

# HOW TO TEACH ANCIENT HISTORY: A MULTICULTURAL MODEL

BY FRANK J. YURCO

TODAY'S SCHOOL teachers have trouble finding reliable and updated curriculum sources on ancient history, particularly as it relates to the Near East. In recent years, Afrocentrists have tried to fill in the gaps with their own revisionist views. They have met with a great deal of success, especially in urban schools, where many Afrocentric materials have received official sanction despite their historical distortions and misinterpretations.

Much of the problem lies in teacher education programs, which largely fail to expose student teachers to the most current information on ancient history and cultures. Most teachers graduate from college with very little knowledge of the ancient world, which, if studied at all, was probably surveyed rather than closely examined. This failing echoes in the woeful misunderstanding of history exhibited by many students entering college.<sup>1</sup> Inadequate teacher preparation only reinforces the misinformation spread by Hollywood films, pseudo-scientific popular magazines, and the sensationalist writings of certain non-scholarly authors.

Thus, an information gap exists between institutions of higher learning and K-12 teachers and students. The purveyors of Afrocentric ideas have exploited this gap to introduce their skewed ideas into the curriculum with materials like the Portland Baseline Afrocentric curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

To combat bad history, teachers should take advantage of the many museums and universities that offer educational outreach programs or provide enrichment courses to the public. Other resources are also available to teachers, including reliable translations of ancient texts as well as good histories and cultural studies of the Egyptian, Mesopotamians, Greeks, and Romans.<sup>3</sup>

Several excellent popular journals also handle current archaeological research, such as the American Institute of Archaeology's *Archaeology*, the Biblical Archaeology Society's *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and the privately published *Kemet*. The American Institute of Archaeology offers membership to anybody interested, and it also has local branches across the country.

Another valuable resource is the academic alliance concept. Academic alliances are organized locally between colleges or universities and school teachers. They strive to create networks among professional scholars and K-12 teachers. In such programs teachers are invited to attend lectures by specialists and to approach and share ideas with scholars. Academic alliances have been formed in many places and cover many different subject areas. In Chicago, the Academic Alliance helped encourage and develop a project entitled *Extending the Great Conversation* (1989-1992), which involved 150 teachers from Chicago public schools in a 15-week program. Teachers studied the literature, history, and culture of ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, and ancient Greece with authorities in the field and learned that the whole Western literary tradition has its earliest roots in ancient Egypt

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and ancient Mesopotamia. The program also introduced the teachers to Chicago's two major museums with exhibits and collections from Egypt and Mesopotamia—the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago and the Field Museum of Natural History. Teachers learned how the museum exhibits can be used as enrichment sources for their lessons, and about the varied outreach and education programs of these museums.

Not only were the teachers excited by the new approaches to ancient history, but their students responded remarkably. Reading directly about the experiences of ancient peoples provided a distinct thrill for the students. By using newer and more reliable texts, rather than more traditional but also outdated materials, the teachers were able to relate experiences that held direct relevance for situations that the students faced daily. Even on a kindergarten level, such an approach excited and stimulated the students, especially because some of the ancient texts are stories and myths.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia wrote not only kinglists and historical materials, but also literary texts, myths, stories, poetry, economic and legal texts, and even letters. Such materials bring these ancient peoples to life as no standard school text can ever do. In the ancient societies, the career of scribe offered a means for advancement in society. The scribal schools thus produced literature extolling education and encouraged students to excel. These school texts are powerful motivators also for today's students. The words of the ancient scribal masters still ring true today: Education is the road to advancement.

The ancient sources, directly read and translated, also illustrate that these ancient societies experienced no racial prejudice. Ancient Egypt, contrary to Afrocentric claims, was a multicolored society, with light to dark skinned peoples, and all shades in between.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Egyptians ascribed physical and language distinctions among humans to their creator deity, Re-Atum, and his effort to distinguish the peoples.<sup>6</sup> Yet in their view all humans were created equally by the creator deity, and he spread his blessings on all humans, including non-Egyptians like the Syrians and Nubians,<sup>7</sup> who lived to the north and south of ancient Egypt. Other texts illustrate the rudiments of social justice and equality, especially concerning the rights of women.<sup>8</sup> Such readings enhance the lessons of democracy and of social justice today.

The ancient Egyptians' lack of color prejudice should serve as another salutary lesson for us all today. It also contradicts the Afrocentric view that the ancient Egyptians called themselves and considered themselves "black."<sup>9</sup> Anthropological and artistic evidence shows that they did not.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Afrocentric claims that the Egyptians were described as black by other ancient peoples are misrepresentations of fact. Herodotus and his contemporaries distinguished the Egyptians from the Kushites, their Nubian neighbors to the south. The Kushites were the blackest in complexion, and had the woolliest hair, according to the classical sources, as Snowden has emphasized repeatedly.<sup>11</sup> The Egyptians were not as dark as the Kushites, though they did vary from light to

dark brown, even as they do today, as one travels southward in Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

The ancient Mesopotamians were also ethnically mixed. From the earliest times Sumerians mingled with Semitic migrants from Arabia.<sup>13</sup> Later Indo-European peoples migrated from southern Russian areas into the Near East and intermingled with the Babylonian population in what is called the Kassite Era. The Hittites, too, were Indo-European.<sup>14</sup> Thus the whole population of Mesopotamia was multiethnic. Later in the First Millennium B.C., even more Indo-European peoples, such as the Persians and Medes, moved into the Near East. With the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, the Greeks (another Indo-European population) entered Egypt and Babylonia. At that time, Hellenic ethnic chauvinism appears in Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the Kushite-Meroitic peoples living south of Egypt in the Sudan were viewed very positively both by the Greeks and by the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> In part, this stemmed from Kushite rule in Egypt, 712-663 B.C., when the Kushites resisted Assyrian domination and helped Hezekiah in 701 B.C.<sup>17</sup> It also stemmed from the fact that of all the Near Eastern powers, only the Kushites had remained independent of the Persian Empire.

The ancient Near Eastern world also reached out to farther parts of Asia and Africa, and encountered other world civilizations. A South Indian sailor who was shipwrecked in the Red Sea in 118 B.C., for example, demonstrated to the Ptolemaic Egyptian navy the techniques of sailing directly to India by making proper use of the Indian Ocean's monsoon winds.<sup>18</sup> A rich trans-oceanic trade soon developed, linking India and the Mediterranean. The Romans took control of this route after occupying Egypt in 30 B.C., and they extended the route eastward as far as Southeast Asia and China. The Muslims later expanded it to the East Indies, and Swahili traders opened another route southward along the East African coast.<sup>19</sup> Madagascar, though, had earlier been settled by ocean-crossing East Indians, eloquent testimony to their navigation and seagoing skills.<sup>20</sup> All these experiences made the Mediterranean world even more multicultural. Only the Americas, Australia, and Antarctica remained unknown to them.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the study of ancient history reveals a multicultural world—much like the world we inhabit today. Seen in this light, the lack of racial prejudice among the ancient peoples should serve as an especially strong legacy to us.

By studying these cultures through direct translations and other materials, we can learn firsthand about the ancient world's chief legacies. From Egypt came the 365

and one-quarter day calendar that we still use, as well as its subdivision into 12 months and 24-hour days.<sup>22</sup> The Egyptians also gave us a sophisticated use of geometry, as well as number usage and calculation based upon the power of 10, anticipating the metric system.<sup>23</sup> Egyptian papyrus and writing led to the development of books and helped develop a literary tradition.<sup>24</sup>

From Mesopotamia came the sexagesimal system, a number system based upon the power of 60 that is still used in our clocks and time-keeping. The earliest known algebraic equations also come from Mesopotamia.<sup>25</sup> Many early civilizations also developed astronomy. In Egypt, observation of the star Sirius was tied to the Nile flooding. The South Indians, East Indians, and Pacific peoples developed star-based navigation, as well as oceanic current and wave pattern analysis, cloud and bird flight pattern analysis—all used in their highly sophisticated and successful trans-oceanic navigation and sailing.<sup>26</sup>

The proper study of ancient history should highlight the brilliant achievements of these many, diverse peoples. Western civilization owes a considerable cultural debt jointly to Egypt in Africa and to Mesopotamia, and indirectly to the wider world that those ancient cultures contacted and learned from. This is the true legacy of the ancient civilizations, and not the monocultural and African-centered view that the Afrocentrists present. Africa does indeed have a strong impact on this legacy, through Egyptian and Kushite contributions, but the legacy also comes from other, non-African cultures.

In conclusion, the direct study of ancient texts and the use of academically sound and scholarly historical sources offer us not only a fascinating glimpse of wonderful ancient civilizations, but also some valuable models in multicultural, ethnic, and racial toleration. Our entire ancient heritage is multicultural right from the start, with deep roots in both Africa and Asia. Today's teachers and students can surely profit from this history. □

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Feder, Kenneth. *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries* (Mountainview, Calif.: Mayfield Publishers, 1990), preface, v-vi.
- <sup>2</sup> Reviewed in Frank J. Yurco, "An Evaluation of the Portland Social Studies Baseline Essay," *Network News and Views* 10, no. 3 (March 1991) 21-26; also, Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, "Multicultural Pseudoscience: Spreading Illiteracy Among Minorities," *Skeptical Inquirer* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1991), 46-50; idem, "Magic Melanin: Spreading Scientific Illiteracy Among Minorities, Part II," *Skeptical Inquirer* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1992) 162-166.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, for Egypt, Miriam Lichtheim. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California, 1973, 1976, and 1980); William Simpson Kelley, ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University, 1973); Nicholas Grimal. *A History of Egypt*, translated by Ian Shaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Barry J. Kemp. *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989); T.G.H. James. *Pharaoh's People* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984); Wente, Edward F. *Letters From Ancient Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Moran, William L. *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992); and R.B. Parkinson. *Voices From Ancient Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> Based upon Ms. Mary Sigman's experience as a kindergarten teacher in the Chicago public school system.
- <sup>5</sup> Yurco, Frank J. "Were the Ancient Egyptians 'Black' or 'White'?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1989) 25-29, 58; also Bruce Trigger, "Nubian, Negro, Black, Nilotic?" in *Africa*

- in *Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1978), vol. I, The Essays, pp. 26-35.
- <sup>6</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, pp. 96-100, esp. p. 98.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, and *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. I, pp. 106, and 131-132.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 131-132, especially top, p. 132, Coffin Text, no. 1131-1132.
- <sup>9</sup> For instance, Cheikh Anta Diop, "Origins of the Ancient Egyptians," in G. Mokhtar, ed. *General History of Africa*, 8 vols. (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), Vol. 2, pp. 36-39.
- <sup>10</sup> Anthropological studies, see, A. Batrawi, "The Racial History of Egypt and Nubia, Part I," *Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 75 (1945) 81-101; idem, "The Racial History of Egypt and Nubia, Part II," *Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 76 (1946) 131-156; and Shomarka Keita, "Studies of Ancient Crania from Northern Africa," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 83 (1990) 35-48; C. Loring Brace et al. "Clines and Clusters Versus 'Race': A Test in Ancient Egypt and The Case of a Death on the Nile." *The Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 36 (1993) 1-31. For the artistic evidence see, Frank Snowden, Jr. *Before Color Prejudice: The ancient view of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1983); and idem, "Bernal's 'Blacks', Herodotus, and Other Classical Evidence," *Arethusa*, special issue (Fall 1989) 83-95; and Yurco. "Were the Ancient Egyptians 'Black' or 'White'?", pp. 25-29, 58.
- <sup>11</sup> Snowden, see note 10, above, and idem. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Graeco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970; and idem, *Blacks in the Ancient Greek and Roman World: An Introduction to the Exhibit* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Library, 1987).
- <sup>12</sup> Trigger, Bruce, "Nubian, Negro, Black, Nilotic?", pp. 26-35, and Yurco, "Were the Ancient Egyptians 'Black' or 'White'?" pp. 25-29, 58, and Snowden, notes 10-11 above.
- <sup>13</sup> Oppenheim, A. Leo. *Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, 2nd ed., revised by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), pp. 48-63.
- <sup>14</sup> Gurney, O.R. *The Hittites*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 17-18, 117-131, and J. G. MacQueen. *The Hittites and their contemporaries in Asia Minor*, rev., enl. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), pp. 22-26, and 35.
- <sup>15</sup> Lewis, Naphtali. *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986).
- <sup>16</sup> Snowden, notes 10-12, above.
- <sup>17</sup> Yurco, Frank J., "The Shabaka-Shebitku Coregency and the Supposed Second Campaign of Sennacherib against Judah: A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991) 35-45; and Kitchen, Kenneth A. *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1986), pp. 383-386, and 552-553.
- <sup>18</sup> Tarn, W.W. *Hellenistic Civilisation*, 3rd. ed. (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), pp. 247-248.
- <sup>19</sup> Horton, Mark. "The Swahili Corridor," *Scientific American* 257, no. 3 (1987) 86-93.
- <sup>20</sup> See, Mervyn Brown. *Madagascar Rediscovered* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1979); John Mack. *Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors* (London: British Museum, 1986); and Otto C. Dahl. *Migration from Kalimantan to Madagascar* (Oslo: Norwegian University, 1991).
- <sup>21</sup> Yurco, Frank J., "Pre-Columbian Voyages to the Americas?" *Skeptical Inquirer*, forthcoming.
- <sup>22</sup> Parker, Richard, A., "The Calendars and Chronology," in J.R. Harris, ed. *The Legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 13-26.
- <sup>23</sup> Gillings, Ron J. *Mathematics in the Time of the Pharaohs* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Books, 1981).
- <sup>24</sup> Cerny, Jaroslav. *Books and Paper in Ancient Egypt* (London: University College, 1952; reprint, Chicago: Ares Press, 1985).
- <sup>25</sup> Neugebauer, Otto. *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*, 2nd. ed. (Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 1957), pp. 3-70.
- <sup>26</sup> Lewis, David. *The Voyaging Stars*, and idem. "The Pacific Navigators' Debt to Ancient Seafarers of Asia," pp. 44-66.