

“LINGUA ET NATIO” IN EASTERN EUROPE
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 14TH CENTURY
ACCORDING TO THE DATA
FROM “DESCRIPTIO EUROPAE ORIENTALIS”¹

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Abstract: The author considers the changes in the perception of geographical space by Europeans in the Late Middle Ages. Particularly, the text is devoted to the issue of the inclusion of the territories eastwards of Europe, within the mental map of medieval people. On the basis of information from anonymously authored Latin treatise “Descriptio Europae Orientalis” the definition of “nation” for the Slavic-Byzantine frontier of Europe is ascertained.

Keywords: Mental Map, Perception of Geographical Space, Descriptio Europae Orientalis, Late Medieval.

“LINGUA ET NATIO” ВА УСХОДНЬОЙ ЕЎРОПЕ
Ў ПАЧАТКУ XIV СТАГОДДЗЯ ПАВОДЛЕ КРЫНІЦЫ
“DESCRIPTIO EUROPAE ORIENTALIS”

Анатацыя: Аўтар разглядае змены ва ўспрыманні геаграфічнай прасторы еўрапейцамі ў перыяд Позняга Сярэднявечча. У прыватнасці, тэкст прысвечаны праблеме ўключэння тэрыторый на Усход ад Еўропы ў ментальную мапу чалавека эпохі Сярэднявечча. Значэнне тэрміна “natio” для тэрыторыі Славянска-Візантыйскага памежжа Еўропы вызначаецца на аснове інфармацыі з ананімнага лацінамоўнага трактата “Descriptio Europae Orientalis”.

Ключавыя словы: ментальная мапа, успрыманне геаграфічнай прасторы, Descriptio Europae Orientalis, Позняе Сярэднявечча.

¹ This publication is a part of my research work at Lund University, thanks to Swedish Institute scholarship and the Historical Department of Lund University.

The change in medieval mentality, at the conventional boundaries of the High and Late Middle Ages, is an obvious reaction by Western society to the shocks it faced in the 13th century. The invasion of the Mongols, the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the loss of Constantinople in 1204 were the episodes which totally changed the mental map of the “*Universum*”, for Europeans. The nascent concept of the national state was about to appear at these times; at least, the actions of the European monarchs could support this statement. For example, Philip the Fair of France was a king, whose actions followed the interests of the French kingdom, more than the global idea of the recuperation of Jerusalem.

European perception of Eastern Europe is based on the data from the French or Italian author of “*Descriptio Europae Orientalis*” and shows us an extremely interesting layer of medieval European mentality, including both the traditional medieval perception and rational description of the new regions. Since this source was created on the cusp of High and Late Medieval, the time of its creation (between 1307 and 1308), as well as the origin of the author, who was an inhabitant of the world of classical “*medium aevum*” (probably, of Italian or French origin), gives us an opportunity to see one of the earliest images of Eastern Europe being included within the European *Universum*.

In this case, the data from “*Descriptio*”, which for the first time introduces Eastern Europe, in the same breath, both as ageographical area and as a geopolitical object, has high value for historians. Furthermore, the source itself for a long time avoided the proper attention of researchers, and so it needs to be fully examined and researched. This treatise provides researchers with much information which has been reconciled both with the Papal Curia, and with the intents and goals of the French royal family. By this time, the French royals had inherited thrones in Hungary and Naples, in addition to the French crown. Since the treatise was also involved in the Papal program for the recuperation of the Holy Land, it could be considered not as an opinion of an individual author, but as the very official position which was promulgated by the most influential powers of Europe in the 14th century.

The perception of “nations” and “languages”, described by the author of “*Descriptio*”, probably creates one of the first images of the national and linguistic situation in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 14th century. The source defines Slavic and non-Slavic nations of Eastern Europe on the basis of the gathered information. At the same time, the notion of family ties between Slavic nations, which is based on the idea of a common Slavic language, is also stated in the text of “*Descriptio*”:

All these nations are perfidious schismatics, speaking the same language. Let us note, that rusheni, bulgari, Rasenses, sclaii, bohemiai, poloni, and pruzeni speak

the same language, scilicet Slavic language. Therefore, Slavic language is the most spread language of the world¹ (Górka, 1916, 41).

The opposite situation is stated about Albanians and the Albanian kingdom, which was founded by Charles of Anjou. Albanians are separated from the Slavic language:

The mentioned Albanians have their own language, which is distinct from the languages of Romans, Greeks and Slavs, so they do not understand other nations at all² (Górka, 1916, 29).

Also, “Hungarians from the province of Scythia, which is allocated over the swamps of Moeotis” are distinct from Slavs, and in accordance with the Hungarian written tradition, are claimed as successors to the Huns:

The territories of the surrounding dioceses, because of these circumstances earlier were captured by Slavs and Hungarians³ (Górka, 1916, 21).

Another distinguishing feature to define the “nation” concept in “*Descriptio Europae Orientalis*” is related to the territory, and the state institutions. In fact, the anonymous author does not even use the “*natio*” concept for the Albanians and the Vlachs, and describes these nationalities with the word “*homo*”, which may refer both to the simple “*human*”, and to any form of dependence (Niermeyer, 1976, 493–494), and “*populus*”, i.e., “*people*” or “*folk*” (Niermeyer, 1976, 813–814).

Thereby, based on the small set of cited passages from the source under consideration now, we may regard some aspects of the Western medieval attitude towards the area, which nowadays is known as Eastern Europe. Taking into account the practical goals of the treatise, since it was supposed to provide the French invaders with much needed information about their new possessions to be conquered, we may view the intersection of the practical (“*Natio*” concept, routes, languages, military abilities, etc.) and the legendary (Literally “*Animalia vnicornia, tygrides et castoria nimis habundant in terra illa*” (Górka, 1916, 57)⁴) information about the area on the eastern boundaries of the European world.

¹ Omnes iste nationes sunt scismaticae, perfide, linguam eandem habentes. Notandum autem hic quod rusheni, bulgari, Rasenses, sclavi, bohemi, poloni, et pruzeni locuntur unam et eandem linguam scilicet sclavoniam, ex quo patet quod lingua sclavica maior est et diffusior omnibus [linguis] mundi.

² Habent enim albanii prefati linguam distinctam a latinis, grecis, et sclavis ita quod in nullo se intelligunt cum aliis nationibus.

³ Regiones autem circumadiacentes sic preoccupauerunt sclavi et ungari, quod iam non videntur pertinere ad dictum imperium constantinopolitanum.

⁴ Cf. it with “Hic sunt leones”.

“*Descriptio Europae Orientalis*” is a bright example of late medieval geographical treatise. The changes in the perception of geographical space after the Mongolian invasion are strongly reflected in this source and it represents one of the first images of Eastern Europe as seen through the eyes of Europeans.

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