

CHRISTIAN HØGEL

*Did Niketas Magistros, envoy and author, introduce Eastern modes of narration into Byzantine literature?*

When people travel far and bring home ideas, they need to present them in comprehensible forms. When merchants, mercenaries and envoys returned, their tales of foreign places, of customs and costumes, would blend the foreign with the exotic, or to put it differently their accounts would include both what they had experienced and not fully comprehended – the foreign – with the things that had at least to some degree fulfilled their expectations of what other places might have to offer, the exotic.

The author of the *Life of Theoktiste*, Niketas Magistros, would blend foreign and exotic, not least because his aim was not to produce an ordinary saint's life, but to compose a text that would support his petition to Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos to allow him back from exile. Such reading is based on a late dating of the *life* to the years after Constantine's accession to sole reign in 946 and before his catastrophic campaign to conquer Crete in 948. In this way the text becomes a sort of pastiche that is at the same time telling its audience that the author is a knowledgeable man who knows of things foreign, and is at the same time giving an account of exotic places, people and dealings, as would be expected. Knowledge comes in from the beginning of the text as Niketas presents himself as former envoy of Leo VI to the Cretan Arabs, journeying in the retinue of general Himerios, who lead successive attacks on the Cretan Arabs in the 910's. But not long into the *Life of Theoktiste*, the story takes on exotic feature with pirates, kidnappings, and a ruined church serving as a *locus amoenus*. Into this exoticism Niketas employs an unprecedented four-layer structure of embedded narrators, echoing Eastern features of which he wishes to stand as expert.