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Sunbathing in Antiquity

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Modern sunbathing is a relatively new fashion, being launched not much earlier than the beginning of the present century. Nudism in Germany at that time, after the extremely proper Victorian period, must have been something like a revolution, to be compared with Rousseau's slogan, "return to nature", with its far-reaching consequences.[1] Now, approaching the end of the century, our solarium generation is warned severely by physicians against perils caused by excessive sunbathing, such perils as melanoma and other types of skin cancer. Equally ambivalent attitudes to the sun and sunbathing can be found in different periods of antiquity. My paper does not pretend to be a thorough investigation, instead I only wish to deal with the principal traits of this complex subject and with some problems connected with it. Despite the unusually rich subject matter, I shall only deal with a few instances and issues.

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The sun is in many ways vital to the existence of human beings, not least in making crops and fruit grow. The paramount importance of the sun is aptly implied in the early Homeric phrase ὁρᾶν φάος ἠελίοιο (e.g. Il. 18, 61), to see the light of day, which is used metaphorically to mean life

[1] The most important of these was that children's physical education was adopted universally as a school subject since the beginning of the nineteenth century. As regards later phases of nudism in Germany, it was accepted by National Socialists as part of their racist doctrine ("rassenstolze Nacktkultur").

itself.[2] Pliny the Elder begins his description of the supreme power of the sun with these solemn words: *hunc esse mundi totius animum ac planius mentem, hunc principale naturae regimen ac numen credere decet opera eius aestimantes* (nat. 2, 13).[3] From this kind of characterization of the sun it is only a short step to conceiving of it as a god. In classical Greece, however, only Rhodes had a cult of Helios, who was gradually identified with other gods, Apollo in particular. These identifications certainly facilitated the introduction of the Syrian Sol Invictus into Imperial Rome.[4]

But gods are not always benign. Helios/Sol could scorch everything ferociously so that nothing grew, and people could die of sunstroke. In summer, the midday sun with its extreme heat had to be avoided most carefully, especially after the rise of Sirius, the Dog Star, which took place at the end of July. The afternoon siesta in the south, then, has its origin in antiquity, when both human beings and animals used to seek the shade offered by trees and cool caves.[5] Calypso's cave with trees and flowers and fresh water in the neighbourhood, as described in Od. 5, 63—71, is a typical *locus amoenus*.[6] Hesiod makes reference to an afternoon siesta, calling it σκιερούς θώκους (Erg. 574), Theocritus laconically mentions

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2 Hesiod, too, contrasts λαμπρὸν φάος ἠελίοιο with δόμον κρυεροῦ Ἀίδαο (Erg. 153—155). Note further Soph. Oed. Col. 1549ff. The importance of the sun is implied in the use of *sol* for *dies* in Latin poetry: e.g. Hor. carm. 4, 2, 46.

3 One particular point in Pliny's account of the sun's sphere of action deserves to be picked out: *etiam humani nubila animi serenat*. It is worth noting that modern devices for alleviating severe mental depression include artificial light treatment.

4 Outside of the actual cult, Helios/Sol used to be appealed to as a witness of oaths. In mythology he was conceived of as a charioteer, who drove daily across the sky from east to west. Perhaps the most fascinating myth concerns his son, Phaethon.

5 These are Persius' words: *siccas insana canicula messes ... coquit et ... pecus omne sub ulmo est* (3, 5f.). Cicada is the only exception in the animal kingdom, in the afternoon being "fond of basking on trees, when the male makes a chirping or clicking noise" (Liddell and Scott, s.v. τέττιξ). To Aristophanes the cicada is θεσπέσιος and ἡλιομανής (Orn. 1095f.); see how the first epithet is explained by Coulon and van Daele (77 n. 3). Several Greek epigrams deal with the cicada: e.g. AG 6, 120; 7, 196; 9, 264, 273, 373, 584.

6 This example of the Homeric ideal landscape in discussed by G. Schönbeck, Der locus amoenus von Homer bis Horaz, Diss. Heidelberg 1962, 61—70, and by S. Lilja, The Treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity, Helsinki 1972, 172f. Note further Theocr. 5, 31—33, 45—49.

ἐλινῦσαι δὲ τὸ καῦμα (10, 51), and Meleager has his μεσημβρινὸν ὕπνον ... ὑπὸ σκιερῇ ... πλατάνῳ (AG 7, 196, 7f.). There was another reason for taking an afternoon rest in silence, to which Theocritus alludes in his first idyll: τὸ μεσαμβρινὸν οὐ θέμις ἄμμιν συρίσδεν (15f.). It is the god Pan who must be allowed, after his hunting, to enjoy an undisturbed rest (16—18).[7]

Cool caves were appropriate for making love, because darkness permitted even timid girls to meet with their lovers. Carna says, in Ovid's words, to her admirer: *haec loca lucis habent nimis, et cum luce pudoris;/si secreta magis ducis in antra, sequor* (fast. 6, 115f.).[8] Incidentally, as regards making love in light or darkness, there were individual predilections. Euripides, in his Meleager, crystallizes a well-known idea: Aphrodite is τῷ σκότῳ φίλη, τὸ φῶς δ'ἀνάγκην προστίθησι σωφρονεῖν (fr. 524). Ovid, too, preferred dim twilight: *nec lucem in thalamos totis admitte fenestris* (ars 3, 807).[9] Propertius, on the contrary, exclaims that *oculi sunt in amore duces* (2, 15, 12). Martial (10, 38, 6f.; 11, 104, 5f.; 14, 39) and Apuleius (met. 2, 11, 3; 5, 23, 5) also emphasize the part played by the lamp. In this they had a famous model in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae, where Praxagora addressed the lamp as a witness of her love-making (7ff.).[10]

The ideal complexion in antiquity for both males and females was fresh and rosy, neither pale nor brown, and this remained as the ideal for hundreds of years, heroes and heroines being conventionally blonde.[11] One of the earliest examples is from Aeschylus. Hephaestus addresses Prometheus: ἡλίου φλογὶ χροιᾶς ἀμείψεις ἄνθος (Prom. desm. 22f.).[12] In

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7 Cahen (ed. Callimaque, Paris 1948) comments on Tiresias' tragic fate as described in Callim. Lav. Pall. 57ff.: "L'heure de midi est la plus dangereuse pour les mortels qui risquent de déranger le repos de la divinité" (294 n. 1).

8 Ovid identifies Carna, "Schutzgöttin der edleren Teile des Leibes", with Card(e)a, "Schutzgottheit der Türangeln ... die alle schädlichen Einwirkungen schlimmer Dämonen abwehrte"; the quotations are from Georges.

9 Line 808 explains why: *aptius in vestro corpore multa latent*. Note also rem. 411f.

10 Note further συμπαίστορα λύχνον, Meleager's offering to Aphrodite (AG 6, 162, 1).

11 More details about this subject are found in S. Lilja, The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women, Helsinki 1965, 119—132.

12 This or some similar passage of tragedy is parodied in an anonymous Old Comedy fragment: χρόαν δὲ τὴν σὴν ἥλιος λάμπων φλογὶ Αἰγυπτιώσει (fr. 9 Edmonds).

Euripides' Bacchae, Pentheus describes Dionysus' fairness as λευκὴν χροιὰν ... οὐχ ἡλίου βολαῖσιν, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ σκιᾶς (457f.). Later, in Seneca's tragedy Hippolytus, the chorus praises the chief character's beauty: *haec solem facies rarius appetat; lucebit Pario marmore clarius* (796f.). The point of comparison, as the phrasing *lucebit clarius* shows, is not so much the paleness of marble as its lustre. The synonymous adjective *candidus*, which strictly refers to fair complexion, is also used more generally for good looks.[13]

In Ovid's Medicamina faciei femineae the contemporaneous urban ideal, *candida ora nitere* (52), is contrasted with the *matrona rubicunda* (13) of more ancient times.[14] In Book I of his Ars amatoria *candidus* is sharply distinguished from *niger*, which in its context, instead of meaning a black person, refers to a prolonged exposure to the sun: *candidus in nauta turpis color ... debet esse niger* (721f.). While *niger*, sunburnt, is the appropriate colour for sailors and farmers (723f.), *candidus* is the urban ideal for rich people who do not need to work.[15] The lover, on the other hand, is characterized by the verb *palleat* (727), because love was considered a disease. The epithet *pallidus*, instead of being a synonym for *candidus*, was mostly connected with disease and death; one example from Horace, *pallida Mors* (carm. 1, 4, 13), may suffice.[16]

What could one do out of doors to avoid an unwelcome suntan? Cicero would reply "nothing": *cum in sole ambulem ... fieri natura ... ut colorer* (de orat. 2, 60). And Horace describes himself as *solibus ustum*

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[13] Fordyce's comment on *candidus*, as used by Catullus, raises "interesting questions about pigmentation in ancient Rome" (ed. Catullus, Oxford 1961, 177). On the colour of the skin as revealed in Greek vase paintings, see K. J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality, London 1978, 76—78.

[14] Horace identifies a *pudica mulier* with *perusta solibus ... uxor Apuli* (epod. 2, 41f.). Aristophanes, especially in Neph. and Eccl., makes frequent amusing remarks about the colour of the skin.

[15] A typical dialogue from Plautus' Vidularia: *mollitia urbana atque umbra corpus candidumst. / sol est ad eam rem pictor, atrum fecerit* (35f.). Note also Men. Dysc. 754f., Verg. ecl. 16 and Luc. Indoct. 3. Plato contrasts the rich and the poor in a similar way: ἀνὴρ πένης, ἡλιωμένος ... πλουσίῳ ἐσκιατροφηκότι (Rep. 8, 556d).

[16] See also Dover, Greek Homosexuality 80 n. 34. The conception of love as a disease is discussed by S. Lilja, op. cit. in n. 11, 100—109. An untanned person, instead of *pallidus*, was *albus*, in Greek λευκός: e.g. Mart. 1, 55, 14; 10, 12, 9.

(epist. 20, 24). But women — and effeminate men — had a device of their own, namely, parasols. Athenaeus records that Artemon, a rival of Anacreon, σκιαδίσκην ἐλεφαντίνην φορεῖ γυναιξὶν αὔτως (12, 534a). Aristophanes mentions σκιάδειον (Hipp. 1348; Orn. 1508, 1550; Thesm. 823, 829); Ovid (ars 2, 209; fast. 2, 311) and Martial (11, 73, 6; 14, 28) *umbraculum*.[17]

Another interesting topic would be to examine ancient attitudes to black people and the more or less dark-skinned. Aeschylus calls the Danaids μελανθὲς ἡλιόκτυπον γένος (Hiket. 154f.) in a neutrally matter-of-fact way. Herodotus even praises the Egyptians on account of their intense exposure to the sun. After observing on a battle-field that the skulls of the Persians were brittle and the Egyptian skulls strong, he learns as an explanation (3, 12) that the Persians always sheltered their heads with felt tiaras, whereas the Egyptians used to shave their heads from childhood, and the bones thicken under the influence of the sun (πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον παχύνεται τὸ ὀστέον).[18] In the Hippocratic Peri diaites there is a similar remark that those ἔθνεα τῶν ἀνθρώπων who live in the south, closer to the sun, are ἰσχυρότερα (37, 1).[19]

The same Peri diaites, however, warns seriously against excessive sunbathing, exactly as modern physicians do. The writer says poetically (68, 9): like trees, which grow a thick foliage for their summer shelter, human beings should get used to the sun only gradually and carefully. He

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[17] Note further *viridem umbellam* at Iuv. 9, 50. Tibullus mentions a special case: *e veste sua tendent umbracula sertis vincta* (2, 5, 97f.). More details about parasols are given by Der Kleine Pauly V, s.v. Schirm, and by L. Deubner, Attische Feste, Berlin 1932, 31 n. 14 (which explains Ar. Orn. 1550f.). See also Liddell and Scott, s.v. σκίρον, and Men. Epitr. 534. Umbrellas, oddly enough, seem to have been unknown to the ancients.

[18] Plato, too, stresses the importance of not protecting one's head (Leg. 12, 942d). Rickets used to be a common childhood disease in countries where too little ultraviolet light was available to form vitamin D. Might not also osteoporosis be more severe in those countries? Herodotus is further told that ample sunlight was the reason why the Egyptians seldom grew bald; but baldness is caused by many other factors, such as heredity.

[19] Investigations into the Hippocratic corpus are encumbered with chronological difficulties; Peri diaites was probably written about 400 B.C. Negative views about those who were dark-skinned may be represented by Sil. 2, 439: *usta cutem nigri soror horrida Mauri*.

also stresses the importance of being in motion continually, again as modern physicians do. In spring, protecting the skin with plenty of oil, one ought to wrestle; in summer one ought to avoid the sunshine altogether and take walks in the shade (68, 10—12).

The most perilous, sometimes even deadly, consequence of a prolonged exposure to the sun is sunstroke. Perhaps the earliest account of it is the case related in the Old Testament, in chapter 4 of II Kings.[20] To Plautus a heatstroke is *solstitialis morbus* (Trin. 544); in Pliny's Natural History a person who has got one is called *solatus* (29, 118). A person's head was most liable to danger. Dio Cassius records (A.D. 37) that Roman senators sitting in the theatre wore πίλους, felt caps, ἵνα μὴ τῇ ἡλιάσει ταλαιπωρῶνται (59, 7). Thus, instead of being inured to the violent heat in the Egyptian way, they had adopted the Persian habit of sheltering their heads with felt tiaras.[21]

The prudent foresight of the Romans concerning intense exposure to the sun seems to have changed during the first century A.D. Pliny the Younger relates that, after a light noon meal and before a bath, his uncle used to sun himself daily: *aestate si quid otii iacebat in sole* (3, 5, 10).[22] When he deals with the order of his own day (9, 36), he does not speak of sunbathing, but he expressly praises Spurinna's mode of life, who in the afternoon, before a bath, exposed his naked body to the rays of the sun: *in sole si caret vento ambulat nudus* (3, 1, 8). Two details here deserve attention: while *ambulat* is in harmony with the Hippocratic and the modern view that sunbathing when one is in motion is less perilous than when lying still (as Pliny the Elder did), *nudus* is in contradiction to the generally negative attitude of the Romans to nakedness.[23]

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[20] See F. Rosner, Sunstroke in the Bible and the Talmud, Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 27 (1972) 326—328. Heatstroke in antiquity would be another interesting topic. To begin with, Greek epigrams mention a few cases: e.g. AG 7, 371; 9, 89.

[21] Dio calls this habit Θετταλικὸν τρόπον. Note also Soph. Oed. Col. 313f.

[22] Note the same detail in Pliny's account of his uncle's last day: *usus ille sole* (6, 16, 5).

[23] On the Roman attitude to nakedness see S. Lilja, Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome, Helsinki 1983, 89—91, 123.

It is obvious that Pliny th Elder and Spurinna took sunbaths, because these were supposed to have a favourable effect on health — a view which was based on Hippocratic principles,[24] and is still at present implied in modern terms like 'sunbath' and 'sunbathing'. In the very same period, however, a change seems to have taken place also as regards aesthetic views. The Romans had always been more or less consistently averse to suntans, as a sign of servile labour, but Martial (10, 12) introduces a young man who is about to leave Rome for the countryside to become sunburnt, in order to arouse envy on his return — *o quam formosus!* — among his pale friends. In this case the suntan was a sought after cosmetic embellishment, and had nothing to do with health. On the contrary, if we may believe Seneca, there were people who even risked their lives to attain this newly found peak of beauty: *quorum aut latrunculi aut pila aut excoquendi in sole corporis cura consumpsere vitam* (brev. vitae 13, 1).[25] Such people might be defined as representing the maximum degree of narcissism. Of course, it is not always possible to distinguish between health and cosmetics, as when Persius, inquiring about the *summa boni*, ironically suggests it would be *adsiduo curata cuticula sole* (4, 17f.).

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To repeat what was said in the beginning, my paper only wishes to pay attention to some interesting details, which deserve to be examined more thoroughly. One important question remains: why did the Romans change their previously negative attitude to sunbathing? The answer may be found in contemporary medicine. One of the chief sources seems to be Soranus of Ephesus (fl. c. A.D. 100 in Rome), whose Acute Diseases and

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[24] And represented by Musonius, Pliny's and Spurinna's contemporary: χρὴ ... ἡλιοῦσθαι θέρους καὶ σκιατροφεῖσθαι ἥκιστα (fr. 19, p. 107 Hense).

[25] Seneca also speaks of *balnea* where people *totius diei solem fenestris amplissimis recipiant*, with the result that *et lavantur simul et colorantur* (epist. 86, 8). Note further Iuv. 11, 203ff. and Luc. Lexiph. 2.

Chronic Diseases have been preserved in an epitomized translation by Caelius Aurelianus.[26] Soranus recommends a treatment called 'metasyncrisis', which included sunbathing.[27]

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[26] Ed. I. E. Drabkin, Chicago 1950. See also J. Scarborough, Roman Medicine, London 1969, and W. D. Smith, The Hippocratic Tradition, Ithaca and London 1979.

[27] Metasyncrisis, to quote Drabkin, is "designed to alter the bodily state so that the disease itself may be overcome" (Introd., p. XX b). See also "Sunbathing as metasyncritic measure" in Drabkin's Index.