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The Research on the History of the Environment in the context of the Programs and Actions of the Institute for Historical Research (IHR/NHRF): Challenges and Future Horizons



Paris Psalter, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. gr. 139, 10th c.



Kylenegetika manuscript of Pseudo-Oppian, Ms. Gr. 479, fol. 2vo, ca. 1060 CE

**CONFLICT AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN MODERN GREECE
SEPTEMBER 21, 2020, WEBINAR WORKSHOP**

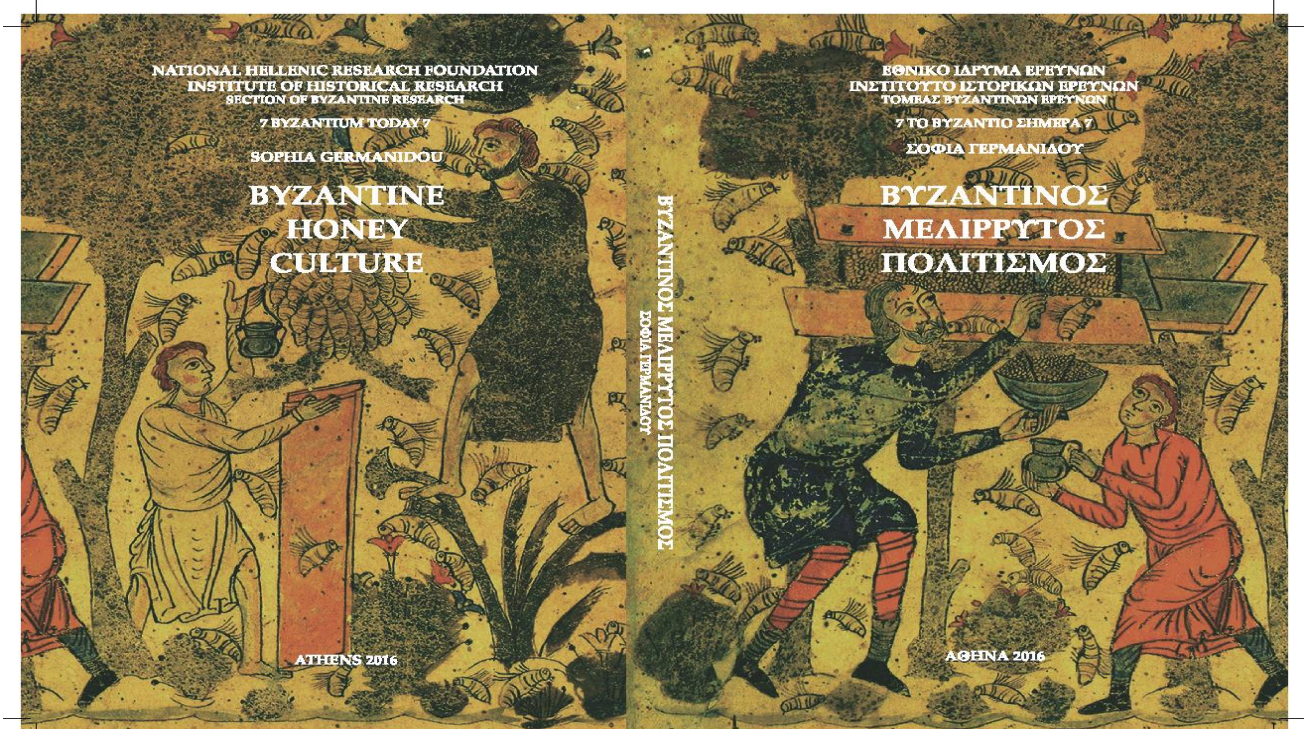
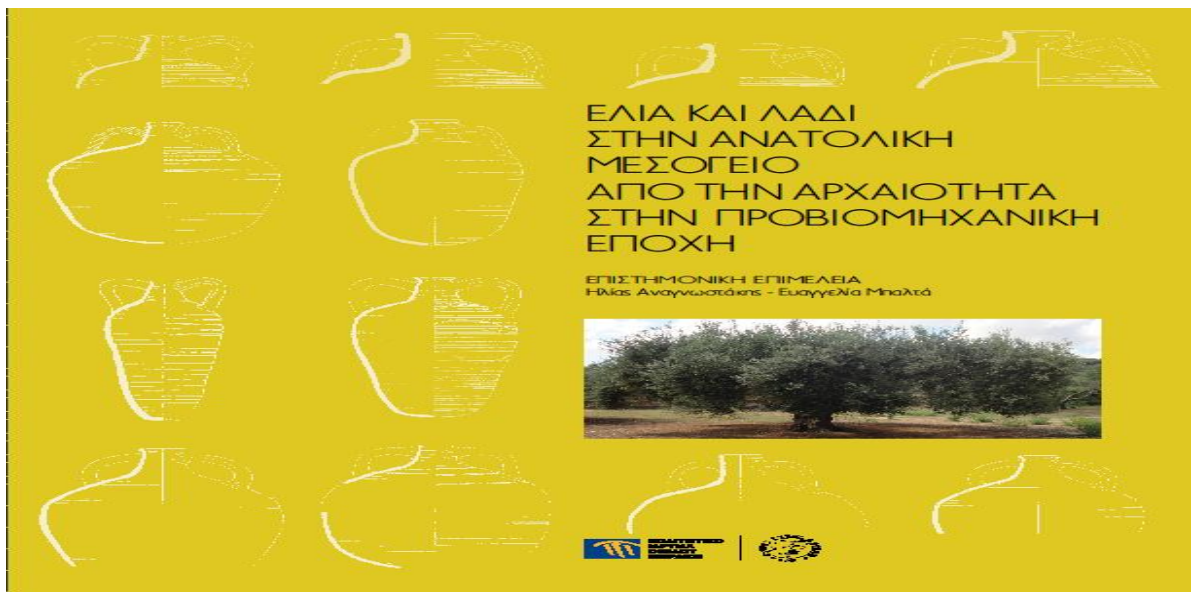
The development of environmental history as a separate historiographical field has given priority to the approach, analysis and evaluation of the relationship between man and the environment, as a central historical process. Research on environmental history was certainly a response to the reflections produced by modern ecological crisis which emerged strongly in the second part of the 20th century. The multiple aspects of the human-environment relationship in the past, have now been addressed and analyzed as social, political, cultural and economic phenomena. Given these established multifaceted approaches, we can now focus on more specific topics such as the today's meeting perspectives on the distinct types of conflict related to human presence in the natural environment: *The environment as an apple of discord*, *The environment as an antagonist*, and *The environment as collateral damage*.

Nowadays, more than ever, we realize that environmental history is a field of research that requires interdisciplinary collaboration. So, from this starting point, I will refer briefly to recent publications of our Institute that responded to this research stimulus. In these works, the search for data from disciplines such as literature, art and archeology was linked and analyzed together with results provided by sociology and also the natural sciences. We are now quite familiar with the quests and comprehensive data that come from the fields of dendrochronology, palaeobotany, carpology and palynology; we also take into account valuable information provided by osteoarchaeology and zooarchaeology. The most recent book, published some months ago, entitled: "Olives and olive oil in the eastern Mediterranean. From antiquity to pre-industrial times", gives some insights into the environmental setting of various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean in relation to the cultivation of olive, based on information provided by individual fields of environmental archeology.

Material of this kind proved to be valuable for understanding the productive potentials of this basic crop in the *longue durée*, from antiquity to early modern period; and opens areas for taking some more steps in order to identify the position of certain crops in agricultural regimes.

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Some particular insights on the environmental potentials of the beekeeping activity are analyzed in the book bearing the title: "Byzantine Honey Culture", that examines the material and the ideal aspects of this occupation by the analysis of various textual, artistic and archaeological sources; through this examination the book manages to highlight several environmental trends of apiculture. I think it is worth mentioning that this book, especially regarding the issue of conflict, touches not only on the symbolic aspects of bee attacking, but also its actual use in some warfare practices, thus, indicating one of the intriguing nuances of the relationship between conflict and the environment.



It is also worth mentioning one earlier publication that touched questions on the conditions relating to the wine production; the agricultural activity par excellence in terms of its extent and its contribution to the rural economy. The volume of the proceedings of the International Symposium on Monemvasian Wine examined several environmental aspects presented in the case studies, dedicated to vineyards of Peloponnese and Crete.

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Research on the history of the environment has placed emphasis to the examination of perceptions and attitudes as also to the evaluation and understanding of strategies applied towards the natural resources management. In these efforts, especially in the case of Byzantium, that I personally study, state control had always played an absolutely regulatory role. Our sources show clearly that the state, aiming at the best management of land, granted abandoned uncultivated lands, to beneficiaries and monasteries. Precisely, because, primary production was of paramount importance for survival, - and as urban and rural populations were constantly vulnerable to crises, famines and epidemics, issues of agricultural exploitation occur very often in our sources.

So, we can benefit from the abundant reference to customs, regulations, practices and behaviors, related to management processes of natural resources, to enrich our research, raise new questions and open up innovative horizons for the study of the environment in history, by exploiting the solid ground of the well-studied rural-economy-issues.

The various meanings that the environment acquired as a basic parameter of everyday life, was related to practices and survival-modes of traditional societies. This reality is reflected in a grid of theories, principles, counteractions and strategies that can be detected in a wide range of primary sources. The effort to secure natural resources and productive adequacy, which is intensively reflected in written sources, could not be absent from the research studies of our Institute's Program, called: "Daily and Social Life of the Byzantines".

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Among the thematic areas covered by this program are the examination of production and processing techniques of agricultural products, as well as the development of animal husbandry and fisheries. This thematic specialization provides a rich infrastructure for the further study of environmental historical research as an opportunity to understand hitherto unknown aspects of Byzantine society that is a typical example of traditional society.

Byzantine writers often borrow verses from religious texts, such as the Psalms, to proudly show the transformation of a wild area into a domesticated and cultivated one. In fact, they use expressions from the Bible or ancient literature to describe and praise their accomplishment to transform forest areas to farmlands or to secure posts suitable for grazing or fishing. For example, the passage from the seventy-fourth Psalm: hit it with an ax and burn it with fire, or the verses of Psalm ninety-one, which invokes the power to exterminate or trample snakes and scorpions, were used to display the symbolisms of the actions taken in order to tame natural landscapes and

integrate them in large estates. Several environmental dimensions of survival, on the other hand, appear in the rules for the exploitation of timber or for the protection of cultivated fields from animals, or the widespread use of fences, reveal.



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The ambivalent attitudes towards the natural environment were related to major changes that led to the successive steps for the redefinition of the relationship between environment and society and became more visible during the period of decline of the ancient world. Church Fathers, like the saints later, tried to create models of self-sufficiency and balanced development by commenting, for example, on Genesis. However, prosperity was easily threatened by climate change, natural disasters or earthquakes and adverse circumstances created by the political and economic instability. In fact, productivity and living conditions were deteriorated following the general recession of Late Antiquity. It would be interesting, however, to see how those rural communities survived in adverse conditions.

During this crucial period of transition between two major epochs, in premodern history, the key features of rural communities' response to environmental change have been adaptation and resilience. State institutions responded to productivity fluctuations by adopting strategies with similar attitudes. Production was certainly endangered by the decrease in temperature and the increase of humidity that was normalized later, during the warm period of the Middle Ages (800–1200 AD). Even so, urban centers proved to be more vulnerable to the crisis caused by these changes, than rural communities, as it is documented by case studies in the Mediterranean area but also in the Near East.

Today we know that these phenomena had a universal influence on the environmental conditions all over the world, but were not homogeneous and their diversity is among the open issues for research.

We now, know that increasing rural productivity meant reducing forest cover. Conversely, the erosion and the cover with wild vegetation witnessed by palynological data, for example, is an indication of human retreat from a certain region. We now know that increasing rural productivity meant reducing forest cover. Conversely, the erosion and the cover with wild vegetation witnessed by palynological data, for example, is an indication of human retreat from a certain region. The effects of climate change, on a larger scale, coincided with the settlement of new peoples in the Balkan Peninsula, as well as the spread of the Arabs in the Middle East, shortly afterwards, which changed the political and cultural physiognomy of the Mediterranean world.

Yet, it still remains an open question, how these phenomena have affected the way of thinking about survival, and the aspects of the adverse environmental conditions impact on daily life are under discussion.

Rural communities that have faced these unprecedented situations have, however, shown considerable resilience and the restoration of a moderate or improved prosperity is reflected in both archaeological remains and literary production. It is no coincidence that the miracles of the saints, which abound in this time period, are closely linked to the adventures of rural life and the struggle for survival in the countryside.

Environmental changes were first examined by contemporary research as issues relating to matters of historical geography, and questions referring to populations and settlement, but soon the subject began to be considered as a distinct scientific field which required interdisciplinary insights.

This shift from the study of pre-modern societies' social structures and economic junctures, to the parallel analysis of spatial and environmental conditions, in given historical periods, was an engaging challenge for historical studies. The surveys on microregions by archaeologists made even more convenient the detection of the impact of the environmental interconnection with the modes of exploitation and the development of population and habitat. Such data could be compared to the perceptions and emotions reflected in the texts, which in many cases testify to the absolute fear and the weakness towards nature. The comparative study of material and written data enables us to better understand the problems faced by societies of the past in the management of environmental issues as well as the multiple inventive solutions they proposed.

To meet these challenges, around 2010, we first sought collaborations within the Historical Research Institute, which led initially to the organization of a seminar series. The contribution of my colleagues from our Institute Angeliki Panopoulou and Dimitris Dimitropoulos, specializing in

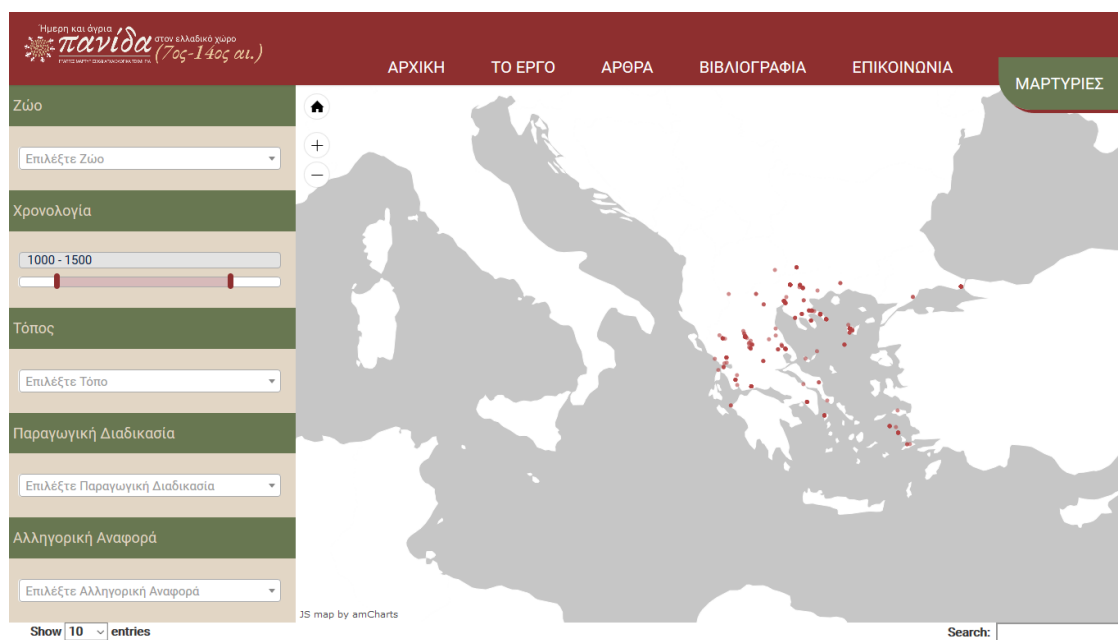
Venetian and Ottoman periods, was valuable in these first steps. The seminars covered topics such as water management, intervention in nature and the creation of man-made environment either by the development of agriculture, or by the expansion of settlements and the building projects (construction roads, bridges etc). Other subjects discussed in these seminars touched at theological thought as opposed to physiocratic-naturalistic conceptions, also the, regularly recurring in the texts, cultural perceptions on the antithetic or symbiotic relationship with nature: the forest, the mountain or the desert, as well as, the aesthetic or practical uses of the flora and fauna.

For the study of environmental history at our Institute subsequently, we started to cooperate with historians and archaeologists who specialize in different historical eras and other fields. In the frame of annual workshops, which we have co-organized together with Angeliki and Dimitris and in collaboration with other academic institutions, we explored the possibility to open new perspectives on the subject, sharing our ideas with experts coming from social and natural sciences. In this context of our searches, a stable cooperation was formed with the *Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation*, continuing in the last five years. The PIOP, Foundation, specializes in archival research and in the promotion of the intangible cultural heritage, through the establishment of several thematic museums on natural and agricultural resources. Along with Lena Beneki from the PIOP, we have set, as a goal, the organization of a series of annual work meetings with various topics of the history of the environment. These workshops gave us the opportunity to discuss issues on the “Historical and Cultural Landscape”, the “Transformations of Natural and Energy Resources”, the “Environment and Nutrition” and, last year, on the “Marine Ecotopies in the Greek Regions”.

The attempt made in 2008 to organize an International Symposium at our institute on “Animals and Environment in Byzantium (7th-12th c.)”, opened a new chapter in our research. The proceedings of this Symposium, published three years later, manifested the importance for the development of environmental research. The papers presented in the Symposium demonstrated the wealth of information about the interaction between human interventions and different environments. This material is available in all kind of Byzantine heritage sources (archival record, illustrated manuscripts, all kinds of prose and poetic discourse, artworks etc.). The volume proved that research on fauna still has a lot of environmental aspects to reveal in the future. The study of the activities of stockbreeders, hunters or farmers presented in this volume, introduced new research parameters on the study of human intervention in the natural environment during this period. Trends of the period were also analyzed, such as the dynamics of livestock farming

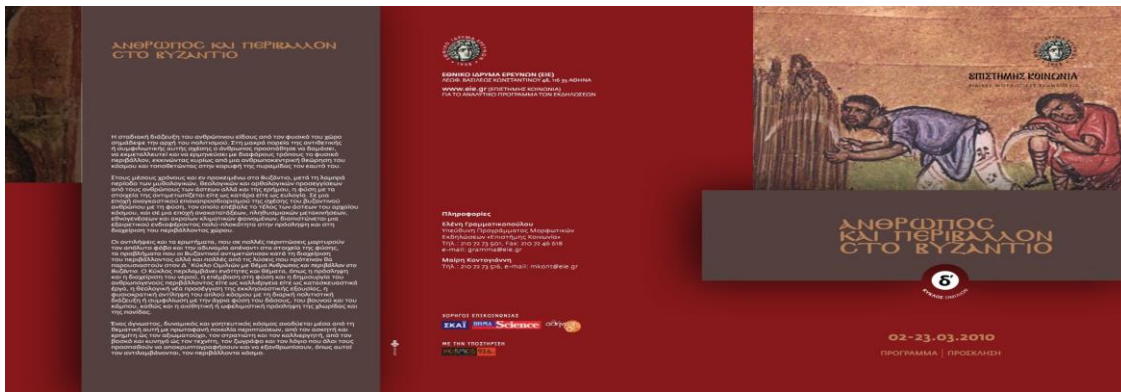
at the expense of agriculture, as well as the fishery development that appeared at that time. It turned out that this intensive exploitation, as I hinted at the beginning of my presentation, is directly related to adaptation strategies to respond to the improved and favorable environmental conditions of the period.

This conference gave the impetus for the development of a currently ongoing project with an environmental orientation, which I had the opportunity to organize, with the aim to place material on a map referring to the “Domestic Animals and Wildlife in Greece (7th-14th century)”. The project sets down the geographical, historical and environmental evidence regarding wildlife and the exploitation of animal husbandry and fishing; the evidence is indexed in an open access database in the context of the research project of the IHR / NHRF called, Anavathmis. To the documentation and indexing of the material contributed Kelly Mavrommati, Anna Sklaveniti and Dimitris Agoritsas. I take the opportunity to thank them, and from here, for their cooperation. I also thank Zisis Melissakis, for the effective coordination of the project, as well as the associates Giannis Ladas, Elisavet Kelidou and Eftychia Georgakopoulou, who organized the core facilities of the database. I owe thanks also to Eleni Molfesi of the Library of our Institute, for her help throughout the preparation of the project, especially during the difficult conditions of the pandemic last spring.



In the last lines of my presentation I would like to mention a contribution on war and the environment that has been delivered for publication by the former director of our Institute, Professor Emeritus Taxiarchis Koliass and Kelly Mavrommati (“Πόλεμος και περιβάλλον στο Βυζάντιο.

Το θεωρητικό πλαίσιο της έρευνας”). Institute of Historical Research, NHRF) Human interaction with the natural world over time is an issue that has a lot to offer in research, as shown by the preparation, of another database that is called: “Natura Byzantina”, dealing with environmental issues of the Late Byzantine Period and is about to be uploaded by Kelly Mavrommati. Of course, I must thank all the colleagues, who have supported all these efforts as well as the former director of IHR and the current director, Dr Maria Christina Chatzioannou for the encouragement to continue and amplify the future horizons of the subject.



The gradual separation of man from its natural environment marked the beginning of civilization. In the long course of this opposite or reconciling relationship, man has tried to tame, exploit and interpret the natural environment in various ways, starting mainly from an anthropocentric view of the world and placing himself at the top of the pyramid. In the Middle Ages and in this case in Byzantium, after the brilliant period of mythological, theological and rational approaches by the people living in urban centers and the countryside but also in the desert, nature with its elements is treated either as a curse or as a blessing (From the Invitation of the NHRF Lecture Series)