

Denise Eileen McCOSKEY
Identity Theory & the Study of Ptolemaic Egypt

Recent scholarship in Classics has provoked heated debate about the significance of race in reading classical antiquity (Bernal, Lefkowitz). Although such work rightly emphasizes the racist biases of European classical scholars, it has too often implied that contemporary racial meanings, meanings primarily (over)determined by black/white distinctions, are the only basis for studying race in ancient societies. Restricted by this problematic paradigm (problematic not only in ideological terms, but also by the paucity of evidence from antiquity that even addresses skin color), classical scholars have increasingly, albeit covertly, discarded the term "race" altogether and have turned instead to related terms such as "ethnicity" and "culture."

In this paper, however, I would like to interrogate this current trend (specifically the replacement of "race" with "ethnicity" and "culture") and reflect in greater depth on the term "race" and its potential uses in classical scholarship. Influenced by contemporary critical race theory (e.g., Omi and Winant, Sollors, Appiah, Michaels), I thus seek to explore the possibilities of "race" in the historic period before "whiteness" and "blackness" accumulated explanatory force in western thought.

Having taken primarily a theoretical (and terminological) approach in the first part of my paper, I would like in the second to apply some of the consequences of my discussion to an examination of the ways in which such terms (especially "ethnicity") have been used in the study of collective identities in Ptolemaic Egypt. The notion of "ethnicity" has been applied by scholars of this period most consistently in their attempts to distinguish the legal rights and status positions of the "Greek" population in contrast to those of the native "Egyptians." While these studies seem to capture well the complexity of identity as a function of practice in Ptolemaic Egypt, I would nonetheless like to interrogate whether such emphasis (including wide-scale scholarly adoption of the category "ethnicity") has obscured underlying power relations that give structure to, and help determine the limits of, identity in Ptolemaic Egypt.