

**Jensen, Erik. *Barbarians in the Greek and Roman World***

Barbarians are convenient. They can be created and used to explain and justify all manner of actions with a clarity and simplicity that is often hard to doubt. In *Barbarians in the Greek and Roman World* Erik Jensen has re-imagined how we view the ancient world and illustrated how, in his words, “selective interpretation” has created the Greeks, Romans, barbarians, and, according to some, even us – whoever we are. Employing multiculturalism as a lens, Jensen illuminates the barbarians and illustrates the interconnectedness and complexity of the Greek and Roman world. His book is about much more than the barbarians. Indeed, it is about how communities, both ancient and modern, identify themselves for good or ill.

The book’s thirteen enjoyably readable chapters survey what amounts to the traditional Greek and Roman world. Beginning with the Mycenaean and Minoan Bronze Age, the book traces ancient history through the fall of the western Roman Empire. Early chapters focusing on the Greek world define what it meant to be Greek and illustrate how this process of identification necessarily built and built upon the creation of the barbarian – an ‘other’ that served the purposes of the Greeks. Chapters on the Roman world illustrate the pragmatic use of the barbarian not just as a method of self-identification, but rather as a justification for conquest and colonial endeavors. Finally, the work traces how in the period of late antiquity the empire turned barbarian with both predictable and unexpected consequences, as insiders feared the arrival of outsiders. The book is rounded off with a “Select Bibliography” made up almost entirely of English-language works. This limited bibliography belies the reality of Jensen’s scholarship, which does refer to foreign language works, especially those by German and French scholars. Considering the book’s emphasis on multiculturalism it might be worth including at least some of these foreign language works in the bibliography. The book also includes many useful images and maps, although regarding the latter, the inclusion of a scale bar and physical relief would improve their didactic value.

Jensen’s work has both ancient and modern precedents. In the ancient world, writers regularly tried to produce total or universal histories that sought to trace the history of the world as they knew it. In the nineteenth and (for much of the) twentieth centuries, scholars sought to craft a historical narrative that defended and explained European and western dominance. More recently, historians have returned to a global framework to illustrate the vast diversity of the ancient world. As Jensen duly notes, “[h]istorians always tend to see the past as reflecting the concerns of their present.” This is, of course, as true of Jensen’s work as it was of past historians. While differing and varied cultures spread throughout the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, and even across the Eurasian steppe, one is still left to wonder how much the majority – those that only knew one language, those that never travelled, those that did not have the (mis)fortune of residing near a Roman army base – how much they would have seen of this multicultural world. There is, in short, a real danger of reading too much multiculturalism into the Greeks and Romans. Jensen is, I think, aware of this and regardless his work serves as a needed corrective to the old teleological history that failed to recognize history’s messiness. By illustrating the stereotypes that the ‘Romans’ and ‘Greeks’ (whoever they were) produced and promulgated, Jensen is able to show both the diversity of the ancient world and the (attempted) singularity that was produced by imperial powers.

Even if it runs the risk of creating a narrative of the ancient world that was multicultural to suit and defend our own increasingly-multicultural times, Jensen's work still repays benefits. By forcing us to view the narrative of Greek and Roman history from another perspective we reform old, outdated, and, frankly, incorrect models about the past. More importantly, perhaps, we challenge the modern world's connection to the Greeks and Romans, and as a result we recognize that a much more diverse group of peoples informed the modern world. We also open new avenues for scholarship. Ancient history has long been a story about the assumed winners – the Greeks, the Romans, and those who claim some sort of descentance from them. Perspective creates history, and Jensen has successfully shifted our perspective to tell a story about the ancient world that accounts for the vast and complicated mix of peoples and cultures that cannot and should not be simplified into a single narrative about a world divided between Greco-Romans and barbarians, or between us and them.

The book is excellent, and even necessary, reading for any survey of the ancient world. Easy to read and unafraid to explain scholarly arguments, Jensen takes his readers on a tour of the so-called Greek and Roman world. While he follows traditional chronological and temporal boundaries, he does not adhere to the old scholarly lens. In fact, by directly challenging it, he opens our eyes to an entirely different ancient world. Rather than speak from the heart of the Roman forum or the Athenian agora, Jensen approaches ancient history from the position of an outsider, as a scholar unwilling to settle on simple narratives of progress from single centers, but rather forcefully admitting difference. Ultimately, Jensen illustrates the benefit of moving beyond the Greeks and the Romans and the importance of doing so. After all, as far as the Romans and Greeks were concerned, we – the English-speaking readers that form Jensen's audience – are as much, if not more, barbarian than Greco-Roman!

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