

## Cultural Imperialism in the *Aethiopica*

In the *Aethiopica* religious behavior is used to compare and contrast the Greeks and the Ethiopians, to the distinct advantage of the Greeks. The Ethiopians in this novel are the mythical people with whom the gods feast in Homer (*Il.* 1.423-424), living in a utopian vision of the golden age (Zeitlin 2008). The very structure of the novel denotes the Ethiopians as the most religiously enlightened people in the world (Beck 2003). The climax of the novel, however, is the Ethiopians deciding to give up the practice of human sacrifice when they nearly sacrifice their long-lost princess. This conflict between the overall nobility of their depiction and the barbarity and taboo nature of human sacrifice has produced debate among scholars over whether the *Aethiopica* is shifting away from “Hellenic hegemonic standards” (Zeitlin 2008) or if the Greek upbringing of the princess makes this novel another paean to Greek culture (Lowe 2000). I argue here for the latter interpretation, and that in fact the entire purpose of the glorious depiction of the Ethiopians is done in order to elevate Greek culture.

The princess is raised as an acolyte of Artemis at Delphi, which helps her keep her virginity on her adventures. In Ethiopia this virginity qualifies her to be a human sacrifice to Artemis, the one unholy practice of the noble Ethiopians. When they discover their long lost princess is the sacrifice, they abolish the tradition. Winkler takes the abolition of human sacrifice in Ethiopia to be the ultimate plot goal of the entire novel, (Winkler 1982) making this a key point of interpretation. Heliodorus’ Ethiopians and Greeks do not have direct cultural contact, so one society cannot have learned of Artemis from the other. They must have both learned to worship her from contact with the gods, which suggests they are both correct to consider her one of the most important gods. The Greeks, however, know that human sacrifice does not please the

gods, whereas the Ethiopians are only persuaded to give it up by their princess' adventure. This shows the superiority of Greek religion over that of even the Ethiopians. The heroic and pious Ethiopians are taken directly from Greek myth, and Greek culture is then shown to be fundamentally superior. Thus every positive aspect of the Ethiopians in this novel is, in the end, something that Greek culture can match and supercede. The novel ends with the culturally Greek princess and her entirely Greek lover being accepted as high priests and future rulers of Ethiopia; the ultimate symbol of Greek culture dominating the rest of the world all the way to its very edges.

#### Bibliography

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