



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

STILL OUT OF AFRICA

Every year about this time one comes out of the woodwork, a self-appointed "defender of the faith" of European cultural values, and both the popular and academic media dutifully supply maximum exposure. Last year we endured Charles Murray and *The Bell Curve*; this year it is Mary Lefkowitz of Wellesley College with her *Not Out of Africa*. It seems that the surest way for an academic, seeking to break out of ivory tower obscurity, to get a manuscript accepted by a major publishing house is to write a book belittling the intelligence or integrity of some segment of the Black community. The phenomenon is so reliable that even non-white writers, covering the spectrum from Dinesh Souza to Henry Louis Gates, have adopted the ploy to obtain media exposure, enhance academic status and augment bank balances. Afrophobic books of every description represent an industry-within-an-industry and there always seems to be a ready market.

The anti-Afrocentric premises of Mary Lefkowitz are patently absurd. One does not even have to be a classicist to find abundant evidence that the influence of northeast Africa, i.e., Egypt and Ethiopia, on Greece was as formative as that of Greece on Europe. The number of Greeks who lived and learned in Egypt reads like a "Who's Who" of Greek philosophy. Solon, Thales, Pythagoras, Eudoxus, Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Plato, Archimedes, Hipparchus, Ptolemy, Herophilus, Galen, and others too numerous to mention pursued their higher studies in the Nile Valley. As a classicist, Lefkowitz has to know these historical facts because the Greeks themselves recorded them! If she doesn't know, then her bona fide as a classicist is spurious. However, it is more reasonable to assume that she does, so her deep aversion to any hint of an African influence on early Greek culture has to spring from a fundamental Afrophobia that informs her whole thought.

It is possible to discredit Ms. Lefkowitz's reasoning on numerous counts. Concerning Aristotle, to insist that Aristotle never visited Egypt nor was under any significant Egyptian intellectual influence suggests strongly that she needs to refamiliarize herself with the literature in her own field. Theophile Obenga shows in an article entitled "Aristotle and Ancient Egypt" (ANKH, vol. 2, 1993) that Aristotle, in his *Meteorology*, describes the topology of the Nile in a manner that leaves little doubt that he had seen in person what he was describing.

Moreover, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states in a completely unambiguous manner that "Egypt was the cradle of the art of mathematics." In his *On the Heavens*, Aristotle states furthermore that the Egyptians and Babylonians were the founders of the science of astronomy. In particular, Aristotle was admiring of the Egyptians' exceptional knowledge of the planetary conjunctions and the nature of comets. Here we find the words of Aristotle himself baldly refuting the contention of Ms. Lefkowitz that Aristotle had never visited Egypt nor had been influenced by Egypt's learning.

After about 600 B.C., when selected students such as Thales and Pythagoras began to trickle into Egypt thirsting for knowledge, the temple learning of the Nile Valley began to flow toward the northern Mediterranean in increasing volume. As Cheikh Anta Diop said, there is no Greek mathematics, philosophy, or science until after prolonged contact with Egypt. Even the term "philosopher," meaning "lover of wisdom," was coined by Pythagoras as a consequence of the 22 years he spent studying in the Temple of Amon at Waset (Thebes). According to Theophile Obenga (*Ancient Egypt and Black Africa*, 1992), the term *sophos*, meaning "learning" or "wisdom," has no root in the Indoeuropean language family from which Greek sprang. But Pythagoras would have studied under learned men in Egypt called *sbau*, from the Egyptian *sba* meaning "to teach" or "to instruct." The word *sba* became in Greek *sophos*, from which the term "philosophy" derives.

Of the 28 dialogues of Plato, 12 deal extensively with Egypt and Egyptian thought. *Laws*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*, to name but three, all betray an incalculable debt to Egypt, an outgrowth of the 13 years Plato spent there. Plato's "philosopher king" in *Republic*, for example, clearly derives from the Nilotic pharaonocracy, i.e., the sacred ruler who was, by definition, priest, king, and philosopher. Also, the concept of the *logos* or "creative word," a central pillar of Platonic philosophy and one that would immeasurably influence Christianity, is taken bodily from Egyptian thought. The world came into being, according to the pre-Platonic priests of Egypt, by virtue of the "divine word" (*Thoth*) activating the forces of Creation. It should be pointed out also that Plato's original teacher, Socrates, also credited Egypt with inventing the mathematical and astronomical sciences (dialogue of *Phaedrus*).

Another facet of the profound Egyptian impact on the Greek world can be seen in the career of Alexander. Before embarking on his campaign of world conquest, Alexander first wrested Egypt away from the Persians. Having accomplished that, he then took an unprecedented step: he embarked on a perilous 10-day journey across the Libyan desert to the Oasis of Siwa, sacred to Amon, where he was

invested with the crown and authority of pharaoh. Following that, he proceeded to build his imperial capital Alexandria not in Macedonia or Greece, but in Egypt. In effect, when Alexander launched his campaign of empire-building in the East, he did so as an Egyptian pharaoh.

The Greeks regularly and forthrightly acknowledged their debt both to Egypt and to Ethiopia. An apocryphal story by Pseudo-Callisthenes has Alexander sailing up the Nile to do homage to Candace, Queen of Ethiopia (Meroe). The veracity of this story is not nearly so important as the manner in which it shows the profound Hellenic respect for Ethiopia. It only added to Alexander's legend--whether true or not--that he had won an audience with the Candace of Ethiopia. Homer, in the Iliad, begins the epic by having the Olympian gods, led by Zeus, descend from their heavenly abode to feast among mortals, but not with Greek mortals, as would be expected, but "the blameless Ethiopians." As we've already noted, in the realm of empirical knowledge, the major Greek thinkers, virtually to a man, deferred to Egypt (some to Ethiopia) as the original home of philosophy, geometry, medicine, astronomy, and religion.

A careful investigation of Greek mythology and religion reveals a pronounced African presence. The goddesses Melainis, Libya, Artemis, Hera, Aphrodite, and Eos were unquestionably of African provenance. Mythic human figures such as Cepheus, Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Circe, Aeetes, Medea, Belos, Aegyptos, Phaeton, Delphos, and at least one of many Herculeses were also from Africa. The two most important oracle centers, Dodona and Delphi, were founded by African priestesses and an African demi-god (Delphos) respectively. Zeus was considered to be a form of the Nilotic Amon, Dionysus a form of Osiris, Hermes a form of Djehuti (Thoth), and Asclepius a form of Imhotep. No wonder Herodotus concluded that the Greeks received their gods from northeast Africa.

Greek traditions also speak consistently of early African emigrants to the Hellenic mainland. Perseus, considered a founding Greek ancestor, married the Ethiopian princess Andromeda, making her a Greek ancestress. Moreover, the myth of the 50 daughters of Danaus and the 50 sons of Aegyptus who emigrated to Greece from the Nile Valley clearly reveals an important African ethno-cultural element in early Hellenic history.

There is simply no valid argument that can be brought forward to disclaim the influence of African civilization on ancient Greece. The transmigration controversy involving a statement of Herodotus is not credible because Greeks such as he, and later Plutarch, who visited and wrote about Egypt had access to information that did not necessarily survive in the documentary record of the

Nile Valley. Much was communicated to certain Greeks that had not been written down and was not supposed to be discussed publicly. Time and again, in his chapter on Egypt, Herodotus refuses to continue his discourse on certain topics because it is about to touch on sacred things that demanded secrecy. Because the available Egyptian records do not specifically mention transmigration, i.e., the doctrine of reincarnation, doesn't mean that the Egyptians didn't believe in it. Indeed, everything points to the existence of this belief among them.

Lefkowitz employs an entirely specious mode of argument because she pins her critique on peripheral issues far away from the heart of the matter. The trivial controversy over the race of Cleopatra, for example, is a case in point. It is irrelevant whether Cleopatra was, wholly or in part, of Macedonian ancestry. The African civilization of Egypt that decisively impacted the growth and development of Greek culture long antedated her. Thus her "true" ethnicity has no relevance at all to the question of Egyptian influence on Greece.

In this short survey, sufficient evidence has been brought forward to show that the overarching thesis of Not Out of Africa--that there was no significant Egyptian/African influence on the formation of Greek civilization--is simply groundless. What is striking is that there is so much evidence to the contrary that her thesis calls into question Ms. Lefkowitz's qualifications as a classicist. Either she doesn't know her job or she is engaging in deliberate falsification. Either way, it is the unseemly haste with which national publications and pundits have embraced her book that truly testifies to the polarized state of contemporary American race relations in a way the much vilified Million Man March never could. Not Out of Africa, and the smug commentary it has inspired, is high-level race-baiting at its most insidious. From where African-Americans sit, there doesn't seem to be any end to it in sight.

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