

**Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks.*** Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, Harvard University Press 1983. Pp. 163. 62 plates. Cloth. \$17.50.

Frank Snowden, Professor of Classics Emeritus at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and author of *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Harvard, 1970), has spent a good deal of his professional life researching the role of blacks in the ancient Mediterranean world and the attitude of whites toward them. His earlier book received the Goodwin Award of Merit of the American Philological Association and opened up an area of classical scholarship that had previously been little or quite inadequately explored. In *Before Color Prejudice* Frank Snowden has two aims, which this new book more than amply fulfills: «through a study of the iconographical and written sources, to trace the image of blacks as seen by whites from Egyptian to Roman times, and to explore the rationale for the attitude toward blacks during this period» (p. vii). As a conscientious classical scholar, it was constantly a concern of Snowden's to avoid misreading the evidence in terms of modern sociological or political ideological positions but at the same time to use relevant contemporary research in the social sciences to deepen his and our understanding of color and race in antiquity.

The present book is quite a short one but nevertheless packed with data and supported by iconographical and literary evidence that is further elucidated in copious notes for each chapter. The book is organized in four easily read chapters: (1) «Who Were the African Blacks?»; (2) «Meetings of Blacks and Whites»; (3) «Images and Attitudes»; and (4) «Toward an Understanding of the Ancient View.» Literary and iconographical sources are clearly given and, as in Snowden's earlier book, emphasis is put on the central role played by the Ethiopians in any discussion of blacks in antiquity because the «Ethiopians became the yardstick by which classical antiquity measured colored peoples» (p. 7). Snowden points out that the blacks of ancient artists bear a close similarity to racial types designated in the modern world as «colored,» «black,» or «Negro,» and that the ancients were acquainted with a wide variety of types whose physical characteristics were similar to those of the highly mixed American black.

The general thesis of the author is that there was no color prejudice in the ancient world, as we know it today: «the ancients did not fall into the error of biological racism; black skin color was not a sign of inferiority; Greeks and Romans did not establish color as an obstacle to integration in society; and ancient society was one that «for all its faults and failures never made color the basis for judging a man» (p. 63). It is also very important to note that the ancient world never developed a concept that joined together slavery and blackness, nor did it ever develop theories to show that blacks were more suitable to be slaves than others; in fact, most ancient slaves were white, not black. Even the question of the association of black with evil, fear, disaster, and death is closely examined and is shown to have nothing to do with skin color.

Because there is no single ancient document that treats in detail the attitudes of whites toward the color of the black man's skin, an investigator like Snowden has performed a superb service by analyzing the primary evidence that illustrates that for three

millenia Mediterranean whites and African blacks came into contact with each other in commerce and in war. Known most commonly as Kushites, Ethiopians or Nubians, the blacks of antiquity were respected as formidable warriors and equals. Early Christianity reinforced the favorable view of the black: «The Christian vision of a world in which «there is no question of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman,» owes not a little to earlier views of man in which color played no significant role» (p. 108).

The best summary of *Befor Color Prejudice*, a book that should be required reading in all university courses in classics and ancient history, are Snowden's own well chosen words:

...in the ancient world there were prolonged black-white contacts, from an early date; first encounters with blacks frequently involved soldiers or mercenaries, not slaves or so-called savages; initial favorable impressions of blacks were explained and amplified, generation after generation, by poets, historian, and philosophers; the central societies developed a positive image of peripheral Nubia as an independent state of considerable military, political, and cultural importance; both blacks and whites were slaves, but blacks and slaves were never synonymous; black emigrés were not excluded from opportunities available to others of alien extraction, nor were they handicapped in social relations — they were physically and culturally assimilated; in science, philosophy, and religion, color was not the basis of a widely accepted theory concerning the inferiority of blacks (*ibid.*).

Certainly, Frank Snowden's latest book deserves to be in every classicist's library and his findings included in the teaching of every survey of the history of the ancient Mediterranean World.

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***Aspects of the Epic.* Edited by Tom Winnifrith, Penelope Murray and K. W. Gransden.** New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Pp. xi + 121. Cloth. \$22.50.

The lectures reproduced in this slight volume were originally delivered as part of a series organized by the School of Classical Civilization at the University of Warwick in the autumn of 1980 and generously sponsored by the Greek Embassy in London. The contributors, only three of whom have academic appointments in Classics (J. Gould, G. S. Kirk, and P. Murray), were asked to consider various aspects of the European epic tradition. All contributors have an interest in the Greek epic, and if there is any unity at all to the volume, it is the poet Homer who provides it.

The first paper by Penelope Murray of the University of Warwick is entitled «Homer and the Bard» (pp. 1-15) and considers the portrayal of the bard in Homeric epic, stressing particularly the relation of Homer's own biography to the fictional bards depicted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but also indicating that there is a basic ambiguity.