

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Invention of Greek Ethnography: from Homer to Herodotus.* By JOSEPH E. SKINNER. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 343. \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-979360-0.

**T**he *Invention of Greek Ethnography* is a welcome addition to studies of identity in the ancient Mediterranean. Ambitious in scope and intelligent in execution, the book positions the question of ethnographic prose in the broad context of Mediterranean engagements with cultural identity, articulated in art historical and archaeological as well as literary sources.

Skinner challenges many of the models traditional for emergence of Greek ethnography: that it was a Greek invention; a prose genre; characterized by simple dualities; a response to the “Barbarians” encountered in the Persian war; and that a preference for aggregative and ethnic identities changed, after that encounter, to oppositional and cultural ones. He defines ethnography as “thinking about identity from the point of view of an outsider” and seeks continually to recover the perspective of the man in the Greek street. Ethnographic discourse emerges as a process as ongoing and ubiquitous as the creation of cultural identity, both of which were continually evolving activities rather than fixed ideas and bounded genres.

The book is organized into five chapters, which proceed from the intellectual history of the problem to a survey of the chief objects of ethnographic investigation, an overview of the cultural mechanisms for addressing the question, case studies in Olbia, Campania, Delphi and Olympia, and a return to the question of Herodotus’ ethnography, informed by the results of the first four chapters.

Chapter 1, “Ethnography before ethnography,” establishes the need for the study: while scholarly monographs and edited volumes on Herodotus have been exploding, the study of ethnography as a genre has been largely static. Material evidence, including Achaemenid cylinder seals, Egyptian reliefs from 1400 BC, and Persepolis reliefs counter assumptions that ethnography was a uniquely Greek or a fifth century invention.

Skinner then outlines the concept of a Greek prose ethnography, beginning with Jacoby’s invention of the idea, his challenges in maintaining the category as

he assembled the *FGH*, and the historical context in which he operated, in which traveling ‘discourses of wonder’ drew popular enthusiasm, and ancient Greece was privileged as the heart and soul of European rationalism – inherently incomparable, and safely distant from the ‘primitives’ studied by Jacoby’s anthropological counterparts.

Chapter 2, “Populating the *Imaginaire*,” provides a sketch of key players in the Greek ethnographic tradition, from the purely mythic, including Cyclopes and Amazons, to the Thracians, Lydians and others of historical contact. Skinner integrates iconographic, archaeological and textual traditions, and underwrites his presentation with a productive elision between the imaginary and historical. The chapter foregrounds the shortsightedness of approaches which value ethnographies primarily for their historicity, and demonstrates the abundance of Greek ethnographic traditions before the Persian wars, traditions sufficiently individual and detailed to counter reductive polarities of Greeks and “Others.”

Chapter 3, “Mapping Ethnography,” provides a survey of the cultural mechanisms through which ethnographic information was disseminated. These begin with literary and sub-literary forms, including lists, epithets, stereotypes, epic and epinicia, and conclude with the material evidence typically excluded from discussions of ethnography—the coins, ceramics, metalwork and sculpture in which iconographic depictions of self and others, as well as regional stylistic variations, provide reflections on ethnic identities. Skinner emphasizes the place for movement and variation: epithets are defined as “mobile, discursive operators that can be continually reworked” (115); stereotypes as cognitive devices to help deal with social complexity; lists as mechanisms of signification which segment, order, condense and transform.

In Chapter 4, “Mapping Identities,” Skinner brings the principles established in the first three chapters to two loci at the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean—Olbia and Calabria—and to Olympia and Delphi as two “imagined centers”. Here as throughout the study, the debates and the nuances regarding each case study are carefully accounted for, and an impressive range of both material and literary evidence is brought to bear. Herodotus’ accounts of Skyles and Anacharsis, read against the evidence from Olbia and the Scythians, emerges as authorial choice rather than historical inevitability.

For Calabria, often deemed a cultural backwater because of its modern poverty, Skinner demonstrates the deep prehistory of Greek contact, the rich agricultural possibilities in the eyes of incoming Greeks, and material evidence for wide-reaching trade networks. Calabrians emerge as people “immersed in a sea of eth-

nographic imaginings,” (211), including epic, lyric, sculpture and vase paintings, in the constant renegotiation of power and identity. Skinner questions the extent to which Delphi and Olympia functioned as centers for information about foreign lands, and foregrounds the contested and competing Greek identities which were played out in the form of genealogical manipulation and victor’s lists, read against foreign votives and myths which made the sanctuaries the point of entry for exotic imaginary groups such as the Hyperboreans.

Chapter 5, “The Invention of Greek Ethnography,” returns to the question of Herodotus and reframes his invention as the choice of prose narrative for the exploration of other ethnicities. A prose ethnography could serve, on the one hand, the interests of the emerging democratic polis, a context in which a competitive display of knowledge could replace divine inspiration as the basis of authority. A less Athenocentric approach, however, is both more appropriate for Herodotus’ origins in multi-ethnic Ionia, and for Skinner’s model of ethnography as a continual cultural process, more nuanced than simple, in which Greeks were as concerned to distinguish themselves from other Greeks as they were from the “Barbarians” on whom so much scholarly ink has been spilt.

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