



# V. Observations on the bodily conformation and mental capacity of the negroes

Professor Blumenbach

**To cite this article:** Professor Blumenbach (1799) V. Observations on the bodily conformation and mental capacity of the negroes , Philosophical Magazine Series 1, 3:10, 141-147, DOI: [10.1080/14786449908676972](https://doi.org/10.1080/14786449908676972)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14786449908676972>



Published online: 18 May 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)

downwards. He was thirty-five inches high at his birth, and is now thirty-nine; so that he has grown four inches in nearly as many months. Elephants are always measured at the shoulder; for the arch or curve of the back, of young ones particularly, is considerably higher than any other part, and it is a sure sign of old age whenever this curve is found flattened or considerably depressed, after an elephant has once attained his full growth.

Though these remarks, as well as several others in the above relation, do not come within the plan I proposed, which was merely to describe the method of taking wild elephants in the province of Tipura, yet I hope they will not be deemed impertinent or superfluous, especially as several of them tend to establish some important facts in the natural history of this animal, that are not known, or not attended to, at least in any accounts that I had an opportunity of seeing.

---

V. *Observations on the bodily Conformation and mental Capacity of the Negroes.* By Professor BLUMENBACH. From *Magazin für das neueste aus der Physik*, Vol. IV.

DURING a tour which I made through Swisserland, I saw in the picture-gallery at Pommersfeld four negro heads by Vandyk, two of which in particular had the lines of the face so regular that the features seemed very little different from the European. At that time, as I had never had an opportunity of acquiring a proper knowledge respecting the form of the negro head and cranium, by studying nature, and as I remembered that Mr. Camper, in a dissertation read in the Academy of Painting at Amsterdam, had mentioned that the greater part of the most eminent painters, and especially Rubens, Vandyk and Jordaens, when they painted Moors, copied from Europeans, whose faces had been blackened for that purpose, I ascribed the European look of the  
above

above negro heads to this common fault. Some months after, however, I had an opportunity of convincing myself that there are real negroes whose features correspond very nearly with those of the Europeans, and that the above heads in the gallery of Pommersfeld might be a true representation of nature.

Going to pay a visit at Yverdun to the two brothers Treytorrens, one of whom, the chevalier, had been thirty-five years in the French service, particularly at St. Domingo; and the other, by means of the opportunities which his brother enjoyed, had a collection of natural curiosities that contained many rare articles, when I entered the court of their elegant habitation, which is situated on the road to Goumoens, I saw no person to shew me into the house, except a woman of an agreeable figure, who was standing with her back towards me. When she turned round to give me an answer, I was much surprised to find that she was a female negro, whose face perfectly corresponded with her figure, and fully justified the fidelity of likeness in Vandyk's negro heads, which I had seen at Pommersfeld. All the features of her face, even the nose and lips, the latter of which were a little thick, though not so as to be disagreeable, had they been covered with a white skin, must have excited universal admiration. At the same time she was not only exceedingly lively, and possessed a sound understanding; but, as I afterwards learned, was extremely well informed and expert in the obstetric art. The handsome pretty negresses of Yverdun is celebrated far and near as the best midwife in the Italian part of Switzerland. I was informed by her master, the chevalier, who has in his service also a negro man as elegantly formed as a statue, that she was a creole from St. Domingo; that both her parents were natives of Congo, but not so black as the negroes of Senegal.

Since that period I have had an opportunity of seeing and conversing with many negroes, and have procured for my collection a great many anatomical preparations from negro  
bodies,

bodies, which, together with what I have read in different voyages, tend more and more to convince me of the truth of the two following propositions :

1. That between one negro and another there is as much (if not more) difference in the colour, and particularly in the lineaments of the face, as between many real negroes, and other varieties of the human species.

2. That the negroes, in regard to their mental faculties and capacity, are not inferior to the rest of the human race.

The three negro skulls, which I have now before me, afford, by the very striking gradation with which the lineaments pass from the one to the other, a very evident proof of the first proposition. One of them, which Mr. Michaelis was so good as to bring me from New-York, and of which I have given an accurate description in another place\*, is distinguished by such a projecting upper jaw-bone, that, if the same peculiarity belonged to all negroes, one might be tempted to suppose that they had another first parent than Adam. On the other hand, the lineaments of the third have so little of the exotic form, and are so different from the first, that if I had not dissected the whole head perfectly entire, and just as it was when cut from the body, I should be in doubt whether I ought to consider it as having actually belonged to a real negro. The second holds a mean rank between both, and in its whole form has a great likeness to the head of the Abyssinian Abbas Gregorius, a good engraving of which by Heifs, in 1691, from a painting by Von Sand, I have now before me, and which not only proves in general the close affinity of the Abyssinians with the negroes, but approaches much nearer to the ugly negroes, to speak according to the European ideas of beauty, than the well-formed negresses of Yverdun, or the handsome young negro whose head I dissected as before mentioned, or than a thousand others whose features are little different from those of the Europeans. What I have here said is indeed nothing else than a confirmation of a truth long

\* In my Osteology, p. 87.

known, which has been already remarked by unprejudiced travellers, as will appear by the following quotations. Le Maire, in his Voyage to Cape Verd, Senegal, and Gambia\*, says: "Blackness excepted, there are female negroes as well made as our ladies in Europe." Leguat, in his well-known Voyages †, tells us, that he found at Batavia several very pretty negresses, whose faces had the perfect European form. Adanson, in his Account of Senegal ‡, speaking of the female negroes there, has the following passage: "The women are almost as tall as the men, and equally well made. Their skin is remarkably fine and soft: their eyes are black and open; the mouth and lips small, and the features are well proportioned. Some of them are perfect beauties. They are exceedingly lively, and have an easy, free air, that is highly agreeable." Ulloa, in his *Noticias Americanas* ||, observes, that some of the negroes have thick projecting lips, a flat nose, eyes deeply sunk in the sockets, which in general are called *getudos*, and wool instead of hair. He then adds: "Others, whose colour is equally black, have features perfectly like those of the whites, particularly in regard to the nose and the eyes, and smooth but thick hair §."

\* Voyages aux Cap Verd, Senegal et Gambie, p. 161.

† Vol. ii. p. 136.

‡ Page 22.

|| Page 92.

§ The following observations of an intelligent Danish traveller may serve still farther to confirm the truth of Professor Blumenbach's proposition: "Almost all the negroes are of a good stature, and the Akra negroes have remarkably fine features. The contour of the face, indeed, among the generality of these people, is different from that of the Europeans; but at the same time faces are found among them which, excepting the black colour, would in Europe be considered as beautiful. In common, however, they have something apish. The cheek-bones and chin project very much; and the bones of the nose are smaller than among the Europeans. This last circumstance has probably given rise to the assertion, that the negro women flatten the noses of their children as soon as they are born. But noses may be seen among some of them as much elevated and as regular as those of the Europeans. Their hair is woolly, curled and black, but sometimes red. When continually combed, it may be brought to the length of half a yard; but it never can be kept smooth. See P. E. Isert Reis na Guinea. Dordrecht 1790. p. 175. EDIT.

The testimonies and examples which serve to prove the truth of the second proposition, respecting the mental faculties, natural talents and ingenuity of the negroes, are equally numerous and incontrovertible. Their astonishing memories, their great activity, and their acuteness in trade, particularly with gold dust, against which the most experienced European merchant cannot be too much on his guard, are all circumstances so well known, that it is not necessary to enlarge on them\*. The great aptitude of the slaves for learning every kind of nice handicraft is equally well known; and the case is the same in regard to their musical talents, as we have instances of negroes playing the violin in so masterly a manner, that they gained so much money as enabled them to purchase their liberty†.

Of the poetical genius of the negroes instances are known among both sexes. A female negro, who was a poetess, is mentioned by Haller; and a specimen of the Latin Poetry of Francis Williams, a negro, may be found in the History of Jamaica. The interesting letters of Ignatius Sancho, a negro, are well known; and the two following instances will serve as a farther proof of the capacity and talents of our black brethren, in regard to literature and science. The protestant clergyman J. J. Eliza Capitein was a negro; a man of considerable learning, and a great orator. I have in my possession an excellent print of him engraved by Tanjé, after P. Vandyk. Our worthy professor Hollman, when he was at Wittenberg, conferred the degree of Doctor of Phi-

\* Barbot, in his Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea, to be found in the fifth volume of Churchill's Collection, relates many interesting things on this subject. Thus he says, p. 235. "The blacks are for the most part men of sense and wit enough, of a sharp ready apprehension, and an excellent memory beyond what is easy to imagine; for, though they can neither read nor write, they are always regular in the greatest hurry of business and trade, and seldom in confusion."

† See Urlsperger's *Amerikanisch Ackerwerk Gottes*, p. 311.

lophony on a negro who had shewn himself to advantage, not only as a writer, but as a teacher, and who afterwards came to Berlin as a counsellor of state to his Prussian majesty. I have now before me two treatises written by him\*, one of which, in particular, displays extensive and well-digested reading of the best physiological works of the time. Of the uncommon knowledge which many negroes have had in the practice of medicine, very favourable testimony has been given by Boerhaave and De Haen, who were certainly competent judges; and the sound skill and delicate expertness of the Yverdun accoucheuse are, as already said, celebrated throughout the whole neighbourhood.

To conclude, the Academy of Sciences at Paris had among the number of its correspondents M. Lislet a negro, in the Isle of France, who excelled in making accurate meteorolo-

\* One of them is entitled: *Differt. inaug. philosophica de humanæ mentis ætæria, sive sensûs ac facultatis in mente humana absentia, et earum in corpore nostro organico ac vivo præsentia, quam* Præs. D. MART. GOTTH. LOESCHERO publicè defendit auctor ANT. GUIL. AMO, Guinea-Afer, Phil. et A.A. L.L. Mag. et J. V. C. Wittebergæ 1734, m. Apr. The title of the other is: *Disp. philosophica, continens ideam distinctam eorum quæ competunt vel menti vel corpori nostro vivo et organico, quam* Præs. M. ANT. GUIL. AMO, Guinea-Afro, d. 29. Maii 1734, defendit Jo. THEODOS, Meiner Rochliz-Misnie. Philos. et J. V. Cultor. In an account of Amo's life, printed on this occasion in name of the Academic Council, it is said, among other things respecting his talents: "Honorem, meritis ingenii partum, insigni probitatis, industriæ, eruditionis, quam publicis privatique exercitationibus declaravit, laude auxit—Compluribus philosophiam domi tradidit excussit tam veterum, quam novorum, placitis, optima quæque selegit, selecta enucleatè ac dilucidè interpretatus est." And the president, in defending the first mentioned treatise, says expressly, in the annexed congratulation to Amo, "Tuum potissimum eminet ingenium felicissimum—utpote qui istius felicitatem ac præstantiam, eruditionis ac doctrinæ soliditatem ac elegantiam, multis speciminibus hætenus in nostra etiam academia magno cum applausu omnibus bonis, et in præsentî dissertatione egregiè comprobasti. Reddo tibi illam proprio Marte eleganter ac eruditè elaboratam, integram adhuc et planè immutatam, ut vis ingenii tui eo magis exinde eluceat.

gical observations. On the other hand, whole provinces of Europe might, in my opinion, be named, from which it would be difficult to produce at present virtuoso's, poets, philosophers, and correspondents of a learned academy.

VI. *Agenda, or a Collection of Observations and Researches the Results of which may serve as the Foundation for a Theory of the Earth.* By M. DE SAUSSURE. From Journal des Mines. No. XX.

[Continued from page 41.]

#### CHAP. VI.

*Observations to be made on Rivers and other Currents of Water.*

1. **E**XTENT of their course, and their inclination from their sources to their mouth.

2. Their dimensions, breadth, depth and velocity in the different parts of their course.

3. Quantity of their periodical increase and decrease at different seasons; their temperature during these seasons; and the causes of these variations.

4. Limits and causes of their extraordinary inundations.

5. Whether they are navigable, and to what distance from their mouth?

6. The nature, purity, and salubrity of their waters.

7. The nature of the sand or mud which they carry along with them; and to what distance they may be traced on the banks or at the bottom of the sea where their mouths are situated. M. Beffon even wishes that the traveller should be furnished with a wooden vessel (*sebille*) to wash the sand and separate the more ponderous particles, which may consist of metal or precious stones. The motion of the waves is also