

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF ANCIENT HISTORY IN BRAZIL: INTERVIEW WITH RAQUEL DOS SANTOS FUNARI<sup>1</sup>



Interview conducted by Google Meet platform on May 12, 2021.

Link: [https://youtu.be/vgfl\\_XdIYG0](https://youtu.be/vgfl_XdIYG0)

**Heródoto (Gilberto Francisco da Silva):** Hello, my name is Gilberto da Silva Francisco, I'm a professor of Ancient History in the *Universidade Federal de São Paulo, UNIFESP*, and I am one of the editors of the magazine *Heródoto*, a magazine of the group "Mundo clássico e suas conexões afro-asiáticas" (*Classical World and its Afro-Asian connections*). Today, the magazine has the great pleasure of receiving the interviewee Raquel dos Santos Funari. She has a degree in History from the *Faculdade de Filosofia de Belo Horizonte*, a master's and doctorate degree from the *Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Unicamp*, a postdoctoral degree at the *Universidade Federal do Paraná, UFPR*, and she has been working as a postdoctoral fellow at the *Museu de Arqueologia e Etnografia da Universidade de São Paulo (MAE-USP)*<sup>2</sup>. She is the leader of a research group registered at CNPQ (Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development) and organizer of the dossier on Teaching History in this issue of *Heródoto*.

Raquel, we would like to thank you very much for your contribution to the magazine *Heródoto*, and for your willingness and availability to

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participate in this interview. I would like to ask a first question: could you talk a little about this dossier about teaching Ancient History that *Heródoto* will publish with your support?

**Raquel dos Santos Funari:** I am very grateful to Professors Gilberto and Gláydson for inviting me to work in the organization of this dossier. In fact, the topic of Teaching History has a lot of relevance. It is through teaching that we all reach the future citizen. And, in fact, when we are in the classroom, especially in elementary and high school, most of our students will not be historians; thus, it is very important for us to note that, perhaps, in high school, it is the last moment that he has access to the knowledge of History.

Many of my students, for example, arrive with memories from the current 6th grade, from the 1st year of high school, and it is this knowledge that they will take for the rest of their lives when they practice many other professions. In the classroom, we are not training historians. This way, we have a very important role of providing the access to the historic knowledge.

Considering that Antiquity is very far in time and space, the teacher can indicate how attractive it is, how much it tells us about our present. Many of our students, from the beginning, want to be archeologists. They ask a lot about it, especially in the current 6th grade. They are enchanted by Greece, they want to study the Greeks, they want to study the Romans, they want to understand how these cultures came to Brazil. So, I think now it's a moment that we, the teachers, that are in the classroom, need to work with them and show them these relations between modernity and these people from Antiquity, and what we have and what we owe them in the field of language and in other matters.

Then, this is what is in the origin of the dossier, which congregates top researches in Brazil and abroad, with focus to less known subjects such as the Ancient History in modern Greece or in the Indian subcontinent. So, this is a great victory for us. When we sent the invitations to some researchers, we had very positive answers, which shows that the subject, the Teaching of History, has a big relevance today in Brazil, in the classrooms, in the public and private universities. This is a great conquest and the dossier comes to contribute with this.

**Heródoto:** Raquel, you spoke a little about this scenario of Teaching History in the first years before the university and a little about the dossier in this issue of the magazine *Heródoto*. I would like to know about your experience as a researcher: how does the Teaching of History and Ancient History, in this context, appear to you? And, besides, can you talk a bit

about this universe that you, somehow, embraced in the Teaching of History?

**Funari:** It was a very interesting experience. You can notice by my accent that I am not *paulistana*<sup>3</sup>, *paulista*<sup>4</sup>. I am from Belo Horizonte<sup>5</sup> and I have been in São Paulo for thirty-two years. As soon as I began teaching, I noticed a big interest in Ancient Egypt by the students - in the ancient world in general, but, mainly, in Egypt - and this is how I conducted my research, I was interested in the process that led these students to this subject, where they found information about Egypt, and I started the research that originated my masters a long time later. Many students brought information from the Bible because, today, it's available in many ways and for free. So, they had, there, access to this information; other ones knew comic books, and yet others brought information from their parents.

I started to do some research and search for this information, to verify how it would be interesting to work with these students. It was this way that I involved myself with the Teaching of History. I think we, the teachers, in some way, are involved in this subject since the preparation of our classes, and we have no perception of it. Early on, it made me very impressed.

The students got very impressed with the history of the history of the Hebrews, with the slaving (if there really was Hebraic enslavement in Egypt), with the pharaohs, with what they did. So, I began to work with these questions, and I believe that Antiquity fascinates all of us. We, that are History teachers, when we speak that we are studying some Antiquity subject, we deal with many people that think that we are encyclopedic, and we need to show that we are not; that, actually, we are researchers and scholars of the matter.

Then, I inserted myself in the Teaching of History in many ways. When I came to São Paulo, I was already invited to write in a collection about the fiftieth anniversary of the journal *O Estado de São Paulo*. There and at the journal *Folha de São Paulo* - I worked for both at the same time - and I received a lot of requests about Ancient History. It was interesting when we wrote about the mummification process, we had a great answer from the students, from letters - and it was the time we still received letter from editors, from editorial -; I wrote textbooks, paradidacts, which treat Ancient History: "*O Egito e os faraós sacerdotes*" was one of my firsts. I worked on the curriculum proposal of the State of São Paulo, along with

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<sup>3</sup> A person who was born in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> A person who was born in the state of São Paulo, Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> The capital of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

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professor Glaydson José da Silva, and I ended up with the Ancient History part.

My researches for my masters and doctorate were about Antiquity and its relation with teaching, and I think it is a differential. That is why, usually, the researchers that I knew were specialists in certain subjects (amphorae specialists, coins specialists, for example). I pursued to demystify some notions, I tried to say that History was not a sequence of dates, a sequence of dynasties, but otherwise, a discipline that brings the student to the middle of it, that proposes to them the organization of illustrated thematic dictionaries, comic books, postcards, etc.

Today we have the possibility of working with these students using even internet posts. For example, I asked my students to create posts about the *apotropaic*, a subject that I'm working with the 6th and 7th grade students. The objective is to understand the meaning of the relation between this theme and amulets. I noticed that it could be different, it was an academic activity and in the classroom, all of it made me work on Ancient History, obviously, showing them that the contemporary world has a relation with the past. That we live in the present, and it is very important that we show them that we do not live in the future, that it will be soon. Ancient History gives us this possibility to reflect about what is going on and what knowledge this student has already.

**Heródoto:** Also related to your research on Teaching History, in your thesis, you made an association between Ancient History and the language of the cinema. Could you talk a bit about your thesis *Reflexões acerca da subjetivação do Antigo Egito na sala de aula, a partir do filme 'O príncipe do Egito'*, that you defended in 2008?

**Funari:** It was an interesting theme. When I started working with the movie in 2008, it was already ten years old (it's from 1998). I had no idea how much the director orientate the viewer's gaze. Then, when we watch a movie, there is a team behind it that directs this gaze, but, on the other hand, the cultural issues lead us to seek for other information and feelings.

The movie is an epic adventure that took four years to be made. At the time, we did not have the technology we have today. One of the directors is Spielberg, who presents the characterization of Moses' history, a biblical character: his history since the birth until the liberation of his people to the Promised Land. For the directors, it is the dramatic history of two brothers whose future was destined to collide.

I worked at three schools with the question of the feminine and masculine view, with the gender perspective. It was a public school in Belo Horizonte and two privates here in São Paulo: the *Escola Municipal Francisco*

*Magalhães*, in Belo Horizonte, the *Colégio Iavne*, which is an orthodox Jewish school here in São Paulo, and the Santo Américo school.

It was very interesting! For example, in relation to the plagues of Egypt, the students from the municipal school showed things that were not in the movie. I worked a lot with drawings and an element that appeared in the representation of the plagues, in very detailed drawings, were well drawn cockroaches, even with their little paws and the color details. I went to visit the school and asked “but there are no cockroaches in the movie, where did you see those cockroaches?” and they said: “teacher, at my house, the plagues as the cockroaches. As my house, the nearby sewers bring these animals. The reading I made of the plagues is very different from the one Moses did”. Then, this took me to the question of subjectivity. For example, the students of the Jewish school knew all the names and draw Moses making the crossing of the Red Sea with Kippah. And I said to them: “but there was no Kippah on the movie”; and they said: “teacher, without Kippah, there is no identity to our people”. I’m talking about students between ten or eleven years old.

Somehow, the movie showed that this reading that the director wanted to convey when guiding the viewer’s look is not all. Actually, when we see the scene in the movie, when we laugh or cry, when this student perceives himself in the movie, it shows a little of his own identity. So, it was also possible to make a reading of the social context of the student, of questions about religion and dwelling.

The movie treated the matter of Moses, the matter of primogeniture too, and many of them got very scared with the “what if” (the “what if” that we say do not exist in history); “What if I was in that time? Would I die?”. Then, many of them were very emotionally touched. The movie gives us this possibility of working with students, and it was very gratifying to work this theme on my masters, making, first, a profile of what caught their attention, and, on my thesis, to work with the students.

**Heródoto:** Raquel, could you speak a little about your experience related to your post-doctoral research at the *Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia* of *University of São Paulo* (MAE-USP) about Egyptian amulets?

**Funari:** Well, the amulets are a theme that also caught my attention. My students always liked the Eye of Horus a lot, the “All-seeing eye”, of the scarabs, and they have some readings about their uses. So, I organized a project that was, happily, accepted at the *Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia*, where I research under professor Vagner Porto. And we, amidst the pandemic, are working on the application of a questionnaire, through *Google Meet*. There is a very big reception, and it’s very interesting to work with socio-economic questions that the amulets may bring.

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What were the functions of those amulets? To have an eternal life, happiness and well-being. So, I made a transposition for today; and, at this moment we are living, there are a lot of talks like: "I can't go to school", "I can't live in situations that I lived in some time ago and during some time I will still live it somehow". The masks did not come for only forty days as we thought, but for a much longer time, because the virus is here, and we are going through many questions and there is also a bigger political, social and cultural question behind it all.

But, it was very captivating to have an answer from the students about how good they feel knowing that an amulet can bring happiness and well-being; and then, they begin to show me: "Ah, I have an amulet. When I was younger, my mother gave me a medal that brings me luck", and "I have a doll that, every time I'm sad, I hug it and I feel fine". So, we started to work with the students from 6th and 7th grades, and it was very intriguing, since, unexpectedly, other amulets came up, not only from Egyptian ones, but coins, little elephants, from other people and cultures.

The proposal is to make this work also in public schools. I already work at a school in Belo Horizonte and two, here, in São Paulo, to show the students how much they know these amulets. I think that the Eye of Horus is watching us more than we imagine, because they have this perception of these amulets, and this proposal we are doing is very exciting.

I have all the support from MAE-USP. In times of pandemic, it's hard to have access to some things, but it is very positive. I think that it is much more than I expected: once again, Antiquity in the classrooms is showing us that it is much more presente than we can even imagine.

**Heródoto:** Lastly, Raquel, I would like to ask about a publication that you organized recently, in 2020: "*As veias negras do Mundo Antigo: a África e o Mediterrâneo Antigo, a relevância negra revisitada*" (*The black veins of the Ancient World: ancient Africa and Mediterranean, the black relevancy revisited*), about a subject that is current here in Brazil, from an Afrocentric perspective in Ancient History. Could you present this publication for us?

**Funari:** This book was published by "*Novas Edições Acadêmicas*", was organized by me and professors Cláudio Carlan and Filipe Silva. It presents contributions by researchers from many countries: Brazil, Portugal, Spain (professor José Remesal Rodríguez wrote to this collection). It's a publication made by women and men that have a look at issues about Africa, and I think that the work that has been made on some social media is very important and is reaching the classroom

Africa is not a country; it is a continent. Then, I made a project with the students last year (2020) that was very important to gather subsidies to

discuss this theme. Because, there is a very strong view that showed, for the longest time, Africa as a whole, and we need to discuss it.

I believe that it lacked the Brazilian public to discuss this matter more, showing the centrality of Africa to the study of Antiquity, which is essential, and to show how much Brazil owns the African continent, which is obvious. But, not everyone knows the importance of Africa to the Ancient History; so, I think that it is critical that we have the possibility to show this theme, to show how much Africa is present in the Ancient world - the limits of the Mediterranean Sea are connected to Greece and the Roman Empire; the Egypt which has always been in Africa, and the Mediterranean that has a northern border, the Europe, and a Southern one, the African.

So, the volume answers this concern, and we hope to contribute in our own way, as scholars of the theme. And that this theme may reach other groups, so that discussions came up. There is an African saying: "I am what we are"; so I think that we need to discuss this a lot and show many other important sayings. We cannot tell the history from the point of view of the hunter, we have to show others points of view. And I think it is a way to amplify our knowledge. I am very grateful for the opportunity to share this book with you.

**Heródoto:** Raquel, thank you very much for the interview and for talking about these themes that are so relevant. And for those who are listening to us, or reading the interview, we invite you all to take a look at the other articles of this issue of the magazine, especially the dossier, that has a great importance for the discussion of Ancient History in Brazil from the perspective of teaching.

**Funari:** Thank you! I second the invitation, don't miss out our dossier, I am sure you will be amazed with our collaborators. Thank you.