

Latest rewrite of the roots script

Black Athena Writes Back
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The title of this book, written for Black Athena by Martin Bernal, will remind readers of Hollywood sequels and prequels. Ratings of its ponderous contents will depend on how familiar reviewers are with earlier works in the series. *Black Athena Writes Back* will be ranked by some, including Semitists, Indo-Europeanists and classicists whom Bernal considers enlightened, as the equal of *The Godfather II*. Egyptologists, historical linguists, prehistorians, classicists and anyone else adhering to positivist belief in the existence of facts or in the unfashionable virtues of consistent logic, historical linguistic sound laws or clear, full and timely presentation of evidence will liken Bernal's sequel to the bloated tedium of *The Godfather III*. It reminded me of Mike Nichols's screen adaptation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But I understand more of the background motives for Bernal's arguments than the hapless young visiting couple in Albee's play can grasp of George and Martha's "walking what's left of our wits".

It is impossible to evaluate the incestuously oblique arguments and half-arguments in *Black Athena Writes Back* without having read and having ready to hand three volumes: the 1,350-plus pages of Bernal's first two books, the controversial *Black Athena : The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (subtitled *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*), published in 1987, and its sequel volume (subtitled *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*), published four years later; and lastly the comparatively spare 550 pages to which Bernal is here responding, *Black Athena Revisited* (1996), a collection of 20 scholarly articles on the views and methods of *Black Athena* relating to Egypt, ancient and modern concepts of race, the Near East, linguistics, the history of science, historiography, and Greek prehistory and history, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers.

Since Bernal himself asserts that "the linguistic argument is central to my hypothesis that Egypt and the Levant had a massive cultural impact on the formation of ancient Greek civilisation", it would have been helpful for Bernal to have given us first a detailed diachronic account of the pertinent linguistic data and how he interprets them. Instead he admits:

"One of the difficulties of this debate, for which I take most of the responsibility, is that it is taking place before the publication of the third volume of *Black Athena*, which will be concerned with language." Consequently, Bernal's lengthy response to Indo-Europeanists Jay H. Jasanoff and Alan Nussbaum is full of untestable claims and scholiastic commentary on lexical items using his protean *ad hoc* linguistic methods. He calls his lexicographical miscellany "The Individual Challenges". Indeed they are.

Bernal justifies by reference to cross-language distortion - an attested phenomenon caused by varying perceptions of sounds and varying graphic representations of those sounds by different speakers at different times and places of lexical borrowing - the breezy freedom with which he

etymologises Greek words. For example, *anthos* "flower," *nitron* "niter" and the formative -*nthos* suffix are all said to come from Egyptian *ntr*. He places heavy emphasis on semantic correspondence, that is, if words in two languages look alike and can be said to have roughly parallel meanings, they derive one from the other or both come from a common root. It is pettifogging of historical linguists to use sound laws to trace any such words back to different roots.

The lexicon of ancient Greek is noteworthy for the large proportion of potentially non-Indo-European words (60 per cent or more). Bernal proposes that Semitic and Egyptian have been overlooked as sources for the potentially non-IE vocabulary, largely because Aryanist cultural prejudices prevailed during and after the development of IE linguistics by German scholars in the 19th century. Although Bernal complains of rhetorical exaggerations on the part of his critics, Nussbaum and Jasanoff included, and again claims that the title *Black Athena* was forced upon him by the Rutgers University Press, he links present-day IE linguists and Nazi ideologists through his chapter title "*Ausnahmslosigkeit* [Exceptionlessness] *über Alles*". As George says to Martha: "You have ugly talents."

Previous attempts to identify the extent of Semitic and Egyptian loan words in Greek are dismissed as flawed by rigid IE linguistic principles. These include two articles in the enemy's journal *Glotta* (Bertrand Hemmerdinger and A. G. McGready, 1968) and a full monograph by Emilia Masson (1967) working under the direction of Pierre Chantraine, author of the standard Greek etymological dictionary. Masson uses all previous work on this subject from Bochart in the mid-17th century through Muller and Muss-Arnolt in the late 19th century up through Semitist Michael Astour's study (1965) of the historical and mythical connections between Greek and Semitic cultures. If Indo-Europeanists and pre-Indo-Europeanists showed for 350 years reasonably strong interests in Greek-Semitic-Egyptian contacts and continue to do so - as in Yves Duhoux's elegant study (1988) of Mycenaean Greek lexical evidence for contacts between Greeks and non-Greeks - and have found little evidence for massive cultural interconnections, they must have prejudiced minds and faulty methods.

To what lengths will this foolishness go? Bernal theorises in *Cadmaean Letters* (1990) and repeats here that the Semitic alphabet was transmitted to the Aegean area around the middle of the second millennium BC in conjunction with a colonisation and settlement of Greece by Phoenicians and Egyptians that was known and accepted by the ancient Greeks, but has been deliberately suppressed by modern Aryanists. However, there is no trace of Greek alphabetic writing until the early 8th century, shortly before which most students of Greek script and history place its introduction.

Bernal claims that the introduction of alphabetic writing was "guided by experts under the local (civil or religious) powers". Yet he offers no explanation of how such a purposeful transmission of his non-extant alphabet through the ruling authorities of Aegean Bronze Age palatial societies (and religious institutions?) would have worked. The Minoan and Mycenaean ruling elites already possessed functioning syllabaries (called Linear A and Linear B respectively) of their own creation and used them extensively in daily administration and even (the Minoans) on religious artefacts. Why would they have commissioned an alphabetic script? Why did they not then use it on any surviving documents? What imaginable use could it have served in the context

of the highly restricted literacy of the period? Bernal rejects the theory that the Greek alphabet originated in Cyprus because "the Greek Cypriots continued to use a syllabary into classical times", but he does not apply the same logic to the introduction of his ghost-alphabet c. 1500 BC into societies that used syllabic scripts until the end of the Bronze Age.

Scholars have attributed some non-IE words in the Greek lexicon, especially those with the formative suffixes *-nth-* and *-ssos*, to what is called an Aegean substrate, ie, the language(s) used by the culture(s) inhabiting the general Aegean area before the arrival of IE or proto-Greek speakers. Colin Renfrew has recently (1998) wondered whether the situation may be much more complex and has asked how the Minoan language(s) and culture fit in here. The *-nth-* and *-ssos* words are both common nouns (such as *terebinthos / terminthos* "terebinth resin") and place names (such as Tylissos, Korinthos and Zakynthos). Bernal, citing Szemerényi and Kretschmer (Glotta 1925), declares that a pre-Greek non-IE substrate does not exist because the *-nth-* place-name suffix can be attached to both IE and non-IE stems and because these suffixes are Anatolian, ie, Indo-European. This does not stop Bernal himself, as we have seen, from proposing that *-nth-* is Egyptian in origin (without refuting Kretschmer's evidence). Even if *-nth-* is Anatolian, it is still attached to many non-IE stems that even Bernal does not explain — at least not yet — as Semitic. Thus the stems of these place names still attest to the wide extent of a substrate population.

Scholarship in sub-fields that are key to Bernal's thesis, like the study of Mycenaean and Minoan scripts and languages, is misrepresented. For example, Bernal thinks that the later Greek word (*h*)*arma* is wrongly etymologised through "a series of hypothetical maneuvers". It is derived unproblematically from the IE root **ar* and the Mycenaean attestation *a-mo* is consistent with the later form morphologically, phonologically, and semantically. In 1400-1200 BC *a-mo* means "joined thing", ie "chariot wheel". In Homer and later historical Greek (*h*)*arma* still means "joined thing" and often occurs in the plural (*h*)*armata* "the joined things" to signify a single chariot. The manufacture and assembly of chariot wheels and other components required the most high-tech kind of joinery work in both periods.

Bernal asserts that Cyrus Gordon in *Evidence for the Minoan Language* (1966) deciphered Minoan Linear A and identified in it "many" Semitic words. What did Gordon himself say he had done? In the entire Linear A corpus he offered possible Semitic interpretations for a mere 15 common nouns, half of them words for material objects. He considered these and these alone as sufficiently "fixed by context". Bernal's assertion will also surprise the dozen or so scholars after Gordon who have proposed alternative decipherments of Linear A, including a different Semitic decipherment, or have demonstrated that none of the proposed decipherments is valid. According to Margalit Finkelberg of [Tel Aviv University](#) (2001), "the lack of agreement in both vocal and consonantal system practically excludes the possibility that the language of Linear A can be identified as a Semitic language".

But this is nothing new. Emmett L. Bennett Jr long ago (1968) pointed out Gordon's misreadings of Linear A signs and similar basic mistakes that invalidate other proposed decipherments. For example, what Gordon and Bernal read as *ya-ne* (interpreted as the Hebrew word for wine) is actually *ya-si*. Bennett thought for a moment that no more than one decipherment could be right. His sober second thought should comfort those who cannot evaluate Bernal's etymologies and

speculations about prehistory and history: "Further thought convinces me that they are probably all right - each in its own of those simultaneous universes, to which the science fiction writers have introduced us, and with which we communicate only through a fourth dimension."

Bernal's sequel also reminds me of Francis Ford Coppola's new director's cut *Apocalypse Now Redux*. In it the idiosyncratic genius Colonel Kurtz still asks Captain Willard: "Are my methods unsound?" Willard still replies: "I don't see any method at all, sir."

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