

### 3 | Ethnic Types and Stereotypes in Ancient Latin Idioms<sup>\*</sup>

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Ethnic and racial prejudice and xenophobia occur in every society, but in widely differing degrees, social settings, and moral environments. They are the result of the human tendency to generalize and simplify, so that whole nations are treated as a single individual with a single personality (Isaac 2004, 3).

#### The Nature of Idioms and Proverbial Expressions

This study is a search for cultural insights through common linguistic structures. More specifically, it is an attempt at gleaning some knowledge of ancient Classical views of foreigners from Latin idioms and proverbial expressions. Let us simply start with the basic definition of idioms as words or phrases that have a figurative meaning which is different from the literal meaning of the individual word(s) composing them. The characteristics of idioms, their social and linguistic functions, and their research are closely related and partially similar to those of proverbs.<sup>1</sup> Like idioms, proverbs, in any culture, contain generalizations or approximate truths originating in real-life experience. Often they turn actual and factual realities into exaggerated and inaccurate assertions. In all their aspects, proverbs, proverbial expressions and single-word idioms, usually emerge from popular experience and are based on impressions of ordinary people. These become maxims reflecting common, sometimes prejudiced, concepts of situations, people, places and other details related to human encounters with the

<sup>\*</sup> I have never been a registered student of Benjamin Isaac but he was kind enough to comment on some of my earlier studies, always offering precise and illuminating suggestions, and his own publications are a constant inspiration for me. I warmly greet him on his birthday and wish him many more healthy years of productivity and satisfaction.

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This chapter is part of a larger on-going research project on Greek and Roman proverbs.

<sup>1</sup> On general discussions of idioms, see Everaert et al. 1995; Glucksberg 2001: 68–89. On proverbs, see Mieder and Dundes 1994; Mieder 2004. Specifically on Greek and Roman proverbs, see Kindstrand 1978; Huxley 1981; Russo 1997.

world. The humble origin of idioms and proverbs does not always mean that they do not hold facts and verifiable truths or that they cannot express educated ideas, but rather that they are not the result of scientific and informed observations. While their origin and initial transmission are both oral, they often penetrate learned and literary texts so that, specifically for ancient societies, we have some record of this popular and oral world of ideas preserved throughout generations.

The Greek *paroimia*, *gnome* or *apophthegma* and the Latin *proverbium*, *sententia*, *elogium* or *dictum*, were usually prose or metric phrases, concise, witty, and sometimes enigmatic or allegorical. They expressed experience and common sense, universal truths and popular wisdom. At times they held even moral and didactic values. In our present study we broaden the scope to include also more flexible proverbial expressions and single-word idioms. As we shall see, unlike strict proverbs in their traditional sense, not all of the idioms and phrases we discuss have moral implications as lessons to be learned or implicit advice or guidance, but all carry ethnic connotation and meaning.

Because of their popular origin, proverbs and idioms regularly reflect ancient times and preserve traces of past events and periods. Many sayings refer to specific regions and peoples. Accordingly, place names or mere ethnonyms, even when detached from a whole sentence as single-word idioms, become proverbial for particular situations, human characteristics and natural conditions. Furthermore, unique events and individual character traits are generally applied and often exaggerated to denote collective local and personal types.

The popularity of idioms and proverbs and their antiquity turn them into a first-rate source of interest for historians and anthropologists. They preserve various facts sometimes through generations after the original circumstances have long changed or after a certain phenomenon has disappeared. They are remains of the past undamaged by time. Their historical value is especially precious because they contain unbiased information and not such that was consciously and deliberately inserted for tendentious historiographical purposes. In this sense they are pieces of 'oral archaeology'<sup>2</sup> in the same sense as material archaeology is straightforward and unequivocal. Still, being an oral testimony, these linguistic phrases may have gone through changes and adjustments in the course of their transmission. But, unlike lengthy and detailed pieces of originally oral evidence, such as tales, fables and poems, which are more flexible and more prone to

<sup>2</sup> Huxley 1981: 339.

changes, it seems that proverbs and idioms are more stable. This has to do with their encapsulated and dense nature. As we shall see later, sometimes we can tell the approximate age of idioms through the dates of the written sources that quote them. Based on theories of the social and linguistic nature of proverbs and idioms, it is assumed that such phrases penetrate literary sources when they are already prevalent for long. Accordingly, they are generally older than the definite date of the quoting source we possess. If, then, we are fortunate enough to have evidence for another, later, use of the same proverbial expression, then we can be rest assured both of its old age and of its consistent durability over the ages.

Finally, the value of proverbs and idioms increases because they are one of the rare avenues that enable an access to the knowledge and concepts of popular, uneducated and illiterate sectors of Greek and Roman societies. Both their simple origin and their oral transmission emphasize their significant role within the public domain, unlike many written sources, which were kept within the narrower sectors of the educated elite.

### Latin Ethnic Idioms

The following discussion intends to offer a brief study of mainly Latin ethnic idioms, meaning bywords and phrases that apply collective names of ethnic groups and associate them with fixed attributes. In analyzing the ethnic aspect of these idioms it is not always possible to separate places from their inhabitants and vice versa, because certain geographical regions prescribe in the popular mind certain human traits. In the present study this is apparent, for instance, with regard to Abdera, its air and its effect on the inhabitants' stupidity, or to Campania, its riches and the resulting arrogance of its residents (see following discussion). Despite this occasional overlap between 'geographical' and 'ethnic' proverbs, I have tried to focus mainly on proverbs that apply strictly to ethnic denominations.

Such proverbial phrases in their specific ethnological aspect usually derive from an initial encounter with foreigners that frequently becomes exaggerated and distorted through oral transmission and rumour. One may easily imagine how someone – a merchant, a soldier, an administrator – visited a certain region where he met local inhabitants or where he met people from other places; a first impression was made by physical looks or on the basis of an act or unique behaviour; this impression was shaped – immediately or eventually – into a generalization pertaining to all local inhabitants or to all people belonging to the same *ethnos* or region. In this

way, proverbs and idioms repeatedly transmitted stereotypic concepts – not necessarily bad ones – in the perhaps unfair belief that all people with a particular characteristic or ethnic origin were the same.

To begin this study I have used the modern collection of A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer*.<sup>3</sup> This collection is arranged alphabetically and includes some references to the main occurrences of each phrase and a brief explanation. On the basis of this valuable selection, and with frequent consultation of the *CPG (Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum)*,<sup>4</sup> I have expanded the discussion by including parallel issues and by directing the inquiry toward the topic of ethnographic beliefs and prejudices. The subsequent survey demonstrates the theme by dividing the extant Latin proverbials into groups according to types of ethnic traits displayed in them.

## Physical Traits

The primary encounter with foreign and unknown nations is clearly and always made through sight. Even if one does not talk to, or trade with, or fight, or approach, other people, a visual impression is made. Accordingly, we find several proverbial expressions related to physical appearance. In Plautus' *Poenulus* ('the little Punic') Antamonides, a soldier in love with one of two Carthaginian girls, exclaims:

Now that I'm angry I'd like my girlfriend to meet me: with my fists I'll make sure that she's black as a blackbird this instant, I'll fill her with blackness to such an extent that she's much blacker than the Egyptians (*atrior . . . quam Aegyptini*) who carry the bucket round the circus during the games. (Plaut. *Poen.* 1288–91)<sup>5</sup>

Egyptians thus are presented as a standard for blackness, even if the image is based not on an actual visit to Egypt but on the appearance of Egyptians who were brought to Rome and performed or worked in the circus. Perhaps these implied circumstances emphasized even more the physical difference between locals (Roman city dwellers who attended the theatre) and foreigners (Egyptian slaves). But Egyptians were not the usual symbol of dark complexion. Based on what we have available in writing, other North

<sup>3</sup> Otto 1962 [1890] reprinted in Hildesheim 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Leutsch and Scheidewin 1965 (reprint of 1839).

<sup>5</sup> Translations of Greek and Roman texts are based on the *Loeb Classical Library* ones when available, unless otherwise indicated.

Africans were more commonly used as proverbial illustrations of black or dark skin.

In the so-called Priapic erotic epigrams, a certain very repulsive girl is said to be 'no whiter than a Moor' (*non candidior puella Mauro*) (46.1). In another Priapic epigram the Moors represent elaborately curly hair when mocking a feminine male who 'primp[s] his hair with curly irons so he'd seem a Moorish maiden' (*ferventi caput ustulare ferro, ut Maurae similis foret puellae*) (45.2–3).<sup>6</sup> The Latin *Mauri*<sup>7</sup> sometimes referred specifically to the inhabitants of the region defined in ancient geographies as Mauritania, or Maurousia in Greek, which is more or less parallel to parts of modern Morocco and Algeria.<sup>8</sup> However, we often find the same terminology applied, especially in poetic works, to Africans in general.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the proverbial association of *Mauri* with dark skin could be understood as pertaining to the inhabitants of north-western Africa or to the inhabitants of the continent as a whole. It seems that even if the crowds had no precise geographical idea of peoples and places, the popular notion of certain groups who have black skin must have been established and transmitted.

The Latin references to Egyptians and *Mauri* as people with a darker complexion combine to form the traditional and most well-known use of *Aethiops* as the symbol of black skin already in Greek proverbial applications. The very etymology of the Greek word Αἰθίοψ, denoting a 'burnt face' (αἴθω, ὄψ), as well as the Greek idiom 'to wash an Aethiops white',<sup>10</sup> must have fixed this image in the minds of the crowds, even those who had never met any person from the relevant African regions. This is quite clear, for instance, in Juvenal's contrast between 'white' and 'Aethiops' (*derideat Aethiopem albus*, Juv. 2.23).

Another unique physical trait was proverbially associated with the people of the island of Myconos. According to this popular notion, all people on the island of Myconos were bald. Strabo commented that 'some call bald men Myconians (Μυκόνιοι), from the fact that baldness is prevalent in the island' (10.5.9 and cf. Plin. *HN* 11.130). Lucilius through Donatus on verse 440 in Terence's *Hecyra*, alluding to a person from Myconos, also says: 'all young men in Myconos are bald' (*Myconi calva omnis iuventus*).<sup>11</sup> This notion, or image, perhaps explains another early Greek proverb related to Myconos. When Plutarch discussed the sitting order in a symposium, he commented that it is not rational to 'make no

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Hooper 1999. <sup>7</sup> Lewis and Short, s.v. *Mauri*.

<sup>8</sup> Sall., *Jug.* 18.10; Strabo 17.3.2–8; Mela 1.4.4. <sup>9</sup> Hor. *C.* 2.6.3; Juv. 10.148.

<sup>10</sup> Luc. *Adv. Ind.* 28; *CPG*, Zen. 1.46. <sup>11</sup> Donatus ad Ter. *Hecyr.* Act 3, Scene 4, l. 440.

difference in their seats, at the first dash making the whole company one Myconos (μία Μύκωνος) as they say' (*Quaest. Conv., Mor.* 2.616b), meaning, in this context, treating all as one, all alike. Why and how did Myconos of all places gain such an attention in Greek and Latin proverbs? There seems to be no historical reason, and we must leave it at that.

## Character Traits

Beside ethnic proverbials for physical appearances, the largest group of Greek and Latin ethnic idioms clearly and perhaps unsurprisingly relates to character traits, and mostly unfavourable ones. So enter the typically stupid.

First, and already in earlier Greek tradition,<sup>12</sup> is Abdera in Thrace, which became typically proverbial for its foolish inhabitants. In several Latin contexts there is not even a need for explanation, and the mere locality indicates its prejudiced reputation; for instance, when Cicero says, *Hic Abdera non tacente me* (*Att.* 4.16.6), while reporting on some commotion in the senate when Cicero could not hold his tongue in front of what he considered sheer stupidity. Or when he says, using the Greek adjective, *id est Ἀβδηριτικόν* (*Att.* 7.7.4), commenting on some silly intentions of Pompey and his advisors. Similarly, Martial bluntly snaps at one Mucius and says: 'You have the intelligence of Abdera's rabble' (*Abderitanae pectora plebis habes*) (*Mart.* 10.25.4). And Juvenal says of the philosopher Democritus of Abdera that 'his wisdom shows us that men of high distinction and destined to set great examples may be born in a dense air, and in the land of fools' (*Juv.* 10.48–50). This fixed image prevailed even in the supposedly scientific works of Galen, who commented that '[i]n Scythia there has been only one philosopher, but in Athens many; in Abdera there are many stupid people, but in Athens few' (*Scripta Minora* 2.79). This prejudice toward the Abderitans originated in Greek discourse, but there is no hint of any special place Abdera had in Roman life. Therefore, while Abdera was not a central point on Roman routes and in imperial activities, this is a clear case of inherited proverbial expression, which carries with it inherited prejudice. The contexts and the meaning remained the same for both languages and societies.

The Boeotians were also typed as quite thick. In Cornelius Nepos' biography of Alcibiades we find this comment: 'all Boeotians devote

<sup>12</sup> *Dem.* 17.23 and later *Luc. Hist. Cons.* 2.

themselves to body strength more than to mental power' (*omnes enim Boeotii magis firmitati corporis quam ingenii acumini inserviunt*) (Nepos, *Alc.* 11.3). And when Horace discusses popular taste and judgment, he says:

Call that judgment, so nice for viewing works of art, to books and to these gifts of the Muses, and you'd swear that he'd been born in Boeotia's heavy air (*Boeotum in crasso . . . aere*) (Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.241–4).

Along similar theories of deterministic environments, this idea wears a pseudoscientific robe in Cicero's *On Fate*:

We see the wide difference between the natural characters of different localities: we notice that some are healthy, others unhealthy, that the inhabitants of some are phlegmatic and as it were overcharged with moisture, those of others parched and dried up; and there are a number of other very wide differences between one place and another. Athens has thin air, which is thought also to cause sharpness of wit above the average in the population (*acutiores putantur Attici*); at Thebes the climate is dense (*crassum*), and so the Thebans are dull and strong (*pingues et valentes*). (Cicero, *De fato*, 7)

The idea of stupid Boeotians features also in the earlier Greek expression of 'Boeotian ear' (Βοιωτίον οὔς), or, in other variations, 'Boeotian mind' (Βοιωτίον νοῦς) or 'Boeotian pig' (Βοιωτία ὄς), all pointing at a foolish behaviour.

The ear appears also in the Latin ethnic expression of 'Batavian ear', referring to the ethnos inhabiting the region of the modern Netherlands. Martial describes the reaction of a person he accidentally met in the street:

Are you, are you really, that Martial, whose lively and naughty jests are known to everyone who has not a Batavian ear? (Mart. 6.82.4–6)

*Tunees, tune' ait 'ille Martialis,  
cuius nequitias iocosque nouit  
aurem qui modo non habet Batauam?*

In this context, this means everyone who is not dull, simple, unrefined and graceless.<sup>13</sup>

In the collective and popular mind of the Romans the Abderitans and the Boeotians were stupid, but the Gauls were not so bright either. They

<sup>13</sup> Note that Erasmus adopted in the sixteenth century exactly this proverbial expression – *Auris Batava* – as the title of one of his treatises to denote his national pride and to emphasize Dutch honour and industry. See Wesseling 1993.

were depicted mainly as naïve, gullible and unsophisticated. An epigram by Martial addressed at the emperor conveys this idea:

I will deem that you have read it, and in my pride have the joy of my Gallic trustfulness. (Mart. 5.1.9–10)

*Ego te legisse putabo  
Et timidus Galla credulitate fruar.*

Here, too, it seems that this Gallic *credulitas* was based on actual experience, as witnessed, for instance, in Julius Caesar's record of his Gallic campaigns:

Caesar was informed of these events; and fearing the fickleness of the Gauls (*infirmitas Gallorum*), because they are capricious (*mobiles*) in forming designs and intent for the most part on change, he considered that no trust should be reposed in them. It is indeed a regular habit of the Gauls to compel travellers to halt, even against their will, and to ascertain what each of them may have heard or learnt upon every subject; and in the towns the common folk surround traders, compelling them to declare from what districts they come and what they have learnt there. Such stories and hearsay often induce them to form plans upon vital questions of which they must forthwith repent; for they are the slaves of uncertain rumours (*incertis rumoribus serviant*), and most men reply to them in fictions made to their taste. (Caesar, *BG* 4.5)

Such characterization of the Gauls as fickle, impulsive and gullible was not new. Already Polybius alluded to the frivolous nature of this ethnos.<sup>14</sup> If so, perhaps by Caesar's time this image has become a literary *topos* or indeed a proverbial stereotype.<sup>15</sup> Yet Caesar clearly relied on his experience in Gaul. How then can one separate reality from a literary *topos*? It seems to me that Caesar's description was indeed based on actual encounters with the local inhabitants. But, the interpretation of their behaviour was perhaps influenced by a set of preconceived notions deriving from current ideas which were already delivered, for instance, by Polybius. Even if Caesar has not read these sections in Polybius' *Histories*, this probably common prejudice possibly prompted him to notice and emphasize these specific traits among the Gauls.

<sup>14</sup> 'The general reputation of the Gauls' (2.7.5); 'their inordinate drinking and gluttony' (2.19.4); 'the Gaulish fickleness' (2.32.8).

<sup>15</sup> There is a very fine line between the nature and application of the two features of *topos* and idiom. In both linguistic structures Gauls, for instance, are fickle, but it seems that they differ in extent: an idiom delivers this idea by the mere ethnic denomination or by a short chain of words; a literary *topos* expands it into a broader image of behaviour and activity.



Then there are the typically arrogant people. Plautus comments on a certain mercenary:

Where does he come from, do you think?  
Praeneste, probably, to judge from his boasting. (Plautus, *Bacch.* 24)

*Praenestinum opino esse, ita erat gloriosus.*

So were also the people of Capua:

Did you think you were consul of Capua . . . , a city where arrogance had once her dwelling (*domicilium quondam superbiae fuit*), or of Rome, a state where all consuls before you have bowed to the will of the senate? (Cicero, *Post reditum in senatu*, 7.17)

And again in another speech of Cicero:

Capua . . . the abode of pride and the seat of luxury (Cicero, *De leg. Agr.* 2.97)

*Capuae in domicilio superbiae atque in sedibus luxuriosis . . .*

Why Praeneste and Capua? The last reference ties this trait with the city's riches and luxury, and both are known to have been prosperous; this probably was explained in the popular concept the arrogance of their residents.

Campanian arrogance was also proverbial. Cicero speaks of *illa Campanorum arrogantia* (*De leg. agr.* 2.33.9), of the *Campanum supercilium* (*De leg. agr.* 34.93) and of the 'always proud Campanians' (*Campani semper superbi*) (*De leg. agr.* 35.95). This specific image and stereotype perhaps resulted from the proverbially very fruitful region of Campania, as it was coined in the proverb denoted as *vulgo dictum*:

Campania produces more ointments than other countries do oil.

*Plus apud Campanos unguenti, quam apud ceteros olei.* (Plin., *HN* 18.111)

All these arrogant people – the inhabitants of Praeneste, Capua and Campania – lived on the Italian peninsula not very far from Rome; but Latin proverbials typed also the people of Rhodes as symbols of arrogance, perhaps again due to their high economic status. Accordingly, Cato the Elder seems to have relied on such common notions when he commented that 'they say that the Rhodians are proud' (*Rhodienses superbos esse aiunt*) (Gellius, 6.3.50). The *aiunt* here emphasizes the inauthoritative and probably popular provenance of this characterization. Note that Cato went on to say: 'but in what does their pride affect us? Would it become us to impute it

to them as a crime that they are prouder than we are?', meaning that in this case Cato has not succumbed to negative notions associated with prejudice. Still dwelling on the arrogance of the Rhodians, we see that in Plautus the association of a certain pompous person specifically with Rhodes seems to be not just a geographical indication. The context reveals that the essence of *Rhodius* contributes to the overall description and portrayal of the man:

A fellow rolling in wealth, a mighty military man, from Rhodes, a ravager of foemen, a braggart (*magnus miles Rhodius, raptor hostium, gloriosus*).  
(Plaut. *Epid.* 300–1)

In Latin proverbs there were nations typed as thieves and frauds. First and foremost are the Punics. There is no need to expand here on *Punica Fides* – whole chapters are devoted to stereotyped profiles of this ethnic group in both Isaac's *The Invention of Racism* and Gruen's *Rethinking the Other*.<sup>16</sup> But the Punics were not alone. The people of Crete were conceived as liars and cheaters:

Well known is that I sing of: Crete, that holds a hundred cities, cannot deny this, liar though she be. (Ov. *AA* 1.297–8)

*Nota cano: non hoc, centum quae sustinet urbes,  
Quamvis sit mendax, Creta negare potest.*

The Cretans will be my witness – and the Cretans are not wholly false. (Ov. *Am.* 3.10.19)

*Cretes erunt testes – nec fingunt omnia Cretes.*

Clearly, these two Ovidian citations apply the people of Crete as supporters of truth. But it is the very use of them as a standard that proves the inherent prejudice.

### *Local Habits*

Besides the typing of nations and inhabitants of specific places as having typical character traits, there were bywords alluding to local habits and norms of life as they were grasped in popular and thus proverbial perception. Accordingly, the men of Massilia were somewhat feminine. The servant in Plautus' comedy says to the old man:

<sup>16</sup> Isaac 2004: 324–51; Gruen 2011: 115–40.

Where are you – you who think to practice Massilian customs here?  
(Plautus, *Cas.* 963)

*Ubi tu es, qui colere mores Massilienses postulas?*

We do not know what these Massilian customs, *mores Massilienses*, were. The context in Plautus' comedy implies that his audience did know and understand the pun, but we need Athenaeus' explanation:

The Iberians go out dressed in elaborate robes that resemble those worn in tragedy, and wear tunics that hang to their feet, although this has no negative effect on their strength in war. The Massalotes, on the other hand, who wear the same costume as the Iberians, became effeminate. The weakness and addiction to luxury in their hearts, at any rate, has led to them behaving in an ugly way and allowing themselves to be treated like women, hence the proverb 'I hope you sail to Massalia!' (πλεύσειας εἰς Μασσαλίαν). (Athenaeus 12.523 C)

And this, of course, is not a nice wish.

In his biography of Pyrrhus, Plutarch depicts the atmosphere in Tarentum at the time of the Pyrrhic war and describes the behaviour of the inhabitants at these pressing times:

[T]hey remained at home in the enjoyment of their baths and social festivities . . . as they strolled about, they fought out their country's battles in talk . . . Many therefore left the city, since they were not accustomed to being under orders, and called it servitude not to live as they pleased. (Plut. *Pyrrh.* 16.2)

No wonder then that this city gained the reputation of a spoiled city, the seat of luxury, and was proverbially typed as 'soft Tarentum':

Small things become small folks: imperial Rome is all too large, too bustling for a home; the empty heights of Tibur, or the bay of soft Tarentum (*molle Tarentum*), more are in my way. (Hor. *Sat.* 2.4.34)

And,

insolent Tarentum, garlanded and sodden with wine (*coronatum et petulans madidumque Tarentum*). (Juv. 6.297)

Persian splendour too, was famous and stereotypic but all the more hated:

Persian elegance, my lad, I hate. (Hor. *C.* 1.38.1)

*Persicos odi, puer, apparatus.*

And, the Parthians were proverbially drunk:

The more the Parthians drank, the thirstier they became. (Pliny, *HN* 14.148)

*quanto plus biberint, tanto magis sitire Parthos.*

### *The Good Traits*

So far we have seen that all nations included in these examples were typed with certain characteristics, mostly unflattering as contexts and internal intonations reveal: the simplicity of the Gauls is not cute, and the Parthian drunkenness and Massilian femininity are not attractive. Weren't any nations stereotypically and proverbially marked for their good traits? There were, in fact, mainly two.

The Athenians, for instance, were presented as loyal: Velleius Paterculus speaks of the behaviour of the Athenians in Sulla's times:

So constant was the loyalty (*fides*) of the Athenians towards the Romans that always and invariably, whenever the Romans referred to any act of unqualified loyalty (*sincera fides*), they called it an example of 'Attic faith'. (Vell. Pat. 2.23)

Other proverbial expressions available in Latin texts reveal that the Romans thought the Athenians were also very sharp and clever:

I'll give you a good six hundred witticisms for a dowry, and all Attic ones, without a single Sicilian quip among them. (Plautus, *Pers.* 394–5)

*Dabuntur dotis tibi inde sescenti logi,  
Atque Attici omnes; nullum Siculum acceperis.*

Or, in Cicero:

You observe that the old flow of wit and humour (*urbanitas*) has quite dried up, which fully justifies our friend Pomponius in saying: 'Were it not that we, we few, conserve the ancient Attic glory'. (*Ad fam.* 7.31.2)

*vides enim exaruisse iam veterem urbanitatem, ut Pomponius noster suo iure possit dicere: 'nisi nos pauci retineamus gloriam antiquam Atticam'.*

Martial also speaks of 'witty stories touched with Attic grace' (*lepore tinctos Attico sales*) (Mart. 3.20.9) and of Attic wit, *Cecropius lepos* (Mart. 4.23.6).

Romans were, of course, even more brilliant than the Athenians, but the Attic wit is still the standard for measuring it:

There is your wit, not Attic, but more pungent than that of Attic writers – the good old city wit of Rome. (Cicero, *Ad fam.* 9.15.2)

*Accedunt non Attici, sed salsiores, quam illi Atticorum, Romani veteres atque urbani sales.*

And it became a proud coinage that ‘A Roman wins while sitting’ (*Romanus sedendo vincit*) (Varro *RR* 1.2.2), perhaps originating in the delaying policy of Fabius Maximus in the second Punic war but then becoming the constant praise of the invincible Romans.

Ennius is said to have stated that ‘The Roman state stands by its ancient manners and its men’ (*Moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque*) (Ennius, *Annales*, F 500 Vahlen). This Roman manner or character – *mos Romanus / mos Romanorum* – is mentioned in several contexts which do not allow for any other understanding than an admirable and honorable one, that of honesty and integrity:

**Cicero, *Ad fam.* 7.5.3 (To Julius Caesar)**

I would beg you, dear Caesar, to receive him with such a display of kindness as to concentrate on his single person all that you can be possibly induced to bestow for my sake upon my friends. As for him I guarantee – not in the sense of that stale expression of mine, at which, when I used it in writing to you about Milo, you very properly jested, but in the Roman manner (*more Romano*) such as sober men use – that no honester, better, or more modest man exists.

**Cicero, *Ad fam.* 7.16.3 (To C. Trebatius Testa)**

Balbus has assured me that you will be rich. Whether he speaks in the Roman manner (*Romano more*), meaning that you will be well supplied with money, or according to the Stoic dictum, that ‘all are rich who can enjoy the sky and the earth’, I shall know later.

### *Discussion*

Prejudice and idioms should not be confused with each other: one is a social phenomenon, the other is a mode of expression. Let us explain. Prejudice originates in reality which, through exaggeration, generalization and misunderstanding, becomes stereotypical and frequently malicious. Thus, when Latin sources refer to Jewish missionary tendencies (Hor., *Sat.*, 1.4.142–3), to the credulity of the Jews (Hor., *Sat.*, 1.5.100) or to their laziness (Tac., *Hist.*, 15.4.3), they promote prejudice.<sup>17</sup> But, in all these

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive collection of Greek and Latin views of Jews, see Stern 1974–84.

examples, and many others, the assertion of these biases is stylistically fluid, and even if identical or similar details are applied, they do not become part of fixed modes of expression or even proverbs. The mere ethnic denomination *Iudaeus* does not represent a whole set of often intolerant ideas. At the same time, idioms and proverbial expressions, like prejudice, also originate in reality which, through exaggeration, generalization and misunderstanding, become stereotypical and frequently malicious, but this similarity is due to the fact that ethnic idioms simply contain prejudiced notions. Again, the Jews are a point in argument, for there seem to be no idioms or proverbial expressions related to Jews.

The sociological function of ethnic bywords is similar to that of ethnic jokes:

Ethnic jokes delineate the social, geographical and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group. By making fun of peripheral or ambiguous groups they reduce ambiguity and clarify boundaries or at least make ambiguity appear less threatening.<sup>18</sup>

It seems then that the perspective of the society which coins such idioms (or jokes) is aimed primarily from inside out, reflecting how foreigners and outsiders are seen. At the same time, however, this ethnographic gaze may be interpreted as stemming from an upper position downwards, because foreigners are mostly associated with bad traits, and, specifically in Latin proverbs, there are no 'bad' idioms involving the Romans. These observations are perhaps unsurprising, but they show once again that such ethnic idioms are more revealing of the society which coins them than of the ethnic groups reflected in them.

The ethnic groups introduced in Latin idioms, as discussed in the present study, are all inhabitants of the Roman Empire. If we place them on a map, some patterns emerge. Four phrases refer to North African nations including the Egyptians; four refer to the further east: Indians, Arabians, Parthians and Persians; three deal with people of Asia Minor; four deal with dwellers of four Mediterranean islands; but twelve concentrate on the Italian peninsula and eleven refer to the inhabitants of mainland Greece. Clearly, the geo-ethnic centre gains more attention. The farthest nations in these proverbia are the Indians in the East; the Scythians, Gauls and Batavians in the North; the Ethiopians in the South; and the people of Massilia in the West.<sup>19</sup> The

<sup>18</sup> Davies 1982: 383.

<sup>19</sup> We have not discussed them in detail, but there are three seemingly self-explanatory idioms related to edge nations: *Indorum gemmae* – jewels of the Indians; *Arabum divitiae* – riches of the Arabians; *Scytharum solitudines* – isolation of the Scythians.

emerging picture is thus a reflection of centre and periphery, the centre composed of the Italian peninsula and mainland Greece together. Then there is a nearer periphery – north Africa, Massilia, Gaul and Asia Minor, and a remote periphery – Scythians, Indians, Parthians and Arabians.

This division between centre and mostly remote periphery represents not only geographical distribution of proverbial nations but also a difference in the essence of proverbial prejudice and image. The nearer nations and inhabitants are typed mostly with personal attributes such as deception, arrogance and stupidity – all qualities which are usually perceived through actual acquaintance and perhaps even specifically through interactions related to trade: one may grasp whether or not the person he transacts with is devious and dishonest, or is too proud about himself or about his merchandise, or is stupid and gullible in handling such transactions.<sup>20</sup> The remote peripheral nations, by comparison, are typed more with exceptional habits or unusual local conditions, which seem extraordinary to the Greek and Roman observers, such as extreme riches, relatively unique skin colour or what is seen as uncivilized customs. In all likelihood, the emergence of such proverbial prejudice is based less on direct and frequent encounters and more on rare visits which produced popular rumours and exaggerated images.

Finally, and although part of a work still in progress, it seems that in comparison to Latin ethnic proverbia, Greek ethnic idioms are, first, more numerous; second – and unsurprisingly – their geographical centre is situated more to the east on mainland Greece and Asia Minor and less on the western Mediterranean and northern Europe. A third point is that, evidently, the Romans inherited from the Greeks some of their world of prejudices but incorporated them in their geographically and ethnically wider world where there was also a slight shift in geographical focus. The old world, so to speak, became integrated with the new world.

### *Conclusion*

The study of idioms and proverbial expressions opens up the gate leading to the ethnic notions of the relatively inaccessible analphabetic or illiterate sectors of ancient society.<sup>21</sup> Thus, from the point of view of the Romans, ‘others’ were located anywhere in the inhabited known earth. At the same time, ethnographic interest turned either to neighbouring and well-known

<sup>20</sup> Isaac has noted another geographical pattern in this ethnic prejudice: people in northern Italy are depicted as arrogant, while people in the south are conceived as thieves. See Isaac 2004.

<sup>21</sup> On illiterate geography, in proverbs as well, see Dueck 2021.

people or to remote groups dwelling at the fringes of the world. The first, closer, group was so familiar that its members became the focus of mockery and 'familiarity bred contempt' (after Aesop). The second, remote, group was so distant and unknown that its members became typed as strange and eccentric.

The emerging picture is first and foremost revealing of the Roman character; and it becomes clear, even if unsurprising, that, in a typical way of dealing with unknown people, the Romans, too, looked at them from inside out and kept these stereotypes as an integral part of their world view and self-identity.