

The Lives of Others: The Boukoloï Between Fiction and History

This paper rethinks the relationship between fiction and history in the ancient novels by focusing on a case study of the Boukoloï (“Herdsman”), a terrifying group of cannibalistic nomadic bandits in the Nile Delta. Previous scholarly approaches to the Boukoloï can be divided into two strands. For Winkler (1980), who wrote in reaction to Henrichs (1972), and Rutherford (2000), they are “fundamentally aesthetic,” a Greek or Egyptian “narrative formula,” whereas Polanski (2006) and Blouin (2010) use the novels as historical evidence for the existence and behavior of the Boukoloï. Neither approach is satisfactory. The aestheticizing reading ignores the cultural currency of the Boukoloï in the Greek imagination, while the historical reading downplays the novels’ fictionality. By contrast, in this paper I argue that Boukoloï draw upon a set of Greek cultural stereotypes about a historical group of nomadic outsiders in the Nile Delta. By “stereotype” I mean an elite discourse about a marginalized group, which often does not reflect reality, but selectively draws upon a repository of imagined features of that group. The novelists’ Boukoloï therefore are neither purely historical, nor purely literary fantasies.

I begin by showing that papyrological evidence unearthed since Winkler’s article attests to the presence of a historical group of nomadic outlaws living in the Nile Delta. Having established their historicity, I turn to their depiction in the novels, analyzing two detailed descriptions of the Boukoloï and their haunts in Akhilleus Tatios (esp. 3.9, 21, 4.12) and Heliodoros (esp. 1.5-6). The two accounts of the Boukoloï share an emphasis on markers of their alterity, such as reed huts, marshy territory, rusticity, and primitivism; I suggest that they also reflect the flexibility of stereotype in the construction of exotic Others: Akhilleus Tatios’ Boukoloï practice human sacrifice and cannibalism (3.15), whereas Heliodoros’ eat uncooked fish dried in the sun (1.5). Both dietary peculiarities, on my reading, reflect how Greek

ethnographical writing imagines Others; the novels draw upon this cultural imaginary in order to construct the Boukoloï.

In the second half of my paper, I consider the relationship between the novelistic picture of these herdsmen and other representations. I argue that although the novels' Boukoloï are mostly consistent with their portrayal in Greco-Roman material culture and historiography, divergences suggest that there is no direct link between the novels and these other depictions of the Boukoloï. For instance, Cassius Dio (71.4) describes a revolt of the "Boukoloï," a group of outlaws in the Nile Delta, who resist Roman power and practice human sacrifice and cannibalism; his narrative also includes elements absent from the novels, most notably transvestism. Further, the Boukoloï may also appear on the Palestrina Nile mosaic, which depicts several figures dwelling in reed huts. I suggest that the continuities between these traditions are the result of a shared set of cultural stereotypes about nomadic bandits in Egypt (cf. Shaw (1982/3)).

Finally, as a counterpoint to Greek presentations, I briefly examine depictions of nomads in Egyptian prose fiction. I demonstrate that the Demotic Egyptian ꜥꜥm.w ("Herdsman") who live in the pr-dwf ("place of papyrus") in *Contest for the Benefice of Amun* are also nomadic outsiders in the Nile Delta, but that a different set of cultural stereotypes are employed in Egyptian texts. Although it has been argued that the similarities between Boukoloï and the ꜥꜥm.w indicate literary contact between Greek novels and Egyptian texts (Rutherford (2000)), I suggest that the Egyptian "herdsman" throw the Greek Boukoloï into sharper relief and show how different literary and cultural milieux apply different stereotypes to the same group.

This paper illustrates the fluid relationship between fiction and history and it shows how the ancient novels draw on the Greek imagination about nomads to construct a perfect set of arch villains within their narratives. The Boukoloi truly exist between fiction and history.

Works Cited

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