



## *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum*

### **Egyptology and the Foundations of Scientific Racism**

The emergence of Egyptology as a field of study in the 1800s opened opportunities to examine Africa's contributions to world history. But it also allowed scholars to use their findings to reinforce old and new racial theories. Undoubtedly, archeological discoveries in Egypt during the French invasion from 1798-1801 led European scholars to make greater use of "science" in order to justify racial [hierarchies](#), especially the enslavement of Africans. Even though countless monuments, sculptures, depictions in tombs, and ancient texts proved that the Ancient Egyptians were indeed African, a central theme within science communities was to prove otherwise. Many prominent European scholars used their resources to deny the African origins of ancient Egypt in order to uphold their newfound racist theory of African inferiority.

#### ***Racialization in the Age of Enlightenment***

It was not until the 1800s, at the height of racial slavery in the New World, and on the heels of French imperialism in Egypt, that European thinkers began to aggressively counter established knowledge of Egypt as a Black civilization. German scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who was responsible for one of the earliest systems of racial categories, coined the term "Caucasian" and classified the Egyptians as members of the "Caucasian" (white) race. Within decades, the scientific community accelerated its efforts to prove non-African origins of Egypt. Blumenbach was the first to pioneer the field of craniology. Blumenbach's work included his description of sixty human crania (skulls) published originally in fascicules as *Decas craniorum* (Göttingen, 1790-1828). Although he did not believe that Africans were inferior to the rest of mankind "concerning healthy faculties of understanding, excellent natural talents and mental capacities," others used his work to formulate theories of racism and racial hierarchy, which placed Africans at the bottom of humanity and Caucasians at the top. Inadvertently his work became the foundation for other scientists in the field of craniometry, such as Samuel Morton of America.

One of the principal scholars to deny the African origins of ancient Egypt of this period was German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Many credit Hegel for providing a basis for modern racism and establishing a role for race in history by correlating a hierarchy of civilizations to a hierarchy of races, notably in his *Encyclopaedia* and *The History of Philosophy*. In *The History of Philosophy* he wrote the following concerning Africa:

"At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitionary phase of civilization; but, as is Nubia, it belongs to

Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History." [Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 99.]

Robert Bernasconi in, "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti", regards Hegel as "a precursor of the mid-nineteenth century tendency to construct philosophies of history organized around the concept of race, such as we find in Robert Knox and [Joseph Arthur] Gobineau." Knox believed that 'race is everything', so that literature, science, art – in a word, civilization – depends on it. Similarly, Gobineau, who is often regarded as the 'father of modern racism', used anthropology, linguistics and history to formulate a theory in which race virtually explained everything in the human experience. The decisive events of history, he argued in his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1854), are determined by the 'iron law of race', so that human destiny is decreed by nature and expressed in race. Gobineau also favored racial purity, suggesting that there should be no crossbreeding between races in order to maintain survival. By linking Hegel's name with that of Knox and Gobineau, Bernasconi clearly implies that the philosopher was responsible for contributing to a distorted perception of race and thus helped to make racism more respectable.

Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (14 July 1816 – 13 October 1882) was a French aristocrat who was best known by his contemporaries as a novelist, poet and travel writer but is today most remembered for developing the theory of the Aryan master race and helping to legitimize racism by scientific racist theory and racial demography. Gobineau was an elitist who, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolutions of 1848, wrote a 1400-page book, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* in which he claimed that aristocrats were superior to commoners and that they possessed more Aryan genetic traits because of less inbreeding with inferior races (Alpines and Mediterraneans).

Gobineau's writings were quickly praised by white supremacist, pro-slavery Americans like Josiah C. Nott and Henry Hotze, who translated his book into English but omitted around 1000 pages of the original book, including those parts that negatively described Americans as a racially mixed population.

At the center of the scientific race debates in America was Samuel Morton, a natural scientist and professor of anatomy, widely considered the founder of American anthropology. Morton supported the theory of polygenesis, which claimed that the different races were separate species created from separate origins. His claim to fame was in the area of craniology, a branch of science that erroneously established white racial superiority and intelligence by measuring the size of human skulls. In 1844, he published *Crania Aegyptiaca* to dispute the eyewitness accounts of Herodotus who described the Egyptians as black Africans. In this study, Morton measured the dimensions and characteristics of 137 human [crania](#) from Egypt and concluded, "The valley of the Nile, both in Egypt and in Nubia, was originally peopled by a branch of the Caucasian race." He suggested the Egyptians were a race in between the Indo-European and Semite races, and as the descendants of Ham they were therefore "affiliated with the Libyan family of nations."

In response to Herodotus' reference that described the Egyptians as black-skinned with wooly-hair, Morton pointed to a slightly different translation in which the passage reads "black and had short curly hair." According to Morton, Herodotus' use of the term "black-skinned" was misleading since black is "evidently a relative, and not an absolute term." He further explained that the Egyptians had hair "as fine as that of the fairest European nations of the present day," and when Caucasian hair is "allowed to grow, it is remarkable for a profusion of short curls of extreme fineness." In respect to the Nubians, Morton suspected they were mixed with Arab and Negro blood due to the appearance of their upper lips, which were "somewhat thicker than is considered beautiful among northern races" though "still far from the Negro lip." Rather than to accept Herodotus' account of a black Egyptian civilization, Morton stated he could "much readily believe that the historian had never been to Egypt at all."

Morton's work was funded by George R. Gliddon, an American Egyptologist who was eager to dispel the notion that Ancient Egypt was established and ruled by black Africans. In 1841, Gliddon wrote a letter to Morton, stating, "I am hostile to the opinion of the African origin of the Egyptians. I mean of the *high caste*—kings, priests, and military. The idea that the monuments support such theory...I think untenable, and might be refuted." Gliddon donated 137 skulls for Morton's study in order to secure scientific verification for his beliefs. Like Morton, Gliddon dismissed the ancient texts written by Herodotus as insignificant because Egyptologists, he argued, "know Egypt better now than all the Greek authors or the Roman." Guided by intellectual arrogance, Gliddon claimed he had more authority on the ancient Egyptians than those who had traveled to Egypt during the time of the ancient Egyptians.

Although Morton conceded that Blacks were "abundantly represented" in the pictorial depictions inside of tombs and monuments, he denied they had any major influence on Egyptian civilization. He noted, "Negroes were numerous in Egypt but their social position in ancient times was the same that it now is, that of servants and slaves." Besides, the size of Negro skulls was proof, according to Morton, that they did not have the intelligence to produce a high civilization. Cheikh Anta Diop, one of the foremost scholars of African history, counters this "falsification of history" that denied African history and reduced the Black race to nothing more than slaves. He states:

The memory of the recent slavery to which the Black race has been subjected, cleverly kept alive in men's minds and especially in Black minds, often affects Black consciousness negatively. From that recent slavery an attempt has been made to construct—despite all historical truth—a legend that the Black has always been reduced to slavery by the superior White race with which he has lived, wherever it may have been. This enables Whites easily to justify the presence of Negroes in Egypt or in Mesopotamia or Arabia, by decreeing that they were enslaved. Although such an affirmation is nothing but *dogma* designed to falsify history—those who advance it are fully aware that it is erroneous—it nonetheless contributes to alienating Black consciousness...It became increasingly difficult each day and even inadmissible, for those unaware of his past glory—and for Blacks themselves—to believe that they could have originated the first civilization which flowered on earth, a civilization to which humanity owes most of its progress.

The scientific community, led by Morton and others, relied on modern racial/racist theories to establish ancient Egypt as a part of the family of Caucasian/white nations confirming white racial superiority. Even in the case of the Nubians, who were undeniably black Africans, Morton invented racial theories to minimize their role in human history.

In addition to using skulls, monuments, and Biblical tales to counter Herodotus' claims of a black Egyptian civilization, Morton argued that the eyewitness account of Ptolemy, published in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, A.C.E., was far more reliable. More than 500 years after Herodotus, Ptolemy recorded geographical accounts of the Egyptian population. For Morton, the demographics were "ample evidence" of a non-Black origin. It was appalling for an educated scholar to suggest that the people of Egypt remained virtually the same over a period of 500 years or more. Just as the U.S. population in 2014 does not reflect the nation's demographics in 1514, the people who occupied Egypt after periods of foreign invasion and decline were not the same people who built the ancient Egyptian civilization.

Morton was not alone in his determination to establish Egypt as a Caucasian civilization. In 1851, Irish writer John Campbell dismissed African origins of Ancient Egypt in his book, *Negro-mania: Being an Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Various Races of Men*. He explained:

There is one great difficulty, and to my mind an insurmountable one, which is that the advocates of the negro civilization of Egypt do not attempt to account for, how this civilization was lost. We know that the white never loses, but always gains. A nation or tribe of the white race may become extinct, from a variety of causes, but the civilization of the race progresses notwithstanding. Egypt progressed, and why, because it was Caucasian.

The study of ancient Egypt is inherently a study of how Western scholars have used race to control how we understand the past—and present. Despite the absurdity of Morton's many theories, he was widely respected and his racist ideas had a lasting impact on science, history, and politics. These racist theories by leading scholars were used to justify slavery, colonialism, and other forms of oppression.

### ***Egyptology and Eugenics***

Scientific racism continued to undergird Egyptology over the course of the nineteenth century. British archeologist W. M. Flinders Petrie, a pioneer in the field, led some of the most significant [excavations](#) in the Nile Valley region in the 1880s and 1890s. His discoveries were groundbreaking in terms of recovering ancient Egyptian knowledge, culture, and architecture. In fact, W.E.B. DuBois believed Petrie's findings supported a Black origin of Egyptian civilization, and he invited Petrie to serve as a board member for a major project to produce an encyclopedia of African history. Yet, Petrie's interpretations of ancient Egyptian history differed from DuBois' views in significant ways. Petrie was less explicit in his belief in white racial superiority, but he continued the work of earlier scientists through careful classification of the Ancient Egyptians into different races or "types," which perpetuated a hierarchy of humankind and a non-African origin of Egyptian civilization.

According to Petrie, the depictions of ancient Egyptians inside of tombs indicated the presence of at least three races: “an aquiline race” with a slender nose, a “snouty race typical of the lower classes,” and a “large eyed race,” all of which demonstrated to Petrie that the Ancient Egyptians were not descendants of a single source in Africa. Rather, Petrie suggested the Egyptians were conquered by an “invading race...a high class race” that migrated to Egypt from the Red Sea. Similar to Morton’s theories, Petrie described the Egyptians as “a kindred race to the Phoenicians” and claimed the invading “Dynastic race” was responsible for Egypt’s unparalleled achievements.

In addition to unearthing tombs, documents, and other artifacts, Petrie also uncovered thousands of human remains. He donated the human skulls to bolster the biological arguments that linked race and intelligence. Petrie’s collection of ancient Egyptian skulls was critical to the development of *eugenics*, a racist social movement in which *geneticists* argued that the elimination of undesirables (including the poor, mentally challenged, disabled and others considered weak, unfit, or social failures) would lead to the creation of a superior human race. Geneticists used the skulls to support Charles Darwin’s theory of the *survival of the fittest*, and they argued that social class was determined by a person’s genetic make-up. Petrie enthusiastically supported eugenics and the violent state policies that denied human rights to millions of people through colonialism and other forms of oppression.

Undoubtedly, the eugenics movement promoted white supremacy in its aim to improve the human race. The racial ideology had been popular in Britain and the United States before it influenced the policies of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Adolph Hitler, inspired by the eugenics movement, carried out a program of elimination in Germany that resulted in the murder of millions of people including gypsies, gays and lesbians, Jews and other non-whites.

Although the eugenics movement was later *repudiated* as a racist *pseudo-science* that had no basis in reality or facts, the racial theories of Hegel, Blumenbach, Morton, Gliddon, Petrie and other scholars, were a part of mainstream thinking. Indeed, their ideas continue to shape common interpretations of ancient Egyptian history. Even today, most depictions of Ancient Egypt in history books and Hollywood films project images that deny African origins. Brown-skinned or dark-skinned Africans are rarely acknowledged in popular representations, and the preoccupation with Cleopatra VII during Greek rule over Egypt perpetuates the same racial images of Egypt as non-African.

### ***Countering the False Racist Claims Against Africa and African history***

In the article, “The Ancient World and Africa: Whose Roots?” Basil Davidson, *renowned* scholar of African history, explains the political and economic context that led many European scholars to deny African origins of ancient Egypt. He writes:

That the Ancient Egyptians were black (again, in any variant you may prefer)—or, as I myself think it more useful to say, were African—is a belief which has been denied in Europe since about 1830, not before. It is a denial, in short, that belongs to the rise of modern European *imperialism*, and has to be explained in terms of the ‘new racism,’

specifically and even frantically an anti-black racism, which went together with and was consistently nourished by that imperialism...The racism that we know was born in Europe and America from the cultural need to justify doing to black people, doing to Africans, what could not morally or legally be done to white people, and least of all to Europeans. To justify the enslavement of Africans, in short, it was culturally necessary to believe, or be able to believe, that Africans were inherently and naturally less than human but were beings of a somehow sub-human, non-human nature. That was the cultural basis, in the context, of the slave trade and of the modern imperialism in Africa which followed the slave trade.”

As Davidson argues, European scholars sought to justify the enslavement of Africans based on theories of white racial superiority. The vast accomplishments of ancient Egypt undermined these theories that regarded Africans as subhuman or intellectually inferior. As a result, Western Egyptologists, scientists, and intellectuals launched a widespread campaign to remake the ancient Egyptians as white or Caucasian.

In a book entitled *The Ruins: Or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1789), French historian and philosopher C.F. Volney documented the Black origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. Reflecting on his visit to Egypt, he writes:

Behold the wrecks of her metropolis, of Thebes with her hundred palaces, the parent of cities, and monument of the caprice of destiny. There a people, now forgotten, discovered, while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair, founded on the study of the laws of nature, those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe.

In the American translation of *The Ruins*, published in the early 1800s, the editor included a footnote claiming that Volney changed his mind about the African origins of Egypt and omitted all of the passages that made reference to the Egyptians as Black. Consider the revision to the paragraph above, which reads:

Behold Thebes with her hundred palaces; that first metropolis of the arts and sciences; the mysterious cradle of so many opinions; which still govern man without his knowledge.

The American translation of *The Ruins* eliminates Volney’s initial observations along with the many sources he cited to verify the African origins of Ancient Egypt. Rather than to note a change in perspective, the American version sought to erase any memory of Volney’s initial arguments. This erasure was significant because it also invalidated Volney’s anti-slavery stance. Two years prior to the publication of *The Ruins*, Volney reflected on the Black origin of ancient Egypt to reveal the contradictions inherent in racial slavery. In *Voyages in Syria and Egypt* (1787), he argues:

Just think that this race of black men, today our slave and the object of our scorn, is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences, and even the use of speech! Just imagine, finally, that it is in the midst of people who call themselves the greatest friends of liberty

and humanity that one has approved the most barbarous slavery and questioned whether black men have the same kind of intelligence as Whites!

Inevitably, the race of the ancient Egyptians mattered in a slave society that justified the oppression of Black people based on their presumed inferiority. Ancient Egypt's achievements as well as its influence on shaping civilization, including that of Ancient Greece, disrupted the [myth](#) of the "Dark Continent." To sustain this myth, the racialization of the ancient Egyptians as anything other than Black or African became a necessary political tool.

These new interpretations as a result of French conquest pointed to the mummies and engravings inside of tombs as evidence of non-African origins. Emphasizing the variations in skin color depicted in these tombs conveniently ignored ample evidence that unmistakably portrayed the Egyptians as African. More significantly, the claim that red, brown, or yellow skin indicated a non-African origin perpetuates narrow interpretations of African features and [phenotype](#). Ironically, the variation in skin color among Black populations in the West did not stop Europeans or American elites from designating these groups as Black and therefore inferior. The one-drop rule prevailed in many parts of the Western world. The notion that a strict phenotype of dark-black skin is the only marker of [indigenous](#), African origin fuels racial myths and ignorance about the African continent and its people.

It is important to reiterate that modern conceptions of race did not exist in ancient times. Yet, the racialization of ancient Egypt as white, light, Asian, Mediterranean, or Caucasian has played a critical role in minimizing Africa and Africans in world history.