what it meant in the polytheistic world of Rome calls for no investigation here. Moreover, the radiate crown with which Nero is shown on certain of his coins is correctly taken as a symbol of divinity, and the logical consequence must be that a personal claim to godhead was made. The divine Sun-King, I imagine, believed in himself.

THE ORIGINS OF RACISM?

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In this ambitious, monumental book, Benjamin Isaac has produced a provocative, revisionist study on a topic of crucial relevance to our contemporary world. His book will be certain to provoke sharp debate and controversy. Many classical scholars subscribe to the views of Frank M. Snowden, who argues in two well-known books that the world of Greek and Roman antiquity was remarkably free of what we should call racial prejudice.¹ In another well-known book, Lloyd A. Thompson argues that although we clearly find signs of group prejudice and ‘somatic norm preferences’ among the Romans, we cannot say that the ancient Romans were racists.² Isaac challenges such views by arguing that there are unmistakable instances throughout Greek and Roman literature of what he calls ‘proto-racism’. Whether or not one agrees with Isaac’s contention will largely depend on one’s conception and definition of racism.³

A lengthy introduction lays out the conceptual framework that informs subsequent chapters.⁴ The stated aims are ‘to contribute to an understanding of the intellectual origins of racism and xenophobia’ (p. 4), and ‘to show that some essential elements of later racism have their roots in Greek and Roman thinking’ (p. 5). A

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³ Isaac concedes as much: ‘[I]t is appropriate to observe that no single definition will ever satisfy everybody, for racism is not a scientific theory or concept, but a complex of ideas, attitudes, and forms of behavior which are themselves by definition irrational’ (p. 22).

⁴ Remaining notes in this paragraph provide commentary and/or supplementary bibliography for specific peoples treated in individual chapters.
corollary aim is to provide an enhanced understanding of ancient imperialism by considering the degree to which negative attitudes towards other peoples contributed to it. The book breaks down into two parts: ‘Stereotypes and Proto-Racism: Criteria for Differentiation’ and ‘Greek and Roman Attitudes Towards Specific Groups: Greek and Roman Imperialism’. Part One is subdivided into the following chapters: ‘Superior and Inferior Peoples’ (pp. 55-168), ‘Conquest and Imperialism’ (pp. 169-224), and ‘Fears and Suppression’ (pp. 225-48). Part Two is comprised of chapters on ‘Greeks and the East’ (pp. 257-303), ‘Roman Imperialism and the Conquest of the East’ (pp. 304-23), ‘Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Syrians’ (pp. 323-51), ‘Parthia/Persia’ (pp. 352-70), ‘Roman Views of Greeks’ (pp. 371-80), ‘Mountaineers and Plainsmen’ (pp. 406-10), ‘Gauls’ (pp. 411-26), ‘Germans’ (pp. 427-39) and ‘Jews’ (pp. 440-91).

Isaac defines racism as follows: ‘an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or

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5 Isaac argues that the ‘association of the East with despotism, effeminacy, moral degeneration, and lack of discipline is first encountered in the literature of the fourth century’ (p. 297). While it cannot be doubted that negative Greek stereotypes of eastern barbarians, particularly Persians, quickened in the fourth century (as, for example, in Isocrates’ *Panegyricus*), it seems to me that Isaac’s statement goes too far. After all, what are we to make of the message of the ‘Eurymedon oinochoe’, dated circa 465 BCE and included in Isaac’s plates (figures 2A and 2B), and the arguments of E. Hall (cited repeatedly by Isaac), Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy (Oxford 1989), who sees the formation of the Greek-barbarian bipolarity as a product of the Persian War experience? Indeed, according to M. C. Miller, Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity (Cambridge 1997), Athenian stereotypes of Persians had already passed through a violently hostile and negative phase by the late fifth century, by which time they had been tamed and incorporated as part of Athenian imperial culture. It is odd that we find no mention at all of E. Said, Orientalism (New York 1978), who cites Aeschylus’s *Persians* as his first example of Orientalist discourse in western literature. On Aeschylus’s *Persians*, see T. Harrison, The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus’ Persians and the History of the Fifth Century (London 2000), who seeks to restore Athenian ethnocentrism and a condescending, patriotic triumphalism to the play.


7 I discuss this topic at length in Cultural Politics in Polybius’s Histories (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2004), which was unavailable to Isaac at the time of writing.


The crucial point for Isaac is the fact that racism is unlike ethnic and other group prejudices insofar as racial prejudice does not allow for ‘the possibility of change at an individual or collective level in principle. In these other forms of prejudice, the presumed group characteristics are not by definition held to be stable, unalterable, or imposed from the outside through physical factors: biology, climate, or geography’ (p. 27).

First of all, it is obvious that Greek and Roman forms of group prejudice based on unalterable physical factors are not the same as racism in the modern sense of the term. That conception had to await the nineteenth century, with Mendel’s peas and Darwin’s voyage on *H. M. S. Beagle*. Isaac explicitly states at the outset that he is claiming that important conceptual antecedents for modern racism are to be found in Greek and Roman antiquity; he is not claiming that the Greeks and Romans already had ideas of ‘scientific racism’.11 The crucial link between modern racism and ancient ‘proto-racism’ in Isaac’s conception is the ancient preoccupation with environmental determinism. Here two key ideas emerge: that people can only become worse as a result of relocating to different climates and geographical locations; and that once environmental factors have determined degenerate characteristics, these characteristics cannot be undone even when an entire people permanently relocates to an optimal climate. In this connection Isaac discusses a remarkable chapter (14) in the Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*. In this passage we learn of the heredity of acquired characteristics: the ‘Longheads’ of Trapezus artificially elongated the heads of their children, but after sufficient time had passed, this was no longer necessary since children were born with naturally elongated heads (pp. 74f.).12

Isaac maintains that the environmental-determinist approach was the predominant one among Greeks and Romans for explaining collective differences among peoples and that the rigidity of this approach in Greek and Roman ‘proto-racism’ informed more recent and insidious forms of racism.13 This is an assertion that is certainly open to challenge. A rival ancient explanation for collective

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11 ‘I certainly do not claim that we are dealing here with the specific form of scientific racism which was the product of the nineteenth century’ (p. 1); but cf. p. 165 on Athenian ideas of autochthony: ‘It could even be said that the Athenians regarded themselves as a “race” in modern terms’.

12 *Airs, Waters, Places* is, of course, the environmental-determinist tract *par excellence*. Another is Arist. *Pol.* 1327b23-33, with imperialistic overtones (see also 1285a19-22). In Roman guise, *mutatis mutandis*, see Vitruv. *Arch.* 6.1.11.

13 ‘[T]he dominant approach . . . is the environmental theory: an environmental determinism which made it possible for Greek and Roman texts to describe foreign peoples in terms of fixed physical and mental traits, determined by climate and geography’ (p. 503).
characteristics stressed political and social institutions. Indeed, it can easily be argued that state organisation is the single most important causal factor in ancient Greek theory on collective characteristics. At the inception of the Greek literary tradition, Homer characterises the brutish Cyclopes as beings without any formal institutional structures for law and order (Od. 9.111), and the sixth-century Milesian poet Phokylides contrasts the well-ordered polis and ‘senseless Ninevah’ (Sent. frag. 4D). Plato maintains that the politeia is ‘the nurse of men’ (Menex. 238c). The idea that institutional structures determine collective characteristics is at the root of Plato’s Republic and Laws and Aristotle’s Politics. In a famous passage Aristotle stresses the primacy of political association, stating that human beings are ‘political creatures’ (Pol. 1253a1-29); even in the environmentalist tract Airs, Waters, Places we find concession to the mitigating factor of governmental institutions (chapter 16). In a famous passage on the educative function of flute-playing in ancient Arcadia (4.21), Polybius explicitly states that institutions overcame environment. There is ample evidence to make the argument that political and social institutions trump environmental factors in the formation of collective group characteristics in ancient Greek thought. The crucial point here is that these institutions are malleable and susceptible to historical change. Ancient ideas on political and social institutions as prime causal factors in the development of collective characteristics therefore pose a challenge to Isaac’s rigid and unalterable Greek and Roman ‘proto-racism’.

There are a few remaining criticisms, which are less important to the book’s overall thesis than the undervaluing of political and social institutions for collective group characteristics in ancient thought. These concern the characterisation of Greek and Roman thought on self and others as a unity. The decision to bypass the Hellenistic period serves to create a deceptive seamlessness. As we have seen, Isaac posits a sharp break in Greek perceptions of Persians between the fifth and fourth centuries. We should be more wary of important distinctions between Greek and Roman thought on these questions especially when we keep in mind the omitted Hellenistic era that intervened. At times Isaac seems to gloss over these differences in treating Greek and Roman conceptions as Greco-Roman conceptions. This tendency is most evident in the discussions of Athenian notions of autochthony and Greek and Roman xenophobia. First, let us consider Athenian ideas of autochthony. Isaac provides a useful discussion of the idea of autochthony and ‘pure lineage’ at Athens (pp.114-24), which of course found concrete expression in Pericles’ citizenship law of 451/450 BCE. But he does not consider the sections of Pericles’ funeral oration as represented by Thucydides, which emphasise Athens’ unguarded openness to foreign goods and ideas (Thuc. 2.38f.). While Isaac admits that we cannot find similar

On the importance of politics for the ancient Greeks, see the thought-provoking discussion of P. A. Rahe, ‘The Primacy of Politics in Ancient Greece’, AHR 89.2 (1984) 265-93. The primacy of political and social institutions in Greek thought for determining collective characteristics is one of the basic tenets of my own recent work (above, n. 7).
conceptions among the Romans, he hastens to consider Roman ideas on autochthony of other peoples. Consequently, he downplays the crucial difference between Athenian myths of autochthony and Roman myths of mixed origins. The distinctions in foundational mythologies are far more important than any similarities we might find and gave diametrically opposed mythological charters for Athens’ jealously guarded political franchise and the steady extension of Roman citizenship. Then there is the related notion of xenophobia and contamination by contact with foreigners. On Roman views Isaac mentions only Arrian (Tactica 33) and the elder Pliny on the ideas that contact with foreigners can be salutary and that Romans borrowed much from foreign peoples. He concludes that authors ‘who regard contact with foreigners as having deleterious effects are far more numerous and influential than those who emphasise its salutary aspects. The latter are a few Greek writing authors of the Roman period, the former range from the sixth century B.C. till late antiquity’ (p. 244). This statement is exaggerated and misleading. The idea that Roman contact with foreign peoples and customs had been beneficial to Rome is not as uncommon as Isaac suggests; Cicero, for example, states it explicitly and at length (Rep. 2.30).

Some of Isaac’s conceptual underpinnings, therefore, are not above contestation. But my criticism does not provide an indication of the impressive scope and range of the book. I cannot imagine that anyone could read this work without learning a great deal from it. Particularly noteworthy is the way in which Isaac relates ancient ideas on environmental determinism and acquired characteristics to modern racist conceptions of Cuvier, Buffon, Kant, Hume, Herder, Thomas Jefferson and many other intellectuals in the western tradition. I find the overall thesis that there are elements in Greek and Roman thought that easily lend themselves to modern racist ideologies to be persuasive, with the reservations stated above concerning the mitigating and contesting ideas among ancient thinkers on the force of political and social institutions in the formation of collective characteristics. Isaac’s notion of ‘proto-racism’ among ancient Greeks and Romans, with the qualifications I have mentioned, is convincing and unproblematic. Debate and disagreement are likely to revolve around the transition from ancient ‘proto-racism’ to modern racism: are the similarities or the differences more important? And of course here objections will be raised that in etymological terms it is anachronistic to speak of ‘race’ in ancient Greek and Roman discourse. We have to wait until the nineteenth century for the words ‘race’ and ‘racism’ to begin to assume the meanings that we give to them today; ancient terms such as ethnos or natio are not synonyms.

15 ‘[U]nlike the Athenians, the Romans never attributed to themselves a pure lineage or any notion of being autochthonous’ (p. 134); ‘Rome made no claim of being autochthonous or of pure blood, but applied those ideas to other peoples’ (p. 514).

16 For Roman ‘inclusive’ ideology see, e.g., Liv. 1.2; 1.8; Sall. Cat. 6.1.

I have rarely been as engaged in writing a review as I have been in writing this one. Isaac’s study has forced me to rethink some of my basic assumptions about the ancient world, and it has provoked sharp criticism on particular arguments. These are things that good books do and are perhaps indicative of the impact the book is likely to have. In sum, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* is meticulously researched, impressive in scope, clearly presented and provocatively stimulating in argumentation. No one henceforth will be able to enter the debate on collective stereotypes and group prejudices in Greek and Roman antiquity without taking it into account.

THE PRINCE AND THE STARS: GERMANICUS’ TRANSLATION OF ARATUS

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Possanza’s book represents an interesting contribution to studies of Aratus’ *Phaenomena*.¹ Focussing on Germanicus’ translation, Possanza aims to show that Germanicus re-interpreted the *Phaenomena* using Greek as well as Latin predecessors as part of a continuous tradition (pp. 1-20 and 112-114). Chapter 1 (pp. 21-77) studies the poetics of translating Greek poetry into Latin. Chapter 2 (pp. 79-99) and characterises Aratus’ work as both a descendant of oral catalogue poetry and a masterpiece of Callimachean refined style. Chapter 3 (pp. 105-67) selectively examines Germanicus’ method of translation. Chapter 4 (pp. 169-218) shows how Germanicus changes the *Phaenomena* in translation, with Possanza’s conclusion being that the ‘Greek poet’s lofty theme of the constellations as “signs” of the providential deity’s immanence in nature is completely subverted and in its place we find no theme of comparable religious and philosophical significance. Instead we discover that it is the poet himself who controls this cosmos, who as a storyteller and self-declared *vates* (bard) turns the map of heaven into a realm of Ovidian transformations where the revelation of what the constellations once were humanizes and dramatizes the existence of those distant astral bodies’ (p. 208).

All of Possanza’s arguments are based on the view, argued in Appendix A (pp. 219-43; see also pp. 15f., 105-109), that Germanicus, the son of Drusus, is the

¹ D. Kidd, *Aratus: Phaenomena* (Cambridge 1997) has recently made Aratus more accessible.