

An Emperor from ‘a worthless nation’:  
Philip the Arab and the problem of race in the Roman Empire

Roman Emperor from 244 to 249, Philip the Arab’s short reign often occupies very little space in the history of the Third Century Crisis, let alone the Empire. In his *Historia Nova*, sixth-century historian, Zosimus, introduced Philip as from “Arabia, a worthless nation.” Although writing nearly three centuries after Philip’s reign, Zosimus’ remark embodies some important understandings about race and ethnicity within the Roman Empire and encourages a deeper look into how Romans viewed and evaluated individuals and groups based upon their origins. Philip was not the only non-Italian emperor, yet he is the only one best known by an epithet connected to his ethnicity. In an empire including a wide diversity of languages, cultures, ethnicities, and races, Philip the Arab allows us to explore how Romans understood and interacted with that diversity.

One can certainly debate whether Philip needs a reformation of his legacy, but racial and cultural stereotypes played a key role in how Romans evaluated individuals, particularly emperors, and Philip the Arab provides a fascinating case study in how ancient historians used those stereotypes in creating his legacy. Reexamining these accounts allows us to reform how Philip’s reign is remembered and encourages further exploration in how we as modern scholars train our students in parsing these ancient accounts. When the stereotypes are sifted out, Philip emerges as a savvy politician who struggled with the problems of the third century, but certainly not to the extent that his only notable feature is his epithet of “the Arab.”