

Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

Edited by

Glenn W. Most
Dagmar Schäfer
Mårten Söderblom Saarela



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A 1st-Century BCE/CE Greek Geographer Discusses What a “Barbarian” Language Is in Terms of Homer and the Carians

Strabo, Geography

Filippomaria Pontani

The concept of “barbarian” arose in ancient Greek thought as a primarily linguistic concept (see Chapter 1.3). It seems to be, however, almost entirely foreign to the Homeric epics: there is just one relevant passage in ancient epic, namely the mention of the “barbarian-speaking Carians” (Καρῶν βαρβαροφῶων) in *Iliad* 2.867, which has aroused a hot exegetical debate since antiquity. The fifth-century BCE historian Thucydides, author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, argued that Homer did not know of a “barbarian” identity as opposed to a unitarian Hellenic identity; however, the first-century geographer Strabo, when providing the most detailed extant treatment of the etymology and function of the word *barbaros*, explains the line as referring not to the Carian language proper, but—contrary to modern scholarly consensus—to the Carians’ inadequate command of Greek.

As we have seen in Chapter 1.3 on Herodotus, it was in fifth-century BCE Attic tragedy that *barbaros* dramatically changed its meaning and implications, gradually acquiring moral overtones and embodying the Greeks’ dismissive attitude *vis-à-vis* foreign languages and cultures:¹ in Sophocles’s *Ajax* 1263, the Greek hero Agamemnon disdainfully refuses to argue with Teukros, a Greek of foreign origin, “for I do not understand the barbarian language” (my translation); Euripides’s tragedies mention “barbarian screams” or “barbarian prayers” (*Phoenician Women* 679–680, and 1301), “Phrygian screams” (the *Bacchae* in their Dionysiac rites), “mixed barbarian” origin (*mixobarbaros*, in *Phoenician Women* 138: a linguistic definition that refers to the mingling of barbarian and Greek descent).

It may come as a surprise that a similar attitude towards “barbarians” should persist even after Alexander’s conquests (late fourth century BCE), when Greek

¹ See Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*.

became the international language of the “open” and globalized Hellenistic world. The influence of non-Greek languages in Asia Minor hardly ever went beyond onomastics, and even in Egypt the evidence for a real Greek-Demotic bilingualism is rather limited, with few mentions and few clear instances of Greeks learning Egyptian;² polyglossy was confined to a few foreigners,³ and foreign intellectuals were expected to learn Greek rather than vice versa;⁴ there is almost no evidence of lexica or grammars expressly designed for learning other languages (see Chapter 3.3); even Aristotle, who devoted several treatises to the laws and customs of other peoples, hardly ever pointed to a multiplicity of languages.

In the—perhaps too harsh—verdict of Maurice Sartre, “No Greek author felt it necessary to learn Aramaic, Egyptian, or some other language spoken in the world that emerged from the Alexandrian conquest in order to have

2 Among the generals of Alexander the Great only Peukestas is said to have learnt some Persian, see Arrian, *Anabasis* 6.30.3; Laomedon was bilingual *es ta barbarika grammata*, a problematic statement in 3.6.6. The reality of daily verbal communication on the ground is of course a different thing, and a degree of interference between Greek and demotic (then leading to the peculiar case of Coptic) is attested by some papyri, ostraka, and inscriptions (but the very references to translators and *hermeneis* are rare): see Fewster, “Bilingualism” and Torallas Tovar and Marja Vierros, “Languages”.

3 Such as King Mithridates of Pontus, see Quintilian 11.2.50; the second-century physician Galen argues that “this was a miracle, one man speaking two languages well” (*On the Difference of Pulses* 2.44–45; my translation).

4 The epigrammatic poet Meleager of Gadara (Gadara, now Umm Qais, is down to this day on the border between three countries) devoted an epigram to polyglossy (*Palatine Anthology* 7.419.5–6: “Now, if you are Syrian, *Salam*; if you are Phoenician, *Audonis*; if you are Greek, *Chaire*; and answer in the same way”; my translation). The philosopher Zenon of Kition overtly refers to his mother tongue as opposed to the Greek he is writing in; the two most important historians of Babylon and Egypt, Berossus and Manetho (both third century BCE) chose to write in Greek even though they were addressing an audience of fellow elite members of their own ethnos. See Dillery, *Clio’s Other Sons*. A certain pride in his own Syrian language and identity is displayed by the prose writer Lucian (second century CE), who is also one of the few to describe humorous multilingual situations in literature, although he writes in pure Attic; see e.g., his *Zeus Rants* 13, trans. Harmon:

Zeus: ‘Hush them up, Hermes, so that they may learn why they were called together, as soon as they have stopped this nonsense.’

Hermes: ‘Not all of them understand Greek, Zeus, and I am no polyglot, to make a proclamation that Scyths and Persians and Thracians and Celts can understand. I had better sign to them with my hand, I think, and make them keep still.’

See also Rochette, “La problématique des langues étrangères,” 217–233. But already in the fourth century CE, under Roman rule, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus and the poet Claudian, both native speakers of Greek, choose to write in Latin instead.

direct contact with the culture that it transmitted.”⁵ This goes hand in hand with the poor attention devoted to translation (see Chapter 4.4) before and after the peculiar enterprise of the Septuagint. Such is the cultural frame in which Strabo of Amasea operates, perhaps the most important geographer of antiquity, and the author of a massive description of the world, almost entirely preserved. This is why the issue of the real meaning of *barbaros* in Homer bears for him a far greater significance than a mere, old philological quarrel: it is part of a wider perception of cultural boundaries between civilized and uncivilized populations, and part of a deeper grounding of Hellenic identity in a common past. The controversial and at times contradictory Greek/barbarian dichotomy is variably based on linguistic, ethnic, or broader cultural foundations, not allowing any room for “mixed” populations but complicating the very nature of Hellenism and barbarism through a process of constant historical evolution and exchange. For Strabo, this dichotomy becomes an essential tool to interpret the world he lives in, and one that he is keen on reading into the Homeric text.

5 Sartre, “Histoires Grecques,” 380. (Also quoted in Dillery, *Clio's Other Sons*, 349.)

Greek Text

Strabo, *Geography* 14.2.28, 661.17–663.5 C., excerpted from *Strabons Geographika*, vol. 4, *Buch 14–17: Text und Übersetzung*, ed. Stefan Radt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2005), 78–82, round parentheses in the original.

Τοῦ ποιητοῦ δ' εἰρηκότος οὕτωςί

Μάσθλης αὖ Καρῶν ἡγήσατο βαρβαροφώνων, (B 867)

οὐκ ἔχει λόγον πῶς τοσαῦτα εἰδῶς ἔθνη βάρβαρα μόνους εἶρηκε βαρβαροφώνους τοὺς Κάραις, βαρβάρους δ' οὐδένας. οὗτ' οὖν Θουκυδίδης ὀρθῶς (1.3.3)· οὐδὲ γὰρ λέγεσθαι φησι βαρβάρους “διὰ τὸ μηδὲ Ἑλληνᾶς πω ἀντίπαλον εἰς ἓν ὄνομα ἀποκεκρίσθαι”· τὸ τε γὰρ “μηδὲ Ἑλληνᾶς πω” ψεύδος αὐτὸς ὁ ποιητῆς ἀπελέγχει (α 334)

ἀνδρός, τοῦ κλέος εὐρὺ καθ' Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος

καὶ πάλιν (ο 80)

εἴτ' ἐθέλεις τραφῆναι ἀν' Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος·

μὴ λεγομένων τε βαρβάρων πῶς ἔμελλεν εὖ λεχθήσεσθαι τὸ βαρβαροφώνων; οὔτε δὴ οὗτος εὖ οὗτ' Ἀπολλόδωρος ὁ γραμματικός (FGrHist 244 F207), ὅτι τῷ κοινῷ ὀνόματι ἰδίως καὶ λοιδορῶς ἐχρώντο οἱ Ἕλληνες κατὰ τῶν Καρῶν, καὶ μάλιστα οἱ Ἴωνες μισοῦντες αὐτοὺς διὰ τὴν ἔχθραν καὶ τὰς συνεχεῖς στρατείας· ἐχρῆν γὰρ οὕτως βαρβάρους ὀνομάζειν. ἡμεῖς δὲ ζητοῦμεν διὰ τί βαρβαροφώνους καλεῖ, βαρβάρους δ' οὐδ' ἄπαξ. “ὅτι” φησί “τὸ πληθυντικὸν εἰς τὸ μέτρον οὐκ ἐμπίπτει, διὰ τοῦτ' οὐκ εἶρηκε βαρβάρους.” ἀλλ' αὕτη μὲν ἢ πτώσις οὐκ ἐμπίπτει, ἢ δ' ὀρθῆ οὐ διαφέρει τῆς Δάρδανοι

Τρῶες καὶ Λύκιοι καὶ Δάρδανοι. (Θ 173 etc.)

6 A line of the *Catalogue of Ships*, the long and detailed list of the contingents of soldiers deployed at Troy by the Greeks, and of those deployed on the opposite side by the allies of the Trojans (such are, in this specific line, the Carians). Ancient exegetes on this line speculated that the Carians—a population of Western Asia Minor—spoke a bad Greek because they were of Cretan descent, or that they had a very heavy accent, or that they used to speak loudly. The name of the Carian commander-in-chief is given as Nastes by Homeric manuscripts. On this line see most lately Saviano, “Sui ‘Cari barbarofoni’ di Il. II 867,” 81–94.

7 The statement of Thucydides is part of the *Archaiologia*, namely of the section devoted to the early populations of Greece (amongst whom the Pelasgians, see Chapter 1.3). According to Thucydides, before the Trojan war there existed among the Greeks no real consciousness of a common ethnic origin. Well before Strabo, the great philologist Aristarchus of Samothrace (second century BCE) already countered Thucydides's observation by referring to the aforementioned line of *Iliad* Book II.

English Translation

Adapted from *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, vol. 6, *Books XIII–XIV* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 301–307.

When the poet says

“Masthes in turn led the Carians, of barbarian speech” [*Iliad* 2.867],⁶ it is inconceivable how it is that, although he knew so many barbarian tribes, he speaks of the Carians alone as “of barbarian speech,” but nowhere speaks of “barbarians.” Thucydides, therefore [1.3.3], is not correct, for he says that there are no “barbarians” in Homer because “the Hellenes on their part had not yet been distinguished under one name as opposed to them”;⁷ for the poet himself refutes the statement that the Hellenes had not yet been so distinguished when he says:

“of a man whose fame is wide through Hellas and mid-Argos,” [*Odyssey* 1.334]

and again

“and if thou dost wish to journey through Hellas and mid-Argos.” [*Odyssey* 15.80]⁸

Further, if there was no use of the word “barbarians,” how could they properly be called a people “of barbarian speech”? So neither Thucydides is correct, nor Apollodorus the grammarian,⁹ who says that “the general term was used by the Hellenes in a peculiar and abusive sense against the Carians, and in particular by the Ionians, who hated them because of their enmity and the continuous military campaigns”; for then he would have had to call them “barbarians.”

But I raise the question: Why does he call them people “of barbarian speech,” but not even once calls them “barbarians”? “Because,” Apollodorus says, “the plural does not fall in with the metre; this is why he does not call them ‘barbarians.’” But though this case does not fall in with metre, the nominative case does not differ metrically from that of “Dardanians”:

“Trojans and Lycians and Dardanians” [*Iliad* 8.173 etc.].

8 As Thucydides observes, the word *Hellas/Hellenes* is in fact never applied to the whole of Greece in Homer, but regularly employed with reference to the land and the people of Achilles, i.e. to a particular district of Thessaly.

9 Apollodorus of Athens (second century BCE) was one of the most important erudites, philologists, and Homeric scholars of his time, and the author of a monumental geographical and antiquarian commentary to the *Catalogue of Ships*. As elsewhere, Strabo takes his cue from Apollodorus's observations in order to refute them.

τοιούτον δὲ καὶ τὸ

οἶοι Τρώιοι ἵπποι. (E 222, Θ 106)

οὐδὲ γε ὅτι τραχυτάτη ἢ γλωττα τῶν Καρῶν· οὐ γάρ ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ πλείστα Ἑλληνικὰ ὀνόματα ἔχει καταμειγμένα, ὡς φησι Φίλιππος ὁ τὰ Καρικὰ γράψας (FGrHist 741F1). οἶμαι δὲ τὸ βάρβαρον κατ' ἀρχὰς ἐκπεφωνήσθαι οὕτως κατ' ὀνοματοποιίαν ἐπὶ τῶν δυσεκφόρων καὶ σκληρῶς καὶ τραχέως λαλούντων, ὡς τὸ βατταρίζειν καὶ τραυλίζειν καὶ ψελλίζειν. εὐφυστατοὶ γὰρ ἐσμὲν τὰς φωνὰς ταῖς ὁμοίαις φωναῖς κατονομάζειν διὰ τὸ ὁμογενές. ἢ δὴ καὶ πλεονάζουσιν ἐνταῦθα αἱ ὀνοματοποιαί, οἷον τὸ “κελαρύζει” καὶ “κλαγγή” δὲ καὶ “ψόφος” καὶ “βοή” καὶ “κρότος,” ὧν τὰ πλείστα ἤδη καὶ κυρίως ἐκφέρεται. πάντων δὴ τῶν παχυστομούντων οὕτως βαρβάρων λεγομένων, ἐφάνη τὰ τῶν ἀλλοεθνῶν στόματα τοιαῦτα, λέγω δὲ τὰ τῶν μὴ Ἑλλήνων. ἐκείνους οὖν ἰδίως ἐκάλεσαν βαρβάρους, ἐν ἀρχαῖς μὲν κατὰ τὸ λοιδορον, ὡς ἂν παχυστόμους ἢ τραχυστόμους, εἶτα κατεχρησάμεθα ὡς ἐθνικῶ κοινῶ ὀνόματι ἀντιδιαιροῦντες πρὸς τοὺς Ἕλληνας. καὶ γὰρ δὴ τῇ πολλῇ συνηθείᾳ καὶ ἐπιπλοκῇ τῶν βαρβάρων οὐκέτι ἐφαίνετο κατὰ παχυστομίαν καὶ ἀφυΐαν τινὰ τῶν φωνητηρίων ὀργάνων τοῦτο συμβαῖνον, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὰς τῶν διαλέκτων ιδιότητος. ἄλλη δὲ τις ἐν τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ διαλέκτῳ ἀνεφάνη κακοστομία καὶ οἶον βαρβαροστομία, εἴ τις ἐλληνίζων μὴ κατορθοίη, ἀλλ' οὕτω λέγοι τὰ ὀνόματα ὡς οἱ βάρβαροι οἱ εἰσαγόμενοι εἰς τὸν ἑλληνισμόν οὐκ ἰσχύοντες ἀρτιστομεῖν (ὡς οὐδ' ἡμεῖς ἐν ταῖς ἐκείνων διαλέκτοις). τοῦτο δὲ μάλιστα συνέβη τοῖς Καρσί· τῶν γὰρ ἄλλων οὐτ' ἐπιπλεκομένων πω σφόδρα τοῖς Ἕλλησιν, οὐτ' ἐπιχειροῦντων Ἑλληνικῶς ζῆν ἢ μανθάνειν τὴν ἡμετέραν διάλεκτον, πλὴν εἴ τινες σπάνιοι καὶ κατὰ τύχην ἐπεμίχθησαν καὶ κατ' ἄνδρα ὀλίγοις τῶν Ἑλλήνων τισίν—οὔτοι δὲ καθ' ὅλην ἐπλανήθησαν τὴν Ἑλλάδα μισθοῦ στρατεύοντες. ἤδη οὖν τὸ βαβαρόφωνον ἐπ' ἐκείνων πυκνὸν ἦν ἀπὸ τῆς εἰς τὴν Ἑλλάδα αὐτῶν στρατείας, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐπεπόλασε πολὺ μᾶλλον ἀφ' οὗ τὰς τε νήσους μετὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ᾤκησαν κάκειθεν εἰς τὴν Ἀσίαν ἐκπεσόντες οὐδ' ἐνταῦθα χωρὶς Ἑλλήνων οἰκεῖν ἐδύναντο ἐπιδιαβάντων τῶν Ἰώνων καὶ τῶν Δωριέων. | ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς αὐτῆς αἰτίας καὶ τὸ βαρβαρίζειν λέγεται· καὶ γὰρ τοῦτο ἐπὶ τῶν κακῶς ἐλληνιζόντων εἰώθαμεν λέγειν, οὐκ ἐπὶ τῶν καριστὶ λαλούντων. οὕτως οὖν καὶ τὸ βαρβαροφωνεῖν, καὶ τοὺς βαρβαροφώνους δεκτέον τοὺς κακῶς ἐλληνίζοντας.

- 10 In Greek the form of the nominative plural *Dardanoi* or *Troioi* becomes acceptable in the dactylic hexameter if it precedes a vowel (as in the line quoted here), for it thus acquires the shape of a dactyl.
- 11 Little is known of this Philip of Theangela, a local historian who probably lived between the third and second centuries BCE. The little we know of the Carian language does not chime in with Strabo's praise of its musicality.
- 12 This is the first extant evidence of the use of *onomatopoeia* not for an invented word but for the verbal representation of a sound: the three Greek verbs enumerated by Strabo represent by their very outer form specific faults of pronunciation.
- 13 That Carians were mercenaries is maintained already by Herodotus, and is proved by the frequency of Carian inscriptions of soldiers found in Egypt and Lydia, where these men gave rise to a fertile phenomenon of cultural and linguistic interaction.

So, also, the word “Trojan,” in

“of what kind the Trojan horses are.” [*Iliad* 5.222 etc.]¹⁰

The reason cannot be, either, that the language of the Carians is very harsh, for it is not, but even has very many Greek words mixed up with it, according to the Philip who wrote *The Karika*.¹¹ I suppose that the word “barbarian” was at first uttered onomatopoeically in reference to people who pronounced words only with difficulty and talked harshly and raucously (like our words *bat-tarizein*, *traulizein*, and *psellizein*),¹² for we are by nature very much inclined to denote sounds by words that sound like them, on account of their homogeneity. Wherefore onomatopoeic words abound in our language, as, for example, *kelaryzei* [gurgles], and also *klange* [howl], *psophos* [noise], *boe* [scream], and *krotos* [clap], most of which are by now used like proper words.

Accordingly, when all who pronounced words thickly were being called “barbarians” onomatopoeically, it appeared that the pronunciations of all alien races were likewise thick, I mean of those that were not Greek. Those, therefore, they called “barbarians” in the special sense of the term, at first derisively, meaning that they pronounced words thickly or harshly; and then we misused the word as a general ethnic term, thus making a logical distinction between the Greeks and all other races. The fact is, however, that through our long acquaintance and intercourse with the barbarians this effect was at last seen to be the result, not of a thick pronunciation or any natural defect in the vocal organs, but of the peculiarities of their several languages. And there appeared another faulty and barbarian-like pronunciation in our language, whenever any person speaking Greek did not pronounce it correctly, but pronounced the words like barbarians who are only beginning to learn Greek and are unable to speak it accurately, as is also the case with us in speaking their languages.

This was particularly the case with the Carians, for, although the other peoples were not yet having very much intercourse with the Greeks nor even trying to live in Greek fashion or to learn our language—with the exception, perhaps, of rare persons who by chance, and singly, mingled with a few of the Greeks—yet the Carians roamed throughout the whole of Greece, serving on expeditions for pay.¹³ Already, therefore, the definition of “barbarous” was frequent for them since their expedition to Greece; and after this it spread much more, from the time they took up their abode with the Greeks in the islands; and when they were driven thence into Asia, even here they were unable to live apart from the Greeks, I mean when the Ionians and Dorians later crossed over to Asia. The term “barbarize,” also, has the same origin; for we are wont to use this too in reference to those who speak Greek badly, not to those who talk Carian. So, therefore, we must interpret the terms “speak barbarously” and “barbarously-speaking” as applying to those who speak Greek badly.

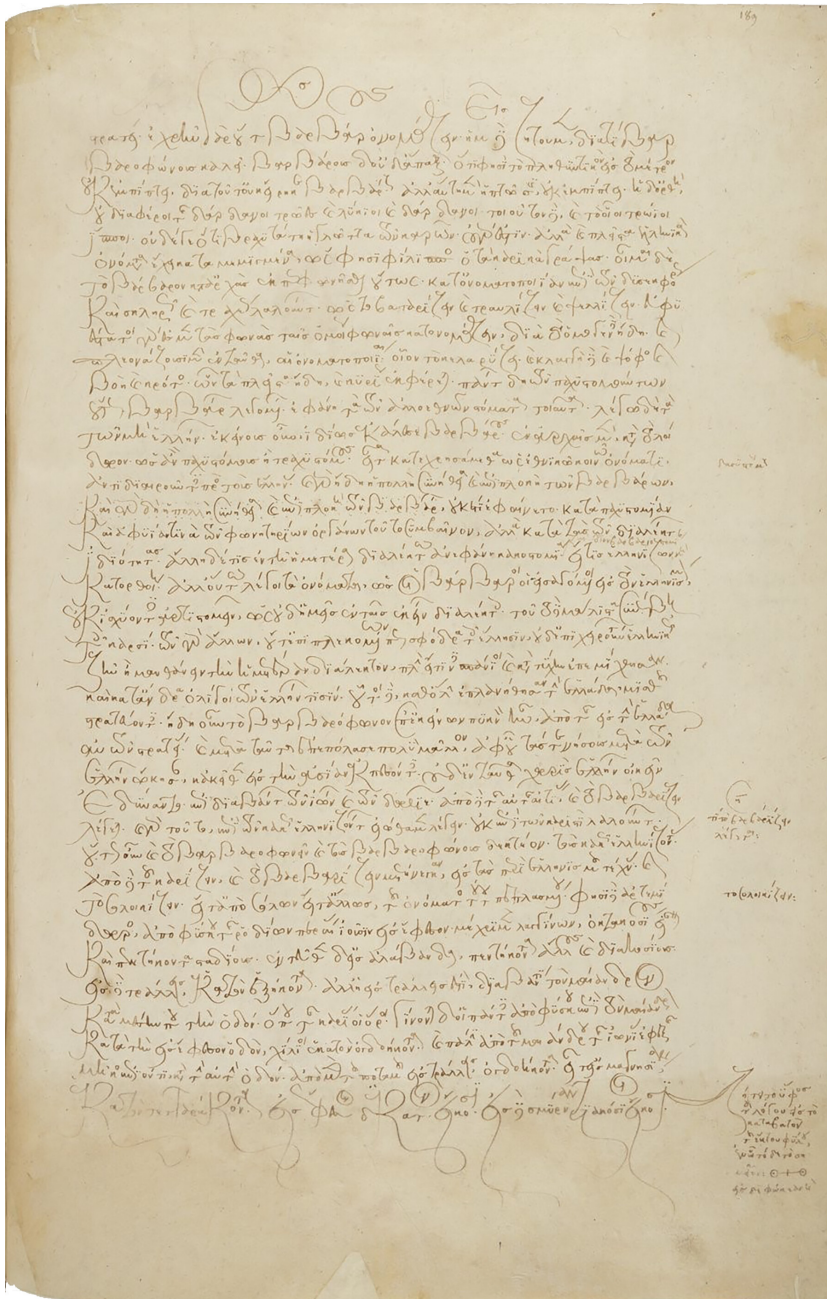


FIGURE 1.7.1 Strabo, *Geography*. MS Grec 1393, fol. 189r
 BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE. DÉPARTEMENT DES MANUSCRITS

Abbreviations

- C. *Strabonis rerum geographicarum libri xvii. Isaacus Casaubonus recensuit ac commentariis illustravit.* Geneva, 1587.

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