



*Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, Irad Malkin (ed.). Center for Hellenic Studies Colloquia 5. Harvard University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-674-000662-3. Pp. 418.

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This stimulating collection of essays examines the variable cultural meanings of “Greekness” (τὸ Ἑλληνικόν) (5) in the ancient Mediterranean world from the Iron Age through the time of Pausanias. Building on recent anthropological work, the contributors reject any essentialist, racial, or primordial conceptions of ethnicity. Instead, they treat ethnicity as a social construction or invention and argue that it revolves around a set of features or markers that become significant within specific contexts. According to Anthony D. Smith, to whom many contributors refer, such features typically include a collective name; shared genealogies, history, and culture; common territory; and an internal feeling of solidarity.<sup>1</sup> As a whole, the contributors emphasize that groups tended to manipulate these ethnic indicators to serve local, contextually determined purposes. For example, ethnicity forms part of a rhetorical strategy already in one of the first and most famous Greek expressions of shared identity, Herodotus 8.144.2, a commonly cited passage. After the notorious embassy of Alexander of Macedon, the Athenians explain to the Spartans why they would never medize: “Again, there is the Greek nation – the community of blood and language,

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); for this list and the outline from which my paraphrase is drawn, see Said’s essay (p.275).

temples and ritual, and our common customs; if Athens were to betray all this, it would not be well done” (8.144.2, trans. de Sélincourt/Marincola). This is not only a compelling definition of “Greekness,” but also a desperate plea for unity and trust at a critical moment in the Greek war effort. In offering a subtle analysis of ancient uses and perceptions of ethnicity, the volume is an unqualified success.

The volume’s ambitions and successes go beyond treating ethnicity as a rhetorical strategy. As Irad Malkin points out in the introduction, “The emphasis in this book is on ancient perceptions and, sometimes, on their function as social facts” (2). In other words, the contributors aim to demonstrate that groups themselves subjectively experienced ethnicity as a reality and made decisions accordingly. Their self-representations were part of their social realities and, consequently, they are part of the reality of the historical record. Hence, a major theme of the volume is the relationship between the insiders’ ethnic discourse – including words, literary genres, symbols, monuments, artwork, and artifacts – and the institutional formations and foreign policies of different cultural sub-groups. To clarify the relationship between insider-discourse and contingent historical facts, the contributors foreground the distinction between the “etic” perspective, or the point of view of the observer, and the “emic,” or the representation of a group to itself – and they move between these viewpoints to excellent effect. In particular, they render problematic any stable sense of identity or ethnic identification: the “self” is as internally diverse as the “other.” Thus, the contributors more fully accommodate the complexities of the evidence than the now-standard “Greek/barbarian” discussions of the 1980s. In elucidating the fragmentation of identity, they present a post-structuralist counterpart to the older, and (as we now see) simpler, binary opposition between “Greek” and “Other.”

In the introduction, Irad Malkin lays out the central problems, issues, and themes addressed in the volume. He offers a solid theoretical overview of the thorny historical and philosophical problems involved in writing about ethnicity; those interested in the subject would certainly benefit from his intelligent discussion. In an essay of impressive scope, David Konstan fleshes out the significance of ethnicity in three periods – those of Homer, late fifth-century Greece, and Pausanias – and illustrates that ethnicity served local, embedded interests. For Konstan, Homer shows little evidence of ethnic consciousness, since Trojans share many of the typical elements of ethnicity with Greeks, but by the fifth century the Greek/barbarian opposition arose primarily in response to Athens’s

claims to hegemony. For Pausanias, Konstan argues, the key to ethnic identity is shared memory, but this was not, contrary to standard views, part of a political agenda. After urging that modern scholars have adopted too artificial a distinction between polis and ethnos, Jeremy McInerney uses comparative data from Africa to illustrate the “processual nature of ethnogenesis” (60), which he illustrates through studying the epichoric myths of Phocis. Catherine Morgan likewise rejects conventional scholarly distinctions between polis and ethnos in a methodological piece arguing that scholars must understand material objects as loci of self-assertion and self-expression, rather than as inert embodiments of culture. Carla Antonaccio advances this discussion of material culture by examining colonial foundations in Sicily and their relation to non-Greek Sicilians, with special reference to the archaeology of Morgantina. Sicilian Greeks created a new identity based on their shared geographical experiences and contacts with non-Greek peoples in Sicily. Jonathan Hall reconsiders the contentious issue of Macedonian ethnicity, showing that the “plurivocality” (167) of the literary sources about Macedonian identity results from shifting and unstable conceptions of Hellenic identity itself. Irad Malkin discusses Epirote ethnicity from three perspectives – that of the colonial or maritime, that of ancient historians and geographers, and that of the Epirote aristocracy. Through an interesting treatment of Epidamnus and Apollonia, Malkin argues that the first perspective was “colonial, external, antagonistic, and relatively recent” (194). He then demonstrates that learned ancient commentators were probably influenced by the colonial settlers’ image of Epirus as barbaric; by contrast, the Molossians and Thesprotians used the heroic *nostoi* myths to create an impressive pedigree for themselves. Rosalind Thomas shows that, through tracing their genealogies, Herodotus contradicts the firm self-identifications and common beliefs of diverse Greek sub-groups, including the Spartans, Athenians and Ionians. Herodotus thus illustrates a tension between ethnicity based on genealogy and ethnicity based on culture or *nomos*. Beth Cohen perceptively argues that Athenian democratic males created an ethnic self-representation through mixing exotic foreign dress with standard Hellenic elements; rather than “playing the Other” (251), Cohen suggests, they tamed and redefined the other in order to display their own power. Suzanne Said compares and contrasts two historical moments in the creation of a shared Greek identity – the fourth century BC, where she considers primarily Isocrates and Demosthenes, and the first two centuries AD, where her focus is on Dio of Prusa and Aelius Aristides.

The classical orators implied that “Greek identity derives from an Athenian self-identity that often mirrors the personality or, better, the persona of the speaker” (284), whereas the later orators, influenced by Roman cultural perceptions, suggested that Greekness resides in both a shared past and the assumption of proper style in deportment and expression. Examining the rural Greek experience in third century B.C. Egypt, Dorothy Thompson argues that individuals increasingly manipulated the traditional ethnic categories of “Hellene” and “Egyptian” in order to win advantages for themselves. She concludes that, in the Ptolemaic bureaucracy, “culture itself (language, education, the gymnasium) increasingly became the defining feature of Greekness” (316). As Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg shows, the rich Greek discourse on self-identity was largely unimportant to the Persian kings, who called Greeks “Yauna,” or “Ionians,” which is “technically incorrect” but “not pejorative” (323). In the Persians’ eyes, Greeks were an unremarkable group whose cultural habits overlapped with those of other populations in the western part of the empire. Although the Persians were proud of their ethnic identity, they made little attempt to “Persianize” their empire – a fact that becomes all the more evident by contrast with the Romans. In a thoughtful piece treating Jewish perspectives on Greek ethnicity, Erich Gruen illustrates the sometimes incompatible ways in which Jewish authors perceived Greeks. Greeks were either “villainous or ignorant aliens” (349) or possessed positive cultural qualities that overlapped with those of Jewish culture itself. Gruen concludes that Jewish intellectuals “simultaneously differentiated their nation from that of the Greeks and justified their own immersion in a world of Hellenic civilization” (366). Antony Spawforth argues that despite the Romans’ taste for old Greece and Attic Greek, and the persistence of negative stereotypes, there are indications of an assertion of Lydian ethnicity in the imperial age. In particular, alongside his Roman-inspired fascination with mainland Greece, Pausanias refers often to his (arguably) native Lydia in order to raise the profile of Lydia among both Greeks and Romans.

To put it schematically, we tend to think of ethnicity in two different ways. The first is pernicious. Ethnicity is often invoked in times of conflict or war, as in Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia. As Jeremy McInerney says, “Ethnic differences invite the redefinition of complex problems along the lines of brutally simple ethnic antagonisms” (51). One of the great strengths of this volume is to show, through historical case study, that simplistic definitions of ethnicity, whether by

insiders or outsiders, are suspect and self-serving. They create distorted narratives of inclusion and exclusion useful only to what we now call war criminals. The second, positive line of thought often arises in pluralistic modern democracies. It is related to tolerance. At least theoretically, the modern democratic nation-state is grounded in the liberal values of freedom, equality, and respect for others. This volume shows how deeply different and other the ancient Mediterranean world was by contrast. In saying that the past was a different place, though, one must be careful not to generate yet another overly schematic opposition. One of this book's most important contributions is to heighten our awareness of the difficulties, and potential pitfalls, involved in self- and other-definition. To its credit, this book not only enlivens the debate about ancient cultural differences, but also sharpens our thinking about the relationship between past and present.