

The Summer of Our Discontent: Rethinking the Intersections of Ancient History and Modern Science in Contesting White Supremacy

In recent years, the science of DNA has played a major role in defining human life; indeed, DNA technology is now widely available to help individuals track both disease and genealogy. Given DNA as an important tool for contemporary white supremacists (Zhang 2016), however, it is important to note that the way “descent” is traced by DNA is invariably subjective, requiring a set of human decisions about which genes to focus on and for what purpose. Moreover, participation of science in defining race and racial boundaries has rarely been ideologically neutral.

The use of scientific analysis in the study of ancient identity was brought to wider attention in the summer of 2017, a phenomenon closely related to classical studies’ increasing confrontations with white supremacist notions of antiquity. A study of the DNA of the ancient Minoans and Mycenaeans, for example, was released to much comment, including by Greek neo-Nazis; so, too, outrage expressed by the alt-right over a BBC cartoon showing a resident of Roman Britain with black skin color led to a push-back from classical historians and journalists citing a range of scientific “evidence.”

In proposing to rethink the intersection of science and ancient history at this particular juncture, I do not claim that science plays *no* role in historical study, but given that one of the articles in defense of diversity in Roman Britain was illustrated—without any sense of irony—by a skull (Beard 2017), it requires, I believe serious reflection about the authority and explanatory power that we, as humanities scholars, are willing to yield to science, especially given the long-standing baggage science carries when it comes to producing racial “knowledge”—indeed, such casual use of the skull image belies the fact that craniometry was once employed in Victorian

times precisely to “demonstrate” that the ancient Egyptians were “white” (Gould 2006). So, I would like to offer a cautionary, perhaps contrarian, view of classicists’ turn to science by outlining what I think are some of the costs of treating science as the premiere arbiter of debates about ancient racial identity.

For one, uncritical acceptance of race’s alleged and “objective” foundations in human biology gives little recognition to the decades-long work by social theorists, historians, and even scientists themselves who have argued convincingly that race is first and foremost a social construction, a product of the subjective application of various ideological structures *to* the human body rather than any passive genetic or somatic feature *of* the body (e.g., Gould 2006). The costs of marginalizing these critiques of racial science, as well as what we might consider more humanistic approaches to race, are steep; in the recent debates over whether people with black skin color were actually present in Roman Britain, for example, the work of Black classicists, who have been interpreting the *meaning* of black skin color in antiquity since the 1970s (e.g., Thompson 1989), was all but erased. Similarly, the application of modern science to ancient bodies ascribes a dangerous universality to race—insinuating that our modern notions of race (centered around skin color) somehow correlate with truths about ancient racial identity when that is palpably not the case. Using genes or somatic characteristics to classify ancient people racially speaks much more to our own modern desires and anxieties than any “reality” lived in the world of the ancient Mediterranean.

Perhaps most significantly, current scientific methods too often bolster rather than debunk some of the main tenets of white supremacy by accepting “blackness” as the object of investigation, as the “problem.” In seeking to document through science how much of the racial “other” was present in ancient cultures, classicists, in effect, try to demonstrate that “diverse”

people were there “too.” Yet the focus on “blackness” alone follows a longstanding pattern of allowing “whiteness” to be taken for granted as both a scientific and sociological “fact,” to remain uninterrogated, and so stand as inviolable. And, in the end, classicists have the unique ability to strike the alt-right where it is most vulnerable, that is, in its use of antiquity as a site of pure “white” origin. For, without citing any ancient skeletal remains or DNA whatsoever, we can (and should) rather tirelessly point out that “whiteness” itself held no power or meaning in the worlds of Greece and Rome.

Bibliography

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