

The Ancient Origin of the East/West Controversy

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It is a truism that the Middle East is the cradle of human civilisation, but also that classical Greece is the cradle of Western civilisation. What can be made of this, besides the fact that we all were once infants (and some of us apparently twice)? When and how did Greece become a cradle of its own, a symbol of Europe and the West, in opposition to the older civilisations in the Middle East? What constituted the difference between East and West before the coming of Islam and the Ottoman Empire?

This essay will address the ancient origin of the East/West controversy in times long before the Turks appeared on the stage, and briefly look at the clashes between East and West along with the rise and fall of the many cultures and empires of Anatolia and the Levant until the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Greece, Anatolia and the Middle East until the End of the Bronze Age

Anatolia can, with Çatalhöyük, claim to contain one of the oldest cities in the world (probably only beaten by Jericho) and the Karacadag Mountains still host wild einkorn, and may have been where the cultivation of wheat began. So there can be little doubt that parts of what is present day Turkey were among the very first human settlements. The spread of Indo-European languages suggests migration and connections between Asia and Europe, with Asia Minor as the bridge. Linguists and archaeologists have discovered traces of non-Indo-European languages and culture in several places around the Aegean basin, and have made the case for a migration of a non-Indo-European people from Asia Minor to the islands and Greek mainland some time during the fourth century BCE. For convenience these people have been

called ‘Pelasgians’, as both Homer and Herodotus describe a non-Greek indigenous people of the Aegean with the name *Pelasgoi*.¹

It is, however, the Fertile Crescent that is credited with giving birth to the first complex societies or civilisations, the river valley civilisations; the first Sumerian city states, the later Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia and the old kingdom in Egypt. By the time of the Bronze Age, however, the whole of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean consisted of, or was more or less controlled by, complex civilisations. The mythical king Minos of Crete was the first to organise a navy according to Greek legend (Thucydides 1.4; 1.8), and it seems probable that Crete was a centre of the East Mediterranean palace culture of the mid Bronze Age, controlling the Cyclades and Aegean islands. Remains of early Bronze Age societies are moreover found in several places in various parts of Anatolia, in what was called the land of the Hatti in Akkadian sources.

The first large empire to appear with a base in Anatolia was the kingdom of the Hittites, expanding from the capital Hattuša (present Boghazköy) in the seventeenth century BCE. At the height of its power in the fourteenth and thirteenth century, the Hittite empire included large areas in Anatolia and the Levant, from the Aegean to the Euphrates. When excavations began in Boghazköy, archaeologists found a rich corpus of texts written in cuneiform, including several treaties in Akkadian with foreign powers from Egypt to the neighbouring Mitanni. We can read about contacts, trade and strife between these highly developed Bronze Age cultures of the south-eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, including that which has been identified as Mycenaean.² Even Cyprus (Alašiya) was conquered and claimed as part of the Hittite empire. The records tell of King Shuppilulima II’s successful campaign in the early twelfth century, but also of mighty warriors ‘who live in ships’, settling on the Anatolian coast. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was also frequent contact and trade with palaces of the prevailing Mycenaean culture to the west and further east towards the Indus.³ We can conclude that the Hittites were in the midst of a highly developed Bronze Age palace culture, with contact and commerce across

¹ Cf. R. Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks: Indo-European Conquests in the Aegean and the Near East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

² T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ See for instance Ian Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History* (2000), J. Hooker, *Mycenaean Greece* (1977) and P.A. Mountjoy, ‘The East Aegean-West Anatolian interface in the Late Bronze Age: Mycenaeans and the Kingdom of Ahhiyawa’, *AS* 48 (1998), pp. 33-67.

enormous distances of the Eurasian continent, in what scholars today call a Near Eastern and Aegean cultural community (*koinê*).⁴

The collapse of these Bronze Age cultures at the end of the thirteenth century is still something of a puzzle, and many attempts have been made to explain it, such as volcanic eruptions, floods and a breakdown in trade patterns. Archaeological findings indicate a migration of Bronze Age warlords eastwards as the Mycenaean palace civilisations crumpled and there are Egyptian sources describing the attack of the 'Sea Peoples' who destroyed the Hittite empire and many other states during the reigns of Merneptah (c. 1220 BCE) and Rameses III (c. 1185 BCE). We will never be certain about the nature of the 'Sea Peoples', but most agree that they comprise different peoples from several places and that they came from somewhere in the north, and thus (interestingly given our present concern) may be an early instance of 'European' raids on the Middle East.⁵ One of the groups mentioned in the Egyptian records, the *Peleset*, seems to have been absorbed into the Egyptian military service, and they are commonly identified with the *Philistines*, and it is probable that they by and large gained control over the Egyptian possessions in the southern Levant, organising independent cities when the Egyptians no longer managed to control the Canaanite area around 1150 BCE. *Peleset* is also similar to *Pelasgoi*, which, as we have seen is used by Greek sources to describe aboriginal people of the Aegean, but also connected to *pelagos* (Greek for 'open sea'), thus also connecting them with some sort of seafarers.⁶ It is also tempting to link this to the Biblical story (Deut. 2.23) of invaders from Caphtor to the Gaza area. The Caphtorim have been connected to Crete or Cyprus, so perhaps the Philistines with their five-city (*pentapolis*) stronghold were early invaders from the Aegean islands to the Levant. Yet all traces

⁴ W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (1992), idem 'Near Eastern connections' in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, (Foley ed., 2005), pp. 291-301. See also A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BCE* (2 vols, 1995) and M.H. Feldman, *Diplomacy by Design: Luxury Arts and an 'International Style' in the Ancient Near East, 1400-1200 BCE* (2006).

⁵ Cf. E.D. Oren (ed.), *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (Philadelphia, 2000) for an updated review of the question.

⁶ Herodotus 1.56-58. In *Iliad* the Pelasgians are allies of Troy, standing between the Hellenic cities and the Thracians in the Catalogue of Ships (2.840-843). The *Odyssey* (17.175-177) places the Pelasgians in Crete, but in Homer and Herodotus the term 'Pelasgian' is usually synonymous with 'ancient times', 'Greece before the Greeks' etc. See e.g. A.M. Biraschi, 'Kreston huper Tursonen: a proposito di Hdt. I 57: mito e tradizione storiografica', *GeogrAnt* 5 (1996), pp. 163-169.

of a non-Semitic language and a distinct foreign culture are gone, so if this was the case, they were very quick to adapt to Canaanite culture.⁷

The so-called Dark Age following the collapse of the palace civilisations (c. 1100-800 BCE) is not completely dark anymore, but remains misty. Whereas empires and monarchies were established again in the Middle East and Asia Minor, Greece went from palace to polis. It was a shift from relatively few but large settlements, to many and small ones. What emerged was not the first city-state culture in the history of mankind, as city-states had appeared in Mesopotamia and particularly in the Levant from the early Sumerians to the Phoenicians, but it was the largest.⁸ What was particular about the evolution of the Greek city-states, however, was their egalitarian political structure, with the communities being organised around a body of citizens with political and juridical rights. This has been described as something unique, ‘a political revolution’, in the words of the leading German historian Christian Meier, who claims that ‘we may see the Greeks as a needle’s eye through which world history had to pass in order to reach the stage of European and worldwide modernity.’⁹

The Near Eastern influence on Greek culture is by now firmly established, and will no doubt continue to be explored and demonstrated by further studies.¹⁰ This does not, of course, mean that the Greek contribution to later thought and society is insignificant, but the uniqueness of Greek political awareness and rationality is beginning to be questioned. What is of importance to our present concern is nevertheless that the Greeks and the Greek city-state culture did not arise in a Dark Age void. They were inspired and affected by Near Eastern societies, not doubting that *ex oriente lux*. After all, Europa was a beautiful young girl abducted by Zeus from the shores of the Middle East, according to Greek myth.

The Greeks colonised large stretches of the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, including the islands of the Aegean and the coast of Asia Minor from c. 1000 BCE onwards, but we know very little of how these societies were organised.

⁷ On the ancient Philistines, see J. Strange, *Caphtor-Keftiu. A new investigation* (1980), idem ‘The Philistine city-states’, in M.H. Hansen (ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Culture* (2000), pp. 129-139, I. Vincetelli, ‘Appunti sulle nuove proposte di localizzazione di Caphtor/Keftiw’, *SMEA* 24 (1984), pp. 263-267, and M. Delcor, ‘Les Kerethim et les Crétois’, *VT* 28 (1978), pp. 409-422.

⁸ Cf. M.H. Hansen, *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Culture* (2000).

⁹ C. Meier, ‘The Greeks: The political revolution in world history’ [orig.1982], in P.J. Rhodes (ed.), *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 330.

¹⁰ Here shall only be mentioned three momentous works, Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* (London: Free Association Books, 1987); Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern influence on Greek Culture in Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Cf. also K. Dowden, ‘West on the East: Martin West’s “East face of Helicon” and its forerunners’, in *JHS* 121 (2001), pp. 167-175.

When they appear in our sources some hundred years later the Greek ‘colonies’ form a network of city-states dominating parts of the coastline of Asia Minor. The world that emerges in archaic times is one of an expanding Greek culture, settling alongside foreign cities and powers, such as Phoenician city-states on Cyprus, the Egyptian kingdom in the Nile delta and the kingdoms of large inland territories, such as Phrygia, Lydia and Caria. Naturally, they did not always live in peace and harmony, but there was apparently no strife between East and West, and the Hellespont and Bosphorus did not form a border area separating West/Europe from East/Asia.

Still, arguably the most famous of all ancient battles was fought out between the Greek West and the non-Greek East some time in the golden age of the palaces, and put on record in archaic Greek times: *The Trojan War*. An overwhelming number of scholars have contributed to the debate on Homer, the Homeric question, Homeric societies and language and so on, and whether or not a Trojan War was ever fought.¹¹ The excavated palace(s) in Hissarlık, first found by the adventurous German Heinrich Schliemann in the 1880s, fits well with a characteristic Bronze Age palace such as Troy would have been, but can hardly be identified with Priam’s great kingdom. Yet archaeological findings and Hittite texts suggest a period of strife and attacks in Hissarlık-Troy during the thirteenth century, attacks that may well have been carried out by Mycenaeans, even if Troy was never of any great importance in Anatolian history and did not vanish as a result of this onslaught.¹²

What is of great relevance to our present concern is the fact that even if this war is depicted as one between all Greeks against Troy and their non-Greek allies, Homer never creates an us-and-them picture of good guys and bad guys. It is a tale with heroes and humans on both sides, tragically and inevitably fighting a war caused by divine quarrel, with the gods divided in their support of the combatants as well. Homer uses the word ‘barbarian’ rarely, and only in the sense of ‘not Greek-speaking’. Much the same can be said of other extant poets of Greek archaic times, such as Hesiod and Alcaeus. In Greek myth there were also other instances of Greek skirmishes with the east, such as battles with Amazons and the expedition of Jason and the Argonauts, but it seems safe to conclude that the Greek West had no major quarrel with the non-Greek East before the mid-sixth century BCE.

¹¹ Cf. B. Powell, *Homer* (Oxford, 2003), for an update on various topics.

¹² Recent overviews of Troy and the possible historicity of the Trojan war can be found in T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 392-404 and J. Lactaz, *Troy and Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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Greeks and Persians in Classical Times

Homer's *Iliad* stands at the beginning of a new epoch of writing, as in all probability it was the first major literary text written in the newly developed Greek alphabet. The Greek alphabet was, however, no Western innovation, but borrowed and adapted from the Semitic alphabet of the Phoenicians. The Greeks soon developed a written culture, as not only administrative records and treaties were set down on clay or metal plates, but papyrus was used to record and circulate songs, epic tales, plays and various kinds of prose narratives. They produced written investigations [*historiē*] of the world, its peoples and their past. The first recognised historian, Herodotus, deals with the crucial war at the beginning of classical Greek times, but tells many stories of people, kings and empires interacting with the Greek world in what we label 'archaic' times (800-500 BCE).¹³ We learn about generations of Lydian kings, the whole of the second book of his work is devoted to Egypt, and other more or less civilised people Greeks were visiting, dealing with, fighting against, being mercenaries for or hiring as mercenaries. Yet something has changed from Homer, which is evident in the writings of the rather cosmopolitan historian from Halicarnassus in Asia Minor: the Greeks had developed an ideology of themselves as unique and superior to all other mankind, who were barbarians, *barbaroi*. This is evident in much of our extant Greek literature from classical times (c. 500-300 BCE). What had happened?

The Persians had entered the stage. After centuries of Greek expansion and progress, with colonies (*apoikiai*) and trading places (*emporía*) all around the Mediterranean and Black Sea, they had suddenly met with an enemy that threatened not only the odd city on foreign soil, but Greece proper. From its base in Fars in present day Iran, the Persians had built an empire larger than any other in the known world under their famous king Cyrus (558-530 BCE). The Persian Empire expanded in all directions and included the Hindu Kush and the west bank of the Indus river in the southeast, the Caucasus and, after beating the legendary King Croesus of Lydia in the mid-540s, Anatolia in the northeast. Soon after, the neo-Babylonian empire was subjugated and the Persians gained control of all Mesopotamia and the Levant. Persian rule was by no means a regime of terror as, for instance, that of the Assyrians had been, and both their culture and government were sophisticated. Their rule was based on local and provincial administration (*satrapies*) and tribute in the form of taxes measured out in silver.

¹³ On Herodotus and his world view, cf. R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge, U.K., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), R. Bichler, *Herodots Welt: Der Aufbau der Historie am Bild der fremden Länder und Völker, ihrer Zivilisation und ihrer Geschichte* (2000) and C.B.R. Pelling, 'East is east and west is west: or are they? National stereotypes in Herodotus', *Histos* (1997).

After Cyrus's death his son Cambyses continued the conquest, and by 525 BCE Egypt was conquered, and Herodotus outlines how Greeks fought as mercenaries on both sides. It was, however the next king Darius (521-486) who would cause the Greeks serious problems. The Greek city-states of the Asian coast had for some time been subject to Lydia, but the Persians wanted a firmer grip on them and even subdued the islands near the coast on their way. In 500 BCE the Ionian Greeks united in a revolt, and although the support from the other Greeks was sparse, the Athenians sent a small fleet to their aid. Darius repressed the rebellion and made sure to eliminate the tyrants of the Ionian cities and replace them with democratic institutions on the way, if Herodotus (6.43) can be trusted on this issue. The Persians also crossed the Hellespont and entered Europe, subduing Thrace and Macedonia. In 490 BCE they launched the well-known attack on Greece and the Athenians, but were beaten at the legendary battle of Marathon; ten years later they returned with an even larger force and a new king, Xerxes. But yet again the Greeks managed to win the decisive battles, and what was left of the Persian troops had to return and the nearly all the Greek city-states of Asia Minor were freed from Persian rule. These famous 'Persian Wars' are significant in Greek history and crucial for the development of a Greek pan-Hellenic and anti-Oriental mentality.¹⁴ The fact that they have entered our history as the *Persian Wars* illustrates the point of a European discourse of *us and them* ever since.¹⁵

Persia was for obvious reasons considered a threat to Greek interests at the beginning of classical times, and the Greeks realised the need to unite not just in arms, but also in words. An anti-Persian discourse or propaganda was developed. After 479 BCE the Greeks became all the more attentive to their own superiority and the Persians were stereotyped and monarchic rule vilified. Denigrating the enemy was certainly nothing new at the time, but the fact that it was put down in writing, in literary texts and treaties to be passed along from generation to generation for later laymen and scholars to read, was decisive.

Aeschylus entered the drama contest of the Dionysus festival in 472 BCE with the play *Persians*, and here the new trend is made clear. Here the Persian messenger brings the Greek war slogan to the court at Susa: 'Forward, sons of the Greeks, liberate the fatherland, liberate your children, your women, the temples of your ancestral gods, the graves of your forebears: this is the battle for everything!'¹⁶ And the chorus later gives the happy state of affairs for the Greeks: 'No longer will tongues in vassal

¹⁴ Cf. Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World* (2006)

¹⁵ Something made very evident in the new book by George Cawkwell with the telling title *The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia* (2006).

¹⁶ All translations from Greek and Latin texts that appear in this essay are my own.

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mouths be kept under guard, for people are freed, set loose to bark freedom now that dominion's yoke is snapped.' Aeschylus is nowhere near as single-minded or one-dimensional as many modern commentators and film makers, but the picture of the Persians as the arch-enemy of Greek freedom is clearly visible and was to be further developed by later writers.

In most of the famous Greek literature of Athens' heyday the same is evident: all non-Greeks were inferior and barbarians. But they were not all alike. Aristotle makes this clear (*Politics* 1327b.29-32), when he speaks of the Hellenic people situated between the raw and cold North/West of Europe, with spirited but unintelligent people, and the settled and warm Asia, with indolent but intelligent people. The Greeks thus had an intermediate character, managing to combine intelligence and temperament to constitute the Aristotelian golden mean of mankind and political ability: 'Hence it continues to be free and is the best-governed of all people, and if formed in one political union would be able to rule the world.' Aristotle is not alone in this assumption, in a short treatise ascribed to the great scholar and founder of scientific medicine, Hippocrates (but maybe not actually written by him), *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, the very same attitudes towards Greek and barbarian physiology is evident (16):

With regard to the pusillanimity and cowardice of the inhabitants, the principal reason the Asiatics are more unwarlike and of gentler disposition than the Europeans is, the nature of the seasons, which do not undergo any great changes either to heat or cold, or the like; ... It is changes of all kinds which arouse understanding of mankind, and do not allow them to get into a torpid condition. For these reasons, it appears to me, the Asiatic race is feeble, and further, owing to their laws; for monarchy prevails in the greater part of Asia.

Defining others as inferior and barbarians was significant in classical Greek thought and writing.¹⁷ This way of thinking is of course connected to Greek thoughts about and attitudes towards slaves and slavery. Nearly all slaves were 'barbarians', and as long as the Greeks were superior and fit to rule, there was no reason to question the

¹⁷ Cf. E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), H.A. Khan (ed.) *The Birth of the European Identity: The Europe-Asia Contrast in Greek Thought 490-322 BCE* (1994), J.E. Coleman and C.A. Walz (eds.), *Greeks and Barbarians: Essays on the Interactions Between Greeks and Non-Greeks in Antiquity and the Consequences for Eurocentrism* (1997), T. Harrison (ed.), *Greeks and Barbarians* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 255-298.

institution of slavery and all the more reason to acquire barbarian slaves. Slavery was common to many ancient societies, but few can be characterised as slave societies in the way that Athens was, relying heavily on slave labour in production.¹⁸

Athens came to lead the coalition of Greek city-states, known as the Delian League, formed in 477 BCE. The Delian League had started as a defence union against Persian aggression, but ended up as an Athenian empire. After decades of tension, minor battles and an unsuccessful attempt to liberate Egypt, a treaty was agreed with Persia in the mid-fifth century, known as the Peace of Callias. Persia continued to be the main enemy, but tension and strife among the major Greek cities increased, eventually leading to the clash between Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian War(s) in the years 431-403 BCE. The Persians were continuously called on by different parties and involved in Greek affairs during the whole of the fifth century, and Greek political leaders who were exiled or fled from domestic prosecution were more than happy to dwell in the Persian court. As the Spartans allied with them to defeat the Athenian fleet, the Persians once again got the upper hand along the Ionian coast. After more wars among the Greeks, Persia was the arbitrator in settling the peace and more or less able to dictate the new treaty in 386 BCE, known as the King's Peace. The treaty established Persian control over the Greek cities of Asia Minor and Persia remained the main foreign menace to Greece. And even though trade and mutual exchange with the Persians continued, so did derogatory speech and writing about them.

The picture of the peoples of the East as meek, decadent, untrustworthy and sub-standard beings was drawn in classical times in Greece. In particular it was sketched out by the Athenians as they also increasingly gained in self-confidence from their imperial successes. This first instance of 'orientalism' has been one of the long-lasting, but not so great legacies of classical Greece to the Western, European world. Yet, somewhat ironically, this legacy has been handed down to us thanks to the conquest of the Persian Empire by a semi-Greek monarch and pupil of Aristotle, Alexander the Great. Without the Hellenistic *koinê* culture that emerged in many of the lands he conquered in Anatolia and the Middle East, classical Greek literature would hardly have survived.

¹⁸ On ancient slave societies see M. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1983) and P. Cartledge, 'Rebels and Sambos in Classical Greece', in idem *Spartan Reflections* (London: Duckworth, 2001). On ancient views on superiority, imperialism and slavery, see B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 169-224.

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Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Period

After his father Philip had subdued the Greeks (338 BCE) and was murdered (336 BCE), the young Macedonian king Alexander fulfilled his mission to attack the Persian Empire in 334 BCE. Until the time of his death twelve years later he managed to conquer the whole Persian Empire, with its many provinces, peoples and cities who stood up against him, as well as peoples and land in the Far East that not even the Persian king had controlled. A pretext for the conquest was to revenge the Persian assault on Greek soil and to liberate the Greek city-states of the Anatolian coast from Persian rule. Alexander had learnt from his teacher, Aristotle, about Greek superiority, but also about the vast and rich lands in the East waiting to be explored and exploited. The campaign was clearly also an adventurous expedition and the entourage included many Greek scholars and scientists. It will never be clear whether or not Alexander started to believe in his own myth and divinity, but as his campaign went along from success to success, he clearly wanted to outdo heroes of the past such as Achilles and Heracles in the East and reach Dionysus's native soil.

Yet the Persian Empire was not converted into a Greek kingdom, rather Alexander became a Persian king. At least so it looked to many of his Greco-Macedonian companions, who started to criticise his habits of dressing in Persian style, his inclination for ritual greeting (*proskynesis*) and eastern luxury, and accordingly neglect of Macedonian court tradition. Ultimately this led to discord, processes, executions, mutinies and the end of Alexander's imperial conquest, but also to the recruitment of easterners to Alexander's army and administration. Nursed on Greek propaganda, the Greco-Macedonian elite never saw the easterners and Persian elite as their equals. But did Alexander?

Much has been written about Alexander and his aim to fuse the races and create a brotherhood of mankind. Some of this literature has been based less on sound interpretation and source criticism than on a wishful reading of certain ancient claims about Alexander.¹⁹ From Plutarch's *Life* and especially his *De Alexandri fortuna* we can learn about Alexander's philosophy that 'all things on earth should be subject to one logic and constitution and that all mankind should be one.' Arrian contributes to the story of Alexander's policy of fusion in his book 7, about the Susa wedding (7.4) and the famous prayer for common peace in Opis (7.11). Yet the mass wedding in Susa was predominantly a confirmation of relationships between Greco-Macedonian men and their local concubines, and the Opis prayer is for Persians and Macedonians to enjoy concord and community in governing the empire, not a blending of all

¹⁹ E.g. J.G. Droysen, *Geschichte Alexanders des Grossen* (1833, 2nd ed. 1877), W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (1948) and R. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (1973).

people within its border. Today few scholars share the past visions of a truly great Alexander, carrying the white man's burden of civilising and uniting people in a great commonwealth and 'brotherhood of mankind' as Tarn wrote 60 years ago.²⁰ Bosworth is more in line with today's *Stand der Forschung* when claiming:

There was no attempt to intermix the Macedonian and Persian nobilities, if anything an attempt to keep them apart. In particular the Macedonians seem to have been cast as the ruling race... There is nothing here remotely resembling a deliberate policy to fuse together the two people into a single army. If there is any policy it is *divide et impera*.²¹

Alexander's conquest was nevertheless of great importance to our subject, as it brought Greece to the Middle East through his establishing Greek cities and administration on conquered soil, and it brought pieces of the Middle East to Greece as spoils and gifts.

This process continued as Alexander's generals and heirs, known as the *diadochi*, fought over and for Alexander's empire, and in the end headed dynasties of separate states. These kingdoms continued to collaborate and fight one another in the following Hellenistic period, as kingdoms have always done in the region. But as their leadership was of Greco-Macedonian origin they kept in contact with the Greek world, and craved for Greek goods and culture and thus kept up trading and distribution across vast distances. Alexander's conquest gave the Greek culture necessary *Lebensraum*, as has been claimed by later scholars. It started a process of Hellenising the Near East, but also of reinforcing Greek culture with a necessary foreign impetus. Alexandria, Antioch, Pergamum soon became new centres of cosmopolitan Greek culture and learning. Greek became the *lingua franca* in Anatolia and the Middle East. Eastern products, fashions and religious ideas were absorbed by the new urban upper-class and even brought to Greece. Yet it never truly became a mixed culture, as the Greeks settled in cities and were devoted to administration, trade and urban activities, and retained their own Greek customs and culture. The rustic parts of these Hellenistic states remained non-Greek, inhabited by local peasants and nomadic herdsmen. Locals had to adapt to Greek ways in order to make it in the urban centres and the state administration.²²

²⁰ W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (1948; I), pp. 146-147.

²¹ A.B. Bosworth, 'Alexander and the Iranians', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980), p. 20.

²² Cf. the interesting study S. Averintsev, 'Ancient Greek "literature" and Near Eastern "writings": the opposition and encounter of two creative principles' (part 1 and 2), *Arion* 7.1 and 7.2 (2002).

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The Roman Empire

One by one these Hellenistic powers had to bow to Rome and Roman conquest from the second and early first century BCE. The Balkans, Anatolia, the Levant and finally Egypt were annexed and laid out as provinces of the Roman Empire. The eastern part of the Seleucid Empire broke away, though, and lost close contact with the Greek culture and the new West. From the old Persian mainland rose the Parthians, and even though they lost several battles with Rome, quite crucially under Trajan (98-117 CE), they always recovered and Mesopotamia never became Roman land. The Parthians therefore remained the major rival and arch enemy throughout Roman history, representing once again the deficient East.

In the East, Romans got to know a civilisation far older and more sophisticated than their own, and also riches and artefacts far beyond most people's imagination. Greek and Eastern people, art and treasures were brought to Rome, and with them Hellenistic traditions and cultures. Roman aristocrats started to fancy Eastern commodities, architecture and style. The Greek-Hellenistic culture and art had been copied for quite some time, but after Rome became master of the Eastern Mediterranean, Romans became acquainted with other Eastern products and customs as well. People started building in oriental style (even creating tombs in the shape of pyramids) and luxury products such as papyrus, silk, spices, incense and aromatics were imported into Rome by the ton. Pliny the Elder claims the deficit on trade with the east was 100 million sesterces a year ('This is what our extravagance and our women cost us') because the easterners did not buy any Roman products in return (*Natural History* 12.84). Many inhabitants of the empire were also involved in Eastern mysteries and cults.²³

Although they started out as barbarians to the Greeks, Romans soon adopted Greek views about (and words for) foreigners, and included themselves in a Greco-Roman community of civilised people. To Romans the barbarians were by and large the people living outside the Roman borders and the *Pax Romana*, those not yet conquered and made into good citizens of the Roman Empire; and among these were the Parthians, although the many German tribes of the north were certainly the most feral. The non-Greek East, whether or not part of the Empire, was still met with

²³ On Hellenism, Hellenic culture and its influence on Romans, see E. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984), idem *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), P. Green, *Alexander to Actium* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), and some relevant articles also in T. Fischer-Hansen (ed.), *East and West: Cultural Relations in the Ancient World* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1988). On Roman trade with the East, see G.K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BCE-CE 305* (2001).

suspicion and prejudice.²⁴ Moreover, not all Romans entirely embraced Greeks and Hellenic culture either.

According to one myth Rome was settled by Trojan refugees, as outlined by the grand bard Vergil in *the Aeneid*, and many a Roman would know by heart his line 'I fear the gift-bringing Greeks'. In a sense Greeks were part of the depraved East. Stern moralists such as Cato the Censor deemed the Greeks as decadent and remained cool towards them. Such critics depicted the Greek way as soft and profligate, talkative and devious. Scipio was accordingly attacked for his Greek associates and preferences, and Marcus Antonius was denounced by the Augustan party for his interest not only in Cleopatra, but also in Eastern ways and *luxuria*. Augustus took great care to promote Roman values and religious tradition, also in opposition to 'foreign' Eastern ways and cults. Later emperors with too much fondness for Greek or Eastern culture and tradition, such as Nero, Domitian and Hadrian, received a bad press because of it. Magicians and astrologers, cynics and sophists, hypocrites and flatterers: all came from the Greek East, according to conservative Roman critics, and from time to time such groups were expelled from Rome en-bloc.²⁵ All in all, the Romans cherished and absorbed the Hellenistic culture of the East, but some were reluctant. Through their portrayal of the Greeks they kept alive the stereotype of the indulgent and aberrant East, which, by a twist of irony, they in turn had acquired from Greek literary tradition.

The Romans were quite tolerant towards foreign gods and religious practices; they even imported the fertility goddess Cybele from Phrygia in times of peril during the Second Punic War (even though they were anxious about her eunuch priests and only allowed public worship for one week each year). Yet, strange and foreign cults have a tendency to upset people, at least those who feel the status quo threatened by them. 'Who knows not what monsters demented Egypt worships?', the satirist Juvenal asks (*Satire* 15.1-2), after having condemned the Greeks and other Easterners in several of his satires, as dishonest flatterers and promiscuous wastrels. Religious conflicts shook the empire. Jewish resistance to the Roman imperial cult remained a great problem for Roman authorities for many years and led to two major revolts (66-70 and 132-135 CE) as well as anti-Semitism.²⁶

When depicting the oriental East, conservative Romans also made sure to criticise its political organisation. Part of the stereotype of the bad East was autocracy

²⁴ Cf. H. Sonnabend, *Fremdenbild und Politik: Vorstellungen der Römer von Ägypten und dem Partherreich in der späten Republik und frühen Kaiserzeit* (1986).

²⁵ Cf. Segal (ed.), *Greece in Rome: Influence, Integration, Resistance, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 97, (1998).

²⁶ B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2004), pp. 440-491.

and despotism. In the classical Greek discourse this was a major part of anti-Persian propaganda, and thus something that also had to be turned against the Greek recent past. The tyrants were characteristic of sixth century Greece, and many had large popular support and introduced socio-political institutions typical to the later, proper polis society. The tyrants were belittled in the later Greek tradition, as were the early kings of Rome in later Roman tradition. Caesar's dictatorship and flirting with absolutism got him killed, and no emperor of the first 200 years could completely ignore the Roman people and senate, SPQR; and the term for king, *rex*, was completely avoided in the West. The political ideals of the Republic lived long in the senatorial elite into the Principate, and the idea was widespread that the Romans (as opposed to Eastern kingdoms) were governed not by an autocrat with absolute power, but by a constitutional monarch.²⁷ Emperors with high-handed conduct and divine aspirations, such as Domitian, ran into troublesome opposition and sometimes got assassinated. They were compared with Eastern despots. The Eastern rulers were also depicted by Romans as self-indulgent autocrats and their subjects as docile idolaters. Typical is Martial's claim (*Epigrams* 10.72), when addressing the new Emperor Trajan some time after the fall of Domitian, that the flattering pixies that had swayed him to sweet-talk the late emperor now should be off to eastern despots:

In vain you come to me, Flatteries, you wretched creatures with shameless lips. I am not to speak of 'master and god'. There is no place for you now in this city. Off you go, ugly, abject beggars, far away to Parthians in turbans, to kiss the feet of tawdry kings. There is no master (*dominus*) here, but a commander-in-chief (*imperator*) and the most rightful of all senators.

Yet the Roman Emperor was a master, of course, with progressively greater powers also in the 'good' era of the Antonines. With Septimius Severus (193-211 CE), Rome got its first Emperor of Punic origin; his wife Julia Domna was of Syrian aristocracy, and later secured the throne for her grand-nephew of Eastern stock, Elagabalus. The third century CE, after the fall of the Severans, was a time of crisis, peril and war for the Roman Empire. The imperial frontiers were attacked in the north and east, and the commanders-in-chief in the years to follow had their hands busy fighting invading forces as well as each other, as different branches of the army hailed their own commanders as emperors. Quite a few of the emperors and usurpers in this period were 'barbarians', and some of those who made it in the official imperial

²⁷ Cf. S. Houby-Nielsen, 'Augustus and the Hellenistic kings: a note on Augustan propaganda', in T. Fischer-Hansen (ed.), *East and West: Cultural Relations in the Ancient World* (1988).

records were men from the East, such as Maximinus Thrax (235-238 CE) and Philip the Arab (244-249 CE).

By and large the Eastern part of the Empire became more and more important and gradually the centre was shifting eastwards. The elite of the Greek East had in the early imperial days remained attached to their own cities as was normal for the Greek city-states, but increasingly they became more involved in the central government and started to join the Roman aristocracy and Senate in numbers by the second century CE. Commodus' decree in 212 CE made all free inhabitants of the Empire Roman citizens, which spurred the Eastern citizens further to become involved in imperial government and administration. In the times of trouble the East had been shown to be more prosperous, urbanised and settled, easier to control and defended and more loyal to the Empire than parts of the West. And in the end, the administration of the Empire was divided and the emperor (or main emperor, when there was more than one) started to reside in the East, rather than in the West. Nicomedia, on the coast of the Sea of Marmara in Anatolia, was for a period the residential city of the Roman Emperor before Constantine redeveloped Byzantium into his new capital, Constantinople, and finalised the shift of weight from west to east.

The Byzantine Period

A couple of generations later another phenomenon of Eastern origin had supplanted the traditional gods and hence the core of the Greco-Roman culture and mindset: Christianity. By Theodosius' edict of 391 CE, which prohibited academies, agonistic activities in the gymnasia and the arena and pagan worship, the Christianisation of the Empire may be seen as complete. It was not, however, any longer a complete and united empire. As northern tribes and people continued to invade and settle within what used to be the Western part of the Roman Empire, the Western provinces fell apart and the Western part of the empire ceased to exist. The unity of the Empire was not forgotten, but the various pieces proved hard to bring together under imperial rule, even for a wilful emperor as Justinian (527-65 CE). After 600 years the Eastern and Western parts of the Mediterranean were again separated, and the Western part disintegrated. The Eastern part of the empire, which we call the Byzantine Empire, remained the intellectual and political centre and the Emperor continued to rule the Balkans, Anatolia, the Levant and the shores and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean. The inhabitants still saw themselves as the true Romans, *Romanoi*, and continued as subjects to Constantinople. And they even still had to fight the Persians. The Sassanians had brought down the Parthian kings and ruled a new Persian Empire (224-651 CE) that caused the Romans a great deal of trouble. Valerian was defeated

and captured by the Sassanians in 260, Diocletian fought hard battles with Narses (and won) at the end of the third century and Emperor Julian died in Mesopotamia during a campaign in 363 CE. The Byzantine Empire was at the brink of destruction, however, when the Persians under Chosroes II from 603 CE captured Anatolia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt (where churches were destroyed and Zoroastrianism instigated) and aimed at Constantinople. Heraclius, exarch of Carthage, seized power and managed by enormous will-power and mobilisation of all the sources of the Empire to drive the Persians back and regain most of the lost territory by 628. Both empires were exhausted after many large battles. When the Arab Muslims started their expansion a few years later, they took advantage of this fatigue to swiftly conquer the whole Arabian Peninsula, Persia and not long after northern Africa and Iberia. A large part of the Byzantine Empire and Christianity was subjugated, and France and Anatolia were endangered. A new Eastern arch-enemy had appeared, and a new volume in the book of East-West antagonism was to be written.

After Justinian there was no sufficient political desire or force to reunite the Roman Empire. The East and the West were united in Christianity, but the quarrels within the early Church lead to discord and schism. The Western Church was smaller and less significant in comparison with the multitude of congregations and parishes of the East. But the West had the pope, claiming authority from Peter, and no strong emperor to overrule the Church. That proved to be an advantage, as the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church thus evolved as a major political force in the West; and, after the breach during the iconoclastic period (711-802 CE), increasingly in opposition to the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Orthodox Church in the East.²⁸ Hence a new chapter in the East/West controversy was opened; its subject was Christian doctrine and heresy. Later attempts to reunite the Church all failed, with the final schism coming in 1054, but a sense of Christian community was brought about in the wake of the Muslim conquests. To the good old Eastern stereotype was added a significant religious factor and the result was the birth of the Western picture of the demonic *Islamic* East.

Crusades to reconquer the lost Palestinian land and the Iberian Peninsula were launched in this spirit. Nonetheless, most of the Christian population of Syria, Palestine and other parts of the conquered territory were treated fairly by the Muslims and were quite indifferent to the shift in sovereignty and the relationship between the Byzantines and the Arabs were not all hostile.²⁹ The steam of the initial Arab conquest ran out and after the Shiite controversy there was an end also to a Muslim

²⁸ Cf. H. Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church from Apostolic Times until the Council of Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Cf. C.E. Bosworth, *The Arabs, Byzantium and Islam: Studies in Early Islamic History and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996).

world united under one caliph. Accordingly the Christian campaign of reconquest was at least partly a success. Yet the recapture of the Holy Land proved that the crusaders and the Byzantine Empire constituted no holy alliance. The Byzantine Empire was not prosperous enough to engage a large army and tried to make the crusaders fight their wars. Various gangs of crusaders, on the other hand, could be quite intolerable to the local inhabitants they encountered on their way, and once they got the taste of Constantinople's splendour they easily forgot about the holy mission. Eventually crusaders, different Christian naval powers of the Mediterranean and Byzantine forces caused each other more trouble than they did any Muslim enemy. In the end they were all driven off Palestinian soil and the Byzantine Empire was left with a broken back. Step by step, from the initial Battle of Manzikert in 1071 to the final capture of Constantinople in 1453, the remainder of the Roman Empire was absorbed by the new Muslim force in the region, the Turks.³⁰ The Ottoman Empire hence attained the role in European discourse as the Eastern menace and the Turks were bestowed with all the classical characteristics of the East.

Epilogue

This short account has tried to show that the stereotype of the barbarians and an anti-Eastern discourse was developed in the literate culture of the Greeks in classical times, based on a genuine fear of the Persians, but also on an increasing smugness. The attitude towards the East was handed down to the Romans and occasionally exploited for political, private or satirical purposes by writers throughout antiquity, and thus prevailed for all those who could read. 'The light from the Acropolis' has never illuminated its Near Eastern neighbours, rather a nefarious shadow was cast on the East that has proved hard to dispose of.

³⁰ Cf. J. Riley-Smith (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and J. Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003).