

# Exploring the Great Digs of Mysterious Egypt:

## Looking to the Past to Learn in the Present



### Everybody Loves Ancient Egypt!

Pyramids, mummies, sphinxes, gold-covered coffins, hieroglyphic carvings, priceless jewelry, beautiful statues—the mystery, adventure, and romance of Ancient Egypt hold a fascination for teachers and students alike. It seems that everyone has a natural interest in this ancient civilization.

This interest has been fueled in part by some amazing archeological finds, such as the discovery of the tomb of Tutakhamen, the boy pharaoh. When Howard Carter made this dazzling discovery in 1922, the world became an eyewitness to one of the richest and greatest cultures from the dawn of civilization. Priceless treasures were found untouched beyond the tomb's sealed entrance.

The famous sphinx and pyramids at Giza also capture our imaginations. Who has not marveled at these magnificent structures, presumably built with the simplest of tools and yet still standing today! Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Great Pyramid at Giza is notably the only one still in existence. Is it any wonder we are so fascinated with Ancient Egypt?

It would seem that Ancient Egypt has invaded today's culture. Popular Hollywood movies and musical productions reflect the world's interest in the Egyptian civilization. Well-known titles include *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Cleopatra*, *Mummy*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Aida*. Most major art museums and world history museums contain Ancient Egyptian collections. And, there are dozens of active Egyptological societies and associations in the United States and throughout the world.

### Why study Ancient Civilizations?

Aside from a natural fascination with an ancient civilization, why study an ancient culture? Of course, a survey of ancient civilization is rooted in tradition, an accepted part of a basic education. However, there are other reasons.

First, by learning about different cultures, we can better understand our own. Interestingly, often it is the differences, not the similarities, that lead to an increased understanding. For example, it is difficult for us to imagine the motivation of thousands of Egyptians who willingly worked in the burning desert heat to build pyramids they would never personally use. Yet, knowing about the Egyptians, we are better able to know our own culture. We can contrast its limits and unique perspectives with the perspective of the Ancient Egyptians.

Secondly, by studying ancient civilizations, students can become more tolerant of different ideas and viewpoints. This includes viewpoints of other cultures as well as minority viewpoints from within their own culture. Students can come to realize that not everyone subscribes equally to a particular culture, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, Akhenaton is remembered not because he followed the Ancient Egyptian tradition of polytheism, but because he challenged his culture's beliefs in multiple gods. Of course, not long after Akhenaton's reign, King Tut returned Egypt to the older polytheistic religion, proving once more that ideas and individuals in power can both rise and fall.

As students make these observations and consider the fact that other cultures and other individuals hold alternative beliefs and traditions that are workable, they may develop a greater degree of objectivity.

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, the study of ancient civilizations holds great benefits. The knowledge students gain will serve them well if they travel to places around the world. At home, it will help them to better understand history, foreign affairs, and current events. An understanding of how the events of the past have led to today's realities will help students be better citizens. As George Santayana states, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>2</sup> And finally, one of the greatest benefits of the study of ancient cultures is the development of a greater love and tolerance for all who share the Earth.