

ON THE MEANINGS OF *BARBARUS*

The Symposium on the Barbarians centered on a incisive lexeme of the Greco-Latin heritage. In a superb semiotic panorama of *barbarus* in the Roman perspective, Y.-A. Dauge understands the concept as «incorporating all the negative manifestations of *the other*, the non-ego»¹, and in his anatomy of its constituents he abstracts *inculture* 'lack of culture' as the dominant thrust². Dauge bases his extensive exposition on the literary Latin documentation; in what follows we try to complement his contextual approach with a succinct diachronic reconstruction of the word's history: A sociolinguistic analysis will add, we believe, some insight into the polysemy of that keyterm of our discussions.

I

The Greek baseform throws light on the image of the 'foreigner' in the eyes (and the ears) of the Greeks. Gr. βάρβαρος originated as a sound-portrait of the non-Greek. His language was the primary characteristic which stimulated the exercise of black humor (we call this prejudice «glossism»³). The term βάρβαρος did indeed focus on language. The word is elegantly structured: The archi-image of mouth and speech, bilabial *b*⁴, is followed by grating and rasping *r*, and *bar*, for pure enjoyment, is reduplicated to *barbar*. The Greeks were not alone in mimicking unintelligible speech by means of an onomatopoeic creation such as *barbar*⁵: Within Indo-European⁶, Sanskrit, e.g., had *barbarah* 'stammering;

1. Y.-A. Dauge, *Le barbare: Recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation* (Collection Latomus, 176; Bruxelles 1981), p. 410.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

3. H. and R. Kahane, A case of Glossism: Gregghesco and Lingua Franca in Venetian Literature, in *Mélanges Petar Skok* (Académie Yougoslave des Sciences et des Arts, Zagreb, 198), p. 223-228.

4. M. Delamain, *Playdoyer pour les mots: Un essai de phonétique expressive*, Paris 1968, p. 186.

5. V. Garcia de Diego, *Diccionario de voces naturales*, Madrid 1965, s.vv. *babl* (152), *balb* (166), *barb* (182), *barbr* (184).

6. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I, 92; Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, s.v. βάρβαρος.

speaking a foreign tongue', and the base morpheme *balbal*, with *l* instead of *r*, was represented by Lat. *balbus* 'stammering, inarticulate' and OSpan. *bable* 'broken speech; a rough dialect'⁷. Language, in short, became for the Greeks, as for others, the shibboleth of foreignness, and by identifying the speakers with their broken speech, a negative image of foreignness was created.

The Greek tradition went from Homer, who, using the morpheme in its original meaning, called the Carians of Asia Minor, βαρβαρόφωνοι 'speaking a foreign tongue'⁸, through classical βάρβαρος 'uncivilized', with a transfer from *lingua* to *mores*⁹, down to its connotation of 'rude' and 'brutal', still surviving in modern Greek folklore, with regard to the Turks¹⁰. The Romans, with records since Plautus¹¹, applied the epithet to almost everybody outside and inside, except the Greeks: to the Galli, Lusitani, Aegyptii, Scythae, Troiani, and, of course, all the Germani¹².

II

This keyterm, *barbarus*, which appeared so frequently in the documentation dealing with the «Barbarians of late Antiquity», was embedded in texts of the classical and postclassical tradition. There, it generally meant (as detailed in Dauge's study and as it still does to us) something on the order of 'uncivilized', representing the xenophobic constituent of the concept 'foreigner'. But one may doubt that 'uncivilized' in its fullest meaning was a genuine concept for the majority of the people in the Empire, to whom the Barbarians were certainly a tangible reality. While the bookish use of *barbari*, shackled to its heritage from Greek, remained mute, the history of the «vulgar» variant, extending from Latin into Romance, is apt to yield information about the actual, the living meaning of the word in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Indeed, already in classical and post-classical Latin, a semantic offshoot, *barbarus* 'wild, untamed, undaunted' is discernible: Pliny, in a context involving nature, speaks of *vespae barbarae*, a wild species of wasps¹³. In Justinus' 2nd-3rd c.

7. Corominas and Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico*, s.v. *bable*.

8. *Il.* 2, 867. Formation and use of anc. βάρβαρος are well analyzed in F. Skoda, *Le redoublement expressif: Un universal linguistique* (Soc. d'Etudes Linguistiques et Anthropologiques de France, 15; Paris, 1982), § 3.39.

9. The phrasing borrowed from Dauge, 517.

10. 'Ακαδημία 'Αθηνῶν, *Ἱστορικὸν λεξικὸν τῆς Νέας Ἑλληνικῆς*, III, Athens 1942, s.v.

11. *Captivi*, 884-85.

12. *Thes. Ling. Lat.*, s.v. *barbarus*, cols. 1741-42.

13. *Nat. hist.*, XI, 24.

epitome of the *Historiae Philippicae* by the Augustan historian, Pompeius Trogus, two synonymous adjectives are coupled: *indomitas nationes et barbaras gentes* 'undaunted nations and wild tribes'¹⁴. Further on, interestingly, both uses of *barbarus*, 'uncivilized' and 'wild', evolve from the context¹⁵: The author speaks of certain *barbaras gentes* as *fidei dubiae et mentis infidae* 'of dubious faith and faithless mind', circumscribing their 'lack of civilization'; and he goes on to say that if those peoples should defect together, *sisti nullo modo posse* 'they could in no way be checked', emphasizing their 'undauntedness'. Corippus, a sixth-century Latin writer from Africa, couples the same adjectives: *indomitas gentes et barbara regna*¹⁶. Corippus, incidentally, speaks in his epic *Johannis* of the *turba barbara Maurorum* 'the wild mob of the Mauri'¹⁷, which is of particular interest in an area in which the name of the *Berbers* continues, in all probability, the same epithet *barbari*¹⁸.

Now, there is a widely advocated hypothesis¹⁹ that Lat. *barbarus*, with its reduplicated stem, changed in folksy speech: first through shortening to **barbru*; then through dissimilation of *r-r* to **babru*; and finally through metathesis of *r* to **brabu*, the proto-Romance base form. The Romance outcome was *bravo*.

The Vulgar Latin meaning 'wild, untamed, undaunted' stayed with *bravo*. From early Romance on the word is documented, first, of course, clad in medieval Latin: A Portuguese record of the ninth century contrasts fallow fields called *barbarae*, with those that are *cultae* 'tilled' or *ruptae* 'plowed'. Incidentally, whereas in this phrase the meaning of *barbarus* results from its antonyms, a line by the first-century Latin writer Martial, describing the same condition of a field, evidences the meaning of *barbarus* through synonymy: *rure vero barbaroque laetatur* 'he rejoices in a farm natural and uncultivated'²⁰. Martial's choice of the term *barbarus* is of particular interest to the present discussion: he grew up in Spain, and his use of the word supports the hypothesis that the popular form, Lat.

14. Justin, *Abrégé des Histoires Philippiques de Trogue Pompée*, E. Chambry, ed. and trans. (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1936), V, 11.11.

15. *Ibid.*, XI, 1.6.

16. Corippus, in *MHG: Auct. Antiqu.*, III:2, J. Partsch, ed., Berlin 1878, *In laudem Iustini*, praeef., 40.

17. *Ibid.*, *Johannis*, VI, 193.

18. *NED* s.v. *Barbary*; *Encycl. of Islam* (New ed.), s.v. *Berbers*.

19. Analysis, with bibl., in H. and R. Kahane, *Language* 57 (1981) 920-922; J. Coromines, *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana, II*, Barcelona 1981, s.v. *brau*.

20. III, 58.5. According to W. C. A. Ker, the translator of Martial's *Epigrams* (Loeb edition, I, 197), who himself rendered *barbarus* by 'artless', L. Friedländer preferred 'uncultivated'; Dauge, 237 reads the term as 'in a state of nature'.

**brabu*, may have taken roots in Ibero-Romance. *Bravo*, apparently, spread from Ibero-Romance through Provençal to Italian and beyond. In Catalan, a 'wild cow' was called *uacha braua* (11th c.), in Italian, an 'untamed horse', *bravo* (14th c.). In a medieval Italian version of the apocryphal *Acta Pilati*, Ital. (*çente*) *brava* renders the model's *στασιαστών και άνοπότακτον* 'rebellious and refractory'. In Renaissance Italy, the Hispanism *bravo* turned into the 'killer'.

On the other hand, in the chivalric milieu of fourteenth-century Spain, *bravo*, the 'ferocious' warrior, seems to have been viewed as 'valiant': this semantic offshoot was the bud of a clearly favorable and ever expanding connotation, which, in the end, possibly via the Italian opera, led to the international acclamation.

The meaning 'wild', as Rohlf's pointed out²¹, is confirmed by a metaphorical variant of the same lexeme, likewise carried from Latin into Romance and applying 'wild' to the 'rough sea coast'. Valerius Flaccus (1st c.) speaks of *barbara litora* 'wild coasts'; St. Jerome records *barbarum litus*; and the term serves now as the familiar name of the *Costa Brava*, in Catalonia.

The metaphorical use of *barbarus* 'foreign' for 'wild' had its counterpart in reverse, the use of 'wild' for 'foreign', which corroborates the tie between the two concepts and is a good example of what H. Weinrich aptly called the *europäische Bildgemeinschaft*²²: In the eleventh century, Old French *salvage* 'wild' (from *silvaticus* 'used in woodland, of plants and animals') was applied, in an expression such as *gent salvage*, to the Saracens²³. Similarly, after the new discoveries, Germ. *der Wilde* becomes popular in the seventeenth century with «*die Wilden in der neuen Welt*» or «*die Wilden in Pennsilvaniem*»²⁴.

The stratigraphic analysis of *barbarus* yielded a history of four layers. (1) The original creation characterized the 'foreigner' by an imitation of his babbling. (2) The Greeks linked the non-Greeks' babbling to their 'lack of civilization', and *βάρβαρος* 'uncivilized' spread from Greece to Rome and as *barbarus* turned into an international Latinism. (3) The polyethnic people of the Roman Empire saw in the foreigner at their doors a 'wild and undaunted man', and the Vulgar Latin form of the lexeme, **babru/*brabu*, came to mean just that. The popular term was used on the Iberian Peninsula, where it surfaced as *bravo*, and it spread from there. (4) In medieval Spain an 'undaunted' man was seen as a 'valiant' one, and the Hispanism, equivalent to our *brave*, spread everywhere.

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21. G. Rohlf's, Aspekte und Probleme spanischer Etymologie, *Revue de Linguistique Romane* 21 (1957) 308.

22. Kahane, *Romance Philology* 32 (1978) 100.

23. Tobler-Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *sauvage*.

24. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *der Wilde*.