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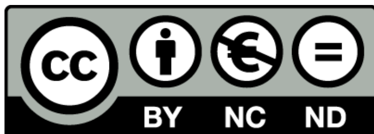
Zitiervorschlag
Bärbel Morstadt. 2025. Historising Épidemaïs – West Asian Characters in the Comic Series 'Asterix the Gaul' Against the Background of Historical Sources, the 20th-Century-Zeitgeist and the Current Discourse on Orientalism. In Sebastian Hageneuer, Aris Politopoulos, Bärbel Morstadt, and Aydin Abar, eds.: West Asia in the Center. Forum Kritische Archäologie 14: 181–193.

URL https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de

DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-51184

ISSN 2194-346X



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Historising Épidemaïs – West Asian Characters in the Comic Series 'Asterix the Gaul' Against the Background of Historical Sources, the 20th-Century-Zeitgeist and the Current Discourse on Orientalism

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Abstract

In this article, Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant in the comic series *Asterix the Gaul*, and other characters representative of ancient West Asian cultures, namely the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians and Medes, are analysed with regard to their historically accurate or stereotyped representation. Even if it has already been made clear several times that the characters and their narratives in the comic series should not be understood as historically accurate, such accuracy is repeatedly attributed to them. First, it will be demonstrated on the basis of some well-known case studies why this is the case. In a subsequent step the results will be applied to an analysis of the West Asian characters. It will be discussed whether the historical reference dominates or whether they rather represent stereotypical characteristics that associate them with the time of their creation in the 20th century, and how to deal with these results.

Keywords

Astérix the Gaul, Épidemaïs, Phoenicians, West Asian characters, stereotypes, orientalism

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden Épidemaïs, der phönizische Händler aus der Comic-Reihe „Asterix der Gallier", und andere Figuren, die für alte westasiatische Kulturen stehen, nämlich die Sumerer, Akkader, Hethiter, Assyrer und Meder, hinsichtlich ihrer historisch korrekten oder stereotypen Darstellung analysiert. Auch wenn bereits mehrfach klargestellt wurde, dass die Figuren und ihre Erzählungen in der Comic-Reihe nicht als historisch korrekt zu verstehen sind, wird ihnen diese Korrektheit immer wieder zugeschrieben. Zunächst wird anhand einiger bekannter Fallstudien aufgezeigt, warum dies der Fall ist. In einem weiteren Schritt werden die Ergebnisse auf eine Analyse der westasiatischen Figuren angewendet. Es wird diskutiert, ob der historische Bezug überwiegt oder ob sie eher stereotype Merkmale aufweisen, die sie mit der Zeit ihrer Entstehung im 20. Jahrhundert in Verbindung bringen, und wie mit diesen Ergebnissen umzugehen ist.

Schlagwörter

Asterix der Gallier, Épidemaïs, Phönizier, westasiatische Figuren, Stereotype, Orientalismus

Aims and Limits

Asterix the Gaul is one of the most popular comic series. Many children and adults have been captivated by the stories of a fictional French hero and his companions, set some 2000 years ago in ancient Gaul, facing the expansion of the Roman Empire. Although it was not the authors' intention to portray the characters and the stories in a historically accurate way, they are often understood and celebrated as such by their enthusiastic readership. While academicians and readers alike frequently emphasise the ingenious mix of historical references and ahistorical elements that comprise the narratives, despite this, it seems that they are often tempted to ignore, to overlook, and to push it to the background due to their fascination with the narrative and images.

The first step is therefore to identify and understand this area of tension in order to explain how, why, by what means and for whom the stories and images were designed and to whom they were intended to appeal. This will be demonstrated by a few case studies that are widely known and repeatedly cited in this context.

In a further step, some West Asian figures, namely Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant, as well as some unnamed Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians and Medes, will be analysed to make a further contribution, an addition to the already known case studies. The result of this analysis will neither be a completely new nor revised reading and interpretation. However, it will add a valuable piece to the bigger picture and prevents them from disappearing behind the veil of uncritical and blind perception. The aim is to work out to what extent historical authenticity dominates in these cases or to what extent they are shaped by the colonialist and orientalist gaze of past decades at the time of their creation in the 1960s, 1980s and 2019. This then leads to the discussion of what contemporary and future approach can be applied to the appreciation of this popular comic series.

The methodological approach is history-based, not that of media studies. Promising aspects of such a study would be the development of the characters within a narrative or across different narratives, the relationship between text and image. Unfortunately, this cannot be accomplished here, because it would go beyond what can be achieved here in terms of scope, time and number of pages. In order to pursue the aim of this study, it is limited to a few meaningful aspects that are relevant to the investigation. It would be rather a reasonable wish to have them studied in the light of their specific mediality. Yet the present study may help to pave the way for this.

Introduction to the Comic Series *Astérix the Gaul*

Astérix le Gaulois (*Asterix the Gaul*)[1] is one of the most successful comic series in the world in terms of sales figures and translations into other languages as well, and it is therefore presumably also one of the best known.[2] In 40 volumes (status 2023), the writer René Goscinny and the illustrator Albert Uderzo, the authors Jean-Yves Ferri (2013–2021) and Fabcaro (since 2023), respectively, as well as the illustrator Didier Conrad (since 2013) depict the manifold adventures of Astérix and his friends. Based in a small village in Gaul otherwise conquered by the Roman Empire, Astérix and his friend Obélix, accompanied by his dog Idéfix (Dogmatix), experience various adventures in the ancient Mediterranean world of the time around 50 BCE. During this time, they meet various characters, fictitious and historical individuals, totalling around 350.[3] Among the most famous historical characters are the Roman dictator Julius Gaius Caesar and the Ptolemaic Queen of Egypt Cleopatra VII Philopator. As examples of fictitious individuals, one could cite the pirate captain Barbe Rouge (Redbeard) and the pirate Triple Patte (Pegleg) as well as the Numidian pirate Baba (Lookout) with his Creole accent, usually sitting in the crow's nest, the Phoenician merchant and seafarer Épidemaïs (Ekonomikrisis), the Egyptian architect Numérobis (Edifis), and various characters who are not presented as individuals and do not have personal names.

1 The characters are named according to their original name in the French editions, their names in English editions are put in parantheses – except Astérix and Obélix.

2 Key figures for the Asterix series 2019: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/986539/umfrage/erfolgreichste-comic-reihen-nach-absatz-weltweit/ (07.08.2023). This applies in particular to the frequency of translations into other languages and dialects: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1106185/umfrage/kennzahlen-zu-asterix/; https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/977469/umfrage/ausgewaehlte-comics-nach-uebersetzung-in-andere-sprachen-weltweit/ (07.08.2023).

3 https://asterix.com/de/die-charaktere/ (07.08.2023).

These include a bunch of pirates, Romans, Egyptians, and Sumerians. Some occur more often, such as the Romans, others rarely (the Egyptians), or only once as in the case for the Sumerians.[4]

The first story appeared in 1959 in the youth magazine *Pilote* (Berner 1999; Uderzo 1986, 2009; Feige 2001: 42–46)[5] and since then, it has enjoyed impressive success: numerous paperback volumes followed, and it continues today. The stories were translated into at least 110 languages, including Latin as well as multiple regional dialects, such as Hessian. The stories were filmed as comics and with real actors.[6] The characters in the comic series are loved by children and adults of many generations, and the depictions are celebrated for their historical accuracy to the extent that teachers, for example, use the volumes in Latin and history classes – the incorporation of comics in school lessons, in general, is considered useful (Gundermann 2007).

The high appreciation of the Astérix series is commonly attributed to the following factors:[7]

- the artistic design of the pictures and the characters, with an intense attention to detail,
- the rich historical knowledge (sic!),
- the dense wordplay as well as myriad allusions, puns, and persiflage,
- because the Gauls, Romans, and other ethnic groups reflect the idiosyncrasies of their recent descendants, in which the reader can recognise himself or herself (sic!),
- the embeddedness of celebrities such as Sean Connery and Arnold Schwarzenegger (to name only a few) or even the authors themselves as characters or references,
- running gags such as the sinking of the hapless pirates, the argument about the freshness of certain goods such as fish that always ends in fisticuffs, or the emphatic ban of the bard Troubadix (Cacofonix) at the final celebration,
- a consistently high level of quality of all foreign-language editions through personal control by the authors.

The integration of the comic series into modern Latin lessons is recommended because of the multilingual availability of the comics, the profitable linking of classical and modern languages, and due to the real-life material and the excellent source situation, coupled with entertainment through anachronistic allusions, which contribute to unbroken students' interest.[8] Numerous studies have emphasised the motivational effects of this comic series on learning Latin (Lüthje 1979). In the following, however, the focus is not on the motivational aid, but on the aspect of the supposedly historical accuracy and the potential self-recognition of ethnic groups which always resonates and is even sometimes explicitly expressed as seen above.

Recognition of the Astérix Cosmos

The creators of the Astérix cosmos, Goscinny and Uderzo, always emphasised that their comics were primarily intended to entertain and amuse readers. They did not depict historical events correctly, nor did they want to express political views:

4 A private project has compiled lexicon-like information on, among other things, the genesis and all characters: https://comedix.de/lexikon/index.php (07.08.2023).

5 https://www.comedix.de/lexikon/special/geschichte_von_asterix/pilote.php (15.05.2024).

6 https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1106185/umfrage/kennzahlen-zu-asterix/; https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/977469/umfrage/ausgewaehlte-comics-nach-uebersetzung-in-andere-sprachen-weltweit/ (07.08.2023). A good compilation of the issues, the editions in different languages and dialects, films and audio plays, websites, special volumes, and learning aids, etc, can be found on the website of a private project: https://comedix.de/medien/index.php (07.08.2023).

7 http://www.werhatxerfunden.com/wer-hat-asterix-und-obelix-erfunden/ (11.05.2023).

8 https://www.lehrer-online.de/unterricht/sekundarstufen/fremdsprachen/latein/unterrichtseinheit/ue/asterix-multilingual/ (11.05.2023).

> "We have only one goal: to have fun ourselves and to make others have fun. This is our modest contribution during our short stay on this planet" (Uderzo 1986: 128);
>
> "Sometimes it was a passage from a historical work that had some relation to the present, or an object or a journey. The main thing was that we liked the occasion and enjoyed it" (Uderzo 1986: 177);
>
> "We therefore needed a minimum amount of documentation in order not to exceed the limits we had set ourselves" (Uderzo 1986: 182);
>
> "Sometimes the readers are better informed or smarter than the illustrator and share their observations with him" (Uderzo 1986: 194);
>
> "We are comedians who have only one desire, one vocation: To amuse children and all those who have remained children." (Uderzo 2009: 204)

Apparently, there were efforts on the part of the readership and fan community to provide real evidence of fictional places, which Uderzo explicitly rejected (Uderzo 2009: 272–276). Therefore, one should not expect Astérix to teach Roman history. Actually, it contains many – in part also presumably deliberate – historical mistakes, as various publications with a scientific archaeological and historical background point out (Wiechers 1999: 31; Müller 1999a; in general: Westfälisches Römermuseum Haltern 1999; Brodersen 2001; van Royen and van der Vegt 2001). Despite manifold authentic elements such as the Roman army and armoury, they do not form a coherent and authentic historical setting.

Yet, why are these comics now and then considered to present historical authenticity? According to Christine Gundermann, who has been intensively researching the connection between comics and history – and also history teaching and education – for many years, this works via the simulation of education (Gundermann 2009).[9] It includes the recognition of occasional historically accurate elements, of real and fake Latin quotations, of historical ruptures and mistakes, stereotypes, persiflage, anachronisms, analogies, and manifold allusions on different levels both in images and text, as well as in their interaction (Penndorf 2001). This tests the reader's education and gives the pleasure of discerning both truth and falsehood, ruptures and allusions. It allows him or her to speculate about details and jokes, which results in the aura of historical authenticity. In this way, the reader experiences self-affirmation and self-assurance of his or her already existing education, an affirmation of belonging to the educated middle class, to which she or he can playfully add.

Apart from the above-mentioned scientific publications with an archaeological and/or historical background, fans have made it their goal to record and list the various aspects on Wikipedia and private websites, e.g., a compilation of allusions to works of art, caricatures of famous personalities and allusions to other comic series, historical and literary allusions and quotes in the margins of the main plot, of running gags,[10] of ethnic stereotypes,[11] a list of references to existing and fictional persons as well as of historical references and references to contemporary society,[12] of Latin quotations.[13]

In the following, a few examples are given to illustrate what this mixture is made of:

- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): In Egypt, Astérix and Obélix meet the faithful scribe of the Egyptian architect Misenplis (Exlibris). He speaks the Gauls' language as well as all other languages that are still in use (sic!), such as Latin, Greek, and Celtic. In his appearance and crouching position, he recalls the famous Egyptian sculpture of the so-called sitting/squatting scribe of the 4th/5th dynasty, 2600 to 2350 BCE, on display in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.[14] Here, a work was the inspiration for the portrayal of a character, one that has

9 https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/1-2009/4506#pgfId-1038554 (22.05.2024).

10 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix (07.08.2023).

11 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix: Ethnic stereotypes (07.08.2023).

12 https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix (07.08.2023).

13 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_lateinischen_Zitate_in_den_Asterix-Comics (07.08.2023).

14 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010006582 (22.05.2024).

long been in the possession of probably the most prestigious museum in France, is on public display, and that can be considered a very famous exhibition piece.

- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): On the other hand, with the exception of a handful of specified characters, the mass of Egyptians is represented as doing what Egyptians are famous for: they build huge monuments, pyramids, and temples. Some of them even seem modelled on real examples, such as the Philae temple complex in Aswan. However, on the whole, they are quite generic. Here, we recognise the creation of a stereotype (see more on this below) for the ancient Egyptians.
- Volume 26, *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*): In the course of the visit to Egypt, it is explained – in a false, but humorous way – why the nose of the Sphinx of Giza is broken off: because Obélix climbed up it and his weight damaged the nose. It is erroneously rumoured that Napoleon Bonaparte's soldiers destroyed the nose during artillery exercises. However, it was already damaged by the time Napoleon arrived. This is demonstrated by a copperplate engraving from 1738, made by the Danish artist Frederick Ludewick Norden (Norden 1795: pl. 45–47). Here, one of the most famous objects in Egypt is used to symbolise a significant military campaign and scientific enterprise in French history. It was executed by one of the most celebrated and controversial characters.
- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): The image of Cléopâtre (Cleopatra) in the comic series is based on Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra in the 1962 film version – disregarding the existing historically authentic evidence of Cleopatra's portraits and depictions such as a famous marble portrait in Berlin[15] or representations on numerous ancient coins[16] and also ignoring her many receptions throughout European history (Farsen 2013; Gentili 2014). It features make-up that was generally considered 'Egyptian' in the 1960s but with the pastel-coloured lips of popular '60s fashion. Her appearance altered over time and was adapted to the Zeitgeist of each era – somewhat thinner and daintier in the 1960s, somewhat more rounded and feminine in the 1980s (Müller 1999b: 47). Her portrait in the comic series was adorned by a particularly pointed nose. This became one of the running gags of the series and a special characteristic of the figure. Here, the purpose was not to approximate a historically valid representation. Instead, it was to use a famous film's recognition and engage with it.
- Volume 26, *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*): The character of the Jew Saül Péhyé (Saul ben Ephishul) – the assistant to the merchant Samson Pludechorus (Samson Alius) in Jerusalem – has been modelled on Goscinny's portrait. He is depicted as a friendly and helpful character, to whom Asterix expresses his gratitude on leaving. Here, no historical connection has been made. However, an appropriate character has been created and used to represent a real-life person as a memorial to him. Goscinny was already deceased at the time, and Uderzo dedicated this volume in his honour (Uderzo 2009: 250). The connection between Saül Péhyé and Goscinny lies in their Jewish ancestry. This biographical background and the physiognomic resemblance are only apparent to dedicated fans of the comic series.

In summary, the aim of the comic was to entertain, and this entertainment is perceived by the readers as a challenge and self-affirmation of his or her education, recognising the complex Astérix cosmos. Various means were used unsystematically, such as actual historical personalities, phenomena, objects, their appearance, and their deliberate alienation. These means represent a combination of the potentially recognisable. It can have a personal connection, be closely linked to history in general or to France's history in particular, to be internationally known. And above all, it lives from stereotypes.

It is obvious and often criticised that the Astérix cosmos is populated by a multitude of stereotypes, namely regarding gender, nationality, and ethnicity, including anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes: corrupt Egyptians, a large, nameless mass of Egyptian construction workers, bad food among the British, the hot water with milk the British drink every day at five o'clock in the afternoon, that the British mow their lawns by hand and always have bad weather, nepotism among the Greeks. It can be observed that the use of stereotypes is not strictly and coherently one-sided, and also contains contradictions and ruptures, sometimes even in difference between the text and pictorial narrative (Riegel n.d.). Very often stereotypes are presented as ambiguous and leave room for interpretations. Notably, anti-fascist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial elements can be found in the textual and figurative

15 https://smb.museum-digital.de/object/8429 (23.05.2024).

16 E.g., https://smb.museum-digital.de/object/156416?navlang=de (23.05.2024).

narrative as well. Yet in doing so, the Astérix characters – individually or in groups – are coated in astonishingly modern national stereotypes (Schleicher 2011, 2023). Some readers may therefore believe that they reflect the idiosyncrasies of their recent descendants (see above), but who are they? Who do they recognise? To whom does this apply?

To answer these questions, we need to take a look at what stereotypes actually are. They are based on the creation and formation of categories around groups of people. Certain characteristics or behaviours, such as appearance, gender, clothing, or eating habits, are chosen and attributed to them in a highly simplified manner. They are not subject to rules or objective observation. Instead, they arise from the perception and evaluation of a detail used in an uncritical or overgeneralising way. They do not always contain valid social information but can be incorrectly generalised and emotionally related. Group-related aspects are transferred to an individual as its representative, where this does not necessarily have a negative or positive connotation per se and due to the reduction of complexity could also create opportunities for identification. It acts as a reference structure for expected and anticipated behaviour by the nominator. The key aspect here is the repetition or repeatability of this statement, which is why stereotypes become fixed and inescapable. Therefore, it is also a demonstration of the power of the nominator as the stereotype-giving group over the stereotyped persons or groups. Stereotypes legitimize social power relations and enable the legibility of images and texts. Even more than in textual media, stereotypes conveyed through images control perception, as they prescribe a relationship of similarity to the depicted object (based on Hall 2019; see also Hahn 1995; Hahn and Mannová 2006).

Therefore, the stereotypes used often tell us more about the stereotype-givers and users than about the stereotyped groups themselves. In the case of the Astérix cosmos, it is the second-half-of-the-20th century French-educated bourgeoisie of the Global West or those who self-identify with that group. These are the readers who understand the stereotypes (and all allusions), and they recognise themselves and others in them. The creation of stereotypes are under their control and power, although they may subsequently acquire a dynamic of their own or be modified and further developed by others. And knowing them and being amused by them enables participation in this group, it is the key to being an insider. It is well known that Uderzo and Goscinny were asked by the editors of the *Pilote* to find a French answer to American comics' dominance (Feige 2001: 42; Berner 1999: 9). Their method of achieving this goal was to create an image of self-identification, the incentive of belonging to this in-group, and the associated exercise of power over outsiders, and it was very successfully applied.

The use of this method is evident not least in light of the difficulty of translation, as well as the language with its specific turns of phrase in general and the names of the characters in particular (Embleton 1991; Kaindl 2008). The examination of the Arabic translation of three comics *(Astérix le Goulois* [*Asterix the Gaul*], *Astérix et Cléopâtre* [*Asterix and Cleopatra*], and *Astérix chez Rahàzade* [*Asterix and the Magic Carpet*]) by Regina Hartmann (1982), for example, revealed that the translators had transformed and reduced the text quite subjectively for two reasons: 1) hardly any knowledge of the history of Western Europe could be assumed by the target group, 2) some aspects could have offended the religious or national sensibilities of the target group. While the author of the study had no data at hand to analyse the effect of the Arabic version on Arab readers, she has the impression that the result of this work is uninformative, less allusive, and less humorous than the French equivalent. This is the reason why the original French names and terms are listed here with their English versions in addition.

With these prerequisites in mind, we will now turn our attention to characters that have not yet been examined in depth but should be now: Épidemaïs, the Phoenician, as well as the unnamed Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes.

Épidemaïs, the Stranger

Épidemaïs (Ekonomikrisis) is a Phoenician merchant. He appears in three stories, *Astérix gladiateur* (*Asterix the Gladiator*), *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*), and *La Fille de Vercingétorix* (*Asterix and the Chieftain's Daughter*), published as the fourth, the 26th, and the 38th volumes respectively in the original French in 1964, 1981, and 2019.

In *Astérix gladiateur* (*Asterix the Gladiator*), the bard Assurancetourix (Cacofonix) was captured by the Romans and should be taken to Rome. Astérix and Obélix therefore board a ship with Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant, who agrees to take them to Rome. After a pirate attack on his ship, which the two Gauls thwart, he admits that he had the intention to sell them as slaves in the next harbour – an allusion to the corresponding episode in Homer's Odyssey (14, 287–300). In gratitude for saving them from the pirates, however, Épidemaïs takes them to Rome as promised and even collects them on the return journey. Subsequently, positive contact seems to have been established between the Phoenician and the Gauls, for Épidemaïs later appears again as a supplier of goods to the Gallic village. However, he has forgotten the stone oil that Panoramix (Getafix) asked him for. So Astérix and Obélix set off with Épidemaïs on the 'Odyssey' to get the stone oil.

As helpful as Épidemaïs seems to be here, he is also responsible for the arduous journey due to his unreliability. Nevertheless, the readers' sympathy goes out to him: he is a distinct character, he is well-travelled, experienced in everything, and independent of anything and anyone, he is intent on profit, he is always friendly, and above all, he cleverly designs his own rules within the legal space of the Roman Empire – and would presumably do so today as well. The rowers of his merchant galley, for example, are allegedly not slaves, as on Roman ships; rather, they are shareholders in the company under a duly drawn up contract, whose fine print they have not read, however. Épidemaïs himself is general manager-president and chairman of the supervisory board, and the voyages are declared to be holiday club cruises. The titles, however, lose their wit in the translations: the rowers are called in French '*gentil membre*' and '*gentil organisateur*' referring to the tourism company Club Méditerranée. And as pleasant and unconcerned as Épidemaïs seems, he is mainly interested in his goods and money. Of course, the comic is a cover-up of classical slavery with profit as the primary goal, but who would condemn the congenial Épidemaïs for his sophistication? In *La Fille de Vercingétorix* (*Asterix and the Chieftain's Daughter*) from 2019 he is no longer portrayed in such a dazzling way: he just offers Astérix and Obélix a passage and cares for his goods.

Épidemaïs, literally 'corn on the cob', enjoys widespread popularity among readers as an entrepreneurial role model. He is pot-bellied, hook-nosed, dressed in a white and green apron with a golden necklace and a bold red headscarf. He comes from the prominent Phoenician trading city of Tyre. In contrast to the above-mentioned characters with individual names – the Egyptian scribe Misenplis (Exlibris), the Egyptian queen Cléopâtre (Cleopatra), the Jew Saül Péhyé (Saul ben Epishul) (see above) – the notorious Épidemaïs has no concrete role model, neither a person of ancient or contemporary history, nor an ancient or contemporary picture, and no references to ancient depictions or quotations of ancient realia are made. He is rather the pure embodiment of a stereotype in the textual and visual narrative: the Phoenician as an ambiguous, roving, mischievous, rather clever than physically remarkable male trader. He is not a muscular fighter, and the fullness of his body, and his clothing and jewellery give him a rather effeminate appearance. He travels as a merchant in the Mediterranean and offers all kinds of goods at his mobile stall. However, the reader is unclear whether he sells valuable gold objects or gold-coloured trinkets – nor are they told. Nor does the reader learn about his social, political, social, and family background. Épidemaïs, the Phoenician, does not belong to the cultures of ancient West Asia, which fight each other only out of tradition (see below) but is a Mediterranean traveller with the closest ties to Europe.

He therefore fulfils two typical Phoenician roles: the (male) merchant and the affiliation with the (European) Mediterranean. It was precisely the aspect of traders and travellers that was first taken up in research on the Phoenicians. This aspect is still considered the most prominent for them today. One could start by citing the *Geographia Sacra* of the French Reformed theologian Samuel Bochart (1599–1667). The *Geographia Sacra* (Bochart 1681) was the standard study of the Phoenicians for the following period. Bochart belonged to intellectual circles. In addition to theology, he was also well versed in geography, natural science, and philology. This made him a typical representative of the century labelled the 'scientific revolution'. In the *Geographia Sacra*, he constructed ancient geography and etymology based on the Old Testament, starting with the table of peoples in Genesis 10, continuing with the Flood, and ending with the first descendants of Noah. For Bochart, the Phoenicians represented the link between biblical and secular chronology and geography as well as the key to ancient migratory movements. Due to this methodical approach, his work *Geographia Sacra* was sensational and highly controversial at the time of its creation and publication. Bochart dealt extensively with Phoenicia's history and geography, Phoenician navigation, expansion, colonisation and language. The Phoenician language allegedly was spread by the Phoenicians through their expansion, driven by search for metals, and they even reached the British Isles. It represents the primal language on which all others depend. This is obviously wrong, as Phoenician belongs

to the Semitic language family and has nothing to do with Indo-European languages – this has been falsely claimed again and again, however. The Phoenicians were therefore to be regarded as the ancestors of the peoples in their area of expansion (including the British Isles) – a theory that had already been formulated, even more radically, before Bochart. It persisted in European research for a long time, also concerning French and German ancestry. England, however, identified with the ancient Phoenician maritime and trading power. The attribution of Western civilisation to the Phoenicians ('Pan-Phoenicianism') is evident in several publications of this and the following period. It was then particularly strongly developed as the Phoenicianism of national ancestry at the beginning of the 20th century in the formation of modern nation-states in the Levantine region and it was even instrumentalised in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990 between the Arab nationalists and the pro-Western Maronites as a vehicle for the latter to express their affiliation to Europe and dissociation from the Islamic world (Shalev 2012; Morstadt 2015: 25–28). And yet it still confronts us in its misused form as a stereotype in Astérix the Gaul.

One could continue and mention what is probably the most comprehensive and influential work of the 19th century about the Phoenicians, the four volumes written by the theologian and orientalist Franz Karl Movers (Movers 1841–1856). Based on written sources, he described the Phoenicians' state, religion and deities, trade and commerce, as well as the state of their colonies. He attached particular importance to the Phoenicians' long-distance trade, through which many elements from the Orient flowed into the Aegean region. One could add the publication *Die Phönizier: Handelsherren zwischen Orient und Okzident* (sic!) by the ancient historian Michael Sommer (2005), in which a general overview of the Phoenicians is given, mainly based on historical, but also including archaeological sources. One could also refer to the public interest, satisfied by scientists and non-scientists, that we can capture on social media such as YouTube, where the Phoenicians are depicted as stereotypically embodied in the character Épidemaïs.[17]

As we have seen, this stereotype can be traced back to the earliest studies of the Phoenicians and even beyond, to antiquity itself, as elaborated by the ancient historian Josephine Quinn (2018). It has already been pointed out that 'the Phoenicians' never actually existed, that it is an externally created image, that there was no Phoenician ethnicity or nationhood. Instead, the people named 'Phoenicians' rather identified themselves as citizens of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, etc. However, this stereotype is not even a modern one, but an ancient one: Quinn traces how the idea of 'being Phoenician' first emerged in support of Carthage and Rome's imperial ambitions, and only crystallised as a component of modern national identities in contexts as far-flung as Ireland and Lebanon. The Phoenicians were already stereotypes related to trade. As a result of believing in this historical mirage, we have been blinded to the compelling identities and communities. Faced with this stereotype of Phoenicians as seafarers and traders, one is always inclined to forget the daily life and social structures in Phoenician communities, including members of administration and scribes, craftsmen of all sorts such as builders, potters, basketmakers, dressmakers, and blacksmiths, likewise farmers, gardeners, livestock and stable owners. One may add unspecified workers, grocery salesmen in local markets, etc., as well as their familial, social, religious, and domestic political organisation. Furthermore, seafarers and merchants are usually conceived as male, in ancient and modern times, and also in their modern appropriation. This was pointed out a few years ago by Ana Delgado (2016: 48). The state of knowledge and research on Phoenician women, for example, is marginal (Morstadt 2017–2019).

Generally speaking, based on ancient, mostly written sources and through research history, the term 'Phoenician' became a synonym for commerce and utilitarianism, dominance, and progress – concepts associated with masculinity in the modern world. Beyond that, it is connected with Europe and the Mediterranean Sea rather than with West Asia. Yet he is the classic stranger in Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, as described by the sociologist George Simmel (Simmel 1908: 509–512): He comes and stays, he brings new qualities into the spatial environment that do not originate from him, he brings something from outside into the economic circle, he has an outside perspective and his own agenda, but he is there, and no one knows how loyal he is.

17 E.g., https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=die%20ph%C3%B6nizier%20handelsherren&mid=49A81FA8FBC1BC8585E249A81FA8FBC1BC8585E2&ajaxhist=0 (20.04.2024).

The Irrational West Asians in Astérix' Odyssée

In *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*), Astérix and his companions meet people of ancient West Asian cultures – namely Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes – on their way to Babylon, presented on panels 32B–34B. Three encounters are staged in the same order, one after the other: the Gauls are ambushed and shot at with arrows. They then take cover. They are asked who they are. When they reply that they are Gauls, the attackers enter the scene and apologise, justifying themselves by saying that they were mistaken for members of an opposing group – the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Hittites, and the Assyrians respectively. The Medes have lost their way and ask for the way out, whereupon Obelix sends them in the direction of the previous attackers ("It's easy! Just follow the arrows!", panel 34B). So, as Egyptians do what Egyptians are supposed to do (see above: they build pyramids), the West Asian people are perpetually at war with each other and attack strangers because they confuse them with their enemies, but they later apologise when they realise that the strangers are not their enemies. This is likely meant as a criticism of the constant conflicts among the Middle Eastern peoples by the author, captured and illustrated here in the comic series in a stereotype. Only the Medes have the possibility of finding a way out: they would be lost, but it is actually the Gaul Obelix who sends them back to their opponents. The fact that these groups are representative of cultures that would not have met in this way and thus pursued each other in an anachronistic, futile manner does not contradict the narrative but rather gives it additional humour.

Here, certain Realia are set in the scene and can be recognised, such as the golden helmet of Meskalamdug, worn by one of the Sumerian soldiers. Meskalamdug probably was an early Sumerian ruler of the 1st Dynasty of Ur (26th century BCE), in today's southern Iraq. His helmet is a spectacular masterpiece, found in a tomb within the Royal Cemetery of Ur that was equipped with rich gifts, among them two golden vessels and a lamp, inscribed with his name. The helmet is housed in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, but with reproductions in several international museums such as the British Museum[18] in London and the Penn Museum in Philadelphia. It measures 22.7 cm high, 27 cm long, and 21 cm wide and is made of one piece of hammered gold in the shape of a wig with ears on the sides. Fine engravings imitate a wavy hairstyle, plaited hair and a ribbon are laid around the head and knotted into a bun at the back of the head. Underneath are several rows of curling locks. The rim of the helmet has a series of small holes to which a lining was probably attached. Similarly designed but simplified helmets are represented on the Sumerian stelae of Eannatum, also known as the Stele of the Vultures, dating to the 1st Dynasty of Lagash, 25th century BCE, today kept in the Musée du Louvre[19] (Parrot 1960: 134–139); the type of hairstyle can also be rediscovered on the so-called mask of Sargon, ruler of the Akkadian empire, 24th to 23rd century BCE found in Niniveh/Kouyunjik, and on a small inscribed stone statuette found in Mari/Tell Hariri in Syria, representing Ishqi-Mari, king of Mari (c. 2300 BCE) (Parrot 1960: 114–120). The mask of Sargon even adorns the cover of a well-known publication by André Parrot on Sumer from 1960. Parrot (1901–1980) was a French Near Eastern archaeologist, who led several excavations in ancient Mesopotamia and held the position of the director of the Louvre from 1968 to 1972. He is the author of several publications that have also attracted attention outside the specialist world. One may even speculate if it were not only the objects exhibited in the Louvre but explicitly this publication that inspired Goscinny for the design of this figure. The statue was discovered by Parrot in 1934 and is kept today in the Aleppo National Museum. The unclothed upper body and the woolly skirts of these Sumerian bunch in the Astérix cosmos are reminiscent of small Sumerian figurines such as the one of Ishqi-Mari and others. The helmets of the other Sumerian warriors, a small round cap with neck shield, also have their role models in the above-mentioned stelae of Eannatum. Among the armour, a sceptre crowned with an animal (bull?) figure stands out, which could have a real-life model in a rein ring from Ur, today in the British Museum in London, crowned with an onager (Orthmann 1975: 169 fig. 37a). The further costume and general armament are so general that they do not correspond to ancient evidence. So, the appearance of these characters is based among other things on some objects that can be admired in the Musée du Louvre and that were published in well-known publications.

The Akkadians are depicted as taller and leaner than the small and chubby Sumerians. The leader's headgear evokes the Assyrian royal tiara of the 1st mill. BCE as it appears so often in the Assyrian reliefs, e.g., from the palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad/Dur-Sharrukin,[20] while the headgear of the others are reproductions of Neo-

18 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_C-278?selectedImageId=842849001 (06.10.2025).

19 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010121794 (06.10.2025).

20 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010122698 (06.10.2025).

Assyrian helmets, e.g., from the palace of Tiglath-Pileser III in Kalhu/Nimrud[21]. Many of these reliefs are exhibited in the Musée du Louvre, others in the British Museum, and they are among the best-known pieces. The representation of the Hittite leader recalls the Hittite representation of the god Teshub, e.g., on stelae from Tel Barsip, today in the Musée du Louvre:[22] this applies to the horned helmet and the short and fringed apron. Otherwise, this group is physically mixed, unlike the Assyrians, who are depicted as almost identical. In this way, they reproduce the aesthetics and costume of Assyrian reliefs, with the sequence of soldiers, whereas the helmets can be compared with the Assyrian ones with cheek-pads as shown in the Assyrian reliefs from Niniveh/Kouyunjik, stored in the Musée du Louvre.[23] The leader's headgear refers to the Assyrian royal tiara (see above). The depiction of the Medes, however, is based on the famous and often displayed reliefs in Persepolis (e.g., Schmidt 1953: pl. 19–117), some of which are in the Musée du Louvre.[24] The West Asian characters in total are not depicted as muscular heroes. Some are gaunt, others plump and feminised. In their appearance, they are a colourful group that looks more like highwaymen than warriors to be taken seriously.

This requires the reader to recognise both these concrete facts as well as general appearances, allusions, and general knowledge of the succession of cultures in ancient West Asia from Sumerians to Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes. Moreover, it is the recognition of the temporal breaks and the anachronistic element, in which centuries are reduced to a few minutes in which Astérix and Obélix encounter these groups in close succession that could never have happened, since these cultures no longer existed in Roman times. And even more: the narrative only works with all of them in a supposedly shared cosmos. The entire sequence is a reference to the later 20th century conflicts in the Middle East and it is the stereotyping of West Asian people as engaged in endless military conflicts. They are involved in conflicts that only they understand and for which no reason is given. It seems to be more of a tradition than a true cause, a habit shared by almost identical parties, barely distinguishable by details such as their headgear. They hardly recognise their opponents themselves, since they initially confused them with Astérix and Obelix. And no information is given beyond that, no further characterisation, nor any women or other members of society or other activities. Instead, only those of the handful of barely distinguishable highwaymen. And, overall, it appears highly irrational. The story and the depictions make the West Asian protagonist appear irrational, in stark contrast to the Gauls. And, incidentally, Astérix and Obélix's journey could have continued without these encounters. This is because they do not influence 'our heroes' and their mission. Thus, the basic idea of self-identification of certain ethnic groups with their ancestors (see above) in West Asian cultures is reduced to absurdity. Only the Medes – usually understood as the ancestors of modern-day Iranians – would have had a chance to escape. And it was actually a Frenchman who sent them back into the conflict. This could certainly be understood as (self-)criticism of the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the interference of the French and perhaps even global Western politics.

It is precisely this irrationality, that is – among others – attributed to the 'Orientals' by the 'Occident'/the Global West as a commonality according to Edward Said. His publication *Orientalism* (1978) is a founding document for postcolonial studies as a field of research. In it, he coined the term 'Orientalism' as a concept created by the Occident/the Global West as an instrument of imperialism and colonialism in the 18th century. The creation of this concept was based on the idea of superiority, made to achieve colonial dominance over West Asia. According to this concept, the 'Orientals' are the opposite of the occidental, Global Western cultures. They can be either effeminate or cruel, luxurious or meagre, rich or poor – as long as the contrast with the Global West attributed in the respective context works. These ascriptions usually had a negative connotation but sometimes also a positive one. They may differ from each other in detail, but are indistinguishable when viewed from the outside. In any case, these 'Orientals' are depicted in the Global West as the irrational others. Said's publication has not gone unchallenged, with the main criticism being that Said himself was caught up in the dichotomy between Orient and Occident and reinforces this with his work (Schnepel et al. 2011).

'Irrationality' is one of the manifold facets of this concept on which the 'othering' of the 'Orient' is based. And it is the process of othering 'Orientals' that is so consistently implemented in the comic series. This is even marginalised in the end: The 'others' are so different that you don't even need to concern yourself with their

21 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123104 (06.10.2025).

22 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123072 (06.10.2025).

23 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123114 (06.10.2025).

24 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010138755 (06.10.2025).

'otherness' because you won't understand it anyway. Their behaviour could only be described as irrational, it is absurd and will never change. And, therefore, in the Astérix cosmos, these 'Orientals' are portrayed as such. This characterisation is so strong and recognisable that it even manages without the use of term 'Orient'.

Interestingly, other episodes also deal with the 'Orient' or are set in the 'Orient', according to common understanding, such as 'Astérix chez Rahàzade' (*Asterix and the Magic Carpet*). The title is an allusion to the Persian tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the original with Shéhérazade as the main character. The English translation of the title also alludes to these fairy tales with the flying carpet. In contrast, the German title (*Asterix im Morgenland*) refers to the 'Orient' after all. And thus, the fundamental methodological problem in dealing with the term 'Orient' arises: the 'Orient' is an imaginary spatial construction. It never existed as a state, an empire, a homogenous culture. What was understood by it has changed repeatedly over time and even from language to language. While the entire Asian world, i.e. the Arab countries, Iran, India, and China, used to be regarded as 'the Orient', later only the countries of the Near East with Egypt and most Islamic cultures were included. Today's usage tends to refer to the Middle East and the Arab-Islamic world – such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and North Africa, but excluding the Islamic states of South and Southeast Asia. This means that the 'Orient' as the object of investigation cannot be defined here and extend far beyond the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes. Given the diversity and complexity of the Astérix cosmos and its interpretation, and given the irregularity of stereotypic allusions and creations, this even defies a comprehensive interpretation. We will therefore stick to the case studies discussed here because they show us how deeply rooted the stereotype of the male, ambiguous Phoenician seafarer with his affiliation to the Mediterranean is, who has nothing to do with the constantly warring irrational 'Orientals'. It is surprising how simply this can be casually integrated into the narrative and understood by readers. It is certainly a good thing to pay attention to the language and avoid problematic terms such as 'Orient', but it is not enough if the concepts behind it continue to exist.

Entertainment Without Stereotypes?

The stories and the figures in the Astérix comics do not illustrate the ancient Gallic and Roman world but what was known and thought of during their creation in the second half of the 20th century, due to the state of research and inextricably linked to the Zeitgeist. Astérix and his creators are not to blame for these stereotypes, they merely reflect existing ones for the scope of entertaining a specific readership. Yet, the extent to which these stereotypes appeal to the French-educated bourgeoisie of the Global West and its self-affirmation is alarming. And it is an excellent example of the self-fulfilling prophecy that society creates through its history. As far as I can see, the volumes with Épidemaïs, the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes appear not to have been translated into Arabic. How would it have turned out, this gang of highwaymen in colourful costumes at constant war with each other in only one short episode, one may ask?

I firmly believe that entertainment is possible without stereotypes. But they are the very foundation of the Asterix comics and their absence would fundamentally distort the stories. Therefore, opinions were already expressed to put an end to the Astérix cosmos and its stereotypes, for example by the publicist Richard Herzinger in the newspaper *Welt* in 2009 on the occasion of the 50th birthday of the comic heroes,[25] saying that their message would playfully evoke old longings that seemed to be buried in the deepest layers of the European collective consciousness. The author Florian Werner even describes it in a podcast from 2021 within the frame of colonialism as fossilised in a world long gone.[26] And, of course, there is immediate opposition and resistance with a strong desire to hold on to[27] – to hold on to what, one should ask. To tradition and status? Couldn't we simply understand the Astérix cosmos for what it is: a historical document based on recent history, not on antiquity. In this way, it could even provide next-level entertainment to include in our simulation of education. At least that's how it was for the author of this paper. And certainly, many allusions were even overlooked by her.

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25 https://www.welt.de/kultur/article5037128/Schluss-mit-dem-Kult-um-die-Asterix-Comics.html (16.11.2019).

26 https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/asterix-neu-gelesen-zwanghafte-pruegeleien-und-ein-bisschen-100.html (08.08.2024).

27 https://exxpress.at/ueberkorrekte-moralisten-wollen-uns-jetzt-asterix-und-obelix-verbieten/ (08.08.2024).

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