

*Ethnicity in the ancient world – did it matter?* By Erich S. Gruen Pp. xii + 265. Berlin–Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020. €64.95. 978 3 11 068478 0

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In this volume, which consists of eleven essays, six of which draw upon previous publications, Erich Gruen, the distinguished ancient historian both of republican Rome and Hellenistic Judaism, addresses the complex question of ethnicity in the ancient world. Five of his essays relate to Greek or Roman subjects, six to Jewish and Christian ones, though Jewish authors appear in some of the former essays.

Gruen is clear in his introduction that the term ethnicity is beset with flux and instability. In accord with its ‘Protean’ character, Gruen suggests a definition, if that is the right term, which operates on two levels. At one of these it can carry the meaning of communal self-perception, at another of collective identity in which ancestry or kinship is emphasised, equivalent to our use of the word ‘race’, ‘by contrast with the host of traits, customs, and traditions that we conventionally associate with “culture”’.

The essays touch on a variety of subjects, dating from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE, ranging from an analysis of the use of the term ‘barbarian’ by Greek and some Jewish authors, to the writings of Herodotus, famous or infamous, one will recall, for the assertion that ‘Greekness’ rests on common blood, common language, shared shrines and sacrifices and similar ways of life, to an examination of Rome’s multiple identities, to essays on Hellenistic Jewish authors, Paul and ancient assertions that Christians formed a ‘third race’. Gruen’s approach is to read the evidence in context, and to take account of its variety, so as to avoid relying upon piquant sound bites supportive of one particular position. In broad terms the book argues that ancients expressed the collective identities of their societies less in terms of ancestry, genealogy and inherent character than in a conglomerate of traditions, practices and shared convictions. ‘In other words cultural commonality counted for more than shared lineage.’ In the process of arguing his case Gruen makes plain that words like ‘genos’ and ‘ethnos’, those traditionally associated with the debate in which he is engaged, were more fissiparous and less precise than we might think and sat with a number of meanings, making precise translations difficult, at least in terms of modern concepts of ethnicity.

Gruen has brought together a mass of evidence, and while, as he admits, this is inevitably selective, he has made a vigorous case for the argument he is pursuing, precisely by getting into the weeds of the primary material. Notable in this respect are his essays on the word ‘barbarian’, here emphasising its often neutral usage and the fact that its negative usage rarely related to any idea of congenital inferiority; on Jewish ideas of intermarriage, largely to be avoided for fear of idolatrous practices, rather than for some specific racial characteristic of the Gentiles; and on Paul in which he argues that the former’s stress concerning Judaism ‘falls on characteristic conventions, commitment to traditions, conformance to the law, and even belief’. In the essay perhaps most relevant to this JOURNAL, namely the final one on Christians as a third race, a description first met in the only fragmentarily preserved Proclamation of Peter, and intermittently alluded to in some apologetic texts and then in Tertullian, Gruen argues that the term cannot be used to support the view that ancients derived their sense of identity according to ethnicity. It is used too infrequently to support such a position; and where it is used it never carries the sense of race.

Gruen's book is clearly written and furnishes its reader with much information. Some will think that on occasion he takes a too majoritarian view of texts in arguing his case, so that those texts which could be thought to bear the hallmarks of what he terms a definition based upon ancestry and genealogy, and so on 'innate and irreversible traits', are to some extent outvoted; on other occasions some will think that he is too quick to allow a rather tendentiously contextual interpretation to smother a more 'ethnic' reading of a particular text (in this regard one should note his discussion of some of Cicero's more rebarbative remarks about various 'ethnic' groups, dispensed with as 'racial' on the grounds of their presence in impassioned legal defences, his view that Tacitus' remarks against Jews in *Histories* 5.2–13 are ironical, as they present paradoxical statements, which both convey and undercut stereotypes, or his view that Philo's highly negative remarks about Egyptians, which pick up on more widely disseminated prejudices, because they appear especially, though not always, in texts in which he was passionately and personally engaged, 'need not have general resonance'). And in all of this one is left asking when Gruen would accept a broadly 'ethnic' view in an ancient source. Interestingly, he says nothing about the evidence that, for instance, Benjamin Isaac produces for racial stereotyping of physical features and related matters of individual groups; and tends to discount as important places where climate and related matters are said to explain individual traits in certain groups of people (see especially Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.2, a passage left undiscussed by Gruen): a matter which was contested, but the very fact of its contestation points to the presence of a debate of this kind. With the exception of a few footnotes, he avoids engaging with Denise Kimber Buell's monograph of 2005, entitled, *Why this new race? Ethnic reasoning in early Christianity*, where she argues that Christians 'reasoned ethnically' (and this in spite of the fact that he reviewed the book); but this may not be surprising as Gruen is not concerned with the same issues, namely an assumed universality among Christians, which transcended ethnicity, often associated with Judaism. Buell, like Gruen, accepted that there was some fluidity in the term as used in antiquity and among Christians, though she might argue that Gruen has made his case more by a narrow and contestable definition of ethnicity than by demonstrating the absence of concern about something we could call peoplehood. Indeed, because Gruen does not see 'cultural' slurs, whether to do with religious or social practices as 'ethnic', one is perhaps less surprised with his conclusion than one might have been; and in going for a narrower definition he appears to contest some standard definitions of ethnicity as we find those in Hutchinson and Smith's work *Ethnicity* (Oxford 1996), to which Gruen refers, but not at length.

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