REVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS BOUNDARIES

Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner, edd., *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2013. Pp. x + 279. Hardback, £64.00. ISBN 978-1-84966-890-3.

*E*thnography, as a scholarly term defining a distinctive discipline that describes, in a scientific way, nations and races of men, their customs, habits, and differences, was coined only in the nineteenth century. In ancient Greek and Roman literature there was no precise equivalent literary genre nor an acknowledged separate discipline, although several branches of historiography and cultural geography (*chorographia*), collections of strange customs, laws, and constitutions among different people (*politeiai*, *nomima barbarika* etc.) and of miraculous stories and events (*paradoxographia*), as well as works from a range of other genres (including poetry) in all periods of antiquity, showed a lively interest in 'ethnographical' material and topics, as defined by the modern discipline.[1] Therefore, from a strictly methodological point of view, attempting to write a history of ancient ethnography today remains a questionable undertaking. Nevertheless, some scholars have undertaken this task, starting their overviews as early as Homer with his broad ethnographical interests, or more often with Hecataeus and Herodotus as the two disciplinary prose 'godfathers' of a hypothetical ancient ethnography.[2] The editors of this volume, E. Almagor and J. Skinner, and their contributors know well the intricate terminological and methodological problems stemming from the simple fact of the absence of any ancient term referring specifically to the study of foreign people.

The discussion about ancient precursors and roots of ethnography and early ethnographical writing is crucial for any serious hypothesis about the origins and the development of Greek historiography from Hecataeus and Herodotus to late antiquity. Several contributions in this volume support this view, and since the topic is of relevance also to this reviewer's research, I take

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[1] Hence, for instance, there is no separate lemma on 'Ethnographie' in *DNP*, but only a cross-reference to the useful brief entry of W. Nippel, 'Anthropologie', *DNP* 1 (1996) 740–4.

[2] See, for instance, K. E. Müller, *Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie und ethnologischen Theoriebildung*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1972 and 1980). Still worth reading, see also W. Nippel, *Griechen, Barbaren und 'Wilde': alte Geschichte und Sozialanthropologie* (Frankfurt, 1990), or A. Dihle, *Die Griechen und die Fremden* (Munich, 1994); for more recent English works see the introduction of this volume, 17–22.

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the liberty to add a remark on F. Jacoby's role in this debate. These intricate problems were clearly understood by Jacoby in his life-long scholarly work on the monumental collection of *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (*FGrHist*).[3] Over the space of several decades Jacoby struggled with establishing a satisfactory working hypothesis on the relation between ancient historical, geographical, and ethnographical writings and with his changing views on how best to present ethnographical material in his collection. We can see this especially from a series of remarks in the prefaces to the individual volumes of *FGrHist* parts I to III C. In parts III B and III C Jacoby included extensive passages of ethnographically important material on different cities, regions, tribes, and peoples, although this way of proceeding contradicted his own earlier strict methodological principles of defining and collecting testimonies and fragments.[4] When in part III C 1 Jacoby reached the section on historians and works on Egypt (*FGrHist* 608a–65), he concluded it with a huge *Anhang* (or appendix) *FGrHist* 665 of more than 200 relevant parallel historical, geographical, and ethnographical texts (214–77), which he tentatively termed (in III C 1, 1958, 6) an attempt to reconstruct an ancient 'idealethnographie' of Egypt. However, already overwhelmed by the highly demanding work on the Egyptian material and in view of the sheer mass of relevant sources on other major ancient regions and people (for instance, on the Assyrians and Persians, the Scythians, the Indians, and the Jews), Jacoby reverted to a much more selective inclusion of ethnographical material in the later entries of III C 1–2. He actually remained undecided until the end of his life as to the best place where and how ethnographical background material should be presented in his collection, and he therefore reserved several important authors and works for the future in the planned parts IV (which was to include, *inter alia*, collections of constitutions and customs) and V (geography and ethnography in a broad sense).

All attempts to establish ethnography in antiquity as a separate literary genre and a discipline in its own right have ultimately failed. As Almagor and Skinner rightly note, at a crucial moment in the development of the genres of historiography and cultural geography in late Hellenistic and early Augustan times the composition by the universal historian and cultural geographer Strabon of the *Geographika*—'one of the most comprehensive repositories of

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[3] See *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (*FGrHist*), Teile I–III C (Berlin and Leiden, 1923–58), and cf. already his remarks on this topic in the presentation of this project F. Jacoby, 'Über die Entwicklung der griechischen Historiographie und den Plan einer neuen Sammlung der griechischen Historikerfragmente', *Klio* 9 (1909): 80–123 (repr. in H. Bloch, *Abhandlungen zur griechischen Geschichtsschreibung von Felix Jacoby, zu seinem achtzigsten Geburtstag am 19. März 1956* (Leiden, 1956) 16–64).

[4] See as his last methodological apologetic statement on these problems III C 1 1958, 5–7.

ethnographic knowledge to have survived from antiquity' (9)—may perhaps also be considered the most illustrative example of such futile attempts.[5]

In their introduction (1–22) Almagor and Skinner mention several new topics and recent trends in research in ancient ethnography, such as the issues of 'audience reception' and 'intertextual allusions'. The majority of the papers collected here treat Greek topics and sources, except for G. Woolf's stimulating paper on Tacitus' *Germania*. Some more 'Roman' papers might have been desirable for reasons of a fairer balance, although one might perhaps defend this imbalance by making the fair claim that in general ethnographical interest may have been greater in Greek than in Roman authors and sources. The editors arrange the contributions in four sections, under the headings 'beginnings', 'responses', 'transformations', and 'receptions'. Admittedly, these four key terms play a crucial role in any discussion of ethnographical sources and accounts, although their choice necessarily remains somewhat subjective. This reviewer would agree with a call that is made in this volume that future scholarly research in ancient ethnography needs an expansion of the traditional methods in interpretation of our source material. Ethno-geographical passages in ancient literary sources of any genre (prose and poetry alike) especially need to be systematically confronted still more intensely with any available material relics and ancient iconographical evidence. Several contributions of this collection also rightly argue in favour of the demise of an overly rigid, strictly dichotomic Greek-barbarian paradigm. With reference to the broad discussion about the concepts of ancient identity over the last decades, this volume supports a prevailing trend in recent research to refer to identities in the plural as inherently complex, socially constructed, and historically contingent.

In what follows I do not intend to discuss all of the contributions in equally great detail, although I should like to stress that every paper is worth reading, at least for the specialists of the topics under discussion. Instead, I shall merely mention the main topics and arguments of each contribution and then focus on some of them in more detail.

H. J. Kim (25–48) defends the thesis that the Greek dichotomic concept of Asian barbarians versus Greeks, which many scholars mainly see as a result of the experience of the Persian Wars in the early fifth century BC, actually had its roots already some decades earlier in the political and military contacts between the Ionian Greeks and the expanding Persian empire under Darius I in the late sixth century BC. Kim holds that Darius' reorganisation of the Western satrapies and the tributes which the Greeks had to pay as sub-

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[5] See for the Greek text the authoritative new scholarly edition of S. Radt, *Strabons Geographika*, 10 vols. (Göttingen, 2002–11), with a German translation, brief commentary notes and extensive indices; see also, most recently, D. W. Roller, *The Geography of Strabo. An English Translation, with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge, 2014).

jects of the empire gave them cause for concerns and new thoughts about their Greek identity exactly at the geographical interface between the Greek world and the Achaemenid empire. However, the number of explicit contemporary sources which might support this revisionist opinion is perhaps too small. I found Kim's new suggestion on the etymology of the Greek word *barbaros* as a loan-word from Old Persian *barabara* (meaning: 'he who carries a burden') intriguing. Later on this word came to mean a subject, or virtual slave, who was taxed by the Persian rulers. Kim rejects the common opinion and the language implications that *barbaros* primarily would mean non-Greeks who speak unintelligible words. If true, this would entail important consequences for the discussion about constructing classical Greek identity after the Persian Wars.

K. Vlassopoulos (49–75) investigates on the basis of several telling stories in Herodotus' *Histories* and Xenophon's *Anabasis* the 'complex process of intercultural communication that was taking place in the Mediterranean world, before and after the time of Herodotus' (65). Vlassopoulos attempts an interesting preliminary typology of intercultural stories. It appears from this paper that the influence which indigenous cultures had on how the Greeks saw these foreign people and cultures was in several cases greater than earlier scholarship assumed. Greek myth shows an astonishing power 'in creating a Mediterranean-wide mental landscape and in mediating intercultural communication' (66). Indeed, the remarkable ability of Greek myth to incorporate foreign local traditions deserves further study, and in my opinion one of the key questions should be why some barbarian regions could be incorporated so much more easily in Greek mythology than others (and which regions and people, and for what reasons, were not incorporated at all). For instance, one easily understands why the coastal regions of the Mediterranean, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India were suitable regions for such an incorporation.

R. Harman (79–96) discusses scenes of 'visual response' in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. She draws attention to a variety of positions and changing roles of a spectator, who observes non-Greeks, and how these changes influence the result of such processes of observation, which in sum create and strengthen Greek identity of the members of the Ten Thousand.

P. Kosmin (97–115) offers an illustrative example of 'apologetic ethnography' or ancient ethnographical writing in the direct service of political purposes: Megasthenes' *Indika* openly defends and legitimates the Indian policy of the first Seleucids, Seleucus I and Antiochus I. For a Greek readership Megasthenes' treatise shifted the centre of India from the river Indus more to the east of the Ganges. Consequently, the Maurya empire, a rival of the Seleucids, no longer was situated at the eastern edge of the known world, but was 'incorporated' among the other multiethnic Hellenistic kingdoms. Kos-

min regards the recurring image of elephants on Seleucid coinage and monuments as an explicit icon of Seleucid might (104–8).

J. Rzepka (117–29) adds another paper on ancient apologetic ethnography, taken this time from Hellenistic Greece. Most Classical and Hellenistic Greek sources disparagingly treat the Aetolians as semi-barbarians and Aetolia as an underdeveloped mountain region. Rzepka calls these predominating, disparaging descriptions the ancient 'Aetolia's black legend' (118). It appears that the Aetolians attempted to defend themselves against such discriminating stories by spreading and actively promoting more positive versions of certain Aetolian myths and heroes. Rzepka focuses on the examples of the shepherd Titormus, who was reported to have been the strongest ever man in Greece and to have been superior even to Milon of Croton, and on the strange stories about Polycritus and his son which we read in Phlegon of Tralleis and other ancient sources. Here, I would not subscribe to Rzepka's bold hypothesis (124–5) that Phlegon's ultimate source for this story on Polycritus might even be the reliable historial work of Hieronymus of Cardia.

Tacitus' *Germania* has justly been given praise for centuries as the most impressive and informative preserved work of Roman ethnography. Focusing on religious ethnography in this treatise, G. Woolf (133–52), however, states that an analysis of Tacitus' remarks on German religion and gods soon shows the very restricted 'limits of translatability' (135). He comes to the conclusion that 'the *Germania* is a poor guide to the religious ethnography of the Roman's northern neighbours. Selection and presentation have, in all parts of the work, subordinated discussions of religious matters to Tacitus' wider aims' (146). On the other hand, indeed, 'Germany offered a familiar kind of 'otherness' and also an ethnographic complexity that might be more richly exploited than more stereotyped realms of the imagination' (137).

In Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* there are many ethnographic digressions. Contrary to views held by influential scholars, E. Almagor (153–78) does not regard them as out of place or even 'misplaced footnotes' (165) merely serving to entertain readers. In his view these ethnographic digressions 'form an essential part of Plutarch's narrative method' (153) and they are integral parts of the composition (165). Almagor discusses three examples to show how these passages do serve Plutarch's overall moral aims of his *Parallel Lives*: a) *Camillus* 15–16, with notes on Celtic ethnography, b) *Theseus* 5, with an excursus on Delphi and a rite of initiation, and c) *Pompeius* 35, with an excursus on the dwelling-places of the Amazons in the context of Pompey's war against the Caucasian Albanians. I was not completely convinced by Almagor's analysis of the first two very brief 'excursuses'. The third excursus, however, in Almagor's persuading interpretation testifies to Plutarch's irony about the demonstrative *imitatio Alexandri* of Pompey the Great, and thus this excursus serves well to illustrate features of Pompey's character.

According to K. Oikonomopoulou (179–99) Athenaios in his *Deipnosophistae* book 4 (128a–156a) offers an instructive ancient example of 'how to write an ethnography of dining' (179). For 'Athenaios constructs an ethnography of consumption, which describes and compares different communities (Greek and non-Greek) exclusively in terms of their dining and drinking customs' (179). In my view, Oikonomopoulou's approach would retain all its value if it were applied to other ancient authors (e.g. Pliny or Gellius). Modern anthropological and ethnographical researchers also justly regard the specific eating and drinking customs (including many taboos) of a social, religious, or ethnic group as a reliable clue to the understanding of these people. Oikonomopoulou's paper follows a growing number of recent other studies on Roman imperial poikilographic authors. Far from rejecting their works as mere compilations and at best as repositories of fragments taken from earlier reliable authors, many scholars (including Oikonomopoulou) now understand those works of Imperial literature 'as rich projects of knowledge systemization' and 'artful creations' (180). Ultimately, however, Athenaeus the bookish scholar remains merely a traveller of a virtual kind far away from those ancient ethnographical writers who were themselves famous real travellers and explorers. Oikonomopoulou calls Athenaeus, with a nice turn of phrase borrowed from J. Wilkins, a 'navigator in a vast sea of ethnographic quotations that he has culled from the library' of Alexandria (185). It turns out to be not very helpful for further modern analysis that Athenaeus does not arrange his material in a strictly systematic way, but in associative threads and great sections devoted to Greeks, barbarians, and different empires.

There is another strong point of the volume under review which I very much like. Some papers also treat the influences of ancient Greek and Roman geography and ethnography on forming modern nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial and imperialistic attitudes towards foreign people. I refer especially—but not exclusively—to the following two papers by J. Skinner and T. Harrison. The former (203–21) discusses the 'relationship between discourses of colonialism and what are currently referred to as "the processes of disciplinary formation"' (203). Although in this volume the focus lies on British colonial and imperial policy and attitudes, some results surely would be transferable *mutatis mutandis* to other great European powers of that age or to the USA. There is an obvious connection in all major nineteenth century colonial powers between an increasing interest in ancient (and of course even more intensely in additional modern) ethnographical and geographical knowledge of Africa and Asia and their contemporary imperial aims. Skinner's paper then examines as an example in detail 'the role that ancient ethnography played in the modern debate surrounding the identity and origins of the polytheistic tribes of Káfiristan' (204), a remote border region of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan. When the British military and civil colonial experts explored this region in the nineteenth century, they knew

very well already from their days at grammar school the ancient Greek and Latin ethnographical descriptions, especially of Herodotus and those works resulting from Alexander's campaign. Skinner demonstrates well how this knowledge in turn now influenced the observations and descriptions of modern authors. For instance, both scholars and military colonial experts engaged in a strange, ideologically motivated search for direct descendants of Alexander's soldiers or even of the king himself in remote Káfiristan. Alexander's campaign actually became a kind of model of the modern British imperial 'mission' in India and neighbouring countries.

I also enjoyed T. Harrison's paper (223–55) on the two brothers Henry and George Rawlinson. These influential gentlemen played a key scientific and social role in the process of self-definition, disciplinary formation, and the institutional establishment of the new disciplines of Assyrology, Egyptology and, in our context most importantly, of ethnography at universities, academies, and museums. Henry Rawlinson led a colourful life as a soldier in India and Persia, as a British diplomat, member of parliament, explorer, and expert in cuneiform studies and Assyriology. His brother, George Rawlinson, taught as Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, was a Canon at Canterbury Cathedral, an influential scholar, and author of widely read books on 'oriental monarchies'. Today he is still justly regarded as one of the most important English translators of Herodotus' *Histories*. The Rawlinsons successfully promoted a systematic expansion of geographical and ethnographical knowledge on a national and international scale which was expected to be of direct advantage to military and political strategical aims of Victorian England. This general drive for knowledge also included an intensified interest in every piece of preserved ancient ethnographical and geographical information, and finally was helpful in the disciplinary formation of ethnography. Some *topoi* of 'orientalism' (in the modern scholarly sense) can surely be detected in the writings of the two Rawlinsons, for instance, the topos of oriental barbary masked only by superficial civilisations in Persia, Assyria, and Babylonia. However, Harrison justly defends the two Victorians against too harsh and anachronistic recent accusations of Eurocentrism and Hellenocentrism.

In the last paper of this rich collection E. Dench (257–67) summarises important results and arguments of the other contributions that deserve further research. She also adds interesting thoughts on methodology, the thematic scope, and the aims of ancient and modern ethnography. I certainly agree with her on the observation that ancient 'auto-ethnographies' (260)—meaning ethnographical treatises, or more precisely and more often, ethnographical passages in historical works written by non-Greeks such as Manetho, Berossos, and Josephus (and there are lesser-known examples of fragmentary works collected in F. Jacoby's *FGrHist* III B and C)—surely still deserve further work, which should combine methods and approaches of

classics and modern ethnography. In my view, ancient 'imagined ethnographies', namely, those ethnographies that were exclusively or mostly composed from literary sources without any eye-witness observation and personal research, are also rewarding objects of further study.

To sum up, Almagor and Skinner have edited a very useful, methodically persuasive, and, through its broad thematic scope, stimulating collection of studies. One also finds a helpful combined index of names and subjects (269–79). I would like to stress once again that almost all studies make use of one or several modern innovative methods and approaches to their evidence. Hence, I highly recommend this collection to all readers who are interested in ancient ethnography and cultural geography, historiography, anthropology, and social and cultural history.

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