



Ethnography After Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature (Empire and After)

By Anthony Kaldellis

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Although Greek and Roman authors wrote ethnographic texts describing foreign cultures, ethnography seems to disappear from Byzantine literature after the seventh century C.E.—a perplexing exception for a culture so strongly self-identified with the Roman empire. Yet the Byzantines, geographically located at the heart of the upheavals that led from the ancient to the modern world, had abundant and sophisticated knowledge of the cultures with which they struggled and bargained. *Ethnography After Antiquity* examines both the instances and omissions of Byzantine ethnography, exploring the political and religious motivations for writing (or not writing) about other peoples.

Through the ethnographies embedded in classical histories, military manuals, Constantine VII's *De administrando imperio*, and religious literature, Anthony Kaldellis shows Byzantine authors using accounts of foreign cultures as vehicles to critique their own state or to demonstrate Romano-Christian superiority over Islam. He comes to the startling conclusion that the Byzantines did not view cultural differences through a purely theological prism: their Roman identity, rather than their orthodoxy, was the vital distinction from cultures they considered heretic and barbarian. Filling in the previously unexplained gap between antiquity and the resurgence of ethnography in the late Byzantine period, *Ethnography After Antiquity* offers new perspective on how Byzantium positioned itself with and against the dramatically shifting world.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Kaldellis has written a considered, very readable book that is bound to stimulate intellectual debate."—Teresa Shawcross, *English Historical Review*

"It is a joy to read a book where the logic of the argument is so clear and so solidly based on the sources. Anthony Kaldellis argues for a new approach to Byzantine identity and self-definition, one that accepts Byzantines' own account of themselves as Romans surrounded by barbarians. The book is a must-read not only for Byzantinists but also for those involved in broader conversations about identity in late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period."—Tia Kolbaba, Rutgers University

About the Author

Anthony Kaldellis is Professor of Classics at the Ohio State University. He is the author of *Procopius of Caesarea*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press.

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Preface

This book is a study of ethnography as a literary practice in Byzantium; that is, it focuses on accounts of foreign peoples the Byzantines themselves wrote. It is not a study of the population of Byzantium according to the methodologies of modern ethnography, something that would be impossible to do given the nature of the evidence. In ancient texts that the Byzantines inherited and studied, ethnography formed a relatively coherent genre (or subgenre), though its emphases and goals varied by author. Its standard topics, to quote a recent book on Roman views of India, included: "mythic or historical origins, populousness, somatic features, warfare, clothing, conditions of living (including eating and accommodation), social structure and political organization, religious practice, gender relations and marriage," and of course geography. Hellenistic and Roman authors wrote ethnographies devoted to specific foreign nations (e.g., Hekataios' *Aigyptiaka*, Megasthenes' *Indika*, and Tacitus' *Germania*), indicating that it was perceived as a potentially separate genre. Even when embedded in other types of literature, it still retained a more or less fixed form. Occasionally I will use the term *ethnology* to denote not a literary passage written in the tradition of ancient ethnography but a general view of a foreign people that shaped the way they were represented textually.

In most extant ancient and Byzantine literature, ethnography is an auxiliary genre, being a "guest" subgenre in epic, imperial panegyric, and especially historiography. In antiquity the *Odyssey* could be regarded as the first account of different peoples and places, but the usual point of reference was the *Histories* of Herodotos. In its supporting roles, one could even call ethnography a symbiotic subgenre, in that it retained its own identity while simultaneously supporting the goals of its host genres, whether those were histories, military manuals, or imperial orations. Its inflection in each case was shaped by the goals and circumstances of its host. There were even parodies of ethnographic discourse, for example, Virgil's account of the bees (in book 4 of his *Georgics*) and Lucian's *True History*. To discuss ethnography as a genre, then, does not require a

strict blueprint, nor do we need an ancient (or Aristotelian) definition of the genre in order to speak about it ourselves. A number of ancient genres were not theorized in antiquity. We will find late ancient texts that were devoted primarily to the description of foreign peoples, and the author of the *Notitiae Urbis Constantinopolitanae* (ca. 400) mentions texts on "the customs of foreign peoples" as distinct from geography. But most extant ethnographic texts, as we will see, were auxiliary.

The goal of my discussion will not be to interrogate the facts contained in these texts to ascertain how much of their information the modern historian can use. That has usually been done for most of them, albeit on an individual basis. My approach will rather be a literary and comparative one, that is, it will analyze the politics of each representation in relation to its context, considering the specific goals of the text in question and comparing different representations of the same foreign people across contexts. In scholarship on classical texts, ethnography has long been studied as a system of representation that speaks to the analytical categories and political goals of the author rather than the "realia" of the subject matter. It is my purpose to extend this type of analysis to Byzantine material. This does not mean that the literary study of ethnographic texts does not have serious historical implications, for ethnographic representation cuts to the heart of how the Byzantines viewed themselves in relation to other peoples, and their views on these matters turn out to have been alternately firm and flexible in surprising ways. In fact, a study of ethnography can cause us to revise our notions of just who the Byzantines themselves were, or thought they were, in relation to the wider world they inhabited.

The focus of this study is on literature of the middle and later Byzantine periods. After discussing the historians of late antiquity, who provided powerful models to their successors for the writing of ethnography, I turn to the problem of the relative decline of ethnography in the middle period, between the Arab conquests of the seventh century and the colonization of the Aegean by western powers in the thirteenth. That period witnessed great historical transformations. The rise of the Arabs, Slavs, Bulgars, Hungarians, Scandinavians, Turks, and others changed the political, cultural, and ethnic map of what remained of the ancient world. The Byzantines were at the heart of these transformations, in the middle of that map, fighting for their own survival, steering events as best they could in their own interest, conducting diplomacy and waging war against many new enemies. Byzantine ambassadors and spies traveled everywhere, from Spain to the steppes and to Baghdad, collecting information for use by Constantinople. There can be no doubt that they had abundant information and sometimes even a global perspective on these geopolitical and ethnic changes. Also, Byzantine writers had direct access to ancient texts that provided models for talking about such historical developments. The Byzantines imitated this tradition with great success when writing the history of their own society, the Orthodox Roman empire governed from Constantinople.

The Byzantines of the middle period thus had the knowledge and means to continue the ancient ethnographic tradition and tell us much about the Arabs, Slavs, Bulgarians, Pechenegs, and others they knew so well. And yet they did not do so. They knew more than they tell us. The question then is, why do middle Byzantine texts avoid following in the footsteps of their ancient models in this regard? Their authors learned to imitate those models in virtually every other respect, so why not in this one? This is an inquiry into a literary problem, and more precisely about a comparative silence in the record, a difficult sort of thing to explain. But their silence does not require us to be silent too. Sherlock Holmes once solved a murder from the fact that a dog did *not* bark. Silences may hold the key to crucial issues in the study of culture; on their basis it is even possible to argue that "in the end, cultural differences are irreducible." Ultimately, the question concerns the Byzantines' underlying mentalities, what we might even call their ideologies, the parts of the world they avoided putting into words to sustain their view of that world and their place in it. It is often in the things that we do not tell ourselves, the things that we "know" and take for granted, that our limitations, anxieties, and values can be found.

I do not mean to imply that there is simply no ethnography in Byzantine literature; there is exactly enough to

fill a volume of the size you hold. The genre actually was revived in the later Byzantine period, and I devote a long chapter to its various manifestations in the Palaiologan period. The problem I have drawn attention to is the perceptible drop in density in the middle period compared to late antiquity. Byzantine ethnography has never before been made the object of systematic study, and only a few scholars have noted the problem that I have defined, usually in vague terms and without positing explanations. This is the first book to examine this subject.

I note in conclusion the striking paucity of representations of foreigners in Byzantine art, especially that of the middle period. There are almost none. It was difficult to locate an appropriate image for the cover of this book. From late antiquity we have sculpted images of barbarians being defeated in battle (e.g., on the arch of Galerius in Thessalonike) or bearing tribute to the emperor (e.g., on the Theodosian Obelisk Base and the Barberini Ivory), but all we can do for the middle and late Byzantine period is to identify foreign "elements" incorporated into icons or manuscript depictions of saints or Old Testament figures. Some such images did once exist, however. In 1200, Nikolaos Mesarites described a palace in Constantinople that was built in the Persian style and that featured ceiling images of "Persians in their various costumes." This is now sadly lost. All we are left with in this case too is a text.

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