

***The First Ethiopians:* A Critical Perspective**

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Book Review Article

The First Ethiopians: The Image of Africa and Africans in the Early Mediterranean World.

By Malvern Van Wyk Smith

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with 50 colour and black-and-white illustrations

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This is an ambitious book by a retired Professor of English at Rhodes University that makes very large claims about the origins of Western racism towards Black Africans. The author has spent many years and a great deal of effort on this project (p. ix) as is evident from the substantial length of the work and the very extensive bibliography¹ (pp. 447-501), from which many scholars will undoubtedly benefit, as I most definitely have. Wits University

¹ The author sometimes employs a ‘scatter-gun’ approach to the references, rather than specifying these more precisely. For example, the reference to Watts (1976) on race prejudice in Juvenal, does not contain much of relevance at all to ‘Roman attitudes to black Africans’ (p. 334) – there is a passing allusion to Blacks on p. 86 of this article, but for the rest it mostly concerns Greeks, Jews and Orientals. The same could be said of the majority of the references given on this page. One of the most serious drawbacks to the bibliography is that it is virtually entirely in English, whereas much important work on Africa in ancient history has been done in French, Italian and German. Thus, there is no mention at all of Gsell (1913-1930), or the 18-volume publication *L’Africa romana* by the Department of History at the University of Sassari.

Press are to be commended for undertaking to publish such a lengthy discussion of what is, when the Introduction (pp. 1-95) is laid aside, actually a work of ancient history, and one hopes that this will set a trend that will continue in the future. This book shows that Ancient History matters and that it matters above all for Africa and Africans.

The author at first describes his project as follows: 'This book is a history of the idea of "Africa" in the consciousness of the early Mediterranean and European world' (p. 1), but it soon becomes apparent that he has a more specific purpose, namely to trace the origin of Western racism to Pharaonic Egypt. He writes:

This distinction [between non-negroid Egyptians and sub-Saharan Blacks] encouraged the rulers of pharaonic Egypt to distance themselves from other Africans, and the consequent racial typology that they developed prompted later Greek and Roman commentators in turn to perpetuate and celebrate the notion of an elite culture of 'worthy Egyptians' based on the lands and legends of Meroitic Nubia and, later, Aksumite Ethiopia, and to dismiss the rest of sub-Saharan Africa as 'savage Ethiopia' (p. 4).

If this is the case, it is a very gloomy view of Western relations with Black Africa, but there is every reason to think that Van Wyk Smith's argument is unsustainable when broken down into the specific details. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that the author is an Egyptologist/Ancient Historian/Classicist *manqué*, as he finds it impossible to concentrate only on the thesis he proposes at the outset of the book, but is frequently drawn into discussion of intriguing side-shows in the ancient world. To a Classicist, this is gratifying proof of the continuing fascination of the history of the ancient Mediterranean, but it must be said that much of this material has already been more authoritatively treated elsewhere, and a more rigorous concentration on what is relevant to the argument would have produced a much slimmer and more persuasive work. Thus on p. 373 the author has cause to mention the Chinese, which leads to a learned excursus on the derivation of the name 'Seres' from the Greek and Latin languages. All this can be found in the relevant dictionaries. Why rehearse it all yet again?

It is at first sight difficult to work out what readership Van Wyk Smith has in mind for his book. At 528 pages, this is no coffee-table publication, and it is unlikely that ‘the general reader’ will take up an extended study of racism in Africa, Egypt, and the West in the period ranging from 3800 BCE to the early Christian period (Van Wyk Smith’s ‘timeline’ covers the periods from 3800 BCE to the Ptolemaic period beginning in 323 BCE, but his discussion actually extends as far as Cosmas Indicopleustes in the 6th century of our era). Since the author is not himself an Egyptologist nor a Classicist, students and researchers in these fields will not take his account as authoritative pronouncements. Disciplinary boundaries do matter – above all where languages and historical methodology are involved. The inability of the author to read Egyptian, Greek and Latin texts in the original languages and his relative unfamiliarity with the source material (especially numismatic, epigraphic, and papyrological) inevitably makes his account derivative. He has clearly read very widely in the fields of Egyptology, Classics, Ancient History, and others, but his argument depends on his summaries (sometimes very cursory and selective too) of the work of ‘authorities’ in these fields and it is sometimes not easy to see why he prefers one account over another (more on this below). Without the freshness of original interpretations of the ancient evidence by the author to keep him going, this reader soon tired of dealing with the barrage of rehashed information presented in this book. The vast scope of the present work is only possible because the author has skated over the issues, debates and controversies within these disciplines.

Who then did the author envisage as the reader of his work? The answer is to be found in the substantial Introduction (pp. 1-95) in which the author outlines ‘the polemics of postcolonial and postmodernist debate’ (p. ix). This is understandably where the author is most at home and it is all the more strange that he can suggest that the reader should skip the introduction ‘to enter the argument with Homer and the ancient “Ethiopians” in Chapter 1’ (ibid.). The book under consideration is above all a political work in the sense that it ventures into the ‘minefields of cultural history’ to propose an unorthodox thesis – that Western racism towards Blacks has its origin in Africa, and more specifically, in Egypt (see especially Chapter 8, ‘The First Ethiopians’, pp. 235-280, on the creation of a dual view of Ethiopian identity by the rulers ‘Kushite’ or Nubian 25th Dynasty). It is in this already

superheated debate that the present book will make its greatest impact. However, when the argument turns to matters of detail, it becomes impossible to sustain such an immense claim as the author puts forward. To combat the untenable views of the Afrocentrists cogent historical reasoning is needed. It is unfortunate that Van Wyk Smith's extremely wide scope and unhistorical methodology draws him away from this goal.

In this review, I take up the author's invitation to bypass the Introduction (pp. 1-95), which presents an excellent overview of the present intellectual debate regarding contemporary cultural politics. It is not possible, even in this extended review article, to deal with all the issues raised by this thought-provoking book. Instead, I shall be concentrating on the area of my own expertise – the Graeco-Roman period.

A key issue in the book is racism (once fondly thought not to exist). Van Wyk Smith points out that recent DNA research indicates that race may not be merely a social construct after all, since scientists now propose that genetic lineages are real. This means that there must have been a variety of human groups in Africa prior to the migrations from the continent between 80,000 and 60,000 years ago (pp. 59-60) and that Africa is racially far more complex than has previously been allowed². However this may be, it is clear that the arguments of both Afrocentrist cultural theorists and Eurocentrists depend on the question of race, which is a very difficult term to keep a grip on, since it constantly needs to be distinguished from xenophobia, cultural stereotyping, and so on³. Van Wyk Smith prefers to use Dawkins' 1976 term 'meme' to describe the

tenacity, prolixity and replicatory powers of single or groups of ideas, beliefs, prejudices and other cultural practices ... that seem to have an almost biological and genetic propensity to survive and replicate in given societies (p. 285).

Racism is a prime manifestation of such 'memes'. Significantly, however, Van Wyk Smith does not give sufficient consideration to the impact that Darwin's theory of evolution had on theories of race in the nineteenth

² See also Seligman (1966).

³ See the useful discussion of these terms in Isaac (2004: 17-23, 38-41).

century. When compounded with Western imperialism at this time, which Van Wyk Smith does recognise, in passing, as a contributory factor (p. 228), Darwinism brought race to the forefront of European thought as never before. Clearly it is in Van Wyk Smith's interest to bypass this important issue, since he argues that Western racism originated in Egypt and was passed on to the Greeks and Romans, who in turn handed it on to the Medieval and Modern Europeans. However, racism towards Blacks in Greek and Roman times was negligible for the simple reason that Blacks never constituted a significant proportion of the ancient population of the Mediterranean and they certainly never presented so much of a threat to the security of the region as Van Wyk Smith often claims (cf., e.g., p. 345). Hence Van Wyk Smith has to dismiss the views of an entire cohort of ancient historians such as Beardsley (1929), Thompson and Ferguson (1969), Snowden (1970, 1976), Bugner et al. (1976), Watts (1976), Raven (1984), Thompson (1989) and Isaac (2004), where they fail to support his case that the Greeks and Romans were consistently and demonstrably racist towards Blacks (cf., e.g., p. 334). He writes, for example:

The sad truth is that by and large, the Romans adopted the substantially racialised dialectics of Hellenistic Lower Egypt as distilled from centuries of discriminatory cultural dynamics practised by dynastic Egyptians and Meroitic Nubians alike (p. 334 Van Wyk Smith's punctuation).

Another essential point in Van Wyk Smith's argument is that the Homeric identification of two Ethiopias led to the later dichotomy between 'worthy' and 'savage' Ethiopians. Homer describes the Ethiopians as 'the most distant of men' some of whom lived 'at the setting of Hyperion' and others 'at his rising' (*Od.* 1.22-25). It is important to note that there is no differentiation between 'worthy' and 'savage' Ethiopians here, although the author takes this passage to have defined the racist 'meme' in Western thinking. On the one occasion that Homer does characterize the Ethiopians he merely says that they are, in general and without distinction, 'blameless' (*Il.* 1.423). The Greek word here is frequently used by Homer as a traditional epithet in his oral poetry and is applied to the prophet Calchas, Peleus, Glaucus and other warriors at Troy with very little distinguishing force.

Moreover, there is no evidence to suppose that Homer had any specific Ethiopians in mind, such as the ‘pious Twenty-fifth dynasty rulers of Egypt’ (p. 250). Van Wyk Smith can summon no reputable Homeric authority for such a suggestion, and does not cite specialist studies of Homer’s knowledge of Egypt⁴ to support his view. It is far more likely that Homer was referring in *Od.* 1.22-23 to people so distant that they were burnt by the sun at its rising and at its setting and so not to the more familiar Egyptians. The myth of the Ethiopians is, after all, inseparably linked to the journey of Helios from the eastern to the western Ocean⁵. The later reference in Herodotus to ‘straight-haired Ethiopians’ and ‘woolly-haired Ethiopians’ (7.69-70) – also without any negative characterization of either group incidentally – confirms this view. Yet, after adducing both theories concerning the Ethiopians (that they were connected in some way with the 25th dynasty in Egypt and that they represented Indians in the east and Africans in the west), Van Wyk Smith concludes: ‘Yet it must be possible that a notion of two kinds of African “Ethiopians” ... made its way into Homeric lore’ (p. 250). He then enters into a discussion of the intractable problem of the date of Homer (pp. 250-251) with a view to showing that distinction between two groups of Ethiopians must go back further than Homer since the poet supposedly lived after the 25th dynasty in Egypt. This discussion is beside the point, however, as it ignores the nature of oral formulaic poetry, which has been shown to preserve detailed knowledge of Mycenaean society even before 1000 BCE.

All this would not matter so much if it did not occur at the most crucial point in the construction of Van Wyk Smith’s argument in Chapter 8, ‘The First Ethiopians’ (pp. 235-280). If his case breaks down here, it will also do so subsequently, since the links between the supposed ‘two Ethiopias’ grow increasingly tenuous in later chapters. While there are some grounds for accepting that in the Hellenistic period Greeks and Romans differentiated between eastern and western Ethiopians (Indians and Africans), especially after Alexander’s conquest of the Persian Empire, there is little basis for supposing that they somehow transposed this distinction into a north-south dichotomy, which is more characteristic of modern thinking in the field of Development Studies. Even in the Hellenistic period

⁴ See Gilbert (1939: 47-61); Sinko (1906: 12-20).

⁵ See the extensive evidence discussed by Lesky (1959: 27-38).

and Roman Empire the Sahara and the *sudh* imposed impenetrable barriers to explorers from the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Blacks were for this reason not well known or understood in the Classical period⁶. Homer's 'inversely ethnocentric' view of Ethiopians⁷, in which they lived lives of blessed ease in the company of the gods, was gradually replaced by more rational scientific accounts of them in the Hellenistic period, as Albin Lesky has shown in his article 'Aithiopika' (1959). Van Wyk Smith repeatedly returns to the supposed divide between 'worthy' and 'savage' Ethiopians without citing any real evidence at all for the distinction (cf., e.g., pp. 288, 293), whereas in fact there is often no pejorative differentiation. For example, Van Wyk Smith arbitrarily links Aristotle's discussion of the five zones of the earth in the *Meteorologica* (to which no chapter and section reference is given here, but cf. p. 310 where the reference 2.5.179 is given), with the same philosopher's *Politics* (1.3.4-5, on the evolution of human society) and then states: 'Aristotelian cosmography created a template of racialised assumptions and expectations from which the world has still not recovered' (pp. 310-311). But there is no necessary connection at all between the two Aristotelian texts and neither makes any pejorative statements about the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere. Similarly, Herodotus' story of the Nasamonian youths crossing the Sahara to discover pygmies (Hdt. 2.32), contains no racist assessment of the indigenous peoples they encountered. Elsewhere too Herodotus talks of straight-haired and curly-haired Ethiopians (7.69-70) and he assigns these to East and West respectively, but he makes no judgement on the savagery or level of civilization of either group (cf. Van Wyk Smith, p. 308). Thus the supposed binary opposition between 'worthy' and 'savage' Ethiopians frequently breaks down.

Did the Romans hand on to the medieval period a racist view of sub-Saharan Blacks as Van Wyk Smith argues? He writes, for example: 'Africa presented to the Roman gaze a largely pejorative view of humanity' – a rather obscure way of putting the matter (p. 344) –; 'Roman discourse' depicts 'the majority of Aethiopians as primitive, barbarous, and wretched'

⁶ Cary and Warmington (1929: 110-111). At the time of Nero a scientific expedition to find the sources of the Nile failed to get further than the *sudh* (cf. Pliny *HN* 6.181).

⁷ This term was coined by Romm (1994: 47).

(p. 345); and ‘Africa is Hell’ (p. 358). The argument is often greatly exaggerated and the evidence cited is deficient or taken out of context. For example, Van Wyk Smith suggests (p. 339) that the ‘isolation’ of Africa from medieval Europe ‘was latent in Roman attitudes’ (ibid.), but the fact is that the Romans (and even their Greek geographers such as Strabo and Ptolemy) knew very little at all about sub-Saharan Africa. We need to put aside our modern knowledge of the world in order to enter into the mind of people who had never seen a globe and whose maps (judging by the Peutinger map) were often severely skewed. On the 12th-13th century Peutinger Map, which is based on a stemma of earlier maps of the main official travel routes of Roman Empire (*cursus publicus*) going back ultimately to the map of Agrippa in the first century BCE via the *Itinerarium Antonini* in the third or fourth century, Africa is reduced to a thin horizontal band, the Nile runs laterally from East to West (as in Herodotus), and Ethiopia is not given nearly as much detail as India⁸ is. On this map the Ethiopians are located near the Gaetulians (under the variant names Bagigetuli, Gnadegetuli, or Higibegetuli) and Nasamonians (Weber 1976, segment VII) but with no indication of the distances between them (although otherwise distances are regularly given). Even the location of the Garamantes is marked more precisely (Weber 1976, segment VI). However, the fact that the Romans were almost entirely ignorant about Africa does not make them racist, and they cannot be faulted because they lacked a ‘conception of African as a vast continuous whole’ (p. 367).

I now analyze Van Wyk Smith’s argument with regard to the Palestrina Mosaic. This famous first-century CE artwork, which was discovered at Praeneste in Italy just south of Rome, depicts Upper and Lower Egypt at the time of the annual Nile flood. The upper section shows the fauna, flora, and mineralogy of Upper Egypt. Some features are labelled; the bear (not obviously an African animal), for example, has ARKOS written beneath it⁹. There is also a mythical, ungulate ‘ass-centaur’ (ONOKENTAUIROS) with a human head. At the top of the mosaic seven Black hunters are seen in aiming their bows and arrows at some birds. The artist is unknown but would probably have been Greek or Egyptian rather than Roman. This

⁸ Cf. Weber (1976).

⁹ The most extensive recent discussion is by Meyboom (1994).

piece should be seen as part of the Roman fascination with Egypt (there was a major tourist industry to this destination during the Roman Empire), which had come into their possession after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra by the first Roman emperor Augustus. Hence the exotic and even mythical animals depicted alongside actual African animals such as hippos and crocodiles. Here too, Van Wyk Smith provides no evidence for his reading of this mosaic as showing ‘the gaze of authority, a confident suggestion that the (Roman) viewer is fully in possession of the African terrain’ and he states without substantiation that ‘the African human subjects on display are shown as grotesques’ (p. 346). Moreover, it is simply wrong for him to say that Walker (2003) ‘sees in the Palestrina Mosaic a pervasive conception of inner Egypt as exotic, sexually priapic and demographically abnormal’¹⁰. Walker’s article adopts one of many possible interpretations of the Palestrina Mosaic – that it formed part of the propaganda of Augustus directed at Antony and Cleopatra during the civil wars in the last years of the Roman Republic in which the famous royal lovers are shown as sexually debauched (and, by implication, Antony is a dwarf or midget). This theory depends on some very tenuous associations with other Nilotic scenes in Roman art such as a terracotta relief in the Princeton University Art Museum and a fragment of a marble frieze in the British Museum, which depict licentious sex involving pygmies or dwarves (there is no indication of skin colour, although the African somatic type is evident in many cases)¹¹. The significance of the dwarves or pygmies in such representations is debatable. Pygmies were often looked on with ambivalence in Black culture because of their supposed magical powers, yet in Egypt pygmies and dwarves were not regularly differentiated (the term *dng* is often used of both). Moreover, the Egyptian fertility god Bes (whose origin in Nubia or Egypt is disputed) was regularly depicted as an ithyphallic dwarf and, if Antony is the target of the fun, he is as likely to be represented as Bes to Cleopatra’s Isis, rather than as a pygmy.

¹⁰ Van Wyk Smith here refers (without citing page numbers) to Walker (2003: 191-202). His phrase ‘inner Egypt’ is an obfuscation suggesting that the sex scenes refer to Upper Egypt or Ethiopia, whereas in fact Walker only refers to Lower Egypt in her analysis.

¹¹ On the identification of dwarves or pygmies in Egyptian art, see Dasen (1993: 26-33).

Other ‘dwarf gods’ such as Re or Horus occur in Egyptian religion¹². In Greece, dwarves were assimilated with satyrs and the cult of Hephaistos and had an ambivalent status in society¹³. It is therefore an oversimplification to identify the short male figures engaging in sexual intercourse on the relief sculptures as a derogatory representation pygmies and thus of Black Africans in general. Walker herself frequently qualifies her argument, since none of the human characters in the mosaic can actually be identified and most seem to be generically Egyptian or Ptolemaic (the identification with Cleopatra is based on the mere presence of a parasol in the Dal Pozzo drawings of the mosaic in Windsor Castle before it was damaged.) There are no pygmies or sex scenes at all in the Palestrina Mosaic. Moreover, even if one accepts Walker’s speculative theory, the target of the caricature is not African Blacks but the deviant Roman and his decadent Ptolemaic queen. Finally, there is no connection whatsoever between the Ship Fresco from the West House of Thera which is dated to half way through the second millennium BCE and the first-century Palestrina Mosaic, nor is there any reason to think that the Thera fresco is at all related to Saharan rock art (p. 225). Van Wyk Smith himself acknowledges the futility of such speculative free-association of ideas (p. 227). Why then discuss them at all?

Van Wyk Smith also anachronistically interprets pre-Christian, pagan Roman literary texts as depicting Africa as ‘Hell’. Lucan’s description of venomous serpents and arid deserts in Libya does not necessarily make Africa a Christian Inferno, for all Dante’s much later use of the theme. Far less is the idea of ‘Africa as “Hell”’ the ‘central trope’ of the *Pharsalia* (p. 354). References to ‘Hell’ and ‘devilish’ (p. 360) impose on Lucan and Pliny the kind of Christian discourse that they would simply not have understood. Pliny’s description of the Astapus river ‘issuing from the shades below’ (p. 357) is his attempt to translate the indigenous name for the river, rather than his own characterization (‘The Astapus, which, in the language of those peoples, signifies water flowing from the darkness’ *Astapus, quod illarum gentium lingua significat aquam e tenebris profluentem, HN 5.53*), and does not therefore make it ‘the Styx or Lethe of the classical underworld’ (ibid.) for which Pliny ‘must bear much responsibility’ (p. 358), far less can it be

¹² Dasen (1993: 27, 28, 29, 43, 46-54, 55-64).

¹³ Dasen (1993: 243-245).

said to anachronistically ‘conjure up the iconography and theme of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’ (ibid.). Van Wyk Smith also considers the fifth-century Greek translation of the voyage of the Phoenician *suffetes*, Hanno, to be a ‘startling anticipation of and a seminal text in the recidivist discourse of West Africa now associated with the literature of slavery, ‘the white man’s grave’, and the worst popular fictions of Victorian colonialism’ (p. 303). Yet this Phoenician text makes no mention of slavery at all and makes no ‘implication that in West Africa primates and human beings were hard to tell apart’ (ibid.) – the Phoenicians had never seen gorillas before and merely recorded that these animals resembled human beings. Likewise, Van Wyk Smith’s account of the *Periplus of the Erythraean [sic for Erythraean i.e. Red] Sea* omits the positive relations between Arabic traders and the local inhabitants of East Africa. In Chapter 16 of this work the anonymous author, writing in Greek, notes that the Arabs had governed the region ‘under some ancient right’, although local chiefs exercised control in specific regions of the land. During this time the Arabic traders had intermarried with the indigenous people and had developed an interlanguage, Swahili, to communicate with them¹⁴. A similar example of intermarriage between Egyptians and Ethiopians is given in Herodotus (2.30), who also records the development of an interlanguage between the two nations (2.42). Texts such as these provide information about racial integration between Ethiopians and Egyptians or Arabs, which does not fit easily into Van Wyk Smith’s argument.

The fact that Meroë occurs as a slave name does not mean that ‘the old Meroitic capital may finally have been remembered as no more than a slave emporium’ (p. 359), which does no justice at all to the extensive descriptions of the place in the extant Graeco-Roman sources (Hdt. 2.29; Hld. 9.22; Strabo 17.817c) in which there is no evidence for slave trading as the purpose of the settlement. Van Wyk Smith repeatedly uses the fact that Greece and Rome were slave societies (along with others in the Mediterranean, of course, such as Carthage) to imply that they therefore exploited Africa. For example, he argues that, because Aristotle appears to have condoned slavery, ‘Aristotle’s legacy in the discourse, as in the

¹⁴ The term ‘Ethiopia’ occurs only once in the *Periplus* (18.5), otherwise specific local names are given for the towns along the route.

exploitation, of Africa would be a lasting one' (p. 311), without further discussion. However, Greek and Roman slavery made no distinction between the various races from which slaves came. The exact number of Black slaves in the Roman Empire is virtually impossible to ascertain, but it is likely to have been extremely small¹⁵. It is not even possible to determine the race of famous slaves in antiquity. Van Wyk Smith writes (p. 318): 'Thousands of African slaves must have passed through Alexandria One of them may have been Aesop.' However, the notion that Aesop was Black depends on a very fanciful etymology which relates his name to the Greek word *Aithiops*. The tradition that he was Thracian is much stronger (it is recorded in a fragment of Aristotle, 573 [Rose]; cf. also Eugeiton in Suidas s.v. 'Aisōpos'). The first-century fable-writer Phaedrus (3.52 *Prologue*), Herodas (5.14), the second-century *Life of Aesop*, and many other writers in antiquity considered him to be Phrygian.

Much of the evidence discussed by Van Wyk Smith, such as the proverb *ex Africa semper aliquid novi* or the *leukaethiopes* provide neutral or even positive aspects of the continent. This is certainly the case in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*. Far from 'rendering the Ethiopians beholden to a white princess' (p. 373), Heliodorus bizarrely makes his hero and heroine turn into black Ethiopians at the end of the novel – the reward for their virtue is 'a crown of white on brows turning black' (Hld. 10.41). They remain in Ethiopia as priest and priestess of the Sun and Moon and there is no suggestion that they return to Greece. There is no doubt that the Ethiopian king Hydaspes and his Ethiopian queen Persinna are portrayed with considerable empathy as a good and just rulers and the Ethiopian gymnosophists are considered the pinnacle of enlightenment. Moreover, the author was a Phoenician from Emesa in Syria, who displays a very sophisticated attitude to the cultural politics in his work; he would not have resorted to such crudely imperialistic sentiments¹⁶. Van Wyk Smith's argument is strongest when dealing with Juvenal's attitude to Blacks but it should also be remembered that Juvenal was writing highly rhetorical,

¹⁵ George (2003: 163), which should be in Van Wyk Smith's list of references; see also Desanges (1976: 257).

¹⁶ On this, see, for example, Whitmarsh (1998: 93-124). For the broader context see Whitmarsh (2001); Swain (1996).

hyperbolic satire and that he was just as ready to make outrageously xenophobic and denigratory remarks about Greeks, Jews, women and homosexuals as he was about Egyptians or Africans.

The author makes use of out-of-date translations that often leads him into obscurity. For example he makes use of Golding's 1590 translation of Pomponius Mela on the possibility of an unknown southern hemisphere (p. 17):

But if there be another world, and that the Antichthones go feet to feet against us in the South, it were not much unlike to be true that the river [the Nile] rising in those lands, after it hath pierced under the sea in a private channel, should vent again in our world.

There seems little to be gained in quoting this translation when the author knows of Romer's far more easily intelligible 1998 version. As a result of using such barbarous translations, Van Wyk Smith is sometimes led into a serious misrepresentation, as when, using Underdowne's Elizabethan translation 'black coloured, and evil favoured' (p. 373) for Heliodorus' μέλανας ... τὴν χροιάν καὶ τὴν ὄψιν αὐχμηρούς (*Aethiopica* 1.3.1). The Greek word αὐχμηρούς in this phrase here means little more than 'squalid' and is an entirely natural term to use of Egyptian bandits (the famous *boukoloi*¹⁷, whom Van Wyk Smith here uncritically conflates with Ethiopians). Not only does Van Wyk Smith use obscure, old-fashioned, and misleading translations, but, by doing so, he fails to cite the texts he is referring to in a way that would enable his reader to trace the passage under discussion. The usual practice among ancient historians is to cite book, chapter, and section of the original text (1.3.1 in Heliodorus, for example). By referring to Golding (p. 17) or Underdowne (folio 1, *recto*) he makes it difficult for readers to trace the texts concerned. This line of criticism could be extended into questions of detail and precision. For example, Van Wyk Smith uses the incorrect term 'troglodytes' for 'trogodytes' (pp. 324, 350, 360). The English term 'troglodytes' is a long-standing but false etymology based on the Greek words 'troglē' ('cave') and 'dytēs' ('one who enters'), as if these people lived only in caves. However, many of the people referred to

¹⁷ On these, see Alston (1998); Rutherford (2000).

with this term evidently did not live in caves. Similarly, Van Wyk Smith makes some very strange, and rather loose associations. For example, on p. 375 the author refers to Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the savagery of the Saracens, Lucan's rhetorical *tour-de-force* on the serpents of Libya, an article in the *Spectator* in 1993 by Paul Johnson on misrule in Africa, and Winston Churchill (1956-1958) on Dio Cassius' description of the Caledonians, as part of a 'dialectic of African primitivism' that 'would remain absolutely central to the unfolding European discourse of Africa over the centuries to come' (p. 375). The free association of ideas may be acceptable in post-modernist discourse but this has little to do with the historical reasoning, the avoidance of anachronism, and logical coherence necessary to persuade a critical reader.

Technically, this was always going to be a difficult book for Wits University Press, which has little experience of Egyptology and Classics, to produce. The problem of typesetting Egyptian hieroglyphic or Classical and Hellenistic Greek texts has largely been avoided by making use of a simplified transliteration into the Roman alphabet but no attempt is made in this transliteration scheme to distinguish long vowels from short in Greek consistently (thus *Periodos Ges*, p. 306, as opposed to *oikumēne*, p. 314, which in any case should be *oikoumenē* – a mistake repeated throughout the book). The author does not consistently avoid using Classical Greek, however. On p. 67 he ventures to write 'Ethiopian' in the Classical Greek alphabet. The result is: 'Myceneans must have had a word for "Negro", which was likely to have been the original of the Greek ἄιθίουψ', in which the Greek is atrociously mangled (it should be Αἰθίουψ)¹⁸. Here Van Wyk Smith (or, more likely, Wits University Press) has not copied the word correctly from the source of this statement (Heubeck *et al.* [1988, 1: 75-6]), who of course do get it right. This was completely unnecessary, since Van Wyk Smith could easily have written the sentence in such a way as to avoid using Classical Greek at all. Elsewhere Van Wyk Smith uses transliteration for this word (*aithiopoi*, p. 322, which could at least have the first letter in upper case), but something is wrong with *aethiopiae* (p. 344). Van Wyk Smith also occasionally uses Latin titles of books pointlessly where he could have consistently given these in English (thus *The Wanderings of Hanno* –

¹⁸ Cf. also p. 330, where ἄμαζος appears for Ἀμαζών.

actually a non-existent book – is given in English, whereas Sallust’s study of the Jugurthine War is given its Latin title *Bellum Jugurthinum* [p. 341] for no obvious reason.) Similarly, reference is made to the *De providentia* of Theodoret (p. 400), which could quite as easily have been referred to using the English title *On Providence*. As could have been anticipated, problems also arise when Greek words in transliteration need to be used in the plural. Thus, for example, Van Wyk Smith produces *peripluses* (p. 302). This monstrosity too could easily have been avoided by rephrasing the sentence in more elegant English. Italics are also not correctly used in terms such as *ideologeme*, *narreme*, *mytheme* (p. 54), which are English terms that should not be italicised. The most egregious production fault, however, occurs in the illustrations which are reproduced, unnumbered, in an insert between pp. 242 and 243. The result of this is that the illustrations cannot be referred to accurately by the author in the course of his discussion and the sumptuous colour plates become a mere decorative appendage. The reader is compelled to have recourse to the original source of the information, which is usually difficult or impossible to obtain, in order to work out what Van Wyk Smith is actually talking about. There is a useful index (pp. 503-528) a map of Egypt (p. xii), a Timeline (pp. xiii-xiv), but, oddly, no list of illustrations¹⁹.

Van Wyk Smith is to be commended on a very bold book that ranges over many vast fields of research and makes a provocative case for locating the origin of Western racism in Africa. This review has been written from the critical perspective of a Classicist who cannot accept the thesis proposed but no doubt scholars in many other fields will be drawn into engagement with the ideas put forward in this work. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the book is to demonstrate the importance of strengthening the study of Egyptology in institutions of higher learning in Africa. Africanists, in particular, will be intrigued by what Van Wyk Smith makes of the connection between the Khoisan and Ethiopia (see for example, p. 94)²⁰. There is much more to be said about the cultural politics and ancient history of Africa.

¹⁹ I have not taken notice of minor errors in the book such as the reference to Kendall, 1993 (p. 250), which is not given under that date in the bibliography.

²⁰ See now Wessels (2010).

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