

Being the “Others”? – Blacks in Blood Games

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Blood games are utilized here in their very literal meaning – that is sporting events and spectacles where the spectators could expect brutality and dangerous actions, where they could see blood flow: the Greek heavy athletics (wrestling, boxing, pancration) and hippic events held in the stadion and hippodrome as well as the fights of the Roman pugilists and gladiators or the chariot races given in the circus and amphitheatre.

Aithiopes – Blacks: the Greek to Roman political and social background

Working on the topic of, “Blacks in the world of sport”, is a very interesting, but extremely difficult project, not only because of the meager ancient source material available, which makes it hard to reconstruct the ancient circumstances, but also because of the topicality of the theme, “Blacks in modern society”, which makes an objective scientific analysis of this topic nearly impossible.

Artifacts and documents from ancient times indicate that there were positive as well as negative statements about Blacks. The arguments of two main scientific movements in the history of research based on this dualistic concept of race will be paramount in this work. A first group of scientists – like Frank M. Snowden – believes that the Greeks and Romans regarded Blacks positively and with sympathy which can be seen in the objects of arts. According to their basic statements the ancient people ignored racial prejudice and skin color racism. Other scientists – like Wulf Raeck – believe that racial ideology also existed in ancient times.¹

In order to compare the ancient circumstances with the modern ones an analysis of the wider social background is also necessary. In principle we can not speak about a general attitude of the ancient societies towards Blacks because there were important differences in the manner, and how to deal with Blacks within the Greek and Roman societies. These societies’ attitudes and ways of dealing with Blacks were also important for the fields of sport.

Fundamentally Blacks – the *Aithiopes*, “the ‘burnt-skinned’ people who dwelled south of Egypt (Herodotus 2.22)”² – were deemed cultural foreigners for the Greeks as well as for the Romans. Blacks were known from Minoic and Mycenic times onwards, but the *Aithiopes* were no direct neighbors of the Greeks until the Hellenization of Egypt at the end of the 4th century BC. From this time onwards the Greeks met free born Blacks, inhabitants of a free kingdom south of Egypt, more often.³

At all times the Greeks regarded all Blacks as *barbaroi*. Greeks called all Non-Greeks – regardless whether their skin color was White or Black or whatever – *barbaroi* – people speaking a foreign language. The Greeks regarded the *barbaroi* as being different and this led to sweeping prejudicial statements at the worst, to differentiated opinions about them at the best. The *barbaros*, as cultural “anti-model”, which suggests despotism, submissiveness, excessive luxury, wildness or rudeness has its roots in the refusal of “the Persian *barbaros*” who had invaded Greece in order to rob the Greeks’ of their freedom.⁴ This meaning culminates in the anti-Barbarian racism of Aristotle (Politics 1252b5-9): *barbaroi* are slaves by nature.⁵ But on the other side an interest in and an appreciation for the variety of people and the cultural creations of *barbaroi* arose. Here the term *barbaroi* often is used as

objective, descriptive expression for people who belonged to another nation or who lived outside Greece, respectively outside these areas where inhabited by Greeks.⁶

In this sense the term *barbaroi* was used for Blacks: the *Aithiopes* were Non-Greeks, and most importantly free born Non-Greeks. For the Greeks understanding most Black *Aithiopes* lived at the southern end of their known world, and as such they were viewed in contrast to the other extreme, the blond Skythes, *barbaroi* living in the farthest northern territories. Those Blacks who came to Greece were seen as curiosities. Differences were recognized and accepted and as such were faced with sympathy or reserve, but seldom hostile. Blacks can be found in the world of entertainment, as musicians, jugglers or dancers, or within the private households as Black servants, respectively slaves.⁷ In general it is important to know that

“the ancient world never developed a concept of equating slave and black; nor did it create theories to prove that blacks were more suited than others to slavery”.⁸

The number of Black slaves in Greece was really very low. The majority of slaves consisted of Whites - former poor citizens, Greeks from other city states who were captured during wars or by slave-traders and very often *barbaroi* coming from the nearby countries like the Balkans and Asia Minor.⁹ Black slaves had to be brought to Greece from very far away and were seen as a kind of “luxury good”, who raised the owners’ prestige.

In general the Greeks showed their interest in *Aithiopes* as curiosity of people living in a country far away from Greece. But they had no political interest as did the Romans. The Romans had to keep political consorts with *Aithiopia*, a nation being a neighbor of Egypt which had become part of the Roman Empire from 30 BC onwards.¹⁰ Egypt was very important for Rome providing about one-third of the annual grain supply and so the neighboring *Aithiopia* continued to be “a major threat to the Romans”.¹¹

Aithiopes in the ancient Greek world of blood games

The ancients were informed about different and sometimes outstanding athletic abilities of Blacks. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian, writing at about 80 – 20 BC hints to “athletic” achievements of the Black inhabitants of *Aithiopia* in archery, shooting at a mark, swimming or climbing, and he emphasizes that they trained to get these abilities.¹² But this does not prove that Blacks were accepted as competitors in their games.

Within the ancient Greek world of sport the role of male Blacks¹³ can not be seen isolated from their social status – as *barbaroi* respectively being slaves in some cases. Practice, important for the daily run of the gymnastic and hippic exercises could be done by free born Greeks, *barbaroi* as well as by slaves: as helpers and servants. If a servant or groom – e.g. the helping boys on Attic vase paintings – should be shown unmistakably as *barbaros*, he was shown chiefly as Black. This was the easiest way for the artists to typify a more or less naked Non-Greek as such by using the physical characteristics like snub nose, big lips, woolly hair and so on to depict Non-Greeks. Moreover, the “Black boy servant” being a kind of “luxury good” was used here as a symbol to heighten the owner’s prestige as can be shown by a notice written by Theophrastus (Characters 21.1-4):

“The man of petty ambition (*mikrophilotimia*) is the sort who, when invited for dinner, takes care to eat reclining next to the host himself. (...) he takes care to have an Athiopian attendant (*akolouthos Aithiops*)”.

Until the 3rd century BC *barbaroi* and slaves were excluded from the active participation within the gymnastic agonistic events. Within the hippic events it was the free-born Greek horse-owners, whose social status was decisive for the possibility to compete in the games.¹⁴ *Barbaroi* and slaves, however, could participate in the games as charioteers and

jockeys as can be shown by a message, mostly described to Demosthenes, from the 4th century BC. The evidence applies to all events: *barbaroi* and slaves could not compete in the role of those people who were allowed to be declared and crowned as victors.¹⁵

Concerning the *Aithiopes*, these facts explain why they could not get victors in Greek archaic and Classical times. The restriction of participation of free Blacks did not depend on the color of their skin. The restriction depended more on the mere fact of being *barbaroi* in the eyes of the Greeks. As slaves they were excluded because of their social status. But they had the theoretical possibility to take an active part as charioteers or jockeys within the hippic events. An object of art dating to later times – the 2nd century BC – evidences this possibility. The jockey of the well known horse-jockey group in the National Museum of Athens is named by Seán Hemingway as being “the finest example of a person of Greek and Ethiopian descent in Greek art”.¹⁶

This sculpture was created in Hellenistic times, a time period full of changes and developments in all parts of daily life. After the conquests of Alexander the Great the Greek way of life – and the Greek sport and sport facilities like *gymnasia* – was also brought to countries whose inhabitants were seen as *barbaroi* by the Greeks, from which began an intercultural exchange. Within these countries some *gymnasia* were also opened to the Barbarian inhabitants, some of who were slaves as well. Clear evidence of the participation of slaves within local games delivers an inscription of the 2nd century BC from ancient Misthia in Pisidia.¹⁷ Because of the Greek occupation of Egypt the Greeks also became direct neighbors of the *Aithiopes*. Some Blacks – like Ergamenes, the king of the *Aithiopes* – were educated in the Greek ways¹⁸, and from this time onwards evidence of Black athletes can be found e.g. on a mosaic from Alexandria of the 2nd century BC showing a Black boy wrestling against a White boy.¹⁹ A new era had begun.

Aithiopes in the fields of blood games in Roman times

An increasing number of Blacks within the world of games, sports and spectacles can be found during the Roman Imperial Times. As in earlier times Blacks served as helpers – shown e.g. on mosaics – but now more Blacks can be seen and listed as active competitors. Blacks are delivered as charioteers and gladiators within the Roman spectacles. Written and pictorial sources, like mosaics and terracotta statuettes, show Black boxers or wrestlers, and names like AFER, the African, indicates an athlete to be Black.²⁰ Blacks competed as equal opponents of Whites without being seen as the “Others” – the world of sport opened its doors for Blacks a little bit more.

It is important, however, to note that there is a difference between participation of Blacks in Roman meetings and shows – as pugilists, charioteers of the Roman chariot-races or gladiators – and those sporting events which were held in the Greek manner following the traditional Greek rules – as heavy-athletes (wrestlers, boxers, pancratiasts) and charioteers – in the Greek games which were continued to be held as *certamina Graeca* also under Roman occupation.

This division or differences in Roman and Greek performances are proven by ancient written and pictorial sources. Within the hippic events²¹ the Roman chariot-races were carried out by teams who were members of one of the Roman factions who bore the names of certain colors – the main ones being the Blues, Greens, Whites and Reds. These races were organized by the various factions as part of the Roman *spectacula*. Certain teams of these factions started within the Greek games only occasionally. The Greek hippic events were still staged by teams going under the more or less private owner’s name. The garment of the Roman charioteer wearing a pair of trousers and a short dress, reaching to the thighs and being fasted with stripes of leather wrapped around the chest and waist several times differed clearly from the Greek long cloth reaching down to the feet of the charioteer.

A distinction seemed also to exist within the heavy athletics of the two societies. It is general accepted that athletes wearing a kind of loin cloth have to be interpreted as Roman. Nudity of the athletes often hints to Greek customs. Wrestling and pancration were only part of the Greek sporting endeavors as well as the Greek boxing. In this event gloves – *caesti* – were used which reached from the elbow to the fingers consisting of a kind of woolly under-glove rapped with leather stripes – equivalent to those Greek *himantes* which were used within the Greek boxing from the 4th century BC onwards. The Latin pugilists, on the other side, used another type of gloves which also consisted of wool and leather but seemed to have one to two hard (metallic?) “spikes” coming-out from the clenched fist. Such *caesti* consisting of a combination of rough leather and metal parts are also named by ancient authors like Statius (Thebais 6.732-733) and Vergilius (Aeneis 5.401-405).²²

Objects of arts – terracotta statuettes, wall-paintings or mosaics – show not only Blacks wearing the Roman spiked *caesti* but also using the Greek type of gloves. This evidences that *Aithiopes* took part not only in Roman combats but also in Greek events of Roman times. Besides, further evidence is given by mosaics showing Black wrestlers and also runners – events that can clearly be placed into the Greek world of sports. This does not mean that the old traditional rule that only Greeks could take part in the games has been abandon. It only shows that Black people were also seen as “Greeks” sometimes when accepting the Greek rules and life-styles.

Those Black athletes evidenced by pictorial sources and also written notices – like e.g. the boxer Nicaeus named by Plinius (Historia Naturalis 7.51) or the charioteers Crescens and Fuscus – can be taken for the real participation of Blacks in the sporting world of Roman times. There is no hint that the picture of the “Black athlete” was used as symbol to define the defeated. The way of describing and showing the Black athletes tell us that the Blacks participated as equal competitors and opponents of the White athletes. Moreover, the picture of a Black athlete was used in literary media to symbolize a strong and powerful fighter who seemed to be invincible. The defeat of an apparently invincible Black athlete is the main task the hero and/or heroine has to solve: the Roman martyr Perpetua has symbolically to defeat a Black Egyptian in one of her visions whereas the Greek Theagenes has to wrestle against an *Aithiops* before he can marry the *Aithiopian* princess Charikleia in the fictitious novel *Aithiopika* written by Heliodorus. Moreover, Luxorius writing in the 6th century AD glorifies Black stars of the arena – like the charioteer Trimalchio or the gladiator Olympius.²³

Blacks could take part in ancient sports. When they are shown as competitors, they competed most often in blood sports. Only in early Greek times was the participation of Blacks in sporting events limited. But the restrictions had nothing to do with the color of skin, but were based on their social status. This was a fact which was true for all other people who were seen as *barbaroi* by the Greeks, or who were slaves. From Hellenistic times onwards and especially in Roman times Blacks competed in all known Greek and Roman blood sports. These Black athletes were often described as especially strong competitors. Moreover,

“if the Ethiopian excelled as charioteer, pugilist, or actor he was celebrated by the poet or depicted by the artist (...). The Greek and Romans counted black peoples in”.²⁴

The American Model: Coincidence or Deliberate Design?

For those of us living in the United States of America, the dilemma of race relations has been an ongoing dogma. From the well known arrival of Blacks being enslaved on the East Coast Shores in 1619, the idea of a racial class and cast system prevailed. Just as the ancient Greek and Roman societies, the original enslaved people of these cultures were not Black people. Many of the enslaved persons were of European and Mediterranean descent!

And most often referred to as “indentured servants”. Just as in the ancient societies Blacks for some reason became the suitable group to use as slaves.

During the colonial period of American society, it was very hard to distinguish between what was indeed sport, and what was survival. In her early works Nancy Struna, commonly pointed out that many of the leisure practices of the colonials were also practices for survival. Most noted were hunting and fishing activities. Because of the survival aspects of these activities indentured servants and slaves alike were permitted to take part in such endeavors. No community governance had been placed on fishing and hunting. The same could not be said for horseracing, and/or gambling. The only early blood sport in the U.S. that can show Blacks participating is boxing.²⁵ They participated in horseracing, but in it’s American form it is not considered a blood sport. Struna points to the regulations in some colonies such as Virginia that allowed only persons of the gentle or aristocratic classes to gamble. While this example does not speak to the racial element of whether or not the Greek/Roman Model was an influence on the U.S., it does speak to the fact that a similar path was taken in ancient times by the Greeks. As noted previously the Romans had an entirely different relationship with Blacks.

David Wiggins in his earlier works wrote about the leisure and sporting activities in the slave quarters (“Their Hands Are All Out Playing”). Wiggins explained that even without the master’s permission the slaves had their own games and leisure activities, in which they participated regularly. Even in those instances that their masters knew of the activities, they allowed the slaves to participate in hopes that it would keep them tempered or satisfied. Again, no written records prevail that exclusively points to the Greek or Roman model being given credit as the forerunner for this thought process. However, as stated here earlier, this model was also utilized by the Greeks.

By the time more formalized sports were taking shape in the United States, the racial and class divisions were very well entrenched in the entire culture. This did not prevent some levels of joint participation in sporting activities. As has been noted by Ron Smith and John Lucas, Black jockeys won 13 Kentucky Derby horse races between 1875 and 1902. No Black jockeys were to ride in the Kentucky Derby after 1911.²⁶ Did the early participation by Blacks in the Derby fit a perception by the Greeks that it was the horses that mattered, not the person or persons riding the animals? And did Blacks subsequent removal indicate the financial rewards for jockeys were too substantial to allow Blacks to continue in that role in the U.S. model?

Taking a more in-depth look at the issue of comparison of treatment of slaves and slavery in different cultures is Peter Garnsey, a professor of the History of Classical Antiquity, who noted that

“in antebellum America some apologists for slavery based their case on a comparison between the blessings of slavery in the paternalistic south and the ‘hunger slavery’ or ‘pauper slavery’ of the wage-labour system of the capitalistic north (and England)”.

He followed that with the notion that, “slavery, then, was far from being the universal or typical labour system in the ancient Mediterranean world”.²⁷ Slavery as Garnsey saw it was a structural element in the institutions, economy and consciousness of ancient societies. With this premise in mind, Garnsey believes that historian Robert Fogel

“is challenging students of the ancient world to ask a number of important questions, including (...): Was there a debate or an exchange of views on the morality and legitimacy of slavery? Were dissentient views expressed? Did anyone say, or think, that slavery was wrong? Did spokesmen for the slave-owning societies emerge to justify the institution? Are attitudes to slavery, whether critical or supportive, reflected in the way slave-systems were run?”²⁸

Of course these are all fair questions, as each has been asked and addressed by historians of American Slavery.

While historians have noted that slave theory in antiquity does not begin and end with Aristotle, he is noted as the “high priest” of natural slave theory. He elaborated the theory, and according to Garnsey, it is Aristotle’s “canonical version which reverberated down the ages”, particularly in European societies:

“William Harper, an American landowner, judge and politician, in his Memoir on Slavery of 1838, recommended Aristotle’s Politics to his fellow American slave-owners in the deep South”.²⁹

The Harper memoir, while not the smoking gun, is an indication that indeed the ancient Greek and Roman Model of slavery, and thus the practice of slave participation in sporting and leisure activities had its role model in ancient theories. This is not to say that, ancient Greek and Roman systems of, class and slavery was the true “model” for American culture. However, to not recognize that they had a major influence on the American system would be either disingenuous or outright naïveté.

As has been so aptly stated, because a few factors are similar in the way the cultures, more than three thousand years apart functioned, we cannot make assumptions that the ancient Greeks’ system was the American role model. Neither can we readily dismiss the notion that it was the prevailing influence. Premeditation or coincidence the similarities in the systems are abundant.

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¹ Snowden, Frank M.: *Blacks in Antiquity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts ³1971; Raeck, Wulf: *Zum Barbarenbild in der Kunst Athens im 6. und 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* Bonn 1981. – See Lonis, Raoul: “Les trois approches de l’Ethiopien par l’opinion gréco-romaine”, in: 6 *Ktéma* (1981), 69-87, p.74.

² Byron, Gay L.: *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*. London 2002, p.130 n.1-2.

³ Lonis: “approches”, pp.71-72.

⁴ Lévy, Edmond: “Naissance du concept de barbare”, in: 9 *Ktéma* (1984), 5-14, p.5; Mehl, Andreas: “Erziehung zum Hellenen – Erziehung zum Weltbuerger”, in: 5 *Nikephoros* (1992), 43-73, pp.44-45. 56.

⁵ Lévy: “Naissance”, pp.5. 14; Morris, Ian: “Remaining Invisible: The Archaeology of the Excluded in Classical Athens”, in: Joshel, Sandra R. & Murnaghan, Sheila (eds.): *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*. London 1998, 193-220, p.211; Garnsey, Peter: *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*. Cambridge ²1999, p.14.

⁶ Mehl: “Erziehung”, p.45.

⁷ Lonis: “approches”, pp.74-81.

⁸ Snowden, Frank M.: *Before Color Prejudice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 1983, pp.70-71.

⁹ Lonis: “approches” p.78; Snowden: *Color*, p.70; Morris: “Archaeology”, pp.195. 200-201. fig. 12.2; Garnsey: *Ideas*, p.14.

¹⁰ Lonis: “approches” p.87.

¹¹ Byron: *Blackness*, pp.33-34.

¹² e.g. Diodorus Siculus 3.8.6; 3.21.3; 3.24.2-3; 3.25.4.

¹³ There exist no hints for the participation of Black women in any ancient sporting activities.

¹⁴ Langenfeld, Hans: “Artemidors Traumbuch als Sporthistorische Quelle”, in: 17 *Stadion* (1991), 1-26, p.8; Crowther, Nigel B.: “Slaves and Greek Athletics”, in: 40 *QuadUrbinCultClass* (1992), 35-42, pp.35-36. 38-39; Decker, Wolfgang: *Sport in der griechischen Antike*. Munich 1995, p.47. 122-123; Golden, Mark: *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge 1998, pp.4-5 with n.2.

¹⁵ Pseudo Demosthenes 61.23. – Golden: *Sport*, p.3. We do not follow Crowther: *Slaves*, p.37 who names this notice as evidence that “slaves participated in all athletic events except the apobates”.

¹⁶ Hemingway, Seán: *The Horse and Jockey from Artemision*. Berkeley, California 2004, p.148.

¹⁷ Crowther: “Slaves”, pp.36-37. 39.

¹⁸ Diodorus Siculus 3.6.3.

¹⁹ Grimm, Guenter: *Alexandria*. Mainz 1998, pp.103. 105 fig.102c-d.f.

²⁰ See the named examples in the indices given by Snowden: *Blacks* and Snowden: *Color*.

²¹ Decker: *Sport*, p.106.

²² Suetonius (Augustus 45.2) names Greek boxers and two kinds of Latin pugilists – those fighting concerning the rules and the *catervarii* boxing wild and without any skill. See e.g. Mann, Christian: “Griechischer Sport und roemische Identitaet: die *certamina athletarum* in Rom”, in: 15 *Nikephoros* (2002), 125-158, pp.125-128 naming also African *catervarii* pp.127-128. – The interpretation of the different kinds of gloves used in Roman times is still a problem – see e.g. Lee, Hugh M.: “The Later Greek Boxing Glove and the ‘Roman’ Caestus”, in: 10 *Nikephoros* (1997), 161-178.

²³ Horsmann, Gerhard: *Die Wagenlenker der roemischen Kaiserzeit*. Stuttgart 1998, pp.22. 222-223 (Fuscus cat. 89). 37. 193-194 (Crescens cat. 37); Snowden: *Blacks*, p.20 and Thompson, Lloyd A.: *Romans and Blacks*. London 1989, pp.31-32. 73. 90-91 (Plinius and Luxorius); Musurillo, Herbert: *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford ²2000, pp.117-119 (Perpetua).

²⁴ Snowden: *Blacks*, pp.217-218.

²⁵ For reference reading see e.g. Davis, John P.: *The Negro in American Sports*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1966; Hauser, Thomas: *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing*. New York 1986; Cashmore, Ernest: *Black Sportsmen*. London & Boston 1982; Shropshire, Kenneth L.: *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America*. New York 1996.

²⁶ Lucas, John A. & Smith, Ronald A.: *Saga of American Sport*. Philadelphia 1978, pp.267-284.

²⁷ Garnsey: *Ideas*, p.5.

²⁸ Garnsey: *Ideas*, p.10.

²⁹ Garnsey: *Ideas*, pp.15-16.