

# Beyond “Greeks”: Toward More Inclusive Histories of the Ancient Mediterranean

Jeremy LaBuff

**Abstract:** This article argues that a commitment to the category of “Greeks” in framing the study of the ancient Mediterranean embeds us in the legacies of nationalism, colonialism, and racism, and rests on a problematic evidentiary basis. After reviewing the ways that scholarly narratives subtly endorse this legacy, I examine two case studies, Classical Athens and the world of the Hellenistic kingdoms, to argue that minimal impact of Greek identity discourse does not justify framing their histories through the category of Greekness. The paper closes with a consideration of how to reframe “Greek” history in more inclusive and coherent ways.

**Keywords:** Greekness, modern historiography, identity, Athens, Hellenistic World

The application of the term “Classical Studies” to a discipline that has traditionally focused on the study of Greek and Roman culture and society has justly come under fire recently for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it advances the Western/white appropriation of a set of histories that are equally situated in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Likewise, the theft of “Ancient History” by historians of the Greco-Roman world merits criticism for implying the insignificance to the point of annihilation of the early (non-white) pasts of other parts of the globe such as East and South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

A seemingly easy solution is to replace such problematic terms with something more honest like “Greek and Roman Studies,” but matters are not so simple. For one, “Greeks” and “Romans” still primarily connote European, and their “European” political histories are given primacy in ancient and modern narratives. For another, this label excludes, or treats as relevant only in relation to two peoples, the histories of Phoenicians, Egyptians, Anatolians, Etruscans and many other non-Greco-Romans. Yet there is a third problem that has received little attention in discussions of what do with and call our discipline, which involves the validity of the term “Greek” itself as a primary category of historical analysis. As Kostas Vlassopoulos has observed, “there was never a single political, economic, social, or cultural centre which could give unity to the Greek world or Greek identity.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this well acknowledged absence, Greek unity and identity remain the *precondition* for much of the teaching and research conducted under the name of “Greek” history, archaeology, art history, and (somewhat more justifiably) philology.

In what follows, I attempt to deconstruct the implications of Vlassopoulos’ observation, both for how we currently interpret “Greek” evidence and tell “Greek” history, and for how we might more accurately and inclusively tell that history going forward. In a first section, I explore

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Goody 2006, 26-67.

<sup>2</sup> Vlassopoulos 2013, 36.

the use of the concept of “Greek” in a wide range of contexts, from world history and Greek survey textbooks to scholarly interpretations of textual and material evidence, in order to show that the term does not innocuously refer to “Greek-speakers,” but rhetorically inherits the 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperialistic and racist concept of a “Greek” nation that is easily analogized with the expansionist European and settler nations of the modern period, facilitating (often unintentionally) the public and scholarly reception of “Greek” history as peculiarly Western and white. In the next two sections, I observe that a discourse of Greekness was intricately bound up with ancient imperialistic discourse, but call into question the importance of that discourse to the behaviors and power dynamics of “Greeks,” first in classical Athens and then in the world of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Here I argue that if such a unity and identity were either lacking or unimportant, then it makes little sense, and reinforces modern imperialist and racialized views of this ancient past, to continue to impose this label in our narratives and interpretations. In concluding, I consider paths forward, acknowledging the challenges of presenting a “messier” history but insisting that we face these challenges rather than continuing to accept what makes sense for the dominant group.

### **Greekness in Today’s Ancient Histories**

Awareness of the minimal and ideologically charged role of the idea of Greekness among the numerous “Greek” communities throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Black Sea world is quite common among scholars. This role was limited to particular contexts, most prominently in responding to Persian assaults (and a Near Eastern imperial worldview) that inspired some of these communities to equate their distinct desires for autonomy with a collective alliance to resist the Persian onslaught.<sup>3</sup> The call to define “our freedom” as Greek, rather than as a set of separate communal freedoms, established the right for Athens to decide how that freedom was to be achieved, and at whose expense. The result was the creation of an Athenian Empire over the Aegean island and coastal states, and in the 4th century, similar discourses of Greekness led to hegemonies by Sparta, Thebes, Athens, and finally Macedon, now as often to resist the dominance of another “Greek” state as to oppose Persian aggression. All these examples highlight the fundamentally political and imperial contexts in which Greekness, the conception of a single people who shared similar culture, language, kinship ties and a territory known as “Hellas,” was implemented as a discourse of identity and power.<sup>4</sup>

The implication of this work has, however, been more assumed than investigated: that the idea of Greekness should represent a basic organizing principle for how we conceptualize ancient (Mediterranean) history.<sup>5</sup> College courses, textbooks, and popular works all make “Greek history” a standard offering to their various publics, an offering that consists largely of narratives about what “Greeks” felt, thought, ate, wrote, “achieved” and “created.” These “Greeks” are granted special ownership over specific vase styles and painting techniques,

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<sup>3</sup> On the Near Eastern roots of Greekness as a response to empire, see Haubold 2013, 98-126.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Perlman 1976, 1985; E. Hall 1987; Faraguna 2003; Rhodes 2007; Low 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Even the argument of Stier 1970, questioning the view of Greekness as a nationality or ethnicity, still takes for granted the concept’s historical centrality as a cultural identity.

building types, literary genres and myths, and of course the *polis* itself, despite many non-Greek groups having a share in the creation and consumption of these sociocultural products. In discussing examples, I should be clear that my aim is not to fault any specific authors, but to highlight the engrained nature of this particular form of Greco-centrism in which we all, myself included, have been implicated.<sup>6</sup> One multi-editioned work celebrates the “accomplishments of the Greeks in innovative political organization, including democracy, history writing, literature, drama, philosophy, art, and architecture...” while bemoaning “their perpetuation of slavery, the exclusion of women from politics, and their failure to unite to preserve their independence...”<sup>7</sup> For the authors of OUP’s *Ancient Greece* textbook, the Greeks developed “a culture marked by astonishing creativity, versatility, and resilience.”<sup>8</sup> “The Greeks valued truth and beauty,” a third text informs students, and “were proud of their way of life...”<sup>9</sup> In treating the Hellenistic period, the most comprehensive English language survey defines its subject via an opposition between Greeks and “those far larger areas, profoundly alien in speech and culture to the Greek spirit,” while a more recent treatment of this same era centers on “the unity of the Greeks—or the lack thereof.”<sup>10</sup> Even the absence of Greek unity is noteworthy precisely because unity is the expected norm, however infrequent.

Who are these Greeks who did so much and had such similar thoughts and mindset? Survey texts rarely address the question directly.<sup>11</sup> This is not an innocent omission, even if unintentional, particularly for works whose primary audience is assumed to know nothing of the subject. But in fact, this audience is being expected to “know” who the Greeks were, which for most initiates means equating ancient Greeks with modern Greece. This assumption is buttressed by the implicit answers that these books give, whether through their titles (*Ancient Greece* or some variation), the choice to start with the topography of the southern Balkans or the Bronze Age societies of this same geographical area, or the similarly narrow understanding of “Greeks” that runs through the opening narratives of Hellenistic histories, where the only Greeks that matter emanate from Philip and Alexander’s initial sphere of influence in the Balkans and Aegean. Greeks, in case you didn’t already know, are from Greece, which is just what you think it is.<sup>12</sup> This impression is further strengthened, although in this case understandably given our evidence, by a focus on the political history of the 5th and 4th-century “mainland” (i.e., the southern Balkan peninsula) in pre-Hellenistic survey texts. It would be misleading to suggest that they fail to convey the broad geographical extent of Greek habitation

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of manageability, I limit this discussion to English-language textbooks, and leave it to others to determine the applicability of my argument to public-facing works of Greek history in other languages.

<sup>7</sup> Martin 2013, 1-5; Cf. Sowerby 2015, esp. x-xi. Less overt in their assumptions, but still comfortable using “Greeks” as a subject of agency, are Parker 2014 and Osborne 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Pomeroy et al. 2018, esp. 1-4

<sup>9</sup> McInerney 2018, esp. 14-28.

<sup>10</sup> Green 1990, xv. Chaniotis 2018, 4. Cf. Thonemann’s “story of the Greek adventure in the East” (2016, vii).

<sup>11</sup> McInerney 2018, 28 endorses the polemical jingoism of Isokrates’ famous cultural “definition” of Greekness (see below for further discussion of this author). Chaniotis 2018, 4-5 comes closer in implying the role of kinship in articulating “real” and invented ties between Greeks and non-Greeks, but still does not clarify who these Greeks are. The idea seems to be that non-Greeks can become Greek, but only if they develop kinship ties with “real” Greeks, which implies that this acquired Greekness is less real.

<sup>12</sup> On the relationship between “ancient Greece” and today’s conceptions of modern Greeks, see Beaton 2019, 3-12.

in West Asia, the Western Mediterranean, the Black Sea coast, North Africa, and Central/South Asia, but in doing so they reinforce the centrality of Greece and Greeks, first by explicitly or implicitly ascribing the ultimate origins of these settlements to “Greece,” and secondly by assuming the importance of “being Greek” to understanding who the inhabitants of these settlements were and how they related to their neighbors.

This last point is important for demonstrating that we are not here dealing with labels used for simplicity’s sake or to indicate a group of people detached from identity, e.g., “Greek-speakers.”<sup>13</sup> Not only is the focus on individuals and communities who are described as Greek because of their historically posited origins in a Greek “motherland,” which is itself a modern construct that elides a host of complex and more locally defined *metropoleis*, but their relations with “non-Greek” neighbors are often explored through concepts like assimilation, colonialism, the middle ground, and hybridization, which are predicated on a pre-existing cultural binary that continues to determine how the groups involved are understood post-contact. “Greek” language, ceramics, architecture, and institutions are the defining features of settlements that originate in “Greece,” but if we find these features in a neighboring settlement, they indicate diffusion, Hellenization, or glocalization. Greek-speaking Elymians or Karians are not included in our “Greeks” who have accomplished so much—even Maussollos just knew whom to hire.

I have dwelt at length on the survey text because it is both symptomatic of broader trends in more specialized scholarship and also helps to inform the basic categories of this scholarship, as well as the even broader surveys of world history that include sections or chapters on the “Greeks.” The latter are perhaps less remarkable, but worth briefly discussing, particularly because there is nothing inherent to world history, besides its pedagogical roots in Western Civilization courses, that dictates a focus on the “Greeks.” Yet a brief examination of several major world history textbooks reveals narratives featuring either brief moments of Greek political collaboration or a more generalized sense of Greek accomplishment.<sup>14</sup> As for scholarly production, there is of course more variation. Publications on political history tend to shy away from the “Greeks” because of the importance of *polis* and *ethnos* autonomy; works in the fields of social and cultural history, archaeology, art history, or philosophy, while in the main emphasizing the individual, local or regional nature of their studies, are at times prone to also identifying their material as “Greek.”<sup>15</sup> One example that serves as a bridge between surveys and specialized scholarship is Vlassopoulos’ already cited *Greeks and Barbarians*, which aims to reach a primarily undergraduate readership while also offering a new and thoroughly researched interpretation of Greek/non-Greek relations. Despite his observation that the Greek world lacks a center, as well as his endorsement of concepts like the middle ground and hybridity that might encourage a move beyond polarities, Vlassopoulos remains firmly convinced of the applicability of “Greek” to a whole range of cultural productions that were never or only belatedly understood as such by the ancient perspectives we have, a range that

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<sup>13</sup> This objection has been raised twice by anonymous reviewers of earlier versions of this article.

<sup>14</sup> Strayer & Nelson 2019, 102-11, 159-61; Bentley et al. 2021, 184-204; McNeill 2021, 155-66. Adelman et al. 2021, 190-198 presents a more inclusive approach to the ancient Mediterranean but still ends up talking mostly about the “Greek” city-states.

<sup>15</sup> Of note is Tuplin 1999, who in treating the question of Greek racism declares (49): “Of course, ‘Greeks’ did constitute a single entity in contradistinction to barbarians,” treating the sources as descriptive rather than persuasive arguments meant to construct both categories.

includes archaic poetic genres, the early centuries of the Classical-era “Panhellenic” shrines, ceramics and painting, temple architecture and sculpture, and the epigraphic habit. His explanation of the successful globalization of the overall cultural package of the “Greeks” due to its adaptability by other cultures depends on the assumption that “Greek” culture was not already global during its period of emergence. This assumption seems at least worthy of investigation, first because there is no evidence before the 5th century of a perception of common culture in terms of Greekness, and second because of the intense participation in this culture by “non-Greek” communities from quite an early date. Why do we speak of the foreign consumption of “Greek” vase paintings in Etruria in a different way than in non-Athenian (or non-Corinthian) “Greek” cities? Were Attic vases seen as “ours” by these cities despite the very real sense of difference that they felt politically (and no doubt culturally) with Athens?

To be fair to Vlassopoulos, his conclusions are meant to synthesize the more focused studies of material and literary culture that have come before his work, and as such he mirrors the tendency of most scholars studying this evidence to describe it using a Greek label that poses as objective while insinuating (again, intentionally or not) an unproven idea of a coherent national culture. De Jüliis envisions the history of southern Italy as the result of the “continuous dialectic between two fundamental protagonists: the Greeks and the Italians (Italici).”<sup>16</sup> For Jenkins, the Nereid Monument from Lykia projects a self-image in which “taste for Greek things and ideas ultimately prevails” over Lykian and Persian elements.<sup>17</sup> In both examples, the term “Greek” elides a diversity of distinct peoples, communities, and product origins, while at the same time implying that local political or cultural differences were typically understood in terms of broader “national” categories. Where cultural mixing occurred that might suggest the irrelevance of this polarity, it is still assumed to represent a deeply engrained substratum that survives in the face of blending and variation. The underlying message is that where we find Greek culture, it is “Greeks” who are responsible, either directly or because they have produced a culture that non-Greeks seek to emulate. Non-Greeks like the dynast who commissioned the Nereid Monument are certainly granted agency, but real credit still goes to “Greeks” as the authors of what is adopted. That studies exist to challenge this way of understanding “Greek” history and culture is noteworthy, but they have not made an impact on the historical image that we project outside our discipline, via textbooks and popular works, and exercise uncertain influence on the majority of teacher-scholars within the field.

In recounting these select but representative examples of what is conveyed by “Greek” in surveys and scholarship, I have also begun to hint at the weak basis for this image of a coherent culture and identity rooted in “Greece” and distinct from surrounding peoples. In the realm of culture, products are either more local in origin, such as Attic pottery, or so widespread as to defy any meaningful Greek/non-Greek boundary that is not imposed on the evidence by later commentators, both ancient and modern.<sup>18</sup> The basis for “Greeks” is stronger when it comes to

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<sup>16</sup> De Jüliis 1996 (new edition, 2021). For a critique of this view that still maintains ethnic polarities, see Buidrick 2019. Cf. the contributions in De Angelis 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Jenkins 2006, 201, largely following the interpretation of Demargne & Childs 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Even the interpretation of the ethnic Other in vase paintings has to assume that the “us” represented by figures that contrast with Egyptians, Thracians/Skythians, or Persians is always “Greeks,” but it makes more sense to include whoever was consuming these vases, which include western Anatolians, Etruscans, and other groups who could have also contrasted themselves with these “Others” without thinking that this made them Greek.

ethnographic and political conceptions of the world, starting at least with Hekataios. It is to this evidence that I now turn to argue that it is neither justified nor politically neutral to frame our study of the ancient Mediterranean through the concept of “Greeks.” To be clear, I am not questioning whether peoples that we now identify as Greeks played an important role in ancient history or even that there was not a clearly conceptualized Greek identity available for people to claim; rather, I propose that it is both misleading and an implicit endorsement of imperialism to think of these historical actors as Greeks, i.e., as people who instinctively and consistently claimed this identity. While questions of agency and identity are often seen to constitute separate issues, I maintain that the two must be treated together: those responsible for the events, objects, and ideas produced in the past should be labeled as they understood themselves, not according to labels that conveniently match modern organizations of the world, which are themselves politically and culturally charged.<sup>19</sup> What Aristotle wrote about the *polis* does not necessarily bear on Spartan political thought, just as the Pan Painter tells us nothing firm about Aitolian art.

Acknowledging the impossibility of making my case through a comprehensive consideration of the evidence, I limit myself to two contexts. First, I look at Classical Athens, home of almost all the key ancient texts in which the concept of “Greeks” was central to the worldview their authors espoused. Considering the agenda of these sources is crucial for determining their impact among Greek-speaking communities outside and, especially, inside Athens. I then turn to the world of the Hellenistic empires, where an imperial discourse espousing “Greek” freedom or privileges is not as pervasive, chronologically or geographically, as general narratives often suggest. Both cases have been chosen for their renown as sites in which discourses of Greekness featured prominently and influentially. My goal is not to challenge scholarly consensus when it comes to political events and motivations, but to highlight how this consensus implicitly invalidates the choice to frame such history as one of “Greeks.” It is my contention that if I can show that even in these environments, Greek identity (and therefore identification) was an ideological claim of empire that did not dominate the thinking of most Greek-speakers, then it will go a long way to cast doubt on the appropriateness of the Greek label for the many other contexts in which Greekness is rarely or never mentioned in our sources.<sup>20</sup> To make my case, and to avoid legitimizing what I hope to call into question, my use of “Greek” in what follows always refers to a term of discourse, ancient or modern, without implying that such discourse is legitimate in describing a people or a culture.

## Athens and the Nation

I take as my starting point Jonathan Hall’s work on Greek identity, which contains two important insights. First, the interaction of elites from local communities, especially at regionally

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<sup>19</sup> The theoretical distinction between “emic” and “etic” identifiers is only partially helpful here: the name “Hellene” is emic insofar as it truly was an identity claimed by certain Greeks at certain times; yet its implied or explicit importance in modern histories of antiquity is etic because unjustified, as I hope to show.

<sup>20</sup> These other contexts are worthy of investigation as well, and require more careful scrutiny that hopefully this piece inspires. For while some scholars have also questioned the importance of Hellenic identity (e.g., Zacharia 2008; Vlassopoulos 2015), they still retain a commitment to Greekness as a basic category of analysis.



important sanctuaries like Delphi and Olympia, led to the articulation of broader, “aggregated” regional identities such as Dorian and Ionian, and eventually, over the course of the 6th century, Greek identity. In other words, local identities preceded “national” identities. Second, Greek identity was largely articulated in “internal” opposition to non-elites. During the late Archaic Period, Greekness was an elite prerogative that not only had little purchase among the majority of the Greek-speaking population, but may have been explicitly employed to emphasize class differences rather than commonality.<sup>21</sup>

The experience of the Persian Wars resulted in a redeployment of Greek identity. Slogans of Greek unity and freedom clearly aimed to create solidarity across class lines by framing Greekness in opposition to the invading Persians.<sup>22</sup> Most scholars (and all textbooks) allow this fact to put them at ease in assuming that, from 480 BC on, being Greek mattered to most Greeks. In doing so, they overlook the important qualification that Hall makes in his discussion of early Classical Greek identity, namely that it was articulated in predominantly Athenian contexts to serve the interests of Athenian imperial power and cultural hegemony.<sup>23</sup>

The attraction of these imperial discourses as central voices in the modern shaping of “Greek history” is in itself telling, but I wish to take Hall’s argument further and contend that Athenian imperial and elite discourses on Greekness blind us to the ways that Greekness rarely mattered even to many Athenians and, by extension, to non-Athenian Greek speakers. I explore the misleading way that Athenian or Athenian-adjacent voices have been taken to represent the views of those people whom we call “Greeks” about themselves. By “rarely” I refer not just to the empirical infrequency with which we find this label used by non-elite or non-Athenian voices, but also to the minimal impact that expressions of Greekness would have had on people used to hearing and referring to themselves with more local forms of identity. They may have agreed that they were Greeks when the question was posed, but there were no institutional mechanisms to make such an identity primary or instinctively “transformable” from *polis* or “tribal” identities.<sup>24</sup> Without institutional mechanisms, such as rituals, oaths, or a visual propaganda, it is doubtful that Greek identity often qualified as the “largest group to command

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<sup>21</sup> Hall 1997, 2002; cf. Honigman 2007. I find decisive Hall’s arguments (2002, 90–124) against the theory that Greek identity emerged as a result of oppositional encounters with non-Greek speakers throughout the Mediterranean and especially in the context of *apoikia* foundations (so-called “Greek colonies”) in southern Italy, Sicily, North Africa, the Black Sea coastline, and elsewhere (on which see Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, 47–58; Malkin 2011). The strongest evidence in support of this position is Naukratis, the pharaonic-regulated settlement in the Nile Delta where a sanctuary was built by several Greek-speaking communities that, according to Herodotos, was called the “Hellenion” (Malkin 2011, 87–95). Certainly by Herodotos’ day this name attests to a broader identity shared by Greek-speakers from several local and regional ethnic communities (Ionians, Dorians, etc.), but the question is when this name was attached to the sanctuary. The assumption is that the name dates to the foundation of the cult, but it is just as likely that the name emerged in later contexts when Greekness had a more pervasive influence (cf. the 5<sup>th</sup>-century date of inscriptions referring to common Greek identity from the sanctuary, on which, see Demetriou 2012, 142–151). At the same time, the name could have also been a response to Egyptian perceptions of the sameness of diverse Greek-speaking peoples, a sameness that mattered in Egypt but less so elsewhere. More generally, Sourvinou-Inwood’s efforts to promote the priority of Greekness in both importance and time (2005, 24–63) depend on teleological arguments.

<sup>22</sup> Raaflaub 2004, 58–89

<sup>23</sup> Hall 2002, 182–205.

<sup>24</sup> On these concepts, see Vlassopoulos 2015.

loyalty based on kinship ties.<sup>25</sup> If this is the case, then the continued emphasis on Greekness as a historical category of analysis represents a choice to endorse those ancient voices who espoused an imperial vision of the Mediterranean world over other, more common, perspectives.

Take the classic definition of Greekness found in Herodotos (8.144.2). With the Persians seeking to detach Athens from the Greek alliance, an unnamed Athenian assuages these allies by pointing to the Persian destruction of his homeland, and secondarily, that “it would not be good for Athenians to betray Greekness—our common blood and language—nor our shared sanctuaries and sacrifices and similar customs.”<sup>26</sup> Hall is surely right to reject the tendency to see this as the definition of Greekness held by anyone claiming to be Greek; instead, Herodotos is attempting to influence what Greek identity should mean, in a way that promoted military cooperation under the aegis of single hegemonic *polis*—when he was writing Athens would have come most quickly to mind.<sup>27</sup> Nor should we assume that Herodotos determined subsequent views on this matter. Even if we can trace an intellectual genealogy from Herodotos to Thucydides, the Hippocratic authors, and the sophists, I am less convinced that we can bridge the chasm between intellectual discourse and common views, plus the behaviors they inspired at the communal level.<sup>28</sup> How did ideas of Greekness influence the behavior of “Greeks” toward each other and those perceived as Other? Regarding the former, the tendency for Greek states to act in their own interest and often against each other is well known, even when commemorating the “pan-Hellenic” struggle against the Persians.<sup>29</sup> This suggests significant resistant to the imperial discourse of Greekness. Yet this resistance is ignored when it comes to analyzing prejudicial statements about the uncivilized nature of “barbarians,” which are tacitly compared to similar bigoted language today that is a symptom of racialized practices of inequity. The assumption then follows that the ancient prejudices must also be a sign of ancient (proto-

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<sup>25</sup> Hall 2015, 22f., using the definition of Connor 1994, 202

<sup>26</sup> Trans. Hall 2002, 189.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 189-194. Cf. Gruen 2020, 42-44. I am less confident in Hall’s assertion that this attempt was made against a consensus understanding of Greek identity as being primarily, or even exclusively, based on genealogy and kinship (common blood), and that Herodotos sought to demote kinship as a criterion of ethnicity. Hall’s case largely rests on several instances where Herodotos seems to privilege language or cultural criteria over kinship in discussing the distinct identities of neighboring peoples, but in the cases adduced by Hall, it is rather the *complementarity* of distinct origins and distinct customs that emerges. For instance, Herodotos argues that the Kaunians cannot have Kretan origins similar to Karians, because they do not have the same customs as Karians (1.172). These factors work in tandem rather than in competition. The evidence for the basis of Greek identity in the 6th century—poetic genealogies—does not preclude the accompaniment or inclusion of cultural criteria as well, nor does it guarantee a uniformity of viewpoints. Furthermore, Persian ethnographic conceptions of Greekness may have also had an important influence on “Greek” self-perception. Far earlier than Herodotos, the visual representations of tribute-bearers on the Apadana staircase at Persepolis demonstrate that cultural characteristics accompanied perceptions of ethnic difference in the imperial worldview (Briant 2002, 390-94). While the specific characteristics attached to *Yawana* (Greeks) may not have been accepted by those espousing Greek identity, it is unlikely that they would have also rejected the very tendency to link ethnic and cultural distinctiveness.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Walbank 1951, 57: “our problem...is really one of a vital idea which appears to be at constant variance with practical politics—the idea of the Greek nation.”

<sup>29</sup> Yates 2019.



racism constructed against a standard of Greekness.<sup>30</sup> While some scholars have rejected this vision by emphasizing the many positive portrayals of non-Greeks in our Greek sources, the impact of this work on public and pedagogical understandings of Greek history remains minimal, and more importantly still assumes the importance of Greekness in many sources where the identity is not present.<sup>31</sup>

In a recent attempt to resuscitate the importance of the “barbarian” as a category in ancient discourse, Thomas Harrison diverges fruitfully from common approaches to the Greek/non-Greek question in attempting to connect discourse to practice. In a penultimate section, he examines the “human factor” that reveals, to his mind, the underlying influence of a barbarian discourse on how non-Greeks were treated. The point is equally applicable to the concept of Greekness itself: if “Greek” is valid, we should not look only to the words of our highly select (thanks to both privilege and time) literary evidence, but also to the impact of this literary framework on the treatment of non-Greeks. Yet contrary to what Harrison suggests, when we look for racist practice as the root of Classical racist statements, it either remains hidden or takes an unexpected form. In most of the “Greek” world, the easiest examples of racism do not involve Greekness at all: Spartan subordination and dehumanization of Messenians and other helots, along with similar master-servile population dynamics in places like Thessaly or Crete. While our sources invoke some parallels to the Spartan situation that involve a Greek-barbarian distinction, e.g., Herakleia Pontikê’s mastery over the Mariandynians, this is the author’s analytical terminology, which cannot necessarily be equated to the Herakleian ideological discourse of subjection, just as it is unlikely that Spartans thought helots were Greek. Examples beyond the scenario of mass enslavement are few and far between. Harrison appeals to a story from Xenophon in which a man is chased out of the Greek mercenary camp “when it is discovered that he has his ears pierced ‘like a Lydian.’”<sup>32</sup> His interpretation of the anecdote ignores some inconvenient details, however. It is unclear, first of all, how these piercings could be a secret for the many months that the army had been together. More importantly, the real issue was the advice given (in Boiotian) by the “Lydian” man, which the leaders of the army found distasteful.<sup>33</sup> If the man was chased away on the pretext of the ear-piercings, that would still be noteworthy, but why trust Xenophon on this account, when it was in his interest to explain away the autocratic behavior of himself and his fellow “Greeks” in refusing to consider

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<sup>30</sup> Isaac 2004, *passim*; Harrison 2020. Part of the issue here is an undertheorized understanding of race and racism. Isaac conceives of racism as a view of individuals as superior or inferior based on their belonging to a group (a people) whose traits are fixed through hereditary or environmental factors (23), while Harrison fails to define these concepts at all (cf. Tuplin 1999’s dependance on the *OED*). Isaac’s understanding is also the organizational principle behind the very useful anthology of sources on ancient race and ethnicity, which is divided between parts on “Theory” and ethnographic passages: Kennedy et al. 2013. Yet a major principle of critical race theory and other theoretical work on race is that the essence of racism is the creation or maintenance of unequal power relations between hierarchically defined groups (see, e.g., Omi and Winant 1994, 55; Sheth 2009, 21-39).

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Gruen 2011. For a critique, see Harrison 2020, who also tends to conflate Athenian with Greek (e.g., 150), despite a few non-Athenian examples, mostly from Pindar, and Thracian/Persian/etc. with “barbarian”, when reading his evidence.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison 2020, 154.

<sup>33</sup> My interpretation thus far follows that of Lee 2007, 73-74.

any opinion contrary to what they wanted to do?<sup>34</sup> At the end of the day, this anecdote demonstrates the existence of anti-barbarian sentiment—Xenophon expects that his explanation will make sense to at least some of his readers—but not its prevalence. Here, we can observe the modern preference for taking nationalist versions of imperialism or racism as more representative of ancient views than those that are more common in the evidence.

Within Athens itself, which was home to a number of non-Greek foreign residents (metics and many slaves) and, in the 5th-century, exercised imperial control over several non-Greek territories in Thrace and the western coast of Asia Minor, the pertinent categories defining privilege and oppression were not “Greek” and “non-Greek,” but “Athenian” and “non-Athenian.”<sup>35</sup> Metics and other foreigners were equally deprived of the privileges of citizenship whether they had been born in nearby Thebes or in distant Paphlagonia (northern Anatolia). Given this well-known reality, it is dangerous to automatically equate Theban with “Greek” and Paphlagonian with “barbarian” when both identities carried the same legal exclusion, an institutional mechanism that promoted a worldview centered on Athens and implicitly rejected Greekness as a meaningful identity.

The intersection of Greekness with the quite obvious classist derogation of slaves in Athenian sources is more muddled. The fact that more slaves in Athens seem to come from non-Greek regions like Anatolia and Thrace has led scholars to feel justified in connecting anti-barbarian rhetoric in literary sources to common perceptions of slaves.<sup>36</sup> This certainly has some merit, at least by the late 4th century, when New Comedy productions were playing on ethnic stereotypes of slave characters. But it is less clear that the antithesis of these ethno-classes was conceived of as “Greek” rather than Athenian for most citizens, or that such racism helped to perpetuate the high number of “non-Greek” slaves, rather than being a symptom of the reality of slave origins, or of the elite bias of our sources on slaves, who were exploited in greater numbers by wealthy Athenians.<sup>37</sup> The move from “Athenian” to “Greek,” and “Phrygian” (or the like) to “barbarian” is based more on assumption than fidelity to the terminology of our evidence.

If we shift our gaze to Athenian imperial holdings, we find a standard policy that places Athens in a superior position over a number of locally categorized subject communities, with no distinction made in terms of broader ethnic identities. The Athenian Tribute Lists at first glance appear to reflect ideas of Greekness, with collection under the direction of “Greek treasurers” (*hellenotamiai*) and certain tribute districts given “ethnic” names, such as “Ionian,” “Karian,” and

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<sup>34</sup> Harrison, *op. cit.*, also adduces the janiform vases mocking “Ethiopian” and “Thracian/Scythian” facial features, but the phenomenon is too isolated to be generalizable, and by no means lends itself to positing “Greek” (as opposed Mediterranean and even West Asian) as the contrast to these othered figures.

<sup>35</sup> Lape 2010. Cf. Kennedy 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Rosivach 1999; Lewis 2015; Harrison 2020, 154-56.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson 2008, 85-87, 90-91; Hunt 2018, 35-40, 85-89, 175-180; Harrison 2019. These authors assume that Greek (rather than Athenian) ethno-centrism contributes to justifications of slavery, which colors their reading of Menander’s treatment of Phrygian and Thracian slaves, as well as their understanding of the famous line in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Tauris* that barbarians are “slavish” (line 1401) as referencing the institution of slavery rather than Athenian imperial fantasies. Granted, this is how Aristotle redeployed the line from Euripides (*Politics* 1252b7-9), but to *novel* effect in his natural slavery argument.

“Thracian.”<sup>38</sup> Yet tribute was determined by settlement and according to size of settlement, which meant larger tribute for the more urbanized “Greek” coastal cities than smaller non-Greek towns.<sup>39</sup> More importantly, settlements that modern scholarship would identify as “Greek” and “non-Greek” were grouped together within each tribute district.<sup>40</sup> The name of the treasurers in charge of the entire operation certainly reflects the imperial ideology espoused by Athens to gain acceptance to its rule from the majority of its subjects, whom the city identified as Greek in the context of “liberation” from the Persian Empire; yet this background did not define the purview of the “Greek treasurers”: they could collect tribute from any other communities conquered by the Athenian navy. Ideology did not determine practice, and in any case contrasted “Greeks” with the Persian imperial apparatus, not other non-Greek local communities. Indeed, slogans of Greek freedom served to justify Athenian subordination of its Greek allies, but no connection can be drawn between the conquest of non-Greek communities and ideas of “barbarian” inferiority.<sup>41</sup>

The same can be said for other aspects of Athenian imperial power. Most obviously, the Athenian settler-colonies established on subject territory did not discriminate between Greek and non-Greek. Modern textbooks and certain ancient authors might consider Lemnians and Thracians as *barbaroi*, and the cities of Lesbos, Naxos, Euboea, and Thasos as Greek, but Athens settled cleruchies at the expense of all these groups.<sup>42</sup> Again, there is no discernible difference of treatment meted out according to the categories of Greek and barbarian.

The Athenians lost their empire at the end of the 5th century, but they continued to treat their metics and slaves similarly irrespective of origin. When aristocrats like Xenophon complained about the number of non-Greeks among Athens’ foreign residents, we should be wary of generalizing from his personal stance to a common Athenian view given the prescriptive nature of the text.<sup>43</sup> The fact that he takes pains to mention this suggests the need to point out what was not particularly obvious, or at least problematic, to his readers.<sup>44</sup> He may have even been appealing to a prejudice held by some of these readers, but as with our discussion of Herodotos this does not speak to the prevalence or influence of this prejudice. Other evidence suggests that it was far from a consensus view: the high number of non-Greek metics indicates a policy of accommodation, as do cultic developments in the harbor district of the city

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 270.

<sup>39</sup> Compare the 900 drachmas demanded from Kyme (*IG I<sup>3</sup>* 270, I.17) or the 1200 from Lampsakos (II.6) with less than 87 from Karian Mylasa (IV.33).

<sup>40</sup> Under the Karian tribute section is listed both ethnically Karian towns like Mylasa (see previous note) and “Greek” communities like Lindos on Rhodes (*IG I<sup>3</sup>* 270, IV.25).

<sup>41</sup> Raaflaub 2004, 166–81. Isaac 2004, 257–298 points out that even hostile and pejorative expressions about non-Greeks only properly emerge in the 4th century.

<sup>42</sup> Lemnos: *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 1164 & 1165, Thuc. 3.5.1, 4.28.4; Mytilene: *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 66, Thuc. 3.50.2; Naxos, Euboea, Thasos, Thrace: Plut. *Perikles* 11.5. Cf. Saloman 1997. 4th-century settler-colonies were established on Samos and in the Chalkidike as well, on which see Cargill 1995.

<sup>43</sup> *Ways and Means* 2.3

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Harrison’s circular discussion of this passage (2020, 154) as hypothetically pointing toward prejudicial behavior which it does not give any explicit indication of.

(Peiraeus), where several Anatolian, Thracian, and Semitic cults were maintained by foreign residents and citizens.<sup>45</sup>

Athenian practice stands in stark contrast to the ethno-cultural chauvinism of authors like Xenophon who promoted imperialist rhetoric. A more notorious example is Isokrates, who advocated for a pan-Hellenic war against the Persians, characterizing them as weak, effeminate, and ruling over peoples trained to subservience.<sup>46</sup> The Athenians, he claims, “are naturally hostile” (*Paneg.*158: φύσει πολεμικῶς...ἔχομεν) toward the Persians, an attitude that, alongside their cultural supremacy even above other Greeks, makes them ideally suited to lead a campaign of conquest against the Persian Empire.<sup>47</sup> Isokrates’ views, however, fell on deaf ears. No Athenian (or other “Greek” state) seems to have found them either actionable or ideologically useful, except to further their ambitions against closer rivals. Foreign policy resulted in many wars against each other, and much diplomacy and alliance with Persia. This included the precedent-setting King’s Peace of 387, which employed the concept of Greekness to support the imperial claims of both Artaxerxes and Sparta: the king positions himself as the granter and protector of autonomy for the “Greek cities” outside Asia, and in practice endorsed Sparta’s right to enforce the arrangement in the southern Balkans.<sup>48</sup> If we judge the actions of those in power, one could argue that Greek identity lost significance in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, even as it became a rallying cry of outlier aristocrats like Isokrates, Xenophon, and Plato.

The dissonance between the written texts’ emphasis on Greekness and the political actions uninfluenced by this discourse bears directly on our understanding of the evolving nature of Greek identity during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Texts like Isokrates’ *Panegyricus* have been read as proof that Greekness transformed from an ethnic to a cultural identity. In part, this argument stems from a mistranslation of the Greek. In Hall’s translation, Isokrates boasts that

The result [of Athens’ superior wisdom and expression] is that the name of the Hellenes (i.e., Greeks) no longer seems to indicate an ethnic affiliation (*genos*) but a disposition (*dianoia*). Indeed, those who are called “Hellenes” are those who share our culture (*paideia*) rather than a common biological inheritance (*physis*).<sup>49</sup>

From this Hall concludes that Greekness “can be taught and learnt,” but in making this inference, he seems to have ignored the essentially rhetorical nature of Isokrates’ words.<sup>50</sup> The “redefinition” of Greeks is clearly a flourish aimed at leavening the already luxuriant praises he has lavished on the Athenians. Indeed, Isokrates’ language suggests that he is offering a metaphor rather than a definition. Verbs of creation and seeming (πεποίηκε...δοκεῖν) govern the entire rest of the sentence.<sup>51</sup> With this in mind, we should amend Hall’s translation to read:

<sup>45</sup> Garland 1987, 105-35; Parker 1996, 188-94; Demetriou 2012, 217-227.

<sup>46</sup> *Paneg.*, esp. 150-152. Cf. Isaac 2004, 285-288.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Paneg.* 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Xen. Hell.* 5.1.30-33.

<sup>49</sup> Hall 2002, 209; italics in original.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* n.172 for previous scholarship.

<sup>51</sup> A look at the whole sentence reveals that Athens (“our city”) is the subject of the verb compound governing both infinitives that follow. *Paneg.* 50 τοσοῦτον δ’ ἀπολέλοιπεν ἡ πόλις ἡμῶν περὶ τὸ φρονεῖν καὶ λέγειν τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους, ὥσθ’ οἱ ταύτης μαθηταὶ τῶν ἄλλων διδάσκαλοι γεγόνασιν, καὶ τὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὄνομα πεποίηκε μηκῆτι τοῦ γένους ἀλλὰ τῆς διανοίας δοκεῖν εἶναι, καὶ μᾶλλον Ἑλλήνας καλεῖσθαι τοὺς τῆς παιδείας

“The result is that Athens has made the name of the Greeks seem to indicate no longer an ethnic affiliation but a disposition, and (has made it seem) that those who share in our culture, rather than our common nature, are called Greeks.”<sup>52</sup> Rather than appealing to a cultural understanding of Greekness, Isokrates’ opposition of disposition and culture to ethnic and natural criteria assumes that descent (*genos*) not only still held currency among his readership, but was the normal standard for evaluating Greek identity. Indeed, the rhetorical force of his assertion depends not on the usurpation of traditional notions of Hellenicity, but on their continuing validity as a locus for comparison with the image of an Athens-dominated culture. Athens is so great, the argument goes, and its cultural leadership so uncontested, that it is *as if* acting Athenian could make up for a lack of Greek heritage. The point is to aggrandize the magnificence of Athens’ cultural prowess, not to persuade the audience to rethink its concept of what made someone Greek. Cultural Greekness divorced from ethnicity is not a notion with practical meaning for Isokrates.

The bigger issue raised by Isokrates’ words is whether we can connect his promotion of Greek superiority and calls for violence against “barbarian” Persia to political action and behavior, as Michael Flower does.<sup>53</sup> The epigraphical evidence from 4th-century Athens suggests that we cannot. The famous Decree of Aristoteles informing us of the Second Athenian Confederacy shows a clear break with Isokrates’ sentiments in its usage of the term *Hellenes*.<sup>54</sup> The purpose of the alliance is to make the Spartans “allow the Athenians and Greeks to be free.” Whereas Isokrates summoned Greeks to unite against a common non-Greek enemy, Athens’ response was to unite some Greeks against another Greek state. The language of the alliance clearly alludes to the King’s Peace of a decade earlier, which granted autonomy to all Greek cities outside Asia and threatened war against anyone contravening this autonomy.<sup>55</sup> The usage of the term is not helpful for defining Greekness, but it does illuminate what Greekness implied, namely freedom *qua* sovereignty. Thus the term applied to the realm of foreign policy and entailed privileges to be defended (or exploited by hegemonic states like Athens) at the state level. There is, however, no interest in actively excluding non-Greek states from these privileges, and the cities under Persian rule are ignored, i.e., precisely those communities that Isokrates’ rhetoric of Greek superiority purports to liberate. In the realm of power relations, Greekness was employed to define and delimit power relations among Greek-identifying states, but not much else, and we might wonder how impactful this discourse was after Sparta was humbled six years later at Leuktra.<sup>56</sup>

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τῆς ἡμετέρας ἢ τοὺς τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως μετέχοντας. Most translations divorce *καλεῖσθαι* from this dependence. Cf. Said 2001, 282

<sup>52</sup> Hall’s translation of *phusis* as “biological inheritance” is perhaps too conveniently narrow, since the term can also encompass what is conditioned by environmental/climatic factors, as is the case in, e.g., the Hippocratic Corpus, *On Airs, Waters, and Places* 12-24.

<sup>53</sup> Flower 2000, 97-107. For more recent arguments in the same vein, see below.

<sup>54</sup> *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 43, esp. lines 7-11.

<sup>55</sup> *Xen. Hell.* 5.1.31; *Diod.* 14.110.3. The peace also excluded three Athenian-owned islands in the Aegean.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Cawkwell 1980, 47-48. Demosthenes’ later employment of Greek identity in exhorting Athenians to take action against Macedon might prove a clearer link between this discourse and political action (see Said 2001, 276-286) but here it seems impossible to distinguish pan-Hellenic motives from self-interest (economic access to the Northern Aegean or protection of Attica itself).



It is tempting to see Isokrates' ideas as influencing Philip II of Macedon's planned invasion against the Persian kings, but more difficult to detect whether this would have led to ethnic hostility rather than simply imperial rivalry. Philip framed the invasion as retribution for the Persian invasion in 480 BC as *hegemon* of the League of Corinth, made up of most southern Balkan states, which he set up in the wake of his military defeats of the Phokians, Thebans, and Athenians.<sup>57</sup> This framing aimed to create solidarity between the Macedonian monarch and his new allies, many of whose fellow citizens his armies had recently slaughtered. His call for vengeance against Persia promoted solidarity between his kingdom and these recent enemies, and promised them violence; what it did not promise was power. Philip's court, the primary stakeholders in Macedonian acts of imperial conquest, consisted of the Macedonian elite, and there is little indication that this elite would have been significantly broadened to include Greeks had Philip lived to carry out his invasion. The rules governing the League of Corinth all seem directed at governing relations among member states. This organization operated in the tradition of the King's Peace and the Second Athenian Confederacy in its understanding of Greekness.<sup>58</sup> Thus the connection between Isokrates' exhortations and the king's eastern plans for expansion lies in the aim to gain support, without an intention to include those the League discourse called "Greeks" as shareholders in Macedonian imperial power.<sup>59</sup>

In this section I have argued that most of the texts espousing Greekness as a concept stem from elite, and above all intellectual, perspectives that sought to convey a broader ethnic consciousness for propagandistic reasons that most Athenians, and probably an even higher proportion of other Greek-speakers, did not share. These texts rarely addressed the majority, but even when they might have done so, foreign policy in Athens and elsewhere seems unmotivated by a Greek-barbarian hierarchy, while domestic policy did not find the concept of Greekness useful in managing and racializing foreign inhabitants, instead privileging a hierarchy with Athenians at the top. The obvious conclusion to draw from this is that the discourse of Greek identity as found in our written sources did not have significant purchase over the majority of "Greeks," including those with a share in the sovereignty of the many states that made up the ancient "Greek" world. Given this, and the rarity with which most "Greeks" would have as a result thought of themselves as such, to continue to refer to this world and its history as "Greek" seems a tacit endorsement of the arguments of Isokrates and his ilk, of Athens' and Philip's imperialistic aims, and a misrepresentation of how individuals were understood with respect to their origins and cultural differences.

## Complicating Monarchy

The world of Hellenistic empires inaugurated by Alexander's conquests seems at first glance like one where Greek chauvinism became policy. Macedonian rulers claimed to have liberated the

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<sup>57</sup> IG II<sup>2</sup> 236; Dem. 17.8 Cf. Flower 2000, 104.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Perlman 1985.

<sup>59</sup> While certainly violence and plunder entail the power of one group over another, the presentation of the campaign as a pan-Hellenic act of revenge merely aimed to justify (and therefore motivate) the Greek states to send troops to serve under Philip. They did not dictate the nature of the violence itself, which likely would have been governed by traditional norms of warfare.



Greek cities of Asia from Persian oppressors, and then from rival Macedonian rulers as Alexander’s successors fought over his empire. While full independence was not the intent of such claims, they did typically lead to real privileges, such as tax relief or freedom from garrisoning, that were not extended to other subject communities.<sup>60</sup> Greek was an official language of every major kingdom, and settlers from the Greek-speaking Aegean arrived to populate dozens of new settlements in Africa and Asia, some of which became imperial capitals.<sup>61</sup> In Egypt, a racially hierarchical state developed, with Macedonians and Greeks enjoying civic and fiscal privileges above and against the indigenous Egyptian population.<sup>62</sup> One may well suspect that Isokrates was, post-mortem, finally having his day, along with Alexander’s tutor Aristotle, who endorsed the idea that non-Greeks possessed a slavish nature and is supposed to have counseled Alexander to treat his non-Greek subjects more harshly than the Greeks.<sup>63</sup> I imagine that few readers will be unfamiliar with this view of the Hellenistic world.<sup>64</sup>

More recent scholarship, as we will see, has challenged aspects of this understanding, but again with little effect on grander narratives of the period, or on the scholarly commitment to the category of “Greek” itself within these narratives. To demonstrate how this picture of an all-too-familiar, ethnically driven set of colonial regimes is misleading in important ways, let us first return to the tale of Aristotle advising Alexander on imperial policy, and especially the story’s most important detail: Alexander’s rejection of his tutor’s advice. I am less interested in the factual status of this account—though a version goes back at least to the 3rd century BC—than in how it reflects what we know of the relationship between discourses of Greekness as found in Aristotle’s writings and the policies and behaviors of Alexander and later Hellenistic rulers.<sup>65</sup> The story nicely encapsulates the Hellenistic political response to the ideas about Greek superiority bristling in the works of Isokrates and Aristotle.<sup>66</sup>

Alexander unquestionably declared freedom to the Greek cities of Asia Minor as part of his efforts to exploit Hellenic identity to garner support for his attempts to out the Persian forces from the region. What is often missed is that he made similar proclamations to communities whom ancient and modern sources do not consider Greek, such as Sardis in Lydia and Mallos in Kilikia.<sup>67</sup> His employment of a rhetoric of Greekness did not entail the refusal to grant similar privileges without such rhetoric. Alexander’s weak attachment to the concept of Greekness can also be seen in his dismissal of his “Greek” allied troops—and we should remember that the label here comes from our Roman-era sources—after taking the Persian homeland. With Spartan resistance in the Balkans crushed and the main forces of the Persian army defeated, the need for

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<sup>60</sup> Ma 1999, 179-242.

<sup>61</sup> On these settlements, see Cohen 1995, 2006 and 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson 2001 (with qualification); McCoskey 2012, 88-109.

<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* 329b-d. Cf. Flower 2000, 107-128; Harrison 2020, 154.

<sup>64</sup> Select examples include Will 1985; Burstein 2008; Stavrianopoulou 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Strabo 1.4.9, citing Eratosthenes.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Stier 1970, 38-39; Isaac 2004, 301.

<sup>67</sup> Arrian, *Anab.* 1.17, 2.6. Similar is the appointment of local dynasts in cities like Sidon, since these positions were traditional institutions of local autonomy (Curtius 4.3.4).

these troops—as much hostages as auxiliaries—was gone.<sup>68</sup> He certainly favored his Macedonian elite with appointments to the majority of satrapies in his new empire, but the rest were assigned to non-Macedonians without any clear preference for those we might identify as Greek. Examples include Ada in Karia, Mazaios in Mesopotamia, and several men with Iranian names in the eastern portion of the empire.<sup>69</sup> In the later years of his reign, he famously sought to incorporate Persian practices and individuals into his court, much to the chagrin of many Macedonian elite and soldiers. Thus, while Macedonian privilege is easy to identify, a Greek counterpart is less striking than we might expect.

The distinction between Macedonian and Greek is an important one. The former, as inhabitants of the original kingdom of Philip II, certainly represented a dominant “ethno-class,” at least in the initial generation of empire following Alexander’s death. Macedonians held the most important positions of political and military power, including in the newly forming royal courts, and were given substantial land holdings in Asia and Africa at the expense of the local population.<sup>70</sup> These early settler-colonists recognized the link between identity and privilege, since they took pains to display imagery on their coinage and grave goods that bore clear Macedonian overtones.<sup>71</sup> Yet over time these symbols and even overt claims to Macedonian identity came from an ethnically diverse set of soldiers, suggesting that what was once an ethnic privilege had become a strictly military one.<sup>72</sup> More importantly, there is nothing in all this evidence to justify the common scholarly assumption that “Greeks” were included in this initial flurry of Macedonian favoritism.<sup>73</sup>

It is true that Seleukos Nikator, Ptolemy Soter, and other self-made kings promoted a Greco-centric slogan of *polis* freedom. This phenomenon has been well studied as a key ideological position for empires that sought to gain the submission and support of cities who might otherwise see these empires as a threat to their cherished autonomy and freedom.<sup>74</sup> Just as for the Athenians in the 5th century and the Philip II of Macedon in the 4th, Greek identity was a useful conceptual tool of empire, because it created buy-in by vaguely promising preferential treatment. Yet if we take a longer view than the first generation of dynasties, the words and policies of the Hellenistic empires betray no clear intention to establish a privileged class of “Greeks.” Subsequently, imperial appeals to Greek favoritism become quite rare in the epigraphic record. We find almost no uses of the term “Greek” by Hellenistic rulers outside of the southern Balkans.<sup>75</sup> The major exception is Antiochos III, the first Seleukid king since the

<sup>68</sup> Faraguna 2003, 107-115, noting the clear “tension” between ideological pronouncements and imperial treatment of Greeks. This tension culminates in the complete violation of the League of Corinth system that the infamous Exiles’ Decree represented (cf. *ibid.* 124-130).

<sup>69</sup> Hyland 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Borza 1992 and 1996. Less definitively, Badian 1982.

<sup>71</sup> Billows 1995, 28-33.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 155-57.

<sup>73</sup> Briant 1982, 263-92; Ma 2003, 187-88.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Billows 1995, 187-236; Ma 1999, 177-242; *idem* 2003. However, these studies often conflate civic (*polis*) and Greek status, assuming that a city that *can* be identified as Greek was always conceived as Greek by the Hellenistic kings.

<sup>75</sup> This of course excludes the literary evidence, which I find unhelpful for accessing the terms of discourse used by the Hellenistic kings, since Greekness was also a central historiographical category for those writing in the

dynasty’s founder to record good will toward Greeks specifically.<sup>76</sup> He was, perhaps, one inspiration for the few other imperial uses of Greekness that we find before the 1st century BC, all by Roman generals.<sup>77</sup> After the 180s, imperial invocation of Greekness again ceased until the 1st century, even after the creation of the Roman province of Asia, which encompassed most Ionian and Aiolian cities on the peninsula.

Instead, the granting of privileges and even freedom to civic communities largely followed a less ethnocentric practice for most of the 3rd and 2nd centuries: not only were Greek and non-Greek cities able to negotiate similar privileges, but the very language of Greekness was absent.<sup>78</sup> Both Miletos and Mylasa won their freedom at some point after the middle of the 3rd century.<sup>79</sup> Mylasa of the 5th century was the heart of the Karian ethnic community.<sup>80</sup> Yet its ability to win and make use of independence was indistinguishable from Miletos, whose Ionian heritage make it unquestionably Greek (if not necessarily “pure”) for ancient and modern authors.<sup>81</sup> Both cities embarked on aggressive campaigns of expansion at the expense of local neighboring communities.<sup>82</sup> The suggestion that these similarities show that Mylasa had “become Greek” not only employs circular reasoning in assuming a valence of Greekness that finds no expression in the evidence until the first century, but also relies on a concept of “Hellenization” that would have been meaningless to most ancient minds.<sup>83</sup> Even Greek status in Egypt came to be more inclusive over time of Egyptians and other non-Greeks.<sup>84</sup>

The treatment of cities like Miletos and Mylasa contrasts not with non-Greek cities, but rather with the status of the Greco-Macedonian settler-colonies. Until the 2nd century, these cities universally—and ironically, given their perception as sites of Greek domination—faced a much more restricted level of autonomy, even if they were not designated as royal capitals. While enjoying civic institutions tied to local administration and cult maintenance, these communities were not granted exemptions from imperial control or resource extraction, and

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tradition of Herodotos and Thucydides, and under the influence of Roman hegemony or direct rule in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is also clear that Greek identity on the Greek mainland continued to serve its 4th-century function of fostering solidarity against some hegemonic forces (Macedonia, Aitolia) in support of other hegemonic forces (Athens & Sparta, the Achaian and Aitolian federations); yet in the context of the larger Hellenistic world, this discourse proves rather exceptional.

<sup>76</sup> *Ilias* 4, lines 41–43 (195–190 BC).

<sup>77</sup> These include the famous declaration of Flamininus at the Isthmian Games in 196 BC (Plb. 18.44–46; cf. Livy 33.33, who interestingly recasts Polybios’ words on the “freedom of the Greeks” into non-ethnic language (“all the cities in Greece and Asia recover their liberty”)) and Scipio Africanus’ letter espousing Greek privilege in his dealings with Herakleia on the Latmos in the wake of Rome’s successful eviction of Seleukid power from all of Anatolia except for Kilikia (Ma 1999, #45). The fact that the official proclamations in both cases do not mention “Greeks” but only cities or other ethnic names strongly suggests the propagandistic valence and limited context of this term.

<sup>78</sup> See Ma 2003, 179–83, 185f., for the similar role of royal negotiation among Greek and non-Greek subject communities. Cf. Stavrianopoulou 2013.

<sup>79</sup> For Mylasa, see Isager and Karlsson 2008, 39–52 and Reger 2010, 49–50; for Miletos, see Welles 1934, #22.

<sup>80</sup> Hdt. 1.171.

<sup>81</sup> E.g., Hdt. 1.146.

<sup>82</sup> LaBuff 2016, 46–49 (with references), 87–117.

<sup>83</sup> For critiques of the concept of Hellenization, see Hodos 2006, 11–16; Dietler 2010, 43–53.

<sup>84</sup> Thompson 2001.

could even be gifted *in toto* to another state, as happened to the Seleukid foundation of Stratonikeia, which was transferred to the Rhodians.<sup>85</sup> It was only in the course of the 2nd century that major foundations like Alexandria and Syrian Antioch won greater political agency, exploiting dynastic and other internal disputes.<sup>86</sup> Even then, these cases did not reflect a generalizable pattern: in Mesopotamia, Antiochos IV founded a settler community at Babylon, which coexisted with the Babylonian population as a politically distinct but equally subject autonomous group.<sup>87</sup>

It is indeed the lack of relevance of Greekness to imperial policy for most of the Hellenistic period that illuminates how Romans could employ the term much more expansively than had been the case in the 4th century. The reappearance of “Greeks” in our 1st-century evidence is likely tied to the Mithridatic wars, when the Pontic king furthered his imperial ambitions by renewing the practice of claiming to bring liberation to Greek cities, who he claimed were now oppressed by the Romans.<sup>88</sup> After Mithridates’ defeat, we find many Roman generals advertising their favor to Greeks, along with numerous epigraphical references to a League (*koinon*) of Greeks, including several decrees from the league itself.<sup>89</sup> Here we have clear institutional support for a notion of Greek identity that intentionally incorporated civic identities into the larger ethnically defined body.<sup>90</sup> This institutionalization of Greekness was not merely a response to Mithridates’ propaganda, but also an act of imperial ordering. The Romans, as non-Greeks, would have been more prone to organize this part of their empire in terms of simpler ethnic categories, but this could have only found acceptance if the boundaries of Greekness were not intensely and frequently policed in the preceding centuries.

The Roman conceptualization of their empire also explains how the League of Greeks in Anatolia differed from earlier diplomatic institutions such as the League of Corinth and the late 4th-century “Hellenic League.”<sup>91</sup> Beyond the fact that the Roman-era league was limited to Anatolia, excluding the Balkans and most of the Aegean islands, we can affirm that membership was not based on a pre-Hellenistic idea of what a Greek city was. Several “non-Greek” cities are listed alongside traditionally “Greek” cities like Smyrna and Miletos, including “Karian” Mylasa and Alabanda, “Lydian” Sardis, and “Thracian” Tralles.<sup>92</sup> The application of Hellenic gloss on

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<sup>85</sup> Plb. 30.31.6. Cf. Ma 1999, Appendix 5. This is not to say that older cities could not also be gifted, as happened when the Ptolemies sold Kaunos to Rhodes for 200 talents. The point here is that this form of control was not generalized across all “non-colonies,” whereas it was for colonies. The few counterexamples either involve a renamed older city (Sikyon as Demetrias) or a colony founded by a different dynasty than the one granting it civic privileges (Lysimacheia under the Seleukids), for which see Cohen 1995, 26.

<sup>86</sup> Chrubasik 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Van der Spek 2009, who assumes that the Greek “*politai*,” as our cuneiform evidence calls them, enjoyed a privileged position in Babylon, but none of the evidence adduced supports this assumption.

<sup>88</sup> McGing 1986, 89–108.

<sup>89</sup> Greek favoritism, *IPriene* 244, *SEG* 37.958, *ISmyrna* 576 (possibly); League of Greeks (1<sup>st</sup> c. BC only): *A&R* #5, *IDidyra* 201, *Milet* I 2.3, *Milet* I 9.369, *IPriene* 105, *IGRR* 4.307 & 1756.

<sup>90</sup> See especially Ferrary 2001, 20–29. Although Ferrary is convinced that the Greekness of the league emanated from the Anatolians themselves, the precedence of externally driven royal or Roman propaganda suggests the opposite. Cf. *idem* 2011, 3–9, and the contributions in Huet and Valette-Cagnac 2005.

<sup>91</sup> On these earlier leagues, see Smarczyk 2015.

<sup>92</sup> *Milet* I.2.3, lines 43–46.

communities we tend to think of as non-Greek illustrates how Romans influenced the use of simple ethnic categories for imperial institutions.<sup>93</sup> These communities had truly “become Greek,” but as a result of the particular imperial conditions of the 1st century, not because ancient minds shared the set of linguistic and cultural criteria employed by modern scholars to determine levels of “Hellenization,” and simply forgot to mention this in their many interactions across regional ethnic lines.

Turning back to the imperial centers of the Hellenistic East, scholarship comfortably asserts “the perceived centrality of Greekness in Hellenistic kingship,” but the basis for this conclusion comes either from more specifically Macedonian military symbols, which as we have seen often mask greater ethnic diversity, or from cultural “facts”—city-planning, festivals, coinage, language—whose ethnic valence is assumed to have been universally perceived across many different contexts.<sup>94</sup> This is ultimately an argument from silence. Were such phenomena perceived similarly from Egypt to Asia Minor to Mesopotamia, whose differing urban histories, for example, variously impacted their inhabitants’ ability to relate to and participate in the importation of *polis* settlements? What was “foreign” in the 4th century may have felt commonplace a century or two later, particularly as many Hellenistic foundations developed an identity as much embedded in the local landscape and its traditions as in imported cultural elements.<sup>95</sup> Even cases in which resistance was framed in explicitly ethnic terms, such as the Jewish rebellion against the Seleukids, highlight that this discourse was merely one alternative among several, given the embrace of *polis* institutions by many self-ascribed Jews, against whom the Maccabean partisans pitted themselves.<sup>96</sup>

The point can be extended to a consideration of the primary stakeholders of imperial power in the Hellenistic empires, i.e., the courtiers around the kings and the commanders of armies and provinces. It was once commonplace to assert a clear preference for Greeks in these positions.<sup>97</sup> More recent scholarship has pointed out the selection bias of our sources, most of which come from the Aegean, and the possibility that linguistically Greek names do not necessarily speak to the identity of their bearers, while Near Eastern evidence highlights how the Seleukids and even the Ptolemies were much more inclusive of elites coming from Iranian, Egyptian, and other cultural backgrounds in delegating authority than had been acknowledged.<sup>98</sup> Complementary to this inclusiveness were the institutions of ethnic integration practiced by both empires in local communities and in the military, suggesting the importance of class distinctions over ethnic difference in determining the powerful and the exploited.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Two other fundamental factors, which I lack the space to explore here, are the agency of indigenous communities to efface ethnic difference and the relative *unimportance* of regional ethnic labels in the daily self-perception of Anatolians.

<sup>94</sup> Quote from Ma 2003, 187-88, following Billows 1995, 170-172.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Strootman 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Ma 2012, 71-84.

<sup>97</sup> Savalli-Lestrade 1998, 216-234; Habicht 1958, 5-7 (relying largely on Polybios and Diogenes Laertius). Cf. Ma 2003, 187f.

<sup>98</sup> Engels 2017, 74-78; Strootman 2017. I use the phrase “cultural background” here to avoid presuming that these elites identified by the ethnic identity we expect them to have claimed.

<sup>99</sup> Fischer-Bovet 2015. Cf. many of the contributions in Fischer-Bovet and von Reden 2021.



Nevertheless, there are actual exceptions to my portrayal of the Hellenistic East. Ptolemaic Egypt represents the most obvious context in which Greekness functioned to define and delineate privilege and its lack. Denise McCoskey has made a strong case for seeing this Macedonian kingdom as, at least initially, a racially hierarchical state. At the heart of this hierarchy was the correlation between land appropriation and Greek legal status: not only urban spaces like Alexandria but significant arable land was apportioned to Greek-speaking settlers, the majority of whom were most likely Macedonian and Greek civic and military veterans.<sup>100</sup> However, not only is this situation complicated by the intersection of class and race, as just suggested, but it is also dangerous to generalize from the Egyptian case, even for regions outside of Egypt ruled by the Ptolemies. Certainly in Anatolia we find little indication that Greekness determined how the dynasty treated individuals and communities. Elites such as Zenon of Kaunos, a city identified by Herodotos as ethnically distinct not only from Greeks but Karians (1.172), were able to rise high in the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy, and in appropriating land from Nagidos in Kilikia to found the colony of Arsinoe, the Ptolemies allowed Nagidos to retain primary status.<sup>101</sup>

The case of Nagidos and Arsinoe largely conforms to the general pattern of Hellenistic colonisation, where pre-existing settlements either maintained their autonomy or became an integral part of the new settlement. The incontrovertible fact that the founding of colonies involved land appropriation and an influx of Greek-speaking settlers should not mislead us to the common conclusion that, as a result, the new settlers represented a privileged population who even ruled over local indigenous populations.<sup>102</sup> In fact, these settlements merely represent an extension of land restructuring practices that had been practiced in the Balkans by the Argead dynasty well before Alexander, and involved the relocation and merging of diverse ethnic groups where hierarchies were established based on class, rather than ethnic, privilege.<sup>103</sup> A typical example that challenges scholarly consensus is the Seleukid colony of Stratonikeia, founded with Macedonian settlers at some point in the middle of the 3rd century. Here we are fortunate to know the names of the major civic subdivisions of the community, which show us that formerly independent indigenous towns had been incorporated into both the territory and the citizen body of Stratonikeia.<sup>104</sup> The city's major state cults were not Macedonian deities but the major local pre-settlement gods, including Hekate of Lagina and Zeus Chrysaoros.<sup>105</sup> The distinction between Macedonian settler and indigenous "Karian" seems to have become fairly irrelevant soon after the foundation, both in terms of local power dynamics and in relation to the imperial center. The same seems true of foundations elsewhere in Asia Minor, as well as in

<sup>100</sup> McCoskey 2012. Cf. *idem* 2002.

<sup>101</sup> On Zenon, see Orrieux 1985, despite the Hellenizing title; for Nagidos, see Jones and Habicht 1989; Chaniotis 1993. The ethnic identity of Nagidos is unknown for the Hellenistic period--only in Roman imperial times do we hear of origin stories that link the city to an original Greek foundation. In the 3rd century BC (the date of the inscription regarding Arsinoe), both Nagidos and Arsinoe are contrasted with a third group identified only as "barbarians," who threatened the territory of the two cities. This group is either a local band of (probably) mountain-dwelling raiders or an offshoot of the Gallic migrations into Anatolia. In either case, this group lay outside the control of the Ptolemies.

<sup>102</sup> Billows 1995, 111-172; Briant 1982, 252-62.

<sup>103</sup> Boehm 2018, 105-120.

<sup>104</sup> Van Bremen 2000, 389-402. Cf. Şahin 1976.

<sup>105</sup> Mileta 2014.



Seleukid Syria and even Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>106</sup> Local “Syrians” helped populate the Tetrapolis founded by the Seleukids in the northern Levant.<sup>107</sup> And while Alexandria may have maintained a strict distinction between its citizens and the suburban Egyptian population, the more general pattern of Ptolemaic settlement was ethnically inclusive.<sup>108</sup>

Another context where we expect to find Greek identity defining power relations is among pre-Hellenistic “Greek” cities that neighbored pre-existing populations in regions like Anatolia or the Black Sea coast. And again, these expectations are disappointed. Border disputes are no more common between “Greek” and “non-Greek” communities than between two “Greek” or two “non-Greek” communities. For example, Miletos’ war with nearby Herakleia (a renaming of Latmos in Karia) parallels its conflict with “Greek” Magnesia or the centuries-long land dispute between Priene and Samos.<sup>109</sup> More positive diplomatic exchanges were also common across supposed ethnic lines, as when Miletos and Mylasa entered into an *isopoliteia* treaty, permitting each other’s citizens to potentially gain citizenship in the other community.<sup>110</sup>

Even in those cases in which “Greek” cities dominated a local non-citizen population, it was not Greekness that justified inequality but civic privileged status, just as with metic-citizen relations in classical Athens. Our evidence in the Hellenistic period comes once more from Anatolian cities like Priene, Pergamon, and Aphrodisias, where less privileged groups dubbed *paroikoi* are occasionally mentioned in the sources.<sup>111</sup> These groups clearly lacked civic political “rights” while still paying taxes and possibly also lacking the ability to relocate. While scholars have tended to assume that these groups were “indigenous” in contrast to an implicit or explicitly labeled “Greek” citizenry,<sup>112</sup> the evidence itself places little emphasis on ethnic terminology and never links citizenship to Greek identity.<sup>113</sup> Just as with studies of the dynamics between Greco-Macedonians and local populations in royal colonies, conclusions are based more on assumption than evidence.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Mileta 2009. See also the discussions of Laodikeia on the Lykos and Apameia-Kelainai in Boehm 2018, 115-16, 135f., 169-170.

<sup>107</sup> Haddad 1951; Cohen 2006, 86; cf. Strootman 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Mueller 2006, 165-174.

<sup>109</sup> For Miletos’ wars, see Herrmann 2001. For the Samos-Priene dispute, see *IPriene* 500 and *Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 688.

<sup>110</sup> *Milet* I.3.146.

<sup>111</sup> Corsaro 1984, 473-77; *idem* 2001; Bertrand 2005, 39-50; Gagliardi 2009-2010; Kah 2012.

<sup>112</sup> E.g. Gauthier 1988, 31-35.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Thonemann 2013, 33-36.

<sup>114</sup> Cohen 1978; Briant 1982, 227-279; Billows 1995, 111-132. The evidence for this position amounts to (1) royal donations or “sales” of land to prominent individuals (members of the royal family or court), where it is clear that dependent populations inhabited these lands and owed revenues to the beneficiaries of the grant/sale; (2) the incorporation or pre-existing village settlements into the territory of newly founded cities; and (3) the presence of ethnically segregated districts in a few colonies. First, the land grants/sales clearly do not reflect the position of the ordinary soldier given land by his king, and Billows’ attempt (*ibid.* 170.), to see the servants (*therapontes*) of the Jewish settlers Asia Minor under Antiochos III as indigenous serfs remains unconvincing. Second, many villages were incorporated into newly founded cities, but only assumption can lead to the conclusion that the villagers became dependents of the settlers. The incorporation of village cults into civic ritual in fact suggests the opposite. Finally, as suggested earlier in the case of Babylon, ethnically distinct districts do not speak to the status of each district’s inhabitants, nor to the impermeability of district boundaries.

There are two exceptions to this picture of the minor relevance of Greekness that require discussion. First, the city of Miletos, in the process of absorbing the neighboring city of Pidasa, granted citizenship to all Pidasean men but demanded that Pidasean wives would only become citizens if born in Pidasa or a Greek city.<sup>115</sup> It is unclear whether the Milesians considered Pidasa to be a Greek city (I suspect not), but clearly they thought that some Pidasean men had married women whom they did not consider to be Greek, and wished to exclude these women from civic privileges (ritual and possibly reproductive) afforded to Milesian women. The gendered nature of this exclusion probably reflects the intersection of patriarchal and ethnocentric notions of purity, unequally imposed on women and foreigners in religious contexts. Yet it is also important to stress that in spite of this desire to limit the number of non-Greeks gaining citizenship, the city had and continued to grant individual citizenship to several persons from non-Greek cities.<sup>116</sup>

A second exception occurred north of Miletos, where Smyrna was also concerned with preventing non-Greeks from becoming citizens in the context of absorbing a neighbor, and in similarly complex ways. Nearby Magnesia on the Sipylus had not remained loyal to the Seleukid kings during a war against the Ptolemies, and Smyrna took this opportunity to propose that Magnesia become part of Smyrna. The proposal stipulated that only those Magnesians who were free and Greek should become Smyrnan citizens—Magnesia was a military settlement on land that also included slaves and non-Greeks.<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, an addendum to the original arrangement allowed for a group of Persians to become citizens as well, implying that only indigenous non-Greeks were being targeted for exclusion.<sup>118</sup>

I mention these exceptions for two reasons. First, these invocations of Greek identity stand out for their rarity. Their impact would have been quite minor on most individuals, who were institutionally conditioned to think of themselves in more local terms. Most people outside of Egypt would not have heard or told themselves that they were Greek very often over the course of a lifetime. While our evidence surely does not encompass all instances of Greek identity being mentioned by or to urban communities, it is also unlikely that a significant number of inscriptions with this term remain unknown to us. From these considerations it seems that in most of the Hellenistic world, being Greek was something one recognized as relevant when it came up (usually externally), but because it did not come up often, only a few cities were motivated at the communal level to stress this identity on their own initiative. In this light, it would be a mistake to assume that Greek identity lay behind the more prevalent binary that divided citizen and subordinate population groups (including not only Athenian metics and Hellenistic *paroikoi*, but also slaves, women, and additional foreign-born groups).

<sup>115</sup> *Milet* I.3.149, lines 10-12: ὅσαι ἄν ὤσιν φύσει Πιδασίδες ἢ πόλεως Ἑλληνίδος πολίτιδες.

<sup>116</sup> LaBuff 2016, 45-48, 87-103.

<sup>117</sup> *OGIS* 229. The phrase “free and Greek” occurs at several places in the inscription, lines 45, 52, 75. Cf. Ihnken 1978, 35-60.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Fingerson 2007. We might also include the more ideological than juridical case of Priene, just north of Miletos, during the Gallic migration into Anatolia in the 270s. In the Prienian version of this event (*IPriene* 17), the city portrayed the Gauls’ behavior as crimes “against Greeks.” Here Greek identity serves the Prienians aim to depict their sufferings in solidarity with other regional communities and to create a mental border between “victim” and “aggressor” through ethnic language.

Second, it is vital to highlight cases where Greekness was employed in racializing discourse, given that ancient historians are wont to deny the existence of race and racism in antiquity. At the same time, contextualizing these cases as exceptions points to the need to go beyond the categories of “Greek” and “barbarian” in looking for other instances of racialized societies. While the Ptolemies, Milesians, and Smyrnans represent important cases where Greekness served to explicitly define privileged and oppressed groups, similar power relations existed in a number of other contexts in which different categories were employed to define these power relations. By insisting on the primacy of Greek identity and its opposite, by favoring only nationalized versions of imperial and racial rhetoric, we risk misunderstanding these other contexts or ignoring them as important sites of racialization.

### **Conclusion: the Greek Allure**

What is the impact of centering “Greeks” in our narratives of political, social, and cultural history of the ancient Mediterranean and beyond? I hope to have shown that this is more than a simple label of convenience to refer to “Greek-speakers,” and instead consistently refers to a posited ethnic group that emerges from ancient imperial rhetoric and stands in contrast to other groups even when they spoke Greek, although in the Hellenistic period the addition of other aspects of “Greek” culture might lead to the full “Hellenization” of formerly non-Greek communities. This ethnic group is assumed to correspond not only to the discourse of Greekness we find occasionally in our sources, but to an underlying unity that represents an imperialistic standard by and against which more locally driven political action and cultural production is measured. Applying the term “Greek” to these phenomena is not merely Hellenocentric; it also endorses the imperial aims of its ancient proponents and conveys the false (and often unintended) impression of a normalized nation that existed in spite of constant disunity, diversity, and considerable cultural overlap within and beyond the supposed boundaries of that nation.<sup>119</sup>

These arguments have a variety of consequences for how we talk about what is currently defined as the ancient Greek world. If even those spheres of life in which we most expect to see Greekness matter are limited in time and scope, and seek (often unsuccessfully) to create rather than describe a reality, then it follows that the concept had even weaker purchase in other spheres. We do not (and likely cannot) know how similarities and differences in consumptive practices, settlement patterns, burial customs, etc., were perceived by the vast majority of those traveling and encountering the diversity of the ancient Mediterranean, but the assumption that they articulated these perceptions in terms of Greekness flies in the face of the identity discourse that we find in the epigraphic evidence, which even if still weighted toward elite perspectives is far more representative than our literary evidence. More importantly, to disregard these perceptions in favor of an imperialized and nationalized representation of their commonalities is to lose sight of the intensity and breadth of the modern scholarly gaze, whose hindsight assists

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<sup>119</sup> The idea that the term *Hellene* refers to a cultural identity, while popular among scholars, does not typically exclude the implicit association with Greek ethnicity/nationality, except in Stier 1955 and 1970, whose views have not, as far as I am aware, won general acceptance.

in the organization of material culture into coherent groupings. Even ancient intellectuals, and certainly most other people at the time, were uninterested or incapable of this level of analysis.

If Greek identity was so rarely articulated and conceptualized in most of the Greek-speaking world during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, then why does this identity continue to anchor our histories of this world? In closing, I would like to briefly suggest three important factors. The first we have already explored in the first section. Greekness was a prominent category within the intellectual and imperial worldview of many ancient writers of histories, a selection of philosophical writings, theatrical works, and certain pieces of rhetoric. Compositions from these latter two genres in particular meant that ideas of Greekness were familiar to a broader set of Athenians and perhaps others, though not impactful enough to shape their behavior in detectable ways. In any case, the status of Greekness as an intellectual category established a precedent for subsequent writers and audiences in these and other genres, such as epigrammatic poetry, across the Hellenistic and Imperial Periods, in both Greek and Latin. For modern historians whose methodology relies on these texts and interprets them as speaking for the silent majority, or at least dictating to that majority the dominant ways of seeing the world, a focus on Greekness made good sense. But the assumptions behind this methodology cannot be maintained.

I have also alluded to the second factor, which is influenced by the first: Roman imperial discourse, and more specifically how Roman political elites defined their subjects through ethnic categories. The overlap between intellectual and political elites during the Late Republic, mostly famously in the person of Cicero, is well known. Yet rather than simply inheriting ethnic categories from Greek intellectuals, Roman politicians at times redefined them to better suit their administrative aims and practices. The province of Asia as it evolved in the 1st century is a case in point, with the establishment of a “League of Greeks” that included all the major cities of the province regardless of earlier ethnic conceptions. While others have seen the name of this league as arising from the member communities themselves, the relative rarity of “Greek” discourse in the preceding century suggests that we should instead view the league’s name through the lens of a Roman perspective that saw enough similarities among the various Anatolian communities in its province to call everyone “Greek,” especially since this mindset finds parallels in Cicero’s contemporary way of talking about the region.<sup>120</sup> Eventually, this discourse, alongside the older literary discourse discussed in the preceding paragraph, then came to shape how Greeks “talked back” to the empire in what we call the Second Sophistic.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, the modern tendency to take seriously Greek and Roman authors, and Roman imperial structures, is not the result of arbitrary methodological preference. The coincidence of ancient history’s birth as a discipline and the rise of nationalism in imperialistic Europe and the Americas meant that what can be called a “nation-state epistemology” played a fundamental role in shaping the categories of analysis that have defined the study of the ancient Mediterranean since the nineteenth century. The implicit and explicit comparisons that run through the work of early 19th-century scholars always take “the Greeks” as the unquestioned counterpart of “us,” defined variously through national categories such as “German,” “French,”

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<sup>120</sup>Ferrary 2011, 6–7. See *idem* 2001, 24–29 for the view that Anatolians wanted the league to be called Greek.

<sup>121</sup>E.g. the contributions in Goldhill 2001. Yet even at this time Greek identity was not always dominant or a unified concept, on which see Whitmarsh 2013; Dench 2018.

or “British.”<sup>122</sup> The implication was that “Greeks” too had been a nation in the modern sense, even if they failed to achieve the ideal of political nationhood. Such assumptions were (and are) intricately interwoven with ideologies of colonialism and racism, insofar as the “Greeks” *qua* nation were always imagined as a metropole in relation to peoples from the rest of the Mediterranean, West Asia, and Egypt, dominating them culturally, and eventually politically, due to their superiority. While historians of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have done away with many of the assumptions and conclusions of these intellectual ancestors, the basic core of nation-state epistemology persists. Even if we know that there never was a Greek nation-state in antiquity, we cannot seem to get away from assuming that national identity, that is, “being Greek,” was central to how ancient Athenians, Milesians, Spartans and, eventually, Mylaseans thought of themselves and their relationship to the wider world of neighboring communities and material culture. As a result, our histories still convey the idea, intentionally or not, that a white European nation stood at the center of Mediterranean history, with other “nations” peripheral and/or subordinate. The inescapable conclusion is that our inability to move past this idea is intimately bound up with how we are all engrained to think of ourselves and our relationship to current state-imposed group identities and allegiances.

What are the alternatives to this centuries-old preoccupation with the Greeks? How can we de-nationalize and decolonize our conceptions of this history?<sup>123</sup> It is my firm belief that answering these questions must involve a collective effort that can only come when more ancient historians turn away from older preoccupations, which the current article cannot presume as a goal achieved. I here but briefly note several options. Least satisfactory is the more explicit use of “Greek-speaking” when talking specifically about historical agents. This phrase certainly can work at the level of generalization, but often shades into simple euphemism that lands us back where we started.<sup>124</sup> Another avenue has been advanced by Paul Cartledge: collate local histories as a demonstration of “the complex, diverse, and challenging...history of ancient Greek civilization.”<sup>125</sup> To this I would add histories of non-*polis* settlements and replace the “Greek” qualifier with a more inclusive adjective: what determines our selection should be based on politically, socially, or culturally coherent geographic units, such as the Mediterranean or a broadly defined Hellenistic *oikoumenê*—West Afro-Eurasia is clunky but carries less baggage.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, surveys of the “Ancient Mediterranean” represent a third alternative, but existing textbooks still follow an ethnic organization that normalizes the nation as a transhistorical

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<sup>122</sup> E.g., Stier 1970; Vlassopoulos 2007, 36–38, 45–47, 55–56; Díaz-Andreu 2007; Fögen and Warren 2016.

<sup>123</sup> On the challenges of decolonizing the academy more generally, see Gopal 2021.

<sup>124</sup> One issue is that “Greek-speaking” relies on the largely modern construct of a unified Greek language. While there clearly was some recognition of a Greek language in antiquity (cf. the passage from Herodotos discussed in section 1), there is also ample evidence attesting to an emphasis on difference among what we call the various Greek “dialects”—and here it is relevant that *glōssa* refers to both languages and dialects—while peoples whose language was most similar to Greek, the Thracians and Phrygians—were intensely othered in literary texts and slave practice (see Harrison 2019). I also wonder whether those who use and hear “Greek-speaking” are ever thinking about second-language learners whose first language was Phoenician, Etruscan, Sikel, Karian, etc.

<sup>125</sup> Cartledge 2011.

<sup>126</sup> While the term “Hellenistic” is still Greco-centric, it is also more openly descriptive rather than necessarily bound up with claims about identity and agency.



category, and typically weight coverage in favor of Greeks and Romans.<sup>127</sup> While there has been helpful scholarly discussion on the question of what a history of the Mediterranean should look like (and even whether it is possible), this has not yet translated into an accepted narrative replacement for “Greek history.”<sup>128</sup> The emphasis on local communal identity in the political, social, and even private discourse of the epigraphic and archaeological records—despite interpretive attempts to nationalize the latter—encourages us to move toward “decentering” histories that are also alert to global developments.<sup>129</sup> What was global was almost always broader than “Greek” (identified from a modern vantage point), and certainly more expansive than those who felt it important to be considered Greek or to conceptualize products and ideas as Greek. *Greek and Barbarians*, despite its title, is an important step in this direction. Vlassopoulos’ inclusive history of the many communities of the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and beyond, explores the complex range of interactions, exchanges, and conflicts that led to a globalized cultural milieu. Where I suggest we can go further is in dispensing with the categories of Greek and non-Greek/Barbarian (and in many cases other group identifiers analogous to modern nations) as central to this exploration—minimizing their narrative and explanatory role—which will help us avoid such contradictory statements as “Greek culture is not just Greek” or “Greek culture was already [at the start of the Classical Period] the culture of an international world.”<sup>130</sup> If a culture is constituted and consumed by multiple “cultures” (a euphemism for a diverse range of peoples), then the privileging of one constructed group as the unique producer and possessor of that culture counteracts the efforts to present a more complex picture.

It is my hope that an awareness of the untenable assumptions underlying our commitment to Greekness in narratives of the ancient Mediterranean will challenge the histories we come to tell. The remaining advantage of clinging to this commitment—the simplicity and familiarity of national categories—does not, in my opinion, outweigh the sizable disadvantages. The category of Greekness promotes false notions of motivation, agency, and credit, wherein we claim that “the Greeks” did/felt/thought a certain way, claims that usually mask either a significantly smaller subset (adult male Athenians or individual philosophers) or refer to a widespread material output like pottery style that probably was not perceived as a defining commonality. Sticking with “the Greeks” also entails the subtle endorsement of imperialism and jingoism. To speak of Greeks is to assume the legitimacy of Isokrates’ arguments and to judge the policies and decisions of Greek-speaking city-states against the dream of pan-Hellenism, as many have done. Given the positionality of most scholars of the ancient Mediterranean within states with a considerable history of empire and colonialism, this endorsement is hardly coincidental, if not always intended. Third, giving “Greeks” center stage can blaze a false trail for those seeking to explore issues of ancient racism as a phenomenon that is fundamentally about power relations, or even support the continued insistence of some that racism did not exist in the ancient

<sup>127</sup> Examples include of Mathisen 2020 and Abulafia 2011, 63-211. An exception is the collection of essays in Abulafia 2003, though with mixed success (on which, see Balot 2004).

<sup>128</sup> E.g., the contributions in Harris 2005, Malkin 2005, and Wittke 2019. In particular a coherent narrative, or series of connected narratives, remains elusive, due to an understandable desire to avoid false portrayals of continuity, unity, homogeneity

<sup>129</sup> Beck 2020. The concept of “decentering” is that of Zemon Davis 2011, 190. Beck unfortunately takes for granted the natural coherence of “Ancient Greece” without defending the assumption, which the very tenets of localism call into question. This is essentially the approach taken in Wittke 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Vlassopoulos 2013, 329 and 276.



world.<sup>131</sup> In short, the unwillingness to admit to the weakness of Greekness is holding us back from a proper understanding of who, how, and why things happened in much of the 1st millennium BC Mediterranean world.

JEREMY LABUFF  
NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

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