Hellenisms (ii), Herodotus' Four Markers of Greek Identity (ch. 1)

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1. Herodotus’ Four Markers of Greek Identity

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[1] "To the Spartan envoys they said: ‘No doubt it was natural that the Lacedaemonians should dread the possibility of our making terms with Persia; none the less it shows a poor estimate of the spirit of Athens. There is not so much gold in the world nor land so fair that we would take it for pay to join the common enemy and bring Greece into subjection. There are many compelling reasons against our doing so, even if we wished: The first and greatest is the burning of the temples and images of our gods—now ashes and rubble. It is our bounden duty to avenge this desecration with all our might—not to clasp the hand that wrought it. Again, there is the Greek nation—the community of blood and language, temples and ritual, and our common customs; if Athens were to betray all this, it would not be well done. We would have you know, therefore, if you did not know it already, that so long as a single Athenian remains alive we will make no peace with Xerxes.’ Trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. John Marincola (Penguin 2003).
as the wheels on which the vehicle of Hellenism has traveled, and where inside the vehicle has the weight of the “passenger” been distributed?

I take “custom” as an invitation to address briefly a much-debated problem between anthropologists: whether there is such a thing as a generally “Mediterranean” or specifically “Greek” (peasant) culture at all. The ethnography of the Mediterranean cultural domain dates from Herodotus and has attracted the attention of some of the founding fathers of social anthropology, such as Fusel de Coulanges, Frazer, Durkheim, etc. The fieldwork of anthropologists like John K. Campbell, Juliet du Boulay, and Charles Stewart is premised on the assumption that there is indeed a “Mediterranean” or “Greek” cultural entity waiting to be investigated as a discrete and coherent subject of study. Of course, the study of such a culture would be subject to the usual difficulties faced by anthropologists interested in simple, that is, pre- or semi-industrial communities, namely the erosion and disappearance of distinctive cultures as a result of the ubiquity of global American consumerism, television, and so on.

The premise that there is such a “Mediterranean” or “Greek” culture at all was recently challenged by the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, who attempted to show that some specific traits that supposedly made the “Mediterranean” or “Greek” culture distinct from other cultures, such as obsession with male honor and female chastity, were to be found also in Japan or other non-Mediterranean societies.2 The peculiarity of the “Mediterranean” culture is now defended by Horden and Purcell in a massive first installment of a comprehensive study of the Mediterranean.3 But even they have to admit that much of the so-called “modern” evidence itself consists of historical documents in the sense that the societies described no longer exist.

The classic work of modern Greek anthropology is John Campbell’s Honor, Family and Patronage (1964), a brilliant account of the Sarakatsani of northwest Greece.4 The fieldwork was done in the 1950s, but recent investigators have concluded that the Sarakatsani have totally ceased to exist as a distinct cultural group, as totally as the Greeks of Homer or Thucydides. This is, of course, a problem facing Africanists or students of Balinese cockfights, so it is not peculiar to Mediterraneanists. Modern anthropological monographs tend to be theory plus fieldwork; applications of anthropology to the ancient Greeks tend to be theory plus literary and especially epigraphic evidence. An example is Robert Parker’s Miasma, which applies the pollution theories of the late Mary Douglas to the ancient Greeks.5

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2 Herzfeld 1987.
3 Horden & Purcell 2000: ch. 11.
4 Campbell 1964.
The comparative evidence of modern Mediterranean societies is what we may call the indirect sources the ancient historian has recourse to when studying ancient Greece. The direct sources are literary, epigraphic (inscriptions, usually on stone), and material remains. Material evidence is notoriously difficult to deploy in arguments about ethnicity, because, for instance, changes in pottery styles or methods of disposing of the dead can be explained in ways other than by the creation or arrival of a new ethnic group. I will briefly note here some considerations when dealing with literary and insessional evidence.

The Greeks memorized huge quantities of poetry and wrote down both it and an extensive and probably non-memorized prose literature, and they recorded their decisions and their ritual ordinances on inscriptions. To take these points in order: The Greeks were unlike the Sarakatsani in that they left a large and sophisticated literature behind them, a significant fraction of which continued to be copied in later centuries because, for educational and cultural reasons, it continued to be valued.

The literary sources are plentiful but it is essential to remember two things about ancient literature. First, by no means all of it survives. This ought to be one of the easiest things for Classicists to remember but is, in fact, one of the hardest. For example, endless books about the fifth-century BC Athenian tragedian Sophocles are published—several a year, at least. However, there are just seven surviving plays of Sophocles and it is an unkind but accurate generalization to say that most modern monographs about him consist of eight chapters: one for each play and one called “Conclusion.” And yet, we know Sophocles wrote over 120 plays, and the fragments of these plays, that is, quotations or literal fragments on papyrus, fill a volume this size. Moreover, some of the lost plays are wildly different in character from the surviving ones; for instance, one of the most savage of his plots deals with the myth of Tereus, Procris, and Philomela (see below). From the fragments, it is clear that one legitimate reading of the play, which has the Thracian King Tereus raping the Athenian princess Philomela and cutting out her tongue, is as an exploration of the close bloody and uneasy relationship between the Athenians and their non-Greek northern neighbors, the Thracians. This is very relevant to the way Athenians constructed their own identity and the way they viewed their northern neighbors, such as Macedonians and Thracians. And there are important authors whose entire output is fragmentary. For students of ancient ethnicity, two of the worst losses are the writers Eratosthenes and Posidonius, both of whom wrote in the Hellenistic Period, the three centuries after the death of Alexander in 323 BC. If we had Eratosthenes in the original instead of having to reconstruct him from Strabo’s criticisms (time of Augustus, 30 BC–AD 14), we would know far more than we do about ancient geography, and this would have
implications for the study of ancient Greek ethnicity. Again, Posidonius’ work on the Celtic contemporaries of the Greeks and Romans has to be reconstructed indirectly; it had influenced surviving ethnographic treatises like those of Caesar and Tacitus.

My second general warning regarding literary evidence concerns the bias of what survives. Even the most objective-seeming of them, Caesar being an obvious example, are steeped in rhetoric, that is, the art of persuasion. Greek historians as well as poets filled their writings with speeches, usually invented and tendentious productions. Certain genres, tragedy and comedy being two, consist of nothing but speeches punctuated by choral song. Therefore, studies of Greek conceptions of barbarians, a topic to which I shall come in a moment, can use the evidence of tragedy only if it is remembered that there is no such thing as an authorial utterance anywhere in any play. Everything is spoken or sung by a fictitious character or by the chorus. For the modern student of ethnicity, the most seductive Greek writer is the fifth-century BC historian Herodotus, because he makes first-person-singular authorial comments on alien cultures in a way which superficially anticipates modern anthropology. But in the formulation of James Redfield, Herodotus, an anthropologically minded Classicist whose father was himself a distinguished anthropologist, was a tourist rather than an anthropologist; he makes no real attempt to get inside the cultures he describes. That is not the only problem. An influential modern book on Herodotus, called *The Mirror of Herodotus*, by the French structuralist François Hartog, suggests that Herodotus’ material on the Scythians north of the Black Sea is really a clever and indirect commentary on Athenian national characteristics to which Herodotus holds up the mirror of the title. Anthropologists are familiar with this approach: Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* purports to be about the strange customs and attitudes of Japan but turns out to be about twentieth-century America, after all.

The Greeks not only wrote a lot, but they also inscribed a lot; they had what had been called the epigraphic habit. Sometimes it is just the physical medium which distinguishes epigraphic from literary texts. For instance, the Danish excavations at Lindos on Rhodes a century ago discovered a long historical narrative called the *Lindian Chronicle*. It was inscribed on the temple wall but it might just as well have been preserved on manuscript or papyrus. There is a subtler and, for our purposes, more important sense in which inscriptions resemble literary texts: Sometimes they, too, have a case

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8 Benedict 1946; see also Geertz 1988.
to plead and must be read carefully for bias and significant silence; this is obviously true of honorific inscriptions or other decrees with a narrative preamble. There is, however, a class of inscription which has no literary counterpart and yet is individually informative, as simple grave-markers are not, namely the class of leges sacrae, sacred laws. Much of our knowledge about Greek religion, for example such crucial concepts as religious pollution and purification, is derived not so much from literary texts—pollution is notoriously un-prominent in Homer—as from inscriptions of this sort. Parker's *Miasma* draws heavily on difficult masses of leges sacrae; they are his fieldwork.  

One of the topics I will address below is the so-called “kinship diplomacy,” the political exploitation of mythical kinship connections. Modern students of ethnicity in other cultures are familiar with the importance of myths: Anthony Smith remarks that the core of ethnicity resides in myths' memories and symbols, and he stresses the frequency with which the idea of eponymous ancestors recur in the relevant myths. In ancient Greek history, some of the best evidence for this is epigraphic; but it is important to grasp that the formal language and “documentary” character of such evidence does not protect it from suspicion of exaggeration and one-sidedness. In other words, decrees, too, are literary constructs. Both literary texts and inscriptions provide evidence for language and dialect, an important but not decisive criterion of ethnicity. The Greeks themselves used, and perhaps over-used, the linguistic criterion in their primary sorting into Greeks and barbarians, a word which implies above all inability to speak Greek.

2. Greek Nomenclature: “Us” and the “Others”

2.1. “The Others:” Greeks and Barbarians

I will now discuss briefly the general categories of ethnicity and the way in which the ancient Greeks used them to sort out themselves, each other and “the other.” Greeks were fond of binary oppositions, and they divided the world into Greeks and barbarians. There was no “Third World,” although a German scholar wrote a valuable book in the 1980s called *das dritte Griechenland* (*The Third Greece*), by which he meant the Greeks other than the Athenians and Spartans, about whom we know most. “Barbarian” was a word which implied, above all, inability to speak and reason in Greek. The Greek assumption was that ignorance of Greek automatically implied inability to reason, to give an account of oneself, logon didonai. This helps to explain the idea of natural slavery; many chattel slaves were

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9 Parker 1983.
10 Smith 1983.
not Greek-speakers and it was easy to categorize them as Untermenschen (sub-men; sub-human) because they were unreasoning. The dichotomy Greek-barbarian is not identical with free-unfree because some Greeks were, as a matter of fact, enslaved through war or piracy, and some Greek thinkers were aware some of the time that not all barbarians were natural slaves. But in ordinary Greek thinking, “barbarian” probably implied “deserving to be unfree,” and “Greek” implied “deserving to be free.”

The word “barbarian” was more than a linguistic category; it implied lack of control, bloodthirsty behavior, and self-indulgence over food, drink, and sex. The link is lack of verbal reasoning ability, which meant that barbarians were thought of as not just literal slaves but slaves in the metaphorical sense of being slaves to their passions. In an influential book, Edith Hall argued that the negative representation of barbarians was a fifth-century construct dating from after the Persian Wars of 490 to 479 BC and even that the Greek–barbarian polarity was an invention of the post-480 BC period.12 The milder version of the thesis is not new; it is clearly stated in the barbaros entry in LSJ1 – (1940). The stronger version of the thesis implies that the Greeks, like the Jews, discovered their ethnic identity as Greeks through the confrontation with Persia. Hall’s thesis leans heavily on the evidence of tragedy, a slippery sort of evidence as we have seen, and she goes far in denying the presence of barbarians in literary genres earlier than the Persian Wars. Homer, admittedly, does not have the word “barbarian,” but he does have the compound term “barbarian-speaking,” barbarophonos (Il. 2.867), used of the Karians, and it seems question-begging to emend this out of his text. But even the milder version of the thesis has interesting consequences. Take Tereus again, the Thracian king who cut out the tongue of the girl he raped, who was also his wife’s sister. Now there is intriguing evidence that Tereus began as a Megarian king, that is, a Greek; and it has been suggested by Thomas Wiedemann that he was reclassified as a Thracian, that is, barbarian, only in the time of Sophocles (late fifth century BC) and perhaps actually by Sophocles, because his crimes were unthinkable for a Greek.13 This is ingenious but there are complications: The climax of the myth has the two Greek sisters, Procris and Philomela, serving Tereus the chopped-up remains of his son Ityss in a ghastly cannibal banquet, as revenge for the rape. All three are then turned into birds by the gods, who take pity. It is hard to say which is more brutal and barbarian—the rape and mutilation, or the revenge. There is a general point here: Starting with Herodotus, the first villain of Edward Said’s influential book Orientalism, there are Greeks who behave like barbarians (Euripides’

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12 Hall 1989.
13 Wiedemann, “barbarian,” in OCD³.
war-time play *Trojan Women* is in part an exploration of this theme) and noble-savage barbarians whose honorable behavior puts Greeks to shame. But I reemphasize one of my initial points: These texts are sophisticated literary evidence with a discernible rhetorical agenda.

2.2. “Us”: Interactions Between “Fellow Greeks”

I will now explore the concept of Greekness and its subdivisions. That is, I here leave behind the “barbarians,” although it would be rewarding to pursue problems of ethnicity into late antiquity, and to discuss the fission and fusion of barbarian peoples on the Roman frontiers. I referred above to the view that the Persian Wars defined the Greeks as Greeks. This is a view elegantly argued for by the late Arnaldo Momigliano of University College London who also made the parallel point about the Jews. Momigliano was, however, aware that though the concept of Greekness is sometimes strongly asserted in Herodotus, it tended to feature only at moments of crisis like the threat from Persia, or in certain recurring but not permanent circumstances; thus, you had to show you were a Greek to be allowed to compete in the Olympic Games, which were, however, held only every four years. For most of the time, when looking at the colonial evidence, we find marked linguistic and religious differences between particular Greek communities, including close city-state neighbors like Athens and Thebes, or Torone and its neighbor, Potidaia, founded by Corinth.

But if the idea of a single Greek identity is a chimera, it would be equally wrong to go to the other extreme, namely the conventional idea of hundreds of Greek city-states forming an ethnic rainbow, with each fiercely particularist city-state possessing and affirming a separate ethnicity. There were divisions, or, to put it positively, unifying categories, smaller than “Greek” but larger than *polis* identity. Yet, on the whole, the Greeks did not attempt to formulate self-definitions of Greekness, as such. As the Harvard historian Christopher P. Jones has insisted, even the famous phrase of Herodotus (8.144.2) quoted at the caption of this chapter, is not an attempt at a definition of Greekness, as it has sometimes been called, but “means only ‘the fact that the people is of one blood and one tongue’.”

2.2.1. Ethnic Subdivisions: Dorians and Ionians

Dorians and Ionians are the two main ethnic sub-divisions according to which the ancient Greeks categorized themselves. The Dorian/Ionian divide was partly a matter of dialect and partly a matter of religion. Thucydides, for instance, has a casual and shamefully neglected mention of the Dorian dialect (*glossa* or tongue as he calls it, 3.112); this shows that the notion of a Dorian dialect, 

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with identifiable isoglosses, is not just a construct of modern comparative philology. And the same Thucydides says that the religious festival of the Karneia was a specifically Dorian sacred month (5.54). Moving on to more subjective and treacherous aspects, the Dorian/Ionian distinction was also held to be a matter of seniority versus juniority. The Dorians were supposed to have entered Greece as invaders and newcomers, and were looked down on accordingly. This myth was known to the Greeks themselves as the Return of the Herakleidai or descendants of Heracles, and the idea, or perhaps one should keep the word “myth,” is known to modern scholars as the Dorian Invasion. The Ionians, by contrast, claimed to be much older, and, as we shall see, the Athenians, the leading Ionian people, prided themselves on being actually autochthonous, sprung from the earth and always resident on that same earth. “Older” is not quite the same as “autochthonous”, and one part of the Ionian myth was conveniently played down in Athenian contexts, namely the story that the original Ionian kings of Athens themselves came from Pylos in the Peloponnese. Famously, the alleged Dorian invasion is archaeologically invisible in that there is no change in burial patterns or pottery styles. But if ethnicity is an expression of what people choose to emphasize, there is no doubt—quite apart from the dialectal and religious evidence just mentioned—of the reality of the Dorian/Ionian distinction.

There is, however, a complication very similar to that which we encountered when considering the concept of barbarian. Dorians and Ionians got polarized, we think, in the fifth century BC, the period of maximum tension between the leading Dorian state, Sparta, and the leading Ionian state, Athens. There was a pronounced Ionian versus Dorian rhetoric; to simplify this, the Ionians, as we saw, despised the Dorians as newcomers, while the Dorians said that they themselves were vigorous and strong, as opposed to Ionians who were weak and effeminate and associated with luxury and Asia Minor. That is the Dorian view, though there is important evidence that in real life the Ionians accepted the implication about relative military weakness. This evidence was stressed strongly in 1982 by the British scholar John Alty in a largely convincing protest against the French scholar Edouard Will, who in a very influential short book in 1956 tried to argue the Dorian/Ionian divide away completely as being a rhetorical construct and nothing more.¹⁶

In the course of my work on the Ion of Euripides (412 BC), I investigated the Athenian search for identity, specifically the myth of Athenian “autochthony” (being born from the earth, and always living in the same

¹⁶ Will 1956; Alty 1982.
place), and the tradition of Ionianism (see lines 1573 ff.). Both ideas are expressed symbolically in Euripides’ play by the account of the Apolline paternity of Ion, son of the raped Athenian princess Kreousa, who was herself descended from the autochthonous royal line. Important but superficially contradictory truths about Athenian self-perception were expressed in this play; both of the two central concepts express an opposition to Dorianism. As noted, the most powerful Dorians of mainland Greece were Athens’ inveterate enemies, the Spartans. I shall return to Ionianism below, when I discuss the Athenians’ legends referring to their own ethnogenesis, where the notions of Ionianism and autochthony were ingeniously combined.

Dorians and Ionians were the largest subgroups but they were not the only ones; there were others, such as the Aeolians who, like the other two, gave their name to a dialect. Groups of non-polis-based Greeks who were nevertheless associated with particular areas were called ethne. Such groups as Arcadians, Achaeans, and Aetolians were organized as ethne, or rather they constituted ethne because lack of tight organization is precisely what distinguishes them from poleis. Recent work on the ethnicity of ethne has rightly insisted that ethnos organization was not more primitive than but merely different from polis organization, the fallacy “simple equals primitive,” what we may call the progressivist fallacy, goes back a long way, at least to Thucydides in his so-called Archaeology (the 20 introductory chapters on early Greece), where he says that village-based as opposed to polis-based settlement patterns were characteristic of the old Greek way of living. He goes straight on to qualify this by saying that the “old” way is still found in many parts of Greece such as Aetolia, but without apparently seeing that this threw a doubt on his own progressivist premise.

2.2.2. Ethnic Connections: Kinship Diplomacy and Colonial Ties So far, I have discussed some more or less static categories, though allowing some flexibility in the sense that fifth-century BC tensions exacerbated or polarized pre-existing distinctions. I now turn to a more dynamic and intrinsically variable way in which Greeks expressed ethnic identity and ethnic connections with each other, at a level which is nevertheless much less broad and vague than just an appeal to “fellow-Greeks.” I refer to the well-rooted and extremely important idea that places with shared mythical or historical ancestors were somehow kin, part of a two-generation family. The exploitation of such kinship connections (the Greek for kinship is sungeneia) is known as “kinship diplomacy.”

17 Zacharia 2003.
Drawing above all on some exciting recent epigraphic discoveries, notably a very long and interesting inscription from Xanthos in Lycia published in 1988, Christopher P. Jones explored the changing ways in which kinship relations were used in order to promote and cement alliances and (as in the case of the 1988 text) as the basis for frank appeals for financial help: The Xanthians a few years before 200 BC are asked by the people of Dorian Kytenion for help in rebuilding their city after a devastating earthquake. The appeal deploys elaborate mythological arguments which go back ultimately to the Dorian origins of both cities. Kinship diplomacy essentially rests on a concept of colonization. The word for a founding or colonizing city was metropolis, and the “mother” relationship inherent in this word was more than a metaphor; it expressed a genuinely perceived reality.

The detection and description of Greek ethnic identity is a problem that has been explored, above all, in colonial contexts, where the identity of the colonizing agents can matter acutely. As just mentioned, the underlying idea is a two-generation family, but there could be three-generation families; thus, Corinth founded Syracuse, which then founded Camarina, and there is even one spectacular four-generation family: Sparta founded Thera, modern Santorini, which founded Cyrene in North Africa, which founded Euesperides, the Hellenistic Berenice, modern Benghazi. The political institution of the ephorate is found in all four communities, a notable instance of colonial continuity over half a millennium. Jones’ book shows how the Romans and their satellites readily bought into this essentially Greek thought-system; Rome was supposedly founded by refugees from Troy (the Aeneas-legend), so we find Greek communities such as Lampsakos appealing (on the evidence of an inscription from the 190s BC) to shared Trojan origins when applying to Rome for favorable terms of settlement. See, in Chapter 2 of this volume, Simon Hornblower’s discussion of the kinship relation between Macedon or rather one stratum of Macedonian society and Macedon’s alleged Greek founding city of Argos. For the moment I note merely, with reference to these same Argives, that kinship diplomacy could be used to bring even the archetypal barbarians into the Greek genealogy. Thus, the Argives effectively took the Persian side in the Persian Wars; in Greek terminology, they “medized.” This, in an obvious sense, made them traitors to Hellenism, but we find in Herodotus the ingenious argument that the mythical Ur-hero of Argos, Danae’s son Perseus, was also the eponymous founding hero of Persia, which meant that their medism was justified. It also reminds us of the rhetorical manipulation of which I warned at the outset, and it is at the same time a good example of something else I have mentioned, namely the occasional blurring of the Greek-barbarian category. Before I leave kinship diplomacy, I stress that it features not just in poets like Pindar or in flowery but tendentious
inscriptions like the Xanthos-Kytinion text. It is given in the hardheaded Thucydides as a motive for action, and should be taken very seriously.

In a recent article, I applied the concept of “kinship diplomacy” to the lost Tereus by Sophocles, which is about a violent king of Thrace, his marriage with an Athenian princess, and his rape of her sister.20 Here, the rape does not express a divine paternity (as in Euripides’ Ion), but is an attempt to say something about Greek relations with a set of barbarians whose riches and fighting skills made them in one sense desirable neighbors but whose bloodthirstiness (also commented on by the historian Thucydides) led to traumas and tensions. There is evidence outside Sophocles that the Athenians tried to represent their close but bloody relations with the Thracians in terms of mythical “kinship.” The concept of kinship diplomacy is ubiquitous in the Greco-Roman world: By a metaphor that was more than a metaphor, Greeks (and, copying them, the Romans later) expressed the colonial relationship in terms of mothers and daughters. Appeals could, thus, be made to quasi-family ties or syngeneia links between nations and poleis as well as between individuals. In its purest form, kinship diplomacy is, thus, an expression of perceived truths about colonial origins and settlement. Clearly, this is relevant to notions of self-identity held by Greeks who settled in other parts of the Mediterranean such as Sicily and south Italy.

Literary texts and material evidence are by no means exhausting the relevant tools for the student of Greek colonial origins. There are at least three other categories. First, coins: On what weight standard are they struck? The Euboic standard is found in suitable colonial contexts, but could, of course, have been copied because of its convenience and acceptability. Second, religious calendars, for which the evidence is usually epigraphic. It is a peculiarity of Greek states that they had different names for the months of the year, but the colonizing city or metropolis (mother-city) usually handed on its calendar to the daughter-city. A nice example is the famous city of Byzantium, whose mother-city was the small and insignificant city of Megara; the mother–daughter relationship is asserted explicitly only by very late sources, but the great French epigraphist Louis Robert showed that the identity of the inscribed calendars of Megara and Byzantium are clinching evidence.21 Third and finally, personal names, the so-called onomastic evidence, is another epigraphic topic. A massive computerized project called the Lexicon for Greek Personal Names (LGPN) enables us for the first time to trace the regional origins of many Greek personal names.22

22 Fraser & Matthews (eds.) 1987.
Here, too, I restrict myself to just one example. The island of Kerzura, Black Corcyra in the Adriatic, was supposedly founded by the fourth-century BC ruler of Syracuse in Sicily, Dionysius I. A close onomastic study by Peter Fraser of a long inscribed list of names from Kerzura shows the Syracusan connection is indeed very plausible.

2.2.3. Ethnogenesis and Claims of Primacy: The Case of Athenian Ethnicity  
As mentioned above, Athenian ethnicity combined two separate ideas: autochthony and Ionianism. I take these in order. Autochthony is a double idea: It combines the idea that the Athenians were “earth-born” (gegeneis), sprung from the (in reality not very rich) soil of Attica; and the idea that they had always thereafter gone on living in the same place. They were not immigrants but aboriginals. Any such aboriginal myth is liable to be meaningless historically (the Thebans also had an autochthony myth and so did the Arkadians), and the Athenian version is not an exception. But as we have seen, it was a useful way of scoring off the Spartans, who were Dorians and, therefore, immigrants; the myth is probably older than the Persian Wars, but it was in the fifth century BC that it really took off. In this, it resembles other ideas discussed above as the Greek and barbarian divide. For the Athenians to represent themselves as old by comparison with the Spartan newcomers was a bit of a paradox, given the usual perception of Sparta as conservative, and given the reputation Athenians had as lovers of novelty and as generators of unwelcome political “novelty,” that is, revolution (Th. 1.102.3). But the myth is firmly established in Herodotus (8.00) and in Thucydides, both in his own person (1.2.5, “the Athenians have always occupied the same land”) and in the mouth of Pericles in the famous Funeral Speech of 430 BC (2.36.1). Thucydides avoids the word “autochthon” when speaking of the Athenians, but he is well aware of it because he uses it elsewhere (see 6.2.2 about the Sikan inhabitants of Sicily). But it was Euripides in his Ion (c. 412 BC) who gave it most emphatic and patriotic expression, not only when he makes the god Hermes in the Prologue speak of the “autochthonous people of famous Athens” (lines 29–30), but by making Ion the son of the Athenian princess Kreousa, who had been raped by Apollo before the play’s action begins. Kreousa was daughter of Erechtheus and, thus, a descendant of Kekrops, half-man and half-serpent, that is, earthborn.

The Ion is also valuable evidence for the other great Athenian myth of identity, the idea of Athens as Ionian “mother-city” of Ionia. Unlike the other myths, this had a substantial grounding in fact. The myth has two distinct but overlapping components: the idea that Athens was itself Ionian (“Ionianism”), and the idea that the Athenians actually colonized Ionia. The Athenians were indeed Ionians in the sense that Attic Greek was a variant
of Ionic; and the Athenians were Ionians in their religion. But it seems that in the fifth century BC, particularly in the period from the Persian Wars to the end of the century (the period of maximum tension with Sparta) the Athenians became more self-conscious about their “Ionianism.” This was surely because, like autochthony, the “Ionianism” of Athens expressed difference from and opposition to Sparta, since the Spartans were Dorsians. The suddenness of the change should not be exaggerated: Already in the early sixth century BC, the poet-legislator Solon had called Athens the “oldest land of Ionia.” The Athenians also responded, as early as 500 BC, to an appeal to help their Ionic colonists (apoikoi) in their revolt from Persia (Hdt. 5.97.2); the Ionian delegate was a man from Miletus called Aristagoras. Some of all this may reflect the position much later in the century when the Athenians had an interest in exaggerating their colonial relationship with Ionia; and, in any case, Aristagoras, a desperate man, had according to Herodotus made an almost equally strong kinship appeal to the Dorian Spartans (5.49.3, where Aristagoras uses another kinship word homaimonas, ‘of common blood’). But one factual historical detail suggests that the kinship factor was indeed important, not just rhetoric, as in the case of the selection of a man with the name Melanthios as general (5.97.3): This was an evocative name which recalls Melanthos, one of the old Ionian royal house of Athens (Hdt. 1.147; 5.65). It has been argued by Alty and J. Hall that the Athenians were ashamed of being Ionians—Ionia was, as we have seen, synonymous for unmilitary softness (cf. Th. 8.25.3)—and that they, therefore, played down the Ionian element in their make-up. Certainly, Herodotus sometimes implies contempt for Ionians (he himself was half Karian, half Dorian Greek). But this view fails because it has to treat Euripides’ Ion as exceptional and out of line: Athena at the end of the play in effect prophesies that Ion’s sons will colonize Attica itself, after which his descendants will colonize the islands and the Asiatic mainland. Ion’s step-father Xouthos will go on to father Dorus, the ancestor of the Dorsians, a clear statement of Ionian priority but at the same time a possible Panhellenic, that is, conciliatory gesture, because it makes Ion and Dorus half-brothers.

The second half of Athena’s prophecy, the colonization of Asia, is a vigorous assertion of the other half of the Ionian myth, that which represented Athens as the founding metropolis of Ionia. The reality was not so clear: Ionia seems like so many colonial areas to have been in reality a place of mixed settlement and the Athenian claim to have been the sole founder was a great exaggeration of a drift of peoples across the Aegean, which was hardly state-sponsored, because it took place before Athens became a polis. The same may have been

true of many foundation-legends; but the scale of the Athenian boast made it remarkable. By the 420s BC, inscriptions show that the Athenians were demanding religious offerings from their subject-allies as symbolic tribute to a mother-city. On Samos, we find a cult of Ion himself, which may not have been entirely voluntary and welcome in that it meant that the revenues of confiscated land were made over to Ion; but at the same time, Ion was an obviously suitable recipient of Ionian cult, so there may be a conciliatory aspect to the choice of the dedicatee.

What can we conclude from this? The two identity myths about Athens were ways of defining by opposition to something else—Spartans, Ionian daughter-cities and subjects. Autochthony and Ionianism are not strictly compatible unless the connection with Pylos in the Peloponnese is conveniently forgotten. Ion’s double descent from Ionian Apollo and from autochthonous Kreousa reconciles the two myths, and his double paternity from Apollo and the human Xouthos nicely explains Ionian seniority over Dorians descended from Ion’s younger half-brother Dorus. But even half-brotherhood is a sort of kinship and in a wartime context this play may have had a conciliatory aspect. It would be a mistake to think that this sort of mythmaking was precious and for merely elite consumption; Athens was a participatory democracy, Athenian tragedies were attended by 13,000 Athenians in the theatre of Dionysus, and Athenian drama was a competitive affair with playwrights competing for the first prize. Without going into the difficult question of how far Athenian tragedy was explicitly political, it can be safely said that playwrights whose themes went down badly could not expect to win prizes and might even collide with the law. Near the beginning of the century, a tragic playwright called Phrynichus got into serious trouble and his play was banned, because it insensitively reminded the Athenians of their failure to avert the catastrophe of the Ionian revolt. The play dealt with the fall of Ionian Miletus, though, unfortunately, the detail of the play is almost entirely lost. Herodotus says the Athenians were angry because the play reminded them of troubles they regarded as in effect their own, a significant phrase which refers to precisely the Ionian ethnicity explored by Euripides at the end of the same century. There is a sense in which these two plays are the most explicitly political tragedies we know of from Classical Athens.

3. Conclusion

We have briefly looked at the four features singled out by Herodotus in the Greek caption at the outset of this section, and may safely conclude that these are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for Greekness. One may quickly dismiss the Herodotean category of blood relationships as irrelevant to the modern study of ethnicity; not even a very sentimental Hellenist would want to insist on racial purity and continuity on those
terms. Of the others, we might argue that language, religion, and customs, in the anthropological sense I discussed above, are vehicles of Hellenism, rather than that they constitute Hellenism. So what we are left with is the conclusion that being Greek is a matter of feeling that you are Greek, and, indeed, modern work shows that ethnicity is, above all, a matter of perception.24

I should like to conclude by offering a hypothesis, which may illuminate the Greek case in particular. I mentioned earlier an insight by Arnaldo Momigliano, who as a Jewish Italian émigré with a chair at my old London college UCL, was well qualified to speculate about the survival of identity in an alien context. He suggested that, in antiquity, both the Jews and the Greeks found their identity via confrontation with Persia. It is, after all, no accident that Herodotus’ four elements are listed in the lull between the battles of Salamis and of Plataea, the decisive sea-battle and the decisive land-battle of the Persian Wars. We might carry this insight further down the centuries and wonder whether the explanation of the tenacity of Hellenism has something to do with the existence, we may almost say the convenient existence, of national enemies or oppressors. In fact, work on modern Greek diasporas shows that the “other” against whom Greeks try to defend a way of life may not be an enemy or oppressor, but just a hegemonic type against which they struggle to preserve themselves. So the common denominators across some of the centuries of Greek history at least are contact with other cultures, the threat of a loss of some aspects of a way of life (including language, religion, customs), and a sense of the superiority and age (an argument that grows as time passes) of whatever Greekness was considered to be at different historical and social contexts.

Political defeat brought cultural victory, and not only in the time of Horace who put that thought so pithily. The Greek homeland is small and poor, and the Greek script difficult. The survival of Greekness and especially the Greek language is miraculous in some respects, in view of the way the odds were stacked against their survival. The Greeks of the fifth century BC were lucky or patriotic enough to repel the Persians; they were not so fortunate with later occupying powers. Greek elites in the time of the Second Sophistic asserted their Hellenism in the face of the overwhelming power of Rome, not only by pursuing successful careers within the Roman system—one thinks of men like Arrian, or rather Flavius Arrianus, who definitely had two cultural passports—but also by recalling the great period of Greek success. One wonders if the same was also true of the survival of

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24 Malkin (2001) assigns to the way of life a prominent role in defining what is Greek and what is not.
Greek culture in the Byzantine Period when Arab power was establishing itself round the Mediterranean. It was surely true in the Ottoman Period.