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Perception as Reality: The Intersection of Genre and Ethnic Identity in Classical History

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Groups of people often define themselves in opposition to other groups. The Greeks and Romans were no different. In fact, modern ways of looking at different groups may simply be the continuation of how the Greeks and Romans looked at external groups over two thousand years ago. The ancient Greeks regarded anyone who did not speak their language as βάρβαρος, the origin of the modern English word “barbarian.” This binary view of their world allowed the various Greek city-states, who were only rarely and briefly united and never in such a way that a modern observer would call a Greek nation, to share something in common with each other. This binary view was an important factor in their ethnic identity. The world was simply divided between those who spoke Greek (and were therefore inherently superior) and those who did not. Which other language was spoken was unimportant. If it was not Greek, it was barbarian.

Throughout this paper the English word “barbarian” will be employed largely in harmony with ancient usage to distinguish between those who are not Greek or Roman. The Greek word βάρβαρος did not originally have negative connotations and referred in a general way to those who did not speak Greek. The Romans did not have a word that described others in such a way, but words like peregrinus (“foreigner”) and alienus (“foreign,” “alien”) came close. Eventually, the Romans adapted the Greek word for their own use and applied it in a similar way to those who did not speak Latin, although it tended to be used more for those peoples to the north and west of Italy—by Roman times it would have been difficult to use the pejorative meaning of “barbarian” against the more culturally developed and sophisticated east. This use of the word “barbarian” did nothing to distinguish identity between various groups of non-Greeks or non-Romans, and it was not until the Romans began to expand both to the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean that they began to make distinctions between different groups of others. Thus, language was one of the primary boundary markers for the Greeks and Romans when establishing others’ ethnic identity. In Homer, the Greek term βάρβαρος is mentioned only as an adjective to describe the way the Carians speak. In Herodotus, it comes to develop a negative connotation as example after example is given of barbarians who continuously demonstrate their otherness.
by the things they do and the way they behave. It appears that the rise of historiography roughly coincides with the rise of ethnocentrism. Ideas about ethnic identity were perpetuated by the writers of history in the Classical world as a way to place the barbarian outside their own ethnic identity in order to strengthen the didactic purpose of their history and as a way to help identify what it meant to be a Greek or a Roman.

The Role of Historiography

The genre of historiography plays a large role in the modern understanding of ancient perceptions of ethnic identity. So much of the current knowledge of ancient peoples comes from the ancient historiographers. There are not many ancient works of what a modern scholar would solely call ethnography, but many of the surviving works of history contain ethnographic sections and accounts. Herodotus, the first author whose history survives, dedicated two entire books of his nine-book history to ethnographic discussions of the Egyptians and Scythians respectively. The Commentaries of Julius Caesar are indispensable for understanding ancient Gaul and Germany, and Livy also described the Gauls and their customs. It makes sense, then, that ancient historians were also interested in ethnography and the customs and practices of others. In fact, Charles W. Fornara, citing the eminent ancient historian Jacoby, claims that ethnography was merely one type of history writing in the ancient world. Anciently, history itself was viewed as a branch of rhetoric and literature and quickly developed its own parameters about who should engage in recording past events, how those past events should be recorded, and how, stylistically, the undertaking should be handled. This would no doubt affect not only the literary style of the author, but also his portrayal of barbarians in order to meet his specific rhetorical purpose. Thus, the genre of history itself could in fact shape the way that barbarians would be portrayed.

Ethnicity Now and Then

The way that these different ethnicities were portrayed brings immediately to the front of any discourse the definitions of ethnicity itself. One of the most important questions, if not the most important, deals with how the ancients viewed ethnicity and how those ancient views are understood today. Modern scholars have suggested various ways of identifying what constitutes an ethnic group, beginning with Fredrik Barth’s four criteria that an ethnic group “is largely biologically self-perpetuating, shares fundamental cultural values, ... makes up a field of communication and interaction, [and] has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others.” Barth’s criteria have largely been accepted by scholars, although they are occasionally modified to fit specific cases or needs. In adapting these criteria for an ancient

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1. Tacitus’ *Germania* is perhaps the most famous, and the only such work in Latin. It should be noted that even though Tacitus wrote a separate work about Germany, he is most recognized for his work as a historian.
understanding of ethnicity, Gary D. Farney (citing Cornell) suggests six bases for understanding ethnicity: sharing a collective name, a myth of common descent, shared history, possessing a distinctive shared culture, association with a specific territory, and a sense of communal solidarity. Many of these six are merely adaptations or expansions of Barth’s original four identifiers. Barth’s “biologically self-perpetuating” criterion can be understood to mean that those within a particular ethnic group have a shared biological relationship, which can be expressed in a myth of common descent. Ancients did not have the same scientific tools for determining genetic makeup or DNA profiling, so many ancient groups, particularly the Greeks, sought to connect the name of their people to each other through mythological genealogies that would provide a collective name and myth of common descent. For example, many Greeks were associated with one of the four primary tribes of Greece: Aeolians, Dorians, Achaeans, and Ionians. Seeking for some sort of familial connection, a mythological genealogy was created in which the Aeolians and Dorians shared a common ancestor named Hellen, whose sons gave their names to these tribes—Aeolus and Dorus. The Achaeans and Ionians were named after Hellen’s grandsons Achaeus and Ionas. The sharing of “fundamental cultural values” and a “membership which identifies itself . . . and is identified by others” of Barth is synonymous with the ideas of Farney about a distinctive shared culture and a sense of communal solidarity. The one area that Barth does not discuss is ethnic groups having an association with a specific territory. This is not a flaw or mistake, but rather a difference that arises when discussing perceptions of ancient and modern ethnicity. In the modern world, people and groups are much more mobile, and while there are pockets of ethnicity that are connected to specific locations—Little Italys, Chinatowns—on the whole, ethnic groups are much more geographically dispersed, especially in the United States. Anciently, people were not generally as mobile and families often stayed in the same locality for multiple generations. Consequently, without the resulting diaspora, ethnic groups tended to remain in the same geographic areas and were associated with specific geographic territories and locations.

This connection of certain groups to specific geographical areas would come to play a role in the Classical perceptions and descriptions of foreigners.

It is interesting to note that the ancients’ view of ethnicity, although they may have referred to it differently, is strikingly similar. Herodotus, the first historian to consciously give some sort of definition regarding the boundaries of ethnicity, says that what unites all Greeks is “kinship . . . in blood and speech” and having in common “the shrines of the gods and sacrifices, and the likeness of our way of life.” So the things that generate familiarity and


5. The various groups of ancient Greece are a good example of this. The Dorians were those Greeks who inhabited the Peloponnesus, while the Ionians were seen as connected with Asia Minor. There was a similar territorial connection with various ethnic groups in Italy.

6. Herodotus, 8.144.2. While Homer portrays the Greeks as fighting against the Trojans, he does not show many differences between the two competing forces. Greeks and Trojans are able to communicate with each other, they share similar religious scruples and they have similar social customs. If it were not for the fact that Homer says that the Greeks came from the Aegean it would not be hard to see the Trojan War as a conflict between two groups of the same people—a sort of civil war.
ethnicity for the Greeks themselves are biological relation, speaking the same language, a common religious system, and common customs. These are very similar to the ethnic indicators mentioned above. Herodotus is much more in line with Barth's thinking (or is it the other way around?) than with Farney's. Again, this is most likely because of the unique context in which Herodotus is writing. By the time Herodotus was composing his history, the Greeks had spread throughout the Aegean and had been settled in those areas for a few generations. Because there were Greeks not only in Greece proper but also in Sicily and throughout southern Italy and Asia Minor, it would not have made sense for Herodotus to include a geographic territorial identifier. The question of whether these notions actually distinguish between ethnic groups is beside the point. What is more important is that they were believed to be ethnic identifiers by the ancients, particularly historians. Although it is a fairly simple task to establish when an idea or perception about a specific ethnic group was first mentioned in surviving texts, it is much more difficult and nearly impossible to determine when that idea really started and how it came to be accepted. The ancient historians were influenced by their cultural and social context and were thus conditioned to see particular groups in certain ways. Additionally, many historians simply repeated the ethnic stereotypes of their predecessors. Consequently, the author's own context, combined with the conventions of the historical genre, perpetuated the cycle of ethnic identity. Historiographers viewed people and events through a certain cultural and genre-specific lens, thus in a way drawing a picture they were already looking for. Perceptions of ethnicity were often perpetuated by historiographers, who wrote about barbarians in such a way that allowed them to place the barbarian outside their own corporate ethnic sphere in order to reinforce the didactic purpose of their history.

Borders of Genre

The earliest literature of the West, Homer's *Iliad*, functions as a sort of history. While its purpose was not primarily historical, it did serve that purpose for many Greeks. Many city-states traced their foundations back to heroes from the Trojan War or even before. With the advent of history-writing, a new genre was created that was different from any other. History was a genre that could praise the great deeds of the past, like epic poetry, but also stand up to the rigors of sophistic inquiry about the validity and truthfulness of the events recorded. Herodotus, writing in the fifth-century B.C.E. after the defeat of Xerxes and his armies by a coalition of Greek city-states, was the first to set the parameters for what history would become. Others followed suit and eventually the writing of history became every bit as much a branch of literature as tragedy and epic, with its own conventions and requirements. Herodotus explains at the outset of his work his reasons for writing and publishing his *ἱστορία* or research: "In order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvelous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners and especially the reason why

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7. Even Rome claimed to have a sort of founding figure from this great story in the Trojan hero Aeneas; hence Vergil's Roman epic *Aeneid*.
they warred against each other may not lack renown.” Herodotus establishes at the outset that he is interested in three things. First, at the most basic level he wants to preserve a memory of things that have occurred in the past. Second, he desires that the deeds of the Greeks and Barbarians receive their appropriate fame. The Greek word ἔργα, translated as “deeds” can mean both the actual deeds and accomplishments of men, but also means the physical buildings and monuments created by men. This is important since Herodotus shows an interest in the monumental architecture of the various peoples he discusses, particularly the Egyptians and is perplexed at the apparent lack of great temples under the Persians. This interest in actions and monuments became standard in historians forever after. Thirdly, he is interested in discovering the reasons for the conflict between the Greeks and Barbarians. The word translated “foreigners” in the passage above is actually the aforementioned βάρβαρος. Over time, these three motivations became the standard motivations and purposes of all later historians, and while others would adapt or expand on them, memorializing the past in an honorable way and searching for the underlying reasons for conflict would forever remain the hallmark of history. At the outset, history is connected not only with recounting the great deeds of the past but also with helping to define particular ethnic groups by cataloging their conflicts. This would, in turn, bring about a sense of corporate identity within the audience, making each individual feel as if he or she were a part of something greater and larger. It is with history that ethnic identity construction becomes an important factor and theme in literature.

Boundaries within Historiography

After Herodotus, each successive historian made minor corrections, suggestions, or additions to the genre of historiography. History was always about the great actions of men (both noble and ignoble), although the focus could shift back and forth between historical monographs like those of Thucydides and Sallust, to larger histories of nations like the massive work of Livy, to universal world histories like Diodorus Siculus. Anciently, it was generally accepted that history had a didactic purpose and that history should inspire people to be better and strive to emulate the worthy actions of their predecessors. Dionysius of Halicarnassus says that historians should write about “noble and lofty subjects and such as will be of great utility to their readers,” and Livy sought to provide examples so that his readers could “behold the lessons of every kind of experience, . . . and from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate.” Polybius argued that “men have no more ready corrective of conduct than knowledge of the past” and that “the soundest education and training” was the study of history. The moralizing aspect of historiography was a mainstay of the genre from the very beginning when Herodotus recounted the deeds of men in such a way so as to illustrate his moralistic purposes—what was appropriate behavior for a Greek was what was expected behavior from anyone else (with almost always

8. Herodotus, 1.1.
10. Livy, Praefatio.
11. Polybius, 1.1.1–2.
negative connotations). History, by its very rhetorical and didactic nature, reinforced and perpetuated the various ethnic identities that served to identify characteristics and traits that were included within acceptable Greek or Roman identities and those that labeled a person as a barbarian.

Because the things included in a work of history were designed to instruct and encourage appropriate behavior from its hearers or readers, it was often others who were shown to be in the wrong. When Xerxes attempts to cross the Hellespont at the beginning of his expedition against Greece, Herodotus portrays him as not only crossing a physical boundary but a sort of metaphysical one as well, justifying his failure. When his bridge across the Hellespont is destroyed by a storm, Xerxes in his rage orders that the river be whipped three hundred times and that chains and fetters be dropped into it as a token of Xerxes’ superiority over the river. There is a direct correlation between Xerxes’ ἰβρίς and his eventual defeat in Greece. Xerxes is shown as one who does not understand the importance of religious scruples, even ignoring them as he marches to Athens and burns the sacred buildings on the acropolis. It is because of this ἰβρίς and disrespect for the gods that Xerxes is, at the most basic level, a barbarian. Herodotus includes shared religious customs as an identifier of ethnicity, and Xerxes—together with Persians in general—has shown that he is, in effect, the very definition of what it means to be a barbarian, the anti-Greek. Likewise Hannibal, the great menace to Rome, was portrayed by historians of Rome as overly fond of money (Polybius and that he had even sworn an oath—with his hand on the sacrificial victim—that he would be the sworn enemy of Rome. While he is portrayed occasionally as noble, that portrayal occurs only to bring more glory to the Roman people when he is finally defeated. His purpose in history is thus twofold: to provide a moral justification for his defeat and, at the same time, to enhance Rome’s prestige at his defeat.

The genre of historiography itself was very different from other genres of literature. While it shared a common goal with epic in providing moral exempla and attempting to instill appropriate and accepted values in its audience, it was not chiefly designed for performance. Epic poetry and the great tragedies of Classical Athens were designed to please the hearer and ultimately win the favor of those who were either in attendance or supporting the poet. This presented the opportunity for sensationalism or overacting that would distort the story. For epic and other forms of poetry, often the moral or message was more important than any pretense to reality or actual events. This was not a concern because it was only rarely that tragedians composed plays based on historical events, and the events of epic poetry were located so far back in the mists of time that there was no hope of retaining any sense of historical truth—not was there really any interest in doing so.

Authorial Boundaries

Just as certain events were fitting to be recorded in history, so were certain characteristics and talents required of those who wrote history. The qualifications of the historian himself were just as important as his skills in

12. Herodotus, 7.35.
lying bare past events. Three things were important to the historian as he prepared to compose his work. According to Polybius, “the first being the industrious study of memoirs and other documents, . . . the second the survey of cities, places, rivers, . . . the third being the review of political events.”¹⁴ Being well-read, well-traveled, and well aware of the political situation were requisites of those who wish to engage in writing history. These qualifications set some very serious limits on who would be in a position to write history—namely the wealthy and politically active. No one else would have the resources to travel to various historical sites or have access to the research materials needed or the connections to have a sound understanding of the political scene. These qualifications seem to have been fairly constant throughout the Greek and Hellenistic periods. The Greeks placed an emphasis on research (ὑστορία) and sought to learn about their subjects, not only in books but by firsthand experience. Herodotus claimed to have traveled all throughout the known world and claims to have spent significant amounts of time in Egypt and Scythia, the two places he spends most time talking about other than Greece. Herodotus was almost unique in his portrayal of otherness in his work. He lacks almost any sense of ethnic prejudice or judgment, commenting only occasionally in any judgmental way. His lack of explicit judgmental opinions or criticizing statements should not be understood to mean that he supported or endorsed the customs or practices he was recounting. Rather, Herodotus usually made his judgment clear in the outcome of the larger event in which his ethnographic treatise was contained. The people whose strange customs or buildings he described often met their end at some later point in the work, and Herodotus implies that at least part of the reason for their destruction or slavery is because of the non-Greek nature of those customs. This is another way Herodotus constructs the ethnic identity of others in order reinforce the ethnic identity of the Greeks.

The Romans felt similarly about the historians’ involvement in affairs. Indeed, Roman history was for the most part written by the very men who made it—Roman senators. While their Greek counterparts appealed to research (through books, travel, and so forth), the Romans accessed their sense of duty and immense personal experience when taking up the task of writing history. Many Roman historians were very active in politics at Rome and fought and even commanded legions in her wars.¹⁵ This background undoubtedly played a role in their portrayal of non-Romans. Caesar wrote about the ferocity of the Gauls and Germans, which he had witnessed firsthand in his campaigns against them. Likewise, Sallust wrote about events contemporary with his own time and he may have even played a role in them. While the Greeks put a premium on research as a qualification for writing history, the Romans seemed to emphasize the political stature and reputation of the man.¹⁶

In addition to Polybius’ three “qualifications” that a historian must have, a fourth qualification was perhaps the most important of all. That was literary

¹⁴. Polybius, 12.25.e.
¹⁵. Livy is a notable exception. See the discussion in John Marincola, Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 140–41, on how Livy neatly avoids his obvious lack of military and political experience.
style. Just as important as what was being written was how it was being written. Indeed, according to Fornara, “the historian was in the awkward position of serving two masters, what we call art and science.” The “science” was what a modern audience would call history—the relaying of facts and of what really happened. “Art,” on the other hand, was what the ancients were just as equally concerned with. “So [historians] must not look for what to say but how to say it.” History must not be only useful but also pleasing. For the ancients, history was a branch of literature and rhetoric, and style was paramount in both. The single largest complaint about history writing by ancient historians and literary critics was the unnecessary stylistic adornments or unearned praise of individuals. This lack of impartiality or neutrality is expressed differently at different times. Polybius, writing during the period of great Roman expansion in the Middle Republic, argued that “he who assumes the character of a historian must ignore everything of [partiality], and often, if their actions demand this, speak good of his enemies and honor them with the highest praises while criticizing and even reproaching roundly his closest friends, should the errors of their conduct impose this duty on him.” He continued, “We should therefore not shrink from accusing our friends and praising our enemies.” This approach makes sense for the time when Polybius is writing and for almost all of Rome’s Republican history. As Rome’s Mediterranean empire expanded and came into contact and conflict with more and more groups of people, the historian had to paint a very vivid picture of these new populations for his Roman audience while portraying these unknown civilizations as powerful and ferocious. It was to be the destiny of Rome to bring law, religion and customs—in short, civilization—to these people. There was no glory to be had in conquering some tiny tribe of weaklings, but a general who had fought ferociously against a nation of ruthless savages would earn himself a triumph and eternal glory. This reinforcement of the Roman ethnic identity became more and more pronounced as Roman power expanded. During this time Rome was coming into increasing contact with other cultures, and Romans needed to know what it was that made them special and different from those peoples they were conquering. The ethnic identities of these other peoples were always constructed so that Romans could feel justified, even blessed by the gods, for imposing their will on unwilling groups. The historians of Rome, especially those who were Roman and wrote in Latin, tended to emphasize Rome’s governmental system as being at the core of Roman military success. Latin authors of Rome’s history were able to co-opt the Roman populace by appealing to their innate desire to believe that they were intrinsically better than others and not that their success was the result of their impersonal government.

21. Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.851–853: “you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud.” Although the *Aeneid* was written during the reign of Augustus, the same feeling of Roman superiority and a mandate to bring civilization to the uncivilized is present in the historians of earlier times and especially in Livy, who was a rough contemporary with Vergil.
All of these factors had a role in shaping how the Greek and Roman historians portrayed the other. Because a main focus of history was to preserve great deeds, history quickly became associated with war, which seems to have been one of the favorite pastimes of the age. By the time of Xenophon in the early fourth century B.C.E., “the proper subject of history had become a settled thing, limited to the notable activities of men at war and, by extension, between wars.” This statement should not be surprising when the subjects of the various histories are considered. Herodotus’ main focus was the Greco-Persian Wars; Thucydides wrote exclusively about the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta; Xenophon himself wrote historical works about the end of the Peloponnesian War and the ensuing conflicts for Greek hegemony in addition to his account of Greek mercenaries fighting in Persia; Polybius dealt with the First Punic War and Rome’s armed expansion into the Mediterranean; Sallust’s two surviving works are concerned with armed conflict, one domestic and the other foreign; much of Livy’s surviving history deals with the Roman unification of Italy by force and defeat of Carthage in the Second Punic War. This focus on war and conflict provides an opportunity for the ancient historian to expose the otherness of the enemy. “Enemy” is the most basic level of the concept of “other.” While a great deal of wars were fought between the various Greek city-states or among quarreling Roman generals, most of the attention of ancient historians is focused on groups that can be identified as non-Greek or non-Roman by the writer. Even when civil wars pitted Romans against other Romans, an effort was made to show the opposing side as somehow quantifiably different and accusations were normally thrown that one of the sides had taken up with the Gauls or some other barbarian group. When this was not the case, virtually all historians lamented the destruction wreaked upon a nation when its own citizens fought against each other. Sadness accompanied the underlying assumption that there is something inherently wrong in fighting against those who share the same language, dress, customs, and religious practices. Occasionally barbarians are praised or even begrudgingly admired because of their courage, but often they served a larger purpose in allowing the Greeks or Romans to identify themselves. As Irad Malkin points out in reference to the Greeks, “The Persians were the whetstone against which a common Greekness was sharpened.” While the Romans fought wars against many more enemies, even fighting against the Greeks themselves, the point remains valid. The Romans sharpened their understanding of their own ethnic identity against the aggregate identity of the barbarians.

**Boundaries of Ethnicity**

While the term βάρβαρος does appear in archaic Greek literature, the term does not seem to carry any pejorative meaning until the sixth-century B.C.E., when Persia and Greece began to come into contact and into increasing conflict. From a very early time, the Greeks seemed to have had a view of

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themselves as different from others. In the *Iliad*, the earliest piece of Western literature, the Greeks are identified as coming from the area of the Aegean as opposed to those living outside the Aegean.\(^{25}\) The depiction of barbarians and other foreigners does not seem to have sprung up in a vacuum but rather in the context of conflict. Because historiography is mostly concerned with recounting these conflicts, the writings of the great historians hold an important position for understanding ancient perceptions of ethnic identity. Ethnocentrism seems to have arisen contemporary with the invention of historiography. The Trojans are portrayed sympathetically in the *Iliad*, and it is only with Herodotus that barbarians begin to be viewed negatively.\(^{26}\) Because there was a recognizable external threat present in Xerxes and his Persians, a sort of unified Greekness became identifiable. It may be that communities are able to most fully identify themselves when they are forced to deal with an outside person or group that allows for formerly concealed or unacknowledged similarities within the group to be recognized and asserted. Indeed, ethnic self-awareness “frequently leads to ethnocentrism” and the “attribution of a pre-eminent status or exaggerated importance of one’s own *ethnos*.\(^{27}\) Both the Greeks and Romans are portrayed by their historians as forming this sense of communal identity in conflicts with other, often hostile, groups.

**Greek Ethnic Boundaries**

According to Herodotus, the Greeks all shared the same kinship, language, culture, and religious system.\(^{28}\) He admits that these same criteria can be used to distinguish other peoples from each other, as he does when describing the Amazons.\(^{29}\) Herodotus is perhaps unique in his treatment of the other, and that may be because very was well-traveled. He supposedly went to most of the places he talks about, especially Egypt. Herodotus himself was somewhat of an interesting case study in ethnicity. He was born in Halicarnassus in Ionia and thus would have had many dealings with various Persians in his youth. Exiled from Halicarnassus after a failed revolution, he spent a great deal of time in Athens and then reportedly spent the last years of his life at the Athenian colony of Thurii in Sicily. His interest in various groups of people, most notably the Egyptians and Scythians, is obvious. He devotes practically an entire book to the customs, marvels and monuments of each place.

When Herodotus expands his discussion to include Egypt, he does so because “nowhere are there so many marvelous things, nor in the whole world beside are there to be seen so many works of unspeakable greatness.”\(^{30}\) This is Herodotus’ justification for spending the rest of book two discussing the various buildings, social customs, and religious rituals in Egypt. He justifies himself because Egypt is so different from Greece: “As the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves, and their river is different in its nature from all

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26. Admittedly, the portrayals of barbarians in tragedy were becoming more negative at this time as well.
28. Herodotus, 8.144.2.
29. Herodotus, 4.111.
30. Herodotus, 2.35.1.
other rivers, so have they made all their customs and laws of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men.”31 Both of these statements connect with his original statement in the preface to his work, that he is interested in the “great and wonderful deeds” of men. Herodotus seems to include interesting facts and stories about Egyptian customs under the heading of great and wonderful deeds, and when he explains the reversed gender roles of Egypt or how only men serve as priests and how they shave their heads, he does so by prefacing his explanation with the phrase, “The Hellenes . . . , but the Egyptians. . . .”32 Thus, it would appear that Herodotus identifies the Greeks as the opposite of the Egyptians in most respects. Paul Cartledge suggests, “The Greeks thus in various ways constructed their identities negatively, by means of a series of polarized oppositions of themselves to what they were not.”33

On the other hand, there is present throughout nearly all ancient historiographical writings an interest in others, which seems to be more than just a passing curiosity. This interest in ethnography of other peoples and their respective social systems and cultural and religious practices could be used to argue that the Greeks and Romans were seeking to understand their ethnically identified counterparts in significant and meaningful ways. While this may have been the case—that Greeks and Romans were interested in building bridges of understanding between themselves and other groups—it is just as likely that they enjoyed listening to and reading those stories because they served to highlight their own uniqueness and superiority. The Romans especially seem to have used these differences for justification of their own prejudices and biases rather than using them to create meaningful relationships.

In addition to the Egyptians, Herodotus was very interested in Persian customs and used the Persians as a way to define the Greeks. While he recorded the wonders of Egypt almost as an interesting and useful digression, Herodotus portrays the Persians as barbarian. It was most likely because of the Greco-Persian Wars that “barbarian” came to be known as a pejorative term. “The Greeks developed their Greek-barbarian antithesis in the context of the conflict against the Persian menace.”34 The Persians were very different from the other Near Eastern peoples with whom Greece had had contact.35 Herodotus portrays the Persians as being even further removed from the Greeks than the Egyptians were. The Persians did not even build temples, statues, or altars or believe in gods who have human qualities or characteristics.36 They only deliberated serious matters when they were intoxicated and did not bury their dead until the bodies were mauled by birds or dogs.37 This last custom would have been particularly horrifying to a Greek audience. It should be remembered that in the Iliad much energy and blood was spilled to regain

31. Herodotus, 2.35.2.
32. See Herodotus, 2.35.2–36.4 for examples of various Egyptian practices.
34. Hyun, Ethnicity and Foreigners, 69.
35. Hyun, Ethnicity and Foreigners, 23.
36. Herodotus, 1.131.1.
37. Deliberating while intoxicated: Herodotus, 1.133.3; Burial practices: Herodotus, 1.140.1.
the body of a killed comrade in order to ensure proper burial. Even the gods were outraged when Achilles at first refused to give Hector a proper burial and instead allowed his body to be desecrated. Whether this was, in fact, the Persian custom is beside the point. Herodotus was attempting to show the Persians in such a way that would allow for a kind of righteous indignation and encourage the Greeks, who all shared similar religious practices, to unite against the Persians. Herodotus also recounts the Persian custom of “netting” the inhabitants of conquered islands and castrating the handsomest boys and sending the prettiest virgins to the king. The Persians would also deport entire populations of captured cities and often impaled their enemies. The literary aspect of what Herodotus was doing must be kept in mind. He was tracing the development of the conflict between Greece and Persia and showing how different and cruel the Persians were compared to the Greeks. This rhetoric gave the Greeks the moral high ground and a reason to unite together against a powerful external threat. By constructing an ethnic identity for the Persians—who were in reality a conglomeration of many different eastern nations—Herodotus demonstrated Persian otherness as compared to Greekness. This Persian ethnic identity then served as a kind of rallying call to the Greeks. It was a way of unifying a geographically and often politically fragmented group of people under the banner of an inclusive Greek ethnic identity in order to rebuff the military advances of an exclusive (non-Greek) Persian ethnic construct.

Boundaries of Roman Ethnicity in History

The question of Roman ethnicity and how it was defined by the Romans is somewhat more complicated than that of the Greeks. From the very earliest stages of Roman history, Rome was a conglomeration of various groups. Many of these ethnic identities persisted down to the empire, and famous Romans often proclaimed their ethnic identity as a way to illustrate the great actions of their forefathers or to attach themselves to the great reputation of those who had come before. Additionally, literature at Rome, and especially historiography, arrived relatively late in relation to ancient Greece and even in relation to Rome’s own founding. In many ways the Romans were the literary offspring of Greece and inherited not only many genres of Greek literature but also many prevailing ideas about ethnicity. Thus, by the time of the historians

38. Herodotus, 6.31–32.
40. Herodotus, 1.128.2; 3.132.2; 6.30.1. Note the especially horrific (to the Greek mind) impaling of the head of the already dead Leonidas at Thermopylae: 7.238.1.
41. See especially the whole of Farney, Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition.
42. Homer is nearly contemporary with the beginnings of a recognizable Greece, and Herodotus recounts, probably within fifty years, the most defining period of Greek history. Rome, by contrast, was a late bloomer. The first historian of Rome, Fabius Pictor, lived during the third century B.C.E.—nearly three hundred years after the founding of the Republic and he wrote in Greek, following Greek models and attempting to legitimize Rome and Roman accomplishments for a Greek audience. It was not until the next generation when Cato published his Origines that a Latin branch of history existed at Rome—and it is no longer extant. The best literary sources for the history of Rome are all comparatively late: Sallust, writing in the late Republic; Livy under Augustus; Tacitus under the Flavians.
whose writings are still extant were writing, many ethnic stereotypes had become entrenched in the Roman mind and embedded in Roman rhetorical training, which all the historians shared.43 This is not as large an obstacle as it may seem at first. Romans were generally known for being conservative in their views and suspicious of those people or customs that were unfamiliar. Their values and customs, as portrayed by their own historians and others, remained largely static throughout Roman history. Roman culture, in turn, served to perpetuate many identifiers used to construct ethnic identities. Roman historians often saw in their stories what they wanted to see and what they had been trained to see during their rhetorical and political upbringing. Thus, historians often used accepted stereotypes in their portrayal of others because a person could reasonably expect all Gauls or Germans to act in a similar way or to say similar things in any given situation. These situations and the ethnically identified responses furthered the authors’ didactic and moral purposes and reinforced those ethnic identities.

According to the historiographical tradition, the Romans were forced to identify themselves as a distinct group early on. The interesting point in dealing with the Romans is that although they identified themselves as a superior group throughout their history, they were unique in affiliating themselves with those whom they had conquered. For example, Livy records two separate traditions of what happened when the Trojan refugee Aeneas arrived in Italy with followers. In one account a war was fought between Aeneas and his men against the native Latins, and in the other a war was barely averted. However, in both traditions recounted by Livy, the Trojans and Latins ended up joining together as one group.44 By the time Livy was writing, many of the early ethnic struggles between the various peoples of early Italy had been buried in the mists of time, but echoes still remained, and there was a consciousness on the part of many Romans and Italians of their ethnic heritage. Livy records two episodes of ethnic blending from early Rome. The story of the rape of the Sabine women is offered to explain how the Romans and Sabines came together.45 Likewise, the story of the capture of Alba Longa and the immigration of the people from there to Rome provides a convenient way for understanding how many important contemporary families like the Julii came to be in Rome.46 Romans, like the Greeks, were interested in their own origins and the origins of others. Stories like this provided an aetiological explanation for how and why different ethnic groups came to live in and have power at Rome. As Roman power expanded throughout the Italian peninsula and later into the Mediterranean, Rome increasingly came into contact with other groups, against whom it became increasingly important to identify and quantify what it meant to be a Roman. Because Italians who had been conquered or had made treaties with Rome supplied a significant amount of military manpower, Romans and Italians often fought together against enemies

43. Sallust’s History does not survive, although his two monographs about the war with Jugurtha and the conspiracy of Catiline do survive. Of Livy’s 142-book history, only thirty-five books remain. On the rhetorical training of Roman historians, see Thomas S. Burns, Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C.–A.D. 400 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003), 22.
44. Livy, 1.1.5–11.
45. Livy, 1.9–13.
46. Livy, 1.29–30.
from outside the Italian peninsula. This allowed for and even encouraged Romans and Italians to come together and identify themselves against an external enemy.

The Romans were unique in their extending of the citizenship to peoples whom they had conquered. However, it is important to realize that the extension of the citizenship went quickest to those town and cities with whom Rome most easily identified. The citizenship was extended more slowly to others who did not fit into the Romans’ conception of what it meant to be Roman, and just as the Greeks had in large part defined themselves in opposition to the Persians, so the Romans consciously identified themselves in contrast to those around them. While the Greeks opposed the Persian barbarians, the constant nemesis of Rome was the Gauls. From a very early period, Rome had harbored a sense of fear and dread regarding these others from the North as a result of the sack of Rome by Gauls in 390 B.C.E. Livy is again the main source for what happened or at least for what was passed down through the literary and oral tradition. He says that the Gauls were lured into Italy by the new pleasures of fruits and wine. The picture of the northern savage that is taken in by the desire of an easier and more pleasant lifestyle is also present in Caesar, but an interesting variation is also present. The Suebi, the most warlike and powerful of the German tribes against whom Caesar fought, prohibited the importation of wine to guard against the ill effects it would have on the inhabitants. The Gauls were portrayed as “consumed with wrath, a passion for which their race is powerless to control” and a “race being naturally given to vainglorious outbursts.” Caesar likewise includes an ethnographic account of the Gauls and Germans, emphasizing their systems of government and their corresponding lack of sophistication and effectiveness vis-à-vis the Roman system. In Livy, the Gauls were shown to be untrustworthy (especially in financial matters), wild and passionate, lacking military expertise and sophisticated military equipment, and characterized by uncontrollable anger. This portrayal of the northern barbarian as savage and nearly uncontrollable and uncontrollable is included by Roman historians as a way to illustrate the strengths of Rome and her citizens by contrasting strength, integrity, and moral uprightness against the ferocity, fickleness, and simplicity of those from the north. It was a way in which Roman historians could illustrate the triumph of Roman virtues over the cold savagery of the Gallic tribes.

The Romans sought to identify themselves by contrasting their customs and institutions in opposition to the customs and institutions of others. Roman historians, who had a particular didactic and even patriotic purpose, sought to illustrate these differences as a way of justifying not only the validity of the Romans but also as a means of justifying the Roman conquest of these

48. Livy, 5.33.2.
49. Livy, 5.37.4.
50. Livy, 5.37.8.
52. Livy, 5.37; 5.46.3; 5.48.9; 38.21.
other groups who were viewed as uncivilized.

**Conclusion**

The writers of history from ancient Greece and Rome sought, above all, to glorify their respective countries and themes and to provide the study of the past as a useful and meaningful tool to show “that if ever again men find themselves in a like situation they may be able . . . from a consideration of the records of the past to handle rightly what now confronts them.” Since the most acceptable means of accumulating glory in the ancient Mediterranean was through military exploits, it is no wonder that most of the histories that survive from Classical antiquity deal mainly with war and the men who fought and commanded in them. War and armed conflict require opposing sides, and the historians essentialized the enemy as something other than Greek or other than Roman. Usually this was accomplished by showing the differences in religious practices in the case of the Persians, or illustrating the ruthlessness and lawlessness of the Gauls. This approach was a useful tool for bringing the moral argument to bear on the discussion. The barbarian was shown to be quantifiably and tangibly different and dangerous in their disregard for the laws of gods and men. The sense of ethnic identity, bound up with ethnographic treatises within historical works, was very important “because a sense of ethnic identity can influence behavior.” This sense of ethnic identity can also be understood as the reason why the Greeks and especially the Romans went to war. The Greek and Roman obsession with the heroism that accompanies war pushed them to look for opportunities to define themselves and to gain glory. Thus, the emerging and sometimes fluid sense of ethnic identity on behalf of the Greeks and Romans encouraged continual self-definition by engaging in conflict with others who had been identified and defined by the communal perceptions of ethnic identity. The historian played a major role in those definitions and in shaping the appropriate response and behavior to those definitions.

It was less important whether the portrayal of these other ethnic groups was accurate in portraying a true ethnicity than it was that a type of ethnic identity be constructed. Most of the time, it would appear that the historians did not fabricate these identities but rather gave them a more permanent voice. Since history was written by those who had the leisure time to do so, which would preclude nearly everyone except those engaged in the highest levels of society, the portrayal of barbarians is most likely a reflection of those opinions and stereotypes held by the upper classes. Because the upper classes were the repository of religious customs and traditional civic values, Classical historiography preserves a very important view of the ancient perceptions of ethnic identity and how it was portrayed.

53. Lucian, *How to Write History*, 42. For historians writing about the greatness of their country, Livy, *Praefatio* 1–11; and the greatness of the topic, Thucydides, 1.21–23.