

Slide 5 Handout: Textual evidence for Greek attitudes towards people with different skin colors (the Archaic Period, ca. 800 BCE – 480 BCE) (Translations by Leah Himmelhoch)

(Note: ancient Greeks did not consider skin color 'significant' the same way we do, so do not mention it often!)

I. 'Aithiopians' in Homer (8th - 7th c. BCE):

A. The Gods favor the Aithiopians ('shining/burnt-faced men', i.e., dark-skinned men) and still consort with them (though they no longer do so with the rest of mortals):

1) *Iliad* 1.423-5, Thetis explains to Achilles why she cannot talk to Zeus right now:

Zeῦς γὰρ ἐς Ὠκεανὸν μετ' ἀμύμονας Αἰθιοπῆας
χθιζὸς ἔβη κατὰ δαῖτα, θεοὶ δ' ἅμα πάντες ἔποντο.

For Zeus set out yesterday for the river Ocean to feast
with the worthy Aithiopians, and all the gods followed with him.

2) *Iliad* 23.205-07, Iris (the messenger of the gods) tells the winds that she must depart to be honored by the Aithiopians:

οὐκ ἔδος: εἴμι γὰρ αὖτις ἐπ' Ὠκεανοῖο ρέεθρα. No time for sitting. No, for I must go to the streams of Ocean
Αἰθίοπων ἐς γαῖαν, ὅθι ῥέζουσ' ἐκατόμβας to the land of the Aithiopians, where they are making a splendid sacrifice of 100 oxen
ἀθανάτοισι, ἵνα δὴ καὶ ἐγὼ μεταδαίσομαι ἱρῶν. for the immortal gods. There, indeed, will I have my share of the sacrificial feast.

3) *Odyssey* 1.21-5, Poseidon is off enjoying some time with the Aithiopians:

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν Αἰθίοπας μετεκίαθε τηλόθ' ἐόντας,
Αἰθίοπας τοὶ διχθὰ δεδαίαται, ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν,
οἱ μὲν δυσομένου Ὑπερίονος οἱ δ' ἀνιόντος,
ἀντίων ταύρων τε καὶ ἀρνειῶν ἐκατόμβης.
ἐνθ' ὃ γ' ἐτέρπετο δαιτὶ παρήμενος:...

But he [Poseidon] had gone to visit the Aithiopians, so very far away,
who were divided into two groups dwelling in the most remote regions of men:
one group where Hyperion [god of the sun] sets, the other where he rises.
Poseidon went there to receive a splendid sacrifice of hundreds of bulls and rams.
There he was sitting and taking delight in the feast....

B. The Aithiopians' divine favor may relate to two intertwined ancient Greek beliefs, namely that:

1) The earth was a flat disc (so the rising sun came up from beneath the disc to the East then set by dropping below it to the West). People living near these two regions (the path of the sun) were special/supernaturally touched. (Again, 'Aithiopian' means 'burnt/blazing face' since Greeks thought their dark skin came from sun exposure). Thus, Aithiopians' dark skin marked their proximity to the divine.

2) Those living at the world's extremes were somehow 'extreme' themselves: either hyper-blessed/magical (e.g., Aithiopians) or hyper-barbaric/monstrous (e.g., Amazons).

II. Dark Skin in Homer:

A. Dark skin was considered masculine (pale skin was feminine (see the next slide's II)). The darker his skin, the more beautiful, masculine, and martially skilled a man was:

1) In *Odyssey* 16.172-6, to help Odysseus defeat the suitors, Athena restores him to his youthful prime, making him μελαγχροῖς, (175) 'black-skinned, dark-skinned.' (This adjective's first half *melas* (μέλας, 'black, dark') is the root for our word *melanin*):

ἦ καὶ χρυσεὶ ῥάβδῳ ἐπεμάσασατ' Ἀθήνη.
φᾶρος μὲν οἱ πρῶτον εὐπλυνὲς ἦδ' ἐχιτῶνα
θήκ' ἀμφὶ στήθεσσι, δέμας δ' ὥφελ' ἐκάλυψε καὶ ἦβην.
ἄψ δὲ μελαγχροῖς γένετο, γναθμοὶ δὲ τάνυσθεν,
κυάνεαι δ' ἐγένετο γενειάδες ἀμφὶ γένειον.

And, indeed, Athena touched him with her golden wand.
First, a well-washed cloak and a tunic
she cast about his breast, then she increased both his stature and his youthful bloom.
And he became dark-skinned again, and his hollow cheeks filled out,
and the beard about his chin took on the deep-blue color/hue of the night sky.