

CHAPTER 1

Antiquity

Scholars of American history have long understood that discussions of the African American experience must begin with a consideration of people and cultures and developments in Africa itself, before the rise of American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, to debilitate the notion that black folk, prior to their experiences in the Americas, had no history worthy of the name.

Long before the rise of professional historians, black men and women had reached a similar conclusion. Facing the withering effects of slavery, black thinkers as early as David Walker and Frederick Douglass were careful to mention the glories of the African past. When circumstances all around suggested otherwise, they found evidence of the potential and ability of black people in the achievements of antiquity. Rather than conforming to divine decree or reflecting the natural order of things, the enslavement of black people, when placed in the context of thousands of years of history in Africa itself, was but an aberration. In this view, there was nothing inevitable about black suffering and subjugation.

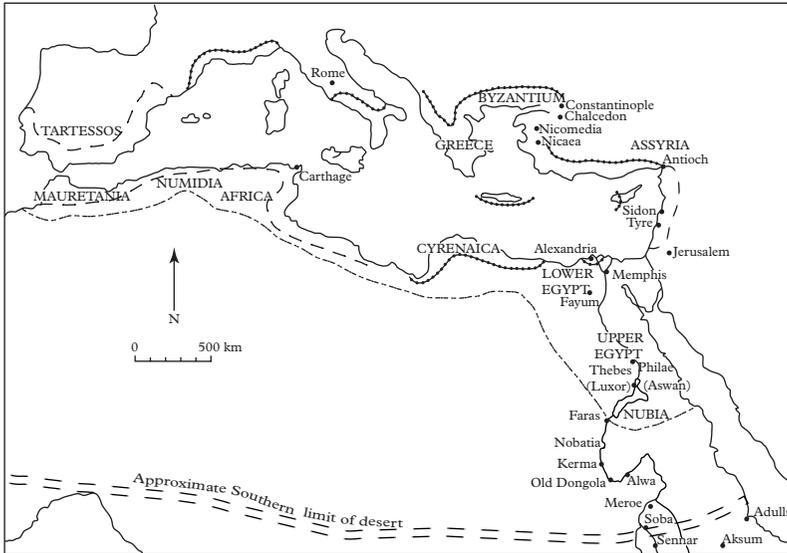
These early thinkers, uninformed about the greatness of West and West Central African civilizations, invariably cited those of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia as exemplars of black accomplishment and creativity. In so doing, they anticipated the subsequent writings of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and St. Clair Drake, who likewise embraced the idea that ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies were related to those toiling in American sugar cane and cotton fields. This view was not limited to black thinkers in the

Americas; the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop argued for links between Egypt, Ethiopia, and West Africa. The latest to make such claims have been the “Afrocentrists,” but whatever the particular school of thought, certain of their ideas resonate with communities in both West Africa and the African Diaspora, where the notion of a connectedness to either Egypt and Nubia or Ethiopia resides in the cultural expressions of the folk. Whether one accepts their views or finds them extravagant, there is no avoiding the realization that Africans and their descendants have pursued a long and uninterrupted conversation about their relationship to the ancients. Such intergenerational discussion has not been idle chitchat but rather has significantly influenced the unfolding of African American art, music, religion, politics, and societies.

A brief consideration of ancient Africa, especially Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia, remains important for at least two reasons: First, it contextualizes the discussion of subsequent developments largely inaugurated with massive trades in African captives. Antiquity reminds us that modernity could not have been predicted, that Africans were not always under the heel but were in fact at the forefront of human civilization. Second, antiquity reminds us that the African Diaspora did not begin with the slave trades. Rather, the dissemination of African ideas and persons actually began long ago. In this first diasporic phase, ideas were arguably more significant than the number of people dispersed. The Mediterranean in particular benefited from Egyptian and Nubian culture and learning. This initial phase was further distinguished by the political standing of the Africans in question; Egypt was a world power that imposed its will on others, rather than the reverse. This was therefore a different kind of African Diaspora than what followed many centuries later.

Egypt

The study of ancient Egypt is a discipline unto itself, involving majestic monuments, mesmerizing religions, magnificent arts, epic wars, and the like, all of which lie beyond our purpose here. Rather, our deliberations are confined to Egypt’s relations with its neighbors, especially to the south, as it is in such relations that the concept of an ancient African Diaspora can be demonstrated.



MAP 1. North Africa in antiquity.

Ancient Egypt, located along the Nile and divided into Upper and Lower regions, exchanged goods and ideas with Sumer (in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) as early as 3500 BCE, and by 1700 BCE it was connected with urban-based civilizations in the Indus valley, the Iranian plateau, and China. Situated in Africa, Egypt was also a global crossroad for various populations and cultures, its participation in this intercontinental zone a major feature of the African Diaspora's opening chapter.

Just who were these ancient Egyptians? While none can reasonably quibble with identifying them as northeastern Africans, the discussion becomes more complex when the subject turns to "race." Race, as it is used currently, lacks scientific value or meaning; it is as a sociopolitical concept that race takes on decided import and gravity. Our understanding of ancient Egypt is complicated by our own conversations about race, and by attempts to relate modern ideas to ancient times. A contemporary preoccupation, race was of scant significance in ancient Egypt, if the concept even existed. For example, while some paintings depict the Egyptians as dark skinned, it is more common to see males painted a dark reddish-brown and females a lighter brown or yellow. Such varying representations were not meant to simply convey

physical traits, but social standing as well; a woman portrayed as light brown suggests privilege and exemption from the need to work outdoors, her actual skin tone a matter of conjecture.

Ancient Egyptians were highly ethnocentric, regarding themselves as “the people” and everyone else as uncivilized, a distinction having more to do with land of birth and culture than outward appearance. Foreigners included Bedouins from Arabia, “Asiatics” from Asia Minor, Libyans from the west, and the Nehesi from the area south of Egypt, called *Nehesyu* or *Khent* (“borderland”) by the Egyptians, otherwise known as Nubia or Kush. But given Egypt’s long history, its gene pool periodically received infusions from Asia Minor, southern Europe, the Arabian peninsula, and, of course, subsaharan Africa. What Egyptians may have looked like in the third millennium BCE is not necessarily how they appeared 1,000 years later, let alone after 4,000 years. Swift and dramatic changes in the North American gene pool between 1500 CE and 2002 caution that sustained and substantial immigration can produce startling transformations.

Egypt and the South

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms (3400–2180 and 2080–1640 BCE), Egypt sought to militarily control Nubia and parts of Syria and Palestine. Under the New Kingdom (1570–1090 BCE), Egypt repeatedly invaded Palestine and Syria in its competition with Assyria and (subsequently) Babylon for control of the region. Africa was therefore a major foreign power in what would become the Middle East for thousands of years, years that were formative, in lands destined to become sacred for millions of people.

While especially interested in Nubia’s gold, Egypt also recruited the Nubians themselves for the Egyptian army, as their military prowess, especially in archery, was highly regarded (Egyptians referred to Nubia as *Ta-Seti*, or the “land of the bow”). Nubians were also sought as laborers, and some were even enslaved. However, with the possible exception of the Hebrews, Egypt’s enslaved population was never very large, with slaves from Europe and Asia Minor often more numerous than Nubians or other Africans.

While extending its control over Nubian territory and tapping Nubian labor, Egypt also relocated select Nubians to its capital at Thebes, where an institution called the *Kap* provided a formal, rare Egyptian

education. Nubians learned the ways of Egypt, but their presence as elites, workers, and soldiers also led to the spread of Nubian culture in Egypt. This phenomenon was similar to later developments in the Americas, where the convergence of African, European, Asian, and Native American elements led to a flourishing of African-inspired cultures, among others.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the New Kingdom's eighteenth dynasty's involvement with Nubia was the determinant role Nubian women played in the royal court. Indeed, Nubian women became Egyptian royals, wielding tremendous power as queen mothers and royal wives. As wives, they ruled at times with their husbands, at times as regents, and in some instances alone. Ahmose I inaugurated the eighteenth dynasty and ruled with Nefertari, a Nubian who enjoyed tremendous prestige and popularity with native Egyptians. Their great-granddaughter Hatshepsut ruled as both queen and regent from 1503 to 1482 BCE. Ties to Nubia were later strengthened when Amenhotep III married thirteen-year-old Tiye, another Nubian. Their seven children included sons Amenhotep IV and Tutankhamen. Renowned and emulated for her beauty, Tiye was also well educated and quite the political force; funerary sculptures depict her as an equal to Amenhotep III. She may have been responsible for affairs of state under Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akhenaton (from *aton*, solar symbol of supreme deity) as part of his promotion of monotheism. As Akhenaton's wife, Nefertiti, was yet another Nubian, we can see that it is not possible to discuss the New Kingdom without acknowledging the Nubian presence and contribution.

Nubian Ascendancy

Nubia, also located along the Nile, was called *Qevis* by its inhabitants. None of its various names – Nubia, Qevis, Cush, Kush, Ta-Seti, Nefesyu, Khent – refer to skin color; one can surmise that whatever differences existed between Egyptians and Nubians, skin color was not one that elicited elaboration.

Nubia was likewise divided into Lower and Upper regions: The former was associated with bows, shields, and other manufactures as well as raw materials; the latter with gold, semiprecious stones, leopard skins, and cattle. A Nubian state may have existed prior to Egypt's Old Kingdom, and at least one was its contemporary. The three major

Nubian kingdoms came later and are named after their capitals: Kerma (1750–1550 BCE), Napata (750–300 BCE), and Meroë (300 BCE–350 CE).

Scholars point to the distinctiveness of Nubian history and culture, that Nubia was not simply an outpost of Egyptian civilization or an imitation of Egypt on a smaller scale. The history of Napata, however, features Egyptian and Nubian convergence. Under Napata's leadership, the Nubians not only freed themselves of Egyptian domination but also turned and conquered Egypt. Establishing the twenty-fifth dynasty, the Nubians ruled as Egyptian pharaohs, their acceptance by the Egyptians a reflection of the long familiarity of the Egyptian with the Nubian.

The twenty-fifth dynasty was a time of contestation between Egypt and Assyria for control of Palestine. Assyria invaded Egypt in 674 BCE but was defeated. Three years later they were successful, driving the Nubians south where they eventually reestablished their capital at Meroë. Removed from the interminable conflicts in the Near East, neither the Ptolemies nor Rome mounted any serious effort to conquer Meroë, opting instead to maintain trade relations. Commerce and defensible terrain allowed Meroë to flourish and export such commodities as gold, cotton, precious stones, ostrich feathers, ivory, and elephants (the latter for war and amusement), while producing large quantities of iron.

Meroë was a unique civilization, with large stone monuments of stelae and its own system of writing, Meroitic. Nubian women played major roles in government (Egypt's eighteenth dynasty may reflect this custom); queen mothers were especially powerful, and, together with royal wives, were called *Candaces* (from *Kentaktes*). The renown of the Candaces in the ancient Near East was such that they reappear in accounts connected with the Bible; they were a source of dramatic and powerful images reverberating to the present day.

Africans in the Graeco-Roman World

The ancient Mediterranean world, successively dominated by the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans, came to know Africans from a number of places and in varying capacities. Most Africans, especially during the Roman period, entered the Mediterranean from both Egypt and Nubia. They also came from areas south of the Nile, North Africa

(from what is now Libya west to Morocco), the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert, and West Africa proper.

In sharp contrast to the impressions that Egyptians and Nubians had of each other for millennia, southern Europeans were completely struck by the African's color; the darker the color, the stronger the impression. Although stunned, southern Europeans generally did not ascribe any intrinsic value or worth to skin color, and, unlike contemporary notions of race and racism, did not equate blackness with inferiority. Modern day racism apparently did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean world. In fact, there is evidence that just the opposite was true, that Africans were viewed favorably.

The Greeks were so taken with the pigmentation of Africans that they invented the term *Ethiopian* (from *Aethiops*). The term means "burnt-faced person" and reflects the European belief that the skin color and hair of the African were caused by the sun. "To wash an Ethiopian white" was a common expression in the Graeco-Roman world, indicating enough familiarity with blackness to use it in conveying the futility of attempting to change the unalterable. The term *Ethiopian* was at times also applied by the Greeks to Arabs, Indians, and others of dark hue, and it is often used inaccurately to refer to Nubians. It should be borne in mind that the ancient state of Ethiopia did not begin until the first century CE.

The combined vocabulary of the Greeks and Romans could include terms of distinction. Color variation was one scheme by which groups (rather than individuals) were categorized, located as they were along a continuum from dark (*fusci*) to very dark (*nigerrimi*). Ptolemy, for example, described the population around Meroë as "deeply black" and "pure Ethiopians," as opposed to those living in the border region between Egypt and Nubia, who, according to Flavius Philostratus, were not as black as the Nubians but darker than the Egyptians. While these classifications are nonscientific and subjective, they demonstrate that blackness varied in the ancient world, much as it does today.

In addition to pigmentation, diet also formed the basis of categorization, so that the work of second-century BCE geographer and historian Agatharchides, as recorded in *On the Erythrean Sea* and surviving in part in the writings of Diodorus (born 100 BCE) and Photius, speaks of the *Struthophagi* or ostrich eaters; the *Spermatophagi*, consumers of nuts and tree fruit; the *Ichthyophagi* or fish eaters; and the *Pamphagi*, who ate everything. Of course, some groups were purely fanciful, as is evident by Pliny the Elder's (born 23 CE) list that includes the

Trogodytae (voiceless save for squeaking noises); the *Blemmyae* (headless, with eyes and mouths in their chests); the *Himantopodes*, who crawled instead of walked; and the three- and four-eyed *Nisicathae* and *Nisitae*.

Greek and Roman attempts to account for unknown parts of Africa represent an acknowledgment of the limitations of the former's knowledge. But what the Greeks and Romans did know of Africa, they tended to admire. Their attitudes toward Africans can be deduced from their accounts of actual encounters, as well as from their literature (such as poetry and drama). Artwork is also a source of information. These views come together in yet another Graeco-Roman division of the African population, this time along lines of civilizational achievement; African societies deemed high in attainment were greatly acclaimed. Egyptians and Nubians had established literate, urban-based, technologically advanced civilizations long before there was a Rome or an Athens, so there was every reason for African achievement to be praised and even emulated. It is not surprising that Homer speaks of the Olympian gods, especially Zeus, feasting with the "blameless" Ethiopians, the most distant of men, who by the time of Xenophanes (d. circa 478 BCE) had been identified as black and flat nosed, and by the fifth century located to the south of Egypt. Herodotus maintained that the Ethiopians were the tallest and most handsome of men, and the most pious. He added that Meroë was a "great city," and that the Nubians had supplied Egypt with eighteen pharaohs. Diodorus wrote that the inhabitants of Meroë were the "first of all men and the first to honor the gods whose favor they enjoyed," and, together with Lucian, who maintained that the "Ethiopians" had invented astrology, claimed that many Nubian practices and institutions were subsequently borrowed by the Egyptians. Meroë was to be distinguished, however, from "primitive" Ethiopians, who went about "filthy" and naked (or nearly so) and who did not believe in the gods. Celebrated sexual encounters in the Greek and Roman imagination are yet another measure of the regard for the Nubian. Examples include Zeus, who may have been portrayed in the *Inachus* of Sophocles (circa 496–406 BCE) as black or dark, and whose child by Io is described by Aeschylus (525–456 BCE) as black and by Hesiod (fl. circa 700 BCE) as the ancestor of the Ethiopians and Libyans. Delphos, the founder of Delphi, was believed to be the son of Poseidon or Apollo and a woman whose name means "the black woman." There is also the example of Perseus, who married the daughter of the king of the Ethiopians, the dark-hued Andromeda.

Just as individuals like Herodotus actually traveled to Africa and gathered information, Africans also entered southern Europe. The context was often one of war, both for and against the Greeks and Romans. Nubians were a part of the Egyptian occupation of Cyprus under Amasis (569–522 BCE), and there is the account of Memnon and his black soldiers coming to the aid of the Greeks in the possibly mythical Trojan Wars. A large number of Nubians fought under Xerxes of Persia in the very real Battle of Marathon in 480–79 BCE. These Nubians experienced liaisons with Greek women, resulting in the “brown babies” of the Persian Wars. Carthage, founded no earlier than 750 BCE by the combination of Phoenician settlers and Berber natives referred to as Numidians, developed a society in which the Berber masses were treated harshly. Although transsaharan trade in the hands of the Garamantes was not very important during Carthaginian ascendancy, a sufficient number of subsaharan Africans made their way to Carthage, where they were inducted into military service. Frontius records the presence of “very black” auxiliaries among the Carthaginian prisoners taken by Gelon of Syracuse in 480 BCE. The Punic Wars (264–241, 218–201, and 149–146 BCE) also saw Maghribian (North African) “Ethiopians,” possibly West Africans, employed in the invasion of Italy, serving as *mahouts* aloft elephants. Rome would go on to conquer Egypt and occupy it from the time of Augustus to the sixth century CE. Its relations with Nubia and the south were relatively peaceful until the third century CE, when it incurred difficulties with the Beja of the Red Sea hills, called “Blemmyes” in the Roman sources.

Africans enslaved in the Graeco-Roman world were only a small fraction of the total number of slaves in these territories. Enslaved Africans also only represented a portion of the overall African population living in southern Europe. A number of Africans were attracted to places like Rome for trade and occupational opportunities, and they could be found working as musicians, actors, jugglers, gladiators, wrestlers, boxers, religious specialists, and day laborers. Some became famous, such as the black athlete Olympius described by sixth-century poet Luxorius. In addition to entertaining and fighting the Romans, Africans also served in the Roman armies, as was the case with the elite Moorish cavalry from northwest Africa under Lusius Quietus, himself of possible Moroccan heritage. Black soldiers even served in the Roman army as far north as Britain.

Potentially more far-reaching than the actual presence of Africans in southern Europe was the impact of their cultural influence. Scholars debate the extent to which Egyptian science, engineering, architectural

forms, and philosophy influenced developments in Greece. There can be no question, however, that Egyptian and Nubian religion was deeply influential throughout the Mediterranean world for many centuries if not millennia, especially the worship of Isis, adopted and worshiped in many places under several names. Her worshipers made pilgrimage to the island of Philae, near the border of Egypt and Nubia, and Nubian specialists in Isiac worship were welcomed in various centers throughout southern Europe, where the Isiac rites were known as the Eleusianian mysteries.

From all that can be determined, it would appear that the racial attitudes of the ancient Graeco-Roman world differed significantly from the contemporary West. Africans were seen and treated as equals, the representatives of homelands both ancient and respected. Their reception in southern Europe and the Near East underscores the power and prestige of African realms and leaders as a factor that distinguishes this phase of the African Diaspora from what takes place much later. In the ancient world, Africa and Africans were forces to be reckoned with; indeed, for thousands of years, they were the leaders of the ancient world.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Useful general histories of Africa include Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, and Jan Vansina, *African History: From Earliest Times to Independence* (London and New York: Longman, 1995, 2nd ed.), and J. Fage and R. Oliver, eds., *The Cambridge History of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1975–86), an eight-volume collection.

Concerning ancient Egypt, works providing general reconstructions include Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Karol Myśliwiec, *The Twilight of Ancient Egypt: First Millennium B.C.E.*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 2000); and Sergio Donadoni, ed., *The Egyptians*, trans. Robert Bianchi et al. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1997). Studies with foci on women, gender, and society are Lynn Meskell, *Archaeologies of Social Life: Age, Sex, Class Et Cetera in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); Zahi A. Hawass, *Silent Images: Women in Pharaonic Egypt* (Cairo: American U. in Cairo Press, 2000); John Romer, *People of the Nile: Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt*

(New York: Crown, 1982); Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2001). Regarding religion, see Dimitri Meeks and Christine Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1996); and Aylward M. Blackman, *Gods, Priests and Men: Studies in the Religion of Pharaonic Egypt* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1993).

The issue of race in Egypt and antiquity is engaged by Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (New York: L. Hill, 1974). St. Clair Drake's two-volume *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, U. of California, 1987–90) certainly addresses identity in ancient Egypt but goes well beyond this period and place.

The question of Graeco-Roman indebtedness to early Egypt is taken up in Martin Bernal's controversial *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 2 vols. (London: Free Association Books, 1987–91), in the course of which race is considered. An oft-overlooked work making parallel arguments, but preceding Bernal by three decades, is George G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954). One of the responses to Bernal (and others) is Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

A rather comprehensive discussion of Nubian history is provided in P. L. Shinnie's massive *Ancient Nubia* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995). Nubia's rise and eventual takeover of Egypt is examined in Robert G. Morkot's *The Black Pharaohs: Egypt's Nubian Rulers* (London: Rubicon, 2000).

A bridge connecting Egyptian, Nubian, and Graeco-Roman societies via race are Frank M. Snowden, Jr.'s *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard U. Press, 1970), and his *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1983). Leo William Hansberry's *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington, DC: University Press, 1981), is also useful.

Finally, Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer, eds., allow for printed visualization of antiquity in *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1992).