True Lies about a Crucial Journey: Satirical descriptions of the underworld in the Greek tradition

The decent to the underworld (*katabasis*) is a mythological and literary motif known from several traditions around the world. One of the most well-known examples is found in the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, which describes the descent of Odysseus to Hades and his meeting with various characters. Homer’s version provided a model for the long Greek tradition of *katabasis*, and while the fabulous tales of the Homeric epics were reworked and ridiculed in Lucian’s *A True Story*, Odysseus’ descent to Hades was turned into witty satire in the *Dialogues of the Dead*. Lucian employed the underworld setting for making fun of and criticizing both politics, religion, and intellectual culture. The fictional framework made it possible to voice criticism of late antique society without risks of being punished, and Lucian’s satire, along with his sarcastic use of ancient literature, won great popularity.

Almost a thousand years later, in the 12th century, Byzantine authors picked up the *katabasis* motif and once again turned it into social criticism. In the anonymous dialogue *Timarion*, the narrator Timarion tells a friend of his recent descent to the underworld, displaying a confusing mixture of ancient and Byzantine elements. Timarion descends from a contemporary Byzantine world (Thessalonike in the 1150s) to a more or less traditional ancient Hades (complete with Kerberos and Elysian fields). The problem from a Christian perspective is that this Hades houses also Byzantines (e.g. one of Timarion’s former teachers, Theodore of Smyrna, and the famous Michael Psellos). Even more problematic: Timarion’s Hades is a really nice place – having nothing to do with the dark place of torment that the Christians envisaged.

In this paper, I shall discuss the *katabasis* as a fictional motif with great potential for satirical criticism of power structures, from late Antiquity onwards.