# Imagining Africa: Identity and Commodity in Archaic Greece

A general tendency in Greek ethnographic thought from the archaic period onwards is that groups with the deepest economic relations with the cities of the Aegean tend to be portrayed most often. Inhabitants of the Black Sea and of Egypt draw particular attention. Recently, a number of scholars (Gruen 2011, Skinner 2012) have attacked the eighties-era consensus established by Hartog (1980/88) and E. Hall (1989) that, by the start of the classical period, Greeks saw the world ethnocentrically in terms of the self and Other. The development of Greek ethnography has thus increasingly been seen as emerging within a Mediterranean context. Studies on the Orientalizing phase of the archaic period (Gunter 2009) and the development of the idea of the barbarian (Kim 2013) have emphasized that apparently Greek ideas of ethnic similarity or difference were largely adopted from the administrative practices of the Assyrian and Persian empires. Hence the recent perspective has been that Greek ethnographic thought is engendered far more by contact than by separation.

Yet, we would be wrong to ignore the fervor with which appeals to Greek ethnic unity are made and their continuing relevance in the fifth century, especially in Athens (most famously in Hdt. 8.144). It is in this period that the ethnic stereotypes familiar throughout the rest of antiquity develop, such as red-headed Thracians and snub-nosed Africans. This paper argues that these images appear in the context of Ionian and Athenian market exploitation of the Mediterranean littoral in the sixth century. Looking at evidence from Herodotus, Xenophanes (DK frr. 15-16), and Strabo, I outline how sixth and fifth century portrayals of foreigners are guided by the logic of resource extraction. The extent and depth of this in Egypt has been conclusively revealed by the Ahiqar palimpsest, listing natron exports from the delta in the winter of 475 BCE (Yardeni 1994).

Starting in the sixth and fifth centuries, Greek visual art commodifies and aestheticizes Egyptian labor. Petrie (1888) unearthed in Naucratis moulds for the production of faience scaraboid pendents in the shape of African heads, and these are found widely scattered throughout the Mediterranean in both Greek and Phoenecian contexts (Gorton 1996). These heads, featuring the

exaggerated features common in Mediterranean portrayals of African bodies, highlight how Mediterranean audiences seek to aestheticize the bodies of the laborers who brought them goods such as natron from Egypt. Marx, in *Kapital* (vol. 1 ch. 1 sec. 4) theorizes that a fundamental aspect of the commodity is that its exchange creates attendant mythologies that justify the labor arrangements required to produce it. Several classicists have observed from a similar standpoint how the discourse of commodification, even if exaggerated, serves to legitimate actual domination (Kurke 1999, Vasunia 2001). The creation of ethnographic difference serves both to legitimate and simply illustrate the entire process of production.

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