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A Few Observations on the Distinctive Features of the Greek Culture*

It is quite common to believe that in the Platonic dialogues the character of Socrates plays two roles (Wróblewski 2005: *passim*). First, the character represents Socrates himself; second, it is used to express thoughts, values, and beliefs of Plato. These two roles are so mixed together that it is hardly possible to distinguish between them. In the dialogue *Menon* (81–84) Plato lectures on his concepts about immortality and pre-existence of soul, metempsychosis, and learning as a reminder of knowledge, which had been gained by the soul previously: before birth (*anamnesis*). Naturally, Socrates proves legitimacy of his points while delivering the lecture to one of Menon’s slaves. The boy demonstrates – in view of his status – a surprising arithmetic skill, a good ability of logical thinking and associating of facts. However, before the conversation, Socrates asks whether the slave is Greek and speaks Greek (“Ἕλλην μὲν ἐστὶ καὶ ἐλληνίζει;¹). A seemingly innocent question about common language may conceal much more – you can look here for one of the most interesting features of the Greek culture in antiquity, namely for an almost total insensitivity of the Hellenes to sounds and colours of any other language.

We all know that the current meaning of the word ‘barbarian’ (βάρβαρος) does not correspond entirely to the original one, the neutral ‘non-Greek.’ For the first time, the term appears in the *Iliad* in the compound form of βαρβαρόφωνος (II, 867), used as an epithet for Karians. It is not quite clear whether it meant ‘speaking an incomprehensible language’ or ‘speaking

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¹ The Greek texts are cited here after their editions found in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*™, University of California, Irvine (<http://www.tlg.uci.edu>).



Greek badly.² Whatever explanation we pick we have to remember that “[t]here is, at the élite level at least, no hint during the Archaic period of this sharp dichotomy between Greek and barbarian or the derogatory and the stereotypical representation of the latter that emerge so clearly from the fifth century [...]” (Hall 2002: 103). The fact that in the Classical times the term βάρβαρος has gained gradually such a highly pejorative denotation did not happen at random. The Greeks may have been interested in cultures of other tribe(s), may have even been enchanted with them and believed that their own culture owed a lot to barbarians. A good example of such a belief may be found in *Epinomis* (attributed – as it seems wrongly – to Plato himself). There, we read that whenever Greeks take anything from barbarians, they make it eventually better.³ The figure of Anacharsis, a Scythian philosopher in times of Solon, whom some Greeks considered one of the Seven Wise Men, proves that even individual people, not just entire tribes or nations, may have become in the Hellenic eyes a model either to follow or to emulate. What must be said however is that the Greeks lacked any desire for learning foreign languages (any known exceptions, as e.g. Themistocles in stories by Thucydides⁴ and Plutarch,⁵ only confirm the rule). On the other hand it is interesting that the Greeks were not racist in the contemporary meaning of the word: regardless of origin, (s)he who takes παιδεία, the Hellenic culture, for his/her own, becomes Greek. We may find an excellent illustration of this in the life and fortunes of Lucian of Samosata, sometimes called *Voltaire of Antiquity*. Born to a Syriac family several centuries after Pericles and raised upon the Euphrates, on the eastern edge of οἰκουμένη (which was already part of the Roman Empire), Lucian learns and studies Greek in its classical Athenian variety with such astounding success that in the end he becomes himself the conclusive reference of what is Classical in the Hellenic style and literature. It goes without saying that Lucian’s writings used to serve for centuries as models how to write Greek impeccably, in addition, with plenty of humour often

² Calling up the opinion of two predecessors Hall writes: “[g]iven the relative familiarity of the Karians to the Greeks, it has been suggested that barbarophonoi in the Iliad signifies not those who spoke a non-Greek language but simply those who spoke Greek badly” (Hall 2002: 112).

³ *Epinomis* 987e: “λάβωμεν δὲ ὡς ὅτι περ ἂν Ἕλληνες βαρβάρων παραλάβωσι, κάλλιον τοῦτο εἰς τέλος ἀπεργάζονται”.

⁴ I, 138: „ὁ (scil. Themistocles) δ’ ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ ὃν ἐπέσχε τῆς τε Περσίδος γλώσσης ὅσα ἐδύνατο κατενόησε καὶ τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων τῆς χώρας”.

⁵ *Vita Themistoclis*, 29: „ἐπεὶ δ’ ἠσθέντος τοῦ βασιλέως τῇ εἰκασίᾳ καὶ λαμβάνειν κελεύσαντος, ἐνιαυτὸν αἰτησάμενος καὶ τὴν Περσίδα γλώτταν ἀποχρώντως ἐκμαθῶν ἐνετύγχανε (scil. Themistocles) βασιλεῖ δι’ αὐτοῦ, τοῖς μὲν ἐκτὸς δόξαν παρέσχε περὶ τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν πραγμάτων διειλέχθαι, πολλῶν δὲ καινοτομουμένων περὶ τὴν αὐλήν καὶ τοὺς φίλους ὑπὸ τοῦ βασιλέως ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ χρόνῳ, φθόνον ἔσχε παρὰ τοῖς δυνατοῖς, ὡς καὶ κατ’ ἐκείνων παρρησία χρῆσθαι πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀποτετολμηκῶς”.

bordering on sarcasm.⁶ The figure of Lucian should be very attractive to Poles,⁷ since through his mastery of a foreign language he reminds them of Joseph Conrad (Korzeniowski).

In a recently released book, dedicated to the prehistoric Aegean and Hellenic tradition, Margalit Finkelberg examines the Greek approach to 'Greekness' (τὸ Ἑλληνικόν).⁸ She recalls in this context a famous passage from Herodotus (VIII, 144, 2), which says *explicitely*: τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, ἐὸν ὁμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον, καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἡθεῖά τε ὁμότροπα⁹ (Finkelberg 2005: 17). Curiously, these words are spoken by Athenians to Spartans frightened by a possible Athenian-Persian alliance. We know from another source (Plato, *Menexenus* 245 d) that Athenians used to boast of the purity of their Greek blood:

οὐ γὰρ Πέλοπες οὐδὲ Κάδοι οὐδὲ Αἴγυπτοὶ τε καὶ Δαναοὶ οὐδὲ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ φύσει μὲν βάρβαροι ὄντες, νόμῳ δὲ Ἕλληνες, συνοικοῦσιν ἡμῖν, ἀλλ' αὐτοὶ Ἕλληνες, οὐ μειζοβάρβαροι οἰκοῦμεν, ὅθεν καθαρὸν τὸ μῖσος ἐντέτηκε τῇ πόλει τῆς ἀλλοτρίας φύσεως.¹⁰

These words, regardless of how xenophobic and chauvinist they sound,¹¹ are uttered in the context of holding true to alliances and the ideal of Greekness. The Hellenes therefore recognize being Greek nominally (νόμῳ) by education and culture (παιδεία), although obviously it is much more valuable (at least in declaration) to be Greek by nature (φύσει).

⁶ Cf. Lukian 1960: XVI: „Lukian [...] nie był rodowitym Grekiem. Mimo to dobrze opanował zarówno język, jak i literaturę grecką; mimo że znał syryjski, w twórczości ograniczył się do greczyzny i tylko nią posługiwał się w publicznych wystąpieniach. Z urodzenia „barbarzyńca”, dzięki wykształceniu przedzierzgnął się w prawdziwego Greka. Cechowało go greckie poczucie wyższości kulturalnej w postawie wobec Rzymu i Rzymian. Literaturę łacińską ignorował, język łaciński znał bardzo słabo, nigdzie nie wspominał żadnego autora rzymskiego. Utwór pt. *O najemnych uczonych* ujawnia lepszą znajomość stosunków w Rzymie; widać, że autor tam dłużej przebywał. Mimo to nie przesiąkł kultem dla cywilizacji rzymskiej. Przykłady z rzymskiej historii zaczął wplatać dopiero w utworach napisanych w późnej starości.”

⁷ Cf. Holzman 1988.

⁸ Finkelberg 2005.

⁹ “[...] the kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life [...]”; translation by A. D. Godley (*after*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>).

¹⁰ “For there cohabit with us none of the type of Pelops, or Cadmus, or Aegyptus or Danaus, and numerous others of the kind, who are naturally barbarians though nominally Greeks; but our people are pure Greeks and not a barbarian blend; whence it comes that our city is imbued with a whole-hearted hatred of alien races”; translation by W.R.M. Lamb (*after*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>).

¹¹ It is also a good pendant to the Athenian regulation on citizenship (451/450 BC), which is traditionally attributed, after Aristotle (*Constitution of the Athenians* 26, 3), to the growing number of citizens and may also be combined with limiting the number of people entitled to getting any form of the state money (Hammond 1994: 366; and Bravo-Węcowski-Wipszycka-Wolicki 2009: 479-481).

No wonder that the Hellenistic spread of the Greek culture throughout the then οίκουμένη produces almost immediately books, in which the ‘barbarians’ depict in the Hellenic idiom their own history (-ies), tradition(s) and culture(s) to the Greeks. We may evoke here e.g. *Babyloniaca* by Berossus, *Aegyptiaca* by Manetho or a little bit later *Antiquitates Iudaicae* by Josephus. Megasthenes, the author of *Indica*, might have been Greek, although it is not entirely sure. To this kind of literature belong also the beginnings of Roman historiography, written in Greek: the books by Q. Fabius Pictor, L. Cincius Alimentus or C. Acilius. On the other hand the number of books, written by Greeks, where ‘barbaric’ history(-ies), tradition(s) and culture(s), often of ancient lineage, would be described as equal and comparable to Hellenic is extremely low. Sergei Averincev writes about one of them (Awierincew 1988: 67–70, Аверинцев 2004: 79–83).

This is quite an unusual book – we do not know who wrote it and what was his name (Dionysius? Longinus? – we shall call him henceforth: Ps. Longinus); its composition may be dated (1st half of the 1st century BC) only on the basis of an analysis of language and style and a few ambiguous political allusions (Korus 2005: 356–361). The book is known in Greek as Περὶ ὕψους, but it is cited much more frequently under its Latin name *De sublimitate*. It is an extremely valuable monograph on artistic style, and a mine of numerous citations, including the famous poem by Sappho (51). In Chapter IX we read:

ταύτη καὶ ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαίων θεσμοθέτης, οὐχ ὁ τυχῶν ἀνὴρ, ἐπειδὴ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δύναμιν κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν ἐχώρησε κατέφηνεν, εὐθὺς ἐν τῇ εἰσβολῇ γράφας τῶν νόμων «εἶπεν ὁ Θεός», φησί, – τί; «γενέσθω φῶς, καὶ ἐγένετο· γενέσθω γῆ, καὶ ἐγένετο.»¹²

There could be no doubt that Ps. Longinus recalls here the Greek-language version of the Bible – to be more precise: the Book of Genesis, part of the *Septuagint* (often abbreviated in Roman numerals as LXX). We know that “as the Prologue to the Book of Ecclesiasticus shows, there was in existence towards the end of the 2nd century B.C. a Greek translation of the whole, or at least of the essential parts, of the O[ld] T[estament]. There is no reason for us to doubt that the LXX text of that period was in general agreement with our present-day LXX text.” (LXX, 1971, vol. I: XXII).

It is a pity that the author does not cite the Holy Scripture precisely. Naturally, we do not expect him to evoke the original Hebrew text (*De sublimitate* is written in Greek and mingling of languages is a much more

¹² “Thus too the lawgiver of the Jews, no common man, when he had duly conceived the power of the Deity, showed it forth just as duly. At the very beginning of his Laws, ‘God said,’ he writes — What? ‘Let there be light, and there was light, let there be earth, and there was earth.’”, translation by A. O. Prickard (Longinus 1906: 18).

recent practice), but we could reasonably hope for an exact Greek version of the text. Yet, we should keep in mind Averincev's wise comments:

Единственное в своем роде значение этого места не может быть ослаблено тем, что Псевдо-Лонгин цитировал «Книгу Бытия», как мы видим, отнюдь не точно и, по всей видимости, не имел под руками текста Септуагинты, когда писал эти строки. Допустим даже, как это не раз делалось, что цитата вообще заимствована из вторых рук [...]. Достаточно того, что лапидарность библейской фразы, облеченная «Семьюдесятью Толковниками» в формы греческого языка, теми или иными путями вошла в кругозор столь впечатлительного эллина, как Псевдо-Лонгин, и была оценена им эстетически как монументальность и значительность, как осуществление «возвышенного». (Аверинцев 2004: 81).

We know that almost any successive act of creation as described in the Bible was good in the Almighty God's eyes: „And God saw that it was good” (RSV 2005: *Gen.* 1. 8.) (בּוֹטֵיב מִיְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֵת אֲשֶׁר יָצָא, BHS, 1997: 1). The Greek text translates בוט as καλόν.¹³ The root בוט is found in all Semitic languages but Ethiopic; it is used to express the idea of ‘good’ in any possible sense (HALOT 2008, vol. I: 351-353). This is not the case of the Greek καλόν. We have no idea about the etymology of this adjective, although some rather farfetched and forced hypotheses have been proposed (cf. Frisk 1960: 766). What is important – the primary meaning of the Greek adjective was ‘beautiful’ (LSJ, 1996: 870). This meaning was still in use in the Roman period of the Greek culture but the new one ‘good’ gradually was gaining ground and eventually prevailed (Sophocles 1914: 623). Interestingly, this later meaning of the adjective survived until today.

We owe to Pierre Chantraine a short but convincing description of the shift in the meaning of the word: “καλός: «beau», dit de la beauté du corps, cf. chez Homère καλός τε μέγας τε dit en attique dans des déclarations d’amour; employé aussi depuis Hom[ère] pour de beaux objets, armes, vêtements, etc., avec le neutre τὸ καλόν «la beauté»; «convenable, beau» au sens moral (au neutre seulement chez Hom[ère] et librement en ion[ien]-att[ique], etc.); dit de ce qui est utile, en bon état, d’où le passage à «bon, qui est bien», etc.; l’expression καλὸς κάγαθός avec καλοκάγαθία s’emploie diversement mais exprime souvent l’idéal du citoyen [...]” (Chantraine 1984: 486). It is very interesting to observe how the idea of physical beauty, typical for any warrior culture and immortalized in the archaic sculpture (endless series of statues of *kouroi*) meets the idea of moral beauty. “Plutôt que comme la morphologie d’un ensemble d’organes ajustés, à la façon d’une planche anatomique, ou que la figure des particularités physiques propres à chacun, comme dans un

¹³ E.g. *Gen.* 1.8.: καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι καλόν (LXX 1971, vol. I: 1).

portrait, le corps grec, aux temps anciens, se donne à voir sur le mode d'un blason faisant apparaître, en trains emblématiques, les multiples « valeurs » – de vie, de beauté, de pouvoir – dont un individu se trouve pourvu, dont il est titulaire et qui proclament sa *timé* : sa dignité et son rang. Pour désigner la noblesse d'âme, la générosité de cœur des hommes les meilleurs, les *áristoi*, le grec dit *kalòs kághòs*, soulignant que beauté physique et supériorité morale n'étant pas dissociables, la seconde se peut évaluer au seul regard de la première." (Vernant 1996: 20). From the point of view of history of culture the typically Greek identification of what is 'good' with what is 'beautiful' seems to be one of the most important features. Without such attitude we would not be able even to imagine the history of Greek and henceforth European philosophy, theology, arts...

On the other hand we cannot of course forget what was the most important duty and obligation of any Greek *kalòs kághòs*. We read twice in the *Iliad* (VI, 208 and XI, 784): "αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων."¹⁴

Such typically Hellenic attitude towards society finds its best expression in Greek enthusiasm, ardour and love for competition (*ἀγών*). Not only literary sources of any kind (beginning with Homer), but also sculpture, vase paintings, architectural monuments remind us of amusement and fun the Greek used to find in rivalry. Of course, we find this also in the so called Pan-Hellenic Games (i.e. Olympic, Pythian (Delphic), Isthmian, and Nemean), some local games, pretending to be Pan-Hellenic (i.e. Panathenaic) or other games, competitions, plays...¹⁵ We could aptly recall here the close connection of the Greek love for contest with religion (Lengauer 2004: *passim*). As it seems there are some conclusions we may draw from this Greek characteristics. A contest (*ἀγών*) is a specific form of play – several decades ago Johan Huizinga stressed the importance of play and ventured to say that play might be assumed as occurring prior to culture (*homo ludens*).¹⁶ On the other hand Walter Burkert (also several decades ago, but more recently) insisted on the significance of the 'hunting theory' and the idea of *homo necans* for understanding the Greek rituals, offerings, and myths (Burkert 1997: *passim*). Thanks to his work we may reasonably argue that at a deeper level, hunting, offering, and war (a very specific form of sport) are mutually symbolically interchangeable.¹⁷ Within the Greek culture we may conclude

¹⁴ "[E]ver to be bravest and pre-eminent above all." translation by A.T. Murray (after: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>).

¹⁵ Cf. von Ungern-Sternberg 2009: 4.

¹⁶ "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing." (Huizinga 2008: 1).

¹⁷ "Für die alte Welt sind Jagd, Opfer und Krieg gegenseitig ‚symbolisch‘ austauschbar: Jagd-

that the views of these two great scholars are not contradictory, but consider different aspects of human behaviour – *homo necans* becomes *homo ludens* quite easily and *vice versa*.

This conclusion allows us also to understand the exclusiveness, self-interest and self-attraction so typical for the ancient Greek culture. Although, as we have already noticed, neither *καλός* ‘beautiful’, nor *ἀγαθός* ‘good’ – words of fundamental meaning for the Hellenes – are clear to us from the etymological point of view; the latter might even be a pre-Greek substrate word (Beekes 2009: s. *vv.*), they may be used to describe only a Greek (either by blood or by culture), since only Greeks are entitled to take part in rituals, ceremonies, games... and in Hellenic eyes only the Greek literature is worth of being studied and respected. A beautiful example of the Greek reluctance and unwillingness to accept importance or value of anything that had not been written in Greek we find in a story told by Plutarch. In the *Life of Cicero* (4-5) Plutarch tells us about Tullius meeting Apollonius Molon of Rhodes, a famous Greek rhetorician of the time:

λέγεται δὲ τὸν Ἀπολλώνιον οὐ συνιέντα τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν διάλεκτον δεηθῆναι τοῦ Κικέρωνος Ἑλληνιστὶ μελετῆσαι· τὸν δ’ ὑπακοῦσαι προθύμως, οἰόμενον οὕτως ἔσεσθαι βελτίονα τὴν ἐπανόρθωσιν· ἐπεὶ δ’ ἐμελέτησε, τοὺς μὲν ἄλλους ἐκπεπληχθαι καὶ διαμιλλᾶσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοῖς ἐπαίνοις, τὸν δ’ Ἀπολλώνιον οὐτ’ ἀκροώμενον αὐτοῦ διαχυθῆναι, καὶ παυσασμένου σύννου καθέζεσθαι πολὺν χρόνον· ἀχθομένου δὲ τοῦ Κικέρωνος εἰπεῖν· „σὲ μὲν ὦ Κικέρων ἐπαινῶ καὶ θαυμάζω, τῆς δ’ Ἑλλάδος οἰκτίρω τὴν τύχην, ὁρῶν, ἃ μόνα τῶν καλῶν ἡμῖν ὑπελείπετο, καὶ ταῦτα Ῥωμαῖοις διὰ σοῦ προσγιγόμενα, παιδείαν καὶ λόγον.¹⁸

The Greek rhetorician needed Cicero’s intervention in order to acknowledge that there was a world of learning and arts outside Greece. We cannot however ignore the fact that Cicero had to speak Greek, since Apollonius did not understand Latin and that it all happened when Greece proper and the Greek *οικουμένη* had already been under Roman rule for a long time.

herr, Opferherr oder Krieger ist der Pharaos so gut wie Herakles; als Jäger, als Krieger oder als Athlet erscheint der griechische Jüngling auf den Grabreliefs. Die Akzente verschieben sich wohl entsprechend der sozialen Wirklichkeit: der Ackerbauer scheint mehr im Opfertitus zu leben; nomadisierende Viehzüchter, die ihren stolzen Besitz ungenutzt durch Schlachten dezimieren, werden zu erobernden Kriegern.“ (Burkert 1997: 59).

¹⁸ “Apollonius, we are told, not understanding the Roman language, requested Cicero to declaim in Greek, with which request Cicero readily complied, thinking that in this way his faults could better be corrected. After he had declaimed, his other hearers were astounded and vied with one another in their praises, but Apollonius was not greatly moved while listening to him, and when he had ceased sat for a long time lost in thought; then, since Cicero was distressed at this, he said: “Thee, indeed, O Cicero, I admire and commend; but Greece I pity for her sad fortune, since I see that even the only glories which were left to us, culture and eloquence, are through thee to belong also to the Romans.” Translation by Bernadotte Perrin (*after*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>).

The Greek culture, albeit self-centred, inbred, and egotistic, had an enormous power to attract and accommodate. The outside world used to become Hellenized soon after it came in contact with Greece and the Hellenic culture regardless of its own history, traditions and heritage. The best, perhaps, example of the process can be found in Egypt. In the book on religions in the ancient Near East Andrzej Ćwiek writes about the country on the Nile:

Symbolem skomplikowanej historii religijnej kraju nad Nilem może być klasztor koptyjski wzniesiony w średniowieczu w ruinach świątyni Hatszepsut w Deir el-Bahari. Chrześcijański klasztor, powstały w czasach i na obszarze dominacji islamu, miał za patrona św. Fojbammona, łączącego w swym imieniu odwołania do greckiego Apollina (Fojbos) i egipskiego Ammona.¹⁹

(Ćwiek 2008: 60–61).

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¹⁹ “We may view the Coptic monastery built in the Middle Ages on the relics of the Hatshepsut’s temple in Deir el-Bahari as a symbol of the complicated religious history of the country on the Nile. The Christian monastery, built in times and on the territory of the Islamic domination, had as its patron saint St. Phoebammon whose name combined references to Greek Apollo (Phoebus) and Egyptian Ammon.”

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Kilka luźnych uwag co do specyfiki greckiej kultury

Artykuł jest poświęcony jednej z najbardziej charakterystycznych cech starożytnej kultury greckiej – braku umiejętności Hellenów do zauważenia piękna i kolorytu języków innych niż grecki. Nie jest przypadkiem, że βάρβαρος ‘barbarzyńca/barbarzyński’ – słowo pierwotnie pozbawione negatywnych konotacji – z biegiem czasu nabrało takiego znaczenia, które jest obecne zapewne we wszystkich nowożytnych językach, czerpiących z antyku klasycznego. Nie wynika to jednak z rasizmu – Grecy akceptują i uznają za swoich innych, o ile przejmą oni grecką kulturę i oczywiście język; klasycznym przykładem jest Lukian z Samosat.

Rozszerzenie się kultury greckiej na cały obszar basenu Morza Śródziemnego i dalej na wschód – konsekwencja podbojów Aleksandra Wielkiego – przynosi pojawienie się książek pisanych po grecku i przeznaczonych dla Greków. Pokazują one dorobek kultur i ludów podporządkowanych przez Greków. Choć pisane przez ‘barbarzyńców’ książki te muszą być po grecku – Helleni nie rozumieją inaczej. Zapewne wynika to z faktu, że tylko Helleni mogą być uznani za nośnik ideału – pojęcia *kalokagathii*, fundamentalnego dla greckiej kultury współzawodnictwa, połączenia moralnego dobra, szlachetności ducha, cielesnego piękna i tężyzny (nierzadko wspartego majątkiem). Kultura grecka – mimo swej ekskluzywności – potrafiła jednak przyciągać innych i do innych się przystosowywać: dzieje kultury europejskiej są tego najlepszym dowodem.
