parrot looked back at the man and said, 'I'm a parrot!' But the mirror was already broken.

And the physiologos, perhaps, replies, 'You spoke well of the parrot. I'll think about that next time. But it's also true that you, Daniil, took wing and flew off like a broken mirror.'³⁸ Kharms retorts:

You're making nonsense! You turn the upside down, beginning to end, you turn offspring into parents, persons into poo. (No, that was me!) But remember what you said of the old hoopoe (this is what you really said):

'There is a bird called hoopoe. When the chicks see that their parents are growing old, they pull out their old feathers, and lick their eyes, and warm the parents under their own wings and brood them and make them young again.'³⁹

I'd say you spoke well of the hoopoe.

Notes

1. It is a confusing but noteworthy aspect of this corpus that the text collection itself and one of the voices in the text are called by the same name. I use the italicized *Physiologos* to denote the collection and the unmarked 'physiologos' to denote the particular narrating voice in the text. It is also this voice which is the focus of the current study.
2. Curley, *Physiologus*, ix.
3. Derrida, *The Animal*, 37.
4. 'physiologizing' is my own inflection.
5. *Physiologos*, 'Lion' (1). Unless otherwise noted, the *Physiologos* translations are my own, and I follow the Greek text of Sbordone, *Physiologus*.
6. I am not treating the question of anthropomorphism in this chapter. For relevant scholarly discussions, see Miller, *In the Eye of the Animal*, 79–118; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 98–100, 119–22.
7. *Physiologos*, 'Hydrops' (36).
8. *Physiologos*, 'Long-eared owl' (5).
9. *Physiologos*, 'Kharadrios' (6); adjusted trans. and Greek text, Muradyan, *Physiologus*, 95–7 / 144–5 (cf. n37).
10. *Physiologos*, 'Kindling stones' (37/37bis).
11. For some Byzantine landscape interpretations, see Della Dora, *Landscape*, and Arentzen, 'The Chora of God'.
12. Meadows, 'Leverage Points', 164.
13. Despret, 'Inhabiting the Phonocene', 255.
14. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival*, 26, 192.
15. Ibid., 38–9.
16. Cox [Miller], 'The *Physiologus*', 441.

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17. Miller, *In the Eye of the Animal*, 71. As Cox Miller also points out, the creatures ‘which are paraded through our text are indeed monstrous, fantastical, extreme. They never existed in the natural world, and I suspect that the author of the *Physiologus* knew this full well ... His passion was nourished in ... the reality of nature as a poetic text’ (Cox, ‘The *Physiologus*’, 443).
18. Kitchen and Peers, *The Bird Who Sang the Trisagion*. For an archaeological study of animals in Byzantium, see Kroll, *Tiere im Byzantinischen Reich*.
19. Derrida, *The Animal*, 7.
20. Anemone and Scotto, *I Am a Phenomenon*, 19–20.
21. Kharms was, in fact, arrested in 1931 for writing ‘*trans-sense*’, a designation related to the *zaum* movement, *zaum* meaning ‘beyond sense/reason’ (see Cornwell, *Daniil Kharms*, 2). For *zaum* and *trans-sense*, see Shklovsky, Janecek and Mayer, ‘On Poetry and Trans-Sense Language’.
22. Yankelevich, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 45.
23. *Physiologos*, ‘Ant-lion’ (20).
24. *Physiologos*, ‘Shield-turtle’ (20); from Muradyan, *Physiologus*, 120 / 153.
25. Yankelevich, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 28.
26. *Physiologos*, ‘Ant-lion’; cf. James 1.8.
27. *Physiologos*, ‘Weasel’ (21).
28. ‘Letter to Klavdia Vasilievna Pugacheva, 24 Oct 33’; trans. Anemone and Scotto, *I Am a Phenomenon*, 423.
29. For an English translation of this story, see Yankelevich, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 215.
30. Cigale, *Daniil Kharms*, 253.
31. Yankelevich, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 214.
32. ‘Letter to Natalia Koliubakina’; Anemone and Scotto, *I Am a Phenomenon*, 520.
33. *Physiologos*, ‘Eagle’ (6). Of course, the indirect reference is to Psalm 103.5, but that is beside the point here.
34. Derrida, ‘Che cos’è la poesia?’, 235.
35. ‘The Brave Hedgehog’; Cigale, *Daniil Kharms*, 103.
36. *Physiologos*, ‘Hedgehog’ (17); from Muradyan, *Physiologus*, 114–15 / 151.
37. Yankelevich, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 214.
38. For late ancient parrots’ speech, see Kitchen and Peers, *The Bird Who Sang the Trisagion*.
39. *Physiologos*, ‘Hoopoe’ (8).