The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher (henceforth BSP) reached the Greek-reading audiences on the easternmost Byzantine frontier at a time when this part of the empire was almost entirely dominated by political instability and military conflict. A witness to a lively literary exchange in the last decades of the 11th century, and a remarkable piece of prose fiction in its own right, the BSP found its way into the Byzantine canon of didactic literature in a translation from Syriac. Rich in overtones of fantasy and exoticism, literary material on Syntipas belongs to the long tradition of Persian and Arabic storytelling. Its uninterrupted, if meandering, transmission generated ever more elaborate storylines and captivating reading-content of a kind that the modern scholarship tends to describe as ‘eastern’. As a sort of compass marker, however, the term ‘eastern’ may lead to confusion, in a manner that is best illustrated by the fact that the so-called Eastern Group of the BSP includes some traditions that began in the medieval West. Any vagueness here is perhaps best circumvented in discussions of the origin and diffusion of Syntipas-Story by using linguistic...
determiners such as Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Hebrew, and Catalan.³ By contrast, the modern misnomers ‘prose fiction’ and ‘novel’ that have been freely applied to the BSP without bearing any direct relation to categories within ancient and medieval literary poetics, seem unhelpful.⁴ With the proviso that any choice of critical terminology in what follows will necessarily be arbitrary, and that it will be used in purely descriptive sense, this essay recognizes the gradual dissemination of the BSP across diverse storytelling traditions in ‘the shared library of the Middle Ages’,⁵ while focusing on one stage of its enduring history. It examines the Byzantine setting in which this narrative was adapted for a new, Greek-reading audience, and which in turn secured its further promulgation within, and outside, the Greek linguistic medium. The BSP allows a great deal of scope for the study of cultural continuity and change, particularly from the 11th-century perspective; it offers illuminating insights into distinct dynamics between patrons, authors, and readers, and into the motives that inspired them to introduce foreign models and styles in their own literary idiom; finally, it casts considerable light on the role of translation in the context of a culture that was not openly responsive to influences from outside, even when individual examples of interaction confirm their impact to have been both significant and meaningful.⁶

³ In what follows, the two medieval Greek translations of the BSP are also referred to as Byzantine under the understanding that they were generated and promulgated within the Byzantine cultural and literary sphere.

⁴ Stories of love and adventure, fictional biographies, historicizing accounts, sometimes in epistolary forms, utopian and fantastic travelogues, and apocryphal and hagiographical texts featuring fantastic and miraculous episodes all have been variously classified as ‘novels’, ‘romances’ and ‘prose fiction’. Most recently the modern scholarship has shifted towards relating literary processes within the text to particular, clearly delineated, cultural and historical context. Secondary literature on this subject is vast; the current debate, while still remaining inconclusive, has departed from quests for origins, generic definitions and diachronic development towards a more synthetic exploration of the patterns, modes, stances, and discourses of imagination and fictionality across, and between, literary cultures. The editors of the present volume reflect this shift by their choice of the overarching theme of fictional storytelling: Cupane/Krönung, “Introduction” in this volume, pp. 1–16. See also, e.g., Whitmarsh-Thomson, (eds.), The Romance between Greece and the East, pp. 1–19; Roilos (ed.), Medieval Greek Storytelling.

⁵ Cupane/Krönung, “Introduction”, p. 4.