

”Who are you calling a barbarian?”

**Larissa Bonfante (ed.): *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe. Realities and Interactions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxiii + 395 pages + maps, illustrations, color plates. Price €80, £60. ISBN 978-0-5211-9404-4.**

Enquiry into the ‘barbarian’ cultures of Iron Age Europe has traditionally had the option of approaching its subject from either of two angles dictated by the nature of our available sources: archaeological and literary. The two groups of testimonies are not entirely incompatible, but the history of such scholarship provides abundant examples that much can go wrong whenever archaeological data is interpreted through preconceptions shaped by readings in ancient literature, or when the said literature is read in order to test its veracity *vis-à-vis* the physical remains of past societies. Then, there are contributions such as this collection of articles brought together by Larissa Bonfante that to some extent reaffirm the possibility of bringing literary and archaeological materials into a polite discourse without overbearing expectations.

That said, even the politest discourse can obtain politicised tones, and nowhere as easily as in the study of pre- and sub-Roman archaeological cultures of Europe. Fortunately, even after a critical reading, such sordid motives are very difficult to spot within the contributions of this book,

which promises to approach the barbarian studies firmly from the direction of archaeology, art history and comparative religion. Many of the physical artefacts from ‘European barbarians’, such as the famous plaques from the Letnitsa Hoard, are referred to in several of the contributions, thus providing not only a continuity between the articles, but also offering multiple viewpoints to these sometimes truly stunning objects. The barbarology of ancient literary sources is carried along the discussion in a majority of contributions, but mostly handled at arm’s length—and occasionally, at least in the eyes of a textual scholar, used with the kind of uncomplicated trust that highlights the need for more fundamental scrutiny.

To give a few examples of potential category errors, at the very outset (2) of her introductory chapter ‘Classical and Barbarian’ (1–36) Bonfante proclaims the joint intention of seeking the common aspects of European barbarian cultures—elements which would transcend their geographical locale and ‘nonclassical status’. Yet is not the notion itself of European barbarians forming a commonality an inherently classical mode of thought? The kind of ‘hidden’ Graecocentricity crops up in some later contributions, as well. Also, taking into account the particular interest of most readers of this review, here and there throughout the book the use of the ethnonym ‘Celts’ is somewhat carefree (e.g. 5, 14f., 301–3), though some qualifications are provided for the use of ancient ethnonyms (e.g. 9–10). And when practices such as human sacrifice, headhunting, or banquets

seem to be attested to by both written sources and archaeology among most European groups (if divided by ethnonyms, in itself a tendentious endeavour) without much variation at all, what can be said of their anthropological value to distinguish one group from another? On the other hand, it is easy to see how such ubiquity could have emphasised the haziness of northern ethnic divisions among the Greeks and Romans.

Classical themes are naturally present in most contributions, but occupy a particularly prominent position in the contributions of Bonfante, Keyser, Frey, and Marincola. This includes the Etruscans, but as comes quite clear from several of the articles, the Etruscans played in many regards the part of gateway communities in the interaction between Mediterranean and continental European circulation of goods, ideas, and as is argued by several contributors, mythological elements. As such, Bonfante's Chapter 8 ('The Etruscans: Mediators between Northern Barbarians and Classical Civilization', 233–81) convincingly demonstrates that in iconographical and artistic influence as much as in any other cultural pursuit, the Etruscans acted as crucial middlemen. But why stop at seeing them as a 'mediating community' when one could transcend the old classical/barbarian-dichotomy and appreciate their cultural sphere in its own terms? Furthermore, the Greece-informed residual notion of Greek exceptionality creeps up here and there (e.g. 245). Even so, the wide-ranging treatment of the artistic objects and iconographical

conventions of not only Etruscans but several northern groups is fascinating and convincing. The Chapter 2 by Paul Keyser ('Greek Geography of the Western Barbarians', 37–70) constitutes a concise and solid treatment of the ways in which the Greeks used the concept of West in their mental geography from early geographers to the Roman era. The chapter is executed through a combination of diachronic frame and thematic treatment, which, when joined to the wide range of western groups that are covered, leads to the inclusion of rather little content of philological and contextualising nature. This is a pity, but all in all the contents of the chapter form a valuable, mostly up-to-date contribution peppered with several excellent insights; it well highlights the formulaic and extensively mythologised nature that characterised the Greek ideas of West and the westerners.

'The World of Situla Art', the contribution of Otto-Herman Frey (Chapter 9, 282–312) compares with Chapter 8 in that it presents a highly skilled and utterly fascinating survey of a difficult group of source material (most *situlae* were found in the nineteenth century, and hence many of their find contexts is only summary). Thankfully, Frey's subject does not require treatment of ethnicities, and while some interpretations of pictorial motifs are, as in all iconographic contributions of this book, matters of opinion (for instance, surely a pair of warriors fighting over the corpse of a fallen comrade could be an element from most ancient societies, and need not be a parallel to Greek epics: 286), much of the imagery in the *situlae* does, in Frey's

treatment, turn up significant information about the pursuits and values of the societies in the broad Veneto-Rhaeto-Illyrian area. John Marincola's 'Romans and/as Barbarians' (Chapter 11, 347–57), on the other hand, is firmly attached in written sources, and treats the ambivalence inherent in Greek attempts to situate the Romans within the dichotomy of Hellenes and barbarians. A distinguished scholar of ancient historiography, Marincola is very well qualified for this kind of study, which moreover benefits from a rather intense interest during the past decade of Classical Studies in the interaction between Greek and Roman identities. Though the epistemology of Greek gaze towards the few urban societies of the west is broadly similar in both the Etruscan and Roman cases, it may be that the certain *tabula rasa*—quality of the Romans, from the onset interested and receptive for most aspects of Greek culture, made them a case of their own. Even when aggressors against Greeks (or being warred against by figures such as Pyrrhus), the Roman compatibility with Greek ideals of proper behaviour, and their obvious deference towards Greek standards (the eminence of the Delphic sanctuary is just one example), made it difficult to ever really see them as 'barbarian invaders', as Marincola notes (348). One might also speculate that the notional and actual alliance between Rome and Massilia—occasionally articulated as being in particular directed against the Gallic barbarians (e.g. Justin *epit.* 43.5.1–8)—would have recommended the Romans to the Greeks. The (partly ambivalent) advocacy of Polybius and the

adaptative Hellenising of the early Roman writers are very competently treated.

Scythians and Thracians, two interconnected population groups in many regards, form the focus in the contributions of Ivantchik, Rolle, Marazov, and Thomson de Grummond. Askold Ivantchik's Chapter 3 ('The Funeral of Scythian Kings', 71–106) is a fruitful case study comparing a classical text with archaeological field research. The text in question is Herodotus' famous description of the funeral practices of the Scythian elite (IV.71–72), which Ivantchik occasionally (e.g. 95) seems to think almost preternaturally well-acquainted with the Scythians' 'ideal of kingship', and apparently a passive and faithful receptacle of ethnographic information. Herodotean testimony is augmented by comparative material from Central Asia, dating from about a millennium later. Ivantchik's results are impressive, although his premises and method compel him to judge very harshly the well-respected and insightful *Miroir d'Herodote* by François Hartog (1980, Gallimard, transl. 1988 University of California Press), which stance in turn complicates his search for confirmation to all elements included by Herodotus. The most obvious one of these is the motif of embalming the bodies (n. 4 in table 3.1, p. 80), which Hartog quite correctly identified as a narrative parallelism with Herodotus' Egyptian ethnography (Hartog 1988, 144f.)—dependent on the ancient author's conscious technique of projecting Scythia as a kind of northern mirror to Egypt, with both acting as

another set of mirrors to the self-identity of Greeks. In rejecting the more literary aspects of Herodotus and seeking real-life correspondences for even them, Ivantchik is driven to seek parallels from as far east as the Pazyryk culture of the Altai. One wonders if a nod at Hartog's general direction would not have been an easier thing, after all.

Renate Rolle continues the Scythian gallop by her Chapter 4 ('The Scythians: between mobility, tomb architecture, and early urban structures', 107–31). She examines the recently found *gorodishche* or hill-forts from the area of ancient Scythia, and their implications *vis-à-vis* the classical imagery of nomadic or at best semi-sedentary groups of the steppes. Herodotus' presence continues, for Rolle suggests that the huge fort at Bel'sk could possibly be identified with the Graeco-Scythian city of Gelonos. In something of a contrast with Ivantchik, Rolle prefers to see the Scythian culture as shaped not only by the Indo-Iranian heritage and the steppe societies, but also the trans-Caucasian network of trade and cultural influence, which makes the two contributions an interesting pairing, negotiating with and augmenting each other. Burials are featured extensively in both. The only real handicap in Rolle's article is the amount of space she devotes to explaining basic information regarding the Scythian history and culture, which limits the space devoted to the things anticipated in the abstract. Perhaps emblematic to the problems inherent in the book as a whole is the map (4.2, p. 128) of trade routes of the Mediterranean

relative to the location of Bel'sk. To be sure, the fort is peripheral if the Graeco-Etrusco-Phoenician circulation of goods is taken as a parameter, but that old-fashioned paradigm is hardly necessary for understanding the steppe economies—on the contrary, it seems to be an conceptual relic deriving from the fact that to some extent the Scythians, for us, are (chronologically) first, (epistemically) foremost, and even nowadays still accessed through the experience of the Greeks. No culture is peripheral to itself, and neither are the exchange networks it partakes in.

Ivan Marazov's contribution 'Philomele's Tongue' (Chapter 5, 132–89) is a fascinating attempt to provide a comparative reading of Greek mythological narratives relating to Thrace, and Thracian pictorial depictions. The Graecocentrism of the written sources, however, does complicate this endeavour: Marazov has not been able to wholly detach himself from perceiving a 'chasm between the Greek and barbarian worldviews' (134), something that is essentially a Greek notion, or from claiming that Greeks and northern barbarians belonged to different epoch in the historical progress (*loc. cit.*). The latter, in particular, is a bafflingly teleological, rather old-fashioned sentiment, which takes for reality the Greek feeling (well articulated at the very outset of Thucydides' work) that the civilisational level of the Greek past could be found among the present barbarians. The article is handsomely illustrated, which of course is quite essential in studies of this nature, and the theoretical background for

Marazov's comparative method is well arrayed. Another commendable aspect is the amount of modern scholarship in Slavic languages which Marazov refers to and which have for the most part been inaccessible to a majority of scholars. Some theoretical claims are, however, required to be taken for granted, buttressed with nothing like concrete examples, or provided only with references to the current author's earlier scholarship (for instance, 136). This does not necessarily detract from Marazov's conclusions, which apart from some overly brave conjectures—such as using Jordanes' *Getica* (a 6<sup>th</sup> century CE abbreviation of Cassiodorus' history of Goths, and very much involved with contemporary Justinianic policy) as a testimony for the supposed *pileati* of Classical era Thracians—is a fine exposition of themes and tendencies that seem to have influenced Thracian iconographical choices.

Nancy Thomson de Grummond tackles the question of methodology in the comparative study of mythological imagery ('A Barbarian Myth? The Case of the Talking Head', 313–46) in a way that forms a valuable addition to Marazov's contribution. The particular 'mytheme' of a severed head that appears to be interacting by way of speech or prophecy is a fascinating motif, and very much connected with that ubiquitous element of Greek thinking about European barbarians: the decapitation. Despite the topicality of the subject, Thomson de Grummond brings nuances into the typology of these heads by distinguishing between 'The Head as a Voice' (acting as a

symbol for an unknown source of voice), 'The Chthonic Head' which emerges from the earth either on its own or attached to a body, and 'The Severed Head'. This last case in particular leads her to treat 'the baffling figure' of Orpheus, a treatment which in fact does reveal some new aspects in the depictions of Orpheus: most importantly, that the Greek depictions of the fate of the Thracian singer are much more gory and violent than those among the Etruscans or Thracians (though both Thomson de Grummond and Marazov have to grant that no explicitly labelled depiction of Orpheus has been found in Thrace). It is plausible to explain this as one reflection the Greeks' primitivistic stereotypes concerning the violent ethos of the Thracians—or more broadly, the poorly nuanced conglomerate of Europe's barbarians. Also, it is not immediately clear whether some literary parallels (obviously governed by conventions of the epic genre) should be compared with iconographic testimonies: a case in point is the tradition about Caesar's horses weeping in anticipation of his death—something which depends upon the Homeric exemplars, not from any fundamental Indo-European mentality, as the context of the reference would make one believe (335). Nonetheless, Thomson de Grummond is particularly aware of the limitations of speculation about the possible Celtic parallels to the motif of a prophetic head (337): her insights are extremely useful, and the limits of what can be claimed are carefully observed. While no real options for the three-fold typology of the talking head are explored,

and occasionally the author seems to presuppose her categories to have an actual existence, independent of the scholarly gaze (e.g. 336), the contribution is both very useful and approachable.

Celts and Germans are referred to in most contributions of the work, but are examined in particular by Cunliffe, Wells, Frey, and Stevenson. The contents and general argument of Barry Cunliffe's Chapter 6 ('In the Fabulous Celtic Twilight', 190–210) could perhaps have been divined on the basis of his earlier work: essentially we are dealing with a balanced and careful argument for retaining the use of the concept of 'Celtic', while the significance of the Atlantic fringe for the development of western barbarian commonalities in both imagery and reality is carried along the treatment. Indeed, the earliest Greek references to Celts—with a clear emphasis on western seaboard and Iberia and no real connections with the continental north—are a good tool for Cunliffe's (and John Koch's) 'Celtic from the West' -theory; occasionally (e.g. 193) he may be slightly downplaying the subsequent Graeco-Roman iconosphere of *Keltikē* covering most of the vast European hinterland. From a classicist's point of view, Cunliffe may be hasty in his dismissal of literary antiquarianism (which, after all, characterises a majority of the written sources to ancient Celts), his trust in Livy's chronology and the literary motif of barbarians from the north invading Italy (193, 205, called to question for instance by J. H. C. Williams' *Beyond the Rubicon* and from the linguistic point of view by

Peter Schrijver), and his perpetuation of the widespread but simplified view of Posidonius' contribution to ancient celtography. To be sure, there is 'a consistency about the Classical concept of the Celts' (195), but by downplaying the inherent traditionalism of the literary tradition, Cunliffe reaches the conclusion that this consistency tells us something about the ancient Celts—when in reality such consistency is an artefact of the classical literary tradition. His examination of the modern scholarly creation of 'Celts', however, is clever, up-to-date, and interesting—especially for those who are not actively against his vision on the 'Atlantic European' exchange networks and trade speech as the origin of both Celtic languages and elites that influenced the Classical view of 'Celts'.

Peter S. Wells covers 'The Ancient Germans' (Chapter 7, 211–32) in a contribution that seeks to answer the relationship of generalised ideas about barbarians and true 'anthropological' elements in the Roman descriptions of Germanic societies. The perennial question 'who were the Germans?' is, of course, perhaps an even more vexed a question than 'who were the Celts?', with the area of ancient geographical *Germania* offering a deceptively attractive template for projections of nationalistic historiography. And obviously, Tacitus' *Germania*—with good reason called 'a most dangerous book' by Christopher Krebs (*A Most Dangerous Book*, 2011, Norton), elaborating on the famous remark of Arnaldo Momigliano—has not

really made things any less involved. The tendentiousness of Caesar's creation of a boundary along the Rhenish line is well articulated by Wells, as is the fundamental dependency of Tacitus' literary *tour de force* on Caesar's primitivistic imagery. All in all, the chapter is a concise and very competent introduction to the multifarious questions involved in coping with the concept of 'ancient Germans'. Wells also tackles the history of archaeological scholarship with its attempts to distinguish a material basis of a Germanic ethnicity, and the history of source criticism. He may also have made a conscious choice not to get involved with the 'ethnogenesis-debate' in the later chronological stages of his article, which is a commendable policy. The contribution of Walter Stevenson ('Identity of Late Barbarians: Goths and Wine', Chapter 12, 358–69) constitutes a highly interesting case study regarding one of the most well-known and identity-laden consumption goods of antiquity, wine. The article abounds in valuable observations, for instance about the probable underrepresentation of Mediterranean consumption of beer-like beverages in our ancient sources (359). The hegemony of wine, the prestige drink, may partly be a factor deriving from the elite nature of the vast majority of written testimonies. Though of more recent chronological frame than most other articles in this collection, Stevenson's piece fits in well, and its aim of looking into the Gothic adoption of viticulture and wine-making and suggesting the possible issues of identity (partly along the axis of *Romanitas–barbaria*) involved

in such an adoption, is worthwhile and fascinating. That said, the omission from his bibliography of the *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy* by Patrick Amory (1994, Cambridge) was slightly surprising, considering the subject matter of Late Antique adaptations of identities.

General interest as well as the all-important function of linking the different contributions is served by the chapters by Bonfante and Cunliffe, as well as the interesting iconographical and art historical essay by Farkas. Bonfante begins the book by tying together the various threads of different contributors in a chapter that is structured around thematic points: barbarian customs, the role of women, and the ubiquitous motif of human sacrifice form the most substantial sections. Some details may raise the eyebrows: for instance, in describing the clothing of ancient Celts, two elaborations stand out because of their potentially ahistorical nature: surely it is difficult to claim that the Celtic breeches were 'riding breeches', while imagining 'brightly coloured plaid mantles' creates an association of continuity in a field where such associations have famously been counter-productive. And however innocently used, a statement like 'it was the Etruscans who taught the French, who were then the Gauls, to appreciate wine' (Bonfante, 23), simply plays into the hands of nationalist myths of ethnic inevitability perpetuated in some quarters even nowadays. Chapter 13 ('Some Final Thoughts', 370–74) by Cunliffe collects some of the various strands of enquiry by way of closure, though it misses the

opportunity to wholly detach the collection at hand from certain old-fashioned notions, such as the ethnographical interpretation of archaeological remains (a case in point on p. 370: ‘Today it is archaeologists who are showing us just how complex the palimpsest of peoples really is’, which seems to presuppose ‘peoples’ emerging from the examination of physical artefacts). Compensating this omission to a certain extent, Cunliffe’s criticism directed at the quite obsolete core/periphery-paradigm is both welcome and well-articulated. And finally, as a kind of coda, Ann E. Farkas contributes a ‘Note on Delacroix, “Enslaved among the Barbarians” (375–80), which beautifully illustrates the complicated and oftentimes rather involved reception of the classical motifs of barbarity and civilization in the later Western art—a fitting vignette for the book.

The book itself is an attractive one, sporting a great amount of illustrations, for the most part of high quality, and an Index that in its scope and level of detail is a pleasant surprise. Situating each separate bibliography after their respective articles is probably a wise choice in a joint endeavour such as this. All things considered, *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe* manages rather deftly the balancing act between realities and representations as well as between two widely diverging assemblages of evidence. Even if the investigation clearly favours the archaeological and physical testimonies—a tendency manifesting in almost all contributions—this should not come as a surprise for the reader, and

could moreover be said to administer a healthy dose of antidote against detaching the discussion of European barbarians entirely from physical reality. The textual scholars should be deeply grateful for studies such as this for reminding them that groups labelled as ‘barbarians’ were developing, experimenting and interacting groups of living human beings. After all, even though an archaeological object cannot tell much secure information besides its facts of deposition, and the lure of elaborating its story through comparative or textual interpretations is well known, the fact remains that the non-classical European cultures were very emphatically alive, acting and reacting in at least as multifarious fashion as the classical cultures with environmental, societal, and cultural influences, and in the course of their existence profoundly influencing the history of Europe in a way that was no less significant than that of Greeks and Romans.

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