

Black Athena

The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization

Vol 1: The Fabrication of
Ancient Greece 1785–1985

by **Martin Bernal**

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A review article by
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“The scholarly purpose of (Black Athena). . . . is to open up new areas of research to women and men with far better qualifications than I have. The political purpose. . . . is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance.”

Thus Martin Bernal ends his introduction to ‘The Fabrication of Ancient Greece’, the first published volume of his trilogy *Black Athena*. These twin themes—that fundamental challenges to professional disciplines tend to come from outside of them and to be looked upon as *heresy* in the face of professionals’ intellectual and emotional investment in the academic status quo; and that Europeans have “insisted on reserving a place in the most distant past for the peoples who dominate world politics in their own period: that is to say, for the Europeans”—provide two key reference points throughout Bernal’s history of the histories of Classical civilization.

Coming himself from an academic background in Chinese studies via a concern with Vietnamese culture during the Vietnam war, and then becoming intrigued with his own partially Jewish roots, Bernal began to study the Hebrew and Phoenician languages. Surprised to find that the two were mutually intelligible, he then also began to notice striking correspondence with Greek. From there he found plausible Indo-European and Ancient Egyptian roots which together with the

two Semitic languages, accounted for 80-90% of the Greek vocabulary.

This did not fit however with the history of Ancient Greece which Bernal had been taught—that Greek civilization was the result of the mixture of the natural indigenous 'pre-Hellenic' population and an invading force of superior Indo-European 'Hellenes' from the north. Egyptian influence was entirely denied and Phoenician/Semitic influence was considered highly questionable.

Later on in his researches he discovered that this version of the history of Ancient Greece, which he calls the "Aryan Model", had only emerged in the 1840s and 50s when, mainly in Germany, but also in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, "counter-revolutionary intellectuals saw the study of the Greeks as a way of re-integrating people alienated by modern life, and even of re-establishing social harmony in the face of the French Revolution."

At this time the threat of Egyptian philosophy to Christianity had become acute. The Freemasons, who were at the centre of the Enlightenment in its attack on Christianity, took Egyptian religion, architecture, symbols and rituals as the basis of their cult, seeking a return to what they understood as the natural and pure original religion of Egypt, believing that Christianity was merely a collection of misunderstood fragments of that great civilization and culture. In opposition to Masonic thought and the dynamic seen to lie behind the French Revolution, there developed a growing interest in classical Greek culture as the ideal of artistic perfection. It was seen as a unified but dynamic culture which could also provide a model for political development that avoided both extremes of reaction and revolution.

Gradually the "Ancient Model" of Greek civilization—that the Greeks were merely pupils of the Egyptians who had preserved and transmitted a small part of their teachers' ancient wisdom—was eroded by this hostility to the French Revolution. Bernal argues that there were three other major factors influencing the growing interest in the Greeks and their transformation into the pure and uncontaminated origin of European civilization—the Aryan Model. These interconnected phenomena were the notion of 'progress', the increase in racism, and the impact of Romanticism.

The Ancient Greeks own view of their history, as written by Herodotus, Plato and others, which forms the basis of the Ancient Model, was generally accepted up until and during the Renaissance. In the late 17th century the spread of European imperialism, especially the continuing colonisation of the New World, with its twin policies of extermination of the native Americans and the enslavement of African blacks, coincided with the establishment of two new academic disciplines in British and German universities—*Altertumswissenschaft* ('science of antiquity') or Classics, and 'racial science'. In Britain the study of Classics was supposed to have a beneficial educational and moral effect on the boys who were to be rulers of Britain and its empire. Scientific racism established the principle that different races were *intrinsically* unequal in physical and mental endowment; there were strong and vital races and there were weak and feeble ones.

In fact the two disciplines neatly functioned together in their use of the classical writer Aristotle to justify slavery. In common with many of his contemporaries, he believed that the Greeks were inherently

superior to other races: "The races that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in brainpower; for this reason, while remaining generally independent, they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule others. On the other hand, the Asiatic races have both brains and skill but are lacking in courage and will-power; so they have remained both enslaved and subject. The Hellenic race, occupying mid position geographically, has a measure of both. Hence it has continued to be free, to have the best political institutions and *to be capable of ruling others* given a single constitution." (our emphasis)

In this way Aristotle linked racial 'superiority' to the right to enslave others, especially those of a 'slavish disposition'. For the new academics it was self-evident that the greatest 'race' in world history was the European or Aryan one. It alone had, and always would have, the capacity to conquer all other peoples and to create advanced and dynamic civilizations—as opposed to the static societies ruled by Asians and Africans.

European expansionism went hand-in-hand with its economic and industrial advance or 'progress'. This paradigm of progress, the revival of the Augustinian analogy between human history and the growth of a child to maturity, naturally favoured 'later' civilizations over 'earlier' ones. In the same vein, 'progress' in academia radicalised the methods of study of the new disciplines. The laws and practice of natural science were now applied to the teaching of history, linguistics etc., emphasizing objectivity, proof and factual evidence. 'Source criticism'—the comparative assessment of the value of different historical sources with reference to the social and historical context, the 'spirit of the age', in which they were written, with preference being given to those which the 'objective' historian judged to best reveal that spirit—lent an air of scientific reliability to a process which in effect merely reflected the era and concerns of the historian.

Thus "with the rise of racism, the ancient notion that Greece was a mixed culture that had been civilised by Africans and Semites became not only abominable but unscientific. Just as one had to discount the 'credulous' Greeks' stories about sirens and centaurs, so one had to reject legends of their having been colonised by inferior races. Paradoxically, the more the 19th century admired the Greeks, the less it respected their writing of their own history." The illusion was created of historical research progressing through time towards an ever more reliable 'truth' about the past. Academic study in general was transformed into separate specialised disciplines with their associated professions, increasingly separate from each other and distant from the traditional folk wisdom and knowledge of the lay public

Romanticism was perhaps the culmination of all the forces at work. Bernal shows how the movement, although originally a reaction to Enlightenment reason which it saw as inadequate and without emotion, was also passionately concerned with 'origins'. Arising in the face of that nation's cultural 'occupation' by the French, German Romanticism was rooted in nationalism—linguistic, racial, geographic, cultural: the attempt to recreate an authentic German civilization from the German soil and German blood. Ancient Greece was looked upon as an ideal for this, with the Greeks themselves as their literal ancestors.

Nations were perceived by the Romantics to be formed by climate and landscape. But more than that, they felt a particular combination—temperate, mountainous and remote—produced the vigorous, virtuous and primitive folk who were their ancestors. They believed in a pure racial essence, progressively perfected by their invigorating homeland, transmitted from generation to generation not through reason which would reach any rational mind, but flowing through feeling which could touch only those with ‘blood’ ties.

What was understood as the essentially pure racial characteristics evolved in their remote past would appear by the same logic to be compromised by any historical intermixing with inferior races moulded in less favourable locations; especially those who were black and therefore down at the bottom of the hierarchy of human racial classification according to the new ‘scientific’ academic studies.

Bernal goes on to document the reaction against Egypt resulting from this political and academic climate. Stable for thousands of years, the Egyptian culture had maintained a high reputation for its philosophy and science, but in particular for its political system. Gradually this view was transformed into one of a static and sterile cul-de-sac riddled with mysticism: an early civilization obsessed with death, whose attempts in mathematics and philosophy had been sapped by superstition and priestly dogmatism.

At the same time he documents the parallel rise of the Greeks—the Greek War of Independence of 1821, perceived similarities in the German and Greek languages and the further opening up of Greece to travellers, especially Romantics who had to read the *Iliad* in situ. Ancient Greek civilization provided the perfect model of a strong conquering and colonising race with a supposedly pure culture, triumphing over inherently weaker races. This civilization eventually came to be seen as transcending history altogether, cultural, political and linguistic—it became the innocent childhood of Europe and of the Aryan race.

As Bannister Fletcher wrote in his *History of Architecture* (1896 edition): “Greek architecture stands alone in being accepted as beyond criticism and as being obligatory study for students of otherwise very different principles”; and on Indian and Chinese architecture: “From an architect’s point of view, these *non-historical* styles can scarcely be so interesting as those which have *progressed on the solution of constructive problems, resolutely met and overcome*, as was the case in Europe.” (our emphasis)

The final consolidation of the extreme version of the Aryan Model and the denial of both Egyptian and Phoenician/Semitic influence on Greece is clearly related by Bernal to the transformation of traditional religious hatred of the Jews into racial anti-Semitism, and in particular to its two climaxes—first, the mass migration of Eastern European Jews into Western Europe and the Dreyfus affair of the 1880s and 90s; and second, the crucial role of Jews in international Communism and the Russian Revolution, and during the economic crises of the 1920s and 30s. And although the academic credibility for the Aryan model was primarily established in Germany and culminated in the Third Reich, Bernal shows that anti-Semitism, racism, hero-worship of the Greeks, and belief in the infallibility of ‘objective science’, continue to be all

commonplace in 'democratic society', including universities and their academic publications, all over northern Europe and North America.

Throughout the book Martin Bernal cites many authors who have to varying degrees put forward unorthodox views challenging the Aryan model. For most of them their credibility has been virtually non-existent within the mainstream; many of them have given up their research in this area, having been treated as cranks and heretics (except sometimes by the 'ignorant' public), unable to publish in the university presses or sometimes at all, and therefore ignored or scorned. 'Black Athena' itself is published by Free Association Books and is written in a style which does not exclude the 'interested amateur', but which is nevertheless exhaustive in its detailed and fascinating research in etymology, linguistics, literary criticism, music, social history, mythology, historiography, and so on, and is obviously also meant to be usable as a text book.

Bernal says emphatically that he has tried to put forward theoretical arguments on the basis of competitive plausibility—that he is not trying to *prove* that the Aryan model is 'wrong'—but to argue that it has been constructed using a particular hierarchy of evidence in the name of scientific objectivity, and that a different attitude to the available evidence, be it archeological finds, or linguistic studies, or myths and legends, can provide a more fruitful framework for further research. In short, history is a discourse not a search for definitive truth.

Perhaps his greatest challenge is to the legacy of the Greeks as the godlike ancestors of Europe, beyond history and beyond criticism. Ahistorical and apolitical categories such as geometry, proportion, harmony, beauty—so-called universal forms and universal value—are brought potentially into the harsh critical arena of ideology and vested interests.

Hoever, despite the consequences of anti-Semitism revealed in 1945, the 'scientific' Extreme Aryan Model survived for more than thirty years afterwards, demonstrating the hold of scientific proof. Gradually it has given way to a 'Broad Aryan Model' which has relented on racism but still cannot tolerate Egypt. Thus in Volume 2 ('Greece European or Levantine? The Egyptian and West Semitic Components of Greek Civilization') he will be investigating linguistic connections between Greek, Egyptian and Semitic, given the failure of scholars working within the Aryan model over the past 160 years to explain 50% of the Greek vocabulary and 80% of proper names in terms either of Indo-European or the Anatolian languages with their supposed relationship to the 'pre-Hellenic' theory. And in Volume 3 ('Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx and Other Studies in Egypto-Greek Mythology') he looks at possible Egyptian influences on Greek mythological and religious names, thus making comprehensible large areas of what has hitherto all too conveniently been a complete mystery.