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Summary of PhD Thesis

Title:

'Pausanias' Hermeneutics': World-view, scientific Research, and Aesthetics in Pausanias’

Description of Greece

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Budapest
2015
I. Context of the Thesis: The scholarly discussion of the *Description of Greece*, and the change of perspectives in the last three decades

Pausanias’ work, the *Description of Greece* (*Periēgēsis Helládos*), written in the second half of the second century AD, was discerned by a broader readership from the 17th–18th centuries. From that time on its perception has a unique, but not atypical history: starting from the time of enlightenment Western European travellers and the whole evolving philhellenic intelligentsia read the *Description* as a source of knowledge for an idyllic Greece of ‘edle Einfalt und stille Gröβe’. Thereafter, as a consequence of the growth of the prestige and scientific self-awareness of German classical philology, the *Description of Greece* has undergone rigorous source criticism. This trend culminated in August Kalkmann’s monograph *Pausanias der Perieget* (1886). However, the start of new excavations on the territory of Ancient Greece (in Olympia, Athens, Delphi and so forth) in the second half of the nineteenth century shed new light on the work and opened new research perspectives. The effects of the new discoveries are discernible for instance in the extensive Frazerean commentary on Pausanias; in the books on Pausanias by Carl Robert; in Trendelenburg’s study ‘Pausanias in Olympia’; and in the wide-ranging debate between Dörpfeld and others about the identification of the ‘Enneakrunos’. Nonetheless, the synthesis of both points of views, a critic-centred approach and negative attitude to Pausanias as a writer on the one hand, and a close-reading of some descriptive sections of the book with evidently positive factual results at the excavation sites on the other, had at the time not yet been born. In the first half of the twentieth century the *Description of Greece* was still used mainly as a source material for the disciplines of classical scholarship, such as literary, mythological, ethnographic, historical studies. A radical change in the approach to the text was brought by the second half of the twentieth century: Christian Habicht’s monograph ‘*Pausanias’ Guide to Ancient Greece*’ (1985) changed Pausanias of a poor mediator of ancient Greek culture and reality into a Greek individual of the Roman era with his own views, perspective, taste and mind.

The base of the scholarly discussion after Habicht’s book is that the *Description of Greece* is a unique work of the existing ancient Greek corpus and Pausanias himself is a unique phenomenon of the second century AD; to describe ‘all Greek things’ (pánta tà hellēniká), as Pausanias aims, is not a self-evident idea for a Greek inhabitant of Asia Minor. Hence, taking seriously the uniqueness of this project and trying to comprehend Pausanias’ purposes and intentions, we might,
on the one hand, get a better understanding of what he writes about and refers to, and, on the other, get an insight into the relation of the second century AD Greek society to its own past. This way the new scholarly approach designates a less evident aspect of the Description of Greece: specifies the significance all the information and stories in Pausanias’ account of Greece might have had for him, and his contemporaries.

The obvious result of these new researches is first of all a far more involved and complex attitude of the modern readers to Pausanias’ work. The customs, rites, stories, buildings and works of art, narrated or depicted by him we might interpret today not only for their own sake, or understand in their own context, but, in line with that, we can try to make sense of them also in a Pausanian context, to comprehend what all these meant for him, a Greek traveller and interpreter.

II. Primary aims of the thesis research

Referring to the context of the above sketched new research trend my purpose was not to work out a (new) general portrait of Pausanias. This direct approach I find the least productive part of the scholarly discussion, as to understand Pausanias ‘himself’ from his work, or reconstruct his world-view in general seems to be rather impossible. We have a view on him grounded in the reviews and interpretations of a plenty of objects and stories in a couple of different topics, and each of these gives us an idea of him, shows an aspect of his world-view and thinking. However, the general picture we can draw of him, as a synopsis of these, is likely to be blurred, oversimplified and not really telling.

The narrator of the Description of Greece does not have a strong personality, he is not a characteristic thinker who would integrate new information seen and heard by him in an evolved scheme, or approach everything he describes with stable interpretive frames. New impressions constantly form his thinking, and the interpretations of different objects do not only differ in length and elaboration, but change also in style and method. This, however, does not mean that the narrator could not have a persona. Still, this persona is not a solid and coherent construct, rather a complex of different discourses emerging in different situations. The narrator does not fix his point of view (there’s neither a preface nor an epilogue in the book); he lets himself guided and affected by the sites and the objects he depicts. Whether this narrator is a result of a conscious literary production, or the manifestation of the author’s character, we do not know.
Hence, the five studies making up the thesis are products of different attempts not to understand Pausanias in general, but to apprehend one or another aspect, one ‘voice’ of the narrator as it appears to us in a concrete chapter or a few thematically interrelated parts of the work.

III. The structure of the PhD thesis and the subjects of the five chapters

As follows from this multi-perspective approach, the five chapters are independent studies; they are not to cover the whole Description of Greece, and not written from strictly one stance. As separate studies, they might show how differently and with how many different focuses it is possible to offer interpretations on Pausanias’ book. Still, in a ‘kaleidoscopic’ way, the studies do represent the main topics of the Description of Greece: the first study is about a description of a cult; the second one is about a historical narrative; the third deals with a few mythic stories; the fourth with a report of a sacred place full of cult objects, monuments and memories; whereas the fifth is about a description of two paintings. The studies were written separately, their aims and purposes are different, and they are also based on different theoretical backgrounds. In some of them I focus more directly on Pausanias, his attitudes and world-view. In others I just try to interpret the phenomena depicted in the text, and let Pausanias’ perspective be seen as a different point of view. Still, both the view of Pausanias and a modern interpretation of the subject matter are present in all five of them.

1.) The first study deals with two love-stories from the Achaean city, Patras, told by Pausanias in the seventh book of his work. The first of them is of a priest of Dionysos Kalydonios, unrequitedly loving and asking god Dionysos for help. The end is sort of a melodrama, when we see both, the priest and the beloved girl to die. It is a simple but unusual and striking plot—in Pausanias’ own interpretation a story about the power of ardent Love. The second story, closely related to a rite performed at Patras every year, is more complex. It has two stages: the first half of the story tells about a sacrilegious liaison of two lovers, and the punishment of the goddess Artemis on Patras, their city, for the lover’s deeds, in the form of yearly human sacrifices; whereas the second half is about the Dionysian madness of a Thessalian hero called Eurypyllos. The two parts of the second story are intertwined through the final episode when Eurypyllos finds remedy in the city of Patras at the same time when the Patraeans disengage from the yearly human sacrifice they had been forced to offer.
Artemis up to that day. The special way these two parts of the myth are combined in the rite allows us to interpret the myth in the light of the rite, and vice versa.

In my analysis I try to step over both the nineteenth-century concept that interprets Pausanian stories stemming from some Hellenistic literary sources, and the fashionable twentieth-century approach, according to which such rites are primarily *rites de passage*, initiations of the young. I try to understand these Patraean stories, cults, and myths told by Pausanias as one cultural complex where all the elements are interdependent and add something to each other.

2.) In the second study I consider one of the longest historical narratives of the *Description of Greece*, the chapters about the rise and fall of the Achaean League. The narration of Pausanias I set in the context of 1) the surviving fragments on the Achaean League of the historian Polybios, and 2) the somewhat sentimental interpretation of modern historians, who call the defeat of the League (the sack of Corinth by the Roman strategist Mummius in 146 BC) the ‘End of Greek Freedom’.

Pausanias as a historian recounts the events of the Achaean history in a continuous narrative and sets in the front a few leaders and a few decisive motives. His method is the contrary of the teleological narration style of Polybius: in Pausanias’ view the main role in history is played by the destiny (tychē, daímōn), which/who does not conduct history towards a fixed goal but punishes and recompenses for deeds of both peoples and individuals. On the other hand, on the level of the military and political leaders, Pausanias tries to make sense of the recent history and the deeds of its heroes and antiheroes in the light of more ancient historical paradigms, well-known ancient strategists, statesmen and soldiers (both successful and unsuccessful).

Pausanias does not interpret the victory of the Romans over the Achaean League as a tragic turn for the Greek nation, but looks at it as a starting point of a subjection of the Greeks by the Romans, similar to the former Macedon subjection. According to him the final defeat is a result of the unworthy and unreasonable deeds of the Achaean leaders on the one hand, and fits in a general scheme of decline on the other: the former well-being (eudaimonía) of the Greek city-states gradually passes and has passed away.

3.) The starting-point of the third study is the relatively new recognition that ‘myth’ is an entirely modern concept: the Greek stories, called ‘myths’ and ‘mythology’ from the end of the eighteenth century, were in their ancient context ‘real’
stories on a bygone period of the life of the humankind, told and retold in literary and historical genres. In antiquity, these narrations were occasionally criticized as being distorted or transformed, which criticism in itself is a historical inquiry and a criticism of historical sources in the ancient perspective on the one hand, ‘the tradition of rationalization of myth’, or ‘rationalistic criticism of mythology’ in modern terms on the other.

In the light of this recognition, in the case of Pausanias I try to show how he could on strictly rational grounds accept ‘miraculous’ and ‘irrational’ stories (called myths by us) as real historical narratives about the past. As a key concept I suggest his notion of the world as a changing world. According to this notion the distant past was in some aspects similar to the present, but in others totally different: big human and subhuman creatures (mostly born from Gaia/Earth) populated the world, and the Gods were much closer to and participated more often in the life of the humans. Unsurprisingly, the sources for this knowledge on the past for Pausanias were the most ancient Greek stories, the ‘myths’, and first of all the epics of Homer.

On the other hand, on the example of two ‘rationalized’ ‘mythical’ narratives told by Pausanias I try to demonstrate how these stories, historical for him, might function and might be seen as mythology and literature in modern readings. Additionally, from a theoretical point of view, with these Pausanian historical stories I try to raise or at least hint at the question what conclusions follow for the modern interpretation of myths from the new recognition that mythical stories are historical narratives turned into literature, and mythology the ‘petrified past’ of the Greeks.

4.) In the fourth study I examine the Pausanian account of the Athenian Acropolis as a lieux de mémoire. Pausanias’ text I set in the context of some other ancient Acropolis-descriptions (that of Strabo and Heracleides Kritikos), and some (ancient and modern) pictorial representations. In this juxtaposition the most important characteristic of the Pausanian account becomes clearly visible: he does not focus on the most famous buildings and objects (Parthenon, Athena Parthenos, Erechtheion, Athena Promachos, etc.) as symbols of the place to make them an icon, a representative illustration of the whole Acropolis, but relying on the cultic and historical context of the cult objects depicts the Acropolis as a place full of religious and historical memories. In his interpretations he deciphers the meaning of the objects as votive offerings (anathemata), pointing at given historical moments, deities, heroes or Athenian military leaders.
It is also worth noting that Pausanias, although from a historical perspective he denies the historical value of many stories credited by the Athenians, he still recounts these, for the sake of making sense of the objects in an Athenian context; that way he sets up all the objects and stories as constituents of Athenian identity. According to him, the relevance of these objects lies exactly in contributing to this identity, and this is why questions like ‘why this statue is erected?’, and ‘what does it stand for?’ are the most interesting ones for Pausanias.

The focus of the Pausanian description is neither aesthetics nor art-history, but history and religion. That way it manifests the difference between an ancient life- and usage-centred and a modern art-historical, museum-centred point of view. The difference is originating from our broader distance to the Greek world and the ancient Acropolis on the one hand, and the different ancient and modern ways of thinking on the other.

5.) The theme of the last study is two Polygnotean paintings in the so called Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi. I examine the methods Pausanias applies to understand what he sees on the picture. I am interested in the interpretation strategies he employs, the way he thinks of the relation of a picture to its denotations and meanings, and also in the question, how his description reflects, or in some cases does not reflect on his trains of thought and interpretative methods.

In my reading Pausanias looks at a picture not as an aesthetic object but as a testimony to past events; by means of the figures and the depicted stories he tries to enrich his own knowledge of a bygone Greek world. Although his hermeneutics, the way he studies the paintings and deciphers their elements is very similar to our modern interpretative methods in many respects, his understanding of the painting as a whole is totally alien to us. He considers stories fictional for us as real, and he does not even consider art as a tool for making up a non-existent world. That makes ‘mythical’ paintings for him function as reports the same way as photographs in the newspapers do for us.
Publications based on the doctoral research:


The most important scholarly works consulted:


