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Being and Well-Being in Byzantium: The Case of Beverages*

Twice in Byzantine history the Macedonian dynasty, founded by the emperor Basil I (867–886) was in danger of losing the throne to other aristocratic families. The Lakapenoi in the first half of the tenth century1 as well as the Paphlagonians one hundred years2 later already controlled the governments’ day-to-day policy. But when they finally tried to take over total power, both of them failed.

By doing so in late 944 Stephen and Constantine Lakapenos even committed the foolish error of revolting against their own father. Romanos, the central figure and guarantor of the influence of the family had been confined to a monastery, in which soon afterwards the unsuccessful conspirators had to join him3. The father maliciously comments upon their arrival: *Caritas quae de me palacio expulit, filiationem vestram non ibi diu esse permisit. O factum bene, quod me quam dudum praemisistis.* The new monastic routine, Romanos continues, differs a lot from the former life in the palace. No gourmet meal threatens one’s health, instead *frigidior Goticis aqua decocto pruinis*4 is available.

A cup of cold water, already in the Gospels, had symbolised a rather small offering (Matt 10: 42; Mark 9: 41), but it represented the basic need of life (John 4: 14; Rev 21: 6). Who offers it mercifully will receive reward in heaven (Matt 5: 7). A slight allusion to the purifying power of water, which washes away the sins and is the natural medium of salvation, also is present in the story.

On a more realistic level this small episode characterises and distinguishes the two paradigmatic lifestyles of Byzantine civilization, imperial and ascetic, right down to the simple but vital aspect of beverages. Instead of water colder than snow at the monastery the imperial table would have offered “sweet gifts of Bacchus, which Gaza had created and lovely Ascalon had given”. Present were “the draughts that the farmer squeezed from the grapes of Methymna”, and servants poured chrysattic wines into golden cups5. Whereas fresh water is essential for being6, tasty wine improves the quality of Well-Being. Byzantine society and life was shaped by both of them7, and it reflected aspects of their availability and abuse.

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2 *ODB* II 1365–6 (Michael IV and Michael V); T.K. Lougnes, Χρονικά περί της αναιρέσεως του Αποβασιλέως Κάρου Μιχαήλ του Καλαφάτου, του γεγονότος Καίσαρος, και των κατ’ αυτήν συμβάντων. *Byzantiaka* 18 (1998) 73–104.


6 In social hierarchy water and bread represented the level of poverty, see Procopius, Secret History XXVI 23 (III 162 Haury – Wirth).

7 Other beverages like milk and beer played a minor to marginal role in Byzantine diet (Ph. Koutoulis, Βυζαντινήν βίος και πολιτισμός, V/1. Athens 1952, 121–2, 130–1; D. Dzino, Sabaiarius: Beer, wine and Ammianus Marcellinus, in: Feast, Fast or Famine. Food and Drink in Byzantium, ed. W. Mayer – S. Trzcionka. Brisbane 2005, 57–68) and therefore will not be considered here.
Due to climatic conditions it was rather difficult to obtain drinking-water everywhere and at all times, especially during the hot summer months. "Rain-miracles", a special type of wonder literature, attest to how the human experience of being at the mercy of nature and of believing in divine help8. Apart from this rational provisions were taken to try to prevent lack of water. Aqueducts, most of which had already been built in Roman times, supplied the major towns. Nevertheless, repairs (attested at Demetrias in Thessaly or at Herakleia Pontike9) and the building of several new structures (among others at Philippopolis / Plovdiv and Karyostos10) reveals continuous demand under less favourable demographic and economic conditions. In the case of Constantinople the sophisticated and complex network of aqueducts could procure water even from regions as distant as 100 km away12. Large cisterns such as those of Aspar and Aetios13 (with a capacity over 1,000,000 sq.m) collected the influx, but use of such vast storage means caused some loss in quality and taste.

Five different kinds of drinkable water can be distinguished according to medical authorities. Those coming from rivers and lakes should be avoided but supplies were from sources, wells and rain water14. Given such circumstances Romanos’s offer to his sons was not so bad. It is not accidental that in modern Greek "nero", deriving from "nearon" (which means fresh) signifies water15.

Walls and other fortifications shaped the appearance of strongholds, but their architects were aware that a successful defence also depended on secure availability of sufficient water16. Byzantine forces at Beroe near Antioch were forced to surrender to the Persians (540) as a result of the consumption of all water supplies by the army horses and mules whilst penned up in the citadel17. The besiegers of a town might interrupt the water-supply to accelerate its surrender, as happened in Rome during the Gothic-war and in 626 in Constantinople18. The field armies in their turn had also to care for sufficient water, because the enemy might have destroyed or poisoned the wells of the territory19. The canteen of each soldier was expected to contain water

17 Procopius, Wars II 7, 12–3 (I 179 Haury – Wirth).
18 Procopius, Wars VI 9, 1 (II 189 Haury – Wirth); Theophanes, Chronographia 440 (De Boor). On Thessalonica in 676/77 see Miracula S. Demetrii II 4 / 247 (I 212–3 Lambrle). At Petra (Lazica) the Persians had constructed a triple system of water supply to mislead the Byzantine besiegers: Procopius, Wars IV 12, 21–7 (II 550–1 Haury – Wirth).
19 Maurikios, Strategikon IX 3 (320 Dennis – Gamillscheg). Niketas Choniates, Chronike diegesis 179 (Van Diest).
– and not wine, as often seemed to occur\(^{20}\). Keeping a balance between military discipline and the satisfaction of the individual might prove a difficult task for the supreme command of the army. Preparations for a campaign against Crete in 911 included the provision of wine\(^{21}\), but military treatises strictly forbade a distribution of it before the battle\(^{22}\). After a first victorious battle against the Arabs on Crete (829 or later) the Byzantine forces rejoiced and much wine was consumed. When the enemies attacked again during the night the drunken soldiers could offer no resistance and were driven from the island\(^{23}\).

Seafaring depended on water and not only in a physical manner. Ships, especially those on long distance travel, had to be able to dispose of enough drinking water\(^{24}\). The sailor is unfortunately often obliged to slake his thirst with water that is little better than mire\(^{25}\). Spoilt water endangered the success of the fleet sent in 533 to conquer Vandal North Africa. Only storage in glass jars completely buried in sand in the hold of the ship preserved the water quality and saved the crews from death by dehydration\(^{26}\). This constitutes one reason, why medieval ships tried to avoid, if ever possible, passages on the high seas. Sailing along the coasts was preferred\(^{27}\), where fresh water could be easily supplied.

It does not seem a mere coincidence, that from the time of Antiquity, both regions along the sea and also nearby several islands along maritime trunk-routes, at one and the same time produced famous wines, e.g. Attica and Euboia or Western Asia Minor with Samos, Chios and Lesbos\(^{28}\). Their reputation also depended upon a geographic and communication-connected advantage. Commercial distribution (of wine) done by ship was faster and much cheaper than its transport overland\(^{29}\). “Some cities are located at a distance from the sea, whereas others have been built on the shores. Of these, those whose fate it was to dwell next to the sea are the truly prosperous cities. That which the earth bears for those inhabiting the city the sea receives, and that which the sea bears in return the land receives”\(^{30}\).

Such advantages and disadvantages of the traffic network affected markets and consumers, too. In his exile at Philippopolis, Nikephoros Basilakes (about 1160) complained in vain about the local wine, which almost foamed as a consequence of the addition of resin\(^{31}\). Unfortunately, it was the only type available. In the provinces, good wine from other areas – the high price of which would have been increased even further by the cost of transport on land – was not sufficiently in demand to make trade lucrative. The case of Michael Choniates is somewhat more complicated. The Metropolitan longed in vain for wines of good quality, even though he lived close to the sea, in Athens. This small twelfth-century settlement did not attract trade. Ships


\(^{22}\) Maurikios, Strategikon XII B 23 (484 Dennis – Gamillscheg), repeated in Leon (VI), Taktika XIV 92 (PG 107, 807B–C).


\(^{26}\) Procopius, Wars III 13, 23–4 (I 372 Haury – Wirth). A filtering procedure is described in Maurikios, Strategikon X 4 (350 Dennis – Gamillscheg).


\(^{28}\) Pliny, Naturalis historia XIV 73–9 (48–50 André). Koukoules, Boc, V/1, 124–7; Kisliger, Weinhandel 143–4, 150.

\(^{29}\) Hendy, Byzantine Monetary Economy 555–9.


passed it by and products from the islands of Euboia, Rhodos and Chios poured into the rich city of Constantinople\textsuperscript{32}.

The vast range of offerings finds its best expression in the luxury of the imperial table (cf. already above 147 with note 5). Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) dined in a Sybaritic manner, “feasting on a laird of wild beast, a sea of fish and an ocean of deep-red wine”\textsuperscript{33}. Abundance, however, may result in abuse. Emperor Michael III (842–867) methystes (the drunkard) is the classical example. He surrounded himself with a dastardly crowd of lusty and sinful men, with whom he, the wretch, spent his time – with rowdy parades and drunkenness as well as with the addiction and intellectual limitations related to the latter – altogether without any consideration for the dignity of imperial majesty. Reckless as he was when he was drunk, he committed every kind of heinous deed, and left the right path of law and order\textsuperscript{34}. Suitable moderation (prepon, prosekon) was one of the obligatory virtues, which a ruler should exercise\textsuperscript{35}.

Public opinion reacted rather sensitively to all transgressions; in the Hippodrome the masses ridiculed the drunken emperor Phokas (602–610) by shouting to him: *Palein eis to kaukon epies, palein ton noun apolesas* (Once again inside the wine-jug, once again out of your mind)\textsuperscript{36}. Such critics reflect the impact of Christian rigour against wine-consumption: “Be sober, not addicted to wine, because drunkenness is followed by sin”\textsuperscript{37}.

“Drunkenness causes the ruin of reasoning, destruction of strength, premature ageing, and death within a short time”\textsuperscript{38}.

“Water is the best beverage, tempers the senses, whereas inebriation, which takes possession, makes the mind turbid”\textsuperscript{39}.

But not every citizen of Constantinople felt himself at risk with plenty of wine. “If only I could also refresh myself with wine from Chios, maybe four jugs, I could burp freely and with joy, but I was never allowed to take even one small sip”\textsuperscript{40}. The person, who thus laments is a simple monk of the Philotheou-monastery. He enviously watches the heads of the monastery, whose nutrition includes sweet wines from Ganos (Thrace), Crete and Samos\textsuperscript{41}. The basic problem of whether or not monks should be allowed to drink wine at all (as Pachomios laid down in his rules\textsuperscript{42}) was watered down in the course of time and became a question of quantity and quality. In the 12\textsuperscript{th} century the genre of satire, to which the Ptochoprodromic poems belong, focuses on a social-hierarchic conflict about Well-Being denied to those ho do not have through the access to more and better wine. Drinking pure water makes the monk feel sick\textsuperscript{43} and become a methystes\textsuperscript{44}. The ascetic

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\textsuperscript{32} Michaelis Choniatae epistulae, ed. F. KOLOVOU (CFHB 41). Berlin 2001, 69 (letter 50).


\textsuperscript{36} Theophanes, Chronographia 296 (DE BOOR).


\textsuperscript{38} Basil of Caesarea, In Ebrisoa 7 (PG 31, 457B).


\textsuperscript{43} Ptochoprodromos, poem IV 134–5 (146 EIDENIEGER).

\textsuperscript{44} Ptochoprodromos, poem IV 133: *kai methysten ton ek nerou, nyn hydrokopiasmenon* (156 EIDENIEGER).
ideal of diet, which mainly consisted of water, bread and a few vegetables\(^{45}\) (and thus intentionally resembles the nourishment of the poor\(^{46}\)) has lost significance here. Warm water with added caraway, pepper (and/or aniseed)\(^{47}\), a traditional monastic lenten-beverage\(^{48}\), is no longer considered a good mixture (\textit{eukraton})\(^{49}\), even watered (\textit{nerokopomenos}) wine proves unsatisfactory\(^{50}\).

For centuries Byzantium had maintained the ancient custom of mixing strong wine with boiled water\(^{51}\). Its addition sometimes was the responsibility of a special servant\(^{52}\). One chapter of the so-called „Book of the Eparch“, which regulates the commercial activities of various professions in the capital – particularly those who make clothes or produce food – is concerned with the proprietors of taverns (\textit{kapeloi}). In the evening, they are compelled to extinguish the fire beneath the kettles. The Aim was not to prevent preparation of cooked meals. It was to remove the supply of warm water to dilute the wine, with the objective of hindering the guests from staying all night and in their drunkenness, indulging in arguments and violence\(^{53}\). At this time – in the early tenth century – it seemed superfluous to contrive a way of preventing the alternative, which is – in the absence of water – to continue drinking undiluted wine. Only a drunkard\(^{54}\) would act in such a manner.

Liutprand of Cremona, who visited the Byzantine Empire three times in diplomatic missions\(^{55}\), did not share this Byzantine attitude. He criticises various bishops with whom he stayed on his way home and who were poor hosts: „On their table, one finds only rusk and they drink, or rather sip, bath water from tiny glasses“\(^{56}\). The Italian guest disliked the fact that the wine had been diluted with warm water and especially the small quantity of wine served. Emperor Nikephoros II (963–969), in a conversation with Liutprand, indirectly confirms the different approaches to nutrition, when he expressed his contempt about Latin voracity: „Your master’s troops are neither good at riding nor at fighting on foot. … Furthermore, their gluttony hinders those whose stomach is their god, whose inebriation is their courage and whose drunkenness is their bravery. With an empty stomach they are weak and when they are sober they are full of fear“\(^{57}\).

At the beginning of the 12\(^{th}\) century we still encounter the gap between the occidental and the Byzantine way of drinking wine. According to the Gesta regum Anglorum by William of Malmesbury (V § 410 ed. Stubbs) King Sigurd of Norway visited Constantinople on his way back from the Holy Land. During his stay there, members of his retinue died in large numbers. Sigurd knew precisely why this occurred and how to...
remedy the situation. He ordered that from now on those remaining should drink less wine and *aqua mixtum*, wine diluted with water\(^{58}\).

The local practice was imitated by doing so, but among the Byzantines drinking habits slowly began to change. No longer did the dangers of wine-drinking stand at the centre of literary attention. Michael Psellos, encyclopaedic scholar and courtier (born 1017/18, died after 1078), wrote in praise of wine for the first time since late Antiquity\(^{59}\). A friend, whom the author had freed from tooth-aches, had sent him some excellent wine. The donor suspects that this wine was responsible for his sufferings, which renders the gift a bit ambiguous, but Psellos and a guest gloat over such anxiety\(^{60}\). For centuries wine had been tolerated as a necessary ingredient of medical prescriptions\(^{61}\). Care for personal health could even offer a pretext for one to ask for wine\(^{62}\). Psellos illustrated how medical practice allowed for access to the pleasures of wine\(^{63}\). Certainly the text belonged to the genre of rhetoric and the same author dedicated other encomia to fleas and lice\(^{64}\), which does not mean that Psellos was particularly fond of them. But wine and Well-Being were repeatedly associated in the vast range of his writings. Another of the so-called Oratoria minora ridicules the son of a tavern-keeper, who in his quest for social advancement, has become a lawyer\(^{65}\). Now that the young academic is unemployed, he should reflect on whether it was really such a disgrace and so stressful to turn the skewered lamb or pork on the barbecue. As far as the process of serving wine is concerned, the text is much more explicit. Psellos makes use of this in order to allude to classical mythology and once again proves how educated and well-read he is. It is not necessary to have first-hand experience of the milieu in question. If he had any at all, Psellos cleverly puts such words into somebody else’s mouth: „One moment he is sipping pure wine, the next he is mixing it, if only with a little tepid water, so as not to reduce the strength of the wine. Frequently he grasps the pitcher with both hands and raises it to his mouth. He is familiar with all the city’s taverns and knows exactly where high-quality wines are served, where the darkest red wine is available and that the best wine of all is without a doubt the one from Chios. This is the strongest wine, he says, and whoever has it, does not need any other\(^{66}\). Who might be the subject of such an ironically-critical account ? It is Psellos’ father-confessor, who, due to his titles *grammatikos* and *notarios*\(^{67}\) must surely have acted as suitable company for the courtier.

The still indirect and cautious way in which Psellos approaches public drinking of undiluted wine appears to be typical of the beginning of a gradual change in Byzantine society. There was a trend towards a greater diversity of material culture, consumption and Well-Being in general from the eleventh century onwards\(^{68}\). The sources document more luxury in dressing\(^{69}\), manufacture of silken clothes ceased to be limited to Constantinople\(^{70}\) and flourished also outside at Thebes or Corinth\(^{71}\). *Tryphe*, physical weakening which might

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63 Cf. once again the Ptochoprodromic poem IV 584–5 (170 EIDENEBERG), where the abbot’s physicians receive a pay of ten gold-pieces or fifteen *metra* wine (approx. 120 litres).


67 On these titles see *ODB* II 866 risp. III 1495.


69 KAZHDAN – EPSTEIN, Change 75–7.


allow evil to enter, was no longer dreaded as much as before. The frequency of taking baths increased, monasteries opened their bath-houses to the public for payment\textsuperscript{72}. Michael Choniates, Metropolitan of Athens, complained about the low standard of bathing facilities on the island of Kea. Only small huts, whose doors could not be closed, were available, so that the bathers suffered from smoke and heat and at the same time shivered from the draft\textsuperscript{73} — and once again (see above 149–50 with note 32) another element of Well-Being, wines of good quality were missing\textsuperscript{74}.

Conservative indignation about the new lifestyle arose. Emperor John II Komnenos (1118–1143) was highly critical of the haircuts and the shoe-styles at court and he cleared the palace of profligacy in food\textsuperscript{75}. On the other hand, Manuel II (1143–1180) knew quite well, how to satisfy the common people. On the occasion of the wedding of his son Alexios with Agnes of France, the inhabitants of the capital were invited to a public banquet: “...wine was not drunk in allotted portions ... nor in the manner of the cup of friendship, mixing the pure wine with water, but just as every one wished it. Some were more prudent, those to whom it was important to be in control of themselves ... others were more headstrong, those who needed only one thing, to go away more heavy and be loaded beyond measure, being served with what they desired by widenning their stomachs as if they were barns. The wineskins provided by nature did not contain their excess, but they cast forth the surplus”\textsuperscript{76}. Even high officials now intentionally displayed similar excessiveness. Kamateros, minister of Manuel, made a bet with the Emperor, that he would succeed in drinking up a huge lekanis. This bowl, which held nearly 7 litres (1.5 gal), was filled to the brim with water. Stooping over like an ox, the minister emptied the vessel, coming up for air but once. Heavy wine drinking was another “ability” of Kamateros. He could compete with the rulers of (western?) ethne, “who gulped down whole casks and held the amphorae in their fingers as though the were wine cups”\textsuperscript{77}.

Kekaumenos, a provincial magnate, dramatically equates a single case of drunkenness with lifelong darkness, but at the same time he advises more wine-growing on the estates\textsuperscript{78}. Therefore, the production and sale of wine promised considerable profit, reflecting the higher level of consumption as well as the changed geopolitical and economic premises.

The recapture of Crete, victories on the eastern Arab frontier and the fall of the Bulgarian empire marked the Byzantine ascendancy during the later tenth and early eleventh century and resulted in a territorial expansion. More land was now available and could be cultivated in peace. The population began to grow, agricultural productivity (as Kekaumenos had recommended) went up\textsuperscript{79}. Rhetorical descriptions (ekphraseis) of Byzantine cities like Thessalonica and Nicaea mention vineyards in its surroundings. Evidently, they constituted an element, which evoked positive feelings in the readers\textsuperscript{80}.

The power of the Byzantine state vouched for the safety of regional and international transport routes\textsuperscript{81}, from which trade soon began to profit. This expanding market attracted foreign traders, especially Venetians and Genoese. A commercial network came into being, favoured by tax-reductions, which the Byzantine em...
perors more or less willingly conceded to the Latin merchants. A cheaper and expanded offer of commodities stimulated the demand and created new standards for Well-Being, both in the field of luxury items and basic needs such as beverages.

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