

# Are We Teaching “Greek Myths” In The Global History Curriculum?

by Alan Singer, editor, *Social Science Docket*, 2(1), Winter Spring 2002

Greece and Rome:

- 1) Petronius's *The Satyricon* contains passages exposing class nature of Rome, and easy parallels to modern US empire.
- 2) story of Gracchi brothers attempted reforms on behalf of plebians
- 3) Spartacus slave rebellion
- 4) Thucydides Melian dialogue (what Athens policy should be towards rebels on island of Melos)
- 5) Catiline conspiracy and other class struggles in Rome
- 6) oracles in Greece...bribery paid to oracular priests for desired outcomes, etc.
- 7) material basis of Athenian empire
- 8) practical discoveries and inventions, Archimedes, etc.
- 9) Egyptian influences on Greek civilization (Bernal, etc.)

When I do Greece and Rome, I make a point to ask students why the US founding fathers were so taken with ancient Greece and Rome, and used Rome in particular as a model for government; what did ancient Athens and Rome have in common with the early US (class societies, slave societies, imperial ambitions)

Our goal is to have every issue of *Social Science Docket* include an essay on a key social studies concept or controversy in order to stimulate responses from readers and debate in the New Jersey and New York Councils for the Social Studies. This essay focuses on our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world and examines whether the “Grand Narrative” of Western Civilization at the core of the Global History curriculum is promoting a mythologized past. Prior to publication, the essay was circulated among social studies teachers at local meetings, through council newsletters and via e-mail. Teachers were asked to respond to the essay, discuss how they teach about the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly Greece, and how they encourage students to think critically about historical interpretation. Selected responses are included at the end of the article.

In March, 2001, *The New York Times* (Broad, 2001: F1) reported that a submerged robot, searching the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea off of the island of Cyprus, found the remains of an ancient Greek vessel. The research team identified it as a Hellenistic trader carrying a shipment of wine between Rhodes and Alexandria. They estimate that it sank 2,300 years ago in the era of Alexander the Great.

The discovery supports the idea that in the ancient world the Mediterranean Sea was a giant highway for transporting products, peoples and cultures from one site to another. This supported the process of cultural diffusion and contributed to the growth of early empires. In “The Odyssey,” Homer claimed that the Greek hero Odysseus sailed a similar route from Crete to North Africa. That voyage would have taken place about 1300 B.C. The Greeks were not the only prolific sailors of this era. During the thousand-year period before the consolidation of the Mediterranean world under Roman rule, the Phoenicians regularly sailed between the Middle East and Carthage in present day Tunisia, and as far as Spain.

This find is of major historical significance because the isle of Rhodes is about 200 miles north of the wreck, near the coast of present day Turkey. Alexandria, Egypt is an additional 200 miles south of the wreck in North Africa. The trip necessitated navigating across open water away from the sight of land.

The research team is continuing to search the region, hoping to uncover a Minoan shipwreck. The Minoans were seafarers who ruled an empire in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas from the island of Crete between 2,500 and 1,200 B.C. This period is known as the Bronze Age because it predates the manufacture of iron tools and weapons in the Mediterranean region. No Minoan ship from this period has ever been recovered.

The subheading of *The Times* article was “Accidental Find Lends New Credence to Greek Tales of Sailing Feats.” This statement is the crux of the issue that I address in this essay. Do social studies teachers present history

“backwards” when our starting point is Greek accomplishments? If the Mediterranean was truly a highway in this period, then the likelihood is that it was dominated by the era’s military, economic and cultural superpowers, Egypt on the Nile River and Sumeria or Babylon in Mesopotamia (the Fertile Crescent). Greece, at best, would have been a peripheral trading partner. If Greece was at the margins and Egypt and Mesopotamia were at the center of cultural and technological advancement in this period, are social studies teachers presenting “Greek myth” as history when we attribute the origin of “Western Civilization” to ancient Greece?

### The Nile and Fertile Crescent

The significance of the Nile and Fertile Crescent civilizations in early human cultural development and the power of cultural diffusion are well established. To cite a recent example, Jared Diamond (1997, see a review of *Guns, Germs and Steel* on page xx), shows that agricultural and animal husbandry emerge in the Fertile Crescent, and spread to the Nile River Valley, over 10,000 years ago (8,500 B.C.). Eventually this “food package,” and a sedentary way of life based on it, spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Diamond traces a similar route for the spread of writing systems. Starting about 5,000 years ago (3,200 B.C.), they develop in Mesopotamia and Egypt (later, but independently, in China, 1,300 B.C. and Meso-America, 600 B.C.), and diffuse across the globe. Other cultural developments in the ancient Mediterranean world followed a similar pattern of dispersion. Pottery first appears in the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia about 7000 B.C.; metallurgy about 4,000 B.C.; formal governments about 3,700 B.C.; and iron tools about 900 B.C. Since the historical record makes it virtually impossible to decide whether a development first emerged in Egypt or Mesopotamia, they are considered as a single point of origin.

Given the early achievements of Mesopotamia and Egypt, why the unbalanced focus on ancient Greece in history textbooks and social studies classrooms?

There are three general answers to this question. Historians and teachers often focus on ancient Greece because they perceive Greek civilization as fundamentally different from the civilizations that preceded it or existed at the same time (as somehow more “western”), and they believe these differences produced the modern world as we know it. Historian Peter Burke (1998: 2) calls this view the “Grand

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#### Timeline of the Ancient Mediterranean World, 5000 B.C. - 500 B.C.

5000-4000	Egyptians develop 360 day calendar
4000-3500	Sumerians (Mesopotamia) develop writing; Copper, silver and gold work by Egyptians and Sumerians; Cretan ships sail Mediterranean.
3500-3000	Egypt develops numerals, plowing and fertilizing of fields; Sumeria develops wheels.
3000-2500	Pyramids and the Great Sphinx built in Egypt; Sumerians develop metal coins; initial settlement of Crete.
2500-2000	Pharaohs rule Egyptian empire; Egypt develops philosophy and the first libraries, discovers use of papyrus; earliest Egyptian mummies
2000-1500	Egypt controls Crete and the Aegean Islands, develops symbolic alphabet; Greeks migrate from Caspian Sea region to eastern Mediterranean; Hammurabi reunites Babylon (Mesopotamia) and develops legal code; Palace of Minos is built on Crete.
1500-1000	Beginning of the Iron Age; Egyptian empire extends to the Euphrates; Moses and Israelites depart from Egypt; Destruction of Troy; First Greek alphabet; High point of Cretan-Mycenaean culture.
1000-500	Periodic emergence of semi-unified Greece under leadership of Athens or Sparta; Spread of Greek settlement and culture across the Mediterranean; initial settlement at Rome; Persian empire (Mesopotamia) defeats Egypt, dominates the Middle East, but fails to conquer Greek cities.

Narrative' of the rise of Western civilization: a triumphalist account of Western achievement from the Greeks onwards in which the Renaissance is a link in the chain which includes the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and so on." Within this framework, Houghton Mifflin's high school text, *History of the World* (1990), reports that "The earliest civilizations that grew up on the Greek islands developed a unique culture. Although these people were conquered by foreign invaders, many of their traditions endured. Greek ideas would come to have a powerful influence on the politics, thought, and art of Europe and the Western Hemisphere. For this reason, Greece is known as the "cradle of Western civilization" (71).

### Can We Document Continuity?

But is there sufficient evidence to document historical continuity from ancient Greece to the modern era? Diane Ravitch and Abigail Thernstrom (1992) edited a collection called *The Democracy Reader* that includes classic and modern speeches, essays, poems, declarations and documents on freedom and human rights. In this book, Ravitch and Thernstrom try to support a thesis championed by Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson (1991), who argues that we can trace the history of democratic ideals as an essential component of western philosophy from ancient Greece to the modern world. But an examination of the table of contents raises an interesting problem. The book contains no documents for the 1500-year period between Aristotle's *The Politics* (written circa 320 B.C.) and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* (written about 1250 A.D.). Even if the ancient Greek city-states possessed a system with recognizably democratic elements, it is exceedingly difficult to establish a direct political or intellectual connection between societies separated by over 1,500 years of history. In fact, Greek texts were largely unknown in Europe prior to the Crusades, and only survived because they were preserved by Arab scholars.

A second explanation for the unbalanced focus on ancient Greece is that modern societies can see ourselves in their art, literature, philosophy and ideologies. Classical Greek sculpture appears realistic rather than symbolic or exotic. Socrates and Plato sound as if they could be giving interviews on C-SPAN. Athens seems the model for democratic society, while martial Sparta reminds some of 20th century totalitarian societies or Star Trek's Klingon Empire. Even their Gods, with soap opera like battles and love affairs, remind us of our own passions and conflicts.

But are we reading more into their culture and history than actually can be supported by the historical record? Are we seeing what is there, or what we want to see? Let me offer two examples that illustrate what I mean. The first is an example of seeing what is not there - an ancient philosopher championing modern democratic values. The second is an example of ignoring what is clearly there - a different attitude toward sexual mores.

The popular conception is that Socrates was a Greek philosopher and teacher persecuted, and then executed, by an authoritarian government for questioning leaders and pursuing the search for truth. Unfortunately, the historical record is not so clear cut. In *The Trial of Socrates* (1988), I. F. Stone concluded that Socrates was actually involved in an attempt by the oligarchy to undermine efforts to broaden representation in Athenian government.

A second issue, rarely addressed because of our culture's homophobia, is the Greek attitude toward same-sex sexual relationships. According to M. I. Finley (1963: 123-125), Aristotle believed that true friendship was only possible between equals, hence impossible between men and women. Bisexuality was common, especially among the upper class, where men and women were expected to seek both physical and spiritual companionship from people of the same gender. Sexual relations between adult men and younger boys was a feature of military elites in Sparta and Thebes and among the nobility in Athens. This aspect of ancient Greek culture is missing from most high school textbooks.

### Population of Athens during the Age of Pericles, 450 B.C.

Total population (estimated)	450,000	
Adult male citizens with ability to vote	40,000	9%
Disenfranchised citizens (women, children and some men)	80,000	18%
Free Foreign-born residents of Athens	80,000	18%
Slaves	250,000	55%

### Celebrating Greek Democracy

Probably the most comprehensive effort to read the present into the past is the celebration of Greek “democracy.” According to Houghton Mifflin’s *History of the World* (1990: 86-87), “Democracy, which had been developing in Athens over many years, reached its peak under the leadership of Pericles. He opened all political offices to any citizen. He paid jurors so that poor citizens as well as the wealthy could serve. Athens had a direct democracy - that is, all citizens had the right to attend the Assembly and cast a vote.” In the next paragraph, however, we learn that “Athenian democracy was far from complete. Citizens had time for public service largely because they owned slaves . . . . Most residents of Athens were not citizens and had no say in government. . . . Women, too, had no political rights.” In fact, during the era of Pericles, the population of Athens was about 450,000 people, and less than 10% were adult male citizens with the power to vote. About 18% of the population were foreign-born with no legal rights and 55% of the residents of Athens were enslaved (Linder, 1979: 95). Athenian “democracy” was so restricted in scope and in time (the age of Pericles lasted about thirty years), that students should consider whether it can legitimately be labeled democratic at all.

### **Eurocentrism?**

A third explanation for the focus on ancient Greece as the source of Western Civilization is Eurocentrism - the effort to center history on European societies and to minimize the contributions of non-European “others.” For example, the debate over the relationship between Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece in the ancient world is highly charged. Claims by Afrocentric authors that Egypt was the source of Greek civilization, that ancient Egyptians were “Black Africans,” and that this history has been hidden by mainstream “white” institutions in order to strip people of African ancestry of their proper place in history, have been challenged by essays in most of the major historical and archeological journals (Lefkowitz, 1992: 440-460; Pounder, 1992: 461-464; Lefkowitz and Rogers, 1996).

I want to side-step the debate over whether ancient Egyptians were “Black Africans” because I believe it takes us away from the more important issue of Egyptian influence on Greek culture and development. We will probably never know for certain the skin color or genetic heritage of ancient Egyptians. Their art is largely symbolic and I suspect the colors used to portray people were selected from pigments available to artists, not because of the skin color of subjects. Most likely, since ancient Egypt was a crossroads civilization, it was a genetically and culturally blended society with diverse people who probably did not place the same significance on race as we do in the United States today.

Much of the debate over the relationship between Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece is in response to the work of Martin Bernal (1987; 1991; 2001), who has published two volumes of a proposed three volume collection called *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Bernal marshals extensive evidence to present a detailed case for Egyptian and Semitic (Middle Eastern) contributions to Greek culture during the Bronze Age (prior to 1100 B.C.) based on an examination of religion, art, mythology, language and artifacts. Among other things, he provides powerful arguments for the origins of the Hercules legend and the Sphinx in ancient Egypt.

The ancient world is not my area of expertise as either a teacher or historian, so I cannot evaluate Bernal’s documentation. What I find most interesting are the concessions made by his opponents. Among his more vocal critics, Molly Myerwitz Levine (1992; 1996) accepts some of Bernal’s claims about Bronze Age influence, but argues that they are not at the core of what we identify as classical Greece - its art, politics and philosophy.

### **Contributions of Ancient Egypt**

In an essay titled, “Did Egypt shape the glory that was Greece?” John Coleman, a classicist from Cornell University, presents an alternative historical scenario to Bernal’s and concludes that “recognizing that Greek civilization was influenced from abroad and made use of previous advances in mathematics and science, . . . is a far cry from asserting that it had ‘Afroasiatic roots’” (Coleman, 1996: 281). Coleman claims that all scholars recognize the contributions of Egypt and the Middle East to the ancient Greek world, especially to Minoan or Crete civilization, and argues that the dispute with Bernal is primarily a matter of degree.

According to Coleman’s narrative, cultural contact between the Aegean and Egypt started in the early Bronze Age, around 2100 B.C., as a result of migration and trade. Crete needed to import tin, a major ingredient in the manufacture of bronze, which was lacking in the Aegean world. The widespread diffusion of pottery from 2100 to 1725 B.C. shows increasing contacts between Greece and Egypt. During this period, Minoan culture, which was

shaped by its contacts with Egypt, exerted a powerful influence on the developing mainland Greek societies. Later, with the decline of Crete, Mycenaean (or mainland Greek societies) took over the trade connections with Egypt. We know less about Greece between 1100 and 750 B.C., but after 750 B.C. Greek soldiers were used as mercenaries in Egypt and, according to Coleman, there is a “flood of influence on all Greek arts and crafts from Egypt” (296). These conclusions are supported by an exhibit I visited, “Crete-Egypt: Three Millennia of Cultural Interactions” at the Herakleion Archaeological Museum in Crete. It contains 527 artifacts that demonstrate interaction between the two Mediterranean peoples. Some of the exhibit can be viewed at the museum’s website ([www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21123m/e211wm01.html](http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21123m/e211wm01.html)).



**Exhibit from “Crete-Egypt: Three Millennia of Cultural Interactions” at the Herakleion Archeological Museum in Crete.**

I find Coleman’s statement balanced and reasonable, and believe it establishes a significant relationship that was ignored before the Bernal work. It is in sharp contrast to what is currently taught in secondary schools. Houghton Mifflin’s *History of the World* (1990) section on Minoan civilization reports that they were “seafaring traders, exporting wine, honey, and olive oil to Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria and Greece” (71), but ignores any Egyptian influence on Crete or Greece. After the collapse of Crete, Egypt plays no further role in Greek history until it is conquered by Alexander the Great. The chapter on ancient Egypt (34-42), reports that Egypt traded with other civilizations in the Mediterranean region including Crete, but does not identify the Greek world or discuss any cultural exchange between the two civilizations. The spread of Greek culture through Alexander’s conquest of the Mediterranean world, known as Hellenization, is presented as a major accomplishment of ancient Greece that stimulated trade, science, philosophy and cultural diffusion. But should conquest and forced assimilation into the Greek world be presented uncritically? Would similar conquests and assimilations be viewed that way if they took place today? The much celebrated Hebrew revolt under the Maccabees (the story of Hannukah) about 170 B.C. was a response to efforts by Greek rulers to enforce Greek culture, law and religion in ancient Israel (Johnson, 1987: 102-107).

**European Renaissance**

The celebration of ancient Greece’s role within the “Grand Narrative” of the Western world is reinforced in standard interpretations of the European Renaissance, which define the era as a rebirth of classical Greek and

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Roman civilization (Thompson, 1996). According to Burke (1998), “the major innovators of the Renaissance presented - and often perceived - their inventions and discoveries as a return to ancient traditions after the long parenthesis of what they were the first to call the ‘Middle’ Ages” (2). Houghton Mifflin’s text credits Italian humanists, especially Petrarch of Florence, with reading ancient texts and “rediscovering knowledge that had been lost or forgotten” (327).

But even if Renaissance innovators believed that social change was a result of the rediscovery of ancient traditions, that does not mean that it actually happened that way. In *Worldly Goods, A New History of the Renaissance* (1996:12), Jardine presents a materialist interpretation of the period, arguing that the celebrated culture of the European Renaissance was the result of a “competitive urge to acquire” stimulated by the growth of trade, cities and a new affluent, secular, elite. She believes that “Early Renaissance works of art which today we admire for their sheer representational virtuosity were part of a vigorously developing world market in luxury commodities” (19).

But why would this increasing affluent, secular, world claim spiritual and intellectual decent from classical Mediterranean civilizations? The answer is related to the power of religious authority in that era. The Roman Catholic Church was threatened by competing religions and new world views, and brutally resisted change. Framing new ideas and discoveries as a rebirth of knowledge from classical Greco-Roman and Biblical eras was necessary for survival. In Florence, where the European Renaissance first emerged, major religious authorities initially attacked the study of “pagan authors” as an impediment to salvation and humanists were forced to defend the texts as compatible with church teachings (Burke, 1998: 31-32). In the end, Church and secular authorities preferred to credit Aristotle and Ptolemy with the origin of civilization, rather than acknowledging the role of contemporary Moslems and Jews.

Debates over ideas during the European Renaissance were not just intellectual exercises. In the early 13th century, Pope Innocent III launched a Crusade to crush heresy in southern France that resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands of people (O’Shea, 2000). After warring against its Islamic population, Spain’s Roman Catholic monarchs expelled Jews and in 1477 established the Inquisition. Under Torquemada, the third Grand Inquisitor, over 2,000 people were burned at the stake for suspicion of rejecting Catholic religious orthodoxy (Thompson, 1996: 509). Noted Renaissance artists and scholars were not immune from suspicion or attack. In 1516, Leonardo Da Vinci, whose actions and work were frequently impious, and who made no pretense of connection with classical antiquity, fled the Italian peninsula and sought sanctuary from King Francis I of France (Thompson, 1996: 147-158). In 1633, Galileo was tried for heresy by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Rome for challenging the Ptolemaic system and asserting that the Earth traveled around the Sun (Sobel, 1999: 273-278).

Where does this leave social studies teachers? We need to re-conceptualize both the “grand narrative” of Western Civilization presented in global history and the way we teach social studies. Instead of presenting the past as a series of facts and truths to be memorized and celebrated, teachers should engage students in a critical examination of different explanations of the past and present. The Global History curriculum can be organized so students explore essential historical questions (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998: 28-32; Singer, 1999: 28-31), including: What were the origins of Western Civilization? Was there only one origin? Was Athens or any ancient society democratic? Does conquest make a leader (Alexander) great? What are the costs of cultural diffusion and assimilation? How does democracy emerge? How do societies change? Why do societies accept and promote myths about their past?

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