

THE
HISTORY OF
WHITE PEOPLE

NELL IRVIN
PAINTER

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ALSO BY NELL IRVIN PAINTER

Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present

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THE HISTORY OF WHITE PEOPLE

NELL IRVIN PAINTER



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the absolute indispensables.*

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INTRODUCTION

I might have entitled this book *Constructions of White Americans from Antiquity to the Present*, because it explores a concept that lies within a history of events. I have chosen this strategy because race is an idea, not a fact, and its questions demand answers from the conceptual rather than the factual realm. American history offers up a large bounty of commentary on what it means to be nonwhite, moving easily between alternations in the meaning of race as color, from “colored” to “Negro” to “Afro-American” to “black” to “African American,” always associating the idea of blackness with slavery.”^{1*} But little attention has been paid to history’s equally confused and flexible discourses on the white races and the old, old slave trade from eastern Europe.

I use “white races” in the plural, because for most of the past centuries—when race really came down to matters of law—educated Americans firmly believed in the existence of more than one European race. It is possible, and important, to investigate that other side of history without trivializing the history we already know so well.

Let me state categorically that while this is not history in white versus black, I do not by any means underestimate or ignore the overwhelming importance of black race in America. I am familiar with the truly gigantic literature that explains the meaning, importance, and honest-to-god reality of the existence of race when it means black. In comparison with this preoccupation, statutory and biological definitions of white race remain notoriously vague—the leavings of what is not black.¹ But this vagueness does not indicate lack of interest—quite to the contrary, for another vast historical literature, much less known today, explains the meaning, importance, and honest-to-god reality of the existence of white races.

It may seem odd to begin a book on Americans in antiquity, a period long before Europeans discovered the Western Hemisphere and thousands of years before the invention of the concept of race. But given the prevalence of the notion that race is permanent, many believe it possible to trace something recognizable as the white race back more than two thousand years. In addition, not a few Westerners have attempted to racialize antiquity, making ancient history into white race history and classics into a lily-white field complete with pictures of blond ancient Greeks. Transforming the ancients into Anglo-Saxon ancestors made classics unwelcoming to African American classicists.^{2*} The blond-ancient-Greek narrative may no longer be taught in schools, but it lives on as a myth to be confronted in these pages. Before launching the trip back to ancient times, however, it may be useful to make a few remarks about the role

of science or “science” of race.

I resist the temptation to place the word “science”—even theories and assertions of the most spurious, pernicious, or ridiculous kind—in quotation marks, for the task of deciding what is sound science and what is cultural fantasy would quickly become all-consuming. Better to note the qualifications of yesterday’s scientists than to brand as mere “science” their thought that has not stood the test of time. I give scholars of repute in their day pride of place in my pages—no matter that some of their thinking has fallen by the wayside.

TODAY WE think of race as a matter of biology, but a second thought reminds us that the meanings of race quickly spill out of merely physical categories. Even in so circumscribed a place as one book, the meanings of white race reach into concepts of labor, gender, and class and images of personal beauty that seldom appear in analyses of race. Work plays a central part in race talk, because the people who do the work are likely to be figured as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of laboring status. It is still assumed, wrongly, that slavery anywhere in the world must rest on a foundation of racial difference. Time and again, the better classes have concluded that those people deserve their lot; it must be something within them that puts them at the bottom. In modern times, we recognize this kind of reasoning as it relates to black race, but in other times the same logic was applied to people who were white, especially when they were impoverished immigrants seeking work.

Those at the very bottom were slaves. Slavery has helped construct concepts of white race in two contradictory ways. First, American tradition equates whiteness with freedom while consigning blackness to slavery. The history of unfree white people slumbers in popular forgetfulness, though white slavery (like black slavery) moved people around and mixed up human genes on a massive scale.* The important demographic role of the various slave trades is all too often overlooked as a historical force. In the second place, the term “Caucasian” as a designation for white people originates in concepts of beauty related to the white slave trade from eastern Europe, and whiteness remains embedded in visions of beauty found in art history and popular culture.

Today most Americans envision whiteness as racially indivisible, though ethnically divided; this is the scheme anthropologists laid out in the mid-twentieth century. By this reckoning, there were only three real races (“Mongoloid,” “Negroid,” and “Caucasoid”) but countless ethnicities. Today, however, biologists and geneticists (not to mention literary critics) no longer believe in the physical existence of races—though they recognize the continuing power of racism (the belief that races exist, and that some are better than others). It took some two centuries to reach this conclusion, after countless racial schemes had spun out countless different numbers of races, even of white races, and attempts at classification produced frustration.

Although science today denies race any standing as objective truth, and the U.S. census faces taxonomic meltdown, many Americans cling to race as the unschooled cling to superstition. So long as racial discrimination remains a fact of life and statistics can be arranged to support racial difference, the American belief in races will endure. But confronted with the actually existing American population—its

distribution of wealth, power, and beauty—the notion of American whiteness will continue to evolve, as it has since the creation of the American Republic.

THE HISTORY OF WHITE PEOPLE

GREEKS AND SCYTHIANS

Were there “white” people in antiquity? Certainly some assume so, as though categories we use today could be read backwards over the millennia. People with light skin certainly existed well before our own times. But did anyone think they were “white” or that their character related to their color? No, for neither the idea of race nor the idea of “white” people had been invented, and people’s skin color did not carry useful meaning. What mattered was where they lived; were their lands damp or dry; were they virile or prone to impotence, hard or soft; could they be seduced by the luxuries of civilized society or were they warriors through and through? What were their habits of life? Rather than as “white” people, northern Europeans were known by vague tribal names: Scythians and Celts, then Gauls and Germani.

But if one asks, say, who are the Scythians? the question sets us off down a slippery slope, for, over time and especially in earliest times, any search for the ancestors of white Americans perforce leads back to non-literate peoples who left no documents describing themselves.¹ Thus, we must sift through the intellectual history Americans claim as Westerners, keeping in mind that long before science dictated the terms of human difference as “race,” long before racial scientists began to measure heads and concoct racial theory, ancient Greeks and Romans had their own means of describing the peoples of their world as they knew it more than two millennia ago. And inevitably, the earliest accounts of our story are told from on high, by rulers dominant at a particular time. Power affixes the markers of history.

Furthermore, any attempt to trace biological ancestry quickly turns into legend, for human beings have multiplied so rapidly: by 1,000 or more times in some two hundred years, and by more than 32,000 times in three hundred years. Evolutionary biologists now reckon that the six to seven billion people now living share the same small number of ancestors living two or three thousand years ago. These circumstances make nonsense of anybody’s pretensions to find a pure racial ancestry. Nor are notions of Western cultural purity any less spurious. Without a doubt, the sophisticated Egyptian, Phoenician, Minoan, and Persian societies deeply influenced the classical culture of ancient Greece, which some still imagine as the West’s pure and unique source. That story is still to come, for the obsession with purity—racial and cultural—arose many centuries after the demise of the ancients. Suffice it to say that our search for the history of white people must begin in the misty mixture of myth and reality that comprises ancient Greek literature.

Early on, most Greek notions about peoples living along their northeastern border, especially that vaguely known place called the Caucasus, were mythological.² Known to Westerners since prehistoric times, the Caucasus is a geographically and ethnically complex area lying between the Black and Caspian Seas and flanked north and south by two ranges of the Caucasus Mountains. The northern Caucasus range forms a natural border with Russia; the southern, lesser Caucasus physically separates the area from Turkey and Iran. The Republic of Georgia lies between the disputed region of the Caucasus, Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. (See figure 1.1, Black Sea Region.)

According to Greek mythology, Jason and his Argonauts sought the Golden Fleece in the (Caucasus) land of Colchis (near the present-day Georgian city of Poti) obtaining it from King Aeetes, thanks to the magical powers of the king's daughter, the princess Medea. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe, the sister of King Aeetes, transforms half of Odysseus's men into animals and seduces Odysseus. Later on, Hesiod and Aeschylus take up the tale of Prometheus, son of a Titan, punished for having stolen the secret of fire from Zeus, who chains Prometheus to a mountain in the Caucasus and sends an eagle to peck at his liver every day for thirty thousand years.³ One can see that to the Greeks, almost anything goes on in the Caucasus. Furthermore, Greek mythology accords women of the Caucasus extraordinary powers, whether the magical of Medea and Circe, or the warlike of the Amazons, variously located in a number of places, including the Caucasus. Even today, these myths reverberate.⁴



Fig. 1.1. The Black Sea Region today.

Underlying the idea that all people originated between the Black and the Caspian

Seas is the text of Genesis 8:1, which has Noah's ark coming to rest "on the mountains of Ararat" after the flood. In the thirteenth century Marco Polo located Mount Ararat in Armenia, just south of Georgia in eastern Turkey, at the juncture of Armenia, Iraq, and Iran in the country of the Kurds. At any rate, Mount Ararat, at 5,185 meters, or some 17,000 feet high, is Turkey's highest mountain and is still believed by many to mark the site of postdiluvian human history in western Asia. Nor have recent events lessened its importance.

Twentieth-and twenty-first-century wars contest access to oil (South Ossetia, Azerbaijan, Grozny, Maykop, and the Caspian Sea, especially Baku, hold rich old deposits); earlier trade brought slaves, wine, fruit, and other agricultural produce from the valleys along the Black Sea, and a variety of natural resources (e.g., manganese, coal, copper, molybdenum, and tungsten). Current iconography of the Caucasus shows bombed-out cities and oil rigs of Chechnya or bearded nationalists called "terrorists" by the Russians. Occasional photographs of Caucasians show gnarled old people as proof of the life-prolonging powers of yogurt. There was a time when the people of the Caucasus were thought the most beautiful in the world. But documentary images making this case—in pictures, not just words—have proven illusive.

BY CONTRAST, vague and savage notions had lodged in the Greek mind concerning Scythians and Celts, who lived in what is now considered Europe. Voicing broad ethnic generalities, Greeks had words—*Skythai* (Scythian) and *Keltoi* (Celt)—to designate far distant barbarians. *Scythian*, for instance, simply meant little known, northeastern, illiterate, Stone Age peoples, and *Celt* denoted hidden people, painted people, strange people, and barbarians to the west. We cannot know what those people called themselves, for the Greek names stuck. Nor can we know how many of those situated in northern, western, and eastern Europe, two or three thousand years ago or earlier, became the biological ancestors of nineteenth-century German, English, and Irish people and twentieth-century Italians, Jews, and Slavs.⁵ We know from Greek descriptions of their habits that, whether chiefs or slaves, all had light-colored skin.

For a sense of this vagueness, recall the naming skills of fifteenth-century Europeans as they looked west in the Americas. Their backs to the Atlantic Ocean, Europeans described sparsely settled people they had never seen before as "Indians." Such precision regarding faraway, unlettered peoples has been commonplace throughout the ages. Those at a distance became the Other and, easily conquered, the lesser. But not in antiquity because of race. Ancient Greeks did not think in terms of race (later translators would put that word in their mouths); instead, Greeks thought of place. *Africa* meant Egypt and Libya. *Asia* meant Persia as far to the east as India. *Europe* meant Greece and neighboring lands as far west as Sicily. Western Turkey belonged to Europe because Greeks lived there. Indeed, most of the Greek known world lay to the east and south of what would become recognizable later as *Europe*.

Mostly, Greek scholars focused on climate to explain human difference. Humors arising from each climate's relative humidity or aridness explained a people's temperament. Where the seasons do not change, people were labeled placid. Where seasons shift dramatically, their dispositions were said to display "wildness,

unsociability and spirit. For frequent shocks to the mind impart wildness, destroying tameness and gentleness.” Those words come from Hippocrates’ *Airs, Waters, and Places*.^{6*}

DISTANCE WAS all, for travel went at the speed of foot and hoof. Scythians roamed from Georgia in the Caucasus and the lands around the Euxine (Black) Sea to the steppes of Ukraine and on east to Siberia. Interestingly, the word “Ukraine” stems from Polish and Russian language roots meaning “edge of the world.”⁷ Russians and Ukrainians who now claim ancient Scythians as glorious ancestors look to Yalta in the Crimea as their ancestral home. Some Russian ancestors surely would have lived there, but the region’s tumultuous history renders any single origin an invented tradition. Black Sea ancestors were Scythians, yes, but must also have included invaders and migrants of Tartar, Russian, Polish, Turkish, Iranian, and Chinese origin—at the very least.

Nowadays, the notion of Celtic ancestry is widely appealing. Thinking wishfully, self-proclaimed Celts like to root themselves in French Brittany, the islands of the English Channel, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, easily separating themselves from Germans, Anglo-Saxons, and Franks. The Greeks, for their part, could not go so far. Across two and a half millennia and lacking good intelligence, they first situated the barbarian Celts in various places from the Danube to the Iberian Peninsula, only later widening Celtic ethnography as Greek scholars learned from long-distance traders, travelers, and one another.

Historians of antiquity credit the traveler and geographer Hecataeus of Miletus (ca. 550–ca. 490 BCE) as the first Greek to map the whereabouts of Celts and Scythians.* We know little about him except that he traveled to Egypt and recognized the extent and power of the Persian empire. But he must have been more widely traveled, for he locates the trading center Massilia (modern French Marseilles) in the land of the Ligurians, near the land of the Celts, and he mentions a Celtic settlement in what is now the southeastern Austrian state of Styria.^{8†} Hecataeus also sees much else: the Black Sea sits near the middle of the map, just to the right of “Thrace,” with the Sea of Azov sticking up above it. His Danube, Dnieper, and Don Rivers—correctly—empty into the Black Sea from the left, the center, and the Sea of Azov, and the Caspian Sea lies at the far upper right at the edge of the world. Lastly, Hecataeus takes a leap, placing the Scythians between the Danube and the Dnieper Rivers and the Celts in the west, left of what we call the Italian peninsula.⁹ A half century later, Herodotus ridiculed Hecataeus’s map as vague and untrustworthy, and so it is. But the Greeks were reaching out and learning more.

BORN SEVENTY years after Hecataeus, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (ca. 480–ca. 427 BCE) had an advantage, and he seized it, gaining acclaim as the West’s first systematic historian, indeed as the father of history, a title given him by the great Roman orator Cicero. So lasting was Herodotus’s reputation that his likeness, real or imagined, was carved in stone in Greece a century or so after his death and copied later in Rome.^{10*}

Born and raised in what is now western Turkey, he traveled widely, took good notes, and produced the first unified world history, encompassing Egypt (“Africa”), western Asia (“Asia”), as well as Greece (“Europe”). Where earlier scholars had repeated hearsay, Herodotus seems actually to have visited Egypt, Babylonia, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region. He also most likely reported on Scythians as an eyewitness.¹¹ Herodotus’s *History*, written in 440 BCE, chronicles a succession of great wars fought between Persians and Greeks during the period 499–479 BCE. More important for our purposes, *The History* also describes barbarians surrounding the Greek known world. Quite naturally, Herodotus puts Greece in the middle of everything and sings its praises. Even so, by modifying Hecataeus’s map of fifty years earlier, he did improve upon it greatly. Of course, Herodotus’s world is still flat—that notion would stand for another thousand years. But he displayed it wider, including the entire Mediterranean Sea, the Celts in the Iberian Peninsula, and the Scythians north of the Black Sea. He also grants the Amazons an appearance, east of the other Scythians and north of the Caucasus.

Living in the eastern Mediterranean, Herodotus knew far more about eastern Scythians than about western Celts, who lived too far away for him to have good information. Much of book 4 of *The History* describes the various Scythian tribes and their territory. Although concentrating on the settled “Royal” Scythians around the lower Danube, Dnister, and Dnieper Rivers—all emptied into the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov—Herodotus’s descriptions reach out to nomadic peoples far east of the Ural Mountains and around the Caspian Sea. Looking east from Athens, Herodotus held an advantage denied earlier historians, for by the time he wrote in the mid-fifth century, the Greek empire extended to the Black Sea, and some Scythian groups were in regular commercial contact with Greeks and Persians. Other various tribes, lumped into the Scythian *mélange* for convenience, were merely designated as wild.

Sharing a common view of Scythians as preeminent warriors, Herodotus was agog at what he described as their savage and drug-riddled life in what is now southern Ukraine, not to mention their circumcised penises.^{12*} Herodotus knew, perhaps as an eyewitness—historians remain divided on this point—that Scythians smoked marijuana and substituted drug use for bathing: “The Scythians, as I said, take some of this hemp-seed, and, creeping under the felt coverings, throw it upon the red-hot stones; immediately it smokes, and gives out such a vapour as no Grecian vapour-bath can exceed; the Scyths, delighted, shout for joy, and this vapour serves them instead of a water-bath; for they never by any chance wash their bodies with water.”¹³

Herodotus’s Scythians also drink the blood of the first man they kill in battle, then cut off their victims’ heads for delivery to their king or chief for payment: “The Scyth is proud of these scalps,” Herodotus reports, “and hangs them from his bridle-rein; the greater the number of such napkins that a man can show, the more highly is he esteemed among them. Many make themselves cloaks, like the sheepskin [garments] of our peasants, by sewing a quantity of these scalps together.” Bodies of the vanquished serve a further use as showy quivers for arrows made of the skin of a right arm: “Now the skin of a man is thick and glossy, and would in whiteness surpass almost all other hides. Some even flay the entire body of their enemy, and stretching it upon a frame carry it about with them wherever they ride.” The skulls of their very

worst enemies served as drinking cups, lined, if the Scythian could afford it, with gold.¹⁴

As for the Amazons, Herodotus found them fascinating as well. After marrying and settling down, “[t]he women of the Sauromatae have continued from that day to the present to observe their ancient customs, frequently hunting on horseback with their husbands, sometimes even unaccompanied; in war taking the field; and wearing the very same dress as the men.” *The History* also describes man-women as skilled soothsayers called “Enarees.”¹⁵

HIPPOCRATES, ANCIENT Greece’s greatest physician and the father of Western medicine, from the Greek island of Kos (off the coast of Herodotus’s Halicarnassus, in western Turkey), also wrote widely and with great confidence on many other matters at the peak of Greek imperial power in the third and fourth centuries BCE. His *De aëre, aquis et locis* (*Airs, Waters, and Places*), a universal encyclopedia from 400 BCE, includes the barbarian ways of Scythians, Asians, and Greeks and, true to his medical interests, their practices of sexuality and reproduction.

For Hippocrates, topology and water determine body type, leading to differences between peoples of bracing, high terrain and those in low-lying meadows. Lowlanders he posited as broad, fleshy, and black haired: “they themselves are dark rather than fair, less subject to phlegm than to bile. Similar bravery and endurance are not by nature part of their character, but the imposition of law can produce them artificially.” People living where the water stands stagnant “must show protruding bellies and enlarged spleens.” Where the living is easy, as in the fertile lowlands, men pay the price in manhood: “the inhabitants are fleshy, ill-articulated, moist, lazy, and generally cowardly in character. Slackness and sleekness can be observed in them, and so far as the arts are concerned they are thick-witted, and neither subtle nor sharp.” Generalizing further about the two types he assumes live in the high country, Hippocrates believed that those in a level, windy place will be “large of stature” and “like to one another; but their minds will be rather unmanly and gentle.” By contrast, those confined to places where the soil is thin and dry and the seasons change dramatically “will be hard in physique and well-braced, fair rather than dark, stubborn and independent in character and temper. For where the changes of the seasons are most frequent and most sharply contrasted, there you will find the greatest diversity in physique, in character, and in constitution.”¹⁶

Getting to the nub of the matter, Hippocrates’ mountainous, rugged Greece clearly shaped his concepts of its European penumbra. A land “blasted by the winter and scorched by the sun,” produced handsome men: “hardy, slender, with well-shaped joints, well-braced, and shaggy.” The fierce Greek/European temperament would seem to explain Greek imperial domination as well as manly Greek/European beauty: for “where the land is bare, waterless, rough, oppressed by winter’s storms and burnt by the sun, there you will see men who are hard, lean, well-articulated, well-braced, and hairy; such natures will be found energetic, vigilant, stubborn and independent in character and in temper, wild rather than tame, of more than average sharpness and intelligence in the arts, and in war of more than average courage.”¹⁷

Such applause for European hardness would reappear over time, depending on the exposure of scholars to armies (mercenary and voluntary) and the relative prestige of militarism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Americans widely envied the military might of European colonial powers.

Though Hippocrates places various Scythian tribes in a number of different regions and assigns to them an array of body types, he oddly concludes that they all look more or less alike. Some live along the Ukrainian Sea of Azov, the mild northern bay of the Black Sea (also known in antiquity as Palus Maeotis, on the border region between Hippocrates' Europe and Asia).^{*} Others inhabit a cold, humid region and drink water from snow and ice, which Hippocrates believed had an effect on skin color: "The Scythians are a ruddy race because of the cold, not through any fierceness of the sun's heat. It is the cold that burns their white skin and turns it ruddy."¹⁸

Some Scythians farm, Hippocrates' encyclopedia declares; others were nomads; yet others called Sauromatae, the Amazons of the Palus Maeotis/Sea of Azov region, seem constantly to be at war. Before young girls reached puberty, Amazon mothers cauterized their right breasts, arresting the breast's development and immensely strengthening the right shoulder and arm. Thus did young Amazon women become warriors; raised to throw javelins from horseback and to fight like men—as long as they remained virgins. Their potency demanded abstinence, of course, which lasted until each Amazon had killed three enemies, whereupon the Amazon performed certain ritual sacrifices before engaging in sex with men. Once married, however, Amazons settled down peaceably, returning to war only during times of dire crisis. This lack of a breast seems not to have interfered with Amazon sexuality.¹⁹

In fact, throughout *Airs, Waters, and Places* one is never far from sex. Hippocrates ties some Scythians' low rate of reproduction to climate, culture, and the bodies of men and women, including the many eunuchs said to be living among them who obviously did not father children. Furthermore, Scythian women, often fat, are said to have damp bellies that tended to close out semen and nullify conception, a serious problem since a rampant effeminacy among Scythian men curtailed the production of semen anyway.^{*} Moistness and softness, "the greatest checks on venery," meant that Scythian men "have no great desire for intercourse." Horseback riding creates further obstacles to fertility. Scythian men remedied the lameness caused by horseback riding through a dubious cure: cutting the vein behind each ear and bleeding until they passed out; then "[a]fterwards they get up, some cured and some not. Now, in my opinion, by this treatment the seed is destroyed. For by the side of the ear are veins, to cut which causes impotence, and I believe that these are the veins which they cut. After this treatment, when the Scythians approach a woman but cannot have intercourse, at first they take no notice and think no more about it." After several failures at sex, they conclude they have sinned against the gods and become transvestites, even though ashamed of comporting themselves like women.²⁰

Turning to the east, Hippocrates rates the milder Asian (i.e., Persian and Babylonian) climate more highly than that of Europe (around Greece). Living in perpetual springtime, the civilized men of Asia were "well nourished, of very fine physique and very tall, differing from one another but little either in physique or stature." Nature and culture do produce weaknesses, however. The lack of well-

defined seasons made Asians “feeble.” Climatic sameness, puzzlingly, retards fetus development, too, no matter what the season of fertilization.²¹ More to the point, monarchy made men into cowards: “For men’s souls are enslaved, and refuse to run risks readily and recklessly to increase the power of somebody else.” Hippocrates says earlier, “All their worthy, brave deeds merely serve to aggrandize and raise up their lords, while the harvest they themselves reap is danger and death.”²²

Not surprisingly, conditions improved closer to home. Unlike Asians, Hippocrates says, the Europeans/Greeks have no kings to tell them what to do. (In fact, he conveniently ignores a complication—that while his Greeks did live in more or less democratic city-states, warlords ruled the surrounding barbarians, many also European.) In any case, Hippocrates sings the praises of European political institutions that encourage individualism: for “independent people, taking risks on their own behalf and not on behalf of others, are willing and eager to go into danger, for they themselves enjoy the prize of victory. So institutions contribute a great deal to the formation of courageousness.”²³ Over succeeding millennia, this contrast between king-ridden Asia and enterprising, individualist Europe hardened into a trope, even amid redefinitions of Europe and even though many Europeans remained under the thumb of kings while others violently overthrew them.

MISSING IN this analysis is any ambivalence regarding slavery. Although Herodotus mentions slaves repeatedly, he always does so in an offhand, matter-of-fact manner, as merely a system within the common hierarchies of antiquity—in Greece, throughout the Greek empire, and among barbarians across the known world. At least as early as the seventh century BCE, nomadic, loosely organized societies around the Black Sea region established an efficient trade network furnishing slaves to the wealthy of Greek society. Regions long fabled in myth, such as Thrace (now southern Bulgaria, northeastern Greece, and northwestern Turkey, homeland of the Roman slave Spartacus) and Colchis (now Georgia), in particular, seem to have supplied the bulk of them. Impoverished parents and kidnapping pirates delivered slaves to the market, and famine and warfare regularly increased the supply of people offered up for sale.²⁴

Could oligarchic Greece have thrived without slavery? Could the philosophers and citizens attending to their businesses and that of the state ever have arisen without such a lower class doing the work? Plato owned fifty slaves, and households with ten or more bondpeople were common. Going about town or on long military campaigns, Athenian gentlemen always took along a slave or two. Quite likely, slaves outnumbered free people in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, probably numbering 80,000 to 100,000 in Athens alone. Multitudes of enslaved women worked primarily at household tasks, providing services that could be sexual, medical, and domestic, while male slaves, skilled and unskilled, labored in the fields, on board ships, and in industrial workshops. Athens used an enslaved Scythian police force numbering between 300 and 1,000, for Scythians were known as skilled archers.²⁵

The slave trade worked like this: as noted, the Black Sea line of supply began with barbarian chiefs whose endless warfare steadily drove refugees onto the market, where chiefs sold them to Greek slave traders for luxury goods like wine and clothing. Not