
It is always interesting to see how the ancient world reacted to problems that our own society has found difficult to cope with. Mr Snowden sets out to examine the Greco-Roman experience of Ethiopians — he uses the ancient term, pointing out that he too has had it applied to him by an Athenian taxi-driver — partly to provide the first comprehensive study of the contact between black and white in classical times and partly to demonstrate Greek and Roman attitudes to Ethiopians, and to show their position in society. His conclusion — that there are no traces of a colour bar in ancient times — is not a new one, but the evidence has not before been assembled with such completeness.

Snowden first details the physical characteristics of Ethiopians, as found in literary and archaeological sources. Descriptions refer to colour of skin, woolly hair, snub noses and thick lips, and correspond closely with characteristics noted in the African Negro by modern anthropologists; the author of the *Moretum*, judged on his description of Scybale, ‘would be rated today as a competent anthropologist.’ The evidence of art vividly confirms the various literary descriptions; and here the evidence is before us, in a series of 120 superb plates showing Negroidas in art from the seventh century B.C. to the third century A.D. There is a Negro in Homer (Eurybates, in *Odyssey* XIX), there are snub-nosed Ethiopians in Xenophanes, and accurate representations of Negroes, often in obvious contrast with Greeks, proliferate in vase-paintings and other artistic media. On the question of descriptions, Snowden is perhaps too inclusive in his assumption that certain colour adjectives always indicate Negroes (even if they can always be assumed to refer to colour of skin rather than of hair, which is not certain). Greeks and Romans were notoriously vague in their descriptions of colour, and a passage like Lucretius, IV, 1160, where *melichrus* is offered as a euphemism for *nigra*, suggests that too much reliance on adjectives of colour is unwise (unless ancient honey was very much darker than modern).

Greek and Roman acquaintance with African Ethiopians, especially with warriors, is examined in the next three chapters. Apart from Eurybates, there seem to be a number of early references, more or less vague, to negroid Ethiopians. Aeschylus locates them in the African continent, and by the time of Herodotus they are relatively familiar, as we should in any case have gathered from the art of the period (an interesting indication of the degree of familiarity might be
found in a comparison with some of the early drawings of Australian natives and animals). Greek mercenaries had served in Egypt early in the sixth century, possibly even campaigning in Ethiopia, and Ethiopians probably served in the Egyptian army about this time (which could account for the tradition that they were an ingredient in the population of Cyprus). Herodotus includes Ethiopians in his list of Xerxes' army, and Aeschylus' 30,000 'black horse' (Persae, 315) may be among these. Naturally the Greeks of Ptolemaic Egypt were well acquainted with their southern neighbours. Roman contact with Ethiopian soldiers may have begun with Hannibal's mahouts — the evidence is strong but circumstantial — and was much closer and more frequent during the Empire. In short there seems to be little or no evidence for the view that Ethiopians were remote and romanticised at any time during the classical period.

Yet one tradition that lingered was that of the blameless Ethiopians with whom the Homeric gods delighted to feast. Interestingly enough, a reputation for godliness seems to be supported by a stele set up by the Ethiopian king Piankhi, the eighth century conqueror of Egypt. Herodotus confirms the tradition, and Diodorus expatiates on it. Apart from this enviable reputation the Ethiopians make occasional excursion into mythology, particularly in Memnon and in the Perseus legend (though Memnon, Cepheus and Andromeda probably all have an Asiatic and white, rather than an African and black origin). Attic tragedy at times exploited Ethiopian motifs, and many of the vase-paintings depicting Negroes may be based on the drama.

Snowden has amassed a considerable amount of evidence for the appearance of Ethiopians at Rome in the theatre and amphitheatre, as actors, gladiators, mimes, jugglers, singers, dancers, boxers, hunters, acrobats and jockeys. While all this conclusively proves that they were a common sight, it hardly squares with his implication that Negroes practised the same range of occupations as any other Romans. Circus, theatre and amphitheatre were not respectable places to earn a living.

Perhaps the most important chapter of the book is that in which Snowden examines the Greco-Roman attitudes towards Ethiopians. Colour in itself never seems to have been as much of a problem as other differences of race; but even here the great distinction is not so much between races as between cultures, and it is no chance that the word barbaros refers to language. In concentrating on Ethiopians Snowden puts perhaps too little emphasis on this important point. Moreover, although the Greeks often explained racial diversity by
environmental factors, it does not necessarily follow that they were less likely to believe in the superiority of the Greek race. However this may be, beauty was often found in dark skins, with no apparent prejudice. (Snowden quotes Ovid's affair with *fusca Cypassis* in *Amores* II, 8, where Ovid asks what is wrong with love for a slave girl; surely colour is irrelevant here and, besides, to quote this poem without reference to its companion (II, 7), where Ovid argues the other side, is at least disingenuous). Doubtless the predilection of artists for Negroes was at first, partly the fascination of an unknown type but, as Beazley pointed out, the existence of 'that magnificent black glaze' may be responsible for its persistence.

The general conclusion is that practice reflected theory, and that while there is little evidence for the presence of Ethiopians in the higher walks of life there was on the other hand no discrimination against them, and no prejudice against miscegenation. The book concludes with an account of early Christian attitudes to Ethiopians.

Snowden has handled skilfully a vast amount of evidence of all kinds. Occasionally he is inclined to make too much out of too little, but the general picture is clear and his case seems proved. The book is not always easy to read – one is sometimes too aware of the card-index in the background. But the question that lingers at the end is not so much why the ancients knew nothing of colour prejudice as why it has come to play such a large part in our society. Traditional explanations, it seems, will not do, and Snowden's work could form an excellent starting point for new ones.

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