

Facts, Fictions and Fundamentals of “Barbarian” in Westerners’ Gaze before 1492 from a Eurocentrism Perspective

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Abstract: This paper interprets some facts, fictions and fundamentals of the “barbarian” in Westerners eyes since ancient Greek till 15th century, examines the mind embodied in the time travel of βάρβαρος, tries to find the essence of Western centrism and its metaphysical interpretation, traces the evolution of the concept of “barbarian”, providing a key to understanding the European consciousness of the world. It also posits the Greek sense of superiority nurtured the ancient Roman and Catholic Church, developed into a strong Eurocentric vision, a narcissism that never wavered even when their politics, economy, and culture were at a low ebb, and that nationalism, populism, racial discrimination, cultural centrism, colonialism, and ethnocentrism were ghostly present almost everywhere in Europe around the era of the first European contact with Americas.

1. Introduction

Where there are people labelled “barbarians” that are facts or fictions, there is some autocentrism; when there is a mirror image of barbarism in eyes of a people, they have a sense of autocentrism. The history of “barbarians” is far from being as simple and straightforward but not rootless as one might think. It is paradoxical that when those who regard themselves as a civilized and noble people despise the others, they are often belittled by “the others” or reduced to “barbarians” by third parties. There is a chain of contempt in the mind of both the so-called civilized and the barbarian people, and the construction of the chain often begins with language, although accompanied and derived by geographical, racial, cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions. Chinese and scholars of other countries have done much research, but there is still room for further study.

It has been at least 2800 years since ancient Greece, the “barbarian” was coined and they were gazed and despised by the westerners, but the West the academic study of the “barbarians” began with Steinhofers 1732 treatise “Dissertatio Critica de Voce βάρβαρος”, simple but seminal. Julius Jüthner’s “Hellenen und Barbaren: aus der Geschichte des Nationalbewusstseins”(1923) deals with the development of various types of ethnical consciousness in Greece. Currently one of the three main directions of research on this issue in Western academia is to analyze the barbarians or the imaginary barbarians and construct their own national identity by taking the self and the other as the starting point of the discourse system of the self and the other. Inventing the Barbarian: The Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy by Edith Hall borrows Said’s concept of “Orientalism” to analyze the shaping of the image of the Oriental in Greek tragedy. In China, the studies distributed in ethnohistory, anthropology, and linguistics, analyze the origins of barbaros, whose semantics extend from purely describing foreign languages to dismissively referring to all non-Greeks - barbarians. Similar studies also follow the roadmap, with facts and fictions, but lacking fundamentals and explanations; what is most focused basically is on ancient Greece. In short, the show of literature is sufficient, while in-depth analysis is deficient.

2. Barbarians in Greek’s Eyes

The civilization/barbarism dichotomy is common among historically powerful peoples, but the Western concept of the “barbarian” has its own unique trajectory, temporally, from pre-Homeric

times to modern times, spatially, from the Greek to its “alien lands”, semantically, from “bird talk” to “barbarians”, hence national spirit, social psychology of universal prejudice, and ethnocentrism. Accounts of barbarian are presented and represented from Greek epic to later philosophy, literature, history books, and vase painting, which are became intertextual. It is noteworthy that the focus of “barbarians” narration in the ancient Greek period was chiefly cultural, in the Roman period was political, in the Middle Ages was religious, in the Renaissance was ethnic, in the age of sea navigation was contempt for the colonial indigenous population, and in modern Europe was mutual attack among nation-states, especially against the colonies in the East and Africa.

2.1. Origin of Barbaros

Diachronic linguists believe ancient Greeks alluded barbaros (βάρβαρος, pl. βάρβαροι (barbaroi)) towards those who could not speak Greek or follow Greek customs.^[1] It originates from the Mycenaean Linear B, with its symbolic sequence 𐀀𐀀𐀀 respectively for pa-pa-ro, meaning “not Pylos” (Pylos of the Peloponnese, Greek Πύλος), and binarily distinguished the Pylos from the rest of the population with a sense of self identity, but it is neutral without connotation of “disgust or contempt”. Barbarophonos, cited from Iliad, came into use not only for the sound of a foreign tongue but also for foreigners who spoke Greek improperly. At length, centuries later, it denotes all languages except Greek are “bar...bar” nonsense, like the modern English blah blah, mocking the coarse language of foreigners. Later, it expanded semantically to weird noises, referring to the foreigners, distinguishing self from other, had the hint of degradation. They are “stutterers” (Latin bulbus), stammerers and babblers, which is why the Greeks also called them barbaroi. However, the term was also used by Greeks, especially the Athenians, to deride other Greek tribes or polis (such as Epirotes, Eleans, Macedonians, Boeotians) but also fellow Athenians, in a pejorative and politically motivated manner.

2.2. Barbaros in Ancient Greece

The narrative of the Greek vase painting is similar to that of Homer’s epic, a way of expressing myth. The portrayal of barbarians in vases gradually became a Greek painting tradition and a shift towards a simple, dualistic Hellenocentric worldview of ancient Greece, reflected in the elaborate differentiation of barbarian Thracian, Scythian, Persian, Ethiopian costumes. It is generally acknowledged that the natural antipathy towards foreigners was particularly strong in the case of ancient Greeks, who were, as they conceived, a chosen race and the very children of the gods, a race primarily and lineally distinct from the rest of humankind, whose holy separation was attested by that deep instinct of their nature which taught them to loathe the alien, the so-called barbarians. Euripides introduced the idea that “barbarians are essentially slaves”; Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, and others considered barbarians to be born slaves. Heraclitus of Ephesus first truly assigns a pejorative to βάρβαρος, and his contempt for the barbarians is apparent when he observes that the eyes and ears of men “with barbarian souls” bear bad witness.^[2] Greek lyric poet Anacreon also openly disdains foreigners in his works. Up to the fifth century B.C., although it was full of pejoratives, it still referred to languages. In 472 B.C., the premiere of Aeschylus’s “The Persians” (Persai) formally stretched βάρβαρος / βάρβαροι to the ill-mannered, alienated people who were slaves by nature, so the vilified barbarians who first came into the Greek public eyes. After Greco-Persian Wars, its connotation was gradually from the “otherness” of the “bird talk” people to the “ferocity” of the Philistines and Vandals, and finally all kinds of brutal, tyrannical, slavish and irrational images of the barbarians depicted in the Greek literature. From classical origins the Hellenic stereotype of barbarism evolved: barbarians are like children, unable to speak or reason properly, cowardly, effeminate, luxurious, cruel, unable to control their appetites and desires, politically unable to govern themselves. Writers voiced these stereotypes with much shrillness - Isocrates, for example, called for a war of conquest against Persia as a panacea for Greek problems.

However, some classical writers in Greece again showed respect and praise for the barbarians, and during Hellenic Greek ethnocentrism of the Greeks declined. Disparaging Hellenic stereotype of barbarians did not totally dominate Hellenic attitudes. Xenophon, for example, wrote the “Cyropaedia”, a laudatory fictionalized account of Cyrus the Great, the founder of Persian Empire,

effectively a utopian text. The Greeks admired Scythians and Galatians as heroic individuals –as in the case of Anacharsis, flourished early 6th century BC –made a great impression as a forthright, outspoken “barbarian”, but his culture was regarded as barbaric. By the time of Hellenistic Greece, the Greeks in “Peri Hyperborean” by Hecataeus of Abdera presented themselves as “civilized men”, despising and criticizing the “barbarians” in a condescending manner, imagining “self” as the mirror image of “other”. In the face of the barbarians, there is both a superiority complex and satisfaction in the friendliness of the “barbarians” towards the “civilized man”.

In this era, the attitude of the Greeks towards the barbarians changed in some way. Expedition of Alexander the Great brought about idea of a world empire, and he believed that there was no difference between Greeks and barbarians. As is known Cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412 B.C.), who said: “Asked where he came from, he answered: ‘I am a citizen of the world (kosmopolitês)’”. The Stoics, who later took Diogenes’ idea and developed it, typically stressed that each human being “dwells [...] in two communities – the local community of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration”. A common way to understand Stoic cosmopolitanism is through Hierocles’ circle model of identity. The task of world citizens becomes then to “draw the circles somehow towards the center, making all human beings more like our fellow city dwellers, and so forth”^[3].

3. Barbarians from Greece onward to Pan-west.

And yet, is it but the Greeks? It is not the case. Nietzsche observed that the good feelings of a collective consciousness of a systematic organization towards itself was proportional to resentment of alien others. Via βάρβαρος’s travels, linguistic contacts, enculturation, exemplified in the intertextuality of various texts, it becomes a tool to deride the “barbarians”, a reflection of the universal human disparagement and prejudice against the alien. The post-Greek European powers inherited the tradition, each with its own expressions to localize a similar phonetic, semantic, or canonical reference, eventually became the common stock in the Indo-European language family, with certain phonetic or morphemic changes.

The Romans indiscriminately characterized the myriad Germanic tribes, Gauls, and Huns as barbarians, and subsequent classically oriented historical narratives depicted the migrations associated with the end of the Western Roman Empire as the “barbarian invasions”. The Romans adapted the term to refer to what was non-Roman. Barbaros was converted into Latin barbari or brabarus. Roman celebrities including Tacitus, Cicero, Vitruvius, Caesar, Virgil, etc., and the Roman public refer to non-Greeks or non-Romans as the “barbarous”. Prejudice against a heterogeneous culture outside the Greco-Roman tradition prevails in Latin rhetoric, and this prejudice is reinforced by the political and military dominance of the West. Pliny considered the Roman inhabitants to be elegant, clear-headed, and creative, and thus superior to the barbarians. According to Cicero, the antithesis of “barbarian” (homo barbarus) is “civilized man” (homo humanus), which is a synonym for “Roman” (Romanus). Like barbarous in context of aforesaid Pylos, Cicero once described the mountain area of inner Sardinia as “a land of barbarians”, with these inhabitants also known by the manifestly pejorative term latrones mastrucati (“thieves with a rough garment in wool”). The region, still known as “Barbagia” (in Sardinian Barbàgia or Barbàza), preserves this old “barbarian” designation in its name – but it no longer consciously retains “barbarian” associations: the inhabitants of the area themselves use the name naturally and unaffectedly. Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (a Roman Christian poet) even declared, “Yet what is Roman and what is barbarian are as different from each other as the four-footed creature is distinct from the two-footed or the dumb from the speaking; and no less apart are they who loyally obey God's commands from senseless cults and their superstitions.”^[4] The Saracens, another term for the Arabs, were also despised by Rome as barbarians. The Arabs, together with the Thracians and the Vikings, had a common name in the eyes of the “authentic” Westerners, the “barbarian bandits”.

In New Testament, St. Paul (from Tarsus) uses the word barbarian in its Hellenic sense to refer to non-Greeks (Romans 1:14), and he also uses it to characterize one who merely speaks a different language (1 Corinthians 14:11). The term retained its standard usage in the Greek language

throughout the Middle Ages; After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the concept of “barbarian” also changed significantly in the 5th to 7th centuries. Frankish historian Gregory of Tours, so-called “Herodotus of the Barbarian Kingdom” rarely used the word “barbarus” to indicate the Frankish in his “*Historia Francorum*”, in which, barbarus and pagan are synonymous, indicating that the word gradually acquired a religious meaning. In the new context of the Middle Ages, the “Western-Christian, non-Western-Pagan” model of defining self and other began to take shape, in which context the Other means primarily all pagans who do not believe in Christ. With the completion of Christianization within Europe, the Other means primarily the Islamic world beyond Western cultural boundaries. Byzantine Greeks used it widely until the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire. They have dismissed alien cultures and rival civilizations for unrecognizable strangeness. Besides, under the Catholic chain of contempt they despised the Central Asian nomadic steppe Turkic peoples in north of the Black Sea, including the Pechenegs and the Kipchaks as barbarians (Berber). After the Christianization of the Byzantine Empire and under the first Christian monarch, Constantine I, mixobarbaroi (semi-barbarians) were used to denote non-Romans who had Christian beliefs and lived on the imperial border. During the Byzantine period of the 11-12th centuries, it was mainly used to represent the linguistic and mixed ethnic groups of the Danube River basin. In medieval Christian texts, the term “barbarian” initially referred to non-Greeks, but gradually became “non-Christian” and “non-Christian territory”, with adjectives referring in particular to hostile paganism (Paynim, Slavic peoples, etc.), portraying Muslim opponents as tools of the devil, although Muslims in the south had a higher material and cultural civilization. This opposing view of religion is also reflected in literary masterpieces such as “*La Chanson de Roland*”. In 1453, when the Ottoman Turks captured and sacked Constantinople, astonished Europeans used the traditional meaning of “barbarian” to refer to Islamist Turkey, emphasizing that its brutality and ferocity threatened the very existence of entire Europe.

During the Renaissance, it became “non-Italian” in the eyes of the Italians, which is similarly depicted in Shakespeare’s “*Othello*” and Dante’s “*Paradiso*” in “*Divine Comedy*”, and after the dissolution of the Charlemagne in 843 at the Council of Verdun, the major European nation-states were formed, all claiming to be authentic superior, with Greco-Roman and Christianity taking second place. States and nations, the religious and the secular, began to denounce and denigrate one another and to label the other as barbarus. Interestingly, Scandinavia and Britain were pejoratively called barbarians for their Geographical periphery to the core of Rome, and in 1095, Pope Urban II instigated the First Crusade, delivering a speech in which he described the newly converted Scandinavian nations as “barbarians”. His successor, Pope Paschal II, in a letter of encouragement to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, also said that he had been sent to England “among the barbarians” in virtual exile, in which context Britain was the land of the barbarians, as the 13th-century English chronicler, Matthew Paris, quoted a letter from Henry Raspe, wherein Mongol bestiality is described in terms reminiscent of Gog and Magog: “sunt enim corpore terribiles, vultu furiosi, oculis iracundi, manibus rapaces, dentibus sanguinolenti, et eorum fauces ad carnem hominum comedendam et humanum sanguinem absorbendum omni tempore sunt paratae” (“They had terrible bodies, hideous faces, fierce eyes, raptor-like arms and blood-dripping teeth, and their throats were ready to bite human flesh and drink human blood.”) ^[5] In English, the term “Berber” continues to be used as an exonym. Historically, the term barbarian has seen widespread use in English. However the external enemy changed, the Jews and Gypsies were constantly labelled as “barbarians”.

After 1492, European countries, although having different cultural and political systems, agreed on a model for their perception of the Americas. The “primitive, uncivilized” image of the Indians portrayed in “*Columbus Landed in San Salvador*” built up a prejudice not to be erased for centuries. “Indians were quite devoid of reason, but that they were indeed capable of sensing reason in the way that animals do...they were content so long as they had enough to eat and drink...they are barbarians and so far from the knowledge of God and cut off from all civilized nations”. ^[6] While it is true there was backwardness among Americas, the main purpose of the repeated European emphasis on the barbarity of the New World was to confirm the superiority of the European

civilized self. “barbarism” has no substance for American society itself, and it is only by comparing the civilization of the “self” with the barbarism of the “other” that Europeans can affirm their civilizational superiority. So, the inhabitants of the New World have two images. One is noble savage, the other more generally anthropological also savage. Michel de Montaigne used “barbarian” to characterize the activities of the Spaniards in the New World, “barbarian” has undergone a semantic change, then some literature arose in Europe that characterized the indigenous Indian peoples as innocent and noble.

4. Conclusion

According to Foucault, fact and fiction sometimes intertwined, any fact is political, and language and knowledge are inevitably shaped by power, making it impossible to express fully objective facts. The so-called unity and continuity of history is essentially an “interpretation” and the apparent consistency of discourse is nothing more than an illusion or created by power. This is one of the fundamentals. The Greek built the Greek-barbarian dichotomy, hence Eurocentrism, which is a worldview or an ideological bias in the humanities and an implicit belief in seeing the world as a whole from a European perspective, consciously or subconsciously feeling a sense of European superiority over the world, developed it, with its essentialism character, and with its tendency to generalize many complex objects into a small number of types that are easy to handle and easy to describe...such as the division of man into barbarians, Europeans, Asians, etc., in line with the binary classification of civilization (self) and barbarism (other), which later structuralist theory called human fervor. This is what Malinowski and C. Geertz called the native’s point of view. As a Chinese maxim goes, one mountain that is lower than this one is higher than the others.

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