Spatialities of Byzantine Culture from the Human Body to the Universe

Edited by

Myrto Veikou and Ingela Nilsson

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The Human Belly as a 'Natural Symbol'

The Greek and Byzantine Anthropology of γαστήρ

Tomek Labuk

It seems difficult to conceive of any specific space which is more private and intimate to us than our bodies. They are crucial to our sustenance and well-being; their diagrams are deeply inscribed within our brain structures, and they facilitate our sensory perception of both the world and any imaginable space.[1] This intimacy of our own bodily 'universe' is strengthened by the fact that no one could have any direct access and understanding of how we perceive our own body or how we feel within it. That said, the body seems to pose a curious paradox: being the most private space, it is simultaneously the most public one. It is through our body that we interact with other bodies and spaces; living within in it, we live in the society of other individuals, and how we comport ourselves in our bodies is a marker of our social and political identity.

The inevitable consequence of our embodiment reveals itself in the simple fact that to live and thrive we need to nourish ourselves. And because the individual body is simultaneously a public or social entity, one of the most effective ways of exerting control upon it is to discipline its dietary habits. Discussing this intimate interconnection between nutritional and social control, Brian Turner noticed that the Latin noun *regimen* conveys a closely connected double meaning both: "dietary regimen", thus a set of rules which control the intake of food, and "political regime", which can be broadly understood as the "government of the bodies".[2] They both strive to control individual and social bodies by producing and exercising sets of rules which rationalize bodily behaviours. From this perspective, the control of the belly and its needs ensures the orderly composition of any given social group.

1 As neuro-biological research shows, we possess a virtual map of our body which is imprinted in our brain since the time of its formation in the pre-natal phase (the so-called 'homunculus'). What is astonishing is that those born without a limb (or limbs) might suffer from 'phantom limb pain' (PLP) and feel members of their bodies which they have never possessed; for this, see Kean 2014, 129–214 with an extensive scientific bibliography on the subject, and Subedi & Grossberg 2011.

2 Turner 1982, 3.

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Thus, there is an apparent analogy between what is organic and social: the body is easily translated into social and political spheres. For this reason, we are accustomed to conceiving of society as an organism: a living entity whose parts (organs and limbs) need to function properly, and such a relation between what is bodily and social is universal to all human cultures.[3] Yet, it is one thing to acknowledge such interconnection, but something else to understand the semiotics of the human body within a specific culture. Mary Douglas has shown that each 'natural symbol', including the body itself, is a construct of both bodily experience and the socio-cultural setting within which it exists.[4] Thus, despite the fact that the concept of the body and its parts is always "a model of any bounded system",[5] it is a product of social convention, an artifice that needs to be interpreted within its specific context and in relation to other sets of symbols.[6]

While some common patterns and structures of conceiving of the body and its parts exist which are universal, the symbolic significance attached to bodily members and physiological processes may differ.[7] While in the polytheistic structures of Hinduism, the anthropomorphized representations of gods are possible, in the Judeo-Christian framework, the intermingling of the divine and the worldly is strictly prohibited. Douglas has illustrated this point with an excerpt taken from Maimonides' reflections on the anthropomorphic representations of God in the Old Testament. According to him, while it is possible to assign the external organs (shoulders, hands, feet, etc.) figuratively to God, one should never associate God with the internal organs of digestion. It is simply inconceivable to present God as truly possessing bowels, as "they are at once recognized as the signs of imperfection".[8]

In the present discussion, I would like to focus on one of the most vital parts of the human body, namely the belly, and its symbolic significance in Byzantine culture. Following the insights and methodological framework put forward by Douglas, I disclose the prevailing patterns of social and religious

3 Temkin 1942.

4 Douglas 1996.

5 Douglas 1984.

6 Douglas 1984, 116: "The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals […] unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body".

7 Douglas 1996, xxxv: "A basic question for understanding natural symbolic systems will be to know what social conditions are the prototype for the one or the other set of attitudes to the human body and its fitness or unfitness for figuring godhead".

8 Maimonides 1956, 61. See the discussion in Douglas 1996, xxxiv.

conceptualization of the space of γαστήρ (belly), στόμαχος (stomach) and κοιλία (gut) in Byzantium. Surely, if our bodies are crucial to both our individual and social lives, and if our bellies are vital to the sustenance of our bodies, then particular symbolic significance must have been attached to it. Hence, in what follows, I address the following questions: what patterns of meaning were concealed behind the social concept of the belly as a 'natural symbol'? What are the ultimate sources of Byzantine conceptualization of γαστήρ? What are the implications of characterizing someone through their belly? Last, but not least, if the belly can be universally understood as a "sign of imperfection", to what extent should its urges be controlled to ensure social well-being? I will proceed with the search for the answers to these in two steps. First, I engage in an 'archaeology of an idea', to seek the sources of the Byzantine conceptualization of the belly. Secondly, I put forward several case studies based primarily but not exclusively on written Byzantine sources to uncover the patterns of conceptualizing the space of the belly in the Medieval Greek tradition.

1 Peeping into Darkness: γαστήρ in the Greek-Byzantine Tradition

The moral problematization of the space of the human belly seems to date back to the earliest period of Greek literature.[9] Already in the archaic iambic poetry, γαστήρ was conceptualized as a threatening space: the greediness of public officials and kings, who were the main targets of iambic insult, was explicitly associated with their insatiable bellies. One of the most conspicuous examples of such a connection is a famous mock-epic purportedly composed by the iambic poet, Hipponax. In the poem, he emphasizes the monstrous voraciousness of the politician Eurymedontiades: he is like the all-devouring Charybdis and "a stomach with a knife inside it" (ἐγγαστριμάχαιρα), hence he swallows the foodstuffs whole:

> Μοῦσά μοι Εὐρυμεδοντιάδεα, τὴν παντοχάρυβδιν,
> τὴν ἐγγαστριμάχαιραν, ὃς ἐσθίει οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἔννεφ',
> ὅπως ψηφῖδι <κακὸς> κακὸν οἶτον ὀλεῖται
> βουλῇ δημοσίῃ παρὰ θῖν' ἁλὸς ἀτρυγέτοιο […]
>
> Tell me, Muse, of the sea swallowing, the stomach carving of
> Eurymedontiades who eats in no orderly manner, so that through a

9 For the "moral problematization" of consumption see Foucault 1990, 14–32.

> baneful vote determined by the people he may die a wretched death along the shore of the undraining sea [...][10]

The passage reveals vividly the close linkage between the insatiable γαστήρ, the unruly eating habits (ἐσθίει οὐ κατὰ κόσμον), and the social threat. This interconnection of the uncontrolled belly and danger is visible in the fact that the ones like Eurymedontiades, who were decreed to be stoned to death in archaic Athens, were those public officials who abused the people for their use: the tyrants, the fraudulent generals, and the traitors of the πόλις, hence all those who threatened the social order and stability of the city.[11] Similarly, in Athenian Old Comedy, the inability to curb the urges of the belly was emblematic of the manipulative and parsimonious demagogues who were living at the expense of the people. For this reason, the costumes worn by the comic actors included a padded protruding belly which pointed to its uncivil character, since it indicated slackness, effeminacy, and unrestrained appetites, and hence pointed to the lack of civic control over their bodies.[12]

The belly and its beastly needs stand at the core of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Pucci and Egbert showed that γαστήρ and concerns over orderly consumption form the leitmotifs of the *Odyssey* and are one of the drivers of its plot.[13] Thus, both Odysseus' companions, who consumed the forbidden meat of the Cattle of Helios, and Penelope's suitors, who broke the divine law of ξενία and were unlawfully filling their bellies with Odysseus' substance, had to be punished and killed; indeed, γαστήρ is characterized in the *Odyssey* as a wretched thing which causes much evil to men.[14] Correspondingly, the entire plot of the *Iliad* is triggered by the belly-driven δημοβορία of Agamemnon, who unjustly takes Briseis for himself and thereby prompts Achilles' anger (μῆνις).[15] Agamemnon's uncontrollable private urges are mapped directly onto his public rapaciousness.

These ideas were further elaborated on and organized by Plato and Aristotle. In the *Timaeus*, Plato argues that gods placed the lowest part of the mortal

10 Hipponax, *Fragments* 128. Cf. Hesychius, *Lexikon* ε 155: ἐγγαστριμάχαιραν· τὴν ἐν τῇ γαστρὶ κατατέμνουσαν. The fragment from Hipponax has been discussed by Brown 1988. English translation by Gerber 1999, 459.

11 Worman 2008.

12 Foley 2000, 275.

13 Pucci 1995, 157–208; Bakker 2013, 135–56.

14 Homer, *Odyssey* 17.473–74: γαστέρος εἵνεκα λυγρῆς, οὐλομένης, ἣ πολλὰ κάκ' ἀνθρώποισι δίδωσιν.

15 Worman (2008, 29) points out that the δημοβορία, literally 'people-eating,' of Agamemnon is driven directly by the urges of his own γαστήρ.

soul in the belly (γαστήρ).[16] As a result, it became the seat of beastly/feminine urges, which included the worst drive for bodily satisfaction. Since this nethermost part of the soul is responsible for the most basic, irrational, animal-like appetites (which include craving for food, drink, and sex) Plato likens it to a savage beast (θρέμμα ἀγρίον).[17] Aristotle argues along similar lines. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he identifies taste and touch as brutish sensations which humans share with other animals.[18] The latter is even more pernicious than the sensation of taste: it is the act of touching food which gratifies a licentious person, being seemingly close to sexual pleasure.[19] A man who takes enjoyment in these sensations can be compared to a wild animal and is characterized by savagery (θηριῶδες). Therefore, gluttons, who are maddened by their bellies (γαστριμάργοι), prove themselves to be extremely crude types of people (ἀνδραποδώδεις). Indeed, such wariness towards γαστήρ is particular to every philosophical system of Greek antiquity. The Pythagoreans, with their elaborate rules which prohibited the intake of certain kinds of food, are a particularly good case in point:[20] Pythagoras' idea of strict ἐγκρατεία entailed holding the belly in constant check against its propensity towards luxury.[21] In the same vein, Philo Judaeus perceived control over the belly, the genitals, and the tongue (an organ which consumes and produces speech) to be the primary concern of philosophy.[22]

Such a conceptualization of the belly as a natural symbol, associated with a threat both to the individual and to society as a whole, became even stronger with the advent of Christianity. It seemed only natural that γαστήρ began to be associated with the deadly sins of gluttony, lust and greed and, by extension, with Original Sin. This can be gleaned from the writings of the Greek Church

16 Plato, *Timaeus* 69c–70e. Certainly, Plato was profoundly inspired by Socrates, who was purportedly the most self-controlled man towards the urges for sex, food, and wine. For this see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.1.

17 As Plato argues further, it is for this reason that the gods decided to place it near the genitals, so that the belly as the seat of the most irrational passions is maximally distanced from the rational soul and does not interfere with it: Plato, *Timaeus* 69e. Plato perceives the belly as the ultimate source of immorality, irrationality, infirmity, and hence links it to effeminacy. See the discussion of these in Hill 2011, 45–55.

18 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1118a–b.

19 In order to illustrate his point, Aristotle quotes story of a glutton who wished his neck was as long as a crane's so that he might enjoy the sensation for a longer time, Ibid. 1118a.30–32.

20 Garnsey 1999, 87–89; Simoons 1998, 192–210.

21 Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 22.18–22.

22 Philo Judaeus, *De Congressu* 80.1–2. For the discussion of this see Hultin 2008, 78–81. The triad of talking, eating, and lust is discussed by Worman (2008, 275–318) in relation to Aristoteles and Theophrastus.

fathers, which advocate for a rigorous ἔγκρατεία towards one's body and one's belly. It was through the maintenance of absolute control over one's σῶμα that one could live up to the ideal of a Christian. Indeed, living by one's γαστήρ was believed to be the polar opposite of godly existence. Clement of Alexandria's famous discussion on gluttony in the *Paedagogus* is a conspicuous case in point here. His ideas related to γαστήρ blend concepts associated with it in antiquity (hence foolishness, bestiality/animality, effeminacy, social danger) with the main tenets of Christianity.[23] In Clement's eyes, those who live only by their bellies resemble savage beasts, for they live only to eat. Clement links them to Satan, who himself was fashioned in Christian thought in the mould of a gluttonous beast. Hence belly, with its uncontrolled and unquenchable desires, leads inevitably to sin and perdition of an individual.

Therefore, for the sake of recapitulation, the webs of meaning associated with the space of γαστήρ in the Greek tradition might be illustrated in the form of the diagram below (Figure 1.1). Against this background, let us turn to the Byzantine period to examine the continuities and developments of such a conceptualization.

2 Case Study No. 1: Γαστὴρ in the Byzantine Ascetic Tradition

Perhaps one of the best places to move the investigation into the Byzantine period is the famous *Ladder of Divine Ascent* written by John Klimax somewhere around the beginning of the seventh century. It should not come as a surprise that the treatise, which was written primarily for the use of ascetic monks, includes an entire chapter entitled "On the beloved and knavish mistress, the belly" (Περὶ τῆς παμφίλου καὶ δεσποίνης πονηρᾶς γαστρός).[24] The title itself is rich with references to ancient and early Christian ideas. John Klimax plays here with the grammatical gender of the Greek noun γαστήρ, which is feminine: we have already seen that in the ancient tradition the belly is a gendered space associated with what was believed to be 'feminine', and thus irrational, urges.[25] The link between the pleasure derived from the consumption of food and sexual fulfilment is present here as well: after all, the Greek noun

23 For this, see an in-depth analysis in Hill 2011, 110–20.

24 John Klimax, *Ladder* 14. English translation by Moore 1959 misses this wordplay and renders the title "On the clamorous, yet wicked master—the stomach".

25 Worman 2008, 8–19 points out that such a conceptualization was a product of a male-dominated society, in which every behavioral pattern that endangered the prevailing norms of 'masculinity' was thought to be 'feminine".

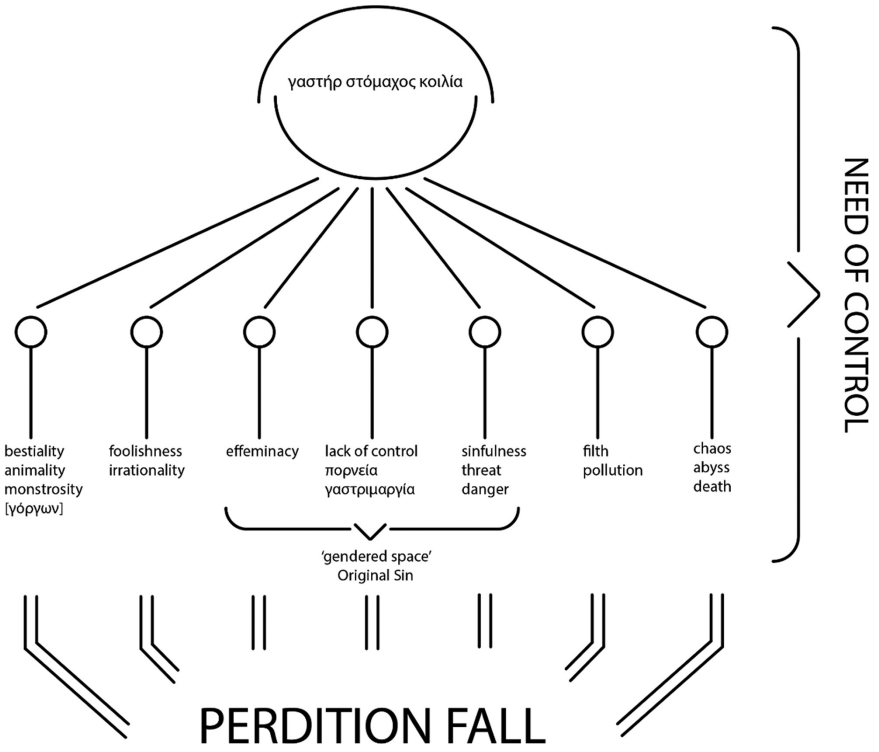

FIGURE 1.1 Visualization of the webs of meaning associated with the space of γαστήρ in the Greek tradition

γαστήρ stood not only for the belly as a digestive organ, but as an organ for sexual procreation. Further in the chapter John Klimax shows how belly-driven gluttony and fornication go hand in hand: the ever-insatiable demon within the belly can never be satisfied, even if it ate all of Egypt and drank up the river Nile, it would still fail to deafen its drive for fornication (πορνεία).[26]

Identification of the belly as a 'mistress' clearly alludes to the original sin, instigated by Eve and the insatiable belly of Adam. This interconnection can be seen in one of the illuminations included in the mss Vat. Gr. 394, which is an important witness to the text. On folio 74 r., gluttony is depicted as a classicizing figure of a richly clad woman, who wears a golden crown on her head and wields an apple in her left hand. She is portrayed while staring lasciviously at

26 John Klimax, *Ladder* 14 κζ′′. The image emphasizes the insatiability of the belly: the Nile was the biggest river which was known back that, while Egypt, due to its fertile delta, was associated with abundance of food.

the figures of the monks, who are being instructed by John Klimax about her dangers.[27] The apple, which she holds in her left hand, points to the sinister character of the belly/gluttony, while the crown underscores the fact that the urges of the belly are the 'ruling passions' and the springboard of every sin. Finally, the extravagant attire of the personification of γαστριμαργία casts it into the role of a biblical whore (πορνή), hence a seditious, precarious, sinful, and lascivious woman.[28] The link between γαστριμαργία, threat, and the original sin is rounded up by next illumination in the manuscript (fol. 78 r.). It portrays two scenes: in the first one we can see Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, who are standing near the apple tree, whereas in the second one they are being expelled from the Garden by an angel.

The entire chapter of the Ladder emphasizes the dire threats which are posed to humans by the belly. Human life seems to be infinite wavering between hunger and satiety, and John Klimax doubts that anyone could set themselves free of this cruel mistress.[29] He does not merely limit the urges of γαστήρ to the lowest and beastly appetites, but identifies the belly as the seat of purely demonic forces that bewitch the individual: indeed, it is Lucifer himself who settles in the stomach.[30] For this reason, it can never be tamed or coddled: it must be overwhelmed, pruned, and treated with the utmost violence and only thereby tamed.[31] At times, John Klimax pictures this struggle in openly military terms—those who struggle against their all-devouring bellies are like combatants (ἀγωνιστής).[32] The threat posed by the passions of one's belly never ceases, and the fight is constant: "Master your gut before it masters you", threatens John Klimax.[33] Within the framework of the *Ladder*, the belly is the ultimate source and the pinnacle of every conceivable sin.[34] The one who lives by it will never have a share in the divine kingdom,[35] the vices which stem

27 Martin 1954, 68–68; Maguire 2012, 112. In the second (left-hand side) section of the scene, she lays conquered by Klimax who is scaling up the divine ladder.

28 For the discussion of the social dangers of πορναί in the biblical tradition see Gaca 1999. Cf. John Klimax, *Ladder* 14 γ′: Κόρος βρωμάτων, πορνείας πατήρ.

29 John Klimax, *Ladder* 14.α′: Θαυμάζω γὰρ εἰ μήτις τάφον οἰκήσας, ἐγένετο ταύτης [scil. γαστρός] ἐλεύθερος.

30 Ibid. 14 λ′: Ἄρχων δαιμόνων, ὁ πεσὼν ἑωσφόρος· καὶ ἄρχων παθῶν ὁ λαιμὸς τῆς κολίας.

31 Ibid. 14 ιζ′; 14 ιη′; 14 κδ′; 14 κς′′.

32 Ibid. 14 ι′′.

33 Ibid. 14 ιζ′: Κράτει κοιλίας, πρὶν αὐτὴ σοῦ κρατήσει.

34 Ibid. 14 λδ′: "Let us ask this foe, or rather this supreme chief of our misfortunes, this door of passions, this fall of Adam, this ruin of Esau, this destruction of the Israelites, this laying naked of Noah's shame, this betrayer of Gomorrah, this reproach of Lot, this death of the sons of Eli […]" For Noah, drunkenness and shame see the section 3 of this article.

35 14 κθ′; 14 λβ′′.

from it defile one's soul and body with "impurities, dreams, and emissions",[36] and when it is not mastered, it leads to the unavoidable fall and perdition.

3 Case Study No. 2: The Gnawing Teeth of γαστήρ/ὕστερα and the Gorgon's Head

That γαστήρ, κοιλία, and στόμαχος are associated with a grave threat to the integrity of an individual in a treatise, which was primarily addressed to ascetic monks, should come as no surprise. Nevertheless, γαστήρ was perceived as a natural symbol associated with the sphere of danger, even in the non-literary folkloric tradition. This point might be well illustrated by the extremely popular Byzantine *hystera* amulets. These were thought to be magical pendants, which endowed its owners with protection against illnesses, especially uterine conditions. On their obverse side, they include various images of the *gorgoneion*, hence a female head with the heads of snakes encircling it.[37] The use of gorgon-related imagery becomes clearer if we take a look at the Byzantine redaction of *Physiologus*. A gorgon was believed to be a creature that resembled a beautiful harlot whose hair was composed of snakes, while her face looked like death itself.[38] Whenever the time of coitus came, the gorgon supposedly emitted frightful sounds and seduced whoever heard her. When anyone glimpsed her, they died immediately.[39]

The deceptive attractiveness and the deadly threat posed by gorgons makes it clear why their resemblance was carved in the prophylactic amulets. The amulets were supposed to ward off the dangers linked with the belly or the womb from its possessors.[40] Foskolou points out that the magical inscriptions which were carved on their reverse side mention, alongside ὕστερα, the belly (<γ>αστέρα) and the stomach (<σ>τόμαχος). Some of the inscriptions refer to the beastly gnawing of teeth and voraciousness of the belly.[41] These were 'performative' engravings: they were supposed to be read aloud and thereby repel the imminent threat related to the belly/womb.

36 14 κζ′: τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἐν μολυσμοῖς, καὶ φαντασίαις, καὶ ἐκκρίσεσι καταμιάνας.

37 For the discussion of the amulets see Spier 1993, Barb 1953, Foskolou 2014.

38 *Physiologus* 23.1–3: Ἔστι γὰρ ἡ γοργόνη μορφὴν ἔχουσα γυναικὸς [εὐμόρφου] πόρνης· αἱ δὲ τρίχες τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ὡσεὶ ὄφεις, τὸ δὲ εἶδος [τοῦ προσώπου] αὐτῆς θάνατος.

39 Ibid. 23.9–10.

40 Cf. the comely figure of the deadly gorgon with the personification of γαστριμαργία in Vat. gr. 394 discussed above.

41 Spier 1993, 46.

The identification of γαστήρ with the gorgon dates back to extremely early periods.[42] Barb noticed that, in the ancient Greek tradition, στόμαχος was thought to be the entering-mouth which led to the womb, while the Greek terms denoting the 'womb,' the 'heart' and the 'belly/stomach' were frequently confused.[43] In the *Lexicon* by Hesychius, such a linkage is overt: he glosses the term ὄδερος (Lat. *uterus*) with the noun γαστήρ.[44] Certainly, the amulets were connected to a widespread belief that the womb was an independent animal-like being which could travel throughout the body, wreak havoc on it, and cause serious illnesses.[45] For this reason, they include the above-mentioned inscriptions, which were supposed to tame the maddened γαστήρ. Furthermore, the conceptualization of γαστήρ as the beastly space of danger is underscored by the fact that, since time immemorial, the womb has been connected in the Greek tradition to the ultimate place of rebirth and death. It stood as a symbol of both the primeval chaos, from which everything sprang, and the hellish abyss. Interestingly enough, in Christian iconography its gulf was represented as the jaws of Leviathan, whose prototype was a dolphin, the womb-fish.[46]

4 Case Study no. 3: Die Like Arius!

It comes as no surprise that within the Greek tradition, the sphere of the belly (γαστήρ) and the bowels (κοιλία, ἔντερα) were associated with pollution and socially/religiously unwanted elements. This can be gleaned from the story of Judas' disembowelment preserved in the Acts of Apostles: the body of the traitor supposedly burst open and his intestines spilled out in an act of divine retribution for his hateful deed.[47] According to Josephus Flavius, a similarly horrid fate was shared by another enemy of Christianity, Herod. In his *Jewish War*, Flavius reports how Herod died from intestinal inflammation. Josephus

42 Barb 1953 notes that in almost every iconography the womb is associated with round objects: vessels, jars, or even the navel, hence the connection of the womb with a round face surrounded by the snakes. The connection of the gorgon and gluttony can be gleaned from Aristophanes *Peace* 810 and is preserved in *Suda* γ 392.

43 Griffiths & Barb 1959, 368 n.14.

44 Hesychius, *Lexicon* ο 74; Barb 1953, 222 n.106.

45 Foskolou 2014, 344.

46 Cf. the Greek term δελφύς, the close connection of δελφύς and δελφίς have been discussed by Barb 1953, 200.

47 Acts of the Apostles 1:18: "With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out". I am following the English version from *NIV*.

describes this horrid disease in minute detail: Herod's body started to decompose, he suffered from chronic pain in his colon, his abdomen was inflamed, his penis putrefied and produced worms.[48] He recovered for a short while only to devise a massacre of those Jews from the illustrious families who plotted against him and died shortly thereafter.[49]

The trope of the 'intestinal death' of heretics and tyrants continued into Byzantine times. A widely-known story recounted in Socrates of Constantinople's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is an excellent case in point here. Arius supposedly dissimulated during his confession of the Orthodox faith: he signed the declaration of 'true' faith whilst holding a small scroll with his own heretical opinions hidden under his armpit, then he took communion from Alexander, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Convinced that he had successfully fooled everyone, he paraded through the streets of the city, but once he reached the Forum of Constantine, he was caught by a strange sensation in his bowels and rushed to a place at the back of the forum, where his bowels burst open, spilling fountains of blood.[50]

I have argued above that the space of the belly enclosed everything that was thought to be socially and religiously threatening: uncontrolled appetites, ungodliness, defilement, and sinfulness. Hence, linking γαστήρ with heretics should come as no surprise at all: what has spilled out of Arius' body symbolized not only the social danger which his heterodox opinions posed but also epitomized what he was: socially rejected filth. Moreover, the meaning of the entire story, which later became an established motif in anti-heretical Byzantine literature (and beyond it), might be elucidated by what Douglas has labelled as a "rule of distance from the physiological origin". According to this rule, the more important a social occasion is, the more the organic processes have to be set outside it, since they defile it and divest it of any dignity.[51] Muehlberger has noticed that Arius' 'intestinal' death gained immense popularity and quickly became a trope of heresy, and many other heretics were reported to have died

48 Joseph Flavius, *Jewish War* 1.656–58.

49 For a discussion of other literary tropes of good and bad death, see Agapitos 1998 and 2004.

50 Socrates Scholasticus *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.38. The story and its immediate reception has been extensively analyzed by Muehlberger 2015. Idem 2015, 7 notes that Judas' disembowelment in the Acts was the prototype for the story of Arius "intestinal death".

51 Douglas 1996, XXXIII: "According to the rule of distance from physiological origin (or the purity rule) the more the social situation exerts pressure on persons involved in it, the more the social demand for conformity tends to be expressed by a demand for physical control. Bodily processes are more ignored and more firmly set outside the social discourse, the more the latter is important. A natural way of investing a social occasion with dignity is to hide organic processes".

like Arius.[52] In later centuries, the trope was used not only for the deaths of the apostates but also for tyrants, usurpers, and ungodly emperors. This point can be elucidated by an example of the ungodly jester Lampoudios from the tenth-century *Vita Euthymii*. He was hired to heap violent insults during the official banquet against the guileless patriarch Euthymios. His malicious words make everyone blush and the emperor himself throws him out of the court. Soon he pays for the irreverent tone towards the patriarch: he was striding through the city with his associates when they passed through the gate on which there was a chapel of St Athenogenes. At that moment, Lampoudios suddenly fell ill, and his intestines, dung, and blood gushed out of his body.[53] It is by no means an accident that Lampoudios is compared to Judas:[54] both of them received bribes for their hateful deeds and both died instantaneously when their innards burst out.[55]

A similar fate is shared by several literary characters in the later periods of Byzantine literature. In Michael Psellos' *Chronographia*, Emperor Romanos III Argyros is pictured vomiting out some thick dark-coloured liquid; Theodora dies after severe diarrhoea, which resulted in a complete evacuation of her intestines.[56] In a similar vein, in Niketas Choniates' *History,* the tyrant Andronikos dies after a long execution when some Latin soldiers burst his entrails (ἔγκατα) with their swords.[57] Likewise, in Nicholas Mesarites' narrative of the failed palace coup led by John Komnenos 'the Fat' (Παχύς), the would-be usurper gives life, once he is decapitated and his bowels gush forth, which were loosened by the imperial soldiers with a two-edged sword.[58]

52 Muehlberger 2015, 7–8 with reference to the relevant sources.

53 *Life of Euthymius*, 7.45.7–10.

54 Ibid. 7.45.4: ὁ δὲ παρέχει τούτῳ ὡς ἄλλῳ τινὶ Ιούδᾳ τριάκοντα ἀργύρια.

55 Ibid. 7.45.10–13. The author of the *vita* identifies Lampoudios' unjustified abuse as the direct cause of his bloody death.

56 On Romanos III Argyros' death: Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* III.26.35–38. On Theodora's death, Ibid. VI.222.4–7.

57 Niketas Choniates, *History* 350.47–351.51. As I argue elsewhere, Andronikos' tyrannical δημοβορία (people-eating) stems from the uncontrollable urges of his γαστήρ; Cf. Worman 2008, 29.

58 Mesarites Nicholas, *Narrative of the Coup* §28 46.21–24: εἷς οὖν τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἀμφικώπῳ σπάθῃ τὰς λαγόνας αὐτοῦ ἐξεκέντησε, καὶ βαρέως ὁ Ἰωάννης ἀνώμωξε χαμάζε πεσών, τῶν κρυφίων ἐκχυθέντων ἐγκάτων.

5 Case Study no. 4: The 'Non-Ascetic' Asceticism of the Drunken Monk Jacob

Let us return for a moment to the ascetic tradition, or rather to its subversion, namely the famous invective against the drunken monk Jacob composed by Michael Psellos.[59] It is an extremely interesting piece of literature which reveals several insights into the Byzantine conceptualization of the belly. Indeed, γαστήρ, στόμαχος and κοιλία stand as the leitmotifs of the entire piece: within the 160 verses of the canon, Psellos wittily shows that the only ἄσκησις which is practiced by Jacob comes down to constant emptying of the ἀσκοί of wine, which flows directly into the chasm of his insatiable gut. Douglas' rule of the distance from physiological origin can be thus applied to it as well: γαστήρ not only subverts the social role which was supposed to be played by the monk, it also shatters the traditional context of singing a religious canon.[60]

Throughout the canon-invective, Michael Psellos reveals how Jacob rejected the virtuous life of a monk and spends entire nights and days hard-drinking and glutting himself: he reduced himself to his insatiable gut and is consistently presented as such. Due to his incessant drinking, he is nothing more than an insatiable animal (ζῷον ἀκόρεστον, ἀκόρεστε). Instead of praying to God and exercising ascetic practices, which he openly despises,[61] he fills his insatiable gut to the very brim,[62] presses wine directly from the grapes into the *pithos* in his belly;[63] he even baptizes himself with litres of consumed wine.[64] Jacob seems to be nothing more than an enormous belly-wineskin which leaks with fountains of foul-tasting wine through its pores.[65] Indeed, nothing can satiate

59 Michael Psellos, *Poem* 21.

60 For an extended analysis of the subverted form of the poem, see my discussion in Labuk (forthcoming).

61 Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 5–8.

62 Ibid. 4: κοιλίαι πίθων πληρούμεναι.

63 Ibid. 11: καὶ σφίγγων [βότρυας] ἐν τῷ λάρυγγι ἀποθλίβει τὸν οἶνον.

64 Ibid. 110–18; 131–36. Of course, the very idea of baptism was to cleanse oneself from sin and sickness and to incorporate the baptized into the community of the Christians. The only thing that Jacob can do is to "baptize" himself in the bodily waste produced by his belly: he can never be cleansed and incorporated into the "divine" community. Jensen 2012, esp. 7–90.

65 Ibid. 45–50: Ὤφθης ἐν γῇ ἄμπελος, πάτερ, πολύκαρπος,|οἶνον στάζων πάντοθεν παχύτατον, | ἐκ τοῦ λαιμοῦ, ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν, | ἐκ τῆς κάτω θύρας, ἀπὸ παντός σου τοῦ σώματος | ἱδρῶτας γὰρ ἐκχέεις, ἀλλὰ μέθην βαρεῖαν | ὡς ἀσκὸς διαρρεύσας, Ἰάκωβε; also see 149–54. Again, it is a pun on a phonetic similarity between the nouns ἀσκός and ἄσκησις: the only ascetic practice known to Jacob is related to emptying up wineskins. More than that, Psellos alludes to

Jacob's raging gut;[66] neither the constantly emptied *pithoi* brimming with wine, nor the proverbial river of the Nile, nor even if he drank up the entire ocean of wine.[67] As Michael Psellos jokingly remarks, even God himself, who had filled the void, would not be able to fill the huge belly of Jacob: his gut accepts everything like a sewer (ὡς σωλήν).[68]

Almost every verse and strophe of the canon emphasizes the unbridled drunkenness driven by an enormous and insatiable γαστήρ of Jacob. Under the humorous surface of the invective, Michael Psellos hides much deeper sense and explores the web of meanings hidden behind the natural symbol of the belly. The striking and, at times, repulsive physicality of the poem works to distance Jacob maximally from the godly life of ascetic monks: having gulped down enormous volumes of wine, he lies naked on his bed, still drinking unceasingly, farting, and "baptizing" himself in his bodily discharges, which he subsequently "vomits" (ἀποβλύζει) through all the orifices of his body: through his throat, eyes, even his "back door" (ἐκ τῆς κάτω θύρας).[69] Moreover, he belches, burps, and "sends out howling winds".[70] Of course, such repulsive physiology is well-grounded within the aesthetics of the Greek/Byzantine tradition of invective. At the same time, it conveys a deeper symbolic meaning: in her study of pollution and taboo, Douglas noticed that the leaking body is always regarded as socially unclean, unwanted, or threatening.[71]

The unsocial and anti-religious character of Jacob, who lives only to satiate his raging gut, is moreover emphasized in the canon by moulding him as the opposite of several biblical figures. Unlike his biblical counterpart, Noah, the first man to get drunk, Jacob did not even bother to plant a vine-tree: he

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a widely-used biblical motif which likened the stomach to wineskin. For this see *Suda* α 4177, Psalm 118:83, 1 Corinthians 9:27; Eustathius, *Opera* 176.11–15 (discussed by Stone 2005, 39).

66 Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 87–88: στόμαχον οἱ πίθοι ἐκκενούμενοι οὐκ ἤμβλυναν.

67 Ibid. 55–56.

68 Ibid. 21–24: Ὁ πληρώσας ἀβύσσους δημιουργὸς κύριος | καὶ τὴν τῆς θαλάσσης κοιλίαν μεστώσας ὕδατος | σὴν οὐκ ἐπλήρωσε, πάτερ, πλατεῖαν γαστέρα· |ὡς σωλὴν γὰρ ἅπαντα κενοῖς δεχόμενος.

69 Ibid. 45–50. Also Ibid. 109–12: Δάκρυσι πλύνεις σου τὴν κλίνην |καὶ βαπτίσματι βαπτίζῃ καθ' ἡμέραν· |ἡ γαστήρ σου καὶ γὰρ τὸν οἶνον μὴ χωροῦσα | δι' ὀχετῶν τοῦ σώματος ἀποβλύζει τοῦτον, πάτερ. Similarly Ibid. 33–36: Ἀναπεσὼν ὕπτιος ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης σου | καὶ γυμνώσας στῆθος καὶ τὸν τράχηλον | καὶ τὸν μηρὸν ἄχρι τῆς αἰδοῦς | πίνεις ἀνενδότως, ἴσως καὶ πέρδεις, Ἰάκωβε. In medieval art nakedness was associated with both drunk Noah and Dionysios: Anagnostakis and Papamastorakis 2004.

70 Ibid. 73–74: πληρωθεὶς γὰρ μέθης βορβορυγμούς, ὀξυρεγμίας ὠργάς τε ἐκπέμπεις καὶ πνεύματα.

71 Douglas 1984.

limits himself to feeding on the work of others and drinks all day and night.[72] Similarly, Michael Psellos subversively introduces the Old Testament story of Jonah's swallowing by the sea monster and spending three days in its κοιλία (*Jon*. 2:2–9). Through his incessant filling of his voracious γαστήρ/κοιλία, Jacob proved himself to be a greater Jonah (μείζων Ἰωνᾶς): he spends his entire life in the belly of his *pithos* and, unlike Jonah, Jacob does not even want to be rescued by God from it.[73] Moreover, the roar (κραυγή) of Jonah's ardent prayers to God, which went up from the belly of the monster in the biblical story, is only a rumble which is emitted by the sickly γαστήρ of Jacob, destroyed by the seas of consumed wine. It thus stands as yet another sign of Jacob's ungodliness.[74]

Moreover, Jacob is cast as the direct opposite of a protagonist of yet another biblical tale associated with baptism and resurrection, namely the story of the three brothers who were cast into the fiery furnace in *Dan.* 3. Jacob seems to be another Azarias (ὡς ἄλλος Ἀζαρίας), but the likeness is merely superficial. While the biblical Azarias was delivered from the ungodly fire because of his unwavering belief in God, Jacob is burnt by the fiery furnace of his drunkenness, which he quenches by pouring more and more wine into his stomach.[75]

In the end, the real identity of the drunken Jacob is fully revealed: he seems better suited to being a bacchant who drinks and sings hymns to the pagan god Dionysos than to being a Christian monk.[76] Even more, the way he drinks

72 Ibid. 57–62. The first verse οὐ φυτεύσας ἀμπέλους is an overt allusion to the opening line of the famous scene of drunkenness of Noah in Genesis 9:20–23 (Καὶ ἤρξατο Νωε ἄνθρωπος γεωργὸς γῆς καὶ ἐφύτευσεν ἀμπελῶνα). Anagnostakis & Papamastorakis 2004, 233 remark that the verbs related to reclining (ἀναπεσών, ἀνάπαυσις) present in the poem have been traditionally associated with Noah: Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 33: Ἀναπεσὼν ὕπτιος ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης σου and Ibid. 64 οὐδὲ τῇ γαστρί σου ἀνάπαυσιν δέδωκας. At the same time, Psellos indicates that the gut-loving Jacob breaks the social rules according to which the monks were supposed work and cultivate the land to secure the provisions of comestibles for their monasteries.

73 Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 29–32.

74 Ibid. 69–72: Ἐκ κοιλίας κραυγή σου | ἤκουσταi, Ἰάκωβε, ἐν τῇ τοῦ πίθου γαστρί, | καὶ ὑπήκουσέ σου | ὁ τὸν οἶνον ἐκχέων σοι, πάντιμε· | πληρωθεὶς γὰρ μέθης / βορβορυγμούς, ὀξυρεγμίας | ὠρυγάς τε ἐκπέμπεις καὶ πνεύματα. On top of that, the story of Jonah's swallowing and his subsequent rescue was liked in Greek tradition with baptism and already in the *New Testament* (Matt. 12.39–40) it was believed to be a prefiguration of Christ's resurrection (Jensen 2012, 154).

75 Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 105–8. Just like the story of Jonah, the tale of the three brothers was believed to be a prefiguration of Christ's resurrection. Here again, Jacob, because of his ungodly, belly-driven life, is set as in opposition to his biblical counterpart. For other anti-religious and anti-monastic guises of Jacob, see also my discussion in Labuk (forthcoming).

76 Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 101–4.

unceasingly and the sheer volume of consumed wine evoke the feeling of ἔκπληξις in those who witness it. Already in the ancient tradition, ἔκπληξις signified a sensation of terror or awe which was believed to be created by the deadly gaze of a gorgon, a monster that epitomized all the deadly threats posed by the γαστήρ/στόμαχος/κοιλία.[77]

6 A Final Case Study: The Monstrous Body and the Disembowelment of a Usurper

Finally, I would like to discuss some of the aspects of a bulky body of texts related to the infamous failed coup led by John Komnenos, nicknamed the 'Fat' (Παχύς). They are of special relevance to the present discussion since all of them make use of the vast array of negative symbols and conceptualizations related to the space of the belly in the Byzantine tradition. Surely, the two speeches by Nikephoros Chrysoberges and Euthymios Tornikes, a narrative account by Nicholas Mesarites, along with a short excerpt from Niketas Choniates' *History* are the only texts from within the Byzantine tradition which use obesity and insatiable belly at such length.[78]

Interestingly enough, the belly is mentioned directly only in the speech by Tornikes: using a biblical quotation from *Phil.* 3:19, he identifies John with the enemies of Christianity, "whose god is their belly" (οὗ θεός κοιλία).[79] At the same time, however, all the sources related to the coup revolve around the threatening insatiability of the belly, its dire consequences, and the threats posed by those who live by it. John's morbid fatness is certainly the focal point of all the accounts. Hence Tornikes, for instance, constantly underscores the bulkiness, meatiness, and fleshiness of John's monstrous body (κρεωβαρής, πλατύσαρκός, βαρύκρεως, βαρύσαρκος, κοῦφος). Niketas Choniates emphasizes John's bulging gut (προκοίλιος, πιθώδης τὴν πλάσιν τοῦ σώματος) as well as his enormous body, which was stuffed with meat (κρεωβριθής). Similarly, Mesarites speaks of John as the one who was verily fat (τὸν ὄντως παχύν), he is described as a useless burden (ἀχθός τι ἐτώσιον), who was so heavy that he could not even walk by himself and had to be carried on a bed.[80] His body was so huge that

77 Ibid. 143–44. For ἔκπληξις and gorgon see van Eck 2016.

78 The only literary analysis of them was put forward by Kazhdan & Franklin (1984, 224–55). Also see Angold 2017, 31–42.

79 "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things".

80 Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the Coup* §8 25.10–18.

even the proverbially insatiable Hades would not be able to consume it in one go.[81]

Undoubtedly, there is a deeper logic in this obsessive focus on John's fat body. After all, John led the coup (or rather was a straw man behind it) against the ruling emperor, Alexios III Angelos.[82] In all the sources, the monstrously bulky body, which resulted from John's gluttony,[83] is used as an emblem of his sinfulness, anti-civic character, and utter uselessness. Of course, the connection between the fat John and Original Sin and evil is easily established by the authors through evoking the notion of sinful flesh (σάρξ): his body presented as a huge sack filled with flesh, even his mind seems to be fleshy (νοῦς σάρκινος).[84] Moreover, in Tornikes' speech and Mesarites' narrative, the sheer weight of John's fat body epitomizes his ungodly and un-kingly character. Tornikes humorously describes how the 'useless burden' of the usurper's body was pushed onto the imperial throne, which then crumbled to pieces,[85] while Mesarites, in a similarly joking tone, tells how a bunch of prostitutes and catamites that followed John wanted to see him "borne aloft despite being grossly fat", and to put the imperial crown on his foolish head.[86] Later in the text, Nicholas Mesarites shows how John drinks himself into a stupor while he is seated on the ground, which "symbolizes the unbearable weight of disaster".[87] Again, Euthymios Tornikes, referring to Aristotelian physics, perorates that such a heavy 'object' like John was bound to fall by its very nature.[88]

Furthermore, John's heaviness is not merely limited to his weight: in all accounts, he is presented as a dim-witted blockhead followed by a foolish rabble and not suited to wear the imperial crown.[89] His irrationality and insatiable appetites reveal themselves in numerous comparisons of John to wild

81 Ibid. §28 46.26–32.

82 For a discussion of the coup, see Angold 2015.

83 Alluded to by Tornikes, *Speech I* §12 67.7–8 by a biblical quotation: φάγων γὰρ ἐνεπλήσθη καὶ ἀπελάκτισεν, ἐπαχύνθη, ἐπλατύνθη καὶ τοῦ τρέφοντος αὐτὸν ἐπελάθετο καὶ ἀπέστη ἀπ' αὐτοῦ.

84 Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech I* §14 68.3. Cf. Michael Psellos, *Against Jacob* 25–28, 75–80. The notion of the 'fleshy' mind simply underscores John's sinful nature.

85 Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech I* §13:14–30.

86 Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the coup* §5 22.12–16.

87 Ibid. §28 45.10–18.

88 Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech I* §17 70.3–6. The inevitable fall of those who live by their insatiable bellies was a standard motif since the times of the Church Fathers. See for instance Nikolaos Kataskepenos, *Life of St Cyril Phileotes* 40.6.21–31; Eustathios, *Speech IX* 165.62–73.

89 Nicholas Mesarites, §2 20.1; §2 20.16–20; §11 28.33–37; § 28 21–22; Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech I* §14 68.2–4; §17 70.3–6; Niketas Choniates, *History* 526.46–47.

animals: Euthymios Tornikes sees in him a proverbial ape,[90] Nikephoros Chrysoberges perceives him, not coincidentally, as a savage beast (θήρ). Both Niketas Choniates and Euthymios Tornikes compare the monstrous corpse of the dead John to an enormous ox (βοῦς), an animal which was used in Byzantine literature as an emblem of foolishness, lack of education, and rusticity.[91] Tornikes adds that the corpse (πτῶμα) appeared as if it was pricked with a mattock and de-aired (οἷον οἱ ἐκ μακέλλης φύσωσιν), an image which not only emphasizes John's foolishness and boorishness, but also his ungodly character: in Ancient Greek literature μακέλλα was a weapon used by Zeus to kill the blasphemers.[92]

Surely, John's morbid fatness and his bulging gut made it easy to present him as an apostate and an enemy of Christianity.[93] It should not come as a surprise that the belly-living usurper is linked with the concept of social filth. Nicholas Mesarites openly connects John to social scum: in his narrative, he identifies John's followers as drunkards, catamites, male and female prostitutes, panderers, adulterers, pimps and gluttons, and all sorts of shady types.[94] Even more than that, Tornikes, Mesarites, and Choniates, just as was the case in Psellos' invective against Jacob, focus on the sickly bodily constitution of the belly-living John. While Euthymios Tornikes' limits himself to a short mention of John's heavy panting (τὰ πολλὰ ἀσθμαίνοντα),[95] Mesarites describes that the usurper looked as if he had already been half dead, breathed heavily and was perspiring so profusely that he constantly wiped the excess of sweat with a towel.[96] Niketas Choniates pushes the sickly imagery one step further: because of his morbid fatness John sweated so heavily that he had to continuously drink up the entire vessels of water, which he leaked through all the pores in his body and sprouted fountains of it "like a dolphin".[97] The function of the sickly body evokes once again the social conceptualization of the leaking σῶμα as something to be shunned and cast out of the borders of social order.

90 Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech 1* §12 67.5–6.
91 Bernard 2014, 266–80.
92 Euthymios Tornikes, *Speech 1* §15 68.23–24. *Suda* μ 67.
93 For instance, Euthymios Tornikes, *Oration 1* §12 66.19–20; §12 67.9–10; §13.25–30; Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the Coup* §6 23.
94 Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the Coup* §4 22.5–8; §7 23.33–24.6. Interestingly enough, already in the archaic iambic tradition fatness (παχεῖα) was associated with the lowest strata of society, especially the cheapest prostitutes, for which see *Suda* μ 1470.
95 Euthymios Tornikes, *Oration 1* §13 67.16.
96 Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the Coup* §28 45.15–18; §11 28.10–13.
97 Niketas Choniates, *History* 527.50–53. For the symbolism of dolphin see n.46.

Finally, the monster was killed by the imperial troops who easily disposed of the rebels: John is decapitated and, if we are to believe Mesarites, gutted and decapitated by one of the soldiers, while his enormous body is chopped up into pieces.[98] The decapitation itself is interesting for several reasons. Mesarites conveys an image of John's head having been loosely attached to his bulky body, even while he was still alive. This was yet another sign of his foolishness and total lack of capacity to rule anyone.[99] Tornikes (and Chrysoberges) explores this imagery further and casts John's body in the form of the proverbial Empedoclean monster,[100] which had deformed half-human half-animal limbs and roamed the world in its primeval state:

> Οὕτω γοῦν παντοίοις ξίφεσι μελιζόμενος, αὐτοῦ ποῦ κατέπεσεν ἐπὶ τοῦ δώματος τοῦ βασιλικοῦ, "τοῦ καὶ φθεγγομένοιο κάρη κονίῃσιν ἐμίχθη·" ἐν ἐκστάσει γὰρ ἡ τούτου κεφαλὴ διεκόπτετο καὶ πρὸς γὴν ἐφίπτετο καὶ πρὸς ᾅδου βάραθρον ἐσφαιρίζετο […]· καὶ ἦν ἰδεῖν κόρσην μὲν ἀναύχενα, αὐχένα δ' ἀκόρσωτον, ταῦτα δὴ τὰ ἐμπεδόκλεια τέρατα, κεφαλὴν οὐ μόνον εἰδεχθῆ τε καὶ μυσαρὰν ἀποστρέφειν τε τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ ταχὺ τὰ βλέφαρα μύειν τοὺς εἰς αὐτὴν ἀτενίζοντας ἀναπείθουσαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερὰν τοῖς ὑπαντιάζουσι καὶ οἵαν ἄντικρυς τὴν τῆς Γοργόνης μυθεύουσι, τὸν δέ γε λοιπὸν ὁλκὸν τοῦ σώματος, ἠύν τε μέγαν τε κείμενον, κατερραγμένον ἐπ' ἐδάφους ὡσεὶ πάχος, κατὰ τὸν ψαλμογράφον, τῆς γῆς, καὶ περὶ τὰς τῆς πόλεως διεξόδους προκείμενον "τοῖς πετεινοῖς εἰς κατάβρωμα".
>
> Dismembered in this way by all sorts and kinds of swords, and [in the place] where he fell in the chamber of the imperial palace "his head was mingled with the dust;" *with his own spear you pierced his head* (*Hab*. 3:14), and it flew to the ground, and it rolled towards the pit of Hades […]. One could see a neckless head, and a headless neck, those Empedoclean monsters, a head which was not only hateful to look at, but also [so] ugly so that it made the ones looking at it earnestly turn their look away and close their eyelids quickly. But those who chanced upon it, they straight away spoke of it as if it had been a gorgon's head, and the remaining "tail" of his body[101] was lying there, enormous and

98 Nicholas Mesarites, *Narrative of the Coup* § 28 46.20–32.

99 Ibid. §11 28.10–17.

100 Empedocles, *Fragments* B 57; B 61.

101 The Greek term ὁλκός literally signifies "that which is dragged" and it signified the body of a serpent.

> huge, torn in pieces *like the broken earth which has been ploughed* (*Ps* 140:7).[102]

The imagery of the passage is extremely dense, and the act of beheading is coloured with a quotation from Homer's *Iliad* and the Old Testament. All of them serve a similar purpose. John's monstrosity is further accentuated by the reference to the frightful sight of his severed head, which resembled not only the grotesque Empedoclean monster but also the dreadful gorgon. Indeed, Euthymios Tornikes, just like Michael Psellos, seems to be revolving around the notion of ἔκπληξις, which was traditionally linked to the feeling of awe incited by the appearance of gorgon's head. The remnant of John's body seems to have stirred the very same reaction: it was so sickening and fascinating at the very same time that no one could restrain themselves from viewing it. More than that, given the sheer popularity of the *hystera* amulets with the image of the *gorgoneion* inscribed on them, it is plausible that Tornikes alludes to this widely popular belief when describing the final fate of the fat John.

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One could easily conclude that the moral landscape, to use Sam Harris' words, of γαστήρ, bristles with traps, obstacles, and bottomless pits. It is extremely easy to fall into them and to fall prey to the insatiable and dangerously alluring savage beasts which are indigenous to this 'territory'. Of course, one cannot escape the needs of one's belly: while we cannot sustain our bodies without 'feeding' it, there exists an extremely thin line between necessity and luxury.

Here I have shown that the space of γαστήρ was morally problematized in the Greek tradition, both ancient and medieval. Γαστήρ seems to have been the focus of special concern since ancient times and the significance which was attached to it within the broad circle of Greek culture was not merely limited to a person. Quite the contrary: the individual γαστήρ, στόμαχος, or κοιλία and the pressing need to exert unceasing control over it were, in essence, social concerns. For this very reason, γαστήρ was relegated to the sphere of negativity and became used as a symbol associated with a threat. Since the time of archaic Greek poetry, the insatiable belly was linked with dangerous types who posed a threat to the social *status quo*. Within the masculinised setting of the Greek πόλις, γαστήρ was perceived as the seat of effeminizing and beastly urges

102 Euthymios Tornikes, *Oration 1* §15. 9–24, my translation. Cf. Niketas Choniates, *History* 527.68–71.

which had to be held in constant check. The Christian setting of Byzantine culture further developed these ideas: the belly started to be associated with Original Sin, ungodly living, and even Satan himself, as we have seen in John Klimax's *Ladder*. Some of the *hystera* amulets include the image of a saint who conquers the raging stomach.[103] In these ways, the web of symbolic meanings associated with the space of the belly was expanded, and γαστήρ began to be associated with heretics, tyrants, and other unwanted social types.

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