

Lucian's *True Histories*: Writing an ἀληθὴ ethnography

Lucian's of Samosata *True Histories* (*Verae Historiae*) is a unique work of phantasy and lie/fiction combined with facts and the truth of its own era. In his narrative, filed under the genre of *journey* (Georgiadou, Larmour 1998), Lucian through his satiric point of view sets out to mock the lies of historians, poets, and philosophers, shaping a world full of marvelous creatures, which amuses his readers. This humorous aspect of *True Histories* is the one that has determined its interpretation, at least, until recently. Yet over the past decades, scholars have started to read Lucian's work through a variety of lenses. Many of them approach it as one of the first sci-fi narratives (Grewell 2001), the precursor of modern science fiction works and movies, while others interpret it as a parody of the search for philosophical truth, where the unusual and weird creatures and incidents allude to certain philosophers and their theories (Georgiadou, Larmour 1998).

Undoubtedly, these approaches have shed light to a rather elusive writer and work. However, it seems that there is a missing piece in the puzzle that depicts this παράδοξον world, which Lucian presents in *True Histories*. In order to find the piece and see the whole picture, we need to take into consideration three parameters: firstly, the fact that Lucian lives in a constantly changing empire, which grows stronger and bigger every day. Secondly, the fact that during Lucian's time different nations and cultures interact with each other daily, and thirdly that the writers, aware of the new situation, express their thoughts about who they are and who the 'others' are within their works. Hence, what is missing in the interpretation of *Verae Historiae* is the focus on the notions of *ethnos* (nation) and identity which lie consistently under the humorous, satirical, allegorical, and *paradoxographic* surface of Lucian's narrative. In this paper, I argue that Lucian's *Verae Historiae* can be read as an ancient ethnographic work.

Ancient ethnography as a genre (significantly different from modern ethnographies) revolves around *ethnos* (nation) and identity, and is characterized by specific features, which I contend that can be traced in Lucian's work.

Specifically, I examine *True Histories* as an ethnographic writing, which reveals Lucian's attitude towards identity and 'otherness' during the 2nd century CE. I begin with an overview of the definition and the characteristics of ancient ethnography to establish the framework for the approach of *Verae Historiae* as an ethnographic narrative. The ancient Greek and Roman works categorized under the term *ethnography* were "pictures from the contact zones between the classical civilizations and nations alien to them" (Murphy 2004). The shared point of these works is the description of cultural and geographical features, such as the land and the climate of the nation which is being presented, that land's agricultural and mineral products, the origin of people, their appearance, and their social institutions (housing, marriage, religion, education, and war), along with a utopian and idealizing view of exotic or primitive people (Murphy 2004). Comparing Lucian's work to works commonly identified as ethnographies, such as Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, I detect the elements of the genre, which appear in *True Histories*.

Subsequently, I discuss the writer's view of its contemporary cosmopolitan society where Romans meet Greeks and barbarians, and *vice versa*. I suggest that all the out-of-this-world creatures, which the narrator encounters, (such as the Moon people and the Corkfeet men) represent the "others" in the parallel universe, which Lucian creates. By experiencing the habits, customs, and features of these "other" people, the narrator makes an indirect statement about his own and his people's identity, realizing that they share both similarities and differences, while advocating the acceptance of the "other" in the huge multi-cultural society that the Roman imperialistic policy created.

Finally, in this paper I suggest that *True Histories* is a work, which strongly expresses ethnographic interests, while contributing to the realization of the existence of a common identity— not a national common identity, but a cosmopolitan one. Lucian’s *True Histories*, veiled with an insightful satire, explores the various boundaries and “voices” of the Roman world through the spectrum of ethnicity, identity, religion, geography, and interaction, and thus forms an one-of- a-kind ethnography. Although describing fantastic lands and creatures, Lucian wittfully invites his readers to approach his *Verae Historiae* as an ancient ethnographic work, which embraces the dynamics of a whole new world.

Bibliography

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