

The Ancient Egypt "Race" Issue

A rebuttal to Afrocentric exaggerations about a "black" ancient Egypt

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Physical Anthropology

Craniofacial morphology

One of the most common ways of assessing population relationships has been the comparative analysis of skull types. Such a study was carried out by the physical anthropologist C. Loring Brace and five co-researchers ([Brace et al., 1993](#)) who statistically analyzed a range of 24 cranial measurements from diverse world samples, including ancient Egyptians. The results of the analysis suggest that ancient Egyptian crania had elements in common with those from Southwest Asia and Neolithic Europe, as well as North and Northeast Africa. However, the Egyptian skulls showed very little similarity to African crania from the more distant south and west. The plot below shows, as accurately as is possible in two dimensions, the relationships between craniofacial configurations of the various regional samples. The predynastic sample from Upper Egypt lies very close to the West Eurasian group but also shows tendencies toward some neighboring African groups; this should not be surprising given Egypt's geographical position near the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe. The northern Egyptians deviate even more strongly from the tropical African pattern, and indeed their closest relatives appear to be western Eurasians and coastal North Africans. Notice that the pooled group of Sub-Saharan Africans from the southern, central, and western regions of the continent does not resemble Egyptians at all: this group is plotted very distant from both ancient Egyptian samples. Similar conclusions are reached by Howells ([1989](#), [1995](#)) and Froment ([1992](#), [1994](#))

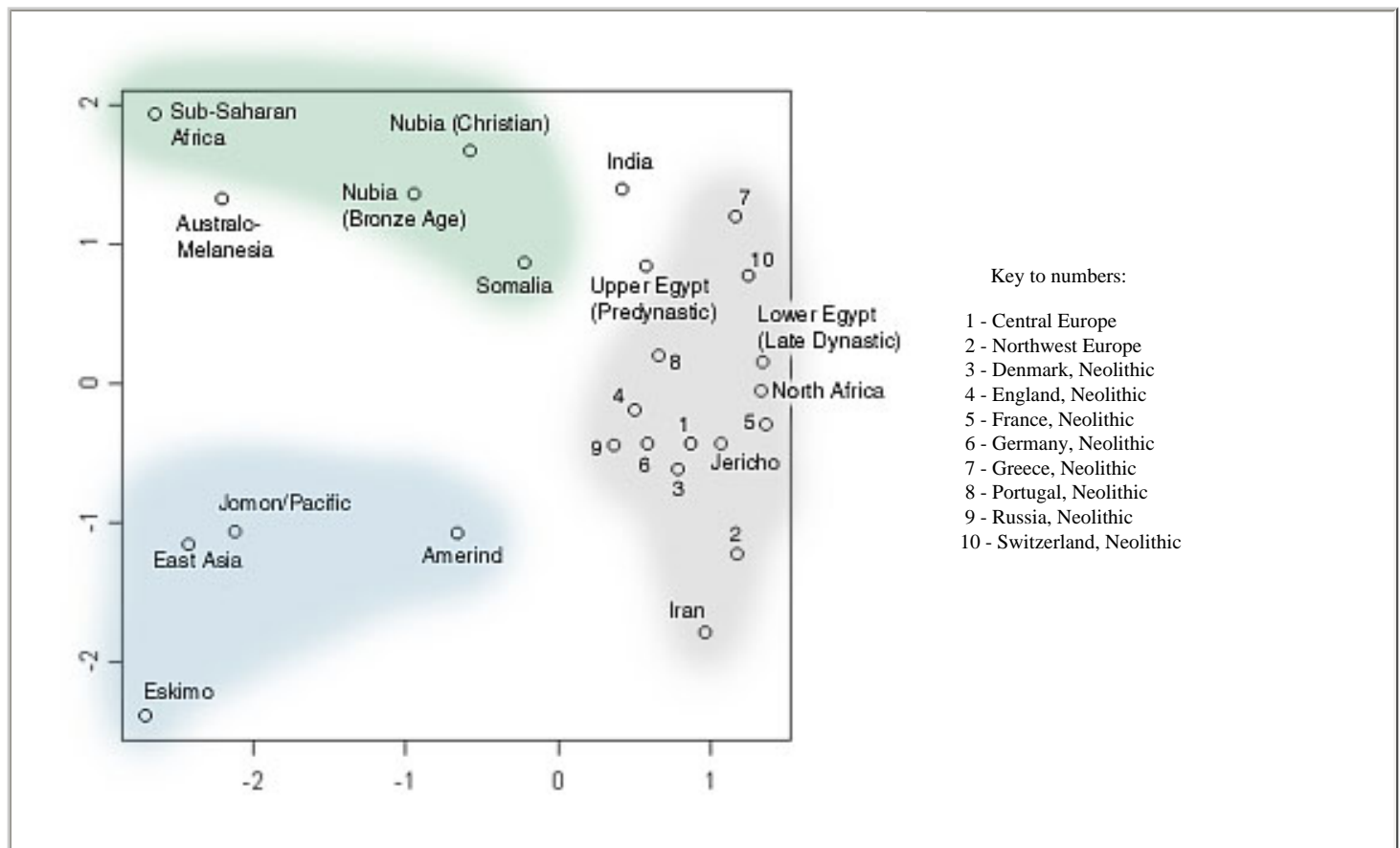


Figure 1. Multidimensional scaling plot based on a suite of 24 cranial measurements taken from samples of 25 world populations. Courtesy of Mike Elby. ([Details](#) , [rotatable 3D plot](#))

Dental Traits

The analysis of discrete dental traits is often used to determine biological relationships of populations using dental remains. The recent work of JD Irish (Irish [1997](#), [1998a](#), [1998b](#)) examines several African populations and concludes that Egyptian populations show more dental similarity to modern North Africans, Arabs, and even Europeans, than to Sub-Saharan Africans. The diagram below (adapted from Irish, 1998b) shows the results of a statistical cluster analysis. It demonstrates that ancient Egyptian dental configuration resembles that of recent North Africans, rather than sub-Saharan Africans. The appearance of Nubian groups in the North African cluster may seem surprising at first, but this may well be due to proximity and gene flow with neighboring North African peoples. Indeed, other North African traits have been found in some Nubian groups as well—in genetics ([Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994](#), [Krings et al. 1999](#)), and hair [Hrdy \(1978\)](#)—although of course Nubians in general show significantly stronger sub-Saharan influences than do Egyptians.

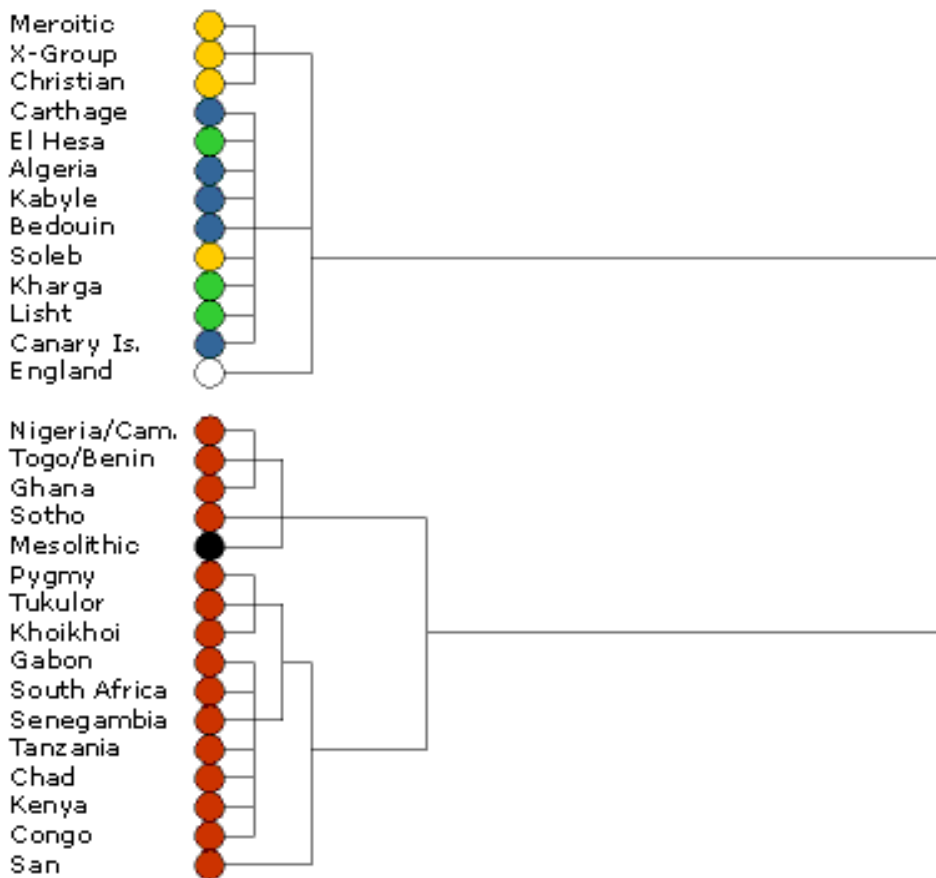


Figure 2: Cluster dendrogram. green: Egyptians; blue: Mediterranean North Africans; yellow: Nubians; white: England; red: sub-Saharan Africans; black: Mesolithic Nubians.

Hair

Numerous mummies with hair still attached to the skulls show that straight, wavy, or lightly curled hair types were

common in ancient Egypt. For example, in a study ([Titlbachova and Titlbach, 1977](#)) involving detailed microscopic investigation of hair samples taken from several ancient Egyptian mummies, most were determined to have been naturally straight, wavy, or gently curled, with a roundish cross-section typical of modern Eurasian and North African peoples. Only a minority showed evidence of structural characteristics traditionally called "Negroid"; even in these the "Negroid" elements were weakly manifested.

Joann Fletcher, a consultant to the Bioanthropology Foundation in the UK, in what she calls an "absolute, thorough study of all ancient Egyptian hair samples" —relied on various techniques, such as electron microscopy and chromatography to analyze hair samples ([Parks, 2000](#)). She discovered that most of the natural hair types and those used for hairpieces were made of what she calls "Caucasian-type" hair, including even instances of blonde and red hair. Fletcher surmises that some of the lighter hair types may have been influenced by the presence of ancient Libyans and Greeks in ancient Egypt. However, this type of hair was also found to be present in much earlier times.

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Genetics

Genetics of Modern Egyptians

- [Cavalli-Sforza et al. \(1994\)](#) compared populations from throughout the world using extensive genetic data. The North African populations grouped with West Eurasian (European, Middle East) populations rather than sub-Saharan Africans.
- [Di Rienzo et al. \(1994\)](#) studied the relationship of three samples (taken from Egyptians, Sardinians, and sub-Saharan Africans), using mitochondrial DNA and simple sequence repeats. In terms of genetic distance, the Egyptian sample was closer to the Sardinian sample than to the sub-Saharan African sample.
- [Hammer et al. \(1997\)](#) used seven different methods to compute population trees of world populations, using Y-chromosome data. All seven methods grouped the Egyptians with the non-African populations rather than with the sub-Saharan Africans. Egyptians' genetic profile resembles that of South Europeans more than the other regional groups in the study.
- [Poloni et al. \(1997\)](#). Egyptians and a few other African populations (Tunisians, Algerians, and even Ethiopians) showed a stronger Y-chromosome similarity to non-African Mediterraneans than to the remainder of Africans mostly from south of the Sahara.
- [Bosch et al. \(1997\)](#), using classical genetic markers, calculated Egyptians to be genetically very close to Mediterranean Asians and Europeans. Click [here](#) for journal abstract.

Genetics of Ancient Egyptians

- Scientists at the University of Cairo tested DNA from the remains of pyramid workers from 2600 BC, and found that the DNA of ancient Egyptians matches that of modern Egyptians. That is, the people living in Egypt now are essentially the same as the people living there thousands of years ago. ([Read an excerpt](#) from PBS's Secrets of the Pharaohs)
- [Borgognini-Tarli and G. Paoli, 1982](#). The ABO blood type frequencies of ancient Egyptians showed no signs of differing significantly from that of present-day Egyptians. According to the authors, "the blood-group distribution obtained for Asiut, Gebelen and Aswan necropolises shows resemblances with the present leucoderm population of Egypt and particularly with its more 'conservative' fraction (the Copts, MOURANT et al., 1976)."

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Foreigners in Egyptian Art

pictures and scans courtesy of (coming soon)

"Four races" from the tomb of Seti I. Egyptians normally portrayed Africans to the south as darker and more "Negroid" than Egyptians, while peoples to the north were drawn in lighter shades. They showed no notion of being in the same "race" as any of these foreign peoples.



Photograph from the tomb of Seti I, showing (from left) Syro-Palestinians, Nubians, Libyans, and Egyptian



Copy of some figures from the Seti I tomb by Minutoli in 1820, possibly when the tomb was in better shape. From left: four Libyans, Nubian, Syrian, and Egyptian.

Foreign "races" from Ramesses III tomb:



Syrians, Nubians, and Libyans from the tomb of Ramesses III



This composite *modern* drawing, frequently shown in Afrocentric texts as supposed "proof" that the Egyptians and Kushites were identical, is a known error (click [here](#) for brief explanation). The actual tomb does not show anything of the sort.



Ramesses II smiting foes

What is interesting about this relief is that the ancient Egyptian artist used the *same* pigment to color the Pharaoh (right) and the Asiatic (2nd from left), but used a different, much darker color for the "black" African type on the far left. Think about that....

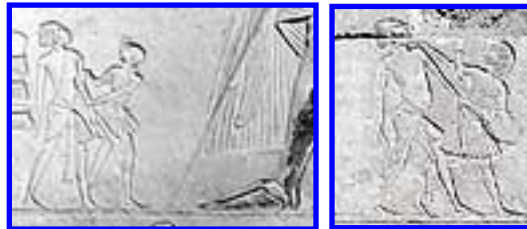
Below are Egyptians appearing together with East African foreigners. Notice the difference.



Egyptians countin' and whoopin' the captives



Egyptian wrestling "black" African



Egyptians with prisoners

More East Africans from south of Egypt, looking not at all like Egyptians:



"Black" captive bound by the neck



Tut symbolically treaded on foreigners imprinted on sandals



Line of African prisoners



Southern peoples bringing tribute to Egypt

Click [here](#) for some pictures of Egyptians

More images (click to enlarge)

a few things Afrocentric websites omit...



Hemiunu, overseer of the construction of the Great Pyramid of Khufu



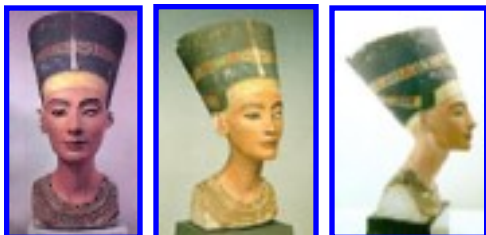
A younger Hemiunu



Limestone reserve head from Dynasty IV



Head of a seated scribe, Dynasty V



Bust of Nefertiti



Rahotep and Nofret, and the stela of Antef: a common convention in Egyptian art was to paint males a coppery hue and women pale. Such a convention would hardly make sense if the Egyptians were – as Afrocentrists often claim – as black as Somalis or Ethiopians.



Light skin coloring, as seen on the three gods on the left, is found often in Egyptian papyrus art. However, the peculiarly white skin of Ramses III on the right is unusual.



Ranofer, priest of the temples of Ptah and Sokar



Woman carrying offering



Nikare, an Old Kingdom official



Nefertari, wife of Ramses II



Ramses II mummy



Yuya mummy

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Ancient testimony

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Ancient Greco-Roman descriptions of Egyptians

Egyptians had a "medium tone"

The Ethiopians stain the world and depict a race of men steeped in darkness; less sun-burnt are the natives of India; the land of Egypt, flooded by the Nile, darkens bodies more mildly owing to the inundation of its fields: it is a country nearer to us and its moderate climate imparts a medium tone.
– Manilius, *Astronomica* 4.724

Here the term Ethiopians (= Greek "burnt face", denoting very dark skin) refers to Africans inhabiting latitudes south of Egypt ([Snowden, 1989](#)). The term "Ethiopian," in that it was a broad category encompassing diverse ethnic groups of tropical Africa, was similar to a modern-day "racial" designation and roughly corresponded to what early anthropologists would have called "Negro." Yet classical writers, as exemplified by Manilius' quote above, clearly differentiated the Egyptians from "Ethiopians." Philostratus, for example, noted that a people living near the Nubian border were lighter than Ethiopians, and that Egyptians were lighter still.

Egyptians resembled Northern Indians

There are cases of Greco-Roman authors likening Egyptians' appearance to that of northern Indians, who generally do not look like black Africans. According to Arrian (*Indica* 6.9):

The appearance of the inhabitants is also not very different in India and Ethiopia: the southern Indians are rather more like Ethiopians as they are black to look on, and their hair is black; only they are not so snub-nosed or woolly-haired as the Ethiopians; the northern Indians are most like the Egyptians physically.

Strabo confirms in *Geography* 15.1.13, in almost identical wording:

As for the people of India, those in the south are like the Aethiopians in color, although they are like the rest in respect to countenance and hair (for on account of the humidity of the air their hair does not curl), whereas those in the north are like the Egyptians.

Arrian and Strabo concur that the Egyptians resembled *northern* Indians – who are usually straight-haired and occasionally as light-skinned as southern Europeans – rather than the dark Dravidian types of southern India. Furthermore, although Arrian and Strabo differentiate Ethiopians from South Indians in terms of facial form and hair texture, they cite no such differences between the Egyptians and northern Indians.

Afrocentric misreadings of classical texts

The meaning of *melas* and *melanochroes*

In their efforts to paint the ancient Egyptians "black," Afrocentrists rely heavily on misreadings of ancient Greek and Roman literature – many of which stem from a severe misunderstanding of the historical use of color terms. In many ages and many cultures, descriptions of human complexion as "white," "brown" or "black" would correspond in modern usage to "fair," "tan" or "swarthy." According to the anthropologist Peter Frost (*):

This older, more relative sense has been noted in other culture areas. The Japanese once used the terms shiroi (white) and kuroi (black) to describe their skin and its gradations of color. The Ibos of Nigeria employed ocha (white) and ojii (black) in the same way, so that nwoko ocha (white man) simply meant an Ibo with a lighter complexion. In French Canada, the older generation still refers to a swarthy Canadian as noir. Vestiges of this older usage persist in family names. Mr. White, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Black were individuals within the normal color spectrum of English people. Ditto for Leblanc, Lebrun, and Lenoir among the French or Weiss and Schwartz among the Germans.

In the same vein, the Greek words *melas* and *leukos* when applied to skin color were usually equivalent to "swarthy" and "fair" rather than the racial terms "black" or "white" as Afrocentrists would prefer (see [definition of melas](#) in the online LSJ lexicon). There are numerous examples of this usage in Greek literature – one unequivocal example describes an aged Odysseus magically regaining his youth (Homer *Odyssey* 16.172-176):

With this, Athena touched him [Odysseus] with her golden wand. A well-washed cloak and a tunic she first of all cast about his breast, and she increased his stature and his youthful bloom. Once more he grew dark of color [*melanchroiês*], and his cheeks filled out, and dark grew the beard about his chin.

In describing the skin tone of Odysseus, Homer used the word *melanchroiês* – a form of the same word that other Greeks sometimes chose to describe Egyptians, and one that is the source of much Afrocentric misunderstanding. If taken literally, the word would mean "black-skinned"; however, it is clear from the context that Homer means "of swarthy complexion" rather than racially "black," and intends to describe Odysseus regaining his youthful color. Otherwise we would have to assume that during the process of rejuvenation Odysseus transformed into a black African! This despite the numerous ancient artistic portrayals of Odysseus as Greek-looking and certainly not "black" in any modern racial sense.

Likewise, when the ancient writers described Egyptians as *melas* or *melanchroes*, they almost surely meant "dark-complected" rather than literally "black." Any ambiguity in such descriptions can be resolved by noting that other classical writers such as Manilius specifically identified the Egyptians as medium in complexion rather than "black," and that the Egyptians [portrayed themselves as lighter and finer-featured](#) than their African neighbors to the south.

The Herodotus quote

Perhaps the most frequently cited Greek quote among Afrocentrists is that of Herodotus ([Histories 2.104.2](#)) describing Egyptians as well as Colchians of the Caucasus as "dark-skinned and woolly-haired." That the Egyptians were dark relative to Greeks is not surprising, considering that the same is true today. But Herodotus' description of Egyptian hair would, at first glance, appear to conflict with the physical evidence left by the Egyptians themselves – numerous mummies with hair still attached to the skulls showing [more straight, wavy, or lightly curled hair types](#) than "woolly." The only way to make the evidence consistent is to assume Herodotus spoke in a relative rather than absolute sense. That is, Egyptian hair was on average curlier than Greek hair,

and the tightly-curved ("woolly") hair type was found more often in Egyptians than in Greeks – as is true today. There is no reason to assume on the basis of Herodotus' words that all or even most Egyptians had "woolly" hair, nor that such hair found in Egyptians was as "woolly" as that of tropical Africans. Indeed, Herodotus himself mentions only "Ethiopians" – not Egyptians – as having the "woolliest hair of all men" (Herodotus *Histories* 7.70.1). Moreover, Herodotus' explanation that being *melanchroes* or *oulotriches* "indeed counts for nothing, since other peoples are, too" suggests that these adjectives did not apply exclusively to any one "race" of people.

An analogous example of a stereotype based on relative comparison comes from the medieval Arab scholar Ibn Butlan, who noted the Greeks as having "straight blond hair" and "blue eyes." Does this mean that all medieval Greeks had a Nordic appearance? Certainly not: it merely suggests that the blond-haired, blue-eyed type is more common among Greeks than Arabs and stood out more as a salient characteristic worthy of mention. The Arabs, like the Greeks, noted characteristics that were unusual in their own population and used these traits to typify the foreigners.

Interestingly, Herodotus mentions the Colchians as another group having "dark skin and woolly hair." Considering that the Colchians inhabited what is roughly modern-day Georgia in the Caucasus, it would seem that the vast majority of Colchians were most likely – and quite literally – Caucasian. Of course Afrocentric diehards might claim that Colchians too were black Africans, but such a theory runs into trouble when one considers the observations of Hippocrates, who wrote that the Colchians in Phasis "are large and corpulent in body. Neither joint nor vein is evident. They have a yellow flesh, as if victims of jaundice" (Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* 15). Nothing in Hippocrates' description suggests that Colchians look anything like sub-Saharan Africans and this further weakens the Afrocentric argument that Egyptians and Colchians must have looked like "blacks" on the basis of Herodotus' words.

Other ancient quotes cited by Afrocentrists

There are certain other quotes that some Afro-Egyptocentrists interpret in such a way as to conflict with other descriptions such as the ones at the top of this page. The interpretations have similar failings as the Herodotus quote. That is, (1) misconstruing *melas* and its variants as meaning racially "black"; (2) assuming certain traits mentioned in quotes are found in all or even most of the Egyptian population; and (3) assuming that when Egyptians do possess such traits, they are expressed nearly as strongly as in tropical Africans to the south. Using similar faulty methods, Afrocentrists might as well say Jews in the Middle Ages were "black" because Joseph ben Nathan in the 13th century quoted his father as saying "we Jews come from a pure, white source, and so our faces are black." Of course to do this would be to ignore the fact that in

medieval Europe as in ancient Greece, black often meant "swarthy." Likewise, Afrocentrists could insist that 12th-century Turks were "black" on the basis of their being exaggerated as "blacker than pitch or ink" in the epic *Chanson d'Aspremont*. But we know on the basis of physical remains and ample pictorial evidence that neither the Jews nor Turks were actually "black" in medieval times.

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Note to e-mailers:

instead of replying to e-mail individually, I will deal with the most common grumbles in a future FAQ (frequently asked questions).

Respectfully,
G.S.

P.S. To save people a lot of trouble: if it's been said in an Afrocentric book or website, don't bother, I've already read it.