

Slide 6 Handout: Textual evidence for Greek attitudes towards people with different skin colors (the Classical Period, ca. 479 – 323 BCE)*

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

I. 'Aithiopians' in Herodotus' *Histories* (written between 440-20 BCE):

Herodotus 3.20 discusses the Egyptian Pharaoh Cambyses' dealings with the Aithiopians, then mentions in passing what many say about the Aithiopians:

οἱ δὲ Αἰθίοπες οὗτοι, ἐς τοὺς ἀπέπεμπε ὁ Καμβύσης, And these Aithiopians to whom Cambyses was sending [ambassadors]
λέγονται εἶναι μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι ἀνθρώπων πάντων. are said to be the tallest and most beautiful of all humankind.

II. Xenophon's *Agesilaus* (a biography of this Spartan king, written ca. 360-59 BCE).

Below we see the Greeks' negative response to men with 'white' skin:

In Agesilaus 1.28, Agesilaus attempts to inspire his men before they fight Lydians and Persians by 'demonstrating' that Lydians and Persians are 'weaklings'. Note: White skin is considered effeminate: This passage also indicates that the Greeks saw themselves as darker-skinned, not 'white.'

ἡγούμενος δὲ καὶ τὸ καταφρονεῖν τῶν πολεμίων ῥώμην τινὰ ἐμβαλεῖν πρὸς τὸ μάχεσθαι, προεῖπε τοῖς κήρυξι τοὺς ὑπὸ τῶν ληστῶν ἀλίσκομένους βαρβάρους γυμνοὺς πωλεῖν. ὁρῶντες οὖν οἱ στρατιῶται λευκοὺς μὲν διὰ τὸ μηδέποτε ἐκδύεσθαι, πίνοντας δὲ καὶ ἀπόνους διὰ τὰ ἀεὶ ἐπ' ὀχημάτων εἶναι, ἐνόμισαν μηδὲν διοίσειν τὸν πόλεμον ἢ εἰ γυναιξὶ δέοι μάχεσθαι.

And, too, believing that feeling contempt for the enemy would instill some strength and confidence in [his men's] fighting, he directed his heralds to sell the barbarians captured in raids (stripped) naked. Then, upon seeing that the barbarians were white-skinned because of never disrobing [for outdoor exercise], and fat and lazy because of constantly riding on carriages, his soldiers believed that the war would be no different from fighting against women.

III. Sophocles' *Inachus*, a satyr-play (comedy) produced in Athens between 468-06 BCE.

Though fragmentary, in Fr. 269a (v. 54) a speaker describes the stranger (Zeus) who impregnated Io:

κάρβανος αἰθὼς ('a black stranger/foreigner').

Zeus is black here because: 1) his son by Io (Epaphos) was black (and born in Egypt!); 2) black Zeus may also be Zeus Ploutos ('Zeus of wealth/bounty/fertility'). As a chthonic ('of the earth/underworld') form of Zeus, he can be portrayed as black — like fertile soil and/or the darkness under the ground (where we find silver, gold, & gemstones). Zeus Ploutos (a 'Zeus of the Underworld') also has ties to Hades. In sum, ancient Greeks did think that Zeus could appear as a 'black' man/Ethiopian.

IV. Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (ca. 463 BCE) features a chorus of Egyptian black women called the Danaids ('daughters of Danaus'). They are Io's descendants:

To avoid being forced to marry their cousins, the Danaids flee Egypt to seek refuge in Argos (Greece). They beg Argos' king (Pelagus) for asylum, claiming they are Argive via Io (who was from Argos). Below, Pelagus is surprised at their claim. But, ultimately, both he & the Argives accept the Danaids as kin (black Argives), caring more about their lineage/ethnicity than their skin color!

ἄπιστα μθεῖσθ', ὧ ξέναι, κλύειν ἔμοί,
ὅπως τόδ' ὑμῖν ἔστιν Ἀργεῖον γένος.
Λιβυστικάῃς γὰρ μᾶλλον ἐμφερέστεραι.
280 γυναιξὶν ἔστε κοῦδαμῶς ἐγχωρίαις.
καὶ Νεῖλος ἂν θρέψει τοιοῦτον φυτόν,
Κύπριος χαρακτήρ τ' ἐν γυναικείοις τύποις.
εἰκὼς πέπληκται τεκτόνων πρὸς ἀρσένων:
τοίας τ' ἀκούω νομάδας ἵποβάμοσιν
285 εἶναι καμήλοις ἀστραβιζούσας, χθόνα
παρ' Αἰθίοψιν ἀστυγειτονουμένας.
καὶ τὰς ἀνάνδρους κρεοβόρους Ἀμαζόνας,
εἰ τοξοτευχεῖς ἦτε, κάρτ' ἂν ἦκασα
ὑμᾶς. διδαχθεῖς δ' ἂν τόδ' εἰδείην πλέον,
290 ὅπως γένεθλον σπέρμα τ' Ἀργεῖον τὸ σόν.

Foreign maidens, you tell me a story unbelievable to hear,
how your descent/family is Argive.
For you are more like women of Libya and
are not at all like the women native to our land.
The Nile, too, would nurture your kind of stock,
and a Cypriot engraved-design in your likeness
is impressed on female figures by male artisans.
And I hear that there are nomad women of such appearance
who ride on padded cushions atop camels as steeds and
live in a land neighboring the Aithiopians.
Indeed, had you been armed with a bow, I would have guessed
that you were husbandless, flesh-devouring Amazons.
But if I should be enlightened [by you], I would understand
in more depth how your lineage and seed are Argive.

*Translations by Leah Himmelhoch