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RESORTING TO RARE SOURCES OF ANTIQUITY: 
NIKEPHOROS BASILAKES AND THE POPULARITY 
OF PLUTARCH’S PARALLEL LIVES 
IN TWELFTH-CENTURY BYZANTIUM*

SOPHIA XENOPHONTOS

The rare story of the Lydian king Pythes and his wife is first attested in Plutarch’s Mulierum virtutes 262D–263A (ca. 115 AD) and exploited again a few decades later in Polyaenus’ Strategemata 8.42 (ca. 163 AD) in a version that seems to follow closely the Plutarchan account.1 After a huge gap of about ten centuries, the same story is revived in the Komnenian era by the Byzantine theologian and teacher, Nikephoros Basilakes (born ca. 1115 – died after 1182).2 In this article, I wish to examine the Byzantine reception of Pythes’ encounter with his wife by discussing the transformation of the story within the context of Progymnasma 11. This will additionally help us to reflect on Plutarch’s popularity in twelfth-century Byzantium and especially on the status of transmission and circulation of his Parallel Lives and Moralia during that age.

* Special thanks are owed to PHILIP STADTER for his insightful remarks on the final draft of this article. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees and the editorial committee for their expert care in publishing this paper.

1 The earliest reference to Pythes is Herodotus 7.27-29 and 7.38-39, where the name is given as Pythius; see S. LEWIS, Who is Pythius the Lydian? Histos 2 (1998) 185-191. Pythes is mentioned also by Pliny, Naturalis historia 33.10 and Seneca, De ira 3.16, but not in relation to his wife. According to STADTER, the episode of Pythes’ wife in Plutarch is unique and independent from Herodotus, P. STADTER, Plutarch’s historical methods. An analysis of the Mulierum virtutes. Cambridge, Mass. 1965, 120-124. The issue of whether Polyaenus actually drew on Plutarch’s narrative or whether he consulted a common source remains a contested one, but the chances are in favour of the former possibility. See STADTER, Plutarch’s historical methods (cited just above), 18-29, who rightly brings out the close verbal resemblances of the two accounts and stresses that everything said in Polyaenus is already in Plutarch, while there are elements of the Plutarchan account omitted by Polyaenus.

Before turning to the variations that Basilakes introduces to Pythes’ anecdote, we need to identify his source material, which is in all likelihood Plutarch’s rather than Polyaeus’ text. \(^3\) Two pieces of evidence lead us towards that conclusion: first, the reference in the narrative’s heading, which explicitly acknowledges Plutarch as a source for the story; and second, Plutarch’s enduring prominence from the early Byzantine centuries until the end of the Palaiologan period, in opposition to the relatively lower profile of Polyaeus in the Middle Ages. \(^4\) Although his *Strategemata* played an important role in Byzantine military ethnography, as a number of Byzantine abridgments of the work attest, \(^5\) the influence of this treatise after the tenth century should not be overestimated. \(^6\) Indeed, that the *Strategemata* survive in a single manuscript (Laurentianus 56.1, ca. 1295) can hardly be explained as a result of mere chance, however optimistic scholars wish to be on that issue. \(^7\)

Nonetheless, if one considers that Plutarch’s version of the story goes on to deal with Xerxes’ wrath against Pythes, a topic absent from both Polyaeus and Basilakes, one would be inclined to establish Polyaeus as Basilakes’ model instead. I do not believe that this need follow, because each of the elements involved in Pythes’ anecdote was appealing at different periods in the history tradition of the narrative. \(^8\) As opposed to Xerxes’ wrath, which figured large in the classical age but fell into oblivion after Seneca (1st century AD), Pythes’ wealth that had aroused his wife’s concern attracted, in particular, the Byzantine authors of Basilakes’ time, for instance Eustathios of Thessalonike and John Tzetzes. This justifies well why Basilakes worked on the currently fashionable topic of Pythes’ wife and

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\(^{8}\) Stadter, Plutarch’s historical methods (cited n. 1), 121.
was uninterested in reproducing the long-abandoned Xerxes’ relation to Pythes.

In addition to the above, I was able to trace a number of textual divergences between Polyaenius and Basilakes at junctures in which Plutarch’s and Basilakes’ accounts appear to be in absolute agreement:

a) Polyaenius’ treatment starts with Pythes’ passion for gold, and omits the authorial praise for the female virtue, which introduces the narrative in both Plutarch and Basilakes, as we shall see.

b) By withholding the name of the queen, Basilakes keeps very close to Plutarch, where the queen is also anonymous. Had Basilakes’ consulted Polyaenius’ text, he would have mentioned the name of Pythes’ wife, Pythopolis, which is overtly stated both in the title of the passage as well as once within it. This would have otherwise helped him to adhere to his tendency in the rest of his narratives of naming his heroes.

c) The element of *eros*/love as a metaphor for Pythes’ passion is absent from Polyaenius, yet actively exposed in the other two accounts. We shall soon see how Basilakes reshapes in a very novel fashion Plutarch’s own treatment of *eros*.

Before embarking upon the thematic analysis of Pythes’ story in its ancient and Byzantine version comparatively, for reasons of convenience I provide the reader with an English translation of the *diegema*.

*Progymnasma 11. ‘Narrative (*diegema*), also mentioned by Plutarch in the *Parallel Lives*’*

The inventiveness of women did not, of course, escape the notice of the men of old, but they quite properly admired those of the female race who possessed some sort of wisdom, though without generating envy of this phenomenon amongst the male race. Once upon a time there was a king whose name may have been different but who shared Midas’ soul and whose temperament was guided by love for gold. Although he was the ruler of many cities, he did not know how to rule his own love of money. While he controlled the rest of his affairs by his immense luck, however he was enslaved to this one passion, his love of gold; he was moderate in all other respects but condemned to suffer insatiably from this one only. During his sleep he would dream nothing but gold, when he was awake he would see gold before him again, and even when he was awake during the night he would once more imagine gold. What pursuit did he not try in order to acquire money? What kind of means did he not contrive in order to accumulate wealth? His subjects were burdened with unbearable taxes and some of these they paid as best they could and others they supplemented from mining the earth. In the former case, the citizens squandered their fortune, in the latter case they
wore out their bodies, and they never ceased inventing all sorts of money making; nonetheless, their ruler’s every effort was dedicated to satisfying his passion. For, in addition to his love for gold he also had a love for hunting. He once set out to the woods, dragging his hunting dogs with him. There the king ran after the deer and the hares on his horse and shouted to his dogs, while the queen had another preoccupation, namely how to diminish her husband’s overwhelming impulse for money making. There occurred to her, as by a flash of divine inspiration, a rather clever idea: if the king were to understand that his beloved gold cannot support life, then he would abstain completely from his passion. The rest of the idea would then be as follows: given that after a surfeit of hunting the king would also want to satiate his belly, he would find a wholly golden dinner, and the moment he felt the slightest sense of hunger, he would understand the uselessness of gold. The queen considered all this and no sooner thought than done. The goldsmiths had vast quantities of gold at their disposal, which was divided up and distributed, and many hands crafted that novel and golden meal. Nearby there was also a table of beaten gold, mixing vessels, and wine-cups, all produced of gold. It was possible to see a completely golden dinner set out on gold. The table was gold and the bread-baskets decorated with gold. Placed next to all these gold things was also the golden food. Partridges out of gold, imitating the real partridges of the forest, hares, ostriches, and everything else were shining because of gold. The same happened with the food cooked on fire, to which the brightness of gold added a golden colour that seemed more fiery than burning coal. When it was time for the king to come for dinner, he was dripping with sweat from the hunt, the servants were present taking care of the golden table and of everything that this was supposed to contain. The king however despised all these and demanded other sorts of food instead. “What is all this, my queen and wife?”. The queen replied: “Eat gold, my king, because gold is what you love, gold is entirely what you are seeking for. So satiate yourself with gold, in order to treasure up gold in your belly and so that your whole body becomes overlaid with gold. If gold, however, is totally useless to your body, and makes one die from starvation more quickly, then what is the point of pursuing it so energetically?”. The king listened to all this and respecting his wife’s mixture of wisdom and justice he relieved the cities of the greater part of the taxes and himself from his excessive lusting after gold.

Basilakes’ diegema on Pythes is about the king’s obsession with gold (element 2 in the table below) and it is shaped around a Midas-type fable, launched with the author’s admiration for the female prudence (σοφία) that heals the male passion (element 1). The incident can be divided into discernible thematic units, treating
the motivation that alerts Pythes’ wife (element 3), the description of her plan (element 4), the king’s reaction together with a lively edifying speech delivered by his wife (element 5), and the story’s resolution, signifying how Pythes has amended his old ways (element 6).

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Nikephoros Basilakes and the popularity of Plutarch's *Parallel lives*  

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<td>‘Δύηγημα, ὁ καὶ Πλούταρχος ἐν Παραλλήλοις διηγεῖται’ Progymnasma 11</td>
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1. Introductory theme: female prudence

2. Pythes’ obsession with gold

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3. Why/How Pythes’ wife decides to treat her husband’s passion

Ἀπολλυμένων δὲ πολλῶν πάντων δ’ ἀπαγορευόντον αἱ γυναίκες ἱκετηρίαν ἔθεσαν ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας ἐλθόντας τῆς τοῦ Πύθεω γυναικὸς.

καὶ ποτὲ καὶ πρὸς τὴν ύλην ἔεξεισε, καὶ τοὺς κύνας ἐπισυνόμενον, ἐνταῦθα ὁ μὲν ἐλάφους ἐπέτρεχε καὶ λαγώνις ἐφιππάζετο καὶ τὸ κυνηγατικὸν ἐπεθώυξεν, ἢ δὲ βασιλικὸς ἔτέραν εἶχε σπουδῆν, ὡς ὑφέλη τῆς ἐς τὸ χρηματίζεσθαι πανταχόθεν ὀρμῆς. καὶ πως ἐπίον, οὕτω κατὰ δαίμονα, εἰς νοῦν λαμβάνει καὶ μάλα σοφὸν τι ἐνθύμιον·

4. Description of the plan

ἡ δ’ ἐκείνας μὲν ἀπιέναι καὶ θαρρεῖν ἐκέλευσεν, αὐτὴ δὲ τῶν περὶ τὸ χρυσόν τεχνίτων ὡς ἐξείσευσε, καὶ καθείρξασα, ποιεῖν ἐκέλευεν ἄρτους τε χρυσοὺς καὶ πέμματα παντοδαπὰ καὶ ὀπώρας, καὶ ὡς ἀριστήτως ἀποδημῶν· ἡ δὲ γυνὴ δεῖπνον αἰτοῦντι παρῆκε χρυσῆν τράπεζαν οὐδὲν ἐδώδιμον ἔχουσαν ἀλλὰ πάντα χρυσὰ. τὸ μὲν οὖν πρῶτον ἔχαιρε Πύθης τοῖς μιμήσιν, ἐμπλησθεὶς δὲ τῆς ὄψεως ᾔτει φαγεῖν· ἡ δὲ χρυσοῦν ὅ τι τύχοι προσέφερε.

ὡς εἰ μηδὲν εἰς τὸ ζῆν ἐκεῖνος γνοίη τὸν φίλον χρυσὸν συμβαλλόμενον, τοῦ πάθους ἀπὸ τούτοις ἀπόκρισαι· τὸ δὲ ἦν, ὡς ἔξει μὲν αὐτὸς καί κόρον τῆς θήρας καὶ τὴν γαστέρα κορέσων, εὑρήσει δὲ τὸ δεῖπνον ἄριστον χρυσὸν καὶ, μικρὸν τι λιμώξεις, ἐντεῦθεν τὸ τοῦ χρυσοῦ περιττὸν καταγνώσεται. ἐδόκει δὴ τὰ ταῦτα καὶ τὸ δοκοῦν αὐτίκα ἐπράττετο. χρυσός μὲν ἦν ἡ μυρίος τοῖς χρυσοχόοις, ἐπὶ μέρος ἀναμετρούμενος, χεῖρες δὲ πολλαὶ διετεχνῶντο τὸ καινὸν καὶ χρυσοῦν ἀριστὸν. ἦν ἐκεῖσε καὶ χρυσῆλατος τράπεζα καὶ κρατῆρες καὶ ὅ ό ν ο ι χ ω α ι καὶ τὰ πάντα χρύσα. καὶ ἦν ὁρᾶν ὅλον τὸ δεῖπνον χρυσὸν ὑπὸ καὶ καταστράφησαν. ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς χρυσοῖς τοῖς χρυσά καὶ τὰ ὄψα ἐτίθεντο· πέριδικες ἐκ χρυσοῦ κρατήρες καὶ τὰ ὀπώρα μιμούμενοι, λαγωκὰς καὶ πάντα ὡς ἀπὸ χρυσοῦ διελάμπετο. εἰχὲ τι καὶ τοῖς ἐκ πυρὸς ὀπτωμένοις, ὥς ἀπὸ χρυσοῦ διεσκεύαστο, καὶ ἦν ὁρῶν ὅλον τὸ δεῖπνον χρυσὸν ἐπὶ χρυσὸν κείμενον· χρυσός μὲν ἦν ἡ τράπεζα, χρυσῶδες δὲ καὶ τὰ κανά διεσκεύαστο. ἐπὶ δὲ χρυσοῖς τούτοις χρυσα τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ τὰ ὀμάδα ἐτέθησαν· θεράποντες, χρυσὴν κομίζοντες τράπεζαν, καὶ ὡς ἐπὶ τῆς τοιαύτης τραπέζης ήμελλον κείσεσθαι.
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5. Pythes' response and his wife's edifying speech

δυσχεράίνοντος δ' αὐτοῦ καὶ πεινήν βοώντος, ἀλλά καὶ γάρ ἐμπειρία καὶ τέχνη πάσα φρούδος, γεωργεῖ δ' οὐδείς, ἀλλὰ τὰ σπειρόμενα καὶ φυτεύμενα καὶ τρέφοντα τῆς γῆς ὁπίσω καταλιπόντες ὀρύσσομεν ἅχρηστα καὶ ζητοῦμεν, ἀποκναίον τες αὐτοὺς καὶ τοὺς πολίτας.

ὁ δὲ τῶν μὲν ὑπερεώρα, ἕτερα δὲ τὰ πρὸς τροφὴν ἐζητεῖτο. «Τί οὖν ἦ, ἡ βασιλεία ἃμα καὶ ξύνοικος;» ἀπὸ χρυσοῦ, βασιλεύει, ἐπειδὴ σοι καὶ χρυσός τὸ φιλούμενον, χρυσός ἂπαν ἐστὶ σοι τὸ σπουδαζόμενον. ἀπὸ χρυσοῦ τοιγαροῦ καὶ κορέννυσο, ἂν σοι καὶ υπὸ γαστέρα χρυσομανές. ηκουσε ταῦτα ὁ βασιλεὺς καί, τὸ τῆς γυναικὸς σοφὸν μετὰ τοῦ δικαίου προσαι δεσθείς, ἀνῆκε ταῖς πόλεσι μὲν τὸ πολὺ τοῦ φόρου, ἑαυτῷ δὲ τὸ ἐσάγαν χρυσομανές.

6. Conclusion: final outcome

ἐκίνησε ταῦτα τὸν Πύθην, καὶ πᾶσαν μὲν οὐ κατέλυσε τὴν περὶ τὰ μεταλλα πραγματείαν, ἀνὰ μέρος δὲ τὸ πέμπτον ἐργάζεσθαι κελεύσας τῶν πολιτῶν τοὺς λοιποὺς ἐπὶ γεωργίαν καὶ τὰς τέχνας ἔτρεψε. ηκουσε ταῦτα ὁ βασιλεὺς καί, τὸ τῆς γυναικὸς σοφὸν μετὰ τοῦ δικαίου προσαιδεσθείς, ἀνήκε ταῖς πόλεσι μὲν τὸ πολὺ τοῦ φόρου, ἑαυτῷ δὲ τὸ ἐσάγαν χρυσομανές.

Table 1: Division of Pythes' narrative into thematic units in Plutarch and Nikephoros Basilakes comparatively

The differences noticed in the Byzantine adaptation of the story are the result of the rhetorical drive informing Basilakes’ text. The diegema belongs to his Progymnasmata, rhetorical exercises concerned mainly with Greek myth and history (and less often with Christian themes as well). The Progymnasmata are an important genre, reflecting the tendency of Byzantine authors to reconstruct a creative illusion of the classical past, in an attempt to define themselves as successors to a brilliant legacy.9

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9 The progymnasmata were a significant part of the educational training in Late Antiquity and Byzantium, which initiated the student into the elements of rhetoric, equipping him for his own rhetorical performances. There were various kinds of progymnasmata, for instance, mythos, diegema, gnome or chreia, ethopoia, encomium. On progymnasmata in
Basilakes’ composition is in general more extensive than the Plutarchan archetype, sophisticated rather than merely informative or descriptive, and it preserves the anonymity of the Lydian king as a way of generalizing the moral tone of the narrative. In connection with this, diegema 11 appears to be an exception to the series of Basilakes’ other diegemata, in that it does not involve famous gods or heroes from Greek mythology, such as Zeus, Pasiphae, Odysseus, and Ariadne, and this might offer another possible explanation for the anonymity of its non-Greek king. In emphasizing the king’s passion with gold, Basilakes calls it a conquering passion and an overwhelming sickness (ἐδούλευεν ἔρωτι, νοσῶν ἀπηλέγχετο, ἀλλ’ ἣ πάσα σπουδή τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἀποπλῆσαι τὸν ἔρωτα), advancing at length the implications of Plutarch’s ἀγαπήσας ... τὸν πλοῦτον (terms under texts in element 2). This must be the product of Basilakes’ heightened interest in the element of eros, which constitutes the predominant theme of his Progymnasmata, as has been noticed.10

Next to Pythes’ love for gold (τὸ φιλόχρυσον), Basilakes additionally invents the passion of love for hunting (τὸ φιλόθηρον),11 not to be found in Plutarch. This prompts him to usher in a whole section, in which he presents a radically different framework for the involvement of Pythes’ wife in the story. According to Plutarch, Pythes had compelled all citizens to work in the mines, performing no other activity. Many perished and became physically exhausted, so that a female embassy appeared at the door of the wife of Pythes and made supplication asking for her help (element 3). In Basilakes’ discussion, the king sets out to the woods

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11 On Byzantine hunts, see Ph. Kουκουλές, Κυνηγητικά ἐκ τῆς ἐποχῆς τῶν Κομνηνῶν καὶ τῶν Παλαιολόγων. EEBS 9 (1932) 3-33, E. Patlagean, De la chasse et du souverain. DOP 46 (1992) 257-263.
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for hunting, dragging his dogs with him, and chasing with manic force deer and hares; he is accompanied by his queen, who observes his folly and contrives a wise means to help him (element 3). Contrary to Plutarch, Basilakes goes on to state bluntly the rationale lying behind the wife’s plan: by offering golden food at a moment of combined tiredness and hunger, she could teach him that the accumulation of gold is a useless pursuit, if it cannot satisfy the basic human needs (element 4). The direct articulation of the moral message at this point leads us to classify the narrative under the category of Basilakes’ hortatory *progymnasmata*, dealing with moralizing topics and concerns. Its ethical impact is reinforced by the sustained focus on the concept of gold during the preparation of the dining table: whereas the corresponding scene in Plutarch merely mentions that the wife set before Pythes a golden table with golden edible, Basilakes imbues this part of the narrative with no less than eighteen cognates of χρυσός (in bold within element 4).

On the other hand, the detailed description of the forest scenery framing this episode implicates another conventional theme of Basilakes’ *progymnasmata*, namely his favourite antithesis between love and nature. *Eros* transgresses the limits of *physis*, and eventually becomes a tyrant for the agent in question, just as Pythes’ obsession with gold, itself a violation of human order and proper ethical behaviour, ultimately conquers him. Another opposing element to *eros* is that of *sophrosyne*, which is definitely in effect in the case of Pythes’ wife, with her prudence being the powerful drive that diminishes the king’s passion.

Plutarch’s Pythes returns home from one of the many journeys he used to make and after marveling at the sight of the mimic food, he shouts out that he is hungry, whereupon the wife castigates him for directing all his energy to plentiful supplies and neglecting agriculture in particular (element 5). In Basilakes however, the king comes back from a tiring hunting excursion and completely overlooks the golden meal, demanding immediately food. That explains why the wife in this version is more judgmental, urging the king with a tone of sarcasm to satiate his hunger with gold, so that his belly and whole body become gold too (the dense usage of χρυσός is again into play, eight times in total, under element 5). She concludes her reproach with the didactic admonition that gold contributes nothing to one’s body, leading faster to starvation. At the end of the

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12 Kaldellis, Hellenism in Byzantium (cited n. 9), 259.
13 Roilos, Amphoteroglossia (cited n. 9), 34 and 38.
14 In Basilakes the demand for food is accompanied by the king’s complaint towards his wife in direct speech: “What is all this, my queen and wife?”, which ushers in an overtone of theatricality and makes their encounter more dramatic, another feature of Basilakes’ *progymnasmata*. 
story, Basilakes sharpens Plutarch’s perspective that stays on the public consequences of Pythes’ alteration (the citizens turn to agriculture and the trades); he instead affirms the wife’s wisdom and justice, which had released her husband from his obsession with gold, stressing thus the ethical dynamics of his narrative (element 6).

I have demonstrated how Nikephoros Basilakes reshapes a rare myth of antiquity by appropriating it to the peculiarities of the literary genre he represents. I would like, by way of conclusion, to look at the heading of diegema 11. Although we cannot be certain whether the individual titles of each Progymnasma are the author’s own or of some scribe, most probably student(s) belonging to Basilakes’ scholastic circle, it is intriguing that the title accompanying Pythes’ narrative erroneously acknowledges it as part of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives.15 Contrary to Pignani, who takes the story to be non-Plutarchan (she sees it as a remake of the well known myth of the king Midas),16 it is clear that it is to be identified with the section 262D–263A of Plutarch’s Mulierum virtutes.17

How are we then to explain the misleading title? I suggest that this is a testimony to the popularity of the Parallel Lives in relation to the Moralia during the Komnenian period as well as in the centuries before that. The great difference in the history of transmission of the two corpora is that the Parallel Lives achieved standardization, becoming thus popular, much earlier than the treatises of the Moralia, which for many centuries lacked unity, circulated either as separate essays or as group of essays, still not as a self-contained project.18 It was not until the end of the 13th century that the miscellaneous treatises now forming Plutarch’s corpus of the Moralia were brought together by the polymath Maximos Planoudes (c. 1255 – c. 1305). With the aid of various assistants, Planoudes launched a serious editorial operation by collating various pre-existing manuscripts, meticulous-

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15 The earliest manuscripts of Basilakes’ Progymnasmata that we have belong to the 13th century, Vind. phil. gr. 254 and Vat. Barb. gr. 240 (olim II.61 et 392). Given that Basilakes died after 1182, it is not impossible that these manuscripts belong to Basilakes’ immediate circle, in all likelihood to his students. This does not exclude the possibility that the surviving manuscripts reproduced the erroneous title of one of Basilakes’ autographs.

16 Pignani, Niceforo Basilace (cited n. 9), 16, n. 8.

17 Stadter, Plutarch’s historical methods (cited n. 1), 122, n. 312.

ly transcribing them, and publishing for the first time *Moralia* 1–69 in two main codices, the Ambrosianus C 126 inf. (859) and Parisinus graecus 1671.\(^{19}\) It is at this stage that we can claim that the *Moralia* enjoyed popularity as a collection and exerted impact on the intellectual activities of Byzantine scholars (for instance, Theodore Metochites models his *Semeioseis gnomikai* on Plutarch’s *Moralia*).\(^{20}\)

Apart from the premise that in Basilakes’ times the *Moralia* were not yet provided with the authority they had in Palaiologan Byzantium, the *Mulierum virtutes* itself appears to have been a less renowned essay of the collection. This is manifested, for instance, in the fact that in the 9th century it was not included in Photios’ catalogue of Plutarch’s works as provided in his *Bibliotheca* (bibl. 161 = II 123-127 Henry), which in turn draws on Sopater’s extracts from Plutarch dating back to the 4th century. Nor does this essay belong within the group of treatises 1-21 (in the Planoudean numeration) that according to Wilson became canonic from an early period.\(^{21}\) Another piece of evidence makes also part of the point here; we know that John Zonaras, a roughly contemporary of Basilakes, in his *Epitome historiarum* included a considerable number of excerpts from the *Parallel Lives*, but only three from the *Moralia*, among which not the *Mulierum virtutes* (these are excerpts from the *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae, De Alexandri fortuna aut virtute, Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*).\(^{22}\) Finally, Plutarch’s biographical writing (rather than the *Moralia*) seems to have influenced the historical outlook of the slightly later author, John Tzetzes (c. 1110–1180/5), who

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20 I treat this issue in a forthcoming article, The Byzantine Plutarch: self-identity and model in Theodore Metochites’ *Essay 71* of the *Semeioseis gnomikai*. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*. One could relevantly notice that Michael Psellos in the 11th century modeled his collective project *De omnifaria doctrina* on the essay *De placitis philosophorum* (now considered spurious) or John Tzetzes in the 12th century his *Chiliads* only on part of the *Moralia*.

21 Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium (cited n. 18), 235. The famous treatises appear to have been *De audiendis poetis, De cohibenda ira, De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*; A. Garzya, La tradizione manoscritta dei *Moralia*: linee generali, in: I. Gallo (ed.), Sulla tradizione manoscritta dei Moralia di Plutarco. Salerno 1988, 9-38, esp. 16.

famously refused to sell his copy of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* at a moment of financial constraint. The same is the case with Niketas Choniates (1155/7–1217), whose *Chronike diegesis* depends on the *Parallel Lives*.

It is obvious that the misattributed ascription of *diegema* 11 squares with the intellectual preferences of the time. The scholars belonging to Basilakes’ milieu were heirs to the long-lasting reputation of the *Parallel Lives* and to a tradition that had placed this corpus at the very heart of the Byzantine historical activity even centuries before. The misattribution might be owed to a *lapsus memoriae* or confusion, in case the student/scribe reproduced the episode without consulting directly the manuscript that contained it; otherwise it might reflect a calculated decision on Basilakes’ part or his circle designed to make the *diegema* appealing to its audience, given that it was supposed to stem from such an authoritative project of antiquity as the *Parallel Lives*. An alternative title assigning the *diegema* to Plutarch’s *Mulierum virtutes* would have probably said nothing to Basilakes’ readers, whereas any attempt at advertising the project that included it would have been both pointless and impossible, as the *Moralia* (*Ἠθικά*) was a label attached by Planoudes much later and established only then. The assumptions around the ascription of the *diegema* may vary, but Basilakes’ audience would have duly enjoyed the prestigious hint.

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**Abstract**

This article examines the Byzantine adaptation of the anecdote of the Lydian king Pythes within Nikephoros Basilakes’ *Progymnasma* 11 in relation to its earliest surviving source, Plutarch’s *Mulierum virtutes* 262D–263A. By looking at the ascription accompanying Basilakes’ *progymnasma*, it additionally argues for the popularity of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* in Komnenian Byzantium.

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23 Wilson, Scholars of Byzantium (cited n. 18), 190.