

## REVIEW

## ETHNOGRAPHY IN BYZANTINE LITERATURE

Anthony Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. Empire and After Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. x + 277. \$75.00/£49.00. ISBN 978-0-8122-4531-8.

As undergraduates reading Herodotus in the late 1980s, we were taught that the elaborate ethnographic profiles in the *Histories* were a hallmark of Greek antiquity's proto-scientific inquisitiveness. The Greeks, we all knew back then, were the first to seek answers about what lay beyond the cramped frontiers of their local identity, anthropologists *avant la lettre*. Later, as graduate students in Classics, we would learn to be wary of such 'whiggish' interpretations of Greek ethnography. Post-colonial theory under the banner of Edward Said's 'Orientalism' had by then been repurposed to deconstructing ancient ethnography as instrumental to the creation of a menacing 'other', a discourse intended to legitimate conquest and colonisation. It has since become all but axiomatic for many that identity is bound up with an often hostile alterity. The differences among the various (sometimes politicised) approaches to ethnography notwithstanding, we have come to regard Greek and Roman antiquity's view of 'the barbarian' as integral to its history.

What then if we look approximately a thousand years after Herodotus and ask, with Anthony Kaldellis, what became of ethnography 'after antiquity'? Given all that the vibrant scholarship on ancient ethnography has taught us about the centrality of 'the barbarian' to both Greek and Roman identity and imperial ideology, how do we account for the decline of ethnography during the Middle Ages, specifically the 'Roman' or Byzantine Middle Ages? As an imperial society occupying vast territories beset by, then lost to, various foreign invaders—from the Arabs in the seventh century to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the fifteenth—Byzantium would seem an ideal candidate for exploring ethnography's evolving contribution to notions of alterity and identity, imperial ideology and the menace of the 'barbarian'. For this reason, I think, the first reaction elicited by Anthony Kaldellis' incisively argued book may be some incredulous headscratching that no one had thought to tackle so obviously important a subject till now.

Byzantium, certainly, did not lack for a 'them' to contrast to an 'us'. On the contrary, an imperial state claiming sovereignty over territories abutting

various peoples—some, like the Arabs, longtime neighbours; others, like the Turks, arriving from distant lands—had more than enough cause to delineate its boundaries, physical as well as notional. The Byzantines, moreover, did not lack for the means, i.e., the models, for writing ethnography. As stewards of the ancient Greek literary legacy, Byzantine historians had before them enough examples of ancient ethnography. Besides Herodotus, Photius' ninth-century inventory of Greek prose, the *Bibliotheca*, included Arrian's *Parthica* and *Bithyniaca*, Ktesias' *Persica* along with his *History of India*, and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (a text whose potential ethnographic reception by the Byzantines is often overlooked). To this one might add Stephanus of Byzantium's *Ethnica*, the late antique lexicon of foreign places and peoples abridged and copied by Byzantine scribes and mined by scholars like Eustathios of Thessalonike in order to gloss his twelfth-century commentaries on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. All the more puzzling then that a literary culture as beholden to the idea of *μίμησις*, the injunction to maintain literary standards by discerning imitation of the classics, should have passed over a genre with so much ideological and rhetorical potential as ethnography.

But how do we explain the scarcity and meagreness of Byzantine ethnography, asks Anthony Kaldellis in this tightly construed study which had its origin in a series of lectures at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Why would an empire pressed on all sides by a constantly renewable roster of 'barbarians'—Goths, Vandals, Arabs, Avars, Rus', Bulgarians, Serbs, Normans, Seljuks, and Ottomans—not reprise on any significant scale a genre as seemingly apt to its predicament as ancient ethnography, inquiring after the customs, dress, religion, history and peculiarities of those it confronted and eventually accommodated? If they did not, Kaldellis assures us, it was not for want of knowledge about contemporary foreign peoples and their way of life. Behind the literary 'Veil of Silence', as Kaldellis characterises it, the Byzantines were no less adept than the Greeks and Romans before them at gathering information about their neighbours. Spies, embassies, religious missions, wars and trade furnished them with all that would have been necessary to write more detailed profiles of foreign lands and peoples. Kaldellis gives examples throughout of the many selective and incidental details about barbarians in diplomatic and military handbooks, as well as numerous asides in Byzantine literature more broadly. All of which lead to the conclusion that a good deal of what was known about foreign

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this book based on the EHESS lectures appeared in French as *Le discours ethnographique à Byzance: continuité et rupture*, translated by Ch. Messis and P. Odorico (Paris, 2013).

peoples was deliberately or reflexively elided in Byzantine literature, or perhaps involuntarily suppressed.

Arguing from relative silence, of course, poses its own challenges. Byzantine ethnography, Kaldellis notes, may resemble the famed dog that did not bark. Like a good detective, he attempts to deduce from the lacunae about Byzantium's neighbours what ideological and cultural factors may have stifled ethnography. If we listen for what the Byzantines did not say, Kaldellis observes, we may gain insight into 'the parts of the world they avoided putting into words in order to sustain their view of that world and their place in it' (ix). The world they avoided, of course, was one in which rivals like the Arabs and Avars could pose an 'existential threat', as we have come to call it, while the world they tried to sustain, in writing at least, was the providentially guaranteed Roman order. But to understand why ethnography was not marshalled to the causes of Byzantine imperialism and identity, Kaldellis argues, we must realign our perspective by looking to precedents in Late, rather than Classical, Antiquity. While the ancient examples epitomised by Herodotus remain for us the touchstone of Greek ethnography, it was the historiography of Late Antiquity which shaped expectations concerning foreign peoples in Byzantine literature. By then, however, ethnography had steadily lost its purchase on the historical imagination. It was not taken up by late antique historians for various reasons, chief among them perhaps, that historiography itself was undergoing changes in the post-Constantinian era. Since it is not Kaldellis' writ here to survey ethnography in Late Antiquity broadly, he illustrates his point about the state of Greek ethnographic writing before the Arab invasions primarily with discussions of Procopius and, to a lesser extent, Priscus and Agathias. Despite the prolonged engagements with Persians, Vandals, and Goths, Kaldellis observes, we find no sustained ethnographic profiles in any of these historians, not even one as 'classicising' as Procopius. Instead we find mostly glosses or occasional brief asides intended to help the reader situate himself in the immediate narrative context of wars in remote theatres like North Africa and central Italy. When abbreviated ethnographic excurses do appear in historians such as Priscus or Procopius, Kaldellis makes the case that these serve the subversive purpose of thinly veiled political dissent. Criticism of the established order, he maintains, has been prudently projected onto barbarian societies in order to insulate the historian from personal risk. In Kaldellis' reading, Procopius' portrait of the Vandals turns out to be a 'covert ethnography of the Roman elite ... designed to explain why they too acquiesced in the rule of the quasi-Persian despot Justinian' (p. 21). This is not a novel interpretation of ethnography in general, of course. Ancient ethnography's putative 'Orientalism' and chauvinism have long competed with interpretations which see instead a coded or displaced internal critique. Throughout the book Kaldellis ex-

presses sympathy for the latter view, even as he admits that few Byzantine references to ‘barbarians’ allow for the sort of ambiguous portrait of the enemy as one finds in Tacitus’ *Germania*.

The fact remains, however, that few, if any, of Byzantium’s rivals are ever granted any redeeming qualities in medieval Greek literature. And while I would agree with Kaldellis that in many instances ethnography should be read as an ‘intimate indicator of a society’s willingness to engage in self-criticism’, I demur from his more sweeping conclusion that late Roman historiography shows no signs of ‘an elitist and chauvinistic projection of Roman imperial values’. Barbarians could be invested with whatever ethnographic characteristics were required by the political parables of later Roman historians because the actual social or political organisation of foreign peoples was not deemed worthy of consideration *per se*. Kaldellis himself concedes as much when he notes that later Roman and Byzantine historians often had to resort to fictions about barbarian societies in order to achieve their literary or ideological goal. This may not amount to regarding foreign nations as akin to animals in a political fable, but it does presume a necessary primitiveness—the ancient equivalent of the ‘noble savage’—necessary to stir Roman audiences from their complacency about their own society. It should be remembered, after all, that Procopius served an imperial apparatus which did not doubt its prerogative to rule over non-Romans.<sup>2</sup> And yet, Kaldellis reminds us, Procopius and his audience were perhaps not without genuine curiosity as well about foreign lands. A later supplement to the *Wars* included information about the peoples living around the Black Sea, a region with a long history of providing Greek and Roman literature with memorable tales of exotic figures and customs. Might this classicising addendum have been a final effort by Procopius at shoring up his credentials as a historian in the Herodotean (not to say a Hecataean) mould?

Why then did Byzantine historians after the seventh century make even less room for ethnography than Procopius had made in the sixth? According to Kaldellis, the answer proceeds from a ‘fundamental rupture’ separating medieval from both ancient and late antique Greek historiography. After the loss of so much once vital territory to the Muslim Arab invaders, Byzantine historical writing was subject to new ideological anxieties. Even as the remaining empire eventually recovered in the ninth and tenth centuries, its historians turned to historical genres like the chronicle and imperial biography which did not oblige them to account for the failures of the Byzantine

<sup>2</sup> The notable exception to this, of course, was Roman rule of Greece, which the Romans themselves had to accommodate to an otherwise chauvinist imperial ideology. Horace’s culturally self-deprecating *Graecia capta* was one way to defend Rome’s presumption; Cicero’s contemptuous *Graeculi* was another.

state. This was the beginning of an ‘inward’ turn from which Byzantine historiography would emerge only when ‘New Rome’ had been irrecoverably lost and a reckoning with the world beyond its borders was inescapable. With Byzantine historians, Kaldellis observes, we are no longer on the world stage of Procopius’ *Wars* but in the intramural and immoral confines of the *Secret History*. Preoccupied by a kind of ‘Constantinopolitan introversion’, Byzantine historiography had no need for the perspective afforded by ethnography.

In Kaldellis’ striking formulation, the succession of epic losses from the seventh to the twelfth century transformed Byzantine historians into ‘analysts of defeat’, a phrase sure to make frequent appearances in future discussions of medieval Greek historiography. The result, argues Kaldellis, was a kind of inverse or ‘internal ethnography’ of the Byzantine ruling class. Suffering insecurity and self-consciousness about their society, the Byzantines occasionally exhibit concern with how they are seen by others, the Latins especially. Thus in a somewhat ironic turn, Nicetas Choniates’ withering profile of the self-indulgence and cavalier governance by Byzantium’s ruling élites is channelled by Latin knights who express contempt for such emasculating customs as the Byzantine aristocracy’s devotion to literary pursuits. For the most part, however, Byzantine literary culture was too self-regarding to take note of non-Roman customs. As evidence for this inward turn Kaldellis offers short résumés of the various middle Byzantine historical works, noting how each excludes ‘foreign relations’ and would therefore not have been served by ethnographic material. But having conceded that ethnography often aimed less at satisfying a genuine interest in foreigners and rather more at prompting reflection about the political culture at home, Kaldellis is all too quick, I think, to dismiss the possibility that a panegyric history like Anna Komnena’s *Alexiad*, or Michael Psellos’ palace pageant, the *Chronographia*, might have found uses for ethnography consonant with their historiographic aims. Ethnography, after all, was no less subject to rhetorical manipulation than any other historical trope.

Further along in the book, Kaldellis responds to suggestions that ethnography’s decline ‘after antiquity’ may have been due to an oecumenical Christianity which subordinated all non-religious differences. To the question, is it possible that Orthodoxy pre-empted ethnography in some cases by privileging religious ties with recent converts such as the Bulgarians, Rus’, or Serbs, in the spirit of St. Paul’s injunction in 1 Corinthians 12 that ‘we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body’, Kaldellis replies no. The Christianisation of Roman society, he argues, was predicated on an inverse corollary which saw Christianity become an extension of Roman social and cultural values. Roman chauvinism was in no way tempered by religion. Instead,

Christianity gave Roman identity ‘a new religious valence’. Byzantine authors, Kaldellis is quick to point out, do not pull their punches when disparaging fellow Orthodox barbarians, nor do they feel any compunction about going to war with them, or in enslaving them. On the rare occasion when they invoked an Orthodox solidarity with otherwise ‘barbarian’ Christians, as in diplomatic missives to Bulgarian or Serb princes, it was for reasons of political expediency. Most often because their otherwise uncivilised Orthodox ‘brothers in Christ’ had the upper hand.<sup>3</sup> Barbarians, regardless of religion, remained barbarians in Byzantine eyes. So even when Byzantine Christian literature, like hagiography, ventured beyond the empire’s borders, it rarely exhibited any interest in the non-religious differences with foreigners. A ‘hagiographic romance’ like *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, whose text had migrated across Asia through Georgian translations to Constantinople in the tenth century, was not expected to say much about the people of India, where its story is set.

Kaldellis segues easily from this conclusion to a dismantling of what is left of Dimitri Obolensky’s specious thesis about a ‘Byzantine Commonwealth’ extending over lands bearing the liturgical and cultural legacy of Orthodoxy. That Byzantium may have bequeathed a religious *cum* ideological identity to Slavic nations does not mean it sought for itself the role of religion-based hegemon. Obolensky and other Byzantinists, Kaldellis argues, assumed that Orthodoxy was the paramount feature of collective identity in Byzantium, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Reprising an argument he has made at greater length elsewhere, Kaldellis insists on Byzantium’s view of itself as a political entity, a *politeia* or ‘republic’ even, whose self-defining characteristic was the rule of law.<sup>4</sup> By virtue of living in politically ‘uncivil’ societies, this meant that Byzantium’s coreligionists could be deemed barbaric. So much did political identity eclipse religious affiliation, Kaldellis points out, following an observation of Ihor Ševčenko’s about religious missions to the Slavs, that Byzantine sources barely register the conversion of the Slavic nations. Cyril and Methodius were missionary heroes of the Slavs; they hardly received any notice back in Constantinople. There was little interest in the conversion of foreign peoples, except in occasional panegyrics praising the emperor’s apostolic mission. But long after they had converted to Christianity, most non-Romans continued to be described as

<sup>3</sup> As the diplomatic correspondence of Nicholas Mystikos to the Emir of Crete demonstrates, if the circumstances warranted, entreaties even to non-Christian rulers could appeal to a shared humane sensibility and vague godliness which transcended ‘the barrier between creeds’ (τὸ τοῦ σεβασματός ... διατέλιχσμα); cf. Nicholas Mystikos, *PG* III, col. 37A.

<sup>4</sup> *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2011) 42–82.

unremittingly inferior. Kaldellis broaches an important subject here from a perspective which deserves greater attention, namely, the incommensurateness of religious and non-religious life in the Middle Ages. Byzantinists have often expressed themselves as though we understand well the place of religion in the self-perception of Byzantine society. Kaldellis invites us to reconsider the coordinates of Byzantine identity, with religion as one, though not necessarily the most important pole.

Still, if the watershed event for fully developed ancient Greek ethnography was the Persian invasions, why did the Arab-Muslim conquests of Romano-Byzantine territory not prompt more systematic inquiry into the enemy's identity? Kaldellis' answer, boiled down, is that whereas the former resulted in a Greek victory (or at least a stand-off), Byzantium's catastrophic losses to Islam and the Arabs could not be squared with a providential ideology of manifest destiny vouchsafed to the Christian Roman empire. The result was an 'ideological blockage'. Byzantine historians were not equipped mentally to grant historical legitimacy to the Arabs as genuine political rivals. Instead they persisted in depicting them as faceless instruments of divine punishment. The only historiographical genre which took systematic note of Arab internal developments, the early Byzantine chronicle, had no need of sustained, self-conscious reflection on differences between peoples and their respective polities. It merely coordinated events within a divinely regulated economy of historical time reassuringly stretching back to creation. Kaldellis' argument about late Roman and Byzantine historians' near congenital inability to address the reality of an emerging Arab-Muslim state is undoubtedly persuasive. But the ideological scheme he invokes, in which Providence underwrites politics, reintroduces religion as the lynchpin of the Byzantine world view. While I agree with his effort to bring Byzantine political identity out of the shadow of Christianity, it seems to me that politics and religion in Byzantium had become embedded in one another, to such a point where they could, at times, become indistinguishable.

In the final part of the book, Kaldellis offers some tentative explanations for the re-emergence of ethnography amid the perceptibly inexorable decline of the Palaiologan period, up to and including the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. He surveys the succession of thirteenth and fourteenth-century 'Skythian' portraits projected onto the Mongols, whose recent and dramatic arrival in the fourteenth century prompted unusual interest on the part of Byzantine authors. Indeed, three of the best known intellectuals of the time, George Pachymeres, Theodore Metochites, and Nicephoros Gregoras, all wrote about the Mongols. Metochites, especially, explained his identification of the Mongols with Herodotus' 'Skythians'. In so doing, Metochites offers corroborating evidence for Kaldellis' account of why Byzantine authors made use of otherwise obsolete ethnonyms like 'Persians' and

‘Paionians’ when referring to contemporary peoples; one of the more notorious instances of literary ‘mimesis’. Kaldellis effectively rebuts the long-standing claim that such anachronistic labels were mere tokens of a rhetorical classicism. Names like ‘Skythian’ or ‘Persian’, he argues, ‘encoded broad ethnographic categories ... [and were] associated with specific cultural traits’ (p. 113). Finally, Kaldellis cannot help but observe here the irony of the ‘Byzantines’ having to answer to a modern, historically ‘distortive’ label they almost never used to describe themselves, all the while being held to account for obscuring the identity of other groups.

But what finally loosened the ‘ideological blockage’ which had previously thwarted ethnography in Byzantium? Kaldellis suggests that by the late fourteenth century even nominal confidence in the medieval Roman order had been irremediably undermined. Byzantine intellectuals thus began to consider the potential of other nations to dominate the historical stage. The culmination of this perspective would eventually reveal itself in a ‘post-Byzantine’ historian such as Laonikos Chalkokondyles, who explicitly claimed the Herodotean mantle for his history of Turkish ascendancy in the fifteenth century, with the crowning of the Sultan as the new Roman *basileus*. Chalkokondyles’ ‘classical’ paradigm makes room for lengthy digressions on Muslims, Germans and Spaniards as it surveys the wider world from the vantage of a new world power. The subject is fascinating and Kaldellis promises a separate study of this *sui generis* classicising Greek historian of Ottoman triumph.

Looking back from the fifteenth century, Kaldellis concedes that ‘[i]f by a “standard” ethnography we mean a historiographical digression that includes “mythic or historical origins, populousness, somatic features, warfare, clothing, conditions of living ... social structure and political organization, religious practice, gender relations and marriage” and geography, then there is probably no ethnography in Byzantine literature’ (p. 98). What’s more, Kaldellis adds, gathering all the ‘[b]its and [p]ieces’ of ethnography scattered across the various genres of Byzantine literature would not yield even a semblance of the kind of ethnography described above.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, the ethnographic asides or vignettes owe their presence to a literary context. They are therefore often better understood as rhetorical tropes than as attempts at documenting some immediate reality. As such, the thumbnail ethnographies of Byzantine literature were highly contingent on the rhetorical exigencies, and their purpose has to be sought anew each time within the aims of each text.

<sup>5</sup> The rundown of ethnography comes from G. Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge, 2008) 82.



The question then, one Kaldellis broaches but which will require more of the kind of scrutiny prompted by this book, is how much of the admittedly diminished ethnography found in Byzantine texts was functional. That is, how much was productive of both identity and ideology and how much had by then become a literary type, serving to shore up the rhetorical frame of a narrative? To get a sense of the latter, one might compare the role assigned to barbarians in twelfth-century medieval Greek romance, a genre which Kaldellis does not discuss at much length, despite its having drawn on ancient fiction's exoticism, much of it derived from Greco-Roman ethnographic literature. Modelled as they were on the Greek novels of the high Roman empire, the Byzantine romances showcase a reductive hardening of the barbarian stereotypes over centuries, similar to those of historiography. Only in the Byzantine novels do barbarians have more than a walk-on role, in which they frequently propel the story as participating characters.

For the most part, the novels match the official oratory of the imperial court in their vehement vilification of these foreigners, who assume the guise of pirates and ruthless rulers. Byzantine audiences were prepared to believe the worst about barbarians. Thus the Parthians in Nicetas Eugenianos' novel *Drosilla and Charikles* rampage like animals, unable to discriminate between ripe and unripe crops, ignorant of agriculture. But as Corinne Jouanno pointed out in a thoroughly detailed study of the subject some twenty years ago, the barbarian also emerges, perhaps for the first time, as a comic, grotesque, even pathetic foil in the Byzantine novels. So Theodore Prodromos, author of another novel and of many a verse panegyric in which Byzantium's foes are disparaged as lawless and savage, nevertheless casts the barbarian chief Bryaxes as an earnest, if somewhat naïve interlocutor in a short Platonic-style dialogue with the captive protagonist Dosikles. Even the barbarian stereotype could give way to the exigencies of narrative ploy. Byzantium may not have needed ethnography to account for τὸ βάρβαρον ἦθος, but it found enough uses for barbarians in its literature to sustain the type, and with it, its own precarious sense of historical pre-eminence. If it did not wish to know much about them, it nevertheless derived some paradoxical reassurance from their presence, anticipating perhaps the dilemma posed by Konstantine Kavafis' much quoted lines, καὶ τώρα τί θὰ γένουμε χωρὶς βαρβάρους / οἱ ἄνθρωποι αὐτοὶ ἦσαν μιὰ κάποια λύσις.