INTRODUCTION

THE BARBARIAN: THE ALIEN IN ANTIQUITY

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The Barbarian was the constant complement to classical civilisation. The essays in this issue of *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* illustrate some of the ways in which Greek and Roman societies can be better understood by examining their antithesis, the Barbarian.

If by ‘barbarian’ we think of the modern English meaning, ‘belonging to a non-literate culture regarded as uncivilised,’ then the constant presence of the Barbarian is demonstrable in the very real sense of physical proximity.\(^1\) The Athenian empire, the Hellenistic kingdoms, and Rome all came into contact with smaller and less complex states which lacked literary cultures or developed economic structures. Relations between these classical states and their modest neighbours could be hostile, cooperative, or exploitative — or indeed all of these at once. The eastern European Scythians were regular butts of condescending humour in Greek drama, but the Athenians exploited their cheap labour and martial skills by employing them as guards and watchmen.\(^2\) The authority of the Roman emperors was predicated largely on the need for a leader to command armies against the kaleidoscope of barbarians outside the borders of Hellenistic civilisation; the Roman imperial army, however, always made use of barbarian auxiliaries to supplement its forces.\(^3\)

A broad pattern of attraction and violence underlay many of these relations. Small states, exploited as manpower reservoirs and as markets by the large Mediterranean economies, were drawn into the political and military spheres of the empires. The sheer magnitude of the classical empires shaped the economy, politics, and culture of tribal peoples along their frontiers. Celtic chieftains in western Europe, for example, imported at great cost goods of Hellenistic and Roman manufacture, not essential items but luxury goods such as glass- and silverware; this conspicuous consumerism reinforced their local social status. But in order to maintain their positions in this way, these chiefs were dependent on the continued supply of their Mediterranean

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3. Wells (1999) e.g. 73-74, 119-120 (Caesar), 133-137 (first and second centuries AD).
imports, either through trade or expropriation. Such ‘barbarian’ aspirations towards participation in the Mediterranean economy, and Greco-Roman patterns of exploitation, were often mismatched and led to conflict. It is the flashpoints of these pressures that register most clearly in our ancient sources, ranging from petty raids by tribal groups aimed at liberation of movable wealth, to wholesale annexation of territory. The latter were not just ‘barbarian invasions’: Caesar’s conquest of Gaul was as much a product of these tensions as the Galatian occupation of central Asia Minor. But beside such dramatic events, the friction of Greco-Roman exploitation and ‘barbarian’ aspiration also affected history at a lower, quotidian level. The enormous Roman imperial system of frontiers is now generally seen not as a hermetic barrier intended to seal off the ‘outside world,’ but as a means to control and regulate contact across the borders – to balance these ‘barbarian’ and Mediterranean interests (though very much in the favour of Rome). If we think of how the modern super-economies of the USA and the European Union shape the behaviour of their Third World neighbours – as purveyors of status symbols, as dominant trade partners, and as destinations for economic and ‘illegal’ migration – we will have some feeling for how Mediterranean and ‘barbarian’ societies interacted.

This cycle of exploitation, attraction, and rebuff was not unique to the Mediterranean world and its hinterlands. Middle Kingdom Egypt and the Hyksos, and Han China and the Xiongnu (or Hsiung-Nu), are other pairs of empire and satellite in Antiquity that demonstrate similar sequences of events: the magnitude of a state shaping the economy and politics of lesser groups along its frontiers, drawing them unintentionally into uncomfortable proximity. Alexander’s conquest of Persepolis, abstracted from its glorious place in Greco-Roman historiography, can likewise be seen as a former fringe zone overwhelming its political centre. Conflict between classical societies and ‘barbarian’ or tribal peoples is best seen not so much as the self-defence of sophisticated Mediterranean societies against destructively primitive external forces, but as an unintended effect of the very expansion of the Greco-Roman states, drawing new participants into their economies and societies.

The Barbarian can also be understood as the constant companion of classical civilisation in another, and more profound, sense: a linguistic and conceptual rather than physical one. First we have to understand that modern English

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5 Whittaker (1994)
‘barbarian,’ though derived from classical Greek _barbaros_ through Latin _barbarien_, does not have quite the same semantic range. Herodotus opens his _Histories_ by stating that he intends to record the deeds of both Greeks and barbarians, and the causes of their hostility. The ‘barbarians’ who feature most in his pages are the Scythians, the Egyptians, and especially the Persians. Only the first of these groups could be considered ‘barbarian’ in the general modern sense at the time Herodotus wrote; Egypt was already regarded as the ancient font of religious and philosophical learning, and Persia was the dominant empire of the Mediterranean and near Eastern world. The Egyptians and Persians were not non-literate peoples ‘regarded as uncivilised’ by the Greeks. Nonetheless, Herodotus consistently uses the term _barbaroi_ to describe the peoples of all three regions, irrespective of obvious differences in levels of civilisation. Nor was this usage new to Herodotus. Half a century earlier, the characters in Aeschylus’ _Persae_, the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes and Darius’ queen, are made to describe their own forces as ‘the barbarian army’ and their language as ‘barbarian speech.’ ‘Barbarian’ here clearly means something other than ‘uncivilised,’ closer perhaps to our ‘foreign.’ Yet Homer, notwithstanding all the many peoples who feature in his epics, never used the word _barbaros_. Only a compound form reveals the availability of the term in the archaic period: _barbarophonos_, ‘speaking barbarian’ or better (if, as the ancients themselves thought, the root _barbar-_ is onomatopoetic for the incomprehensible sound of a foreign language) ‘speaking gibberish.’

The use of _barbaros_ in the sense employed by Aeschylus and Herodotus seems to have been an innovation of the fifth century BC, and specifically of the period following the Persian wars. In the newly triumphalist Athens following the battles of Thermopylae and Plataea, all the world was collapsed into two categories: _Hellenes_ and _barbaroi_. Just as regional differences between variegated Greek-speaking groups were overlooked in the interests of promoting ‘Panhellenism,’ so too the multiplicity of non-Greek-speaking peoples was telescoped into one category of ‘outsider.’ The division was not

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6 Herodotus, _Hist_ I praef. The introduction and commentary to the recent translation of Waterfield and Dewald (1998) usefully addresses recent theoretical work

7 Aeschylus, _Pers_ II 255, 337, 391, 423, 475, 798 (army); 634 (language). Also II. 634 (Asia as ‘barbarian territory’); 434, 844 (Persians as ‘barbarian peoples’). See now the edition of Hall (1996)

8 E g Strabo XIV 2.28; 1 Corinthians 14.11. For etymological discussion and analogues: Janse (2002) 332-338. For an alternative etymology of the word (as a loan word from Sumerian _bar-baru_): J Hall (2002) 112; Poo (2005) 39

9 E. Hall (1989a); J Hall (1997) (2002) A useful survey of recent work along these lines is Harrison (2002); note especially the introductory overview at 1-23
traditional or natural, but new and artificial; it was not a neutral observation of the surrounding world but a polemic.

The elucidation of this division, as it appears in the writings of Aeschylus, Herodotus, and other Athenian authors, has been one of the more profitable, and accessible, applications to Ancient World studies of Structuralist analysis – that is, the theoretical model that social groups construct crucial aspects of 'reality' through language usage, for ultimately political purposes. Over the last two decades, much work has been devoted to demonstrating that the identity of the ancient Greek peoples as Hellenes was a construct: not an innate recognition of a biological fact, but a concept more-or-less consciously built up through cultural means. The Barbarian (we can personify this abstract concept) was essential to the Hellene: by providing an antithesis, an opposite, the conceptual Barbarian defined what the Hellene was. The Scythian was primitive, the Egyptian effete, the Persian slave-like. These different aspects of the Barbarian helped construct an ideal of what the Hellene was: that is, none of these things. The Barbarian, as the French classicist François Hartog says, was a 'mirror' of the Hellene.\(^\text{10}\)

This conceptual Barbarian was part of a schema of Greek self-definition (taken over, in large part, by Hellenistic and Roman cultures also). The schema is a series of what some scholars term 'polarities': binary oppositions defining what is Hellene by what it is not. Along with other pairs – male versus female, citizens versus aliens, free versus slave, god versus mortal – 'Barbarian and Hellene' provided a conceptual framework for envisaging the self in opposition to the 'Other'.\(^\text{11}\) The capitalised Other is now a mainstay in academic vocabulary, donated originally by Hegel and popularised by French Structuralism. It is much used in studies of social and individual identity, both in historical and contemporary contexts, a major theme of late-twentieth century research.\(^\text{12}\) The classical Athenian term 'Barbarian,' likewise, was a Greek gift to the Hellenistic and Roman thought-worlds. Latin already had words for aspects of 'foreignness': externus, peregrinus, idiota. But, just as Latin in the Republican period absorbed Greek philosophical vocabulary to express ideas new to Roman culture (and similarly, ecclesiastical vocabulary in Late Antiquity), so too the borrowed concept of barbarus was too ideologically useful not to be taken up. Who was defined as 'Hellene' or

\(^{10}\) Hartog (1980) xxiii-xxv. See also Cartledge (1990); Harrison (2000); Hartog (2001); Munson (2001)

\(^{11}\) Cartledge (2002) is an invaluable and very accessible presentation of these ideas

\(^{12}\) For a useful introduction: Cavallaro (2001) 120-130.
‘Roman’ may have been fluid – ‘barbarians’ could become ‘new men’ – but the concept of a binary opposition was retained.\textsuperscript{13}

The cultural specificity of the Greek term ‘Barbarian’ is thrown into relief by contrast with other ancient cultures. The comparable foreign confrontations and interactions of Middle Kingdom Egypt and imperial China have already been mentioned. Neither Egypt nor China, however, produced words synonymous to \textit{barbaros}, that functioned as both an umbrella term for all foreign peoples and as an antithesis to self-image. Instead, foreign peoples were denoted by individual ethnic or tribal names, even if these designations were often transferred rather carelessly from one group to another by Egyptian or Chinese observers (much as Greeks and Romans used the terms \textit{Celti} and \textit{Germani} to refer to a range of peoples who seemed broadly similar to the groups first encountered with these names).\textsuperscript{14} The world-view of the Greeks and their cultural heirs differed from that of other ancient empires by virtue of the divisive concept of the Barbarian.

These two aspects of the ancient Barbarian – the economic aspirant allured by Mediterranean society and the ideological Other debarred from it – can be seen combined in the military memorials of Antiquity. The monumental statuary raised by Attalus of Pergamon to laud his defeat of the Galatians (including the original ‘Dying Gaul’ later replicated by Roman copyists) catapulted his bid to be recognised as a Hellenistic dynast through cultural as much as military repulsion of the Barbarian.\textsuperscript{15} The column of Marcus Aurelius celebrated imperial army police actions along the Roman frontier with brutal depictions of barbarians whose features are mere caricatures, rendered as generic pictograms after centuries of repetition in Hellenistic royal propaganda. These and like images in public art gained their visual power by proclaiming simultaneously not only monarchs’ martial prowess in checking the ambitions of neighbours, but also the eternal opposition of the Hellenistic and the Barbarian.\textsuperscript{16}

These current economic and ideological approaches to the interaction of classical and ‘barbarian’ societies provide the context for several of the papers in this volume. The first three examine the ideological use of concepts of the Barbarian in Greek or Roman contexts. Kristen Szumyn

\textsuperscript{13} Dench (1995) 66-108

\textsuperscript{14} Poo (2005) 34-48. I am indebted to my colleagues Dr Christiana Köhler and Dr Jonathan Markley for this point.

\textsuperscript{15} Pollitt (1986) 79-110. Note that the Gauls defeated by Attalus I in 229-228 BC were in coalition with the Seleucid army of Antiochus Hierax; the Attalid monuments in Pergamon and Athens, however, depict only barbarian enemies.

\textsuperscript{16} Smith (2002) 78-82.
examines an apparent paradox in some Greek philosophical traditions: the belief that the study of philosophy originated not in the Mediterranean world but among ‘barbarians,’ and that a defining feature of the ‘wise man’ was a period of travel to barbarian lands, of ‘geographic marginality,’ for the getting of alien wisdom. She traces, from the early Greek period down to the Neoplatonists, the tradition that made Pythagoras an initiate of the ancient philosophies both of Egypt and of peoples whom the Greeks regarded as more primitive and strange, the Thracian Getae and the Hyperboreans of the far north, and suggests that genuine Central Asian religious practices may underlie the received image of Pythagoras. Kelly Morales discusses another complexity in the relationship between Athenian conceptions of the Hellenic self and the Barbarian Other, the concept of autochthony (‘aboriginality’ or the belief that specific peoples arose from ‘the soil’ of a particular place). Autochthony played a central role in Athenian self-identity. Yet at the same time Athenian writers, primarily Herodotus, could acknowledge the aboriginality of some foreign peoples – even if they themselves believed that they had migrated from elsewhere in the past – while denying it to certain other Hellenic groups. Clare Rowan, in moving from the Greek world to Roman times, shifts also from a focus on ‘core’ areas of classical civilisation to the fringes. How did groups living on the frontiers of major cultural blocs construct their identity, with regard or in opposition to the ‘discourses of identity’ of dominant cultures? What impact did the shifting of frontiers, by expansion or collapse, have on conceptual categories of self and Barbarian Other? Here again the economic and political forces of Hellenistic-barbarian contact interact with ideologies of identity.

When Jonathan Markley shifts the discussion to Han China, roughly contemporary with the rise of Rome to dominance over the Mediterranean world, there is an interesting interplay of novelties and differences. Han China had important cultural and trade contacts with other developed states, the Kushan empire of northern India and Parthia; the foreign relations of the Han dynasty, however, were dominated by conflict with northern steppe peoples rather than with these neighbouring empires (unlike the struggles of Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman powers with the rival Iranian states of, successively, the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian dynasties). Classical Chinese had no direct equivalent to the term ‘barbarian,’ which embraced both tribal and highly developed outsiders, nor even a single term for the unsettling steppe-dwelling peoples. Nonetheless, Chinese texts can be seen to construct parameters that define ‘us’ from ‘them,’ in cultural rather than physiological terms. These permeable barriers perhaps facilitated political

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17 The classic overview of Greek intellectual interaction with different civilisations is Momigliano (1971).
relations between the Han state and Xiongnu leaders. Unlike dealings between the Mediterranean states and either their Iranian or northern European ‘barbarian’ neighbours, relations between Han China and the Xiongnu revolved around the presence or absence of diplomatic marriages between the two ruling families. This was a form of diplomacy familiar within cultural blocs in the West, such as Hellenistic states and medieval Europe, but rarely adopted for those perceived as ‘barbarians.’

While several of these papers exploit theoretical tools, such as ‘the Other,’ as an entrée into the thought-world of ancient cultures, each highlights the need to employ such frameworks with careful attention to the particularities of specific historical circumstances. Conceptual analyses of the terms of ancient thought and action have to be informed by methodological approaches to source studies. These essays also demonstrate that ancient societies were not isolates; around the Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman states were a myriad of other societies, which impressed upon the classical cultures in both concrete and intangible ways. Inevitably the vocal literary cultures of Greek and Latin writings dominate our attention to the ancient Mediterranean; but by listening for the faint echoes or even mock portrayals of less audible groups, we can at least appreciate the range of modulations of the ancient world.¹⁸

References


¹⁸ The papers in this volume originally formed part of a seminar on the Barbarian in Antiquity at Macquarie University, Department of Ancient History, in 2004. I am grateful to all participants of the seminar, and also to Mr Tim Scott and Mrs Margaret Parker for their advice.


