

ANTHONY KALDELLIS: *Ethnography After Antiquity. Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2013. ISBN 978-0-8122-4531-8. X, 277 pp. USD 75, GBP 49.

Anthony Kaldellis' new book is a timely contribution to the study of ancient ethnography, a subject which is constantly picking up momentum. In this dynamic atmosphere, formative contributions discussing questions barely visited before are still a possibility, and the book under review is convincing proof of this. Though a relatively slim volume, it packs a powerful punch comprising in equal measure erudition, the tackling of under-explored subject matter, and putting to use recently accrued understanding regarding the peculiarities of ethnographical writing in antiquity. The period Kaldellis discusses is a particularly important one, as it encompasses the entrance into the written record of many population groups which wielded great influence in the Mediaeval history of Eurasia: Arabs, Slavs, Bulgars, Magyars, Rus, and Turks are just some of these. Studying the literary descriptions of these peoples through literary creations – themselves tapping into a rich tradition of ethnographic writing – provides a crucial source concerning the challenges and changes that the Roman/Byzantine identity underwent over the centuries.

Within the scope of this book, Chapter 1 ("Ethnography in Late Antique Historiography") is by necessity preparatory in nature – though this does not entail a simplistic treatment of the ethnographical writing during this crucial and complex period. In Kaldellis' vision, the Late Imperial texts represent the end of the ancient tradition, not the birth of the Byzantine one; later he goes as far as to posit a rupture in the historiographical tradition in the seventh century (p. 44). This idea is particularly important for Chapter 3 (see below). Though walking an already well-trodden path, Kaldellis describes well both the dynamism and competitiveness of the Late Imperial setting of ethnographic writing, as well as the resultant texts' relationship to the previous tradition ("more a useful tool than a mental straitjacket", p. 9). The focus of the chapter is on 'classicizing' historiographical texts, which are treated separately from the "Christian genres of ethnography" (again, Chapter 3). This leaves out some other 'ethnographicizing' elements – such as the ethnic labels which poetic works often add to ethnonyms, and which certainly would have conditioned the associations of a learned audience when encountering foreign people's names. Kaldellis does, however, make it clear that not all ethnographic information in prose works was given out in digressions: the 'parenthetic' explanations for a foreign term, office, or custom are a case in point (p. 3). The genre of 'embassy reports' (Priscus, Nonnosus, and others) is well covered.

Chapter 2 ("Byzantine Information-Gathering Behind the Veil of Silence") sets off by examining the sources the Byzantines had about foreigners – a question made more acute by the relative lack of literary ethnographies from the Middle Byzantine period. Diplomatic correspondence, intelligence reports, and many other alleys of information referenced in a variety of sources make it clear that the Byzantines did not lack the knowledge of foreign groups, but rather the incentive to produce ethnographical writing. Most importantly, there existed a large body of 'popular ethnography' dispersed through the society, consisting of rumours, mimes, comedic quips and more (p. 33). Kaldellis' examination of the 'dog in the night-time' question of a large-scale ethnographical silence – extending even to the circulation and copying of ethnographical material from earlier authors – in Byzantine historiography between the eighth and fourteenth centuries is a nuanced and convincing one. The Byzantine conversion narratives

dealing with foreign groups are subjected to a particularly sober and minimalistic interpretation.

Chapter 3 ("Explaining the Relative Decline of Ethnography in the Middle Period"), in many ways the most central section of the book for Kaldellis' argument, starts with a useful caveat about the faulty, classically conditioned presupposition of ethnography being most easily found in historiographical writing (p. 44). The event-centred chronographies and chronicles of Christian historiography found the old type of ethnographical digression ill-suited for annalistic structures or the changed geographical frame of interest of the embattled empire. Traditional histories would also have needed to explain the Byzantine defeats against the Islamic advance ("the norms of representation could not accommodate it", p. 74); instead, historical writing became even more emperor-centred in nature. Kaldellis shows how the authorial strategies – most of them of moralizing, epideictic nature – of most Byzantine writers did not favour ethnographical material, though exceptions occur. He is perhaps too quick to dismiss the 'ethnic stereotypes' of, say, Anna Komnena, but this is in line with his strict separation of rhetorics and ethnography (particularly strange since he well demonstrates how prevalent in Middle Byzantine historical writing the emperor-centred rhetoricism was, e.g., pp. 47–53). In Psellos and Choniates, we are however witnessing something like an 'internal ethnography' of the Byzantine elite, and barbarians act in them mostly as Tacitean mouthpieces (what Kaldellis calls "autoethnography by proxy", p. 53). The following discussion – with examples – of Christian ethnography and its relationships with the Herodotean paradigm and the Roman/Byzantine identity, is stimulating and incisive; rich endnotes augment the discussion further. In religious texts, the ethnographical approach and level of detail could sometimes be directed at describing Christian heresies (p. 68) and the doctrinal challenge of Islam. Moreover, explanations of cultural difference which had previously taken ethnographical form, were now more often doxographical in nature: what remained largely unchanged was the level of polemicism. As Kaldellis notes, "ethnography and mutual understanding were impossible under these ideological conditions" (p. 78). This structural similarity to certain modern discourses of incomprehension is grim to contemplate.

The detailed Chapter 4 ("The Genres and Politics of Middle Byzantine Ethnography"), a very valuable section of the book overall, sets off by examining ethnographical elements in technical literature through *Taktika* and *De Administrando Imperio*. The discussion focuses next on the 'ethnographic moments' (a useful new coinage, I believe) in Byzantine historical texts, with Kaldellis demonstrating the Byzantine form of an *origo* narrative to be quite different from the earlier *origines*, and closer to official briefings concerning 'new peoples'. A distinct subgenre or not, Kaldellis' assessment of these stories as 'quasi-ethnographic' (p. 98) seems correct. The formal imitative elements of classicising traditionalism, especially the 'ethnonym tagging' according to inherited barbarian group names, is tackled relatively late in the chapter (and the book), but the author's way of treating this phenomenon clarifies the Byzantine (Roman) motivation for continuing the Late Antique convention. In particular, his warning about the modern essentialist interpretation that population groups had an objective or 'true' name which the classicising ethnonyms 'distort' (p. 107), even as much of the scholarship goes on to use generalising ethnic categories (and exonyms such as 'Byzantium'), is very welcome. The section amounts to a sharp challenge to the usefulness of an unreflective use of the concept 'classicising writing'. It is also useful to bear in mind political side of such ethnonym usage: calling peoples with the names they bore during (sometimes within) the Roman Empire

implied the right to reconquer these aberrantly independent groups (p. 113). The rhetoric of Christianisation was similarly expedient politically, for not even conversion could change a barbarian people into Romans – unlike in some Late Antique authors.

Chapter 5 ("Ethnography in Palaiologan Literature") deals with Byzantium's final, culturally vibrant period, which finally imposed substantial cross-cultural exchanges on the Roman state. This led to a fragmentation of the earlier Middle Byzantine pattern as regards ethnographic writing; while religious rhetorics of self-justification and invective still occupied a central position in historiography, historians such as the pluralistically Herodoteanizing Laonikos Khalkokondyles found more plentiful use for ethnographies than before. Embassy narratives resurface, and travellers' tales continue to include some ethnic portrayals. Kaldellis' deft analysis of the conceptual shock given by the immeasurably vast Mongol Empire to the now contracted Roman state is fascinating to read (pp. 156–66). Byzantine writing on Mongols was less religious in tone than in the West – instead its salient characteristic was the intense use of classical references, including the framework of climatic determinism. Along long-standing lines, George Pachymeres and Theodore Metochites are shown to weave these newest Scythians into their criticisms on perceived faults in the Roman society. The last, thematically ordered, section of the chapter is devoted to the Latins/Franks, whose image in Byzantine literature has already been studied quite extensively. Kaldellis demonstrates that in the Late Byzantine period, vestiges of the old essentialist East-West dichotomy became increasingly enmeshed with a blurring of boundaries about who the true inheritors of the Romans in fact were. The very brief Epilogue summarizes some of the previous discussion and glimpses at the influence that Plethon's philosophy and classical emphasis may have had during the final period.

A recent collection of contributions discussing ethnographical writing in antiquity, *Ancient Ethnography: new Approaches* (Bloomsbury 2013), co-edited by Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner, has introduced many nuances into our understanding of what this literary register entailed. Most of the time Kaldellis seems to view ethnographic writing as a rather distinct and self-standing genre, though occasionally he does refer to ethnography as a 'symbiotic subgenre' of other literary registers (vii). Such a concession fits well the more recent understanding. The book does exhibit some self-imposed limitations. For instance, Kaldellis focuses heavily on historiographical texts, which cannot avoid influencing his conclusions. He also distinguishes between *ethnography* and *ethnology* (the latter being the 'general view' of a foreign group) which poses the danger of a circular reading of sources – though it also helps us distinguish rhetorical denunciations of current or recent enemies (cf. p. 10) from ethnographical knowledge. Overall, Kaldellis' book is an important contribution and a wonderful starting point for further studies on this fascinating subject. His main arguments about Byzantine ethnographical writing are persuasive and much more nuanced than this short review has space for. Of particular value is his emphasis on the significance of literariness and reception in shaping texts previously understood as almost anthropological. What is needed now is a similarly nuanced and philologically meticulous account regarding the reception of ethnographical writing in the Latin West.

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