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Collective Degradation:
Slavery and the Construction of Race

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Slavery and Proto-racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity[1]

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There appears to be a consensus that racism as such originates in modern times. Since it is thought not to be attested earlier, conventional wisdom usually denies that there was any race hatred in the ancient world.[2] The prejudices that existed, so it is believed, were ethnic or cultural, not racial. In this paper I shall discuss three topics. First, I shall argue that prototypes of racism were common in the Graeco-Roman world. My second point will be to describe the close links between those forms of prejudice and ancient ideas about slavery. Finally I shall have something to say about the connection between these concepts and ancient imperialism.

Obviously, in classical antiquity racism did not exist in the modern form of a biological determinism. Clearly too there was no systematic persecution of any ethnic group by another. However, I shall argue that it is justified to speak of early forms of racism, or 'proto-racism' as a widespread phenomenon in antiquity.

Hostility towards foreigners occurs in every society, but in widely differing degrees, social settings and moral environments. An essential component of such hostility is always the tendency to generalise and simplify, so that whole nations are viewed as if they were a single individual with a single personality. I should emphasize at the outset that one of the difficulties in studying group prejudices in antiquity is the lack of any term in Greek and Latin for 'racism' for 'prejudice', or 'discrimination'. Anticipating the conclusions of this paper I would like to suggest that the lack of such terminology stems from the fact that there existed no intellectual, moral or emotional

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[1] The ideas proposed in this paper are fully discussed in a forthcoming study: Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004).
[2] See George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: a Short History* (Princeton, 2002), 17: 'It is the dominant view among scholars who have studied conceptions of difference in the ancient world that no concept truly equivalent to that of "race" can be detected in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians.' Frederickson cites Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Washington, DC & Baltimore MD 1996), chapters 2 and 3. This work, however, suffers from a totally inadequate treatment of the ancient texts in their context.

objections against such generalizations. We must therefore trace the development of ideas and attitudes for which there existed no terminology in the culture under consideration. Modern definitions of race are numerous, definitions of racism a little less so and it is the latter that is needed here, for I am studying attitudes of mind and their development.

My definition of racism is as follows: 'an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography.' The essence of racism is that it regards individuals as superior or inferior because they are believed to share imagined physical, mental and moral attributes with the group to which they are deemed to belong, and it is assumed that they cannot change these traits individually. This is held to be impossible, because these traits are determined by their physical make-up. This is a relatively broad definition which allows us to recognize forms of racism that are not steered exclusively by biological determinism.

I will now briefly consider five concepts which, together, were in antiquity commonly held to determine the collective nature of groups, or the character of peoples. These are: environmental determinism, the heredity of acquired characters, a combination of these two ideas, the constitution and form of government, autochthony and pure lineage. This will be followed by some thoughts about the connection between those ideas and the ideology of ancient imperialism.

1) *Environmental Determinism*. In both Greek and Latin literature from the middle of the fifth century BC onwards we encounter an almost generally accepted form of environmental determinism. This is first explicitly and extensively presented in the medical treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*, written at an uncertain date in the second half of the fifth century BC. The particular form of environmental determinism first found in this work became the generally accepted model in Greece and, afterwards, with variations, in Rome. According to this view, collective characteristics of groups of people are permanently determined by climate and geography. The implication is that the essential features of body and mind come from the outside and are not the result of either genetic evolution, social environment or conscious choice. Individuality and individual change are thereby ignored and even excluded. This is definitely related to racist attitudes as here defined. Entire nations are believed to have common characteristics determined wholly by factors outside themselves and which are, by implication, stable and unchangeable. These presumed characteristics are then subject to value judgements, in which foreigners are usually rejected as being inferior to the observer, or approved of as being untainted and superior in some respects. Such descriptions are, of course, not based on objective observations of reality. They are expressions of ethnic stereotypes and proto-racism.

The essence of the concept of environmental determinism is found again in the work of Aristotle, with some interesting variations. It is worth citing the text at some length: 'The peoples of cold countries generally, and particularly those of Europe, are full of spirit, but deficient in skill and intelligence; and this is why they continue to remain comparatively free, but attain no political development and show no capacity

for governing others. The peoples of Asia are endowed with skill and intelligence, but are deficient in spirit; and this is why they continue to be peoples of subjects and slaves. The Greeks, intermediate in geographical position,[3] unite the qualities of both sets of peoples. It possesses both spirit and intelligence: the one quality makes it continue free; the other enables it to attain the heights political development, and to show a capacity for governing every other people — if only it could once achieve political unity' (trans. Ernest Barker).[4]

These claim made environmental determinism a useful ideological tool for ambitious imperialists, because it justified the conclusion that the Greeks were ideally capable of ruling others. Roman authors took over these ideas, duly substituting themselves as the ideal rulers, and with some variations. Instead of the contrast between Europe and Asia, which the Greeks found essential, the geographical poles for most Roman authors are North and East. As clear examples of this pattern I shall later describe ancient views of the Germans and Syrians

It is appropriate here to indicate also how environmental determinism related to more distant foreigners, notably the Ethiopians, as blacks were usually called by the Greeks.[5] The Ethiopians are mentioned fairly frequently already in some earlier sources, but usually as representatives of peoples living near the edge of the world. In Homer they are 'the furthest of men'. They are 'blameless' and their country is so prosperous as to furnish the ample sacrificial feasts which the gods relish. (Romm, 49-55). In Herodotus 1.134, they occur as the ideal example of the faraway good barbarians (Romm, 55-60). In later periods blacks did not form much of an actual presence in the Greek and Roman worlds. They were regarded as remarkable, but relatively few of them lived among the Greeks and Romans and no country inhabited by a majority of blacks was ever part of the Greek and Roman empires. They were present in fifth-century Athens, but as a rare and expensive type of slave, the possession of which enhanced the status of the owner.[6] Questions about the cause of their appearance appear in the literature from the fourth century onwards. An undatable Pseudo Aristotelian chapter in *Problemata* asks: 'Why are those who live in climates of extreme cold or heat brutish in manners and appearance?' (*Problemata* 909a) This text further elaborates on the favourable effect on body and mind of the 'best mixture' of qualities and the harmful effects of the extreme climates. As examples of the physical effect of extreme heat, for instance, the text gives the bandy legs and curly hair of the Ethiopians and Egyptians. This is explained by analogy: just as planks are warped when they dry, so are the bodies of living beings (909a.27-32). The text adds that those who live in the South have dark eyes while northern peoples have grey eyes and this is explained by the influence of the temperature on the balance of moisture in the body (910a.12). The text also goes a step further: a person who is thought to fit the physical stereotype of a certain nation, is assumed to have the (mostly negative) mental and moral characteristics attributed to that nation, even if

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[3] Xenophon, cited below, claims the same for Athens and Strabo 6.4.1 (c.286) for Italy.

[4] Aristotle, *Politica* 1327b. On ethnocentrism, James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration and Fiction* (Princeton 1992), 46-8, 54f.

[5] Cf. Frank M. Snowden, Jr., 'Greeks and Ethiopians' in: John E. Coleman & Clark A. Walz, *Greeks and Barbarians: Essays on the Interactions between Greeks and Non-Greeks in Antiquity and the Consequences for Eurocentrism* (Bethesda, MD, 1997), 103-126, esp. 111-113.

[6] Margaret C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: a Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge 1997), 212-17.

he does not belong to the nation. Thus not only are all Egyptians believed to be cunning, fickle, etc., but also all people who have curly hair like the Egyptians. A fourth-century treatise on physiognomy gives an example: Egyptians and Ethiopians, being dark, are cowards (however, women, who have light skins, are also cowards, Ps. Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 812a).[7]

2) *The Heredity of Acquired Characters.* A second conceptual mechanism which was generally accepted in Graeco-Roman antiquity is a belief in the heredity of acquired characters. In modern times this has been popular and was identified mainly with the theories of Lacan, but it is now no longer accepted. In antiquity, however, it was accepted as a matter of course by many authors. It is explicitly propounded in some works, for instance in the treatise mentioned earlier, *Airs, Waters, Places,* in the work of Aristotle and elsewhere, mostly in technical treatises. However, it is clear from many implicit references that the principle was taken for granted throughout antiquity. The best known example, found in the treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*, ch. 14, is the case of the people who artifically elongated the skulls of their children, a feature which reputedly became hereditary after a couple of generations. The theory recurs, for instance, in the work of the geographer Strabo who wrote in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. Strabo discusses the cause of the colour of the skin of Ethiopians and the texture of their hair, which he attributes to scorching by the sun. He then observes that the Indians 'do not have woolly hair and that their skin is not so mercilessly burnt.' Strabo continues: 'And already in the womb children, by seminal communication, become like their parents; for congenital illnesses and other similarities are also thus explained' (Strabo 15.1.24 (696)). Later in the first century, the elder Pliny wrote in his *Naturalis Historia* that the Ethiopians are 'scorched by the heat of the sun which is nearby and are born with a singed appearance, with curled beard and hair…'(Pliny, *NH* 2.80.189). Pliny has interesting observations about the transmission of characters in book seven of his work. 'It is also well known that …deformed parents … may have children with …the same deformity, that some marks and moles and even scars reappear in the offspring, in some cases a birthmark on the arm reappearing in the fourth generation'.[8] As I said, these are random examples, it is easy to add more.

3) *A Combination of these Factors.* Many authors combine environmental determinism with a belief in the heredity of acquired characters. When applied to human groups, this leads somewhat paradoxically to an assumption that their characteristics become uniform and constant. One example must suffice, taken from Livy's account of a speech made by the commander Cn. Manlius before his troops in 189 BC. The troops were about to give battle to mixed forces of a people descended from Celts who had moved from Europe to Asia Minor. The commander tells his troops (Livy 38.17.9-10): 'These (Celtic units) are now degenerate, of mixed stock and really Gallogrecians, as they are called; just as in the case of crops and animals, the seeds are not as good in preserving their natural quality as the character of the soil

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[7] Cf. Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), who concludes that generally there were no such prejudices in antiquity. Note, however, the different views of Lloyd A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (London and Oklahoma, 1989). The least that can be said is that ancient views of the Ethiopians were not uniform. Herodotus certainly gives a different perspective, cf. Reinhold Bichler, *Herodots Welt: Der Aufbau der Historie am Bild der fremden Länder und Völker, ihrer Zivilisation und ihrer Geschichte* (Berlin, 2000), 31-35.

[8] Pliny, *NH* 7.50; for similar, earlier claims: Aristotle, *de generatione animalium* 721b; 724a.

and the climate in which they grow have the power to change it.'[9] Climate and geography have definite effects on all people being born in a given region. These effects then become permanent traits because they become hereditary in one or two generations. The result of this combination is a powerful incentive to discriminatory attitudes.

4) *The Constitution and Form of Government.* In the view of many of the relevant authors there is yet another important factor. A good form of government is an essential ingredient in shaping a people. Under a bad ruler or government no people can function well. The most obvious example from the fourth century BC is Isocrates' firm belief that Persia must be a weak nation, because it is ruled by too powerful a king. This, clearly, is not a racist or proto-racist concept, if only because it is liable to change. The last chapter of Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus*, the *Cyropaedia*, claims that Persia was strong when it had a good king, and deteriorated when the kings did. This is essentially a socio-political view, and is often offered in parallel to, or together with the environmental approach. It is important to understand throughout this paper that we are not discussing a strictly logical or closely reasoned system, but often vaguely worded attitudes and beliefs which may well have been regarded as complementary where we would regard them as inconsistent.

5) *Autochthony and Pure Lineage.* The fifth and last concept to be mentioned here is that of autochthony and pure lineage.[10] The Athenians attached enormous importance to the dual myth that they had lived in their own land from the beginnings of time without ever abandoning it, and that they were a people of unmixed lineage. They saw themselves as originally having sprung from the soil itself, the earth serving as their collective mother. This myth served various purposes: a) It was used as argument that they and only they held legitimate possession of their soil. b) They regarded themselves as a people uncontaminated by an admixture of foreign elements, and were therefore superior. The uniqueness of their origins is deemed obvious by many fifth-century authors. Indeed a law promulgated by Pericles in 451/0 awarded citizenship only to the children of two citizens, the intention being to preserve the purity of lineage of the Athenians.[11] All the fourth-century authors who mention these subjects, mostly orators, are convinced of the value of pure descent. They are agreed that the Athenians are uniquely pure in their origins and superior to all other peoples of the world. Other Greek states have produced comparable myths, but only Athens insisted on this to such a great extent. Their insistence was still accepted in Roman literature.

The idea as such had a broad appeal, mostly in a negative sense, among other Greeks and, later, among Roman authors: intermarriage and mixed blood are considered bad and conducive to degeneration. The Celts already mentioned, who had migrated to Asia Minor, deteriorated for two reasons: first, because of their move to another environment, and, second, because they were a mixed people and thus of lesser quality: 'degenerate and mixed' *degeneres sunt, mixti* ...(Livy 38.17.9-10) or, in Florus' later paraphrase: '*mixta et adulterata,*' mixed and impure, bastards (Florus 1.27.3-4). This is the negative equivalent of the view held by the Athenians that they were superior because their ancestors were not mixed with migrants. The belief that

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[9] Cf. the adaptation of this passage by Florus 1.27.3-4.
[10] Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (forthcoming), 74-82.
[11] C. Patterson, *Pericles' Citizenship Law of 451-50 BC* (New York, 1981)

marriage with outsiders produces offspring of lesser quality appears firmly entrenched in Greece as well as in Rome.   In this form the concept of pure lineage emerges in the works of many Roman authors, even though the Romans in practice liberally granted citizenship to subject peoples. Best known are Tacitus' comments on the Germans, whom he described in terms in which the Athenians describe themselves: they were 'indigenous, and not mixed at all with other peoples through immigration or intercourse' (*Germania* 1; 4) As we know, the idea was taken up enthusiastically by the Germans in recent history. To be fair I must note here that some ancient authors are critical of such ideas, for instance Lucian and Apuleius. It may be no coincidence that these two were originated in the Roman provinces, respectively Syria and North Africa, although they were of Greek and Latin culture.

Clearly, of all the concepts briefly described so far, this is the one which most closely approaches modern racism, for it establishes a hierarchy of peoples, based on the fiction that some are of pure lineage, while others are of mixed descent. It could even be said that the Athenians regarded themselves as a 'race' in modern terms. Furthermore, it is clear that these ideas were influential later as well, for they appear in authors who were read widely ever since the Renaissance.

6) *Ancient Imperialism.*   The ideas here described were a significant element in ancient concepts of imperialism. As with so many other features the essence of this is first encountered in the treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*, 16; 23, which insists that the inhabitants of Asia are soft because of their good climate and resources. They are less belligerent and gentler in character than the Europeans, who are more courageous and belligerent. Aristotle (*Politica* 1327b) then claimed that the Greeks, combining the best qualities of both groups were therefore capable of ruling all mankind — an early, if not the first text to suggest that Greeks should achieve universal rule.

No less important: these ideas were taken over, suitably adapted, by the Romans. We find them, for instance, in Vitruvius, the Elder Pliny, and Vegetius.[12] For them, Italy was ideally situated in the middle, but now the middle was between North and East, rather than between Europe and Asia.

One further significant concept should be emphasized again in connection with Greek and Roman imperialist ideas, namely that of decline and degeneration. Just as there are believed to be environments which are good or even ideal for the creation of an imperial power, so there are those that are unfavourable. A related idea, that also is part of the complex of environmental theories, is that of decline as a result of migration. It is first attested in the work of Herodotus, 9.122, where Cyrus says that the Persians, if they move from rugged Persia to a better country, should not expect to continue as rulers, 'but to prepare for being ruled by others — soft countries give birth to soft men. There is no land which produces the most remarkable fruit, and at the same time men good at warfare.' This idea was fully accepted in Rome, for instance in the case of the Celts who established themselves in Asia Minor and, in the opinion of the Romans, subsequently degenerated. I cite Livy again: 'The Macedonians who rule Alexandria in Egypt, who rule Seleucia and Babylon and other colonies spread all over the world, have degenerated into Syrians, Parthians and Egyptians; … whatever grows in its own soil, prospers better; transplanted to alien soil, it changes and it

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[12] Vitruvius 6.1; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 2.80.190; Vegetius 1.2.

degenerates to conform to the soil which feeds it. ...’ (Livy, 38.17.12) It is essential to recognize that no account is taken anywhere of the possibility of improvement: strong people become feeble in a soft environment, but the reverse does never occur.

Individual and Collective Slavery

In considering Greek and Roman society we must be aware that slavery hardly represented a moral dilemma as it has done in modern history. The existence of slavery as such was not a relevant topic of discussion in antiquity, but there were arguments about specifics, notably there was a controversy about the difference in nature between free men and slaves, an issue important for the justification of slavery. If an essential difference, mentally and physically, between free men and slaves could be demonstrated it was easier to claim that their difference in status was justified and reasonable. If there was no essential difference, slavery was harder to justify, for it would depend only on brute force. Was slavery contrary to justice and also contrary to nature? Aristotle responds to arguments along these lines by contending that slavery was both natural and just, because some human beings were so shaped by nature that they lacked some of the essential qualities of fully-fledged men.[13]   They were therefore fit only to serve as instruments for those who had all those qualities. Here we move from the sphere of the individual into that of the collective and the group.

Relevant for our subject are ideas which assign not just to individuals, but to specific groups of people an inferior place in society on the grounds that they are deficient in various ways and need therefore to be subordinated to their intellectual and moral superiors in a master/slave relationship. That is to say, specific, non-Greek peoples are described as collectively having the qualities which slaves of the Greeks should have. Being less than human, or even subhuman they live best in a symbiotic relationship with fully human masters. The arguments applied by Aristotle to individual slaves and masters are frequently and easily applied by other authors to entire groups and peoples. This is clear from the terminology employed: δο λωσις and δουλε α i.e. ‘enslavement’ and related forms are commonly used by Thucydides and by other authors to express the subjection of one state to another.[14] Slavery, δουλε α and similar terms are frequently used to denote political subjection generally.[15] It should be observed that the contrast between free man and slave, ἐλεύθερος-δοῦλος, originated in the domestic sphere and was first broadened out into the realm of politics in the early fifth century. The justification of individual slavery becomes then applicable also to collective subjugation and thus becomes part of imperialist ideology which we should now discuss briefly. These views are again best expressed by Aristotle, whose words are now cited:

‘From this it follows that even warfare is by nature a form of acquisition — for the art of hunting is part of it — which is applied against wild animals and against those men who are not prepared to be ruled, even though they are born for subjection, in so far as this war is just by nature’ (Aristotle, *Politica* 1256b 23-6). War then is a form of acquisition, just like hunting, and the object of this process is the procurement of

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[13] Aristotle’s discussion of slavery in his *Politics*. See P. Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge 1996), definition on p.13.

[14]   Thucydides, 1.98.4; 1.141.1; and just above 2.63.1 on possible domination of Athens by Sparta.

[15] A.W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides: The Ten Years’ War* (Oxford, 1956), 3.646.

slaves among those peoples who are slaves by nature, but resist Greek demands that they submit to their proper fate in the world.[16]

The Athenians assimilated the relation between imperial states and their subjects to that between master and slave. At least, they do so in a speech which Thucydides attributes to them: 'Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do.'[17] The Athenians do not claim that this is just and right, nor do they claim that both sides profit from the unequal relationship, as does Aristotle in his theory of natural slavery. The Athenians merely claim it is inevitable.[18] Callicles, speaking in Plato's *Gorgias*, goes a step further towards Aristotle in claiming that this is not merely inevitable, but indeed just and right:

'But I believe that nature itself reveals that it is a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share than the worse man and the less capable man. Nature shows that this is so in many places[19] … both among the other animals and in whole cities and nations of men, it shows that this is what justice has been decided to be: that the superior rule the inferior and have a greater share than they …' (Plato, *Gorgias* 483c-e)

To turn now to Roman literature, Cicero is far more explicit in describing the benefits of empire to the ruled than Aristotle ever is (*de officiis* 22; cf. Augustine, *de civitate dei* 14.23). He claims that the existence of the Empire is justified because of genuine advantages to the provincials. The attitude of Cicero and other Romans comes closer to the modern concept of the 'White Man's Burden'

In the age of Augustus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus is writing for Greeks in Greek to persuade them that Rome deserves her empire '…that they, the Greeks, may neither feel indignation at their present subjection, which is grounded on reason (for by a universal law of nature, which time cannot destroy, it is ordained that superiors shall ever govern their inferiors), nor rail at Fortune for having wantonly bestowed upon an undeserving city a supremacy so great and already of so long continuance...' (1.5.2).

So far this brief demonstration of the connection between classical ideas of slavery and imperialism. It is now proper to point to yet another influential complex of ideas in this sphere. Besides the common ancient assumption that those who have been enslaved deserve to be in that position, there is another common belief which holds that people, once enslaved, degenerate irrevocably into servile characters. Homer,

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[16]   Robert Schlaifer, 'Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 47 (1936), 165-204 repr. in M. Finley, *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* ([2]1968), 93-132176-181, emphasizes the exact identity of the bases of the legal positions of the slave, metic and foreigner in Athens.

[17] Thucydides 5.105.2 (trans. Richard Crawley). See also 1.76. 2 and 4.61.5. See A.W. Gomme, A. Andrewes and K.J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* 4 (Oxford, 1970), 162-4.

[18]   For imperialism in the Athenian speeches, see J. de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (Oxford, 1963), esp.56f.

[19] Cf. E.R. Dodds, *Plato, Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1959), 267.

later cited by Plato, says: "If you make a man a slave, that very day / Far-sounding Zeus takes half his wits away".[20] For a similar sentiment in a major Roman author we may turn to Cicero. Servitude is a central motive in his thinking about contemporary Greeks. Cicero advises his brother, proconsul of Africa to to be cautious in his dealings with the Greeks in his province, 'In your province there are a great many who are deceitful and unstable, and trained by a long course of servitude to show an excess of sycophancy'(Cicero, *ad Quintum fratrem* 1.1.16). Cicero was certain that a state of subjugation distorts and degenerates character. Indeed, many Roman authors assume as a matter of course that the conquest of a people and their subjection to another inevitably set in motion a process whereby they increasingly lose their belligerency, their sense of freedom and their virility, the longer they are subjects. Cicero, Josephus and Tacitus agree that it is an irreversible process.[21] In fact, only those who are born in freedom have a chance of regaining it after they have been subjected. It is a sentiment echoed, for instance, by the third-century historian Cassius Dio in the pre-battle speech which he attributes to the British rebel queen Boudicca: '— let us, I say, do our duty while we still remember what freedom is, that we may leave to our children not only its appellation but also its reality. For, if we utterly forget the happy state in which we were born and bred, what, pray, will they do, reared in bondage?' (Dio 62.4.3, trans. E. Cary, Loeb)

The last part of this paper will be devoted to two unambiguous examples of what I would call proto-racist attitudes of Roman authors to other peoples, whereby it is clear that these attitudes also played a substantial role in the way the Romans conceived the relationship of these peoples with the Empire. The various topics of this lecture come together if we briefly look at Roman ideas about two peoples: the Syrians and Germans. First, the Syrians.[22] They were *born* for slavery according to the familiar formula.[23] The presumed qualities of the Syrians and other Asiatic peoples which earn them the description of having been born for slavery are: servility, effeminacy, perversity. Homosexuality, self-castration, perverted cults are all associated with this presumed lack of masculinity. They were no fighters, it was thought. Connected with this is the accusation of luxurious living. The Syrians are good at feasting, they tend to go to the baths rather than exercise, and they over-eat. This means that they represent the opposite of what Romans think real men ought to be. Roman ideas about Syrians constitute a complex of stereotypes with what I would call proto-racist characteristics. Their presumed qualities were also regarded as infectious. When effeminate Syrians and Romans are brought together the Romans become soft and the Syrians remain as they are. The reverse would never apply: Syrians do not become sturdy fighters under the influence of Roman conquerors.

The Germans, ever since Varus' defeat in AD 9, were to the Romans a constant reminder of failure and by many authors they were regarded as a major threat. Roman authors saw them as the ultimate northern people.[24] Accordingly, a full assortment of environmental stereotypes was applied to them. Tacitus, however, as already mentioned, attributes their specific characteristics rather to their pure lineage, a

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[20] Homer, *Odyssea* 17.322-3; cited by Plato, *Laws* 776e – 777a. Cf. Garnsey, p.89 with discussion on p.93f.

[21] Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 2.15.4 (356-358); Tacitus, *Agricola* 21; *Historiae* 4.17; 4. 64.3

[22] Isaac, *The Invention of Racism* (forthcoming), chapter 6, pp.335-50.

[23] Cicero, *de provinciis consularibus* 2.5.10; Livy 35.49.8; Livy 36.17.4-5

[24] Isaac, *The Invention of Racism,* ch. 12, pp. 427-439.

significant idea, even if we ignore its influence in later history. The Germans were of pure blood because they lived far to the north and apart from others and therefore were not corrupted into civilized degeneracy of any kind, except those living closest to other peoples. The Germans were tall, brave and firm, prone to anger. They cannot stand hard work nor can they stand heat or thirst, but they are inured to cold and hunger. They love fighting, sleeping and feasting; they hate peace and serious work and so forth. With all their weaknesses, however, the Germans represented the ultimate form of virility. Many of their virtues were the opposite of Roman decadence, especially in Tacitus' *Germania*. The Roman imperial view of itself and others saw here an unavoidable logic: subject people eventually lose their independence of mind. Conversely the Germans, if they are *not* subjected, remain dangerous. Combine this with the essential pessimism and belief in inevitable decline of the ancient world, and the German presence is indeed a serious long-term threat. Being uncorrupted and powerful, they were the the most dangerous people that had not been conquered.

For our purposes it is important to note that, in the case of the Germans we encounter a strong combination of forms of proto-racism: environmental stereotypes are reinforced by the belief in pure lineage and socio-cultural integrity. These notions in turn played a significant role in the ideas about the relationship between the Empire and the Germanic peoples. Thus Roman views — and especially those of Tacitus — on the Germans are probably the best example to be found anywhere in ancient literature of a full integration of proto-racist stereotypes and imperialist ideology. To conquer and rule them was not only the ultimate test of a warrior-Empire, it was also a necessity for its long-term survival. It so happens that these ideas were absorbed by a nation particularly susceptible to them in the early modern and modern periods.

To sum up: In antiquity, as in modern times, we constantly encounter the unquestioned assumption that it is possible and reasonable to relate to entire peoples as if they were a single or collective individual. The conceptual means employed to this end were not the same in antiquity as in modern history, although they are still quite familiar. They were the environmental theory and the belief in the heredity of acquired characters, concepts broadly accepted in Greece and Rome. These hold that collective characteristics of groups of people are permanently determined by climate and geography. The implication is that the essential features of body and mind come from the outside and are stable. They do not occur through genetic evolution, or conscious choice. Social interaction plays a secondary role. Individuality and individual change are thereby ignored. When applied to human groups these ideas lead to a belief that their characteristics are uniform and constant, once acquired, unless people migrate. The latter would lead to decline and degeneration through displacement and contamination. The presumed characteristics that resulted were subject to value judgements, in which the foreigners were usually rejected as being inferior to the observer, or, in rare instances, approved of as being untainted and superior.   Greeks in the fourth century developed the environmental theory further, adding two elements which made it an essential tool for imperialists. They claimed that Greece occupies the very best environment between Europe and Asia and produces therefore people ideally capable of ruling others. More specifically this was directed at the Persian Empire and the the inhabitants of Asia, who were said to be servile by nature, or natural slaves, and therefore suited to be subjects of the Greeks.

These and similar ideas are found in many Roman authors in a popularized form, adapted to the specific needs and circumstances of the times. The Romans duly substitute themselves as the ideal rulers. A related idea, accepted by many Roman authors, held that long-term imperial rule reduces a people to a state almost identical to that of natural slavery. As a result masters and slaves, rulers and subject peoples live in a symbiosis beneficial to both parties. Other relevant concepts are autochthony and pure lineage. The Athenians, in their period of imperial expansion, developed an emotional attachment to these interrelated ideas. Rome made no claim of being autochthonous or of pure blood, but applied those ideas to other peoples. Particularly important is the strong disapproval of mixed blood. There is a firm conviction, encountered in numerous texts, that mixing leads to degeneration. The idea is not so much that purity of lineage will lead to improvement, the reverse is true: any form of mixture will result in something worse. This, as has been shown, is connected with the absence of a belief in progress in antiquity.

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