

## **Slide 1 Handout: Before reviewing archaeological & textual sources, we must define some terms then address two relevant, modern assumptions:**

### **1. First, we should clearly define how this presentation uses the terms ‘race’ & ‘ethnicity’:**

**Race**: the classification of people based upon their perceived physical forms and traits (i.e., physical, bodily differences), often for placement in a social hierarchy of value and/or ability.

**Ethnicity**: “the classification of people according to ideas about ancestry and descent” (Mac Sweeney 2025: 103) — an ancestral connection, real or imagined, that can manifest culturally.

For example, we consider:

- 1) Kenyans & the English *both* racially & ethnically distinct from each other; while
- 2) the Welsh & the English are racially the same but ethnically different.

Yet the Greeks & Romans sometimes identify people *we* view as ethnically different but racially the same as *both* ethnically *and* innately (what we would call ‘racially’) different due to different hair, height, etc. We should also note that their classifications of difference were constantly shifting, both between regions — even city-states, in the Greeks’ case — and across time.

**Modern assumption 1**: Historian Richard Alston (2022) notes that, “Racism is understood as the use of various minor corporeal differences, in particular skin color, to create categories of people. Those categories are subsequently associated with identities, which reinforce that categorisation. Such categorisation is a peculiar and perverse modern idea. Greeks and Romans didn’t think in these ways. They were aware of differences. But for Romans, White or Black were not meaningful social categories. As a result, our sources hardly ever mention skin pigmentation, since it wasn’t important to them. It is normally impossible for us to associate particular ancients with those modern racial categories. But this absence of evidence has allowed the assumption that most prominent Romans were, in our terms, White. However, there is every reason to think that many leading Romans were, in our terms, Black.... Many Romans were dark-skinned. Yet for moderns, this seems surprising and an assertion that requires justification.... Black Romans were central to classical culture and not as an exceptional few or as slaves or servants. They were soldiers and traders, dramatists, poets, philosophers, theologians, and emperors. We need to re-imagine imperial Romans as having a completely unsurprising diversity of skin pigmentation.”

**Modern assumption 2**: Regarding North Africans, Professor Rebecca Futo Kennedy emphasizes that: “Typically, we read that *Ethiopian* is the term that ancients used to refer to people with dark skin tones, those we would call black, and that these are often also referred to as sub-Saharan Africans.... Herodotus, however, clearly places black Africans in northwest and north central Africa and not as slaves but as indigenous and early. And according to Herodotus, they are living north of the Sahara, since the Sahara beyond its edges merges into the uninhabitable zone and then Ocean [[see Herodotus’s map of the world](#)]. He

states that they live “south” of the Libyans, but “south” for Herodotus is still north of or in the Sahara. As far as Herodotus and others well into the Roman period were concerned, ‘sub-Saharan’ either didn’t exist or it was an uninhabitable zone in between them and the Antichthones, ‘opposite-land’ (as Pomponius Mela calls the mystical southern continent [[Book 1.3-23 \(pp. 34-40\)\]](#)); for his map, see [here](#)]. Strabo, too, writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE-CE, writes of groups of black Africans living in northwestern Africa — the Pharusians and Nigritae, whom he places near the ‘western Ethiopians’ ([17.3.7](#)). How do we know they are likely black? Because they are said to be like the Ethiopians and the Pharusians, in particular, are linked to southern Indians, whom many ancient authors think either were immigrants from Africa or migrated to Africa. The Mauri (later Moors) are also located in northwestern Africa, but Mauri, like Berber, is not necessarily a clear term that associated with skin tone in antiquity — evidence links them more to geography and nomadic lifestyle and when skin colors are mentioned, they range from light to dark....

In other words, there were black Africans living north of and in the Sahara in antiquity. Herodotus never mentions their skin tones as warranting discussion, likely because he had placed them in the torrid zone on the map and environment dictated they would be dark skinned. The Phoenicians and Greeks came there with their lighter brown skin, more northern Libyans were environmentally browner than Greeks and Phoenicians, but lighter than the Ethiopians and others.”

***Hence, in our historical imaginations, we should:***

- 1) avoid the impulse to automatically ‘see’ ancient Greeks & Romans (even famous figures) as ‘white’. It is inaccurate. It also keeps students from ‘seeing’ evidence that indicates an individual may have been darker-skinned.***
- 2) avoid ‘reading’ ancient Africa with modern geographic/demographic assumptions (since modern racist narratives like to treat North Africans, especially Egyptians, as more ‘white-seeming’ than not).***

***We can now turn to bronze age texts and archaeology...***