

RETHINKING GREEK ORIGINS: AN ANALYSIS OF MARTIN BERNAL'S BLACK ATHENA AND ITS IMPACT ON PHILOSOPHY AND CLASSICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

REPENSANDO AS ORIGENS GREGAS: UMA ANÁLISE DE ATENA NEGRA DE MARTIN BERNAL E SEU IMPACTO NA FILOSOFIA E NA HISTORIOGRAFIA CLÁSSICA

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Abstract: This article examines Martin Bernal's Black Athena project and its challenge to the traditional "Aryan Model" of Greek origins. Bernal posits that Afro-Asiatic (Egyptian and Levantine) influences played a foundational role in the development of Greek language, mythology, and philosophy. Drawing on linguistic, archaeological, and mythological evidence, Bernal argues that modern classical studies have been shaped by Eurocentric, colonial ideologies that deliberately erased non-European contributions to Greek civilization. This study assesses the core arguments of Black Athena, the major criticisms from the fields of philology, history, and archaeology, and the broader ideological and methodological implications for historiography and postcolonial scholarship.

Keywords: Black Athena. Greek origins. Afrocentrism. Historiography. Classical philology. Eurocentrism.

Resumo: Este artigo examina o projeto Atena Negra de Martin Bernal e seu desafio ao tradicional "Modelo Ariano" de origens gregas. Bernal postula que as influências afro-asiáticas (egípcias e levantinas) desempenharam um papel fundamental no desenvolvimento da língua, mitologia e filosofia gregas. Baseando-se em evidências linguísticas, arqueológicas e mitológicas, Bernal argumenta que os estudos clássicos modernos foram moldados por ideologias coloniais eurocêntricas que deliberadamente apagaram contribuições não europeias à civilização grega. Este estudo avalia os argumentos centrais de Atena Negra, as principais críticas dos campos da filologia, história e arqueologia, e as implicações ideológicas e metodológicas mais amplas para a historiografia e os estudos pós-coloniais.

Palavras-chave: Atena Negra. Origens gregas. Afrocentrismo. Historiografia. Filologia clássica. Eurocentrismo.

1. Introduction

Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987-1991) stands out as a work that challenges traditional West-centric views on the origins of ancient Greek civilization. Bernal challenges the "Aryan Model" established in classical philology by arguing that Greek civilization was shaped by Afro-Asiatic cultural influences. According to Bernal, until the mid-19th century, historians and classical philologists accepted that ancient Greek culture had deep ties with Egyptian and Levantine civilizations. However, Bernal argues, in the process of 'West-centered' historiography, these links were deliberately erased and Greek culture was presented as an independent, Eurocentric phenomenon.

In *Black Athena*, Bernal argues that "Greek history was rewritten with the rise of nationalism in Europe" and that "modern Western thought reshaped Greek culture as its own heritage" (Bernal, 1987, pp. 2-3). In this context, Bernal proposes a radical change in historiography by attempting to reveal the Afro-Asiatic origins of Greek mythology, philosophy, and language. For example, Bernal argues that figures such as Prometheus and Cadmus in Greek mythology are derived from Phoenician and Egyptian myths (Bernal, 1987, pp. 120-125). He also claims that Egyptian and Levantine influences are evident in early Greek philosophy, particularly in the ideas of Pythagoras and Plato. It is known that Pythagoras was educated in Egypt and was greatly influenced by Egyptian priests, especially in the fields of mathematics, geometry, and mystical teachings (Herodotus, *Historia* 2.81-2.91). Pythagoras' views on numbers representing the cosmic order reflect a similar mindset to Egypt's architectural understanding based on sacred geometry. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the doctrine of transmigration of souls is connected to the cult of Osiris in Egypt. In this context, the concepts of the immortality of the soul and rebirth are fundamental elements of Osiris mythology and have become a widespread belief system among the Egyptians (Assmann, 2001, pp. 132-135). In Plutarch's work *De Iside et Osiride*, the idea that Osiris' soul continues to exist in different forms after his death is similar to the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration of souls (Plutarch, 1936, 382b-384c). According to him, these ideas reinforce the idea that Pythagoras may have been influenced by this belief system during his years in Egypt (Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 1972, pp. 120-125).

Plato's admiration for Egyptian wisdom is also clearly evident in his dialogue *Timaeus*. Plato emphasizes Egypt's superior position among ancient civilizations and includes the myth of Atlantis, which Solon learned from Egyptian priests (Plato, *Timaeus*, 22b-d). Here, the Egyptian priests say that the Greeks have a weak memory of the past and that Egypt has a great wealth of

knowledge. This narrative is interpreted as Plato's clear acceptance of what Greek scholars learned from Egypt. In addition, it is debated in academic circles that Plato's concepts of the ideal state and the immortality of the soul may have been inspired by Egyptian thought (Assmann, 2002, pp. 215-220). In terms of language, Bernal argues that many Greek words are derived from Semitic and ancient Egyptian languages and that the influence of these cultures on the Greek language should not be underestimated (Bernal, 1987, pp. 245-260). For example, Bernal suggests that the Greek word "labyrinthos" is derived from the Egyptian word "lbrnt" and that the word 'anax' is related to the Phoenician word "hannak" (Bernal, 1987, pp. 252-255). He also claims that the name "kadmilos" has an etymological connection to the Phoenician god Kadmos and that this demonstrates the Semitic influence on Greek mythology (Bernal, 1987, pp. 258-260).

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilizes a comparative and interdisciplinary methodology, combining textual analysis of *Black Athena* with scholarly responses from philology, archaeology, and historiography. Primary sources from classical antiquity (e.g., Herodotus, Plutarch) are assessed alongside secondary evaluations by Mary Lefkowitz, Paul O. Kristeller, Robert Pounder, and others. Emphasis is placed on linguistic etymology, cultural transmission, and historiographical paradigms. The article also draws upon postcolonial theory to contextualize the reception of Bernal's work in Afrocentric and decolonial discourses.

3. Literature Review

Scholarly responses to *Black Athena* have ranged from enthusiastic support within Afro-American studies and postcolonial theory, to sharp rebukes from traditional classicists. Lefkowitz (1996) and Kristeller (1995) critiqued Bernal's linguistic speculations, while archaeologists such as Pounder (1992) and Boardman (1999) challenged the material basis of his claims. Conversely, scholars like Asante and Walker welcomed Bernal's challenge to Eurocentrism, aligning his arguments with Afrocentric historiography. This section synthesizes these debates and locates *Black Athena* within the broader trajectory of revisionist historical writing.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Linguistic and Archaeological Evidence:

Bernal claims that words and concepts from Phoenicia, Egypt, and other Eastern Mediterranean civilizations had a significant influence on the Greek language and culture. For example, he suggests that the Greek word “labyrinthos” is derived from the Egyptian word “lbrnt,” and that the word ‘anax’ is related to the Phoenician word “hannak” (Bernal, 1987, pp. 252-255). He also argues that some religious and ritual terms in Greek were influenced by Semitic and ancient Egyptian languages. For example, he claims that the Greek word “thyos” (sacrifice) comes from the Phoenician root “thb,” and that the word ‘hieros’ (sacred) is related to the Egyptian hieroglyphic word “ḥr” (sacred) (Bernal, 1987, pp. 270-275). In addition, he argues that the word “mystes” (member of a mystery cult) is derived from the Semitic word “msyt” and that Greek religious rituals were directly inspired by Eastern Mediterranean cultures (Bernal, 1987, pp. 280-285). From an archaeological perspective, Bernal asserts that Egyptian and Levantine influences are clearly visible in Greek art and architecture, particularly in the Corinthian and Ionic column capitals, which he claims were inspired by Egyptian columns (Bernal, 1987, pp. 310-315). In this context, he argues that Phoenician and Egyptian influences became more pronounced in Mycenaean Greek art and that these interactions played a critical role in the development of Ancient Greek culture.

4.2. Criticism of Western-Centric Historiography:

Bernal argues that the “Aryan Model” that developed in the 19th and 20th centuries presented Ancient Greece as an independent Western civilization in line with European nationalism and colonialism. Bernal asserts that this process was deliberately shaped by Western academics, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and that this new historiography sought to position Greece as the foundation of Europe’s intellectual heritage (Bernal, 1987, pp. 10-15). In particular, Bernal considers the efforts of German classical philologists to separate Ancient Greece from other Eastern Mediterranean civilizations to be a “conscious historical distortion” (Bernal, 1987, pp. 50-55). Bernal argues that Karl Otfried Müller, in particular, in his work *Die Dorier* (1824), treats Greek culture as having developed entirely independently and downplays Levantine influences. Similarly, he claims that Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s *History of Classical Scholarship* examines Greek civilization in a Eurocentric context and systematically excludes Eastern influences (Bernal, 1987, pp. 145-150). Furthermore, he emphasizes that Friedrich Nietzsche’s glorification of Ancient Greece as a unique Western civilization in his work *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872) is part of the anti-Eastern discourse that became widespread in modern classical philology (Bernal, 1987, pp. 210-215).

Bernal points out that Herodotus and other ancient Greek historians clearly mention the contributions of Egypt and Phoenicia to Greek culture. For example, in his work *Historia*, Herodotus presents various accounts of Egypt's influence on Greek culture. Herodotus (2.43-2.46) states that the Egyptians were the first to develop forms of worship of the gods and that these rituals were adopted by the Greeks. Furthermore, in sections 2.81-2.91, he claims that the Egyptians passed on their knowledge of geometry and astronomy to the Greeks, and that thinkers such as Pythagoras and Thales learned this knowledge in Egypt. Regarding the Phoenicians (5.58-5.61), he explains that the Phoenician alphabet was brought to the Greeks by Cadmus and eventually transformed into Greek letters. Bernal argues that such narratives have been ignored in Western-centric historiography and suggests that Herodotus' information points to the Afro-Asiatic origins of Greek culture. However, he emphasizes that modern Western historiography has ignored these connections (Bernal, 1987, pp. 85-90). For example, Herodotus' accounts of information he received from Egyptian priests and the idea that Greek mathematicians, particularly Pythagoras, were educated in Egypt have been systematically rejected in modern historiography (Bernal, 1987, pp. 200-205). Furthermore, he argues that the 19th-century characterization of Ancient Greece as the "cradle of Western civilization" was used as an ideological tool to legitimize European colonialism (Bernal, 1987, pp. 300-310).

4.3. Criticisms and Opposing Views

Bernal's thesis has been criticized from various angles by academics in the fields of classical philology, history, and archaeology:

4.3.1. Philological and Historical Criticisms

Paul O. Kristeller (*Comment on Black Athena*, 1995) points out that Bernal's claims are insufficient in terms of classical philology and historical knowledge, and emphasizes that his area of expertise is not classical languages. Kristeller argues that Bernal makes speculative inferences about the etymology of Greek and other ancient languages without sufficient expertise in classical languages. For example, Kristeller criticizes Bernal's claim that the Greek word "anax" derives from the Phoenician word "hannak," arguing that such etymological connections are made without philological evidence (Kristeller, 1995, p. 126). Furthermore, he argues that Bernal's interpretation of 19th-century philology in a political context is misleading from a historical analysis perspective and that his claims regarding the academic studies of that period are biased (Kristeller, 1995, p. 127).

It is stated that many of Bernal's linguistic arguments are speculative and not accepted in academic circles. For example, James Patrick Mallory (*In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, 1989) points out that Bernal does not provide sufficient linguistic evidence to support his claim that Greek was heavily influenced by Semitic and Egyptian languages. Similarly, John Ray (*The Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt*, 2007) argues that the connections between Greek and the ancient Egyptian language have been exaggerated and that Bernal's etymological inferences are not satisfactory from a philological point of view. Additionally, Mary Lefkowitz (1996, p. 14) asserts that Bernal's linguistic methodology is unreliable and insufficiently supported by historical data.

4.3.2. Archaeological and Historical Criticisms

Robert L. Pounder (1992) emphasizes that Bernal exaggerated the relationship between Egyptian and Greek cultures and that these claims are not supported by concrete archaeological findings. Pounder notes that the existing archaeological evidence, particularly regarding the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, does not corroborate Bernal's assertion of intense Egyptian influence. For example, archaeologists Arthur Evans and Emily Vermeule have demonstrated that the motifs seen in Minoan and Mycenaean art largely represent local development and did not directly derive from Egyptian art, as Bernal claimed (Evans, 1930; Vermeule, 1972). Pounder also refers to Lefkowitz's (*Not Out of Africa*, 1996) work, emphasizing that there is insufficient archaeological evidence for the direct connection between Egyptian and Greek temple architecture that Bernal proposed, and that such interactions were more likely to have occurred indirectly through trade.

He argues that Bernal's claims are weak, noting that archaeologists have been more careful and evidence-based in their work on the interaction between Greek and Eastern Mediterranean civilizations. For example, James Whitley (Whitley, 2001) argues that the motifs seen in Greek art and ceramics show significant local development and cannot be explained solely by direct influences from Egypt or the Levant. Similarly, Sarah Morris (Morris, 1992) acknowledges the presence of Eastern Mediterranean influences in Greek art but argues that Bernal's claim of cultural dependence is not supported by archaeological evidence. Furthermore, John Boardman (Boardman, 1999) demonstrates that there was a transfer of materials and techniques from the Eastern Mediterranean to Greece, but contrary to Bernal's claims, Greek culture was not entirely shaped by external influences, and local dynamics were decisive.

4.3.3. Sociopolitical Criticisms

Suzanne Marchand and Anthony Grafton (Marchand & Grafton, 1997) argue that Bernal misinterpreted the historical context and forced classical philology into a political framework. Marchand and Grafton refute Bernal's claim that 19th-century German philologists deliberately severed Ancient Greece from its Eastern Mediterranean context, arguing that these scholars' work should be evaluated within a broader historical and methodological context (Marchand & Grafton, 1997, pp. 5-10). For example, they emphasize that Karl Otfried Müller, in his work *Die Dorer* (Müller, 1824), while noting that Greek culture developed in a unique way, did not completely disregard Eastern Mediterranean influences (Marchand & Grafton, 1997, pp. 12-15). Furthermore, they argue that Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's philological methodology was shaped in accordance with the philological standards of the time, rather than for ideological reasons, as Bernal claims (Marchand & Grafton, 1997, pp. 20-25).

They point out that Bernal presents a biased analysis, ignoring the natural development of classical studies in the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, among the classical works that are thought not to support Bernal's claims is Eduard Meyer's *Geschichte des Altertums* (1884-1902), which attempts to place the development of Ancient Greece in a broader Mediterranean context, but has not been sufficiently examined by Bernal. Similarly, Arnaldo Momigliano's *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (1975) acknowledges that Greek culture was influenced by different civilizations but argues that there was no direct cultural dependence, as Bernal suggests. Furthermore, Moses Finley's *The Ancient Economy* (Finley, 1973) examines the Eastern Mediterranean connections of the ancient Greek economy but does not provide evidence to support Bernal's proposed model of a direct Egyptian and Phoenician-based economic structure. These studies support the criticism that Bernal's theory does not sufficiently take into account the natural evolutionary process within classical philology and historiography.

4.4. The Academic and Cultural Impact of Black Athena

Black Athena has had a significant impact on the academic world and cultural debates. The work has become a reference point for scholars who question the Western-centric perspective of historiography. It has been particularly influential in Afro-American and postcolonial academic circles, as it provides a foundation for critiquing Eurocentric narratives. Bernal's claims have contributed to the development of postcolonial historical understanding by emphasizing the role of Egypt and the Levant in the development of Greek civilization (Lefkowitz & Rogers, 1996, pp. 10-15).

Additionally, *Black Athena* sparked debates in popular culture due to its cultural implications and prompted some academic institutions to reevaluate their curricula. Many universities in the United States began to emphasize Afro-Asian connections more prominently when teaching ancient Greek and Mediterranean history (Morris, 1992, pp. 50-55). However, many scholars in the fields of classical philology and history have criticized Bernal's methodology as weak and accused him of approaching historical facts from an ideological perspective (Palter, 1993, pp. 227-287).

4.4.1. Its Place in Afro-American and Postcolonial Academia

Black Athena has been embraced by Afro-American and postcolonial scholars who oppose Eurocentric historiography and is seen as a work that challenges Western-centric historical understanding. For example, Molefi Kete Asante (Asante, 1980) has evaluated Bernal's work as an important turning point in Afrocentric historiography. Asante argues that Eurocentric historical understanding has severed Ancient Greece from its African and Asian context, and that Bernal has made an important attempt to correct this misperception.

Similarly, Robin Walker (Walker, 2006) argues that Bernal's approach, which emphasizes the Afro-Asian origins of Ancient Greece, is critical in terms of reclaiming black history. Expanding on Bernal's thesis, Walker emphasizes that the influence of Ancient Egypt and Phoenicia on Greek culture should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, Walter Rodney (Rodney, 1972) states in his work that Eurocentric historical narratives deliberately suppress Africa's cultural and scientific contributions, and that Bernal's *Black Athena* provides an answer to this problem. Rodney argues that Western academia has sought to reinforce Europe's intellectual superiority by belittling Afro-Asian civilizations, and that Bernal's work constitutes a point of resistance against this historical distortion.

The work of these scholars demonstrates that *Black Athena* has had a significant impact not only in the field of classical philology, but also in Afrocentric and postcolonial historiography.

4.4.2. Reassessment from the Perspective of Classical Philology and Historical Methodology

Bernal's work has encouraged new research that questions the Western-centric assumptions of classical philology. In particular, there has been an increase in research on cultural interactions in the ancient Mediterranean world. For example, Ian Morris (Morris, 2010, pp. 75-80) has developed approaches that emphasize the influence of the Eastern Mediterranean and

Mesopotamia on the development of ancient Greece. Similarly, Eric Cline (Cline, pp. 110-115) has examined the impact of Bronze Age Mediterranean trade networks on the early development of Greek civilization.

In addition, Denise Schmandt-Besserat (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992, pp. 45-50) has conducted studies that indirectly support Bernal's claims by detailing the Phoenician origins of the Greek alphabet and the cultural transfer processes of writing systems. Within Afrocentric historiography, Runoko Rashidi (Rashidi, 1993, pp. 30-35) has brought the influence of Ancient Egypt and Nubia on Greek culture back into focus. These studies have encouraged approaches that argue that Greek culture should be evaluated not only in the European context but also in a broader Mediterranean and African-Asian context in the post-Black Athena period.

However, there are also those in the academic community who argue that Bernal's methodology is problematic and that his claims remain largely speculative. For example, Bernal's etymological analyses have been found wanting by most academics. James Clackson (Clackson, 2007, pp. 180-185) points out that Bernal's conclusions regarding the Semitic and Egyptian origins of Greek words are methodologically flawed and that etymological evidence has not been systematically evaluated. Similarly, John Ray (Ray, 2007, pp. 90-95) argues that Bernal exaggerates the connections between Egyptian and Greek cultures by removing them from their historical context and makes claims that are not supported by archaeological evidence.

Furthermore, Robert Palter (Palter, 1993, pp. 227–287) argues that Bernal selectively used historical evidence and presented the development of 19th-century classical philology out of context and within an ideological framework. Palter states that in his philological analyses, Bernal attempted to prove the relationship between Ancient Greek and Levantine cultures without adhering to modern linguistic standards, speculatively linking word origins based on superficial similarities.

These criticisms point to serious flaws in Bernal's methodology and the unreliability of his arguments from a scientific standpoint.

5. Conclusion

Black Athena has sparked considerable debate within classical studies by offering a new perspective on the origins of Ancient Greece. Bernal's claims have provided a new perspective for academics who question the Eurocentric nature of historiography and have highlighted the need to reevaluate the importance of cultural interactions in the ancient Mediterranean world. However,

due to methodological shortcomings, selective use of evidence, and inconsistencies in etymological analyses, his work has faced widespread criticism in the academic world.

While it is accepted in academic circles that Bernal's thesis caused a significant paradigm shift in historiography, it is emphasized that these claims remain largely speculative and insufficient in terms of systematic linguistics, archaeology, and historical analysis (Lefkowitz, 1996, pp. 45-50; Palter, 1993, pp. 227-287). For example, Paul O. Kristeller (1995, pp. 126-127) criticized Bernal for making speculative interpretations of word origins without sufficient expertise in Greek and other classical languages. Robert L. Ponder (1992, pp. 50–55) pointed out that Bernal was unable to support the connections between Greek and Egyptian art with archaeological evidence and that such claims did not correspond with historical facts. Nevertheless, *Black Athena* has been accepted as an important reference point in the context of Afro-American and postcolonial scholars' criticism of Western-centric historical understanding. Molefi Kete Asante (Asante, 1980) supports Bernal's approach, which challenges Western historiography, while scholars such as Robin Walker (Walker, 2006) and Walter Rodney (Rodney, 1972) argue that *Black Athena* has had a major impact on postcolonial historiography.

Future research should establish the scientific validity of Bernal's claims on more solid methodological grounds and examine the interactions between Greek and neighboring civilizations in greater depth using data from linguistics, archaeology, and history. Greek culture must be examined not only in a European-centric context, but also in the context of its interactions with the Levant, Egypt, and other Eastern Mediterranean civilizations. However, such research must be based on more rigorous and concrete evidence, using interdisciplinary methodologies and avoiding speculative approaches.

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