CLEOPATRA WAS A BLONDE

No, this is not a blonde joke. Cleopatra was in fact a blonde. That's because she was not Egyptian. She was a Macedonian Greek, with hair as blonde as Alexander's.

Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 BC, then went on to subdue all of the Middle East. When he died nine years later, his just-conquered empire was fought over and carved up by his generals. The one who ended up running Egypt was Ptolemy (367-283 BC).

Declaring himself Pharaoh, he founded the Ptolemaic Dynasty, with twelve Ptolemies in succession, many of whom had wives named Cleopatra.

The Cleopatra we know, lover of Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, was the daughter of Ptolemy XII, and entitled Cleopatra VII (69-30 BC).

There was not a drop of Egyptian blood in the Ptolemies. They remained 100% Greek, including the Queen of the Nile herself Cleopatra. Can you imagine Elizabeth Taylor as a blonde? It kind of shakes up your image of history.

I am writing this overlooking the Nile in Cairo. The Pyramids of Giza are in the distance. If there is one thing omnipresent in Egypt it's history - and most all of that history is old, in more ways than one.

Egyptian history ended over 3,000 years ago. The Pyramids, the Pharoahs like Ramses II and King Tut, all of that was pretty much over by 1,000 BC. When the Persians seized the place in 525 BC, it had been torn apart by Libyans, Kushite Nubians, Assyrians and other invaders for centuries.

Thus the very name "Egypt" isn't Egyptian. The Persians called it *E Ko Ptah*, the Land of Ptah, the Egyptian creator god. Herodotus Greekified this to *Aegoptus*, which we changed to Egypt.

The Sphinx isn't the Sphinx - that's a Greek word the Ptolemies gave it, meaning "bound together" as the statue of a Pharoah's head with the body of a lion. The real name is *shesep-ankh-atum*, the Living Image of the God Atum.

The Ptolemies' Greek rule of Egypt ended in 31 BC, with Octavian's (who became Augustus) defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium. For almost 700 years, Egypt was a Roman colony (first of Rome, then Constantinople). Then came the Arabs, followed by the Turkish Mameluks, followed by the Ottoman Turks.

When Napoleon grabbed it in 1798, Egypt was an unknown backwater (I must dispense one myth here: The Sphinx's nose was not blown off by Napoleon's artillery, as there are pre-1798 drawings of it so disfigured. It was defaced by Arab iconoclasts in the 8th century).

Three years later, the Brits kicked out the French, and Egypt remained a British colony until independence came in 1952.

Well, sort of. Under the dictatorship of Gamel Abdel Nasser, Egypt became a virtual colony of the Soviet Union's. After Nasser died in 1970, it had a brief respite under Anwar Sadat, who kicked out the Soviets.

Sadat was assassinated in 1981, and a fellow named Hosni Mubarak has been Egypt's Pharaoh ever since.

It's hard to go anywhere in Egypt today without seeing Mubarak's picture staring down at you from huge billboards and street posters everywhere.

For twenty-five years, there have been no elections, only "referendums," where people get to vote either "yes" or "no" on his rule with no other options or candidates. He routinely gets over 98% yes. Any public criticism of him gets you in prison.

Mubarak will be 77 this May. Bush White House people who have talked with him recently comment on how he is always repeating himself and is showing signs of senility.

Yet he still is shrewd enough to understand he cannot appoint his son Gemayel as his successor, and to announce (last month) with fanfare that there will be something like an actual election this fall, instead of another referendum.

If this takes place, with opposition parties allowed to organize, opposition candidates allowed to campaign, people allowed to freely vote with international monitors watching, it will be the first time in 5,000 years of recorded Egyptian history that Egyptians have had a voice in choosing their government.

Far more importantly, it will have a thunderous effect throughout the entire Arab world.

Egypt is the Arab giant. There are 72 million people here, almost three times the population of Iraq. For 3,000 years it has been a sleeping giant.

In the half-century since independence, its political freedom has been stifled and its economy shackled by socialism. With the most cursory glimpse of the country, one can see the enormous potential here. Egyptians are smart, friendly, hospitable to the world, and ready to go.

The famous monuments tourists have flocked here to see for centuries have a very interesting psychological impact on Egyptians.

Civilization began in Mesopotamia, but there wasn't any stone. Everything was made of mud brick

and it all crumbled away. So the memory and reality of a pre-Islamic history faded away. So it is throughout the Arab world. All that came before Islam can be ignored.

Except in Egypt, where there was stone, where gigantic monuments made of stone still exist and their pre-Islamic history cannot be ignored.

For many Arabs, all they are, besides a tribal or clan membership, is Moslem. Egyptians know they are far and deeply more.

There is thus an entrenched capacity in Egypt for a moderate Islam that participates in the world and doesn't reject it.

Egyptian Islamofascists like Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's Number Two in Al Qaeda, aren't welcome and have to go elsewhere. Radical anti-West movements like *Iqwan Muslimi*, the Moslem Brotherhood that started here, have to ally elsewhere, like with the Wahabbis of Saudi Arabia.

The *Iqwan* is here in Egypt, no doubt. It was formed here in 1928. It conducted the assassination of Anwar Sadat. Right now it is quiescent. And so we come to Egypt's great fork in today's road.

The fear of the *Iqwan* is now suddenly serving a useful purpose. The January 30 elections in Iraq stunned Egypt. Millions of Egyptians watched their fellow Arabs freely, peacefully, and enthusiastically vote for their government. Now they want the same for their country.

And Mubarak realizes that if he doesn't give it to them and dashes their hopes, then lots of folks will see the *Iqwan* as their only alternative. American, European, and world pressure will be on Mubarak to not hold pretend sham elections. He's got to launch Egypt on the road to actual democracy.

That, plus an unshackling of the Egyptian economy with solid free market reforms - which has already started - will be a blow from which Arab Moslem terrorism and radicalism may not be able to recover.

A free democratic Egypt is the doom of radical Islam.

It's a memorable time to be here, watching Egypt awaken from a slumber of three millennia. This ancient land may be about to play a critical role in our future.