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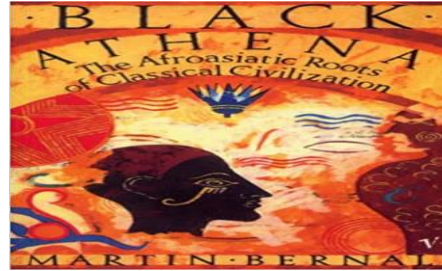
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BLACK ATHENA, THE AFROASIATIC ROOTS OF CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION

“THE ANCIENT MODEL IN ANTIQUITY”

KARA ATHENA, KLASİK MEDENİYETİN AFRO-ASYATİK KÖKLERİ

“KLASİK ANTİKÇAĞ'DA ESKİÇAĞ MODELİ”



Bernal, M. (1991). *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol.I., The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, Vintage, London.

In an effort to challenge the Eurocentric view on the roots of civilization, Martin Bernal commences the first volume of his series *Black Athena, The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* with the chapter “The Ancient Model in Antiquity.” However, to understand what he means by ancient model, analyzing and comprehending the introduction of the book is indeed essential. Literally, through the use of the word ‘model’, he reveals the draft of a belief system, and submits three models: ‘Aryan’, ‘Ancient’, and ‘Revised Ancient’. The Aryan model, developed during the first half of the nineteenth century, views Greece as the progenitor of philosophy and literature that is essentially and exclusively European; the ancient model is the conventional classical and Hellenistic Greek version. Conforming to this model, Greek culture arose as the result of colonization by Egyptians and Phoenicians around 1500 B.C, meaning that the Greeks would have borrowed heavily from the Egyptian and the Near Eastern cultures.

To get back to the chapter, Bernal initiates his assertion by presenting what Herodotus claimed in his *Histories*: that in the 5th century B.C, it was widely believed that Greece had been colonized by Egypt at the beginning of the Heroic age; though such a view has always been scorned by ancient historians. So, Bernal's thesis discusses the perception of ancient Greece in relation to the African and Asiatic neighbors of Greece, chiefly, the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians, whom he believes had an

influence on ancient Greece. In fact, such a thesis becomes a challenge toward the concept of ethnic purity in terms of Eurocentric view on culture, literature and philosophy, and also Romantic Hellenism. In his attempt to challenge the Aryan model, Bernal does not directly attack this belief system; but rather presents issues that contradict the model. Through his argument, Bernal introduces the subject of the earlier population of Greece, the Pelasgians, and the ideas of classical Greeks in this period about them:

1. Pelasgians were mentioned inconsistently by divergent authors; in particular, in Homer's view there were Pelasgians on both sides of the Trojan War. Among these were Pelasgians who came from Larisa.
2. The prospective role of Larisa in Bernal's debate appears in disparate ways. Larisa is likely derived from the Egyptian toponym R-3ht: "Entry into Fertile Lands" and was likely used for the Hyksos capital of Avaris in the Eastern Nile Delta. The Hyksos were the invaders of ancient Egypt, verified as the XV–XVIII dynasties. They were a northwestern Semitic people who entered Egypt sometime between 1720 and 1710 BC and subdued the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom. They used Avaris-Tanis in the Nile delta as their capital rather than the Egyptian capital of Thebes. Under their hegemony, which lasted over a century, they established a powerful kingdom that included Syria and Palestine and maintained peace and prosperity in their territories. Their foremost contribution was the introduction of Canaanite deities and Asian artifacts into Egypt. The Hyksos were defeated by Amasis I at the battle of Tanis in 1550 BC.
3. Aside from the semantic correlation between Homeric description and the Egyptian toponym, it is essential to note that Strabo, a geographer from the first centuries BC and AD also pointed that many of the Greek sites known by the name Larisai were also on fertile lands.
4. If using Hyksos' idea of colonization as a hypothesis, it is interesting to note that the acropolis of the Peloponnesian Argos was called Larisa as well.
5. In his *Geography*, Strabo stated that 'Argos' in Greek means 'flat land'. This correlates with the etymology of Larisa from "Entry into the fertile lands" as the name of the Hyksos capital (mentioned in point 2).
6. 'Argos' can also signify 'dog', 'wolf', or 'speed', which was reflected in mythology and iconography of the Peloponnesian city as well.
7. The core meaning of Argos is 'silver' or 'brilliant'. This also matches the 'silver wall', the most frequently used name for Memphis, the capital of Lower Egypt.
8. After Homer referred to the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in Epirus as Pelasgian, many other writers continued to use this descriptive term for the site. Dodona in Epirus in northwestern Greece was an oracle devoted to a Mother Goddess. Epirus is a geographical and historical region in southeastern Europe, shared between Greece and Albania.
9. Considering the points discussed above, Bernal suggests that the Pelasgians were the earliest Hellenic or Greek-speaking inhabitants who arrived on the island before the Achaian and Dorian invasions.
10. Another Greek historian, Thucydides, also presented a similar picture to that of Herodotos regarding the Pelasgians. According to both historians, the Pelasgians formed the majority of the early population of Greece and the Aegean and most of them were assimilated by the Hellenes.
11. The belief that Kekrops, the founder of Athens. was Egyptian was likely current in Herodotos' day. This contradicts the notion that the Athenians were indigenous to Greece.
12. The plays of Aischylos and Euripides written around the time of Herodotos depict the Pelasgians as indigenous overcome by the Danaos. According to Aischylos, the Pelasgians were identified with the later Hellenes.
13. There is little doubt about the presence of Egyptian and Semitic religious influences throughout Northern Greece and Thrace.

These issues cannot be accommodated in the Bernal's Aryan model. However, Bernal states that some writers like Ernst Curtius saw Pelasgians as semi-Aryans conquered by the superior Aryan Hellenes. Although this perception fits Herodotus' report of Pelasgians in the Northeastern Aegean regions, it

cannot account for why there is no memory of conquest by the Hellenes if the Pelasgians were so well remembered. Bernal further claims that 'Pelasgian' was a term predominantly applied to the indigenous Indo-European speaking people who were colonized and to some extent culturally assimilated by the Egypto-Phoenician invasions.

Additionally, Bernal points to the issue of the Ionians, who, along with the Dorians, were one of the great tribes of ancient Greece. During the Classical period, the Ionians lived in a band across the central Aegean from Attica to 'Ionia' on the Anatolian shore. There is consensus among historians on the assumption that the name Ion is Greek, despite the fact that it lacks an Indo-European etymology. The most credible basis for the name of the native Aones and Hyantes seems to be the Egyptian *Iwn(ty(w))*, meaning bowmen or barbarians. It is also important to note that according to conventional wisdom in 5th-century Greece, the father of Ion was Xouthos, a name that could also be derived from 'St', the Egyptian god of the desert. Bernal argues that St is the Egyptian equivalent of Poseidon, and the semantic connection between the two is strengthened by the fact that Poseidon was the patron of the Ionians. However, Bernal believes that for reasons of cultural pride, Greeks tended to downplay the extent of Near Eastern influence and colonization.

The *Iliad* is full of references to Danaans and Kadmeians, whose eponyms – Danaos, the mythical king of Egypt and Kadmos, a Phoenician prince- would have been recognized by later Greeks as having come from Egypt or Phoenicia. Furthermore, Homer and Hesiod both referred to Europa, who was always seen as a sister or close relative to Kadmos, as the 'daughter of Phoinix'. Reluctant to admit that this could have any connection with Phoenicia, critics have correctly indicated that 'phoinix' has many diverse meanings and should not be directly connected with the Near East.

Ancient historians tended to put Hesiod before Homer and to place them both between 1100 and 850 BC, in any event definitely before the first Olympic Games in 776. Scholars today tend to reverse the order. They place Homer between 800 and 700 BC and Hesiod sometime around the latter. The fundamental basis for this down-dating has been that since the 1930s the conventional wisdom has held that the alphabet was introduced only in the 8th century. Another reason given for placing Homer in the late 8th or 7th century is that the *Odyssey* is largely set to the west of Greece, and it is argued that the Greeks could not have known about the central Mediterranean before their colonization of Sicily and Southern Italy before the end of the 8th century. In Bernal's mind, it is in many ways useful to look at this epic as a Greek version of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, and that in both Egyptian and Greek cosmology, the western islands of the sunset were associated with the underworld and astral realms of the dead.

Further, Bernal discusses Aischylos' play *The Suppliants*, which is widely considered to be the first play, and illustrates how scholars have attempted to diminish the Egyptian aspects of the play. Nevertheless, Bernal depicts the parallels between the Greek and Egyptian mythologies. For example, Io, the daughter of King Inachos of Argos, was loved by Zeus. But Hera, out of jealousy, turned her into a cow and tormented her with gadflies. Io fled to many places and finally settled in Egypt, where she gave birth to Zeus' child, Epaphos. Similarly, Michael Astour demonstrated how the story of Io, Zeus and Hera resembles the Semitic one of Hagar in the Bible. The last, whose name seems to derive from the Semitic *vhgr* (wander), was loved and impregnated by Abraham and driven by his jealous wife Sarah into the desert. She almost died, but God provided her with rest at an oasis where she gave birth to Ishmael, who was half man, half beast.

Bernal, in his dispute against Eurocentrism, also discusses how the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Isokrates, Plato, and Aristotle confirm that the population of that time believed in the legends of the 5th century. A prime example of this argument comes from Herodotus' *Histories*, which was written around 450 BC. The major theme of this work was the relationship between Greece, which was generally accepted to be Europe, Asia and Africa. Passages in the work show that Herodotus accepted that colonization had occurred. For example, "The temple of Athena there (Lindos in Rhodes) was founded by the daughters of Danaos, who touched at the island during their flight from the sons of Aigyptos".

In the early 4th century, the outstanding spokesman for Pan-Hellenism and Greek cultural pride was the Athenian orator Isokrates. In a famous speech given at the Olympian festival of 380 BC he called on Spartans and Athenians to drop their differences and join in a Pan-Hellenic union against Persia and the barbarians: “And so far, has our city (Athens) distanced the rest of mankind in thought and in speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world. She has brought it about that the name 'Hellenes' suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and that the title 'Hellenes' is applied rather to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood”.

The arrogance of this statement is surprising when one considers that many cultured Greeks, including Eudoxos, the great mathematician and astronomer of the 4th century, still felt obliged to study in Egypt. Isokrates admired the caste system, the rulership of the philosophers, and the rigor of the Egyptian philosopher/priests' education that produced the 'theoretikos' (contemplative man), who used his superior wisdom for the good of his state. There is in fact no logical inconsistency between this deeply respectful attitude towards Egypt and his passionate xenophobia.

For Plato, if one wanted to return to the ancient Athenian institutions one had to return to Egypt. According to Bernal, there are many similarities between *Bousiris* and *The Republic*; however, priority should be given to *Bousiris*. In *The Republic* there is a division of labor based on castes ruled by enlightened Guardians, produced by careful selection and rigorous education. Apart from the resemblance to the explicitly Egyptian *Bousiris*, Egypt, where Plato had spent some time probably around 390 BC, figured centrally in *Phaidros*. Plato had Socrates declare that “He (Theuth-Thoth the Egyptian god of wisdom) it was who invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry... and most important of all letters.” In *Philebos* and *Epinomis*, Plato went into more detail on Thoth as the creator of writing, even of language and all sciences. Plato also praised Egyptian art and music and argued for their adoption in Greece. As his earliest commentator, Krantor, who wrote within a few generations of Plato: “Plato's contemporaries mocked him, saying that he was not the inventor of his republic, but that he had copied Egyptian institutions”.

Aristotle has a seat for himself in the argument presented by Bernal. Aristotle was not only a pupil of Plato; he also studied at the academy under the great mathematician and astronomer Eudoxos of Knidos, who is thought to have spent sixteen months in Egypt studying with priests there. Aristotle was also heavily influenced by Herodotos on Egypt and was clearly fascinated by the country. Although at times he stressed the great antiquity of Mesopotamian and Iranian civilization, his considered opinion seems to have been that the Egyptians were the most ancient people. Amongst many other things Aristotle was, of course, the tutor of Alexander the Great. The movement among Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples to worship the gods under their Egyptian names had begun well before Alexander's conquests. For instance, early in the 5th century BC, the poet Pindar wrote *A Hymn to Ammon*, which opened 'Ammon King of Olympos'. But with the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire in the 330s BC, a great surge of Greek interest in all Oriental civilizations, and especially in that of Egypt emerged. It was in the years immediately after the conquest that the Egyptian priest Manetho wrote a history of Egypt in Greek in which he out the scheme of 33 dynasties which remains the basis of the historiography of Ancient Egypt.

Indeed, Bernal's argument can be questioned on its basis of the accepted Eurocentric regions within the literature in the fields of humanities and anthropology, which assume that earlier Oriental cultures were based only on superstition and dogmatism. Bernal, however, should not be read in the context of creating other *-isms* like Egypt-centrism or Oriental-centrism, as this would be just as anti-academic as the previously challenged thought systems. Rather, Bernal's work depicts how racially-charged perspectives of the research fields can deviate from and distort realities for centuries to come, or perhaps forever.