

1 | Introduction

1.1 Historiographies

Few topics in ancient history attract such wide attention as the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians. To mention just two recent Hollywood movies should be enough: Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, on Alexander the Great's overthrow of the Persian Empire and the conquest of various peoples in the East; and Frank Miller's *300*, on the battle of Thermopylae between the Greeks and the Persian Empire, were great commercial successes and created considerable cultural and political debates.¹ But there are also few topics in ancient history that lead to such fundamental differences in scholarly approaches and views. On the one hand, there is a long-standing approach that focuses on polarity and conflict. The relationship between Greeks and Barbarians is seen as part of the wider distinction between West and East; the Greeks are the ancestors of the West, the people who invented democracy, freedom of thought, science, philosophy, drama and naturalistic art, and whose literary works stand as the foundation of Western literature; the world of the East, the world of the people whom the Greeks described as Barbarians, is a wholly different world, characterised by despotism and theocracy and the absence of all the Greek achievements.² The confrontation of the Greeks with the Persian Empire was the fight to preserve these achievements and values that we still cherish, and should be seen as part of a perennial confrontation between West and East; back in 1846, John Stuart Mill expressed this view in a famous adage:

Even as an event in English history, the battle of Marathon is more important than the battle of Hastings. Had the outcome of that day been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still be roaming the woods.³

But this is by no means an old-fashioned view:⁴ for many people 9/11 is another act in a long play which started in the summer of 490 at the

¹ For scholarly responses on the former, see Cartledge and Greenland 2010.

² For example, Meier 2011. ³ Mill [1846] 1978: 271. ⁴ For example, Billows 2010.

battlefield of Marathon.⁵ It is not for nothing that the UNESCO delegation of Iran officially complained about the depiction of ancient Iranians in the film *300*, in the context of a deepening confrontation between Iran and the West. But views do change; if scholars at the time of Mill instantly identified with the Greeks at Marathon, this is no longer automatically the case in the post-colonial and multicultural world that we inhabit. The post-colonial critique of Western imperialism has led many scholars to turn the tables and approach the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians in a wholly different manner. The publication in 1978 of Edward Said's famous *Orientalism* played a fundamental role in the changing of perspectives by providing a consistent critique of Western discourses about the Orient and showing how Western knowledge about the Orient had functioned as the handmaid of Western imperialism. Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians*, enacted in 472, just eight years after the battle of Salamis, was the first portrait of the Oriental in Western literature and was seen by Said as the origin of Western Orientalism.⁶

Since then, many scholars have explored the sinister consequences of Greek ethnocentrism. François Hartog in an influential study explored how Herodotus' work and his descriptions of various Barbarian Others functioned as a mirror of the Greek Self: according to him, Herodotus' discourse, and Greek discourses in general, showed little genuine interest in understanding foreign cultures and more in using them as a mirror to reflect a number of stereotypes about non-Greeks which were essential for constructing Greek identity.⁷ Edith Hall, in another ground-breaking work, took a similar approach and explored how Greek tragedy invented the Barbarian;⁸ more recently, Benjamin Isaac has examined the origins of racism in classical antiquity and in Greek writings about the Barbarians.⁹ The tables have truly turned: academics are as likely nowadays to focus on the ethnocentric, xenophobic and racist aspects of Greek views and Greek attitudes towards the Barbarians, as on exalting the Greek defence of democracy and free thinking against Oriental despotism. But no matter which perspective one might adopt, this is a discussion of the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians which focuses on conflict and unbridgeable polarities.

Be that as it may, there has also long existed an alternative approach with a very different focus. This approach has a long pedigree, but perhaps its most influential statement ever was by Johann Gustav Droysen, one of the most famous German historians of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ In 1836,

⁵ Pagden 2008. ⁶ Said 1978: 56–7. ⁷ Hartog 1988.

⁸ Hall 1989; cf. Hall 2006: 184–224. ⁹ Isaac 2004; cf. Tuplin 1999. ¹⁰ Bravo 1968.

Droysen published the first edition of a monumental work titled *Geschichte des Hellenismus*.¹¹ Droysen created the concept of *Hellenismus* to describe the process of the fusion between Greek and Oriental culture that took place in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire. According to him, the emergence and spread of Christianity, one of the foundational forces of the West, would have been impossible without the gradual fusion of Greek culture with the cultures of the Near East, which took place in the centuries after Alexander. Droysen's concept of *Hellenismus* and his view of the fusion of Greek and Oriental cultures have been deeply influential as well as widely criticised; we shall have the opportunity to discuss them more extensively in Chapter 7.¹²

What is of importance here is the very different approach to the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians. Instead of conflict and polarity, this approach stresses interaction and exchange. The discovery and decipherment of the cuneiform documents of the Near East in the decades since Droysen have shown the significant extent to which cultural interaction went both ways. The discovery of the Hittite poetic cycle of Kumarbi, to give merely one example, has shown that Hesiod's famous description of the succession of gods in the *Theogony* is clearly of Near Eastern origin (see p. 61).¹³ Influential scholars, including Walter Burkert and Martin West, have explored in various works the ways in which the cultures of the Near East influenced Greek culture and society already from the archaic period;¹⁴ others, such as Sarah Morris, have argued that the influence goes back all the way to the Bronze Age and is a constant aspect of Greek culture.¹⁵ And in 1987 the publication of the first volume of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* trilogy created shockwaves in the academic world and beyond.¹⁶ Bernal argued that the ethnocentric and racist presuppositions of Western scholars since the nineteenth century had led to the disparagement of Eastern cultures and the minimisation of their deep influence on Greece. In fact, Bernal, using a variety of archaeological, linguistic and literary evidence, went on to claim that the emergence of Greek culture was the outcome of the migration of Egyptian and Phoenician populations to the Aegean during the Bronze Age and later periods, and that Greek culture was effectively an offshoot of the older cultures of the Near East.¹⁷ As with Droysen, Bernal's views have been both inspiring and deeply contested.¹⁸ Again, no matter what perspective one might adopt, and whether one

¹¹ Droysen 1887/8. ¹² Canfora 1987; Moyer 2011a: 1–41. ¹³ Rutherford 2009.

¹⁴ Burkert 1992, 2004; West 1971, 1997. ¹⁵ Morris 1992. ¹⁶ Bernal 1987.

¹⁷ Bernal 1991, 2006.

¹⁸ Lefkowitz 1996; Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996; Berlinerblau 1999; Vlassopoulos 2007.

stresses the impact of Greek culture on non-Greeks or the other way round, the important thing is that this approach puts its focus on cultural interaction and exchange, and denies or minimises the deep polarities between East and West.

We are accordingly faced with two diametrically opposite approaches to the study of the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians: one stresses conflict and polarity; the other stresses interaction, exchange and mutual dependence. Which one should we prefer? Or should we try to reconcile them? And if so, how exactly? Given the extent to which the study of the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians is enmeshed with so many issues relating to modern debates and identities, it might be worth starting by examining whether these two different approaches can already be found in the ancient sources, or are a mirage of modern scholarship and modern preoccupations. I want to explore this question by means of a number of different stories relating to a paradigmatic figure: this figure is Thales, a citizen of Miletus on the west coast of Asia Minor, who lived in the first half of the sixth century, and to whom modern histories of philosophy accord the honour of being the first Western philosopher.

1.2 A test case: Thales the Milesian

There is an old Belfast joke about a stranger who goes to a pub. The regulars look at him apprehensively and one of them suddenly asks: 'Stranger, are you a Catholic or a Protestant?' 'Well,' says he, 'as a matter of fact, I am a Jew.' The long silence that ensues is finally interrupted by the only question that really matters: 'Well, fair enough; but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant one?' No matter what, at the end of the day there is a single, clear dividing line and one has to belong to one side or the other. Even more, this discourse of polarity is also an evaluative one: depending on one's point of view, it is a good thing to be a Catholic or a Protestant and a bad thing to be the opposite. Something in the spirit of the Belfast joke is clearly expressed in a Greek story about Thales:

Hermippus in his *Lives* refers to Thales the story which is told by some of Socrates, namely, that he used to say there were three blessings for which he was grateful to Fortune: 'first, that I was born a human being and not one of the wild animals; next, that I was born a man and not a woman; thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian'.¹⁹

¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 1.33.

The mentality of the Belfast joke is clearly evident here: one is either human or beast; a man or a woman; a Greek or a Barbarian; and, in fact, it is preferable to be a human rather than a beast, a man than a woman, and a Greek than a Barbarian. This story therefore clearly confirms that polarity and conflict were essential aspects of how Greeks approached their relationship with the Barbarians. At the same time though there are a number of other stories relating to Thales which point in rather different directions. Let us start with a story reported by Socrates in one of the Platonic dialogues:

Why, take the case of Thales, Theodorus. While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet. The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy.²⁰

This is a nice anecdote: a Thracian Barbarian, who was also a woman and a slave, got the chance to jeer at the great philosopher Thales, who was so grateful to the gods for being a Greek and a man. The story is not exactly a reversal of Thales' prejudices; in fact, the ridiculing of philosophers is made even more poignant precisely because it is attributed to the lowest of the low: a Barbarian female slave. The story is illuminating about an important way in which Greeks came into contact with Barbarians. Slavery was an essential institution of Greek societies, and most slaves were Barbarians; it does not take much thinking to understand why the Greeks might have despised Barbarians and consider them slavish and inferior. But the fact that the stereotype of the Barbarian slave can be used to poke fun at a quintessentially Greek phenomenon like that of philosophy underlines the complexity and subtlety with which Barbarians can be portrayed in Greek sources: the moral of the story is put in the mouth of the witty Barbarian, not the super-wise Greek.

A third story presents a radical reversal:

The advice given before the destruction [of the Ionians] by Thales of Miletus, a Phoenician by descent, was good too; he advised that the Ionians should have one place of deliberation, and that it be in Teos (for that was the centre of Ionia), and that the other cities be considered no more than *demes* [villages].²¹

Thales might have praised the gods for being born Greek: but according to Herodotus, he was in fact Phoenician in origin. We do not know on what basis Herodotus claimed that Thales was Phoenician; according to later

²⁰ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a. ²¹ Herodotus, 1.170.

sources, he was the descendant of the Phoenician Thelidae and became a citizen of Miletus when he was expelled from his Phoenician homeland;²² what is interesting is that in no way is Thales' alleged foreign origin used against him, since Herodotus immediately commends his wise advice to the Ionians. But Herodotus also knew another story about Thales and Croesus, the famous king of Lydia, the most powerful king of Asia Minor in the first half of the sixth century, and the first Barbarian, according to Herodotus,²³ to subjugate Greek communities:

When [Croesus] came to the river Halys, he transported his army across it – by the bridges which were there then, as I maintain; but the general belief of the Greeks is that Thales of Miletus got the army across. The story is that, as Croesus did not know how his army could pass the river (as the aforesaid bridges did not yet exist then), Thales, who was in the encampment, made the river, which flowed on the left of the army, also flow on the right, in the following way.²⁴

Thales might be happy he was not a Barbarian, but according to this story he could also be a loyal servant of a Barbarian king who had subjugated Greek communities. We saw above in the story with the Thracian slave how Greeks would come to know Barbarians from a position of superiority as masters towards slaves. But here we see how exactly the opposite could also be the case; Greeks could interact with Barbarians from a position of inferiority, as the employees and subjects of Barbarian kings. The model of interaction and exchange is not therefore inapplicable to Thales. Not only was he, according to some stories, a Barbarian who had migrated to a Greek city and become a citizen, but according to other stories he had worked in the entourage of a Barbarian king: what better context to imagine for interactions and exchanges? And in fact, according to a final story, the very wisdom of Thales was the result of such interactions with Barbarians:

Pamphila states that, having learnt geometry from the Egyptians, [Thales] was the first to inscribe a right-angled triangle in a circle, whereupon he sacrificed an ox.²⁵

We have come full circle: if a Barbarian slave could successfully poke fun at Thales for his astronomical interests, we are now told that his very scientific achievements were the result of his education among the Egyptians, who were, according to Herodotus, the first people to discover geometry.²⁶ If Thales could boast about his Greek origins, other Greeks circulated stories about his Barbarian origins. If Thales had a Barbarian

²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 1.22.

²³ 1.6. ²⁴ 1.75.

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 1.24.

²⁶ Herodotus, 2.109.

slave, he was also the employee of a Barbarian king. Is Thales the model of a proud/bigoted Greek who despises Barbarians, lords it over Barbarian slaves and instigates the Greek invention of philosophy? Or is he a model of a Barbarian who becomes a citizen of a Greek city, a Greek who works as an employee of a Barbarian king, a Greek who owes his wisdom to Barbarian teachers? We can consequently conclude that conflict and polarity, as well as interaction and exchange, are not mirages of modern preoccupations and debates. They can already be found in the different stories that circulated in antiquity about the same individual. We cannot choose one model and discard the other: but how are we to understand them and explain their coexistence?

1.3 Hellenicity and Hellenisation

The relationship between Greeks and Barbarians is often presented within a chronological trajectory which differentiates sharply between the archaic (c. 700–479), the classical (479–323) and the Hellenistic (323–31) periods, with the Persian Wars (490–79) and the conquests of Alexander the Great (334–23) serving not only as the major dividing lines between the archaic/classical and classical/Hellenistic periods, but also as the major explanatory forces behind the presumed radical differences and changes between the three periods.²⁷ The key factor in this traditional account is Greek identity (Hellenicity): the narrative focuses on the formation and development of Hellenicity, and the role of non-Greeks and their cultures in its formation and development. According to this traditional account, the archaic period is characterised by the expansion and transformation of the Greek world out of the fragmented world of the Iron Age (1100–700). Around 700 the Greek world was emerging as a backward periphery, which was highly stimulated through contact with and influence from the older, richer, more developed and more powerful world of the Near East. In the same way that the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet enabled the Greeks to become literate, with significant effects for the transmission of their literature and for the transformation of their intellectual pursuits,²⁸ the stimulus of the artistic traditions of the Near East led to what has been variously described as the Orientalising period, the Orientalising phenomenon or the Orientalising revolution.²⁹ Greek artists and artisans adopted and adapted countless Near Eastern techniques, products, motifs and iconographies; they were thus able

²⁷ See already Jüthner 1923. ²⁸ Burkert 2004: 16–20.

²⁹ Burkert 1992; cf. Riva and Vella 2006.

to break through the long established traditions of Geometric art and begin the process of continuous artistic transformations that characterises the history of Greek art.³⁰ This transformation of Greek culture and society through the stimulus of the Near East was accompanied by the gradual process of the formation of Greek identity out of the multiple local and regional identities that characterised the Iron Age. There was not yet any clear distinction between Greeks and Barbarians, as is also evident by the (relative) lack of references to such distinctions in archaic Greek literature.³¹

The Persian Wars are traditionally seen as a radical juncture between the archaic and classical periods.³² The military confrontation and the Greek victory created a new world, polarised between Greeks and Barbarians. The ensuing classical period was the time when the Greeks were ‘inventing the barbarian’ and investing heavily in this invention.³³ Greeks became highly aware of their common cultural and ethnic characteristics, while categorising all non-Greek people as Barbarians, who lacked Greek virtues and exhibited all non-Greek vices, such as luxury, effeminacy, despotism and lack of self-control.³⁴ If the archaic period was characterised by exchange and Near Eastern influence on Greek culture, the classical period is characterised by confrontation and polarity.

Alexander’s conquest of the Persian Empire is then seen as a new radical change of the plot. In the aftermath of the dismemberment of Alexander’s empire by his successors, Greco-Macedonian dynasties came to rule over non-Greeks from Asia Minor and Egypt all the way to modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. A major result of these new states was the adoption of Greek culture and identity by many individuals and communities across the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. The creation of new settlements by the Hellenistic kings, which took the form of Greek poleis, was based on the migration of Greeks into Egypt and the Near East, and played an important role in the spread of Greek culture. The reformulation of Hellenicity as a cultural identity, which took place primarily in classical Athens,³⁵ made it relatively easy for non-Greeks to acquire a Greek education and to adopt Greek culture; many of the most important Greek intellectuals and artists of the Hellenistic period came from Syria, Phoenicia and Cilicia. Given the large numbers of non-Greeks who had adopted Greek culture, the old, polar distinction between Greeks and Barbarians progressively lost much of its importance in the course of the Hellenistic period.³⁶

³⁰ Poulsen 1912; Akurgal 1968. ³¹ Hall 2002: 90–171, 2004. ³² Morris 1992: 362–86.

³³ Hall 1989. ³⁴ Cartledge 2002: 51–77. ³⁵ Hall 2002: 179–226.

³⁶ For example, Burstein 2008.

This account of the emergence and transformation of Hellenicity and its interaction with other cultures over the archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods coexists with another approach: that of Hellenisation. Scholars have rarely defined carefully and explicitly what they mean by Hellenisation, but in most cases it describes the process through which non-Greek communities adopted Greek material culture, language and literature, styles and iconography, cults and myths, cultural practices like athletics, and even Greek identity.³⁷ The focus of this approach is the process through which elements of Greek culture make their presence clearly felt among non-Greek societies across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea from the archaic period onwards.³⁸ While the Hellenicity approach presents a clear chronological narrative that distinguishes between the archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods, the Hellenisation approach is less interested in drawing chronological distinctions, and more willing to portray Hellenisation as a continuous process.

As regards the study of the archaic and classical periods, the Hellenicity and the Hellenisation approaches coexist implicitly, because they are applied to different problems and aspects.³⁹ The Hellenicity approach is applied to the study of the mainland Greek world and its interaction with the empires of the East, while the Hellenisation approach is primarily applied to the study of the wider world of *apoikiai* ('colonies'), the Greek settlements that spread from the eighth century onwards across the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ It is to the progressive adoption of elements of Greek culture by various non-Greek societies in the areas where Greek *apoikiai* emerged, from Italy, Sicily and southern France to Thrace and the Black Sea, that the Hellenisation approach is usually applied. It is only in the Hellenistic period that Hellenicity and Hellenisation finally mingle, with the creation of a cultural form of Hellenicity open to non-Greeks, the Greco-Macedonian rule over non-Greek societies in the Near East, and the progressive Hellenisation of non-Greek communities from Asia Minor to Syria and Egypt.⁴¹

While there are elements of truth in the traditional account presented above, it is also deeply misleading in many of its assumptions and conclusions. The traditional account presents a clear chronological division that is identical with the division between archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods, and posits two great political events as explanatory forces for

³⁷ See, e.g., Domínguez 1999: 324. ³⁸ See, e.g., the case of Greek art: Boardman 1994.

³⁹ See already Chapot *et al.* 1914. ⁴⁰ Blakeway 1935; Dunbabin 1948: 191–3; Benoit 1965.

⁴¹ See already Jouguet 1928.

what are seen as major changes in the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians. This political explanation is deeply flawed, as we shall see. While both the Persian Wars and the conquests of Alexander were significant developments, they did not constitute radical breaks in the relationship between Greek and non-Greek cultures. To start with, this is because most of the changes attributed to these political events long predated them. We shall see in Chapters 2 and 5 that the Panhellenic community and the Barbarian repertoire in Greek culture predated the Persian Wars. While Droysen attributed the expansion of Greek culture in the Near East to Alexander's conquest, scholars have long discovered that many of the interactions that Droysen posited as being a result of the conquests of Alexander had in fact started long before that. Everybody knows that the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: this was the funerary monument of Mausolus, a native dynast of Caria in Asia Minor, who was also a satrap of the Persian Empire and who died in 353, three years after the birth of Alexander the Great and nineteen years before Alexander crossed to Asia Minor. Mausolus used Greek artistic models and the most famous Greek artists of the day; he was a Hellenistic ruler before the emergence of the Hellenistic world.⁴²

Furthermore, the major flaw of the traditional approach is the assumption that each historical period is dominated by a single form of interaction between Greeks and non-Greeks. It is as if, in the various stories about Thales we have examined above, the stories about his learning of Egyptian wisdom or working for a Lydian king would represent the archaic period, while the story about his polarised pronouncements concerning Barbarians would represent the classical period. In fact, the various stories about Thales and the realities they reflected coexisted: Greeks went on working for foreign kings and presenting Greek thought as the beneficiary of alien wisdom, while also presenting polarised images of Barbarians, throughout the course of the classical period. The interactions and encounters between Greeks and non-Greeks exhibited a wide range of forms during the whole of the first millennium and in all three periods (archaic, classical and Hellenistic). We need a methodological framework that will allow us to examine the full range of Greek–Barbarian interactions over the long term. This is the framework of the four parallel worlds that we shall shortly explore in section 1.4.

Equally problematic are the assumptions of the Hellenisation approach.⁴³ The adoption of elements of Greek culture by non-Greek communities did

⁴² Hornblower 1982: 352–3.

⁴³ Whitehouse and Wilkins 1989; Hodos 2006; Dietler 2010: 43–53.