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‘The Ablest Race’

The Ancient Greeks in Victorian Racial Theory

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In the antique Greek figure alone resides perfection: all nations and races must yield the palm to Greece.

(Knox 1852: 164)

In his *Manual of artistic anatomy*, the anatomist and racial scientist Robert Knox recommended that artists pursue the study of Greek sculpture. Knox made this recommendation as he considered the portrayal of the human form in Greek sculpture to epitomize physical and racial perfection. ‘The ablest race’ considers how Greek art, in particular Greek sculpture, fuelled the construction of an ideal physical type and the ambiguities within that construction through the work of two racial theorists in nineteenth-century Britain. This chapter considers how the idealization of the human body in Greek art, as defined by Winckelmann, fed the theory that physical beauty and racial perfection was found among the ancient Greeks. It then considers how links were made between the ancient Greeks and contemporary ‘races’, or ‘types of mankind’, such as Saxons in Britain, and how this related to the ownership of the classical past. The use of Greek sculpture in the development of racial theory is examined, and some assessment is made of the impact of constructing the ancient Greeks as racially and culturally superior.

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The physical beauty of the ancient Greeks, as evidenced by their art, was used to construct theories of racial difference in the Western world that placed certain 'types of mankind' above others in a hierarchy of racial and cultural superiority. The ancient Greeks were placed at the top of this hierarchy with other Caucasian European groups either equal or just subordinate to them. This chapter illustrates how ancient Greek material or culture played a part in the construction of this dubious hierarchy. The previous chapter illustrated how classical tropes, allusions, and quotations constructed an image of the West Indies in a travel journal. This chapter similarly examines how assumptions based on the use of classical art as purported evidence for the racial superiority of the ancient Greeks permeated wider intellectual culture through novels and art. It finishes with a consideration of how these assumptions filtered into the early work of the Victorian polymath Francis Galton and how this was linked to imperial fears and ambitions around the idea of Greater Britain.

Terminology surrounding race could be vague and what was exactly meant by 'race' was not clearly defined. Knox was unusual in systematically using the term race, while other theorists frequently used 'type' or 'breed'. The cultural theorist Kenan Malik argues that the concept of race 'is a medium through which the changing relationship between humanity, society, and nature has been understood in a variety of ways. What is important to understand are the ways in which this changing relationship has been, and still is, expressed through the discourse.'¹ The mid nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in race and increased use of related terminology in discourse about politics, art, culture, and science. This was, in part, related to changes to attitudes in colonial rule, the abolition of slavery, and the precarious position of indigenous peoples in settler colonies. However, much of the discourse around race was not international in scope but domestic. The Victorians did not use race, as Christine Bolt has pointed out, as a term or description in the way we use it today.² Race was intertwined with heredity and social class, whereas in the twenty-first century race tends to refer principally

¹ Malik (1996: 71).

² Bolt (1971: ix).

to skin colour and ethnic identity. There was, as indeed there is now, vagueness as to the meaning of ‘race’, which meant that there was ‘dangerous’ confusion between biological and cultural concepts.³ Racial categories in the mid nineteenth century often exposed fears about the impact of racial mixing and social class in Britain, for example anxieties about Celtic influence (linked to Irish migration), anti-Semitism (linked to the migration of Jews from Eastern Europe), and the so-called ‘criminal underclass’. Arguably, then as now, anxiety around race was linked to patterns of immigration into and migration from Britain, which in turn was linked to the idea of decline and degeneration (explored further in Chapters 7 and 8 of this volume). The attempt to locate traits of criminal ‘types’ was also connected to a fear of degeneration in the late nineteenth century, which in turn influenced cultural and scholarly activity such as the Olympic movement or research on malaria and the tropics.⁴ There were shared assumptions amongst racial theorists from the 1840s to the early twentieth century that certain Caucasian European races were more civilized and superior to other ethnic groups, with Saxon or Anglo-Saxon (the latter term was developed later in the century to further define a more English version of Saxon) at, or near to, the top of a hierarchy of ethnic categories.⁵ These ideas took their lead from earlier theories around beauty, art, and human difference, albeit drawing different conclusions from their eighteenth-century precursors.

ORIGINS OF RACIAL MODELS

The art historian and curator Johann Joachim Winckelmann was influential ‘in setting in place a chronological schema for plotting ancient art as a development; and for identifying the main stages or periods of that development’ in the mid eighteenth century.⁶ This was

³ Bolt (1971: 206).

⁴ See Reisz, this volume.

⁵ See Robert Young on the definition of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in chapter 6 ‘A vaster England: the Anglo-Saxon’ in Young (2008: 177–95).

⁶ Beard and Henderson (2001: 68).

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later reconceived as the 'Great Chain of Art'. At the heart of this ambitious aesthetic schema was Winckelmann's belief that Greek art reached artistic perfection and, as Alex Potts has argued, 'In developing a new historical and theoretical framework for reconstructing the antique classical ideal, he was tackling something fundamental. The antique ideal then stood unquestionably as the highest model of art.'⁷ The ethical value of art was fundamental to Winckelmann; his focus on the perfection of classical Greek art was linked to the political and philosophical freedoms that Winckelmann felt determined ancient Greek identity. The main indicator of this ethical freedom could be found in the development of Athenian democracy and its independence from a dominant foreign empire from the late sixth century to the early fourth century BCE. Winckelmann articulated the belief that the absolute ideal of beauty was found in Greek art from fifth-century Athens, principally in work by Pheidias, the artist of Periclean democracy.⁸

Although, as David Bindman points out, Winckelmann approached the Greeks as a nation rather than a race and did not connect the racial characteristics of ancient Greeks with those of modern Europeans, he inadvertently played a part in the emergence of racial theory in defining aesthetic quality: 'Winckelmann makes the assumption that artists are bound to study most closely the forms most familiar to them, and therefore reproduce in their figures the characteristic traits, physiognomy and constitution of their nation.'⁹ Compounded with this was Winckelmann's insistence on the aesthetic ideal of Greek sculpture and civilization over Egypt due to the physical embodiment of nature and realism in the representation of the human form. These factors would later play a crucial role in Hellenism and in the emphasis on anatomical perfection that would bolster the status of the Parthenon sculptures as emblems of artistic excellence. Winckelmann's ideas had a massive impact, as Alex Potts has shown, on the critical terminology around ancient art and the idealization of Greece, and thus the dominance of Hellenism throughout the nineteenth century. The idealization of the physical characteristics of the ancient Greeks played a dominant role in

⁷ Potts (1994: 11).

⁸ Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny (1981: 104–5) comment that though Winckelmann was not the first to 'insist on the superior quality of Greek sculpture', he systematically attempted 'to characterise the successive stages of Greek sculpture'.

⁹ Bindman (2002: 84).

the formulation of racial theory around antiquity and art production, and later connections between racial health and Hellenism can be traced to Winckelmann.

The 'Great Chain of Art' reinforced the idea of the 'Great Chain of Being'; a model formed in the eighteenth century to explain and define racial difference, which positioned different racial types in a chain that was usually hierarchical. The Dutch physician and naturalist Pieter Camper stressed that all humans shared the same anatomy, and his charts of racial profiles were meant to illustrate this lack of difference between European and African facial profiles as part of his deep opposition to slavery in the late eighteenth century. However, as David Bindman has pointed out, Camper's diagrams ironically appeared to 'reinforce the Great Chain of Being'.¹⁰ Camper's construction of the 'facial angle' showed different facial profiles and how they conformed to different degrees of measurement, from the almost 45 degrees of the face of the Apollo Belvedere to the more acute angle of a 'typical' African face. This 'facial angle' became a defining feature of the theory of physiognomy from the early 1800s on, and different facial profiles were fitted into this angle to determine their beauty and intelligence, with the Apollo face signifying beauty and intelligence. Camper's 1794 instruction book for artists on anatomy was deeply influential on the anatomist and art instructor Charles Bell and on Robert Knox, who rewrote one of Bell's books. The facial profiles also prefigured the charts of genetic hierarchies and composites produced by Francis Galton at the end of the nineteenth century. There is a significant difference in meaning between Camper's and Winckelmann's theories and those of Robert Knox and Francis Galton. The relativism in intellectual culture during the eighteenth century was no longer applicable by the 1840s. Over the course of the nineteenth century racial theory became part of a scientific language about progress and evolution, which was racially deterministic and rooted in polygenetic theories of racial development and origins.¹¹

¹⁰ Bindman (2002: 205).

¹¹ Biddiss (1979: 12).

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By the 1820s, as Bradley discusses in his introduction to this volume (pp. 000–0), the British Museum had acquired a series of sculptures that became synonymous with Greek artistic perfection—most notably the sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens. In 1833 the Principal Librarian of the British Museum, Sir Henry Ellis, published an unofficial guide to the Elgin and Phigaleian Rooms for the 'Library of Entertaining Knowledge'. Ellis argued that by studying antiquity we can trace the 'origin and progress of our moral, intellectual and social existence; it is to recur to our remotest ancestry, from which we trace a descent neither doubtful nor disputed, though our line is not direct'.¹² Arguably, as we have seen (p. 000), Richard Westmacott's pediment sculptures above the British Museum entrance not only complemented the antiquities in the Museum, but they also helped develop the idea that these antiquities were 'returning' to the land of their true cultural heirs. Ellis contended that contemporary nations could claim direct racial descent from the ancient Greeks if they were of Germanic stock, and he was not alone in making claims about the origins and descendants of the ancient Greeks in the 1830s. The German scholar Karl Otfried Müller sought to establish the origin of the Dorian Greeks and his *The Dorians* (published in Germany as *Die Dorier* in 1824 and translated into English in 1830) argued that the Dorians migrated from the northern frontiers of Greece and mainly settled in the Peloponnese. This, according to Müller, made the Spartans and other Doric tribes European.¹³ Such a view diminishes the importance of Egyptian and Near Eastern civilizations in the formation of Greek civilization.¹⁴ Müller's approach to the origin of the Greeks was produced at the same time as the Austrian theorist Jacob von Fallmerayer published his conclusions on the ethnology of the modern Greeks in a *History of the Peloponnese* in 1830. Fallmerayer, through studying the origins of place names and history of medieval Greece, contended that the modern Greeks were not the descendants of the ancient Hellenes and there was no racial continuity between the ancient and modern inhabitants of Greece.¹⁵ Fallmerayer's arguments

¹² Ellis (1833: 218).

¹³ Müller (1830).

¹⁴ Bernal (1987: 308–16).

¹⁵ Peckham (2001: 35) and Clogg (1992: 2).

were simultaneous with the formation of the Modern Greek nation-state in which the racial and cultural continuity of the Greek nation was a founding precept. It has been suggested that Fallmerayer was principally hostile to romantic German philhellenism and fearful of Russian influence in an independent Greece rather than condemnatory of Greek nationalism. However, there is no doubt that Fallmerayer's work was used against the claims of modern Greece to its classical heritage.¹⁶

It is probable that Ellis's views reflect both these debates about ancestry and heritage of the ancient and modern Greeks taking place in London in the 1830s. Henry Ellis was writing on the Parthenon sculptures nearly two decades after they had been bought for the British nation and absorbed as emblems of cultural nationalism. The 1816 Parliamentary Paper on the sale of the Parthenon sculptures concluded that 'no country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honourable asylum to these monuments of the school of Pheidias, and the administration of Pericles'.¹⁷ Connections were made between 'liberty loving' Athens and Britain in the Parliamentary Paper and, as Vlassopoulos points out in this volume, both Athens and Carthage became alternative models of empire to Rome in the eighteenth century as they were based on sea and commerce, which was thought more appropriate to the British experience of empire. The use of Rome as a model in Napoleonic France also made Athens more relevant to Britain in the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ The views put forward by Fallmerayer suggest that the ownership of the works of art from ancient Greece in nations that could claim 'direct' racial descent can be justified and makes the physical ideal embodied in the 'classical body' of national importance. If this theory was fully applied, arguably, Greek antiquities were brought 'home' and the national appropriation of the Parthenon sculptures in Britain was inevitable: Britain was the heir of classical Athens and thus the rightful heir of classical antiquities from Athens. By implication, the Britons, at least those descended from 'Germanic stock', were the true descendants of the ancient Greeks ideologically, culturally, and ethnically.

¹⁶ Skoptea (1988: 165–6).

¹⁷ Cited in Cockerell (1835: 30).

¹⁸ Challis (2006: 33–9).

ANATOMY, STYLE, AND PHYSIOGNOMY

The surgeon and anatomist Charles Bell combined his medical and artistic training in *The anatomy and philosophy of expression as connected with the fine arts* (1824). In this Bell argued that the depiction of anatomy was the grammar and language of art. Bell compared skulls and the physiology of different 'racial types' with 'brutes' (chimpanzees and monkeys) as well as other animals in order to reveal the veracity of art, often using sketches or copies of sculpture and painting as his illustrations. Bell contended that it was in the face of man that nobleness was observable, which was dependent on the development of certain origins that indicate 'prevalence of higher qualities of thought'.¹⁹ He used Camper's facial angle to illustrate racial difference by comparing the profile of the face on an ancient gem of M. Agrippa with that of a head of an African, supposedly proving that the classical face showed a higher intellectual capability. Bell argued that the 'perfect' cranium in classical statues illustrates the highly developed status of Europeans, while the backward fall of an African skull illustrates 'weaknesses'.²⁰ The 'typical' Greek face, based on 'antique heads of Apollo and Jupiter', was the most admirable, according to Bell, since it was 'oval; the forehead full and carried forward, the eyes large; the nose straight; the lips and chin finely formed'.²¹ However, Bell also considered that the profile of the typical Greek face was so perfect it could not exist in humans today. Bell supposed that, though the Greeks did not dissect, they had a perfect knowledge of anatomy. He thought this was probably through comparison of a young healthy athlete with someone in old age: 'The finer specimens of ancient statuary evince a more perfect acquaintance with anatomy as far as it is shown in the proportions, general forms and action of the body'.²² Bell considered that it was the energies of the people that informed artistic creation. Therefore, according to Bell, Athens' greatness was not due to political and intellectual freedom, but to Athens' constant struggle for independence.

¹⁹ Bell (1872: 30).

²⁰ *Ibid.* 35.

²¹ *Ibid.* 75.

²² *Ibid.* 204.

Bell's *The anatomy and philosophy of expression* was important for artists, not just due to its illustrations of anatomy but also for the connections it made between physical representation and character virtues. Camper's proportions for the face became an important concept in physiognomy, the practice of reading character through physical traits in the body (particularly in the face), during the early 1800s, and diagrams using Camper's facial angle were repeated in books on physiognomy throughout the nineteenth century. The rules of physiognomy were in part derived from writings by the ancient Greeks on health and character: 'many physiognomies and anthropologists not only appealed to Greek physiognomical theory but include examples of Greek art in their illustrations as embodying an ideal of beauty.'²³ Clearly the ancient Greeks did not have the same conception of racial difference as articulated in the nineteenth century. Arguably, however, assumptions about the ideal body and beauty as well as the grotesque representations of 'barbarians' in Greek art informed physiognomical constructions in the modern world.²⁴

Racial theorists used the rules of physiognomy to distinguish superior races from those that were inferior and used this supposedly scientific practice to bolster their evidence. Examples from Greek art were used, as we shall see, in Robert Knox's racial theory and this was not atypical. *Types of mankind*, by the American racial theorists S. G. Morton, J. C. Nott, and G. R. Gliddon, not only promoted the Greek head as the best Caucasian type but also used dozens of examples from the ancient world and applied Camper's facial angle as evidence for which 'type' of mankind these sculptures fitted. The most notorious use of the angle showed the comparative profiles of the Apollo Belvedere and a Greek skull, an African and a 'skull of a Creole Negro', and a chimpanzee and chimpanzee skull to illustrate that comparative use of skull types indicated different racial types in a hierarchy of difference (Fig. 4.1).²⁵ This book was deeply rooted in the pro-slavery movement in the United States. Morton, Gliddon, and Nott had a vested interest

²³ Cowling (1989: 14)

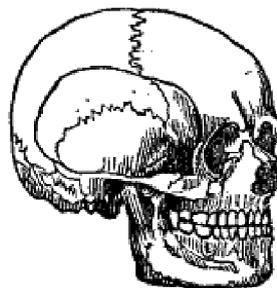
²⁴ For more on the ancient physiognomical gaze see Sassi (2001), particularly chapter two ('The physiognomical gaze') and chapter three ('Reality and its classification').

²⁵ Mary Cowling comments that reviews in the *Athenaeum* in Britain thought this view was too extreme, see Cowling (1989: 61).

Fig. 339. — Apollo Belvidere.⁵⁵³



Fig. 340.⁵⁵⁶



Greek.

Fig. 4.1. Profile of the Apollo Belvedere and a Greek skull, from Samuel George Morton, ed. J. C. Nott and G. R. Gliddon (1854), *Types of mankind or ethnological researches based upon the ancient monuments, painting, sculptures and crania of races and upon their natural, geographical, philological and biblical history* (London: Trübner & Co.), 458, figs. 339–40.

in promoting supposed evidence that African Americans were inferior to Caucasians and different racial types, or, as they saw it, species. *Types of mankind* has a different historical and political context from the work of either Knox or Galton. It was far more concerned with considering the inferiority of ethnic groups with dark skin colour than different racial types within Europe and Britain. In this it had similarities with Henry Nelson Coleridge’s *Six months in the West Indies* and the construction of frequently ambiguous boundaries between different races and the validation of slavery through classical allusion, explored in Chapter 3.

The surgeon and racial theorist Robert Knox was much influenced by Charles Bell’s work. Knox had been an army surgeon in South Africa 1817–20, serving during the Cape Frontier War of 1819. This colonial service strengthened both his anti-colonial and racially deterministic

views. He became an eminent anatomist and lecturer in Edinburgh, and was curator of the Museum of Comparative Anatomy, now the Royal College of Surgeons' Museum, for which he purchased Charles Bell's anatomical collection in 1825. He is most notorious, however, as the surgeon who received the bodies of William Burke's and William Hare's murder victims for anatomical instruction in 1827–8. This tarnished Knox's reputation in the city and he left Edinburgh in 1842, after various political battles and feuds with the medical establishment. From the mid 1840s Knox gave lectures on the 'races of men' in towns across England, including London, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Manchester, and entered a public lecturing culture that attracted thousands of people and publicity in the local press.

The 1840s has been considered to be the zenith of popular science lecturing at various local institutions, which attracted the growing middle-class population in urban areas.²⁶ Knox's lectures were frequently reviewed and debated in local newspapers: for example, on 19 March 1847 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that Knox spoke on the races of men at the Mechanics' Institution as part of a course. In the summer of 1847 he played a part in a lengthy correspondence with 'Toleration' who objected to Knox's anti-Semitic views in the *Manchester Times and Gazette*.²⁷ The *Manchester Times and Gazette* reviewed his fifth lecture at the Athenaeum in the city, observing that the talk on beauty in race lasted two hours and ten minutes to an audience of between 400 and 500 people. The paper describes how Knox drew on the work of Winckelmann to talk about beauty but broadened his definition of beauty from being just about youth, commenting that he believed that Greek statues were copies of 'living originals' such as he has himself seen 'among his own pupils':

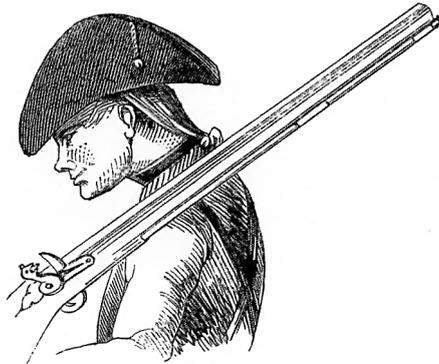
Dr Knox concluded with some remarks upon the necessity for spreading throughout the nation copies or originals of the great Grecian sculptures, in order to develop the public taste... Dr Knox, at the conclusion of his lecture, and frequently during its course, received the warm applause of the audience. ('Dr Knox on the Races of Men', *Manchester Times and Gazette*, 28 Sept. 1847)

²⁶ Hewitt (1996: 75, 139).

²⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 Mar. 1847.

It was this course of lectures that Knox later published, first as articles in the *Medical Times*, then as a book *Races of men: a fragment* in 1850.

Knox was a polygenist who believed that races were separated into different species in a progressive scale of intellectual and cultural abilities with Caucasian races, particularly the Saxons, at the top of this scale.²⁸ *Races of men* was as much about cultural characteristics as physical ones, or rather Knox believed the two were closely intertwined.²⁹ He was mainly concerned with European races and did not believe all white races should be considered as Caucasian, but rather separated out according to different types such as Norman, Celtic, Saxon, and Sarmatian.³⁰ An example of this is how Knox differentiated between the 'Russ', which he identified as living in parts of Russia and the Balkans including modern Greece, and the ancient Greek, although both (he claimed) belonged to the 'fair races'. He argued that the ancient Greeks were the finest race while 'no fair race was ever sunk so low in the scale of humanity' as the Russ (see Figs. 4.2a and 4.2b).³¹



[*Russian Soldier, in the time of Paul: from Clarke's Travels.*]

Fig. 4.2a. Richard Westmacott, 'Russian soldier, in the time of Paul: from Clarke's travels', from R. Knox (1850), *Races of men: a fragment* (London: Henry Renshaw), 366.

²⁸ Biddiss (1976: 245–50).

²⁹ Young (2008: 78).

³⁰ *Ibid.* 83.

³¹ Knox (1850: 366).



[*Apollo; the Greek Profile contrasted with the other extreme of the fair races—the Russ.*]

Fig. 4.2b. Richard Westmacott, 'Apollo, the Greek profile contrasted with the other extreme of the fair races—the Russ', in R. Knox (1850), *Races of men: a fragment* (London: Henry Renshaw), 368.

Knox placed the Saxon at the top of this racial hierarchy and identified them as living in parts of Britain (Lowland Scotland, northern England, and parts of southern England) and areas in Germany and north-west Europe. By 1850 the views of Robert Knox in 'fixed and distinct racial types' had permeated intellectual culture. Nancy Stepan argues that 'by the middle of the nineteenth century, a very complex edifice of thought about the human races had been developed in science that was sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, racist. That is to say, the language, concepts,

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methods and authority of science were used to support the belief that certain human groups were intrinsically inferior to others.³²

Knox used illustrations of Greek art throughout his publications, and presumably also in his lectures. These engravings were produced by the artist and sculptor Richard Westmacott, who had designed the pediment sculpture 'The progress of civilization' for the British Museum; Westmacott's involvement with Knox's publications suggests that he may have had some sympathy with Knox's views on the relationship between racial difference and cultural achievement. Knox was not unusual in using examples of Greek art as illustrations to depict what was in his view the highest form of beauty in art and in physical type. However, Greek art was more important to Knox than simply an illustration of a physical type, since he maintained that the material and literary culture of the Greeks was indelibly linked to race. He argued that the ancient Greeks did not form 'a distinct race of men', but were a brief perfect mix of the highest races from northern Europe, who had migrated to Greece, and achieved greatness assisted by a fair climate.³³ This shared some characteristics with the 'organic form of art' formulated by Johann Gottfried von Herder in *Reflections on the philosophy of mankind* (1774), which argued that regional manifestations of art developed in 'accordance with its environment; that is somehow responsive to the climate and geography of the area, but unaffected by social or political conditions'.³⁴ Knox argued that ancient Greek sculpture was vital since that was all the evidence that remained of this manifestation of racial greatness, apart from 'points of resemblance between the women of classic Greece and the thorough-bred Saxon women of England, or Holland, or Sweden'.³⁵ He contended that only the superior races could excel in the qualities of civilization: 'These qualities were innate only in the antique Greek race, the race which produced Homer and Pindar, Xenophon and Thucydides, Plato and Socrates, Aristotle and Euclid; who built the Parthenon, carved the Venus and fought the battle of Marathon; a matchless race, to whom the world is indebted for all that is lofty and true in civilization.'³⁶

³² Stepan (1982: ix). ³³ Knox (1850: 407).

³⁴ Gibson-Wood (1988: 211). ³⁵ Knox (1850: 408).

³⁶ Ibid. 596.

Knox argued that the present ‘Saxon race’ was developed from ancient Greece where ‘it contributed mainly, no doubt, to the formation of the noblest of all men’. He contended that examples of ancient Greek beauty could still be seen: ‘It was Sir Charles Bell, I think, who said that the grand facial line or angle of the antique Greek could not now be found! Never, I think, was so great an error of observation committed, for the streets of London abound with persons having this identical facial angle; and it is in England and in other countries inhabited by the Saxon or Scandinavian race that women resembling the Niobe, and men the Hercules and Mars are chiefly to be found.’³⁷ This astonishing claim is reminiscent of Sir Henry Ellis’s avowal that the British were the true inheritors of the sculptures from the Parthenon. Ownership of Greek antiquities was justified by claims of cultural and racial kinship with the ancient Greeks, and Knox drew extensively on the collections of the British Museum in his next book.

In 1852 Robert Knox published *A manual of artistic anatomy for the use of sculptors, painters and amateurs* which reworked Charles Bell’s *Anatomy*. Knox was inspired to ‘demonstrate the importance of true anatomy’ in art by visiting the Greek and Roman antiquities in the Louvre and by looking attentively at the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum (see Fig. 4.3).³⁸ Knox considered the Parthenon sculptures to be ‘faultless’ and to represent the study of ‘living anatomy’. Knox applied Camper’s facial angles in *A manual of artistic anatomy* but argued that the ‘angles’ of the face illustrated intellectual prowess (see Fig. 4.4). He criticized Camper’s failure to use a system of comparative measurement and so supplied his own based on the universal standard of the Parthenon sculptures.³⁹ He argued, as before, that the facial characteristics found in antique sculpture were ‘more common in Europe at this day’ and this ‘noble face’ was transmitted to ‘us [Saxons] by the Greeks’.⁴⁰ Applying his racially determinist views to the arts of antiquity, Knox argued that racial migration fixed the ‘chain of progress’ in art from East to West, claiming that the ancient Egyptians could not have been black

³⁷ Knox 403.

³⁸ Knox (1852: 36).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 66.

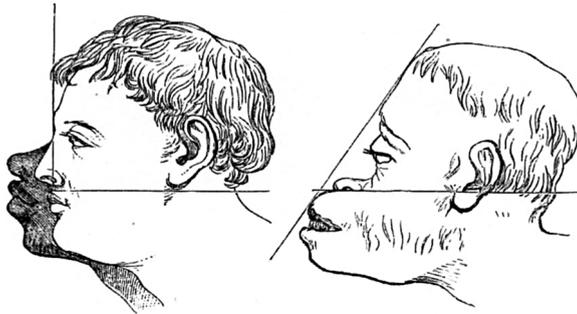
⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 72.



Fig. 4.3. Richard Westmacott, 'Drawing of a section of the frieze of the Parthenon: battle of the centaurs and lapiths', in Robert Knox (1852), *A manual of artistic anatomy for the use of sculptors, painters and amateurs* (London: Henry Renshaw), 36.

Africans since such a civilization shows high qualities only found in 'superior races'.

Knox explicitly opined attitudes towards antiquity, classical heritage, and race that were often implicitly held by Victorian intellectuals. On his death in 1862, *The Lancet* commented that Robert Knox would be best remembered by his work on the 'Races of Men', despite its faults: 'it is certain that the strength of the argument will make many who set out with being sceptical as to the truth of Dr Knox's proposition, end with their study of its pages by becoming firm



[*Profile of Negro, European, and Oran Outan.*]

Fig. 4.4. ‘Facial angle, copied from Camper’s works’, in Robert Knox (1852), *A manual of artistic anatomy for the use of sculptors, painters and amateurs* (London: Henry Renshaw), 63.

believers in it.’⁴¹ Knox was deeply anti-colonial and his belief in the fixed status of different races was not meant as a prelude to the argument for the dominance of white races over non-white subjects. Robert Knox’s experience in South Africa convinced him that the dangers posed by imperial colonization for the purity of the race outweighed the so-called ‘civilizing’ mission of the British Empire. Knox was concerned about the racial repercussions of the imperial diaspora and feared that Britain would suffer a dilution of its Saxon race. Knox argued that the Greek race, responsible in his view for the perfect artistic rendering of the human form, was once spread across Europe but was now only found in parts of northern Europe. Knox was no advocate of the ‘born to rule’ idea promoted within the British Empire, although his racial theories arguably played a part in the justification for imperial expansion. Later theorists would also stress the danger of mixed-race breeding for the degeneration of ‘superior races’ and, as Reisz demonstrates in Chapter 7, this had an impact on the supposed degeneration in Greece during the fourth century BCE. Knox’s views on ancient Greece and Greek art reflect the high status of Hellenism in the mid nineteenth century and illustrate

⁴¹ ‘The Late Dr. Robert Knox’, *The Lancet*, 3 Jan. 1863.

how the depiction of the human body in classical art embodied racial assumptions and defined difference.

THE GREEK IDEAL: RACE, ART, LITERATURE

Two societies based in London lay at the centre of intense debates about race that were divided between monogenists, who believed racial types came from the same genetic model, and polygenists, who believed that the different races were all different models of racial types at different stages of evolutionary progression. The English Ethnographic Society was formed in 1843 (from the Aboriginal Protection Society) and the Anthropological Society was formed in 1863, shortly after Knox's death, as a splinter group from the older society. The Anthropological Society was led by Knox's follower the anthropologist James Hunt and was more racially deterministic. Hunt in fact regularly invoked Knox's work.⁴² The creation of the Anthropological Society meant that there was wider acceptance of racially deterministic thinking among the Victorian intellectual elite—though Jan Marsh points out that 'in general prejudices rather than theories prevailed'.⁴³ Even before the wider permeation of racially deterministic thinking in Victorian intellectual discourse in the 1860s, race was a major concept that provoked discussion. For example, in his 1847 novel *Tancred*, the politician and writer Benjamin Disraeli had Sidonia, a powerful Jewish figure, exclaim: 'But England flourishes. Is it what you call civilization that makes England flourish? . . . Clearly not. It is her inhabitants that have done this; it is an affair of race. A Saxon voice, protected by an insular position, has stamped its diligent and methodical character on the century. And when a superior race, with a superior race, with a superior idea to work and order, advances, its state will be progressive, and we shall perhaps follow the example. All is race: there is no other truth.'⁴⁴ This

⁴² Young (2008: 75).

⁴³ Marsh (2005: 16).

⁴⁴ Disraeli (1847: 169).

statement in a novel which in part was about how the ‘Asian race’ can reinvigorate the European, and vice versa, reflects a growing consciousness about race in Victorian society. *Tancred* was published the same year Knox was touring the country with his lecture series, though clearly Knox and Disraeli had very different attitudes to racial construction, miscegenation, and colonial politics.

Knox was far from alone in judging the pinnacle of ancient human achievement to be the Parthenon sculptures. The curator and archaeologist Charles Newton, for example, pronounced that the Parthenon sculptures were the fixed standards of excellence in a lecture at Oxford University in 1849.⁴⁵ The sculpted ancient Greek body was constructed throughout the nineteenth century as a perfect example of racial purity and aesthetic nobility. Athena Leoussi has illustrated how the return to classical subject matter in Victorian art during the mid nineteenth century was influenced by the use of the Pheidian figure as a positivistic ideal.⁴⁶ Artists who actively engaged with this ideal through greater anatomical realism in art and the depiction of a Greek figural type include Frederic Leighton, Edward Poynter, and George Frederick Watts. The rise of Hellenism in art from 1850 onwards occurred at the same time as the growing acceptance—whether implicit or explicit—of some form of racial theory in determining the origins and development of humankind. Certain forms of Greek art were defined as artistically perfect, and this idea of perfection was based on both the realistic rendering of human anatomical form and a Hegelian notion of the classical body as the ideal in art. Elizabeth Prettejohn has convincingly argued that nineteenth-century artists such as Leighton linked aesthetic theories to the ‘beautiful body’ and made it a ‘central concern for English art’.⁴⁷ By extension corporeal concepts of artistic perfection and human beauty were intertwined. As we have seen, polygenic interpretations of racial characteristics and ancient Greece had roots in Enlightenment thought, but it was during the nineteenth century that the categorization of human racial and ethnic types had a more coherent impact on analysis of Greek art. The identification of some works of

⁴⁵ Newton (1850: 7).

⁴⁶ Leoussi (1998).

⁴⁷ Prettejohn (2007: 141, 146).

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art, most notably the Parthenon sculptures, as embodying aesthetic and physical perfection, then, influenced the ideals of racial bodily perfection.

These ideas about the racial and physical superiority of the ancient Greeks filtered across into more popular media, and representations of the classical world can be wide ranging, as Malamud illustrates in her chapter on turn-of-the-century America in this volume. Examples of the emphasis on the physical perfection of the Greek body and the connection with the intellectual achievements of ancient Greece could be found in popular fiction. The hero of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s best-selling historical novel *The last days of Pompeii* (first published in 1834, at about the same time as Sir Henry Ellis’s guide to the Elgin Room) is Athenian.⁴⁸ From the moment the hero Glaucus enters the novel he is shown to be Greek in both temperament and physical appearance: ‘The owner himself was of that slender and beautiful symmetry from which the sculptors of Athens drew their models; his Grecian origin betrayed itself in his light but clustering locks, and the perfect harmony of his features.’⁴⁹ The purity of Glaucus’ intellectual beliefs and his physical form was contrasted to the decadent city and empire of the Romans in which he was living and the sinister Semitic Egyptian priest who became his implacable enemy. This was an early example of the belief that intellectual and physical purity was found in the ancient Greeks. The depiction of the human body was not simply about aesthetics but was a racial ideal and became a concern of national importance.

In the later nineteenth century the idealization of the classical female figure became increasingly popular in English art and the female body emerged as key to racial purity and breeding.⁵⁰ In *Nausicaa in London, or the lower education of women* (1873), Charles Kingsley admired the female physique of Greek sculptures in the British Museum and considered that, in comparison, contemporary women were small and physically disproportionate.⁵¹ The artist Mr Phoebus in Disraeli’s *Lothair* (first published in 1870) is widely

⁴⁸ Bulwer-Lytton (1879: 20).

⁴⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁵⁰ Leoussi (1999: 79).

⁵¹ Kingsley (1880: 117).

recognized to be modelled on the artist Lord Leighton and, parodying Leighton, Mr Phoebus lectures the hero on the purity of a female statue in the ‘Phidian style’:

‘Aryan principles,’ said Mr Phoebus; ‘not merely the study of nature, but of beautiful nature; the art of design in a country inhabited by a first rate race, and where the laws, the manners, the customs, are calculated to maintain the health and beauty of a first rate race. In a greater or less degree, these conditions obtained from the age of Pericles to the age of Hadrian in pure Aryan communities, but Semitism began to prevail, and ultimately triumphed. Semitism has destroyed art; it taught man to despise his own body, and the essence of art is to honour the human frame.’ (Disraeli 1881: 136)

The heroine Theodora Campian in *Lothair* is ‘pale, but perfectly Attic in outline, with the short upper lip and round chin’. She is thus a sculpted and thus idealized woman.⁵² Leighton himself, in his 1883 address to students of the Royal Academy, proclaimed that the ideal type of physical beauty preserved by Pheidias can only be ‘found in the women of another Aryan race—your own’.⁵³ Leighton’s proclamation echoes that of Robert Knox in *The races of men* thirty years previously. The actress Lilly Langtry was supposed to embody this classical Greek beauty. She was painted by Leighton in *Idyll* (1881), John Everett Millais as *The Jersey lilly* (1878) and Edward Burne-Jones in *The wheel of fortune* (1886). Langtry even sat on stage at University College London as a ‘living example of Attic beauty’ for a lecture on Greek art by Charles Newton in the 1880s.⁵⁴

In contrast to the artistic production of the white female body, Charmaine Nelson has argued that the representation of the black female has a ‘strained relationship to the history of western art’ and that the medium of unpainted sculpture and the white female body had been elevated into an aesthetic ideal by the mid nineteenth century.⁵⁵ An idealized female nude in this form, *The Greek slave* by Hiram Powers, was placed in the narrative context of an accompanying text to make clear the female’s Greekness and European

⁵² Disraeli (1881: 34).

⁵³ Leighton (1896: 89).

⁵⁴ Wood (1983: 30).

⁵⁵ Nelson (2005: 47, 51). Cf. Williamson, this volume.

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identity within the backdrop of an Oriental harem at the Great Exhibition in 1851. The sculpture *Tinted Venus* by John Gibson, displayed in Rome in 1856 and in London in 1862, was controversial as the 'typical' classical statue was tinted in colour with a very pale flesh coloured skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and red lips. Nelson has pointed out that the controversy caused by this sculpture had racial overtones since critics were upset by the 'staining' of the white marble body.⁵⁶ Indeed, the idea of colour on classical sculpture still has the potential to shock the broader public in the early twenty-first century.⁵⁷ The whiteness of the ancient Greek female body in the presentation of female nudes was taken for granted in the larger discourse about the corporeality of the female body in art in the nineteenth century. Implicit within this emphasis on the ancient Greek physical characteristics of the female body and face are concerns about good racial breeding and the reproduction of a pure race.

HEREDITARY GENIUS AND DEGENERATION

Charles Darwin's *On the origin of the species* (1859) is considered key to developing a highly charged scientific language that was used by Social Darwinians to measure race along an evolutionary model of development, with Anglo-Saxon culture at the peak and other races at the bottom. In many ways, Social Darwinism (as distinct from Darwin and what he personally believed about race since he argued strongly for monogenesis) merely intensified this discourse and aided the categorization of ethnic differences.⁵⁸ The negative classification of certain so-called racial types was applied to Celtic (particularly the Irish) and Jewish peoples as well as to the working classes, particularly the urban poor, as much as to non-Caucasian ethnic groups in the nineteenth century. The geneticist Francis Galton added yet another, more pessimistic, dimension to these racial and racist attitudes. Galton had used his travel narrative *The narrative of*

⁵⁶ Nelson (2005: 53).

⁵⁷ Bradley (2009: 427).

⁵⁸ Desmond and Moore (2009).

*an explorer in tropical southern Africa*⁵⁹ to launch his scientific career at the Royal Geographic Society, and his focus on race and racial purity began with his travels in Africa.⁶⁰ Galton's fixed attitudes to Africans were explicitly stated in *The narrative of an explorer* and *The art of travel*, for example: 'Recollect that a savage cannot endure the steady labour that we Anglo-Saxons have been bred to support. His nature is adapted to alternations of laziness and severe exertion.'⁶¹

Social progress had become analogous with biological progress and Galton's book *Hereditary genius* attempted to explain human predestination through racial and genetic make-up and was a distinct contribution to the discourse of evolutionary racism. Galton argued that 'man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world.'⁶² His chapter on 'The comparative worth of different races' expands on the polygenic discourse of Knox, but uses evolutionary language. Galton's composites and images of racial types were mainly concerned with British and European 'types' and showed an interest in the 'question of national character' and racial and genetic breeding.⁶³

Galton considered the ancient Greeks to be 'the ablest race of whom history bears record; with Athens being the ablest' since Athens accepted only immigrants of the highest ability and offered attractions for men of the highest culture thereby building up a 'magnificent breed of human animals'. Unlike Knox, however, Galton contended that:

We have no men to put by the side of Socrates and Phidias, because the millions of all Europe, breeding as they have done for the subsequent 2,000 years, have never produced their equals... it follows... that the average ability of the Athenian race is, on the lowest possible estimate, very nearly two grades higher than our own—that is, about as much as our race is above that of the African negro. (Galton 1869: 341)

Galton argued that the races of Europe had degenerated through decades of mixed inter-breeding with lesser racial types. Although he did not refer to works of art from Greece, Galton's consistent

⁵⁹ Galton (1853: xiii).

⁶⁰ Coombes (1994: 56).

⁶¹ Galton (1872: 308).

⁶² Galton (1869: b).

⁶³ Ryan (1997: 167).

emphasis on good breeding and the body takes the ancient body as projected in Greek art for granted. Galton was obsessed by the look of the urban masses, describing them as 'the draggled, drudged mean look of the mass of individuals especially of the women'.⁶⁴ Galton is likely to have based his ideas about the body and breeding of the ancient Greeks on the conspicuous medium of Greek art, next to whose artistic perfection the impoverished working-class urban masses would not measure well. It is also clear that Galton was warning British readers about the dangers of miscegenation: 'In a small sea boarded country, where emigration and immigration are constantly going on, and where the numbers are as dissolute as were those in the period of Greece of which I speak, the purity of the race would necessarily fail.'⁶⁵

Galton does not so much promote Athens as a model as warn of the dangers to racial breeding which Athens faced and apply these to both Britain and the idea of a Greater Britain.⁶⁶ Charles Dilke's description of the settler empire in his book *Greater Britain*, published the year before Galton's *Hereditary genius*, made the idea of an Anglo-Saxon settler empire particularly acute.⁶⁷ Francis Galton believed Athens, like England, to have built an empire because of generations of breeding from Greek immigrants with good racial stock. Galton promoted the idea of emigration of Britons to colonial centres, if they were of the right 'stock'. His main fear was about the dangers of domestic miscegenation among the urban masses, particularly in London, the cosmopolitan capital of empire. In this way, the relationship between conceptions of ancient Greece, race, and empire are ambiguous.

Galton's work also creates an image of degeneration that became more powerful in European thought in the last decades of the nineteenth century. As Daniel Pick points out, an image of degeneration emerged to articulate 'in biological terms what was felt to be the widening political contradiction between national prosperity and empire on the one hand and persistent urban poverty, criminal

⁶⁴ Galton (1869: 342).

⁶⁵ Ibid. 343.

⁶⁶ Duncan Bell's argument (2006a) that the Greek and Roman empires more often served as warnings and emblems of failure than role models in the late nineteenth century is relevant here.

⁶⁷ Young (2008: 196–9).

sub-culture and social pathology on the other'.⁶⁸ A renewed interest in the physical characteristics of the pure male body returned amidst fears of 'degeneration' across Europe in the late nineteenth century (see Rogers and Hingley, this volume, exploring the social context in Britain for such anxiety). Such interests informed the formation of the modern Olympic Games in 1896 and the promotion of the healthy body and standards of modern sport against degenerate culture and physique. The physical ideal of the ancient Greeks was based on Greek art, mainly sculpture, and fed a larger racial corporeal discourse.

The relationship between race, empire, and the idealization of the ancient Greeks was not straightforward. Knox used the 'peril' of diluting the Saxon race as an argument against imperial colonization, while Galton was more concerned about the impact of industrialization, miscegenation, and imperial diaspora within Britain. Despite this ambivalence about race and empire, the use of racial theory to justify colonial expansion was prominent at the end of the nineteenth century. An example of such a connection in archaeology is the case of the European discovery by Karl Mauch of Great Zimbabwe on the east coast of southern Africa; a large stone city that is now known to have been built from the eleventh century CE to the fifteenth century CE.⁶⁹ The idea that such architecturally complex cities could date from the medieval past in Africa seemed ridiculous to many at the time and Mauch himself did not believe that the Great Zimbabwe was the work of black Africans, deciding that it had links to Grecian, Israelite, and Phoenician architecture. Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company forcibly occupied the lands around the Great Zimbabwe and the site 'became a symbol of the justice of European colonization, which was portrayed as the white race returning to a land that it had formerly ruled'.⁷⁰ Similarly there was no ambiguity about the idealization of Greek beauty and the fact that this beauty was thought to reflect real corporeal bodies. By the end of the

⁶⁸ Pick (1989: 200).

⁶⁹ Kuklick (1991: 135). For a more recent example of the role of classics in the form and function of African material culture in Zimbabwe see Maritz (2007).

⁷⁰ Trigger (1989: 131). This assumption was challenged as early as 1905 and in 1928 Gertrude Caton-Thompson excavated the site, conclusively proving that the site was African in origin.

nineteenth century there was a very generic sense that there was some physical and intellectual connection between the ancient Greeks and Anglo-Saxon Britons, which made the British more able to rule and govern other parts of the world.

CULTURE WARS AND CONTEMPORARY CONSTRUCTION

Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* and the concept of the 'Aryan Model' has been one of the most influential works on the role of the classics and classical scholarship on racial theory and racial construction in the modern world. In the Introduction to this volume, Bradley points out that despite the responses to and critiques of Edward Said's work on the inherent imperialism within Western cultural discourses and the 'flurry of work' around Bernal, the role of classics on imperialism and related areas has not been integrated into 'understandings of the role of classics in the modern west' (above, pp. 000–0). Bernal's arguments caused an angry stir and his evidence was picked apart. However, despite its flaws, *Black Athena* should have inaugurated a constructive scholarship that could reassess the history of classics and its relation to racial and imperial ideologies in the last two hundred years.⁷¹ Barbara Goff is right to point out that contemporary political conditions dictated the debates around *Black Athena*: 'Since both the "aspirations" and the "fantasies" of African-Americans are conditioned by their position within a society to which their ancestors were exported as slaves, it is the diaspora to the States, consequent on the exploitation of Africa by the European empires, that partly determines both sides of this modern debate about ancient Greece.'⁷²

Arguably the debates against *Black Athena* were in part connected to the 'culture wars' that took place in the States, and elsewhere, in the 1980s and 1990s and were part of a conservative backlash that

⁷¹ von Binsbergen (1997).

⁷² Goff (2005: 16).

considered multicultural pluralism a cause of national disintegration.⁷³ This has meant that the debates around *Black Athena* have frequently been distorted and polemical on both sides. Human difference has always been socially constructed, whether in the nineteenth century, the 1990s, or today. There is no doubt that classical influences played a part in racial theory and the construction of difference and ideas of superior and inferior races. The extent of the impact of such racial theory on the discipline of classics needs further and wider discussion to come to a fuller understanding of classics and racial construction, and the influence of this on imperial practice and theory. In order to enable such full and frank discussions, recognition of our own personal and institutional attitudes has to be made. This chapter and this book is a small step towards such a debate about national and racial iconography and the reception of the classical world.

⁷³ Malik (1996: 179, 181).