

Representing the Other: Ancient Perspectives of the Other

AHAR5004



Representing the Other

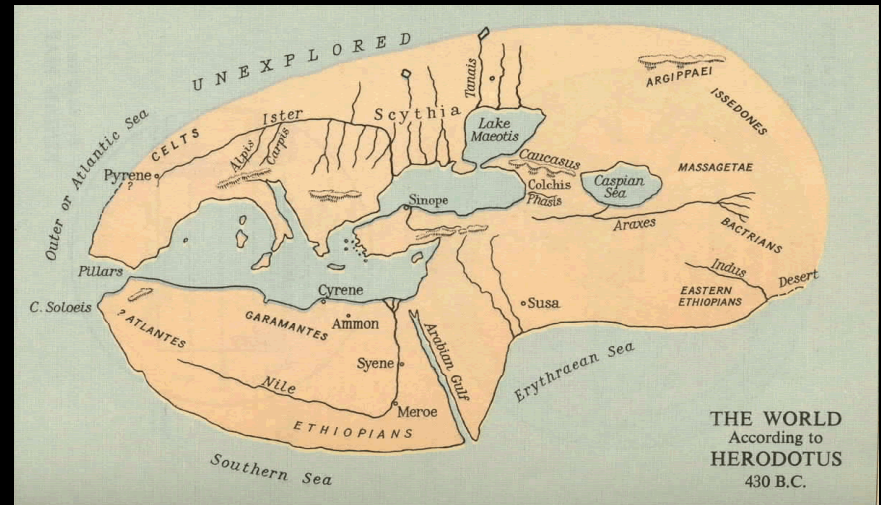
- What do we mean by **otherness**?
- Textual representations of the other
- Focusing on **Greek texts**:
 - Homeric epic & representations of Phoenicians
 - Herodotus: representations of ancient Egyptians, Amazons, Persians



Darius: the Alexander Mosaic

Travellers' Tales

- Introduced the Greeks to other peoples & faraway places
- Set formula for representing the other
- Herodotus' histories contain:
 - Introductory passage on nature of country
 - Account of its *nomoi*
 - Mention of the *thomasia*
 - Report on the political history



Fascination with the Other

- Ancient Greek writers were fascinated by Egypt:
- “Its antiquity generated awe. And its exotic appeal wove a spell” (Gruen 2010: 76)
- How the pyramid & obelisk got their name...



Obelisk of Thutmosis I, Karnak

Greeks and Barbarians

- Greeks divided peoples of the world into two groups:
 - Hellenes
 - Non-Hellenes = **barbarians**
- Barbarian: some one whose speech was not Greek
- Not necessarily hostile, pejorative, nor an allusion to inferiority
- = a signifier of difference, of otherness



Lapiths & centaurs
Parthenon sculptures

A Rhetoric of Otherness

- **The other:** implies difference (binary opposites)
- Once the difference is articulated & **transcribed** it becomes significant (part of literary trope)
- **Rhetoric of otherness** (Hartog): narrative device, used in travellers' tales
- Otherness:
 - More than simply difference between A & B
 - A is the **converse** of B



Kadmos & dragon

A Rhetoric of Otherness

- Herodotus & Egypt:
 - The Egyptians live in an “other” (*heteros*) climate
 - Nile is different (*allos*) from all other rivers
 - “their customs & laws of a kind which is for the most part the *converse* of those of all other men” (Hdt. 2.35)
- An *inversion* of the natural, right (Greek) way
- Differences are enough to set them apart



Amazons

- Greek perspective: polarity between warfare & marriage: both disjunction & complementarity
 - War = male social role
 - Marriage = suitable role for women
- Amazons: **inversion** of the natural order
 - Women hold monopoly of warrior function
 - Women reject marriage & live without men



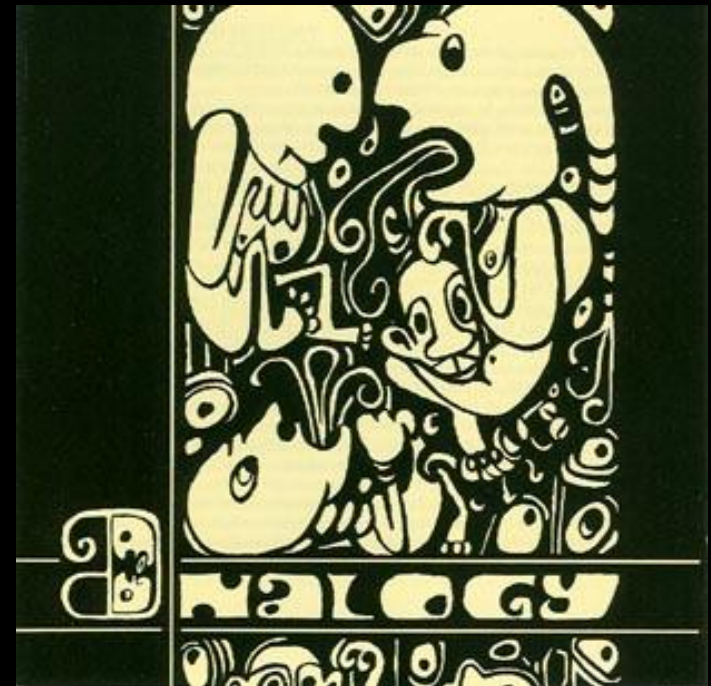
Heracles fighting the Amazons

Amazons: Diodorus Siculus 3.53

- "...there was once in the western part of Libya, on the bounds of the inhabited world, a race which was ruled by women & followed a manner of life unlike that which prevails among us. For it was the custom among them that the women should practise the arts of war & be required to serve in the army for a fixed period, during which time they maintained their virginity; then when the years of service in the field had expired, they went in to the men for the procreation of women, but they kept in their hands the administration of the magistracies & of all the affairs of the state. The men however, like our married women, spent their days about the house, carrying out the orders which were given them by their wives...when their children were born, the babies were turned over to the men, who brought them up on milk..."

Comparison & Analogy

- Travellers' tales of "others":
use of **comparison**
 - "a net the narrator throws in the waters of otherness" (Hartog 1988: 225)
- Fundamental tool of Archaic thought & early Greek writing:
 - Resemblances & differences between here/us & there/the other
 - Relies on **shared knowledge** of the object of comparison



Comparison & Analogy

- Herodotus describing course of the Nile:
 - Beyond the town of Elephantine its course is winding like (*kataper*) that of the Meander (Hdt. 2.29)
- Herodotus' description of the rivers Araxes:
 - Many islands dotted along its course are comparable (*paraplesiai*) in size to Lesbos (Hdt. 1.202)
- What would these comparisons convey to the typical Athenian?



Nile at Elephantine

Marvels & Curiosities

- Travellers' tales should contain *thoma*
- These marvels *authenticate* the account
- Qualitative & quantitative
- Homer & Hesiod: use adjectives great (*mega*) & daunting/terrible (*deinos*)
- Herodotus conveys *thoma* by a number



Great pyramid, Giza

Marvels & Curiosities

- Extremities of the world where the “fairest” & “rarest” of blessings are to be found, possess, in particular, mysterious spices (Hdt 3.107-12)
 - Descriptions of harvesting incense & cinnamon
 - Laudanum is “more extraordinary still”
- Products only to be found in most extraordinary of places



Harvesting incense in Oman

Marvels & Curiosities

- “Concerning Egypt I will now speak at length, because nowhere are there so many marvellous things (*pleista thomasia*) nor in the whole world besides are there to be seen so many works of unspeakable greatness (*erga logou mezo*); therefore I shall say all the more about Egypt” (Hdt 2.35)



Giza

Phoenicians in Homeric Epic

- Very different attitudes to Phoenicians in *Iliad* & *Odyssey*
- Reflects different levels of contact during 1st millennium
 - 11th-8th centuries: East = source of luxuries
 - 8th century: learn alphabet from Phoenicians
 - 7th-6th century: increasingly competing over resources of West Mediterranean



Phoenicians in the *Iliad*

- Appear only rarely
- Reputation is of craftsmen: metalworkers & women weavers: *polydaidaloi* (of many skills)
 - Prize of silver bowl at Patroklos' funerary feast "far the finest in the world; Phoenicians brought it over the cloudy sea ...& presented it to [King] Thoas (*Il.* 23. 74off)
 - Paris acquires finely woven garments for Helen, the work of Phoenician handmaidens (*Il.* 6.289)
- Admiration & no hint of hostility



Silver basin (*lebetes*) from Praeneste

Phoenicians in the *Odyssey*

- More prominent in story – reflecting closer contacts
- Significant change in perception
 - *Polypaipaloi* (of many tricks)
 - Seduce women, kidnap children, lure merchants into slavery
 - Rascals (*trōktai*) skilled in deception, working mischief on men
 - Trade in trinkets (*arthumata*)



Necklace, Athens

Persia & the Construction of Greek Identity

- Conflict with Persians = “pivotal turning point in the conception of Greek identity” (Gruen 2010: 9)
- Prompted Greeks to reconsider their values
 - Shaped these in deliberate contrast to the “barbarian other”
 - Defined what made them different from the “despised” other



Red Figure kylix: Greek hoplite
& Persian soldier

Persia & the Construction of Greek Identity

- Persia: pre-eminent adversary of the Greeks
- **Orientalizing** of the Persians?
 - Lived contentedly under despotism
 - Preferred servility to rationality
- Earliest orientalist perspective on the Asiatic cultures (see Said)?



Red Figure vase: Persian archer

Persia & the Construction of Greek Identity

- Aeschylus: *The Persians* (472 BC)
 - Set in Susa, after battle of Salamis
 - Tragedy presented from Persian perspective: a calamity
- Expression of Hellenic superiority?
- Gruen: play avoids trumpeting inherent superiority of Greeks
 - Argues that Aeschylus does not present Persians as the other but is more subtle...



Persian warrior, Persepolis

Summary

- Ancient Greeks were fascinated by other peoples & cultures & wrote about them avidly
- Earliest references to other peoples: Homeric epic: changes between Iliad & Odyssey
- Herodotus: most famous for representation of the “barbarian”
 - Travel writing & ethnographies
- Construction of the barbarian as the other?
- Early form of orientalization?