

# Candidate 1 evidence

**To what extent did Greco-Roman writers have distorted views of the Middle-East?**



Word Count without sources: 4200

Word Count with sources: 5098

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Abstract:

Generally, historians would consider the Greco-Roman periods alike as the pinnacle of ancient civilisation; two entities that came to historically dominate the world, taking an intrusive form, overarching a heterogeneous set of identities. These political, economic and cultural engines remained intact for years, yet that's not to say they were unchallenged; those in the Levant have always posed a threat to the established West, and thus writers have always tried to undermine the East. The focus of this dissertation lies in the matter of assessing to what extent Greco-Roman writers had distorted views of the Middle-East, with specific reference to the concept of 'Orientalism' (a term popularised by Edward W. Said<sup>1</sup>), a construct found in contemporary scholarship. The justification for such a title is simple; focusing on the perception of the Middle-East provides a richer understanding of the region's historical significance, complexity, and enduring legacy in shaping global history, and given the current unrest in the East (and the West's opinions), scrutiny of the Ancient Orient presented to us by the Ancient Occident seemed fitting. In school, the entirety of the East seems to be disregarded in Classical Studies - the Persians are discussed in relation to Athens, yet at secondary level education, there is little else said about this cultural melting pot. The value of the proposed dissertation title is more personal than anything - curiosity concerning an area that the current author knew little about almost necessitated scrutiny. Moreover, trying to balance these two worlds - Occidental and Oriental - is a task that should not be neglected, and if completed, the value to the Classical Studies field would be enormous. This study requires certain skills that can only be cultivated after studying humanities for several years - the ability to synthesise historiography and engage with complicated primary sources, whilst remaining subjective and critical, is a particularly arduous task. The primary difficulty,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*

however, lies in the interpretation of these sources - the legitimacy of some distortions are challenging to assess, and the multi-faceted nature of the question makes it appropriately complex for this level of academic study. The research approach taken follows a fairly straightforward model - historiography in the form of books has been heavily consulted as a result of easy access through libraries, and primary sources have been used because of similar reasons. Primary sources are limited, yet what they contain are invaluable - insight from a unique perspective, something pertinent to this study. The plan for research was effective because select authoritative sources were chosen in advance to properly tackle the question, allowing for a smooth completion of the paper. My initial title ('to what extent did the rise of Islam signify the end of the Ancient World?') was outside the date confines of the course - starting in the 7th century AD, it seems that the proposed period would more appropriately fit the category of 'late antiquity' rather than 'classical' and was thus disallowed. Therefore, in keeping with the theme of the Middle-East - utilising aspects of the course itself - exploration of Western literature and its views of the Orient seemed a beneficial alternative.

### Chapter 1: Manifestation of Orientalism

The Orient<sup>2</sup>, by which I mean the Middle-East<sup>3</sup>, is essentially a social construct that has almost been designed, and subsequently propagated to the Orient, by 'The Occident' - that is, the West - as a way of defining its rival in all aspects of culture and human endeavour.<sup>4</sup> The Middle-East, under this label of 'The Orient', has - especially during Classical antiquity - always been considered somewhat of an antithesis to everything the West represents; for instance, if there was democracy in the West, it was believed that there was an oppressive, absolutist regime in the East, dominated by despots. Nevertheless, not only does Orientalism categorise the East, but it is also a way of dealing with it; fundamentally this implies total Western hegemony. In its most simple form, Orientalism is a Western invention which has been manipulated to dominate, restructure and have absolute authority over the Middle-East. The Orient was, and is by some, effectively characterised as an uncivilised geographical location, acting as a dichotomy to the Occident, with its peoples and customs being viewed as mysterious and blatantly unorthodox. To say that these distorted views of the East began in the contemporary era is entirely wrong; Edward W. Said, in his seminal monograph entitled '*Orientalism*', claims that the concept of the Orient has indeed existed since the age of antiquity, having been known:

*"as a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The current author is aware of the problematic implications of this label, and stresses the fact that this term is being used strictly for academic purposes.

<sup>3</sup> When referring to the Middle East, it must be remembered that this term encapsulates twenty-four countries, spanning from Egypt to Afghanistan, rather than being exclusive to the countries detailed in this dissertation. To Americans, this is considered the far East, being Japan and China, though this will not be the focus of this particular dissertation

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*, pp. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*, pp. 1.

It is understood that to the Ancient Greco-Roman, the Middle-East was an enigma, a place that due to a lack of understanding, was subject to wildly speculative interpretations. Whether these views are the result of bias, fact or misconception is still a contentious area for scholars - though there is little documentation of Eastern behaviour and its culture under dynasties such as the Arsacids, the Sasanians - much like their Achaemenid predecessors -

*"tell historians a substantial deal about their notions of government, their public appearances and their political aspirations in both the domestic and foreign spheres."*<sup>6</sup>

Because of this, scholars are able to ascertain (to a degree) the levels of distortion in the works of Greek and Roman commentators - although there may be truth to what they say, it is often a misrepresentation of the truth.

When considering the distorted views of Greco-Roman writers, one must take into account the interactions of both Greece and Rome with geopolitical factors influencing the perception of The Orient. Herodotus - a Hallicarnassian - in his works *'The Histories'*, claims that the perpetual enmity of Greece towards the East began with the abduction of women from one another.<sup>7</sup> He then goes on to posit the notion that due to the acceptance (as there were no repercussions for either party) of these outrages by both the Greeks and Persians, Paris of Troy 'stole' Helen from Menelaus, thus beginning the devastating Trojan War, and therefore consolidating the perennial divide between the unlawful East and the rest of civilisation.<sup>8</sup>

This war, though we are unsure of its actual existence, was initially brought to the Greeks by

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<sup>6</sup> Josef Wiesehöfer: *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume I*, pp. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 5.

Homer (a Greek himself) in his epic recounting the tragic decade.<sup>9</sup> Within *The Iliad*, it must be observed, however, that Homer does not use any derogatory terms to describe the Trojans and the other Oriental forces (the Lycians, Phrygians etc) that make up the Greeks' rival - instead, his interpretation is fairly neutral, avoiding labels such as 'barbarians', but rather subtly creating a difference between the two by creating pusillanimous Trojan characters, and courageous Greek characters. The pertinent element of *The Iliad* that provides a foundation for Orientalism and the Orient - "*Europe's deepest and most recurring image(s) of the Other*"<sup>10</sup> - is simply the conflict between the Greeks and the Eastern peoples; they are seen as natural foes from incredibly early on, and there is a distinct difference between the Greeks and the Trojans.

This idea of the Middle-East being a polar opposite from the West is prevalent throughout *The Histories*, yet its origin is commented on in the early stages of Book I:

*"From that root [invasion of Troy by the Achaeans] sprang their belief in the perpetual enmity of the Grecian world towards them - because the Persians claim Asia and the barbarian races dwelling in it as their own, Europe and the Greek states being, in their opinion, quiet separate and distinct from them."*<sup>11</sup>

Especially in Greece, conflict with the barbarians of the East (Persians) was seen to define an entire era, most definitely shaping their initial views of the Middle-East, opening up Greek accounts of Asia to some type of scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> Warfare between the two entities was apparent

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<sup>9</sup> Homer: *The Iliad*

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*, pp. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 4.

<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, a number of theories as to what caused the initial division between these two entities, yet it is understood that this is the most compelling.

from as early as fifth century BC, so this acrimony, which has been subsequently translated into forms of art and literature, goes further back than when many academics believed. The Golden Age of Pericles came after a period of well documented unrest between the 'wild' Orient and the well-established Occident. From 499 BC to 449 BC, war with the Persian forces (under the Achaemenid dynasty) seemed to signify a transition from the Persian tyranny that had infected Ionia since the fifth century BC to the civilised democracy that was yet to completely flourish.

In terms of Roman involvement with the Orient, there are many instances where their paths are seemingly intertwined. If we are to think of Roman attitudes towards the Orient, one must also take into account Virgil's epic, *The Aeneid*, in which it is written that Lavinium, which later moves to Albalonga (modern-day Rome), is founded by Aeneas, a Trojan Prince who has been exiled after the Trojan War. Clearly there are claims that Roman heritage can be traced back to the Middle-East, and so potentially animosity towards the Orient on behalf of the Romans are simply products of ignorance. There is evidence, however, of perhaps critical descriptions of Aeneas throughout Virgil's work; in two instances, it appears that Aeneas is subject to unjust comments from two individuals - Iarbas, an African chieftain, and Turnus, the leader of the Rutulian force. In Book XII, Turnus, who is preparing to face Aeneas, says:

*"Grant me the power [spear]to bring down that effeminate Phrygian, to tear the breastplate off his body and rend it with my bare hands, to foul in the dust the hair he has curled with hot steel steeped in myrrh!"<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Virgil: *The Aeneid XII*, pp. 267.

A distortion that likely stems from their imminent conflict, Aeneas - but perhaps the entire Phrygian race - is likened to a woman with perfumed hair, an individual that is obsessed with appearance, taking value away from any other positive attributes. When considering the scale of bitterness in this comment, one has to acknowledge that this body of work was written in a time when inequality between men and women was extremely prevalent, thus this comment is particularly scathing, a distortion of the truth most likely, or an obtuse exaggeration (feeding into the Romans' perception of East). This being said, this idea of commenting on the delicate nature of Oriental men is detailed earlier in Book IV, when derogatory language is used by Iarbas who is seen to criticise Aeneas after Dido chooses Aeneas over a far more 'manly' specimen:

*"We gave her a piece of shore to plough and laid down the laws of the place for her and she has spurned our offer of marriage and taken Aeneas into her kingdom as lord and master, and now this second Paris, with eunuchs in attendance and hair dripping with perfume and Maeonian bonnet tied under his chin, is enjoying what he has stolen while we bring gifts to temples we think are yours and keep warm with our worship the reputation of a useless god."<sup>14</sup>*

Echoing the judgement of Turnus, it seems again that the description of Aeneas is unflattering; in associating him with perfume and the Phrygian cap, Aeneas instantly becomes synonymous with other barbarians from Anatolia, especially Paris and Ganymede, both of whom are typically depicted wearing the Maeonian bonnet. Iarbas, in making the comparison between Aeneas and Paris, may be attempting to imply that Aeneas, like Paris, has brought trouble or misfortune, perhaps due to his association with the fall of Troy.

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<sup>14</sup> Virgil: *The Aeneid IV*, pp. 75.

Additionally, it could be a way of expressing disdain or resentment towards Aeneas, likening him to a figure known for his controversial actions, and also that of a man who is often described as beautiful, a quality that is not valued in the eyes of men (analogously to the narrative that Herodotus presents concerning the formation of the Persian Empire under the Lydian dynasty, this idea of man being exposed was thought of as "*highly indecent*"<sup>15</sup>).

Literary works aside, typically one would look at the relations between the East and Rome at the beginning of the Empire - Augustus, in his competition for authority with Marcus Antony, attempted to liken himself to Alexander the Great - the man who had brought civility to the disorderly East - whilst trying to associate his competitor with the East itself, claiming that Antony "*had gone native*"<sup>16</sup>, becoming too accustomed to the Egyptian way of life (wearing Egyptian clothing, adorning himself with jewellery and makeup). The hostility between the Romans and the Orient stems mainly from the alliance between Antony and Cleopatra; the Roman struggle was characterised by civil war caused by Eastern interference for which the Orient is to blame. In terms of a modern comparison, conflict between Israel and Palestine bears economic and financial suffering for Europe - the East is being blamed for being so unlawful and barbaric, unwilling to compromise for the greater good, such that they receive criticism in the media.

And, of course, it is this '*Orientalism*' that is the salient distortion that arises from these Greek and Roman writers - it provides a framework for all other contorted views to exist. The concept makes the Middle-East and the Occident seem like two entirely separate worlds, a reflection of one another, and so it is clear that there was no intention of integrating these two radically different cultures as they were seen as incompatible.

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<sup>15</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories*, pp. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Boatwright: *The Romans From Village to Empire*, pp. 269–271.

### Chapter 2: Oriental Decadence and Excess

To ancient Greek writers - who we must remember are the victors in the lengthy conflict with the Persians - the successes of the small Greek forces against the mighty Persians were a triumph of discipline and liberty over a tyrannous, effeminate empire weakened by decadence and excess (which in turn highlighted the simplicity of the Greeks). The Persians had supposedly been weakened by their indulgence in lavishness - having been consumed by maintaining prestige and power through luxury, it was widely believed that this was a source of weakness. Splendour had seemed to permeate Persia under the Achaemenid dynasty - the royal court had used extravagance to help establish authority over its vast territory (Kings commanded loyalty by dispensing extravagant gifts). Over indulgence was frowned upon by the Greeks, especially by the Athenians, who were seen as the cradle of democracy; as the government in Athens progressed - and the idea of power being in the hands of the people was disseminated throughout the land - displays of affluence were curbed to stimulate civic cohesion and avoid potential unrest. This emphasis on restraint echoed an inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: "*Nothing in excess*". This Oriental decadence is something that is primarily written about by Greeks as opposed to Orientals themselves, and because of this, the accounts could be construed as unnecessarily exaggerated. Ultimately, however, the sentiment remains - decadence in the Middle-East was pervasive, reflective of avarice.

Herodotus highlights that the Persian Empire was known for its wealth and extravagance, describing the Persian king's court and the luxurious lifestyle of the ruling class, whilst also detailing the method of tribute.<sup>17</sup> Decadence in the ancient Orient is a complex and subjective concept that can be interpreted in various ways - different civilisations and cultures in the

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<sup>17</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories III*, pp. 212-213.

region experienced periods of prosperity, cultural flourishing, yet, in some cases, this might be considered as decline, perhaps being weakened by greed. One notable example is the description of the royal palace of Persepolis, which was adorned with precious metals, jewels, and intricate decorations.<sup>18</sup> Herodotus highlights the opulence of Persian banquets and feasts, describing elaborate meals and the use of precious utensils,<sup>19</sup> whilst also noting the luxury and abundance of resources enjoyed by the Persian elite. Throughout these books, Herodotus uses the theme of decadence in the East to contrast Greek values of democracy, and moderation with the perceived excesses of the Persian Empire.

Nonetheless, it is crucial that we approach Herodotus's accounts with some degree of caution, as he was known to include both factual information and fictional embellishments in his narratives. The distortion in his writings must be taken sceptically, because although his works are invaluable as historical sources, academics often scrutinise them, comparing them with other contemporary or archaeological scholarship to get a more comprehensive understanding of the cultures he described. James Redfield appreciates that there are obvious discrepancies between the works of Herodotus and others, commenting that:

*“Herodotus merely notes particular traits; he is not concerned with the functional, structural or stylistic coherence of the cultures he describes. Here, for instance, is his account of the Adurmachidae, the people who inhabit the border between Egypt and Libya (4.168):*

*They observe most Egyptian customs but the clothes they wear are rather those of the rest of the Libyans. Their women wear a bangle on each shin, made of bronze. They let the hair on their head grow long, and when a woman catches lice on herself she bites them*

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<sup>18</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 62.

*in retaliation and then throws them away. These are the only Libyans who do this, and they are the only ones who before setting up a household display their virgins to the king.*

*When the king finds one of them pleasing he himself takes her maidenhood.*

*Herodotus notes points which distinguish this people from others, and especially points which a Greek finds odd, and therefore repellent.”<sup>20</sup>*

The holistic interpretation of other Oriental cultures by Herodotus is limited, featuring multiple imperfections - as Redfield makes clear, Herodotus appears to be concerned with making a clear distinction between the esteemed Greeks and the foreigner residing in the East. That's not to say that he ignores the intricacies of different cultures entirely; his appreciation of the East makes it itself clear in the beginning of the text:

*“Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry, so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvellous deeds - some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians - may not be without their glory”<sup>21</sup>*

It seems that Herodotus concedes that there were significant achievements made by the “barbarians”, and thus historians have to realise that though it seems that specific focus is placed upon alienating barbarians, there is evidence of attempts to be neutral. It must also be noted that Herodotus states he happens to know specifically some details of the practices in the Persian Empire “*first hand*”, and thus we realise that his narrative is purely based on speculation, partnered with distortion.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it is of the utmost importance to note that

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<sup>20</sup> James Redfield: “*Herodotus the Tourist*” *Greeks And Barbarians*, pp. 24-49.

<sup>21</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories I*, pp. 10.

perceptions of decadence can vary based on cultural and moral perspectives - what might be seen as decadence by one group could be viewed as a display of political power by another. The last Hellenistic ruler and member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Cleopatra VII, was defeated in 31 BC, signifying the end of an era. Syncretism existed to the extent that in Rome, exoticism associated with the East continued to bestow status and prestige, yet while some Romans revelled in the show of wealth, others regarded it as excessive and decadent. This uneasy combination of desire and distrust serves our perception of luxury today - for instance, some are weary of the wealth being injected into the cities the Middle-East; the Dubai, for one, is essentially an artificial city condemned by many because of the vast amount of money paired with unnecessary levels of gaudiness it seems to harness; in the eyes of the West, it is unnatural, and has thus been criticised in the media.

In Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, this notion that unnecessary extravagance was a far more prominent reality in the East than the West is made clear when Hecuba, the Trojan Queen, has the opportunity to respond to Helen's infamous dialogue in which she disputes her supposed responsibility for Greek and Trojan suffering:

*"My son was handsome beyond all other men; when you saw him your mind became the goddess. All the indiscretions of mortals pass for Aphrodite and it is appropriate that the goddess's name begins with folly. You saw him resplendent in his foreign costume and gold and you went out of your mind. For, living in modest circumstances as you were in Greece, you hoped that, once you had shaken off the dust of Sparta you would enjoy a riot of extravagance in the city of the Phrygians that flowed with gold. Menelaus' palace gave little scope for the life of luxury you wanted to revel in."*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Euripides: *The Trojan Women*, pp. 208-209.

It must be remembered that Hecube's response is fuelled with resentment (given that her entire family has perished as a result of the decade long conflict), and so her words are excessively spiteful and vindictive. Nevertheless, the sentiment remains - she believes that Helen was enticed by Paris' beauty and overt displays of splendour. In this description, Paris characterises the common depiction of an Oriental; he is over-indulgent, choosing to clothe himself in precious materials to the extent that women are mesmerised by him (during Antiquity, women were believed to be materialistic), thus accentuating this perhaps unjust perception that Middle-Easterners were feminine. In Karl Strathmann's fictional novel *Salambo*, this theme of decadence is reinforced, demonstrating this belief was maintained in Western literature centuries later. As Natalie Pretzman observes:

*"These two applications of the idea of decadence, I argue, are intrinsic to the viewing and interpretation of Strathmann's Salambo, an interpretation which takes into account the painting's decorative inspirations as well as the numerous symbols contained within. Furthermore, I argue that this decadent decoration served to overcome and contain the figure of Salambo herself: an eroticized and sexual femme-fatale of the ancient Orient who brought about the demise of the man who lusted after her, she represents the feminised Orient/East which was alternatively seen as a threat against and submissive to the dominant, masculine West"*<sup>24</sup>

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<https://naranrouge.com/drunk-on-art/academic-papers/karl-strathmanns-salambo-as-oriental-decadence/>

Though largely believed to be a weak reflection of the West, there is evidence of Western attempts to replicate Oriental culture; Arrian, in his works *The Campaigns of Alexander*, concedes:

“[...] that Alexander came to allow himself to emulate Eastern extravagance and splendour”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, though the Occident appears to have been opposed to extreme indulgence, perhaps one must consider that there was an element of envy involved - did the West denounce luxury because it was unattainable? Of course to dispute this point Plutarch - in *The Age of Alexander* - proposes that Alexander adopted both Persian and Median dress, yet actively avoided the most barbarous elements of the latter<sup>26</sup>, whilst Arrian later confesses the motive for such adoption was solely political.<sup>27</sup>

Essentially, these descriptions served to contrast the perceived decadence of the East with the simpler, more austere lifestyles valued by Greek and Roman authors. As such, there is something to be said about how this reflects on the West - obviously, there was truth to what these writers said, but this is not a reality exclusive to the Orient. For instance, Suetonius<sup>28</sup> and Tacitus<sup>29</sup> both wrote scathingly about the depravity of decadent *Roman* emperors, and thus it has to be understood that this supposed ‘bias’ does extend to Romans and Greeks rather than to just Orientals. As Donner aptly comments:

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<sup>25</sup> Arrian: *Campaigns of Alexander*, pp. 213.

<sup>26</sup> Plutarch: *The Age of Alexander*, pp. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Arrian: *Campaigns of Alexander*, pp. 397.

<sup>28</sup> Suetonius: *The Twelve Caesars*

<sup>29</sup> Tacitus: *Annals*

*“They [Westerners] often pursued these goals [disproving or discrediting Islam, but perhaps the entire Orient] by presenting grotesque misrepresentations”<sup>30</sup>*

Literature was manipulated to create a distorted picture of the East and its culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Fred M. Donner: *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume I, pp.625*

### Chapter 3: Oriental Despotism and Cruelty

The presence of despotic and oppressive behaviour may indeed be considered a reality when assessing the nature of the political and social climate within the Orient of antiquity. Whilst historians generally agree that the West was deemed responsible for the formation of democracy<sup>31</sup>, the nature of Oriental governance remains somewhat ambiguous to the common man; to what extent can we truly say that the methodology for enforcing political discipline was draconian in its approach? In recognising this historiographical and academic trend - contemporary and unctemporary alike - one must also acknowledge that those few writers in the period of antiquity will similarly have believed in their inherent political superiority, and thus will demonstrate this in their publications, most likely painting a bleak picture of systems they know surprisingly little about. After all, it was virtually impossible for one to travel across to the Orient and view it as a neutral location. Arrian talks of the excessively harsh punishment imposed by Alexander on Bessus (also known as Artaxerxes V), claiming that the foundation of such brutality can be traced to the barbarians:

*"Alexander had Bessus brought before a full meeting of his officers and accused him of treachery to Darius. He then gave orders that his nose and the tips of his ears should be cut off, and that thus mutilated he should be taken to Ecbatana to suffer public execution before his own countrymen, the Medes and Persians. I do not myself approve the excessive severity of this punishment; for mutilation of that is, I think, a barbarous custom. I admit, moreover, that Alexander came to allow himself to emulate [...] the fashion of barbaric kings of treating their subjects as inferiors"<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Cartledge: "Ancient History in depth: The Democratic Experiment" - BBC

<sup>32</sup> Arrian: *Campaigns of Alexander*, pp.213-214

In becoming more accustomed to Eastern ways of life, it seems that Arrian credits the despotic kings of the East for Alexander's methods of reprisal (which needless to say is somewhat sadistic). In voicing his own opinion on the matter - bearing in mind that Arrian was a Greek from Nicomedia - the negativity of the entire situation is amplified; once again, the civility and benevolence (in comparison to the savage Orient) of the Occident is victorious over the Orient. Nonetheless, Arrian documents his works centuries after the existence of Alexander the Great, so how far can it really be said that this an accurate observation, and not a bias that subconsciously (or consciously, though one would hope a historian would attempt to be subjective) makes itself apparent in his writing? Furthermore, taking into account the political context, tyrannical activity can be seen in Greece in as early as the fifth century BC, as exemplified through the Delian League, in which Athens became the dominant force, transforming the league to empire, treating their subjects as inferior. For that reason, can it not be said that Alexander was merely a student of history, hoping to recreate Periclean policy? This idea of cruelty and savage behaviour makes itself apparent again:

*"The troops kept themselves alive by eating grass so long as there was any to be had in the country, but once they had reached the desert, some of them were reduced to the dreadful expedient of cannibalism."<sup>33</sup>*

Perhaps not a wild distortion of the truth given the circumstances are rather dire, however, this description makes the peoples of the East seem almost animalistic and primal, unable to control themselves and unjustifiably cruel.

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<sup>33</sup> Herodotus: *The Histories III*, pp.181

For the Greeks, their initial interaction with the East was with Persia, a relationship that was characterised by suffering and tyrannicalism. The most significant interaction between the Athenian Empire and the Persian Empire was the series of conflicts known as the Greco-Persian Wars. These wars, particularly the Persian invasions of Greece in the early 5th century BCE, had a profound impact on Athenian society and politics. The Athenians fought against Persian expansionism and successfully repelled the invasions, establishing themselves as a major power in the Aegean region. Aeschylus, in his tragedy *The Persians*, presents a unique viewpoint for the typical Greek viewer; the Battle of Salamis is not retold by the mighty protagonistic Greeks, but rather the unsuccessful Persians, potentially to emphasise the Greek superiority by reliving Eastern failure. Most saliently, however, the theme of stringent authoritarianism is made abundantly clear when Queen Atossa asks about the Greeks:

*"And who is set over them as shepherd and is master of their host?" And the chorus of Persian elders answered, "Of no man are they called the slaves or vassals."*<sup>34</sup>

It is here that, due to the viewpoint Aeschylus presents, readers are able to ascertain the alien nature of Athenian democracy in comparison to Persian despotism in the eyes of the barbarians, providing an insight into the politics of the East (everyone is supposed to serve someone, acting as slaves in a stratified social system). As Edith Hall concludes:

*"The presentation of the Persians is predicated on the antithesis of Hellene and barbarian; the barbarian character is powerfully suggested not only by the elaborate rhetorical style but*

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<sup>34</sup> Aeschylus: *Persians*, lines 241-242

*by the use of a distinctive new vocabulary of words, symbols, significant actions, possible rhythm and by the emotional.*"<sup>35</sup>

Dealing with the works of Aeschylus is quite challenging; it's entirely speculative, a story recounted by the victims, yet these authors contributed to the portrayal of Eastern rulers as despotic and cruel in literature. Their works reflect cultural biases and political tensions, shaping perceptions of the East in Western thought. Against the democratic world of the West - where the people had power - the barbarity that supposedly permeated the lands of the East was an abomination. The threat posed by the Persian Empire played a significant role in shaping Athenian politics and alliances - Athenians statesmen, namely Themistocles and Pericles, used the Persian threat to justify policies of naval expansion and alliance-building, which ultimately contributed to the rise of the Athenian Empire. Did they become the very thing they despised and wrote about so harshly? An exhaustive answer to this imponderable unfortunately lies beyond the confines of this paper.

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<sup>35</sup> Edith Hall: *Inventing the Barbarian*, pp.99-100

Conclusion:

In conclusion, through the evidence analysed, it is clear that the writings of the Greco-Romans were indeed distorted, but not to the extent that one might imagine; of course, they wrote scathingly of these unknown peoples that dominated the East, but their distortion can not be taken at face value. Rather, Greco-Roman writers' perspectives on the Middle-East reveals a complex interplay of cultural biases, political agendas, and limited knowledge - whilst some writers displayed curiosity and sought to provide accurate portrayals, many others, like Herodotus, succumbed to stereotypes, misconceptions, and ethnocentric viewpoints, their depictions often reflecting prevailing power dynamics, as well as attempting to justify imperialist ambitions.

This common theme of the Occident against the Orient - condemning the East for its alien practices - makes itself abundantly clear in literature. The Greeks and Romans are forever portrayed as civilised victims against an unruly enemy which seems to be devoid of civility and principles, as seen with Aeschylus. Considered a mirror of the West, there seems to be no attempt to integrate these cultures - they are separate, incapable of amicably co-existing. Of course, any distortion that arises, as discussed previously, can be flawed - painting a picture of the oppressor makes it an arduous task to remain subjective, and thus distortions are difficult to verify. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, the diversity among Greco-Roman writers, as well as the occasional instances of nuanced understanding and appreciation for Middle-Eastern cultures, especially when documenting the adoption of various practices, as seen with Alexander the Great. Ultimately, unravelling the extent of distortion in their views is a task that requires more pressing scrutiny, as in many cases, the existing primary sources we have detailing the Orient are Western, and thus provide a history of which there is certainly more to understand.

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