

Did racism exist in the ancient world?

Setting aside preconceptions and a modern, judgemental approach is difficult when discussing racism in the ancient world, due to the pertinence of the issue in our society. However, it is also easy to justify ancient attitudes by the argument that racism as we know it has only existed in more modern times. Therefore, to avoid getting involved in debate about how to define racism, I am regarding racism as the belief that one's race is superior in some way to others, as such beliefs are at the very heart of racial discrimination. In order to discuss the question in some depth, I am only considering the ancient Greeks, as their beliefs and prejudices have been so influential, especially since they were formative for the Romans' views and therefore endured for a long time. However, it is also important to consider the difference between racism and xenophobia, as despite the common use of the word racism describing hate crimes or speech, it is fundamentally the ideology of superiority of a race, whereas xenophobia is the fear or hatred of foreigners. Within these parameters, clearly some form of racism did exist in the ancient world, as the ancient Greeks had a strong sense of superiority over non-Greeks, seen both in their attitude towards foreigners, for whom they had a collective term ('βαρβαροι') to signify that they were not Greek, and in how they saw themselves, that is, as a pure race descended from the Earth itself, giving them a sense of superiority over other races.

To start with, it is important to look at how political systems and the law treated other races, to which end ancient Athens provides a crucial insight into how the political system treated other races, showing how much the Athenians were obsessed with their identity and how they defined themselves in contrast to others. Each person's status and rights were determined by whether they were a man or woman; citizen, slave or metic and so on. This internal structure is extremely important when considering institutional attitudes to foreigners and their presence in the city. Importantly, only those whose parents were both Athenian qualified for citizenship, so that foreigners and other Greeks could never become citizens except in exceptional cases, being limited to the status of metic once they had resided in Athens for long enough. This was motivated by the Athenians' belief that they were autochthonous and that their ancestors had always lived in Athens, since they wanted to protect this 'purity' of lineage. Although clearly not drastic in its effects, this shows the extremity of Athenian discrimination against anyone 'non-Athenian', as they led themselves by pseudo-historic means to a belief in their own supremacy which affected fundamentally the political rights they allowed others to have.

In addition to political and legal racism, it is important to look at what Greeks actually thought about people of other races. For this aspect, it is useful to look at the animosity provoked by the Persian Wars and how this affected Greek attitudes towards other races, as they were a catalyst in the development of the concepts of Greek identity. Increased usage of the word barbarian (‘βαρβαρος’) occurred around this time due to the increased awareness of cultural differences as well as enmity towards their enemy. Aeschylus’ *Persians* (472 B.C.) provides an excellent insight into what the Greek stereotypes of the Persians were, especially as it was written so soon after the Persian Wars and focussed so much on the Persians. The repeated use of ‘βαρβαρος’ as well as a clear effort by Aeschylus to make the Persians names sound strange and unfamiliar to the Greeks, helps to create a sense of unfamiliarity for a Greek audience, alienating the Persians, while common stereotypes of the Persians are heavily used to reinforce the audience’s preconceptions about the Persians.¹ For example, the Persians are portrayed as slow-witted and easily tricked by the Greeks’ cunning, but also tyrannical and cruel. These sorts of stereotypes became a vicious circle, as the more people believed in them, the more they found ways to confirm their beliefs. This was especially true for the belief that barbarians were naturally servile, as the fact that so many slaves in Greece were foreign confirmed this belief for the Greeks, justifying it in their minds as perfectly natural, to the extent that Aristotle even believed that slavery was necessary and beneficial for both parties.² Although a lot of the animosity towards the Persians can be put down more to xenophobia than to racism, there was also certainly a conviction that the Persians were morally inferior to the Greeks, which can certainly be considered racism. The Persian Wars clearly did a lot to advance the Greek sense of superiority because of the unity they gave the Greeks and the existence of a common enemy whom they defeated.

In addition, when considering attitudes towards foreigners, it can be helpful to look at how Herodotus treats foreigners in his *Histories*, as he focusses in his writings on other cultures, so we can learn a lot about his attitudes towards other races. He also provides a different perspective to other Greeks because of his travelling and experience with other cultures. Although he certainly exaggerates a lot of the facts about the cultures and people he describes, it is difficult to know exactly why Herodotus did this, whether it was because he actually believed what he was writing, or in some cases because he was trying to be derogatory, or just because he was trying to enhance his narrative to make it more interesting to read. However, he clearly subscribes to some racist views, such as his claim that there is

¹ Favorini, A. (2003): History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus' "The Persians". *Theatre Journal*, 55(1), 99-111.

² Aristotle: Politics 1.1255b

no country that produces good fruit that also produces brave warriors, but that soft countries breed soft men.³ Despite this, Herodotus also shows a great deal of understanding regarding different cultures and customs, for example when he relates Darius' attempt to show some Greeks and Callatians that the way each of their cultures disposed of their relatives' corpses was shocking and unthinkable to the other⁴. He tells this in what seems to be a very neutral way, not suggesting that either is superior to the other but just seemingly genuinely interested in the differences between the Greeks and Callatians. Herodotus' views are extremely complex, but he seems to have less of the sense of superiority that the Athenians had and to have had a more tolerant view of other cultures, while still showing evidence of the same sort of prejudice that was common among Greeks.

Although in a modern sense racism is mostly concerned with skin colour, for the ancient Greeks arguably this was a less important factor. It is incredibly difficult to assess what the Greeks really thought about colour as there are so many conflicting pieces of evidence. The widespread admiration for centuries for the character of Memnon, the mythic Ethiopian hero of the Trojan war, seems to show a great level of acceptance. However, Homeric attitudes to race were very different to later attitudes, as he does not seem to show any discrimination against other races, which was certainly not true in Classical Greece, and in fact in Memnon's later depictions in art, such as Exekias' amphora depicting him with two black servants, he conspicuously lacks the characteristics of a black African, looking more like any other Greek or Trojan heroes, in contrast with the servants standing next to him, although it is difficult to establish what the reason for this was.⁵ However, the Greeks did seem to admire the Ethiopians greatly, as Homer describes them as blameless⁶ and Herodotus writes that they are said to be the tallest, most handsome, and most long-lived people, but there is the added complication that he might have been saying this ironically as he does not say whether he agrees with this and goes on to say that they live to 120 years old⁷. There was, however, little contact with the Ethiopians in their own land, as the Greeks knew them mostly from hearsay or contact as slaves or foreigners in Greece. On the other hand, Aristotle wrote that those whose skin was too dark or too light were cowardly, showing that he had no doubt about the correlation between skin colour and

³ Herodotus: *Histories* 9.122 “ἐκ τῶν μαλακῶν χώρων μαλακοὺς γίνεσθαι.” (from soft countries come soft men). (My translation)

⁴ Herodotus: *Histories* 3.38

⁵ British Museum, 1849,0518.10. (Photograph below)

⁶ Homer: *Iliad* 1.423 “ἀμύμονας Αἰθιοπῆας” (blameless Ethiopians)

⁷ Herodotus: *Histories* 3.20 “μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι ἀνθρώπων πάντων” (the tallest and most beautiful of all men); 3.23 “ἔτεα μὲν ἐς εἴκοσι καὶ ἑκατὸν τοὺς πολλοὺς αὐτῶν ἀπικνέεσθαι” (most of them lived for 120 years). (My translations)

character, although it is important to remember that often his opinion was not always representative of popular beliefs at the time.⁸ In addition, we can see that there was a fascination with the physiological differences between the Greeks and the Africans from Greek art, such as an Attic kantharos from 480-470 B.C.E. depicting the face of Heracles and a black African, highlighting their differences by the juxtaposition of colours, while bringing out the beauty of each face.⁹ This would suggest a situation where physical differences were accepted and even emphasised to bring out their beauty. This goes to show how difficult it is to tell what the Greeks thought about those with different skin colours, and just how different their prejudices were to those that we associate with racism. In fact, they appear to have accepted varying skin colours as simply a product of climate and location, which, while it has other implications which I will discuss in later in the essay, does not suggest a racist attitude. Although not as important, arguably one way in which they had a prejudice regarding skin colour was aesthetic, as there is evidence to suggest that they considered lighter skin more attractive, such as Asclepiades, who writes about Didyme's beauty, asking what does it matter if she is black.¹⁰ A strong sense of what skin colours were considered beautiful can be seen in other cases, such as the epithet Homer uses to describe women, white-armed¹¹, while describing Odysseus as dark-skinned¹². Although there is some controversy as to what the exact meaning of the word is here, especially as it is a hapax legomenon, men clearly had darker skin than women as they spent so much more time outdoors, which can be seen on black figure pottery where men are portrayed as black and women as white. Having lighter skin would have been the mark of a woman who didn't have to go outside as much especially in richer families, while a man having dark skin would show that he worked hard, spending a lot of time outdoors. Clearly, the Greeks' ideas about what was beautiful are complex and difficult to fully determine, but they certainly were prejudiced to a certain extent and considered certain skin colours less desirable than others.

Inevitably, people tried to justify their beliefs and prejudices scientifically and philosophically, which helped to establish such beliefs as facts in the minds of many. In *Airs, Waters, Places*, Hippocrates, although writing about the link between diseases and the environment, seeks to clarify why the Asiatics are less belligerent than Europeans, reaching the conclusion that the more extreme climate in Europe gave its inhabitants spirit and courage, while the less extreme Asian climate led to

⁸ Aristotle: *Physiognomics*, 6.812b

⁹ Attic kantharos, Musei Vaticani: 16539 (Photograph below)

¹⁰ Asclepiades: *Didyme*, 5.210 Greek Anthology

¹¹ Homer: *Iliad* 3.121 "Ἑλένη λευκωλένῳ" (white-armed Helen)

¹² Homer: *Odyssey* 16.175 "μελαγχροῦς" (dark-skinned)

its inhabitants being weak and lacking spirit¹³. He considered that the Greeks were in the optimal location being between the two extremes and this led to his conclusion that the Persians were more suited to autocracy because of their cowardice while the Greeks were strong-willed so were more suited to autonomy. Such beliefs grew in popularity and Aristotle subscribed to such a view, stating that Asians were naturally servile, which to him justified enslaving them as it suited their nature to be slaves.¹⁴ However, not all Greeks thought this; notably Alexander the Great disagreed with Aristotle on the subject of foreigners as Alexander was more than happy to mix with Persians and other 'barbarians', even wanting to integrate Persian customs into the Macedonian court.¹⁵ However, Aristotle's 'rational' explanation for the inferiority of non-Greeks was a more popular point of view than Alexander's embrace of foreign culture.

By the previously stated definition of racism, there was evidently racism in ancient Greece and especially Athens which had been present for a long time, although such attitudes were strengthened by the unity that the threat of Persia gave the Greeks. This helped to create a strong sense of what it meant to be Greek, which cemented the Greeks' belief that they were a superior race to all those around them. From all the examples mentioned previously, it is obvious that the Greeks were not of one mind about when it came to foreigners, with attitudes varying from city to city and depending greatly on education, though it seems clear that most Greeks show some degree of prejudice against foreigners due to their supposed inferiority. However, they lacked the prejudice that is associated with modern racism regarding skin colour, although they seemingly believed that lighter skin was more desirable than darker skin. Despite their strong prejudices, they show great admiration for certain races such as the Ethiopians and in some ways were very tolerant of other races, not allowing their prejudices to stop them from interacting peacefully with many cultures around the Mediterranean. Their belief that barbarians were inferior created the scope for pseudo-scientific theories to explain why the Greeks were superior, helping to entrench such beliefs so that they became accepted essentially as fact. Fundamentally, regardless of their many different opinions and beliefs, many Greeks held the clearly racist belief that they were simply better than everyone else around them due to their lineage and their culture.

¹³ Hippocrates: *Airs, Waters, Places*. Part 16

¹⁴ Aristotle: *Politics*. 7.1327b

¹⁵ Tierney, Michael (1942): *Aristotle and Alexander the Great*

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VISUAL SOURCES BELOW:

Sebastian Norris

Exekias: Black Figure Vase Depicting Memnon. (Photograph below)



British Museum, 1849,0518.10.

Sebastian Norris

Attic kantharos, Musei Vaticani: 16539 (Photograph below)

