



8-2023

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Recommended Citation

Berteaux, John (2023) "Book Review: Erich S. Gruen. *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 89: No. 89, Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol89/iss89/16>

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Book Reviews

**Erich S. Gruen. *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*
Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2011**

Reviewed by John Berteaux

Erich S. Gruen's edited collection *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean* first appeared in 2011. I feel the significance of this collection is that it teases out and asks us to assess unreflective assumptions that inform not only our vision of the past, but also our grasp of present-day collective identities. Early on Gruen reports that while moderns tend to focus on difference, dissimilarity, or contrast when distinguishing cultures, in the eight sections of this text scholars identify and investigate complex connections that resulted in the cultural identities we associate with the ancient Mediterranean world. The essence of Gruen's argument is that "The fashioning of a collective self-consciousness in antiquity took shape in complex and diverse forms." Ancient people defined themselves "by claiming links with other societies, by pointing to cross currents and overlapping that placed less emphasis on distinctiveness than on shared heritage within a broader Mediterranean setting."

Part one of the text (*Myth and Identity*) includes articles by Professors Tanja S. Scheer, Pascale Linant de Bellefonds, and Tonio Holscher. These pieces go beyond myths of common descent, claims of shared history, and symbols of peoplehood as distinguishing characteristics of a culture. For example, in the article *Ways of Becoming Arcadian: Arcadian Foundation Myths in the Mediterranean*, Schreer observes that while common descent and common territory play a part in the creation of "being Arcadian" these are not isolated attributes and there is more to the story. Likewise, while Linant de Bellefonds in *Pictorial Foundations Myths in Roman Asia Minor* examines foundational legends of Asia Minor Greek cities under Roman rule she also emphasizes the role of local visual representations in the creation of common identities and Holscher in *Myths, Images, and the Typology of Identities in Early Greek Art* looks into the way "a collective entity creates identity using the memory of a mythical heroic past in early Greece."

Part two of the text (*Perceptions and Constructions of Persia*) includes five separate articles that delve into, and question identity found via contrast – that is identity based solely on the assertion of dissimilarity from others or the assertion of self in relation to others. Eric Gruen, for example, in *Herodotus and Persia*, asks if we should buy the notion that the conflict between Greece and Persia "was a pivotal turning point in the conception of Greek identity." In other words, was it solely the Persian wars that, "drove Greeks to distinguish their special selves from the characteristics of the despised 'other'?"

Margret Cool Root in *Embracing Ambiguity in the World of Athens and Persia* “unpacks numerous tropes of modern (Western) scholarship that emphasize utter polarities between Greece and Persia – and examines how this modern intellectual tradition has inscribed its perspective upon the classical *testimonia*.”

Part three of the text (*Representation of the “Barbarian”*) includes four articles that delve into the complexity of art. I.M. Ferris’ *The Pity of War: Representations of Gauls and Germans in Roman Art* asks us to see the images in Roman public art as more than realistic portrayals of war. Rather Ferris asks that we reflect on these images as “signifiers of various messages linked to Roman, and particularly Roman imperial rhetoric.” He suggests that the images often contain levels of meaning – or as he puts it “are often imbued with meaning inside meaning and so on, like nested Russian dolls.” In other words, Ferris suggests a complex framework for understanding the barbarian enemies of Rome.

Section four of the text (*Jewish Identity in Text and Image*) includes three articles that seek to expose the complexity of “conventional dichotomies such as self/other, Greek/barbarian, and Jew/gentile.” The initial article in this section, *Surviving the Book: The Language of the Greek Bible and Jewish Identity* by Tessa Rajak, works toward throwing new light on these dichotomies, examining the Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek. Tessa Rajak suggests that this first translation of the Bible into Greek, “encapsulates the paradox of its successive communities, poised between two worlds. It represents a resolution of two powerful drives: the pull of acculturation and the anxiety of cultural annihilation.” The second article in this section is Steven Fine’s *Jewish Identity at The Limus: The Earliest Reception of the Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings*. Fine takes up the issue: “Who is a Jew?” He concludes that “Jewish Identity in late antiquity was indeed a complex affair.” Karen Steven in *Keeping the Dead in their Place: Mortuary Practices and Jewish Cultural Identity in Roman North Africa* points out the importance of reexamining past conclusions about a significant ancient necropolis and considering changing priorities of interpretation.

In part five (*Egyptian Culture and Roman Identity*) Molly Swetnam-Burland and Penelope J.E. Davies delve into the importance of reinterrogating the shared or mutual impact that cultures can have on one-another. For example, Swetnam-Burland suggests that while Egyptian deities and cults were an established part of Italian communities “both literary and visual representations of priests depict a performative cultic role that does not completely describe the lives or identities of those who held the office, much less reflect any actual or ever perceived ethnicity.” On the other hand, Penelope Davies concludes that Rome enjoyed certain benefits “by appropriating the Egyptian legacy as part of its own identity.

Part six (*Construction of Identity in Phoenician Diaspora*) probes the ways in which a culture changes, is reshaped, and adapts by its dispersion among an “other.” Corinne Bonnet’s *On Gods and Earth: The Tophet and the Construction of a New Identity in Punic Carthage*, and Josephine Crawley Quinn’s *The Cultures of the Tophet: Identification and Identity in the Phoenician Diaspora* examine how the mingling of people results in complex transformations.

Section seven (*Composite Identities*) includes articles that emphasize “Composite identities were nowhere more evident than in the Roman world.” Selections in this section by Andrew Wallace-Hadill, Maria Cecilia D’Ercole and Kevin Butcher suggest that identities in the ancient world were composed of many elements. There is not just one affiliation that really matters.

Part eight (*Contested Identities*) includes articles by Ada Cohen *The Self as Other: Performing Humor in Ancient Greek Art* and Benjamin Isaac’s *Attitudes Toward Provincial Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*. This section grapples, with the complexities of art that “disparage non-Greek targets of Greek artists” as well as prejudicial stereotypes about non-Greeks or non-Romans. Cohen argues, “Because it can be directed toward both the self and its others, as well as addressing the interactions between self and other, humor affords great insight into the workings of ethnic, racial, and gender identities.” Benjamin Isaac observes that an investigation of the writings of provincial intellectuals could give us some idea of how well they integrated into the diverse society in Rome.

In conclusion, this edited collection is comprehensive. Its eight sections emphasize the importance of moving beyond myth, common descent, contrast, or conventional dichotomies to understand the cultural identities of the ancient Mediterranean. In addition, while one section observes that art has probative importance in investigating collective consciousness, another points out the value of interrogating the shared mutual impact that cultures can have on one another. Accordingly, each of the articles in the text supports Gruen’s thesis that cultural identities in the ancient Mediterranean “took shape in complex and diverse forms.”

In addition, this collection is important for moderns because each of its twenty-four articles challenge modern habits of thought. For example, presently, one easily forgets that collective identities are not simply given once and for all. In fact, cultures may identify themselves, but that never lasts because others get their say. Or again as Swetnam-Burland says in part five, there is a shared mutual impact that cultures can have on one another. Hence, just as the collective identities in the ancient Mediterranean were the product of complex interconnections, the elements that the makeup present day collective identities are both complex and mutable.

In other words, today, one can ask, what is it that we are really looking at when we focus on race, gender, or sexuality ? And this question is not unlike that asked about cultural identity in the ancient Mediterranean by contributors to this collection.