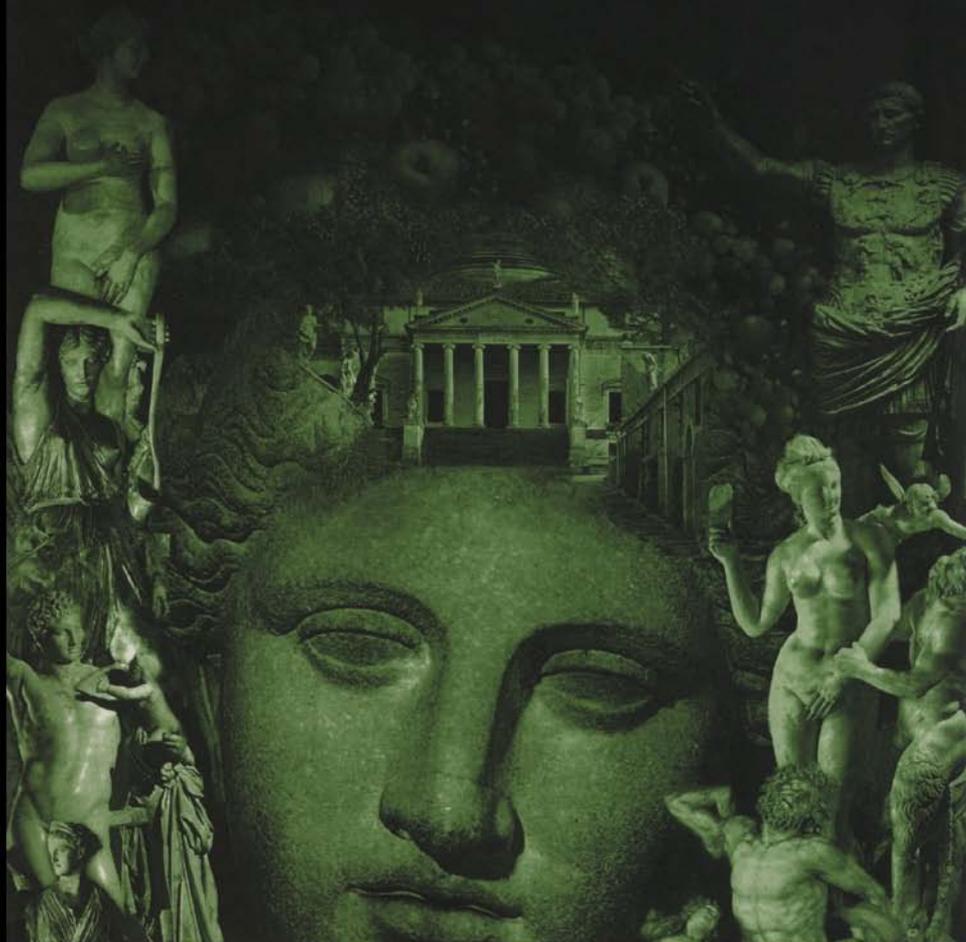


CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES *in* LATE ANTIQUITY

RICHARD MILES



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IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Edited by Richard Miles



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INTRODUCTION

Constructing identities in late
antiquity*Richard Miles*

The past decade has seen a proliferation of scholarly work on collective identity, especially among political scientists and historians (as well as psychologists, anthropologists and archaeologists). As one social scientist has observed: 'Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, conflict was explained and discussed in terms of conflicting ideologies, that terrain of contestation is now more likely to be characterised by competing and conflicting identities' (Woodward 1997:18–19).

This academic trend has usually been explained in terms of a posited 'crisis of identity' in the 1990s, on the grounds that identity becomes an issue only when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer 1990:4, Woodward 1997:15–20).

Various explanations have been put forward for this late twentieth-century 'crisis of identity': globalisation and migration of labour, the disruptions following the break-up of the USSR and the Eastern European bloc and the emergence of new social movements concerned with the politics of personal and sexual identities have all been pointed to as potential catalysts (Woodward 1997:15–29).

However, although it is certainly correct to say that academics have in the past few years turned to identity and difference as a main organising principle, identity, by its very nature, is always at issue. Identity has always given us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live. Identity is there to answer that fundamental question 'Who am I?' The academic world might have rediscovered identity, but men and

women have never ceased thinking about and articulating themselves in these terms.

Recent scholarship on the ancient world has mirrored wider academia's concern with identity and difference.¹ The past fifteen years have seen the gradual development of a more sensitive attitude towards text and image, which are no longer regarded simply as mines of empirical data that will help the classical scholar to reconstruct the 'reality' of the ancient world, or as an isolated literary exercise, but rather as dynamic cultural forces that create their own 'imaginaire' and meanings. A significant number of cultural historians of the ancient world have also been influenced by the post-colonial school of writers whose primary concern has been to investigate cultural imperialism and responses to it under the rubric of identity.²

This volume is the product of a two day seminar held at the Open University on 28 February and 1 March 1997. The focus of the meetings was on how identity was constructed and represented in late antiquity. The essays that resulted from these seminars centre on two interrelated themes:

- 1 Identity. How is the theme of identity, whether it be geographical, ethnic, religious, status- or sex-based, used in late Roman texts and images to create and organise particular visions of late antique society and culture?
- 2 Periodisation. How do constructions of identity and culture contribute in the fashioning of 'late antiquity' into a discrete historical period?

In the past twenty years scholars of the later Roman empire have perhaps been too successful in resuscitating what was until then a much-neglected field of study. Thanks to the efforts of scholars such as Peter Brown and Averil Cameron, late antiquity is now recognised as an exciting and important area of the ancient world.³ As Cameron points out,

It is a mark of the dramatic change that has taken place in our historical perceptions of the ancient world that when the new Fontana series was first launched, the later Roman Empire, or, as it is now commonly called, late antiquity, was not included in it; now, by contrast, it would seem strange to leave it out.

(Cameron 1993:1)

It is useful, for heuristic purposes, to portray late antiquity as a discrete historical period, as undoubtedly in religious, economic, social and political terms the period spanning from the late third to the sixth centuries was very different from what came before and after it. However, by portraying late antiquity as a ‘world’ which is worth studying in its own right, scholars have perhaps been guilty of ‘ring-fencing’ the period in a way that suggests self-containment. It is perhaps worth pointing out the obvious, namely, that the term ‘late antiquity’ is a modern construction. Although in many ways the inhabitants of the Roman empire during this period perceived themselves as being different from those who had come before them, they certainly did not think of themselves as being ‘late antique’.⁴ What becomes clear in this collection of essays is that there is no unitary ‘late antique’ identity, just as there is no single ‘late antique’ culture in which these identities are created. Identity and culture are both in a constant state of flux and development.

Several of the contributors to this volume highlight the dangers of seeing late antiquity as a discrete cultural time span. Peter Stewart points out that the riot of the statues at Antioch, contrary to what some historians of the later Roman empire would have us believe, ‘are neither so surprising nor so novel as they may at first seem’ (p. 160). Indeed, he argues that fourth- and fifth-century Christian sources relating to the destruction of pagan images ‘resist our efforts to identify cultural change between the conventional periods of the Principate and the later Roman Empire. They defy evidence for social, cultural and artistic transformation with symbols of continuity’ (p. 182). Morales argues that the constructions of gender and vocality in Musaeus’ *Hero and Leander* ‘are symptomatic of an ideology which has a long tradition in Greek and Roman literature’ (p. 55).

The term ‘late antique’ can also lead to other dangerous assumptions. Janet Huskinson warns against labelling images on third- and fourth-century sarcophagi as ‘Christian’ or ‘non-Christian’ or the ‘snap identifications of female praying figures as “souls”, of philosophical-looking men as “apostles”’ (pp. 191–2). Huskinson concludes her chapter on a cautionary note arguing that although the intellectualisation of female images on these sarcophagi might indicate ‘empowerment of some kind’ brought about by the gradual Christianisation of Roman society in the fourth century, the last images of the biblical story of Susannah on the fourth-century sarcophagi ‘close off the image in the time-honoured way’, where it

is a male figure, Daniel, whose wisdom and decisiveness eventually vindicate her (pp. 209–10).

What needs to be asked is whether there are any general organising features in the construction of identity that the scholar can identify as being particular to this period. To argue that identity becomes an important concern in the later Roman empire is of no particular use, because identities are being constructed and dissolved in all historical periods. Even to argue that new labels of identification come into existence is not really correct. Christians and barbarians might become more prominent in late antique texts, but both had existed as important constructs well before late antiquity. Nor is there any universal meaning that can be attributed to such terms as 'Roman', 'Greek', 'Christian' and 'barbarian'. Therefore, if one is to look for any unificatory aspects it is in how identity was discussed in late antique texts and images. Here a general, although tentative, consensus seems to emerge that the sample texts and images under consideration display an increased openness and mobility in realigning and reappropriating older paradigms. There is a novel, self-consciously revisionist perspective to constructions of identity and culture. For Whitmarsh, Heliodorus' great romance, the *Aethiopica*, reveals 'the open and mobile cultural patterns of late antiquity' (p. 32), where terms such as Hellene seem to be more self-consciously questioned. Clark sees similar phenomena in neo-Platonist discourses on alien or barbarian *sophia* (pp. 122–3). Huskinson detects a willingness to elide and confuse existing gender differentiations, reflecting an 'ambivalence to closure' (p. 210). James shows how the most 'Roman' of cultural locations, the arena, is converted into an impressive 'literary metaphor for the Christian victory' (p. 89) in Prudentius' text. Harrison (chapter 7) argues that Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* is a text in which the Christian thinker formulates the question of his cultural identity as part of a complex set of philosophical questions in order to force the reader to confront his own education and cultural identity. Easterling and Miles (chapter 5) contend that the Church fathers' construction of their own and their audiences' identities in their diatribes against the theatre points to a new malleability in the discussion of such issues.

Although many of these cases should perhaps be viewed as provocative and playful rhetorical poses, manifestations of the enduring sophistication of literary *paideia*, this does not negate their importance (pp. 123, 31–2). For what we are witnessing is a significant change in acceptable rhetorical strategies and discourse

amongst the intelligentsia of late antiquity. The construction of identity is, at its heart, a matter of an *imaginaire* rather than a fixed *reality*.

What brought about these changes? There can be no doubt that there was a profound transformation in the political, bureaucratic and religious institutions in the late third and early fourth centuries. Three particular developments seem to stand out, namely, the changes in imperial self-representation and ideology, the influx of 'barbarians' and their growing importance in the military and civil structures of the empire, and the emergence of Christianity as a powerful force. Each of these developments has been well documented elsewhere, but part of our task in preparing this volume has been to look at how the different responses to these changes (i.e. resentment, approval and indifference) affected the way individuals and groups constructed themselves in late antiquity.

All the chapters in this volume are concerned with how identities are constructed in image and text rather than as a 'fixed' reality. Identities, both individual and collective, are not a set of essential characteristics, but are the ascribed or recognised characteristics which a person or group is agreed to possess. Benedict Anderson's description of the nation as an 'imagined community' can be applied to all group identities in that members of even the smallest identity group 'will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community' (Anderson 1991:6). Part of the contributors' task in this project has been to examine what kind of communities were imagined in late antiquity.

It is possible to have an overarching single identity, but it will always be made up of several, if not myriad, separate identities, some of which may be contradictory (Smith 1991:4-7). Some will be stronger than others and the pattern will change over time. One has only to look at the choices open to Porphyry and those who wrote about him: Phoenician, Hellene, Roman or philosopher (Clark, chapter 6)? The multifarious nature of identity is also in evidence in Harries's essay (chapter 10) on the representations of the *iudex* in late antiquity, according to which the same individuals who are portrayed as bloodthirsty tyrants in the acts of the martyrs in their role as persecuting judges are portrayed in a completely different light, as generous patrons and leaders in their communities, in epigraphic material.

The formation and contestation of identity are fundamentally about *power*, the power to represent. In late antiquity the barbarians

were barbarised, the East orientalised, non-Christians paganised because they *could be* subjected to such categorisations without their voices being heard or their ideas known. In late antiquity, as both Clark (chapter 6) and Whitmarsh (chapter 2) point out, this allowed Neoplatonic debates about the origins of *sophia* to flourish. Writers such as Heliiodorus and Porphyry could create and represent 'non-Greek', alien wisdom. Meanwhile, the Roman emperor, through his control of the production and dissemination of laws, could construct a particular image of his provincial officials (chapter 10).

It is within this context that the image of the 'barbarian' in late Roman texts is so important. No identity can exist by itself and without an array of opposites or negatives. The 'barbarian' is an important conceptual pole in late antique texts and images. Rather than thinking about these images in terms of a history of the 'barbarian', it is perhaps more fruitful to think in terms of what light the 'barbarian' as a literary construct throws on our authors' attitudes to their own identities. Hence, the discussions recorded from the seminars of Plotinus and exchanges between Iamblichus and Porphyry on the languages, traditions and religions of the Near East and India will tell us little about the actuality but rather raise questions about Roman citizenship and Greek culture. As Clark argues, 'Any "Oriental" inheritance in these texts has been filtered through Greek ethnography and philosophy, and different beliefs about the soul have more to do with philosophical debates about Plato and Aristotle than with Egyptian or Iranian theological tradition' (p. 123). Similarly, as Heather points out, in the fourth century 'It is no surprise, therefore, that the more precise connotations of the image of the barbarian, as it had evolved by late antiquity, served to underline what was good and important about being Roman' (pp. 235–6). Huskinson in her chapter shows how the images of women on third- and fourth-century sarcophagi establish a rhetoric about women that is 'defined in terms of a male society, as potential reinforcements or as threats to its values' (p. 192).

This does not mean, however, that such organising constructs are nothing more than an idea or a creation with no corresponding social reality: they are a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment (Said 1995:6). As Heather describes in chapter 11, the ideologically inspired image of barbarians in the fourth century helped create Roman imperial foreign policy. But it should not be inferred that it was only the creators of this image who had considerable material investment in these stereotypes. These 'barbarians', as the culturally subjugated

'other', had a highly articulated set of relationships with *Romanitas*. Indeed, the cultural experience of one overlaps and depends on the other. Each is articulated on a largely common although disputed terrain provided by culture (Said 1993:78–9, 1995:230–1). Consequently, we find the kings of the barbarian successor states of the fifth century using the ideologically inspired images of *Romanitas* to legitimise their own rule.

The different constructions of a particular identity can reflect wider changes in the cultural framework of a society. Harries points out that the changing representations of the provincial *iudex* in the imperial law codes reflect 'The Janus-like qualities of late Roman autocracy' (p. 231), on the one hand ritualised, and, on the other, reflecting the evolution of complex strategies for the assertion and expression of power. This 'culture of criticism' allowed the assertion of the emperors' authority by repeatedly stressing the accountability of their own officials. But this is not to say that all political upheavals necessarily mean a change in how certain identities are constructed. For instance, Heather (chapter 11) shows how despite the establishment of the barbarian kingdoms in the Roman West in the fifth century, the fourth-century construction that pitched civilising *Romanitas* against uncivilised barbarians still held good. What did change was who aspired to, or represented themselves as belonging to, such groups. Theoderic uses his *Romanitas* as a weapon to portray other barbarian kings and even the eastern emperor as being decidedly un-Roman. Hence the Ostrogothic king could proclaim his equality with, and even his superiority over, contemporary rulers.

The geography of an area, like history, culture and its politico-economic manifestations, is disputed and ever-changing.⁵ The idea of a geographical area has to be reified through images and text. So, in order to make the later Roman empire into any kind of political or cultural reality, or even to give it a geographical identity, significant numbers of people need to have had a concept of what the empire consisted of. A recurrent theme at the conference was how significant was geography in the construction of identity. What became clear was quite how arbitrary the geographical distinctions were. Such distinctions, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. This is borne out in Clark's (chapter 6) description of the seminar of the third-century neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus. On the surface, it was a cosmopolitan affair held in Rome and attracting students from all over the empire. But as Clark points out, its focus was completely directed towards Greece and the Near East. Its working

language was Greek, and in fact Porphyry, an important member of the seminar, shows no sign in his writings of understanding Latin or any awareness of the Western philosophical tradition. It is a common practice to designate a familiar place which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar place beyond those boundaries which is 'theirs'. Those who live outside these boundaries are not required to acknowledge them. These geographic boundaries match the social, ethnic and cultural ones in expected ways (Said 1993:52). What is more important than actual physical geography is the theoretical mapping and charting of territory that underlies the fiction, historical writing, art and philosophical discourse of the time (Fuhrman 1983:1, Said 1993:69).⁶ Whitmarsh argues that geography is a crucial structuring device in the *Aethiopica*. The river Nile serves to structure the linear shape of the text: the journey up Egypt's great river mirrors the progression towards self-knowledge and becoming culturally other. By employing an unconventional 'linear' narrative, Heliiodorus presents a different conceptual geography from the traditional Greek one.

Identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture. The term 'culture' implies that there is such a thing as a homogeneous group, even though there is no need for consensus throughout that group as to the actual content of that culture (Wintle 1996a: 6). However, as Said has pointed out, 'all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic' (Said 1993: xix). 'Culture', in other words, is an ever-changing construct, a multifarious collective mental conditioning (García 1993:67, Shelley 1995:192). Culture as a descriptive, communicative and representative force is articulated through text. Each text creates its own 'world' with its own parameters and dynamic. Hence, as Harries points out in her chapter on the role of the *iudex* in late antiquity,

The various representations of this both feared and indispensable figure in Roman society are therefore often more relevant to the creators of texts and the cultural perceptions of late antiquity than to the actual functioning both of *iudices* themselves and, more broadly, of the judicial system of the time.

(p. 215)

What all these texts indicate is that culture and identity are produced *performatively* as narrative. This is well illustrated in Morales's

study of *Hero and Leander* (chapter 3), where not only representations of vocality are shown to play a crucial role in distinguishing gender status, but also the omnipresent narrator frames and reinterprets Hero's words thereby creating a discrepancy between what she is reported as saying and how her speech is heard and understood by its audience. This leads to what Morales terms a 'discourse of distorted dissent' whereby if the female subject vocalises dissent to a sexual overture it is interpreted as consent and if she remains silent, it is interpreted as consent. Narrative is in a constant state of contestation, revision and reformation (Bhabha 1990:296–7, 1994:2). This is borne out in chapter 2 where he argues that the *Aethiopica*, in its reconfiguration of traditional narrative and geographical structures, represents the ever-changing and incomplete properties of cultural identity.

This is not to say that each of these texts should be studied in glorious isolation from one another. It is these texts that create knowledge and contribute to an accumulated tradition or discourse which further texts simultaneously gain authority from and add to. Such discourses are at the heart of all constructions of identity (Said 1995:96). This is also well illustrated in Morales's reassessment of the dominant ideological interpretation of *Hero and Leander* as a social commentary on civic identity: a discourse which serves to validate socially sanctioned marriages and stigmatise the indulgence of individual desire outside of the institution of marriage (chapter 3). Through the study of late antique texts it is possible to trace the development of certain discourses relating to different identities. As Whitmarsh argues in the case of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, the

narrative structure engages with and reconfigures a widespread narrative pattern which was fundamental to the construction of cultural identity in the archaic and classical periods. Heliodorus' active transformation of this pattern... articulates a new conception of cultural identity.
(p. 18)

In the same way, Heather in his chapter has been able to show the importance of text in the construction of a dominant discourse concerning *Romanitas* and barbarians in the fourth and fifth centuries. Indeed, Morales reminds us of the tenacity of a 'gendered discourse of distorted dissent' (p. 55) through which women's speech, paradoxically dismissed, socially disavowed and overdetermined