

## Greek Perception of the Persian Other

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The development of Western society has occurred in concert with the establishment of a discourse concerning the 'other.' The Western understanding of the 'other' is dependent on a division between two cultures and is typified by an antithetical analysis, asserting its own cultural identity and defining the 'other' merely as the opposite of itself. Existing beyond the scope of the Western scholarly tradition – and thus beyond the discourse defining it – the 'other' is not engaged as an equal on its own terms; rather, it is viewed from afar.<sup>1</sup> Despite the historically changing counterpart to this occidental study, the tendency to demarcate and define based on an oppositional understanding of those beyond Western society has existed since well before the Greco-Persian wars.<sup>2</sup> Within this tendency, the 'other' is not described within their cultural phenomenology, but rather is understood along inherently biased Western sociological lines. That being said, the Western depiction of the 'other' is not static; it evolves and changes in accordance with both the external realities confronting a society and the internal academic current. The writings of Aeschylus, Herodotus and Xenophon attest to such growth. The existence of certain motifs of 'otherness' concurrent in all three authors, and pervasive in Greek thought, is undeniable. However, beginning with Herodotus' nuanced understanding of the tenuous relationship between civilization and barbarism, and culminating in the tolerant ethnography of Xenophon, a changing conception of the other occurred within Greek thought. By the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

time of Xenophon's writing, Greek thought had undergone a palpable shift in the tone and depiction of the Persian 'other.'

Orientalist discourse is dependent on the maintenance of a separation between the scholar and the subject of analysis. In Edward Said's formative text, *Orientalism*, he recognizes this tendency of demarcating the other and analyzing them on specifically Western terms in the oldest Grecian tragedy extant, Aeschylus' *The Persians*.

Aeschylus represents Asia, makes her speak in the person of the aged Persian queen, Xerxes' mother. It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of orientalism, insofar as it understands foreign cultures along Western norms, is to silence the 'other' and to transform the threat of difference into familiar, albeit reductive and degrading, terms.<sup>4</sup> In the age of Aeschylus, before any pervasive cultural exchange can be understood to have occurred between the Achaemenid Persians and the Ionian Greeks, the Persians presented a "tabula rasa upon which Greeks drew a portrait in their own idiom, a portrait that answered to their own imaginative purposes."<sup>5</sup> However, as Said notes later in his work, the identity of the 'other', created by the orientalist, is far from static. It is constructed and reconstructed as society evolves and is the product of historical, social, intellectual and political debate.<sup>6</sup> As the Greek

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Gimelli Martin, "Orientalism and the Ethnographer: Said, Herodotus and the Discourse of Alterity," *Criticism* 32 (1990), 511.

<sup>5</sup> Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience: From the Archaic Period to the Age of Xenophon* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 332.

experience with Persians evolved, so too did their discourse concerning them.

If the orientalist discourse is the subject of constant reinterpretation depending on changing societal factors, then before it is possible to discuss concurrent motifs of 'otherness' within Greek thought, it is first necessary to understand the context in which the discourse was produced. This paper will analyze the works of Aeschylus, Herodotus and Xenophon insofar as they can be understood to be representative of their respective eras. While all three authors are the product of the same Grecian scholarly tradition, the context in which they were writing differs greatly. There existed a threat to the social fabric of society during each author's era; the threats, though, differed for each. The subsequent classification of barbarism by each author reflects their perception of the threat.

Said asserts that a Western orientalist tradition has existed within scholarly circles from the earliest times in Europe; one of its earliest manifestations occurs in the era of the Greco-Persian Wars.<sup>7</sup> The threat of Persian despotism loomed over Athenian society during this epoch and it was within this milieu of fear that the "two terms [Greek and barbarian respectively] were constituted as a pair and passed into the shared knowledge of Greeks and that barbarian came to mean, first and foremost, Persian."<sup>8</sup> Engaged in a war defined along a democratic versus tyrannical division, Greek scholars began to associate notions of freedom and autonomy with their society and conversely notions of slavery and despotism with Persian society.

"Aeschylus and Sophocles are the two surviving tragedians whose minds were formed in Athens' era of liberation from tyranny and the threatened absorption into the world monarchy of Persia."<sup>9</sup> It is within this context that one must appreciate the de-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 323.

<sup>9</sup> Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 78.

piction of Persian culture in Aeschylus' *The Persians*. To understand how a contemporary Greek would comprehend the image of the Persians as presented in the play, it is first necessary to understand whether the play was intended as a tragedy or satire. This question hinges on the depiction of the Persian failure as either a tragic representation, making the play a tragedy with the Persians as the heroes, or as homage to the victory of Greek culture over the barbarians, making the play a satire. Modern scholarship has tended towards the second interpretation, asserting that the timing of the play – eight years after the initial victory of the Greeks over the invading Persians but four years before the banishment of the Persian army from Asia Minor following the battle of Eurymedon – establishes it as an homage to the triumph of the Greeks.<sup>10</sup>

The time of the play allowed Aeschylus certain liberties when describing the Athenian enemy. Occupied in the process of self-definition, he expounds the Athenian self-conception of society as democratic and autonomous and of the Athenian citizen as masculine and guided by moderation, reason and self-restraint.<sup>11</sup> Persian culture, as presented in *The Persians*, “operates antithetically to that of the Athenians [...] and contradicts Hellenic nature at every point with radically pathological human consequences.” He thus engaged in a typical orientalist methodology – that of definition by opposites. To affirm the reality of such an Athenian image he asserts the very opposite, namely slavery, decadence, effeminacy and tyranny, as Persian traits.<sup>13</sup> The depiction of the Persians by Aeschylus therefore describes some important truths held by contemporary Greeks; they were, however, “truths pertaining less to the Persians than to the Athenian sense of self-

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<sup>10</sup> J.D. Craig, “The Interpretation of Aeschylus' *Persae*,” *Classical Review* 38 (1924), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Edith Hall, trans., *Aeschylus' Persians* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1996), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, *The Persians*, 13.

identity.”<sup>14</sup> Despite this limited, Greco-centric means of constructing the ‘other,’ Said notes that Aeschylus’ presentation of the emptiness, loss and disaster which the Persians suffer is thereafter associated with Oriental meetings with the West. The motif of imminent danger and irrationality of the East, evident in Aeschylus’ work, remains present in the Western imagination long after the reductive conceptions of the Persians, exemplified by Aeschylus, ebbed.<sup>15</sup>

Aeschylus identified anything non-Greek as barbarian; the Persians, therefore, as the epitome of the ‘other’ embodied the epitome of barbarism. The distinction, for him and many Greeks of the time, was simple: Greece was civilized, cultured and democratic and thus anything opposing Greece must be opposing Greek values as well. There is little ethnographic support for such a viewpoint. In contrast with this wholly sophisticated argument stands Herodotus’ *Histories*. The *Histories* represents the most formative account of the Greco-Persian War, and, if Herodotus can be trusted as an historian, it is the product of empirical knowledge rather than rumour and conjecture. Like *The Persian*, the *Histories* must be understood in context. With the Greco-Persian War long over and the Peloponnesian Wars already looming, Herodotus’ writing provides a justification for the long standing hostility between Persians and Greeks, thematically aligning it with the growing enmity between Ionian Athenians and Dorian Spartans.<sup>16</sup> Herodotus relied on direct investigation – the *epsis* and *akoe* (the eye and ear respectively) – and often rejected the clout of accepted wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Writing retrospectively after the victory of Greece over Persia, Herodotus’ account is more interested in the delineation between citizen and slave than between civilized and barbaric.<sup>18</sup>

While both Aeschylus and Herodotus present the traits of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>15</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 56-57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>17</sup> Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 224.

the barbaric 'other' similarly – namely, despotic, unorganized and violent – the difference lay in the definition of what constitutes a barbarian.<sup>19</sup> For Aeschylus, the redeeming and indeed civilizing factor of Greece was its Grecian identity while the barbaric nature of Persia was dependent solely on its non-Grecian, Persian identity. For Herodotus, on the other hand, all peoples are capable of both civilization and culture.<sup>20</sup> Herodotus engaged the Persians and, by doing so, partially reshaped their place as the separate 'other.' From Herodotus' relatively equitable pursuit arises:

Not the strict and linear opposition between barbarian and Hellen canonized by Aeschylus [...] but a taxonomy of human behaviour that threatens to span the received distance between the two human poles of barbarism and Hellenism, or even to erase it: close beneath the surface of his narrative is his conviction that Hellenism – the condition of being Greek through and through – is a hard-won, fragile prize, and easily lost.<sup>21</sup>

Society's question, which Herodotus strove to answer in his *Histories*, concerned the nature of the division between Greek and Persian and between civilized and barbaric. Herodotus' answer, elucidated over the nine books of his *Histories*, is that neither term is static and that both Europe and Asia engaged in a cultural transvaluation.<sup>22</sup>

The *Histories*, in qualifying the definition of barbarism as more than non-Greek, distinguishes the Persian 'other' from further forms of barbarism. There are several incidents recorded by Herodotus which defy the typical conception of Persian barbarism. He recounts a Persian debate concerning their means of government which occurred between Darius, future Shah of Persia,

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, *Persians*, 6; Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 181.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

and his six political equals.<sup>23</sup> Despite the outcome of these debates, in which Darius proclaims that a monarchical system best suits Persia and assumes autocratic control, the ability to conceive alternative forms of government is an ability in which Aeschylus and earlier thinkers never could have ascribed to the Persians. Rather, as understood by Aeschylus, Persian barbarism is intricately linked with servitude and tyranny; "to that extent, the peoples of Asia are incapable, not of seeking liberty, but of living with it."<sup>24</sup> Herodotus, on the other hand, presents this incident as a point of reference for the possible Persian evolution towards Hellenism. Otanes, who suggests "entrusting the management of the country to the Persian people,"<sup>25</sup> represents the freedom possible to all Persians. Anticipating that many Greeks may find the idea that a Persian could conceive of free rule deplorable, Herodotus puts forth the story of Mardonius as further proof. Mardonius, a Persian commander under Darius, deposed of the Ionian tyrants and instituted democratic rule in Ionia, further proving the Persian capacity for democracy, a defining characteristic of civilization.<sup>26</sup>

According to Herodotus, the states of barbarism and civilization are thus determined, not by the ethnicity of the people in question, but by their culture and laws.<sup>27</sup> There exists a potential in all peoples, attested to by Herodotus' accounts of the Pelasgian evolution and assimilation into the Hellenes and the Medes constitutional debates, to develop their culture.<sup>28</sup> This evolution, however, occurs from the theorized tyranny of barbarism and culminates in the autonomy of Hellenism. Thus, despite Herodotus' nuanced understanding of the causes and relationship between barbarism and civilization, he still maintained Athenian society as

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<sup>23</sup> Robin Waterfield, trans., *Herodotus: The Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203-206.

<sup>24</sup> Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 324.

<sup>25</sup> Waterfield, *Histories*, 204.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

the ultimate goal of both. As Georges writes, “in the *Histories* the potential direction of development of Asianic peoples is out of their peculiar barbarisms into Hellenism.”<sup>29</sup>

The changing conception of the ‘other,’ evident in the evolved depiction of the Persians in the writings of Herodotus as compared to those of Aeschylus, evolved once more in the works of Xenophon, a fourth century B.C.E. Greek philosopher and historian. Of the three thinkers discussed in this paper, Xenophon requires the most contextualization and his writing receives the most scrutiny. His close association with the Persian Empire led to both his involved knowledge of Persian society and allegations of bias. Unlike the epochs of both Aeschylus and Herodotus – epochs in which the Persian threat loomed but was tempered by Grecian strength and unity – Xenophon lived in an era of Athenian disarray. The Peloponnesian Wars ravaged Athens and the Thirty Tyrants disillusioned the Athenian identity. The inability for any single Greek state to maintain stable hegemony became evident, and an increasing number of Greek thinkers looked to monarchical rule to maintain order. Having served the Thirty in the cavalry, the restoration of democracy saw Xenophon exiled from Athens. Xenophon was ideologically orphaned from politics – betrayed by the autocratic and self-serving Thirty and disillusioned by a weak democracy – and began his service as a mercenary in the Persian military.<sup>30</sup> It is within this context – that of a disgruntled and disillusioned Athenian serving under a stable, albeit monarchical, regime in Persia – that one can understand the writings of Xenophon.

Confronted with the chaos and disarray of Athenian democracy coupled with the subjugation of Athens to Sparta following the Peloponnesian War, Xenophon became increasingly enamored with the Persian Empire. Xenophon’s work concerning the Persians, *Cyropaedia*, is unique among Greek depictions of Persia.

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<sup>29</sup> Georges, *Barbarian Asia*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-212.



Whereas the typical Greek historiography of the 'other,' evident in Aeschylus' work, equated Persia with barbarism solely because it opposed Greece, Xenophon saw within the different Persian political system – monarchy as opposed to democracy – an idealized society. Xenophon freed the barbaric Persian from their place in servitude within the Greek tropes of though as attested to be by both Aeschylus and Herodotus, and elevated them above the fragmented Greek society. Xenophon understood "the stability of the Persian empire in its rule over so many mutually foreign peoples, which contrasted so remarkably with the anarchy and misrule of Greece,"<sup>31</sup> as an achievement beyond the reach of Greek society. His elevation of tyranny over democracy – indeed of Persia over Greece – is indicative of his reverence for stability and order, not ethnicity and culture, and is testimony to the growth which occurred in the Greek conception of the 'other.' As Georges writes:

That Xenophon should regard Persians of his own status to be as noble and essentially free in their choice of loyalties as himself and his Spartan hero Agesilaus, completed the formation of a new outlook toward the imperial people that stood Aeschylus and the ideology descending from the Persae on its head. This outlook belonged to the future.<sup>32</sup>

The future era which Georges alludes to is the era of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered much of the Achaemenid Empire which Xenophon praises; within his ecumenical policy, his appropriation of Persian culture to justify his rule, and his regard for Persian nobility and military, Xenophon's influence is evident. Alexander's attitude, like that of Xenophon, was one forged by personal experience not by patriotic prejudice and scholastic training.

The close relationship that Xenophon had with many Per-

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

sians, including Cyrus – the object of his *Cyropaedia* - has led many of his contemporaries and subsequent generations of scholars to question the bias present in his depiction. In this vein, Georges writes that Xenophon's conception of the Persians and their civilization was "formed far less by the patriotic anti-barbarism of those demagogic politicians and rhetorical performer whom he despised,"<sup>33</sup> but rather was more in tune with his personal experience with Cyrus. Despite criticisms levelled at Xenophon, alleging that his writings amount to the precursor of the modern novel, much can be learned about the evolution of Greek thought from him. The *Cyropaedia* remains an orientalist work, using Greek terms to define both Greece and Persia; it is, however, for this very reason that it proves to be astonishing. Whereas Aeschylus perceived the barbaric to be intrinsically linked to the Persian and Herodotus perceived the Persians as requiring cultural evolution to achieve Hellenic culture, Xenophon used the same ideals to venerate Persia. The rubric of liberty, stability, knowledge of the world and the like – the same rubric used just centuries earlier to degrade the Persians – now attested to their cultural distinction.

Plato, writing in the fourth century B.C.E., like Xenophon recognized the universality of merit:

Among the mass are always some men, though not many, of superhuman excellence. Association with such men, who spring up in misgoverned communities as well as those enjoying good laws is a privilege of the highest value. It is always a good thing if members of well-governed states, if they are incorruptible, should travel by land and by sea in search of such men, in order to confirm those good customs of his own community and correcting those which are defective.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>34</sup> Trevor Saunders, trans., *The Laws* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 951.

The Greek discourse on the Persian 'other,' as evidenced by subsequent Hellenistic policy in concordance with this reasoning, evolved beyond the simple dichotomy of Greeks and Persians. What was good was no longer solely what was Greek; likewise, what was bad was not merely what was 'other.' A universal standard of society – based on a common rubric – had been developed, with which it was possible to better understand the notion of the 'other.' However, following Xenophon's praise of Persian society, many within Athenian academic circles maintained their prejudiced, antithetical conception of the 'other.' The reductive Greek depiction of the 'other,' in fact, from the time of Aeschylus, remains as ubiquitous today in society, as illustrated by Said.<sup>35</sup> That being said, while their understandings may not have eradicated previous preconceptions, Herodotus and especially Xenophon represent an evolving discourse on the 'other.'

Greek perception of the Persian 'other' has not been static over time. Its evolution has been shaped by concurrent factors both from within Greek society and from without. While there are common motifs present – namely, characteristics ascribed to barbarians – the perception of the Persians and the qualitative definition of barbarian changed greatly in the period spanning Aeschylus and Xenophon. The changing perception of the Persian 'other' corresponds to the evolving classification of what constituted a barbarian. The initial definition of a barbarian presented by Aeschylus, that of merely a non-Greek, was replaced by Herodotus' delineation between a citizen and a slave and his acceptance of the Persian ability to progress. In terms of the scope of this paper, the Greek understanding of the 'other' receives its ultimate expression – the expression carried forth by Alexander into the Hellenistic age – in the writings of Xenophon. Xenophon freed the Persian 'other' from the title of barbarian and provided a universal conception of the dichotomy between the civilized and the barbaric.

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<sup>35</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 56.