

Antiquity, Modernity, and Anti-Black Racism

Ancient Greece and Rome, as parts of the ancient Mediterranean world, were to some degree multicultural societies. Accordingly, peoples from all sides of the Sea encountered, transformed, and attempted to explain each other. Such groups included “Greeks,” or those who natively spoke Greek and practiced certain cultural norms, as well as “Romans,” or those who attained the legal status of Roman citizen, and many others, including peoples from the south that we would today call black Africans. However, it is important to keep in mind that many of the terms we use to describe these categories are inventions that carry with them certain connotations that would not have been present in ancient times. Racism, specifically anti-black racism, is today a powerful force and has been for centuries. However, that racism has largely been construed to be the result of the African slave trades, specifically the Atlantic Slave Trade, and consequently, the ancient world has been left theoretically “untouched” by such “modern” concerns. This thesis questions whether it is accurate or even responsible to say that “antiquity” was unaffected by any similar kind of racism against black people.

Did anti-black racism exist in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, and how have the racial conceptions of these societies influenced early modern and current racial attitudes? Contrary to popular opinion, this thesis argues that there was indeed anti-black racism in ancient Greece and Rome, and that this analogue to modern racism was more substantial than general xenophobia. This conclusion is directly contradictory to most previous scholarship, which in general has found that the ancient Mediterranean world was mostly, if not completely, free from anti-blackness. Although “race” and its associated terminology may not yet have been so strongly associated with slavery, ancient Greek and Roman authors, all elite men, assigned certain negative characteristics to black people, who they generally called “Ethiopians.” These characteristics were often associated with ancient theories of climate and the bodily humors, and they ranged from savagery to physical grotesqueness. Such ancient attitudes were carried on and translated through the Medieval and Renaissance periods to the early Modern period, where they were amplified and used as justification for “updated” modes of enslavement, colonialism, and imperialism. Furthermore, ancient attitudes are still relevant today, both because of their part in

lasting racial tensions, but also because the study of ancient history has long participated in a whitewashing of and uncritical thinking about the ancient past.

This thesis will consist of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will largely focus on definitions and clarifications of terms to be used in the rest of the thesis. These terms include “ancient” or “antiquity,” “modern,” “race” and “racism,” as well as “black” and “white.” These terms have meanings applied to them that either have indirect parallels in the ancient world or that carry connotations only developed over a more recent trajectory. The first chapter will also outline the findings of previous scholars and describe why their conclusions are being rejected. The second chapter will trace this history of modern scholarship in more detail, from the nineteenth century to today. In the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most scholars found, incorrectly, that the ancient Mediterranean world was free from “color prejudice.” This conclusion may have been the result of personal biases and/or attempts to prove the transience of racial hatred, and these arguments and motives will be explored. Lastly, this chapter will describe the recent outrage that has arisen in response to attempts to include black people in the ancient Mediterranean world. Such responses reveal the urgent need for a detailed re-evaluation of the interrelationships between ancient and modern constructions of “race.”

The third chapter will contain a thorough reading of the ancient sources, both Greek and Latin. The earliest will date from about 500 BCE, and the latest will date to the seventh century CE (see bibliography). This chapter will put these sources into context via a discussion of Greek and Roman identity, before identifying broad trends in ancient racial theories. It will then conclude with an annotated catalogue of the sources, listed in chronological order.

The fourth chapter will show how ancient racial attitudes never died out, and instead were carried forward by authors writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It will examine both implicit and explicit references to classical antiquity among those employing “modern” racial theory in the period. The chapter will be arranged chronologically and will focus on the equivalences between and evolutions of ancient and “modern” theories. The fifth chapter will draw conclusions and address why this topic and the history revealed by this thesis are important, both for the field of ancient Mediterranean studies and for the wider world.

Ancient Sources

Xenophanes, *Fragment 16*. 6th-5th Cent. BCE
Herodotus, *The Histories*. 5th BCE
Euripides, *Fragment 228*. 5th BCE
Aristotle, *Problems, History of Animals, Generation of Animals, Physiognomicon*. 4th BCE
Menander, *Unidentified Minor Fragments*. 4th BCE
Asclepiades, *Untitled Epigram*. 3rd BCE
Theocritus, *Idylls 17*. 3rd BCE
Strabo, *Geography*. 1st BCE
Varro, *On the Latin Language*. 1st BCE
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* VI, IV. 1st BCE
Propertius, *Elegies* IV 6, IV 78. 1st BCE
Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*. 1st BCE
Virgil, *Moretum*. 1st BCE
Ovid, *Metamorphoses, The Art of Love*. 1st BCE – 1st CE
Seneca the Younger, *On Anger*. 1st CE
Petronius, *Satyricon*. 1st CE
Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*. 1st CE
Martial, *Epigrams*. 1st CE
Frontinus, *Stratagems*. 1st CE
Juvenal, *Satires* II, VIII, V, VI. 1st-2nd CE
Suetonius, *Caligula*. 1st-2nd CE
Plutarch, *On Delays of Divine Vengeance*. 1st-2nd CE
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Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*. 2nd CE
Galen, *On Temperaments*. 2nd-3rd CE
Arrian, *Anabasis*. 1st-2nd CE
Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*. 2nd-3rd CE
Claudian, *On the Gildonic War*. 4th CE
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