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# L'AFRICA ROMANA

Momenti di continuità e rottura:  
bilancio di trent'anni di convegni *L'Africa romana*

a cura di  
Paola Ruggeri



Estratti

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49

*In memoria delle vittime innocenti  
del tragico attentato  
al Musée National du Bardo,  
con la solidarietà di tutti gli studiosi  
al popolo della Tunisia libera e democratica*

Sassari, 18 marzo 2015

In copertina: L'arco di Caracalla a *Volubilis* (foto di Piero Bartoloni)

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# L'Africa romana

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## Images of Black People in Roman Age through Sculpture: Identity and Otherness

The study of the representation of black people is an interesting topic to know more about the non-classical image of the Roman society. They were a minority and mostly a marginal part of the society, as it can be interpreted from the statues of slaves which we know. But we should not understand the meaning of the figures of black people in the Roman mind with the prejudices of racism and ethnic animosity created mainly in the Medieval Europe and perpetuated since then.

*Key words:* Blacks, otherness, iconography, *Aethiops*, African people.

### Geographical and terminological contextualization

The most common term to refer to a black person in Antiquity was *Aethiops*, but it was not the only one. The Greek word *aithiops* means literally “sunburnt face”. But the Greek conception of Ethiopia and its people was not so clear. Its geographical contextualization was a little more accurate in the age of Herodotus. He described two types of *Aethiopes*, those who inhabited the territories of the south of Egypt and Libya and who had woolly hair – clearly the type that we today know by the name of “black” or “Negro” – and those who lived within the zone of the modern Iran and Pakistan – the so-called “Eastern, or Asiatic, branch” – and who were straight-haired; still a mystery for scholars, whose debate is focused on the question

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of the possible identification – or confusion – of this kind of Ethiopians with the later *Indi*ʳ.

Other terms used to describe black people in ancient literature – already in Roman texts – were *niger*, *perniger*, *nigerrimus*, *fuscus*, *decolor* and *rubens*. The difference between these words was, basically, the degree of darkness in the colour of the skin of the described person<sup>2</sup>.

Of course, the African provinces of the Roman Empire had more contact with black people than the other regions. They would not have been so common in the European provinces but even despite these scarce connections, there is sufficient information from the literature, visual art and hearsay to recognize and to know about them.

Their dark skin was the foremost ethnical difference comparing *Aethiopes* with the white Italians. But this difference, as it seems, was merely aesthetic and noted because its “scientific” interest, not implying psychological factors or elements of another class, at least not in the vast majority of the cases and following the most recent interpretations.

There are tens of literary references to this black population in the classical texts but the most clarifying of them all could be this one:

*erat unica custos*

*Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,  
torta comam labroque tumens et fusca colore,  
pectore lata, iacens mammis, compressior alvo,  
cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga planta.*

Translation: «His solitary housekeeper was she, her nationality was African, and all her figure proves her native land. Her hair was curly, thick her lips, and dark her colour, wide was she across the chest, with hanging breasts, her belly more compressed, with slender legs, and large and spreading foot»<sup>3</sup>.

This text – as many others – just describes a black servant woman in a physical way. We have other texts where some authors speak about the intelligence and education of the Ethiopians, many times in a pretty positive and laudatory way<sup>4</sup>.

1. SNOWDEN (1947), pp. 268-9, note 7.

2. SNOWDEN (1970), pp. 1-14.

3. *Moret.*, 31-35; translation on virgil.org, obtained from MOONEY (1916).

4. Especially in legendary texts, but with a lasting continuation through history. GRUEN (2011), pp. 201 and ff.



## Iconography

African people in the iconography of the Classical Antiquity were represented mainly as slaves, warriors, entertainers and as dwarfs in Nilotic scenes. Most of the black people inhabiting Italy and Europe arrived there as a result of the commercial transactions between Italy and the African provinces, also in contact with the inner regions of the continent and the desert routes. In this sense, we find some representations of Negroes as simple slaves.

Maybe one of the most interesting topics was the iconographic type of the so-called *negrillón*. This was developed in the Hellenistic period and it was pretty popular in the Roman age. This category is defined by the representations of black children or youths as slaves in a servant situation.

For instance, we can ascribe the *lampadarium* of the Museo Nacional Arqueológico de Tarragona – which was found near the port of the ancient *Tarraco* – to this category. It has been interpreted as a black youth holding a tray to bear the necessary elements to light and make a lamp work. We find some lamps in the shape of heads of Ethiopians as well (FIG. 1).

The iconographic type of Blacks as slaves can be seen in another sense. For example, the Hellenistic sculpture of maybe a slave acting, supposedly, as a musician found in Chalons-sur-Saône (France) and now in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, shows to us the appreciation of the patricians for the educated and skilled Blacks. Playing music by the streets of the cities seems to have been a usual occupation for black people in Antiquity (FIG. 2).

We have other examples in the Galleria dei Candelieri at the Musei Vaticani, for example, the one which displays a young slave with a *lekythos*, and another sculpture in Adana.

To this category have been ascribed many sculptures of black children, like those we have mentioned. It is frequent to explain them as examples of slavery related to Ethiopians, but in some specific cases we do not have any proof of this status. We can find an example of this in the child with the dove at the Musée de Sousse (Tunis). We have another example of these children without proofs of their slavery status in Ostia, found at the Casggiato dei Molini. Here, the black youth wears over his tunic a sleeved cloak like a *paenula* to which is attached a hood (*cucullus*), a kind of visual indicator of relatively good social position (FIG. 3).

In the same line, we can also speak about the head of a black sculpture in bronze found in Limagne Auvergnate. It shows a black child represented



FIG. 1 *Lampadarium* representing a young black slave at the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Tarragona (photo J. A. Remolà Vallverdú, Área de Colecciones, Documentación e Investigación of the Museo Nacional Arqueológico de Tarragona).

in alexandrine style. Or another one in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. This is a balsamaire (a perfume vase) shaped like the head of an Ethiopian, in bronze (FIG. 4).

At the same time, we have many other examples of representations of slaves without being necessarily children. This sculpture was found in the *thermae* of Afrodiasias (Turkey) (FIG. 5).

Among other representations, we also find defeated warriors in the iconography. The problems with the *Aethiopes* and, in general, with black African populations in the southern frontier of the African Roman provinces



FIG. 2 Black musician from Chalons-sur-Saône, now at the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (Snowden, 1970, n. 60, pp. 84-5).

could have been the inception for creating this kind of iconographic topic<sup>5</sup>. They are not so common as, for example, the Galatian and German types, perhaps because the war in Africa was not so intense and long as in those other regions. However, we can find some examples of these figures at the Musée du Bardo (Tunis), which owns two hermaic pillars in black schist from the *thermae* of Antonine in Carthage: one of them representing an

5. SNOWDEN (1947), p. 283, note 86 and ID. (1970), pp. 130-43 about the military contacts between Romans and Ethiopians in a broad sense.



FIG. 3 A small bust of a black youth from Ostia, at the Museo Ostiense (Snowden, 1970, n. 53, p. 80).



FIG. 4 Balsamaire in the shape of a head at the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (photo taken and edited by the authors).

actual Ethiopian and the other one interpreted as a portrait of a Libyan due to his special haircut. A similar model is kept at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, but it is currently regarded to as a mocking image<sup>6</sup>, maybe not representing in this case an enemy or a captive, as long as the treatment of the figure is totally different from that in the other two *hermae*. Another example of a defeated Ethiopian is the sculpture found in the *Fayyūm*, near Memphis, Egypt – now at the Musée du Louvre (FIGS. 6-7).

## Culture contact

Greeks were the first – after the Egyptians, who were geographically much closer and so, more likely to establish these contacts – in coming to meet

6. GRUEN (2011), pp. 213 and ff.

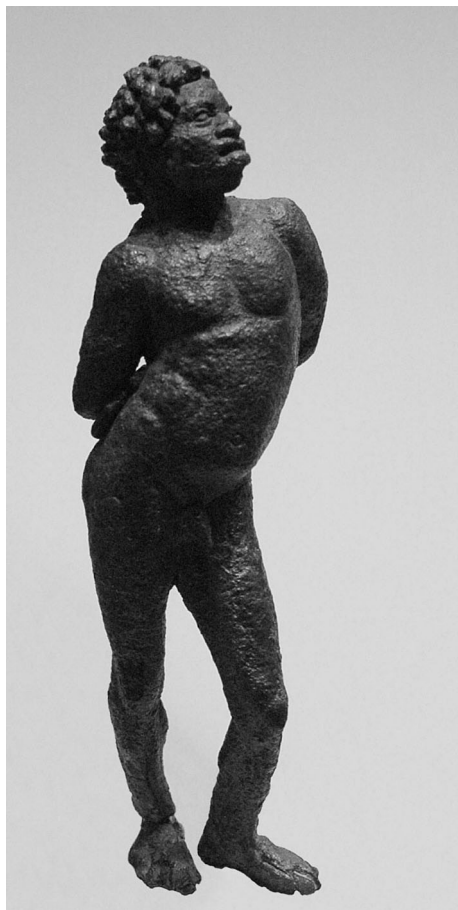


FIG. 5 *Balneator* (or slave at the baths) found in Afrosdias and now at the Musée du Louvre in Paris (Snowden, 1970, n. 117, p. 251).

Ethiopians, and also their literature and their material evidences reflect these interactions – examples of them are, above all, the so-called plastic head vases, sometimes Janiform<sup>7</sup>, or some interesting depictions in painted amphorae or vases. Romans began to take fluent contact with black people essentially since the defeat of Carthage. After this, Africa was annexed as a province and dark-skinned people started more frequent and long-term relations with the Roman population, in some cases becoming Roman themselves and even reaching high social positions.

The contact between Blacks and Romans was continuous. Considering the textual and material sources we have, we cannot assume any kind

7. GRUEN (2011), pp. 216-9.

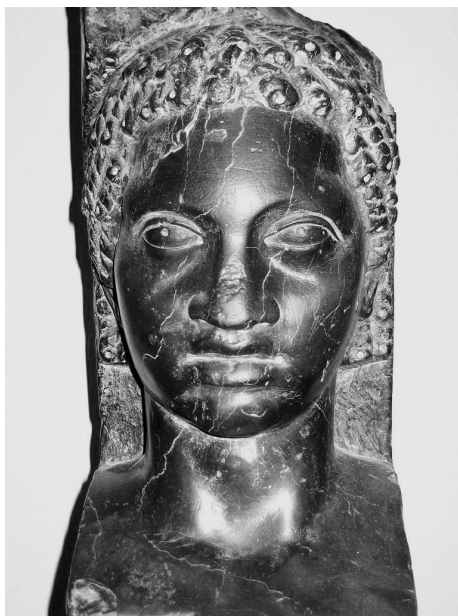


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FIG. 6 Black prisoner with hands bound behind his back from the *Fayyum*, now at the Musée du Louvre in Paris (photo Wikimedia Commons).

of racism or discrimination on the basis of race and physical appearance for the Antiquity. The value of each person for their actions and their specific civic status was always more important than other factors in the definition of people. The colour of the skin was understood as a direct mark of identification and was clearly perceived, but it seems to have not had other implications which have probably been added to our mentality in later historical periods.





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FIG. 7 *Herma* with a head of Ethiopian at the Musée National du Bardo in Carthage (photo Wikimedia Commons).

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