Andrew Lawler: Writing Gets a Rewrite

Summary

Mesopotamian legend has credited a high priest from Uruk as the inventor of writing. However, new discoveries in Egypt and Pakistan are starting to disprove this theory. The invention of writing is now thought to have been a complex process rather than invented by one person. Clay spheres with markings were found in Iraq, Syria, and Iran and for many years were dismissed by researchers as games. Pierre Amiet began to examine the small spheres and began to suspect that they were actually used as a method to count trade goods. She suspected that the marks were the predecessors to what eventually became cuneiform. Her theory was eventually dismissed due to the lack of evidence and curators not wanting to destroy their artifacts with testing. Hieroglyphics were thought to have been created a century after cuneiform. However, the discovery of a royal tomb in 1989 changed that theory. The tomb contained objects with inscriptions that were dated to be at least a hundred years older than the oldest writing found in Egypt previously. The inscriptions would mean that Egypt had created a writing system about the same time as Mesopotamia. The exact date of the inscriptions cannot be calculated due to the stratigraphic record being a disaster. However, there is another civilization that may have developed a writing system around the same time. The Harappan’s system was not as complex as the other two, but it still developed and there was a grouping of signs. The three civilizations interacted through trade in pre-history. Therefore, the long held theory of Mesopotamia creating writing is now in question with the possibility that another group created it first. There is also the chance that all three writing systems were created independently around the same time.

Analysis

Andrew Lawler was quite informative about the different systems of writing. He explained each reason for not having enough proof fairly well. However, he could have gone into more detail about the writing systems of the Harappan civilization. He cannot talk about a third system that has been proposed when there is not enough evidence to support the claim.

Vocabulary

Periphery- the outward bounds of something as distinguished from its internal regions or center

Coalesce- to unite for a common end: join forces

Situ- in the natural or original position or place

Tomography- a method of producing a three-dimensional image of the internal structures of a solid object (as the human body or the earth) by the observation and recording of the differences in the effects on the passage of waves of energy impinging on those structures
Robert Draper: Black Pharaohs

Summary

Piye the king of Nubia decided it was time for a change in Egypt. After a yearlong campaign he had overthrown Egypt’s leaders and made himself Pharaoh. Unfortunately, his face and what he looked like has been lost. There is only one detail about him that is known from a destroyed statue that is only his legs. His skin was dark and he was the first black pharaoh. The black pharaohs reunited a torn apart Egypt. They built monuments and even built their own set of pyramids in Sudan. Racism did not play a role in the ancient role; dark skin did not make anyone inferior to anyone else. However, European researchers did not feel the same about the Nubians’ dark skin. Racism led to the neglecting of the Nubians’ chapter in history. The Nubians did so much for Egypt and they embraced the ways and beliefs of Egypt. Egypt flourished under Nubian rule, they had large harvests and were very economically well off. Eventually the Assyrians took over what the Nubians had fixed and their hold on Egypt was lost. Still to this day their history remains largely a mystery.

Analysis

Robert Draper did a really good job of laying out the history of the Nubian’s rule in Egypt. Draper equalized them despite their skin color, and showed that they contributed to Egypt without a second thought to the color of their skin. He gave a detailed history and established them as a civilization worth a second look.

Vocabulary

Capitulated- to surrender often after negotiation of terms

Embattled- ready to fight: prepared to give battle

Harem- a group of females associated with one male

Geopolitical- a study of the influence of such factors as geography, economics, and demography on the politics and especially the foreign policy of a state

Cartouches- an oval or oblong figure (as on ancient Egyptian monuments) enclosing a sovereign's name

Uraeus- a representation of the sacred asp appearing in ancient Egyptian art and especially on the headdress of rulers and serving as a symbol of sovereignty
Andrew Lawler: Beyond the Family Feud

Summary

“The Olmec, were the Sumerians of the New World.” Archaeologist Michael Coe said this about the Olmec civilization, a very advanced people who were before the Mayans. It was a remote civilization that is famous for their giant stone heads. They shunned maize and preferred to use aquatic resources. Scholars argue whether or not the Olmecs formed the first Mesoamerican civilization. Pottery they made has been found all over Mesoamerica to further the argument that they were first. They also established a writing system, but there has been no way to translate the symbols. However, a discovery of ballcourts, terraces, and ceremonial buildings in another part of Mesoamerica that predates the Olmec may confirm that the Olmecs did not form Mesoamerican civilization. New world archaeologists have started looking into the day to day lives of the Olmecs hoping to one day understand the stone heads and tell the story of the Olmecs.

Analysis

Andrew Lawler made a strong case for the Olmecs creating the first Mesoamerica civilization. However, he then horribly contradicts himself by referring to evidence that they may have not. He also refers to a lot of theories, but does not refer a whole lot to cold, hard facts that have been established by researchers.

Vocabulary

Rudiments- a basic principle or element or a fundamental skill

Fracas- a noisy quarrel

Nuanced- a subtle distinction or variation

Palisades- a long strong stake pointed at the top and set close with others as a defense

Basalt- a dark gray to black dense to fine-grained igneous rock that consists of basic plagioclase, augite, and usually magnetite
Paul Cartledge: Alexander the Great: Hunting for a New Past?

Summary

Alexander the Great is well known for his conquests and battles. However, little is known about his personal life. The records about it are not every extensive or reliable. His mother’s name was Olympias and his father’s name was Philip. She was a Greek princess and he was from Macedon. Olympias would later go on to claim that Alexander’s actual father was the Egyptian god Ammon. He was appointed a regent of Macedon at the age of sixteen. He soon after passed the two crucial tests of Macedonian manhood. Alexander became an alcoholic and even murdered a personal companion during a drunken rage. He was married to several women in order to further his military conquests. However, it is said that Alexander preferred men to women sexually wise. Then there are others who say that fighting battles and conquering satisfied the same sexual pleasures as other men. Alexander only suffered defeat during battle twice and it was by his own men’s desire to travel no further than they already had. The people he conquered thought him to be a God. The Egyptians went as far as to call him Pharaoh. He ended the Achaemenid Persian Empire, developed territorial kingdoms, and thus he changed the world. However, his victory was short lived. He died at the age of thirty-two, and without an heir his kingdom crumbled.

Analysis

Paul Cartledge was very thorough with his history on the personal life of Alexander the Great. His facts were a little out of order at times. He also got a little sidetracked when he discussed how the countries he conquered saw Alexander. Overall it was well written and a good start to learning more about the conqueror.

Vocabulary

Patricide- one who murders his or her own father

Regicide- a person who kills a king

Extirpate- to destroy completely

Inchoate- being only partly in existence or operation
Chris Hardman: Woman Power in the Maya World

Summary

In 2004 there was a discovery and excavation of a tomb. It was discovered to belong to a woman of uncommon power and status. There was greenstone everywhere which was used to signify royalty. Jewels and jade were found everywhere in the tomb. They also found a helmet, which may have meant that she had a higher rank than her husband, who was a king. Woman had the job of summoning up war gods and placing sacred magical power in the gear used for battle. They would then present the helmet when she was finished preparing for war. There was another tomb later found, it too is believed to have belong to women of royal standing. However, these women were thought to have been sacrificed by an invading ruler who wanted to wipe out the previous royal family. These discoveries were almost lost due to illegal logging, slash-and-burn agriculture, and drug smuggling. There is now a partnership with Guatemala to protect the rainforest that surrounds the tombs with the hope of finding more hidden treasures.

Analysis

Chris Hardman could have done a better job discussing the role of the woman in the Maya world. He mostly discussed the architecture of the city, who the women in the tombs were, how they were understood to be royalty, and what was in the tombs. Hardman said very little about the power the women possessed.

Vocabulary

Salient- standing out conspicuously: prominent; especially: of notable significance

Posit- to assume or affirm the existence of

Osteologist- someone that studies the bony structure of an organism
Evan Hadingham: Secrets of a Desert Metropolis

*Summary*

Petra is a large, empty canyon that has been labeled as a “city of the dead” or a “tent city”. Researchers recently have come to find that it was actually a very wealthy city, full of life, and it ruled the incense trade. It was full of pools, shops, gardens, and the walls are lined with more than eight hundred tombs. The Nabataeans have been described in one of two ways. They were said to be nomadic shepherds or fun-loving, pleasure-seeking people. Historians do not know for sure, but they do know that they were big into trading. Researchers have found different artifacts to support the claim of a nomadic people. They have also discovered “stone tents”, which were used in the early days of Petra before they were replaced by actual stone houses. An amphitheater was found in 1997, researchers do not know exactly what it was used for yet. They also uncovered an open-air pool which originally was thought to be a marketplace. It had a pipeline that supplied the pool, public baths, and fountains with water. It is believed that some of Petra’s first monarchs were wanted their people to settle down. The settlements established help the trading caravans to not be plundered. However, this did not stop the Romans from diverting the caravans and gradually drained the wealth from Petra. Then, in 363 A.D., it is thought that an earthquake finished off the Nabataeans. Recent findings have found that the Nabataeans thrived well into the Roman era. Scrolls were found in 1993 that may further prove that the Nabataeans’ beliefs may have even thrived until the coming up Islam in 631 A.D.

*Analysis*

Evan Hadingham did a fairly decent job of talking about the city of Petra. He brought the Nabateans into the discussing without really explaining who they were until later in the article. Hadingham is all over the place in the article. His paragraphs should be in a better order to where the point he is trying to makes comes across more clearly.

*Vocabulary*

Succored- to go to the aid of

Pastoralists- someone part of a social organization based on livestock raising as the primary economic activity
T.R. (Joe) Sundaram: Ancient Jewel

Summary

India is a land of rich cultural inheritance and may be the oldest continuing civilization that still exists. They developed their own writing system, traded extensively, several religions, and many other things. India could easily be compared to Egypt and Greece in developments and culture. The Upanishads were a compilation of their ancient philosophical texts. Upon its translation it influenced European philosophers and American writers. The texts spoke of three central tenets by which Indians think. They believed in assimilation, which is the belief that new ideas and experiences are just absorbed into the old ones. They believed in cycles of life, which is the belief that all changes in the world take place in cycles. The final one is the belief in the acceptance of the coexistence of opposites, which is the belief that contradictory ideas are a natural part of their way of life. India has also contributed the Pythagorean Theorem, the concept of zero, the modern numerical system, areas of science and astronomy, concept of black holes, and impacts on music and film. They have even contributed to the foods people eat, how to dye fabrics, chess, yoga, and meditation.

Analysis

T.R. (Joe) Sundaram did a really great job at showing people how India’s past achievements affects people in the modern world today. He brought The Upanishads into a modern light and made them easy for people to understand. Sundaram defiantly gave people a reason to be thankful for what India has done.

Vocabulary

Zenith- culminating point

Quintessential- the essence of a thing in its purest and most concentrated form

Albeit- conceding the fact that: even though
Toby Lester: What is the Koran?

Summary

Scholars are trying to reinterpret the Koran for the modern world. Parchment papers found in Yemen are thought to be fragments from some of the first Korans every written. Scholars are hoping to use these fragments to fortify the Koran as a real book with a history as real as the Bible’s. However, the Muslim community is against this process, making the Koran a historical book would unravel their struggle to follow the commandments given in the book. This calls into question of when exactly the Koran was written and if Muhammad even understood all of the text. Someone then came up with the idea of looking at the Koran with a literary approach. He was so afterwards declared an apostate and fled for his life after being forced to divorce his wife by the government. The founder, Muhammad, was said to have visions where the Angel Gabriel spoke to him and told him to serve as Messenger of God. He was persecuted and took his followers with him to Medina. He later gathered up enough support to attack those that had persecuted him and his followers. When he died, it is said that the Koran was not recorded yet except on palm leaves, flat stones, and orally. It would be another decade before the writings were all compiled into what today is the Koran. Soon after, Islam had finally established itself as a religious and political entity. Those new to reading the Koran are surprised to find that it contains relatively the same stories as the Bible. The Koran takes great care to stress the belief of monotheism, but at the same time to separate itself from Judaism and Christianity. However, the Koran is fairly hard to read and understand. It makes dramatic shifts in the style, voice, and subject matter. It also said to be incomprehensible at times, and this is due to the fact that it was written down from oral traditions. In the end, Islam is said to be one of the world’s great religions due to its original openness to change and new ideas. It is all a matter of being able to accept people’s ideas and that they are only trying to help.

Analysis

Toby Lester did a very good job of explaining the Koran. He explained everything in great detail. He broke down what exactly the book was and gave a detailed history of the book. He even discussed the book with people from Islam and got their opinions. Overall it very well executed and was not biased.

Vocabulary

Inerrancy- exemption from error

Paleography- the study of ancient writings and inscriptions

Orthography- the art of writing words with the proper letters according to standard usage

Minarets- a tall slender tower of a mosque having one or more balconies from which the summons to prayer is cried by the muezzin
Aberrations- the fact or an instance of deviating or being aberrant especially from a moral standard or normal state

Epistemological- the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity
Karen L. King: Women in Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries

Summary

Women were followers of Jesus from the beginning. They followed him even after his death. Women became strong leaders after his death. They held church in their homes, held church office positions, taught, preached, and even lead prayers. The most prominent female was Mary Magdalene; she was visionary and was sometimes even a leader to the apostles. She was very curious and always had questions to ask Jesus. Mary was not the only important woman, there were many more women, but most of their names have been lost. These women died and were tortured for their beliefs. However, their accomplishments and roles in the church were discouraged. The texts were changed; one woman was even turned into a man in text. Mary was turned into the unnamed sinning woman in almost every story in order to lessen her influence. Woman were present, but due to sexual biased they were excluded and cut out.

Analysis

Karen L. King did not really discuss the new discoveries found about women in Christianity. She mostly discussed what Mary Magdalene and the other women did for the church. She stated their history and how they were under appreciated. She spent a few lines to a paragraph stating some discoveries that were rather trivial.

Vocabulary

Pseudonymously- bearing or using a fictitious name

Presbyters- a member of the governing body of an early Christian church

Praxis- customary practice or conduct

Martyr- a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle
Summary

The Vikings were the most feared people in Europe for about two hundred fifty years due to their brutal nature. They plundered, traded, settled lands, and terrorized powerful kingdoms such as England and France. Their homeland of Scandinavia was fairly unknown to the rest of Europe when the Viking raids began. They were fierce warriors that eventually settled Iceland and were the first Europeans to set foot on American soil. However, that was during times of war. They were mostly farmers and raised live stock. They were adventurous and wanted to explore the world and expand. Eventually over time, they started to settle down and based their lives on trading. They eventually adopted Christianity and their raids ended. They became part of Christian Europe and their lives went on peacefully.

Analysis

Arne Emil Christensen was all over in the discussion of the Vikings. At one point there is a paragraph on how they were warriors, but the next paragraph would be about how they were farmers. Then the next one would be about them fighting wars again. It was well written, but it should have been in a better order.

Vocabulary

Steatite- a massive talc having a grayish-green or brown color
References