

Graeco-Roman Popular Perception of Africa. The Proverbial Aspect*

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Almost all we know of Classical antiquity is inherently predisposed towards the life of intellectual male elites. Even if natural elements and human criticism were more sparing, so that more textual and material remains could outlive them, we could not expect to discover what other sectors of the population thought, felt, planned, did. Literacy prevailed among a limited number of people. Theoretical education and then the production and reading of written texts involved, in both Greek and Roman societies, free upper-class males. Women, slaves, and the poor either could not afford the leisure and funding needed to acquire impractical knowledge, or were not considered suitable, worthy, or in need of such knowledge. Indeed, some non-elite persons could probably recognize letters and perhaps even read words and sentences. But literary texts were available to them neither physically nor intellectually.¹

* I congratulate Ranon Katzoff on his jubilee: (משלי, ג:ב). I would like to thank the anonymous readers of an earlier version of this article as well as David Schaps for their helpful comments.

¹ There is an abundant literature on Greek and Roman education, literacy and orality; I therefore refer the reader only to studies from the last decade: WATSON 2001; YUNIS 2003; COOPER 2007; MACKAY 2008; JOHNSON & PARKER 2009. On illiteracy specifically see HANSON 1991.

The knowledge and thoughts of Greek and Roman illiterate crowds are thus seemingly beyond modern reach. However, hints and clues to some notions held by non-readers may still be cautiously drawn. Most obviously, information presented orally or visually was accessible to all sectors of the population, sometimes including even children and foreigners. Oral transmissions such as public speeches delivered at assemblies of citizens (both in Athens and in Rome) or in popular law courts included details that could, at least in theory, reach all the various groups in the audience. The same premise is valid for ideas and facts included in dramas. Likewise, visual representations, whether on public monuments (temples, sculptures, triumphal arches) or on private artifacts (vases) had the potential of indiscriminately impressing their viewers.² What was absorbed naturally depended on the personality, interest and mental abilities of each individual observer, but the important point for us is that a large resource of information was available outside the realm of letters.³

In the category of non-written sources, a significant place should be kept for proverbs and proverbial expressions which are frequently originally oral and popular or, if their origin is literary, eventually become part of the daily speech of the crowds. It seems thus safe to assume that proverbs, when they function as proverbs,⁴ reflect what common people thought or knew. Such idioms transmit facts and notions to future generations and in this sense reinforce and promote real or erroneous knowledge and ideas.⁵ That being the case, from texts that, although now written, document expressions that were originally oral, we might glean some idea of what non-reading social strata assumed, be they solid facts or mere stereotypes.

For considerations of scope appropriate to a short, self-contained contribution, the present study proposes to learn what illiterate people knew about Africa according to Greek and Latin proverbs and proverbial expressions concerning the continent. As one might expect, there are other “geographical” proverbs⁶ referring to various sites and I hope to discuss them elsewhere. But the methodology, the insights and the cautious conclusions which I attempt at offering here, even if relying on but few examples, may serve as a guideline and represent a wider linguistic and social phenomenon.

Naturally, geographical places within the immediate environs of the people who attended them are more likely to invade common talk. Therefore, names

² See CLARKE 2003.

³ Most importantly HORSFALL 1996, 103-109; 2003, 48-63.

⁴ Meaning short sentences or phrases, independent of any context and regardless of their origin.

⁵ HORSFALL 1996, 110; LARDINOIS 2001; DUECK 2004.

⁶ Definition in DUECK 2004, 42.

of sites in Greece, on the Aegean islands and in Asia Minor which are included in proverbs seem to reflect the living space of the Greeks, and proverbial expressions including sites in the western Mediterranean mirror the regions in which the Romans were more active. It seems therefore more intriguing to investigate what people could know about remote places which were less likely to be visited by a relatively wide public such as merchants and soldiers. Thus – Africa.⁷

Another reason for choosing Africa is social. Proverbs often refer to ethnic groups and are most probably based on acquaintance of foreign peoples. However, foreigners occasionally arrived at the cultural centres of Greece and, even more so, of Rome, and therefore people could almost stay at home and meet them. In other words, in the ethnic sphere the world reached Graeco-Roman society, but what is at issue presently is how Greeks and Romans mentally reached the world, or what ordinary people knew about the world without leaving their backyard. Let us then focus on Africa rather than on a specific ethnic group.

The following examples derive mainly from relatively late collections of Greek proverbs. Zenobius, a sophist at the time of Hadrian (117-138 CE), based his compilation on the Hellenistic collections of Didymus and Lucillus of Tarrha and arranged it in sets of hundreds (*centuriae*) and within them in alphabetical order according to the first word of the proverb. Diogenianus, a lexicographer of the same time as Zenobius, is perhaps the author of another compilation of popular proverbs also arranged alphabetically for scholastic purposes. Later medieval compilations of the 13th-15th centuries copied and preserved parts of these earlier collections.⁸ Although late, these corpora often include very early—even 600-year-old—proverbs as far as their origin may be traced according to their written occurrences. Therefore, the chronological span of the present discussion may seem wide, but it should be kept in mind that the collections are merely the final written end of their consequences while their oral and popular origin may be much earlier. The apparent chronological disorder in the evidence for the textual occurrences of the proverbs in this article derives from the nature of such idioms. Because their birth

⁷ Merchants, especially at times of Roman dominance, reached Africa, and, as we shall see, commerce is a significant source for proverbs on Africa. As is well-known Rome also had several military campaigns on African soil. In this sense the continent was not totally unknown to sectors of the population which may have been illiterate. However, the point here is that because Africa was more exotic in the primary sense of “non-native”, it seems more revealing to study its occurrence in the proverbs.

⁸ For a short survey, see *OCD*³ (1996) s.v. paroemiographers. The most comprehensive modern collection of Greek proverbs is *CPG* and the recent edition of Zenobius: BUHLER 1987-99. Latin proverbial expressions appear in the collection and edition of OTTO 1890.

and their consequences are often inseparable from oral agents, it is hard to identify the exact circumstances of creation of proverbs. Therefore we depend on their occasional literary occurrences. A chronological order of presentation would be almost impossible and in any case inaccurate. The order chosen here thus aspires to be thematic.

1. ἀεὶ φέρει τι ἢ Λιβύη καινόν
(“AFRICA ALWAYS BRINGS SOMETHING NEW”)⁹

This proverb first appears in writing in Aristotle’s zoological works (*HA* 8.28, 606b19-24; *GA* 2.7, 746b7-12).¹⁰ The zoological context in Aristotle connects with the content of the proverb: the discussion is of African fauna and the proverb relates to Africa. Aristotle explains hybridization, i.e. the mixture of different animal species, through the geographical conditions in Africa: numerous animals gather near few water resources where they meet and mate. Then he adds this expression which in all likelihood he has not coined himself for this specific discussion: Aristotle defines it as *τις παρουμία* (*HA*) or *τὸ παρουμιαζόμενον* (*GA*), meaning that it was already circulating as an expression independent of the specific zoological context and earlier than the time of the Aristotelian composition. The generalizing *semper* (ἀεὶ) in the proverb seems indeed to reflect the proverbial, popular, non-scientific, language.

At about the same time (mid. 4th century BCE) Anaxilas, an Attic writer of comedies, used this expression in a different context for its proverbial meaning. Two verses in his lost comedy *Hyacinthus* claimed that “music is like Libya which... brings forth some new creature every year”.¹¹ Anaxilas’ use of the expression is less straightforward than Aristotle’s use. Anaxilas associates the proverb with an idea about a different field, about music.

⁹ *CPG*, vol. 1, p. 45; p. 192; vol. 2.1, p. 96. *Libyē* translates throughout, already by Latin authors, into *Africa*. The Greek *Libyē* first referred to the entire continent in Pindar (*Pyth.* 9.8). The inhabitants of North Africa (excluding Egyptians) were named *Libyēs* already in the work of Hecataeus of Miletus c. 500 BCE; the term is probably of Egyptian origin. See *Brill’s New Pauly* s.v. Libyēs, Libyē; ZIMMERMAN 1999. *Africa* as a toponym parallel to *Libyē* and applied to the entire continent appeared in Latin texts only at the latter half of the 3rd century BCE. Its etymology was probably based on the name of the local tribe of the *Afri*. See *Brill’s New Pauly* s.v. *Africa* (1); (3); VYČIČEK 1975; LACROIX 1998, 283-285. Josephus, after Alexander Polyhistor (*AJ* 1.239-241), attributes the name ‘Africa’ to ʿΑφρ, a descendant of Abraham (*Gen.* 25:4). Both *Africa* and *Libya* appear interchangeably in Latin proverbs.

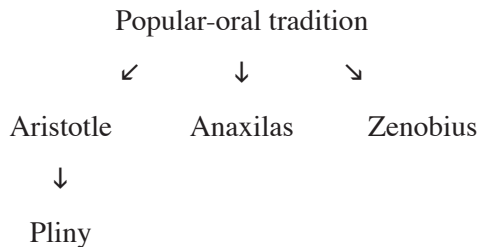
¹⁰ The form quoted is that of *HA*; in *GA* it has a slight variation: ἀεὶ τι τῆς Λιβύης τρεφούσης καινόν.

¹¹ *PCG* F 27 = Athen. 14.623F. Unless otherwise specified, translations throughout this article are slightly modified versions of the *LCL* editions.

The same proverb in Latin - *semper aliquid novi Africa adfert*¹²- first appears in Pliny (*HN* 8.42) when he mentions hybridization in African animals and specifically defines this sentence as a popular Greek saying (*vulgare Graeciae dictum*). Pliny probably took the entire section from Aristotle since it includes the zoological explanation, the proverb and its definition as *vulgatus*.

The proverb appears as such in the Hadrianic collection of Zenobius and this may prove, even if Zenobius based his work on earlier collections, that it perhaps circulated as a popular saying for several centuries. Zenobius, however, added a slight variation: “Libya always brings something new *and bad* (ἀεὶ φέροι τι Λιβύη καινὸν κακόν)” (Zen. II 51, *CPG* p. 45). This might be either a confusion and miscopy of καινόν and κακόν, or, what seems more likely, a popular addition deriving from the association of bad or horrible things with remote and unknown places.¹³

We have then four literary occurrences of the proverb in Aristotle, Anaxilas, Pliny and Zenobius, but no proven direct link of literary transmission between each chronological consecutive authors. Since the aim of attention is presently geographical notions of illiterate sectors of ancient society, it seems probable to assume oral transmission in some or in every stage of this literary tradition. The only less likely oral stage may be between Aristotle and Pliny since the latter uses the entire zoological context just like the earlier Greek authority. This might be illustrated in the following diagram:



The Greek proverb diffused into Latin, became available to the crowds without the scientific broader context, and with it notions about Africa were available in common use. Africa was thus associated with new things and, like other new things in antiquity it was paired with bad things at least in Zenobius.¹⁴

¹² OTTO 1890, 8, and recently VAN STEKELBURG 1988 and RONCA 1994.

¹³ For which see ROMM 1992.

¹⁴ For the idea that new is bad, see the use of the term *novus* to mean “seditious” (*OLD* s.v. *novus* 10).

2. Λιβυκὸν θηρίον ("AFRICAN BEAST")¹⁵

This proverbial expression refers to something which is rare and strange. Diogenianus explains that it derived from the large variety of beasts and creatures living together in Africa. This exact expression does not appear in writing in the Greek texts, however in Aristophanes' *Birds* we find the following variation: Euelpides and Peisetaerus introduce themselves to a slave. Peisetaerus introduces himself as "the Fearflow, a Libyan bird (Λιβυκὸν ὄρνεον)" (65), and Euelpides as "a Shitterling, from the land of Phasis (Φασιανικόζ)" (68). Both characters do not resemble any known bird and therefore claim that they are of species native to distant regions – Africa and the Phasis at the eastern end of the Black Sea (modern Georgia). The association with the river Phasis derives from its remoteness and perhaps also from its specific relevance to birds because it has given its name to the pheasant.¹⁶ Therefore it seems that Aristophanes chose it specifically for his ornithological needs. But the association with Libya-Africa simply denotes rareness, and that may derive from already circulating popular notions about that region of the world.

Similarly to the first proverb discussed here, the basis for this popular notion of Africa as a bearer of strange natural phenomena, is the otherness of the nature, and specifically of the fauna, in comparison to what was known in the Greek world. This caused astonishment as well as fear and affixed such notions in the collective consciousness of the Graeco-Roman societies.

3. FRUMENTI QUANTUM METIT AFRICA ("AS MUCH CORN AS AFRICA REAPS")¹⁷

This proverbial expression appears in slight variations in Horace, Statius and Martial. In all contexts it expresses an excessively and exaggerated large amount, specifically of wealth. In one of his satires Horace demonstrates avarice through the example of the perverted values of a certain Staberius, who ordered his heirs to record after his death his exact financial status because he thought the more one was rich the better he was:

¹⁵ *CPG*, vol. 1, p. 271; vol. 2.1, p. 78.

¹⁶ Translation and some comments are those of SOMMERSTEIN 1987 ad loc.

¹⁷ OTTO 1890, 8.

Staberius' heirs had to carve his wealth on his tomb,
if not they'd to entertain the masses with a hundred
paired gladiators, at a funeral feast to be planned
by Arrius, plus all of Africa's corn (Horace, *Satires*, 2.3.84-87).

The clearly exaggerated amount of corn is specifically associated with Africa and is based on the real dependence of Rome on specifically Egyptian corn.¹⁸ This idea is parallel to (and probably independent from) the biblical depiction of Egypt as the granary of neighbouring nations (*Gen.* 41:54-57) and similar to the proverbial expression associated with this agricultural fact to denote an extreme amount: "And Joseph gathered corn as the sand of the sea, very much, until he left numbering; for *it was* without number¹⁹" (*Gen.* 41:49).

The numismatic symbols of Africa on Roman Republican and Imperial coins personify the province as a woman with emblematic configurations of specific animals as well as stalks of wheat symbolizing the fertility of the country.²⁰ In the present context of geographical images among illiterate crowds, it seems worth emphasizing that coins were naturally widely available and figurative representations on them could be absorbed by anyone regardless of any social criterion. In this way the reputation of Africa as a fruitful land which produces an abundance of corn was reinforced as a mental image among the illiterate.

An expression similar to the one in Horace (...*quod messibus Afris verri-
tur*...) and perhaps deliberately alluding to this literary precedent,²¹ appears in Statius when he describes the tasks of the secretary *a rationibus* of the father of Claudius Etruscus who had to handle:

... All that Iberia ejects from her gold mines,
that shines in Dalmatian mountains, that is swept up in Africa's
harvest ... (Statius, *Silvae* 3.3.89-91).

The exaggerated description deliberately and explicitly aspires to denote "riches garnered among all peoples, the outgoings of the great world" (87-88) and Africa is lined up together with Iberia, Dalmatia and other regions. But the Horatian precedent and other similar proverbial expressions (see next example) show that Africa was hyperbolic for extreme riches.

¹⁸ RICKMAN 1980, esp. 232-235 and cp. the situation in the late Empire: TENGSTROEM 1974.

¹⁹ King James Bible.

²⁰ See GRUEBER 1910, vol. 2, 573-574; vol. 3, pl. 121 nos. 5-7; ROBERTSON 1971, 116, no. 298, pl. 26; 157, no. 573, pl. 40; 166, no. 638, pl. 44 (Hadrian); 423, no. 67, pl. 115; 448, no. 189, pl. 122 (Commodus).

²¹ HARDIE 1983, 155-156.

Finally, Martial in another variation when he clarifies that wine and icy water are preferable to any riches one may get, depicts wealth as a curse if it follows having to drink mere warm water:

*Possideat Libycas messis Hermumque Tagumque,
et potet caldam, qui mihi liuet, aquam.*

Let one that wishes me ill own Libyan²² harvests and Hermus and Tagus,
and drink warm water (Martial, 6.86.5-6).²³

4. QUIDQUID DE LIBYCIS VERRITUR AREIS ("EVERY GRAIN THAT IS SWEEPED FROM THE THRESHING FLOORS OF LIBYA")²⁴

Similarly to the previous proverb, this one is also first cited by Horace and is meant to express a large amount by stressing the abundance of grain in Africa. In the well-known first ode Horace demonstrates the variety in men's options for joy and delight:

...another [man is delighted] if he has stored in his own barn every grain that is swept from the threshing floors of Libya... (*Carm.* 1.9-10).

Using this expression, Horace shows how certain people delight in extreme wealth, here demonstrated through the acquisition of enormous amounts of grain. Seneca applies a similar expression in the description of the traits of a real king in his *Thyestes* (348-357):

A king is one... that no willful ambition or the ever shifting favour of the hasty mob can affect, nor all that is mined in the West or that the golden-flowing Tagus carries down in its bright bed, nor all that is threshed from Libyan harvests on scorching floors (*non quidquid Libycis terit fervens area messibus*).

Africa is thus once again associated with extreme abundance, specifically of grain.

²² In this proverbial expression some versions use *Africa* and a derived adjective (*Afer* in Statius) or a Latinized adjective derived from the Greek toponym (*Libycus* in Martial). See n. 9 above.

²³ The river Hermus (modern Gediz) in Lydia and the river Tagus (modern Tajo) on the Iberian peninsula are also proverbial for extreme wealth: *Hermus... auro madidae* (Claudian *de Raptu Proserpinae* 2.68-69); *aurifer Tagus* (OTTO 1890, 340).

²⁴ OTTO 1890, 8.

5. PULVERIS AFRICI ... NUMERUM ("AS GREAT A NUMBER AS THE DUST OF AFRICA")²⁵

In poem 61 Catullus wishes to describe the enormous joy of the recently married bride and groom:

Let him first count up the number of the dust of Africa and of the glittering stars, who would number the many thousands of your joys (61.202-206).

This metaphor is paired with the number of stars to form a literary *topos*. The comparison to the infinite number of sand grains or stars is surely well-known from *Gen. 22:17* (and elsewhere): "in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" there specifically referring to the sand by the sea. In earlier Greek sources these metaphors appear separately or, more rarely, together.²⁶ In all these contexts the expression relates to non-specific sands and stars, but Catullus refers specifically to African sand. This might be so because to a Roman mind the sands of Africa, i.e. the Sahara, appeared limitless, while the sands of the sea, even if numerous, were still defined on both sides by the land and the sea.

6. QUAM MAGNUS NUMERUS LIBYSSAE HARENAE ("AS GREAT AS IS THE NUMBER OF LYBIAN SAND")²⁷

Lesbia asks how many of her kisses will satisfy Catullus and he answers:

As great as is the number of Libyan sand that lies on silphium-bearing Cyrene, between the oracle of sultry Jove and the sacred tomb of old Battus (7.3-6).

The common expression uses, similarly to the previous one, the idiomatic great number of (specifically African) sand grains. But while Catullus departs from this popular proverb he, as a *doctus poeta*, demonstrates his wider acquaintance with African scenery and alludes to Cyrene, the oracle of Zeus-Amon and the tomb of Battus (the founder of Cyrene). These academic allusions are probably meant to pay homage to Callimachus as suited the so-called 'Alexandrian' circle of Roman poets.²⁸ The result, however, as should be stressed

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sands – Hom. *Il.* 2.800; 9.385; Pind. *O.* 2.98; Ov. *Met.* 11.615; stars: Hom. *Il.* 8.554-556; Call. *Hymn* 4.175; both: Plat. *Euth.* 294b.

²⁷ OTTO 1890, 8.

²⁸ GODWIN 1999, ad loc. and NEWMAN 1990.

in the present discussion, is that the common *topos* is associated with Africa and adds to the mental concept of the sandy continent for non-travelling and uneducated Romans, even if Catullus probably did not consider illiterate Romans as his audience.

When Virgil wishes to demonstrate the innumerable number of vine names he also mentions the number of Libyan grains of sand (*Libyci harenae*) (*G.* 2.105-6). And, later, Claudian (2nd cent. CE) says:

Can you count the waves of the sea, the grains of Africa's sands (*Libyae harenas*)? If so you can number Eutropius' masters (*Against Eutropius*, 1.32-33).

Although all the examples derive from strictly literary texts, some of them specifically addressed to connoisseurs, the fact that the expression is used in different contexts proves that it became a proverbial expression to denote excessive amounts of anything. The nature of proverbs as independent linguistic idioms may allow a cautious, yet probable, assumption that it was also orally widespread.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Greeks and Romans did not know the entire continent of Africa. Circumnavigations of Africa were attempted (and rarely succeeded) as early as the Carthaginian expeditions of the 5th century BCE, but there is no evidence for actual knowledge below an imaginary line between Zanzibar in the east and Guinea in the west. No solid information exists of real visits south of these points.²⁹

For Classical antiquity we depend heavily on written sources, and these guide us even in detecting originally oral traditions. As was shown here, proverbs and proverbial expressions were often preserved in literary texts, and occasionally in "higher" literature such as philosophical treatises or learned poetry. This fact, however, does not preclude these idioms from having been popular in certain stages of their circulation. When Aristotle, for instance, incorporates such an expression in his scientific and taxonomic discussions, it is likely that he absorbed it himself in a colloquial sphere of images. Even if such an idiom is the result of an author's own experience or intellect, the fact that we find it in later texts as well as in later collections of proverbs proves that the expression has long left its original context and became autonomous and independent of any specific connotation. Therefore, the earliest documented occurrence of a specific expression is in fact, from the point of view of those who are interested in proverbs, a sort of fixed point which helps to track down

²⁹ DUECK 2012, 51-67.

its history. It may have been popular before it became integrated in the literary texts and it may have become popular after it appeared in a text, but in any case it carried through generations facts, notions and stereotypes.

Africa is not a common component of Greek and Roman proverbs, but the idioms listed above seem sufficient to demonstrate how the popular mind and common images work and how proverbs are preserved and transmitted through the eternal interplay between written and oral traditions. Exaggerations (“always”, “most”) are a sign of simplicity, particularly when compared with scientific and intellectual aspirations to accuracy.

The literary usage of such proverbial expressions is various and depends on the character of the author and his work. Evidently a proverb within a scientific context (Aristotle) or in intellectual poetry (Catullus) has a slightly different role than a proverbial expression in Attic old comedy (Aristophanes and Anaxilas) or an epigram of Martial. The former genres probably insert them partially as part of a literary correspondence with earlier texts and partially in order to bring subjects closer to a wider audience. The more popular genres in their turn both absorb and dictate vulgar speech. Thus, in some cases it is difficult to separate elite concepts from popular ones, but the assertion this article wishes to offer is that because these idioms appear in collections of proverbs, even their occurrences in literature of higher scholarly stature reflects oral and most probably common origins.

What is the relationship between stereotypes and facts as reflected in these proverbs? Clearly Africa was colloquially associated with large amounts of sand, extreme abundance of corn, strangeness and unusual (“new”) phenomena. As usual in popular, unscientific, notions and even stereotypes, the details were based on certain truths: the scenery of north Africa and the northern regions of the Sahara may understandably produce an image of endless sands; Africa, and specifically Egypt, was one of the major sources of corn for the Roman state; and as far as strangeness is concerned, natural phenomena of zoology, botany and even anthropology were very different from what the average Greek and Roman knew. This fact connects with the psychological phenomenon in which any foreign country is, to a certain extent, strange in the eyes of outsiders. Thus, as is typical for popular expressions, extreme and exaggerated elements have a leading role in the image of remote places.³⁰

Last but not least, the very toponym of Africa / Libya became a colloquial expression even if most people had no accurate idea where this region was. May we cautiously take these hints as reflecting some illiterate ideas of Africa?

³⁰ ROMM 1992. Already in Herodotus Egypt in particular represented the strangest country in the world, where everything was the opposite of regular Greek nature and custom (Hdt. 2.35).

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