

BEYOND BARBARIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

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ENVISIONING THE ETHNE: REPRESENTING THE PEOPLES OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Much recent work in Late Antiquity has involved issues of 'identity,' including 'ethnic identity.' 'Identity' is a concept apparently central to understanding the *ethne* of the period, whether those peoples seen as part of the Greco-Roman world or those perceived as outsiders. The use of the concept 'identity' as an investigative tool and explanatory category is of course shared with many other areas of contemporary research, in both historical and synchronic fields. Though 'identity' is part of common parlance, recent work is generally informed, directly or indirectly, by concerns and theoretical models drawn from the Social Sciences of Anthropology and Sociology. It is part of the analytical armoury imported into historical research from these fields, with a view to enabling deeper understanding of the meaning of past phenomena in universalist rather than in historicist terms.

In Late Antique studies, these approaches interact with older paradigms arising from earlier disciplines which, while now being constituents of the field of Late Antiquity, have also continued in parallel their own academic trajectories. Fields such as *Antike und Christentum* and Germanistik have their own concerns and interpretative frameworks; newer approaches may overlap and approximate these concerns, but need not be driven by the same agenda or methodological bases. 'Barbarian identity' – or the ethnic nature of the northern European groups that intruded on Roman territory from the fourth to sixth centuries – has been a concern for late Roman, Germanistik, and early Medieval studies, whence it has been absorbed into the field of Late Antiquity as a framework for conceptualising the post-Roman West (e.g. Patrick Geary, "Barbarians and Ethnicity," in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, 1999). This adoption of 'barbarian ethnic identity' into Late Antiquity, however, is problematic. In Classical studies, 'barbarians' (e.g. Scythians, Achaemenid Persians) are always 'the other': a consciously-constructed, alienating category able to be re-applied as necessary (as successive regions became partners in the project of Hellenism, and no longer outsiders). Classicists have long and profitably recognised this (e.g. Emma Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men*, 1995). 'Barbarians' in early Medieval studies, however, are not 'the other.' Medievalists generally need 'the barbarians' to provide the origins of ethnic, cultural, or national groups of Europe; 'the barbarians' are precursors of 'us,' however indirectly. But the two groups of 'barbarians,' Classical and early Medieval, are the same: though specific names differ, the category by which sources describe them is constant. The concept 'barbarian,' with its extensive attendant discourse of ethnography, remains an alienating construct, in late as in early Antiquity. The late antique and early medieval authors who describe 'barbarians' do not identify with them or invite their readers to do so. Endeavours to translate data out of texts composed under the paradigm of the 'barbarian' into the construct of 'identity' necessarily violate fundamentals of these discourses. They reify modern constructs, invoking historical referents stripped of the context that gives them meaning.

One way to approach this problem of disciplinary fossils and conflicting agenda is to look critically at the modern concept with which we try to capture ancient ethnicity. The value of the term 'identity' as an intellectual tool is now contested within those Social

Sciences from which historical studies borrowed it. Used as a means to describe a plethora of actions and categories, its explanatory value has become degraded; or perhaps its original inadequacy to act as a conceptual catch-all has come to light (cf. R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29 [2000], p. 1: "the term loses its analytical purchase"). These calls in the Social Sciences seek to move past this homogenising terminology to a fuller range of conceptual categories with which to understand diverse phenomena currently lumped together as expressions of 'identity.' Should not historians, as debtors to the theoretical disciplines, follow suit? Within late antique and medieval studies, moreover, warnings have been raised against the application of social-scientific models to analysis of these periods. The motive is not a defensive desire to treat historical periods 'on their own terms,' but recognition of the historically-constituted nature of current theoretical models themselves (cf. Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*, 2001). This is not to suggest that we abandon altogether analysis through the concept of 'identity'; the term has the somewhat uncommon advantage of being contemporary to our subject, indeed, a late antique coinage. But critique both of disciplinary agenda and of analytical tools is necessary if our discussion of the past is to avoid reifying fictive historical 'ethnic identities' through an artificial category of 'identity.'