

## CONSONANTS IN COLLISION

Neith and Athena reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

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'Der Verfasser möge eine wohlgemeinte Warnung beherzigen und die angekündigte Fortsetzung dieser nutzlosen Bemühungen unterlassen.'

*L'histoire se repète*

The advice contained in the motto was not meant for Martin Bernal, but has been borrowed from a review<sup>2</sup> of a book written by the Russian Egyptologist P.V. Jernstedt and published in 1953,<sup>3</sup> a year which also saw the death of Joseph Stalin. In his monograph the Soviet scholar proposes several derivations of Greek words from Egyptian originals, which are generally considered too good to be true.<sup>4</sup> The rare copies of Jernstedt's book standing on the shelves of Egyptological libraries are now covered with dust, which even the whirlwind caused by *Black Athena* could not blow away.<sup>5</sup> Yet the similarity between the etymological

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<sup>1</sup>I thank Mark Smith for correcting my English, and Wim van Binsbergen and Chris Reintges for their useful comments on a draft of my paper. Its limitations will become apparent to those who read it to the end. Readers requiring a comprehensive Egyptological review of *Black Athena* are referred to J. Baines, 'The aims and methods of *Black Athena*', in: M.R. Lefkowitz and G.M. Rogers (eds.), *Black Athena revisited* (Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 27-48; F.J. Yurco, 'Black Athena: An Egyptological review', *ibid.*, pp. 62-100.

<sup>2</sup>J. Knobloch, *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft* 10 (1957), cols. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup>P.V. Jernstedt, *Egipetskie zaimstvovaniya v grecheskom yazyke* [Egyptian loan words in the Greek language] (Moscow and Leningrad, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1953).

<sup>4</sup>J.-L. Fournet, 'Les emprunts du grec à l'égyptien', *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 84 (1989), pp. 55-80, esp. p. 55, n. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Jernstedt does not figure in the bibliography of M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization I* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987, nor in that of *Black Athena revisited*; however, the above book and a related

investigations of Jernstedt and Bernal leaps to the eye and even reaches the point of overlapping.<sup>6</sup> The disparity between the impact of Jernstedt's study and that of the linguistic digressions contained in *Black Athena* is closely bound up with the different languages, countries, and periods in which these books were published. In the interval between the first volume (1987) and the second volume (1991) of Bernal's attempt to rewrite ancient history, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, an event which according to a recent intellectual vogue signalled the end of modern history.<sup>7</sup>

### *Teach yourself Egyptian*

In his lecture at Leiden University on June 28, 1996, at the occasion of the conference from which the present collection emerged, Bernal addressed various issues relating to *Black Athena*.<sup>8</sup> From an Egyptological point of view, his remarks concerning the possible Egyptian origin of 'Athena' and 'Parthenon' were the most relevant part of his paper. Before proceeding to a scrutiny of Bernal's derivations of these two names, some generalities about the Egyptian language and scripts are in order.<sup>9</sup>

The documentation of Egyptian ranges over a period of more than four millennia, lasting from c. 3000 BCE well into the Middle Ages. Therefore, Egyptian is the Methuselah of written languages. As such, it offers a rich field for the exploration of language change. Large parts of this field are still untrodden by students of historical linguistics, since it requires years of philological training to accustom oneself to the subtleties and crudities of the various scripts in which Egyptian texts have been transmitted.

Egyptologists are wont to distinguish five stages in the evolution of the Egyptian language: Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian,

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article by the same Russian author are cited in the bibliography of M. Bernal, 1991, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, II. The archaeological and documentary evidence*, New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University Press, p. 670, where the author's name is transliterated as Ernshtedt. In *Black Athena II*, p. 577, n. 47, Ernshtedt is credited with an Egyptian etymology of *mythos*; this appears to sum up the very limited explicit use that Bernal has made of Jernstedt's work. I am indebted to Wim van Binsbergen for pointing out these bibliographical details to me.

<sup>6</sup>Compare pp. 49-50 of Jernstedt's book with pp. 47 and 61 of *Black Athena I* (*martur*, 'witness'), and pp. 94-96 of the former with p. 62 of the latter (*chēra*, 'widow').

<sup>7</sup>F. Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man* (New York, Free Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. M. Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena: General and linguistic issues*' (this volume), a greatly expanded and revised version.

<sup>9</sup>Good introductions are W. Schenkel, *Einführung in die altägyptische Sprachwissenschaft* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990); A. Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A linguistic introduction* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Demotic, and Coptic. Old and Middle Egyptian were spoken in the third millennium BCE. The gradual transition from the Middle Egyptian to the Late Egyptian vernacular must be situated in the first half of the second millennium BCE. The first attestations of written Late Egyptian date from c. 1350 BCE. Although at that time Middle Egyptian was no longer spoken, it continued to be used for the transmission of canonical religious and literary texts, as well as the production of new texts based upon the conventions of that canon. The latest documents drawn up in Middle Egyptian date from the Roman period, when many Egyptians had already succumbed to the temptations of Christianity. Demotic is the Egyptian vernacular of the first millennium BCE. It slowly transformed into Coptic, which is associated with the first millennium of the Christian era.

It should be noted that following the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE Greek was imported as the main language spoken by the many immigrants who settled in Egypt. Moreover, Greek became the language employed by the administration headed first by the Hellenistic kings known as the Ptolemies and then by the Roman and Byzantine emperors. The Romans came into power after Octavian, who was to become Augustus, had defeated his rival Anthony and the latter's beloved Cleopatra, the last scion of the House of Ptolemy, in 30 BCE. Thus Graeco-Roman Egypt was essentially bilingual. The Greek and Egyptian documentation surviving from this period is impressive and unrivalled in the other regions of classical antiquity.

In 640 CE the Arabs invaded Egypt in order to spread Islam in a society which by then was thoroughly Christianised, the last remains of paganism having been uprooted some two centuries earlier. They succeeded in converting most Egyptians to the new faith, but not all. The Christians of Egypt, known by the name of Copts, are nowadays an important religious minority in their country. The linguistic effects of the Arab conquest, on the other hand, were overwhelming. Gradually, both Greek and Egyptian were ousted by Arabic, which is the sole vernacular of present-day Egypt. Whereas ancient Greek lives on in its modern descendant spoken in Greece, Egyptian is now an extinct language. Its only vestige is the use of Coptic in the liturgy of the Coptic church, which may be compared to the former use of Latin in the Roman Catholic rite.

### *How to handle hieroglyphs*

Since the last native speaker of Egyptian died long ago, we only know this language by its documents. These have been composed in various scripts. The most illustrious script is hieroglyphic, which was predominantly used for inscriptions. The cursive version of hieroglyphic employed in

manuscripts is known as hieratic. Both hieroglyphic and hieratic lasted nearly as long as the culture that created them. The origin of demotic, the third script used to render Egyptian, lies in a less remote period. It is a simplified form of hieratic, which was introduced as the official script of the Egyptian administration around 600 BCE. It must be distinguished from the Demotic phase of the Egyptian language, which owes its name to the fact that it is primarily documented by texts written in the demotic script.

Hieroglyphic and its derivatives hieratic and demotic are rather complicated scripts, the principles of which need not concern us here.<sup>10</sup> The only fact that matters is their failure to indicate vowels, a characteristic shared with the alphabets used to render Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic. For that reason, the Egyptological transcriptions of hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic texts can hardly be pronounced. The ancient Egyptians must have been aware of the deficiencies of their scripts, especially when they were acquainted with the Greek alphabet and its advantages. Yet these scripts were so firmly rooted in ancient Egyptian civilisation that it took a cultural revolution to abandon them: the advent of Christianity. The Christians who spoke Egyptian adopted the Greek alphabet and added a few signs taken from the demotic script for the notation of sounds exotic to Greek. The resulting alphabet is called Coptic. Its letters have immortalised the last phase of the Egyptian language, named Coptic as well after the Christians who spoke the language and wrote the letters. The Coptic alphabet includes signs for vowels, so that we have some idea of how to pronounce Coptic texts. Moreover, the fairly systematic spelling variations exhibited by these texts allow us to infer the existence of various Coptic dialects. The most important among these are the Upper Egyptian dialect known as Sahidic and its Lower Egyptian counterpart called Bohairic.

### *Sound methods*

The *Junggrammatiker* of the 19th century have taught us the regularity of sound change within a language and of sound correspondences between genetically related languages or dialects.<sup>11</sup> Even seeming exceptions can often be explained on the basis of general principles. The system of

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Loprieno, pp. 11-27.

<sup>11</sup>H. Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (Halle, Niemeyer, 1909<sup>4</sup>). Some modern textbooks are R. Anttila, *Historical and comparative linguistics* (Amsterdam etc., Benjamins, 1989<sup>2</sup>); T. Crowley, *An introduction to historical linguistics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992); H.H. Hock and B.D. Joseph, *Language history, language change, and language relationship: An introduction to historical and comparative linguistics* (Berlin etc., Mouton de Gruyter, 1996).

principles and rules with which students of historical and comparative linguistics are able to operate make them the uncrowned kings of the humanities, even though they will never reach the Olympian heights reserved for the heroes of the natural sciences. The different manifestations of a word in the Coptic dialects allow us to reconstruct its Pre-Coptic form with a fair degree of probability. This 'pre-form' may then be checked against the spellings of the same word in hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic, provided that such spellings are attested. Since the native Egyptian scripts ignore vowels, they are of no great use in verifying the vocalisation of a Pre-Coptic word. To some extent, this shortcoming is made up by the occasional transcriptions of Pre-Coptic words and names in other scripts, notably Greek, Akkadian cuneiform, and Masoretic Hebrew. Given the operation of sound laws, the reconstruction of forms also works the other way round: if an Egyptian word known from hieroglyphic, hieratic, or demotic is no longer found in Coptic, we may yet reconstruct the 'post-form' it would have had in the last phase of the Egyptian language. Here as well, transcriptions of such words in foreign scripts may prove useful guides.

### *Brain-teasing Athena*

According to Greek myth, Athena was born from the skull of her father Zeus, which must have caused him a terrible head-ache. The origin of the goddess' name proves to be a real brain-twister as well, for generations of classical scholars have been unable to come up with a satisfactory explanation.<sup>12</sup> Among the numerous Egyptian etymologies for Greek names proposed by Bernal, his derivation of 'Athena' from *Ht-Nt*, 'House of Neith', must be his pet. Unfortunately, it seems to have difficulties in coming of age. Whereas the pages of *Black Athena I* devoted to this etymology<sup>13</sup> are presented as being merely a summary of a chapter in the prospective second volume, we are told in the actual version of *Black Athena III*<sup>14</sup> that the said chapter is envisaged for the third volume, the appearance of which is still awaited. The delayed appearance of Bernal's explanation as to how 'Athena' can be derived from *Ht-Nt* has kept neither classicists nor Egyptologists from expressing their scepticism regarding this cornerstone of his thesis.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Bernal continues to assert

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<sup>12</sup>H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I* (Heidelberg, Winter, 1960), p. 28; P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots I* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1968), pp. 27-28.

<sup>13</sup>*Black Athena I*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>14</sup>*Black Athena II*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>J.D. Ray, 'An Egyptian perspective', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 3 (1990), pp. 77-81, esp. p. 80 (cf. M. Bernal's reply, 'Responses to critical reviews of

its plausibility, witness the talk he gave at Leiden.<sup>16</sup> At the time, in my improvised oral response to his lecture, I tried to explain why the average Egyptologist is likely to be incredulous of Bernal's etymology. In what follows I will repeat the same endeavour in written form. Since I need not convince my fellow-Egyptologists, my exposé addresses itself primarily to persons who have been wise enough to choose another profession. For that reason, I will refrain from using unfamiliar scripts and content myself with transcriptions, which for the sake of convenience follow the conventions set out in *Black Athena II*<sup>17</sup>— with the exception of my transcription *u* for the Greek letter ypsilon. There the interested reader may also find information about the pronunciation of the various signs employed in the transcriptions.

### *Small is beautiful*

Let us now consider the minutiae of Bernal's derivation of *Athena* from Egyptian *Ht-Nt*. The latter expression literally means 'House of Neith' and designates the temple of Neith at Saïs, a town located in the Egyptian Delta and constituting the most important cult centre of this goddess.<sup>18</sup> The first attestations of Neith date from the dawn of Egyptian history. Her identification with *Athena* in the *interpretatio graeca* of Egyptian religion is well documented by the writings of various classical authors.<sup>19</sup> Since there is at least one example in Greek mythology of a personage who owes his name to a town in the Nile Delta, viz. king Busiris of Egypt,<sup>20</sup> Bernal's explanation of 'Athena' need not be impeded by semantic considerations.

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*Black Athena*, volume I', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3 (1990), pp. 111-137, esp. pp. 120-121); F.J. Yurco, 'Black Athena: An Egyptological review', in: *Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers*, o.c., pp. 62-100, esp. p. 78; J.H. Jasanoff and A. Nussbaum, 'Word games: The linguistic evidence in *Black Athena*', *ibid.*, pp. 177-205, esp. pp. 193-194; J.E. Coleman, 'Did Egypt shape the glory that was Greece?', *ibid.*, pp. 280-302, esp. p. 300, n. 20. A more positive review is G.A. Rendsburg, 'Black Athena: An etymological response', in: M. Myerowitz Levine and J. Peradotto (eds.), *The challenge of Black Athena = Arethusa*, special issue (Fall 1989), pp. 67-82, esp. pp. 72-73.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues'.

<sup>17</sup>*Black Athena II*, pp. xxiv-xxvii.

<sup>18</sup>R. el-Sayed, *Documents relatifs à Saïs et ses divinités* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1975); *id.*, *La déesse Neith de Saïs I-II* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1982).

<sup>19</sup>H. Cassimatis, 'Athena (in Aegypto)', in: *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* II (Zürich and München, Artemis, 1984), pp. 1044-1048. See for the concept of *interpretatio graeca* J.G. Griffiths, 'Interpretatio graeca', in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* III (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1980), cols. 167-172.

<sup>20</sup>F. Hiller von Gaertringen, 'Busiris', in: G. Wissowa (ed.), *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* III (Stuttgart, Metzler, 1899), cols. 1073-1077.

The earliest attestation of 'Athena' is found in Linear B, where it is spelled *Atana*, the pre-form of Doric *Athānā* and Ionic *Athēnē*.<sup>21</sup> Bernal's derivation of this name from *Ht-Nt* presupposes that at the time of the borrowing, which he seems to date to about 2000 BCE, the two elements of the Egyptian prototype were no longer regarded as separate words belonging to a nominal phrase expressing a genitive construction (a syntactic unit), but as constituents of a composite name (a morphological unit). This is by no means impossible, for there are several other examples of composite names having *ht* for their first constituent. Before reviewing these, we must take a closer look at the pronunciation of the second constituent *Nt*.

### *Dissi-dentals*

The words *ht* and *Nt* end in the suffix *-t* which characterises feminine gender. In the earliest stage of the Egyptian language this suffix was undoubtedly pronounced as a voiceless dental preceded by a vowel. In Coptic, however, feminine nouns usually end in a vowel, which shows that the final dental had meanwhile been dropped. Hieroglyphic spellings are notoriously archaic and they continue to indicate the suffix *-t* well into the Graeco-Roman period. Yet there is good evidence from Akkadian transcriptions of Egyptian words and from Late Egyptian texts written in hieratic that the drop of *-t* had already occurred in the second half of the second millennium BCE. Certain peculiarities in the hieroglyphic spellings of Old and Middle Egyptian words even allow us to date the drop of *-t* to the third millennium BCE.<sup>22</sup>

There is no sound law without exceptions, and it is precisely these that matter in the case of *Nt*. The sound law prescribing the drop of the final voiceless dental in feminine nouns implies that at the time Bernal supposes the Greeks to have borrowed the composite name *Ht-Nt*, the latter constituent ended in a vowel, which would explain the last syllable of the Greek rendering *Athānā*. In this case, however, the law does not apply. We know from later Greek transcriptions of *Nt*, which show the forms *Nēith* and *Nit*, and from the Coptic form *Nēith*, that the final dental was exceptionally retained in the pronunciation of this divine name.<sup>23</sup> The most

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<sup>21</sup> F. Aura Jorro, *Diccionario micénico I* (Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto de Filología, 1985), p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> G. Fecht, *Wortakzent und Silbenstruktur: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der ägyptischen Sprache* (Glückstadt etc., Augustin, 1960), §§ 267-276; P. Lacau, *Études d'égyptologie I, Phonétique égyptienne ancienne* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1970), pp. 57-67.

<sup>23</sup> W. Brunsch, 'Untersuchungen zu den griechischen Wiedergaben ägyptischer Personennamen', *Enchoria* 8/1 (1978), pp. 1-142, esp. p. 93.

important of these transcriptions is in its turn transcribed by Egyptologists as 'Neith'. The retention of the final dental is also found in the name of another goddess, viz. Mut of Thebes, for Egyptian *Mwt* is variously transcribed as Greek *Mouth* and *Mout*. The most plausible explanation of the preservation of the final dental in the pronunciation of *Mwt* is based on the principle of semantic differentiation between old and new forms. In all probability, the divine name *Mwt* was originally identical with the word *mwt*, 'mother', which survived in the Coptic form *maau*, exhibiting the regular drop of *-t*. Thus the old form of the word became the name of a goddess, whereas the new form retained the meaning 'mother'.<sup>24</sup> The same principle must have been operative in the case of *Nt*, if we suppose that the preservation of the final dental served to differentiate the divine name from *nt*, 'water', and *nt*, 'crown', which we know from hieroglyphic evidence to have dropped the *-t*. This does not necessarily mean that when the drop had not yet occurred, 'Neith', 'water', and 'crown' were different meanings of one and the same word *nt*, for this unvocalised transcription might just as well stand for three different words sharing the same consonants. It should be noted, though, that the representations of Neith consistently show her wearing the crown called *nt*, whereas her association with water is attested by a wealth of sources from all periods of Egyptian history. These interconnections may point to a common origin of the three concepts. Alternatively, their intertwining may be the result of theological speculations by the ancient Egyptian priests, who viewed phonetic and orthographic resemblances between words as a token of semantic coherence.<sup>25</sup>

Let us leave the speculations to the Egyptians and return to matters of fact. My first objection against Bernal's derivation of 'Athena' from *Ht-Nt* follows from what has been said above: where did the final dental go after its arrival in Greece? According to Bernal, this 'objection is not serious because Greek did not tolerate final *-ts*'.<sup>26</sup> This peremptory statement is wrong, as shown for example by the Greek transcriptions of the name of the Egyptian god Thot ending in *-t* or *-th*.<sup>27</sup> Even if it were true, the Greeks could have easily solved the problem by adding an ending taken from their native language, as they often did in the case of Greek transcriptions of Egyptian names (e.g. *Aiguptos* and *Nephtus*, to be discussed in the next section). Bernal's view implies that the speakers of

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 123-128.

<sup>25</sup>A. Egberts, 'Hearts of stone: Temples and their inscriptions in Graeco-Roman Egypt', *Dutch Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures*, 2 (1996), pp. 27-42, esp. pp. 34-35.

<sup>26</sup>M. Bernal, 'Responses', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, esp. p. 120.

<sup>27</sup>Brunsch, p. 105.



Greek simply dropped the consonants they did not like. On such an assumption, anything goes.

### *How does house sound?*

My next task is to establish the pronunciation of *ht*, the first constituent of the purported Egyptian prototype of 'Athena'. According to Bernal, it is reflected in the element *Ath-* of the Greek name. This suggests that here we have yet another exception to the sound law of Egyptian prescribing the drop of the final voiceless dental in feminine nouns. In order to evaluate Bernal's argument, we must first take a closer look at the Coptic (Co.) and Greek (Gr.) transcriptions of *ht* and the composite words and names in which it occurs. I have collected the following examples:

- 1) Co. *hō*, 'tomb' < *ht*, 'house'<sup>28</sup>
- 2) Co. *Hou* < *Ht(-Shmt)*, 'Hu'<sup>29</sup>
- 3) Gr. *Nathō* < *N3-t3-ht*, 'Natho'<sup>30</sup>
- 4) Gr. *Auaris* < *Ht-w'rt*, 'Avaris'<sup>31</sup>
- 5) Co. *Houōr* < *Ht-wr* < *Hr-wr*, 'Hur'<sup>32</sup>
- 6) Gr. *Thunabounoun* < *T3-ht-Nbwnn*, 'The house of Nabunun'<sup>33</sup>
- 7) Co. *Hnēs* < *Ht-nn-nsw*, 'Ahnas el-Medina'<sup>34</sup>
- 8) Co. *henēte*, 'monastery' < *ht-ntr*, 'temple' (literally: 'house of god')<sup>35</sup>
- 9) Gr. *Asphunis* < *Hsfn* < *Ht-Snfrw*, 'Asfun'<sup>36</sup>
- 10) Gr. *Aiguptos*<sup>37</sup> < *Ht-k3-Pth*, 'Memphis'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>J. Osing, *Die Nominalbildung des Ägyptischen* (Mainz am Rhein, von Zabern, 1976), p. 476; cf. W. Vycichl, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte* (Louvain, Peeters, 1983), p. 287.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 287. Hu is an ancient town in Middle Egypt, called Diospolis by the Greeks.

<sup>30</sup>W. Helck, 'Natho', in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1982), cols. 354-355. Natho is the name of two ancient towns in Lower Egypt, called Leontopolis by the Greeks.

<sup>31</sup>Vycichl, p. 237. Avaris is an ancient town in Lower Egypt, presently known as Tell el-Dab'a.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 314; Fecht, § 293. Hur is an ancient town in Middle Egypt.

<sup>33</sup>W. Clarysse and J. Quaegebeur, 'Ibion, Isieion and Tharesieion in two Oslo papyri', *Symbolae Osloenses* 57 (1982), pp. 69-85, esp. p. 79. This expression designates the funerary temple of the high priest of Amun commonly called Nebwenenef by Egyptologists.

<sup>34</sup>Vycichl, pp. 305-306; Fecht, §§ 30 and 38; Osing, p. 476. Ahnas el-Medina is an ancient town in Middle Egypt, called Herakleopolis by the Greeks.

<sup>35</sup>Fecht, §§ 206 and 257; Osing, pp. 315 and 441. This etymology has been questioned by Vycichl, p. 306.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 205; Fecht, § 60, n. 112. Asfun is an ancient town in Upper Egypt.

<sup>37</sup>Already attested in Linear B in the personal name *Aikupitiyo* > *Aiguptios*. See J.K. McArthur, *Place-names in the Knossos tablets: Identification and location* (Salamanca, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1993), p. 35; E.H. Cline, *Sailing the*

- 11) Co. *Atripe* < *Ht-t3-rpyt*, 'Triphion'<sup>39</sup>
- 12) Co. *Athrēbe*, Gr. *Athribis* < *Ht-ḥry-īb*, 'Athribis'<sup>40</sup>
- 13) Co. *Hathōr*, Gr. *Athur* < *Ht-Hr*, 'Hathor'<sup>41</sup>
- 14) Co. *Nebthō*, Gr. *Nephtus* < *Nbt-ht*, 'Nephtys'<sup>42</sup>

In examples 1-11 and 14 *ht* has dropped the final dental. In examples 1-3 and 14 this must be the result of our sound law. The same law may have determined the pronunciation of the remaining examples, if the composites in question came into existence after *ht* had already dropped its *-t*. In the case of composites dating from a more remote age, the *-t* of *ht* must have been assimilated to the following consonant.

The most interesting examples are 12 and 13, for in these cases *ht* was pronounced as *at*. It is this form that set Bernal on the track of his daring derivation of 'Athena'. The preservation of the dental in these examples has been plausibly explained as a case of partial assimilation.<sup>43</sup> The following *h*, called a laryngeal spirant in scholarly jargon, merged with the preceding *t*. This resulted in the aspirated dental *th*. The same phenomenon happens to be observable in example 14, where the first constituent *nbt* exceptionally retains the final dental under the influence of the following spirant. The latter compensated for its disappearance by modifying the nature of the preceding dental, which thereby became aspirated. The preservation of the dental shows that the names 'Athribis', 'Hathor' and 'Nephtys' must have originated before the drop of the final dental of feminine nouns occurred. The ancient Egyptians themselves were aware of the special status of these names in comparison with other composites, for late hieroglyphic and demotic spellings sometimes insert a *t* between their two constituents.<sup>44</sup> Mostly, this *t* is expressed by means of the hieroglyph for *t3* (> Co. *to*), 'land'. Especially in the case of 'Athribis', this spelling

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*wine-dark sea: International trade and the Late Bronze Aegean* (Oxford, Tempus Reparatum, 1994), p. 128.

<sup>38</sup>Vycichl, pp. 5 and 519; Fecht, § 426, n. 594. Memphis was the capital of ancient Egypt. *Ht-k3-Pth* came to denote the entire land by *pars pro toto*.

<sup>39</sup>Vycichl, p. 18; Osing, p. 471. Triphion is an ancient town near Wannina in Middle Egypt.

<sup>40</sup>Vycichl, p. 18; Fecht, §§ 119-126; Ósing, p. 429; P. Vernus, *Athribis: Textes et documents relatifs à la géographie, aux cultes et à l'histoire d'une ville du Delta égyptien à l'époque pharaonique* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1978), 337-344. Athribis is an ancient town in Lower Egypt.

<sup>41</sup>Vycichl, pp. 291 and 317; Fecht, § 120, n. 202. Hathor is an Egyptian goddess. The literal meaning of her name is 'House of Horus', Horus being a god associated with heaven who is often represented as a falcon.

<sup>42</sup>Vycichl, p. 140; Fecht, § 120, n. 202 and § 293. Nephtys is an Egyptian goddess. The literal meaning of her name is 'Lady of the house'.

<sup>43</sup>Fecht, § 120, n. 202.

<sup>44</sup>Vernus, pp. 341-343.

may be suggestive of a folk-etymology.

As far as I know, the composite name *Ht-Nt* has left no traces in the Coptic and Greek documents, so that we must content ourselves with a reconstruction of its pronunciation on the basis of similar composites. The preceding discussion has shown that the last dental of *ht* was only retained when followed by a laryngeal spirant. Since the first consonant of *Nt* is a nasal dental, we can be absolutely sure that around 2000 BCE *Ht-Nt* was pronounced as *hvnvt*, in which *v* denotes a vowel of unknown quality. Bernal's derivation of 'Athena' from *hvnvt* forces him to smuggle in a dental in the middle after smuggling away the dental at the end. So far for my second objection against his etymology.

### *The long and the short of it*

My third and last objection concerns the presence of the stressed long vowel in the middle of Greek *Athānā*. Even if Bernal were right in reconstructing *Ht-Nt* as *hvtnv* instead of the correct *hvnvt*, he cannot account for the appearance of the vowel between the two constituents and the consequent change of the syllabic structure in the Greek derivative. Bernal's recourse<sup>45</sup> to the postulation of a so-called 'prothetic vowel' as the first phoneme of *Nt*, resulting in the pronunciation *init* or the like, is nothing short of preposterous. It is inconceivable that a prothetic vowel, which is by definition short and unstressed, would end up by being stressed and long. The ugly duckling belongs to a fairy-tale, and I do not suppose Bernal to have written *Black Athena* merely to amuse us.

To conclude: Bernal's derivation of 'Athena' from *Ht-Nt* must be dismissed, since it neglects the final dental of *Nt*, ignores the loss of the dental in the pronunciation of *ht*, and conjures up a long vowel which did not exist in the original.

### *Black Parthenon*

As stated earlier, the birth of Athena was a cerebral affair, in which genitals played no obvious part. Therefore, she was considered the most chaste, or least licentious, of Greek goddesses and worthy of the epithet *parthenos*, meaning 'virgin'. Its derivative *parthenōn*, 'maiden's chamber', came to denote the most famous temple dedicated to Athena, which was built at the behest of the statesman Perikles in the fifth century BCE and continues to dominate the city of Athens. The origins of the word

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<sup>45</sup>Bernal, 'Responses', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, esp. pp. 120-121.

*parthenos* are obscure.<sup>46</sup> This has led Bernal to another etymological brain-wave, which he disclosed during his lecture at Leiden. On that occasion, he suggested that the element *parthen-* of *parthenōn* could be derived from the Egyptian toponym *Pr-ṯhn(t)*, 'House of Glitter' or 'House of Frit', which designates a sanctuary of the god Osiris at Saïs.<sup>47</sup>

From a phonetic point of view, this etymology cannot be ruled out. We know from Greek and Coptic evidence that the pronunciation of the word *pr*, which has a fairly uniform spelling in the hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic scripts, could take the forms *per* and *p*. The latter seems to be preferred in composite toponyms and shows the common drop of final *-r* in accordance with a sound law similar to the one determining the drop of final *-t*. There is at least one specialist who has argued that the Egyptological transcription *pr* actually conceals two differently vocalised words.<sup>48</sup> Since there are no Coptic, Greek or other transcriptions of the stem *ṯhn* and its derivatives, we do not know for certain how these words were pronounced. Proceeding from the analogy with the Coptic word *tehne* < *dhnt*, 'peak', one expects the stressed vowel of *ṯhnt* to lie on the first syllable, which is not incompatible with the Greek equivalent *then* proposed by Bernal.

Although the present etymology cannot be dismissed on phonetic grounds, it is utterly implausible because of its shaky semantics. The toponym *Pr-ṯhn(t)* is known from a single source, namely an inscription in one of the Osiris chapels on the roof of the temple of Dendara in Middle Egypt dating from the first century BCE. Its rarity alone makes *Pr-ṯhn(t)* an unlikely candidate for the prototype of any Greek word or name whatsoever. There is another objection as well. According to Egyptian myth, the god Osiris impregnated his wife Isis after he had been murdered by his brother Seth. Faced with this display of uncommon virility, one wonders why the Greeks felt obliged to resort to Osiris of all gods when designating their maidens or naming the temple of the divine virgin Athena. While this would tell against the much-belauded imagination of the Greeks, it definitely speaks well for Bernal's.

Two erroneous derivations cannot be taken as proof that Bernal is wrong on every count, but they show him to be a poor etymologist. Perhaps the same epithet should be bestowed on me, for I am unable to

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<sup>46</sup>H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* II (Heidelberg, Winter, 1970), pp. 474-475; P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots* III (Paris, Klincksieck, 1974), p. 858; G.C. Papanastassiou, *Compléments au dictionnaire étymologique du grec ancien de Pierre Chantraine* (Théssalonique, Magia, 1994), pp. 49-50.

<sup>47</sup>S. Aufrère, *L'univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1991), pp. 521-537, esp. p. 523.

<sup>48</sup>P. Lacau, *Études d'égyptologie I, Phonétique égyptienne ancienne* (Le Caire, Institut français d'Archéologie orientale, 1970), pp. 85-112.

offer satisfactory alternatives. Some of my readers may entertain the opinion that in the case of unknown etymologies it is better to come out with a suggestion than to say nothing at all. In my perception, this does not apply when nothing is replaced by nonsense.

### *Paradigm lost, paradigm regained*

The explicit aim of *Black Athena* is to cause a paradigm shift within classical studies.<sup>49</sup> Although the concept of paradigm shift was first formulated with regard to the natural sciences,<sup>50</sup> there have been similar cataclysms in the history of the humanities and social sciences. These are associated with the names of intellectual giants such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of structuralism within the domain of cultural anthropology, and Noam Chomsky, the American radical who revolutionised linguistics by introducing his theory of transformational grammar. The way I see it, these paradigm shifts always involve the introduction of new methods and concepts or the substantial modification of existing ones. Bernal has chosen another track, which leads to a rather gloomy vista. This is evident from his brief discussion on methodology in historiography (and by implication the other humanities), which in his view comes close to non-existence.<sup>51</sup> This does no justice to the thousands of scholars who devote their working years to the pursuit of knowledge in the fields of linguistics, philology, and archaeology, which are fundamental to our understanding of ancient history. Given Bernal's obvious disregard of modern methods and modes of interpretation, there is no reason to admit him to the pantheon of the paradigm shakers, no matter how loud he knocks at its door.<sup>52</sup>

In defence of Bernal it must be said that *Black Athena* may have helped to open the eyes of those sleepy scholars (mainly classicists) who had not yet realised the importance of cultural interconnections in the ancient world. But this kind of salutary effect is small compared to the impact of new discoveries, such as the Bronze Age shipwrecks lying on the bottom of the Mediterranean<sup>53</sup> and the Minoan frescoes recovered from the mud of the Nile Delta.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>*Black Athena I*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>50</sup>T.S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1970<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>51</sup>*Black Athena I*, pp. 7-10.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. J. Baines, 'The aims and methods of *Black Athena*', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 27-48.

<sup>53</sup>E.H. Cline, *Sailing the wine-dark sea: International trade and the Late Bronze Aegean* (Oxford, Tempus Reparatum, 1994), pp. 100-105.

<sup>54</sup>*Ägypten und Levante* 5 (1995) = M. Bietak (ed.), *Trade, power and cultural*

Bernal's derivation of 'Athena' from Egyptian *Ht-Nt* has meanwhile been endorsed by the proponents of Afrocentrism, who claim the legacy of ancient Egypt without knowing the heirlooms or understanding the testament.<sup>55</sup> I hope that the present refutation, which is by no means the first one, will cause Bernal to retract this weird etymology instead of defending it on the basis of *ad hoc* arguments, as he did in response to earlier comments by Egyptologists.<sup>56</sup> As long as he persists in distorting the plain linguistic facts, I am prone to regard him as the very crank he is anxiously professing not to be.<sup>57</sup> In fairness to Bernal, I should add that this harsh judgment only relates to his interpretations of the Egyptian evidence. In all other fields, I am incompetent myself, and far less erudite than Bernal at that.<sup>58</sup> It is with this *caveat* that I proceed to the final section of my paper.

### *An ego-trip to the ancient world*

Whereas Bernal's record of ancient history does not appeal to me, I am fascinated by the personal history behind it, for *Black Athena* seems to be haunted by the ghost of Oedipus.

Martin Bernal's father John Desmond Bernal (1901-1971) was one of the leading British physicists of his time, who specialised in crystallography.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, he was a historian of science with a deep interest in its sociological aspects.<sup>60</sup> His publications in that domain include a history of the natural sciences, which comprises more than a thousand pages.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the first volume of *Black Athena*, which outlines the history of classical studies with a keen eye for the ideological

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*exchange: Hyksos Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean world 1800-1500 B.C.* (Wien, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995). See also W.V. Davies and L. Schofield (eds.), *Egypt, the Aegean and the Levant: Interconnections in the second millennium BC* (London, British Museum Press, 1995).

<sup>55</sup>M. Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history* (New York, Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>56</sup>Bernal, 'Responses', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, esp. p. 120.

<sup>57</sup>*Black Athena I*, pp. 4-7; *Black Athena II*, p. xx.

<sup>58</sup>In view of Bernal's habit of classifying scholars on the basis of their ideological backgrounds and presuming the existence of hidden political agendas, it may interest him to know that I have been a slumbering member of the Dutch Labour Party since 1978. According to most opinion leaders in the Netherlands, the agenda of this party is nowadays forgotten rather than hidden.

<sup>59</sup>C.P. Snow, 'Bernal, John Desmond', in C.C. Gillispie (ed.), *Dictionary of scientific biography XV* (New York, Scribner, 1978), pp. 16-20.

<sup>60</sup>His most influential work has been *The social function of science* (London, Routledge, 1939). See for an appraisal M. Goldsmith and A. Mackay (eds.), *The science of science: Society in the technological age* (London, Souvenir Press, 1964).

<sup>61</sup>J.D. Bernal, *Science in history* (London, Watts, 1965<sup>3</sup>).

preferences of the scholars involved, owes a debt to the author's father, to whose memory the book was consequently dedicated. In addition to being a physicist, John Desmond Bernal was a devout communist, which did not impede his scientific career in Great Britain and did much to establish his reputation on the other side of the Iron Curtain, resulting in a shower of decorations decreed by Joseph Stalin and other dictators of the same stock.

The maternal grandfather of Martin Bernal was Sir Alan Henderson Gardiner (1879-1963), a millionaire by birth who rose to be the most influential Egyptologist since Jean-François Champollion.<sup>62</sup> Sir Alan's renown was based not only on his exemplary editions of Egyptian texts, which made him the pharaoh of philologists, but also on his talents in the field of linguistics.<sup>63</sup> The etymological investigations contained in the second volume of *Black Athena*, with their rich display of Egyptian words and expressions, remind us of the author's grandfather.

If the communist John Desmond Bernal, the celebrated crystallographer, is the Laius lurking behind the first volume of *Black Athena*, then his capitalist father-in-law Sir Alan, the eminent Egyptologist, must play the part of Menoikeus, the father of Laius' spouse Iocaste. She was doomed by fate to become the wife of her parricidal son Oedipus. What then, we may ask ourselves, is the hidden meaning of the Egyptian superiority over the Greeks (the founders of the natural sciences), as alleged on each and every page of *Black Athena's* second volume?

Martin Bernal himself has avowed that *Black Athena* owes its conception to his mid-life crisis.<sup>64</sup> Now that he has overcome this set-back with obvious success, one hopes that he will live long enough to follow the example set by his mother Margaret Gardiner and his grandfather Sir Alan, who both wrote their memoirs in their eighties.<sup>65</sup> I have no doubt that Bernal's autobiography will generate more interest among educated lay persons and less irritation among scholars than any future volume of *Black Athena*.

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<sup>62</sup>M.L. Bierbrier, *Who was who in Egyptology* (London, Egypt Exploration Society, 1995<sup>3</sup>), pp. 160-162.

<sup>63</sup>His most important works in this area are: A. Gardiner, *Egyptian grammar: Being an introduction to the study of hieroglyphs* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957<sup>3</sup>); *id.*, *The theory of speech and language* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1951<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>64</sup>*Black Athena I*, p. xii.

<sup>65</sup>M. Gardiner, *A scatter of memories* (London, Free Association Books, 1988); A. Gardiner, *My working years* (Oxford, privately published, 1963).