HOW ‘GREEK’ WERE THE EARLY WESTERN GREEKS?

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Lest my title mislead, I should state at the outset that my intention here is not to reopen the controversy as to whether we should attribute primacy in early eighth-century ventures in the west to Greeks or to Levantines. I take it that most today would acknowledge that Pithekoussai on the island of Ischia was a mixed settlement, albeit one in which a Euboean presence was dominant.1 Rather than focusing on what Max Weber would have termed the ‘objective’ ethnicity of the early settlers of the west—a concept whose heuristic value is now in any case doubtful from the anthropological point of view—I want instead to consider how the actors themselves may have conceived of their own identities.2 In other words, I am interested in whether those early settlers who set out from the Greek mainland for the shores of southern Italy and Sicily actually thought of themselves as Hellenes, confronted by indigenous barbaroi, or whether other levels of identification were more salient—be they civic


identities (e.g. an inhabitant of Syracuse or Megara), regional identities (e.g. Achaean or Cretan), or 'subhellenic’ ethnic identities (e.g. Dorian, Ionian, or Achaean). To avoid confusion between internally- and externally-applied categories, I shall use the term 'Greek' as a conventional designation for those settlers who originated from the Aegean area, and the term 'Hellenic' to denote the self-consciousness that Greeks may (or may not) have entertained of participating in a wider community that transcended political and regional boundaries.

Among the six characteristics that the sociologist Anthony Smith believes define an ethnic group, the existence of a collective name represents an important and necessary, if not sufficient, criterion. It is, then, all the more striking that the names 'Ελλάς and 'Ελληνες are attested relatively late in the literary testimonia. It is well known that despite single references to both the Ionians and the Dorians (Homer II. 13.685; Od. 19.177), the Homeric epics do not employ the terms 'Ελλάς and 'Ελληνες to designate Greece and its populations, but Ἀχαιοί, Ἀργεῖοι and Δαναιοί to denote the Greeks and Ἀργοι and Ἀχαῖα to signify Greece. Many scholars are reluctant to infer from this that a sense of Hellenic identity was still weak in Homer's day (whenever we place that) and assume therefore that the poet is engaging in conscious archaizing. Yet quite apart from the fact that a growing number of Homerists now agree that the world portrayed in the epics cannot have been so far removed from the experience of audiences in the late eighth or even seventh centuries, there are indications that the inference may well be valid.

In the Catalogue of Ships—a section of the Iliad that, regardless of its date of composition, intentionally looks back to an earlier era—'Ελλάς designates a narrowly defined area of Southern Thessaly

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