

## REVIEW

A GUIDE TO *PERIĒGĒSIS*-LITERATURE

Eva Falaschi, *Περιηγηταί nel mondo antico: Usi e interpretazioni del termine in una prospettiva cronologica*. Milan: Edizioni LED, 2021. Pp. 141. Paperback, €29.00. ISBN 978-88-7916-974-5. Open access pdf: <https://www.ledonline.it/ledonline/974-periegetai.html>

Who were the ‘periegetes’ of the ancient world? What did it mean to be a ‘guide’ to a place? In this brief discussion of just over a hundred pages, Eva Falaschi constructs a cultural history of the *περιηγητής* (*periēgētēs*), showing that the term gained currency in the Roman imperial period as a flexible way of referring to cultural exegetes of various kinds for whom geographical space functioned as an organising principle. A *periēgētēs* might be a self-appointed expert on local history; a recognised guide offering to inform visitors on the history of particular sanctuary or city; a literary author of the Hellenistic period described by his imperial-era readers as a *periēgētēs* because of the site-specific framing of his antiquarian history. In the Roman period, Falaschi argues, increased mobility and touristic interest in the heritage of the Mediterranean created the need for a flexible term for people who trafficked in cultural knowledge indexed to the local landscape. Presenting the reader with contextualised readings of all the relevant source material, both literary and epigraphic, Falaschi constructs a nuanced story of the emergence of *periēgēsis* as a cultural function. The strength of the book lies in Falaschi’s determination to let variety stand, rather than to press for a unified account. In this respect, Falaschi’s collection and interpretation of the evidence provides a solid foundation and an extremely useful resource for future discussions of the concept of *periēgēsis* and, more specifically, of the actors and authors to whom the title of *periēgētēs* came to be attached.

As scholars have recognised, our sources make it difficult to get a clear picture of *periēgētai* in the ancient context. Only in one quite specific body of evidence does *periēgētēs* appear as a technical term: in a set of imperial-era inscriptions listing cult personnel at Olympia, the term *periēgētēs* is used four times as a substitute for the otherwise standard (in these lists) term *exēgētēs* (pp. 15–16). The functional equivalence of these two terms in the Olympia inscriptions is generally accepted. But in other sources the relationship between *exēgētēs* and *periēgētēs* is unclear—problematised, notoriously, by Pausanias’ geographically organised, ten-volume prose guide to the cultural

centers, art works, local history and mythological traditions of mainland Greece. The language of *periēgēsis* appears nowhere in Pausanias' text—instead, he consistently uses the term *exēgētai* to refer to those authorities on local tradition that he consulted in the course of his research.<sup>1</sup> Another key literary source, Plutarch, uses the language of both *periēgēsis* and *exēgēsis* in distinct but overlapping ways. By triangulating these two literary sources with the limited body of inscriptional material, as well as passing references in contemporaries such as Aristides and Lucian, Falaschi fills out the picture of a set of terms that were undergoing a process of development in the imperial period—away (*pace* Pausanias) from *exēgētēs* and towards *periēgētēs*. The material presented has been collected and discussed by scholars previously. Falaschi's book—focused, thorough, fully documented, and up-to-date—brings fresh order to this long-running conversation and succeeds in its aim to put the role of the *periēgētēs* into 'chronological perspective'.

A three-page introduction outlines the problem of recognising the ancient *periēgētēs*. Chapters 1–3 present the history of the language of *exēgēsis* and *periēgēsis* in the Greek world, broadly understood. Chapters 4–6 then take a source-specific approach, focusing on the first-century CE evidence of Plutarch (Ch. 4), inscriptional evidence and references in a range of literary texts dated to the second and third centuries CE (Ch. 5) and, finally, the peculiar case of Pausanias (Ch. 6). This is followed by a brief chapter on the late antique reception of *periēgētai* (Ch. 7) and a Conclusion (Ch. 8). The volume includes a comprehensive bibliography, as well as an index organised in three parts: a general index, including places, personal names, and key Greek terms; an index of literary sources discussed in the text; and an index of the epigraphic sources discussed. Five pages of Plates at the end of the book present nine images of inscriptional material referred to in the text (a mix of black-and-white drawings and colour or greyscale photographs), providing ready visual reference points for the reader.

Falaschi's treatment of the literary and epigraphic evidence for the term *periēgētēs* in the imperial period is comprehensive. She subjects every item to patient and even-handed analysis and puts all the evidence—primary source materials and previous scholarly discussion—in front of the reader. For epigraphic sources, the footnotes direct readers not only to the standard print corpora, but also to online reproductions and databases. The book thus offers scholars and graduate students an expert overview of our evidence for ancient *periēgēsis* in historical perspective, direct access to the collected primary sources, and clear interpretive guidance. In the process, Falaschi contributes to several broader scholarly conversations relating to spatial experience in the imperial

<sup>1</sup> As Falaschi explains in Chapter 3, Pausanias' second-century CE work seems to have acquired the title *Ἑλλάδος Περιήγησις*, or 'Guide to Greece' in the Byzantine period, and the author himself is referred to as a 'periegete' beginning in nineteenth-century editions.

world, the relationship between oral and literary culture, and the ways in which centuries of reading and interpretation have conditioned scholarly perspectives on ancient texts.

In Chapter 1 Falaschi lays the groundwork for her discussion of *periēgētai*. Here, she presents a typology of uses of the older term, *exēgētēs*, for individuals engaged in activities of cultural interpretation, from the classical through the Roman period. Turning, in (a very brief) Chapter 2, to the word-family built on the *periēg-* stem (*periēgeomai*, *periēgēsis*, *periēgētēs*), Falaschi points out that *periēgeomai* and *periēgēsis* had similarly ancient roots but saw a definite uptick in use in the Hellenistic period. Strabo, notably, uses the noun *periēgēsis* in a way that combines ideas of spatial itinerary and verbal description—a sign of contemporary intellectual interest in the description of space. Over the following centuries, as illustrated by several passages in Lucian, the language of *periēgēsis* moves in a new direction: the guided tour. The agent-noun *periēgētēs* is an innovation of the Roman imperial period and, as Falaschi shows in Chapter 3, it emerges with two slightly different uses. On the one hand, it describes tour-guides offering oral, in-person cultural interpretation. In the literary realm, however, the term is also used to describe writers (including writers of the past) whose works were organised according to spatial principles or offered some kind of spatial access—for the authors of antiquarian works, for example, that were attached to a particular territory. Chapter 3 is also a treasure-trove of detailed information on appearances of the language of *periēgēsis* in bibliographic and literary contexts from Athenaeus in the imperial period, through late-antique sources like Stephanus of Byzantium, to the Byzantine *Suda*, and nineteenth-century scholarship.

The linguistic story Falaschi tells in the first three chapters is one in which cultural needs condition the emergence of new language. In this case, increased mobility in the imperial period created the demand for an interpretive infrastructure for cultural tourism and also changed the use-horizons of older, existing geographical and antiquarian texts. These authors were now sometimes referred to as *periēgētai* because the function they were being called on to perform was akin to that of in-person, local guides. This construction of *periēgēsis* as a cultural function, and the emergence of *periēgētai* as its agents, informs the discussion in the second half of the book. Over the next three chapters (Chs 4–6)—the core of the volume—Falaschi looks at literary and inscriptional sources that reveal *periēgētēs* at work in the imperial world.

References to *periēgētai* in Plutarch make it clear, as Falaschi shows in Chapter 4, that these agents of interpretation could occupy various cultural positions and play a range of roles. On the one hand, Plutarch describes *periēgētai* at the sanctuary at Delphi who act as professional guides for visitors. Somewhat different is the character Praxiteles in the *Quaestiones Convivales*, who appears in the company of learned academics—and Plutarch's reference to

*περιηγητικά βιβλία* (pp. 53–55) is the best evidence we have for the idea that ancient readers may have recognised *periēgēsis* as an intellectual pursuit and even a literary genre. Taken together, the Plutarchan evidence suggests that *periēgēsis* should be understood as a broad concept. Plutarch's *periēgētai* appear at different places on the social and intellectual spectrum. They also suggest, in their variety, that one of the boundaries bridged by the term *periēgētēs* was the notional divide between oral and written.

A range of anecdotal or incidental evidence from the second and third centuries CE, including inscriptions, corroborates and extends the Plutarchan picture of *periēgētēs* as a broad umbrella term that includes both in-person guides and authors of literary *exēgēsis*, that is, both oral and written modes of cultural interpretation. The discussion of this diverse evidence, in Chapter 5, is the heart of the volume—most succinctly, the four-page concluding section, 'Ἡ περιηγηταί in epoca imperiale: alcune conclusioni'. Here, Falaschi makes her case for recognising four different definitions of *periēgētēs* in the imperial period (72–73): 1) literary author of a spatially oriented work of cultural interpretation; 2) guide for visitors at sanctuaries and other cultural sites, sometimes as a publicly recognised function; 3) exegete of an image or other cultural material; 4) formal cult appointee in a sanctuary context.

The idea of the *periēgētēs*-as-tour-guide was current in the imperial period: Lucian refers to a *periēgētēs* showing souls around the realm of the dead in the *True Histories*; in the *Philopseudes*, Philocles comments that if it were not for the Greeks' self-aggrandising myths, *periēgētai* would die of hunger—suggesting that tour guides worked for pay, perhaps sometimes in the employ of a given city. Evidence from inscriptions supports the idea of a recognisably public function—and adds a degree of formality and social distinction. Aside from the Olympia inscriptions, which use *periēgētēs* interchangeably with *exēgētēs* to designate a formal cult appointee in the sanctuary context, five other commemorative inscriptions from the second and third centuries (from the Argolid, Mytilene, and Athens) connect the role of *periēgētai* with other high-status appointments, many with cult connections. Of these *periēgētai*, two are commemorated also as *archiatros*, and a third inscription was found near the Asclepieion in Athens, leading Falaschi to suggest a possible association with the cult of Asclepius (69). In any case, the inscriptional evidence shows clearly—in a way that the literary evidence does not—that the title of *periēgētēs* could be a term of formal recognition. Falaschi credits Christopher Jones with rehabilitating the status of the 'tour guides' in his succinct discussion and contextualisation of the evidence offered by Pausanias.<sup>2</sup> But she also insists,

<sup>2</sup> See C. P. Jones, 'Pausanias and His Guides', in S. Alcock, J. Cherry, and J. Elsner, edd., *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece* (Oxford, 2001) 33–9. Jones describes Pausanias' guides (*exēgētai*) as 'respectable local antiquarians' (39) and concludes that 'Pausanias belongs at that middle level of the Greek intelligentsia which is perhaps

productively, on keeping the flexibility of the term in full view. The broader picture of *periēgētai* as (paid) guides for site- or city-visitors should not obscure its more specialised uses. The array of evidence we have from the second and third centuries suggests capaciousness—as does Plutarch’s use of the term to refer to individuals of apparently different social standing.

At the same time, the term continues to be used for those who offered exegetical, hermeneutic, guidance of various kinds, both in oral and in written form. The place we would expect to see this use confirmed, for the high imperial period, is in Pausanias—but from the narrow perspective of vocabulary, Pausanias fails us. Across Pausanias’ text, it is *exēgētai* who offer interpretations of artefacts, images, and the stories associated with sites of cultural importance. Following the scholarly consensus, Falaschi accepts the argument that Pausanias avoids *periēgētēs* as an un-Herodotean neologism. At the same time, she highlights the degree to which his use of *exēgētēs* entails a ‘resemanticisation’ (98–9) of an old term. Like the semantically capacious *periēgētēs* in contemporary sources, Pausanias’ twenty-two direct references to *exēgētai* encompass a variety of people and circumstances—and *exēgētai* could lie behind a number of Pausanias’ more oblique references to sources of information, both oral and written (84). In this sense, we should imagine Pausanias’ research and creative process as including authors of written texts who (to judge by references in Strabo, Plutarch, Aelius Aristides, and Lucian, among others) would have been referred to as *periēgētai*, as well as in-person guides, whether formal—as at Olympia, where Pausanias refers to Aristarchus as ‘the’ exegete (p. 94, 101)—or informal. Key to Pausanias’ picture is that the *exēgētēs* is someone whose expertise is tied to place (p. 82), but in any given location there will be an economy of written and oral interpretive material that is hard for us now to recover. Falaschi makes the case for understanding the *exēgētēs* in Pausanias not as a ‘guide’ (‘guida’)—apparently because she feels this language is too closely associated with on-the-ground tourism—but as an ‘interpreter’ (‘esegeta’) or ‘expounder’ (‘espositore’). Choosing a single term for a broad range of functions, whether in English or Italian, is not straightforward (‘expounder’ would be awkward in English), but Falaschi at least clarifies the problem.

So, where does this leave us when it comes to calling Pausanias a ‘periegete’? He does not—and apparently would not have—used the term of himself, nor does he use *periēgēsis* to describe his work. Yet, he clearly belongs to the capacious world of imperial-era *periēgētai* as Falaschi has described it. Pausanias and his reception prompt us to reflect on the ways in which titles set readers’ horizons of expectations, shaping the way we read texts and categorise

represented better by inscriptions than by literature. At the same level, or slightly below, stood the local antiquarians who supplied him with information, the guides whom he calls with a quaint conservatism “expounders”.

them—which, in turn, may limit how we imagine the social interactions on the ground. This is true in all periods. In this sense, a particularly interesting aspect of the book is the way in which Falaschi integrates into her story the imperial-era designation of earlier, geographically oriented Hellenistic texts as *periēgēseis*, and their authors as *periēgētai*. Just as Strabo, for example, designates some of his predecessors as *periēgētai*, so later writers designated Pausanias a ‘periegete’ because of the kind of spatially oriented guidance his text appeared to offer. The language of *periēgēsis* and of the *periēgētēs*, has a reception history of its own that has as much to do with the needs of later readers as with the cultural context in which these terms emerged. This hermeneutic point is the conceptual key to Falaschi’s approach: our interpretation of *periēgēsis*-language—or, in Pausanias’ case, the avoidance of this language—requires an approach that is both capacious and situation-specific.

The territory and the materials covered in this book have been explored fairly extensively already in a multi-lingual scholarly conversation that the author engages and documents fully in both the main text and footnotes. Falaschi contributes methodological clarity, nuanced literary interpretation, and a commitment to contextual analysis. By taking a context-specific and non-reductive approach to the evidence, Falaschi makes it possible to imagine *periēgētēs* as a flexible, evolving term covering a diversity of actual contributions to the stewardship and promotion of cultural heritage in the imperial world. Where other scholars have tried to systematise a limited and divergent body of contemporary material, seeking a more precise picture of the *periēgētēs* in terms of education and social position, Falaschi’s methodology leads her instead to distinguish different valences of a term with broad semantic reach. In the process, she provides a clearer view of the potentially close relationship between oral and written cultural material. While the language of *periēgēsis* came to be used in the titles of literary works, it is not first and foremost a designation of literary genre. *Periegesis* and *periēgētai* emerge from worlds of cultural interpretation in which cities and temples had their own libraries, archives, experts, and functionaries and we should probably imagine a constant commerce between oral and written material in touristic encounters of all kinds, as well as in the performances and exchanges of intellectual and ritual life.

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