



Napoleon's Campaign in Egypt, 1798. Egypt is the western extension of the broad region often described as the 'fertile crescent,' where agricultural innovations more than five thousand years ago culminated in an urban revolution. There is some disagreement on whether urban settlements in Egypt were completely distinct from those in Mesopotamia, in the eastern reaches of the fertile crescent. Around the time of Napoleon's campaign, Egypt also became a topic of debate in histories of ancient Greece. Source: William R. Shepherd (1926), *Shepherd's Historical Atlas*. New York: Henry Holt & Company. Public domain image, reproduced courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collections.

Urban Origins and Preindustrial Cities

Urban Studies 200, *Cities*

September 21, 2011

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The First Cities

Where and when did the first cities emerge? Historians and archaeologists have, traditionally, answered the question like this: the first cities emerged around 3,500 years *before the current era* (or BCE) in the fertile river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, in Mesopotamia (in present-day Iraq). This dates the first cities, then to about 5,500 years ago.¹ Agricultural innovation, providing a consistent surplus, was the basis for specialization, the growth of hierarchical institutions, and the increasing scale of dense human settlement. Wittfogel² portrayed this as a “hydraulic society”: particularly in arid and semi-arid environments, the required scale of irrigation produced the kinds of division of labor, intensification of agricultural production, and large-scale cooperation that together formed the preconditions of urban growth. V. Gordon

When and where did the first cities emerge?

The conventional view: cities emerged about 5,500 years ago in Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq.

New discoveries, however, now suggest cities may have emerged 10,000 years ago, or even earlier.

Childe³ spent a career excavating ancient cities in Mesopotamia and evaluating the evidence of a large, sophisticated, and quite heterogeneous urban society. His work portrayed a long series of transformations in which the agricultural revolution (and its associated surplus) drove a process of societal change culminating in a rapid “urban revolution” sometime around 3,500 BCE. His work came to be summarized under the acronym of ‘poet’: population, organization, environment, and technology.

The conventional view of early cities has been in question, however, since the 1960s. Archaeological excavations have found remnants of dense settlements at Wadi-al-Natuf (circa 11,000 BCE), Jericho (8,000 BCE), and Çatal Hüyük (7,500 BCE), and

each of these sites has yielded different kinds of evidence contradicting key elements of Childe’s thesis (or at least his extrapolation from Mesopotamia to a universal theory of urbanization.)

There is an emerging consensus that many cities predated the development of sedentary agriculture: many hunter-gatherer societies developed semi-permanent and heterogeneous settlements long before the innovations of the agricultural revolution produced a large, consistent

¹ And so all date estimates described in years BCE can be converted to similar years-from-today by adding 2,000 years.

² K. Wittfogel (1957), *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Tribal Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

³ The most concise summary of his thinking on urbanization is V. Gordon Childe (1950), “The Urban Revolution.” *Town Planning Review* 21(1), 3-17.

surplus. But a few key “hearths” saw a full-fledged process of urbanization: Mesopotamia,⁴ Egypt,⁵ the Indus Valley,⁶ the Huang Ho (Yellow) River Valley,⁷ and Mesoamerica.⁸

Ancient Greece, and then the Roman Empire, created a network of cities around the Mediterranean in what came to be known as the “Classical” period of urbanization.

The “Classical” Period of Urbanization

By the eighth or ninth century CE, cities had appeared in scattered regions throughout a broad zone from Mesopotamia through the eastern half of the Mediterranean. Urban development was especially pronounced in Greece, and spread from here throughout the Mediterranean basin. “The Greek urban diaspora was a direct response to population pressure and the poor agricultural base available to the mainland cities. Individual cities equipped expeditions to establish new

cities. A first wave beginning around 750 BCE led to settlements on the coast of the Ionian Sea, in Sicily and in southern Italy (e.g., Ephesus, Syracuse and Naples), with a second wave spreading east to reach the Black Sea by 650 BCE.”⁹ Early Greek cities came to be dominated by the *acropolis* (a fortified palace, temple, and fort complex), but after the fifth century BCE the *agora* (a central area of markets, temples, courts, and other public buildings and spaces) became much more important. Hundreds of semi-autonomous city-states developed in Greece after a Dorian invasion from the north around 1200 BCE; the *agora* and the *polis* are central themes in classical political and democratic theory. A long series of wars (with the Persians in the fifth century BCE) and rivalries amongst some of the larger independent cities (e.g., Athens and Sparta in 431-404 BCE) weakened an already decentralized Greek system. Various portions of the Greek Isles were made Roman provinces between 146 BCE and 27 BCE, but the Greek influence on Roman thought was profound, and thus shaped a long period of imperial Roman urbanization. Roman expansion bound cities together in networks of military outposts, points of control and administration, cultural centers, and trading hubs in an expanding Mediterranean

⁴ One of the earliest and most-studied Mesopotamian sites is Ur, which was the capitol of the Sumerian Empire from 2300 BCE to 2180 BCE; Ur and the other cities in Southern Mesopotamia were captured by the Babylonians in 1885 BCE.

⁵ Not all authorities recognize Egypt as a distinct hearth of urbanization, in part because of a consensus that agriculture and other technologies diffused from Mesopotamia through the Fertile Crescent into the Nile Valley, around 3,300 BCE.

⁶ The Harappa civilization was anchored around the twin capital cities of Harappa in the Punjab and Mohenjo-daro several hundred miles to the south on the Indus; these cities flourished from about 2,300 BCE to 1,750 BCE, and there is some evidence of trade with the Sumerians; the civilization fell after an invasion around 1,500 BCE.

⁷ The Shang dynasty emerged about 1,800 BCE, and large cities can be traced to the period between 1,300 BCE and 1,500 BCE; Pacione (2001) notes that “The most significant feature is that individual cities, such as Anj-Yang, were linked into a network of agricultural villages; a town wall did not separate an urban subculture from a rural one. This form of ‘urban region’ is without precedent in the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Nile, and the Indus.” Michael Pacione (2001). *Urban Geography: A Global Perspective*. New York: Routledge, p. 41.

⁸ There is some ambiguity on the earliest emergence of cities in this region (Mexico, Guatemala, and other portions of Central America). Cities emerged sometime between 600 and 200 BCE, with the Mayan civilization recognized as the most socially and spatially heterogeneous and stratified. As Phillips emphasizes (p. 85), some experts also identify a separate hearth of urbanization in the Peruvian Andes, dating to the range between 3,500 - 3,800 BCE.

⁹ Pacione, *Urban Geography*, p. 42.

empire. Britain was conquered in 55 BCE, and the northern frontier of Hadrian's Wall is generally seen as the symbol of the empire's height. Assassinations subsequently precipitated military anarchy, while frontier pressures weakened the integrated empire; Emperor Constantine temporarily reunited the far-flung territories, and decreed Christianity as the official faith in 380 CE, but ultimately the empire went into a long period of decline, punctuated by the sacking of Rome by the Visigoths (410) and the Vandals (455, and again in 476). The empire collapsed in the seventh century in the face of Islamic expansion, competition, and invasions from the east. "Under such unsettled conditions long-distance trade of any significance was impossible, towns became isolated and inward-looking, and urban life in Western Europe declined to its nadir by the end of the ninth century."¹⁰ The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, then, marks the end of what is often regarded as a period of classical urbanization.

New Perspectives on Ancient and Classical Urbanization

Recent scholarship has brought fascinating new insights and perspectives to this history.

First, there are now major reconsiderations of seemingly obvious parts of the story – the early relations between socio-technological change and the emergence of the first cities. Influential urbanists have challenged the material and ecological functionalism of Childe, in some cases reversing the arrows of causality between agricultural innovation and urbanization. Jane Jacobs, for instance, marshaled historical evidence suggesting that cities emerged at the crossroads of important trading networks – often in quite inhospitable environments – and that they survived on the basis of long-distance trade. Moreover, Jacobs argued, these urban trade networks were crucial for the diffusion of agricultural innovations; hence cities helped agriculture to develop, not the other way 'round. Lewis Mumford, by contrast, interpreted the prehistoric and archaeological evidence to suggest that culture mattered. Mumford questioned the *materialist* explanations offered by Jacobs and Childe -- the idea that what really mattered were the tangible, material considerations of an agricultural surplus, or the availability of things acquired by trade. Meaning also matters. For Mumford, one of the earliest impulses for urbanization came from "a ceremonious concern for the dead, manifested in their deliberate burial":

*There is
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"Early man's respect for the dead, itself an expression of fascination with his powerful images of daylight fantasy and nightly dream, perhaps had an even greater role than more practical needs in causing him to seek a fixed meeting place and eventually a continuous settlement. Mid the uneasy wanderings of Paleolithic man, the dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling: a cavern, a mound marked by a cairn,¹¹ a collective barrow. These were landmarks to which the living probably returned at intervals, to commune with or to placate the ancestral spirits. Though food-gathering and hunting do not encourage the permanent occupation of a single site, the dead at

¹⁰ Pacione, *Urban Geography*, p. 44.

¹¹ This comes from the Scottish-Gaelic word *cairn*, referring to a heap of stones set as a memorial.

least claim that privilege.”

“The city of the dead antedates the city of the living. In one sense, indeed, the city of the dead is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city.

In all this, there are ironic overtones. The first greeting of a traveler, as he approached a Greek or Roman city, was the row of graves and tombstones that lined the roads to the city. As for Egypt, most of what is left of that great civilization, with its joyous saturation in every expression of organic life, are its temples and its tombs. Even in the crowded modern city, the first general exodus to a more desirable dwelling place in the country was the migration of the dead to the romantic Elysium¹² of a suburban cemetery.”¹³

Second, there are major re-evaluations of taken-for-granted interpretations of the classical and Roman urban periods. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire has long been regarded as a key factor affecting European and Mediterranean cities: the end of *pax romana* severed long-

*The classical period
-- especially the
Roman Empire --
may be more
complex than we
once thought.*

distance trade and communications routes, eroded the unifying imperial relations binding cities together, and thus isolated the far-flung system of cities that stretched all the way from Hadrian’s Wall to Palestine. But in recent years many historians have questioned the organizing idea of the empire’s ‘decline.’ Bowersock writes that, today, “no responsible historian would want to address or acknowledge the fall of Rome as either a fact or a paradigm...The fall of Rome is no longer needed.”¹⁴ Clearly, the empire is no longer there, and the cities associated with it certainly did change a great deal. The argument here is more subtle: the effect of an influential historical consensus on the decline and fall of the empire was to privilege attention to ancient, classical cities at the expense of late-antiquity or medieval

cities; over the course of several generations, this consensus guided inquiry and field archaeology, and so the accumulated empirical evidence simply provided stronger confirmation for the prevailing wisdom. “The neglect of post-classical levels has had a distorting effect on archaeology and historical writing....it has misled historians into concluding that at certain periods cities were declining, or even disappearing, just because the archaeological literature had no evidence of their continued existence; in reality, the absence of evidence was simply due to the failure of archaeologists to look for it because they were sure there could not be any.”¹⁵ New evidence reveals that “decline” was quite uneven, scattered, and dynamic; that its relation to the

¹² In Greek mythology, *Elysium* refers to the Elysian Fields, the resting place after death for the brave and the good; the word commonly refers to a state of ideal happiness.

¹³ Lewis Mumford (1961). *The City in History*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ G. W. Bowersock (1996), “The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome.” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 149, 29-43.

¹⁵ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz (2001), “The Uses and Abuses of the Concept of ‘Decline’ in Later Roman History.” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supplementary Series 42: *Recent Research in Late-Antique Urbanism*, edited by Luke Lavan, 233-238, quote from p. 236.

“fall” is uncertain; and that both of these considerations vary widely across different regions of what has been viewed as a coherent historical-geographical entity.

A **third** question involves consciousness and intentionality. Set aside, for a moment, the dispute over the existence, timing, and location of an ‘urban revolution’; what did people living in ancient cities know and understand about the process of urbanization? The most prominent literature on these sorts of questions focuses on political thought and democratic theory in the Greek *polis*; although most of the traditional inquiry in this area is only implicitly urban, new generations of scholars have applied literary theory to the question, for example analyzing historic accounts of heroic battles between Messene and Sparta: “More so than works still partly rooted in reality, this instance of a purely fictional city history goes to show to what extent city histories were indispensable in creating a sense of historical awareness and identity in the world of the Greek poleis.”¹⁶

Scholars are using literary theory and other approaches to try to understand what people thought about urbanization in ancient times.

Historiography -- the philosophy of learning about the past -- is encouraging the search for new evidence of hidden urban pasts.

A **fourth** issue involves historiography -- the philosophy of how historical knowledge is (or should be) created. The histories of urbanization we are able to write are necessarily shaped by the historical consensus produced by previous generations of urban inquiry. In other words, only by searching in new areas outside the classical “hearths” of urbanization will we find the kind of evidence that makes it possible to see an alternative history. One example of this new line of work emerges from twenty-five years of excavations of cities of the Middle Niger in Central West Africa (in Mali). A “clustered” urbanism of small cities developed here sometime before 300 BCE, and the accumulated archaeological evidence is raising fascinating questions. Neither the age nor the size of the cities¹⁷ presents the kind of challenge that Çatal Hüyük did; but the Middle Niger cities had a remarkable absence of evidence of kings or other decision-making elites, as well as any signs of monumental architecture -- despite clear indications of substantial wealth. Roderick J. McIntosh summarizes the archaeological evidence from a site called Jenno-jeno, a network of clustered cities that emerged as a comparatively non-hierarchical societal way “to combat unpredictability” in flooding and precipitation by creating “many (and

increasingly) specialized artisan and subsistence producers linked into a generalized economy.”¹⁸ But this “ecological-functional” explanation is only partial, and must also be balanced by a recognition of the spiritual knowledge of different groups and individuals in the Mande society

¹⁶ Guido Schepens (2001), “Ancient Greek City Histories: Self-Definition Through History Writing.” In Kristoffel Demoen, ed. *The Greek City From Antiquity to the Present*, 3-25. Louvain, Paris: Peeters Publishing, quote on p. 25.

¹⁷ By the ninth century CE, the entire complex had only about 20,000 people.

¹⁸ Roderick J McIntosh (2000), “Clustered Cities of the Middle Niger: Alternative Routes to Authority in Pre-History.” In David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa’s Urban Past*, 19-35. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

of the time: “one needs to appreciate how they differentially harvest occult power and, hence, authority from the power grid of the Mande landscape.”¹⁹ McIntosh’s review of dozens of articles and dissertations based on the archaeological record is all distilled into a challenge to “An Archaeological Intangible: Authority.” The key authorities under question involve those of definition, distinctiveness, and hierarchical control.²⁰

Black Athena

But other new developments have been even more challenging to (conventional) authority, and one has sent shock waves through the Classics, an area of study that is often portrayed as obscure and peaceful, curious but somewhat irrelevant. The shock waves came from Martin Bernal, a specialist in Chinese studies who turned his attention to Vietnamese culture as the U.S. war in Indochina accelerated in the 1960s; Bernal intended “both to contribute to the movement against the American repression,” and wanted to study Vietnamese culture “for its own sake as a fascinating and extremely attractive civilization that was at the same time both thoroughly mixed and entirely distinctive.”²¹ But then in 1975 Bernal

“...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 Nuremberg 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

¹⁹ McIntosh, “Clustered Cities,” p. 32.

²⁰ The first issue concerns whether the settlements of Jenne-jeno would qualify as cities under many prevailing criteria: as a complex, the settlements are densely populated, but individually they are difficult to consider urban; the second issue raises the question of whether the processes under way in the “first” cities are of the most interest. “Why investigate early urbanism in Africa, or South-East Asia or India, when developments in those places will be a pale reflection of the essential causes and circumstances known from the ‘core civilizations’? Countering this privileged view is the argument that long-term transformations leading to food production, to settled life or to urbanism everywhere need not replicate the experience of Europe or Mesopotamia and that, as a general rule, world history and prehistory have taken much more diverse routes to the same destination than traditional models would allow.” McIntosh, “Clustered Cities,” p. 21. The third issue is of authority and hierarchy, exceedingly difficult to infer just from “settlements cast aside...the prehistorian’s problem is to verify motivations and intentionality in the remote past.” (p. 31). McIntosh is careful to point out the limited evidence, but concludes that “One has the strong impression of a highly complex society, with multiple overlapping and competing agencies of authority and decision-making, and of resistance to centralization”; this “heterarchy, rather than hierarchy” also had deep spiritual dimensions.

²¹ Martin Bernal (1987). *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume 1, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, p. xii.

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. ...”²²

Bernal’s book proceeds like this through a gripping narrative through hundreds of pages in two delicious, thick volumes. The basic outlines of the story go like this. Greek, an Indo-European language, shares many grammatical and phonetic features with other surviving ancient languages that can be traced to a broad region straddling Europe and Central Asia. But an unusually large portion of the Greek vocabulary cannot be tied to any of the Indo-European languages. Bernal, an incurable language junkie who had studied Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and a Bantu language called Chichewa, knew that random chance could not explain the similarities between Hebrew and Phoenician: the linguistic similarities provide strong evidence of substantial contact. He began to investigate the possibility that the words in Hebrew – and Greek – that could not be explained through Indo-European roots may have come from Canaanite/Phoenician. Bernal labored several years to track down evidence, and he managed to trace nearly a quarter of Greek vocabulary to Semitic origins; but this still left at least another quarter unexplained. Bernal explored several possibilities for a third source, but none offered any relevant evidence. Bernal’s narrative continues:

“It was only in 1979, when I was glancing through a copy of Cerny’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 percent 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 percent of the Greek vocabulary, which is as high a proportion as one can hope for in any language.”²³

In the conventional wisdom, ancient Greece had been invaded by peoples from the north -- “Pre-Hellene” invaders with a distant but shared Indo-European heritage.

It is hard to overstate the importance of these connections. Nearly every fiber of the conventional-wisdom literature emphasized that ancient Greece was invaded by peoples from the north, and that the roots of classical Greek civilization could be traced to the intermixing of ‘invaders’ and ‘natives’ with a distant but shared Indo-European heritage. The established authorities called these northern invaders “Pre-Hellenes,” and very little was known about them; in fact, there was almost no reliable evidence for the critical historical interpretation – their invasion,

²² Bernal, *Black Athena*, p. xxii-xiii.

²³ Bernal, *Black Athena*, p. xiv.

*In **Black Athena**, Martin Bernal traced histories of language to document relations between ancient Greece and ancient Egypt.*

Knowledge of these ties -- the “Ancient Model” of Greek history -- was overthrown in the nineteenth century in favor of an “Aryan Model.”

colonization, and influence on the existing peoples of the Greek isles. Bernal *had* found compelling evidence of a link between Greece and Egypt. But if the evidence was so strong, *why was it completely missing from the dominant literature on ancient Greece, and why had no one seen it before?*

As it turns out, historians had seen it before. Bernal undertook a comparative historiography – a careful analysis of histories written in different generations while referring to the same original events – and he was shocked to find that the so-called conventional wisdom only achieved widespread acceptance in the middle years of the Nineteenth Century. Prior to that time, historians recognized the strong ties between Greece and Egypt. Herodotus and many other ancient Greek

historians and philosophers had written of these connections, and generations of historians accepted that Greece had “been settled by Egyptians and Phoenicians who had built cities and civilized the natives”²⁴ around 1,500 BCE. But Bernal found that this “**Ancient Model**” of Greek history was challenged and overthrown by European historians in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries for reasons that were bound up with struggles amongst different European societies, and with attempts to find ‘scientific’ justifications for the slavery that was at the heart of European colonial competition. When two influential writers in the 1780s and 1790s documented the role of black peoples in Upper Egypt in providing a “higher civilization” to the black Egyptians of the lower reaches of the Nile, “Abolitionists quickly picked up this idea to argue the immorality of enslaving the people who had given Europe civilization.” These kinds of arguments drove a movement to suppress the historical understanding of close ties between ancient Greece and Egypt, and the gradual construction of an “**Aryan Model**” of Greek history that was confined to the invasion of Indo-European, Caucasian peoples from the north. Bernal provides voluminous and meticulous documentation in support of elements of the Ancient Model, although he also marshals evidence suggesting that the Ancient view should be revised to account for pre-Egyptian and Phoenician invasions that did originate amongst northern Indo-European peoples. But this is still an enormous challenge to the Classics status quo:

“If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of ‘Western Civilization’ but also to recognize the penetration of racism and ‘continental chauvinism’ into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. The Ancient Model had no major ‘internal’ deficiencies, or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For 18th- and 19th-century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to

²⁴ Martin Bernal (2001), “Introduction.” In David Chioni Moore, ed., *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to his Critics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1-20, quote from p. 3.

have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore the Ancient Model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.”²⁵

This is the equivalent of planting a good dose of plastic explosives at the base of the Ivory Tower. Bernal’s meticulous scholarship has been deeply influential, but it has also ignited a firestorm. Mary Lefkowitz, a Professor of Humanities at Wellesley College, introduced a response to *Black Athena* with a chapter titled “Ancient History, Modern Myths.” She opens by describing the hostility she faces from some of her students, who have been influenced by other courses to believe that Socrates and Cleopatra are black. Lefkowitz continues:

“Classicists ... have more than enough grounds for paranoia. We are reminded daily that our subject is useless, irrelevant, and boring – all the things that, in our opinion, it is not. But now a new set of charges has been added. Not only students, but also many of the academic acolytes of Martin Bernal’s influential theories about “the Afroasiatic roots of Western civilization,” and Bernal himself, ask us to acknowledge that we have been racists and liars, the perpetrators of a vast intellectual and cultural cover-up, or at the very least the suppressors of an African past that, until our students and our colleagues began to mention it, we had ourselves known nothing about. Had our teachers deceived us, and their teachers deceived them?”²⁶

Lefkowitz accuses Bernal of concocting “some conspiracy theory about European scholars who wished to give priority to the contribution of northern peoples like themselves,”²⁷ and she argues that he relies too heavily on Herodotus’ writings on Egypt, and that his case for the acceptance of the Ancient Model prior to 1600 belies the fact that not much was known about Egypt prior to the 1600s. Lefkowitz questions the widespread influence of Bernal’s work: “For black Americans (many of whom now prefer to be known as African-Americans) the African origins of ancient Greek civilization promise a myth of self-identification and self-ennoblement...”²⁸ Bernal responded to Lefkowitz through various sorts of correspondence, culminating in *Black Athena Writes Back*. The title of Lefkowitz’ *Black Athena Revisited*, Bernal suggests, “is brilliant, indicating as it does a calm objectivity. It is, however, misleading hostility to my work was the main criterion in selecting the reviews. In disciplines where there were no sufficiently hostile reviews, new ones were commissioned.”

Bernal provides detailed responses to Lefkowitz and many other critics, and clearly this debate is not something that we can settle here. What matters for our purposes is this: questions which at first may seem trivial or obscure -- when and where did the first cities emerge? where did the people who settled ancient Greece come from? -- often turn out to be profound questions about such big-picture issues as, say, Western Civilization. And the practice of doing history -- pursuing archaeological, archival, or linguistic evidence to try to understand the past -- is deeply

²⁵ Bernal, *Black Athena*, p. 2.

²⁶ Mary R. Lefkowitz (2001), “Ancient History, Modern Myths.” In Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds., *Black Athena Revisited*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 3-23, quote from p. 4.

²⁷ Lefkowitz, “Ancient History,” p. 13.

²⁸ Lefkowitz, “Ancient History,” p. 21.

enmeshed with current issues. We might go so far as to say that the study of the past tells us almost as much about the present as it does about the past.

The study of the past tells us almost as much about the present -- our worldview, our priorities, our assumptions -- as about the past.

Conclusions

We began with very simple questions at the outset. When and where did the first cities emerge? The conventional answer was that cities began in Mesopotamia, in present-day Iraq, about 5,500 years ago, or 3,500 BCE. But in the last generation, new discoveries have pushed the consensus view of urbanization farther back into the past, to 7,500 BCE (Çatal Hüyük), 8,000 BCE (Jericho), 11,000 BCE (Wadi al-Natuf), and possibly even earlier. In part, what we know is the result of the investments we have made in trying to

learn more about the past: each new investment brings new evidence, and allows us to answer some questions even as new questions become obvious. The answers we offer to even apparently simple questions, then, depend on the ways that we work to assemble evidence, and the way that different analysts interpret a record that is always partial and incomplete. And the past is never really past. Indeed, the future of the past is quite a fascinating and important topic for study and research.

