NEGROES IN CLASSICAL GREECE
THE NEGRO PRESENCE IN CLASSICAL GREECE
– AN OVERVIEW

Negroes were common in Classical Greece – as slaves and as freedmen, and it was their inclusion into Grecian society, which ultimately saw that civilization fall.

GREEK DESCRIPTIONS OF NEGROES


The Classical Greeks most commonly described Negroes as “Ethiopians”, or

In Diod. Sic. 3.8.2, for example, is associated with black skin, woolly hair, and a flat nose.

Arr. Ind. 6.9, states that the natives of Southern India, though Blacks, are not so flat-nosed or so woolly-haired as the Ethiopians.

In Tetr. 2.2, and Strabo 15.1.24, is associated with black skin and woolly hair; and the authors discuss the reason for the Ethiopian's black skin and woolly hair.

In Sext. Empiric. Adv. Ethicos 43, is associated with black skin and a flat nose; and the Ethiopians are said to prefer the blackest and most flat-nosed;

Xenophanes, frg. 16 (Diels), in a discussion of racial types, says that the Ethiopians represent their gods as flat-nosed and black.

In Herodotus 7.70, is associated with woolly hair: Herodotus even differentiates between the woolly-haired and the straight-haired Ethiopians, in relation to each other from West to East; which we today know is the result of Arabic/Semitic admixture.

Aristotle, in his Gen. An. 5.3.782B, contrasts the straight hair of the Scythians and Thracians with the woolly hair of the Ethiopians and people who live in hot regions.

Aristotle, in his Physiogn. 6.812A, says that those with “wooly hair” those who are too swarthy (Phgn 6.812B.) are cowardly, and meant this about Ethiopians.

Philostratus writes of the Ethiopian's color as follows: "Charming Ethiopians with their strange color..."
(Imagenes, 1.29.

Galen, in his Temperament. 2.616, attributes the woolly hair of the Ethiopians to the effect of heat.

!424@R associated with black or dark skin in the following works: Aesch. Prom. 808-809, frg. 370 (Nauck 2 ); Eurip. frg. 228.3-4 (Nauck 2 ), cf. frg. 771.4 (Nauck 2 ); Theoc. 17.87; Aristot. Probl. 10.66 898n, Hist. An. 3.9.517A, Gen. An. 2.2.736A; ps.-Aristot. Physiogn. 6.812A; Lucian, Adv. Indoctum 28, Bis Acc. 6; Ach. Tat. 4.5; Quint. Smyrn. 2.32, 2.101, 2.642; Sext. Empiric. Adv. Physicos 1.249; Arr. An. 5.4.4; ps.-Callisth. 2.190; Galen, Temperament. 2.628; (SCHMIDT, P. C., 1897 Eine griechische Grabinschrift aus Antinoë. Aegyptiaca: Festschrift
The most common words that the Greeks used to designate the color of the Ethiopian’s skin were: (black) and compounds of: (black or dark - Aesch. Prom. 808 and Theoc. 17.87.) and (dark - Quint. Smyrn. 2.101; cf. Hes. Op. 527.), according to VECKENSTEDT, E., 888 Geschichte tier griechischen Farbenlehre. Paderborn, p. 138, refers to the Ethiopian’s black, oily, shiny skin.

In Arr. An. 5.4.4. Aristot. Probl. 10.66.698B., an Ethiopian’s skin is called the blackest in the world.

Blacks were well known to Classical Greeks: Here a Greek soldier spears a Black, from the Lefkadia, Kinch tomb in Macedonia. Note how the Black is wearing Persian dress, very likely one of the Negroes noted as fighting in Xerxes’ army, which penetrated the entire Greek peninsula past Athens itself.

Lucian Adv. Indoctum 28. notes the proverbial which means to “wash an Ethiopian white”.

When the Greeks wanted to illustrate blackness of color, they often selected the Ethiopian for this purpose. (Lucian Bis. Acc. 6. In which reference is made to tanning the skin until it resembles an Ethiopian’s, and Ach. Tat. 4.5.2, in which mention is made of a flower among the Greeks as dark as an Ethiopian’s skin.)

In the mythological ‘Labors of Hercules’, Negro bodyguards marched to the assistance of the Egyptian Busiris whom Heracles had laid low. (Beardsley, G.H, 1929 The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, no. 7 and fig. 1; nos. 104-110.)


The Memnon or Aithiopes of Sophocles and possibly the Memnon of Aeschylus had an Ethiopian chorus. (Soph. Frgs. 25-30 (Nauck 2) and WEBSTER, T. B. L., 1936 An Introduction to Sophocles. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, , p. 173.)

A passage in Menander refers to Ethiopians in this way:

"The man whose natural bent is good, He, mother, he, though Aethiop, is nobly born. "A Scyth," you say? Pest! Anacharsis was a Scyth! " - (Frg. 533 Koch. Allinson's translation in the Loeb edition.)

Allinson translates lines 11-12 as follows: "The man whose natural bent is good, he, mother, though Aethiop is nobly born.” (Loeb edition.)

Racial contrasts are common in Greek literature. Aristotle contrasts the straight hair of the Scythians and the Thracians with the woolly hair of the Negroes. (78 Gen. An. 5.3.782B.)

Ptolemy (79 Tetr. 2.2.) contrasts Negroes and Scythians in a passage in which it is clear that the author is interested in the racial types involved.
Xenophanes (Frg. 16 (Diels) in a similar contrast recounts that the Negroes represent their gods as black-faced and flat-nosed, while the Thracians show their gods to be blue-eyed and red-haired.

Sextus Empiricus (Adv. Ethicos, 43.) writes that beauty is relative, the Negroes preferring the blackest and the most flat-nosed and the Persians approving the whitest and the most hook-nosed.

The authors cite the Negroes and Scythians or Thracians as examples of distinct racial opposites. A similar practice is reflected in the Menander passage (SCHMIDT, P. C., 1897 Eine griechische Grabinschrift aus Antinoë. Aegyptiaca: Festschrift für Georg Ebers, p.102. W. Englemann, Leipzig.)

It is thus clear that references to Negroes abound in Classical Greek literature.

Knowing how they described Negroes, therefore makes it easier to look for identical descriptions or references to Negroes in Greece itself.

THE NEGRO PRESENCE IN CLASSICAL GREECE

Negroes were known in the Greek world as early as Minoan times. (EVANS, A. J.: The Palace of Minos, I. Macmillan, London, 1921, pp. 302, 310, 312, and figs. 230, a, b, and c; and The Palace of Minos, II. Macmillan, London.1928, pp. 45-46.)

Negroes soldiers were employed by the Minoans as auxiliaries. (EVANS, A. J., 928 The Palace of Minos, II. Macmillan, London, pp. 755-757 and plate XIII. Evans (p. 756) states that the Blacks also served as palace guards at the King’s residence in Minos.)

A Negro on a human mask from a bronze age tomb was found at Cyprus (MARSHALL, F. H., 1911 Catalogue of the Jewellery, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman in the Departments of Antiquities, British Museum. London. No. 144).


A double headed vase showing a Black and a White face, reflecting the two elements in late Grecian society.

<= Numerous Janiform objects which contrasted White and Negroid types reveal the same anthropological interest in racial contrast. (BEARDSLEY, G. H., 1929 The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. nos. 8, 9, 36, 37, 39, 40, 44, 45, 47, 50.)

In Homer’s Odyssey, Eurybates, who came from Ithaca, as Odysseus' herald, is described as follows: "He was round-shouldered, dark-skinned, and woolly-haired, and his name was Eurybates; and Odysseus honoured him above his other comrades." (Homer, Odyssey. 19.246-248).

According to Quintus (2.100-101.) of Smyrna, the Greeks encountered Negroes in the army of Memnon at Troy.
The mask of a Negro, discovered at Akragas along with the representations of Demeter and Persephone and their worshipers, portrays the flat nose, thick lips and short woolly hair with an accuracy obviously derived from direct observation of the real racial type. (MARCONI, P., 1931 New Light on Greek Religion in Sicily: Great Discoveries at the Sanctuary of the Earth-Goddesses at Agrgentum: Art Relics Ranging from the 6th Century B.C. to the Hellenistic Age. London Illustrated News, 178, pp. 959-960, and figs. I and 2).

Negro contingents formed a part of Xerxes' army (Herodotus, 7.69-70.)


In this 300 BC Grecian statue above, a Black African slave is shown polishing a boot.

Theophrastus states that the "man of petty ambition" had an Ethiopian slave. (Char. 21.4.)

One of the pupils of Herodes Atticus was a Negro. When his pupils died, including the Negro, he erected statues to them (Philostr., V. A. 3.11; V. S., 2.558-559.)

The extensive use of Negro soldiers is another indication of their presence in Classical Greece: Quintus (2.216.) of Smyrna records that the Ethiopians at Troy excelled in battle.


THE NEGRO IN GREEK ART

The accuracy of the depictions of Black racial types in Classical Greek art shows without any doubt that the artists had real, live, actually models before them.

A statuette vase in the form of a "temple boy," together with the mould for making it, was discovered at Olynthus in 1928. (ROBINSON, D. Y., 1931 Excavations at Olynthus, Part IV, The Terra-cottas of Olynthus Found in 1928. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, page 78, no.384, and plate 42.)

A mulatto priest of Isis has been identified as the work of an artist working in Athens in either the first century B.C. or the first half of the first century A.D. The priest, according to Poulsen, represented one of the native clergy whom the Egyptian metics demanded for their Isiac worship. (POULSEN, P., 1913 Tête de Prêtre d'Isis Trouvée a Athènes. Mélanges Holleaux, pp. 217-223. A. Picard, Paris, pp. 217-223 and plate VI.)

The Negroid face of the herm of Memnon, one of the pupils of Herodes Atticus.

Graindor believes that a Negro-faced herm, discovered at Athens is that of Memnon, one of the pupils of Herodes Atticus. (GRAINIDOR, P., 1915 Tête de Nègre du Musée de Berlin. Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique, 39, p. 402; and 1930:

A vase depicting a Circe as a Negroid female.

Circe is represented on several vases as a Negro. (WALTERS, H. B., 1893 Odysseus and Circe on a Boeotian Vase. Journal of Hellenic Studies, 13, p. 81.fig. 2, and pl. 4.)

One of the followers of Theseus was a boy whose thick lips and curly hair suggest that he was a Negro. (Beardsley, G.H, 1929 The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 63, no. 121.)

A Negro youth, interpreted as an attendant of the sons of Niobe, appears in a group of the Niobids. (Beardsley, G.H, 1929 The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 86, no. 179.)

A 5th Century lecythus depicts a Negro woman being tortured by satyrs (MAYER, M., 1891 Noch Einmal Lamia. Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Ableilung,16, pp. 300-312.)

One of two actors appearing on an early fourth-century vase is a bald, beardless Negro, who wears a little skin fastened on the right shoulder, walks by the aid of a staff, and holds a flaming torch. (TILLYARD, E. M. W., 1923 The Hope Vases - a Catalogue and a Discussion of the Hope Collection of Greek Vases with an Introduction on the History of the Collection and on Late Attic and South Italian Vases. University Press, Cambridge, England, no.121, pl. 19 and p. 71.)


It is likely that Negroes appeared as actors not only in regular dramatic performances but also in myths danced in pantomime. (HARRISON, J. E., 1890 Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens. Macmillan, London and New York, p. cxvii.)

A Greek statue of a Negro musician dating from between the 4th and 3rd Centuries BC, and on the right, a close-up of Negro musician's face (picture artificially lightened so as to bring out the features.) On display in the Biblotheque Nationale, Paris.

A bronze statuette of a Negro usually interpreted as a dancer represents one of the wildest moments of a dance, reminiscent of certain African tribal dances. (Beardsley, G.H, 1929 The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization: A Study of the Ethiopian Type, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, no.207 and fig. 18; also nos. 211-212.)

A Negro musician, is one of the more famous such sculptures, currently in the
The numerous representations of Negroes in Classical Greek art, and their accuracy in depiction, all point to an obvious live presence of that racial type form, which the artists could work.

Further references to Negroes in Ancient Greek art can be found in the following works:


It is therefore beyond doubt that the Negro racial type was present in significant numbers on the Greek mainland - in all manner of occupations, including slaves to soldiers, actors and so on.

RACIAL MIXING IN ANCIENT GREECE

The Athenian leader, Pericles, tried in 451 BC, to limit citizenship of Athens to those of pure Athenian biological descent.

Despite Pericles’ law, the Classical Greeks, according to Zimmern, showed very little other traces of racial awareness (what Zimmern calls "color-prejudice" - ZIMMERN, A. E., 1931 The Greek Commonwealth, fifth edition. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 323.)

Another scholar, Westermann, goes even further and states that Classical “Greek society had no color line”. (WESTERMANN, W. L., 1943 Slavery and the Elements of Freedom. Quarterly Bulletin of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1, p. 346.)

This appraisal is borne out by a review of Classical Grecian references to mixed racial unions.

Aristotle mentions a woman of Elis whose daughter by a Negro, was not Negroid but whose grandson was. (Gen. An. 1.18.722A; Hist. An. 7.6.586A.) This passage would be meaningless unless it referred to the offspring of a black-white union. Aristotle’s general usage of :X8"1, furthermore, indicates that in these passages he clearly had in mind the Negro type.

Plutarch (De Sera Numinis Vindicta, 21.) relates a similar story about a Greek woman whose black baby caused her to be accused of adultery, although an investigation of her lineage revealed that she was the great granddaughter of an Ethiopian.
RACIALLY MIXED GREEK TYPES ILLUSTRATED IN COFFIN PORTRAITS

The best original examples of what happened to many Classical Greeks, in racial terms, comes from the coffin portraits of Greeks who emigrated to Egypt during the Ptolemaic Era.

AB
From left to right: (A) detail from the mummy case of Artemidorus the Younger, a Greek who had settled in Thebes, Egypt, during Roman times (100AD).; (B) This coffin-portrait from AD 40-50 bears the inscription "Hermione, Grammatike." Hermione was, therefore, an educated woman, a teacher of reading, writing and grammar. There is evidence that grammatikoi were highly esteemed in the Roman empire for their role in disseminating Greek education.

C D
From left to right: (C) Unknown woman, Roman period of Greek Egypt. ca. 130-60 A.D.; (D) Unknown woman, Roman period of Greek Egypt, circa AD 55-70.

AB
From left to right: (A) Two Greco-Roman brothers, 1st century AD, one darker than the other, mulatto types: (B) Greco-Roman male, 2nd century AD, clear Semitic admixture.

C D
From left to right: (C) Greco-Egyptian, 1st half of the 2nd Century AD, mixed race; (D) Greco-Roman male, 2nd Century AD, mixed-race type.

Above: An original painted clay mask of a Greek man, on display in the British Museum, London. Diosopolis Parva, from the Roman Period in Egypt, ca. AD 100, showing the obvious effect of racial mixing. Alongside, his skull, also on display in the British Museum.

Mixture between Blacks and Whites in the Greek world is confirmed by the evidence of sculpture.

A vase of a temple boy from Olynthus is described by Robinson as a boy with "almost negroid features." (ROBINSON, D. Y., 1931 Excavations at Olynthus, Part IV, The Terra-cottas of Olynthus Found in 1928. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 78, no.384 and pl. 42.)

Another Olynthus head whose features Robinson also regards as "almost negroid" is another obvious product of racial mixing. (ROBINSON, D. Y., 1931 Excavations at Olynthus, Part IV, The Terra-cottas of Olynthus Found in 1928. The Johns
Above: A mummy of a Greek boy, whose face was painted on his coffin, First/Second Century AD. (detail below). Once again, the effects of racial mixing are plain to see. On display in the British Museum, London.

Reference was made above to a mulatto priest of Isis: his racial appearance is described as follows: "... this man, whose cranium belongs to the type of Asia Minor and whose lower face and neck are those of a Negro, is obviously of a mixed race; we are dealing with a mulatto..." ("...cet homme, dont le crâne appartient au type de l'Asie Mineure et dont le bas du visage et le cou sont ceux d'un nègre, est évidemment d'une race mixte; tout bien considéré nous avons affaire à un mulâtre." - POULSEN, P., 1913 Tête de Prêtre d'Isis Trouvée a Athènes. Mélanges Holleaux, pp. 217-223. A. Picard, Paris, p. 218 and pl. VI.)

SECOND AND THIRD GENERATION RACIAL MIXES

Both Aristotle and Plutarch discuss the racial characteristics of second and third generation black-white racial mixes in their works:

"Further, children are like their more remote ancestors from whom nothing has come, for the resemblances recur at an interval of many generations, as in the case of the woman in Elis who had intercourse with the Aethiop; her daughter was not an Aethiop but the son of the daughter was." - Aristotle, Gen. An. 1.18.722A

and

"But parents may pass on resemblance after several generations, as in the case of the woman in Elis, who committed adultery with a negro; in this case it was not the woman's own daughter, but the daughter's child that was a blackamoor" - Aristotle, Hist. An; 7.6.586A.

Further references to racially mixed types stretching over generations can be found in Plutarch's De Sera Numinis Vindicta, 21.

Also previously mentioned was the herm of Memnon, which, according to Graindor, was a Negroid pupil of Herodes Atticus. This herm is "of mongrel race but with the Negro type of North Africa, Nubia or Abyssinia, being prevalent." ("de race métisse mais avec prédominance du type nègre du Nord de l'Afrique, de la Nubie ou de l'Abyssinie." - GRAINIDOR, P., 1915 Tête de Nègre du Musée de Berlin. Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique, 39, p. 402.)

CONCLUSION

This brief overview shows conclusively that:

1. The Ancient Greeks were well aware of the Negroid and mixed racial types;

2. That Blacks were present, as slaves, mercenaries or freedmen, in Classical Grecian times; and

3. That racial mixing took place.
Click here for a discussion of the racial types of the Ancient Greeks
Click here for an overview of the Negroid presence in Classical Greece
Click here for genetic evidence of racial mixing in Ancient Greece
Click here for a list of leading literary references to race by Classical Grecian writers
For a discussion of racial mixing in European populations, including Greece, click here

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