Xenia is a concept that is often referred to as “guest-friendship” or Mediterranean hospitality, and it refers to a broad assortment of rituals, morals, values, and general social behavior in ancient Greece. From texts originating in that time period, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* it becomes clear that one’s approach to Xenia indicated much about their status and what kind of person they were; the discussion of Xenia and its surrounding practices in ancient texts solidifies its importance as a principle in ancient Greek culture. Xenia is a custom that was vital in ancient cultures but is lost to the vast majority of modern society; however, it absolutely should not be forgotten or dismissed simply because it is archaic, and no matter how many years have passed, maintaining our humanity will always be important. We citizens of the world would do well to try and bring this custom back to some degree, particularly as it pertains to refugees.

The word Xenia is often translated to mean “hospitality,” but it means so much more than current society’s definition of hospitality. It was considered in ancient Greece to be an essential and vital part of their culture, and studying it has been integral in revealing the core of their morals, values, and beliefs. Ancient Greeks are widely known to have been deeply religious, and they saw hospitality as a way of honoring the gods; they never knew whether a stranger at their door was hostile, dangerous, hospitable, perhaps a god in disguise, or if the gods were observing to see and judge how they approached this situation where a stranger needed their help- but this was irrelevant, and wasn’t up to them to judge. As Dr. Kevin O’Gorman puts it in his article on hospitality:

“In true hospitality, it doesn’t matter who the guest is, nor their apparent status in life. Generous hospitality freely given to a stranger was the same as that given to a god. […] As the traveler would not usually be wandering without cause from their home into the dangers of the world, it was assumed that they were on some mission, and the host was expected to be able to provide assistance.” (O’Gorman, pp. 141-142)

Xenia was not just having someone over for dinner or letting a friend stay in your guest room for a few nights. It was not a courtesy, it was an imperative necessity, and a thorough ritual, seen as part of the natural order. Some of the main elements of Xenia in relation to the treatment of guests are (Johnston, p. 104):

1. Arrival of the stranger at the door

2. The stranger is welcomed, disarmed, and invited in

3. The stranger is bathed or given a chance to wash up (this sometimes occurs later in the sequence)

4. The stranger is invited to sit (and usually given the best seat at the table)

5. Entertainment, food, drink is given

6. After this, and only after all needs are taken care of, is the stranger

questioned; “Who are you, whence have you come, and what is the purpose of your journey?”

7. The guest is given a place to sleep

“The relationship is sealed with gifts, either given or promised, and the offer of reciprocity when the host may visit the guest’s locale.”

Such treatment of guests was said to have been enforced by Zeus himself; he was known also as Zeus Xenios, or he who ensures that the duty of hospitality is honored, and was said to personally take on the responsibility of making sure hosts offered proper hospitality to anyone who came to their door. To quote Homer, “All strangers and beggars are from Zeus.” Those who did not offer Xenia to strangers or guests were seen as barbaric and savage; in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus says before approaching an island that he must first find out whether they are people who welcome strangers or “wild, lawless aggressors.” (Homer) Observance of Xenia was arguably a large factor in judging a person or family to be civilized and honorable.

“Xenia” is derived from the Greek word *xenos*, which has many meanings including guest, wanderer, stranger, friend, refugee, and guest-friend, but essentially indicates the relationship between guest and host. If it sounds familiar, it might be because nowadays it is most often used as the root of the word “xenophobia,” or fear of outsiders (indicating that we have developed a very different approach to strangers in modern societies.) Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the world has changed, for the better in some ways and for the worse in others. Strangers and refugees are most often met with suspicion or hostility, and certainly not welcomed into people’s homes.

Greece is no longer even considered a safe host country for refugees, and has incredibly poor laws and procedures in regard to refugees and offering asylum; for example, Law 1975/1991 sought to restrict admission of refugees by deeming an applicant’s recognition as a refugee inadmissible if they did not submit an application to authorities immediately after arrival, and if they had not come directly from the country where their life or freedom was being threatened. (Skordas and Sitaropoulos, p. 29) Although these provisions were highly criticized on a global scale and were abolished in 1999, this displays how far the public opinion and customs have strayed from the original spirit of Xenia. Due to its geographical location, Greece is one of the main thresholds to Europe for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and thus receives a disproportionately high number of asylum applications; despite this, it somehow has the lowest asylum recognition rates in the EU, and is often caught committing many violations and causing delays during the asylum process. Greece is frequently criticized for poor asylum practices, whether as an unacceptable guardian of European Union borders or a deficient host for newcomers. (Rozakou, p. 563) Clearly, a far cry from the place where true hospitality and respecting strangers as honored guests was once all but law.

It's not as though the principal has been entirely forgotten in Greece, but the meaning behind it is either gone or unrecognizably changed. In 2007 the Greek minister of the interior and public order of the right wing government of Greece made a speech on the inauguration of the new “model reception and hospitality center for illegal immigrants” with reference to Xenia:

“[This is] a project that makes us proud of the level of *filoksenia* (hospitality)

that our country offers to illegal immigrants who stay here until their

return to their country of origin. This high level of hospitality is indicative

of the equivalent level of guarantees we ensure for the protection of

Human Rights as well as for the total respect for the value and dignity of

*Anthropos* (the human being). After all, *our tradition and culture command*

*us to do so.* [emphasis added]” (Rozakou, p. 562)

This facility was in fact a detention center for undocumented immigrants, presented under the guise of hospitality as a national virtue, self-congratulating the magnanimous honoring of their tradition and culture; a generous offer and act of concern for “illegal immigrants” while making sure to clarify that they are still unwanted guests. In Greece, 65 percent of people surveyed in 2019 said that they think the presence of immigrants increases the risk of terrorism, 59 percent say they think immigrants are more to blame for crime, and an astounding 86 percent support deporting undocumented immigrants. (Gonzalez-Barrera)

Some of the principle is still taught here and there; Christian sermons and parables preach about the Good Samaritan and loving thy neighbor, but these same Christians consistently vote against policy that would assist refugees and immigrants. The Hindu *Vishnu Purana* describes a ritual of awaiting the arrival of an unknown guest every day at sunset and states, “Even an enemy must be offered appropriate hospitality if he comes to your home. A tree does not deny its shade even to the one who comes to cut it down.” (Mahabharata 12.374) Nowadays, people generally justify their refusal to help strangers or welcome refugees by citing concerns for their safety. This justification, while somewhat understandable, is a problem in itself. Ancient Greeks knew that bringing a stranger into their home was a risk- in fact, probably even more dangerous than it is today- but offering kindness and helping one’s fellow man was more important than that risk. This principle, it seems, is one of the things that civilization has lost through the years. Personal safety and protecting one’s family take precedent now. Ironic, perhaps, that a civilization that is seen as primitive and archaic may have been more “civilized” than today’s humans, in this way.

There are seemingly some scattered fragments of Xenia left, in the form of what is sometimes called “the rule of rescue,” the reason that resources like firehouses, ambulances, social services, and countless other organizations exist to aid people in need or in emergencies. And these services make us as a society feel safer, don’t they? It is incredibly reassuring to know that if one’s house is on fire and they are in danger, firemen will rush to their rescue; if one is injured in an accident, an ambulance will hurry to transport them to the nearest hospital. How much safer would we feel knowing that most people, even strangers, would most likely offer kindness and help us if we were in need, and how much better would we feel about ourselves if we did more good deeds to help others when they are in need, perhaps making lifelong friends and connections to help us in turn? How much would Xenia improve our modern world, improve our faith in humanity?

Clearly, Xenia was hugely important in ancient Greek culture, and it was obviously for good reasons that improved their civilization. While modern cultures seem to have lost sight of this critical value, it would benefit everyone to work towards bringing some semblance of it back into practice. The world is a dangerous place, but it has always been dangerous, and this frightening idea would be much improved if we knew that most of the strangers out there would be more likely to be obliged to help us than to hurt us or turn us away. The ancient Greeks had the right idea.

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