

Slide 10 Handout: Broader cultural attitudes of the Romans towards non-Romans & different skin-colors (from the late Republican to the Imperial era, ca. 200 BCE – 3rd c. CE)

I. The Romans adopted the Greek term ‘barbarian’ to describe non-Romans. But unlike Greeks, they thought barbarism marked an inferior condition, not an inferior nature: Roman culture could ‘civilize’ them.

A. Further, different skin colors were deemed no more significant than any other physical or cultural peculiarity that non-Romans might exhibit. Thus, Roman ‘racial formation’ mostly centered on ‘barbarism’ (which, in theory, could be remedied).

B. Yet, unexpectedly from our perspective, when it came to Rome’s “racial boundaries...no group would do more to unsettle” them “than the Greeks” (McCoskey 2012: 73). Yes, Greeks worshipped the same gods, had a common descent, influenced Roman philosophy, literature, & art, and even coined the term ‘barbarian,’ but they were non-Romans, conquered by Romans, and from the ‘east.’ Ironically, Romans applied the Greek ‘racial’ stereotype of ‘decadent, eastern barbarians/Persians’ to the Greeks themselves!

1. To Cicero (106-43 BCE), the Romans’ exceptional piety/respect for the gods made them superior to Greeks ([*On the Responses of the Haruspices* 19](#)). Still, he admired Greeks enough to set them apart from other non-Romans when he divided the world into: Greece, Italy, and ‘barbarian’ lands ([*De Finibus* 2.49](#)).

2. This explains why Romans often said that Greeks had ruined Rome (e.g., the Roman satirist Juvenal in [*III.58-125*](#) (ca. 55-138 CE), though a satirist is not wholly serious).

II. Rome’s “political structure” which “promoted the incorporation of others into their empire (rather than, say, the merits of democracy and self-rule)” also shaped their approach to ‘barbarism’ (McCoskey 2012: 75).

A. Though Romans considered people from the ‘east’ decadent and soft, they did think that some eastern states were closer to Roman than not, so qualified as somewhat civilized (e.g., Greeks & Egyptians). To Romans, the truly savage, barbarian ‘others’ were found in northern & northwestern Europe, where decentralized tribal cultures like the Gauls/Celts & Germans lived.

B. Romans often compared Gauls/Celts & Germans (and often confused them with each other, too). But even though the Germans famously obliterated a Roman legion in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest (9 CE), the Romans also admired and romanticized Germans as a fierce, exotic, and conveniently distant northern culture untouched by corrupting external influences — i.e., as ‘noble savages.’

C. But the Gauls were the Romans’ original boogey-man, a, scary, northern, ‘racial’ other: ca. 390/87 BCE, in a defining act of barbarism, Gauls from northern Italy sacked Rome. These north Italian Gauls were later subdued (in the 190s BCE) and Romanized (becoming Roman citizens in 49 BCE). But Gauls *beyond* Italy remained a plausible threat for years. Even in Caesar’s day, Romans had a visceral hatred/fear of Gauls (McCoskey 2012: 77), and later historians would repeat tales of Gallic barbarity (e.g., [*Pomponius Mela* 3.18](#) (late 1st c. BCE – ca. 45 CE); [*Ammianus Marcellinus* 15.12.1](#) (ca. 330-90 CE)).

III. The Roman ‘racialization’ of barbarians meant that Roman authors sometimes noted physical differences like skin color (as evidence for foreign-ness, *not* because they assigned the same values to skin color as our culture does). And given their belief that northern people were completely barbaric, *both* dark *and* ‘pale white’ skin (neither of which were like Italic Romans’ light brown skin) marked barbarity — which, again, could be changed.

A. In Petronius *Satyricon* 102.13-15, when our ‘heroes’ contemplate disguising themselves as enslaved Ethiopians or Gauls (by darkening or lightening their skin), one character denigrates *both* Ethiopians’ black skin *and* the Gauls’ ‘chalk-white appearance’ (*increti facies*). (Incidentally, this scene confirms that Romans saw themselves as light brown).

1. Notably, this character is especially (and unusually!) hostile towards the appearance of enslaved Ethiopians. (His companions do not share his sentiment). Freas 2024: 161 suggests that a *type* of “color-coded prejudice” could have been *part* of Roman ethnocentric ‘racialization’ (a type that does not isolate skin color/attach the same import to it as modern racism does). Still, this character also demeans ‘chalk-white’ skin, and evidence confirms that Romans could view pale-white skin negatively, too.

B. The Gauls’/Celts’ ‘unnaturally pale’ skin, hair, & eye color, along with their great height and distinct musculature, apparently reflected their savage, innate otherness (see also II. C.’s hyper-links):

1. Vergil describes the Gallic attack on Rome: the Gauls’s golden hair, cloaks, torcs, and pale skin practically glow in the dark (*Aeneid* 8.657-61, late 1st c. BCE):

Galli per dumos aderant arcemque tenebant,
defensi tenebris et dono noctis opacae:
aurea caesaries ollis atque aurea vestis,
virgatis lucent sagulis, tum lactea colla
auro innectuntur,...

The Gauls were approaching through the thickets and seizing the citadel,
covered by darkness and by the gift of shadowy night:
their hair is golden, and their clothing is golden, too.
They gleam in their striped, short military cloaks, & their milky-white necks
are encircled with gold...

2. Diodorus Siculus (1st c. BCE) remarks upon the Gauls’ distinctive physical characteristics (*Bibliotheca Historica* 5.28.1):

οἱ δὲ Γαλάται τοῖς μὲν σώμασιν εἰσιν εὐμήκεις, ταῖς δὲ
σαρξὶ κάθυγροι καὶ λευκοί, ταῖς δὲ κόμαις οὐ μόνον ἐκ
φύσεως ξανθοί, ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τῆς κατασκευῆς ἐπιτηδεύουσιν
αὔξειν τὴν φυσικὴν τῆς χροᾶς ιδιότητα.

And as for their physical makeup, the Gauls are tall, and they are
rippling-muscled and bright-white of skin. As for their, not only
are they naturally golden-tressed, but they even make it a practice
to increase the peculiar nature of its color by artifice.

3. The Greeks also ‘racialized’ Gauls/Celts:

i. In the early 3rd c. BCE, Celts invaded the Greek peninsula, attacking the sacred site of Delphi. After the Celts’ defeat, ‘Greeks vs. Celts’ combat scenes appeared beside ‘Olympians vs. Giants’ & ‘Greeks vs. Amazons’ scenes in Hellenistic art. Like mythic monsters, Celts were now a barbaric ‘other,’ civilization’s enemy.

ii. The Hellenistic poet Callimachus (early 3rd c. BCE) ridiculed the Celts’ pale appearance, swarming attack-strategy, & barbaric northern origins by calling them ‘snowflakes’ (νιφάδεσσιν, *Hymn to Delos*, 175).

Italic Romans accepted non-Italic citizens as Romans & were accustomed to dealing with people from all over the empire. But they could still be ‘racist’ (via their own ‘racial formations’). If they disparaged skin-color, *both* ‘black’ *and* ‘pale-white’ skin were targeted. Still, Romans viewed ‘pale’ northern Europeans as much more ‘barbaric’ than other foreigners.

What does this tell us about ancient Roman identity? What did ‘Romans’ look like? What does this teach us about using ancient texts in modern cultural or political debates?