Georgios Pachymeres between Ethnography and Narrative: 
Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι 3.3–5

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Georgios Pachymeres’ Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι records the reigns of Michael VIII Palaiologos and his son Andronikos (i.e. the years 1260–1307). In Book 3, after the latest chapter in Michael VIII’s embarrassing transactions with Patriarch Arsenios, Pachymeres shifts his attention to the Emperor’s eastern policies (chapters 3–5), namely his diplomatic relations with the Τόχας (the Mongols) and the Αἰθίοπες (the Mameluks). Recounting the embassies of the


latter to Constantinople, Pachymeres tells the strange story of a Cuman slave who, though being himself supposedly ἀσύνετος, “devoid of intelligence,” rose to power and became the Sultan of his former masters, the ἄγαν συνετοί and sophisticated Ethiopians. Subsequently, this white, warlike Cuman, now paradoxically King of the dusky, languid Ethiopians, bamboozles the Byzantine Emperor by sneaking Scythian slaves from the Euxine into Egypt. With his newfound army the ex-slave sweeps away with ruthless force τὰ κατὰ Συρίαν (ch. 5) and wreaks havoc in the empire. Midway through this engrossing narrative, which towards the end breaks into pathetic and irate lamentation for Byzantine losses in the Near East (καὶ νῦν κεῖται μὲν ἡ Περσεφονής Ἀντιόχεια … θρηνεῖ Λαοδίκεια … τὰ μεγάλα τῶν Ταλάν ἀστεα ὡς οἵδ' ἔχαν λογιζόμεναι, etc.), Pachymeres digresses on a pedestrian ethnographic comparison of “Scythians” and “Ethiopians” (ch. 3). In this section, Pachymeres conceptualizes the differences between the two peoples in terms of binary oppositions, which relate physique (black/white, soft/hard, etc.) with character (vehement/indolent, brave/cowardly, etc.), thus venturing a physiological account of their natural and psychological traits. This digression, itself quite strange, as we shall see, despite all its traditional overtones, is followed by an even stranger chapter on a curiosum (ch. 4: περὶ καμήλοπαρδάλεως, ὃποῖον ἐστιν), which at first sight rings like an intemperate afterthought.

Chapters 3–5 of Book 3, therefore, constitute quite an assortment of historiographical elements, at least on the surface: they combine paradoxography with ethnography; “tragic,” rhetorically heightened and sentimental style with dry, “scientific” physiology; anecdotal gossip with consequential political discourse. In this paper, we shall try to make sense of this section of Pachymeres’ Συγγραφικαὶ Ἱστορίαι, to see how its disparate elements come together, by (a) restoring some of its cultural background, focusing mainly on Pachymeres’ departures from the classical tradition; and (b) attempting connections and associations between the various narrative

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The peculiarities of the ethnographic digression in ch. 3, we shall argue, the extent to which this passage evokes but also undermines classical patterns and motifs, are at the core of this section. The very elements in Pachymeres’ account which appear the most extraneous and digressive may well be the ones that encapsulate the political punch of his discourse. This paper, therefore, will connect Pachymeres’ ethnology with narrative, that is, the historian’s overall historiographical and political agenda. It is hoped that this analysis will contribute to our understanding of Pachymeres’ elaborate and “obscure” style of writing.

The crucial passage reads:4

τὸν δέ γε τὸν Αἰθιόπων οὐσιλάν ἄλλη τις χρείαι τῷ βασιλείς σπένηδοςκατηργάζεται ἐκ Κομάνων γὰρ ὄν ἐκείνος, εἰς τὸν εἰς δουλείαν ἀποδεδομένων, τὸ γένος ἐξητήτα αἰτίαν συνετὴν ὁτι καὶ ἐπάγων ἐγγύσις. τὸ γὰρ ἀντικρύ ἄλληλαγείματα τῆς γῆς, τὸ τε βόρειον καὶ τὸ νότιον, ἔμφυτος ταῖς δυνάμεσιν ἐπὶ τὰ συμματικὴ καὶ ψυχικὴ διαθέσεις αντιπροσώπησαν, ὅπερ δήτα καὶ κράσιαν, εἰς τοῖς οὐκ ἴσων ἄλλων ἰσόφων ἰσόψυχοι ἐκεῖνος, ἐκ τῶν εἰς δουλείαν ἀποδεδομένων, τὸ γένος ἐζήτει κατ’ αἰτίαν συνετὴν, ὅτι καὶ ἐπαίνων ἐγγύσις. τὰ γὰρ ἀντικρύ ἄλληλαγείματα τῆς γῆς, τὸ τε βόρειον καὶ τὸ νότιον, ἔμφυτος ταῖς δυνάμεσιν ἐπὶ τὰ συμματικὴ καὶ ψυχικὴ διαθέσεις αντιπροσώπησαν, ὅπερ δήτα καὶ κράσιαν, εἰς τοῖς οὐκ ἴσων ἴσων ἰσόψυχοι ἐκεῖνος, ἐκ τῶν εἰς δουλείαν ἀποδεδομένων, τὸ γένος ἐζήτει κατ’ αἰτίαν συνετὴν, ὅτι καὶ ἐπαίνων ἐγγύσις. 

4 Georges Pachymèrés, Relations historiques I, edition, introduction, notes A. Failler, transl. V. Laurent (CFHB 24.1 [Paris 1984]) 237. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.
A different need forced the Sultan of the Ethiopians to come to terms with the Emperor. For being of Cuman descent he was one of those who had been given over into slavery and thus sought after his race for an understandable and well nigh laudable reason. For the opposing climates of the globe, the north and the south, on account of certain innate qualities, are ranged in antithetical manner by the physical and mental disposition as well as by the temperaments they are conducive to, whereby one might mark significant differences not only amongst senseless animals of the same species, but also amongst men. In northern regions, animals have white hides, whereas in southern regions they are dark. Men in northern regions are devoid of intelligence, in some cases being found to be barely rational. Amongst them there are no intellectual sciences, no studies of nature, no knowledge, no thought, no organisation of everyday life or practice of arts or other things whereby men distinguish themselves from irrational beasts. Rather, they have an uncontrollable and ever-ready inclination to battle, are keen to rush forward against one another, if anyone spur them on, like reckless Bacchants in pursuit of sacrifice or libation-bearers of Ares. In southern regions, however, the case is the opposite. For the men there are noble and very wise, and excellent in political science and the arts and intellectual pursuits and deliberations on every matter. But they are slow of impulse and soft in battle, living in inertia and choosing to have less rather than plenty through exertion.

Taking physical phenomena into consideration, one might name the sun as the cause of this. In the first case, the sun has little contact and only for a short time, not warming the brain in the right measure, whereby nobility of nature is wont to arise, but rather causing the skin to harden and producing rigidity in the body’s members. In the second case, however, through greater contact with the body’s members the sun warms the brain to nobility, but reduces virility in the body’s members overall. For natural law enjoins that souls share the changes undergone by bodies.

5 Literally “to speak in the language of natural philosophers,” cf. LSJ s.v. φυσικέομαι.
Let us begin by examining Pachymeres’ ethnic terminology. Such onomatological archaism as employed here by Pachymeres is common in Byzantine historians. By “Scythians” Pachymeres means peoples of the Eurasian steppe, mainly the Cumans.\(^6\) Of such Cuman origin were the slaves (mameluks), who originally formed the guard of the Ayyubid Sultan of Egypt and later took control of the country to create the Mameluk sultanate of Egypt under Sultan Baybars (1260–1277).\(^7\) By “Ethiopians” the historian refers to the dark-skinned races of northeastern Africa, now under Mameluk rule. In his generic usage of the terms—“Scythian” to encompass the nomadic tribes beyond the Sea of Azov and “Ethiopian” to include both the mixed Nilotic type and the Negroid living along the Nile and spreading from the μεσόγαια of Libya to the Arabian peninsula (Diod. 3.8.1–2)—Pachymeres is in line with the most authoritative ancient sources, for instance Strabo (1.2.27).\(^8\)

For a Greek, the Ethiopians were a race of black skin, flat nose, thick lips, and curled, woolly hair.\(^9\) The curliness of their hair was caused by heat (Arr. Ind. 6.9). The same cause accounts for the shape of their legs: [Arist.] Probl. 909a; [Verg.] Moretum 35; Petr. Sat. 102.15.

The image and character of the Scythians, too, as presented

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\(^8\) The evidence is carefully compiled in F. M. Snowden, Jr., Blacks in Antiquity. Ethiopians in Greco-Roman Experience (Cambridge [Mass.] 1970) 1–21. Fragments of ancient “horographical” and ethnographical works on Egypt and Ethiopia are collected by Jacoby, FGrHist 608a–673, on Scythia 841–844.

\(^9\) Diod. 3.8.2: χρώας εἰσὶ μέλανες, ταῖς δὲ ἴδεαις ομοί, τοῖς δὲ τριχώμασιν οὐλο. Compare also Herodotus’ description of the Egyptians as μελέχρας ... καὶ οὐλότριχες (2.104).
by Pachymeres (especially their prowess in war and their proverbial virtuosity in horse riding and archery), as well as the unforgiving harshness of their land, are also traditional: see, e.g., the Ἐθνικοὶ λόγοι in Herodotus (Book 4) and the Hippocratic De aëre aquis et locis 18–22, etc.10 Pachymeres, though, is more forthcoming on the Scythians’ ἔθος than their physical appearance: one major physical detail with bearing on character, which prevails in accounts of Scythian peoples, but is curiously omitted in Pachymeres, is τὸ πυρρόν (Hippoc. Aër. 20), generally a sign of πανουργία.11 Another divergence may be noted between Pachymeres and the classical tradition: while Pachymeres stresses the thickened skin of the Scythians and the στερρότης of their limbs as natural products of the cold, the Hippocratic author (Aër. 19) emphasizes, on the contrary, for the same exact reason, their υγρότης, their πιμελή and ψιλή flesh and their παχέα and σαρκώδεα εἴδεα: the perceived dryness of the Scythians is the result not of nature, but of a custom, according to which the Scythians cauterize their bodies, to remove the excess of moisture and to render them better braced, nourished, and articulated (Aër. 20). In his interest to present the Scythians as warlike and fearsome as possible, Pachymeres disregards the fact that νόμος, after all, is just as decisive a determinant of φύσις and ἔθος as the climate, a central argument in the Hippocratic treatise.

Generally, however, and despite small incongruities in mat-

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ters of detail, there is little doubt that Pachymeres aspires to register his narrative in the context of ancient physiological theory, more specifically in the adjoined fields of humoural ethnology and physiognomics: for τὸν ἥλιον αἰτιάσαι ἄν τις φυσικευόμενος cf. Galen’s φυσικευομένος τοῖς φιλοσόφοις (Adv. ea quae a Juliano, XVIII 256.4 K.). Terms like δύναμις (“power, faculty”), διάθεσις (“disposition”), εὐφυία (“balanced disposition, good nature”) and, of course, κρᾶσις (“temperament”) are keywords of a discipline that combines acute medical observation and ethnographical empiricism with ideology and prejudice, thus putting under systematic study the correlation between climate, topography, diet, and body chemistry, on the one hand, and human character and behaviour, on the other. What we are dealing with is a hodgepodge of such disparate elements as ethnography, astrology, biology, humoural theory, philosophy, even social engineering and politics, first amalgamated into a single coherent system by Aristotle and his school. Although physiognomics owed much to Hippocratic and other pioneers and did not reach its true apogee until Late

12 On the history of ancient ethnography, see K. E. Müller, Geschichte der antiken Ethnographie und ethnologischen Theorienbildung (Wiesbaden 1972–1980).


Antiquity—first with Galen\textsuperscript{15} and Polemon (II A.D.) and then with Adamantius (IV A.D.)\textsuperscript{16}—it was the Peripatetics who first gave physiognomics a sound syllogistic foundation as inductive inference from signs (\textit{δε} γὰρ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἄφαντων τοῖς φανεροῖς μαρτυρίοις χρήσθαι, Arist. \textit{Eth. Nic.} 1104a13–14),\textsuperscript{17} an \textit{ἐνθύμημα εἰς σημείων} (\textit{An.pr.} 70a2).\textsuperscript{18} The ethnological physiognomics practiced by Pachymeres in 3.3–5, that is, inferring ἰθος from racial type, was one of three main physiognomical methodologies in Antiquity (the others being zoological analogy and \textit{ἐκ τῶν ἰθῶν τῶν ἐπιφαινομένων}, cf. [Arist.] \textit{Phgn.} 805a18–32). Ethno-physiognomics was arguably less arbitrary than the other two (see the criticism of the author himself, \textit{Phgn.} 805b1–27), but no less schematic and biased.

In the last sentence of the passage, Pachymeres clearly reformulates the discipline’s basic axiom: συμμετατίθεσθαι γὰρ τοῖς σώματι τὰς ψυχὰς ὁ φυσικὸς λόγος δίδωσι.\textsuperscript{19} Body and soul exist in harmony and “sympathy”; the movements of the first affect the second and vice versa. The fact that Pachymeres connects ἰθος with climate bespeaks also his grasp of the other foundational principle, that environmental and overall geographical conditions determine both health and “character”


\textsuperscript{16} On Polemon see S. Swain (ed.), \textit{Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam} (Oxford/New York 2007). A study of physiognomics in Byzantium is, so far as I know, still a desideratum.


\textsuperscript{18} For the genera likely to yield physiognomical information, see [Arist.] \textit{Phgn.} 806a26 ff.

\textsuperscript{19} Compare, apart from Galen, Arist. \textit{An.pr.} 70b6–8: τὸ δὲ φυσιογνωμονεῖν δυνατόν ἐστιν εἰ τὰς δόξαν ἐμα μεταβάλλει τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ὧδε φυσικά ἐστὶ παθήματα, and [Arist.] \textit{Phgn.} 805a1–2: ὅτι αἱ διάνοιαι ἐποντοῦ τοῖς σώματι καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν αὐταί καθ’ ἑαυτὰς ἀπαθεῖς οἴσαι τῶν τὸν σῶματος χαιρέον.
(ἦθος), because they bear directly on the humoral chemistry of the human body (Hippoc. Aër. 1). This chemistry, and thus health, relies on the balance of opposites (cf. Pachymeres’ ἀντιπεπῶνθασιν): first, the four elemental conditions (hot/cold, moist/dry), and then the four χυμοί (“humours”) phlegm, blood, yellow and black bile. This balance is secured by the temperate and timely change of seasons (Hippoc. Nat.hom. 7).

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Table 1: The Hippocratic Theory of Humours, as expounded in Nature of Man

Pachymeres’ discussion, therefore, reflects traditional ethno-logical principles. The historian adopts an absolute binary model of symmetrical opposition between North and South. He regards Scythia and Ethiopia as opposites in terms of both geography and people’s ethos. Northerners are strong and reckless in battle, but barely logical and not at all civilised. Southerners on the contrary are soft (μάλακοι may also mean “cowardly”21) but εὐφυεῖς; sluggish, but intelligent and endowed with the highest qualities of culture. Northerners may be veritable Bacchants, worshippers of Ares with no γνῶσις or φρόνησις, but should they have a leader, they are unstoppable in battle. Southerners may be masters of the political game, but given a choice, they will sit back and do nothing.

In ancient geographical accounts, as in Pachymeres, Scythia and Ethiopia constitute the utmost boundaries of mankind in


21 Thuc. 6.13: ὅπως μὴ δύξει, ἐὰν μὴ ψηφίζηται πολεμεῖν, μάλακος εἶναι.
North and South, just as India and Iberia determine East and West. In Strabo, Scythians and Ethiopians are ἀντίποδαι ἀλλήλοις (1.1.13). The contrast between Scythians and Ethiopians, on the basis of pairs such as cold/hot, rough/soft, and fierce/spiritless, constitutes a κοινὸς τόπος trickling down the whole body of Greek literature from Hesiod on. F. M. Snowden identifies three different motives behind this τόπος: (a) to present the Ethiopians as examples of anthropological or geographical “others” with reference to Greeks; (b) to account for racial diversity; (c) to express the conviction that race is inconsequential, because all men have been created equal, κατ’ εἰκόνα καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ Θεοῦ. None of these seems to apply exactly in the case of Pachymeres. Unlike, for instance, Herodotus, he does not make explicit comparisons between “self” and “other”; although he does explicate the natural causes of the Scythian/Ethiopian antithesis, Pachymeres does not care to embark on a long-winded discussion of racial diversity; and he is definitely not delivering a Sunday sermon. We need to follow the threads of the narrative and understand the divergence of his own account from the general norm, in order to fathom, to whatever extent this is feasible, Pachymeres’ own motives.

What, then, is peculiar in Pachymeres’ ethno-physiognomical digression? It is certainly not the sharp antithesis between Ethiopias and Scythia per se (that in itself is neither rare nor inexplicable). Neither is the image of Scythian fierceness. This last feature may not be painted in particularly bright hues by ancient sources, where Scythian traits are usually interpreted as

22 See also Ephorus FrGrHist 70 F 30a and 30b, especially the latter, quoted by Cosmas Indicopleustes, the most important Byzantine geographer (the word ἀντίκειται here is particularly weighty). On the notion of the antipodes in Antiquity, see G. Moretti, Gli Antipodi. Avventure letterarie di un mito scientifico (Parma 1994) esp. 17–48.

23 For all the evidence, see Snowden, Blacks 171–177. Despite the fact that in the traditional book division a whole book separates the Αἰγυπτιακὸς from the Σκυθικὸς λόγος in Herodotus, it is clear that there also the two are symmetrical. See J. Redfield, “Herodotus the Tourist,” CP 80 (1985) 97–118, esp. 106–109.

24 Snowden, Blacks 172.
signs of σκαιότης, ἀγριότης, and κακότης, and, although respected, the Scythians are hardly ever “honoured,” as in Pachymeres (ἐτίμων τὸ Σκυθικὸν Ἁιθίοπες, ch. 3 [p.237.25]); however, the Byzantine historian does not deviate much from the norm here. It is rather the Αἰθιοπικὸς λόγος that strikes us as odd: the warmth of praise Pachymeres bestows upon the Ethiopians, the vehemence of his endorsement, and of course the transfer to them of much that in other sources is reserved for peoples living in different geographical regions. All in all, Pachymeres’ earnest attempt to appreciate his North and South subjects, not as extremes with reference to a tertium comparationis, as in most ancient sources, but as symmetrical opposites, balancing each other with their pros and cons, does not seem to have an exact ancient analogue. Let us examine these traits more closely.

In the physiognomic corpus, intelligence is not a quality often ascribed to Ethiopians or Asians as a whole. The physiognomic characteristics attributed to them cannot be conducive to the development of a very sophisticated civilisation. In Ps.-Aristotle Physiognomonica (807a12–33), people like the Ethiopians, as ἄγαν μέλανες and τρίχας σφόδρα οὔλας ἔχοντες, are δειλοί; but, pace Pachymeres, being δειλοί such peoples are automatically disqualified from being εὐφυεῖς at the same time. In fact, the εὐφυής constitutes the mean between such extreme types as the Scythian and the Ethiopian, cf. [Arist.] Phgn. 807b12–19:

εὐφυοῦς σημεία σὰρξ ὑγροτέρα καὶ ἀπαλωτέρα, οὐκ εὐεκτικὴ οὐδὲ πεμπλόδης σφόδρα· τὰ περὶ τὰς ὀμοπλάτας καὶ τράχηλον ἑσυχότερα, καὶ τὰ περὶ τὸ πρόσωπον, καὶ σύνδετα τὰ περὶ τὰς ὀμοπλάτας, καὶ τὰ κάτω ἄφειμένα· εὐλίτα τὰ περὶ τὰς πλευράς· καὶ τὸν νόστον ἀσαρκότερος· τὸ σῶμα λευκέρυθρον καὶ καθαρόν· τὸ δερμάτιον λεπτόν, τριχωμάτιον μηδὲ μέλαν, οὐδὲ ὑγρὸν.

The signs of a man with good natural disposition are flesh rather moist and soft, not overly conditioned or overly fat. Around the shoulder-blades and the neck, he is rather lean, as he is around the face, while around the shoulder-blades, again, he is well-set

25 [Polemon] Phgn. 8 (I 393 Foerster).
26 See also [Polemon] Phgn. 6, 56 (386–388, 392–397, 410 F.).
and his lower parts are more relaxed. His loins are loose and his back is not too fleshy. His body is of a rosy complexion and clear. His skin is thin, with hair not excessively hard or black. His eyes are bright, moist.27

Indeed the communis opinio on Ethiopians is that they were savage rather than cultured. The account in Diodorus (3.8.1–6), for example, is damning. Ethiopians are wild and beastly, not so much in their spirit as in their way of life. They live in squalor, usually naked, covering only their private parts or using makeshift garments. They have no sense of social solidarity; they display no signs of “civilised life” (βίος ἥμερος). The dissonance of this image with Pachymeres’ seasoned politicians, sensible governors, and excellent artists and thinkers is remarkable.

In the end, Pachymeres’ Αἰθιοπικὸς λόγος is striking above all for one absolutely fundamental reason: in its rather over-enthusiastic reassessment of the Ethiopians and its strict binary structure (the tertium comparationis, we repeat, seems strangely absent), the passage seems to disregard the most essential principle underpinning Greek physiological theory, the Doctrine of the Mean.28 For a fairly well-informed commentator and teacher of Aristotle,29 this is certainly odd. Even if Pachymeres is not known to have been error-free in his Aristotelian read-

28 The best relevant study is T. Tracy, Physiological Theory and the Doctrine of the Mean in Plato and Aristotle (The Hague 1969).
ings, disregarding the Doctrine of the Mean is too serious an omission to have been made entirely by accident.

Ancient ethnology and ethno-physiognomics are without exception predicated on the Doctrine of the Mean: ἔλλειψις and ὑπερβολή balance each other around a μεσότης. Whether they recognized three (Aristotle), five (Parmenides, Posidonius), or six (Polybius) geographical zones, all major Greek geographers and ethnologists accepted the notion of εὐκρασία. Significantly, this notion is also implied in the ancient geographer whose work, along with Strabo’s, had perhaps the most currency in Pachymeres’ cultural environment, Claudius Ptolemy. All ethnology founded on the theory of humours regards the North and the South (the ἀρκτικὴ ζώνη and the τροπικὴ ζώνη) as extremes surrounding a μεσότης, the εὔκρατος ζώνη of the Mediterranean. Aristotle located all positive traits of character around this basin; the locus classicus is in Pol. 1327b20–36:

σχεδὸν δὴ κατανοήσειν ἄν τις τούτο γε, βλέψας ἐπὶ τε τὰς πόλεις τὰς εὐδοκιμούσας τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ πρὸς πάσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, ὡς διελήπτει στὸν ἑθεισμὸν, τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐν τοῖς ψυχροῖς τόποις ἔθνη καὶ τὰ περὶ τὴν Εὐρώπην θυμοῦ μὲν ἐστὶ πλήρη, διανοίας δὲ ἐνδεέστερα καὶ τέχνης, διόπερ ἐλεύθερα μὲν διατελεῖ μᾶλλον, ἀπολίτευτα δὲ καὶ τῶν πλησίον ἄρχειν οὐ


31 Most important here is [Poseidon] Phgn. 5–6 and Adamantius Phgn. 2.31–32 (382–388 F.). Galen, too, applying the notion of κρᾶσις to ethnology, believes that the best-tempered (or blended) person is one who represents the absolute mean between extremes—thinness and fatness, softness and hardness, warmth and cold. See Evans, Physiognomies 25–26.

32 See the discussion in Posidonius fr.49 Edelstein-Kidd, preserved by Strabo.

33 See Laiou, in The Making of Byzantine History 95.


35 Some discussion of this passage in reference to Pachymeres is attempted in S. Lampakis, “Ὑπερφυσικὲς δυνάμεις, φυσικὰ φαινόμενα καὶ δεισιδαιμονίες στὴν ἱστορία τοῦ Γεωργίου Παχυμέρη,” Symmeikta 7 (1987) 77–100, at 92.
Now this [the natural character of the ideal citizen] one might almost discern by looking at the famous cities of Greece and by observing how the whole inhabited world is divided up among the nations. The nations inhabiting the cold places and those of Europe are full of spirit but somewhat deficient of intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organization and capacity to rule their neighbours. The peoples of Asia on the other hand are intelligent and skilful in temperament, but lack spirit, so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery. But the Greek race participates in both characters, just as it occupies the middle position geographically, for it is both spirited and intelligent; hence it continues to be free and to have very good political institutions, and to be capable of ruling all mankind, if it attains constitutional unity. The same diversity also exists among the Greek races compared with one another: some have a one-sided nature, others are happily blended in regard to both capacities. (transl. Rackham)

Examined closely, Pachymeres’ discourse does not seem compatible with Aristotle’s tripartite model. Aristotle’s διανοητικά καὶ τεχνικά τὴν ψυχὴν may seem analogous to Pachymeres’ formulations, but in fact it allows for much less than the Byzantine historian’s inmoderate superlatives ἀμφότεροι, ἄλλοι καὶ ἄγαν συνετοί). Moreover, although Pachymeres does openly recognize that the Scythians constitute an ἐλεύθερον regarding the degree of sunshine warming their brains (ch. 3 [p.237.19–20]: ὧν μετρίως θερμαίνοντα τὸν ἐγκέφαλον), it is by no means obvious whether the prepositional ἐπὶ πλέον used of the Ethiopians means “more than the Mean” (thus being an ὑπερβολή) or simply “more than the Scythians,” thus in effect constituting a Mean. Finally, and most telling, Pachymeres uses a catchword ἐφύσει, which, as we saw above, is taboo in ethno-physiognomical theory for any nation that ἔχει τὴν
φέσιν μονόκωλον and is used only for those that εὐ κέχραται. One wonders whether what we have here is simply a case of sloppy verbal overcompensation or whether one can read more into it.

Aristotle’s Politics is an attempt to conceptualize the marking differences between Greeks and other nations. As such it is naturally biased. It seems conceivable that Pachymeres’ binary pattern represents an attempt for an objective, non-self-referential discussion along the lines of the second part of Airs Waters Places.36 Indeed, the Hippocratic author, dividing the globe in two continents in lieu of the usual three, compares “Europe” and “Asia” (Ethiopia being part of the latter) in a manner quite reminiscent of Pachymeres and seemingly with the same approving tone as regards Asia. His comparison is underscored by a double conviction, which seems to approximate that of Pachymeres fairly closely: (a) that the two continents are opposites; and (b) that everything in Asia is superior to anything in Europe, because of the balanced cycle of the seasons (12.1–3);


37 Cf. also Ἀν. 16.1: περί δὲ τῆς ἀθυμίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τῆς ἁνα-νδρείας, ὡς ἀπολεμώται εἷς τῶν Εὐρωπαίων οἱ Ασίνοι καὶ ἡμερότεροι τὰ ἥθεα.
Now I intend to compare Asia and Europe, and to show how they differ in every respect, and how the nations of the one differ entirely in physique from those of the other. I hold that Asia differs very widely from Europe in the nature of all its inhabitants and of all its vegetation. For everything in Asia grows to far greater beauty and size; the one region is less wild than the other, the character of the inhabitants is milder and more gentle. The cause of this is the temperate climate, because it lies towards the east midway between the risings of the sun, and farther away than is Europe from the cold. Growth and freedom from wildness are more fostered, when nothing is forcibly predominant, but equality in every respect prevails. (transl. Jones)

Pachymeres’ insistence on the effects of sunshine on the brain and his apparent neglect of the role of the cardiovascular system is evidence that he may be choosing to follow the encephalocentric tradition of Alcmaeon of Croton, Anaxagoras, and the Hippocratic doctors, rather than the cardio-haemocentrism encountered in Plato and in Aristotle’s biological works.38 This increases the possibility that Pachymeres reproduces Hippocratic models, but we should not be precipitous. For only on the face of it does the Hippocratic author operate on the notion of an absolute opposition between Europe and Asia; consequently, it cannot be argued that Pachymeres found in Hippocrates an ethnographic model that circumvents the Doctrine of the Mean.

The Hippocratic author’s discourse, too, is clearly governed by the principle of proper mixture, χρῆσις, which of course requires tripartite structures, hence the Mean. He may recognize only two continents, apparently going against the grain; he may be working on a binary pattern comprising two sets of opposites (north/south, east/west); but he can never be oblivious to that sense of symmetry and balance that produces the optimum result. The Hippocratic author’s general work pattern is

to set out general rules, only to qualify them in due course with the necessary nuances and exceptions. The universal law of difference between Europe and Asia is multiply compromised in what follows; in fact, in some cases, to the point of total contradiction. “Europe” and “Asia” are multifarious in climate and environment. Seven different regional varieties with wide variations between them render the postulation of a single, homogenous “Europe” rather strained (Aër. 24). Asia, too, may be less heterogeneous, but it is not uniform. We should be observant enough to see that the privileged characteristics mentioned above do not apply in an undifferentiated and unqualified manner to the whole of Asia, but to the region situated midway between the heat and the cold (so 12.19–45). This is a part which, as far as its moderate nature is concerned, has all the qualities of spring season, the yearly cycle’s μεσότης. The language here is emblematic of the Doctrine of the Mean.

It is unfortunate that, while the paradosis preserved four whole chapters on Scythia, the Egyptian part of De aëre, at the beginning of ch. 13, has been lost. However, there are clear indications in what remains that the Egyptians must have been treated as the foil of the Scythians. This symmetry between the two peoples can only mean that as the Scythians represent the ὑπερβολή of North, the Egyptians stand for the ὑπερβολή of South. The overall affinity between Egyptians and Scythians, an affinity in extremis, relies on the lack of seasonal variation in both regions, one of which is “oppressed” by extreme cold, the other by heat (18.1–5):

περὶ δὲ τῶν λοιπῶν Σκυθέων τῆς μορφῆς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἑωυτοῖσιν ἑόρται, καὶ οὐδαμῶς ἄλλοισι, ὃντος λόγος καὶ περὶ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων, πλὴν, ὅτι οἱ μὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ θερμοῦ εἰσὶ βεβιασμένοι, οἱ δ’ ὑπὸ τοῦ ψυχροῦ.

As to the physique of the other Scythians, in that they are like one another and not at all like others, the same remark applies to them as to the Egyptians, only the latter are distressed by the heat, the former by the cold.

Homogeneity of appearance among Scythians and Egyptians is proof that these peoples are not subjected to tempered seasonal change; hence they do not live in the most εἰχραστοί regions of Asia and Europe. In places where violent seasonal change occurs, great diversity of physical appearance is usually
the result (24). Uniformity of seasons does not allow proper κρᾶσις, whereas a correct cycle establishes equilibrium, with one season balancing the other. Any deviation from this cycle would have unhealthy repercussions: seasonal uniformity fosters corporal humidity, which leads to reduced physical fitness. So much for European vehemence! In fact, judging by the example of the Σαυφομάται (17), we may suspect that the Hippocratic author regards the warlike character of Scythians, just as much as τὸ ἄναλκες of Asians, as more the result of νόμος than of φύσις (see the famous discussion at 16 on the effect of despotism on Asian ἥθος). As we said, νόμος as determinant is something that Pachymeres chooses to ignore.

The Hippocratic author’s insistence on the extremes of each continent corresponds to the polarised geographical schematic by which he organizes the globe and which he puts in effect in the first part of the treatise (North/South, East/West). This schematic serves him best in order to show the defining role played by both climate and νόμος on the ἥθος of men. Finally, it allows him to locate the best possible condition, which is that part of Asia that is exposed to the eastern currents and whose climate is moderate and well-mixed. “Excellence” can only be fostered ἐν μεσότητι. If Pachymeres’ model is un-Aristotelian, it is ultimately un-Hippocratic as well.

One may suggest a number of explanations for Pachymeres’ “unorthodoxly” positive ethnological evaluation of the Ethiopians, at the extreme of southern heat, which contradicts most ancient authorities. One certainly is the conceptual and discursive merger of “Ethiopian” and “Egyptian,” which transposes onto the former the general admiration enjoyed by the latter among the Greeks. Much of what Pachymeres has to commend regarding the Ethiopians definitely comes from the tradition of Αἰγύπτιοι λόγοι, not Αἰθιοπικοὶ λόγοι. Just as “Ethiopian” is used as a generic ethnological term to include all the people of the Mameluk sultanate, similarly the information on the culture of Ethiopians is perhaps reprocessed in a scrambled fashion to comprise the cultural glamour of the Egyptians.

39 See Tracy, Physiological Theory 57.
Another plausible reason may also be the differing attitudes of certain Byzantine sources towards the Ethiopians. The journeys of Cosmas Indicopleustes in the kingdoms of Axum and Nadulis, and the fact that the Ethiopians were allies of the Byzantines in controlling the eastern routes, led to a favourable image of the Ethiopians in early Byzantium and beyond, despite the occasional imputation of Ethiopian demonology. The “blameless Ethiopians” of Homer (Il. 1.423), with their dignity, continence, wisdom, and astrological learning, became symbols of Christianity’s ecumenical mission.40

But a third, more nuanced process may be in play, which need not exclude the previous two, a process which touches upon the workings of Pachymeres’ own historical narrative. At first glance, one may be misled into believing that the praise of the Cuman-descended Ethiopian Sultan’s σύνεσις and the εὐφυία of the people he now rules may constitute implicit praise of the Emperor’s policies and the Empire’s new friends. The Sultan acts συνετῶς by seeking the Emperor’s alliance. The Ethiopian embassy to Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, whose main objective is to obtain permission for imports of slaves from Scythia, is the direct result of Byzantium’s renewed prestige after the recapture of Constantinople. The Byzantines control the Hellespont once again: anybody who wants to do business with the Euxine has to procure for himself “New Constantine’s” consent (τοῦτο δὲ ποιεῖν μὴ ἀξιοῦντας τὸν βασιλέα ἀμήχανον, p.237.30; hence κατηνάγαξεν at 237.2).

Much of this is of course true, but all in all Pachymeres is far from praising Michael VIII’s policies towards the barbarians. Failing to foresee the ramifications of his decision—in fact, failing to display the necessary φρόνησις on this particular βουλή (recall the terms of Pachymeres’ Ethiopian encomium)—the

Emperor allowed the Ethiopians to import Scythian mercenaries through the Euxine. Egyptian intelligence was supplemented with Scythian valour. What has this generated? Not peace, as the Emperor had hoped, but disaster, as the Ethiopians turned against their Byzantine allies.

As we hinted at the beginning, Pachymeres treats the antithesis between Ethiopians and Scythians with a view to a paradox, whose consequences for the Empire were grievous. How could it have come about in the first place that brawn overcame brains? A warlike, brute Cuman was first enslaved to the sluggish Egyptians (brains overcome brawn) and then became their Sultan because the Egyptians appreciated his valour: brains offset their shortcomings by accepting brawn in power. It seems reasonable to suggest that Pachymeres’ ethnological model eschews traditional tripartite structures, in order to underscore even more emphatically the constructive outcome of the merger—the κρᾶσις, for that matter—between two barbarian nations, otherwise imperfect on their own. Sultan Baybars’ acquired σύνεσις is the supreme exemplar of this novel, ominous balance: from two diametrical opposites stems the most beautiful harmony (ἐκ τῶν διαφερόντων καλλίστην ἁρμονίαν: Heraclitus fr.8 D.-K., quoted by Aristotle Eth.Nic. 1155b4, a work which Pachymeres commented upon, cf. n.29). Bipolarity, therefore, is essential rhetorically and narratologically; that it may contradict classical ethnology is immaterial.

Pachymeres directs pungent criticism at Michael VIII’s policies towards the barbarians, inasmuch as they have failed to anticipate the potentially explosive effects of merging brains with brawn. This is where the so-far-absent “we,” the elusive tertium comparationis of traditional ethnological models, comes into play, belatedly but all the more forcefully because of that. The positive attributes of North and South have come into perfect counterpoise and by so doing they have created a new formidable enemy—essentially, a new μεσότης, to displace the old one from its traditionally controlled territories. “We,” the Greeks, who should, supposedly, have possessed superiority over both extremes, allowed this to take place ταῖς ἡμετέραις ἁβουλίαις ἢ κακονοίαις ἢ αὐτονόμοις ὁμαίας καὶ ὅρθοις. The language is resonant of caustic and excruciating reversal: if the Ethiopians have intelligently infused themselves with the
positive qualities of the Scythians (ch. 5, p.241–8: θαρσούντας, ἀνδρίζεσθαι), the Greeks, it appears, have been infected by their shortcomings: ἄβουλία (absence of correct political deliberation), κακόν (malice), and above all ὁρμή and ὀρέξις, selfish, irrational impulse and desire.

This is the yardstick whereby the detailed description of the giraffe (ch. 4) inserted between the historical parts proper (ch. 3 and 5), should be read. Such indulgent attention to a gift donated by the Ethiopian Sultan to the Emperor, and that in the midst of a fairly grim account of territories lost, may seem like vintage historiographical ἀκρίσία, lack of judgment, (or ἀκρασία, intemperance!), on the part of Pachymeres, who arguably cannot resist the attractions of a curiosum. Nonetheless, in the face of what follows, the digression on the giraffe reeks of bitter sarcasm:

ὁ δὴ καὶ πολλάκις γεγονός ἡγεμονέν, ἐκείθεν μὲν τῶν χαρισμάτων πρὸς βασιλέα διαπεμπομένων, ἐντεῦθεν δὲ ἀνοιγομένης σφίσι τῆς πρὸς ἐκείνου κελεύθου … τούτο ἡ καμηλοπάρδαλις, ὡσεὶ τι τέρας, ἐκείθεν πρὸς βασιλέα διακομισθέν, ἡκάστης θέαμα ἄγοράς ἐλκόμενον (ch. 3, p.239.3–5, 26–28).

We have learned that this in fact has also happened a number of times, from there the gifts sent to the Emperor, from here the way opened for them towards the Scythians … And this giraffe, like a sort of monster, sent over to the Emperor from there, was a spectacle and a delight to onlookers every single day, as it was being dragged through the market place.

In its own way, this assorted beast may symbolise the very kingdom of the Mameluks, a curious blend of nations and idiosyncrasies, a τέρας in its own right. If so, such use of zoological allegory here would be extremely interesting.

41 Pachymeres’ account does not seem dependent on Cosmas Indicopleustes 11.4. On animals as gifts exchanged between the Byzantines and their neighbours, see N. Drocourt, “Les animaux comme cadeaux d’ambassade entre Byzance et ses voisins,” in B. Doumerc and Chr. Picard (eds.), Byzance et ses périphéries, Hommage à Alain Ducellier (Toulouse 2004) 67–93, esp. 70.

42 I owe this point to Professor Kaldellis.
Pachymeres does try to be fair: the Emperor may have consented to the Ethiopian alliance out of geopolitical considerations (δοκήσει τού συνοίσεν τοίς ἡμετέροις: ch. 4, p.241.1–2), but cheap, childish ploys like donating τέρατα (amidst many other χαρίσματα, which reached the capital not once but πολλάκις) were no mean bait, apparently. Michael’s lack of both foresight and a strong hand in dealing with the barbarians (apparently because he underestimated the threat they posed, compared with enemies in the West), for all his intent to foster peace, proved “immensely disastrous” (ἐς μέγιστον ἐλυμήνατο: p.241.3). The Tochars (Mongols) and, of course, the Seljuks are ante portas. The Emperor is employing towards them a policy of condescending appeasement, arranging marriages and dispatching splendid gifts (δουλικαῖς ὑπελεύθεροι κήδη ποιοῦντες καὶ δορφοφοροῦντες συγχάσας τὰ κάλλιστα τε καὶ μέγιστα)—including a daughter ἐκ σκοτίων σπερμάτων. The result of this appeasement policy is that the Tochars managed through “friendship” to get their hands on what προσταλπαροῦντες πολέμῳ μόλις ἀν ἐκτῶντο (ch. 5, p.243.4–10). Further along in the narrative (ch. 22) Pachymeres will elaborate on Michael VIII’s blameworthiness for the loss of Asia Minor: pernicious social policies (heavy taxation as a means to subdue the border population’s rebellious tendencies); bad choices of imperial dignitaries to be sent to the eastern border; above all, however, the erroneous conviction that Asia Minor, being “just around the corner” (ὡς ἐπὶ θύρας οὖσαν) would be readily recoverable ὅτε δὴ καὶ θελήσοι (“whenever he would feel like it”). Evidently, the more Pachymeres foregrounds the marshaled strength of Michael’s enemies, the more catastrophic appears the Emperor’s supercilious attitude towards those enemies and those who could foil them. After all, patronizingly, Michael VIII ἐπὶ τοῖς δυναμοῖς πάσαν εἶχεν τὴν ἀσχολίαν τὰ ἐν ποι ἀπαραϊτέμενος (“was completely occupied with the West, utterly neglecting what was right at his feet”).

Scholars have long noted Pachymeres’ interest in Asia Minor and the Black Sea, as well as his overall ethnographic curiosity. They have also remarked that for all of his impressively accurate observations on these regions, his interest in the West was rather perfunctory and generally limited to the nexus of Byzantine-Western relations. The most useful insight to bear in
mind, however, is that for Pachymeres geography, hence ethnography as well, was political. Pachymeres had an eye for ethnographic detail, but also, certainly, the uncanny ability to weave such observation into an intricate and sophisticated fabric of internal and international complexities. That Byzantine historiography tended to reserve ethnographic observations mainly for relatively unknown “barbarian” nations; or that Pachymeres, born and raised in Nicaea, identified the Empire exclusively with the East and granted rather limited scope to the West—these go only half way toward explaining the measure of respect Pachymeres bestows upon the Empire’s enemies in the East. Pachymeres’ eastward gaze derived from his reading of the historical tides, a reading which gainsaid that of the Emperor: whereas Michael VIII still considered the West as the major threat to the integrity of the Empire and mustered his political efforts around thwarting Charles of Anjou or the Greek sovereigns of Epirus, Pachymeres realised that the growing power of the Mongols and the Seljuks would sooner rather than later have to be reckoned with and that alliances with those and other eastern nations were short-sighted, extemporary solutions likely to cause more mayhem than they could possibly avert. This realisation is given programmatic significance in the proem of Pachymeres’ work, a passage which Ruth Macrides recently called “the finest piece of historical analysis by any Byzantine writer.” Pachymeres cannot be more explicit: the reason for the gradual decline of the Empire was nothing other than the abandonment of the Eastern border.

Pachymeres’ narrative in 3.3–5 is ultimately a cautionary tale, a warning of worse things to come and a desperate call for

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45 Laiou, in The Making of Byzantine History 96.
a stronger hand: 47 “we are still holding back the audacity of the Tochars, but not with audacious force (Τοχάρων δὲ τοῦ θρά- 
σους καὶ ἕτι ἀνέχομεν, οὐ δυνάμειν οὐμενούν θαρσαλέας, ch. 5, p. 243.3–4). The ethnological digression provides the 
perspective, which the Emperor should have had but did not 
have in his dealings with those nations: awareness of the 
historical momentum created by a series of dangerous alliances 
and a mutual empowerment between barbarian nations enclos-
ing the Empire into an ever-tightening grip. Pachymeres was 
not interested to observe every last shred of ethnophysig- 
nomical accuracy in his account: he did not hesitate to deviate from 
standard ethnological models, because narrative, not ethnology 
was his main concern. I believe that for all the inaccuracies, for 
instance, in Pachymeres’ Aristotelian works, the departures 
from the classical tradition in this passage are neither ignorant 
nor accidental. Pachymeres manipulates his sources with 
“surgical” readjustments mainly of phrasing—consequential 
enough to make a difference but not brash enough to be im-
mediately spotted. Overemphasising Ethiopian sophistication, 
investing the Ethiopians with traits pertaining to the Mean, 
may have been ethnologically inaccurate, but it was narrato-
logically expedient. In the light of the historical end result, it 
made perfect sense. 48

December, 2008

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47 For the viewpoint of modern historians on the issue, see Nicol, Last 
Centuries 80–81; and A. Ducellier, “L’abandon de l’Asie par Byzance: de 
sens des mots à la réalité des choses,” BF 25 (1999) 15–43. For the different, 
more positive appraisal of Michael VIII in Nikephoros Gregoras’ work, see 
V. Georgiadou, Ἡ εἰκόνα τῆς αὐτοκρατορικῆς ἐξουσίας καὶ ἡ ἱδεολογία τῆς 

48 I am indebted to Professors Stephanos Efthymiadis, Anthony Kaldellis, 
and Dr. Christos Simelidis, for their helpful comments and encouragement. 
The suggestions, bibliographical and other, by the editorial board and the 
anonymous referee of GRBS were also invaluable. Special gratitude is due to 
Professor Efthymiadis for his help with Uspensky’s Russian among so many 
other things.