

Slide 7 Handout: Broader cultural attitudes of Greeks towards non-Greek ethnicities in the Classical Period (ca. 479 – 323 BCE): ‘Greekness’ as a shifting construct*

I. Pre-classical Greeks originally identified with their city states & did not think of themselves collectively as ‘Greeks’ until after the Persian Wars, ca. 470s BCE (see Presentation 1):

A. The Persian Wars prompted Greeks to define themselves as the ‘opposite’ of the Persians — making Persians the first ‘barbarians,’ though the term soon included other non-Greeks.

B. Greeks considered ‘barbarians’ innately different. According to this ‘racial formation,’ barbarians were irrational beings who required/benefitted from the rational supervision that Greeks could provide (e.g., Aristotle’s *Politics* claims that barbarians are ‘slaves by nature’). In sum, ‘barbarians’ were ‘racialized’, i.e., Greeks viewed ‘ethnicity’ as *we* view ‘race.’ Thus, Greeks’ belief that environment shapes morals, intellect, appearance, & types of governance meant that ‘wild, unintelligent’ Northern Europeans & ‘servile, intelligent’ Asians benefitted from being enslaved (ideas seen in modern racist discourse).

1. Enslaved ‘barbarians’ were people of all skin colors and ethnicities. Greeks also enslaved each other because of war (between city-states) and poverty. Though Greek city-states had always practiced chattel slavery the newer concept of the ‘barbarian’ merely offered them a different rationale for enslaving others.

2. The logics applied to ‘barbarians’ mirror those applied to non-citizens in a typical city-state (*especially* women, but also the poor and enslaved people). Since citizens were usually aristocratic men, the ‘racial formation’ of ‘the barbarian’ is effectively aristocratic/elitist, misogynistic chauvinism applied on a broad scale!

II. Yet, unsurprisingly, the 470s BCE also marked the origin of the debate whether ‘Greekness’ was determined by lineage/ancestry or participation in Greek cultural practices: could anyone become ‘Greek’ by adopting ‘Greek’ language, culture, & ritual? As Greek ideas about ‘Greekness’ changed & developed, so did their ‘racial formations.’

A. In Herodotus’ *Histories* 8.144.2 (written in the mid-400s BCE) the Athenians explain to the Spartans why they would never side with Persians against their fellow Greeks. As they do so, they appear to locate ‘Greekness’ in common descent, language, and ancestrally shared cultural practices:

πολλά τε γὰρ καὶ μεγάλα ἐστὶ τὰ διακωλύοντα ταῦτα μὴ ποιεῖν μηδ’ ἦν ἐθέλωμεν, πρῶτα μὲν καὶ μέγιστα τῶν θεῶν τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ τὰ οἰκήματα ἐμπερησμένα τε καὶ συγκεχωσμένα, τοῖσι ἡμέας ἀναγκαίως ἔχει τιμωρέειν ἐς τὰ μέγιστα μᾶλλον ἢ περ ὁμολογέειν τῷ ταῦτα ἐργασαμένῳ, αὐτὶς δὲ τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐὼν ὁμαιμὸν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἡθεά τε ὁμότροπα, τῶν προδότας γενέσθαι Ἀθηναίους οὐκ ἂν εἶ ἔχοι.

For there are many important/great reasons that keep us from doing this, even if we were willing to do so. First and foremost, is the statues and the temples of our gods, burnt to the ground and covered in rubble [on the Athenian Acropolis], which we are compelled to avenge to the utmost, rather than to make a pact with the one enacting these atrocities [Persia]. And, next, is our being Greek, being of one blood and one tongue, having both shrines of the gods and sacrificial rituals in common, and sharing customs and habits of life, which it would not be right for Athenians to betray.

B. Yet around 380 BCE, as the Athenian orator Isocrates urges all ‘Greeks’ to unite against Persia, he argues that ‘Greekness’ is more about culture/learning than ancestry (*Panegyricus* 50):

τοσοῦτον δ’ ἀπολέλοιπεν ἡ πόλις ἡμῶν περὶ τὸ φρονεῖν καὶ λέγειν τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους, ὥσθ’ οἱ ταύτης μαθηταὶ τῶν ἄλλων διδάσκαλοι γεγόνاسι, καὶ τὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὄνομα πεποίηκε μηκέτι τοῦ γένους ἀλλὰ τῆς διανοίας δοκεῖν εἶναι, καὶ μᾶλλον Ἑλλήνας καλεῖσθαι τοὺς τῆς παιδείας τῆς ἡμετέρας ἢ τοὺς τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως μετέχοντας.

And by so great a distance has our city [Athens] left behind the rest of humanity in respect to thinking and speaking, that her students have become the teachers of others, and she has made it that the name of ‘Hellenes’ [Greeks] no longer seems to be a matter of descent/bloodline [*genos*] but of mindset/understanding [*dianoia*], and that those to be called ‘Hellenes’ are those who share our culture/education [*paideusis*], rather than those who share a common origin/birth/nature [*phusis*].

III. Warning: students should not confuse citizenship with ‘Greekness’. Citizenship was a special status reserved for a small number of wealthy/aristocratic men that allowed them a share in governance, state duties/privileges, and state ritual. Even in democratic Athens, the majority of residents did not have citizenship. You did not need to be a citizen to be ‘Greek’, Thus:

A. For most city-states: women & common men of Greek ancestry were ‘Greek’, but neither group could be citizens. In democratic Athens: those with Greek ancestry were Greek. All free men with Athenian paternity were citizens until a new law (451 BCE) required that *both* parents be ‘Athenian’. Athenian women in citizen families may have had a form of citizenship tied to state ritual (Block 2017).

B. If a Greek citizen in city-state ‘X’ moves to city-state ‘Y’, he cannot be a citizen of city-state ‘Y’ but is still Greek. (**Note:**, the Greek for ‘resident alien’ was *metoikos* (in English: *metic*). *Metics* were not usually treated well by the laws of their new city-state. Athens treated its *metics* quite poorly, though wealthier *metics* seem to have had better experiences).

C. If someone’s ancestry is not Greek but their family has lived in Greece for generations (so she/he speaks Greek, lives like Greeks, & practices Greek religious ritual), is she/he ‘Greek’? See: **II.**, above.

*Translations by Leah Himmelhoch