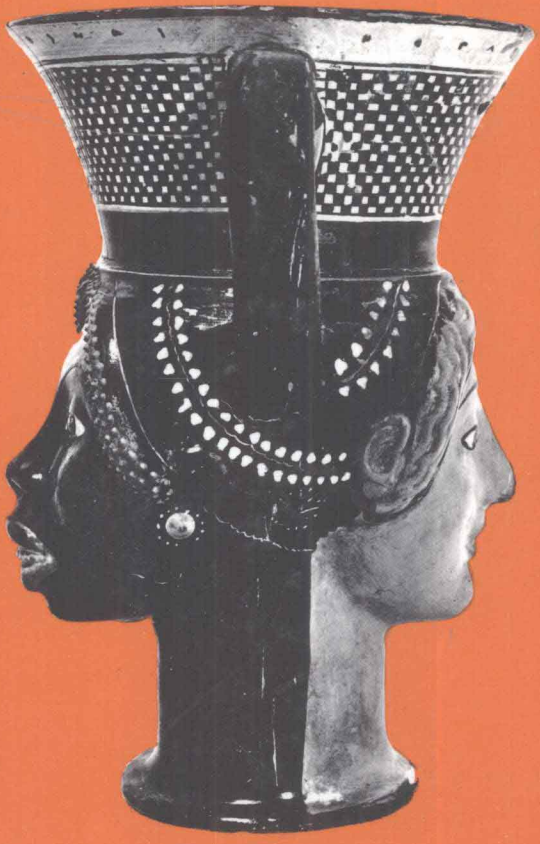
Frank M. Snowden, Jr.

Blacks in Antiquity



Blacks in Antiquity

Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience

Frank M. Snowden, Jr.

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Preface

Among the many peoples who entered the Greco-Roman world were the dark- and black-skinned Ethiopians of Africa. The experiences of these Africans who reached the alien shores of Greece and Italy constituted an important chapter in the history of classical antiquity. An examination of the resultant intermingling of these peoples enables us to study an early encounter of white Europeans with dark and black Africans.

Following the practice of the Greeks and Romans, I have applied the word "Ethiopian" to the several dark- and black-skinned Africans whom the Greeks and Romans designated as Ethiopians. The classical evidence relating to physical characteristics, geographical location, and tribal identification demonstrates that the Greeks and Romans classified as Ethiopians several physical types of dark and black peoples inhabiting different parts of Africa. However classified by modern scholars, to Greeks and Romans these peoples were *all* "Ethiopians." A very large portion of these Ethiopians comprised peoples considered by anthropologists today as Negroes. In fact, the Negroid type, both in classical art and literature, was in a sense the most frequent example of the Ethiopian in Greco-Roman usage. The Ethiopian, especially the Negroid type, was the yardstick by which antiquity measured colored peoples. The Ethiopian's blackness became proverbial. The Ethiopian, together with the Scythian, was a favorite illustration of a physical type differing from the Greeks and Romans. Some Egyptologists and Africanists prefer the term "Kushites" for the inhabitants of certain areas south of Egypt, and some scholars reject the term "Ethiopian" to avoid confusion with the modern nation of Ethiopia. I have chosen "Ethiopian," however, for the simple reason that it was the word used by the Greeks and Romans themselves. I have not included Asiatic Ethiopians except for purposes of clarification. Eastern Ethiopians (exactly who they were and where they came from are not certain) differed physically from African Ethiopians, according to Herodotus, only in that those of Asia were straight-

haired and those of Africa the most woolly-haired of all men.

An important constituent part of the evidence is that provided by the numerous representations of Negroes depicted in classical art. Since archaeologists differ as to the criteria they use in classifying a depiction as Negro, archaeological reports are often misleading, especially when unaccompanied by photographs. Hence, a first-hand examination of relevant materials in museum collections was indispensable. In classifying art-objects as Negro or Negroid I have followed the guidelines of modern anthropologists. Although using Ethiopian whenever it appears in the ancient evidence, in referring to art-objects I have employed Negro or Negroid.

I have attempted to set forth the facts as precisely as possible on the basis of the ancient evidence — literary, epigraphical, papyrological, numismatic, and archaeological. The material has been presented topically, each topic chronologically as far as practicable when such an arrangement was necessary for the most effective presentation of my findings. I have focused on the Ethiopian from the Homeric period to the age of Justinian; on what the Greeks and Romans said, knew, and felt about the Ethiopian both in the lands of his origin and in various parts of the Greco-Roman world. Only a few ancient authors dealt with the Ethiopians in some detail; the works of several writers reported to have visited Ethiopia are lost. For a comprehensive picture, therefore, the countless scattered notices had to be examined. In addition to classical sources I have used pertinent findings of Egyptologists, especially for the Meroïtic period of Ethiopian peoples.

Scholars have treated one or more limited aspects of the Ethiopian in the Greco-Roman world; yet no comprehensive study has appeared. As a result, important specialized investigations have not had the advantage of the perspective derivable from a broad picture of the Ethiopian in Greek and Roman civilization. For example, even though some early archaeologists foresaw the significance of the archaeological evidence, scholars have not always related properly the literary notices and the archaeological materials. The most detailed treatment of the Negro type in Greek and Roman art — *The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type** by Mrs. G. H. Beardsley — recognized the importance of considering the lit-

*Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1929.

erary evidence. This pioneer work of forty years ago, however, gave only scant treatment to the Ethiopian in Greek and Roman literature.

Even more serious are two other consequences of the absence of a comprehensive study. First, unwarranted generalizations have been made and repeated by generations of scholars. The view, for example, that classical references to Ethiopians glorify an unknown, mysterious people needs to be modified in light of what is known of these peoples from the findings of Africanists. Or, to designate certain depictions of Negroes as caricatures is to overlook the anatomical curiosity of the artist similar to the scientific interest of the Greek environmentalists. Second, classical texts have often been misinterpreted because scholars have mistakenly attributed to antiquity racial attitudes and concepts which derive from certain modern views regarding the Negro. I considered it essential, therefore, to acquire some familiarity with modern anthropological and sociological research on pertinent racial and intercultural problems. For an interpretation of the Greco-Roman attitude toward the dark and black peoples of Africa designated as Ethiopians this excursus into nonclassical disciplines has been valuable. Having lived in Egypt, Greece, and Italy for substantial periods of time, I have noticed similarities between the ancient and modern views of colored peoples in these areas of the Mediterranean. Two personal experiences illustrate this point. During my last visit to Athens, the taxi driver who drove me from the airport, upon observing my dark color, exclaimed with confidence "Αἰθίοψ!" (Ethiopian) — a happy coincidence and an encouraging introduction for an investigator in pursuit of classical representations of Ethiopians in Athenian museums. I once encountered in Sicily an interesting parallel to the ancient confusion between Indians and Ethiopians, between east and south. A colleague and I had spent some pleasant moments with the local custodian of an archaeological site. Finally the Sicilian's curiosity prompted him to inquire of me "Are you *Chinese?*" I have acquired some unexpected insights, therefore, from my sojourns among the descendants of the people whose literary documents and art are the subject of my study.

"Africa is always producing something new" was a Greek proverb, preserved by Aristotle and Pliny. This proverb has a certain applicability to my study. A fresh and comprehensive look

at what the Greeks and Romans had to say about Ethiopians from Africa has perhaps yielded something new.

In the preparation of this book, I owe much to many. I am grateful to William L. Westermann, who long ago discussed some of my findings with me and suggested that I develop and publish them and to Mason Hammond, who has encouraged me over the years. I acknowledge my gratitude for the leisure and financial assistance provided at various intervals by a Fulbright fellowship and by research grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Howard University Research Fund. I have enjoyed the generous hospitality of the libraries of Harvard College, Dumbarton Oaks, the Center for Hellenic Studies, and the American Academy in Rome. I have many individuals and museums to thank for the courtesy of photographs and permission to publish them and for the kindness in helping me study the objects themselves. Certain chapters of this book are either based on or are developments of ideas expressed in articles which I have published. Some portions are the same as in the articles in question but in general have been modified or enlarged by the inclusion of additional material. My thanks are due, therefore, to the editors of the *American Journal of Philology*, *American Anthropologist*, *L'Antiquité Classique*, and *Traditio* for permission to make use of material which has appeared in these journals. I am also grateful to the many scholars who have generously answered my questions on knotty points. Colleagues at Howard have been very helpful — Leon E. Wright and Gene Rice in the chapter on early Christianity; Mark H. Watkins, in anthropological matters; J. Edwin Foster, in photographic guidance; Eva Keuls, in proofreading; and members of the Department of Classics as well as other departments, in their willingness to hear me and advise.

I am deeply obliged to my secretary, Mrs. Gladys Clemmons, who cheerfully typed draft after draft, and to Mrs. Natalie Frohock of the Harvard Press, who patiently edited this volume. Finally, I can never express sufficient gratitude to my wife for her assistance and encouragement along the way.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

F. M. S., Jr.

Washington, D.C.
February 1969

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