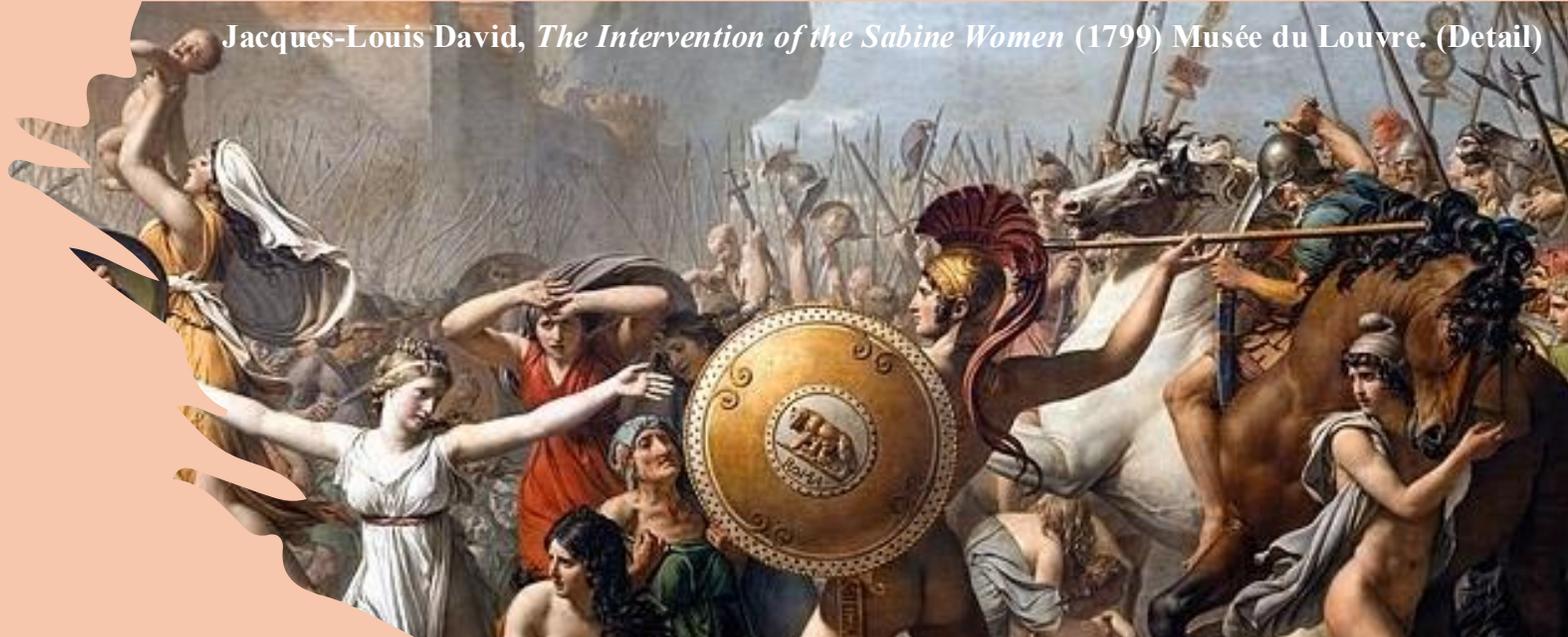


**Were the ancient Greeks
& Romans
'White' People?**

Jacques-Louis David, *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (1814) Musée du Louvre. (Detail)



Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799) Musée du Louvre. (Detail)

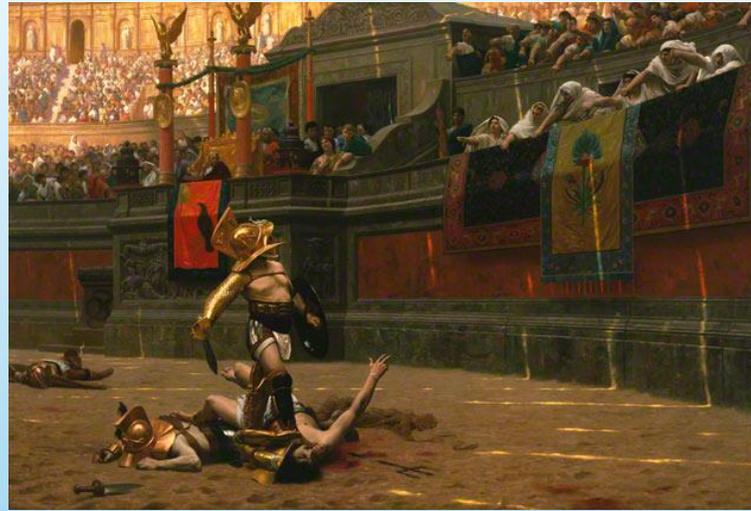


**Part I: Definitions & Some
Visual Sources**

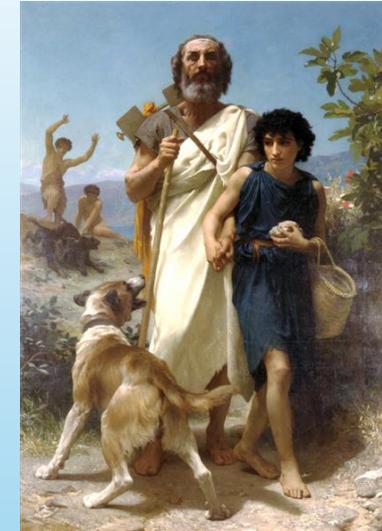
School of Athens (1510-11)
Raphael, fresco in the Vatican.



Pollice Verso (Thumbs Down) (1872)
Jean-Léon Gérôme @ Phoenix Art Museum.



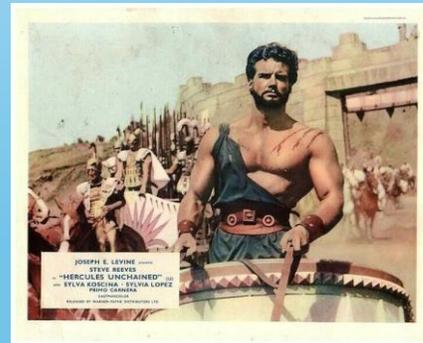
Homer and His Guide (1874)
William-Auguste Bouguereau @ Milwaukee Art Museum



In art, movies, tv, and other media, ancient Greeks and Romans are regularly portrayed as ‘white’ people. But were they ‘white’? To answer this question, we must first address its two assumptions.



Quo Vadis (1951): General Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) parades before cheering Romans.



Hercules Unchained (1959)
Bodybuilder Steve Reeves is Hercules.
←

Clash of the Titans (1981)
Perseus (Harry Hamlin) & Princess Andromeda (Judi Bowker) →



Coke Zero TV Commercial (2017) Throughout history, men have enjoyed watching stuff, e.g., Romans in the Flavian Amphitheater (the Colosseum).

Assumption #1: Asking if ancient Greeks and Romans were ‘white’ is really asking: Were they ‘white’ like Europeans or their (‘white’) American descendants? Yet, what if this question is anachronistic, like asking: Were they “hippies”?

(Not a thing) →



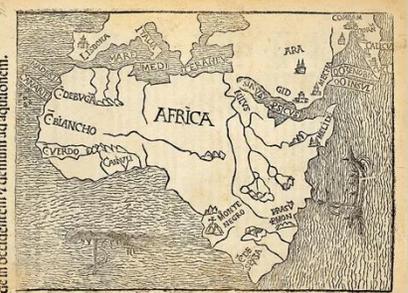
That is, would ancient Greeks or Romans themselves understand the question — the *concept* of ‘white’ people?

No, they would not. Though they saw that people had different skin colors, the social construct we call ‘race’ (‘white’ & ‘black’ people) only began to emerge in the 1400s CE.

- 1) **A social construct** is an idea, thing, or categorization that a culture *agrees* is ‘true’ or ‘real.’ Geographic borders, laws, and money are all social constructs, ideas/things that only ‘exist’ or have power because cultures/communities agree that they do. ‘Race’ is no different.
- 2) **Why did the idea of ‘race’ emerge in the 1400s? Who invented it?** Before the 1400s, most enslaved people in western Europe were eastern Europeans (our word ‘slave’ is even derived from the ethnic ‘Slav’). By the mid-1400s, however, Slavic communities were defending themselves against slave raiders more effectively; that is, the number of enslaved Slavs dipped, just as the Portuguese (the first Europeans to sail south beyond Cape Bojador on Africa’s Atlantic coast) began to buy great numbers of enslaved Africans. The Portuguese not only characterized “their African slave-trading ventures as missionary expeditions” but as civilizing ones (Kendi 2016: 23). They treated all “dark-skinned people... [d]espite their different ethnicities and skin colors [as] one inferior people” who ‘benefitted’ by being subjugated/enslaved, since it introduced them to European ‘civilization’ and Christianity (Kendi 2016: 24). The Portuguese became a renowned source of information about Africa and the primary suppliers of enslaved Africans to other European nations and the new world. They were also the first purveyors of the racist narrative that *all* dark-skinned people were ‘innately inferior’ and, therefore, exceptionally suited for being enslaved by ‘superior’ pale-skinned Europeans (Kendi 2016: 23).
- 3) **Later Europeans (& Americans) ‘scientifically’ expanded upon this racist narrative** from the 1700s into the 1900s. (In the US, ‘scientific racism’ became especially prominent after the Civil War). Scientists used questionable methods (e.g., craniometry: measuring skull size and volume) to ‘quantify’ racial differences. Such data supposedly ‘scientifically confirmed’ that humans are divisible into biologically distinct ‘racial’ categories and ‘verified’ white superiority. “Today, however, biologists and geneticists...no longer believe in the physical existence of races — though they recognize the continuing power of racism” (Painter 2010: xii).
- 4) **Incidentally:** in the 1700s-to-early-1900s, scholars argued that ancient Greek & Roman cultures ‘corroborated’ scientific racism’s ‘verification’ of white superiority.

Hence, before the 1400s CE, there were no ‘white’ or ‘black’ people! Again, ancient Greeks and Romans *did* see that people had different skin colors. But “there is simply no evidence that the ancient Greeks or Romans collectively considered themselves ‘white’ nor that they engaged in any kind of group identification as ‘white’ with others in the space of what is Europe today. The idea would have been nonsensical to them” (McCoskey 2017). Understanding this not only matters for reasons of historical accuracy but keeps us from unwittingly projecting modern ‘racial’ assumptions or logics onto ancient cultures.

Fracanzano da Montalboddo’s 1508 wood-block print is one of our earliest (modern) maps of Africa.



Assumption #2: Asking what ancient Greeks & Romans ‘looked like’ must *also* acknowledge the following: though lumped together in our imaginations, Greece & Rome were distinct cultures with different histories and different identity formation:

1. Ancient ‘Greece’, 6th c. BCE.

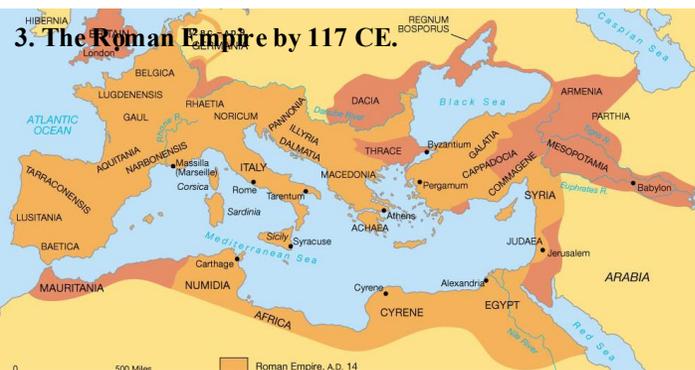


1. The ‘Greeks’ only identified *collectively* as ‘Greeks/Hellenes’ following the Persian wars (early-to-mid 5th c. BCE), whereupon they essentially characterized themselves as the Persians’ cultural ‘opposite’ (Hall 2001: 166). Before this, however, they identified with their individual city-states — each its own nation with its own customs — which, by the 6th c. BCE, dotted the Mediterranean coastline (including eastern Spain, southern Gaul, southern Italy, Sicily, what is now Croatia, North Africa, the trading-post Naukratis in Egypt, Asia Minor, the Aegean islands, and the modern Greek peninsula) up into the Black Sea. Unsurprisingly, we have evidence for “mixed communities,” and “intermarriage on a substantial scale” (Graham 2001: 327).



2. Founded by indigenous Italians, the city-state Rome controlled the Italian peninsula by 270 BCE, then became an ‘Empire’ after winning the First Punic War (264- 241 BCE) and gaining its first province: Sicily. Rome claimed the islands of Sardinia and Corsica shortly after this.

The Roman empire further expanded after the Second (218- 210 BCE) and Third (149-146 BCE) Punic Wars, claiming former Carthaginian territory (parts of North Africa and Spain) then spreading west and east along the Mediterranean coast into the Greek peninsula and Asia Minor. Map 2’s green portions show the empire by 201 BCE; its brown portions show the empire by 100 BCE. In 88 BCE, citizenship was granted to all free men in Italy south of the Po River. After 48 BCE, Roman citizenship was extended to provincial ruling classes, provincial soldiers, and other political allies.



3. In 44 BCE Rome conquered Gaul, Northern Greece, more of the North African coast (expanding south into Africa), the Levant, and parts of Syria, then moved further east into Asia Minor. Under Augustus in 14 CE (the map’s light brown portions), Rome conquered most of the North African coast. The dark brown portions were added by 117 CE.

The city of Rome, then, became the “melting pot” capital of a “relatively diverse” Roman empire, “as might be expected” given it “encouraged trade and mobility that extended from Hadrian’s Wall to North Africa, the Rhine, and the Euphrates” (Nicholls 2017). Further, Roman auxiliaries, recruited from far-flung provinces and garrisoned (for decades) at the Empire’s borders, often married local women and retired where they had been posted. During the 100s CE, Roman citizenship became less-and-less exclusive. In 212 CE, Emperor Caracalla declared all free persons in the empire Roman citizens.

Greek & Roman identity was neither homogeneous nor static. We noted earlier how this presentation’s opening question — “Were Greeks & Romans ‘white’ people?” — is anachronistic. But now we can see how it is also too reductive (simplistic).

Now we are prepared to answer the question:

“Were ancient Greeks & Romans ‘white’ people?” The answer is: No.

1) **Technically speaking** they *could not be* ‘white’; the racial labels ‘white’ and ‘black’ did not exist yet. Ancient Greeks & Romans would not even understand the question. If they would not call themselves ‘white’, we should not call them ‘white’ — especially since this label is not ‘neutral’ but driven by assumptions and logics specific to later cultures reacting to later historical events. Importantly, too, Greeks & Romans considered themselves distinct from (superior to) other cultures that *we* would consider European; they would *never* have lumped themselves together with them (as the modern category ‘white’ does)!

2) **Historically speaking** they were diverse in appearance. True to their Mediterranean context, their skin colors spanned the spectrum from what *we* would call ‘white’ to ‘light brown’ to ‘brown’ to ‘black’ (Bond 2017, Morley 2017, Philo 2017, Woolf 2021).

- Recognizing ancient Greek & Roman diversity is necessary for historical accuracy and to rectify the regular erasure of ‘non-white’ individuals in modern historical reconstructions and narratives.
- Yet we must also set aside the modern construct of ‘race’ when *interpreting* ancient material, since it:
 - forces incorrect readings onto our evidence, or obscures what the evidence does indicate;
 - subtly perpetuates the falsehood that skin-color-based ‘race’ is a constant feature in human societies when it is really an invention specific to a particular time, culture, & place (like a cell-phone).

Still, ancient Greeks & Romans *did* create hierarchies of human value/ability based upon perceived human difference (i.e., they engaged in their own style of ‘racial formation,’ as Omi & Winant 1994 would say).

**But if their prejudices/‘racial formations’ were not based upon skin color,
what were they based upon?**

Three factors regularly appear in ancient Greek & Roman explanations for why humans exist in different forms:

1) Climate & geography:

- A. People from flatter, fertile terrain with milder or hotter climates and less seasonal change, were thought to be smaller, lazy, flabby, unintelligent, effeminate, and cowardly. (Hippocratic Corpus, [On Airs, Waters, Places 24](#)).
- B. Those from rugged terrain, in harsher or cooler climates with dramatic seasonal change, were thought to be larger, vigorous, lean, intelligent, fierce or masculine, and warlike. (Hippocratic Corpus, [On Airs, Waters, Places 24](#)).
- C. Similarly, Aristotle ([Politics 7.5.6 \(1327b\)](#)) & Vitruvius ([On Architecture, 6.1.3-5, 6.1.8.-11](#)) claimed that extreme cold (e.g., northern Europe) leads to braver but less intelligent men, while extreme heat (e.g., Asia) makes men cowardly but smarter. Those living between Europe and Asia, however, (e.g., Greeks & Romans) were brave *and* intelligent, with better forms of government.

2) Ethnicity (= a people with shared culture & (real or imagined) ancestry):*

- A. Different ethnic/cultural groups were deemed uncivilized and morally inferior *because* of their different customs, especially their different forms of governance:
 - i. 'Lazy', 'soft', 'unmotivated' people in milder or hotter regions were ruled by kings because they were 'naturally' willing to be ruled;
 - ii. 'Active', 'motivated' people in regions with variable climate ruled themselves (e.g., democracy or democratic republics);
 - iii. 'Aggressive', 'willful' people in cold regions were unruly, ungovernable.
 - iv. (For the above, see: Herodotus, [Histories 9.122](#); Aristotle [Politics 7.5.6 \(1327b\)](#), Pliny the Elder, [Natural Histories, 2.80](#); Seneca [On Anger, 2.15](#)).
- B. Greeks & Romans called foreigners 'barbarians,' from the Greek word/insult *barbaros* (the Greeks thought 'bar-bar' replicated the 'nonsensical sound' of non-Greek languages). Though the Greeks considered barbarians innately uncivilized (Hall 1989: 4-5, 10-11), the Romans believed they could be 'uplifted' via Roman culture/imperialism (McCoskey 2012: 75).

3) Lineage/heredity: Supposedly, children not only inherited their parents' physical traits, but their moral character & other climate-determined/cultural features.

Using ethnocentric cultural logics like these, ancient Greeks & Romans constructed their own racial formations/types of 'racism'.

*(For a discussion of the social constructs 'race' & 'ethnicity' that also suggests how we might apply them to Greco-Roman antiquity, see [Kennedy 2019](#))



Evidence for diversity in Greco-Roman antiquity is plentiful. Yet before reviewing our pictorial sources it is important to note that: Minoan, Mycenaean, Greek, & Roman figurative art often (but not always!) portrayed men as ‘red-skinned’ or ‘dark-skinned,’ and women as ‘white-skinned.’*

Minoan Frescoes (1600-1450 BCE)



A young man boxes (Akrotiri, 1600 BCE); Athens National Archaeological Museum, Photo, by Leah Himmelhoch

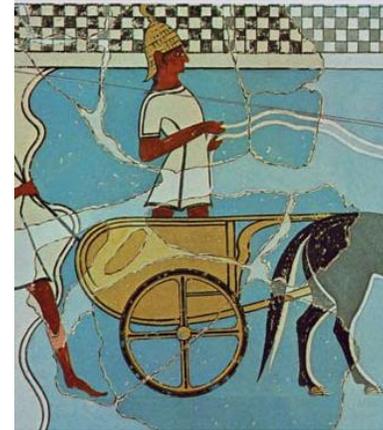


A Minoan woman (Knossos, 1600-1450 BCE)
Heraklion Archaeological Museum.
Photo by Wolfgang Sauber
[CC BY-SA 3.0 license.](#)

Mycenaean Frescoes (1400-1250 BCE)



‘Warrior’ goddess & griffin (Mycenae, 14th c. BCE);
National Archaeological Museum, Athens,
© Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Tourism.



A charioteer (Pylos, 13th c. BCE);
Archaeological Museum of Chora.
Public Domain.

Archaic Greek Black Figure Pottery (7th – 5th c. BCE)



Achilles kills the Amazonian queen Penthesileia
(Exekias, Athens, 540-30 BCE) © The Trustees
of the British Museum.

In Minoan, Mycenaean, Greek, & Roman art, dark and pale skin usually marked *gender difference*!

- It may have reflected the cultural ‘ideal’ that men mostly led their lives outdoors in the sun while women largely pursued domestic activities indoors.
- It may have represented the belief that men and women were ‘different’ beings.
- It may owe its existence to artistic convenience.

Again, this pattern was not 100% consistent. *When color was used to denote gender difference, however, scholars agree that it was ‘symbolic’ and did not reflect the actual skin color of ancient Minoans, Mycenaeans, Greeks, or Romans.* (Notably, too, Athenian Red Figure pottery (late 6th – 3rd c. BCE) largely made all its figures ‘red,’ while White Ground Pottery (500s-400s BCE) usually made all its figures ‘white’ or, sometimes, ‘black’; neither style reflected ‘real’ skin color). **What might this suggest about these cultures? Why might it be important to recognize?**



Hercules in Olympus with Juno & Minerva.
@ Hall of the Augustals.
Photo by AlMare. [CC BY-SA 2.0 license](#)

Next: Minoans, Mycenaeans, and our pictorial evidence for diversity in the bronze age Aegean...

*The Minoans may have adopted this practice from Egyptians or Syrians. The Mycenaeans emulated the Minoans. Archaic Greeks likely copied Egyptian/Eastern art. Greek art influenced the Romans.

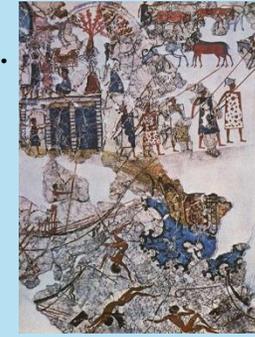
I. The Minoans & Mycenaeans: pictorial evidence for contact with/the presence of darker-skinned people in bronze age Crete and Greece.

A. ‘Captain of the Blacks’ fresco (Knossos, Crete; 16th–15th c. BCE), “one of the earliest known depictions of black people outside of Africa” (Derbew 2022). Knossos’ first excavator, Arthur Evans, posited that the Minoans led conquered ‘Nubian’ troops. Yet the fragments only indicate two figures (the third is reconstructed) & offer no evidence that one has higher status than the other. Evans assumed the ‘Blacks’ were subordinate to the lighter-skinned Minoan because of racism, even paralleling them with the African troops (from French colonies) fighting for the French in WWI (Brouwers 2022). If they are warriors, the ‘Nubian’ could well be a mercenary (like those the Egyptians hired). But their headpieces & shorter spears also suggest they could be hunting or enacting a ritual.



Heraklion Archaeological Museum/Alamy. Public Domain

B. Fragmentary battle scene (?) (the ancient ‘Minoanized’ town of Akrotiri (on Santorini), the Cyclades; 16th c. BCE). From the naval fresco at Akrotiri, this scene shows a battle line of Mycenaeans (with their signature boar tusk helmets) & slain/drowned defenders (?) in the water. The drowned men’s identities are unclear: 1) they could be native light-armed Aegeans; 2) some scholars note the topmost figure’s curly/knotted hair (see detail) & suggest that the drowned men could be north African ‘barbarians’; 3) or one or more of them could simply be ‘native’ Aegeans of African heritage!



B.



Visual Arts Legacy Collection (ARTSTOR)

← (detail)

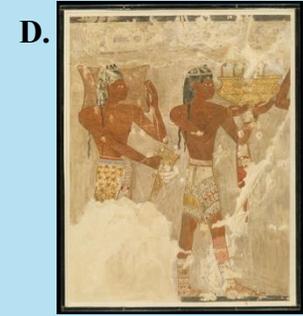


C.

University of Cincinnati & Plate 129 (Lang 1969).

C. Fragments of an African (?) man in a procession (Pylos, Greece; 14th c. BCE) — far too fragmentary to determine whether he is a resident (a Pylian of African heritage), visitor, leader, priest, envoy, etc. We should not assume he is enslaved.

Yet Minoans & Mycenaeans themselves appear in Egyptian art:



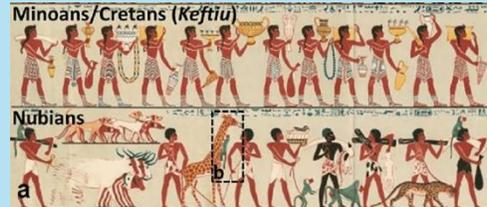
D.

Wall painting, the Tomb of Rekhmire. Public domain.



E.

©kairoinfo4u



F.

Minoans/Cretans (Keftiu)

Nubians

a

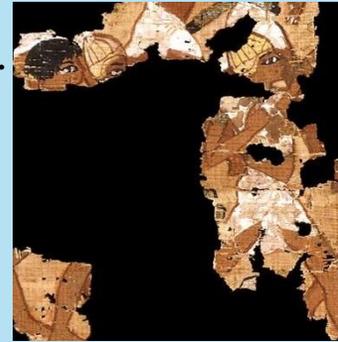
b

(TT 100). New York Public Library. Public Domain.

D. Funerary wall painting, the Tomb of Rekhmire (Egypt’s Theban necropolis, c. 1479-25 BCE), depicting ‘Keftiu’ (the Egyptian name for the Minoans) offering diplomatic gifts to Rekhmire, the vizier to Pharaoh Thutmose III. (Panagiotopoulos, 2024)

E. & F. (context for **D.**): **E.** is the original painting from Rekhmire’s Tomb, and **F.** is a reconstruction. Top Row: Keftiu (Minoans); Bottom Row: Nubians.

G. Papyrus fragment (El-Amarna, Egypt, c. 1550-1500 BCE) depicting a battle line of Mycenaean Greek → warriors (identifiable via their boar-tusk helmets; e.g., **B.** above & the previous slide’s Mycenaean charioteer). Mycenaean mercenaries were hired throughout the Aegean. Yet notably: though scholars have proposed that the ‘Africans’ in **A.** & **C.** were subordinate to or conquered/enslaved by the Minoans & Greeks, this has not been suggested for **G.**’s Mycenaeans. Could this be due to the modern assumption that ‘white’ Mycenaeans would not be enslaved by Egyptians?



G.

© The Trustees of the British Museum

Along with further, abundant evidence for Minoan & Mycenaean trade & diplomacy with neighboring Mediterranean cultures (see Presentation 2), these images verify that:

- 1) Minoans & Mycenaean Greeks worked and lived with ‘non-natives’ in Crete and Greece (Brouwers 2022);
- 2) Minoans & Mycenaean Greeks interacted regularly with other Mediterranean cultures via trade, diplomacy, warfare, and cultural exchange (Betancourt 2008; Cline & Yasur-Landau 2013; Mee 2008; Panagiotopoulos 2024; and Vasiloudis 2022).
- 3) Minoans, Mycenaeans, & Egyptians *portrayed themselves and each other using the same color palette*. Even the Nubians in **D.** & **E.**, with a few exceptions, resemble the Egyptians, Minoans & Mycenaeans. Indeed, Egyptians regularly portrayed Nubian skin color “flexibly”, suggesting they saw Nubians as “multicoloured”, not ‘black’ (Derbew 2022).
- 4) Minoan, Mycenaean, and Egyptian figurative art, then, apparently portrays *all* (male) Aegean and Egyptian ‘natives’, as well as many ‘non-natives’, with red-brown skin, only reserving different skin colors for strikingly different-looking ‘non-Aegeans’ or ‘non-Egyptians’. This artistic convention obscures each population’s potential internal diversity and/or appearance.
- 5) Further, though darker skin can suggest an ethnic difference, nothing indicates that it was associated with inferiority or considered intrinsically negative.

What might this suggest about these cultures?

II. Ancient Greece: some figurative art depicting darker-skinned people (c. 800 – 323 BCE, the Archaic through the Classical Period)

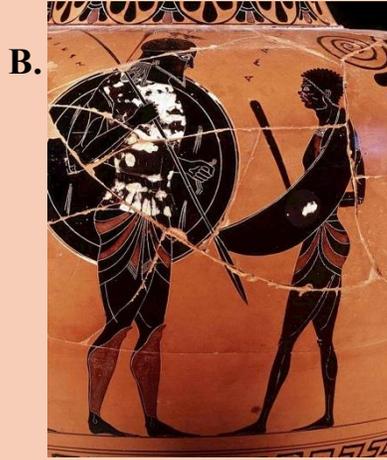
Three notes: 1) Some pottery was ‘high-end,’ some was for daily life, but all images were chosen because they would sell. Workshops often made multiple copies of an image idea;

2) Ancient Greeks called north Africa ‘Libya’ and ‘black’ people ‘Aithiopiens’ (*Aithiops*, from Greek *aitho* ‘burn, blaze’ and *ops*, ‘face,’ to give ‘burnt’ or ‘blazing face;’ they thought black skin was due to sun exposure).

3) Generally, Ethiopian features were meant to be ethnic markers, not intrinsically demeaning. Ancient Greeks considered Ethiopians divinely favored (Homer *Iliad* 1.423-4, *Odyssey* 1.21-5) and handsome (Herodotus 3.20). We should not read Greek portrayals of Ethiopians with modern racist depictions in mind (though, yes, some pots display comedic scenes that comically distort the features of *both* Ethiopians and Greeks).



Black-figure fragment made in Northern Ionia; found in Temple of Apollo, Naukratis, Egypt. 560-540 BCE. This figure’s features indicate ‘Ethiopian’ descent. © The Trustees of the British Museum. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)



Exekias amphora; Homeric (?) warrior flanked by light-armed Ethiopians (detail). 540-30 BCE. © The Trustees of the British Museum. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

← The Ethiopian figure (right) has the Egyptian name ‘Amasis’ (above his club). Exekias (the Athenian potter who made this pot) reportedly had a rivalry with another Athenian potter named Amasis, & potters sometimes mocked each other on their pots (we are unsure if it was lighthearted or not). This is one of two extant pots by Exekias that portray an Ethiopian ‘Amasis’ (the other pot has the epic hero Menelaus stab him!). Both pots could be ‘jabs’ at the potter Amasis. Making him look Ethiopian might be a joke. But it is also possible that Amasis was a dark-skinned Athenian of Egyptian descent (Boegehold 1985: 31). Potters were skilled artisans, so Amasis was unlikely to be enslaved. At this point in Athens’ history, he could even have been a citizen from a well-to-do family with Egyptian contacts.

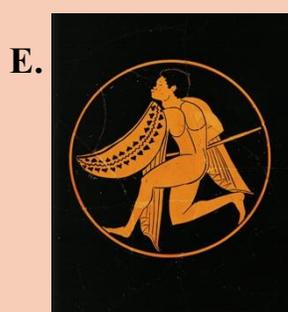


Herakles & Busiris (detail). 510 BCE; found in Caere, Italy; made in Etruria, Italy by an Ionian workshop that emigrated there. Image courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna. © ‘KHM-Museumsverband.’

← In one Greek myth, the Pharaoh Busiris tried to sacrifice Herakles to end a drought. Herakles killed Busiris as he escaped. These Egyptians have diverse skin color; Herakles is a very dark red (though much of the red paint is lost, exposing his black-glaze base). His dark skin could mark: his hyper-masculinity (which dark skin was said to reflect); his lineage (Ethiopian via his great-grandmother Andromeda, or Egyptian (Herodotus 2.43 & 2.91)); or both?



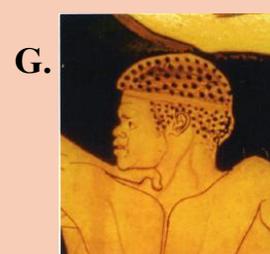
Janiform (double-faced) kantharos (cup); Ethiopian & female Greek (her wreath suggests she is a maenad, a follower of Dionysus). Attic Greek (480-70 BCE). Janiform cups had different ‘faces’ (satyr & Greek woman; Herakles & a woman; Herakles & Busiris; a satyr & African man, etc.) and were popular at *symposia* (aristocratic parties). Dionysus was the god of wine & acting (‘not being oneself’), so some think this cup ‘masks’ its drinker’s face (like an actor’s mask), allowing him to ‘play’ the ‘other’ for a night. Image courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum.



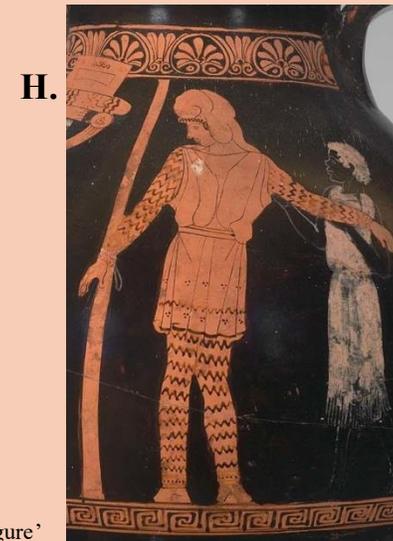
E. Ethiopian warrior; tondo (center medallion) of a red-figure kylix (drinking cup). From Poggio Sommavilla, Etruria. 520-500 BCE. At the Musée du Louvre, Paris.



F. Ethiopian soldier/archer. Athenian white-ground alabastron (perfume/oil container). 480 BCE. J. Paul Getty Museum (71.AE.202). Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program.



G. Herakles & Busiris (detail). Athenian Red Figure. 470-460 BCE. Close-up of a ‘red figure’ Ethiopian Busiris, as indicated by his hair and facial features (his ‘skin color’ matches that of the Greek Herakles, which is not uncommon on red figure pottery). This rendering of Busiris treats ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Ethiopian’ as interchangeable categories. Image Courtesy of The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. ([AN 1896-1908.G.270](https://www.ashmolean.org/objects/AN1896-1908.G.270)).



Andromeda & attendant; Niobid Painter (detail). 450-440 BCE. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Art, Boston ([SC151055](https://www.museumofart.org/collections/sc151055)).

← King Cepheus & Queen Cassiopeia, ruled Ethiopia. Cassiopeia offended Poseidon, who sent a sea-monster to attack Ethiopia’s coasts. To save Ethiopia, its princess, Andromeda, was offered to the monster. She was saved by the Greek hero Perseus, who turned the monster to stone with the Gorgon’s head. Here, an Ethiopian attendant (rendered with black and white glaze) binds Andromeda, who is portrayed as ‘foreign’ (i.e., she is dressed like an ‘eastern barbarian’). Her skin color is ‘red figure’ Greek but some argue that her curly hair, along with her father Cepheus’ hair & facial features, represent their ‘mixed’ heritage. →



‘Ethiopian’ head in profile. Lekythos, Pagenstecher class. 350-25 BCE. From Paestum, Italy. [LL 89.N.2566](https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/lekythos-pagenstecher-class). © 2009 Musée du Louvre.

III. Ancient Greece: Diversity in the Hellenistic Period (323 – 30 BCE)

After Alexander ‘the Great’ conquered Greece, Egypt, much of Asia Minor, & the territory from Persia to northwestern India, he died without an heir in 323 BCE — and the Hellenistic Period was born. Alexander’s generals fought over who got to inherit his empire; when the dust settled, three ‘Successor Kingdoms’ emerged: the Antigonids ruled Macedon (i.e., Greece); the Ptolemies ruled Egypt & Cyrene; and the Seleucids ruled Asia Minor & the territory from Syria to India’s borders. Each ‘Hellenistic’ Successor kingdom became an amalgam of Greek & indigenous cultures. The Hellenistic period ended with the death of Pharaoh Cleopatra VII, the last independent ruler of the Hellenistic ‘Successor’ dynasties.



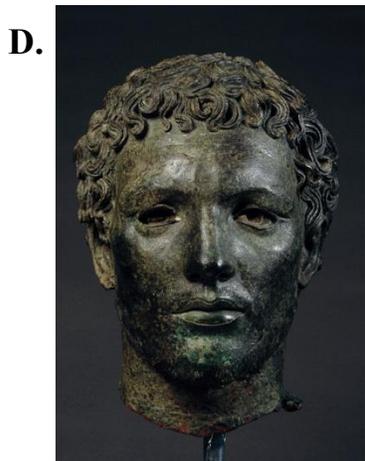
Statuette, young musician. 3rd c. BCE. Roman copy of a Greek original. Image courtesy of the Image Gallery, Harvard University Press. Found in Calons-sur-Saone, France. Currently at the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris (no. 1009).



Egyptian youth (bronze balsamarium (oil container)). Alexandria, Egypt. 2nd c. BCE. Image courtesy of the National Archeological Museum of Florence



Gray marble head of man with curly hair. Possibly made in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), then transported to Ptolemaic Egypt. Late 2nd c. BCE. Brooklyn Museum photograph. 70.59. [CC-BY license](#).



D. Head from bronze portrait statue of a North African (a native Libyan (Berber)). ca. 300 BCE. From the Temple of Apollo in Cyrene. © The Trustees of the British Museum (AN 344057001). [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](#).

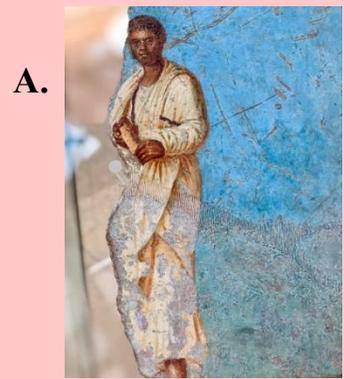


E. Jockey of Artemisium; bronze statue of a victorious jockey, a boy of ‘mixed’ heritage (part-Ethiopian). 150 BCE. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. X 15177, 19089. Photo by Zde. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](#).

The adjective ‘Hellenic’ means ‘Greek’, while ‘Hellenistic’ refers to the (gradual) spread of Greek language & culture into the ‘east’ under the Successor Kingdoms. (By the 2nd c. BCE, Hellenistic trade routes extended to India). Yet also, during the 2nd c. BCE, Rome kept clashing with the Antigonid and Seleucid kingdoms before absorbing them into its empire (in 168 and 64 BCE, respectively). The Ptolemaic kingdom became part of the Roman empire in 30 BCE after the death of Cleopatra VII (its last independent Pharaoh). But even so, many ‘former’ Hellenistic Greeks kept identifying as Greek. Thus, we should ask: 1) Was ancient Greece ever just the ‘Greek peninsula’? 2) Who is a Greek in the Hellenistic period? 3) Could a Greek still be ‘Greek’ under Roman rule? 4) Is identity simple or complex — can someone *legitimately* have multiple identities?

Why do the answers to these questions matter for modern students?

III. Diversity in the Roman Empire: some material evidence from the 1st c. BCE – 3rd c. CE (much more exists for the eras before & after those represented below)



A. A scholar; fresco fragment. 1st c. BCE-to -1st c. CE. Villa of Catullus at Simione on Lake Garda. Photo by Gareth Harney. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



B. Juba II; bronze bust. c. 20 BCE. Museum of History & Civilizations @ Rabat, Morocco. Found in Volubilis, Mauretania's western capital. Photo, Françoise Foliot. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

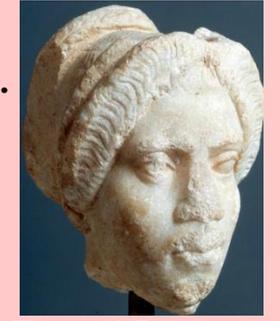
← After Juba I, king of Numidia (eastern Algeria to western Tunisia) was defeated by Julius Caesar, young Juba II was brought to Rome, granted Roman citizenship, and raised by Caesar (then Octavian). Juba II became a respected scholar of Greek & Latin. In 30 BCE, Octavian installed Juba II as Numidia's client king. Juba II married (and co-ruled with) Cleopatra Selene II, daughter of Cleopatra VII and Marcus Antonius.



C. Priests of Isis lead a ritual; fresco, Temple of Isis, @ Herculaneum. 1st c. CE. Note: priests of 'Ethiopian' heritage lead the local Italian population. Photo by science-junkie.tumblr.com



D. Gray marble bust of a man. (Different angles) 1st c. CE. Museo Torlonia, Rome. AN 209. Left: [A&AePortal, Yale University Press](https://www.aandaeportal.org/). Right: Image 280, Snowden 1976: 215



E. Woman with Trajanic-period hairstyle; marble. 101-200 CE. From the Athenian Agora. Agora Museum, Athens. Image from medievalpoc.tumblr



F. A child; marble. 150-200 CE. provenance unknown (from Italy). J. Paul Getty Museum, 71.AA.462. Digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program

G. Portraits of Romans (so-called 'mummy' portraits from the cemetery in Fayum, Egypt). These portraits were *realistic* likenesses of the deceased, painted on wood or linen. Only the wealthy could afford them. Roman Egypt's population was of mixed heritage: Greek, Italian, & north African.

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| Saffron maiden. 40-50 CE. Landesmuseum Württemberg. 7.1. P. Frankenstein, H. Zwietasch. CC BY | Youth's portrait (still covering his face). 80-100 CE. The Met. 11.139. | Young woman. c. 90-120 CE. Public domain. | Man, equestrian rank, c.190-230 CE. © 1998 Musée du Louvre. AF 6883. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license . | Roman officer with sword belt. c.150 CE. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. AS 31161-3. CC BY-SA 4.0 | Man (equestrian rank?) c. 150-70 CE. J. Paul Getty Museum. 74.AP.11. | Man (equestrian rank?) 160-80 CE. The Met. 09.181.1. |



H. The Severan Tondo; painted on wood. Early 3rd c. CE. From Egypt. Altes Museum, Berlin. 2017. © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

← Emperor Septimius Severus. Born in the province of Africa (modern Libya) at Leptis Magna, he ruled from 193-211 CE. His mother Fulvia Pia was from an Italian equestrian family that immigrated to Africa & intermarried with local families. His father Publius Septimius Geta was of Italian, Libyan, & Phoenician ancestry. This is a portrait of Septimius Severus, his Syrian wife Julia Domna, and their sons, Caracalla & Geta (whose face was 'erased' after Caracalla killed him). Scholars debate whether Septimius Severus' dark skin reflects his skin color or the convention of making men 'dark,' though Thompson (1982) argues convincingly that this portrait was likely made by an Egyptian artist who painted mummy portraits for a living (24). *These artists painted realistic likenesses.*

In sum, ancient Greeks & Romans were verifiably diverse. But if so, why does our society still treat them as 'white' (or as 'white' by default)? For several reasons:

- 1) Modern Europe and the US (a former European colony) consider themselves heirs to ancient Greek & Roman culture, so assume ancient Greeks & Romans were 'white Europeans,' too.
- 2) The mistaken belief that ancient Greeks & Romans were 'white' has also been reinforced and/or taught for generations because earlier European scholars edited and 'interpreted' ancient material to support, justify, and promote both race-based slavery and 'white' European exceptionalism/superiority.
- 3) In sum, evidence for ancient diversity has always existed; it was just not reported. But as our society has started to address racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism, it has become more acceptable within the field of Greek & Roman studies to discuss and research material that earlier scholars discounted or dismissed.

Current work on Greco-Roman antiquity, then, includes previously omitted material; it attempts to *correct* the narrative that earlier scholars distorted to support their bigotry and neither fabricates nor manipulates evidence to attack 'real' history, as some social commentators allege (also Morley 2017, Hunter 2017, Morley 2017, Philo 2017).

What does this suggest to you about the reception and interpretation of historical evidence, in general?

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