RESPONSE TO EDITH HALL

MARTIN BERNAL

Any criticism inevitably simplifies the arguments of the case it is attacking. However, although it is ill-defined, there is a boundary beyond which criticism ceases to be interesting because the distortion is so great that the object of the criticism bears very little resemblance to the original and has become a “straw man.” I believe this is largely the case here and I shall be referring to examples of what I see as exaggeration throughout my reply. I should like to begin with the following important instance; Professor Hall states that I call for a return to the Ancient Model, whereas I propose a revised ancient model. This not only accepts much of the Ancient Model but incorporates some crucial features from the Aryan Model, notably the existence of the Indo-European language family and Greek’s membership in that family, (Black Athena I.2 and many places elsewhere).

Linked to this is what I see as another misleading exaggeration. Edith Hall writes, (Bernal) “asks us to accept that the Greeks themselves genuinely believed that they were descended from Egyptians or Phoenicians. . . .” At no point do I suggest this, what I claim is that conventional wisdom in Classical and Hellenistic Greece maintained that some Greek royal families were descended from Egyptians or Phoenicians. Thus, for me there is no incompatibility between the legends of Egyptian and Phoenician settlement in Greece and other myths of origin which claimed that the Greeks were of autochthonous or “Pelasgian” descent.

The Return of the Heraklids cannot plausibly be interpreted as an early Aryan Model because a) they came from Northern Greece not the Balkans; b) there is no doubt that according to tradition there had
been Greeks in Greece before the “Return” and c) the Heraklid rulers were not seen as northerners but as descendants of Gods and Aegypto-Phoenicians! I believe that one reason for the variety and inconsistency of Greek myths and legends of origin was that the Greek past of the third and second millennia was in fact immensely complex. The other reason was, of course, that myths of origin are not merely histories and they do — as Edith Hall quite rightly emphasizes — serve many other aesthetic, ideological and political purposes. On the other hand, the same is true of modern historiography and I think — and I state many times in Black Athena, that ancient and modern sources should be read critically with all of these aspects in mind.

Acceptance of my work does not require, as Hall states, the abandonment of “the sophisticated theories of the twentieth century, which have so much helped us to understand how mythology works.” The fact that myths have intricate and complicated structures and that some of these complexities can be explained interestingly by modern scholars has no bearing on the question of their having, or not having any historicity.

It is clear that not every myth of origin contains a kernel of truth, some myths are complete fictions and some are borrowed from other peoples. On the other hand, it is equally clear that many myths of origin do contain “historical” elements. Thus, it is possible that this is the case with Greece. This possibility is increased by the fact that the myths in question do not refer to anything that violates the rules of natural science, such as an origin in the sun or the moon. They are not even very improbable. Greece is as close to Egypt and the Levant as Japan is to China and the Mediterranean is much less dangerous than the Yellow Sea. Egypt and Canaan/Phoenicia had had considerable periods of urbanisation and prosperity and had possessed the nautical means of reaching the Aegean since the fourth millennium. It was this inherent plausibility, as well as a respect for authority, that led scholars to accept the basic truth of the Ancient Model until the beginning of the nineteenth century when there were very pressing ideological reasons not to do so.

Edith Hall argues that in “a logical non sequitur and a methodological flaw,” I confuse what the Greeks may have believed about their “ethnic origins” with what actually happened. This is not the case. I made the distinction throughout volume 1 of Black Athena and I concluded the book with the argument that the Ancient Model could be wrong and modern scholarship right: “I insist that its (the Aryan Model’s) conception in sin, or even error, does not necessarily invalidate it . . .” Nevertheless, I do believe that what would appear to be the historical kernel of the myths should be taken, not as Edith Hall would have me claim, as “the most vital plank” of my argument, but as an important source of information to be seen in conjunction with the others: archaeology, linguistics and Bronze Age documents and paintings. Inquiry into these other sources has convinced me that the ancient traditions of settlement may well be right. Thus, in this case I am persuaded that the myths do contain a kernel of “truth,” but any correspondence between what the Greeks believed about their past and “what actually happened” is contingent not necessary and I try to keep them firmly distinguished in my mind and my books.

Edith Hall is absolutely right when she claims that my knowledge of the secondary literature on ethnicity is sketchy and my use of the concept is unsophisticated. I do not find it helpful, however, to make the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” ethnicity which she attributes to Weber. In the 1990s — as opposed to the first 30 years of this century — it is difficult to maintain that any ethnus is a “biological” entity. “Race” does not come into it. I agree with my colleague Benedict Anderson that a nation as an “imagined community” is a social artifact. The only partial exception to this is the situation in Northern Europe and North America after the establishment of racial slavery and the resulting development of obsessional racism. In these societies it has been impossible for individuals of markedly different physical type to be accepted as members of the nation. Even in these societies, however, there is no “objective biological” basis for say English, French or German ethnicity. In the ancient East Mediterranean, there may have been awe and fear of, as well as jokes about people with strange Northern European or Central African physical appearances. There is no question, however, that Egyptian, Phoenician or Greek ethnicity had any objective or biological bases. The identity of these and nearly all ethnic groups has been founded on a common language or dialect cluster, common customs, etc., and a common ideology. These are all more or less changeable. Thus, I see ethnicity as an essentially subjective category.
In any event, I do not see that this issue impinges on the revised Ancient Model, as it is only in Edith Hall's exaggeration of my views, which I discuss above, that the Greeks as a people are supposed to be descendants of Egyptians and Phoenicians.

Now to some of her detailed criticisms. I am sorry if my ellipse on page 19 has led readers to believe that Homer had referred to the Kadmean foundation of Thebes. As I read it, I only attribute the story of the foundation by Amphion and Zethos to him but I see how confusion could arise. In any event, on page 85, I state explicitly that "Homer did not mention the colonisations" — referring to those of Kadmos and Danaos. I quite agree with the line of scholars stretching beyond Professor Hall and Gomme to K. O. Müller that references to Phoinix or Phoinikes do not necessarily indicate Phoenicians. However, given the frequent later associations between the Greek Thebes and Phoenicia and between Phoinix and Europa, the existence of very plausible Semitic etymologies for Kadmos and Europa, and iconographic evidence that Europa was seen as “oriental” in the seventh century, it is overwhelmingly likely that when Homer referred to Kadmeans at Thebes and Hesiod described Europa as “daughter of noble Phoinix” who was carried by Zeus over “salt water” they were following the traditions for which we have so many later attestations.

Edith Hall raises Aithiops as a parallel term to Phoinix maintaining — if I understand her — that this term was only used for a fabulous people living at the end of the world until what she sees as the rise of ethnography in the late sixth century BC. This argument raises a substantial and interesting division between Classicists on the one hand, and archaeologists and other students of the East Mediterranean on the other. Classicists still work in the model set up in the early and mid nineteenth century that maintains “Greece” began with Homer, Hesiod and the Olympic Games in the eighth and seventh centuries BC and rose to consciousness in the following centuries.

We now know, however, that inhabitants of the Aegean had a substantial knowledge of Africa at least by the time the Thera murals were painted in the seventeenth century BC. Spyridon Marinatos (1969,374-75) and (1973,199-200) maintained that an African Black was portrayed on one of these and whether he is right about this particular case the detailed representation of African flora and fauna in the paintings makes it virtually impossible that “Ethiopians” were unknown in the Aegean at the time. In Cyprus there are Late Bronze Age representations of Blacks (Karageorghis 1988. esp. 10, no. 2).

There is no reason to suppose that the name Aithiopes was not used to describe such people. Ventris and Chadwick (1973,537), have plausibly linked A3̄tjoqo, which appears several times in Linear B, to the Homeric Aithiops. They (1973,582) and Chantraine (1984,1005) have also plausibly associated the Mycenaean names Sima and Simo to the latter ones Símos, Simón, Simmos and Simmias and to the word simos, “snub-nosed.” Xenophanes (16) referred to the Aithiopes as simoi. Homer’s Eastern Aithiopes can be explained in terms of the Black and sometimes negroid population of Elam, which had especial associations with the Homeric Ethiopian hero Memnon. (I discuss this issue in excruciating detail in ch. 6 of Black Athena II.) I have stated the grounds for my belief that there were many cultural continuities through what are misleading named the “Dark Ages” (Bernal 1990). Thus, even if taken to refer to the Geometric and Archaic periods, the idea that Greeks had only a foggy sense of the outside world in general and Africa in particular before the sixth century BC is made still less plausible by the substantial archaeological evidence of contact between the Aegean and the Middle East not merely in the late Bronze Age but also in Early Iron Age. All in all, while there is no doubt that the term Aithiops was used in a utopian sense, I see no reason to believe that it ever lost its association with actual peoples, whom we should call Black.

Now to Danaos. Edith Hall is quite right to point out my sloppiness in stating baldly that Io was the daughter of Inachos when this was merely the view of the annalist Kastor and many of the tragedians. There was, as she states, the tradition reported by Hesiod and Akusilaos that her father was Peiren — whoever he was. While confessing to this omission, I should like to have another offense taken into consideration, my failure to state that Apollologus (II.1.3) and Pausanias (II.16.1) maintained that Io’s father was a certain Iasos. I cannot see, however, how these affect my general argument. Hesiod’s statement that Io was impregnated near Euboia, and not as the mainstream tradition held, at the mouth of the Nile, is more relevant. The Aegean location can be relatively easily explained, given the poet’s close if unfortunate connections with the Greek Island and the association between the Bovine Io and Euboia. Nevertheless, I concede Professor Hall’s argument here and agree that I should have raised this
point. But it does not, in my opinion, damage the case that the predominant Greek tradition associated Io and Danaos with Egypt.

I am more dubious, however, about Edith Hall’s belief “that there may have existed a whole alternative mythical tradition about Io’s descendants through Epaphus to the Danaids and of course also to Heracles which had a local mainland Greek colour and very little to do with Egypt.” Given the plausible Egyptian etymology for the name Epaphos (see Black Athena I.92) and the fact that Heracles had as I hope to show (see Black Athena II. ch. 2) a great deal to do with Egypt as well as the substantial attestation of a genealogy set outside Greece, I see no basis for such speculation. I agree that there may well have been an Egyptianizing trend in Greece, in the seventh and sixth centuries BC and I do not deal in proof but in competitive plausibility. Thus, I cannot disprove that the connection between Danaos and Io and Egypt was constructed in this late period. What I try to do is to assemble evidence to suggest that this is extremely unlikely.

Professor Hall refers to:

an important process during this period [the sixth century], of which Bernal seems unaware, by which many traditional mythical figures were brought into connection with foreign peoples and places. This process was associated with Greek colonisation.

Of course I am aware of this scheme as it is a mainstream of nineteenth and twentieth-century Classics and I refer to its beginnings (Black Athena I.310). Such a process may indeed have been one element in the construction of the myths of Oriental contacts which we have attested from after this time. What I argue throughout my whole project is that this element was not a major one and that it has been blown completely out of proportion by nineteenth and twentieth-century Greccocentrism and Besserwissen.

I follow Nilson and Renfrew on one essential point, that the Greek religious and mythical traditions have strong and highly ramified roots going back to the Bronze Age. Where I disagree with them is in their attempt to maintain that the Aegean was isolated from the rest of the Near East in the formative second and third millennia with which they have been concerned. I see considerable evidence to suggest that for long stretches of both millennia there were substantial contacts. Material remains suggest that the predominant cultural flow was towards the north-west. This would seem plausible because of the greater wealth, power and sophistication of Egypt and the Levant. Another reason why I am inclined to believe the Greek claims of early connections with the rest of the East Mediterranean is my distrust of the racism and antisemitism present in modern scholarship that has denied such links. This last point is conceded by Professor Hall, when she writes “cultural contact between ancient Hellenophone communities and ancient Semitic and black peoples has been and is still being played down” because of “modern racial prejudice.”

I do not — as Edith Hall states — “consistently forget” that some Greek writers claimed autochthonous origin for heroes otherwise seen as foreign. (See for instance Black Athena I.90.) I do, however, see these stories as less remarkable than the legends of Oriental settlement and cultural influence. This is because we know that Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries were generally xenophobic and particularly hostile to Phoenicians and Egyptians. The force that such feelings generated would seem to more than equal any desire to give Greece cultural depth by plugging it into older civilizations. It is probable, therefore, that there is a tendency to minimize cultural borrowings from the Near East rather than to exaggerate them. This would seem to be indicated by the fact that some of the writers who reported foreign settlements were clearly unhappy that they had taken place (Black Athena I.90 and 104).

This leads to another fundamental disagreement I have with Professor Hall, the relative credibility of Greeks of the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods on the one hand and nineteenth and twentieth-century Classicists on the other. She maintains that “credulity is stretched to the limit,” when we use such “late” authors as Strabo, Pausanias and Plutarch who are “in little or no position better than we are to judge.” I believe that one should treat both the ancient and the modern writers with caution but that one should be even more skeptical of the claims of the latter. In the first place, the scholarly framework, which I have called the Aryan Model, was set up by scholars who had no knowledge of the great advances made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the decipherments of hieroglyphics and
cuneiform let alone those of Hittite, Ugaritic and Linear B and the substantial archaeological discoveries of Bronze Age cultures throughout the East Mediterranean and beyond. Thus, they knew far less of the Bronze Age than even the “latest” ancient writers, who lived before the cumulative cultural breaks made by the rise of Christianity and Islam and the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. The “late” writers lived when there were still many physical, linguistic and institutional vestiges of the Bronze Age civilizations. Scholars working within the Aryan Model in the twentieth century have had much more data than their nineteenth-century predecessors and in some respects their knowledge may even exceed that of Late Antiquity. However, I do not accept that this was true in general and it is certain that Strabo, Pausanias and Plutarch had a feel for the societies they were describing that can not be equaled by modern scholars.

There is no doubt that some modern scholars have been more systematic than the ancients and they have had the advantage of understanding natural science. To my mind, this advantage is far outweighed, in the areas with which we are concerned, by the passionate faith in physical ethnicity and race held by the founders of the Aryan Model and by the racism and antisemitism rampant in the societies in which the later nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars have worked.

Professor Hall, interestingly, implies that I am inconsistent when I maintain that there is a kernel of “historical truth” in the Ancient Model but have nothing good to say about the nineteenth century myth of the Aryan Model. In fact, however, I believe that the Aryan Model too has a kernel of “truth” in that I accept that there was once a proto-Indo-European language or cluster of dialects and that it existed somewhere to the north of Greece, and that as Greek is undoubtedly an Indo-European language, there must have been substantial cultural influence on, if not migrations to the Aegean basin from the north. When, how or in what ways these took place I do not know except that I am convinced that they must have taken place before 1900 BC. This acceptance of two kernels is what I call the “Revised Ancient Model.”

Lastly, I should like to consider once again the charge that I have been taken in by Athenian propaganda (1989,22). This is certainly true in that it prevented me from giving the same emphasis to the legends of the Egyptian origins of Kekrops and Erechtheus that I gave to those around Danaos and Kadmos. Professor Hall challenges me to find a text from the fifth century to back my statement that the story that Kekrops was an Egyptian was probably current in Herodotos’ day. She is quite right, I cannot. It was precisely for this reason that I used the word “probably.” My hypothesis, however, is not simply a projection backwards of the Egyptian claims reported to Diodoros Sikeliotes in the first century BC (1.28-29). It is based on a number of factors. First there is Plato’s report of the special relationship between Sais and Athens in what purported to be the beginning of the sixth century. Then, in the middle of the century, there is Peisistratos’ use of Egyptian-Libyan imagery in the propaganda for his tyranny. Furthermore, there are the relations between his promotion of the cult of Athena in Athens and the promotion of her cult elsewhere in the Aegean by his contemporary, the Saite pharaoh Amasis. There is also the strong possibility that many of the silver “owls” with the head of Athena found in Egypt did not originate from Athens but were struck locally. All of these suggest that in the sixth century there were close relations between Athens and Egypt and, more specifically, between the Greek city and the Egyptian capital of Sais, both of which were seen to worship the same goddess Neit in Egypt and Athena in Greece (see Black Athena I. 51-53). I believe such circumstantial evidence is enough to establish a probable case that stories of Kekrops’ origin in Egypt were current in Greece during Herodotos’ lifetime in the fifth century. If I am right here, this is clearly a case of the contemporary political situation influencing legends. However, I argue that such stories were not merely the result of such pressures and that the forms in which the desired connection was set may well have had some historicity, which can be checked by other means.

I also maintain that there is ample evidence to suggest that Boiotians of Classical and Hellenistic times believed in the connections between the Theban Kadmos and his dynasty with Phoenicia. This evidence is not restricted to the Athenian tragedies but includes toponyms, myths and cults as well as — dare I say it — in Hesiod. Thus, while the plays clearly have an anti-Theban bias there is no reason to suppose that the material used had no historical substance.

The position is equally clear in the Eastern Peloponnesse, even if one — strangely in my opinion — rules Herodotus and the Athe-
nians out of court. Here again, there would seem to be evidence from the respectably Boiotian Hesiod. Pausanias provides detailed and specific references to local traditions concerning the arrival of “the Egyptians” and the cults they were supposed to have introduced. The strong probability that the Spartan kings believed in their Heraklid “Syrian or Egyptian” descent, as set out by Herodotos, is indicated not merely by king Areios’ letter to the High Priest at Jerusalem c. 300 BC, but much earlier by the building of the Menelceion in the sixth century as a pyramid. There is also ample evidence of the Spartan attachment to the Lybio-Egyptian oracle of Ammon at Siwa. I shall argue in volume III that the use of special organizational terms, with plausible Late Egyptian etymologies in Sparta indicates that the Spartan rulers of the ninth and eighth centuries were eager to demonstrate their relationship with Egypt. All this would seem to corroborate Herodotos’ statement that it was conventional to believe that the kings of the Eastern Peloponnese were of Egyptian or Syrian descent.

On two minor points about Aischylos’ Suppliants. Firstly, I did not “go through the play” looking for Egyptian religion, I merely made a superficial reconnaissance. I am convinced that there is far more material of this kind to be found there. Secondly, it is an exaggeration to say that I derived the word hikesios from the Egyptian ḫḥ3 ẖ3st, “Hyksos.” I merely referred to paranomasia here.

I should like to raise another point arising from the difference in our time scales. It is of course ridiculous to suppose that Dionysos or his cult arrived in Greece in Archaic times. His arrival from the East by sea after the establishment of the other gods could just as well refer to the arrival of an ecstatic cult of Osiris, Thammuz or Attis in the Late Bronze Age. The situation is made more complicated, however, by the discovery of traces of his cult in the Aegean from the turn of the second millennium (Caskey 1980).

I will end with my fundamental disagreement with Professor Hall’s conclusion that “what we need to do is to reject the historical validity of both myths [the Ancient and Aryan models] and turn ourselves to the three really important questions. . . . Who on earth did the Greeks think they were, why did they think it and what is it about the late twentieth century which renders the issue so important to us?” I do not accept that we should be so restricted. I see no reason why Edith Hall’s interesting questions should be incompatible with those posed in Black Athena. We should ask both sets. Refusal to examine the historical as well as the structural-functional aspects of Greek myths and legends leaves in place the myth of a purely European Greece that I am convinced is not merely politically undesirable but historically wrong. I believe that both the Ancient and the Aryan Models contain elements that may well have historical value and that these possibilities should be examined in the light of evidence from other sources.

There are several reasons why the ethnicity of the Greeks is important to us in the late twentieth century. Firstly, it is certain that Western European culture is dominant in the world today; there is also no doubt that — directly or indirectly — the civilization of Ancient Greece has been central to the formation of this culture. Furthermore, Europeans holding the gamut of political views from fascist, to liberal, to communist have all agreed that Ancient Greece created philosophy, art, science and democracy. This myth of origin has been widely used to give Western Europeans and their descendants elsewhere the exclusive possession of such desirable cultural artifacts. This monopoly has been used to bolster and justify European military and political power in other continents.

If it can be shown that the greatness of Ancient Greek civilization came from its eclecticism, that it was not a purely European culture and had equally strong African and Asian roots and that many crucial elements of “Greek” philosophy, art, science and democracy had been introduced from the Near East, this would have a fundamental and to my mind beneficial effect on not merely the peoples of South West Asia and North East Africa but also those of the rest of the world including Europe. However, an empty “myth of eclectic Greece” would be worse than useless in that it would lead to disillusion and a still greater sense of cultural inferiority among non-Europeans. For this reason I would not have published my work if I had not been convinced that on the issue of contacts between the Aegean and the rest of the Near East, the Greek traditions were generally more reliable than the modern scholarship.

Cornell University
BIBLIOGRAPHY


