

PREFACE

Wim van Binsbergen

This book reflects the intellectual encounter, over the years, between, on the one hand, a group of Dutch scholars studying the Ancient Mediterranean, Ancient Egypt and Africa, and, on the other hand, Martin Gardiner Bernal as one of the most challenging and innovative, but also controversial and criticised, scholars of recent decades.

In the 1980s, Bernal delivered his first statements on his *Black Athena* thesis, vocally claiming with new arguments and a new style of presentation, what the specialists had realised for almost a century: that the roots of Western civilisation were to be sought not in Ancient Greece but outside Europe, in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (and perhaps ultimately in sub-Saharan Africa). In the 1987 first volume of *Black Athena* (initially planned to be a tetralogy) Bernal's leading question was not so much

‘what really happened in the formative millennia of European proto-history’,

but rather:

‘what processes in the course of two and a half millennia of European intellectual history have made us forget our essential indebtedness to “the Afroasiatic roots of classical civilisation”?’

In subsequent volumes (1991, 2006) and in Bernal's collection of critical responses (2001),¹ the perspective more and more shifted, from European intellectual history, to a highly controversial reconstruction, largely based on linguistic arguments, of the cultural relations between Ancient Egypt and Aegean region (today: Greece and Western Turkey) in the Middle and Late Bronze Age (c. 2000-1200 BCE). Wreaking havoc in

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¹ Cf. Bernal, Martin Gardiner, 1987-2006, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol. I* (1987), *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1987; Vol. II* (1991), *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence; Vol. III* (2006), *The Linguistic Evidence*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press; Bernal, M. Gardiner, (D. Chioni Moore, ed.), 2001, *Black Athena writes back: Martin Bernal responds to his critics*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.

the Western identitary and cultural self-image; addressing issues that directly relate to the main trends of contemporary history and sociology (racism, exclusion, cultural domination, White and Western / North Atlantic hegemony, and the latter's challenge by representatives of other continents and other cultures); and combining an inveterate tendency to champion theories outside the specialist mainstream with a passion for *ad-hominem* arguments derived from his personal sociology of knowledge, – Bernal blazed a trail of polemics and conflicts throughout a considerable number of international scholarly fields, conferences, and learned journals.

For the present collection, the core was laid in one such conference, at the Leiden African Studies Centre, 1996; and part of it was originally published as a special issue of the peer-reviewed international archaeological journal *TAAANTA* (vol. XXVIII-XXIX, 1996-1997). Our thanks are due to the journal's editors at the time, Jan Stronk and Maarten de Weerd, for facilitating the original publication and its present updated reprint. Expanded and brought up to date, also the present collection in its final form inevitably reflects these controversies, but its overall orientation is rather more positive. With three original contributions by Martin Bernal himself, the other contributors have sought to combine an unrelenting specialist critical perspective with emphasis on what is new, inspiring, illuminating, and possibly lasting, in Bernal's work.

Here we need to appreciate, in the first place, that Bernal has been an important factor in putting Eurocentrism and North Atlantic hegemony on the scholarly agenda. He thus made a lasting contribution to the liberation of Asian and African difference,² and to scholarly production's self-reflexive awareness of its responsible, even though dependent, position within the global politics of knowledge. This *principal* aspect of Bernal's work converges with the global movement of Afrocentrism, and his work features prominently in recent devastating criticisms of Afrocentrism. Therefore it was decided to broaden the present collection's base by a more general, largely positive, discussion of Afrocentrism. Part of the violent debate around Bernal has been fed by his unique personality and another part by his idiosyncratic choice of empirical positions in research – but much was fed by the ideological positions of others, resenting and combating not the contents but the stance of his counter-hegemonic scholarship. On this crucial point, it is one of the present collection's aims to help distinguish between ideological conflict and detached, empirically-based scientific debate – and thus to lend to Bernal the support and defence he deserves.

However, in regard of the substantial empirical issues that Bernal has

² On the specific meaning of this philosophical expression, cf. Mudimbe, Valentin Y., 1997, *Tales of faith: Religion as political performance in Central Africa: Jordan Lectures 1993*, London & Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press; *idem*, 1992, 'Saint Paul-Michel Foucault?', *Transition*, 57: 122-172.

addressed in his work, the present collection by and large takes a less positive, intermediary position. Most of the contributors are critical of his scientific methods and of his claimed results. Support for Bernal's claim of substantial Egyptian influence on the Aegean is, however, the thrust of Jan Best's and Fred Woudhuizen's papers on the Cretan script. Alternatively, Arno Egberts and Josine Blok are dismissive in their discussion of Bernal's key etymology explaining the name of the Greek goddess Athena from an alleged Egyptian prototype, and of his treatment of nineteenth century classical scholarship in Europe. Wim van Binsbergen's theoretical and epistemological opening piece (misread by some of Bernal's opponents as further devastating criticism in the line of *Black Athena revisited*)³ critically brings out Bernal's unmistakable achievements, while turning the admitted shortcomings of his work into an exhortation towards sustained interdisciplinary collaboration on the issues raised by Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis – 'the job has been simply too big for one man'. In van Binsbergen's Africa-centred Chapter 9 (that originally concluded this collection in the *TAMANTA* version) he applies Bernal's inspiration to the global comparative and historical study of selected, relatively minor items of formalised culture (mankala board games and geomantic divination), and here seems to find confirmation of the Bernallian / Afrocentrist schema. However, van Binsbergen's subsequent research since the late 1990s has taken on a much broader range of subjects for transcontinental comparison, and has more effectively mobilised population genetics, long-range linguistics, archaeology and comparative mythology as ancillary sciences. This left him with the sobering conclusion of the collection's final piece: *we cannot treat any proposed South-North cultural influence of sub-Saharan Africa upon the Mediterranean (via Ancient Egypt), and thus upon Eurasia at large, as an independent and all-explaining factor*; instead, the communalities between Greece and Egypt are to be explained, largely, from a common West Asian / Mediterranean source in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, for which 'Pelasgian' seems a fitting name – good at least for another round of controversy *à la* the *Black Athena* debate. This also leads to a totally different interpretation of the relation between Egyptian Neith and Greek Athena, and of the etymology of their names.

On the point of empirical research, therefore, this collection – apart from Bernal's own contributions – takes a rather more reticent view of his lasting achievements than scholarship at large seems to do at present. In November 2008, an international conference at Warwick (U.K.) brought together prominent scholars from all over the world, to make up the balance of 21 years of scholarly debate of the *Black Athena* thesis. Their papers, currently being prepared for publication in a context unrelated to

³ Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., eds, 1996, *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press.

that of the present collection, made clear that the extreme controversy of the 1980s and 1990s has now largely given way to accommodation. The *Black Athena* thesis was finally found to be respectable, and was admitted to the canon of ancient history – or at least was very close to that comfortable, yet alarming, state of affairs. I use the word *alarming* deliberately; for the purpose of research, after all, is to produce provisional knowledge to be superseded by better research; canonisation, on the other hand, is a fertile breeding ground for ideology and popular myth, as the very opposites of scientific knowledge.

The assessment emanating from the present collection as a whole does not in the least call for canonisation of the *Black Athena* thesis as a mainstream achievement of empirical research, on the contrary. It does however, and emphatically, call for recognition of Martin Bernal as the courageous and visionary initiator of an inspiring and timely research programme, that has meanwhile managed to prompt much further research into long-range issues far exceeding, in time-span and geographical scope, the somewhat parochial and rhetorical question of whether two adjacent regions in the eastern Mediterranean, in a period of adequate and recognised technologies of intercontinental transportation (the Bronze Age), might have been culturally indebted to each other.... At the same time, Bernal's *Black Athena* series (and especially part I) has greatly contributed to raising the question of the global politics of knowledge, from heresy,⁴ to becoming the very boundary condition of scholarly and institutional integrity.

In this sense of maturation, self-transcendence and limitation, we can truly say that *Black Athena comes of age*.

Molly Myerowitz Levine,⁵ prominent contributor to the debate, called the present collection in its earlier *TAAANTA* form 'the most interesting, constructive, and substantive treatment of *Black Athena* to date'; we can only hope that *that* assessment, at least, has stood the test of time.⁶

⁴ Cf. Berlinerblau, J., 1999, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena controversy and the responsibilities of American intellectuals*, New Brunswick etc.: Rutgers University Press – a well researched and fairly balanced assessment of Bernal's achievements, which however tends to reduce the *Black Athena* debate to an epiphenomenon of the 'culture wars' fought inside the U.S.A. prior to the emergence (or creation?) of external, Islamic enemies from 1990 on, and (while being a sociologist of Ancient Judaism himself) to treat the empirical historical issues in the Ancient World as secondary. On the aloofness of Biblical Studies from the *Black Athena* debate, cf. Bach, A., 1998, 'Whitewashing Athena: Gaining perspective on Bernal and the Bible', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 77: 3-19. However, some of Bernal's sympathisers made a considerable impact on Bible studies, such as Michael Astour and Cyrus Gordon.

⁵ Myerowitz Levine, M., 1998, 'Review article: The marginalization of Martin Bernal', *Classical Philology*, 93, 4: 345-363.

⁶ Chapters 1 through 9 appear here in the original *TAAANTA* version; the new Preface and Chapters 10 through 12 bring the collection up to date, which is also reflected in the new General Index.