

excerpted from:

Greeks and Barbarians
ed. by J. E. Coleman and C. A. Walz
Bethesda, 1997
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Greeks and Ethiopians

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WHO WERE the African Ethiopians—the subject of this paper? We are most fully informed about Ethiopians who lived in the Nile Valley south of Egypt, and to a lesser extent about those who inhabited the southern fringes of northwest Africa. What did these Ethiopians look like? Why were individuals with physical features similar to those of the Ethiopians of Greek texts often selected as models for artists in various media? When and under what circumstances did Greeks become acquainted with Ethiopians inside and outside Africa? What was the Greek image of and attitude towards Ethiopians? The ancient written and iconographical evidence, misread by some modern scholars, provides important information relating to these and similar questions.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHIOPIANS

The color of Ethiopians was regarded as their most characteristic and identifiable feature, a trait highlighted in the word *Aithiops*, literally a burnt-faced person, which was applied to certain dark- and black-skinned Africans. Greeks, the first Europeans to leave their impressions of blacks, were also the first to describe several African people and their country by a color word which, however, lacked the pejorative meanings of post-classical societies. Some Ethiopians were described as the blackest people on earth ([Aristotle] *Problemata* 10.66.898b; Arrian *Anabasis* 5.4.4; cf. Manilius *Astronomica* 4.722-30); others, as exceedingly dark (Diodorus 3.29.1) and pure Ethiopians (Ptolemy *Geographia* 1.9.7); and those near

the Egyptian-Ethiopian boundary, as not so black as Ethiopians, but darker than Egyptians (Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* 6.2). "Ethiopian," the most generic word used to describe certain Nilotic and northwest Africans, however, was not applied to other peoples such as Indians and Egyptians, whose color and hair texture, it was emphasized, differed from those of Ethiopians (Strabo 15.1.13; Arrian *Indica* 6.9).

In addition to their observations on color, Greek writers commented especially on the woolly hair and flat noses of Ethiopians. Xenophanes (Fragment 16, Diels and Kranz, 1961) described Ethiopians as black and flat-nosed. The hair of African Ethiopians, according to Herodotus (7.70), was the woolliest of all mankind; and those Ethiopians who lived near the Nile, according to Diodorus (3.8.2) were black, flat-nosed, and woolly-haired. In short, many African Ethiopians were perceived as the blackest and most woolly-haired people on earth and were used as a yardstick to measure the color and hair-texture of other dark-skinned peoples (Arrian *Anabasis* 5.4.4, Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* 6.2.).

The physical characteristics of Ethiopians of classical texts as well as those of realistic depictions of many black- or dark-skinned Africans from the workshops of Greek and Roman artists have often been designated by anthropologists and other specialists as "black" or "Negro." Some scholars, however, have avoided applying the terms "blacks" and "Negroes" to Ethiopians. I agree, however, with those who point out that the combined written and iconographical evidence from peoples who were contemporaries of Ethiopians warrants such a usage. Hence, following Greek and Roman practice, I use a color word "black" and sometimes "Negro" in referring to artistic depictions of persons having various combinations of the physical characteristics included in textual descriptions of Ethiopians.

The earliest iconographical evidence outside Africa relating to blacks comes from islands of the Aegean—Cyprus (Karageorghis, 1988, 8); Crete (Snowden, 1976, 136 and ill. 134; Evans, 1928, 755-757 and pl. XIII); Thera (Marinatos, 1969, 374-375 and color pl. 1). These depictions of Negroid types point to an awareness of blacks outside Africa in the second millennium B.C., although we cannot always be certain as to the reasons for their appearance. However, a procession of coal-black warriors led by a Minoan commander depicted on a fresco from Crete, dated toward the middle of the second millennium B.C. (Evans, 1928, 755-757 and pl. XIII), suggests the Minoan use of African auxiliaries, perhaps Nubian soldiers whom a pharaoh could no longer trust (Burn, 1966, 44). Ethiopians entered the artistic picture of mainland Greece in a fresco

from the palace of Nestor at Pylos, dated to the second half of the thirteenth century B.C., depicting a procession of white and black men, representing perhaps conquered peoples bearing tribute or foreigners and natives in an offertory rite (Lang, 1969, 61-62, 94 and pls. 44, 129, 129D). This iconographic evidence and the inclusion of an *ai-ti-jo-qa* (Aithiops) among landowners in the Pylos tablets (Ventris and Chadwick, 1956, 243-244, 248, 250-252) suggest that the blameless Ethiopians of Homer, favorites of the gods (*Iliad* 1.423-424, 23.205-207; *Odyssey* 1.22-25), and the poet's black, woolly-haired Eurybates, a respected herald of Odysseus (*Iliad* 2.184, 9.170; *Odyssey* 19.246-247), were not mere figments of Homer's imagination, as some have argued, but perhaps echoes of an awareness of an Ethiopian power on the edge of the Greek world.

It was not until the sixth century B.C. and later that representations of blacks from the workshops of Greek artists became well-known ethnic types in various parts of the Greek world. Portrayals of blacks, even those in mythological scenes, were scrupulously attentive to details, anthropologically accurate, and obviously the work of craftsmen who were well acquainted with blacks. The first artistic portraits of blacks, reflecting Greek experience in Africa, were of the pronounced Negroid type (Snowden, 1976, 139-148 and ills. 151-165). Mixed black-white types did not appear until the middle of the fifth century B.C. (Snowden, 1976, ills. 169, 176; 1983, fig. 20). These were apparently children of Greek women by Ethiopian soldiers in Xerxes' army, whose novel features caught the eyes of artists before Aristotle, in the next century, referred to the physical characteristics of the descendants of black-white racial mixture in the families of a Greek woman from Elis and another from Sicily (Aristotle *De generatione animalium* 1.18.722a; *Historia animalium* 7.6.586a).

From the third century B.C. onward, Negroid types were realistically depicted, with features varying from those of a terra-cotta head—strongly everted lips, frontal cicatrices, tightly coiled hair represented by tiny circular dots incised in clay (Snowden, 1983, figs. 22a-b)—to those of a delicately molded bronze head (third or second century B.C.) with thinner lips, narrower nose, and hair arranged in corkscrew curls (Snowden, 1976, ill. 242). The remarkable range of variant black types in the Hellenistic period (Snowden, 1976, ills. 236-270) attests an accurate knowledge of African reality—a point noted by Africanists who have commented on the similarities between the physical characteristics of blacks from workshops of Greek artists and those of later inhabitants of the Nile Valley and the fringes of northwest Africa (Mveng, 1972, 66-70). In short, all African blacks were not perceived by Greek artists and writers as if

they were cast from a single mold, *i.e.*, not “monolithic,” as some have argued. Portrayals of Negroes by artists found in various parts of the Greek world brought Ethiopians to the attention of Greeks who had not actually seen them in the flesh.

GREEK ACQUAINTANCE WITH ETHIOPIANS

Under what circumstances did Greeks become acquainted with Ethiopia and Ethiopians? Although blacks are known from iconographical evidence as early as the second millennium B.C. and Ethiopians are mentioned in Homer, it was not until the seventh century B.C. and later that most Greeks had occasion to encounter Ethiopians face-to-face. It is not unlikely that Ethiopians were encountered in Egypt by Greek mercenaries who had received settlements there from Psammetichus I (663–609 B.C.) in return for the assistance they had given the pharaoh (Herodotus 2.154). Further opportunity for acquaintance with Ethiopians in Egypt was provided by the privileges which Greeks received from Amasis (570–526 B.C.) at Naucratis (Herodotus 2.178).

Greek mercenaries in the army of Psammetichus II (594–588 B.C.) were perhaps the first Europeans to enter Nubia and to confront Ethiopian warriors in sizeable numbers on African soil. They had been recruited by the pharaoh for his expedition into Nubia (Herodotus 2.161; Kitchen, 1973, 406), undertaken to eliminate a threat to his kingdom from the Ethiopians who had conquered and ruled Egypt during the XXV Dynasty (ca. 751–663 B.C.). A certain Pabis from Colophon in Asia Minor was one of the Greek mercenaries whose names are known from graffiti scratched on a colossal statue at Abu Simbel, 700 miles up the Nile (Tod, 1946, no. 4, 6-7). Worthy of note is the fact that another Colophonian, the philosopher Xenophanes, was the first European to identify Ethiopians by a feature other than color, their flat noses (Fragment 16, Diels and Kranz, 1961). Pabis and his fellow Greeks, upon their return to Asia Minor, had apparently passed on to their countrymen accounts of what they had learned about the flat-nosed Ethiopians, once rulers of Egypt and of an empire that extended from deep in the interior of Africa to the Mediterranean. Further, Greek military experience in Egypt is strikingly reflected in the prominence given to Negro warriors in Greek art of the sixth century B.C. and in continuing Greek interest in the XXV Ethiopian Dynasty.

The popularity of Negroes as subjects in Greek art of the fifth century B.C. and of Ethiopian themes in the theater was stimulated no doubt by

the presence of Ethiopian soldiers among the troops of Xerxes (480–479 B.C.) during his invasion of Greece (Herodotus 7.69-70, 9.32). For the majority of mainland Greeks, these Ethiopians were the first blacks whom they had actually seen in the flesh.

The presence of Ethiopian soldiers on Greek soil in the army of Xerxes provided an opportunity for the tragic poets of the fifth century B.C. to play a curiosity about a “far away country of a black race that lived by the fountains of the sun” (Aeschylus *Prometheus Victus* 807-812). Plays by the tragic poets entitled *Memnon*, *Aethiopes*, *Andromeda*, and *Busiris* familiarized spectators with Ethiopian types and legends, the popularity of which is attested by scenes depicted on vases, some probably from the workshops of vase-painters who had actually witnessed performances (Snowden, 1976, ills. 167-177; 1983, figs. 17, 19, 20-21). *Andromeda*, a play of both Sophocles and Euripides, dealt with a legend in which Perseus, a son of Zeus, rescued and married a daughter of a king of the Ethiopians. Although the Danaids in the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus are described as differing from the Greeks as to color and form, and as “black and smitten by the sun” (Aeschylus *Supplikes* 154-155, 496), they experience no antipathy because of their color. In fact, they receive a sympathetic hearing of their request for asylum, although the Greek king realizes that by his decision he and his countrymen run the risk of war.

Following performances of plays on Ethiopian themes, theatergoers may well have concerned themselves with related questions such as the identity of the Negro on coins of Athens and Delphi. Was he Delphos, the son of the Black Woman, and did his features resemble those of the Ethiopians in Xerxes’ army? Some Greeks may have recalled the ancestry of Delphos, the eponymous founder of Delphi, whose father was Poseidon or Apollo and whose mother’s name in all instances, except one, meant the Black Woman—Celaeno, Melantho, Melaena, and Melanis (Snowden 1976, 161, 164, and ills. 187-192). According to a tradition ascribed to Musaeus, recorded by Philodemus, Argos begot four Ethiopians by Celaeno, the daughter of Atlas (Diels and Kranz, 1961, 25). If Celaeno, daughter of Atlas, was known as the mother of Ethiopians, it would have been reasonable to conclude that a woman bearing the name of Celaeno, or its equivalent, had given birth to an Ethiopian named Delphos, and to have identified him with the Negroid type stamped on the Delphic and Athenian coinage.

Ethiopians created substantial obstacles to implementation of plans which the Ptolemies had for the military occupation of Nubia and/or their commercial activity there. At times Ethiopians besieged Ptolemaic

positions (Preisigke, 1915, no. 5711). In some of the Egyptian rebellions that plagued the later Ptolemies, Ethiopians played a role (Préaux, 1936, 535-536; Pestman, 1965, 168-169). Although Ptolemy Philadelphus, according to Theocritus (*Idyll* 17.87), had conquered a part of the country of black Ethiopians, Ethiopia was nevertheless a threat to Egyptian autonomy. An unnamed Ptolemy, perhaps Epiphanes, according to the geographer Agatharchides, recruited a corps of 500 horsemen from Greece for his war against the Ethiopians. It was also perhaps a threat of the Ethiopian military that Agatharchides was referring to in his account of the advice of an experienced regent to a young Ptolemy recommending caution against undertaking an expedition into Nubia: "Why futilely announce an impossible task and pay attention to invisible hopes rather than to manifest dangers?" (Agatharchides *De Mari Erythraeo* 11-20 = *GGM*, 117-119; cf. Fraser, 1972, I 541-542, II no. 342, 297-298 and no. 179, 778.)

In his account of Roman encounters with Ethiopians in the last quarter of the first century B.C., the historian Strabo reinforced the image of Ethiopians as a substantial black military force. Ethiopians, according to Strabo, crossed the Roman boundary in Egypt, captured several towns, defeated three cohorts, enslaved the inhabitants, and seized statues of Augustus. Although Roman countermeasures reportedly resulted in the capture of Napata and the sale of Ethiopian prisoners, the extremely favorable terms of Augustus' peace settlement suggest that some details of Strabo's account may have been exaggerated because, according to the historian's report, Augustus granted the envoys of the Ethiopian queen everything they requested, including the remission of the tribute he had imposed (Strabo 17.1.53-54).

Whether fighting in the interest of their homeland or as auxiliaries in the armies of others, captured Ethiopians, like other prisoners of war, were often enslaved and were an important source of slaves. It is difficult to determine whether Ethiopians mentioned in classical texts were prisoners of war or acquired through other means, because the few references to Ethiopians specifically designated as slaves seldom reveal their origin or method of acquisition. On the assumption that all Ethiopians were slaves, too little attention has been given to the mobility and dispersal of Ethiopians who voluntarily migrated in search of a better life. The advantages of cosmopolitan centers in the ancient Mediterranean world were as attractive to enterprising Ethiopians as to others—Greek, Syrian, or Jew—who migrated for many reasons, educational, occupational, or personal (Snowden, 1983, 33-34, 123, and notes 71-72).

The circumstances under which Greeks became acquainted with Ethiopians throw some light on the initial and continuing interest in these dark- and black-skinned Africans. When first encountered by Greeks in sizeable numbers, Ethiopians had not been a part of the daily scene as they had been in the life of Egyptians throughout their history. In fact, as a result of long-standing familiarity Egyptians saw nothing unusual about the Kushites' physical characteristics and rarely mentioned them in their literature and inscriptions. The novelty of a newly discovered people also created a desire to become better acquainted with various aspects of Ethiopian life and history.

THE GREEK IMAGE OF AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ETHIOPIANS

In Greek literary sources what was the image of, and attitude towards, those Africans whom Greeks called Ethiopians? Ethiopians appear for the first time in the Homeric poems, where they are the most distant of peoples, dwelling by the streams of Ocean, some where the sun rises and some where it sets. Whatever the origin and significance of Homer's "blameless" Ethiopians, favorites of the gods, echoes of Ethiopian-Olympian consortia and of pious, just Ethiopians are heard throughout classical literature long after Ethiopians had become an African reality. Though shadowy figures in Homer, Ethiopians were known to be black and flat-nosed by the time of Xenophanes and the most woolly-haired of all men, according to Herodotus, who located them in Africa, south of Egypt. And from the sixth century onward, the many representations of Negroes in Greek art point to a general awareness of the Ethiopian ethnic type among those who had not actually encountered Ethiopians.

Ethiopians were fleshed out for the first time in Herodotus, according to whom Greeks had accurate knowledge of Egyptian history from the time of Psammetichus I onward (Herodotus 2.154). And this knowledge included what the historian had learned about Ethiopians during his visit to Egypt, which took him as far south as the First Cataract (Herodotus 2.29). Meroe, the capital of Ethiopia, was a great city whose inhabitants paid high honor to Zeus (Amun) and Dionysus (Osiris) (Herodotus 2.29). Ethiopia was an independent country which had been ruled by only one Egyptian king, while 18 Ethiopian kings had ruled in Egypt (Herodotus 2.100-110). One of these, Sabacos, after invading Egypt with a great army, ruled for 50 years in a humane manner, never putting evildoers to death, but instead requiring them to perform worthwhile civic undertakings

(Herodotus 2.137, 139). And the perspicacious king of the Macrobian Ethiopians, the tallest and most handsome men on earth, rebuked the Persian king Cambyses for coveting territory that did not belong to him and for attempting to enslave a people who had not wronged him (Herodotus 3.17-26).

Although the figures of Herodotus are obviously incorrect as to the number of Ethiopian kings in Egypt and Egyptian kings in Ethiopia, the historian's account of Sabacos stresses details attested by other documents relative to the pharaohs of the XXV Ethiopian Dynasty. Sabacos' piety and respect for human life, as reported by Herodotus, are reminiscent of the temperament and generosity of the second pharaoh of the Ethiopian Dynasty, Piye (ca. 751-716 B.C.), as recorded on a stele which describes him as attentive to religious ritual, respectful of the temples and gods of Egypt, and moderate in his relations with the vanquished (Breasted, 1906, 419-444). The religious interest of the XXV Dynasty is also corroborated by inscriptional evidence (Lichtheim, 1973, 51-17).

Herodotus was apparently reporting on African reality more often than has been realized. In his account of Cambyses' plans for an Ethiopian campaign, Herodotus describes a "table of the sun," said to have been a meadow outside the city of Meroe (Herodotus 3.17-18). Herodotus in this passage, according to Meroitic specialists, has provided an apt description of the site of the Sun Temple, located outside the city of Meroe in an area that can be appropriately described as a meadow because vegetation still grows there more readily than in the surrounding plain (Arkell, 1961, 150). Herodotus' account of Macrobian expertise in archery and his description of the bows of Xerxes' Ethiopian auxiliaries (Herodotus 3.21, 7.69)—like Heliodorus' later description of the Ethiopians' unerring skill in hitting their adversaries' eyes (Heliodorus *Aethiopia* 9.18)—point to a fifth-century B.C. knowledge of an ancient Ethiopian military tradition: the bow had been the traditional weapon of southerners, and blacks, renowned as formidable archers, had been recruited by Egyptians as early as 2000 B.C. (Vercoutter, 1976, 43 and ill. 10-12).

Even after Ethiopians had been encountered as enemies, Greek authors continued to record, without rancor, familiar "Ethiopian themes"—military power, love of freedom and justice, piety, and wisdom. Ethiopians, according to Diodorus, were not only the first of all men but also the first to worship the gods who looked upon them with such favor that they doomed to failure attempts of foreign rulers like Cambyses to invade and rule their country (3.2.2-3.3.1). As late as the fourth century A.D., Heliodorus painted a full vignette of a just Ethiopian king, reminiscent of

Herodotus' Sabacos. Heliodorus' Ethiopian ruler Hydaspes was a model of wisdom and righteousness, shunned putting men to death, and instructed his warriors to refrain from slaughter and to take the enemy alive. In a charitable spirit he heeded the plea of his bleeding Persian foe to spare his life and, having no desire to expand his kingdom, was content because of his reverence for justice to withdraw within the natural boundaries of the Cataracts (Heliodorus *Aethiopia* 9.20-21). As late as the fifth century A.D., the anthology of Stobaeus preserved the tradition of Ethiopian piety and justice: Ethiopian houses were without doors and no one stole things left in the streets (Stobaeus 4.2.25).

Ethiopians were not only pioneers in religion but also originators of many Egyptian beliefs and customs, according to Diodorus (3.2-37). Lucian's statement that Ethiopians invented astrology (*De Astrologia* 3) may have stemmed in part from reports of travelers who had visited Meroe, where astronomical calculations have been found (Garstang, 1944, 4-6). It is tempting to suggest that visitors to Meroe, impressed by "discoveries" of this kind at the southern periphery of Egypt, circulated a report that astrology was an Ethiopian invention and gave rise to further speculation that a number of Egyptian institutions such as Diodorus mentioned had an Ethiopian origin. References to Ethiopian justice and the Ethiopian origin of Egyptian customs should perhaps be interpreted as evidence of the writers' objectivity in reporting what they had learned from their sources rather than as an idealization of an unknown, distant people, as some have argued. The Greek image of Ethiopians, even when not always based on historical fact, must have had an enormous impact on the day-to-day attitudes toward Ethiopians: perceptions are often influential in shaping social attitudes.

THE ENVIRONMENT THEORY AND GREEK BARBARIAN ANTITHESIS

On Airs, Waters, and Places attributed differences in the physical traits and character of men to environment—soil, water, climate, and exposure; and illustrated this theory by describing the effect of these factors on the physique, character, and institutions of the Egyptians and Scythians (Hippocrates *Aer* chapters xii, xvii-xxiv, and/or a comparison of Libyan and Pontic people and the races nearest each, *Vict.* 2.37). In the same tradition, after describing the effect of the extreme cold of the north on Scythia and its inhabitants and of the torrid southern heat on Ethiopia and Ethiopians, Diodorus stated, "it is not at all surprising that both the fare

and manner of life as well as the bodies of the inhabitants of both regions should be very different from those that prevail among us" (Diodorus 3.34). Some Ethiopians who lived beyond Napata and Meroe, for example, were reported to be completely or partially nude, others to have wives in common, and some to be without belief in any gods (Diodorus 3.8.5; 3.9.2; 3.15.2). The wild habits of certain Scythians and Ethiopians were attributed by Ptolemy to the excessive cold, in one instance, and the torrid heat in the other (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 2.2.56). In short, according to the environment theory, people, regardless of their color, who lived in the outer regions of the earth, followed customs that differed strikingly from those of populations in temperate climes. Ethiopians, however, were not stereotyped as primitive or cannibalistic. In fact, it was fair northerners, not black southerners who, according to Strabo, were said to be among the most savage people in the world—more savage than the Britons were the inhabitants of ancient Ireland, who considered it honorable to devour their fathers when they died and to have intercourse with their mothers and sisters (Strabo 4.5.4). Likewise, blacks were not stereotyped as possessors of physiognomical flaws. The author of the *Physiognomonica*, for example, wrote that swarthy Egyptians and Ethiopians, as well as the woolly-haired were cowardly, but he also stated that the excessively fair were cowardly (Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*, 6.812a).

The environment theory, cited by Diodorus and others, was one of the reasons that Greeks developed no special theory of the inferiority of blacks *qua* blacks. Setting forth the effects of environment on the physical characteristics of peoples and their mores, this explanation of racial differences was applied in a uniform manner to all peoples. The basic human substance—the same in all—was tempered differently in different climes. The black, woolly-haired Ethiopians of the deep south and the fair, straight-haired Scythians of the north, who were frequently cited as favorite anthropological and geographical illustrations of the environment theory, also figured prominently in contexts emphasizing inclusiveness and equality. It makes no difference whether one is Scythian or Ethiopian, wrote Menander, it is natural bent, not race that determines nobility (Fragment 612 Koerte = *CAF* III 157). And Origen, in his statement that all whom God created He created equal and alike, extended the traditional Scythian-Ethiopian formula by adding Hebrews, Greeks, and Taurians (Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.5-6 = *GCS* 5.169-170). In his Scythian-Ethiopian contrast Menander was attacking the validity of birth as a criterion for judging the worth of an individual, and it was not, as some have

argued, referring to a particular belief concerning the inferiority of blacks *qua* blacks. And Menander, like the early Christians in their pronouncements on the equality of all in God's eyes, employed the familiar Ethiopian-Scythian contrasts of the environment theory because it made unmistakably clear an unprejudiced view of racial differences.

The popularity of the environment theory did not prevent Greeks from classifying foreign peoples and their country as barbarians. The Greek-barbarian antithesis, however, was based on cultural differences, not on color or physical appearances, and was a manifestation of ethnocentrism, a characteristic of many people—the view that one's group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it (Sumner 1960, 27-28).

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE

Several scholars have commented on the unbiased Greek view of Ethiopians. E. Baring has observed that color antipathy, considered by itself, formed no bar to social intercourse in antiquity (Baring, 1910, 139-140); A. E. Zimmern, that Greeks showed no trace of color prejudice (Zimmern, 1931, 323); W. L. Westermann, that Greek society had no color line (Westermann, 1943, 346); and C. Kluckhohn, that Greeks did not fall into the error of biological racism and that color was no stigma (Kluckhohn, 1961, 34, 42); and H. C. Baldry, that Greeks were spared the modern curse of color prejudice (Baldry, 1965, 4).

It has been difficult for some scholars, however, to recognize that in the ancient world blackness did not evoke the hostilities which have developed in more color-conscious societies. An *idée fixe*—black as the immutable equivalent of slave or inferior—has not been without its influence. As H. C. Baldry has pointed out, "In treating a subject which is so alive today, nothing is easier than to read back twentieth-century ideas into documents which in reality have quite another meaning" (Baldry, 1965, 6). And this is exactly what some scholars have done in their interpretations of blacks in the ancient world—consciously or unconsciously they have seen color prejudice were none existed. P. R. Helm, for example, concludes his study of "Races and Physical Types in the Classical World" with the statement, admittedly not supported by literary evidence, "it is not unlikely that an informal color bar existed even if it is unarticulated in the literary sources" (Helm, 1988, 153). In the entire corpus of classical literature, with its many references to Ethiopians, often confirmed by repeated events of history, there are only a few

concepts or notions which even a few scholars have claimed as anti-black in sentiment—primarily these: the so-called ugliness of the Negroes of classical artists, the Mediterranean somatic norm image, black-white symbolism, and physiognomical observations.

In spite of Herodotus' description of some Ethiopians as the most handsome men on earth and of tributes to dark and black beauties in Greek poetry, some critics have attributed to Greek artists an unproved aesthetic antipathy to the physiognomy of blacks in comments such as these: as a rule the Negro is most absurdly drawn in Greek vases (Bates, 1904, 50); the ugliness of the Negro seems to have appealed alike to sculptor, engraver, and painter (Seltman, 1920, 14); Memnon was represented as white because of a Greek aversion to Negroid features (Robertson, 1959, 67); and most of the Negroes depicted by Greek and Roman artists are "hideous and implicitly racist" (Patterson, 1982, 421 no.16). Some scholars have curiously regarded simply realistic portrayals of blacks as revealing a "degree of antipathy...[and] a sensory aversion to the physiognomy of blacks" (Thompson, 1989, 160).

Interpretations such as those just cited misrepresent the interest of classical artists in Negroid types. Against such views, however, one can point to the varied and often sympathetic treatment which blacks received over many centuries in several media and art-forms. By far a majority of scholars have seen in classical art an astonishing variety and vitality, and penetrating depictions of a racial type which artists perceived as a challenge to their skill to represent by texture and paint the distinctive features of Negroes, and often as an opportunity, by contrasting blacks with other Mediterranean types, to express the infinite variety of a common human nature. The popularity of blacks as subjects and the high quality of many pieces—some of the finest from ancient workshops—have given rise to a common view that ancient artists were as free from color prejudice as their literary counterparts (Snowden, 1983, 79-82).

Some scholars have mistakenly seen color prejudice in certain references to the Ethiopian's color as evidence of a "child-psychological" theory which regarded black skin as unpleasant. Though obviously aware of the Ethiopian's color, Greek authors attached no significance to the color of the skin. Ethiopians do not astonish Greeks because of their color and different physical appearance: such an astonishment, Agatharchides wrote, ceases at childhood (Agatharchides *De Mari Erythraeo* 16 = *GCM I* 118). This statement was not only an accurate assessment of Greek reaction to the Ethiopian's color, but is also a sound observation

on an aspect of child behavior noted by modern psychologists, according to whom "four-year-olds are normally interested, curious, and appreciative of differences in racial groups" (Allport, 1964, 304). In other words, Agatharchides was merely recording the normal reaction of young Greek children to observed differences in skin color, and he was not setting forth, as A. Dihle has suggested (Dihle, 1962, 214-215), a theory of aversion to the black man's color rooted in childhood.

In light of the fact that both Greeks and Romans regarded black and white skin as mere geographic accidents, with no stigma attached to the color of the skin, it is strange that some references to ethnocentric aesthetic preferences have been interpreted as evidence of color prejudice. Like many people, Greeks and Romans had narcissistic canons of physical beauty—what H. Hoetink has called a "somatic norm image" (Hoetink, 1967, 120). Classical authors frequently stated a preference for "Mediterranean" complexion and features—a middle point between the extremes of fair, blue-eyed northerners, and black woolly-haired southerners. There is nothing odd or pejorative about preferences for a white type in a predominantly white society, or for dark- or black-skinned beauties in a predominantly black society.

What was unusual in the Greco-Roman world was the fact that, long before Hoetink, Greeks and Romans observed that standards of beauty were relative. Dio Chrysostom's discourse on beauty raised the question as to whether there was not a foreign type of beauty, just as there was a Hellenic type (Dio Chrysostom *Orationes* 21.16-17). Sextus Empiricus noted that men differ in definitions of beauty—Ethiopians preferring the blackest and most flat-nosed; Persians, the whitest and most hooked-nosed; and others considering those intermediate in color and features as the most beautiful. And, further, there were also those who openly expressed a preference for dark- or black-skinned women. A poem of Philodemus to a certain Philaenion, short, black, with hair more curled than parsley and skin more tender than down, concludes: "May I love such a Philaenion, golden Cypris, until I find another more perfect" (Asclepiades *Anthologia Palatina* 5.121). Asclepiades praises the beauty of one Didyme: "Gazing at her beauty, I melt like wax before the fire. And if she is black, what difference to me? So are coals, but when we light them, they shine like rose buds" (Asclepiades *Anthologia Palatina* 5.210).

Realistic portrayals of mulattoes and various mixed race, black-white types in Greek and Roman art illustrate various steps in the disappearance of Negroid physical traits, and references to racial mixture in classical texts provide dramatic confirmation that there were those who rejected

the standard norm image. There is little doubt that Ethiopians in many instances were physically assimilated in a society in which there were no institutional barriers or social pressures against black-white racial mixture. Aristotle (*Historia animalium* 7.6.586a; *De generatione animalium* 1.18.722a) and Plutarch (*De sera numinis vindicta* 21.563) in references to the transmission of inherited physical characteristics or to supposed evidence of adultery included no strictures on black-white racial mixture. The interracial amours of gods and heroes with Ethiopians, some of which have been mentioned, presented no embarrassment and evoked no apologies. In the *Aethiopica* of Heliiodorus (4.8), a descendant of Achilles was enamored of a girl whose Ethiopian mother had exposed her at birth to avoid being accused of adultery for having given birth to a white child. The eventual discovery that her parents were the black king and queen of Ethiopia did not matter to her Greek beloved. In short, black-white sexual relations were not the cause of great emotional crises.

The basic elements of the favorable view of Ethiopians among Greeks were assimilated or adapted by Romans and early Christians. J. Bryce, for example, observed that in the Roman Empire we hear little of the repugnance to dark-skinned Africans (Bryce, 1902, 18); and R. S. W. Hawtrey, that there were no traces of color prejudice in antiquity (Hawtrey, 1972, 58). D. L. Noel has stated that the arguments for an overall absence of color prejudice in antiquity are sound and complement Stephen Jay Gould's assessment of "latter-day scientists who perceive and interpret racial differences through lenses severely distorted by prevailing racism" (Noel, 1984, 227). As with some interpretations of the Greek view, however, there have also been a few scholars who have read back into Roman and early Christian literature a non-existent anti-black sentiment.

This is not, however, the place for a detailed treatment of these misinterpretations which I have discussed elsewhere, but I call attention to only one common misreading of documents from the Roman period. Homer's and Vergil's underworlds were dark and gloomy; the god of the Underworld himself was often black (Seneca *Heracles Oetaeus* 1705; Statius *Thebais* 2.49, 4.291; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.438), and the ferryman Charon, son of Erebus and Night, was gloomy, grim, and terrible in his squalor (Vergil *Aeneid* 6.298-299). It was obviously because of this deeply rooted tradition that some writers in the early Roman Empire placed dark-skinned people—Ethiopians, Egyptians, and Garamantians—in ill-omened contexts. An Ethiopian was reported to have met troops of Cassius and Brutus as they were proceeding to battle (Appian *Bella*

civilia 4.17.134; Florus 2.17.7.7-8; Plutarch *Brutus* 48). At the time of Caligula's death, according to Suetonius, a nocturnal performance was in rehearsal in which scenes from the lower world were enacted by Ethiopians and Egyptians (Suetonius *Caligula* 57.4). If the scenes were not actually related to Isiac worship popular among Egyptians and Ethiopians in Italy, there would have been nothing unusual or pejorative about the participation of dark- and black-skinned actors: it would have been simply a matter of imaginative casting, especially since Ethiopians enjoyed popularity as actors. And very important, the classical association of Ethiopians with death and the Underworld seems to have been due, according to social scientists, to a basic tendency of many people, African Negroes included, to equate blackness and evil, especially in the areas of human experience concerned with religion and the supernatural (Gergen, 1968, 112-125). Also, research in the social sciences has raised the question whether individuals who react negatively to the color black develop antipathy to dark-skinned peoples and suggests that though such a reaction is in theory possible, the evidence is far from conclusive (Gergen, 1968, 121).

There is no evidence that the association of dark-skinned peoples with omens of evil had an adverse impact on day-to-day reactions to blacks. The highly positive image of Ethiopians had long been firmly established, and the unbiased environmental explanation of racial differences which harked back to the Hippocratic Corpus was restated in the Roman period by writers like Vitruvius (6.1.3-4), Pliny (*Naturalis historia* 2.80.189) and Ptolemy (*Geographia* 2.2.56). And at the same time that the notion linking dark-skinned people and omens of disaster was being circulated, Christian authors were developing an exegesis and a rich black-white imagery in which Ethiopians were chosen to illustrate the meaning of the Scriptures for all men.

Early Christian writers referred to Ethiopians and blackness in two major contexts, demonological and exegetical. The demonological references were obviously related to the Greco-Roman association of black with evil and the underworld. In apocryphal and patristic literature, for example, black was the color of the devil and of some demons who tempted early Christians or troubled them in visions or dreams. The emphasis in demonological contexts, however, was on skin coloration, *i.e.*, blackness, and no other Ethiopian physical characteristic, and there was no stereotypical image of Ethiopians either as the personification of demons or the devil, or as unworthy of inclusion in the Christian brotherhood. Those who have read an anti-black sentiment in certain demon-

ological references have overlooked the fact that exegetical interpretations of scriptural Ethiopians, much broader in scope than the limited demonological references, are much more significant for the insights they provide as to fundamental Christian beliefs and practice.

By using familiar patterns of classical thought, early Christian writers apparently believed that they could explicate their message more convincingly and could interpret scriptural passages more meaningfully if they adapted certain familiar classical associations of blackness. The pioneer in the adaptation of an Ethiopian symbolism was Origen, who became a model for later patristic treatment of "Ethiopian" themes. In his commentary on the "black and beautiful maiden" of the Song of Songs (*Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum* 1:5-6), Origen was not apologizing in deference to traditional values, as L. A. Thompson has argued (Thompson, 1989, 134), but was rejecting the traditional somatic norm image, and illustrated the applicability of black-white imagery to all peoples in these words: "We ask in what way is she black and in what way fair without whiteness? She has repented of her sins; conversion has bestowed beauty upon her and she is sung as 'beautiful'...If you repent, your soul will be 'black' because of your former sins, but because of your penitence your soul will have something of what I may call an Ethiopian beauty" (Origen, *Homiliae in Canticum Canticorum* 1.6 = *GSC* Origen 8.36). The mystery of the church arising from the Gentiles and calling itself black and beautiful, Origen pointed out, was adumbrated in the marriage of Moses to a black Ethiopian woman which he interpreted as a symbolic union of the spiritual law (Moses) and the church (the Ethiopian woman)—a foreshadowing of the universal church (Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum* 2.362, 366-367 = *GCS*, Origen 8.115, 117-118). By extending the traditional Ethiopian-Scythian formula and by making it more inclusive, Origen expressed a basic Christian tenet. It made no difference, Origen declared, whether one was born among the Hebrews, Greeks, Ethiopians, Scythians, or Taurians, all whom God created He created equal and alike (Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.5-6 = *GCS* Origen 5. 169-170). When in a similar spirit St. Augustine wrote that the universal church was not to be limited to a particular region of the earth, but would reach even the Ethiopians, the remotest of men (Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 71.12 = *CCL* 39.980), he was not only recalling Homer's distant Ethiopians but in all likelihood had in mind those Ethiopians on the southernmost fringes of his own native northwest Africa such as the young Ethiopian slave "not yet whitened by the shining grace of Christ," whose spiritual welfare was a source of concern to Fulgentius,

bishop in the north African district of Byzacena and a deacon (Fulgentius *Epistulae* 11-12 = *PL* 65. 378-392).

The imagery of Ethiopians and their color was a dramatic means of presenting cardinal tenets of Christianity that were translated into practice. The Ethiopian eunuch, a high official of the queen of Ethiopia, was said to have been the first Gentile to receive from Philip the Evangelist the mystery of the Divine Word (Acts of the Apostles 8. 26-40). Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian foreshadowed what was to be the practice of the church in the first centuries after Christ. Ecclesiastical historians of the late fourth and fifth centuries reported that Ethiopians had been seen with monks in the Egyptian desert and that many of them had excelled in virtue, thus fulfilling the words of the Scriptures (Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 52 = *PG* 34. 1145C; Rufinus *Historia monachorum, de Apollonio* 7. 151 = *PL* 21.415). Blacks were not only humble converts but influential figures like St. Menas, sometimes portrayed as a Negro on sacred ampullae (e.g., Oxford, Ashmolean 1933. 717; Paris, Louvre, MNC 140), a national saint of Egypt whose shrine west of Alexandria attracted pilgrims from Europe and Asia as well as from Africa. The black Ethiopian, Abba Moses, was cited as a model of humility and the monastic life, and as an excellent teacher, reported to have left 70 disciples at his death (Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 22 = *PG* 34. 1065-1068; Sozomen *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.29 = *PG* 67.1376-1381; Acta Sanctorum, August VI 199-212; *Apophthegmata Patrum, de Abbate Mose* 2, 4, 6, 8-10 *PG* 281-285). The Ethiopian imagery dramatically emphasized the ecumenical character of Christianity, and adumbrated the symbolism of the black wise man in the Adoration of the Magi.

SUMMATION

In summary, both Greeks and Romans, notwithstanding a few concepts and ideas sometimes misinterpreted as anti-black in sentiment, had the ability to see and to comment on the obviously different physical characteristics of Ethiopians without developing an elaborate and rigid system of discrimination based on the color of the skin. Color did not acquire in the Greco-Roman world the great importance it has assumed in some post-classical societies either in the self-image of many peoples, or in the denial of equality to Ethiopians in theory or practice. In science, historiography, and religion color was not the basis of a theory concerning the inferiority of blacks *qua* blacks. Ethnic differences were explained in the same way for all peoples. Blacks were not stereotyped as savages,

but blacks and whites alike living at the outer extremities of the world were described as following a way of life that differed strikingly from that of peoples living in temperate climes. Many first encounters of Greeks and Romans with Ethiopians frequently involved soldiers or mercenaries, not slaves or so-called savages. Ancient slavery was color-blind, and the majority of slaves was white, not black: the anti-black sentiment that developed after slave and black became synonymous was absent. Nor were there theories that blacks were especially or more suited for slavery than whites. And there were no hierarchical notions in which whites occupied the highest and blacks the lowest positions.

There is no evidence that Ethiopians were excluded because of their color from opportunities—occupational, cultural, social, or religious—available to other newcomers of similar origin. Like many others, slaves or adventurous migrants, Ethiopians engaged in occupations at the lower end of the economic scale, and those with special qualifications found a place for their talent and industry. In the Greco-Roman world a military career, for example, provided a means of attaining positions of security and prestige, as it had been for centuries in Egypt. A large basalt head of a Negro (ca. 80–50 B.C.), found in Egypt, has been interpreted as that of an officer in a Ptolemaic army (Alexandria, Greco-Roman Museum 3204). Cleopatra's boats, according to Sidonius (Sidonius Apoll. *Carmina* 5.460), were loaded with pitch-black warriors. Blacks who served in the army of Septimius Severus in Britain (Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Septimius Severus* 22.4-5) and elsewhere enjoyed the same advantages upon discharge as others in the Roman *numeri*. In view of the African connections of Septimius Severus, it is not unlikely that the emperor recruited other blacks from northwest Africa, who, like the Negro soldier in a scene on a third-century sarcophagus, perhaps became members of Septimius Severus' elite bodyguard (Salerno, 1965, 259, no. 85, and fig. 139).

There were blacks who were culturally assimilated in the Greco-Roman world. Some Ethiopians learned Greek before they left Nubia, where evidence of the Greek alphabet at Meroe suggests that the language was taught (Shinnie, 1967, 23). The Ethiopian king Ergamenes, according to Diodorus (3.6.3), had a Greek education and studied Greek philosophy. Where Ergamenes studied is not known, but Alexandria was a likely center for the education of children of well-to-do Meroites. A Negro boy in bronze from the Hellenistic period was perhaps the portrait of a lad who had left the south to study in Alexandria (Snowden, 1976, fig. 259 and Comstock and Vermeule, 1971, 78-79). Reported among the disciples of Aristippus, a Cyrenaic philosopher, was a certain Aethiops

(Diogenes Laertius 2.86; 10.25). The dark- or black-skinned playwright Terence, who might have been of Negroid extraction (Snowden, 1970, note 3, 270), arrived in Italy as a slave from Carthage, received a liberal education and his freedom from his owner, a Roman senator. Achieving fame as a comic poet, Terence became a member of the learned Scipionic circle, and his daughter is said to have married a Roman knight (Suetonius *Vita Terenti* 5). A Negro known only as Memnon, whose portrait has been preserved in Pentelic marble, was one of the most talented disciples of Herodes Atticus. The celebrated sophist and patron of art in the second century A.D. mourned Memnon's death and that of two other of his foster children as if they had been his own because they were honorable youths, fond of learning, and worthy of upbringing in his household (Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* 3.11 and *Vitae Sophistarum* 2.558, and Snowden, 1976, ills. 336-338).

When Ethiopians sought spiritual comfort in their new homes, they were welcomed on the same terms as others in both the Isiac cult and Christianity, not only as converts but as priests and monks. Blacks frequently played an influential role in the spread of Isiac ritual like those in murals from Herculaneum depicting black and white Isiac worshippers and priests—one a black choirmaster directing a chorus of the faithful of both sexes, and another a black dancer, a central figure upon whom the eyes of the worshippers are focused (Snowden, 1983, ills. 288-289). Like the Herculaneum blacks and those depicted on a sarcophagus found on the Appian Way (Leclant, 1976, ill. 384), Ethiopians may have been strangers to the temple when they reached Italy, but their reception by fellow cultists gave them a spiritual security in their new homelands. Like the Isiac cult, Christianity swept racial distinctions aside, and blacks in the early church found equality in both Christian theory and practice.

In brief, the written and iconographical evidence relating to Ethiopians, when considered in its entirety, demonstrates the soundness of W.R. Connor's description of the Greco-Roman world as "a society which for all its faults and failures never made color the basis for judging a man," and the aptness of his observation that "the signs of bigotry which we find in studying the history of classical antiquity are almost always among modern scholars, not among their ancient subjects" (Connor, 1970, 3).

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