STRANGE TALES and SURPRISING FACTS
from History's Most Orthodox Empire

A Cabinet of BYZANTINE CURIOSITIES

ANTHONY KALDELLIS

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PREFACE

For those who want to lecture or write, this book is not without its uses.
—Photios, *Ten Thousand Books* cod. 167

Byzantium is enigmatic enough by itself, but its popular reputation these days is also a mystery. Undergraduate students at my Midwestern university enroll by the hundreds in introductory survey courses of its history and even attend academic lectures whose Byzantine-themed titles should give them ample warning to stay away. Still, they come. Why? Twenty-year-olds are more opaque to me than Byzantines who lived a thousand years ago. If their interest has deeper roots than the orientalist fantasy of *Assassin's Creed*, I do not know what they are. On the first day of class, they often cannot name a single Byzantine emperor between Constantine I and Constantine XI (which should not be that difficult, when they are asked it that way). In more literate circles, including the mainstream media, "Byzantine" continues to be used in its pejorative sense, for unnecessarily complicated systems that work through intrigue, evasion of responsibility, obfuscation, and backstabbing. This usage results from centuries of Western prejudice.

In the Western Middle Ages, some Germanic warlords began to fancy themselves as Roman emperors and decided that the Byzantines were not really Romans, as they claimed, but something far, far worse: *Greeks*, an effeminate, cowardly, and treacherous lot, who ate with forks and liked to read and write. Later, some Catholics decided that the "Greek" Church was disobedient, even heretical, faithless, and

in league with Islam. They ratcheted up the rhetoric. The Byzantine imperial mystique was dispelled when Constantinople was captured by the armies of the Fourth Crusade, in 1204, and then again by the Turks in 1453. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers decided to make this long-extinct civilization their poster child for the worst imaginable society: theocratic, superstitious, and run by eunuchs and evil monks with no trace of civic virtue. Voltaire called it *a worthless collection of miracles, a disgrace for the human mind,* while for Hegel it was *a disgusting picture of imbecility; wretched, insane passions stifle the growth of all that is noble.* In the twentieth century, some political scientists attributed the totalitarian evils and dysfunctions of the Soviet Union to its Byzantine origins.

The move to rehabilitate this relatively harmless civilization began in earnest quite late—only in the past generation. Yet despite hopeful claims that the nonsense is all behind us, in reality it continues to shape how Byzantium is discussed. Moreover, it is unclear what positive image has taken its place. Byzantine literature remains mostly inaccessible to the broader public, despite (or because of) the increasing sophistication of studies devoted to it. Byzantine art remains a strong draw, but is often promoted in a way that reinforces the orientalist image of an otherworldly "spiritual" civilization, and so still caters to Western anxieties and needs. And beyond literature and art, how might Byzantine history and politics find a voice in contemporary discussions and debates? What is Byzantium saying about itself these days?

This conundrum makes it trickier to identify what is "strange" and "surprising" about Byzantium. By what standard of normalcy? Greece and Rome have established and relatively coherent reputations to poke fun at. A scientific breakthrough is more curious in a Byzantine context than a Greek one, and, given the Byzantine reputation for mysticism, asceticism, and "spirituality," so is the lewd, bawdy, indulgent, and forgiving attitude toward the body that we encounter in so many aspects of Byzantine life. Therefore, a flexible approach seemed best for this volume. I have included material that makes the Byzantines seem weird and alien along with material that

highlights their down-to-earth, pragmatic, inventive, and rational sides. They could be a vulgar, worldly, and witty lot, even in their spiritual moments. They had admirable powers of description, a love of paradox, and a deep humanity that was independent of dogma.

A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities is primarily a work of entertainment. Each item is self-contained, so the whole can be read in snatches. My highest ambition, that the book should be ideal for bathroom reading, was driven home by the fact that the Greek derivative of French *cabinet* (*kabinés*) means a toilet.

In another sense, I have written this book as a tribute to those Byzantine authors who have given me so much enjoyment and intellectual stimulation during the past decades. It would include, for example, the philosopher-monk who admitted in a letter to a lovesick friend that *I too have fallen for the charms of a brown-eyed girl,* and, elsewhere, that *I saw a wonderfully-made icon in a church, and so I stole it, by hiding it under my cloak.* I can only hope that such Byzantines would appreciate what I have done here under their names. Their culture, after all, produced many thematic anthologies, paradoxography, and collections of edifying tales and miracles, along with books of quotations. They might recognize this book as kindred to one of their own. They did, after all, produce almost all the material that it contains.

In addition to entertainment, *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities* may provide, to anyone who lectures on Byzantium, a handy reservoir of tales and anecdotes that amusingly illustrate a range of contexts and situations. Many are also great for dinner-party conversations—though you should judge the company's tolerance for vulgarity carefully in advance. Some are so obscure, or culled from such diverse texts, that with them in hand you can pretend to know the culture far more intimately and widely than you actually do. So plunder away! The book even has uses for those who do not actually wish to read it: for example, it may be reviewed.

The individual entries in *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities* are slightly longer than in its Greek and Roman counterparts and feature more short stories, a format in which the Byzantines excelled.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, though in many cases I have condensed or paraphrased them to heighten the focus on the punch line or curious aspect. There is no bibliography. Anyone with internet access should be able to find full references for the primary sources that I cite, though I have placed the truly obscure ones in the endnotes. For most items, I give a specific date when known, an approximate date otherwise, or the years of the relevant emperor's reign.

Some of the curiosities in this book were contributed, wittingly or not, by my usual crowd of Byzantinist friends (they know who they are). Technology has enabled us to stay in close contact over great distances, and the format of its media has promoted the art of the small oddity sent to amuse. I thank especially Naomi Pitamber for suggesting some of the images used in this book. Above all, the book owes its existence and whatever virtues it may have to Stefan Vranka, who read and reread it, culled the initial dross, and gave excellent advice for refining the final product. Credit for inventing the format goes to Jim McKeown, whom I was also fortunate to have as one of my readers. I thank him along with the one other anonymous reviewer for their valuable suggestions.

· I ·

Marriage and the Family

DIVORCE

By law, a man could ask for divorce if his wife had questioned his masculine honor—say, through infidelity or immoral behavior; caused him bodily harm by attempts on his life through magic or physical violence; or jeopardized his attempts to procreate—for example, through infidelity or abortions. He could also demand divorce if his wife was incapable of fulfilling her conjugal duties due to an incurable illness—say, madness or leprosy. Madness was sometimes distinguished from demonic possession, which did not constitute grounds for divorce (*Corpus Iuris Civilis; Ekloge; Basilika*).

†

Women could demand divorce if the marriage threatened their chastity—say, through incitement to prostitution or accusations of infidelity; or their bodily integrity by attempts on their life through magic or physical violence; or if the man could not fulfill his duties because of an illness (again, madness or leprosy), was implicated in

serious crimes, or was sexually impotent for more than three years or absent for more than five—for example, if he was a prisoner of war. A woman could also ask for divorce if her husband was convinced that she was cheating on him and persisted in this belief even after discovering that he was wrong (*Corpus Iuris Civilis*; *Ekloge*; *Basilika*).

A man's infidelity was no grounds for divorce, but a law of A.D. 449 allowed a woman to seek it if he fornicated with other women *while she was looking on* (*Justinianic Code* 5.17.8.2).

A striking couple petitioned the bishop of Naupaktos, Ioannes Apokaukos, for a divorce (ca. 1210). The husband Konstantinos was sixteen years old and slight, and his wife Anna was older and portly. She admitted to having an affair because her husband could not perform his conjugal duties. *For women love to be ravaged*: Apokaukos quoted Aristophanes in his verdict, so amused was he by their situation and contrasting appearances. He granted the divorce—the law should not force together what nature obviously intended to keep apart—on the condition that Anna not marry her lover (Apokaukos, *Letter 12: Divorce Decree*).

Apokaukos was faced with another couple in a divorce case because the wife (Eirene) absolutely detested her husband (Konstantinos). She would not sleep with him, their neighbors mocked them, and he cringed at her approach. The bishop's representatives tried to shut them both in a small cell in order to force them to have sex, but she would bite his fingers and use her nails to rake open wounds on his arms. Konstantinos finally gave up on this *shipwreck* of a marriage, and asked for divorce. Apokaukos granted it with the saying, *It would be easier for fire and water to come together than for Konstantinos and Eirene to do so* (*Letter 7*: *Divorce Decree*).

Maria petitioned for divorce from her husband Nikolaos because *he was trying to force upon her the form of lust that men practice when they have sex with each other* [andromania]*, which she refused, and he was making an effort to coerce her into this filthy act that is loathed by God.* The case came before the bishop of Ohrid, Demetrios Chomatenos (ca. 1220), who admitted that there was no legal justification for divorce here, but as the woman swore that she would commit suicide, he granted the divorce lest her soul be imperiled by that even greater sin (Chomatenos, *Opus* 17).

GETTING IT UP

Male impotence was discussed by medical writers, for *those who fall in love or who are married but cannot perform the duty of a man are consumed by shame and depression* (Paulos of Nikaia, *Medical Manual* 81). Paulos recommended exercise, potions, unctions, salves, and rubbing with pepper, nard (an aromatic plant), and other substances. *The erection of one's rod counts as a form of glory* (Theophylaktos of Ohrid, *A Defense of Eunuchs*, p. 329).

HAVING CHILDREN

Anastasios of Sinai used soil as an analogy to explain why some rich people desire to have children but cannot, whereas many poor people can easily have many children: soil that has received too much water is not fertile, whereas soil that has been watered moderately is. Poor bodies, which have received so little nourishment, immediately absorb the moisture of the seed. That is why Arabs, who hardly have any bread, have so many children, but also (conversely) why prostitutes cannot conceive (Anastasios, *Questions and Answers* 81).

A young man begged Daniel, an Egyptian ascetic, to come to his home and pray over his wife, who was infertile. Daniel did so and she became pregnant, but people then began to say that it was the man who had been sterile, not the wife, and that Daniel caused the pregnancy in a non-miraculous way. When he heard this, Daniel told the man to inform him when the child was born and to prepare a meal for all his friends and neighbors. After the meal, Daniel took the newborn in his arms and asked him, *Who is your father?* The infant, who was twenty-two days old, said, *That man,* pointing to the woman's husband (Ioannes Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 114).

A lawyer had a child with a slave woman. His father advised him to kill it, whereupon the lawyer angrily replied, *Why don't you worry about killing your own kids, and let me worry about killing mine?* (*Philogelos* 57).

According to the book of dream-prediction attributed to Ahmet, which contains ancient, Arabic, and more recent elements, if you dream that

- *your testicles are cut off, then if you have children, they will die, but if you don't have children, it means that you won't have any;*
- *your testicles are crushed, then your children will be ill for a long time;*
- *your testicles are firm and larger than before, then you will take joy in your children;*
- *you were a eunuch without testicles before, but now you have them, then you will grow rich to your heart's desire and your relatives will return from a foreign land;*
- *you lose your left testicle, then you will not have a daughter;*
- *you lose your right testicle, then you will not have a son;*
- *your testicles along with your penis are cut off, then both you and your heir will quickly die.*

(Ahmet, *Dream Criticism* 99).

A horse that is exposed to the wind when it couples, especially when it does so toward the North Wind, will produce healthy offspring. What is bizarre is that we have heard that people do this too, indulging freely in such deeds that are more fitting for a weathervane (Eustathios of Thessalonike, *Commentary on Homer's Iliad*, v. 4, p. 398).

BRIDES AT THE COURT

The imperial court would often organize bride shows, basically beauty pageants, to find a wife for the heir to the throne, who would give the winner a golden apple. The most famous show was for Theophilos (ruled 829–842). He was allegedly smitten by the beautiful but sharp-tongued Kasia (or Kasiane), and tested her by saying, *The worst evil came into the world through woman,* referring to the temptation of Eve. To this she responded, *And so did the best of the best,* referring to the promise of salvation, Jesus, born of Mary. Theophilos didn't like the riposte and chose Theodora instead, giving her the golden apple (Leon Grammatikos, *Chronicle*, p. 213). Divorced and rejected before even being married, Kasia joined a monastery and became a famous writer of hymns.

Court officials touring the provinces in search of suitable brides for the imperial prince were apparently given a painting of what a perfect or ideal match should look like, and they tried to match it to the candidates they met. It was called a *lauraton*. They also carried an imperial shoe of the right length for the ideal bride (a *tzangion*), and tested it on their feet (*Life of Saint Philaretos the Merciful* 4c; cf. Claudian, *Epithalamium for Honorius and Maria* 23–28).

The three finalists among the brides brought to the court for the competition were sometimes examined nude in the bath by the prince's mother, the current empress, who picked the best-looking one (*Life*

of Saint Theophano 10). At least three emperors in the heyday of these pageants (eighth–ninth centuries) eventually rejected the wives chosen for them by their mothers and took up with mistresses instead: Konstantinos VI, Michael III, and Leon VI. Even Theophilos, who chose his own bride, later cheated on her with one of her handmaidens and had to seek her forgiveness, saying in his defense that he had done it only once (Theophanes Continuatus 3.8).

Among the twelve finalists in the bridal show organized for Leon VI was an Athenian girl, well practiced in divination, who proposed the following competition to the rest of the girls for deciding the winner: they would all remove their footwear and sit on the floor. As soon as the emperor entered, they would race to stand up, lace up their sandals, and bow before him. Whoever did so first, won (*Life of Saint Theophano* 9).

When he was five years old, the prince Romanos II (959–963) was married to Bertha, the illegitimate daughter of king Hugo of Italy and a prostitute. Hugo was frank about his daughter's mother . . . *but Greek nobles look only to the father's side, not the mother's* (Liudprand, *Payback* 5.14).

MARITAL RELATIONS

A man who, in anger, uses an ax against his own wife should, indeed, be considered a murderer (Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 188, canon 8).

The man who is not yet yoked by the bonds of matrimony is buffeted by rabid lust, by urges that are impossible to resist, and unerotic romances. But the one who is bound to a spouse is troubled by a whole host of other bothers: if he is childless, by his desire for children; if he has children, by concerns for their upbringing, by keeping an eye on his wife, tending to his household, supervising his domestics, damages from contracts, feuds

Fig. 1.1 A general offers his daughters as wives to guests during a banquet. From the Madrid Skylitzes.

with neighbors, legal contests, the risks of business, and the toils of farming (Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 2.2).

†

Away from beating women! It is an outrage not only on the one who suffers it but also on the one who inflicts it. For the women: if it is your misfortune to have such a husband, do not take it hard, but consider the reward that is stored up for you, and the praise of society. For the men: there is no offense that she can give you that grants you the right to beat a woman. . . . It is a mark of extreme injustice to commit such an outrage upon a person who shares your life with you, as if she were a slave (John Chrysostom, *Homily 26 on 1 Corinthians* 7).

Girls could be engaged to be married even before they were ten, but if they were married before they were twelve, the marriage had legal validity only when they became twelve (*Basilika* 28.4.3).

A misogynist stood in the market and said, *I am selling my wife, tax-free.* When some people asked him why, he replied, *So that she might be confiscated as contraband* (*Philogelos* 246).

†

Kekaumenos was a somewhat paranoid advice-writer of the eleventh century. *If you have a friend passing through the city where you*

live, don't invite him to your house, but let him stay elsewhere and send him the things that he needs. For if he stays in your house, listen to how many accusations you will face. First, your wife and daughters and daughters-in-law will not be free to leave their room and make the necessary arrangements in your house. If there is absolute need for them to come out, your friend will hoot and fix his eye on them. Even if you are standing by him, he will give you the impression that he is looking down, but really he will be checking out how they walk and turn, their hips and glance, and, in short, from top to toe; and when he is alone with his own people, he will imitate their movements and laugh (*Strategikon* 39).

Andronikos Komnenos, cousin of the emperor Manuel I (1143–1180), spent almost three years in prison in the Great Palace (1155–1158). He there discovered an underground space beneath his cell and crawled into it, pulling the dirt and bricks shut behind him. The guards thought that he had escaped, even though nothing appeared disturbed, whereupon an empire-wide manhunt was set into motion. Andronikos' wife was arrested as a precaution and placed in his cell. That first night he rose up before her out of the floor *like a demon from Tartaros,* and they had sex, making sure to do so quietly but conceiving their son Ioannes in the process. As she was not being guarded strictly, Andronikos managed to escape the prison, but he was later found and arrested again (Choniates, *History* 106–107).

A woman who is so tight that she cannot endure the function of a woman is not healthy (*Basilika* 19.10.31.8).

The twelfth-century satirical poet Ptochoprodromos complained to the emperor about how he was verbally abused by his wife, shut out of the bedroom, and starved (*Poem* 1).

I fear her mouth, I fear her wrath,
I cringe at her threats and her disgust.

She accuses him of being worthless about the house, while she does all the work:

You sit in my house, and don't keep up the home,
the marble is gone, the floor is a waste,
the roof tiles are loose, the roof is rotting . . .
You've never changed the door, not a single board,
you've never changed the tiles, nor repaired the wall,
nor summoned a technician to fix it up.
Never did you buy a nail to pound into the beam . . .
I wonder why I want you around at all, what good are you?

The next scene is full of sexual innuendo:

When I mounted the threshold like a rider,
she saw that I was on top, mounted in the seat,
she started to murmur and whine,
"Who do you think you are? Take care whom you insult!"
I was of a mind, my lord, to strike her, but said to myself,
"On your soul, Prodromos, hold steady.
Whatever she says, bear it like a man.
For if you strike her and make her hurt,
you are old and short and weak,
and she might lay her hands hard upon you!"
So I quickly grabbed the broom from the closet,
and prayed, "Lord Christ, prevent her
from twisting around and taking my rod
and letting me have it, leaving me all bent."
Up she goes and leaves, and locks the door behind her,
without a care, while leaving me out in the cold.
Holding the broom, I started on the door,
but when I gave up pounding loudly on it,
I found a hole and inserted the end of its rod,
but she jumped and grabbed it,
and pulled from inside, while I from outside.
But when she saw that I was stronger, and pulling harder,
she released the broom, and opened the door.
This was unexpected, and I fell to the ground,
and when she saw that I had fallen, she started to laugh.

FORBIDDEN UNIONS

In the ancient Roman empire, it was illegal for senators to marry actresses, for the profession was regarded as little better than prostitution and was often practiced together with it. When Justinian I wanted to marry the former "actress" Theodora, he pressured his uncle, the emperor Justin I (518–527), to issue a law allowing such a marriage if the woman had changed her ways and practiced "moderation." The law implies that the prospect of marriage to a senator might incentivize women of loose morals to shape up. Also, daughters born to "women of the stage" may petition the emperor to be legally *freed from the blemish of their mothers' reputation* (*Codex Justinianus* 5.4.23).

The regime of Konstantinos V was opposed by many monks in the provinces because of his stance against religions icons. Michael Lachanodrakon, a staunch supporter of the emperor and governor of a province in Asia Minor, gathered together the monks and nuns of his province and ordered them to exchange their black robes for white ones and to marry each other. Whoever refused would be blinded and exiled to Cyprus. Some opted for marriage, others for blindness and Cyprus (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia,* p. 445).

By the eleventh century, the Church had put in place a complicated set of restrictions on marriage. Among other rules, marriage was forbidden between two persons who were connected by up to seven degrees of genealogical relation, counting inclusively. So, for example, first cousins represented five degrees of relation (cousin 1 → father → grandfather, and then back down → uncle → cousin 2). Additional rules prohibited marriage between persons related via spiritual kinship, especially that established by baptism, or by the prior marriage of mutual relatives. It was a complicated enough business that special

treatises were required to sort it all out (e.g., Ioannes Pediasimos, *On Marriage*).

The only emperor who came close to having two wives at the same time was Konstantinos IX Monomachos (1042–1055). He was the third and final husband of the empress Zoe, and he himself had been married previously, so the whole thing was uncanonical from the beginning and required special dispensation. Moreover, after the death of his previous wife, Monomachos had taken up with Maria Skleraina, his true love, though he had not technically married her. After he had married Zoe and become emperor, Zoe allowed him to bring Maria to the palace and even to invest her with imperial titles. Monomachos now lived in the palace with three empresses: his wife Zoe, her sister Theodora, and his consort Maria. When the latter died, he took up with an Alan princess. Theodora absolutely forbade him from marrying her (Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.151–154).

As he lay dying in 1067, the emperor Konstantinos X Doukas bound his wife Eudokia Markembolitissa with powerful oaths never to remarry, and he required the leading members of the Senate to sign the oath as well. But his own sons were either not ready or not fit to take command in those troubled times; the state needed a leader, and Eudokia had her eyes on the handsome general Romanos Diogenes. But how could she and the senators get around the oath? A clever eunuch found the answer. He went to the patriarch (Ioannes Xiphilinos) and suggested that the empress was thinking of marrying the patriarch's nephew. What could be done? The patriarch was mobilized to go around to the leaders of the Senate and explain why the oath was invalid, releasing them from their obligation to honor it. Whereupon Eudokia brought Romanos to the palace and married him (Skylitzes Continuatus, *History,* pp. 123–124).

Desperate for an alliance with the aggressive Serb ruler Stefan Milutin, the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328) offered him his daughter Simonis in marriage. She was five years old and Milutin was fifty, but the real problem was that he had already married three times, so this would be his fourth, which violated Church rules. The court came up with a clever loophole: as wife #1 had been alive when Milutin took wives #2 and #3, the latter had not been real wives after all. But wife #1 had died in the meantime, which meant that Milutin was now free to marry Simonis as wife #2. The question of her age was apparently not important. According to some sources, Milutin immediately consummated the marriage, leaving Simonis unable to bear children.

The scholar and essayist Theodoros Prodromos (twelfth century) wrote a treatise *To Those who Reproach Providence because of Their Poverty*, and it begins by listing many mismatched things that we encounter in life, including rich idiots and poor scholars. Also, *consider the man who seems as if he was aborted by Nature, uglier even than the monsters of Empedocles, hideous to behold, his face full of soot, the kind of person we put on the stage to entertain us, like African midgets, with wrinkled skin. . . . And yet that man has bagged a beautiful young girl, like Hephaistos with golden Aphrodite. And what about the handsome young man whose beard is just beginning to grow, a gift to us from the Graces, a statue made by Nature, a man pleasant to speak with and glorious to behold, and yet we see him in the company of a hideous old crone?* (in *PG* 133: 1293–1294).

AGAINST MARRIAGE

The Church Council of Gangra in Paphlagonia (fourth century) condemned Christians who rejected the institution of marriage; also those who told pious women that they could not get into heaven if they had sex with their husbands; those who refrained from sex out of a hatred of marriage; women who dressed like men and cut their hair

to become like monks; women who left their husbands because they hated marriage; and parents who abandoned their children to go off and play at being ascetics (*Canons* 1, 9, 13–15, 17).

The wife of a misogynist died, and he was asked at the funeral, *Who is it that now rests in peace?* He said, *It is I who am at rest, now that I am rid of her* (*Philogelos* 248).

UNCHASTE

A poor man brought an enormous "Phrygian" apple as a prodigy to the emperor Theodosios II. He marveled at its size and gave it to his empress, Eudokia. She, in turn, gave it to her husband's friend Paulinos as a gift, and Paulinos, not knowing its history, regifted it to the emperor. Theodosios now suspected an affair between the two (apples were given as declarations of romantic interest, and Phrygia alluded to the Judgment of Paris). Theodosios asked Eudokia what she did with the apple, and she said that she ate it. Thereupon the emperor executed Paulinos and Eudokia left the capital for Jerusalem, devoting herself to good works (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 14.8). This story, which is probably not entirely historical, was very popular among later Byzantines.

The empress Theodora forced some members of the aristocracy to marry her former colleagues from the brothel. *When Saturninus slept with this wife of his—the daughter of one "Goldilocks"—and found that she had already been deflowered, he told one of his friends that he had married one who was "not unperforated." When this comment reached Theodora, she ordered her servants to lift him up the way one does to schoolchildren and give his back a good long whacking for showing off and boasting about things to which he had no right. She then told him not to run his mouth off again* (Prokopios, *Secret History* 17.36–37).

There was a statue of Aphrodite near the hospital of Theophilos in Constantinople which was said to have the following power: if a woman was a virgin or a chaste wife, it would allow her to pass unmolested, but if she had been naughty or adulterous, it would cause her to lift up her dress and expose the shame of her privates for all to see. It was, accordingly, used to perform chastity tests. But the sister-in-law of the emperor Justin II (565–578) had the statue destroyed because it did this to her when she was passing by on other business (*Patria of Constantinople* 2.65).

When she was married to Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034), the empress Zoe had an affair with the young Michael the Paphlagonian. Then Romanos died and Zoe married her lover, whom she elevated to the throne. Being married to her now, Michael began to suspect, based on his own prior experience, that his wife was not the chaste sort. . . . (Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 4.6, 4.16).

WTF?

Anna, the daughter of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), is said to have planned a coup against her brother Ioannes when their father died. But her husband, Nikephoros Bryennios, failed to show up and the plot was foiled. She then angrily criticized Nature *for giving her the hole and him the protrusion* (Choniates, *History* 10). The American translator misread this passage in a hilarious way, writing instead: she was *a shrew by nature, and felt justified in strongly contracting her vagina when Bryennios' penis entered deep inside her, thus causing him great pain.* Scholars relying on this mistranslation rather than the Greek have debated whether this is even possible.

· II ·

Unorthodox Sex

CUNNILINGUS

Theodoros Balsamon (twelfth century) was a lawyer who wrote commentaries on Church law. He is also the only Byzantine who has left us a detailed discussion of cunnilingus. The canonical issue is whether a priest should celebrate the liturgy after defiling his lips—but *what exactly defiles his lips? Some say it is when a man has committed the sin of passionately and erotically kissing a woman. . . . Others say that people who are passionately inflamed by sexual fire use female genitals as a drinking cup and—O the desecration!—drink from it that abominable drink, thereby defiling their lips. Others say that some, driven mad by sexual lust, actually rain kisses on the female shameful part, and they are not ashamed, but even say, "our lips are our friends, who will be the boss of us?"* [Psalms 12:4] (Balsamon, *Commentaries on the Canons*, v. 4, 229–230).

‡

Balsamon then displays his lexicographical erudition when it comes to the parts involved: *I read in Ioulios Polydeukes* [Pollux]*, in the second book of his* Onomastikon*, that he calls the parts and various components of the female genitals "myrtle lips," "drop-offs," and "flaps." The most wise*

Aristotle, in his biological work Concerning the Parts of Animals [actually *History of Animals* 583a15] *calls these things "lips."*

Balsamon adds that *many who write erotic songs say that these parts gape, and spit at you, and grow large when placed on a tongue. I therefore believe that a priest who is defiled by them in any way should be excommunicated for a time as a man who has done a most foul deed. But as he did not commit the complete sin of fornication, he should not be defrocked.*

CONFESSION

According to the standard manual for taking confession and prescribing penance, the priest must begin by asking, *How did you lose your virginity? Was it through fornication, lawful marriage, masturbation, or in some unnatural way?* After that is answered, the next question is, *How many women did you have sex with before marriage, and were they slaves, widows, women married to another man, or nuns?* (Ioannes the Faster, *The Order in Which to Conduct a Confession*, in *PG* 88: 1893).

Fig. 2.1 Glazed bowl from the twelfth century, showing couple embracing on a chair; the rabbit may be a reference to their runaway lust.

According to the confessional manuals, there were three degrees of sex between men: doing it; having it done to one (which was not as bad); and both together, which was the worst. There was only one degree of bestiality. There were two degrees of masturbation: one by your own hand, and another by the hand of someone else. The word for masturbation in Byzantine Greek was *malakia* ("softness"), the same as in modern Greek.

Basileios Maleïnos (eleventh century) advised priests taking people's confession to avoid insisting on the details of their sexual behavior *because it only reignites their lust and incites arousal* (*Ascetic Treatise,* p. 48).

LESBIAN SEX

There are extremely few references in Byzantine literature to female homosexuality or, as a fifth-century dictionary put it, to *women who have sex with female companions, the same way men do* (Hesychios, *Lexikon*, s.v. *dietaristriai*). A common term was *tribas*, possibly from the root for "to rub," because *they shamefully rub up against each other,* as a Byzantine scholar explaining words in Lucian put it (*Scholia on Lucian*, p. 277).

The first person in history to call women who engaged in homosexual acts "Lesbians" was Arethas, the bishop of Caesarea in Asia Minor, in 914 (*Scholion on Clement of Alexandria's Pedagogos* 3.3.21.3).

In a vision recounted in the life of the fictitious saint Basileios the Younger (ca. tenth century), the servant-woman Theodora dies and passes through a number of moral checkpoints and heavenly toll-houses to atone for her sins. At one she is asked by a lewd demonic customs official *whether perhaps, when she was young and shared a bed with a young girl of the same age, she ever committed the feminine sin of sex with a woman* (*Life of Saint Basileios the Younger,* p. 31).

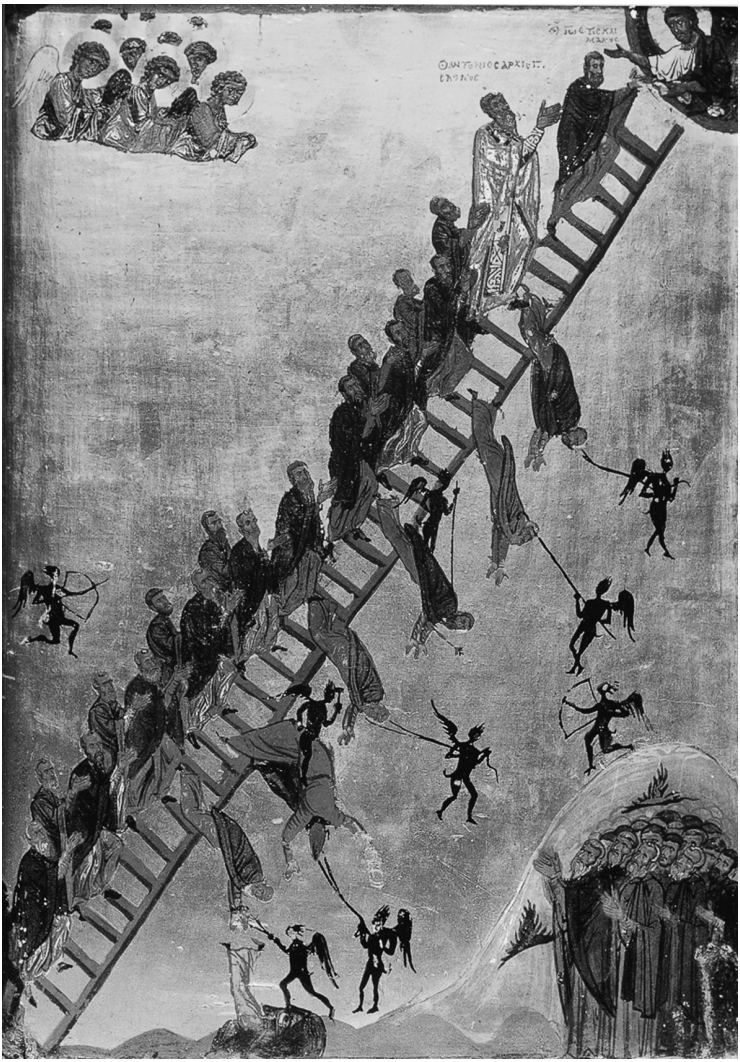

Fig. 2.2 Icon of the *Heavenly Ladder*, a treatise of moral improvement and spiritual ascent written in the seventh century by Ioannes Klimax, or Klimakos ("of the Ladder"). John is shown at the top leading the faithful to Christ, while demons try to pull them off through temptations and angels (top left) encourage them.

Satan often tempts a woman to desire a woman. For this reason pious abbesses of nunneries instruct the nuns under them not to look at each other's faces plainly or by chance, lest through gazing upon each other they should slip and slide into passion and harm. Instead, they are to lower their heads, look at the ground, and in this way to speak to each other, virgin-to-virgin (*Rule for the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist of "Phoberos"* 58).

SEX ADDICTS

Some bless those who are physically eunuchs, as being free from the tyranny of the body. But I instead bless those who choose to be eunuchs on a daily basis, for they are able to dismember themselves by wielding the knife of reason. I have seen men who lapsed against their will and men who want to lapse but are unable to do so. I pity the latter more than those who lapse on a daily basis (Ioannes Klimakos, *Ladder to Heaven* 15.884).

A holy man once visited Constantinople to see the sights, but his enhanced spiritual vision enabled him to see a eunuch sitting outside a brothel, sobbing with his head in his hands, a sight so pitiful that you would think the whole world was weeping along with him. *"Tell me,"* he approached the eunuch and said, *"why are you weeping and why don't you leave this filthy place? I am moved by your tears." "Oh servant of God,"* said the eunuch, *"I am an angel, one of those who is assigned to watch over each person when he is baptized. The man to whom I am assigned is devoted to this whore. Here I sit, then, so how could I not weep seeing the image of God dragged through this filth? I can see the demons dancing in a chorus around him, laughing and singing"* (Makarios, *A Horrific Tale*, in *PG* 34: 221).

If someone sins, then repents, then commits the same sin and repents again, and does this again and again until he dies, what should we think about him? I have seen men a hundred years old, who have lost all their vigor and tremble in most parts of their body, being unable to refrain

from carnal sin on account of their longstanding habits. When doctors are asked about them, they say that in these men the tubes through which the semen flows become relaxed and loosened after having sex for so many years, so that it is no longer in their nature to refrain. They just can't control themselves (Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers* 33).

†

Before she met Justinian I and became empress, Theodora was a prostitute, starting from the bottom of that profession, the rank they called *basic infantry.* The historian Prokopios wrote a lurid account of her accomplishments and lack of shame. *Even though she put three of her orifices to work, she would impatiently reproach Nature for not making the holes in her nipples bigger than they were so that she could devise additional sexual positions involving them as well* (*The Secret History* 9.18). The first editor of the text—the Vatican librarian who discovered it in 1623—censored this entire chapter.

Fig. 2.3 Empress Theodora (d. 548), wife of Justinian (527–565), depicted here in the contemporary mosaic panels of San Vitale, Ravenna, bringing the wine to church. Prokopios described her as "beautiful of face and otherwise graceful, but too short and sallow, yet not excessively so; one could rather call her pale. Her glance was swift and always intense" (*Secret History* 10.11).

One of the most popular saints' lives in Byzantium and the medieval West was that of Maria of Egypt, a prostitute who repented and became an extreme ascetic in the desert. The story of her early days comes as close to pornography as hagiography could manage. *I saw some young men standing on the shore, about ten in number or more, with well-built bodies and vigorous movements, and they seemed just perfect for what I had in mind. I went right into their midst shamelessly, as was my custom: "Take me," I said, "wherever you are going. There is zero chance that you won't like what I have to offer." I made them laugh with some even more vulgar comments. . . . Oh man, how could I even tell you what happened then? What tongue can speak and what ears can bear to listen to what happened on that ship? The things that I made those wretches do, even if before they were unwilling! I was their teacher in every kind of disgusting depravity, both speakable and unspeakable* (*Life of Saint Maria of Egypt* 20–21).

A nun in Alexandria would go to the public bathhouse, expose herself to the men, and incite them to have sex with her, including the priests. And after what she showed them, they would have wet dreams at night. The holy man Daniel prayed that she be punished, so God sent a demon to possess her. The demon caused her to tear at her own flesh, so to save her life they brought her to the holy man Isaiah to perform an exorcism (Ioannes Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 242).

A pious woman married a man who was enslaved to lust: he would visit brothels regularly, squandering her property and hanging out with a young girlfriend in her presence. Asking for help, she was directed to a man, Virginos, who had special skills. After a consultation, he told her that he could cause her husband's sex drive to wither, or cause him to die, or put a demon in him and drive him mad, *whichever you want, my lady, it's your choice.* She said, *I only want him to love me and no one else.* Virginos taught her the spell for that, and it worked! Her husband now loved only her. But using

the dark arts had a cost. The woman was now visited in her dreams by an old Ethiopian man, who pressed himself upon her to have sex with her. *Good to meet you here, my lady,* he would say, *Come on, my love, let's make out.* Her next dream was of a large black dog that also embraced her and began to kiss her, *mouth-to-mouth like a person.* Another dream involved her having sex with the nude statues in the hippodrome, and then with frogs and snakes. Eventually, holy powers and a saint helped her to block these demonic assaults (*Life of Saint Andreas the Fool* 35).

Byzantine pornography: Canon 100 of the Council in Troullo warns against paintings or texts that attract the eye, corrupt the mind, and move people to shameful deeds. In his commentary on this canon, Theodoros Balsamon (twelfth century) noted that certain *erotomaniacs* depict sex acts in drawings, even on their walls, in order to become aroused by looking at them and thereby carry out their carnal desires. He adds that in rich houses these are not only drawings but also plaster statuettes (*Commentaries on the Canons*, v. 2, p. 546).

The afterlife was often imagined as a series of "tollhouses" (*telonia*) where specialist demons scrutinized each person's life with respect to a particular type of sin. Father Makarios had a vision in which *the heavens opened and angels of God were going up and down, conveying souls. I saw two angels taking the soul of a man up to heaven to the telonion of fornication, adultery, and homosexuality—this is the most shameful of all the telonia. The master of that tollhouse said to the angels, "Why are you bringing this one here? He fornicated up to the end of his life, and often willfully committed sodomy, and yet he slandered his neighbors too." The angels responded, "He did do these things, but he stopped toward the end," and they brought forth his guardian angel as a character-witness that the man had indeed repented genuinely at the very last moment* (Makarios, *Additional Tales*, in *PG* 34: 224–225).

BESTIALITY

It is not just women and boys. We even have to contend against animals too. We know this from many confessions. . . . Once the presbyter of the monastery of Kellia came from the mountain of Nitria sitting on a female donkey and sent it back again with his disciple. Along the way the devil attacked him, using the female donkey as bait seven times, tempting him to sin with it. The brother fought back with prayer and was lifted up. Thus he returned the donkey to his father, but his face was disturbed. The old man was supernaturally perceptive and saw seven crowns on his head [a sign of victory]. *The brother repented before the old man saying, "Pray for me because I have fallen into fornication," and he told him how the devil had assaulted him along the way using the female donkey. The old man told him, "Have courage, my child, because I saw seven crowns on your head when you came. For you were not defeated, seeing as you did not commit the sin but instead prevailed. It is a hard fight when a man is given the opportunity and yet restrains himself"* (*Rule for the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist of "Phoberos"* 58).

The bursar of the monastery confided this to me: "When I was young," he said, "and placed in charge of the animals, I fell into a most grave spiritual sin. But it was not my custom to hide a serpent in the nest of my heart and so I grabbed this serpent by the tail and denounced it to the healer, and by the 'tail' I mean that I told him everything about my sin all the way to the end ["tail" can also mean "penis"]. *He smiled at me, gently struck my chin, and said, 'Go, child, tend to your duties as before, and have no more fear.' I was then emboldened by fiery faith . . . and ran along my way in joy, yet also trembling"* (Ioannes Klimakos, *Ladder to Heaven* 4.697). The modern English translators of this text censored the key passage.

This we instruct on the authority of the Lord God, that you shall never possess female animals inside or outside the monastery, not oxen, or sheep, or anything else of this kind. For this has been forbidden to all who

live according to God and renounce the affairs of this life (*Rule for the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist of "Phoberos"* 57).

The professor of rhetoric Nikephoros Basilakes (twelfth century) wrote an exercise on *How Pasiphae Fell in Love with the Bull* (she was the wife of Minos who gave birth to the Minotaur after having sex with a bull). In it, Eros has to struggle against the limitations of Nature to get the deed done (*Progymnasma* 12). Basilakes also wrote exercises on *What the Virgin Mary Said When Jesus Turned Water into Wine at the Wedding*; *What the Blind Man Said When He Saw for the First Time*; and, possibly the most amusing title, *What Hades Said When Lazaros Rose up from the Dead*.

HERMAPHRODITE SEX

Hermaphrodites: *This type of prodigy appeared in our times too, having the qualities of both sexes. With respect to sexual activity, he could be both active and passive. But this person would say that the desire to be the active partner was stronger in him, though sometimes he was the passive one, not willingly, but being forced*[1].—written by Theodoros Skoutariotes (thirteenth century) in a manuscript of Photios' *Ten Thousand Books (Bibliotheca)*, at the point where the learned patriarch is giving a summary, based on Diodoros the Sicilian (cod. 244), of hermaphrodites that appeared at various times in ancient history.

WET DREAMS

The twelfth-century romance novel in verse, *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eumathios Makrembolites, contains a first-person account of a wet dream, one of few that we have from premodern times. The narrator, Hysminias, has been kissing and fondling his beloved in the dream, but she blocks him. *I was in pain and distress, trembling in a strange way; I couldn't see well, my soul softened, and my vigor left me*

entirely as my body grew weak. It was hard to breathe, my heart beat faster, and a sweet torment poured over my limbs, almost tickling me. An unspeakable, inexpressible, incomparable passion took control of me. I then experienced—by Eros—what I had never experienced before (3.7).

Among many accusations that Byzantine writers brought against the Latins was the allegation that Catholic priests have sex with women secretly under the covers but then call it a "wet dream," not fornication, and thereby excuse themselves from sin (Konstantinos Stilbes, *Accusations against the Latin Church* 37).

After sex with my wife, or after a wet dream, is it okay if I merely wash myself and then go to church? Answer: *Tears are the true bath for any Christian. Nevertheless, water exists so that we may clean our bodies* (Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers* 38).

REMEDIES

Theodoros Priskianos, a fourth-century medical author, recommends as remedies for impotence that men rest during the day in addition to the night; use feather pillows and soft mattresses; secure the sexual services of pretty girls or boys; and read books that incite the soul to pleasures, such as Philip's *Amphipolitans*, Herodianos, and of course the Syrian Iamblichos (author of the *Babylonian Tale*), or others of the same sort who delicately recount romantic adventures (*Euporiston* 2.11).

Don't try to defeat the demon of fornication with excuses and objections, because he has more plausible arguments and fights against us with Nature on his side (Ioannes Klimakos, *Ladder to Heaven* 15.884).

Rigorous fasting was the key to suppressing sexuality. *You can't fight against the demon of fornication on a full stomach* (Ioannes Kassianos in *Philokalia* 1.74).

Fornication can take bodily form even in the absence of another body (Ioannes Klimakos, *Ladder to Heaven* 15.885).

Don't be free with yourselves either; don't touch "it" or handle "it" at all, and don't look closely at your nudity either. It is fornication even if you don't actually approach another body. And when you have to do the needs of nature, sit down in a modest way to make water, and don't touch your member with your finger (Theodoros Stoudites, *Great Catechetical Orations* 39).

If he who has looked on a woman with desirous intent has committed adultery with her already in his heart [Matt. 5:28]*, it is all the more so with the one who spends time with the young, whether he is an old man or a younger one in the prime of life, at the peak of his powers, and excited by the passions of the flesh* (*Rule for the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist of "Phoberos"* 58).

Beware, my children! Beware of furtive glances and of speaking freely with each other, because then, before you even know it, you're holding hands and stealing kisses; and when you've stolen kisses, you come to forbidden intercourse, and then you are at the point of eternal death (Theodoros Stoudites, *Great Catechetical Orations* 58).

MT. ATHOS

In the years around 1100, the monasteries of Mt. Athos were rocked by scandals that cost them severely in credibility. Apparently, some

Fig. 2.4 Massacre of the Innocents ordered by king Herod (Matt. 2:16–18); from the *Menologion* made for the emperor Basil II in ca. 1000.

Vlachs—Balkan pastoralists—had moved their flocks onto monastic lands, bringing their women and children with them, against the rules of Mt. Athos. The women were apparently dressed like men to avoid giving scandal. However, in addition to the dairy products that the Vlachs provided, their women soon began to provide other services as well. This created an ongoing scandal. The patriarch believed that some of the monks were behaving like *lusty cocks*, and when a delegation of monks complained about all the Vlach children, Alexios said, *And what do you want me to do about the children? I am not king Herod!* (*Partial Narration Consisting of the Letters of the Emperor Alexios and the Patriarch Nikolaos*[2]).

Construction crews hired to build or carry out repairs on Mt. Athos were sometimes explicitly barred from bringing young apprentices

or beardless youths with them to help in the work (*Acts of Protaton*, pp. 213, 260).

MISCELLANEOUS

A lawyer tried one night to have sex with his grandmother, but his father quickly hit him. He fired back: *You've been having sex with* my *mother all these years and I never hit you, so why are you now angry that I want to have sex with* your *mother?* (*Philogelos* 45).

The race of women is threatened with sexual extinction as young men these days are willing to take their place and do everything that they do (John Chrysostom, *Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*, in *PG* 47: 361).

According to the book of dream-prediction attributed to Ahmet, which contains ancient, Arabic, and more recent elements, if you dream that you have sex with

- *a classy escort, it means that you will become rich;*
- *a nun, it means that grief is in store for you;*
- *a common whore, your wealth will grow, but by unjust means;*
- *a beautiful woman, you will find joy and wealth within a year;*
- *a woman who turned out to be a man when you look at her hidden parts, you will find joy and have a male child;*
- *an old woman, you will obtain power from an ancient source;*
- *but if you see that you ask an old woman for sex, and she does not give in, then it means that you will wear yourself out in an impossible task, and not finish it.* (Ahmet, *Dream Criticism* 127–128).

What is *"spread open and bolted shut? An erotic kiss in which it is necessary to lick the tongue of one who is kissing you from above"* (*Souda*, s.v. *peripetaston*, a tenth-century dictionary of classics).

A monk who was troubled by sexual fantasies went out into the deeper desert to find peace and consulted with the ascetic Pachon, who was about seventy. Pachon told him not to overworry about it: sexual fantasies may be a sign that the body is still swelling with desire and so the monk is not yet perfect, but they may also be sent out of sheer envy by demons to disturb a perfect monk. *Look at me, I have been doing this for forty years, and yet I still experience temptations. For twelve years after I was fifty there was not a single night when I was not assailed by it* (Palladios, *Lausiac History* 23).

The emperor Justinian I (527–565) issued a law forbidding "unnatural" sexual acts and blasphemies on the grounds that they cause famine, pestilence, and earthquakes (*Novella* 77.1).

The Church Father John Chrysostom eloquently pointed out the double standard by which women were condemned and punished for adultery but not men. *But it's the same crime for both!* he protested (*Homily 5 on 1 Thessalonians 4*, in *PG* 62: 425).

Female palm trees become pregnant when they are smeared with the semen of the male tree. There is much affection between the two, which is why they lean toward each other. If the male trees do not know with which one of them a female wants to mate, she coats her trunk with her own "unguent" and this attracts the right partner. But if she does not receive his semen in time, she suffers an abortion and the fruit falls before it is ripe (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 24.3.12–13).

In the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of James*, Salome is skeptical that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. *Unless I thrust in my finger and search those parts, I will not believe it.* And so she went in and thrust in her finger and cried out, *Woe is me for my unbelief! Behold, my hand is melting off!* (19–20).

Those who take hold of their genitals with the intention of spilling their seed end up moving their hand, not as they began, but much more vigorously, fired up as they become through the cumulative effect of the motion (*Scholia on Aristophanes' Knights* 24c).

†

A text sent to a bishop in Bulgaria in the twelfth century (under Byzantine rule at the time) demands a reform of the nocturnal *satanic games that the Bulgarians call nedalai in their barbaric tongue*, which seem to have involved sex among men in the guise of "games." The instructions, sent probably by the patriarchal Synod, are that these games should henceforth be played during the day *when evil becomes weaker through shame* (*Selection from the Holy Canons to Correct Spiritual Errors*[3]).

Andronikos Palaiologos was the grandson of the reigning emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328). In 1320, he became infatuated with a certain woman of high birth but loose morals, who already had a lover. Acting in jealousy, Andronikos (the grandson) placed archers around her house to kill this mysterious rival, which they did when he came on his horse. Going down to the body, they realized that it was none other than Andronikos' brother Manuel. When news reached their father, Michael IX Palaiologos, he died of grief (Nikephoros Gregoras, *Roman History* 8.1).

· III ·

Animals

PETS

The cruel emperor Valentinian (364–375) kept two savage bears as pets, named Innocence and Goldflake, outside the imperial bedroom. Valentinian would feed prisoners to them. After years of her service, he turned Innocence loose in a wild forest, hoping that she could bear cubs like herself (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 29.3.9).

†

The diplomat and historian Olympiodoros of Thebes, who carried out missions for Theodosios II (408–450), had a pet parrot for twenty years. It could imitate a wide range of human action and speech, such as singing and dancing, and it could call people by name (*History* fr. 35).

Tzetzes wrote a poem on how unfair fate is, focusing on the pet cat (or weasel or ferret) of the empress Zoe (d. 1050). Its name was Mechlebés, Arabic for "talon" or "claw." *This Mechlebés, then, ate a huge variety of foods each day, on pure gold dishes and with so many attendants. He had separate people to buy the food, make it for him, prepare it on the plate, carry it on a platter, bake his bread, mix his water, and serve every one of his needs. At that time it was Mechlebés, today it might be some royal*

Fig. 3.1 Boy walking geese.

puppy . . . and all this when people are actually going hungry (Tzetzes, *Histories, or Thousands of Verses* 5.12).

PESTS

In the days of Justinian I, ships around Constantinople were terrorized on and off for over fifty years by a whale whom locals called Porphyrios, presumably from the dark-wine color of its skin (*porphyra* was Greek for a deep purple color). One day it began to chase and eat some dolphins, but it ran aground in the mud and got stuck. The locals came out with axes and cut it into pieces: some of the people began to eat it on the spot, while others took away their portion to cure (Prokopios, *Wars* 7.29.16). In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville concludes that the whale in this story was a sperm whale (ch. 45).

The Justinianic Plague was first recorded in Egypt in 541 and spread along the coasts of the Mediterranean, then inland from the ports. This followed the movement of the ships that carried the rats whose fleas transmitted the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*. The role that these small pests played in the plague was completely unknown and invisible to the Byzantines. One sixth-century author noted that the plague also struck down cows, dogs, and rats (Yuhannan of Amida in Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle* III, pp. 95–96).

The irascible scholar Tzetzes complained about the three-story apartment building in which he lived. On the floor above him there lived a priest *with more children than Priam* (Priam was the king of Troy with fifty sons and many daughters). Along with the children, the priest also kept pigs. The children and pigs together produced *rivers of urine on which ships might sail*. Tzetzes was reminded of *the horses of Xerxes, which drank so much that they dried up the rivers; but the priest's brood and pigs did the opposite. And if it happened to rain at the same time*. . . . Tzetzes pleaded with his landlord to install gutters or thick tile plumbing that would direct these rivers away from his front door (*Letter* 18).

At some point Konstantinos IX Monomachos had a problem with some predators who were eating the animals in the imperial game preserve of the Philopation, a park located just north of Constantinople. So he hired some Gypsies who were known for their skill in solving such problems. They placed poisoned meat beneath the trees, then climbed up into the branches and imitated the sounds of the prey that the predators liked to eat. The beasts would come, eat the meat, and die (Giorgi the Lesser, *Life of Saint Giorgi the Hagiorite* 12).

AND SAINTS

As a child, the future saint Theodoros of Sykeon could outrun a horse in a three-mile race (*Life of Saint Theodoros of Sykeon* 13).

The (probably fictitious) Saint Basileios the Younger was arrested under Leon VI (886–912) on suspicion of being a spy, and was taken to the emperor's Arab minister, the eunuch Samonas, for interrogation. After failing to get him to talk, Samonas summoned the emperor's beast-keeper and told him to starve a most ferocious lion for a day. When many people had gathered, they brought in the roaring beast and threw the saint to him. But the lion was struck with fear as soon as he saw the saint and started to roll around at his feet like a lamb. The saint began to pet it, saying to those present, *Behold the Lamb* (*Life of Saint Basileios the Younger*, p. 288).

In his wandering days, Saint Lazaros (eleventh century) wanted to climb Mt. Argeas in Cappadocia, but when he was halfway up, a thick fog fell upon him and he had to get on all fours to keep climbing. In this state he met a bear, and neither was aware of the other until they bumped into each other. They both froze, paused momentarily, then went quietly on their way (*Life of Saint Lazaros of Gelesion* 25).

AND EMPERORS

In Greek, a giraffe is called a "camel-leopard." One was sent as a diplomatic gift from Egypt to the emperor Konstantinos IX Monomachos (1042–1055), paraded in the capital, and described as follows: *it is a composite animal, having the spots of a leopard but the size of a camel as well as the latter's head and thin, elongated neck, except its neck is upright and not curved like a camel's. Nor is there a hump in the middle of the back, which is straight all the way to the tail. Nor is it all of the same height: its back comes up to a certain height, but its loins are lower down and closer to the ground. Its overall shape is like a hill that starts from*

below and rises up. It does not lift the hind legs first and then the front ones like other animals, but lifts and moves both legs of one side and then both legs of the other side together, producing a balanced swaying motion (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 49–50).

Monomachos was sent an elephant. When it was led into the hippodrome by a trainer using reins, it knew enough to kneel before the emperor and place its forehead on the ground (Psellos, *Oration 1 in Praise of Monomachos* 267–277; and *Oration 4 for the Same Emperor* 155–169).

To conclude a truce with the Avars, a nomadic people who had recently invaded the Balkans and taken the city of Sirmium, the emperor Maurikios (582–602) was eager to please their khan. When the latter expressed his curiosity in certain large animals that he had heard the emperor kept, Maurikios sent him his largest Indian elephant. But the khan sent it back—either because he was frightened of it or in order to insult the emperor (Theophylaktos Simokattes, *History* 1.3).

When the crusading armies of 1101 arrived at Constantinople and sat before its walls, it was said that the emperor Alexios I Komnenos released three lions and seven leopards between the two outer walls of the city, to guard the perimeter. When some Franks thought to enter, the lions badly mauled them. Eventually, the lions were killed by the knights and the leopards were chased up the middle wall. The fighting came to the men posted on the inner wall, whereupon the emperor sued for peace (Ordericus Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy* 10.19).

The Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela reported that public celebrations of Christmas in Constantinople—he was there in the late 1160s—included wildbeast shows in the hippodrome attended by the emperor Manuel I Komnenos and his wife. The shows featured lions, bears, leopards, wild donkeys, and even birds, which were

trained to fight each other for public amusement. *No entertainment like it can be found in any other land* (Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary* 21.2).

HUNTS

The emperor Ioannes II Komnenos (1118–1123) was killed during a boar hunt in Cilicia. He had speared the boar in the chest head-on, but the animal writhed, which twisted the emperor's arm onto a quiver of poisoned arrows that he had by his side. One of the tips of these arrows nicked his hand (Kinnamos, *History* 1.10; Choniates, *History* 40).

Konstantinos Pantechnes, bishop of Philippopolis in the twelfth century, wrote an account of an imperial hunt of partridges and hares that was accompanied by Spartan hounds, trained leopards, falcons,

Fig. 3.2 Hunting humping boars by night; from the illustrated manuscript of Oppianos, *On Hunting*.

and herons. Each of these animals had teams of handlers in tow, with specialized gear and techniques. He describes in graphic language how the birds of prey would hunt the partridges and how the leopards would chase down the hares. *The animals were trained to bring the prey back to their handlers and not eat it, whereupon they were given a tiny taste of the innards, just enough to turn the beak red but not to satisfy the gut. For if a bird of prey is not tormented by hunger, it is no good for the hunt* (*Description of a Hunt of Partridges and Hares*).

In 1184, the hippodrome shows featured hunting hounds chasing fleet-footed hares (Choniates, *History* 290). The Church canonist Theodoros Balsamon (twelfth century) argued that when Canon 24 of the Council in Troullo banned clergy from attending the hunts, it meant the wild beast shows, not the hare hunts (*Commentaries on the Canons*, v. 2, 426).

Fig. 3.3 Men hunting a tiger with spears.

SILK

In the fourth century, it was believed that silk (*sericum*) was produced by certain trees in China: it was a wool-like substance that was then spun into threads (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 23.6.67).

†

The correct process for making silk was understood by the sixth century, and was imported by monks who had been to "Serinde" (China). First, they explained it all to the emperor Justinian I: *the makers of silk were certain worms that knew how to do this by nature*. The monks then went back to Serinde and smuggled the silk worm eggs back, using mulberry leaves to feed the worms (Prokopios, *Wars* 8.17.1–8). This provided a huge economic benefit to the empire, which had been hemorrhaging gold to buy silk. Justin II (565–574) was able to impress the Turks by producing silk without paying Persian middlemen (Theophanes of Byzantion, *History*, in Photios, *Ten Thousand Books* cod. 64).

HORSES, MULES, AND OTHER MAMMALS

Theophylaktos was only sixteen when his father, the emperor Romanos I Lakapenos (920–944), appointed him patriarch of Constantinople. Theophylaktos' true passion was not religion but horses, of which he kept about 2,000 in a large stable near Hagia Sophia. He fed them not only hay and oats but also pine seeds, almonds, pistachios, dates, figs, and raisins, mixed with quality wine and expensive spices. One time he hurried through the liturgy during Holy Week because his favorite mare had foaled. After visiting the foal, he went back to finish the hymn. Ironically, he died in a riding accident, when he was thrown from his horse (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, pp. 242–244).

A lawyer was traveling by coach, but the mules grew tired and the driver untied them so that they could rest. But they ran away. The

lawyer said to the driver, *Wretch, as you can see the mules are fine, it was the carriage that was tired!* (*Philogelos* 100).

The excavations of the Yenikapı harbor on the south side of Constantinople have turned up hundreds of animal bones and skeletons in shipwrecks dating to the second half of the first millennium A.D. Archeozoologists have concluded that the Byzantines ate horses, donkeys, bears, and ostrich legs. Some bear skulls showed signs of abuse, suffered possibly during training for the circus, and some had marks from muzzles. One dog was found whose leg was set after it had been broken[4].

PROPHESY

During the reign of Justinian I (527–565) a man named Andreas went from village to village with his dog, which could perform an amazing trick. Andreas would gather a crowd and take from each person coins and personal items and place them on the ground. He would then order the dog to *fetch me the coin of the emperor Leon; now, a coin of the emperor Zenon;* and so on, and the dog would do it. The dog could also match rings to their owners in the crowd and could point out women who were pregnant, adulterers, and misers (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.51; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia,* p. 224).

Canon 61 of the Council in Troullo imposed a six-year sentence of excommunication upon anyone who used bears or other animals to dupe the public by fortune-telling. A twelfth-century commentator on the canons, Theodoros Balsamon, wrote that such grifters would tie strips of dyed cloth on the bear and then offer them, along with the animal's hair, as amulets against harm and the evil eye (Balsamon, *Commentaries on the Canons*, v. 2, 444–445).

Gypsies (*Athinganoi*) wrapped snakes around their bodies in order to make predictions about the future (Balsamon, *Commentaries on the Canons*, v. 2, 444–445).

CHRISTIAN ANIMALS

The lioness brings forth her pups dead, and she must watch them for three days, whereupon the male lion comes and breathes life into them. Thus were the infidel nations brought to life by the Word of God after the Resurrection of Christ, which took place three days after the Crucifixion (*Physiologos* 1, a Christian book on animal lore).

When the fox wants to catch its prey, it rolls over and plays dead, holding its breath so that it appears to be bloated. When the birds come to peck at the corpse, it seizes them. This is how the Devil snares men with temptation (*Physiologos* 21).

The elephant has no knee joints and so cannot lie down. In order to rest, it leans up against a tree. Therefore, to catch an elephant a hunter will saw through the tree in advance, causing both to fall down. This symbolizes the fall from grace of Adam and Eve (*Physiologos* 43).

Basil of Caesarea's homilies on the Creation served as a natural history for many learned Byzantines. He defends the usefulness of natural science by explaining the moral and theological lessons that animals teach us. For example, the king bee does not sting his own subjects; cranes take turns in keeping watch over their sleeping fellows; storks support their parents in old age, even help them to fly when they are weak, providing a model for human children; and the turtle dove will take only a single partner and never marry again—*Listen up, women!*, added the saint (Basil, *Six Days of Creation, Homily* 8).

The Indian horned worm will change from a caterpillar to an insect and then grow wings, proving that Christ's Resurrection is not at all impossible (Saint Basil, *Six Days of Creation, Homily* 8).

FABULOUS ANIMALS

In a work on Indian exotica, in addition to the well-known dragons, huge ants, and scorpions, Palladios (ca. 400) describes an amphibious creature living in the Ganges called the Tooth-Tyrant (*Odontotyrannos*). It was able to swallow an elephant whole (*On the Nations of India and the Brahmans*, p. 10).

Philostorgios (ca. 425) wrote that the unicorn lived in India: it had a serpent's head and coiled neck, a crooked horn, a beard, and lion's feet. India also had various ape hybrids, such as lion-apes and bear-apes. The mythological Sphinx also lives in India and is a type of ape-creature (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.11).

Among the works attributed to the saint and theologian John of Damascus (eighth century) is a two-page text *On Dragons*. Dragons can transform themselves into small or large snakes, can also take on human form and even converse with people, abduct their women, and have sex with them. There is the long serpentine kind, like the one the Roman general Regulus encountered outside of Carthage in the First Punic War, but there is also another kind with a broad head, golden eyes, horns on the back of the head, and a beard; this type is called *Agathodaimon*—that is, Good Spirit (in *PG* 95: 1600–1601).

ANIMAL FABLES

A school exercise of the twelfth century tells the story of a mouse caught by a cat when he came out to eat the leftovers after a meal. Toying with him, the cat asked after the mouse's parents, life, and

profession. The mouse said that his name was Drinker-of-Oil, his father was Eater-of-Lard, and his mother was Licker-of-Salt. When the mouse began to cry and pray for his life, the cat wondered whether he was a monk, whereupon the mouse claimed to be an abbot and started reciting the Psalms. But the cat decided to eat him, as he had evidently left his monastery without his habit, being out of uniform as it were[5].

In the twelfth century, the classical scholar Theodoros Prodromos wrote the faux-epic *Katomyomachia*, or *The Battle of Cats and Mice*. This is a cento, meaning it consists of lines lifted from Homer and the ancient tragedians, cut and pasted to recount an epic battle between the two rival species. Heroic mice satirize the ruling warrior class of the Komnenoi.

Many satirical animal poems were written in the later Byzantine period. There is the *Poulologos*, or *Bird Story*, about a party organized by the eagle, the king of all birds, for the wedding of his son, which descends into vicious but inventive name-calling.

SAID THE STORK TO THE SWAN: *"Tell me you long-neck, black-footed, horrid-voiced, lake-bred, and ill-starred bird, why did you come to this wedding? You can neither sing nor play!"*

REPLIED THE SWAN: *"You are the ugliest of all the birds in the world, you long-legged, camel-walking, gray-colored, sickle-nose, how dare you mock the snow-white swan?"*

It goes on like this in pairs for 600 verses until the eagle tells them to be quiet, or else he will set the hawk and falcon on them.

The *Story of the Quadruped Animals* recounts an attempt by the lion and his deputy, the elephant, to broker a lasting peace among the animals. One by one, the animals start setting forth their complaints, including the elephant, who notes that his very bones were used for

making furniture for emperors and bishops (i.e., ivory). Eventually, an open war of all against all is declared, and the animals tear each other apart. The lion attacked the cow, but the bull ripped out his innards with his horns, and so on.

The *Synaxarion of the Honored Donkey* (a *Synaxarion* was a call to honor a saint) recounts the adventures of a donkey that escaped from his cruel master and is being stalked by a wolf and a fox. He tells them that his master and hounds are nearby, so the fox persuades them to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where they could amass wealth by begging for alms and then live a carefree life. The donkey kicks them off the ship.

· IV ·

Food and Dining

Saint Symeon the Fool (sixth century) was known to walk down the street on Sundays with a string of sausages around his neck like a scarf, while chewing on them with one hand and holding mustard sauce in which to dip them with the other (Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Saint Symeon the Fool* 94).

†

Breakfast is rarely recorded as a meal in Byzantium. The main meals were lunch (*ariston*) and dinner (*deipnon*). One medical textbook recommended that a third of one's daily consumption should be at lunch, two thirds at dinner (Aetios, *Medical Textbook* 9.27).

A philosopher named Hierophilos (fifth or twelfth century) wrote a treatise on *What a Man Should Eat Each Month*. It recommends different spices, fish, vegetables, and meats for each month, based on the condition of the blood and other bodily humors during that time of year.

Eating customs that elicited the most surprise from foreigners included the use of paired knives and forks, and finger bowls and napkins for washing and drying the hands[6].

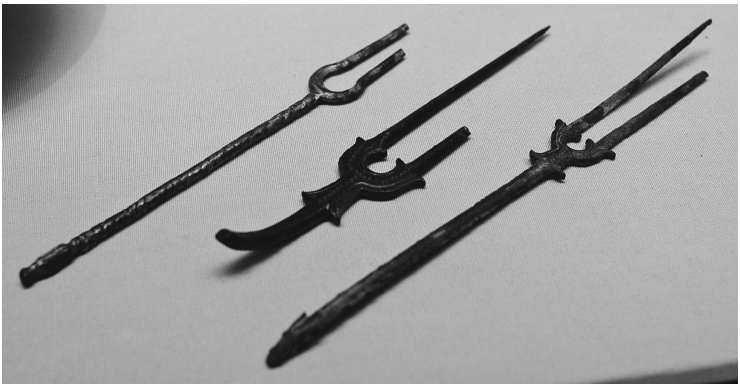

Fig. 4.1 Byzantine forks.

†

SMELLY

Cretan cheese, stinky tuna, and bonito fish were foods of the poor, for *they scrape the skin off one's throat* (Ptochoprodromos 4.109–110).

In 968, Liudprand was sent by the German emperor to the court of Nikephoros II Phokas, where he had a hostile reception. This time he wrote a caricature of imperial banquets in Constantinople. The meal was disgusting, swimming in oil and fish sauce. On a different day, Liudprand was sent a goat dish stuffed with garlic, onion, and leeks, swimming in fish sauce (*Embassy to Constantinople* II, 20).

The fish sauce mentioned by Liudprand was *garon*, ancient Roman *garum* or *liquamen*, which the Byzantines continued to make and consume. Here is how it was made: fish entrails were put in a covered pot with a lot of salt and left to sit in the sun for a few months, while

being stirred. The liquid strained from this mess was *garon*, and it could be mixed with wine, water, or oil (*Geoponika* 20.46). Symeon Seth said that it was good for clearing out the gut (*On the Properties of Different Foods*, Gamma). It was standard fare in the ancient Roman empire, but forgotten among Liudprand's Lombards and Germans.

The tenth-century saint Basileios the Younger had the miraculous ability to eat garlic without generating an odor. This was especially praised by his biographer Gregorios, who could not stand to be near anyone eating garlic (*Life of Saint Basileios the Younger* 1.41).

The smell of fish from the markets was so intense around the monastery of Myrelaion ("Myrrh oil") that it was popularly called Psarelaion ("Fish oil") (*Patria of Constantinople* 3.134).

PORK

The treatise of Symeon Seth (late eleventh century) *On the Properties of Different Foods* presents most macabre information about pork. *It is the most flavorful and easily digested among the meats because it is so similar to that of the human body. For in famines some people have had to taste human flesh and they report that it is similar to pork* (Chi).

In addition to discussing human foods, Seth considers also the impact of the foods eaten by the animals that we eat. For example, some people wonder how the pig can be so tasty given that it eats such foul things. The answer is that it must be able to convert those things into useful (and tasty!) flesh. Pork is especially delicious when the pigs have been fed with figs (Chi).

A lawyer invited some friends over for dinner and served them a pig's head as the main course. It was a great success, so he invited everyone back the next day. He went to the butcher and said, *Give me*

another head from the same pig, because they really liked the one yesterday (*Philogelos* 91).

Psellos declared the partridge to be the easiest on the stomach among the birds. Among land animals, the meat of the pig is the sweetest, though it is not easy to digest. Mutton is hard on the stomach, and goat meat the worst of all (*Poem on Medicine* vv. 191–205).

In 1265, ʿIzz al-Din, the exiled Seljuk Turkish ruler who sought refuge in Byzantium, asked the emperor Michael VII Palaiologos to be served smoked pork thigh in order to prove that he was now living as a Christian (Georgios Pachymeres, *History* 4.6).

CHEESE

In order to keep cheese white and prevent it from drying out, it could be stored in salt water (brine, even sea water), as is done with feta cheese today (*Geoponika* 18.19, tenth century, based on ancient treatises). In the patriarchal palace, on the first Sunday in Lent, a *cooked cheese soup* was served up—possibly fondue[7]—at a meal after a sermon on fasting and before the singing of hymns by a choir (*Book of Ceremonies* 2.52).

Paphlagonian cheese-makers were able to blow air into the milk they were curdling, resulting in a product with holes—Byzantine Swiss cheese (Michael Psellos, *Letter KD* 206).

FOOD FOR THE HOLY

A basic Byzantine soup contained water, onions, and oil, and was called *agiozoumi*, or "saints' soup," as it was fit only for saints.

In the Lavra monastery of Saint Athanasios on Mt. Athos (late tenth century), there were not enough monks to mix the flour with water and prepare the bread for everyone, as they had too many chores. At first, Athanasios reproached them and made them go hungry, but eventually *he contrived a certain device, which was turned by oxen,* to perform this function for the monastery *in perpetuity* (*Life A of Saint Athanasios* 179).

A man who wanted to serve God had a vision in which an emperor appeared to him. *"Do you want to serve me with all your soul and enter my palace?,"* he asked. *"Here, have a taste of what my kingship is like."* And he gave him something like snow to eat (a sorbet?), which was more delicious that the human mind can grasp. The man asked for another, and the emperor gave him something that looked like a *kydonaton* (ordinarily a quince jam). But it was horribly bitter and caused him to forget the previous delight. *"Now you understand what it is like to serve me." "Truly, lord, it is not possible for someone eating this to serve you." "But I gave you the sweet one first, and the bitter one second. Why did you forget the former? Serving me* [i.e., God] *lies somewhere in between"* (*Life of Saint Andreas the Fool* 4).

EMPERORS

By the eighth century, it was customary in the provinces to eat while sitting before a table, but in the capital, and especially in the palace, the old-fashioned Roman custom of reclining was preserved (*Life of Saint Philaretos the Merciful* 5). Apparently, it was still being inflicted on palace functionaries in the eleventh century. One of them, Michael Psellos, complained of having to eat in this way and compared it to a form of torture: *We are all jammed together in a tight place, pressing up against one another while lying on our sides, so that tears are involuntarily squeezed out of our eyes, spit drools out of*

the mouth, and, to add the most offensive part, excrement is squeezed out of our butts. Our inner organs are being crushed! (Psellos, *Oratoria Minora* 11, p. 46).

No one who has dined with the emperor goes straight to the tavern—an aphorism used by a saint to reproach those who went straight to the baths after the Eucharist (*Life of Saint Theodoros of Sykeon* 137).

A tenth-century *Treatise on Imperial Expeditions* recommends that the master of the emperor's table take four ovens with him on expeditions to Syria, nets for 200 chickens and 100 geese, and wooden bowls so that the latter could drink (*Treatise C* 155–157); also 100 suckling lambs, 500 rams, and 50 cattle for feasts (*Treatise C* 535).

Many emperors who were deposed were sent to monasteries to live out the rest of their days. The change in diet from the palace was a major inconvenience. In 945, the sons of the emperor Romanos I Lakapenos (920–944) were exiled by Konstantinos VII to the same island as their father, whom they had themselves exiled the previous year. Romanos came to meet them at the monastery's door with a broad grin. *"Oh, how lucky I am,"* he said, "*that your Majesties have come to visit my humble self. My fellow brothers-in-Christ here do not know how to properly receive emperors, but I do. Here is some boiled water for you, colder than Gothic snow; and some beans and leeks. Fortunately, there are no fishmonger's delicacies to cause indigestion. We accomplish that through rigorous fasting!"* (Liudprand of Cremona, *Payback* 5.23).

When someone asked the deposed emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates (1078–1081) what he missed most, now that he was living as a monk, he said, *abstaining from meat, the rest not so much* (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 3.1.1).

BEER

An early account of the brewing of beer was added by a later scribe to the works of the famous alchemist of the fourth century, Zosimos of Panopolis. It says: *Take good, clean, white barley, and soak it for one day. Then take it out of the water and set it in a windless place until the morning. Soak it again for five hours. Then place it on a shallow strainer and wet it. Then dry it until it becomes like a cushion and, when that happens, let it dry in the sun until it falls apart, for the little hairs are bitter. Then grind it and make it into loaves, adding yeast as if you were making bread, but heat it more. When it rises, crumble it using fresh water and strain it through a strainer or fine sieve. Others bake the loaves in an oven with water, but heat it only a little bit so that it does not boil or become lukewarm; then, they take it out and strain it. They cover it, heat it, and pour it out* (Pseudo-Zosimos, *On Making Beer*).

SPICES

When the Byzantine army captured the Persian palace at Dastagerd in early 628, at the end of the great Roman-Persian war of antiquity, they discovered 300 Roman military standards that the Persians had taken over the years, as well as large quantities of aloes, silk, pepper (*piper*), linen shirts, sugar (*sachar*), ginger (*zingiver*), and Persian carpets. They burned it all (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, pp. 321–322).

Expert cooks removed from fowl every possible blemish, sprinkled it with "mountain-bred" salt, mixed it with herbs and spices, and either roasted it on a five-pronged spit or soaked it in aromatic juices to produce the sweetest fragrance and taste, tickling the senses (Ignatios the Deacon, *Letter* 14, ninth century).

BANQUETS

Liudprand of Cremona wrote a glowing account of the entertainments following a palace banquet hosted by Konstantinos VII in 949. They included a man who balanced a long pole, more than twenty feet long, on his forehead, without using his hands. Near the top, it had a crosspiece. Two boys, naked but for brief loincloths, climbed up the wooden pole as it was being balanced on his head and performed various acrobatic maneuvers up there; then, they climbed back down—head-first! (*Payback* 6.9). This type of performer was known in Byzantium as a *kontopaiktes*—a "pole-player." Tightrope walkers were a regular aspect of the half-time shows at the games in the hippodrome (Choniates, *History* 290).

In a letter, the twelfth-century philosopher Michael Italikos compares his classroom to the scene of a banquet where his students are treated to *logical treats.* The food consists of courses in philosophy, mechanics, optics, solids, center of gravity, and the like, and has its corresponding sausages and honey-sweets. Pythagoras and Plato are the wine-bearers, while Aristotle and the Peripatetics are the cooks, making the Academy their servants. Desserts consist of Stoicism, Skepticism, and whatever is known of barbarian philosophies, especially Chaldaean and Egyptian. Musical accompaniment is provided by literary genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy, and satire. *This, then, is what my "eatery" is like* (*Letter* 18).

Following the Stoics, a philosopher of the later sixth century opined that life is like a banquet and can end in the same ways: first, through lack of food, when the host has nothing to give to his guests on account of poverty; second, through the unsuitability of poisonous foods (i.e., the body is sickly and not suited to the soul); third, a special and unique circumstance may cause the host to break up the gathering; fourth, through drunkenness: ill-considered words may dissolve the banquet (in life this corresponds to old age, for the old

babble nonsense, which is why some barbarians kill the old); and fifth, through a circumstance that falls upon all alike, such as a fire in the house (Pseudo-Elias, *Commentary on Porphyrios' Eisagoge*, praxis 13).

ELABORATE DISHES

In a letter, the philosopher Michael Italikos demonstrates that the Byzantines, like the ancient Romans, prepared animal dishes to look like other animals—for example, *cooked fish made to look like birds and birds made to look like fish* (*Letter* 18).

The scholar and bishop Eustathios of Thessalonike (twelfth century) was invited to a fancy dinner by a Komnenos lord, and knowing that he could not reciprocate in kind, responded with a letter about his experience. After braving the snow and ice, he had finally reached the warmth of his host's home. A stuffed chicken swimming in nectar—that is, wine—was then set before him. But it was prepared so expertly that it took him some time to figure out what had been done: it was an enigma, both a bird and not a bird. The parts of it that retained the skin, and the wings and feet that still had their bones, were like a bird. But the rest was boneless and quite novel in appearance. The guests were confused and eager to explore it, so they started to take it apart with their hands. As each layer was pulled away, and the stuffing made with almonds and other ingredients came out, the dish would take on a different appearance, prompting further investigation (Eustathios, *Letter* 4).

Eustathios described a complicated way of cooking a bird in another letter to the same Komnenos. Dough is kneaded into the shape of a semi-sphere, with an enclosure within to hold a chicken, and the whole is then baked in a clay dish. It is then served on a platter that is both tender and tasty. The crisp pastry has to be pulled away, or picked apart, for the meat to reveal itself to the guests. The pastry

is like soft bread but imbued with the flavor of chicken. The smell of it, he says, was just about sufficient! But once you had tasted it, you could not stop until your hand reached the bottom. And it was a complete meal-in-one, a single dish that contained all ingredients (Eustathios, *Letter* 5).

An eleventh-century poet described a cake or loaf of bread made to resemble the twelve signs of the zodiac. The baker—a woman with knowledge of astronomy—used two triads of duck eggs to mark the stars of the Pleiades, while hens' eggs stood for the seven planets. Five larger eggs (from a different species of bird, presumably) were used to mark Orion and the four compass points (Christophoros Mytilenaios, *Poem* 42).

AND SEX

If you are about to have sex, don't gorge yourself on food first. If you must eat first, take a nap afterward until you digest the food (Aetios of Amida, *Medical Textbook* 3.8, sixth century).

Those who are working themselves up to have sex may have a large lunch but only a small dinner (Michael Apostoles, *Collection of Proverbs* 3.74, fifteenth century).

Lentils cut one's appetite for sex and dry out the sperm, so they are perfect for those who want to practice virtue and self-restraint (Symeon Seth, *On the Properties of Different Foods*, Phi).

The lecherous emperor Andronikos I Komnenos used many types of aphrodisiacs, among which was a dish prepared from an animal of the Nile related to the crocodile (Choniates, *History* 322).

Maria, the mother of Saint Theodoros, ran an inn and brothel situated on the imperial road in the village of Sykeon, in Galatia. The inn's cook was named Stephanos: he was religious and fasted regularly, but was also an accomplished gourmet chef. Based on his skill and reputation, Maria was able to convert the inn from a brothel to a fancy dining venue, "with benefits." But governors and other officials would come primarily for the food. When little Theodoros began to live as an ascetic in a hermitage above the inn, his mother would bring him white loaves and roasted or boiled birds to eat. He would accept it all gratefully, and then secretly throw it out onto the rocks for the birds and animals to eat (*Life of Saint Theodoros of Sykeon* 6, 16).

MISCELLANEOUS

Those who are unused to eating fish may be harmed by it, because it causes thirst (Symeon Seth, *On the Properties of Different Foods*, Iota).

When fruit ripened, grocers in Constantinople would sell it in glass containers (e.g., figs; *Life of Saint Andreas the Fool* 21). Possibly these were fruit preserves, stewed in honey.

The high official Ioannes Kamateros (mid-twelfth century) is presented as a formidable epicure. He could drink a lot and then still be able to dance and make witty comments, without getting drunk. He made a bet with the emperor Manuel I Komnenos that he could gulp down the contents of the imperial wine bowl at one go (it contained one and a half liters, and he came up for air once). One time on campaign, he saw a field of beans on the other side of the river. He stripped down, swam across, and ate his fill. He gathered up more stalks and swam back, sitting down to eat the rest of the beans on the floor of his tent (Choniates, *History* 114–115).

FORBIDDEN FOODS

Among the many, many things that the Latins (Catholics) did wrong according to the Byzantines was to eat animals that had drowned, were dying, or had been killed by other animals, and to eat their blood and offal, too. Specifically, they ate bears, jackals, turtles, hedgehogs, beavers, crows, seagulls, dolphins, flies, and even filthier things. Also, *they eat with dogs and tamed bears at the table, and allow these animals to lick their bowls clean, which they then use again for their own meals!* (Konstantinos Stilbes, *Indictments of the Latin Church* 66, 72, thirteenth century).

†

The famine in Italy caused by Justinian's long war (535–552) led to cannibalism, and a scenario straight from a horror film. *It is said that two women in a certain field above the city of Rimini ate seventeen men. Strangers traveling that way lodged in the little house where these women lived, and so they would kill these strangers while they slept and eat them. The story goes that the eighteenth stranger was roused from his sleep just when these ladies were about to lay hands upon him. He leaped up, learned from them the whole story, and killed them both* (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.21).

In the twelfth century, a nun named Maria confessed to a Church tribunal that famine had caused her to eat unclean animals—lizards, snakes, and mice—then the bodies of the dead, and then to kill and eat her own daughter. The judge Andronikos, *horrified by this story which made him dizzy and caused his hair to stand on end*, passed the case on to the patriarch. Sensing a literary opportunity, instead of writing a legal brief he wrote a poem about the case. He was unsure what its genre should be—*Is it a tragedy?*, he asks and cites appropriate tales of murder and cannibalism from the Bible and mythology. His poem on this *omnivorous nun* survives in a manuscript after a (still) unpublished poem *On Teeth* (*Report of the Judge Andronikos*[8]).

· V ·

Eunuchs

Self-castration was a big problem in the early Church. Jesus had said that there are three kinds of eunuchs: those who were born that way from the belly of their mothers; those who were made eunuchs by other people; and those who made themselves into eunuchs on account of the kingdom of heaven. *Let him do so who is able to accept it* (Matt. 19:12).

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The most famous person who took Jesus' advice literally and castrated himself was the first great Christian theologian, Origen (third century) (Eusebios, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.1–5). Allegedly, he did it in order to be able to discuss theology with women in addition to men, without scandal. This was ironic, perhaps tragic or even apocryphal, because as a mature thinker Origen championed nonliteral readings of Scripture—that is, that material realities in the Bible were coded discussions of spiritual matters. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, he argued, alas too late for his own bodily integrity, that castration should be understood "spiritually" (15).

The first canon of the First Ecumenical Council of the Church—held at Nicaea in A.D. 325—stipulated that men who had castrated themselves could not be ordained as priests, and had to be deposed if they were ordained already. If, on the other hand, they were castrated because of a medical procedure or by barbarians, then no penalty applied to them.

An Arian presbyter in Antioch named Leontios castrated himself *in order to remove the suspicion that he was having illicit sex with a woman named Eustolion, with whom he spent a lot of time. . . . After that, he lived with her openly, as there could be no grounds for slander against her* (Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.26).

Eunuchs who had been castrated before puberty were fairly easy to identify: they did not grow facial hair; their voices remained high-pitched; their limbs were often longer, and they were sometimes taller; they were narrow-shouldered and broad-hipped; and they accumulated fat around the chest, buttocks, and thighs more than did bearded men.

Before 1100, eunuchs were most visible among the palace staff, at whose head stood the Grand Chamberlain, a eunuch who sometimes functioned as a kind of prime minister or chief of staff. These eunuchs could be quite powerful, and were often of foreign origin. The emperor Constantius II (337–361) was rumored to have great influence with his chamberlain Eusebius (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 8.4.3).

Roman law repeatedly outlawed castration, which is why so many eunuchs were imported from outside the empire, from Persia, Armenia, and so on. In the sixth century, a chief source of supply was Abasgia (Abkhazia, in modern Georgia). Their boys were noted for being beautiful and so their kings would castrate them and sell them as slaves to the Romans, killing their fathers as well to prevent

any retribution. Thus the Abasgians feared having beautiful boys. But Justinian I ordered their kings to cease this practice (Prokopios, *Wars* 8.3.15–20).

Many families in the middle period would castrate one of their sons to create elite service opportunities for him, especially at the court, as well as in the Church. The law allowed an exception for medical castration, which was used as the loophole to practice it for other reasons (Theophylaktos, *Defense of Eunuchs*, pp. 313–315, late eleventh century). A number of eunuch-saints and admired eunuch-generals are said to have been castrated for medical reasons in their youth, or "by accident." The great sixth-century general Solomon was said to have been accidentally castrated as an infant by his nurse (Prokopios, *Wars* 3.11).

We have a single medical account of castration, by the doctor Paulos of Aigina (seventh century), who says that he was coerced to perform the procedure against his will by certain powerful people. *There are two ways of performing the operation, one by compression, the other by cutting out. That by compression is performed in the following way. While the children are still infants, they are placed in a basin full of hot water. Then, when the body is softened, you press the "twins" with your fingers in the basin until they are no longer there. You should no longer be able to feel them as they are broken up. The method by cutting out is as follows. The man about to be castrated is laid down on a bench, and the scrotum with the testicles is grasped firmly with the fingers of the left hand and pulled. Two straight incisions are made with a scalpel, one for each of the twins. As they are pressed out, they are to be cut out, as they are naturally connected to the surrounding vessels by a thin bond. This method is preferred over that by compression, for eunuchs-by-compression retain a partial desire for intercourse, seeing as part of the twins seem to escape compression* (*Epitome of Medical Science* 6.68).

In sixth-century Frankia, a doctor named Reovalis cured a boy of *terrible groin pains by excising his testicles through a procedure that I once saw performed by a doctor in the city of Constantinople* (Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 10.15).

Eunuchs were often called *ektomiai*—"out-cuts." Sometimes they were called *entomiai*—the "incised." Popular etymologies of the word *eunouchos* included *eu* + *nous* = well disposed or loyal (toward their master) and *eunê* + *echô* = keeper of the bed (a steward of the bedroom).

The eighth-century law code *Ekloge* (*Ecloga*) prescribed castration as the punishment for the crime of bestiality.

An Egyptian monk named Elias (ca. 400) devoted his life to caring for female virgins, and even built a monastery on his property to house them. But they kept fighting among themselves and he was forced to constantly mediate their disputes. In the process, he was sexually tempted, and so he went off into the desert to pray either for death or for a solution to his problem. Two angels then appeared to him in a vision and held down his arms and legs, while a third one castrated him, *not in truth but in his vision, which cured him. "Do you perceive the benefit?"* they asked him. *"Indeed I do,"* he replied. He then went back into town and, for the next forty years, assured people that he felt no temptation (Palladios, *Lausiac History* 29).

The emperor Justinian I outlawed castration in A.D. 558, citing the testimony of one eunuch that only three out of ninety people survived the procedure. The penalty for performing a castration was to be castrated in turn, lose one's property, and be sent into exile—or only the latter two if the perpetrator was a woman. Moreover, the victims were automatically to be set free (*Novella* 142).

Roman law barred eunuchs from adopting children on the grounds that the law could not bestow what nature had denied. This was overturned by Leon VI (886–912), who argued that it was not nature but usually the injustice of men that created eunuchs. By adopting and caring for children, eunuchs could benefit from their support in their own old age. Also, just because men took away from them the ability to have natural children does not mean that the law should then take away from them the legal right to adopt them (*Novellae* 26–27).

A fool once saw a eunuch in the company of a woman and asked his friend whether that was the eunuch's wife. When he said no, eunuchs cannot have wives, the fool concluded that it must then be his daughter (*Philogelos* 115).

According to the animal lore of the Christian bestiary *Physiologos*, the beaver's genitals have useful medical applications. But rather than be captured by hunters, the beaver will bite off his own genitals and throw them before the hunter. If another hunter approaches later, the beaver will roll over and show him that he has none. This is interpreted as follows: one should cut off temptations and throw them away before the Devil gets you (*Physiologos* 37).

Near Hierapolis in Phrygia there was a cleft in the earth from which noxious vapors arose that were deadly to every living thing—except eunuchs (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 23.6.18).

Among the gifts that he offered to Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos when he visited the court on a diplomatic mission, Liudprand brought four *carzimasia* slaves—child-eunuchs from whom both the penis and the testicles had been removed. Liudprand says that they were made by the merchants in Verdun (in modern France) for sale in Spain (*Payback* 6.6). The word *carzimasia* is of Arabic origin, meaning to

"cut out." These eunuchs were apparently employed in the women's quarters of the palace (Theophanes Continuatus 3.43; p. 145).

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When Byzantine soldiers were defeated and captured in southern Italy by a local lord, Tedald, he castrated them all, telling their general that he was sending the emperor a gift of eunuchs, who, as he had heard, were most precious to him, and that he would soon send him more, if God was willing. But the wife of one of these men managed to secure his release before he was castrated by appearing before Tedald in a distraught state and accusing him of waging war against the women: *You are not taking what is theirs when you castrate them, but what is ours! Take his eyes, nose, hands, or feet, but leave me what is mine!* (Liudprand, *Payback* 4.9–10).

The empress Eirene (797–802) governed through powerful court eunuchs who became so unpopular that one Chrysaorios gave the following advice to a nobleman: *If you have a eunuch, kill him. If you don't, buy one and then kill him* (Georgios Kedrenos, *Compendium of History*, v. 2, 29).

The eunuch Eutropios was the secretary of the Constantinopolitan noblewoman Anicia Juliana (d. 520s). He retired to become a monk near Jericho. A local noble who frequented the monastery asked him to be his son's godfather, which Eutropios did with a pious and pure intention. Yet when the child became ten, he began to feel an impure desire for him. As Eutropios later confessed, *Do not be amazed that a eunuch feels lust. For Scripture says that a eunuch can deflower a virgin girl* [Sirach 20:4]. *He not only desires, he can actually have sex with a woman and ejaculate, except his sperm is not capable of impregnating her. Please don't be put off by hearing about eunuchs. So too I wanted to have sex with this boy, and prayed that God strike me down with fire. God granted me a brief respite and I managed to tell the man not to bring his son to my monastery anymore. But the Enemy had imprinted the boy's visage in my mind and his image in my heart. I was unable to suppress it through extreme*

fasting, prayer, and even self-flagellation. My penis was still inflamed and aroused and secreted that fluid that comes straight from the Pits, polluting my thighs with that filthy moisture. Finally, God took pity on me and released me from this temptation (Paulos Helladikos, *Letter*).

†

Were eunuchs sexual beings? Some believed that castration removed temptation altogether. This led to a belief in their inherent purity—akin to that of angels. But others, such as Basil of Caesarea, wrote that their chastity was to be *without reward, as it was due to the knife* (rather than inherent virtue) (*Letter* 115).

Fig. 5.1 Seraphim angel from the pendentive mosaics of Hagia Sophia, a three-feet-wide face surrounded by six wings.

Basileios, the bishop of Ankara and a former physician (fourth century), argued that by *disarming the weapon of lust* eunuchs merely indicted themselves of being sexually tempted: their subsequent virginity was not a matter of will but due to a lack of means. But the

desire remained and they became even more lustful. *The passages of the semen between the kidneys and loins to the remnant of their penis are closed and therefore the fluid cannot escape. . . . They use their lack of testicles as a way to seduce women deceitfully, and shamelessly have sex with them. Whereas a natural man spends his seed and his desire then withers, the man who cannot empty that which is tickling him on the inside is aroused and rages again as soon as he has performed the first time* (*On the True Purity of Virginity* 61).

Some Church Fathers warned against using eunuchs to guard women, for eunuchs too experienced sexual desire. *They can still corrupt women with their hands and fingers* (Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Eunuchs*, in *PG* 77: 1109B).

Even if they don't have the proper organs of debauchery, they can still fornicate with their tongues (Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers* 66).

Eunuchs could be considered "effeminate" or as belonging to neither gender. In an infamous letter to Simplikia, Basil of Caesarea heaped the vices of *both* genders upon them, calling them *unwomanly, unmanly, lusting after women, envious, useless, fickle, stingy, hoarders, disgusting, dinner-weepers, quick to anger, lusting after gold, roughnecks, effeminate, and gluttonous* (*Letter* 115). This letter was a handy repository of insults that were used against them ever after.

Between the sixth and late eleventh centuries, eunuchs could be found in all branches of the administration and Church, even becoming patriarchs of Constantinople. They were often placed in charge of the empire's finances and also of its armies. The most famous eunuch-general was Narses, of Armenian origin. Formerly Justinian I's steward, at an advanced age he was sent with an army to Italy in 551 against the Goths, who called him *an effeminate manikin from the bedchamber who did not know how to perform anything manly* (Agathias,

Histories 1.7, 1.16). But he crushed them in battle and restored Italy to the empire. For this he earned the name "The Hammer of the Goths." Eunuchs like him were praised with the rhetoric of manly virtue (e.g., in Agathias, *Histories* 1.16), it being a mere side note that they were eunuchs.

In 666–667, the general Shabur rebelled against the emperor Konstas II. Both sent envoys to the Arab caliph Mu'awiya, seeking an alliance: Shabur sent one Sergios and the emperor sent the eunuch Andreas (a name that means "manly"). At the caliph's court Sergios refused to stand in honor of Andreas, saying, *You are neither a man nor a woman.* Upon returning to Roman Asia Minor, Andreas set a trap for Sergios and captured him in a pass. Sergios begged for his life, but Andreas asked him, *Aren't you the Sergios who boasted of his genitals before Mu'awiya and called me effeminate?* He then cut off Sergios' genitals and hanged him (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, pp. 348–351).

Petros was a domestic eunuch of the Phokas family, and was often placed in charge of armies. He was one of the two conquerors of Antioch in 969, and he captured Aleppo in 970, forcing it to submit to the empire. In 971, he campaigned against the Rus' who had invaded Bulgaria and mocked the Byzantines as *little women raised in the shadows*—a reference to eunuchs. Yet Petros killed a massive Rus' general in single combat (Leon the Deacon, *History* 6.10–11).

Eunuchs could be many things, but they could not take the throne. New emperors sometimes castrated the sons of their deposed predecessors so that they could not claim their father's throne when they matured. For example, Leon V did this in 813 to a son of Michael I, Ignatios, who later became patriarch of Constantinople and a saint. Michael V did it in 1042 to his *own grown* relatives—including uncles and cousins—which only deprived his shaky regime of their support.

Romanos I Lakapenos (920–944) castrated his own (illegitimate) son Basileios, possibly to remove him as a rival to his legitimate sons. Basileios went on to become one of the most powerful managers of the empire and patrons of the arts under four emperors (Konstantinos VII, Nikephoros II Phokas, Ioannes I Tzimiskes, and Basil II) and even commanded armies.

Fig. 5.2 Mosaic of the eunuch-patriarch Ignatios from Hagia Sophia (847–858, 867–877). Ignatios was the son of the emperor Michael I (811–813), but was castrated by his successor, Leon V, to be made ineligible for the imperial throne.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, there were offices at the court reserved for eunuchs, while the rest belonged to "bearded" magistrates. Among the eunuchs, the *nipsistiarioi* held the emperor's bowl, while the *koubikoularioi* were in charge of his chamber. The *spatharokoubikoularioi* were *koubikoularioi* armed with a ceremonial sword and formed the emperor's escort. The *papias* was the palace supervisor (lighting, keys, doorways, etc.). The *parakoimomenos*—literally, "he who sleeps beside one"—often functioned as a kind of prime minister in charge of the civilian administration.

In ca. 1100, Theophylaktos, archbishop of Ohrid, wrote the only surviving *Defense of Eunuchs*, and did so on behalf of his brother, who was a eunuch and was offended at what people would commonly say about his kind. The work takes the form of a debate that Theophylaktos claims to have overheard in Thessalonike between two monks, one bearded and one a eunuch, the latter of whom was planning to have his nephew castrated too. Theophylaktos argues that castration does not make a person better or worse, but that eunuchs were people just like anyone else—to be judged by the content of their character, we might say, rather than their physical wholeness.

Some monastaries were reserved for eunuchs, but they could also join monasteries for men. In Byzantine literature, some female saints who wanted to join male monasteries disguised themselves as eunuchs. These were the so-called transvestite nuns, such as Saint Anna-Euphemianos. She was put in an awkward situation, however, when a fellow monk went on a tirade against eunuchs, whom he hated (*Synaxarion of Constantinople*, p. 175).

Partly because monks could not be trusted to not lust after eunuchs, and partly out of fear that eunuchs might be women in disguise, eunuchs were banned from joining the monastic communities of Mt. Athos, first by tradition and later by imperial law.

Saint Niketas was castrated by his parents, served at the court under the empress Eirene (797–802), upheld the adoration of icons, attained high titles, and ended his career as a saintly monk whose prayers could quell the raging sexual passions of his fellow monks (*Life of Saint Niketas the Patrikios: Miracle* 8).

There is a race that lives in the heart of the palace,
feminine compared to men, but masculine compared to women;
it has traces of both, without being either one or the other;
it has nothing to do with women, but its masculinity is eroded.
It rules everyone but is enslaved by all.
It will dare anything, but trembles with fear before all.
It hates laughter, but loves tears.
Insignificant, but boastful by nature,
a tyrannical, obsequious, cruel race.
Decorous, humble, mindless, speechless, chatty,
servile, violent, spirited, cowardly, greedy,
born of the mixture of extreme opposites,
the greatest evil emerging from evil.

—Manuel Philes, *Poems* 2.255

· VI ·

Medical Practice

DISSECTION

A Slavic chief named Christianos, who had been raiding imperial territory, was captured in A.D. 763 and brought to Constantinople. He had his arms and legs amputated on a pier, after which he was vivisected from his genitals to the chest in the presence of doctors, for medical-research purposes (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 436).

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Pseudo-Eustathios of Antioch (fourth or fifth century) casually reports that *the best among the doctors, hoping to accomplish something beneficial for human life, petition that those who have been condemned to death be given over to them for dissection* (*Commentary on the Six Days of Creation* in *PG* 18: 789).

The Norwegian king Sigurd is credited with the following discovery when he passed through Constantinople on his way home from Jerusalem in IIII. His men were dying at an alarming rate and he decided it was because they were drinking the local wine unmixed. He tested this hypothesis by pouring the wine on a pig's liver, which quickly dissolved. To confirm the results, he performed an autopsy

on one of the dead men and found that it was indeed so. Therefore he instructed his men to mix the wine with water (William of Malmesbury, *History of the English Kings* 5.410).

Whoever wants to be able to diagnose limbs and joints, muscles and tendons, should dissect monkeys, if he can afford it; if there are no monkeys, then bears; if there are no bears, then any random animal. At any rate, he should perform dissections (Theophilos, *On the Composition of the Human Body* 5.11).

OPERATIONS

In those days [ca. the 940s]*, a monstrosity came to the city from Armenia: two male children who were conjoined from the time when they emerged from the same womb. They were whole in all the limbs of the body, but were fused together around the navel and lower abdomen, and so were facing each other. They spent a long time in the city and were regarded by all as an extraordinary sight; in the end, however, they were expelled as an evil omen. They returned when Konstantinos VII was sole emperor* [after 945]. *When one of them died, some skilled doctors cut off the attached dead body in the hope that the other one would live. He survived for three days, then died also* (Theophanes Continuatus, p. 433). There are no instructions for such a procedure in any ancient or Byzantine medical textbook.

A pregnant woman went into labor, but the child, a boy, was positioned with his feet pointing downward, which was causing her unbearable, wracking pain. Doctors were summoned, and in order to save at least her life, they were prepared *to commit surgery upon the embryo, and extract it in pieces, if need be.* But Providence intervened: one of those present happened to have a holy relic, a piece of the burial shroud in which Saint Ignatios had been buried. He called on the saint and the child immediately reversed its orientation and

Fig. 6.1 Operation on the conjoined twins; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

came out head-first (Niketas, *Life of Saint Ignatios* 86; *PG* 105: 564, late eighth century).

Sergios the eunuch was beaten up by a mime. His skull had been fractured and in pieces. *You could not make out any of his facial features, it was all one big swelling.* The doctors at the hospital of Euboulos cared for him for seven days, but finally gave up and told his friends to prepare his funeral. That night Sergios saw a vision of an old man instructing him to receive surgery. The next day Sergios kept gesturing with his hand toward his face, hoping to get his friends to realize he wanted surgery. They thought he had finally gone crazy, so they restrained his right arm. But he continued doing the same with his left hand, making cutting gestures to indicate "surgery." His friends finally understood his mime performance and called the doctor. The doctor was reluctant to perform the operation, unless the patient himself placed the scalpel into his hand to indicate his consent. The operation went well and produced prodigious amounts of smelly pus and other liquids that flowed out of both sides of his face. But after wearing bandages and ointments for many weeks afterwards, Sergios survived and recovered (*Life of Saint Loukas the Stylite* 23–24).

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A woman had grown a lump in her breast *like a rock* that was getting progressively worse, so she consulted some doctors, who recommended

a mastectomy. The woman was terrified of that option, saying that it was basically the same as death. *"If your advice is that I submit to so risky a surgery, it would be better if I sought the help of saints Kosmas and Damianos instead." They laughed and said, "Go ahead, but you will be back, and the tumor will be worse." The saints, however, appeared in a dream to her doctor and told him, "If you want to save your patient, perform the mastectomy on her in exactly the way we will now show you." They then instructed him exactly where to make the cut, showing him her breast, and what medicines to apply to it afterward so that it would heal. In the dream, he carried out their instructions. Then, when he woke up, he went to find the woman and discovered that the surgery had already been performed!* What he had done in the dream "virtually" had happened in real life too, in real time (*The Miracles of Kosmas and Damianos* 28).

A certain Georgios was afflicted with berry-like growths on his penis, no fewer than seven of them. He went to the doctors but they discouraged him from having surgery, based on their prior experience of the condition: *"When we cut you with a knife, you will bleed, and wherever the blood falls, another growth will appear there. Besides, even if we were to get rid of them without a knife, they will come back eventually." The man then called on Saint Artemios, who specialized in hernias and genital afflictions. Like a doctor, the saint said, "Lift up your clothes, let me see what you have." When he saw the condition, he said, "Seven growths, no big deal. Look at what stumped the doctors! Take some cheap wine, add salt, dip a cloth into it, and apply it to the spot where you have the condition. You'll be fine"* (*Miracles of Saint Artemios* 20).

Whenever the doctors slice or burn a man and carve up his limbs, many stand around the patient and the doctor who is doing such things. . . . One can see the skin being cut, and the blood flowing, and the rot being removed, and you have to endure a great deal of disgust at this sight, and much agony and sorrow, not only from the sight of the wounds but from the pain of the person being cauterized and cut up. For no one is made of

stone, to stand beside these people as they are suffering and hear them howl in pain, and not break down. Yet our desire to witness all this enables us to endure it (John Chrysostom, *On the Paralyzed Man*, in *PG* 51: 55).

Paulos of Aigina (seventh century) offers detailed instructions for the removal of kidney stones using an instrument known as a "stone-cutter." After positioning the patient correctly, while an assistant holds up the testicles, the doctor *makes the incision between the anus and the testicles, but not straight down the perinaeum, rather to the side of the buttocks, cutting diagonally across.* Children, he says, are easier to operate on because their bodies are soft, the old less so (*Epitome of Medical Science* 6.60).

The emperor Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203) decided to cauterize his own legs himself when the swelling in his joints had become too painful. He barred the doors to his chamber, told no one but his chamberlains, and applied the cauterizing iron deeply into the flesh. At first he withstood it philosophically, but then to counteract the pain he began to swear and yell loudly against his doctors, saying that they wanted to treat everything with a purgative. In the end, they were summoned to save his life, which they did with drugs (Choniates, *History* 497).

The mad emperor Justin II began to be tormented by bladder stones and the physicians were summoned to operate. They requested, *in the cowardly manner of the physicians*, that he himself place the scalpel into their hands, thereby signifying his assent. They made the incision, but the operation failed and Justin died nine days later (John of Ephesos, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6).

HOSPITALS

Byzantium invested heavily in hospitals: buildings with wards and beds for patients, where they were cared for by trained medical doctors

in the hope of their recovery. There were many such hospitals in the capital and the rest of the empire, and they were often associated with monasteries, so that the monks or nuns could assist in caring for the patients as part of their religious duties. A large facility of this sort, the hospital of Saint Sampson, existed directly between the churches of Hagia Sophia and Hagia Eirene; its foundations have been excavated.

The most detailed surviving charter of a Byzantine hospital is that associated with the Pantokrator monastery in Constantinople, founded by Ioannes II Komnenos and his Hungarian wife Eirene in 1136. It had fifty beds in five wards, one of which was for women. Each ward had two doctors and a number of assistants; the hospital had a chief pharmacist; and the female ward also had a female doctor and female nurses. The salaries of the male and female nurses were equal. But the salary of female doctors was half that of their male counterparts, and their food allowance was also somewhat smaller (*Pantokrator Typikon* 36–38, 52).

The *Pantokrator Typikon* also requires the medical clinic to have a "sharpener" of medical implements such as lancets, cauterizing irons, catheters, and forceps for drawing teeth. There were also bowls for the doctors to wash in after treating each patient (52).

A list of Byzantine surgical equipment includes, among other items, a tonsil knife, a tooth file, a small scalpel for working on eyelids, a rectal speculum, a uterine dilator, a rib saw, a clyster for irrigating genital passages, tweezers, various types of forceps, needles, and something called a "skull-breaker," used possibly to break a dead fetus and make its extraction easier[9].

A man who lived alone had water in the chest, felt that he was coming down with dropsy, and went to stay at the Christodotes hospital in Constantinople. The doctors treated him there for ten months, but he saw no improvement. In the meantime, he had developed another

condition: his genitals dropped to below his knees, so that he could not close his legs or turn to either side. He measured this hernia with his hands and found it to be twenty fingers long. Finally, he showed it to one of his doctors. When he saw it, the doctor was amazed and struck his forehead. *"What is it, by God, tell me!",* the patient asked. *"You know,"* the doctor answered, *"this is just what happens with old age."* And it was true: the patient was sixty-two (*Miracles of Saint Artemios* 20).

REMEDIES

Alexandros of Tralleis begins his *Therapeutics* with recipes regarding hair, including: for hair loss, which apparently may be caused by drinking unmixed wine or having too much sex; for making the hair darker; and for making the hair blond or white.

Recipes for abortifacient drugs to be applied inside the vagina: *Grind up two parts of the inner peel of the pomegranate rind along with one part of oak gall, and fashion them into acorn-like vaginal suppositories. Use them by inserting the suppositories* [to prevent pregnancies] *after the menstruals have ended.* Also, *charred testicles of castrated mules, quaffed in decocted willow-juice, will prevent conception.* Other prescriptions were less medical: *Carry about a tooth that has fallen from a young child as long as it has not touched the ground, and is to be worn by the woman inside a signet ring* (Aetios, *Tetrabiblon* 16.17–18, sixth century[10]).

The doctor Ioannes Zacharias (fourteenth century) had a difficult patient who would not take his medicine: *The medicine was a bitter round pill. I mixed as much vinegar-honey as I thought was suitable into it and poured in some hot water, so that it would be more liquid and easily swallowed, and offered it to the patient to drink. He took the cup and placed it to his lips, when he noticed some unpleasantness in it because it was indeed bitter. The man was arrogant and difficult to deal with, resistant to persuasion when it came to taking medicine. I wanted to play a bit with him and also prove that his haughty inclination to vomit was due*

to vanity. Believing that my pharmacist assistant would suffer no harm, I gave it to this assistant to drink and said that it would be very beneficial to the body. The assistant took the drinking cup in his hands, placed it to his lips, and after having completely drunk the medicine, displayed the empty goblet (*On Urines* 2.19[11]).

On July 30, the True Cross (the one on which Jesus was crucified) was conveyed to Hagia Sophia from the palace, placed next to the baptistry to bless it, and subsequently processed throughout the City. *This is done because people are more ill during that month* [August]*, and by being taken around the City it cleanses the air, the houses, and the narrow alleys, bringing health to all* (*Synaxarion of Constantinople*, p. 856).

MEDICINE AND THE LAW

Byzantine law punished with exile or death any doctor who caused the death of a patient by giving him or her a drug, including drugs that were supposed to cause conception. These cases fell under the law for murder (*Basilika* 60.39.3).

Female doctors were expected to specialize in gynecological issues, and this was the one area where the law gave their testimony real weight. The emperor Leon VI decreed (ca. 900): *I mean in matters concerning childbirth and the other things that only the female eye sees, which are invisible to the male eye* (*Novella* 48).

The judge Eustathios Romaios (eleventh century) was presented with the following case: an uncle had abducted his nephew's bride, and the suspicion was that he had had sex with her, undermining the legal validity of the marriage. But specialized women tested her virginity by hand—literally, *by groping*—and testified to the court that it was intact (*Peira* 49.36).

MISCELLANEOUS

A buffoon at the court of Konstantinos IX Monomachos (1042–1055) pretended that he was, in fact, the son of the empress Zoe. He would put on an act, recalling the experience of his own birth, the details of the labor, how he exited her womb, and how his mother had nursed him (Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.144).

Medical textbooks sought to regulate the behavior of wet nurses to ensure that they produced the best milk. *I instruct that women who are breastfeeding should abstain from sex altogether. When they have sex with a man, their menses are agitated and the milk does not smell as sweetly. Some of them, moreover, may become pregnant, and there can be nothing more harmful than that for a child nursing on milk* (Oribasios, *Collectiones medicae* 30.3).

When one shows a mirror to a man who has been bitten by a rabid dog and he thinks that he sees the dog in it, he will die; if he sees himself, he will live (Timotheos of Gaza, *On Animals*, p. 33).

One of the few self-portraits that we have from Byzantium was written by the medical author Meletios (undated, but early in the middle period). He is talking about the bundle of qualities that make an object unique: *Take me, for example: I am a Constantinopolitan, a doctor, short, olive-skinned, snub-nosed, gouty, with a scar on my forehead of just such a shape, the son of Gregorios. All these qualities taken together point to one and only one person: me* (*On the Nature of Man*, p. 155).

Disorders of the body come in the form of excess or deficiency—for example, in having too many of a certain limb, as some people have six fingers, or are missing a hand or leg or eye. Lack of symmetry is also a form of disorder. . . . such as when someone has twisted eyes or legs, or one arm longer than the other. Another flaw is when something is not in its place, such as intestines down by the hip, a thigh not attached to the hip-joint, an arm growing out of the back, or the like. Likewise regarding size, such

as having an enormous head, or one that is smaller than natural, or a nose or eye of that kind; the same goes for the whole body, as in the case of giants or dwarves (Meletios, *On the Nature of Man*, p. 47).

To a vain doctor:

> *Doctor, don't puff yourself up,*
> *for if you look really closely*
> *at how exactly you make a living,*
> *you yourself will become disgusted,*
> *for you live from urine and dung.*
>
> (Christophoros Mytilenaios, *Poem* 85.1–5)

Theodoros Prodromos (twelfth century) wrote a satire about going to the dentist: *I call them enemies of human health, butchers of our bodies, and cruel executioners; nothing is worse than to fall into their hands. They bring siege-engines against the mouth, and wage war against the tongue, the teeth, and the lips. I want to grind my teeth against the invader, but am unable; my tongue is useless for defense against these tools. You see, I had a toothache once and I went around to all these philosophers. One wanted to cut open my veins, while another wanted to cauterize my ears. Finally, a bold fellow said, "Fools, can't you hear what he's saying? It's his tooth that hurts. It must come out!" So he armed himself against my teeth: he came out bearing an enormous iron tool, cradling it in his lap, the sort of thing that you would use on the tusk of an elephant or wild boar. In the end, however, he managed only to break the tooth in half, and had to cauterize the rest to stop the bleeding. The law of Moses then came to my mind: a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. We have laws against thieves, why can't we have laws against these men who steal things from our bodies and then expect to be paid for it?* (Prodromos, *The Executioner or the Doctor*).

· VII ·

Science and Technology

THEORY

Galileo is credited with refuting Aristotle's theory of falling bodies. Aristotle thought that heavier bodies fall faster, in proportion to their weight (*On the Heavens* 1.6). But, as Galileo knew, skepticism about this theory had been expressed by Ioannes Philoponos, a teacher, Christian theologian, and philosopher in Alexandria (ca. 530). Philoponos denied that the speed of motion was proportional to the weight of the bodies. *This,* he wrote, *is a complete error, as we can see through observation better than through any abstract proof. If you drop two bodies of vastly different weight from the same height, you will see that the difference in the time that it takes for them to fall is not at all proportional to their difference in weight; it is, in fact, a small difference* (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* v. 17, p. 683). Philoponos rarely receives credit for this breakthrough, made over one thousand years before Galileo.

†

The cause of a solar eclipse is that the body of the moon has interposed itself as a kind of dividing partition between the sun and earth and casts a shadow, preventing the sun's light from reaching us. The extent of the eclipse is proportional to the amount of the moon that is hiding the sun. Don't be amazed that the body of the moon is smaller, for the sun is said by some to be much, much bigger than the earth. The Fathers say that it is as large as the earth. Many times a small cloud can cover it, or even a small mountain or wall (Ioannes of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 21, p. 60).

Symeon Seth (eleventh century) gives a number of proofs that the earth is a sphere. First, the sun dawns in the east before it sets in the west, so when it is afternoon among the Persians, it is morning among us. But how do we know that there are time differences? We know it from eclipses of the sun and moon: the same eclipse is recorded as taking place in the afternoon by the Persians but in the morning by us. Second, we see mountaintops appear first on the horizon when we are sailing at sea, just as we see the top of the mast of a ship first that is sailing toward us. Third, were the earth not spherical, all the stars in the night sky would be visible from everywhere at the same time, but there are some seen in the north that are not seen in the south, and vice versa (*Summary of Physics* 1.5).

TIME

A number of portable sundials survive from the early Byzantine period. One from Aphrodisias in Asia Minor is a bronze disk 75.5 mm in diameter (almost 3 inches). One of its sides (that which catches the shadow) bears the declination and latitude scales while the other has a radial list of places and their latitudes, so that its use could be adjusted to those specific locations. Two Byzantine specimens list mostly places

Fig. 7.1 Damaged portable Byzantine sundial.

in the East, including Constantinople, but also Rome, Bordeaux, and Merida (Spain) for use in the West[12].

†

One early Byzantine portable sundial contained a mechanism of interlocking gears and dials that synchronized the time with the day of the week (represented by seven images of the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn), as well as with the month and the phases of the moon. Its fragments are in the Science Museum, London. The whole mechanism was about 135 mm wide and about 15 mm thick (or 5 by 0.2 inches), minus the *gnomon* (the stylus that casts the shadow on the face[13]). Constantinople heads the list of latitudes.

In the ninth century, the Byzantines employed a system of telecommunications to send messages across Asia Minor in an hour. This was constructed by Leon the Philosopher for the emperor Theophilos (829–842), and consisted of two synchronized clocks (likely hydraulic), one at a fort near Tarsos on the eastern frontier and another by the palace in Constantinople. Each hour on their faces corresponded to a message—for example, "the Saracens are raiding." At the corresponding time of day, a bright fire would be lit at the first tower and the signal was conveyed along a series of ten mountaintop watchposts until it reached the palace (pseudo-Symeon the Logothete, *Chronicle*, pp. 681–682). The emperors could thereby be informed within an hour of important disturbances in the east, and court officials would ready an expedition (Konstantinos VII, *Book of Ceremonies*: Appendix 3 to Book 1: *On Imperial Expeditions*). There is evidence of smaller, local versions of this system along the frontier: the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas refers to *kaminoviglae* ("furnace watchposts") that informed the generals of disturbances (*Skirmishing Warfare* 2).

When the emperor went on campaign, his bed chamber was supposed to be equipped with a small silver clock—probably an hourglass rather than a mechanical device—to set the night watches, and a bronze one was placed outside with the bedroom staff (Konstantinos VII, *Book of Ceremonies*, Appendix 1: *On Imperial Expeditions*, p. 472).

FLAMETHROWERS AND HAND GRENADES

One reason the Arabs failed to defeat the empire was that, starting in the seventh century, Byzantine ships were equipped with an incendiary chemical weapon known in the West as Greek fire—or as *liquid fire, sea fire*, or *constructed fire* to the Byzantines. It was a compound of flammable resins, sulphur, and naphtha. Its exact composition remained a carefully guarded state secret, and it was operated by a

secret branch of the army. The compound seems to have been propelled by the pressure of air pumped into a heated sealed container; the compound was then ignited as it left the nozzle. Its effect was like that of napalm: it set ships on fire *and* continued to burn while it floated on the water, so that diving overboard wouldn't save the seamen. This was also how the Byzantines survived Viking attacks: they incinerated the long ships in close-quarter fighting.

Fig. 7.2 The fleet loyal to the emperor burns a rebel fleet with Greek fire; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

Some Byzantine ships had the heads of lions or other beasts affixed to their prows, so that the Greek fire appeared to be belching out of their mouths. These heads were made of bronze or iron, but gilded with gold (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 11.10.2). Whereas normal fire rises up, this weapon could be directed to any direction: up, down, left, or right, so that barbarians could not escape from it (11.10.4).

Portable flamethrowers: the emperor Leon VI (886–912) claimed to have invented a small, hand-held mechanism for hurling Greek fire against an enemy ship, a "siphon" that could be used by marines from behind the safety of iron shields (*Naval Warfare* 63–64).

Greek fire could be placed in hand-held vessels, lit by a fuse, that were hurled and ignited wooden targets upon impact. When the Turks were besieging the city of Mantzikert in 1054, a soldier from the Byzantine garrison rode out and, using one of these devices, incinerated the enemy's main siege engine. The Turks gave up and left (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 46–47).

When the Normans attacked Dyrrachion in 1107–1108, the Byzantine defenders fought back with Greek fire. *This is how they make this fire. First, they gather the resin from pines and other such evergreen trees, which burns easily. It is rubbed together with sulphur and placed in reed tubes, through which the man who is playing this instrument blows it out with a strong, sustained breath; it then comes into contact with the flame that is lit at the end of the device; it ignites and falls like a lightning flash on the enemy's face* (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 13.3.6).

MILITARY CONTRIVANCES

When the Goths besieged Rome in 536, they cut the aqueducts and so there was no water to power the mills that fed the population inside. Belisarios, the Byzantine general in charge of the city, contrived the following device. He stretched two ropes across the Tiber River, as tightly as he could, and then he attached to them, at the point where the current was strongest, many boats equipped with mill wheels on the side. Thus he was able to feed Rome. The Goths countered this by tossing logs and bodies into the river upstream, which jammed and broke the wheels. In response, Belisarios hung chains thickly between the arches of a bridge, which caught the debris, and he had men pull them out of the water with hooks (Prokopios, *Wars* 5.20).

Stirrups are first attested in Byzantium in the military manual attributed to the emperor Maurikios, ca. 600 (*Strategikon* 1.2, 2.9). The likeliest explanation is that this was a Central Asian invention brought west by the Avars.

If the enemy contrives tortoises to fill in a moat, it is necessary to pour out human excrement all over them and thus repel them. In fact, human excrement is useful against every kind of siege engine, including interlocked shields (*How a General in Charge of a City under Siege Should Fight Back* 175[14]).

In 964, a Byzantine fleet crossed the straits of Messina and invaded Arab-held Sicily. Arabic sources recount how Arab frogmen swam over to the Byzantine ships, and tied ropes to their rudders, that they then connected back to their own ships. The Arab captains could then let pots of their own Greek fire slide along the ropes to the ships, igniting them upon contact[15].

The twelfth-century novelist Theodoros Prodromos wrote about a fictional naval battle in which an admiral sent out divers with small hammers to swim under the enemy's ships and rupture them from beneath, sinking them (*Rodanthe and Dosikles* 6.8–21).

PNEUMATIC DEVICES

The reception hall in the Magnaura throne room of the palace was adorned with chandeliers and hangings, but it also contained mechanical devices flanking the emperor's gold Throne of Solomon. There was one gold organ and two silver ones, which accompanied the different stages in which visitors were received. There was a golden tree with mechanical birds on it that could warble, and birds on the throne itself, which was flanked by rows of mechanical lions that could rise

up, roar, and sit down again. These motions and sounds were coordinated to punctuate visitors' interactions with the emperor. The lions evoked those that flanked the Throne of Solomon in the Old Testament (1 Kings 10:18–20). The audio effects were accomplished through pneumatic-hydraulic means explained in ancient textbooks. For example, water was poured into airtight containers, pushing the air out through apertures designed to make certain sounds or motions, or the same was effected by pneumatic pumps—that is, bellows, operated behind curtains.

One visitor impressed by the devices in the Magnaura reception hall was Liudprand of Cremona, who visited the court of Konstantinos VII in 949. He mentions the gilded bronze tree with the warbling birds, and the lions that roared and struck the ground with their tails. *I wasn't afraid*, he boasts, *because I had been told about this in advance*. But when Liudprand prostrated himself before the emperor and then looked up again, the throne had been elevated to the ceiling and the emperor wore different clothes. *Was there a pulley behind the wall?*, he wondered (Liudprand, *Payback* 6.5).

Organs were not used in Church, but were used for half-time shows in the hippodrome and for court banquets and receptions; they even accompanied armies into battle and emperors touring the provinces.

In 757, Konstantinos V sent an organ named *Big Mouth with a Loud Voice* as a gift to Pepin, the king of the Franks. It was long believed that this introduced the organ to the medieval West.

WATER

Constantinople lacked adequate water sources, so it was endowed with three major aqueducts bringing water from Thrace. At 592 km,

their combined length surpassed that of Rome's eleven aqueducts (520 km), the most for any ancient city[16].

†

Imported water was stored in hundreds of cisterns, some of which were vast. The open-air Aetius cistern measured 244 by 85 by 13–15 meters, and is used as a soccer stadium today. The covered cistern of Philoxenos was supported by 224 double columns and had a capacity of 40,000 m^3. Its Turkish name is *Binbirdirek* ("Thousand and One Columns"), and today it hosts wedding receptions. The largest covered cistern is the Basilica Cistern, across the street from Hagia Sophia, which can hold 80,000 m^3 (its dimensions are 138 by 65 meters, with 336 columns). It was used as a set in the 1963 James Bond film *From Russia with Love*.

Fig. 7.3 Basilica Cistern, Constantinople.

Pierre Gilles investigated the antiquities of Constantinople in the early sixteenth century. He thought he knew where the Basilica Cistern was located, but the area was entirely built over. *By chance I went into*

a house where there was a way down to it and went aboard a little skiff. I discovered it after the master of the house lit some torches and rowed me here and there across through the pillars, which lay very deep in the water. He was very intent upon catching the fish with which the Cistern abounds (*The Antiquities of Constantinople* 2.20).

An early experiment in steam power was performed by the architect of Hagia Sophia, Anthemios (early sixth century). He had a neighbor, Zenon, a lawyer, who had blocked his view with a structure. Unable to defeat him in court, Anthemios contrived the following. In a part of his basement that was underneath Zenon's house, he built vats and connected their sealed lids to the beams of the floor above. He brought the water inside them to a boil, making the floor shake and causing Zenon to rush out into the street in terror. Zenon was mocked for asking whether others had suffered damage from the earthquake. Anthemios earned the nicknames "Zeus the Thunderer" and "Poseidon the Earth-Shaker" (Agathias, *Histories* 5.6–8). These devices found no other use, being merely the "fine toys" of an inventive mind.

Anthemios also used arrays of focused mirrors to send dazzling light into Zenon's house, a trick on which he wrote a treatise, which survives.

SECURITY

The imperial chancery in the fourth century used a special, complicated script to safeguard the authenticity of its documents, and decreed that no one else could use it (*Theodosian Code* 9.19.4). The emperors also signed their names with a special purple ink whose use was restricted; the punishment for any unauthorized manufacture of the ink was death (*Justinianic Code* 1.23.6).

Fig. 7.4 Signature of the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1281–1318), made with the special purple ink prepared for imperial use.

We have only one specimen of an early Byzantine emperor's handwriting, written in the special imperial ink: a greeting added to the end of a missive sent by Theodosios II (408–450) to a commander in Egypt (*Papyrus Leiden Z*).

†

As the emperor Justin I (518–527) could not write (whether because of age or illiteracy), his staff created a wooden stencil so that he could sign legal orders with the special imperial ink (Prokopios, *Secret History* 6.15–16).

The authenticity and integrity of documents was ensured with seals: the paper was folded and tied securely with strings that were

passed through a wax or lead seal, about an inch in diameter. This was then stamped shut, sometimes with a set of special bivalve tongs, which when struck imprinted the sender's favorite saint on one side, and his job title and name on the other. Some seals used complex monograms. People who like working on these puzzles are called *sigillographers* (the field is called *sigillography*). Seals were used at all levels of society, especially after the sixth century. Over 60,000 lead sealings survive, each representing one act of communication.

Emperors could also seal documents with gold: these were the famous *chrysoboulla*, a composite word containing the Greek for gold and the Latin for seal (*bulla*). Historians often render this word oddly as "golden bulls."

Many Byzantines used locks and keys to bar their doors, but most were generic, lacking distinctive cuts, holes, and channels, so that a few master keys would have opened most doors in the empire[17].

Fig. 7.5 Byzantine key.

MATHEMATICS AND ASTRONOMY

The Byzantines stuck to the Greek numerical system, which represented numbers using various combinations of letters in the Greek alphabet. The scholar Maximos Planoudes (d. ca. 1305) wrote a treatise on what we call Arabic numerals, explaining how to use them in arithmetic and calling them "Indian" (which is technically correct). Here is how he introduced the system: *Given that numbers are infinite, but we cannot have infinite numbers, the more philosophical astronomers invented signs and a method for using them so that they could precisely write the numbers they needed in a concise way. There are only nine of these signs: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9. They also postulate another sign that they call the* cipher*, which according to the Indians means "nothing." All nine signs are Indian in origin; the cipher is written as 0* (Planoudes, *The Great Method of Calculation according to the Indians* 1).

Nikephoros Gregoras (1295–1361) was one of Byzantium's best astronomers, and spent years under house arrest for opposing the prevailing theology. In 1329, he wrote a letter to a colleague, Georgios Pepagomenos, predicting three eclipses that would happen during the upcoming year, one solar and two lunar. He predicted the year, date, time of day or night, and extent of eclipse (Gregoras, *Letter* 40).

In 1324, Gregoras tried to find an accurate way to calculate the date of Easter, which led him to realize that the Julian calendar miscounted the length of the year by a small fraction of a day. He put his findings before scientific peers and explained them to the emperor, Andronikos II Palaiologos. The emperor saw that he was right, but decided not to go to the trouble of changing the calendar, which he said would create confusion; the emperor and clergy also feared a split in the Church over the matter (as happened later in Russia). Gregoras believed that in two or three years, everyone could be instructed in the new system (*Roman History* 8.13, including his calculations). In 1582, pope

Gregory XIII implemented the same solution proposed by Gregoras, and so we have a *Gregorian* rather than a *Gregoran* calendar.

MISCELLANEOUS

The excavations in the Yenikapı harbor, on the south side of Constantinople, turned up, among the many ships found there, "a seven-inch wooden notebook with five removable wax pages that could be written on and erased again. The 'tablet' had an 'app' at the bottom: a sliding compartment concealing a tiny assay balance[18]."

Under Theophilos (829–842), the helmet on Justinian I's equestrian statue fell off. The statue was standing on a tall column in the square next to Hagia Sophia. For a while no one knew how to put it back. A dexterous handyman climbed onto the roof of Hagia Sophia, tied a rope to an arrow, and shot it at the statue (either it stuck there somehow, or it went through the legs and the rope was fastened on the ground). The man then walked across the tightrope and replaced the helmet, for which the emperor gave him a hundred gold coins (Leon Grammatikos, *Chronicle*, p. 227).

An attempt to build wings and glide on the air is recorded for 1162. An Arab resident of Constantinople announced that he would fly off the tower that stood over the starting gates of the hippodrome. At first he seemed to be a charlatan, but when the people saw him, they realized that he was an inventor. *He stood at the top of the tower, wearing a long, wide, white robe. It was twisted around many withes in a wide circle so that it contained many folds. His plan was to unfurl it like a sail and catch the wind. Every eye was turned on him and the crowd chanted "Jump! Jump! How long will you keep us waiting in suspense?" The emperor sent a man to dissuade him, to no avail. The man tested the wind many times by raising his arms and flapping them like wings. When*

he judged the moment was right, he leaped off the tower like a bird, but dropped to the earth like a dead weight, shattering all the bones in his body and giving up the ghost (Choniates, *History* 119–120). A similar attempt was made at the Eiffel Tower in 1912, with the same result. It was caught on film, viewable online.

· VIII ·

War—By any Means

ATTITUDES

We must always prefer peace and refrain from war whenever possible (Leon VI, *Taktika*, preface).

†

One of the earliest attestations of the famous phrase, *If you desire peace, prepare for war,* is in the Latin military manual *De re militari* of Vegetius (early fifth century, Book 3, preface). This work was being read in Constantinople in A.D. 450 and seems to have been translated into Greek. In his *Encomium of Trebizond*, his native city, Cardinal Bessarion (fifteenth century) also wrote that *He is most at peace who is best prepared for war* (p. 193).

The Orthodox Church said little about war. The most influential declaration was the following ambiguous statement by Basil of Caesarea: *Our fathers, it seems to me, did not consider killings that occurred during war to be murder, and they granted forgiveness to those fighting in defense of religion and piety. It might be good to advise those*

[soldiers] *whose hands are not clean to abstain from communion for three years* (*Letter* 188, canon 13).

Some soldiers on a boat about to sink in a storm drew their swords and were preparing to kill themselves before it went down. The philosopher-bishop Synesios, who was present, said that they believed this to be a more honorable way to die than drowning, *and I thoroughly approved this approach* (*Letter* 5).

WEAPONS

The Byzantine state monopolized the manufacture of weapons by law (e.g., Justinian I, *Novella* 85); selling weapons to the barbarians was forbidden; and private citizens were not allowed to bear or use arms. Axes for domestic use and small knives were excepted, and clubs could obviously not be regulated. The emperor Leon VI (886–912) wanted everyone in country towns and villages to have a bow (*Taktika* 20.81). But in civilian contexts, even soldiers could carry only one sword (Prokopios, *Wars* 4.28.7–8). We sometimes hear complaints that people could not make or use their own weapons in self-defense against the barbarians (e.g., Synesios of Kyrene, *Letter* 107, A.D. 405). The position of the state was that this was the job of the armies, to maintain which citizens paid taxes (Priskos of Panion, *History* fr. 11).

In 528, Huns invaded the Balkans and defeated the Roman generals Konstantiolos, Godilas, and Askum. In the pursuit, the Huns lassoed the generals, pulled them off their horses, and captured them. Godilas used his sword to cut the rope and escape (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.21).

In 545, some pro-imperial conspirators planned to assassinate the rebel Gontharis, who had taken over the province of North Africa and had invited them to a banquet at his palace in Carthage. One of the conspirators, Artasires, devised the following defense: he cut some arrows in half and tied them around his left forearm, and then pulled the

sleeve of his tunic over them. When he stabbed Gontharis in his side, the latter's guard raised his sword to strike him, but Artasires deflected the blow with the arrows wrapped around his arm, and managed to kill the guard as well (Prokopios, *Wars* 4.28).

†

When Saracens attacked his village, the priest Themel set upon them with a *semantron*, a large wooden stick used to ring bells; he killed a few and routed the rest. But his bishop would not forgive him for this act of violence, so he fled to the Arabs, converted to Islam, and led raiding parties into the empire (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 240).

WOUNDS

After a battle during the siege of Rome in 537, the imperial soldier *Koutilas was struck in the middle of the head by a javelin, but he kept on pursuing with the javelin embedded in his head. After the rout was finished, he rode into the city about sunset with the other survivors, the javelin in his head waving around, an extraordinary sight. In the same encounter Arzes, one of Belisarios' guardsmen, was hit by a Gothic archer between the nose and the right eye. The point of the arrow penetrated as far as the neck behind, but it did not show through, and the rest of the shaft projected from his face and shook as the man rode. When the Romans saw him and Koutilas they marveled greatly that both men continued to ride, paying no heed to their wounds* (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.2.14–18).

Later in the siege of Rome, *one of the barbarians shot Traïanos in the face, above the right eye, not far from the nose. The whole of the iron point penetrated his head and disappeared entirely, although the barb on it was large and extremely long, but the remainder of the arrow duly fell to the ground without the application of force by anyone, in my opinion because the point had never been securely fastened to the shaft. Traïanos, however, paid no heed to this at all, but continued killing and pursuing the enemy. But in the fifth year after this* [i.e., 541], *the tip of the iron*

of its own accord began to project visibly from his face. This is now the third year [i.e., 544] *since it has been slowly but steadily coming out. It is to be expected, therefore, that the whole barb will eventually come out, although not for a long time. But it has not been an impediment to the man in any way* (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.5.24–27).

Fig. 8.1 The Byzantine army retreats naked from a defeat in Serbia; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

During the war with the Persians in 586, a Roman unit came across a dying soldier after a battle. His body bore four wounds: a Persian arrow had passed through the cheek-guard of his helmet and was lodged in his upper lip; a second arrow was protruding from his lower lip, but had come from a different direction, so that his tongue was pinned fast and he could not close his lips; there was a spear stuck in his left arm; and another spear was lodged in his right side, and this was the mortal wound. All this hero wanted to know before he breathed his last was whether the Romans had won (Theophylaktos Simokattes, *History* 2.6).

DISCIPLINE AND CAUTION

Leading the army on campaign against Tarsos, Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) saw a soldier drop his shield when he became exhausted

by the rough terrain. He ordered one of his attendants to pick up the shield and later summoned the soldier and his captain to his presence. He berated them both and ordered the captain to flog the soldier, cut off his nose, and parade him through the camp. But the captain didn't do this, either out of pity or because he was bribed. When the emperor saw that the soldier was unharmed the next day, he imposed the same punishment on the captain himself, and saw that it was carried out (Leon the Deacon, *History* 1.2).

Byzantine strategy was famous for a calculated avoidance of pitched battles and heroic behavior. Victory was to be obtained by diplomacy, bribery, and subversion of the enemy's nobility; if it came to war, generals were instructed to use delaying tactics, ambushes, and harassment of the enemy. A military manual associated with the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969) advised generals *to avoid not only an enemy force of superior strength but also one of equal strength,* unless it has already been defeated three times (*Military Precepts* 4.19).

Don't attack neighboring states engaged in a civil war, because they are likely to make peace with each other and join together against you, the foreigner, if you attack them then (Syrianos, *On Strategy* 42).

The *Strategikon*, or military manual attributed to the emperor Maurikios (ca. 600), stipulates that *high-ranking officers should be stationed in safe positions so they are not killed by rushing forward in battle, which would demoralize the soldiers* (2.16). The army herald is commanded to shout—this is written out in camp Latin: *Do not fall back. Do not advance ahead of your standard. . . . This is what a brave soldier does. If you leave your standard, you will lose. . . . Do not charge out impetuously, do not break ranks* (3.5). "Bravery" meant staying in formation.

Before he became emperor, Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) rushed out ahead of the line in battle and was flogged for it afterwards by his father, Ioannes II (1118–1143) (Choniates, *History* 35).

†

Psellos gave the following portrait of Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer (976–1025), the greatest Byzantine conqueror: He would not return to the capital unless he had accomplished his strategic objectives, no matter the weather. He had an exact knowledge of military matters and had studied the manuals of war. He micromanaged the battlefield but never took part in battle, knowing how quickly the tide could turn. During battles he maintained close contact with all parts of his army and forbade anyone to rush ahead of the formation. He did not reward soldiers who performed individual feats of prowess even if it led to a rout of the enemy. There were no prizes for that kind of behavior, only a dishonorable discharge. Basileios had his eye solely on victory and knew that it was best attained by compact formations (*Chronographia* 1.32–33).

BY OTHER MEANS

By the twelfth century, some Byzantines had become defensive about their cautious approach to war, especially when compared to the impetuous bellicosity of Western knights. The historian and Aristotelian scholar Ioannes Kinnamos explained that *strategy is also an art, and the one who uses it must know how to take many shapes and forms; he must know how to adapt to any circumstance with alacrity. There are times when it is not shameful to flee, if the opportunity calls for it, and then to pursue relentlessly, each depending on when it is advantageous. When it appears that you can prevail through cunning more than by force, avoid risking all in an engagement. As many different strategies may lead to the same end, victory, it is a matter of indifference which one you use to reach it* (*History* 4.13). In other words, by any means necessary.

The walls of Constantinople were not breached before 1204, but in 705, Justinian II returned from exile and infiltrated the city by crawling through the aqueduct with some companions (Nikephoros, *Short History* 42).

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Rather than go to war, the Byzantine emperors preferred just to pay potential invaders not to attack. This was a cost-effective policy, considering the damage that invasions could cause to agriculture, the risks of battle, and the fact that the emperors usually had more money than any of their neighbors. The empire was thus often paying protection money to foreign tribes and states, which meant that any emperor could be accused of being soft on barbarians.

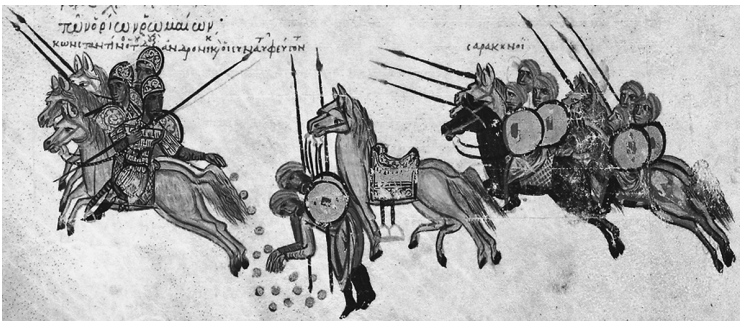

Fig. 8.2 A Byzantine force distracts a Saracen army in pursuit by dropping coins; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

The emperors also preferred to pay one of the enemy's neighbors to attack him from behind; for example:

- Justinian I turned the Lombards against the Gepids (in the northern Balkans), and the Utigur Huns against the Kutrigus Huns.
- Herakleios turned the Central Asian Turks against the Persians.
- Leon VI turned the (pagan) Magyars against the (Christian) Bulgarians.
- Nikephoros II Phokas invited the Rus' to attack the Bulgarians.

- Alexios I Komnenos used the Cumans against the Pechenegs.
- Later emperors were basically using the Turks to fight the Franks and hiring Franks to fight the Turks. In the end, both Franks and Turks were entrenched in Byzantine territory and stayed there.

SPIES AND SUBTERFUGE

By the mid-620s, the Persians had overrun most of the Roman East and their armies were operating freely in Asia Minor. One of their generals was the powerful Sahrvaraz, whom, however, the Persian King of Kings, Khusrow II, had began to suspect as disloyal. The king sent a letter to another commander ordering him to kill Sahrvaraz. But this letter and its messenger fell into Roman hands, and were brought to Constantinople. The Romans summoned Sahrvaraz to a meeting and showed him the letters. He now changed sides and they came up with the following ruse: they inserted the names of four hundred additional Persian commanders into the letter as also marked for death, and summoned them to Constantinople. At a public meeting, they all abandoned Khusrow and went over to the emperor (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, pp. 323–324).

Byzantium had spies everywhere, and they were good enough that we know little about them. *Many men had always been maintained at public expense who would infiltrate the enemy and enter the palace of the Persians on the pretext of trade or something else, and there they would carefully investigate everything. When they returned to Roman territory, they were in a position to reveal all the enemy's secrets to the magistrates* (Prokopios, *Secret History* 30.12).

In 970, in advance of his massive campaign against the Rus' in Bulgaria, the emperor Ioannes I Tzimiskes (969–976) *sent bilingual men, dressed like Skythians* [i.e., either as Bulgarians or Rus'], *to the*

military camps and dwellings of the enemy in order to ascertain their plans and report them back to him (Leon the Deacon, *History* 6.11).

A ninth-century military manual devotes a section to spies. They should work with associates in foreign lands, and they should have a prearranged way of communicating, preferably by posing as merchants in a public place. They should be of the same race as the enemy, but should not have suffered serious harm by us. Nevetherless, their families and children should be in our hands. They must be fluent in the language and familiar with the customs of the enemy. They should avoid being seen by our prisoners there, lest they be recognized (Syrianos, *On Strategy* 42).

In the fourth century, a certain Antoninus, the secretary of the Roman governor of Mesopotamia, had fallen into too much debt, so he sold state secrets to the Persians. He gathered all the information he could find about unit strength, troop movements, payments, and supplies. To avoid suspicion about his movements, he bought a farm on the border and used servants who would swim across the river Tigris to deliver the secrets to the Persians. Then, one night, he and his entire household crossed over and defected (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 18.5).

In 1018, the Bulgarian empire had collapsed and surrendered to Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer, but one Bulgarian lord, Ibatzes, resisted. On August 15, Ibatzes celebrated the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God on his estate. The Byzantine governor of nearby Ohrid, Eustathios Daphnomeles, invited himself to the party and came with only two attendants. He led Ibatzes to believe that he was there to discuss peace terms from the emperor, so they retired to a glade in his gardens to talk privately, whereupon Daphnomeles pounced on Ibatzes, threw him to the ground, placed his knee on his chest, stuffed his tunic into his mouth so that he could not call for help, and ordered his

attendants to blind him. They then carried him to the second floor of his mansion, from where Daphnomeles addressed the angry crowd, persuading them to come to terms with the emperor. One of his arguments was that it was not personal: he was only following imperial orders. This ended the thirty-five-year war (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, pp. 361–363).

Some Westerners blamed the failure of the Crusade of 1101 on Alexios I Komnenos' dealings with the Turks. He was *like a scorpion, in that you have nothing to fear from his face, but you should beware of his tail* (William of Tyre, *History of Jerusalem* 10.12).

Byzantine generals knew that sometimes you can reap the benefits of a thing only by pretending to do it, while avoiding the harmful consequences of actually doing it. The eunuch-general Narses, the "Hammer of the Goths," was besieging Lucca in Italy, a city that had failed to keep faith with him despite having given him hostages. So he brought out the hostages before the walls and made a grisly show of executing them—only he had tied wooden boards to their necks so that they were not harmed by the axe blows, but they agreed to play along by writhing on the ground. These were the city's most prominent men, so their compatriots watching on the walls began to wail and grow angry. Narses offered that, if the city surrendered, he would restore the hostages to life and impose no further sanctions. They agreed, thinking that he could never fulfill such terms, but he did, so Lucca surrendered (Agathias, *Histories* 1.12–13).

The general and future emperor Alexios Komnenos had just arrested the rebel Norman mercenary Roussel de Bailleul, but was afraid that his supporters in Asia Minor would seek to free him before he could get him back to Constantinople. So Alexios pretended to blind him in front of many witnesses, acting the part of a wrathful judge, while he made Roussel play along, screaming in agony, spurting fake blood.

No one now wanted to free him, and Alexios conveyed him to the capital, where the "bloody" bandages were removed from his eyes (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 1.3).

SKILLS

The soldier-emperor Ioannes Tzimiskes (969–976) may have been short of stature, but he was strong and was said to be able to leap from horse to horse at a run; to shoot an arrow through a ring; and to use a stick, while riding at full speed, to strike a leather ball placed on a glass cup, without damaging the cup (Leon the Deacon, *History* 6.3).

Defeated by Robert Guiscard's Normans at Dyrrachion on October 18, 1081, Alexios I Komnenos was surrounded and had to fight for his life. He severed the arm of one assailant, and when another aimed a blow at his head, he coolly leaned back in the saddle to lie against his horse's rump, so the sword merely cut the strap of his helmet, sending it clattering to the ground. Later, enemy spear-thrusts against him from the left did not unseat him because he was propped up by countervailing spear-thrusts from the right. Amazing his opponents, his horse then leaped up onto a tall rock, *as if by the wings of Pegasos,* and he made his escape (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 4.6–7).

In his *Treatise on What Sort of Person a King Should Be*, the philosopher Nikephoros Blemmydes (thirteenth century) questioned the usefulness of games used in military training, such as skillful moves in polo matches. Trainers apparently believed that this made soldiers more dexterous, and he refers to an exercise in which they had to jump around on one leg standing on an inflated sack, trying to balance on it (in *PG* 642: 173). This was a Byzantine descendant of an ancient Greek game called *askoliasmos*.

MISCELLANEOUS

Over the entire course of their history, the Byzantines fought about 120 civil wars—on average, one every ten years. Over one-sixth of those wars succeeded in overthrowing the emperor in Constantinople[19].

Fig. 8.3 Massacre during a civil war; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

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Four Byzantine emperors died fighting in foreign wars: Julian was fatally wounded in battle against the Persians in 363, Valens by the Goths in 376, Nikephoros I by the Bulgars in 811, and Konstantinos XI Palaiologos against the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Julian was buried first at Tarsos and then in the imperial mausoleum in Constantinople. The bodies of Valens and Konstantinos XI were never found. Nikephoros' skull was plated in silver by the Bulgar khan, Krum, and made into a drinking cup. Krum made his chiefs drink from it (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 491).

During the siege of Rome (536–538), a Roman soldier fell into a hole outside the walls, where grain used to be stored. He could not get out, so he stayed the night, not daring to call out for help, as the area was crawling with Goths. The next day, a Goth soldier also fell in. The two men made an agreement that they would call for help and each pledged to save the other's life if it was his own people who found

them. As it turned out, they were found by Goths, who honored the pledge and let the Roman go (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.1.11–19).

When the general Nikephoros Phokas was besieging Arab Chandax on Crete (Candia, modern Iraklion), in 960–961, the chief of his artillery launched a lame but living donkey into the city, and Nikephoros made a joke to his men as he watched it soar above *like an eagle* (Theodosios the Deacon, *Capture of Crete* 3.173–194). Nikephoros also decapitated Arabs he found in the surrounding countryside and catapulted their heads into the city, so that the townspeople might recognize their relatives: *here a brother, there a father* (*Capture of Crete* 2.58–80; Leon the Deacon, *History* 1.7–8).

Alexios Komnenos defeated and nearly wiped out the Pechenegs—northern barbarians whom the Byzantines called Scythians—on the last day of April. This led to a saying among people of Constantinople: *But for one day, the Scythians didn't see the month of May* (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 8.5.9).

At its full power, the Byzantine state could impose and enforce embargoes on other countries. In 1016, Basil II prohibited travel and trade between the empire and Syria and Egypt, excepting only a few clients (Yahya of Antioch, *Chronicle* v. 3, 401–403). He later lifted it on Syria, as its rulers came to heel, but kept it active against Egypt into the 1020s.

The Byzantines believed that the Mother of God had saved Constantinople in 626, when it was besieged by the Avars. For this reason, they honored her as their "chief general"—for example, in the Akathistos Hymn, one of the most important hymns in the Orthodox tradition. The standard theory was that the Virgin tearfully interceded with her son, Christ, to save the Romans, using her *weaponized tears* (Georgios of Pisidia, *The Avar War* 141). But it was also possible to imagine her fighting in person, sinking Slavic ships, wielding invisible

swords, and hurling holy fire from above (*The Avar War* 448–461; Theodoros Synkellos, *On the Attack by the Atheist Barbarians and Persians against this God-Protected City*). In a chronicle, the Avar khan besieging the city was made to say in fear, *I see a woman in stately dress defending the walls* (*Paschal Chronicle*, p. 725).

GREAT STROKES OF LUCK

In 982, the German emperor Otto II invaded Byzantine southern Italy with the intention of conquering it. Just then, a large army invaded Calabria from Muslim Sicily to plunder far and wide. The two armies collided and fought two bloody battles that forced them both to retreat. Two Byzantine ships, there to collect taxes, were anchored off the coast, no doubt amused to see their two enemies so conveniently destroy each other. Otto sought refuge on one, but had to disguise his identity and escape, lest he be escorted as an "honored guest" to Constantinople (Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon* 3.20–23).

Constantinople was nearly destroyed when it was sacked by the crusaders in 1204. Fifty-seven years later, when the Byzantines retook it, it happened through a windfall. The general Alexios Strategopoulos was reconnoitering the area when he learned from some local farmers that the main Latin army was away on a raid and that the city was undefended. He sneaked inside the walls, attacked them from the *inside*, and took them easily. The Latin court was hastily evacuated by a Venetian fleet.

By 1394, the empire was reduced to Constantinople and a few outlying areas. Determined to end it once and for all, the Turkish sultan Bayezid placed the city under siege and blockade for eight years; he probably would have captured it, had the Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) not appeared out of the blue to crush Bayezid at the battle of Ankara (1402), and extend the life of the Byzantine empire by fifty years. Bayezid was kept captive in a cage.

· IX ·

A Menagerie of Saints

STYLITES

A "stylite" saint (*Stylites*) was one who lived up on the top of a column for years, while a support community developed around him at its base. The most famous was Symeon (d. 459), who lived on a pillar near Aleppo for forty years (or more, depending on the source). The goal of some his imitators was to spend more time than that at the top of a column.

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124 stylite saints have been counted, the most recent in the nineteenth century[20].

Symeon fastened himself at the top of his column to restrict his movements and prevent himself from sitting down, but his restraints chafed on his flesh and revealed the bone and sinew; three joints in his spine were dislocated because when he prayed he would constantly bend down and then stand up again; and he lost his eyesight three times for

Fig. 9.1 The stylite saint Alypios; from the *Menologion* made for the emperor Basil II in ca. 1000.

forty days each, possibly due to malnutrition (*The Syriac Life of Saint Symeon* 46).

For nine months the boils on Saint Symeon's left foot oozed pus and worms down from the pillar to the ground. The stench was so great that visitors had to smear cedar resin under their noses to approach (*The Syriac Life of Saint Symeon* 48).

One explanation for Symeon's choice to live on top of a pillar was that he wanted to get away from the crowds that were pestering him for blessings back when his only unique ascetic feat was chaining himself to a rock (Theodoretos of Kyrrhos, *History of the Monks of Syria* 26.12).

Saint Daniel the Stylite (d. 493) sought to imitate Symeon's lifestyle, only near Constantinople. He graduated from a small pillar twice the height of a man to a much taller one, and the emperor Leon I (457–474) then added another, so that he could walk across a plank between them. But one time during a thunderstorm that second column was

buffeted to and fro by violent winds, threatening the saint's life. The emperor wanted to execute the architect, but Daniel intervened to have his life spared (*The Life of Saint Daniel the Stylite* 47–48).

During another storm, the wind snatched Daniel's clothes away and he remained there naked, exposed to the icy rain. When he was found later, his long hair and beard were entirely glued to his skin with icicles, and his face was hidden behind a film of ice. His disciples had to thaw him out by pouring warm water on him. Daniel claimed that he slept through the whole ordeal, dreaming that he was sleeping on a comfortable couch under warm blankets (*The Life of Saint Daniel the Stylite* 52–53).

Hermits allegedly made dwellings on the imperial columns in Constantinople and lived atop them for years (Robert de Clari, *Conquest of Constantinople* 89).

ASSORTED EXTREMISTS

There was a class of ascetics called the Grazers, who lived out in the wild and did not prepare their meals, preferring to feed off the earth. They quickly acquired the aspect of wild beasts, their minds were no longer compatible with human society, and they ran away when they saw people (Euagrios, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.21).

There was a certain hermit who lived and grazed with the antelopes. He prayed to God, *Lord, teach me where I am deficient.* And a voice told him, *Go to the monastery and do what they tell you.* So he went and the brothers pestered him with *do this* and *do that, you crazy old man.* In the end he prayed, *Lord, I can't do this, please send me back to the antelopes.* And he was released from this service and went back to grazing with them (*Sayings of the Holy Old Men* 62).

Another extreme ascetic practice was "iron-wearing" (*siderophoria*), in which a hermit wore a mass of heavy chains such that a strong man could not lift it. The mass consisted of an iron collar around the neck and waist, from which were drapped many heavy chains. Theodoretos of Kyrrhos (fifth century) knew two women, Marana and Kyra, who took up this way of life and kept to it for forty-two years. Only Marana would speak to visitors; Kyra could barely stand up. Their servants and handmaidens lived in a small hut nearby (*History of the Monks of Syria* 29).

An ascetic technique was to stand ceaselessly. Baradatos did so while covered in multiple animal skins that left openings only for the nose and mouth, so that he could breathe. Before that, he had lived in a box that was not tall enough for him to stand in and had openings that cruelly exposed him to the elements (Theodoretos of Kyrrhos, *History of the Monks of Syria* 27.2–3).

HOLY FOOLS

"Holy fools" (*Saloi*) were saints who were either a bit mad or who played at being mad to defy convention, rejected the social prestige brought by a reputation for holiness, and revealed how paradoxical true devotion to Christ could be. Symeon entered Edessa by pulling a dead dog that he had found on a dung heap outside the city; he went to church during the service and started throwing nuts at the candles; and when the people chased him, he stood at the pulpit and threw more nuts at the ladies (Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Saint Symeon of Edessa*, pp. 145–146).

A holy fool went to any length to conceal the fact that he was a holy miracle worker, including:

- defecating in public
- entering the women's baths

- throwing small stones at jugglers as they were performing
- dragging himself along on his buttocks
- sticking his foot out to trip people

But when Symeon started whipping columns and ordering them to "remain standing," it was to protect the city in advance from an earthquake that he knew was coming.

If the height of vanity is pretending to have virtues that you do not in fact have, in order to be praised for them, then the height of humility must be to pretend to have vices that you do not have, in order to be regarded as lesser than you are. That is why some abstinent men reach for the bread and cheese: in order to avoid being praised for being abstinent (Ioannes Klimakos, *Ladder to Heaven* 25.997).

DOG-HEAD

In Byzantine tradition, the military saint Christopher was a *Kynokephalos, from the race of Dog-Headed people who came from the land of the Man-Eaters* (ancient writers located them somewhere near India or in Africa). In icons, he is painted as a Roman soldier with the head of a dog. When he converted, God gave him the ability to speak like a human being but did not change his appearance. The evil emperor Decius (249–251) sent two hundred soldiers to arrest him when he learned that he had converted to Christianity, *and if he resists, chop him into pieces and bring me only his head*. When he was brought before the emperor, Decius almost fell off his throne in terror at the sight of him (*The Martyrdom of Saint Christopher*).

DREAM-HEALERS

Georgios, a ship owner from Rhodes, spent two years at the shrine of Saint Artemios in Constantinople, hoping for a cure of the hernia

Fig. 9.2 Icon of Saint Christophoros the Dog-Head (*Kynokephalos*).

that had developed on both of his testicles. At one point he was having lunch with the priests of the shrine when he urgently had to run off to answer the call of nature. In the dark latrines there was another man, whom he could see only dimly. They struck up a conversation about their ailments. *The other man said, "Let me see your testicles, whether they are more swollen than mine or not." But it was too dark to show him, so Georgios said, "Reach your hand over to touch them, but do so gently, because I am in great pain." So he guided the other man's*

hand over to his testicles, but the other man grabbed them firmly, causing him wrenching pain. "Oh, man, what have you done? You killed me with your nails!" He got up, thinking that he was injured, but in fact his condition had vanished—and so had the other man (*Miracles of Saint Artemios* 35).

Another man with a hernia sought the assistance of Saint Artemios by sleeping in his shrine, next to his tomb, at night. But he brought with him an Alexandrian actor, who woke up during the night because he had to pee. He could not get out, because patients were locked inside the shrine for the night, so he urinated by one of the doors, instantly developing a hernia that reached below his knees. *He cried out in pain in his Alexandrian accent, "Ow, this saint is an impostor! He creates hernias, he doesn't cure them!" This woke up the other man, whose hernia had now disappeared. "Look at that! This impostor saint gave me your hernia!"* But the actor's condition cleared up later that day (*Miracles of Saint Artemios* 17).

Men and women with various ailments would visit the shrine of the healer-saints Kosmas and Damianos in hope of a miraculous intervention. Among them were a palsied man who was unable to walk, and, lying in the cot to his right, a woman who was unable to speak due to depression. The saints appeared to the palsied man and instructed him that if he wanted to be healed, he had to have sex with the woman. Thinking it was just his imagination, he didn't take this approach. But they appeared to him again and again, and finally threatened him. So, waiting for the middle of the night, he crawled over to the woman's bed. When he grabbed the side, she sensed him, realized what he was about to do, and started to call out loudly for help. For his part, he saw men coming for him and, terrified, started to run away. Thus they were both cured, two healings for the price of one (Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Miracle 24 of Kosmas and Damianos*).

CROSS-DRESSERS

Many married couples decided to abstain from sex and live piously and ascetically thereafter, some even parting ways to join monasteries. This is what Andronikos and Athanasia did, the latter going off on pilgrimage to the Holy Land disguised as a male monk. A while later she met Andronikos by chance and managed *not to say anything that women typically say* in such circumstances. He did not recognize her and took her for a fellow monk. The two lived together after that for many years, and Andronikos did not suspect that "Athanasios" was really his wife. Before she died, she left him a note revealing the truth (*Anonymous Synaxarion of the Tenth Century*, v. 1, pp. 169–172).

YOU BECOME WHAT YOU PRETEND

A thief disguised himself as a monk in order to enter a nunnery and let his accomplices in at night, but the sisters mistook him for a real holy man and began to wash his feet. When the same washwater then cured a paralyzed nun after it was used to wash her, the sisters began to importune the man for his blessing, even when he revealed that he was a fraud. Overcome by their sincerity, he decided to take holy orders (*The Converted Brigand*, in J. Wortley, *A Repertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales*, no. 861).

During the persecutions, mimes would put on popular satirical shows mocking Christians and their rituals. One time, when the actor Gelasinos of Helioupolis emerged from his stage parody of a baptism, he announced that he was now a Christian because he had seen a vision of God in the tub, had converted, and was prepared to die for it as a Christian. The people dragged him out and stoned him to death (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 12.50).

MISCELLANEOUS

The missionary Julian was sent by the empress Theodora to convert the Nubians (in modern Sudan), which he did during the course of two years (537–539). But Julian could not endure the heat and the sun blistered his skin, so for the two years that he was there he would spend all day, from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M., lecturing his congregants in a pool inside a cave, and wearing only a loincloth (John of Ephesos, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.7).

According to her eulogy, Anna Komnene was not religious because she was ugly, which explains why so many other people become religious; she was, in fact, quite beautiful (Georgios Tornikes, *Funeral Oration for Anna Komnene*, p. 248).

An Athenian named Paphnoutios went to Rome, where he became a specialist in exorcising demons. One day, the Evil One tempted him into raping and murdering a possessed girl who had been brought to him. He fled to Asia Minor and lived in a cave for three years, without ever standing up, looking up, or uttering the name of God, thus seeking forgiveness. He ate only plants and the water that dripped onto the floor of his cave. One day, a shepherd shot him with an arrow, believing him to be a wild animal. The body of holy Paphnoutios was taken to Constantinople, while the shepherd, stricken with remorse, took his place as a hermit in the cave (*The Life of Saint Lazaros of Galesion* 37–40).

DOUBTS

In a work *On Pretending*, or *On Hypocrisy*, Eustathios of Thessalonike exposed some of the antics of extreme ascetics, such as stylites or monks who went around in chains their whole lives. Some cut away their own flesh with knives or raked it with their nails, pretending

they had been attacked by demons at night. Others wore iron shackles during the day—though they took them off at night, when they were "off duty"—and sprinkled blood around the iron to enhance the appearance of their endurance. One of these types took an animal lung or liver and ground it into a pulp that looked as if it had been chewed. He smeared it on himself around the iron when he received visitors. After speaking for a while he would groan, reach into the place, and bring out some of that vile stuff. *My flesh,* he would piously intone, and flick it to the ground, though some remained lodged in his fingernails (Eustathios of Thessalonike, *On Hypocrisy* 35–36).

· X ·

Heresy and Scandal

Byzantine society was divided and its energy consumed by theological controversies that required the intervention of emperors and multiple Church Councils, and sometimes required the use of force, persecution, arrests, and even executions. Major questions included:

- *What is the relationship between the Father and Son within the godhead?* (fourth century)
- *What is the relationship between the human and the divine natures of Christ?* (fifth–sixth centuries)
- *Does Christ have one will?* (seventh century)
- *Is it acceptable to make images of Christ and the saints?* (eighth–ninth centuries)
- *Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father alone or from the Father* and *the Son?* (eleventh century to the present)
- *Is there a distinction between the energies and the substance of God such that the former might be seen in the form of light?* (fourteenth century)

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These big controversies overshadowed, or sometimes were caused by, lesser-known ones, such as:

- *Did the divine nature of Christ sit side by side with his human soul within his human body—that is, did Christ effectively have two souls?*

- *How had Mary, the mother of Jesus, remained a virgin after his birth? Had God restored her hymen or was Jesus miraculously born without rupturing it?*
- *Was the Virgin the Mother of God or only the Mother of Christ?*

And people always had "practical" theological questions that were rarely addressed by the Church Councils, such as the following (mostly taken from Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers*, seventh century):

- *If I drown at sea, or my body is eaten by birds, how will it be restored after the Resurrection?*
- *To what age will our bodies be restored after the Last Judgment? Will we have sex organs? Will there be sex in heaven?*
- *Where do innocent, unbaptized children go when they die?*
- *Can the dead really benefit from prayers said on their behalf?*
- *Does God accept donations of stolen money?*

During the persecution of Christianity by the emperor Galerius (d. 311), bishops were divided between those like Petros of Alexandria, who took a lenient stance toward people who had lapsed and performed sacrifice under duress, and others, such as Melitios of Lykopolis, who took a stricter stance. A later story goes that Petros and Melitios had once been imprisoned together by the Roman authorities and began to disagree in prison about this policy. They hated each other so much that Petros finally hung a cloak in the middle of the room and said, *All those who are with me come on this side, and those who are with Melitios go over there!* This came to be known as the Melitian Schism (Epiphanios of Salamis, *Medicine Chest* 68.3.3).

Arius (d. 336) was a priest in Alexandria whose theology was branded and condemned as Arianism. His opponents liked to imagine that he died by literally exploding in the bathroom. Passing by the forum and seeing there the statue of Constantine (who had once tried to bring Arius to accept the doctrine of Nicaea), Arius was struck by a crisis of

conscience and an instant *relaxation of the bowels. Asking if there was somewhere nearby where he could go, and learning that there was a place behind the forum of Constantine, he walked there. He was on the verge of fainting, and as he was passing excrement his whole belly slumped. That which doctors call the* intestinum rectum *immediately fell out of his belly, followed by a profusion of blood and then the small intestine along with the spleen and liver, and so he died there. That toilet is still pointed out to this day in Constantinople* (Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.38)

Theology was a popular passion, talked about in the streets almost as much as the chariot races. In 381, Gregory of Nyssa was in Constantinople for a Church Council and complained about the lower classes' addiction to theological speculation: *You know the type I mean. The whole city is full of them, in the alleys, the marketplaces, the squares, and the wards; those who deal in apparel, who change money, who sell us food. If you ask someone about a sale, he will philosophize to you about the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you inquire about the price of bread, he will answer that "the Father is greater and the Son lesser." And if you say, "Is the bath ready?," he will assert that the Son comes from non-Being. I don't know what to call this evil—an inflammation of the brain or a mania or some other illness that destabilizes the mind*? Gregory was insinuating that only lower-class people held Arian positions (*Oration on the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit* 557).

Theology by flatulence: the Arian theologian Aetios (fourth century) illustrated the various theological positions regarding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by farting. Three farts of identical volume stood for the theology of his opponents, while three farts of decreasing volume signified his own (Theodoros of Mopsuestia, *Against Eunomios*).

Theology by obscene gesture: in A.D. 498, Olympios, a high official in Constantinople and an Arian, was preparing to bathe in the

Helenianai baths when he heard someone refer to the Orthodox Trinity. *"What's this Trinity?" he asked. "Here, look," he said, grabbing his genitals, "I have a Trinity too!"* But when he entered the water, it miraculously boiled and killed him. A painting of the episode was drawn by the Orthodox on that spot, but a later official was bribed by the Arians to take it down (Theodoros the Reader, *Ecclesiastical History* 465; John of Damascus, *On Images* 3.90).

The first Christian bishop executed by a Christian emperor for having the wrong theology was probably Paulos of Constantinople (d. 350), who was strangled in prison—a mere forty years after the end of the Great Persecution of Christianity by the pagan Roman emperors.

The Marcionite sect allegedly baptized the dead. A living man would lie under the bed of the deceased, and when the priests asked the corpse whether he wanted to be baptized, the man under the bed would say *yes,* and so it would be done (John Chrysostom, *Homily on 1 Corinthians 15:29* 40).

Theological controversies often generated sex scandals, as it was an excellent way to discredit an opponent. Some Arians at Antioch hired a prostitute, took her clothes off, and sneaked her into the room of bishop Stephanos at night, to make it look like he was having sex with her. She thought she was being hired to sleep with a young man and was eager, but when she saw that it was an old man—one, moreover, dressed like a bishop—she began to cry out that violence was being used against her. They told her to keep quiet and lie about the bishop. The matter became a scandal, and the court got involved. Finally, her pimp gave up the men who had hired her and they betrayed their ringleader, the bishop's Arian rival (Athanasios, *History of the Arians* 20).

When Eudoxios of Antioch was made bishop of Constantinople in 360, the year when the first church of Hagia Sophia was finished, he

said in his inaugural sermon that *God the Father is impious, but his Son is pious.* At this, the people became agitated and began to cause a disturbance, but he explained that the Son is pious because he worships the Father, but the Father cannot be pious because there is no one for him to worship. Then everyone in the church laughed (Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.43).

When they were not stirring up theological controversies themselves, the emperors usually tried to keep the peace by forbidding theological agitation: *No man shall be given the right to go out in public and argue about religion or discuss it or give his opinion about it. If anyone brazenly contravenes this law, he will be restrained with a proper penalty and punishment* (Theodosius I in 388, *Theodosian Code* 16.4.2).

The Byzantines loved making long lists of heresies that filled many volumes and explained exactly the errors of each one, providing counter-arguments to their main positions or talking points, and sometimes showing how they were genealogically related to each other. An early massive work of this nature was written by the "heretic-hunter" Epiphanios of Salamis, called the *Panarion* or *Medicine Chest* (fourth century). Other titles included the *Dogmatic Fortification* (or *Panoply*) by Euthemios Zigabenos and the *Treasure of Orthodoxy* by Niketas Choniates (twelfth century). In the later period, separate lists circulated that itemized the *Errors of the Latins* (i.e., of the Catholic Church). Law codes had separate sections listing all the penalties and restrictions that applied to various categories of heretics—for example, *Theodosian Code* 16.4: *De haereticis* (fifth century).

Synesios of Kyrene (in modern Libya) was an aristocrat who claimed to be descended from Herakles and studied philosophy under Hypatia (the female Platonist who was later to be torn to pieces by a Christian mob in Alexandria). In 409, Theophilos, the bishop of Alexandria, invited him to become the bishop of his home city. In response,

Synesios wrote an open letter, ostensibly addressed to his brother, setting forth his terms: (a) He would not separate from his wife; (b) he would not pretend that he was not having sex with her; and (c) he would not accept Christian doctrines in his own mind but only tell them to people in order to improve them morally and give them a small glimpse of the truth. For himself, he intended to go on believing in the preexistence of souls and the immortality of the world; as for the Resurrection, it is merely an allegory. *But false beliefs can be beneficial to the masses*, so he did agree to become a bishop (*Letter* 105).

Another man whom Theophilos of Alexandria wanted to ordain as a bishop escaped that fate by cutting off his own ear (Palladios, *Lausiac History* 11.1; Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23).

Theophilos of Alexandria was involved in the so-called Anthropomorphite debate in Egypt (ca. 400), basically the question of how literally or figuratively God may be said to be like a human being. According to a Coptic source, Theophilos had argued that God cannot be like human beings, for the latter include *Ethiopians, lepers, cripples, and the blind,* who are obviously unworthy of the divine majesty. The holy man Aphou replied that the image of a king, however defective, is still the image of *that* king, and human beings are likewise made, however imperfectly, in the image of God[21].

When Theophilos of Alexandria publicly proclaimed that God has no body, the desert monks of Egypt marched on Alexandria and threatened to kill him. He pacified them by coming out and saying, *In you, I see the face of God* (Sokrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.7).

The Council of Ephesos (A.D. 431) was convened to resolve the differences between Cyril (Kyrillos) of Alexandria and Nestorios, the patriarch of Constantinople and his supporters from Antioch. In the end, the Council split into two factions, each of which condemned the

other. The initial reaction of the court of Theodosius II was to accept *both* verdicts, but Cyril launched a campaign of propaganda and persuasion to change the court's mind, paying bribes to key courtiers. We have among Cyril's letters the inventory of precious objects and gold that were sent by Alexandria to named courtiers on condition that they champion his cause. The chamberlain Domninus, for instance, was to receive various types of furniture, including four large wool rugs, four table covers, six stool covers, fifty pounds of gold, and four ostriches (*Letter* 96).

The Council of Ephesos (A.D. 449) was convened to debate how many natures there are in Christ and how they are associated. The bishop of Constantinople, Flavian, was beaten so badly by his opponents, including Dioskouros, the bishop of Alexandria, that he died of the blows soon afterward. Voltaire wrote that in the end the Council gave Flavian two natures: black and blue (*Philosophical Dictionary*: Councils). This subsequently became known among the Orthodox as "the Robber Council of Ephesos."

In 484, pope Felix III excommunicated Akakios, the patriarch of Constantinople. The story goes that the person charged to deliver the notice was afraid to do so, and gave it to a monk who was fervent in the cause. The monk mingled in the crowd that was entering Hagia Sophia as the patriarch was about to officiate, and pinned it to his back when no one was looking (Liberatus, *Breviarium* 18).

The historian Euargios of Antioch (late sixth century) noted that the Christian world had split into two hostile and irreconcilable factions over the difference of a single letter: some claimed that Christ was "in" two natures (*en* in Greek), while the others claimed that he was "from" two natures (*ek* in Greek) (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.5). There are a number of theological works from this period that wrestle with the meanings and implications of these two prepositions.

At the fifteenth session of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (A.D. 681), one Polychronios, a monk, upheld Monothelitism, the view that Christ has a single will. He claimed that a document containing a written statement of his position could be shown to be true by its ability to resurrect a man. The Council accepted the challenge and relocated to the baths of Zeuxippos in Constantinople, where before a large crowd the statement was placed on a corpse laid out on a bier. For hours Polychronios tried to revive him, whispering over the corpse, to no avail. *I am unable to raise this dead person,* he said finally, and was excommunicated (*Acts of the Third Ecumenical Council of Constantinople* [Sixth Ecumenical Council]*, Fifteenth Session*, pp. 672–678).

The emperor Konstantinos V (741–775), reviled by the Orthodox as an Iconoclast, is said to have denigrated the Virgin Mary in the following way. He held up a purse full of gold and asked what it was worth. Everyone agreed that it was worth a lot. He then poured out the gold and asked the same question. *"It is worth nothing," they said. "So too with Mary," he said. "While she carried Jesus she was fit to be honored, but after delivering him she was like any other woman"* (*Life of Saint Niketas of Medikion*, in *Acta Sanctorum* April 1, app. 23).

Konstantinos V was later known as *Kopronymos* by the Orthodox, which means "he whose name is dung." The legend goes that he soiled himself at his baptism and christening, and so *brought the stench of his foul innards to all who were present* (*Against Konstantinos Kaballinos* in *PG* 95: 337).

The last Iconoclast emperor was Theophilos. When he died in 842, his widow Theodora wanted to restore the worship of icons but did not want her husband's memory to be denigrated. So, she gathered the leading defenders of icons and told them that her husband had repented on his deathbed and wanted to recompense them for their

suffering. Most were willing to be bought, but the ascetic monk Symeon responded with words *hotter than fire: "To Hell with him and his money!"* (*Acts of David, Symeon, and Georgios* 244–246).

The patriarch installed to reverse Iconoclasm in 843 was Methodios. His enemies allegedly bribed a woman to say that he had seduced her, causing a scandal at the court and leading to a formal inquiry. At first Methodios chatted amicably with the woman—*How do you do, my lady?* and *How is so-and-so?*—until he realized that he was on trial. At that point, he lifted up his garments and showed to all that *his genitals had been transformed by a miracle and were not at all like those of a human being*. He explained that when he used to live in Rome he was tormented by lust and begged Saint Peter to deliver him, whereupon the Apostle appeared in his dream, touched his genitals, and said, *There, you are cured of these passions* (Theophanes Continuatus, 4.10). Was he a eunuch?

The scholar and future patriarch of Constantinople Photios (ninth century) is said to have tricked his rival, the unsophisticated patriarch Ignatios, by concocting a sham heresy. The idea was that human beings have two souls, one of which commits sins and another which does not. Photios circulated this to show that without a philosophical education Ignatios would be unable to deal with such problems (Anastasius the Librarian, *Preface to the Acts of the Eighth Ecumenical Council of 869* 6; and *Letters*, p. 407).

The eleventh-century mystic Symeon the New Theologian argued that the entirety of a saint's body becomes like Christ when it receives God's glory: *Even the penis becomes like Christ. Are you shocked by this, reader? But Christ made you as you are* (*Hymn* 15).

Convicted heretics usually lost their jobs and were placed under house arrest or sent into exile. Unlike the medieval and early modern West,

the Byzantines did not often burn heretics at the stake. The emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) was determined to burn a number of Bogomils on pyres in the imperial polo court (Bogomils were accused of being Dualists—that is, of believing in one good and one evil god). Alexios faced a dilemma: many of those rounded up denied being Bogomils. So, he resorted to a stratagem: he told them that there would be two pyres, one for the Christians and one for the Bogomils, and each person could decide, in that final moment, what he was in his heart as there was no need anymore to deceive a human judge. *You will all die anyway, with no exceptions, but at least you get to decide whether you die as a Christian or a Bogomil.* After the groups had separated, the emperor released the Christians, giving them gifts. Alexios returned the Bogomils to prison, hoping to convert them, and later burned their leader, Basileios, at the stake in the hippodrome (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 15.9).

Among other charges of heresy, Eustratios, the bishop of Nikaia, was condemned by the Church in 1117 for saying that Christ used Aristotelian syllogisms in his teachings (*The Misconceived Notions of Eustratios of Nikaia regarding the Incarnation* 24).

In 1284, the Church was divided between the Arsenites, a large faction who had refused to recognize the official patriarchs of Constantinople since 1265, and everyone else. The emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos called a council at Adramyttion in Asia Minor and, after all efforts at persuasion failed, the two sides agreed on the following: They would each write down their respective positions and place them in a powerful fire. If one survived and the other not, they would all accept the position that was not burned. If both were burned, they would make peace. Both were burned. But the next day most of the Arsenites refused to be reconciled (Georgios Pachymeres, *History* 7.21–22).

No wild beasts are as ferocious as Christians are to each other (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 22.5.4, late fourth century).

Around A.D. 300, one Alexandros of Lykopolis wrote a treatise *Against the Manichaeans*, which begins with a lucid account of the transformation of Christian thought in his time. *The philosophy of the Christians is fairly simple. It is mostly concerned with ethical teaching and gives only hints when it comes to the more esoteric questions about the nature of God. . . . Its precepts are rather crude, but they do help the common people improve their lives. However, later generations subdivided this philosophy by engaging in contentious disputations to which there can really be no solution, and the people have been led into fractious quarrels too. As each of these teachers strives to impress others by the novelty of his doctrines, they have turned this formerly simple philosophy into an unspeakable mess.* It is unknown whether Alexandros was a pagan or a Christian himself.

I fear theology more than anything else, and there is no way that I will touch it unless I absolutely have to (Maximos Planoudes, *Letter* 113).

WHAT IF?

In the satire *Timarion* (ca. 1100), the hero dies after eating a heavy meal and is conveyed by demonic escorts to Hades, where he learns, to his surprise, that the afterlife is run by pagans after all. The judges on the Tribunal of the Dead are ancient Greek kings and philosophers who wore turbans, like Arabs, along with the heretical emperor Theophilos (A.D. 829–842). Sensing his alarm, his advocate before the Tribunal of the Dead tells him, *Don't worry about the pagan judges: they are strictly just and do not discriminate on the basis of religion* (*Timarion* 29). In the end, the Tribunal finds that the demon-escorts snatched his soul from his body before he was quite dead, and so he is sent back.

· XI ·

A Gallery of Rogues

CON MEN

When he was young, Saint Lazaros (eleventh century) fell in with a wandering monk who would go from town to town begging for food and supplies; then he would sell them at a local market elsewhere and make a profit. Lazaros, who had to carry all these goods, began to give them away secretly to passersby, whereupon the crooked monk arranged to sell him into slavery to some Armenian sailors at the port town of Attaleia—but Lazaros fled just in time (*Life of Saint Lazaros of Galesion* 8–9).

†

Lazaros, who eventually became a stylite saint, was once approached by a man who appeared to be possessed, yelling incoherently. But the man then calmed down and made him a business proposition. His game was that he would travel from town to town and find a local who ran a church or shrine and knew who owned valuable items. Then he would bury a cross in the dirt. Going to the church during the service and acting like a demoniac, he would lead them to where he had buried the cross and dig it up. He would call on them by name and say that the saint commanded them to bring him this or that

specific valuable item or else their families would be possessed. When they had all done so, he pretended to be cured and would split the loot with his contact. Then he would move on to another town (*Life of Saint Lazaros of Galesion* 12).

An expert forger named Priskos from Emesa contrived the following scheme. The church of Emesa had, a while back, inherited the estate of one Mammianos. Priskos, cutting a deal with the church, researched the ancestry of the leading men of the city and forged documents in which they declared that they owed Mammianos great sums of money. He then bribed the emperor Justinian I to pass a law extending the statute of limitations from thirty to a hundred years, and began to prosecute the descendants of those men for fictitious past debts. Fortunately, the imperial investigator Longinos uncovered the fraud. Justinian, mumbling on about how things don't work out as intended, repealed the previous law (Prokopios, *Secret History* 28; Justinian, *Novellae* 9 and 111).

A man deposited fifty coins with a controller of weights, but the latter thought that no one had witnessed the transaction and later denied receiving the money. But it had been seen by a town notable, who arranged to meet the controller at the shrine of Saint Andreas. The notable went inside, took all his clothes off, and began to pretend that he was possessed by a demon, yelling incoherently. In his rant, he accused the controller of stealing the money and swearing false oaths: others would think that he was merely mad but the crook would realize that he knew. The notable then began to throttle the thief and shout that he should return the coins. The thief confessed and handed them over. The notable then ended his charade, put on his clothes, and acted normally. *I did this to save your soul,* he said, *and get the man his money back* (*Sayings of the Saintly Old Men* 48).

Canon 60 of the Council in Troullo prescribed that those who pretend to be possessed by demons should be punished as if they were.

The twelfth-century canonist Theodoros Balsamon liked to ferret out those who pretended to be demoniacs in order to make money. *I see many of these types going around the cities. Far from being punished, they are embraced by some as if they were sanctified. . . . Many bishops arrest and imprison people who chain themselves to the church of the great martyr Niketas or who wander the streets pretending to be demoniacs* (*Commentary on Canon 60 of the Council in Troullo*, v. 2, pp. 441–442).

The biggest con man of all was Paulos Tagaris, whose confession was taken by the patriarchal Synod that heard his case in 1394. His first scam was to pretend to have a miraculous icon, which he used to make money. He then took up service under the patriarch of Antioch, who ordained him, and began selling Church offices. Soon he falsely called himself the patriarch of Jerusalem and appointed other bishops, always in exchange for money. He traveled to Georgia, where he settled a dispute in the royal family, siding of course with the member who paid him the most. Summoned to Constantinople to answer for his impostures, he instead fled to Rome via the Crimea and Hungary, to seek the pope's help. He there converted to Catholicism and was appointed (titular) Catholic patriarch of Constantinople, whose base was Euboia (Venetian Negroponte). Denounced to the pope as an impostor by the bishop of Athens, Tagaris fled to Cyprus, where he was received as a patriarch and paid to crown the Lusignan king. He was arrested, freed, played the pope against the anti-pope in Rome and Avignon, and established himself again. Tagaris traveled as far as Paris, decked out in jewels and with a retinue, and gave the head of James, the brother of Jesus, as a gift to the city of Ancona. Eventually, he returned to Constantinople, where a case had been building against him for years, and he confessed (Miklosich and Müller, *Acta et diplomata*, v. 2, pp. 224–230).

DOUBTING THE SAINTS

Vitalios, an old monk from Palestine, wanted to test the patriarch of Alexandria, Ioannes the Merciful, to see whether he was judgmental

and yet weak in the face of scandal. So he came to Alexandria and tracked down all the prostitutes. He would work during the day and spend each night with one prostitute, but paying her to *not* have sex. He would stand in the corner praying over her all night as she slept. In the morning, he would make her promise not to tell. He soon acquired a reputation as a dirty old man. *Don't I too have a body, like everyone else?* he told his accusers. When they told him to take a wife, he said, *Mind your own business. Why should I take on the burdens of a household and pass my days in misery to make you feel better? You won't have to answer for me, leave me alone.* They brought this to the patriarch's attention, but he declined to rush to judgment, and told them to stop slandering the good monk. It turned out that some of the women had quit their profession after seeing Vitalios praying over them all night (Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of the Patriarch and Saint Ioannes the Merciful* 36).

†

Gessios was a medical doctor of the late fifth century; he was a pagan at heart, but had been forced by the emperor to be baptized. He scoffed at the miracles of the healer-saints Kyros and Ioannes, saying that they accomplished their cures by medical science, not divine power. But one day he was stricken by an affliction of the back, which made it hard for him to move. He tried every treatment known to science, to no avail. Finally, he turned to the two saints. They appeared to him in dreams and gave him specific instructions about how to heal his affliction, only, they said, afterward he would have to go around the church crying out, *I am an idiot!* Gessios dismissed their visitation as a silly dream. This happened repeatedly, until finally Gessios did as he was told and was healed (Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Miracle 30 of Kyros and Ioannes*).

The hermit Barsanouphios—the "Great Old Man"—lived near Gaza in the early sixth century. He lived inside a small cave and remained unseen by the other monks for fifty years. At one point, a monk in the community began to openly doubt that he existed, but Barsanouphios

came out and washed all their feet (*Letter* 125 of Barsanouphios). Another doubter was Eustochios, the patriarch of Jerusalem, who at one point had enough of this nonsense. He ordered men to dig into the little cave, but a blaze of fire burst out and almost killed everyone there (Euagrios, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.33).

When Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) was building his church, a man named Anthes, with whom he was in a dispute over property, would call the saint a fraud and a hypocrite, and alleged that he used chaff-smoke to change his appearance and make himself look more ascetic. He was openly skeptical that divine power flowed through him. Symeon brought it about through a miracle that the man fell ill and died, his face the color of a lemon. He did this *to terrify uneducated people, so that they did not despise the grace that resides within the holy* (Niketas Stethatos, *Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian* 124).

Come back to the Imperial City! These days every scoundrel like you can dress up like a monk and hang some bells from his penis, or wrap chains around his feet or a rope around his neck, and immediately the people of Constantinople honor him and treat him as a saint more exalted than the Apostles! They shower these people with money and even make them bishops. And I'll add one more thing. The women of this city in particular, but also some of the men are not content to have icons and relics in their homes but covet the chains and irons worn by these common crooks, and buy them in exchange for money! (from a letter by the scholar Tzetzes to his slave Demetrios Cobinos, who had run away and was selling sausages in Philippoupolis: *Letter* 104).

Christophoros Mytilenaios (eleventh century) wrote a poem mocking a certain monk Andreas *for buying the bones of ordinary people as if they were the relics of saints and for accepting an infinite number of limbs as coming from the same saint.* There was an industry of fake-relic production targeting gullible fools. Andreas apparently had ten hands of

Saint Prokopios and four heads of Saint George. *But Saint Nestor was not an octopus to have eight legs, nor George a Hydra to have so many legs. Andreas, you are more likely to run out of money before the tomb raiders run out of graves to plunder* (*Poem* 114).

One study has found 226 pieces of the body of the obscure Saint Charalambos revered in various places of the Orthodox world, compared to only 66 pieces of the body of Saint John Chrysostom[22].

Already in the fourth century there were so many fragments of the True Cross in circulation that a bishop of Jerusalem could claim that the whole world was full of them (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 4.10, 13.4).

NAUGHTY IN CHURCH

Anastasios of Sinai observed that most people could not bear to be in church, not even for a single hour, and they rushed to leave when the service was over as if the building were on fire. If the priest dragged out his sermon even a little bit, they groaned in distress, yawned, and some even left before he was finished. Some in attendance were more interested in who was wearing what fancy clothes; they would ask each other when it would all be over; then, they would snatch the bread of the Eucharist and dash off. Others chatted and gossiped with their friends throughout the service, or checked out the bodies of the women who were there, turning God's church into a brothel. Some people made deals about properties and lands, trading and selling in the church. And the women were not much better. . . (*Speech on the Holy Assembly and on Not Judging Others or Holding a Grudge*, in *PG* 98: 829–832).

One time during the festival in honor of Saint Thekla (in southern Asia Minor), some visitors were eating together and comparing what

they had liked best. One liked the splendor, another the crowd, a third the assembly of archpriests, or the harmony of the psalms, and so on. But one man said that although others may like what they will, *he* saw the most beautiful girl under one of the colonnades, and he had prayed that he might have her. This got him into serious trouble with the saint later on (*Miracles of Saint Thekla* 33).

During his sermon honoring the forty martyrs of Sebaste in 383, Gregory of Nyssa admitted that his voice was unable to overcome the noise being made by the congregation. *I am hardly able to reach those standing nearby.* He tried to restart the homily, but again could not overcome the commotion, so he cut it short, with an amen. He had to finish the speech the next day (*Homily I on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* 141).

BAD INTENTIONS

Two lawyers wanted to kill their fathers: *"So, do you want to go through with it? Each of us will kill his father?" "No, because then they will brand us as patricides. You kill mine and I'll kill yours"* (*Philogelos* 152).

After ca. A.D. 500, the Parthenon in Athens was a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Among the many prayers and epitaphs carved on its columns and walls during the following centuries, a man carved the following prayer/curse: *Dear Maria, Full of Grace, take the man who is fucking my bride and give him a hernia, and then make me his doctor so that I may cut his bandage.*

LUSTY PRIESTS

Philippos, the bishop of Amorion in the early eleventh century, employed a rustic to seduce young girls and widows. This man would entice them to the bed of the bishop, *a man not small, and vigorous*

in the act. Eventually, he appointed this middleman to be the bishop of Philomelion. *Now I ride a horse,* says the rustic in a satirical poem written against him, *and I'm rich, and may the darkness cover over what I do at night* (Michael the Grammarian, *Poem on the Bishop of Philomelion*).

Tzetzes refers to shameless women who allow priests to use *their crowbars of flesh to pry up their marble flooring,* and then pay them money for their *night battles* so that the priests might purchase a bishopric (*Histories, or Thousands of Verses* 3.70).

MISCELLANEOUS

Psellos wrote a series of letters on the scandalous habits of a wandering monk named Elias (Elijah), whom Psellos found amusing. Elias wandered because he had to support his mother and many relatives. On one occasion, Psellos crossed the Sea of Marmara in a boat in his company. The monk was commenting on the city's prostitutes, noting which were real pros and which were unqualified for the job. He expressed an opinion on which barmaids might take to the streets, and had lists of women who plied the trade both openly and secretly. The rowers were in thrall as they listened. However, Elias told Psellos that his fornicating went only as far as words, not deeds (*Letter KD* 97).

The great scholar of Homer and bishop of Thessalonike, Eustathios (twelfth century), wrote a long treatise exposing the greed and corruption of monks in that city. They joined monasteries in order to make money, swindle it out of others, and live a lordly life. They ran businesses, frequented the marketplace, and were always on the move, buying and selling. Some brought all their property with them when they joined a monastery, and continued to enjoy it now—tax-free. Eustathios exposes how they bamboozled gullible rich victims in the secular world, pretending to work a few miracles on them, seeing

visions, and promising them heaven or sanctification. Then they got them to join their monastery and turn their property over to them. What these corrupt monks hated above all was learning and education (Eustathios of Thessalonike, *Scrutiny of the Monastic Life with a View toward its Reform*, esp. 57, 117–135).

In the days of the emperor Isaakios II Angelos (1185–1195), there flourished a prophet named Basilakios. He made ambiguous and enigmatic predictions about the future while jumping around erratically and making wild gestures. When women would come to him for a reading, one of his techniques was to fondle their breasts and touch their ankles (Choniates, *History* 448).

Garment thieves would wear their stolen goods inside out so that they would not be recognized (Michael Choniates, *Letter* 89).

There are few bona fide wizards in Byzantine literature, and the most interesting is Heliodoros, the anti-hero of the life of Saint Leon, the bishop of Catania (eighth century). When Heliodoros was insulted by a noblewoman in Constantinople, he cast a spell that extinguished all the fires in the city and made it so that the people could henceforth obtain fire only from her "hole." Then he teleported magically back to his native Sicily before he could be executed (*Life of Saint Leon of Catania* 14, pp. 94–95).

· XII ·

Inventive Insults

AGAINST EMPERORS

Telmatobios borborophagos choiros: swamp-dwelling, filthy pit-eating swine (Konstantinos Manasses, *Concise Chronicle* 4258, on the Iconoclast emperor Konstantinos V).

†

Popular poem mocking the emperor Maurikios (582–602) and his empress Konstantina:

> *He found her, the heifer, tender, and like a young cock*
> *he mounted her, and made children like wood-chips [?].*
> *And no one dares to speak out, because he's muzzled everyone.*
> *My holy Lord, you are terrible and mighty, smack him upside the head!*
> (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 283)

The Byzantines gave nicknames, sometimes unflattering, to some of their emperors, including:

- *Thick Neck* (Constantine I)
- *The Apostate* (Julian, who renounced Christianity)
- *The Butcher* (Leon I, who slaughtered a rival general in the palace)

- *Mismatched Eyes* (Anastasius I, who had eyes of different color)
- *Big Beard* (Konstantinos IV)
- *Cut-Nose* (Justinian II, whose nose had been cut to prevent him from regaining the throne)
- *Shit-Name* (Konstantinos V, who allegedly defecated in his baptismal font)
- *The Khazar* (Leon IV, after his mother, a Khazar princess)
- *The Stammerer* (Michael II)
- *The Drunkard* (Michael III)
- *The Wise* (Leon VI)
- *Pretty Boy* (Romanos II)
- *The Bulgar-Slayer* (Basil II)
- *The Caulker* (Michael V, after his father's profession)
- *The Geezer* (Michael VI)
- *Penny-Pincher* (Michael VII, who was parsimonious).

Emperors born while their fathers occupied the throne were called *Born-in-the-Purple* (*Porphyrogennetos*), though it remains in use today for only one emperor (Konstantinos VII).

The people of Constantinople trained parrots to insult the empress Euphrosyne (d. 1211) by squawking, *You whore, pay a fair price!* (Choniates, *History* 520).

AGAINST MEN IN HIGH PLACES

- *Maxilloploumbakios*: a man with "heavy jowls," from *maxilla* and *plumbus* (lead), a name coined by the people of Constantinople for a hated Cappadocian official, the flesh of whose cheeks hung down heavily over his jaws; also called the "broad-joweled one" (*platygnathos*) (Ioannes Lydos, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State* 3.58, 3.61).
- *Koukkouroboukinatores phouktokolotrypatoi*: men with shriveled cocks and gaping assholes. There's a bit of guessing involved in this one, but it's the likeliest rendition. It was part of a demotic poem mocking the regime of Ioannes I Tzimiskes (969–976), here

targeting its eunuchs, the chamberlain Basileios Lakapenos and patriarch Polyeuktos.

High officials in the sixth century had odd nicknames: leading generals were known as the Eater and the Hunchback, civil magistrates were known as the Pumpkin, and a fiscal officer was called Alexandros Scissors (because he would trim coins around the edges).

The Byzantines were by no means above making fun of someone's name by distorting it to produce an insult:

- The unpopular high official Stephanos Hagiochristophorites (named after Saint Christopher) was called *Antichristophorites*—in other words, *the Anti-Christ-Bearer* (Choniates, *History* 293).
- The lord of Philadelphia after the fall of Constantinople in 1204, Theodoros Mangaphas, was called *Morotheodoros*—that is, *Moron-Theodore* (Georgios Akropolites, *History* 7).
- Ioannes Argyropoulos mocked his enemy Katablattas as Skatablattas, from Greek *skata*, "shit" (*Satire of Katablattas*, fifteenth century).

AGAINST RIVALS

- *Kasalbopornomachloproktepembates*: he who mounts (*epembates*) the anuses (*proktos*) of whores (*kasalbas*), prostitutes (*porne*), and lewd women (*machlas*). One of many compound insults devised by Konstantinos of Rhodes to mock his enemy, the scholar and diplomat Leon Choirosphaktes (ca. 900), whose name, by the way, meant Pig Butcher.
- *Olethrobibliophalsogrammatophthoros*: he who destroys others (*phthoros*) by writing evil books (*olethro-biblion*) and rotten writings (*phalso-gramma*).
- *Hellenothreskochristoblasphemotropos*: he whose character (*tropos*) is inclined to revere pagans (*Helleno-threskos*) and blaspheme Christ (*Christoblasphemos*).
- *Presbeutokerdosynchytospondophthoros*: he who destroys (*phthoros*) treaties (*spondai*) and throws them into confusion (*synchyzo*) by being an ambassador (*presbeutes*) motivated by greed (*kerdos*).

- *Boulgaralbanitoblachos*: a Bulgarian-Albanian-Vlach, an ethnic slur targeting a Bulgarian candidate for the patriarchate of Constantinople, alleging that he was a Vlach by birth and an Albanian in appearance (Ioannes Katrares, *Anakreontic verses against the philosopher Neophytos* 50–54, fourteenth century).

Tzetzes was asked to correct an old manuscript containing Thucydides' *History*, but he found that the previous copyist had made many mistakes. At one point he wrote in the margin, *The shit of the copyist stinks the worst here* (*Palatinus graecus* 252, f. 184v).

· XIII ·

Punishments

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Basil of Caesarea opined that punishment was imposed not in order to redress what had already happened—*for there are no means by which we can undo what has been done*—but so that criminals might become better people in the future and to prevent others from committing crimes (*Letter* 112.3).

†

Men who castrated other men were to be castrated in turn (Justinian I, *Novella* 142, repealed by Leon VI). Men who blinded other men were to be blinded, albeit in only one eye (Leon VI, *Novella* 92). Whoever falsely accuses another man suffers the penalty that he would have suffered had he been convicted (*Ekloge* 17.51).

Question: *For what kind of person should we not pray after he dies?* Answer: *For anyone who has a mistress and won't break it off with her, and for anyone who collects interest on a loan* (Ioasaph of Ephesos, *Questions and Answers* 44).

HUMILIATION

Criminals were commonly subjected to a humiliating public procession around town, which either was their actual punishment or merely formed its opening act. Men and women pilloried in this way would typically have their hair shaven off—made even *balder than an egg* (Choniates, *History* 349)—and stripped naked, or dressed in rags if they were nobles, or in women's clothes if men. Sometimes they would also be whipped in advance, or covered in black pitch, especially on the face, and animal intestines might be draped around their neck and shoulders. Often they were placed on a donkey or camel or ox, sometimes facing backward and made to hold the tail. They might also be required to cry out, *I am an idiot!* (Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Miracles of Kyros and Ioannes* 30). The public would then spit on them, toss feces and blood, empty out chamber pots on them, and mock them, calling them dogs and insulting their parents. In some cases they threw stones or pieces of wood. In front there would be a man proclaiming the crime, and sometimes jesters too, making fun of the whole scene with jokes and ditties.

†

In 765, Konstantinos V humiliated some monks who opposed his religious policies by forcing them to walk around the hippodrome hand-in-hand with women, while the people jeered and spat upon them (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, pp. 437–438).

When Alexios I Komnenos seized Constantinople in 1081, his soldiers killed many residents and plundered properties. Regretting these events, Alexios summoned a special ecclesiastical court to impose penance on himself and his relatives who had supported him, including the women: for forty days they were to fast, sleep on the ground with a rock for a pillow, wear a hair shirt, and lament their evil deeds (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 3.5.5–6).

PRISONS AND MINES

It was illegal to have private prisons—which meant they probably existed (*Basilika* 60.55). Bishops had the right to release people confined in them (3.1.4) and those who operated them had to spend as much time in a public prison as their victims had spent in theirs (60.55.2).

The chief characteristic of prisons was that they were dark—so dark that one could not tell whether it was day or night outside, and cellmates could not recognize each other. After two years of solitary confinement in the dark, one prisoner emerged nearsighted and generally ill (Prokopios, *Secret History* 4.9–12; cf. Michael Glykas, *Prison Verses* 91; *Basilica* 60.51.60; Demetrios Kydones, *Letter* 224). Inmates lacked beds and space in which to move. They often had to rely on the support of their families or the charity of strangers.

Prisoners could be chained with cuffs around the ankles, wrists, and neck, fastened to a wooden trunk (Theodoros the Stoudite, *Letter* 2.58). There is also evidence for the stocks used as a punishment.

Demetrios Kydones (fourteenth century) wrote an evocative account of the joy that prisoners felt after their release, addressing them directly: *The scent of trees and flowers has now replaced the stench that prevails there, and the chains that would previously not allow you to even sit seem now to be but the webs of spiders. Now, not only can you walk at will, you can even run, and not only with your feet but on horseback. Thinking about that pit that held you, we laugh as we behold plains and mountain tops. Nothing can hold you now! You hunt, exercise, and converse with each other, doing everything with pleasure!* (*Letter* 224).

A punishment imposed by Roman and Byzantine law was confinement to hard labor in the mines. The Church Father John Chrysostom says that the condemned toil away in the dark, bound and without

breaks until the evening. To avoid falling into clefts and hollows, they are given a lantern. As they cannot tell the time, the chief guard makes a loud noise to signal that it is time to eat (*Homily 23 on 1 Corinthians*, in *PG* 61: 196–197). Prisoners in the mines could be released into the custody of relatives after ten years if they were no longer able to work due to age or illness, as determined by the governor (*Basilika* 60.51.21).

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

Constantine the Great increased the number of capital crimes and decreed innovative punishments for them. For example, corrupt government officials could have their hands cut off: *their greedy hands shall cease—they will cease, I say, or be cut off!* (*Codex Theodosianus* 1.16.7) If a girl's nurse assists in her seduction, *her mouth and throat shall be poured full of molten lead* (9.24.1.1).

And what is most disgraceful, some ladies are so vicious and cruel that they lash their slaves so hard that the welts don't disappear within a day. They even strip the girls naked, tie them down on the couch, and call their husbands in to do the deed. . . . Do you really want to show your slave-girl naked to your husband? And then you incite him further by insulting the poor wretch by calling her a Thessalian witch, a runaway, a slut? Can this be allowed in a Christian household? (John Chrysostom, *Homily in Ephesians 15.3-4*, in *PG* 62: 109–110).

Some emperors would place the amputated limbs of criminals on display in the hippodrome or along the main streets of Constantinople. They included Phokas (602–610) and Leon V (813–820) (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 296; Ioseph Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors* 1.15).

A lawyer visited the parents of a friend who died. The father was crying and expressing grief in strong terms: *"My child, you've ruined me!"*

Fig. 13.1 The Iconoclast emperor Theophilos orders that hot plates be applied to the hands of the icon-painter Lazaros; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

And the mother added, "You've blinded me!" The lawyer then said to his friends, "If he truly did such things, he should have been burned alive" (*Philogelos* 69).

Two brothers from Jerusalem, Theodoros and Theophanes, opposed the emperor Theophilos (829–842) by defending the veneration of icons. To punish them, he had a poem in twelve verses tattooed upon their faces, from when they were then known as the Graptoi brothers, "The Inscribed Ones." The low quality of the poem was part of the punishment:

> *In that fair town* [Jerusalem] *whose sacred streets were*
> *trod by the pure feet of the Word of God*
> *– the city all men's hearts desire to see –*
> *these evil vessels of perversity*
> *and superstition, working foul deeds there,*
> *were driven forth to this our city, where,*
> *persisting in their wicked and lawless ways,*
> *they are condemned, branded on the face as scoundrels,*
> *and hounded back to their native place*[23].
>
> (Pseudo-Symeon, *Chronicle*, p. 641; Ioannes Zonaras, *Chronicle*, v. 3, 366)

The admiral Niketas Ooryphas skinned alive some Christian defectors whom he captured after defeating an Arab fleet in ca. 873. His rationale was that he was removing only their baptism, which they themselves had renounced; he was not taking anything that belonged to them. Others he dropped from cranes into vats of boiling pitch, to give them a real experience of the baptism of pain and darkness that they had chosen. This created not a little fear in the minds of those who wanted to attack Roman territory (Theophanes Continuatus, p. 301).

Fig. 13.2 Admiral Ooryphas punishes Arab captives; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

According to an apocryphal story, the Armenian king Gagik II, who had been forced to abdicate his throne, was angry at the Byzantine bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia for naming his dog "Armen" as an insult to all Armenians. One day he announced that he would visit the bishop, which made the latter happy. During the meal, he asked him to bring out his dog, which was rumored to be powerful. The bishop was embarrassed to call him. *Call him by his name, so that he comes.* The bishop then called him, adding that he named him Armen because he was *powerful like a soldier* (many Armenians served in the army). *We shall see about that,* said Gagik, and ordered his men to place the dog and the bishop in a sack. For the rest of the day they beat the dog with sticks so that it attacked its master and tore him

to bits, amid thrashing, growling, and moaning (Matthew of Edessa, *Chronicle* 2.43).

According to a later legend, the emperor Justinian I (527–565) *feared that Ignatios, the architect of Hagia Sophia, was more popular than he was. He was advised to kill him in the following way: when the equestrian statue was placed on top of the column next to the church* [this column held up a massive equestrian statue of Justinian next to Hagia Sophia]*, the scaffolding was taken down before Ignatios could descend. So he was left there to starve. That night Ignatios cut all his clothes into thin strips and tied them together. He told his wife, who was crying at the column base, to get a strong rope, dip it in pitch, and bring it to him. She tied the rope to the end of his clothesline and he hauled it up. Tying it to the horse's leg, he climbed down and then set fire to it, so that there was no proof left of how he escaped. Ignatios then lived as a monk. When the emperor happened to see him three years later, he gave him gifts and sent him on his way: "Look," he said, "if God wants someone to live, a thousand men can't kill him"* (*Narrative of Hagia Sophia* 31).

After the Crusaders took the city in April 1204, they captured the latest Byzantine emperor Alexios V Doukas (1204), also known as Mourtzouphlos, allegedly because of his bushy dark eyebrows. He had previously been blinded by his Byzantine rivals. His Latin captors now debated how to kill him—in front of him!—and they settled on throwing him from the top of the column in the forum of Theodosios I. When this was done, *his whole body was smashed*, and *he was broken all to pieces.* The Venetian doge, Dandolo, had proposed this method in a joke: *He is too lofty a man to be hanged*, he said, *for such a* lofty *man we need* lofty *justice!* (Robert de Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople* 103–104). Others wrote poems celebrating the event: *Now come on, blind man, fly! You do not deserve a single execution, but also by cross, rope, and millstone! So come on, blind man, fly!* (Gunther of Paris, *Hystoria Constantinopolitana* 20).

SEX CRIMES

Not only rape but also proposing marriage to a nun carried the death penalty (emperor Jovian, in *Codex Theodosianus* 9.25.2).

The Council of Ankara (A.D. 314) decreed a graduated system of penance for those who committed the sin of bestiality, depending on extenuating circumstances. Those who were under twenty years old were treated more lightly. But if they were older, or had really taken to the practice with a passion, or had wives, then the penance was severe (*Canon* 16). Yet it was recognized by later commentators that one may lapse into this sin through *a natural urge* (Theodoros Balsamon, *Commentary on the Canons of Ankara*, v. 3, p. 54).

Starting with Justinian I (527–565), the penalty for some crimes, especially those of a sexual nature, was confinement in a monastery. This was presumably intended to promote the criminal's moral improvement, but it often entailed the transfer of his property to the monastery, thus contributing to its financial support.

Justinian I (527–565) decreed that those who committed homosexual acts should have their genitals completely amputated (*kaulotomia*: not just their testicles), and they were then paraded through the city. This was effectively a death sentence. Among his victims were bishops (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.18). According to a later source, in some cases Justinian had sharp reeds painfully inserted into the holes in these men's genitals, and paraded them that way through the streets (Georgios the Monk, *Chronicle*, v. 2, 645). Scholars have called these "punishments that mirror the crime." Allegedly, Justinian was asked why he punished them in this way, and he said, *If they had stolen sacred vessels, would I not have cut their hands off?* (Ioannes Zonaras, *Chronicle* 14.7). But none of this was done by later emperors.

The emperor Theodoros II Laskaris (1254–1258) gave the daughter of Theodora Palaiologina in marriage to one of his men, and Theodora was resentful because she had engaged that daughter to another man. The new husband, however, was unable to perform his conjugal duties. The emperor asked him whether he believed that he had been the victim of a magical attack by his mother-in-law, and the man said that it was so. The emperor was now furious and believed that the magic was targeted against *him* as the person responsible for the marriage. To force her to confess her guilt, he placed Theodora in a sack full of cats that began to rip her apart. But the brave lady would not admit that she was in the least responsible for the unhappy state of her son-in-law, and so she was released from this torture, in a pitiful state, more dead than alive (Georgios Pachymeres, *History* 1.12).

NOSES

When the people deposed Justinian II, in 695, they cut off his nose to disqualify him for the throne, yet he returned from exile to rule again in 705. A later Western source, Agnellus of Ravenna, says that he sported a golden prosthetic replacement (*Book of the Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, p. 367).

Tatikios was the general who represented Alexios I Komnenos on the First Crusade, as it marched through Asia Minor. The historians of the Crusade mention that he had a mutilated nose, and one of them adds that he had a gold prosthesis (Guibert of Nogent, *The Deeds Accomplished by God through the Franks* 162).

EYES

The empress Eirene, a native of Athens, ruled in 780–797 as regent for her young son Konstantinos VI, but when he came of age, the two began to quarrel and plot against each other. Finally, in 797 her

partisans arrested him and she had him blinded, so cruelly that he died soon afterward. Eirene then became the first woman to rule the Roman empire in her own name. For her role in restoring the worship of icons in 787, Eirene was (and still is) regarded by some as a saint in the Orthodox Church.

†

Two ways of blinding were used: physical gouging out of the eyes—in individual cases tent pegs are said to have been used, a kitchen knife, or candelabrum—and the destruction of the ability to see by the application of a red-hot implement. The more merciful method seems to have involved red-hot cups brought near to the eyes that, over time, seared away the ability to see, possibly without physically touching the organs (Georgios Pachymeres, *History* 3.10).

Fig. 13.3 The blinding of Leon Phokas in 971; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

In 1014, the emperor Basil II (976–1025) ambushed and surrounded a large Bulgarian army in the pass of Kleidion ("the Key"). The Bulgarians surrendered, whereupon Basil is said to have blinded all 14,000 of them, leaving one eye to only one person out of each hundred, so that he could lead the rest of his group home (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Chronicle* 348–349). The Bulgarian king Samuil is said to have died of grief and terror upon witnessing this grisly sight, and

the Bulgarian empire collapsed four years later. Basil II later became known as "the Bulgar-Slayer."

After a brief civil war in 1071–1072, the emperor Romanos IV Diogenes surrendered to his enemies, the Doukas family. He was promised that he would not be harmed, but in violation of its oaths the Doukas regime had him blinded. The bishops who had given guarantees stood by helplessly as Diogenes screamed for mercy. The deed was allegedly done by an inexperienced Jew, who did it so cruelly that Diogenes died a few weeks later, his eyes running blood and pus in the meantime (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 178). Psellos, a Doukas partisan at the time, wrote a consolatory letter to Diogenes explaining that everything happens for a reason and that the Sleepless Eye of divine justice sees all. *Now that he has lost his sight, Diogenes can enjoy the divine light that God will ignite in his soul* (*Letter S* 82).

Nikephoros Diogenes, son of the blinded emperor Romanos IV Diogenes (d. 1072), was implicated in a plot against the emperor Alexios I Komnenos in 1094, and was blinded himself. According to Alexios' daughter Anna Komnene, who knew him, Nikephoros subsequently took up scholarship by having others read to him. He was interested in (and apparently good at) geometry, which he practiced through the means of shapes drawn for him in relief (*Alexiad* 8.10).

According to one tale, a son of the Byzantine emperor Ioannes V Palaiologos (1341–1391) and a son of the Ottoman sultan Murad (1362–1389) conspired against their fathers, but were defeated. Murad ordered Ioannes to blind his son, Andronikos IV, as he did his own. Ioannes poured scalding vinegar over Andronikos' eyes, but in such a way that he was still able to see, and his vision even improved later (Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *Histories* 1.48, 2.4).

Pero Tafur was a Spanish traveler who passed through Constantinople in 1437. *One day the Castilian captain there sent for me, because one of his men had been killed at sea by a Greek, with intent to steal his ship. We took the criminal and the corpse to the emperor* [Ioannes VIII Palaiologos] *that justice might be done. In front of the palace, he ordered the criminal's hands to be cut off and his eyes to be put out. I enquired why they did not put him to death, and they replied that the emperor could not order his soul to be destroyed* (Pero Tafur, *Travels* 17[24]).

SUPERNATURAL

The Vandal barbarians who conquered and ruled North Africa (429–534) were Arian heretics and sometimes persecuted their Catholic subjects. Among their victims were some holy men whose tongues they cut out, but who, as many sources attest, continued to be able to speak, and some even traveled to Constantinople to display this miracle. Only the historian Prokopios adds, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, that two of them visited the city's prostitutes, after which they lost the ability to speak (*Wars* 3.8.3–4).

Justinian I made it illegal for a man to be punished with the loss of both his legs or both his arms (*Novellae* 134.13). In the early seventh century, there was a certain mime who used to mock the Mother of God on stage. She appeared to him and asked him to stop (*Why are you slandering me before the people? What did I ever do to you?*), but he persisted. She then appeared to him in a dream and traced lines across his arms and legs. When he woke up, all four limbs had been cut off, *and there he lay, like a stump* (Ioannes Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 47). His wretched state made clear to all the fruit of blasphemy: this was *true love of humanity*, the pious author adds.

One afternoon in the heat, Ioannes and Sophronios paid a visit to the house of their friend Stephanos in Alexandria, but a servant girl told them that he was taking a nap, could they come back later? So they went to wait in the shade of a nearby arch that spanned an intersection, where three blind men were telling each other how they had lost their sight. One had developed ophthalmitis while he was a sailor and the other had been injured working as a glass-maker. The third said that he used to steal when he was a younger. One day, he followed a funeral procession to rob the corpse after it had been placed in the tomb. But the corpse suddenly sat up, stretched its hands toward him, and gouged out his eyes. *And that is how I became blind.* Ioannes and Sophronios quickly found another place to sit (Ioannes Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 77).

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The late Byzantine philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon argued against what he called *cruel and unusual punishments,* here especially mutilations and amputations of limbs, which he thought were barbaric and un-Hellenic. Punishment should aim to ensure that a man commits no crimes in the future. If a person is incorrigible, it is best to kill him and free his soul. But a host of maimed people are a burden on the state (*Advice to the Despot Theodoros Palaiologos concerning the Peloponnese,* v. 4, pp. 124–125). Condemned criminals could be put to work on the defensive wall protecting the Peloponnese from Turkish invasion (*Address to Manuel II Palaiologos concerning the Affairs of the Peloponnese,* v. 3, 162).

Mehmet II the Conqueror often executed hundreds of his captives *by sawing each man in half. This was the most violent form of death that he had devised for them, to cut the body into two. They make the cut at the diaphragm, whence it happens that the victim lasts for a long time during his execution* (Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *Histories* 10.11).

Fig. 13.4 Early Christian martyr being sawed in the head; from the *Menologion* made for the emperor Basil II in ca. 1000.

The Wallachian prince Vlad III Dracul (1431–1477) was known as the Impaler, based on his favorite method of killing his enemies, and he inspired the legend of Dracula. A striking account was left by the Athenian historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles, describing the reaction of the Turkish army of Mehmet II when they entered the valley of death that Vlad had created near his capital. *The sultan's army entered into the area of the impalements, which was seventeen stades long and seven stades wide* [i.e., 3 by 1.5 km]. *There were large stakes on which about twenty thousand men, women, and children had been spitted—quite a sight for the Turks and the sultan himself. The sultan said that Vlad had a diabolical understanding of how to govern his realm and its people. . . . The rest of the Turks were dumbfounded when they saw the multitude of men on the stakes. There were infants, too, affixed to their mothers on the stakes, and birds had made their nests in their entrails.*

· XIV ·

Foreign Lands and People, A.D. 330–641

Synesios was a Platonist philosopher (a student of the famous Hypatia) and the bishop of Kyrene (in modern Libya). In a letter to his brother, he recounts a journey in 401 from Alexandria to Kyrene on which almost everything went wrong. The captain and more than half his crew were Jews, *who believed it was an act of piety to kill as many Greeks as possible*, and there were thirteen of them, an added evil omen. They called each other by nicknames based on physical defects: *Cripple, Hernia, Lefty,* and *Squinty*. It turned out, moreover, they were strict orthodox Jews, so that they refused to pilot the ship during a storm on the Sabbath. All the captain would do was read his scroll, even when the passengers begged him to save them and an Arab soldier threatened him with a sword (Synesios, *Letter* 5).

†

Later on during the journey, the ship put in at a place called Azarion, where provisions were brought by the local women who were endowed with enormous breasts, and their nipples were turned up, so

that they fed their children over the shoulder, not by cradling them. These women had heard that women from other lands had smaller breasts and wanted to see them, so they brought food in exchange for a glance. Synesios' group happened to have a young female slave with them from Pontos, who was more petite than an ant. *All the talk was about this one; she was the one the locals liked most, and they gave her the most. And she was not at all embarrassed to show herself naked to them* (Synesios, *Letter* 5).

The Vandal king Geizeric (d. 477) conquered North Africa, sacked Rome in 455, and terrorized the Mediterranean with his pirate fleet. One time when he was setting sail from Carthage, his pilot asked him where they were going. Geizeric replied, *Clearly, against people with whom God is angry* (Prokopios, *Wars* 3.5.25).

The spoils of Jerusalem: In 534, Justinian I celebrated his conquest of the North African kingdom of the Vandals. Among the spoils led in the triumphal procession were the sacred artifacts from the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem, the Second Temple rebuilt by Herod the Great in the first century B.C. The Second Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, when Titus took Jerusalem, ending the Jewish War. The spoils from the Temple, including the famous menorah, were taken to Rome and paraded in triumph, as shown on the Arch of Titus in the forum and described in detail by Josephos (*Jewish War* 7.5.3–6). They were then captured when the Vandals under Geizeric sacked Rome in A.D. 455 and stored in their palace at Carthage, where they were found by Justinian's general Belisarios and shipped to Constantinople. After the triumph of 534, a Jew pointed out to Justinian that no city that held them had been safe, and that they should be returned to Jerusalem. Justinian did so, dispersing to them to various churches there (Prokopios, *Wars* 4.9.5–9). Jerusalem was captured by the Persians in 614 and the relics are never heard of again.

EGYPTIANS

The people of Egypt are dark and swarthy, and they have a sad look about them; they are slender and shriveled, but easily animated in their gestures; and they are quarrelsome and persistent. Any one of them would be ashamed not to show many stripes of the lash on his body caused by his refusing to pay taxes. And no torture has been invented that is harsh enough to force one of their most hardened criminals to even reveal his name (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 22.16.23).

Public-order officials in Constantinople employed "Egyptian-catchers" and "Syrian-catchers" (*Aigyptiopiastai* and *Syriopiastai*) who, by means similar to modern racial profiling, apprehended people from those provinces who were not in the capital for valid reasons[25].

The last known dated hieroglyphic inscription in Egypt was written at Philae (the Nile island) by the scribe and prophet of Isis, Esmet-Akhom, on the birthday of Osiris, on August 24, 394 A.D. It records the name of the priest, the date, and the god—a son of Horus—that was being honored.

In the fifth century A.D., the grammarian and philosopher Horapollon wrote a treatise in Greek (the *Hieroglyphika*) on how to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. He gets a few things right, but mostly relies on his own imagination. Horapollon's treatise survives and has even been translated. But no one is known who could read hieroglyphics between 394 and its decipherment by Champollion in the 1820s.

When the temple of Serapis in Alexandria was torn down in 391, hieroglyphics were exposed that some Christians wanted to read as signs of the Cross, in order to convert the pagans by showing them that their own religion had prophesied the Life to Come. But the Church historian Sokrates later pointed out that, if the advent of Christ had been a mystery hidden for ages from the world (1 Cor. 2:7–8; Eph.

3:4–5; Col. 1:26), then there was no way in which the Devil and his ministers, the Egyptian priests, could have known about it in advance (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.17).

A monk named Jacob took up residence in the tomb of Ramesses IV in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. He wrote a graffito on the wall stating his inability to understand the hieroglyphics found inside, and also that he covered part of them up with a sheet[26].

ETHIOPIANS

A man approached a pimp offering a black slave girl and asked, *How much for the night?* (*Philogelos* 151).

An old hermit in Egypt named Pachon told the story of how, when he was younger, he was tormented by the memory of an Ethiopian girl he had once seen working in the fields. The Devil would take her form and come sit in his lap, and Pachon was aroused to the point of feeling that he was having sex with her. He struck her, and she vanished, but then for two years he could not bear the smell of his hand. So he found a small viper and rubbed it all over his genitals in the hope that it would bite him there and kill him, but it did not (Palladios, *Lausiac History* 23).

In many lives of desert ascetics, the Devil appears to the saint in the form of a black man, woman, child, or beast, to test him. Sometimes the saint has to wrestle with these figures in the vision. So while Ethiopians generally enjoyed a positive reputation, in this context their blackness was a sign of evil. The fellow monks of Moses the Ethiopian, for example, would mock him in order to test him spiritually, saying, *Why has this Ethiopian come into our midst? Go out, you Ethiopian. You are not a human being, why are you coming here among us?* (*Sayings of the Holy Fathers*, in *PG* 65: 284).

Some say that a woman who fantasizes about an Ethiopian at the time of conception will give birth to an Ethiopian (Theodoros Stoudites, *Letter* 380).

In 530–531, Nonossos was sent by the emperor Justinian I on an embassy to Arabia and Ethiopia, and he wrote a first-hand account of his travels, including a memorable description of Elesboas (Ella Asbeha or Kaleb), the king of the Ethiopian realm of Axum (also known as "India" to the Byzantines). *The king was naked, with gold-threaded linen strips hanging from his belt to his loins, a tunic with pearls thrown about his stomach and shoulders, and bracelets in sets of five and gold bangles on his arms. A gold-threaded linen turban was wound around his head with four pleats on either side, and he wore a golden torque around his neck. He stood atop four elephants that were yoked and had four wheels; on top there was a kind of tall carriage adorned with gold leaves. . . . His entire senate likewise stood with him under arms, and flute-players provided a musical accompaniment* (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.57).

An Egyptian lawyer who traveled to Ethiopia in ca. 400 claimed that the Indian island of Taprobane (probably Sri Lanka) was so rich in magnetic rocks that ships made with nails could not depart from it: they were drawn back to it. He attempted to travel there, but was arrested by a people called the Bisads before he reached it. *As we did not speak a common language, I could not understand their accusations, nor could they understand my explanations. But I knew they were accusing me of something from the bloodshot color of their eyes and the wild grinding of their teeth, and I guessed at their strength from their bodily motions, while they for their part realized that I had no fight in me from my terror, trembling anxiety, and the fact that I had gone pale.* He was sent to work in a bakery for six years, but was released when the great king at Taprobane learned that a Roman—a nation that they hugely respected—had been sent to menial labor (Palladios, *On the Peoples of India and the Brahmans* 1.5–10).

INDIA

A Roman description of India written around 400 says that Brahman men and women live on opposite banks of the Ganges. The men cross the river to be with the women for only forty days during July and August, which are their coldest months. After the woman has two children, the couple never meet again, and remain celibate thereafter. If a woman is barren, the man will try this for only five years (Palladios, *On the Peoples of India and the Brahmans* 1.13).

Around A.D. 500, a Roman merchant named Sopatros reached Taprobane (Sri Lanka) on a ship that also carried a Persian ambassador. They were taken to the local king, who asked them which of their rulers was greater. The Persian claimed that his own Shah of Shahs was greater. Sopatros replied merely that the king should look at them both and judge for himself, for they were both present. *How so?* asked the king. *Their coins*, said Sopatros, *have images of them both so see for yourself*. The king compared them, and found that the shiny gold Roman *solidus* far outmatched its silver Persian counterpart. Sopatros was then mounted on an elephant and paraded around town with musical accompaniment (Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography* 11.19).

CHINA

A reference to the Great Wall of China? Discussing the Seres (Chinese) and Sera (China), Ammianus Marcellinus notes that their land was enclosed and defined by the summits of lofty walls. The Seres themselves are quiet, gentle, and unwarlike, their climate is agreeable, and their sky is clear (*Res Gestae* 23.6.64).

The philosophers of India, the Brahmans, say that if you stretch a rope from China to Romanía (i.e., Byzantium), the middle point will be in Persia (Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography* 2.45).

The longest account of China in a Byzantine source is provided by the seventh-century historian Theophylaktos Simokattes, writing about the late sixth century. He calls its major city "Taygast," and says that it is the most populous region of the world. Next to it is Moukri, possibly Korea. The governor of Taygast is called Taïsan, which means The Son of God, and he has a harem of seven hundred women. The men there never wear jewelry (*History* 7.9).

PERSIANS

Persians are slender, dark, and have intimidating eyes, like a goat's. Their eyebrows are curved like arches and meet in the middle. They have trim beards and long hair. They are addicted to sex and have many concubines and wives, as many as they can afford, but they do not practice pederasty. They are careful never to be seen when they answer a call of nature. They wear swords in public and are formidable fighters, but win through craftiness rather than courage. Otherwise, they talk a lot, boast, are arrogant, and make threats easily (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 23.6.75–83).

The prince Hormizd escaped from his native Persia to Constantinople in the following way. His older brother, the shah Shapur II, had imprisoned him as a potential rival, but his wife brought him a large fish to eat in which she had placed a file. She then sent a large supply of wine to the guards, who passed out in a drunken stupor. Hormizd filed through his shackles, disguised himself as a eunuch, and escaped to Constantinople (Zosimos, *New History* 2.27). He was there given a palace to stay, which was thereafter named Hormisdas after him.

When the Persian army arrived at dawn before Amida in 359, the light of the sun illuminated an entire plain full of glittering arms, cavalry, and coats of mail. The king himself rode a tall horse and wore a ram's head helmet of gold (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*

19.1.2–3). During Julian's invasion in 363, the Persians brought out cavalry entirely encased in metal, with the steel plates fitted exactly to the limbs beneath and a mask sculpted with detailed facial features, having tiny holes for the eyes and nostrils. Next to them, archers were flexing their bows with nimble fingers, pulling the strings all the way back to the right breast; the shafts made a loud hissing noise upon release. And behind them was a row of massive elephants, whose noise and smell terrified the Roman horses. The elephants' mahouts had knives to sever their spines in case the beasts become uncontrollable (*Res Gestae* 25.1.12–15).

The sixth-century historian Agathias commented on Persian (Zoroastrian) rites for disposing of the dead, in which bodies were exposed to be dismembered and picked clear by birds and dogs. If the animals moved fast to do this, the person must have been virtuous; if not, he must have had a flawed character. Sometimes they exposed the terminally ill in this way too, to be eaten. But if they survived and returned, looking like someone half-dead, they were shunned as belonging to the underworld (*Histories* 2.23–24).

Agathias recognized that *all people believe their own customs to be perfect and sacred, reject those of others, and produce every type of clever argument to justify their own*. Still, he could not get over the fact that Persians had sex with their sisters, nieces, daughters, and mothers (*Histories* 2.23–24). What happened to their bodies after death was a fitting punishment for these sexual abominations (2.31.9).

SCYTHIAN NOMADS

An ethnographic type that fascinated the Byzantines throughout their history was that of Herodotos' "Scythians"—horse-riding nomadic pastoralists without cities. One of the earliest to fit the type were the Huns. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, they were squat and ugly, and gashed the cheeks of their children so that beards would

not grow properly on them and they would look scarier. They ate the half-raw flesh of any animal, "cooking" it only by rubbing it between their thighs and their horses' back as they rode. They wore clothes of linen or the sewn skins of mice. Their shoes were not meant for walking so they rode everywhere, conducting all the day's business from horseback. In war they used lassos and extremely powerful bows (*Res Gestae* 31.2).

The Byzantine historian Priskos met with Attila the Hun on numerous occasions and left us a description of him: *he loved war, but was not quick to anger. He gave good advice, was gentle with those who sought mercy, and loyal to his allies. He was short with a broad chest, large head, tiny eyes, sparse beard flecked with white, flat nose, and dark skin* (*History* fr. 11.3).

Attila died on the night after his wedding to the latest in a long series of wives, a beautiful girl named Ildico. He drank too much and suffered a hemorrhage in his sleep. As he was lying on his back, the blood filled his lungs and he drowned. When his men found him the next morning, they gashed their cheeks in respect (Priskos, *History* fr. 24).

The White Huns, or Ephthalites, had a large empire in Central Asia and defeated the Persians on many occasions. Prokopios says that they had cities, were civilized, and had white bodies and faces, so they were not ugly like the other Huns. However, when a rich man among them dies, his companions—up to twenty men who have shared his wealth—are sealed up in his tomb and die with him (Prokopios, *Wars* 1.3.2–6).

SCANDINAVIANS

The Heruls were a pagan German people who settled near the empire in ca. 500. They performed human sacrifice for their gods, and their

old and sick were not permitted to live on but had to be set on a pyre, killed with a dagger, and then cremated. When a man died, his wife was required to hang herself by his tomb or face an evil reputation. *They have sex in unholy ways, especially men with donkeys; they are the vilest of all people* (Prokopios, *Wars* 7.14.1–7, 36).

Jordanes and Prokopios also provide the earliest detailed accounts of Scandinavia, which they call Scandza or Thule and believed was an island. For Jordanes, who self-identifies as a Goth, it was the homeland of his own people, *who burst forth from it like a swarm of bees*—though he admits there are no bees there on account of the cold. In the summer, the sun does not so much set as skim the horizon. The island is *a hive of races and womb of nations*, such as the Finns, Goths, Danes, and Heruls (*Getica* 9, 19–24).

The people of Scandinavia are depressed during the winter because the perpetual darkness prevents them from mingling with each other. They set a watchman on the tallest mountain, and when he first glimpses the sun, he runs back to tell the others that the light will return in five days. They then celebrate a festival, even in the darkness. *I was eager to go to this island and see this for myself, but the opportunity never presented itself* (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.15.5–15).

Among the Scandinavians, the Scrithifini are hunters and do not feed milk to their infants but exclusively the marrow of animals killed in the hunt. *As soon as a woman gives birth, she throws the infant into a skin and hangs it from a tree; after putting marrow into its mouth she immediately sets out with her husband for the customary hunt. For they do everything in common and engage in this pursuit together too* (Prokopios, *Wars* 6.15.22).

Prokopios says that the most populous Scandinavian nation was the *Gauti*, Jordanes' *Gautigoths*. These were the Norse *Gautar* and Old

English *Geats*—that is, Beowulf's people. Now, in the poem *Beowulf*, the hero is the nephew of the Geat Hygelac and goes with him on a raid against the Merovingian Franks. That raid is mentioned by Gregory of Tours in his *History of the Franks* 3.3 ("Chlochilaichus, king of the Danes") and dated to the 520s; his account tallies with the story recounted in several places in *Beowulf*. In sum, Beowulf was a contemporary of Justinian I and Prokopios.

GOTHS

About to fight for his life and kingdom against the eunuch-general Narses, Totila (r. 541–552), the warrior-king of the Goths in Italy, wanted to delay the battle so that reinforcements could arrive. He rode out between the two armies. *His armor was plated with gold, and the adornments that hung from his cheek-plates, helmet, and spear were of royal purple. He himself, sitting upon a very large horse, began to perform the dance-under-arms skillfully between the armies. He wheeled his horse around in a circle and then turned him again to the other side and so made him run round and round. As he rode, he hurled his javelin into the air and caught it again as it quivered above him, then passed it rapidly from hand to hand, shifting it with consummate skill, and he gloried in his practice of the art, falling back on his shoulders, spreading his legs and leaning from side to side, like one who has been instructed with precision in the art of dancing from childhood* (Prokopios, *Wars* 8.31). In the end, Totila lost the battle, his kingdom, and his life.

SLAVS

The first-ever references to the Slavs (and their cousins the Antai) are found in the works of two early Byzantine historians, Prokopios and Jordanes, writing in Greek and Latin respectively, in Constantinople, ca. 550. The Slavs appear suddenly, raiding the empire's Balkan territories and leaving historians to wonder where they came from. *These nations, the Slavs and the Antai, are not ruled by one man but have lived*

of old under a democracy, and so everything that involves their welfare is a matter of common concern among them. They believe that one god, the maker of lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims. But they also revere rivers and nymphs and other spirits, and they sacrifice to these, too. They live in pitiful hovels that they prop up far apart from one another, and as a rule, every man is constantly changing his abode. They are all exceptionally tall and hardy men, while their bodies and hair are neither very fair or blonde, nor indeed do they incline entirely to the dark type, but they are all slightly ruddy in color. They are at all times covered in filth (Prokopios, *Wars* 7.14.22–28).

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In the late sixth century, some Slavs attacked Corinth and their leader carted off the *ciborium* from the city's cathedral—a gilded canopy placed over the altar—in order to live in it as a tent (Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 361–363).

· XV ·

Foreigners and Stereotypes, A.D. 641–1453

Tzetzes wrote a poem about how he was able to greet people in their native languages: *You will find me a Scythian among the Scythians and a Latin among the Latins, and, in general, among all other people you will find me to be one of them.* He explains how he would greet a Persian, a Scythian, a Latin, and so on, transcribing the phrase into Greek characters and giving a translation of it. For example, he would greet a Latin with the question, *bene venesti, domine, bene venesti, frater?* But at the end it gets weird. Tzetzes had a normal greeting for an Alan man—the Alans were an Iranian people in the northern Caucasus, today's Ossetia—but *if an Alan woman has a priest for a boyfriend, you would hear this: "aren't you ashamed, my lady, that a priest is fucking your cunt?" (to farnetz kintzi mesfili kaitz foua saougge).* This is one of our few samples of surviving medieval Alanic. Some modern translations, discussions, and even editions of the text censor this line (Tzetzes, *Epilogue to the Theogony*).

JEWS

This is how Tzetzes would greet a Jew: *You blind house, full of evil magic, mouth like a gorge sucking up flies—that is, memakomene bith fagi Beelzebub timaie*, followed by: *You Jew, thick as a brick, the Lord did come, lightning upon your head—that is, ever ergam, maran atha, vezek on your khothar. And thus I say good and proper things to everyone* (*Epilogue to the Theogony*).

In the twelfth century, the Spanish traveler Benjamin of Tudela reported that there were two thousand Rabanite Jews in Constantinople and five hundred Karaites (these were rival sects that disagreed on which religious texts were authoritative). While both groups were required to live in Pera, across the Golden Horn, they so disliked each other that they built a wall between their two communities. No Jew was allowed to ride a horse in the City, except one, who was the emperor Manuel I Komnenos' physician. Benjamin says that the Byzantines beat Jews in the streets (Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary* 23–24).

PROVINCIALS

A poisonous snake once bit a Cappadocian . . . and died from tasting his tainted blood (proverb, e.g., in Konstantinos VII, *On the Themes* 2.2). It could also be said of eunuchs.

Paphlagonians were called "Pig-Assed" (*choirokoloi*) because they were seen as dirty and hairy—in fact, *the hairiest of people* (a Byzantine comment on Lucian).

One day Konstantinos Manasses (twelfth century) was in church:

> *I happened to be standing by the door*
> *when another man came in, from Cyprus he was . . .*
> *He came and stood right up against me,*
> *smelling of wine and reeking of garlic.*

My sense of smell was overcome by the stench,
I became dizzy and began to swoon.
I spoke to him, gently at first,
"My man, stand farther off, don't come so close.
You stink of garlic, so go far away,
I can't tolerate this foulness."
But he paid no attention, nor moved at all.
I spoke to him again, with more anger.
"My man, move away, don't smother me!
Your breath stinks like a midden."
But he must have had a shield against words,
and paid as much attention to me as a lion does to a fly.
So I had to teach him a lesson with my hands.
I flexed my arm in a manly way
and struck the man right on the jaw,
a blow hardened by my anger.
What a shit-eater!

(Itinerary 4)

BIG, LITTLE, AND DOUBLE PEOPLE

In the early fourth century, there lived the philosopher Alypios, *who was very skilled in dialectic. His body was scarcely taller than that of a dwarf, but it was entirely suffused with mind and soul. It was almost as if the divine elements in him had absorbed all to the same extent to which the more corruptible part had failed to grow.* He had many followers, but never wrote a book (Eunapios, *Lives of the Philosophers* 5.25–26).

Around A.D. 389, there was an Egyptian so short that he made a game of mimicking partridges in their cage, playing mock battles with them. *Stranger yet was the fact that the man had intelligence: he was not at all mentally impaired by his shortness. His speech too was eloquent and revealed inner nobility. He lived to the age of twenty-five* (Philostorgios, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.11).

The twelfth-century author Konstantinos Manasses wrote a number of curious works, including a history in verse and a romance novel, and he also wrote *A Description of a Little Man*, a dwarf from the island of Chios who had traveled to Constantinople in order to entertain the court. Everyone turned out to see him, and *he was like a hinny among noble Arabian steeds.* He wore a straight top hat that was equal in length to half his body, the gift of an aristocrat who wanted to make a joke. His legs were bowed and it was difficult to see his knee. Ever since he was a child, he traveled from house to house to entertain and thereby support his parents.

In the year 524, there appeared a giant woman in the province of Cilicia. She was taller than any man, and extremely broad, too. She traveled around asking for money from shopkeepers (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 17.7; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 171).

Leon the Deacon (later tenth century) recorded the appearance of Siamese twins from Cappadocia whom he claims to have seen on multiple occasions as they roamed the empire. *The limbs of their bodies were whole and in good shape, but their sides, from the armpit to the hip, were joined together, so their bodies were united into one. With their opposite arms they could embrace each other around the neck, and they used staves in order to support themselves as they walked. They were thirty years old, and their bodies were well developed, robust and youthful. They rode a mule for longer journeys, but sat on it side-saddle, like a woman. They were very friendly and sweet to meet* (*History* 10.3).

ARMENIANS

Kassia or Kassiane was a nun and hymnographer of the ninth century, one of the most famous in the Byzantine tradition. She wrote a poem about Armenians:

The terrible race of the Armenians
is deceitful and extremely vile,
fanatical, deranged, and malignant,
puffed up with hot air and full of slyness.
A wise man said correctly about them that
Armenians are vile when they live in obscurity,
even more vile when they become famous,
and most vile in all ways when they become rich.
When they become filthy rich and honored,
then to all they seem as vileness heaped upon vileness.

ARABS

The Greek translation of the Quran rendered a crucial term describing Allah as *entirely encased in metal* or *entirely hammered into a ball,* which caused some Byzantines to form a bizarre image of the God of the Muslims.

Question: *Why are there more maimed people, lepers, people crippled with gout, and epileptics among us Christians than among foreign people such as the Arabs?* Answer: *It is because of our wetter climate, excessive wine drinking, and heavy eating, whereas the Arabs enjoy a drier diet and climate* (Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers* 26).

To make it easier for Muslims to convert to Orthodoxy, the emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) wanted to remove Allah from the list of Muslim beliefs that they had to renounce, on the grounds that the name just meant "God" and it was absurd to ask converts to renounce God. But this aroused fierce opposition in the Church.

When the Crusaders arrived at Constantinople in 1203, they attacked and destroyed the mosque at Pera. Some Byzantines rallied to the

defense of their Muslim neighbors against the jointly hated Latins (Choniates, *History* 553–554).

RUS'

The tenth-century historian Leon the Deacon provides our only physical description of a Rus' king, in this case Sviatoslav of Kiev, who was defeated by the emperor Ioannes Tzimiskes in 971. The two leaders agreed to meet to discuss terms. *Sviatoslav came on the river in a small boat, pulling an oar with his companions. He was of medium height, had thick eyebrows, gray eyes, a snub nose, a shaved chin, a thick and long mustache on his upper lip. He had completely shaved his head, except for a strand of hair that hung down on one side as a mark of his nobility. He had a thick neck, broad chest, and a powerful physique. His visage was grim and his countenance was savage. He had a gold earring in one ear, adorned with two pearls and, between them, a ruby. His clothes were white, just like those of his companions, except they were clean* (*History* 9.11). On his way back to Kiev after the war, Sviatoslav was ambushed and killed by a band of Pechenegs, who turned his skull into a drinking vessel.

VARANGIANS

The Varangian Guard was an elite unit of Northmen loyal to the emperor. One of them, who was stationed in western Asia Minor in 1034, tried to seduce a local woman. When she would not consent to his advances, he tried to rape her. But she took his sword and ran him through the heart, killing him. The men from his unit gave her all his possessions in recompense and tossed his body away, as if it were that of a suicide (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, p. 394).

The Varangian Guard was formed by Basil II in 988, when he requested mercenaries from Vladimir of Kiev (978–1015), the son of Sviatoslav.

Fig. 15.1 Mostly illegible runic inscription carved on balustrade in Hagia Sophia, possibly mentioning one Halfdan, or Half-Dane.

Basil needed them to put down a civil war raging in the empire. In exchange, he gave Vladimir his own born-in-the-purple sister Anna to wed. Anna did not want to go off to the *Scythian wasteland* to marry a still-heathen king who was known in the West as *fornicator immensis* (Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon* 7.72). She *departed with reluctance. "It is as if I were setting out into captivity," she lamented; "better were it for me to die at home." But her brothers protested, "Through your agency God turns the land of Rus' to repentance,"*—that is, to Christianity (*Russian Primary Chronicle* 111–113). According to the later Rus' legends, the wedding took place in the Church of Saint Basil of Caesarea in the center of Cherson, which is why Russians still consider the Crimea to be a kind of national holy land.

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The Varangian Guard was recruited initially among Scandinavians, including Icelanders, then among Germans and the English. It was the Guardsmen who probably carved the runic inscriptions found in

Byzantine territories. Two of them were carved as graffiti onto the marble balustrade of the upper gallery of Hagia Sophia. The most famous of the two cannot be fully deciphered, but mentions one Halftan—that is, Half-Dane. Another was carved onto a massive statue of a lion guarding Piraeus, the port of Athens. This statue was stolen by the Venetian admiral Francesco Morosini after he blew up the Parthenon in 1678. It now stands outside the Arsenal in Venice.

There are about thirty runic inscriptions in Scandinavia, mostly in Sweden from the eleventh century, mentioning men who went to "Greece" (*Grikkland*), likely to serve the emperor in "The Great City" (*Miklagard*), which is what they called Constantinople. These men were called *Grikkfari,* "Greece-farers."

Icelandic Sagas mention many heroes who went to *Grikkland* to serve in the Varangian Guard, and returned to Iceland rich and covered in honor. Consider Bolli Bolason in the *Laxdaela Saga: Bolli brought out with him much wealth, and many gems that dignitaries had given him. He would wear no clothes but of scarlet or silk, and all his weapons were gilded; all his followers were dressed in scarlet, and with gilded saddles. He had on the silken clothes which the emperor had given him, he had around him a scarlet cape; and he had the sword Fótbítr* [Foot-Biter] *girt on him, the hilt of which was ornamented with gold, and the grip woven with gold. He had a gilded helmet on his head, and a red shield on his flank, with a knight painted on it in gold. He had a lance in his hand, as is the custom in foreign lands; and wherever they took quarters the women paid heed to nothing but gazing at Bolli and his ornaments, and those of his followers* (224–225[27]).

The collection of the miracles of Saint Eugenios of Trebizond tells the story of a deaf foreign soldier serving in an ethnic unit, probably the Varangian Guard. He could not speak or hear commands,

and so he had to communicate with his company through nods and gestures. One day, while they were busy making camp in the province to which they were posted, he saw the saint's shrine from afar, prayed for his help, and was cured (Ioannes Xiphilinos, *The Miracles of Saint Eugenios* 262 ff.).

In 1111, king Sigurd of Norway passed through Constantinople on his way home from Jerusalem. After being royally entertained by Alexios I Komnenos, he left his Viking-style longships behind. The gilded dragon heads of his ships were placed in the Church of Saint Peter, north of the palace (*Synopsis of the Sagas of the Kings of Norway [i.e., Ágrip]* 48–49; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: The Saga of Sigurd the Crusader* 13).

One Laskaris Kananos (otherwise unknown) wrote a brief account of his journey from Bergen in Norway to Sweden, Livonia, Prussia, Slavonia, Denmark, England, and then Iceland, probably in the 1440s. Only of the Icelanders does he give a description: *The men there are robust and strong, and their diet consists of fish. Their bread is fish too, and their wine is water.*

MISCELLANEOUS

Serbs means "slaves" in the language of the Romans [i.e., Latin *servus*], *and they have this name because they were slaves of the emperor of the Romans* (Konstantinos VII, *De administrando imperio* 32).

In 1167, something funny happened in the forum of Constantine, as the emperor Manuel I Komnenos was on his way to march against Hungary. Two bronze statues of female figures stood on the western arch leading into the forum, of which one was called "the Roman" and the other "the Hungarian." The Roman one happened to fall while the other remained standing, a terrible omen. So Manuel commanded

that the Roman statue be restored and the Hungarian thrown down, attempting to reverse the outcome of the war (Niketas Choniates, *History* 151).

A Nubian prince, possibly Lalibela, who had a cross branded on his forehead in childhood in accordance with the custom of his people, came to visit Constantinople and honor it as the city from which Christianity came to his country. He explained that his land lay a hundred days' travel south from Jerusalem. He had set out with sixty countrymen, but only ten were left alive by the time he reached Jerusalem, and only two by the time he reached Constantinople. His story is recorded only by the French writer Robert de Clari (*The Conquest of Constantinople* 54).

With the army of the Fourth Crusade encamped outside the walls of the city in 1203–1204, the historian and retired high minister Choniates read the ancient history of Diodoros the Sicilian and made notes in the margins of his copy (*Vaticanus graecus* 130[28]). At 5.17.4–18.1, Diodoros explains that at weddings on the Balearic islands, the relatives all have sex with the bride in descending order of age, with the groom last to do so. Choniates wrote in the margin:

> *If these customs regarding weddings*
> *were maintained down to our time,*
> *I too would gladly swim over to those islands,*
> *though I suffer more at sea than anyone*
> *and have white hair due to age.*
> *But I would never choose to be the groom in this case!*

At 1.88.5, Diodoros the Sicilian notes that the ancient Egyptians sacrificed red-headed men to their gods. Choniates, who had reddish-blond hair, wrote in the margin of the same manuscript: *Now that I have grown old, I am no longer afraid of this custom.*

The British *speak their own particular language which does not sound at all like that of the Germans, the French, or any of their neighbors. They have the same dress, customs, and way of life as the French. They have a rather casual attitude when it comes to women and children so that throughout the island, whenever a man is invited to a friend's house, he is greeted with a kiss by the host's wife. Even in the streets they present their own wives everywhere to their friends. It brings no shame upon them for their wives and daughters to be kissed in this way* (Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *Histories* 2.39).

†

ROMA

A marginal note made by another twelfth-century reader of the same manuscript of Diodoros contains one of the first reference to Gypsies (Roma) in Europe (the name "Gypsy" comes from "Egyptian"). Diodoros (1.80.1–2) notes that in ancient Egypt thieves had a guild-master who received all stolen goods. The victims could recover them by paying him a fourth of their value. The Byzantine scholiast wrote: *The same happens today among the thieves who live in Macedonia and are called "Egyptians." They go around thieving and, when they are caught, they do not deny it but confess it, and ask to be paid for their thievery, which they call "bold lad's wages."*

In late Byzantium, acrobatic and juggling skills were often associated with foreign groups. Nikephoros Gregoras devoted a chapter of his *Roman History* (8.10) to a troupe of Gypsy performers ("Egyptians"), some twenty in number, who passed through Constantinople in the first decades of the fourteenth century. He insisted that they did not use magic to perform their tricks, only the arduous training of their bodies. Among their feats he records the following:

- *They fixed two or three ship masts to the ground, securing them with cables and extending a rope from peak to peak; and they also coiled a rope around each mast, which they used to climb up. Once at the top,*

the acrobat would perform a headstand, pointing his feet toward the sky. He would then leap onto the rope and perform some kind of cartwheel across it. At the center he would take a bow and accurately shoot a distant target. Another time he walked across the rope holding a child.

- *Another would stand on a horse while it was running, leaping from its mane to its rump, then to the ground, where he would grab its tail and leap back up again. Leaning over from the saddle, he would pass underneath the horse and emerge on the other side—all while the horse was moving fast.*
- *Another would balance a jug of water at the end of a tall pole standing on his head; let a small child climb up a tall spear with a rope-ladder balanced on his head, all while he was walking; or juggle a glass ball, balancing it on his fingertip when it came down.*

Gregoras adds that these entertainments were risky. Forty of these Gypsies had set out from their native land and only twenty remained. The people in Constantinople saw one of them fall from the masts and die. He says they moved west after that, toward Spain.

Fig. 15.2 Acrobatic feats performed in the hippodrome, on a horse with a sword; from the Madrid Skylitzes.

VLACHS

Andronikos Komnenos, cousin of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos, spent a good part of his life in prison or trying to escape from the prison to which Manuel had confined him. After one of his escapes, he was captured by some Vlachs near the Morava River, who intended

to take him to the emperor. To escape from them, he pretended to suffer from gastroenteritis. Every day he made emergency stops in order to defecate, going a ways behind the bushes so as not to offend his captors. He did this one night, only he planted a stick in the ground, put his hat on it, and wrapped his cloak around it so that it looked like a squatting man. While they were looking at that, he stealthily made his escape (Choniates, *History* 131).

The Vlachs are a Romance-speaking people associated with the Romanians and scattered throughout the Balkans. They were part of the Bulgarian empire conquered by Basil II in 1018, for they begin to appear in Byzantine sources immediately after, primarily as pastoralists. Kekaumenos (eleventh century) calls them treacherous thieves. He offers a theory about their origins that is still one of the main contenders: he says that they are the descendants of the Dacians conquered by the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98–117) who have scattered throughout the Balkans (*Strategikon* 4.187).

The first Byzantine writer who understood that Vlachs spoke a language descended from Latin was Laonikos Chalkokondyles (ca. 1468). He knew that the medieval Wallachians (i.e., "Vlachs," the ancestors of the modern Romanians) *speak a language that is similar to that of the Italians, but so corrupted and different from it that it is difficult for the Italians to understand anything they say, unless they recognize words that are spoken distinctly* (*Histories* 2.22).

TURKS

Tightrope-walking is an art at which the Turks excel above all other peoples—so much so that they can walk along the ropes even when shackled, or run along them at full speed with eyes blindfolded. They perform countless other amazing tricks on the ropes, such as passing through swords or twirling about. One can see these things being done every day in the

marketplace [of Adrianople, or Edirne, in 1457]. *When they bury a child beneath the earth, speak with him from there, and get him to answer any question that they may have, how could you see this and not be amazed? But even that, accomplished through some higher power, is arguably less impressive than the men who run around on the ropes* (Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *Histories* 8.70).

†

The Turks are so sexually depraved that they never stop having sex, whether in accordance with nature or against it, with men or with women, or even with animals. If they happen upon a Greek woman or an Italian, they embrace her as if she were a new Aphrodite or Semele, but they despise the women of their own race as if they were bears or hyenas (Doukas, *History* 9.1, p. 59).

· XVI ·

Latins, Franks, and Germans

FRANKS

The military manual attributed to the emperor Maurikios (*Strategikon*, ca. 600) calls the Franks, Lombards, and other Germanic types *the blond nations.*

†

When Arechis II, the Lombard duke of Benevento, was seeking to escape the grip of Charlemagne and side with the Byzantines, in 788, he promised the emperor Konstantinos V that henceforth he and his people would dress and cut their hair like the Byzantines (pope Hadrian I, *Letter* 3, p. 617, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*).

In the Middle Ages it was believed that there could be only one Roman emperor at a time. The pretext used by the Franks for calling Charlemagne "emperor of the Romans" was that, at the time of his coronation in Rome (in A.D. 800), the Byzantine throne was occupied by a woman, Eirene (797–802), who obviously didn't "count."

The Franks are easily corrupted with money, for they are extremely greedy, as we know from experience, when many of them have come here from Italy, to take up some position (Leon VI, *Taktika* 18.84).

†

Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos (d. 959) wrote a manual on foreign policy for use by his son and heir, Romanos II (959–963). He instructs him that *all the peoples of the north have implanted in them by nature an insatiable greed for money, and they want to earn a lot in exchange for doing a little*. Konstantinos was happy to give them gold in order to keep them quiet, but three *inappropriate requests and audacious demands have to be turned back and denied with plausible-sounding clever excuses*. Specifically, the emperors should never give them imperial regalia, attire, crowns, Greek fire, or imperial princesses as brides. *Never shall an emperor of the Romans make a marriage alliance with an alien people who have different customs from the Romans, especially if they have a different religion and are not Christians, unless it be the Franks, for there is much closeness and intermarriage between the Romans and the Franks. . . . Otherwise, just as each animal mates only with its own kind, so too it is just for each people to marry among its own and not with foreigners and people who speak a different language* (Konstantinos VII, *De administrando imperio* 13).

After ca. A.D. 800, Western Europeans—especially those working for the papacy and the German emperors—refused to consider the Byzantines as Romans and called them "Greeks" instead. Many Byzantines found this offensive (in part because it was intended offensively). The court of Nikephoros II Phokas was outraged in 968 when emissaries brought letters from the pope addressing him as "emperor of the Greeks." *Doesn't that idiot of a pope know,* they said, *that Constantine the Great transferred the imperial capital and senate here, to Constantinople, and left behind in Rome only slaves, plebeians, and common types?* (Liudprand, *Embassy to Constantinople* 50–51).

NORMANS

After the Norman conquest of England in 1066, many Anglo-Saxons, possibly in the thousands, fled to Byzantium and joined the Varangian Guard. Within a few years, and likely to their great satisfaction, they were fighting Normans again when Robert Guiscard decided to invade and conquer Byzantium in the early 1080s. Many of them died fighting the Normans at the battle of Dyrrachion in October 1081. The Byzantines accordingly held the English in great esteem (Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, v. 2, pp. 202–205; Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 4.6–8).

The father of William the Conqueror, Robert I "the Devil," duke of Normandy, was buried at Nikaia when he died on his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1035. In ca. 1086, after Alexios I Komnenos had defeated the Normans of southern Italy, Robert's body was moved to Apulia on his son William's orders (William of Jumièges, *Gesta* 6.11–12).

When the Normans sacked Thessalonike in 1185 and plundered the city, they revealed that *they had no conception of the value of perfumed oils, distilled aromas, powders for treating diseases, for pleasure, or for painting. They used scented woods for kindling, believed that spiced resins were coal, and did not understand the uses of rose water, thus revealing their savage nature. What they wanted were iron rings, nails, and knives* (Eustathios of Thessalonike, *The Capture of Thessalonike* 139).

VENICE

The emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) was dark-skinned. When he was at war with the Venetians near Ithaca in 1149, they captured his imperial barge. Taking an Ethiopian, they dressed him up like the emperor and paraded him along the deck, making a mockery of imperial ceremonies and of Manuel for not having blond hair.

This reminded the historian Choniates of the verse from the Song of Songs 1:5–6: *I am black but beautiful. . . . it's the sun that's burnt me* (*History* 86).

On the brink of war with Venice, the emperor Manuel I Komnenos sent secret letters throughout the empire with orders to the provincial governors that they should arrest all Venetians on the same day, March 12, 1171, place them in prison, and impound their property to the imperial treasury. About 20,000 were arrested: 10,000 in and around the capital and 10,000 in the provinces. The scale, efficiency, and secrecy of the operation were impressive, but it did lead to more war.

GERMANS

The first wife of Manuel I Komnenos was a German, Bertha of Sulzbach, who took the name Eirene (d. ca. 1160). In his funeral speech for her, Basileios of Ohrid praised her piety and humility—such a contrast to the rest of her people, the Germans. The latter, he said, are haughty, arrogant, and simply don't know how to yield or compromise. *Who doesn't know that, among all the nations between Italy and the outer Ocean, the Germans rule over all the others, and cannot bear to be ruled?* (Basileios of Ohrid, *Epitaph for the Empress Eirene*, p. 324).

Bertha-Eirene refused to wear makeup (including face powder, eyeliner, eyeshadow, and rouge) and was opinionated, so her husband, the emperor Manuel I, slept with other women instead (Choniates, *History* 53–54).

The German emperor Heinrich VI (d. 1197) threatened to attack the Byzantines unless they bought him off. The emperor Alexios III Angelos therefore invented the *German tax* (*to Alamanikon*) and convened a full assembly of his subjects in 1197 to put it before them, but

they rejected the idea loudly. He resorted to plundering the tombs of past emperors to find the gold, but Heinrich died before the money could be paid (Choniates, *History* 475–479).

FOURTH CRUSADE

When the army of the Fourth Crusade arrived at the island of Corfu (Kerkyra) in 1203 on their way to Constantinople, the local bishop invited its leaders to lunch. The conversation inevitably came around to the contentious issue of papal supremacy—the idea that the bishop of Rome is the head of the entire Church—whereupon the local bishop sarcastically said that the only justification for it that he could see was that Roman soldiers had crucified Christ (*Chronicle of Halberstadt*, p. 118). Later Byzantines also pointed out that Saint Peter was also the first to deny Christ.

When the Crusaders occupied Constantinople, some of them mocked the Byzantines for being *a nation of secretaries.* They dressed in robes and took up pens and inkwells, pretending to be writing in books in imitation of typical Byzantine manners (Choniates, *History* 594).

When the Crusaders sacked the city in 1204, they *reveled and indulged themselves all day long, some of them eating elaborate confections while others ate their own customary food: meat from the back of the ox cooked in cauldrons, and chunks of pickled pork accompanied by ground beans, all washed down with a pungent garlic sauce* (Choniates, *History* 594).

PLUNDER OF THE FOURTH CRUSADE

What they didn't smash or burn when they sacked Constantinople in 1204, the Latins took home with them, to Venice in particular. The results are visible even today. The four extraordinary bronze horses that stood on top of the entrance to St. Mark's Basilica (they have now

been moved inside and replaced outside with copies) once stood on top of the starting gates of the hippodrome in Constantinople, *their necks slightly curving as they eyed each other while racing the final lap* (Choniates, *History* 119).

Fig. 16.1 The Horses of St. Mark's Basilica, ancient Greek sculptures that stood above the starting gates of the hippodrome of Constantinople for almost a millennium before being removed after the Fourth Crusade to Venice.

The elaborately sculpted "Pilastri Acritani" that stand to the side of St. Mark's were believed to have come from Acre (hence, "Pillars of Acre"), but excavations during the 1960s in Constantinople revealed that they came from the church of Saint Polyeuktos, built in the 520s by the noblewoman Anicia Juliana. Her design included an epigram carved along the inside and on the outside of the church praising her work, which mentions *the row of columns upon columns that hold up the rays of the golden dome* (*Greek Anthology* 1.10.56–57).

Fig. 16.2 The Pilastri Acritani, or "Pillars of Acre," of St. Mark's Basilica, were believed to have come from Acre until excavations in Constantinople revealed that they were originally part of St. Polyeuktos a huge church built in the sixth century by the noblewoman Anicia Juliana.

The outside corner of St. Mark's features the famous porphyry statue of the four embracing Tetrarchs—the emperors Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius. This, too, came from Constantinople: the missing heel of one of the Tetrarchs was found in an excavation in Istanbul and can be seen in the Archaeological Museum there.

When the Byzantine delegation to the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1439) reached Venice, the patriarch of Constantinople Ioseph was given a tour of St. Mark's, where the Byzantines saw countless icons and implements of silver and gold adorned with precious stones that had been taken in the sack of the city in 1204, *by right of conquest.* Sylvestros Syropoulos, a member of the delegation, wrote that *these were a source of pride and pleasure for those who held them, but they brought great sadness to those of us who had lost them, as happened to us.* The Venetians claimed that the implements and icons had come from Hagia Sophia, but the Byzantines could read the inscriptions and knew that they came instead from the Pantokrator monastery and had been dedicated by the Komnenoi emperors. It was a small consolation and revenge that the Venetians had only second-rate plunder (Syropoulos, *Memoirs* 4.25).

ERRORS OF THE LATINS

The Byzantines considered themselves Romans in direct continuation of the ancient Roman empire, but they spoke Greek, which gave them a conflicted attitude toward the Latin language. They called it their "ancestral language," but also thought that it was quite inferior to Greek. The Church Fathers Gregory of Nazianzos and Basil of Caesarea (fourth century) believed that Latin theologians *were unable, on account of the thinness of the Latin language and its conceptual poverty, to tell the difference between* hypostasis *and* ousia, two technical terms for the persons of the Trinity and the "substance" of God (Gregory, *On Athanasios the Great of Alexandria* in *PG* 35: 1124; and Basil, *Letter* 214.4, respectively).

In the ninth century, in a letter to pope Nicholas I, the emperor Michael III referred to Latin as *a barbarous and Scythian language. How then can you call yourself a Roman?,* the pope asked (*Letter* 88).

Calling the two Churches "Catholic" and "Orthodox" is a modern convention. After all, both claim to be both Catholic and Orthodox. In late Byzantine times, the equivalent terms were "the Church of the Latins" and "the Church of the Greeks." But the latter term could be offensive to some. When the pope sent a letter inviting the Byzantine delegation to the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1439), Stephanos, the bishop of Medeia, said, *He is insulting us. He is calling us Graikoi, and that is an insult. How can we go if he is insulting us?* But the other Byzantines thought he was being silly (Sylvestros Syropoylos, *Memoirs* 2.21).

"Roman Catholic" is a contradiction in terms, Orthodox theologians argued, because "catholic" means everywhere in the world where Orthodox Christians may be found, whereas "Roman" designates only one of the churches in contradistinction to all the others; it refers to a specific place. What creed ever proclaimed "the Roman faith"? (Barlaam of Calabria, *Treatise on Papal Primacy* 310–330).

After the eleventh century, Orthodox hardliners began to compile formal lists of *The Errors of the Latins*—that is, everything that Catholics did wrong, including in their daily lives and culture. The most entertaining list was produced by Konstantinos Stilbes in the early thirteenth century, after the sack of Constantinople by the soldiers of the Fourth Crusade. These errors include:

- *They do not use actual bread in communion as Christ instructed but an unleavened wafer* (11).
- *When they elect a new pope, they lead him to the body of the previous one, place the latter's dead hand on the living neck of his successor, and consider this to be an anointing. The new pope then immediately presides over the funeral of the old one* (24).
- *The pope and his clergy sell indulgences for serious crimes, including murder, that have yet to be committed, stipulating that the indulgence is valid for a set amount of time* (33).
- *They form the sign of the cross using five fingers* (35).

- *Their bishops fight in wars and stain their hands with the blood of men they have killed* (38).
- *Their bishops shave their chins and depilate their entire body (39). This makes them look like women* (65).
- *They do not entirely like Saint Paul, claiming that he was not an eye-witness of the Christ but in reality because he reproaches the Roman community in his epistle to them* (47).
- *They do not honor Constantine the Great as a saint because he built New Rome—that is, Constantinople* (49).
- *Horror of horrors, they allow dogs to enter the sanctuary during the liturgy* (55). *They even allow bears to enter the church* (58).
- *It is said that some of them bathe in their own urine, and even that they drink it. Could anything be more disgusting?* (74)
- *During the sack of Constantinople in 1204, they turned ruined chapels into horse stables* (77).
- *When they sacked the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, they led donkeys into the sanctuary in order to cart away their plunder, and those animals urinated and defecated inside* (78).
- *They brought a common whore into the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia, where she pretended to conduct the liturgy, blessing the people present, and then she danced her way out* (80).

Hatred against the Latins ran highest among the Byzantines in the years after 1204. The patriarch-in-exile Germanos II even prayed in a homily that *God might arm his hands with a bow, learn to fight* [Psalm 17:35]*, and send the evil Latins packing, so that they can no longer lap up our blood like the dogs that they are. Our emperor Ioannes* [III Batatzes] *will rebaptize them in their own blood* (*Homily 1 on the True Cross and Against the Bogomils*, in *PG* 140: 641).

ATTITUDES

Western writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries called the Byzantines *an effeminate people* who had *degenerated entirely into women.* They were *unwarlike and relied on tricks, not the force of*

arms. They were *soft and effeminate, tricky and talkative, cowardly and devious*[29].

The Byzantines believed that the Latins were so violent and bestial that they were unable to control their impulses. This could be used against them in war. When the armies of Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–1281) were facing those of Charles of Anjou, the generals *decided that it would not be a good idea to wage open war against them, as the latter had a numerical advantage and were well armed. Instead, they set ambushes and shot at them from the steep hills in order to spur them into a wild and uncoordinated rage. If the race of the Italians advances to battle in an orderly way, they form a solid and immovable wall. But if they deviate from their accustomed order even a bit, there is nothing to prevent their enemies from taking them prisoner. Sometimes their innate stupidity and arrogance have greatly harmed them as they cannot be marshaled easily when their anger gets the better of them. The Roman army had long known about this and so engaged them with tricks and stratagems* (Nikephoros Gregoras, *Roman History* 5.6).

According to the fantasies of the Benedictine historian Guibert of Nogent (d. 1124), the emperor Alexios I Komnenos ordered that any family that had many sons was required to castrate one of them and make him a eunuch, thereby depriving the army of soldiers. He also ordered that any family that had many daughters was to make one of them a prostitute. Believing that Byzantine women were far more beautiful than the French ones, he used them as bait for the French army in Thrace (*History of the Crusades* 1.37).

The Latin habit of shaving led some Byzantines to wonder humorously whether Latin men were, in fact, men and not women or eunuchs. The Athenian historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles (ca. 1468) described the election of a new pope in the following way: *When the votes are cast and they obtain a result, they acclaim that man pontiff. They seat him*

upon a chair with a hole so that his testicles dangle down and can be touched by a man appointed to that duty, and in this way it becomes clear that he is a man. They believe that long ago a woman attained the high priesthood at Rome [the legendary pope Joan]. *The uncertainty about gender is due to the fact that almost all men in Italy and the Western lands regularly shave their beards. She then became pregnant and when she went to perform the Eucharist she gave birth to a child during the ceremony in full view of the congregation. It is for this reason, so that they may know for certain, that they do this touching, and the person doing the touching calls out, "Our lord is a man!"* (*Histories* 6.27).

†

Sophia of Montferrat was the second wife of the imperial prince Ioannes Palaiologos (later emperor, 1425–1448). She was tall and had a body to die for, and her flowing blond hair reached to her ankles. But there was something grotesquely disfigured about her face. The people of Constantinople called her *Lent from the front but Easter from behind.* (They were a religious people, those Byzantines.) Ioannes never had sex with her, and divorced her as soon as he gained the throne (Doukas, *History* 20).

· XVII ·

Disasters—Mostly Acts of God

TSUNAMIS

One of the most striking descriptions of a tsunami occurs in the history of Ammianus Marcellinus, referring to the aftermath of a massive earthquake on Crete in the summer of 365. The sea was pulled back from its bed, exposing marine animals wallowing in the muck, and underwater valleys and mountains could now be seen for the first time. People started to roam about the new "land," scavenging among the stranded ships and creatures, but then the sea came roaring back and up onto the land, drowning thousands and swamping many cities. Ships were carried inland and even stranded on the top of buildings (*Res Gestae* 26.10.15–19). The event permanently lifted parts of the island of Crete out of the water.

†

According to later legend, when the tsunami caused by this earthquake was rushing toward the city of Alexandria, the bishop of the city Athanasios (the Church Father) faced the sea with a Bible in his hand and said, *Oh God, you never lie, and you promised after the Noah's*

Flood that "I will not again bring a flood of waters upon the earth." Thereupon the water stopped and the city was saved (John of Nikiu, *Chronicle* 82).

To interpret the tsunami as God's anger against the pagan emperor Julian (361–363), some Christian authors predated it by two years (Sozomenos, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.2). By contrast, the pagan writer Libanios (and fan of Julian) included the event among events caused by the earth to mourn Julian's passing (*Oration* 18.292–293). The *day of horror* (as it was called) was commemorated every year, at least to the late sixth century.

In the summer of 551, an earthquake off the coast of Lebanon triggered a destructive tsunami. The lawyer and historian Agathias visited the Aegean island of Kos in the aftermath, and found the city a pile of rubble. There were broken pillars and beams sticking out everywhere, and haggard people scavenging in the ruins. The city's water supply had also been contaminated by the sea (Agathias, *Histories* 2.16).

In 552, a tsunami flooded parts of Boiotia, in Greece. When the waters receded, certain unfamiliar sea creatures were left behind in the muck. The first instinct of the locals was, of course, to grill them, but when the fire touched them they dissolved into a gross smelly liquid (Prokopios, *Wars* 8.25.21–22).

EARTHQUAKES

The city of Nicomedia was struck by an earthquake at dawn in August 358. As part of the city was built on a slope, the houses tumbled down on top of each other, causing a terrific roaring cascade. When the sun rose, the extent of the damage was made visible: some people were crushed, other buried up to the neck in the debris, and some were

skewered on sharp points and beams. Many people were trapped in their homes and eventually starved to death, including the governor, Aristainetos. A fire then raged in the ruins for five days, burning the buildings that survived (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 17.7.1–8).

Fig. 17.1 Saint Cornelius the centurion was the first gentile to be converted to Christianity. When he was later required to sacrifice to the idols, he caused an earthquake that destroyed their temple and statues; from the *Menologion* made for the emperor Basil II in ca. 1000.

Some Byzantine authors called earthquakes *mysteries of God's love for mankind*, citing pregnant women who were removed from beneath the rubble twenty and thirty days after the earthquake, some having given birth to healthy babies (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 17.16).

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The bishop of Antioch Euphrasios died in the earthquake of 526. It happened that tanners had their workshop on the ground floor beneath his episcopal residence. When the building collapsed, he fell directly into one of their vats of boiling pitch and was cooked in it, the flesh melting off his body. But his head was hanging outside, so

he was recognized (Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle*, pt. III, pp. 50–51).

To appease divine anger, Antioch was officially renamed The City of God (*Theoupolis*) after the earthquakes of the 520s.

A powerful earthquake struck Constantinople in December 557. The people streamed out into the streets and were afraid to go back inside, except for those who sought refuge in churches. The city was so built up by then that there were few open spaces where they could huddle in the cold rain. During the tremors, some people inside saw the roofs of their houses open up, revealing the stars, only to close back down again afterward. The only senator to die was Anatolios, a corrupt financial official. His bedroom walls were lined with sculpted marble panels: one of them fell and crushed him in his sleep. People began to say that the earthquake had been sent by God to kill this man for his crimes, but the historian Agathias remained skeptical: the earthquake did not distinguish between good and bad people. However, he reluctantly conceded that it made sense to promote the idea because fear might reform some people's bad morals (Agathias, *Histories* 5.3–4).

After a powerful earthquake struck Constantinople and its environs in September 1063, Psellos gave a lecture on the nature of earthquakes to a group of priests and monks. While endorsing their pious belief that God sends such catastrophes to chastise us for our sins, he digresses at length on their physical causes and comments on the *irrationality* of those who believe that God personally takes a hand in directing the universe, *for divine nature is entirely outside of the universe.* He also noted that churches offered no protection during the quake itself; indeed they seem to draw a greater measure of divine wrath! (Psellos, *Regarding the Earthquake that Occurred on 23 September = Philosophica Minora I* 30).

FLOODS

The river Daisan (Skirtos), which flowed through Edessa, flooded so suddenly in 525 that the waters poured through the doors of a local bathhouse and drowned those who were bathing there. The waters filled up the city all the way to the walls and turned it into a lake, until finally the walls collapsed, releasing the flood onto the plains outside (Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle*, pt. III, pp. 41–42). The event was known as "The Anger"—that is, of God (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 17.15).

In 547–548, the Nile flooded more than usual in some places and the waters refused to recede, destroying many crops and causing famine. Some people took this as an omen, but Prokopios rejected this way of thinking: *When people do not understand the present they like to find portents regarding the future and, when they worry themselves to death about things that confuse them, they make groundless predictions about what will happen. I leave these oracles and the science of portents to others. What I know well is this, that the Nile's swamping of the land became the cause of great misfortunes in the present time* (*Wars* 7.29.18–20).

In the late tenth century, huge waves caused by gales toppled a seaside column on which lived a stylite saint, pitching him into the currents and drowning him. This was in the Eutropios district, south of Chalcedon across from Constantinople (Leon the Deacon, *History* 10.11).

THE DUST-VEIL

One of the most peculiar events in history was the "dust-veil incident" of 535–537, caused either by a volcanic eruption or the impact of a meteor, which sent a large amount of dust into the atmosphere, obscuring the sun. Sources from Ireland to Byzantium and China

recorded the same observations. In the words of Prokopios, *during the whole year the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, and it seemed extremely like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it emitted were not clear nor like those it usually makes* (*Wars* 3.14.5–6). This led to lower temperatures and, in some places, reduced crop output and caused famine. Some modern historians have tried to use this to explain the plague pandemic of 541 and the Arab conquests of the seventh century.

PLAGUE

The bubonic plague, sometimes called the Justinianic plague, first struck the empire in 541 and Constantinople the following year. The prevailing theory is that the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, was transmitted by fleas carried by small mammals, such as rats (so not from person to person, which is why doctors were not affected more than others). The best description of its symptoms is given by Prokopios, who witnessed the first outbreak in the capital. Among them were these:

- *The initial fever was so feeble from its beginning all the way to the evening that it gave no cause for worry either to the victims themselves or to their doctors who touched them. In fact, no one who fell ill in this way believed that he would die from it.*
- *Some fell into a deep coma, others developed acute dementia: imagining that people were attacking them in order to kill them, they became hysterical and fled at a run, shouting loudly. So those who were caring for their needs were driven to exhaustion.*
- *No doctor or layman contracted this misfortune by touching any of the sick or the dead, given that many who were constantly burying the dead or caring for the sick, even those unrelated to them, continued to perform this service against all expectation.*
- *If any patients came near to water, they wanted to throw themselves in, but not because they needed to drink (for most rushed into the sea); rather, the cause was mostly the mental illness. Some doctors were at a loss because the symptoms were unfamiliar to them and,*

believing that the focus of the disease was to be found in the bubos, decided to investigate the bodies of the dead. Cutting into some of the bubos, they found that a kind of malignant carbuncle had developed inside.

- *The most eminent doctors predicted that many would die who shortly afterward were unexpectedly freed of all their maladies, and they also claimed that many would survive who were destined to perish almost immediately.*
- *As for women who were pregnant, death could be foreseen if they were taken ill with the disease. It is said, however, that three new mothers survived while their infants did not, and that one died in childbirth though her child was born and survived.*
- *In the case of others who happened to survive, their speech was not unaffected, and they lived afterward with a lisp or barely able to articulate some indistinct words* (*Wars* 2.22).

At its worst, the mortality rate in Constantinople reached ten thousand a day, or more. Men were posted at the gates to count the dead being taken out—at least at first. Mass graves were created across the Golden Horn (in Pera), but they were poorly covered and the stench of death wafted over the city when winds blew from the north. Groups would search homes and take out any corpses that they found. Sometimes they found the parents dead and the children still alive, even infants suckling the breasts of their dead mothers. People took to wearing name-tags so that they could be identified if they died away from home (Prokopios, *Wars* 2.22; Yuhannan of Amida in Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle*, pt. III, pp. 94, 101, 103).

Prokopios says that *this disease, whether by some chance or providence, carefully picked out the worst people and let them live.* He then adds that the emperor Justinian I too fell ill—and survived (*Wars* 2.22).

Yuhannan of Amida (a.k.a. John of Ephesos) wrote an emotional account of the plague that contrasts with Prokopios' clinical precision. He evokes scenes of corpses split open in the streets, leaking pus everywhere; ships drifting at sea with dead crews; houses that had become tombs with their inhabitants rotting in their beds; villages where only one child survived; herds that had reverted to the wild with no one to look after them; and deserted highways (in Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle*, pt. III, pp. 80, 88).

A rumor went around Constantinople that monks were causing the plague, so people would flee from them on sight (Yuhannan of Amida in Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle*, pt. III, pp. 108–109).

The church lawyer and historian Euagrios (late sixth century) contracted the plague when it first broke out in 541–542—he was in elementary school—and survived. Yet in its later visitations he lost many of his own children, his wife, and other relatives, in addition to servants and farmers on his estates. Two years before writing his history in Antioch, he lost another daughter and her son (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.29). All this misfortune led him to "blasphemy" in his mind, especially as the children of a pagan neighbor Epiphanios survived. The stylite saint Symeon read Euagrios' mind from afar and sent him a message of admonition. Euagrios came to the saint to beg forgiveness (*Life of Saint Symeon the Younger* 233). When Euagrios took a second wife in 588, a powerful earthquake struck Antioch during the wedding celebrations, killing 60,000 people (calculated from the subsequent reduction in the bread dole). Everything around the church collapsed, except the dome (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.8).

Monks wrote to the hermit Barsanouphios to do something about the plague, to pray to God and beg him to spare the world, because

the *world's very existence is at risk.* The Grand Old Man—that is how he was known—told them to join their prayers to those of the Three Perfect Men who had received from God the power to bind and to loosen, for they had been told that the "anger" would abide for a while. The prayers of these three men converged at a single point, the entrance of the sanctuary of the Father of Lights. These men were Ioannes in Rome, Elias in Corinth, and *one other in the province of Jerusalem*—that is, Barsanouphios himself. *I believe that they will be able to move God to pity* (*Letter* 569).

ICE

The winter of 763–764 was so bitterly cold that icebergs floated down the Bosporos and struck the seawalls of the city, shaking the houses that abutted on them. The entire sea was filled with ice, which was sometimes taller than the walls. In his *Chronicle*, Theophanes remembers that he was a child at the time: he and thirty playmates went out to climb and play on the ice (p. 434).

The cold of the winter of 927–928 was so bitter that the ground froze for 120 days, killing the crops and causing the worst famine in Byzantine history. There were more dead than the living could bury. The emperor Romanos I Lakapenos boarded up the porticoes in the capital so that the snow and cold could not easily reach the homeless poor who lived in them. He made charity available and invited poor people to eat at his own table, albeit in small groups (Theophanes Continuatus, pp. 417–418).

FIRE

The main street of Constantinople, the Mese, was a paved street 25 meters wide, with colonnades, porches, and shops on either side. There were miles and miles of such porticoed streets in the city.

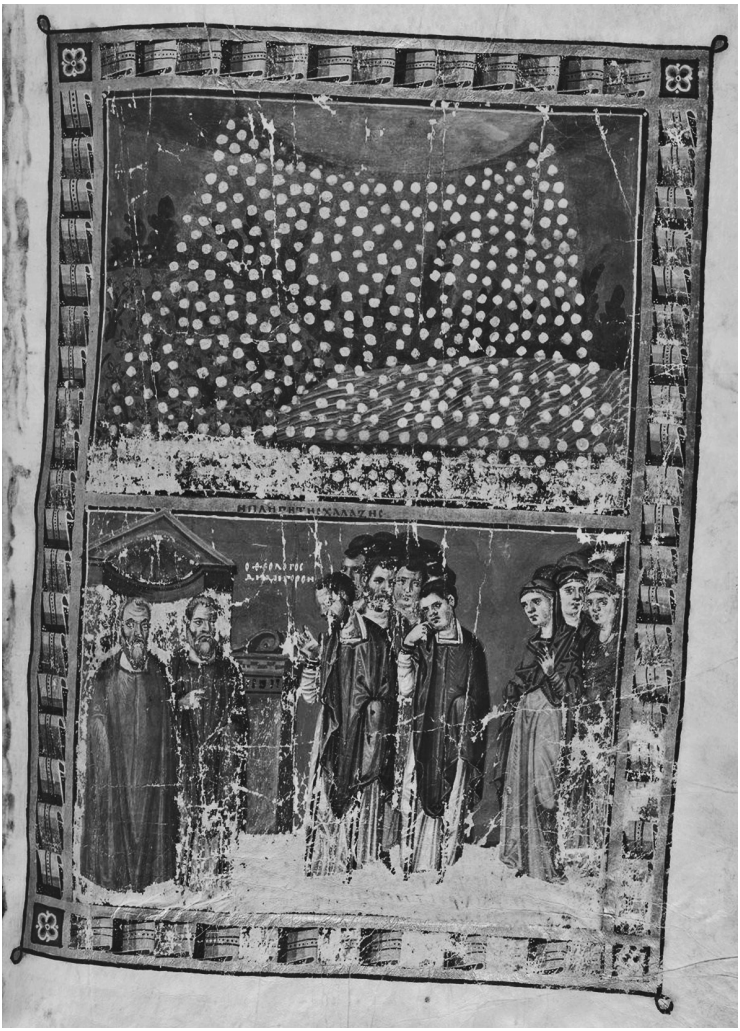

Fig. 17.2 Saint Gregory of Nazianzos preaching about the damage caused by a hailstorm.

When the Crusaders burned the city in 1203, in the year before they sacked it, the flames traveled swiftly along the rafters of the porticoes, resembling *rivers of fire* that flowed across the face of Constantinople (Choniates, *History* 554–555).

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THE END

The central column in the forum of Constantine, topped with a colossal statue of the emperor himself and regarded as a kind of talisman of the city, experienced almost every disaster that struck the empire. It was scorched by the great conflagrations of the fifth and sixth centuries—probably those of 464 and 532—which left it blackened and in need of reinforcement by ugly iron bands. The spear of the statue fell during a later earthquake and embedded itself in the forum pavement. The column was struck by lightning in 1079 (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 310–311), while a powerful gale toppled the statue in 1106, squashing a number of people on the ground (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 12.4.5). The statue was replaced by a tall cross. Its huge head was moved to the palace and kept as a curiosity (Ioannes Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 8.192, v. 332). In modern times, the monument has been given names that allude to all this damage, including The Burned Column and, in Turkish (the name of the local district), Çemberlitaş, or "stone with bands" or "hoops." But it is still standing.

The column and statue of Constantine in Constantinople formed a symbolic focal point for the city and the empire's very existence. An apocalyptic vision from the tenth century offers a sad image of the End Times: the city would be flooded over, except the tip of the column of Constantine, because it bore the Nails of the Crucifixion. The survivors of the Flood would tie their boats to it and lament the passing of the once-great "Babylon" (*Life of Andreas the Fool* 36).

The Byzantines calculated that the world was created in what we call 5508 B.C.. It was also believed that the world would end 7,000 years after it was made, which put its destruction in the year A.D. 1492.

· XVIII ·

The Emperors

Constantine the Great (306–337) was a popular emperor, but he was worse then Nero when it came to his family. He

- *suicided his father-in-law, the not-so-retired emperor Maximian in 310;*
- *killed his brother-in-law, the emperor Maxentius in battle in 312 (this was Maximian's son);*
- *executed his other brother-in-law, the emperor Licinius, in 325 after he had promised to spare him;*
- *executed his nephew, Valerius Licinius, the ten-year-old son of Licinius;*
- *executed his own son, Crispus, in 326 for reasons that remain mysterious;*
- *and soon after that executed his second wife Fausta, the daughter of Maximian, possibly for having an affair with Crispus. It was said that he put Fausta in a steamy bath until she asphyxiated.*

The best face that could be put on this was that Constantine did not spare his own family when it came to the good of the state (Michael Psellos, *Short History* 55). Pagan critics claimed that Constantine converted to Christianity because it promised him forgiveness for his crimes against his family members.

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Fig. 18.1 Foot of the giant statue of Constantine the Great, Rome.

Early Byzantine emperors loved to name things after themselves. Constantine I, son of Constantius I, named his sons Constantine, Constantius, and Constans, one of his daughters Constantina, and his city Constantinople. Justinian I (*Iustinianus* in Latin) named many things after himself, including the law book *Codex Iustinianus* and the new city *Iustiniana Prima*, and he renamed over twenty other towns *Ioustinianopolis* or *Iustiniana*. First-year law students were to be called *Iustiniani novi*. The titles of officials, provinces, cities, and ecclesiastical dioceses were changed to include his name (e.g., to *praetor Iustinianus*, *Carthago Iustiniana*), and military units recruited among barbarians were named *Iustiniani Vandali*, *Numidae Iustiniani, Scythai Iustiniani, Bis electi Iustiniani*, and *Perso-Iustiniani*.

When Constantius II made his triumphal entry into Rome in 357, it was noted that he sat perfectly still in his carriage, looking straight ahead, and did not rub his nose or even spit (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 16.10.10).

Julian (361–363) was a lenient judge and magistrates complained to him, *"How can anyone be convicted if a denial of the charge is sufficient for an acquittal?" To which he said, "How can anyone be acquitted if an indictment without proof is sufficient to secure a condemnation?"* (Ioannes of Antioch, Chronicle fr. 269 R).

Valens (365–376) invented new ways to torture people, and justified this by saying that *people had already developed ways to cope with existing forms of torture* (Michael Psellos, *Short History* 60).

It was said that Theodosios II (408–450) would sign documents without reading them. One day his sister Pulcheria placed a contract before him selling his wife, the empress Eudokia, into slavery, and he signed it, whereupon Pulcheria gave him a scolding for being so careless (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 101).

Leon I (457–474) issued a law that Sundays should be days of rest and that no musical instruments were to be played, neither flutes nor lyres (Ioannes Malalas, *Chronicle* 14.39).

In the disputed imperial succession of 519, Justin, who was the captain of the palace guard, was given money by the chief chamberlain Amantios and told to bribe the soldiers to acclaim one of Amantios' clients as emperor, but Justin used it to bribe the soldiers to acclaim himself emperor instead.

The only Byzantine emperor who can be said to have gone mad in a clinical way was Justin II (565–578). He would utter the cries of various animals, rush about the palace in terror, hide under the bed or his pillows, and try to throw himself out of the window. The empress had to install bars on the windows. He would try to bite his attendants. To distract him, they made a little cart with a throne on it and rocked him back and forth on it. An organ would play soothing music all day and night near his chamber. This went on for five years, during which time the empire was governed by Justin's eventual successor, the Caesar Tiberios II (John of Ephesos, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.2–3, 3.6).

An abbot had a dream in which he asked God whether all rulers were appointed with his approval. God said yes. *"Then why, Lord, did you send the evil Phokas to rule the Romans?" "Because I could find no one worse"* (Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers*, in *PG* 89: 476–477).

The emperor Herakleios (610–641) was so pathologically afraid of water that, when he had to cross the Bosporos on his return from war to Constantinople, his engineers built a covered pontoon bridge all the way across so that he could cross on horseback and not have to see the waves (Nikephoros, *Short History* 25).

Konstas II (641–668) was killed while he was lathering himself with soap in the baths at Syracuse, Sicily, by an assailant wielding the soap dish (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 351).

When Justinian II was returning from exile in 705, intent on regaining his throne, a mighty storm blew up around his boat. A servant implored him to promise before God that he would spare his enemies, hoping to appease the divine wrath. Justinian swore, *If I spare even a single one of my enemies, may God strike me down now!* He survived

the storm and regained his throne (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 373).

The Iconoclast emperor Konstantinos V (741–775) was said to have forbidden people from using the word "saint" when referring to churches—so they could say only "let's go to George's" rather than "to saint George's"—and he denied that the saints had any intercessory powers, their virtues and accomplishments being good only for their own salvation, not ours (*Against Konstantinos Kaballinos,* in *PG* 95: 337).

Nikephoros (802–811) organized a bride show for his son and heir Staurakios, but his real purpose was allegedly to assemble some girls who were more beautiful than the one chosen for his son in order to have them as his mistresses, and he violated them during the wedding celebrations (Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 483).

Michael of Amorion was convicted of treason on the day before Christmas, 820, and the emperor Leon V was persuaded by his wife to postpone the execution until after the festival. But, Michael's associates murdered Leon at church and placed Michael on the throne wearing his chains from prison (Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors* 1.17–19, 2.1).

When Theophilos began to go bald, he ordered that no Roman should wear his hair longer than the neck, but he alleged that this was done in order to restore ancient Roman hair-styles (Theophanes Continuatus, p. 107).

At an imperial banquet, the patrician Himerios the Boar—called that because of his beastly face—let out from his belly such a loud noise that it extinguished a torch. Michael III (842–867) awarded him with

a hundred pounds of gold for performing such an extraordinary feat (Theophanes Continuatus, p. 172). We are unfortunately not told from which end of his belly this mighty roar came.

In order to keep his mistress Eudokia close at hand, Michael III married her to his favorite courtier, Basileios the Macedonian, but after Basileios murdered Michael he kept Eudokia, creating doubts about the paternity of Leon VI (886–912), who was born in the year of her "overlap."

The debauched emperor Alexandros (912–913) was persuaded by magicians that his talisman was a bronze statue of the boar that stood in the hippodrome, facing off with a lion, which stood for his brother (Leon VI). The emperor thereupon endowed it with teeth and genitals, which it had previously lacked (Theophanes Continuatus, p. 379). When he became impotent, these magicians persuaded him to clothe the statues in the hippodrome and light candles before them (*Life of the Patriarch Euthymios* 20).

Liudprand wrote an unforgettable satirical description of Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969), one of Byzantium's most formidable generals: *a monstrosity of a man, a pygmy, fat-headed and like a mole in the smallness of his eyes; disgusting with his short, broad, and thick beard and short neck; in color like an Ethiopian; generally not a person it would be pleasant to meet in the middle of the night; with big belly, lean of loin, and long of hip considering his short stature; clad in a garment costly but too old, and foul-smelling and faded through age* (*Embassy to Constantinople* 3; Henderson tr., mod.).

Romanos Argyros was presented with two choices by the ailing emperor Konstantinos VIII (1025–1028): either divorce his legitimate wife (who would then have to be tonsured and forcibly "volunteered"

Fig. 18.2 Image of Basil II (976–1025) in military attire and posture, subjecting subjects and foreign enemies alike; from his Psalter.

to join a nunnery), marry the emperor's daughter Zoe, and become emperor; or else be blinded. He chose the first option (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis,* p. 374).

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Michael IV (1034–1041) was an epileptic: when a seizure came upon him, his handlers were ready with a screen to put around him and

block him from view; that is why he always had a circle of men around him (Psellos, *Chronographia* 4.18).

The patriarch and the people of Constantinople persuaded Michael VI to abdicate in 1057 when his armies had been defeated by the rebel Isaakios Komnenos. *"What do I get in return?" he asked. "The kingdom of heaven" was the answer* (Ioannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, p. 499). When the patriarch then embraced him with a kiss, Michael said bitterly, *May God reward you fittingly for this embrace* (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 59).

The military emperor Isaakios I Komnenos (1057–1059) was raised as an orphan at the Stoudios monastery in Constantinople. After he abdicated, he retired there and spent the remainder of his life as a humble doorman, serving the abbot without complaint (Skylitzes Continuatus, p. 109).

Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078) *was naïve, ignorant, and inexperienced enough that he was deemed fit only to be a bishop* (Michael Attaleiates, *History* 303).

Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–1185) was the most amazing and beguiling of all emperors: incredibly handsome, with an enviable physique, a dashing warrior and seducer of many women (including his own cousin and a foreign princess), an escape artist, and troublemaker—also quite unscrupulous and evil. Yet the image was marred when he seized the throne as an old man and took to wearing hats shaped like pyramids (Choniates, *History* 252).

At a banquet, the emperor Isaakios II Angelos (1185–1195) called for salt, which in Greek is *alas*. This sounds exactly like *allas*—"other women." One of his courtiers immediately retorted, *"O emperor, let us*

first go through these"—indicating the women present—"and then we can call for others!" (Choniates, *History* 441).

In search of help for his ailing empire, Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) traveled farther than any Roman emperor since the time of Hadrian. Between 1400 and 1403, he traveled from Constantinople (under blockade by the Turks) to Venice and France (where Charles VI the Mad was too far gone to pay attention), and finally to England, where Henry IV hosted him at Eltham palace and gave a joust in his honor. Having nothing to do at Paris, he wrote another refutation of Latin theology and a literary description of a tapestry depicting scenes of spring that hung at the Louvre (Manuel II, *An Image of Spring in a Woven, Dyed Hanging*).

Manuel II also wrote a literary *Dialogue* between himself and his mother on the topic of marriage; a *Poem to an Atheist*; and a *Dialogue with a Persian*—that is, a Turk, which is a refutation of Islam. Pope Benedict XVI caused a controversy when he quoted that last work at an address to the University of Regensburg in 2006. The pope quoted this passage: *Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached,* and he later defended himself by saying that he was only quoting Manuel, not necessarily giving his own view.

The last known words of the last Roman emperor: *Neither I nor anyone else among its inhabitants has the right to surrender this city to you. By a common decision we have freely chosen to die and will not spare our lives in its defense*—Konstantinos XI Palaiologos to the sultan Mehmet II, in 1453 (Doukas, *History* 39.1).

Fig. 18.3 Modern statue of Konstantinos XI Palaiologos at Mystras, with an inscription of his famous last words.

EMPERORS: SOME FACTS, STATISTICS, AND A LIST

The dates given in conventional lists of Byzantine emperors (such as the one that follows) are not the dates of their reigns but the years during which they ruled as the senior or only emperor in the palace. Being an emperor as such meant only that one had been acclaimed as *basileus* or *Augustus* by the people. For some, this happened while they were infants or children, when their father was effectively in command. Their reigns, in other words, were longer than their rule. Consider the longest-reigning Roman or Byzantine emperor in history, Basil II. His rule is normally given as 976–1025, or fifty years. But he was made an emperor by his father Romanos II when he was only two, in 960, which gives him a reign of sixty-five years.

Sometimes there were many men and women who held the rank of emperor in the palace at the same time, a whole college of emperors that is depicted in family portraits on coins. But the dates of rule are assigned to the man or woman in charge.

Byzantine history is marked by dozens of plots, rebellions, and coups, both successful and not. The emperor's rival during such disturbances was regarded as the true emperor by his own supporters, and literally *was* the emperor in the territories he controlled (issuing coins, appointing magistrates, etc.). These men are usually not listed unless they gained the capital and deposed the previous emperor, even if only briefly. The emperors who came to power after a violent transition of some kind are marked in the list with an asterisk (*) before their name.

The list features ninety-one regimes for 1,129 years of Byzantine history, which yields an average of 12.4 years per reign.

The ninety-one listed regimes represent eighty-eight individual emperors (i.e., three of them took the throne twice: Zenon, Justinian II, and Konstantinos V; the blind Isaakios II Angelos took it again too, but in partnership with his son, Alexios IV Angelos).

Forty-three of those eighty-eight emperors were biologically related to their predecessors, so Byzantium exhibits an almost 50 percent rate of dynastic succession, though even within families some successions were violent.

Forty-two of the ninety-one regimes—or 46 percent—came to power as the result of some kind of violence, which is probably the highest percentage for any state that lasted for more than a few centuries. Byzantium was the most long-lasting state in all of history: it had the most stable system and the least stable politics.

Only two women ever ruled the Byzantine empire in their own name: Eirene (797–802) after she blinded her own son Konstantinos VI; and Theodora (1055–1056), the daughter of Konstantinos VIII and niece of Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer. When she was asked to make donative payments upon her accession in 1055, Theodora replied correctly that she

had really been empress ever since the people acclaimed her in 1042, and so there would be no more gifts.

Disabilities: one emperor was missing a nose (Justinian II, in his second reign), one was blind (Isaakios II Angelos, in his second reign), and two were epileptic (Michael IV and Theodoros II Laskaris). Only one was certifiably mad (Justin II), but he knew it and made arrangements for a successor.

Early Byzantine Period

306–337	*Constantine the Great *(ruled the East after 324)*
337–361	Constantius II *(son)*
361–363	*Julian *(cousin, since 360 in the West)*
363–364	Jovian
364–378	Valens
379–395	Theodosius I
395–408	Arcadius *(son)*
408–450	Theodosius II *(son)*
450–457	Marcianus
457–474	Leo I
474–475	Zeno *(son-in-law)*
475–476	*Basiliscus
476–491	*Zeno *(again)*
491–518	Anastasius I
518–527	Justin I
527–565	Justinian I *(nephew)*
565–578	Justin II *(nephew)*
578–582	Tiberios II Konstantinos
582–602	Maurikios
602–610	*Phokas
610–641	*Herakleios

Middle Byzantine Period

641	Herakleios Neos Konstantinos III *(son)*
641	Heraklonas *(half-brother)*

641–668	*Konstas II *(son of Konstantinos III)*
668–685	*Konstantinos IV *(son)*
685–695	Justinian II *(son)*
695–698	*Leontios
698–705	*Tiberios III Apsimar
705–711	*Justinian II *(again)*
711–713	*Philippikos Bardanes
713–715	*Anastasios II
715–717	*Theodosios III
717–741	*Leon III
741–742	Konstantinos V *(son)*
742–743	*Artavasdos
743–775	*Konstantinos V *(again)*
775–780	Leon IV *(son)*
780–797	Konstantinos VI *(son)*
797–802	*Eirene *(mother)*
802–811	*Nikephoros I
811	Staurakios *(son)*
811–813	Michael I Rangabe
813–820	*Leon V
820–829	*Michael II
829–842	Theophilos *(son)*
842–867	Michael III *(son)*
867–886	*Basileios I
886–912	Leon VI *(son)*
912–913	Alexandros *(brother)*
913–920	Regencies for Konstantinos VII *(son of Leon VI)*
920–944	*Romanos I Lakapenos
944–945	*Stephanos and Konstantinos Lakapenos *(sons)*; Konstantinos VII
945–959	*Konstantinos VII
959–963	Romanos II *(son)*
963–969	*Nikephoros II Phokas
969–976	*Ioannes I Tzimiskes
976–1025	Basileios II *(son of Romanos II)*
1025–1028	Konstantinos VIII *(brother)*
1028–1034	Romanos III Argyros
1034–1041	Michael IV
1041–1042	Michael V *(nephew)*
1042–1055	*Konstantinos IX Monomachos

1055–1056 Theodora *(daughter of Konstantinos VIII)*
1056–1057 Michael VI Bringas
1057–1059 *Isaakios I Komnenos
1059–1067 Konstantinos X Doukas
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1078–1081 *Nikephoros III Botaneiates
1081–1118 *Alexios I Komnenos
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1143–1180 Manuel I Komnenos *(son)*
1180–1183 Alexios II Komnenos *(son)*
1183–1185 *Andronikos I Komnenos *(second cousin)*
1185–1195 *Isaakios II Angelos
1195–1203 *Alexios III Angelos *(brother)*
1203–1204 *Isaakios II Angelos *(again)* and Alexios IV Angelos *(son)*
1204 *Alexios V Doukas

Later Byzantine Period

1205–1222 *Theodoros I Laskaris
1222–1254 Ioannes III Doukas Batatzes
1254–1258 Theodoros II Laskaris *(son)*
1258–1261 Ioannes IV Laskaris *(son)*
1259–1282 *Michael VIII Palaiologos
1282–1328 Andronikos II Palaiologos *(son)*
1328–1341 *Andronikos III Palaiologos *(grandson)*
1341–1391 Ioannes V Palaiologos *(son)*
1347–1354 *Ioannes VI Kantakouzenos
1376–1379 *Andronikos IV Palaiologos *(son of Ioannes V)*
1391–1425 Manuel II Palaiologos *(son of Ioannes V)*
1425–1448 Ioannes VIII *(son)*
1448–1453 Konstantinos XI Palaiologos *(brother)*

GLOSSARY

THIS GLOSSARY defines some of the individuals, places, institutions, technical terms, and unique aspects of Byzantine civilization that are encountered most frequently in the book. It is not comprehensive. For additional information, consult *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols., edited by A. Kazhdan (Oxford University Press, 1991).

Abbot: literally "father," the leader of a monastery or more loosely organized religious community. In Byzantine Greek, abbots were usually called *hegoumenoi*, "leaders."

Ammianus Marcellinus: fourth-century historian, who hailed from the Greek-speaking east, served in the army as an officer, and then wrote his *Res Gestae* in Latin in Rome.

Ascetic: a person subjecting himself (or herself) to some form of rigorous self-denial and renunciation of earthly pleasures in order to be closer to God through constant prayer. Ascetics often lived apart from human communities—for example, a little way off in the desert or on a mountain—and sometimes they formed small communities. The practice is called *asceticism*.

Athos, Mt.: network of monasteries on the easternmost finger of the Chalkidike peninsula in northern Greece, which today forms a nominally separate country under Greek protection. The monastic communities there began to form in the ninth and tenth centuries, though reliable evidence comes only from the later tenth. Women were, and still are, forbidden from setting foot on the mountain.

Basil of Caesarea (in Cappadocia): bishop, theologian, saint, and Church Father of the fourth century who laid down some of the fundamental rules of monastic, episcopal, and Orthodox life.

Byzantion: name of the ancient Greek colony on the Bosporos where, in A.D. 330, Constantinople was later founded; also used by the Byzantines themselves as an archaic name for Constantinople.

Byzantium: modern label for the eastern Roman empire as a whole, not just the capital city, between A.D. 330 and 1453; the empire was known to its inhabitants as *Romanía*—that is, Romanland.

Choniates, Niketas: high official and historian of the empire in the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, who witnessed and wrote about the capture and sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade; one of the best and most artful of historians in the Greek tradition, and also one of the hardest to read.

Church Canon: a rule or "law" of the Church produced at a Church Council that sought to regulate the lives of the clergy and laity, the organization of the Church, and the like. Some canons were then ratified by the emperors as imperial law.

Church Councils: a conference of bishops (a few hundred at a time) convened to discuss disputes over theological doctrine and settle questions of Church law. A handful of Councils resulted in important doctrinal formulas that "stuck" in the long term, and these were called *Ecumenical Councils*. Meetings of bishops to resolve more local matters were called *Synods*.

Church Fathers: a conventional term for designating the theologians and bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries who established the Orthodox doctrine of the Church and the basic rules of ethical Christian life and the organization of the Church. There were no Church Mothers.

Constantinople: the "city of Constantinople" or "New Rome," founded as a branch office of Rome in A.D. 330 to serve as the capital of the eastern Roman empire. In the 1930s, its name was changed to Istanbul.

Eunuch: a man whose testicles have been removed, either as a child (in which case he would go through puberty in a very curious way) or as an adult.

Fornication: any type of sexual activity considered illicit by the Church; basically anything other than sex between a married man and woman, though some hardliners in the Church would insist that it also be for the purpose of procreation only.

Hagia Sophia: cathedral church of Constantinople, one of the marvels of Roman-Byzantine engineering and religious architecture. The domed version that stands today was built by Justinian in 532–537,

was subsequently turned into a mosque under Ottoman rule, and is today a museum.

Heretic: this is how Christians branded other Christians whose theological views were different from their own, even if only slightly different. No one called himself a heretic; it was a term of abuse. The opposite is *Orthodox*: everyone always thinks that he himself is Orthodox.

Hippodrome: racetrack for chariots, a form of popular entertainment that spread throughout the Roman empire and continued in Byzantium. The largest hippodrome was adjacent to the palace in Constantinople, allowing the emperor easy access to his box.

John Chrysostom (Ioannes the "Golden Mouth"): a preacher from Antioch, one of the best orators of his age, who became patriarch of Constantinople. His many volumes of homilies and essays explored the requirements of a Christian life and urged his reluctant contemporaries to be more rigorous when it came to Christian ethics.

Justinian I: probably the most important emperor in Byzantine history (527–565). He reconquered North Africa, taking it from the Vandals, and took Italy from the Ostrogoths; he codified Roman law and built Hagia Sophia. He also persecuted religious groups that did not agree with his theology, as well as sexual deviants.

Justinianic Code: collection of past imperial laws made in the early sixth century under Justinian I (527–565) in Constantinople, a part of his famous codification of Roman law, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Much of it was translated into Greek, in the Byzantine *Basilika*.

Icon: image of a saint, the Virgin Mary, or Christ, mostly painted on wooden boards or church walls. In the eighth and ninth centuries, they were the cause of a major controversy, called *Iconoclasm*, over whether their use and adoration constituted idolatry. The defenders of icons were called *Iconophiles* or *Iconodules* ("slaves of icons").

Iconoclast (i.e., "breaker of icons"): a person who believed that the use and adoration of religious images of the saints or Christ (icons) constituted idolatry and should be banned from Christian worship. The opposite is an *Iconophile* or *Iconodule* ("slave of icons").

Ioannes: the Greek form of the name John.

Komnenoi: dynasty founded by Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) that ruled until 1185, though almost all subsequent emperors were descended from them in one way or another. It was under the Komnenoi that Byzantium can first be said to have a family-based aristocracy.

Law: Byzantine law was basically Roman law translated into Greek. It consisted mostly of imperial decrees, which were often issued when emperors were asked to settle a dispute. These were periodically collected into Codes (such as the *Theodosian Code* and the *Justinianic Code*). There was also Church law, or canon law, which was based on decisions made by the bishops who assembled at the Church Councils that were then made into state law by imperial order.

Liudprand of Cremona: tenth-century bishop from northern Italy who was sent on a number of diplomatic missions to Constantinople, the last of which, in 968, went so badly that he wrote a vicious attack on the emperor, Nikephoros II Phokas, called the *Embassy to Constantinople*. If you don't like Byzantium, you probably like Liudprand.

Madrid Skylitzes: richly illuminated copy of the history of Ioannes Skylitzes, written originally toward the end of the eleventh century. While the text in the manuscript is the Greek text of Skylitzes, the images were painted at the court of Norman Sicily in the twelfth century, so strictly speaking they are not Byzantine images.

Monastery: a community where men go in order to be alone together ("monk" in Greek literally means "he who is alone") and live strict religious lives of prayer and service. Some monasteries were in the desert, some on mountains, and some in cities. There were prestigious "Ivy League" monasteries in Constantinople from which patriarchs and abbots were chosen. Monasteries for women are called nunneries. There were also a few separate monastaries for eunuchs.

Novella: short for *Novella Constitutio*—that is, a "new law" issued by an emperor, to be added to existing collections.

Palaiologoi: imperial dynasty that ruled Byzantium from 1259 to the end (1453), with only brief interruptions. With few exceptions, they were mostly ineffectual.

Patriarch: an honorific title given to a small number of bishops who are considered more important than the rest, or are more powerful, often because they are associated with the ruler of a realm. In Byzantium, the bishop of Constantinople was a patriarch (also of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome).

PG: abbreviation for *Patrologia Graeca*, a standard nineteenth-century collection of Greek patristic and Byzantine texts published by J.-P. Migne, also known as "God's Plagiarist."

***Philogelos* ("Lover of Laughter"):** early Byzantine collection of jokes, some of which are ancient while others have a definite late Roman/

early Byzantine ambiance; they target lawyers, eunuchs, misogynists, and the like. Many of the jokes in this collection are still used by comedians.

Prokopios of Caesarea (in Palestine): contemporary historian of the age of Justinian I (527–565) who wrote an account of the regime's wars (*Wars*), scandals (the *Secret History*), and *Buildings*. He is one of the greatest historians of the ancient and medieval worlds.

Psellos, Michael (né Konstantinos): philosopher, polymath, historian, and courtier of the eleventh century. He wrote in almost every genre of literature known to the Byzantines.

Saints' *Lives*: these were biographies of holy men and women that highlighted their virtues and miraculous powers. Often they aimed to promote a specific cult, but many of these texts gave free rein to literary invention, resulting in amusing and edifying tales. They are also a prime source of information for social history, as they record the lives and travails of ordinary people.

Stylite: a type of saint who lives on the top of a column, sometimes for decades, with a community of supporters and fans living around him. Stylites would receive visits from people who had all kinds of problems.

***Theodosian Code*:** collection of past imperial laws made in the early fifth century under Theodosios II (408–450) in Constantinople.

Troullo, Council in: Church Council held in Constantinople in 692, under a dome in the palace, from where it got its name. It was also amusingly known as the Quinisext ("Fifth-Sixth") Council because it aimed to supplement the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils.

Tzetzes, Ioannes: classical scholar in twelfth-century Constantinople, known for his acerbic wit and propensity for vulgar insults. He wrote commentaries on many ancient texts, as well as letters and allegorical works. He tried hard to make himself seem like a thoroughly unpleasant person, and succeeded.

COIN IMAGES

The local currencies of the Roman empire, issued by its cities separately, ceased to be produced during the crisis of the third century A.D., and with them went the variety of images they sported. Only imperial coins circulated thereafter, depicting the emperor, empress, or imperial "college," sometimes with a figure of victory on the other side or, after the seventh century, a holy figure. Images I–VII, IX, XII, XIV, and XVII are reproduced courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., www.cngcoins.com; images VIII, XI, XIII, XV–XVI are © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.; image X is reproduced courtesy of the American Numismatic Society ANS digital library; image XVIII is reproduced courtesy of Wikimedia.

Chapter I: Constantine the Great (306–337), wearing a triple diadem of pearls, lifing his gaze to heaven. Constantine was popularly known as Trachala, or "Thick Neck" (*Epitome de Caesaribus* 41.14).

Chapter II: Julian (361–363), known among Christians as "The Apostate", as he rejected Christianity and returned to paganism. He broke with the shaven look of his family and sported a "philosophical" beard, a reference to classical Greek culture. In a satirical work, he joked about the food that got tangled in it and the lice that lived there.

Chapter III: Eudoxia, empress of Arcadius (395–408), noted for her beauty. She was pregnant for most of her reign, and died during a miscarriage. This was interpreted as divine punishment for her opposition to the popular preacher John Chrysostom, whom she drove into exile because he had denounced her vanity.

Chapter IV: Leon I (457–474), known as "the Butcher" because he ambushed in the palace and killed a general, Aspar, who was trying to dominate him, along with his family. Leon is here shown in consular robes, holding the *mappa*, a piece of cloth used to start the games in the hippodrome.

Chapter V: Justinian I (527–565), on a coin struck by the Gothic regime of king Athalaric in Italy, before Justinian invaded Italy. The emperor wears a helmet and is holding a spear that rests on his shoulder. In reality, Justinian never led an army in person.

Chapter VI: Phokas (602–610), a centurion who rebelled against the emperor Maurikios, killed him, and took the throne. He broke with the shaven look of the Christian Roman emperors and sported a military beard. It was said that he did as much damage to the Roman state from the inside as the Persians did from the outside.

Chapter VII: Herakleios (610–641) and his son Herakleios Konstantinos. Toward the end of his reign, Herakleios began to sport the biggest beard, handlebar mustache, and sideburns ever seen in Roman imperial history. Its significance remains mysterious.

Chapter VIII: Konstantinos IV (center), Herakleios, and Tiberios, shown on a coin issued by their father, Konstas II (641–688). Emperors would often crown their children, resulting in an imperial "college." When Konstantinos took power, an army unit demanded that he rule together with his brothers, "for we believe in a Trinity!" He impaled the ringleaders and cut off his brothers' noses (Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 352). Minted 663–668 Constantinople. (BZC.1948.17.2193.)

Chapter IX: Konstantinos IV (668–685); inferior design in the tradition of the type represented by the coin of Justinian in chapter V.

Chapter X: Gold dinar of the Arab caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan (685–705). This was modeled on Byzantine imperial coins, with the cross bar removed from the cross on the tiered base (thus eliminating the Christian message, at the cost of producing a rather meaningless image), and an Arabic legend added around the edge (ANS Museum, album 3350).

Chapter XI: Christ on a coin of Justinian II (685–695, 705–711), his first appearance on a coin. Christ is labeled as the "King of Kings," whereas the emperor, on the reverse, is labeled as the "Slave of Christ." (BZC.1948.17.2341.)

Chapter XII: The boy emperor Konstantinos VI (780–797) and his mother Eirene, who later blinded him and went on to rule in her own name (797–802).

Chapter XIII: Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos (sole reign, 945–959). On the obverse, Christ is shown with an equally impressive nose. (BZC.1948.17.3075.)

Chapter XIV: Ioannes I Tzimiskes (969–976), being crowned by the Virgin; the hand of God is also reaching down above the emperor. In reality, Tzimiskes usurped the throne after scaling the palace wall during a winter night with a gang of assassins and killing the previous emperor, Nikephoros II Phokas.

Chapter XV: For the first and only time in its history, the Roman empire was briefly ruled by two women, Zoe and Theodora, the daughters of Konstantinos VIII (1025–1028). In 1042, they held auditions and interviews to find the man who would marry Zoe and become the next emperor. Minted in Constantinople, 1042. (BZC.1956.11.)

Chapter XVI: Isaakios I Komnenos (1057–1059), shown with a drawn sword. The coin was controversial at the time, as it was taken to imply that Isaakios was attributing his success to his own prowess, not God. (BZC.1948.17.2961.)

Chapter XVII: Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), here called a "Despot." The emperor is being crowned by the hand of God and wears a garment with *huge* jewels on the the right hem.

Chapter XVIII: Medallion made by Pisanello, a Renaissance artist, for Ioannes VIII Palaiologos (1425–1447), the emperor who traveled to Italy with the Byzantine delegation to the Council of Ferrara-Florence.

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