

IDENTITY(IES)

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“WHOEVER IS NOT GREEK IS A BARBARIAN”

Juan Luis García Alonso
University of Salamanca

Abstract: In this presentation I will look at the central role played in Ancient Greek identity formation by the duality Greek / Barbarian, originally constructed on linguistic grounds, but eventually evolving into other significant cultural areas. *Bárbaroi* was how the Ancient Greeks referred to all the foreign peoples around them whose language was not understandable. It was, of course, an onomatopoeia that allowed them to imitate the apparent stammer of those who were speaking so “strangely”. Interestingly enough the word, particularly with its passage through Latin, became to be the base of something different, to be perceived in the concept of *barbaric*. And so, those who could not or did not speak your language became uncivilized. People(s) not knowing the Greek language, not participating in Greek civilization, religion or literature started to be perceived not only as “different” but as somehow “inferior”. One of the legacies of Ancient Greece is then the word “barbarian”, still used today in English and many modern languages. This question has been studied extensively, as it says a lot about Greek and Roman culture in general. However, what has been not so much looked at is

the extent of negativity in the attitudes towards immigrants and foreigners in Greek and Roman society. I will reflect in all these questions, and on how this is echoed in more recent times.

Keywords: *Polis* and Barbarian, Identity formation, Classical Greece, Language Identity, Cultural Identity, Political Science, Greek History, Greek Philosophy.

“Youths of... all the Hellenic peoples, join your fellow-soldiers and entrust yourselves to me, so that we can move against the barbarians and liberate ourselves from the Persian bondage, for as Greeks we should not be slaves to barbarians”.

Alexander the Great
(‘Pseudo-Callisthenes’ 1.15.1-4)¹

“πᾶς μὴ Ἕλληνα βάρβαρος” (“whoever is not Greek is a Barbarian”) is a very old Greek idiom² that speaks for itself at several levels, as I will try to show in these pages.

But, first of all, I would like to thank our Portuguese hosts for the opportunity to be here with you. It is very Greek both to offer this hospitality (this is the concept of *xenia*³ in Greek) and for us, who

¹ Callisthenes of Olynthus (c. 360 – 328 BC) was a Greek historian. He was the great nephew of Aristotle, who, in his turn, was Alexander the Great’s tutor. Callisthenes was appointed to assist Alexander on his trips to Asia. But this is not the author reporting this sentence. His work is actually lost. However, in the centuries following his death, some materials attributed to him gave form to a text, the so-called *Alexander Romance*, from the 3rd century AD, more than half a millennium after Callisthenes’ death. Its author is usually known as Pseudo-Callisthenes.

² The origin of this saying, in any case, is not known, and it does not appear on any extant ancient Greek text.

³ See Chirino, 2007 on this, with recent bibliographical references on the question.

are receiving it, to show our appreciation. The rituals of hospitality in Greece created and expressed a reciprocal relationship between guest and host expressed in both material benefits (such as the giving of gifts to each party) as well as non-material ones (such as protection, shelter, favors, etc). The Greek god Zeus is often called *Zeus Xenios* in his role as a protector of travelers. He thus embodied the religious obligation to be hospitable to travelers. There are many stories in Greek mythology that caution mortals that any guest should be treated as if potentially a disguised divinity checking their behavior. This would help establish the idea of *xenia* as a fundamental Greek custom.⁴ *Xenia* consists of two basic rules:

- The respect from host to guest. The host must be hospitable to the guest and provide him/her with food and drink and a bath, if required. It is not polite to ask questions until the guest has stated his/her needs.
- The respect from guest to host. The guest must be courteous to the host and not be a burden.

It is basic good manners of *xenia*, then, to thank your neighbours for offering you your home, and Coimbra is a special neighbour in the Coimbra Group community, for obvious reasons. To my institution in particular it is so in one additional level: because this University is our closest neighbour in mere geographical terms.

Now that I have tried to show through my manners how civilised and respectful of my obligations I am, I look at the sentence of my title and experience mixed feelings. Since I am not Greek, would I need to accept I am a barbarian, no matter what?

⁴ Actually all the bloody and terrible events around the Trojan war are originated in a sinful breach of *xenia*. Alexander from Troy betrayed his host ignominiously: by kidnapping his wife during the night and taking her with him back to Troy.

It is with my deepest regret, I have to say, that the Coimbra Group has no longer a Greek-speaking institution among us. This may mean the Coimbra Group itself is a barbarian network, then... In any case, the word *economy* is Greek. Etymologically, it means something like “the rules of the house”. But the word *crisis* is also Greek. And it means, etymologically, “times for reflection before judging”. Europeans are judging themselves and each other a lot these days. But I am not sure we are dedicating enough time to reflect before we judge.

Βάρβαρος (*bárbaros*) was originally how the Ancient Greeks referred to a person that spoke a language they could not understand. It is commonly accepted this term simply was an *onomatopoeia* that tried to imitate the apparent stammer of those who were using such exotic linguistic codes.

So, at first, apparently, the term did not have any sort of negative connotation about the person or peoples so defined. The correct translation into modern English would be, then, something like, “someone speaking a foreign language, a foreigner”. To derive connotations from the term is something that goes beyond language and reflects other identity factors.⁵

This reminds me of the word “gringo”, used constantly today by Latin American speakers of Spanish, especially by Mexicans, and particularly by Mexicans living in the US. Originally, the word “gringo”, of an obscure and much discussed etymology, used both in Spain⁶ and in Portugal, in Spanish and in Portuguese, meant “speaker

⁵ See Isaac, 2004 on the development of xenophobic attitudes in Classical Antiquity. See also Tuplin, 1999. On the semantic evolution of the word see also Skoda, 1980, as well as E. Weidner, 1913.

⁶ In Spain it is first documented in 1787, in the second vol. of the *Diccionario castellano con las voces de Ciencias y Artes y sus correspondientes en las 3 lenguas francesa, latina e italiana*, by E. Terreros y Pando: “GRINGOS llaman en Málaga a los extranjeros, que tienen cierta especie de acento, que los priva de una locución fácil, y natural Castellana; y en Madrid dan el mismo, y por la misma causa con particularidad a los irlandeses”.

of a foreign language, a foreigner”, basically the same as the original meaning of βάρβαρος in Greek. The word is not currently used much in Spain, but for Mexicans in particular the connotations of the word changed with the occasion of the Mexican – American war of 1846. Today it is applied to white Americans, and it is generally derogatory. In Brazil it is still used with the original meaning, and it is often shocking to Mexicans to hear how Brazilians apply this word... *to them!!*

In many cultures the identification of the foreigner, out of his/her many oddities, is done through the language he or she uses. Greek *barbaroi* was paralleled by Arabic *ajam* “non-Arabic speakers; non-Arabs; (especially) Persians”. In the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*⁷, the Sanskrit word *barbara-* meant “stammering, wretch, foreigner, sinful people, low and barbarous”. The ancient Indians referred to foreign peoples as *Mleccha* “dirty ones; barbarians”. The Aryans used *mleccha* very much like the ancient Greeks used *barbaroi*: at first it indicated the incomprehensible speech of foreigners and then extended the label to their odd habits. In the ancient texts, *Mlecchas* are people not particularly clean and/or who had abandoned the Vedic beliefs. Today this term implies people who are physically dirty. As for the Chinese, historically, they used various words for ethnic groups foreign to them. They include terms like 夷 *Yi*, which was used for different non-Chinese populations of the east. The connotation of people ignorant of Chinese culture and, therefore, ‘barbarians’ is clearly there.

The term βάρβαρος was already in use in the oldest Greek texts we know, those written 1200 years before the Christian era in the Linear B semi-syllabary writing system⁸. In the Pylos clay tablet collection

⁷ On this work see Badrinath, 2006.

⁸ Classical monographs on this are, of course, Chadwick, 1958 and 1976. A recent and beautifully written book on the decipherment is Fox, 2013.

we do find the word simply applied, apparently, to people from out of town. A βάρβαρος in these texts meant “someone not coming from Pylos”. The word is clearly very old in Greek, since, apart from appearing since the very first known texts, it has a direct cognate in the Sanskrit word *barbara* (‘stammering’), just mentioned.⁹

In a parallel course, we may look now at the word πόλις – *polis*, “city-state”.¹⁰ The political organization of Ancient Greece was, at least, particular from our point of view. For centuries, the city and its immediate surroundings enjoyed the status of a free independent state. *Polis* could also mean citizenship and body of citizens. Ancient Greek city-states, which developed during the archaic period (roughly from 800 to 480 BC), were the ancestor of the modern concepts of city, state and citizenship, and persisted (though with decreasing influence) well into Roman times, when the equivalent Latin word was *civitas*, the social body of the *cives*, or citizens, united by law.¹¹

The term *polis*, which in Archaic Greece¹² meant simply a city, changed with the development of the governing structures in the city to indicate state (which included its surrounding villages), and finally,

⁹ Whenever there is such a coincidence between a Greek and an Indo-Iranian term, of course, we may assume the word was created before their separation, and could then go back several millennia. These two have perhaps been the most relevant branches for the reconstruction of the Indo-European language family, the language family with more speakers in the world today (almost 3 billion speakers). Indo-European is the common ancestor of most languages of Europe (as well as extensive regions of central and southern Asia, most of the Americas and large parts of Africa). See David W. Anthony, 2007 for an attractive recent account on the reasons why this language would eventually “shape the modern world”.

¹⁰ On the complex question of the Greek city-state, a recent very interesting monograph is Hansen, 2006.

¹¹ *Municipium* was the other main Latin term for this. This was usually how they called a town or city (apart from Rome). Etymologically the *municipium* was a social contract between “duty holders”, or citizens of the town. They were independent city-states at first, but eventually it simply meant municipality, the lowest level of local government. See Garnsey 1987 on all these questions.

¹² See Snodgrass, 1980 and Pomeroy, 2009, for an introduction on the Archaic period of Ancient Greek History.

with the emergence of a citizenship notion, it came to describe the entire body of citizens.¹³ The ancient Greeks often did not refer to Athens, Sparta or Thebes, and other *poleis* as such; they often spoke instead of the Athenians, Lacedaemonians, Thebans and so on. The body of citizens¹⁴ came to be the most important meaning of the term *polis* in ancient Greece. When the Classical-period Greeks wanted to refer to the totality of *urban* buildings and spaces they used another term: ἄστυ (*asty*). Curiously enough, the word for ‘police’ in most modern European languages comes from a word eventually derived from *polis*, whereas the Greeks use today the term ‘*astynomia*’, literally, ‘the law of the city’, for their ‘police’. But they use today the word that in Classical times simply designated the body of buildings (*asty*) and not the body of citizens (*polis*).

The development of the concept of *polis* in ancient Greece would with time lead to the confrontation of the two notions of βάρβαρος (at first simply “foreigner”, later “barbarian”) on the one hand and πολίτης or *politēs* (“citizen”, derived from πόλις – *polis*), on the other hand.

In Homer’s works (8th century BC), the first known author¹⁵ of Greek literature, the term βάρβαρος appeared only once (*Iliad* 2.867), in the form βαρβαρόφωνος (*barbarophonos*) (“of incomprehensible speech”), used of the Carians fighting for Troy during the Trojan War. In general, in fact, the concept of *barbarians* did not figure largely in archaic literature before the 5th century BC. It has been suggested even that “barbarophonoi” in the *Iliad* signifies not those

¹³ See Patterson, 1981, who explains that, according to a law promulgated by Pericles in 451, citizenship was only awarded to the children of two citizens, the intention perhaps being to preserve the purity of lineage of the Athenians. Cf. also the special legal status of the *metics*.

¹⁴ For a theoretical reflection on the whole process, see Hall, 1997 and 2002; Saïd, 1991; Malkin, 2001 and García Sánchez, 2007.

¹⁵ See Fowler, 2004 on Homer.

who spoke a non-Greek language but simply those who spoke Greek badly, not being Greek their native language.¹⁶

The Greeks (and the Romans after them¹⁷) used the term as they were making contact with other civilizations. And so the Greeks applied the term to the Egyptians, Persians or Phoenicians. Then, the Romans would use it for Celts, Germanic peoples, Carthaginians, and soon it became a common term to refer to all foreigners, both in Greek and in Latin. The *Berbers* of North Africa were another example; in their case, the name remained in use, having been adopted by the Arabic speakers and is still in use as the name for the non-Arabs in North Africa (though not by they themselves¹⁸). The geographical term *Barbary* or *Barbary Coast*, and the name of the *Barbary* pirates based on that coast seem to derive from this word as well. The name of the region, *Barbary*, comes from the Arabic word *Barbar*, possibly from the Latin word *barbaricum*, “land of the barbarians”.

Barbaros was also used by the Greeks (and especially by the Athenians), to deride other Greek regions and states (such as Epirotes, Eleans, Macedonians and speakers of the Aeolic dialects), in a pejorative and politically motivated manner. Using this word against someone would feel like diminishing the other's greekness

¹⁶ See Santiago, 1998 for an analysis of the use of the scarcely mentioned pair Greek / Barbarian prior to Aeschylus and Herodotus. See also Levy, 1984 and 1992; Hartog, 1988 and Cartledge, 1993 and 1995.

¹⁷ See Dauge, 1981.

¹⁸ They are the Amazighs in their own language (*Imazighen* / *Imazi-en* in plural, and *A-mazigh* in singular). They are considered indigenous to North Africa west of the Nile Valley and up to the They are distributed from the Atlantic Ocean, from the Mediterranean to the Niger. With the conquest of the region by Arabic speakers in the seventh century they gradually started using different varieties of Maghrebi Arabic. There are today about twenty-five million Berber. *i-Mazigh-en* possibly means “free/noble people”.

by the linkage to non-Greeks both in “civic manners” and/or in language use.¹⁹

The 320 year-period from 800 to 480 BC saw a marked semantic shift in the Greek word. What started as a linguistically-motivated labeling of the foreigner, without a clear connotation, started to denote the strangeness, the otherness. With it the connotation²⁰ came. The negative connotation of the designation of the other came. The superiority of us vs. them came.²¹

And so, the sentence “whoever is not Greek is a barbarian” became to suggest something different. Already in Classical times, Plato²² rejected the Greek – barbarian dichotomy as an absurdity on logical grounds: dividing the world into Greeks and non-Greeks told one nothing about the second group. De-personifying the other is a part of the derogatory process:

It was very much as if, in undertaking to divide the human race into two parts, one should make the division as most people in this country do; they separate the Hellenic race from all the rest as one, and to all the other races, which are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language to one another, they give the single name “barbarian”; then, because of this single name, they think it is a single species. Or it was as if a man should think he was dividing number into two classes by cutting off a myriad from all the other numbers, with the notion that he

¹⁹ See Malkin, 2001 for a discussion on the perception of Greek ethnicity in Antiquity.

²⁰ A change occurred in the connotations of the word after the Greco-Persian Wars in the first half of the 5th century BC, when an extensive coalition of Greeks defeated the vast Achaemenid Empire. Indeed in the Greek of these years ‘barbarian’ is often used to mean Persian in particular.

²¹ See Isaac, 2004 on the concept of racism in Antiquity.

²² The amount of bibliographical production on Plato is staggering. See a recent exercise at a bibliographical repertoire (2012-2013), by an eminent expert, at <http://platosociety.org/plato-bibliography-2012-2013-by-luc-brisson-cnrs-paris/>

was making one separate class, and then should give one name to all the rest, and because of that name should think that this also formed one class distinct from the other. A better division, more truly classified and more equal, would be made by dividing number into odd and even, and the human race into male and female; as for the Lydians and Phrygians and various others they could be opposed to the rest and split off from them when it was impossible to find and separate two parts, each of which formed a class. (*Statesman* 262c-263a)

Being Greek implied the *polis*, implied the *polites*, implied speaking Greek, implied Greek civilization, culture, religion, habits, mindsets. The foreign-speaking other, slowly, started to mean all the opposite: no-polis, no citizenship, no-Greek, strange beliefs, religions, habits, no-Greek civilization... even no civilization at all.²³ Because, after all, the Greeks, as Aristotle²⁴ put it, believed, that

the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal, and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune city-less is either low in the scale of humanity or above it (...) inasmuch as he is solitary, like an isolated piece at draughts. And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possess speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations

²³ See Goossens, 1962; Long 1986; Hall, 1989; Cartledge, 1993; Hall, 1997; Harrison, 2000. Some scholars are of the opinion this Greek/barbarian polarity in classical literature should not be overemphasized: Synodinou, 1977; Luschnig, 1988; Mossman, 1995; Vidal-Naquet, 1997; Saïd, 2002 and Miller, 1997.

²⁴ See now Knight, 2007.

of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state. (...).

Therefore the impulse to form a partnership of this kind is present in all men by nature; but the man who first united people in such a partnership was the greatest of benefactors. For as man is the best of the animals when perfected, so he is the worst of all when sundered from law and justice. (*Politics*, I, 1253a)

This last sentence is a key to this question. When outside the *polis* system, a man is not really a man, he is not a *polites*: he is simply a barbarian. Perhaps a man is then not much better than other members of the animal kingdom. Because, in very Aristotelian words, a man is a political animal, which does not exactly mean, as very often taken, that a man is interested in politics. It means that a man is an animal that is different from other animals because of this habit of sharing his life with others in social structures such as the *polis* (*civil-ized* animal).

Against this background, the masterpieces of Greek literature in the Classical period, explored the attractive soul of the barbarian, and particularly at length that of the barbarian woman, where one could find all the excesses the human condition shares with the animal world... when outside the *polis* and the emotional constraints the *decorum* of the Greek morals put on the *polites*, the spectator of the plays in the theatre of Dionysus on the southern slopes of the acropolis. On the walls of the temple of Apollo at Delphi it was possible to read the inscription μηδὲν ἄγαν – ‘Nothing in excess’, really in good harmony with the Latin concept of *aurea mediocritas*

(or *golden mean*, the desirable middle between two extremes) and the constant urge in Greek thought of avoiding the sin of *hybris*, or extreme pride, arrogance. *Hybris* is a really important moral concept. It is in the centre of many important ancient legends, stories, myths and moral exempla. It refers to someone who, removed from reality, overestimates his/her capacities or achievements, someone who does not know his/her place and behaves with arrogance, offending the divinity, although sometimes the offense is not voluntary. For instance, being “too beautiful” is considered hybristic in ancient Greek religion, and it would imply a sin and a punishment, even if there is no will.²⁵

At this point of Greek history, the beginning of the Classical period, the first foreign power is Persia. Persians were the terrible enemy of all Greeks during the first half of the 5th century BC., and so they have a very special position in Classical literature.

As E. Papadodima (2010, 1-2) puts it in a recent study of this question, “by contrast with epic and archaic non-epic poetry, the term “barbarian” appears quite frequently in drama, tragedy and comedy, either as an ethnic designation or as a (pejorative) value term. In many contexts, the term is treated as a distinct or even stereotyped cultural status that is accompanied by substantial connotations of inferiority. These might include for instance the treatment of barbarians as morally corrupt, savage or slaves by nature. These points are far more challenging and telling not only because they refer to the core of the Greek/barbarian antithesis but also because they are incorporated into contexts which often blur, undermine or at least raise doubts about their validity. If viewed in isolation, these points can and do lead to misleading conclusions”²⁶.

²⁵ On the concept of *hybris* see Fisher, 1992.

²⁶ See Long, 1986 for the depiction of the barbarians in Greek Classical Comedy.

E. Hall (1989: 121-133) remarks that barbarians are portrayed in fifth-century Greek drama, typically, as:

- 1) Effeminate, luxurious, highly emotional and cowardly,
- 2) Despotic and servile,
- 3) Savage, lawless and unjust,
- 4) Unsophisticated or unintelligent.

She continues remarking the Greeks show the opposite virtues: manliness/bravery, political freedom, lawfulness/justice and intelligence/reason. There seems to be a rough division into two types of barbarians, Eastern and Northern. The former (Persians, Phrygians, Lydians...) are associated with effeminacy, softness, cowardice and servility, while the latter (Thracians, Scythians) are associated with crudeness, savageness and ferocity. Of course, the idea of such superiority can be linked with the different attempts at justifying slavery.²⁷

However, Hall and Papadodima show that this presentation of the barbarian does not always lead to an attempt at demonstrating an idea of a Hellenic superiority. The ethnocentric attacks often appear at the end as ambiguous or ironic.²⁸ This is an interesting nuance, in my view, worth taking into account.

I have always liked this statue of the *Dying Gaul*²⁹ (today kept in the Capitoline Museum in Rome). It is true Hellenic culture brought the concept of *barbarian* to the table of the Western world. It is true one can read every sort of derogatory comments on the other in Greek literature, or even plain justifications of slavery

²⁷ Consider Aristotle's discussion of slavery in his *Politics* (see Garnsey, 1996). See also Schlaifer, 1936.

²⁸ See Brigham, 1971.

²⁹ <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Galata_Morente_-_Musei_Capitolini_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Galata_Morente_-_Musei_Capitolini_(1).jpg)> Photographer: Jean-Pol Grandmont.

on such grounds. It is true that, through the passage to Latin, the onomatopoeic noun *barbaros* gave way, in our languages, to the concept of *barbaric*, *barbarism*, etc. But it is also true, in my mind, there is an implicit admiration of the other, the barbarian, in the portrayal of this dying Celtic warrior, a very humane closeness to the suffering human being. In any case, as the important monograph by B. Isaac (2004) puts forward with an appalling clarity, racial discrimination or xenophobic behaviours are also parts of the Classical legacy³⁰.



³⁰ Fredrickson, 2002 is more cautious in the use of terms such as 'race' applied to the Ancient world. See also Snowden, 1983 and 1997 for another point of view on this. Cf. Bichler, 2000.

I would prefer to end this paper on an optimistic note. But the title I have chosen for this talk reminds me also of another very dangerous, worrisome development of the concept of extreme ideas of ethnic superiority. The last very difficult years in Greece have seen the emergence, among many other sad phenomena, of neo-nazi groups (as is also the case in many other regions of Europe and the rest of the world), such as the political group known as “the Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή)”. During the Greek national elections of 2012 they used the natural concerns of the Greek people for unemployment, as well as the unpopularity of the austerity measures in the economic policies imposed from the EU, as well as a very blatant anti-immigration rhetoric. They were able to obtain 7% of the vote, what initially gave them 21 seats in Parliament (later 18, after a second election in June 2012).

Whoever is not Greek... is a Barbarian?

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