



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

UNIT 1: Ancient Africa (200,000 B.C.E. – 476 A.C.E.)

CLASS 6: The Whitening of Ancient Kemet/Egypt

OVERVIEW

Around 3800 – 3500 B.C.E., Africans founded one of the first and most advanced civilizations in world history in the Nile Valley region of Africa, which included modern day Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. In fact, the oldest human remains ever found were discovered in Africa, with recent discoveries emerging in Ethiopia. According to Ethiopians and other historians of antiquity, Ethiopia is the oldest civilization on earth. It [fostered](#) the civilization of Nubia to the west, which in turn influenced the civilization of Egypt in the north. Although Egypt represents some of the highest cultural achievements of Nile Valley civilizations, it is the product of the collective African genius. The Nile River, the longest in the world, connected Africans in the south to those in the north and drew others from the interior. Together, these Africans shared and expanded their knowledge and resources and practiced similar cultural and religious rituals. This collective genius found its greatest expression in ancient Kemet, renamed Egypt by the Greeks. For the first 2,000 years of recorded history ancient Egypt was the light of the world. It was an African civilization built on the African continent by African people based on indigenous African culture and spirituality.

Egypt, by its location, had the highest contact with the non-African world, and was subsequently invaded and conquered in ancient times by the Hyksos, the Libyans, the Nubians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, the French and the British. Thus, Egyptian society was always a melting pot of African and foreign cultures, resulting in a population with highly varied skin colors. Yet the people who established Egypt – its first Dynastic Pharaohs and those who built the Great Pyramids, were from southern and eastern Africa.

Because of the splendor and [unequivocal](#) brilliance of Ancient Egypt, those who cultivated the modern racist theories of the 18th – 19th centuries began to claim that Egypt was actually established by Caucasians – not Africans. Therefore, this class will explore the whitening of Ancient Egypt. The Greeks referred to this extraordinary civilization as *Aegyptos*, the origin of the name Egypt. But Africans called their land “KMT” or **Kemet**. The people of Ancient Kemet/Egypt invented one of the oldest writing systems, including paper made out of papyrus, and established the world’s first libraries and universities. They pioneered the arts and sciences and provided the foundations for many different fields including religion, philosophy, astronomy, agriculture, mathematics, architecture, medicine, government and engineering.

To preserve their legacy and reflect their accomplishments, they built remarkable statues, monuments and temples that continue to astound the modern world. When the rest of the world remained in what has been called “the Dark Ages,” the people of the Nile Valley region in north and east Africa were living in a period of enlightenment, prompting archeologists to refer to Africa as “the cradle of civilization.”

The racial characterization of the Ancient Egyptians has been one of the most controversial aspects of Egyptology – a branch of archeology founded in the 1800s, which focuses exclusively on the study of Ancient Egyptian history and culture. Despite overwhelming evidence that confirms the African origins of Ancient Egypt, Egyptologists and cultural producers have portrayed Ancient Egyptian civilization as Mediterranean, Asian, or Caucasian. More recently, in order to disassociate Egypt from the African continent altogether, many scholars have begun to claim (and teach) that Egypt is a part of the “Middle East”— a fairly recent geographical invention – rather than part of the African continent.

Most of the artifacts and images of Ancient Egypt that are commonly shown in history books, documentaries, and Hollywood films emphasize an era of Greek and Roman rule following the reigns of Alexander the Great through Cleopatra VII, 336 - 30 B.C.E and the subsequent Roman occupation. By this time the Egyptian population had intermixed with foreign people for over a [millennium](#), creating a multi-racial population. Ancient Kemet – or Ancient Egypt under African rule, lasted for well over 2,000 years before Greek and Rome were established as nations. All of the pyramids, major monuments, statues and temples in Ancient Egypt were constructed under African rule. Yet rarely are the contributions and images of Ancient Egypt before foreign invasion highlighted in historical studies and popular culture. Images of the original architects of the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx, as well as statues and tomb paintings, for instance, reflect men and women of African descent in varying shades of black and brown, affirming their identity as African people.

It is important to note that the ancient world did not subscribe to the same racial concepts we use today. Racism as we know it did not exist. Many of the most prominent ancient Greeks and Romans openly acknowledged the genius of the “Ethiopians” – a term used to refer to Africans in general – and Greek scholars spent many years studying in Egypt. However, throughout the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, Egyptologists, scientists and intellectuals challenged this established knowledge by claiming that Egypt should be classified as a “Caucasian” civilization. This preoccupation with portraying the ancient Egyptians as non-African and non-Black has had a lasting impact on both the shaping and erasure of African history, and by extension world history.

Some of the most explicit testimony regarding the race of Ancient Egyptians came from Ancient Greeks. Many Greek scholars including Herodotus, Pythagoras, Aesop and Plato traveled to Egypt for study, and they credited Egypt as the model for classical Greek civilization. At that time, the race or color of the Egyptians was not a mystery. For instance, Herodotus, often celebrated as the “father of history,” described the Egyptians as “black-skinned and woolly-haired.” Similarly, the famed Greek philosopher, Aristotle referred to both the Egyptians and Ethiopians as “very black.”

In fact, the name “Ethiopia,” a term that was used to describe Africans more broadly, derives from the Greek words *ethios* and *ops* meaning, “burnt faces.” In ancient times, black skin did not carry the negative stigma it does today. Racism and white supremacy are modern inventions with origins in late 18th century Europe and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

The Legacy of Racial Theories

The images of Ancient Egypt as a Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Asian or Caucasian civilization are so common in historical and popular imagination that it is difficult for many to believe that Black Africans are responsible for its founding and development. Rarely are Ancient Egyptians depicted as Black unless they are portrayed as slaves. Why do dominant historical and cultural narratives deny African origins of Ancient Egyptian civilization? And why do many scholars continue to omit and distort evidence of the African foundation of ancient Egypt?

In this lesson students will contemplate the merits of the “great race debate” by examining a range of physical evidence including: statues, papyri, tomb paintings, monuments, eyewitness accounts from the ancient Greeks, archeological and historical research, and the personal testimony of the ancient Egyptians themselves. Students will reflect on their own perceptions of ancient Egypt and identify how education and culture have influenced their perspectives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Analyze artifacts, monuments, and images of Ancient Egyptians in relation to modern concepts of race.
- ✓ Compare and contrast the observations made by the Ancient Greeks vs. 18th-20th century Western scholars regarding the origins of Ancient Egyptians.
- ✓ Analyze contemporary depictions of Ancient Egypt in Hollywood films and popular culture.
- ✓ Define scientific racism and explain its impact on the shaping of historical narratives.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Read the following materials:

1. [Cheikh Anta Diop and the New Light on African History](#) (10 min)
2. [EFLA Article: Egyptology and Scientific Racism](#) (20-30 min)
3. [Ancient Greek Testimony Regarding the Ancient Egyptians](#) (20 min)

4. [10 Arguments That Prove Ancient Egyptians Were Black](#) (10-15 min)

View the following materials:

5. Slideshow: [How the Ancient Egyptians Depicted Themselves](#) (10 min)
6. Slideshow: [Greco-Roman Egypt: 332 B.C.E. - 395 C.E.](#) (7 min)
7. Slideshow: [Hollywood Depictions of Ancient Egyptians](#) (5 min)
8. [Studio Apologizes for all white cast for Gods of Egypt](#) (10 min)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are four of the ten ways to prove that the ancient Egyptians were African and “Black” by modern definitions of race?
2. What are the primary reasons 17th-20th Century European scholars began denying that the ancient Egyptians were Black Africans?
3. What is scientific racism? Name at least two people who promoted scientific racism.
4. What is craniology and how did Egyptology contribute to the expansion of craniological studies?
5. Who is Cheikh Anta Diop and what does his Melanin Dosage Test measure? What does it prove?
6. In general, how did the ancient Greeks describe the physical features of the ancient Egyptians?
7. How do Hollywood depictions of Ancient Egypt compare to how the Ancient Egyptians portrayed themselves?
8. Do these images confirm or dispel your previous conceptions of Ancient Egyptians?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Free e-books (access on website)

- ☆ *Origin Of The Ancient Egyptians* by Cheikh Anta Diop
- ☆ *Stolen Legacy* by George James
- ☆ *The Histories* by Herodotus
- ☆ *Introduction to African Civilizations* by John G. Jackson
- ☆ *Egypt Revisited*, *African Journal of Civilization*, ed. by Ivan Van Sertima
- ☆ *The Wonderful Ethiopians of the Cushite Empire* by Drusilla Dunjee

- ☆ *Strabo's Geography* by Strabo
- ☆ *Ancient Egypt: Light of the World* by Gerald Massey
- ☆ *The Ruins, or Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires*, by C.F. Volney
- ☆ *The Literature Of The Ancient Egyptians* by E.A. Wallis Budge, M.A., Litt.D.
- ☆ *Ethiopia and the Origin of Civilization: A Critical Review of the Evidence of Archaeology, Anthropology, History and Comparative Religion: According to the Most Reliable Sources and Authorities* By John G. Jackson (1939)
- ☆ *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785- 1985* by Martin Bernal
- ☆ *Black Athena Writes Back* by Martin Bernal
- ☆ *Black Genesis: The Prehistoric Origins of Ancient Egypt* by Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy