

Perception of the Other in the Greek and Roman World

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The ancient Greeks and Romans, to a great extent, lived off the idea of their inherent superiority over the world around them. The Romans saw their city as the epicenter of the world and Italy as the ideal breeding ground; and, like the Greeks, saw their position as the perfect blend between the extremes – primitive west and the decadent, servile and weak east. In most ways, these beliefs, by today's standards, often appear as illogical and were based mostly on misconceptions. Nevertheless, the supremacy was not so strong as to prohibit both of these societies from accepting the good. The Greeks were forced to admit that both the Egyptians and Jews were older than them, if still inferior, the former being shunned for things like his worship of animals while the other distrusted for his isolationism; while the night-colored, or "burned", people in Africa could be both the most beautiful people and a symbol of evil and misfortune. In all these cases, along with most other non-Greek or Roman ethnicities, there was a level of respect that was to be held for the people yet the ultimate superiority of the Greek or the Roman (who viewed the Greek as inferior to him), either in thought or character, was a recognized fact.

The Greeks seem to have been amazed by the Egyptians almost as soon as they came into contact with them, their antiquity was undisputable: "The name of almost all the gods also came to Greece from Egypt", wrote Herodotus(II.50); and with these names also came various festivals (the invention of which he ascribes to the them as well) and practices. In fact, the high religiosity of the Egyptians matched with their age leads Herodotus to infer that many religious practices in general came down to the Greeks from them. Herodotus' respect for these people went to such an extent that it allowed him to believe the story of Sesostrius and his great conquests. This should not surprise us since while listening to these stories, Herodotus and other Greeks who entered Egypt were marveling at the monumental works surrounding the land. The antiquity of the Egyptians is intertwined with their vast wisdom, Solon is said to have made a visit to Egypt, along with Plato, and their knowledge of history exceeds that of the Greeks through the sheer fact that they are older. However, as later events would show, once Greeks took control of Egypt, the level of respect that Herodotus did not seem to transfer over into status.

In contrast to this positive view, the Greeks also viewed with disdain the high level of sanctity that the Egyptians held animals in, especially those animals that were seen as good dishes to the Greeks. On top of this, the Egyptians could be viewed upon as despotic. While he viewed the pyramids, Herodotus could not help but think of the number of slaves employed in their construction: "They worked in gangs of 100,000 men for three months at a time."(II.124) This can be compared to the Persian construction of what would eventually be called the Suez canal. From Ammianus we hear of the stereotypes that Egyptians are "somewhat swarthy and dark of complexion, and rather gloomy-looking, slender and hardy, excitable in all their movements, quarrelsome, and most persistent duns."(Marcellinus.22.16.23) and through Horace we hear of the licentiousness of Egyptian society.(Horace 1.37) Due to the fact that "...almost all Egyptian customs and practices are the opposite of those everywhere else"(Herodotus.II.35) we can see them as a symbol of otherness, a foreign society Greeks cannot really identify with. As Herodotus also mentions, they have an innate desire for kings and cannot go live without one (II.147): a symbol of their servility. The Egyptians then, for all their wisdom and age, were still part of the barbarian community, and still prone to its weaknesses. Also, their high degree of religiosity and dogmatic character could give the Greeks the

view that perhaps the Egyptians were too superstitious.

The introduction of Greeks to the Jewish community opened them to a unique culture that they have never been truly introduced to: radical monotheism as the center of religious practice. In compliance with the tendency to apply their own perceptions and ideas to the world at large, Greeks saw the Jewish people as a mass of philosophers due to the fondness of Greek philosophers in speculating a monotheistic heaven: "Given an entire people practicing monotheism, simple logic demands that they be a 'people of philosophers.'" (Modrzejewski 48-49) Much like with the Egyptians, the ability of the Jews in proving that they were undoubtedly older than the Greeks garnered them a sense of respect that would not be evident for the later Christian community. This respect was perhaps not as high as the one granted to the Egyptians, but it was there nevertheless and it, along with the favors granted by Alexander, paved the way for concessions granted to them later by the Ptolemies, such as the construction of temples or the acceptance of their religious law in the empire. However, no matter how much the Jewish community assimilated to the dominant Greek element around them, they remained a distant culture and people to the eyes of the Greeks.

The "philosopher-born" title the Jews were granted early on by the Greeks does not seem to have helped them against the negative stereotypes and misconceptions that surrounded them during the Roman era: "The Jews were described as lepers and their carriers of other pestilential afflictions..." (Modrzejewski 136). On top of being the bearers of a contagious and incurable disease, they are also seen as isolationists, atheists and stigmatized with stories involving ritual murder and cannibalism. (140) Although the Jews had assimilated culturally in the Greek sphere, the harsh restrictions of their faith prohibited them from reconciling with the Greek 'faith'. This difference created an aura of unsociability and seclusion. This along with the practice of circumcision, among other rituals, further alienated them from the Greeks; in such circumstance we see how men like Dositheos, who abandoned his faith to reach the top office under the Ptolemies, came about and why Philo was forced to use so much of his intellectual ability in defending the Jewish position, which was so often attacked.

With the Ethiopians we are dealing with a community that was not known to the Greeks and Romans as well as Egyptians and the Jews since the former lived primarily on the periphery of the Greco-Roman world and not so much within it. Not only this, but the community itself does not seem to have been viewed in one image: "...Diodorus makes a clear distinction between savage, squalid Ethiopians and civilized Ethiopians..." (Snowden 109) Already then we must be careful in trying to find any stereotypes. Beyond this, Ethiopians seem to have been surrounded by an aura of divinity and mysticism. Herodotus, speaking of one community, states that they are "...the tallest and most attractive people in the world" (177) and that they enjoy abnormally long lives. We have continuous mentions as to how they are a people favored by the gods, pious, "godlike" and together form a utopian society: "The Ethiopians, according to Stobaeus, practice piety and justice; their houses are without doors and no one steals the many things left in the streets." (Snowden 148) According to Homer, the Ethiopians were often visited by the gods, who enjoyed feasting with them. Thus these people living on the edge of civilization seem to be among those favored by the gods.

During a scene in the Life of Benedict by Gregory the Great, Benedict finds one of the monks distracted from prayer by a "little black boy", he acts quickly and saves the monk from the devil's agent through prayer. (Gregory.4) The scene in the biography is representative of a perception of dark skin that became prevalent throughout the ancient world: dark people had an association similar to our black cats, "...related no doubt to the association of the color black with death, the underworld, and evil." (Snowden 179) Ethiopians, then, are often used in the foreshadowing an unfortunate event. To the Greeks and Romans, the Ethiopians also formed part of the extreme positioning that made men prone towards barbarism. Like the Scythians who were in the extreme north, the Ethiopians were in the extreme south and showed the symptoms of a society living on the edge of civilization; at the

same time, being the color of what was perceived as unlucky, or evil, they received such a title.

In creating the stereotypes and judgments of the people living within or around them, the Greeks and Romans relied mostly on misconceptions derived either from ill knowledge, such as in the practices of Jews, to myths, as in the case of Ethiopians, and preconceived notions of the "other". In most of these cases, they do not show the proper knowledge of the people to make any opinions of them to begin with and in many cases, such as with the Jews, the Greco-Roman culture does not seem to have made any real attempt to understand the foreigners. It is enough for them to know that the Ethiopian lives on the extremity of the world for them to deduce then that weakness is part of his breeding. Other stereotypes, whether positive or negative, were built off of aspects of a foreign society interpreted through their own culture. Thus the Greeks saw the Jews as "born-philosophers" through an aspect of their own society, a concept that seems laughable to us today. Although often attempting a scientific conclusion of a given people, most of the conclusions are not actually scientific based and often are reliant on hearsay or superstition. By today's standards, nearly all of these stereotypes today would be seen a sign of shortsightedness on the part of the Greeks and Romans and an overall failure to understand the people in question.

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