

In 215 BCE, the old and famous Greek city of Croton, now fallen on hard times, was besieged by the Bruttians. The Carthaginian general Hanno then asked the citizens of Croton to surrender on the condition that they share their citizenship with the Bruttians. The Crotoniates refused, and their reasons for doing so are intriguing and understudied. They declared that “they would rather die than be mixed with the Bruttians and converted to alien rites, customs, laws, and ultimately even language” (Liv. 24.3). The situation was resolved by the evacuation of the population to Locri.

This incident has generally been interpreted in terms of domestic political unrest or as a Carthaginian attempt to gain political capital by mediating between the Greeks and Bruttians – more generally, in political terms (Salmon 1982; Lomas 1993). But a comparison with a famous expression of Greek identity provides another angle. Herodotus has the Athenians explain why they will not abandon the Greeks for Xerxes: “Then there is Greekness – having the same blood and language, common temples of the gods and rituals, and similar customs” (8.144). The elements of Greek identity are almost identical in Athens in 480 and in Croton more than two and a half centuries later.

Identity is a constantly shifting phenomenon, and these particular elements were not always central to the various Greek identities (J. Hall, 2002), but patterns remained that could be re-activated when desired. The once-flourishing Greek cities of southern Italy had long since fallen under what seemed to them to be the shadow of barbarian domination. Two Greek cities in Campania had been “barbarized” two centuries earlier (Cumae in 421 and Poseidonia in 410), and the rise of the large and powerful non-Greek cultures, the Bruttians and the Lucanians, threatened to do the same to the cities on the Ionian coast. This threat led to a sense of collective identity among some Italiote Greeks in the fourth and third centuries that was predicated on a Greek vs. barbarian dichotomy much like that created in the Persian Wars and familiar from fifth-century Athens (E. Hall 1989). In 215, Croton still strongly felt herself to be Greek and, whether consciously or otherwise, drew on the same view of Greek identity that was common in the fifth century. Neither Rome nor Carthage were important factors.

For Tarentum, however, the situation was rather different. She had long been a leader of Magna Graecia, and her pride in this position did not die easily. For the Tarentines, the Romans were just another barbarian tribe to be defeated. In 280, she summoned Pyrrhus to fight Rome, and in 212, when an opportunity presented itself to revolt from Rome, she did so, even though this meant allying with Carthage, which had been a perennial enemy of the western Greeks for centuries. Hannibal offered the Tarentines autonomy and freedom from garrisons and tribute (Liv. 25.8, Plb. 8.25), an offer worthy of Tarentum’s perceived leadership role and ancestral status as a free Greek city. For Tarentum, her Greek identity depended more strongly on opposition to Rome than to the nearby Lucanians, and she was even willing to ally with Carthage to act on this identity. This paper will examine the multiple conceptions of Greek identity that existed in southern Italy in the late third century BCE, during the Hannibalic War.