

THE PROTO-RACIST VOICE IN CAESAR AND PLINY THE ELDER

By

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To my parents who have always supported and encouraged to reach for my dreams

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	7
2 DEFINING PROTO-RACISM.....	12
Skin Color .....	12
Proto-Racism .....	14
The Greeks .....	19
The Romans .....	23
3 THE QUESTION OF RACE .....	26
Gauls, Celts, and Britons .....	26
Nubian vs. Aethiopian .....	29
4 GEOGRAPHY OF PROTO-RACISM IN CAESAR AND PLINY THE ELDER.....	35
The Gauls .....	35
The Britons .....	39
<i>Virtus</i> — Do They Really Have It? .....	41
The Aethiopians.....	46
If It Is Positive, Is It Still Proto-racism?.....	49
5 HEREDITARY FEATURES IN CAESAR AND PLINY THE ELDER AS THEY RELATE THE GAULS AND AETHIOPIANS .....	51
To the North.....	52
To the South .....	55
Comparisons to Contemporary Racism .....	60
6 CONCLUSION.....	63
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	67
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	69

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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Many scholars posit that ancient authors did not have a racist bias because they did not discriminate based solely on race or skin color. This paper examines two prominent Roman authors, Caesar and Pliny the Elder, using Isaac's definition of proto-racism: basing discrimination and discriminatory language in geography and climate, rather than skin color. The paper utilizes history that predates these authors' works to provide a comprehensive understanding of Caesar's and Pliny the Elder's work including Greek Art, Greek philosophical treatises, and ancient African history. This paper also compares ancient world proto-racism to examples of contemporary racism to demonstrate the differences between the two. The paper concludes that there are both overt and subtle examples of language that demonstrate proto-racist worldviews.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

According to the Hippocratic treatise *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, there is a region where (5):

For the sun in rising and shining upon them purifies them, by dispelling the vapors which generally prevail in the morning...a city so situated resembles the spring as to moderation between heat and cold.<sup>1</sup>

This location is situated precisely where the northern and southern regions meet, and the Greeks and Romans believed this region produced the best men. It is one that receives a perfect amount of sun, a perfect amount of wind, and whose waters flow clear and are not too hot or too cold. The land is fertile and brings forth a proper amount of resources for the inhabitants living there. The place described is the Mediterranean, considered perfect by the ancient world. The Hippocratic treatise *On Airs, Waters, and Places* (hereafter *AWP*) continues to describe the other locations that are to the north and south of this ideal place. Those living in infertile climates (as deemed by those living in the Mediterranean) and suffering from too much cold display strong physical features and emotionalism. Those living in infertile climates and suffering from too much heat display the opposite: strength in mind, but weakness in body.<sup>2</sup> This characterization of people based on their geography is not unique to the Hippocratic treatise and is one that is seen in other pieces of ancient literature. Such proto-racist ideas were so

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. by Adams (1868).

<sup>2</sup> *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, 3-5.

common that they appeared without comment or intention in both Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Isaac (2006) defines proto-racism as (34):

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

This definition is clearly distinct from contemporary racism. While contemporary racism focuses on a misunderstanding of Darwin's theory of evolution and focuses on skin color as its base, proto-racism uses external features and hereditary factors to explain human traits tied to observations about geography and climate, attributing these to the human populations living there.

Isaac has his detractors, who focus on a perceived positivity in ancient sources. Erich S. Gruen argues that, in the *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar's use of the word *virtus* shows a sense of camaraderie between the Romans and the Gauls, likening the latter to the former, and suggesting that *virtus* existed for the Gauls as it did for the Romans.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as will be discussed further in Chapter 4, what is key to Caesar's description of the Gauls is the use of *virtus* solely in battle, and never in reference to morality. While Caesar's discussion of the Gauls and *virtus* may not be perceived as negative in tone, the fact that he does not discuss the Gauls as having *virtus* in multiple venues can imply a negative tone, especially in the way he uses the term for two different peoples: a

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<sup>3</sup> These ideas were in play when both the *De Bello Gallico* and the *Naturalis Historia* were written, circa 52 BCE and 77 CE, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Gruen (2011) 152.

limited use for the Gauls with an expanded use for the Romans. He advances this argument by demonstrating the Gallic *virtus* as physically savage due to their climate and weather. Caesar goes on to explain this physicality as one that is passed through the generations as a hereditary characteristic and one by which the Gauls can be identified.<sup>5</sup>

Gruen continues to argue that Pliny the Elder's discussion of the Aethiopians is void of negative voice and, therefore, void of racist views.<sup>6</sup> While Gruen points to a relevant piece of Pliny the Elder's work, his argument regarding a lack of negativity rests on an understanding of contemporary racism and, therefore, skin color. Gruen's understanding of the ancient view of the Aethiopians rests on the Romans' equally biased views of races in the north and in the south, and, since both those with pale and dark skin features were considered lesser than the Romans, Gruen argues that the distinction is one of courage and not proto-racism.<sup>7</sup> However, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, Pliny the Elder's treatment of the Aethiopians lends itself to the proto-racist view, even though his bias is more subtle than Caesar's.

Both Caesar and Pliny the Elder write works that focus on the concept of "other," i.e., peoples that are considered foreign or alien to the Romans. Caesar focuses on the northern peoples like the Gauls and Britons, using a militaristic voice and purpose not only to portray his expedition as good for the state and to lift his own reputation, but also

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<sup>5</sup> *De Bello Gallico* 1.13, 2.14.

<sup>6</sup> Gruen (2011) 197-203. This paper is using the spelling "Aethiopia/Aethiopian" to distinguish between the modern country Ethiopia, and Pliny the Elder's understanding of the area south of Egypt. See discussion on pg. 27-31.

<sup>7</sup> Gruen (2011) 205.

to lift the Roman people up, using language they understand, by pointing out attributes of the Gallic tribes, dependent upon their location and climate, key to a proto-racist filter. Pliny the Elder, on the other hand, uses an ethnographic voice to rationalize his descriptions of peoples and their relationships to places, a voice that exemplifies proto-racism. His discussion of the Aethiopians relies heavily on not only his understanding of geography and hereditary features, but also rumors and stories handed down from others scholars, Roman, Greek, and Egyptian. Pliny the Elder's explanations for cultural differences in his ethnographic writing serve as examples of proto-racism as they subtly reinforce the "otherness" of another people based on traits tied to geography and climate. In contrast to Caesar's writing, Pliny's demonstrates the environment-based theories of proto-racism, but often lacks the obviously negative voice Caesar's writing uses.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will examine the definition of proto-racism more closely and compare and contrast it to contemporary racism. In the third chapter, I will examine the question of race itself and how it relates to the ancient worldview of people and geography, with special attention paid to the particular vocabulary used by each author. In the fourth chapter, I will give examples of proto-racism found in both Caesar and Pliny the Elder, particularly regarding how specific geographies affect the Romans' view of other peoples and the role *virtus* plays in Caesar's discussion of the Gauls. In the fifth chapter, I will provide examples of how hereditary features play a role in both Caesar's and Pliny the Elder's writing and how these views can be explained using a proto-racist lens. Since modern western notions of racism are driven by skin color, the ancient authors have not been examined for racism. However, another sort of

racism—proto-racism—opens the door to that possibility. This thesis aims to interpret selected works of Caesar and Pliny the Elder through the hermeneutic lens created by Isaac's construct of proto-racism and his dialogue with Gruen.

## CHAPTER 2 DEFINING PROTO-RACISM

The question of racism and the existence of race is one that has long been a topic for discussion and debate. The words “racism” and “racialism” first appear in writing in the early 20th century, but groups of people and nations have long had a concept of “other” and “alien.”<sup>1</sup> Contemporary society has established an understanding of racism that is particularly related to slavery and negative bias based on skin color and non-European heritage. For the purposes of this thesis, however, a different definition of racism needs to be established that takes into account the point of view and the understanding of other peoples that the Romans of the late Republic and early Empire would have held.

### **Skin Color**

The use of skin color as a defining feature in regards to race is more prevalent in contemporary racism than that of proto-racism.<sup>2</sup> While skin color was certainly noticed in the ancient world, it was discussed in a variety of ways not associated with race.<sup>3</sup> Instead, color differentiation in representations of skin tone was used to distinguish between men and women, while features of what Isaac terms “proto-racism” were used to distinguish between races.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac (2004) 1 notes that while the first written instance of the ideas of racism have roots in the early twentieth century, and contemporary scholars often use this to argue that such prejudices did not exist prior. Isaac goes on to note, however, that the ideas of “other” and discrimination did exist prior, but did not rely on skin color as contemporary racism does.

<sup>2</sup> Eaverly (2013) 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> Eaverly (2013) 33-35 argues that the use of color could represent physical objects, and the symbolism of objects.

Eaverly points to early Egyptian examples of color differentiation used in regards to men and women. The variations of color used to represent Ancient Egyptian men and women point to an alternative use of color, which does not equate to the modern notion of skin color as defining race. Instead, women are given a yellow color and the colors for men symbolize many things.<sup>4</sup> Differences in color depicts prowess and refinement among men, while a single color is given to women, depicting a relatively secluded experience of women, suggesting a symbolic meaning (each color represents a level of employment) rather than any literal physical interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Yates discusses a similar use of skin color among the Greeks to differentiate between women and men. While the Egyptians give women a yellow color, the Greeks paint women without color, emphasizing a pale skin tone.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the Egyptian use of skin tone symbolizes gender and the different attributes between men and women, the Greeks' paintings reflect something they understood as an inherent physical trait: according to Aristotle, women were pale due to the loss of blood during the menstrual cycle. For both cultures, the difference represented in painting is due to an observed difference between genders, not races.

Eaverly's and Yates' observations redirect the modern reader's notions of race in a way that resets racial understanding appropriate to an ancient viewpoint. While skin color was not ignored and frequently appears in both art and literature, it was not a

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<sup>4</sup> Eaverly (2013) 33-37 notes that men's skin tones vary based on work, position, and location (inside vs. outside). Women, on the other hand are given a yellow tone regardless of their status.

<sup>5</sup> Eaverly (2013) 36-40 goes on to discuss the use of yellow to represent the duality between men and women, as well as the use of yellow to demonstrate a weakening or aging of men.

<sup>6</sup> Yates (2015) 3-4.

standard for judging a person's race or applying stereotypes based on race. Rather, it was used as a separation of gender, and a symbolic representation of power and principality.

### **Proto-Racism**

Perceived differences in race are always formed by comparing other cultures with one's own people. Proto-racism uses a set of constructs other than skin color to define these differences. This thesis uses Isaac's definition of proto-racism with the understanding that proto-racist views make direct connections between geography and climate to the hereditary traits, morals, and temperament of certain groups of people.<sup>7</sup> This differs from contemporary definitions of racism in that proto-racism does not rely on a difference of skin tone. Instead, proto-racism relies upon the geographical features of the land and the hereditary features presumed to be passed from generation to generation.

The idea that geography is directly attached to a culture's traits is not a purely Roman idea, but is instead borrowed from the Greeks.<sup>8</sup> Yates demonstrates that Aristotle uses these stereotypes to argue the relative compatibility of various groups of people with such ideas as power and slavery: those living in cold climates are spirited,

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac (2004) 23 defines proto-racism as "an attitude towards individuals and groups of people which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography." Hester Schadee (2008) 163 goes on to explain further that "harsh conditions were believed to create strong, courageous, but not very smart people; and a mild climate was held responsible for handsome and clever, but weak and cowardly men."

<sup>8</sup> Isaac (2004) 56-57 notes the role geography plays in certain Greek writers' works, but he also notes that this presence is somewhat overstated by other commentators. The example he provides, from Macan, draws from Herodotus and demonstrates the relationship between geography and a people's traits.

but lack intelligence and skill, while those living in warm climates are intelligent, but lack spirit, and thus are naturally prone to slavery.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, in turn, inherited these ideas from the Hippocratic treatise, *AWP* which agrees: those living in hot climates are physically weak and those living in cold climates lack emotional control.<sup>10</sup>

While the Romans are clearly influenced by the Greeks in these ideas, the Greeks did not use this perceived causal connection in a systematic way to create the stereotypical “other” as the Roman authors did; instead, their understanding was more subtle. Isaac points to an example in Herodotus where conquered nations are told to prepare “for being ruled by others soft countries give birth to soft men.” Unlike examples from Pliny and Caesar, which are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, this example is more subtle, relating “soft men” to fertility of land and servitude, whereas the examples on which this thesis focuses make direct connections between geography and climate and inferiority.<sup>11</sup> Other examples can be found in the artistic displays of the ancient Greeks. As previously discussed on page 11-12, the ancients didn’t solely discriminate between various peoples and nations using perceived unchangeable factors, but also used these views to distinguish between men and women. McNiven discusses these distinctions as they are displayed in ancient Greek artwork. As facial expressions were avoided in artwork, gestures were heavily relied on to display the differences between groups of people.<sup>12</sup> Women and men were marked by their position, composition, and gesture

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<sup>9</sup> Yates (2015) 13.

<sup>10</sup> *AWP* 3-4 notes that extreme heat affects the people living there through physical disease while extreme cold affects mental capacity.

<sup>11</sup> Isaac (2004) 55-59.

<sup>12</sup> McNiven (2000) 72.

rather than their faces and other physical features one might expect. Similarly, young boys were displayed similar to women as they were not expected to display the traits of a Greek man at that time.<sup>13</sup>

One specific example that McNiven points to differentiates between men and women using a supplication gesture where one reaches to another's chin.<sup>14</sup> McNiven notes that for men such a gesture was considered cowardly, but for women, it was expected. What is unique about this gesture, particularly when one applies a proto-racist understanding, is that according to Greek art, even Amazonian women, despite their courage and manlike features, were shown giving this gesture. McNiven notes that typically Amazons were pictured as fearless fighters, dying in battle just as courageous men. However, in some cases, Amazonian women are pictured reaching out to their attacker's chin, begging to be spared.<sup>15</sup>

DeVries gives another example in ancient Greek literature. The Phrygians occupied an area of land that was more remote than the Greeks and many of the encounters they had with the Greeks were through slavery.<sup>16</sup> Throughout Greek literature, the Phrygians are painted as a cowardly people and, DeVries notes, that this generalization can be connected back to their status in Greek society.<sup>17</sup> For example, in both *Orestes* and *Birds*, the Phrygians are demonstrated directly to be fearful of those in

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<sup>13</sup> McNiven (2000) 73.

<sup>14</sup> McNiven (2000) 78 shows an image of a female reaching towards her attacker's chin as a form of supplication.

<sup>15</sup> McNiven (2000) 79.

<sup>16</sup> DeVries (2000) 339.

<sup>17</sup> DeVries (2000) 340-341.

power.<sup>18</sup> In *Orestes*, a Phrygian man begs for his life, while in *Birds*, a Greek says he is not Phrygian and therefore not fearful of words. So prevalent was this viewpoint that even Strabo draws upon it using the idiom, “more cowardly than a Phrygian hare.”<sup>19</sup> This particular example from Strabo shows how this stereotype carries over into perspectives on those Phrygians living in their native lands.

Both of these examples are more subtle than the Roman examples discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Neither the example of supplication or Phrygian cowardice are connected to such factors as geography, climate, or gender outright, but rather are understood amongst the audience: through gestures to demonstrate the overall weakness of women, and attitudes towards Phrygians in writing that come through in examples of cowardice. Caesar and Pliny the Elder, however, make direct connections between geography, climate, and perceived traits regarding the Gauls and Aethiopians.

While skin color does play a role in a geographical understanding of proto-racism, it is not, as in contemporary situations, the crux of the argument and source of stereotypes. Instead, skin color is a result of geography and, thus, included as one of many geographically influenced traits. The difference between skin color in proto-racism and contemporary racism resides in how skin tone is used in the understanding of various groups of people. Contemporary racism ties skin color, regardless of history or geography, to stereotypical traits and derogatory terms, while proto-racism ties skin color and language surrounding skin color to geography and, through geography, to stereotypical traits. Whereas contemporary racism begins in skin color, proto-racism

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<sup>18</sup> DeVries (2000) 341.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

begins in geography and through it and the hereditary traits it is understood to cause proto-racism can, at times, arrive at commentary on skin color. People who live in cold, harsh climates that are “further from the sun” are physically strong, suffer from emotionalism, and have fair hair and skin. People with darker skin tones, especially those from African regions, live in a hot climate “closer to the sun” and, their location affects not only their skin color but their physical and mental traits (weak and strong, respectively).<sup>20</sup>

Other aspects of geography can also, in the view of Greek and Roman scholars, have a direct causal relationship with the traits of the people who live there.

Assumptions about hereditary traits create further groups among those already designated weak or strong, wise or foolish by their climate. The Greeks and Romans attributed characteristics to the type of terrain people inhabited: those who live on the plateau are clever, but are physically weak and effeminate, while those who live in harsher ground conditions are physically strong, but lack the emotional constitution of others.<sup>21</sup>

These physical traits, which have their base in geographical bias, were assumed to be hereditary traits that were passed down to offspring. This understanding makes stereotyping and discrimination easier for the Romans by combining nature and nurture and allowing the stereotyping of an entire group with one geographical bias.<sup>22</sup> Isaac

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<sup>20</sup> Isaac (2004) 65. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac (2004) 65.

<sup>22</sup> Isaac (2004) 78-79 considers examples from Aristotle, *De Semine*, and *AWP* to explain the ancient view that “differences between simple heredity and the heredity of acquired characters” are not conceptually important.

notes that the Greeks' writing is based on theory, rather than experience. The Romans, on the other hand, use this theory and apply it to their experiences.<sup>23</sup> Isaac, in demonstrating the connection between the Greek subtleties and Roman systems, draws a clear line from the long history of assumptions among the Greeks to the discussion in the writings of the Romans.<sup>24</sup> This literary and historical connection is the foundation of the argument in this thesis.

### **The Greeks**

As Isaac states, proto-racism divides groups of people based on their perceived superiority (or inferiority).<sup>25</sup> Groups of people were believed to share the same traits based on environmental theory. Essentially, outside conditions (i.e., climate and geography) were used to explain human characteristics that were then believed to be passed through generations, and would remain present through time.<sup>26</sup> The Greeks, as previously stated, made connections more subtly than the Romans, often indirectly stating the perceived connections between one's land and one's characteristics.<sup>27</sup>

Herodotus is often credited with authoring the idea that there are critical differences between, particularly, Europe and Asia: that Europe produced people who

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<sup>23</sup> This thesis focuses on Caesar and Pliny the Elder. The theory of proto-racism applies to their works and experiences, though at times differently. As will be discussed in Chapter 3 of the thesis, Caesar focuses on his own experience with the Gauls and Britons during his campaigns while Pliny the Elder relies on his science and pulls from other writers and literature to create his own discussions.

<sup>24</sup> Isaac (2004) 55-66 applies views of proto-racism beginning with Herodotus, and through implicit connections in Greek tragedy before directly referencing *AWP* and Aristotle.

<sup>25</sup> Isaac (2004) 56.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Isaac (2004) 58-59 gives an example from Herodotus who describes the Egyptians and their practices as opposite the rest of mankind, just as their environment is. This is not given as a direct correlation, but rather a subtle indirect comparison between the two.

were strong and natural leaders, while Asia produced people who were weak and natural slaves.<sup>28</sup> What Herodotus' writing lacks, however, is the overt assumption that those living in western lands (namely Greece and Rome) were the best groups of people.<sup>29</sup> Rather, Herodotus makes implications between a people's geography, climate, and political atmosphere, and the features of the people living there, without assigning specific attributes to specific groups of people. Herodotus provides an excellent example of early Greek notions of geography and people: using environmental theory to covertly name superior and inferior peoples.

The Hippocratic treatise *AWP* uses natural elements of geographical locations to explain physical traits of the people that live there. It argues that the natural elements of a location, particularly regarding the roles of the winds and waters, explain not only the physical appearance of a group of people, but also their temperaments and the diseases to which they most commonly fall. Consistent with Isaac's ideas, *AWP* suggests that those living in extreme heat and cold display particular traits that are unseen in areas with different kinds of winds and waters.<sup>30</sup> The Hippocratic treatise *AWP* demonstrates this in its treatment of people living further east (*AWP* 16):

And with regard to the pusillanimity and cowardice of the inhabitants, the principal reason the Asiatics are more unwarlike and of gentler disposition than the Europeans is, the nature of the seasons, which do not undergo any great changes either to heat or cold.

This passage clearly draws on the connection between climate and perceived traits of whole groups, particularly on how the lack of change can affect a group. The passage

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<sup>28</sup> Isaac (2004) 57-58.

<sup>29</sup> Isaac (2004) 59.

<sup>30</sup> *AWP* 3-4.

goes on to make a connection similar to that of Herodotus: that those living in this area are considered weak and prone to slavery.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of this understanding comes from Aristotle (*Politics* 1327b):

The nations of Europe are full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organization and capacity to rule their neighbors. The peoples of Asia on the other hand are intelligent and skillful in temperament, but lack spirit, so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery.

Again, this example draws on this understood connection between climate and particular traits that are assigned to whole groups. Where *AWP* and *Politics* differ from Herodotus' work is that they go a further step and begin to identify these traits with specific peoples, particularly those in power: the Greeks.<sup>32</sup>

Even in the diseases that the treatise notes as particular to certain cultures, the proto-racist viewpoint is plain: those who live in extreme heat are physically weaker and suffer from diseases that result from the flow of bodily fluids while those who live in extreme cold are physically sturdier but suffer from diseases that put these people in extreme pain.<sup>33</sup> *AWP* also notes that those who live in between these places, and towards the east, are purified by the sun and are generally healthier. It argues that eastern peoples enjoy water that flows into the sun and is healthier and more fragrant.<sup>34</sup> Men living towards the west, however, despite being between the north and south, still

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<sup>31</sup> *AWP* 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Politics* 1327b.

<sup>33</sup> According to *AWP* (3-4) people living in the southern, hot climates may suffer from diseases that include phlegm flowing from the head, miscarriages, and digestive issues. In contrast, people living the northern, cold climates may suffer from diseases that include a hardening of vessels and organs, which in turn can burst painfully, rupture of the eyes, and epilepsy.

<sup>34</sup> *AWP* 5.

suffer because they are without the winds that those in the east experience and their water is unclear.<sup>35</sup> The use of these examples in *AWP* demonstrates a clear example of the proto-racist view. Its conclusions regarding the peoples who live in the north, south, east, and west rely entirely upon their geography and connects it to the unchangeable traits they possess.

As the ancients' exposure to the other nations of the world expanded, various depictions of "other" developed. This changing landscape and the need to define themselves as opposed to the cultures they were encountering can even be traced through the various iterations of the traditions and experiences of the people in question. One place where this transference of notions and ideas regarding other peoples is clear is in the Augustan era and the work of Strabo. Isaac notes that Strabo takes issue with many specific writers' work when it comes to environmental theory and perceived hereditary traits.<sup>36</sup> However, the influence of earlier Greek writers are still visible in Strabo's writing. Strabo draws on specific ideas from *AWP*, but then adds his own elements to the conversation regarding the balance between ruling and conquered nations.<sup>37</sup> Not only are conquered nations lesser in military strategy, but they are unable to coalesce into one stronger power due to their environmentally-induced self-sufficiency. Strabo's view of environmental theory, though different from earlier writings,

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<sup>35</sup> *AWP* 6.

<sup>36</sup> Isaac (2004) 91-92.

<sup>37</sup> Strabo puts forth that part of this balance includes contact between nations, "An interesting passage illustrating Strabo's insistence on the need for communications is the following: 'Now one might think that the wanderings of the Greeks to the barbarian peoples are caused by the circumstance that the latter had been divided into small groups and powers which, because of their self-sufficiency, had no intercourse with one another; therefore they are weak against attackers from abroad.'" Isaac (2004) 92.

lends itself to the study of proto-racist viewpoints, as much as it fuel for and justification of Roman imperialism.<sup>38</sup>

### The Romans

The idea of *virtus* can serve as an exemplar of the application of ancient Roman bias, especially when viewed through the framework of proto-racism. Caesar's use of *virtus* is illustrative; he uses assumptions indicative of a proto-racist understanding of the world to reinforce Roman superiority.<sup>39</sup> While it can be tempting to look solely at the existence of this word within Roman texts that discuss "others," more attention should be paid to the context within which this word is used, and the complexities, or lack thereof, when it is applied to various groups of people.

*Virtus* has a variety of definitions based on both use and purpose. For the Romans, *virtus* was a complex ideal within which a dialogue of meanings was compressed. Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary* gives the first definition as manliness and manhood, referring particularly to both the corporeal and emotional stature of a man, including such things as strength, bravery, and virtue. When used to refer to animals and inanimate objects, *virtus* can take on the meanings of goodness and value

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<sup>38</sup> This idea that some cultures were lesser and deserved to be conquered (and perhaps benefited from being conquered) can even be traced in the language of the conquerors. One word of interesting origin is the modern word "barbarian" which has come to be defined with words like savage, uncivilized, and uneducated, even when used to describe people in the same group, but who are still identified as "other". While the Roman usage of the Latin *barbarus* does include implications similar to the contemporary definition, most often the word is used to refer to foreigners in relation to the Romans or even the Romans in relation to the Greeks. What the evolution of the Greek word βάρβαρος into the contemporary English word "barbarian" shows is the evolution of differing understandings or views of "other." This word itself has been carried across generations and languages, though the main definitions have changed from an ancient worldview (other, speaker of gibberish, uncivilized) to that of the contemporary world (uncivilized, primitive, unchristian). The same relationship can be applied to the contemporary definition of racism and proto-racism.

<sup>39</sup> Discussion of *virtus* in Pliny the Elder is out of the scope of this thesis as the word *virtus* only appears twice in *Naturalis Historia*. The first instance, in Book III, is part of a name and the second, in Book VII, refers to a specific Roman and his endeavors (*NH* 3.12, 7.106).

or worth. A third definition describes moral perfection, as the Romans viewed it, and duty to the gods. The last definition refers to a very specific use of *virtus*, namely, in reference to military talents and skills. It is this last definition, in its specificity and target usage, that is important to this discussion of proto-racism, especially when applied to Caesar's discussion of the Gauls.<sup>40</sup>

This word is especially pertinent to the discussion of proto-racism because of its martial context and repeated use in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*.<sup>41</sup> The discussion in Caesar's work on the Gauls and his perceived brand of Gallic *virtus* not only differentiates the Gaul's warring tendencies from well-rounded *virtus* of the Romans, but even establishes yet another connection between the Gauls and their geography. *Virtus* plays a significant role in Caesar's branding of the Gauls as "other." He uses the word to distinguish his opponents as strong and worthy, and then uses it to assign them the attributes their geography determines.<sup>42</sup>

While contemporary racism relies heavily on hereditary traits based on skin tone, these ancient examples establish notions of race in relation to geography and environment. It is only with this geographical basis that mental and physical features (such as skin tone) come into consideration. The Romans believed they lived in a perfect center of the world around them. They lived in a fertile land that, due to its climate and geographical features, made them not only physically strong, but emotionally superior as well. They based their view of "other" on their own

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis & Short (1879) "virtus."

<sup>41</sup> McDonnell (2009) 5.

<sup>42</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4.

experiences—with some Greek influence—which created a uniquely Roman version of proto-racism. The Roman understanding of “other” is best exemplified in two opposed examples: the Aethiopians, who, while strong in mind, were considered effeminate, and the Gauls, who, while strong in physicality, were considered emotionally inferior, suffering from a lack of control.

## CHAPTER 3 THE QUESTION OF RACE

In order to properly discuss proto-racism in Pliny the Elder and Caesar, attention must be paid to the terminology each uses to describe the Aethiopians and Gauls, respectively, and it is impossible not to notice the strong ties of this terminology to the geography and environment of these particular groups of people. When one reads the various sources to which both Caesar and Pliny the Elder had access, it is clear that a variety of terms were used to understand different groups of people as well as their ethnicities, which underscores the importance and intentional nature of the terms chosen by these authors. These terms, along with the relevant history of each term, in themselves indicate proto-racist views. To this end, this chapter discusses Caesar's use of the term "Gaul" and its connection to the terms "Celt" and "Briton," as well as the relationship of the terms "Nubian" and "Aethiopian" in Pliny the Elder's work.<sup>1</sup>

### **Gauls, Celts, and Britons**

As per the definition of proto-racism established in chapter 2 of this paper, groups of people are assigned stereotypes based on their geography and hereditary features, rather than biology and lineage. This holds particularly true for the history surrounding the groups of Gaul and Britain. Contemporary society refers to these groups by their countries: French (France), English/British (England/Britain), Irish (Ireland), and Scottish (Scotland). Each group maintains its history, language, and traditions and, for many years, these locations, languages, and traditions have lent themselves to an argument that these groups of people are different and should be

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<sup>1</sup> Special attention is paid in this thesis to biological and linguistic features for the Gauls/Celts and linguistic and historical features for the Nubians/Aethiopians.

referred to as such.<sup>2</sup> Ancient society, however, did not distinguish between these races in the same way: Celts and Gauls were one race separated by terminology. This vocabulary is separated by contemporary history, but in ancient sources the words blur together, saying more about the people who coined these terms, rather than the people whom they describe.

The Greek term *keltoi* first appears in the sixth century BCE as a reference to an “alien” people who lived to the north of Greece.<sup>3</sup> The term is later expanded to include those living on the Danube river.<sup>4</sup> The Romans, however, did not adopt the Greek term, but created their own term, *Galli*, to refer to people from the same area.<sup>5</sup> While it seems obvious that Caesar would make use of the Roman term *Galli*, both terms are used throughout history and have historical significance, so his use of the term has significance in itself.<sup>6</sup>

While the evidence for Dietler’s model of socio-linguistic and cultural history of the people living in these areas is incomplete, socio-linguistic ties have been made

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<sup>2</sup> Language in particular lends itself to this argument in that the groups of Ireland, England, and Scotland are often grouped and called Celtic, while those in France are called French. According to Dietler (1994) 594-595, some argue that due to this there is no connection between the groups and this prevents an argument that French history can be linked to the history of the Isles.

<sup>3</sup> Deitler (1994) 585 remarks, “people called *Keltoi* lived beyond the Ligurian peoples inhabiting the hinterland of Marseille in southern France.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis & Short (1879) 800.

<sup>6</sup> Dietler (1994) 587-588 makes note of the French uses of the word: commoners were often referred to as descendants of the “Gallo-Romans.” The word Celt was then used by the common people in defiance of the French nobility, giving it more clout than the term “Gaul.” Also interesting to note is that the French later re-adopt a love of the idea of the Gauls from its use in literature.

between those living on continental Europe and the British Isles.<sup>7</sup> This complex history has created a variety in terminology and has led to a mistaken understanding that those living in the British Isles are culturally and racially distinct from those living on continental Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Modern use of the word Celt is often used to refer to the peoples who inhabit, and have inhabited, the British Isles and Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Modern usage dictates a difference between these people and those who live in mainland Europe, but research shows that strong linguistic similarities occur between the languages spoken in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and those spoken by the ancients in what is now modern-day France.<sup>10</sup> Despite these linguistic ties, the Romans made a clear distinction between these two groups of people: the term “Celt” was never used in Latin literature to refer to those living in Britannia, Caledonia, and Hibernia.<sup>11</sup> These distinctions based on geography and customs are easier to understand when viewed in light of the proto-racist perspective of the world. Caesar does not use language or biology to distinguish between the peoples of Gaul and Britain, but rather he uses elements of geography and

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<sup>7</sup> Dietler (1994) 594-595 provides such examples as the folklore that comes from the regions of Brittany and Burgundy. Brittany, however, also maintains a political, linguistic, and social connection to its Celtic heritage. As Dietler discusses regarding Brittany, another connection can be made to the linguistic history of Ireland and England’s attempt to wipe out the mythologies, folklore, and language native to the area given its Celtic origins. As in Ireland, Brittany has made attempts to resurrect its native Celtic traditions and language.

<sup>8</sup> Dietler (1994) 594-595.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to the modern British Isles of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

<sup>10</sup> Dietler (1994) 585-586 notes an interesting possibility within Strabo’s linguistic history of the word “Celt.” If Strabo is correct, then the ancient Celts may have spoken a language different than the language tied to the term in contemporary times. While this does not affect the premise of this thesis, it is interesting to note and perhaps lends itself to understanding how the reference changed over the years.

<sup>11</sup> Dietler (1994) 586.

custom to separate these peoples. Caesar points out that the people of Britannia, Caledonia, and Hibernia are separated from those of mainland Europe by water and, it can be extrapolated, were considered divergent from those in the Mediterranean in terms of race and customs.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Romans did not come into contact with these island peoples until Julius Caesar's campaigns into Northern Gaul. Caesar further separates the Britons from those living on the mainland by discussing in geographical terms a group of people who lived on the interior on the island.<sup>13</sup> As the term *Galli* already applied to those Celts living on mainland Europe, the Celts living on the islands were given different names, derived from the names given to their locations.<sup>14</sup>

### **Nubian vs. Aethiopian**

The Romans and Greeks used rivers as boundaries in the areas north of the Mediterranean, so it is no surprise that they used them for the same purpose in the lands to the south of the sea. In ancient times, modern day Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia were not aligned with their contemporary political borders; instead, the area was separated according to the geography of the land.<sup>15</sup> Differences developed between the various groups of people who lived in the area through the outside influences of the

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<sup>12</sup> While there is evidence in Caesar's writing to suggest that those on the islands did send assistance to those on the mainland, little was known about those in the islands and knowledge was exclusive to those peoples living on the coast. The lack of knowledge and the rarity (and lack) of correspondence and trade shows a lack of relationship between those on the islands and those in the mainland, with the exception of those on the coast (with whom the only contact was established).

<sup>13</sup> Schadee (2008) 172. Caesar also notes that customs on the mainland come from Britain.

<sup>14</sup> Short (1879) explains that *Galli*, *Gallorum* refers specifically to the Gallic nation and the Gauls, particularly those past the Rhine river, as well as those in Northern Italy. *Britanni*, *Britannorum*, rather, refers specifically to those living in Great Britain, the Britons, as well as those living specifically in Brittany, France.

<sup>15</sup> First separated by cataracts (narrows areas of water flow often broken by rocks, boulders, and cliffs), then by formal rivers, Kirwan (1974) 44-46. For our references, it might be easier to consider the land to the South and East of the Nile river as the main consideration for this discussion, Adams (1984) 45.

Egyptians, Greeks, and, eventually, the Romans. In fact, the differences, both cultural and geographical, between the lands of Nubia, Egypt, and Aethiopia are often disputed and differ depending on the author, period, and purpose.<sup>16</sup> Boundaries were drawn along the second, third, and fourth cataracts of the Nile during the rule of the pharaohs. These varying borders depended heavily on who was in power. The civilization that eventually arose from this area, after the rule of the Egyptians (around 500 BCE), lying on the Island of Meroe, is often referred to as Nubia.<sup>17</sup> However the Nubians were grouped with others in the same location, called “Aethiopia” by the Greeks and Romans.<sup>18</sup>

The interaction between Egypt and this land just to its south did not end with the early withdrawal of Egyptian rulers and people. Instead, economic interests kept the Egyptians at least partially in touch with their neighbors. The period around 1880 BCE sees its first economic actions against the Aethiopian peoples, including the Nubians, in an attempt to form a monopoly.<sup>19</sup> What followed was a strengthening of not only the Egyptian economy, but Egyptian culture and control in the area and later outright Egyptian colonization of the area.<sup>20</sup> Adams describes colonization similar to the African

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<sup>16</sup> Kirwan (1974) 44-45 discusses the importance of the rise of this civilization that developed in the area directly south of Egypt through its writing system and indigenous language alongside its contact and dependence on trade from the Graeco-Roman peoples. Smith (1854) 56-57 also summarizes this, “Aethiopia, as a generic or ethnic designation, comprises the inhabitants of Africa who dwelt between the equator, the Red Sea, and the Atlantic.” Given the evolution of the language and geography as stated by Smith, it is clear that the terms Nubia and Aethiopia refer to the same area south of Egypt.

<sup>17</sup> Kirwan (1974) 44-46 notes that while this group of people were called Nubians (presumably on account of their African language), they developed a remarkably Egyptian culture and economy.

<sup>18</sup> Adams (1984) 37; Kirwan (1974) 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Adams (1984) 48.

<sup>20</sup> Adams (1984) 63-64.

colonization by Europe including a period of indoctrination of native peoples to create a more Egyptian like society.<sup>21</sup> Natives who had enjoyed a sense of autonomy and control previously were removed from power and groups of natives were subjected to labor to meet the needs of the Egyptians.<sup>22</sup> These periods of strife ultimately resulted in constantly shifting borders and differences in racial definitions, so that the terms for the people in those areas shifted based on the political impressions of the time.

A further distinction, in addition to the geographical distinction between those in Egypt and those located to the south, lies in the physical skin color of the peoples who inhabited the area. While proto-racism is not dependent upon skin color—unlike contemporary racism—ancient authors still noticed and remarked on differences in skin color, particularly in the case of the inhabitants of Nubia and Aethiopia. The Egyptians noticed this physical difference and commonly referred to these peoples as “black.”<sup>23</sup> Eventually, Egypt had sole rule over the area referred to as Nubia (the Roman Aethiopia).<sup>24</sup> During this time a change in attitude towards the Nubians emerges, placing the Egyptians clearly above the Nubians in status.<sup>25</sup> Egypt continues rule over the area into the era of the New Kingdom and, eventually, loses power.<sup>26</sup> What is left

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<sup>21</sup> Adams (1984) 65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Adams (1984) 39-40.

<sup>24</sup> Adams (1984) 53-56 offers as evidence a lack of constructed tombs and buildings for the rulers of Nubia like those seen earlier.

<sup>25</sup> Adams (1984) 59 notes this change via religious structures, mainly temples and statues.

<sup>26</sup> The New Kingdom period covers Dynasties XVIII-XX, approximately 1600-1000 BCE according to Adams (1984) 38. Little is known about this fall from power, but Adams (1984) 62-63 draws a link to the pharaohs' own decreasing power within Egypt.

behind is, in areas, a fertile land which the Nubians and other Aethiopians populate and in which they create their own civilization. This civilization develops its own indigenous African language and, while maintaining some Egyptian customs, becomes what is called the Meroetic Kingdom around 500 BCE. This kingdom developed in pockets within this area and later developed relationships with the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>27</sup>

The origins of the terms Nubian and Aethiopian are heavily wrapped in the history of the land, recounted above, and the development of civilizations in the area. As people moved in and out of the land and new civilizations emerged, the terminology naming those people changed repeatedly. Not only did terms differ between time periods, but they also differed between cultures and even between authors in the same culture. The ancient Egyptians, while they had the most contact with the races living to the south, never actually used the word *Aethiopia* or *Nuba* to refer to this area, but rather referred to the land called Lower Nubia (the land just south of Egypt) as “Wawat.” Rather, the terms *Nuba* and *Aethiopia* play a more significant role in Classical literature.<sup>28</sup>

The term *Nuba* comes from a variety of ancient Egyptian sources that combine the ideas of “golden” and “land” to refer to the same area.<sup>29</sup> The Egyptians often referred to the Nubians (and by extension, the Aethiopians) as vile and the natural enemies of Egypt and, the Later Egyptian distinction *nb* means “impurity.”<sup>30</sup> While the

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<sup>27</sup> Kirwan (1974) 44.

<sup>28</sup> Smith (1854) 57 lists the use of the word in Strabo and Herodotus as such examples and this thesis uses references in Pliny the Elder.

<sup>29</sup> Selden (2013) 328.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

original term does not contain a negative meaning, in that it refers to a golden land, the language is later imbued with the negative relationship between the Nubians (and Aethiopians) and the Egyptians, creating a negative connotation for the word.

The word *Aethiopia* has remarkably clearer etymology when compared to *Wawat* or *Nuba* and is far more common in Classical literature: Pliny the Elder used this word exclusively. The origin of the word is somewhat unknown, but more than likely indigenous to the area and Semitic.<sup>31</sup> The term is picked up by the Greeks who connect it to their own αἴθω, meaning “to burn brightly.”<sup>32</sup> The term is used in Greek to refer to those living to the south of Egypt as well as those living in areas of Asia Minor, referencing the belief that their skin was burned by their proximity to the sun. Unlike *Nuba*, *Aethiopia* does not have a negative connotation in Egyptian and is more commonly used by the population itself. For the Romans, however, this nation is named for a physical characteristic believed to be the result of the climate, and so Pliny’s choice to use *Aethiops* in his writing demonstrates his proto-racist view through its ties to the Greek αἴθω.

Understanding the origins of the terms that Caesar and Pliny choose in contrast with other terms available to ancient authors help us understand the perspective of these authors as well as the assumptions they held at the time of their writing. While Pliny drew on references from the Greeks, who used geography and climate as the basis for their assumptions, to name the area south of Egypt and the people who inhabited it, Caesar assumed geography and distance racially distinguished those living

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<sup>31</sup> Smith (1854).

<sup>32</sup> Jones (1940) αἴθω.

on continental Europe from those living on the British Isles. Both examples, however, exhibit environmental theory and the proto-racist view. For the purposes of this paper, the term “Gauls” refers to those living in Gallia and “Britons” refers to those living in Britania. Similarly, Aethiopian is used to refer to those living to the south of Egypt in the lands below the second cataract in modern day Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This paper, out of respect for the Classical authors, uses their chosen language when referring to those living in modern day France and Sudan/Ethiopia.

## CHAPTER 4 GEOGRAPHY OF PROTO-RACISM IN CAESAR AND PLINY THE ELDER

As has been established, references in Caesar and Pliny the Elder to skin color attribute skin color differences to geography. Other attributes and stereotypes were also thought to be caused by geography; generally speaking, it was believed that those who lived in colder climates had stronger physical features and were less intelligent while those in hot climates were physically weak, but with clever minds. Both Caesar and Pliny the Elder make use of these stereotypes in their understanding of the peoples whom they discuss: the Gauls and Aethiopians, respectively.

### **The Gauls**

Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* makes use of geography to attain two goals in addition to simply orienting his reader. First and most obvious, the geography Caesar describes must bring his own uncle's conquests to the reader's mind and thus establish Caesar's viability and authority.<sup>1</sup> This gives him credibility while also making the subject matter of his commentary compelling to the reader. By establishing this baseline of authority, Caesar sets a foundation for his second goal, in which, by using geography, he establishes the importance of this particular conquest.

Hester Schadee discusses Caesar's defined space in Gaul as near the Rhine River.<sup>2</sup> By choosing this particular area in Gaul, Caesar helps define the kind of people

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<sup>1</sup> Schadee (2008) 162 notes the importance of the information passed to Caesar through his uncle Marius and his defeat of the Cimbri and Teutones as well as the importance of the fear of another sack by the Gauls as in the fourth century BCE. By using these histories and referencing this geography in his *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar plays on the fears of the Romans, making his conquests all the more important.

<sup>2</sup> Schadee (2008) 162. This thesis discusses the following inhabitants of that space, seven tribes of Gaul: the Remi, the Suessiones, the Nervii, the Belgae, the Helvetii, the Veneti, and the Morini. Smith (1854) 698-699 says that the Remi were located in Belgic Gaul which, as Caesar describes in Book I of *De Bello Gallico*, is the northern part of Gaul. Smith (1854) 1044-1045 similarly places the Suessiones in the same area as the Remi, as neighbors. Caesar notes in 2.4 that the Nervii are the fiercest among the Belgae

he will face in his conquest as particularly fierce. This area was not known for its fertility and, given its northern location, the tribes which inhabit it, while not particularly intelligent, would be expected to be physically fierce opponents, given a proto-racist lens (*DBG* 2.4.6-8):

Suessiones suos esse finitimos; fines latissimos feracissimosque agros possidere. apud eos fuisse regem nostra etiam memoria Diviacum, totius Galliae potentissimum, qui cum magnae partis harum regionum, tum etiam Britanniae imperium obtinuerit; nunc esse regem Galbam: ad hunc propter iustitiam prudentiamque summam totius belli omnium voluntate deferri; oppida habere numero XII polliceri milia armata L; totidem Nervios, qui maxime fer inter ipsos habeantur longissimeque absint.

The Suessiones, the Remi said, were their own immediate neighbors; they occupied lands as extensive as they were productive. Among them, even within living memory, Diviciacus had been king, the most powerful man in the whole of Gaul, who had exercised sovereignty alike over a great part of these districts, and even over Britain. Galba was now king; to him, by reason of his justice and sagacity, the supreme charge of the campaign was delivered by general consent; he had twelve towns, and promised fifty thousand men-at-arms. An equal number were promised by the Nervii, accounted the fiercest among the Belgae, and dwelling farthest away.<sup>3</sup>

In the passage above, Caesar relates information received from the Remi in regards to the other Gallic tribes surrounding them and the amount of armed men they have. Caesar gives the reader this information in order of geographical location in proximity to the Remi. The Suessiones, the closest, have the most fertile land and, in direct connection to that, have the most powerful Gaul among them, the king. This description

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and Smith (1854) 420-421 confirms this. Smith (1984) 372 places the Morini near the north western coast of Gaul, closest to Britannia, in Belgic territory. However, Smith also notes that the origins of the Belgae were unproven. Certain tribes claimed German origins and others claimed Gallic origins. While the actual origins are unclear, these tribes lived in Gaul and Caesar's discussion of them fits a proto-racist view. The Helvetii, as Smith (1854) 1040-1041 tells us, are of Gallic and Celtic origin. Also according to Smith (1854) 1270, the Veneti, who live along the coast by the Atlantic, are of Gallic origin.

<sup>3</sup> English translations of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* are from the Loeb Classical Library (1917).

fits with Isaac's definition of proto-racism and Schadee's description of traits.<sup>4</sup> While the Suessiones do live in a colder, less fertile climate than the Romans, they live in a more fertile land than most Gauls, and so provided the ruler of all Gaul.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Caesar identifies the fiercest group to be the Nervii. As Caesar related the Suessiones' leader with the fertility of their land, so he compares the Nervii's fierceness with their lack of proximity to the Remi. Caesar goes on to describe the contributions of other tribes, but these two noteworthy ones, according to Caesar, have promised similar numbers of armed men, compelling the reader to compare them. Rather than comparing their military skills or strategies, Caesar instead focuses on their geography and, in such, demonstrates a clear proto-racist bias.

In the passage below, Caesar comments on the emotional weaknesses of the Gauls. Even though the cold makes them physically strong, according to the proto-racist view, it also leaves them prone to emotionalism: (*DBG 3.8.3-5*)

horum auctoritate finitimi adducti, ut sunt Gallorum subit et repentina consilia, eadem de causa Trebium Terrasidiumque retinent et celeriter missis legatis per suos principes inter se coniurant nihil nihis communi consilio acturos aundemque omnes fortunae exitum esse laturos, reliquasque civitates sollicitant, ut in ea libertate quam a maioribus acceperint permanere quam Romanorum servitatem perferre malint. omni ora maritima celeriter ad suam sententiam perducta communem legationem ad P. Crassum mittunt, si velit suos recuperare, obsides sibi remittat.

Their authority induced their neighbors — for the Gauls are sudden and spasmodic in their designs — to detain Trebius and Terrasidius for the same reason, and, rapidly dispatching deputies among their chiefs, they bound themselves by mutual oath to do nothing save by common consent,

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<sup>4</sup> For the full definition of proto-racism and Schadee's traits, see page 13, footnote 7.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac (2004) 55-59 notes that ancient viewpoints held that those living in fertile areas were more ready to rule, while those living in infertile areas were less likely to rule and should, therefore prepare themselves to be ruled (Cf. pg. 13 where I make this argument initially).

and to abide together the single issue of their destiny. Moreover, they urged the remaining states to choose rather to abide in the liberty received from their ancestors than to endure Roman slavery. The whole sea-coast was rapidly won to their opinion, and they despatched a deputation in common to Publius Crassus, bidding him restore their hostages if he would receive back his own officers.

Caesar writes in this passage about the influence those living on the coast have on their neighboring Gallic tribes. Caesar notes just prior that those living on the coast have knowledge of sea travel and trading and, given the landscape, hold control of all of the ports in the area. The proximity to the sea affords this group more control and influence over their neighbors, and they are easily able to sway their neighbors' opinions. Caesar relates the persuadability of the neighboring Gauls to a trait commonly given to those living in the North due to their colder climate: intellectual inferiority. While the Gauls maintain physical strength and fierceness, they lack the intellectual capacity to make sound and well considered decisions. Caesar asserts Roman expertise over these people, who, using a proto-racist filter, do not reason well. He then benefits from their ability to influence their neighboring tribes.

Both of these examples epitomize Schadee's description of commonly accepted stereotypes of those living in colder harsher climates. Because the Suessiones live in the most fertile area, they are able to provide a powerful king and a large number of armed men. On the other hand, the Nervii, marked by their distance from the Remi, provide a similar amount of armed men, due to their fierceness, rather than emotional superiority. In the second example, a similar comparison can be drawn between the Veneti (who live along the coast) and their neighbors. The Veneti hold the ports and have knowledge of the sea, given their location, and are easily able to convince those Gauls living further inland to try and resist the Romans, because the Gauls are, as

Caesar argues, by their nature, quick to judgment. The Veneti, by their proximity to the sea, have the convenience of more fertile land than those living inland and, by Caesar's own description, are able to hold sway over their neighbors. Those Gauls living inland, however, are more susceptible to lack of control in judgment on account of their cold and harsh climate. Both tribes, however, give way to Roman superiority in Caesar's account, demonstrating a clear example of proto-racism. This is another example of Caesar utilizing assumptions in his writing about the Gauls which fit a proto-racist understanding of these dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Britons**

Caesar's discussion of geography and its perceived effect on race and culture extends to his venture into Britain and his dealings with the British people. The island of Britain was considered an important conquest to the Mediterranean world.<sup>7</sup> As such, it provided a perfect opportunity for Caesar to use geography to convince his Roman readers of the importance of his expedition into this land (*DBG* 4.20.1-2):

exigua parte a aestatis relinqua Caesar etsi in his locis, quod omnis Gallia ad septentriones vergit, maturae sunt himes, tamen in Britanniam profisci contendit, quod omnibus fere Gallicis bellis hostibus nostris inde subministrata auxilia intellegebat, et si tempus anni bellum gerundum deficeret, tamen magno sibi usui fore arbitrabatur, si modo insula adisset, genus hominum perspexisset, loca, portus, aditus cognovisset; quae omnia fere Gallis erant icognita.

Only a small part of the summer was left, and in these regions, as all Gaul has a northerly aspect, the winters are early; but for all this Caesar was intent upon starting for Britain. He understood that in almost all the Gallic campaigns succours had been furnished for our enemy from that quarter; and he supposed that, if the season left no time for actual campaigning, it would still be of great advantage to him merely to have entered the island,

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2, section "Proto-racism."

<sup>7</sup> Schadee (2008) 171.

observed the character of the natives, and obtained some knowledge of the localities, the harbors, and the landing-places; for almost all these matters were unknown to the Gauls.

Caesar states in this passage his desire to explore this unknown region of Britain. He reasons that this desire and subsequent expedition is important because it would allow him to observe the nature of those Britons who were even unknown to the Gauls. And yet, even though Caesar admits to knowing little to nothing about the Britons, in the next passage he refers to them as barbarians.<sup>8</sup> In the next section, Caesar connects this word to the Morini tribe as well.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, as Shcadee notes, Caesar makes the Britons enemies of the state of Rome in using the word *nostris*, since use of the word marks his expedition as useful for the state and not just for personal reasons. While this passage does not show such a direct, overt conclusion indicative of the proto-racist viewpoint, his willingness to travel into Britain to discover the geography and thus learn about the character of the Britons, while already referring to them as barbaric, is still a subtle example of the proto-racist viewpoint.

Caesar uses geography to both establish the kind of foes Rome faces in the north as eager for war, able to fight, but fickle in mind. He also uses the same geography and his own travels to play on the fears of the Romans and argue for his journey in his discussions of the Germans, Gauls, and British. Caesar uses this same description of the geography and the stereotypic assumptions of the proto-racist view to speak positively about the Romans, their journey, and their mindset.

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<sup>8</sup> *DBG* 4.219. Also see discussion on pg. 21 regarding the Latin word *barbarus* and its significance.

<sup>9</sup> *DBG* 4.22.

## ***Virtus* — Do They Really Have It?**

Caesar also uses the geography in his *De Bello Gallico* to establish the presence of *virtus* in the people he writes about. The presence of *virtus* is key to understanding and recognizing Caesar's proto-racism because, while it appears to be used in a positive sense and refer to the strength of the Gauls, instead it is patronizing, limited only to their ferocity in battle and lacking the complexity and depth of the word's significance when applied to the Romans. The Gauls were not Roman; when Caesar used the term *virtus* his Roman audience recognized the implications of its context, both when it was used and when it was omitted.

Caesar does not use *virtus* to imply the Gauls are equal to the Romans. Gruen argues that by applying the term *virtus* to the Gauls, Caesar is not showing a proto-racist view because, in doing so, he establishes a similarity between the Romans and these peoples.<sup>10</sup> However, while his application of the term here may look like Caesar seems to raise the merits of the Gauls and Germans to that of the Romans, this approach fails to look at the phrasing and reasoning behind different uses of the word.

Caesar's first use of the word appears in his first book, applied to the Gauls (*DBG* 1.1.4):

proximique sunt Germanis, qui trans Rhenum incolunt, quibuscum continenter bellum gerunt. qua de causa Helvetii quoque reliquos Gallos virtute praecedunt, quod fere cotidianis proeliis cum Germanis contendunt, cum aut suis finibus eos prohibunt out ipsi eorum finibus bellum.

and also because they are nearest to the Germans dwelling beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually at war. For this cause the Helvetii also excel the rest of the Gauls in valour, because they are struggling in almost daily fights with the Germans, either endeavoring to keep them out of Gallic territory or waging an aggressive warfare in German territory.

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<sup>10</sup> Gruen (2011) 155.

This first use of the word *virtus* shows that, while the term can be applied to the Helvetii, it is only in relationship to the other Gauls, and not to the Romans. The lack of reference to the Romans in this passage separates the two peoples by more than just geography, but also in this important Roman ideal. The *virtus* the Helvetii hold is not in comparison to the Romans, nor even to the Germans, but rather to other tribes in Gaul.

Furthermore, Caesar's use of *virtus* only applies in this case to the physical strength and ferocity of the Helvetii, attributes that, according to the tenets of proto-racism, the Gauls would be assumed to hold living in the climate they do. Caesar's use of *virtus* in reference to the Gauls directly refers to their military prowess and physical strength, along with their willingness to engage the ferocious Germans repeatedly, and specifically leaves out any mention of any manliness or moral understanding, arguably the most important facets of *virtus* as applied to the Romans.

Caesar's second use of the word is one chapter later when recounting a tale about a certain Gaul: Orgetorix (*DBG* 1.2.1).

apud Helvetios longe nobilissimus fuit et ditissimus Orgetorix. is M. Messala, [et P.] M. Pisone consulibus regni cupiditate inductus coniurationem nobilitatis fecit et civitati persuasit ut de finibus suis cum omnibus copiis exirent: perfacile esse, cum virtute omnibus praestarent, totius Galliae imperio potiri.

Among the Helvetii the noblest man by far and the most wealthy was Orgetorix. In the consulship of Marcus Messalla and Marcus Piso, his desire for the kingship led him to form a conspiracy of the nobility, and he persuaded the community to march out of their territory in full force, urging that as they excelled all in valour it was easy enough to secure the sovereignty of all Gaul.

While this use of *virtus* seems to give full credit to the Helvetii, Caesar is careful to give it the voice of a Gaul, rather than let it be a description of the Gauls by Caesar. Just as comparing the Helvetii to other Gauls gives them *virtus* without giving them a quality of

*virtus* equal to that of the Romans, so here does Caesar limit the scope of *virtus* . Caesar argues the physical and military prowess of Orgetorix only, rather than a sense of morality and virtuous ability. Gruen argues that by using words like *virtus* to describe the Gauls, Caesar is giving credence to and suggesting that the Gauls shared ideas of virtue with the Romans.<sup>11</sup> However, Gruen's argument fails to consider this excerpt in the context of Caesar's work as a whole. Caesar discusses the geography of Gaul at length in his *De Bello Gallico*. In addition to this, he explicitly points out the distance between Gaul and Rome. By pointing his readers to the geography of the Gauls and their distance from Rome, Caesar reminds his readers of their separation from the Gauls and the harsh, cold climate in which they live. He reminds them subtly that the Gauls are less intelligent and more savage, and in Orgetorix's voice, the word *virtus* becomes shallow, a mockery of Roman virtue expressed by a man viewed by the Romans as too cold and stupid to really understand what he is saying. Orgetorix would not have known Roman *virtus* in such a way, and neither would the Gauls have had a meaningful reference for Roman *virtus*, to be able to use this word the same way the Romans did.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gruen (2011) 152-153.

<sup>12</sup> Fergus Millar (1984) 7-8 points out that little is known about the effects Roman rule and colonization had on local peoples outside of Rome. He notes a move towards agriculture and urbanization in Gaul particularly, and how Gallic soldiers could be found all over the empire. What he also notes, and what is most pertinent to this thesis, is a lack of evidence of Roman influence in everyday society and understanding. This suggests that either the Roman invasion did not necessarily change Gallic understanding of Roman morals and traditions or that the changes did not undo the Gauls' lack of knowledge of Roman understanding or they were such minor changes in attitude that they did not warrant any further discussion.

Another passage which lends itself to a proto-racist interpretation of Caesar is his description of a group of Gauls who have changed their geography, and through time, have taken on the aspects of those Germans living in the same area (*DBG* 6.242-6).

itaque ea quae fertilissima Germaniae sunt loca circum Hercyniam silvam, quam Eratostheni et quibusdam Graecis fama notam esse video, quam illi Orcyniam appellant, Volcae Tectosages occupaverunt atque ibi consederunt; quae gens ad hoc tempus his sedibus sese continet cummamque habet iustitiae et bellicae laudis opinionem. nunc quod in eadem inopia, egestate, patientia qua Germani permanent, eodem victu et cultu corporis utuntur; Gallis autem provinciarum propinquitas et transmarinarum rerum notitia multa ad copiam atque usus largitur, paulatim adsuefacti superari multisque victi proeliis ne se quidem ipsi cum illis virtute comparant.

Accordingly, the Volcae Tectosages, seized on those parts of Germany which are the most fruitful [and lie] around the Hercynian forest, (which, I perceive, was known by report to Eratosthenes and some other Greeks, and which they call Orcynia), and settled there. Which nation to this time retains its position in those settlements, and has a very high character for justice and military merit; now also they continue in the same scarcity, indigence, hardihood, as the Germans, and use the same food and dress; but their proximity to the Province and knowledge of commodities from countries beyond the sea supplies to the Gauls many things tending to luxury as well as civilization. Accustomed by degrees to be overmatched and worsted in many engagements, they do not even compare themselves to the Germans in prowess.

Caesar demonstrates here just how his sense of geography plays a role in his proto-racist views of the Gauls. This particular tribe once lived with the other Gallic tribes; however, they since moved to a territory otherwise occupied by Germans. Caesar then argues that this tribe's new distance in geography, as compared to those Gauls who have come to enjoy contact with the Romans, maintained a sense of physical fierceness, whereas those living in Gaul have weakened in military prowess.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Isaac (2004) 97 also notes this loss of military skill and further notes that through contact with Roman wealth, the Gauls are "contaminated."

This viewpoint of Caesar's is further proven by his discussion of the Druids living in upper Gaul. Having already established the geography of the land and the time within which the Romans travel to Britain, Caesar discusses the two ranks of men among the Gauls, focusing particularly on the Druids.<sup>14</sup> He establishes the power that the Druids hold and the makeup of their group, focusing on the mental preparation that the Druids undergo and stating as one of his first points that the Druids do not fight in wars.<sup>15</sup> At this point, Caesar turns his attention to what gives the Druids inspire virtue (*DBG* 6.14.5):

in primis hoc volunt persuadere, non interire animas, sed ab aliis post mortem transire ad alios, atque hoc maxime ad virtutem excitari putant metu mortis neglecto.

The cardinal doctrine which they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one to another; and this belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour.

The Druids differ from the Romans and most of the Gauls of mainland Europe in that their virtue is not based on war, duty, or riches, but rather on a spiritual understanding of how the world and souls work. Again, as with the Helvetii, this interpretation of *virtus* is not one that is comparable to the Romans, but one that is unique to the Druids. This example, as with ones already discussed, shows the *virtus* of the Gauls tied directly to military prowess. Even though this example makes use of morals and religious duty for the Gauls, it still only incites *virtus* in battle. Caesar goes to the trouble of describing the Druids as a section of people who do not participate in physical activities like that of

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<sup>14</sup> *De Bello Gallico* 6.13-14 states that throughout Gaul there are two classes of people: common and noble. The common folk are often treated as a lower class, which Caesar remarks as similar to the treatment of slaves. The noble class are called Druids.

<sup>15</sup> Caesar *De Bello Gallico* 6.14. As the Druids were not only noble but also served as the priests of the society, they would not be involved in battle.

war, for which the Gauls are eager, and as an elite group of people separated from that of the rest of the Gauls. In doing so, he furthers their separation from the Romans and establishes a new brand of virtue for the Druids. Furthermore, the Druid teaching that the soul does not die, but passes from one body to another only increases the British ferocity. As they don't fear death, the Romans can expect a ferocity in the Gauls that is unknown among the Romans. This ties back to Caesar's application of *virtus* to the Gauls: their courage is about ferocity, not loyalty.

Caesar uses geography to utilize the already understood stereotypes of the "other." Additionally, he uses geography to provide reason and support for his own causes and to establish degrees of separation between himself and those people he comes into contact with. While Gruen argues that this shows a lack of proto-racism, the very fact that these descriptions and attributes rest upon stereotypes established by geography shows a clear proto-racist understanding in Caesar's work.

### **The Aethiopians**

Pliny's work *Naturalis Historia* is a collection of books based in science and research, making geography key to understanding parts of this work. In these books, Pliny leans heavily on preexisting research and previously established assumptions about his various topics, including, and particularly relevant to this thesis, the Aethiopians. As has been previously discussed, Pliny uses the term *Aethiopia* to refer to the area south of Egypt and to the people that dwell there. Pliny's choice avoids the negative connotation of impure that *Nuba* gives. Rather, it relies on not only the Greek language, but the Greek understanding of the people living to the south of Egypt: that those people living there were burnt by the sun, given their geography's perceived proximity to the sun, and the heat of their climate.

As does Caesar, Pliny makes connections between the quality of the environment and the temperament of the peoples in question. His assessment of those living north of the Mediterranean is in line with Caesar's, and Pliny also evaluates those living to the south, particularly the Aethiopians (*NH* 2.189):

namque et Aethiopas vicini sideris vapore torreri adustisque similes gigni, barba et capillo vibrato, non est dubium, et adversa plaga mundi candida atque glaciali cute esse gentes, flavis promissas crinibus, truces ver ex caeli rigore has, illas mobilitate sapientes, ipsoque curum argumento illis in supera sucum revocari natura vaporis, his in inferas partes depelli umore deciduo.

For it is beyond question that the Aethiopians are burnt by the heat of the heavenly body near them, and are born with a scorched appearance, with curly beard and hair, and that in the opposite region of the world the races have white frosty skins, with yellow hair that hangs straight; while the latter are fierce owing to the rigidity of their climate but the former wise because of the mobility of theirs; and their legs themselves prove that with the former the juice is called away into the upper portions of the body by the nature of heat, while with the latter it is driven down to the lower parts by falling moisture.<sup>16</sup>

Pliny's description of the two groups, even though a straightforward list of the traits they possess, is indicative of a point of view that results from proto-racism.. He describes a people to the north and, within his physical description, focuses especially on their physical strength; the biological understanding Pliny uses to explain the northerners' strength is directly connected to their geographical location and climate. The Aethiopians to the south of the Mediterranean display the opposite traits from those in the north: wise temperaments instead of physical strength, dark skin instead of fair, curly hair instead of straight. Pliny again ties the traits of the Aethiopians to their geographical locations and climates, and points to their opposing geography to explain

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<sup>16</sup> English translations of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* are from Rackham, Jones, and Eichholz (1949-1954).

their opposing features: those who live in a cold climate have near opposite characteristics that those who live in a hot climate.<sup>17</sup> Pliny's understanding of how geography influences the outward appearance and temperament of the peoples in question is also in line with Aristotle's teaching.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly Pliny asserts that while the Gauls—the men to the north—are fair skinned, fierce, and, therefore, stupid, the Aethiopians are dark skinned, cowardly, and wise.<sup>19</sup>

In this same book, which concerns the movement of the stars, Pliny discusses more of the Aethiopians traits, by comparing them to those who live “in the middle of the Earth” (*NH* 2.189-190):

corporum autem proceritatem utrobique, illic ignium nisu, hic umoris alimento; medio vero terrae salubri utrimque mixtura fertiles ad omnia tractus, modicos corporum habitus magna et in colore temperie, ritus molles, sensus liquidos, ingenia fecunda totiusque naturae capacia, isdem imperia, quae numquam extimis gentibus fuerint, sicut ne illae quidem his paruerint, avolsae ac pro numine naturae urgentis illas solitariae.

but in both regions men's stature is high, owing in the former to the pressure of the fires and in the latter to the nourishing effect of the damp; whereas in the middle of the earth, owing to a healthy blending of both elements, there are tracts that are fertile for all sorts of produce, and men are of medium bodily stature, with a marked blending even in the matter of complexion; customs are gentle, senses clear, intellects fertile and able to grasp the whole of nature; and they also have governments, which the outer races never have possessed, any more than they have ever been subject to the central races, being quite detached and solitary on account of the savagery of the nature that broods over those regions.

In this section, Pliny attaches traits to groups of people based solely on their geography. Those who live in the middle of the earth enjoy particularly mild, clever, and strong

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<sup>17</sup> Pliny in 2.189 applies this understanding to both the animals and groups of people living in the regions.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac (2006) 94 differentiates Pliny's description from Aristotle's in that Aristotle focuses on the Greek world while Pliny's writing is with an understanding of both the Greek world and the Roman Empire.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac (2006) 151.

attributes due entirely to a healthy mixing of geography from the surrounding areas. Those in the outer areas, due to their geography alone, not only lack in either physical or mental ability, but also lack as a community in their rites and governments. This practice of attributing hereditary traits and proclivity to certain customs to geographical location stems from that same proto-racist concept that the Romans inherited from the Greeks.

### **If It Is Positive, Is It Still Proto-racism?**

Gruen argues that because Pliny the Elder and others focus on positive or neutral stereotypes, racism is absent from the Roman viewpoint.<sup>20</sup> With a contemporary understanding of racism, this would seem to be the case, but the contemporary definition of racism depends upon a relationship with skin color the ancients did not have; Gruen also recognizes this, but insists on this discounting any possibility of racism in the ancient world. This direct connection between skin color and bigotry and negative bias betrays a contemporary lens, rather than an understanding of ancient viewpoints. What is key to Isaac's definition of proto-racism, however, is the understanding that people in power (the Romans) assign stereotypes and explain characteristics using geography and climate, rather than skin color, as their origins in comparison to themselves. These stereotypes and explanations are clearly proto-racist because these people are compared to the Romans, who hold the power (particularly in the literature discussed in this thesis) and are, therefore, considered inferior.

While the discussion of the bravery of the Gauls, wisdom of the Druids, cleverness of the Aethiopians, and *virtus* in non-Romans might be perceived as positive

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<sup>20</sup> Gruen (2011) 197-203.

from a contemporary point of view, they are still examples of the proto-racism that was prevalent among the Romans. Caesar both directly and indirectly connects these attributes to specific locations in Europe and with certain climates. Pliny states that these attributes can be applied to whole groups of people based solely on the sun, stars, and weather in any given region. The perceived negativity of any single stereotype does not play into whether or not the stereotype is an example of the proto-racist view. Often a perceived lack of negativity relies on a contemporary understanding of racism: relying heavily on skin color. Rather, the application of these stereotypes is consistently tied to observations about the connection of geography and weather to the characteristics of the people who live there and by these connections are seen as inferior by the people in power. Caesar demonstrates this each time he uses *virtus* to refer to the Gauls because unlike the Romans, Caesar's use for the Gauls refers only to military prowess and savagery on the battlefield.

A contemporary understanding of racism requires a connection between perceived negative characteristics and skin color. Through this understanding, it can be easy to argue that the ancients were lacking in any racist thoughts. However, when one looks at examples from the ancient world in writing, a clear perspective is evident. Rather than basing stereotypes and perceived negative traits in skin color, they are based in particular perspectives of the role that geography and climate have on various groups of people.

## CHAPTER 5 HEREDITARY FEATURES IN CAESAR AND PLINY THE ELDER AS THEY RELATE THE GAULS AND AETHIOPIANS

In addition to geography, features perceived to be hereditary are central to a proto-racist view of the world. For the purposes of this paper, "hereditary features" will include those features which are considered by ancient sources to be biologically passed down from parent to child, whether or not they are indeed biologically passed down. Geography still plays a role even in this aspect of proto-racism because these features, thought to be passed from parent to child, are considered direct results of the geographical location. What is key to this understanding, however, is that these features, much like geography, are considered to be unchangeable, making them, in a proto-racist viewpoint, an integral part of the culture in which they are found.<sup>1</sup>

Isaac illustrates the immutable qualities of hereditary features, using a proto-racist lens, with multiple examples from ancient authors.<sup>2</sup> He points particularly to Strabo's descriptions of the Aethiopians and Indians. Strabo marks the differing hair between the two groups, suggesting that the Aethiopians' skin color and texture are due to being closer to the sun than other groups. Strabo goes on to say that these attributes are passed from parent to child within the womb, along with other similarities.<sup>3</sup> This example illustrates a central tenet of proto-racism: variable aspects (geography, climate,

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac (2006) 38 gives an important example from Livy which points to the perceived effect geography and weather have on the features of seeds and animals. These features are passed down from parent to child, thus making them hereditary features.

<sup>2</sup> He also points to examples wherein such things as scars and tattoos are passed from parent to child via biology.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac (2006) 37.

etc.) are thought to cause hereditary features passed between generations.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will analyze examples from both Caesar and Pliny the Elder for discussions of such perceived hereditary features, keeping in mind the proto-racist viewpoint.

### **To the North**

Throughout his *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar points repeatedly to the physicality of the Gauls, mainly their strength and warring tendencies. In the first book, Caesar recounts a battle with the Helvetii, a Gallic tribe. Caesar recounts a particular conversation with a representative of the Helvetii (*DBG* 1.13.3-4):

Is ita cum Caesare egit: si pacem populus Romanus cum Helvetiis faceret, in eam partem ituros atque ibi futuros Helvetios ubi eos Caesar constituisset atque esse voluisset; sine bello persequi perseveraret, reminisceretur et veteris incommodi populi Romani et pristinae virtutis Helvetiorum. Quod improvise unum pagum adortus esset, cum ii qui flumen transissent suis auxilium ferre non possent, ne ob eam rem aut suae magnopere virtuti tribueret aut ipsos despiceret. Se ita a patribus maioribusque suis didicisse, ut magis virtute contenderent quam dolo aut insidiis niterentur.

He treated with Caesar as follows: If the Roman people would make peace with the Helvetii, they would go whither and abide where Caesar should determine and desire; if on the other hand he should continue to visit them with war, he was advised to remember the earlier disaster of the Roman people and the ancient valour of the Helvetii. He had attacked one canton unawares, when those who had crossed the river could not bear assistance to their fellows; but that event must not induce him to rate his own valour highly or to despise them. The Helvetii had learnt from their parents and ancestors to fight their battles with courage, not with cunning nor reliance upon stratagem.

In this passage, Caesar has the Helvetii use their physical strength to remind him of the potential for damage to the Roman people should he persevere in his endeavor.<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>4</sup> The scope of this thesis does not include the works of Strabo, but it is important to include Isaac's examples from Strabo as an example parallel to what I am identifying in Caesar and Pliny.

strength, which Caesar defines as savage and unrestrained, as well as lacking in emotional fortitude, is well known among the Helvetian people and, as it was inherited from the previous generation which defeated the Romans, older generations have shown the strength is dangerous to the Romans. Caesar describes this physical strength, refusal to use cunning or strategy, and lack of knowledge of Roman power as something that has been passed down as a hereditary feature, and the current generation with whom he is treating continues to rely on this inherited power, since their location and hereditary traits prohibit them from using “cunning” or “strategy,” as they themselves declare. While war traditions and practices may be passed down as aspects of culture, underlying Caesar’s encounter in this passage is a reinforcement of his and his readers’ expectations, which lend themselves to a proto-racist view: a tendency for violence over wit and great physical strength passed through generations, rather than earned on merit.

Caesar’s description and treatment of the Helvetii is not unique. He repeatedly refers to the physical strength of the Gallic tribes and, ultimately, their emotional weakness when they lose to him or give in to his demands. Schadee mentions Caesar’s encounter with the Belgae. Due to their northern geography, they are exempt from some of the corruption of weakness that plagues the southern Gauls, and instead the severity of their climate causes particular fierceness.<sup>6</sup> Schadee also points to a dual agenda for Caesar in referencing the Belgae’s distance and fierceness; it elevates his

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<sup>5</sup> As has been discussed in Chapter 1, while *virtus* had many complex meanings for the Romans, Caesar’s exclusive use of *virtus* to mean physical and military strength in reference to the Gauls remains consistent, limiting the Gauls, by their geography, to be physically strong, yet lacking in intellectual skills.

<sup>6</sup> Schadee (2008) 164-165.

reputation among his audience and further establishes the Belgae as a group of people squarely in the camp of “other.”

Schadee highlights the Nervii as another example of the same. Caesar again uses their distance and geography to redefine Nervii traditions and cultural points as hereditary factors (*DBG* 2.14.3-5):

Quorum de natura moribusque Caesar cum quaereret, sic reperiebat: nullum esse aditum ad eos mercatoribus; nihil pati vini reliquarumque rerum ad luxuriam pertinentium inferri, quod his rebus relanguescere animos eorum et remitti virtutem existimarent; esse homines feroces magnaevirtutis.

concerning whose character and customs when Caesar inquired he received the following information: - That there was no access for merchants to them; that they suffered no wine and other things tending to luxury to be imported; because, they thought that by their use the mind is enervated and the courage impaired: that they were a savage people and of great bravery.

Caesar’s use of the word *natura* suggests something unchangeable. The information he receives is not, in and of itself, unchangeable information about a group of people, but he takes it as such, using geography and the isolation of the group to explain their stubbornness, savageness, and refusal to work with Caesar.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Caesar’s targeted use of *virtus* continues in this passage, balancing their lack of emotional fortitude with their savagery and military bravery.

Caesar’s descriptions of the various Gallic tribes are excellent examples of a proto-racist view, coloring the opinions of his readers according to their preexisting expectations for men to the north. His repeated reminders of the north’s savagery and

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<sup>7</sup> Schadee (2008) 165 also points out that Caesar uses these commonly held beliefs about those living in remote locations to point to the end of his Gallic campaign, suggesting that Romans reading his work would be familiar with these stereotypes and would recognize these traits, and subsequently, accept Caesar’s superiority.

remote location serve both to clearly label the Gauls as “other” and to reassert Roman superiority. These tribes inherit mindless valor, but no art or strategy. Their *natura* is fixed, hereditary, and inextricably linked to their location.

### To the South

In contrast to those in the north, the Aethiopians and other peoples living to the south of the Mediterranean are considered mentally clever, but physically weak. However, these traits, like those of the peoples to the north, are presumed hereditary and used to characterize whole groups, again sourced in their climate and their geography.

Pliny the Elder describes a specific instance when the stereotypical traits caused by geography become hereditary (*NH* 7.50):

lam illa vulgata sunt: varie ex integris truncos gigni, ex truncis integros; eadem parte truncos, signa quaedam naevosque et cicatrices etiam regenerari, quarto partu Dacorum originis nota in brachio reddita

It is also well known that sound parents may have deformed children and deformed parents sound children or children with the same deformity, as the case may be; that some marks and moles and even scars reappear in the offspring, in some cases a birth-mark on the arm reappearing in the fourth generation.<sup>8</sup>

The supposed hereditary nature of scars, moles, and disease is a commonly accepted theory in the ancient world.<sup>9</sup> Pliny’s discussion here centers around the physical marks

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<sup>8</sup> Another translation of this passage makes the point more clearly, so for comparison I have included this older translation from Bostock and Riley (1855). “It is universally known that well-formed parents often produce defective children; and on the other hand, defective parents children who are well formed, or else imperfect in the same part of the body as the parents. It is a well-known fact also, that marks, moles, and even scars, are reproduced in members of the same family in successive generations. The mark which the Daci make on their arms for the purpose of denoting their origin, is known to last even to the fourth generation.”

<sup>9</sup> Isaac (2006) 37 also points to examples in *AWP*, as well as in Aristotle. He uses Strabo 15.1.24 to further illustrate, ‘and already in the womb children, by seminal communication, become like their parents; for congenital illnesses and other similarities are also thus explained.’

and weaknesses believed to be caused by proximity to the sun and describes their transfer into hereditary traits passed from parent to child. While extreme heat was believed to cause physical disease (as compared to the emotional deficiencies extreme cold was believed to cause), Pliny suggests that these attributes or diseases become hereditary. Pliny exemplifies the textbook definition of proto-racism when he originally explains these illnesses and inferior features by their geography and then argues in favor of a hereditary nature.

Pliny also uses the geography of the southern lands to describe hereditary features that have been passed down throughout entire peoples that are so distinct and strange that the people become identified by these features first and foremost (*NH* 6.35):

animalium hominumque monstrificas effigies circa extremitates eius gigni minime mirum, artificii ad formanda corpora effigiesque caelandas mobilitate ignea. ferunt certe ab orientis parte intima gentes esse sine naribus, aequali totius oris planitie, alias superiore labro orbas, alias sine linguis. pars etiam ore concreto et naribus carens uno tantum foramine spirat potumque calamis avenae trahit et grana eiusdem avenae sponte provenientis ad vescendum.

It is by no means surprising that the outermost districts of this region produce animal and human monstrosities, considering the capacity of the mobile element of fire to mould their bodies and carve their outlines. It is certainly reported that in the interior on the east side there are tribes of people without noses, their whole face being perfectly flat, and other tribes that have no upper lip and others no tongues. Also one section has the mouth closed up and has no nostrils, but only a single orifice through which it breathes and sucks in drink by means of oat straws, as well as grains of oat, which grows wild there, for food.

This passage discusses peoples in the area of Aethiopia.<sup>10</sup> In other books, Pliny noted this location's proximity to the sun, as well as the extreme heat of the land.<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> This particular passage of Pliny (*NH* 6.35) discusses the specific landscape of the area of Meroe, where the Aethiopian/Nubian people and their rulers lived.

passage also refers to the geography of the land in the “mobile element of fire” and continues his description of this area by describing the people there and the particular physical deformities from which they suffer. These traits, which Pliny has already asserted are caused by the geography and climate, are also argued to be hereditary and are assigned to entire tribes as a distinguishing factor.

Additionally, Pliny uses the geographical features of the area to explain traits the Aethiopians themselves had, making generalizations about their features and habits based solely on the geography and stereotypes passed on to the Romans by the Egyptians. In the passage below, Pliny particularly discusses the traits of those living in temperate zones, namely, the Romans, to contrast the flow of bodily juices to those of other peoples. Additionally, Pliny argues that these unchangeable hereditary features affect the traditions and morals of whole groups.<sup>12</sup> Pliny then turns this discussion again to those living outside the so-called temperate zones to remark on perceived mental capabilities. As pointed out before, Pliny describes the climate “in the middle of the earth” as producing men for whom “customs are gentle, senses clear, intellects fertile and able to grasp the whole of nature” (*NH* 2.190).<sup>13</sup> In his compiled descriptions of various peoples that live within the borders of Aethiopia, Pliny uses the geography of Aethiopia to explain the physical weaknesses and the general “nature” of the groups living there. Pliny’s rationalization of these physical and mental features as hereditary traits formed by the geography and climate and then passed down from generation to

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<sup>11</sup> Pliny the Elder *NH* 2.189, 7.50

<sup>12</sup> Pliny the Elder *NH* 2.188-189.

<sup>13</sup> See pg. 43-44.

generation until it is these traits by which the peoples are identified is an excellent example of proto-racism.

Indicative of proto-racism in Pliny's work is his generalization that those living in hot climates are mentally clever. Isaac notes the same model of the proto-racist view in Vitruvius, who agrees that those born in the extreme heat are exceedingly clever and cunning but, due to the lack of blood flow caused by the heat, are physically weak and substandard.<sup>14</sup> The Hippocratic treatise *AWP* also points out this perceived pattern, although it uses Europe and Asia as its examples.<sup>15</sup> Pliny the Elder, while he does subscribe to the well-accepted theory that cleverness and physical weakness both result from the heat in the south, does not take such a negative tone as his predecessors. As discussed in Chapter 4, in the section "The Aethiopians," Book II of *Naturalis Historia* gives a clear example of this proto-racist bias. Pliny the Elder's description of those in the north and south clearly reflects a proto-racist understanding of these areas, given his reliance on geography to ascribe traits to those living in the south, but the description does not take on the negative connotations that Caesar's description of the hasty, savage Gauls does. Rather, Pliny's Aethiopians are, "wise ... and their legs themselves prove that...the juice is called away into the upper portions of the body by the nature of the heat."<sup>16</sup> Pliny argues that the height of those in the South

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<sup>14</sup> Isaac (2004) 83-84.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac (2004) 83-84.

<sup>16</sup> Pliny the Elder *NH*, 2.189

demonstrates the desire of the blood to leave the heat of the land by creating longer legs.<sup>17</sup>

Gruen argues that this lack of negativity in Pliny the Elder's description (along with a fabled and legendary history of Aethiopia) demonstrates a lack of proto-racist influence in Pliny's writing. While Pliny's discussion of the mental features as a balance for being physically weak, in regards to the Aethiopians, is not as full of condemnation as Caesar's discussion of the Gauls, his adherence to the influence of geography, climate, and heredity—the markers of a proto-racist view—is clear, attributing such characteristics as skin color and mental capabilities first to geography, then as hereditary features of the geographically afflicted. Gruen's argument is founded in contemporary racism, however, in which the basis for stereotypes is skin color and not geography. As Isaac repeatedly confirms, proto-racism is not the same as contemporary racism (though both deserve further analysis and comparison, see below, "Comparisons to Contemporary Racism").

While Caesar uses proto-racist stereotypes to further his own military projects and reputation, Pliny's lack of agenda (other than gathering the world's information into one body) lends itself to an ethnographic understanding of proto-racism. Pliny's descriptions of the Aethiopians as dark skinned, clever, and sometimes physically abnormal assume the Aethiopians acquired these characteristics due to geography, and they then became hereditary features that are not only passed down from parent to child, but assigned to groups as a whole. Caesar's stereotypes do the same, but are

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<sup>17</sup> In this same passage (*ibid.*) Pliny also describes that those living in the north are tall due to the effects of the dampness. Those living in fertile regions are of medium height.

offered with a more negative connotation in order to create worthy enemies of the Roman state and reinforce Roman superiority.

### **Comparisons to Contemporary Racism**

Some may choose to argue the points of comparison when it comes to Pliny's discussion of the Aethiopians and contemporary racist views. However, the origins of these views are singular. Pliny and Caesar both pinpoint characteristics that differentiate the cultures they discuss from Romans. Pliny discusses the Aethiopians' skin color, physical weakness, and sharp intellect, while Caesar points to the Gauls' violent natures, physical strength, and lesser intelligence. For both authors, the source of these differences is the geographical location of each race and the hereditary traits that they have attained as a result of their location and climate. In contrast, contemporary racism, while also associating intellect and personal characteristics with stereotyped groups, identifies skin color and ethnicity as the sources of these traits. Racism and proto-racism both assign traits based on an unchangeable factor; racism's unchangeable factor is skin color while proto-racism's unchangeable factor is geography.

One notable example of this difference is in the theory behind Charles Murray's book *The Bell Curve*.<sup>18</sup> Murray argues that differences between women, African Americans, and other minority groups and white males are based on biological factors. He goes on to argue that one's genes determine specific features of a person and by those genes they can be categorized as superior or inferior.<sup>19</sup> Murray uses statistics on

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<sup>18</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center (n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

poverty to argue that certain genders and races are inferior to others: African Americans are lazy where whites are motivated. Murray's argument relies on an understanding of inferiority based on biology and skin color, while Pliny's argument relies instead on factors external to the person: geography and climate. These factors constitute proto-racism.

Another example can be drawn from Governor Paul LePage's recent remarks regarding crime in his state of Maine. Governor LePage remarked that the increase of crime, particularly that involving drugs, was due to people "by the name of D-Money, Smoothie, Shifty."<sup>20</sup> Governor LePage went on to explain his remarks by arguing that if one knows how his enemy dresses and what his enemy looks like, one uses those attributes to go after the enemy. Pliny's view does recognize skin color as an attribute of certain peoples, but it is not the basis for his description of a particular culture. Rather Pliny relies on unchangeable features like geography to delineate cultures, and skin color is simply a result of that geography. In contrast, Governor LePage is clearly referencing one particular skin color as the absolute base of his argument and, therefore, the reasoning for his racist view. While both sets of stereotypes stem from a view of superiority over "the other," the proto-racist view attributes weaknesses to location and climate while modern racists' views attribute weakness to the persons themselves.

Both of these examples provide specific views distinguishing the differences between proto-racism and contemporary racism. While proto-racist views rely on supposed unchangeable features like geography and climate to explain and argue for

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<sup>20</sup> BBC (2016).

certain stereotypes and hereditary features (like skin color), contemporary racist views use skin color and biological elements inherent to the person as the base of the argument. Gruen argues that the ancient world differed so much from the modern world that the ancients could not have held racist views. However, the definitions of proto-racism and contemporary racism differ significantly enough to encompass the particular stereotyping unique to each time period.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Benjamin Isaac defines proto-racism as “an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities” (38). This attitude therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography.<sup>1</sup> Examples of this type of racism are clear in both Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* and Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* regarding their treatment of the Gauls and Aethiopians in their respective works.

Caesar and Pliny both draw upon an understanding of geography and climate that has clear proto-racist implications: namely, those who lived in colder climates had stronger physical features and were less intelligent while those in hot climates were physically weak but with clever minds. Caesar labels the Gauls based on their savageness and perceived *virtus* in battle. Pliny also uses these geographical stereotypes to describe those living in the north in contrast to those in the south, reinforcing Caesar’s descriptions. In Pliny’s description, those in the northern regions are pale in skin color, with yellow hair, and savage and fierce. Similarly, Pliny describes those in the southern areas as scorched by the sun, with curly hair, and physically weak.<sup>2</sup> Both Pliny and Caesar use geography to explain the physical traits of groups of people who are native to the various areas they discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac (2006) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny the Elder *NH* 2.189.

Both Caesar and Pliny describe these features as hereditary and, therefore, definitive of entire groups. Caesar uses this to further his own purposes for his military expeditions, but, more importantly, he uses them as a base to identify the Gauls as “other” for his audience, the Romans, suggesting that these assumptions and stereotypes were not only known, but commonplace. Pliny’s use of the same helps put forth his ethnographic view of the world based in this proto-racist understanding.

Gruen argues against these examples with the crux being that neither Caesar’s nor Pliny’s descriptions are particularly negative, even calling the use of the word *virtus* a sign of positive views.<sup>3</sup> While both contemporary racism and the idea of proto-racism have in common the alienation of people (as “other”) to gain superiority, each type of racism is different in the means by which they it alienates. Caesar’s use of *virtus*, especially in the voice of a Gaul, demonstrates that the Gauls themselves believed they had strength, but that this is not necessarily the strength of the Romans, but instead patronizing. As has been discussed, the Roman idea of *virtus* is both moral and physical, referring to bravery and morality as the Romans understood it in mental, physical, and spiritual capacities. When Caesar uses it in reference to the Gauls, however, the usage is exclusively physical, regarding their savageness in war. This distinction separates the Romans from the Gauls and, despite sounding positive, serves to lift the reputation of the Romans for being able to face such an enemy in their own territory. While neither Caesar nor Pliny’s discussion of the “other” may appear to have a negative voice, they follow the formula for proto-racism as set forth by Isaac: those living in cold harsh climates are physically strong, but emotionally stunted; those living

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<sup>3</sup> Gruen (2011) 151-153.

in hot harsh climates are mentally clever, but physically weak, and those living in areas where there is a balance of temperature, fertile land, and ease of weather are both physically strong and mentally clever. While the Gauls may be strong and the Aethiopians tall and wise, the Romans truly have the upper hand given their geography, traits, and resultant hereditary features.

The continuity of stereotypes across multiple authors, as in Pliny and Caesar in their descriptions of those living in the northern regions, also provides support that these views were not unique to the author, but were widespread and well-known. As has been discussed, Strabo also discusses the Aethiopians in a way similar to Pliny the Elder.<sup>4</sup> Similar examples are provided by Yates and Eaverly when it comes to skin color.<sup>5</sup> As Yates and Eaverly discuss, proto-racism was not exclusive to groups of people from various areas, but also created a divide based on gender within majority groups like the ancient Romans and Egyptians.<sup>6</sup>

These examples from Caesar and Pliny exemplify an “othering” of peoples who were not Roman. The definition provided by Isaac of proto-racism allows us to see how they work. Caesar uses geography and hereditary traits to demonstrate proto-racist views against the Gauls that they were physically strong and “savage,” as well as emotionally weak and stubborn. Pliny uses the same types of traits, but applies them to the Aethiopians to demonstrate a group affected physically by their proximity to the sun and fire so that they are “scorched” and physically abnormal (by Roman standards), and

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<sup>4</sup> Isaac (2006) 37.

<sup>5</sup> Yates (2015) 3-4. Eaverly (2013) 36-40.

<sup>6</sup> Yates (2015) 3-4. Eaverly (2013) 36-40.

that these traits are passed through the generations making them unchangeable and key to identifying the entire group. Based on these examples and support, it is clear that proto-racist language was not only commonly known, but used in both militaristic and ethnographic pieces of literature, suggesting that the proto-racist view prevalent throughout the Roman Empire.

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