



**BLACK ATHENA
REVISITED**



EDITED BY

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and

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ANCIENT HISTORY, MODERN MYTHS

Mary R. Lefkowitz

ARE ANCIENT HISTORIANS RACIST?

As the principal text in our second-year Greek course I prefer to use Plato's *Apology*, his account of the trial of Socrates. I stick with this traditional text, even though it is hard for students who have had time to learn only the bare essentials of Greek grammar, because it deals with so many matters that are central to our civilization. Should a man be condemned for his beliefs, if they differ from the majority's? Why did the majority make a judgment that is now universally regarded as unfair? How could Socrates think that no man would willingly commit an evil act? Important questions, all; but several years ago I had a student who seemed to regard virtually everything I said about Socrates with hostility. Before she graduated she explained why she had been suspicious of me and my classes: her instructor in another course had told her that Socrates (as suggested by the flat nose in some portrait sculptures) was black. The instructor had also taught that classicists universally refuse to mention the African origins of Socrates because they do not want their students to know that the so-called legacy of ancient Greece had been stolen from Egypt. Further study persuaded this student that most of what she had heard in this other course could not have been strictly accurate. Because Socrates was an Athenian citizen, he must have had Athenian parents; and since foreigners couldn't become naturalized Athenian citizens, he must have come from the same ethnic background as every other Athenian. Even though Greeks in Socrates' day did not pay much attention to skin color or more generally to

physical appearance, they did care about nationality. If Socrates had been a foreigner, from Africa or any other place, he would not have been an Athenian citizen. It was as simple as that.¹

Meanwhile another student wrote to complain that we had sponsored, as part of our Bad Ancient History Film series, a screening of the film *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor. The student had grounds for complaint; Taylor's sexpot Cleopatra certainly had little in common with the charming, manipulative queen whom Plutarch describes, the woman who spoke many languages and captivated everyone she knew with her conversation. But no, this student was indignant for a different reason: Elizabeth Taylor is, after all, a white woman, whereas Cleopatra was black. We did our best to persuade this student, on the basis of Cleopatra's ancestry (and her name), that Cleopatra was a member of the Macedonian Greek dynasty that had imposed itself on Egypt, and that despite her fluency in the Egyptian language, the style of her dress, and the luxury of her court, she was in origin a Greek.²

Classicists in the late modern world have more than enough grounds for paranoia. We are reminded daily that our subject is useless, irrelevant, and boring—all the things that, in our opinion, it is not. But now a new set of charges has been added. Not only students, but also the many academic acolytes of Martin Bernal's influential theories about "the Afroasiatic roots of Western civilization," and Bernal himself, ask us to acknowledge that we have been racists and liars, the perpetrators of a vast intellectual and cultural cover-up, or at the very least the suppressors of an African past that, until our students and our colleagues began to mention it, we had ourselves known nothing about. Had our teachers deceived us, and their teachers deceived them?

Classicists should be perfectly willing to ask themselves these questions, because we know, at least as well as our critics, that much of our so-called knowledge of the past is based on educated guesswork and sensible conjectures. In my own lifetime I have seen many histories and many textbooks rewritten to take account of new finds. Before the Mycenaean Linear B syllabary was deciphered in 1952, many scholars believed that people who lived in Greece and Crete between the sixteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E. spoke a language other than Greek. When the tablets written in Linear B script were deciphered, however, it became clear that Greek had been spoken in settlements such as Mycenae and Knossos. That is, the world described by Homer was in some respects real.

If we had once thought that Homer's world was imaginary, it is conceivable that our notions of the origins of the Greeks might also be based on uncertain premises. Before it was known that in the second millennium the inhabitants of Mycenae and other settlements spoke Greek, students of the ancient world imagined that there was a kernel of truth in the Greek myths

about the invasion of Greek-speaking tribes, known as the Dorians, after the twelfth century. Some textbooks still follow the outline of the Greek myth of the "races" of man, which tells of a distinct separation between the Bronze (Mycenaean) Age and the Iron (Dorian) Age, whereas in actual fact there seems to have been considerable cultural and linguistic continuity from the twelfth century to the eighth century B.C.E. And until our own century, relatively little importance was attributed to the influence of Semitic peoples, such as the Phoenicians, on the civilization in mainland Greece. Until very recently, moreover, the Greek alphabet was regarded as a relatively late invention, coming into general use only after the beginning of the eighth century B.C.E. Now Semiticists insist that the shape of the letters shows that the Greek alphabet was modeled on the characters of a much earlier version of the Phoenician syllabary, perhaps from the tenth century, perhaps even earlier (Lloyd-Jones 1992, 55-56).

If classicists managed to get all these things wrong, isn't it possible that they have ignored Egyptian and African elements in Greek culture? It is possible. Still, there is the slightly touchy matter of the intention behind this alleged ignorance. The students who believed that Socrates and Cleopatra were black assumed that we had deliberately tried to deny them the truth, that we had used (or misused) history as yet another means of enforcing European political domination on Africa. In their view, classicists are propagandists from the White European Ministry of Classical Culture. In our view, classicists are historians who try to look at the past critically, without prejudice of any kind, so far as humanly possible. If classicists have indeed misinterpreted the facts about the Greeks' past, they certainly have not done so willingly. I know that I run the risk, in the aftermath of Foucault and poststructuralism, of seeming naive in my belief that some kind of objectivity is possible, but it is my view that classicists and ancient historians would have been only too delighted to discover the true answer, whatever it was, *if it were possible to know it*.

No responsible historian of antiquity would deny that it is possible to misinterpret the facts, either through ignorance or malice; but the open discussion of scholarly research has made it rather difficult to conceal or to manufacture facts without arousing the skepticism or the scorn of colleagues. There are, after all, canons of evidence and standards of argument. For the student of ancient history, moreover, it is often the case that certainty is impossible. The classicist frequently deals with sources that are partial and scattershot and essentially obscure. To speak with complete confidence, without any tincture of doubt, about some of the great controversies is to betray a misunderstanding of what classicists do.

Still, the absence of certainty does not mean that one interpretation is as valid as any other. Probabilities and plausibilities matter; and when the

evidence is less precise or less tangible than we would like it to be, some explanations are still more likely than others. Thus, if Socrates and his parents had had dark skin and other African racial features, some of his contemporaries would have been likely to mention it, because this, and not just his eccentric ideas about the gods, and the voice that spoke to him alone, would have distinguished him from the rest of the Athenians. Unless, of course, all the rest of the Athenians also had African origins; but then why are they not depicted as Africans in their art? (Snowden 1979, 1-99).

This distinction appears to have been lost in the din of the great Afrocentrism debate. For this reason, it cannot be too much emphasized: to show influence is not to show origin. One people or culture may introduce its ideas or its symbols or its artifacts to another people or culture, but the difference between the peoples and the cultures may remain. Borrowings, even when they can be demonstrated, are only borrowings. They do not, in most cases, amount to a transformation of identity. And even when borrowings do overwhelm a people or a culture sufficiently to transform it, they still shed little light on the actual historical beginnings of the borrowers.

The evidence of Egyptian *influence* on certain aspects of Greek culture is plain and undeniable, though surely it must be pointed out that other Mediterranean civilizations also had important influences on Greek (and Egyptian) culture, so that the picture of who came first, and who took from or loaned what to whom, is anything but clear. But the evidence of Egyptian *origins* for Greek culture is another thing entirely. The principal reason that students of antiquity have not given the Africans or the Egyptians primary credit for the achievements of Greek civilization is that Greek culture was separate and different from Egyptian or African culture. It was divided from them by language and by genealogy.

AFROCENTRIC ANCIENT "HISTORY"

Given the nature of the evidence, or rather the lack of it, it is not at all surprising that modern scholars hold many conflicting opinions about the true origins of the Greeks and their civilization. But the situation is further complicated by the tendency of all modern cultures to make the Greeks like themselves, or at least to give priority to the aspects of Greek culture that they themselves most admire. In grade school we were taught about Athenian democracy, but not about the widespread slavery that supported it, or the other governmental systems in Greece that coexisted alongside it, including some fairly brutal tyrannies. Democracy and the other accomplishments of Greek civilization, however real or imaginary, remain so precious to us that virtually every modern civilization has wanted to claim them for itself.

It was inevitable, therefore, that black peoples in the English-speaking

countries of this continent, as they developed a sense of their own identity, would want to show that they had a stake in the cultural legacy of ancient Greece. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, began to study history while he was a teenager in Jamaica, and he used his knowledge of Egyptian and African history to help promote racial emancipation. As Tony Martin writes in *Race First*, his biography of Garvey: "History, like everything else for Garvey, was a subject to be used for the furtherance of racial emancipation. He used history first to establish a grievance—to show that the black man had been wronged" (1986, 83). Garvey thought of history as a means of instilling self-confidence in a people who had lost faith in themselves and had been compelled to lose touch with their past. In his essay "Who and What Is a Negro?" (1923), Garvey wrote:

The white world has always tried to rob and discredit us of our history. . . . Every student of history, of impartial mind, knows that the Negro once ruled the world, when white men were savages and barbarians living in caves; that thousands of Negro professors at that time taught in the universities in Alexandria, then the seat of learning; that ancient Egypt gave the world civilization and that Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her arts and letters, and taken all the credit to themselves. (Garvey 1986, 2:19; T. Martin 1986, 84)

Garvey's claims are not supported by the citation of any archaeological or linguistic data. It was not his purpose to assess the evidence objectively. He was not a historian; he had a use for the past. He needed the past to show that it was not the fault of black people that they had no great historical achievements to look back on, because European whites had conspired to steal the credit for all the great achievements of past civilizations:

Out of cold old Europe these white men came,
From caves, dens and holes, without any fame,
Eating their dead's flesh and sucking their blood,
Relics of the Mediterranean flood;
Literature, science and art they stole,
After Africa had measured each pole,
Asia taught them what great learning was,
Now they frown on what the Coolie does.

(Garvey, as quoted by Martin 1986, 81-82)

Contemporaries like W. E. B. Du Bois objected to Garvey's methods (Martin 1986, 273-74); but the theory of white conspiracy survived him, and it was explored by other writers, particularly in recent years. By now it has developed into what amounts to a new philosophy of black history. The post-Garvey school of historians objects to the way that Europeans have discredited the

African contribution, and more generally to the European methods of distinguishing fact from fiction. According to Molefi Kete Asante, the chair of the African American Studies Department at Temple University and the author of *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, black historians finally have been freed from dependence on "Eurocentric frames of reference." In Asante's opinion, the scholar who has done most to release Afrocentric historians from this dependency is the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop (Asante 1990, v-vii, 5).

In *The African Origin of Civilization*, an English translation of a work published in French in 1967, Diop claimed that Europeans have consistently falsified evidence that suggests that the Egyptians were black-skinned. He traces Egyptian influence on Greece back to prehistoric times, claiming that Cecrops (a half-snake/half-man whom Athenians themselves regarded as indigenous) came to Attica from Egypt and that Danaus (who, according to the Greeks, was of Greek descent) taught the Greeks agriculture and metallurgy. According to Diop, Greek mythology reflects the resentment of the Indo-Europeans against this cultural domination. Cadmus was driven out of Thebes; Orestes' murder of his mother Clytemnestra celebrates the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy; Aeneas rejects and abandons Dido. The white world rejected the ideas of other cultures as soon as it could—and "this is the meaning of the *Aeneid*."³

Another influential Afrocentric work appeared in the 1950s: George G. M. James's *Solohe Legacy* (1954). This book offers a detailed account of how Greek philosophers derived most of their doctrines from the secret Egyptian mysteries said to be preserved in Masonic cult: "the term Greek philosophy, to begin with, is a misnomer, for there is no such philosophy in existence" (i). James claims that the basic doctrines in Aristotle's *De Anima* were based on the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.⁴ On the basis of anecdotes related by the gossipy ancient biographer Diogenes Laertius, James concludes (107, 109) that Plato stole the ideas for his *Republic* and *Timaeus* from other Greek philosophers. Thus Plato is doubly unreliable: he stole his ideas from Greeks who in turn stole them from the Egyptians.

James suggests various ways in which the knowledge of the Egyptian mysteries could have been brought to Greece from Egypt. Certain Greek wise men studied there, such as Solon and Pythagoras. Because Aristotle had been his tutor, Alexander the Great gave the philosopher the money that he needed to buy books for his Academy in Athens. Other Afrocentric scholars have gone farther, implicating Aristotle in the takeover of Egyptian knowledge; not content with the notion that the Greeks simply failed to acknowledge the Egyptian sources of their wisdom, Yosef ben-Jochannan, in *Africa, Mother of Western Civilization*, states that Aristotle began to write his philosophy only after "he totally sacked the temples and lodges of the African Mysteries in

Egypt upon his arrival in 332 B.C.E. with Alexander the Great" ([1971] 1988, 395-96; cf. 379, 399, 423, 492).

Not a single one of these assertions about cultural expropriation and scholarly dishonesty can be directly substantiated from ancient sources (see also Snowden, this volume). Not one responsible ancient author (certainly not Aristotle) doubted that Plato wrote the *Republic* and *Timaeus*. And there is no reason to believe that Aristotle had much contact with Alexander after he ceased to be his tutor, before 338 B.C.E. It is simply untrue, to the best of my knowledge, to claim that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egyptian sources. There is no evidence whatever for James's claim that Alexander took books from the library at Alexandria (which was founded after his death) to give to Aristotle, or for ben-Jochannan's assertion that Aristotle came to Egypt with Alexander and sacked the temples of ideas and books (Lefkowitz 1992a, A52; 1994).

Corrections and criticisms such as these, however, do not seem to matter: they are based, after all, on European sources, which are by nature suspect. It is axiomatic for Afrocentric authors that there has been, since antiquity, a European conspiracy to suppress evidence of African origins, and therefore any argument that a European makes against their ideas, especially on the basis of European writings, ancient or modern, can be regarded *ipso facto* as invalid.

The Afrocentric description of ancient history has been circulating in print for at least seventy years, but it is only since the late 1960s that Afrocentric ideas have begun to be included in the curricula of the most prominent universities in this country, and it is only in the last several years that, as a result of the "canon wars," they have begun to be taken seriously by historians who might themselves have been otherwise regarded as Eurocentric. The debate has significant consequences for the teaching of Greco-Roman antiquity. For if the Greeks and Romans and the people who teach about their civilization have suppressed the truth, why should the classics (and the European literatures that drew inspiration from them) occupy a privileged place in the curriculum, or any place at all? I myself would agree that they should be eliminated, if these charges could be shown by any objective standard to be true. If . . .

ANCIENT MYTHS OF GREEK ORIGINS

Where did the Greeks themselves think that they came from? No surviving Greek author, not even Herodotus, attempts to provide anything like a systematic historical account. Presumably the question did not interest them: they seem not even to have imagined that as a population they were anything but indigenous. The Athenians believed that they were *autochthonous*, that is,

sprung from the ground (*chthon*) itself. The Myrmidons, the soldiers who came with Achilles to Troy, would have said that their ancestors were ants, or *myrmēkai*, turned by Zeus into men to be companions for Achilles' grandfather Aeacus. Some Thebans spoke of themselves as the descendants of the "sown men" who sprang up from the teeth of the dragon killed by Cadmus, the founder of their city. According to another story, the Titan god Prometheus made mortal beings from clay and breathed life into them, and taught them letters and craftsmanship, though another myth said that the alphabet and numbers were invented by Prometheus, a mortal. Or mankind derived from the sticks and stones thrown by Prometheus' mortal son Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha after the great flood sent by Zeus to put an end to human wrongdoing.

Whoever the Greeks may have been, and whatever stories they preferred to tell about their origins, they believed that their ancestors were born in the land that their descendants inhabited, that the language they spoke was their own, and that one of their own gods or people invented their system of writing. They called all foreign peoples, whatever their origin or language, barbarians, *barbaroi*, that is, people who, instead of speaking Greek, spoke nonsense, *barbar*. (They did not seem to know or to care that the word barbarian is itself a loan word, from the Babylonian-Sumerian *barbaru*, "foreigner" (Hall 1989, 4).)

Cadmus himself was said to have come to Thebes from Phoenicia, bringing some of his own people with him. Pelops, the founder of the Olympian Games, was said to have been a Lydian. Io, daughter of the king of Argos, was exiled to Egypt by the jealous goddess Hera, and later her descendants the Danaids sought asylum in her homeland. The Corinthian hero Bellerophon was exiled to Asia Minor carrying a letter with "baneful signs" that the king of Lycia was able to interpret; Bellerophon's descendants settled in Lycia and later fought with the Trojans against the Greeks (Homer *Iliad* 6.150-211).

How "true" are these myths? We must, as always, proceed with caution (see Coleman, Hall, this volume). The myths appear to represent history only in the most general way. They mention the names of real places, but they do not attempt to give an accurate picture of who their inhabitants were or how they lived. Myths are resolutely anachronistic, and tend to give only a vague impression of actual time. For historians, they can serve at best as a general guide to the existence of a particular place or its inhabitants. Although Mycenaean, for example, was only a small town in the fifth century, according to the myth of the Trojan War there was an important settlement at Mycenaean toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E. The general truth of the myth has since been confirmed by archaeological excavation.

The myths that mention foreign places seem also to be "true" in this same general way. They confirm that in the second millennium B.C.E. civilizations

large enough to trade with and to visit existed in Egypt, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, and parts of Asia Minor. But they can tell us nothing more specific about the movements of peoples, the languages that they spoke, or the particular wars that they fought. That Danaus came to Greece from Egypt, that Cadmus came from Phoenicia, or that Pelops came from Lydia, tells us no less but no more than that the Greeks had contact with those places. If the myths of their arrival in Greece represent anything more substantial than a trade mission or a piratical raid, archaeology has not confirmed it.

Before the Persians invaded the Greek cities of Asia Minor and then the mainland itself in the early fifth century B.C.E., the Greeks themselves did not acknowledge any debts to neighboring cultures. Nor did they make much show of their own uniqueness. Instead they tended to imagine that everyone was like themselves. In the *Iliad* the Trojans speak the same language, worship the same gods, wear the same clothes, and have the same laws and customs as their Greek enemies, even though in reality the Trojans may have spoken a different Indo-European language, Luwian, or some derivative of Hittite.

It was only as a result of the Persian Wars in the early fifth century B.C.E., in which they were almost defeated, that the Greeks became aware of, and began to celebrate, the unique features of their own civilization. But even when they became interested in the differences between themselves and other peoples, like the Persians or the Egyptians, they seem never to have asked in any systematic way whether or not they might at some much earlier time have been influenced by the civilizations of their neighbors or derived from the same origins. We know that Greeks visited Egypt in the seventh century, but the only explicit description of Egypt that has come down to us dates from around the 430s B.C.E. Its author was Herodotus.

Herodotus, a Greek from Halicarnassus on the coast of Asia Minor, claims that he traveled around Egypt and writes with admiration and appreciation of the antiquity and the achievements of Egyptian civilization. He records the names of some of their kings, and he describes the pyramids. But curiously (at least from a modern point of view) he says nothing about the Egyptian features in archaic Greek art, and nothing about language, with one apparent exception: the names of the gods. About these names he says that he "learned by inquiry" that "the names of almost all of the gods came from Egypt to Greece," with the exception of the gods whose names the Egyptians did not know. Those gods, Herodotus claims, were named by the Pelasgians, the first people to settle in the Greek mainland, with the exception of Poseidon, who was Libyan (2.50.1-3). And after talking with priests at a temple near the mouth of the Nile, he discovered that the tragic poet Aeschylus had "snatched" from local stories the myth that the goddess Demeter (rather than Leto) was the mother of the goddess Artemis (2.156.6).

Modern historians are understandably frustrated when they try to use

Herodotus to discover "what really happened," or even what most of his contemporaries might have believed. He is a famously slippery historical source. What did the priests really tell him? What did he ask them? Did he even go to Egypt? Should we take Herodotus literally, or try instead to reconstruct, on the limited basis of what he tells us, what the purpose of his inquiry was, and what he meant his readers to learn about themselves? (Pritchett 1993, 1-9). Perhaps all we can say with confidence is that he meant his audience (who probably heard rather than read what he wrote) to respect the "barbarians" and their customs, and not to regard them as culturally and morally inferior.

It appears to have been the similarities between certain Egyptian and Greek myths, and the impressions that they gave of the character of particular gods, that suggested to Herodotus that the Greek gods derived from the Egyptian. He does not speak about representations in the visual arts, or discuss the architectural style of sacred buildings in the two countries. Certainly he does not consider the etymology of the gods' names, since he gives both their Egyptian and Greek names. His general practice is to call the gods of all cultures by Greek names, and to describe their cults in all foreign settings; thus he also discusses how the Phoenicians worshiped Heracles (2.44).

Herodotus also points out that (because of their climate) the Egyptians were different from the Greeks in many respects: "their habits and customs are different from those of the rest of humankind; their women go to market and conduct trade; their men sit at home and do the weaving"; Egyptian men were circumsised; the Egyptians ate different food, and buried their dead and offered their sacrifices with different rituals, and wrote from right to left, and so on (2.35-2-36.4). At the end of the fifth century the Athenian dramatist Sophocles could offer his audience a similar account of the contrastness of Egyptian behavior (*Oedipus at Colonus* 337-41). From the Greek point of view, in sum, Egypt was a strange and foreign culture.

BERNAL'S RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST

The question of Greek origins recently has been broached again, and become a subject of passionate popular discussion, with the publication of the first two volumes of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* in 1987 and 1991. Unlike most of his Afrocentric admirers, Bernal can read hieroglyphics and Greek, and he claims he knows other ancient languages; and though his field is political science, he seems at home in the chronological and geographical complexities of the ancient Mediterranean. Moreover, he insists that he reached Afrocentric conclusions about Greek origins independently of the Afrocentrists. "I had been studying these issues for eight years," he writes in his first volume, "before I became aware of this literature" (401-2).

As Bernal's discussion, notes, and bibliography testify, he has read widely and thought strenuously about the Mediterranean as a whole, if not exactly with an open mind, at least without giving priority to the Greeks, as classically trained scholars tend to do. Still, his assessment of the evidence for the Egyptian contribution starts from the premise that European scholars have distorted the evidence, documentary and archaeological. His first volume, subtitled *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece*, is a kind of historiographical prelude to the subject, in which he attacks the nineteenth-century notion that the Greeks were Aryans from the North. Bernal proposes to return from the "Aryan Model" to the "Ancient Model," that is, to Herodotus' notion that the Greeks derived their religion and possibly other important customs from the East, and from Egypt in particular.

To speak of "fabrication," and thereby to suggest some conspiracy theory about European scholars who wished to give priority to the contribution of northern peoples like themselves, is to exaggerate wildly. But Bernal has ample justification for calling into question many widely accepted hypotheses, such as the traditional date of the Greeks' adaptation of the Phoenician syllabary into their own alphabet. (In *Cadmean Letters* [1990a], he suggests that the Greek alphabet came into use much earlier, in the middle of the second millennium.) Bernal is right to point out, often amusingly, that scholars are apt to treat hypotheses as orthodoxies, and so have been incapable of giving proper weight to new and important data.

Bernal shows how Egypt and its culture were misrepresented or simply ignored by European writers. He argues that widely influential books, such as Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862), promoted the notion that African cultures were more depraved and uncivilized than those of the Greeks or the Romans. He describes how Flaubert had originally meant to write a historical novel about Egypt but fixed on ancient Carthage as his subject because the Egyptians were not sufficiently depraved for his purposes. The Carthaginians, particularly because they sacrificed young children, provided him with an almost ideal opportunity to criticize non-Christian and non-European values, and to condemn the Carthaginians' Phoenician background and culture, and by association Jewish culture as well (*BA* 1:355-59).

Bernal regards Flaubert's description of Carthaginian life as a typical illustration of Eurocentric hypocrisy: "Flaubert implied that Europeans—with the possible exception of the English—were incapable of such things. In fact, the Romans outdid the Carthaginians in virtually every luxury and outrage while the Macedonians [i.e., Greeks] were not far behind" (*BA* 1:357). He proceeds to note a few specific examples of the cruelty shown by the Romans to some of their war victims, and mentions some of the horrors of the treatment of colonial populations in Flaubert's own lifetime, and many more examples of Greco-Roman (and European) atrocities might be men-

tioned. Both the Greeks and Romans "exposed" unwanted children. But Bernal might have noted that in Carthage firstborn children were often sacrificed to protect the lives of younger ones, and a civic crisis could elicit a mass slaughter; more than two hundred children were said to have been sacrificed in 310 B. C. E. because the Carthaginians thought the gods were angry at them (Diodorus 20:14, 5; Stager and Wolff 1984, 43-44, 49).

Surely there is something rather simple about these comparisons. Which civilization, ancient or modern, has *not* been guilty of unspeakable atrocity? And is Bernal being fair even to Flaubert? For in *Salammbo* Flaubert attempted, like Homer and the Greek tragic poets, to portray rather than to condemn or to expose. It is true that Flaubert treats his characters, no matter how horrific their actions, with a certain sympathy, but that is so that we can imagine what it was like to see vast armies marching to their death, or to prepare to sacrifice one's own child. Bernal reads the novel as if it were a political pamphlet.

The problem for this critic of other historians and historical writers is that his own "Revised Ancient Model" betrays considerable historiographical naiveté. Bernal relies too much on Herodotus' treatment of Egypt. And he painstakingly describes how Egyptian scientific notions were preserved in certain Christian legends and in Masonic ritual, claiming that "no one before 1600 seriously questioned either the belief that Greek civilization and philosophy derived from Egypt, or that the chief ways in which they had been transmitted were through Egyptian colonizations of Greece and later Greek study in Egypt" (B4:112).

It is perfectly correct that nobody before 1600 questioned these historical propositions, but that is because nobody before 1600 (or thereabouts) knew much about Egyptian history. Hieroglyphics were not deciphered until 1824; before that historians relied primarily on Greek sources that were more or less fictional. Among the most influential of these Greek writings were the so-called *Hermiasia*, which are purported to have been written at the beginning of time by Hermes Trismegistus, grandson of the god. Until the early part of this century these writings were believed to have been earlier than any other Greek philosophical works. But now it is clear that they were composed only in the second century C. E., centuries after Plato and Aristotle. In fact the vocabulary in which they are written was created by those philosophers (Copenhaver 1992, xlv-lxx; Lefkowitz 1994, 31).

Another influential fiction is the notion that Masonic rituals are based on the "Egyptian Mysteries," which were an integral part of an elaborate system for the education of Egyptian priests. But in reality the earliest descriptions of these mysteries, along with academies for Egyptian priests, with large libraries and art galleries, first occur not in any ancient text but in an eighteenth-century French work of historical fiction, the novel *Sibos* by the

Abbé Jean Terrasson, first published in 1731. Terrasson's novel was widely read; it had a profound influence on portrayals of Egyptian religion in later literature, such as Mozart's *Magie Flûte* (Lefkowitz 1994, 30). Bernal owes it to his readers to remind them that the "Ancient Model" was largely based on these misconceptions. But instead, as in the case of his treatment of myth, he adds historical superstition as if it were historical fact.⁵ He does not point out that these ancient and medieval beliefs about cultural relations in antiquity were based on the acceptance of mythology as history, and on taking Herodotus and ancient anecdotal biographers at their literal word.

Again, myth is a tricky object of historical inquiry. If the myth of Danaus coming to Argos has been interpreted as an example of Egyptian penetration of Greece, it can also be understood, as the Greeks themselves tended to understand it, as the return to Greece of a native after many generations. Similarly, the myth of the journey of Danaus' ancestor Io to the Nile Delta can be understood to suggest that a civilization from the North, perhaps even a Greek civilization, penetrated Egypt at some early time. But as the Egyptologist Donald Redford has recently argued (1992, 122), the story of Io may be based instead on a Canaanite myth that reflects the conquest of Egypt in the second millennium by the people known as the Hyksos. Or, one wonders, did Greeks visit Egypt and simply identify cow-headed images of the goddess Isis with Io, a character from their own mythology?

Bernal cites Herodotus on the Egyptian origin of Greek religion and ritual, but he does not show how the Greeks came to borrow their "philosophy" as well. He does not discuss the implications of Herodotus' very explicit statement that Egyptian habits and customs in his own time were totally different from those of the Greeks. He suggests that the Eleusinian Mysteries were derived from Egyptian rites (Herodotus 2:171; B4:110), but he does not point out that such a claim cannot be proved or disproved: ancient mysteries were (as their name suggests) kept secret, and no one now knows much about their origins.

Bernal tries to support his discussion of the "Ancient Model" etymologically—with etymologies of Greek names such as Danaus, Aegyptus, and Io. These examples appear to be plausible, because the Greek names and the Egyptian (or Semitic) counterparts that Bernal produces certainly look alike, and usually have some connection in meaning. It is worth noting that look-alike etymologies also feature in other Afrocentric discussions of African origins of European societies: John G. Jackson, for example, in his *Introduction to African Civilization* (1990, 150) lists a few examples of Egypto-English words, such as *cow/kani*, without noting that there are also other more plausible etymologies. (In fact, the word *cow* is Indo-European, cognate to Greek *bous* and Latin *bos*.)⁶

Bernal chooses a more sophisticated range of words to investigate, but the

results of his research still cannot be taken as positive proof of an Egyptian presence in Greece. Consider, for example, his ingenious explanation of the name of the people who invaded Egypt in the second millennium. To the Greeks they were known as Hyksos (see Vermeule, Coleman, this volume). According to Bernal, *Hyksos* may be related to the Greek *hikētidēs*, the term used to describe the daughters of Danaus, who came with him to Argos as "suppliants." If so—and it is very unlikely (see Jasanoﬀ and Nussbaum, this volume)—the etymology would help establish that the story of Danaus represented the Hyksos invasion of Greece (BA 1:96–97). It is, perhaps, not impossible. But there is a much more likely interpretation of the invaders' name: that *Hyksos* is a Greek garbling of the Egyptian word for "ruler of foreign peoples," which designated the regime, rather than the nationality, of the invaders (Redford 1992, 100).

Bernal also proposes that the city of Athens' name derives from the Egyptian *Ht Nt* (vocalized), "house of Neit," who was identified by the Greeks with their goddess Athena. This derivation would provide a striking confirmation of Herodotus' claim, better than any that Herodotus himself was prepared to offer, as the Greeks had only the most rudimentary "sound-alike" understanding of the history of words. But even though it sounds plausible to us, it is no more likely than his farfetched suggestion that *Hyksos* is cognate to *hikēti* (Ray 1990, 80; see Jasanoﬀ and Nussbaum, and Coleman, this volume).

But even if common etymologies could be found, they would not in themselves confirm that the Greeks borrowed their religion from the Egyptians. For place names and proper names, and even the occasional ordinary noun, easily make their way into foreign cultures as loan words. That is to say, they reveal patterns of influence and little else. A linguistic proof of origins requires more than a similarity in names and nouns. The derivation of one culture from another is almost invariably reflected in other aspects of the language, such as its grammar and its working vocabulary. That is why we would have discovered that French-speaking peoples occupied the island of Britain after the eleventh century C.E., even if we did not know it from history.

Bernal's account of the origins of Greek knowledge is presented in an equally unsatisfactory way. He does not point out at the beginning of his discussion, although it would be reasonable to expect him to do so (see also Baines, this volume), that the Hermetic Corpus that preserves many of the details of Egyptian wisdom is not at all as ancient as it claims to be, but rather was written in Greek writing in the second century C.E. (This was one of the earliest and the most important discoveries of modern critical history.) That is, he refrains from stating explicitly that what the authors of Masonic ritual and other Europeans considered to be "Egyptian" knowledge was in fact thoroughly Hellenized. Certainly elements of ancient Egyptian religion

were retained, but within a Neoplatonic framework (Fowden 1986, 31–44). What Bernal represents as Egyptian is essentially Greco-Egyptian.

In his treatment of the transmission of Egyptian knowledge Bernal seems to have reproduced the Afrocentric analysis. According to Bernal, G. G. M. James's "fascinating little book *Stolen Legacy* also makes a plausible case for Greek science and philosophy having borrowed massively from Egypt" (BA 1:38). He speaks of James as a pioneer in the effort to promote awareness of the "Afroasiatic formative elements in Greek civilization" (1:43). But like James and other Afrocentrics, Bernal tends to ignore possible influences *not* from Africa. He overlooks eastern Semitic cultures in favor of the Egyptian. And he does not speak of Egyptian influences so much as of Greek borrowings.

Bernal's tendentious treatment of Flaubert, his eager credulity about Herodotus, his selective etymologies, and his neglect of the distinctively Greek element in Egyptian "science," all suggest that his own discussion of European historiography is rather less free of historiographical bias than he would have his readers believe. Why, instead of cataloguing mistakes made by nineteenth-century writers, did he not begin his discussion of the problem with an attempt to describe the general identifying characteristics of the societies in question at the times when they could have been thought to have had some influence on each other? Why exactly is it likely that we should think that Egyptian culture was absorbed in greater or lesser degree by the Greeks? Why not attempt to survey some of the more tangible evidence that can be provided by art and architecture, before going on to discuss any similarities that might be found in language and customs?

To this task Bernal turns in his second volume, and finally concentrates on trying to demonstrate the truth of his account (which he now calls the "Revised Ancient Model") by assessing the ancient archaeological and documentary evidence for the origins of Greece. That volume surveys the varied information that can be gleaned from disparate and often fragmentary sources about the movements of Mediterranean peoples in the second millennium. It is difficult and exhausting to read, though not because Bernal fails to state his case clearly, or to arm the reader with maps, dates, a glossary, and excellent indices. Unfortunately for Bernal, unfortunately for all of us, the second millennium B.C.E. so far has dealt us only a partial hand of cards. Occasionally new evidence is found, but we have little hope of ever recovering the complete deck. Bernal plays his cards with confidence, however, and with an exuberance that is more characteristic of the amateur than the professional; but they are in the end cards from the same old incomplete and incomplete pack.

Bernal (to press the metaphor a little further) clearly believes that certain

suits are luckier than others, those suits being mythology and etymology. But to capture the reader's imagination, and to move his theory closer to the evidence that exists, he should have provided illustrations of the visual evidence, not least as reminders of why these varied cultures may be thought to have had some influence on one another. What of the frescoes depicting bull-leaping from the palaces at Knossos and Thera? The archaic Greek statues that try to replicate the stance of Egyptian figures? The imaginary compound animals on sixth-century Greek vases that seem to have been inspired by Near Eastern archetypes? They are not in Bernal's book. He is clearly more comfortable at some distance from such evidence, more comfortable with theory and speculation than with the archaeologist's pots, sherds and leafmold.

Instead he returns again to Herodotus' statement about the Egyptian and Greek gods, discussing the many rough but intriguing parallels that can be drawn between Egyptian and Greek myth and cult. Again, none of these seem in themselves conclusive; and again, Bernal seems somewhat reluctant to investigate all possible explanations. The Greeks, for example, devised an elaborate irrigation system in Boeotia (the region of which Thebes was the principal town). Where did they learn how to control water? The question puts Bernal in mind of the Nile. But how much weight should be given to the fact that in Greek myth the hero Heracles is depicted as controlling large bodies of water, and do references to the hero's control of water necessarily suggest that Heracles originated in Egypt? (*BA* 2:116-19). The Nile is perhaps the most famous body of water in the Mediterranean world that causes problems, but it is certainly not the only one. The behavior of the Euphrates has hardly been without consequence.

Such correspondences are not exact parallels, and at most they suggest only influences. But then there remains the question of how such influences might have been transmitted, and here, too, Bernal is on less than solid ground, again relying heavily on Herodotus. Herodotus talks about invasions by an Egyptian king whom he calls Sesostris, whose armies penetrated as far north as the Black Sea, and conquered the Scythians and the Thracians. This Sesostris, Bernal believes, should be identified with the twelfth-dynasty pharaoh Senwosret I (1919-1914 B.C.E.), although this involves some rearrangement of generally accepted chronology (*BA* 2:197-235). And (later in the millennium) the myth of Danaos could be understood to suggest that influences were imposed by immigration, invasion, or even a peaceful takeover.

On the infirm basis of this myth Bernal seems to assume that Egyptians or some bearers of their culture occupied the Greek mainland during the second millennium. The Hyksos invaders are the logical candidate for this role. In order to let them play it, however, Bernal argues that they came to Greece two centuries earlier than the ancients thought they did, and he insists that

they managed to transmit, along with elements of their own Semitic language and culture, aspects of Egyptian culture as well. It does not trouble him that Herodotus fails to state that Sesostris' armies conquered or even penetrated mainland Greece.

And the Hyksos invasion, even if it happened as Bernal supposes, is very different in character from the Egyptian cultural domination described by Diop, or from James's notion of the wholesale plundering of Egyptian ideas by Greeks in the first millennium B.C.E. It is both more gradual and more passive: it allows for two-way exchange—Egyptian and Semitic influence on Greece, and Greek influence on Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. That is, it suggests that cultures and words can be transmitted peacefully, by trade or by physical coexistence. A useful analogy may be found in the conquest of Greece by Rome in the second century B.C.E.: according to the Roman poet Horace (first century B.C.E.), it was the culture of the conquered that dominated the culture of the conquerors.

This analogy has an important implication. For it seems that Bernal, as he leaves the world of nineteenth-century speculation and confronts the new evidence brought to bear on the problem by the archaeological and linguistic discoveries of the twentieth, edges ever closer to precisely the complex multicultural "model" of Greek origins championed by most modern classical scholars. Indeed, Bernal himself now admits, "with some surprise and distress," that the "Aryan Model" may in some respects be valid (as in the case of the Hyksos invaders; *BA* 2:132).

Bernal is right to insist that all scholars, and particularly archaeologists and anyone who seeks to understand incomplete and fragmentary data, must start from assumptions of some sort. But why test only the Aryan and the African assumptions, when others are also tenable? Why not a "Semitic Model" or a "Hebrew Model" or a "Mesopotamian Model"? In both the Greek and Hebrew accounts, heaven and earth are created from a formless void and then separated, man's behavior becomes offensive, so that he is compelled to lead a hard life, and the human race is almost destroyed by a flood. And why not a "Hittite Model"? In both Hittite myth and Greek there is strife among the generations of gods, and fathers are violently overthrown by sons. And why not a "Multicultural Model," to take account of the various elements that seem to have been incorporated into Greek mythology and culture?

Perhaps that is what Bernal himself is intending for his subsequent volumes. He seems to have found himself trapped in a Procrustean model of his own making. Thus he has revised the "Ancient Model" (really the "African Model") not only to put the Hyksos' invasion of Greece earlier than the time of their departure from Egypt, but also to allow that Greek speech, since it must have come to the Greek peninsula in some way from the North, is undeniably Indo-European. If he can admit that the Hyksos invaders may

have included speakers of Hurrian (a non-Semitic, non-Aryan agglutinative language) and even speakers of Indo-European languages (*BA* 2:123), is he prepared to admit that linguistic and other cultural transmission is really too complex to be accurately portrayed in a single model, or as a myth of invasion or even immigration?

Bernal has forcefully reminded us of what may have been the principal reason that contact with Egypt was essential for the Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples, including, in the second half of the first millennium, the Romans: Egypt provided an abundant source of grain. In this way, and with the data that he has assembled, he may have sharpened the quality of the debate about the origins of Greek culture. But I do not think that he has brought about any dramatic change in the way the evidence about Greek origins should be interpreted. The slim and difficult evidence shows, at most, the ways in which elements of foreign cultures could have been transmitted, whether by trade or by conquest, but it does not establish that the Greeks stole anything, or that they were not people who came from the North, speaking an Indo-European language, whose culture was influenced over many centuries by their neighbors, through invasion, trade, and importation. The basic picture remains unchanged.

Nobody would deny that the Egyptians had a notable influence on Greek religion and art. On the basis of the most scrupulous scholarly evaluation of the present evidence, however, nobody should claim that the Greeks stole their best or their most significant ideas from the Egyptians, or from anyone else. Certainly, and fortunately, they did not copy their system of government from the Egyptians. We need only to look at the remains of public buildings. The pharaohs built the pyramids for themselves and their families; the citizens of Athens voted to build the Parthenon for the use of all the city's inhabitants.

CONCLUSION

To the extent that Bernal has contributed to the provision of an apparently respectable underpinning for Afrocentric fantasies, he must be held culpable, even if his intentions are honorable and his motives are sincere. But not even he has dealt with the racial issue squarely. One hopes that in his forthcoming volumes he will finally assess how much of the Afro-Asiatic legacy to the Greeks involved *black* Africans, or as the Greeks called them, "Ethiopians." So far Bernal has simply ducked the issue. Or rather, he has tried to have it both ways, allowing the Egyptians to stand for the rest of Africa, whatever their racial type or types. In a colloquium about *Black Athena* at the American Philological Association in 1989, he admitted that he would have preferred to

have called the book *African Athena*, but his publisher insisted on its present title because the combination of blacks and women would "sell."⁸

Bernal would prefer to emphasize that Egypt is a part of Africa, rather than try to determine the exact proportion of darker-skinned central Africans in the population. For to speak of the ancient (or modern) Egyptians as "black" is misleading in the extreme. Not that it would have mattered from the Greek point of view, since the Greeks classified people by nationality rather than skin color, as Frank Snowden pointed out a quarter-century ago (Snowden 1970). But Herodotus, the earliest Greek source, refers just once to the skin color of the Egyptians, and then only to prove that the Egyptians under Sesostris managed to penetrate as far as the northeast end of the Black Sea; he says that the Colchians, the people who lived there, could be classified as Egyptians both because they had dark skin and woolly hair and because they spoke the same language, practiced circumcision, and worked their linen in the unique Egyptian manner. Bernal takes this passage as evidence that the Egyptians were "black" in the modern sense of Negroid. But if that had been what Herodotus meant, he would have referred to them as Ethiopians, who spoke a different language from the Egyptians and had different customs (see Snowden, this volume; Snowden 1989, 88-89; Snowden 1993).

Will believers in the Athenian conspiracy be persuaded by these and other historical arguments? Some will perhaps continue to believe that the Greeks stole African culture, without wishing to inquire what exactly they mean by African culture or Egyptian culture or Greek culture. That would be a pity, because in the process of claiming Greek history as their own, they will miss an opportunity to learn about real Africa and its own achievements and civilizations.

When Marcus Garvey first spoke about the Greeks' stealing from the Africans, he was not creating a new historiography, he was creating a new mythology. The reasons are not far to seek. For black Americans (many of whom now prefer to be known as African-Americans), the African origins of ancient Greek civilization promise a myth of self-identification and self-ennoblement, the kind of "noble lie" that Socrates suggests is needed for the utopian state he describes in Plato's *Republic* (3.414b). It is the Afrocentric view that is, to use Bernal's term, the fabrication; but such fabrications may build confidence and may encourage marginalized groups to quit the margins and participate in the common culture. In that sense, they may be useful and even "noble."

But hope is not enough of a reason for illusion. What constructive purpose will the myth of African origins really serve? If it causes us to ignore or even to subvert the truth about the past, it damages our ability, the ability of all of us, no matter what our ethnic origins, to judge fairly and accurately, which

is the best purpose of education. And even if a myth helps people to gain confidence, it will teach them simultaneously that facts can be manufactured or misreported to serve a political purpose; that origins are the only measure of value; that difference is either a glory or a danger, when in fact it is a common, challenging fact of life; that the true knowledge of customs, language, and literature is unimportant for understanding the nature of a culture.

The Greeks, least of all peoples, deserve the fate to which the Afrocentrists have subjected them. The great historian Arnaldo Momigliano observed that "what I think is typically Greek is the critical attitude toward the recording of events, that is, the development of critical methods enabling us to distinguish between facts and fancies. To the best of my knowledge no historiography earlier than the Greek or independent of it developed these critical methods; and we have inherited the Greek methods" (1990, 30). Momigliano was not a Greek. He was an Italian Jew, and a refugee from one of the most terrible political myths of all time, the not very noble lie of Jewish inferiority that provided the justification for the Holocaust. But the rational legacy of Greece belonged to him, too, exactly as it belongs to people of African descent, whatever their skin color or their exact place of origin. Like everyone in both the African and the European diasporas, and like everyone in the American melting pot, they should take pride in the Egyptians, in the Phoenicians, and in the ancient Greeks, and give them each their due for their actual achievements, as well as for their contributions to other civilizations. For all these civilizations, like everything else in the past, belong equally to all of us.

NOTES

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1. I do not believe that Socrates could have been black just because it is conceivably possible that Socrates (or any other Greek) *might have had* an African ancestor; cf. Lefkowitz 1993b, 13-14. But here is how Asante interprets this incident: "Lefkowitz's response to the student and use of the student's alleged statements demonstrates one of the major issues involved in the attacks on Afrocentricity: white racism. Most whites cannot believe that a person with the reputation of Socrates or his teachers could have been black because of the institutional disregard for Africans. Of course there is no indication that he was black, and for me, it is not a question of interest, but for whites it strikes right at their souls" (Asante 1993a, 39).

2. The student wrote: "Cleopatra's father was not a full blooded Greek. Generations after Ptolemy I and many interracial marriages the Greek ancestry was no longer pure. By the time Cleopatra was born she was almost, if not all Egyptian" (as quoted in T. Martin 1993, 39). Similar "information" may be found in J. H. Clarke 1984. According to the known facts, Cleopatra VII was the daughter of Ptolemy XII

and his sister Cleopatra V. Ptolemy XII was the son of Ptolemy IX and a mistress. Who was the mistress? Since none of our sources tells us otherwise, the natural presumption is that she was a Greek, like the Ptolemies. That of course does not prove she was not African, but there is no evidence at all that she was African. See Snowden, this volume.

3. Diop 1974, 100-112. The text of the *Aeneid* does not support Diop's interpretation: Aeneas vows to honor Dido wherever his travels take him (1.607-10), and remember her so long as he lives (4.335-36). Virgil expresses such sympathy for her in order to convey the enormous personal and moral cost of founding an empire.

4. James 1974, 123-26; curiously, Bernal finds it "in many ways useful" to look at the *Odyssey* as a "Greek version of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*" (B4 1:87). But only one book of the twenty-four books of the *Odyssey* describes the world of the dead, and the description of souls there bears virtually no resemblance to anything in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

5. For example, "In this case, then, the Masonic claim of drawing their traditions from Ancient Egypt has a basis in fact" (B4 1:176).

6. Eng. *cow* and Greek *bous* derive from the Indo-European root **g^ou-* (ox, bull, cow). The sound represented by **g^o* (known as a labiovelar) was treated differently in different Indo-European languages. Sometimes the velar (the *w*-like element) was lost, leaving just *g* or *k*, as in Sanskrit *gam*. In other languages the labial element was strengthened at the expense of the velar articulation, leaving the labials *b* and *p*, as in Greek *bous*. Another example of the same kind of shift in sound is Indo-European **h²e^o-*, which comes out as *what* in English, but *quod* in Latin.

7. B4 2:403-6 compares the Hyksos "conquest" of Greece to the Norman invasion of England; but the comparison is absurd, because there is no archaeological record of a Hyksos invasion, or linguistic changes that can be traced to such an event.

8. Mully (1990b, 103) observes that the title was not forced on Bernal, as he uses it for a course at Cornell (cf. also Snowden 1993, 321).