Images and Attitudes

Ancient Views of Nubia and the Nubians

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Ancient Nubia was clearly perceived by its contemporaries as an independent country, rich in coveted resources and inhabited by dark- and black-skinned Negroid peoples. These peoples at one time competed and ruled Egypt, and the foundations of a state that survived for more than a thousand years. Various sources leave no doubt whatsoever that the inhabitants of this region, designated as Kushites, Ethiopians, and Nubians, were perceived as physically different from Egyptians (see box). Their physical characteristics were faithfully depicted not only in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and early Christian art, but also in detailed Greco-Roman and early Christian writings.

While recognizing physical differences among the peoples of their world, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and early Christians attached no special stigma to skin color and did not develop notions of race involving a hierarchy with “whites” in the highest position and “blacks” in the lowest. Underlying this unbiased view was an objective approach to man’s diversity, in which skin color was mere geographical accident. To see how those we today call black Africans were known to their contemporaries, let us take up, in turn, Egyptian, Greek-Roman, and early Christian representations of the peoples of Nubia.

Egyptian Views

The history of Egyptian Nubian encounters is in large part the story of Egypt’s policy of exploiting Nubia’s material and human resources and of Nubia’s resistance to Egypt’s commercial and imperial ambitions. This state of affairs throws light on the heavy military emphasis in and the ambivalence of pharaonic records relating to Nubians. Egypt’s southern neighbors were depicted on the one hand, as enemies whose country was to be invaded, seized, and exploited whenever necessary to fulfill pharaonic objectives. On the other hand, in spite of their successes in Nubia, Egyptians had a high respect for the military capabilities of Nubian soldiers and their ability to thwart Egypt’s plans for the south.

Recruitment of Nubian mercenaries, enlisted for service in Asia as early as the Sixth Dynasty (Old Kingdom), was stepped up in the First Intermediate Period and eventually became an important factor in strengthening Egypt’s military effectiveness (Fig. 4). Inscriptions and stelae of Nubian bohem from Gebelein, south of Thebes, and wooden models of Nubian archers from a royal tomb at Assuan further north in central Egypt, point to a sizable Nubian element in the Egyptian population about 2000 B.C.

The Second Intermediate Period saw the flourishing of Kerma, a powerful Nubian kingdom just below the Third Cataract which replaced Egypt as the controlling force in Lower Nubia. Kerma’s position as a political and military power at this time was recognized by the Hyksos King Apophis, who in control of northern Egypt, Apophis invited the ruler of Kerma to join him in a campaign to defeat the Egyptians and to divide Egypt between them. The pharaoh Kamose himself frankly admitted the reality of Kerma’s power in these words: “Let me understand what this strength of mine is for! (One) prince (the Hyksos) is in Asut, another in Nubia, and (here) I sit associated with an Asiatic and a Nubian! Each man has his slice of this Egypt, dividing the land with me.”

During the New Kingdom Thutmose I began to break the power of Kerma which had played a leading role in
Figure 2. The blacks portrayed by classical artists were not "monomorphic," as if cast from a single mold. Accuracy of detail shows that the craftsmen were intimately acquainted with different Negroid types. Modern specialists with a knowledge of contemporary Africa have seen in classical art a vast and authentic tableau of the principal types of present-day African Negroids.


Nubia's resistance. He described his black foils as "helpless in his grasp," and boasted that there was not a "single survivor among them." It is in an adversarial rather than an "anti-black" context; however, that Egyptian expressions of superiority such as these should be understood.

Similarly, the stele mandating maintenance of Egypt's southern boundary that Seti I erected at Semna was not the "first colorbar," as it was once called; it was merely an announcement of the pharaoh's determination to call a halt to Nubian activity north of the boundary he had established. Other pharaonic and written documents have been interpreted as evidence that Egyptians lacked respect and showed contempt for Kushites as Nubians were called in Egyptian sources), but it should be emphasized that Egypt's Asian foes were portrayed and described in the same or similar manner. A few pieces from Egyptian workshops dating to the reign of Tuthmosis III illustrate the pharaonic practice of symbolizing Egypt's power and might by portraying both defeated Asians and Kushites as humiliated foes with a wooden chest depicting the pharaoh slaughtering Syracans on one side and Kushites on the other; a footstool decorated with alternating Kushite and Asiatic captives dressed in their native attire and a ceremonial throwing stick combining a black African in chibor and a bearded Assyrian in ivory.

It has also been argued that Egyptian contempt for Kushites was intended to express a dehumanizing form of human beings as "barbaric" or "the other," as it was once translated. "Kush the defeated," as it is now understood. Similar expressions, however, were used for Egypt's Syrian-Palestinian foes. Ramesses, for example, referred to the Amanites as "the base Asiatics" (Tuthmosis III), in a reference to a rebellion headed by a prince of Kadeshe (a city on the Orontes), described Asiatikos as the enemy of Kadesh, and Ammonitekhep Pecharn characterized his northern foes as a useless lot. In short, Egypt's enemies, regardless of color, were portrayed and described similarly, with no more significance attached to the color and features of dark- or black-skinned Nubians than to those of the lighter-skinned, bearded Assyrians.

During the entire history of Egypt's relations with Nubia, Egyptians developed no special theory concerning the inferiority of blacks. The spirit of the Great Hymn to the Aten was reflected in the Egyptians' manner of dealing with Nubians.

The countries of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt

Their tongue is like magic, and their words are sweet. And at the very first words, they speak, their words are sweet.

In other words, all human beings are offspring of the Aten, the sun disk, who made them diverse in skin color, speech, and character.

The Nubians' color did not affect their day-to-day contacts with Egyptians. Intermarriage of Nubians and Egyptians was not uncommon (Fig. 5). The practice dates back at least to the Fourth Dynasty, when the Nubian wife of a noble at the court of Memphis was accorded the

Figure 3. (left) This marble statue, with its attendant lion and elephant headpiece, appears to be a personification of Africa. Even so, the features are highly individualized, perhaps even based on a living model. Such statues portrayed over a century earlier in later classical works. End of the 1st century B.C., to the 1st century A.D., from lower Egypt.


Figure 4. (right) Ta Sety, meaning "the Land of the Bow," was a name given by Egyptians to Lower Nubia. This bow was the typical weapon of Nubians as early as the days of the black archers at Gibelet and Aswet in 2009 B.C. As late as the 7th century A.D., Nubian bowmen were known to Arab writers as "impal-saime," respected for their skill in blindsiding their opponents. Limestone relief from the pyramid of Seti I (12th Dynasty), Dahshur, Egypt.

Figure 5. This portrait of a black princess and one of her Egyptian husband, a prince from the court of Memphis (not shown here), are the earliest examples in Egyptian art of a mixed Negroid-Egyptian couple. The women is one of the first clearly recognizable portraits of a black in Egyptian art. White limestone head from Giza, 2500-2527 B.C.

A Note on Terminology

The question of who were and who were not African blacks in the ancient world has given rise to much emotional rhetoric. One particularly erroneous statement is the unsupported assertion that Egyptians as well as inhabitants of northwest Africa—the Moors and Cathaginians, for example—were predominantly blacks or Negroes in the twentieth century sense of these words. It has been mistakenly assumed that in classical texts the word "Afric" (African) and adjectives denoting color such as melas (black), niger (black), and fusces (dark) are always the equivalents of "Negro" or "black" as used in the modern world. In classical usage, however, "Afric" (African) referred in general to the peoples of the countries west of Egypt along the northern coast of Africa, the Cathaginians, and the inhabitants of the Roman province of Africa—peoples whose physical characteristics Greeks and Romans distinguished from those of the darker-skinned inhabitants of the interior of northwest Africa. Furthermore, adjectives meaning "dark" and "black" were applied to a number of peoples, including Egyptians, Indians, and Moors, who were darker than Greeks and Romans but whose color and other physical features differed from those of sub-Saharan Africans.

Greeks and Romans commonly used the word "Ethiopians," literally "burnt-faced persons," to refer to African peoples whose various combinations of physical characteristics were similar to those individuals designated today as Negroid or black. These burnt-faced peoples came from regions of the Nile Valley south of Egypt, Ethiopia, and the southern fringes of northwest Africa. The context of the Ethiopians' "blackness" is further illustrated by the familiar classical color scheme succinctly stated in the 1st century A.D. by Pliny the Elder: "Ethiopians, the blackest; Indians, less sunburned; Egyptians, mildly dark; and Moors, the lightest."

The ancients considered physical characteristics beside color in their depictions of African peoples (Figs. 1, 2, 8, 10). According to copious evidence from contemporary witnesses, inhabitants of the Nile Valley south of Egypt were perceived as having various combinations of blackish or dark skin, flat noses, woolly or tightly curled hair, medium to thick lips, and flattened noses. Southern Nubians were seen as differing from northern Nubians in that they were generally darker, with broader noses, thicker lips, and hair more tightly curled. The physical features of Egyptians, on the other hand, according to ancient evidence as summarized by Frank Verwey, consisted of complexions determined by a light Mediterranean type to a darker brown in upper Egypt; hair ranging from straight to wavy and even to tightly curled; lips from thin to full; and noses from small to broad nostrils. In other words, the ancients saw a continuum of physical features, including color, from the Mediterranean into the interior of Africa. Among this continuum, Egyptians were clearly distinguished as physically different from the dark- and black-skinned peoples designated as Kushites, Ethiopians, and Nubians. Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were also aware of the presence of a mixed Egyptian-Nubian element in their world. Realistic portrayals of mulattos and other mixed "black-white" types in ancient art provide striking confirmation of references to racial mixture in classical texts.

Figure 6. Like other foreigners, many Africans came to the Mediterranean as prisoners of war or as slaves. Some, however, came on missions of diplomacy or trade, or to be educated. This youthful Phoenician may have been sent to Alexandria to receive a Greek education in philosophy or rhetoric. Greek, Hellenistic, 2nd century B.C.

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same position as that of Egyptian women. In the New Kingdom the children of some conquered chieftains, both Asirite and Nubian, were educated at school in Egypt. Nubian children in Egypt were sometimes incorporated into the bureaucracy of Kush or employed in Egypt as palace servants and soldiers. A few attained positions of wealth and power. Merserpi, the fan-bearer of Tuthmosis III, for example, received a large grant of land in the eastern desert of Sinai. In many respects, the Nubian pharaohs of the Nubian Twenty-fifth Dynasty were seen by Egyptians as native rulers rather than foreign invaders. Regarding themselves as perpetuators of Egyptian culture, they maintained the image of the pharaohs, adopting traditional titles such as "Beloved of Amun," renovating and enlarging existing temples and constructing new ones in certain parts of Egypt. It is not surprising, therefore, that some Delta chieftains looked to Nubian leadership in their efforts to cut off the rule of Assyrian domination. Rebellious Egyptians, according to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, turned to his Nubian pharaoh Taharka as one of their own. They sought Taharka's help in freeing Egypt from Assyrian domination. With this plea: "Let there be peace between us and let us come to mutual understanding—let us divide the country between us, no foreigner shall be ruler among us!" In other words, Taharka was viewed as a kind of native son, not an foreign intruder like the Assyrians.

Nubia also appears to have been traditionally regarded as a region for Egyptian refugees and a friendly ear to Egyptian causes. Necharchus II, one of the later Nubian pharaohs, is reported to have fled into Ethiopia with the expectation of receiving assistance in his efforts to prevent a second Persian conquest. In summary, Nubians feared no differently than did many other foreigners who settled in Egypt. Egyptians distinguished these foreigners from themselves not in what we would call "racial" terms but by regional or political names. Like many other "outsiders" who lived in Egypt, learned the language, and adopted Egyptian customs, Nubians were accepted as "of the people." Color did not handicap their full participation in Egyptian society.
Greek and Roman Views

The most detailed and varied picture of Nubians from the ancient world is provided by classical authors. Not limiting themselves to military reportage, Greeks and Romans touched on a broad range of subjects, including history, anthropology, sociology, and religion. Although Nubians and other southeners had from the earliest times been a familiar part of the daily scene in Egypt, they were, in a sense, a newly discovered people to the Greeks and Romans. Upon their first introduction to dark-skinned Nubians, the Greeks were obviously struck by the novelty of a people who had once conquered Egypt and ruled an empire extending from deep in the Nile Valley to the Mediterranean.

The earliest information about black Africans in the Greek world comes from the island of the eastern Mediterranean. In a fresco from Cnossos (c. 1500-1550 B.C.), a procession of black soldiersperhaps Nubians whos anachronous could no longer look like or be confounded with Egyptians—are led by a Minyan commander. A later fresco from Pylos on the Greek mainland, dated about the second half of the 13th century B.C., depicts a procession of white and black men in a scene that may be festive or religious. This evidence and the mention of an arirgios (or Nubians) among landowners in the Pylos tablets suggest that Homer’s Ethiopians (as Nubians were called in Greek, Roman, and early Christian sources) may have been more than mere figments of the poet’s imagination.

It was not until the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. that Greek colonists and mercenaries encountered sizable numbers of black Africans. The Greek mercenaries of the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus II’s Nubian campaign were apparently among the first Europeans to meet black Africans in military combat on African soil. This Greek military experience in Egypt is reflected in the prominence given to black warriors in 5th century Greek art (Fig. 7). During the Sicilian invasion of Greece (480-479 B.C.), black soldiers among the Periand troops stimulated the interest and curiosity of 5th century Greeks. For most mainland Greeks, the Nubian soldiers were the first black Africans they had seen in the flesh. Evidence of Greek interest in Nubians is attested by the popularity of black African themes in 5th century Greek art and of “Ethiopian” themes in the theater.

Knowledge of Nubia and Nubians was considerably enlarged during the Ptolemaic period when the Greeks were reported to have traveled to Meroe and beyond. Agatharchides, the 2nd century B.C. geographer and historian, reinforced the image of a black military power south of Egypt; he mentions the preparations of an unnamed Ptolemaic, perhaps Ephiphanes, for an Ethiopian campaign for which five hundred Greek mercenaries had been pressed into service.

Roman encounters with Nubians were also military in nature. A bronze coinage found in northern Italy, with a Negro on the obverse and an elephant on the reverse, has been interpreted as referring to Negro nabobs in the Carthaginian army (Fig. 12). From the Augustan era onward, Romans found Nubians a threat to the southern boundary of Roman-occupied Egypt. Roman countermeasures, according to Strabo, resulted in the capture and destruction of Napat and the sale of Nubian prisoners. However, the extremely favorable terms of Augustus’s peace settlement with Egypt, which were regularized by Trajan, represented a notable change in the Roman attitude toward Nubia. The most celebrated of these treaties was the one with the king of Allu, who agreed to pay an annual tribute in the form of gold, ivory, and slaves. This treaty was celebrated in a marksman that remains one of the most famous of all Nubian monuments.

Nubians appear for the first time in European literature in the Homeric poems, where they are remote peoples, the most distant of all, dwelling by the streams of Ocean, some where the sun rises and some where it sets. The image of Homer’s “black-skinned” Ethiopians (as he and other Greeks and Romans called Nubians), familiar of the gods, porn and just, echoes throughout classical literature. Even after these Nubians had been encountered as enemies, classical writers...
continued to recount, without rancor, familiar "Ethiopian" themes—military power, love of freedom and justice, piety, and wisdom.

Shadowy individuals in Homer, Nubian gradually became African really—black and fist-fisted and living south of Egypt in Xerophanes. Some Nubians, according to Herodotus, were said to be the tallest and handsomest men in the whole world. Memnon, their capital, was "a great city" whose inhabitants paid high honor to Amun and Osiris. In the historian's account, the Ethiopian Sabaces, after invading Egypt with a great army, ruled for fifty years in a humane manner, never putting wrongdoers to death but instead requiring them to perform worthwhile civic undertakings. And the king of the "long-lived Ethiopians," according to Herodotus, rekindled the Persian king Cambyses for covering territory that did not belong to him and for attempting to extort a people who had never wronged him.

The image of pious and just Ethiopians persisted until late in the Roman Empire. According to Diodorus, a historian of the late 1st century B.C., Ethiopians were the first of all men. They were the first to worship the gods, who looked upon them with such favor that attempts by foreign rulers like Cambyses to invade and conquer the country were dashed to futile. Ethiopians, in Diodorus's account, were not only pioneers in religious but also the originators of many beliefs and customs of the Egyptians, who were colonists sent out from Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian king's contempt for Cambyses's spies, first mentioned by Herodotus, evoked the admiration of Seneca. And in the 4th century the Anthologia Palatina painted a full vignette of a just Ethiopian king, Hylas. Than an Ethiopian ruler, a model of wisdom and righteousness, shuns putting men to death and instructs his warriors to refrain from slaughter and to take the enemies alive. As a charitable spirit he heeds the plea of his bleeding Persian foe and spares his life, like Herodotus's Ethiopian king, he has no desire to expand his kingdom by conquest but content, because of his reverence for justice, to retire within the natural boundaries of the Cataractas.

In the course of time, along with favorable reports about Ethiopians and the Napatan kingdom of Kush, other stories were circulated about primitive Ethiopians living beyond Napata, whose way of life contrasted sharply with Greek-Roman customs. Some of these stories were repeated in the 1st century C.E., complete or partial nudity, some to have vices in common, and others to be without belief in any god. Furthermore, in the early Roman period, lesser-known regions of both the distant south and the far north were reported to be inhabited by fabulous creatures. According to Pliny the Elder, there were in inner Africa creatures with no voices, others without eyes but heads and noses attached to their chests, and still others who ate human flesh. In the north, especially in Syria and beyond, were creatures with a single eye in the center of their heads, some with feet turned backward who ran through forests like wild beasts, and others who were camels.

Differences between the Ethiopians inhabiting the region adjoining Egypt into the neighborhood of Mene, and those who lived beyond Mene are explained in terms of an environmental theory. After describing the effects of the excessive cold of the north on Scythia and its inhabitants and of the torrid heat of the south on Ethiopia and Diocletian states "it is not at all surprising that both the face and manner of life as well as the bodies of the inhabitants of both regions should be very different from those that prevail among us."

According to this environment theory, people who lived at the outer edges of the earth, regardless of their color, followed customs that differed from those of populations of temperate countries. It is important to note that blacks were not stereotyped as primitive or cannibalistic. In fact, it was some white people, according to Strabo, who were said to be the most "savage" in the world—more savage than the Britons were the inhabitants of ancient Ireland who considered it honorable to devour their fathers when they died and that they have intercourse with their mothers and sisters.

The environment theory, cited by Diodorus and others, was a key stone of the classical view of other peoples and one of the reasons why Greeks and Romans developed their particular theory of the inferiority of blacks qua blacks. This explanation of racial differences was applied in a uniform manner to all peoples. The basic human substance—the same in all peoples—was tempered differently in different climes. Thus, the woolly-haired Ethiopians of the deep south and the fair, straight-haired Scythians of the far north came to be called again and again in salient illustrations of this theory. These north-south, Scythian-Ethiopian contrasts were purposely chosen by later Greeks and Romans, and by early Christians to advocate the view that race is of no consequence in evaluating men.

**Early Christian Views**

Building on classical images, Christian writers developed a highly spiritual black-white symbolism in which Ethiopians illustrated the meaning of the scriptures for all men. Origen, the Alexandrian theologian (A.D. 185-254), was the pioneer in the use of an Ethiopian symbolism. His work became the model for the treatment of ethnic and religious themes by later church fathers. In his commentary on the "black and beautiful maiden" of the Song of Songs, Origen illustrated the applicability of black-white imagery to all peoples:

We ask in what way she is black and in what way fair without whiteness. She has repeated of her skin; conversion has bestowed beauty upon her and she is sung as "beautiful"... If you repent, your soul will be 'black' because of your former sins but because of your penitence your soul will have something of what I may call an Ethiopian beauty.

A church that arose from the Gentiles yet called itself black and beautiful. Origen pointed out, was forshadowed in Moses' marriage to the black Ethiopian woman, mentioned in the Book of Numbers. Origen interpreted the marriage as a symbolic union of the spiritual law (Moses) and the church, 'the Ethiopian woman.' Further, the theologian expressed a basic Christian tenet when, making the traditional black-white symbolism, he said, "The church is not at all surprising that blacks were not stereotyped as primitive or cannibalistic. In fact, it was some white people, accord-
considered potentially Christians. The baptism of the minister of the Ethiopian queen by Philip the Evangelist, described in the Book of Acts, was a landmark in proclaiming that considerations of race were to be of no significance in determining membership in the Christian church. All believers in Christ were eligible. Blacks were not only humble converts but influential figures like St. Menas (sometimes portrayed as a Negro), a national saint of Egypt (Fig. 13) whose shrine west of Alexandria attracted pilgrims from Asia and Europe, as well as from Africa. A black Ethiopian named Moses, the picturesque patriarch of the Egyptian desert, is another such figure. Once a brigand, he reached the height of perfection during his life and left seventy disciples at his death. He was frequently cited as a model of humility and the monastic life, as an excellent teacher, and as a "Father's Father."

This Ethiopian imagery dramatically emphasized the ecumenical character of Christianity. There is no evidence that Ethiopians of the first centuries after Christ suffered in their day-to-day contacts with whites as a result of the metaphorical associations of this symbolism. In the early church, blacks found equality in both theory and practice.

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In the entire corpus of evidence relating to black Africans in the Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and early Christian worlds there are only a few concepts or notions which those who would read a non-existent color prejudice into ancient documents have been able to point to as presumed evidence of anti-black sentiment. Most scholars who have commented on the misinterpretations of black-white symbolism in classical and early Christian literature, and of other similar misreadings of the ancient evidence agree that proponents of such views are expressing the prejudices of the modern interpreters, not of ancient Mediterranean peoples. In short, Ethiopians, Greeks, Romans, and early Christians were free of what Keith Irvine has described as "the curse of acute color-consciousness, attended by all the raw passion and social problems that cluster around it."

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