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# The desert and the city: the rhetoric of savagery and civilisation in some early Byzantine narratives

Arietta Papaconstantinou

"The desert," says Athanasius of Alexandria, "became a city filled with monks, who left their own homes and registered in the city of heaven" as a result of Antony's persuasive powers.[1] Earlier in the *Vita Antonii* he had used the same metaphor: the "enemy" was worried that Antony would turn the desert into a city populated with ascetes.[2] With time, the enemy's fear became reality, so that later in the same text we see the demon complaining that he has "no place to go, no weapon, no city. The Christians are everywhere; and now the monks have also filled the desert."[3]

This striking antihtesis, and in particular the first phrase, was made famous as the title of one of the earliest, and perhaps still the most widely read study on early Byzantine monasticism, Derwas Chitty's *The Desert a City* (1966). In his prologue to that book, Chitty uses the same contrast to describe his encounter with the desert:[4]

> The heat of an October afternoon in 1925, in the deep gorge of Wadi Qelt in the mountains behind Jericho: the monastery of Choziba hanging, baked in the sun, on the foot of the northern cliff: and in its church … two spare and shabby Greek lay monks chanting their office on and on with its interminable, tinny, nasal, gabbled *Kyrie elesions*. A young student, fresh from Oxford, having his first taste of Greek monasticism, was oppressed with a strange desolation.

Chitty went on to explain how "that student" decided to research the origins of those monasteries:[5]

> In the two years that followed, he came increasingly under the spell of that Wilderness, scrambling over its stark ridges and valleys until, from the moonlike monotony which seems to mark our first view of it from Olivet, each turn of it began to have for him its own character. … Then, unexpectedly, he found himself

[1] Athanasios of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii* 14.7: καὶ ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη μοναχῶν, ἐξελθόντων ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων καὶ ἀπογραψαμένων τὴν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς πολιτείαν (SC 400: 174).
[2] Athanasios of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii* 8.2: καὶ φοβούμενος μὴ κατ'όλίγον καὶ τὴν ἔρημον πολίσῃ τῆς ἀσκήσεως (SC 400: 156).
[3] Athanasios of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii*, 41.4: Οὐκέτι τόπον ἔχω, ού βέλος, ού πόλιν. Πανταχοῦ χριστιανοὶ γεγόνασιν· λοιπόν καὶ ἡ ἔρημος πεπλήρωται μοναχῶν (SC 400: 246).
[4] D. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford, 1966), xv.
[5] Chitty, *The Desert a City*, xv.

> settled back in England. But what he had been studying in its solid reality – its skies, its rocks, its ruins, and its living inheritors, he could now continue to study in books and manuscripts, building up and filling in, as his time and ability would allow, the story of the monasteries and their early occupants.

The trope proved very powerful in monastic circles, and as recently as February 2015, the Orthodox St Cyril and Athanasius Institute in San Francisco used it to refer to monasticism in urban environments by reversing its terms: "The City a Desert" was the title of a symposium it organised on that subject.[6] This highlights the extent to which the term "desert" has lost its literal sense and has become a metonymy for "retreat" or "solitude."

The original expression, of course, also functioned metonymically. The "desert" was never quite the geographical desert, and even less did it literally become a city. Yet this opposition between desert and city is central in early Byzantine texts, and used rhetorically with much more power than, say, the opposition between desert and fertile land, or desert and forest: the defining feature of the desert was not its ecological quality, but the fact that it was not inhabited. This is no doubt why the desert was construed by Roman civilisation as the *par excellence* location of the uncivilised – while the ultimate high point of civilisation was, of course, the city.

In what follows I will first analyse an iconic description of the desert and its inhabitants, and then show move on to a discussion of the expression "ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη" and its implications beyond its use as a metaphor or figure of style.

The desert inhabitants that are most present in early Byzantine (and late Roman) sources are the people colletively described as Arabs.[7] Interest in their perception by the various Mediterranean empires has grown in recent years,[8] and texts relating to Roman relations with them have been the subject of a recent anthology.[9] Generally described as Saracens, they were portrayed from Ammianus onwards as groups of

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[6] See http://www.sforthodoxinstitute.org/main/conferences/2015-city-desert/ (acc. 31 January 2018).

[7] The term itself is not unproblematic: see R. Hoyland, "Arab Kings, Arab Tribes, and the Beginning of Arab Historical Memory in Late Roman Epigraphy,", in *From Hellenism to Islam: cultural and linguistic change in the Roman Near East*, ed. H. Cotton, R. Hoyland, J. Price and D. Wasserstein (Cambridge, 2009), 447-466; P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh, 2016); and M. Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before Late Antiquity," *Topoi* 16 (2009): 277-332.

[8] Among the many publications, see R. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the coming of Islam* (London, 2001); J. Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London, 2003); M.C.A. Macdonald, *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Farnham, 2009); G. Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011); F. Millar, *Religion, Language and Community in the Roman Near East: Constantine to Muhammad* (Oxford, 2013); Wolińska and P. Filipczak, eds., *Byzantium and the Arabs: the Encounter of Civilizations, from Sixth to Mid-Eighth Century*, transl. J. Gaszewski, Ł. Gaszewski, A. Mękarski, K. Wodarczyk, M. Zytka (Łódź, 2015); K. Klein, "Marauders, Daredevils, and Noble Savages. Perceptions of Arab Nomads in Late Antique Hagiography," *Der Islam* 92.1 (2015), 13-41; M.C.A. Macdonald, "Was There a 'Bedouinization of Arabia'?" *Der Islam* 92.1 (2015): 42–84; W. Ward, *The Mirage of the Saracen. Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Peninsula in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 54 (Oakland 2015), with the review by K. Klein in *Plekos* 18 (2016): 5-101; and of course Irfan Shahîd's *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 4 vols. (Washington DC, 1995-2009).

[9] G. Fischer, *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford, 2015); this publication complements the important collection by D. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, Translate Texts for Historians (Liverpool, 2010).

raiding barbarians on the eastern frontier. That, however, was a view from a distance: areas where Saracens were known only through hearsay. In the eastern provinces they were much more present in the sources. Roman and Byzantine relations with the Arabs in this period have been widely studied, and much has been written on the information offered by those sources for a study and assessment of the inahbitants of the areas situated, broadly, on the eastern and south-eastern frontier. I do not wish to revisit this discussion here – rather, my aim is to analyse one specific trope in early Byzantine literature and to draw attention to some of its implications.

I will focus more specifically on some depictions of the nomadic lifestyle of the Arabs. This is quite commonly – and not only for the Arabs – used in literature to signal a a people lacking civilisation. In some texts, however, that theme becomes more central. The most vivid text in this respect is the third narration by Pseudo-Neilos, a monk from the Sinai.[10] whose date is still debated, sixth or possibly fifth century.[11]

> The aforesaid nation [of Barbarians] inhabits the desert extending from Arabia to Egypt's Red Sea and the River Jordan. They practise no craft, trade, or agriculture at all, but use the dagger alone as their means of subsistence. They live by hunting desert animals and devouring their flesh, or else get what they need by robbing people on roads that they watch in ambush. If neither is possible and their provisions run out, then they consume pack animals – they use camels called dromedaries – for food. Theirs is a bestial and bloodthirsty way of life. Killing one camel per clan or cluster of tents, they soften its flesh with heat from a fire only insofar as it makes it yield to their teeth without having to be too forcefully torn. In a word, they eat like dogs.
>
> They know no god abstractly conceived or materially hand-crafted, but bow down instead to the Morning Star. When it appears on the horizon they offer to it the best of their spoils, if anything suitable for sacrifice falls into their hands from their bandit raids.

Through its description of the "Barbarians," this passage reveals the categories used by the author to define his own culture, and therefore what he considers as the civilised way of life. Accordingly, the "Barbarians" lack all the elements that make up civilisation as the author knows it: crafts and trades, agriculture, cooked food. Hunting, in Rome an aristocratic pursuit for pleasure, is for them a necessity. Robbing people like bandits is their backup solution, so to speak – a breakdown of the order and security which come with civilisation. They are like animals – bestial and bloodthirsty, and they eat like dogs. Like dogs, they eat their meat uncooked, and even when they do put it on the fire it is not to cook it, we are told, but to soften it. These deficiencies are also visible in their religion, since they have neither "abstract" nor hand-crafted deity (θεὸν οὐ νοητὸν οὐ χειρότευκτον), presumably the only sort bearing the mark of civilisation for the author.

As the above makes obvious, Pseudo-Neilos's account candidly rehearses many well-known stereotypes in the contruction of the Other, most of which not only show them as

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[10] See Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 73-83 for a discussion of the author's identity and an introduction to the work.

[11] Pseudo-Neilos, *Narrations*, III 1, transl. Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 94-95.

uncivilised, but also dehumanise them. One would think it could not get any worse, but it does:[12]

> 2. They especially like to offer children distinguished by beauty and the bloom of youth. These they sacrifice on piles of stones at dawn. (…) Habituated as they are to performing human sacrifice without reservation, they feel no pity for the children whom they slaughter, even if the suppliants sing their laments as seductively as Sirens.
>
> 3. But if no children are available, they make a camel that is white and free from blemishes bend down on its knees. Then they circle around it three times in a procession that is drawn out by the multitude of participants involved. The person who leads in the procession and in singing a hymn they compose for the star is either one of their kings or one of their priests distinguished by old age. After the third circuit, but before the throng has finished its hymn, while the last refrain is still carrying on their tongues, this man draws a sword and vigorously strikes at the victim's sinews. Eagerly, he is the first to have a taste of the blood.

The passages above present almost a textbook case of describing the Other. The Arabs do everything in opposition to what Neilos would expect of his civilised co-citizens. Used to human sacrifice "without reservation," they practice even child sacrifice; they lack compassion, even for children; they indulge in collective ritual killings, and common tasting of blood: all these are timeless *topoi* that mark the "savage" as opposed to the civilised man.[13]

Several texts put the Saracens in this light, especially in Syria and Palestine. In the Nile Valley Saracens are also mentioned, but generally in a matter-of-fact way, with only few exceptions.[14] They are called "vagabonds" in a petition to the duke of the Thebaid in the sixth century,[15] but otherwise the term is used mainly as a neutral ethnic epithet. Egypt's barbarian foil to civilisation are the nomadic tribes of the Eastern Desert, especially the Blemmyes and Noubades.[16] At some point in the middle ages they were conflated with the headless people located by Herodotus somewhere in the western Libyan desert, even though they were to be found mainly south of Aswan and and east of the Nile Valley. The same petition that calls the Saracens "vagabonds" also complains about the "marauding Blemmye barbarians who took our town at the time of our

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[12] Pseudo-Neilos, *Narrations*, III 2-3, transl. Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 95-96.

[13] The use of this theme by William Golding in his *Lord of the Flies* to mark the lapse from civilisation shows the power this *topos* has held in the western imagination.

[14] On the presence of "Saracens" in the eastern desert of Egypt see T. Power, "The Material Culture and Economic Rationale of Saracen Presence in the Eastern Desert of Egypt,", in *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides: peuplement et dynamiques spatiales*, ed. A. Borrut, M. Debié, A. Papaconstantinou, D. Pieri and J.-P. Sodini, Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive 19 (Turnhout, 2011) 331-344.

[15] *P.Cair.Masp.* 67009r, 22: ἁλιτηρίων Σαρακηνῶν.

[16] J.H.F. Dijkstra, „Blemmyes, Noubades, and the Eastern Desert in Late Antiquity: Reassessing the Written Sources," in *The History of the Peoples of the Eastern Desert*, ed. H. Barnard and K. Duistermaat, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Monograph 73 (Los Angeles, 2012) 239-247.

parents and savagely destroyed it,"[17] lamenting that since then things have gone from bad to worse:[18]

> After that, while the imperial and public baths had been very large to that day, today all that is left in the city is a private bath functioning for the poor, who can bathe there for a couple of *nummi*.

It is interesting that alongside the opposition to the Blemmyes, there is also a strong class consciousness in this passage. The Blemmyes are called "barbarians" and "vagrant" in other documents too, as well as "unholy," and are said to raid cities and towns of the Valley. Most of their activity, however, seems to have been in the eastern desert where there were gold mines as well as precious metals.

Spatially the desert is thus construed as a place of danger – because of its inhabitants, but also because of other factors that oppose it to "normal" civilisation. The wild or poisonous animals and the lack of water are the ones that generally stand out in descriptions. The insistence on the mobility of the desert peoples is also striking. The populations living in cities saw this as a powerful sign of otherness.

It is against that background that the discourse on asceticism developed. Ascetics were also presented as inhabitants of the desert, albeit in a very different form, and with different tropes. By the time of the narration of Pseudo-Neilos that symbolic construction had reached a certain maturity, and the author makes abundant use of it. After describing the horrors of the Saracens, the text opposes them directly to that other population of the desert, the "solitaries":[19]

> 4. Such is the traditional way of life and cult among the Barbarians. In this way they subsist in the desert, moving from place to place, making encampments wherever they find easy pasturage for their flocks and plenty of water.
>
> But those who pursue the solitary way of life select a few places in the desert for themselves where water suffices to meet the needs of their bodies. Some build huts, while others inhabit caves or grottoes for their entire existence. Few have bread in their diet, only those whose diligence forces the barren desert to yield up grain. With a small trowel they work a wretchedly small and solid piece of earth, only as much as needed to just barely survive. Most observe a diet of raw fruits and vegetables. They prefer their meals plain and simple, having bid farewell long ago to chores of cooking and baking, lest by spending too much time on needs of their bodies they neglect the more important object of their care.

Neilos is opposing very clearly the two ways of desert life: one alien, the other familiar, if simplified. There is water, stable accommodation, and cultivation, even if cooking is not practiced regularly. Yet what is eaten raw is not meat and blood, but fruit and vegetables. The passage encapsulates an important point made by much monastic

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[17] *P.Cair.Masp.* 67009v, 17-19: τῶν ἁλιτηρ(ίων) Βλεμύων βαρβάρων ἐπὶ τῶν πάλαι ἡμῶν γονέων παραλ̣α̣β̣[όντων] εἰληφότων [τὴν ἡμετέραν πόλι]ν καὶ πορθησάντων δεινῶς.
[18] *P.Cair.Masp.* 67009v, 22-24.
[19] Pseudo-Neilos, *Narrations*, III 4, transl. Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 96-97.

desert literature: the monks are civilising the desert. They build huts, and they "force the barren desert to yield up grain." It becomes "a city" in the sense that it is no longer a wild uncultivated place, where demons roam undisturbed. At the same time, these civilising actions remain minimalist, because monks also need to keep their distance from the "world," in other words the real city.

The demons, another staple figure of desert narratives, are often brought to play into this symbolic opposition, especially in narratives of the Egyptian tradition. To take but one example, in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* we find the following otherwise unremarkable story:[20]

> A certain father when he went out to become a monk was a virgin, and he did not even know that a whore existed among the children of men. And when he was dwelling in his cell the devils began to stir up in him the passion of fornication, and lifting up his eyes he saw the devils going around him in the forms of Ethiopians, and they incited him to yield to the passion; then he rose up straight away and prayed and said "Oh Lord, help me," and when he had said these things, a stone fell from the roof, and he heard as it were a sweet voice, and he seemed to enjoy a short respite from the thoughts of fornication.

It is perhaps the banality of this short narrative that makes its force, as much of what is said has come to be taken for granted. Being miraculously rid of demons after prayer is the very heart of desert literature.[21] By giving those demons the form of Ethiopians (i.e. dark-skinned individuals), however, another *topos* that goes back to the *Life of Antony*, such stories equated the dangers of solitude and self-reflection (demons) with the real inhabitants of the desert, thus once again radically opposing the old and the new inhabitants of the desert landscape.[22]

The literature of the desert, however, goes well beyond opposing uncivilised desert peoples to the monks that settle in the desert to civilise it and fight off its dangers. With time, it gives monks a more and more active role in the dissemination of the empire's dominant culture. They turn the desert into a city not only symbolically, but almost literally, that is, they civilise it profoundly by bringing life, water, and buildings to it – in addition to a civilised religion.

This process is most explicitly narrated in the *Life of Euthymios* by Cyril of Skythopolis. A convert of Euthymios, Aspebetos/Peter, later[23]

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[20] *Apoph. patr.* (Syriac) 579, transl. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, II (London, 1907), 130.

[21] See D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk* (London, 2006).

[22] See the analysis in Brakke *Demons*, ch. 7, "Ethiopian Demons," 157-181; see also G.L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London, 2002).

[23] Cyril of Skythopolis, *Life of Euthymios* 15, transl. by R.M. Price, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* (Kalamazoo, 1991), 20. See the discussion of the entire section of this *Life* relevant to this episode in Fisher, *Arabs and Empires*, 303-310, and especially in K. Klein, "How to Get Rid of Venus. Some Remarks on Jerome's Vita Hilarionis and the Conversion of Elusa in the Negev," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, N. McLynn and D. Schwartz (Farnham, 2015): 241-266.

> …came to him with a great number of Saracens, men, women, and children, and begged him to preach to them the word of salvation. The holy elder catechized them all and received them into the lower monastery, where he baptized them. After remaining with them for the whole week, he then ascended with them to his own cave. Peter brought along skilled workmen and constructed the great cistern with two openings that has been preserved in the garden till now; nearby he built a bakehouse and for the holy elder constructed three cells and an oratory or church in the middle of the cells. Moreover, these men who had formerly been wolves of Arabia but had then joined the rational flock of Christ begged to remain near him. Out of his devotion to the solitary life Euthymius did not agree to this because of the disturbance involved, for he keenly loved solitude. But taking them to an appropriate spot he said to them, "If you want to be very near me, settle here." This spot lies between the two monasteries. Marking out a church for them and tents round it, he told them to build the church and settle there. He frequently made visitations to them, until he assigned them a priest and deacons. Those who had already been baptized came and settled there, and others too who arrived gradually were baptized by him. Since in consequence they became extremely numerous and spread out to form various encampments, our great father Euthymius wrote to Juvenal patriarch of Jerusalem requesting the ordination of a bishop and, when he consented, sent him Peter the father of Terebôn, as most capable of drawing souls to salvation. So it was that Peter was the first to be ordained in Palestine bishop of the Encampments. One could witness a multitude of Saracen barbarians coming to the great Euthymius, receiving baptism and being taught to worship the one who is God over all.

In other words, the Saracens give up their nomadic lifestyle and settle down, in a well organised settlement around a well, and near the monastery – not too close, however,because Euthymios liked solitude. So many Saracens came, that a priest and a deacon were not enough, and the patriarch Juvenal appointed a bishop for them.

What Cyril is describing is not only how the monk Euthymios lived in the desert by himself and converted scores of Arab nomads to Christianity: in Cyril's eyes, what Euthymios has set in motion is a civilising process, whereby the barbarians become Christian, the Arabs become Roman, the tribe becomes a community, the nomads become sedentary, and the desert, indeed, becomes a city. Having a bishop was, after all, the prerogative of a *civitas*, and signalled the urban status of a community. Cyril's narrative plays with those symbols as it defends the superiority not only of a religion, but of an entire culture and way of life. At the same time, narratives like this one express the often competitive urge of ecclesiastical and monastic institutions to establish their control over a territory, and having brought it into the fold of civilisation legitimizes their aims.[24]

Adoption of Christianity was a rite of passage, one construed primarily as a transition from paganism to "true belief," but also, at the same time, as a wholesale cultural

[24] This process has been admirably analysed by Hassan Elboudrari, 'Quand les saints font les villes: lecture anthropologique de la pratique sociale d'un saint marocain du XVII$^{e}$ siècle', *AnnalesESC*, 40 (1985): pp. 489–508.

progression after which the Saracens were considered to have entered the civilised world. This is very well expressed by Ahudemmeh, one of the converters of the Arabs:[25]

> There were many peoples between the Tigris and Euphrates in the land of Mesopotamia who lived in tents and were barbarians and warlike. Numerous were their superstitions and they were the most ignorant of all the peoples of the earth until the moment when the light of Christ came to them.

A similar narrative, albeit not as well-furnished in literary texts, can be found regarding the Blemmyes and Nobades on the southern frontier: the temple of Isis that they used to frequent became a church of St Stephen and this had great civilising influence on the nomads to the south.[26]

Across entire swathes of desert literature, we see monks create wells, build hospices, allow the land to be cultivated, neutralise deadly animals, protect from the dangerous inhabitants, and bring proper religion, education, and culture to the anarchy of the desert landscape – they tame the wilderness and win it over to civilisation. Throughout the diverse manifestations of this theme, one thing remains clear: when "the desert became a city," the cultural implications for its erstwhile inhabitants were profound and lasting. Far from being a a mere literary trope, it functioned also as a discursive instrument that colonised and appropriated the desert landscape.

* * *

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said chose this passage from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as his epigraph:[27]

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...

Said went on to discuss the complexity and ambivalence of Conrad's positioning, both critical and participating in an imperial project. In this, he was part of a long tradition that criticised the European self-perception as the most – if not the only – civilised part of the world. Similarly, in *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift famously described, if in a fictional context, the way colonisers treated the natives they found:[28]

> And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a modern Colony sent to convert and civilise an idolatrous and barbarous People.

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[25] *Life of Aḥudemmeh* 3, PO 3:21; transl. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 148.
[26] J. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion. A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298-642CE)*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 173 (Leuven, 2008).
[27] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993).
[28] Jonathan Swift, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, by Lemuel Gulliver*, part IV (Dublin, 1727), 86, chapter 12.

Mark Twain also poured irony on the "white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages." Yet such works were also part of the imperial project itself, as was early social anthropology, concerned as it was with "primitive" peoples at an "earlier" stage of civilisation, in the context of historical evolutionism. Only with structuralism did such sets of binary oppositions become systematically theorised, most prominently in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit*, significantly the first part of a series of four books entitled *Mythologiques*.[29] In a long review of this foundational book, Edmund Leach brings home – almost literally – the role of binary oppositions in the construction of identity:[30]

> If you want to express your difference from your neighbor for any reason whatsoever you will act in a manner exactly opposite to that in which you expect him to behave. And our attitude to our predecessors and to our neighbors always has this kind of ambiguity.

The development of this form of discourse in a society is never easy to follow, not least because the boundaries between "us" and "them" are aways fluid and multiple. It proceeds through the gradual manipulation of elementary symbols of one's superiority *vis-à-vis* the other, and the development of a discourse of polarity within the cultural value system, where rationality is compared with ignorance and right-mindedness with folly, where civilisation is opposed to wilderness and settlement to nomadism. This timeless rhetorical device was used not only to define identity, but also to undermine the legitimacy of rivals and to assert one's cultural superiority. It is also entirely reversible: Galerius used it to incriminate the Christians,[31] Cyril of Skythopolis to belittle the pagans.

Contrary to Conrad and others, Byzantine authors knew no ambivalence: conquering the earth and bringing those with flatter noses into the fold of your own world, culture, and religion was inherently and unambiguously good, because the idea that supported it was absolute. Even though our narratives generally offer positive stories, one must assume there were negative ones too, ones where things were less "pretty." In many ways, the Christianisation of the deserts, styled as their "urbanisation," and justified on account of their insecurity was part of an imperial process of territorial appropriation, carried out at the expense of local populations and justified through the negation of their cultures.

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[29] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, I: *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris, 1964).
[30] E. Leach, in *American Anthropologist*, 67 (1965): 778
[31] S. Corcoran, "From Unholy Madness to Right-Mindedness: Or How to Legislate for Religious Conformity from Decius to Justinian."in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond*, ed. A. Papaconstantinou, N. McLynn, and D. Schwartz Farnham, 2015) 67-94.