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## Collective Degradation: Slavery and the Construction of Race

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### Why White People Are Called 'Caucasian?'<sup>1</sup>

Nell Irvin Painter

#### Introduction

On first thought, the theme of *collective degradation* would seem to exclude white people, not only because white people are not now considered particularly degraded—at least, not as a race—and the themes of "slavery, resistance, and abolition" apply more intuitively to people of African rather than European descent. Even one of the classic texts in the history of whiteness, The Invention of the White Race, by Theodore W. Allen, associates slavery and race with black people. But as Allen realizes, the function of the general concept of race is to establish and maintain hierarchical boundaries in human

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taxonomy, even when the categories are not "black" and "white"; Allen, therefore, begins the first volume of his study with the case of the Irish.<sup>2</sup>

Sound as it is, Allen's Irish opening is relatively rare in race studies, which usually finger blackness compulsively. Blackness, however, is not my subject here; whiteness is. I address the issue of white people as "Caucasian" as a heuristic: usually the question is not asked, because whiteness has not been problematized as thoroughly as blackness. My question of why white people are called "Caucasian" and its answer belong to the relatively new field of whiteness studies, a field nowhere as developed as African-American studies, with its sophisticated literature on race, enriched by the scholars featured in this conference.

Including the invention of "Caucasian" as the name of white people makes good sense in a conference dedicated to collective degradation, for the still current term "Caucasian" connects directly to collective degradation, in the form of the gendered, eastern slave trade, via the network of learned societies that so deeply influenced the history of science in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before this essay turns to Göttingen in 1795 and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1762-1840), who is known for having invented the association, let me locate the Caucasus and its peoples.

Obviously the name "Caucasian" connects to the Caucasus, the 440,000 square kilometers of land separating the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The two ranges of the Caucasus Mountains cross the region running roughly east to west. The northern, Caucasus range

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<sup>2</sup> See Theodore W. Allen, The Invention of the White Race. Volume One: Racial

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forms the natural border with Russia; the southern, lesser Caucasus forms the natural border with Turkey and Iran. Anthropologists classify the fifty Caucasian ethnic groups into three main categories: Caucasian, Indo-European, and Altaic. Among the Altaic peoples are the Kalmuck, whom Blumenbach and his colleagues considered an embodiment of ugliness. Circassian peoples and Georgians, famed for their beauty, also fall into the category of Caucasian people. Known to Westerners since prehistoric times, this geographically and ethnically complex area has been subject to numerous overlords and considerable confusion. They have sent slaves into Western Europe and Asia Minor since before the time of Herodotus.



The Caucasus<sup>3</sup>

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Oppression and Social Control. London: Verso, 1994: 22-24.

<sup>3</sup> Rand McNally: The World, Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. N/P. rev/ ed., 1998: 154.

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Today "Caucasian" functions as a synonym for "white," as in this quote from a recent psychological paper:

Moderation analysis indicated that although there was no difference in the stress-coping-depression relationship between Latinos and Caucasians, the relationship among perceived stress, anger coping, and depression was stronger for female than for male adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

In this representative quote, social science expresses the consequence rather than the cause of the association of Caucasian with white people. But what, exactly, is the relationship between the Caucasus and "Caucasians"? The political news of our day offers more guidance.

The Caucasus appears today as Chechnya. In the Republic of Chechnya supporters of independence from Russia are draining the force out of the Russian Army in the Caucasus and bombing theatres and apartment buildings in Moscow. Akhmed Zakayev, chief negotiator for Chechnya's rebel government is the Chechen most recently in the news.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elisha R Galaif, Steve Sussman, Chih-Ping Chou, Thomas A Wills, "Longitudinal relations among depression, stress, and coping in high risk youth," Journal of Youth and Adolescence 32, No. 4 (August 2003: 243-258, abstract.

<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Steele and Nicholas Watt, "UK arrests Moscow's most wanted man," The Guardian Unlimited, 6 December 2002, and Open Here, "Europe: Russia Gathering Evidence to Boost Case for Chechen Leader's Extradition," 3 November 2002.



Akhmed Zakayev,

Moscow's most wanted  
man. Russia accuses  
Zakayev of terrorism.

To judge from his photo, Zakayev does look like a "white person" in the current meaning of the term.<sup>6</sup> Like many Chechens, he may be Muslim. If so, his religion (like that of the Turks) would complicate his white identity. But religion is a tangential question, important only because Georgians, who live south of Chechnya and are sometimes also considered Caucasians, are largely (but by no means entirely) Christian. As symbolic Christians, Georgians have been more readily accepted as honorary Europeans than have Muslim Chechens.

President Vladimir Putin's "terrorism" problem (as he conveniently defines it) has deep historical roots. The Chechen rebels in the news are continuing a struggle that reaches back to the eighteenth century and the imperial ambitions of Catherine the Great. The war

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Braude cites a New York Times article of 11 October 1998 that says that in Russia, Caucasians (including Georgians) are relatively dark-skinned and abused as "chorniye" or "blacks." See "Remarks on the History of Race," paper delivered in Leipzig University, Germany, 8 July 2000: 6.

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in Chechnya begins to answer the question in this essay's title, because the historical antecedents of just such a war made white people into "Caucasians."

The history of the term "Caucasian" pulls us out of our own early twenty-first-century episteme, out of thinking about race in terms of people of African descent.<sup>7</sup> This two-centuries' old history demands two reorientations of American thought: One reorientation must be geographical, the second, historical. We turn away from the United States, with its racial history rooted in the Atlantic slave trade and African slavery, and turn toward central Europe, with its preoccupation with Russia and slavery in and from Russia and its empire. In the association of whiteness with "Caucasian," Russia and the Russian borderlands take the place of the tropical regions of Africa, the Caribbean islands, and the United States South. Just as one sort of Orientalism attaches to Africa and the American plantation lands, so another, Russian, Orientalism attaches to the lands from whence came white slaves.

To understand "Caucasian," we must also go back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before the World Wars that impoverished Europe through bloodshed and military spending and discredited anti-Semitism through atrocity. We must go back before the elaboration of scientific racism to the Enlightenment's rage for classification and early Romanticism's preoccupation with morphological aesthetics. The eighteenth century's

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<sup>7</sup> I am using Michel Foucault's notion of episteme, especially in his history of science, Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines (1966).

Theodore Allen, while extending the conflation of race with blackness, explicitly warns historians not to be blinded by the present. His warning against presentism warrants heeding. See Allen, Invention of the White Race: 9.

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network of learned societies linking far-flung savants must come back into view, as must voyages of discovery that revealed the existence of peoples Europeans had not known before. As "Caucasian" became the word for white people, scientific elaboration depended upon many of the same contingencies that influence the transmission of knowledge today: institutional prestige, connections among savants and, in turn, rich and well-educated people.

Historical events shaped the elaboration of knowledge about human taxonomy and its attendant hierarchies. The universal, egalitarian ideals of the French and American Revolutions moved scholars to situate themselves for or against revolutionary political ideals. In Germany scholars pondered the meaning of race in a world in which the controversy over the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade raged. The Atlantic slave trade and African slavery remained theoretical in Germany, relegating them to the background of this particular history. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of slavery and the vulnerability to which it exposed women weighed heavily in this white racial naming, just as slavery still counts in stereotypes of blackness.

A slave trade lies at the center of the history of white people as Caucasians: the age-old, eastern, white slave trade from the Russian borderlands to the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Because the iconography of the eastern slave trade features women, women occupy a more central place in the history of "Caucasian" than in the iconography of the western, Atlantic slave trade.

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The figure of the white slave is invariably female, always young, emphatically white--sometimes even blonde--and invariably beautiful. Beauty plays a leading role in the designation of "Caucasian." A leading figure in Russian and Western European Orientalism, the beautiful white slave usually comes from Georgia or the Caucasus.<sup>8</sup> The odalisque became one of the most popular subjects of nineteenth-century academic art. She appears in harem scenes full of naked white women or in sculpture such as the most popular statuary in the nineteenth-century United States: Hiram Powers's ravishing, young "Greek slave" (1847).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the common conflation of Georgia and the Caucasus, the two regions are not exactly the same. The populations of both Georgia and the Caucasus are heterogeneous and overlapping, but Georgia lies to the south of the Caucasus. The Caucasus is largely mountainous; Georgia has mountains but is known for its fertile plains and valleys along the Black Sea.

<sup>9</sup> See Joy S. Kasson, Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-century American Sculpture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, and Jean Fagan Yellin, Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989: 99-124.



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Hiram Powers, "The Greek Slave" (1847)<sup>10</sup>

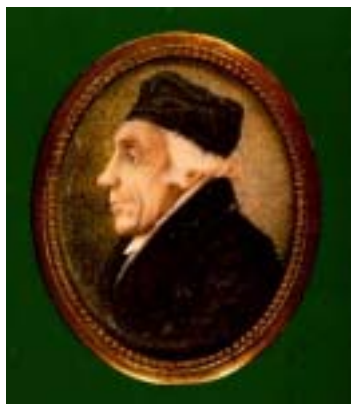
The connection between "Caucasian" and white people lies in this very history. The name "Caucasian" for white people includes an open genealogy, one originating in the work of a pioneering social scientist, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Beneath this history of classification and measurement, however, lies another, hidden history of beauty and hierarchy. Blumenbach's embrace of beauty links his classification, which serves large geographical races and American racial binaries, with the nineteenth-century division of white people into better and lesser breeds. Blumenbach borrowed the name "Caucasian" from a reactionary colleague who was interested in setting Germans and Aryans at the top of the white heap.

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<sup>10</sup> In Yellin, Women and Sisters :101.

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach

White people are called "Caucasian" because Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), an influential German scholar in an up-and-coming German university, chose the name on 11 April 1795 in Göttingen, Lower Saxony, in what would become Germany. Blumenbach's and Göttingen's scholarly prestige made "Caucasian" a scientific classification.<sup>11</sup> The term "Caucasian" quickly entered scientific discourse, appearing first in English in an 1807 translation of Blumenbach's Handbuch der vergleichenden Anatomie (A Short System of Comparative Anatomy) by the influential English surgeon William Lawrence (1783-1867).



Blumenbach portrait from the exhibition catalogue of Blumenbach correspondence in the Göttingen University library, 1984.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Caucasian" appeared as a scientific classification in English in 1807: . . .

<sup>12</sup> F. W. P. Dougherty, ed., Commercium Epistolicum J. F. Blumenbachii: Aus einem Briefwechsel des Klassischen Zeitalters der Naturgeschichte. Katalog zur Ausstellung im Foyer der Niedersächsischen Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen 1. Juni-21. Juni 1984. Göttingen: Göttingen University: 1984: frontispiece.

Nineteenth-century English- and German-speaking natural scientists honored Blumenbach as “the father of anthropology,” a distinction he had to share in the French-speaking world with his older contemporary George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon.<sup>13</sup> In the historiography of physical anthropology, Blumenbach appears as a Founding Father of racial science and the classification of races. The mere designation of classifier oversimplifies both Blumenbach’s own work and the history of Western racial thought. Placement at the head of the toxic school of racial science also distorts the complexity of Blumenbach’s role in Western scholarship.

Blumenbach wrote forcefully of the kindredness of the human races. While no advocate of the French Revolution, he opposed the stress on racial hierarchies of worth by more conservative colleagues in his own university and elsewhere in Europe. There existed only one race of people, he insisted, criticizing those like the Dutch anatomist, Petrus Camper, whose “facial angles” proves so useful to scientific racists' so-called “Great Chain of Being” linking humankind with apes. Camper's racist elaborators (like Edward Tyson, Josiah Nott, G. R. Gliddon, and even Johann Caspar Lavater) placed Negroes and Kalmucks as close to apes as to Europeans.<sup>14</sup> Possessing the first known Africana library

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<sup>13</sup> Blumenbach was also called the “German Buffon,” an indication as much of French scientific prestige as a hierarchy of the two men’s scholarship. See Luigi Marino, Praeceptores Germaniae: Göttingen 1770-1820. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995: 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Visser stresses Camper’s use of facial angle as a means of establishing the unity of humankind. According to Visser, Camper’s son Adriaan and successive generations of racists put the facial angle to uses Camper had not intended. See “Die Rezeption der Anthropologie Petrus Campers (1770-1850),” in Gunther Mann and Franz Dumont, eds., Die Natur des Menschen: Probleme der Physischen Anthropologie und Rassenkunde (1750-1850). Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer, 1990: 325-326, 329, 334-335. See also David Bindman, Ape to Apollo:

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and sharing the motives of future black bibliophiles, Blumenbach dedicated several pages of his Contributions to Natural History (1806) to the vindication of Ethiopians' (i.e., Africans') capacity for civilization. Throughout his work, and especially in the definitive 1795 edition of De generis humani varietate nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind), Blumenbach rejected racial hierarchy and emphasized the unity of mankind.

Blumenbach's long career as a teacher at the University of Göttingen and a citizen of the world of science stretched from the mid-eighteenth century, with its Enlightenment emphasis on rigorous measurement and classification, well into the Romantic era, with its preoccupation with human beauty and its fascination with the various Orients. Over the years, Blumenbach's thought came to bear the traces of other German thinkers, notably the Göttingen philosopher Christoph Meiners (1747-1810), whose values and methodologies differed from his. Meiners stressed ethnocentric travelers' accounts and philology connecting Germans to ancient Greeks as fellow Aryans and used skeletal measurements to rank peoples according to their physical beauty. Romantic themes also appear in Blumenbach's late eighteenth-century writing, in the guise of an emphasis on physical appearance and mentions of ancient German racial purity.

Blumenbach's 1775 Göttingen dissertation, De generis humani varietate nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind) made him a medical doctor and a star in the German

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Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th century. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002.

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academic firmament. The dissertation was published immediately, and Blumenbach joined the faculty at Göttingen, the most rigorously scholarly German university of the time.<sup>15</sup>

Blumenbach's long career in Göttingen brought him honors in abundance. He married into the family of Professor Christian Gottlob Heyne, who controlled his institution's library, scientific society, and administrative destiny. The connection with Heyne's library brought Blumenbach into contact with the library's great benefactor, Georg von Asch of St. Petersburg. Blumenbach taught a bevy of aristocrats and other privileged men, including three English princes, the crown prince of Bavaria, and the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt. Gifts from grateful colleagues and students continually enriched his natural history collection. Led by the von Humboldts, his students supervised the celebration of his jubilee—the fiftieth anniversary of his doctorate—in 1825. The medal struck for the occasion showed Blumenbach's portrait on the right and skulls of three (of Blumenbach's five) principal human races.



Blumenbach jubilee medal.

The medal revises Blumenbach's number of races from five to three and sharpens his hierarchy. The "Caucasian" at the top faces forward, highlighting the high forehead and

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<sup>15</sup> Blumenbach's prime years in the last quarter of the eighteenth century coincided with his university's apogee. See Luigi Marino, Praeceptores Germaniae: 48-52, 74.

small face. On the right, the “Ethiopian” appears in profile, as though to reinforce the authority of Petrus Camper’s unflattering “facial angle.” On the left, the placement of the “Mongolian” skull emphasizes the breadth Blumenbach saw as its prime and ugly characteristic.<sup>16</sup> The difference between Blumenbach's own five-fold, scientific classification and the more older and more popular notion of three races points to the difficulty of science to overcome prevailing cultural concepts regarding race.

By the time he died at 88 in 1840, Blumenbach’s membership in seventy-eight learned societies attested to his eminence. In the eighteenth century, learned societies consolidated the masculine realm of letters. Organizations like the Royal Societies in London and St. Petersburg and Göttingen’s own Royal Scientific Society brought together “scholars and moneybags” from across the Western world.<sup>17</sup> In the learned societies, academic scientists—professional thinkers often short of the wealth necessary for the active pursuit of science—met and corresponded with rich and aristocratic men (like Sir Joseph Banks of London and Alexander von Humboldt of Paris and Berlin) who could afford to undertake foreign travel and amass vast collections of exotica. In his capacity of corresponding secretary of his own scholarly society in Göttingen, Blumenbach cemented his ties with colleagues on several continents.

Maintaining the status of a world-renowned scholar demanded more than profound thinking on important topics such as the place of humankind in nature. It also required

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<sup>16</sup> Title page of K. F. H. Marx, “Zum Andenken an Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.”

<sup>17</sup> The quoted phrase comes from Suzanne L. Marchand, Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996: 193.

influential contacts, honors, the backing of strong institutions, and something to show off, for instance, a collection of skulls or a royal garden: Linnaeus and Buffon kept royal gardens in Uppsala and Paris. By the end of his life, Blumenbach owned the greatest contemporary collection of human skulls (what he terms his "Golgotha"): 245 whole skulls and fragments and two mummies.<sup>18</sup>

Blumenbach used what he and his peers saw as complete and scientific means of classifying races. In addition to the already commonly accepted index of skin color, he factored into account a series of other bodily measurements, notably of skulls. Unlike Petrus Camper in Amsterdam, Blumenbach measured skulls along several lines. Placing scores of skulls of individuals from around the world in a line and measuring the height of the foreheads, the size and angle of the jawbone, the angle of the teeth, the eye sockets, the nasal bones, and also Camper's facial angle in profile, Blumenbach produced what he called the norma verticalis.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rudolph Wagner, "On the Anthropological Collection of the Physiological Institute of Göttingen," Göttingen, 1856, in Bendyshe: 384.

Germany's National Socialist regime took such anthropological collecting of skeletons and skulls to a perverted, murderous extreme. See Robert Jay Lifton, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide. New York: Basic Books, 1986: 284-287.

<sup>19</sup> Stefano Fabbri Bertolotti, "The Anthropological Theory of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach," in Stefano Poggi and Maurizio Bossi, Romanticism in Science: Science in Europe, 1790-1840. Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994: 111-113.



Blumenbach's norma verticalis.<sup>20</sup>

Adding skin color to the norma verticalis, Blumenbach classified the single species of human beings into five races. Such rigorous methods endowed the “Caucasian” race with an unimpeachable scientific pedigree.

The 1775 (1<sup>st</sup>) and 1781 (2<sup>nd</sup>) Editions of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*

Blumenbach's 1775 doctoral dissertation, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, followed his “immortal Linnaeus,” in designating four human races by their geographical situation: “Europe,” “Asia,” “Africa,” and “America.” The dissertation went into print immediately. Two subsequent revisions followed: a minor one in 1781, a major one in 1795.

The first edition corrected prevailing misconceptions about differences between various peoples. Blumenbach pointed out that climate produced differences in skin color, so that dark -colored people live in hot places and light colored people live in cold places. He reminded his readers that individual bodies contained lighter and darker places (the genitals of light-colored people often being dark) and that outdoor work darkens people with light skin. He also cautioned his readers against drawing conclusions about whole

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<sup>20</sup> Citation for image of norma verticalis.



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racism based on only one or two individuals, for instance regarding beauty and ugliness. His example came from a people from the northeastern Caucasus-western Asian regions, the Kalmucks, noted for their ugliness: Blumenbach warned that one traveler's drawing of an ugly Kalmuck's skull could not sustain conclusions about the group as a whole. For another traveler described Kalmuck men as beautiful and symmetrical, adding that their young women "would find admirers in cultivated Europe."<sup>21</sup> This allusion to young women's sexual attractiveness to European men follows a pattern common among European travelers, virtually all of whom were male. Under various spellings ("Calmucks," "Kalmyks"), Kalmucks remained salient exemplars of ugliness well into the nineteenth century.

Despite the prominent role Blumenbach ascribed to culture and climate in determining outward appearance, he believed that certain groups maintain their distinctive physical and cultural characteristics over successive generations and changing geographic situations. Among the people of Europe, for instance, the Swiss retained their open countenance; the Turks remained manly and serious, the people of the far north kept their simple and guileless look; and despite long residence among Gentiles, "the Jewish race presents the most notorious and least deceptive [example], which can easily be recognized everywhere by their eyes alone, which breathe of the East."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (1775) in Bendyshe: 116-117.

<sup>22</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (1775) in Bendyshe: 122.

This first edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind noted in passing the relative beauty and elegance of the various kinds of people, portraying brown skin as less beautiful than white, but without undue stress.

Having initially built upon the Linnaean scheme, Blumenbach in the 1780s and 1790s departed from Linnaeus's four-way racial classification of Homo sapiens. Revising his presentation of the human species in light of exploration of the southern Pacific and the exigencies of his scholarly network, Blumenbach invented and elaborated his own, five-fold classification

The second edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind of 1781 added Malays and introduced the five-fold racial categorization (Europeans, Ethiopians, Mongolians, Americans, Malays) for which Blumenbach is known. However the designation of Europeans as "Caucasian" did not yet appear. Blumenbach explained in the 1781 that five races were "more consonant to nature" than Linnaeus's four. He cited the account of Johann Reinhold Forster of Captain James Cook's second voyage to the South Pacific in 1772-75, on which Forster and his son Georg headed a team of naturalists.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Of seventh-century English background, both Fosters lived and worked in Germany. They published accounts of the voyage: Georg Forster, A voyage round the world, in His Britannic Majesty's sloop, Resolution, commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the years 1772, 3, 4, and 5. London: B. White, 1777; and Johann Reinhold Forster, Observations made during a voyage round the world, on physical geography, natural history, and ethic philosophy. London: G. Robinson, 1778. Johann Reinhold Forster was accepted into the Royal Society in 1771, Georg Foster in 1777, sponsored by Sir James Banks. See Michael Charles Carhart, "The Writing of Cultural History in Eighteenth-Century Germany," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers History Department, 1999: 38-39. See also Rolf Siemon, "Soemmerring, Forster und Goethe: "Naturkundliche

The 1795 (3<sup>rd</sup>) Edition of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*

In the 1795 third edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind, Blumenbach perfected the descriptions of his five varieties of humankind and described one of his races as “Caucasian,” the designation for which he is remembered. Now as much a Romantic as an Enlightenment taxonomist, he stressed a racial hierarchy of physical beauty. Nonetheless, he reiterated his conviction that all people belonged to the same species, “Bimanus,” with only one variety, Homo. Laying out the basis for his conclusions, he presented five “perfect examples” of these varieties.<sup>24</sup> Blumenbach realized that the issue of the exact number of human races (or varieties, as he called them) remained open, and he invited his reader to consider twelve competing schemes of human taxonomy and “choose which of them he likes best.” Three of his authorities, including Blumenbach’s Göttingen colleague, Christoph Meiners, designated two races (Meiners’s were “handsome” and “ugly”); one designated three races; six designated four races; one, Buffon, designated six races; and one designated seven races.<sup>25</sup> (Two hundred more years’ worth of racial inquiry have not diminished confusion over the true number of existing human races.)

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Begegnungen" in Göttingen und Kassel,"  
<http://www.google.de/search?q=cache:www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/archiv/ausstell/1999/soemmerring.pdf+Georg+Thomas+Baron+von+Asch&hl=de>.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, four of Blumenbach’s five typical skulls came from women. He did not comment on the significance of their gendered identity. On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 152, 155-162.

<sup>25</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 226-227.

Skin color played a far larger role in the third edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind than in earlier editions. Blumenbach also now ranked skin color in a frank hierarchy. He began with the white, not merely because he believed it to be the oldest race of man.<sup>26</sup>

1. The white colour holds the first place, such as is that of most European peoples. The redness of the cheeks in this variety is almost peculiar to it: at all events it is but seldom to be seen in the rest.

After white comes “second is the yellow, olive-tinge.” Then, third, “copper colour (Fr. bronzé); fourth is “Tawny (Fr. basané); “Lastly, the tawny-black, up to almost a pitchy blackness (jet-black)”<sup>27</sup>

As in the first and second editions, the 1795 edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind ascribed differences of skin color to climate and individual experience. Individual difference characterizes non-Europeans as well as Europeans, as Blumenbach reminded his readers. Poor people who work outside, for instance, become darker, and European skin becomes lighter in winter: “our own experience teaches us every year, when in spring very elegant and delicate women show a most brilliant whiteness of skin, contracted by the

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<sup>26</sup> The most accessible discussion of Blumenbach and his five-fold racial classifications lies in Stephen Jay Gould, The Mismeasure of Man, Rev. ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996, esp. 401-412. However, as Thomas Junker points out, Gould’s visual representation of Blumenbach’s “racial geometry” conveys a misleading impression. See Junker, “Blumenbach’s Racial Geometry,” ISIS 89, No. 3 (1998): 498-501.

Blumenbach’s contemporary Thomas Jefferson joined the legions citing red and white complexions as one of white people’s claims to racial superiority. Notes on the State of Virginia: [P# T/K].

<sup>27</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 209.

indoor life of winter.” If those women are careless and go into the summer sun and air, they lose “that vernal beauty before the arrival of the next autumn, and become sensibly browner.”<sup>28</sup>

As though to disregard his own explanations of individual difference, Blumenbach went on to describe the “racial face” of each of his five human varieties, dwelling longest on the Caucasian (from whom Lapps were now newly excluded):

Caucasian variety. Colour white, cheeks rosy; hair brown or chestnut-colored; head subglobular; face oval, straight, its parts moderately defined, forehead smooth, nose narrow, slightly hooked, mouth small. The primary teeth placed perpendicularly to each jaw; the lips (especially the lower one) moderately open, the chin full and rounded. In general, that kind of appearance which according to our opinion of symmetry, we consider most handsome and becoming. To this first variety belong the inhabitants of Europe (except the Lapps and the remaining descendants of the Finns) and those of Eastern Asia, as far as the river Obi, the Caspian Sea and the Ganges; and lastly, those of Northern Africa.<sup>29</sup>

His long footnote quoted the seventeenth-century traveler, Jean Chardin, as only one of a “cloud of eye-witnesses” making the same point.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 227, 214.

<sup>29</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 264-265; “racial face,” 229.

<sup>30</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 269. The Chardin footnote reads: “From a cloud of eye-witnesses it is enough to quote one classical one, Jo. Chardin, T. I. p.m. 171. ‘The blood of Georgia is the best of the

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Blumenbach placed the Caucasian race's northeastern boundary at the River Obi (or Ob), farther to the east than the Ural mountains, usually considered the boundary between Europe and Asia.<sup>31</sup> He put the southeastern boundary at the Ganges. Although he included north Africans in the category of Caucasian, he mentioned no particular geographic demarcation dividing Caucasians from Ethiopians.

Regarding human beauty, Blumenbach was of three minds: First, he said he based his taxonomy on the measurement of skulls, but, second, his descriptions of the human varieties stressed personal beauty, not simply the beauty of skulls:

Caucasian variety. I have taken the name of this variety from Mount Caucasus, both because its neighborhood, and especially its southern slope, produces the most beautiful race of men, I mean the Georgian.

Skull measurements counted, but beauty counted for more. Third, while extolling the beauty of Caucasians, he also recognized Europeans' racial chauvinism. He jokingly found this conceit in toads: "If a toad could speak and were asked which was the loveliest creature upon god's earth, it would say simpering, that modesty forbade it to give a real opinion on that point."<sup>32</sup> As in the first edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind,

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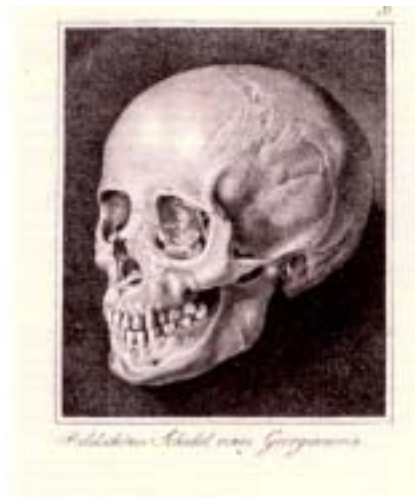
East, and perhaps in the world. I have not observed a single ugly face in that country, in either sex; but I have seen angelical ones. Nature has there lavished upon the women beauties which are not to be seen elsewhere. I consider it to be impossible to look at them without loving them. It would be impossible to point more charming visages, or better figures, than those of the Georgians."

<sup>31</sup> One of Russia's greatest rivers, the Obi flows north out of central Asia, passing Novosibirsk, Russia's third most populous city, to empty into the Kara Sea.

<sup>32</sup> K. F. H. Marx, "Zum Andenken an Johann Friedrich Blumenbach": 30, note 1.

Blumenbach qualified his estimation of European beauty as lying in the eyes of Europeans themselves.

Cultural relativism did not prevent Blumenbach's dwelling on Caucasian beauty: He used the word "beautiful" compulsively—five times on one page—to describe the Georgian woman's skull, which by 1795 had become "my beautiful typical head of a young Georgian female always of itself attracts every eye, however little observant."<sup>33</sup> The stunning power of beauty, Blumenbach concluded, made "Caucasian" inevitable for his first variety of humankind.



The beautiful Georgian skull that made white people into Caucasians.<sup>34</sup>

In Blumenbach's time as today, naming evokes differing impressions. The Caucasus is the chain of rugged, stunning, snow-covered mountains, which now attract

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<sup>33</sup> On the Natural Variety of Mankind, 3rd ed. (1795) in Bendyshe: 300. Here, as elsewhere, Blumenbach falls back on the authority of untutored observers to reinforce his scientific truths.

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mountain-climbing tourists: Mount Elbrus, the tallest mountain in Europe, is 5,633 meters high; Mt. Shkhara is 5,068m. high; and Mt. Kazbek is 5,047m. high.<sup>35</sup> The names of the countries, in contrast, summon up histories of enslavement and endemic warfare and genocide: Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya.<sup>36</sup> Twentieth- and twenty-first century wars concern access to oil (Azerbaijan, Grozny, Maykop and the Caspian Sea, especially Baku hold rich old deposits); earlier struggles sought slaves (notably from Circassia), wine, fruit, and other agricultural produce (from the valleys along the Black Sea), and a variety of natural resources (e.g., manganese deposits and coal, copper, molybdenum, and tungsten).<sup>37</sup>

Caucasians represented Blumenbach's "primeval" race because, he wrote, Noah's ark came to rest in the Caucasus mountains. The idea that all people originated between the Black and Caspian Seas was an old one: Genesis 6-8 mentions Mount Ararat as the ark's resting place after the flood, and in the thirteenth century Marco Polo located Mount Ararat in Armenia. Situated south of Georgia in eastern Turkey, at the confluence of Armenia,

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<sup>34</sup> Dougherty 1984 149.

<sup>35</sup> See

[http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0025/00370944\\_A.html](http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0025/00370944_A.html) and <http://www.caucasustravel.com.ge/georgia.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Blumenbach reflects the terminological confusion prevailing in his time: while he says a skull from Georgia inspired him, his terminology slips. Rather than call his white race "Georgian," he draws upon the more ambiguous "Caucasian." Neither European nor Asian, the region and the people of the Caucasus evoke mythology as much as their all-too-bloody history.

<sup>37</sup> See <http://www.ichkeria.org/english/history/ng96feb.html> Source: National geographics - feb 1996 - By Mike Edwards. See also [http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0025/00370944\\_A.html](http://www.comptons.com/encyclopedia/ARTICLES/0025/00370944_A.html)



Iraq, and Iran in the country of the Kurds, Mount Ararat, at 5185 meters or some 17,000-ft. high, is Turkey's highest mountain. Blumenbach conflated the Caucasus mountains with Mount Ararat.

Western Europeans had long traced their origins to amorphous Eurasian regions, calling not only Caucasians, but also Scythians and Circassians, their beautiful, powerful-- and always pre-Muslim--ancestors. The semi-mythological Scythians were said to have ruled the Caucasus-Black Sea-Crimean-Caspian region from Paleolithic times until the seventh-century Arab conquest.

Blumenbach never explained why he did not call white people "Georgian." Certainly the long-standing European fascination with the vaguely known place called as the Caucasus was older than Blumenbach.<sup>38</sup> Its very vagueness probably made it more attractive than the more precisely located "Georgia," whose name lacked this Caucasus' mythological and symbolic charm.

European fascination with the borderland of Europe and Asia, the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, remounts to antiquity. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus toiled in the Caucasus and Jason and his Argonauts sought the Golden Fleece in the land of Colchis (near present-day Georgian city of Poti).<sup>39</sup> Jason obtained the Golden

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<sup>38</sup> In "Europea als Bewegung: Zur literarischen Konstruktion eines Faszinosum," unpublished paper, 2001, Ottmar Ette discusses the nowhere-ness of the idea of Europe. Like the idea of the Caucasus, Europe also grows out of a vague borderland. See especially 5, 15-17.

<sup>39</sup> The legendary high-point of Georgian greatness is considered to be the reign of Queen Tamar (1189-1213). By the 16<sup>th</sup> C. Turkey had taken control of western Georgia, Iran of eastern Georgia. Russian control began with a treaty in 1783, which made Georgia a Russian protectorate. The Russian revolution made Georgia independent in 1918, but the USSR quickly re-annexed Georgia in 1921.

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Fleece from King Aetes, but only thanks to the magic powers of the daughter of King Aetes, the princess Medea. She used her potions against both the dragon guarding the fleece and her father, who was withholding the fleece, even after Jason had yoked the fire-breathing bulls to a plow, sowed the field with a dragon's teeth, and vanquished the warriors who sprang therefrom.

In Homer's Odyssey, Circe, the sister of King Aetes, transformed half of Odysseus's men into animals and seduced Odysseus. Hesoid and Aeschylus tell the story of Prometheus, son of a Titan, punished for having stolen the secret of fire. Zeus chained Prometheus to a mountain in the Caucasus and sent an eagle to peck at his liver every day for 30,000 years. <sup>40</sup>

Greek mythology accords the women of the Caucasus extraordinary powers, whether magical, as in the case of Medea and Circe, or warlike, as in the case of the Amazons, who originated in the Caucasus and later moved to Asia Minor. Writers today unfailingly mention these myths as corroboration of the inherent magic of a region known to Herodotus, Strabo, and Pliny. <sup>41</sup>

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After the break-up of the USSR, the Republic of Georgia became independent in 1991. The most famous Georgian (after Stalin), Eduard Shevardnadze, assumed leadership in 1992 and was elected president in 1995. and See on-line Encyclopedia of Central Asia, Caucasus and Russia:

<http://www.esezam.com/shtml/html/georgia/history/index.htm>

<sup>40</sup> See Robert Bedrosian, "Eastern Asia Minor and the Caucasus in Ancient Mythologies," in <http://www.virtualscape.com/rbedrosian/mythint.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Fritz F. Pleitgen, Durch den Wilden Kaukasus. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2000: 22-24, 26.

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By the seventeenth century, when the French traveler Jean Chardin described the people of the Caucasus, and the eighteenth century, when Blumenbach drew upon the name, the women of the region were known not for potency, but as enslaved embodiments of vulnerability. The tradition of seeing the peoples of the Caucasus as the most beautiful in the world endured well into the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Although he chose "Caucasian," Blumenbach might as well have called his beautiful people Circassian.

In today's iconography of the Caucasus, people appear less prominently than images of warfare, oil drilling, and a strikingly mountainous landscape. Pictures of Caucasians show gnarled old people as proof of the life-prolonging powers of yogurt.

Once Blumenbach had established the superiority of Caucasians, the term floated away from its geographical origin. Actual Caucasians--the people of the Caucasus, living cheek to jowl with the Turks and the Semites of the eastern Mediterranean and the supposedly hideous Kalmucks--lost their semiotic standing as ur-Europeans. Although real Caucasians fell off the apex of the racial pyramid, the idea of the "Caucasians" lived on, as did its claims of racial superiority and beauty.

The fact that Blumenbach's unblemished young woman's skull came from the Caucasus-Georgia had to do not only with youth, beauty, warfare, and mythical history,

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<sup>42</sup> More than a century after Blumenbach, "Caucasian" and beauty still went together. The classic (1910-1911) eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica even singled out the most beautiful of the beautiful. The Britannica praised the Circassians of the northwestern part of the Caucasus as particularly outstanding: "In the patriarchal simplicity of their manners, the mental qualities with which they were endowed, the beauty of form and regularity of feature by which they were distinguished, they surpassed most of the other tribes of the Caucasus."

but also with networks of scholarly exchange that transported the Georgian skull from Moscow to Göttingen.

### Scholarly Exchange

The third edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind grew out of scholarly exchange. Blumenbach acknowledged Georg Thomas (Egor Fedotvich), Baron von Asch of St. Petersburg as the source of the skull inspiring the designation “Caucasian” race.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Actually Blumenbach offered far more fulsome thanks to the extremely wealthy and influential English naturalist, Sir Joseph Banks (1740-1820). President of the Royal Society of London, Banks for decades dominated the worldwide enterprise of scientific exploration. Blumenbach dedicated the 1795 edition of On the Natural Variety of Mankind to Banks, thanking him for skulls and other precious scientific items and for his hospitality in London in 1792. The tribute to Banks refers to the invention of the fifth, Malay race, as though Banks’s gifts had revealed its existence. Blumenbach had actually added a fifth race in 1781 on the basis of the Forsters’ travel accounts. The dedication to Banks in 1795 did not, in fact, represent gratitude for his having made possible a brand new discovery. For the Forsters had offered that new knowledge several years earlier.

The dedication to Banks cemented the relationship between a researcher in Göttingen (still the provinces of academic western Europe, compared with London and Paris) and a sovereign figure in the European scientific kingdom. Blumenbach had initiated a correspondence (in French) with Banks in 1783, sending him information on German plants. Corresponding with Banks not only bolstered Blumenbach’s standing as a scientist with international connections, it also prepared the way for requests for exotic skulls and other foreign materials Banks controlled. Blumenbach later joined the legions of pilgrims to Banks’s home and vast scientific collection.

From his seat of power in the Royal Society, the wealthy wool merchant Sir Joseph Banks ruled the natural history establishment of the day. He had sponsored the collecting of specimens during Cook’s second voyage to what Cook named Botany Bay.<sup>43</sup> By dint of persistent correspondence in French and then in English, Blumenbach finally got a South Sea skull out of Banks. According to flattering recognition to the most powerful figure in late-eighteenth-century natural history, Blumenbach in 1795 proclaimed his new (in 1781) race the Malay and placed it between the beautiful Caucasian and the ugly Mongolian.

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Asch proved quite generous with skulls. A medical doctor born St. Petersburg of German parents, Asch had received his medical degree from the University of Göttingen in 1850 and headed the Russian army's medical service during the era of Catherine the Great's first war in the Caucasus. As befit his status as a scientist, Asch belonged to Russia's leading learned societies in St. Petersburg and Moscow as well as in Göttingen.<sup>44</sup>

Asch sent Blumenbach skulls from European and Asian Russia throughout the 1780s and 1790s: In 1788, for instance, he sent an example of the kind of skulls Blumenbach considered supremely ugly: a Kalmuck skull from Astrakhan. The following year Asch sent Blumenbach a whole skeleton and four Tartar skulls. In 1792 he sent another nine skulls. In 1897 Asch sent a Persian skull.

Shortly after Catherine won her second war against the Ottomans for the Caucasus, Asch sent Blumenbach the prized Georgian skull.<sup>45</sup> In his 1793 cover letter to

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<sup>44</sup> Asch had begun his medical studies in Tübingen and finished them in Göttingen with the famous Albrecht von Haller in 1750, before Blumenbach's time. Asch was born in the same year as Blumenbach's father-in-law, the classicist Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), who was responsible for the Göttingen University library. The Asch-Heyne correspondence, begun in 1771, holds over 120 letters from Asch to Heyne, many accompanying Asch's generous gifts to the Göttingen University Library. In Göttingen Asch is known as one of the library's foremost patrons, for in addition to sending Blumenbach numerous skulls, Asch also enriched the university library's collection with gifts of Slavic and Persian books. Books from Asch even had their own bookplate indicating they had come from him. See Helmut Rohlfing, ed., "Ganz Vorzügliche und Unvergeßliche Verdienste"—Georg Thomas von Asch als Förderer der Universität Göttingen. Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek: Göttingen, 1998: 2-3, and Rolf Siemon, "Soemmerring, Forster und Goethe: 'Naturkundliche Begegnungen' in Göttingen und Kassel": <http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/archiv/ausstell/1999/soemmerring.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> F. W. P. Dougherty, ed., Commercivm Epistolicvm J. F. Blumenbachii: 76, 114-116, 148, 150, 171.

Blumenbach, Asch explained the circumstances surrounding his receipt of this skull. It belonged to a woman the Russian forces had taken captive and brought back to Moscow. Although Asch's letter sheds no light on the nature of the captive woman's life in Russia, he does hint at adversity, reporting her sudden death from venereal disease. A professor of anatomy in Moscow had performed an autopsy, then forwarded the skull to Asch in St. Petersburg.

In On the Natural Variety of Mankind of 1795, Blumenbach sought authority for naming Caucasians the most beautiful people in the world in a prestigious travel narrative: The Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East Indies, 1673-1677 (1686), the two-volume, seventeenth-century travel account of Jean Chardin (1643-1713). Chardin's status as a fellow Fellow of the Royal Society surely reinforced his authority in Blumenbach's mind.<sup>46</sup>

Chardin's story mostly concerned Persia. But having been barred from the normal route east through Constantinople, he had passed through the Caucasus on his second journey to Persia in 1671 and wrote several passages on the people of the Caucasus. Brigands controlled the chaotic region of Georgia, causing Chardin much anxiety over the fate of his life, his goods, and his freedom. Such fears did not prevent his noting the beauty

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<sup>46</sup> Chardin made two long visits to Persia and India in the 1670s and 1680s to satisfy his curiosity and advance the family jewelry business. (His Huguenot family supplied jewelry to the court of Louis XIV.) On his return to Paris in 1677 he encountered anti-Protestant persecution and moved to London, where he spent the rest of his life as Sir John Chardin, jeweler to the British crown. On the strength of his Persian account, Chardin was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. The catalogue entry in Blumenbach's skull collection also mentioned Chardin's comment on Georgian beauty.

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of Caucasian women, whom he compared favorably with darker-skinned, broader visaged Asians.

On a boat leaving the Black Sea region Chardin encountered an enslaved Caucasian woman with a baby at her breast. He took the woman to be twenty-five years old and thought her beautiful white complexion, regular features, and lovely breast (the most beautiful he had ever seen, he said) practically begged to be loved. Elsewhere he compared Persians and Georgians, concluding that “the Nobility of Persia had been the ugliest Men in the World,” because they were Tartars: “short and thick, have their Eyes and Nose like the Chinese, their Face flat and broad, and their Complexion yellow, mix'd with black.” Through marriage with lovely Georgian and Circassian women (whose beauty lies “both upon the Account of the Shape and Complexion”), Chardin thought the Persians’ looks had improved enormously.

Blumenbach followed Chardin and others (such as Petrus Camper, who dedicated whole sections of his work to Kalmucks) in finding Mongolians (or Kalmucks) embodiments of ugliness, as ugly as black Africans.<sup>47</sup> The Kalmucks’ near neighbors, the Georgians of the Caucasus, meanwhile, appeared as the most beautiful people in the world.<sup>48</sup> Situated at the junction of Europe and Asia, the Caucasus remained in the realm of

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<sup>47</sup> See Miriam Claude Meijer, Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper (1722-1789). The Hague, Cip-Gegvens Koninklijke, 1999: 139-144.

<sup>48</sup> This information comes from an audio recording of Dirk van der Cruysse speaking at the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) on 13 February 1999, available through the web site of the Centre de Recherche sur la Littérature des Voyages at [http://www.crlv.org/outils/encyclopedie/afficher.php?encyclopedie\\_id=13](http://www.crlv.org/outils/encyclopedie/afficher.php?encyclopedie_id=13). See also van der Cruysse, Chardin le Persan, Paris: Editions Fayard, 1998. The discussion of improving Persians’ looks through intermarriage with Georgians and Circassians is at <http://www.iranian.com/Travelers/June97/Chardin/index.shtml>.

imagination: beyond the European familiar but not quite into foreign Asia.<sup>49</sup> The ugliest and the handsomest people were thought to live in close geographical proximity to each other and to Russia. Ugly or beautiful, they fell prey to Catherine the Great's pursuit of empire at the expense of Poland in the west and Ottoman Turkey in the south. Catherine waged two wars against the Ottomans, in 1768-1774 and 1787-91; the second brought Blumenbach his favorite skull. The skull came from Georgia; the name "Caucasian," however, came from a colleague in Göttingen.

#### Christoph Meiners's Beautiful Caucasians

Blumenbach owed the philosopher Christoph Meiners complicated and ambiguous debts. One of Göttingen University's best known but most reactionary scholars, Meiners exerted a contradictory power over the second revision of On the Natural Variety of Mankind. Meiners, like Blumenbach, had studied at the University of Göttingen and taken his terminal degree there. He assumed a Göttingen professorship in 1776, about the same time as Blumenbach.<sup>50</sup> During the 1790s his voluminous publications shaped the work of

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See also Georgette Legée, "Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), La Naissance de l'Anthrologie à l'Epoque de la Révolution Française," in Scientifiques et Sociétés Pendant la Révolution et l'Empire. Paris, :Editions du CTHS, 1990: 403.

<sup>49</sup> See Hanna Franziska Augstein, "From the Land of the Bible to the Caucasus and Beyond: the Shifting Ideas of the Geographical Origin of Humankind," in Waltraud Ernst and Bernard Harris, eds., Race, Science and Medicine, 1700-1960. London: Routledge, 1999: 59.

<sup>50</sup> Meiners's life is not nearly as well documented as Blumenbach's. The fullest recent sources for information in his regard are found in the work of Dougherty, Zantop, Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, and Carhart, mentioned in these notes.



his more distinguished colleague.<sup>51</sup> Meiners's name appears only once in the influential 1795 edition of Varieties of Humankind, but Blumenbach's language--notably the emphasis on beauty (and the evocation of an ancient Greek ideal), the repeated mention of Tacitus and the "ancient Germans'" racial purity, and even the name "Caucasian"--betrays the pull of his contrary colleague's opinions.<sup>52</sup>

While both Meiners and Blumenbach joined the lively discussion over the divisions of humankind, their views diverged over methodology, politics, and conclusions but converged over the naming of races and the importance of personal appearance.<sup>53</sup> Where Blumenbach gave skull measurement pride of place methodologically, Meiners relied on travel literature, which he read selectively and represented unreliably. Meiners wrote hastily and at great length, distorting the meaning of scholars whose work he cited and filling his pages with contradictory statements. Blumenbach and Georg Forster criticized

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<sup>51</sup> See Suzanne Zantop, Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997: 67-68.

<sup>52</sup> A fascination with ancient Greece dominated German thought throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as did a selective reading of the Roman author, Tacitus, on the ancient Germans. See Suzanne L. Marchand, Down from Olympus: 3-24.

<sup>53</sup> Aesthetic judgments figure prominently in the thought of several late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century intellectuals. For all his revolutionary fervor, Georg Forster included comments about relative beauty in his writing on humankind. In the early nineteenth century, the founder of the rigorous German educational system, Wilhelm von Humboldt (who had studied at Göttingen), made aesthetic considerations fundamental to his thinking about languages. See Hans Aarsleff, "Introduction," in Wilhelm von Humboldt, On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind, Peter Heath, trans. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988: vii-lxv, esp. x, xxix, xxxii, xlili, lvii-lxiii.

Meiners's intellectual one-sidedness as well as his political convictions. For Meiners, certain peoples were inferior to others, and their inferiority justified, even required, enslavement and despotism for its control.<sup>54</sup>

Meiners thought about race in two ways. Initially he posited a binary racial scheme in his Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit, published in 1785:

1. Tartar-Caucasian, divided into Celtic and Slavic, and
2. Mongolian.

The Tartar-Caucasian was first and foremost the beautiful race, for Meiners laid great stress on the importance of beauty as a criterion for racial classification. Within the Tartar-Caucasian, the Celts were the most "gifted in spirit and rich in virtues." The Mongolian was the ugly race, "weak in body and spirit, bad, and lacking in virtue," as characterized by the Kalmucks. Not surprisingly, the ugly race was dark skinned, the pretty race, light-skinned. Meiners joined his German contemporaries in locating the ideal of human beauty in ancient Greece.<sup>55</sup> Later he concentrated on differences among Europeans and venerated the ancient Germans on racial grounds.

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<sup>54</sup> Luigi Marino, Praeceptores Germaniae: 112-116.

<sup>55</sup> The quoted material comes from Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, "Des Choses Occultes en Histoire des Sciences Humaines: le Destin de la 'Science Nouvelle' de Christoph Meiners" L'Ethnographie 2 (1983): 151. See also Frank W. P. Dougherty, "Christoph Meiners und Johann Friedrich Blumenbach im Streit um den Begriff der Menschenrasse," in Gunther Mann and Franz Dumont, eds., Die Natur des Menschen: 103-104 and Luigi Marino, Praeceptores Germaniae: 111-114. See also Suzanne Zantrop, "The Beautiful, the Ugly, and the German: Race, Gender and Nationality in Eighteenth-Century Anthropological Discourse," in

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Blumenbach's conclusions in 1795 overlapped with Meiners's from 1785, but Blumenbach did not acknowledge the relationship. Blumenbach borrowed Meiners's name, "Caucasian." But to explain his choice, Blumenbach reached for higher authority and cited the illustrious Jean Chardin, not Meiners's Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit, on the beauty of Caucasians. Though more widely read than his more respectable colleagues, Meiners lacked the intellectual status of a member of the London Royal Society.

Göttingen's scholarly community muttered about Meiners's sloppy methods and cranky conclusions, but with the exception of Blumenbach and Georg Forster, the sharpest criticism remained in private letters. Meiners's popularity may explain the prevailing public diffidence, for his work circulated extensively. Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit went through three editions and was translated into several languages. Whatever its basis, the paucity of public outcry over Meiners's writing preserved his citizenship in the republic of letters.<sup>56</sup>

In work published in the mid-1780s to 1790, Meiners drew binary comparisons between the European-Asian/light-dark/ handsome-ugly races. But in the early 1790s, he wrote a series of articles positing the superiority of Germans among Europeans. Meiners described some Europeans' color as "dirty white," and compared it to their detriment to the

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Patricia Herminghouse and Magda Mueller, eds., Gender and Germanness: Cultural Productions of Nation. Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1997: 23-26.

<sup>56</sup> The popular Berlin writer August Lafontaine (1758-1831) published a four-volume satiric novel making fun of Meiners and his ugly dark and beautiful blond

“whitest, most blooming and most delicate skin” of the people of German stock. To a greater degree than any other Europeans, Germans possessed the prized quality of racial purity.

By the mid-1790s, when Blumenbach was revising On the Natural Variety of Mankind, Meiners had moved racial discourse in Göttingen beyond comparisons between Europeans and non-Europeans. He depicted an intra-European hierarchy of lightness and beauty with ancient Germans on top.<sup>57</sup> In the late 1790s, French counter-revolutionaries like Charles de Villiers stayed in Göttingen and studied with Meiners. Villiers and his school instructed succeeding generations of anti-Semitic German nationalists, notably Arthur de Gobineau, Richard Wagner, and, in the early twentieth century, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, all inspirations for German National Socialism.<sup>58</sup>

Both a potent and a shadowy presence in Blumenbach’s masterwork, Meiners connects the eighteenth-century, scientific discourse on race to the more popular Nordic/Aryan race chauvinism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Meiners suggested the name “Caucasian” to Blumenbach, for which Blumenbach became famous. Meiners also inspired a rank ordering of white people within Europe, thereby rendering “Caucasian” obsolete.

### Conclusion

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people in 1795-1796. See Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, “Des Choses Occultes”: 167. See also Suzanne Zantrop, “The Beautiful, the Ugly, and the German”: 30-31.

<sup>57</sup> See Suzanne Zantrop, “The Beautiful, the Ugly, and the German”: 28-29, and Suzanne Zantrop, Colonial Fantasies: 87-90.

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The magnitude of Blumenbach's contribution to scientific racism sometimes lumps him in with the white-supremacist mass of racist scientists and pseudoscientists. Although he survived into their times, Blumenbach was not such a figure. Through his wide correspondence and influential publications, Blumenbach consistently opposed nonsensical propositions advanced by colleagues like Meiners. A conscientious collector of artifacts crucial to his study, like skulls, Blumenbach also assembled the first collection of books by Africana authors in order to support his contention that people of African descent were not essentially inferior to other races. In the history of black bibliophilia, Blumenbach stands at the head of the line.

It may seem odd that the scholar who gave a name to white people and placed them at the top also prized the intellectual endeavors of black people and knew of their works. But the mouth of Blumenbach's work spoke out of two sides. At the same time he vindicated black people's abilities, his aesthetic standards prized whiteness above all. He reinforced the habit of embedding non-scientific themes, such as "ancient Germans," "Greek ideal of beauty," and the fetishism of racial and cultural purity, into scientific writing. He furthered the expression of ethnocentrism as truth. Succeeding generations' ethnocentrism divided Blumenbach's Caucasians into a welter of superior and inferior races of Europe.

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<sup>58</sup> See Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, "Des Choses Occultes": 132-136.