Roman Depiction of the Aethiops Type in Literature and Artwork

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Introduction

This article will examine the issue of racism in antiquity by a survey of literary and artistic evidence concerning “blacks” in ancient Rome. Four books serve as they lens through which this issue will be viewed. They are Frank Snowden’s Blacks in Antiquity (1970) and Before Color Prejudice (1983) and Lloyd Thompson’s Romans and Blacks (1989), and Benjamin Isaac’s The Invention of Racism in Antiquity (2004). These three authors are notable for their varying, sometimes contradictory, stances on the issue. While Snowden maintains that no racism at all existed in antiquity, and Thompson maintains that while racism against blacks qua blacks did not exist, a certain amount of color-based bias did, Isaac asserts that antiquity, by fostering seeds of “proto-racism,” provided the basis for racist theories developed in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This article will focus on the issue of racism directed towards blacks in Roman antiquity. The definition to be attached to “racism” is forthcoming, but I should note that I conceive of racism, for the purposes of this paper, as primarily an issue of skin color, and do not expand its scope into gender, class, or sexuality. While other physical features besides skin color determine how one can be classified racially, I believe that skin color is the most visible, and therefore receives the most attention in this article as the prime aspect in racist perceptual models. Because the people of ancient Rome and Greece have traditionally been viewed as more “white” than “black,” I follow that determining these people’s attitudes towards blacks would be a good indicator of whether they were racist or not.

1 Bernal 1981. 2-3: Bernal posits that there are two models of Greek history (and, by extension, Roman): the ‘Aryan’ and the ‘Ancient.’ The ‘Ancient’ was the conventional view of the ancient Greeks themselves – that Greek culture had arisen due to colonization and heavy cultural influence by Egyptians and Phoenicians. The extreme version of the ‘Aryan’ model, first developed in the early 19th century, denied any influence whatsoever from African or Near Eastern cultures. It instead maintained that invasions from the north – unreported in antiquity –
Frank Snowden is a Howard professor who is one of the preeminent authorities on blacks in antiquity. His positions in the two books covered in this thesis are not different – rather his second book, Before Color Prejudice (1983), develops some of the ideas found in his first, Blacks in Antiquity (1970). His primary stance is that “nothing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern times existed in the ancient world” because “the ancient world did not make color the focus of irrational sentiments or the basis for uncritical evaluation” (1983.63). This is not to say that there were not irrational sentiments expressed, but rather color by itself was not the main reason. He does admit that the ancients expressed ethnocentric judgments of other cultures and had “narcissistic canons of beauty” (1983.63). He contends that color prejudice did not exist in antiquity because of sentiments expressed by ancient authors and through his own analysis of the socio-racial dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean as opposed to ideas prevalent in seventeenth and eighteenth-century imperial England.

As a result of growing up in a society devoid of socializing forces characterized by overt racial consciousness and/or hostility, there was no reason for the Greeks and Romans to attach “special significance to differences to color or to think that blacks were fundamentally different” (1983.75). He posits that the careers of black Africans in antiquity illustrate that “blacks suffered no detrimental distinctions that excluded them from opportunities – occupational, economic, or cultural – available to other newcomers in alien lands,” (1983.94) and that an examination of occupations, religion, social acceptance, and race mixture supports his position that racism, or color prejudice, was absent in antiquity (Snowden 1970.186). He cites as support for the latter assertion the fact that many Ethiopians were welcomed in ancient Rome and Greece as priests and participants in the cult of Isis by fellow cult followers. Their association with Africa, and particularly Egypt, where the cult originated, might have lent an air of authenticity to the ceremonies (1970.99). Dark-skinned Isiac cultists are depicted in a Herulaneum wall painting from the Neronian age (Plate 1; 1970. Fig. 118).

Lloyd Thompson, professor of Classics at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, agrees with Snowden on the essential point that there was no color prejudice in ancient Rome. He does, however, have some reservations concerning the terminology often used in works on this issue as well as concern for the overlooked aspect of the psychological damage “ethnocentric disparagement may have caused blacks in ancient Rome. He proposes that “open disparagement of black somatic features (or those of any other group) is ipso facto racist, or constitutes racial prejudice” [which, to him, is identical to color prejudice for the purposes of his study] (Thompson 1989.19). He then asserts that “nothing in the ancient evidence (written or archaeological) entitles us to see Roman society as one in which skin color or somatic [i.e. body] type functioned as a deference-relevant quality [a term for which he provides no specific definition, but which we are left to infer means something like “quality that determines whether one subordinates the other, or subordinate oneself”], either positive (like wealth, noble birth, power, or high educational attainments) or negative (like poverty, illiteracy, or servile birth), as distinct from a mere appreciated quality like kindness or femininity or a vitium like obesity, alcoholism, or emaciation,” (1989.24). Therefore “all the various interpretations of ancient data as evidence of racial prejudice must be dismissed as misconceptions” (1989.24). In other words, Thompson believes that skin color was not an essential determinant of one’s success in life – it could matter to a certain extent, depending on the personal tastes, or particular sensory aversions, of the people with which you were dealing, but it did not affect the relations with every person of a different race you met. Like Snowden, Thompson maintains that Roman blacks’ social mobility was not impeded by racism: "It is very obvious that, in Roman society, somatic appearance was not an index of ascribed social rights, roles, and status" (1989.78).

Benjamin Isaac, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Tel Aviv, believes that the idea of what racism is should not be limited to the modern, biologically-associated definition in which a person’s color and, consequently, moral or intellectual traits, are determined by that person’s genetics. He sees genetics as just one of many expressions of the prime characterizing trait of racism: a “form of determinism… which ignores individuality, personal characteristics, and free will in the shaping of humanity” (Isaac 2004.21). One’s physical environment, an impersonal, theistic God, or even astrology could serve as examples of different forms of this
particular determinism. As a result, Isaac bases his book on the belief that early forms of racism, which he calls “proto-racism”, were common in the Greco-Roman world (2004.1). He believes racism has an historically fluid nature, that it is “a phenomenon that can assume many apparently different shapes and forms while preserving a remarkable element of continuity that is undeniable, once it is traced over the centuries” (2004.3). Over the course of his book, he intends to illuminate what he perceives as fundamentally racist concepts in ancient literature, and to link this “proto-racism” of antiquity with modern racist ideas.

The central “proto-racist” concept is the environmental theory of physical differences, which maintains that “the flora, fauna, and human inhabitants of region and their manner of life are determined by a large extent by diversity of climatic, topographical, and hydrographical conditions” (Snowden 1983.85). The first literary articulation of it appears in the late fifth-century treatise Airs, Waters, Places, believed to have been written by Hippocrates (Isaac 2004.62), who asserts that Asians are more gentle and cultured, but less tenacious and brave, than Europeans (i.e. Greeks) because the climate and land in which they live is more moderate and nourishing than that of the Europeans’. Europeans are said to have a strong, courageous character and “endurance in body and soul” as a result of living in trying, cold climates (Hippocrates Airs. Chap. 24; cf. 2004.65). Later, he writes that “Those who inhabit low-lying regions, that are grassy, marshy, and have more hot than cool winds, and where there is hot water, those will be… dark rather than blonde…” (Airs. Chap. 24; cf. 2004.65). The overall idea that fighters are light and blonde and that the dark are weak “may well be the earliest occurrence of this type of this kind of stereotype about color and character” (2004.65). This work also seems to be the first “which consistently describes peoples in terms of stereotypes that are said to cover all the individual members of the groups it describes” (2004.68) and as such serves as the starting point for Isaac’s search for proto-racist ideas in antiquity.

A later expression of the theory comes from Aristotle’s Politics, where Aristotle argues for a direct connection between bodily and mental characteristics: “…body and soul react on each other; when the character of the body changes, it changes the character of soul” (Aristotle Pol. 1327b; cf. 2004.71). Those living in extreme conditions, whether hot or cold, were thought to suffer certain physical and temperamental effects. For instance, Aristotle explains that the bandy legs and curly hair of Ethiopians as an effect of the heat – just as planks are warped when they dry, so do the bodies of living things (Pol. 909a27-32; cf. 2004.71). He goes on to add that “Barbarians are by nature more slavish than Greeks and those in Asia more than those in Europe” (Pol. 125a; cf. 2004.73). This statement catches Isaac’s attention like a lightning bolt. He comments: "The claim that some members of humanity were born to be slaves could be described as the ultimate form of proto-racism." (2004.46). It is a sentiment reiterated a few hundred years later in Rome, when Cicero writes that Jews and Syrians were “born to be slaves” (servituti nati, Cicero de prov. 5.10; cf. 2004.225).

Isaac believes that while an idea such as the environmental theory may not have a direct connection to modern racist ideologies, its influence is felt from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment: "As modern racism has been shaped by eighteenth-century roots, so the Enlightenment adopted ideas and modes of thinking developed and accepted in the world” (2004.13). Jean Bodin, a late Renaissance French political philosopher quoted passages about the environmental theory directly in a chapter of his Republique, at one point emphasizing that those in the “middle regions” are better suited to command and govern commonwealth because they have more “force than they of the South” and “wit than they of the North” (Republique 550; cf. 2004. 103).

Clarification of Essential Terminology

It is essential to define the key terms that are utilized in this article. Let’s start with the pivotal word “racism.” An obvious place to begin would be the Encyclopedia Brittanica, so Isaac starts here, and finds racism defined as “the theory or idea that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and certain traits of personality, intellect, or culture and, combined with it, the notion that some races are inherently superior to others” (2004.21). Isaac disagrees with this definition because of its focus on biological determinism as the sole ingredient of racist attitudes – that is, that racists adopt negative attitudes toward other “races” solely on the basis of genetic inheritance. He feels other factors – like climate, or geography,
can serve as forms of determinism which can be seen to divide humanity into superior and inferior peoples. He also believes it is important to add that racism posits that the physical and mental traits of certain races are unalterable by human will and that the merit of a given individual is always determined by preconceived notions of that individual’s race. His full definition of racism is:

… an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography. The essence of racism is that it regards individuals as superior or inferior because they are believed to share imagined physical, mental, or moral attributes with the group to which they are deemed to belong, and it is assumed that they cannot change these traits individually. This is held to be impossible, because these traits are determined by their physical makeup” (2004.23).

Isaac understands that he is trying to define precisely something that can never be precisely defined, because the concept of racism is provisional. He admits no one theory of racism can ever please everyone because racism “is not a scientific theory or concept, but a complex of ideas, attitudes, and forms of behavior which are themselves by definition irrational” (2004.23).

Controversy surrounds any attempt to decide a single definition for “race” itself. When Isaac looks in the OED, he finds that race is “One of the great divisions of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common” (2004.28). Isaac objects to this definition because it asserts that race is “another term for Darwin’s subspecies, which rests on physiological traits: skin color, eye color and eye form, hair color and hair form, shape of the nose, stature and cephalic index. Racial differentiation is usually assumed to depend on certain combinations of these anatomical characteristics” (2004.30). He then notes that such specific combinations are never found to represent large populations, and points out that this definition assumes that these races are reproduced “without gene influx from other populations, a phenomenon, however, which rarely occurs on any significant scale” (2004.30). Concluding that race as a sociological reality is largely determined by people’s beliefs and not by actual biology, Isaac asserts that a race is “a group of people who are believed [my italics] to share imagined common characteristics, physical and mental or moral which cannot be changed by human will, because they are thought [my italics] to be determined by unalterable, stable physical factors: hereditary, or external, such as climate or geography” (2004.35).

An appropriate distinction to be drawn in this discussion is between races and ethnic groups. Isaac says that for a group to qualify as an ethnic group, it should have “1) a long shared history, of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups, and the memory of which it keeps alive 2) a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance” (2004.35).

The primary difference between a race and ethnic group seems to be the perception of unalterable, essential qualities. A member of a race is forever defined by these qualities while a member of an ethnic group could conceivably change those qualities by which he or she is defined. A white supremacist, for instance, may maintain a black man could never be a “good” doctor, yet would allow that a “hillbilly” could (perhaps tragically) become acculturated into New York City high society.

It is appropriate to discuss what is meant by the term “black” and why its usage is appropriate in the context of this article. The most common term for a black person in Greco-Roman antiquity was Aethiops. This term came from ancient Greek, literally meaning “burnt-faced,” and is thus a primarily a color-based word. Other words used to describe dark-skinned people were melas, niger, ater, and fuscus (1970.3). Snowden uses the word “black” because he believes it properly emphasizes color, which follows suit with the ancient Greco-Romans’ terminology. He uses “negro” when he has in mind modern anthropological classifications, or persons having at least two of the physical characteristics included in the forthcoming description (Snowden 1983.17). The most complete physical account of a black (a female house-slave named Scybale) from classical times comes from the poem Moretum, often ascribed to Vergil (1983.10). In it, the distinguishing somatic characteristics of the Aethiops are broad nose, thick lips, and tightly coiled hair (sima nare, labro tumens, torta comam) (1983.5).
The usage of the term “Aethiops” was used generally to describe those dark-skinned Africans hailing from the Upper Nile region (modern-day Sudan) and, later in Roman times, those blacks found on the southern fringes of the northwest Africa, though it could be applied to all populations derived from “inner Africa” (Thompson 1989.59). It should be noted that, in Roman literature, the term Aethiopes and Aethiopia also developed a specific link to the people and land of the Nilotic kingdom of Kush, also known as Nubia (1989. 57).

Chapter Five: Roman Depiction of the Aethiops Type in Literature and Artwork

With our conceptual framework established, we are now prepared to better examine the question of whether blacks experienced racism in ancient Rome. The “method” by which we accomplish this will be a critical survey of references, both negative and positive, to blacks in Roman literature and artwork. Then we will discuss various influential and powerful historical figures who have gained reputations for being black and discuss what validity there is in these claims. The establishment of black identity for certain socially prominent Roman personages would help negate social mobility based on color as a factor in assessing whether Roman society was racist or not.

Before discussion of specific blacks within Roman society, let first examine the way in which Ethiopia and its inhabitants were viewed by Roman authors and then look at incidences in which Roman authors deal with groups of blacks within Roman society. Roman references to Ethiopians as a faraway people invariably upheld the positive connotations and praise that had exemplified Greek references. Before listing some examples, it is important to note that this subject is one over which Snowden and Thompson disagree. Thompson feels Snowden gives undue emphasis to these laudatory references while not paying enough attention to the more negative writings that link black symbolism with Negro characteristics. He says “the Roman image of the geographically distant Ethiopians, which Snowden regarded as the one and only noteworthy Roman ‘image of the black,’ belongs entirely to l’approche mythique -- the urge to view distant barbarians through ‘the deforming prism of myth’, resulting in fantasy and stereotypes that might be favorable or unfavorable, but were in any case ‘very distant from reality’” (Thompson 1989.88).

Romans regarded Ethiopians as an extremely ancient people. Diodorus, a late first-century B.C. historian, wrote that the Ethiopians were the first men and the first to honor the gods and that they sent out colonists to Egypt, for whose ancient civilization, along with that of Greece, Romans generally carried the most admiration (Diodorus 3.8.5; cf. Snowden 1983.51). Lucian stated that the Ethiopians first gave the doctrine of astrology to man, and, “being in all else wiser than other men,” relayed their astrological discoveries to the Egyptians (Lucian De Astrologia 3.4; cf. 1983.52). The view that Ethiopians had made substantial contributions to the cultural progress of pharaonic Egypt was a pervasive one in Roman educated circles (Thompson 1989.92).

The story of Memnon in the Trojan War was another strain from the distant past that influenced upper-class Roman perceptions of Ethiopia. Though originally from Asia, the divine Memnon, son of Tithonus and Eos (goddess of the Dawn), eventually came to be associated with Ethiopia. According to the early Greek poet Arctinus (c. 650 B.C.) in Aethiopis, Memnon went to the aid of Priam at Troy, where, through extraordinary valor, he made a name for himself. After killing Achilles’ friend, Antilochnus, but sparing his father (Nestor), he finally met death at the hands of Achilles himself (Snowden 1970.151). Vergil also pays tribute to the Ethiopian contingent that Memnon had brought with him in the Aeneid (Vergil Aeneid 1.488-489).

When discussing Ethiopia per se, Latin authors often praised Meroe as viewed through the prism of its Napatan-Meroitic past, but had distaste for the “barbaric” and primitive peoples living in the other parts of Ethiopia. Pliny comments on the unfortunate “desertification” of the kingdom’s northern regions as a contrast to its once glorious past. He attributes the kingdom’s

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2 Three different capital cities dominated the chronology of Nubian civilization – Kerma, Napata, and Meroe. Nubian eras are named after them: Kerma Culture (2000-1559 BC), Egyptian Domination (1950-1100 BC), Napatan Period (747-200 BC) and the Meroitic Period (200 BC – 300 AD). (Egypt: Nubia History)
1st century AD state to the exhaustive wars it had waged with Egypt since antiquity (Pliny HN VI 182). Strabo, while criticizing its army’s poor organization and equipment, still considers the Meroitic kingdom a ‘cultivated’ one in strong contrast with primitive and wretched mode of life in which the majority of other Ethiopians lived (Strabo XVII 1.54; cf. Thompson 1989. 94). An example of the “cultivation” to which Strabo is here alluding comes from the remains of a column found in Meroe. Around it is written the Greek alphabet, suggesting that some Meroitic children received instruction in the rudiments of ancient Greek (Snowden 1983.93).

Another reason for the inaccuracy of the notion that slavery and the skin color of blackness were necessarily entwined in upper-class Roman consciousness comes to us from Seneca the philosopher. He relays a reputation of Ethiopians as the very antithesis of the slavish, servile type. When the Persian king Cambyses II tried to conquer Ethiopia in the late 6th century BC, he used the threat of slavery in an attempt to cow the Ethiopians into submission. Instead, Seneca writes, the “freedom-loving” Ethiopians rejected such a threat by sending envoys who “made reply in the independent words which kings call insults” (De Ira. 3.20.2; cf. Snowden 1970.147).

It is appropriate to question whether these positive representations of a mythologized Ethiopia actually permeated into the consciousness of the Roman masses. Downplaying this literature’s influence on most Roman commoners, Thompson writes “It would be a mistake to assume that the mythic and utopian image of “Aethiops” was shared by the unlettered masses of the Roman world” (Thompson 1989.91). He asserts that the evidence suggests that this group’s imagination was dominated by the negative symbolism of the color black, resulting in negative attitudes only altered in individual cases where there was increased familiarization with blacks (1989.92). He says that there is no reason to assume that “anthropological information about distant peoples, other than in situations of grave conflict with such peoples, enjoyed a wide circulation” (1989.96), noting that even in educated circles there was sometimes confusion about the difference between Egyptians and Ethiopians, perhaps in part due to Herodotus’ representation of Egyptians as “black-skinned” (melanchroes) (Herodotus. 2.104; cf. 1989.96).

Before we examine passages in which the Aethiops somatic type is lauded, let us contrast them by first looking at a few passages in which characteristics of such a type are disparaged. The primary reason for the disparagement of the Aethiops somatic type in Roman literature is the black skin color of such people, which had connotations of dreadful premonition and ominous death. Such connotations are borne out explicitly in the works of a number of authors, including Horace, Seneca, Pliny, Ovid, and Virgil. A common motif in these works is depiction of Charon, “the grim ferryman of the underworld, not only as black-skinned, but as an Aethiops (with snub nose and thick lips)” (Hor. Odes II 13.21, Sen. Herc. Oet 1704-5, Pliny HN II 17, Ovid Met. IV 436-8, Virgil Aen. VI 128; cf. Thompson 1989.110). Beside mere depiction through costume and make-up, actual black and Egyptian performers were often utilized to play theatrical roles of the inhabitants of the Underworld. In a similar vein, adolescent slaves were painted black to represent the Underworld in a dinner party thrown by Domitian for Senators he disliked:

…at a different time, he gave the leading senators and knights a feast of the following kind. Preparing a room that was absolutely black on all sides, from the ceiling to the walls and floor, and setting up on the naked floor equally bare couches, he invited in the guests alone, at night, with no attendants. First, he set up markers shaped like tombstones beside each one, having the name of the person and a little lampholder like those that are hung in tombs. Then attractive naked boys, themselves painted black, entered like ghosts, encircled the guests in a terrifying dance, and took up seats at their feet. After this, the things which are customarily offered to the dead, black and in black dishes, were placed before them, so that they all began to shake and tremble in fear, each one expecting to have his throat cut any moment. This feeling intensified as they stayed just as quiet as if they were already among the dead, while Domitian chatted on amiably about topics related to murder and slaughter. Finally he sent them away, removing the slaves waiting at the door and putting other, unfamiliar coachmen and footmen in their place, so that they were filled with even more fear. Each had barely returned home and begun to catch his breath when the message came that someone was there from the Augustus. While they waiting, fully and finally expecting to die, one fellow brought in the marker, which was actually made of silver, and others the rest of the paraphernalia used in the dinner all of which turned out to be expensively made. Finally the very boy which had seemed to be the
Another histrionic example of the association of black with “the sinister, evil, and the repulsive” (1989.110) comes from Juvenal, who presents a satirical picture of black Egyptian musician who “plays a leading role in a barbaric religious ceremony that ends in a scene of cannibalism…” (Juv. XV 49f; cf.1989.110). It seems that this passage is an example of a primitive, “uncultured” stereotype given to Ethiopians (those living outside of Meroe) by Roman authors as well as being an example of the negative symbolism of the color black. An example of a more tempered “barbaric” stereotype comes from Martial, who includes blacks in a list of foreigners living in Rome who are not so [italics mine] barbaric as to miss to opening of the Flavian amphitheater nor abstain from learning Latin (Mart. Spect. 3; cf. Thompson 1989.125).

Another reason for negative portrayal of blacks in Roman literature is the pressure exerted by Saharan tribesmen (many of whom would have undoubtedly had dark skin color) on the southern African fringe of the Roman Empire in late third century. Some of these people were marauders and traders who began to threaten the countryside and emerald mines of Upper Egypt after centuries of peaceful Roman-Meroitic relations, but the threat of menace from Saharan barbari was felt throughout the southern parts of every Roman African province. It would be instructive to here look at an epigram by an anonymous Romano-African poem describing a Saharan marauder from the south:

faex Garamantarum nostrum processit ad axem
et piceo gaudet corpore verna niger,
quem nisi vox hominem labris emissa sonaret,
terreret visu horrida larva viros.
dira, Harumeta, tuum rapiant sibi Tartara monstrum:
custodem hunc Ditis debet habere domus.

The riff-raff of the Garamantians [Saharan tribe] came up to our part of the world, and a black slave rejoices in his pitch-colored body; a frightful spook who would scare even grown by his appearance were it not that the sounds issuing from his lips proclaim him human. Hadrumeta [a town in modern-day Tunisia], let the fearsome regions of the dead carry off for their own use this weird creature of yours. He ought to be standing guard at the home of the god of the nether world (Anth. Lat. 183; cf. Thompson 1989.36).

This is the most extended and vitriolic denunciation of the black somatic type I have yet encountered in my readings. It stands out for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the Latin word translated “riff-raff” is faex, which could also be translated “shit.” Such a term degrades the people with which it is associated to a sub-human standing. Secondly, Thompson points out that the violent tone of this piece suggests something beyond “a simple sensory aversion to negritude, mockery of an alien and unfamiliar somatic appearance, or a concern with voicing a stereotype [of an association with death] of the Aethiops” (1989.37). He observes that the Latin for “slave” here is verna, which could more specifically mean “household slave.” This would mean that the black slave who is rejoicing in the second line is not one of the Garamantians who had been captured and brought up to Hadrumetum, but a black slave born and bred in the city, who finds the bringing of another black-colored slave from the south a cause for celebration. Thus, “we may have here an imputation which presumes sympathy and collaboration with barbarian marauders from the Sahara on the part of one or more local blacks at Hadrumetum, and the hostility reflected by the epic would thus also possess a scapegoating dimension” (1989.37). Assuming that the slaves of Hadrumetum are not Garamantian in origin, this passage could be the only insinuation of a “brotherhood” of Aethiops types in the Roman Empire based primarily on somatic similarity.

We will now turn to examples of praise for the black somatic type in Greco-Roman literature as well as incidences in which possible blacks of high social standing are lauded. One way in which praise for the black somatic type was expressed was through amatory poetry. Examples include Asclepiades (1st century B.C.), who wrote concerning the beauty of 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” (Asclep. Anthologia Palatina 5.121; cf. Snowden 1983.77). Ovid’s Sappho tells Phaon she is not fair but reminds her that the dark (fusca) Andromeda, with the hue of her native Ethiopia, captivated Perseus by her beauty (Ovid. Heroides 15.35-38; cf. 1983.77). Finally, Martial writes that, though he was pursued by an ivory-white maiden, he pursued a girl “blacker than an ant, pitch, jawjaw, or cicada” (Martial 1.115; cf.1983.77).

These passages and others signify that while black somatic traits were outside of the Roman “somatic norm image” and were sometimes criticized, they could, especially when found in women, be esteemed as beautiful. It seems that in Roman society beauty was often a matter of personal preference and that those with a preference for blacks had no qualms about expressing it. This is evidenced by the fact that the number of expressed preferences for blackness and whiteness in classical literature is approximately equal (Snowden 1970.179), though when one factors in implied preferences as well as expressed, then the number for white beauty exceeds slightly those for black (Snowden 1983.79). It should be noted that these statistics only pertain to those instances in the literature where black and white puellae (girls) are explicitly paired in contrast. The puella, sans comparison, in Latin love poetry (Propertius, Tibullus, Ovid) is overwhelmingly described as white (Richlin 1992.45-6). Snowden also cites testimonies of affection for black courtesans and slave girls as evidence that ancient miscegenation was accepted (1970.193).

There are few quotations in Roman literature that allude directly to black individuals, anonymous or not. We know of nothing written by a black author. An example of laudatory passage for a black person comes from a poem in the Anthologia Latina. It is an anonymous tribute directed to an undefeated black charioteer: “Memnon, though a son of Dawn, fell at the hands of the son of Peleus [i.e. Achilles]… Never will there be born an Achilles who will surpass thee. Memnon thou art in appearance, but in fate thou art not” (Antho. Lat. 251, no. 293; cf. Snowden 1970. 168). Other examples of praise come from Philostratus, who admired the learning of Memnon, the protégé of Herodes Atticus, a celebrated sophist and patron of the arts (Thompson 1989.149). Atticus mourned Memnon’s death as if he had been his own son because he was a “noble-minded, honorable youth, fond of learning, and worthy of the upbringing in his household” (Philostratus. Vita Apoll. III 11; cf. Snowden 1970.188). A marble portrait, believed to be a depiction of Memnon (Plate 2; Fig. 73 1970), emphasizes a “Romanized” look, meaning pains were taken to give the face the proportion usual in Roman portraiture to indicate that black was perceived not as a barbarian, but as “integrated into Roman society and fully accepted in the strata appropriate to his positive deference-entitling properties (i.e. culturally assimilated)” (Thompson 1989.147).

There are a number of Roman individuals who have been associated with blackness but about whose racial identity we know nothing definitive. One such person is the comic playwright Terence (ca. 190 BC – 159 BC), who arrived as a slave in Rome from Carthage and was accepted into the upper-class and social circles of the day. Another is King Juba II (died ca. 23 AD) of Mauretania, an impressively learned man who strove to inject Greco-Roman culture into his African kingdom. A marble head of him from the late first century BC or early century AD suggests slight negro traits (Snowden 1983. Fig. 58). Lastly, we have Lusius Quietus, the highly respected commander of Rome’s elite mobile Moorish cavalry (whose exact racial composition is not known) under emperor Trajan. Snowden writes that in the opinion of some scholars Quietus “was Negroid, an Ethiopian from Cerne, perhaps Mogador Island, off the Atlantic coast of Morocco” (Snowden 1983.33). The racial identity of these men is yet another point of contention between Snowden and Thompson, who asserts: “Juba, Terence, and Lusius Quietus are never described in ancient references as Aethiops or in language that might in any way suggest that Romans perceived them as men of the Aethiops type” (Thompson 1989.51).

Artwork depicting blacks in the Roman and Hellenistic world provides to us a sharper image than that of literature concerning the kinds of professions blacks held and the social status some attained. One such profession that blacks participated in was boxing, and one of the most famous boxers of his day was the black Nicaeus, about whom Pliny the Elder wrote (Naturalis Historia 7.12.51). While no direct representations of Nicaeus are known, we have an idea of how black boxers looked from two late Hellenistic terracottas in the British Museum (Fig.49 1970.165). A glimpse into a less-glamorous profession is provided by a mosaic of a rural scene depicting a Negro fowler placing snares in a tree in third century AD Tunisia (Fig.52 1983.91).
Occasionally blacks were represented as satyrs in Greco-Roman plays, as shown in a small terracotta first-century Roman mask, which Snowden perhaps none too seriously calls “a realistic depiction of a Negro” (Plate 3; Fig.99 1970.162). Snowden does not believe such representations of blacks necessarily imply color prejudice since non-blacks were also mocked in comic and satiric scenes: “If Negroes had been depicted only as comic or grotesque, or if satirical scenes had been the rule and not the exception, there might be some justification for a pejorative interpretation of the Negro in classical art” (1983.80).

From artwork, we also receive more evidence of the high social ranking which some blacks were able to achieve. The path to power required attainment of “deference-entitling properties,” an important one of which was education. A few Roman statues have been interpreted as relating to blacks receiving a tertiary education3, which was a prerequisite for ‘liberal’ occupations and careers, such as practicing law or politics, or becoming an author. Two bronze statues (Plate 4; Fig.64-5 1970), both Hellenistic, depict boy orators, and show the beginnings of such an education (Thompson 1989.149). One depiction of a man of white-black extraction having attained a rather high level of financial property comes from a mosaic of C. Julius Serenus, whose lavish surroundings signify his wealth. The mosaic is from Thaenae, in Tunisia, circa the third or fourth century AD (Plate 5; Fig.56 1983.92). Blacks featured in some artwork have been viewed as having high social standing. Examples include a fragment of an early-thousandth century sarcophagus which depicts a general whose features resemble those of Libyan-born Emperor Septimius Severus. He and three soldiers are receiving supplant Roman captives (Fig.33 1983). One is black, an unsurprising choice considering the Emperor’s African origins (1983.33). A Roman bronze represents “an unknown Negro dignitary” (Plate 6; Fig.54 1970.187), while a life-sized, Flavian-period bust has been interpreted as that of a black who came to Rome as an ambassador or hostage and had had his portrait made during his stay” (Plate 7; Fig.115 1970.187).

An example of how “pure” negro physical features were not always represented en masse comes from a marble head of black young man found in the city of Agora, ca. 250-260 AD. While there is a “distinctly Negroid look” in him, his hair does not follow suit: it does not appear curly or frizzy at all, and instead lies flat (Plate 8; Fig. 75 1970). Another example comes from the marble head of black woman, probably from the Hadrianic period. Her features are not “true” Negro because they evince origins in certain (Arab-influenced) populations of North Africa or East Africa along the Red Sea (Fig. 72 1970).

Conclusion

Are we any closer to determining whether Romans were racist towards blacks than when we started? The answer may hinge on the extent to which we incorporate two factors into what we consider “racism.” First, does “racism” have to occur on an institutional level – that is, does it have to be backed by power? Second, does “racism” have to be directed towards one or a few particular races, or can its object be everybody except those imposing the “racism”?

If we believe that racism has to go beyond color prejudice on a personal level and incorporate institutional support on a societal level (e.g. through laws that forbid interracial marriages), then it would be difficult to refer to ancient Rome as a racist society. They had no laws explicitly associated with race, no less with forbidding certain races certain actions. The inability of freedmen to enter the political arena due to lack of “deference-entitlements” suggests that “classism” existed, but it does not seem that this “classism” was necessarily linked to skin color.

Because of my American background, I conceive of “racism” as primarily a “black” and “white” issue with clear-cut antagonisms involved – in American history, “whites” have been either racist against “blacks,” or Native Americans, or Asians, etc. Because for so long certain states had specific laws prohibiting blacks from enjoying the same rights as whites, I had developed an idea that this is the way racism is “supposed” to look. Rooted in this cognitive paradigm, I approached the issue of racism in ancient Rome wondering how such a “black/white” racist mental framework would hold up. It did not hold up well. Not only did the

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3 The final stage of Roman education under a rhetor, or teacher of oratory. Generally begun around age 15, it including learning different styles of declamation and parts of rhetoric.
Romans not conceive of themselves as “white,” but they did not conceive as the “other” as primarily one color. The “other” could be one of a myriad of colors – whether the “other” be a Greek, Jew, Syrian, German, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Iberian, or Gaul.

While the Romans did not derogate blacks qua blacks, there is evidence that they denigrated blacks qua “the other.” As Isaac so amply points out, they derogated many ethnic groups and races qua “the other.” Such tendencies lead to the question: Is there such a thing as “equal opportunity” racism, and is this it? Or are we dealing with a case of ethnocentrism? I believe there are a couple of reasons that it is more accurate to call the Romans ethnocentrist rather than “equal opportunity” racists. First, the very nature of ethnocentrism involves a kind of “us” vs. “all of them” mentality, in which all oppositional (and perceived inferior) ethnicities are lumped together. The focus is generally on “us” as a superior group and not on any one particular other group as inferior. I think the term “racism” describes more aptly a clearer “one-on-one” antagonism as opposed to a “one-vs.-all” antagonism. Second, I believe an integral component of racism is the belief that a certain race is not able to change the moral and mental attributes it is perceived to have on the basis of its physical traits. Romans did not believe particular physical traits precluded a person from attaining esteemed moral and mental attributes. Any freeborn Roman, no matter of what race, was in theory just as capable of displaying Roman excellence, or virtus, as any other Roman citizen.

I do not believe that Isaac’s “proto-racism” was intense enough to merit a description of ancient Rome as a racist society. There are two “racist” passages which stand out – where Aristotle claims in Politics that barbarians and Asians are more slavish by nature than Greeks and Europeans and where Aristotle claims in the Physiognomonica that men of the South are by nature crafty, greedy, lustful, fickle, and frivolous. I do not think that this writing of Aristotle, nor of any of the other authors who espoused the theories Isaac discusses, would have permeated Roman society to the extent where 1) one could say that most (illiterate) people had heard of it and 2) these same people believed it and adjusted their behavior accordingly. I do not contest that these “proto-racist” theories eventually did play a crucial part in the formation of 17th and 18th-century racist ideology, but I believe that a reason for their influence during the Enlightenment was the increased circulation of ideas via printed books as well as a higher level of literacy in American and Western European society relative to ancient Roman society.

There are a number of avenues of research which could be taken to expand the scope of this article. First, was ancient Greece more “racist” than ancient Rome? Foreigners and freed slaves were not assimilated into ancient Greek city-state society as they were in ancient Rome. They acquired “metic” (resident alien) political status with different rights than Greek city-state citizens. This difference, coupled with the intellectual climate that spawned Aristotle’s “racist” comments mentioned above, provide two reasons for a pursuing a more thorough evaluation of the issue of racism, specifically in ancient Greece. Another avenue of research could involve searching for more evidence concerning blacks in ancient Rome. One method could be the examination of ancient Roman tombstone inscriptions for Romans who were described as black or Aethiops. These inscriptions could contain information about black Romans’ social statuses, vocations, spouses, and children that would be vital in assessing what level of economic power and status Aethiopis reached in ancient Rome. A third possible avenue of research involves the question of color symbolism in anthropology. Snowden insinuates that the derogation of black skin color in Latin literature was inevitable given the universal stigma of death, evil, and the Underworld attached in the color black (even in African societies). It would be informative to examine his sources for this statement to assess exactly how “universal” evidence for such a stigma is and if there are any exceptions. An examination of more current anthropological research on the subject should also be undertaken.

It is important to remember that it is problematic to assume the terms so extensively used in this article have any definite meanings. Race, racism, and “blacks” (Aethiopes) are the

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4 “The essential difference between the psychological condition of the victim of ethnocentric attitudes on one hand, and the victim of racism on the other hand, is emphasized by social scientists who point out that everyday realities of the world of a racized sociological minority call upon every member of that group, qua member, to battle an imposed and unalterable inferiority which places his ego ‘under constant assault from all the conditions of his social life’ (Thompson 1989.20). Even if one saw blacks qua “the other,” their “inferiority” was not unalterable in Roman society.
especially hazy terms that I have tried to bring into sharper focus over the course of this paper. The fluidity of these words, I think, mirrors the perceptual fluidity of blacks in ancient Rome. Some were praised by poets as the most handsome and virtuous of men and some were mocked by merchants as hideous, nearly sub-human barbarians. The mix of literary and iconographic evidence which is favorable to blacks and disparaging towards them indicates “that blacks possessed a variety of statuses, not a particular attitude, but a variety of attitudes.” (Thompson 1989,26).
73. (right) Pentelic marble head of a Negroid male, perhaps Memnon, a pupil of Herodes Atticus, found in Thyrretis, ca. 160-170 A.D. — hair short and tightly curled (woolly effect), nose, though broken, obviously broad, and thick lips. P. Graingor, "Tête de nègre du Musée de Berlin," Bulletin de correspondance hellénique XXXIX (1915) 402-412 considers the subject of mixed race but with predominance of Negro type of North Africa, Nubia, or Abyssinia; C. Picard, La Sculpture antique de Phidias à l’ère byzantine (Paris 1926) 444 describes the head as that of a Negro or mulatto; G. Sena Chiesa, s.v. Memnone — 2° Enciclopedia dell'arte antica IV (Rome 1961) 1001.

Small Terracotta Roman Mask, First Century BC.

Plate 2


Plate 4
58. Mosaic of a racially mixed couple, C. Julius Serenus and Numitoria Saturnina, from Thaenae, third or fourth century A.D.

Plate 5

Plate 6

Life-sized marble bust of ambassador or hostage, Flavian period
Plate 7
Pentalic Marble Head of a Young Man, found in Agora, ca. 250-260
Plate 8

Bibliography


Faculty comment:

David Fredrick said of his student’s work:

Evin Demirel has been my student in numerous classes, including the CLST 40003H honors colloquium, Rome on Film. Evin is extremely bright, with "As" across the board in Latin and Greek. His performance in the honors colloquium, which serves as a capstone course for the Classical Studies program, was also impressive. For this course, the students read primary and secondary works on Roman history, politics, and entertainment, as well as works on film theory and criticism. They were required to write ten 2-3 page reviews of a given movie in the light of their reading; the final project for the class was a website that required in-depth research on background and meaning of a specific film or genre. Evin researched the influence of Anthony Mann's Fall of the Roman Empire on Ridley Scott's Gladiator, comparing them both with the historical record on Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Because he entered the class with no training at all in computer graphics or web design, this course was a real challenge for Evin, and his "A" in the course reflects real dedication and hard work.
Evin has pursued his thesis topic with similar intelligence and persistence. Reacting to the portrayal of blacks in the Roman movies, and to his own experience with race at Little Rock Central High School, his first thought was to research the history of sub-Saharan contact with Rome. When evidence for this (archaeological or textual) proved very slight, he switched to a wider survey of the perception and experience of "blacks" in the Roman empire, and the question of whether or not the Romans were "racist." Evin's proposal received an Honors College Fellowship to support undergraduate research, 2004-2005. He found that there were several major works on this topic (Snowden, Thompson, Isaac), but also discovered through close reading that they contained fundamental disagreements about how to define "race" and , racism," about the possibilities (or barriers) for political or economic advancement for blacks in Roman society, and the challenge posed to the "white" (Italian? Mediterranean?) aesthetic/ erotic ideals by the portrayal of blacks as indeed beautiful, in literature and art.

While playing these major works off against each other, Evin also found ample space to interject his own interpretation of the evidence, and (most importantly) to pose basic questions about where research on race in antiquity should turn next. First, since Snowden and Thompson argue that the black population of Rome was quite large, while Isaac argues that it was numerically insignificant, Evin proposes that a very careful study of occupations and ethnic origins in funerary inscriptions is necessary, to help refine our estimates concerning the black population of Rome, and to better assess the career outcomes of individuals who indicate African origin on their tombs. He also notes a fundamental methodological problem, in that second or third generation "blacks" in Roman Italy, likely the product of "racial" mixing (the Romans had no laws prohibited inter-racial marriage), would probably no longer reflect their African heritage explicitly in their tombs or funerary inscriptions. Second, he proposes a more thorough analysis of the representation of blacks in material culture (coins, lamps, mosaics, sculpture), noting that some representations (e.g. ithyphallic bath attendants, analyzed by John Clarke) seem to exploit stereotypes about "black" physical features, but others (a bronze statuette of an attractive African musician) adapt those features to redraw the canon of classical male beauty.

As a review of the contemporary communis opinio on Romans and race, and an outline for further research, Evin has done a truly admirable job with his thesis. With some further editing one or two of his chapters would be appropriate for submission to a journal in Classics- - in particular as an extended, critical review of Isaac's The Invention of Racism in Antiquity (2004). His writing and his level of critique have risen very close to the published standards of our profession.