

Talking Points: Race, Place, and the Ancient Egyptians

- Egypt's location in North Africa made it easily accessible over water (the Mediterranean Sea) by people from the Middle East, Persia, Greece, and Rome. In the ancient world, the fastest and preferred mode of travel was by ship.
 - As a result, Egypt was a crossroads of many cultures. Many people traveled there, traded goods, and intermarried.
 - Various groups or kingdoms were vying for power: the Nubians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all invaded and ruled Egypt at one point.
 - Ancient Egyptians depicted their skin color as somewhere between their neighbors to the south (who were shown as darker) and to the east (who were shown as lighter).
 - The way Egyptians look today is the way the ancient Egyptians looked.
 - Historians have whitewashed ancient Egypt. They used light-skinned or European-appearing people to represent ancient Egyptians. This isn't accurate; ancient Egyptians didn't look European or white.
 - The ancient Egyptians called their country Kemet, which means "Black Land" a reference to the rich, dark soil along the Nile River where the first settlements began.
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From *Egypt's Sunken Cities* audio guide:

What did Ancient Egyptians look like?

Skin Color and Identity in Ancient Egypt - Anne Austin, PhD, Egyptologist

The construct of race (especially Black and White) in the U.S. today doesn't apply to contemporary or ancient Egyptians. They do not and did not think of themselves in those terms. Our definitions of Black and White are not only different between ancient Egypt and today, but also between the United States and modern Egypt.

The country is at the cornerstone between sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. And their features and skin color reflect that.

Ancient Egyptians showed themselves and they showed their neighbors. They showed their neighbors to the south and they showed their neighbors to the east. And when they showed them, they often showed that Egyptian skin color sits somewhere in between. They have people to the south of them that have darker skin, and people to the east of them that have lighter skin. Ancient Egyptians actually used skin color to tell us about completely different things. For instance, in the Old Kingdom the Egyptians showed women as being yellow-skinned and men as being red-skinned to show us that women spent more time inside the house and men spent more time outside of the house.

Now, do I think ancient Egypt has been white-washed? Yes, 100%. Let's take a recent example. Recently there was a forensic reconstruction of Nefertiti. Now this is a woman who's incredibly famous, and famous because we have a life-like, realistic bust depicting what she looked like. And yet, if you look at this reconstruction, her skin color is much lighter than the skin color on

the bust. So I think there has been a huge problem with ancient Egyptians being shown as if they're European, as if they're northern European. As if they're White. And the ancient Egyptians certainly didn't depict themselves as if they looked like Europeans. If you look at who's often cast to be kings, queens, or gods in Egypt, you usually see people who are seen as European. And you rarely see people who come from the Middle East or from Africa, which would be the most appropriate places to expect.

Yeah, an Egyptian today wouldn't call themselves White or Black. They would call themselves Egyptian. And the ancient Egyptians felt the same way.

From Bioarchaeologist Kristina Killgrove, PhD

- 1) Our idea of race is a modern cultural construction, not a biological one. The ancient Egyptians didn't think of people's race the same way we do, and it's unfair and anachronistic to try to apply our modern categories to their culture. We need to understand them on their own terms (cultural relativism).
- 2) RE: DNA analysis
 - a. biological anthropologists still don't know how many and which genes control skin color, hair form, etc., so even a genomic study of ancient Egyptians is not going to tell us their skin color;
 - b. most complex genes independently assort at fertilization, which means that even if we could tell from genes what someone's skin color was, we wouldn't also know their nose form, their eye shape, etc.;
 - c. humans are one species and can reproduce with any other member of our species; we have for at least hundreds of thousands of years
 - d. populations that live in the same general area for multiple generations are going to look more similar (it's simple gene flow and genetic drift, two of the forces of evolution), but humans have been moving all over the known world for well over 1.5 million years, so these "gene pools" may be still for a while, but there are plenty of ripples in them throughout history.
- 3) A slightly more complicated interpretation of this whole "race of the Egyptians" thing is that -- it is whatever we want it to be. For example, President Obama has a white mother and black father -- but he's considered the first black president. This is because of the cultural history of the US. Similarly, the canon of Western history had Cleopatra as super white for decades, played by Elizabeth Taylor. But in more recent years, Cleopatra has become a hero to the African-American community, as a black female ruler. As our modern culture changes, our interpretation of the past changes -- and that's a good thing.