

LAPIDES ORIENTE PETITI: The Image of the Orient¹ in Ovids *Metamorphoses*

The first question that occurs when someone wants to deal with the Orient, is the meaning of the term. At first glance it's a geographical term. However, it covers a larger area, as it's a key element of the European civilization and culture. As Said puts it the Orient "is one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other".²

As it can be easily understood, it's crucial to define the geographical boundaries of the East. So, to Romans the Orient was the region expanded from Greece to the edges of the known world. Nonetheless, we have to assume that there's more to it. Strabo, living in the same period as Ovid, goes on to an ideological demarcation. To him the Greeks have a special status among the other peoples of the empire because of their civilization and they are the predecessors of the roman world order. In fact, the Greeks and the Romans are the only civilized peoples in the whole empire.³ As a result, the geographical and ideological boundaries of the Orient should be moved in the Greek East. We may, therefore, assume that the Orient is the region covering the southeast Mediterranean (Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt), Mesopotamia, the Parthic Empire and India. Carthage also belongs to the Orient due to its Phoenician origin.⁴

Although it's relatively easy to define the area covered by the term "Orient", the same does not happen as far as its ideological identity is concerned. The Orient is not just a region, but also a way of life and a conception. This ideological image is by no means a sole roman creation, since the Romans base their perspective on the already fully developed Greek – barbarian bipolar, which existed since the classical period.⁵ It's clear, therefore, that the oriental Other is related both to the greek thought and its roman evolution.⁶ The Orient was related to effeminacy, deception, softness, incompetence in battle, corruption, luxury, submission, breaking the social conventions, tyranny, pride, impiety and decline because of its advanced civilization.⁷ However, one must not stay at this ruling negative image. The Orient is at the same time the source of the western civilization.⁸ Aeneas starts his journey from oriental Troy in Phrygia to found Rome, even if this requires him to be stripped off his

¹ Since in greek the terms "Orient" and "East" both translate as "Ανατολή", I'm going to use the former with both geographical and ideological meaning.

² Said (1996) 13.

³ Muñiz Grivaljo (2011) 139-147.

⁴ Parker (2011) 7. The connection between Orient and Carthage allows us to connect the whole African South to it.

⁵ Said notes that every author dealing with the Orient bases his knowledge on his predecessors. Said (1996) 3. A telling example of this is the image of India during the imperial time, which, in fact, had not changed since the time of the Hellenistic kingdoms and Alexander's conquest (Parker (2011) 6).

⁶ The construction of the barbarian and its meaning during the classical period in tragedy have been elaborately examined by Hall (1989) 54-158. In her treatise she points out all the traits that make the barbarians inferior to the Greeks – as well as those which are related to a virtuous aspect of life outside civilization, in other words, the double meaning of the barbarian as both savage and righteous at the same time.

⁷ Baldson (1979) 61-67 deals with the traits the Romans used to attribute to oriental and other peoples. The dangers for the roman way of life deriving from the Orient have been a subject for many scholars, such as Zanker (2009) 91-101, Wyke (1992) 98-117, Nauta (2007) 85-87 & 89-92, Hardie (2007) 97-98, Muñiz Grivaljo (2011) 138-139.

⁸ Said (1996) 13. Although Said recognizes this aspect of the Orient, he simplifies it by just mentioning that the Roman authors focus on the inferior status of the Orient, Said (1996) 76. The two aspects of the Orient are clear in Hardie, who examines the case of Phrygia (Hardie (2007) 93-101. Hall has also dealt with the matter (see above, footnote 6).

oriental identity and arrive in Italy as “tabula rasa” in order to acquire a new roman one.⁹ Moreover, the alphabet is of Phoenician origin and many cults come from Asia.

Even though the Orient as a leitmotif exists since the Greek lyric poets of the archaic period (connecting the homeric Trojans to the oriental Other is rather uncertain)¹⁰ when Alcaeus refers to the Trojans by using the term “Phrygians” (fr.42.15PLF), the first real orientalist text is Aeschylus’ *Persae*. The other tragic poets deal with barbaric themes as well (Euripides’, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, *Rhesus* and the fragmentary *Andromeda* by Sophocles are just a couple of examples), while the traits of the eastern peoples play a major role in Herodotus and Thucydides refers to the thracian avarice in 2.97. The bipolar between Greeks and barbarians is a key element in Polybius, who is the one to connect the greek civilization and Rome in his sixth book.¹¹

The Roman authors continue the tradition of their Greek predecessors. Obviously the starting point for them is historiography. Both Livy and Sallust seem to be affected by specific prejudices about the Orient. Even texts, in which one might await a refined image of the oriental barbarians, do not escape the usual prejudices. In Sallust’s *Epistula Mithridatis*, despite of the critic against Rome, Mithridates is bound to oriental traits about politics; he does not take responsibility for his actions, he tries to deceit and has the very oriental despotic attitude the Romans despise.¹²

Authors such as Cicero (*Pro Flacco*) and Horace (his highlight being the ode 1.37) have also dealt with the Orient. Vergil uses the East – West bipolar in order to construct the roman identity in his *Aeneid*. Of special interest are the stories of Dido in books 1-4 and Cleopatra in the 8th.¹³ The Orient has a role in Propertius’ 4th book, too (in 4.1 the gap between East and West is evident in the narrator’s discussion with Horus, while in 4.6 the Romans prevail their oriental enemies). Augustus himself is keen on oriental matters in his *Res Gestae*, in which he mentions the way he ruled Egypt (27), the recovery of the roman war flags from the Parthians (19) and his role in the political affairs of the oriental states (31-33).

⁹ Of some interest is Russo’s treatise about the use of the trojan myth in the context of the roman imperialism (Russo (2014) 589-597). Aeneas’ transition from his trojan to a roman identity has been examined by Nauta (2007) 87, 89-92. Aeneas gradually gets stripped off all the items connecting him with Troy (i.e. he gives Priamus’ tiaras to Latinus in 7.247) and eventually Jupiter himself (12.820-40) mentions that the Trojans will acquire the roman virtus and stop being Orientals, as so often they had been accused of (i.e. by Numanus Remulus in the 9th book).

¹⁰ Even though Hall (1989) 25-29 notices that the trojan perjury has later been connected to the barbarian, the same cannot be said for the mutilations and the desecration of the corpses, a practice used by both Trojans and Greeks. Understanding the Trojan war as a crusade against inferior Orientals is negated by the status Troy has in the *Odyssey*.

¹¹ Champion (2004) 46 cf. mentions that during the Hellenistic period the barbaric identity depended on the education and not the origin. Based on that he examines the relation between the Greeks and the Romans (and why the latter should be considered to be close to the greek world), as well as the roman superiority against other peoples due to their participation in hellenism. For Polybius the Romans are superior to the Phoenicians and the Libyans because of their political institutions which are greatly affected by the greek virtues of order, ratio and temperance.

¹² As Adler (2011) 16-40 points out Mithridates tries to decry the Romans to Arsaces, but he does not escape his own oriental flaws. The same thing happens with Hannibal in Livy’s third decade, which is based on Polybius (Adler (2011) 65-115). Hoyos (2015) 371-3, also deals with Hannibal’s image in Livy.

¹³ Syed (2008) 137-92 examines the construction of the Other in the *Aeneid* in terms of nationality and gender identity. She focuses on the female figures (Creussa, Dido, Cleopatra, Lavinia), their connection to the land and the sexual aspect of the conquest as well as on why these figures are the Other. Especially the connection between Dido and Cleopatra as dominant figures of the oriental otherness plays a key role to the construction of the roman identity in Vergil.

An unusual image of the Egyptians can be found in *Bellum Alexandrinum*. There, the initial moderate image of chapter 21 is progressively deteriorating.¹⁴

The question that occurs here concerns Ovid's point of view. Ovid lives after all these authors and for him both the roman identity and the oriental otherness are already well defined. Perhaps that's the reason why we don't have an elaborate examination of the Orient in his poetry. Most scholars focus in his *Fasti*, as far as Magna Mater, the battle of Actium and the recovery of the war flags from the Parthians are concerned (*Fast.* 1.709-24, 4.179-375, 5.579-96, 6.461-69). *Metamorphoses* are usually left outside the picture.

Philip Hardie is the only one who has dealt with the Orient in the *Metamorphoses*, but his treatise focuses only on Phrygia. Using the double meaning of the adjective "Phrygius" as a reference both to the Trojan past of Rome and the barbaric "Other", he tries to find the way these two meanings coexist in the epic. He comes to the conclusion that although initially Phrygia is connected with hybris (stories of Niobe and Arachne in the 6th book), at the end the region gains respect in the reader's eyes with the story of Philemon and Baucis in the 8th book, leading to the narration of the trojan movement from their homeland in Phrygia to Italy and their future as Romans.¹⁵

However, an epic such as the *Metamorphoses* has apparently more to give as a whole. It's of great interest to find out how the Orient is used as a representation of the Other, as a source of civilization and as roman pre-history. In order to do something like that there's no need to examine every single story of the epic. There has to be a selection based on two criteria. First, there's geography. Asia and Egypt are parts of the Orient, but, as mentioned above, the same cannot be said for Greece, due to the status of the greek wisdom in Rome.¹⁶ To these stories we can add the ones about Carthage because of its phoenician origins, Cadmus and Aeneas. Stories that take place on the edges of the Orient, such as Thrace, should be included as well. Oriental wisdom is present through the oriental elements of Pythagoras' speech, while the stories about Bacchus in the 3rd book have a role to play as far as the introduction of oriental cults is concerned.

Phaethon	1.747 – 2.343
Europa & Cadmus	2.833 – 3.137
Pentheus	3.511 – 3.733
Minyads	4.31 – 415
Perseus	4.604-5.249
Arachne	6.1 – 145
Niobe	6.146 – 312
Latona in Lycia	6.313 – 381
Marsyas	6. 382 – 400
Procne and Philomela	6.401 – 674
Boreas	6.675 – 721
Medea	7.1 – 424
Philemon and Baucis	8.611 – 724
Byblis	9.439 – 665

¹⁴ The bibliography for these texts is extensive and not necessary to be mentioned here. Geartner & Hausburg (2013), O' Royrke (2001), Praker (2008 & 2011), Brunt & Moore (1983) are just some examples of the treatises on these.

¹⁵ Hardie (2007) 93-101.

¹⁶ See above, footnotes 3, 6, 10, 11.

Iphis	9.666 – 797
Orpheus	10.1 – 11.66
Midas	11.85 – 193
Trojan past of Rome	books 11-14
Pythagoras	15.60 – 478

The stories to be examined according to the criteria set above.

Besides all the ideological issues mentioned, an observation on Orientalism made by O' Rourke can broaden our perspectives. O' Rourke notices that Said has not taken into consideration the gender identities,¹⁷ whose role in Latin poetry is crucial. As a result, the 'female' Orient is directly connected to elegy, while the 'male' epic emphasizes in the western dominance. It's clear that such an observation gives another, generic this time, aspect to the *Metamorphoses*.

To sum up, the basic question of this treatise concerns the role the Orient plays in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. First of all, it must be defined what exactly the Orient stands for in Ovid's time, in terms of geography and, most importantly, ideology. Then, this image of the Orient should be compared with the oriental stories in the *Metamorphoses*. However, since this oriental leitmotif seems to have a generic significance as well, it's important to focus on its role in stories taking place outside the geographical borders of the Orient.

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¹⁷ Of the same spirit are the observations made by Syed as mentioned above (see footnote 13).

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