

This essay will examine the influence of contemporary preoccupations on ancient scholarship around race and slavery. It will argue that there is some extent to which our understanding of Greece and black Africa has been obscured by the involvement of modern ideas about race, whilst the move towards a vision of the relationship between Greco-Roman slaves and their masters which appreciates this as a deeply regrettable but nonetheless two-way dynamic has massively profited our understanding of history.

Contemporary preoccupations have impacted scholarship on race in the ancient world. Amidst a general backdrop of scholarly reflection on race in the Anglo-American world, the increased influence of postmodernism on the humanities has led many scholars to promote the deployment of race as an analytical lens, useful in the same way as gender and class when applied to past societies in order to scrutinise their attitudes around these constructs (Frederickson 2000, 77).

One definition of racism, dominant in post-war Anglo-American scholarship, holds that beliefs and practices rooted in the notion that ‘inferior’ peoples are born with immutable characteristics regarding their mental and physical attributes, giving rise to a supposedly natural hierarchy amongst peoples. In the modern period, the operationalisation of such ideas had grotesque consequences for groups such as the Africans enslaved during the Atlantic slave trade or European Jewry’s plight at the hands of Nazism (Frederickson 2000, 79). Whilst modern racism has often been rooted in pseudoscientific theories about the innate capacities of various peoples alien to ancient societies, such as phrenology, some scholars have nonetheless sought to identify whether the Greeks and Romans had a biologically racist view of the peoples surrounding them (Harrison 2020, 152).

Isaac has argued that we can surmise that there was a 'proto-racist' outlook prevalent in Greece based on assertions made by authors about group differences. He cites belief in environmental determinism, heritable traits and superiority of lineage as supporting factors for this (Isaac 2009, 33-34). For Isaac, Aristotle's image of Greece as existing between two European and Asian poles, the first defined by a trying climate imbuing its inhabitants with vigour and the second whose inhabitants were rendered soft and submissive by their warm environment, held currency amongst most Greeks and indicates proto racism (Isaac 2009, 40-41; Aristotle, *Politics* 1327b in Isaac 2009, 40-41). This is entirely different, though, from modern biologically racist outlooks, which generally have not attributed the alleged inferiority of black or Jewish people to the climate but rather to their inherent savageness or wickedness, unchanging irrespective of setting.

In fact, textual analysis by other scholars, such as Gruen's analysis of works dealing with Persia, has contradicted Isaac's conclusions about the ancient Greeks' attitudes. Gruen interprets Aeschylus' *Persae*, written only 7 years after the repulsion of King Xerxes I's 482BCE invasion and seen by some as a work of Greek triumphalism, as instead an even-handed text devoid of such sentiments. It does not, Gruen urges, portray the efforts of its Persian characters to conquer Greece as doomed to fail because of the innate superiority of their opponents, instead emphasising the role of intervention by deities ignored by the blunderous Persian king. When Xerxes himself is criticised, it is not based on stereotypes around Achaemenid kingship as an oriental despotism but for his personal improprieties; he is indeed chastised by Darius I's ghost for his hubris (Gruen 2010, 10-18; Aeschylus, *Persae* 723-725 in Gruen 2010, 18). Similarly, Gruen emphasises Herodotus' treatment of Xerxes as an emotionally complex, three-dimensional figure whose vituperative outbursts were often followed by sincere showings of remorse (Gruen 2010, 35-37). When handling a major

opportunity to wax lyrical about Greek superiority over the humbled Persians, then, these authors exhibited no signs of a belief in the biological feebleness of their Eastern foe.

Similarly, Greek works which discuss black Africans, who were recognised as substantially physically different from Mediterranean peoples, suggest that Greeks could deal equitably and even favourably with such peoples, even when they too had been implicated in the Persian invasion (Snowden 1983, 47-48). Snowden has argued that modern scholars have suffered from 'a tendency to read modern racial concepts in ancient documents and see color prejudice where none existed' (Snowden 1983, 64). This has distorted our view of history not only by exaggerating our view of the Greek chauvinism but also by obscuring the role played by black people: he cites one scholar's attempt to minimise the role of the Ethiopians in Xerxes' armies as a 'humble and almost grotesque auxiliary', contrary to evidence that they were a respected and feared battlefield force (Beardsley 1929, 53 in Snowden 1983, 64; Snowden 1983, 64). This coincides with the aims of modern-day racists in limiting the achievements of black people in the past, obscuring historical reality in favour of falsehoods intended to placate racists on their own terms.

Snowden has detected a similar phenomenon in the efforts of Afrocentrist authors, themselves motivated by an understandable dissatisfaction with the marginalisation of black history in traditional academic and educational settings (Snowden 1997, 37). Notions such as the idea that the Ptolemaic Queen Cleopatra VII was of African descent, despite numismatic evidence stretching across centuries indicating that her lineage was entirely Macedonian, have circulated amongst Afrocentrists convinced that Europeans have long engaged in falsifying the historical record to maintain the predominance of Eurocentrism (Snowden 1997, 47). For Snowden, though, these distortions have themselves drawn attention away from the actual history of black people in antiquity: Afrocentric works designed to enliven

modern people of African descent scarcely touch on ancient Nubia, whose political history and long involvement in Egyptian affairs would provide an example of a sophisticated black African polity interacting with its northern neighbours on relatively equal terms (Snowden 1997, 44-46). It appears, then, that this is another case in which present-day concerns amongst scholars should refocus on evidence and the narrative naturally springing from its interpretation, rather than being led astray by attempts to counteract racist narratives through the insertion of fiction.

Since the 1960s, many Anglo-American scholars of race have utilised a more wide-ranging definition of racism than biological racism: the idea of societal racism holds that practices and policies which have disproportionately negative impacts on peoples of specific racial backgrounds can be deemed racist, even in the absence of an argument from genetics (Frederickson 2000, 79-82). At face value, this would justify the characterisation of the Greeks as racist. As Harrison has noted, most of the 100,000 slaves owned by the male citizenry of Classical Athens were of 'barbarian' origin (Harrison 2020, 155-156). The Greek/'barbarian' distinction was a cultural construct which identified negative characteristics such as cruelty, stupidity, and lustfulness with non-Greeks, who were often judged as uncivilised in their behaviour, speaking foolish-sounding languages and displaying manners verging on the animalistic (Tuplin 1999, 49-50). Importantly, though, the Greeks' chief objection to the 'barbarians' was rooted in cultural complaints rather than in ideas of racial inferiority. Peoples whose practices starkly contrasted with the Greeks, such as Xenophon's Anatolian Mossynoeci, particularly repulsive for their communal sexual practices, were defined as substantially more barbarous than peoples whose customs more closely resembled those of the Greeks (Xenophon, *Anabasis* V. 4.31 in Tuplin 1999, 60). This suggests a willingness to measure other cultures against the standard set by their own in

a way which was certainly convinced of Greek predominance in civilisational terms, but it would be problematic to label this as an instance of modern-style societal racism.

Tuplin notes that Greeks of the classical period conceived of the barbarians as 'simply underdeveloped', living in a primitive way alike to how their own ancestors had in prehistory (Tuplin 1999, 61). There is textual evidence that indicates that when their speech and actions conformed with Greek standards, it was possible for 'barbarians' to redeem themselves.

Menander wrote that 'if a man is of good character, it doesn't matter if he's an Ethiopian... it is absurd to abuse someone for being a Scythian' (Menander, Frag, 612 in Tuplin 1999, 59).

Whilst Harrison has critiqued the use of this quote as evidence for benign racial attitudes in Greece on the basis that it favours such individuals *despite* their backgrounds, comparison with modern racism exhibits the harshness of this view of Menander (Harrison 154). An author writing in the American Deep South at the height of white anti-black racism would have been breaking dramatically with the cultural zeitgeist of his surroundings in making such a statement; they could expect at a minimum, major social consequences for doing so.

There is no evidence that Menander's attitudes were radical by Athenian standards, suggesting that his society had much to teach modern-period Anglo-Americans in this regard.

Snowden draws attention towards the absence of formal barriers to 'barbarian' social and economic integration of the sort which obstructed the efforts of American black people until the mid-20th century, also noting a lack of opposition to what modern people have referred to as 'miscegenation', provided the relevant 'barbarian' was sufficiently Hellenised (Snowden 1983, 92-97).

Frederickson has argued for a modern-day cultural racism in which the 'group culture' of minorities is labelled as destructive or abject by the standards of the majority, thus legitimating their marginal position in society (Frederickson 81). Whilst this technically fits

the Greeks' treatment of the 'barbarians', it should be noted that in the modern Anglo-American world, racial group cultural differences largely pertain to diet, dress and religious practice whilst for the literate, sedentary Greeks, far more marked cultural differences could be observed between themselves and, for instance, the preliterate, nomadic Scythians whose irruptions into settled societies have elicited negative attitudes across the periphery of the steppe over millennia. In this way, it becomes possible to indite modern antagonists as cultural racists without overextending this concept into a setting it is not suited to.

Taken together, the evidence discussed above suggests that race is analytically helpful but should not be misapplied in a way which suggests that the Greeks were biologically racist or that race was the predominant characteristic which they emphasised when handling relations with foreigners. This should not lead to an acceptance of the malign acts legitimated by the Greek/'barbarian' distinction, but direct scholars towards a more focused engagement with Greek attitudes as a form of xenophobia rooted in cultural jingoism. This option gives a fair hearing to the Greeks themselves whilst recognising the activities of historically understudied groups such as ancient black Africans.

Another area of ancient world scholarship which has felt the impact of contemporary preoccupations is the topic of slavery. Parodi identifies with a burgeoning concern amongst scholars and educators, motivated partly by a desire to reckon with the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and in doing so, 'decolonise the Classics'. She argues that there has been a historic tendency for scholars, often elite men themselves, to identify with the slaveholding upper crust of ancient societies and in doing, minimise the horrors of ancient slavery. She questions why, for example, given that there is ancient Roman evidence for extensive abuses on the part of slave-masters, the *Cambridge Latin Course* portrays placid, unquestioning slaves who do not stimulate critique of the institution of slavery (Parodi 2020, 43-46).

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Similarly, Du Bois is dissatisfied by the image of ancient slavery communicated to the general public by American films such as *Spartacus* (1960) and *Gladiator* (2000), which prefer to meditate on high political themes which mirror a fictionalized version of the American struggle for independence (Du Bois 2014, 191-192).

Given the fundamental unseriousness of these accounts in representing the historical reality of ancient slavery, one approach which has yielded more accurate results has been a direct engagement with the primary evidence which foregrounds the enslaved, rather than the slave-master. For example, whilst the Roman practice of manumitting slaves and endowing them with a limited form of citizenship has often been viewed as indicative of benignity, close analysis of primary evidence without the presupposition of masterly benevolence does not suggest this (Woolf 2012, 83). An inscription commissioned by a Roman Italian slaveowner, Marcus Junius Euphronysus, in the 1st-century AD, is illustrative of the retention of coercive power by slave-masters following manumission: he curses his freedwoman, Acte, who he manumitted in order to marry, for deserting him in order to live with her lover, a fellow slave who she could not abandon because of laws preventing this without relinquishment by her former master (*CIL* VI 20905 = *CLE* 95; Grubbs 2013, 234). Grubbs has highlighted that despite having cohabited with Acte as his wife for almost a decade and having at least one child with her, he mobilises the language of slave discipline when castigating her, even referring to the practice of physically branding slaves deemed beneath contempt by their owner (Grubbs 235-236). Such use of primary evidence can serve as a valuable counterpoint to the 'happy slave' narrative – in the hands of past scholars, this text might have been studied solely for its value as a curse tablet or literary source but was mined by Grubbs for evidence of the uneven power dynamic which Acte's enslavement embroiled her in. Notably, this was possible despite her silence in the text.

There are parallels elsewhere in the study of ancient slavery for Grubbs' effort at centring slaves themselves, despite evidentiary difficulties, such as around the question of the existence of slave culture in the Classical Athenian world. Morris has argued that there is no basis for the notion that those enslaved by the Athenians retained cultural affinities with the populations they lived amongst before capture or purchase. Slaves drawn from Thrace, Anatolia and the Near East for use in silver-mining operations at Lavreotiki, in this telling, have left nothing in the archaeological record which implies that they were not removed of their home allegiances by their slave-masters (Morris 1998, 199-202). For Morris, this justifies the assertion that at Athens, 'we face an unusually pervasive male citizen culture' wholly successful in the suppression of alternative cultural options for slaves (Morris 1998, 219). This pessimistic argument, rooted in archaeological silence, imagines the Athenian citizenry as almost omnipotent actors able to enforce their agency on their slaves to no resistance.

In a more recent article, Hunt has called for scholars to approach Classical Athens as a 'radically multicultural society' given the disparate backgrounds of its slaves (Hunt 2015, 129). He disagrees completely with Morris, pointing to evidence of engagement with foreign religious cults such as an inscription commissioned by a Thracian slave-athlete which dedicates a victory to his native god Bendis and Near Eastern evil-eye beads recovered from a brothel in Athens 'staffed' by enslaved women (*SEG* 39.210 in Hunt 2015, 135; Hunt 2015, 135). Whilst Hunt is clear that such expressions of religious belief by slaves were possible to varying degrees depending on factors such as the amount of autonomy their position allowed, he suggests that we should even envisage slaves haggling with their owners for time away from their duties in order to attend non-Greek religious festivals (Hunt 2015, 145-148). This represents an important corrective to Morris' defeatist vision as regards the possibilities of the evidence and the alleged brainwashing of slaves.

Hunt's willingness to imagine negotiations between slaves and their masters is typical of an increased desire amongst scholars to progress beyond the public-facing representations of servitude which dominate our source into the realm of the lived experiences of slaves. Much of the evidence about Roman freedmen and slaves comes from public inscriptions: Bruun notes that the commissioning of monuments such as statues, often dedicated to masters or patrons, were a vital way for freedmen or, in rare cases, slaves, to exercise a strong sense of agency in their social world (Bruun 2015, 611-612). For example, an inscription at Nepet commissioned by Hermeros Thymadianus, a slave of the emperor Claudius, attests to the way in which slaves could make an impression on the built environment and indeed act as a patron in this way (*CIL* XI 3199 = *ILS* 3481 in Bruun 2015, 612). One limitation of such evidence, though, is that the constraints of public acceptability likely shackled what was said in this format. It is unsurprising, then, that we do not have epigraphic evidence of this sort contradicting the outlook of the slave-owning class or lambasting a named master for his iniquities (Bruun 2015, 614-615).

The possibility of reaching into the private sphere to access the attitudes and behaviours of slaves which were impermissible according to public standards has been pursued through the analysis of graffiti, particularly useful because of the near-total certainty that the same person authored and inscribed the material, unlike much other epigraphic material (Keegan 2007, 1). Keegan's analysis of graffiti from the Palatine Paedagogium at Rome, probably used to house and educate young scribal slaves, has yielded insights into the sexual and religious activity of slaves. From erotic drawings on walls, it appears that homosexual activity was rife here, as one way in which slaves exercised some degree of agency in their social world (Keegan

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2007, 11-13). Keegan detects a substantial Christian minority here, with evidence of sectarian disputes between adherents of traditional Roman religion and followers of Christianity etched into the building during the Severan period (Keegan 27). Such insights into private details and even intra-slave conflicts ignored by elite authors and epigraphers of the day add a great level of texture and granular detail to our image of ancient slavery. An approach to research and indeed to teaching which emphasizes the potential of such evidence can only continue to aid scholars in avoiding resorting to the simplistic and favourable vision of ancient slavery outlined above.

Indeed, Joshel and Petersen have argued for the active use of the imagination by scholars of ancient slavery (Joshel and Petersen 2015, 4). They appear to believe that it resembles an act of scholarly negligence to imagine that where we find, for example, a *villae* storeroom, we are dealing only with a slave's workplace; instead, such spaces were probably used to conduct private conversations, exchange goods and even subvert the will of the slave-master through theft (Joshel & Petersen 2015, 14). Small acts of rebellion by slaves, for these authors, such as stooping under a wall to momentarily sneak away from work, can be deduced from the layout of buildings and the apparent necessity of disciplinary measures (Joshel and Petersen 2015, 61-62). An apparent weakness of this method, borne of an interest in conceiving of the relationship between slave and master as a two-way exchange, might be that it is ultimately rooted in supposition rather than empirical evidence. These authors, though, are transparent about this, acknowledging that some slaves they discuss are not concrete historical figures for whom we can recover details, but rather are 'produced by pastiche functioning as a heuristic device' (Joshel and Petersen 2015, 23). Provided that those who practice this method do not suggest otherwise, the benefits of our understanding of the past will likely outweigh the uncertainties inherent to operating in this way. This should be

conceived of as a worthwhile leap of faith, notwithstanding the absence of hard evidence, intended to capitalise on what we do know in a way which, in line with contemporary concerns around the need to move away from slave-master centric narratives, maximises the possible extent of slave agency.

This essay has examined the way in which contemporary occupations have impacted the study of race and slavery in the ancient world. It has demonstrated that the potential for modern ideas around race to illuminate our understanding of the Greek world has not fully been realised because of well-intentioned mistakes made in transplanting contemporary conceptions of racism into the past. Conversely, concerns around the need to abandon from elite-centric depictions of ancient slavery have facilitated a move towards an understanding of ancient slaves not as passive, pampered figures, but as restricted agents whose subjugation did not entirely strip them of their identity or ability to express themselves.

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