Preface and Acknowledgements

The story behind *Black Athena* is long, complicated and, I believe, sufficiently interesting as a study in the sociology of knowledge to deserve extended treatment; thus I can give only a brief outline of it here. I was trained in Chinese studies; for almost twenty years I taught about China and carried out research on both intellectual relations between China and the West at the turn of the 20th century and contemporary Chinese politics. After 1962, I became increasingly concerned with the war in Indo-China, and in the virtual absence of any serious scholarship on Vietnamese culture in Britain, I felt obliged to study it. This was both to contribute to the movement against the American repression there, and for its own sake as a fascinating and extremely attractive civilization that was at the same time both thoroughly mixed and entirely distinctive. Thus in many ways Vietnam and Japan—whose history I had also studied—have served as my models for Greece.

In 1975 I came to a mid-life crisis. The personal reasons for this are not particularly interesting. Politically, however, it was related to the end of the American intervention in Indo-China and the awareness that the Maoist era in China was coming to an end. It now seemed to me that the central focus of danger and interest in the world was no longer East Asia but the Eastern Mediterranean. This shift led me to a concern for Jewish history. The scattered Jewish components of my ancestry would have given nightmares to assessors trying to apply the Nuremburg Laws, and although pleased

to have these fractions, I had not previously given much thought to them or to Jewish culture. It was at this stage that I became intrigued—in a Romantic way—by this part of my 'roots'. I started looking into ancient Jewish history, and—being on the periphery myself—into the relationships between the Israelites and the surrounding peoples, particularly the Canaanites and Phoenicians. I had always known that the latter spoke Semitic languages, but it came as quite a shock to discover that Hebrew and Phoenician were mutually intelligible and that serious linguists treated both as *dialects* of a single Canaanite language.

During this time, I was beginning to study Hebrew and I found what seemed to me a large number of striking similarities between it and Greek. Two factors disinclined me to accept these as random coincidences. First, having studied Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese as well as a little Chichewa—a Bantu language spoken in Zambia and Malawi—I realized that this number of parallels is not normal for languages without contacts with each other. Secondly, I now realized that Hebrew/Canaanite was not merely the language of a small tribe, isolated inland in the mountains of Palestine, but that it had been spoken all over the Mediterranean—wherever the Phoenicians sailed and settled. Thus there seemed to me no reason why the large number of important words with similar sounds and similar meanings in Greek and Hebrew—or at least the vast majority of those which had no Indo-European roots—should not be loans from Canaanite/Phoenician into Greek.

At this stage, led by my friend David Owen, I became heavily influenced by the works of Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour on general contacts between Semitic and Greek civilizations. Furthermore, I was convinced by Astour that the legends concerning the foundation of Thebes by the Phoenician Kadmos contained a kernel of truth. Like him, however, I dismissed the legends of Egyptian settlement either as complete fantasy or as cases of mistaken identity, believing that—whatever the Greeks had written—the colonists had really been Semitic speakers.

I worked along these lines for four years, and became convinced that anything up to a quarter of the Greek vocabulary could be traced to Semitic origins. This, together with 40–50 per cent that seem to be Indo-European, still left a quarter to a third of the Greek vocabulary unexplained. I hesitated between seeing this irreducible fraction conventionally as 'Pre-Hellenic' or of postulating a third outside language, either from Anatolian or—as I preferred—Hurrian. When I looked into these languages, however, they provided virtually no promising material. It was only in 1979, when I was glancing through a copy of Černy's *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, that I was able to get some sense of Late Ancient Egyptian. Almost immediately, I realized that *this* was the third outside language. Within a few months I became convinced that one could find plausible etymologies for a further 20–25 per cent of the Greek vocabulary from Egyptian, as well as the names for most Greek gods and many place names. Putting the Indo-European, Semitic and Egyptian roots together, I now believed that—with further research—one could provide plausible explanations for 80–90 per cent of the Greek vocabulary, which is as high a proportion as one can hope for in any language. Thus there was now no need for the 'Pre-Hellenic' element at all.

At the beginning of my research I had had to face this question: Why, if everything is as simple and obvious as you maintain, has nobody seen it before? This was answered when I read Gordon and Astour. They had seen the East Mediterranean as a cultural whole, and Astour had demonstrated that anti-Semitism provided an explanation for the denial of the role of the Phoenicians in the formation of Greece. After hitting upon the Egyptian component, I soon became even more acutely involved in the problem of 'why hadn't I thought of Egypt before?' It was so obvious! Egypt had by far the greatest civilization in the East Mediterranean during the millennia in which Greece was formed. Greek writers had written at length about their debts to Egyptian religion, and other aspects of culture. Furthermore, I found my failure still more puzzling because my

grandfather was an Egyptologist, and as a child I had been extremely interested in Ancient Egypt. Clearly there were very profound cultural inhibitions against associating Egypt with Greece.

At this point I began to investigate the historiography of the origins of Greece, to make sure that the Greeks had really believed they had been colonized by Egyptians and Phoenicians and had taken most of their culture from these colonies, as well as from later study in the Levant.

Once again, I had a big surprise. I was staggered to discover that what I began to call the 'Ancient Model' had not been overthrown until the early 19th century, and that the version of Greek history which I had been taught—far from being as old as the Greeks themselves—had been developed only in the 1840s and 50s. Astour had taught me that attitudes towards the Phoenicians in historiography were profoundly affected by anti-Semitism; it was therefore easy for me to make a connection between the dismissal of the Egyptians and the explosion of Northern European racism in the 19th century. The connections with Romanticism and the tensions between Egyptian religion and Christianity took rather longer to unravel.

Thus, one way and another, the scheme set out in *Black Athena* has taken me more than ten years to develop. During this time I have been a public nuisance in both Cambridge and Cornell. Like the Ancient Mariner, I have waylaid innocent passers-by to pour my latest half-baked ideas over them. I owe these 'wedding guests' a tremendous debt, if only for their patient listening. I am even more grateful for the extremely valuable suggestions they made, which—although I have been able to acknowledge only a few of them—have been of incalculable help to my work. Most mportant of all, I want to thank them for their excitement about the subject and for the confidence they gave me that it was not madness to challenge the authority of so many academic disciplines. They appeared to believe in what I was saying and they convinced me that although some of my ideas were probably wrong in particular, I was on the right track.

I owe the experts a different kind of gratitude. They were not simply in my way. I pursued them into their lairs and pestered them with requests for rudimentary information and explanations of the reasons behind their ideas or conventional wisdom. Despite the fact that I took up much of their valuable time and sometimes upset their most cherished beliefs, they were uniformly courteous and helpful, often going to considerable efforts on my behalf. The help of the 'wedding guests' and the experts has been central and essential to the project. In many ways I see the whole thing as a collective rather than an individual effort. One person could not possibly have covered all the many fields involved. Even with this massive outside help, however, I have inevitably fallen short of the thoroughness one would rightly expect of a monographic study. Furthermore, I am fully aware that I have not understood or properly assimilated much of the best advice given to me. Thus none of the people mentioned below is in any way responsible for many errors of fact and interpretation the reader will find. Nevertheless, the credit for this work belongs to them.

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