

VII. Arrumbar los perímetros historiográficos

*Breaking Down Historiographical
Perimeters*



**SLAVERY, RACE, EMPIRE: EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY
REPRESENTATIONS OF GREGORY WITH THE ENGLISH SLAVES**
**ESCLAVITUD, RAZA E IMPERIO: SAN GREGORIO CON LOS ESCLAVOS
ANGLOS EN REPRESENTACIONES DE LOS SIGLOS XVIII Y XIX**

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ABSTRACT

This essay surveys varied retellings of the legend of Gregory the Great meeting a group of “Angle” slaves, in eighteenth- to nineteenth-century histories of Britain, and analyzes a watercolor of the episode by William Blake along with an engraving designed by the Victorian artist, Sir George Scharf. The legend was rarely illustrated before the nineteenth century; it became a popular subject of Victorian art partly because it aligned with the belief that the successes of the British Empire resulted from the superiority of the English, Saxon, or Teutonic race. Studying the two pictures together provides insight into the range of artistic approaches to illustrating this legend between the Enlightenment and Victorian eras. Present-day social concerns as well as developing racial ideologies may illumine the design choices of Blake and Scharf, and responses among contemporary English viewers of their pictures.

KEYWORDS: Gregory the Great, William Blake, Sir George Scharf, slavery, race.

RESUMEN

Este texto examina las diversas versiones de la leyenda de Gregorio el Grande encontrándose con un grupo de esclavos «anglos», tal y como se formuló en historias británicas durante los siglos XVIII y XIX. Además, analiza una acuarela del episodio realizada por William Blake junto con un grabado diseñado por el artista victoriano Sir George Scharf. Esta leyenda, que rara vez se ilustró antes del siglo XIX, se convirtió en un tema popular del arte victoriano, en parte porque coincidía con la creencia de que los éxitos del Imperio Británico eran el resultado de la superioridad de la raza inglesa, sajona o teutónica. El estudio conjunto de los dos dibujos permite comprender la disparidad de los enfoques artísticos asumidos para ilustrar esta leyenda,

primero durante la Ilustración y después en la época victoriana. Las preocupaciones sociales del momento, así como el desarrollo de las ideologías raciales, pueden ayudar a comprender las opciones de diseño de Blake y Scharf, respectivamente, así como las respuestas de los espectadores ingleses contemporáneos de sus cuadros.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Gregorio Magno, William Blake, Sir George Scharf, esclavismo, raza.

For Herbert L. Kessler, in admiration and gratitude¹

A provocative story about Gregory the Great (d. 604) tells of his meeting with a group of pagan “Angles” in Rome. According to the legend’s most famous retelling, in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English* (c. 731), the Angles were boys on sale as slaves.² Variations on Bede’s version of this story appear in Latin and vernacular works dating to every century between his and our own. While details fluctuate, the many accounts tend to share certain core elements. The slaves are described as beautiful with “white” or “fair” skin, traits implied to be common to all Angles and Saxons, Anglo-Saxons, or English – the terms shift over time and place. The juxtaposition of the name “Angles” (Latin, *Angli*) with whiteness or beauty, we are often told, inspired Gregory to liken the slaves to angels (*angeli*) and seek the conversion of their people to Christianity.

The legend’s medieval reception was shaped by attitudes distant from modern racial ideologies, but as it endured, it continually reinforced belief that the English possessed exceptional somatic features mirroring special moral or psychological qualities. In the nineteenth century, the story’s affirmation that whiteness and beauty combined with superior temperament were distinctively English traits played a key role in the diffusion of racialized Anglo-Saxonism.

In the first section of this essay, I survey rehearsals of the “Gregory legend” in select eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories of Britain, the main textual genre in which the story appears in this period. Section 2 analyzes a pen drawing with watercolor of the episode by William Blake and, more briefly, an engraving designed by the Victorian artist, Sir George Scharf. I compare the two images with written histories but also discourses on race, slavery, and related issues. The legend was rarely illustrated before the nineteenth century, but it

¹ I am immensely grateful to Gerardo Boto Varela and Alejandro García Avilés for the invitation to contribute this paper in honor of our esteemed colleague and friend, Herbert Kessler, and for organizing the conference as well as the *Festschrift*. My thanks to the Victoria & Albert Museum and the British Museum London for reproductions of the works by Blake and Scharf discussed here and permission to publish them. The essay was written partly at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton New Jersey during a sabbatical granted by The College of New Jersey. My gratitude to both institutions for the opportunity to spend a year focused on research and writing, and to the Institute for access to its outstanding scholarly resources.

² B. COLGRAVE, R.A.B. MYNORS (eds. and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford, 1969, pp. 132-135. This paper is a first foray into material explored in my book in progress: (working title) *Gregory the Great and the Construction of English Whiteness*. Restrictions on length have limited scholarly and primary source citations here. Fuller references will be found in the book and scholarship noted below.

became a popular subject of Victorian art in part because it aligned with theories of English racial superiority and of the British Empire as heir to Roman hegemony.³ Scharf's picture is an especially rich example and thus offers a useful counterpoint to Blake's complex watercolor. Although the latter work has sometimes been assigned to Edward Dayes, the scholarly consensus is that it is by Blake, and my discussion points to aspects strengthening this attribution.⁴ Studying these representations together allows a sense of the range of approaches taken by English artists to the legend between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century. As I also hope to show, social concerns as well as racial ideologies may illumine Blake and Scharf's design choices along with the responses of contemporary viewers.

WRITTEN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Enlightenment histories of Britain covering the pre-Norman period generally echo a Whig belief that the nation's political institutions, protective of individual freedoms, are traceable back to the Saxons who came to Britain in the fifth century. A widely read history by Paul de Rapin, in Nicholas Tindal's English translation of 1727, sees the workings of divine providence behind the development of Saxon kingship, the survival of a Saxon constitution, and England's progress from Saxon times to modernity. David Hume's popular history, first published between 1754 and 1761, similarly accepts the Saxon origins of English liberty, though he maintains that freedom was eroded through wars and, after conversion, excessive devotion to Rome until Henry VII's reign. Other eighteenth-century historians provide varied interpretations positing the continuity, with interruptions, of Saxon institutions.⁵

Perhaps because of the discrepancy between the supposed Saxon foundation of modern liberties and the enslavement of the Angles (Saxons) met by Gregory, eighteenth-century narratives of this legend tend at least implicitly to link the slavery with Saxon barbarism prior to conversion. The slaves' aesthetic appeal is almost invariably identified as the cause of Gregory's interest in sending a mission. Rapin admits that Saxons sold children when "over-stocked"; fortunately in Rome, the "young Slaves, being exposed to sale in the publick Market, drew the Eyes of vast Numbers of People upon them, who could not admire them enough. Among the rest, Gregory ... beheld them very attentively."⁶ Hume takes a more negative view of Gregory's conduct but admits that conversion was necessary to the civilizing process. "However limited in their views [the Saxons were]," he argues, "they could not but have perceived a degree of

³ The only eighteenth-century illustration of the scene predating Blake's known to me appears in W. HOWELL, *Medulla Historiæ Anglicanæ: The Ancient and Present State of England* – e.g. 6th edn, London, 1712, where the image is reversed, and 11th edn, London, 1750. The 1st edn, London, 1679 does not contain this picture. I discuss this and other depictions in my book in progress. My thanks to Fernando Gutiérrez Baños for information about a relief of the scene made c. 1600 for an altarpiece of San Benito el Real, Valladolid (Spain), which is possibly the oldest extant representation.

⁴ The definitive catalog of Blake's art assigns the watercolor to him: M. BUTLIN, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake: Text*, New Haven, 1981, no. 55. This attribution has been reaffirmed in Jonathan Yarker, *Ambition in 'The Grand Manner': Edward Dayes as History Painter* (London, 2013), p. 62 n. 2, with reference to earlier scholarship.

⁵ D. FRAZIER WOOD, *Anglo-Saxonism and the Idea of Englishness in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Woodbridge UK, 2020, pp. 74-81.

⁶ N. TINDAL (ed. and trans.), P. RAPIN DE THOYRAS, *The History of England*, Vol. I, 2nd edn, London, 1732, p. 65.

cultivation in the [Christian] southern countries beyond what they themselves possessed; and it was natural for them to yield to that superior knowledge ...” Hume’s subsequent report of Gregory meeting the slaves closely follows Bede’s:

It happened, that this prelate, at that time in a private station, had observed in the market-place of Rome some Saxon youth exposed to sale, whom the Roman merchants, in their trading voyages to Britain, had bought of their mercenary parents. Struck with the beauty of their fair complexions and blooming countenances, Gregory asked to what country they belonged; and being told they were Angles, he replied, that they ought more properly be denominated *angels*: It were a pity that the Prince of Darkness should enjoy so fair a prey, and that so beautiful a frontispiece should cover a mind destitute of internal grace and righteousness. Enquiring farther concerning the name of their province, he was informed, that it was Deïri, a district of Northumberland: Deïri! replied he, that is good! They are called to the mercy of God from his anger, De ira. But what is the name of the king of that province? He was told that it was Ælle or Alla: Alleluiah, cried he: We must endeavour that the praises of God be sung in their country.⁷

Romantic and Victorian-era histories continue to represent the modern English as heirs of Saxon institutions and love of freedom, but increasingly references to this legacy fuse with ideas of racial superiority. The Saxons’ allegedly advantageous physical and psychological attributes, bequeathed to their descendants, were also upheld as instrumental in the successes of the British Empire. Different racial classifications are promoted, yet the opinion most often expressed is that the Saxons, with other northern populations, belonged to the Germanic or Teutonic race. Among its distinguishing characteristics were courage, dedication to liberty, racial purity, and beauty identified with fair skin and hair.⁸ Sharon Turner, whose *History of the Anglo-Saxons* was the most popular account of pre-Norman Britain in the early nineteenth century, thought that physiology did not “govern moral character so permanently as the good or evil habits and discipline to which it is subjected.” Nonetheless, before conversion, “the ferocity of the Saxon character would seem to suit better the dark and melancholy physiognomies of Asia and Africa, than the fair, pleasing, and blue-eyed countenances by which our ancestors are described.” Nature, he thought, supplied Saxons “with the germs of those amiable qualities which have become the national character of their descendants.” Rome’s Christian mission enabled the Saxons to progress from barbarism to civilization. The “white skins, the flowing locks, and beautiful countenances” of the English slaves prompted Gregory’s enterprise.⁹

Victorian histories likewise emphasize the slaves’ beauty and present the meeting with Gregory as a catalyst of the Saxons’ acquisition of civilizing traits. Somatic features not necessarily mentioned in previous accounts are described in some detail, especially light-colored hair. According to Edward Freeman, writing in 1869, the slaves were “beautiful boys ... with a fair skin and long fair hair, as English boys then would have.”¹⁰ John Green, whose *History*

⁷ D. HUME, *The History of England*, Vol. I, 1st edn, London, 1762, pp. 22-23.

⁸ R. HORSMAN, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge MA, 1981, pp. 25-42, 62-77.

⁹ S. TURNER, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, Vol. I, 6th edn, Paris, 1840, pp. 122-123, 199.

¹⁰ E.A. FREEMAN, *Old English History for Children*, London, 1869, p. 44.

appeared in 1874, describes the slaves' "white bodies ... fair faces ... [and] golden hair."¹¹ The church history published by the Catholic John Lingard in 1845 dwells less on somatic attributes but notes that the slaves' "forms so fair" caught Gregory's eye. Roman Christianity, Lingard argues, rescued the English from barbarism; the British Empire would have been impossible without this civilizing force. He describes the Saxons' brutality at length and compares their practice of slavery unfavorably with that of African "savages." Conversion through Rome, however, gave the Saxons – among other benefits – "a new spirit of legislation," laws to punish immorality, and "seeds" of liberality that led to slavery's abolition.¹²

ILLUSTRATING THE GREGORY LEGEND: WILLIAM BLAKE

Born in 1757, William Blake apprenticed during the 1770s to James Basire, engraver for the Royal Society and Society of Antiquaries. Until Blake's death in 1827, engraving remained a central medium of his artistic expression and source of income. One of his assignments under Basire was to reproduce medieval monuments in Westminster. Several of Blake's early works attest his resulting interest in historical representation, including medieval. Often such subjects are cast in ways reminiscent of his republican values; examples include his paintings of *The Ordeal of Queen Emma* (1779) and *The Penance of Jane Shore* (1793), which present both women in a sympathetic light as victims of oppression.¹³

An analogous characterization can be made of the pen and watercolor study of *Gregory the Great and the British Captives* (Fig. 1) that Blake probably executed in the 1780s or early 1790s for a *History of England, a Small Book of Engravings* outlined in his *Notebook*. No trace of the *History* has been located; it may never have been finished.¹⁴ The subject of Gregory meeting the slaves is not in the list of intended contents, but Blake possibly changed his mind about what to include after this watercolor was made.¹⁵ Stylistically it is close to other early historical paintings by Blake, some likely designed for the *History*.¹⁶ The *Notebook* offers no clue whether he meant to accompany the illustrations with reports of the events; but the listed scenes were fairly well known in educated circles of his day, as was the story of Gregory and the slaves. Blake could probably assume viewers would recognize the subjects with only short captions.

The watercolor shows three English (Saxon) slaves – a dark-haired bearded male flanked by a beardless young man and boy with almost white hair – standing in a tiled space framed

¹¹ J. GREEN, *A Short History of the English People*, Vol. I, illustrated edn, London, 1902, p. 31.

¹² J. LINGARD, *The History and Antiquities of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, Vol. I, London, 1845, pp. 20, 45-46.

¹³ R. ESSICK, "Blake, William (1757–1827)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (henceforth ODNB); D. ERDMAN, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, Princeton, 1969, pp. 45-47.

¹⁴ D. BINDMAN, *Blake as an Artist*, New York, 1977, pp. 23-26; R. LISTER, *The Paintings of William Blake*, Cambridge, 1986, no. 7.

¹⁵ London, British Library, Add. 49460, f. 59v. Princeton University owns a preliminary drawing: William Blake, *Non Angli sed Angeli*, Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton University Library Special Collections. My gratitude to AnnaLee Pauls for her assistance.

¹⁶ D. BINDMAN, "Blake's 'Gothicised Imagination' and the History of England", in M.D. PALEY and M. PHILLIPS (eds.), *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, Oxford, 1973, pp. 29-49, Figs. 8-13.



Fig. 1. William Blake, "Saint Gregory the Great and the British Captives," watercolour: Victoria & Albert Museum, London, #A.L. 6868

by a column to the right and a tonsured man to the far left. The adult slaves wear waistcloths. The boy is naked except for a white cloak hanging down his back with no clear fastening to his shoulders; the cloth is reminiscent of long angel wings. A spotlight seems to illumine the trio's fair skin. Three slaves with darker complexions and hair, two probably meant as Africans, emerge from the shadows to the right and in the background. The slave merchant stands to the left of the young adult English slave, gripping an axe and a chain around the slave's wrist.

The meeting supposedly took place before Gregory became pope, yet he is portrayed as an old man. With his white hair, long beard, and white robe and skin, he resembles numerous portrayals by Blake of the mythical Urizen, the Creator God or Christ, and holy men such as Abraham, Samuel, and Job. The similarity to those striking figures, which have little correspondence in Daye's work, is another reason to ascribe the watercolor to Blake.¹⁷ Yet whereas some of Blake's imagery of Urizen and God identifies them with human misfortune, there is nothing really threatening about Gregory in this picture. His splayed fingers imply he has just noticed the English slaves and is startled by their appearance. The merchant glowers; he and the noblemen to the left, possibly buyers, appear worried that the future pope will disrupt their plans, but Gregory seems uncertain how to respond. Moreover, the light-colored cloths and skin of the English slaves link them visually with Gregory while distinguishing them from other

¹⁷ LISTER, *Paintings*, e.g. nos. 3, 12, 28, 30, 68, 69, 75.

figures in the scene. The boy and his dark-haired companion stand serenely with unbound hands, and both English adults meet Gregory's gaze; the slave to the left seems to smile, as if hoping for liberty. But the non-English slaves, whose hands are tied, bow their heads, and the boy looks away sadly. He and the darker slaves perhaps realize that the encounter will not bring freedom.

As William Richey has shown, this painting is deeply informed by classical and neo-classical sources.¹⁸ The San Ildefonso Group, a Roman sculpture of two adolescent nudes with a smaller deity that the German art historian Johann Winckelmann reproduced in his *Monumenta antichi inediti*, published in 1767, was a possible model for the adult Saxons.¹⁹ Both compositionally and in its coloring, Blake's watercolor also recalls Benjamin West's 1766 painting of Pylades and Orestes before Iphigenia. Like the English slaves, West's accused men stand in the center-right foreground, bathed in light. They are barely robed, and the light emphasizes their skin's whiteness. This trait and their serenity differentiate them from the excited shepherd who brings them and others in the shadowy background, yet connects them with Iphigenia, her body draped in a white mantle and illumined.²⁰

One conceivable motivation for Blake's choice to represent Gregory with the slaves, Richey pointed out, was to support James Barry's defense of British artists against contentions that they were inferior to those of the continent. In Winckelmann's opinion, Italians knew better "how to paint and figure beauty" partly because many models in Italy had a "noble beauty" instilled by the temperate climate. Against this view, a treatise published by Barry in 1775 argues that historical circumstances rather than inadequate physical features lie behind English art's limitations. Indeed, the beauty of Englishmen was remarked in Rome "even so early as Gregory's time," Barry writes, and he relates that beauty to the "spirit" and "manly vigor" of later English generations. By modeling the English slaves on classicizing norms of beauty, Blake follows Barry in turning Winckelmann's claim on its head.²¹ The English in the watercolor are more classically "beautiful" than anyone around them. The portrayal of one Saxon slave as bearded with dark hair, his companions with almost white hair, correlates with Barry's arguments that apart from skin color, people in England as on the continent have diverse features.

But given the focus on slaves, we should attend to the strong possibility that the decision to paint this scene – rarely represented by earlier artists – was also tied to Blake's support for Britain's anti-slavery movement. Although reading the watercolor through this lens by no means exhausts its potential significance, it reveals further ways in which the scene might have had topical resonances. His sympathy with abolitionism – an issue that, so far as I know, did not attract Dayes' interest – is thus an added factor in favor of assigning the picture to Blake.²² An early indication of his antipathy to modern slavery lies in his engravings of 1791–92 for

¹⁸ W. RICHEY, "Not Angles but Angels: Blake's Pictorial Defense of English Art", *European Romantic Review*, 7 (1996), pp. 49-60.

¹⁹ *Monumenti antichi inediti*, Vol. I, Rome, 1767, p. xiv.

²⁰ RICHEY, "Not Angles", p. 54.

²¹ RICHEY, "Not Angles", pp. 50-54.

²² See e.g. D. BINDMAN, "Blake's Vision of Slavery", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 58 (1995), pp. 373-382; D. LEE, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, Philadelphia, 2002, pp. 66-119, with references to earlier studies.

John Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition*, one of the first works widely available in England to illustrate the practice's horrors in the Americas.²³ Blake's engravings, some of which show Africans in manacles or enduring torture, helped sway British opinion toward the abolitionist cause.²⁴ His *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) draws attention to slavery's cruelties within an allegory about moral and sexual freedom. Allusions to slavery also appear in *America* of the 1790s and *The Little Black Boy*, part of *Songs of Innocence* (1789).²⁵

The latter illustrated poem merits particular consideration for its critique of the traditional association of whiteness with goodness. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists as well as defenders of slavery accepted this association, and *The Little Black Boy*, the picture of Gregory with the slaves, and other works by Blake allude to the idea; but *The Little Black Boy* disturbs the notion by identifying dark more than fair somatic features with virtues such as love.²⁶ The poem's first illustration shows a black mother and her son beneath a tree in the "southern wild," probably Africa. The boy, the poem's speaker, bemoans his dark skin "as if bereav'd of light," but he believes his soul to be "White as an angel is the English child" – a likely echo of Gregory's comparison of the white English child-slaves to angels. The boy then recalls his mother teaching him that dark skin came from the sun's burning, an ancient theory still promulgated by some Enlightenment scientists. The mother's instruction upends missionaries' claims that Africans need white teachers to become civilized. The black body is but a "cloud and like a shady grove" she explains to her son. Once souls learn to withstand the heat of God's love, the cloud will vanish and they will rejoice in heaven.

The second illustration portrays the boy stroking the "silver hair" of a white "English boy" who stands before Christ. The poetry indicates that this is the black boy's vision of heaven. In the present on earth, his mother is dead or separated from him by slavery; he teaches a distorted form of her instruction to the white child that Blake casts in broken English, implying it to be a second tongue imperfectly learned from slavers. The black boy promises to shade the white boy from God's heat until he can bear it enough "To lean in joy upon our fathers knee." One implication is that the black child will continue to serve his companion in heaven, though the clouds of bodily difference will be gone, as the poem states. Since the two children will be "like" one another, the black boy hopes finally to win the white boy's love. Bereft of maternal love, the black boy already loves the white child, yet to judge from the illustration, even in heaven his love may not be reciprocated. The white boy turns his back on his companion; Christ looks only at the white boy and touches his arm, apparently also ignoring the black child.

When designing his picture of Gregory with the slaves, Blake may have similarly hoped to encourage abolitionist sentiment, in this case by reminding viewers that their Saxon ancestors endured slavery, despite the supposed roots of modern liberty in pre-Norman times. Enlightenment opponents of slavery echoed Whig historiography in implying that the practice

²³ J. STEDMAN, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, London, 1796.

²⁴ M. KLARER, "Humanitarian Pornography: John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796)", *New Literary History*, 36 (2005), pp. 559-587, at 559.

²⁵ Reproductions online at <http://www.blakearchive.org/> (William Blake Archive).

²⁶ BINDMAN, "Blake's Vision", pp. 374-378.

conflicted with an innate English respect for freedom. Judicial rulings in 1701, 1750, and 1762 referred to African slaves as free if they set foot on English soil. Lord Mansfield wrote in 1772 that England's air was "... too pure for slaves to breathe in," a concept repeated in William Cowper's poem, *The Task*, of 1785: "Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs/ Receive our air, that moment they are free./ They touch our country and their shackles fall."²⁷

To any extent that Blake showed watercolor to other viewers, it might have also brought to mind contemporary reports of Barbary pirates selling Europeans, including English, as slaves. The greatest danger lay in the Mediterranean, but the piracy occasionally reached Britain. The fear lasted into the nineteenth century, fueled by tracts like *The Cruelties of the Algerine Pirates, showing the present dreadful state of the English slaves, and other Europeans*. The frontispiece's upper register depicts an enslaved mother and children; the text describes boys as well as girls taken "as they approach maturity ... to gratify the lust of their barbarian master."²⁸ Stories also circulated of slaves sold to Ottoman masters for sexual services, among them Circassian women prized for their "Anglo-Saxon beauty."²⁹ An 1862 English translation of a sixteenth-century Czech account describes male, female, and child slaves stripped for inspection.³⁰ The naked boy in Blake's watercolor could have stirred imaginings of a comparable fate.

For Blake personally, though, the picture's subject surely coincided with not only his opposition to slavery abroad, but his worries about freedom within Britain. There may be a correlation between the picture's design and his belief that "state Religion" restricted spiritual liberty.³¹ As he knew, Gregory did not actually free the slaves met in Rome, and Blake seems to avoid any hint in this image that contact with the Roman church was spiritually beneficial. The painting's subject may have further resonated with his disapproval of England's system of urban child labor, which he saw as a form of enslavement. His writings and art repeatedly allude to the sufferings.³² A notable example is his two-part poem, *The Chimney Sweeper* (1789, 1794).³³ Both texts describe boy sweepers as effectively slaves and – like *The Little Black Boy* – condemn established religion for teaching the poor to accept misery in hope of heavenly reward. In the first part, the sweeper-narrator remembers his father selling him into labor. The boy then reassures his fellow sweeper Tom that shaving his head will prevent the black ashes from spoiling his "white" hair. That night Tom dreams of sweepers in "coffins of black" whom an angel frees into a meadow, where they run, laugh, and wash in a river until, "naked & white .../ They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind." Tom and his fellow

²⁷ M. KAUFMANN, "English Common Law, Slavery and", *Encyclopedia of Blacks in European History and Culture*, Vol. 1 (2008), pp. 200-203; A. MELLOR, "Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 58 (1995), pp. 345-370, at 345-350; W. COWPER, *The Task: A Poem*, London, 1785, p. 47.

²⁸ W. HONE, et al., *The Cruelties of the Algerine Pirates*, London, 1816, p. 9.

²⁹ W. VON SCHIERBRAND, "Slaves Sold to the Turk", *New York Times*, Mar. 28, 1886; N. PAINTER, *The History of White People*, New York, 2010, pp. 43-58.

³⁰ A.H. WRATISLAW, *Adventures of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw*, London, 1862; quoted in A. FISHER, "The Sale of Slaves in the Ottoman Empire", *Bogazici Üniversitesi Dergisi*, 6 (1978), pp. 149-174, at 152.

³¹ S. MAKDISI, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, Chicago, 2002, pp. 8, 247-248.

³² J.F. MOYER, "'The Daughters Weave their Work in Loud Cries': Blake, Slavery, and Cotton", *Blake Quarterly*, 48:3 (2014-15), online at <http://bq.blakearchive.org/48.3.moyer>.

³³ *William Blake Archive* (above, n. 25).

sweepers wake in the cold and dark to resume work, but Tom feels “happy & warm” thanks to this promise of heaven for those who “do their duty.”

As in *Little Black Boy*, Blake here juxtaposes black and white, body and spirit, death and eternal life, the darkness of forced labor and the allusive dream of a sunlit heaven. The illustration shows an angel lifting a child while naked sweepers leap with raised arms. Their postures recall Blake’s image of the fair-skinned and blond Albion, arms lifted in ecstasy, first engraved in 1793. Later printings included a caption that described Albion rising “from where he labour’d at the Mill with Slaves.”³⁴ He could be a mature version of the slave child meeting Gregory, except that boy’s sad expression and lowered arms are the antithesis of Albion’s joyous dance of freedom. It is perhaps significant, in this regard, that the English slaves with Gregory also somatically resemble depictions by Blake of the ghostly Samuel with the Witch of Endor and the entombed Christ.³⁵ Such analogies suggest that for Blake, the slaves’ whiteness might have ironically evoked the deathlike state of enslavement as much as purity, while Gregory’s whiteness could partly signify an analogous perception of mainstream religion.

Yet even as the watercolor of Gregory with the slaves foregrounds the plight of the Saxon group, it encourages sympathy for all the represented captives. Despite the darker slaves’ positioning to one side and in the background, it is difficult to imagine Blake or other viewers feeling sorry only for the English party. In line again with his ambivalence toward the established church, the picture is a stark reminder that slavery was tolerated in medieval Christian Rome. Gregory’s focus on the Saxons and apparent disinterest in the darker slaves appears as unjust as Christ’s gaze only at the white child in *The Little Black Boy*. As Saree Makdisi has shown, true freedom for Blake entailed complete liberation, physical and spiritual, for every individual, in line with his antinomian principles: among them, the “creative, affirmative, positive ... power to affirm life as being in common, and art as the making of that ‘divine body’ of which we are all ‘members’.”³⁶ The oscillating pigmentation of the “little black boy” (who is sometimes fair, sometimes dark) in that poem’s printings, and the transformed coloring of the sweepers cleansed of ashes who play in heaven seem expressive of this outlook. An additional, possible message of these visual and literary images, which conflicts with both the practice of slavery and the “othering” fundamental to British imperialism, is that skin color is irrelevant to a person’s essence and hence worthiness of love or pity. The painting of Gregory with the slaves, all of them empathetic victims of oppression despite their physical differences, perhaps reflects this line of thought, too, at an early stage in Blake’s career.

SIR GEORGE SCHARF

Scharf trained under his father, the Bavarian artist George Johann Scharf, and at the Royal Academy Schools. He was initially attracted to the theater as well as art; an early work was a series of depictions of theater scenes at Covent Garden.³⁷ A journey with Charles Fellows to Asia

³⁴ MAKDISI, *William Blake*, pp. 35–38, Fig. 2.

³⁵ See “The Witch of Endor Raising the Spirit of Samuel”; “Christ in the Sepulchre”: *William Blake Archive*.

³⁶ MAKDISI, *William Blake*, p. 2, also see pp. 3, 41–42, 316–324.

³⁷ P. JACKSON, “Scharf, Sir George”, *ODNB; Recollections of the Scenic Effects of Covent Garden Theatre During the Season 1838–9*, London, 1839.

Minor in 1840 sparked Scharf's interest in ancient Mediterranean cultures. He served as artist for an 1843 government expedition that arranged export of Lycian antiquities to the British Museum. Images by Scharf of antiquities were exhibited at the Royal Academy and published in books such as Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1847). Elected fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1852, Scharf became secretary of the National Portrait Gallery in 1857. He was appointed a director in 1882 and held this post until shortly before his death in 1895.³⁸

The etching based on Scharf's 1846 drawing of Gregory with the slaves was published in 1847 (Fig. 2). The title, *Non Angli sed Angeli*, often used for Victorian representations of this scene, derives from Gregory's less punchy comparison of the Angles to angels in earlier retellings of the legend. A description apparently provided by Scharf, printed with the image, refers to the setting as the "forum of Aurelius."³⁹ Two Roman boys play in the foreground as a woman with grapes – probably their mother – beckons to them. A man sets out fruit for sale while his wife holds their small son, an image of family unity. On the right, a woman offers

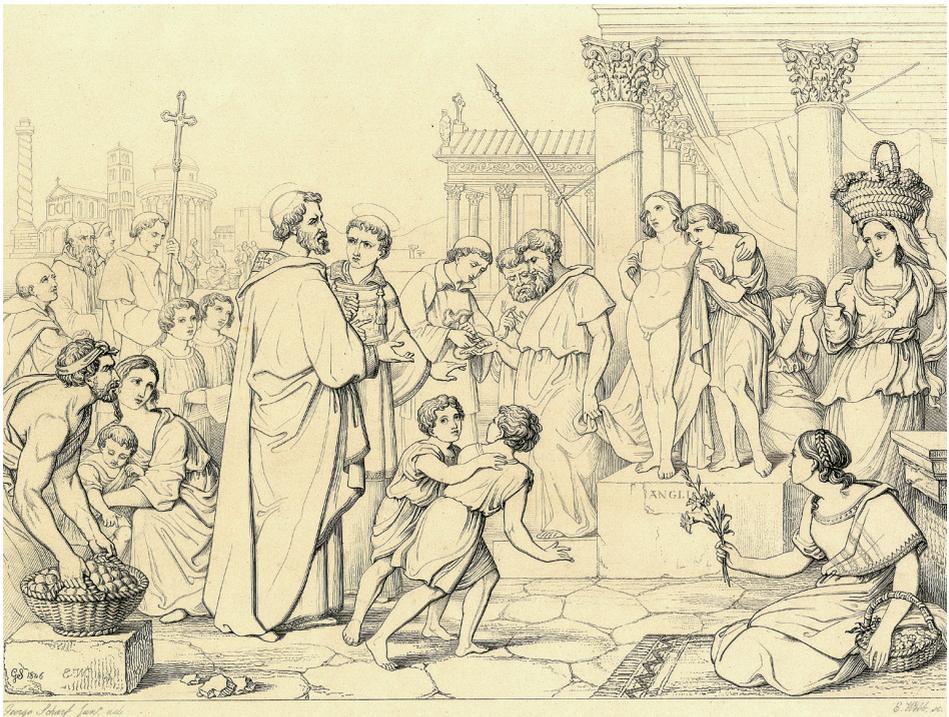


Fig. 2. Sir George Scharf, "Non Angli sed Angeli," engraved by E. Webb: British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum

³⁸ JACKSON, "Scharf", *ODNB*.

³⁹ Text online at <https://www.pamono.eu/unknown-non-angli-sed-angeli-original-lithograph-after-g-scharf-and-e-webb-1846> (accessed 30 October 2021).

Gregory flowers, but his eyes are directed toward the children standing on a block engraved with *Angli* in square capitals, set in front of a spear tied to a column of the Pantheon portico, a symbol of sale. One slave, a boy, is naked; the gender of his more covered companion is uncertain, but the delicate features and long hair give both children a feminine appearance. The father of the small child seems to look in pity toward the slaves; a woman weeps behind them. Gregory stands with Augustine (later archbishop of Canterbury); they gesture at the slaves as a fellow cleric gives coins to a merchant and his partner counts the money. In the background, four clerics wait with boy choristers.

The naked slave and his companion have arms over each other's shoulders, a pose reminiscent of the youths in the San Ildefonso Group. The merchant taking the coins pulls away the naked child's cloak; the boy looks up as if shy about his nudity or fearful of the clergy's intentions, while his companion gazes worriedly at Gregory and holds the cloak's other end, perhaps to prevent it from falling. These gestures may signal an assumption that the clerics buy the slaves for sexual purposes. The haloes of Gregory and Augustine, however, reveal their holiness and thus their cause's virtue – to free the children. The accompanying text claims that Gregory abolished slavery throughout Europe.

Illustrating this scene gave Scharf a chance to show his talent for tender portrayals of mothers and children; his notebooks are filled with sketches of such groups based on paintings examined for the National Portrait Gallery. The carefully drawn Roman architecture is indicative of his antiquarianism. Like Blake's picture, Scharf's may also reveal the influence of orientalizing visions of Mediterranean slavery. Other nineteenth-century images of the slaves with Gregory – usually children, in keeping with most textual accounts of the incident – show them partly or entirely nude. Such scenes conformed to prevailing norms for the representation of slaves and notions that depicting well-bred children's naked bodies accorded with their innocence.⁴⁰ Yet the manner in which Scharf's slave displays his body as the merchant removes the cloak, unusual details in illustrations of this episode, lends this scene a certain eroticism.

Whereas Blake's anti-slavery leanings may have encouraged him to depict this scene, Scharf's work postdated the end of British slavery by thirteen years, and Barbary piracy largely ceased once France conquered Algeria in 1830. Still, the British public knew that slavery persisted in the Ottoman Empire, the US, and elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, like Blake, Victorian reformers perceived English child labor as akin to slavery. According to the preface of the 1832 *Memoir of Robert Blincoe*, "... it might have afforded a sort of sorry consolation to the Negro slaves of America, had they been informed, that their condition, in having agriculturally to raise the cotton, was not half so bad, as that of the white infant-slaves, who had to assist in the spinning of it"⁴¹ An anonymous 1840 poem, *'Infant Slavery', or the Children in the Mines and Factories*, opens with, "Are we now living in a Christian land? / Can a fond mother by the father stand / And patient see her child, but five years old, / ... For terms of years to abject slav'ry sold? ... Slav'ry vile in all it's hideous form / Blacker than midnight in the

⁴⁰ J. KINCAID, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, New York, 1992, pp. 223-224, 227-228; J. WOOLF, "Lewis Carroll's Shifting Reputation", *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2010), online at <https://www.smithsonian-mag.com/arts-culture/lewis-carrolls-shifting-reputation-9432378/>.

⁴¹ J. BROWN, *Memoir of Robert Blincoe*, Manchester, 1832, p. iii.

pelting storm ...”⁴² Scharf’s design was published the year that Parliament restricted adolescent textile workers to ten hours labor per day, but advocacy for reforms persisted into the next century. Whether or not he thought about the parallel between the enslaved children with Gregory and the exploitation of modern children, the analogy may have occurred to viewers of Scharf’s picture. The juxtaposition of free Roman children watched by attentive women and English children under the control of merchants underscores the tragedy of separating children from parents in order for them to work, a practice the reformers vigorously attacked.⁴³

At the same time, Scharf’s representation of the legend aligns with developing theories of the unique destiny of the English “race.” His German ancestry quite possibly made the concept that Saxons and Germans shared Teutonic racial primacy especially attractive to him. The picture’s title and the name *Angli* carved below the slaves reinforce the message that they embody “angelic” beauty, hence purity. This heightens the sorrow of their enslavement. But even as the imagery encourages appreciation for the beauty of the Angles, as does Blake’s picture, Scharf’s is distinguished by its overall prettiness and sentimentalizing character. Although long hair and nudity or semi-nudity differentiate the English from the Roman children, the range of physical types seen in Blake’s watercolor is missing. Scharf’s English slaves exemplify an aesthetic pinnacle, yet the other figures also reflect classicizing norms, while more clearly than in Blake’s picture, the setting is identifiable with historical Rome. These features invite us to consider the relationship between Scharf’s image and the more negative attitudes toward classical Rome articulated by some nineteenth-century British intellectuals, such as Thomas Arnold.⁴⁴ In an analogous vein, Howard Williams has noted that Victorian archaeological research into the ancient Saxons grew partly in reaction to the older focus on the grandeur of Greco-Roman civilization.⁴⁵

An additional possible motivation behind Scharf’s picture can be proposed in this light: to emphasize, in response to scholars like Arnold, how much the English for all their racial preeminence still owed to Rome. The picture urges the viewer to recall the refinements of classical culture. The portrayal of Gregory ending physical slavery – as the text printed with it asserts – while planning the liberation of the English from spiritual slavery was perhaps meant to convey that contact with Rome was the reason “Saxon freedom” flourished in both senses – a concept expressed in Lingard’s *History* published two years earlier. Illustrating the legend of Gregory with the slaves allowed Scharf to situate pride in the Saxon/Teutonic race squarely within the frame of the Roman heritage. His slaves posed like classical statues near virtuous clergy and precisely rendered ancient monuments capture both the secular and the religious facets of Rome’s greatness, in Scharf’s eyes. Gregory’s purchase of the slaves in this image and, as viewers would have remembered, the mission later led by Augustine, enabled the transfer of that glory to England and its empire.

⁴² ANONYMOUS, ‘*Infant Slavery*’, or the Children in the Mines and Factories, London, 1840, p. 13.

⁴³ See C. CREIGHTON, “Changing Conceptualizations of Children’s Rights in Early Industrial Britain”, in N. GOOSE and K. HONEYMAN (eds.), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750–1914*, Farnham, UK, 2013, pp. 231–253, at 242–252.

⁴⁴ HORSMAN, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, pp. 65–69; T. ARNOLD, *Introductory Lectures on Modern History*, 5th edn., London, 1860, pp. 26–29.

⁴⁵ H. WILLIAMS, “Anglo-Saxonism and Victorian Archaeology: William Wylie’s *Fairford Graves*,” *Early Medieval Europe*, 16 (2008), pp. 49–88, at 51.

