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Review Article
Black Athena 2: History without Rules

ROBERT L. POUNDER

Martin Bernal, **Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization**, Volume 2: **The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence** (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991). 736 pp. \$60.00, paper \$15.95.

MARTIN BERNAL ESTABLISHES THE METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS of this book, as well as of its predecessor and the two volumes that are promised, early in his introduction: "I have based my case in this whole project on the principle of competitive plausibility rather than certainty."¹ Undergraduate term papers are failed every day for indulging in "competitive plausibility," and unless we are willing to endorse a fanciful and revolutionary approach to the writing of history, we must, in examining *Black Athena*, subject its arguments to a level of skepticism, and indeed to the application of evidential rigor, that such methodology demands.

Bernal's claim is that certainty cannot be achieved in his investigations. One could argue that certainty is elusive in any period of history, that subjective interpretation defines history. But all important historical analysis incorporates, to the extent it can, concrete, "hard" evidence, of various sorts. At the very least, hard evidence should not be ignored when it exists and is available. Nor does Bernal ignore it, as long as it suits his particular purposes. But he castigates "archaeological positivists," who tediously prefer to see some sort of physical indication before they are willing to draw conclusions, especially conclusions that sweep aside decades of painstaking physical and mental labor.

This is a long book. To illustrate the methodology sketched above, it may be instructive to refer to two chapters (2 and 3) dealing with Egyptian influence on Boeotia and the Peloponnese in the third millennium B.C. Here, Bernal argues that similarities between Egyptian mythology and Boeotian cults indicate the presence of Egyptians in Boeotia in the early Bronze Age (the third millennium B.C.). On this point, let it be said that the myths of many cultures share common themes, even individual details of stories, so we are provided a slender reed with which to overturn traditional chronology. The further claim, that myths of

¹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, Volume 2: *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991), 3–4.

Herakles as a hydraulic engineer should be meshed with achievements in irrigation and drainage in Middle Kingdom Egypt to prove the presence of Egyptian engineers in Boeotia in the third millennium, is given no substance apart from vague coincidence. The draining of the Kopaic Basin, currently dated, on the basis of ceramic and architectural evidence, to the Mycenaean (late Bronze) period, should not be pushed back a thousand years on grounds of a dubious plausibility and without a scrap of physical corroboration (“[a date in] the 3rd millennium would seem plausible despite the lack of any definitively Egyptian objects from Boiotia in that period.”²

An Egyptian presence on the Greek mainland in the third millennium B.C. is an important aspect of Bernal's assertions. The first chapter of the book, however, deals with Crete before the Palace period (7000–2100 B.C.). During these centuries, according to Bernal, who rejects theories of indigenous development (not only on Crete but in the Aegean region generally), there was massive and sustained influence from the Near East and Egypt. It is doubtful that any Minoan archaeologist today would deny the existence of some external influence in pre-palatial Crete, especially from the Levant, but there are no physical remains, at least so far, to support the notion of widespread contacts or occupation. Bernal's polarization of the “diffusionist” explanation of cultural development in the prehistoric Aegean (championed in the 1930s by V. Gordon Childe, to whom the volume is dedicated) and the “isolationist” explanation creates unnecessary barriers that are not supported by the very scholars he cites and sets in opposition (Keith Branigan, Saul Weinberg, Lucy Goodison, among others, on the one hand, and Colin Renfrew and Peter Warren, on the other). He is quite open about his distrust of most contemporary archaeologists, who, he claims, are tainted by an anti-Semitic and racist heritage that dates to late eighteenth-century Germany (a theory expounded in *Black Athena*, Volume 1), but he repeatedly skirts a serious refutation of the conclusions they draw from concrete evidence.³ Instead, he inflates the role of Egypt beyond its borders on the basis of an ill-defined plausibility.

Chapters 4 through 12 examine aspects of purported Egyptian and Levantine influence on Greece in the Bronze Age. The most striking feature of Bernal's arguments in these pages is a resurrection of theories popular in the 1920s and 1930s (espoused by Childe, for example) that made the Hyksos, a shadowy foreign group that dwelt in the Nile delta in the first half of the second

² Bernal, *Black Athena*, 2: 135.

³ There are many instances of this throughout the volume, and space does not permit a full examination of them. One example, however, is Colin Renfrew's theory (expounded in *The Emergence of Civilisation: The Cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millennium B.C.* [London, 1973], 110) regarding Early Bronze Age buildings in Boeotia and the Argolid that he believes are private houses. Bernal, in his hope to associate the structures with hydraulic works that are conventionally dated much later, asserts that they are granaries. Another example is Bernal's tinkering with Egyptian chronology as he borrows from the work of scholars whose careers span the twentieth century, from James Breasted at its beginning, through Hans Stock and Eduard Meyer to James Mellaart and Herbert Haas in recent years. The result of his convoluted conflation of these scholars' theories and research is an affirmation of Breasted's early dates for the 7th through 11th dynasties (J. H. Breasted, ed., *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times*, vol. 1 [Chicago, 1906], 40–45). Bernal's purpose in this exercise (*Black Athena*, 2: 235) is to assign an active role in the eastern Mediterranean to Sesostri I, “despite the lack of rigour in this eclectic procedure.”

millennium B.C., the dominant force in the eastern Mediterranean. Much more is now known about them, thanks to the Austrian excavations of the 1960s at the site of Tell ed-Daba'a, which the excavators identify with the Hyksos capital of Avaris. The excavators also report that the pottery and architecture found at this delta site point to a Canaanite origin for the Hyksos, who oversaw a thriving trade in wine and oil. According to Bernal, this purely mercantile role for these newcomers to Egypt from the Levant should be rejected. They should be seen, along with the Hurrians and (oddly) the Indo-Europeans who, he believes, commingled with them, as warlike invaders ruling a vast empire from Anatolia to Greece. In Greece, so the theory goes, they became the initiators of Mycenaean civilization. Bernal is at pains to explain how he can envision a role for Indo-European Aryans in the composition of the Hyksos, but his explanation serves only to confuse: "where I accept the Aryanists' interpretation, I refuse to accept their basic Social Darwinist premise that conquest or domination through violence somehow makes a people or linguistic group morally or creatively *better* than those who are conquered or dominated."⁴ The time is long gone when ancient historians considered violent invaders to be morally superior to those they subdued. On the contrary, to mention one example, for many decades the "peaceful" inhabitants of Minoan Crete in the Middle Bronze period have been celebrated and romanticized, perhaps excessively, by such scholars as J. Walter Graham, following the lead of the archaeologist of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans.⁵

Just as troubling as the importance Bernal assigns to the Hyksos is his overarching belief in forays by pharaonic Egypt into the Near East and Greece throughout the Bronze Age. These phantom armies were comprised mainly of blacks, says Bernal: they were African armies. Reviewers of the first volume have dealt at length with the difficulties in finding reasons to support a significant role for blacks in Egyptian society.⁶ For instance, there is nothing wrong with the notion of a black Cleopatra, except that we have no reason to believe she was anything other than a Ptolemaic Greek with a Macedonian lineage. That is what the evidence conveys. Bernal makes a major contribution to confusion and divisiveness by giving credence to Afrocentrist theories that cannot be supported by historical, anthropological, or archaeological criteria.

Thus the heart of the flaw in Bernal's ambitious project. In his ardor to convince us that Egypt and the Near East played the essential role in the development of Greek culture, not just through trade and occasional immigration but through colonization and conquest, he sets aside standards of evidence that are not the twisted constructs of evil German historians of the nineteenth century; rather, they find their origins at least as early as Thucydides. These standards are

⁴ Bernal, *Black Athena*, 2: 360.

⁵ J. Walter Graham, *The Palaces of Crete*, 2d edn. (Princeton, N.J., 1972).

⁶ The first volume was widely reviewed and discussed, for instance, by Martha A. Malamud, *Criticism*, 31 (1989): 317–22; Jasper Griffin, *New York Review of Books*, June 15, 1989; in a special review section by James D. Muhly, Sarah Morris, Patricia Maynor Bikai, J. D. Ray (and with a response by Martin Bernal), in *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3 (June 1990): 52–110; and in a special issue, John Peradotto, *et al.*, "The Challenge of 'Black Athena,'" *Arethusa* (Fall 1989). There have also been many articles in the popular press.

true ancient models. Their dictate is simple: base your assertions on evidence, not on bias or wishful thinking.

BERNAL'S WORK AND THE STIR IT HAS OCCASIONED have caused ancient historians and archaeologists to undertake a major reexamination of methods and motives. His charges of anti-Semitic and racial prejudice among nineteenth-century scholars can hardly be refuted. One can find numerous patronizing, paternalistic, or outright racist references to blacks, Jews, and Arabs, not to mention sexist treatment of women, in the journals. We would be surprised if these slurs were not there, as the prejudice they reflect stems from attitudes that were, and to a degree still are, part of the fabric of European and North American society. The reason one cannot, in the end, accept his theories is because they force the conclusion that racist historians counterfeited evidence. However imperfectly they may have construed evidence, however selectively they emphasized it, the evidence itself remains. And it does not permit the interpretation Bernal wants. Thus, in reexamining the past, we must not cast aside the real for the likely, the known for the hoped-for. The enormous learning that has produced this book founders on methodological weakness and stubborn idealism.

Bernal puts himself in the company of Heinrich Schliemann and Michael Ventris, outsiders who changed the landscape of ancient studies.⁷ But Schliemann found Mycenae and Troy, and Ventris discovered that Linear B was a syllabic script for an early form of Greek. These are tangible accomplishments based on tangible evidence. Bernal is more like the armchair philosopher whose views are imbued with a plausibility that is far too private, whose stated motives seem at odds with the strange fruits of his labors.

⁷ Schliemann made a fortune in trade before turning to archaeology; Ventris was trained as an architect.