

“Gardens without Gardeners: (Un)narrating Agricultural Labor in the Medieval Greek Novel”

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ABSTRACT: Byzantine literature by and large reflects the experiences of the urban elite who comprised its patrons, authors, and audience. As a result, much of this cultural production elides the experiences of the agricultural workers whose labor in palatial pleasure gardens and vast rural farming estates supplied these aristocrats with much of their food, wealth, and leisure. In Eumathios Makrembolites’ twelfth-century *Hysmine and Hysminias*, for instance, the novel’s central aristocratic couple meet in a garden that is described in great detail, though the presence of the gardeners themselves goes unnarrated. This paper argues that contemporary critical theory drawn from Chicana Studies and African and African American Studies—which have long foregrounded the subjectivity of slaves, migrant laborers, and other marginalized agricultural workers—offers models for recuperating the lives and experiences of agricultural workers in Byzantium. These recuperative models, applied to other elements of the Byzantine archive (such as the court decisions recorded in the sixth-century *Novels of Justinian* and farm manuals such as the tenth-century *Geoponika*), demonstrate the physical, economic, and personal hardships endured by agricultural workers, and can thus offer a corrective to a scholarly tradition that has too often reflected the bias of its sources in this erasure.

THE ERASURE OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS operates as silent praxis in Byzantine studies. In this respect, Antony Littlewood’s description of who appears (and does not) in his “Gardens of the Byzantine World” is representative of a scholarly tradition that elides such workers:

Most of Byzantine literature was written by and for an élite, an élite not only of social class but also of sex and age. In consequence almost no mention has been made of women, for whom we are reduced to making assumptions and watching their imaginary activities in the gardens of erotic romances. For the elderly, apart from noting the nostalgia of Chrysoloras, we are again left at the mercy of admittedly fairly safe speculation. Finally, not one word has been written in this survey of those who surely spent much of their free time in gardens, that is children, but of them something, however trivial, can be said.¹

Although Littlewood points to the question of “social class,” even mentioning that such literature was written by and for the elite, he notes that there is “almost no mention [...] of women,” nor “the elderly,” and, “finally, not one word has been written in this survey of those who spent much of their free time in gardens, that is, children.”² While sensitive to various kinds of marginalized or unnarrated groups, the hermeneutic paradigm remains the garden as a place of beauty and leisure, and thus the gardeners themselves—for whom these were spaces of labor not leisure—is not an operative perspective.

Linda Farrar’s *Gardens and Gardeners of the Ancient World: History, Myth, and Archaeology* demonstrates much the same silence regarding fieldwork. As she puts it:

The history of gardens embraces many aspects of former ancient societies. We see how gardens related to houses and other buildings, how they were used for leisure and as status symbols. It highlights the skills needed by gardeners for landscaping and installing water features, and the use of a gradually increasing range of plants available. [...] The myths and literature of each period gives a valuable insight into the way people in the past thought and used their gardens. We understand how people enjoyed the fresh air and plants growing in their gardens, how they used art and architecture to enhance garden spaces.³

The focus again is on the upper-class experience of gardens: “leisure,” “status,” “enjoy[ment] of fresh air.” While it may “embrace many aspects of former societies,” the laboring underclass is not one of them; this is the garden from the perspective of the owners, not the workers. This is also the perspective of Costas Constantinides, whose “Byzantine Gardens and Horticulture in the Late Byzantine Period, 1204–1453: The Secular Sources” describes how, despite a decrease in Byzantine territorial integrity and military power, “there were individuals of considerable culture and wealth who could [...] appreciate pleasure gardens and ensure their continued existence, however precarious, in the big cities.”⁴ For Constantinides, moreover, “there is no evidence to suggest that the legislation concerning the everyday life of those working farms and gardens had changed in the late Byzantine period, and it seems the ‘Farmer’s Law’ (of possibly seventh-century origin) continued to provide legal solutions to their problems.”⁵ Even so, these solutions

¹ Antony Littlewood, “Gardens of the Byzantine World,” in *Byzantine Gardens and Beyond*, ed. Helena Bodin and Ragnar Hedlund (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Publications, 2013), 112.

² *Ibid.*

³ Linda Farrar, *Gardens and Gardeners of the Ancient World: History, Myth, and Archaeology* (Oxford: Windgather Press, 2016), xiii.

⁴ Costas Constantinides, “Byzantine Gardens and Horticulture in the Late Byzantine Period, 1204–1453: The Secular Sources,” in *Byzantine Garden Culture*, ed. Antony Littlewood, Henry Maguire, and Joachim Wolschke-Bulman (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

were designed to benefit the owners of the farms, not their workers. In this, Ingela Nilsson is perhaps right to note that the garden “became a place of imperial importance: a mirror of the heavenly paradise over which the emperor could reign,” insofar as he ruled over them, but wrong to note that he could “also turn it into a creation of his own,” since he himself would be providing none of the creative labor.⁶

The absence and presence of agricultural laborers in Byzantine literature is more than a matter of historical interest. It is also a matter of aesthetics and representation. It is a matter of literature presenting certain kinds of human encounters with nature and omitting others. Enslaved laborers or laborers for hire appear more rarely in Byzantine literature than do plantation owners, and when they do it is often only to the extent that their lives intersect with the higher-class protagonists around whom such narratives revolve. The erasure of labor from both the archive and the scholarly tradition is not unique to Byzantine literature; it is ingrained in imperial, feudal, and capitalist rhetorical structures, written under economic systems that privilege variously elite patronage or bourgeois purchasing power. Byzantinists, therefore, can learn much from other disciplines with a longer tradition of wrestling with the narration (or, as often, the un-narration) of laborers. In a study of contemporary farm worker art in California, for example, Curtis Marez likens how US mass media marginalizes agricultural workers to the early modern painting technique of anamorphosis, “a visual trick in which artists include a distorted image in a painting that can only be recognized when the viewer adopts an oblique perspective.”⁷ His analysis of Ester Hernández’s screen-printed poster *Sun Mad* (1983), which reimagines the iconic woman on Sun-Maid raisin boxes as a skeleton, demonstrates how farmworker visual art “probes the blind spots in corporate imagery and promotes oblique farm worker vantage points on social reality that effectively ‘annihilate’ privileged agribusiness perspectives.”⁸ Though the politics and economics of contemporary agribusiness differ from those present in the pre-industrial Byzantine Empire, contemporary theories of agricultural worker representation can help recuperate the experiences of these unnarrated peoples by modeling the “oblique perspective” that prioritizes workers over owners, labor over leisure. In particular, it models the way in which a foregrounding of contemporary workers’ experiences and voices might serve as the foundation for a recuperation of agricultural workers’ experiences in Byzantium.

Perhaps by coincidence, a consideration of the Sun-Maid opens Sarah Wald’s analysis of Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*,⁹ a novel about a family of Mexican-American migrant field workers in the rich agricultural land of California’s Central Valley. The novel’s thirteen-year-old protagonist, Estrella, reflects on the difference between the reality of her work picking grapes and the image she sees on the box. She contrasts the grace and ease with which the smiling Sun-Maid, in her spotless white shirt and perfectly folded red bow, holds her grape basket with her own clumsiness, dirtiness, and the physical pain caused by the repetitive work. As Wald reads it, “Estrella recognizes the labor that the Sun Maid raisin box erases is not only that of farmworkers, but also the work of the earth itself,” and that “Viramontes’s novel contests

⁶ Ingela Nilsson, “Nature Controlled by Artistry: The Poetics of the Literary Garden in Byzantium,” in *Byzantine Gardens and Beyond*, ed. Helena Bodin and Ragnar Hedlund (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Publications, 2013), 18.

⁷ Curtis Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 1995).

the erasure of both human and ecosystem labor.”¹⁰ Wald connects this to the American ideal of “Jeffersonian agrarianism” that “continues to cast its shadow over contemporary US agricultural literature, a literature that has often centered and celebrated the farmer while rendering the farmworker invisible.”¹¹ Byzantium and the United States both emerged as self-proclaimed heirs to the Roman Empire, and elites in both states, though separated by so much time and space, have systematically worked to erase the foundational work of field laborers — especially enslaved laborers — from their literatures and histories.

AGRICULTURAL WORKER ERASURE IN THE BYZANTINE ARCHIVE

One can understand the erasure of the experiences and conditions of agricultural labor in Byzantine Studies in part as a replication of the biases inherent in the Byzantine archive itself. Anthony Bryer, for instance, argues that “in the absence of a work ethic, Byzantines had an approach to manual labor. It was to avoid it. The mark of all classes but the peasantry was that they did not soil their hands.”¹² In the twelfth-century novel *Hysmine and Hysminias* by the otherwise unknown Eumathios Makrembolites, for instance, the protagonist, a young aristocrat named Hysminias, arrives as an honored herald at the house of Sosthenes, a wealthy inhabitant of the fictional town of Aulikomis. Sosthenes takes him to his garden: “Seeing this,” Hysminias narrates, “I thought I beheld Alkinoös’s garden and felt that I could not take as fiction the Elysian plain so solemnly described by the poets.”¹³ Hysminias’s reference to the famous garden of the *Odyssey* serves as a multilayered metafiction in which Hysminias, a fictional first-person narrator, claims to be so astounded by the sight of a garden that he becomes convinced that Elysium, a mythical afterlife paradise, must in fact be real. For Hysminias, as for the reader, the boundary between reality and fiction becomes a bit blurry: characters perceive actual gardens through literary frames, and these frames in turn shape the interpretation of the actual. Literary and actual gardens are, in other words, both composed as much of fantasy and imagination — of perception — as of soil, seeds, stems, and stones. What the wealthy young aristocrat sees when he enters the garden of another aristocrat is what literature and life have taught him to see: a place of beauty and luxury. As importantly, literature and life have rendered other elements of the garden invisible, principally the presence of the gardeners who, in the actual world, toiled under exceedingly difficult circumstances so that aristocrats could find beauty and respite in them.

The erasure of garden labor is a result of the cultural context in which *Hysmine and Hysminias* and other twelfth-century works were produced. *Hysmine and Hysminias* is one of the four “Komnenian novels,” works of imaginative fiction drawn from the tradition of the ancient Greek novel and performed orally in the Byzantine *theatron*.¹⁴ The *theatron* was not a physical space, but rather a cultural institution in twelfth-century Constantinople, “a circle of learned

¹⁰ Sarah D. Wald, “Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers: Locating Immigrant Labor in Food Studies,” *Food, Culture & Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 14, no. 4 (December 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Anthony Bryer, “Byzantine Agricultural Implements: The Evidence of Medieval Illustrations of Hesiod’s ‘Works and Days,’” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 81 (1986): 45.

¹³ Eumathios Makrembolites, “Hysmine and Hysminias,” in *Four Byzantine Novels*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 179, 1.4.3.

¹⁴ The novels are collected in English, Bryan Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989). For a scholarly overview of the works, see Tim Whitmarsh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

men who gathered around a patron, patroness or host either to listen to letters or texts that the latter had received, selected, or written, or to perform their own contributions.¹⁵ The imperial and elite aristocratic audience of the *theatron* would likely have included some of those who held vast estates in the countryside like the one Hysminias visits. The allusion to Alknoös is also significant, marking the writer and his audience as members of the educated elite for whom the Homeric epics were central school texts and markers of cultural capital in the rhetorical games of twelfth-century literature.

It is in the context of novels as elite leisure entertainment that Hysminias, upon entering the garden again the next day, says, "The garden was the abode of all good things, a dwelling place for the gods, and was all charm and pleasure, a delight to the eyes, comfort to the heart, consolation to the soul, repose for the limbs and rest for the body."¹⁶ As a place in which aristocrats like Hysminias find sensual delight and physical relaxation, the garden shares much with the garden of Alkinoös to which Hysminias had alluded. In Book 7 of the *Odyssey*, Homer describes how, in that garden, "The fruit of these never perishes nor fails in winter or summer, but last throughout the year."¹⁷ Both Sosthenes's garden and Alkinoös's garden share an almost supernatural beauty.

The garden of Alkinoös, however, is not the only garden in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus sees the garden, but he still asks the queen to grant him "speedy conveyance, that I may come to my native land, and quickly; for it is a long time that I have been suffering woes far from my people."¹⁸ When Odysseus finally arrives home, he goes to find his father. Unlike Alkinoös, who lives in a vast palace of silver and gold and whose fruit is always in bloom, Odysseus finds his father, Laertes, in much more humble circumstances. He is "alone in the well-ordered vineyard, digging about a plant; and he was clothed in a dirty tunic, patched and wretched, and about his shins he had bound stitched greaves of oxhide to guard against the scratches, and he wore gloves upon his hands because of the thorns, and on his head a goatskin cap."¹⁹ Odysseus finds his father dressed like an ordinary gardener, in the kind of worn-out clothes that gardeners wear.

It is physical labor that separates the garden of Alkinoös from the garden of Laertes, and it is also such labor that inverts the expected utopia/dystopia binary at the heart of the poem. Phaiakia should be a utopia, since everything there is made of precious metals and there is no need for labor; however, it is a dystopia for Odysseus and his father, since human labor is for them precisely what constitutes utopia. Laertes, skeptical that the man before him is his son, asks him to prove his identity. The proof that Odysseus offers reveals a small detail about his upbringing that has significant implications for his actions throughout the epic: "And come, I will tell you

¹⁵ Niels Gaul, "Performative Reading in the Late Byzantine *Theatron*," in *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. Teresa Shawcross and Ida Toth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 215. Emmanuel Bourbouhakis notes that "the term is too widely invoked in the literature to support any single definition," though his own definition more or less agrees with Gaul and others: the *theatron* "referred to any occasion, usually informal and non-ceremonial, at which texts might be read aloud or, in keeping with the dramatic label of the venue, performed by a select and usually appreciative audience, which could include peers and potential patrons." Emmanuel Bourbouhakis, "The End of ἐπίδειξις. Authorial Identity and Authorial Intention in Michael Chōniatēs' πρὸς τοὺς αἰτιωμένους τὸ ἀφιλένδεικτον," in *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature: Modes, Functions, and Identities*, ed. Aglae Pizzone (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 209n18.

¹⁶ Makrembolites, "Hysmine and Hysminias," 185; 2.1.1.

¹⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, 2 vols., trans. A. T. Murray and George E. Dimock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 255; 7.113–19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257; 7.151–52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 429; 24.226–31.

also the trees which you once gave me in our well-ordered garden, and I, who was the only child, was following you through the garden, and asking you for this and that. It was through these very trees that we passed, and you named them and told me of each one.”²⁰ Odysseus and his father find meaning in garden labor; they had done the work themselves, and it had been a bonding experience for them. Odysseus values labor, and this is reflected in the honorable treatment he offers the various fieldhands who appear in the text. Odysseus is a master of disguise, and he clearly understands that Alkinoös’s garden, like all of Phaiakian society, is a shiny façade hiding a hollow shell. It is a society entirely committed to leisure and not to labor. Odysseus’s encounter with his father in their garden in Ithaka demonstrates that the value of a garden resides as much in the labor required to cultivate it as in the repose it offers, and that work and rest are both heroic traits.

In referencing the garden of Alkinoös as he does, Hysminias reveals that he has misunderstood the critique at the heart of Odysseus’s rejection of Phaiakia; the *Odyssey* reveals leisure gardens as a divine dystopia. When he compares Sosthenes’s garden to that of Alkinoös, he sees it through a lens of leisure and repose. Unlike Alkinoös’s garden, however, Sosthenes’s garden is neither magical nor divine. It requires human labor; however, the gardeners do not appear in the narrative. Hysminias’s garden as a locus of physical repose thus depends on the work of silent, invisible characters whose lives and labor go unnarrated. The garden is a place of repose for aristocrats such as the novel’s protagonist, its author, and its implied audience, but it is a place of exhausting physical labor for others.

The narrative omission of the labor that goes into Sosthenes’s garden is evident from the remainder of Hysminias’s description. The first thing he notices is that “a well had been dug about four cubits deep, circular in form.”²¹ Hysminias narrates the creation of the well with a passive verb (*ῥωρήθη*), syntactically keeping the focus on the physical structure and omitting the work of digging and the diggers themselves (e.g., workers had dug a well). In the center of the well was a column topped with “Thessalian marble,” and the well was ringed with elaborate sculptures and was “decorated with marble from Chios, coming from Lakonia.”²² From this, other worker narratives disappear as well: the quarrymen who cut the marble, the dockworkers who loaded it onto the ships, the sailors who transported it from the islands to Aulikomis, and many more besides.

The guests then sit down to an elaborate feast during which the courtship of the central couple is recounted down to the smallest detail; at one point, for example, Hysminias’s friend Kratisthenes tells him “with a gesture” to remain silent, “pressing his foot” on that of Hysminias.²³ The labor that goes into the banquet, meanwhile, appears only in passing: “three female attendants conducted us to our chamber. [...] One of the servants brought water from the well, another brought in a silver bowl on her shoulders, and the third brought linen white as snow.”²⁴ Hysminias is focused on Hysmine, and the household staff appear in the narrative as they appear to him, as undifferentiated and insignificant presences only worth mentioning when their actions bear directly upon his experience. To him, all of their labor is of the same importance as a single tap on the foot from his friend.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 437; 24.336–39.

²¹ Makrembolites, “Hysmine and Hysminias,” 179; 1.5.1.

²² *Ibid.*, 180; 1.6.7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 182; 1.2.3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 183; 1.12.1.

A similar erasure of labor occurs in another Komnenian novel, Niketas Eugenianos's *Drosilla and Charikles*. Separated from his beloved Drosilla and confined to a slave prison by the Parthians, Charikles tells his fellow prisoner Kleandros about his home, how it had a garden in which "trees that were always blooming as if in spring," an evocation of the garden of Alkinoös.²⁵ From this garden flows a river called Mellirhoe; however, Charikles adds, "most of the cowherds call / the sweet Mellirhoe Threpsagrotis."²⁶ The river's two names are significant. "Mellirhoe" ("honey-flowing") is the name that aristocrats like Charikles use, while the cowherds refer to it as "Thespagrotis" ("nurturer of farmers"). The latter suggests that the trees were in fact not always in bloom; rather, farmers and other workers tended to them. As even the aristocratic Charikles admits, "every shepherd, every farmer / whose lands are within its streams is fortunate" to have such a fertile area to work.²⁷

At the center of the garden is a beautiful golden plane tree where Charikles and his friends go to feast and relax. He recounts how he listened to "erotic speeches / and to even more delightful songs,"²⁸ and he fully reproduces two love songs by the talented singer Barbition.²⁹ Across the garden "was Drosilla with the girls dancing around her."³⁰ Like *Hysmine and Hysminias*, *Drosilla and Charikles* also demonstrates the central duality of the Byzantine literary garden. On one hand, there are the aristocrats, who find in the garden a place of repose and sensory delight, and whose lives, experiences, and emotions are narrated at great length. On the other hand, there are the garden laborers, who appear as almost ghostly presences haunting the margins of these texts, and who find in the garden a place of demanding physical labor.

RECUPERATING AGRICULTURAL WORKERS' LIVES

One should not assume that the absence of farm laborers and gardeners in the literature of the Constantinopolitan elite is somehow representative of Byzantium itself. Byzantine texts in other genres, for instance, reveal the presence of a large and variegated class of agricultural workers. The *Novels of Justinian*, a collection of sixth-century CE legal documents, contain numerous rulings that testify to the existence of agricultural workers. Many indicate the difficult position of these laborers, particularly their ambiguous state between freedom and slavery. One case, for instance, addresses the legal status of "children born to mothers of free legal status but fathered by registered or tied agricultural workers (*coloni adscripticii*)," whose position was more akin to that of a slave.³¹ Another decrees that in the case of an even number of children, one shall be free with the mother, the other enslaved to the owner; in cases of odd numbers of children, the extra

²⁵ Niketas Eugenianos, "Drosilla and Charikles," in *Four Byzantine Novels*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 375, 3.66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 376; 3.71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 376; 3.79–80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 377; 3.128–29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 382; 3.263–88 and 297–322.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 384; 3.338.

³¹ Peter Sarris, ed., and David Miller, trans., *The Novels of Justinian: A Complete Annotated English Translation*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 437; case 54. More detailed analysis of the different categories of farm and garden laborers can be found in Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jairus Banaji, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Peter Sarris, "Large Estates and the Peasantry in Byzantium c. 600–1100," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 90 (2012): 429–50.

would be free.³² A subsequent ruling seeks to rectify a particularly thorny “offense, unworthy of our times, that is being committed in Mesopotamia”:

It had become normal among them for people from different estate properties to contract marriages with each other; but what is happening now is that owners are trying to break up marriages already made, or to drag the children born to them away from their parents. As a result, the whole population of agricultural workers in these regions is suffering from the forcible separation of husbands from wives and the abstraction of offspring from those who have brought them into the world.³³

To solve this problem, Justinian bans marriage between people from different estates, with the punishment being the seizure of the estate itself. Hysminias does not see the gardeners; Makrembolites’s Constantinopolitan audience in the *theatron* would perhaps not have wanted to be reminded of the human cost of their wealth—that is, people indentured or enslaved, families separated.

If the two previous cases address problems from the Byzantine periphery, a third case concerns the role of “market gardeners” (κηπουργοί) in Constantinople. The city had large swathes of agricultural land within its walls, much of it in the hands of the “aristocratic owners of neighboring villas.”³⁴ These aristocrats rented out their land on a temporary basis, a fact that distinguishes their agricultural workers from the permanent class of serfs mentioned above. Tenants received payment based on how much they improved the value of the land, and so the ruling seeks to end the practice of tenants inflating the valuations of the land after their lease. In restricting these allegedly inflated valuations, the landowners, supported now by the law, were able to extract more labor for less money. Though these three cases differ in significant ways, they touch upon the central elements of the lives of agricultural workers: a profound lack of personal and economic freedom.

The presence of agricultural laborers appears again in the tenth-century CE *Geoponika*, a Byzantine collection of ancient and medieval texts that instruct landowners on how to run their farms most effectively.³⁵ In a section titled, “Boys are best suited to agriculture. Select workers for their physical suitability to the work, and choose separately those adapted to each work,” that is adapted from the *Rerum rusticarum* of Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), the author of the *Geoponika* alludes to the physical harshness of farm labor. He argues that certain boys “are bred up to labor, obedient, and keenly responsive to whatever arises. They can easily bend down to pull out dog’s-tooth grass or to remove vine leaves.”³⁶ The ploughman, by contrast, “has to bear down on the plough-handle strongly and with the whole ploughshare.”³⁷ For their part, “those who work the vineyard need not be so tall, but four-square; one of that build will not be stooping down to tend the vines; being at ground level he will work without tiring.”³⁸ As the author makes clear, agricultural labor is highly taxing, and only those physically suited to it will succeed.

³² Sarris and Miller, *Novels*, 983; case 156.

³³ *Ibid.*, 985; case 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 479n2; case 64.

³⁵ Andrew Dalby, trans., *Geoponika: Farm Work* (London: Prospect, 2011).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69; 2.2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69; 2.2

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The *Geoponika* elsewhere cites the work of the fourth-century CE Roman writer Florentinus in a section titled, "Health of farmers." It begins with a clear statement that "it is a good idea to station a doctor at the farm."³⁹ As the bluntness of the sentence suggests, agricultural workers were subject to numerous forms of illness and injury. For instance, the text suggests that "since the hot sun injures the bodies and veins of those who work in the sun and are unable to bear the burning, it is necessary to control their food."⁴⁰ Later, the author discusses how to protect oneself from the bites of "venomous creatures" such as "adders, widow spiders, poisonous snakes and rats also scorpions."⁴¹ Elsewhere, a cryptic entry titled, "To harm the gardener," suggests (in its entirety) that the plantation owner should "dissolve goose droppings in brine and sprinkle over the vegetables," presumably to prevent the workers ("gardeners") from eating the produce themselves, since they would not have been able to wash this concoction off.⁴² The *Novels of Justinian* point indirectly to the broader social, political, economic, and legal status of agricultural workers. The *Geoponika*, by contrast, reveals the smaller-scale difficulties of the labor itself: sunburns, insect bites, minimal food and potentially dirty water, the different physical demands of pulling produce out of the ground and off a vine or tree, driving cattle and ploughing.

The *Novels of Justinian* and the *Geoponika* speak in a matter-of-fact tone of legal documents and instruction manuals. The financial, physical, and emotional toll of agricultural work on the workers themselves is never considered. One can find glimpses of the hardship of agricultural workers' lives, however, in the Byzantine archive. Perhaps the most compelling example is John Chrysostom's homily on Matthew 18:23 ("Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants"). Excoriating the injustice and sins of the world, John goes on to single out aristocratic landowners. Speaking of those who own agricultural land and "reap the wealth that springs from the earth," he claims:

And what can be more unjust than these? For if anyone were to examine how they treat their wretched and toil-worn laborers, he will see them to be more cruel than savages. For upon them that are pining with hunger, and toiling throughout all their life, they both impose constant and intolerable payments, and lay on them laborious burdens, and like asses or mules, or rather like stones, do they treat their bodies, allowing them not so much as to draw breath a little, and when the earth yields, and when it does not yield, they alike wear them out, and grant them no indulgence. And what can be more pitiable than this, when after having labored throughout the whole winter, and being consumed with frost and rain, and watchings, they go away with their hands empty, yea moreover in debt, and fearing and dreading more that this famine and shipwreck, the torments of the overlookers, and their dragging them about, and their demands, and their imprisonments, and the services from which no entreaty can deliver them!⁴³

Though explicitly a rebuke of the owners of large agricultural estates, John's condemnation of these aristocrats is organized around the exploitation of agricultural workers, the "wretched and toil-born laborers" who are treated so badly that their employers or slavers are "more cruel than savages." These workers "are pining with hunger," they are worked like "asses or mules," they are

³⁹ Ibid., 99; 2.47.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 100; 2.47.

⁴² Ibid., 251; 12.11.

⁴³ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 377–78.

constantly exhausted, for there is no time even “to draw breath a little;” they labor throughout the year, including the “the whole winter, and being consumed with frost and rain.” And, for all this, they come away with no money.

The Komnenian novels were not the only aristocratic genre that centered rich landowners and marginalized agricultural workers. The *Life of Saint Philaretos* (702–792 CE), written by his grandson Niketas, paints an equally grim picture of work conditions for farm and garden laborers. Before he became a holy man, Philaretos was a rich one:

He was very rich [farmer] and had many livestock: six hundred head of cattle, one hundred yoke of oxen, eight hundred mares in the pastures, eighty saddle horses and mules, twelve thousand sheep and he had forty-eight estates abounding his land, all separate, very beautiful and of great value, for in front of each one of them there was a well gushing forth from a hill-top, capable of watering everything that needed water from it in abundance. And he had many slaves and very great possessions.⁴⁴

Like Sosthenes, Philaretos was a wealthy landowner with many estates and many slaves who worked on them. Also like Sosthenes, Philaretos was a man of great hospitality and charity: “When a beggar came to him asking for something, whatever it was, he first gladly offered him what he wanted from his table in satiety and then gave him what he was looking for.”⁴⁵ This charity, of course, did not extend to the people he enslaved to produce his wealth.

Niketas claims in the *Life* that God and the devil chose to test Philaretos because of the latter’s great wealth and charity. They effectively turn Philaretos into a kind of Job figure by taking away his wealth: “[through] the cattle-lifting of the Ishmaelites and numerous other methods, the devil managed to drive him to utter poverty so that he was left with no more than one yoke of oxen and one horse and one ass and one cow with its calf and one slave and one slave-girl.”⁴⁶ In this, too, the *Life of St. Philaretos* mirrors the plot of *Hysmine and Hysminias*, since the central characters of the latter likewise find themselves in misery—enslaved and then captured by roaming marauders. Perhaps more importantly, the *Life* shares with *Hysmine and Hysminias* a world in which enslaved people drive the economic system in which the characters operate, even if their lives do not rise above the threshold of narratability.

The *Life of St. Philaretos*, it bears mentioning, does not ignore the physically demanding labor that went into sustaining the large agricultural and slaveholding estates of the period. Having lost all his wealth, Philaretos is forced to go into the fields himself, “ploughing and thanking God that he had been counted worthy of observing God’s first penalty clause: ‘With difficulty and sweat shall you eat your bread.’”⁴⁷ This Biblical quotation underscores Niketas’s recognition that agricultural work is exceptionally difficult; however, it is only Philaretos whose physical labor earns moral or spiritual credit. Niketas does not consider Philaretos’s field workers—enslaved or otherwise—to be holy for performing the same hard labor to earn their living. He in fact never mentions them again. The remainder of the *Life* focuses on how Philaretos embraces poverty

⁴⁴ Niketas. *The Life of St. Philaretos the Merciful, Written by His Grandson Niketas*, ed. and trans. Lennart Rydén (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Publications, 2002), 61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

and achieves sainthood through charity, but there is no mention of the people whom the saint had once legally owned.

PAST FARMWORKER FUTURES

In "The Life and Times of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty," an account of the recuperated lives of the first enslaved African Americans to be photographed, Gregg Hecimovich describes a tour of the plantation on which they were enslaved given to US Rep. Daniel Webster on May 13, 1847. "Probably mimicking the focus of his guide," Hecimovich writes, "Webster says very little about the enslaved workers that he witnessed. Instead his notations consistently emphasize soil, planting, and profits, not the experiences of the enslaved."⁴⁸ For Webster, "it was as if plow and hoe moved independently," Hecimovich writes, noting the frequent use of the passive voice in Webster's diary: "land is kept clear of weeds by the plough."⁴⁹ From this, Hecimovich concludes that "it is far easier to trace Webster's experiences among white enslavers than it is to pick through the fragments and scraps of slave inventories."⁵⁰ In Ethnic Studies generally, and Chicana Studies and African and African American Studies more specifically, literary scholars, historians, and artists have worked to recuperate and amplify the voices of marginalized workers, particularly migrant workers, enslaved workers, incarcerated workers, and others whose humanity the modern Daniel Websters repeatedly fail to acknowledge. This scholarly commitment is built on the ethical foundations of the historical and ongoing exploitation of race-based and immigration-based labor conditions in the United States; contemporary scholarly practice on ancient and medieval forced labor, however, projects these ideological blinders into the past.

The situation for Byzantine farmworkers is quite different, and barring a miraculous discovery, the experience of the Byzantine Dolores Huerta will never be known. This does not mean, of course, that the experience of Byzantine field workers cannot be recuperated to some degree, as the examples from the *Novels of Justinian*, the *Geoponika*, and other sources prove. Indeed, reading from the margins reveals the presence of enslaved laborers even in the aristocratic tradition of the literature of the *theatron*. By the end of his stay in Aulikomis, Hysminias is deeply enamored of Hysmine. He renounces his home and swears he will stay there forever. His friend Kratisthenes, however, cautions him: "But that famed Odysseus was not a herald but a slave, a stranger, and had gone astray; he judged the smoke of his homeland to be more precious not only than liberty but even divinity itself."⁵¹ Though Kratisthenes is speaking specifically about amorous bondage, his statement foreshadows the remainder of the story. Pirates capture Hysminias during a sea voyage and sell him to a nobleman. Reduced to the status of domestic slave, Hysminias's narrative changes perspective. Put simply, he now describes all the domestic slave labor—and its effect on him—that had remained unnarrated in the first part of the story. His owners mock him, and he is forced to stand "in attendance in servile fashion" while fighting back tears.⁵² They also compel him to sacrifice any desire "lest [he] learn chastity the hard way

⁴⁸ Gregg Hecimovich, "The Life and Times of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty," *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, ed. Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis (Cambridge, MA: Aperture and Peabody Museum Press, 2020), 72.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Makrembolites, "Hysmine and Hysminias," 199; 3.9.7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 240; 8.12.1.

and find the master's hand a teacher."⁵³ Makrembolites now foregrounds the sufferings of slaves, since the aristocratic protagonist is experiencing them. For the first time, too, Hysminias narrates the presence of other slaves, since he is among them: "I made for the servants' quarters with my band of fellow slaves and took my place with the slaves and dined with them and eventually fell asleep."⁵⁴ Once Hysminias is liberated, the reader learns no more of the experiences or fate of these slaves. The novel concludes with Hysminias and Hysmine's wedding, at which, one imagines, enslaved hands work tirelessly to facilitate aristocratic enjoyment. A

⁵³ Ibid., 242; 8.14.4. The passage and its context have been discussed as a rare instance of the narration of the interiority of enslaved people in Byzantium in Adam Goldwyn, *Witness Literature in Byzantium: Narrating Slaves, Prisoners, and Refugees* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 222–26.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 255–56; 10.9.2.