

An Apple between Folktales, Rumors, and Novellas: Malalas 14.8 and its Oriental Parallels

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THE CHRONICLER JOHN MALALAS, writing in the sixth century,¹ is the first known Greek author to relate a spectacular incident that involved a recycled gift and apparently took place towards the end of the reign of Theodosius II (408–450).

This curious episode, focused on an apple and the suspicions of a jealous husband, has been much discussed by scholars, who have been especially keen to assess its dubious veracity, and to place it in the context of the struggles between Chalcedonians and Monophysites. This, as will be seen in the following pages, is extremely useful for framing this alleged scandal in the political and religious scene of the later Roman Empire. There is, however, still something to say about the nature of the story, especially if one considers it in a wider context. In this paper, after reviewing the anecdote as told by Malalas and its many Late Antique and Byzantine parallels, I will try to evaluate in depth this ‘affair of the apple’ as an early variant, turned into a ‘celebrity rumor’ *avant la lettre*, of a folktale pertaining to a rich (and so far mostly neglected) narrative tradition attested in India and in the Iranian and Arab world.

¹ The writing of the episode in question can be dated to years 530–540 according to R. Scott, “From Propaganda to History to Literature: The Byzantine Stories of Theodosius’ Apple and Marcian’s Eagles,” in R. Macrides (ed.), *History as Literature in Byzantium* (Farnham 2010) 115–131, here 119.

Malalas 14.8:²

συνέβη δὲ μετὰ χρόνον ἐν τῷ προΐεναι τὸν βασιλέα Θεοδοσίον εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐν τοῖς ἀγίοις θεοφανίοις τὸν μάγιστρον Παυλίον ἀηδισθέντα ἐκ τοῦ ποδὸς ἀπρόιτον μείναι καὶ ἐξσκουσσεῦσαι. προσήνεγκεν δὲ τῷ αὐτῷ Θεοδοσίῳ βασιλεῖ πένης τις μῆλον Φρυγιατικὸν παμμέγεθες πολὺ εἰς πᾶσαν ὑπερβολήν. καὶ ἐξενίσθη ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ πᾶσα ἡ σύγκλητος αὐτοῦ· καὶ εὐθέως ὁ βασιλεὺς, δεδωκὼς τῷ προσαγαγόντι τὸ μῆλον νομίσματα ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα, ἔπεμψεν αὐτὸ τῇ Αὐγούστῃ Εὐδοκίᾳ· καὶ ἡ Αὐγούστα ἔπεμψεν αὐτὸ Παυλίῳ τῷ μάγιστρῳ ὡς φίλῳ τοῦ βασιλέως· ὁ δὲ αὐτὸς μάγιστρος Παυλῖνος ἀγνοῶν, ὅτι ὁ βασιλεὺς ἔπεμψεν αὐτὸ τῇ Αὐγούστῃ, λαβὼν ἔπεμψεν αὐτὸ τῷ βασιλεῖ Θεοδοσίῳ ὡς εἰσέρχεται εἰς τὸ παλάτιον. καὶ δεξάμενος αὐτὸ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐγνώρισεν αὐτὸ καὶ ἀπέκρυσεν αὐτό· καὶ καλέσας τὴν Αὐγούσταν ἐπρώτησεν αὐτήν, λέγων· “ποῦ ἐστὶ τὸ μῆλον, ὃ ἔπεμψά σοι;” ἡ δὲ εἶπεν, ὅτι· “ἔφαγον αὐτό.” καὶ ὄρκωσεν αὐτήν κατὰ τῆς αὐτοῦ σωτηρίας, εἰ ἔφαγεν αὐτὸ ἢ τι αὐτὸ ἔπεμψεν. καὶ ἐπωμόσατο, ὅτι· “οὐδενὶ αὐτὸ ἔπεμψα,” ἀλλ’ ὅτι αὐτὴ αὐτὸ ἔφαγεν. καὶ ἐκέλευσεν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐνεχθῆναι τὸ μῆλον, καὶ ἔδειξεν αὐτῇ αὐτό. καὶ ἠγανάκτησε κατ’ αὐτῆς, ὑπονοήσας, ὅτι ὡς ἐρώσα τῷ αὐτῷ Παυλίῳ ἔπεμψεν αὐτῷ τὸ μῆλον καὶ ἠρνήσατο. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἀνεΐλε τὸν αὐτὸν Παυλῖνον ὁ βασιλεὺς Θεοδοσίος· καὶ λυπηθεῖσα ἡ Αὐγούστα Εὐδοκία, ὡς ὑβρισθεῖσα, ἐγνώσθη γὰρ πανταχοῦ, ὅτι δι’ αὐτὴν ἐσφάγη ὁ Παυλῖνος· ἦν γὰρ πάνυ εὐμορφος νεώτερος· ἠτήσατο δὲ ἡ Αὐγούστα τὸν βασιλέα Θεοδοσίον τοῦ κατελθεῖν εἰς τοὺς ἀγίους τόπους εἰς εὐχήν· καὶ παρέσχεν αὐτῇ.³

² Text pp.276–277 Thurn; transl. E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Melbourne 1986) 194.

³ In addition to the twelfth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Barocci* 182 (upon which Thurn’s text is based), the final part of the episode is transmitted also by a palimpsest fragment from Grottaferrata (sixth century) recently re-edited, with significant improvements, by F. Schulz, “*Fragmentum Tusculanum II* und die Geschichte eines Zankapfels,” in M. Meier et al. (eds.), *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas* (Stuttgart 2016) 153–166, esp. 159. The fragment now reads: ...ἐκέλευσεν καὶ ἠν[έχθη] τὸ μῆλο[ν, καὶ] ἀπέδειξεν αὐτῇ αὐτό. καὶ ἐ[γέ]νετο μεταξὺ αὐ[τῶν] λ[ύ]πη καὶ ἀπομερισμός. λ[οι]πὸ[ν] ὑπε[ν]όησεν τὸν αὐτὸν Παυλῖνον ἀ[γ]απᾶ[ν] θε[ῖ]αν βα[σ]ίλισσα[ν] Εὐδοκ[ί]αν ὁ Θεοδοσίος αὐγού[στος]. ἐκτείνατο θ[εῖ]ος βασιλεὺς τὸν αὐτὸν Παυλῖνο[ν]. καὶ ἐλυ[πή]θη αὐ[γ]ούστα δέσπ[οιν]α Εὐδ[οκί]α ὡ[ς]

It so happened that, some time later, when the emperor Theodosius was proceeding to the church at Holy Epiphany, the magister Paulinus, who was indisposed because of his foot, remained behind and sent his apologies. A poor man brought to the emperor Theodosius a Phrygian apple of enormous size, so big as to defy description. The emperor and all his senate were amazed. Immediately the emperor gave 150 nomismata to the man who brought the apple, and sent it to the Augusta Eudokia; and the Augusta sent it to the magister Paulinus, since he was a friend of the emperor; but the magister Paulinus, not being aware that it was the emperor who had sent it to the Augusta, took it and sent it to the emperor Theodosius, as he was entering the palace. When the emperor received it, he recognised it and concealed it. He called the Augusta and questioned her, saying, “Where is the apple which I sent you?” She replied, “I ate it.” Then he made her swear the truth by his salvation, whether she had eaten it or had sent it to somebody. She swore, “I have not sent it to anybody, I have eaten it myself.” Then the emperor commanded the apple to be brought in and showed it to her. He became angry with her, suspecting that it was because she was in love with Paulinus that she had sent him the apple and had denied it. For this reason the emperor Theodosius put Paulinus to death. The Augusta Eudokia was offended at the insult she had received, for it was known everywhere that Paulinus had been executed on her account, for he was a very handsome young man. The Augusta asked the emperor Theodosius to be allowed to go to the Holy Places to pray, and he gave her permission.

This same narrative is reported almost verbatim by the *Chronicon Paschale* (generally dated ca. 630),⁴ which places this event in the year 444;⁵ at the beginning of the ninth century another influential chronicler, Theophanes the Confessor, reports the affair in an abbreviated and doctored form, more

ὑβρι[σ]θ[ε]ῖ[σ]α. ἐγνώσθη [γὰρ] πανταχοῦ ὅτι δι’[α]ὐτ[ῆ]ν [ἐσ]φά[γ]η ὁ Παυλ[ί]νος, ὡς εὐ[μ]ορφος νεώτε[ρ]ος. καὶ [ἡ]τή[σ]ατο τὸν βασιλέα Θεοδοσί[ο]ν αὐτῆ Εὐδοκία τοῦ κατελθεῖν εἰς τοὺς ἀγίους τόπους εἰς εὐχὴν καὶ παρέσχεν αὐτῇ.

⁴ See B. Baldwin, “*Chronicon Paschale*,” *ODB* I (1991) 447.

⁵ I 584–585 Dindorf; see also M. Whitby and M. Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD* (Liverpool 1989) 73–74.

hostile to Eudocia than Malalas' version, placed under A.M. 5940 (= 447/8). As a matter of fact, Theophanes speaks of the love affair as something real and not just gossip: Παυλῖνός τις μάγιστρος ἠγαπᾶτο παρὰ τῆς Εὐδοκίας ὡς λογιώτατος καὶ ὠραιότατος, ᾧ τινι συχνῶς ἰδίως συνετύγχανεν, "a certain *magister* Paulinus was loved by Eudocia on account of his being very learned and handsome, and she often consorted with him in private."⁶

Therafter, the story of the apple was quoted by many Byzantine chroniclers and historians,⁷ and it also appears in the compilation of Constantinopolitan traditions known as the *Patria*, composed in the tenth century, where it is used to explain fictitiously the origin of the Constantinopolitan monastery known as *Ta Paulines* or *Ta Paulinou*. In this account, Paulinus' death is postponed by the intercession of saints Kosmas and Damianos; after he has finished building their church, he is beheaded by order of the emperor (3.146):⁸

ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς ἰδὼν καὶ γνοὺς ὅτι τὸ ἀποσταλὲν τῇ Αὐγούστη μῆλόν ἐστιν, τῇ μὲν Αὐγούστη προσκαλεσάμενος ἔφη· "ποῦ ἐστιν τὸ μῆλον ὃ παρέσχον σοι;" ἡ δὲ ἔφη· "εἰσελθὼν πρὸς με Παυλῖνος ὁ μάγιστρος ἐξητήσατο καὶ παρέσχον αὐτῷ." καὶ αὐτὴν μὲν ἡμίνατο αὐστηροῖς λόγοις· τὸν δὲ Παυλῖνον προσέταξεν ἀνερχό-

⁶ I 99 de Boor. For a careful analysis of Theophanes' manipulation of Malalas' material in order to worsen the position of Eudocia, whom he considered responsible for the Monophysite tendency displayed by Theodosius II, see Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 122–126.

⁷ George the Monk p.609.6-610.6 de Boor; Symeon Magister 97.2, pp. 124–125 Wahlgren; *Excerpta de virtutibus et vitiis* 12, I 162.9–24 Büttner-Wobst-Roos; George Kedrenos 365, pp.579–580 Tartaglia (I 590–591 Bekker); Zonaras 3.110.12–111.10 Büttner-Wobst; Michael Glykas p.484 Bekker; Constantine Manasses *Breviarium chronicum* 2623–2661, pp.145–146 Lampsides; Theodore Skoutariotes 2.131, p.90 Tocci; Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos *HE* 14.23, *PG* 146.1233D. The story is also mentioned in the seventh century by John of Nikiu, in his *Chronicle* handed down only in an Ethiopic version (87.1–13, pp.104–105 Charles). See also Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 128–131.

⁸ Text T. Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum* II (Leipzig 1907) 262; transl. A. Berger, *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople: The Patria* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2013) 201–203..

μενον ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ μελοκοπηθῆναι. τοῦ δὲ ἀνερχομένου ὡς πρὸς τὸ Πάνθεον ἔξωθεν εἰς τὸ σκοτεινόν, οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν τοῦτον σφάξαι, εἰ μὴ τὰ ὄτα αὐτοῦ ἐξέκοψαν· καὶ εὐθέως ἐνόησεν ὁ Παυλῖνος τὴν ἐπιβουλήν. τοῦτο δὲ θαῦμα τῶν ἁγίων Ἀναργύρων γέγονεν, ἵνα τελειώσῃ αὐτὸς τὸν ναόν. ἀκούσας δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς, ὅτι ἠστόχησαν αὐτόν, αἰσχυνθεὶς σφόδρα τὸν Παυλῖνον ἄγνοϊαν προεβάλετο μηδὲν εἰδέναι. τελειώσας δὲ τὸν ναόν τῶν ἁγίων Ἀναργύρων ἀπεκεφάλισαν αὐτὸν φανερώς προτροπῇ τοῦ βασιλέως.

When the emperor saw it and realized that it was the apple which had been sent to the Augusta, he summoned her and said to the Augusta, “Where is the apple I gave you?” She said, “The *magistros* Paulinos came to me and asked for it, and I gave it to him.” And he reproached her with harsh words, and ordered that Paulinos be cut to pieces when he arrived at the palace. When he had arrived somewhere outside the Pantheon in the dark, they were not able to kill him, but just cut off his ears. And immediately Paulinos understood the plot. This was a miracle of the Holy Anargyroi so that he could finish the church. When the emperor heard that they had failed to kill him, he was greatly ashamed in front of Paulinos and pretended not to know anything. When he had finished the church of the Holy Anargyroi, they beheaded him, evidently by order of the emperor.

The tale also arrived in the West in the first half of the twelfth century through the *Expositio in Graecas dictiones quae inveniuntur in prologis sancti Hieronymi* of Moses de Brolo, from Bergamo, a leading exponent of the Latin community of Constantinople in the time of John Comnenus.⁹

⁹ See F. Gustafsson, *Moysi expositio* (Acta Soc. Scient. Fenn. 22.3 [1897]), esp. 16 (9): *quondam de Ionia regione, cuius scilicet caput est Ephesus, delatum est imperatori Theodosio malum, pomum mirae magnitudinis, qualem se nemo vidisse meminerat. Hoc Theodosius acceptum quasi miraculum misit uxori. Illa vero susceptum misit Paulino senatori, speciosissimo viro liberalibusque studiis pariter instructissimo. Ille vero, ceu nescius unde venisset, rursus quasi non ante visum miraculum misit imperatori post duos dies. Imperator vero cum agnovisset hoc abscondit et abiens dixit Augustae: per salutem meam, malum quod misi tibi, ubi est? Et illa: per salutem, inquit, tuam, manducavi illud. Tunc ira motus malum iubet afferi et Paulinum exsulem mitti in Cappadociam ibique protinus decollari.* On Moses de Brolo see G. Gorni, “Mosè del Brolo,” *Dizionario*

What should we make of this curious story? The scenario, at least, is plausible.¹⁰ Its protagonists really existed and Paulinus, *magister officiorum* around 430, did truly fall into disgrace and was put to death by Theodosius II in 440 or 444.¹¹ Eudocia actually left Constantinople (probably in 443) to go to Jerusalem, where she dedicated herself to pious works and died in 460.¹² For some contemporaries, these two events seem to have appeared suspiciously connected. Probably there were slanders about the empress already in her lifetime:¹³ it seems, in fact, that a contemporary writer referred, albeit in a veiled manner, to rumors about a possible relationship between Eudocia and Paulinus. The writer in question is Nestorius. At the end of his *Bazaar of Heracleides*, written after the Council of Chalcedon (451) and surviving only in Syriac translation, the author talking to an interlocutor states, in the French translation of Nau, “tu viens de voir que la mort a enlevé la fille de celui qui régnait alors et, après celle-là, ce démon, prince de l’adultère, qui avait jeté l’impératrice dans l’opprobre et la honte.” The first reference seems to be to Arcadia, sister of Theodosius II, who died in 444,¹⁴ and the words that follow seem to concern Eudocia and her alleged seducer, who can be identified with Paulinus.¹⁵

biografico degli italiani 77 (Rome 2012) 316–318.

¹⁰ See J. Wortley, “The Legendary History of Byzantium,” *Historical Papers* 12 (1977) 214–229, here 226.

¹¹ *PLRE* II 846–847 s.v. “Paulinus 8.” Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 119, favors the earlier possibility.

¹² T. E. Gregory, “Athenais-Eudokia,” *ODB* I (1991) 220–221; Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 120.

¹³ See K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1982) 193–194. On the plausibility of the scenario see also R. Scharf, “Die ‘Apfel-Affäre’ oder gab es einem Kaiser Arcadius II?” *BZ* 83 (1990) 435–450, here 448.

¹⁴ *PLRE* II 129 s.v. “Arcadia 1.”

¹⁵ F. Nau, *Nestorius, Le livre d’Héraclide de Damas* (Paris 1910) 331; Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 119 n.11; A. Cameron, *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford 2016) 59.

What should one think specifically, however, of the apple episode? Some scholars give some credence to the story. Antony R. Littlewood, talking about the “disgrace of Eudokia” in his review of occurrences, mostly in literary texts, of the apple as a gift of love, defined it as “a famous historical example of this.”¹⁶ In fact, Littlewood himself considered it “not necessarily implausible,”¹⁷ while Cameron, who did not ignore the presence of the “folk-motif of the apple,” noted that “there may be some kernel of truth in the story.”¹⁸ Croke also felt that some incident really occurred.¹⁹ More recently Livrea pointed out that Eudocia, who suffered a foot injury a few years before, could actually have sent the fruit as a gesture of sympathy for the similarly injured Paulinus.²⁰

Others, however, branded the tale of the apple as an invention, pure and simple. The connection between the misfortune of Paulinus, the departure of Eudocia, and the imperial apple in fact rests exclusively on the authority of John Malalas,²¹ a notorious collector of legendary traditions, writing about a century after the events narrated. Roger Scott, therefore, concerning this tale and other “good stories” transmitted by Malalas and other chroniclers like Theophanes, observed that such authors “have

¹⁶ A. R. Littlewood, “The Symbolism of the Apple in Greek and Roman Literature,” *HSCP* 72 (1968) 147–181, here 154, and “The Symbolism of the Apple in Byzantine Literature,” *JÖB* 23 (1974) 33–59, here 46–47.

¹⁷ Wortley, *Historical Papers* 12 (1977) 224, writing about the biography of Eudocia in its entirety, remarked that “there will always remain the possibility that in spite of its improbability, it just could have happened.”

¹⁸ Cameron, *Wandering Poets* 59.

¹⁹ B. Croke, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus* (Sydney 1995) 83–84: “during the elaborate ceremonial procession to Hagia Sophia on that occasion [6 January 440], from which Paulinus was excused ... there occurred some incident between him and Eudocia which proved their undoing”; also Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale* 74 n.250.

²⁰ E. Livrea, “La slogatura di Eudocia in un’iscrizione paflagone,” *ZPE* 113 (1996) 71–76, here 75–76 (repr. E. Livrea, *IIAPAKMH: 63 studi di poesia ellenistica* [Alessandria 2016] 561–568, here 567–568).

²¹ Cf. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* 176–177 n.6.

succeeded remarkably well in evading the prying eyes of modern scholarship, which, if not always convinced by their accounts, has nevertheless tended to accept that these are bland, simple, and so generally trustworthy reports. The modern reader needs to beware of being lulled into such confidence.”²² This view was shared even by some of Malalas’ contemporaries. Evagrius Scholasticus, even without expressly citing the episode, voiced his distrust (*HE* 21) in relation to the alleged reasons, reported by historians, for the transfer of Eudocia to Palestine.²³ In fact, it has been noted that the sumptuous construction activity financed by the empress during her stay in Jerusalem is hardly compatible with the hypothesis of her expulsion or fall into disgrace.²⁴ Thus Gibbon, after speaking in very dry terms about the “rumor” that Eudocia and Paulinus might have been lovers, adds in a footnote that “the celebrated story of the *apple*, etc., is fit only for the Arabian Nights, where something not very unlike it may be found.”²⁵ Bury spoke openly of “legend”;²⁶ for others, “the story of his [i.e. Paulinus’] adultery may be no more than a contemporary rumor,”²⁷ and “here the chronicler [i.e. Malalas] transmitted popular tradition, in a tale patently invented to save the reputation of an amiable figure.”²⁸

In fact, there are strong reasons to believe that the narrative

²² R. Scott, “Text and Context in Byzantine Historiography,” in L. James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium* (Chichester 2010) 251–262, here 259.

²³ Neither does Marcellinus *comes* a. 440 speak of the *affaire*, despite mentioning the killing of Paulinus in Cappadocia.

²⁴ Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 120–121, and in *Companion to Byzantium* 257–258.

²⁵ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* III (New York 1993) 364.

²⁶ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* I (London 1923) 230.

²⁷ *PLRE* II 847.

²⁸ Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* 177. Other similar opinions are mentioned by Livrea, *ZPE* 113 (1996) 75 n.20. A. McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire* (New York 2002) 21, speaks of an “unlikely story.”

about the apple-affair was a spicy story that, evidently, circulated in the empire of the fifth and sixth centuries and, as a kind of urban legend, ended up being adapted to the different personalities that someone might want to discredit. The proof is that an almost identical tale appears in the *Life of Dioscorus* of Theopistos. This is a text of Monophysite provenance preserved only in Syriac which, for the part we are going to mention, seems to date between 455 and 477, though a date around 512 is not entirely implausible.²⁹ In any case, it is older than Malalas' testimony.³⁰ In the translation of Nau:³¹

Or, il y avait dans le palais impérial un jeune homme de belle prestance, nommé Marcien, il appartenait à la secte Nestorienne, et Satan enflamma le cœur de Pulchérie pour cet impie. Un jour, on apporta à l'empereur victorieux Théodose une grosse pomme de toute beauté, il la regarda et l'admira; il s'en exhalait un agréable parfum, et comme il n'y avait personne qu'il honorât et estimât plus que sa sœur, il l'appela et lui donna cette pomme. Cette adultère la prit et l'envoya aussitôt secrètement à son impur ami, le Nestorien Marcien, parce qu'il n'y avait aucun homme qu'elle aimât plus que lui. Mais Marcien pensa qu'aucun homme n'était digne d'avoir cette pomme, si ce n'était l'empereur; il la prit donc et la lui porta. Celui-ci reconnut la pomme qu'il avait donnée à sa sœur, mais il demanda comme s'il ne savait rien: "D'où vient cette belle pomme si remarquable?" Marcien lui répondit: "Un général de mes amis me l'a envoyée." L'empereur reconnut alors que sa sœur Pulchérie brûlait d'un amour adultère et il exila aussitôt Marcien en Thébaïde d'Égypte sous prétexte qu'il était Nestorien et, en réalité, pour que sa sœur ne le vit plus à Constantinople. Peu de temps après, le victorieux Théodose mourut.

²⁹ See R. W. Burgess, "The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic," *BZ* 86/87 (1993–1994) 47–68, here 50–51.

³⁰ "At least half a century earlier than the first occurrence of the Eudocia story" according to Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 119.

³¹ F. Nau "Histoire de Dioscore, patriarche d'Alexandrie, écrite par son disciple Théopiste," *JA SER. X* 1 (1903) 5–108 and 241–310, here 244.

In this case the story of the ‘recycled’ apple is not told of Eudocia but of the chaste Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, and to the man whom, after the death of her brother, she consented to marry for the good of the empire, though already advanced in age (she was born ca. 399).³²

This is not an isolated variant. This same version, in fact, appears in an Armenian anti-Chalcedonian pamphlet attested in the manuscript Yerevan, *Matenadaran* 6617, dated to as late as 1618, but containing materials dating back to the sixth century. In this account Theodosius II, in order to humiliate Pulcheria, limits himself to sending her the apple for the second time; his sister, realizing she has been discovered, poisons him and then marries her beloved Marcianus.³³

It seems obvious, then, that the story of the recycled apple could be a good card to play in slandering political and religious enemies or adversaries (particularly women): “l’épisode de la pomme” was like a small pamphlet that “pouvait s’adapter à toutes sortes de circonstances.”³⁴ In this specific case, it has been argued that its first version could have been the Monophysite one, hostile to Pulcheria. Later the Chalcedonians turned it around (as it appears in Malalas), not so much to discredit Eudocia as to redeem the honor of the same Pulcheria, closely connected as she was to the Council of Chalcedon. The move proved effective, linking widely and persistently the apple story with Eudocia: this is shown by the reworking by the Monophysite bishop John of Nikiu who, while accepting the general lines of the episode, tried to exonerate the empress by putting the blame on Paulinus.³⁵

³² About her see C. Angelidi, *Pulcheria: la castità al potere* (Milan 1998), esp. 52 n.40 for her involvement with the apple story.

³³ M. van Esbroech, “La pomme de Théodose II et sa réplique arménienne,” in C. Sode and S. Takács (eds.), *Novum millennium: Studies on Byzantine History and Culture, dedicated to Paul Speck* (Aldershot 2001) 109–112.

³⁴ Van Esbroech, in *Novum millennium* 110.

³⁵ See Burgess, *BZ* 86/87 (1993–1994) 50 n.14; Scott, *From Propaganda to History* 116–121, and in *Companion to Byzantium* 257–258. Some persistent

This is an extremely interesting and compelling reconstruction,³⁶ and it shows how this story, an extremely effective narrative in itself,³⁷ was suitable to be used for propaganda purposes. But what were its components? The core of the episode has been identified, not without sophistication, in the symbolic value of the apple as a typical token of love (with sexual overtones) in the Greco-Roman context, starting from the famous episode of the Apple of Discord, which set in motion the events leading to the Trojan war.³⁸ Less attention, however, seems to have been given to the plot of the story, which, as already noted by Gibbon, would be perfectly suitable for a novella.

rumors about the infidelity of Eudocia (called Athenais before her baptism), along with Moses de Brolo's account (see above), possibly inspired the character of Athanaïs, the unfaithful wife of emperor Laïs, in the *Eracle* by Gautier d'Arras, a very romanticized biography of Heraclius written at the end of the twelfth century. The episode of the apple does not explicitly appear in this text, but it is meaningful that Athanaïs' lover is called Paridès, with an obvious allusion to Paris' role in the Apple of Discord story: H. F. Massmann, *Eraclius* (Quedlinburg/Leipzig 1842) 460–465; A. Fourier, *Le courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Age I* (Paris 1960) 223–227, 251–252; C. Pierreville in her introduction to A. Eskénazi, *Gautier d'Arras, Eracle* (Paris 2002) 19–20. For the actual use of Byzantine narrative material by Gautier see K. N. Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople. The West and Byzantium, 962-1204* (Leiden 1996) 187.

³⁶ In my opinion, this reconstruction is not necessarily called into question by the new reading of the Grottaferrata fragment; for a different view see Schulz, in *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas* 164.

³⁷ See Wortley, *Historical Papers* 12 (1977) 227: the tale “stuck, perhaps for the simple reason that men wanted it to stick”; Scott, in *Companion to Byzantium* 257: “These stories, which ... challenge our credulity, doubtless survive as true history because they were good stories which audiences continued to demand. They are repeated in chronicle after chronicle for the next millennium.”

³⁸ See Littlewood, *HSCP* 72 (1968) 149–159, and *JÖB* 23 (1974) 34–52; S. Trzcionka, “Calypso's Cauldron: The Ritual Ingredients of Early Byzantine Love Spells,” in W. Mayer and S. Trzcionka (eds.), *Feast, Fast or Famine: Food and Drink in Byzantium* (Brisbane 2005) 161–170, here 163–166. In addition to its love connotations, the apple donated by Eudocia to Paulinus is also considered as a symbol of imperial investiture (*Reichsapfel*): M. Di Branco, *La città dei filosofi: storia di Atene da Marco Aurelio a Giustiniano* (Florence 2006) 223 n.148.

Perhaps because it appears in historiographical works, the *affaire de la pomme* has not yet been thoroughly analyzed typologically, at least in the context of Late Antique and Byzantine studies: this I will try to do here.

The tale of the apple as a recycled gift between husband, wife, and lovers is not, in fact, limited to the Roman Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries, but is attested in Arabic and Indian novellas from the Middle Ages. As we have seen, Gibbon refers to the *Arabian Nights*, although without providing a precise reference. In all likelihood, the English historian was thinking of the *Story of the Three Apples*, in which the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, along with his vizier Ja'far, decides to travel the streets of Baghdad at night to apprise himself of the living conditions of its inhabitants. They come across a fisherman and assist while he pulls out in his nets a heavy chest from the Tigris. Inside are found the remains of a woman cut to pieces. The caliph, furious, orders the vizier on pain of death to find the culprit within three days. The term expires, but when the minister is about to be executed, a young man confesses his guilt, explaining the reasons for his gesture. His beloved wife, convalescent after an illness, had asked him for an apple; the young man, finding none in Baghdad, had bought three in Basra by great effort and at great expense, and had brought them to the woman, who had placed them beside her bed. The husband went to his shop and, while he was there, he saw a black slave strolling before him, playing with an apple. Intrigued, he asked him where he had found it, and the slave answered that it was a gift from his lover, who had been ill and to whom her husband had brought back three apples, bought at great cost, from Basra. The man lost his mind. He went home and, noting that an apple was actually missing, he asked his wife what happened to it. She was not able to answer, so he killed her, cut her body to pieces, and threw it into the river enclosed in a chest. Back home, however, the man found one of his children in tears. The boy told him that, after secretly taking one of his mother's apples, he went off to the streets. Then a black slave appeared who, after asking him where the apple came from and learning the whole story, beat him and stole it. At that point the caliph ordered Ja'far to track down the

slave within three days. Once again the term had expired, and when the vizier was saying goodbye to his family before going to his death, hugging his younger daughter, he noticed that she had a round object in her pocket, like a ball of yarn. When her father asked what it was, the girl replied that it was an apple, bought at a very high price from the household slave Raihan. The slave was immediately summoned and, having confessed to being the author of the theft, was handed over to the caliph.³⁹

It is believed that this story is part of the original core of the *Arabian Nights* (whose oldest fragment dates back to the ninth century), and in fact it is present in A, the oldest complete manuscript, dated to the second half of the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ This original core of the *Arabian Nights*, in turn, most probably derives from a Sasanid collection entitled *Hezār Afsān, A Thousand Stories*; in fact, a pre-Islamic Persian origin has been advocated precisely for the *Three Apples*,⁴¹ and this is an element to which it will be necessary to return hereafter.

Among Arabic short stories there are further variations (somewhat softened compared with the tale of the *Arabian Nights*) centered on a wife unjustly suspected because of an apple taken from a child.⁴²

The similarity between the Arabic tale and the story of the apple set in the time of Theodosius II is perceptible, even if not extraordinary. Even closer and more remarkable parallels, how-

³⁹ M. C. Lyons, *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights I* (London 2008) 126–129 (night 18); F. Gabrieli, *Le mille e una notte I* (Turin 1997) 105–110 (nights 18–19).

⁴⁰ U. Marzolph and R. van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia I* (Santa Barbara 2004) 17–18, 414–415.

⁴¹ Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia I* 588; U. Marzolph, “The Persian *Nights*: Links between the *Arabian Nights* and Iranian Culture,” *Fabula* 45 (2004) 275–293, esp. 279.

⁴² See M. Sironval, “Le don du fruit merveilleux dans le *Mille et une nuits*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36 (2005) 288–310, here 298–299, for two examples from *One hundred and One Nights*.

ever, can be detected in the literary and oral tradition of India.⁴³

The oldest attestation of this Indian version of which we are aware is found in the *Vikramacarita* (“The Adventures of Vikrama”), an extremely popular collection of tales—in addition to various Sanskrit versions there are translations in Tamil, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Newari, Siamese, Persian, Tibetan, Mongol—written no earlier than the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁴⁴ The collection, whose author is unknown, is centered around the virtues of the mythical king Vikramaditya, alleged to have lived in the first century B.C. The first tale, entitled “King Bhartrihari and the Fruit of Immortality,” concerns the brother and predecessor of Vikramaditya.⁴⁵

There is a city called Ujjayini. It lacked nothing: it was better even than Indra’s heaven. In it there reigned a king called Bhartrihari, who was versed in all the arts and skilled in every science. [...]

In this city there was a brahmin who was an adept in all the sciences, specially that of incantations. But he was exceedingly poor. He propitiated the goddess Bhuvaneśvari with a ritual of spells and charms, and she asked him to make a wish.

“Goddess,” the brahmin cried, “if you are pleased with me, grant me freedom from old age and death.” The goddess gave him a divine fruit, saying, “My son, you will never grow old or die after you eat this fruit.”

The brahmin took the gift and went home. He bathed and did his devotions. Then, as he sat down to eat the celestial fruit, a thought crossed his mind. “What am I doing?” he asked himself.

⁴³ See N. Elisseff, *Thèmes et motifs des Mille et une nuits: essai de classification* (Beyrouth 1949) 45, and Stith Thompson’s *Motif-index* under entry N212.1, *Husband’s magic gift returns to him*, which in turn refers to S. Thompson and J. Balys, *The Oral Tales of India* (Bloomington 1958) 363.

⁴⁴ See L. Sternbach, *The Kāvya-portions in the Kathā-literature: An Analysis II Hitopadeśa, Vikramacarita* (Delhi 1974) 229–241; A. Sathaey, “*Vikramacarita*,” in R. W. Brednich (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens XIV* (Berlin 2014) 209–213.

⁴⁵ On the traditions concerning Bhartrihari, sometimes identified with a famous Sanskrit poet, see also A. G. Gold, *A Carnival of Parting: The Tales of King Bharthari and King Gopi Chand as sung and told by Madhu Natisar Nath of Ghatiyali, Rajasthan* (Berkeley 1992) 60–62.

“I am so poor. Whom will I benefit by becoming immortal? Though I live for ever, I will still be a beggar. Even a short life is preferable if one can do some good to others. It is worthwhile only if one acquires learning, wealth and other merits, even though one lives for no more than a moment. [...] Therefore this fruit should be given to the king. He will then be freed from death and ageing, and be able to protect and nurture all the four castes as it should be rightly done.”

Taking the fruit, the brahmin then went to Bhartrihari. [...] he placed the fruit in the king’s hands and said: “Majesty, I obtained this incomparable fruit as a mark of divine grace. Eat it, and you will become immune to old age and death.”

The king took the fruit, and dismissed the brahmin with many gifts. “I will become immortal by eating this fruit,” he pondered, “but I love Anangasenā deeply. She will die while I still live, and I will not be able to bear the pain of that separation. So, I will give this fruit to her instead, for she is dearer to me than life.”

He then called the queen and gave her the fruit. Now she had taken a stablehand as her lover and, after some thought, she gave the fruit to him. He passed it on to a servant maid who was his sweetheart. She in turn gave it to a cowherd with whom she was in love. The cowherd was deeply in love with a girl who carried the cowdung, and he presented the fruit to her.

The dung carrier would collect the cattle droppings and take them out of the village. She put the basket of dung on her head, flung the fruit on top of it, and came out thus on the highway. At that time King Bhartrihari was going on a hunt with the princes. He noticed the fruit lying on top of the excrement on the girl’s head. Taking it, he turned back and went home. Then he summoned the brahmin.

“O brahmin,” he asked, “is there another fruit of the kind you presented to me?” The brahmin replied: “My lord, that was a celestial fruit obtained as a gift from a god. There is no other fruit like it on earth. One may not lie to the king who too is a god personified and must be regarded as such. [...]”

“Well,” said the king, “what if another fruit like that one were to be here?”

“Didn’t you eat it?” the brahmin asked.

“I did not eat it,” the king admitted, “I gave it to my beloved Anangasenā.”

“Then ask her if she ate it.”

The king called Anangasenā, put her under oath, and questioned her. She acknowledged that she had given the fruit to the stable-hand. The latter was summoned and asked, and he said that he had given it to the servant maid. She said that she gave it to the cowherd, and he that he had presented it to the cowdung carrier.

When the truth dawned upon him, the king was overcome by a deep depression. [...] Bhartrihari renounced the world and himself retired to a forest.⁴⁶

In 1805 the story was reworked in Old Hindi in the *Baitāl Pachīsī*,⁴⁷ in turn a rendition of the *Vetālapañcavimsatikā* (“The Twenty-five Tales of the Specter”), another popular collection attested in many versions, and better known in the West under the title of *Vikram and the Vampire* given to it in 1870 by Richard Francis Burton.⁴⁸ But in the extant Sanskrit attestations (11–14th cent.) of the *Vetālapañcavimsatikā* (whose origin is thought to be prior to the tenth century) the fruit of immortality tale is absent;⁴⁹ so, for example, in the version merged in the famous *Ocean of Story* by Somadeva, written between 1063 and 1081.⁵⁰

The tale is then attested in oral narratives,⁵¹ and in particular

⁴⁶ Transl. A. N. D. Haksar, *Simhāsana Dvātrīṃśikā: Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne of Vikramaditya* (London/New York 2006) 5–10, providing an eclectic text from the four major recensions (Southern, Metrical, Brief, and Jainistic). A separate English translation for each is in F. Edgerton, *Vikrama’s Adventures I* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1926) 5–14.

⁴⁷ W. Burckhardt Barker, *The Baitāl Pachīsī* (Hertford 1855) 1–7. A simplified form of this tale, entitled “Preface to Baitāl Pachīsī,” is printed in G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India IX Indo-Aryan Family, Central Group Part IV Specimens of the Pahārī languages and Gujurī* (Calcutta 1916) 69–73, referred to also by Thompson and Balys, *The Oral Tales of India* 363.

⁴⁸ See M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature* (Delhi 1985) 365–370; A. Sathae, “Vetālapañcavimsatikā,” *Enzyklopädie des Märchens XIV* 178–183.

⁴⁹ See H. Oesterley, *Baitāl Pachīsī, oder die fünfundzwanzig Erzählungen eines Dämon* (Leipzig 1873) 176.

⁵⁰ N. M. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story, being C. H. Tawney’s translation of Somadeva’s Kathā Sarit Sāgara VI* (London 1926) 165 – VII (London 1927) 125 (ch. LXXV–XCIX). Date: Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature* 353.

⁵¹ See for instance W. Crooke, “The Common Legend of Bhartri Nath,”

we can mention a version which introduces the aetiological myth of the cult of the Muslim saint Lal Shahbaz, venerated at Sehwan in the Pakistani region of Sindh. This religious legend, it can be observed, is somewhat reminiscent of the connection between the history of Eudocia and Paulinus and the foundation of the church of saints Kosmas and Damianos, as found in the Byzantine collection of the *Patria* (see above):⁵²

Now why do Hindus worship at his shrine? That is perhaps the strangest part of the story. In 56 B.C. lived the great king Vikramaditya of Dharmanagar or Ujjain, the Arthur of Hindu historical legends. At his court lived the nine gems of learning and his valour and his arms reduced all India to subjection. Once upon a time he resolved to disguise himself and see with his own eyes how his viceroys governed his provinces. He appointed to be his regent during his absence his younger brother Brartrahari. One day the Goddess Parvati gave to a devout old couple in Ujjain an apple, that conferred immortality on anyone who ate it. The old couple preferring riches to immortality sold the apple to the regent for a great price. The regent gave it to his youngest and prettiest wife. She unfortunately had a lover and she gave the apple to him. He in turn presented it to a dancing girl, who sold it back to Brartrahari. The regent thereby discovered his wife's infidelity. In a rage he flung away the apple and abandoning his office, became an anchorite. According to the local legend, he wandered until he came to Sind, where he became a devoted worshipper of Shiva. He called his abiding place Shivisthan or the place of Shiva. From Shivisthan has come the modern name Sehwan. Brartrahari lived at Sehwan until he died and by his life and death made the spot holy. The Musulman invasion swept away the temple of Shiva, but the memory of the pious recluse lingered on; and when Lal Shahbaz came and worked miracles at the spot where Brartrahari had lived, the Hindus declared that Lal Shahbaz was his reincarnation.

The parallel between the Indian tales of the *Vikramacarita* and the *Baitāl Pačīsī*, those of the *Arabian Nights*, and especially the

North Indian Notes and Queries 2 (1892) 129, and "The Fruit of Immortality," *Indian Antiquary* 55 (1926) 55 (repr. W. Crooke and P. R. Gharib Chaube, *Folktales from Northern India* [Santa Barbara 2002] 391–392).

⁵² C. A. Kincaid, *Folk Tales of Sind and Guzarat* (Karachi 1925) 11.

story of Eudocia, had already been highlighted in the early decades of the nineteenth century in an anonymous note in *Calcutta Journal*, later reprinted in *Asiatic Journal*, where it was claimed that “it is not improbable that this story may have been fresh imported from India in the times of the Greek writers mentioned above.”⁵³ The story later received comment by Wilson, who also thought of an Asian origin of story,⁵⁴ followed by Hermann Oesterley⁵⁵ and others.⁵⁶ The usually watertight compartmentalization of the various branches of humanistic knowledge has hitherto prevented, to my knowledge, scholars in the field of Late Antique and Byzantine studies from duly taking into account the existence of these narratives so similar to the episode of the apple narrated by Malalas and others.

However, in order to provide a truly comprehensive evaluation of the ‘affair of the apple’ in Byzantine profane and ecclesiastical historiography, it is not advisable, in my opinion, to disregard the fact that variations of this tale enjoyed so wide a circulation between late antiquity and the modern age.

It was noted earlier that the story of the apple, as told by Malalas about Eudocia, was preceded by an almost exactly equivalent narrative, that of Theopistos, which nevertheless had two different—and totally implausible—protagonists (Pulcheria and Marcianus). This leads one to deny any credence to the episode as told by these sources. Would it be possible to assume that the other variants could contain a kernel of truth? Oesterley asserted that embarrassing cases of recycled gifts returning to their first donor do happen in reality more often than one would believe. He cited two actual events which happened in his time, one in Hannover and one in Göttingen, centered on a capercaillie and a turkey, exchanged between friends and

⁵³ “Coincidence in Literature,” *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Dependencies* 10 (1820) 341–342.

⁵⁴ *Works by the late H. H. Wilson* IV (London 1864) 155–156, originally published in *British and Foreign Review* 21 (1840) 224–274.

⁵⁵ *Baitál Pachisi* 176–178.

⁵⁶ *The Ocean of Story* VI 240–241.

acquaintances who hoped to scrounge wine or a dinner from the beneficiary⁵⁷.

But is it really possible to imagine a case of polygenesis, i.e. an independent birth, for the congeries of narratives concerning the gift of an apple exchanged between husbands, wives, and true or presumed lovers? This seems really excessive, and it is therefore preferable to suppose that all the occurrences rather derive from a variedly adapted ‘Ur-tale of the apple’.

In fact, the proximity of the Byzantine apple tale to Persian/Arabic and Indian folktales and novellas constitutes the real ‘smoking gun’ that proves the fictitious nature of all the variants of the episode. What seems likely, in short, is that the episode of the recycled fruit was a folktale of real or only alleged adultery circulating widely in the late-antique and medieval Mediterranean, and in the East as far as India. This story also lent itself, like a defamatory ‘migratory rumor’, to being associated with various personalities, particularly in a context poisoned by political and religious disputes as in the Eastern Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries. Even in the contemporary world there are, in fact, cases of folktales and urban legends that are transformed into rumors by attaching them to different figures, depending on the point of view of those who tell them. One of the leading scholars of urban legends, Jan Harold Brunvand, has even dedicated a section of his *Type Index of Urban Legends* to what he calls “celebrity rumors and legends.”⁵⁸ Studies have highlighted how, among the widespread rumors to the detriment of men (and women) of power a significant number, unsurprisingly, are related to sexual mores:⁵⁹ the *Secret history* of Procopius constitutes a veritable cornucopia of the lewd stories that could circulate about the Byzantine elite in the sixth

⁵⁷ *Baitál Pachísí* 178.

⁵⁸ J. H. Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*² (Santa Barbara 2012) 763, nos. 09000-09155 and pp.103–105 for a specific entry about *Celebrities*.

⁵⁹ See J.-B. Renard, “La construction de l’image des hommes politiques par le folklore narratif. Anecdotes, rumeurs, légendes, histoires drôles,” *Mots. Les langages du politique* 92 (2010) 11–22, here 18–19.

century.⁶⁰ In this sense the affair of the apple, which according to Scott's persuasive reconstruction had first been connected to Pulcheria by the anti-Chalcedonians (as a true adultery story) and then to Eudocia by the Chalcedonians (as a true or only alleged adultery story, depending on the source), could effectively be a case of a rumor born from a folktale.

Is there any way to establish where the 'Ur-tale of the apple' originated? In fact, it is extremely difficult to try to reconstruct the diachronic diffusion of this popular story. The fact that the Byzantine versions are the earliest attested, while the Arabic are the second oldest and the Indian by far the latest, would apparently support a movement from West to East, but this is not necessarily the case. In fact, when it comes to oral material, the eventual appearance in literature can often take place after a noticeable time lag.⁶¹ Moreover, if the *Story of the Three Apples* in the *Arabian Nights* actually derives from an original of the Sasanid era, this would make the Persian-Arabic variants almost contemporary with the Byzantine ones.

⁶⁰ As stated by L. James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London/New York 2001) 16, "sexual intrigue and adultery were always a good and very popular weapon to use against overambitious empresses who needed to be put in their place. Fausta, Eudoxia, Eudokia, Pulcheria, Verina, Zenonis, Ariadne, Theodora above all, and Sophia are all accused of having lovers, being sexually loose or being involved in adulterous affairs, sometimes all three." Moreover, it has been said that "the vilification of a celebrated woman via sexual slander was hardly a new phenomenon in the sixth century": see McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses* 94 and 112–117, for a comparison between the debasing techniques adopted by Procopius against Theodora and those employed by contemporary media to discredit Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

⁶¹ For the possibility that the stories contained in the *Vikramacarita* could be much older than the collection itself, see Haksar, *Simhāsana Dvātrīṃśikā* xv. The story of the apple, however, apparently did not appear in the *Bṛhatkathā*, the Great Tale by Gunadhya, dating back to the first century B.C. (see G. Boccali, S. Piano, and S. Sani, *Le letterature dell'India: la civiltà letteraria indiana dai Veda a oggi* [Turin 2000] 499), considered to be the basis of most of the later Indian collections of tales. See the summary in D. A. Nelson, *The Bṛhatkathā: A Reconstruction from Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha, Peruikatai and Vasudevahimḍi* (diss. U. Chicago 1974) 245–323.

As to the content of the respective versions, there are conflicting contact points. The Indian variants present supernatural elements (the fruit guarantees immortality and is a divine gift), while the Arabic, Syriac, and Greek ones seem to have a more realistic allure; the Arabic versions and most of the Greek ones (with the exception of Theophanes) tell of a misunderstanding, while the Syriac and Armenian versions, Theophanes, and the Indian versions portray true adultery. On the other hand, the Arabic ones have courtiers or common men as main protagonists (the caliph plays a minimal role in the story, or none at all), while the others have sovereigns as main characters. It should be noted, however, that in both the Greek and the Indian tales the episode is often connected to a religious conversion: Eudocia leaves for the Holy Land, Paulinus builds a church, Bhartrihari embraces an ascetic life. As already noted, in both cases this aspect allowed these stories to be linked to foundation myths of cults or religious institutions. Finding a key to the problem, i.e. advancing a hypothesis of diffusion, is therefore a daunting task. Weber believed, nevertheless, that the Byzantine tale, in its “schmucklosen Einfachheit,” was at the origin of the much more elaborate Indian version;⁶² Basset instead thought that the origin was an Indian narrative, as the Greek one was characterized by a “rationalization” of the story, featuring an apple that does not give immortality but is simply prodigious in size.⁶³

Basset’s hypothesis is supported by various parallels. The arrival of stories and edifying narratives from India to Byzantium, with a Persian/Arab mediation, is in fact attested for a whole series of literary works. The fables of *Stephanites kai Ichneutes* were translated at the end of the eleventh century by Simeon Seth from the Arabic *Kalīla wa Dimna* of Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (mid-eighth century), in turn translated from a Pehlevi text (dating back to about 570) deriving from the famous Indian collection of the *Pañcatantra* (dated to somewhere in the second to fourth cen-

⁶² A. Weber, *Indische Studien* XV (Leipzig 1878) 214–215.

⁶³ R. Basset, *Étude sur la Zénatia du Mzab de Ouargia et de l’Oued-Rir* (Paris 1893) 127–128.

turies). *Barlaam kai Ioasaph* was the Byzantine version of Buddha's story, translated by the monk Euthymius at the beginning of the eleventh century from a Georgian version (*Balavariani*), derived in turn from the Arabic *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Būdāsf* (eighth-ninth century), which drew on Indian materials (probably with a Persian mediation). From a Persian original of the sixth-seventh century (*Sindbād-Nāma*, perhaps influenced by Indian material) to Arabia (where it flows into the *Arabian Nights*, too) to Syria and finally to Byzantium is instead the path of the *Biblos Syntipa tou philosophou* translated, once again in the eleventh century, by Michael Andreopoulos.⁶⁴ Perhaps less known, but extremely interesting, is also the *Historia Ptochleontos*, attested since the beginning of the fourteenth century. It is a novella (variant of the ATU 655 type) on the sagacity and intuition of an old landowner, fallen into disgrace and sold as slave. Its plot can be traced back to the Buddhist story of Suppāraka-kumāra, contained in the *Jātaka* (a collection of tales on the previous lives of the Buddha), compiled in the fifth century A.D. As often, there was an Arabic intermediary: the story appears in fact in some versions of the *Arabian Nights* as "The King who Kenned the Quintessence of Things."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See the up-to-date essays in C. Cupane and B. Krönung (eds.), *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond* (Leiden 2016), and in particular B. Krönung, "Fighting with Tales: 1 the Arabic *Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*" 365–379; I. Toth, "Fighting with Tales: 2 The Byzantine *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher*" 380–400; R. Volk, "From the Desert to the Holy Mountain: The Beneficial *Story of Barlaam and Ioasaph*" 401–426; B. Krönung, "The Wisdom of the Beasts: The Arabic *Book of Kalīla and Dimna* and the Byzantine *Book of Stephanites and Ichneutes*" 427–461.

⁶⁵ On *Ptocholeon* and its background see H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Volksliteratur* (Munich 1971) 148–150; G. Kechagioglou (ed.), *Πτωχολέων* (Thessaloniki 2011) 15, 18, 62–66; a translation of *Suppāraka-Jātaka* (XI 463) is available in E. B. Cowell, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* IV (Cambridge 1901) 86–90; for the tale of "The King who Kenned the Quintessence of Things" (night 289 in the Breslau edition) see Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* I 258. About the type ATU 655 see K. Ranke, "Brüder: Die scharfsinnigen B.," in K. Ranke (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* II (Berlin 1979) 874–887, esp. 880–881. A version of this tale is

One could perhaps suppose a similar East-West direction, in the context of oral transmission, for the tradition of the story of the ‘recycled’ apple. There is, however, a problem: in this case the Arabic variants, which should constitute the connecting link, seem to differ in too many respects from the extremes represented by Theopistos (and for many aspects, also Malalas) and the *Vikramacarita*.

Taking our cue from the objective similarities between the Byzantine (especially that of Theopistos) and Indian versions, one could then try to borrow Matteo Giulio Bartoli’s linguistic norm of the archaism of ‘side areas’.⁶⁶ The fact that Byzantium and India are placed at the margins with respect to the Persian-Arab sphere would lend some credibility to the assumption that the narrative originated in the center and radiated from there. Within the central area of Persia and Arabia the ‘Ur-tale of the apple’ would have then undergone a change, resulting in the novella in the *Arabian Nights* (perhaps derived from a Sasanid version in the *Hezār Afsān*). The original form, instead, would have been more faithfully preserved where it arrived later, i.e. in India and Byzantium, where it was recorded at a very early date. The hypothesis of Persia as the cradle of the ‘Ur-tale of the Apple’, a rumor-folktale circulating between the Eastern Roman and the Sasanian empire in Late Antiquity and expanding towards West and East, sounds very attractive. However, the possibility of direct contacts, albeit sporadic, between the Roman Empire and India in Late Antiquity cannot be totally ruled out—and this could call into question their belonging to independent ‘side areas’ as regards the diffusion of the story of the recycled fruit. In addition to commercial relationships by

present also in the *Eracle* of Gautier d’Arras (end of the twelfth century), probably influenced by Byzantine traditions: M. L. Morris Wolsey, *The Eracle of Gautier d’Arras: A Critical Study* (diss. U. Minnesota 1972) 20–21; Fourier, *Le courant réaliste* 216–219, 251–252.

⁶⁶ See J. Albrecht, “Neolinguistic School in Italy,” in E. F. K. Koerner and R. E. Asher (eds.), *Concise History of the Language Sciences from the Sumerians to the Cognitivists* (New York 1995) 243–247, esp. 246.

sea, documented at least until the seventh century, it is necessary to remember the presence in India, since Late Antiquity, of Christian communities connected with Syria (a strong Antiochene background and also a Syriac influence, albeit “much less obtrusive,” have been postulated for John Malalas,⁶⁷ not to mention the fact that Theopistos’ *Life of Dioscoros* was also preserved in a Syriac translation).⁶⁸ This may have favored contacts and allowed the circulation, in one way or another, of a spicy narrative refigured, in both cases, as a pious legend.⁶⁹

The precise path of the tale of the recycled apple, expanding from a possibly Iranian center or travelling from East to West or vice versa (not to mention that the two movements do not necessarily exclude each other, as we have seen), cannot therefore be reconstructed with certainty. Nevertheless, its significance as an example of a circulating popular tale capable of becoming novella, gossip, urban legend, myth of foundation is beyond doubt. In 1921 Marc Bloch, in a seminal article about “war rumors,” pointed out that “les fausses nouvelles, dans toute la multiplicité de leurs formes, – simples racontars, impostures, légendes, – ont rempli la vie de l’humanité. Comment naissent-elles ? de quels éléments tirent-elles leur substance ? comment se propagent-elles, gagnant en ampleur à mesure qu’elles passent de bouche en bouche ou d’écrit en écrit ? Nulle question plus que celles-là ne mérite de passionner quiconque aime à réfléchir

⁶⁷ E. Jeffreys, “Malalas’ World View,” in E. Jeffreys (ed.), *Studies in John Malalas* (Leiden 2017; original edition Sydney 1990) 55–66, here 55–59 and 66.

⁶⁸ See I. Gillmann and H.-J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Ann Arbor 1999) 166–169; A. de Saxcé, “Trade and Cross-cultural Contacts in Sri Lanka and South India during Late Antiquity,” *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 4 (2016) 121–159.

⁶⁹ See L. Silvano, “*De Philentolo fornicatore* or the tale of the soul stuck betwixt Heaven and Hell. A curious story and a theological paradox,” *Byzantion* 86 (2016) 367–418, here 388, on the ease of circulation of hagiographic traditions in the sixth-seventh centuries, especially in monastic environments, where they could easily cross linguistic barriers and switch from the written form to the oral one and vice versa.

sur l'histoire."⁷⁰ I hope that this analysis helps to clarify, at least in part, the nature and the diffusion of one of these *fausses nouvelles* that spread in Late Antiquity.⁷¹

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⁷⁰ M. Bloch, "Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre," *Revue de synthèse historique* 33 (1921) 17–39, here 20.

⁷¹ This article benefited from the suggestions and friendly help of Gianni Pellegrini and Luigi Silvano, whom I would like to thank here. I wish also to express my gratitude to the anonymous reader who commented very helpfully on this paper.