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On the Powers and Dangers of Collective Identity: History in the Mirror or through the Window?

Abstract: The basic claim of this contribution will be to argue against identitarian uses of history and to plead for critically investigating societies of the past to widen our experience of possible and alternative forms of human culture. The goal of Classical Studies should not be to identify — or dismiss — authoritative traditions of an *own* past as a foundation of Western cultural identity. Rather, Classics should aim to provide and explore a fruitful field of *differing* forms of human culture for critical reflections and discussions on the multiple possibilities of human social practice.

Keywords: collective identity, cultural memory, Greek identity, historical research, inclusive/exclusive, 'self' and 'other', social coherence, solidarity

1 Preliminaries

Theoretical reflection on categories, notions and terms by which we try to understand history is an obvious requirement of all serious research. We develop and use terms and notions from our own thinking and apply them to societies that have thought differently and carried out their lives with different concepts. How far can we develop terms that capture the otherness of former societies? Or are there general terms that have validity beyond the boundaries between us and those historical societies?

This question arises particularly sharply with the term and notion of collective identity which recently has gained an almost irresistible significance for describing historical societies but is at the same time of utmost actuality in political discourses, decisions and practice of our own days. This means that, in using this term, we must give answers on two opposing levels: On the one hand, what do we impart to historical societies by applying the notion of collective identity to them? On the other hand, what are we imparting to our own societies by grounding today's concepts of identity in historical traditions? How appropriate is the concept of identity for them? and how healthy is it for us? As historians, we are not only responsible for the right understanding of the past, but we are also, consciously or unconsciously, weaving the net of notions and concepts of our own time.

2 Two uses of history: mirror or window?

There are two approaches to the historical past that are fundamentally different regarding what we expect from history for ourselves.[1]

The first access is history as a founding resource and power for the present. In this sense historical traditions of one's own community are regarded as the origin and foundation of its present state, conveying by its old age authority and legitimacy to the heirs and the inherited positions of this cultural, social and political tradition. This is the common denominator from the Renaissance over classical humanism to Pierre Nora's "Lieux de mémoire" and present-day concepts of cultural memory. History, in this sense, serves to create identity: The upholders of this approach look into their 'classical' past as a mirror in which they try to discover — if not themselves, at least some fundamental aspects of themselves, the roots of their own essential cultural equipment, from which they expect to understand themselves and to legitimize their models of cultural practice.

This is a basically narcissistic position by which we are mainly confronted with ourselves — which is open to fundamental criticism and involves problematic consequences for the societies of the present.

First, we should know ourselves sufficiently through our own (critical) life-experience: so, our alleged 'counterparts' of the past will bring us little new knowledge and insight about ourselves. History as a look into the mirror is basically

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1 The following considerations on history as a gaze into the mirror versus out of the window have much in common with Hans-Joachim Gehrke's categories of intentional versus rational history. See Foxhall/Gehrke/Luraghi 2010.

tautological, it provides us with a comfortable resting place for our self-consciousness, nothing more.

Second, the past can by no means provide us with legitimization, for cultural practices, whether traditional or newly conceived, are either good or bad as such, but they do not gain any authority from their age.

Third, and above all, history as a look into the mirror is the basic factor in creating identity. Identity, however, as I will argue, is a basic, almost pandemic disease of, and a great social threat to, present-day societies. Wars are fought worldwide for national, cultural or religious identity, societies and communities disintegrate through the search of individual groups for their identity. Identity is the great opposite to solidarity — but historians continue to insist in identitarian traditions as the foundation of present-day culture.

Fourth, it is this identitarian approach to history, and in particular to the Classical past, that leads some vanguards of progress, particularly in the United States, to discredit this 'contaminated' past altogether: They look into the mirror, and when they do not find in it their desired self-image, they throw away the mirror.[2]

The counter-position to this perspective is history as a look out of the window. It means looking out from our own house of culture towards other ways of cultural life, past as well as present, with curiosity for other societies and cultures. It means, instead of self-concerned identity, taking a critical distance from the self, opening one's eyes to alternative ways of life, strengthening the sense of mutual solidarity, and developing creative imagination for new forms of one's own social and cultural practice.

Of course, the view out of the window is also related to the subject of the viewer. To stay with the metaphor: it is human subjects who have made the window, who look from it in specific directions, who direct their gaze to specific objects and phenomena, who react to what they see and integrate it into their previous experience of the world. The subject cannot be eliminated even when looking out of the window. Nevertheless, it makes a big difference whether the viewer does this in search of selfness or of otherness. This is the perspective I will adopt in this essay.

3 Problems with identity

For two generations the concepts of identity and alterity, both individual and collective, have become basic categories in the analysis of historical as well as contemporary

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2 On — and against — search for identity in Classical Studies, see Grethlein 2022.

societies.[3] An important general approach to these categories has been developed in the Freiburg project "Identitäten und Alteritäten", led by Hans-Joachim Gehrke from 1997 to 2003.[4] However, in spite of these efforts, there remains a worrying proliferation of these categories: The term 'identity' is booming in a totally uncontrolled way in titles of books and articles. There are productive as well as meaningless uses. Regarding Greek antiquity, it has long been seen what enormous power a new panhellenic identity imparted to the allied Greeks in the wars against the Persians, and with what massive polis identity Athens and Sparta then established their spheres of power in Greece. Early on, Christian Meier employed the concept of political identity to describe the intense civic spirit and the 'emergence of the political' in classical Athens;[5] more recently, Christoph Ulf and Erich Kistler portrayed with great power the 'emergence of Greece', with its communities of tribes and city-states as the 'formation of a Hellenic identity'.[6] On the other hand, however, identity has deteriorated into an inflationary label for all kinds of socio-cultural commonalities: From ceramics to architecture, lifestyle to burial practice, sports to warfare, urban structures to landscapes, economy to religion, language to memory, there is no subject that could not be subsumed and dealt with under the cover of cultural identity. In this terminological proliferation, there are three problematic tendencies: First, identity and alterity have increasingly become ubiquitous passepartout for all kinds of cultural qualities and differences that they often conceal more than explain. Secondly, a pronounced consciousness of collective identity is assumed throughout world history, without asking whether this is meant as a universal anthropological constant of mankind or as a historical phenomenon of specific societies. Thirdly, more or less consciously, every society or social group is granted an absolute moral right to its unbreakable identity. In so doing, historical societies are often anachronistically judged by today's standards.

These assumptions imply various general questions that seem not to be given sufficient attention in historical research — and which, last but not least, have consequences for our own cultural habitus. In what follows I will argue for a critical approach to these terms, and in this I feel encouraged by some authors who have argued in the same direction: the German historian Lutz Niethammer in his book *Kollektive Identität. Die heimlichen Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000); the Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti in his volumes *Contro l'identità* (1993)

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3 Marquard/Stierle 1979; Gleason 1983; Stachel 2005; Jenkins 2008; Coulmas 2019. See also the books quoted in n. 7. Application in Classical Archaeology: Shear 2021, 21–26.

4 Fludernik/Gehrke 2004.

5 Meier 1979.

6 Ulf 1996; Ulf/Kistler 2020. For Greek identity in general, see Gehrke 2008.

and *L'ossessione identitaria* (2010); and the French philosopher François Jullien under the title *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle* (2016). They have found little attention because the Zeitgeist was blowing in a different direction. At present, however, there may be some signs of a turnabout: Florian Coulmas, analyzing *Das Zeitalter der Identität* (2019), speaks of the "specter of identity" that dominates, like a genie from the bottle, all present-time discourses. Even more resolutely, Yasha Mounk describes *The Identity Trap* (2023) as the almost inevitable result of a well-intentioned policy to strengthen suppressed or marginalized social groups which counterproductively leads to the polarization and fractionalization of those societies.[7]

The aim of the following considerations and reflections is to bring together two discourses that are normally conducted separately, and to draw consequences for both fields. In discourses on present-time societies, the identity of political, social, cultural and anthropological communities has gained an almost fundamental significance for their self-identification and cohesion.[8] It forms the basis of an ever-expanding identity politics for these communities, which is often pushed forward with imperative confidence but is rarely discussed critically in terms of its ambivalent consequences. In historical research, especially on early periods, identity has advanced to become a key notion of cultural, social and political commonality.[9] Collective identity is understood as constitutive for the emergence of ethnic units, political states and other communities, and in this sense, it is usually seen as a positive impulse for the formation of complex collective structures. In this context, phenomena of life practice as well as material culture are often understood very largely in terms of collective identity.

Cross-references between these discourses are rarely made. Yet, they could become fruitful in both directions. Especially in the historical disciplines they could strengthen the awareness that research on distant historical periods does not take place in innocent distance to present-time actuality.

In this sense, I am going to argue for two different objectives. First, for understanding the historical past, a precise terminological definition of what we can usefully mean by collective identity; second, for shaping the present, an analysis of the fundamental goals and effects, positive and negative implications of concepts of identity.

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7 Niethammer 2000; Remotti 1993; 2010; Jullien 2016; Coulmas 2019; Mounk 2023.
8 See especially Coulmas 2019.
9 Pohl/Mehofer 2010.

3.1 Definitions

Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have subjected the term 'identity', as a category of scientific analysis, to a sharp and salutary critique and proposed a scale of less grandiloquent but more precisely differentiating designations of collective affiliations of various kinds and intensities.[10] They did not find much of a following, but it is worth going in this direction.

In order to clarify the meaning of collective identity and alterity it is necessary to make a clear distinction between an object-oriented meaning of factual commonality and a subject-oriented concept of fundamental ideological identity.

Identity of distinctive marks, features and characteristics. On a primary level, individual beings as well as collective entities constitute themselves by some sort of factual sameness against otherness. Identity in this sense is a category of identification of individuals and collectives from an external perspective. In collective communities, this sameness manifests itself in their common material culture, common social practices and common cultural concepts. Speaking in this sense of collective identity means using this term as an object-oriented category of cultural commonality. It defines communities and the social roles of their members on the basis of their cultural repertoire and resources. For the sake of terminological clarity, I would prefer to speak of a community's cultural profile, world, or kosmos.

Identity of essence. On a secondary level, identity and alterity signify an emphatic ideological consciousness of the 'self', whether individual or collective, in essential opposition to the non-self of 'others'. Identity in this sense is a category of essential self-determination from an internal perspective. It is the explicit response to the question "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" and a conscious concept of what this self not only is, but what it knows and intends to be — and it makes the unconditional claim to the fundamental rights of this self. On this level the self is no longer objectively described but intentionally privileged from its own perspective. From this perspective, the other becomes a — mostly negative — counter-image of the self. In this sense, identity and alterity are categories of ideological construction: Factual sameness becomes intentional kinship, factual difference becomes essential alterity. By emphasizing this dichotomy, the concepts of identity and alterity develop a strong potential of political and social dynamics.

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10 Brubaker/Cooper 2000.

3.2 Alarming effects

Emphatic identity is far less innocent than it may appear: By its claim for its rights, it generates not only attitudes of collective self-concern and self-righteousness, but also forces of defensive walling-off and aggressive self-assertion. Hitler's crimes were an excess of identity. Today, in Germany and elsewhere, conservative voices advocate national leading cultures ('Leitkulturen') of identity, with foreseeable consequences. Right-wing extremists appear under the name of 'Identitarians'. National identities explode in wars worldwide.

In a wider sense, too, concepts of identity imply worrying social prospects. In the middle of our societies, identity is exclusive: Those who do not belong to the group of identity are not only different 'others' but ideological 'aliens'. And this potential of exclusion is even enhanced by founding identity on concepts of cultural memory: Those who do not share the same cultural memories — Turks in Germany, Palestinians in Israel — have no access to the prevailing cultural identity.[11]

On a more general level, identity implies mostly a latent tendency towards conservative rigidity. Although recent cultural theory has developed concepts of permanent fluidity of individual and collective identity, the intention and claim of identities is their permanent validity. Staying identical with, and true to oneself is considered an almost unquestionable ethical value, independent of its content. Thus, identity of persons and communities has become a sort of sacred anthropological right that is founded on emotions and largely eludes rational criticism. Of course, social and political communities must be founded on common values. But these values should be based on rational choices, not on pre-determined postulates of irrational identities — be they German, Western or otherwise.

In this context a basic question arises that is rarely reflected upon: whether identity and alterity in this emphatic sense are universal anthropological categories — or rather specific states of aggregation of specific historical societies. In this context, we should be aware that identity and alterity only moved to the center of social discourses in the 1970s to the 1990s. What does this mean for the historical reach of these notions? Are they conceived in the specific situation of the last two generations? Do we risk projecting our own self-perceptions — and our actual social concepts and problems — onto former historical societies?

At present we live in an age of the selfie. The photograph of the self is the technique of an obsessive, almost pandemic habitus of self-concern, self-centeredness,

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11 On the concept of cultural memory, see J. Assmann 1992; 2018²; A. Assmann 1999. It must be stressed, as both Assmanns have clearly underlined, that cultural memory does not *eo ipso* imply 'identitarian' positions, but the dangers pointed out here seem evident.

self-assertion, self-determination, self-righteousness, and self-pity. At first glance, this might seem to be a private matter of individuals and groups, but the inherent danger in this is the dissolution of social solidarity. For solidarity in its true sense is not limited to one's own group. In fact, identity is the counter-concept to solidarity.

Regarding history, we should ask whether the question "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" was so much at the center of social and political discourse in all societies of the past. And if at all, whether they were asked, and determined the social and political practice, in all situations of life. Could it not be that previous societies had mostly other problems than "who they were", and that they lived and acted in many situations, or even in entire epochs, not on the level of emphatic subject-oriented identity but on that of functional and object-oriented cultural practices?

At this point, we may turn to Greek archaeology where we find an instructive broad spectrum of cultural attitudes, from wide openness to fixed identities, with strong historical changes.

4 Archaeology, identity and alterity

The new rise of the Greek world, after the collapse of the Mycenean palace culture, was achieved through the formation of a variety of political units and social communities. Historical research has drawn a complex picture of the formation of tribes and city states, of social classes, gender and age groups, of family clans and hetairies. These communities developed a common Greek culture of life with multiple local differentiations of social roles and cultural practices. The question is, however, to what extent was there a factor of conscious identity at work here that would have gone beyond these common social and cultural practices?[12]

In general, of course, there were strong concepts of identity and alterity in the ancient world that shaped the actors in their attitudes and practices of cultural and political life: with demarcations of Greeks against other ethnicities and cultures, of single cities against other cities, of social groups against other groups, and so on. But these concepts were not present everywhere and always in the same way, they were in constant flux, the boundaries were fluid, changing from one epoch to another, varying between different communities and groups, with different intensities, from largely absent to emphatically effective.

Archaeology is a difficult field for discussing questions of identity and alterity. For archaeology disposes only of material objects that do not reveal how they were

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12 See lastly, with strong emphasis on the category of collective identity, Ulf/Kistler 2020.

valued by their historical users.[13] To give an example from recent history: Coca Cola was imported in the 1920s from the USA to Europe as a trendy beverage. In 1949, however, it was forbidden in communist China and soon afterwards boycotted by French leftists, throughout the Eastern Bloc and in the Arab League as a symbol of American capitalism, while by now it is accepted everywhere without any strong cultural meaning. The significance Coca Cola once had as a symbol of cultural identity is not essentially inherent in the bottles or the drink itself: it is a potential that can be attributed to them and written off again. Future archaeologist who may excavate Coca Cola sherds will have difficulties in finding out their cultural significance.

4.1 Permeable identity boundaries in Archaic Greece

Instructive insights into the problematic of identity and alterity can be expected from situations in which objects from one cultural origin are transferred to other contexts.[14] Here it becomes particularly evident that material objects from foreign cultures get their meaning not from their intrinsic essence but through cultural and ideological attributions and evaluations on the part of their users and viewers. Among such attributions of meaning identity versus alterity is but one of several options. In 8th century BC Athens, an Athenian aristocrat was buried with a bronze bowl from Phoenicia with incised figurative decoration (fig. 3).[15] If we ask for the cultural significance given to this object by its Greek owners, various explanations could be put forward: They could have appreciated the bowl because of its economic value, its social prestige, its aesthetic beauty, its figurative themes, its material durability or its functional form — but how far an opposition between Greek and alien culture or even a concept of identity and alterity played any role remains totally open.

There are remarkable testimonies of cultural permeability. From the 9th century BC Greek drinking vessels were exported to the Levant.[16] At the multi-ethnic emporion of Al Mina on the coast of Northern Syria, where fragments of such vessels were found in considerable quantities, they might possibly be referred to banquets

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13 See Hall 1997, 128–131; 2012; Pohl/Mehofer 2010; Baitinger 2016; Gehrke 2016. Gehrke proposes a new theoretical concept of defining identities by interpreting material culture in its broader cultural context. This is a step towards more objective results, though there remains the old problem that contexts too are not objective facts but scholarly constructs.

14 For a general approach to Transcultural Studies, see Abu-er-Rub/Brosius/Meurer/Panagiotopoulos/Richter 2019.

15 Kübler 1954, pl. 162.

16 Luke 2003.

of Greek merchants, but this is purely hypothetical. And in cases of single sherds found in the interior of Syria this is very improbable. More convincingly, these finds were explained as testimonies of Greek exports for oriental-style banquets. Certainly, such sporadic finds cannot be taken as evidence of Greek cultural practice, let alone of Greek cultural identity.

At the opposite end of the Greek world, we find a flourishing symposion culture at the commercial emporion of Ischia-Pithekoussai, with the famous drinking cup in Greek style, inscribed with a Greek sympotic inscription referring to the Greek mythical hero Nestor (fig. 4).[17] Here, we have obviously to do with a group of Greek traders who celebrated Greek-style symposia. They may have invited some participants from other countries, and in any case, they must have feasted in view of many foreign merchants present at this site. So, one can imagine that they must have felt some sort of cultural affiliation and coherence with their Greek-speaking compatriots. Nevertheless, we can only speculate how far this experience was valid, how strong such differences were felt, how far 'Greekness' and otherness were superseded by other affiliations, such as social groups, cross-cultural trade cooperation or competition, etc.

On the other hand, Greek drinking vessels were also found in the chieftain's residence of Torre Satriano in northern Lucania where indigenous elites celebrated great banquets without apparently assuming a Greek identity in any precise sense.[18] Sympotic culture was an overarching social practice that served to create social coherence within participating members of elite groups but not to express any sort of commonality or identity between the wide-ranging elites of various societies celebrating symposia.

In general, the Greeks were very much interested in the provenience of their cultural objects. They appreciated helmets from Corinth, craters from Laconia, marble from Paros, textiles from Ionia, purple from Phoenicia, silphium from Cyrene in Libya, bronze from Tartessos beyond Gibraltar — but significantly there is no difference made between Greek and non-Greek products, and certainly not between cultural identity and alterity. The relation between Greece and other Mediterranean cultures in the archaic age should not be conceived in terms of identity and alterity but of participation.

As Jonathan Hall has convincingly demonstrated, an explicit consciousness of Greek identity *versus* alien alterity developed only rather slowly and came to full fruition only in the Persian Wars.[19] In archaic times, a common name for a Hellenic

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17 Buchner/Ridgway 1993, 219, 245–250; Murray 1994; Wecowski 2014, 127–139, 251–263.

18 Osanna 2009. Already cited by Gehrke 1016, 10.

19 Hall 2002, 172–228.

country and a community of Hellenes came into use only gradually, to varying extents and in specific situations. It is true that only participants of Greek descent were admitted to the Olympic Games; and when the ruler Kleisthenes of Sikyon wanted to marry off his daughter Agariste, he invited suitors from all over Greece, but not from other peoples. Yet this was an expression of self-evident commonality, not of emphatic identity. The same is true for the Greek city-states and tribes: they represented communities with a certain coherence, also with enmities against other cities and tribes, but hardly with a specific, different ideological or cultural bond in the sense of a strong identity.

4.2 Greece and the Orient in archaic times

The great antithesis of "East" versus "West", Orient versus Occident, is the classic case for studying identity and alterity. It has two sides, both attesting the enormous power of identity construction: One of them belongs to modern historical research, the other to the history of antiquity itself.[20]

In his famous book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said powerfully described how the modern West had created and imposed an image of the "Orient" that was an absolute negative antithesis to the ideal-typical self-image of European-American societies.[21] A striking example from archaeological research is the evaluation of a specific type of bronze protomes adorning huge bronze craters, which first were imported from the Near-East to Greece (fig. 5) and then imitated by Greek artists (fig. 6). Scholars have interpreted the differences in a revealing way as fundamentally antithetical and at the same time in the sense of clear Greek superiority: the oriental "scheme" are characterized by their "persistent, self-sufficient, indifferent attitude", whereas the Greek "figures" are praised for their "clear structure imbued with a genuine Greek sense of form", "conscious, alert expression of the face", "bright spirituality", "liveliness and activity" — an achievement of transformation "that one cannot admire enough".[22] Quite certainly, however, the Greek artists imitated the oriental models not with the intention of opposing them with an identity of their own, but to come as close as possible to their artistry. There can be no doubt that their main aim was not the assertion of Greekness but integration into the great cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean. The equivalent in Classical Philology is

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20 On Greece and the Orient, see Burkert 1984; West 1997; Rollinger/Ulf 2004; Gunter 2009; Zenzen/Hölscher/Trampedach 2013; von Bredow 2017.

21 Said 1978.

22 Herrmann 1972, 83–84.

Bruno Snell's famous book, still worth reading, with its problematic title *The Discovery of the Mind* in early Greece — as if the cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt had been lacking a 'mind'.[23]

The extensive reception of cultural goods from the Orient during the archaic period, from the alphabet and mythology to the practice of banquets and to countless forms of artistic imagery and material equipment led to an enormous change of Greek culture but had nothing to do with Greek identity.[24] The alphabetic script, which was taken over in the 9th century from Phoenicia and modified for the exigencies of the Greek language, became soon a genuine element of Greek cultural practice. The Hittite and Mesopotamian myths of the origins of the world and the gods or of great heroes defeating wild monsters and dangerous fiends were remodeled into a mythical past of the Greek world.[25] The custom of banquets reclining on couches, according to oriental traditions, was to become the fundamental form of Greek aristocratic commonality.[26] All these new elements did in no way change any kind of Greek 'identity', they were integrated into the Greek cultural repertoire and served to integrate Greece into the surrounding cultures. In this sense, it has long been observed that Homer, in the epic of the *Iliad*, does not portray the heroic Greeks and Troians as fundamentally alien to each other: They have the same gods, comparable political and social structures, the same culture of life.[27]

4.3 Ideological identities in Classical Greece

The creation of new forms of emphatic identity in the Persian Wars of the early 5th century BC has been extensively analyzed, most powerfully by Edith Hall in her book "Inventing the Barbarian" of 1989.[28] From her title it becomes evident that emphatic identity is not a pre-given anthropological constant but a result of cultural, social and political construction. As Hans-Joachim Gehrke has shown, the Greeks developed from this identity their power for defeating the Persians, but on the other hand they also laid the foundations for the eternal conflict between "East" and "West" that continues to our days.[29] The relevant phenomena are well-known: Greeks and non-Greeks were conceived according to a general cultural, ethical,

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23 Snell 1946.

24 See the works cited in n. 20.

25 West 1997.

26 Wecowski 2014.

27 Dihle 1994, 7–21.

28 Hall 1989.

29 Gehrke 2000.

religious and political antithesis. This antithesis is fortified by a strong cultural memory of mythological precedents, such as the conflicts between Greeks and Amazons, Greeks and Trojans etc. And it is materialized in symbolic cultural objects, such as the courageous Greek lance versus the cowardly bow and arrow of the Persians or the virtuous naked Greek body versus the effeminate dressed body of Orientals.[30]

Fortunately, however, things are not that easy. As is well known, scholarly judgements on this antithesis differ widely. Some scholars see in the Greeks a blatantly negative image of the Persians as archenemies, while others recognize in them a high regard for their ancient culture and human solidarity with the fate of their opponents.[31] A consensus will not be reached as long as one thinks in general terms of 'the' Greeks and 'the' Persians. For the Greeks' thoughts, attitudes and practices were often ambivalent and varied greatly in different cultural and social contexts.

First, the attitudes varied in different media and their specific social situations. Around 460 BC, the battle of Marathon was depicted in the great public painting of the Stoa Poikile as an achievement of heroic patriotism, under the protection of gods and mythical heroes, led by Miltiades and other glorious Athenian protagonists.[32] Shortly before, Aeschylus brought his tragedy "The Persians" to the stage, in which he made the defeat of the Persians at Salamis the subject of great empathy from the perspective of the Persians themselves.[33] And at the same time painted vases for private symposia describe the victory of the Greeks with blatant violence (figs. 7 and 8) and even with metaphors of crude homosexual abuse.[34]

Secondly, the real interactions between Greece and Persia developed in different ways in different areas of life. In the realm of politics, the rifts were deep, and in the realm of lifestyle the Greek ideal of virtuous simplicity was conceived in opposition to Persian luxury. The entire world *could* be seen as divided between Greeks and Persians. But at the same time trade between Greece and the Levant via Cyprus continued without interruption; in the field of science, the high esteem of expert knowledge from the Orient was maintained; and in the field of religion, no divide was created between Greek and foreign gods. The ideological antithesis of identity and alterity remained confined to political and social life, while in many

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30 Miller 1997; Miller/Hölscher 2013, 388–414.

31 Most divergent: Hall 1989 and Gruen 2011, 67–85.

32 Hölscher 1973, 50–84; de Angelis 1996.

33 Grethlein 2010, 74–104.

34 Hölscher 1973, 38–49; Raeck 1981, 101–163; Hölscher 2000, 301–304; Muth 2008, 239–267; Miller/Hölscher 2013, 396–402 (T. H.). Eurymedon oinochoe with homosexual scene: Schauenburg 1975; Wannagat 2001; Gerleigner 2016; Lichtenberger 2023.

other sectors of life, the former openness remained. All attitudes had partial validity in different fields of life.[35]

Further ambivalences occur over the course of time: The constructed counter-image of the Orient could be remodeled to meet new historical conditions. In the generation of the actual battles, vases depict fierce fights of triumphant Greeks in perfect hoplite armor or with naked athletic bodies against weak and defeated enemies in luxurious patterned dresses (figs. 7 and 8). Around the middle of the 5th century, however, when the war was brought to an end, the Persians are represented in vase-paintings as pious worshippers of the gods similar to Greek piety (fig. 9). And at the end of the century, when the Greeks themselves had adopted the ideals of luxury and felicity, the luxurious lifestyle of the East is praised on painted vases and highly valued in real life, in Athens and elsewhere in Greece (fig. 10).[36]

This is a process of great psychological complexity. When the Greeks in the early 5th century BC developed their new self-concept of normative simplicity, they projected the negative counter-concept of a luxurious lifestyle onto the Persians. Yet, opulence and luxury, *habrosýne*, had been the highest values of the leading classes in Greece itself until the Persian Wars: noble Greeks appear on late archaic vases in richly decorated clothing (fig. 11). Thus, the antithetical image of the Persian 'others' as the great foe was in many respects a suppressed former self-image of the Greeks themselves, and the new ideals of two generations later were a total reevaluation of this classical post-war antithesis.

After all, the ideology and psychology of identity and alterity are in many respects unstable. They change according to the changing experiences and challenges of life. And yet, they make a claim to absolute and lasting validity. This is what makes them dangerous.

5 Conclusion

We will not shape the classical past into a mirror-image of ourselves, nor ourselves into a mirror-image of classical antiquity. Rather, we should look out of our cultural window to the past in order to widen and sharpen our experiences. From this short outlook I would propose to draw three conclusions, two for scholarship, one for ourselves.

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35 See the spectrum of contributions in Zenzen/Hölscher/Trampedach 2013.
36 Raeck 1981, 101–163; Hölscher 2000, 300–314; Miller/Hölscher 2013, 388–414 (T. H.).

1. As historians, we should make use of the notion of identity in a precise sense, in order to avoid fashionable but useless generalizations. Whatever terms we adopt, we must distinguish between object-oriented definitions and descriptions of factual political, social and cultural commonality on the one hand and subject-oriented assertions and claims of ideologically based identity on the other. When describing cultural phenomena, we should focus less on the diffuse category of identity than on the actual cultural goods, practices, and concepts and their functional interaction; for material culture and social practices had primarily concrete tasks and purposes within the communities, while the formation of community as such was usually a secondary motive. On the other hand, the notion of essential-ideological identity in its emphatic meaning is helpful for analyzing the specific subjective concepts with which communities create an awareness of their communality, affirm themselves in this awareness and use this concept explicitly as a category of determining their 'self' vis-à-vis 'other's, mostly to strengthen their own forces in situations of conflict, aggressive or defensive.

2. When we deal, as historians, with emphatic collective identity we must be aware of the fact that this is not an innocent anthropological right but a consciously constructed claim, implying ambivalent and potentially dangerous consequences of exclusion and confrontation. The formation of strong collective identity is always an ambivalent process, strengthening one's own group and excluding others. Community identity should therefore not be celebrated as an unequivocally grand historical process but should be judged in its complex ambivalence.

3. With regard to the present, we should not make ourselves guilty of promoting a category of social attitude that potentially leads to exclusion and conflict. Strengthening social and political identity groups leads to political practices of pushing forward one's own claims instead of acknowledging the rights of other, underprivileged groups. Identities must not be strengthened but defused, borders must not be marked but bridged. Identity is the opposite of solidarity. What we need is social coherence and solidarity beyond — and against — identities.

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Illustrations

Fig. 3: Phoenician bronze bowl from tomb in the Athenian Kerameikos. Athens, Kerameikos Museum. 8th cent. B.C. © Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Culture.

Fig. 4: Greek drinking cup with sympotic inscription, so-called 'Nestor cup'. Ischia, Pithecussai Museum. Late 8th cent. B.C. © DAI Rome (R. Sansaini).

Fig. 5: Oriental bronze protome of votive cauldron. Olympia, Museum. 8th cent. B.C. © DAI Athens.

Fig. 6: Greek bronze protome of votive cauldron. Athens, National Archaeological Museum.
Ca. 700 B.C. © DAI Athens.

Fig. 7: Red-figure kylix, Greek warrior defeating Persian foe. Edinburgh, National Museum of Scotland. Ca. 470 B.C. © National Museum Scotland.

Fig. 8: Red-figure oinochoe, Greek warrior defeating Persian foe. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.
Ca. 460 B.C. © 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig. 9: Red-figure lekythos, Persian nobleman with wife performing sacrifice. Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Institut für Archäologische Wissenschaften. Ca. 440 B.C. © Institut für Archäologische Wissenschaften der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt.
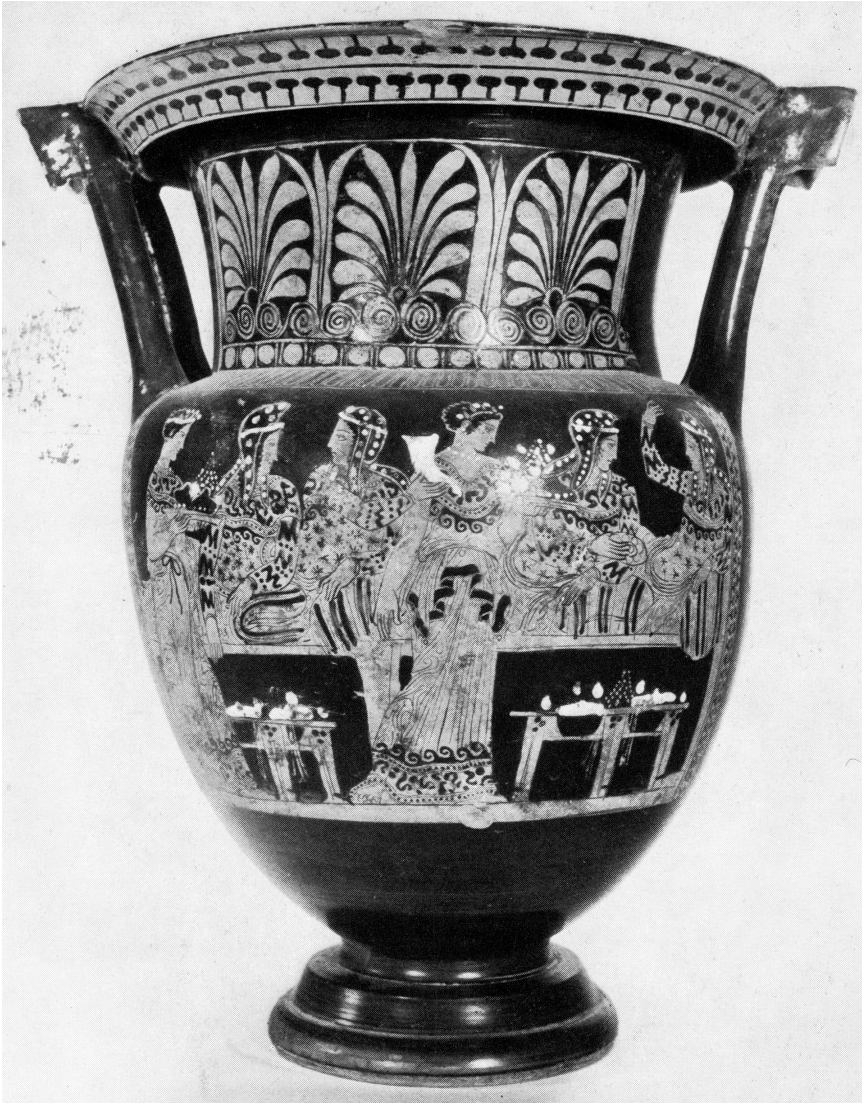
Fig. 10: Red-figure column-krater, symposion of youths in oriental costume. Salerno, National Archaeological Museum. Ca. 400 B.C. Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Athen 90 (1975) pl. 38, 2.

Fig. 11: Red-figure amphora, kithara-player with attendants. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Ca. 520–510 B.C.
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