

Candidate evidence

Us and Them: Exploring Classical Greek Conceptions of 'The Other'



3797 words

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....	3
'The Other' in Herodotus.....	4
'The Other' as described by later Classical writers.....	6
Modern Accounts of 'The Other'.....	9
Conclusion.....	10
Bibliography.....	11

Introduction:

"If anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations in the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably—after careful considerations of their relative merits—choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best."¹

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that Herodotus was an "inexhaustibly curious chronicler"². Following his exile from Halicarnassus, Herodotus travelled widely around Greece, West Asia, and North Africa in the 5th Century B.C., and certainly was curious. He wrote, in detail, of the peoples of Persia, Lydia, Egypt, India, and Ethiopia among others, making him perhaps one of the earliest anthropologists. Herodotus' works on culture played a vital role in classical times, spreading knowledge and awareness of human beings whom most people would never have the chance to meet. His writing explored the complexities of religion, tradition, and morality in many people groups, and has now immortalised groups whom we today may otherwise have never known.

'Othering' is a concept directly connected to the way in which we view ourselves. It is the idea that the 'I' and the 'us' forms the 'natural' or 'ideal' state of humanity, and that anything different from that, is 'other' to us. This shows itself in that people of different categories from us, for example culture, sex, race or social status, are because of these traits and differences judged, and de-valued. This 'us and them' mentality does two things: it defines the other as something different, and in doing so is a means of defining what 'we' are. To put down the 'other' and raise the 'self', gains one an identity. If the 'other' is *unintelligent*, 'we' are intelligent. It is a form of cultural alienation and historically has been used philosophically as a means for justification of difference-based discrimination and violence.

This is not a uniquely classical issue – we see it carry on in many forms throughout history. In modern history, between the fifteenth and nineteenth century A.D., through European colonialism – 'othering' has seen entire people groups exploited; criminalised by their religion or ethnic background and justified through notions of 'us and them'. This is what makes this area of investigation so crucial, because of its huge significance to modern history and to the present day. Writers who avoid a negative 'othering' process, such as Herodotus, are vital to a healthy understanding of how we view ourselves and others. To have an empathetical and anthropological viewpoint regarding people groups other than our own, actively seeking to understand and humanise, can bring about constructive and transformative change.

Through what has survived of classical text, we often see the formation of what is sometimes referred to as 'othering'. 'Barbarian', a classical Greek word referring to all non-Greeks – or all non-Greek speakers – plays a key part in how we can decipher exactly the history and context of this 'othering' of foreigners. In Homer's works, we once see the word in the form of "*barbarophonos*"³, referring to someone with a language which the Greeks could not understand. It is, however, 300 years later when we see 'barbarian' used much more

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*. P. 38

² Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, P. 58

³ Redmond, Frank, *You Barbarian! Greek Kernel of Orientalism*. Paragraph 6.

commonly. Following the Greek defeat of the Persian empire, we see power and conquest alter the minds of Greeks in terms of how they view the other – a view which is belittling and derogatory. 'Barbarian' is used later by Plato to refer to non-Greeks who fight in an uncivilised manner, through "war"⁴ with the Greeks, as opposed to Greeks who *fight* Greeks, in which case "Greece is sick... and divided by faction"⁵.

With this in mind, this research aims to compare, and contrast works of classical Greek writers and philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle on their understandings and comprehension of people who are foreign to them through race, status, and gender, and the resulting power dynamics and sense of superiority which follows these differences. In doing so it aims to identify Herodotus as an outlier of the time due to his unique sense of acceptance of all societal 'others'.

The exploration of this concept gives insight into the minds of humanity, discovering how national power can confer inherent worth. It also helps us to understand how Ancient Greece, which formed the foundations on which today's Western society rests, shaped how we view societal others today. Herodotus' *Histories* has been considered the basis for all Western history and gives in many cases the earliest accounts written about certain highly influential historic events and groups, such as the Greco-Persian wars, and information about the Persian Empire.

This dissertation addresses a complex historical and cultural issue that has repercussions for our evaluation not only of Greek texts, but also their reception in later times, which may have influenced fundamentally our view of 'the other' in the West. While the alternative titles '*Othering in Herodotus*' and '*A Greek view of Greekness*' were considered, it was finally titled '*Us and Them: Exploring Classical Greek Conceptions of 'The Other'*', as this title fully allows for the breadth of relevant topics and areas involved in this 'othering', and can capture more accurately Herodotus' unique position as an outlier compared to surrounding historians, playwrights, and philosophers.

'The Other' in Herodotus

Herodotus is not immune to the biases of the Greek ideas of the self and the other; we see Herodotus use the word 'barbarian' to describe the Persians on some occasions⁶, however there is certainly an aspect of his history which does indeed give dignity and respect to the Persians and surrounding states which were very much 'othered' to the Greeks. Herodotus, uniquely, seems to have a desire to respect cultures foreign to his own.

In Book 1, Herodotus writes about the religious practices of the Persians, explaining why anthropomorphic statues are not erected in Persia, while they are in Greece – under Greek religion. He attempts to understand the way in which their un-anthropomorphic belief system works, writing about "Zeus, in their system"⁷. While Herodotus has been criticised for

⁴ Plato, *The Republic*. 5. 470c.

⁵ Ibid 5. 470c

⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories*, P. 3

⁷ P. 61

minimising or limiting the religion of the Persians into the same boundaries as the Greek religion, alternatively, it could be argued that he was, in fact, honouring their ways through self-comparison. Instead of putting them down in this othering, Herodotus honours difference through comparison: stating that just as Zeus in Greek religion is revered, the Persian gods too, are highly praised and important. The alternative is a description where the writer is unwilling to understand or give honour to another's religion or culture and devalues or demonises it. Herodotus gives it value and praise in comparing it to something he too regards as holy and perfect, as Zeus was the most important figure in classical Greek religion.

In contrast, in Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*, a Greek comedy, the Persian Ambassador visits Athens and is mocked. The Persian language is reduced and de-valued, as he says "*Yartaman esharsha sapitchona satro*"⁸. The Persian language is portrayed as gibberish simply because it is not understood by the Greek-speakers, showing a feeling of Greek lingual superiority. The ambassador, too, is described as the "*great gorilla himself*"⁹ – he is animalised, simply on the grounds of his racial difference; mocked because of his foreignness of physicality. Although this is set in comedic context, it makes clear the general societal prejudices of Greeks towards ethnic 'others', and its comedic place shows it to be an issue so casually discussed that it is chosen as a point of humour in a play. This stands in clear contrast to Herodotus' openness to understand the Persians. Aristophanes' public work mocks these 'others', revealing a much more deep-set and accepted societal prejudice.

This concept of accepting rather than reducing the 'other' is not unique to Herodotus' *Histories*. In book 3, he examines the funeral rites of an Indian tribe named the "*Callatae*"¹⁰, describing a custom where they "*in fact eat their parents' dead bodies*"¹¹. Cannibalism was highly frowned upon and villainised in Greek society – "*few transgressions were as heinous*"¹². It was considered sub-human, animalistic, and uncivilised. Herodotus, culturally, may be inclined to write negatively about any form of cannibalism, however, he chooses to use this tribe's customs as a lesson in the subjectivity of what is moral and what is not. He argues that it is "*custom*"¹³ which is "*king of all*"¹⁴, and that it is custom which creates these differences between groups of people, rather than the differences being caused by inherent worth. Herodotus reinforced this in a comparison between Greek and Callatae burial rites in book 3, writing that when the King of Persia:

*"summoned the Greeks... and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later... he asked some Indians, of the tribe of Callatae, who do in fact eat their parents' dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing."*¹⁵

⁸ Aristophanes, *The Acharnians*. P. 53

⁹ Ibid P. 54

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, P.187

¹¹ Ibid P. 187

¹² Gipson, Christopher Lawrence, *Anthropophagy and cannibalism in ancient Greek literature*. Section: Abstract.

¹³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, P. 187

¹⁴ Ibid P. 187

¹⁵ Ibid P. 187

Herodotus makes a direct comparison between vastly contrasting cultural ideas of morality, and instead of ranking one higher than the other, he places both at the same level. In fact, he uses the Greek side to humanise the Indian custom and encourage a Greek audience to consider the Indian rites from an open and understanding perspective. In the description of the people of the Callatae tribe forbidding even the *"mention [of] such a dreadful thing"*¹⁶, Herodotus shows his readers that both societies have customs which they extol and abhor, and that just as the Greek culture abhors eating of the dead, the Callatae, too, abhor their burning. He honours their right and their wrong, and instead of 'othering' them, he brings the Callatae to an even level in order to be understood not as foreigners or as others or barbarians, but simply as human beings like themselves, despite their differences.

Herodotus upholds this same attitude in relation to his writings on women. Jennifer Roberts writes that *"women interest him as actors in their own right"*¹⁷. Herodotus, unlike other writers of the time, praises women for their achievements in history just as he praises men. In book 1, he writes of the achievements of Tomyris of the Massagetae, the queen who ruled a state, and who opposed and defiled the body of one of the greatest kings in antiquity¹⁸. She is justified, courageous, and firm in her actions – she is manlier than her opponents, despite being a woman. Against the Persians, a massive empire, the Massagetae, under her command,

*"got the upper hand, the greater part of the Persian army was destroyed where it stood, and Cyrus himself was killed."*¹⁹

And, on finding the body of Cyrus, she *"pushed his head into a skin which she had filled with human blood"*²⁰ and cried out: *"I fulfil my threat: you have your fill of blood."*²¹

He, too, writes about Artemisia of Halicarnassus in book 7 – a queen who stepped into the role of war despite there being *"no necessity for her to do so"*²². Herodotus is in awe of her ability, saying that *"not one of the confederate commanders gave Xerxes sounder advice than she did"*²³.

'The Other' as described by later Classical writers

Plato and Aristotle, Philosophers in Athens, write, too, about 'the other' through interpretations of slaves, foreigners, and women. Their accounts of these groups of 'others' do not compare to Herodotus' curious and honouring ones.

Plato, in *Gorgias*, writes about slavery, arguing that *"justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior"*²⁴. He believes that those who rule are inherent

¹⁶ Ibid P. 187

¹⁷ Roberts, Jennifer T., 'Women in history, women in *The Histories*', Chapter 5

¹⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*, P. 94

¹⁹ Ibid P. 93

²⁰ Ibid P. 94

²¹ Ibid P. 94

²² Ibid P. 447

²³ Ibid P. 447

²⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*. 488b

rulers, and those who are ruled have, too, been assigned that role. He does not consider power through an understanding of it as plentiful resources or military strength, instead it is biological inheritance. Power, which is gained in war through organisation or weaponry, he magnifies to be an essentiality placed within man at birth – and he states that this is “justice”. He furthers this sentiment, saying,

“One must punish slaves justly, not spoiling them by admonition as if they were freemen”²⁵,

showing his belief that some people are naturally more worthy of freedom than others, and that not all human beings should be treated as equals. Aristotle, his student, echoes this, writing that *“some should rule and others be ruled”²⁶*, and states further that it is,

“not only necessary, but expedient; from the hours of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.”²⁷

This idea of there being an innate differential of value in human beings, determined by ethnic background has been named ‘Aristotelian Slavery’ or ‘Natural Slavery’. It is the epitome of ‘othering’. This othering is not a result of, or reaction to ignorance or fear; it is a weaponising of difference used to one’s philosophical advantage to justify inhuman treatment of other human beings.

This sense of an inherent weighing and ranking of worth is not unique in Aristotle’s work. It continues in his explorations of differences between the sexes. He believes, also, that in,

“regards to the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.”²⁸

As a man – in the way that he does as a Greek and a freeman – Aristotle uses a method of ‘othering’ to elevate himself to a level of highest status. Whether this mindset has formed out of innocent ignorance, or out of a malicious drive for supremacy of identity, it is undoubtedly a harmful and oppressive tool of the mind.

Aristotle’s misogynistic viewpoint, however, was not the exclusive understanding of women in classical Greece. Along with Herodotus’ celebration of achieved classical women, Euripides, in his play *Medea*, explores the frustrations and injustices of the classical woman, writing empathetically through the character ‘Medea’ that, *“Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the sorriest lot”²⁹*. Medea, who was both a foreigner in Greece, and a woman, was seen in her struggle through both, and despite her hardships was an esteemed character, and a relative of the gods.

The mentality of an innate drive for power is explored further in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In book 1, Athenian representatives address Sparta and her allies, stating:

²⁵ Plato, *Laws*. 777e

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*. P. 58

²⁷ *Ibid.* P. 58

²⁸ *Ibid.* P. 59

²⁹ Euripides, *Medea*. Lines 229-230.

"We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up"³⁰.

Thucydides opens up the idea that perhaps it is indeed "human nature" that drives people to search for superiority and power wherever they can find it, by whatever means, and that this 'othering', is simply one tool by which one may reach this finality of ultimate power.

Aristotle continues this power-hungry 'othering' to the extent to which he compares slaves to animals, saying in *Politics*, that:

"the use of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life".³¹

As Aristophanes did with the Persian Ambassador, Aristotle, too, does with slaves: people who are foreign are dehumanised. We can see a trend in classical Greece, of a sense of self superiority gained through the practice of 'othering' by naming non-Greeks, animals. The wealth and power of classical Greece – Aristotle's Athens in particular – relied completely upon the work of slaves. This 'othering' justified the inhuman treatment of them and upheld the greatness of Athens. Further, seeing the 'other' as an animal, enables the Greeks to see themselves as civilised, rational, and intelligent.

This, however, is not at all what we see in the work of Herodotus. Even Herodotus' simple explanations of cultural normalities of nations sets him out as a uniquely refreshing anthropologist, interested in people as fellow human beings – complex and intricate, not groups to be conquered and subjugated. His simple recognition of significant women places him leagues above other writers of his time.

There is, however, a significant difference in the lives and travels of Plato and Aristotle, compared to that of Herodotus. Herodotus, who strives to understand the foreigner, not only grew up in Halicarnassus – a Persian-ruled Ionian city, ruled by a queen – he, too, travelled very extensively, actively learning about the people and customs of each place he visited. Plato, despite growing up and spending most of his life in Athens, did travel to Italy, and briefly went as far as Egypt, however, his travels tended to lead him to other great thinkers like Pythagoras, rather than to experiences with people from the places he travelled to. Aristotle, on the other hand, was born in the Greek city Stagira, and moved to Athens at the age of 17 to study under Plato. When he left Athens in his late 30s, he only travelled to other Greek states. Perhaps it was Herodotus' contact with non-Greeks which gave him adequate experience of humanity outside of a purely Hellenic perspective, and the ability to comprehend humanity outside of his own culture.

Additionally, it may be important to note the difference in genre of the writers which may factor into the difference in treatment of 'others'. Aristotle's philosophical treatises are meant to categorise, clarify, and draw clear distinctions in order to construct a functioning philosophical system that supports a certain point of view or a status quo. Herodotus, on the other hand, while stating that the overall purpose of his *Histories* is to ensure that "human

³⁰ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. P. 80

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*. P. 59, 60.

*achievements may not become forgotten in time*³², he seems to take particular pleasure in exploring the variety of cultures he came across in his travels.

Modern Accounts of 'The Other'

The blight of 'othering' is certainly not restricted just to the minds of classical thinkers. Modern history is no exception. The horrors of European colonialism were built upon the philosophy that these non-Europeans were barbarian, brutish, and uncivilised – like animals. This 'othering' led not only to European occupation of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East, but within these areas, mass killing, loss of culture and loss of identity. Whether or not this 'othering' passed on to Western philosophy (as many other foundational parts of modern Western society have been influenced by Greek culture), or if it is indeed an aspect of human nature, there are certainly shocking parallels with the classical Greek concepts of the 'self' and the 'other'.

This is evident in modern colonialism, where, in the words of Sven Lindqvist in *Exterminate all the Brutes*:

*"Too many Europeans interpreted military superiority as intellectual and even biological superiority."*³³

Just as in the concept of 'Aristotelian Slavery', in modern colonialism, too, the argument is made that people of different ethnic backgrounds have inherently determined 'less or greater' value. And Plato's words in *Laws*, advising harsh treatment of slaves is mirrored in *Exterminate All the Brutes*, through the diary of E.J. Graves, stating that towards the local people of the Congo:

*"It is no crime but a kindness to make them work... The measures adopted are severe, but the natives cannot be satisfactorily handled by coaxing; he must be governed by force."*³⁴

And, as in Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*, and Aristotle's *Politics*, in modern colonialism too, we see a reduction of people who are foreign. The colonised are debased, seen merely as animals. Sven Lindqvist speaks of Swedish missionaries in the Congo, whipping Congolese boys, proclaiming that *"the best of them is not too good to die like a pig"*³⁵.

Such a lack of belief in human worth has been proven in modern history to lead to extreme horrors and evils, where Lindqvist goes on to describe innumerable murders which were

*"committed during the conquest of the German East Africa colony [and] were considered quite natural and went unpunished."*³⁶

³² Herodotus, *The Histories*. P. 3

³³ Lindqvist, Sven, *Exterminate all the Brutes*. P. 174

³⁴ *Ibid* P. 175

³⁵ *Ibid* P. 174

³⁶ *Ibid* P. 205

'Othering' has shown itself leading people to such a polluted state of mentality where injustice and mass murder are considered "*natural*". It is in cases such as these, more than ever, that the works of writers like Herodotus are vital. Clearly, humanity is harshly inclined to grab for power whatever the means, regardless of the victims. It is the attitudes of writers such as Herodotus which have the power to influence people gently and empathetically on the unfamiliarities of that which is foreign to us – both in classical times just as much as in modern times. History has proven that it is all too easy to lose sight of the intricacies and worth of the people we are unfamiliar with, but Herodotus attacks this through his sense of excitement and curiosity that he finds in what is different – in the 'other'.

Conclusion:

It may be the case that this 'us and them' mentality *is* inherently human, but that only deepens the urgency for a shift in thought; for a new, constructive, and transformative way of viewing the world around us and the people in it. Herodotus, through his "*inexhaustibly curious*" view of humanity has been a shining example of how we can turn a fear of the unfamiliar into a beautiful and redemptive drive for appreciation. The prejudiced and self-involved views of Plato and Aristotle highlight not only the dangers of reducing the importance of human beings, but also lose the sense of beauty and wonder that can be found in uniqueness. Euripides' *Medea* helped to reinforce and remind the fact that regardless of the widespread nature of fear or belittling of 'others', there are always those who take notice of and appreciate the under-appreciated. However, Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate All the Brutes*, warns that it is easily within the grasp of human philosophy to be able to justify evil based on a notion of 'otherness' – creating mass movements in which horrors are normalised. Herodotus, with an open, joyous curiosity, and freedom of exploration, reminds us that difference is something to be intrigued by, not simply to be judged or exploited for our own power and advantage.

Bibliography

Roberts, Jennifer T., 'Women in history, women in *The Histories*', *Herodotus: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, 2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Sept. 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199575992.003.0006>, accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

Herodotus, *The Histories*. Published by the Penguin Group. This translation first published 1954. Further revised edition 2003. Translation copyright 1954 by Aubrey de Sélincourt. Revised edition with new introductory matter and Notes copyright John Marincola, 1996, 2003.

Georgiou, Irene-Evangelia (2002) *Women in Herodotus' "Histories"*. Thesis, Swansea University <http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa43005>
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161880979.pdf>

Plato, *Gorgias*, Translator: Benjamin Jowett. Release date: March 1999 [eBook #1672], [Most recently updated: April 27, 2022]. Produced by: Sue Asscher
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1672/1672-h/1672-h.htm>

Aristophanes, *The Acharnians*. Published by the Penguin Group. This translation first published 1973. Copyright Alan H. Sommerstein, 1973.

Gipson, Christopher Lawrence, *Anthropophagy and cannibalism in ancient Greek literature*. Date of issue: 07.07.2022. <https://hdl.handle.net/2142/116037>

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*. First Vintage Books Edition, October 1979. Copyright 1978 by Edward Said. Originally published by Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., in November 1978. https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said_Edward_Orientalism_1979.pdf

Lindqvist, Sven, *Saharan Journey*. Grants Publications, 12 Addison Avenue, London W11 4QR. First published in Great Britain by Grants Books 2012. This book consists of two previously published volumes: *Desert Divers*, first published by Grants Books 2000, originally published under the title of *Ökendykarna*, by Albert Bonniers Förlag 1990, and *'Exterminate All the Brutes'*, first published by Granta Books 1997 by arrangement with The

New Press, New York, originally published under the title of *Utrota varenda jävel* by Albert Bonniers Förlag 1992. '*Exterminate All the Brutes*' translation copyright The New Press, 1996.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner with an introduction and Notes by M.I. Finley. Published by the Penguin Group. This translation first published 1954. Revised with a new introduction and appendices 1972. Translation copyright 1954 by Rex Warner.

Euripides, *Medea*. Translated by C.A.E. Luschnig.
<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/medea.trans.print.shtml>
<https://www.pelister.org/courses/topics/greece/medea.pdf>

Redmond, Frank, *You Barbarian! Greek Kernel of Orientalism*. Authored by Frank Redmond, 2012. <http://lucianofsamosata.info/wiki/doku.php?id=2012:you-barbarian-greek-kernel-of-orientalism>

Plato, *The Republic*. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6 translated by Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd 1969. The Annenberg CPB/Project provided support for entering this text.
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0166%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D470c>

Plato, *Laws*. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 10 & 11 translated by R.G. Bury. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967 & 1968. The Annenberg CPB/Project provided support for entering this text.
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0166%3Abook%3D6%3Apage%3D777>

Aristotle, *Politics*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, with an introduction by Max Lerner, professor of political science, Williams College.
<https://www.bard.edu/library/arendt/pdfs/Aristotle-Politics.pdf>