

“A Pestilent Knave from Macedonia:” Narratives of Culture and Ethnicity in Demosthenes’ *Third Philippic*

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The Greek orator Demosthenes delivered his blistering *Third Philippic* before the Athenian assembly in 341 BCE. In the speech, he lambasts the Athenians for their perceived complacency in the face of the growing military threat of Philip II of Macedon. Demosthenes calls for an immediate alliance between Athens and her fellow Greek *poleis* in order to counter Philip’s divisive political maneuvering and safeguard their own independence from Macedon. However, the primary thrust of Demosthenes’ rhetoric focuses is not on the *military* danger, but on the *cultural* danger that Philip poses to the essential Greek identity, since, in Demosthenes’ view, he is not a true Greek but rather an uncivilized and contemptible outsider. In this paper, I will situate Demosthenes’ references to ethnicity in the *Third Philippic* within their historical and cultural context, outlining in particular the ancient Greek view of Greek ethnicity, as contrasted both with the *ethnē* (including Macedon) and with other non-Greek (“barbarian”) cultures, which is exemplified by the historical conflict between Greece and Persia. I will demonstrate that Demosthenes, throughout his speech, skillfully interweaves two narratives: 1) the domestic narrative of the ‘upstart slave’ and 2) the historical narrative of the Greco-Persian Wars. Together, these narratives convey a subtle and convincing portrayal of Macedon as the ‘new barbarian invader’, supporting Demosthenes’ exhortation to the Athenian’s to take up her ancient role as ‘saviour of Greece’ against the outsider. By characterizing Philip as not only non-Greek but more importantly *sub-Greek*, Demosthenes makes a persuasive case for Athenian action against Macedon, representing Philip’s imperial ambitions as both a *political* danger to Athens and an *existential* threat to the Greek identity and worldview itself. Thus, Philip the Macedonian is a threat which must be stopped at any cost.

When Philip became involved in the Chersonese in 341, an area to which Athens laid claim as recognized by the Greek states in 365, Demosthenes saw this as the critical moment for Athens to take a decisive military stand against Macedon (Worthington 59).

Indeed, Demosthenes viewed Philip's rise to power as a threat not only to Athens, or indeed to any *individual* Greek *polis*, but to "Greece" as an ethnic and cultural whole. Throughout his *Third Philippic*, he references Greek culture, values, government, and history, contrasting each facet of the Greek identity with Macedon under Philip. In particular, he calls into question Philip and the Macedonians' ethnicity, constructing two dichotomies on the theme of ethnic identity: one centered around the present-day conflict ("Greek vs. Macedonian"), and one of critical significance in the historical development of Greek identity ("Greek vs. Persian"). These dichotomies are skillfully interwoven together with the domestic narrative of the 'upstart slave' to make a persuasive case for military action against Philip.

Demosthenes' repeated references to ethnicity throughout the *Third Philippic* raise an important question: how did most fourth-century Greeks living in the southern city-states view the *ethnē* in general and, specifically, how did they view the Macedonians? Gabriel does not mince words as he sums up what he sees as the prevailing Greek view of the time: "Culturally, the Greeks of Philip's day regarded Macedonia as a geographic backwater inhabited by untrustworthy barbarians who spoke an uncouth form of Greek; were governed by primitive political institutions; subscribed to customs, social values, and sexual practices that bordered on the unspeakably depraved; dressed in bear pelts; drank their wine neat; and were given to regular bouts of incest, murder, and regicide. To the degree that the Greeks thought about isolated Macedonia at all, it was from the perspective of snobbish and sophisticated contempt" (Gabriel 5-6). Demand takes a more nuanced approach, implying that disagreement existed among the Greeks as to whether they shared a common ethnic origin with the Macedonians, though the Macedonian kings themselves were eager to claim descent from the heroes of Greek legend (Demand 286). Perhaps, though, the precise answer that most Greeks of the time would give if asked "Are the Macedonians *actually* Greek?" is far less important than the fact that their ethnic status was viewed as questionable at best. In other words, the Macedonians were culturally, politically, and linguistically different enough from the Greeks living in the *poleis* to the south that, in a time of political crisis, a skilled orator such as Demosthenes could easily depict them as outsiders inherently hostile to the Greek world. Indeed, throughout his *Third Philippic* Demosthenes characterizes the

Macedonians as not only non-Greek, but, critically, *sub*-Greek: not merely barbarians (like the Persians) but *contemptible* barbarians lacking refined civilization, orderly government, or respect for Greek ideals such as freedom, justice, and honor. This narrative, sometimes stated overtly but far more often present as a subtext, provides the foundation for Demosthenes' anti-Philip and anti-Macedon rhetoric throughout his oration.

Demosthenes opens his speech with a call for immediate action against both Philip and those citizens of Athens who argue for inaction and/or appeasement of the Macedonian power. However, his focus in the first paragraph is intriguing: rather than emphasizing the *military* threat that Philip poses to Athens, he discusses the "wrongs" that Philip is committing and -- even more strikingly -- Philip's "arrogance" which Demosthenes calls upon the Athenians to "check and chastise" (Dem. *Philippics* 3.1). From the first sentence of Demosthenes' speech, Philip is represented as more *contemptible* than threatening: not an invader who deserves wary respect but an upstart slave or menial (note Demosthenes' subtle reference in 3.3) who has ideas above his station. Even worse, Philip is a *wrongdoer*. As Demosthenes will more explicitly spell out later, Philip breaks the implicit social code that the Greek states are bound by their interactions with one another, and thus commits wrongs not only against individual Greek states, but against Greece as a whole. By extension, then, Philip of Macedon is hostile to Athens' interests and affairs, and must be stopped at once.

Demosthenes builds on this idea as he counters what he knows will be his opponents' first objection: Philip has not yet taken direct military action against Athens, though he challenges by proxy Athens' territorial control in regions such as the Chersonese and Byzantium. If the Athenian assembly declares war on Philip, could not Athens justly be termed the aggressor and Macedon the wronged party? Demosthenes must first settle this question decisively if he wishes to convince his audience that Macedon is a threat. Philip, Demosthenes argues, may promise peace, but cannot be trusted to uphold it; he is *deceptive*, as can be demonstrated by his treatment of Olynthia, Phocis, and Thessaly, and has a rapacious appetite for expansion at the cost of his neighbors' territory and political autonomy. Worse, he violates the central Greek ideals of "religion and justice" and does not respect Athens' claim to the Chersonese, a claim which has been recognized by "the king of Persia and all the Greeks" (3.16). The all-but-stated

implication, of course, is that Philip himself is *not* Greek. Indeed, Demosthenes argues, whether Macedon has overtly threatened Athens is irrelevant; simply by *being what he is*, untrustworthy, aggressively expansionist, and non-Greek. Philip is a threat not only to Athens and her territories but to the entire Greek world. Athens, therefore, must take immediate action to help *all* the Greek *poleis* avert “the great danger that besets them” (3.20).

Here, again, Demosthenes anticipates a possible objection. After all, the Greek city-states have eagerly been fighting one another for over a century. How can Philip and Macedon, newcomers on the Greek political scene, present any threat to Athens which is comparable to Sparta’s repressive dominance after the Peloponnesian Wars, or to Thebes’ recent rise to a position of authority among the Greek city-states? Demosthenes readily concedes that relations between the Greek *poleis* have been “mutually disloyal and factious.” Indeed, if they had not been, he argues, Philip, who came from “small and humble beginnings,” (again, a reference to Macedon’s allegedly underdeveloped culture) could scarcely have attained the supremacy he now enjoys (3.21). Yet, Demosthenes contends that Philip’s methods and ambitions are quite different than those employed by of Sparta, Thebes, or Athens herself during their periods of dominance. These Greek powers had each enjoyed only a limited position of military, economic, and political influence among a group of city-states that retained their autonomy. However, Philip’s goal is quite different; he seeks the “right of unrestricted action” (3.23). That is, “the power of doing what he likes, of calmly plundering and stripping the Greeks one by one, and of attacking their cities and reducing them to slavery” (3.22). In short, Philip is that most despised of rulers, a tyrant. He demands total obedience, has already set up tyrannies in Thessaly and Euboea, and levels any cities, such as Olynthus, that dare defy him. Evidently, he is bent on dispossessing the Greek city-states of their most dearly held value: political autonomy. Only an outsider, a non-Greek who does not understand or respect Greek values, would consider this concentration of absolute power in one man’s hands desirable or even acceptable.

With this, we come to the heart of Demosthenes’ argument: Philip is *doubly* in the wrong by seeking to conquer the Greek world, not only because he is a tyrant, but because he is not even Greek. An Athenian might well argue that Sparta or even

Athens herself, during their respective periods of hegemony, had exercised much the same rigid and tyrannical dominance over the other Greek *poleis* as Philip desires now. Demosthenes sharply contrasts the two cases, using the example of a legitimate son who mismanages an estate: though his actions may deserve blame and reproach, at least he has wasted and squandered his own ancestral property, not another's. By extension, though Sparta or Athens may have made poor decisions and overstepped their authority during their periods of hegemony, at least they were "true-born sons of Greece" (3.30). But if Athens or Sparta is a "lawful heir," Demosthenes argues that Philip is a "slave or superstitious bastard" (3.30-31) who has no valid claim even to a hegemony over the Greek states, much less the right to conquer and control them as he pleases. His rise is all the more "monstrous and exasperating," because "He is not only no Greek, nor related to the Greeks, but not even a barbarian from any place that can be named with honor, but a pestilent knave from Macedonia, whence it was never yet possible to buy a decent slave" (3.31).

Philip is not only not *fully* Greek or even distantly related to the Greek people; as a Macedonian, he is *sub-Greek*. He falls below the level of the 'honorable barbarian' (i.e. the Persian) and below even the level of the desirable slave. Yet in his "insolence" (3.32) this outsider has sought to gain control over the most revered icons of Greek culture: the Olympic Games, the passes into Greece at Thermopylae, which are both militarily and historically important, and the sacred Oracle at Delphi. Thus, in Demosthenes' view, Philip's conquests and rise to power pose not only a practical threat to Greece, both military and political, but an *existential* threat, because, unthinkable as it would be for the Greek city-states to be stripped of their freedom, it would be a far worse insult to be conquered by barbarians. Not even by the formidable and sophisticated Persian Empire, but by uncultured barbarians such as Philip and his Macedonians.

Demosthenes' use of the "slave" metaphor for Philip, and by extension for Macedon, is particularly striking. Worthington points out that the Macedonians, mostly pastoralists and farmers in an economy lacking widespread slave labour, were held in contempt by the Greeks for performing tasks that in the mainstream Greek world would be delegated to slaves. Furthermore, the fact that the Macedonians lived under a monarchy implied that they were "not intelligent enough to govern themselves" (Worthington 9). That

is, to live as free Greek citizens in an oligarchy or democracy. As Hunt discusses, to be a “slave” was to be automatically labelled not only socially but *morally* inferior: “slaves were stereotyped as trivial, cowardly, shiftless, and childish” individuals who deserved their own menial status in Greek society (Hunt 110). Philip, the ‘upstart slave’, inherently poses a threat to the Greek way of life and thus is the common foe of Athens and all her fellow Greek city-states. His rise threatens not only Athens’ own economic and political interests, but the entire “established order of things” (Dem. *Philippics* 3.24). As Demosthenes declares near the end of his oration, “Better to die a thousand times than pay court to Philip” (3.65). For a free and honorable Greek citizen, death is preferable to slavery under the yoke of the despised Macedonian tyrant who is by nature unfit even to be a slave himself.

At this point, an Athenian listener might well object: if Philip is essentially nothing more than a cowardly slave who has ambitions far beyond his rightful (i.e. non-Greek) place, how is it possible that he has attained the military and political dominance he now enjoys? In response, Demosthenes elaborates on the second ethnic dichotomy demonstrated in the historical conflict between “Greeks” and “barbarians,” specifically the Greco-Persian Wars. He reminds his hearers that Greece under Athens’ leadership was able to triumph over the unimaginable wealth and military might of Persia nearly a century and a half before, fighting against great odds and at enormous cost to herself, in order to uphold her highest value: political freedom. It is not Philip’s own abilities or resources that have gained him his position of political and military advantage, but rather the corrupt and cowardly citizens that comprise the Athenian democracy of Demosthenes’ own time. Demosthenes contends that their ancestors despised and hated anyone who took bribes from the Persians, even if such bribes did not affect Athens directly (as illustrated by the story of Arthmuis of Zelea) because they recognized how such bribery weakened all of Greece in its common struggle against Persia: “The natural result was that the Greek power was dreaded by the barbarian, not the barbarian by the Greeks. But that is no longer so” (3.45). The situation has been reversed. Due to the self-interest and corruption of Athens’ citizens, the ‘new barbarian enemy,’ the uncultured and backwards Philip of Macedon, has been able to gain an advantage over Greece that the ‘old barbarian enemy,’ Persia, never held.

Demosthenes concludes his historical narrative by turning to the

long years of inter-Greek warfare to hammer home the intensity of the threat that Philip poses. Can this upstart barbarian from Macedon truly pose a military threat to Athens on the level of Sparta, its traditional 'worst enemy'? Demosthenes argues that the two cases are simply not comparable, for Philip has revolutionized the art of war, partially through the use of innovative and well-trained forces, but more importantly because, unlike the Spartans, he does not 'fight fair'. First, the Spartans had a set season (four or five months) for invading an enemy's territory, and after this period of time they would return home "like everyone else" (3.48). The set duration of military engagement was anticipated by the Greek city-states. However, Philip of Macedon never stops fighting and appears bent on universal conquest. Secondly, the Spartans used traditional methods of warfare, using citizen militias and the hoplite phalanx, rather than Philip's hired mercenaries, mixed forces of archers and cavalry, and rigorously trained professional armies. But finally, and most importantly, the Spartans were "good citizens" (i.e. *Greek* citizens) and their fighting was of the "fair and open kind" (3.48); they did not attempt (nor even, it is implied, *need*) to win over their enemies through bribery as Philip has done at Olynthus, Eretria, and Oreus. In short, the Spartans, unlike Philip, were (to use a British term) 'sporting' -- formidable opponents in battle, to be sure, but they knew the unspoken rules of Greek warfare and were content to abide by them. In contrast, Philip the outsider uses subversion and strife within a city to weaken its ability to defend itself, and thus to capture it without opposition. Afterwards, the traitors who have worked for Philip become the city's new tyrants, while the general population are made "slaves, doomed to the whipping-post and the scaffold" (3.66). Recalling Demosthenes' earlier metaphor of the slave, Philip here is guilty of unjustly supplanting the rightful heirs and enslaving the Greek city-state.

In his concluding remarks, Demosthenes lays out his proposed plan of action. Firstly, the Athenians themselves are to take immediate practical steps of preparing warships and armed forces in order to counter Philip's military threat. Secondly, they must seek to win over the other Greek city-states and unite the Greek world against the invader, as they did during the Greco-Persian Wars: "We must summon, collect, instruct, and exhort the rest of the Greeks. That is the duty of a city with a reputation such as yours enjoys.... [T]his is a task for you; it was for you that your

ancestors won this proud privilege and bequeathed it to you at great and manifold risk" (3.73-74). Here Demosthenes once more brings together the two narratives of 'Greek vs. barbarian' which he has employed throughout his speech. Both Athens and all of Greece, he implies, face in Philip a threat every bit as great as they faced during the Persian attack led by Xerxes and Darius. The Athenians must take up their ancient role as leaders and protectors of Greece. Now is the time to once more unite their fellow city-states against attack by an outsider who seeks not only to crush the Greeks militarily, but to deprive them of their democracy, political autonomy, and cultural institutions. This is the central and persuasive theme in Demosthenes' *Third Philippic*, that Philip of Macedon, the barbarian who is neither Greek nor related to the Greeks, who neither understands their culture nor respects their political autonomy, seeks to obliterate not only the Greek political world but the entire Greek ethnic *identity*. It is a call to arms in order to secure and preserve Greek identity from an inferior, alien, and barbaric force.

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