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Stealing history

by [Donald Kagan](#)

The publication by Martin Bernal in 1987 and 1991 of the two volumes of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* gave widespread attention to a series of claims about the relationship between ancient Greek civilization and, therefore, of the Western Civilization that sprang from it, and that of ancient Egypt. Bernal was not trained as a classical scholar nor as a historian of the ancient world, but his position as a professor at Cornell University and his two volumes, packed with footnotes and intricate arguments, lent a respectability to a set of assertions and an interpretation of the past that had previously been ignored almost entirely. These claims include, among other notions, that the people who developed and lived in the ancient Egyptian civilization were black Africans and that the Athenian Socrates and the Macedonian Cleopatra descended from black African ancestors. Some writers assert that Egyptians invaded Greece in the sixteenth century B.C., taught the Greeks agriculture and metallurgy, and in other ways directly and powerfully influenced Greek civilization. There are also claims that the Greek philosophers Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, and Plato studied with Egyptian masters and that Aristotle accompanied Alexander the Great to Alexandria in 333 B.C., looted the great library there, using the collection as the foundation of his entire system of philosophy and science. All of this is seen not as cultural influence but as the theft of a “stolen legacy” whose traces have been carefully obliterated by subsequent generations of white Europeans.

It would be easy to dismiss these claims as self-evidently or demonstrably erroneous claptrap, the product not of a serious and honest search for historical truth but of a current cultural and political agenda, but Professor Mary Lefkowitz, a distinguished classical scholar at Wellesley College, is right to take them seriously in her new book, *Not Out of Africa*.^[1] They are put forward seriously on campuses all over the country both in public lectures and in the regular curricula of classes for credit. As part of Afrocentric programs of study some of them have found their way into the public schools. Few of the students and audiences exposed to such notions have the training to see through or even to pose intelligent questions about what they hear, so there is ample reason for Professor Lefkowitz to undertake her task, which she carries out with clarity and scholarly elegance.

She cites the work of Professor Frank Snowden, emeritus professor at Howard University, and long the leading authority on blacks in antiquity, who has clearly shown that the ancient Egyptians, like most Africans north of the Sahara, were not black.

The case for an Egyptian invasion of Greece during the Bronze Age, she points out, requires us to treat Greek myths as if they were historical facts and then to make a tendentious selection from among them and finally to distort them to reach the desired conclusion. It also rests on childish false etymologies and is unsupported by either the archeological record or reliable evidence in

Egyptian or Greek sources.

Professor Lefkowitz reminds us that Cleopatra was of Macedonian Greek descent, part of a dynasty that practiced inbreeding beyond the point of incest (she herself married her own brother). The sole reason for thinking she might have a black ancestor is our ignorance of the origins of her paternal grandmother, the mistress of Ptolemy IX; in this absence of evidence seekers for Cleopatra's alleged black African origins find what they are after. Professor Lefkowitz characterizes their arguments as follows:

Because we know nothing about Cleopatra's grandmother, it is possible to conjecture that her identity was deliberately concealed. In the absence of any information about the reasons for the concealment, it is possible to hypothesize that the facts about her identity were suppressed because she was black, just as some people nowadays refuse to acknowledge their black ancestors. Therefore (to follow this line of argument to its logical conclusion), even though her portraits show her to have no characteristically African features, it becomes possible to conclude that she was black. The argument can then be judged to be successful because it is *culturally* plausible. No one seems to have pointed out that a generation ago, it would have been possible to argue on the same grounds that Cleopatra was Jewish.

One argument for Socrates' alleged African origins amounts to something like this: to be sure, there is no ancient testimony saying that Socrates had African ancestors, but neither is there any that says he didn't, so he might have. Another arises from his appearance, which was compared by contemporaries with that of a silenus, an imaginary creature like a bearded man with the tail and ears of a horse. Sculptures made after his death show him with a snub nose, wide nostrils, and a broad mouth, features that also appear on a vase painting of an Ethiopian from the fourth century B.C., as well as on that of a white satyr (a creature portrayed as having a man's body, pointed ears, goat's legs, and a horse's tail). These are said to argue for an African ancestry for Socrates. Professor Lefkowitz points out that Socrates' students joked only that he had a flat nose and was bald. Greek vase paintings display such features not only on Ethiopians but also on white-skinned Scythians from southern Russia. Seleni and satyrs were also usually depicted as having the same skin color as other Greek males.

Saying that Socrates looks like a silenus means that Socrates looks like a silenus, not like an African. If we were to use his resemblance to a silenus as an indication of his origins, it would clearly be equally logical to infer that he was descended from bearded men with horse's ears and tails.

The story of Aristotle's theft of Egyptian learning from the library at Alexandria is the most entertaining of all these fantasies. There is no evidence whatever that Aristotle visited Egypt, not to mention Alexandria. Had he done so, he could not have visited the library, which was assembled only in 297 B.C., twenty-five years after his death. Had his spirit visited the new center of learning it could not have discovered the secrets of Egyptian learning and philosophy since the library at Alexandria was devoted almost entirely to works in Greek, written by Greeks, especially to the canon of classic works since Homer and to learned commentaries on them.

Professor Lefkowitz goes beyond the easy explosion of such fictions to trace the route by which they came into being. Two ancient writers, in particular, have been the sources of assertions of Egyptian origins of Greek ideas: Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century B.C., and Diodorus of Sicily, four centuries later. They neither spoke the Egyptian language nor could read its scripts but were dependent for what they report on what was told them by Egyptian informants. Like many other Greeks they had great respect for the antiquity of Egyptian civilization and liked to seek the roots of Greek ideas and customs in it. The Egyptian informants, for their part, were eager to claim origins in

their own culture for Greek achievements, for the days of Egypt's imperial greatness were long in the past. In Herodotus's day, Egypt was a province of the Persian Empire; in the time of Diodorus and later Greek writers it was a part of the Roman Empire. The chief remaining source of national pride was the antiquity and superiority of Egyptian history and culture. Over time they claimed, as reported in Greek sources, that Egyptian wisdom had instructed such Greek thinkers as Homer, Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, Eudoxus, and Plato. The decipherment of ancient Egyptian writing in the last century has made it possible for us to read thousands of documents that reveal a civilization and way of thinking that could hardly be more different from that of the Greeks and could not possibly serve as a basis or a model for the ideas of the listed Greek thinkers.

Herodotus and Diodorus, as well as the other ancient writers who speak of Egypt, knew nothing of any of this but relied on what they were told. Professor Lefkowitz ingeniously explains why their Egyptian informants made their implausible claims by drawing our attention to similar claims made by the ancient Jews and Christians.

The Jews who lived in Alexandria in the centuries after its foundation sought to show that, although they were ruled by the Greeks, Jewish writings and teachers had inspired much of Greek culture. They claimed that the mythical Greek singer Musaeus was really Moses. Aristobulus, an Alexandrian Jew of the second century B.C., wrote verses that he attributed to such famous Greek writers as Sophocles, showing them to believe in a single male God such as that of the Jews. He asserted that Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato had studied the books of Moses and believed that the world was sustained by the God of the Hebrews. He claimed that "Plato followed our system of law, and clearly worked out every detail in it."

To explain how Plato was able to learn from these Hebrew writings, Aristobulus said he used a Greek translation of the Bible—several centuries before the first known Greek translation. Later, Christian church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria (circa A.D. 260–340), locked in a struggle with the predominantly Greek pagan culture, took a harder line. Clement claimed not merely that Greek culture was borrowed but that it was stolen. "They not only stole their religious doctrines from the barbarians, but they also imitated our [that is, Jewish] doctrines." As Professor Lefkowitz says, these claims by Jews and Christians help us understand why Egyptians were eager to tell visiting Greeks that the greatest Greek thinkers depended on Egyptian instruction.

It was a way of asserting the importance of their culture, especially in a time when they had little or no political powers. The Greeks were willing to listen to what they were told because of their respect for the antiquity of Egyptian religion and civilization, and a desire somehow to be connected with it. But as we have seen, there is no reason to believe that Greeks derived their philosophy or learning from Egypt, despite their great (and wholly justified respect) for Egyptian piety and knowledge.

The story of how the myth of a Greek appropriation of Egyptian philosophy reached the twentieth century is more curious. At the base of the modern version is the assumption that from early times there was such a thing as an "Egyptian Mystery System," which is what is supposed to have led the Greeks to come to Egypt to study and which they stole and presented as Greek philosophy. For this there is no acceptable evidence. Professor Lefkowitz demonstrates that the ancient crumbs from which this notion derives are either works that are not philosophical or works of Greek philosophy written by Greeks. They used a genre in which they hoped to gain greater respect for their ideas by pretending that they themselves were Egyptian mysteries. These works came to the attention of Western Europeans during the Renaissance. Their message was taken literally, and from them was created a picture of what Professor Lefkowitz calls "Mystical Egypt" (as opposed to the historical Egypt that has only come to light since the excavations and translation of real Egyptian writings in the nineteenth century), which won considerable attention and respect.

The greatest influence of this invented Egypt came through its adoption in the eighteenth century by the Freemasons. Their version assumed not only the existence of an Egyptian Mystery System but one that was connected to a great system of moral education. The source for these notions was entirely fictional, a three-volume novel called *Sethos, a History or Biography, based on Unpublished Memoirs of Ancient Egypt*, published in 1731 by a French priest, the Abbé Jean Terrasson. Following the ancient convention, the author pretends to be translating an unknown manuscript written by an unknown Greek of the second century A.D. Ostensibly describing the Egypt of the thirteenth century B.C., Terrasson depicts a world of advanced science, technology, art, law, and educational institutions such as would delight the imagination of a forward-looking eighteenth-century European gentleman. Access to it requires the comprehension of a complex system of mysteries prepared for by study, moral purification, and entered by means of a mystical initiation ceremony.

Father Terrasson's novel became very popular and powerfully shaped the beliefs, practices, and rituals of the Masonic movement, whose reliance on a mythical, mystical, Egyptian tradition is perhaps most widely known in its depiction by Mozart in his *Magic Flute*. This picture of ancient Egypt was soon forgotten by everyone else and, before long, totally discredited by the discoveries of scientific Egyptology. It remained, however, the one preserved among the Masons, and it was from black Masons that the claim arose that not only had the Greeks learned their philosophy, they had stolen it from the Egyptians, who were black Africans, and deliberately attempted to conceal the theft.

During the nineteenth century, black American writers claimed that the ancient Egyptians were black and took pride in the belief that their ancestors had built the pyramids, "that this race of black men ... is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences, and even the use of speech." The idea was adopted by the black Masons, one of whom wrote as follows:

When the ancestors of the present haughty Saxons—the Gauls, the Normans, and the Celts—were naked barbarians, living in grottoes and dropping [*sic*] caves, slinging stones at wild animals for food, and eating that food uncooked, there was on Africa's soil, in Egypt, the land of the black man, a civilization resting on the "pinnacle of national splendor" far exceeding that of Greece or Rome today. On the great Oasis in the desert of antiquity blossomed the golden deeds of the world's first Masonry. Here mind was the standard of the man, and natural ability ranked above birth. Every woman was educated. ... Here the landmarks of Masonry were born.

This vision deeply influenced Marcus Mosiah Garvey, the important black separatist leader of the first part of the twentieth century. Garvey was at one time a Mason, and his Universal Negro Improvement Association's organization, regalia, and practices resembled the Masons' in many ways. He also accepted the Masons' myth of an Egyptian civilization that was the root of classical civilization in Greece and Rome, but added two elements: that the ancient Egyptians were black Africans and that their legacy to the Greeks was not the consequence of influence but of theft.

Every student of history, of impartial mind, knows that the Negro ruled the world, when white men were savages and barbarians living in caves; that thousands of Negro professors at that time taught in the universities in Alexandria, then the seat of learning; that ancient Egypt gave to the world civilization and that Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her arts and letters, and taken all the credit to themselves. It is not surprising, however, that white men should resort to every means to keep Negroes in ignorance of their history, it would be a great shock to their pride to admit to the world today that 3,000 years ago black men excelled in government and were the founders and teachers of art, science and literature.

It remained for later writers only to spell out in imaginary accounts that range from the implausible to the impossible just how the theft took place.

Professor Lefkowitz tells this story in a calm and scholarly way, taking the most absurd assertions seriously and taking the trouble to lay out the evidence and reasoned argument to refute them. This is a great service and will help introduce careful learning and cool, sound judgment to a subject that has up to now badly lacked such things. But why was she willing to spend her time, energy, and intelligence to demonstrate the emptiness of an argument that is so obviously unsound? The task must have been far less inherently rewarding than the more positive and creative scholarly work in which she usually engages. One answer is her concern over the damage done to the students who are taught false lessons by such shabby means for “culturally useful purposes” to increase ethnic pride and self-confidence, and to the society in which they live. What will happen, she asks, in future years when students from different ethnic groups discover they have learned different versions of the past that have little in common? “Will students of one ethnicity deny the existence of other ‘ethnic truths,’ with dire consequences akin to the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia?” Will they “be no better off than the Jews who claimed that Plato studied with Moses”? Will they “have no respect for evidence, no concern with chronology, no understanding of the differences between languages and cultures”? Will they “have overlooked everything that has been learned about history since Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. began his famous inquiry into the human past”?

Another motive for her undertaking is the growth in today’s academy of a movement that attempts to blur or even to remove the boundary between history and fiction, one that regards each as an alternate form of narrative, equally pliable and subjective, neither more authoritative than the other. Thus, the test of what should be taught and believed is not whether it conforms in the most rigorous way possible to the evidence explained by reasoned argument, but by what is thought to be psychologically and culturally useful, that is, to a political judgment based ultimately on power, not on the usual canons for arriving at truth. This broader concern is what, after all, best explains Professor Lefkowitz’s effort. For her, “the problem with saying that Aristotle stole his philosophy from Egypt is not that modern Greeks and classicists will be offended; what’s wrong with the statement is that it is untrue.”

We are indebted to Professor Lefkowitz not only for her qualities as a scholar but also, sad to say, for her courage. Such is the state of American colleges and universities today that it requires valor to question the fashionable prejudices favored these days and to insist that the same standards be applied to them as to other opinions and interpretations. Inevitably, she has been called a racist, a leader of a Jewish “onslaught” against Afrocentrism, part of a conspiracy to preserve white Eurocentric hegemony. Those outside the academic world need to understand the terrific power of such denunciations. Among one’s colleagues, such accusations produce suspicion, hostility, and fear of association. They alienate students and especially potential students, who cannot measure the charges against reality. In these respects their effects are worse than being called a Communist in the 1950s. Undaunted, Professor Lefkowitz has spoken out in the public press and in her own college. Her latest work will make it easier for others with her courage to do the same. We owe her much for her scholarship and for her character.

Notes

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1. *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, by Mary Lefkowitz; Basic Books, 222 pages, \$24. [Go back to the text.](#)

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