

Martin Bernal, 'Black Athena' Scholar, Dies at 76

By PAUL VITELLO

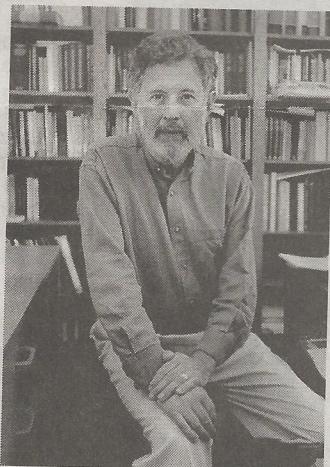
Martin Bernal, whose three-volume work "Black Athena" ignited an academic debate by arguing that the African and Semitic lineage of Western civilization had been scrubbed from the record of ancient Greece by 18th- and 19th-century historians steeped in the racism of their times, died on June 9 in Cambridge, England. He was 76.

The cause was complications of myelofibrosis, a bone marrow disorder, said his wife, Leslie Miller-Bernal.

"Black Athena" opened a new front in the warfare over cultural diversity already raging on American campuses in the 1980s and '90s. The first volume, published in 1987 — the same year as "The Closing of the American Mind," Allan Bloom's attack on efforts to diversify the academic canon — made Mr. Bernal a hero among Afrocentrists, a pariah among conservative scholars and the star witness at dozens of sometimes raucous academic panel discussions about how to teach the foundational ideas of Western culture.

Mr. Bernal, a British-born and Cambridge-educated polymath who taught Chinese political history at Cornell from 1972 until 2001, spent a fair amount of time on those panels explaining what his work did not mean to imply. He did not claim that Greek culture had its prime origins in Africa, as some news media reports described his thesis. He said only that the debt Greek culture owed to Africa and the Middle East had been lost to history.

His thesis was this: For centuries, European historians of classical Greece had hewed closely to the origin story suggested by Plato, Herodotus and Aeschylus, whose writings acknowledged the Greek debt to Egyptian and Semitic (or Phoenician) fore-



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Martin Bernal, who taught at Cornell for almost 30 years.

bears.

But in the 19th century, he asserted, with the rise of new strains of racism and anti-Semitism along with nationalism and colonialism in Europe, historians expunged Egyptians and Phoenicians from the story. The precursors of Greek, and thus European, culture were seen instead as white Indo-European invaders from the north.

In the first volume of "Black Athena," which carried the forbidding double subtitle "The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece — 1785-1985," Mr. Bernal described his trek through the fields of classical Greek literature, mythology, archaeology, linguistics, sociology, the history of ideas and ancient Hebrew texts to formulate his theory of history gone awry (though he did not claim expertise in all these subjects).

The scholarly purpose of his work, he wrote in the introduction, was "to open up new areas of research to women and men with far better qualifications than

I have," adding, "The political purpose of 'Black Athena,' is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance."

He published "Black Athena 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence" in 1991, and followed it in 2006 with "Black Athena 3: The Linguistic Evidence."

Another book, "Black Athena Writes Back," published in 2001, was a response to his critics, who were alarmed enough by Mr. Bernal's work to publish a collection of rebuttals in 1996, "Black Athena Revisited."

One critic derided Mr. Bernal's thesis as evidence of "a whirling confusion of half-digested reading." Some were more conciliatory. J. Ray, a British Egyptologist, wrote, "It may not be possible to agree with Mr. Bernal, but one is the poorer for not having spent time in his company."

Stanley Burstein, a professor emeritus of ancient Greek history at California State University,

A three-volume work started fierce debate over ideas of Western culture and history.

Los Angeles, said Mr. Bernal's historiography — his history of history-writing on ancient Greece — was flawed but valuable. "Nobody had to be told that Greece was deeply influenced by Egypt and the Phoenicians, or that 19th-century history included a lot of racial prejudice," he said in a phone interview Tuesday. "But then, nobody had put it all together that way before."

The specific evidence cited in his books was often doubtful, Professor Burstein added, but

"he succeeded in putting the question of the origins of Greek civilization back on the table."

Martin Gardiner Bernal was born on March 10, 1937, in London to John Desmond Bernal, a prominent British scientist and radical political activist, and Margaret Gardiner, a writer. His parents never married, a fact their son asserted with some pride in interviews.

"My father was a communist and I was illegitimate," he said in 1996. "I was always expected to be radical because my father was."

His grandfather Alan Gardiner was a distinguished Egyptologist.

Mr. Bernal graduated from King's College, Cambridge, in 1957, earned a diploma of Chinese language from Peking University in 1960 and did graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1963 and Harvard in 1964. He received his Ph.D. in Oriental studies from Cambridge in 1966 and remained there as a fellow until he was recruited by Cornell.

His other books, which also focused on the theme of intercultural borrowing, were "Chinese Socialism Before 1907" (1976) and "Cadmean Letters: The Westward Diffusion of the Semitic Alphabet Before 1400 B.C." (1990).

Besides his wife, he is survived by his sons, William, Paul and Patrick; a daughter, Sophie; a stepson, Adam; a half-sister, Jane Bernal; and nine grandchildren.

Mr. Bernal was asked in 1993 if his thesis in "Black Athena" was "anti-European." He replied: "My enemy is not Europe, it's purity — the idea that purity ever exists, or that if it does exist, that it is somehow more culturally creative than mixture. I believe that the civilization of Greece is so attractive precisely because of those mixtures."