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Black Athena Revisited and the Debate Over the Origins of Greek Civilization



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These days classical historians cannot avoid encountering in one form or another the radical theories Martin Bernal has advanced in his book series *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. When the first volume appeared in 1987 (*The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*), and then the second volume in 1991 (*The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*), the books made a great splash both in the media at large and within the academic communities of classics and classical archaeology. The author's thesis is sweeping and dramatic: ancient Greece, the cradle of Western Civilization, owed its fundamental development to Egypt and Phoenicia, whose massive influence over and even colonization of Greek lands has been buried by a racist European scholarly tradition bent on hiding the contributions of Semites and Africans. Most professional classicist reviewers, while welcoming the fresh perspective and invigorating challenge of *Black Athena*, were sceptical about various aspects of the argumentation and evidence used by Bernal. Reviews by other academics were often more trusting; and, not surprisingly, Afrocentrists took the work as proof of a racist classical discipline and of Egyptian dominance among ancient Mediterranean civilizations. The whole argument has caused quite a sensation in the profession, with panels convened at scholarly conferences, college courses offered, internet debates held, and countless book reviews. More is surely on the way if Bernal holds to his avowed plan of producing two more volumes in the series.

Unfortunately for those wishing to see for themselves exactly what Bernal is up to, reading his huge tomes can be a trying experience. This is true even (or perhaps especially) for professional ancient historians used to plowing through lengthy discussions of the distant past. Bernal's conceptions are bold, and he weaves together intriguing bits of evidence

into a suggestive, sometimes compelling whole; yet many find themselves with a deep sense of unease about the whole construction. One cannot avoid the feeling that only part of the story has been included in the discussion. Now Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers have edited *Black Athena Revisited* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), a volume designed to answer clearly and expertly many of the questions Bernal raises by gathering together a set of responses by specialists in the affected disciplines. For people lacking familiarity with the ancient Greek world or its source materials, it will prove to be an indispensable corrective to the excesses of *Black Athena*; for the sceptical classicist, the new book fully validates suspicions about the viability of Bernal's wide-ranging hypotheses.

Black Athena Revisited should not be confused with a related book also authored by Lefkowitz in 1996, *Not Out of Africa*. That monograph was designed specifically to debunk the most outrageous Afrocentric claims about Greek "theft" of "Black" Egyptian knowledge and about ancient Mediterranean history generally; it is not really concerned with Bernal's more carefully expressed theories (Bernal does not label himself an Afrocentrist, though he sympathizes with that cause). *Not Out of Africa* has the easier task: many of the claims of Afrocentrists are downright silly and easily refuted. For example, G. G. M. James and Y. Ben-Jochannan promote the notion that Aristotle learned his philosophy from native African sources at the famous library in Alexandria.¹ Even a passing acquaintance with the relevant ancient texts makes clear that the library at Alexandria was founded (by the Macedonian Greek ruler Ptolemy) only after the death of Aristotle, rendering the assertion of the philosopher's debt to Egyptian records he found there not merely unattested, but ridiculous.

Countering the arguments of *Black Athena* is not so easy, for whatever one thinks of Bernal, he is far too erudite and rhetorically skilled an historian to self-destruct with gross errors of fact. Given his background, it is to his credit that Bernal has been able to avoid making such errors: he is not a classicist, but rather a specialist in Chinese studies

¹G. G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians* (New York, 1954; repr. San Francisco, 1973); Y. A. A. Ben-Jochanan, *Africa, Mother of Western Civilization* (Baltimore, [1971] 1988).

who became seriously interested in the ancient Mediterranean only relatively recently. As his vast bibliographies in the *Black Athena* volumes imply, he has read very broadly. He insists that his outsider's perspective gives him a valuable advantage, for, unfettered by the traditional tenets and restrictions of an ancient historian's training, he is free to innovate and make connections insiders would never see. Critics, however, might point out other consequences: an amateurish, even naive approach to ancient texts, shallowness of analysis due to overdependence on secondary sources, and a failure to properly contextualize evidence.

Black Athena Revisited (*BAR* hereafter) collects essays and reviews by a number of established scholars in fields associated with the topics raised in *Black Athena*. Bernal ranges so widely in his subject matter that no one person (including Bernal himself) could be expert enough to fully address all the areas touched upon, which include classical literature, history, mythology, ethnicity, archaeology, and linguistics. The editors claim that *BAR* represents a number of different perspectives, but do not be misled: its aim is to refute the *Black Athena* thesis via a thorough and devastating critique. While for the most part professional, scholarly, and fair, *BAR* makes no attempt to balance negative reactions with positive ones, or include responses from Bernal.

A preface and introduction precede the main content, divided into seven subject categories: Egypt, Race, The Near East, Linguistics, Science, Greece, and Historiography. Some of these areas contain only one article (The Near East, Linguistics, Science); the others can claim fuller treatments of three to six entries. The categories seem a bit arbitrary at times, for a number of the contributions range broadly into several different fields and could have been put elsewhere just as easily. The sources of the collection explain this hodge-podge: while some of the articles were freshly commissioned for the volume, most grew out of previously published work. Many originated as book reviews and aim to treat their subject comprehensively. Thus the editors' attempt to arrange the material neatly according to chronology and field breaks down, leading to a certain amount of repetitiveness as one proceeds cover to cover. A conclusion, an extensive bibliography, descriptions of the contributors, and an index come at the end. Footnotes immediately follow each piece, and a number of helpful maps and chronological tables are provided near the beginning. On the whole the volume is attractively produced,

easy to use, and mostly free of typographical errors.

In the Preface Lefkowitz and MacLean set the tone for much of the volume, for they are at once critical and polite, dubious of Bernal's results and (and at least perfunctorily) thankful for his efforts. The appeal of *Black Athena*, they say, is to be explained by its author's rare combination of energy, an outsider's perspective, and a strong sense of moral mission. Nevertheless, the editors continue, there is good reason to doubt his conclusions. As they put it, "we have tried to provide the information our readers will need if they wish to get a full and accurate impression of the complex web of cultural influences during the period when Greek civilization developed." (xii) The implication is that one cannot get the complete picture from the *Black Athena* alone, which is certainly true — one should really have on hand both *Black Athena* and *BAR* to appreciate the strength of the arguments.

The introduction by Lefkowitz, a reprint of her 1992 *New Republic* article, gets the ball rolling even as it seems a touch out of place. "Ancient History, Modern Myths" delivers a broadside against Afrocentrist pseudohistory, including *Black Athena*, which is subjected to criticism along lines more fully elaborated in the rest of *BAR*. The article is a skillful polemic, implacable in its hostility, that highlights the stakes of the debate: Lefkowitz opens with stories of students insistently spouting misinformation about a black Socrates or Cleopatra, and then moves on to describe some of the scholarship (if it can be called such) asserting racist plots to give credit to the (European) Greeks for advances made in (African) Egypt. Lefkowitz successfully raises the specter of revisionist, politically correct myths being blindly accepted and taught as history in our schools. The problem is that these subjects, though perhaps relevant as background to the *Black Athena* debate, go far beyond anything proposed in *Black Athena* itself, the putative subject of the volume. Only about half of the introduction tangles directly with Bernal's own ideas.

The first substantive section of *BAR*, entitled "Egypt," contains three articles. John Baines, a professor of Egyptology at Oxford, pens "On the Aims and Methods of *Black Athena*," which discusses Bernal's general approach and does not try to come to grips with any particular claims. Baines apologizes for writing a "second review" (an earlier version of the paper appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, 8/11/91) but proceeds to make damaging points concerning Bernal's penchant for

discussing scholars' schools and ethnicities in evaluating their work, his openly political agenda, his exclusion of Mesopotamia from serious consideration as a source for influence over Greece, his curiously Eurocentric interests and his old-fashioned approach to sources. Another Egyptologist, David O'Connor, contributes "Egypt and Greece: The Bronze Age Evidence." This brief entry looks at a few specific pieces of Egyptian evidence employed by Bernal in the first *Black Athena* volume (including the Mit Rahina inscription) and finds his treatment unpersuasive. (Sadly, the second *Black Athena* volume, a supposedly detailed presentation of the evidence, still fails to discuss as a whole and closely the full language of this key inscription, despite the appearance of an earlier version of O'Connor's piece in its bibliography.) A third Egyptian specialist, Frank J. Yurco, writes "Black Athena: An Egyptological Review," a more comprehensive assessment of Bernal's ideas about ancient Egypt. Yurco's discussion is neutral and uncombative, calmly surveying a great deal of material. He gives credit to Bernal for useful contributions here and there, but finds more of his interpretations overly speculative and even unreasonable.

The next section of *BAR* tackles issues of "Race." The three authors here bring different kinds of evidence to bear on a question that provides a powerful emotional undercurrent to the whole *Black Athena* project: to what extent were the ancient Egyptians "black" in the sub-Saharan African sense? Bernal never takes a firm stand himself on this issue, but tends to deploy his language in a very suggestive way: he talks of pharaohs who could "usefully" be called black, stresses the "fundamentally African" nature of Egyptian civilization, and refers approvingly to Afrocentrists who straightforwardly claim a black ancient Egypt. The very title of his opus, based on a hypothetical derivation of Athena from the Egyptian word Ht Nt, makes no sense unless one has this racial identity in mind. Given the emotional power of racial issues, and Bernal's habit of leveling against others charges of racial stereotyping and racism outright, it seems appropriate to challenge him here and establish whether it is sensible to refer to Egyptians as black or any other racial color. The resounding answer is no.

Kathryn A. Bard looks primarily at archaeological and artistic evidence in "Ancient Egyptians and the Issue of Race." Frank Snowden, a classicist, discusses the Greco-Roman literary testimony in "Bernal's 'Blacks' and the Afrocentrists." Finally, in "Clines and Clusters versus

'Race': A Test in Ancient Egypt and the Case of a Death on the Nile," a team of physical anthropologists headed by C. Loring Brace present and analyze craniofacial measurements of physical remains from a wide variety of chronological and geographical backgrounds (from all over the world, in fact) to try to elaborate a secure biological means of comparing different population groups. Despite widely varying approaches and kinds of evidence, all three come to a similar conclusion: labeling Egyptians black is at best very misleading and certainly misapplies the available evidence. Ancient iconographic and literary testimony suggests the native population of the Nile valley varied in skin tone, tending perhaps to get darker the farther one proceeded up the river toward Nubia. Though on average Egyptians were surely darker-skinned than, say, the Greek population, they seemed to distinguish themselves (as did outside observers) from the darker populations to the south — people the Greeks called Aethiopes ("burnt-faced peoples"), whose described physical characteristics more closely approximate those commonly associated with modern blacks. More precision comes from Brace et al., with their carefully catalogued samples of human remains from every region of the globe, their battery of 24 craniofacial measurements, and their technical discussion of *C* scores and dendrograms. This article, in fact, offers the most bizarre read in the whole volume: the terms and techniques are difficult at times for the general reader to follow, but mostly it is just a bit eerie to see such a thorough, scientific analysis on the subject of racial typing, even if skin color does not enter into the calculations (for obvious reasons of the decayed state of the samples). One is somewhat encouraged at the end to read the authors' definitive conclusion that using "race" to categorize human populations lacks any biological justification. As far as these samples of Egyptians are concerned, it is quite clear that to lump them in with any supposed "racial" group (Negroid, Caucasian, Mongoloid, etc.) is just wrong. They share some craniofacial characteristics with peoples to the south and north, as well as east and west — indeed, depending on how one chooses to group the scores, one can find particularly close affinities between the Egyptian samples and those from India, Neolithic Europe, Somalia, and North Africa (but not West or Central Africa). Most of all the Egyptians seem to be basically *Egyptian*, sharing features to be sure with various groupings here and there but not to the extent of calling them white, black, or whatever. One hopes that this eminently sensible conclusion

will not be lost on readers, and may perhaps encourage a viewing of the Egyptians as their own people with their own culture and not as mere appendages of European or greater African development.²

The next section of *BAR* is entitled "The Near East," but contains only one article, "The Legacy of Black Athena," by Sarah P. Morris. This contribution falls under the category of a general review, though from an interesting perspective, because Morris, a classical archaeologist, is a proponent of some fresh ideas of her own having to do with Near Eastern influences on developments in early Greece. Unfortunately for Bernal, rather than looking upon *Black Athena* as a complementary or kindred effort, Morris lambastes its unquestioning treatment of texts, fantastic hypotheses, predilection for theories of conquest and colonization instead of trading contacts, and a misguided fascination with Egypt, which obscures the most active conduit for influence, the Levant. Morris' tone is straightforward and sometimes hostile, stressing the larger, negative consequences of Bernal's malformed ideas.

Even more dismissive is the linguistic review offered (again in its own section) by Jay H. Jasanoff and Alan Nussbaum. "Word Games: The Linguistic Evidence in *Black Athena*" offers perhaps the single most devastating critique in the whole book. It is not the sometimes mocking note struck by the authors that is so hurtful to Bernal's cause, but rather their ability to back up criticisms of his tendentious and amateurish approach with example after ruinous example, such as the attempt to derive Greek *kudos* from Semitic *qds* (for which Bernal is compelled to mistranslate the Greek and ignore a good Indo-European etymology) or his ready acceptance of the connection of "Mycenae" with a Semitic word **mahaneh* for "camp" (ignoring the fact that the ending *-enai/-ene* comes up frequently in Greek place names, which surely disallows a hypothetical root word incorporating that element). Illustrations of this kind go on for pages, thoroughly destroying Bernal's credibility as a lin-

² For another take on anthropological findings with regards to the Egyptians see S. O. Y. Keita, "Black Athena: 'Race,' Bernal, and Snowden," *Arethusa* 26 (1993), 295-314, along with the responses of the authors concerned in the same issue. Keita attempts to justify assertions of the essentially "African" nature of the ancient Egyptians, though he does not have the data available that Brace, et al. do. One wonders what he would think of this contribution (which is a reprint from the *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 36 [1993]), and what Brace & co. would make of Keita's arguments.

guist and reducing a crucial part of his evidence for “massive” Egyptian and Semitic influence to a pile of mostly unconvincing and superficial word associations. As Jasanoff and Nussbaum dryly conclude, “in relation to Bernal’s overall project, the linguistic evidence is worse than unhelpful.”

Less devastating to the Bernal thesis is the one-work chapter (“Science”) featuring “*Black Athena*, Afrocentrism, and the History of Science” by Robert Palter. As occasionally found elsewhere in *BAR*, Afrocentrists seem to be the real target of this article, with Bernal, who concerns himself with matters scientific only occasionally, playing a secondary role. While some misconceptions and dubious interpretations promoted in *Black Athena*—such as Isaac Newton’s supposed debt to ancient Egyptian knowledge—are exposed, Palter’s assault often comes across as meandering and strained. The article certainly goes on far too long (with notes, nearly 60 pages), at least to this mathematically disinclined reader. Nevertheless, it is worth consulting if one wishes to check questionable assertions Bernal and others make about ancient astronomy, mathematics, and medicine.

The final two sections concern themselves with Greece and Historiography, and contain treatments which come from all manner of perspectives. Emily T. Vermeule offers another general review of *Black Athena* in “The World Turned Upside Down,” a reprint from the *New York Review of Books* (from 1992). Vermeule, a vastly knowledgeable and respected archaeologist of early Greece, credits Bernal with some good historiographical work in the first *Black Athena* volume, but reproaches him for perverting the evidentiary record in the second. She points out that few if any scholars doubt that Egypt and other Eastern lands contributed significantly to Greek cultural developments (a fact that one might never guess from the tone of Bernal’s books), but that solid evidence for the grand conquests and colonizations he wishes to propose is painfully lacking, especially the necessary archaeological evidence. This perhaps explains Bernal’s penchant for “creation of fact by assertion” (276) and misuse of what testimony there is. In sum, Vermeule can only describe the second volume—the one that claims to lay out the archaeological and documentary proof for his version of ancient history—as “a whirling confusion of half-digested reading, bold linguistic supposition, and preconceived dogma.” (277)

Another classical archaeologist, John Coleman, offers criticisms in a similar vein in "Did Egypt Shape the Glory that Was Greece?" He also notes the unoriginality — indeed, the common acceptance — of the notion that Greece was much influenced by its Mediterranean neighbors, but vigorously and effectively challenges the far more radical hypothesis that Greek culture in fact had "Afroasiatic roots." He points to chronological problems and the absence of key evidence, such as Egyptian objects or writing on Greek sites, or Egyptian or Canaanite gods in Linear B texts, or references to a Hyksos presence in Greece in later literary testimony. For all of Bernal's talk of an "Ancient Model," according to which most Greeks themselves supposedly recognized a prior colonization of their lands, no sign of awareness of an Egypto-Syrian presence intrudes in the works of Homer or Hesiod, for example. These early texts, positively central for Greek self-understanding, suggest that the Hellenes generally believed they and their gods were indigenous, not rooted in foreign civilizations. Moreover, Coleman argues, discovering racist attitudes among past scholars does not in itself prove that all their studies and conclusions, or those of other contemporaries, must be rejected out of hand. He further condemns the imprecise and nasty way Bernal employs the labels "Aryan Model" and "Aryanist" to stigmatize those with whom he disagrees.

Lawrence A. Tritle completes the section devoted to Greece with another general review in "*Black Athena: Vision or Dream of Greek Origins?*" He emphasizes, as have others, Bernal's uncritical and gullible approach to ancient testimony, especially the often unreliable Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. Also irksome is Bernal's concomitant tendency to denounce modern scholars, especially Germans, for the concept of *Besserwissen* (which quite reasonably allows that often we are in a better position to understand ancient phenomena than non-contemporary ancient historians) — but then himself to correct or ignore ancient historians when their testimony does not suit him. Tritle also ridicules Bernal's promotion of the idea that the hill of Amphion and Zethus in Boeotia was a "step-pyramid": Tritle's own inspection of the site, recorded in the text with photos, persuaded him that any connection of this rather ordinary tumulus-style mound with Egyptian pyramid engineers is fanciful. Not that a pyramid would necessitate an Egyptian presence in any case — a point easy to miss when reading through Bernal's attempts to document his ambitious claims.

The last section tackles Historiography with six articles. Edith Hall examines *Black Athena's* use of literary and mythological texts in "When Is a Myth Not a Myth?" Robert Palter, author of the earlier piece on ancient science, returns with another long paper entitled "Eighteenth-Century Historiography in *Black Athena*." Robert E. Norton follows with "The Tyranny of Germany Over Greece?," a brief but bitingly effective critique of Bernal's misrepresentation of J. G. Herder. Next is Richard Jenkins' "Bernal and the Nineteenth Century," which traces the overreliance on externalist pressures like racism, Christianity, and the notion of progress to explain the results of many scholars included in *Black Athena*. In "The Bathwater and the Baby" Mario Liverani eschews listing the many mistakes and omissions he takes to be a part of Bernal's books, challenging instead their simplistic and finally Eurocentric historiographical approach, *Ex Oriente Lux* (i.e., Eastern civilizations are important because they enlightened the West). Nevertheless, he sees some value in *Black Athena's* attack upon another flawed model, "The Greek Miracle" (true civilization begins independently with the Greeks/the West). Guy MacLean Rogers wraps up the section with a description of *Black Athena* as essentially an elaborate conspiracy theory masquerading as a multicultural study: Bernal only seems interested in Africa and Asia to the extent that they affected Greece. Rogers also (wickedly but cleverly) turns the tables on Bernal by subjecting his social and personal background to the same kind of prejudicial analysis that Bernal applies to other scholars. "Multiculturalism and the Founders of Western Civilization" is not the strongest of the papers in the historiography section, however, for it sometimes wanders, repeats itself, or stretches to make its points.³ Edith Hall's opening contribution on the

³ A good example of the latter is MacLean's endorsement of the questionable idea of Mesopotamian "primitive democracy" in order to make the point that Bernal, had he been willing to consider non-Semitic or non-Egyptian contributions, would have had plenty to talk about. One need not reach so far to make the simple (and valid) point that Mesopotamia was enormously advanced from the very earliest times and should have a larger place in any reexamination of Mediterranean/Near Eastern development. A dubious faith in the historicity of myth (much like Bernal's, interestingly enough) lies at the heart of claims for possible third millennium democracy in Sumer. See Jacobsen's pioneering work in "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia" and "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz* (Cambridge, 1970), 157-70 and 132-156 respectively. [First published in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 (1943), 159-72 and *ZA* 52 (1957), 91-140.]

use of Greek myth makes the most powerful impression overall: she persuasively illustrates the lack of any ancient Greek consensus on racial origins, the biased, Athenocentric origin of most of the myths Bernal relies upon to make his claims, and the generally primitive approach he takes in interpreting myths.

A brief conclusion by Guy MacLean Rogers, "Quo Vadis?", summarizes the results of *BAR* by posing eight questions which go to the heart of the *Black Athena* project (e.g., "Who were the ancient Egyptians?", "Did the ancient Egyptians or Hyksos colonize Greece?") and providing brief answers based on the combined conclusions of the various contributors to the volume. Naturally, the queries generally get answered in ways antithetical to much of *Black Athena*. MacLean closes by crediting Bernal for raising legitimate and worthwhile issues, but then in the name of the editors stridently challenges him to "reject publicly, explicitly, and unambiguously any theories of history which conflate race and culture." (453) It makes for a curious and pugnacious end to a weighty and pugnacious book.

Having picked or plowed through *BAR*, one might legitimately wonder whether it represents an overreaction. Certainly it is an unusual academic exercise — how often do you find a large collection of reprints and new articles from reputable scholars in a wide variety of subfields, not simply united around a general theme, but combined in an obvious attempt to vanquish the intellectual thesis of one particular contemporary historian? Suspicious Bernal partisans might well take the book as evidence of some malevolent classical cabal. Nevertheless, one ought not condemn *BAR* without understanding that Bernal himself bears substantial responsibility. The clear implication of the *Black Athena* endeavor, it must be remembered, is that all classical historians are racists or the unthinking dupes of earlier racists if they follow the current standard reading of early Greek history. What academic would want to be so unfairly tarred with that brush? Naturally hackles will get raised and, given the inviting weaknesses of Bernal's methods and conclusions, projects like *BAR* will be inspired.

Bernal has complained that he was not informed that *BAR* was being compiled and should have been granted space in the volume to respond; he also (exaggeratedly) labels *BAR* "a massive, sustained and, at

times, passionate *ad hominem* attack."⁴ He certainly has reason to be upset by *BAR*, but mostly for the devastating effectiveness of the criticisms launched. Put simply, Bernal's credibility as a historian of the ancient Mediterranean suffers tremendously here, especially due to the penetrating critiques of his interpretation of ancient texts, his treatment of modern scholars, and his handling of linguistic matters. The contributors to *BAR* are not merely fully credentialed and often eminent in their fields, but they demonstrate in these studies a depth of knowledge and analysis that Bernal does not or cannot match. Given the profound skepticism all have for various parts of the *Black Athena* thesis, the damage is considerable. The only part that survives unscathed is the general proposition that Greece was strongly influenced early in its history by civilizations to its south and east — a proposition that classical historians have long recognized and eagerly discussed, whether Bernal wishes to admit it or not. *Black Athena's* further notion of uniquely massive Egyptian and Semitic influence, including large-scale Egyptian and Hyksos colonizations of Greece itself, utterly fails to convince when all the evidence is considered. One can only wonder, perhaps with more morbid curiosity than anything else, how and with what manner of argument Bernal will press on with his grand enterprise in the volumes to come. ↪

⁴Quoted from Bernal's electronic posting during the HarperCollins-sponsored debate on *Black Athena*, dated Friday, May 3, 1996. See the full electronic exchanges between Bernal and Lefkowitz in *The Bryn Mawr Classical Review* issues 96.4.5 and 96.4.19 (archived at gopher.lib.virginia.edu/11/alpha/bmcr) and continuing in the aforementioned HarperCollins debate (archived at www.harpercollins.com/news/news.htm#athena).